

'Warcraft' is a baffling, but beautiful fantasy

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 124 min.

Well, at least it isn't a sequel. In a summer full of follow-ups, the latest Hollywood blockbuster takes a different route and instead adapts a fantasy video game for the big screen... and it may be as close as we get to an original popcorn flick this year. If you like the game, you'll probably enjoy this elaborate, effects-filled epic. However, if *Warcraft* is completely new to you, then you might want to bring a game savvy translator along.

Set in a fantasy realm, this tale attempts to explain how humankind went to war with a large breed of otherworldly warriors called Orcs. Led by a tyrannical ruler, the Orcs travel from their dying planet through a portal and into the human world. Of course, they intend to rule over the land and use up its resources. Meanwhile, the King, a noble warrior, a Wizard, as well as his younger apprentice do their best to save their people. Loyalties and motives that further complicate the struggles of all parties are eventually revealed.

In truth, this is a very simplified summation of events. There are a good dozen characters with elaborate back stories and viewers are dropped right in the middle of the fracas without a compass. Naturally, parties familiar with the game will have little trouble understanding the circumstances and who's who. But for those unfamiliar, the feature is a jumble early on.

There are numerous references to Guilds, Guardians, Demons, and the Fel with a mere line or two that don't provide a clear idea of what any of these groups and forces are. Even the nature

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of the magic and powers being used isn't explained and leaves several questions. Instead of becoming engaged in the story, new viewers will be playing catch up with what the terminology means and who these characters are for the first 30 minutes.

It's clear that there was definitely some behind-the-scenes tinkering with the first act. There are many strange and fast dissolves at the end of dialogue exchanges to new scenes and characters. One can be certain that there is more set-up and explanation sitting on the cutting-room floor. In some respects, the choppiness made me appreciate *The Lord of the Rings* even more, for introducing its world through the relatable eyes of a meek adventurer who feels as out-of-place on his journey as the viewers.

The good news is that despite the lack of an entry point, patient newcomers eventually will come to a better understanding of certain elements. Strangely enough, the most attention is paid to the invading Orcs. In fact, they are the more developed and complex characters, struggling with a leader they don't like and trying to change the outcome of a conflict despite their naturally combative nature. The human beings are given short shrift by comparison and come off a bit silly in their fancy kingdom dress (although to be fair, that is typical for the genre). At least the heroes and wizards each get a couple of lines and moments later on in the film to make an impression.

And on a technical level, the movie is nothing less than an eye-catching spectacle. The camera sweeps through the environments and even offers some incredible angles and moves that really pop out in 3-D. Even a library and numerous bookshelves curving and reaching out of the screen impresses. As for the action, it's extremely well handled. The battle scenes are excitingly rendered and edited in a clear and concise manner. It's a beautiful looking movie.

Another unexpected positive is that the story takes a few unforeseen turns and twists (at least to those unfamiliar with the game) toward the end. The fates of a couple of the characters are a bit of a surprise when revealed, adding some suspense to the climax. Yet again, the intent here is to create a franchise, so there aren't any concrete resolutions for those involved.

This is a borderline call. One can see those familiar with the game itself enjoying *Warcraft*, and I would recommend it to them. I only wish it were more inclusive for newcomers. The first act is confounding and immediately threatens to turn viewers against it.

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Should this movie prove to be a success at the box office and a sequel ordered, I have some suggestions for the filmmakers. Next time, slow down a bit and ease us into this impressive world. A few minutes here or there developing the characters and their motivations more thoroughly from the outset will help everyone’s cause tremendously.

By Glenn Kay

For the Sun