Sega and More Mature Video Games: Crash Course Games #8

Crash Course: Games
https://youtube.com/watch?v=MjWdhGRGL5E
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/MjWdhGRGL5E

Hi, I'm Andre Meadows and this is Crash Course Games. So we finished the last episode nearing the end of the 1980s and Nintendo was dominating the US and Japanese home console markets. But, with the video game business being a capitalistic enterprise and all, competition was on the rise.

The 90s was the third decade of modern video games and, like the First Console War between Atari, Mattel, and Coleco, competition drove innovation and better games. These new competitors were filling the holes left from the crash of the 80s but also targeting an older and more mature audience. In the 1990s, players started seeing first person shooters, fighting games, and lots and lots of sports games. And today we are going to focus on the entrance of one company in particular that prompted this innovation and the war that came with it. Sega!

(Intro)

So the Sega Corporation of Japan had entered the North American home console market in 1986 with its Sega Master System which desperately wanted to compete with the NES but never managed to capture much market share.

But before we get ahead of ourselves, I want to take a second here to talk about Sega. Sega sounds like a quintessential Japanese company but, actually, it was founded in the United States. By Americans. The company moved to Tokyo after World War II in focus on operating slot machines and coin-operated games on US military bases. At that time, the company was called Service Games, which would eventually be shortened and combined to form Sega.

Sega transitioned into video games in the 1970s, and survived the whole boom and bust that we already talked about. And by the time Sega released its Master System, the company had been acquired by a Japanese conglomerate.

Okay, back to the Master System. The Sega Master System failed to really compete with the NES in the United States, even though the hardware was technically superior. This was mostly attributed to Sega's poor marketing but also because of Nintendo's licensing practices (which we talked about last episode) which limited the number of third-party developers that Sega could work with.

But then, in 1989, Sega released its Genesis console, which was much more competitive. To paraphrase Yoda, "Begun, the second console wars had." Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Sega's first shots in the console wars were from the marketing department. Sega ran commercials that touted their superiority with the tagline "Genesis does what Nintendon't!" Their main weapon, though, was the technology. Their position as the only next generation console on the market was a strong advantage and they kept using that term "blast processing".

The superior Genesis hardware had moved from an 8-bit to 16-bit architecture. This made for improvements in the look, sound, and playability of Sega's games. This improved hardware allowed a home console to more closely match the quality of games in arcades. Sega also took a cue from Nintendo and created a flagship character that could be the face of the console like Mario was for Nintendo. Sega's answer to the dumpy plumber who could sometimes throw fireballs was Sonic the Hedgehog.

But Sonic wasn't Sega's first attempt at a mascot. During the Master System era, Alex Kid had been Sega's flagship character. Unfortunately, he was a bland character on a system that hardly anyone owned so no-one even cared enough about Alex Kid to hate him. Sonic was designed to fix that problem and become the hedgehog that Sega could really sink its corporate identity teeth into.

Sonic, he could really move! Sonic, he's got attitude! Sonic, he's the fastest thing alive! Sonic was meant to appeal to an older crowd than Mario and the NES and it kinda worked. The Genesis also differentiated itself with the quality of its sports games. They partnered with American athletes to make games like Joe Montana Football and Mario Lemieux Hockey and licensed real teams and their players into these games. Sega succeeded. It differentiated itself from Nintendo and was growing in market share.

But then, in 1991, Nintendo introduced its own 16-bit console in North America: the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, or Super NES. Thanks, Thought Bubble! So the Super NES launched with the universally acclaimed *Super Mario World* and the technologically impressive racing game *F-Zero*. But the Genesis software library had a two-year head start. Many games for the Genesis were already on the market and the Genesis continued to lead during the Super Nintendo's first year.

But Nintendo fell back on their tried-and-true strategy of producing high-quality games. The company created hit after massive hit for the new console. Nintendo games like *Super Mario Kart*, *Starfox*, and *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* all sold millions of copies. Third-party developers also delivered hits like *Chrono Trigger*, *Mega Man X*, the *Final Fantasy* series and a port of the immensely popular arcade hit *Street Fighter II*. We'll talk more about that later.

And Nintendo also introduced another successful console around this time: the Game Boy which would go on to be one of the most successful handhelds of all time. Even though the Game Boy was handheld, it had similar capabilities to an 8-bit console. It only displayed four shades of grey, though. Some people even said it was green. And it required a ton of AA batteries. But it was portable, and it was bundled with the hit game *Tetris*. When the Game Boy released in Japan, it sold out of its initial 300,000 run in two weeks. This early success in handheld gaming would lead Nintendo to dominate this sector of the gaming industry for decades.

So this Second Console War was long and difficult, but there were some upsides. Number 1: Nobody died. Number 2: All of this was pretty great for people who liked to play video games. The Console War was capitalism at its best. Competition drove rapid innovation and improvements in video game hardware and software. But the Console War wasn't the only fight going on in the early 90s. There was also the bitterly fought battle between M. Bison and Ryu. Fighting games were huge at this time and *Street Fighter II*, which was released in arcades in 1991, revolutionized the format.

Now, fighting games have been around since the early days of video games but the genre was mostly made up of platforming beat-em-up titles like *Double Dragon*. The original *Street Fighter* pitted players against each other in head-to-head combat. It had a moderate success in Japan and America. *Street fighter II*, though? That was a game changer. There were character backstories, you got to know all their blood types. Hey, you may want to donate blood to Guile one day. You don't know. But the real star of the show was the gameplay.

The new 16-bit technology and its advanced controls were hyper-responsive and gave players the ability to execute a huge number of moves. *Street Fighter II* invented the combo mechanic and created the deep human pleasure of a well-timed Shoryuken or a Hadoken or whatever that thing that E. Honda does when he just does this.

But nothing breeds competition like success so in 1992, Midway

released *Mortal Kombat* to compete with *Street Fighter II*. Its deeply compelling characters, visual style and carnage made it a popular alternative to the *Street Fighter* series. *Mortal Kombat* used digitized photographs as models for the characters. It was supposed to make the fighters look more real than the characters in *Street Fighter*.

Mortal Kombat also aimed for the adult market by including a lot of blood and gore. And I mean a lot. You might not have known Johnny Cage's blood type, but in *Mortal Kombat* he could punch a dude's head off and then put on his sunglasses and look super cool. Hey, it could be worse. You could go up against Sub Zero and he'd pull your spine out. Fatality. Excellent. Let's play some *Mortal Kombat*! Level up!

So when the game came out on Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis, it was interesting because on the Super Nintendo version, they didn't have any blood at all. They actually made the blood splats clear so it looked like sweat. So you weren't supposed to think that they were bleeding, you were thinking that they were just sweating. And the Genesis version, as we're seeing right now, is clean to start but you could put in a special code and if you put in that special code, you got blood. I think we're gonna do that right now.

Okay, here you go. On the screen, you go A - B - A - C - A - B - B. (Gasp) Did you see it? See it change color? That means we got blood! (Laughs) So all the game's graphic violence, the blood, the fatalities, that's what led a lot of parents and legislators to be upset specifically about *Mortal Kombat*. It was games like this that led to the Electronic Software Ratings Board, or ESRB. Oh, see? That's wh... see? That... (Laughs) That right there is why we now have ratings on our video games.

See? And that's why I could only play the Super Nintendo version of *Mortal Kombat* at my home and watch some of my friends who'd got the Genesis version. Now let's talk about the ESRB for a second. The ESRB, much like the MPAA, is a self-regulating organization that assigns age and content ratings to computer and video games. And, just like the MPAA, it has become the standard of the industry.

Now, we're not here to talk about if this is a good thing or a bad thing but rather the fact that in 1994, it was even a thing. The ESRB's need for a rating scale showed that games were not only containing more mature content but that they were also gaining a much wider audience. People who weren't playing video games even knew about video games and what were in them. Like movies, comic books, and music before it, games were going mainstream, and people noticed.

Speaking of more mature games, *Doom* was released on the PC in 1993. Once again, players and non-players reacted very differently. The game's violence and "evil" imagery caused a media uproar.

For example, on CBS' *Sixty Minutes*, a former army colonel called the game "a mass murder simulator" and tried to connect the game directly to the 1999 school shootings in Columbine, Colorado. So *Doom* was controversial but no one disputes that it was also hugely influential in the world of video game design. It was a major improvement on the first-person shooter and its wide popularity brought a lot of gamers to the genre. The game was praised for its level design and its overall gameplay but it innovated in a number of important ways. *Doom* was an early example of the use of 3D elements in video games. Sure, some people say the game wasn't purely 3D and had some 2D elements but the experience of running through 3D rendered hallways was new and deeply appealing to players.

Doom was also one of the first games to successfully make use of network play. Players could compete over the internet. The extremely popular online arena matches were called deathmatches now a standard term in the online FPS world. The other big innovation in *Doom* was the modification system. Players could edit or "mod" the levels that came with the game or they could create levels from scratch. This was a very popular feature and it shaped the video game industry for years to come. Many game designers had their first taste of creating games while making levels for *Doom*.

Wow, game modification, online play, fighting games, 16-bit consoles, portable systems, super fast hedgehogs! The 90s saw a number of huge leaps forward for the video game industry and we've only talked about the first half of the decade! Next week, we'll see the entry of a major new player to the console market, the adoption of CD-ROM technology and the rapid evolution of 3D gaming that would play out on the next generation of consoles. And there's another war. Another Console War. Thanks for watching. We'll see you next week. Say bye, Sonic! (Sings) Sega! (Laughs)

Stan: Crash Course Games is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana and it's made with the help of all these nice people. If you'd like to keep Crash course free for everyone forever you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Speaking of Patreon, we'd like to thank all our patrons in general and we'd like to specifically thank our High Chancellor of Knowledge Morgan Lizop and our Vice Principal Michael Hunt. Thank you for your support.