

METROID: SAMUS RETURNS

GENRE(S): Action-adventure

AVAILABLE ON: Nintendo 3DS

DEVELOPED BY: MercurySteam Entertainment, Nintendo

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2D *Metroid* was not dead – it was hibernating. MercurySteam, best known for their revival of the *Castlevania* series with the *Lords of Shadow* storyline, and (a version of the) *Metroid* team joined forces to make a *Metroid* game for the Nintendo 3DS. MercurySteam wanted to make an enhanced remake of *Metroid Fusion*; once again, series producer Yoshio Sakamoto disagreed with the development team, and made a counter-proposal of completely remaking *Metroid II* instead. 26 years after the release of the original, *Samus Returns* hit just the right nerve and stands together with its predecessor *Metroid: Zero Mission* as one of the greatest remakes ever produced. For the most important part, that is.

Samus Aran travels to the planet SR388 to drive the Metroid species to utter extinction. Soon after arriving on the surface, Samus discovers that the Metroids are capable of evolving into lethal forms the Galactic Federation could not predict... or counter when needed. Samus must eliminate each and every one of the remaining Metroids to save the galaxy from their plague.

After Team Ninja's *Metroid: Other M* was utterly destroyed and disowned by disgruntled fans, Nintendo must have made a very tough call to outsource the development of another non-*Prime Metroid* game again. They ultimately passed the wheel over to MercurySteam, who at that time were best known for their very own vision of another classic video game franchise; as in another vision by an outsourced studio that was both loved and hated in equal measure by critics and fans alike. Not to worry, though, Nintendo kept a close eye on this one, and from what I've gathered, MercurySteam's efforts never seized to amaze the producers; they knew what they were doing. *Metroid: Samus Returns* is not just a complete

reimagining of *Metroid II*; it's a love letter to classic *Metroid* and its fans, lost in the mail for a number of years, and takes the original game's narrative to whole new heights, directly tying the game's events to those of both *Metroid Fusion* and *Zero Mission*, making the overarching storyline of the 2D games feel even more essential part of the experience than it already did.

To be precise, *Samus Returns* is presented in 2.5D, and – do not be alarmed, hear me out first – it takes cues from what I know of *Other M* thus far (it's coming much later on in this marathon, and I'm heading in completely blind; I just know some basics). *Melée* counterattacks are a very essential part of Samus' repertoire, and whenever you successfully counter a boss, the screen shifts to a third-person perspective, where you can either let rip on your helpless opponent, or are able to pull off a lethal manouver in Quick Time Event style. It might sound like, well, not *Metroid*, but believe me, it makes for dynamic, fluid action that was never the classic series' strongest suit. By holding the L button, you enter a free-aim mode; by rotating the analog disc, you can snipe into any direction, but cannot move. While this trick is mainly used in exploration puzzles where you need a good, fast aim, this comes very handy against tough enemies as well, especially regarding bosses, since like in the original, the *Metroids* have only one truly weak spot – in *Samus Returns*, they're a whole different game than in the source title. More about them later.

The controls follow the same basic pattern as the previous handheld iterations on the Game Boy Advance, but making things a bit more complex is the need to switch ammo via the touch screen, as well as a whole new set of four special abilities, called *Aeion Abilities*. Each of these abilities is mapped to the digital pad. First up, is *Scan Pulse*, which is a heavily upgraded version of the *X-Ray Scope* from *Super Metroid*. With this, you can spot each and every breakable block in your immediate vicinity; even if you don't actually see it, you can hear it. One single pulse also reveals more of the unexplored map around you, on a certain, quite wide radius – there's no navigation room like in *Super Metroid* and *Fusion*, this one you'll have to draw all by yourself. Second, is *Lightning Armor*, which forms a force field around Samus, taking in all the damage as long as your *Aeion Gauge* can stand the heat – yeah, there are tanks for this gauge in addition to the usual energy tanks. Third, is *Beam Burst*; this allows you to use immensely powerful rapid fire,

which increases in power with each basic weapon upgrade, naturally. Fourth, is Phase Drift, which is kinda this game's equivalent and opposite of the Speed Booster at the same time. *Samus Returns* is indeed the first ("official") game since *Super Metroid* not to have a version of the Speed Booster. What Phase Drift does is that it slows time around you, allowing you to get past rapidly moving enemies or rapidly shifting obstacles (such as pitfall blocks) easily. It's mostly used for environmental puzzles, like the Speed Booster in the *Super Metroid* and *Metroid Fusion* endgames to many fans' dismay – luckily it's not quite that frustrating to use, although it is frustrating to try and remember to shut it down after use, so you don't waste that precious Aeion energy.

While *Metroid: Samus Returns* is based on *Metroid II*, for all intents and purposes it feels more like a sequel to *Super Metroid* from a certain point on. For starters, the Grapple Beam, not seen since *Super Metroid*, makes its return, and it's actually not used for hanging and swinging all that much... it's more of a "key". Using it is really easy, genius even – you just aim at any grapple point in free-aim, and you automatically switch to the Grapple Beam. What truly makes the game feel like a continuation of *Super Metroid* though, is its level design; when they were making *Zero Mission*, the developers had a good starting point in basic texture and background design. Here, they had to work with a game that had different mixtures of white and grey, set against a completely black background. The differences between levels were absolutely minimal.

Well, here every single one of the eight main areas greatly differs from the last by all accounts, and yes, *Super Metroid* is definitely used as the basic mold... all the way to the soundtrack. A few old favourites play louder than ever, with original *Super Metroid* composer Kenji Yamamoto laying down the law to young upstart Daisuke Matsuoka, who starts off with nothing less than a very impressive remix of "Theme of *Super Metroid*" during the intro sequence. Of course the main theme of *Metroid II* ("Surface of SR388") plays in the "tutorial area", to remind everyone that this is still – in its EXTREMELY basic core – a re-run of *Metroid II*.

With that out of the way one last time, let's go over the premise. Your mission is to eliminate the last 40 remnants of the Metroid species, hiding on their home planet, SR388. Although considered mindless, merciless killers, these parasitic creatures are quite intelligent, and have managed to dig into the darkest corners of the planet, where they are able to evolve into even more dangerous versions of themselves in record time. In other words, this is a glorified statement of the obvious; the bosses in the game get much tougher, bigger and more agile towards the end, and completely different from the visually evolving and more enduring, but still as stoic target boards of the original. Every time you face a new type of Metroid, you are treated to a cutscene that will scare the living shit out of you, to put it frankly. The game is overall the creepiest *Metroid* since *Super Metroid* – if not taking that single moment of SA-X's introduction in *Metroid Fusion* into account. It reverts to that sci-fi horror vibe I have always loved most about this series when it comes to atmospheric issues. ...Oh yeah, and before I forget: don't expect Queen Metroid to be the first and last boss to make a meal out of your ass in this one.

The way to make progress is exactly the same as in the original: kill all the Metroids in one area, the lava level of the planet drops down, and you're free to enter the next hub. Even so, the map is MUCH bigger, extending all the way to the vast surface of the planet, and all that new equipment certainly isn't just for show when it comes to exploring even those few remotely familiar nooks and crannies. Backtracking is imminent; there's no way to clean any of the areas out before the ultimate endgame. The map design's pretty much the same as in *Metroid Fusion* and *Zero Mission*, but there are some notable differences. There are more icons to indicate different doors (even certain beam upgrades are needed to open certain types of doors) and different points of interest. The most important update regarding the map, is of course the fact that it's presented in real time, on the touch screen; since the original DS never got a 2D *Metroid* game, credit for this very welcome, awesome update goes to *Castlevania (Dawn of Sorrow)*, to be exact).

Last, I'd like to acknowledge the ending of the game, avoiding spoilers the best I can. Let's just say the ending not only heavily expands the general *Metroid* lore, it also gives us an even tastier cliffhanger

towards a potential sequel than *Zero Mission* back in its day. It feels kind of stupid to speak of it now, 'cause we got that sequel against all real expectations, and it certainly cashed in on that cliffhanger, but let me just say what everyone else is thinking: yeah, sure, it would be nice to have a remake of *Super Metroid* to push the narrative envelope one final step further, and with two remakes that are this incredibly strong already under their respective developers' belts, one can't even imagine a similar remake of a game that is still one of the greatest video games ever made as it is. Anyway, do NOT disregard *Metroid: Samus Returns* as just a remake – to have full understanding of the *Metroid* storyline, you need to experience it.

Also regarding the ending of the game – here comes the one and only (power) bomb – the game is a little drawn out for its own good. The overtly ambitious, sloppy, heavily self-repeating endgame pursuit for 100% does very little to cancel out all the fun you had before – moreover the fun you will remember this game by – but it will most certainly frustrate completionists who were so sure having all the equipment along would be enough to beat the game to the hilt. The game is definitely the longest 2D *Metroid* there is, but there is not quite enough fresh and intriguing content to justify the last couple of in-game hours.

The DS family lived an incredibly long life, and will most certainly go down in history as the greatest and most innovative family of handheld consoles (Switch doesn't count). *Metroid: Samus Returns* arrived late to see the family's youngest go out in style, and luckily so: it would've been a shame, and a loss to Nintendo to have yet another system go out without a proper *Metroid*. It's not just a magnificent remake, it is also one of the most essential games exclusively developed for the 3DS. If only the endgame run-around could hold up to the rest of it, the overall rating would be so much higher.

8.7