

Sonic Rush – Nintendo DS
By Sonic Team and Dimps
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Pros:

- impressive visuals and character design
- classic Sonic gameplay
- great special stages and trick system
- perfect control

Cons:

- boss battles often frustrating
- bizarre music
- few uses of the DS's special capabilities

Sonic Team and Dimps have been releasing the Sonic Advance games for the Game Boy Advance for the past few years, creating a refuge for long time fans of the Sonic franchise by retaining the venerable hedgehog's speedy 2-D roots. In the face of the sprawling city hubs, fetch quests, and even weapons-based combat, these games have been much appreciated for their overall adherence to the formula that made the onetime Sega mascot so popular in the first place. The two developers continue this trend with Sonic Rush for the Nintendo DS, perhaps the most enjoyable Sonic experience since the Genesis days of yore.

The storyline for the game is just as shallow and unimportant as it has always been, only with some more complicated variables thrown in. It seems as though there are two Eggmans running about (Eggmen?), and a mysterious newcomer named Blaze the Cat is searching for her own cache of enchanted Emeralds. Its only purpose is really to let Sonic's buddies make brief cameos during some text-based cameos, and introduce Sonic's stoic counterpart for this adventure.

Both Sonic and Blaze are virtually identical as far as gameplay is concerned. Veterans of the series will know what to expect – seven zones, separated into two stages each, that need to be passed at breakneck speed while crashing through loops-de-loops, Eggman's robots and other environmental hazards. The sense of speed in Sonic Rush is absolutely dizzying. Your normal speed is impressive already, but hitting an accelerator will make you go even faster, and now you can press the Y button go even *faster*, turning yourself into a fireball of sorts at the same time, allowing you to plough through enemies and breakable walls...it's almost too much to handle. Thankfully, the DS can handle the speed just fine, as there is no slowdown to speak of. This "super boost" drains your tension gauge, a new feature that you can fill by defeating enemies or performing tricks in the air or on grinding rails with the R button. Borrowing its flavour from skateboarding games, these features introduced in the Sonic Advance games have evolved into something the player must now truly pay attention to in order to make his or her passage through the levels easier, as well as to cause more mayhem and have a little fun at the same time. Blaze has a few extra tricks, such as rocket boots which allow her to hover for a limited time, but otherwise she plays exactly like the titular star.

The level design in Dimp's Sonic games has been criticised in the past, and for good reason. It was all too common to run into some deviously placed spikes or enemies while running at full speed, with no warning. Though this still occurs, overall there seems to be a better sense of when to slow down and include some platforming elements as well as a roller-coaster ride. Prepare to deal with isolated rooms filled with robotic foes, and unfeasibly dangerous obstacles along the way. However, the end result isn't perfect, as you'll still find yourself running into more unannounced death traps than you'd like – the crushing pistons that equal instant death in the aptly named Huge Crisis level are notable offences.

Sonic Rush's visuals are nothing to scoff at. The 2-D graphics are absolutely gorgeous, giving each zone a unique flavour and environment. The backdrops should be familiar to many Sonic fans, from Leaf Storm's lush jungle to Altitude Limit's absurdly designed airborne battleship. A first for the DS, both screens house the action, simply doubling the amount of eye candy at once. Despite this, action will be focused on one screen at the time, and the player will only have to glance at the other occasionally to look for potential upcoming hazards. Gameplay switches from one screen to the other, but at fixed intervals rather than at a more "natural" pace, making it feel more like a gimmick than a real innovation. The stylus is not used for the main levels, but is the only control method for the special stages, which take place in a half pipe, just like the classic special stages of Sonic the Hedgehog 2 on the Sega Genesis. Long time fans will jump at this great feature, especially considering the abysmal special stages in the previous Sonic Advance games.

The boss stages bear special mention, as they are the best example of a mixed result. At the end of each zone, Sonic or Blaze must face off against either Eggman or his identical twin in another of his malicious contraptions. Battles take place on the top screen in a sort of 2.5-D aspect, on a single plane but with impressive polygonal visuals. The bottom screen displays the boss' remaining health, and an accompanying character (Tails for Sonic, Cream the Rabbit for Blaze) to be your cheerleader throughout the ordeal. The boss designs are absolutely beautiful, but many of the battles can be frustrating to complete. Due to the limited manoeuvrability of the stages and unpredictable nature of Eggman's attacks, the tougher battles especially must be won with a combination of tenacity, luck, and "ring management." Since you can only lose a life when you are hit without any rings, another challenge arises in avoiding from catching too many rings in an already restricted field, knowing full well you'll be pummelled by the boss several times before it all ends. While this all looks spectacular, actually grinding through the later boss battles seems more like a chore than anything else.

The music in Sonic Rush is an oddly mixed bag as well. The songs for each stage capture the more recent irreverent, skater-influenced attitude of Sonic very well, and would fit right in a Jet Set Radio game without a hitch. It sets the tone for the fast paced and often nonsensical adventure of the game, and can be described in a single word as "fun." However, the melodies themselves are neither memorable nor enjoyable in their own right, resembling an idiotic cacophony without the actual gameplay to compliment them. The fact that you receive a sound test mode after beating the game seems more like a punishment than a reward. Just try to listen to the theme for Night Carnival in the sound test. I *dare* you.

Game modes are sparse, the main adventure being the very capable meat of the cartridge. Sonic and Blaze have the same levels to pass, but are done in a slightly different order and take slightly different paths. A simple map displays all the levels, tying the locales together rather nicely. A special final zone is available after both character's paths are beaten and Sonic collects all the Chaos Emeralds (Blaze simply acquires her Sol Emeralds after defeating each boss). Time Attack mode and a barebones multiplayer mode round it out; in the latter, two players can race in levels to see who gets there first. Considering this is the same versus mode that appeared way back in Sonic 2 for the Genesis, and that Sonic Team engineered the fantastic multiplayer options in Sonic Adventure 2: Battle for the Gamecube, one cannot help but feel a little disappointed at the multiplayer experience on the DS, a console seemingly designed for the matter.

Despite the odd music and boss battles, Sonic Rush is perhaps just what the Sonic fan has been frothing over for several years. The breakneck 2-D action is as enjoyable as ever, and Dimps have really refined their portable adventures under the guidance of Sonic Team. It's an easy game to pick up, and even those uninitiated to the unusual racing/platforming feel of the Sonic franchise have reason to try it out.

FINAL SCORE: 8/10

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