

# A G.U.N. To Their Heads

## The Faux Feminism of SA2

[TOBI TONTIC]

The inciting incident of Sonic Adventure 2 (SA2) concerns the murder of a 12-year-old girl, shot dead just off-screen in a CIA cover-up of illegal genetic experiments. Shortly after, the plot proper begins when a 3-foot talking hedgehog is branded a terrorist, leaps from a helicopter, and snowboards down the sloping streets of San Francisco with the American military in hot pursuit. To call this game “inconsistent” seems an understatement. To call it feminist is absurd. Yet, that’s what I thought for many years, misled by the notion that female involvement equals female empowerment. Released in 2001, SA2 follows the basic structure of a cheesy action flick, occasionally veering into ill-advised bouts of existentialist philosophy. But it’s just this reckless disregard for tone and logic that drew me to it when I was nine. My favorite part was the brash, rebellious cast of characters who acted against one another, following clashing motivations to move the story forward. Much of this conflict arises between male and female characters engaging in rivalries. SA2 is a game where male motivations are valorized and females’ trivialized, reinforcing the dominant ideology or “hegemony” of the broader culture, despite an apparent feminist lean.<sup>1</sup> I will examine the character dynamics of Sonic/Amy, whose motivations for adventuring display a cliché pattern of masculine action and feminine reaction. Then Rouge/Knuckles, whose visual design recreates potentially harmful stereotypes of ideal men and women. To perform this analysis, I will engage a radical feminist framework described by Deanna Sellnow as criticizing how the dominant culture struggles to keep women in their prescribed social roles and undermines attempts to escape by displaying characters who are unusual or unhappy and traditionally masculine roles and maintaining a male-focused perspective for an assumed male audience, in what’s called the “male

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<sup>1</sup> Deanna Sellnow, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts* (Orlando: University of Central Florida, 2017), 139.

gaze.”<sup>2</sup> An arrangement which, as you might imagine, plays out poorly for the girls in the game, and in the audience.

This boy-centrism manifests in Sonic (the aforementioned snowboarder), Knuckles (a long-time frenemy), and other male characters, who facilitate the narrative, Sonic rebelling against the stifling authoritarianism of the Guardian Unit of Nations (G.U.N), and Knuckles, stoic protector of the plot pivotal Master Emerald. Both are aggressive, rude, and independent, consistently portrayed as radical and heroic, someone the assumed audience of teenage boys should look up to and emulate. They are the game’s primary models—characters who demonstrate appropriate or desirable behavior—and although everyone in SA2 carries a theme of rebellion against hegemonic control when female characters participate, things do not go well.

Before examining the character pairs, I must address Maria, the only true model offered to the female audience. She is a perfect little angel who lays down her life for a friend and, thus, is dead before the game begins. We know her entirely through the reminiscence of males. She’s a prop to give the moodier and broodier characters something to be sad about. Thankfully, the other girls are much livelier, but they each fall short of Maria’s example.

Amy Rose debuted in 1992 as the pink girl to Sonic’s blue boy. Much like him, she is an energetic and hot-tempered traveler. By visual comparison, we can see that Amy’s rendition of hedgehog is noticeably more human-esque. She is fully clothed and fashionable, wearing chunky bracelets and keeping her quills down with a hairband. While one must look to Sonic’s impetuous manner to understand his teenhood, Amy is unmistakably 12. Her design is preoccupied with assuring viewers that she is a little girl and denies her any room to express the untamable nature she shares with her counterpart.

While Sonic trots the globe in search of adventure and to defend the innocent, Amy does so in literal pursuit of her crush, who couldn’t want anything less to do with girls. She inserts herself into SA2’s plot as an unwanted tagalong who twice jeopardizes the heroes’ mission by getting herself captured. Boy crazy to the point of blindness, she throws herself into the arms of the enemy in her introductory scene, mistaking another character for Sonic simply because he, too, is a male hedgehog. Once rescued, she spends most of the game whining that the boys never take her seriously, and she’s right. The cast consistently dismisses her involvement by speaking over her or ordering her around. Near the finale, she is rescued from gunpoint in the same room where Maria was killed. These characters have nothing in common but their gender, yet the game considers them interchangeable.

The radical feminist perspective tells us to look out for when female characters are portrayed as incapable or unhappy, taking actions reserved for men.<sup>3</sup> Amy ends up more of an anti-model than most of the bad guys. Distrusted by and detrimental to her friends, Amy is mocked for the same rebellious attitude and emotional outbursts

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2 Sellnow, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture*, 145.

3 Sellnow, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture*, 146.

that earn Sonic and Knuckles admiration. She is allowed to come along but denied meaningful participation, reifying the hegemonic idea that women should stay in their lane, as their dreams are too silly to qualify as real motives.

If Amy were allowed substantial sympathy, she might take away from the real centerpiece of the female cast: brand-new anti-heroine Rouge the Bat. A jewel-obsessed thief and secret agent, she works with G.U.N to sabotage the heroes and villains alike while scheming to swipe the Master Emerald from under everyone's nose. She amazed me as a child by being the most active female character I'd ever seen in a video game. In contrast to someone like Super Mario's Princess Peach, whose role as a zero-agency kidnapping victim borders on literal objectification—keeping her experiences well out of the viewers' mental reach, Rouge has a role in every part of the story. And since she is a playable character, I was encouraged to experience her trials and victories as my own, which I did.

Conceived as a morally ambiguous foil to the simple-minded and straight-shooting Knuckles, she's every bit as tough, able to tear down giant battle mechs with a single kick and stand up to blows that even Sonic himself would struggle to withstand. He's gullible; she's a liar. He uses claws to dig under the earth; she uses wings to take to the sky. He guards the mystic secrets of an ancient tribe, driven by a sense of honor, and she's a tech-savvy spy who steals for her own gain. Their whole dynamic is a "gender war," perpetuating the idea that men and women are natural opposites and must come to blows over it.<sup>4</sup>

And it is Rouge who ends up cast in an unfavorable light. She is portrayed as much more intelligent and agile than her rival (leaning on the stereotype that men are meatheads), but she is consistently his moral inferior. Despite her competence, confidence, and physical prowess, one cannot ignore that she is motivated by a vain pursuit of jewelry—again utilizing this idea that what women want is simply a trivial reflection of men's more noble pursuits. Knuckles spends much of his dialogue in SA2 chastising her greed. Her potential as a model is undermined by an occluded reading. No matter how impressed I might've been, the text positions her as irregular and her life as undesirable and reinforces hegemonic beliefs by passively encouraging young girls to stay out of the fray.

Rouge's design fits comfortably in the trope of kid-friendly femme fatales like Cat Woman, complete with high heels, make-up, and a prominent bosom to cushion the blow to the male ego her competence creates. And when she ends up falling for the man who's spent the whole game insulting her and punching her in the face, what started as a character with a strong case for liberal feminist appeals for equality and inclusion is safely packed away inside patriarchal assumptions about the fickleness of the female mind.<sup>5</sup>

This analysis cannot capture the total significance of Sonic Adventure 2 or even its feminist implications. I have been unable to analyze the male characters as thor-

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4 Catherine Palczewski and Victoria DeFrancisco, *Gender in Communication: A Critical Introduction* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2019), 4-5.

5 Sellnow, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture*, 143-144.

oughly as I would wish, and several remain excluded. However, the treatment of Amy, Maria, and Rouge is sufficient to highlight sexist patterns in the narrative. At every turn they are used as points of contrast against men, more or less denied the ability to stand on their own. Amy's radical spirit is quashed by a damsel plot, Rouge's independence is watered down by romance, and poor Maria is just a prop. As a boy, I saw these characters as exceptions to a rule of female passivity, finally able to be strong, important, actors. But while the boys fight against the tyranny and save the day, the girls lag behind. Hegemony won the day, and, in the end, all three were under the G.U.N.