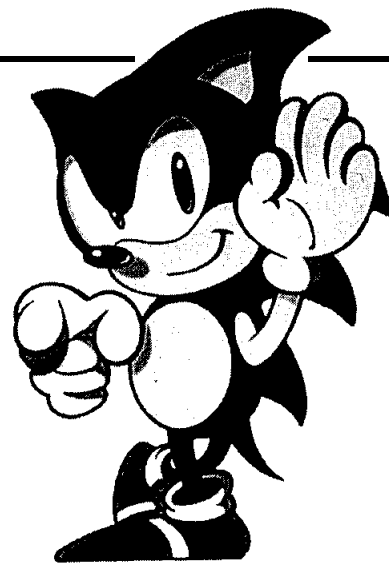


SONIC THE HEDGEHOG AS INDIVIDUALIST HERO: A LIBERTARIAN-CONSERVATIVE DEFENCE OF VIDEO GAMES

IAIN SMEDLEY



From primary school to fashionable boardroom, videogames are all the rage. But whilst the kids are eager to lap up more games and new technology, the killjoy element amongst grown-ups have decided that videogames are a bad thing. Like comic books, bubblegum, B-movies and cigarette cards before them, videogames are — if you believe the hype — making Britain's youth illiterate, violent and anti-social. Playing also makes you go blind. There is always a band of fruitcakes attached to every bad cause, and the anti videogame campaign may have more than its fair share. (The same people were against every previous youth craze, including acid house: some were probably violently opposed to the introduction of the hula-hoop.)

Discounting the fringe element, there are some serious battles going on, of a ferocity that would put *Mortal Kombat* to shame. So, game on!

BIG BUSINESS

Games are big business: more than 12 million game consoles were sold in 1993. Sega's annual sales in Europe alone have soared from about £10m in 1987 to £800m today. Part of the case against the games is barely-disguised anti-capitalism, nationalism and anti-Japanese feeling. This argument is made by similar types to those who argue that McDonalds, CocaCola and Hollywood amount to American cultural imperialism, which in turn amounts to much the same as real guns-and-armies type imperialism. Yeah, sure it does: people get mown down in the street in the Cola-Pepsi wars, or stuck in prison camps for not accepting the truth of the McDonalds way. Not.

It is increasingly inaccurate to describe companies as 'national' in any case. Sega and Nintendo products include

components and ideas from around the world. The next step in the argument is often that, not only are the wicked capitalists Japanese, but they are ripping off the kids by overcharging for the software: the Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle without the Rock'n'Roll. At around £40-£50, cartridges cost about the same as a couple of tickets to a major pop concert, or one training shoe. By this reckoning, game carts — highly creative products — look pretty good value.

Prices are not 'high' because of the power of the big bad corporations. Cut-throat competition ensures thin profit margins and innovation at every turn. Games for 'open architecture' systems such as Amiga or Atari ST are not significantly cheaper than those for consoles.

As with pop singles and home computer games before, the market has produced a cut-price option. Telstar (famous for *Sixty Great Country-and-Western Lovesong Favourites* and similar order-by-tv compilation albums) is set to market collections of repackaged back-catalogue games at a bargain basement price — *Now that's what I call shoot-em-up games*. Game rental, through video rental stores and similar outlets, and informal playground and workplace swaps, help keep down the cost of access to new games.

SOCIALLY UNDESIRABLE?

Ultimately the commercial arguments are irrelevant if the games are felt to be socially undesirable. As with other forms of entertainment — such as video, films and music lyrics — this is a battleground between the paternalists (of both old-fashioned and new 'politically correct' varieties) and the supporters of individual choice and responsibility.

With a few concessions to the paternalists, the *laissez-jouer* liberals are winning. Censorship and social opposition to video games is limited. But the industry is having to defend itself against increasingly sophisticated attacks. The 'chattering classes' rate video games as at best downmarket and at worst wicked. Pop music now graces the arts pages of the broadsheets; games may take a similarly long time to reach the cultural mainstream. For now, even Sonic and Mario are cultural outcasts and open to attack.

Despite the 'Pirate TV' posturing, Sega and Nintendo are established and respectable companies. They want their products to have wide appeal, and hence carefully blend excitement with respectability. Sega's rules governing game contents explicitly rule out blasphemy, explicit sex or racism. But, as cyberpunk guru William Gibson pointed out, the street finds its own uses for the technology. Hackers'

Cultural Notes No. 33

ISSN 0267-677X ISBN 1 85637 249 9

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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This article was first published in the October 1993 issue of *Campaigner*,
the magazine of the National Young Conservatives.

Iain Smedley is the editor of *Campaigner*.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not
necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory
Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Mickelthwait Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



bulletin boards and computerised porn and ultraviolence represent the unacceptable face of the techno-culture. But it is often from the 'leading edge' that advances come, and it may be impossible to kill off the undesirable aspects without at the same time inhibiting future versions of Steve Jobs, setting up Apple Computer from his garage.

NOT ALL FOR FOUR YEAR OLDS

Back in the mainstream, former Sega MD Nick Alexander sensibly argues that game software should be seen as similar to other home entertainment products such as video-films. Whilst it may not be acceptable to show *Night of the Living Dead* during kids' prime viewing time, equally well it would be "pretty sad if every piece of entertainment had to be for four year olds". Sega, who wish to develop the potentially lucrative market for video-games for grown-ups, have pursued the logic of this argument. The big companies have now signed up with the Video Standards Council to introduce voluntary guidelines, and the European Leisure Software Publishers Association is planning to introduce a ratings system. Association director Roger Bennett says the aim is to ensure that members' products are "clearly separated from illegal, anarchistic, pornographic and offensive software".

One of the most contentious big-league games so far has been Sega's Mega-CD horror pastiche *Night Trap*, which features digitised real-live actors and actresses interacting with computer-generated images, and is a small step towards interactive film in your living room. According to the alarmists, the game features 'horrific murder' and mutilation of wholesome American youths (shockingly, including girls "wearing nightdresses and underwear" — I wonder what the reaction would have been if they had not been wearing underwear?) by ape-like monsters and a stalking psychopath. From the furore, you would think the player was the psycho — not trying to defeat him. *Night Trap* has been described as 'evil' by Family and Youth Concern, but the generally conservative British Board of Film Classification has passed it with a 15 rating — not surprising as they described it as "like an early episode of *Doctor Who*".

KIDDIE COCAINE

One of the strongest arguments is that games are addictive: they are 'kiddie cocaine' and that kids will easily play them all day long if left to their own devices. This is a denial of individual and parental responsibility. If little Johnny is playing with his Nintendo all day long, then perhaps little Johnny and his parents, rather than the game, are at fault. Even if Johnny does spend several hours a day in front of the console, it is probably a replacement for the more passive and less stimulating activity of watching TV, or the more active pastime of beating up his kid sister.

It would be very easy to produce games that were so tedious that they would bore kids after an hour, but they might not be seen as very good value. According to the PC anti-gamers, games must not be poor value (exploitation) or good value (addiction). Like little bear's porridge, they have to be just right. How will this be judged? Perhaps the new left will do it, with as much success as the old left did with real economic planning.

Perhaps the pro-gamers should move the debate onto their own territory. One beneficial but rarely heard side-effect of video games is their effect on kids' social mobility. In the often viciously hierarchical society of the school play-

ground, video games offer kids a new opportunity to excel. Even if they are weedy and no good at sports, and irrespective of race, sex or social class, kids can gain respect through high-scores and insider knowledge (on how to gain extra lives, get to bonus screens or set the game into ultra-fast mode).

VIDEO-GAMES: NOT PC?

The ultimate evidence of the political attitude of videogames comes from inside the games themselves. They have been denounced as not 'politically correct' — racist, sexist, and (shock horror) individualist. Most of these charges are so ludicrous they can be dismissed immediately (Sonic is hardly a dead white european male).

The issue of individualism should be addressed head on. Almost every non-sports videogame, whether it is a platform, shoot-em-up, street fighting game or problem-solving adventure, is based on the notion of heroic struggle. A hero (or heroine, and often an unlikely one) must overcome numerous obstacles, of increasing difficulty, by using ingenuity, cunning and their own natural resources. There is a goal in sight — rescuing Princess Daisy from the Koopa, defeating evil Dr Robotnik, or whatever — which must be achieved.

Those with a particularly right-wing taste in foreign policy might remember the 'Super Contra' arcade game in which the Nicaraguan freedom fighters took on a variety of evil enemies. Many science-fiction games follow the SF tradition in which the outnumbered 'rebels' fight a tyrannical empire.

Video games are by their nature infused with a heroic and individualistic philosophy with which individualists should feel naturally sympathetic. Individual action is of paramount importance — 'society' isn't going to save Daisy, Mario must do it — and the player controls a heroic struggle against evil. Even in the least sophisticated games, player action determines the outcome; in games of a more problem-solving nature, the use of rational thought is crucial to the outcome of the story and the defeat of evil.

In order to succeed, the player must apply skill and also determination. Repeated practice enables gradual improvements in performance. Persistence, patience and determination are rewarded, and are amongst the 'vigorous virtues' inherently promoted by video games.

BOOTLEG ROMANTICISM

The philosopher Ayn Rand identified a tradition of 'bootleg romanticism' which flourished in westerns and space-opera science fiction, genres which were denigrated by the cultural mainstream. Whilst high culture had become dominated by anti-individualist, anti-rational, and determinist ideas, these 'low' cultural forms maintained a tradition of individualism and heroism.

Video-games, similarly shunned by the high culture patriarians and *Independent*-readers, follow in this tradition and build on it by adding the element of the player as active participant. The games player does not merely cheer on the hero in his struggle; the player's actions determine the outcome of that struggle. Sonic, Mario and their ilk remind us of the importance of the individual, that great men (and even great hedgehogs) make history, and that evil exists to be defeated. Their values, and the values of the games in which they act, are heroic and individualist.