

Review: Solid Nintendo 3DS could use fresher games

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In this video game image released by Nintendo, a scene is shown from, "AR Games." (AP Photo/Nintendo)

Whether you're watching a Hollywood action movie in an IMAX theater or college hoops on a 3-D TV, there's no denying the wow factor of current 3-D technology. And the trend isn't lost on video-game companies - particularly Sony, which has been trumpeting the 3-D environments of recent PlayStation 3 games like "Killzone 3."

Still, big-screen 3-D isn't for everybody: Those of us with poor vision will probably never adjust to wearing 3-D glasses on top of our prescription specs.

That's why Nintendo's announcement last year that it had created eyeglasses-free 3-D was greeted with such enthusiasm. And its 3DS portable [game](#) machine (\$250) lives up to the hype, creating a convincing illusion of a third dimension beyond its 3.5-inch screen.

The most dazzling demonstration, which comes installed on the device, is "AR Games." ("AR" stands for "augmented reality.") Place a card on a table, point the 3DS cameras at it - and a dragon bursts out of the flat surface. To shoot targets on the dragon, you have to move yourself around the card to find different angles.

You can also take 3-D photos and add a variety of effects. Or you can incorporate your friends' images into "Face Raiders," which morphs them onto a fleet of floating, whirling attack helicopters. Like "AR Games," it's simple, but offers a promising glimpse of what we might expect from future 3DS software.

Nintendo has assembled a solid but derivative lineup of 18 games (\$40 each) to accompany the launch of the hardware. Almost all of them are based on familiar franchises, including Nintendo's own "Pilotwings Resort," a lighthearted flying game, and "Nintendogs + Cats," a lovable pet simulator.

The 3-D effect does enhance sports games like EA Sports' "Madden NFL Football" and Namco Bandai's "Ridge Racer 3D." But it feels superfluous in Capcom's "Super Street Fighter IV 3D Edition" because its 3-D angles tend to block your view; it's a good game, but "SF" fans will probably stick to the 2-D perspective.

LucasArts' "Lego Star Wars III: The Clone Wars" delivers flashier 3-D effects: In combat, enemies burst into Lego bricks that look like they're going to burst through the screen. For the most part, though, the game plays just as well in two dimensions.

It's easy enough to switch that extra dimension on and off, and I suspect many players will make frequent use of the device's 2-D/3-D slider. If you look away from the 3-D screen, it takes a few seconds to readjust your eyes back to it. More significantly, my eyes got tired after about 10 minutes of 3-D action, so I spent more time with it turned off.

So, if the games are just as playable in two dimensions, what's the point? The 3DS launch lineup doesn't answer that question, but surely some developers are plotting software that makes 3-D more integral to gameplay.

Beyond 3-D, the 3DS does sport several new

features that will delight longtime players of Nintendo handhelds. The most welcome change is a circular thumb pad - at last! - that complements the traditional plus-sign-shaped directional pad. The 3DS adds a motion sensor so you can tilt the device to control the action in games like "Super Monkey Ball 3D." And a retractable stylus can be adjusted to your comfort level.

The whole package is only slightly thicker and heavier than 2008's DSi. The biggest drawback is battery life: If you have the screen set at maximum brightness, a charge lasts just three hours.

Before release, I was unable to try out the 3DS' wireless features, which encourage you to leave the device turned on - in sleep mode - while you carry it around. SpotPass will detect wireless hotspots and automatically download information and free software, Nintendo says. StreetPass will detect other 3DS players and automatically transfer data such as Mii avatars between devices. And the Nintendo eShop, like the earlier model's DSi Shop, will let you buy and download new games, starting in May.

Nintendo's longtime dominance of handheld gaming has been threatened by the expanding presence of smartphones, especially Apple's iPhone. It will probably take more than 3-D technology to slow down the competition, so the eShop and the 3DS' other wireless goodies will be key. What the 3DS demonstrates is that Nintendo isn't going to give up the portable market without a fight.

More information: www.nintendo.com/3ds

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