Sonic 3 ????? (and Sonic Adventure 2 ?????)

I did not re-watch Sonic the Hedgehog 1 and 2 before seeing Sonic the Hedgehog 3, so it's been a while since I've seen them. But I remember enjoying Sonic 1 as a fun but kind of forgettable jaunt and 2 as fairly mediocre. So my expectations of 3 were not very high, but I wanted to see the movie, for the simple reason that the movie introduces Shadow the Hedgehog.

Shadow is like if Sonic were edgy and dark, and he's one of the best things that happened to the Sonic franchise. In the games, Shadow makes his first appearance in Sonic Adventure 2 from 2001, which was the second 3D Sonic game to be released, and also, the first Sonic game I ever played. Yes, I am a dirty heathen who played 3D Sonic before 2D Sonic, and I loved it. I still love it. It's hard for me to explain my love for this game, because this game is, in my opinion, both the best 3D Sonic game ever released, and a hot pile of garbage. But for this essay, I'm concerned mostly with its story.

The story, as it's presented in the game, is full of cliches and tropes, plot holes and nonsense, characters showing up at random places, and scenes that don't quite follow from the last. This is a story where Tails realizes that the president is on a video call with Dr. Eggman, so Sonic and Tails race to intercept the President's limo, jump in, interrupt delicate negotiations involving the lives of everyone on earth, trace the call to find out where Eggman is, and leave without so much as a thanks. And at least in the version I played, Sonic Adventure 2 Battle for the GameCube in English, the characters have awkward pauses or interrupt each other in hilarious ways that were clearly not intended by the developers. Underneath the bad acting, timing problems, and awkward shaping of the plot to fit gameplay, however, is surprisingly deep lore that is only hinted at during the game and its cinematics. I myself had to watch a Youtube video to understand the full backstory. But the mystery and ambiguity in the way that Shadow's origins are presented is part of the story, not a flaw in the storytelling. Shadow himself does not have a full memory of his own past, and struggles to figure out who he is.

In fact, the whole structure of the game supports the story of Shadow struggling to understand his own nature. The game is organized into two main campaigns: the good campaign where you play as the archetypal good guys Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles, and the evil campaign where you play as the "bad" guys Shadow, Dr. Eggman, and Rouge the Bat. Once you beat both campaigns, the two stories merge into one for the finale campaign, where the good and evil characters have to work together to defeat the true final boss.

The plot hinges on events that happened 50 years ago, which Shadow keeps having flashbacks to. Shadow was an experiment created on the research facility and space colony ARK by Gerald Robotnik, the grandfather of Dr. Eggman. Gerald was attempting to create the "ultimate lifeform"

through Project Shadow. Gerald also had a granddaughter, Maria, who had a close bond with Shadow. But eventually the government's military, G.U.N., "shut down" the research by murdering everyone on ARK. Maria helped Shadow escape, but died in the process. Her last words to Shadow ring in his memory, but his memory isn't complete, and he thinks she wanted him to exact revenge on all of earth for her death. Shadow is captured and put on ice for 50 years until Dr. Eggman frees him, not knowing Shadow's full history. Together they start collecting chaos emeralds to power ARK's planet-busting weapon, the Eclipse Cannon. Rouge the Bat is also here, ostensibly helping them collect Emeralds, though secretly she is actually a spy working for the President. Eventually they have 6 out of 7 emeralds, enough to make a display of the Eclipse Cannon's power by destroying half of the moon.

Meanwhile Sonic has been mistaken for Shadow since they look alike, and is running from G.U.N., and he and Tails, Knuckles, and Amy (Sonic's wannabe girlfriend) are trying to find Dr. Eggman. Eventually they locate him on ARK, and Tails creates a fake Chaos Emerald that has the same properties as a real chaos emerald, but with less power, which for some reason means that it will backfire and destroy the Eclipse Cannon if it is used to power it.

But unwittingly, all of them are playing into the hands of the long dead Gerald Robotnik, who "went insane" after years in the custody of G.U.N. and while pretending to work for G.U.N., programmed the station to crash into Earth, completely annihilating the planet, whenever the 7 chaos emeralds were used to activate the weapon. So when Sonic places the Chaos emerald in the Eclipse Cannon, the Cannon is destroyed, but ARK begins to plummet to Earth, guided by a creature who may be the actual "ultimate lifeform" instead of Shadow. Until the discovery of this creature, Shadow found purpose and identity in being the ultimate lifeform, but now he questions even his own identity. In the end, Shadow properly remembers that Maria wanted him to protect earth, not destroy it. He (seemingly) sacrifices himself to save earth, finally feeling that he has achieved his own self made purpose, born out of his love for Maria.

Because of the awkward way that the story is told, I didn't take Shadow seriously at first. He seemed melodramatic and emo for no reason to me. It was only after multiple play-throughs that I started to appreciate the melodrama and look past the polygonal animation and voice acting to see that Shadow is not a one dimensional character. His motivations make sense, and he grows from feeling anger and wanting revenge because of the pain in his past to letting that pain be a motivation to help others. There's a scene in the middle of the game where Rouge is trapped in a building that is about to blow up, and we see Shadow experiencing a flashback to Maria's death cut together with the image of Rouge about to die. Shadow then decides to save Rouge to spare her from the same fate as Maria. He plays it off as if he did it for selfish reasons, but the cracks are already starting to form in his bad boy persona. Shadow is not an evil character, he's just in pain, and honestly, he has good reasons to rebel, at least against the government that killed his friend.

Sonic also has an interesting character arc, or at least is set up to have one. He is mistaken for Shadow, who is just as fast as he is. Sonic finds himself fighting against the authorities, even though he is usually thought of at the "good guy." Sonic accuses Shadow of being a fake hedgehog, but the truth is that Shadow was created 50 years ago, and presumably Sonic is not 50 years old. Sonic, just like Shadow, needs to let go of the story he tells about himself that he's the fastest

hedgehog in the world, and Shadow is just a fake hedgehog, and instead work with Shadow to save earth.

With all of this story, it seems that it would be easy for Sega to make Sonic the Hedgehog 3 a great movie. Or just a good movie. Alas, it was not to be. Three major things hindered this movie from being great, or honestly, even watchable. First, the previous two movies set up human characters not found in the games, namely Tom and Maddie Wachowski. The movie is constrained to the previous canon, and the idea that these humans need to be main characters. They just get in the way, and a whole unnecessary, campy subplot has to be created to have something for them to do.

Second, the movie tries to be about a theme of teamwork, and how badly things go when you try to do things on your own. The lesson falls flat and feels preachy. Sonic Adventure 2 was not about teamwork, though there was plenty of teamwork in it. It was about identity, and about the nature of good and evil. Teamwork featured in the game as a result of figuring out how one's identity works to enhance a team's capabilities. And the third reason this movie fails, is Jim Carrey.

Jim Carrey is the worst thing that happened to this movie. He takes up an inordinate amount of screen time, and reduces the characters of both Dr. Eggman, and Gerald Robotnik into mere slapstick humor. It was painful to watch. I did not want to see Jim Carrey slap his belly around for a minute straight, or break the fourth wall by looking at the camera and tell us that he's one actor playing two characters, or have a fight with his grandfather that references the Green Lantern movie. I crave sincerity in my Hollywood blockbusters, something that Marvel has made all but obsolete. Sonic Adventure 2, despite its numerous flaws, is extremely sincere. Even though I laugh when the sincerity doesn't hit like it's meant to, that seriousness drives a plot that is unashamed of its silly nature and allows the audience to accept its reality and be part of the story.

The elements of a good story are here in Sonic 3, in all their sincerity. Maria features prominently, with a largely similar plotline as in Sonic Adventure 2. Shadow retains his seriousness, and the movie left me wishing I could have seen a movie with Shadow as the main character, not Dr. Eggman, or Tom Wachowski, or even Sonic. Keanu Reeves was obviously the perfect voice for Shadow, and Shadow has a similar arc of wanting revenge, and eventually wanting to help save earth. Ultimately this movie would have been watchable with about ten percent of Jim Carrey, and it would have been great if it were reworked with Shadow as the main character. As it is, I cannot recommend it. Can we all just pretend like the cinematics of Sonic Adventure 2 is the real Sonic the Hedgehog 3? If that's the case, I give it 5 stars out of 5. Go watch that Youtube video, or better yet, play the game. Otherwise, if you're wanting to see the movie in theaters, I give it 2 stars out of 5. At least Shadow is in it, but it could have been a masterpiece.

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