“The Switcher” is real: Witcher 3 on Switch is a blurry, tolerable compromise

Enlarge / In good news, you can boot straight into expansion content when loading this version of *The Witcher 3*. I imagine more than a few fans of the game will use this Switch version to dive deeply into either or both of the expansions.

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Since Nintendo’s Switch console launched in 2016, we’ve seen no shortage of holy-cow ports of games we never thought would work on what turned out to be the most underpowered console of this generation. *Doom 2016*, *Dark Souls*, *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus*—that’s a list of demanding 3D games I never expected to launch on Switch, let alone games I’d actually recommend for the system.

But I do so with a pretty hefty asterisk attached. The charm of these games on Switch comes almost entirely due to them being playable on the go, at which point their severe compromises (image quality, rendering resolution) become much more acceptable. What looks iffy on a full-sized TV is easier to shrug off when seen on a six-inch 720p panel.

This week marks the arrival of arguably the most holy-cow port yet on the portable console: CD Projekt Red’s 2015 action-RPG *The Witcher 3*. This is a game, after all, whose other console versions required quite a few patches to get their most

troublesome spots up to a locked 30 frames per second. We went hands-on over the weekend with the game's final retail version (which launches for Switch on Tuesday) to answer a crucial question: could we expect playability in CDPR's acclaimed adventure game on an even weaker system?

Not every polygon came through unscathed

- In many ways, *The Witcher 3* dedicates its Switch polygons where they count.
- And when pre-baked lighting effects emerge, cinematic scenes can look quite handsome, even if they run closer to 20fps.
- But while characters and certain scenes can look fantastic, a lot of the game's default geometry, particularly its foliage, can look quite weird.
- There's also the matter of some rampant texture pop-in in some cinematic scenes.
- Even in this cinematic scene, the effects of reduced screen resolution come into play.
- Some optimized cinema scenes can look crisp and clear enough.
- What you're really looking for is real-time gameplay, and the rest of this gallery focuses on that.
- We don't have pixel-counting gear in-house, but in action, this looks on par with *Doom 2016*'s Switch port.
- The physics attached to these trees in a wind storm makes them look pretty convincing—at least, as opposed to some of the lower-poly foliage in other scenes.
- There's one wolf and one deer in there. That can be kind of hard to discern, even in action.
- The view distance is okay, but nothing to scream home about.
- Low-res Witcher.

- There’s more than bad weather affecting the visibility in this moment.
- Witchers can just barge in anywhere, can’t they.

The good news is that our initial impressions reveal a mostly locked 30fps refresh rate—stable enough to where the slightest frame rate hiccups have been nigh unnoticeable in our first few hours of play. The most crucial moments of battle and enemy management aren’t ruined by the on-screen action herking and jerking. This is met by some seriously quick loading times; getting from a cold boot to a loaded game save is rarely more than 60 seconds, and loading times between parts of the world are even faster.

The bad news, as can be seen in the gallery above, is that *Witcher 3* on the Switch looks a lot more like *Witcher 2*. For starters, its apparent resolution is some of the blurriest we’ve ever seen on Switch in both docked and portable modes. While the results look comparable to *Doom 2016*, *Witcher 3* is a much slower game, and it demands that you let your eyes linger over massive, dramatically lit landscapes and towns. The blur draped over all of that scenery is more noticeable than, say, a rapid-fire pulse of shotguns through demons’ faces.

Those landscapes are covered in foliage, a fact that impressed back in 2015 with CDPR’s dense rendering system working nearly as well on console as it did on PC. But that system’s polygon count and texture density have both been scaled back dramatically to get trees, shrubs, and other greenery working on Switch. This was probably done to preserve facial detail on pretty much every human character in the game, which is certainly a preferable compromise, but the disconnect between an emotionally brooding Geralt and a dinky, PlayStation 2-era wall of vines is one fans will have to accept if they want to marathon this version of *Witcher 3* on the go.

Other major settings like shadow resolution, ground textures, and hair physics have also been scaled back, which you can

argue is acceptable or annoying based on your personal preferences. The lower resolution of the Switch screen makes these downgrades a little more tolerable, in my opinion. But enough of the game's geometry has been noticeably de-tuned that it stands out in the game's lengthy, well-written cinema scenes (which, I should note, often struggle in the frame rate department, sometimes dipping into 10-15fps range).

One moment, the game will smother its scenery in some of the most handsome, pre-baked lighting effects you may have ever seen on Switch. The next moment, a tight zoom on Geralt and his allies stutters with texture pop-in and grungy foliage effects nearby. That kind of startling visual contrast shows up in this Switch port more than I expected.

Totally playable—just be warned

I don't mean to say *Witcher 3* is unplayable or ruined by the effort spent getting it into Switch-compatible shape. However, completely new players should be warned that CDPR's cinematic vision for the game is compromised *just* enough to take this port out of my running for a clear-cut recommendation. If you've already played *Witcher 3* and want an excuse to burn through it anew on the go, complete with convenient "fast forward to the expansions" shortcuts, then yes, this port is a great reason to return to Nilfgaard. If you don't have any other consoles or a decent gaming PC, then "Switcher 3" is absolutely playable. (Plus, in my personal opinion, it's better than Switch's *Skyrim* as an on-the-go RPG, even with low resolutions and other visual compromises.)

But if you *do* have another hardware option and aren't necessarily itching for a purely portable RPG, take a breath and look at other systems' heavily discounted versions before making this your very first way to play the game.

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