

'Gran Turismo' doesn't quite reach the podium

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 01 September 2023 04:34



Rating: ««

out of «««««

Running Time: 134 minutes

This film from Sony Pictures opens exclusively at cinemas on Friday, Aug. 25.

While most video game-to-film adaptations feature monsters or otherworldly creatures from fantastic worlds, the new feature *Gran Turismo* actually has some basis in reality. It's a biopic of Jann Mardenborough, a teenage gamer who won the opportunity to race professionally.

Yes, at times the movie does feel like a commercial for Sony's hit product. It is also exaggerated and definitely struggles to squeeze in a lot of extraneous story material. However, the racing sequences are handled with creativity and are exciting to witness. And despite its flaws, it is better than many game adaptations.

The feature gives some background information about the racing simulation franchise before

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introducing marketing executive Danny Moore (Orlando Bloom). He successfully convinces Nissan to fund a professional driving academy made of *Gran Turismo* players.

After Moore acquires the services of ex-driver and skeptical trainer Jack Salter (David Harbour), young Jann Mardenborough (Archie Madekwe) enters the picture. Obsessed with game to the chagrin of his parents (Djimon Hounsou and Geri Halliwell), he finds his way into the academy. He gets grilled by Salter and fights to survive the competition. After improving, he is faced with numerous challenges in order to go pro and prove to the world that gamers can become real racers.

As mentioned, there is an awful lot of material that is stuffed into the feature. Besides spending time introducing the creation of the academy, as well as Mardenborough’s driving skills and conflict with his family members, it also introduces love interest Audrey (Maeve Courtier-Lilley), numerous competitors at the academy, as well as nasty rivals on the professional circuit and a movement to shut down the entire program. There are many important races (first, to win at the academy and compete with pros, then to obtain an official license, and finally to land on the podium), questions about the protagonist’s marketability with the public, as well as a tragic mishap that leads to self-doubt on the track. Seemingly every ten minutes, a new hiccup arrives to complicate matters.

Of course, conflict is always important to keep audiences invested, but there is so much in this screenplay that it forces the makers to deal with several of these issues very, very quickly. As a result, some of the most interesting challenges, including Mardenborough’s lack of confidence after a race in Germany, don’t get the necessary screentime to make a strong imprint. Most are dealt with in a surface-level manner, where a brief conversation or inspirational speech often fully resolves the problem. As such, when the movie attempts big impassioned and moving emotional moments, it frequently falters.

At least Madekwe is charming and likable in the lead role, keeping viewers watching when the story presents another clichéd element. And Harbour adds plenty of gravitas as Salter, who comes across as amusingly mean to his pupils before slowly warming up to Mardenborough. This character is in the majority of the film with the lead and as such he feels more developed than all of the other co-stars. Watching their relationship grow from initial antagonism into a deeper friendship is the most effective and entertaining part of the movie.

The film also includes impressive driving footage. Director Neill Blomkamp (*District 9*, *Elysium*)

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does a lot to jazz up the races. The camera bolts around the track, frequently cutting to engine parts and gears in motion, while it follows the drivers with intensity.

There are plenty of unique shots throughout that do make the races dynamic. This includes superimposing potential driving paths on the screen and even using digital effects to transform Mardenborough from his car back into his bedroom gaming area when he is attempting to calm his nerves (there is also a series of funny gags involving the driver’s preferred music while prepping for a race).

All of the references to the game franchise comes across as awkward, and the constant need to introduce more and more challenges to the protagonist causes an overcramped narrative that doesn’t stir the soul. However, there are some fun moments and dizzying driving sequences that will likely entertain fans of the game. In the end, *Gran Turismo* doesn’t quite reach the winner’s podium, but it does at least make a respectable showing.

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