

Review: Nintendo Switch is impressive, but needs more games

March 1 2017, by Lou Kesten



When you're deep in a video game, the last thing you want to do is leave home. If only you could take the game with you for your commute to work or your bus ride to school, or to liven up your lunch hour.

Nintendo's new Switch console tries to address that by letting you play it anywhere. You simply yank the Switch out of its docking station. It

functions as a tablet with a built-in display, so you don't have to worry about finding a TV. Games typically work without a persistent internet connection. Once you're back home, just slide it back into the docking station to play games on a big-screen TV.

The Switch works like a traditional game console when you want that; it offers portability when you need that. Over the past week, I've played the new "Legend of Zelda" game at home, outside, in a laundromat and in a mechanic's waiting room. The game picks right up wherever I left off.

The big question, as it so often is with Nintendo, is whether it will be able to deliver enough games. When the console starts selling Friday, for \$300, the Switch will have a paltry nine titles, leaning heavily toward familiar franchises such as "Just Dance" and "Skylanders." By contrast, Sony's PlayStation 4 and Microsoft's Xbox One had about 20 games each at launch.

A new hardware introduction is big for any company, and even more so for a company in such a state of transition. Nintendo's Wii U console bombed when it came out in 2012, and its long-held dominance of the portable game market has been usurped by smartphones and tablets. Its two big successes of 2016—"Pokemon Go" and "Super Mario Run"—were made to be played on other companies' devices. "Pokemon Go" wasn't even developed in-house, but under license by a California company called Niantic.

The Switch is a gutsy attempt by Nintendo to reclaim its territory in both the home and portable markets.

The console comes with two controllers, known as Joy-Cons. Each has a control stick, four buttons, two triggers, motion sensors and haptic feedback. The right one also has an infrared sensor to detect nearby

objects.

On the go, you can turn the tablet into a hand-held game machine by attaching Joy-Cons to each side. Or just prop the tablet on a table with a built-in kickstand and use the Joy-Cons as wireless controllers, just as you would at home. You can also transform the Joy-Cons into a more traditional game controller by sliding them into a wireless grip accessory, which is included.

To play a solo adventure like "Zelda," you'll need all the buttons on both Joy-Cons. But Nintendo also wants you to play socially, so each Joy-Con functions as a freestanding controller for party games like "Just Dance 2017" and "Super Bomberman R."



In this Friday, Jan. 13, 2017, file photo, a model puts the controller onto the Nintendo Switch during a presentation event of the new Nintendo Switch in Tokyo. Nintendo's new Switch device aims at video gamers who like to play both

at home and on the road. It's an impressive device, notwithstanding trade-offs in appealing to both. The bigger question is whether Nintendo will be able to deliver enough games to keep Switch users happy. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara, File)

The Joy-Cons are surprisingly comfortable given that they are small, about the size of a candy bar. I'd be more worried about losing them than getting hand cramps. They slide into slots on the tablet and the grip with a satisfying snap.

The tablet, with the Joy-Cons attached, is about as wide as a standard iPad held horizontally, but just a little more than half as tall. The screen resolution is equivalent to 720p high definition. "Zelda" looks just about as good here as on your big-screen HDTV. The battery lasts about six hours, though a power-hungry game like "Zelda" could cut that down in half.

The Switch has a puny 32 gigabytes of internal storage. You'll need to buy a memory card if you intend to download plenty of games. Games also come on postage-stamp-sized game cards you slide into a slot on top.

It remains to be seen just how many games you'll want. There's a drab collection of multiplayer mini-games, packaged as "1-2-Switch." The package would have been great as a free starter kit; instead it costs \$60. "Snipperclips," for just \$20, is a more inspired cooperative puzzle game. The marquee attraction, of course, is "The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild" (\$60). It is spectacular, but also available on the Wii U, so owners of that console don't need to upgrade yet.

Granted, I am a hardcore gamer, the type of guy who would buy a

Switch just for "Zelda" and spend 100 hours happily wallowing in it. Casual gamers who get by with the occasional fix of "Candy Crush Saga" on cellphones will probably wish for a broader selection.

Nintendo says more than 80 games are in development, with homegrown franchise titles like "Super Mario Odyssey," "Mario Kart 8 Deluxe" and "Splatoon 2" coming this year. But Nintendo hasn't said whether the Switch will get some version of its Virtual Console, which delivered classic hits from the company's 30-plus-year history to the Wii U.

The Switch hardware is very impressive, and the ability to easily take a game from the living room to the laundromat scratches an itch I didn't know I had.

But in bridging two worlds, it sacrifices important pieces of both. It doesn't have all the functions you want from a tablet; even the Xbox and the PlayStation have web browsers and video apps such as Netflix on their non-portable systems. And the Switch doesn't (yet) deliver the range of games you want from a home console.

The Wii U failed, in part, because Nintendo left too many of its most beloved heroes idling on the bench. Consoles gathered dust because there weren't enough compelling games to play.

The long-awaited "Zelda" is a good start for the Switch, but Nintendo will need to deliver this kind of quality more consistently.

More information: www.nintendo.com/switch

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