Space Channel 5 VR hands-on: Ulala’s back, and I met her



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BOSTON—It’s been nearly 20 years now since swinging space reporter Ulala made her stylish, retro-futuristic, musical-theater melodrama debut in *Space Channel 5* for the Dreamcast. In the years since, we’ve only seen her and her crew in an underpromoted sequel and a handful of Sega-centric cameos.

That long absence will finally end later this year with *Space Channel 5 VR: Kinda Funky News Flash* for PlayStation VR. I was one of the first people to try the game out at PAX East this morning and the demo was a welcoming, familiar, and all-encompassing jump back into the series’ unique world.

First things first—no, you don’t get to play as Ulala.

Instead, you're a similarly outfitted, silent cub reporter shadowing her for a day on the job (as a 36-year-old man, looking down at that provocative outfit from my first-person VR perspective is… interesting, to say the least). Ulala's voice is noticeably different from the original games—her original voice actress has been notoriously hard to track down—but the sound-alike is close enough to not be distracting.

The demo starts with a quick tutorial that has you mirroring Ulala's basic moves with two handheld PlayStation Move controllers. That means gesturing up, down, left, right, and forward in time with the music, Simon Says-style (the familiar brassy '60s hit *Mexican Flyer* makes a welcome return for the demo). You also get a few new moves in VR: dodging your entire body left, right, and down to avoid incoming shots, for instance, or waving your hands above your head briefly to charge up a shot.

After the tutorial, it's right off to a (slightly empty) fully 3D version of the familiar, stark white spaceport from the first stage of the original game. The brightly colored Morolians have once again hypnotized some citizens and forced them to dance, and it's up to you and Ulala to set journalistic distance aside and save them.

- A view similar to the one you'll see in VR.
- Chu chu chu!
- I am a beautiful, musical space journalist.

Ulala walks in from behind you and takes position just to the side, letting you grab a quick glance and mimic her moves during the timed sequences. There's also a 2D screen floating off to the right, giving you a third-person view of Ulala and your dancer to center your timing a bit. A subtle bell sound after each individual move helps you judge whether or not your moves are landing with the correct timing.

The call-and-response experience is extremely familiar to rhythm-game fans, but it’s also reborn thanks to the motion and perspective of VR. Actually moving along with the music ends up much more engrossing than simply tapping buttons to control Ulala, and there’s something a little magical about throwing both arms forward and seeing those perfectly timed, glittery power beams fly out and obliterate some Morolians. Even though my feet weren’t tracked, I found myself moving almost instinctively in the same kind of full body poses Ulala makes and bobbing to the music between sections.

The early demo still ran into some tracking problems during my short ten-minute session (which I blame for my final 85 percent rating), and the introductory rhythmic patterns were a bit simple, as you might expect for the beginning of the game. Still, as the demo faded away with a glimpse of Coco Tapioca’s imposing, rotund presence, I found myself wanting to keep playing. This quick taste got me looking forward to seeing some more new first-person VR takes on *Space Channel 5*‘s distinct style.

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