

the *Escapist*

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by **Julianne Greer**

Gamers world-wide know and accept a pantheon of gaming giants. These include:

Atari – Console and software maker. Founded 1972.

Nintendo – Console and software maker. Founded in 1889, but didn't jump onto the videogame battlefield until the early to mid 1970s.

EA – Software maker and publisher, Founded 1982.

Sony Computer Entertainment – Console and software maker. The Johnny-Come-Latelies founded in 1993.

But there is one giant who predates all of these, who from the very beginning was about bringing electronic games to the masses: Sega. Sega was founded originally as Standard Games, and soon became Service Games (**S**ervice **G**ames ... Sega ... get it?), in 1940. Back then, their purpose was to bring arcade games to servicemen abroad.

And now, after decades of developing electronic entertainment products, I dare you to find anyone, claiming himself to be a gamer, who has not played at least

one product created by Sega, be it an old school arcade game or the most recent iteration of *Sonic* for the Wii. Sega has been so ubiquitous in our gamer world that many of us have deep-seated emotions and vivid memories about them to match their depth of involvement in the game industry.

And it is these deep emotions and vivid memories which prompts this week's issue of *The Escapist*, "Sega!" about ... well, Sega. Russ Pitts shares his woes of battle when he took sides with Dreamcast over the PlayStation 2 in that round of the console war. Newcomer Edward Moore can't outrun his favorite Sega game of years past, nor does he want to. Shawn Williams runs through the full history of the *Sonic* franchise. Spanner discusses his disillusionment with Sega through the mighty gaming giant's ups and downs. And Gearoid Reidy returns to explain his sense of déjà vu upon his first time arrival in Japan. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Play Within a Play" from The Escapist Forum: The "Emotioneering" slant of the article is interesting but let's remember a key fact: The book was first published in 2003, and FF VII came out in 1997.

The Final Fantasy team did not use "Emotioneering techniques" per se, they just designed a great game. I point this out to emphasize that excellent games and good game writing exist independent of how-to texts, consultants, and

buzzwords. While Freeman did useful work to identify, formalize, and codify techniques -- and I too am a big fan of his "character diamond" -- no game developer should expect to be able to find cookbook answers to the thorny and complex issues of plot and character.

- **coot**

In response to "Play Within a Play" from The Escapist Forum: Regardless of what you think of the book or the author, this article still raises some very valid points about what makes a good story compared to a forgettable or overly cliché story.





The so called “emotioneering techniques” described in the book are very valid methods of story writing, that have been around for a long time. Freeman has simply given them a name and attempted to claim some credit for pointing out what the best authors already knew. But isn’t that what most non-fiction books do anyway?

To say that the final fantasy team didn’t use emotioneering techniques would not be entirely accurate. That would be like saying that nobody ever used gravity before Newtonian physics gave it a name. I think you would have been better off pointing out that Freeman based his book (and his newly coined methodologies) on the techniques used by already successful storytellers like the final fantasy team.

- **Goofonian**

In response to “Alone in the Dark” from The Escapist Forum: Just like comfort foods, there are definitely games that provide essential distractions/interactions in those stressful times that follow a breakup. I find that there’s a lot of stressful situations though, not just

those that are love related, in which I’ll return to specific games. While I definitely see the pull of the RPG, I usually find myself returning to strategy games. Red Alert 2 used to serve that purpose, but lately it’s been Advance Wars on the DS. Madden has also filled those voids for me, with the structure and regimented flow providing a needed regularity in stressful times.

- **Dr. Wiley**

In response to “Dunbar’s Number” from The Escapist Forum: Neat article. I liked how it summed up this week’s issue of The Escapist by discussing some really interesting findings in the science of psychology. I got my BA in Psychology, and I have lost my intimacy with it since I graduated (even though it was less than a year ago). I was glad to revisit the subject within another subject that I enjoy.

-**Blaxton**

In response to “Killjoy” from The Escapist Forum: The job of the developer isn’t an easy one here, Do they remove quick-saves entirely?

Should they instead break up their game into 15 - 30 minute sections so that it can still be played by people without a lot of time? I’d personally be satisfied just to see more games implement Diablo II’s hardcore mode. It would force the developers to make sure the game could be played successfully through without failure through intelligent planning and execution. It caters to both crowds in this, because I’m sure that there are people who don’t want to deal with making a new character or starting over if they make a fatal mistake.

- **TomBeraha**

In response to “Killjoy” from The Escapist Forum: The core problem is that many video game engines simply don’t have the room for the kind of creativity needed to save your neck in a bad situation. There are encounters in any given RPG where it’s mathematically impossible to not take a lot of damage. Get rid of those. The player should *always* be able to think, fight, run, talk, or otherwise find their way out of an unexpected threat.

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Precisely where to balance it is an issue, but I think you'll find more success in having a variable (user-specifiable) difficulty level, so that the player always feels no more threatened as they want to feel. Eventually they'll realize that quick-saving all the time is boring.

- Bongo Bill

In response to "Killjoy" from The Escapist Forum: I agree that designing games/levels that don't kill you every 5 steps is the way to go, but in conjunction you need a limited save system that makes sense and isn't exploitable. One of the most interesting save systems I've seen comes from *Operation Flashpoint*. The game has automatic checkpoint saves, but it also allows you **one** arbitrary savegame to use whenever you want during the course of a certain mission. It's a nice compromise... it can be used either as a convenience save (e. g. saving after you've spent a lot of time setting up the perfect ambush) or a post-"omg I just did an epic maneuver that I surely won't be able to pull off again" save, but either way it prevents

quicksave/load exploitation enough to not remove the challenge of the game.

Of course such a system would probably only work for linear/mission-based games.

- te2rx



Requiem for a Dreamcast

by Russ Pitts



We were having the office debate to end all office debates.

Granted, debates are fairly typical, most occurring over who moved whoever's cheese, what Accounting thinks about Accounts Payable's new stationery or which team has a better chance of winning what game; perhaps who'll be the next to die on *Lost*. This, however, was no ordinary office debate, nor any ordinary office. This was TechTV, bastion of nerd television and repository of all that was holy in the world of emergent technology media. The debate: PlayStation 2 or Dreamcast?

Sides were chosen, technical specifications examined, large words tossed around, marketing double-talk scoffed at, discarded and redistributed as "accepted fact." It was an all-out nerd war. Wide swaths of work weeks were leveled in favor of poring over every last detail to be dredged out of the gaming press and all of the evidence was tried in the court of nerd.

The PS2 had beefier tech specs, a faster processor and the ability to wrangle almost twice as many polygons, making for far more detailed graphics. The

Dreamcast however, through some programming voodoo, looked better. The lines were smoother, colors slightly brighter; it couldn't bench as much, but it had legs. It also had internet connectivity out of the box and a long list of launch titles. The scales, in other words, were fairly well balanced however you looked at it.

Besides, the Dreamcast had an obvious, irrefutable advantage: It was currently available. The PS2 wasn't due for another month and would be hard to find on store shelves, we all knew, for the remainder of the year. Meanwhile the Dreamcast, which had launched the previous fall was readily available, as were over 100 games for it. And here's another kick in Sony's shins: It was cheaper, too. About half of what the PS2 would cost at launch. And yet, the numbers didn't lie: The PS2 was a powerful machine. Or would be, when it came out.

In the end, after weighing all possible pros and cons (real and imaginary) all that was left were personal allegiances. Most of the office, raised on PlayStation, remained loyal to Sony's second effort and praised the machine as, not only a true next-gen

game console, but a cheap DVD player to boot; leaving only a stalwart few to wave the Dreamcast flag, pointing crooked fingers at the Sega name, harbinger of awesomeness from the days of yore. And by “few,” I mean me. After weeks of debate, it had come down to the entire *Screensavers* staff versus me, with one undecided. That undecided was Leo, our fearless leader, and the only one whose vote actually mattered.

Leo had a nose for nerdity, a taste for tech and an ear to the ground of what really mattered in the dork dimension. When Leo liked a product, everyone liked that product, not just because we were kissing his ass (although that was often the case) but usually because he was right; the stuff he liked, he liked for good reasons, and they were usually reasons we could all get behind. Reasons like “this doesn’t suck,” or “it’s utterly awesome,” and more than just our office listened when he talked about tech. His prowess was the foundation upon which the whole of our empire was built. Leo was, in a word, TechTV, and if he went on the air saying something rocked his world, it wouldn’t be long before that something was rocking the worlds of everyone who watched our show. Needless to say, a lot

was riding on his decision, and with the fate of our console gaming lives - nay, the console gaming lives of our entire viewing audience - in the balance, the stakes were incredibly high.

I made my case, the other side made theirs. Leo remained undecided. Then I played my trump card. I left the office, walked across the street to Toys-R-Us, dropped just over \$200 (less than the price of the PS2) and returned carrying a retail Dreamcast and two games, *Sonic Adventure* and *Jet Grind Radio*, arguably the best games available at the time. My

plan was simple: I’d walk back in, hijack an editing terminal, display the awesomeness that was Sega’s next-gen console, let Leo soak in its awesome sauce for a bit, then hit him with the clincher: He could take it home. No big, I’d grab another. But if he wanted a PS2, he’d have to wait until Christmas, or more likely, the following spring. Bing, bam, boom. Point, winner. It couldn’t possibly go wrong.

It went wrong. While I was gone, the rest of the team had pulled out the big guns. They snagged a review model of

the PS2 from the product lab, sat Leo in a chair in the conference room and popped in the DVD of *The Matrix*. Then, as he watched bits of granite flying around in slow motion, while gun-toting uber geeks wearing black leather jackets shot up the joint, they hit him with **their** clincher: He was watching the movie on the cheapest DVD player in existence. Oh, and it also played games. Bing, bam, boom. Point, winner. By the time I returned, purchases in hand, it was all over. I’d lost, and so had Sega. (It’s hard to argue with the bank lobby scene.)

I clutched my Dreamcast to my chest and nursed a single, salty tear as the rest of the office slowly turned their backs on Sega and their wonderful little machine. This would be a scene repeated the world over.

A month later, when the PS2 finally launched, the Dreamcast had ironically become harder to find. Shipments had slowed, and stocks were slow to be replenished. It was as if the orders weren’t even being placed, much less filled. A few months later, the games, too, began to slide into oblivion, and the



I clutched my Dreamcast to my chest and nursed a single, salty tear as the rest of the office slowly **TURNED THEIR BACKS ON SEGA**

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→ **KEYNOTES
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early reviews of both the SegaNet service and the games playable on it were **LARGELY ... well, GLOWING.**

Dreamcast sections at every local store dwindled away to nothing. In 1999, Sega had launched with the best machine and the most high-quality games anyone had ever seen. They had a well-supported platform which was easy to program for and offered an abundance of after-market options and services. They had, in other words, a first-rate game console, launched perfectly and supported flawlessly. Nothing, so it

seemed, could go wrong. And yet it did. Sony beat them just by showing up to the party, and by the time Sega pulled the plug, only 10 million Dreamcasts had been manufactured, an estimated half of which still sat in warehouses and on store shelves.

At first glance, it doesn't make any sense, and considering only the machine, its capability and wide appeal, it doesn't. But the problems with Sega's machine were legion, and most had nothing to do with the Dreamcast at all.

For one thing, Sega launched an online-capable machine and attendant internet service at exactly the worst possible time. It was the first of its kind, and in a vacuum, that would have mattered. Around the turn of the century, however, the internet was a volatile place to be doing business, especially as a service provider. Internet use and online play were catching on in a big way, but so was broadband. Sega's inclusion of a 56k modem in the Dreamcast rendered it obsolete off the shelf, forcing users to upgrade the machine with a pricey broadband adapter or live with a less-than-fast dial-up connection. This created a wide disparity in connectivity

speeds to the SegaNet online arena, punishing players who stuck with the onboard 56k, which was most of them, and introduced a measure of confusion to what was really the most intuitive and easy to install internet service going. Still, early reviews of both the SegaNet service and the games playable on it were largely ... well, glowing.

"If this is where Dreamcast gaming is headed, sign me up, Sega," *IGN* said of the first-ever online-playable console sports game, *NFL2k1*. "Stellar, stellar job, people."

NFL2k1 would be followed (mere months before the Dreamcast production lines were closed for good) by another first: the first ever console MMOG, *Phantasy Star Online*, developed by Sega's stars, Sonic Team. PSO reviewers praised innovative features like the chat lobby, group-based questing, cooperative play and deathmatch, features PC gamers had come to take for granted, but which had to date never before been seen on a console.

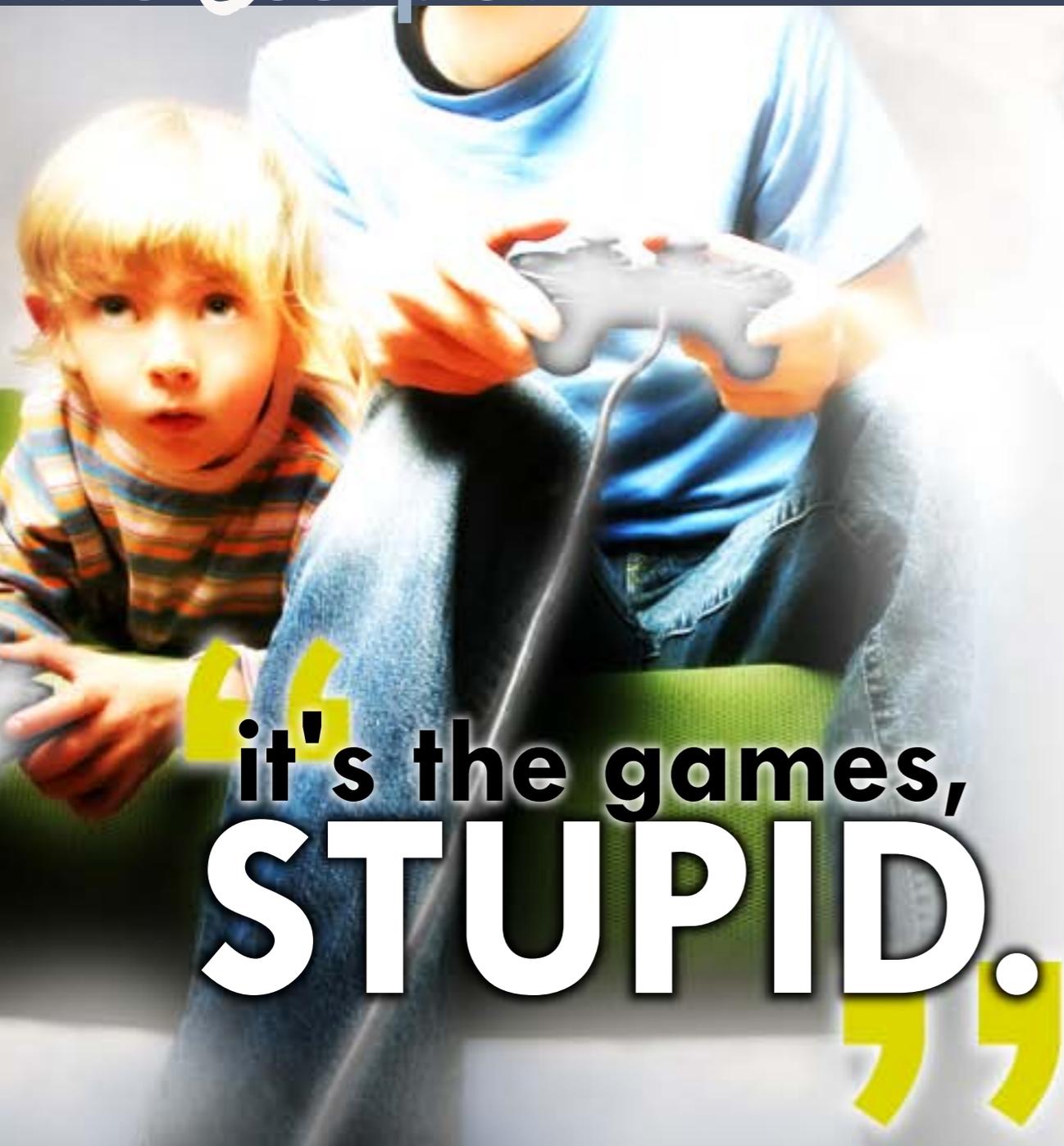
"Will it be something that we can build, where our competitors are so far behind in the learning experience of game design online... ?" Peter Moore, then

President of Sega of America, asked *IGN* in December of 2000. "Absolutely, and when broadband comes, it'll be a breeze for us. If broadband ever comes."

Little did he know it was already knocking on his door. In fact, in retrospect, it appears that Peter Moore knew very little about the state of gaming in 2000, or the future of his own company's console. Perhaps he and Sega were simply looking too far ahead.

Microsoft has a problem because MSN still relies on the internet. If you're going to try to go out and get involved in a high-twitch type of gaming, unless they do something different ... sometimes it'll be good, and sometimes it won't work at all for them.

We've gone out with SegaNet and built up the server hubs -- they're fond downstairs of saying that they own everything from the cables to the service to the electricity -- because with online play, you've got to be able to create an environment that is less variable. There is nothing worse than inconsistency when playing online.



“it's the games,
STUPID.”

In 2000, Peter Moore was already thinking about the future of the internet, and a few years later, at Microsoft, he would help make it a reality

Moore's 2000 interview with *IGN* continues:

We are fully committed to the Dreamcast. The Dreamcast sold more units in its first four days than Saturn sold in its first year. There's no comparison there. And after the dust settles on this holiday, the Dreamcast will be at a very critical mass that will continue to be attractive to third parties. That said, I know we will lose some third parties. ... Yes, it's been a transitional period all around for Sega, but the thought that once this Christmas is over that Sega will suddenly disappear out into the crowd ... Nope. Nothing would be further from the truth. Too many great Dreamcast games are in development for Christmas 2001 to ignore -- this platform will keep growing and growing.

A month later, Sega would announce that production of the Dreamcast would discontinue; they had decided to exit the

hardware business. The game, as they say, was over. Nick Gibson, Senior Internet and Games Analyst at Durlacher Research Ltd. suggests why:

Hardware manufacturers have a symbiotic relationship with game publishers which leaves them with the catch-22 problem of needing to convince publishers to commit resources to developing high quality titles for a platform whose growth is entirely dependent on the release of high quality titles. ... Thus Sega, weakened both financially but more importantly in the eyes of the games market by the failure of Saturn, 32X and MegaCD, launched Dreamcast with few expecting it to seriously challenge its principal rival Sony in the longer run. With little serious support from publishers as a result, the self-fulfilling prophecy of its demise as a retail product was more or less complete before it started.

In other words, it's the games, stupid.

Sega, sensing a weakness in the market for their Saturn console, which they had originally counted on to see them through a five-year cycle, pulled the plug in favor of

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an advanced launch timetable for the Dreamcast. The third-party developers, annoyed at having thrown resources behind a now-defunct console, were reluctant to commit again to Sega's new platform, costing the company the support of the third-party developers they needed to ensure the Dreamcast's success. No third-party games, no publisher support, no audience. Cause, effect, close the doors and turn out the lights. Had Sega been less skittish over Saturn's long-term prospects, or developers more bullish on the Dreamcast's, maybe they'd still be in the game. But they weren't, and that's that. Sega now makes games, end of story. What happens when you throw a perfect console launch and no one shows? Dreamcast.

TechTV shared office space with a few of Sega of America's divisions, notably, Dreamcast. In the spring of 2001, they closed their doors and moved out, shedding inventory in an inter-office fire sale. I cleaned up. It was the most Dreamcast merchandise I'd seen in one place since buying the damn thing, and the most I'd see ever again. I carried my treasures home and played them over and over. They were great games: *Jet*

Grind Radio, Sonic Adventure, Ecco the Dolphin, Crazy Taxi, Shenmue, Seaman, Soul Calibur, etc. Sega had never failed as a game designer, and their machine felt like it was made for their games. The games that actually made it to shelves, however, were only half the story. *Half-Life, Max Payne, Tropico* ... the list of games slated for 2001 release on the Dreamcast reads almost exactly like the list of games I ended up purchasing and playing on my PC. Between the PC and the Dreamcast, I weathered the first few years of the new millennium, never once sparing a thought for Sony, Microsoft or Nintendo. But it didn't last.

Eventually, I caved and bought an Xbox and let the Dreamcast go in some tumultuous breakup or another. I never did drink the Kool Aid and buy a PS2. Not for a long time anyway. Not until it came with a plastic guitar. Personal allegiances run deep, after all, and although I (and Sega) lost that round, I couldn't admit it. Couldn't concede. Then again, as has been well established, prophecy has never been one of my strengths. Nor has forgiveness.

[COMMENTS](#)

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He has written and produced for television, theatre and film, has been writing on the web since it was invented and claims to have played every console ever made.



What's in a NAME

by Spanner

To a significant portion of the planet's population, the name Sega quite literally means "games": It implies innovation, conjures images and feelings of high-octane entertainment, it's a beloved epoch of childhood, it is a friend, and it has been a lover. Sega is more than a company name – it's an aspect of modern history that requires no definition for those who were there.

But behind the name, and its many and passionate sentiments, there's a sadness which stems the flow of good feelings for gamers almost as quickly as they begin. There's a feeling that the company hasn't lived up to its promise. A regret that love's labor may have been lost.

Historically, the name originates from its conception as Standard Games - an importer of coin-operated amusement machines for U.S. servicemen stationed in Hawaii in the 1940s. When the company moved to Japan, it was renamed Service Games of Japan and later merged with pinball machine importer, Rosen Enterprises, to become Sega (**SE**vice **GA**mes), in the 1960s. As a company, Sega has been repeatedly bought and sold in one of those tedious financial paper trails that so easily

reduce history to a boring list of dollar signs followed by six or more figures. It's not important.

What **is** of importance to contemporary Sega fans is something David Rosen said when he bought his company back from Gulf & Western, after the great videogame market crash of the early '80s. With his then business partner, Hayao Nakayama, at the helm of Sega of Japan and himself as CEO of Sega of America, the company publicly vowed "never to stick to one concept for too long," acknowledging that every piece of technology "has a life and a death." In principle, this policy was sound, and it was reassuring for customers to know Sega would remain committed to pushing the boundaries of videogaming. It has, however, been somewhat of a double-edged sword; pushing boundaries while simultaneously dispossessing consistency.

Whether the management took this philosophy too literally or simply used it as an excuse to circumnavigate problems, it's impossible to say. In retrospect, one thing is certainly clear – this belief has remained at the core of Sega's principles ever since, and has turned the developer into something of



The wave of disillusionment that washed over me when I finally hunted a Master System down is still palpable today.

an industry dichotomy; pledging longevity on the one hand by establishing and supporting long-lived game franchises, embracing brevity on the other by rushing out updated hardware solutions and abandoning console systems as soon as they appear to flag in the market place.

Coupled with Sega's insistence on sending out confounding mixed messages (interest in its own products seeming to run hot and cold, and severe mood swings guiding vital marketing decisions) there's little reason to believe that many of the gargantuan problems the developer has faced (and, it must be said, thus far survived) were not entirely self-inflicted.

I still recall the first time I really took notice of Sega. While I was happily partnered to a humble ZX Spectrum - which met all my gaming needs with eight dazzling colors and a cassette tape loading system which only required minimal supervision during its 10-minute loading cycle - I happened upon an advertisement for the Sega Master System. It was in the form of a poster (I think it may have come packaged with other games, though I've no idea how I got hold of it), with a single screen shot of each available game.

It was incredible. I vaguely knew the name Sega from the arcades, but until that moment I'd no idea those games could be brought home, especially in such a picture-perfect package. You'd better believe the next time I was in the

store I was on the prowl for this magic box with a waterfront arcade inside. Not that I could have afforded one anyway, but the wave of disillusionment that washed over me when I finally hunted a Master System down is still palpable today.

There was no *Shinobi*, no *Golden Axe*, no *Thunder Blade*. All I could find propped against the shelf was some cutesy *Alex Kidd* rubbish and random sports platitudes designed to lure in parents, not players. I knew what the problem was, of course. It wasn't the game store that was lacking in shelf candy; it was my naivety that had played tricks on an arcade-addled mind for believing that promo in the first place. No matter, it was gone from my memory the moment I got back to the Spectrum shelf, and it didn't return until this issue of *The Escapist* came along.

A few minutes of cursory research gives a different slant to my search for a Master System, and one that backlights the ominous storm cloud that has hung over Sega for a long time. The Master System was the final evolution of two other games systems Sega never granted a U.S. or European release: the SG1000 and the SG1000 Mark II. This

initial foray into the home hardware market ran headlong into the Nintendo Famicom and struggled to find a finger hold on the Eastern shelves.

Despite receiving great support from Taiwanese players, the SG1000 was once again remanufactured (very early in its life) into the Master System for the U.S. market. When the consoles didn't immediately fly off the shelves, Sega's interest evaporated, and they licensed the Master System rights to toy giant Tonka. Of course, the toy truck manufacturer had no concept of videogames, especially in a market still reeling from collapse, and the Master System sold even worse under their administration. In response, Sega immediately invoked its new philosophies and severed the damaged Master System limb, setting its attention firmly on the future.

But I wasn't alone in that game store. The same grubby-faced kids I knocked elbows with in the back alley arcades were also hunting for this Holy Grail that promised a wealth of top coin-op titles in the living room. We didn't know or care who Sega was, or if they'd spent millions of Yen developing hardware; we knew

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Joe Musashi and the Ferrari Testarossa's names, and if they'd been on the shelves to tempt us, the Master System might have lived up to its name and held a very different place in history.

What I don't know about marketing would fill a warehouse, but selling a Master System to the likes of myself and other arcade creepers would not have been a difficult task. It's been said the company's first global console suffered due to a lack of a mascot that could compete with Mario, yet I remember loads of them: We played them three times a week and all weekend in the arcades! Fine, perhaps we didn't **know** they were Sega mascots, but their names carried weight with addicted gamers. We cared as much about fancy promotional campaigns as we did about global warming or going to school. All we wanted was the games, and if Sega, or whatever it was called, wasn't going to give us home conversions of the titles we spent all our money on in the arcade, it could go to hell and wait for us there.

And so the Master System died young and was quietly buried in unconsecrated ground. Sega, true to their beliefs,

moved on without, it would seem, looking back, toward the future of gaming: 16-bit consoles and, perhaps fittingly a machine called "Genesis," which at an approximated 29 millions shipped, is Sega's best-selling console to date.

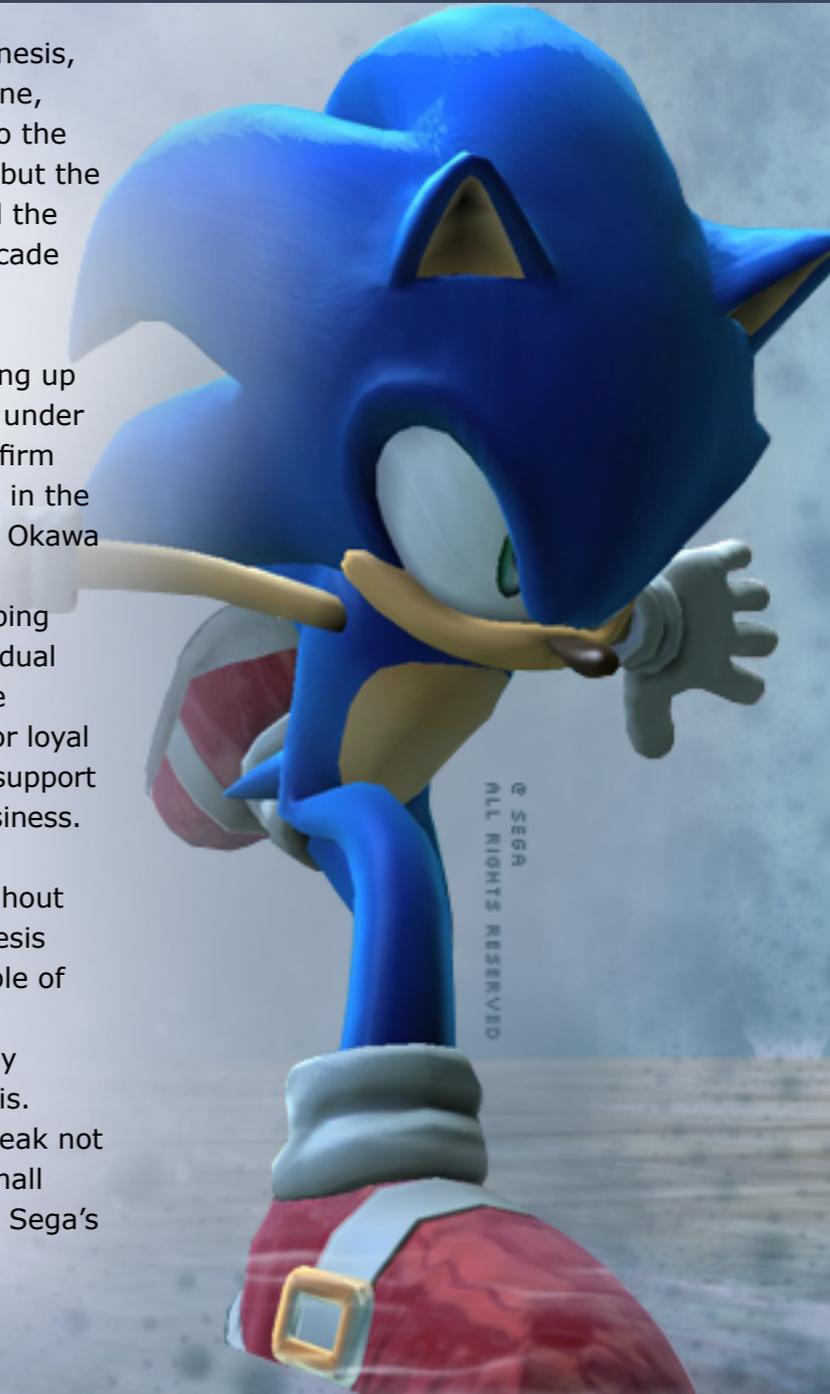
Sega's marketing of the Genesis is fondly remembered for a churlish goading of Nintendo and a playful, almost irreverent indifference to sales figures. This kind of confidence is infectious, giving power to a product while instilling a sense of security in the customer base. Good (or perhaps lucky?) timing was also a significant factor, though neither of these accounts for the phenomenal triumph of the machine.

Just as the Master System is accused of being unrepresented by a suitable mascot, it's commonly held that, until *Sonic* shot into view, the Genesis was equally voiceless. Yet for almost a decade, the arcades had rung to the splash of overfull coin boxes in games such as *Altered Beast*, *Golden Axe*, *Hang-On*, *After Burner*, *Out Run* and an army of other groundbreaking titles. Almost inadvertently, Sega had built itself a Herculean empire from a wealth of franchises ready to come home.

Unlike the Master System, the Genesis, through raw processing power alone, was able to deliver that promise to the home gamer, bringing everything but the stale odor of unwashed males and the mysteriously sticky floor of the arcade into the living room.

By the time the Genesis was tearing up the charts, Sega was comfortably under the umbrella of venture capitalist firm CSK with its founder, Isao Okawa, in the game developer's plush CEO chair. Okawa allowed the creative teams virtual autonomy when it came to developing their games. As a result, the individual logos of *Sonic Team* and *AM2* were nothing short of a seal of quality for loyal players, but they didn't get much support from the marketing arm of the business.

While the 3-D virus spread throughout the gaming world, the 16-bit Genesis fared surprisingly well with a stable of 2-D games, some original, some franchise updates, but most clearly exhibiting the power of the Genesis. Likewise, the arcades reached a peak not seen since the early '80s, in no small part due to pioneering visions like Sega's *Virtua* series.



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Sega's hardware was taken out into a field and shot, so the company could move toward a platform-agnostic software future.

And yet, a slew of confusing hardware add-ons designed to prolong the lifespan of Genesis and perhaps bar the gate, kept the gaming giant from carving out a permanent niche on the console hardware scene. The 32x upgrade would supposedly enable the Genesis to harness the power of 32-bit architecture, but at over \$150, was overpriced as an add-on, and since it required the Genesis console, failed in every respect as a standalone upgrade. Sega experienced similar problems with the CD-ROM player accessory. It was as if, for one brief moment, reveling in the success of a triumphant console, Sega was unable to let go, live up to their founding philosophy and charge ahead. Naturally gamers and developers alike appeared perplexed by Sega's apparent lack of focus, and neither, accordingly, were willing to invest in the future of these half-baked hardware solutions.

It may seem like a long leap forward to 2001, but the events of Sega's turbulent history are remarkably interchangeable. From the Master System to the Dreamcast, each of Sega's forays into home-based game hardware has failed, or fallen prey to one fatal misstep or

another. And yet throughout its storied, often turbulent history, Sega has held true to the promise of making playable, boundary-pushing games. The short lives of its home consoles were shored up by the developer's one saving grace: incredibly playable franchises, delicately woven throughout its home and arcade catalogues – though even magnificent conversions of *Virtua Fighter 2* and *House of the Dead 2* only had so much mileage in them.

The new millennium marked a harsh return to the cutthroat marketing paradigm established all those years ago by the founding fathers. Sega's hardware was taken out into a field and shot, so the company could move toward a platform-agnostic software future. A brutal, yet lifesaving amputation that opened Sega's real strength up to new markets. This was the chance for two decades of some of the industry's most revered gaming franchises to live again on a new generation of game systems.

Naturally, it was in Sega's best interests to play this hand as though it were a considered and beneficial decision (rather than a necessity), but the

company was in serious debt, and even slicing itself in half wasn't enough to retain buoyancy. Step in Isao Okawa, the mega-wealthy entrepreneur and chairman of the software developer's parent company, CSK. Okawa gallantly gave up his stock shares in Sega (and other companies with an **interest** in Sega) to offset the company's debts. This \$700 million gesture came only weeks before the unexpected death of the Japanese businessman: a parting gift with the potential to re-launch the new "software-only" Sega as the world gaming power it once was.

The new hardware-less corporation rolled out its franchise wagon like never before, and while classics like *Sonic* and *Out Run* shifted units purely on the strength of their revered names, it was a far cry from the days when Sega was turning out these great titles from new.

Unfortunately, many of those classic games survived in name only, as the new Sega farmed out licenses to all and sundry in an attempt to regain its footing. With Okama no longer watching over the game giant, Sega rapidly began running out of breathing room, and its

long reputation slipped, along with any last vestiges of brand loyalty from the gamers. CSK put Sega on the auction block in 2003, where Japanese amusement machine vendor Sammy, a corporation known for buying out struggling firms in an effort to squeeze out what remaining revenue may be left in them, bought controlling interest.

Although Sega has continued to work across the board, and has developed a great deal of consumer interest in the new generation of consoles and computers, a lot of what made Sega, Sega has suffered at the guillotine of corporate rationalization.

When Sega became the plaything of Sega Sammy Holdings in 2003, the second-party development teams were consolidated into just three factions (from the original eight), forcing the teams who'd functioned autonomously under Okawa to merge staff and mindsets. Even industry legend Sonic Team now only exists in name (with Yuji Naka breaking away to form his own development team just last year, which is admittedly close to, and partly funded by, Sega), while arcade pioneers AM2

repeatedly bang the same *Virtua* drum without any new rhythm. And by messing with the last thing that worked, the eight software development teams, Sega has drastically reduced its chances to succeed on the merits of its original franchises.

This isn't to say Sega can't turn it all around, but if they do, it's going to need to be quick. There's little room for yet another *Virtua Fighter* or an even faster *Sonic*, so we could soon see Sega drop yet another business model like a hot brick and charge toward a future **without** the franchises around which the company was built. If its former creative genius can be harnessed once again, the company's vision of becoming the world's leading developer might be a reality sooner than we could hope. Of course, once the solid foundations of Sega's franchises begin to crumble, it might finally meet a challenge it can't outrun.

Most everything about Sega is still in place: the names, the games, the business philosophy and the mistakes. Sega's promise to focus on games has, to date, yielded little more than a slew of rehashed franchises and repackaged hits from its console and arcade catalogue.

The brilliance and innovation have been slow in coming, and missteps like *Full Auto* and *Shadow the Hedgehog* have severely eroded the footing of a once-great giant. Where the name, nay the **word**, "Sega" once represented brilliance, it risks now becoming an empty slug line; reminiscent of something which used to be great, reduced to the role of minor publisher in an industry which has largely moved on.

[COMMENTS](#)

Spanner has written articles for several publications, including Retro Gamer. He is a self-proclaimed horror junkie, with a deep appreciation for all things Romero.

If its former creative genius can be harnessed once again, the company's vision of becoming the world's leading developer might be a reality sooner than we could hope.



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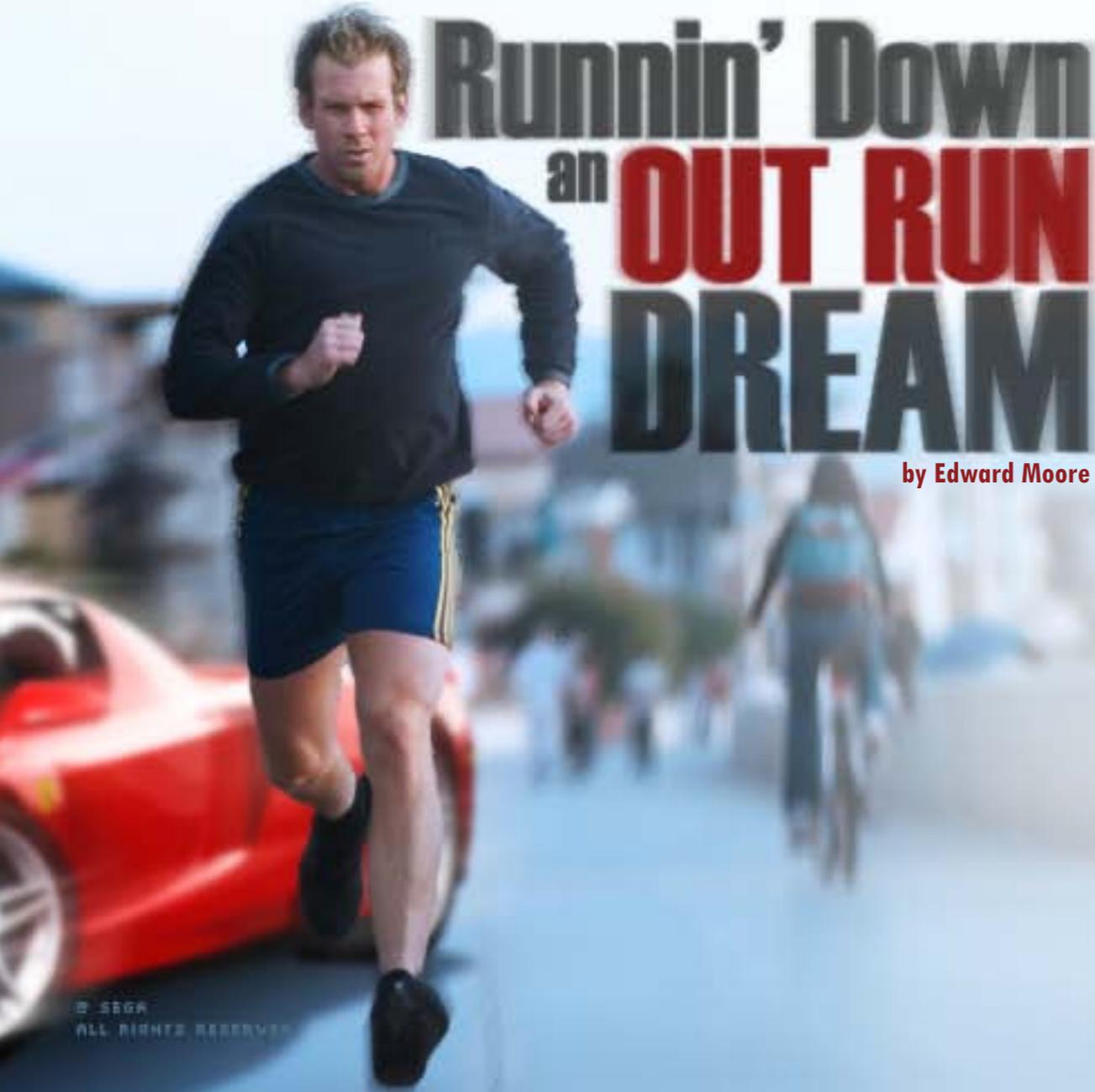


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Runnin' Down an **OUT RUN** DREAM

by Edward Moore

Here in Los Angeles, in the South Bay communities of Manhattan and Hermosa Beaches, there is a concrete pedestrian path that hugs the shore. Lined with multi-million dollar mansions and Mediterranean-style beach condos, "The Strand" is easily my favorite place in the whole world to go running. As I don my headphones in the early hours of the evening and begin my run under dark palm tree silhouettes, set against the backdrop of the fading Pacific sunset; it is in these moments that conscious thought and mundane stress melts away, giving way to the purity of rhythm and music.

During my runs, I feel truly grateful to be healthy and alive, and the image of sunsets and palm trees calls to mind childhood summer vacations, on a different shore, where the sun touches the sea only at dawn. On this coast, in my memory, the rushing waters of the outgoing tide echo beneath a pedestrian path of a much different sort, made not of concrete but of wooden floorboards, bleached gray and desaturated by the sun and briny ocean air. This path is lined not with mansions or palm trees, but with funhouse mirrors and roller-coasters, with miniature golf courses and water slides. It is a place filled laughter, smiles and the

balmy aroma of fried dough and powdered sugar ...

... and arcades upon arcades like there was no tomorrow.

It was in this place, the Boardwalks of Ocean City, New Jersey, that my two older brothers and I, ages 10 to 15, would spend the evenings of our summer vacation in an electric feeding frenzy of pixels, color and music. Our bemused parents, welcoming the respite from their three little geeks, would sit on the benches outside, keeping a close eye on my baby brother, enjoying a cool, nocturnal ocean breeze and a slice of fresh fried pork roll on a bun with cheese.

It was during these beloved halcyon summer nights in the mid 1980s that my love for Sega games probably first started, and no game more powerfully evokes poignant memories from this magical time than Sega's arcade driving masterpiece, *Out Run*.

Out Run's innovative mechanical features, such as the candy-red, motorized sit-down cabinet that pivoted side to side as you drove and the force-feedback steering wheel that jerked in your hands

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as you crashed, supported a very tactile and uniquely immersive driving experience for its time. But it was the game's replayable, branching course structure, vivid art direction and amazing sprite scaling technology that truly distinguished it from its contemporaries: Few games offered the sense of velocity and tension as you downshifted from 290 kph and power-slid into a hairpin curve.

For me, however, the most memorable and lovable aspect of the game is easily the musical soundtrack, composed by Hiroshi "Hiro" Kawaguchi, of Sega's legendary R&D Department, AM2.

I have always loved videogame music, probably unusually so. I listen to it all the time, and it never fails to conjure

impressions and feelings of people, places and moments from my younger days. The beautiful thing about game music is that it's a way to continue to derive enjoyment from a game long after you've beaten it or put it aside. Back in the 8- and 16-bit console eras, sound tests were an extremely common and welcome feature in games, and for me, half the fun of buying the game was playing it through first and experiencing the music afterward. Naturally, this worked out fine for home console games, but in order to experience the full fidelity of *Out Run's* music, there was just no way to get around it - you had to go to the arcade and feed it quarters.

I remember my older brother, Chris, and I used to wonder much it would cost to get

a home version of *Out Run* (\$4,000 was his best guess) - wishful thinking for a bunch of dorky teenagers with no money. But Chris was a hard worker and possessed much stronger musical talents than I did. During his junior year of high school, he worked for months washing dishes at a local restaurant to save up enough money to buy a rack-mounted Ensoniq Mirage Music Sequencer and Sampler and Roland MIDI Controller Keyboard. Once he figured out how to use all this music hardware, he taught himself one of *Out Run's* main soundtracks, "Magical Sound Shower," and programmed it into the sequencer. What he wouldn't give for videogame sheet music or an MP3 back in those days!

Today, Chris also lives a few short blocks from the ocean in Manhattan Beach, CA. If it wasn't for him, I never would've discovered the South Bay communities of Los Angeles or moved out here in the first place. Although we are both very busy with our respective jobs, when we get time to meet up, one of our favorite places to go is this Mexican restaurant in his neighborhood, Pancho's.

"'Magical Sound Shower' was hotter than a Cuban street fiesta," he tells me. We're

seated in the basement dining room of Pancho's, a huge hall adorned with pastel murals, palm trees and year-round Christmas lights. It's a Friday night, it's crowded and a little loud, and he and I are seated at a table in the corner, sipping on blended "Naughty" Margaritas, our favorite.

"And the part where you get the wild steel drum solo? That part was the best! You could only get to that part if got close to the end and you played really well."

Most modern games rely on overt mechanisms to keep you playing - like cut-scenes, power-ups or in-game money - but *Out Run* employed a more subtle method. Its main soundtrack, comprised of three songs ("Splash Wave," "Magical Sound Shower" and "Passing Breeze"), was really like no other game music at the time, from the standpoints of both technical fidelity and style. It was this soundtrack that drove you to keep playing, to hear the best part, all the way at the end.

Very recently, I tracked down a copy of the North American *Sega Ages* compilation for Sega Saturn on eBay, containing pixel-perfect versions of *Out*

“**Most modern games rely on OVERT MECHANISMS to keep you playing - like cut-scenes, power-ups or in-game money - but *Out Run* employed a MORE SUBTLE METHOD.**”

Run and its arcade brethren, *Space Harrier* and *After Burner II*. Released for the North American market by now-defunct publisher Working Designs, the game comes with a foil-stamped instruction manual containing some interesting commentary from the composer, Hiro.

"I like the song called 'Passing Breeze' the best," says Hiro. "The melody that makes you feel sorrowful and the atmosphere, it is hard to explain how great this song is."

It's really interesting that Hiro would characterize "Passing Breeze" as "sorrowful" – if anything, I'd say that the song was peppy and light. But I think I understand what Hiro is trying to describe – "nostalgia" – a feeling that any fan of Sega, past or present, would understand and appreciate.

Even in its handling of player failure, *Out Run*'s use of music is very smart. Beat any of the top-10 time records, you got to enter your initials into the high-score screen.

"Oh my God, that high-score screen! That was like heaven!" my brother said.

Set to the soothing bell tones of "Last Wave" and a relaxing tide of synthetic white noise, the *Out Run* high-score screen was a vivid gradient texture of twilight hues and tree-lined boulevards.

"Please listen to this song at the end of summer, when you are all by yourself, in the dusk, at the beach," Hiro says from the liner notes.

It is this image, this feeling that Hiro's words suggest, that has always been very meaningful to me. When I was young, that high-score screen was like a window into a place where life maybe was a little easier, perhaps a little more laid-back and carefree, a dream that I always knew I would one day work very hard to make happen.

"And now you're living your *Out Run* dream," said my brother. "Palm tree silhouettes by the beach in the sunset and everything." I smile and dip a tortilla chip into the spicy salsa. While my life is far from carefree, and the novelty of living in LA by the beach wore off a while ago, I still try not to take it for granted, taking time to appreciate that I'm very lucky to be where I am.

Sega really captured something special with *Out Run*, a timeless, universally appealing title, nothing less than a true icon. Few games succeeded at bringing the player into its breezy, hyperbolic vacation fantasy, immersing players in the essence of being the laid-back cool dude in shades, with the sexy, blonde girlfriend, cruising to exotic locales in a red Ferrari in the sunshine. Like Composer Hiro from AM2, I, too, feel that words don't fully describe what the game represents to me, but *Out Run* will always stand out among its august arcade lineage as an entertainment experience like no other. [COMMENTS](#)

Edward Moore is currently a Senior Game Designer at Pandemic Studios in sunny Los Angeles. Prior to this, he served as a Game Designer at Electronic Arts and Irrational Games in Boston. As a first-time contributor to The Escapist, Ed looks forward to future opportunities to share his geeky gaming insights with you.

“Please listen to this song at the end of summer, when you are all by yourself, in the dusk, AT THE BEACH”



THE STREETS OF JAPAN

by Gearoid Reidy

"I walk the streets of Japan 'til I get lost," sang Audioslaves's Chris Cornell, "because it doesn't remind me of anything."

Obviously, Cornell has never played *Shenmue*, because if he had, he would have been instantly reminded of quests for sailors and high-pitched little girls talking about their kitty.

When I first arrived in Japan several years ago, some things felt strangely familiar. The blinding white of the convenience store; the cozy, box-sized bars piping jazz played on a My First Casio keyboard; the curving streets that mixed concrete jungle with temples. It felt in some ways like I was revisiting an old haunt, but I had never been there - except in *Shenmue*.

Shenmue is a stunning testament to videogames' power to draw players into their world. Eight years after its release, *Shenmue* remains the most ambitious game ever created. It recalls the greatest excesses of Hollywood, in its ludicrous ambition and budget, which is said to have run anything from \$20 million to \$70 million. It divided gamers and critics, sold poorly, and still has a

rabid fan base calling for creator Yu Suzuki to finish the story.

Yet there are no signs that he will. *Shenmue 3* languishes in pre-development, and six years on, Ryo and Shenhua are still stuck in that cave.

After *Shenmue* flopped so famously, it took a brave company to return to something so superficially similar. But in *Yakuza* (*Ryu ga Gotoku* in Japanese), Sega returned to the streets of Japan.

Where *Shenmue* painted a friendly world of kindly surrogate mothers and innocent schoolgirls, *Yakuza* showed a seedier side of Japan. Replacing arcades with porno stores and martial arts training with stabbing your opponent in the ribs with a broken bottle, *Yakuza*'s Kamurocho was Yokosuka's evil twin. Put together, the two games represent a greater push for immersion and authenticity than any other developer has attempted.

Yokusuka Blues

Shenmue is something you either love or hate. The haters have any number of reasons: Some deride its interminably slow pace, some its fetch-quest

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gameplay, others its substandard plot and voice acting.

But those who love it share one common passion: the way it sucked the player into its world and did not let him go. Like a hypnotist's spell, it put you under, and just like hypnosis, it only seems to work for a certain percentage of the population.

In some ways, *Shenmue* is gaming's *Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's classic also featured wretched expositional dialogue, endless uneventful traveling and ambiguous homoerotic subtexts, but none of these could stop Tolkien's world from seeping into your brain. Both sold poorly when first released, and like *LOTR* before Peter Jackson, *Shenmue* is a perennial fan favorite, but has little commercial appeal.

Tolkien captured the imaginations of millions because of his ability to submerge the player in his world. His anal attention to detail, millennia of created history, continents and languages, created something the reader had no choice but to believe in. This is also the key to *Shenmue*'s success. Its plot was second-rate and the gameplay often dull, but those who were able to

suspend their disbelief were taken to a new world.

Just as *Shenmue*'s protagonist, Ryo Hazuki, is destined to journey to the new land of China, so too do we journey to a different world, a stunning recreation of 1980s Japan. A case example of *Shenmue*'s self-indulgence is the new genre Suzuki declared for his game: FREE (Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment). Every character you saw could be talked to; almost every building could be entered, every floor of it explored: In Ryo's home, you could open every drawer and closet, see what's in the fridge.

Time passes and is more than a cosmetic change. Head out in the morning, and you'll see smart-suited salary-men heading to work; walk around in the evening, and the same salary-men are stumbling home merrily from after-work drinking sessions. Play long enough, and you'll start to see the same people walking around, just like in your own neighborhood.

Just like society, the game puts limits on you. Freedom, after all, is a concept that cannot be defined without limits. If you had an appointment for 2:00 p.m. tomorrow, you had no choice but to wait,

a touch of realism that infuriated some players so much, *Shenmue 2* allowed the player to skip ahead. But it was in that time spent waiting that *Shenmue* came alive: This was your world, and you had to fill your own time in it.

You found yourself rushing home late at night so as not to upset Ine-san, your kindly surrogate mother. You woke up in your bed in the morning and looked at your diary (helpfully starting with "I'll get

revenge for my father!" as if he was likely to forget) to decide what you were going to do that day.

But aside from the environment, one of the reasons *Shenmue* is so immersive may not even have been intentional. Ryo is a poorly written character, but an excellent avatar. His relationships with the people around him are just vaguely defined enough to allow the player to assume them. He appears helpless at



“*Shenmue* is something
you either LOVE
or HATE!”

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times, as in his ability to respond to his schoolmate Nozomi's affections, but this allows us to overlay our own feelings on his actions. How much of this was intended by the game's writers is questionable – the point is, it works.

Stiff Little Fingers

Or at least, it did for some. *Shenmue* was the Dreamcast's flagship game, but it failed commercially, and in retrospect, it's easy to see it has limited appeal and practically no cool factor whatsoever. Then came the second act. If *Shenmue* is *Lord of the Rings*, *Yakuza* is its *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, a darker, meaner imitation.

Stephen King once wrote that all high fantasy writers like Terry Brooks and Robert Jordan were "trying to bring Frodo and Sam back from the Grey Havens because Tolkien is not longer around to do it for them."

"A thousand pages of *Hobbits* hadn't been enough for three generations of ... fantasy fans," said King, and 100 hours of *Shenmue* wasn't enough either. In picking up *Yakuza*, many players were trying to bring Ryo back from China, because Yu Suzuki is taking too damn

long to do it for us. Yet on first play, *Yakuza* is static and limited. Only selected buildings could be entered, and only selected characters could be talked to, and even then, it was text-only. For those who dig deeper, *Shenmue*'s influence is apparent: Its mixture of about-town exploration with *Virtua Fighter*-inspired fighting, its optional extras like mini-games and collectibles to

pass the time, its feeling of being caught up in a good murder mystery.

Yakuza's creation of Japan is just like its fights: based in realism but exaggerated enough to be fun. Just as the fights can cause the player to wince and laugh all at once, so too does Japan combine humor and realism. It is to the real Tokyo what the stories of Raymond Chandler were to LA. *Yakuza* is often

compared to *Grand Theft Auto*, but the comparison flatters *GTA*'s cartoonish world. Apart from the tendency to get attacked by thugs every four steps, walking down the streets of Kamuro-cho is like real life, or at least a movie: neon stores, word-perfect street signs, schoolgirls standing in front of convenience stores, chatting on their cell phones. Real-life stores like Don Quixote stand exactly where they would be in real life.

The game constantly plays with the seedy side of the real-life red-light district of Kabuki-cho it is based on, allowing you to chat up hostesses with some wonderfully cheesy dialogue or have a massage (quotation marks optional). Barmen tell you about the real-life spirits you can drink, and you can drink them 'til you were legitimately wasted.

Yakuza doesn't suck the player in quite as *Shenmue* does; Ryo's a blank slate, but Kiryu Kazuma is a well-constructed character. But the plot more than makes up for it; a plot that is more than a function to get the player from the graveyard level to the ship level, but a real story, with believable characters who face challenges and overcome them. *Yakuza*

“one of the reasons *Shenmue* is **SO IMMERSIVE** may not even have been intentional.”

Ryo is a **POORLY WRITTEN** character, but an **EXCELLENT AVATAR**.”

was written and acted by professionals, and in the Japanese version at least, it shows. Tellingly, the story is so strong, it is set to appear in movie form later this year, directed by Takashi Miike (the famed Japanese director who collaborated with *Yakuza's* author, Seishu Hase, in *The City of Lost Souls*).

The game's sequel, released late last year in Japan, improves on almost all the flaws of the original, notably its irritating loading times. It also expands the amount of sub-quests and side-stories to ridiculous degrees, allowing Ryo to try his hand at being a host, or even run his own cabaret club.

Worlds Apart

Although coming out just a year after the first game, *Yakuza 2* is not a cheap cash-in, but an expansion of the world that Kazuma lives in. Kazuma's world expands to include Osaka, his relationships with characters from the first game continuing and changing, his past explored, his loyalties questioned.

The four games that make up these two series do exactly what games – no, what **art** – should do: push boundaries. Be it *Shenmue's* offering the player

revolutionary levels of freedom and detail, or *Yakuza's* attention to detail in crafting an intricate plot and believable characters, Sega has done more to create convincing worlds than any physics improvements or higher resolution textures could hope to do.

Neither game is about the end of the world, that story crutch so many lesser games fall back on in an attempt to make their unconvincing worlds appear important; they are simple stories in a world in which the player has a true emotional investment, with characters that are to be cared about. When games finally stand as an art form the equal of movies or books, it is games like these that will deservedly be thought of as the milestones along that journey.

COMMENTS

Gearoid Reidy walks the streets of Japan 'til he gets lost because he has no sense of direction. His website is www.gearoidreidy.com.

Yakuza is often compared to *Grand Theft Auto*, but the **COMPARISON FLATTERS** *GTA's* cartoonish world.





ALL HAIL SONIC!

by Shawn Williams

It was 1990, and Sega was on the ropes. Nintendo had a firm lead in almost every country in the world, *Super Mario Bros. 3* had just been released, and the Super Nintendo was looming on the horizon. Hayao Nakayama, then president of Sega, issued the challenge to his company: Sega needed a new mascot, brand recognition and a game that could sell a million units. After a number of rejected ideas, Naoto Oshima (a character designer), Hirokazu Yasuhara (the original game and level designer) and Yuji Naka (the programmer) from research and development team AM8 brought their talents together to form a character and game that would become legend: *Sonic The Hedgehog*.

In one stroke, AM8 (who changed their name to Sonic Team after *Sonic's* launch) found the perfect blend of style, design and attitude adroitly capturing the image Sega was trying to spread about its new machine: It was cool, fun and, above all, it was **fast**. The game showed off the Genesis' faster CPU – clocking in at a blazing 7.6 MHz, it left the slower, fatter, mustached Mario and his pitiful 3.58 MHz in the dust.¹ And it wasn't just that Sonic was a fast game – it was **such** a fast game, only the mighty

Sega Genesis could handle it! It had “Blast Processing,” a phrase not many people really understood, but nobody cared, because “Sega does it, Nintendon't!”

Since his original launch in 1991, Sonic has appeared in a new title every year. Some are considered classics of gaming, some are considered sad attempts, and some just aren't considered. But Sonic has weathered time and changes with the same determination, speedy red shoes and carefree smirk that endeared him to millions of gamers all those years ago. If only what he represented had weathered the change as well.

Sonic Fashion

When he broke onto the scene, Sonic was a rotund, blue hedgehog with bright red sneakers. He was a heroic figure who sought to free his animal friends from the evil clutches of Dr. Robotnik (known as Dr. Eggman, now, to match how the Japanese have always known him).

Sonic was a fun, carefree character that wasn't killing anyone – he merely broke the robotic devices enslaving the animals and freed them from their eggy overlord. It was a vastly different sort of gaming

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than we'd been used to: Instead of exploring levels, you focused on how fast you could burn through them. When Sonic curled into a ball and shot through the various pipes, ramps and loop-to-loops, you weren't playing, you were holding on for dear life.

In 1992, *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* launched for the Genesis, Master System and Game Gear. In the Genesis version, two-player action was introduced, along with the ability to play as Miles "Tails" Prower. Sonic picked up some new tricks, too: He now had the Spin Dash Attack, which allowed him to spin up to speed in place before charging forward. We also saw a new incarnation, the almighty Super Sonic, an invincible-but-difficult-to-control version of Sonic. Critics and gamers alike enjoyed *Sonic 2*, and Sonic became a household name.

In 1993, *Sonic CD* came out for the Sega CD and introduced another of Sonic's friends, Amy Rose, as well as Sonic's arch-rival, Metal Sonic. Sonic was a bit sluggish in this game – although he got the new Super Peel-Out, he was vulnerable to running into enemies when using it, and it slowed down the gameplay. On top of that, the overall

feeling was a bit darker than the Sonic most people knew. The game was extremely enjoyable, but here we saw the first signs of Sonic leaning toward more "mature" themes and gameplay and again Sonic demonstrated his (and the Sega CD's) speed. Unfortunately, the Sega CD lacked market penetration, so sales were nowhere near as strong as *Sonic 2*, although Sonic somehow still maintained his fame.

Such was his popularity at the time, he also starred in not one, but **two** animated series - *Adventures of Sonic The Hedgehog* and *Sonic The Hedgehog*. Both series were produced by the same company, starring the same cast. Merchandising for the franchise took off, and Sonic could be seen in every conceivable market, from shampoo to a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon. Sonic – and Sega – was everywhere. From 1989 to 1993, Sega went from \$800 million in annual sales to over \$3.6 **billion**. Sonic wasn't a mascot, he was a **leviathan**.

In 1994, *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* came out for the Genesis, to be followed later that year with the "other half" of *Sonic 3*, *Sonic & Knuckles*. The two games made use of "Lock-On" technology – the

ability to plug the Sonic 3 cartridge into the back of the *Sonic & Knuckles* cartridge, which then plugged into the Genesis. What did this do? Lock-on worked to fuse both games together, which allowed players to move through the two games seamlessly.

Adding a bit of dimension into Sonic's usual adversaries, Knuckles went against Sonic because Dr. Robotnik had tricked him. In *Sonic & Knuckles*, Robotnik betrayed Knuckles, and now Knuckles joined forces with Sonic. It was a bit more depth than previous Sonic titles, and with fantastic gameplay to accompany it, the game was (and still is) held in very high regard as a pinnacle of 2-D gaming.

But soon, Sonic became a victim of his own success: Never mind shampoos and cartoons – because he was such an icon, it seemed developers felt they could slap his face on any game, and it would sell. From 1994 to 1999, a number of "Sonic" titles came out on a variety of platforms. From the truly horrible *Sonic Drift* for the GameGear to the downright blasphemous *Sonic Schoolhouse* for the PC, Sonic's once-golden image was badly tarnished.

From 1989 to 1993, Sega went FROM \$800 million in annual sales TO OVER \$3.6 BILLION.

Sonic wasn't a mascot, he was A LEVIATHAN.

Sonic Redemption?

Sonic Adventure came out for the Dreamcast in 1999 and successfully transitioned Sonic to 3-D. The game played differently than other Sonic games; it featured a mix of platform gameplay, puzzle solving and even exploring. It was a triumph, not only in restoring Sonic's good name but also in restoring him to the status of loved and trusted mascot. Once again, Sonic demonstrated the capabilities of a game system, this time proving the Dreamcast's power. Although *Adventure* suffered from difficult camera control and some troublesome control schemes, its sum was greater than its parts, and the world loved it.

But just as the Sonic brand was making a successful comeback, *Sonic Shuffle* arrived for the Dreamcast, in 2000. It was a disaster. Abandoning any pretense of original gameplay, it was a clone of the hugely successful *Mario Party* on the Nintendo. With ear-shattering music, terrible gameplay and horrific load-times, it accomplished the exact opposite of *Sonic Adventure*: Where *Adventure* demonstrated the advanced capabilities of the Dreamcast, *Shuffle* made it look like a technical disaster.

While Dreamcast fans were still staggering from this brutal treatment, *Sonic Adventure 2* arrived in 2001 and promptly delivered a swift kick to the Chaos Emeralds. Although, in design, it wasn't a bad game, the Sonic gamers had grown to love was suddenly no longer a fun, carefree hedgehog. With the introduction of Shadow The Hedgehog, Sonic's villainous rival, the series seemed to be trying to shed the fun image that made it such a favorite. In its stead was a new game with a

darker, grittier hedgehog. A hedgehog so gritty, he **grinds** like a rollerblader. Sonic and Shadow ground so hard, they had their own model of SOAP shoes and inspired kids to get their own and grind along with them.

As a result, Sonic ended up looking less like a cool, hip re-imagination of himself, and more like a joke – a mockery of "cool," brought about by boardroom executives and a PR department. All the game lacked was an "X-treme" athlete

with his baseball hat cantered sideways, screaming, "To the **max!**"

Sonic Doom

With the arrival of the high-performance gaming platforms like the PS2 and Xbox, gamers were expecting new Sonic titles to really shine. In 2004, what gamers got instead was *Sonic Heroes* for the GameCube (then ported to the PS2, Xbox and PC).

The Sonic Team was trying to do the right thing, visually: *Heroes* harkened back to the original Sonic series in its look, but little else. Terrible control schemes haunted the game, and again poor camera control and numerous bugs plagued its release. Instead of focusing on Sonic and his speed, attention was split between a dozen characters with much more focus on combat.

But if combat was more of the focus in *Heroes*, it was **all** the focus in *Shadow The Hedgehog*, released in November 2005. Although the game focused on Shadow instead of Sonic, Sonic was a character in the game and was featured extensively. The game earned an ESRB rating of 10+ (the first Sonic title to do so), and it bombed commercially.



“With the introduction of Shadow The Hedgehog, Sonic's villainous rival, the series seemed to be trying to **SHED THE FUN IMAGE** that made it such a favorite.”

Ironically enough, it would be Sega's old rival and their superb handheld platform that managed to save some of Sonic's dignity. That same November, Developer Dimps avoided the mistakes that Sonic Team made. When they released *Sonic Rush* for the Nintendo DS in 2005, it paid homage back to the speedy rush of blazing through levels that made the original Sonic games such fun. It was what gamers expected in a Sonic title.

Sonic Riders was released in celebration of Sonic's 15th anniversary on the GameCube, PS2, Xbox and PC, in 2006. The game was supposed to be about speed – only this time utilizing "Extreme Gear" (though we still have no one shouting "To the **max!**"). It was another tough turn for Sonic fans, as the game was "Extreme"-ly difficult and frustrating. This time, the attitude was right, but the gameplay was wrong. Most fans liked Sonic better before he started slumming with Tony Hawk.

Then came *Sonic The Hedgehog* for the Xbox 360 (and soon the PS3). Instead of re-imagining Sonic, as the title seemed to imply, the game followed right along with much of what had come before:

poor control, buggy code, and horrific camera control.

Sonic Symbol?

Sonic is no longer the mascot gamers grew up loving. His image is completely muddled and iconic of nothing. He can't be counted on for fun gameplay, he isn't symbolic of a powerful and fast system – you can't even associate him with family-friendly titles. Perhaps it was because Sega no longer focused on a sole platform, or perhaps it was because of too many incarnations to keep straight, but Sonic himself is no longer focused on a central message. Sonic, is no longer Sonic.

Sonic may never regain the market significance he once had, but few other mascots ever single-handedly played such a pivotal role in the world of videogames. No matter what came after his first appearance, no matter what is still to come, Sonic was an incredible influence on the world of gaming and will always have a place in our hearts. And maybe some day he'll be fast again. Maybe someday, once more, he'll scream. We can only hope. [COMMENTS](#)

Shawn "Kwip" Williams is the founder of N3 (NeenerNeener.Net), where he toils away documenting his adventures as the worst MMOG and pen-and-paper RPG player in recorded history.



“Sonic is no longer the mascot gamers GREW UP LOVING.”

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