

A review of Shadow Generations and Neon White

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Introduction

The concept of every Sonic game was inspired by the creators playing 1-1 of Super Mario Bros. repeatedly while getting game-overed. As they played 1-1, they got faster and faster, and it was fun! The enjoyment didn't come from the speed itself – it came from the demonstrated skill, execution, and mastery of the level. It's the same feeling you get from playing a piece on the piano or executing a difficult combo in a fighting game. Unfortunately, this mastery hinges on replaying the same level over and over, which isn't very fun.

This is a problem that every “awesome-via-technical-skill” game runs into (e.g., tough platformers, souls-likes, rhythm games). Hell, it's a problem that anyone who's tried to learn an instrument has run into. It's difficult to keep the player engaged while they practice the stages. The flow state once you've mastered the level is fun, but building up enough skill to reach that point isn't nearly as fun. That's the key issue that any Sonic game will need to solve – how do you motivate the player to repeat the stages and earn their speed?

The classic Sonic games had a solution – multi-tiered levels with tons of branching pathways. Each level has multiple paths – generally, you get a top path, a middle path, and a bottom path. If you played badly, you'd naturally fall into the lower, slower path. If you played well, you'd get to stay on the top path, which was much faster, but also harder to stay on. In other words, each level has *multiple* levels worth of content built into it. This way, you're motivated to go back in and replay levels – if you play well, you get to experience more content. It also means that the background elements you see in-game reflect your mastery of the level. Scoring/ranking systems are cool, but the real reward comes from within the level itself.

Of course, the branching paths system is supported by several secondary systems/mechanics. For one, every enemy/obstacle stops you *completely* – it's annoying, but intentional. It helps fast-track the memorization process – you'll remember to jump over the Spikes since they interrupted the flow state in your previous run so violently. Obviously, dying repeatedly to obstacles designed to slow you down is annoying, which is why the Ring system exists. It guarantees that you can beat the level at least once and get some idea of the level layout before trying again. Extra collectables, such as the Chaos Emeralds, also

play into this. The 50-ring requirement is key – you need to know the stage very well to maintain 50 rings throughout since you lose a lot of them when you get hit. You can't play cautiously either – there's a level timer and you'll fail if you play like a coward. Sonic's moveset is also kept intentionally simple – all you have is a jump, spindash, and some bonus Shield abilities. That way, it's obvious what you need to do at any given time. You don't spend a lot of time figuring out how to control him - once you beat a level, it's obvious how you can improve on the next run.

Bottom line – games that let you feel “awesome-via-skills” are surprisingly difficult to craft in a way that keeps players engaged. Moving to 3D, Sega would run into a few issues. For example, the usual momentum-based physics worked against the designers - the new 3D environment meant that it was super easy for people to skip parts of the game or jump around obstacles if they built up enough speed. This can be fun, but a game where the point is “non-interaction” isn't a great idea. It's also harder to design level gimmicks if you know that the player could arrive moving anywhere between 0 and 200 mph. To solve this, the designers need to add a lot of automation, such as boosters that normalize your speed and direction. All the automation led to an

even bigger issue – if speed is the reward and the game hands you the speed for free, then you’re completely demotivated from replaying the stages. On top of that, it was harder to elegantly design branching paths in 3D. Combined with the fact that you’d typically collect the Chaos Emeralds during normal gameplay for story reasons, the player has almost zero reason to replay stages. Turns out, making Sonic work in 3D is surprisingly difficult – it doesn’t help that any high-speed platformer requires longer stages than their slower counterparts. Sonic also gets more moves, which can make the learning process trickier and keep players out of the “Flow” state for even longer.

Shadow Generations

Shadow Generations is interesting – for one, Shadow gets a lot of moves. He gets all the modern 3D Sonic staples like the boost and the stomp. He also gets special Chaos abilities - Chaos Snap, Chaos Control, and Chaos Spear. On top of that, he unlocks special Doom abilities as you progress through the game - the Surf, Surfing Dash, Doom Morph, Morph Grappling Hook, and Doom Blast. Teaching the players how to use all these moves seems difficult, which is where the hub and challenge stages come into play. To even reach the new stages, you need to get there using Shadow’s new abilities, proving that you understand how to

use them. To do the boss stages, you need to beat these shorter challenge stages, most of which function as “tests” to prove that you’ve mastered the new abilities. They’re way shorter than the main stages, making it more enticing to replay them for better ranks, which further enhances your mastery of the new abilities. These stages also subtly hint at ways you can use the new abilities to create your own shortcuts in levels, like how you can aim the Doom Blast at points that the level doesn’t specifically highlight. You can create your own paths on top of the brilliantly crafted branching paths built into the levels themselves.

The branching paths in Shadow Generations work because a lot of them are well hidden, which makes finding them more rewarding. Finding these hidden paths is never frustrating – there are hints built into the level design itself, like rails that seem to appear from a secret section of the level, seemingly unreachable rings, or even obvious ones like Orange Rings that’re out of reach. I do wish S ranks were harder to get – my favorite level to S rank was Radical Highway Act 2 (the last level in the game), since its S rank depends on you finding the best path through the level. If you don’t take advantage of the faster pathways and optimize your movement, you won’t get the S rank. The ranking

time requirements also told me when I was missing some hidden paths – if I optimized my movement to near perfection and still had 20-30 seconds to shave off, I knew that I was missing a secret pathway. In most other stages, you don't need to optimize nearly as much. Taking the default paths through a level somewhat competently is enough for a lot of these S ranks. Secondary mechanics, like extra collectables (such as the tokens that unlock bonus Shadow lore) and the separate categories for runs that utilize the Doom Wings ability, further encourage you to replay the stages.

The expert handling of Shadow's difficulty curve, the great level design, the impressive visuals in each level, the cool mid-level cutscenes, and Shadow's smooth controls all come together to make this my favorite Sonic game ever. It's incredibly polished and thought out – unlike most other Sonic games (including the critically acclaimed Sonic Generations), there aren't any levels that I dread replaying. All the objectively unfun Sonic ideas (auto-scrollers, slow cycle-based platforming, the stupid hotdog spring, etc.) were cut. The only things in the game are the ideas that work with Sonic. There's one minor issue – the boss fights aren't as fun to replay (especially early ones like the

Biolizard), but they make up for it with the built-in hard mode that gives every boss a little extra oomph and interactivity.

The levels are also very long, most of them lasting 4-5 minutes, if not longer – there's a lot that goes into each level. It seems like the length would discourage replaying for better times, but it never really comes off that way – in fact, it makes the levels even *more* rewarding to get good times on, like playing a longer piece on the piano. On the other hand, Neon White chooses to take the opposite approach, despite having a similar goal.

Neon White

Neon White is the *ultimate* flow state game. A lot of it works thanks to the card mechanics – on paper, Neon White (the main character) has a lot of moves. You have a double jump, a horizontal dash, a dash you can angle anywhere, a bomb that you can use to boost you to higher places, a bazooka that does something similar, a stomp ability, a grappling hook, and a teleport. Each move also has a unique gun to go with it. It sounds like a lot to hold in your head all at once – every stage would be overwhelming if you had access to these abilities at any given time. This is where the card system comes in. It reduces your options at any given moment, making it easier to figure out what

to do. When it's coupled with the two-card limit, you're never confused about how to get past an obstacle – if you have only two moves, then one of them probably works. The card system also makes it easier to predict changes in the level, which makes your first run a lot more fun. For example, if you pick up the stomp card, you know that a drop's coming up soon.

The short level lengths and completion requirements also aid Neon White's flow state. These levels are very short – most of them are around 1 minute long. Repeatedly restarting for a gold or an ace medal isn't too annoying, since you're only losing a maximum of 1 minute of progress. You're never hunting for overly hidden paths either. Instead, your knowledge of a stage's layout allows you to create your own shortcuts. Since you can make your own paths, it seems like it'd get overwhelming all over again, but that's never the case, thanks to the "destroy all enemies" requirement on most levels. You can't skip *everything* since you need to be in shooting distance of every single enemy. This also gives you hints as to where you can cut corners – if there are stretches in the level without any enemies, then you know that it's safe to start experimenting there.

Neon White's level design further feeds into the flow – most platformers require a “generic plentiful collectable” to guide the player through levels (think of Mario's coins or Sonic's rings). Neon White uses its terrain, cards, and enemy placement to tell you where you need to go – it doesn't need an equivalent to Mario's coins. The terrain, cards, and enemy placement are more than enough, which is part of why sightreading a level works so well, keeping you in the flow state during your first run. On top of that, you need to get at least a few gold+ medals to progress in the main story. You're never required to get any of the bonkers Ace (or Red Ace) medals – gold will do. Coupled with the level hints, mastery never feels far out of reach, which makes it easy to try again. And they can only get away with this because the levels are so short.

The only mechanic that breaks Neon White's perfect flow is an extra collectable – the Gift. These bonus collectables don't fit neatly into the expertly crafted flow-state of most of these main levels. They aren't based on your speed, input, or routes – they're more exploration/puzzle based. It's the only mechanic that indulges exploration, which contrasts with the multi-tiered interconnected elegant design of the main speedrunning content.

The gifts are very similar to the Green Stars from Super Mario Galaxy 2 in terms of their placement – a lot of them are hidden out of normal view and placed on geometry that you wouldn't think to utilize. On the one hand, I really liked the Green Stars in Galaxy. The insane placement of some stars helps show off the different ways you can use Galaxy's surprisingly deep movement and gravity slingshots to reach new areas. A lot of the gifts in Neon White do this well, showing off ways to save cards and optimize your movement.

On the other hand, at least 25% of the gifts are bullshit. During the first 65% of the game, I went through and replayed each level until I got at least a gold medal and the gift, but I got so stuck on some of them that I figured that it wasn't worth my time to collect each gift. This was accentuated by the fact that each Gift only becomes collectable once you've beaten the level once. I couldn't scout out the gift during my first run and figure out if it was easy to get. You need a 2nd run to even figure out if the Gift is doable, and it stopped being worth my time later in the game. It didn't fit neatly into the elegant flow of the level's main content.

The game gives you some help – there's a big sparkle around the gift that's visible from far away, provided nothing blocks your sightline

to the gift. However, plenty of these are hidden in rooms or around corners, meaning that the sparkle effect doesn't help that much.

There's also a sound effect when you get close, but you need to be so close that it's unhelpful. In any other game, you'd be able to use your coins to buy hints from a store in the hub world, but this game doesn't have any coins! As mentioned earlier, the level design doesn't need it, and it'd be completely redundant.

This is made even worse by the fact that the levels aren't completely polished for exploration. Sometimes, you'll need to use multiple mobility cards to reach distant towers that don't look like they're part of the main level. Sometimes, you'll need to use creative routing and climb on little ledges and bumps in the wall or on decorative props to get to the tops of buildings. As a result, I'd try these strategies on levels where I couldn't find the Gifts, but then the levels would fall apart. Sometimes, they'd forget to put collision on structures and I'd just phase through and sometimes they'd forget to put collision on decoration elements that look solid. On one instance, I encountered a weird pop-in glitch where parts of the roof would appear and disappear as I walked around. The design and placement of these gifts begged me to break the game, so I broke it. And nobody's happy.

Normally, I wouldn't care about an optional collectable like this – but these gifts unlock tons of extra content. For one, they unlock bonus levels, which are quite fun. Each character gives you their own style of bonus stage. Neon Violet's levels felt especially fun – they're what I'd imagine Celeste B/C-sides in 3D would look like before the actual Celeste team released Celeste 64. More importantly, however, these optional gifts dramatically improve the story and dialogue.

All the reviews I saw online (and the marketing of the game) completely mislead me – the story and dialogue are quite enjoyable. The premise itself is way more interesting than everyone said it was – you've got a bad case of amnesia in pseudo-heaven and you're at the mercy of a bunch of radical Christians. You're tasked with killing demons that sneak into pseudo-heaven. If you kill the demons well, you might get to spend some time in actual heaven (which you wouldn't get before since you're a sinner). Later, God starts talking to Neon White as he's getting a concussion. It's awesome.

Another thing I was misled about – there aren't dating simulator mechanics. You're only romantically involved with one character (maybe two – it's up to interpretation), and you don't have a choice in the matter. Between each level, you can use the map UI to talk to each

character and give them Gifts, which are used to unlock extra content, such as the aforementioned bonus stages. You also get to unlock extra dialogue, scenes, and memories. I enjoy these more than the main storyline dialogue – I can't tell if it's because the extra dialogue lacks voice acting or if the "slice of life in pseudo-heaven at constant risk of being blown up by radical Christians" endears me more to these characters and better sells their relationships with Neon White. Maybe it's both!

There is one strange thing regarding the storytelling in this game, and I think it ties to the other major issue I had with this game. Typically, you get these Visual-Novel style cutscenes with a dialogue box, character portraits, little emotion effects/animations, and sometimes Voice Acting. Sometimes, however, you get 3D cutscenes, which are used more often towards the end of the game to show off set pieces like the Hand of God rising out of the ground. You get another taste of 3D cinematics when you beat all the levels in a "world" – you get a mini-celebration where Neon White does some acrobatics (like Sonic's celebratory dances if you get a high rank on a stage). The model looks decent (and it's used in two other places for some very short

cutscenes at the end), but I can't figure out why they bothered making the model, texture, and rig just for it to be used so sparsely.

Everyone else has a model too – the angels and other main-character-Neons have their own models and rigs, but they're only used during the first runs of some select levels to help tell the player where to go. But, as I've discussed already, the level design already does enough to tell the player where to go. It's a little more justified with Red and Green since they interact with the stage. In Red's case, it happens during the second to last level. In Green's case, his Boss Fights use his model to great effect. However, that still doesn't feel like enough to justify the creation of these models. Everything else is used so efficiently that these feel like a huge splurge for no reason. The 3D cutscenes with characters could easily be done with 2D key art, like with other scenes in the game.

Here's my conspiracy theory – I suspect that the hub used to be fully 3D instead of a 2D map UI element. You'd get to explore the 3D hub world to find bonus goodies and chat with the other characters, who would gesture and nod along to the dialogue when you talk to them. The characters would be found in different locations depending on the story progression – combined with the other optional collectables, the

player would have plenty of practice utilizing the movement for puzzles/exploration, making the Gift finding mechanics stick out way less.

I also suspect that other characters were planned to be playable. During a level, you get a portrait of Neon White in the bottom left corner that emotes along to your gameplay. And there's a bunch of text added for style that also describes Neon White himself – I think they were planning to put other characters in this corner and add more decorative flavor text unique to each character. This would also justify Neon White having his own model – if you switch to another character, he'd probably appear in the level itself, acting as a guide or a boss fight.

Conclusion

Shadow Generations and Neon White take opposite approaches to keeping players in the Flow state and encouraging players to replay their stages. A level in Shadow Generations is so big and full that it *demands* to be played over and over, with Shadow's complex moveset encouraging you to try a multitude of different strategies. Meanwhile, a level in Neon White is so short that it tantalizes you into trying just one more time – coupled with White's surprisingly simple moveset, the game is effortless to replay. Both approaches work incredibly – the only thing

that suffers is my free time. I literally don't have enough time to play these games as much as I would like to.