

TEACHING AN OLD HEDGEHOG NEW TRICKS

SONIC CHRONICLES THE DARK BROTHERHOOD



FORMAT

DS

PUBLISHER

SEGA

DEVELOPER

BioWare

REVIEWED BY

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It's tough being a company mascot. After firmly establishing himself as an indestructible pop culture icon in the 90s, SEGA's *Sonic the Hedgehog* has since been trundled out for a quick buck time after time, be it to play tennis, or even ride hover boards. Each canon installment has also confirmed the anthropomorphic hedgehog's reluctance to fully meld his traditional gameplay styles with the demands of 3D platform gaming, whilst overloading an already stuffed ragtag of series cast members. Thus much-vaunted Canadian RPG developers BioWare's (*Neverwinter Nights*, *Mass Effect*) decision to breathe life and credibility into SEGA's star was one that perplexed hardcore gamers and delighted Sonic devotees. Its outcome, *Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood*, is an admirable success, but one that falls short of satisfying both spectrums.

Placing the world's fastest hedgehog into one of gaming's slowest genres was always going to be the biggest hurdle yet for BioWare. Luckily then, that the developers have introduced an intuitive interface for their first handheld title. The entire game is stylus-controlled, with special markers indicating character-specific abilities to navigate (Tail's Flight, Sonic's Speed etc). The bottom DS screen displays an isometric view whilst the top screen is a wonderful hand-drawn map of your area. In all, the art style is impeccable and *Chronicles* features some of the finest visuals on Nintendo's

handheld thus far. As for the stylus control, for fans of *Phantom Hourglass* it will be of second nature but for newcomers it can prove irksome, particularly when trying to avoid the pre-determined paths of foes looking a battle.

Speaking of battles, each turn-based conflict in *Chronicles* is indicative of the faith BioWare had in relying on stylus control. Each character holds a PP bar, reserved for upgradeable "POW" attacks. A POW attack's full damage can tend to only be administered through a variety of Elite Beat Agent-style co-ordination tests. Fail a repetition in one POW attack and you'll see your potential damage decreasing, whilst perfectly repelling a similar attack from your foe will cause them to miss the attack entirely. It's a great idea in practice and initially spurs you into fighting as many battles as possible to discover the intricacies of the system. Sadly, it quickly becomes clear that each attack and defence only relies on 3-4 different stylus challenges.



**“A TITLE SURE TO WIN
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The system also ensures that one cannot simply turn away once their turn has been chosen; their full concentration for each move will be required. For RPG veterans this approach, coupled with its repetitious nature, does the game no favours yet it's a problem that could be easily solved should BioWare continue the series.

If there's one thing that BioWare does manage to get right however, it's turning Sonic's ever-expanding cavalcade of supporting characters from painful irritants to likable allies. Yes, even Tails. That the RPG developers have somehow managed to wrangle empathy and personality from a series renowned for fast gameplay and shallow characters is a minor miracle. Faced with the challenge of translating their typical multi-layered console storytelling to Sonic was always going to be a challenge and while the storyline itself is uninspired, it is still perfectly pitched at younger Sonic audiences, and does an admirable job in that respect. Sadly for BioWare veterans, here dialogue tree choices rarely make any difference to proceedings (aside from constantly putting down the awful Amy Rose) and are a rare missed opportunity.



PLAY ▶ PAUSE || STOP ■



If anything, where *Sonic Chronicles* succeeds and falters is in trying to appease both vastly different audiences - younger Sonic fans and hardcore BioWare veterans. Anyone that had looked at the developer's impressive track record could be forgiven for hoping this title would be the modern incarnation of Squaresoft's 1996 classic, *Super Mario RPG*. However this type of gamer is already well catered-for on the DS with a number of titles - most recently Square's own *The World Ends With You*. In deliberately sidestepping this market BioWare has created a rare beast; a beginners RPG that is pitched perfectly for the hedgehog and handheld's younger followers to identify with, while still possessing its developer's unmistakable sheen of quality. Thus despite its flaws, *Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood* is the game that Sonic's fans had hoped for since its announcement and a title sure to win the troubled mascot many more in the months to come.

VERDICT ★★★★★