Jumanji: The Next Level is a body-swapping delight

When Sony first rebooted *Jumanji* two years ago with the decades-later, new-cast follow-up *Jumanji: Welcome To The Jungle*, it was a pleasant surprise even in the long shadow of *Star Wars.* It was pretty good for a movie nobody was clamoring for.

For a movie based on a book about a board game, *Welcome to the Jungle* found a good premise: four teenagers of varying social positions would be forced to inhabit the bodies of avatars that looked suspiciously like Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Kevin Hart, Jack Black, and Karen Gillan. The stars, then, would also be forced to inhabit the teenagers: Dwayne Johnson would improbably play an insecure nerd, Kevin Hart a strapping athlete frustrated by his newly diminutive frame, Jack Black a popular queen bee type aghast to find herself as a middle-aged man, and Karen Gillan an awkward girl shocked by her newfound action-heroine coordination. It was a perfectly timed gambit, coinciding with the downfall of the broadly popular Hollywood comedy. *Welcome to the Jungle* may have looked like a high-concept action-adventure, but it was really offering star-driven laughs.

The new follow-up *Jumanji: The Next Level* isn't as conceptually inspired — few sequels are — but it definitely understands that the new *Jumanji* movies are, at their heart, body-swap comedies. The teenage characters, back in their normal forms, have been separated for their first semester at college and are reuniting for holiday break. Spencer (Alex Wolff), pining for his time in Dwayne Johnson's super-body avatar, impulsively heeds the call of the broken video game console and gets sucked back into the world of Jumanji. Once his friends realize what's happened, they set out to rescue him.

For pure laughs, ‘The Next Level’ might outdo its predecessor
But director and co-writer Jake Kasdan doesn’t stick them all back in the same bodies. Martha (Morgan Turner) once again takes the form of Karen Gillan’s Lara Croft-ish badass, but Fridge (Ser’Darius Blain) is now Jack Black’s tweedy map-reader, while Johnson and Hart are “played” by Spencer’s Grandpa Eddie (Danny DeVito) and his former best friend Milo (Danny Glover), respectively, who have also been sucked into the digital world. Johnson does a game (if not exactly spot-on) imitation of DeVito’s rasp, while Hart does a (quite spot-on) imitation of Danny Glover’s gentility. That’s just the setup; the movie goes further into body-swap territory and introduces Awkwafina as another gaming avatar, among other complications.

For pure laughs, *The Next Level* might outdo its predecessor. Hart milks a funny running gag about the leisurely pace of Milo’s speech, which would be maddening if not for its unflagging good nature, which somehow makes it funnier. It’s also a kick to see the artist formerly known as The Rock scrunch up his face and bark “HAH?” in confusion, suggesting that Grandpa Eddie has less of a hearing problem than a comprehension one. Body-swapping, or character-shifting comedy, has long been a stunt that allows some virtuosic comic actors to rise to the occasion; think of Steve Martin sharing his body with the ghost of Lily Tomlin in *All of Me*, Eddie Murphy double-cast in *Bowfinger* (and quintuple-cast in other movies), or Tom Hanks playing an overgrown 13-year-old in *Big*. It’s neat to see the *Jumanji* series sneak some of that old-fashioned performance value into a big-ticket Hollywood blockbuster.



Image: Sony Pictures

Yet, even as the movie continues to invent new twists on its own formula — Gillan and Black share a flashy scene around the midpoint — there's also something oddly dispiriting about watching this *Jumanji*. Because the "real" characters are so flat and uninspired, there's a limit to how far their comic avatars can go. The personas twist, but they don't really develop or escalate, settling instead for the kind of rote lesson-learning that turns adventure movies and comedies alike into self-improvement seminars. Eddie and Milo address a decades-long rift over a restaurant they used to co-own; the kids relearn some of the lessons from the first movie. A decade or so ago, *Tropic Thunder* stuck Jack Black in the jungle with Ben Stiller, Robert Downey Jr., and more, and let its cast play off each other's personas. *The Next Level* thinks the milk-bland personalities of its central teenagers and a couple of cranky old people count as a rooting interest to ground the hijinks. Black, Hart, and Awkwafina could be a comedy dream team; instead, they're stuck hustling around a bunch of video game battles.

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This would be less of a sticking point if the *Jumanji* movies really were cracking action adventures. But while Kasdan has made some fine comedies (and one all-timer, the terrific comic detective picture *Zero Effect*), his command of set pieces lacks the playfulness he brings to the funny bits. There’s a specific action sequence involving a herd of angry monkeys and a series of rickety, rotating bridges that a director like Gore Verbinski might have choreographed with pizazz; Kasdan’s version turns into a smeary CG-blur of some cool ideas and momentary thrills. Earlier in the movie, a chase involving a desert vehicle and a bunch of ostriches is downright dull.

Hordes of CG animals probably do count as part of the *Jumanji* brand, so it’s unlikely that they would disappear entirely. But it’s still a shame to see these actors thrown to the ostriches with such abandon. In the end, the performers’ high energy feels weirdly thankless; they shift their voices and their posture and their personalities, and they’re all still just subsumed into blockbuster noise. In other words, don’t count on anyone reaching into the Hollywood game and rescuing comedy anytime soon.

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