Sonic Superstars is so close to being a Sonic classic



With *Sonic Superstars*, I'm starting to get the feeling I've been here before.

In *Sonic*'s return to the 2D format, there's a good game here with lots of moments where I was pleased to see the innovation of Sonic Team shining through. These ideas were, unfortunately, buried in slower-than-it-should-be-for-a-*Sonic*-game moments with technical issues and unintuitive boss fights.

For *Superstars*, I really, *really* wanted another *Sonic Mania*. That game was sublime, and I feel like both Sonic Team and *Sonic* fans have been chasing that high ever since. I can say *Superstars* did not deliver as *Mania* did but also did not frustrate me as badly as *Sonic Frontiers* did. There were no moments when I wanted to put either my controller or my head through a wall like I did with that *damnable* pinball sequence in *Frontiers* or the boss fight that glitched out as I was on the verge of triumph.

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The frustrations of *Superstars* came in smaller bursts that took just a *touch* too long to surmount. There are platforming sequences in just about every level that required me to go through them again and again, often in peril of death, before I was able to punch through.

Sometimes, I would get bounced around by springy platforms, frustratingly arranged to block forward progression. Other times, the game didn’t adequately communicate what I was meant to do, leading to multiple deaths trying to tease out that information.

During the carnival stage, Sonic rides on rollercoasters to get to the next portion of the level. During one of those sequences, the coaster kept crashing, and I kept dying, only to realize the coaster was moving way too fast for me to see that I’m supposed to jump into little canon launchers to escape certain death.

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Despite my frustrations with some bosses — with one actually causing me to put down my Switch and walk away for the night — I really enjoyed the thought put into their design. Whereas in previous 2D *Sonic*s, bosses were usually structured like, “Hit four or five times for the win,” in *Superstars*, bosses have phases that change up the flow of the fight. After a couple of hits, Robotnik switches up, forcing me to switch up, too. Sometimes, the new strategy for the next phase is easily intuited; other times, it is very not.

For the sand level boss, I only found out after eight or nine deaths that Sonic could bump one of the badniks it throws at

you to damage the boss.

Innovation is very much on display in *Superstars*, but there could be more. I'm kind of tired of seeing the same flavors of stages in every *Sonic* game. I get that there are good feelings in reminding *Sonic* fans of the games they grew up with, but there's a fine line between nostalgia and unoriginality. Oh, another carnival zone? A Green Hill remix? A water zone with slides? A desert sand zone? How quaint.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with having another casino zone or the like as long as they do something different, and I didn't feel like those legacy zones did.

There are some bright spots in level design, though. There were often very small, discrete moments in each zone that break up the gameplay from hold left and jump. One zone makes you use a drill to burrow through dirt and rocks to reach another part.

There's even an *Arkanoid* section that was a real treat. Just great little ways to make the 2D Sonic formula feel new.

I really enjoyed Press Factory Zone, where every few seconds, a giant pneumatic press in the background falls, making everything in the level jump. In the second act, the factory will self-destruct, killing Sonic instantly unless he presses reset buttons scattered throughout the zone. It was a more urgent version of turning on the lights every so often in the Sandopolis Zone in *Sonic & Knuckles*. Press Factory was a great way to do something new while evoking *Sonic* games of old.

There's a lot of old and new in *Superstars,* which was great. It's exactly what I wanted. There are plenty of new enemies – some frustrating, others simple – to fight. The game also straight-up ports the badniks from the first three *Sonic* games into this one. Remember those grasshoppers from Launch Base Zone that could snipe you from across the screen with their claws? They're back.

The Special Stage from *Sonic the Hedgehog* where you tilt Sonic through a maze? That’s back, too. But now, instead of winning a Chaos Emerald at the end, you earn medals, a currency you use in the cosmetic shop that I didn’t pay much attention to because the last thing I want or care about in my Sonic games is a dress-up feature. There are Chaos Emeralds, though, and you earn them by chasing them through a stage that reminded me of the special stages in *Sonic CD.* Not too simple, not too challenging, and definitely cathartic when you manage to catch them.