# In Kirby Air Riders, expression is more fun than racing

Hear me out: *Kirby Air Riders* isn’t a racing game, it’s an art tool with a racing game tacked on.

The game, out now for the Nintendo Switch 2, is the follow-up to the quirky Kirby-flavored kart racer released in 2003 on the GameCube. It features *Smash Bros.* creator Masahiro Sakurai’s round, pink, utterly charming child participating in short races where the main feature isn’t so much about how fast you go, but how well you can manage the winding courses while fighting the cutest rogues’ gallery ever committed to polygons.

Unlike in other kart racers, *Air Riders* has no acceleration button. Instead you’re automatically propelled forward, requiring you to negotiate the track with the brake button that you can use to drift around corners. You can also use the brake to charge your kart (known as a “machine”) for an extra boost of speed at the expense of halting all forward momentum while you charge up.

To add another interesting wrinkle, *Air Riders* is stuffed with different kinds of machines with different properties. Those properties are not the kind of acceleration, braking, and handling stats that are common in, say, *Mario Kart*, but fundamentally change how the machine handles. The Swerve Star, for example, is super fast but can only change its direction while charging. As a result, it can’t gently glide along curves and turns, but instead ricochets across a course like a pinball. Meanwhile, the Bulk Star won’t accelerate if it’s not

charged, but it makes up for the constant starting and stopping by being super fast and super tanky. In *Air Riders*, the machines have just as much personality as the racers, which brings me to my strange little declaration.

I haven't done much racing in *Kirby Air Riders* because I don't wanna leave the damn vehicle customization screen. I was not expecting this cute little mashup of Sakurai's pet projects — *Smash Bros.* and *Kirby* — to have such robust customization options, and it has completely dominated my time with it. More than just changing machine colors and adding the odd sticker, you can add different patterns and textures to your machine, both on the body and the boosters. There are different visual effects you can add to the trail your machine leaves in its wake. You can customize your Rider Cards that you show off while you race online with titles, backgrounds, pictures, borders, and more. Even the act of applying the cosmetics has an unexpected level of detail to it, allowing you to rotate, transform, and flip patterns and decals with fine precision to get anything you want in the right place just so.

And if that weren't enough, there's also an online shop where players can upload their own creations that other players can buy. Better yet, it's all done with currency earned in-game, which is refreshing when this kind of cosmetic expression is typically locked behind microtransactions and gacha-game-like chance. Naturally, there have been issues, but the level of creativity on display there speaks to just how incredible these customization features are.

After a couple of introductory races, I blew my entire stack of currency buying up stuff just to play with the customization tools. In fact, the only reason I race at all is to earn enough currency to go back, buy up more stuff, and play with them some more. I know I'm playing *Kirby Air Riders* incorrectly — but I'm having too much fun to care.

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