



Sonic the Hedgehog first appeared in Sega's groundbreaking 32-bit arcade racing game *Rad Mobile*, as a dangling ornament (see top of this page). It was a year later that the world got a chance to meet and play Sonic properly, on the Megadrive (Genesis) console.

Sonic was almost immediately Sega's front man, their mascot to challenge Nintendo's Mario. Sonic became a much loved series, due in no small part to the bright and colourful visuals. It is a little surprising that the entirety of Sonic's 2D sprite adventures were limited to just four consoles: the Megadrive, Master System, Game Gear and Nintendo's GameBoy Advance. Two other systems had games licensed from, but not made by Sega: the Game.com and NeoGeo Pocket Color.

The Megadrive Three

The Megadrive needed its own Mario, a game to match the cheerful and bright *Super Mario World* on Nintendo's SuperNES. Sonic delivered, with Sega's trademark exuberance and thrills; matching Mario's polish and character with huge graphics and speed.

Sonic had changed little between *Rad Mobile* and his debut on the Megadrive in 1992. Blue,



Above from top: Sonic 1, 2, 3, Spinball and 3D Blast (Megadrive)

spiky, and with all of the attitude a 1990's mascot was required to have. He's happy, but his furrowed brow suggests determination and sass! So much sass.



It was hard to believe anyone could actually out-do Mario, but Sega's artists had packed the game with huge, playful graphics and impressively smooth animation. Sonic's future as Sega's mascot was assured.

There were only five Sonic games on the MegaDrive, ignoring games that re-used sprites (*Sonic & Knuckles* & *Sonic CD*). Only four of these were 2D, and one of those was a pinball game. The first three Sonic sprites at right show a clear progression, and it's easy to see how Sega's artists refined their mascot's image.

Sonic was initially a less vivid shade of blue, something that changed in *Sonic 2* to help Sonic stand out against the background, and stayed that way for the rest of the series. There were few other changes in the second game, but the third game saw Sonic's appearance overhauled significantly.

From the second game his soles pointed outward instead of inward when he ran, and his pointy shoes were swapped for a shiny round pair in game three.

The standing position saw fewer changes than the running one, at least between the first and second games. Except for some

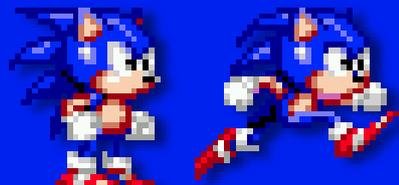


widening of the eyes in Sonic 2, giving Sonic a less angry appearance, the sprites are nearly identical. The adjustment from the second to third games is much more noticeable.

Sonic 1 and 2 had him thrusting his chest forward with his arms back, as if spoiling for a fight, but in Sonic 3 he is more relaxed. His cheeks appear rounder, and there's a suggestion of a mouth where there wasn't before. Sonic's hands were much larger, and because of their placement and the highlight on his cheek Sonic almost looks chubby.

The Other Two

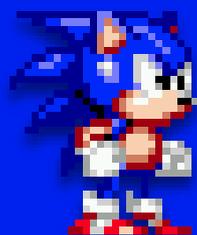
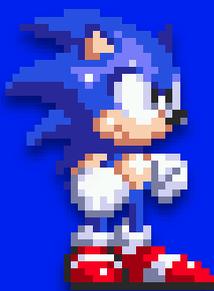
Of the five games released for the Megadrive, only three were proper Sonic platform games. The other two were a pinball spinoff, and a rather dreadful 3D-ish top-down game.



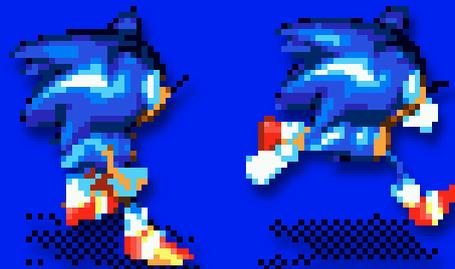
Sonic Spinball (Megadrive)

When players raved about the pinball levels in the first Sonic games Sega listened. *Sonic Spinball* was the result, a kind of adventure pinball where Sonic spent most of the game rolled up into a ball and bouncing around a giant pinball machine. Pinballs aren't very big, so Sonic was made a little smaller. There are walking and running sprites in the game, even though Sonic only walks for a few seconds before starting the pinball game proper.

The last Megadrive Sonic game was one of those mis-steps that most developers made while transitioning from 2D to 3D games. It featured pre-rendered sprites, created in 3D on powerful computers, and converted to flat sprites for use on the Megadrive.



There's a problem with pre-rendered graphics, however: they're never any good. *Sonic 3D Blast* looked great in commercials but disappointed if you looked too closely at Sonic's new needle nose, or were unlucky enough to actually play it.



Sonic 3D Blast (Megadrive)

The Missing One

There's one other Sonic sprite on the Megadrive, but it's not one Sega expected anyone to see.

Knuckles' Chaotix was the 32X Sonic game, but it was so bad it didn't even feature Sonic. It used an odd game mechanic where the player's character held a ring connected to another character by a stretchy magic chain.

Before it was released, Sega produced an internal demo game to try out the concept of two characters linked together, and this prototype had Sonic in it. It's essentially the Sonic 1 sprite (note the running feet) with some extra shading on the belly and face, and of course the ring.



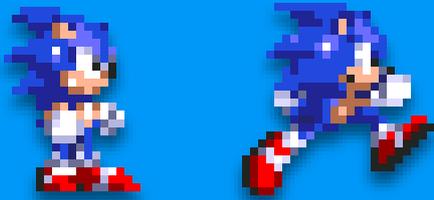
Sonic and Crackers (Megadrive Prototype)

Above from top: Sonic 1, 2, 3, Spinball and 3D Blast (Megadrive)



Sonic Mini (the Other Sonic 3)

When Sonic 3 came out on the Megadrive, it included a head-to-head racing mode, similar to Sonic 2. Unlike the latter title however, Sega created all new sprites for this game instead of just squashing the regular ones. It's a sign of Sonic's status at the time that this extra effort was expended.



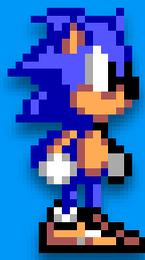
Sonic 3 (Megadrive)

Master System & Game Gear

It is unusual for a manufacturer to support two different generations of hardware at the same time for longer than it takes to transition from one to the other. Sega's success in different regions with the 16-bit Megadrive and 8-bit Master System required simultaneous releases for both platforms for an extended time.

Sega also released the GameGear portable system, which was essentially a Master System with an attached screen. Though it received some exclusive titles, many games were brought over without modification, and on games which existed on both platforms the sprites are identical.

Right from top: Sonic 1, 2, Triple Trouble, Chaos, Labyrinth, Spinball & 3D Blast (Master System, GameGear)



The sprite progression on the 8-bit hardware was very different to what happened with the Megadrive. After the first two 8-bit games *Triple Trouble* and *Chaos* didn't get the cute & chubby treatment. Instead of bringing Sonic's hands forward, Sega first added new shading detail, and then brought the hands even farther back for *Chaos*.

Despite the lower resolution, Sega still tried to keep up with the 16-bit machine, and released *Sonic Blast* with more ugly pre-rendered sprites (though without the bizarre needle nose this time). Strangely, *Blast* was a pre-rendered traditional Sonic platform game, while *Sonic Labyrinth* used the same overhead perspective as *Sonic 3D Blast* on the Megadrive, but with better looking hand-made pixel sprites.

Non-Sega Sonics

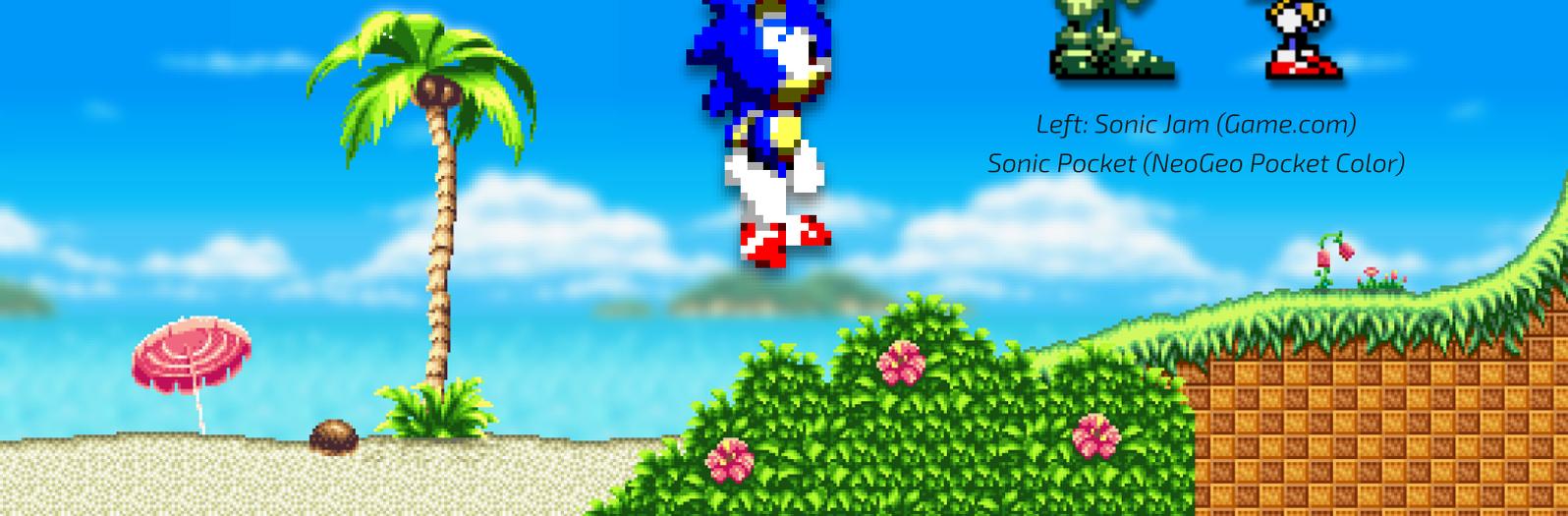
As Sega's star was fading they licensed Sonic out to other companies, at first smaller uncompetitive handhelds that didn't threaten Sega, and later Nintendo's GameBoy Advance.

When SNK released Sonic Pocket for their doomed NeoGeo Pocket Color system, they created all new sprites for the diminutive device, accomodating the reduced palette and processor.

Tiger's even more doomed Game.com system wasn't so lucky. The cheap handheld had a screen similar to the GameBoy that preceded it by nearly a decade. No shortcut was ignored when the MegaDrive 3 Sonic sprite was converted into a large 4-colour mosaic.



Left: Sonic Jam (Game.com)
Sonic Pocket (NeoGeo Pocket Color)



Mobile

The last 2D Sonic games were a trio of titles on Nintendo's GameBoy Advance. All three games used the same sprites, but Sega overhauled their venerable *erinaceus*. This new Sonic was a significant departure from the old designs, but it looked much more modern,



and more like the character in Sega's marketing.
Sonic Advance (GBA)

The new sprites used the same number of colours as on the Megadrive, but were shorter than the Master System sprites, and the result is a bit sketchy looking. The Sonic of old didn't change appearance when running up hills which meant he'd often stand on thin air when walking up or down a slope. With the power of the GBA Sega applied some raw sprite rotation on the hills, creating an even sketchier Sonic.

None of the GameBoy releases really captured the Sonic magic, the new games seemed remade by and for a generation that no longer cared.

All of the subsequent games used polygons, the age of Sonic sprites was over. Except, as is often the case, on mobile phones. Even there, however, this generation of sprite reprieve didn't last long. Modern phones now emulate the original games, with the original sprites, or use polygons as for new Sonic games.

Developed by iPhone, Sonic the Hedgehog 1 & 2 used barely edited sprites from the first game. You'd have to wonder why they didn't use the second game, because it doesn't use the awkward feet...



Sonic the Hedgehog 1 & 2 (mobile)

A later version, developed by Gameloft, used all new sprites. Called Sonic Unleashed, this game allowed Sonic to transform into the much larger Werehog.



Sonic Unleashed (Mobile)



Above: The many deaths of Sonic

