

METROID FUSION

GENRE(S): Action-adventure

AVAILABLE ON: GBA

DEVELOPED BY: Nintendo

PUBLISHED BY: Nintendo

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Although bursting with power back in the time of its release, the Game Boy Advance started off heading towards a very similar arc as its predecessors: "conversions" (rather, loose adaptations) of bigger games with a 50/50 potential of success, portable remakes of games from the 8- and 16-bit eras, spin-offs and semi-official sequels galore, but there really wasn't much to go on when it came to exclusive first-party titles; for example, the Game Boy Advance never got an exclusive Mario platformer, which makes the system an eternal black sheep of the Nintendo family (Virtual Boy doesn't count...)

Just like in 1991, when a group of developers led by Gunpei Yokoi created *Metroid II: Return of Samus* exclusively for the very original Game Boy, a group of developers led by Takehiro Izushi (replacing Yokoi, who died in a tragic car crash in 1997) created the concept of *Metroid* for the Game Boy Advance in very early 2001. When the game was first announced and quickly demonstrated, everyone – EVERYONE – was convinced that this "new" game was to be an enhanced remake of *Super Metroid*. Nintendo very quickly intervened, and stated that while familiar aesthetics from *Super Metroid* were indeed used as a template to announce the coming of a new *Metroid* game, the Game Boy Advance game was nothing short of a whole new *Metroid* game – AND, not just any *Metroid* game, but *Metroid 4*. In late 2002, *Metroid Fusion* was finally released; it disappointed, and continues to disappoint many fans of the franchise, but it's still hailed by critics around the world as one of the greatest games on the Game Boy Advance, and most certainly paved the way to the peak of the Game Boy Advance's popularity.

With the Metroids gone, Samus returns to the origin of the species at SR388 with a whole team of

Federation soldiers and scientists to investigate a newly discovered species dubbed "X" - even more vicious than Metroids, these parasites are capable of possessing their hosts' minds. Coming into physical contact with the parasite, Samus loses consciousness while delivering a sample of the X to its destination, and crashes her ship. Severely injured and almost completely consumed by the parasite both mentally and physically, Samus is picked up by the BSL (Biologic Space Laboratories) and taken to intensive care at Federation HQ. As a last resort to save her, Federation scientists inject Samus with Metroid DNA - taken from the dead larva that already saved her life on Zebes - which not only kills the X inside her, but makes her immune to further infections and gives her the ability to drain the X the same way as Metroids drain all life. When Samus recovers and reports back to active duty, she is sent to investigate a mysterious incident at the BSL labs, where her old power suit still infected with the X is housed - along with other remnants of her past that make Samus question her own loyalty to the Galactic Federation.

First off, I'm pretty much obligated to share my views on the one thing people truly hate about *Metroid Fusion*: its linearity. The BSL labs are divided into seven clear-cut levels, and some additional "rooms" which are levels in themselves, hidden within those main levels. Samus' new ship is equipped with a talkative A.I., fully compatible with the technological equipment on board the lab ship, meaning Samus can (and must) connect to it from each sector of the labs to pinpoint her next narrative destination at all times. While the previous games - especially *Super Metroid* since the game otherwise follows its predecessor's core gameplay design to the last nail - were all about free exploration, *Metroid Fusion* pretty much guides the player by hand 'til the end. There are times when the objective is carved in stone so hard, that every door and passage in the whole laboratory complex locks down until you have followed the one path to your current objective and completed it.

Also, the color-coded doors are no longer related to your equipment in any way. Missiles don't do shit to red doors, for example - differently colored doors (Level 1 to Level 4) are opened all at once from strategically placed security rooms across the complex. This brings us to the map, which is a heavily upgraded version of the *Super Metroid* map: the doors, including unopened color-coded doors, are very

clearly marked on the map, which is an absolutely awesome upgrade. If you think that makes things too easy, you're just not right in the head. Also, points of interest, previously marked with a dot – which didn't vanish upon discovery – are now hollow round shapes, reduced to a dot once you find whatever they've got hidden in there. One more thing: the navigational maps you obtain near the beginning of every sector, only show the very basic blueprints – kind of like visitor maps. They don't include detailed stuff like vents and staff-only rooms – vents and staff-only rooms are more than an essential part of Samus' infiltration to a seemingly derelict space laboratory, so you need to find them, all by yourself, and once you do, feel free to gasp as the sector map suddenly grows by a half of its original size, with the rest of it drawn in real-time as you muddle through the narrow corridors.

So, my opinion? Sure, it's more linear than its predecessors, notably so, but after scouring through all of the readily available maps and every nook and cranny there is, and STILL ending up with a total completion of 64%, I dare say *Metroid Fusion* is a *Metroid* game. And a very good one at that.

Samus has grown as a character. Her human side is explored quite a lot, in the style of *Super Metroid*'s intro sequence. She thinks to herself every now and then at quiet moments, informing the player of her thoughts on the situation at hand, her mental and physical condition after surviving such a horrible ordeal (or a few of them), even dropping insights into her past before the events of the first *Metroid*. Towards the end, she even begins to actually converse with the terrifyingly human-like A.I., who's barking orders at her, even scolding her in a way that makes Samus – as well as us – extremely suspicious of what's really going on in BSL. *Metroid Fusion* is easily the most narrative-heavy game in the main series, and not just a breakthrough in the *Metroid* series in this sense, but also a good stand-alone sci-fi mystery. Its roots run deep in the ones that came before, but you can play it blind to the franchise and enjoy it all the same.

What's most ailing me about this game as opposed to everyone else who's so eager to pick on it for its straightforward nature, is the lack of new equipment. OK, Samus' new suit looks cool, and with the Varia

upgrade, she can absorb even the toughest and most vicious standard X larvae by simply touching them. The only truly new upgrade to Samus' equipment is the Diffusion Missile – a charged ice missile shot that enables you to freeze every enemy on the screen at once. To my memory, this has just one single use in the whole game – one single use related to making progress – the Diffusion Missile doesn't do shit to bosses. On the other hand, it's quite damn great that nearly every upgrade from *Super Metroid* is here (except for the Grapple Beam and X-Ray Scope), in this small-scale game, and few of them are actually gained in bulks, two upgrades at the price of one – the Morph Ball and Spring Ball, for example. Which brings us to the controls...

The controls in *Metroid Fusion* are simply genius. There's no more annoying pause-action toggling with the Select button. The diagonal aiming is restricted to just one shoulder button, the R button, while the L button enhances your basic shots. In other words, pressing and holding L switches your regular beam shots to missiles, and dropping a bomb while morphed and holding L changes the bomb into a Power Bomb. There are no longer different missiles – the basic missile is automatically upgraded into the Super Missile, from there the Ice Missile, and finally the Diffusion Missile. You can easily shoot while building up momentum to the Speed Booster, as Samus automatically sprints after a while of straight running. The Shinespark is still very much a part of the Speed Booster, but it's no longer needed as much, after all the BSL is a much more confined space than Zebes; there is no need to blindly smash into random walls high up in the air, hoping there's something there. There are a few kinky Speed Booster puzzles, sure, but nothing quite as annoying as the few brainfuckers in *Super Metroid*.

What we have here is an absolutely standout Game Boy Advance title, a great game with a great story, and definitely worthy of the title *Metroid 4*, despite its specific shortcomings, to which I'd like to add a few boss fights which are simply weird – pure filler material. I think they should've given it a few more years to have it truly shine – perhaps fully concentrate on *Metroid Prime* first, then strike back with a new 2D *Metroid*, and ride the new wave to lordship of the genre. Of course, even Nintendo couldn't predict that 2D, especially Metroidvania, was coming back at such a high volume on major systems just a few years

later. *Metroid Fusion* is a magnificent game, but considering the most basic fact – that all of its three predecessors were the most ambitious action-adventure games of their time – it really doesn't bring enough fresh meat to the table, purely as a game. As far as its storyline and control scheme go, it's a winner and a new standard to the series. Having such contrast within, it's a tough game to review, but I'll go with my instinct and personal values with the final rating.

8.8