

Review: Nintendo's 'Star Fox Zero' crashes and burns

April 22 2016, by By Lou Kesten



This image released by Nintendo shows a scene from "Star Fox Zero," for the Wii U. (Nintendo via AP)

How do you solve a problem like Fox McCloud?

The vulpine aviator, sort of a bushy-tailed Han Solo, has been headlining Nintendo games for nearly two decades. And yet, he's not going to make many lists of Top 10 Nintendo characters, mainly because his "Star Fox" franchise has been such a mixed bag.

Over the years, Nintendo has recruited an assortment of outside developers to try to revive "Star Fox." This time, the duty falls to Platinum Games, best known for gonzo free-for-alls like "Bayonetta" and "MadWorld." The resulting reboot, "Star Fox Zero" (for the Wii U, \$59.99), falls far short of either company's best work.

"Star Fox" doesn't need to be complicated: Just strap me into the cockpit and let me shoot at aliens. But "Zero" is marred by a terrible design decision intended to emphasize the Wii U's clunky GamePad controller. You have two perspectives on dogfights: A third-person view from outside your Arwing spaceship shows up on your TV, while a first-person view from inside the cockpit appears on the GamePad screen.

In theory, you can use the big screen to navigate around three-dimensional space and use the small screen to target and fire upon enemies. My problem is that I have just one set of eyes, so every time I look down at my controller I tend to slam into some random piece of space junk. If you adjust the settings so you don't need the small screen, you lose the accuracy.

The controls feel a bit more manageable when you land on a planet and switch to a ground-based vehicle like the bipedal Walker or the beefy Landmaster tank. There's also the Gyrowing drone, whose stealth missions drag on so long you'll be dying to get back into the open skies.

The plot is essentially a rehash of 1997's "Star Fox 64": Fox and his crew have to stop an invasion by the evil Andross. You can polish off the story in about four hours, although the final boss battle is so exasperating that I suspect many players will give up without seeing the ending. Hidden areas provide some motivation to go back and explore levels you've already beaten, so at least there's some payoff for masochists who master the thorny controls.

For most players, though, Nintendo's insistence on forcing us to use the GamePad's second screen is a huge stumbling block. It's like a tech demo for a four-year-old console that's already past its prime, and a sad tribute to the failures of the fading Wii U. One star out of four.

"Star Fox Zero" is packaged with "Star Fox Guard," a mini-game in which you control a dozen cameras parked around a maze; your job is to switch among the cameras and shoot the approaching robots. It's amusing in brief spurts, and you can download it a la carte for \$15. Fans of the tower-defense genre will enjoy it, but it's hardly essential.

More information: starfoxzero.nintendo.com/

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