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How 'A Minecraft Movie' Won With Memes and Deliberate Stupidity

The video-game adaptation succeeded at what cinema struggles to do consistently: sell gobs of tickets and get young people into theaters

By **John Jurgensen** April 14, 2025 5:12 pm ET



From left: Jack Black, Jason Momoa and Sebastian Hansen in 'A Minecraft Movie.'

In its second weekend in theaters, "A Minecraft Movie" passed $550 million in global ticket sales to officially become the second-biggest video-game movie ever and Hollywood's top-grossing release of 2025.

Unofficially, it's the crowning of cinema's meme era. Fueled by a barrage of inside jokes shared by the masses who play Minecraft or at least live online, the movie succeeded at what Hollywood struggles to do consistently: sell gobs of tickets and get young people into theaters.

For Generations Z and Alpha, to whom the virtual world of Minecraft belongs, the movie adaptation will be remembered as the thing that united them in real life to shout the words "chicken jockey" together.

Among them: 20-year-old Davian Rodriguez, wearing a slime-green Minecraft blanket over his shoulders, superhero style, at a Regal multiplex in Secaucus, N.J., on Sunday afternoon. With six family members stocked with concessions, he was preparing to see Jack Black and Jason Momoa run around a realm of blocky pigs and sheep and zombies for a second time.

His first viewing was a wilder scene. At night at a nearby theater on opening weekend, popcorn flew as people screamed out lines of the characters' dialogue—which the audience already knew from videos recorded by other moviegoers for social media.

The most viral of those videos were chaotic, showing groups of teens and tweens leaping up and chucking food. Other videos offered rankings of the movie scenes that triggered these responses, topped by the big-screen appearance of the chicken jockey: a marauding zombie baby mounted on a chicken, a fan favorite in the Minecraft game. Some videos showed police responding to theaters and a live chicken reportedly smuggled in by moviegoers in Utah.

All this drove more people to theaters so they could experience and document the memes for themselves.

"We all recorded it," Rodriguez said.



Audiences have been shouting 'chicken jockey' in theaters. Photo: Warner Bros. Pictures

Minecraft, developed in 2009 by a Swedish game designer, puts players in a geometric landscape where they roam freely while building and excavating, constructing whatever they can imagine with stockpiled tools and materials. They avoid green assailants called creepers and other threats. Other than that, the point is to make stuff and hang out with other players.

Rodriguez got into Minecraft around age 7. He will turn 21 in June ("but I look like I'm 12," he said) and still re-immerses himself in the game for stretches of a month or more.

"We grew up with this," Rodriguez said. "Now the little kids understand, too."

"The Super Mario Bros. Movie" from 2023 holds the record for the highest-grossing video-game adaptation. But that Nintendo game had decades-worth of fans and a built-in adventure plot. As intellectual property, Minecraft has more in common with Barbie, a doll synonymous with childhood but with a blank slate in terms of story. Director Greta Gerwig's "Barbie" movie was a smash hit in 2023 and had smart things to say about gender roles and beauty standards.

"A Minecraft Movie" won by being knowingly stupid. That's because director Jared Hess, who made a goofy touchstone movie for millennials with 2004's "Napoleon Dynamite," understood the assignment.

Hess built the movie around Black, who delivers every line full tilt. He plays Steve, the normally silent character players use in the game, and sings a catchy song about cooking poultry with hot lava. Momoa, wearing a fringed pink jacket, plays a gamer who peaked in the '80s. The movie establishes a parallel reality with a few minutes of voice-over explanation by Black—"Turns out, we opened a portal to another dimension…"—before setting its characters loose.

Older viewers, including parents accompanying their young kids, have found themselves baffled when audiences recite (and, in some theaters, freak out over) seemingly random lines. Like when Black declares, "I…am Steeeve."



'A Minecraft Movie' won over audiences by being knowingly stupid. Photo: Warner Bros. Pictures

“It’s not for them. It’s for us,” said 13-year-old Jackson Hamilton, who was with four friends and free of parental supervision at the Secaucus theater, where there were 22 showtimes scheduled on Sunday.

The film has become a generational referendum on how to behave in public. Plenty of people have gotten frustrated and annoyed by audiences hurling popcorn at screens. But owners say that’s been rare, and pointed to the upside: cinemas packed with the young people who don’t show up with any regularity.

“If we have to pop more popcorn and sweep up more of that popcorn at the end of every showtime, man, it’s a small price to pay for sold-out houses,” said Paul Farnsworth, executive director of communications and content at B&B Theatres, an independent chain in 16 states.

After a sleepy start to the year, theater owners and Hollywood studios—especially Warner Bros., which released “A Minecraft Movie”—still get to say that films create communal experiences. Even as young audiences are probably already moving on to the next trend.

“The shelf life on these memes, it’s short,” Farnsworth said. “But in the meantime, we’re just along for the ride.”

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