Toejam & Earl

By Bobinator

The Genesis was always home to more classic games than one could probably count, going from high-speed platformers like the Sonic games, to deeper, more complicated adventure games like Beyond Oasis, and a whole lot of games in between. Of course, such a prolific publisher like Sega would end up making a ton of games, and while it's unfortunate, it'd only make sense that a few of their games would end up slipping through the cracks. Look at poor Alex Kidd, for example. But we’re here today to talk about another Sega series entirely.

Greg Johnson, one of the designers behind the classic space sims Starflight and Star Control, and Mark Voorsanger, one of the designers behind Night Trap, among other things, went to work on 1991 designing characters and concepts for a game they had plans to have Sega publish. The two were both heavily influenced by games such as Rogue and Nethack, and took inspiration from the way the games randomly genereated new environments each time. Forming a company called, simply enough, Johnson Voorsanger Productions, the two went on to create their first game all by themselves. Sega published the game, their American branch making plans to make the alien duo their official mascots. Of course, that whole Sonic thing stopped those plans, but Johnson and Voorsanger went on to create a few more games, including the children’s art program ‘Orly’s Draw-A-Story’. Unforunately, after the third T&E title, the creators disbanded, with Greg Johnson going on to form his own development studio, HumaNature Studios, who have currently not released any games.

Toejam & Earl, 1991 (Genesis/Virtual Console)

Toejam & Earl are two peaceful, hip-hop loving aliens from the planet Funkotron. Toejam’s the red, three-legged red alien, while Earl’s the big orange guy in the polka-dot shorts. While cruising out one day in their spaceship, the Righteous Rapmaster Rocketship, Earl ends up taking the wheel and promptly crashes the ship into an asteroid, forcing them to crash land on Earth. Considering that ‘Earth’ in this game is represented by floating chunks of land covered by quicksand, tornadoes, and people who want to kill them, it’s understandable that they would want to escape as soon as possible. The problem is that their rocketship ended up breaking into ten pieces on impact, and the only way off the planet is through finding them all.

From the start of the game, you get the option on whether you want one or two players, or if you’re playing alone, whether you want to play Toejam or Earl. This does make a small difference: Toejam’s faster, but Earl starts off with more health. You also get the choice on if you’d prefer the levels to be randomly generated or fixed, although considering how the levels actually look, it doesn’t make too much difference either way. There’s also a pretty neat ‘Jam Out’ mode, which is basically a sound test where Toejam & Earl perform dance moves with the push of a button in front of one of the game’s trippy backgrounds.

The actual game itself involves Toejam & Earl, either alone or together, making their way up the 25 ‘floors’ that make up the planet in order to find all ten scattered pieces of their rocketship. While the first level starts you off on a small island surrounded by water, every stage after that is surrounded by nothing but space. If you end up falling off the edge, you won’t die, but you will end up falling back to the previous floor. The goal of each stage is to find the elevator that’ll bring you to the next floor, unless there happens to be a rocketship piece on that level, in which case you’ll want to go for that first. The game will let you know if there’s a rocketship piece on your current stage, but it’s quite common to go for several stages before finding one.

What’s mostly stopping you from doing all this, besides the gaps in the world you’ll have to find a way around, the quicksand that slows you down, and the water that drains your health Mario 64-style (without even the courtesy to give you ALL your health back) are the earthlings. These go from crazy dentists that let off crazy Joker laughs every time they manage to drill you, to hula dancers that hypnotize you into dancing with them, to giant hamsters rolling around in hamster balls. They quickly go up in threat level as you get further into the game, and for the most part, there’s not a whole lot you can do about them besides try to run away.

You’re not totally defenseless, though, thanks to the presents you’ll find laying around the levels. These bestow a random effect on you once you open them, and once you know what one type of present does, every other present of that type will be automatically identified for you. Some of these are useful, like extra health, super high-tops for more speed, and tomatoes you can throw at the earthlings to destroy them for a while. On the other hand, not all of them are helpful, and there’s a good chance you’ll end up having all of your identified presents randomized again, reading a boring textbook that makes you fall asleep, or killing you instantly, right then and there. It’s usually a pretty bad idea to open a bunch of unidentified presents at once, which makes it a good idea to look out for the old man in a carrot suit, who’ll tell you what a present actually does for some of your ‘bucks’. The money you’ll find is good for a lot more, too, like buying presents from mail order, getting healing from a wizard, or having an opera singer kill all the earthlings on screen by singing at them.

If this is all starting to sound like some sort of insane, real-time roguelike, that’s not really a bad comparison at all. While actual combat tends to be incredibly rare, since the tomato powerups aren’t all that common, they both share wandering around a randomly generated environment, experimenting with different items to see what effect they’ll have. There’s even an experience system, where get points every time you explore one ‘square’ of the map or open a present. Every time you hit a certain score, you rank up, lengthening your health bar and possibly earning yourself an extra life. Your rank on the status bar will increase, too, starting from ‘Weiner’, before moving to ‘Poindexter’ and ‘Dude’, before finally hitting the prestigious rank of ‘Funklord’. There IS also perma-death, in a sense, since there’s no way to save the game, and no continues if you run out of lives.

This is entirely possible, too, since the difficulty curve quickly starts to crank up once you get a few floors in. The early enemies usually aren’t too much of a problem, but after a while, they start to get faster and much more aggressive. The toughest enemies tend to be so fast that once they start hitting you, they’ll keep running into you and ‘juggling’ you to death unless you have some spare food or an item to help you escape. The game starts you off with four sets of super high-tops, and it’s highly recommended you keep these for emergencies like this.

The co-op’s pretty neat, and there’s so much work and polish put into it you could say it’s almost the point of the game. Toejam & Earl are free to split apart and do their own thing, and if they get too far away from each other, the game will go into a split-screen view, coming back together if they meet up again. If they walk into each other, they’ll high-five and trade some health, and if a player ends up running out of lives, their ghost can ask to borrow a life from another player to come back into the game.

The actual game is full of this kind of zaniness throughout, and all this is barely covering it. Both Toejam & Earl let off tons of 80’s slang, and they’re frequently get into silly conversations in one of the elevators to next level. While looking at the characters and listening to the game’s music would give you the impression that the whole game has a hip-hop thing going on, the sense of humor is much closer to something like Earthworm Jim. Speaking of the music, there’s not all that many tracks in the game, but what there is probably the best hip-hop you’ll ever hear coming out of the Genesis’s sound chip.

Finding all ten of the missing rocketship pieces is worth the journey, too, as the ending has Toejam & Earl safely making it back to their home planet. The game doesn’t end there, either, as you’re still free to wander the surface of Funkotron, where the residents congratulate you for winning the game.

What really makes Toejam & Earl a cult classic is just how original it is. Sure, the Roguelike was hardly a new concept, even on the Genesis. Fatal Labyrinth may have done the basic concept before, but the weird sense of humor, co-op play, and focus on real-time action made T&E a much more memorable game.

Toejam & Earl 2: Panic on Funkotron 1993, (Genesis/Virtual Console)

T&E2 starts shortly after the events of the first game, after Toejam & Earl managed to rebuild their rocketship and return to Funkotron. The problem is that all the earthlings ended up sneaking on board their ship without them noticing, and now they’re out making a mess of the planet. How what amouts to dozens of people managed to get on board such a tiny ship isn’t answered, but this isn’t the kind of game that needs to answer things like that. Toejam & Earl take it upon themselves to send the earthlings back to where they came.

This time around, the game is more of a standard platformer instead of the odd action-roguelike style of the original game. It’s not really a bad change, since keeping the same style for this game would have probably made it feel way too sameish, anyways. It’s got pretty much all of the same elements and goofy humor the original game did, anyway, like all the present inexplicably hanging from balloons.

Every level in the original game tended to look more or less identical, aside from some levels having more orange and blue than others. Funkotron’s a pretty wild looking place in comparison, if you couldn’t tell by the name, and that means a lot more variety in level design. There’s colorful, almost Suessian forests, bright, flowery meadows, a hellish cave known as ‘The Underfunk’. You will tend to see a few areas a bit more than you’d like, but having more than one basic tile set really helps. There’s a whole new set of earthlings to capture, too, which go from small children to ghost cows.

This time around, however, since you’re back on your home planet, you’ll run across the other citizens of Funkotron, who’ll help you out in their own way. Some of them give you hints on where to find certain secrets and earthlings, and some of them run a rhythm game that you can play for bonus coins and other power-ups. You're not ever actually forced to talk to them or play their minigames, so they don't tend to be too intrusive.

This time, the goal of each of the fithteen stage is to find all the earthlings in each level , indicated by an arrow on your status bar that shows you with direction you should look. Once you manage to come across one, you throw jars at them, of which you have an infinite supply, until they end up captured inside one. You can’t leave a level until you’ve captured every earthling, and it’s entirely possible they’ll be in an out of the way area, or hiding behind a tree. Once you get further into the game, however, levels will start having way more earthlings to capture before you can actually leave the level. This starts to get a bit less than enjoyable, especially considering how much damage the tougher enemies can still do to you.

You don’t have quite as much of an inventory as you did in the first game, since most presents give you instant rewards like points or money. You do still have a few special items you can collect and use, like super-powered jars or a vacuum to suck in earthlings, along with a couple of moves powered by a collectible called (what else?) Funk. You use Funk for a short-range teleport good for getting past some hazards and getting through certain walls, along with a radar used for uncovering hiding earthlings and other hidden things.

There’s a lot more secrets in general than the original game had, and a lot of them tend to be placed in ways where you’ll end up running into them. Aside from stashes of coins and Funk, there’s also hidden rooms where you’ll receive extra benefits for the duration of the levels, like unlimited coins. Funkotron’s leader is also in hiding, and to get him to come out, you’ll also need to find his twelve favorite things, although the difference in endings is so small that it’s not really worth it unless you’re in it for the challenge.

T&E2 isn’t really a bad game, really, but the biggest issue is that compared to the first game, which was something that had barely ever been done on the Genesis before, the sequel is more of a standard platformer. And compared to something like the Sonic series, which constantly changed up the environments and what you had to deal with in them, T&E tends to get repetitive very quick. It’s still got the weird sense of humor the original game was known for, and it’s definitely not a bad game, but compared to most of the platformers in the Genesis library, it’s just lacking.

Toejam & Earl 3: Mission To Earth (XBOX, 2002)

After the death of the Saturn, Sega had plans to make a new, 3D outing of the series for the Dreamcast. The new hardware didn’t make it, but the game did, eventually hitting Microsoft’s new console along with a few other exclusive Sega games. A developer called Visual Concepts developed the game, and whether it was their involvement, possibly a lack of involvement from the original creators, or something else, something about T&E3 just feels more dated than even the Genesis games ever did.

Twelve sacred vinyls have been stolen from the planet Funkotron and scattered across Earth, and an evil force known as ‘The Anti-Funk’ is starting to drain the power from them. Toejam, Earl, and a blue alien girl named Latisha are sent out to retrieve them. Toejam & Earl come off like really awkward stereotypes this time around with their new outfits and full voice acting, and while a new character is always appreciated, Latisha just comes off as trying way too hard to be ‘sassy’. One good thing is that the difference in characters is a little more pronounced in this game, since Latisha’s less likely to have a present backfire, and Earl can get health back from rotten food, among other things.

The game itself is much closer to the concept of the first game. Instead of having a number of stages placed one atop of the other, though, this time there’s hub levels that have doors leading to different stages. You still need to find all the missing records before you can actually complete the game, but you also have to collect a number of giant floating keys that’ll actually let you unlock the level doors. If this is starting to sound like some sort of collect-a-thon in the making, you wouldn’t be too wrong.

The actual gameplay once you reach a level isn’t too far from the first game. You have a number of goals on each stage, which may or may not involve finding a vinyl if a level contains one, along with other tasks such as finding every present on a level or ‘converting’ every earthling. You get experience for accomplishing these goals, which go towards increasing your rank. There’s also still presents scattered all over the levels that still help you or harm you, although having vendors that sell you cheap food that you can keep in your inventory for as long as you need lowers the difficulty quite a bit.

One of the major differences in T&E3 is that you can actually attack the humans that chase after you. You can use ‘Funk-Fu’, a short-range attack, or fire notes out of a boombox your character somehow manages to stow in their pants. The problem is that the notes you collect for ammo aren’t always easy to find, and some earthlings won’t actually be harmed by Funk-Fu until you reach a certain rank. Every time you lower an earthling’s health to zero, they become ‘funkified’, sprout an afro and shades, and become friendly to you. The game’s obsession with the word ‘funk’ hardly stops there, and it’s just one of the many reasons the humor in this game just becomes groan-worthy.

There’s five different ‘worlds’ in the game, given such creative names like ‘Grassy Zone’, ‘Urban Zone’, and ‘Snowy Zone’. The fact that you’re not stuck on a bunch of floating patches of grass for the entire game is nice, but problem is that nothing but the enemy difficulty ever actually changes, so there’s no new hazards or level gimmicks to look forward to at all. At least you can save the game as much as you want, in case bad luck depletes your stock of lives. There’s a mode to have the game randomly generate levels for you unlocked by beating the game once, but by then you’ll most likely just be tired of it.

All these problems with the game’s lack of variety or total lack of any cohesive level design could be excused if you’re forgiving enough by saying that it’s an early XBOX game that came from the Dreamcast. But the biggest issue is that nearly all the wacky humor from the first two games is gone entirely, and what replaces is just feels like the developers were trying, way, way too hard to be ‘hip’ and ‘edgy’. For an example, the game actually has ‘Naughty’ and ‘Nice’ modes that change the character dialogue slightly, and there’s a lot of stupid jokes about Toejam’s third leg and cheerleader’s ‘pom-poms’ in there. Even that could be overlooked if it weren’t for the random gospel singers that appear to explain the goal of every level, which you can’t even skip. Still, though, there’s a few bits where the spirit of the Genesis games shine through, like the boogeymen who talk like stereotypical government agents. Or random houses scattered across the level, whose residents will compliment your great alien costume and hand you a treat.

That’s still not really excusing the German muscleman wearing an XBOX Live billboard, who constantly calls at you to sign up and download the DLC so you’ll stop being a wimp.

The graphics, as you’d expect from what’s basically a Dreamcast game, aren’t all that hot. The main characters look and animate fairly well, but the earthlings themselves have this odd blocky look to them that would fit firmly in the uncanny valley if they weren’t so cartoony. The voice acting, on the other hand, is the real problem. All the characters have a little quip they make any time they do practically ANYTHING, like yelling out ‘FUNKIFY!’ every SINGLE time they fire off a note. This, as you would expect, tends to get very grating quickly, and the fact that all three main characters sound like giant stereotypes doesn’t help too much, either.

As it stands, T&E3 is a very disappointing sequel, which makes you wonder if it was really needed in the first place, at least in its current form. The entire game comes off incredibly dated, even compared to the Genesis games. The difference between those and this is that even with the heavy hip-hop theme they had, you could tell they weren’t taking it nearly as seriously as the developers for the third game were. You can just feel like nearly everything in the game was made by a bunch of corporate suits trying to figure out what their demographic wanted, and not really doing a good job at deciding.

That was the last Sega had to do with Toejam & Earl, perhaps a bit understandably after the third game. Toejam & Earl were in talks to be in Sonic & Sega All-Star Racing as DLC, but the fact that the series’ creators didn’t feel that they were being offered enough money for them squashed those plans. As it is, while the sequels weren’t up to the standards of the first game, the original Genesis game is a cult classic that still deserves to be enjoyed for the sheer creativity of the whole thing.

Other Games:

Ready, Aim, Tomatoes (1992, Part of the Menacer 6-game cartridge, Genesis)

In 1992, Sega released a light gun for the Genesis called the Menacer, which was basically their version of a Super Scope. It came packed with a cartridge containing six different games, one of which was this Toejam & Earl themed shooter.

You use the Menacer to shoot tomatoes at enemies from the original T&E before they get a chance to shoot back at you and drain your health. The goal of each stage is to hit a point target before you hit the end of the level. If you manage to reach the target, you go onto the next level. If not, you get a “Good shooting … NOT!” voice clip, because, hey, it was 1992. The music and enemy sprites are taken from the original game, but the backgrounds are mostly new. It’s decent fun for a few levels, but it gets pretty boring after that.

Art Alive (1991, Genesis)

This is a simple painting game, released about a year before Mario Paint ever was. It’s hard to make anything with the Genesis D-Pad, but there are stamps you can place of Sonic, Toejam, and Earl.

Wacky Worlds Creativity Studio (1994, Genesis)

This is basically the ‘sequel’ to Art Alive, only you place different stamps across a background instead of drawing. Toejam, Earl, and Tails are stamps you can select and place. There’s not much else to say about this game, except it was one of the very, very few games that supported the Mega Mouse.