Jazz Jackrabbit

By Bobinator

**Jazz Jackrabbit, 1994, DOS**

In early 1994, the Sonic the Hedehog series was a worldwide phenomenon, especially with its recently released third game. Even before then, pretty much every major game company was making their own Sonic rip-off for every console at the time, some with more success than others. But the one system that never had its own Sonic-style game was the PC. Sure, there were a lot of great side-scrollers at the time, such as Duke Nukem, but nothing that could match up to the speed of Sega’s series.

That was when Epic Megagames, who had previously created DOS hits like Epic Pinball and Jill of the Jungle, started work on the first attempt to make a high-speed platformer for the PC. Their attempt was Jazz Jackrabbit, and while it couldn’t really stand up to the games it was inspired by, it ended up becoming a pretty big hit on the PC, and for good reason.

The evil turtle terrorist Devan Shell has kidnapped the princess of the planet Carrotus, and starts trying to conquer the rest of the galaxy, as well. It’s up to the rabbit mercenary Jazz Jackrabbit to travel the galaxy, destroy Devan’s forces, and eventually rescue the princess. Not really the most creative plot, but it sure beats an environmental message. The manual includes a small comic explaining the plot, where it admits that yes, it is completely and utterly ripping off Sonic the Hedgehog. At least they’re honest.

As far as animal mascots go, Jazz is much more on the ‘cute’ side of the spectrum rather than the ‘annoying’ side. While he’s not quite a mute, he never actually speaks in actual sentences, which automatically ratches him miles over Bubsy. He’s also suspiciously similar to forgotten Saturday morning cartoon character Bucky O’ Hare in design, although at least Jazz doesn’t have to cart around some random kid everywhere he goes.

The major difference between Sonic and Jazz is that while Jazz can’t roll himself into a pinball to defend himself, he doesn’t actually need to. Jazz carries with him a big gun referred to in the in-game instructions as the LFG-2000, (Wonder where they got that from) which he uses to blow through everything in his way. Unlike the other Sonic-esque game about a gunslinging anthropomorphic animal with a gun, however, Jazz is much less angsty about it.

There’s four different special weapons in the game, which Jazz can use as soon as he collects ammo for them. Aside from the standard blaster, Jazz can collect Launchers, projectiles that bounce across the ground, Toasters, fireballs about as big as Jazz himself, RF missiles which spread out in a V shape, and TNT, which basically works as a smart bomb.

Aside from a few specific situations, however, such as using Launchers to shoot an enemy below you (Jazz can’t aim down), there’s not much reason to use anything but the standard blaster. Most enemies go down in one shot no matter what weapon you use, and every weapon shares the same rate of fire, determined by how many rapid fire powerups you currently have on you. Ammo’s never really a concern, since you collect it by the hundreds, but in a slightly unfair design decision, you lose all the ammo you’re carrying when you die, along with your rapid fires.

Other power-ups include shields, which protect your health bar and circle around you. The fact that they come in monitors the size of your character would be blatant enough if it weren’t for the fact that there wasn’t a speed shoes power-up, and yes, the music does speed up while it’s active. You’ll also occasionally find a bird stuck in a cage, and freeing it will make it follow you around, shooting at your enemies until you take a hit.

Some levels also have giant red gems, which, when collected, will send you to a bonus stage at the end of the act. These are Mode 7-style stages where Jazz has to run around a 3D environment and collect gems, while avoiding hazards like spinners and sticky goo. Clearing a bonus stage will earn you an extra life, although sadly there’s no sort of fancy super form in this game. The bonus stages aren’t all that fun, though, since they’re so simple, and the faux-3D effect was done better in games like Wacky Wheels. Still, the fact that the coders managed to pull it off is pretty impressive.

Unlike Sonic, Jazz actually has a health bar, and can only take three to five hits, depending on which of the four difficulty levels you’ve chosen. While health pickups aren’t terribly rare, you don’t have the same kind of safety net that Sonic’s rings gave you. This means that you have to play a lot less recklessly, which doesn’t really gel with a game that advertises itself as being so fast.

Jazz also doesn’t need any time to get to full speed, unlike Sonic, which can make it so not running into enemies and hazards is a little tougher than it should be. A lot of screen space is taken up by the status panel, which can make seeing anything below you a little tough, as well. It’s entirely possible to lose quite a few lives to cheap hits, which makes the fact that the game gives you unlimited continues and a quicksave feature from the pause menu quite handy.

Since Jazz doesn’t have the same complex pinball physics as the series that inspired it, you won’t be seeing many loops and corkscrews. There’s actually a lot of precision platforming involved, a lot more than you’d expect from a Sonic-style game, and it never really feels like you get many opportunities where the game will let you enjoy the speed you’re given. The game may feel more like a ‘standard’ platformer given a boost of speed, but the levels are still pretty well made. There’s a lot of secrets, alternate routes, and out of the way areas to check through, including a few hidden stages. The game also does a good job of mixing things up by including new level gimmicks, like hoverboards to fly around on, magnets that suck Jazz in, and of course, water. Thankfully, Jazz had the foresight to bring a snorkel, so he handles it a lot better than Sonic does.

The game is split up into six episodes, each with three planets containing two stages each. At the end of each episode is a boss fight, and these range from incredibly easy to brutally unfair. One of these bosses is something the game calls Zoonik, which is basically Zool with Sonic’s spines and a fox tail. While this kind of ribbing usually ends up backfiring after the original game’s release, Jazz Jackrabbit IS a much better game than Zool ever was. Each episode also has an animation at the end, which, while it doesn’t do much to advance what little plot there is, is still pretty cool.

Although it’s not quite as good looking as a game you’d find on a SNES or Genesis, Jazz is a pretty good looking game. It’s got a full 256-color pallete, which is quite a step up compared to some of the games companies like Apogee were releasing. (Speaking of Apogee, the disc version of Jazz had an ‘APOGEE’ cheat code, which puts the game into sixteen colors and puts it in slow motion, calling it ‘Apology Mode’. Pretty harsh, which is probably why later versions removed it.) The sprites are all pretty big and have a good number of frames on them, although that can make it hard to not end up running into them, at times.

All the planets are pretty visually distinctive, too, and they even each have their own unique enemies and point items. The game starts off in your standard foresty area, typical fare for a Sonic clone, but as you move on, you’ll come across levels like medieval castles, abandoned temples, factories, junkyards, and the inside of a giant computer. The fact that the developers managed to restrain themselves enough from putting a casino or carnival level in is impressive, even if you’ll come across big tubes Jazz can travel through that look like they just came straight from Chemical Plant Zone.

The music, however, is definitely one of the highlights of the game. If you’re big on MOD music, with heavy use of samples, you’re going to love this game. There’s a lot of great tracks in there, including the incredibly metal boss music. The sound effects are also fairly decent, and Jazz has a few lines, although they’re never really said enough to ever get annoying.

Jazz was released on both disk and CD-ROM formats. The major difference is that the CD-ROM version has three new episodes with all-new planets. They also include a mode to practice the 3D bonus levels, as well as including the Holiday Hare 1994 episode. Unforuntately, there’s pretty much no way to get the game at this point besides eBay or abandonware, and with Epic’s current mindset, it’s unlikely the game will ever see a rerelease.

Jazz Jackrabbit may not quite stand up to the Sonic games, but it’s still a great game for what it is. The only real issue is a serious amount of cheap hits and really rough boss fights, but other than that, it’s a smooth, well-made platformer. While Jazz couldn’t possibly hope to stand up against Sega’s game, it was a pretty big hit on the PC, and helped Epic to move onto bigger things.

**Jazz Jackrabbit: Holiday Hare 1994, 1994, DOS**

Along with a demo containing the game’s first three planets, Epic put out a special Christmas version of the game on BBSes that was free to download and play. The levels are all new, although the enemies were reused from the full version of the game. There’s also some new music, if you’ve ever wanted to hear what ‘Silent Night, Holy Night’ sounded like in MOD format. Overall, it’s a pretty nice set of levels if you’re in the mood for something Christmas-y. This episode was included on the CD version of the game.

**Jazz Jackrabbit: Holiday Hare 1995, 1995, DOS**

A year after the release of the original game, Epic released a new version of Holiday Hare for the new year. This time around, it’s a full episode, with two brand new planets each with their own look and enemies to fight. The first planet is a snow level with lots of giant pieces of candy scattered across the stage, and other is a toyland made out of Legos. Keep an eye out for a doll of a red rabbit in this stage, because he’s going to be important later on.

The fact that Epic bothered making new enemies this time around means that this episode is a lot more interesting than the previous Holiday Hare, so it’s worth looking at. There’s some new music, too, including a rap version of ‘Little Drummer Boy’. This episode isn’t included on the CD version, but it’s trivially simple to find on any site with DOS games for download.

**Jazz Jackrabbit 2, 1998, Windows/Macintosh**

Some time after the original Jazz Jackrabbit, Jazz and the princess are set to be married. Suddenly, Devan Shell appears and steals Jazz’s giant wedding ring to power a time machine (How very Day of the Tentacle), where he plans to conquer the universe before Jazz is even born. The queen declares Jazz a fraud and throws him in the dungeon, where his slightly psychotic brother Spaz rescues him.

The only time the story actually shows up at any point is the manual, though, so none of this matters very much. The game starts off with a nicely animated intro FMV, which is basically what the opening would be if Jazz actually had a cartoon. While the original game was definitely inspired by stuff like Bugs Bunny, the sequel has much more of a Saturday morning cartoon vibe, which fits perfectly, considering the character.

Gameplay wise, there’s been a lot of changes since the original Jazz, and pretty much all of them are for the better. Running has been mapped to a separate button, so you’re not constantly dashing around into everything at full speed. You can also now actually aim upwards, so that you don’t have to kill enemies above you by jumping up and down and mashing fire. And in platformer tradition, you now have a downward stomp for crushing enemies and certain blocks below you.

The other big major change to the sequel is that you can pick from two characters: Jazz or his demented brother Spaz. They both have the same weapons and they both go through the same levels, but they each have a couple of unique special moves. Jazz can glide through the air with his ears by mashing the jump button, while Spaz gets a double jump. By pressing down and jump, Jazz will jump into the air with his fist upraised, destroying blocks and enemies above him. Spaz will do a flying kick with the same input, which destroys enemies and certain blocks horizontal to him.

Sadly, however, the level design doesn’t really work with this idea as much as it should. One characters will be able to get to some power-ups and hidden areas the other can’t, but there’s not any places where Jazz’s and Spaz’s route will actually differ. The fact that both characters get the same ending and are mostly identical except for their special moves makes it more of a matter of preference than anything else.

There’s nine weapons in total in Jazz Jackrabbit 2 compared to the original’s five, although just like the original game, they’re very situational. All the weapons from the original Jazz are back, although the Toaster is more of a standard flamethrower, and the TNT works more like a mine. Some weapons, like the toaster and homing missles, work great on enemies that fly around just out of the reach of your shots. Some of the other weapons, however, like the pellet gun, are near useless. Just like the original Jazz, your standard blaster will be all you’ll need to use for about 80% of the game. The random food items you collect now also have a use, as collecting a certain number of them will activate a ‘Sugar Rush’, which is basically 20 seconds of reptile-murdering invincibility backed by a techno beat.

The resolution is much higher than it was in the original game, and all the game statistics were moved to the corners of the screen instead of bunching them all up at the bottom. This makes it a whole lot easier to see where you’re going, so you’re a little more free to speed through the levels without bumping into an enemy. While the increase in resolution is a big improvement, it does help contribute to Jazz 2’s biggest problem. While its prequel felt a little too hard at times, the sequel has the opposite problem entirely.

Everything about the game feels like it’s been tuned to be as easy as possible. Enemies die in about three to five shots or less, and extra lives and health are incredibly common. There’s never any real pressure when you’re platforming, since the game doesn’t have any pits, or anything else that does more than one heart of damage.

The only time the game starts actually getting difficult is around the third episode, when it starts overusing small, flying enemies that fly just out of range of most of your weapons. A few of the bosses are also moderately challenging, although that’s more because you’re in a cramped area than anything they do. The fact that Epic took whatever complaints they had about the original game’s difficulty to heart is nice, but they really overdid it here.

Something about the level design doesn’t feel quite as polished here, either, although it’s not especially bad. The original game tended to have a lot of unique gimmicks to mix things up, and there’s not as much of that in Jazz 2. You still have big bodies of water to swim through and hoverboards to fly on, along with a valiant attempt at making a Sonic-style pinball level. There’s also quite a lot of secrets to look out for, including a lot of silly developer in-jokes. But other than that, a lot of the levels feel like they’re more pretty to look at then they are to play.

The single-player campaign runs a bit shorter than the original game’s, clocking in at only 4 episodes for a total of 24 levels. Unlike Jazz 1, you have to unlock each episode in order before you can play them, although you can start a new game from any episode once you’ve unlocked it. Each episode follows the same structure as the first game, with three worlds with two stages each, although some episodes will have more than one boss fight. The third episode is actually a revisit of the third three episodes in the original game, and seeing them all redone in the new engine is pretty cool.

Aside from the single player mode, however, what’s unusual about Jazz 2 is the fact that it has a surprisingly sophisticated multiplayer mode, more like something you’d see in your average FPS than a 2D platformer. You can either play online, (Well, more like could, considering the game was made in 1998) or split-screen with up to four players. Which doesn’t work very well in practice, considering how difficult crowding around a keyboard is.

Along with a mode for doing the single-player campaign in co-op, there’s modes for deathmatch, racing, capture the flag, along with a mode called Treasure Hunt, which is where players collect a certain number of gems and race for the exit before the other players do. Unforuntately, the game’s age means you’re not too likely to find many people still on the servers, if any still exist. The game does come with a level editor, however, and there’s quite a number of custom levels across the internet, so if you end up beating the main game, there’s still plenty of levels of varying quality to play through.

While Jazz 2 isn’t quite as good looking as a game like say, Rayman, it’s still a pretty great looking game, especially compared to the original. The levels look quite nice, if a little too static, and use Unreal-style skyboxes and dynamic lighting, which was pretty fancy for 1998. All the characters have a hand-drawn look to them, which fits pretty well with the game’s cartoony vibe. The music was done by Alexander Brandon, the same composer of Deus Ex and Unreal, and this game’s soundtrack sounds a lot like those games, if a bit ‘cartoonier’. This game also has a particularly metal boss track, although it’s not used very often compared to the other boss song.

Jazz Jackrabbit 2 definitely isn’t a bad game, something about it just doesn’t feel quite as polished as its prequel. Maybe it’s the lack of challenge, or the fact that the game’s new features don’t change up the gameplay as much as they should. It’s still a game worth playing, and it’s fun while it’s lasts, it just doesn’t quite match up to the original DOS classic.

**Jazz Jackrabbit Holiday Hare ’98, 1998, Windows/Macintosh**

Since the original Jazz Jackrabbit had a special Christmas edition, it makes sense for its sequel to have one, too. HH98 follows the same tradition of the episodes before it, giving three new levels set in a snowy landscape to play through, with all the enemies given Santa hats where appropriate. And as always, there’s a great new Christmas-y track to listen to while you’re blowing you’re way through the levels. Oddly enough, the boss at the end of the third level is way, way tougher than anything found in the actual game, since he likes to throw homing fireballs that’ll take away two of your five hits. The game also comes the levels from the Jazz 2 level, which use tilesets from the full version but have brand new layouts.

**Jazz Jackrabbit: The Secret Files, 2001, Windows/Macintosh**

It’s a pretty weird decision to release an expansion pack to Jazz Jackrabbit 2 three years after its release, but here we are. The Secret Files is basically just a level pack with three new worlds, including an candy-filled Easter land, a haunted mansion, and a city. There’s a lot of nice new level art, if that interests you, along with some new music that sounds pretty good.

The biggest change is that they’ve added in a new character named Lori, who’s supposedly Jazz’s sister. She uses Jazz’s helicopter ears to glide, as well as Spaz’s flying kick to break through horizontal obstacles. The problem is that she has no way of getting vertical altitude like Jazz and Spaz do, so she has to miss out on a lot of secrets that they can get to just fine. Not only that, but if you put her into the original Jazz 2 levels, there’s no way to actually get beat the game with her, since there’s so many jumps she just can’t make.

The new levels themselves are decent, if a little boring. The problem is that a lot of them require precision platforming, which just doesn’t work with how slippery the controls tend to be. It’s more annoying than it is actually difficult, but it makes getting through all nine levels a real pain. You don’t even get an ending for clearing every level, either, you just get kicked to the high scores.

If you really, really need more levels for Jazz Jackrabbit 2, go ahead and pick this up. But don’t bother getting it for the new character. Secret Files was only released in Europe, and it would probably be pretty hard to get a physical copy of it nowadays. A Jazz Jackrabbit game called Christmas Chronicles also exists, but all it is Holiday Hare ’98 with the addition of Lori.

**Jazz Jackrabbit, 2002, Game Boy Advance**

It had been a while since Jazz’s last game, four years in fact, and it seemed he had undeservedly ended up in the same obscurity that belonged to lesser mascots, like Socket and High Seas Havoc. The good news is that an attempt at the reboot of the series was made for the GBA. The bad news is that they might as well have not even bothered. The only real involvement Epic seemed to have had in this was putting their logo in the opening to the game, as it was by some unknown company called Game Titan. The publisher, out of all possible companies, was oddly enough, Jaleco.

Jazz himself was changed from a Rambo-esque mercenary to a more Han Solo-ish secret agent, and the villain this time around is a turtle named Dark Shell. There really should be some kind of rule of comedy that making a parody of a parody never works out. Whether Dark Shell is actually supposed to be Devan in a new outfit or not is never explained. Jazz is the only playable character this time around, although a weird looking Spaz makes a cameo appearance. There’s actually something of a plot this time around, with dialogue and cutscenes between words. The writing’s not mind-blowing, of course, but it’s appropriately goofy, with a few chuckle-worthy lines.

Jazz still has helicopter ears move from Jazz 2, and it’s much more important this time around now that Jazz can actually take fall damage. There are a few times when you’ll have to use this move to get up to a higher platform by activating it right before you hit the peak of your jump, which the game never explains to you at all. Jazz can also aim in shoot in all eight directions, both on the ground and in the air, which is pretty handy. Unfortunately, he’s also a bit floaty and slippery to control, which makes precision platforming a little tough at points.

The focus this time around is more on the guns instead of the speed, which was a smart move considering the GBA’s small screen size. Jazz now has to collect guns before he can use their ammo, which is a minor change, since there’s no separate ammo pickups, anyway. He also has a supply of carrot grenades he can toss with the L button, which are powerful, but are perfectly capable of blowing him up, too. A lot of the weapons can actually hurt Jazz if he’s not careful firing them, which doesn’t match the way you could spray projectiles all over the screen in the previous games at all. Jazz can also collect money scattered around the levels, and at the end of each planet is a shop where he can use the money he finds to buy weapons and extra lives.

The problem is most of the weapons are pretty boring to use. Aside from your standard blaster, which is much less useful this time around because of how little damage it does, the only really interesting weapon is the richochet gun, which fires metal balls that bounce of walls and 90 degree slopes. It’s also perfectly capable of hitting you in the face and damaging you. It’s nice that you can’t just breeze through the game for once with your default weapon alone, and all the other weapons so much more damage than the blaster that you’ll want to use them as much as you can. Oddly enough, having the bigger weapons equipped will slow Jazz down. You have to wonder why they needed this kind of realism was needed in a game about a cartoon rabbit who can hold six or so guns in his pocket.

The problem is that you WILL need to use these weapons because the enemies can do so much damage to you. Most of them fire hitscan weapons at you, which drains away your life without much you can do to dodge it. Every level is more of a test of enduring enough damage to make it through without losing too many lives, especially since 1-Ups go for a ridiculous price in the shop. It does help you respawn right where you die when you lose a life, and the game saves itself at the end of each level, keeping track of your ammo and lives count. Although if you’re really low on lives, that can make things even tougher on you.

The level design is sparse and empty, and pretty much every level feels like the same routine of walking around, shooting enemies, finding keys, and pulling levers. There’s not really any real hazards or gimmicks to vary things, except for a few moving platforms and some spikes at the end of the game. All the levels tend to be pretty short, but they all feel like they play exactly the same, almost like you’re playing the same level with a new tileset. When your sewer level is your most interesting level, you’re really doing something wrong. At least the bosses are a little interesting, even if they tend to be pushovers.

The graphics are a mixed bag. The sprites are decent looking, if a little too large and chunky. The small screen size isn’t an issue, since Jazz doesn’t move as fast in the previous games. The problem is that each of the three levels on each of the five planets look more or less identical, and you’ll only be fighting one or two enemies throughout that entire level. The worst part is that they’ve even blatantly stolen some art from Jazz Jackrabbit 2. At least they acknowledged something from the previous games. The music is made from samples, so it automatically sounds better than 90% of the GBA’s music library, but it’s all very generic and lacks a suitably metal boss theme.

Jazz Jackrabbit is a really mediocre game, and only worth playing if you absolutely must play every game in the series. It barely acknowledges its roots, the level design is static at best and monotous at worst, and the difficulty curve just doesn’t know where it wants to be. There’s so many better platformers for the GBA, and much better games in the series. It’s nice that somebody wanted to bring the series back, but if they were going to put this little effort into it, they really shouldn’t have bothered.

**Jazz Jackrabbit 3D, Cancelled, Windows**

After the success of the first two games, Epic started work on making a new Jazz game, this time using their Unreal engine to put Jazz in a 3D environment for the first time. A lot of concepts were made, but sadly, they were never able to find a publisher, and the game ended up cancelled. However, there’s a very early alpha floating around across the internet, so at least we have some idea of how the game would have ended up.

Apparently, the story would have involved Devan kidnapping Jazz’s children and taking them to an alternate dimension, the third one, to be exact, where Devan rules and everything is in 3D. In the alpha, Jazz is the only playable character, but it seems the menus indicate you might have been able to play as Spaz and Lori, too.

The view is set behind Jazz’s back at all times, with the mouse being used to aim. Once you set the controls to WASD, it controls pretty well, although Jazz’s jumping feels a bit off. Jazz no longer has his helicopter ears or his jumping punch, but he can now hang onto ledges, just like any proper 3D platformer hero.

There’s two weapons in the alpha, Jazz’s standard blaster, plus the Launcher. You can also find ‘cells’, small gems that change the way your weapon fires. Combing it with the blaster makes it shoot fireballs, and combining it with the Launcher makes a rocket launcher. You no longer have ammo, instead your weapons are tied to a regenerating universal ammo bar.

Instead of being set in separate levels like the previous game, Jazz 3 is split into areas that Jazz can travel between freely. Jazz starts off in a small village with a few rabbit NPCs he can talk to, as well as enter a mine that serves as the tutorial. The only ‘real’ level in the alpha is Carrotus Castle, which ends with something resembling a boss fight before the alpha ends.

The graphics are pretty good for such an early alpha, although the models are blocky and untextured, giving them an odd ‘shiny’ look to them. There’s a few songs in there, still composed by Alexander Brandon, and they all sound great, although the suitably metal boss theme hadn’t been finished yet.

Overall, what’s left of Jazz Jackrabbit 3 is pretty fun, as early as it is, and it’s a real shame it never ended up to market. Whether it would have been any good is anyone’s guess, although that there is to play seems promising. There’ve been talks in the air of another attempt at making a Jazz 3, but sadly, nothing’s ever come of it.

**Cameo: One Must Fall 2097, DOS, 1994**

While Jazz isn’t a playable character in One Must Fall, Jazz, Devan, and the princess, Eva Earlong, appear in the game’s tournament mode as secret challengers. They have their own unique dialogue when you’re about to face them, but they still control the same robots as anybody else. Still pretty cool, anyway.

After the release of Jazz Jackrabbit for the GBA, he pretty much fell off the gaming radar and hasn’t appeared since, except for a small tech demo made by Epic for the iPhone. With Epic’s current strategy of making lots of games about big angry men killing big angry monsters, it’s unlikely we’ll see a reboot or a rerelease any time soon. Which is too bad, since, despite their flaws, the first two games are a lot of fun and a great attempt at making a speedy platformer for the personal computer.