

8-Bit Icons: A look at the video games of 'Pixels'

July 21 2015, byDerrick J. Lang



This photo provided by courtesy of Sony Pictures shows Josh Gad as Ludlow chased by Pac-Man in Columbia Pictures' "Pixels." The movie releases in the U.S. on July 24, 2015. (Sony Pictures via AP)

Q(asterisk)bert is ready for his close-up.

After bringing Harry Potter and Mrs. Doubtfire to life on the big screen, Chris Columbus' latest film sees the director inserting classic video game characters into the real world. "Pixels" follows a trio of 1980s arcade champions who are recruited by the government to stop an alien force that's taking the form of Donkey Kong and other interactive critters.

"I was excited about bringing these characters to life in a way we haven't

seen," said Columbus. "I've done visual effects before, but they've all been reality based. In this particular situation, we were creating 30-foot-tall voxelized, lived-from-within creatures that had to be menacing enough to destroy a city, yet also have a mischievous charm about them."

"Pixels," out Friday, is inspired by the 2010 short film of the same name that depicted old-school games wrecking blocky carnage on New York City. Columbus included imagery from about 20 titles, such as "Burger Time" and "Tetris." During a recent interview on the Sony backlot, the "Home Alone" director discusses bringing the games to life in his movie.

"CENTIPEDE"

For their first mission against the misunderstood extraterrestrials, the "Pixels" protagonists played by Adam Sandler and Josh Gad encounter the slithering baddies who star in the 1981 shoot-'em-up "Centipede." In the movie, behemoth renditions of the game's bugs descend from the sky onto human forces positioned on a soccer field in London.

"I wanted 'Centipede' to be a surrealistic three-dimensional moment," said Columbus. "It's the first time we really insert these characters. For me, I pushed it into 'Yellow Submarine' territory where, in the middle of that scene, it just totally turns psychedelic. You shouldn't do any mind-altering drugs before you watch that particular sequence of the film."



This photo provided by courtesy of Sony Pictures shows, Peter Dinklage, from left, as Eddie, Ashley Benson as Lady Lisa, and Josh Gad as Ludlow, on the streets of Washington, D.C. in Columbia Pictures' "Pixels." The movie opens in U.S. theaters on July 24, 2015. (George Kraychyk/Sony Pictures via AP)

"PAC-MAN"

An oversized tyrannical take on Pac-Man goes on a chomping spree through the streets of New York as the movie's heroes tail the pellet-eating character in Mini Coopers. Columbus filmed the chase sequence over three-and-a-half weeks by having the actors followed by a yellow golf cart, which was later replaced with a computer-generated Pac-Man.

"The key was that we weren't immersing people into 'Pac-Man' as much as the game was forcing itself onto the streets of Manhattan," said Columbus. "Because the visual-effects toolbox is so giant these days,

there's this temptation to do everything CGI, but I wanted a tangible, hand-made quality to the film. We didn't resort to CGI for everything."

"Q(asterisk)BERT"

In the movie, the cube-hopping creature Q(asterisk)bert serves as an intergalactic trophy who eventually becomes a sidekick to the human heroes. Despite his history of speaking only in cartoon bubbles filled with punctuation marks, "The Goonies" and "Gremlins" screenwriter opted to give the aliens' version of Q(asterisk)bert a voice and beef up his role in "Pixels."

"In the first draft of the script, Q(asterisk)bert was there, but we didn't utilize him as much," said Columbus. "When we first started playing around with the designs, I felt like it was my Gizmo moment from 'Gremlins.' I could actually create a fun, loveable character that kids would respond to and add a different element—that not all the aliens are here to kill us."



This photo provided by courtesy of Sony Pictures shows, Matthew Lintz, left, as Matt, and Adam Sandler as Sam Brenner with Q*bert, in Columbia Pictures' "Pixels." The movie opens in U.S. theaters on July 24, 2015. (Sony Pictures via

AP)

"DOJO QUEST"

The filmmakers licensed characters from real-world video games for the movie, but they opted to craft a fictional title starring a ninja-fighting heroine named Lady Lisa (played by Ashley Benson), who serves as an unconventional love interest for Gad's character. To promote "Pixels," Sony released a side-scrolling mobile game resembling "Dojo Quest."

"Lady Lisa was in the first draft of the script, and I thought it would be fun to create just one game that didn't exist back in the '80s," said Columbus. "It never occurred to me not to do it. I felt like we could get away with it. A character like Lara Croft could've worked, but I loved the fact that Josh Gad's character has been pining for this woman all his life."

"DONKEY KONG"

The movie's climatic final battle takes place inside the alien's mothership, where filmmakers recreated the original 1981 barrel-jumping game. Columbus called Donkey Kong "the holy grail" of game characters and said talking Nintendo into allowing them to feature the angry ape required more convincing than any of the other games depicted in "Pixels."

"The 'Donkey Kong' sequence is one that we could have done 90 percent CGI, but we literally built the game from scratch," said Columbus. "We built the platforms. When you walked into that soundstage, it was mind blowing to see actors 100 feet in the air on harnesses running around from barrels that we later added. It was an amazing experience."

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