

RETROINSPECTION

MASTER SYSTEM

SEGA MAY NOT COMPETE IN THE HOME-CONSOLE ARENA ANY MORE, BUT ITS MASTER SYSTEM ARGUABLY PLAYED A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN INTRODUCING MANY GAMERS TO THE CONCEPT OF THE 'HOME ARCADE'. DAMIEN MCFERRAN TAKES A FURTIVE LOOK AT ONE OF SEGA'S FIRST FORAYS INTO THE DOMESTIC HARDWARE MARKET

The Sega Master System is something of an enigma. One of the most powerful home consoles of its time, the machine is barely worthy of a footnote when it comes to deconstructing the history of the American and Japanese gaming industries. It sank almost without trace in these two key territories, failing to make even a dent in the seemingly impregnable armour of Nintendo's NES (or Famicom). However, in other parts of the world – most notably Europe and South America – it was a tremendous success, winning hordes of fans and establishing Sega's reputation as a first-rate purveyor of arcade smash hits in the process.

Founded in 1940, Sega (an abbreviation of 'Service Games') initially gained renown for its unique brand of automated coin-operated arcade games. Having plenty of experience in the field of amusements, the company was perfectly poised to compete when 'true' arcade titles like *Pong* and *Space Invaders* started to appear. Thanks to games like *Future Spy* and *Zaxxon*, Sega soon garnered a reputation as something of an expert when it came to arcade thrills and spills.

As the Eighties began to unfold, the videogame industry seemed unstoppable. Encouraged by the sterling performance of its coin-op division, and the sheer amount of money American company Atari seemed to be making from the VCS/2600, Sega decided to enter the home entertainment arena. Released in 1983, the SG-1000 was Sega's first attempt at cracking the console market. However, it was not the triumph the company had hoped for. To make matters significantly worse Atari managed to successfully flush the US home videogame market down the toilet in the same year, causing the first worldwide videogame crash. Sega's assets were hit badly in the ensuing fallout, but salvation came from American David Rosen (who had previous ties with Sega) and Japanese businessman Hayao Nakayama. These two men stopped the firm from collapsing into the gaping hole created by Atari's poor management.

After a period of stabilisation, Sega was purchased in 1984 by Japanese corporation CSK and subtly re-christened 'Sega Enterprises'. Despite the abject failure of the SG-1000, plans were made for a successor in the shape of the updated SG-1000 'Mark II'. Sega, like fellow Japanese company Nintendo, knew that although the

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A clone of the SG-1000 Mark I was produced by Telegames that could also play ColecoVision software.
The Master System possessed a pair of 3D Glasses that simulated depth of vision by using a shutter system on the right and left lenses.
The Power Base converter allows you to play Master System games on a Mega Drive console, although it acts only as a 'pass through' device, as all the necessary hardware to run Master System software is already included inside the 16-bit machine.
The first SG-1000 did make it out of Japan, albeit in small quantities. It was distributed in Italy and Spain, as well as a few other countries.
The Japan-only computer SG-3000 is actually a SG-1000 Mark II with a built-in keyboard. A keyboard could be added to the SG-1000 to bring it in to line with the SG-3000.
Tec Toy released several games in Brazil, like *Street Fighter II* and *Dynomite Heady*, long after the Master System had ceased to be a force elsewhere in the world.
The Brazil-only Master System Compact uses a wireless RF signal to connect to the television. A pink version was also released called the Master System Girl.
The final commercial Japanese release for the Master System/Mark III was 1989's *Bomber Raid*.
Built-in software was often a feature of Master System hardware, with games such as *Hang On*, *Alex Kidd In Miracle World*, *Sonic The Hedgehog* and the famous 'hidden maze game' (turn on the machine without a cartridge in the slot and press up and both buttons at the same time) all being included inside different variants of the console.
Sega first used Opa-Opa from *Fantasy Zone* as its mascot, but Alex Kidd was soon drafted in as a replacement. Kidd was popular – there was even a Japanese board game based on his exploits – but he too would be dropped in favour of a certain blue hedgehog.



Year released: 1986 (US), 1987 (UK and Japan)
Original price: £99 (Core Pack)
Buy it now for: £15+
Associated magazines: Mean Machines, Computer+Video Games
Why the Master System was great: With a far brighter colour palette than Nintendo's NES and some superb arcade conversions, the Master System proved to be a cracking purchase if you were a die-hard Sega fan

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► The SG-1000 and SG-1000 Mark II – the Japanese forefathers of the Master System.

crash of 1983 had damaged confidence in the videogame industry, it had created a void that simply begged to be filled – in Japan at least. The Mark II struggled to shift units at retail, but this hardware would eventually evolve into 1985's SG-1000 'Mark III' – bar a few technical differences this was the Master System in all but name.

It was around this time that Sega's rivalry with Nintendo – which would later bloom into a full-scale war when the Mega Drive and SNES arrived on the scene – became apparent. Sega's machine was more powerful than Nintendo's, but when the Mark III and Famicom went head-to-head in Japan the former was given a rather humiliating beating by the latter. Nintendo's popular console trounced Sega's technically superior hardware thanks to a wealth of third-party support. Developers were infamously forced to agree that they would not publish their NES titles on rival hardware, which left Sega in a rather tight predicament – it could only rely on its own home-grown arcade titles for so long. The solution was to obtain the rights to 're-program' the games of other developers (a process that PC-Engine creator NEC also indulged in, ironically converting many of Sega's key arcade hits to its own 8-bit format), but even this

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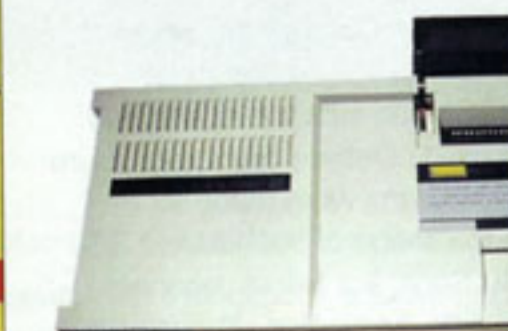
strategy wasn't perfect – many of the licensed titles were distinctly lacklustre compared to the 'cream of the crop' that the NES enjoyed.

Undeterred by the underwhelming performance of the Mark III on home soil, Sega decided to release the hardware in the US, where it was radically re-styled and rebranded as the impressive-sounding 'Master System'. Released in 1986 (a year after Nintendo performed the same trick with the Famicom, which became the big loveable slab of grey plastic known as the NES), the Master System found itself in a similar predicament to the one experienced in Japan. Nintendo had spent the previous year busily promoting its new console and had snapped up key developer support from Capcom, Konami and Taito. Again, Nintendo requested that developers keep their games 'NES exclusive', and given the unassailable position the console enjoyed, few had the will to defy this request. Despite possessing technically superior hardware, Sega had, unfortunately, come to the party too late, with the Master System also crippled by

OTHER VERSIONS – WHEN ONE MACHINE ISN'T ENOUGH...

SG-1000 Mark III

Only released in Japan, this was the precursor to the Master System and is almost technically identical, although the FM sound chip in the Master System was an optional extra with the Mark III. Because it faced off against Nintendo's Famicom in Japan, it didn't sell particularly well and was swiftly dropped when the Mega Drive hit the market.



Master System (Mk I)

The 'classic' machine. The attractive casing features a slot for card-style games and also allows you to use the 3D Glasses. Although it's possibly the most well-known design in fan circles, it's actually harder to track one of these down in the wild than you'd imagine; because of this, second-hand prices are on the rise.



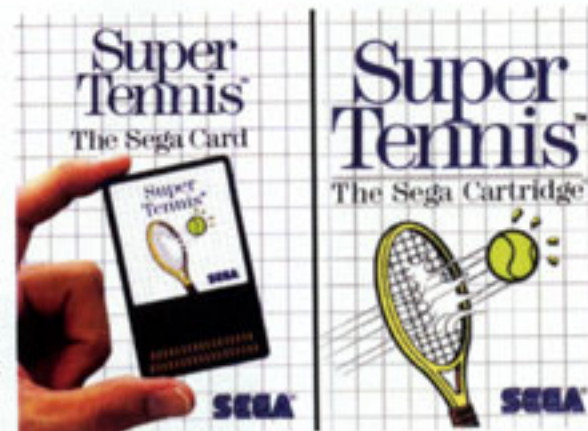
Master System II

A revision that allowed Sega to manufacture the machine more cheaply, the Master System II lacks the card slot that the original machine had. The design isn't fantastic but it's a lot smaller than its predecessor. This is probably the most common variant of the console in the West and can be found with ease at most car-boot sales.



Game Gear

Released to compete with the Game Boy, it was essentially a portable Master System. Many of the games were ports of home titles and the machine was even able to play Master System carts thanks to the 'Master Gear' converter. The Game Gear was battery hungry and suffered from a blurry screen – two factors that resulted in its downfall.



► Some early titles were released in both cartridge and card forms, with the latter usually being sold at a budget price. As games became bigger the card format was eventually dropped due to insufficient memory.

a meagre software library. Compared to the multitude of third-party developers that supported the NES, Sega was only able to call upon the allegiance of two in the US: Activision and Parker Brothers.

By 1988, Sega's Japanese overlords had decided that enough was enough. Keen to offload the under-performing console, the questionable decision was made to sell the US distribution rights to toy firm Tonka. While the company was the indisputable king of the bright yellow plastic digger, it, sadly, had no experience whatsoever of effectively selling a cutting-edge electronic entertainment system. Tonka immediately made some puzzling choices regarding software choices and vetoed the localisation of several key titles (many of which were selling like hot cakes elsewhere in the world). Compared to the stunning collection of software available on the NES, the result was something of a foregone conclusion. Despite Tonka taking over the distribution duties, the Master System continued to perform poorly and was all but ignored by American gamers.

A rather pointless Japanese release of the Master System hardware followed in 1987, with the console being treated with the same level of disdain as its predecessor – unsurprising when

you consider it was effectively the same machine that had been released to general apathy in 1985. It was eventually discontinued in Japan two years later. Any other company would have capitulated in the face of such a dismal performance, but Sega wasn't about to give up without a fight. Carefully scanning the globe for possible conquest, the stubby finger of fate fell on Europe – the one region where Nintendo's influence had yet to be felt. Nintendo had released the NES in Europe towards the end of 1986, but poor promotion coupled with a lofty price point meant that the market penetration enjoyed by the machine was decidedly unimpressive. Sega saw the opportunity and pounced.

Able distributed by UK company Mastertronic (previously famous for releasing budget games for the 8-bit home micros), the European variant of the Master System was unleashed in time for Christmas 1987. Spurred on by adverts that promoted the console as 'an arcade in the home', and supported by a range of killer coin-op

COMMUNITY – SEGA WEBSITES TO WATCH

Sega 8-bits

www.smtributes.co.uk/

One of the best Master System websites, here you'll find heaps of content including reviews, forums, hints on where to purchase a system and even regular competitions. A clean, neat and easy-to-navigate design rounds things off nicely. Highly recommended if you find yourself bitten by the Master System bug.



Master System Museum

<http://alexxidd.com/>

Although it's not updated particularly often, this is an excellent site for information and features a design that complements that of the original Mk I console. It's also packed with loads of reviews and represents a handy one-stop resource for fans of the machine.



SMS Power

www.smspower.org/

The home of a group of Master System fans dedicated to preserving and documenting the history of their beloved system. The site has been around since 1997 and continues to perform valuable work in regards to keeping the memory of the console alive. Check out the excellent scan archive!



Master System Junkyard

<http://segams.blogspot.com/>

A blog that takes a rather wittier look at Sega's classic console than the other sites here. Within the Junkyard you'll find links to a variety of amusing content, and unlike the vast majority of Master System fan sites out there, this looks to be getting regular updates – which is nice.



classics such as *Hang On*, *OutRun*, *After Burner* and *Space Harrier*, the Master System quickly mopped up the market share Nintendo had been too slovenly to secure. Gamers weaned on the Spectrum and C64 suddenly saw the attraction of owning a home console – rather than playing bumbling, half-arsed conversions of their favourite arcade hits by Western companies only concerned with cashing in on popular titles, fans could indulge in highly accurate ports produced by Sega itself. "The Master System raised the bar in terms of arcade-style home gaming," explains Neil West, former editor of *Sega Power* magazine. "The hardware was a leap forward from the home computer systems we'd all been used to." It was with the Master System that many UK gamers experienced instantaneous loading – an astonishing revelation after years of waiting for tapes to load on the home computers.

Such was the success of the machine that Mastertronic soon found that the Master System was accounting for nearly its entire yearly turnover. Such spectacular performance attracted the attention of Richard Branson's Virgin, who eventually acquired the firm (which was renamed Virgin Mastertronic) and, therefore, the European distribution rights to Sega's hardware and software. It was a timely intervention and a shrewd business move as the Master System's successor was on the horizon and it would prove to be even more successful.

When the Mega Drive/Genesis was released, it spelt the end for the Master System in the US and Japan, despite a remodelled alternative appearing in the shape of the Master System II. Sega reacquired the US distribution rights for its products, from Tonka, and set about promoting the new-look Master System, possibly in the hope that the frenzied public interest in the 16-bit Genesis would somehow trickle down to its 8-bit stable mate. Sadly, it wasn't to be, and the final game to be published in the US was *Sonic The Hedgehog* in 1991. Compare this to Europe, where the Master System II was a big success and helped the format cling on to its significant market share. As the Mega Drive started to gather momentum, Sega Europe wisely kept the 8-bit console ticking over with a drip-feed of quality titles like *Streets Of Rage II*, *Mercs* and *Sonic 2*. Support finally died away in the mid-Nineties.

Another market where the Master System enjoyed almost unchallenged success was Brazil. Traditionally a region where console technology trails that of the US, Europe and Japan, the machine was released in 1989, but remained wildly popular well into the following decade, marketed with impressive skill by Tec Toy (see *Retro Gamer* 30 for more info). The company even went as far as to release a wireless variant of the Master System hardware, dubbed 'The Compact'.

When you consider this rather sketchy history, which saw the Master System fail catastrophically in two of the three key worldwide markets, it begs the question: is the console really worthy of a reassessment? The answer is simple. Without this criminally undervalued machine, Sega would not have enjoyed the considerable success it had with the Mega Drive. The Master System allowed Sega to experiment with arcade conversions, original IP and even create a mascot in the form of the loveable monkey-boy Alex Kidd. Without the Master System we also wouldn't have *Phantasy Star* – one of Sega's most well-known and best-loved franchises. Developers like Yuji Naka and Naoto Oshima cut their teeth on Sega's 8-bit hardware. Although it couldn't boast the sheer volume of classic titles possessed by Nintendo's NES, the Master System is still worthy of praise. Those gamers willing to stick with their machines back in the late-Eighties were treated to a commendable selection of games including *Wonderboy III: The Dragon's Trap*, *Psycho Fox*, *Power Strike* (aka *Aleste*), *Golvellius*, *Phantasy Star* and many, many others.

The fact that Sega was so dominant in the coin-op arena also meant that the machine played host to some commendable ports, as Neil West reveals, "The console came at a time when Sega enjoyed huge influence and power in the coin-op world, which meant a lot of games were available for conversion." Although it could be argued that the promise of 'an arcade in the home' wasn't fulfilled until the advent of the Mega Drive, the Master System nevertheless created a solid foundation to build on and gave gamers an insight into the fascinating world of Sega. This was a company that in the preceding years would scale the heights of the world videogame industry, only to fall from grace in spectacular fashion almost as rapidly. In that respect, the Master System serves as a remarkable historical piece – with this much-maligned console, Sega tentatively tested the waters they would ultimately flounder in.



► Towards the end of its life the Master System played host to some ambitious conversions – some far more successful than others.



► The Mark III came with a dazzling range of peripherals – none of which helped it in the fight against the Famicom.



► US Gold provided admirable support for the European Master System.



► These promotional booklets were bundled with Japanese releases.



► A 'Card Catcher' was needed to play card games on the Japanese SG-1000 Mark II.