

Reading Time: 9 minutes

Prior warning. I'm a HUGE sonic fan, and have been since I was 5 years old when I first got my hands on this crazy little blue mess of speed. I remember being 'That kid' who brought Sonic Comics to a show and tell, and I have a special folder on my iPhone just for Sonic ports (Sonic 4 very rarely gets played!)

Like many living on the edge of the Generation X - Millennial border, we picked our turf early. I chose SEGA, others chose Nintendo. Don't get me wrong, I respect Mario, and will crank out old Mario games on my DS, but it's not Sonic to me. Some may notice already though, it's the *old* games I crank out. As good as Mario 64 will always be, and as hard as SEGA have tried to move into the 3D world, it would never really cut it for me, as it was always the 2D scrollers which had me gripped.

It was for this reason why I pre-ordered Sonic Mania the second it was available to pre-order, and in the absence of a Sonic 3 / Knuckles port for iOS, I was hoping that Christian Whitehead, the saviour of Sonic gameplay on mobile devices would come up with something good. Anyone who's played the iOS ports of Sonic 1 / 2 / CD over the years will know that things took a huge step up when Whitehead got involved. I had never played Sonic CD as a kid, now I rate it as one of the best. It's made me reappraise Sonic 1, and meant that I could resume my battle of completing Winged Fortress Zone in less than 90 seconds (I'm now at 1:17.31, and many grey hairs!)

So, on to Mania itself. Truth be told, I ordered it for Xbox 1, and have yet to play it on there. Then I ordered it on PC to stream, then it got delayed. So I waited up till midnight to download on the Nintendo Switch, and subsequently spent a good two hours playing what felt like a 21st Century GameGear. And all the way though, I was smiling like that same 5 year old on a Mega Drive. (Except for about 3 minutes, and we'll get to that).

Where to start? Let's go through one by one:

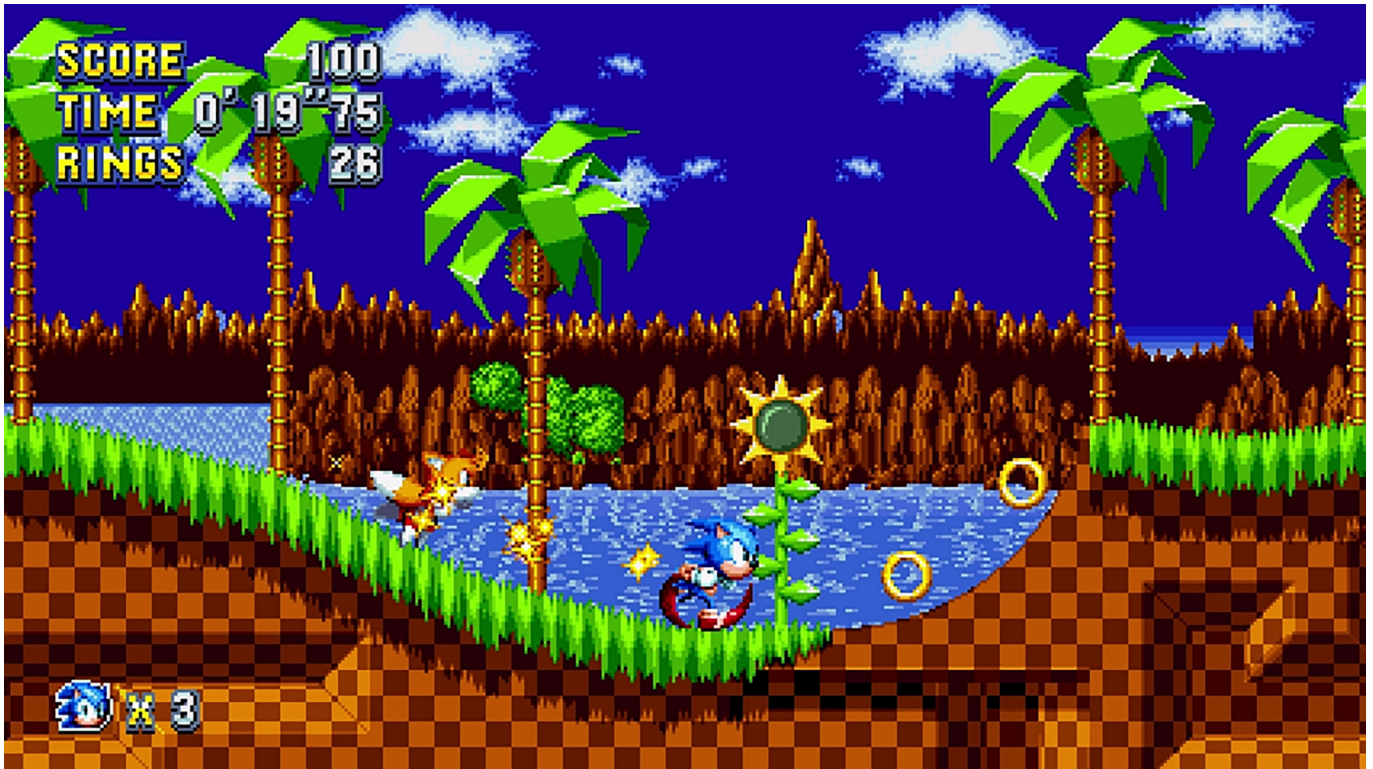
Gameplay

One of the key reasons why I'm still addicted to the iOS versions of Sonic 1 & 2 is how smooth it is to play. Mania is exactly the same. Smooth as anything, in perfect 60FPS widescreen. It still *feels* retro (And you can make it more so with some hipsteresque filters), but it feels like it's had the TLC it needs to survive in 2017.

Whitehead and co have been smart in terms of gameplay. Not messing too much with the overall narrative, yet also making it feel like a new chapter. From the plane ride intro scene, to having a similar level structure to Sonic 3 (Mini bosses and rolling between Act 1 & 2), it feels like a Sonic game. The old powerups are there, with only one addition in the Blue Coin, and Sonic mainly performs as before, with only a single new move in 'Drop Dash', which I actually am yet to use in detail.

What makes the gameplay special is how the levels actually work. Act 1 is generally an homage to their previous iteration, sometimes stitching the previous games' 2/3 acts together into one. This has two benefits, the first being that the levels are chunkier than on Sonic 1 and 2, where early levels in

particular were just too short. The second is that there's a ton of new routes to take. For Green Hill Zone for example, you can easily run a stitched version of Sonic 1's Act 1 & 2, or delve off into Emerald Hill Zone just by taking a slightly different route. This makes this a great exploratory game, especially when one starts to consider speedrunning.



Act 2 on the other hand is where the team get to experiment. My two favourite examples actually come from the Sonic 2 ports, where Chemical Plant zone becomes a syringe injecting bounce fest, and Oil Ocean Zone sees the game literally go up in smoke. The changes are subtle, but do impact on gameplay and how you must navigate the level. These levels still mostly find a way to continue the fast pace, just come with new ways of doing so.

Then there's the 'new' levels, of which there are five. Each have their own unique take on what made Sonic such a lovable franchise, and attempt to replicate in different ways. The attention to detail, and level of 'Easter Eggs' is on full show here, from a clapperboard showing the exact zone time, to reference to old school Sonic comic characters. It's at this point that you realise that it's not a case of SEGA telling a group of fans to make a game, it's the crew showing off 25 years of research and love for a franchise in one product.

Chaos Emerald Special stages are surprisingly hard. Like **surprisingly** hard. It takes the Sonic CD approach, adds in some new dots for speed, then adds in a huge dollop of fast paced thinking. When you remember that here is only one giant ring per zone, it becomes difficult to get all 7 emeralds , and it forces the player to investigate the new, and unseen routes. Would I have preferred the slalom coin collectomania? Not really to be fair. This offers more of a challenge, and with the save options, and the ability to farm opportunities if needed, I can still see how it works for various levels of fans (The 6th Emerald is however **incredibly** hard to complete!)



Are there negatives? Yes. Although I see the historical reference, the Chemical Plant Zone boss is a waste of 3 minutes of my life (Although I admit, the Sonic 2 boss was too easy!). Some of the end levels are a bit too long for a casual gamer to complete without a time expiry, and the blue dot special stages are probably the worst option that could have been taken to get medals (And I still don't really see the point of them for the casual fan). I would finally add that sometimes the team have tried to emphasise the speed *too* much. For example I spent a full 20 seconds just going at warp speed at about 3 points of the game, and whilst that's fine in flying battery, sometimes it means you can't appreciate the levels as much as you would like.

Soundtrack

If I were to be a head of state, I would ban this game being played on silent. Levels bring back nostalgia, but only to an extent. It's only when you hear the opening bars to Chemical Plant Zone or Flying Battery Zone that you really get pumped up, and not only have the team retained what was always the best sets of soundtracks to a game in the 1990s, they also remixed, and homaged perfectly.

The music changes with the newly imagined levels as discussed above, but does so in a way which makes it still recognisable. There's some nice little mashups at places as well, as if the team just give a nod to the way they have attempted to merge two themes the same way scientists try to make GMO crops. A good soundtrack can save a mediocre game. Here, the soundtrack lifts the game to the giddy fanperson heights.

Additional Features

Saved games is a must really, but what makes this game cool is that you can go backwards in zones,

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as well as just carrying on where you left off. This will help someone trying to farm points, lives, medals or emeralds, but also recognises that this is more than just a story mode game for fans.

As someone who's other favourite game growing up was SEGA's Daytona Racing game, having the legendary voice from that game crossover to announce the time trial and competition mode is a huge thing. Competition mode is almost deliberately squished, and almost unplayable consequently on a Nintendo Switch if you're not on a TV, but it's still good fun. The nostalgia element runs wild here, and it does make it a proper throwback party game, especially as mistakes were learned over the silly 'lap' competitor mode in Sonic 3.

Time Trial is what a lot of iOS gamers loved, especially competing with players around the world. As someone who has the 19th Fastest time on Star Light Zone 2 on Sonic 1 on iOS and the 24th Fastest time on Winged Fortress Zone, I know a lot about finding that last 10th of a second and doing a perfect run. Whilst there will always be the any % complete run and 100% runners, I'm more of an Act by act guy, and this is the case of learning a single dance, in comparison to an entire ballet.

There are additional things that you can earn, such as the ability to use the Sonic CD 'Super Peel Out' (A faster version of a spin dash, but not protected from damage), an ability to play that silly boss level from Chemical Plant Zone till your heart's content, and D.A Garden, which is basically a sound test (Worth it with this soundtrack!!!)

Conclusions

Gameplay will vary depending on if you play on PC, PS4, Xbox or Nintendo Switch, however I kind of like this. I will most likely have to rely on a controller when the PC version comes out, though I do like the old emulator keyboard runs which kept me going through those shadowy Sonic years. Again though, I think I've fallen in love with this game more because of the fact that I'm playing on a modern GameGear. This is the game we *wish* we had when that console came out, instead of that 8 bit piece of tripe.

Is it worth the hype? A million times yes. It's not perfect, but it is very very **very very** good. It takes one of my few gripes about Sonic 1 & 2 about being too short (Sonic 1 can be completed in 45 minutes, Sonic 2 in about 55), but also joins the dots nicely between the first 5 games in the franchise. The nod to Sonic CD is important, as whilst underappreciated, it's still a very important part of the franchise, and should not be ignored.



The age old debate around this game is if this is the best Sonic game since Sonic & Knuckles. It certainly blows Sonic 4 out of the water, and by the looks of it has the proper formula Sonic Forces, along with games for a long, long time has been lacking. Sonic Generations was OK, and Sonic Advance (2 more than 1) offers something to distract you, but with full nostalgia hat on, it wasn't 'real' to the diehard fan. My best analogy here is Take That; sure the new stuff they did was fine, but people still cheered the loudest when they went back to their roots. For me, this is the game we've been *dying* to see for 20+ years.

Speedruns are already sub 90 minutes for the game, but for average you and I, this is a good 5 hours

gameplay end to end. It's cheaply priced, however lacks a physical disc / cartridge for gameplay which is a tad annoying. This is a collector's game, and whilst I can't complain about the quality of the Collector's Edition box, I still prefer having something physical; perhaps it's that 90s nostalgia!

When supposed Sonic haters IGN rate this at 8.7 / 10, you know it's good. It's not quite up there, but it's certainly a 9.something. One week's gameplay has kept me interested enough for the nostalgia and hype not to wear off, and that's worth something, so for now, I'll give it a 9.5, and hope that Whitehead *et al* are already recruited for another run. I raise my hats to all of you!

Mario, ball's in your court now.