Sonic the Hedgehog 3: A Subtle Introduction to Japanese Culture

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Sonic the Hedgehog 3 is a side-scroller created by the Japanese game maker Sega. Rated by the ESRB as appropriate for "Kids to Adults," the game offers wholesome fun involving platform jumping, ring collection, and enemy avoidance. Sonic walks, jumps, and spin-dashes through six zones of colorful adventures. Although Sonic can collect a series of power-ups along the way, the main objective of his quest is to progress in a rightwards direction. While not necessary for winning the game, Sonic has the additional sub-objective of collecting Chaos Emeralds by beating bonus levels. Once all seven emeralds have been collected, Sonic gains extra powers. Sonic is joined on the journey by his pal, Miles "Tails" Prower, a helpful flying fox who can be controlled either by the console or a second player. *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* differs little from its predecessor, *Sonic the Hedgehog 2*, except for offering a larger selection of power-ups, a different type of bonus stage, and a fresh set of levels. While the game is not innovative, its familiarity will be pleasing to Sonic fans.

Unlike Nintendo's Super Mario games, which often contain a short story about the capture of a princess as a premise, *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* provides little motivation for game play. When a new game is started, a cut-scene is shown in which Tails pilots a plane flying over water. Sonic leaps from his perch on the wing of the plane and then races over the water to the shore. Upon reaching shore, Sonic bumps into Knuckles the Echidna who gives him a double-take, and then races off. After this non-verbal encounter, the game commences. Sega may have considered it beneficial not to include dialog, as the game was released in both Japan and the United States, and marketed to a young, potentially illiterate audience.

While the game does not communicate verbally with the player, it conveys Japanese values through the notion of friendship that it models, which is substantially different from what is seen in many other side-scroller games. Although Sonic and Tails are inseparable throughout all of the levels, Sonic always takes lead, with Tails following in tow. Forever subordinate, Tails proactively moves to capture rings and kill enemies, reducing the amount of time that Sonic needs to spend backtracking to accomplish these tasks. This is a far improvement over Donkey Kong's friend Diddy Kong, who in *Donkey Kong Country* does little more than follow until he is the leader. Likewise, despite Mario and Luigi's, fraternal relationship, they never appear onscreen at the same time to help one another. Tails is by Sonic's side through thick and thin and doesn't seem to mind being the tagalong.

Tails's submissive status is reflected in the game play in *Sonic the Hedgehog 3*. When two human players play the game, one plays Sonic, while the other simultaneously plays Tails. Although play is anchored to Sonic's position, Tails has the same capabilities as Sonic within the frame of the screen. As Sonic moves beyond the frame, the frame advances to where he is standing so that he remains centered on the screen. However, when Tails moves beyond the frame, he is parachuted back into the frame from the top of the screen. Through this handicap, the game enforces the same hierarchy between Player A and Player B that exists between Sonic and Tails. Player B, through Tails, is not treated as Player A's equal, but instead as an inferior and subservient friend.

In the Super Mario games, by contrast, neither player assists the other. While Mario is playing, the player serving as Luigi is free to ignore game play until it is his turn. Once Mario dies, Luigi has control over the game until he dies as well. In *Sonic the Hedgehog 3*, Tails never has the opportunity to gain full control over the game. He is so strongly linked to Sonic that

when Sonic dies, he dies as well. This linkage also works to Tails's advantage, as his life is restored if he is injured while Sonic is still alive. Sonic and Tails do not take turns leading; instead they trek through Angel Island as knight and squire.

Sonic and Tails are dual-income friends. All of the rings that they capture are shared in a joint account. Sonic, as the lead character with all of the responsibility, is the only one of the two that can lose rings through injury. While Tails has less control over the game than Sonic, he also lacks the ability to be injured. However, Sonic can be injured, causing Tails and him to experience adversity. If there are no rings in the bank, Sonic dies upon injury. If there are rings stored, they are released from the bank, forcing Sonic and Tails to hurry to reclaim them.

Sonic and Tails are meant to be played by two people who have a hierarchical relationship. The more skilled player plays Sonic, while novice player plays Tails. Tails appears regardless of whether there are two players, and is controlled by the console if Player B is inactive. There is an implied permanent inequality between the two players because one assumes an inferior role to the other, and they do not alternate participating in this role.

The relationship between Sonic and Tails is modeled after a form of hierarchy that is typical in Japanese society. According to sociologists Marcia and Jeffrey Johnson:

Although visible in the general high school experience, it is in the clubs that the fundamental relationships of senpai (senior) and kohai (junior) are established most solidly. It is the responsibility of the senpai to teach, initiate, and take care of the kohai. It is the duty of the kohai to serve and defer to the senpai. For example, kohai students in the tennis club might spend one year chasing tennis balls while the upperclassmen practice. Only after the upperclassmen have finished may the underclassmen use the courts. The kohai are expected to serve their senpai and to learn from them by observing and modeling their behavior. This fundamental relationship can be seen throughout Japanese society, in business, politics, and social dealings.[1]

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[1] Johnson, Marcia L. and Jeffrey R. Johnson. "Daily Life in Japanese High Schools." Social Studies Development Center (SSDC). Oct. 1996. <http://www.indiana.edu/~ssdc/jdaydig.htm> 4 Dec. 2005.

In *Sonic the Hedgehog 3*, Sonic serves as the *senpai*, while Tails is the *kohai*. Hirokazu Yasuhara, the lead designer of *Sonic the Hedgehog 3,* globalized the concept of this relationship by placing it within the structure of the game. While American children do not typically engage in age or experienced-based deference while playing videogames, *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* encourages them to do so. For instance, although British-made *Donkey Kong Country 3* contains two different types of multiplayer play, both involve taking turns controlling the game. In no case is a player subordinate for the entire duration of the game. While most other two-player side-scrollers teach children to share and take turns, *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* teaches them that in some situations, their turn to lead will never come.

Although *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* is a simple game, it teaches American children to behave in a Japanese manner through the hierarchical relationship in which it forces them to participate. Despite the lack of dialog, the game communicates information about Japanese social structure through fostering experiential learning. American children are not used to being the *kohai*, the continual lower man on the totem pole. Through encouraging siblings to play games of *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* together, parents can instill the value of deference to hierarchy in their children. However, as America is an individual-centric society, it is unclear whether American parents wish to promote this value in their children.