

Biking Route 66 for the 90th Anniversary

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The 26th of this month marks 90 years since the inception of the famed “Mother Road of America”: Route 66. The road itself has been made famous over the years by song and film and has been travelled by many people for its nostalgic theme and scenic views. As many people know, Route 66 starts in downtown Chicago, right in front of the Art Institute. From here, the route travels south through Illinois and Missouri before turning and heading southwest. Along the way, the route passes by some of the greatest natural and man-made wonders the region offers to tourists such as the Grand Canyon in Arizona, The St. Louis Arch in Missouri, The Great Plains in Oklahoma, and the glitz and glimmer of Hollywood, California. The road continues west, terminating by the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica, California.

To mark the occasion of the anniversary, many enthusiasts of the road have taken the challenge of traversing between Chicago and Santa Monica on Route 66 by a method of transportation of their choosing. The most popular choice for this long journey has not been cars as many would assume, but bikes. The reason for this is simple, you can no longer drive Route 66. The route itself was decommissioned back in 1985 and the roads that composed the route were either used for other routes, destroyed, or abandoned altogether. Because of this, many find it difficult to drive on the route since it is no longer on any map and has no signage beyond the occasional historical marker. Many have begun lobbying the US Congress and the Department of Transportation to reinstate and rebuild Route 66 to its former glory. For now, however, the best choice for people who want to drive the route is to follow the interstate or highway that most closely matches the path of the original route.

For bikers, the situation is somewhat better. Bikes, with their small size and durability, have a greater ability to follow the original route, especially along those portions of abandoned roadway which are now crumbling into uneven gravel. The 2,451-mile (3,945 kilometer) journey is no small feat, as it takes months of training and preparation to ensure the rider's health and safety along the way. The riders will face generally unpleasant conditions which include trekking through the Mojave Desert, climbing elevation in both Arizona and New Mexico, and generally isolated locations. This is all along the path where resources or help are hard to come by. Despite the risks and challenges, many still make the journey, often travelling in large groups and camping on the side of the road at night to ensure the safety of all the riders.

The journey takes roughly over a month to complete if done with no unnecessary stops along the way, and many of the groups that plan to reach the opposite end of the route

by the anniversary date have already departed from either Chicago or Santa Monica. Along the way, many cities will be celebrating their links to the famed road, including celebrations scheduled in Kingman, Arizona; Gallup New Mexico; Amarillo, Texas; and Springfield, Illinois. Chicago will also be hosting several celebrations across the city this month to commemorate the route's anniversary. The bikers heading towards Chicago should be traversing the state of Arizona or entering the state of New Mexico at the time of this article's publication. Slower riders that left California at a much earlier date should currently be in either Oklahoma or Missouri. The bike riders should begin arriving at the entrance of the Art Institute of Chicago within the next few weeks, with the majority arriving around Thanksgiving weekend.



Photos by Steven Milan Moreno

Retro arcade game review: OutRun

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Ever feel the need to just play a game that's very behind the times and allows you to drive at speeds that would make you sick? Well, I would never put it in such a light, but if you said no to either of those, there clearly isn't enough fun being had in your life. If you said yes in any capacity, I'm going to go ahead and suggest you play OutRun, an arcade-style racing game released in 1986 for arcades and later, the Sega Genesis in 1991. The game was awarded 1987 Game of the Year at the Golden Joystick Awards in 1988 and was the top selling arcade game of 1986.

Gameplay

As it's the most important, let's talk gameplay first. The main goal of the game is to drive as far as you can within the given time limit while also driving as quickly as possible and “outrunning” traffic. The more distance you cover, the higher your score, which will be entered into the leaderboard upon receiving a game over or completing the game. In addition, there are two gear options, L and H, which are slower and faster. L is the default and, according to the game, has you driving at a maximum speed of 110-120 Kmph (you can change to Mph in “options”). Depending on your controller setup, you switch to the H gear by pressing the designated button, thus allowing your car to travel closer to 200 Kmph, which, while faster, is also significantly harder to turn with and brings up the issue of avoiding traffic. The main strategy to acing this game is to time when you change gears and, of course, to avoid any obstacles. If you do happen to run into a car, a tree, or even a rock while in H gear, be prepared to see your car lose the driver and fly into the distance. Now, being a video game and having video game logic, you can simply start driving again after being spun out, putting you back in the game, but at the loss of precious time. The player can extend time by reaching checkpoints, denoted by the game yelling “checkpoint!” In total, you will pass five checkpoints, with a fifth one being the finish line of the game. There are many possible paths that can be followed, allowing for a somewhat different experience each time you play, with

a total of 15 levels available. If you don't make a checkpoint in time, it's game over and you'll have to start the entire game over again. Now, this is all well and good, but how are the visuals?

Graphics

Let's consider that in front of us is a mostly simple game that involves some basic strategic driving. Now consider that this is a game on a 2D plane acting like it's in 3D (read: “ow, my eyes!”). So, what does this mean? Well first, it could mean pain to your eyes, but if

Sound

OutRun has your standard array of skidding tire, revving, bumping, and crashing sounds that you would expect from a racing game, doing its best to make you feel like you're in the driver's seat, and out of it if you happen to crash. As for the soundtrack, well, I do a radio show on WIIT called “Goodbye 70s,” which indeed features music from the 80s, so I should get some biases out of the way. I would be lying if I said I didn't have an obsession, so here is my take on the soundtrack



Photo courtesy SEGA

you get past that, this game has an amazing aesthetic that just screams 80s. If that at least puts some air in your boat or even floats your boat like it does mine, you will probably enjoy this game visually. That said, the 16-bit graphics create an added level of challenge simply due to the limitations of the times, so often you will have trouble figuring out just where you are and when a turn is coming up (besides the road signs). This is a problem of all games from this time, however, but never the less it should be kept in mind. Aside from being clearly from its time, the visual feel of OutRun ranges from sandy beaches and palm trees to mountainous regions. Over time the sun sets as well, and as you get closer to the end of the game you'll get to see a wonderful 16-bit sunset over head, emphasizing the game's relaxing nature and striking a nice counterbalance to an otherwise fast-paced game. Visuals alone are not enough to get the feel of the game across, and as 80s as the game itself looks, the music is no exception.

given my admitted bias. You have the choice of four different background tracks, which you can select before starting the game. The tracks are “Passing Breeze,” “Magical Sound Shower,” “Splash Wave,” and “Step On Beat.” The first track, “Passing Breeze,” has a very calm, tropical sound, featuring melodic synth alongside a pleasant drum beat, giving this feeling of taking a pleasant cruise. “Magical Sound Shower” is the most iconic track from this game, and has more of an upbeat, Caribbean style, featuring a chiptune steel drum, giving a real sense of driving alongside the beach. “Splash Wave” is my favorite track, starting off strong with a fast-paced drum beat and a well-placed “clap track,” progressing into almost a breakbeat, which sounds amazing on a 16-bit MIDI. That said, the track, despite its fast beat, manages to have an on-edge yet relaxing sound, making for an exciting and pleasant cruise. The last track, “Step On Beat,” is essentially a notably funkier “Passing

Breeze,” with a sound somewhat like Sonic the Hedgehog 3's save file select screen (for those familiar with that game, which actually came out later than OutRun). Alongside the gameplay tracks is one titled “Last Wave,” which plays upon receiving a game over or completing the game and reaching the leaderboard. Considering that there are only five music tracks in the entire game, it was important that they all be decent to good in quality, which Sega accomplished. That said, I have a little extra information for the reader.

Extras

Hit me with a magazine and call me Nintendo Power, because I'm about to lay down some cool extras that significantly increase the fun factor of OutRun. This will be a throwback to those who remember games having cheat codes built in. If you're playing the Genesis version, you can press A 11 times, B three times, then C eight times to unlock a special version of the “options” menu called “hyper options,” which includes a stage select option for playing any of the 15 stages whenever you want, a higher difficulty option called “hyper” (max speed is now 300 Kmph), and a “mode” changing option. Mode is interesting because it essentially sets whichever stage you're on to act like a specified stage when you reach the end. For instance, if you change mode to “15” and stage to “01,” then upon completion of stage 01, you will reach the finish line of the game. There isn't a particularly great usage for this, but it certainly adds another layer of fun and experimentation, which I feel games tend to lack now.

Closing comments

If I were to review this game as compared to all others in existence at this moment, it just would not stand up to any degree aside from perhaps the gameplay and music. So, taking this into account, I'm giving this game a 4/5. If you're wondering how to play this game yourself, you can actually find the game at arcades even now. Other than that, you'll be able to acquire the game in some form if you look hard enough. In the near future, look forward to an eventual article reviewing the OutRun official soundtrack (OST) vinyl pressing from Data-Discs!