

Christopher Lucas
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Sonic the Hedgehog was first released in the U.S. on June 23, 1991 for the Sega Genesis. Developed by Sonic Team, a group of programmers led by Yuji Naka of Phantasy Star fame, Sonic the Hedgehog took platform games to a new level by featuring superior graphics, music and gameplay compared to a legion of 2D forefathers. Sonic the Hedgehog became the flagship character for Sega and its popularity continues today with comics, television shows and games for newer consoles. Released during a time when console games were mired in a two-dimensional, platforming rut, Sonic added new stylistic and graphical dimensions to videogames, including a character with enough personality to spawn 4 separate cartoon series and 3 comic books, and new framerate achievements to create visualizations of speed not before seen.

In *Sonic*, the user takes on the role of Sonic the Hedgehog, a blue, spiky-haired hero with bright red sneakers. He lives in a world full of defenseless forest creatures in which he has abilities far beyond them: he is bigger and more importantly, faster, and he uses his gift of speed to defend his home against interlopers. Sonic's attitude, shown through his facial expressions when he's running at top speed and when you leave him motionless for too many seconds, is one of independence. His finger-wagging lets the user know he is confident and brash about his power and his determined expression when running shows that he realizes the responsibility that comes along with his power; he alone is capable of saving the forest from mechanization, and he will do so because others depend on him. The primary villain is Dr. Robotnik, a character who is the

antithesis of Sonic. Besides being human, Dr. Robotnik (known in other Sonic games simply as 'Eggman') has an egg-shaped body and is reliant on machinery to battle Sonic. In fact, at the end of the game all of Dr. Robotnik's machinery is destroyed, leaving him helpless and forcing him to flee from Sonic. Throughout the game, Sonic faces lesser enemies who are actually the woodland animals turned into mechanical manifestations by Robotnik. When Sonic applies his Super Sonic Spin Attack (jumps or rolls) to a robot, the metal bondage disappears in a puff of smoke, and a grateful squirrel, rabbit or bird scurries away to freedom. As Sonic progresses through different zones in pursuit of Robotnik, the areas lose their verdant characteristics and become increasingly cold, metal and automated. A message is contained there: Sonic must venture deep into the mechanical world to eliminate the core of the forces that threaten his pristine, green environment.



A secondary plot involves Sonic's quest to retrieve the six Chaos Emeralds. In this first *Sonic* game, the Emeralds gave the user 'continues', or extra chances to complete the game in a form more valuable than a 1-up. The Emeralds are essentially a way to increase the challenge of the game; the user could defeat Dr. Robotnik without recovering any of the Emeralds, but to do the additional tasks required to retrieve the Emeralds *and* defeat Robotnik presumably constitutes an advanced gamer. A reward for getting all six Chaos Emeralds was worked into the game in the form of an alternate ending upon the game's completion.

Unlike Mario, who began his adventures as a weakling needing the aid of mushrooms, flowers, leaves and capes to become powerful and do battle, Sonic doesn't receive powerups, per se. All of the abilities needed to complete every aspect of the game are afforded Sonic from the beginning; all he has is a run, jump and roll, yet he must figure out how to use those abilities to traverse nineteen levels of danger. The invincibility and speed powerups are essentially tools to let the user run without abandon to show off the effects of the level. Also, Sonic created a new standard of evaluation for the game. The rings which are just as prevalent as coins in Mario games are for sustainability, not points, making them vitally important. Taking a hit while in possession of rings simply causes Sonic to drop them, and he must scramble to retrieve as many as he can, for a hit without rings causes him to throw up his hands and fall off the screen staring blankly, perhaps the only effect taken from Mario.

Strategy and replay value are the areas in which *Sonic* isn't able to separate itself from the army of 2D platformers. As with most platform games, the puzzles aren't terribly difficult even for novice gamers; the challenge comes in the execution. *Sonic*

does introduce different types of maneuvers to perform, most notably the pinball-reminiscent bumpers and rotating mazes contained in the Spring Yard and Special Zones, respectively. Unlike, most platformers before it, there are times when the user doesn't have complete control of Sonic, and this effect is intended by the programmers. While early in the game, players can use Sonic's speed to rush through the levels without concern for taking a hit, later levels require players to restrain themselves and think about where they can peel out and where to slow down and examine the territory. The thought required in playing *Sonic* is exemplified while fighting Dr. Robotnik at the end of the Labyrinth Zone; Sonic must simultaneously chase a fleeing Dr. Robotnik while climbing out of a pit that is rapidly filling with water, which can drown him. If the user's goal is to keep up with the doctor in his flying machine, he will certainly fall victim to the traps set in the pit. However, if the user ignores the doctor in order to concentrate on his own safety, he or she will soon find themselves free from the pit and headed for the next zone. In this way, *Sonic* is like a driving test. The game sees that the user can rev up the engine and realize the power of his vehicle, but also ensures that the user can slow down and make the tight turns.

The Genesis 68000 processor is shown off in *Sonic*, whenever Sonic achieves top speed. Whether it be the half-pipe in the Spring Yard Zone or the loop in the Green Hill Zone, the frames per second demonstrated in *Sonic* were more than any game prior to it. Marketed in 1991 as "blast processing", not only was it a technological achievement, but it created a sensation for the user that set a standard for all *Sonic* games to come.

The simplicity of controlling Sonic mentioned above is illustrated in the interface. The three buttons on the Genesis/Megadrive controllers all had the same function of

causing Sonic to jump. The keys responded to length of time pressed, so the user could make longer or more accurate jumps according to the time the button was pressed down.

The popularity of Sonic the Hedgehog is unprecedented. Extremely recognizable and unmistakably linked to Sega, Sonic has such staying power that even after Sega has announced that it will stop making its own hardware, the *Sonic* games being produced for “rival” consoles like the forthcoming Gameboy Advance are expected to be bestsellers. The character of Sonic also helped to define Sega and distinguish it from Nintendo. Sonic is supposed to be a teenager and, as stated above, a rebellious, independent, but heroic individual. Sonic’s sass and attitude set Sega’s image apart from its then chief rival, Nintendo. During the nineties, while Nintendo created an image of wholesomeness, by censoring the titles of third-party games and releasing passive titles like the Mario series, Sega had an appearance as more cutting-edge. Sega was the company that released the gory Splatterhouse games and it was the system that released the then-controversial Mortal Kombat with blood and violence intact. Nintendo’s released the watered-down version for its system, a move very un-Soniclike.

Technologically and stylistically, *Sonic the Hedgehog* is a true classic which has shown its mettle by surviving to make Genesis the bestselling 16-bit console and by outlasting the tremendous steps down its company has been forced to take in recent months. 10 years later, new *Sonic* products are being churned out and newsgroups contributors and members of its web fan clubs are a testament to its staying power. Yuji Naka and Sonic Team created a masterpiece back in 1991, and that team of programmers along with their cocky blue hero will remain legends of videogaming.

Sources

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