





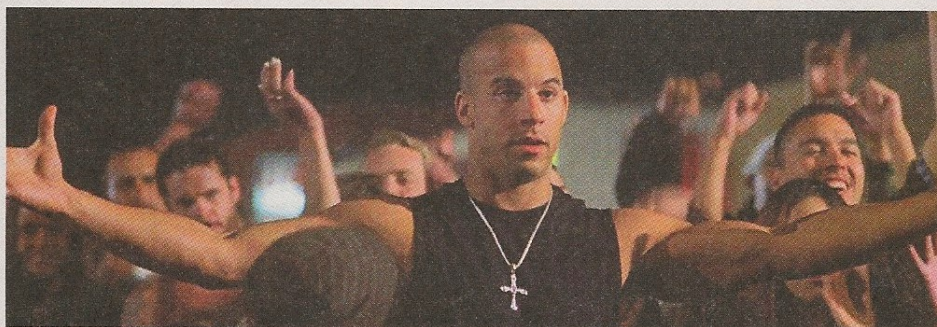
# ALL HAIL VIN DIESEL:

## *King of the Riddickulous*

● by OWEN WILLIAMS

In epic fantasy narratives, the protagonist is often pursuing his destiny. Or sometimes he's trying to avoid it, but inevitably ends up embracing it. In the fantastical narrative of Vin Diesel's life and career, our buff hero begins his quest with an acclaimed politically- and ethnically-engaged short (MULTI-FACIAL, 1995), joins a Spielberg ensemble for SAVING PRIVATE RYAN, and moves forward through dramas like BOILER ROOM, KNOCKAROUND GUYS, and Sidney Lumet's FIND ME GUILTY. He initially resists the lure of the sequel, turning down no less than \$20 million to make 2 FAST 2 FURIOUS ("Are you joking? THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS was a serious movie, not a clown show!"). But his path leads inexorably to franchise stardom; his instincts are those of a dyed-in-the-wool gamer. Beneath the tough-guy exterior and the gravel-gargle growl beats the heart of an avowed dork.

"I'm a Gary Gygax DUNGEONS & DRAGONS player from the '70s," he says. "I played D&D in a serious way, into my 30s. I was this romantic in New York City, and the only thing in the world that I enjoyed more than chasing women was an all-night session of D&D. There was a cop that played, musicians and caterers, all around this table and it was escapism at its best. I was a bouncer and I wasn't so into drugs. D&D was my drug." His character, developed and finessed across years of campaigns, was a witch hunter called Melkor: a name borrowed from the deepest depths of Tolkien's legendarium (the moniker is actually tattooed across his stomach in the XXX film series). "It's a game that allows you to be anyone you want to be," he mused in his foreword to Wizards of the Coast's celebratory 2004 tome 30 YEARS OF ADVENTURE. The actorly appeal is obvious.







Michelle Rodriguez apparently likes to joke with Diesel that he's DM'ing Hollywood. In this case that stands for Dungeon Master: the D&D-specific name for the lead player who organizes the game scenarios and narratives, maintains continuity, fleshes out mythologies, and tells the players what's happening to them.

It's those instincts you can see at play in Diesel's career as a producer, credited or otherwise. The roleplay gaming aspects of the RIDDICK series are abundantly clear, both in the confined-space monster battles of PITCH BLACK and RIDDICK (bluntly named in the way some bands will suddenly deliver a self-titled album mid-career), but especially in the mad, overblown space opera of THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK, in which the narrative undergoes an exponential expansion and there are giant baroque DUNE-like spaceships and colossal statuary and very silly names like "Underverse." The infamous intergalactic sociopath Richard B. Riddick (would he be Dick Riddick to his friends, if he had any?), much like Conan



the Barbarian, ends up wearing the obsidian crown of the conqueror-goth Necromongers on his troubled brow: the inheritor of a vast army of interstellar religious fanatics.

"The fun of CHRONICLES was expanding this universe," says Diesel. "The possibilities are infinite. I'm a mythology guy, and those are the areas that are exciting to me. As much as many people say they preferred PITCH BLACK for being so contained, there's a whole bunch of people that loved that open mythology of CHRONICLES. You have to own it all. The fun of a franchise like this is that you can."

Diesel initially wanted to leave THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS alone as a "modern classic" that he saw in terms of something like REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE. He was only persuaded back by Universal in exchange for the rights they held to the stalled RIDDICK franchise and the promise of personal control over the FAST future.

But the way he went about reshaping the FAST franchise is instructive.

Often portrayed as a vast ego, Diesel nevertheless steers his franchises in terms of what he himself would find cool as an audience—not to mention, to some extent, the things his tens of millions of followers on Instagram and Facebook tell him they'd like to see. The vain Diesel of popular narrative would have hogged the limelight and made FAST & FURIOUS (the fourth one) his grand solo comeback. Instead, in that film and its immediate follow-up FAST FIVE, he found space for every major character we'd met to date, including ones from sequels he'd wanted nothing to do with.

"My producing partner Neal [Moritz] had been very stubborn, almost against my wishes, in wanting to keep the series moving forward," Diesel explained on the set of FURIOUS 7, the first FAST since the fourth to take place chronologically after TOKYO DRIFT ("Always the plan," Diesel bullshits with a wink). "But thank God he did, because we had something to work from. We pulled characters from the second and third films to continue





the saga.” Scene-stealing new characters were brought in too, including Dwayne Johnson’s Luke Hobbs and Jason Statham’s Deckard Shaw: the latter introduced in a retcon of TOKYO DRIFT’s final moments. “It was such a nice pop at the end of FAST & FURIOUS 6 when you realized, ‘Wait a minute, that film I saw ten years ago with the nondescript white Mercedes... there’s a character in there we need to know?’” Diesel laughs. “People appreciate that.”

See also XXX threequel RETURN OF XANDER CAGE, in which Diesel cedes the film’s biggest hero moment—a moment where all seems lost, but for the surprise intervention of one indomitable warrior—to Ice Cube, who starred in the sequel that Diesel didn’t do and barely anybody saw. The modern tendency is for franchises to shit on installments that are perceived as unpopular (look at the TERMINATOR series, for example). Dungeon Master Diesel would rather find an occupation for all the players at his table, regardless of status in the pecking order. Nobody liked STATE OF THE UNION, but c’mon, Ice Cube is cool. People appreciate that. The online chatter around FAST & FURIOUS PRESENTS: HOBBS & SHAW tended to focus on the social media “beef” between Diesel and Johnson, and suggest that Diesel was jealous of the spin-off taking his focus. But come the final FAST & FURIOUS, Hobbs and Shaw will be back in the principal family, mark our words. It was a spin-off, not a split.

Ironically, one of Diesel’s biggest recent disappointments was closest to his D&D roots: in THE LAST WITCH HUNTER he played his immortal avatar Melkor in all but name. But while audiences can accept Diesel jumping supercars out of skyscrapers, Diesel waving a flaming sword around is apparently a little much. His ten-sided dice didn’t roll with that one; the shaggy Kaulder wasn’t part of his destiny after all. But with the fourth RIDDICK film, FURYA, recently announced, Diesel is still DM’ing for all he’s worth. And somewhere over a future post-FAST mountain, he insists, still lurks the elephantine HANNIBAL THE CONQUEROR. A trilogy, of course.

