Hands-on: Switch’s NES controllers offer unmatched old-school authenticity

Enlarge / Now you’re playing with power.

reader comments

65 with 53 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

Playing old-school games on the Switch thus far has been a choice between various control compromises. You can use two Joy-Cons held in two hands, but the tiny buttons and lack of a true d-pad make this setup less than ideal. Holding a single Joy-Con sideways eliminates the d-pad completely and forces you to curve your grip around a hand-crampingly small control surface. A Switch Pro Controller or various third-party solutions can solve these problems, but they come with relatively high prices and some added features you don’t need for classic games.

Enter Nintendo, which is offering subscribers to its new Online service the ability to buy two wireless, Switch-compatible replica NES controllers for $60 (on top of the $20 a year subscription). After spending a few hours testing the little guys (just before pre-orders start shipping out) we found them to be competent, authentic throwbacks with some important limitations.

Truly authentic

Anyone with fond memories of gripping an NES controller in their youth will be happy to hear that Nintendo got the authenticity darn-near perfect with these replicas. Everything from the sizing to the tactile feel to the springiness of the buttons and the d-pad is practically indistinguishable from a brand-new NES controller you might have bought three decades ago. This isn't that surprising, since the wired NES Classic Edition controllers had the same level of fidelity, but it's still nice to see.

- Not a very fancy box, all told.
- How to charge.
- Look ma, no wires.
- The stubby little L and R buttons. Also notice the slight differences between the "left" and "right" controller, when it comes time to snap them onto the Switch.
- The wrist straps make the shoulder buttons much less stubby.
- The positioning of the "release" button on the back is the only real difference, here.
- You can technically use the controllers when plugged in this way, but really this is mainly for charging.
- Aside from the wires, from the front it's hard to distinguish between a real NES controller (top), an NES Classic Edition controller (middle), and an NES controller for Switch (bottom).
- Size comparison between a Joy-Con (with wrist strap), NES controller for Switch, and a Switch Pro Controller.

The only really noticeable differences between a real NES controller and the Switch-based replica are the lack of wires and the familiar Joy-Con groove along the top edge. This allows you to plug the controller into the Switch itself for easy syncing and charging (we haven't gotten through a full

charge yet, but the battery level display suggests one will last for dozens of hours). After a quick update to the Switch's NES emulation app, the controllers worked as well as you'd expect, with no discernible input lag.

Playing these emulated NES games with a replica of the controller they were originally designed for proves pretty crucial to appreciating them correctly. There's something about rolling your thumb around a real, accurately sized d-pad and resting the pads of your thumbs on the little indentations of real NES buttons that feels better and truer than fighting with a tiny Joy-Con. This really is the way these games were meant to be played.

The NES controllers also offer the same stubby, recessed L and R buttons you'd find on a traditional Joy-Con. You can slide a standard Joy-Con strap on top of this groove to help raise and enlarge those shoulder buttons, and you'll probably want to access some Switch-specific features in the NES app. The L button takes screenshots, the R button returns to the home menu, and both together bring up the in-game menu needed to switch between games.

Can it do more?

When these replica NES controllers were announced, Nintendo warned that they were designed to work only with the Switch's downloadable selection of classic NES games. Our testing, though, found that the replica controllers were more than suitable for a variety of old-school and retro-styled games found elsewhere on the system.

- The Switch UI recognizes the NES controllers as distinct when they're plugged in.
- …and also when you sync them to the system wirelessly.
- At the bottom, you can see new menu control options that show up specifically when the NES controllers are

connected.
- On-screen instructions for the new menu controls.
- L + R = Suspend Menu.

The Switch's UI makes it clear that the system sees these replica NES controllers differently from standard Joy-Cons. That said, the system also treats the inputs from the controller just like those from a set of Joy-Cons that just so happen to be missing analog sticks and a few face buttons. The d-pad and face buttons are perfectly suitable for navigating system menus and performing basic Switch functions, provided you don't need the Home or Screenshot buttons (though syncing up nearby Joy-Cons can give you access to these functions in a pinch).

Those inputs are also enough to offer full control over a surprisingly large array of Switch games (sometimes with a bit of menu fiddling). That includes modern platformers like *Super Meat Boy* and *Celeste*, puzzle games like *Lumines Remastered* and *Puyo Puyo Tetris*, classic re-releases like *Ikaruga* and *Namco Museum*, and many more. Even *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* was perfectly playable using the controller, with enough buttons for acceleration, braking, drifting, and items (though reaching around the controller's sharp edges to hit the shoulder buttons so frequently was a little uncomfortable).

That said, a large number of Switch games that are designed with the assumption of analog stick controls—everything from *Breath of the Wild* to *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*—can't be controlled with the NES controllers. Even some games designed for digital directional input require more than the NES controller's four action buttons—games like *Dead Cells* and *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* are missing crucial inputs without a full complement of Joy-Con buttons.

Of course, these games aren't what the Switch's NES controllers were designed for. When it comes to their intended purpose—offering a truly authentic control option for NES

games played on Switch—these controllers serve their role at a reasonable price (assuming you want two of them). The ability to play some Switch games as well is just icing on the cake. If you want a controller that offers better control options for any and all Switch games, though, invest in a Pro Controller.

Specifics aside, we hope these NES controllers indicate a willingness on Nintendo's part to experiment more with new controller designs for the Switch. We'd love to see Joy-Con options that offer a split-handed version of the GameCube control scheme, for instance, or a Joy-Con with a trackball in the place of the analog stick, or simply bigger options with larger buttons and a true d-pad. The Switch's modular control design seems ripe for novel new ideas, and we hope Nintendo has some in the offing.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1428003