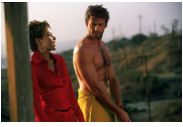


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### ***SWORDFISH*, *ATLANTIS: THE LOST EMPIRE*, and *LARA CROFT, TOMB RAIDER***

Within a four-day span, I sat through *Swordfish*, *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, and *Lara Croft, Tomb Raider*

and have become convinced that they're all the same movie. True, one is a sleek action-thriller, one a Disney cartoon, and one inspired by a popular videogame, but consider:

- In *Swordfish*, our hero, Stanley (Hugh Jackman), goes looking for billions of dollars in hidden e-currency. He wants to find the money for mostly benevolent reasons – he's hoping to use his share of the dough to win custody of his estranged daughter – but his quest is hindered by an egomaniacal villain (John Travolta) and his assorted cronies, who have mercenary, and potentially evil, plans for the loot.
- In *Atlantis*, our hero, Milo (voiced by Michael J. Fox), goes looking for the sunken, presumably mythological continent. He wants to find Atlantis for mostly benevolent reasons – he's hoping to aid the stranded Atlantians and prove himself a true scientist – but his quest is hindered by an egomaniacal villain (voiced by James Garner) and his assorted cronies, who have mercenary, and potentially evil, plans for the discovery.
- In *Tomb Raider*, our heroine, Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie), goes looking for the two halves of a mystical triangle. She wants to find them for mostly benevolent reasons – when combined, the halves are able to control time, which could reunite Lara with her departed father – but her quest is hindered by an egomaniacal villain (Iain Glen) and his assorted cronies, who have mercenary, and potentially evil, plans for the archeological findings.

Beyond their basic plotlines, these three features have other elements in common: All are ridiculous to the point of being incoherent, all are sadly mediocre, and all have built-in audiences that will guarantee them big bucks, at least for a few weeks. Do audiences no longer care

if movies make sense? I'm all for a little silliness at the cineplex, especially in a summertime Hollywood entertainment. But the problem with so many of our current blockbusters is that their

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silliness has reached epic proportions. Remember

*Face/Off*

, where John Travolta and Nicolas Cage upped the ante on their cat-and-mouse game by *surgically switching their faces*

? Nowadays, that movie looks like the pinnacle of common sense and restraint. Its plot might have been ludicrous, but at least it was

*simple*

; once you accepted the fact that, yes, we live in a world where people can surgically switch faces, you moved on.

In our current blockbuster-minded climate, however, filmmakers have apparently decided that audiences are better left *continuously* baffled, so they don't notice that the movies themselves aren't offering much.

*Swordfish*, for instance, is your standard techno-geek affair, with hackers moving their fingers quickly across a keyboard and the screen words "Access Denied" becoming "Access Granted" in record time. But as the box-office failure of many computer-themed movies proves, watching a guy type isn't the most kinetic of cinematic images, so the film is chock-full of

*Mission: Impossible*

-esque identity switching and

*True Lies*

-style super-stunts, neither of which makes any sense in the "realistic" universe the movie pretends to exist in. These added elements ensure that

*Swordfish*

is never dull, but there's a vast difference between not being bored and being entertained.



It takes *Atlantis* a lot longer to become totally bewildering. For a time, it's an agreeably benign and amusing Disney product, with a lot of familiar voices doing entertaining comic turns; in a vocal cast that includes Fox, Garner, John Mahoney, Jim Varney, Claudia Christian, and Leonard Nimoy, the biggest laughs come courtesy of Don "Father Guido Sarducci" Novello and the gravelly voiced Florence Stanley. Those annoying Disney ballads are gone (as are their equally bothersome up-tempo numbers), and despite the PG rating, I was glad that the farting and burping humor was kept to a minimum (take note, *Shrek*). But just when you're having a completely pleasant, innocuous time, the story enters Bizarro World.

You see, there's this "life force" in Atlantis, complete with all sorts of blinding white lights, that the film's baddies want to steal and sell on the earth's surface, dooming the Atlantians, and it's

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at this point that any sane viewer will ask, "Uh, exactly *who* is going to buy a life force, and *why*?" This plot, which encompasses the movie's last half hour, seems a craven device to add drama to a story that, fundamentally, has none, and seeing that it comes out of nowhere, it kills the project. It also leads to too many predictable denouements – Will Milo stay with the Atlantians or the turncoat humans? Will the comedic supporting characters discover the errors of their greedy ways? – and several goofy metaphysical metamorphoses, which is two "meta"s too many.

#### *Atlantis*

starts out light and funny and ends up draggy and apocalyptic, an enjoyable cartoon trounced by its blockbuster aspirations.



*Tomb Raider*, of course, is also a cartoon, fleshed out with live actors for that quasi-realistic feel, and is the least interesting of this cinematic trifecta of overkill. I have a theory why movies based on videogames don't work: When playing a videogame, there's the possibility that your "character" will die at any moment; it takes a degree of skill to get out alive. In a movie *based*

on a videogame, there's no chance of the hero dying, so as not to ruin the franchise, and the movie just becomes a series of set pieces; since their destiny is secured, you have no rooting interest in anyone's actions. Angelina Jolie is a marvelous embodiment of comic-book-style sex appeal, but she's the only involving performer on display, and the rococo set design just makes the movie feel

#### *grandly*

moronic. Simon West doesn't direct, exactly; he

#### *edits*

; like many a blockbuster wannabe, the movie is

#### *cut*

to be a mega-hit, coherence be damned, and you can't figure out what the hell's going on. Welcome to summer.