Instead of Geeky Greatness, Adam Sandler Sucks the Soul Out of a Badly Miscast 'Pixels'

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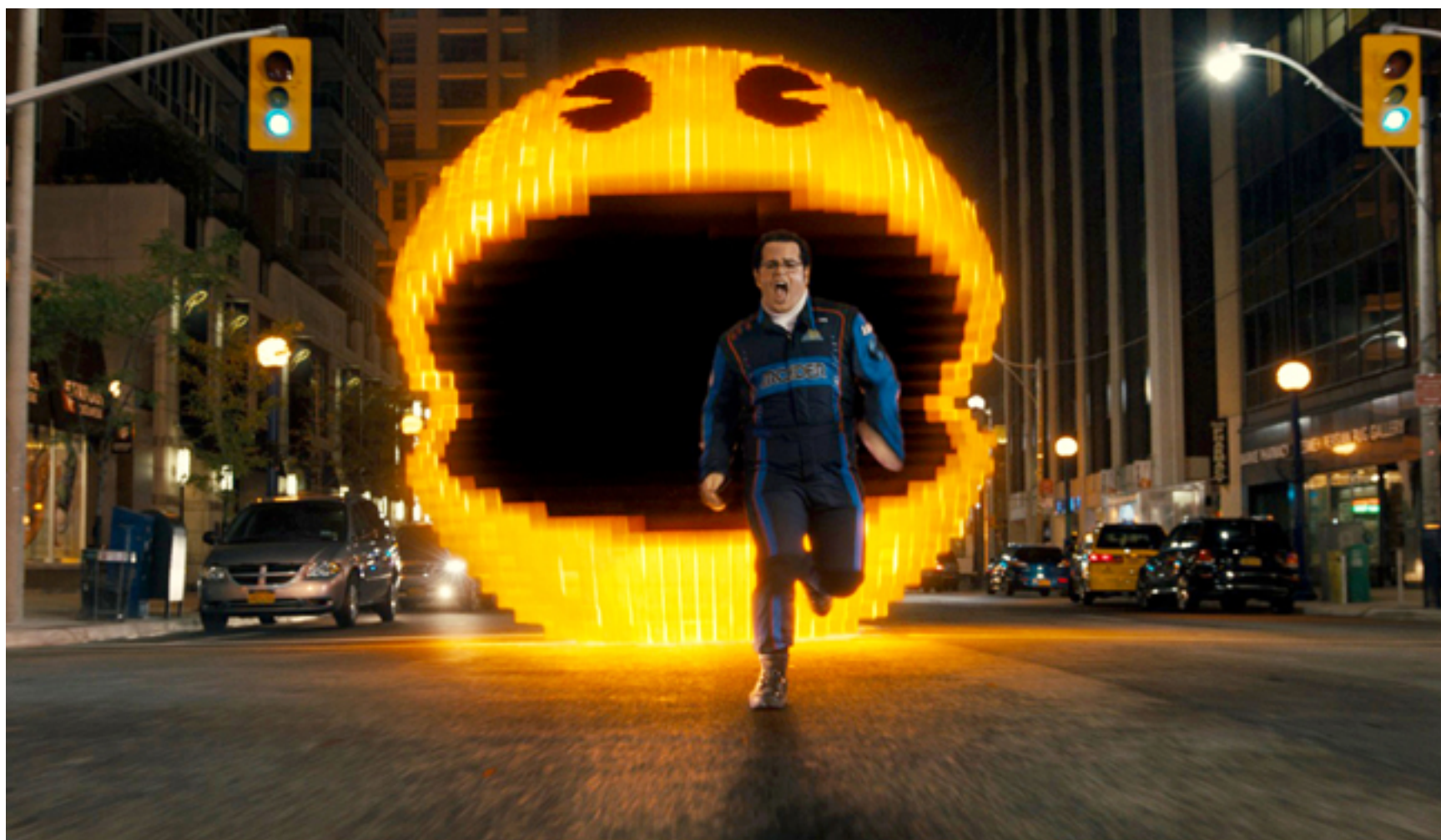- Tim Herlihy [19]
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Rating: **2.0**/5.0

CHICAGO – The epitome of an idea that far outweighs its execution, "Pixels" is a bittersweet blunder that had all of the elements to be geeky great but ends up being cheesy mediocre. I could literally *feel* its potential for 105 minutes, but the $88 million film ultimately fails to *realize* it.

At the heart of the issue is **miscasting** and specifically Adam Sandler's Happy Madison Productions. Even though he and his production company let me down in the critically panned "The Hot Chick," "50 First Dates," "The Longest Yard," "The Benchwarmers," "Click," "I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry" and on and on, I honestly always give Sandler a chance even though his humor almost never works for me.

Despite my love for PAC-MAN, I was disappointed going into "Pixels" to see Sandler in such a lead role with his production company attached and his pals making bank with him. Still, I had hoped he'd just be a guy in it instead of *the* guy who sets the often-unfunny tone.

PAC-MAN chases Ludlow (Josh Gad) in "Pixels".
Image credit: Sony Pictures

But that's exactly what happened. What should have been a true geeky gamer film instead became yet another Adam Sandler production that devolves a solid premise into a cheeky, unintelligent semi-comedy. The comedy that *did* work didn't come from Sandler or his cronies, but rather from a supporting guy who's actually this film's star: "Game of Thrones" mega star Peter Dinklage.

Dinklage's character, Eddie, gets gamer culture. He's obsessed, narcissistic, uber competitive, always wanting to be the best, has delusions of grandeur, comes with a posse and knows how to put on a show. This certainly isn't to say all gamers are like this because they aren't, but films tend to cast an extreme light on a subject and exaggerate it for dramatic effect. Eddie, who calls himself the Fire Blaster, nails it.

Unfortunately, Adam Sandler as Brenner does not, and not a single human being on this Earth could possibly buy Kevin James as president of the United States. Among all of the U.S. presidents we've seen in film – Morgan Freeman sold it in "Deep Impact" and "Olympus Has Fallen" and so did Bill Pullman in "Independence Day" – James has got to be the worst one. Even an unusually cast Chris Rock as our president in "Head of State" pulled it off better than James, who needs to stick to physical comedy.

Eddie (Peter Dinklage, left), Lady Lisa (Ashley Benson) and Ludlow (Josh Gad) in "Pixels".
Image credit: Sony Pictures

Along with Dinklage's character, Josh Gad as Ludlow has the right idea, too. Gad's role is the stereotypical hermit hacker who yells at his grandma while he's furiously using binary to cheat the man. Thankfully, writers Tim Herlihy and Timothy Dowling give Gad's character a funny scene when he is trying to deliver a drill sergeant-like speech to Navy SEALs. James empowers the SEALs to defeat waves of alien space invaders in the form of our classic arcade characters.

Unlike many of this film's casting decisions, a well-cast Denis Akiyama plays Professor Toru Iwatani (the creator of PAC-MAN, who we recently interviewed [21]). While his father/son scene makes for good drama and then humor when the plea goes awry, the sequence was already spoiled by the trailer along with most of the rest of the best parts of the film.

Another one of the best parts of the film comes unintentionally at the very beginning when the credits reveal the director's name: Chris Columbus. I chuckled. Obviously not an Italian explorer, this Oscar-nominated dude directed several Harry Potter films and wrote "The Goonies" and "Gremlins". I repeat, he wrote "The Goonies"! But I digress. Wait, he was actually born Christopher Columbus. What the frick!

Violet (Michelle Monaghan), Sam Brenner (Adam Sandler, center), Ludlow (Josh Gad) and Q*bert "Pixels".
Image credit: Sony Pictures

Moving on for real now, I don't blame Michelle Monaghan herself for her uninspired, overdone role as Violet. Though her writers tried to mold her into the Rachel McAdams-esque girl next store in her personal life and a badass government business suit while at work, she turns just to be, well, Rachel McAdams who again falls for the lead guy in a way that would never actually happen.

She's annoyingly fabricated just to get with Adam Sandler's loser character from the get go. Moments after getting the news that her husband has run off with a 19-year-old pilates instructor, the worst part of the film comes when she decides to hide from her kid and cry her woes all alone in a closet.

Adam Sandler's character has super-duper ears, of course, so he can hear her plight and drink to her rescue. They fight like childish pre-teens throughout the film until, well, you can guess the rest. And when, how and why exactly does she put on an Arcader uniform? That's so ridiculous that it's not even worth wasting keystrokes to chastise it.

Once she's out of the closest and aliens are trying to destroy our planet, though, Violet forgets to have one ounce of remorse for her collapsed marriage. Instead, she happily flirts with the Geek Squad-esque Adam Sandler guy who would never have been privy to chillaxing with her in that closest without being fired in the first place.

Serena Williams (as herself) on a date with Eddie (Peter Dinklage) in "Pixels".
Image credit: Sony Pictures

It is artificially forced plot lines like this that make up this disappointing film instead of actual story cohesiveness. "Pixels" should have taken a quirkier, more indie-feeling page from actors like Michael Cera, Alison Pill, Ellen Wong and Mary Elizabeth Winstead in "Scott Pilgrim vs. the World" rather than Adam Sandler's same old sleepy routine and Kevin James playing a role no one could ever possibly buy.

"Pixels" also suffers from its emotionally dead villains. They seem fun instead of scary. I wanted to play games with them instead of run from them screaming. Even the big bad Donkey Kong scene doesn't pull one emotional heartstring. That's because this film forgets to give any of its primary pixelated bad guys any humanity. They literally just feel like temporary enemies in a game to beat, and once beaten, they just disappear and 1,000 points pop up in their place. Our actual lives are supposed to be threatened, remember?

Q*bert had the right idea, but it makes absolutely no sense why the film would only flesh him out emotionally and literally no other pixel monster. Sure, he's cute and human-like. Q*bert likes the same kinds of things we do and fears the same kinds of things we fear. But why is Q*bert literally the only one? Ashley Benson as Lady Lisa – Ludlow's gamer dream girl – sort of gets an attempt at humanization, but instead we get yet another hot chick with no need for any lines.

"Pixels" stars Adam Sandler, Kevin James, Michelle Monaghan, Peter Dinklage, Josh Gad, Dan Aykroyd, Sean Bean, Denis Akiyama, Ashley Benson, Serena Williams, Martha Stewart, Tom McCarthy, Brian Cox and Matt Lintz from director Chris Columbus and writers Tim Herlihy and Timothy Dowling. The film, which opened on July 24, 2015 and has a running time of 105 minutes, is rated "PG-13" for some language and suggestive comments.

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