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Liu Kang (Robin Shou, left) battles the demon sorcerer Shang Tsung (Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa) in "Mortal Kombat."

Flashy special effects can't save 'Kombat'

By Gerry Beltz
Film Critic

The Facts

Film: "Mortal Kombat"

Stars: Robin Shou, Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa, Christopher Lambert

Director: Paul Anderson

Rating: PG-13

Grade: C

Five Words: Video game hits big screen

It's better than "Street Fighter," but that's not saying much.

Building a 90-minute movie from a video game experience would be difficult. But instead of just using the characters for a completely stupid plot line—as in "Street Fighter"—"Mortal Kombat" director Paul Anderson placed them in a setting similar to the video game itself.

And while "Street Fighter" was pushed into theaters to draw on the video game crowd and beat "Mortal Kombat" in the race to the screen, the move worked to "Kombat's" advantage.

With the extra time, grade-A special effects were perfected, fight sequences were refined and (most importantly) space was put between the two movies.

Smart move. Still, "Mortal Kombat" is not without its drawbacks.

Any film headlining Christopher Lambert is asking for trouble. Lambert's earlier works ("Highlander," "Subway") are unfortunately overshadowed by his more recent—and numerous—escapades into the Hall of Films Not Worth Crap ("The Hunted," "Highlander III"). But Anderson did one smart thing with Lambert this time around: very little dialogue or screen time.

Lambert plays the Thunder God Rayden (in the video game it's spelled R-A-I-D-E-N), who has come to Earth to protect three mortals—Johnny Cage, Sonya Blade and Liu Kang—as they prepare to enter the Mortal Kombat arena.

The evil sorcerer Shang Tsung (Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa, "Rising Sun") has won the last nine Mortal Kombat competitions, and if he wins the 10th contest, Earth will be overrun by his legions of evildoers, committed to eradicating good, peace and free parking.

Johnny Cage (Linden Ashby, "Wyatt Earp") is a martial arts movie star out to refute the popular public opinion that he can't fight worth beans. Sonya Blade (Bridgette Wilson, "Billy Madison") heads up a Special Forces Team, and is out for revenge against the vile Kano (Trevor Goddard).

Yeah, the plot sucks and the acting is borderline deplorable. However, the special effects and fight sequences absolutely rock.


Still, a movie cannot survive by special effects alone. Lack of a truly fun plot and a slow beginning damage the full spectrum of the film.

Hopefully, the sequel (which is GREATLY hinted at) will go for more action and less acting.



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