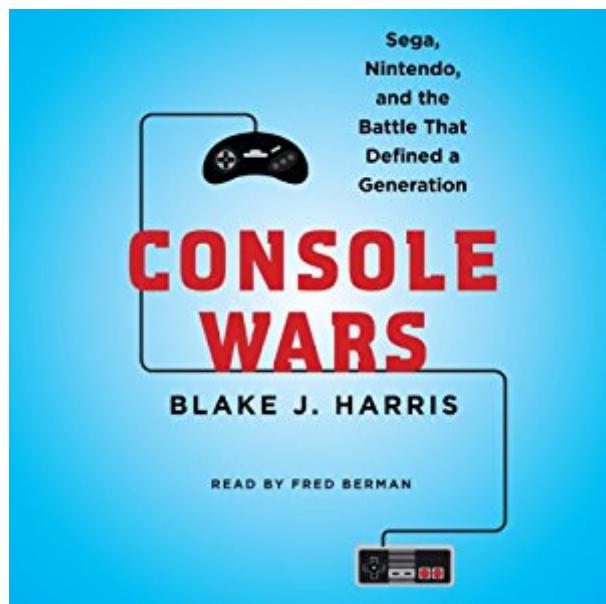


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# Console Wars: Sega, Nintendo, And The Battle That Defined A Generation



## Synopsis

A mesmerizing, behind-the-scenes business thriller that chronicles how Sega, a small, scrappy gaming company led by an unlikely visionary and a team of rebels, took on the juggernaut Nintendo and revolutionized the video-game industry. In 1990, Nintendo had a virtual monopoly on the video-game industry. Sega, on the other hand, was just a faltering arcade company with big aspirations and even bigger personalities. But all that would change with the arrival of Tom Kalinske, a former Mattel executive who knew nothing about video games and everything about fighting uphill battles. His unconventional tactics, combined with the blood, sweat, and bold ideas of his renegade employees, completely transformed Sega and led to a ruthless, David-and-Goliath showdown with Nintendo. Little did he realize that Sega's success would create many new enemies and, most important, make Nintendo stronger than ever. The battle was vicious, relentless, and highly profitable, eventually sparking a global corporate war that would be fought on several fronts: from living rooms and school yards to boardrooms and Congress. It was a once-in-a-lifetime, no-holds-barred conflict that pitted brother against brother, kid against adult, Sonic against Mario, and the United States against Japan. Based on more than 200 interviews with former Sega and Nintendo employees, *Console Wars* is the tale of how Tom Kalinske miraculously turned an industry punch line into a market leader. Blake J. Harris brings into focus the warriors, the strategies, and the battles and explores how they transformed popular culture forever. Ultimately, *Console Wars* is the story of how a humble family man, with an extraordinary imagination and a gift for turning problems into competitive advantages, inspired a team of underdogs to slay a giant and, as a result, give birth to a \$60 billion industry.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Console Wars largely chronicles the period between 1989 and 1995, when Sega battled Nintendo for dominance in the home console market, ending as Sony displaces Sega in the 32-bit era as Nintendo's main competitor. In a sense, it does serve as a sort of sequel to David Sheff's gold-standard account in "Game Over" of the rise of Nintendo in the 80's, which left off at the point where Sega's Genesis had just started to get a serious foothold in the market. However, the styles in which the two authors approach their subjects are very different, and it's interesting to compare them. Sheff's Game Over contained very little conversational dialogue. He wrote his book like a reporter: documenting scenes and incidents by describing the people and particulars involved, the content of what they said, and the effect of their interactions. His book was full of individual quotes, but the large majority of them were presented matter-of-factly as accounts made by the subject either directly to the author in interview, or to another source of record which Sheff was citing. In-scene "dialogue" was used sparingly, and mostly limited to short lines that reflected exactly what was known by the subject or other observers to have been said, or something very close to it. This gave Sheff's book a journalistic crackle, keeping the pace moving, the flow of information constant, and the level of authorial distance removed enough that the reader always maintained a panoramic view of the bigger picture, and didn't get bogged down in superfluous, artificial detail. In contrast, Harris's book is written like a screenplay, with full "scenes" that progress via elaborate, lengthy dialogues between "characters", while novel-esque, detailed stage directions record their precise movements and interior thoughts, all of which can only have been manufactured by the author (as he himself loosely admits in his author's note) based on the factual framework of an interaction that did occur. Where Game Over was a documentary, this book is much more a historical re-enactment. It's obvious that Harris already had a film in mind when he was writing, and the cinematically styled sharp, pithy dialogue (or at least, attempts at such), and conversational set-ups and payoffs were designed to translate easily to the eventual film. This may make the book more engaging than Sheff's reserved style for some, but I found it distracting and a little gratuitous. Irrelevant detail often gets in the way of what's interesting and entertaining about the information. That said, the information and voluminous research this book does contain is incredibly valuable, and makes for a truly rewarding read. The saga of the Sega and Nintendo battle in the US is as fascinating and provoking as any story the business world has to offer, and there's more than a little tragedy in

seeing how Tom Kalinske and Sega of America were able to achieve a brilliant and improbable success, only to be cut off at their knees, in the end, by Sega of Japan. The often clumsily overwritten "reconstructed" dialogue by Harris makes me doubt I'd be interested in any fiction of his, but this particular subject matter is rich enough that my issue with his authorial indulgences is just a quibble. This is by all means a book worth reading.

I'm torn here. I liked the book and it was entertaining like a movie. But the truth is still out there. This was too biased, even if the description warned me that it was going to be. It started off at 5 stars, then lost one when I realized I wasn't going to get Japan's side, and another one when I realized the writing wasn't that good. Many times the dialogue and descriptions feel like an amateur screenplay, although there are flashes of talent a la Michael Crichton. It's shame "Console Wars" is basically a biography of Sega of America's Tom Kalinske (who is awesome, don't get me wrong) as opposed to a straight historical account of Sega vs Nintendo spanning from the early days until Dreamcast (which is not even mentioned in this book). I thought the book would have been more balanced, but Harris decided to make it from Mr. Kalinske's point of view, and makes usfeel sorry for him as an underdog who managed to make a dent in against "Goliath" (in the U.S.). Since Tom is the "good guy", we don't get to question if he was too cocky, if he was justified to be so angry at Nintendo, if he was really sincere about being concerned with video game violence, or why his employees whispered in Al Nilsen's ear that they were going to quit after Al left. The book is a "reenactment book", like the book "Washington's Spies" by Alexander Rose. It's basically a style that tells history via reconstructed (or fictional) dialogue, so it feels like a novel, or in this case a screenplay. Harris had a disclaimer about how he massaged things, but it still is jarring and took me out of the story a few times because Harris just isn't a polished writer. Some of his descriptions are corny at best, and the dialogue treats us like idiots, as it retells or re-frames the scene. If the book was organized it wouldn't have to. But even if it was, Harris likes to have "surprise" scenes- in a history book? The book is organized in a weird way and is not chronological- with tons of flashbacks which feel like double flashbacks, jumping around time, segwaying into personal scenes, focusing on scenes unrelated to the theme, and shifting POVs without revealing who is the focus is yet. It is like Harris felt forced to use the bulk of the quotes he received from the interviews he conducted. I see Harris responding to some reviews and disbelieves that he has to improve his writing skills. My advice: master the basics first, and then experiment. At its heart, it is a business book and valuable to anyone in the industry, or people involved in marketing, manufacturing, venture capitalists, corporate world, etc. Gamers into actually playing games or programmers into game design need

not apply, although gamers in their 30s+ would enjoy the trip down memory lane. The book focuses on the sales and marketing of the top selling games, not the actual gameplay or why the games were popular (besides Sega choosing to market them). So awesome Genesis games like Earthworm Jim, Streets of Rage 2, Gunstar Heroes, Phantasy Star IV, Landstalker, Shinobi III, Shadowrun, Castlevania: Bloodlines, Vectorman, Flashback, Splatterhouse 3, etc didn't make the cut. We get the origin of Ecco the Dolphin, but no mention of its sequel Ecco: The Tides of Time. The focus is on the development and advertising of Sonic the Hedgehog and Joe Montana Football. Even big sellers like NBA Jam and the Genesis version of Street Fighter 2 weren't mentioned (the superior SNES version was focused on). The sales team celebrated when Sega's Mortal Kombat 1 beat the SNES version in sales and magazine reviews, and Tom framed it as the face to face battle of which system is better, but there was no discussion about how MK2 was superior for the SNES, or how Street Fighter 2 for Sega was inferior. The book was entertaining, and I couldn't put it down. So in the end, I guess that's all Harris wanted. But as I digest everything, I really wish the Japanese side of Sega, Nintendo, and Sony were more accessible so we could hear their side, which is described as villainous. Most of his sources were from the American sales team. One can't help but notice that the message of the book is that "the tortoise beats the hare, but the hare was handcuffed by racist Japanese businessmen and engineers." In conclusion, this is not a straight history book- it is a tribute to Tom Kalinske; there are even many personal scenes where Tom is with his family or helping out a dying little girl. It is not even a Genesis vs Super Nintendo 16-bit battle, most of it is Genesis vs 8-bit Nintendo. Game Gear vs Game Boy is rarely mentioned, because it doesn't fit the story. Why was Sega CD a flop? The other video game history books are more clear. So... buyer beware. After reading this, just realize you didn't get the whole story. The real title is "SEGA! The Rise and Fall" or the rather mundane "The Biography of Tom Kalinske".

I enjoyed the book overall, but was disappointed the book focused entirely on marketing and sales and basically ignored engineering and software development. There are occasional allusions to technology (16 bits vs. 8 bits, Nintendo's mode 7, Sega's Blast Processing, etc.) but basically this book implies the console wars were won and lost by the sales and marketing teams of Nintendo and Sega. The book is also very focused on the Sega Genesis and the NES/SNES. Very little is written on the Sega Saturn and its commercial failure. I understand the best engineering doesn't always win (Betamax), but the exclusive focus on marketing and sales seems unbalanced and superficial. I was hoping for a more balanced treatment of the subject including more details on the technical innovations in each generation of the console hardware and the incredible creativity and technical

accomplishments of the game developers of this era. Instead, we are treated to stories of marketing and sales staff arguing over first-class airplane seats.

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