



NINTENDO DS... HOME OF THE PADDLE CONTROLLER?

by Kevin Bunch

As anyone who has tried to play a game such as *Breakout* or *Tempest* on a home console may already know, it is incredibly difficult to do well in these games when played without the proper arcade-style controls. Call it a paddle, a vau, a knob, or a spinner, the end result is without the accuracy and speed one of these devices offer the games designed around them are nearly impossible to do well in. Only a handful of home systems have ever featured these accessories, but the most recent – and possibly the most unexpected – platform to feature one is the handheld Nintendo DS.

Yes, in December 2007 Taito released a paddle controller in Japan for the DS, bundled with *Arkanoid DS* and sold separately as well in black, white, silver, and pink colors. The controller plugs into the Game Boy Advance slot, which means it is only compatible with original DS and DS Lite systems, but the potential inconvenience of tracking down one of these devices and the older DS models is well worth it if you're a fan of the handful of games designed to utilize it.

Arkanoid DS obviously is the primary title Taito built for the controller, and it turns the game from a passable sequel to the arcade classic with weak digital controls to a fantastic adaptation of the game concept. The ability to accurately and quickly place your paddle onscreen makes all the difference for this game, bringing in the "feel" of the arcade to a handheld, something unexpected and thoroughly amazing to someone who grew up struggling with awkward attempts at arcade-to-home control translations. That said, *Arkanoid DS* is not the showcase title for the little device. That honor belongs to the Space Invaders Extreme series.

Both *Space Invaders Extreme* and *SIE 2* support the paddle, and it brings an interesting new dynamic to both titles. The original *Space Invaders* did not use anything more than simple digital controls, and under normal circumstances the *Extreme* titles do a fine job of bringing the classic movement pace into a wild, more modern gaming world. Much like the early shooters, the player must be mindful of getting trapped, and has to think a couple moves ahead to finish out the level successfully.

The paddle controller, however, brings a new dynamic to the games. Suddenly the ship has the movement capabilities of the little *Arkanoid* avatar, capable of flying across the screen in moments rather than ponderously making the journey over a couple seconds. This feeds into the game's sense of manic excitement, speeding up the pace significantly insofar as clearing invaders and dodging shots goes. It also requires a deft hand to avoid flying out of control into a bullet, a problem the more methodical d-pad control setting does not have. That said, it is much easier to get high scores with the paddle controller, and its use is disabled when playing over the Internet.

The paddle is also compatible with *Space Bust-A-Move*, though with no direct experience with that title I have little to add. Though the paddle was never sold outside of Japan, the programming enabling its use was never taken out of overseas releases of any of the games that use it, so Western players can use it on their domestic copies of *Arkanoid DS*, *SIE* and *SIE 2*, and *Space Bust-A-Move*. Thankfully, the DS and Lite platform itself is also region-free, so using the accessory on a domestic system is also not a problem.

The paddle itself has a bit of resistance to it, and the knob feels like it has a bit of weight that comes into play with inertia when you turn it too quickly. Unlike the Atari VCS paddle controllers, the paddle for the DS is free-spinning with no lock-points. Though it may seem like it sits at a weird angle for playing games that also use the buttons on the DS, it actually does not end up being particularly difficult to hold the system while using both the buttons and paddle. If there is any downside to the paddle controller, it boils down to the fact that only four officially released games use it. Given that it is a Taito-released accessory it isn't shocking that it doesn't work for games developed by other companies, but it would have been nice to use it on one of the classic arcade game compilations released on the system. The paddle also adds bulkiness to the system's profile that makes it difficult to pocket.

Despite these minor shortcomings, the controller is a worthy purchase for any fans of the games it supports, and for people interested in strange DS accessories. It can be a little tricky to track down since it has been out of production for a couple years, but it is a fantastic addition to anyone who loves the precision a paddle controller brings.