



# THE HEDGEHOG



Move over Mario! Now we have a new cult gaming figure for the 90s courtesy of SEGA. But can he match Nintendo's pipe-fitting superstar?

rankly, I'm getting a little bored of it all. Mario this and Mario that. The way things are going, the little pest will be addressing us from the Oval Office before we know it. I'm not arguing with the games he stars in - finest quality throughout - it's just I think it's time for a change. A new people's champion. A new hero.

Sega obviously thinks so too. Its latest MegaDrive character is already being groomed for all kinds of Mario-style marketing opportunities. Chances are that this new pretender to the console crown will be propping



(Left) The evil Doctor Eggman awaits at the

end of Green Hill Zone, flying high in his lethal ball-and-chain machine. (Below left) Bonus points aplenty in Spring Yard's pinball section - bounce Sonic off those bumpers for ten points a time.

up a freeway flyover long before he gets a chance to muscle in on Mario's action - but in the meantime the console debut of Sonic the Hedgehog (obviously the result of many a torturous brainstorming session in Sega's marketing department) is a real blinder.

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In the classic Mario tradition, Sonic, who's love ly and cute but not entirely unendowed in the special powers department, finds himself battling through a colourful and enemy-infested world in an attempt to rescue his fluffy chums from the clutches of the evil Doctor Eggy. Perils and



platforms are still the order of the day, but emphasis has been placed firmly on variation too, and elements of Rick Dangerous and Strider aren't difficult to spot along the way.

In order to be best, Sonic must make his way through six zones, each comprising three "acts", or areas. Each world has a graphical theme which is consistent throughout its three stages -Green Hill is all grassy pastures and flowers, Marble is decked out in Greek-style pillars and columns, Spring Yard looks like a surreal version of Las Vegas, Labyrinth is understandably mazelike, Starlight is a cosmic space-type affair, and the final zone, Clockwork, is filled with dangerous high-tech machinery. All treacherous territory for a hedgehog with nothing but a pair of gloves and training shoes on.

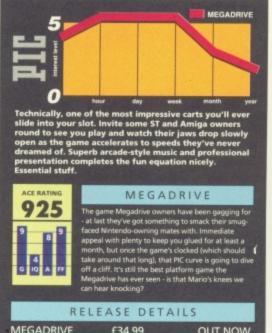
Sonic's not totally without protection, though. Like his Nintendo "rival", he's particularly blessed in the jumping department, enabling him to dispose of most types of adversary with a well-timed descent onto their bonces. His real skill, however, and the one that gives him his unusual name, is his ability to roll up into a ball (as is a hedgehog's wont), and rotate at supersonic speed, leaving his spines to do the business on any adversary who gets in his way. Sonic's spiky form also comes in handy when dealing with enemies from above - like birds - as he also goes into "temporary" sonic mode when jumping, rendering him deadly to anything he touches.

The most common objects in Sonic's world are shiny gold rings which can be found in abundance just about everywhere - even though it's not always easy to get to them. Like the coins in Mario, they're cashed in for an extra life when a hundred are collected. As an added bonus, the rings also act as a kind of buffer for Sonic's mishaps. As long as you're carrying any number of rings, any contact with a bad guy isn't fatal - instead Sonic is knocked back and drops all his rings. It's vital that as many as possible are collected up again fast before they disappear, as if Sonic is caught short without any rings to protect him, it's instant death.

Also littered around the landscapes to help Sonic on his quest are all manner of special bonuses hidden inside TV sets - which are often hidden themselves. The most useful of the lot comes in the form of a sparkling starfield which surrounds Sonic and makes him more or less invulnerable; he can walk on spikes, through fire

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and enemies, the lot - only falling off the bottom of the screen is fatal. Unfortunately, this effect is only temporary - much more lasting but not quite as useful is a mini-shield that allows our prickly friend to make one mistake without having to sacrifice his ring collection. To be filed under the slightly-less-useful-but-still-worth-getting heading are the shoes, which speed up Sonic (and the accompanying music) for a short time, and treasure boxes, worth ten rings apiece.

The primary feature of Sonic which separates it from Mario's escapades is the staggering size



(Above) One of the many puzzles that awaits Sonic in Marble Zone - push the block onto the plunger to raise the portcullis that blocks you way. Simple when you think about it. (Left) More dexterity required here in Spring Yard as Sonic attempts to avoid these two giant rolling maces AND collect the bonus rings into the bargain. (Far left) The Special Stage, where the mystical Chaos Emeralds are begging to be collected. Tough, very tough. (Below) Shades of Indiana Jones as Sonic races down a narrow corridor pursued by a column of flame - those spikes ahead won't be much help either.

ahead won't be much help either.





(Above) Just one of the many secret rooms waiting to be discovered - this one in Marble Zone is worth 30 gold rings in total.

(Left) More Temple Of Doom antics here, with Sonic hanging on to this primitive pulley system in the watery Labrynth

(Below) Glug! Sonic's running low on oxygen - a geyser to the right should prove helpful on that score. Meanwhile these two moles need to be dealt with.



and almost unlimited accessibility of the play area. Each area really is HUGE, with the landscape extending in almost every direction imaginable, and there are no restrictions on speed either. When blasted upwards or along by a spring-plunger, or when entering one of the special short-cut airducts, Sonic goes supersonic, accelerating the on-screen action to incredible speeds - certainly faster than the MegaDrive has ever been pushed before, and it's an astounding sight to behold. Momentum has been thoughtfully implemented, so that

when Sonic is travelling at such high speeds, he's more or less invulnerable, simply by virtue of the fact that he's moving so damn fast. He hurtles right over deadly lava pits and abysses and cuts through his adveraries like a hot knife through butter. The only problem is that, at such a tremendous rate of knots, Sonic is likely to miss out on the aforementioned bonuses, which often take care to find.

A nice touch is that Sonic can take things as fast or as slowly as he likes, since there's no time limit to force him towards the goal-line. Instead, a clock ticks upwards, with bonus points awarded for how quickly the level was completed. As a result, the player is given much more opportunity to explore and discover the game's intricacies at leisure, with still some incentive to get a move on - pats on the back all round for that one.

In its attempt to create a game that would do for the MegaDrive what Mario has done for Nintendo, Sega deserves credit for not coming up with just another unispired clone, but a game that's genuinely original in its approach to the platform genre and still immense fun to play. Admittedly there are infuriating aspects, like the tiresome way in which Sonic sometimes has to negotiate steep hills and the occasionally fiddly control, but these are but minor bumps in what is otherwise a lovely, smooth velvet blanket of playability. It's difficult without being frustrating, addictive without being repetetive and altogether a joy to play.

Gary Whitta



# THE LEVELS

### **GREEN HILL ZONE**

Designed as a taster of things to come, so as to ven the greenest of gamesplayers into the style of Sonic gently, the Green Hill looks to be pretty standard stuff - but don't let appearances deceive you. There are plenty of torturous twists and shortcuts to be found among the vegetation. One of this zone's more interesting features (and one that is used throughout the game), is a loop--loop corkscrew that Sonic can only get round if he takes a long run-up and builds up enough speed. Care must be taken when coming out of the loop (invariably at high speed) to not run headfirst into a buffer which could send you flying right back to where you came from. The evil Doctor Eggy awaits at the end of the third act in his int powered flying machine, bent on stornier his jet-powered flying machine, bent on stopping you from reaching to the next level. Armed with a efty ball and chain, he's a pretty touch customer the only way Sonic can see him off is to use the special raised platforms to jump onto Eggy's head Don't think you've seen the last of him once he's defeated though - he returns at the end of the next, and every other level, with a tougher

### MARBLE ZONE

The style of gameplay changes dramatically for the second zone, where things start to get very Greek in terms of graphic style. In each act, the c setup is the same: after a few screens of ing on aliens heads and running about, the



action takes Sonic underground and into more Rick Dangerous-style territory. Now it's time to engage those grey cells in the solving of some basic puzzles (using blocks to weight down plungers which in turn open doors and so on) and secome even more adept with the joypad as the game starts to throw some really hideous stuff at you for the first time. Jumping across a sea of fire on floating blocks, dodging great spiked weights that descend from the ceiling on chains and keeping ahead of a great column of flame as it pursues you down a narrow corridor is no mean feat Manage to survive that lot and it's back up to the surface for the final dash to the finish line.

### SPRING YARD ZONE

The third level takes its rather unlikely name from the inordinate amount of springy plungers that are vital to Sonic's progress. Each of the three act has been built with platforms at such giddying heights and distances that only use of the multitude of bouncy buttons will get Sonic anywhere. There are plenty of original touches in evidence, such as one particularly bizarre scene









where platforms are replaced by Pinball scorebumpers, allowing Sonic to amass a few extra points by using himself as the ball!

### **LABYRINTH ZONE**

More shades of *Rick Dangerous*, now with a little Strider added to the mix make up this forth level where the backgrounds are decked out in shiny aztec-style gold and sloping ledges make platform-negotiation skills all the more vital. A new feature makes its entrance here - water! As the tide-level rises, much of the action takes place underwater, with enhcanced momentum to provide realistic aquatic movement. Hedgehogs can't breathe underwater, so Sonic must constan ly grab bubbles of air as they rise from the seable in order to top up his oxygen supply. There are no shortage of marine-style bad guys to hamper you progress still further, and as the zone's name suggests the layout of these levels is distinctly maze like, making it easy to lose your bearings if you don't keep your wits about you.

### STARLIGHT ZONE

Best not to say too much about the later levels, suffice to say that this zone is very spacey and high-tech. Like Spring Yard, bouncy plungers play a big part in propelling Sonic between the many high-rise platforms - and, of course, it's very very hard.

## **CLOCKWORK ZONE**

The final challenge! As the name suggests, big clunking machinery is the setting here, with Son tested to the limit by... well, wait and see.

