

SONIC Teachers Notes Annemaree O'Brien

Super Sonic: video games and learning

*From the enormous Space War! of the 1960s through to Pong of the 70s, Space Invaders of the 80s, Sonic the Hedgehog of the 90s and most recently, Pokémon, computer games have become a central part of leisure time.*¹

GameOn at: <http://www.gameonweb.co.uk/education/unit1.html> (retrieved 21/06/05)



Playing games is one of the best things about being a kid and playing video games is now part of the fun. Video games are highly visible examples of the new information and communication technologies revolutionising our world, and are found in the hands, homes, hearts and imaginations of lucky kids (and adults) around the world.

ACMI celebrates the short but intense history of video games with the exciting, interactive *Sonic the Hedgehog – Icon of our Times* exhibition, from June 22 – October 2, 2005. Evolving with the games industry itself, Sonic has journeyed from simple 16-bit 2D graphic levels first released in 1991 to high-resolution 3D graphic worlds in 2005. Sonic The Hedgehog, the cool but cute blue game character is now so well known that his likeness can be identified by those who have never held a game controller or felt the thrill of game play.

What is it about this speedy blue hedgehog that has made him so appealing and so enduring? It is not just that Sonic has a cool persona and a charming devil-may-care attitude. Sonic has come to represent the magical blend when a game gets the balance right between the technology, the mechanics, the interface, the challenge, the look and the hero. The cutting edge physics and fluid gameplay of the original game embraced the principles that a great game should be 'easy to learn but hard to master'.

What can we learn from and about Sonic the hedgehog in the classroom? What can students learn from video games? What can we teach from them?

¹ GameOn at: <http://www.gameonweb.co.uk/education/unit1.html> (retrieved 30/06/05)



Screen Education

These activities invite students in Years 5-9 to reflect on the games they play, to examine and evaluate video games, explore the development of game characters – in particular Sonic The Hedgehog, and to create their own game characters. Thinking and talking about video games encourages questioning and learning more about how games work and how they are made — developing essential screen literacy skills and knowledge.

Most activities are open-ended, and can be modified for use with younger or older students. While designed to support a class excursion to the Sonic: Icon of our Times exhibition at ACMI, users can also choose to adapt ideas and suggested activities to suit their own situation.





Introduction – the games we play

What games do we play? Brainstorm a class list of all games played including board games, card games and outside games.

As a class, discuss how these games could be grouped into different categories. For example suggestions might include: board games, handheld games, computer games, games for one player, games for two or more players, team games, non video games and outside games.

Decide on at least three categories that make sense to the students. Create a worksheet using these agreed categories. Have students record their three favourite game of each type. For example:

Hamish's Favourite Games		
Handheld video games	Computer video games	Other games
<i>Pokemon Sapphire</i>	<i>Sonic Heroes</i>	<i>Chess</i>
<i>Sims In the City - Urbz</i>	<i>Age of Empires</i>	<i>Basketball</i>
<i>Harry Potter</i>		<i>Backgammon</i>

Sarah's Favourite Games		
Handheld video games	Computer video games	Other games
<i>Harry Potter</i>	<i>Dragonland</i>	<i>Bat tennis</i>
<i>Pokemon Sapphire</i>	<i>Mario Party</i>	<i>Chinese Checkers</i>
<i>Tetris</i>	<i>Karaoke Dance Party</i>	<i>Monopoly</i>

Compile a master list of all this games information. Create a new worksheet using the class categories and have students sort the class games information accordingly.



Screen Education

It could also be interesting to include gender to see what similarities and differences may occur. For example:

Class Games Survey (example)	
• Most popular handheld video game	-----
• Most popular computer video game	-----
• Most popular other game	-----
• Most popular game with boys	-----
• Most popular game with girls	-----

This information could also be presented as graphs.

As a class, look at these results, draw attention to the information that has emerged and write one or two summary statements.

Students individually or in pairs write more summary statements based on the information gathered.

As a class, discuss what students like about games. Why do you like playing them? Students reflect on these questions and respond using **Worksheet 1**.

Video games

Go back to the survey data and find out how many students play video games.

List all the different video games included from the survey.

Have students add in the game classification for each game on the list.







Game Classifications

As with film and TV texts, it is important in the classroom situation to ensure that any games demonstrated, studied and brought to school for this purpose are within the correct classification guidelines for the age group.

Discuss game classification with the class. Explain that in Australia, by law, all computer and video games (including those in arcades) have to be classified by the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC). Video covers and arcade booths must clearly display the game’s classification and ‘consumer advice’, which indicates the chief reasons why the game got its classification (for example ‘medium level violence’).

Game classifications are:

Classification	Meaning	Guidelines
 General	General	For general audience. The content is very mild.
 Parental guidance recommended	General	Not recommended for use by persons under 15 without guidance from parents or guardians. The content is mild.
 Recommended for mature audiences	Mature	Not recommended for persons under 15 years of age. No legal restrictions on access. The content is moderate in impact.
 Not suitable for people under 15. Under 15s must be accompanied by a parent or adult guardian RESTRICTED	Mature Restricted	Unsuitable for persons under 15 years of age. Content is strong. Legally restricted category.

For more information about the classification system go to the Teachers page at the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) website at: <http://www.oflc.gov.au/> Their fact sheet called **“Information For Schools: Showing Films and Playing Computer Games”** explains these restrictions.

Young Media Australia also has some useful fact sheets on video games and classification for teachers and parents at http://www.youngmedia.org.au/publications/fact_sheets.htm#games

Identify the games which have the appropriate classification for the age level of the students. Use these games for the following activities.



Game Genres

Discuss the different game genres and sort the listed games accordingly.

- What type of games are the most popular?
- What types of games are more popular with girls?
- Why do you think this is so?
- With types of games are more popular with girls?
- Why do you think this is so?

There are many different types of games and below are some of the most important games genres.

Game Genres

- **Platform** Relatively simple games, the player chases or avoids characters by jumping onto platforms. (Eg. *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Super Mario Brothers*.)
- **First Person Shooter** (FPS) FPS emphasize shooting and combat and place the player behind a gun or weapon, giving the player the feeling of "being there." These games tend to be very violent. (Eg. *Quake*, *Unreal*, *Grand Theft Auto*.)
- **Real-Time Strategy** (RTS). The player can strategically direct battles, the game progresses continuous in "real time", rather than turn-by-turn. (Eg. *Age of Empires*, *Command & Conquer*, *Close Combat*.)
- **Role Playing** (RPGs) The player goes on a quest of some sort overcoming obstacles on the way. (Eg. *Everquest*, *Morrowind*, *Ultima*, *Baldur's Gate*.)
- **Adventure** The story is crucial and the player follows clues or uses problem-solving to overcome obstacles and puzzles which must be solved to continue the story. Can be set in fantasy worlds or ancient times. (Eg. *Myst*, *Syberia*, *Dark Fall*, *Monkey Island*.)
- **Simulators** —The player participates in simulated sporting situations, car races or flies an aircraft. (Eg. *Links*, *Sports Car G2*, *V8 Super Cars*, *Flight Simulator*.)²

² For more detailed information about computer and video game genres go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Computer_and_video_game_genres (retrieved 30/06/05)



Reviewing Games – Quality Assurance

Discuss and research the qualities students might expect good games to have. Look at a series of current games reviews for ideas. Try newspaper reviews, game magazines or search for suitable examples on line – there are loads of them.

List all the possible review criteria. For example:

Games Review Criteria
ease of use
instructions
characters
fun
story
game challenge
music and sound
game play
frustration
re-playability

Develop a class checklist of game assessment criteria: In pairs, students select up to four qualities they see as the most important to include in a review.

Consolidate results from all groups into a whole class list with the most popular choices at the top. These top four could become the agreed evaluation criteria, or after discussion, the group might agree on preferred criteria.

Decide on an evaluation system and ratings. For example:

Example Rating Model

-  excellent,
-  pretty good
-  OK - acceptable
-  not good
-  really bad, useless
- ? don't know



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Students complete their reviews for each of their games eg:

Sample Worksheet

Review Criterion Classification	Game 1 Rating: G	Game 2 Rating: G	Game 3 Rating: G (8+)	Game 4 Rating: G
1. Ease of use				
2. Game Challenge				
3. Game Play – Fun				
5. Characters				
Overall Score				
Comment				

Students could bring along examples of the highest reviewed (appropriately classified) games to discuss, view and play.

Viewing the best games: If possible, project computer games onto a large screen using a data projector so the class can watch players and game attributes can be demonstrated and discussed.

If available, a GameCube can be used to project Gameboy (Nintendo) games onto a large screen. An alternative is to have a player play a handheld game under a camera and this image is projected through a data projector onto a large screen so all can watch.

Have a games day where the most popular (appropriately classified) video games are brought to school by those have them and are played in small groups with students taking turns to play and teach new games and game play strategies.

Discuss and compare game genres, characters and game play. Add any further information noted about each example to the list already made.



Game Characters



Lara Croft
Tomb Raider
Eidos Interactive



Mario
Super Mario Brothers
Nintendo



Sonic
Sonic The Hedgehog
Sega



Jin
Tekken 5
Namco

The chief goal of a game developer is to create the most intensely enjoyable and immersive experience possible. An ideal game would envelop the player, drawing them so deeply into the digital reality of the game that they quite literally forget it's not their native environment. Character is an effective tool to help build that immersion... People want stories about things with which they can identify ... and whether we identify with hedgehogs or space marines, the core of the story is always the same. Character is the crucial element to powerful narrative; it cannot be set aside.³

Favorite Game Characters

Have students describe what they like about their favourite game character — appearance and personality.

Make a class chart, combining all this information. You might also record how many class members selected each character and rank them from the most popular choice to the least popular.

Character's Name	Male/ Female	What we like about his/her appearance	What we like about his/her personality	Chosen by: (# of boys, # of girls)

³ Sakey, Matthew The Character Issue *Understanding character in video games* Unpublished article, ACMI 2005



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Discuss this information and ask students to comment on the choices made and the reasons for them, using questions such as:

- What are the most popular features noted about the characters' looks? What might this mean?
- What are the most popular features noted about the characters' personalities? What might this mean?
- Are there any similarities between the most popular characters? What might this mean?
- How many female characters were selected in comparison to male? Why do you think this is?
- Is there a difference between girls' choices and boys' choices? If yes, why?
- What other interesting things can you see in this information?

Make a poster listing all the characteristics that students look for and enjoy in a game character and display in the classroom for future reference.





Introduction to Sonic the blue hedgehog

“Characters produced from games are naturally born of the fun elements of the games. ...It’s different in that respect from animated cartoon and movies. You think about the game itself and then create characters.”⁴

Sonic the ultra fast blue hedgehog became the icon for Sega 14 years ago when artists Yuji Naka and Naoto Ohshima were put in charge of creating Sega's Next Big Thing. Their task was to make a character that was instantly likable but also controllable within the games technical specifications, including a single-button design. Yuji Naka Lead Programmer of the original *Sonic The Hedgehog* and now Head of Team Sonic explains: “The game’s movement and flow are the necessary reason why Sonic was born.”⁵

Sonic’s speed, the characteristic that defines him as a unique game character “is meshed intimately into the game mechanics”. His name reinforces it, as does his look and the game’s innovative sound design. Sonic could run, jump and roll at significantly higher speeds than any platformer at the time, a feature which exploited the performance capacity of Sega’s Mega Drive processor. It was further enhanced by the fact that Sonic’s jump attack did not require him to slow or stop. Other features help define Sonic’s personality. He greets the player with a grin, eyeballs them and wags his finger at them in a cheeky reproach. Leave him waiting and he will turn arch an eyebrow and start tapping his foot in impatience.⁶

In a history of Sonic, Davis and Shoemaker also note that:

His spiky back made for a good weapon, so jumping was combined with attacking to create the famous spin attack. Add a face that looks eerily like Felix The Cat, a good dose of attitude, and enough energy in his system to equal one hundred caffeine addicts, and you have Sonic The Hedgehog. Onward to adventure!⁷

Analysing the Sonic Characters

Distribute copies of Worksheet 2, Part A to each student/group. Have students list words that best describe each character’s personality based on information *from the images only* to explore these characters and how they are represented.

Groups can report their responses back to the class and compile a class list of all characteristics noted for each character. Compare these responses. Did everyone interpret the characters in the same way? Discuss.

⁴ Saltzman, Mark , “Game Design: Secrets of the Sages – Creating Characters, Storyboarding, and the Design Documents”, Gamasutra 15 March 2002 URL: http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20020308/saltzman_01.htm (retrieved 30/06/05)

⁵ Yuji Naka quoted Saltzman , ibid.

⁶ Stuckey, Helen, ‘Sonic the Hedgehog: Icon of our times’ ACMI brochure June 2005

⁷ Davis, Cameron and Shoemaker Brad *The History of Sonic The Hedgehog* at: http://www.gamespot.com/gamespot/features/video/hist_sonic/index.html (Retrieved 30/06/2005)



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Exploring character and playing the game

Other important character traits emerge as you play the game. This information comes from audio, dialogue and movement.

What do we look for? In action, the four main Sonic characters are full of their own personality and unique actions. For example:

- *Sonic* dashes at high speed and attacks while rolling.
- *Tails* flies as he spins his two tails.
- *Knuckles* glides strongly in the sky.
- *Amy* jumps and attacks with her Piko Piko Hammer.
- In contrast, *Dr Eggman* isn't fast on foot but his intelligence and ability to build mechanical monstrosities makes him a formidable foe.

Students complete **Worksheet 2 Part B** noting the attributes of selected characters through playing, and observing others playing some Sonic games.

Creating new Sonic Characters

...If you're going to expect players to spend dozens of hours with a character you're creating, at the very least you want that character to be interesting, easy to identify with, and hopefully very likeable as well. The more a player can get into the skin of the character or characters they're controlling, the more the experience becomes something that's happening to you, rather than something you're doing.⁸

The following activities focus on game character design and explore the decisions a game maker makes to 'bring their character to life'.

⁸ Meretzky, Steve 'Building Character: An Analysis of Character Creation' Gamasutra November 20, 2001 URL: http://www.gamasutra.com/resource_guide/20011119/meretzky_01.htm (Retrieved 30/06/2005)

Who are they?

Explain that the task is to create two new Sonic characters, a good one and an evil one. Discuss the concept of good and evil game characters. Students compare and analyse the information they have collected about two Sonic characters, a good and an evil one. Eg Sonic or Tails compared to Dr Eggman.



Tails



Dr Eggman

Discuss the new character, Shadow the Hedgehog a dark incarnation of Sonic the Hedgehog. Have students reflect on and discuss what sort of a character Shadow might be.

Examine good and evil characters in comic books, cartoons, photographs, and picture books. Compare and contrast how good and evil characters are portrayed in these sources and in computer games.

Use descriptive words to describe the characters.

Discuss how good and evil characteristics are conveyed by visual clues and use **Worksheet 3** to record information from a selection of characters.

Character profiles

When developing a game character, the designer firstly has to answer some key questions and all of this information influences the development and final look of the character. Game developer, Steve Meretzky explains that before you start developing a new character, you need to know and thoroughly understand the character.

“You've got to become the world's biggest expert on them, even if you end up creating 10 times as much background as you'll ever use. That way, once you start figuring out what your character will do in a given situation, you won't have to figure out, you'll know.”⁹

⁹ ibid



Have students create a background list for their new Sonic character using **Worksheet 4**. Encourage them to break gender stereotypes in their character design.

You may wish to extend students using **Worksheet 5** and have them create a back-story or background for their Sonic characters as well. This is where the details of who their character is and why, are fleshed out.

Who is this character?

When the worksheet is complete, students can write a brief paragraph description of their character. For example a Sonic character description (from a fan site) reads:



*Name: Sonic the Hedgehog
Species: Hedgehog
Sex: Male
Age: 15
Height: 100cm (3.3ft)
Weight: 35kg (77lbs)
Abilities: Running speed that exceeds Mach 1, spin attack
Weaknesses: Impatience, he can't swim
Likes: Music, fast things
Dislikes: Tears, slow things*

...Whether he's racing against gravity on towering skyscrapers or just chilling on the beach, he'll usually be found having fun. Never one to get snagged on regrets of the past, Sonic's eyes are set firmly on the horizon, and he's got the speed it takes to get him there. He's always around to put a kink into the world conquest schemes of his long-time enemy, Dr. Eggman. Utilizing his mad speed and spinning abilities, Sonic becomes a blazing, unstoppable pinball of doom and always manages to out-manuever Eggman's mechanical monstrosities. While he's usually found alone, Sonic is very close friends with Miles "Tails" Prower, a young fox who idolizes him. He's (usually) on pretty good terms with his rival, Knuckles the Echidna, and will stop at nothing to avoid an encounter with Amy Rose, his self-proclaimed girlfriend. 10

¹⁰ The Greenhill Zone "Sonic the Hedgehog" <http://ghz.emulationzone.org/sonic/encyclopedia/index.html> (retrieved 30/06/05)



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What does your character look like?

Revisit the earlier discussion of all the characteristics that students look for and enjoy in their favourite game characters and remind them to consider these along with the following guidelines.

Look at the Sonic image again.

The gloves and sneakers clearly define his hands and feet from his body when in motion. His oversized head a cartoon standard for cute appeal, exaggerates his eyes and face enabling his distinctive expressions to be visible to the player. The white gloves and red sneakers clearly define his hands and his feet from his body when in motion.¹¹

Discuss how the character has been created through shape, colour and symbols and explore the drawing guidelines below.

Some Guidelines For Drawing a Game Character

- Try different combinations of head and body sizes. What shapes work best? Is your character a square, rectangle, triangle or circle shape?
- Think of some special look or feature for your character to make them different. Try different shapes for the body, head, arms and legs, eyes, mouth, eyebrows, nose etc.
- Concentrate on facial expressions, hands and feet, and gestures.
 - For a **good character** enlarge the eyes and pupils. A smile and small ears all give the impression of a friendly character.
 - To create an **evil character**, try small beady eyes, sharply angled eyebrows, a slight darkening around the eyes and large upright pointed ears. Try a large nose and a thin hard mouth or sharp teeth.
- Is there a special feature that may be part of your character's abilities? For example arms that elongate so the character can reach things from far away.
- What clothes or costume does he/she wear? This is important because game characters usually wear the same costume most of the time.
- Create some symbols or icons and special tools.
- Above all — KEEP IT SIMPLE.

Give students two minutes to sketch a rough outline of a possible Sonic character. Discuss the main features that students have focused on in their drawings.

¹¹ Stuckey, op-cit



Give students time to share with a partner and to change or further develop their character sketch.

A focus on colour

Discuss the impact of colour in creating characters in animation - for example, the colours used for Sonic are intense, flat colours. Colour can also be used to distinguish certain features of each character - for example Amy Rose is pink and Knuckles is red.



AmyRose



Shadow

In games colour often carries meaning at multiple levels, quite subtly contributing to character - for example a sense of menace. Discuss some of the understandings we have about colour in our culture - for example: red/orange are often seen as active colours which come to the foreground and blue/green can be seen as cool colours which can be seen as inactive and receding. Red and green are often used to convey aggression and anger or jealousy. What does a red face convey as opposed to a blue face?

Have students individually list common colours such as red, blue, yellow, green, black, purple, white and brown and write next to them the feelings they associate with each colour. Compare responses as a class and create a master list of common responses to each colour. Students can look for examples of colour used in this way, in picture books, magazines and in other animation series to back up these responses.

Students can also explore what happens to the intensity of colours when they are placed next to each other, for example blue next to yellow and red next to green. Ask students to consider some of the ways colour is used in a variety of well-known games and discuss.

Students can now decide on the colours for their game character.



Naming Characters

Naming characters is a vitally important step. A good name makes a character memorable and it is often what gives people their first impression of what the character is all about. As game developer Steve Meretsky says:

...a character's name should be interesting and memorable. In addition, it should be euphonious, pleasing to the ear, and rolling off the tongue rather than twisting it. It should fit the character. Studs Steelpike probably wouldn't be a good name for the skinny accountant who solves crimes with his amazingly logical mind... an excellent name [is] easy to say and remember, and ... instantly creates just the right mental image.¹²

Encourage students to think and to research possible character names before they make their final decision. Review class lists from earlier and think of as many successful characters in games, films, TV programs and books that you can. Examine how well their names conjure up the right first image. Meretsky suggests examples such as the sinister Darth Vader and the mischievous Bugs Bunny and many of JK Rowling's Harry Potter characters.

Follow up activities:

Once the design is finished, students can do some of the following activities to bring their character to life.

- Draw/paint a picture of their character showing how he/she looks including clothes, the type of world he/she comes from.
- Create a PowerPoint presentation.
- Make 3D (three-dimensional) characters using plasticine or modeling clay.
- Create large paintings or collages of the characters (good and evil).
- Use an animation program such as *Frame Thief* (Mac) or *Stop Motion Pro* (PC and Mac) and experiment with animating characters.
- Animate a sequence of still images using a program such as PowerPoint, QuickTime-Pro or PaintShop-Pro to show how characters move.

¹² Meretzky ibid



Screen Education

Further Resources

Game Genres for more detailed information about computer and video game genres go to:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Computer_and_video_game_genres
(retrieved 30/06/05)

Gameon Education Resource A classroom teacher's pack for an arts based program inspired by computer games at: <http://www.gameonweb.co.uk/education/>
(retrieved 30 June 2005)

Interactive Timeline of Games – from 1952 to the present, in the PBS site, *The Video Game Revolution* go to
http://www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/history/timeline_flash.html (retrieved 30 June 2005)

The **Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC)** website has a teachers page and fact sheets “Information For Schools: Showing Films and Playing Computer Games” at: <http://www.oflc.gov.au/>.

The Impact of Games – essays exploring a range of topics and gaming issues. Go to <http://www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/impact/essays.html> (retrieved 30 June 2005)

The **Sonic the Hedgehog encyclopedia** tells you everything you have ever wanted to know about Sonic. Go to
<http://ghz.emulationzone.org/sonic/encyclopedia/index.html>

For more **Sonic character profiles** go to <http://www.concept-mobius.com/info/realcharacterprofileindex.htm>

Young Media Australia also has some useful fact sheets on video games and classification for teachers and parents at
http://www.youngmedia.org.au/publications/fact_sheets.htm#games



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<http://ghz.emulationzone.org/sonic/encyclopedia/index.html> (retrieved 30/06/05)



Sonic Worksheet 1

Name:

My favourite game is

because

.....

.....

Playing games makes me feel

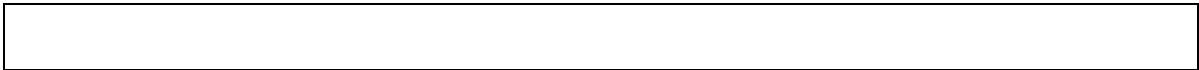
.....

.....







.....

.....

My favourite game



Sonic Characters

<p>Sonic</p> 	<p>AmyRose</p> 
<p>Tails</p> 	<p>Knuckles</p> 
<p>Shadow</p> 	<p>Dr Eggman (Robotnik)</p> 



Sonic Worksheet 2

Name:

Part A Sonic Characters – visual attributes	
Character Name:	
Body Features: (posture, gesture facial expression)	
Visual Features: (clothing, accessories, hairstyling, colours, physical attributes)	
Part B Sonic Character Attributes	
Gesture and Movement (gestures and movement; facial expressions)	
Audio attributes – music and SFX. (Character dialogue – consider the tone, speed and accent of the voice.)	
Character Attributes – likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, positive personality traits, negative personality traits and special abilities.	



Sonic Worksheet 3

Name:

Characteristics	Good characters		Evil characters	
Name				
Colours				
Facial features				
Clothes				
Expression/gestures				



Sonic Worksheet 4

Name:

My Sonic Character's Background	
Male or female?	
Good or evil?	
Animal or human?	
Age	
Personality traits (eg: Shy or outgoing? Greedy or generous?)	
Abilities	
Clothes	
Favourite books, movies, etc.	
Favorite foods	
Favorite activities	
Hobbies	
Dislikes	
Interesting or important possessions	
Weaknesses	
Fears	
Unusual talents	



Sonic Worksheet 5

Name:

My Sonic Character's Back-story
Born where?
Lives where?
Level of education?
Friends
What were the traumatic moments in the character's life?
What were his/her biggest triumphs?
What's the best thing that could happen to your character?
The worst thing?