

THE MICHAEL JACKSON VIDEO GAME CONSPIRACY



In the mid-1990s, a boy who loved *Sonic the Hedgehog* came up with a theory so strange only the Internet could love it.

What if he was right?

When Ben Mallison was a child in the early 90s in Manchester, England, his favorite video games featured Sonic:



A blue hedgehog who wore red-and-white, Michael Jackson-style boots. Ben was a "Blue" -- a hardcore Sonic fan. "I always batted for Sonic over Mario," he remembers. He watched Sonic cartoons. He wore Sonic T-shirts. He carried Sonic pencil cases and backpacks to school. He slept in Sonic pajamas. He owned every Sonic game for the Megadrive -- the game system known in the U.S. as the Sega Genesis -- and its successor, the Sega Saturn. He collected "Sonic the Comic," a biweekly magazine.

Ben and his friends loved trying to solve the mysteries surrounding Sonic. The games were full of Easter eggs and secrets: not only hidden bonus levels, but also art, sounds and even characters that were planned and then discarded. Some Blues went further, unearthing scrapped prototypes and unlocking beta versions of Sonic games. The quest for hidden features was at the center of the Sonic fandom.

Ben had another, equally gripping fixation: Jackson. It was, perhaps, an accident of birth: Ben is named after "Ben," Jackson's Golden Globe-winning 1972 title track for the movie of the same name. By the time Ben started listening to music, in the early 1990s, the King of Pop reigned supreme, and Ben acquired quite the collection of Jackson albums:

"Off the Wall," "Bad" and of course, "Thriller."

When "Dangerous" -- now Ben's favorite Jackson CD -- hit stores in late 1991, he and his parents went to WHSmiths, bought it, took it home, and listened to it immediately.

"I WAS SONIC MAD"

Lots of '90s kids liked Sonic. Everyone liked Jackson -- at least until 1993, when allegations first emerged that the pop star had sexually abused underage boys. But Ben's passion for Sonic, Jackson, and especially Sonic's secrets made him particularly well-suited for the role he would play in a mystery that would captivate his fellow Blues soon after the release of *Sonic 3*.

Nine-year-old Ben was "very impressed," he says now, noting the "updated design, expansive levels and the fact you could turn Super Sonic" -- when the hedgehog gained speed and became nearly invincible -- "like in *Sonic 2*." The music, credited to six men -- Brad Buxer, Bobby Brooks, Doug Grigsby III, Darryl Ross, Geoff Grace and Cirocco Jones -- was pretty cool, too.

In early 1994, Sega released *Sonic 3*, which had been developed in secret at a secure facility in Silicon Valley, thousands of miles from Sega's Japanese headquarters.

It became Ben's favorite game.

"THERE WAS SOMETHING WEIRD ABOUT THAT SONIC 3 MUSIC"

Jackson's "Jam," the lead track on "Dangerous," sounded a lot like Sonic 3's "Carnival Night Zone," Mallinson (aka "Ben2k9") argued.

The teenager's post would captivate the Blue subculture for decades. But the Blues' obsessiveness may have harmed their cause.

Whenever Blues found an email address for someone who had worked on a Sonic game -- any Sonic game -- they would overwhelm them with messages (Some people got phone calls, too). "Someone would track down someone who originally worked on Sonic 2, like a level artist," said James Hansen, a Sonic fan from the Forest of Dean, near Gloucester.

"Then they'd just get bombarded with a million emails and then you'd never hear from them ever again."

As the 1990s wore on, Sega lost a crucial round of the console wars to a resurgent Nintendo and upstart Sony. Ben Mallinson remained a Jackson and Sonic fan. But as he entered his teen years, something about Sonic 3 started to tug at him: there was something weird about that Sonic 3 music, and he couldn't figure it out. Then one day, it came to him. "Huh," Ben thought. "That Sonic music sure sounds like Michael Jackson."

By 2003, Mallinson, then in his late teens, had been downloading and comparing Jackson and Sonic tracks for years. That September, he explained his Sonic/Jackson conspiracy theory in a post on Sonic Classic, one of the countless message board communities that dominated early-2000s Internet culture.

This phenomenon isn't unique to the Sonic community. For years, a film producer named Keith Calder has received emails, phone calls and tweets from fans of the boy band One Direction who believe he's a key player in a massive conspiracy to cover up a secret gay relationship between two of the band members. As Calder has found, answering fans' emails only encourages more emails. Many people who worked on or around Sonic games stopped answering fan emails entirely.

But as more Sonic fans joined the hunt, they found more evidence for their theory. They compared song structures and instrumentations.

In September 2005, the online investigators caught a break. That month, a Sonic forum user who called himself HXC interviewed Roger Hector, the executive coordinator of the secretive Sega team that was in charge of developing Sonic 3. HXC said Hector had told him Sega had worked with Jackson to develop a soundtrack, but Sega had scrubbed all of the tracks from the game.



Hector may have thought that addressing the conspiracy theory would calm the fans.

Drossin told me he had been under the impression he'd be working with Jackson, not replacing the superstar's work. "At some point either shortly after I was hired, probably the first or second day I was there, and [Roger Hector] mentioned that I was going to work with Michael Jackson," Drossin remembers.

But he refused to say more – and his claim that Jackson worked on the game but his tracks were removed before it hit stores only added to the mystery. If Jackson's songs weren't in the game, the Blues wondered, why did the soundtrack sound so much like a Jackson album? And why would Sega have worked with Jackson only to scrub the game of his

As a teenager, Hansen was more interested in the "secrets in the Sonic games" than the games themselves, he says now. So he found Hector's comment immensely frustrating. "People had picked up on this stuff," he says. "But people didn't really get it. They didn't really grasp that it was actually a thing. And this was just ridiculous because it seemed so obvious to me."

When Drossin finally got his hands on the game, "there was a lot of music already plugged into it," he says. Drossin didn't change much -- and certainly didn't rewrite the whole soundtrack before handing it off to Sega for final processing. When I pointed out some of the similarities between Jackson songs and the Sonic soundtrack, Drossin said "Wow." He seemed genuinely surprised to hear Jackson samples and song structures were in the game -- and insisted he hadn't written them.

Jackson wrote that music. The men who worked with him are certain of it.

"Oh, it did get in the game," Grigsby insisted. "The stuff we handed in, the stuff we did, made it. To. The game."

It's hard to know for sure why Jackson's name wasn't on Sonic 3. My guess is that both the molestation charges and Jackson's concerns about sound quality played a role in his removal from the credits. But Ben Mallison and his fellow Blues are right, Buxer says: The melody that appears in the end credits is also in Jackson's single "Stranger in Moscow."

The Sonic song was written before Buxer and Jackson "ever started working on" the single, Buxer said.

The chorus hook for "Hard Times," a song Buxer had written for a band he was in, was also repurposed for Sonic, he said. "These cues are all over the Internet," he said.

"People have accurately matched the songs to the cues."





This is how Sonic 3 ends.

As Sonic, you float to the last level, where you fight the game's main boss, Doctor Eggman, who flies a kind of armed rocketship. You whack Eggman's ship over and over, aiming for his vulnerable head, until the ship floats offscreen.

But the battle isn't done yet.

Eggman, in this case hilariously mustachioed, returns in a bigger ship with more weapons and a spiked top that makes getting to his head all the more difficult. You whack away some more, and finally, against all odds, the Eggman is defeated and the journey complete.

Sonic, whom you no longer control, celebrates by jumping in the air, spinning into a blue dot.

The credits roll, and Michael Jackson's music plays.

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Creative Direction by Carina Kolodny & Marc Janks
Web Design by Jonathan Shin
Edited by Nick Baumann
Copy Edited by Grace Maalouf
Graphics by Ji Sub Jeong and Josh Carter
Motion Graphics by Isabella Carapella and Adam Glucksmann

A few months after the game came out, Buxer visited Neverland Ranch.

Jackson was there, showing off one of the cues to his friends.