HARDCORE GAMING 101 DIGEST VOL. 7
METROID AND KID ICARUS

Introduction

I was a Sega kid growing up, but my mail carrier dad used to bring me home discarded issues of the Nintendo Fun Club newsletter, which made me a little jealous of the competitor's system. It did introduce me to *Metroid*, which is why it was one of the first games I bought when we finally got an NES. (It was also comparatively cheap since it was a little on the old side in 1990!) My fascination continued with the series, to the point where I bought a GameCube pretty much for *Metroid Prime* (which was worth it). Over its history, it's become one of the most foundational works in gaming, and it's been a lot of fun to revisit it, especially with the recent (and excellent) *Metroid Dread*.

I wanted to cover *Kid Icarus* along with *Metroid*, since I've always viewed them as sister series, but that still wasn't quite big enough to fill this digest. However, the *Captain N* cartoon show had villains based on *Metroid*, *Kid Icarus*, and *Punch-Out!!*, weaving an unusual connective tissue between the franchises, so Nintendo's boxing game was included as well. The rest of the digest is rounded out with some lesser-known Nintendo-developed games for the NES, some of which were region-exclusive. This feature was originally intended for the previous Nintendo-themed digest (*Vol 4: Star Fox and F-Zero*) but was cut back then for a series on 3D rail shooters. Also included is *Balloon Fight*, one of my personal favorites of Nintendo's early output, plus the mid-90s PC shareware *Metroid* homage *Vigilance on Talos V*, and the recent indie Metroidvania *Gato Roboto*.

We have a few more digests planned for the future, including another *Retro Horror* book and more Taito arcade classics, but the next Nintendo-themed one will probably be *Fire Emblem / Advance Wars* and whatever other early 90s Japanese strategy games we can fit in. This is an ambitious topic, so it may take awhile!

-Kurt Kalata
December 2021

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Metroid
Original Release: 1986
Platforms: FDS, NES, GBA, ARC, GCN, WII, 3DS, WIIU, NSW

Nintendo released the Famicom Disk System in March 1986, with the intention of it serving as a way to get around the technical limitations of ROM cartridges. Early Famicom releases tended to be pretty simple arcade-type games, but the expanded storage capacity and ability to save games allowed for more complex experiences, similar to what could be found on home computers. Its marquee title was *The Legend of Zelda*, the seminal game that combined fantasy role-playing with colorful characters and huge worlds.

Obviously Nintendo needed more than one game to sell its new hardware, so they worked on developing a few other titles that also played to the strengths of the system. One of the other most popular of these was *Metroid*, directed by Satoru Okada, who had previously worked on *Balloon Fight* and *Wrecking Crew*, and later went on to helm *Kid Icarus, Famicom Wars*, and *Super Mario Land*. Much of the design of the game is attributed to Yoshio Sakamoto, who had previously worked on *Donkey Kong Jr.*, as well as *Balloon Fight* and *Wrecking Crew* with Okada. Other team members include Hirofumi Matsuoka, a graphic designer who later went on to direct *Mario Paint*; Hiroji Kiyotake, the artist credited with all of the original designs, including the franchise's protagonist (he later also designed Wario); and Makoto Kanou, the scenario writer.

While the open-ended adventuring spirit of *Metroid* was similar to Shigeru Miyamoto's *Zelda*, it differed in two major ways: first, it used a side-scrolling perspective, and second, it featured a science-fiction theme, heavily inspired by Ridley Scott's 1979 movie *Alien*. The developers didn't know it at the time, of course, but *Metroid* (along with *Zelda)* codified many genre conventions, and its influences can still be felt decades later. The series name itself comes from a combination of "metro", bringing to mind dark subway tunnels, and "android".

The game stars Samus Aran, an intergalactic bounty hunter wearing a cybernetic exo-suit, as she explores the underground caverns of the planet Zebes. Her design is most likely based on the protagonist from the manga/anime *Space Adventure Cobra*, another intergalactic bounty hunter with a gun for an arm, while her name was inspired by Edson Arantes do Nascimento, the full name of the soccer player known as Pelé. This hostile world is the home base of a group known as the Space Pirates, who have stolen samples of a mysterious (and incredibly dangerous) creature called the Metroid. These can be bred into weapons of biological war, so it's of utmost importance that Samus is able to stop them.

At the outset of the game, Samus is incredibly under-equipped. You have a ridiculously short-range

bullet attack…and that's it. However, the game subtly teaches you the way that you must hunt and upgrade your powers in order to fully explore Zebes. Most arcade games have trained players to walk to the right – in *Metroid*, you can only proceed a few screens before reaching an impassable area, a tunnel which Samus is unable to squeeze into. So instead you need to go back left, past the starting point, to obtain an upgrade called the Maru Mari ("maru" means "circle" in Japanese), later known as the Morph Ball, which allows Samus to shift into a spinning ball, and allowing you to roll through the tight passage back to the right. While exploratory action games existed before *Metroid*, one of the primary elements is the concept of "items as keys", using new abilities or weapons to enter new areas.

This is only the first step in exploring more of Zebes. The planet is divided into five areas: Brinstar, the opening area; Norfair, an area filled with lava; the two lairs for each of the games' bosses, the spiked turtle-esque creature Kraid and the dragon creature Ridley; and finally Tourian, the final area, which contains both the Metroids and the Mother Brain, the leader of the Space Pirates. You transition between screens through bubble-shaped doors which open when

you shoot them, though some require being plastered with missiles before they'll unlock.

Zebes is filled with a variety of distinctive enemies, many of them vaguely insectoid in appearance. One of the most common are little spiked creatures that crawl around the perimeters of platforms, which take on multiple forms throughout the game. Also present are shelled creatures that fly back and forth, which are invincible to most attacks; bees that spawn infinitely from pipes; fire-breathing dragons; and tiny little buggers that swarm in great numbers. It's a testament to the game's visual design that they all remain distinctive given the limited power of the NES.

Other than finding and destroying the game's bosses so you can enter the final level, you'll need to find other assorted items in order to beat the game. Most of these are found in the claws of Chozo Statues, mysterious bird-like creatures, whose lore is expanded upon in subsequent *Metroid* games. One of the most important things to find are missiles, which are not only more powerful than your regular weapons, but are required to open red doors. Each missile upgrade increases the amount of ammunition you can store, up to 255 shots in total.

Just as important are bombs, which let you destroy certain

blocks on both the floors and on the walls. With proper timing, you can also "bomb jump" by using the explosions from detonated bombs to propel you upwards, something which takes a lot of practice but can be used to bypass certain areas of the game. There are also the high jump boots (expectedly, these make you jump higher) and the Ice Beam, which lets you freeze enemies and use them as temporary platforms to jump to higher areas.

These are the only items that are (technically) required to beat the game, but there are other things to find that will greatly help your journey. One of the most important is the Varia Suit (a mistranslation of "Barrier"), which halves any damage you receive. There's also the Wave Beam, which travels in a sine wave pattern and is much more powerful than your other main weapons (save for missiles), as well as the Long Beam, which simply expands the length of your main weapon across the entire length of the screen. Also, by default you can only store up to 100 energy (health) points, but Energy Tanks extend your capacity by another 100, eventually expanding your health to 699 points if you find enough of them. There's also a fun ability called the Screw Attack, which effectively turns Samus into a buzz-saw during somersaults, shredding anything that comes
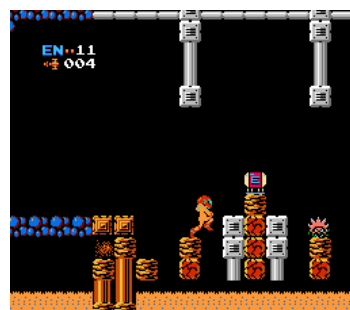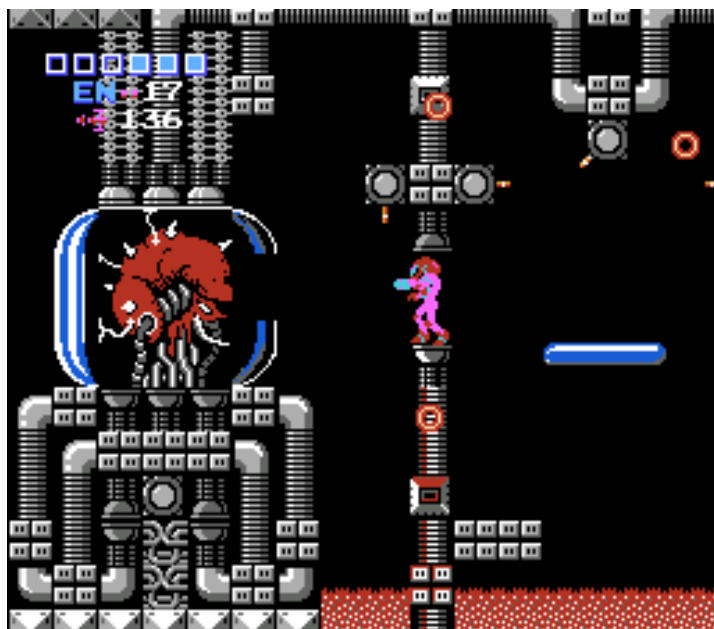
into contact. However, you're definitely going to want to explore as much as possible before beginning the final assault on Tourian, as it's incredibly difficult. To that end, you'll need as much health and missiles as possible before facing the Mother Brain.

Of course, one of the major issues with *Metroid* is that Zebes is an incredibly large, confusing labyrinth. There's no real direction for what to do or where to go, compounded by the fact that many of the rooms and corridors look identical, making it very easy to get lost. This was long before games included auto-maps, so it expects you to draw your own (or buy a strategy guide). Furthermore, many of the power-ups are hidden and there's no indication of which bits of scenery can be destroyed. This isn't just to find bonus stuff, either. Mandatory items are hidden in obtuse places – the Ice Beam, for example, is found beneath a fake lake of acid.

Even though it can be intimidating, it's certainly not impossible. One of the advantages of the game's level layout is that it's neatly divided into horizontally and vertically scrolling areas, allowing it to be easily mapped into a grid. Plus, after playing for a while, you grow some intuition of where hidden passages might be. Find a dead end, for example? Shoot or bomb everything, everywhere!

Samus is actually pretty fun to control, too. There are some limitations – you can't duck, so to defeat crawling enemies, you either need to use bombs or the Wave Beam – but the fluid, acrobatic jumps are satisfying, which is especially useful during the many areas where you need to scale vertical caverns.

Still, there are other areas where *Metroid* shows its age as a product of the mid-80s, or otherwise just plays cruel tricks on you. For example, the game lets you save your progress. However, neither version records your health (only your maximum number of energy tanks), so you'll always begin each game with a measly 30 energy points. Luckily, there are certain pipes where enemies quickly respawn, so you can camp out there and farm health from their corpses until you're maxed out. There aren't any save points, either, so you either need to intentionally kill yourself or use a command via the second controller to quit the game.

There's no status screen either, nor is there any way to switch weapons. For example, you'll probably be spending most of the game using the Wave Beam due to its strength. But for the few areas where you need the Ice Beam (including Tourian), you can't just switch to it. You need to run back to any of the spots where it's located in order to equip

it. You generally don't want to use the Ice Beam when you don't need to because it's weaker than your main gun – one hit to freeze, and then another to unfreeze, but it only registers the same amount of damage as one regular shot, even though you hit it twice. Plus, there are a few areas where you can fall in lava and it's impossible to get out, requiring you to sit and wait until your life drains.

Still, there's a lot to like about the original *Metroid,* even in spite of its many improved sequels and the subsequent games that were inspired by it. Though the visuals are stark – all of the backgrounds are just dark black – each of the five main areas are visually distinct, complete with their own music theme. The triumphant Brinstar tune sets the mood for the rest of the game, though the remainder of the songs run between low-key (the Norfair tune) and actively terrifying (Kraid's lair) in ways that few NES tracks are. The music was composed by Hirokazu "Hip" Tanaka, who, along with Koji Kondo, is one of Nintendo's most well-known composers, with his works including *Kid Icarus*, *Balloon Fight*, and *Dr. Mario*. Even the sound effects are distinct, ranging from Samus' footsteps to the strange noises that enemies make when they're hurt, to the "FWOOP" sound of opening doors, and the sizzling sear of the Screw Attack.

Above: *Space Adventure Cobra*

Plus, many parts of the game are just incredibly scary, in ways that its progeny backed away from. For starters, there's the eponymous Metroid itself. Though its design has become iconic among video games, the manual doesn't actually show what it looks like, making it all the more mysterious at the time of its release. When you finally enter Tourian and see these jellyfish-type creatures swarming you and quickly sucking your life away, it's a moment of shock and terror almost unlike anything else on the system. It's doubly frightening if you don't know how to beat them – you can technically ward them off via bombs, but the only way to kill them is to freeze them and unload a torrent of missiles.

The final battle with Mother Brain is also harrowing. You need to shoot a large number of missiles into her jar, while avoiding the many flaming projectiles being shot out of her support system and avoiding being tossed into the lava below. Assuming you do beat her (without running out of missiles), it triggers a self-destruct sequence, where you need to put your platforming skills to the test as you escape through a large, vertical cavern, leaping between tiny platforms to beat the clock.

Metroid is also infamous for its glitches, particularly how you can slowly work your way through solid walls to reach otherwise inaccessible areas. Of course, the game wasn't designed with these in mind, so you're basically entering "junk" data of the game's map, so there's nothing really important there but various rooms and enemies. Even so, it's fascinating to think that there's an area outside of the game's boundaries, especially since magazines at the time hyped these up as hidden worlds, of sorts.

Of course, there's also the game's most famous twist – you get different endings based on how quickly you beat the game. If you complete it under a certain number of hours, then Samus' helmet will be removed, revealing the bounty hunter to be a woman! (Even though the manual explicitly refers to Samus as a male.) As an added bonus, with even quicker completions, Samus will take off her whole outfit and reveal herself in a bikini, a concept likely borrowed from the heroine of the sci-fi comic/movie *Barbarella*, as well as Jane Flowers from *Space Adventure Cobra*.

Metroid was released in North America about a year after the Japanese FDS original. In the intervening year, technology had improved to allow larger ROM space, though some changes had to be made to accommodate the different format. Most notably, some sound effects and music used the additional FDS sound channel, so these needed to be changed. The biggest revisions are the title screen and the iconic "item get" jingle. The reworked sound effects are pretty good, and in some cases improved – the Japanese version featured a blaring siren during the escape scene after destroying Mother Brain, which is thankfully removed from the US release.

The Japanese version uses a save game system, with a menu similar to *The Legend of Zelda* – it even has a unique kneeling sprite for Samus not otherwise seen in the game. This could have been brought over for the cartridge release, but since it would've required battery backed-up RAM, a password system was used instead as a cost-cutting measure. This also allowed various cheats to skip ahead to parts of the game. There are a few other tweaks too

– some of the enemy behavior is simplified in the ROM version due to differences in random number generation, there's some extra slowdown in various areas (particularly in Tourian), and there are some bugs that cause certain tiles to be miscolored. Plus, the final battle with Mother Brain is made more difficult since there's an extra piece of indestructible glass on her platform, making it impossible to fire right next to her.

The biggest alteration though is the ability to play as Samus without her suit. Her hair is brown in the ending, but this changes in-game, depending on whether you have the Varia Suit or you've enabled missile fire. Normally unlocking this is done by getting the appropriate ending, but there are assorted codes – particularly the JUSTIN BAILEY password – that let you start the game without the suit, along with assorted power-ups. There's a long-running urban legend that "bailey" is Australian slang for a swimsuit, effectively making the password mean "Just in bailey", or "just in a swimsuit". This actually isn't true, and the fact that the password spells actual English words is just a coincidence. The only hard-coded password is NARPAS SWORD, ("Nar Password"), a reference to Tohru Narihiro, the programmer who converted *Metroid* to the ROM format.

Metroid might be hard to go back to for gamers accustomed to newer entries – for anyone wanting to experience the "story" of this game, there's always the GBA remake, *Metroid: Zero Mission* – but its historical importance can't be denied, and even compared to its NES 8-bit contemporaries like Konami's *The Goonies II* and *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*, it holds up comparatively well.
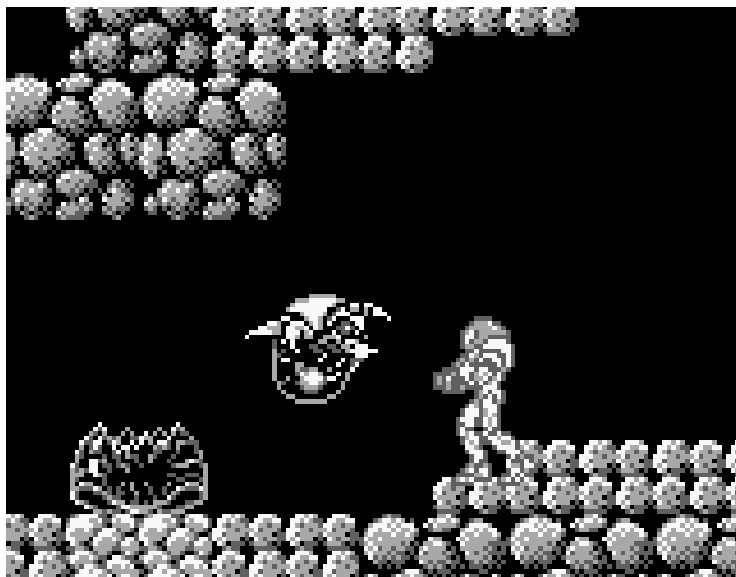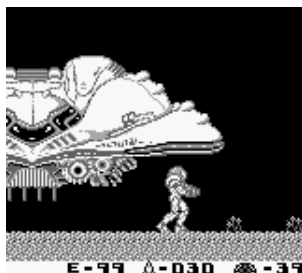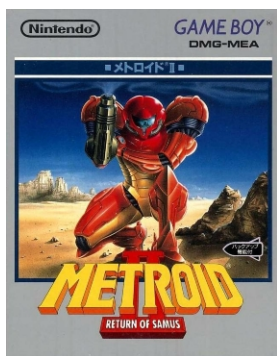
Metroid II: Return of Samus
Original Release: 1991
Platforms: GB, 3DS

Rather than directly converting their NES and SNES games, Nintendo made it a habit to create unique entries of their popular franchises, like *Super Mario Land* and *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*. *Metroid II: Return of Samus* falls into that category as well, iterating greatly upon the original game despite the lesser Game Boy hardware.

As the introduction to the original relates, the Metroid samples were stolen by the Space Pirates from their home planet, called SR388. (This was named after the SR400 line of Yamaha motorcycles, whose engines at the time maxed out at 388cc.) In order to put an end to this, Samus is sent directly to the desolate world to hunt and destroy every last one of them. What we learn in this game is that the Metroids we saw originally were just in a larval stage, and once they grow old enough, they transform into something more terrifying. Indeed, every Metroid you fight here is actually evolved into a completely different form, divided into four categories: Alpha, Gamma, Zeta, and Omega. In their Alpha state, they won't do much more than fly around and attack, but both their size and abilities grow more advanced in the later forms.

Metroid II makes some small advancements over its predecessor. Samus' sprite is larger, and her power suit, as seen on the cover, has been redesigned into the style

that was used in later entries. She can also kneel and shoot downwards now, and actually starts off with both the Morph Ball and a small collection of missiles. The game utilizes a save system too with regular save points, as well as periodic stops where you can refill your health and missiles. Samus' iconic ship, with its design loosely based on the power suit's helmet, also makes its first appearance here. The screen is no longer restricted to just scrolling horizontally or vertically either, allowing for larger rooms and more elaborate level designs.

Samus' arsenal has also been expanded considerably. The Spring Ball lets you jump in ball form (no more bomb jumping!), while the Spider Ball lets you attach yourself to most walls or ceilings and roll along. The Space Jump lets Samus repeatedly jump in mid-air too, effectively allowing her to fly, as long as you get the timing down. There are a few new weapons as well, including the Spazer Beam, which shoots three small lasers in a wide pattern, and the Plasma Beam, which is more focused but also much more powerful. The Ice Beam isn't as important this time around, since it no longer works on evolved Metroids anyway – only missiles will do the job, so it's even more important to both conserve them and hunt for more canisters.

The levels have also been restructured to be a little more linear. As you explore the caverns
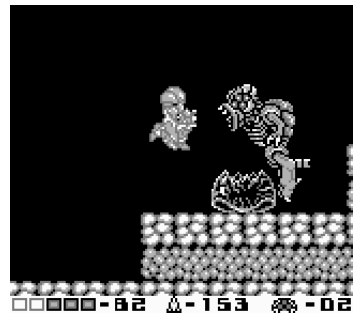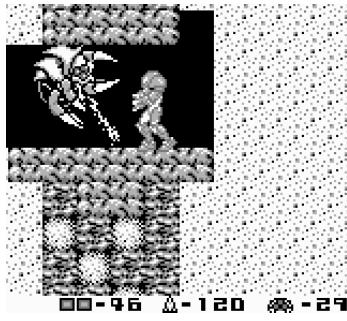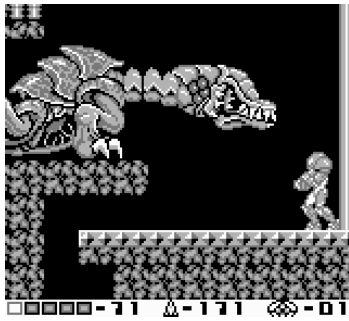
of SR388, you'll occasionally encounter pools of hazardous liquid, which blocks you from progressing deeper into the planet. There's a little indicator that shows how many Metroids are left to kill in the game – once you destroy all of them within a given area, an earthquake will be triggered and the liquid will disappear, allowing you to backtrack and continue downwards. The only indicator that you're close to a Metroid is their abandoned shell, sending your senses racing until you find it. It's legitimately terrifying when you come across one and it's the first to evolve into a more powerful form, one which you might not be ready to tackle.

The restrictive approach to level design has both its positives and negatives. On the one hand, it lets you focus on looking in a specific area, rather than needing to comb the entire game world for any remaining Metroids. On the other hand, many of the Metroids are still hidden, and with the existence of items like the Spider Ball, you're required to test every wall, floor, and ceiling.

This is only one aspect that makes *Metroid II* even more tedious than the original. The larger sprite means Samus is easier to see, especially against the dark background, but it also makes the screen feel more cramped, and it's hard to get a grasp on what's around you. The monochrome backgrounds don't do the game any favors, either – even though the original game was rather repetitive, there were still many distinctive areas in both design and color. Here, it's just caves and more caves, and even though the background tiles are a little different, without any color, they still lack variety. Technically

the game is divided into areas by the liquid, but there's not much visual distinction between them, and outside of the Metroids (and one optional boss fight), there aren't any other bosses. Plus, given that the level layouts don't adhere to a mappable grid like its predecessor, it makes navigating even more haphazard. Once again, there's no auto-map either, so using a strategy guide makes playing the game much easier. There are also more weapons than before, but still no way to switch them without backtracking and picking one up again.

The final boss battle against the Queen Metroid is also incredibly difficult, even more so than the Mother Brain fight. It takes about 150 missiles to kill, though there are some alternate strategies, including getting into the queen's mouth and bombing from within its stomach, which will do some extra damage. Either way, you'll definitely need to have found enough missile canisters or energy tanks to finish the job.

Aurally, things are just as sparse. There are only a few pieces of music, with the surface theme being quite catchy. The rest are harsh and dissonant though, especially coming out of the Game Boy's sound chip. Still, it does create a harsh atmosphere that works in the game's favor, providing your ears can endure it.

And that's the general takeaway for *Metroid II*. Much like the original game, it's a harsh and frightening voyage, as you scramble around seemingly endless tunnels, digging deeper into a cavern filled with unknown terrors, all while hoping to just get some grasp on where you are and where you're supposed to be going. It's incredible that such a deep, expansive world could be

contained within a tiny cartridge, and on a system that could be stored away in your backpack. While it does grow tedious if you play for long stretches, there's still something satisfying about seeing the Metroid counter tick down each time you kill your namesake foes, and it feels like a huge undertaking once you've whittled them down to the single digits. Plus, between the original and the later games, the antagonists are technically other forces (like the Space Pirates) utilizing the powers of the Metroids for their own ends. Here, the Metroids, fearsome and ever-evolving, being wild creatures that care just for their survival and procreation, are the only real enemies.

The best moments in *Return of Samus* come at the end, where the Metroid counter is at one, and you think you might be coming upon the final encounter...only for Samus to discover an egg, which immediately hatches and the Metroid counter ticks back up to nine. These are actually the only "original-type" Metroids found in the game, compared to the evolved forms you fight elsewhere, though once you've got the Ice Beam, they're easily disposed of.

The game is also unusual in that it doesn't end in a timed escape sequence. Indeed, once you beat the Queen Metroid, a little baby Metroid hatches and mistakes Samus for her mother, causing her to spare its life and instead care for the creature. The trip back to the surface, with the baby Metroid nipping at Samus' heels and clearing otherwise impassable obstacles for her, is surprisingly calm and stress-relieving, as that kind gesture from Samus will eventually set off the story for the next game.
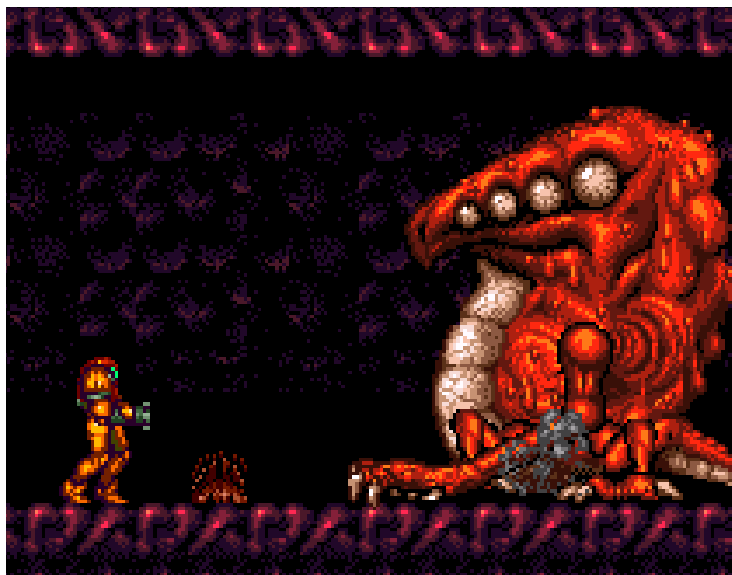
Super Metroid
Original Release: 1994
Platforms: SNES, WII, WIIU, 3DS, NSW

During the SNES era, many developers were honing their craft by iterating on ideas from the previous console generation. You can see this with the likes of *The Legend of Zelda: Link to the Past* and *Final Fantasy II/IV* (and its sequels), which not only greatly improve in graphics and sound but also in scope and mechanics. The single greatest example of this was *Super Metroid*, a brilliant game that showed the developers had studied what did and didn't work with the first two *Metroid* games, and created a title that codified many elements of the Metroidvania subgenre as we know it.

   Super Metroid is unusual for a Nintendo title, in that it actually acknowledges the previous games as part of a connected story. (See: The *Zelda* series as an example of them otherwise not caring much for these things.) Taking up right after the end of *Metroid II*, Samus delivers the baby Metroid she found to the Federation space research facility. This turns out to be a pretty bad idea, because as soon as she jets off back into space, the station is attacked by Space Pirates. Upon returning and docking, Samus explores the facility to find it mostly in ruins, with her old foe Ridley having captured the specimen. After escaping from the exploding lab, Samus takes chase back to the planet Zebes to (again) defeat the Space Pirates and prevent the Metroid threat from spreading further.

   These opening moments lean heavily on the player being familiar with the previous *Metroid* games, especially the first one. Once Samus lands on the surface, you're taken down through an elevator, working your way back through the devastated remains of Tourian and the areas where you had previously fought Mother Brain. You then end up back at Brinstar, in the area where you originally began the game. (There's even an energy tank hidden in the same spot in the ceiling.) After this you're routed back through the way you came, though, and then the new adventure really begins.

   Despite these opening similarities, the rest of Zebes is completely different from the way it was in the NES game. There's still Brinstar, now represented as an area overgrown with vegetation, and Norfair, still the land of lava, but there are a few new areas: Crateria, the area on the planet's surface; Maridia, which is mostly underwater; and the Wrecked Ship, the seemingly haunted remains of a crashed alien vessel. There are four main bosses now too, including the return of Kraid and Ridley, plus one each for the new areas: Phantoon, a one-eyed ghostly floating head; and Draygon, a sort of insect/lizard hybrid. There are no longer lairs for these bosses though, as with the expanded areas, they would've been redundant.

   Beyond the greatly expanded world, there are a huge number of

quality of life improvements. The single biggest one is an auto-map, which lets you view everything you've explored, along with a mini-map to help navigation during gameplay. There are also map rooms that reveal part of a given area, providing some idea of your surroundings. Furthermore, the map also marks rooms with a circle if there's an item present, giving you hints of where to look for goodies. Like *Metroid II*, there are regular save stations, and rooms to either replenish your health or restore your ammunition. The controls have been enhanced too, so you can aim diagonally upwards or downwards (using the shoulder buttons), and you can even "moonwalk", allowing you to move backwards while still aiming ahead of yourself.

The amount of items and weapons you need to find have been drastically expanded, adding in much of the arsenal from *Metroid II* (including the Spazer and Plasma Beams, and the Moon Jump). You can now combine several (though not all) beams into one, and can deactivate them at will. You can mix the Ice Beam with the Spazer and Wave Beam, for example, and since subsequent hits damage foes rather than unfreezing them, makes it much less of a pain to use. New weapons include Super Missiles and Super Bombs, which unlock different kinds of doors in addition

to the offensive benefits they provide. The Varia Suit is also required to enter high temperature areas, plus there's the Gravity Suit, which will let you move smoothly underwater, otherwise your agility and jumping height are greatly limited. Also new is the Grapple Beam, which lets you latch onto certain blocks, as well as the X-Ray Visor, to hunt for hidden passages. The Speed Booster lets you run much faster, allowing you to zoom over collapsing blocks, and, when you've built up enough speed, crash through certain types of blocks. Once you've built up that speed, you can also stop dead in your tracks and leap in a certain direction, with that same level of destruction, in a tricky maneuver called the Shinespark. This is used to find many otherwise impossible to reach items. Also new are Reserve Tanks, which are extra energy canisters that are only filled if you gain health power-ups while your energy is already filled, and can be set to replenish your health automatically if it gets too low.

Stylistically, the atmosphere is impeccable, being a perfect update of the feel of the original game while improving its specs for a 16-bit platform. Outside of the introduction, which uses some fancy rotation and scaling effects, the rest of *Super Metroid* is fairly understated, but it's still effective in its subtleness. Much of this is
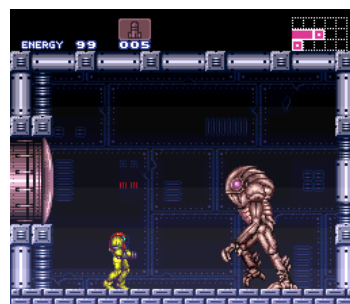
thanks to the brilliant soundtrack as well, giving each area a distinctive sound texture. While some jingles are reused from the original games, much of the tunes here are completely new. The booming drums of the Norfair theme, the chorales of the Brinstar theme, the triumphant, heroic sound of the Crateria music, where Samus' ship is parked, are all legends among SNES soundtracks. The boss themes are consistently excellent too, even when they're used in different ways – this is especially effective in the battle against the Spore Spawn, where the creepiness is accentuated by the plant monster's quick and hypnotic movement patterns.

Almost everything about Zebes is brilliantly designed, both subtly leading you in the correct direction while teaching you how all of the items work, as well as giving slight glimpses of what powers you might get later on. Right at the beginning, you'll find tons of blocks that can't be destroyed or impassable doors, teasing you with what's behind them until you can revisit later when properly equipped. While there are map rooms, which will display (most) of a given area in your auto-map, there's still plenty to explore on your own, and the game rarely gets you too lost. For example, near the beginning of the game, you're dropped into a pit
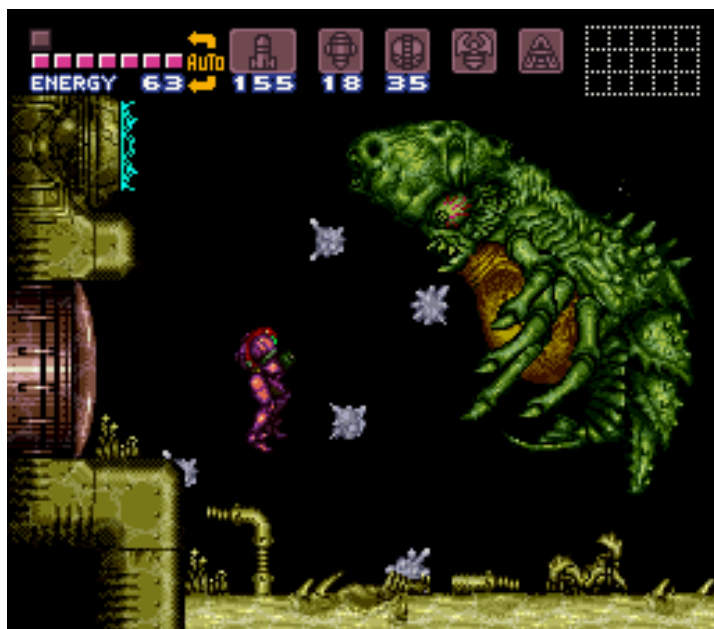
that's seemingly inescapable. The only clue is that there are little unkillable bugs traveling back and forth. Of course, this telegraphs to anyone familiar with the original *Metroid* that you can't get out until you find an Ice Beam, which will let you freeze the critters and climb out, but even those without prior knowledge will eventually realize that you need to push ahead before you can go back.

Finding most of the missiles and energy tanks in the first two *Metroid* games was mostly a matter of being extremely thorough – explore everywhere and bomb everything. *Super Metroid* is much smarter, by removing the tedium and instead asking you to put your mind to the test. There's still plenty of secret stuff of course, with many of the hidden items being given as rewards for solving fairly simple environmental puzzles with your various moves and weapons. It ends up being much more satisfying, even if the result of just

a few more missiles isn't necessarily all that special.

There's nothing in the way of tutorials outside of the opening demo either, which gives some clues to the various powers of your arsenal. Instead, you're supposed to learn from the environment. Despite Zebes being largely hostile, there are a few friendly animals which will demonstrate various abilities, including a wall jump move that's rather difficult to use consistently, but required in a handful of areas. In another spot, there's a door way out of reach, but a number of bricks that can be destroyed using the Speed Booster, so you're supposed to deduce that dashing will also let you jump up to much larger heights than usual. It also rewards creative thinking – right after you get the Super Bombs, you backtrack through a glass tube that runs through water. Though the game never explains this, you might be tempted to see if the Super Bomb does anything here –
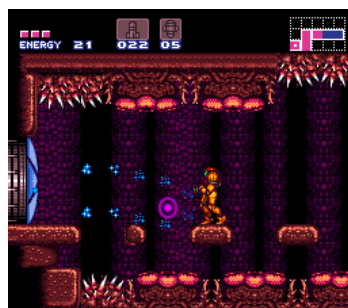
and it does! It'll crack the glass and let you explore the flooded area around it, giving you a glimpse of Maridia. (Though at this point in the game, you can't actually do anything until you get the Gravity Suit.)

Throughout your exploration, there are tons of memorable moments when dealing with tricky rooms or boss monsters. Easily the most memorable is the fight against Crocomire, a lizard-like creature which seems impervious to damage, but can be forced into lava by driving it to the edge of its platform. You think it's dead, so you turn around and walk a few steps back...then it pops out to attack again, only to have all of its flesh melt off and its skeleton fall harmlessly back into the lake of fire. It's actually surprisingly grotesque for a Nintendo game, even though there's no real blood.

The battle with Kraid is much more elaborate than before as well, seeing as he's grown from a monster about the size of Samus
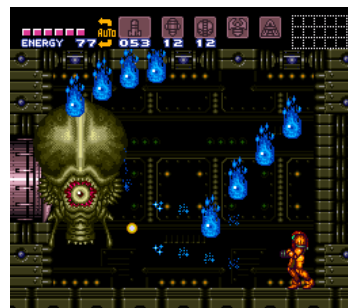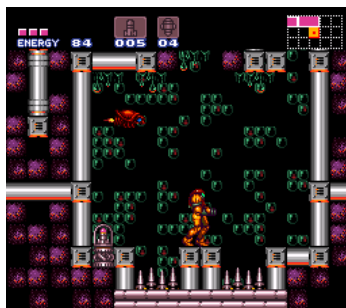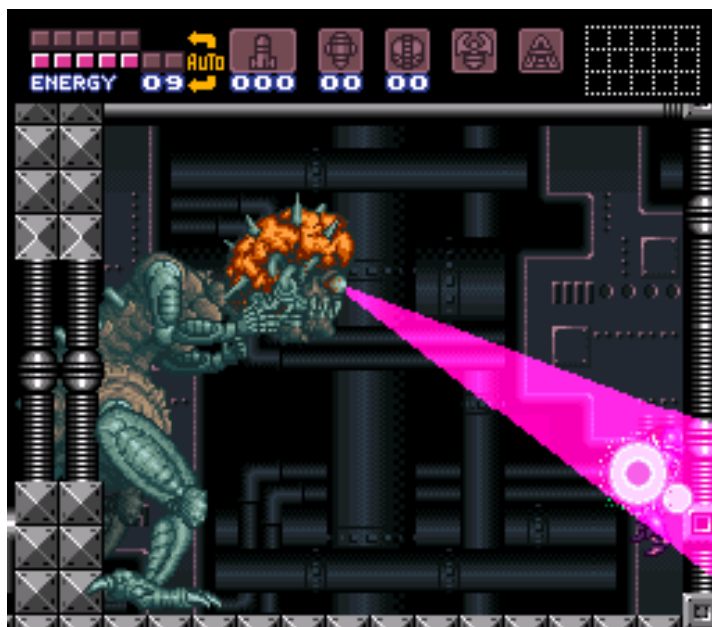
into a gigantic dragon that extends over two screens. The game even plays a few tricks on fans of the old games – one of the early Chozo statues, rather than giving you a power-up, instead comes to life and attacks!

There's also the final encounter with Mother Brain, who is no longer content to just sit around in a jar and now has its own hulking, mechanical body. She's impossible to beat, and an undodgeable attack seems like it will completely wipe out Samus... until the baby Metroid, now grown to gigantic size, swoops out from behind the scenes and saves her mother figure, providing her with the energy to fight back. As expected of the series, the game ends with a timed escape sequence (and an alternate quest to help save the friendly creatures who demonstrate your abilities), with your complete time and obtained item percentage giving you an incentive to explore further or replay the game. As with the

other games, these play into what kind of outfit Samus appears in at the ending.

Super Metroid is an almost perfect game, with the only real nitpicks being some small tweaks made in later *Metroid* games or other similar titles. Samus moves a little slowly compared to the way she does in *Metroid Fusion* and *Metroid: Zero Mission*, plus the ability to grab ledges in those games makes navigation in vertical areas much quicker. These points are definitely missed here. There aren't any warp devices or other ways to quickly move around the map, either. It's not a big problem for most of the main game, since you're generally guided to where you're supposed to go, even when backtracking, and the disparate areas do connect with each other at a few points. Still, it would've helped in the late game, when you have all of the powers and are looking for various extras that you couldn't reach before. In general, the difficulty level is fairly low too,

as the boss fights are well-designed but fairly easy once you know what you're doing. However, none of the later games really have as many memorable moments as this one, nor as consistently excellent soundtracks – the fact that many continue to arrange and remix the music from this one speaks to its quality.

The eloquent design of *Super Metroid* has inspired countless other developers and games (including *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, which together created the "Metroidvania" label). The fact that it still stands tall next to those, with many created decades later, is a testament to its everlasting appeal.
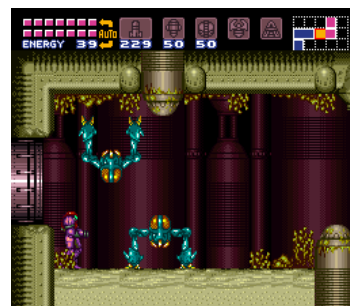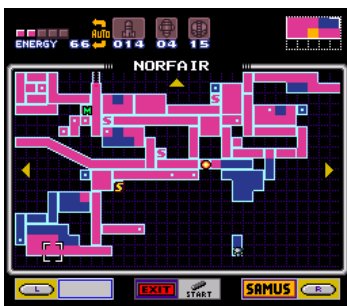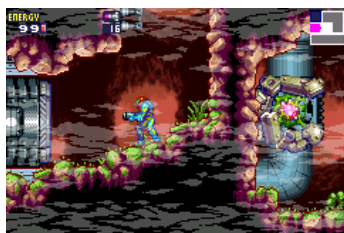
Metroid Fusion
Original Release: 2002
Platforms: GBA, WIIU, 3DS

The *Metroid* series skipped the Nintendo 64 era, so they made up for it in 2002 with the release of two *Metroid* titles on the same day. One of them was *Metroid Prime*, a fully 3D first-person shooter developed by American team Retro Studios, which at the time was met with skepticism. The other was *Metroid Fusion*, a 2D game for the Game Boy Advance made by Nintendo of Japan, including being directed by Yoshio Sakamoto and developed by some of the same staff as *Wario Land 4*. It was a glorious day of riches, though no one could've expected that the 3D "foreign" version was actually more faithful to the spirit of the old games than the Japanese one, which eschews much of the exploration in favor of a focus on action and storytelling.

After Samus' exploits in the previous games, the Metroids have basically been entirely wiped out from SR388. This has an unfortunate side effect though – they were the natural predators of the X virus, who have since proliferated and infected Samus. Almost near death, she is only saved thanks to an injection of Metroid DNA. As she leaves the facility, she receives another distress call – while she's cured, the X has run rampant throughout the Federation research station, infecting and destroying anything that comes near it. Since Samus is essentially vaccinated against the virus, she's immune to its effects,

and is called back to contain it and save the day once again. Since she's in a weakened state, she begins with few of her powers, and must upgrade her arsenal and abilities by either visiting Data rooms administered by the Federation's computer, or killing the bosses that absorbed her powers. There are still colored hatches, but these are unlocked via security rooms, rather than being opened by her weaponry.

The game plays similar to *Super Metroid*, but with a number of tweaks and control enhancements, many due to the lesser amount of buttons on the Game Boy Advance. Most of this works in the game's favor. You no longer need to hit the Select button to cycle through weapons – just hold down the R button to activate missiles, then fire. Similarly, hold R when in Morph Ball mode to drop Super Bombs. Super Missiles are equipped automatically when you get them and don't consume any different (or more) ammo than normal, they're just more powerful. There's no dash button either, as Samus naturally walks a little faster, and power dashes automatically after gaining enough speed. The nicest addition is the ability to grab onto ledges, which makes platforming much easier.

However, not everything was carried over from *Super*. The grappling hook is gone, as is the X-ray Visor (Super Bombs have an effect of showing some hidden
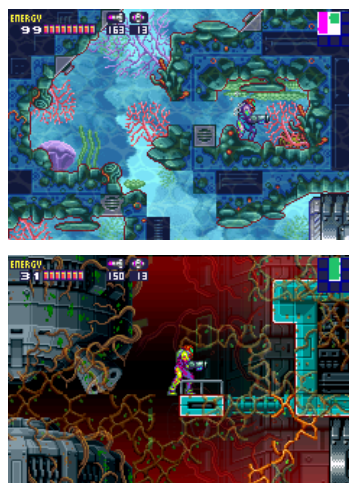
stuff). Some of the more unusual abilities, like dropping several bombs after charging your weapon, as well as the Crystal Flash healing skill, are gone too. You can't de-select obtained power-ups either, though there's really no reason to here as all weapons are just upgrades of your current one anyway. Reserve tanks are gone too, as they probably seemed redundant.

There's now an additional piece of lore added to the canon – given that the only way to kill Metroid larva in previous games was to freeze them, it's revealed that they can't survive at low temperatures. And with Samus' DNA now being part-Metroid thanks to the vaccine, she's now susceptible to cold as well. Because of this, Samus can't use a regular Ice Beam, so instead you get Ice Missiles, which are easier to use. This aspect is fairly quickly forgotten, though, once you obtain the power-up that lets her survive in low temperatures.

Now, *Super Metroid* had an intro text scroll, but it was fairly short, and any further text basically disappeared until the ending. In *Fusion*, this type of narration is constant. Samus is paired up with an AI commander, whom she names Adam after a previous compatriot of hers and will instruct her to the next goal. The flow is: find a navigation room, get your orders, find the goal, and then report back for more orders. You're rarely allowed to deviate from this, either. Furthermore, the ship has a central hub and is divided into six discrete

habitats – SR388, Tropical, Aquatic, Arctic, Pyro, and Nocturnal – each accessed via a central elevator. It makes logical sense, but it's so orderly that it removes the sense of one big, interconnected world. Plus, the navigation room also gives a map layout, and while it doesn't always pinpoint the exact location you need to go to (the "security" rooms which open locks are off the map, so your commander says), you rarely need to explore very much. This is in contrast to *Super Metroid*, which had map rooms but also made you wander around before you found them.

Super Metroid was restrictive at points, but it also organically led you in the right direction, and let you wander off-course if you wanted. *Fusion* barely gives you any such freedom. It does work mostly in the same manner though, in that it will often stick you in small areas and force you to look for hidden stuff in order to advance. This results in far less opportunities for sequence-breaking, though there are a couple, one of which the designers even anticipated and include a hidden message from Adam if you achieve it.

To be fair, *Fusion* gives less and less direct guidance as the game progresses. You'll often be led back into previously visited habitats and need to explore all of the areas well outside of the mapped area. Plus, even though it's not displayed, there are times where you break through walls in the habitats and enter others outside of the main elevator, so

the worlds are (slightly) connected. Still, it never feels like you're really let off of the game's leash. Even at the finale, it denies you the ability to explore the rest of the ship before the final encounter, because it simply locks off where you're not supposed to go (unless you know about this event beforehand and specifically avoid it in order to prevent getting railroaded into the conclusion). You can always reload your save after you've beaten it to continue to explore, but it's still annoying.

A lot of this in service of the narrative, mostly in personifying the X virus as an ever-present antagonist. How do you anthropomorphize a virus? Easy – by making it like the baddie from *The Thing*, the 1982 movie by John Carpenter, in allowing it to absorb and take whatever shape it wants. Here, X takes some of the power suit parts discarded during the medical procedure that saved Samus' life, and basically turns itself into an evil Samus clone called the SA-X. What's more, the procedure left Samus in a different suit, with a sort of off-kilter coloring. Here, the SA-X basically looks as Samus is supposed to, so the "real"-looking one is in fact the evil one.

The best moments of the game are when you encounter the SA-X. The AI commander warns you that under no circumstances are you to engage it, because it will absolutely destroy you. And it's not lying – any of the few times where the SA-X pop ups, the music stops, and the only thing you can hear are its echoing
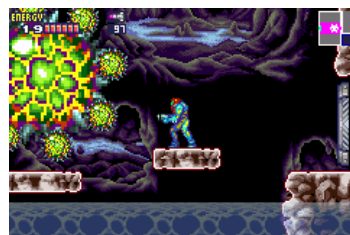
footsteps. At some points, you just need to sit still until it passes; in others, you need to stun it and scramble past it in order to find a hiding place, and eventually safety. These situations are always harrowing, but there are also moments where, like *Super*, it plays with *Metroid* series conventions to take you by surprise, like one part when the electricity is cut and you're stuck on an elevator between zones.

This game is also more focused on action. Both Samus and her enemies move faster, and incoming attacks inflict more damage. To counterbalance this, every defeated foe will unleash a form of the virus, which can be absorbed by Samus to either increase health or missiles, depending on its color. If you're not quite fast enough, this virus can either spawn new enemies, or mutate current ones into stronger forms, an element which is occasionally used to solve some of the game's puzzles.

In general, *Metroid Fusion* really isn't that much harder than previous games in the series, except for the boss fights, most of which are substantially more difficult than the earlier 2D games. In many of those cases, simply

having enough health or missiles was enough to defeat your foes, but here, you really need to understand their patterns in order to uncover their vulnerabilities. The most taxing battle is against Nightmare, a biomechanical being whose weak point is so precariously placed that you need to coax it into the right position to be able to attack it consistently without taking damage. There's also a battle against Nettori, which recalls the fight against Mother Brain in the original game, except in a plant-like environment.

Once you kill a boss, you'll also need to deal with the virus that infects them. These are rarely too difficult (they're mostly the same with some variations throughout), especially given that they'll provide health and missile replenishments if you hit them, but they can prove troublesome if you only survived the fight by the skin of your teeth, as they can still kill you if you're not careful.

However, the battles actually get easier as the game goes on. You'll encounter Ridley here, whose corpse has been frozen, but the fight is extremely simple. For all of the build-up to how powerful the SA-X is, the actual fight against it is rather rote. And you

get to fight an Omega Metroid right at the end, but perhaps because it's under a time limit, it goes down too quickly.

A special mention must be made of both the graphics and the spritework. Compared to the other *Metroid* games, which all took place on dark planets, *Fusion* is set on a space station – a common trope in other sci-fi games, but given the different biomes of the facility, it has more visual variation. Owing to the lack of a backlight on the original GBA models, the visual style is also much brighter and colorful. The boss designs are all fantastic too, especially the gravity-controlling Nightmare, whose face slowly begins oozing off as you break apart its armor.

Sonically, the music is a substantially different style than the tunes in *Super Metroid*, though it's suitably atmospheric in its own way, despite the typically low GBA quality. The only downside is that the main theme, a heroic little tune, is played a little too often. You'll hear it constantly when traveling into different zones, and it only changes to that area's theme after exploring a bit.

The main issue with *Metroid Fusion* is the same one for every

corrupting large areas of my Power Suit.

As for me, one life ended... yet I survived, reborn.

The Quarantine Bay is ahead.
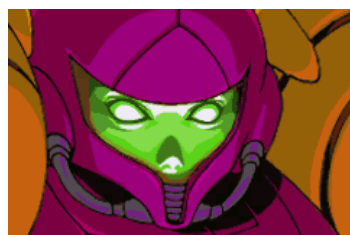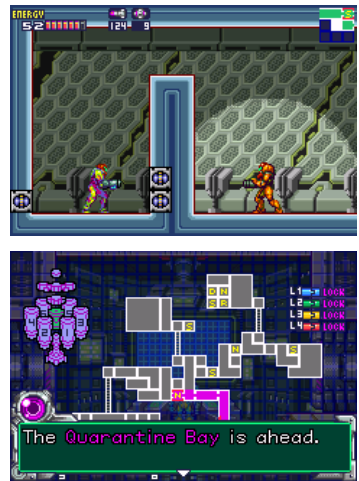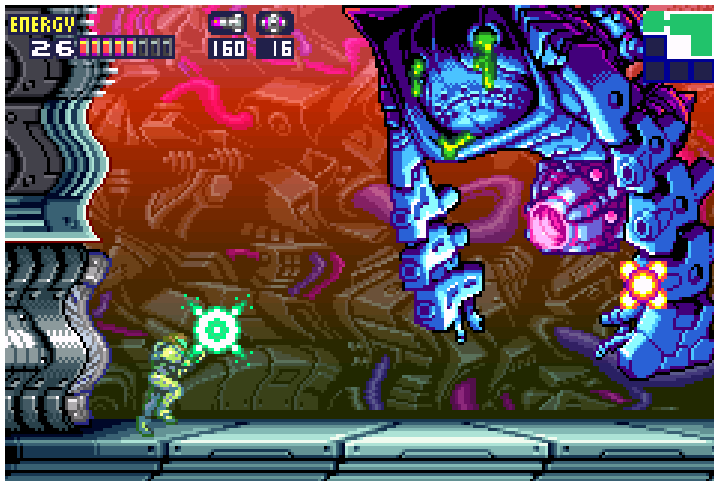
beloved franchise that deviates from an established formula. With the earlier *Metroid* games being so focused on exploration, if you take so much of that away, is it really a *Metroid* game? The game still looks and feels like one, plus the focus on action and storytelling generally works in its favor, so the change isn't entirely bad. Still, it can't help but feel like a small disappointment. There's a sense that the developers didn't really like how open-ended the previous games were, especially for younger players, and wanted to create something specifically for them, rather than series veterans. This is even seen in the way that the computer asks if you understand each and every objective (if you say no, it simply repeats itself).

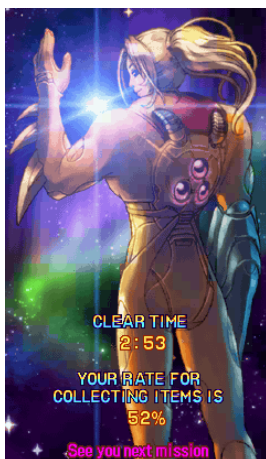However, the disappointment can largely be felt due to the circumstances of its release. At the time, there were very few other similar games, outside of the portable *Castlevania* games that Konami was releasing. In the subsequent years, the Metroidvania subgenre became more popular, especially in the Western indie development scene, making such titles more prevalent, especially seeing how they embrace the exploratory spirit of the older games rather than shying away from it. In that context, *Fusion*'s flaws are more forgivable, since it's just a different take on the same formula. Still, this focus on action and narrative predicated the game's follow-up from Nintendo's Japanese branch, *Metroid: Other M*, which was met with much more disappointment.

Owing to the series' overseas popularity (and launching simultaneously with *Metroid Prime* for the holiday season), *Metroid Fusion* was actually released in North America, Europe, and Australia first. The Japanese release, published a few months later in early 2003, adds in both easier and harder difficulty modes. Additionally, as in previous games, you get different pictures of Samus, either in or out of her power suit, based on both your found item percentage and completion time. These were drawn by Kenji Ishikawa, who also illustrated the manga being serialized in *Monthly Magazine Z* at the time. A handful of extra ones were also added to the Japanese release. Some of the enemy names are different too: Serris is Ishtar, Pogo is Zazabi, and Yakuza is Gedu. There's also a "Kid's" mode which re-writes the dialogue to use less kanji. This has different pictures for the ending that were added specifically for the Japanese version. Beating *Metroid Fusion* and connecting it to the GameCube via system link will unlock a few things in *Metroid Prime*: an emulated version of the NES version of *Metroid*, as well as an optional Fusion suit skin for the main game.

CLEAR TIME
2:53
YOUR RATE FOR COLLECTING ITEMS IS
52%
See you next mission

CLEAR TIME
2:18
YOUR RATE FOR COLLECTING ITEMS IS
71%
See you next mission

CLEAR TIME
9:10
YOUR RATE FOR COLLECTING ITEMS IS
100%
See you next mission

CLEAR TIME
1:30
YOUR RATE FOR COLLECTING ITEMS IS
100%
See you next mission

Metroid: Zero Mission

Metroid: Zero Mission
Original Release: 2004
Platforms: GBA, WIIU

The dual release of *Metroid Prime* and *Metroid Fusion* cast a new spotlight on the overall series, bringing in a number of new fans. But while *Super Metroid* was still perfectly playable for modern gamers, the first two games lacked many of the accommodating features that later entries had implemented. To that end, Nintendo developed *Metroid: Zero Mission*, a ground-up remake of the first game in the style of *Super Metroid* (and using a few elements from *Metroid Fusion* as well).

The game thankfully eschews the wordiness of *Fusion*, as the introduction delivers a simple message: "Emergency Order: Exterminate all Metroid organisms on Planet Zebes and defeat the mechanical life-form, Mother Brain." Samus' ship rockets onto Zebes, lands, and then she makes her way down to Brinstar for the game to begin. There's a brief monologue from Samus as well as a few comic book-style cutscenes during key moments (mostly as she rides elevators between zones), but until the last section of the game, there's almost none of the pervasive story found in *Fusion*, which is refreshing.

The controls feel a lot like that game, though Samus moves quicker here. The visual style, however, is unique among the series. *Super Metroid*'s dark visuals just weren't going to work on the Game Boy Advance, particularly on the models that came before the backlights, so instead it replicates the basic graphics of the first game and redraws them in a bright, comic book style. This also adds quite a bit of depth to the backgrounds, which were originally just stark black, while including some contrasting colors to certain areas. The music is similarly updated, with remixes that still manage to sound fantastic coming through the system's low fidelity sound system.

The world map is patterned roughly after the original *Metroid*, but it's still been heavily revised to feel more organic, cutting down on the repetitive series of halls and corridors while adding some unique obstacles to the ones that remain. A number of unique enemies are featured here too, including some new minibosses, like a one-eyed worm that stalks you through the halls of Brinstar until you defeat it, and a slug (that later morphs into a winged insect) you face off against in Norfair and in Ridley's Lair. (Remnants in the ROM indicate that you were meant to fight Crocomire from *Super Metroid*, too.) A few new areas have also been added, including the surface (Crateria), as well as the Chozo Ruins.

Some of the items are placed in roughly the same area, but others have been moved to less hidden areas, like the Ice Beam. Most of the power-ups found in *Super* (the Speed Booster, Plasma Beam, and Super Bombs) have been added, as well as the Power Grip,
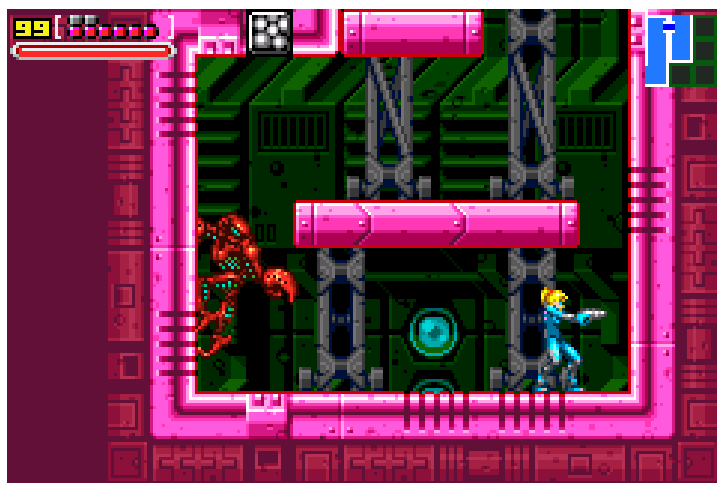
which lets you grab onto ledges like in *Fusion*. There are also mystery upgrades that your suit can't quite figure out (until it's upgraded near the end of the game), but let you destroy certain types of blocks.

Certain Chozo statues will point you towards your next goal, but they work here as they did in *Metroid Prime*, merely pointing at a general location, which is often in unmapped territories. There are still map rooms that fill out most of the area, but there's plenty left to explore in order to find them. In other words, it's a good halfway point between the sometimes aimless wandering of the older games, and the super explicit guidance from *Fusion*.

But with this, the game is also much more linear. Certain items that were optional in the original game are now mandatory, like the Varia Suit (needed to sustain the heat of Norfair) or the Screw Attack (required to destroy certain blocks). You also used to be able to fight the minibosses in either order; now, it's required to fight Kraid first. It's also a substantially easier game. The venture through Tourian used to be harrowing, but now you're so powerful, with weapons that aren't just optional but stuff you need to find, that the Metroids are more like casual annoyances than something to really fear.

Also, the game no longer ends once you destroy Mother Brain and escape. Instead, while Samus is flying away from Zebes, she's shot down by the Space Pirate Mother Ship and forced

back onto the planet's surface. Seeing how the Power Suit was damaged during the attack, this is the first time you get to play as Samus in her Zero Suit outfit, which makes its first appearance in this game. She only has a stun gun in this form, and most of her other powers (save for the Power Grip) are gone too. You need to infiltrate the pirate ship in this section of the game, make your way to the Chozo Ruins, and get a new Power Suit before you can properly fight back and escape for real. Some elements of this area are stealth-focused, as you try to hide from the eyes and spotlights of the pirates, but there are many points where it's impossible to avoid being seen, so you just have to run and crawl until you get to a safer area. It seems to be an attempt to recall one of the times in *Metroid Fusion* where you need to escape from the SA-X, though on a much larger scale.

This part feels much different from other *Metroid* games, obviously, and while it goes on a little too long, it does make for a nice change of pace. Plus, it's pretty gratifying to regain the Power Suit and be able to totally crush all of the enemies that previously hounded you. These additions also retroactively introduce some of the elements from later in the series, particularly the suit's connection with the Chozo, as well as making Ridley out to be the true recurring antagonist of the series.

Although it's not all that clear, you actually can re-enter the main hallways of Zebes in this

final area, although only after a certain point. There's nothing mandatory to do there, but you can use it to pick up any items you may have missed. However, since the final encounter isn't all that difficult, it's not like you really need to go out of your way to do so unless you want a higher item completion percentage.

Still, even with all of the added stuff, *Metroid: Zero Mission* is a short game. The new areas in the main game are tiny, so it's still just two main bosses, the Mother Brain fight in Tourian, and then the Zero Suit section. Even without speed running it, an average play time will probably take about three or four hours, primarily because Samus moves so quickly here, and from there being very little room to actually get lost.

As with *Fusion*, there are plenty of arguments among *Metroid* fans regarding whether or not the feeling of being alone and lost within the labyrinth of the game world is one of its essential features. While aspects like this are definitely missed, *Zero Mission* introduces others to make up for it. A recurring theme is that Zebes is so hostile that the environment is a threat to everything in it, not just Samus. There are certain growths that are completely impervious to Samus' fire; the only way to destroy them is to hunt down a colony of little flea-like creatures, which hound Samus' suit but are otherwise mostly harmless. When you bring these things to the growth, the fleas will jump up and immediately destroy it for you. There are also vines that

capture some enemies for you; during one of the miniboss encounters, you actually find a larva entangled in one of these, and end up saving it in order to progress. However, once it hatches a few screens later, it'll end up attacking you, clearly ungrateful that you just saved it moments before.

The concept is also, on some levels, a bit redundant. *Super Metroid* also had you exploring Zebes, with almost all of the same power-ups. So with *Zero Mission*, it's basically just *Super Metroid* with a different graphical style and

music, using a map layout closer to the original game. That doesn't mean that the game isn't worth playing though, as the world design is still fantastic, and *Metroid* games are generally so brilliant that it's hard to complain about more of them. Plus, it doesn't entirely make the NES original useless either. Those with less patience for the eccentricities of 80s action games can probably just play *Zero Mission*, but others can experience the harsh difficulty of the older games, and revisit them with remodeled graphics and extra elements in the remake.

Indeed, this seems to be the intent of *Zero Mission*. Once you beat the main game, you actually unlock the original NES version. This is a little unusual, considering that it was also released as a standalone retail title for the GBA as part of the *NES Classics* series. The only distinction? In Japan, the equivalent Famicom Mini release used the FDS version. Conversely, all territories include the NES ROM version in *Zero Mission* instead (with a save feature to help alleviate the necessity of passwords, though that functionality is still there).
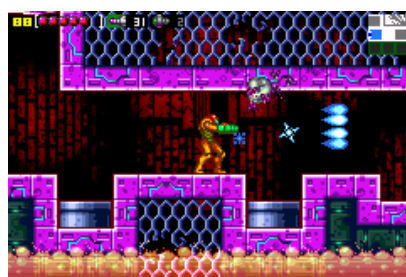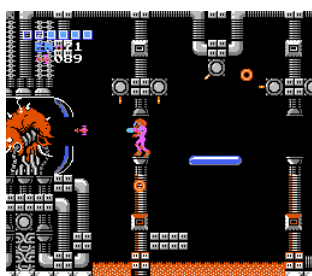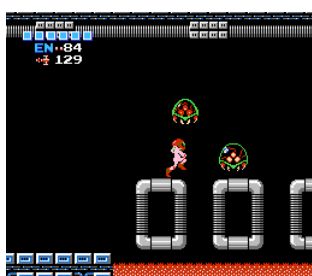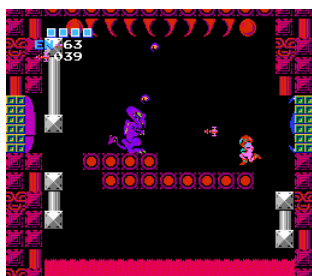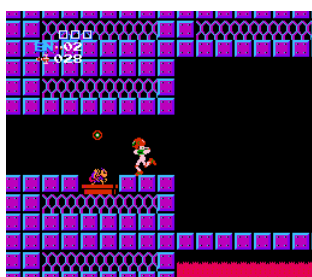
Screenshot Comparisons

Nintendo Entertainment System
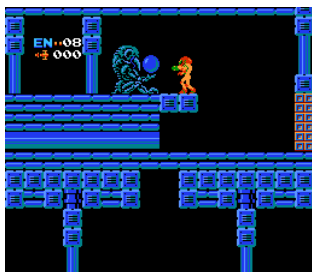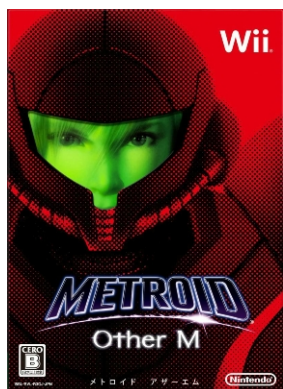

Game Boy Advance

Metroid: Other M
Original Release: 2010
Platforms: WII, WIIU

After *Metroid Prime 3*, Retro Studios shifted to work on *Donkey Kong Country Returns*, leaving *Metroid* back in the hands of the Japanese teams. They conceived *Metroid: Other M*, which is sometimes referred to as "Metroid Gaiden", as it was made by *Ninja Gaiden* developer Team Ninja, who's part of Tecmo-Koei. That title is fitting for other reasons, too. The word gaiden means "side story" in Japanese, and this game feels drastically different from most others in the series. It's also one of the most reviled entries overall – for a number of reasons, primarily its cinematic focus and rather dire storyline – though this reputation is probably harsher than it deserves.

The game takes place on a derelict space station called the Bottle Ship, where Samus runs into members of the Galactic Federation platoon but operates independently most of the time. You explore this facility, linked with a central elevator that takes you to three sectors with different biomes themed on plant, fire, and ice. Each room or corridor is part of a large, interconnected map, and your goal is to explore the entire structure, collecting upgrades until you're virtually unstoppable. Typical *Metroid* stuff.

That's where the similarities end. For starters, *Metroid: Other M* is a 3D game, but unlike the *Prime* titles, it's displayed from the third-person perspective (most of the time). Every part of the world is modeled in 3D – even linear spaces like corridors – which allows Samus to move in three dimensions. The game is played holding the Wii Remote sideways (with no option for a Classic Controller), and you run through areas of enemies, pulverizing them with your laser before they get too close. Combat and dodging are at the core of *Other M,* often requiring Samus to get up close and personal with the enemy, rather than taking them out from afar. When you enter a room, enemies don't stand around waiting for you to shoot at them from a safe distance. Instead, they hurl themselves at you, sometimes two or three at a time, and you need to be able to dodge out of the way by tapping a direction on the D-Pad at the last second. Follow-up a dodge with an expertly-timed press of the 1 button and Samus instantly charges her beam to full power, which you can let rip in the enemy's direction.

Every part of the game is carefully choreographed with a variety of enemy types mixed together, each with their own attack patterns and nuances, and learning how to effectively deal with them without taking too much damage is half the fun. Most enemies also tend to have a bit more health than you'd expect, which is why Samus now has melee takedown attacks. As you tussle with foes, they'll gradually enter a weakened state where they're prone to melee attacks.

When this happens, Samus will be able to use a takedown move, either to weaken them further or finish them off entirely.

These melee actions can also be used to interrupt enemy attacks, and they give Samus a real sense of athleticism and strength. They flow in and out of the rest of her moveset, sort of like special moves in a fighting game. It's also a way to present cinematic action similar to Quick-Time events, but without the distracting button inputs flashing on screen, or tedious button mashing that tend to typify them.

It's nothing if not stylish. There's a slickness running through every part of *Other M,* from its combat encounters to the cutscenes to the way Samus moves. Unlike *Super Metroid* or *Metroid Prime*, *Metroid: Other M*'s heroine is designed like a sports car, with bright, reflective colors and a sense of sleekness and athleticism in every movement. This is a Samus that puts her whole body into whatever she's doing, and the animation conveys body language in a way that very few games manage to do even today. One of the greatest joys of *Other M* is simply watching Samus dash from one end of a corridor to another, her feet creating just the right amount of impact against the floor to help convey a sense of weight and agility all at once. One of the game's bosses can even be

defeated using the Shinespark. It isn't required to beat him, but learning the timing to pull it off feels great, especially once you're good enough to consistently replicate the technique during repeat playthroughs.

Finally, there's the more unusual aspect of the combat: first-person aiming. At any point, no matter where you are, you can point the Wii Remote at the television to enter a first-person aiming mode, which can be used to fire missiles. If you stop pointing and go back to holding the remote sideways, the action goes back to third-person. There are no buttons involved – you're literally required to perform a physical action in real life to aim, and enemies are designed to interrupt you. This makes for an intense back-and-forth with enemies, as you try to find opportune moments to go into first-person and let off a couple of missiles, while they do everything they can to knock you out of it. Boss encounters in particular require heavy use of this ability, which often makes them frantic, stylish, reflex-intensive affairs. This is also important because you can only use missiles in first-person mode. It does require a fair bit of controlling juggling, and the Wii sensor isn't always the best at keeping up with switching between the two modes, so this aspect isn't quite as well

integrated as the rest of the combat. It also feels like it's an unusual compromise between the "classic" third-person *Metroid* games and the (then) modern first-person *Prime* games.

The game's camera serves to present Samus and her antics in the best possible light, too. Because *Metroid: Other M* is played using a Wii Remote held sideways, there's no way for the player to control the camera – nor is there a need to do so. *Other M*'s camera constantly highlights the action from all sorts of dynamic angles to keep things interesting. In one room, you might control the action from a side-scrolling perspective. In another, it might change to a third-person view behind Samus's back. In yet another, you might see things play out from an overhead/isometric angle. Fascinatingly, none of this feels abrupt or disorienting in the slightest. Every single part of the game's world is constructed in a way that the camera sweeps or pans or zooms out to the appropriate viewpoint in an elegant, unobtrusive fashion.

Since the camera is constantly switching between so many different viewpoints, *Other M* handles this rather elegantly by having Samus auto-aim at enemies that are closest to her or directly in her line of sight. This frees the player up to focus more on

movement and dodging instead. The downside to the game's controls is that you're playing a 3D game using a digital directional-pad, rather than an analog stick, though you can get accustomed to it.

By the end of the game, you'll have settled into that familiar *Metroid* dance, dashing and jumping and navigating back-and-forth between areas, and *Other M*'s excellent camerawork will make your entire playthrough look like a well-choreographed demo. If you've ever wondered what a "cinematic" game from Nintendo might look like, this is it.

There are a few oddities as the result of the focus on action, however. Primarily, enemies no longer drop health or weapon restoratives. Missiles can be recharged at any time by holding the Wii remote vertically and holding the attack button, which leaves you defenseless for a moment. Health recharging works similarly, except you can only do it right when your energy is in the critical range. This takes a few more seconds, so it's crucial to find a safe moment to do it. Otherwise, the only way to replenish your health is through save station terminals. There's little in the way of new power-ups, though you do obtain the Accel Charge, which increases how quickly your charge shot powers up.

One of the more irritating aspects of the game are sections where you need to go into first-person mode to hunt for a specific item in the scenery. There's nothing to do here but rotate around until you've locked onto whatever it is the game wants you to find before you proceed. These are usually solved quickly, and while it feels like the designers wanted more opportunities to put you in Samus' visor, they just feel like a waste of time.

The action aspects of *Other M* are solid, but it's the narrative, both in the structure and the actual story being told, that the game takes the most criticism. *Other M* is a more low-key adventure than other *Metroid* games. There are no Space Pirates invading, no military-authorized mission to exterminate a planetful of Metroids, and no interplanetary travel. Instead, there's Samus and a bunch of her ex-military buddies, all locked up together on a spaceship housing illegal experiments, and getting picked off one by one as they try to get to the bottom of things. A few bosses return though, including Ridley and Nightmare (the latter from *Fusion*), as well as a hidden boss fight against Phantoon from *Super Metroid*.

The game's whodunit yarn is also woven into an examination of Samus' character, and this is one of the most lambasted elements of

Other M. This aspect largely focuses on the way Samus has grown and matured over the years, with an emphasis on her strained relationship with Adam Malkovich, her former commanding officer and mentor who's referenced in *Metroid Fusion*. (He also commands a ship called the VIXIV, a reference to Nintendo/Argonaut's 3D Game Boy game *X*.) It's the first in the series to feature fully voice-acted cutscenes, and the actress performing Samus' lines sounds extremely somber throughout the entire affair. (Her drone-like reading of the line "the baby", in reference to the Baby Metroid from the previous games, has been routinely mocked by players.) Over the next several hours, the game fiddles with a bunch of interesting ideas that action games rarely concern themselves with – depression, insecurity, the difference between strength and wisdom.

However, this all feels so out of place because, outside of the internal monologues of *Metroid Fusion*, Samus has never had much of a personality, and now all of these feelings are mapped onto a character that was mostly a blank slate. Some of Samus' backstory is similar to how it was presented in the manga, but very few people outside of Japan have access to that, and the canonicity of those are often questionable.

It's even more bizarre given that the game takes place between *Super Metroid* and *Metroid Fusion* – the themes it explores make sense for a rookie, not for a combat-hardened veteran. Plus, *Other M*'s unskippable cutscenes also mean that you have to sit through the exposition the first time you play, which takes about 10 hours, and that just kills the pacing. (These are skippable in replays.)

The narrative impacts the game in other frustrating ways, as well. Like nearly every other game in the series, *Metroid: Other M* has you start out with just a small subset of Samus' abilities. In other games, if this is explained, it's usually because Samus' suit was damaged and they need to be found on the mission. The justification for this in *Other M* is that because Samus is working with her old military unit again, her commanding officer needs to authorize use of her more advanced weapons and techniques, as they pose a very real danger to other human beings. This is all well and good, until Samus eventually runs into a volcanic area overflowing with lava, but isn't authorized to turn on her Power Suit's heat resistance until you're well into the sector and at a real risk of dying from the high temperatures. The game clearly wants your first lap of this area to feel a little more dramatic than usual, but justifies it with a story decision that makes no logical sense.

At the time of *Metroid: Other M*'s release, scenes like these gave rise to the notion that maybe Samus was being a little too subservient to her old commanding officer, and sparked a larger debate around father complexes, sexism, and the depiction of women in video games. What the story was trying to demonstrate was that someone can be both strong and vulnerable, confident and insecure, and most importantly, have trouble with authority but still understand the importance of being a team player. In retrospect, perhaps using Samus Aran, and the *Metroid* series in general, wasn't the best place to tell this story.

What's most striking is that *Other M* wasn't created by people new to the *Metroid* series. Rather, it was directed and written by Yoshio Sakamoto, one of the original creators going back to the NES days. And it's clear that there's a mismatch in expectations between how he views this game versus the fanbase's opinions. While Sakamoto wanted cinematic action, *Metroid* fans wanted to explore maze-like caverns and space stations. Sakamoto also wanted to explore Samus' character, but fans greatly preferred the silent version and letting their heads fill in the gaps. It's clear this was the direction Sakamoto was taking the franchise after *Fusion*, though, so it's not like *Other M* emerged out of nowhere.

The story is a major reason why *Other M* is so contentious, but it's only part of the issue. For starters, it's quite linear in terms of progression. This is very much the follow-up to *Fusion* in that there's not much actual exploration, as the route to your goal is pretty well-mapped. You just need to poke around the scenery a bit to get there. There's backtracking, but as in *Fusion*, the story dictates when you're allowed to do so.

Then there's the music. If you go into *Metroid: Other M* expecting the melodious synths of prior games, you're going to b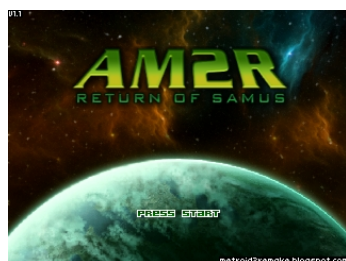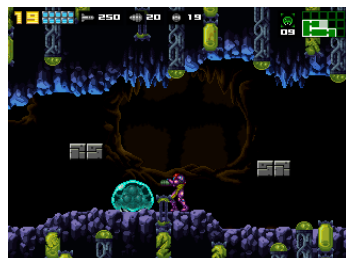e disappointed. Most of the game's soundtrack is ambient and its presence is barely felt, with only a few tracks really standing out.

Finally, there's the art direction. *Other M* is no *Metroid Prime*. On a character animation level, it looks fantastic and feels incredibly smooth, but lacks a lot of the environmental beauty of the *Prime* games, which had set expectations very high as far as art and design sensibilities go. It's definitely not an ugly game, though. *Other M* lets you go into first-person mode wherever you are, which means that each area had to be designed to look good upon close scrutiny. This is quite the technical feat.

Metroid games tend to receive widespread acclaim, whereas *Other M*'s reception was mixed. It has a fairly poor reputation among the fanbase, particularly since it was the last "true" game in the series after the *Prime* titles. For the next decade afterward, there were only two middling 3D spin-offs for portable consoles, and a decent remake of *Metroid II* for the 3DS. It's hard not to get the impression that *Other M* did real harm to the franchise as a result, though it eventually recovered.

The contradiction of *Other M* is that it genuinely does look and feel authentic to the *Metroid* series, even if it changes up the structure, and the action-based elements were further elaborated with *Metroid Dread* a decade later. But at the same time, the story it's trying to tell probably would've been much better off with a character that wasn't so established, especially Samus, being one of the most prominent female protagonists in gaming. There's actually a pretty great game buried in there, even if it requires divorcing itself from so much of what came before it.
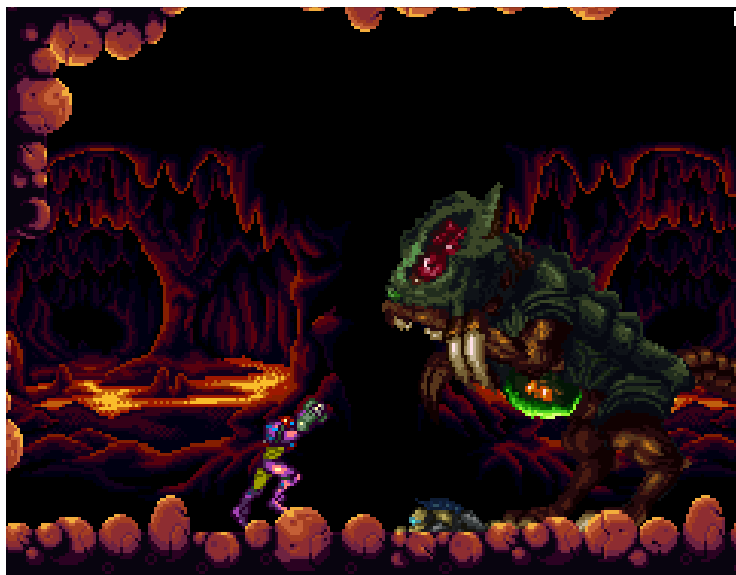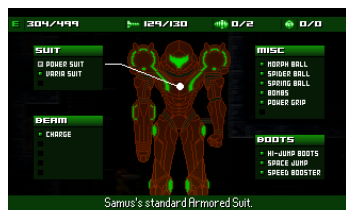
AM2R: Return of Samus
Original Release: 2016
Platforms: WIN

Samus's standard Armored Suit.

THE LOST RACE

The Chozo were an ancient and mysterious avian race. Incredibly advanced, they colonized many worlds, spreading their message of peace throughout the universe. There are historical records and legends of the Chozo visiting other races with whom they shared their knowledge and wisdom. These brief encounters led many

After *Zero Mission,* some *Metroid* fans began to wonder: if Nintendo remade the first game, then would they do the second? Unfortunately, the company moved away from 2D *Metroid* games entirely, focusing instead on the *Prime* series, then eventually followed it up with the (poorly received) *Metroid: Other M* release and other spin-offs. In the meantime, an Argentinean developer named Milton Guasti (under the moniker DoctorM64) worked on creating his own *Metroid II* remake in *Gamemaker: Studio* for Windows. It was dubbed *AM2R* ("Another Metroid 2 Remake"), a reference to other similar projects which ultimately never got off the ground. In 2016, after nearly a decade of on-and-off work, it was finally released for free…and then, predictably, issued a cease-and-desist order by Nintendo within a matter of days. Yet all that effort wasn't wasted, as the product is excellent, being something that could stand as a professional product if not for its background (and the fact that it was only released on computers).

The concept, of course, was to remake *Metroid II* in the same way that *Zero Mission* remade the original NES game. This means upgraded new graphics (some of which were taken from *Metroid Fusion*, *Zero Mission*, and *Super Metroid*), revised structure, additional bosses, new music, and tons and tons of quality of life improvements. Indeed, the game

basically plays the same as its GBA forebears. The map structure is based on the Game Boy game, though with significant changes. For example, SR388 was originally somewhat hard to map, because some parts overlapped with each other. With the auto-map right on the screen, *AM2R* can't pull off those types of tricks, so the areas were changed and expanded to accommodate this. The power-ups from later entries have also been added, including Super Missiles, Power Bombs, Speed Booster, and the Gravity Suit. Most of these additions – the map, the graphical variation, the music, the faster movement speed – alleviate most of the major issues of the original *Metroid II*.

Each of the areas has been given their own unique identity too, rather than just endless caves, including the robot factory near the beginning, a research center, and a cylindrical weapons testing facility called The Tower. One of the very first large rooms you encounter, with the gigantic structure in the middle, has also been turned into a shrine. Even though the structure is similar, many sections have been completely redesigned and added, and as a result are far more distinct and interesting. Furthermore, a few new elements have been added, like some parts where you remote control a hopping robot, or bounce into the cockpit of a drilling machine. The game also keeps track of how many Metroids are
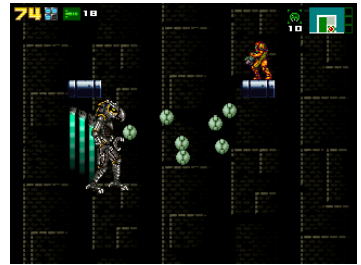
remaining overall (like the original game), and additionally notes how many are left in a given area before triggering an earthquake to proceed onwards. Taking a page from the *Prime* games, there's a log book that's automatically activated when entering new areas, providing some description and backstory for each one. Indeed, this isn't solely an extermination mission like the original game; technically, you're also supposed to be looking for a missing Galactic Federation squadron who, as you'll eventually learn, didn't exactly end up with good fortunes.

Gameplay-wise, the Metroid behavior has changed to varying degrees. Alphas aren't much different, though they can only take damage on their underside, but the rest have been given new moves and have more elaborate attack patterns. The Queen Metroid fight has been greatly expanded, as well. With this are some extra boss fights, including with the evil Chozo (AKA Torizo) statue (similar to *Super Metroid*), an encounter with Serris (taken from *Metroid Fusion*), and a few new bosses, including a mechanical unit known as The Tester, which floods the screen with projectiles in vaguely bullet hell-type patterns.

Visually, SR388 doesn't quite have the unique color schemes of *Fusion*, or the comic book-style art of *Zero Mission*, being more subdued like *Super*. Furthermore,

many of the assets used here were initially created for a portable game machine, and when reworked to fit a 4:3 aspect ratio for a monitor, this makes everything feel a little small and zoomed out. It doesn't really harm the game, though. The soundtrack is fantastic too, consisting primarily of remixes of past tunes but done in a similar style to the *Prime* games. This includes an outstanding version of the surface theme, as well as the Hydro Station that arranges the Brinstar theme from *Super* so subtly that it may as well be its own theme.

AM2R is well-paced and generally not too difficult, especially since save rooms also now restore health and ammo a la the *Castlevania* games. Some boss fights are still considerably challenging though, and it's a little longer than the other GBA games when just doing a standard run. Beyond the bosses and music, there are a ton of nods to other *Metroid* games too, like some references to Phazon (from *Prime*), as well as ships designed like the ones from the other *Prime* games. It's definitely the work of someone who's a big-time fan of the series.

Still, while the level design is excellent, it can't help feeling like the puzzles aren't quite as interesting as the GBA games. That's to be expected to an extent, considering there's only so much you can do with the items given, and there aren't any new ones. If anything, the only minor

downsides are the occasionally tedious Metroid fights – they're better than they were before but they're still pretty samey, especially when you get to the tougher and more aggravating ones. Even then, that's still consistent with the original. It does ditch one of the cooler moments of the Game Boy game though, as you whittle the Metroid total down to zero and expect a final encounter, only for an egg to hatch and you need to fight nine more. This battle still occurs, but the global Metroid counter now accounts for them, so it kind of ruins the surprise. Other than these (extremely minor) nitpicks, *AM2R* is a brilliant remake, and especially impressive considering it's the effort of a single fan.

While the developer stopped working on the title and ceased distributing it officially after Nintendo's notice, some fans have provided subsequent patches that add features and fix bugs (and even corrects the issue with the Metroid counter at the end). The source code was additionally made public in 2020, allowing for even more improvements. While it seems like Nintendo was being needlessly cruel at the time, at least they let it be released, so it's still easy to find from various sources if you search around. Plus, the work that Guasti put into this game earned him a job at Moon Studios, the developer of *Ori and the Blind Forest*, a very *Metroid*-inspired title.
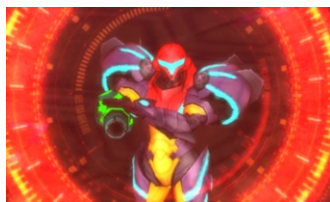
Metroid: Samus Returns
Original Release: 2017
Platforms: 3DS

The *Metroid* franchise was in a bad place in 2016. The series seemed all but killed off thanks to the poorly received *Metroid: Other M* for the Wii, and when Nintendo did bring the series to the 3DS, it was as a squad-based shooter, *Metroid Prime: Federation Force*, a game that almost no one actually wanted. While the unofficial *Metroid II* remake, *AM2R*, was hugely welcomed by fans, it was also taken down at the request of Nintendo within a matter of days. It seemed like Nintendo was being the enemy here, after treating the series so poorly for so long. What the public didn't know, though, is that they were working on their own *Metroid II* remake, which was eventually released in 2017.

With Retro Studios seemingly no longer involved with *Metroid*, Nintendo teamed up with MercurySteam, the Spanish studio that worked on the *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* titles. However, the management structure was similar: the game was produced in Japan by Yoshio Sakamoto, and various aspects, including the soundtrack, were taken care of by the Japanese staff, while the rest of the game was handled by MercurySteam. They were chosen due to their work on *Mirror of Fate*, the portable spin-off for *Lords of Shadow* which was only superficially a *Metroid*-type game, but apparently impressed Nintendo enough to give them the go-ahead. The studio had originally pitched a

remake of *Metroid Fusion*, but Sakamoto requested *Metroid II*, as it was the only game in the series he hadn't worked on and he wanted to remold it in his own vision. As a result, the project became *Metroid: Samus Returns* (curiously missing a numeral and slightly changing the subtitle in a way that was familiar, but still indicated something new).

It comes as no surprise then that *Samus Returns* is less of a remake of *Metroid II* than a re-imagining of it. The basic concept remains the same – explore SR388, kill lots of ever-evolving Metroids – but otherwise so much has been added and changed that it's much different, and a far more drastic take on the concept than *Zero Mission* was to the original *Metroid*.

The most obvious change is the move to 2.5D, with a style similar to the *Metroid Prime* games. Despite the switch in developers, it's not only consistent but looks fantastic on the small screen. Samus' arsenal and skill set have been expanded to include everything from *Fusion* and *Zero Mission*, barring a few changes and omissions. It does run at 30 FPS, so it lacks the usual smoothness that comes with 2D titles, but the control is so tight and the speed is so quick that it's barely an issue.

Some tweaks to the controls have also been included. Samus is only moved by the analog pad, which feels a little weird for a 2D game, but becomes fluid enough

once you get used to it. The main reason for this is that you can now lock your position and aim in 360 degrees, allowing for much more accurate shooting. The combat is also made more interesting through the use of a new melee deflect attack. Many of the early enemies either have quick striking moves or frontal armor. This requires you to goad them into attacking you, countering, and then stunning them in order to emerge victorius. Both of these changes have the effect of making standard combat and boss fights much more interesting. In particular, the Metroid fights have been redesigned to take these skills into account, and are a lot more interesting than they were before. There are a few cases where damaged Metroids even escape and move between rooms, requiring you to hunt them down before you can take them out. It's infrequent enough that it's never annoying, though, and they never move too far anyway.

However, the counterattack becomes less important as the game goes on and you can obtain more useful abilities, like the Wave Beam, which shoots through almost anything (though it doesn't zig zag in a sine wave anymore, which is kind of disappointing). Many enemies start using charge attacks too, which can't be

countered. Consequently, it's a good idea but not relevant for long enough to be a big factor.

New to this game are Aeion abilities, charged by a separate power source called (yup) Aeion. The one you'll probably end up using the most is a type of sonar, which scans the immediate idea, maps the surrounding squares, and highlights any blocks that are destructible. Unlike *Zero Mission*, there are no indicators of where to go next, nor are there any map rooms, but this is a good alternative to the old X-Ray Visor that will help guide you without giving too much away. Other abilities increase defense (and protect you from poisonous plants) and greatly upgrade your beam's rate of fire. Finally, there's the ability to slow down time, useful for dodging certain rapid-fire turrets. There are a few Amiibo functions too, which can unlock Reserve Tanks for both health and Aeion, as well as the Fusion Suit. Frustratingly, while Amiibo typically just give bonuses, they're the only way to unlock these items and modes.

The Spider Ball was a big part of *Metroid II* but was removed from every 2D game after that. It returns here, though there are many more small Morph Ball mazes to make it more interesting. Also returning for the first time in

a while is the Grappling Hook, which lets you break certain bricks. The only major upgrade that's missing is the Speed Booster, though its functions have moved to other abilities. Using the time-altering Aeion ability, you can easily crush crumbling blocks (technically instead of moving faster, you're slowing down everything else, but functionally it's the same), and when you use Power Bombs in conjunction with the Spider Ball, you can launch yourself forward, similar to the Shinespark but easier to execute.

Other adjustments involve area progression. Rather than simply triggering earthquakes when you've destroyed the required amount of Metroids, you encounter a statue at the beginning of each area which highlights the number of strands of Metroid DNA required to lower the dangerous liquid. The level design is almost entirely different from *Metroid II* (other than the map making one large circle back to the surface), though there are some similarities – you'll notice that an early large room has both a health and an ammo regenerator hidden in the ceiling, like in the Game Boy game. The level layouts have a lot of large rooms like these, with plenty of vertical areas to jump around in, and are a lot of fun to maneuver through once you get
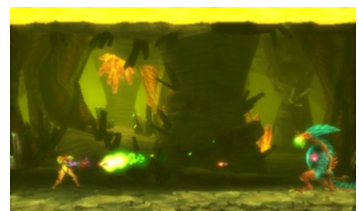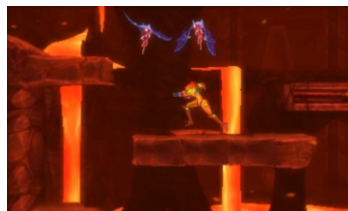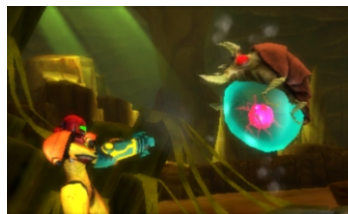
the Space Jump. Due to the linear nature of the world design, teleporters have finally been added to *Metroid*, allowing you to easily return to earlier sections, or simply hop around a given area.

A new foe has been added too – a rogue Chozo mining machine called the Digger. It first appears in a chase sequence, though you later need to fight it on its own. The finale has also been slightly altered so that, after fighting the Queen Metroid and making your way back to your ship, you have to fight (surprise!) Ridley. The trip back to the surface is also a little more involved, as you do have to fight enemies, while the Baby Metroid helpfully removes crystalline barriers that are otherwise impassable. The cinematic presentation of this whole section is fun, though it can't help but feel like a retread of other *Metroid* games, particularly the climax of *Super*. The ending does include the appearance of the SA-X though, tying it into *Fusion*.

The areas still don't have any distinct names beyond numbers, though nearly all of the rooms have distinct backgrounds and color schemes, so it's just all cavernous hallways. Some are illuminated with purple crystals, others have radiant blue reflecting from waterfalls in the background, and still others are overgrown with

vegetation. MercurySteam's take on *Castlevania* was always controversial, but it was still undeniable that they had brilliant graphic designers. There is, however, a bit of same-ness permeating everything here. The enemy types are new to this game, including slugs that leave poisonous slime trails and little robots that (annoyingly) sap your Aeion energy, but there's little variation through the later sections of the game.

The soundtrack additionally contributes to the overall blandness. Like the visuals, it borrows from the style of the *Prime* games (particularly the later ones), but since it's atmospheric rather than melodic, it just recedes into the background. Most of the rest of the music are remixes from old *Metroid* games. The arrangement here of the old *Metroid II* surface theme is good, if barely used, while the rest is well done but tiresome, especially as the *Super Metroid* Norfair theme blares every time you enter a volcanic room.

Of course there's also the question of how this one stacks up next to *AM2R*. It's obviously something of an unfair comparison, one being a fan project worked on by one person, and the other professionally created by a whole team of

developers. The 3DS game is certainly larger, more ambitious, and more polished. Still, *AM2R* does a few things better. The new bosses added some refreshing variety to that game, even though the actual Metroid fights are better implemented in the 3DS game. Recasting the areas with different identities and adding in log entries is something that would've benefited the 3DS game, too. Plus, *AM2R* easily has a superior soundtrack, and the remixes it features are far more interesting than the rather straightforward ones presented by the 3DS game.

As with *AM2R, Samus Returns*' main issues can be traced to this being a remake – sure, it may have drastically changed many aspects, but the things it did keep (the linear map layout, the somewhat repetitive Metroid battles) are mitigated but remain unresolved. And the Aeion powers are welcome, but not new or different enough to be notable. Still, the combat is extremely well done, and so are the level layouts. Especially given the shortness and relative simplicity of both *Fusion* and *Zero Mission*, it's refreshing that *Samus Returns* not only dials back the linear storytelling but also offers a larger, more interesting world to explore and run around in. And the final section of the game is still brilliant, especially

when you hear the distinct trills of the Baby Metroid as it flies alongside Samus.

MercurySteam certainly lived up to the *Metroid* name, and allowed them to work further on the series with *Metroid Dread*, a true continuation of the core

franchise, released four years later in 2021. Incidentally, it's such a tremendous improvement over *Samus Returns* in pretty much every way, it's a little hard to go back to this one afterwards.

One of the most amusing bits about this game being developed

by a Western company is that it has a reference to something that was only found in the American/European version of the original game. Beat the game in under three hours and you get the suitless, green-haired, red leotard Samus from the NES game!

Screenshot Comparisons
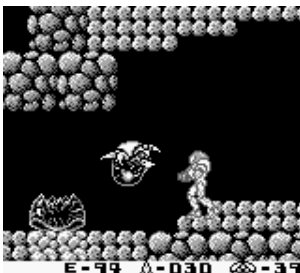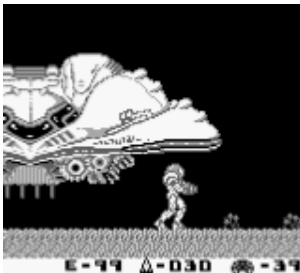
Original (Game Boy)	**AM2R (Windows)**	**Samus Returns (3DS)**

Metroid Dread
Original Release: 2021
Platforms: NSW

For most of the 2010's, the *Metroid* franchise was in a bad spot. *Metroid: Other M* had flopped, *Metroid Prime 4* was nowhere to be seen, and *Federation Force* was hardly a consolation. 2017's *Samus Returns* wasn't mind-blowing, but it still brought some life back to the series and showed off what developer MercurySteam was capable of. Nintendo must've agreed, because they put them in charge of *Metroid Dread*, released in 2021 for the Switch, the first game in the core *Metroid* series since 2002's *Metroid Fusion*.

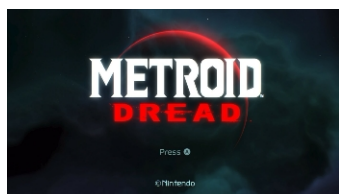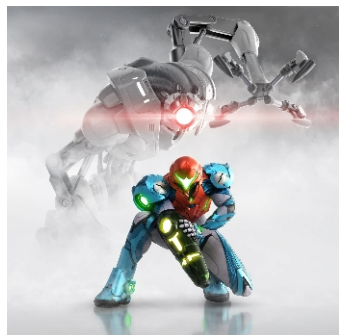*Metroid Dread* had been kicking around as a concept for awhile. It was initially announced as a DS game for release in 2006, and then dropped off the calendar with little explanation. It was revised internally in 2008, with a prototype created that has yet to be shown publicly, but this too was canceled. Producer Yoshio Sakamoto indicated that the DS wasn't powerful enough for the game he wanted to create. One of the mission logs in *Metroid Prime 3* made reference to a "Metroid project Dread" that ended up getting canned, though this was placed as a joke rather than an actual inter-game reference.

The story here is a direct sequel to *Fusion*, as Samus is sent to planet ZDR to investigate the spread of the X parasite. When she lands, she is immediately accosted by a Chozo warrior named Raven Beak and knocked out, awakening deep within the planet. Communicating with her ship, her only mission now is to reach the surface and escape, but not before building her strength and facing off against the figure that captured her in the first place. She also had to deal with robots that were dispatched for an exploratory mission and never came back; called EMMI (Extraplanetary Multiform Mobile Identifiers), these terrifying mechanical beings have been reprogrammed to stalk and capture Samus, who cannot defeat them directly.

Since *Metroid Dread* is developed by the same folks as *Samus Returns*, the controls and general feel are similar, though substantially improved. Samus now moves at an incredible speed, being able to cover a large amount of ground very quickly. Movement is still restricted to the analog pad, as with *Samus Returns*, since you can aim your weapon at any angle. However, everything is much smoother in *Metroid Dread* thanks to the Switch hardware and a 60 FPS framerate, as well as the larger resolution that allows for a more zoomed-out camera. The counter-attack is more fluid than before, though this entry doesn't rely on it quite as much, plus a new melee attack executed when running. Making Samus feel like a super agile, badass action hero has been the *Metroid* series' goal reaching back to *Metroid Fusion*, and with

the evolution continuing through *Other M* and up to *Metroid Dread*, it's never felt better.

The "dread" of the title seemingly alludes to the EMMI robots, as a way to constantly put Samus in danger. There are seven of them throughout the game, though their presence is restricted to certain zones on the map, which are presented with a chilly, monochromatic color scheme and film grain effects. The SA-X encounters from *Fusion* were the high points of the game, but there weren't very many of them, and they were all scripted. The EMMI skirmishes build off of this, but not only are they more prevalent but much more harrowing, due to the AI that commands them to ruthlessly hunt down Samus. Normal weapons are useless against them, so the only thing to do, at first, is to try to avoid them.

These aren't quite stealth segments like the kind seen at the end of *Zero Mission* – instead, they're more like games of tag, as you try to avoid detection from the EMMI, and then run like hell if you do. The EMMI hunts by sound so it will always have a vague idea of where you are if you're moving, though if it actually detects you with its scanner, it will more quickly and aggressively home in on your position. When its on high alert, the doors to the zone shut down, and the only thing to do is evade it until it calms down. If it

collides with Samus, there's an extremely short window of time where you can employ a counterattack and stun it, allowing you to escape, but this is so tough to hit regularly that if you're caught, you may as well just assume that you're dead.

In terms of layout, each EMMI zone has a central core. In a reference to the original *Metroid*, these look like small Mother Brains, complete with similar defenses systems that shoot out lasers and little ring beams. They're fairly simple to take down and even activate your Omega Beam powers, allowing you to destroy an EMMI. You can't just run up and shoot it, though – you need to find an appropriate spot that places enough distance between Samus and the robot, then hammer its head for a few seconds with a rapid-fire laser. When aiming this weapon, the viewpoint switches to an over-the-shoulder camera, allowing you to more easily target its weakpoint. With its shield down, you can then charge up a more powerful laser and take aim at its head for the final killing blow. This will usually grant you a new power, as well as letting you navigate the EMMI zone without running into trouble.

From a design standpoint, these encounters are tricky to get right – if they're too prevalent or difficult, then they become tedious, but if they're not

challenging enough, they become inconsequential. For the most part, *Metroid Dread* balances this well – though the EMMI rarely invoke fear in the same way the SA-X did, they can still make for some incredibly intense standoffs.

However, until you get used to it, you will almost definitely die a lot in *Metroid Dread*, far more than previous titles. Boss battles, too, are significantly more challenging, since the damage output is extremely high. But they all have readable patterns, as well as certain moves that can be countered that not only inflict a lot of damage, but also restore your health and missiles. Dying sends you back to a checkpoint rather than a save station – right before the EMMI zones or the boss encounters, case-depending – so even when you do die, it's just a few seconds before you can get back out there and try again.

The boss battles themselves are also some of the best the series has ever seen. Kraid returns for the first time since *Super Metroid,* where he's just as enormous as he was there, but now even more of a threat. Other baddies include an underwater fight against the tentacled Drogyga and the electricity-conducting insect, Escue, as well as the particularly vicious monster Experiment No. Z-57 in the depths of the planet's core. There are also several miniboss encounters
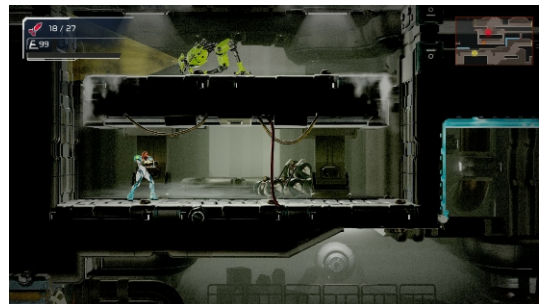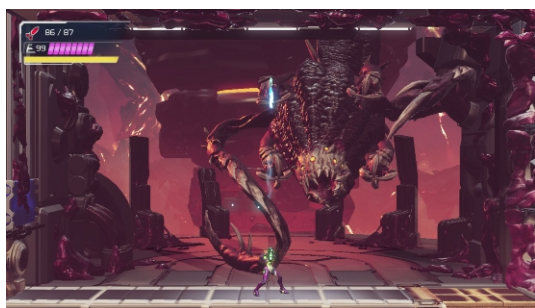
with Chozo warriors, and while they play out similarly, they also get more tricks as you proceed through the game. They're not nearly as pervasive as the Metroid encounters from *Samus Returns*, though near the end of the game, they do become a little tiresome.

Most of the standard *Metroid* power-ups return, though the Spider Ball is ditched here in favor of the Spider Magnet, which just lets Samus climb and hang on blue surfaces. Unusually, while you normally get the Morph Ball pretty early on in *Metroid* games, it takes a while before you find it in this entry, instead forcing Samus to rely on a slide maneuver to squeeze through tight spaces. The Aeion gauge from *Samus Returns* appears here as well and is required for a few of the powers, though it regenerates fairly quickly. Your loadout also includes the Phantom Cloak, which temporarily turns you invisible. This is handy for hiding during EMMI encounters, though only when it's trying to sniff you out – if it's on alert, it'll still find your location and can also pin you down even if you're cloaked. The Flash Shift lets you quickly dash forward or backward, which is quite a useful combat maneuver. The Storm Missile further expands your arsenal and lets you lock onto several targets (or even a single one) to send out a barrage of explosives, and the Cross Bomb

has large, cross-shaped explosions that propel you farther forwards or upwards. These new powers are fun, though using them requires both rows of shoulder buttons, which is a bit of a pain on the Switch Joy Cons.

The development team seems to have been keenly aware of the feedback toward how previous games toned back the open-ended exploration in favor of linearity. *Metroid Dread* seems to have thankfully found a solid middle ground between these two design philosophies. Adam, your ship's computer (not to be confused with Adam, Samus' commanding officer from *Other M*, even though one was named after the other) will converse with you in certain rooms, summing up the story as well as your powers, as well as general instructions on your next goal. There aren't any of the internal monologues of *Fusion* though and Samus only speaks very briefly, so outside of some brief story segments with other characters, the game retains the sense of loneliness missing from most recent *Metroid* games.

Further changes include the game no longer pinpointing progression goals on the map – there isn't even a hint function a la *Prime*. Instead, the map itself has been modeled in far deeper detail than has ever been seen before in the 2D games, detailing the precise shape and size of

every room rather than just presenting them as rectangular boxes. Not only that, it also keeps track of every type of destructible block you come across – bomb, missile, speed boosters, etc. – as well as every type of door, and even power-ups that you've collected, or have seen but haven't been able to obtain. If you don't have the necessary weapon to destroy a certain block or open a door, it'll be marked as "???", letting you know that you can't access that area just yet. Additionally, rooms that contain a hidden item will be highlighted on the map with blinking lights, which is just helpful enough to lead you in the right direction without forcing you to shoot every block or scan constantly.

Other *Metroid* games (and Metroidvanias in general) make the player either rely on their memory or make them manually mark their maps for points of interest. *Dread* makes it much more user-friendly, giving you pretty much all of the information you need to proceed. This makes it feel like you're figuring things out for yourself, instead of the game doing the work for you. Despite seeming to be open-ended, progression is actually pretty linear (outside of sequence breaks), as previous areas are often closed off to prevent yourself from wandering too far in the wrong direction. The critical path also sends you

An E.M.M.I.'s attack can be countered by pressing ⊗ at the exact moment of the flash. However, the timing is extremely difficult to gauge, making this a desperate maneuver.
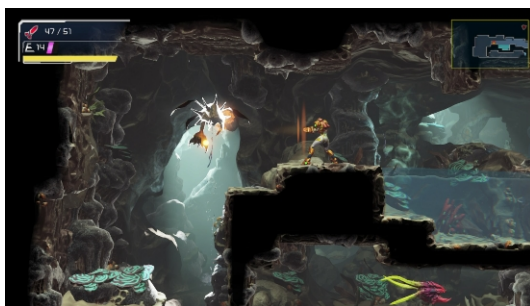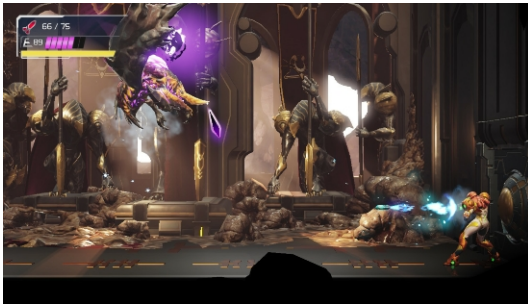
bouncing back and forth between zones, so it never feels like you're just beating one level and moving on to the next. The downside to this is that you're not always given the option to backtrack to look for extra missiles or energy tanks, which would've been pretty useful for some of the more difficult boss encounters.

Planet ZDR is broken up into nine areas in total, with mostly familiar territory for the series: the rocky Artaria, the lava-filled Cataris, the research site Dairon, the water-based Burenia, the Chozo sanctuaries Ferenia and Elun, the jungle Ghavoran, the military facility (and surface area) Hanubia, and the sky temple Itorash. There are transport elevators and shuttles between these areas, as well as color-coded teleporters to quickly move you to specific zones. These are paired off for most of the game so you can only jump between those specific points, though by the end of the game you can zoom off to wherever you wish. This is also pretty helpful since the map zigs and zags back and forth, with plenty of one-way areas, so making the rounds to find all of the extra hidden power-ups can be a little rough.

Regarding the presentation, the visuals are nice and clean, with plenty of subtle lighting effects adding to the atmosphere. This obviously isn't a triple-A game as far as budget goes, but it looks decent enough, with some excellent cutscenes and nice animations. One issue is that the color scheme throughout the whole game is a little muted, and just doesn't stand out in the same way as the 2D games, particularly *Fusion*, which had a pretty bright palette. It doesn't help either that the EMMI zones look identical, regardless of what area you're in.

The music, similarly, is a little same-y. The dramatic theme of Artaria recalls one of the main tracks in *Metroid Fusion*. Likewise, the Cataris tune is reminiscent of the Norfair track without reusing it directly (like so many other *Metroid* games did), but most of the rest are content just to blend into the background. A few remixes are spread throughout, like the Lower Brinstar theme from *Super Metroid* used in a cutscene. It's a fantastic arrangement, but it highlights how unmemorable the rest of the music is. The soundtrack was provided by Nintendo of Japan and composed primarily by Soshi Abe and Sayako Doi, two newcomers who had collectively worked on games like *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Pikmin 3*.

The story itself is minimal, but serves as a fantastic continuation for the mainline series – since this is the sequel to *Fusion*, it's basically "Metroid 5". The Chozo have been around since the early days of the series – since they began as item-giving statues in the NES game, and the storyline has expanded them into a technologically advanced race that helped Samus. We've seen them in flashbacks, encountered their ruins, and read their lore, but we've never seen them directly outside of the Chozo ghost battles in the *Metroid Prime* games. *Metroid Dread* brings them to the forefront, making them the central figures of the game. This story is said to be the end of the main *Metroid* plot, and it's interesting to see how each individual game contributes its own unique element to the story. The first one introduces Samus, the Space Pirates, and the Metroids (and *Zero Mission* expanded the Chozo lore stuff); the second showed us the Metroid homeworld, the third explained how Samus bonded with the baby Metroid, the fourth saw the debut of the SA-X, and the fifth brings everything together.

Metroid Dread is a brilliant game – even with all of competing Metroidvanias from indie developers, themselves inspired by the older games, it still finds its own place thanks to its story, world design, atmosphere, and incredible movement and combat mechanics. MercurySteam really pulled out every stop to ensure this is not only the best title they've done, but one of the best in the whole series.
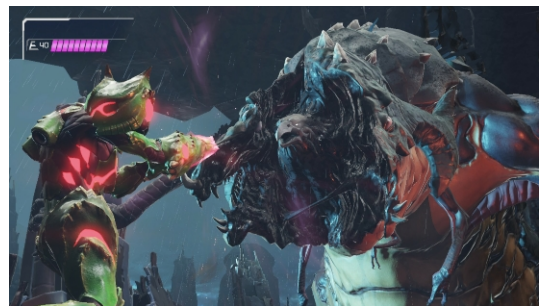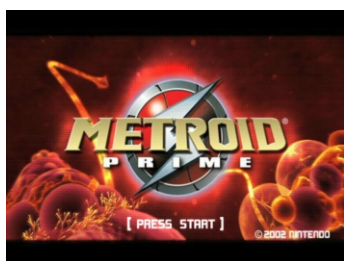
Metroid Prime
Original Release: 2002
Platforms: GC, WII, WIIU

Despite the widespread acclaim of *Super Metroid*, the series took a leave of absence during the Nintendo 64 era. Perhaps to make up for this, Nintendo planned for two brand new games to be released in late 2002, with a 3D one for the GameCube called *Metroid Prime*, developed by the Texas-based Retro Studios; and a 2D title for the Game Boy Advance called *Metroid Fusion*, developed in Japan. There was quite a bit of doubt over the 3D entry – Retro Studios had some staff from Iguana Entertainment, who had previously developed two of the *Turok* games for the Nintendo 64, but hadn't released any games at all in their then-current incarnation. As first-person shooters like *Halo* were extremely popular at the time, there was also plenty of concern that the series would abandon its exploratory roots in favor of action. In the end, all fears were immediately allayed upon release where, curiously, the 3D *Prime* ended up being more faithful to the series' roots than the 2D *Fusion*.

Chronologically, the *Metroid Prime* series takes place between the first and second *Metroid* games. The first one begins similarly to *Super Metroid*, with Samus answering the distress signal of a vessel orbiting the planet Tallon IV. This opening segment acts as both a prologue and a tutorial, allowing the player to accommodate themselves with the new first-person perspective and controls. Once again there's an encounter with Ridley, now taking on a cybernetic form, and once again, the ship begins to self-destruct as Samus tries to escape. She takes some damage in the process, removing many of the special abilities of her suit (providing an in-game explanation as to why she keeps losing her powers and must regain them). Upon reaching her ship, she chases Ridley to the surface of Tallon IV and begins her search.

Nintendo and Retro were keen to address some of the regular issues with first-person shooters of the era. Primarily, in many of these games, it doesn't really feel like you're controlling an actual character, but rather just a floating gun. To that end, *Metroid Prime* works overtime to make it feel like you are truly inhabiting the Power Suit of intergalactic bounty hunter Samus Aran. The perspective here includes her visor, which displays the health meter, a missile gauge, a radar, and a minimap. Not only is it a clever bit of UI design, but it's also incredibly immersive – the visor mists up when you approach steam or water, and bits of alien goo will splatter on it if you kill an enemy up close.

Other first-person shooters like *Halo* and *Doom* never really leave the perspective of the characters, so weirdly, you never actually get to see protagonists like Doomguy or Gordon Freeman unless you're looking into a mirror. In contrast,

Metroid Prime regularly takes the camera outside of Samus' view to give a cinematic look at the action, typically in the form of cutscenes than pan around and introduce new areas. The camera also changes to a third-person perspective when using the Morph Ball, giving you a wider view of the terrain as you roll around.

A few other first-person shooters of the time attempted platforming, like the planet Xen at the end of *Half-Life*, and no one had anything nice to say about them. *Metroid Prime*, again, tries something different in making platforming a significant part of the experience, since it was so intrinsic to the 2D games. Samus' movement is keenly attuned to allow you to easily jump from platform to platform, moving at a speed that's easy to control and helpfully tilting her head slightly downwards in mid-jump. It's a little tough to get a hold of at first, since, unlike other 3D games, you can't use a shadow to approximate where you'll land, but the landscapes are also constructed to make it as easy as possible. You also get the Space Jump early on in the game, which effectively acts as a double jump in the *Prime* series, making traversal almost effortless. There's even a little gauge on the visor which detects the proximity of environmental hazards.

Because of your movement capabilities, the rooms in *Metroid Prime* have much more verticality than most other first-person

shooters, which also works to make the world feel much more three dimensional. They're also finely crafted, down to even the smallest details – there's almost never such a thing as a flat wall, as each area is designed with angles and outcroppings that make navigating the environment feel remarkably organic. It also keeps a buttery smooth 60 FPS most of the time, and it's astounding that the game both looks and feels fantastic to play. Load times are minimal too – outside of the elevators, which act as transitory scenes between major areas, all of the data is streamed off the disk. Just beware that early releases of the GameCube version have a bug where if you run through a tunnel too fast and try to open a door to the next room, the game may freeze up.

The controls are a bit non-standard though, at least in the GameCube version. While most console-based first-person shooters of 2002 had adopted the dual-stick control scheme used in games like *Halo*, *Metroid Prime* only uses a single analog stick for movement, and instead the C-stick is used for selecting weapons. The R shoulder button is not only used for strafing, but is also to lock onto enemies, allowing you to both circle strafe and more easily target them. It may sound unusual, but it's basically the same set up as *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, only implemented from the first-person perspective. The only real hiccup comes from the dual

function of the B button – normally, this is the jump button, but when you tap it when you're moving and locked on, it'll make Samus dash. This is extremely useful for avoiding attacks in boss fights, plus many enemies are only vulnerable from behind or the sides, so you can quickly move into attack position. However, it's also very easy to tap the button too strongly, which means you'll jump rather than dash, potentially screwing up your maneuvers.

The 2009 version featured on the *Metroid Prime Trilogy* release instead features Wii Remote controls, giving you a more traditional control scheme that lets you move and look around independently. However, the lock-on function is still available and used in many fights, since the combat was originally designed around it. Even though the Wii supports GameCube controllers, you have to use the Wii Remote control scheme if you're playing this version.

Also unique to the *Metroid Prime* series is the Scan Visor, which lets you obtain information on enemies and other things in the environment. It's a very different approach to storytelling compared to *Metroid Fusion*, which regularly included interior monologues by Samus, whereas in this game she never really speaks. Outside of giving hints on how to beat bosses or showing bits of scenery that can be destroyed, you can also read messages by the Chozo and logs by the Space Pirates. Much of
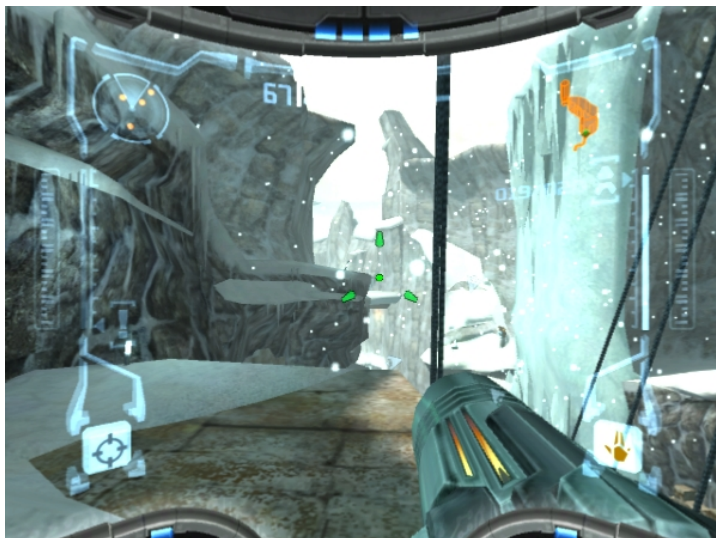
these have to do with their experiments on the Metroid specimens found in their labs, but there's also quite a bit of commentary on Samus and her suit, who they fear greatly. In one amusing log entry, they make note of how they tried to replicate her Morph Ball functionality, only for all of the test subjects to end up horribly mangled.

As far as weapons go, most of the usual ones return – Ice, Wave, and Plasma Beams, along with Super Missiles and Super Bombs. In addition to the Scan Visor, there are also Thermal and X-Ray Visors, which let you see in the dark or view things that wouldn't normally be visible, among other things. There's also the Grappling Beam, though the Screw Attack is missing, as the developers couldn't figure out how to get it working, though it's a problem they solved in the sequel. As with *Super Metroid,* the Varia Suit increases defense while the Gravity Suit lets you maneuver in water, and the new, stylish Phazon Suit decreases radiation damage. There's also the super powerful Phazon Beam, but this is only usable in the final battle.

Easily the most fun of the upgrades is the Morph Ball. It was always a weird and unusual function in the 2D *Metroid* games, but here, the physics are completely different from when you're walking about, and it's a lot of fun to just roll around the scenery. There are also a few half-pipes where you can use the Boost

function to build up momentum as you roll back and forth, eventually propelling you to greater heights. The Spider Ball from *Metroid II* returns as well, though it's only usable on specific tracks, rather than just latching onto any surface. There are plenty of little mazes that are presented from a side-view perspective too, and it's fun to see the way the tracks and tunnels twist all over.

Tallon IV is divided up into several areas with different biomes. You begin on the rainy Overworld, an area similar to Crateria and Brinstar, which is overrun by plant life and other vegetation. Early on you also explore the Chozo Ruins, the remains of the ancient civilization that created Samus' Power Suit, and mostly sits in an area filled with sand and rocks. Magmoor Caverns is an underground series of tunnels filled with lava and is basically this game's equivalent to Norfair, while the Phendrana Drifts present an arctic climate buried in snow and ice, as well as being the home of a Space Pirate research facility. Like *Super Metroid*, there's also a ship wreckage to explore, except this one is the Frigate Orpheon, the same vessel you explored in the game's prologue, which is now partially submerged in water. There are the Phazon Mines as well, a mountainous area where the Space Pirates set up operations to collect the energy source called Phazon, which is a recurring theme throughout the *Prime* subseries.

As with previous games, you'll be sent back and forth across these areas, gathering power-ups to expand Samus' movement capabilities to access new areas. The ultimate goal is to gain entrance to the Impact Crater, the site of a meteor crash from long ago, where you'll face off against the final boss, the titular Metroid Prime. Additionally, you'll need to hunt for twelve Chozo artifacts scattered around the planet before you gain entry. If you know what you're looking for, you can collect these as you journey around, but if you're playing for the first time without a guide, you'll probably spend the last part of the game following the hints left by the Chozo and retracing your steps.

The end-game hunt is also a good time to search for all of the energy tank and missile upgrades you weren't able to reach the first time around. In *Super Metroid*, this felt like an optional step since the game was so easy that you didn't really need to build up yourself that much. Not so with *Metroid Prime*, which is far more challenging, and you'll need everything you can get in the climactic final encounters. The Game Over scenes in the *Metroid Prime* games are some of the most harrowing seen in a Nintendo franchise – in this game, the camera focuses on Samus' broken visor while a heart beat monitor beeps loudly, indicating that life support systems are failing, before it flatlines and quietly requests
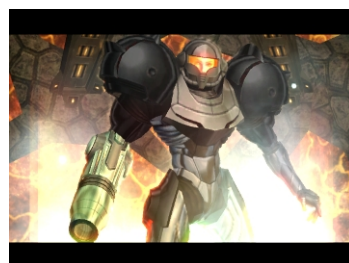
that you reload a previous save. It's shocking every time you see it!

The boss fights are similar to those found in the 3D *Zelda* games, where you need to avoid a pattern and look for openings until you find a weakpoint, then exploit it. While they're well-designed, the boss monsters themselves are a little underwhelming, and serve as one of the game's only sore points. Of the more notable ones, there's a large plant creature called the Flaahgra, a being made of rocks called Thardus, and an enormous Omega Pirate. Ridley pops up again near the end in his robotic form as Meta Ridley, and the design of the eponymous Metroid Prime in the climactic final battle is pretty cool.

Partially because navigating 3D environments takes so much more time than 2D ones, and also due to the artifact hunt, *Metroid Prime* is quite a bit longer than most of the 2D entries, with an average playthrough taking between 12-15 hours. It can be very easy to get lost the first time you play, and while the map is extremely helpful, since it's a 3D wireframe, it's something you really need to sit down and study. A hint function will at least point you in the right direction (though not necessarily tell you how to get there) if it detects that you're wandering around for too long.

The soundtrack is one of the few elements provided by the Japanese team, and was composed by Koichi Kyuma and Kenji Yamamoto, the latter of whom also worked on *Super Metroid*. While some classic themes are rearranged here (the Magmoor Caverns track is basically identical to Norfair's theme), the style is a little different, less melodic and more subdued. But it's also perfect for the atmosphere, particularly the piano in the Phendrana Drifts area. The title screen is an extreme close-up of a Metroid accompanied by the game's main theme, which perfectly sets the stage for the game. Curiously, the disc's files have a voiced introduction by Samus, played by famous voice actress Jennifer Hale. This was never used in the game though, and Samus didn't end up speaking aloud until *Metroid: Other M*, several years later.

It's almost shocking at how good *Metroid Prime* turned out, especially considering how green Retro Studios was – nearly every element is expertly crafted. The visuals are beautiful, and combined with the smooth framerate and sparse loading, it shows a game that was way ahead of its time in 2002. Outside of the standard definition visuals, it barely feels dated at all. The environments are brilliantly crafted, presenting a world that feels lived in, with finely tuned controls that make them a joy to explore. It's just a fantastic game, and easily one for the annals of history.

There have been several revisions of *Metroid Prime*, mostly to tune up various bugs and remove glitches that allow for sequence breaking. The first instance was released in late 2002 in North America on the GameCube. The PAL and Japanese versions tuned things up, and were later imported back into North American prints. There are also small differences and tweaks too, like added voices for Samus' suit (for when it records scanned data into your log book and such), as well as some different lore text. The Japanese version also has a male voice that announces the names of the different sectors when reloading a saved game and provides other bits of narration, which pops up sporadically in the European version.

The game was released separately in Japan on the Wii as part of the New Play Control line, and compiled into the *Metroid Prime Trilogy* release in North America and Europe. This version uses controls tailored especially for the Wii Remote, and they're basically identical to the scheme used in *Metroid Prime 3*. In addition to including most of the bug fixes and tweaks up to this point, and support for 16:9 widescreen, it features difficulty changes that make it quite a bit easier, as well as other small additions like the Spring Ball, allowing you to jump in ball form without the need to use bombs. However, it's missing the eerie title screen in favor of a menu for all three games, and there are a few minor graphical effects missing, like the condensation when charging the Ice Beam.
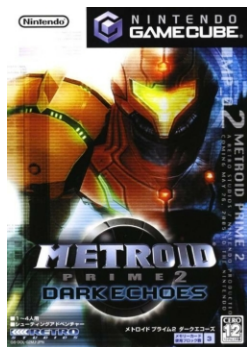
Metroid Prime 2: Echoes

Metroid Prime 2: Echoes
AKA: **Metroid Prime 2: Dark Echoes** (JP)
Original Release: 2004
Platforms: GC, WII, WIIU

Metroid Prime 2 takes place on the world of Aether, home to a race called the Luminoth. Several decades before the events of the game, a Phazon meteor crash landed into the planet, which caused the formation of a dark, mirrored, alternate dimension that became home to evil beings called the Ing. The Luminoth and Ing have been fighting a war ever since, and things haven't been working out too well for the Luminoth. The Space Pirates who colonized Aether have also had a rough time, as well as the Federation Marines who set out to stop them, as both were wiped out by Ing assaults. Samus Aran comes to investigate and finds herself being the hero that must not only save the Luminoth civilization, but also prevent the Ing from spreading throughout the rest of the galaxy.

This sequel takes inspiration from one of *Metroid's* sister series – *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. While you begin the adventure on Light Aether, you quickly find portals that will suck you into Dark Aether, the alternate world that has the same basic layout but with some substantial changes – routes that are blocked in one will be clear in the other, room layouts can sometimes be different, and some locales only exist in one and not the other. You also need to explore the Dark versions of each area to find the three keys that will unlock the boss battle and let you proceed onwards.

Dark Aether isn't just a different map with a darker color palette, though – it's so dark that the atmosphere is toxic, causing Samus damage simply by existing within it. To alleviate this, there are spheres of light that are posted at regular intervals, which not only protect Samus but also slowly regenerate her health. Sometimes these are stationary, allowing you to rest, but others need to be activated with a shot and collapse after a short period, and some are attached to moving creatures, so you need to move along with them to stay protected. Advancing through the dark world therefore means running quickly from sphere to sphere, trying to find safe spots as you map the territory and fight off the Ing.

The Ing are particularly terrifying foes, too. They're not just shadowy monsters, they also possess the bodies of their victims, using them as zombie-like puppets that you must dispose of. Between these eldritch menaces and an environment that's literally trying its best to kill you, there's a tremendous sense of terror and menace prevalent in *Metroid Prime 2*. It's not quite a horror game – it isn't particularly gruesome, and it's not much on jump scares either – but there's a sense of oppressiveness that pervades the whole experience. Plus, the Game Over sequence is absolutely brutal. The version in the first game, which zoomed in on

Samus' cracked visor, was already a little unnerving, but this game shows an x-ray highlighting the failure of Samus' heart as beeping indicates the flatlining of her vitals, before the text reads "Mission Failure". It's terrifying, so make sure not to die!

Rectifying one of the few shortcomings of its predecessor, the boss fights are much improved. Before obtaining any of the main power-ups, there's a mini-boss fight against a Guardian who uses that ability, making for some interesting fights. The main bosses are quite a bit cooler too, like Amorbis, a trio of gigantic worms that bury under the ground; Chykka, an enormous insect who begins the fight cocooned, proceeds to larval form, and then grows into a dragonfly-like creature; and Quadraxis, a terrifying, multi-legged security drone. You also have a few encounters with Dark Samus, a doppelgänger formed from Phazon which was seen in the hidden ending to the original *Metroid Prime*. The design is cool, but since *Metroid Fusion* already dealt with an evil Samus in a somewhat interesting fashion, this lacks its intended impact.

New to the arsenal are the Light and Dark beams, though they function similarly to familiar weapons. The Dark Beam stuns enemies similar to the Ice Beam, while the Light Beam is a laser similar to the Plasma Beam, and both have a couple of additional charge shots. However, each is

also limited in ammunition, maxing out at 50 at first but this can be expanded. Defeating an enemy with one type of gun may spawn the opposing type of ammunition, so you can always keep yourself well-stocked. Since opening certain doors requires either Light or Dark shots, you can always use one of these weapons when using a charged attack, even if you're out of ammo. You can also find the Annihilator Beam in the late stages of the game. This is easily the most powerful weapon available and is also powered by both kinds of ammo.

The original *Metroid Prime* was missing the Screw Attack, as the developers couldn't quite figure out how to make it work in 3D. They've solved that problem here, though functionally it's also similar to the Space Jump from *Super Metroid*, allowing you to bounce mid-air several times, as well as spring off of certain types of walls. Like the Morph Ball, it's a lot of fun to use, though it doesn't shred through enemies quite as well as in the 2D games. There are also new types of visors: the Dark Visor lets you see objects that are stuck between the two dimensions, and the Echo Visor, which lets you see sound waves. Both of these are used in boss battles and some puzzles.

While the Dark world elements are *Metroid Prime 2*'s biggest strengths, they're also one of its biggest weaknesses. The original *Metroid Prime* was so effective because it was such a

gorgeous game, presenting an alien world that was dangerous but fascinating. In contrast, *Metroid Prime 2* is just unrelenting brutality. The hub area of the Temple Grounds show off some cool designs, but the Agon Wastes consist of little more than sand and rocks, while the Torvus Bog is one gigantic green swamp. Toss in the purple shades of the Dark Aether, and so much of the game just looks and feels gloomy. At least this is somewhat rectified by the Sanctuary Fortress, a citadel filled with high technology and a bright silver, retro sci-fi aesthetic. It also contains one of the coolest enemies in the game, a virus that infects Samus' suit and can only be defeated by rebooting, executed via a button function.

The dual-world set up also makes navigation somewhat of a pain. Traversal in the original *Metroid Prime* was already a little difficult due to the 3D layouts, but when you have to work your way around two maps that are kind-of-but-not-entirely-the-same, it can get extremely confusing. Perhaps to alleviate some of this, the world design is more straightforward, with the Temple Grounds at the center and the three main areas branching out individually from there, though it ends up lacking the interconnectedness that makes *Metroid*'s worlds so fascinating. Much like the Artifact hunt in the first *Prime*, there's a late game quest where you need to track down a number of Sky Temple keys. While the number of items

here have been reduced from 12 to nine, having to retread such an enormous amount of ground feels more exhausting than it did before.

When the original *Metroid Prime* was released, one of the only major criticisms was the lack of a multiplayer mode. *Metroid* was never previously a multiplayer game, but it's been the general assumption that first-person shooters should have them, and so one was added to *Metroid Prime 2*. Taking control of one of four colored Samus Arans, there are two modes: a normal Deathmatch, and Bounty, where the object is to collect as many coins as possible, either by destroying crates or knocking them out of other players. There are six arenas in total plus a number of music themes, which

can be expanded by playing the single-player game. In addition to obtainable weapons, there are also machines which provide a randomized benefit, like invisibility or super strength.

Despite the effort, this mode isn't really much fun, as the controls just weren't made for competitive multiplayer, especially in the GameCube version. Neither the GameCube or Wii versions had online multiplayer, either.

Metroid Prime 2 is definitely an acquired taste – it's darker and moodier, and certainly effective at eliciting fear and tension, but while the original game was often enchanting, this one can end up feeling depressing in comparison. Furthermore, having two worlds to explore is definitely a little too overwhelming, especially since

there's no way to fast travel around to different areas. Still, the fact that Retro Studios tried experimenting with this entry shows that they weren't content to merely create a safe sequel – for those that gel with its brutal vibes, they may find their favorite entry in the *Prime* series.

Unlike the original, there haven't been quite as many variations of *Metroid Prime 2*. The version featured in the Wii *Trilogy* release adds in the Spring Ball jump function, which also makes the fight against the Spider Guardian miniboss much easier. Considering that this was an unnecessarily difficult fight in the GameCube release, this makes the *Trilogy* version preferable. The easier difficulty mode added to this version helps, as well.
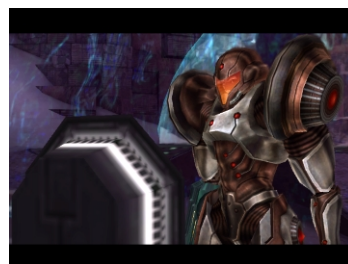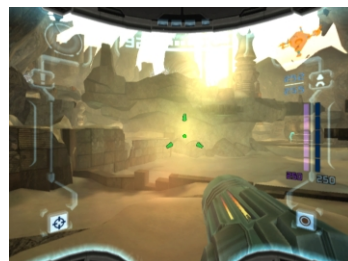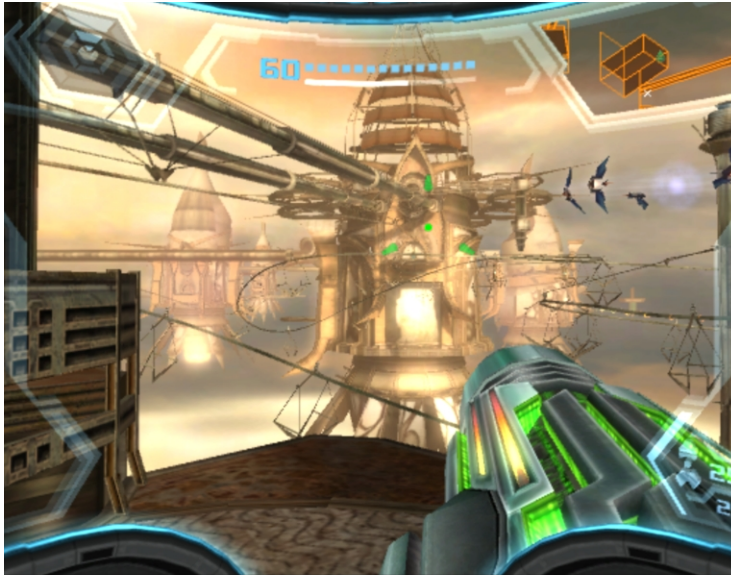
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption marks the series' evolution to the Wii, a move which defines its identity in numerous ways. The story begins when Samus is called by the Galactic Federation to defend a base on the planet Norion. She, along with three other bounty hunters, repel the attack, which includes a dramatic battle with Meta Ridley while in freefall. They end up getting ambushed by Dark Samus though, who knocks them all out and infects them with Phazon. The real Samus is unconscious for about a month, after which she awakens to learn that the other hunters have already woken up and were sent on assorted missions, only to have fallen off the radar. It's up to you to investigate their disappearances and finish the jobs they were supposed to have started.

The adventure takes place over multiple planets this time, each of which have been infected by Phazon attacks in the form of meteor-like rocks called Leviathan Seeds, like Tallon IV from the first *Metroid Prime* and Aether from the second one. Bryyo condenses many of the types of areas on Tallon IV, including a set of ancient ruins, a jungle, a snow-covered area, and a mining zone filled with fuel gel, basically this game's equivalent to a lava zone. Elysia has a toxic, gas-filled atmosphere, so the only habitable parts are above the clouds, where several enormous outposts are suspended in the sky.

Finally, the Space Pirate Homeworld also contains some facilities on a planet covered in perpetual acid rain. You can move between major points on each planet by flying in Samus' ship.

While the first two *Metroid Prime* games had motion controls implemented when they were ported to the Wii, they were initially designed to use the GameCube controller. In contrast, this entry is the only one that was created with the Wii Remote in mind. In addition to controlling more like a typical first-person shooter, there are various motions you need to do when activating switches and the like. You get the Grapple Beam fairly early on, as well as the Grapple Lasso, which lets you grab and rip things from the scenery, as well as disarm shield-wielding foes. This is the first entry in the series where you actually get to sit in the cockpit of Samus' ship, and you can use the Wii Remote to look around and operate any of the major systems (though it's still on autopilot so you don't actually get to fly it). Various enemies can also only be beaten with careful aiming, like drones that attack in a grid formation, and open and close their shutters when they're vulnerable.
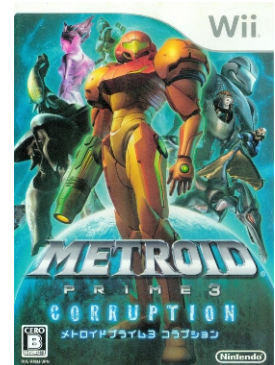
The selectable beams are gone, instead you just get beam upgrades. The Ice Beam is absent too, but you get Ice Missiles with a similar function, like in *Metroid Fusion*. Instead, you're equipped with the Phazon Enhancement

Metroid Prime 3: Corruption
Original Release: 2007
Platforms: WII, WIIU

Device (PED), which lets you use an Energy Tank to send you into Hypermode with a powerful laser weapon. However, the Phazon can overtake you too, requiring you to expel it by shooting as quickly as possible, before Samus becomes completely corrupted. The X-Ray Visor from the first *Metroid Prime* returns, which is used in conjunction with the new Nova Beam. Additionally, the new Command Visor lets you summon your ship to certain waypoints, which can be used to blow up things or to aid with some puzzles.

With the move to the Wii, the visuals have improved slightly, as many areas now have fuzzy bloom lighting effects. These look nice, but heavily date the game as being from the mid-2000s. The multiplayer mode from *Metroid Prime 2* is gone, but there's now an achievement-like system where you get credits for reaching certain in-game goals. In the *Metroid Prime Trilogy*, this system was retroactively implemented in the first two *Prime* games.

Beyond the motion functions, *Metroid Prime 3* takes the casual userbase of the Wii into consideration with its design to make it a little more approachable to a wider audience. Perhaps influenced by the popularity of *Halo*, the Galactic Federation plays a big role in the story, particularly in the beginning. Previously, storytelling in *Metroid* games was relegated to narrations or internal monologues, but it has a much bigger role here, with quite a bit of voiced dialogue for the first time in the series. It was already a little strange when Samus directly interacted with the friendly Luminoth in *Metroid Prime 2*, so it's even more unusual when you can also walk up and talk to various people (most of whom ignore you anyway).

The three bounty hunters who Samus fights alongside in the beginning are also the main bosses through most of the game, since they've obviously been corrupted by the Phazon. Ghor has an enormous mechanical suit that dwarfs Samus in size, and is one of the cooler ones, but the others feel out of place here. Gandrayda is a strange-looking shapeshifter that refers to Samus as "Sammy", while Rundas flies around by creating ice bridges and feels more like something out of *X-Men* than *Metroid*. *Metroid Prime Hunters* already introduced players to the concept of other bounty hunters in the *Metroid* universe, but at least they were silent. All told, the characterization here just doesn't feel right.

Perhaps reacting to the sometimes confusing map layouts of the previous two games, *Metroid Prime 3* has a much more streamlined design. There's still quite a bit of exploration, but it's more guided and linear, especially since the areas are broken up into disparate chunks. The previous games had a hint system that could be disabled, but here, Samus will regularly get communications from the Federation guiding her to her next goal. This was already the direction the design was heading in with *Metroid Fusion* (and later made even more direct in *Other M*), but some will probably find themselves annoyed at the hand-holding. The presence of the secondary characters and omniscient guidance sort of ruins the lonely exploration that made earlier entries so compelling, and

the discordant areas make exploration feel disjointed.

Still, after the dreary environments of *Metroid Prime 2*, the planets here are much more visually enthralling. Among the many things the artists at Retro excel at is creating ruins of long-dead alien civilizations, and those locales always have some of the most impressive architecture. However, the standout area of *Metroid Prime 3* is SkyTown on Elysia, where you travel between floating outposts in the sky by riding on rails via the Grappling Beam. The same basic idea was used in *BioShock Infinite*. The final area, the planet Phaaze which is the source of all of the Phazon in the galaxy, also makes for a compelling, creepy, endgame experience, with doors made out of teeth rather than metal.

The end game quest, one of the most contentious points of previous *Prime* games, has also been scaled back. Here, you need to hunt for batteries in order to power up the space cruiser Valhalla – there are nine in total, but you only need five in order to beat the game, with the rest unlocking assorted bonuses. By making some of them optional, it makes the whole affair less exasperating than before.

Curiously, the Japanese version uses a questionnaire to determine the difficulty level. In general, the standard mode is quite a bit easier than the GameCube versions of the previous titles, and even includes checkpoints, so you don't need to reload a saved game if you die.

Metroid Prime 3 is a game that lacks confidence in itself,

attempting to keep true to its roots while also trying to be the Nintendo counterpart to *Halo*. It doesn't come close to ruining the experience, but for longtime fans, it feels like it's trying to fix something that was never broken. In the end, it still presents a set of entrancing worlds to explore, and it still feels like a *Metroid* game, albeit a partially compromised one.

Alas, this entry effectively brought an end to the *Prime* series. Phazon was central to all three games, and that arc was finished with this game's finale, though finding all of the items will show Samus getting chased by Sylux, her main rival from *Hunters*.

As with its precursors, *Metroid Prime 3* was in the *Trilogy* compilation for Wii, but other than the lack of a proper title screen, it only has some minor tweaks.

Prime 2D is a fanmade demake of *Metroid Prime*, recreating the game using 2D graphics and developed by Team SCU. The game doesn't use any assets from any previous 2D *Metroid* game, instead creating everything from scratch, and looks quite impressive given the small team of only four people. The music is all arrangements of the original tracks, too. The game eschews gamepad controls in favor of a mouse/keyboard combo, which lets Samus run and aim independently, plus it also features

the Scan Visor to obtain info about the environment.

A demo was released for Windows on April 1, 2021 as a fake April Fools joke, which skips over the segment on the Frigate and starts immediately on Tallon IV. It recreates the original *Prime* up until the fight with the Hive Mecha, which takes about 20 minutes or so to play through. Alas, like most fan games based on established properties, it was shut down by Nintendo a few months later, leaving it an artifact of what might have been.

Prime 2D
Release Date: 2021 (demo only)
Platforms: WIN

Metroid Prime Hunters
Original Release: 2006
Platforms: DS, WIIU

Back in the late 1990s, the Nintendo 64 was the console to have for multiplayer first-person shooters. Much of this had to do with the four controller ports built into every system, as well as the presence of games like *GoldenEye 007* and *Perfect Dark*, and even a few lesser quality titles like *Turok*. Alas, Nintendo was never able to carry that momentum forward to the next generation on the GameCube, where its crown was quickly stolen by Microsoft's Xbox and the immensely popular *Halo*. They tried again with *Metroid*, implementing a split-screen competitive multiplayer mode in *Metroid Prime 2*, but this failed to catch on.

Even though the GameCube generation ended up being a wash for competitive FPS games, the Nintendo DS was in the portable space where it didn't have much competition. The Game Boy Advance had a few first-person shooters, like ports of *Doom* and *Duke Nukem 3D*, but these were mostly just novelties as opposed to games the audience took seriously. The DS meanwhile could handle 3D roughly on the level of the PlayStation and Nintendo 64, as well as wireless network transmissions, so it was more suitable for a multiplayer first-person shooter than its predecessor. And thus, *Metroid Prime Hunters* was born.

Hunters wasn't developed by Retro Studios, as their team was working on the third *Metroid Prime* at this point. Instead, the project was handled by NST (Nintendo Software Technology), a largely American studio who had made GBC games like *Bionic Commando: Elite Forces* and the port of *Crystalis*, as well as the GBA *Mario and Donkey Kong* titles. The game was directed by Masamichi Abe, who had previously worked on the *Pikmin* series.

The game takes place in the Alimbic star system, where Samus is tasked by the Galactic Federation to hunt for items that are said to give tremendous powers. This bit of intel was dispensed by a mysterious telepathic transmission, which several other bounty hunters have also intercepted, and end up being Samus' competition in her journey. The six other hunters include Weavel, Trace, Kanden, Noxus, Spire, and Samus' sworn archenemy, Sylux.

Since the Nintendo DS doesn't have any analog input, this game has an unusual control scheme where you move Samus with the direction paid, turn and aim with the touch screen (either with a stylus or using the thumb pad enclosed with certain systems), and the shoulder buttons to fire. This gives a level of control far more precise than even analog sticks ever could, though without the ability to alter the camera's acceleration, it ends up very jittery. It also leads to other problems – like the console games, there's

some light platforming, but jumping is mapped to the A button, which is tough to hit when you're trying to position your view. Missiles, the Morph Ball, and other equipment are also activated by hitting the touch screen. A bigger issue is that, depending on which DS (or 3DS) model you're using, as well as the size of your hands, it can become very uncomfortable to play for prolonged periods.

Despite calling itself a *Metroid Prime* game, this is really more of a straight first-person shooter, cutting back drastically on the exploratory elements the series is known for. There are four areas to visit: the planets of Alinos and Arcterra, and a pair of space stations called the Celestial Archives and the Vesper Defense Outpost. These areas are mostly linear, though some teleports help you zoom quickly between certain zones, and there are still hidden upgrades to find. However, once you've completed the stages, you also need to revisit them later on, being able to access previously inaccessible areas with your newfound powers.

As you work your way through the game, occasionally all of the doors will be locked and you'll need to fight against one of the other bounty hunters. These are like mini-deathmatch fights against AI bots, and must be disposed of before you can move on. They take a lot of hits, but they also don't inflict too much damage either, so these aren't too difficult, though it's weird to see a

Metroid game reward you for hitting headshots. There are also more standard boss battles, though there are only two main types, with several variations over the course of the game.

The single-player mode seems like it was something hastily pasted together in order to satisfy the longtime *Metroid Prime* fanbase, in order to give them something that superficially resembled a classic *Metroid* game. But this really is a multiplayer shooter at its core, so anyone expecting an experience like the GameCube and Wii games will almost definitely be disappointed.

Still, the multiplayer is impressively robust considering the technology, and it's quite a bit better than most other later multiplayer shooter efforts by Nintendo, even including a voice chat. The other bounty hunters were added primarily to give some variety, so all of the players aren't just playing as differently colored Samuses. The DS online functionality has long been disabled, but local play will always be functional, providing you can find enough people with the hardware and willing to play.

This is a real technical marvel, though. It's obviously scaled back, running at a much lower resolution than the GameCube games, with plenty of jaggies and much simpler level geometry, but it actually does an outstanding job of replicating the look and feel of its bigger brothers. The lighting in particular looks fantastic, as do the

polygonal character models (relatively speaking, of course), and the game runs at an incredibly smooth 60 FPS. Nintendo of America obviously felt that this was the perfect technical showcase for the DS, since a demo subtitled First Hunt was included with the first batch of the system, and most subsequent 3D games for the system didn't look (or run) nearly as well. The soundtrack, too, is excellent, basically being more *Metroid Prime*-style music coming through the DS synth. The title screen track, always a highlight in these games, is marvelous, and the Alinos theme has the same backing rhythm as the Chozo Ruins, but with a completely different main melody.

Metroid Prime Hunters is a peculiar artifact from a very specific time. It's hard to imagine that too many folks want to play a multiplayer shooter on DS nowadays, especially due to the lack of online support, and there's not much here for fans of the mainline games. Still, it's hard not to be impressed by how faithfully it replicates the look and feel of *Metroid Prime* on a system with such limited horsepower. As a downscaled proof of concept, it feels like a neat tech demo, and is still worth messing around with. Plus, some of its concepts, like using Samus' ship to fly around the galaxy and the presence of multiple bounty hunters was carried forward, for better or worse, to *Metroid Prime 3*.

Metroid Prime: Federation Force
Original Release: 2016
Platforms: 3DS

The *Metroid* series was sent into hibernation after Retro Studios moved on to work on the *Donkey Kong Country Returns* franchise, and *Other M* was a flop. It briefly re-emerged with *Metroid Prime: Federation Force*, released for the 3DS in 2016. The game was developed by Next Level Games, the Canadian studio known for the Wii version of *Punch-Out!!* as well as the later *Luigi's Mansion* games.

Federation Force is a multiplayer-focused spin-off, similar to *Metroid Prime Hunters* on the DS, though with a focus on cooperative rather than competitive play. The narrative centers on the marines of the Galactic Federation, who appeared prominently in *Metroid Prime 3*. Accordingly, you don't play as Samus, but as one of these nameless soldiers, taking on 22 missions across three planets. The game supports local as well as online play, though the multiplayer is missing voice chat, which even *Hunters* had, instead relying on canned phrases.

The game mercifully ditches the control pad/touch screen scheme used in *Metroid Prime Hunters*. On a regular 3DS, the controls are similar to the GameCube *Metroid Prime* games, with a lock-on function, as well as gyro functionality that lets you look around when holding the R button. With a New 3DS or Circle Pad Pro, the C-stick can also be used to turn the player, making for standard FPS dual analog controls. Your mecha

can double jump, and also hover for short distances, though the walking speed is painfully slow and there's no way to run. There's obviously no Morph Ball either, since that's a Samus Aran thing.

Though you never actually see the face of the marine you're controlling, you can customize them to an extent, like their color, as well as their voice, where you can give them a male or female voice (in Japanese or English) and change the pitch to make them sound distinct. There are also several subweapons and items that you can pack, like Repair Kits to replenish your health, decoys to distract enemies, and various weapons like missiles, flame shots, ice missiles, and so forth. You can only select a few to bring per mission though, with replenishments found in destroyed boxes. There are also mod chips that provide different functions, and again, you're limited in what you can equip. Some are kept permanently when you find them, but others break after being used a certain amount of times, or can be destroyed if you fall in battle.

There's some sort of objective in each stage – usually get to the end and destroy something – but there are also more varied goals, like forcing ice beasts into cages to capture them. Many of them also have some kind of time escape sequence at the end, which has become a *Metroid* hallmark at this point. Though most of the game is

spent piloting mechanical suits (whose designs are roughly based on Samus'), there are some occasions where you need to jump around and control your character directly. These segments are displayed in the third-person perspective, but without any weapons or armor, your poor marine can be disposed of quickly. These on-foot segments typically concentrate on stealth or simple platforming challenges. You're also scored at the end of mission, with bonuses given for finishing within a certain time limit or when completing secondary objectives.

Given this stage-based, mission-based structure, there's very little *Metroid* about this at all. Some of the mod chips are hidden, which at least gives the incentive to look around areas a bit, but the areas aren't anything too complex. Plus the fact that many of them aren't even permanent upgrades makes the abilities feel less important than they should.

Like *Hunters*, *Federation Force* is designed as a multiplayer game first and foremost. *Prime Hunters* gave a cobbled-together single-player experience that wasn't great, but still serviceable. In contrast, *Federation Force* just feels really boring, primarily due to its co-op nature. The stages are all built with the expectation that you're playing with more than one player, resulting in bosses that take too long to kill or stages that feel tedious if you're doing them alone. A prime example is in the second stage, where you need to move around four sets of rolling balls to unlock a door. With four players, each one would divide the tasks and proceed quickly, but it's all on the shoulder of one player if they're doing it alone.

Additionally, if one player dies in multiplayer mode, one of the

others can just resurrect them. But if you die in single player mode, that's it, you're done. And since there aren't any checkpoints, you need to restart the whole mission. One concession in single-player mode is an unbreakable mod chip that doubles your attack power and defense, to help you weather enemy attacks more easily; another are the AI drones you can call in to take the slots meant for other players. But it's also obviously just a bandage for a larger issue, which is that it needs a better single-player mode.

There's also a competitive mode called Battle Ball, which is a galactic sport played by the space marines. Consisting of three-on-three matches, it's basically soccer, except the ball is gigantic, and you move it around the arena by shooting it. This is a pretty fun little side mode that sets it apart from other co-op shooters. Unlike the main campaign, this mode supports Download Play, so other people don't need a separate copy of the game; there's also a standalone downloadable version in the eShop.

Visually, the game doesn't really hit the mark. Even though *Hunters* was downgraded from the mainline titles, it still looked and felt accurate to the GameCube games, giving it a certain charm. The environments in *Federation Force* technically look a little better since the 3DS has better polygonal capabilities, but they don't feel like *Metroid*. On that same note, the music sounds like a generic Western-developed score, missing all of the texture that make the *Metroid Prime* games so beloved. The atmosphere is just gone.

A more bizarre choice is the decision to redesign all of the characters to use a little chibi form, with large heads and

comparatively small bodies, making them look like animated toy figures. Though it may have been done to attract the slightly younger audience of the portable 3DS, the designers also stated that the smaller characters work better given the portable screen. However, *Metroid Prime Hunters* worked fine with its realistically proportioned designs, so perhaps that premise is ill-considered.

There's a little more story in *Federation Force* compared to *Hunters* – it takes place shortly after the end of *Prime 3* – but it's relegated to dialogue given by the marine superiors. Samus Aran does appear in the story, and it is cool to see her operate from a perspective other than her own. But she's also made part of the game's ridiculous final boss fight, where her suit gets infected and sticks it permanently in Morph Ball mode. This last battle plays out like Battle Ball, except with an enormous Samus rolling around. There's also a final cutscene involving Sylux, one of the rivals from *Hunters*, implying that they'll be around for the next entry.

Federation Force earned the immediate ire of the *Metroid* fanbase due to the poor state of the franchise at the time. Here was this weird spin-off game that didn't star Samus, focused on a part of the *Metroid* storyline that almost no one cared about, and was a multiplayer shooter that had basically none of the elements that people want or expect from a *Metroid* game.

Even on its own terms, though, it's nothing special. Taken as a co-op multiplayer shooter, it's occasionally fun, but the single-player mode is just slow and plodding. In the end, it's simply an unremarkable game that no one really wanted to begin with.

Metroid Prime Pinball

Metroid Prime Pinball
Original Release: 2005
Platforms: DS

The morph ball in *Metroid Prime* was incredibly fun, sending Samus across tunnels or launching her into the air through cannons. So why not take the Morph Ball and put it into a pinball game? It's not like it hasn't happened before – Mario had his own take on the theme with the GBA title *Mario Pinball Land*, released in 2004. That was handled by Fuse Games, who also developed *Metroid Prime Pinball*. This was a small team comprised of the developers of the *Pro Pinball* series of computer games, which stretched back to 1996, so they had quite a bit of experience under their belts.

There are a total of seven tables in *Metroid Prime Pinball*, each based on areas from *Metroid Prime*. The two main tables are the Tallon Overwold and Frigate Orpheon. More are unlocked by obtaining Artifacts, which pop up on the tables when you reach certain objectives. There are also several minigames that involve hitting enemy characters that spawn on the table. Some of these are in Morph Ball mode, but others put Samus in the middle of the playing field in Combat Mode, where you can rotate her to shoot enemies directly. Samus also has a life meter as well as a limited supply of missiles for use in Combat Mode, plus Power Bombs. These tables additionally have an Award Scanner that will spin a wheel and grant one of several prizes, including a Force Field to

prevent the ball from passing the flippers, a multiball, or increasing the Bounty multiplier that grants extra points when you lose a life.

Eventually you can unlock four more tables: Phendrana Drifts, Phazon Mines, the Artifact Temple, and the Impact Crater. These are primarily focused on boss battles, with a large enemy on the upper part of the screen that needs to be defeated. There's also a seventh table, Magmoor Caverns, which is only used in multiplayer mode.

The visuals are all pre-rendered sprites and backgrounds based on the original *Metroid Prime* game. In truth, this is about the best that can be expected for its low resolution as a portable console. The tables are spread across both screens, with a dead space in the middle that prevents the ball from being seen. This allows for a vertically oriented table, without using the pillarboxing found in other pinball games, or the screen scrolling found in many 16-bit titles. Most of the soundtrack consists of tracks from *Metroid Prime* played on the DS sound synth, while the Frigate Orpheon features a guitar rendition of the Brinstar theme from the NES game.

Metroid Prime Pinball is great for what it is, though having only two non-boss tables makes it feel a little thin in content. Perhaps to help allay the retail price, Nintendo included the Rumble Pack with the game, which fits into the GBA slot for consoles that support it.
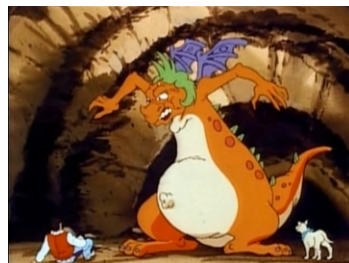
Captain N

Nintendo fever was in full swing in the late 1980s, resulting in a push for several TV series with video game tie-ins. Both *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda* were included in the *Super Mario Bros. Super Show*, while many others were featured in another show called *Captain N: The Game Master*, produced by DIC. Broadcast on Saturday mornings in the United States between 1989 and 1991, it takes place in a universe called Videoland, which consists of many smaller worlds based on assorted NES games. The eponymous hero is a teenager from the real world named Kevin, who's accompanied by his dog Duke. The youth is summoned by Lana, the Princess of Videoland, to be its protector.

These are all original characters, but most others come from video games. On the side of justice there's Kid Icarus (*Kid Icarus*, seemingly unaware that his actual name should be Pit), Mega Man (*Mega Man*), and Simon Belmont (*Castlevania*). The bad guys in turn are led by Mother Brain (*Metroid*), who bosses around her subordinates King Hippo (*Punch-Out!!*, here with sickly blue skin for some reason), Eggplant Wizard (*Kid Icarus*), and Dr. Wily (*Mega Man*). The villain's home is an asteroid base in the shape of a brain called Metroid. Curiously, neither Samus Aran nor Little Mac actually show up in the cartoon, even though the *Metroid*

world is present. According to a 2002 interview on The Unofficial Captain N Home Page, head writer Jeffrey Scott didn't know who Samus was. Some minor villains also pop up, including ridiculously cartoony dragons that seem to be based on Kraid and Ridley, plus Medusa as well. There's also a world based on Greek mythology called Mount Icarus.

Across the 34 episodes, the show hops between worlds of various NES games, including *The Adventures of Bayou Billy, BurgerTime*, *Dragon Warrior*, and *Wizards & Warriors.* It's typical Saturday morning cartoon stuff and all quite silly, but it was a lot of fun at the time to see various game characters pop up on TV with actual personalities and speaking roles. Sure, the writers' interpretations of the characters and environments were bizarre – Kid Icarus has a verbal tic where he adds "icis" at the end of words, Mega Man adds the adjective "mega" to damn near everything, and Simon Belmont is overbearingly vain. The villains come off a little better, as Mother Brain's constant screaming (played by Levi Stubbs, also Audrey from *The Little Shop of Horrors* movie) at her incompetent underlings is amusing. Its soundtrack consists of rearrangements of various NES game music, all of which are well done, as well as covers of assorted American pop music hits.

A different version of *Captain N* ran in the *Nintendo Comics System* series by Valiant Comics.

Above: The *Captain N* cartoon
Below: The *Captain N* comic and concept art for a *Metroid* cartoon

Here, all of the characters from third-party developers were removed and replaced with ones from first-party Nintendo games. This allowed Samus Aran to appear, as well as Uranos, a minor enemy from *Kid Icarus*. Oddly, Samus is presented as being rather conniving and greedy, and also competes with Princess Lana for Kevin's attention. It's ridiculous, but it's hard to say if it's any worse than her characterization in *Other M*.

Some concept art revealed that a whole cartoon based on *Metroid* was pitched, featuring a decidedly male Samus. This never got near production, though.

Manga

Metroid has a number of manga and book adaptations, though most never left Japan. Some are just silly, while others are regarded with some level of canonicity.

Starting in 1986, Nintendo released a manga called simply *Metroid,* featuring a trigger happy Famicom-playing (male) Samus Aran in a slapstick comic that doubled as a strategy guide for the original game. *Metroid* would also be the basis of a few chapters of *Famiken Ryuu*, with the protagonist Ryuu using the Power Suit to defeat the bosses. Additionally, *Shiawase no Katachi* ("Shapes of Happiness") is a gag manga featuring various video games, with a few chapters based around *Metroid*.

Super Metroid had both a comic and manga adaptation in 1994. The *Super Metroid* comic, featured in *Nintendo Power* magazine, used the game's story as a basis but added a few characters and events, as well as establishing Samus as an orphan

who was raised by Chozo. It ran for five issues and was illustrated by Benimaru Itoh. Samus also appeared in the *Captain N* comic (see page 49). In Japan, the *Metroid: Shounen Ou! Shorts* manga is a series of brief, self-contained comedy stories, with a cute chibi version of Samus.

Two manga were released in Japan in 2003 alongside the debuts of *Prime* and *Fusion*. The first, *Samus & Joey* by Idzuki Kouji, is aimed towards children and co-stars a little boy named Joey who tags along with Samus after being rescued by her. There are three volumes, one of which includes a story recounting the intro to *Metroid Fusion*. Later there was a sequel called *Metroid EX: Samus & Joey*, where Samus sacrifices herself at the end to save the universe. This was never compiled into a tankoubon and is only in the original issues of *Comic BomBom* magazine.

In addition to all of those there's *Metroid*, written by Koji Tazawa and illustrated by Kenji Ishikawa. It goes through Samus' childhood, with her being raised

Clockwise from top-left: *Famiken Ryuu*, *Metroid EX: Samus and Joey*, *Metroid* (2002), *Metroid: Shounen Ou! Shorts*, *Metroid: Zebes Shinnyuu Shirei*, and the *Nintendo Power Super Metroid* comic.

and trained by Chozo, up until just before her battle with Mother Brain from the original *Metroid* game. This manga is considered canon, and is far more faithful than *Samus & Joey*. It has two collected volumes.

An American comic based on *Metroid Prime* was also released in 2003, which is just an abridged version of the game's events. In Japan, *Metroid Prime: Episode of Aether*, released in 2005, marks the last adaptation to date of *Metroid*. Although it's an adaptation of *Prime 2*, it takes some liberties, as it starts prior to the event of the game with Samus helping the crew of a ship targeted by Space Pirates, and there being survivors in planet Aether who work alongside Samus.

Kid Icarus also received two short manga chapters in *CoroCoro* and *V Jump* magazines, each focusing on a different boss fight. This never received a tankoubon.
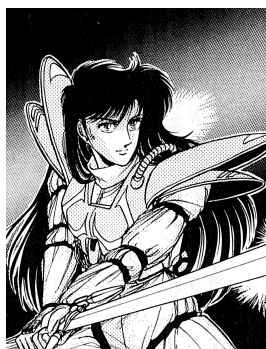
Game Books

Metroid: Zebes Shinnyuu Shirei ("Zebes Invasion Order") is a Choose Your Own Adventure-style book where you'd manually keep track of your health and ammo, and roll a die when performing actions against enemies. It roughly follows the storyline of the game, but continues after the defeat of Mother Brain, having to deal with a mutant giant Metroid and the leader of the Space Pirates. The art is the best part, with some cool renditions of the enemies, as well as a dark-haired rendition of Samus. An English fan-translated Twine game is available at: **https://www.metroid-database.com/a-merry-twinetroid-christmas/**

Palutena no Kagami: Shinden no Akuma wo Taose ("Palutena's Mirror: Defeat the Demons of the Temple") is a similar book focusing on *Kid Icarus*. It features artwork by Ryusuke Miita, known for the fantasy-comedy manga/anime *Dragon Half*.

### Japanese Commercials
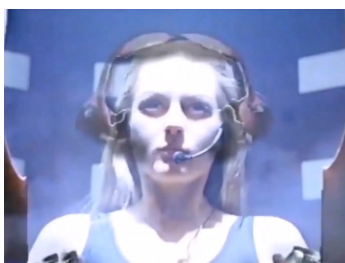
Metroid   **Super Metroid**   **Metroid: Zero Mission**

WarioWare

WarioWare served as a nice avenue for cameos, thanks to the retro-centric 9-Volt microgame sets. *Metroid* makes several appearances here, including one in the original game where you need to blast open Mother Brain's glass jar, and another in *WarioWare Twisted* where you tilt the GBA to get Samus (in Morph Ball form) to roll into a missile. There's also "Mewtroid", starring Samus redrawn as a cat. It's very simple, with you controlling a cat rolling around the bottom of the screen and shooting enemies with a gun. *WarioWare Gold* also includes "Mewtroid 2: Return of Sameow", whose title screen recalls *Metroid Prime*, though the in-game visuals are rather basic.

Kid Icarus has popped up in a few microgames too, with the most amusing instance being in the jukebox in *WarioWare Twisted*, which features a music track from the game. The text from Wario here taunts "This is the closest thing to a sequel you're gonna get! Har har!", though *Kid Icarus: Uprising* was eventually released. *Balloon Fight* makes an appearance too, including one from a 3D, third-person viewpoint where you play a variation of the Balloon Trip mode.
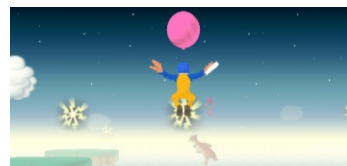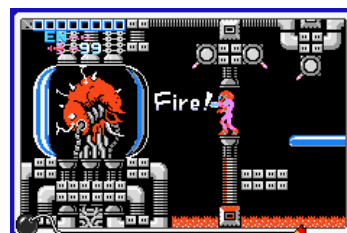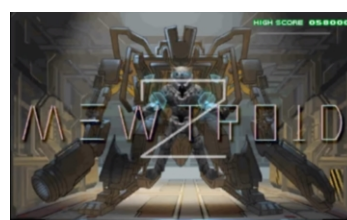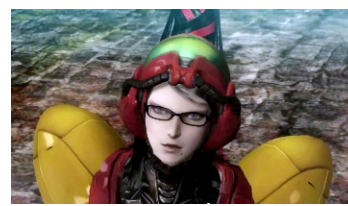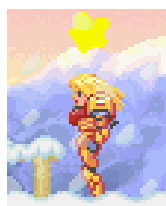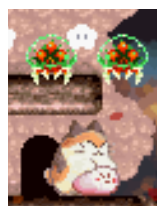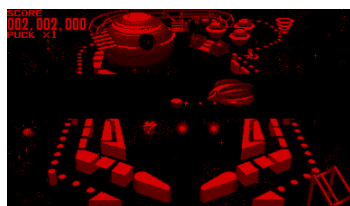
Cameos

If you manage to beat the NES version of *Tetris* at a certain level, Samus Aran and Pit appear in one of the endings playing various instruments. An entire stage of *Tetris DS* is also based on *Metroid*. The Game Boy game *F-1 Race* also features Samus and Pit (among other Nintendo characters) before one of the courses. *Famicom Wars* includes a general named "Samusoon" who has a helmet that looks just like Samus'. The Virtual Boy game *Galactic Pinball* has an "S" power-up which turns your ball into Samus' ship, presenting a minigame where you blast Metroids and other foes. The game was developed by some of the same staff as *Super Metroid*.

Samus can be found snoozing in a bed in *Super Mario RPG*. In English she mentions that she's resting to fight Mother Brain, but in Japanese she says "Omoroid", a reference to the "Metroid, Omoroid" Japanese TV commercial for *Metroid II*. Sprites for Samus were included in the ROM for *Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga* on the GBA but she isn't featured in the actual game. There's an enemy called a Snoozorb, which looks like a silly version of Nightmare from *Metroid Fusion*. One level in *Kirby's Dream Land 3* has Metroid enemies, which can only be destroyed with an ice power. At the end, you'll find Samus; she's wearing her suit if you didn't kill all of the Metroids but she takes her helmet off if you

did. A hidden Metroid can additionally be found in *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze*, also developed by Retro Studios.

Due to the collaboration with Koei-Tecmo on *Metroid: Other M*, there are a few Tecmo games with *Metroid* references. In *Dead or Alive Dimensions* for the 3DS, the Geothermal Power Plant is based on *Metroid*, and even features Ridley. *Dynasty Warriors VS* for the 3DS has a Zero Suit costume too, as does *Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water*, though the latter is exclusive to the Western release. *Yoshi's Wooly World* also lets you scan various Amiibo to give you colored yarn variations of Yoshi, including both the regular and Zero Suit versions of Samus, as well as Pit, Dark Pit, and Palutena. The Wii U version of *Tekken Tag Tournament* also has a Zero Suit costume. Meanwhile, *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate* for the 3DS includes the Power Suit and Zero Suit as DLC, while the Wii U and Switch ports of *Bayonetta* have various Samus costumes.

A few other non-Nintendo games feature *Metroid* references.

Clockwise from top-left: *Tetris* (NES)*, F-1 Race, Famicom Wars, Super Mario RPG, Bayonetta, Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga, Starcraft II, Guacamelee!, Vs. Mach Rider, F-Zero X, Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water, Kirby's Dream Land 3, Galactic Pinball*.

Guacamelee! is an indie Metroidvania that pays homage to the series with statues that feature a Metroid, as well as item-giving figures called the "Choozo". *Teslagrad* features similar-looking statues. Some Metroids can be found in a canister in *Starcraft II.* The Kalibas foe from *Doom* (2016) is an enormous brain that protects itself with turrets, which may be a further allusion to Mother Brain.

Metroid isn't the first game that featured a costumed woman. *Vs. Mach Rider*, which predated *Metroid* by a year, features a rider who first appears fully covered, slowly revealing a woman in a Barbarella-style swimsuit as you play. The character Jody Summer from *F-Zero X* (and later games) also looks roughly similar to Samus out of her suit.

The DS RPG *Glory of Heracles* namechecks *Kid Icarus*, noting that the name Pit doesn't sound Greek at all.

Super Smash Bros.

Metroid has been around since the beginning of *Super Smash Bros.*, featuring Samus as a playable character and a background based on Zebes. Later characters include Zero Suit Samus, Dark Samus, and Ridley, with many stages added. Pit showed up in *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, while Palutena and Dark Pit, as well as Little Mac from *Punch-Out!!*, were added in *Super Smash Bros. for Nintendo 3DS and Wii U.* This version also has a stage based on *Balloon Fight,* and snuck in a further nod to the franchise with *Animal Crossing*'s Villager fighter donning a helmet and two balloons to float as an Up Special. Kirby can also don Samus' helmet for his copy attacks.

Nintendo World

This Wii U launch game features a number of minigames based on assorted Nintendo franchises. These include Takamaru's Ninja Castle, where you hold the Wii U tablet sideways and use it to throw shurikens and bombs at attacking ninjas; Metroid Blast, where you either walk around or fly in Samus' ship and shoot baddies; and Balloon Trip Breeze, a graphically enhanced take on Balloon Trip mode, but you can only control the flight of your floating Mii by moving gusts of wind over the Gamepad with the stylus.
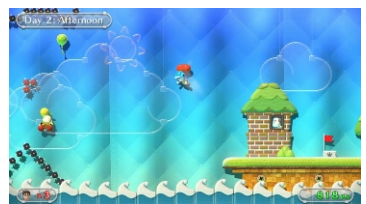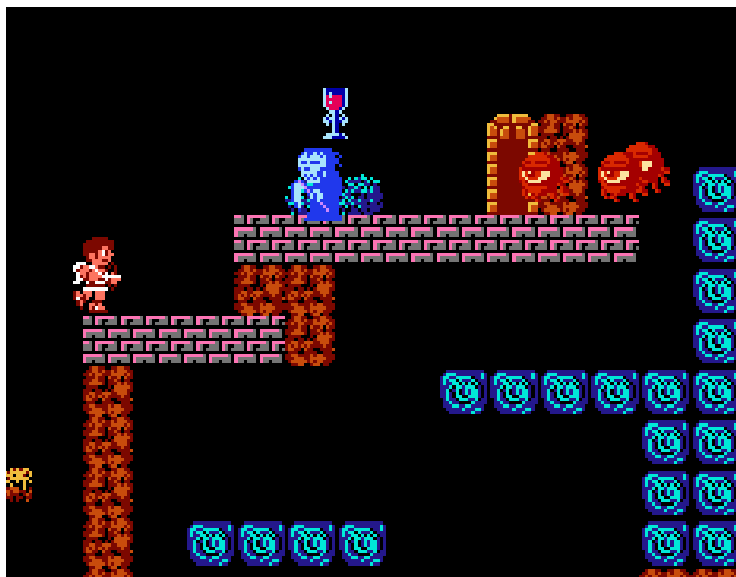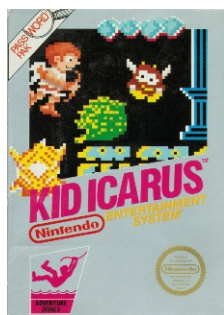
Kid Icarus
AKA: **Hikari Shinwa: Palutena no Kagami** (JP)
Original Release: 1986
Platforms: FDS, NES, GBA, 3DS, WII, WIIU

With the advent of the Famicom Disk System in 1986, Nintendo was keen to create action games with more complex mechanics in ways that made them comparable to PC games. *The Legend of Zelda* and *Metroid* were the two most popular of these, but shortly afterward they released *Kid Icarus*. An action-platformer based loosely on Greek mythology, it's a somewhat more straightforward title, being a linear, stage-based game with some RPG aspects. The story and art design was handled by Toru Osawa and served as his first major work at Nintendo before moving on to pen the scripts for Famicom adventure games. Direction is credited to Satoru Okada, who also directed *Metroid*. The Japanese title is *Palutena no Kagami* ("The Mirror of Palutena"). It also has a subtitle, *Hikari Shinwa* ("Myth of Light"), which became "Angel Land Story" in English.

Despite the localized title, the hero isn't actually Icarus of Greek legend, but rather an angel named Pit. The evil Medusa has ransacked Angel Land, stealing their three holy treasures, turning most of its residents to stone, and kidnapping their goddess, Palutena. It's up to Pit, who's broken out of his prison, to climb out of the depths of the underworld, into the sky, and defeat the vile gorgon.

Kid Icarus is unique in that there are multiple types of stage constructions. There are four worlds altogether, the first three of which are broken down further into four levels. The first and third worlds consist of vertically scrolling levels, as you ascend upward, jumping between platforms and killing enemies. Here, the screen loops around at the edges – if Pit walks off of the left side, he'll appear on the right. Rather frustratingly, the screen scrolls upward but not downward, so if you drop off the screen, you die instantly. The second world consists of straightforward horizontally scrolling areas. These are much easier, because while there are still bottomless pits, they're not such a constant threat as they are in the other areas.

In these stages you'll also come across open doors, which lead to several types of rooms. You'll regularly find shops, at which you can purchase items using hearts dropped by fallen enemies. Common choices include health restoratives and life bottles, the latter of which will rejuvenate Pit if he runs out of life. You'll also come across black market shops, which have much higher prices but also more powerful items, like barrels which let you store more than one life bottle at once, and a single-use feather that will rescue Pit from falling off of the screen.

Other types of rooms offer various challenges. One kind is filled with jars marked with question marks. You can break them to uncover items, but if you find one with the God of Poverty,

you lose everything in the room. However, if you manage to beat the odds and clear the room completely without finding it, the last one will contain a powerful item. Also present are two types of challenge rooms, one of which contains strange monsters with gigantic noses, and is a fine spot to get extra hearts and points, while the other is filled with invincible *Xevious*-style spinning monoliths. If you manage to weather the second type, you'll be allowed to choose one of three weapon enhancements – a fire arrow, a stronger bow (which shoots arrows further), and a guard crystal that spins around Pit to protect him from enemies.

Beyond hearts, killing enemies will also increase your score. This is tallied up at the end of each stage, and life extensions are granted at certain point thresholds. There are also rooms where your arrow strength is upgraded, which will cause Pit's sprite to change color, like Link in *The Legend of Zelda* and Samus in *Metroid* when improving their status. Enemies will attack from all sides, even dropping from the skies or popping up from below. You'll also occasionally find harps lying about, which will temporarily turn enemies into hammers. These hammers don't seem to have a function, at least at first.

The fourth area in each world is the fortress, and things are

changed up here again. These are labyrinths you must explore, with the main goal being to find the boss. Unlike *The Legend of Zelda*, there aren't any puzzles or much in the way of secrets, but they're also more elaborate mazes. There's an auto-map to help you out, but it's only accessible once you find three items – the map, the torch that highlights your position, and the pencil to show which rooms you've been in. It's useful but still rather vague, and it doesn't highlight any other important types of rooms – *Zelda* was nice enough to at least show the boss chamber once you've found the compass, but there's nothing like that here.

There are little stone statues in these parts, and it's here that you can put all of those hammers you've found to use. Whenever you bash a statue, the hammer breaks and you free one of the trapped angelic warriors, who'll fly off-screen to join your army. Once you reach the boss fight, they're summoned into combat and shadow Pit's movements, giving some welcome firepower in these tough battles.

The Eggplant Wizards are an ever-present threat in the fortress stages. These one-eyed creatures cast spells that will turn Pit into a gigantic eggplant, rendering him unable to attack. The only way to cure him is to find one of the nurse rooms around the maze.

(This is a goofy joke – the Japanese word for eggplant is "nasu", which sounds very close to the Japanese pronunciation of the English word "nurse".) It's very difficult to dodge these attacks, considering that they're lobbed at varying arcs and are often placed so that they'll take you by surprise right as you enter a room. It then requires a huge diversion for you to find a nurse and then retrace your steps.

The very final stage switches things up completely, this time presented as a side-scrolling shoot-em-up. Pit has finally recovered all three treasures, and it's here that he puts them to use – the Wings of Pegasus (which let him fly), the Mirror Shield (which let him face off against Medusa without getting turned to stone), and the Light Arrows (which travel the whole length of the screen and are far more powerful than regular shots). This stage consists of a few brief areas, cycled over and over, until you've defeated enough enemies that you're allowed to take on Medusa for the final encounter.

Kid Icarus sure is super ambitious in the way that it tries to do three different things – action-platformer, dungeon explorer, and shoot-em-up – combined with some RPG elements. Even so, the game definitely needed some more time in development to fine tune it further, as it's exceedingly
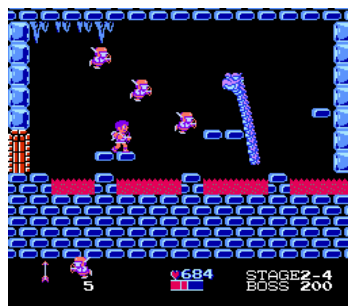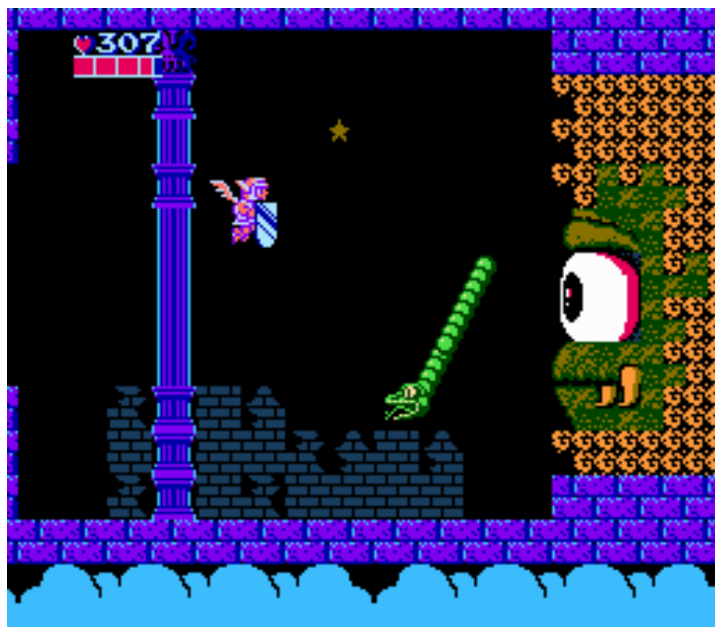
difficult, especially at the outset. The jumps you have to make are often pretty tough, filled with narrow platforms no larger than Pit himself, with very little room for error...and these are just minutes into the very first stage! While Pit can duck, this will also cause him to automatically fall through certain types of platforms, so you need to be very careful.

One of the most troublesome enemies is the Grim Reaper, who marches calmly back and forth. If you come into his line of sight, he'll panic and summon a small army of his followers to attack. He also takes several hits to kill, so it's best to try to sneak around him if you can. Furthermore, health restoratives exist outside of shops but are fairly uncommon. Pit's life meter is short, and you're taking a chance any time you enter any of the challenge rooms, as they can very quickly deplete your meager health. The levels can get pretty long too, and one misstep will end in Pit falling to his doom and having to restart the whole stage. Whenever you die, Pit falls off the level, with the screen then turning black and dramatically displaying the phrase "I'm finished!" before you're given the option to continue. Retries are unlimited, thankfully, and there's a password system that lets you record progress.

While life extensions and arrow improvements are

permanent, the special weapons are not, and can be stolen by thieves called Plutons. Considering how tough it is to earn these upgrades – those training rooms are pretty hard! – it's extremely frustrating to see how easily they can be taken away. Plus whenever you die, which will probably be often, the game reverts your hearts, score, and items back to what they were when you started the level, making it impossible to replay to gain more strength.

The entire first world is extremely rough, but it becomes much easier in the second, since it's horizontally scrolling and you're not constantly in the danger of falling to your doom. Enemies here are also much more generous in dropping hearts, allowing you to actually afford to buy stuff at the shops. The third world returns to the vertically scrolling areas, and while these contain a large number of life-sapping obstacles that make the platforming slightly more challenging, it's not really much more difficult than the first area. Plus, these areas end up being much easier overall than the first stage because your life meter and arrow strength are higher.

The game also loves eccentric subsystems. There's a hard-to-find item called the credit card, which lets you take something from a black market shop but puts any subsequent hearts towards paying off your debt. There's a secret

function that lets you haggle with merchants too, but there's a possibility they may increase their prices instead. Collecting those hammers to free the trapped soldiers for the boss fights is cool in principle, but they end up being killed extremely quickly in battle. While their presence is useful, they don't provide as much of an advantage as they should.

In spite of its difficulty, there's a weirdly charming game buried in *Kid Icarus.* Titles based on Greek mythology were rare at the time, even if the game plays fast and loose with the theme. Pit is an original character too, with his design seemingly based more on Cupid than Icarus or any of the more powerful mythical figures; meanwhile, Palutena is basically Athena but with anime-style green hair, and only appears at the very end. Some of the enemy designs are what you'd expect – snakes that drop out of pots, floating eyeballs, etc. – but seem veer into parody, with foes that resemble chomping Pac-Mans and Goomba-like mushrooms, and one enemy that looks a whole lot like a Metroid, though here they're given the name Komayto.

Specknoses, the enemies with the tiny eyes and gigantic noses fought in one of the challenge rooms, were inspired by composer Hip Tanaka's distinctive facial features. Two baddies, a winged snake and an armored guy,

are named Phil and Collin, a reference to the British musical artist. Of the three main bosses, the ones based on Cerberus (Twinbellows) and Hydra (Hewdraw) are amusing, though the third, Pandora, is a large, floating blob face, which is hardly threatening. Medusa is much more impressive – she's a gigantic face that spans an entire wall, with an enormous eyeball that shoots out beams, and a large snake that weaves at various angles.

As was previously mentioned, the soundtrack was composed by Hirokazu "Hip" Tanaka, who also did *Metroid*, and is pretty decent. The title theme is a little shrill but memorable, while the first level theme fits alongside any of the great Nintendo 8-bit songs. The rest of the tracks aren't quite as good, and the fortress theme sure gets old quickly, but overall it's decent work.

As with *Metroid* and *The Legend of Zelda*, *Kid Icarus* originated as a Famicom Disk System system title, and a few changes were made for its cartridge adaptation overseas. The disk version had a name entry screen that allowed you to save your game (your name also appears on the pause screen), which was replaced with a password system, like in *Metroid*.
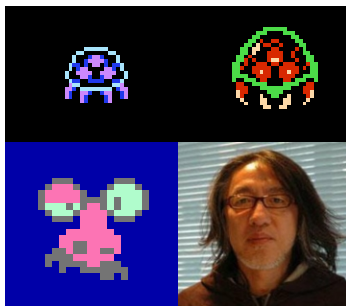
A few music tracks also used the extra wavetable sound channel on the FDS hardware, most notably the title screen theme and the game over ditty, which had to be changed. Many of the sound effects had to be altered too – Pit's damage sound is more like a shriek, and the grim reaper's yells sound more like nails on a board.

The biggest changes are found in the final level and ending. In the last area of the FDS version, you need to hold the jump button to fly and move right to scroll the screen manually; both of these are automatic in the NES version. You can also fly through the columns in the NES game, plus the enemy patterns are different. In all versions, there are several endings depending upon which stats you maxed out and other factors, where Palutena rewards Pit by changing him into different forms. The FDS version has a unique worst ending where you're turned into an enemy; meanwhile the NES version has a unique best ending where Palutena rewards Pit with a kiss. The ending screen is also more elaborate in the NES version, whereas it's just a black screen in the FDS release. There's also an extra animation of Medusa collapsing when defeated.

When *Kid Icarus* was rebooted for the 3DS in 2012,

Nintendo went back to make a special 3D version of the original game. While the other titles in this line were just straight ports using 3D visuals, Nintendo put much more effort into *Kid Icarus*. The original release used stark black and blue backgrounds throughout the entire game, lacking the detail that makes for good looking 3D. Accordingly, each level has a new, completely unique background. These are at a higher color depth than what would normally be possible on an NES, though not quite on the level of a 16-bit title; the look does clash with the sprites, which haven't been updated, but the fact that each level now has its own unique color scheme helps differentiate the zones (shown below). The controls have been fine tuned as well, so it's a bit easier to play. The music here is based on the FDS version, plus it uses a save system rather than passwords, but the last level and ending improvements are based on the NES version.

Kid Icarus never had quite the same legacy of other similar Nintendo titles – *The Legend of Zelda* inspired a whole legion of action-RPGs, while *Metroid* would eventually lay the foundation for the Metroidvania exploratory platformer subgenre. Meanwhile, the closest things to *Kid Icarus* are other action-platformers with RPG-lite elements like *Wonder Boy in Monster World*, which were popular for awhile, but hardly very distinct. The game didn't make much of an impact in Japan, but was more popular elsewhere, leading Nintendo to revive it for a Game Boy sequel.
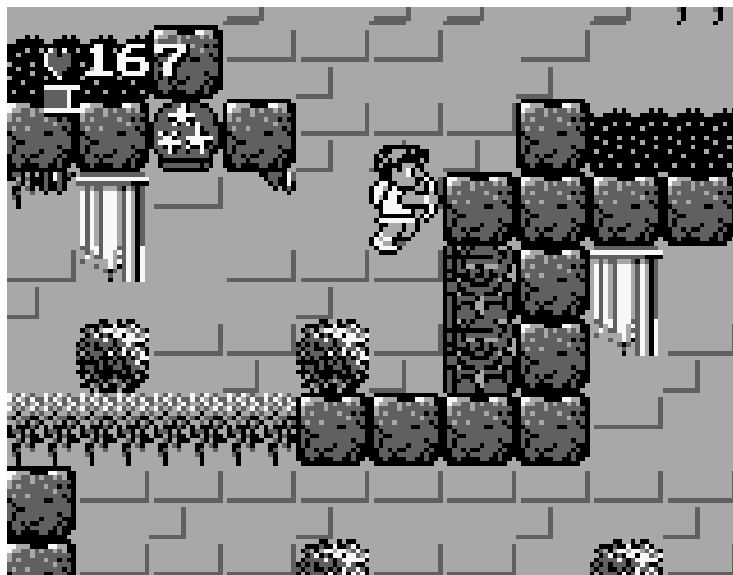
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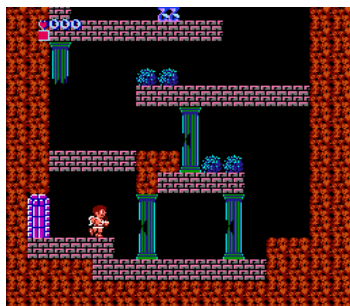
Nintendo Entertainment System

3DS

Kid Icarus: Of Myths and Monsters
Original Release: 1991
Platforms: GB, 3DS

Five years after its NES release, *Kid Icarus* received a follow-up for the Game Boy. This was a not uncommon evolutionary path to take for some of Nintendo's games (see: *Metroid II*, *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*). However this new game, subtitled *Of Myths and Monsters*, straddles the line between being a remake and a true sequel – technically, all of the levels and enemies are brand new, but in many ways, it's still very faithful to the original, just with many of its more troublesome elements patched up.

The plot here is that Palutena has a prophetic nightmare about the coming of the evil Orcos. Pit is apparently too weak to use the three sacred treasures (despite having employed them quite handily in the NES game), so he's sent on a training regimen to improve his strength. After going through all of this, Palutena is kidnapped again, and in the final stage, Pit must save her.

The four-act structure is basically the same as the NES game. The biggest change to *Of Myths and Monsters* is how the vertical stages play out. Before, the screen only scrolled upwards, with Pit warping around the edges as he hit the left or right sides. The stages scroll in all directions now, though they still wrap around if you go left or right, giving the impression of scaling a tower. It can get a little confusing to get your bearings, but as long as you keep moving upwards, you can't really get lost. With this, that also means there's no longer any danger of falling off of the screen and dying; instead, if you miss a jump you'll just end up losing a bit of ground and need to climb back up. The game uses a save system too, and you now have a limited number of lives, allowing you to resume progress midway on some stages.

There are still doors with shops and challenge rooms, though occasionally you'll find folks that just give helpful advice on where to find hidden stuff. As with before, doors will close once you've entered the room, but you can re-open it after you've found a key if you want to do another challenge to grind for hearts or buy extra stuff. If you've found all of the doors in the stage, you're awarded a special Palutena's Key that reopens all of them. Shops now cycle their goods as well, so you have a greater option of stuff to buy. Credit cards are still present but work slightly differently, as they just allow you to get an item from a black market shop for free.

Additionally, angel statues are now in all stages, not just the fortresses. However, smashing them will just give you bonus items here, typically health restoratives, but the pencil and torch items are also found in the fortress levels. Angels no longer join you in boss encounters though, which is really unfortunate. These fights are already full of flickering, so perhaps

they were too taxing on the Game Boy. The bosses are different from the NES game, featuring a Minotaur, a creature called Skull Wing, and another large serpent called the Fire Serpent. You still gain health extensions from your score, but now improved arrows are only granted once you've accomplished specific tasks. These are hidden from the player, but your rank increases based on killing enemies, opening doors, acquiring items, and not dying.

You're also judged on your performance in the last level, but if you don't pass, you then need to undertake extra tests to get the Silver Armor (which increases your defense) and Light Arrows (which are pretty powerful). Though this area isn't a shoot-em-up scene like in the NES game, you are allowed to use the Wings of Pegasus, which let you fly freely around the stage. The finale is a two-part battle against Orcos, whose second form is so large that most

of his body remains off-screen, only popping in his head and limbs to attack. There's only one ending (since the criteria that was previously used to judge this was instead applied to the equipment you get), though it does have a cheeky reference to the actual Icarus myth, where Pit gets his wings melted by flying too close to the sun.

The spritework here is more detailed than in the NES game, being most noticeable in the backgrounds. The neatest detail is the little face drawn on the eggplant whenever you get cursed. However, the NES game kept things varied by regularly changing up the color palette; with the Game Boy stuck with monochrome visuals, everything ends up looking same-y. The room structure also keeps the same dimensions as the NES game rather than being shrunk down to match the lower screen resolution, so each chamber in the labyrinth is
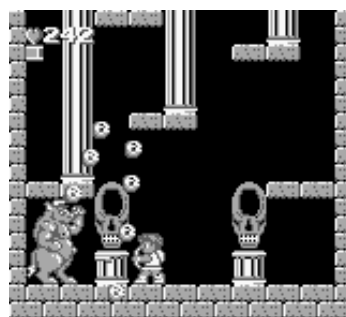
too large to be displayed on the screen without scrolling. The music is easily the one area where it's definitely weaker than the original game, though – the first level song isn't bad, but the rest of the tunes are hardly memorable.

Of Myths and Monsters addresses most of the major issues of its predecessor, even if it ends up discarding a few of its more interesting ideas (the angels in the boss fights, the shoot-em-up final level) rather than fine-turning them. It feels like they spent so much time fixing its predecessor's flaws that they forgot to find something new and interesting to do with the concept. It's certainly a less frustrating game, but it still doesn't feel very exciting, either.

Curiously, this game was only released in North America and Europe, without a Japanese release, perhaps speaking to *Kid Icarus*' (lack of) popularity in its home territory. It wasn't officially published there until 2012 on the 3DS Virtual Console, to tie in with *Kid Icarus: Uprising*, but the English text was untranslated.

Kid Icarus: Uprising

Kid Icarus: Uprising
AKA: **Shin Hikari Shinwa: Palutena no Kagami** (JP)
Original Release: 2012
Platforms: 3DS

While Nintendo kept popular titles in the limelight, it had long forgotten poor *Kid Icarus.* However in the Nintendo 64 era, Nintendo published *Super Smash Bros.*, a multiplayer fighting game featuring characters from many titles across the company's history. The series continued on the GameCube with *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, highlighting some other (then-obscure) releases like *Earthbound* and *Fire Emblem*. English-speaking journalists then began asking Nintendo if perhaps Pit or other *Kid Icarus* characters could return for the next *Super Smash Bros.*

Nintendo of Japan was shocked at the interest – here was a game that they apparently felt was a failure, at least in their home country, but seemed to be popular overseas. They responded to the demand by adding Pit to *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* for the Wii, which was met with tremendous applause. That enthusiasm let them greenlight a proper resurrection for the series, eventually released for the 3DS in 2012. This was developed by Project Sora, a team created specifically for the project, and was led by Masahiro Sakurai, the director of *Super Smash Bros Brawl*, who would later helm the series over the next decade.

Rather than going for a retro throwback and mimicking the style of the older games, *Kid Icarus: Uprising* is a brand new 3D re-imaging of the world, though the NES game is still considered canon.

(The Game Boy title is skipped over since it wasn't originally released in Japan.) Twenty-five years have passed since Pit defeated Medusa – about the same amount of time between the NES and 3DS games, not coincidentally – but Medusa has somehow escaped from prison and is out for revenge. It's up to Pit to once again find the three sacred treasures and then defeat her.

The original FDS game was called "The Mirror of Palutena" in Japan, but curiously she was barely in the game, only showing at the end (much like Zelda in her "debut" game). *Kid Icarus: Uprising*, on the other hand, puts her front and center in the main supporting role. Pit still can't fly on his own, so he relies on Palutena's power to take to the skies, though even her power limits his airtime to five minutes in total.

Each stage is broken up into two sections. The first part is a rail-shooter, somewhat similar to *Space Harrier* or *Star Fox*, as Palutena guides Pit through the stage, dodging enemy fire and taking down foes. The second part is a 3D on-foot action segment, where you can explore freely and fight enemies with a combination of projectile and melee attacks. The on-foot segments are much longer than the flying sections, and end with a boss fight, most stages taking about 20 minutes overall to complete. These areas have rails you can grind on, and while there's no real jump command (outside of a

Oh, goody—guests! Protecting an impregnable fortress can get awfully lonely.

limited-use special skill), there are colored pads which will automatically propel you across some of the more expansive areas. Certain levels also have vehicles you can ride, like the Exo Tank, which is basically a magical motorcycle, and the Cherubot, an angelic mecha. These are typically restricted to specific areas before you're required to jump off and continue on foot.

Despite the initial setup, the encounter with Medusa isn't the end of the game – once you beat her, you're actually only about 30% of the way through the adventure. There are a total of 25 stages in *Kid Icarus: Uprising*, and the game is always tossing new surprises at you, sending you to additional locations or meeting up with further characters. It turns out that the figure behind Medusa's resurrection is Hades, God of the Underworld, who ends up being the ultimate foe, though not before fighting against other factions like the Forces of Nature, who seek to save the Earth by destroying humanity, and the Chaos Kin, an even more erratic semblance of enemies.

One of the most appealing elements of *Uprising* is the regular banter amongst the cast. This is unlike *Star Fox 64*, where characters only intermittently chatter. Here, there's a regular dialogue through most of the stage, mostly focusing on Pit and

Palutena, who share a light-hearted little brother/older sister sort of relationship. They not only narrate the on-screen action but also share details of the story, which elaborates on the game world without stopping the proceedings for cutscenes.

Pit and Palutena may be the main focus, but all sorts of characters, both friend and foe, also regularly join the conversation. Medusa will pop in to taunt the heroes, as does the even more despicable Hades. As the game progresses, the cast expands even further with the likes of Viridi, the Goddess of Nature and leader of the Forces of Nature who takes on the form of an adolescent girl; Pyrrhon, the God of Sun, a wannabe superhero with more muscles than smarts; and Dark Pit, a clone of our hero created with the Mirror of Truth who's occasionally antagonistic, but lends a hand whenever he feels it's needed.

The dialogue is also pretty jokey, regularly leaning into the fourth wall. Palutena often makes direct comments about the 3DS controls, as well as console functions like the 3D slider. Whenever you encounter an enemy, the bottom screen flashes how the original foe looked like in the NES game. One character exasperatingly notes that a particular stage is so long that it needed to be broken up by a

loading screen. The bosses from the original game return too, including Tanatos, presented here as a flamboyant buffoon. This was a mistranslation in the original English manual, but the game fixes it up by giving him the proper name Thanatos (the added "h" is for "ha-mazing"). Nintendo's localizers have long had a knock for dialogue that feels both natural and funny in English, without making it apparent that it originated in a different language. The voice acting is fantastic, too, keeping things lively without ever wearing itself out.

There's an astounding amount of content across the course of the game's levels, which takes roughly 10 hours to complete. Much like the NES game, defeated foes drop hearts, which can be used primarily as currency. Pit can equip himself with one of nine types of weapons – Blades, Staffs, Claws, Bows, Palms, Clubs, Cannons, Orbitars, and Arms – and there are several variations within each class containing different melee and projectile abilities, from range to power to firing rate. There's a huge loot-gathering aspect to this, as many are dropped in the stage, can be purchased with hearts, or fused together to make different weapons. There's a whole system involving the 3DS Streetpass as well, where players can encase weapons in jewels and send them

to other passersby wirelessly. There is also a wide selection of subpowers, each of which are presented as different shapes and can be equipped by fitting them within a small grid, which grants extra powers in the stages, though they typically can only be used a few times.

You can also choose your Intensity by wagering hearts at the beginning of each stage, which sets the difficulty level for that area. Higher ranks grant better rewards, plus there are special doors that only open if you're playing at a certain Intensity level, leading to even more prizes. Of course if you die you lose those hearts, and the game adjusts the Intensity down a bit. Other than that, there's not much punishment for failure, as there are no lives and checkpoints are frequent.

Indeed, kineticism is the key to *Kid Icarus: Uprising*'s energy. The flying stages are basically digital roller coasters, and even though the on-foot sections let you run around freely, there are plenty of arrows and indicators to point you in the right direction. The game never wants you to get lost or have you retread too much ground when you die, instead always keeping the action alive.

There's a ton of stuff to check out between stages too, because the game is constantly challenging and rewarding you, much like in the modern *Super*

Smash Bros. games. Both Palutena and Viridi have paintings covered by tiles, which are slowly revealed whenever you accomplish a certain goal. You can find idols in the stages (or purchase with 3DS Play Coins) which can randomly unlock some element of the game, whether it be a character, stage, weapon, or enemy, along with a little bit of lore. There's even an expansive multiplayer mode, where you play as a warrior in Palutena's army and duke it out with other teams.

The game looks absolutely incredible – it may have been released early on in the 3DS' lifespan, but it still remains one of the best looking titles on the platform. Early stages borrow typical Greek mythological tropes – ruins, coliseums, labyrinths and so forth - but some of the visual designs get really wild, like the flat colors of Pandora's fortress. This area ventures into the realm of sci-fi when you fly out of the atmosphere and deal with space pirates, or into the surreal as you fight against the battleships of the Chaos Kin. There's so much variety to the stages that it seems like the developers knew they were never going to make a sequel, so they just crammed as many ideas as possible into this single game.

Since many of the enemies are taken from the original NES title, including the Specknose

faces and the Metroid-esque Komayto, there's also a sense of goofiness that maintains the feeling of a classic video game while still feeling remarkably modern. The best touches are the small ones, like the way that Pit runs on solid surfaces in the flying segments, a la *Space Harrier*, and the fact that the last digit of your score increases by one every time you continue, a regular element of many 80s and 90s arcade titles. Indeed, the game nails the feeling of a modern arcade experience; it's almost more like a Sega game than a Nintendo one.

The soundtrack, too, is extremely impressive. Largely composed by Motoi Sakuraba (*Star Ocean*, *Valkyrie Profile*), much of it is orchestrated and occasionally accompanied by synths and live guitars, both trademarks of the musician. There's a main motif that's woven into many of the tracks, plus the music regularly references melodies from the original NES game. There are individual tracks for each of the stages too, making for a very robust soundtrack album.

There's so much that's utterly brilliant about *Kid Icarus: Uprising* that it's unfortunate that one contentious issue can turn it into a love-it-or-hate-it affair – the control scheme. The setup here is somewhat similar to *Metroid Printer Hunters* for the DS. Pit is directly controlled using the circle
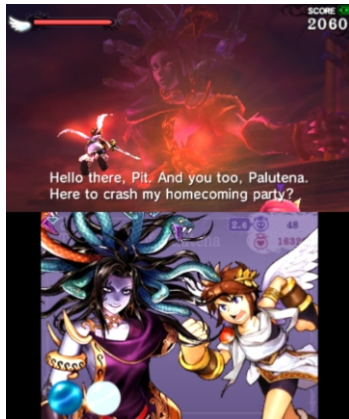
pad, as you use the stylus and touch screen to aim your weapon. In the on-foot stages, it's also used to rotate the camera – this functions similarly to a trackball in that it has some inertia, so you can quickly swipe in a direction to spin around. Attacking is mapped by default to the L shoulder trigger. This means, assuming you're right handed, that the weight of the system rests entirely on your left hand, since your right is holding the stylus. And that weight, especially with the constant need to either repeatedly press or hold down the L button, places a lot of stress on your wrist, resulting in uncomfortable cramping when playing for more than a few minutes.

Divisive control schemes are nothing new in Nintendo games – see *Star Fox Zero*, both DS *Zelda* games, and many others – but those were games that you could eventually adjust to with enough time. The problem isn't that the control scheme in *Kid Icarus: Uprising* is difficult to use, it's that it can be physically painful.

There are plenty of configuration settings to remap the buttons and tweak the camera controls, but nothing ever actually feels comfortable. You can also ditch the stylus totally and use the face buttons to control the camera, but this is extremely sluggish and cumbersome. Curiously, the game supports the Circle Pad Pro – the extension originally designed for the original 3DS models whose functionality is built into the New 3DS as the right analog nub – but this only reverses the controls for left-handed players. There's absolutely no way to use dual-analog controls like
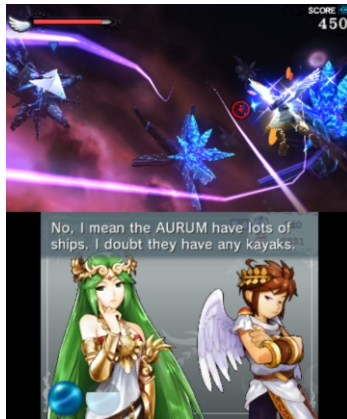
you would typically see in a console game.

Nintendo at least seemed to be aware of the issue, since the retail release included a stand that allows you to rest the 3DS on a table, freeing your hands from having to hold it, but it's still incredibly awkward to use. The best way to mitigate the issue is by turning on auto-fire, so Pit will automatically shoot a projectile weapon at anything you hit with the targeting cursor. This means you don't need to hit the L button as much, only using it for melee attacks or in cases where the auto-fire doesn't work. This takes a lot of stress off the wrists, though you still shouldn't play too much in a single session.

In truth, the game probably doesn't support traditional dual-analog controls because it isn't really designed around them. The action in the on-foot segments is made so that you can target enemies all around you and whip the camera around in an instant. It's fast and chaotic, with opponents attacking from all directions, and you need a tight level of precision to react. Using the touch screen gives the action a satisfyingly tactile feel that you don't get by aiming with an analog pad (or Wii remote), and the camera controls are only second to a mouse as far as accuracy.

But there are other control issues, too. There's no dodge or run button, so instead you just need to push the circle pad very quickly. This isn't always accurate though, leading you to either walk into an attack when instead you wanted to dodge roll, or accidentally run off of a ledge when you just wanted to walk
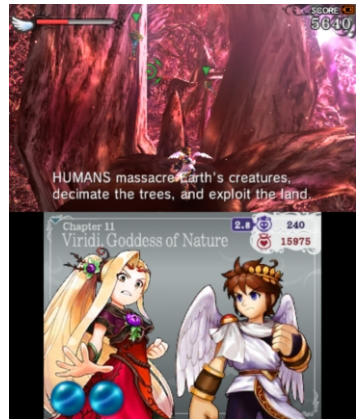
forward. Furthermore, Pit can only run for a handful of seconds before getting tired, so you need to stop moving, try to walk slowly for a few seconds, then jam the circle pad again to pick up the pace. Then there are the host of secondary powers, which are displayed as small buttons on the touch screen, and are so troublesome to hit that they almost may as well not be there.

Since the game is so customizable, you can always set the Intensity to low. So if the game is a little overwhelming, at least it's forgivable, and you can barrel through boss battles pretty quickly as a result. But the control scheme demands at least one extra hand to use effectively, and until we reach that stage in human evolution, *Kid Icarus: Uprising* is always going to feel a little unwieldy, no matter how much you tweak it.

The myth of Icarus warned of the dangers of hubris, of flying too close to the sun. As a result, it's hilariously ironic that a game based on that legend suffers a similar fate. It's not impossible to enjoy, but truly requires using a control scheme that works without pain, which some players may never find. With more standardized controls, *Kid Icarus: Uprising* could be one of the best games Nintendo has ever produced, and it's just begging to be ported away from the 3DS hardware. Unfortunately, its development seems to have taken a toll on Sakurai, who has revealed in interviews that he really doesn't want to revisit the game. In the tradition of Greek tragedy then, this game might just remain Nintendo's most flawed masterpiece.
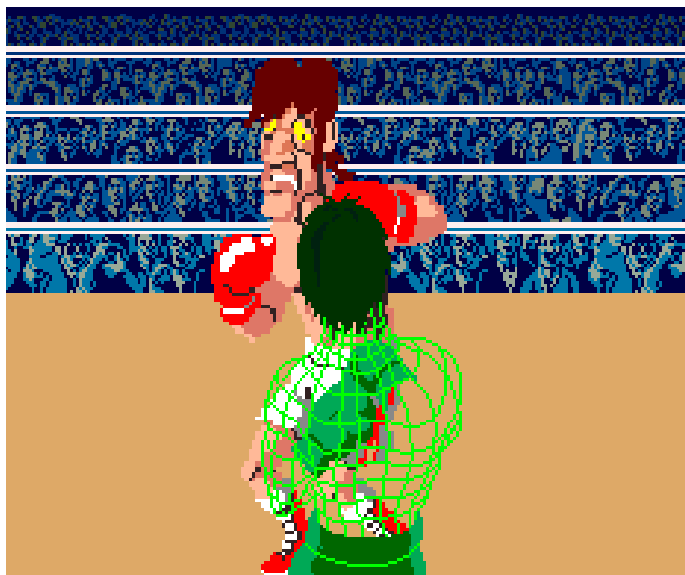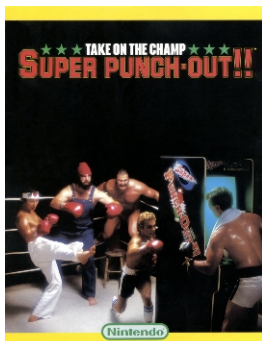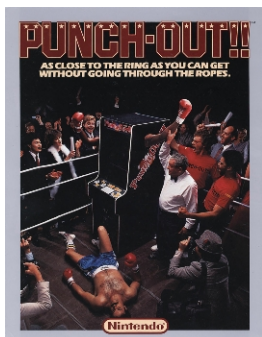
Punch-Out!! / Super Punch-Out!!
Original Release: 1984
Platforms: ARC, NSW

Nintendo's take on the boxing world is quite interesting. While not the first pugilistic video game, *Punch-Out!!* was certainly the first one to become a successful hit. It's really no surprise either, as the game boasts incredibly tight controls and memorable characters. While the arcade games were relatively popular, it was the NES outing of the series that brought it to the forefront of gaming, with the endorsement of professional boxer Mike Tyson.

Here, unlike most boxing titles, putting yourself on the offensive is a bad idea. A majority of the time you'll need to wait until your opponent strikes, dodge, and then hit them while they're stunned. Each character usually has a set pattern that can be learned, but you need to react quickly against your opponents to truly win. A few of the more colorful boxers have some truly outlandish attacks, some of which border on the supernatural (Indian boxer Great Tiger teleports around the ring) or flat-out illegal (Chinese boxer Dragon Chan can jump kick you), but this game is obviously not meant to be taken seriously. Naturally, you'll need quick reflexes to succeed, along with some elementary puzzle solving skills.

The whole *Punch-Out!!* series is the brainchild of Genyo Takeda, who worked on every game, even as a supervisor on the Canadian-developed Wii reboot, in addition to the *StarTropics* games. Most of these titles were made for an American audience, as *Punch-Out!!* fared much better overseas than in Japan. Takeda was also a technical guru, and helped in the creation of many NES mapper chips, as well as the battery backup function used in games like *The Legend of Zelda*.

The very first outing of *Punch-Out!!* had players assume the role of a nameless green-haired boxer. Nintendo used two screens stacked on top of each other for the game's arcade machine – one for the actual gameplay and the other for keeping track of stats. Matches last for three minutes here, with the timer counting down from the sound of the first bell. Your character is portrayed in a green mesh, which is the closest the hardware could approximate transparency. There's also quite a lot of voiceovers, with the announcer calling out your opponent's name and detailing every single attack you land. ("Body blow! Body blow!" etc.) The game also makes use of some unique sound effects, especially the distinct noise when you send someone flying to the mat. This has practically become a trademark of the series.

The game gives you an array of punches to throw, depending on your character's position (Up or Down) and which button you press (Left button or Right button). As you strike your opponents, a KO meter will build (kind of like a super meter for a 2D fighting game). If

your attacks are blocked, the meter will drop. When it reaches maximum, you can then throw a KO punch (either a Right Hook or an Uppercut). If this connects, it can be devastating to the competition. You shouldn't throw too many, however, because eventually the computer AI will pick up on this, and dodge them with ease. One thing that might take a little while to notice is that when you're hit by your opponent, you can't throw a punch for about a second or two. This makes the game incredibly tough, seeing as how when you get hit, you're trying to counterattack only to be struck once again.

There are six boxers in total to compete against, which are in order: Glass Joe, Piston Hurricane, Bald Bull, Kid Quick, Pizza Pasta, and Mr. Sandman. Each foe has a different tactic to be brought down, and it's not always noticeable at first as to how to knock them out. You can always tell when they'll be attacking, as their eyes consistently turn yellow

beforehand. Once you finish defeating everyone and gain the championship title, you then have to defend it and go through each opponent again, and this time around they really mean business. One thing that's particularly annoying in this game is that when you're knocked out by your opponent, you only have one more chance to try and defeat them if you put in another quarter. If you lose again, you will be forced to start back to the beginning.

Super Punch-Out!! isn't so much of a sequel as it is an upgrade (and barely an upgrade at that). Not much has changed since the first installment – which isn't surprising as this came out a mere seven months after the original release. Matches are still three minutes, and the control scheme is mostly the same. The only new thing here is the ability to duck under attacks, which is done by pulling a knob on the control panel. Other changes are all pretty minor. The upper screen has a different set-up, where it gives the

top three scores and KO times right on top, instead of just the first top score. The timer has also been changed. Where in the last game it counted down how many seconds you have left to defeat your opponent, here it shows how long you've been fighting.

There are five new characters to do battle with, such as fan favorites Bear Hugger and Dragon Chan. This version is definitely harder too, as it unleashes all of its fury from the very first round (Bear Hugger is a much more formidable foe than Glass Joe could ever be). The boxers this time also include Vodka Drunkenski, Great Tiger, and Super Macho Man. Just as before, you once again need to defend your title against each opponent after winning. Other than that, this is pretty much the same deal as last time. The only other notable change is the protagonist's portrait has him donning a new haircut (shown directly above), which makes him resemble Principal Skinner from *The Simpsons*.
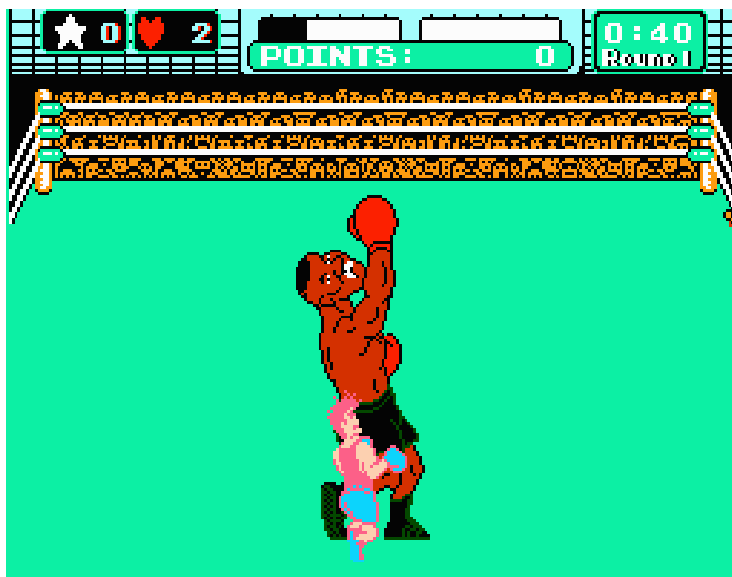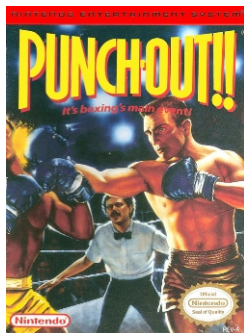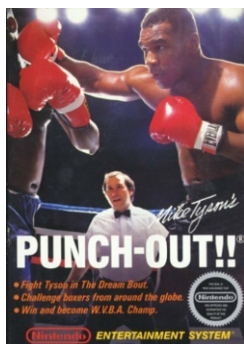
Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!
AKA: **Punch-Out!!**
Original Release: 1987
Platforms: NES, GC, WII, WIIU, 3DS

Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!! is a bit of a departure from the arcade games. Players assume the role of Little Mac, an 18-year old New York City hopeful who's determined to become the greatest boxer. With the help and training of his coach Doc Louis, he dukes it out against several much larger boxers to win the title.

Right off the bat, the look and feel of the game differs greatly from the arcade games. Instead of being a wireframe character, Little Mac is just incredibly short. It kind of makes the game even more humorous, seeing as how he has to essentially jump up to punch his opponents in the face. (This was done to accommodate the NES hardware, since it wasn't quite powerful enough to replicate the arcade experience.) Little Mac has the usual four punches and can dodge left or right, duck, and block upwards, as the opponents never hit below his face (probably due to his size). Gone is the KO meter, and strength is now regulated by a star counter. Stars are earned at certain points as you play, such as hitting an opponent just as he's about to strike. Once you have obtained a star, you can throw a KO punch by hitting the Start button. These punches are valuable and should only be used if there is a huge opening, preferably when the opponent is already stunned.

Also new is the fatigue meter, signified by hearts. Little Mac has a set number of punches he can throw before becoming tired, and the counter goes down when he misses, has his attack blocked, blocks an opponent's punch, or gets hit. If the counter goes down to zero, he becomes purple and unable to attack, and can only dodge and block. If you're hit while fatigued, you're still disabled and can't attack. Blocking moves also leaves you fatigued, but once you dodge a punch, you can begin attacking again as the fatigue meter is reset. This makes the fights more challenging, but it also gets in the way as you try to defeat your opponents and suddenly find you can't attack because you weren't paying attention to the meter. One other minor change from the arcade version is that instead of opponents' eyes turning yellow when they're about to attack, their entire bodies will flash.

The last major addition comes into play when Mac is knocked down. When this happens, you have to frantically button mash to get back up and fight. The more damage that was done, the harder it is to get back up. However, the more damage you did to the opponent before, the faster you'll return to your feet.

The game's timer is also different, as this entry introduces rounds. Each round is three minutes, but you don't have to defeat your opponent within that specific time. You're now given three rounds in total, so you actually have a total of nine

minutes to KO your foes. If neither character gets a KO, a decision will be made based on performance. This makes it more realistic than the arcade and SNES versions of the game, where you automatically lose the match when time is up. In between rounds, coach Doc Louis gives a hint on how to defeat the enemy, while your opponent sits there and says something that is completely stupid and/or hilarious ("Make it quick... I want to retire." - Glass Joe). Furthermore, you still have whatever stars you had in your star meter each time a new round begins, and damage to either contestant is carried over as well. (Although you can "cheat" and hit select between rounds to regain a bit of health.)

The game is divided into circuits, with three fights per circuit. Once you have bested the final opponent in a circuit, you win the title for that class and move on to the next one. After each title, the game gives a little cinematic of Little Mac running through the streets of New York City in a pink sweatsuit, with Doc Louis following him on a bike. It then gives you a password so you can go back to fighting at any time. A lot of characters return from the arcade games such as Glass Joe, Bald Bull, Great Tiger, and Vodka Drunkenski (renamed Soda Popinski). New foes include Piston Honda (who's really only a

Japanese version of Piston Hurricane), Don Flamenco, and fan favorite King Hippo. The main draw to the game would have to be the inclusion of Mike Tyson, though. He's the final match for a good reason, as he's ridiculously fast and powerful. When fighting him for the first time, it's hard to last for even 15 seconds.

Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!! was one of many NES titles that was featured on the PlayChoice 10 arcade machine. The game here is exactly the same, except now you have a time limit of 300 seconds for each quarter you insert. The only other noticeable change is the ability to put your initials in right at the beginning.

When it came time to re-release this game, its namesake star had lost his championship belt. As a result when it came to renegotiate the licensing contract, Nintendo opted not to renew (this was before Tyson's rape trial, so it wasn't related to that). *Punch-Out!!*'s new boss thus became Mr. Dream. Although different in appearance, he has the exact same moves as Tyson, meaning the method for defeating him is also exactly the same. It's a shame though, as this new opponent is nowhere near as intimidating as Mike Tyson was. This version of the game can be found as a bonus in *Animal Crossing* for the GameCube, and was used for all Virtual Console

releases, but the actual cart is one of the rarer NES games to find.

Even more exceptional is the special gold cartridge Nintendo gave away as a prize in a *Nintendo Famicom Golf* competition, which was held in June of 1987. This actually predates any of the regular versions, and was still called just *Punch Out!!*. The game is mostly the same as *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!*, except it's missing Iron Mike himself. This means that once you beat Super Macho Man, the game is won. Nintendo didn't originally plan for a retail release in Japan, but the high demand made them change their mind. Both Japanese versions use a different color scheme than the Western releases, and have a bit more hilarious Engrish.

Mike Tyson's Punch Out!! is the only NES game to use the MMC2 chip. (MMCs were memory mapper chips that allowed the system to pull off effects that would otherwise be impossible for the hardware.) This allowed for the huge characters seen in the game. The Japanese version uses the MMC4, although it's not exactly clear why, as there aren't any immediately noticeable differences. In fact, the whole game is still in English, even referencing the Nintendo Fun Club newsletter, which didn't exist in Japan. A few other Japanese games, like *Fire Emblem*, also use the MMC4 chip.
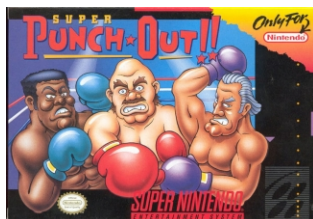
Super Punch-Out!!
Original Release: 1994
Platforms: SNES, WII, WIIU, GC, 3DS

Though different from the arcade game of the same name, the SNES *Super Punch-Out!!* is much closer to the originals than *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!*. Gone is the miniscule boxer named Little Mac, who has been replaced by a new nameless blond-haired kid whose mission is to win the title of World Video Boxing Association champion. The perspective here is the same as in the arcade game, except your character is transparent instead of being a wireframe model. The timer has also reverted back to the three minute limit with only a single round. There are a total of four circuits (Minor, Major, World, and Special), with the Special Circuit only becoming accessible with a record of 12 wins and zero losses. Besides the regular game called Championship Mode, this title features a Time Attack Mode that lets you beat your completion records, which can be viewed in Records View Mode. Thankfully this time around, the game uses a battery-backed memory for saving instead of passwords.

The regular punches have now been tampered with here, as each one has varying speed and power. From fastest to slowest and weakest to strongest, it's Left Jab, Right Jab, Left Body Blow, and Right Body Blow. The star KO meter has been ditched as well for the original KO meter, so the more blows you land, the higher your meter goes to finally deliver KO punches (uppercuts, huge body blows, and new rapid punches). New to the series is the power-up system. As time passes, the color of your character's portrait above the stamina meter changes, signifying an increase to your power. This progresses from blue, to green, to yellow, and finally to red – you can also think of it as weakest to strongest. When your KO meter is filled, your boxing gloves flash, and normal punches now have more speed and KO punches are more powerful. You can actually change the settings of the power-up in the Button Setting Mode to adjust from Auto (power-up begins when power is at maximum and you throw another punch) to Manual (lets the player choose when to start power-up with a button press whenever your power is at maximum). Knowing the properties of your punches and utilizing them is key to besting the opponents in this entry.

The dodging system has been revamped too, making this version the easiest in which to defend ones' self. In the other games, you have to press the direction you wanted to block an attack (Up blocking high, Down defending low). In *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!*, you could only block upwards, anyway. Here, pressing Up blocks above – however not pressing anything allows you to block body blows automatically. It really makes the game that much easier, and gives more control to the character instead of being thrown off due to

not pressing the correct directional button. You can also dodge left and right as well as duck.

Another much welcome addition is self-healing. When you knock down the opponent and the referee is counting down, you can press any button as fast as you can to regain lost health in the battle (as usual, the enemies' punches are always much stronger than your own). You still need to mash buttons to get up after being knocked down, though. Don't think that the game is any easier either with the added defensive and offensive options, as it's still quite difficult, especially in the final two circuits. If anything, the result is a much faster-paced game compared to the others.

Super Punch-Out!! features a diverse group of pugilists to challenge. Many of these have been in previous outings, such as Bear Hugger, Piston Hurricane, Bald Bull, Mr. Sandman, and Dragon Chan, but there are also a lot of new faces such as Mad Clown, Aran Ryan, Heike Kagero, Masked Muscle, and the Bruiser brothers. Much like in prior titles, each fighter follows a certain pattern. They all possess a huge arsenal of signature moves too, whereas before there were only two or three moves that separated foes from the other boxers.

An example would be Kagero, a Japanese kabuki dancer who

floats around the ring with a fast dance and hits you with his long, grey hair. Or Mad Clown, who at one point does black flips to the rear of the ring, juggles balls, and then throws them at you – all before jumping forward and attempting to smack your head and knock you down with a single attack. Then there's the match against Hoy Quarlow, a 78-year old martial artist who beats the living tar out of you with his walking stick. Despite the frustration with some of these cheesy attacks, they lend even more to the personality of the series (get knocked down by Super Macho Man and watch him flex the entire time you're on the mat. It's ridiculous). Your opponent's coaches will even yell tips at them, telling them to either attack or take it easy. These should be a sign that they're about to lay a huge strike on you, so dodge or counter accordingly.

At the time of its original release, this game was criticized by fans of the NES title for being too different. What people didn't realize though, is that this version was closer to the original spirit of the arcade games. If anything, *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* is the only entry in the series that deviates from the norm.

Super Punch Out!! was an American/European exclusive game for a few years, as it was

initially released in 1994 and didn't hit Japan until 1998. Further, the game was only sold through the Nintendo Power vending system, where you would purchase a blank cartridge and pay to have various games written on to it.

Super Punch Out!! made an appearance in the EA boxing game *Fight Night Round 2*. Since the GameCube port lacks the online modes of the Xbox and PS2 versions, EA gave Nintendo owners the ability to play *Super Punch-Out!!* instead. It's actually emulated very well, and is definitely a welcome bonus. You can even unlock the fighter for the modes in *Fight Night Round 2* in all his 3D glory. The game has him wearing shorts that say "MAC" on them, implying that the boxer is Little Mac, which is incorrect (again, in *Super Punch-Out!!* he technically didn't have a name).

Punch-Out!!
Original Release: 2009
Platforms: WII, WIIU

After 15 years, Nintendo finally decided to revitalize the *Punch-Out!!* franchise. Given to the Canadian development team Next Level Games after the success of the *Super Mario Strikers* series, this isn't so much a remake as it is a full-on upgrade taking elements from each and every *Punch-Out!!* before, with most of the inspiration being drawn from the NES game. Yet again players take control of Little Mac, the little boxer who could. With the return of his coach Doc Louis, it's time to set the world on fire again and battle it out in three circuits to take the title of greatest boxer in the world.

This game has the same setup and some mechanics as the NES game: three rounds with three-minute time limits where you try and knock out your opponent. You fight every boxer and when you become the champ, you have to defend your title much like before and defeat every boxer yet again. The fatigue meter is back with the hearts showing you how many times you can miss / have your attacks blocked before Little Mac has to rest and can't throw anymore punches. Also making a return is the star counter system, which works similarly as it did in the NES version. However, instead of stacking up to three super moves, it allows you to perform a single super punch of varying strengths. Getting hit also drains all stars instead of just one. It is a bit easier to obtain stars, though. The

best defensive maneuver from the SNES version of mashing buttons to regain health while your foe is down also makes a glorious return.

There are multiple control configurations, with the most lauded being the use of the nunchuk attachment and holding the input devices as if you're actually boxing. It feels natural and is surprisingly accurate. However, due to the fast-paced nature of the game it's not entirely useful. For the best reaction time, you'll end up just holding the Wii remote sideways and playing it like an NES controller. The Wii balance board can also be used to lean left and right to dodge, and shifting your weight in the back to duck. This unfortunately is also a gimmick, and most people's reaction time in real life is nowhere near the speed of the game, so you just end up getting hit a lot.

Adding to the nostalgia is the return of the more popular boxers from past *Punch-Out!!* games. Many of them make their triumphant return after not being seen since the NES version, like King Hippo, Von Kaiser, and Great Tiger. The selection of past foes is perfect (although the *Super Punch-Out!!* debutants are mostly missing, with the exception of Aran Ryan), with each one realized in true 3D. While this will make most fans of the series squeal with glee, it's the infused personalities that really take center stage. Every action and word said (which is spoken in their

native tongue!) has been thought out to make every boxer come to life, like Great Tiger flying into the ring on his magic carpet, or when Bald Bull slides his feet in anger, much like a bull before he charges. It makes every character seem over the top and stereotypical, but in turn makes it easy to love each pugilist while beating them to a pulp. There is also lots of great artwork of the opponents getting ready for the fight.

This release also features two new boxers, one being the well-known Nintendo icon Donkey Kong, as well as Disco Kid. His appearance in the game is amusing, and he fits in so well with the rest of the cast that it's almost as if he could have been from an earlier title. While this new opponent is great and so many lovable boxers return, it's still a little odd and sad that

almost all of the characters are from past games. Why couldn't they add even more new boxers?

Besides the regular career mode one would expect, there's also an exhibition mode with many challenges that are just absolutely ridiculous. Expert players-only need apply. Additionally, for the first time in the series' history there's a head-to-head two-player mode. Here, you both control two Little Macs in split-screen and try to punch the other the most while filling up your meter. Once this is done, the winning player becomes Giga Mac and switches to the typical single-screen setup. From there, Little Mac must face off against Giga Mac as it turns into a typical *Punch-Out!!* match. These games were never about multiplayer at all, but this mode is certainly a creative approach to the concept. There's also a

practice mode that lets you face a holographic version of your foes.

All in all, this is a great re-imagining of the classic series. The graphics are obviously fantastic, with huge, cel-shaded characters and incredibly charismatic animation. For the music, all of the themes are remixes of the main tune from *Punch-Out!!*. The track during the regular game is played on guitar and has a cool 80s rock feel to it, and it changes with each circuit. What's particularly cool is that each enemy has his own unique arrangement of the theme.

Nintendo released *Doc Louis's Punch-Out!!* in October 2009 on WiiWare, as an exclusive reward for Club Nintendo platinum members. Using the same engine as *Punch-Out!!* , all you can really do here is fight or spar with Doc Louis himself.
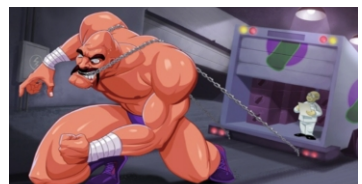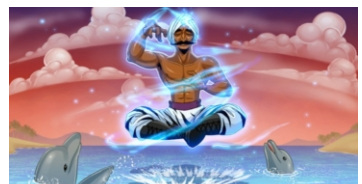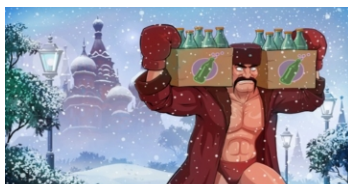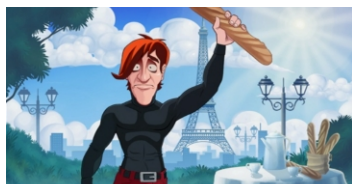
Punch-Out!! Characters

Glass Joe
The worst boxer in the game, his track record is 1-99 KO. He's your first opponent in the arcade, NES, and Wii games. Pathetic by nature, in the ring he barely even throws a punch. If you can't defeat him, this game is not for you.

Piston Hurricane
Hailing from Havana, Cuba, Piston is notorious for his fancy footwork and barrage of alternating high and low punches. Originally appearing in the arcade *Punch-Out!!*, he's the only character to receive a complete make over in the SNES *Super Punch-Out!!*

Bald Bull
The Turkish boxer has been in every *Punch-Out!!* with the exception of *Super Punch-Out!!* in the arcades. A fan-favorite, his Bull Charge is his best move and ironically his major weakness. Punch him right as he's charging at you!

Kid Quick
This New York boxer is easily the dullest character design. He has no big moves to separate him from anyone else and his tactics include just being able to react quickly to your punches. It's clear why he didn't appear in of the sequels.

Pizza Pasta
This unfortunately named Italian doesn't have a lot going for him. He reacts quickly to your attacks and has rather good defense, but otherwise is pretty plain. One of only two boxers in the *Punch-Out!!* series who will clench.

Mr. Sandman
Named for constantly putting his opponents to rest, Mr. Sandman is ill-tempered and will stop at nothing to win once you start gaining the upper hand in the match. Originally from New York City, but the Wii version changes it to Philadelphia.

Bear Hugger
Weighing in at 440 lbs., this Canadian has one huge advantage: you can't deliver a body blow. He grew up fighting animals in the woods and originates from *Super Punch-Out!!* in the arcades, and later appears in the SNES and Wii games.

Dragon Chan
Inspired by Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, Dragon Chan is an ex-kick boxer, and he's not afraid to use his legs in the boxing ring. He even has a healing ability. Once you know his style, you'll realize that he's all about offense, with a weak defense.

Vodka Drunkenski / Soda Popinski
A Russian who loves to box just as much as he loves to drink. While in the arcade games he is Vodka Drunkenski, on consoles his name was changed to Soda Popinski. He makes references to getting drunk but is supposedly addicted to soda?

Great Tiger
This native of India has the ability to teleport in the NES game. He can also create mirror doubles in the Wii version. Blocking his barrage punches during his teleporting will make him dizzy, giving you a chance to give a barrage of your own.

Super Machoman
The world champ in most *Punch-Out!!* games, this L.A. boxer is a workout nut job who seems more interested in flexing his muscles than fighting, which produces disturbing sounds. His super spin punch is one of the deadliest moves in the series.

Von Kaiser
This German boxing machine appears in the NES and Wii versions as the second weakest opponent after Glass Joe. He has an unfortunate habit of shaking his head before he punches, making it laughably easy to avoid every single punch he throws.

Piston Honda / Piston Hondo
He's an edit of Piston Hurricane for the NES version and very patriotic of his home country (Japan) as he always proudly proclaims, "I'll give you a KO from Tokyo!" He's renamed Piston Hondo in the Wii version, possibly to avoid litigation.

Don Flamenco
This Spaniard is a flamboyant opponent who believes he's a beautiful fighter. He has a thing for hair, especially Referee Mario's. In the Wii version he's shown wearing a toupee which you can knock off to make him angry.

King Hippo
The strangest boxer you will go up against, King Hippo's defense is impenetrable until he opens his mouth. Clock him there and a band-aid appears. When he's knocked down the first time, the fight is over due to his massive weight.

Mike Tyson
The only real life boxer in the entire series, Mike Tyson is the final opponent in your way of winning the title belt in *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* Also known as Kid Dynamite. One successful uppercut means an instant knockdown, no matter what.
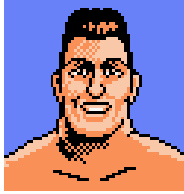
Mr. Dream
Mike Tyson's replacement for the later re-release of *Punch-Out!!* for the NES. He's not exactly the fierce-looking opponent that Iron Mike was. His move set is exactly the same, though, so defeating him requires the same strategy

Bob Charlie
Crowned the Jive King of Kingston, Jamaica, Bob Charlie is really agile and nimble around the boxing ring. He'll shuck 'n' jive to dodge your attacks and comes in with relatively weak punches of his own.

Aran Ryan
This irate Irishman could be considered a stronger Piston Hurricane clone. Notable for being one out of two boxers who try to clench to regain health, he's also the only new character from the SNES game to show up in the Wii version.

Mad Clown
With a similar build as Bear Hugger, this Italian clown doesn't mess around. Undamaged by body blows, you have to constantly attack his face. Another dirty fighter, he backflips and juggles balls, only to hurl them toward you.

Hoy Quarlow
The most unorthodox boxer in the series, Hoy Quarlow is an incredibly quick and agile man for being a 100 pound-78 year old. The Chinese martial artist will attack you with backhands, kicks, and the occasional beating with his cane.

Nick Bruiser
The absolute champion in SNES *Super Punch-Out!!*, he's never lost a match. The ground even shakes when he walks. Annoyingly, he seems to be able to throw a punch and deal damage even if you're blocking his attacks.

Donkey Kong
Nintendo's famous ape dons some boxing gloves in the Wii version. He's a hidden opponent that only appears in the "Last Stand" mode, where you're challenged by constant random opponents after beating the career mode.
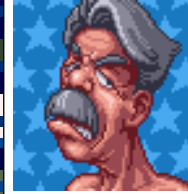
Gabby Jay
The first opponent in the SNES *Super Punch-Out!!*, he's pretty much exactly like Glass Joe. They have some of the same stats (Both from Paris, France and weighing 110 lbs.) His only win was against Glass Joe, which isn't really an accomplishment.

Masked Muscle
This Mexican wrestler is the crown prince of the cheap shot for a reason. Not only will he head butt you from time to time, but he also tries to spit in your eyes, disorienting you and making you unable to attack.

Heike Kagero
This Japanese kabuki student quite literally dances around you in the ring. He moves with an ultra-fast dance that goes left and right. Once he stops, he usually starts to throw equally quick punches. He also attacks with his long, silver hair.

Narcis Prince
The large V on the Prince's sweater stands for "Victory." This Londoner hates having his face touched, so you should take advantage of that. When you pop him in the noggin, he goes bloody barmy.
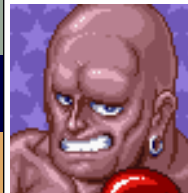
Rick Bruiser
One of the Bruiser brothers, Rick has won every single boxing match he's been in with the exception of one (against his brother). His Earthquaker move shakes the entire ring and leaves you frozen, only for him to uppercut you for a quick knockdown.

Disco Kid
This 70s-infused disco lover from Brooklyn is a new contender included in the Wii version. He uses his dancing skills to trick you as to where he's going to attack. He's also the only *Punch-Out!!* character created by Next Level Games.

Doc Louis
Doc Louis isn't an opponent in the regular series, but rather Little Mac's faithful trainer in the NES and Wii versions. It's possible to spar with him in *Doc Louis's Punch-Out!!*, A small, exclusive WiiWare game only for Club Nintendo platinum members.

Little Mac
While technically nameless in the arcade games (the player enters their own initials instead), the *Punch-Out!!* protagonist gets his name in the NES game. The SNES design changes it up, while the Wii game is closer to the NES version.

Punch-Out!! Related Games

As the title suggests, this arcade title is a very different game from the *Punch-Out!!* series. However, it was developed by the same team behind *Punch-Out!!* and there are many similarities, namely the same dual-screen setup and the graphics. *Arm Wrestling* has the same graphical engine as the *Punch-Out!!* arcade games too, featuring bright, vibrant colors and an assortment of flashy enemies to take down, including a Texan, a sumo wrestler, a monkey robot controlled by a little girl, and Frankenstein's monster's son named Frank Jr. Of note is the fact that the opponent called Mask X is actually Bald Bull in a mask, and seems to have inspired the character Masked Muscle in the SNES *Super Punch-Out!!* In this game, the characters make faces and strange noises while you frantically wiggle the arcade stick and keep pressing the button to bring his/her arm down. In truth, it isn't nearly as fun and was never as popular as the *Punch-Out!!* games were.

Arm Wrestling
Platforms: ARC
Release Date: 1985

A part of Nintendo's Micro Vs. series of two-player LCD handhelds, *Boxing* was released a few months after *Punch-Out!!* hit the arcades. After the success of the NES game, Nintendo of America re-released it as *Punch-Out!!* to tie in with the popular title. The game shows a side view of the action, and the players can direct high or low punches at each other. Depleting an opponent's health bar makes them back away a step, and knocking them down in the corner wins the match. Nintendo included this game in their *Game & Watch Gallery 4* for the Game Boy Advance, where it again appears as just Boxing. The remade mode has Luigi fight against a Wiggler, a Boo, and finally Waluigi.


Boxing / Punch-Out!!
Platform: G&W
Release Date: 1984

Power Punch II's development history is an interesting tale. Riding on the heels of the success of *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!,* Nintendo decided to begin working on a sequel with the help of a development company named Beam Software. Things started going downhill before it even got started, though. Mike Tyson, the poster boy for the series, was facing trial for rape accusations. That was a bit of an impediment, as this upcoming game was meant to star him again, and this time, players were actually going to control Kid Dynamite. To avoid controversy, Beam Software replaced Mike Tyson with the look-a-like Mark Tyler, who wore pink shorts to differentiate him from his obvious inspiration. As the game continued in development, Nintendo disapproved of its quality and dropped the contract, leaving another company to publish it. That dubious honor would go to American Softworks Corp. Since Nintendo kept the rights to the *Punch-Out!!* name, it was given the confusing title *Power Punch II*, even though there isn't actually a "Power Punch I".

Mark Tyler is so cocky, he says he'll accept any challenge from anywhere and anyone. Some aliens catch word of this and invite him to an intergalactic boxing championship of epic proportions. Before each fight, you can go and train, which is strongly recommended, or you'll lose no matter what. Correctly mastering the training segments will power you up for the next match.

The actual fighting scenes are terrible. For starters, the essence of the *Punch-Out!!* gameplay is entirely removed – there's no counterattacking, and thus, no real strategy. It's just punching, dodging, and more punching. Another horrific downfall during the fights is the sheer power of your opponents. They can attack with quick jabs that rapidly reduce your life gauge, while it takes 20 jabs of your own to bring the enemies' own health down even a single notch. Making matters worse, every single character is remarkably ugly.

As a whole, the game walks a line between boring and massively frustrating. A beta ROM that still features Mike Tyson was leaked, for those who are curious.
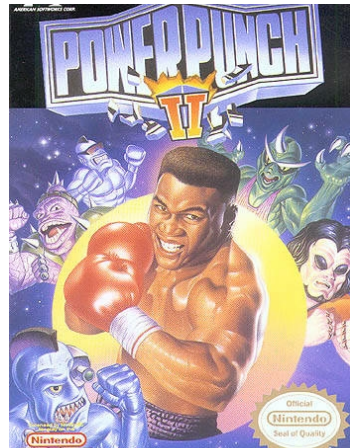
Power Punch II
Platform: NES
Release Date: 1992

A year after the original arcade *Punch-Out!!* games, Elite published a computer title that's such a monstrously huge rip-off, it's hilarious. In addition to getting a famous boxer to endorse it, several characters are ripped straight from the arcade *Punch-Out!!* games, including Bear Hugger (renamed Canadian Crusher), Dragon Chan (Fling Long Chop), and Vodka Drunkenski (Andra Puncharedov). There are even more offensive characters – Ravioli Mafiosi and Frenchie France are tame, but Antipodean Andy is the worst kind of blackface stereotype. This kind of tactic wasn't too uncommon in the European computer scene of the 1980s – see the *Super Mario Bros*. clone *The Great Giana Sisters*. Most likely, the devs figured no one would notice.

Frank Bruno's Boxing
Platforms: C64, ZX, CPC
Release Date: 1985

Developed by Inferno Games, *Wade Hixton's Counter Punch* is an obvious tribute to the *Punch-Out!!* series in terms of gameplay (especially the SNES game). In fact, it plays almost identically. However, there's a new feature here where each match earns you some cash, which can be used to purchase extra moves.

Wade Hixton's differences to *Punch-Out!!* outweigh the similarities, though. For starters there's a story mode, albeit a very weird one. Wade Hixton's car breaks down in a small, podunk town. While his beloved vehicle is being worked on, he stays- at O'Reilly's Pub to wait and wet his whistle. Trouble starts immediately as he takes the seat of Rocco McScrub, and he challenges Wade to a boxing match. The whole plot is exceedingly bizarre, but it oozes goofy charm. The rest of the characters are an amusing bunch as well, including a pimp named Sweetness, a witch doctor named Jobu, a demon straight from hell called Gus Incubus, and even a gorilla wearing a tuxedo. Wade even has a doppelgänger to fight.

The graphics in this game are incredible, and the talented artists really have to be commended. Sure, each attack has probably only three or four frames of animation, but the huge characters look fantastic. The game has a delightfully cartoonish look that fits its world nicely. Each opponent is hilarious, and their attacks sometimes become more over the top than those in *Punch-Out!!* Rocco, for instance, sics his pet raccoon on you. There are plenty of other cool touches too, like the trashy card girls in between each round.

The difficulty here is a little steep, seeing as it takes a lot of punches to knock your opponent down, and it has the arcade *Punch-Out!!* blocking system (you have to press Down to block down). It's obvious the developers were huge fans of *Punch-Out!!* though, and they did a great job updating it for the Game Boy Advance, especially due to the absence of an official entry.

Wade Hixton's Counter Punch
Platforms: GBA
Release Date: 2004

In *WarioWare, Inc.: Mega MicroGame$!* for the Game Boy Advance and *WarioWare, Inc.: Mega Party Games* for the GameCube, Jimmy's boss stage is called "Punch Out". Jimmy's description is, "Fancy feet & sweet moves! KO that guy, baby! If he's got flash in effect, it means he's comin' at you!" Basically, you have dodge an opponent's punch when he's flashing (moving either left or right), and then land one right on his kisser.

Wario Ware Touched! for the NDS has a micro game called "Button Masher" where you have to press the A button on an NES controller to do one of a few things. One of them is to hit a boxer as he stops lowering his arms, clearly inspired by *Punch-Out!!* Little Mac would later also show up in the Skip Ltd. game *Captain Rainbow* for the Wii, alongside other obscure Nintendo characters like Takamaru from *Nazo no Murasamejou* and Lip from *Panel de Pon*. Little Mac has became overweight here, and it's up to the hero to help train him to shed the excess pounds and once again fight in the boxing ring. This game never came out in America.
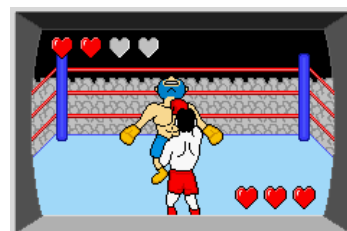
Balloon Fight
Original Release: 1984
Platforms: ARC, NES, PC88, X1, GC, GBA, WII, DS, 3DS, WIIU, NSO

Williams' *Joust* was released in 1982 with the simple-but-challenging goal of fending off waves of enemies while riding upon an avian steed. The mechanic was easy to grasp: whoever lances higher is the victor. The key was in the execution, as the sole button controlled the flapping of your ostrich mount, requiring you to cope with the hover physics to survive attacks. Nintendo's variant of this game, *Balloon Fight*, performs almost exactly like its earlier Western counterpart, only with a more cartoonish twist.

As a balloon fighter, you have nothing to ride on. It's just you wearing a helmet and strapping two balloons onto your back to float. Without a bird to ride, you simply flap your arms to gain lift. Your fellow fighters only have a single balloon keeping them aloft, but they also wear woodpecker masks with sharp beaks, ready to pop your sole means of flight. Each balloon serves as a larger, more easily recognizable weak point to strike from above. Your double-balloon harness gives you two strikes before your fall, but movement gets more difficult when you lose the first, and you only recover your balloons after defeat or through a bonus game.

Much like *Joust,* the game takes place in an enclosed arena with plenty of open air to dogfight your foes. Both buttons function to flap and fly while you move around in the air with the joystick or pad,

with the arena wrapping around at the left and right. Inertia plays a major role here, as you need to build up lift and account for your momentum as you try to change altitude and direction. You bounce away when colliding with floating mounds of solid ground or your opponents' bodies, which can send you hurtling off into danger if you're unlucky.

The stage layout changes after every round, with 12 unique sets on the NES version before looping. This makes for a suitable change of pace to the static repeating arena in *Joust*. After completing three stages, you get a breather in the form of a bonus round where you try to collect 20 balloons that drift from four pipes for added points. Two players can play at once, but they can collide with each other, so without proper care, "friendly fire" can make this more difficult than the single-player mode.

The normal balloon-flying opponents come in three palette-swapped forms, but unlike *Joust*, they don't turn into bonus point-garnering eggs to collect once bested. Instead, they float down via parachutes and can be finished off for extra points after they reach solid ground. While downed enemies aren't a threat for the time, leaving them to their own devices gives them ample time to inflate a fresh balloon and rejoin the battle. As a fair gesture, each stage starts with the beaked opponents on the ground inflating their

balloons, making them sitting ducks for a speedy player to even the odds. Piling on the threat is a giant fish that lurks in the water at the bottom, ready to gobble up any combatant who dares to fly by close enough.

In contrast to *Joust*, further variables come into play from two added hazards: sparks bolt from the clouds in the background if you take too long to clear the stage, and flippers launch anyone who flies into them out of control. There are no power-ups, but bubbles float from the bottom of the screen periodically for added points per pop.

The first release of *Balloon Fight* was on the dual-screen arcade Vs. System in late 1984. While visually similar to the more recognized NES version, there are several differences that make things more difficult. For one, the stages are more than twice as tall, leading to vertical scrolling and the chance for blind hits from foes that are buzzing around off-camera. Enemies are also more aggressive and simpler in their AI, as they only seek to pop your balloons and don't try to evade. Their parachutes also drop later than on the NES, making them fall faster out of immediate harm's way. The giant fish and sparks are quicker to appear, too. A few added tunes are played here for extended periods, but the game is still rather silent, aside from the constant bleeping of the enemies' flapping. The largest issue is the stiff flight controls, further stacking the odds against you.

The home port was published shortly after the Vs. edition hit arcades. This was developed in part by HAL Labs, and programming the NES version was one of the late Satoru Iwata's earliest projects with Nintendo. With the playing field limited to

the size of the screen, there aren't any potential blind spots to contend with now. It also has more precise controls compared to *Vs. Balloon Fight,* thanks to a very simple programming change. As Iwata explained, the calculations for player movement are moved a decimal point and based on tenths, rather than the arcade's integer-rounded computation, leading to a far smoother play experience. The NES port also puts the two buttons to better use, with the A button serving as the standard flap-per-press and the B button changed to a continually flapping motion. This leads to less thumb wear, as you can switch between quick lifting and delicate floating with little strain.

Another programming trick makes for smarter foes that like to play keep-away, strike from behind, and make use of the screen wraparound, rather than swarming you in a group. The fish acts more intelligently too, following your movement rather than just being a startling, randomly snapping set of jaws. One important significance of the NES version is the hidden legacy of its code: Iwata's floating physics would later be retooled for the swimming movements in *Super Mario Bros*.

Added to the package on NES is a Balloon Trip mode, where a single balloon fighter flies over an endless fish-laden sea, with the skies packed with a gauntlet of sparks. There are bonus balloons to collect here for score, and a catchy Hip Tanaka tune to groove to. Collecting enough balloons in a row upgrades the color to a larger point amount. Floating bubbles appear periodically and stop the horizontal scrolling briefly, offering some welcome relief.
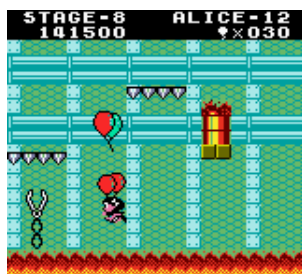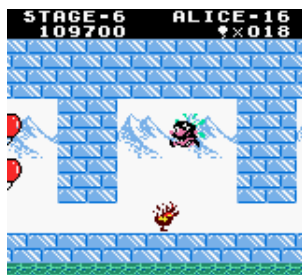
Months after being released on the NES, Hudson chose *Balloon*
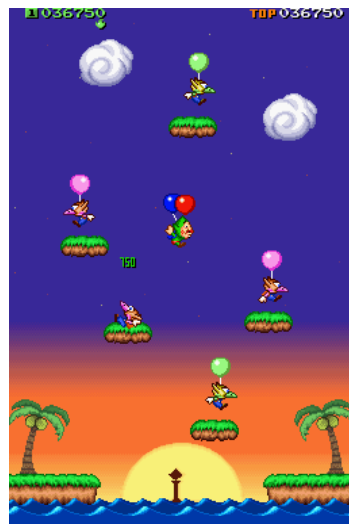
Fight as one of the handful of Nintendo titles to convert onto Japanese home computers. These PC-88 and X1 ports are nearly identical to the NES version, save for some technical compromises. The sprites are more flickery and the scrolling for the Balloon Trip mode chugs as well, but they're decent conversions. Oddly, a downloadable port was made available for Sharp's Zaurus PDA. An unofficial version also shows up on Watara's portable Supervision console.

A special revamped port of the game was also given away in 2007 as a reward exclusively on the Japanese Club Nintendo program. *Tingle's Balloon Fight DS* (above) stars the bizarre Tingle from later *Zelda* installments as the balloon fighter, thanks to the self-declared fairy's penchant to float on a balloon himself. While it's based heavily on the NES version, the port uses the dual screens of the DS to expand the playing field much like the arcade original. The visuals are a step up too, with more variety in the background shifting from day to dusk to night, and rupees are tied to the balloons Tingle collects. This also offers the original NES score, along with new remixes, up to four-player Download Play co-op, and a gallery of Tingle art to unlock. The movement is gentler too, with better auto-lift, making for a breezier experience for veterans and newcomers alike. Despite being a promo release, the game is common on used markets.

STAGE-6 ALICE-16
109700 ♥×018

STAGE-8 ALICE-12
141500 ♥×030

Balloon Kid / Hello Kitty World (JP FC) / Balloon Fight GB (JP GBC)
Original Release: 1990
Platforms: GB, FC, GBC, 3DS

Balloon Kid stars a young girl named Alice who takes to the skies to save her little brother Jim. Both siblings lived in the quaint town of Pencilvania and have a fondness for balloons. One day, Jim decides to tie all of his rainbow-colored balloons to bring color to the sky (this was made for the original monochrome Game Boy, after all). However, in cartoonish folly, the balloons lift Jim too high and he gets snatched away in a strong gust into the heavens, leaving his big sister to chase after him. Only a colorful balloon trail left by Jim leads Alice to find him.

The gameplay here is an expanded take on the Balloon Trip mode from the NES. Automatic right-to-left scrolling is still rare in the platforming genre, but the first levels take it slow, giving you time to adjust to the physics and controls. The A button does the usual airlift, but the B button makes Alice release her balloons and drop to the ground. Losing your only means of flight might fly in the face of the series' central element, but there are times where she needs to fit through narrow corridors to proceed or nab a power-up. On foot, Alice can leap high on her own, but solid ground doesn't stick around forever. Taking a cue from the Balloon Bird enemies, Alice can blow up a fresh pair of balloons by tapping Down on the D-pad repeatedly. This trick can also replenish any popped balloons in a relative jiffy, but as the scrolling speed amps up in later stages, touchdowns for inflations grow thinner. While balloon collecting isn't essential, it adds to your score which racks up extra lives. Collecting enough in a row doubles the balloon count per pickup, along with launching a flashing invincibility power-up balloon to nab. With a link cable, Alice can even partner up with her friend/rival Samm, allowing two players to try and beat each other's score.

Alice must travel through eight levels to find her lost baby brother. Flights soar over her sharp, graphite-infused town, through a forest, beaches, inside a whale's belly, an ice-covered landscape, a perilous cave littered with pointy stalactites and stalagmites, and a factory. The giant fish still lurks in the seas to gobble you up, but the bird-like Balloon Fighters are few in number throughout the game. Instead, several other foes serve as obstacles to avoid, such as walking flames, spiders, penguins, and crocodiles. Sparks also return, alongside instant-fry fire hazards. Giant Game Boys appear in many stages to send you into the bonus game from the NES too, albeit in a more compact form without the horizontal wraparound shortcut. Every other stage ends with a cartoonish boss blocking the path, who must be defeated with three bops on the head.

Balloon Kid is a rather breezy experience. Much of its design and theme is skewed for a young

demographic, which makes the bump in difficulty in the last quarter daunting for its intended audience. Thankfully, the surplus lives that are easily racked up in the early levels serve as a good buffer when the game speeds up and requires tighter precision. Most of the deaths will be in the final stretch of the game, with danger bouncing everywhere and tunnels zig-zagging to reach a spark-spewing tin robot. Despite the ratcheting difficulty curve, the length of a decent playthrough tops out at around half an hour. For a title early in the Game Boy's life cycle, this wasn't too terrible.

Balloon Kid was developed in Japan, yet never saw release there in its original form. Developer Pax Softnica would later port the game to the Famicom in 1992 and use the license of Hello Kitty and her pals. *Hello Kitty World* (shown right) follows the exact same layouts of its portable predecessor, only with the graphics re-skinned in pastel hues,

with plenty of colorful blocks adorning the landscape. Alice, Samm, and Jim are replaced with Hello Kitty and her twin sister Mimmy, who have to rescue Tippy the bear. The enemies are also given the Sanrio touch to match, with the Game Boy minigame icons changed to strawberry cards. While the move to the home console makes for a plus in screen size, the level layouts remain unchanged, leading to a large vertical chunk of the screen being blocked off at all times.

Japan wouldn't see the original version of *Balloon Kid* until 2000, when the game was colorized and mildly expanded for a release under the Nintendo Power RAM system. This program sold rewritable carts for Super Famicom and Game Boy that could store up to seven titles apiece, and could be written onto at stores with a catalog of games to choose from. This reworked edition of the game, named *Balloon Fight GB*, was one such

title offered through this service. Aside from the added splash of color, the game also introduces a simple map along with a save system, so you can easily pick up where you left off and return to previous stages.

Balloon Fight GB also works with the Super Game Boy, where it features not just one unique border but also a hidden extra one, selectable with a simple code. Sadly, only Japan has the GBC version on the 3DS Virtual Console. The rest of the world is left with the black & white one.
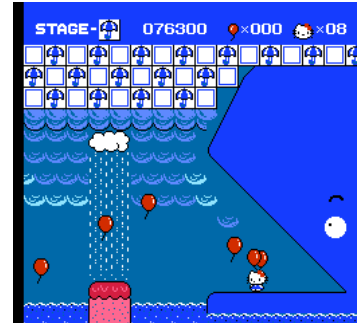
In the Game & Watch version of *Balloon Fight*, you control the sky patrol officer Balloon Man on a quest to capture the finned and fishy sky pirate Oiram Repus (read it backwards). The game plays like the Balloon Trip mode on the NES, using the D-pad and button to fly. You collect scattered pieces of a map tethered to the balloons, all while avoiding the occasional

spark. Collecting these pieces is required to proceed to the next stage, where a warp panel can send you to a bonus phase to earn points for a limited time.

It's a serviceable take on Trip mode considering the limitations of the technology, and a rare title in the lineup that was never revisited in any of the *Game & Watch Gallery* releases.

Balloon Fight
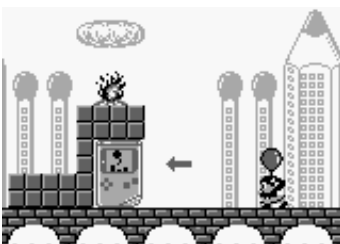**Platform:** G&W
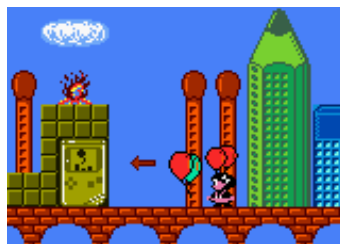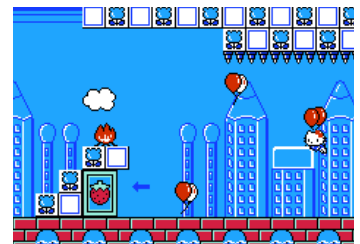**Release Date:** 1986

Screenshot Comparisons

Arcade

Sharp X1
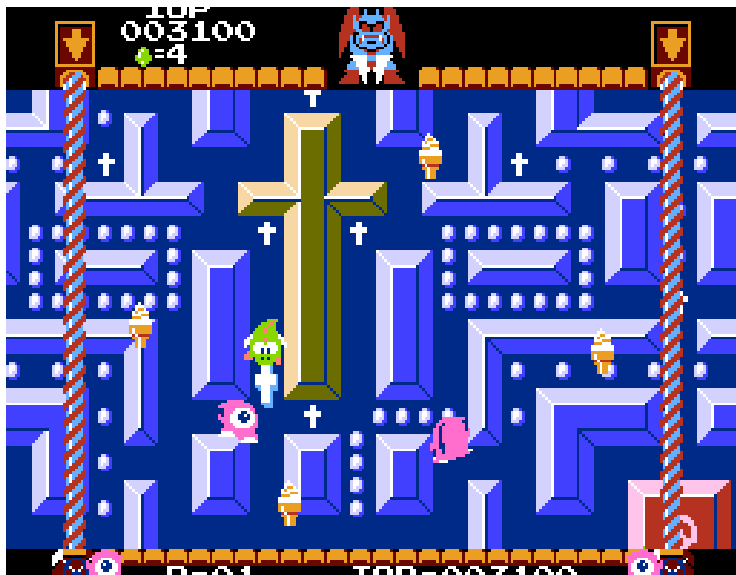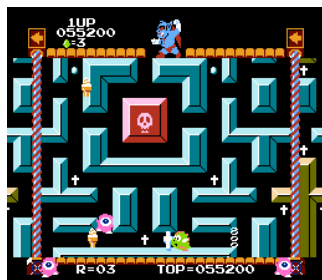

DS (Tingle's Balloon Fight)

Game Boy
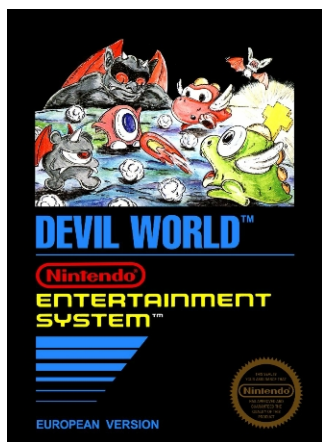

Game Boy

Famicom (Hello Kitty World)

Devil World
Original Release: 1984
Platforms: FC

Shigeru Miyamoto, simply put, is a legend in the gaming world. As creator of the *Super Mario Bros.* and *Legend of Zelda* series, it can be argued that he was one of the visionaries who helped a generation of Americans fall in love (again) with console games after the infamous Atari crash. Many of his works are celebrated by Nintendo of America, often receiving re-releases or special editions. That is, except for one: *Devil World*, a 1984 Famicom release which has the dubious distinction of being a Miyamoto game that never reached the U.S.

Devil World is also the first game Takashi Tezuka worked on for Nintendo, and the first game that Miyamoto and Tezuka worked on together; Miyamoto supplied the ideas, Tezuka designed the images. This partnership would continue on to nearly every *Mario* and *Zelda* game and is still strong to this day, with both men holding the title of General Manager of the Software Development Department in EAD.

Like the majority of early Famicom games, *Devil World* was short on plot. Taken from a translation of the Famicom manual: you play as Tamagon, a tiny green dragon who is lost and ends up in the Devil's realm. Where Tamagon comes from or how he manages to find himself in there is never mentioned. The Devil, as you'd expect, isn't the most hospitable person, so he looks to destroy Tamagon before he can escape.

In addition to Tamagon and the Devil, there are three additional enemies: Medaman, a one-eyed pink creature who chases you and is turned into a fried egg when attacked; Co-Devil, a miniature blue version of the devil that only appears during the second scene of every round and cannot be defeated; and Bon-Bon, a palette swap of Medaman who first appears in round 7.

Devil World can be played solo or in co-op where both people play simultaneously. Each person starts out with four extra lives. Once your mode of play is selected, you are told to "Attack the Devil's World!" – which doesn't make a lot of sense. Isn't Tamagon merely lost and defending himself? As this is the only cutscene, we'll never know for sure. After this, you find yourself immediately thrust into the game.

Devil World is often called a *Pac-Man* clone, but this is only half-true. Each round consists of two scenes, with a bonus scene at the end; each successive round becomes more difficult than the last due to an increase in game speed and enemy count. *Devil World*, much like other games of its type, is endless; rounds continue indefinitely until you run out of lives. However, after the 16th round, the difficulty stops scaling for the remainder of the game, which at that point is either when you run out of lives or turn the system off. A counter at the

bottom of the screen also lets you know what round you're on.

The first scene is structured like *Pac-Man* and similar titles of the era, hence the reputation for being a clone of Namco's hit. The objective is to eat the Boa-Boa dots scattered throughout each maze. However, to eat the dots, Tamagon must be holding a cross, the first of a few religious references made throughout. When holding the holy symbol, which can be found scattered throughout the maze, Tamagon also gains the ability to breathe fire and defeat his enemies. Once all of the Boa-Boa dots are eaten, the second scene commences.

Taking place in the same maze, the second scene changes things up a bit. Gone are the Boa-Boa dots, replaced instead with four bibles in the corners of the screen. Each of these tomes must be placed into one of the four slots of the Devil Hole, the box with the skull and crossbones logo on it in the center of the maze. Once this is completed, the Devil morphs into a bat and flies away angrily, ending the round. Overall the second scene is much easier than the first as Co-Devil, an enemy exclusive to this second round, never really provides much of a challenge.

In both rounds you must also contend with a moving border. This boundary is controlled by the Devil himself, who stands at the top of the screen barking out orders to the four overworked Medamen who are powering it (well what did you expect, he is the Devil). As he points in one direction, the border moves in the opposite heading – meaning *Devil World* perpetually scrolls. If Tamagon is caught between the border and a section of the maze, he gets crushed and loses a life. If the enemies are caught in a jam

between the edges, they turn into ghosts and float to a new section of the maze. However, while they can't be attacked in ghost form, Tamagon can walk through them freely. Much of the game's challenge therefore comes from the border; replacing it with holes on the floor would have made the game entirely too easy.

After both rounds are completed, the bonus round begins. Here, six mystery boxes are placed throughout the maze: two in the center and one in each corner. Only one of these enigmatic containers holds a 1-Up, in the form of a green egg, while the rest merely grant extra points. As the Devil has flown off, the border is now controlled by you, and stepping on an arrow on the floor will move it in that direction. Each bonus scene also has a strict timer, and it's usually impossible to search every mystery box before this runs out. If you get squished by the border or time runs out, the next round begins. Luckily if you get crushed by the border in the bonus round you don't actually lose a life, which is certainly appreciated.

Hopefully you found the 1-Up there as the bonus area is your only place to gain any. While a score counter is present, it serves no purpose other than for bragging rights, much like the score counter in *Super Mario Bros.* Ice cream cones often appear in each scene, which Tamagon can eat to increase his score. However, as this isn't important for anything, they really aren't worth going out of your way. In practice, *Devil World* isn't an overly difficult game, but the limited stock of lives and the ease with which you can make a mistake, by miscalculating the distance between the border and the wall, means that each life is precious.

There's no continue option, either – lose all of your lives and it's all the way back to Round 1.

In terms of presentation, the graphics are rudimentary, but they're what you'd expect from a Famicom game in 1984. To its credit, the colors of the character sprites are bright and pop out against the dark, muted tones of the background. However, there's not much music outside of jingles.
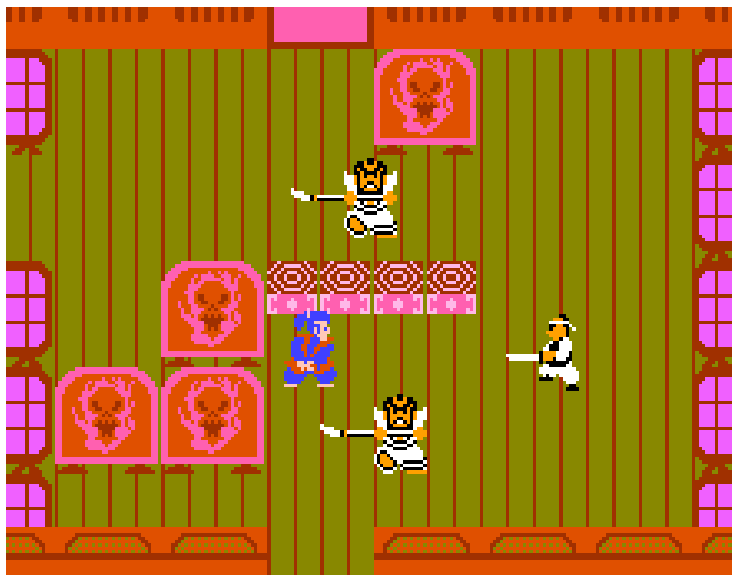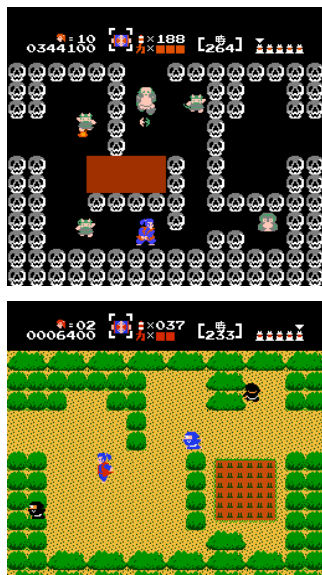
A lot has been made of the religious depictions in the game. In addition to the aforementioned bible and cross, large golden crosses are part of the layout of each maze. This never transgresses into offensive imagery, but it does beg the question of why the Devil would surround himself with objects meant to defeat him.

It's easy to see why *Devil World* wasn't released in the U.S., as Nintendo of America took a hard stance against anything that could potentially be offensive. To remove the religious images would result in redoing the entire game. However, it was published in PAL territories in 1987, though not in great numbers.

Nintendo has largely forgotten *Devil World*, though there have been a few cameos over the years. The Devil himself was featured prominently in *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* as an Assist Trophy. In *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, Tamagon appeared as a trophy but was removed from the American version.

All told, fans in North America didn't miss out on much with *Devil World*. It starts out fun but quickly gets repetitive, making it ideal to play in small bursts or for score attacks among friends. It's worth trying to see Miyamoto and Tezuka's first work together, just don't expect anything along the lines of their later hits.

The Mysterious Murasame Castle
AKA: **Nazo no Murusamejou** (JP)
Original Release: 1986
Platforms: FDS, WII, 3DS

It's easily apparent that the number of Japanese Famicom titles outnumbers the American/European libraries by some huge number. And yet, most of those were third party games. Nintendo was actually consistent in bringing over most of its projects, and for the ones that they didn't, there were pretty clear reasons. *Super Mario Bros. 2* (the real one) was, for example, a little underwhelming, *Famicom Wars* and *Fire Emblem* were probably just too difficult/obtuse for the audience they had, *Famicom Detective Club* and *Shin Onigashima* required far more translation when, at the time, their best localization efforts resulted in stuff like "LET'S PLAY MONEY MAKING GAME", *Joy Mech Fight* simply came out too late as well, and *Devil World* was a bizarre *Pac-Man* clone with crosses and demons and all kinds of other nonsense Christian symbolism that just wouldn't fly in middle America.

And yet, here we have *The Mysterious Murasame Castle*, AKA *Nazo no Murasamejou*, a cool little Famicom Disk System title that wasn't originally outside of Japan, that takes the basics of *The Legend of Zelda* and ditches all of the adventure elements in favor of *Commando*-style action, while setting the game in feudal Japan. Maybe it was deemed too Japanese to bother reprogramming for cartridge and re-releasing? Perhaps, but that didn't stop Taito's *The Legend of Kage*, which has a similar theme.

The Mysterious Murasame Castle is, however, a little weird. It's about an alien entity that slams into Murasame Castle and takes over a giant statue, which in turn spreads its evil influence to four neighboring castles, each named after different colors. As the heroic Takamaru, you must fight your way through each of these fastholds, and then slay the demonic source. Each assault is divided into two parts – the "approach" stage, as you fight your way through the grounds, and the "interior" stage, where you explore the castle.

At its core, this looks and controls much like *Zelda*, although it's a bit faster and much more difficult. Although each level has a definite beginning and end, the route isn't linear, often containing many branching paths, loops, or dead ends. There's also a time limit to hasten your assault, in case you feel like wasting time. If you explore, though, you can find kidnapped maidens, which will grant you an extra life if rescued. Some of these are actually demons in disguise, though, just for an extra bit of foul trickery.

Ninjas of all types bounce out of bushes, rivers, and even thin air to assault you from every direction. Like Link, Takamaru can only walk in four directions while enemies can attack at any angle. However, he also has unlimited use of long range weapons like shurikens, which can be upgraded to blades or fireballs, and also has a variety of
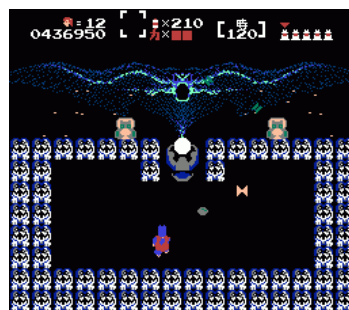
spread shot types at his disposal. These upgraded weapons use magic scrolls, so you can't just run around firing blindly, but most enemies will drop cards to replenish your power.

Takamaru can also shred his foes *Shinobi*-style using his sword, which is automatically used when you're close enough. More importantly, the sword can further be used to block enemy shurikens, so while you might be inundated with enemy fire all over the screen, as long as you're facing in roughly the right direction, you can defend yourself simply by slicing judiciously.

Of course, that doesn't work all of the time. By the second level, you'll start facing ninjas that explode when you hit them, making your melee attack pretty much useless against them, and more foes start shooting fire, which is unblockable. Some of the tougher enemies also toss bombs that explode upon impact and absorb your attacks, essentially acting as a sturdy defense. Then the game adds increasingly difficult foes, like the tengu that sweep across the screen as little tornados, spear-twirling warriors that seem to block your every attack, and magicians who surround themselves with flames. One of the bosses even chucks bombs which then explode into more ninjas. By the third stage,

the difficulty really ramps up to an incredible degree. All in all, it's an incredibly tough game, as you can only take three hits before dying, and you have only three lives before you need to restart the stage. Furthermore, dying completely devolves your weapons, making you exceedingly underpowered on a new life. This is either a death knell, or requires that you backtrack a bit to strengthen yourself.

There are a couple of power-ups that can be stocked and used with the B button, including a cape that turns you invisible for a few seconds, and a lightning attack that damages everything on the screen. You can only use these a few times and they're not exactly prolific, so you need to employ them sparingly.

Maybe it's the overwhelming difficulty that caused Nintendo to pass this one over. It's still a remarkably fun game, though, and it's not like the NES library didn't have other monstrously difficult challenges. The music is pretty good too, even if there are really only a couple songs you hear for a majority of the game.

Despite a re-release for the Game Boy Advance as part of the Famicom Mini series, this has never had any sequels. Even so, it's been referenced in a few of Nintendo's more fan service-y works. For instance, the main

theme makes an appearance in its original form in *Super Smash Bros Brawl*. One of the treasures in *Pikmin 2* is called a "Cosmic Archive", which is actually an FDS disk of *Nazo no Murasamejou*. Takamaru also appears in the Japanese-only Wii title *Captain Rainbow*, along with other forgotten Nintendo characters like Hikari from *Shin Onigashima*, Birdo (Catherine) from *Doki Doki Panic / Super Mario Bros 2* USA, Little Mac from *Punch-Out!!*, Tracy from The *Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*, and the Devil from *Devil World*. On a strange note, *Nazo no Murasamejou* formed the basis for an episode of the 1986 Fuji TV show *Onyanko Club*.

The game saw a port to the Wii Virtual Console in 2008, but only in Japan. *Nazo no Murasamejou* has also been represented in two other games. *Samurai Warriors 3* for the Wii features a mode called Murasame Castle where you play as Takamaru. It's also referenced in the Wii U title *Nintendo Land* with a mini game entitled "Takamaru's Ninja Castle."
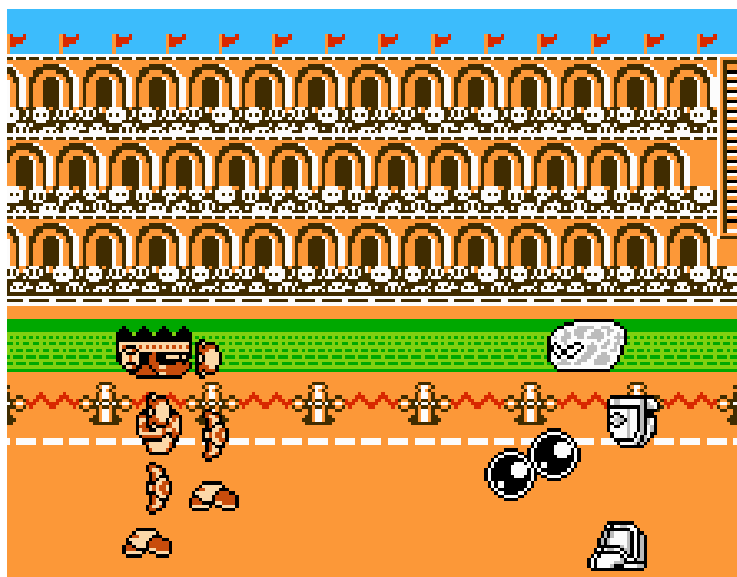
Finally, in 2014, the game was released in America for the 3DS Virtual Console under the name *The Mysterious Murasame Castle*, though it's unaltered from the Japanese original.
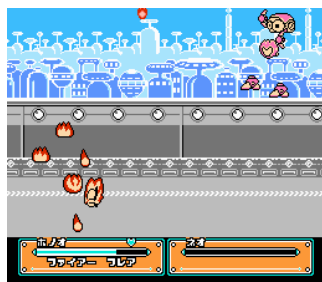
Joy Mech Fight
Original Release: 1993
Platforms: FC, WII, 3DS, WIIU, NSW

Capcom's *Street Fighter II* shaped the arcade industry for much of the early-to-mid 1990s, creating a market for tons of competitive fighting games. This happened when most gamers were transitioning to 16-bit consoles, which would handle these conversions fairly well, but there were still millions with 8-bit systems that wanted in on the action. However, both the sprite size limitations and the ROM size constraints posed a problem - there were few NES fighting games of this era, and the ones that did exist, like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Tournament Fighters* and many bootleg versions of *Street Fighter II* and *Fatal Fury*, were typically of poor quality.

One of the lone exceptions was *Joy Mech Fight* (sometimes spelled *Joy Mecha Fight*), published in 1993 solely in Japan by Nintendo. It's unusual not only for its timing, but for the company itself, who rarely dabbled in the genre outside of its terrible early NES game *Urban Champion*, which was closer to other mid-80s fighters like *Yie Ar Kung Fu* and *Karate Champ*. Meanwhile, *Joy Mech Fight* was aiming to compete with *Street Fighter II*.

Rather than having characters that have unique sprite frames for every animation, the pugilists in *Joy Mech Fight* consist of several smaller floating sprites – generally being a head, a torso, hands/arms (and sometimes weapons), and feet

– that are animated in unison. This looks a little weird in stills, since there's so much dead air between the parts, making it hard to determine the whole character. But it looks pretty decent in action, for the most part, even if some moves are a little hard to read. Proportionally, the fighters are pretty large too, taking up almost half the height of the playing field.

Each character shares the same basic moveset – a punch and a kick, along with ducking and jumping moves – along with four special moves. Many of these are the same kind that you'd see in *Street Fighter II*, like fireballs and jumping uppercuts, though throws count as a special move too, so not every character has one. With only two buttons, the controls are easy to use, and there's even a tutorial – possibly the first fighting game to have one – that shows how to execute each character's moves and allowing you to practice. The fighting is a little choppy since moves don't flow into each other, so there are no combos, but otherwise it controls well.

Matches aren't technically broken down into rounds, but rather, each fighter has two hearts. When they run out of life, they're knocked to the ground and they lose a heart, with the winner regaining a little bit of health in the meantime. A similar system was used later in Capcom's *Vampire Savior*. It also means fights go on a little longer than normal two-out-of-

three matches, since a fighter needs to be knocked down three times before the match is over. The arenas don't have walls either, so they scroll around in either direction infinitely.
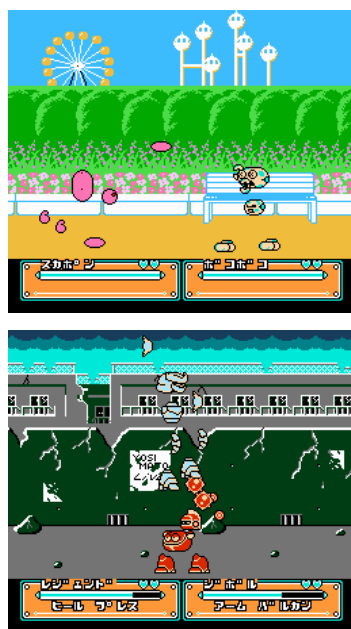
There's a pretty extensive single-player mode in *Joy Mech Fight*, too. The story is basically ripped off of *Mega Man* – two genius professors, Dr. Little Emon and Dr. Ivan Walnuts, worked to create a series of robots together. At some point, Dr. Walnuts goes mad and runs off with seven of them, turning them all evil. The only one left is Sukapon, a comedy robot that's converted to a fighter in order to take them down. During the first set of battles, you can choose your opponent from the seven others, and when you beat them, they're reprogrammed and added to your roster so you can play as them. After a boss fight, you need to engage in several other battles before you fight the climactic showdown on the moon and win the game.

Altogether, there are 36 characters (though since the last batch is just more powerful evil doppelgangers of the initial eight, it's actually more like 28 unique characters). If you play through the game on all difficulty settings – the game thankfully saves your progress automatically – then all of the characters can be unlocked for other modes. It's a huge roster for the time, one that wouldn't be

bested until *The King of Fighters '98*. This is the advantage of having your characters consist of a handful of small, single-frame sprites, since they don't take up much memory! Most have a signifying feature – Honou's name means "flame", so he has fire properties, Tiger is a bit like a Muay Thai kickboxer (a la Sagat), Senju has drills, Sasuke is a ninja, Eye has an enormous single eyeball, and Giant has a rock head with bubble hands. Grak looks like a crab, Skater has wheels for feet, Legend looks like a Japanese suit of armor, Hover has jets for legs, Shenlong is like a dragon, a Ghoston is a specter with a skull face, and so forth.

Despite the simple-looking robots, they have plenty of character, with some having large, goofy expressions when they take damage. Since they're cartoon robots, their heads can be knocked off, and it's not particularly violent. The backgrounds have multiplane scrolling too, even if their designs are a little simple. The soundtrack is likewise solid. Since the developers didn't have the memory to allow for digitized voices, a character's move is instead displayed in their status bar when it's executed.

Joy Mech Fight has an unusual history, in that it was developed by a few members of a Nintendo-Dentsu Game Seminar, which it used as a recruitment

tool. Initially titled *Battle Battle League*, the team members were hired, and Nintendo published the game after giving it a new name. Despite being a cult classic in Japan, Nintendo was unable to re-release or reference the game due to its licensing. However in 2007, one of the programmers, Koichiro Eto, stumbled upon a document in his house. He thought that the rights for the game had already been transferred to Nintendo, but it was never officially signed. Upon realizing this, he completed the copyright transfer, allowing *Joy Mech Fight* to appear on various Nintendo Virtual Console (and Switch Online) releases, and for Sukapon to show up in a few spots in the *Super Smash Bros.* games, including as a Spirit fighter. Eto didn't stay in the game industry, but instead became a computer science scholar and multimedia artist. One of the other main programmers of *Joy Mech Fight*, Koichi Hayashida, stayed with Nintendo and later directed *Super Mario 3D Land/World*.
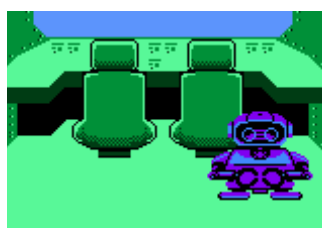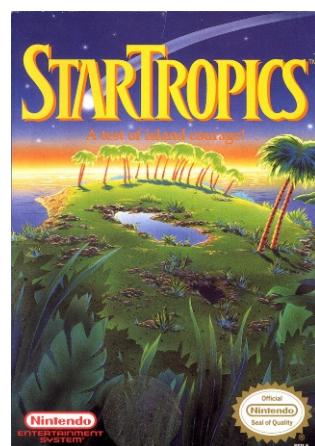
Oddly enough, even though you don't need to understand Japanese to play *Joy Mech Fight*, the game has never made its way out in any other territories. It's a funny, cute, and weird little experience, and one that's still worth checking out nowadays against the behemoths from Capcom or SNK.
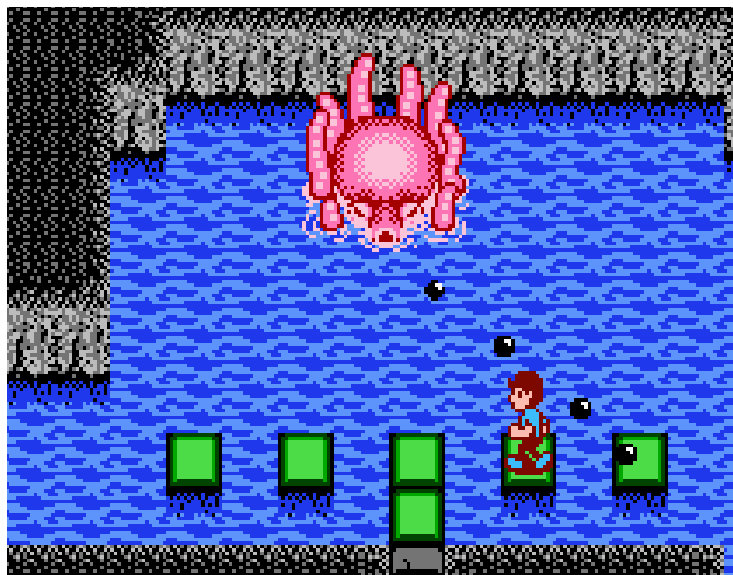
StarTropics
Original Release: 1990
Platforms: NES, WII, WIIU, NSW

StarTropics follows the adventures of Mike Jones as he arrives on C-Island to visit his Uncle Steve, a famous archeologist. Soon he gets caught up in a series of fantastic events that send him diving into ancient ruins, deep space, and even traveling through time.

The *Zelda* games were two of the most popular games on the Nintendo Entertainment System. It's natural that they'd be ripped off at some point – so who'd be better suited for the task than Nintendo itself? The similarities are apparent right from the outset. For instance, a familiar name registration screen pops up right at the beginning of the game. Dungeons? Check. Puzzles? Check. Heart Containers? Double-check. Although the game is broken up into chapters and therefore much more linear than the *Zelda* series, the influence is still obvious, and certainly not unwelcome. *StarTropics* was even featured on the cover of *Nintendo Power* and had a massive marketing push, although it never quite caught on in the way Nintendo wanted it to.

Although the series was developed in Japan, it was geared specifically towards Western audiences and was never released over there. The first was directed by Genyo Takeda, a longtime developer from Nintendo back to the arcade era, who also directed the NES version of *Punch-Out!!*

Plot-wise, Mike Jones is a teenager hailing from Seattle and an ace baseball player. He's also willing to go to great lengths to discover what happened to his uncle and help out other individuals along the way. Supporting characters include the Island Chief, who leads the populace of Coralcola on C-Island and is a good friend of Mike's uncle; the Shaman of the Coralcola, who's basically there to revive Mike when he runs out of lives; and Uncle Steve, who ended up discovering something extraordinary under the islands, attracting a very serious problem. Also helping out is Nav-Com, the computer who guides the Sub-C with which Mike does a lot of exploration. His design is a nice homage to R.O.B. the robot from the early days of the NES. Through most of the game, Mike explores C-Island and the surrounding tropical areas until he learns the hidden truth – Uncle Steve has been captured by aliens, led by the evil Zoda, and only by infiltrating their spaceship can Mike save him.

StarTropics has an overworld map, similar to *Dragon Warrior* albeit much smaller in scale, consisting of towns and other elements. This is contrasted by an underworld set of dungeons, full of monsters and action sequences. Shortly after Mike's arrival on C-Island, the natives tell him that his uncle has gone missing and that there are a lot of suspicious circumstances behind his disappearance. The majority of the game is then set down below.

DID YOU GET THE BANANAS OUT OF YOUR EARS?
YES   NO
POINTS:67170
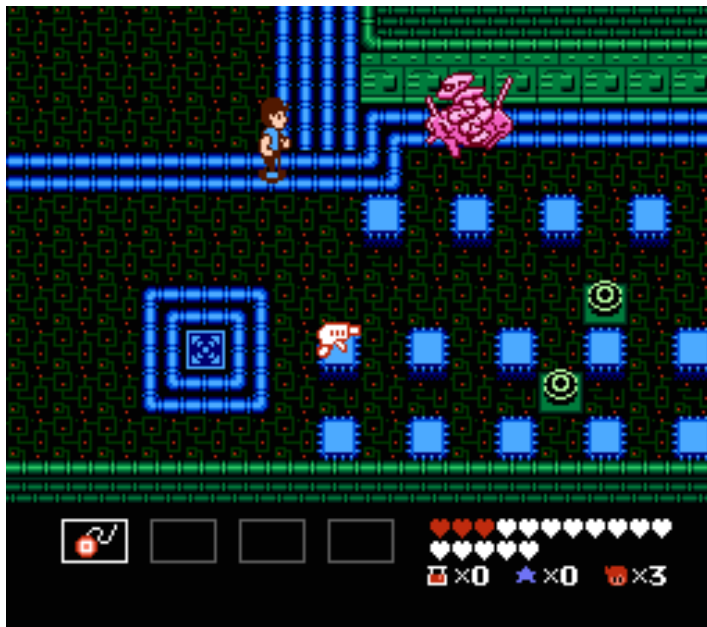
The overworld area is fairly open, though again it borrows from *Zelda* with the secret areas to push up against, often revealing passages and hidden items like Heart Containers. There are a few puzzles here, including a rather annoying maze, a music puzzle, and to the frustration of all those who didn't get the game in-box and complete, a fairly innovative puzzle that requires the player to dip a letter received with the instruction manual into water. This reveals a hidden frequency needed to complete the game. (For those missing the instruction manual, it's 747.) Most of the story is pretty cut and dry, but there are enough amusing sequences to keep it interesting, like having to dress in drag to infiltrate Shecola Castle. There's also a strange running gag about getting bananas stuck in your ears.

The underworld requires Mike to move along X-Y axes like in *The Legend of Zelda*. The primary weapon is a Yo-Yo (kind of like Mikey Walsh in *Goonies II*) that later powers up into a Morning Star and a Super Nova, each with extended power and range. The power-ups are dependent upon your progress in the game, as well as the number of hearts Mike currently has (if it slips below the required number, the weapon downgrades). Mike can also use other sundry weapons, ranging from bolas, room-freezing

snowmen, baseballs, and even lasers, though each of them has a limited number of uses. Also required are special crystals which reveal hidden enemies, and lamps to light up dark rooms. Medicine and other health replenishments are found along the way as well.

Though the dungeons are set out in a linear fashion, they're sometimes rather sizable and often filled with hidden rooms, false exits, traps, and special switches. These triggers are found by jumping onto a series of blocks – once to make the switch appear, and then again to activate it. These do things like opening doors, materializing items, and dropping bosses to their doom a la Bowser from *Super Mario Bros*.

Unfortunately, the controls are a bit awkward, which is one of the biggest issues with the game. The movement works on a grid system, so it's just not possible to move only a few pixels. Mike always has to move over a whole square. Furthermore, in order to walk in a direction, it has to be held down for a split second before Mike actually moves. Furthermore, unless he's next to water, he can only jump straight up, and the only way to move from tile to tile is to jump, which can take a long time if there are plenty of tiles in the room. This all feels very restrictive and can get frustrating when the rooms are filled with enemies.
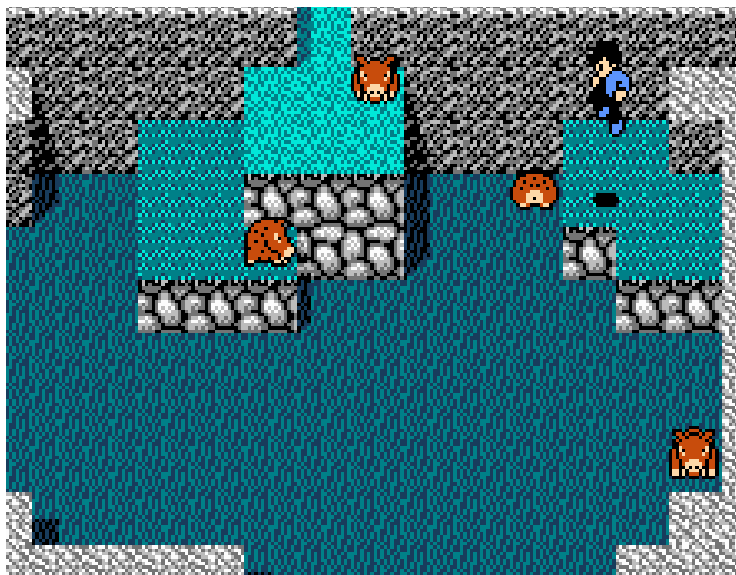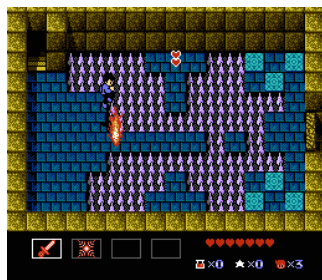
The game starts off easy, but around chapter three, the difficulty picks up, getting nasty in chapters five and six, and sometimes wretched by chapters seven and eight. Most enemies and attacks only hurt Mike a bit, but coming into contact with a rolling boulder, a mini-boss or boss, or falling into water or lava instantly kills him. He can continue endlessly, but there's a set number of lives to complete each dungeon, requiring you to start back at the beginning after losing them all. At least the game saves automatically when entering or exiting a dungeon, which is rather convenient.

The graphics are decent enough during the underworld scenes, but they leave something to be desired on the overworld. The music is quite catchy in some parts though, even if the same main theme keeps repeating.

While not as great as the original *Zelda* or *Crystalis*, *StarTropics* is still a huge improvement over the likes of *Faria* or *Hydlide*. All in all, it's a solid game from Nintendo that has been overshadowed and largely forgotten since its debut. The game has been released digitally on the Wii U Virtual Console, as well as on the Switch as part of the NSO service. This version changes the "yo-yo" to a "star", presumably because "yo-yo" is a trademarked term and not a generic object.
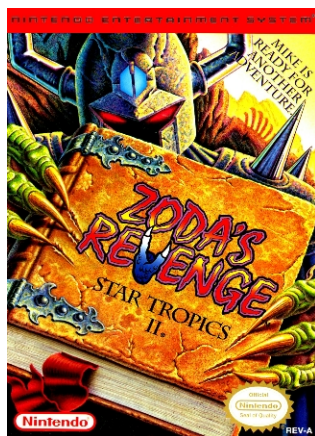
Zoda's Revenge: StarTropics II
Original Release: 1994
Platforms: NES, WII, WIIU

StarTropics ended with Mike defeating Zoda and saving three magic cubes. These objects turned out to be escape pods for seven alien children sent into exile on earth to escape Zoda's wrath. Afterwards, life seemed to go more or less back to normal for Mike. Uncle Steve, however, found more hieroglyphs in the ruins that contained the cubes and has been investigating them, leading to the mysterious "Oxford Wonder Book", which outlines several real and faux historical figures. After some telepathic hints, Mike ends up deciphering the book and is sent hurtling through time to collect seven Tetrads (blocks shaped not-so-coincidentally like pieces from *Tetris*) before Zoda can get his hands on them. Eventually, Mike gets caught up in the struggle between Zoda and the Argonian children he rescued at the end of the last game.

The sequel sees the addition of some new cast members. Princess Mica is one of the Argonians, being able to communicate with you across space and time to advance the plot. Eventually she falls victim to yet another classic Nintendo trope and needs rescuing. Merlin is the legendary magician, who pops up throughout the adventure to revive Mike when he runs out of lives and bestows special attack skills on him at key points. There's also Hirocon, the leader of Argonia, who apparently is good friends with Merlin. For reasons to be revealed in the game, he had the Tetrads sent through space and time.

The plot here is a bit more subdued, though still fairly quirky. Personages such as Cleopatra, Sherlock Holmes, King Arthur, and Leonardo da Vinci appear along the way, sending Mike navigating through pyramids, English sewers, and even Dracula's castle. The game's rather bizarre sense of humor once again resurfaces, like when Mike is sent on a mission to deliver pizza to Cleopatra (from Caesar's Hut, no less, a gag which works on at least three different levels). There's also a special treat for fans who've completed the original game, as they get to revisit some old areas and meet returning friends. Zoda is back, of course, with three clones of himself spread throughout time.

The mechanics are pretty much the same, although the clunky controls from the original have been greatly improved. Mike can now move as he jumps, veering left or right to reach other platforms. Furthermore, there are also height differences in the various rooms, giving an added incentive to master jumping skills. Mike now also has two primary weapons – a series of upgradeable swords and a psychic shock wave attack. The former is a strong, steady throwing weapon, while the latter is upgradeable and like the Yo-Yo in the first game, dependent upon the health bar for power.

Some enemies can only be hit with the psychic attack, and with a faster rate of fire, it's usually the weapon of choice. Again there's a set of secondary weapons of limited use, but they're not quite as valuable in this game.

The dungeon design is at least a bit more innovative. There's a "random" dungeon element here, where moving around on the overworld sends you to certain smaller dungeons that need to be cleared before proceeding. This only happens in a few chapters (including right at

the beginning), and can get annoying at times. Most of the puzzle elements are gone, though there's a torturous sequence of trial and error in chapter five that has Mike fishing for a lost mine. Thankfully, switches can be walked on now without having to jump on them, and dungeons still contain the usual secret rooms and other fun features, as well as the addition of special arrow tiles that send Mike hurtling along in a certain direction.

Sonically, the music has taken a hit compared to some of

the catchy tunes of the original, though the theme for the Zoda boss battles isn't too bad. In terms of graphics, the game is a bit sharper, although the colors aren't quite as bright. Mike's sprite has been entirely redrawn as well. Like the original, there's a battery backup auto save.

There's some level of debate as to whether *StarTropics II* is better or worse than the original. While the second game seems a bit better made and more balanced in terms of difficulty, both are definitely still worth a try.
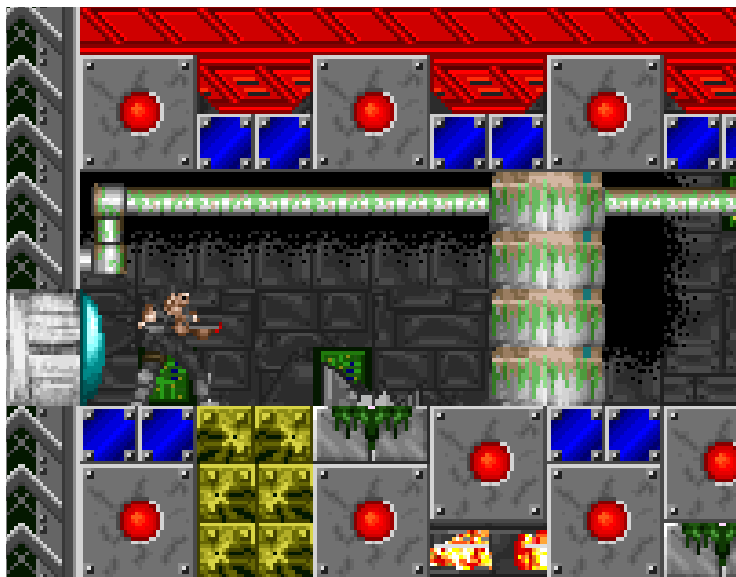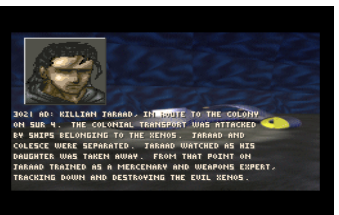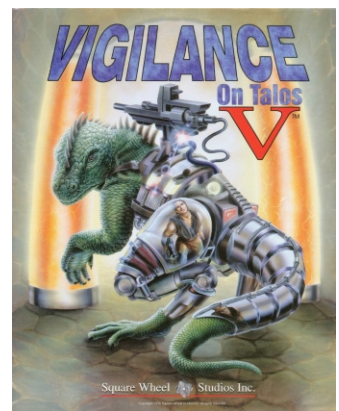
Vigilance on Talos V
Original Release: 1996
Platforms: IBM, OS2

For those who enjoy discovering and playing older games, surely *Vigilance on Talos V* is what it's all about. Finding a forgotten jewel that was overlooked at the time, and is poorly documented today but is still supremely playable. What makes *Talos* especially interesting is that it's a *Super Metroid* clone. Not a Metroidvania, as it predates *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, the game that added the "vania" to the moniker, but a straight up replica of *Super Metroid,* initially released as shareware for IBM PC computers back in 1995. So much so that a casual glance at it playing on a computer might make you think it's actually ZSNES running a graphical hack of the original. Having said that though, it does do a few things to differentiate itself, while also being an excellent homage to what is arguably one of the greatest video games of all time.

The opening story (and the ending too) is brief, told only through two voiced screens of text, but it sets the grim sci-fi tone nicely. The year is 3021 AD, and Killian Jaraad is traveling to the colony on the planet Sur 4. The colonial transport is attacked by the Xenos, and Jaraad is separated from his daughter Colesce, who is taken away to be a slave. From here Jaraad trains as a mercenary, hunting down the Xenos. Three years later Jaraad receives a tip from another mercenary, known as E. Red, who explains the Xenos are holding their human slaves on the planet Talos V. Hoping that Colesce might be among them, Jaraad heads out. And so the scene is set for three sprawling worlds which mimic the *Super Metroid* design template.

Describing the game in detail is difficult, given how similar it is to *Super Metroid*. One of the first items you discover is the Saturn Ball, which allows you to shrink down much like the Morph Ball and roll through tight passages. One slight difference is that you're able to jump immediately, without needing to first find the Spring Ball add-on. Next you find bombs that allow you to destroy secret holes in walls, of which there are plenty. Afterwards you acquire missiles, needed for tougher enemies and opening special doors – all of which, by the way, look and operate identically to the *Metroid* games, right down to the whole screen going black and sideways-shifting mechanic.

Further items include Jump Boots for higher leaps, an X-Ray Beam for scanning the walls for secret passages, and a Grapple Hook for swinging from special blocks. The difference here is that when you swing, you do so while in Saturn Ball form. Plus there are extra energy tanks to collect, each one holding 99 units of energy. The best thing is that most of these items are given to you via a statue that has a rather striking familiarity about it.

There are other similarities. Unusual for a computer game is that you save in special archways, which also recharge your current energy tank. Further energy top-ups can be had from enemies, and there are even "enemy spawners" that cause tiny flying opponents to come out of the ground and fly at you. Many elements, such as the long elevator shafts and pools of acid, can admittedly be found in plenty of other games. With the way they're portrayed here though, you can't deny what their influence was. Several background designs and enemy types are also reminiscent of Nintendo's classic. In fact, the final boss is almost an exact replica of Draygon from the Maridia zone, albeit looking exactly like Kraid from Brinstar. He even grabs you in a similar fashion to Draygon.

As mentioned, however, it still brings some new ideas too. There are teleporters that give the world a much bigger feel, albeit at the cost of a singular cohesive structure. There are several functionally interesting aspects to the environment as well. At one point there's a spawning bubble that carries you across a chasm – it's never used other than in this specific instance, but it's cool.

There are also vines you can grab and slide down, or if you hold the jump button, continuously leap up, allowing you to scale large heights. Not as much fun are the enormous rotating arms made from spiked balls, which act as traps in some areas. Although they do very little damage, they do knock you back and can prove infuriating in places, especially

when you're desperately trying to avoid enemies and use the Grapple Hook to traverse a large area. One misstep and you fall below, forcing you to redo an entire section. Generally though, the levels are structured in an enjoyable way that recreates a fair amount of the magic of exploration in *Super Metroid*. The music is also entirely different, eschewing ambient sounds in favor of something more tuneful.

The biggest shift though is that you lose all of your items between each of the three worlds. In effect this makes *Vigilance on Talos V* akin to three, very small *Super Metroid* titles crammed into a single game. Which isn't a criticism, since the best part of the *Metroid* series has always been item acquisition. Each world is only about an hour or so long, giving proceedings a much faster, more arcade-y pace. There's still a focus on exploration though, with every stage containing some fiendishly placed secret passages for use with the Saturn Ball. In fact, in the first level you can only reach the final boss by rolling into a deadly pool of acid and bombing the floor for a secret passage.

Which also leads to the criticisms. The game is extremely short and seems to end abruptly after the third world boss. The ending hints that there's more to do, but the main protagonist refuses and then it's over. It says he rescued his daughter, but you don't even see this. The game almost feels unfinished, especially when you consider that the third weapon in your inventory is never made available, and some items

such as the flamethrower are only accessible right at the end for the final boss. The impression is that the team had a looming deadline and had to complete it quickly.

Rushing to finish would also explain some other things. The collision detection is dodgy at times. It's nothing game-breaking, but it's possible to clip through walls using the Grapple Hook, and some things don't work quite as smoothly as you'd expect on a console release. You also can't fire at an angle or even straight upwards. For some this could be a deal breaker, and certainly it's annoying in places. The game does try to compensate though, mainly by (usually) avoiding situations where you'd specifically need to fire upwards, as well as giving you an item that grants infinite homing missiles. Even so, there are times in the final area where you'd really like to crouch to shoot the egg-pods spawning tiny flying creatures.

In spite of these criticisms, none of this prevents you from playing or completing the game and, given its short length of around three hours, all of the idiosyncrasies lend *Vigilance on Talos V* a certain charm. It's best seen as a remixed version of an old favorite. Without a doubt this is *Super Metroid*, just not the version Nintendo would ever allow you to see. It copies the Japanese console design template but infuses it with that distinctive style you find in old DOS games. It results in a somewhat warped marriage that creates something both instantly recognizable and yet genuinely unique.

Gato Roboto

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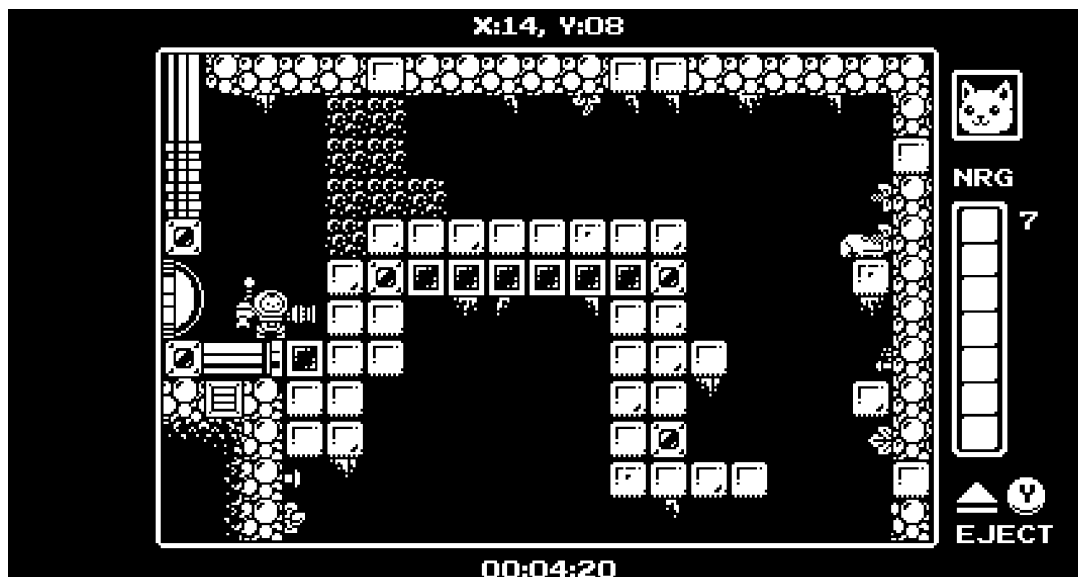
Gato Roboto
Original Release: 2019
Platforms: WIN, NSW, XB1

What if Samus Aran was a cat? That's probably not a question most of us have asked (except the folks behind the Mewtroid microgames in *WarioWare*, see page 51), but it's the one answered in *Gato Roboto*, an indie Metroidvania by Doinksoft released in 2019. Here, a cat named Kiki has crash-landed on an alien planet, and must explore its tunnels to help her and her stranded owner escape.

She accomplishes this by piloting a mecha, which can be equipped with guns, a missile launcher, and the usual sort of Metroidvania enhancements, like a spinning double jump and a phase dash move. There are also some areas where you need to slip out of your mecha to fit into tight spots, climb up walls, or swim around in water (which is a little strange since cats notoriously hate getting wet). Further, there are submarines and cannons to hop into and command. Kiki is defenseless on her own though, and a single hit will make her explode Mega Man-style. Along the way, you'll also be tormented by a strangely talkative mouse, who attacks with a variety of contraptions.

The visuals are entirely monochromatic, giving the game a stark feel, but the colorfully animated sprites exude plenty of personality, and it's way more cute than scary. The controls make it feel a little like *Cave Story*, with enemies that satisfyingly explode when shot, and missiles that give you a bit of lift to extend your jumps. Combined with the lo-fi sound effects and unusual soundtrack, it's a very unique experience, despite borrowing some very basic stylings from *Metroid*, particularly the bubble doors. The downside is that there's little variation between the area designs, and sometimes it's hard to pick out enemies from the scenery.

The game is fairly linear, and you probably won't find yourself getting lost much. However, it's not like there's much of note to find – there are the usual health extensions, plus cartridges that let you select other 1-bit color palettes and can also be used to improve your gun. (Missiles are unlimited and operate on a cooldown, literally – their gauge shows their temperature.) Beyond that, there's not a lot of hidden stuff nor much of a reason to look for it. Enemies don't drop health or anything, but save/healing stations are frequent. While some of the boss battles might provide a bit of a challenge – mostly because their life bars are a little too long – most players will probably be able to breeze through *Gato Roboto* in a few hours.

Even so, this actually works to the game's benefit. The lack of a big time commitment pairs effectively with a normal retail price of only $8 USD. All told, *Gato Roboto* is a weird and charming little game that never wears out its novelty, and makes for a decent snack between larger games.

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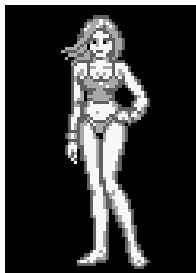**A Guide to Japanese Role-Playing Games**

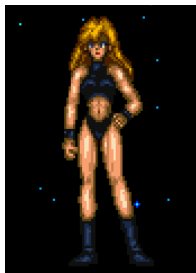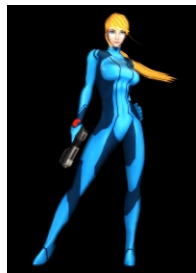**The Guide to Beat-Em-Ups: Vol. 1**

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