

RE-FRAMING VIDEO GAMES IN THE LIGHT OF CINEMA

Edited by Riccardo Fassone, Federico Giordano, Ivan Girina





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Re-framing video games in the light of cinema

In its fourth issue G|A|M|E interrogates the complex relations between video games and cinema, revising and reflecting on a topic controversially debated over the past ten years. The relationship between these two media is layered and they are interconnected not only through their textual fabric (sharing and influencing each other in form and contents), but also in their practices and the theories that accompany them. More than fifteen years ago, in a seminal piece published on *Film Quarterly*, Mark J. P. Wolf pointed at the relationship between cinema and video games beyond ‘characters and plotlines’ (1997, p. 11), including aesthetics, visual codes, iconographies, practices, social spaces. The connection between video games and cinema (and, more broadly, the tradition of audiovisual media) is conceptually reflected by the compound noun that gives the name to the medium¹, but the two also show similar production models, sharing professional figures and displaying familiar consumption behaviours. The study of the relation between cinema and video games is connected to the development of game studies as a field and has become part of the debate on the status of video games as an object of academic study, focusing on the definition of methodologies and theories associated with it. In fact, during the past two decades cinema became a privileged means to access video games in popular discourses. Scholars and researchers in games studies developed a strong awareness of the problems intrinsic to this comparative approach, leading to its problematisation within academic contexts. Torn between the need to develop an independent field of studies and the interdisciplinary vocation of the discipline, game studies developed a suspicion towards this relationship, often debated at the margins of one or the other field. The complexity of this debate is dictated both by the nature of the video game as a layered medium (intersecting discourses on technology, cultural studies, aesthetics etc.) that eludes closed definitions² but also by the process of negotiation between the fields involved. Most notably, the argument took the form of an opposition between traditional fields of knowledge and the definition of a new area of investigation capable of developing an autochthonous discipline dedicated to the new medium. Among the contributor to this debate, Espen Aarseth (2004) stressed the necessity to develop independent tools

1. Mark Wolf points at the implications of the two possible variations of the name: “video game” and “videogame”. The first one reflecting the ludic tradition of the medium and resembling other typologies of games such as board games and card games, while the second one foregrounds the audiovisual nature of its support, recalling artefacts such as videotapes and videodiscs (Wolf, 2008, p. 3).

2. Among others, James Newman points at the difficulty to provide a univocal definition of video games due to their ‘instability and mutability’ (Newman, 2013, p. 1).

of study apt to address specific characteristics that risked to be underplayed in the adaptation of pre-existing theoretical models directly applied from other established fields, calling for an understanding of video games in the respect of their primary ludic function. In particular, the opposition between the ludic character of video games and their narrative aspiration (Murray, 1997) generated a debate that was fundamental to the definition of game studies as a field and its object of investigation. Whether this conflict ever took place or not (Frasca, 2003)³, its perception somehow had an impact on the development of the field and on its disposition towards certain approaches. On the other hand, the resistance generated within the declaration of independence of game studies only paired with the difficulty of film scholars to engage with the new medium, due both to the lack of suitable theoretical and analytical tools and to the scepticism towards its artistic potential. This situation resulted in the dismissal of video games from the tradition of studies on the moving image. Nevertheless, authors such as David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000), Lev Manovich (2001) pointed at the possibility of framing these media within a wider audiovisual tradition, tracing connections across their contents, structures and modalities capable of surpassing compartmentalised medium specific positions.

On a first level, game studies call for an updated reflection on what Wolf and Perron (2009, p. 10) call (referencing Francesco Casetti's work on film theory) the methodological theory. After half a century, film studies developed a constellation of theories that cover the ontological and phenomenological nature of the medium, its practices, its representative strategies, its history and historiographical value, and the politics connected to it, finally leading to question its methodological premises. Can the cinematic theoretical corpus offer a contribution to the development of game studies? If so, what are the possible intersections between these fields? What more can we learn about video games through the lens of film studies?

On a second level, we want to investigate the characteristics of these two media, their similarities and differences in terms of aesthetics, practices and production. The majority of the studies on this topic assume the narrative quality of the cinematic medium, focusing on the continuity between these media in terms of genres, tropes and iconography. This assumption is debatable and in need of renegotiation. If, on the one hand, it is true that the cinematic character of video games is often reflected by its narrative and spectacular bias, on the other hand it is possible to rethink the interplay between these two media in different ways. For example, by positioning video games within the larger history of spectacular media and attractions to which also cinema belongs. It is then possible to frame this medium within the tradition that connects shadow play theatre to the magic lantern and, subsequently, to early cinema and devices for amplified vision (widescreen, stereoscopy).

Since its birth the video game medium established a strong bond with its cinematic counterpart, defining itself in relation and often against it. Cine-

3. In an effort to put order to this debate Gonzalo Frasca points at the false nature of this opposition that was somehow generated in its commentators rather than by the authors allegedly involved in its construction (Frasca, 2003).

ma has often been used to reach a wider audience, especially with the advent of home consoles, to market video games outside the niche of the arcades and capitalise on the popular culture dominating the majority of households, the one of cinema. For this reason as early as in the 1980s video games such as *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (Atari, 1982), capitalised on the fame of their cinematic counterparts to attract new audiences. This strategy allowed video games to exceed their technical limits connecting to wider narrative universes. While today discussions relating to IPs and the spreading of their content across different platform, format and different media underline the ever expanding transmedia storytelling strategies, as in the seminal case study of *The Matrix* saga (Jenkins, 2006), video games always relied on paratexts (manuals, adverts etc.) and, in a wider sense, on other source material to expand their communicative potential. Nowadays, it is not only common for video game franchises to share contents with films and other audiovisual products –franchises such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord Of The Rings* witnessed endless iteration of adaptations, spin-offs and expansions to their universes – but narrative ecosystems became so vast to make it difficult the identification of textual relationships. What is the primary text to *Disney Infinity* (Heavy Iron Studios, 2013)? Nevertheless the relationship and reciprocal influence between cinema and video games goes well beyond storylines and characters. Instead it is primarily at the level of the interface that cinema's influence becomes manifest in video games. Conception of space, in commercial products, is mostly tied to the idea of a camera recording the reality before it. The presence of a camera –a virtual one rather than a physical– in video games points at the relevance of understanding this phenomenon “in the light of” cinema, its history and its theories. In fact, not only are game artefacts to be looked at –we look at them while playing, but they also exist in a plethora of other spectatorial practices such as walkthrough on YouTube and live streams on Twitch– but their audiovisual codes become part of their ludic structure. Despite the unfulfilled promise of the interactive movie, titles such as *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010), and more recently the b-movie inspired *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015) experiment with alternative ways of control that combine interactivity and non-linearity with a cinematic drive and direction. Furthermore, the cinematic is to be found in a much wider variety of products and genre. A game such as *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013), for example, is extremely cinematic not only due to its dramatic storyline, genre tropes and iconography, but also because it requires the player to develop a nuanced understanding of framing and editing techniques. In fact, players are required not only to switch to different perspectives according to the situation and to individual preferences, but also to alternate between multiple view-point in order to frame the action in functional and/or interesting ways, occasionally in order to record the session and upload spectacular fragments of gameplay. Moreover, the rise of the indie market and the proliferation of tools and commercialised engines allowed the emergence of experimental works that challenge the mainstream identification

with narrative models, opening new horizons of research. Titles such as *Garry's Mod* (Facepunch Studios, 2004) provide points of intersection with avant-gardes, problematizing the acquired definition of the medium, its strategies and internal structure. The 2000s witnessed an increased attention towards this topic also in academic environments. Scholars such as Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2002 and 2006), Alexander Galloway (2006) and Michael Nitsche (2008), furthered the studies on this subject exploring the ways in which video games intersect cinema in form, contents, and theories.

Finally, with its fourth issue G|A|M|E intends to discuss the place of video games in cinema. Cinematic incarnations have often been overlooked, mostly referenced with regards to their aesthetic and iconographic influence. Nevertheless, more than thirty years after the release of *Tron* (Steve Liesberger, 1982), video games still influence cinema on iconographic, thematic and linguistic levels. What role do video games play at the cinema? Are video games contributing to the development of a new cinematic aesthetics? Is this process connected to the commercialisation of new technologies? What are the reasons behind unsuccessful cinematic adaptations of video games? Video games provide source material for TV shows and web series, becoming protagonists of transmedial serialisation. At the same time, they are made cinematic subject of both apocalyptic and nostalgic discourses. Film studies have tentatively addressed the influence of video games on cinema accounting for the ways in which film texts and viewing practices have been affected by the emergence of video games and other interactive digital media. Since the appearance of *WarGames* (John Badham) on the big screen in 1983, cinema constantly reflected on its neighbouring medium, often depicted as a threatening object associated with the dangers of the digital frontier. Accounts of video games in films are generally articulated in three typologies: films that use video games as a trope; films that are influenced by video games in their structure and/or aesthetics; films that are adaptation of original video game materials. To the first category belong films such as *The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992) and *Existenz* (David Cronenberg, 1999). From *The Matrix* (Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999) to *Gamer* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2009), video games and digital media (especially VR technologies that, similarly to video games, project the user within a digital space) are depicted as dangerous tools, cause of personal and social disruption, responsible for the progressive alienation and dehumanization of society. These apocalyptic accounts of video games on the big screen only point at the strong relationship between the two and at the need for mutual acknowledgement and reflection. To the second typology belong films such as *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998) and *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003) that reflect on the ludic medium on a formal and structural level. Among others, scholars such as Warren Buckland (2009, 2014) and David Bordwell (2006) pointed at the increasing complexity of movie storylines in relation to both new media and new technologies. Audience's media literacy and their familiarity with digital environments and video games

encouraged the experimentation with traditional narrative structure. Moreover, the development of digital supports and the commercialisation of these technologies on a large scale, allowed new practices and forms of fruition. DVDs first and digital content now, bring repetition and fragmentation to the film experience, allowing the viewers to catch up with increasingly complex narrations. The aesthetic influence of video games on films surpasses the complication of their plots, becoming manifest in their aesthetic, formal devices and audiovisual strategies that develop accordingly. While the role and impact of digital technologies in the development and multiplication of dynamic view-point that characterise the sensuous experience of contemporary “camera-less” cinema is widely acknowledged, video games often inform the understanding of time and space in cinema offering new and not-so-new modes of visions. If it is true that the emergence of the point-of-view shot in films largely precedes their dialogue with the digital media, its use represented mostly a form of experimentation usually associated with the altered states of either the subject or the object of the shot (Galloway, 2006, p. 39; Brooker, 2009), on the other hand, recent productions show wider and more diverse use of this technique, often used to evoke a kinaesthetic pleasure and embodiment typical of video games and in interaction with digital environments. From *Kick Ass* (Matthew Vaughn, 2010) to the *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012) and *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013), films increasingly try to achieve and offer a closer view-point (often a POV shot) to the characters trying to convey presence and sensorial experience. Following an initial stage of distrust and competition, films such as *Wreck it Ralph* (Richi Moore, 2012) and *Pixels* (Chris Columbus, 2015) nowadays turn video games into objects of nostalgia, becoming part of in the collective memory of the new generations, digested through postmodern referential texts, and consequently accepted within larger popular culture.

With an essay titled *Video Games, Cinema, Bazin, and the Myth of Simulated Live Experience* Mark Wolf opens this issue of G|A|M|E highlighting the importance and relevance of film theory in relation to video games. In fact, taking inspiration from one of Bazin’s seminal essays, Wolf criticises the rhetoric that promotes the irreconcilability between film and video game theory, stating instead the continuity that can be potentially unlocked within Bazin’s original vision of cinema and its ideology. Through the analysis of the myth of total cinema, the author points at the ideas and ambitions that inspired the development of the cinematic apparatus –above all the one of the total reproduction of reality, to the point of transcending reality itself and capturing its essence– and pointing at similar ideas within the rhetoric of simulation at the core of the medium specificity. In this work, “The Myth of Total Cinema” is expanded reaching for an experience that includes the representation of reality and surpasses it via its simulation. In doing so, the author reframes the realist ideology of cinema within an experience that not only includes it but even exceeds it, reaching a higher ontological dimension already hinted at in the work of Bazin.

The contribution of Dominic Arsenault e Bernard Perron provocatively questions the opportunity and the necessity of using cinema and film studies as a framework to understand video games. According to the authors, this approach has been extensively influencing the study of this medium. The starting point is the concept of cultural series developed by André Gaudreault e Philippe Marion. Arsenault and Perron state that the cultural series of cinema has been dominant in the interpretation of video games, forcing its acknowledgement as a medium only in relation to the film medium, preventing the potential for more relevant models, such as the one of animation. The identity of the video games as medium is tied to its name (video game) that constrains its interpretation to the cultural series of cinema. The use of video game as a label to address genres such as text-based adventure games, games based on abstract representations –which are possibly better related to technical and architectural drawing– is not a neutral act. Arsenault and Perron emphasise once more the dangers of using cinema as a model in the understanding of video games, stressing the need to explore alternatives to a cinema-centric approach.

The essay by Enrico Gandolfi and Roberto Semprebene, aims at studying the relation between cinema and video games proposing a new methodology. Taking inspiration from media sociology, the authors identify five categories and elements that can be found in films based on or inspired by video games texts: the production, the agential dimension, the representational dimension, the economic and cultural impact of the video game/movie. In addition, looking at films that establish a crossmedial relationship with video games, they point at the configuration of recurring categories such as the narrative, the aesthetic, the encyclopaedian and the dynamic. Finally, the authors analyse these categories within a series of case studies. These categories and their overlaps determine the identity of each cinematic adaptation in relation to the original video game texts. More in general, the model could offer some insight on the sustainability of crossmedial adaptation also beyond these two media. Semprebene and Gandolfi use three case studies to test their model, selecting works distant in time from each other, in order to proof how the relationship between the two media is inflected in different ways.

Sarah Atkinson and Helen Kennedy shift the focus from game to game-ness and from cinema as a medium to its manifestations within social reality. The object of this investigation is the London-based experience of Secret Cinema that stages a collective performance. Viewers book a movie event for which they are provided a secret location on the Internet and through social media, where the film is projected within an environment that somehow replicates the one of the movie. While the opening recalls an alternate reality game, the final act instead recalls theme parks and a multimedia performance. The audience is given a film-themed dress code and once at the venue, they can either watch the movie or engage in other unrelated activities, many of which have commercial purposes. According to the authors, the ludic context is not only

evoked by the deployment of gamification strategies and by placing spectatorship within a more physically engaging framework, but it is mostly reflected by the ways in which video game related competences are mobilised taking part to a hybrid production between game, theatre, cinema and performance. Lluís Anyó's article, *Narrative Time in Video Games and Films: From Loop to Travel in Time*, maps a series of connections between the use of narrative time in cinema and in video games. Adopting Genette's narratological theories as a starting point for his exploration, Anyó highlights both congruences and distinctions in the analysis of chronology in the two media. The focal point of the research is, as expected, the relevance of player agency in the context of both the representation and the experience of narrative temporality. While cinema, both in the era of classical Hollywood and throughout modernity, has often employed devices such as prolepsis and analepsis, games seem to strive towards a paradoxical linearisation of time. More specifically, in multiplayer games, Anyó argues, the necessity for players to negotiate time intersubjectively allows for a minor degree of design freedom. Finally Anyó proposes an analysis of one of video games' most recurrent features, that of the loop. Revisiting the same game sequence several times, in order to overcome an obstacle or obtain a better performance, is a recurrent experience in gameplay, but as a transmedia form, that encompasses video games, cinema and digital media, loop seems to characterize many facets of contemporary media production and consumption.

In Bad Objects 2.0: Games and Gamers Steve Anderson analyses the representation of video games at the cinema through a diachronic perspective that reflects on the evolution of the socio-cultural relations between the two media. In addition to the thorough historical path offered by the author, the value of this contribution extends on a methodological level thanks to its original format. The piece is a hypertextual project designed on Scalar in order to inform the reading with a large array of clips providing examples to the points made by the author and allowing the essay to directly quote the referenced films. In this sense, the essay does not only reflect on the history of videoludic representations but also on the methodologies associate with these investigations. Anderson's piece in fact, is an example of new formats that are rapidly being adopted in academic contexts –such as hypertexts and video essay– that use multimedia formats to bridge the semiotic gap between the critical work (the essay) and its object (audiovisual media). Anderson's piece allows the reader to unfold a historical organised in decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s) each associated with dominant themes and ideologies that are exemplified via clips available on Scalar. For this reason, the journal directly hosts an introduction to this work that maps it with links redirecting to the Scalar project.

In his article Alex Casper Cline examines three ways in which traditional audiovisual media have represented video games and the social, economic and cultural discourses surrounding them. Cline focuses on what he dubs as the (re)production of the 1980s UK game industry, a productive milieu that is at the same

time described and constructed ex-post by a series of films and TV series. *Micro Men* (Saul Metzstein, 2009) frames the rise of the British video game industry as dominated by the attrition between creative genius and a reactionary approach to media and technologies. The crowdfunded documentary *From Bedrooms to Billions* (Anthony and Nicola Caulfield, 2014) embraces a more optimistic view, often bordering overenthusiastic technophilia and, Cline argues, constructs a discourse that is largely devoid of a critical focus. Finally, the experimental documentary *Spectrum Diamond: The Myth and Legend of Matthew Smith* (Lucio Apolito, Paolo Caredda, Alessandro Diacco, 2002) constructs a quasi-fantastic narrative around the production of the games *Manic Miner* (Matthew Smith, 1983) and *Jet Set Willy* (Matthew Smith, 1984), blending gaming nostalgia, archival research and pseudo-history in the attempt to re-construct an esoteric segment of the history of video game production in the UK. Cline's article resonates with Anderson's Scalar project, in its attempt to shift the focus from the analysis of semiotic traits common to both media to the research around the discourses on video games and those produced by cinema and television.

Over the past ten years, cinema and video games have clearly developed a relationship that is as prolific in their practices and production as it is complex and problematic in its theorisation. With its fourth issue G|A|M|E asks, once more, what is cinematic in video games and what is ludic in cinema.

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Video games, cinema, Bazin, and the myth of simulated lived experience

ABSTRACT

Video games theory has advanced far enough that we can use it to reevaluate film theory as a result, en route to broader, transmedial theorizing. This essay looks particularly at how video games can be seen as participating in and advancing Andre Bazin's "Myth of Total Cinema", and perhaps recontextualizing it as the Myth of Simulated Lived Experience.

KEYWORDS: *Bazin, cinema, simulation, transmedia, imaginary worlds*

The guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of the mechanical reproduction of reality in the nineteenth century, from photography to the phonograph, namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time. If cinema in its cradle lacked all the attributes of the cinema to come, it was with reluctance and because its fairy guardians were unable to provide them however much they would have liked to. —Andre Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema"[Bazin, 1967, p. 21.]

Those of us writing about video games who are too old to have been in degree programs devoted to video games are, like myself, likely to have come out of film and television studies programs; and anyone having gone through them will have encountered the works of Andre Bazin, and his "Myth of Total Cinema". In this famous essay, Bazin describes how cinema's advancements, when not made merely for capitalistic gain, propelled cinema ever closer to an attempt at the complete recreation of reality, or what we might more accurately call simulated lived experience. Bazin saw the reproduction of imagery, sound, and motion as the beginning of this endeavor, and the addition of color, sound, and widescreen as bringing cinema closer to our actual sensory experience of the world; and he supposed that other additions like stereoscopy would be

added in the future, as the experience that cinema provided grew asymptotically closer to lived experience.

During his time, and perhaps even more so after his death in 1958, Bazin's stance became placed in opposition to that of another early theorist, Sergei Eisenstein, whose love of formalism, montage, and a screen aspect ratio that was closer to a square, countered Bazin's love of realism, uninterrupted long takes, and widescreen imagery that let the viewer decide where to look. While such an opposition provided a good entry point for film theory students considering the various positions possible, as a dichotomy it often oversimplified both theorists' positions, even as it placed them more firmly in the spotlight as foundational figures in academic film studies. Today, while faster cutting, special effects, and an ever-increasing number of image alteration technologies would seem to work against an increase in cinematic realism (although special effects have at the same time allowed for the increase in the realism of what they depict), other technologies, like the recent return of 3-D, and cinematic technology exploring higher resolution imagery and projection with higher frame rates, suggest that the Myth of Total Cinema is alive and well, as does all the hype surrounding the history of virtual reality technology and its cinematic imaginary as found in films such as *Total Recall* (1990), *eXistenZ* (1999), and *The Matrix* series (1999 and 2003), wherein Total Cinema, with its reproduction of experiences indistinguishable from lived experience, has been technologically achieved. And video games can be included in this endeavor as well, not only due to their continued striving for greater perceptual realism, but also for the additional contributions, like interactivity and navigable worlds, both of which increase the hyperreality of the experiences they offer.

Video games, then, can also be seen as a part of *Total Cinema*, a term which could be seen to be broadly inclusive of all the media available in Bazin's time, and what we might now refer to as the simulation of lived experience. While their ontological connection to reality is different than that of analog photography (discussed in the next section), they nonetheless can provide different linkages and experiences which can not only be seen in the light of film theory, but which can generalize certain aspects of film theory, and Bazin's specifically, to cover more than just the photographic representation of reality.

While Bazin's stance is rightly considered as a realist position, one occasionally finds his position being reduced to something that rejects anything that leads away from increased realism; but this is not the case at all. As Steven D. Greydanus points out in "*Citizen Kane, André Bazin, and the Holy Moment*",

Bazin wasn't against creativity. On the contrary, he believed that the realism of cinema gives it greater creative power because it taps directly into the power of creation itself, to the creative power of God. Bazin's realism was ultimately personalist, rooted in a belief in the world as revelatory and sacramental, the work of God, the Supreme Person. At its best, film can capture transcendence amid transience

and make us aware of sacredness in the midst of fleeting reality: a “Holy Moment,” to cite a catchphrase that is not Bazin’s but has become associated with him.¹

While it remains true that the ontological nature of analog photography, with its direct iconic and indexical linkages to the referent, was championed by Bazin in his writings, the capturing of transcendence and the belief in the world as revelatory and sacramental that Greydanus mentions indicates that these connections are only the first step to an ontology of a higher order that is eternal, one that is revealed in the world through the material but does not end there. Thus, Bazin’s theory can be applied not only to cinema, but to anything capable of also tracing the connections to a higher ontological order; it is not dependent on any particular medium, but rather only on the idea of the existence of media and their revelatory ability.² Seen in this light, one could suggest the motivation behind the desire for Total Cinema or simulated lived experience goes beyond just a technical challenge to be achieved, or a fantasy to be attained; perhaps it could be a way to experience the real world afresh, through comparison with its simulation, and even to begin to consider the real world itself as a simulation of a higher-order world to come, with earthly things analogous to spiritual ones. While Bazin does not discuss the motivation behind the desire for Total Cinema, such speculation is supported by Bazin’s own personalism and Roman Catholicism, which could have provided a foundation for such thinking.

Philosophical musings as to the origin of the Myth of Total Cinema aside, our purpose here is to see how video games might fit into the equation, and whether an ontological theory such as Bazin’s can be applied to a medium notorious for its lack of indexical connections to any real-world referents. Thus we must turn to a discussion of realism, and its relationship to various media, and in particular, film and video games.

CONCERNING REALISM

Realism, as a term, has come to mean a series of attributes or criteria which are used to compare representations of things with analogous entities in the actual or real world of lived, intersubjective experience. While such comparisons were originally made between representations and the real-world objects they represented, implying the presence of a semiotic linkage that was iconic (the picture looks like the object it depicts) and in the case of photography, also indexical (the picture was made from the light reflected from the object itself, providing a direct link between the two), the ability to create images of things that do not exist meant that the comparison which determined how realistic something looked depended not on any particular individual object, but on typical objects of the same type. For example, rather than making a painting based on a real apple, and then asking if the artist had captured how that apple appeared in the representation, an apple could be painted which looked like an apple but was in fact just a collection of traits (redness, roundness, possessing a stem, etc.) which

1. Greydanus, 2011.

2. Here Bazin’s Roman Catholicism clearly separates his outlook from those who have no belief in the transcendental and eternal, and thus only begin and end with the material rather than see it as pointing to something beyond itself; which may account for the more narrow reading of Bazin’s ideas that one often finds.

did not refer to any particular apple, but rather to what apples in general were typically like. Likewise, photographs can be altered so that their link to a referent is broken, and today they can be completely generated algorithmically in the computer, with an object's dimensionality, color, lighting, and so forth all computed from general parameters, and often with the detail necessary to give it the specificity of an actual, physical object. Thus, realism is more about the typicality of a representation than the actual existence of what is represented.

The changeover from analog film technology to digital imaging technology makes such ontologically untethered image production easier than ever. Computer-generated imagery (CGI), however, can still be used to create extremely realistic images, far more visually realistic than even the best photorealistic painters could produce. As I have noted elsewhere, computer-generated images can also be linked to real-worlds referents in a variety of ways, and in new ways that were not possible previously.³ CGI has also brought film and video games closer together, so that an increasing amount of film theory can be applied to video games.

At the same time, game studies has grown enough that it can now be used to refocus the lenses provided by film studies in such a way as to reposition how we think of film studies. If Bazin is right, then cinema's advance to greater perceptual realism is carrying on the same tradition begun many years earlier with technical developments in painting that moved it toward greater perceptual realism, a move which dominated the medium before the advent of photography. Video games, then, aren't so much trying to be cinematic any more than films are trying to be painterly;⁴ instead, video games and film are both moving toward the goal of Total Cinema, the total simulation of lived experience, which can also be seen as the attempt to increase the transparency of mediated experience.

"Why should mediated experiences be transparent?" is a question that is perhaps seen as being so obvious that one forgets to ask it at all. It is the same reason we clean the glass windows of buildings; we want to focus on the view itself, not on the glass in front of us. But, transcendental motivations aside, why do we want our mediated experiences to seem as real as lived experience? There is a need for escape from our present circumstances, but also the need for fantasy, and for new experiences (safe ones that do require risk, and relatively inexpensive ones; which is why so few of us will physically travel to the Himalayas or take part in a shoot-out with live ammunition). New experiences, especially those in a persona unlike our own, may give us greater insight into the Other. Consider the great popularity of the Grand Theft Auto games; the cities they take place in are hardly exotic ones, but the avatar's social position and occupation—that of a ruthless criminal—is quite unlike that of (hopefully) most players. Just as cinema takes us inside the minds of its characters and into worlds outside our own experience, video games go even farther, inviting us to make decisions as those characters and to interact with their worlds. A transparent experience improves the illusion of closeness to those characters and worlds, which can also explain the popularity of first-person perspectives,

3. Wolf, 1999.

4. True, video games do employ cinematic conventions, such as title screens and credits, which do not make the cinematic experience more like lived experience; but these attempts to be cinematic were more to give video games a more transparent interface for their users, since cinematic conventions are currently so ingrained in viewing practices.

real-time action, open-ended sandbox play, and the ever-increasing expansiveness of the worlds to be explored.

Video games can be seen as the next step forward in the journey already begun by painting and cinema. Perspective gave painting its first step along the way, providing a consistent and coherent point of view, and photography added a level of detail that more closely approximated that seen by the human eye, with color photography coming even closer. Vision relating to various subjective states could be simulated with changes of focus, filtering, and other optical tricks, which went beyond merely simulating an optical point of view but tried to convey a sense of the subject's frame of mind and interior state; painting began adding these features along with photography and cinema, from the visions presented by Impressionism to the emotions of Expressionism. Cinematic sound was a further advance along these lines; it expanded the flatness of the image into three-dimensional spaces where sounds emanate and surround listeners, sounds that appeared to be the consequences of actions occurring on-screen. Moving imagery with synchronized sound also gave these perceptual illusions a temporal dimension, and motion picture editing (at least within the classical Hollywood style) developed in such a way as to simulate selective perception, saccades, and even the temporal elisions of selective memory that result with the psychological chunking of long series of events into a comprehensible narrative framework.⁵ As cinema developed, the simulation of experience was not only perceptual in nature but became psychological as well, as it tried to simulate emotions and thought processes and convey them to an audience.

Though video games still fall short of matching the visual contributions to simulated experience made cinematic moving imagery, they have made an advance in the psychological area by featuring the addition of interaction and decision-making, in some cases a controlled and manipulatable point of view and choice of viewing angle, and diegetic acknowledgement of one's participation in a game's imagery, from simulated movement through a world under the player's control to the reactions of characters who react to the player's avatar's actions. While realism in film usually refers to photorealistic plausibility, combined with the emotionally plausible choices made by characters with whom audience members may or may not identify, video games must try to simulate the affordances interactively encountered in the real world; if I see a closed door, I should be able to open it and see where it leads, if I find an object like a gun or a car, I should be able to make use of it as I would in the real world. Thus realism, in video games, requires everything that cinematic realism requires, and more. And whereas the laws of physics need not be simulated while a movie is being filmed (on the contrary, it is the breaking of the laws of physics which must be simulated), video games have no inherent laws of physics in their worlds; all laws of physics must be simulated by physics engines, the abilities of which have developed tremendously in their attempts at realism though they still fall short of what is taken for granted in cinema.

5. Though they differ technologically, the effects are similar. Saccades, for example, occur reflexively and are the abrupt movements of the human eye which jump from one place to another, without focusing on anything between their endpoints. Thus, direct cuts simulate the human visual experience more accurately than swish pans which involve actual movement but end up calling attention to themselves

At the same time, players understand the difficulty that the demands of visual realism, realistic behavior, and realistic affordances place on the production of a video game, and can still be satisfied by depictions and interactions that fall far short of the real world. Even the illusions of presence and free will within the mediated world can potentially heighten the sense of artificiality, since they provide more limitations and boundaries for the user to encounter. So these additions to the Myth of Simulated Lived Experience are more than merely perceptual or even psychological; they add a sense of agency (and diegetic acknowledgement of that agency) that greatly enhances the illusion of lived experience, and this illusion remains even when the imaginary experiences depicted are quite unlike those of the real, intersubjective world that the Myth attempts to simulate. In short, the experience of agency, and of a world in which that agency is active, may be more important to the Myth as that of perceptual realism, at least when it comes to the illusion of a functioning world, especially if that world is unlike that of actual lived experience. After all, our perceptual systems can fill in the gaps and complete gestalten within the game world, but agency is either present or it isn't, and even the degree of agency available is very noticeable, since it involves effort on the player's part and influence and feedback once actions have been completed; agency is difficult to fake.

Realism, then, can refer to perceptual realism (visual and aural imitation of the real world), behavioral realism (actions and physics that seem to follow real-world laws of physics), emotional realism (characters who behave in a plausible manner, who seem to act and make choices like real-world individuals), and what we might call participational realism (the ability to participate in one's environment the way one does in the real world).⁶ While audiences expect film to have the first three, they do not expect the fourth due to the nature of the medium itself; likewise, video game players expect to participate in their on-screen worlds. Just as film audiences were generally content with silent cinema until sound appeared, and black and white imagery until color became more common, video game players do not expect interactivity and affordances to match those of the real world (and once they are aware of video game conventions, they may automatically fill in the gaps), though they enjoy advances in that direction and imagine what greater interactivity would be like. Thus, when one refers to the participational realism of a game like *Grand Theft Auto V* (2014), it is praised in comparison with other games, rather than criticized for falling short of the participational potential found in the real world. Because of this, it can be seen as a step forward toward the simulation of lived experience, and most reviews of the game highlight the number of things that the player can do within the game world.

At the same time, the availability of participational realism in video games underscores the lack of it in film and other less interactive media, where visual realism usually makes up for the lack of participational potential. Such compar-

6. I use *participational* here (instead of *participatory*) to match the adjectival forms of *perceptual*, *visual*, and *aural*, and also because *participatory realism* sounds more like a form of realism which is subjective in nature, rather than one which merely allows participation in an imaginary world

isons and measures of realism, then, lead us to the final topic to be considered, that of the imaginary worlds which films and video games create, depict, and inviting the audience to enter vicariously.

ENTERING WORLDS

Imaginary worlds have a long tradition, extending back into antiquity.⁷ Film and video games are two relatively recent windows through which audiences can vicariously experience such worlds, and as cinema's analog photographic technology gives way to digital imaging technology, computer technology becomes the basis for both media, and the means used to create and depict the worlds in which the stories told in them take place. The technological convergence of all screen media, with computers and CGI as their basis, makes trans-medial moves of franchises much easier, as assets can more easily be adapted between from one medium to another.

Overall, more possibilities for the generation of worlds (whether those of film, television, video games, or other media) have become available. Not only perceptually, with computer-generated imagery bringing objects, vehicles, creatures, and entire locations to life with enough photorealism to seamlessly combine them with live-action, but also in the very control and animation of those things. Computer animation not only simulates lighting and physics in ways that are beyond what could be hand-animated, but artificial intelligence (AI) is used to control the actions of crowds of characters in battle scenes, procedurally-generating action shots which are unplanned by human beings and can surprise even those who set the parameters of such scenes.⁸ Video games also use simulated lighting and physics and AI, but some go even farther by producing entire worlds which are procedurally-generated. Such games as David Braben and Ian Bell's *Exile* (1984), Alessandro Ghignola's *Noctis* (2000), Tarn Adams's *Dwarf Fortress* (2006), Markus Persson's *Minecraft* (2009), Hello Games' *No Man's Sky* (2015), and others generate entire worlds and the events in them, leading to not only new experiences from game to game, but even new locations and places. While such worlds are behind their hand-crafted competitors in their perceptual realism, the potential for exploration and new experiences outweighs such concerns in the minds of their players, who value freedom of movement and interaction over graphical realism (perhaps the most popular example of this is *Minecraft*). Video games, then, ask us to question the relative value of agency and free-form exploration in the Myth compared to the value of perceptual realism; perhaps video games have reached a moment analogous to the shift that occurred in painting when, freed by photography from the need to for perceptual realism, it began integrating subjectivity and experience into its imagery. They suggest that there is more to the simulation of lived experience than the need for transparency, since these games are, visually at least, less transparent (although procedurally-generated content is itself growing more photorealistic as technology improves).

7. See the second chapter in Mark J. P. Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012) for a history of the imaginary world tradition

8. For example, while creating scenes with the program Massive for Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films, some A.I.-controlled combatants in a battle scene actually ran away from the battle rather than fight in it, something which surprised the filmmakers. See Koeppl, 2003, p. 44

This focus on worlds, instead of just the narratives taking place within them, is a more recent phenomenon. The increasing amount of scholarship on transmedial narratives and worlds reveals just how medium-specific much previous writing has been, and how limited a critical point of view can result from such an emphasis. There is a shift occurring in media studies which now regards worlds and franchises as the focal point of interest, and media as the varied set of windows through which the world or franchise is experienced.⁹ Decades before the study of transmedia, Bazin wrote of a similar idea, according autonomy to the subject matter depicted, and looking at the common features shared by cinema and other media, anticipating discussions of transmedial works decades before the terminology appeared. Along with “The Myth of Total Cinema”, *What is Cinema? Volume I* contains Bazin’s essays on cinema and theater, and cinema and painting, and “In Defense of Mixed Cinema” which defends newer cinematic adaptations of novels and plays, which, unlike their older counterparts, “serve to supply the film-maker with characters and adventures largely independent of their literary framework”, and which “have become part of a mythology existing outside of the novels. They enjoy in some measure an autonomous existence of which the original works are no longer anything more than an accidental and almost superfluous manifestation.”¹⁰ One can easily change “film-maker” to “video game maker” for a description of what occurs in many video game adaptations; such games are more like evocations of the original works than direct adaptations; the interactivity alone requires more flexibility in the possible events that will be encountered. And the same applies to transmedial adaptations as well, which give their subject matter an autonomy which is free of any particular medium, and which cause one to view the same characters and worlds through multiple media windows rather than only a single venue. The same can be said about narrative itself; thanks to procedurally-generated content (including an increasing amount of narrative content), worlds are being created directly for their own sake, and not merely as a backdrop in which to place a narrative.

Bazin’s essay “In Defense of Mixed Cinema” also makes predictions regarding the future direction that he expects cinema to take, which was prophetic for its time in 1952 when the essay was written;

The days are gone when it was enough to “make cinema” in order to deserve well of the seventh art. While we wait until color and stereoscopy provisionally return its primacy to form and create a new cycle of aesthetic erosion, on the surface cinema no longer has anything to conquer. There remains for it only to irrigate its banks, to insinuate itself between the arts among which it has so swiftly carved out its valleys, subtly to invest them, to infiltrate the soil, in order to excavate invisible galleries. The time of resurgence of a cinema newly independent of novel and theater will return. But it may then be because novels will be written directly onto film. As it awaits the dialectic of the history art which will restore it to this desirable and hypothetical autonomy, the cinema draws into itself the formidable resources of elaborated subjects amassed around it by neighboring arts

9. See in particular chapter six, “Transmedial Growth and Adaptation”, of my book *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* and the section of the book’s Introduction which traces the movement toward considering imaginary worlds as objects of study.

10. Bazin, 1967, p. 53.

during the course of the centuries. It will make them its own because it has need of them and we experience the desire to rediscover them by way of the cinema.¹¹

Here, too, one could change “novels will be written directly into film” to “films will be written directly into video games”, or for that matter, into graphic novels, television series, and so forth; and certainly the “neighboring arts” have supplied a wealth of material not only for adaptation, but for “rediscovery”, as Bazin indicates. Not only can franchises originate in any medium and spread to any other medium, but often works are designed to appear in multiple media simultaneously; for example, the video game *Enter the Matrix* (2003) was released the same month as the movie *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), with storylines interwoven between the film and game, and both film and game sharing the same cast and locations.

Bazin, then, realized at a relatively early time not only the potential for the transmedial movement of material, but the possibility of originating works in other media which carried over characters and story situations, what we would call a transmedial franchise today. Even in Bazin’s day, such things had been going on (to a limited degree) since L. Frank Baum made new additions to Oz which originated in novels, stage plays, comic strips, movies, and more; but Bazin may have been one of the first theorists to notice that this was a direction that cinema would be heading, or to suggest that it had not yet reached its goal. Likewise, imaginary worlds, as the settings of many simulated experiences, are embalmed (or appear to be embalmed) by media just as the actual, physical world is “embalmed” by cinema, as Bazin noted.

Thus, film theory can serve to add to video game theory, without merely overlaying ideas which reinterpret game elements as cinematic ones, precisely where it extends beyond merely discussing cinema itself. Film theory itself, then, needs to be reevaluated, since many of the areas where it departs from strictly looking at film (such as performance, audience response, narrative gestalten and inferences, and the control of viewer attention) may be marginal or underemphasized, although this seems to be beginning to change. Even though he died in 1958, far too early to conceive of the possibilities presented by interactive media, Bazin’s interest in the future of cinema and the unrealized potential it still held helped him to ask the right questions and make predictions that have, for the large part, come true. While his “Myth of Total Cinema” may seem, in retrospect, too medium-specific, the idea behind it, the Myth of Simulated Lived Experience, acts to redefine cinema as something broader than what was available during Bazin’s lifetime, and perhaps why he claimed that “In short, cinema has not yet been invented!”¹² In this sense, all forms of media, whether they strive for ever-greater transparency or try to simulate the free-form exploration of and participation in the imagined worlds they depict, could be enfolded into this project of “cinema”, which is still growing ever-closer to its being completely and fully invented in Bazin’s sense of the term, and video games have brought them one important leap toward that goal.

11. Andre Bazin, 1967, p. 74-75.

12. Bazin, 1967, p. 21.

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De-framing video games from the light of cinema

Interactivity is the cinema of the 21st century.
David Cage (foreword of *L'empire des jeux*, 2005)

ABSTRACT

In this essay, we shall try to step back from a blinding cinema-centric approach in order to examine the impact such a framing has caused, to question its limitations, and to reflect on the interpretive communities that have relied on film (communities we are part of, due to our film studies background) to position video games as an important cultural phenomenon as well as an object worthy of scholarly attention. Using Gaudreault and Marion's notion of cultural series and wishing to spread a French theoretical approach we find very relevant to the discussion, we will question the bases on which we frame video games as cinema. This inquiry will focus on the audiovisual nature of both media and highlight their differing technical and aesthetic aspects, which will lead us to consider video games as being closer to other forms of audiovisual media.

KEYWORDS: *video game; cinema; theory; history; remediation*

It is difficult not to rephrase the theme of this issue and try to see outside its box. It seems that video games, since a while already, have been framed in the light of cinema by the designers, producers and scholars who have begun to study them. Indeed, as we have been doing for ten years throughout the activities of the Ludiciné research group (www.ludicine.ca), film theories have been one of the most important body of works used to analyse video games at the dawn of game studies. It is then hard to see why we should today re-frame such a common mode of examination. Therefore, the real query would not be to see video games through the lenses of cinema, but to show how this view is far from being (an) "objective". As Godard playfully formulated, there is nothing "objective" in looking through an objectif, the French term for the camera

lens. The methodological theories that are now elaborated in game studies show us that the video game's specificities as a playable and interactive art are calling not for a close-up but for a wide-angle shot on the complex relations between video games and cinema.

In this essay, we shall try to step back from a blinding cinema-centric approach in order to examine the impact such a framing has caused, to question its limitations, and to reflect on the interpretive communities that have relied on film (communities we are part of, due to our film studies background) to position video games as an important cultural phenomenon as well as an object worthy of scholarly attention. Using Gaudreault and Marion's notion of cultural series and wishing to spread a French theoretical approach we find very relevant to the discussion, we will question the bases on which we frame video games as cinema. This inquiry will focus on the audiovisual nature of both media and highlight their differing technical and aesthetic aspects, which will bring us to consider video games as being closer to other forms of audiovisual media.

IN THE AXIS OF A CERTAIN SERIES-CENTRISM

The link between the video game and cinema has first been made by the industry itself, as both branding and legitimation practices. These roots cannot be clearer than with the names of companies such as Cinematronics and Cinemaware. Founded as early as 1975 (and defunct in 1987), Cinematronics was originally producing arcade games with vector graphics. Despite the label, the wireframe visual representations, as well as the arcade as the context of diffusion, and the short, repetitive and competitive structure of these games' experience were all very far from the in-theater, collective, feature-length photographic records of reality structured as a fixed narrative that the "cinema" term represented. Cinemaware (1985-1991), who worked to produce games based on genre films or television series, explicitly tried to recreate different aspects of the seventh art by showing the action through different camera angles and shots of diverse scales. Lucasfilm Games, founded in 1982, is another obvious bridge between cinema and the video game, of which George Lucas has never lost interest in. The seemingly ever-present dream of fusing games with film has been fulfilled – materially at least – with the introduction of the Laserdisc and CD-ROM as high-capacity data storage solutions, enabling game developers to include "Full-Motion Video" (or FMV) in their "interactive movies" starting in the late 1980s. The craze – and quick fall, we should emphasize – of these "FMV games" in the 1990s have pushed the ties so far as to make people realize that this bond might not be so natural, after all (see Perron *et al.*, 2009, for an in-depth examination of the interactive movies, and Perron and Therrien, 2009, for an overview of the cinematic aspiration of the video game image), even if a well-known designer like David Cage is, as the epigraph of our essay highlights, widely relying on cinema to justify his work and to qualify the future of video games.

These already debated connections between films and games advocate us to take another step back and look at an even bigger picture. Because, as André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion have appositely stated: «To name a media is to contribute to its identification (to bring out its mediality, to grasp its singularity) and to jointly construct an identity for it, which is sometimes not without producing teleological effects» (2009: 27, freely translated). In their recent study of the identity crisis of cinema in the digital era, Gaudreault and Marion explain how the choice of what they call a cultural series (a series of cultural practices ordered around a common principle or paradigm, and determined by an analyst to be constituting a certain continuity of forms) has an important impact on the study of a media. For them:

Choosing a name for a media always betrays what we propose to call a «series-centrism». This series-centrism is at work when a way of naming a media brings a cultural series to the forefront rather than another. There is always a form of series-centrism at work in the institutionalization process of any media, a powerful series-centrism that, aided by the regulatory power of the institution, comes to dominate and take an appearance of “naturalness” even though it is, without contest, a cultural construction.

This concept of series-centrism leads us to believe that one always chooses a side with respect to such and such cultural series in order to identify a media and, inevitably, to interpret its evolution. This choice confirms that a certain constructivism creates and indeed imprints any theory of media identity. Viewed through the prism of a cultural series elected among others, the allocation of the territories and of the media identities is considerably affected (2013: 215, freely translated).

Consequently, the choice to speak about films as motion pictures instead of animated views has placed emphasis on the question of capture (of a photograph) and restitution (of reality), over the important notion of animation which is in the end, according to Gaudreault and Marion, the “hyperseries” defining the movies. This is why they introduce the concept of *animage* to deal with the «type of film image that is born from the expressive potential of the digital and that crystallizes the current spreading of a cultural series formerly neglected by the cinema institution: animation» (2013: 256, freely translated). This is in line with Edmond Couchot’s claims that the digital marks a major shift in the history of visual media because it replaces the capture/restitution paradigm present in photography, cinema, and some television and video, with the paradigm of simulation, with digital media offering images based on calculations computed by a machine and generated on-the-fly (often in real-time) instead of being previously recorded in detail (Couchot, 1998). This hints towards some significant differences in media specificity between the film and the video game image.

THE «VIDEO» PRISM

The designation of games since the creation of *Spacewar!* in 1962 is as interesting as the various markers of cinema. Indeed, the expression used to describe the objects and activities we came to study is far from being “natural”, which is reflected by the fact that our field hasn’t yet adopted a single expression. While the title of this issue is for example referring to video games, the inaugural editorial of *Game Studies* was announcing the «Computer Game Studies, Year One» (Aarseth, 2001). Our international organization founded in 2003 is named the *Digital Games Research Association* (DiGRA). We can also bring to mind the 1980s magazines *Electronic Games* and *Computer and Video Games*, which posit neatly separated kinds of “digital” games. The last fifty years of writing about games could actually be revisited to trace the ways they created a media identity. However, if we draw on Google Ngram Viewer (an online phrase-usage graphing tool) for indications on the ways games were named between 1962 and 2008 (the year that the chart ends), we discover that «video games» was as early as 1976 more widely utilised than «computer games», and that by 2008, the first expression is about twice as likely to be used than the second, while the references to «digital games» are still pretty rare (see <<http://bit.ly/1mZwLq2>>). As of August 17th, 2014, a search through Google Scholar shows an obvious preference for «video games» (even if the numbers are less reliable in a simple Google search because they seem to vary too much, and this is why we are not using them, the same conclusion would still be reached):

Term	Google Scholar
Digital games	19.600
Computer games	241.000
Video games	384.000

Following Gaudreault and Marion’s theoretical account, it is difficult not to see that there is behind this choice a certain form of series-centrism as well. Such a teleological effect was stressed by Aarseth in his well-known editorial:

Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again. And again, until computer game studies emerges as a clearly self-sustained academic field. To make things more confusing, the current pseudo-field of “new media” (primarily a strategy to claim computer-based communication for visual media studies), wants to subsume computer games as one of its objects. There are many problems with this strategy, as there is with the whole concept of “new media,” and most dramatically the fact that computer games are not one medium, but many different media (Aarseth, 2001).

If Aarseth explicitly and rightfully stated that there are more than one media or cultural series composing what we might call, according to his cybertext theory, an *ergodic animage*, and that the “new media” labeling blurs boundaries to one’s own advantage, he was also implicitly electing cinema as the first or at least as one of the main prisms on games. In fact, the great majority of game studies scholars have come to show their bias by using “video games” in common parlance. Underlining that “jeu vidéo” has imposed itself in the language of Molière (over *jeu électronique*/electronic game or *jeu informatique*/computer game) under the francization of the English expression, Étienne Armand Amato explains how the expression has associated two neglected objects of study. After dealing on the one hand about the “game”, Amato states:

On the other hand, the word “video” highlights the iconic quality of these games. It also evokes the video, this electronic technology of capture–recording–restitution which was long perceived as a poor man’s substitute for film, synonymous with household and amateur usage, or with television and commercial exploitation (Amato, 2012: 21, freely translated).

This assertion reveals two consistent and common assumptions which have shaped the media identity and theory of games in the electronic and digital era. First and foremost, speaking about “video” games has promoted the importance of the audio–visual display over the computation or, much to the discontent of those more oriented towards the second term of the expression, the ludic dimension of the activity. As we know, the quest for visual realism or the photo–realism of film did not start yesterday. «Better graphics and sounds» has always been one of the best marketing slogans of video game companies, as Mark J.P. Wolf explains in «Abstraction in the Video Game»:

Game graphics were, and to a large extent still are, the main criteria by which advancing video game technology is benchmarked by the buying public; thus representational graphics act as a means of visually benchmarking the computer’s graphics against the visual experience of unmediated reality, while abstract graphics are unable to serve such a purpose (Wolf, 2003: 53).

Even if the ergodic animage isn’t in essence based on the same technical process, the idea of “video” did point toward the implied notion of capture–recording–restitution. Insofar as, and Amato’s remarks are perceptive, the quality of the image did not have the quality of film, people did not – thank God! – choose to talk by and large of “movie games”, nor “TV games” (except when referring to a certain kind of game system, the likes of which Nintendo used to make before its Famicom/NES), even though the latter might have been more relevant.

The expression “TV games” portends a second way of “allocating the territory” of games, to return to Gaudreault’s phrasing on cultural series, and a way

that was ironically explored first, notably by the pioneer Ralph Baer. His battle was to sell his “television gaming and training apparatus” (as his 1971 patent was titled) to television manufacturers because «he had to deal with the public perception that television was for watching, not playing» (Murphy, 2009: 202). Eventually, the Magnavox Odyssey was commercialized as the world’s first home video game console in 1972. Though the Odyssey managed to sell 350,000 units by 1975, it equipped less than 1% of active televisions. As William Audureau writes when describing that period:

Though Magnavox’s console is technically in a situation of monopoly in the United States, its position is not hard to attack: it is only distributed in the manufacturer’s own stores, resulting in an unfortunate reputation of being incompatible with televisions from competing manufacturers. Consequently, the console market is still wide open (Audureau, 2014: 33).

In his economic study of the worldwide market of video games between 1976 and 1980, Audureau indicates that the total number of different game systems introduced made a gigantic leap from around 100 models in 1976 to a whopping 744 machines in 1977, thanks to the development of the AY-3-8500 integrated circuit chip by General Instrument, with worldwide sales of electronic games (of which video games made the bulk) amounting to a staggering 272 billion euros (Audureau, 2014: 14). The game system had really gotten into the home.

This access had a certain bearing on the identity of games. Studying the role of television largely gone unnoticed in the history of video games, Sheila C. Murphy reflects on a decisive change:

By the time that Atari’s breakthrough Sears Home PONG console was released, consumers were ready to play with and on their TVs. This shift towards seeing the television as a playable consumer device is crucial. While the histories of both computing and mass media contain important contributions from amateurs and hobbyists, the widespread public acceptance and use of home video game systems by a broader audience indicates that consumers were rethinking television’s role as a home technology in the mid-1970s (2009: 202).

Murphy explains how home gaming systems were seen as «low level home computers» (p. 201) and how the television came to be considered «as part of both a larger entertainment system and as an interactive “computer”» (p. 202), but a computer solely focused on leisure rather than utility. There are much fewer advertisements presenting people gathered around a computer screen than ones showing friends, couples or family grouped in front of a TV screen in order to play or to just watch others do so; it’s indeed an image used from the outset to promote the home gaming systems, from the Atari VCS to the Nintendo Wii. Nevertheless, this new appraisal of TV as an interactive system

did not discard the old consideration of the image as a capture-recording-res-titution process. The popularity of Atari's Video Computer System (VCS) was overlapping with the increasing presence of the home Video Cassette Recorder (VCR) in the 1970s, with the Sony Betamax's 1975 release and JVC's VHS format appearing in 1976. Although "video games" is not designating a venue as clearly as "arcade games" does, there is a correlation to be made between "video" and "home video". It might not be mere happenstance that Google Ngram Viewer gives 1976 as the time when "video game" overtook "computer game". Home video with its cassettes, and home video games with their cartridges, were leading the commodification of visual practices.

THE VIDEO GAME AS FILM: A "SCHOLARLY SERIES"?

The accent put on the relationship between video game and film is certainly not merely a matter of commercial practices. It has also been an academic line of inquiry before this present issue, to the point that we may consider the history of views on games as cinema as forming its own "scholarly series". It was indeed one of the cases used by Bolter and Grusin, in a seminal book hard to eliminate from the discussion even if it is dated, to illustrate how the new media tried to refashion prior media forms.

Finally, the new medium can remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized. The very act of remediation, however, ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways. For example, the genre of computer games like *Myst* or *Doom* remediates cinema, and such games are sometimes called "interactive films" ([1999] 2000: 47).

In a sense Bolter and Grusin were right to call Cyan's graphic adventure and id Software's first-person shooter «computer» games, since the first was responsible for the popularity of the CD-ROM, and the second for real-time first-person perspective. However, they were wrong to label them «interactive films» (and not even «movies»), as this is reflecting their series-centrism. That being said, the idea behind Bolter and Grusin's seminal concept of remediation should spur us to be conscious about the fact that even if new theoretical approaches about games remain dependant on older ones, like film theory in our case, they have to be refashioned.

Eventually, the idea of discussing video games through cinema must be engaged with. Games were never "filmic" since the term film is, even in the present-day theory of the seventh art, reserved for the material properties of the film medium – the film stock itself and the mechanical logistics necessary for its projection. Video games have seldom relied on actors and scenes photographed in real-time motion, but have been using motion-capture technologies to better record the movement of objects or people. This doesn't mean that game

developers are not taking clues and inspiration from film in structuring scenes, visual narrative, and dramatic action set-pieces, just as the artisans of cinema in its beginnings looked at theater. This is what Chris Kohler, for example, meant when he described the cinematic elements and mode of storytelling in *Final Fantasy IV* (Square, 1991):

This was closer than ever to true beginning-middle-end narrative in the true Hollywood cinema sense of the term. Still, the differences between game and film were obvious. The characters and locations were still made out of small, pixilated drawings and 99% of the game's scenes shared the same camera angle, which wasn't even a physically realistic one [...]. What is important here is that even though these extreme limitations were still being imposed, Square pressed on and attempted to make movie-like games even on computer hardware that couldn't handle complex animation. (Kohler, 2005: 113-114)

Kohler's assessment is exemplary of the "cinema envy" (Zimmerman, 2002) that has characterized many video game designers. And while we typically speak of the cinematic ambitions of game developers as if they were caressing an age-old dream or holy grail, it is important to keep in mind that this reality is historically constructed as well. Eric Zimmerman's 2002 essay "Do Independent Games Exist?" has foreshadowed a lot of the games industry's subsequent development by weighing the pros and cons of the games-and-cinema movement (p. 125; since Zimmerman uses two columns to contrast his argument, we have kept the original layout for the quotation):

Games are merging with cinema.

Technological advances, particularly in real-time graphics, means that games are becoming more "realistic" and increasingly resemble film. The cinematic turn in games will allow developers a broader palette of expressive tools that will appeal to new kinds of game audiences. Games will absorb and replace film.

Games suffer from cinema envy.

What passes for "realism" in games is an awkward and unimaginative use of 3D computer graphics. It's time for game developers to stop trying to replicate the pleasures of film. Games need to find their own forms of expression, capitalizing on their unique properties as dynamic, participatory systems.

We're certainly playing our "game" here, looking at essays with positions that have since been nuanced or superseded and siding with those advocating for taking a step back from cinema, even from a theoretical perspective. However, to play fair, our claim cannot be so clear-cut. For instance, settling on "video" instead of "TV" or "film" is significant, and brings a meaningful question: if games do not rely on the same semiotic materials (live-action foot-

age) and syntactic organization (tightly-edited feature-length narratives) than popular cinema, how can they be commonly held to be “cinematic”? Would video games only be “cinematic” in the specific sense of the adjective? Indeed, nowadays, the qualifying adjective “cinematic” is more used to describe the felt experience of certain games. It is closer to the way we declare that the acting in a film is «theatrical» on the account that it is suiting the exaggeration of an actor on stage, and not because we see the whole work as filmed theater. This is also explaining why we can say that *Blacksad* (Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido, [2000] 2010) has a «rich cinematic style» (see <<http://bit.ly/1ov2eQP>>) without taking the comic book for a «filmed book». With this in mind, and following Nitsche’s thoughts, we realize that films do not serve as models for games, but provide a set of necessary viewing space techniques that the video game takes and adapts to its own needs : «Cinematic visualization is seen as the audiovisual means to present game spaces via moving images. Thus, parallels between games and film primarily are meant to be read as space-driven necessities and not as cinema-infused guidelines for games» (Nitsche, 2009, p.74).

Kohler’s previously-cited observation was emphasizing something very important: video games face technical limitations in their visual representation that are very different from those of live-action film, which constitutes the default form of cinema, and are actually much closer to a markedly different kind of cinema: animation. And if the cinematic and the animetic face varying constraints and possibilities, the animetic must also be divided between pre-rendered and real-time animation. The first is the classic way of animating well-defined static pictures by taking photographs and ordering the images as “frames” of animation; the second method, real-time animation, was identified by Eric Zimmerman (cited earlier) as being especially important to video games. This is fundamental: video games do not merely play back pre-recorded “cut-scenes” (these are, very appropriately, called *cinematics*, owing to the common principle of record/playback that defines the cultural series “motion pictures”), but rather produce their images in real-time using art assets created by artists and simulation routines implemented by programmers.

THINKING ABOUT GAMES AND THEIR CULTURAL SERIES

The restrictions placed on the visual flux of video games because of their need for real-time graphics is highly significant when we consider the media identity of games. While cinema may not provide the all-in-one answer, animation film alone is insufficient as well since, just as we noted regarding the focus on *video*, it elevates the visual aspect of games as their chief characteristic to the detriment of their other aspects, and namely, part of their nature as computer software. In this regard, we should point out a paradox that future work would need to address: of all the computer-mediated practices, the video game is one of *the most* graphically intensive. By that we mean that even compared to a variety of digital visual practices, whether digital animation, architectural draw-

ing, or the processing of pictures received from giant telescopes, the real-time imperative sets video games in a class of their own. This explains why video games have consistently been the driving force behind the technological adoption by consumers of dedicated graphics cards for their home computers. And yet by contrast, among visual practices, the video game is one of *the least* graphically intensive. “Hardcore” gamers will routinely lower the quality of graphics rendered and displayed by their computer to optimize the game’s performance; to summarize the gamer’s creed, an ugly game running smoothly trumps a visually beautiful game with frame rate issues, since slowdowns negatively impact the game’s interactivity. The flexible nature of graphics in games is not restricted to the competitive scene either, as “casual” gamers with bare-bone computers missing a dedicated graphics card will likewise experience visually impoverished games due to their system’s performance. Game developers face the same problem, and constantly have to strike a compromise between fluidity of play and responsiveness of controls (the needs of the game situation) and visual complexity (the needs of the spectacle). This is evidenced by the very different processes and skillsets implied in the work of 3D modellers in “low-poly” (for real-time graphics rendering, typically in video games) and “high-poly” contexts (for pre-rendered images in animated films).

It should be clear by now that the choice to name our object of study “video games” is not neutral. This is undeniably a question of framing and de-framing since one could just as easily decide to study “interactive audiovisual experiences”, shifting the focus from *games* to another cultural series. For example, we could have talked about *user-controlled images* (with ancestry comprising magic lanterns, optical toys, flipbooks, etc.), or *indoor sports* (noting in passing that Atari’s *Home Pong* console was originally marketed by Sears’ winter sporting goods department), along with billiards, ping-pong, and so on. Even if we settle on examining these objects through their visual nature, there is no need to look at them through the filtered light of cinema, with its specters and shades in half-life. The interactivity of video games makes animation a much more relevant cultural series to study them, since the animation of pictures can be manipulated in time, and hence adapted to the player’s actions. But if we stop looking at the motion and start studying the images themselves, there is much to say on the properties of individual pictures regarding their point of view, scale, perspective, and so on. In many cases, the realities of in-game graphics are far from those of cinema, and multiple visual cultural series would undoubtedly prove to be more appropriate to study them. Games whose graphics are drawn in parallel projection, for instance, with the game world receding in “tiles” that don’t stretch to conform to a realistic perspective, derive much more from architectural and technical drawing than from the monocular perspective of illusionism in art history and cinema. Other games present their world through an overhead perspective that has more in common with maps and cartography than anything else. And this is to say nothing of text-based games associated with

the genre of interactive fiction, or their hybrid cousins, the text-heavy adventure games. Many games are not an extension of cinema (see Arsenault, forthcoming in 2016, for more on this topic). This is exactly what Jonathan Lessard illustrates in his study of *Adventure* (1977). His article «reframes *Adventure* in its historical context» in order to show how the game is «the computerized extension of a specific mesh of cultural series familiar to William Crowther and Don Woods» (2013: 122); those series are «programming, hacking, fantasy role-playing, cave mapping and, to a lesser degree, game designing» (2013: 133).

The call for papers of this issue was asking: «Can the cinematic theoretical corpus offer a contribution to the development of Game Studies? If so, what are the possible interceptions between these fields? What more can we learn about video games through the lenses of Film Studies?». Ultimately, we have taken a stand and chosen a perspective, in line with our own scholarly series framed within French theories in film studies. Yet, there is one important answer that our essay wishes to give: it is as important to remove our eye from the camera's viewfinder as it is to look through the lenses of cinema. It might be our ability to decentre our cinematic view on games that will better help us historically understand the ways we have linked together the seventh and the tenth arts. As we know, it is through montage that a film joins together in a transparent matter shots that are in fact independent. It is also through these montage techniques and all the other film practices that the spectators come to forget that it is the camera that is really doing the looking that they have in their view. As theorists, we should never forget that our responsibility is not only to view, but also to direct and shoot our subjects; more fundamentally, as we have argued through this essay trying to deal with the ergodic animage, our responsibility includes deciding when it is time to put down the camera and instead pick up a pen, a brush, or even a computer keyboard, as appropriate. The real issue is to be conscious of the scholarly series in which we situate ourselves.

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Play the game in the opening scene

A multidisciplinary lens for understanding (video)ludic movies, including *Super Mario Bros.*, *Resident Evil* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to create a multidisciplinary tool concerning the passage from the medium of videogames to cinema. According to concepts taken from Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Semiotics and Game Studies, we will explore the multiple dimensions and the related connections that occur in the film linearization of digital interaction: production issues, narrative and aesthetic elements, heuristics and mechanics in-game and on the big screen, and so on. The framework will be tested through three paradigmatic case studies: *Super Mario*, *Resident Evil*, and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*. The overall intent is to give scholars, and also practitioners, a holistic perspective on this peculiar type of crossmedia process, pointing out virtuous productive strategies as ruinous ones.

KEYWORDS: *ludic movies*, *Super Mario*, *Resident Evil*, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, *multidisciplinary approach*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years movies and digital games have become increasingly interconnected. The variety of transposition and influences from both sides has implied a strong plurality of forms and hybridizations. Digital entertainment has become a recurrent example of Hollywood trends only recently; the consequence is a heterogeneous landscape of products with a mixed value, from international co-production like *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* [2010]) to Hollywoodian blockbusters like *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2010). We could interpret the linearization of the agency enacted by these films as an experiential impoverishment of the *source-game* in terms of ergodic interaction; however, this reverse remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) may offer representational benefits due to the rescued author's power. Moreover, creation and consumption frames significantly change from medium to medium, sometimes in a radical manner. The point is to understand how this cross-media relation is articulated, taking into account the many variables that occur as a result of a specific transposition. Even if many authors have suggested peculiar analytic ways to set comparisons (Bittanti, 2008), a further challenge is to outline an overall picture of such dialogue, from production to final consumption. Indeed, we believe that cultural meaning comes from the merging of textual, cultural and economic forces. Therefore, in this article we propose a multidisciplinary framework founded upon principles drawn from Semiotics, Cultural Studies, Media Studies and Game Studies in order to draw a holistic picture of the process from videogames to cinema. In order to test and ground this model we present two paradigmatic case studies, each one chosen due to its particular traits: *Super Mario Bros.* (1993), the first major adaptation of a video game and an exemplar flop in terms of revenues and critical reviews; *Resident Evil*, first episode of a successful franchise (2002-2016), inspired by the survival horror games; *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010), a cult film with a significant nostalgic halo. Our ambition is to provide a multidisciplinary tool for scholars and practitioners across different disciplines and traditions; we aim to improve the understanding of the key factors that occur during the transposition of video games to movies.

2. A HYBRID FRAMEWORK

Cinema and digital games refer both to complex worlds with specific accounts, standards and frames. Moreover, their connections imply further processes and dynamics. How can we completely analyze such a complex type of translation? What are the theoretical and practical drivers to reach this goal in a holistic and satisfying manner? According to the Sociology of Media (Sorice, 2008), the dimensions through which a social researcher can investigate media phenomena are basically threefold: production, text and audience. This assembly represents a good start for dealing with the (video)ludic movies as *final output* from video games as *original source*. We intend to extend the second dimension in two further sub-dimensions according to the “ergodic” nature (Aarseth, 1997) of digi-

tal games and their agential and representational issues (Mäyrä, 2008). From a relational perspective between these sides, we embrace the consideration of culture as a fluid battleground: a scenario where different actors and processes dialogue and fight with each other following a bidirectional and non-casual relation (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). Consequently, power relations are polycentric and difference-based: final users are relatively active in experiencing media and culture, and the success or failure of a production is due to multiple sets of moves and countermoves. According to this assumption, we will adopt criteria without an assumed range of importance. Conversely, their influence must be explored qualitatively depending on the specific game/movie pairing, and we will do exploring the case studies.

In essence, we propose four basic *transductional grounds* to consider:

1. The production (Hesmondalgh, 2013) of the video game and the related film. This dimension concerns the productive effort in creating and promoting the text (budget available, marketing, actors chosen, etc.) and its ideal target.
2. The agential dimension, with a specific focus on the translation of video game accounts and rules into movie dynamics.
3. The representational dimension, that is the cultural system embodied by the video game/film as symbolic assembly of connotations and influences.
4. The economic and cultural impact of the video game/film (from the box office to the verdicts by specialized press).

Specifically, for the second and third dimensions (strictly textual and interconnected in composing the game world and its coherence; Juul, 2005), we suggest four further operative fronts (or bridges) of comparison:

[n] Narrative: the architecture of meaning set by the story and the characters following a semiotic perspective. As suggested by Greimas (1983) in his “narrative program”, every narration can be visualized as a progression of phases: the contract, when the protagonist knows his mission; the competence, when he prepares himself to accomplish the mission; the performance, the achievement; and the sanction, the judgment on the performance. Moreover, every character in a story can play six different roles called “actants”: the subject (the protagonist, e.g., the hero), the object (the goal to achieve, e.g. the princess to rescue), the sender (who appoints the mission to the subject, e.g., the king), the villain (the main enemy, e.g., the dragon), the helper (who helps the subject in the mission) and the receiver (responsible for the judgment, e.g., the king who rewards the hero). This narrative categorization is useful because it is abstract enough to cross media boundaries and overcome their peculiarities.

[a] Aesthetic: the plastic, figurative (Floch, 2012) and technical features that characterize the product, from colors to art styles and direction adopted to maintain or revolutionize a specific identity. We can expect two main tendencies in picturing and managing the graphic output: the realistic and the iconic

ones. The first tends to reproduce the reality or a related representation (Bateman & Boon, 2006), whereas the second follows abstract and mediated (e.g., from the genre itself) styles.

[e] *Encyclopaedian*: the information/symbolic stock that structures the interpretation by the audience. According to Eco (1975), every textual consumption is localized and connected to other texts (objectively and subjectively related). In general, our interpretation depends on previous media experiences and on the context around us. On this front, we analyze the quotes and references that drive the media consumption both as potential (offering multiple levels of lecture) and obstacle (generating confusion and misunderstanding if unknown by the spectators).

[d] *Dynamic*: the relevant mechanics (Adams & Dormans, 2012) and heuristics that characterize the media experience. The former concept concerns the main rules/logic of the game that can be realistic (trying to reproduce plausible patterns) and abstract (with a significant autonomy, often genre-based, from reality). The latter concerns the «rules of thumb that help (. . .) [players] play the game» (Elias, Garfield, & Gutschera, 2012, p. 29) as much as to say the best strategies and tactics in order to win the ludic system. In the linearization into a film these processes can be maintained (e.g., my avatar has to move fast and his film counterpart does the same thing) or modified (e.g., a stealth game that becomes an action movie where protagonists constantly shoot everyone). The reference is again to the “narrative program” described above: what are the right sequences of action in order to achieve the desired sanction? What are the working heuristics and the wrong procedures within the game? Does the movie try to replicate them in its ending or is there a relevant change?

Adopting a parallel analysis between game and film through these categories and their connections, we will explore the result of a ludic movie according to two different continuums:

[C] *Coherence*, between the extremes high [C+] and low [C-] and with the middle point [C/]: this criterion concerns the fidelity of destination-movie to the source-game. How intensely does the former take its textual and cultural identity from the latter? Which are the elements of continuity and the factors of divergence from the original experience?

[D] *Dependency*, between the extremes high [D+] and low [D-] and with the middle point [D/]: the main question is how much the knowledge of the source-game is fundamental to understand the destination film: references, logic and rules typical of the game may represent a plus for fans but, at the same time, work as a barrier for other audiences without a specific gaming competence. Moreover, their implementation in a different medium can match perfectly or struggle with its patterns and customs (e.g., a hero who remains hidden for half the film is not an appealing choice for most viewers).

The positioning of a ludic movie in these continuums is derived from the dynamic combination between 1, 2, 3 and 4, and a, n, e and d. We must be

careful in judging coherence and dependency; indeed, high positions following such criteria may result in low quality or incomprehensible movies. We consider that a high level of coherence is crucial for engaging players and fans, who may even work as “brand ambassadors”, while a low level of dependency contributes to the spreading of a film to a wider audience. Furthermore, this passage is influenced by the genre ecology of both the texts involved. We can define a genre as a culturally constructed assemble of textual *isotopies*, or redundancies (Sorice, 2009). It represents a reference frame by which people label and interpret books, movies, digital games, etc. Usually, the translation of a video game into a film entails a relation of genre because it implies proven codes, standardized in production and familiar to audiences, that can be exploited in order to prevent commercial failures and make a profit (Cavaleri, 2010). However, these textual habits can damage innovative instances in favor of an economically secure uniformity. Furthermore, we expect that some video game genres are easier to translate to films than others (e.g., action games rather than puzzle games) according to our criteria. For example, abstract mechanics (typical of products such as *Candy Crush Saga*) may find difficulties in their modification in linear actions, whereas realistic ones (as in *Tomb Raider*) involve an almost direct connection to our tangible world. In the former case, a perfect coherence may appear deleterious; on the contrary, in the latter a structural change probably represents a lost opportunity to exploit already existing potential.

The aim of the following paragraphs is to examine these relations with the help of paradigmatic case studies able to problematize and then strengthen our framework.

3. SUPER MARIO BROS.

Super Mario Bros. is a 1993 film directed by Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton, with Bob Hoskins playing Mario, the famous videogame plumber and Dennis Hopper as King Koopa, the main antagonist. The film costs amounted to an estimated \$48 million and the domestic total gross in the USA was \$20,915,465¹, making the film a failure in economic terms.

The choice of making a film out of a video game was a big gamble in 1993, considering that *Super Mario Bros.* was the first real “tie-in” from video games to cinema, but the reasons that led the producers to this risk are almost self-evident: Super Mario was the best known video game hero, with 40 million game copies sold and a Nintendo Entertainment System in the homes of almost 40% of American families. The potential audience was huge, composed primarily of teenagers and families.

In 1993, however, video games and cinema were far from similar media in aesthetic and narrative terms: adapting an 8/16 bit game to a film required a complete re-creation of the environment, considering the stories and the settings of most video games were extremely simple if not absolutely poor.

1. Data retrieved from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=supermariobros.htm>

3.1 GAME SOURCE

Super Mario is a mostly horizontal scrolling platform game set in a fantasy world where the hero, a plumber, has to rescue his beloved, who is actually the princess of the Mushroom Kingdom (the object of value). The girl was kidnapped by Bowser, a giant spitfire turtle and king of Koopa turtles, aimed to conquer her land [n]. This setting is both simple and absurd. It is acceptable as a fairy tale, which does not need to be realistic to be engaging. Moreover, it works for the medium because of the predominance of game aspects over narrative ones in the platform genre. Following this fantastical attitude and the technical possibilities of that period, the aesthetics [a] embrace an iconic approach.

On the agential dimension, there were some peculiar aspects of *Super Mario Bros.* – and video games in general – that were well known to audiences and have become part of our cultural background [e]: concepts such as life-up, power-up, bonus, and coins are part of *Super Mario Bros.* as much as the characters and platforms, so it would have been wise to consider them during the adaptation. Moreover, the competence [d] required of *Super Mario* and the player is strictly physical in terms of jumping, timing and agility.

3.2 DESTINATION FILM

Conversely, in adapting *Super Mario Bros.*, screenwriters Parker Bennett, Terry Runte and Ed Solomon tried to re-interpret some main concepts, including Mario's job as a plumber, the mushrooms as characters, and the jumping actions, making them cinematographically credible and appealing. The overall result [n-a] set the film between New York and a parallel cyberpunk universe which is reached through the sewers; Mario was described as a New York plumber; Luigi, his brother, as a young man without his typical moustache; Princess Peach became Daisy and she falls in love with Luigi instead of Mario; the turtles, which were the typical basic villains in the game, were substituted for anthropomorphic dinosaurs. Moreover, both the dinosaurs and the mushrooms were the consequences of a “de-evolution” machine, and the object of value is a stonethat has the ability to merge the two dimensions, coveted by all characters (Koopa wants it in order to conquer the real world, Mario and Luigi with the aim of stopping him): thus, the narrative program totally changes. Aesthetically [a], neither characters (with the exception of Mario) nor locations have a connection to the source: the cartoon-like aspect of *Super Mario Bros.* gets lost in the dark cyberpunk rendering adopted for the film. Even the typical red/blue and green/blue outfits of the main characters appear late in the story, limiting themselves to quoting the source text rather than identifying the characters from the beginning (as it occurs in the video game). The film assumed an “adult aura” and created a narrative universe inconsistent with the source but, at the same time, it did not reach its autonomy as a film. The references to the game such as names, helpers and gadgets seem to be extemporaneous nonsense that problematize and weigh down the overall media experience.

Furthermore, the dynamics of the movie [d] are distant from their counterparts in the video game: Mario and Luigi overcome challenges with humor, smart ideas and plumbing skills (also [d] become realistic), and the act of “jumping” appears only as a “tribute”. In the end, we have a low coherence [C-] (the modifications are significant) but a relevant dependency [D/] (several elements from the game work as filter and barrier for general audiences). To sum up, *Super Mario Bros.* the film is actually a dystopic cyberpunk story that could have even benefited from eliminating the restrictions imposed on it by being an adaptation: according to its plot and dynamics, there was no need for the characters to be Mario, Luigi, Peach or Bowser. Furthermore, eliminating explicit references to the video game, the audience would have had no chance to see the connection with the source game.

4. RESIDENT EVIL

The success of the *Resident Evil* saga (2002–2016) has both put forth Paul W.S. Anderson as a mainstream action director and also established him as the foremost name in realizing video games adaptations. Anderson had already directed *Mortal Kombat* (1995), a film that gained some success with audiences and was the first attempt to mediate in a thoughtful way between game and film specificities. With a production budget of \$33 million and global grosses of \$102,441,078², the first *Resident Evil* (2002) is one of the most successful videogame adaptations in cinema history, which was followed by four profitable sequels and has another currently in development. The action-horror genre associated with the film contributed to a marketing campaign that addressed a teen and adult movie audience that referred to videogame fans as an element of the general film target – the videogame was not even cited in US official trailers, except for the billing. *Resident Evil* was born as a successful videogame and has grown into a trans-media franchise, composed of videogames, films, books, comics, and cartoons. Choosing to focus on a new character for the film gave the producers the opportunity to create a new narrative branch, almost autonomous from the original saga.

4.1 GAME SOURCE

Resident Evil (1996) [n] tells the story of agents Chris Redfield or Jill Valentine (it was possible to choose the main character), members of Raccoon City Special Investigation staff. The agents are investigating some strange deaths in the woods near the city. The inquiry leads them to a mansion where a virus has transformed all the inhabitants into zombies. They subsequently discover that the building is the entrance to a secret laboratory where biological weapons have gone out of control. The player’s mission is to survive the horror and escape alive, handling limited provisions of ammo and medical kits.

Times had changed from the 1980s and the videogame dynamics of *Super Mario Bros.* The technical improvements of PC and game consoles allowed

2. Data retrieved from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=residentevil.htm>

developers to move from two-dimensional aesthetics to polygonal graphics and the simulation of the three dimensions. This leap represents a major turning point and the true reason why games started to look similar to cinema in technical and expressive terms: the introduction of the third axis assimilates the frames and the possible movements through game spaces to those of a movie camera. Consequently, developers, faced with this new world, plundered its techniques, introducing in-game overviews, subjective viewpoints, tracking, zooms, even visual aberrations such as “lens flare”, to recall a cinematic appeal. *Resident Evil* series followed this technical and productive approach [a], and went beyond: its chapters re-mediated the cinematographic genres, developing forms never seen before in any of the two media. *Resident Evil* is the first representative of a type of game that takes the name of “Survival Horror”, borrowing from the cinema genre’s setting and sense of suspense, surprise and tension to generate innovative strategies [e] in videogame form in which the action is always restrained by the need to preserve health and ammunition [d].

4.2 DESTINATION FILM

By the time Anderson took on the task of making a movie out of the videogame franchise, the saga had already developed its own strong fictional universe, with well-defined characters, established topical events, and a detailed plot. The director then chose to draw inspiration from the video game to create a film – later to become the founder of a narration [n] that involved again Anderson on the fourth and fifth episodes – that differs profoundly from the original product, retaining only a few elements and shaping the story around a new character, Alice, played by Milla Jovovich. From a point of view that is consistent with the original product, Anderson’s operation is questionable. Conversely, the result had the merit of recognizing to the film its own autonomy and consistency, which allowed it to be successful even among audiences who had no familiarity with the game (Morris 2012).

The cinematic saga of *Resident Evil*, though intended to proceed along a separate path from the videogames, continued to resume narrative elements so that it can be considered as a sort of parallel universe (the main opponent, the Umbrella Corporation, remains, as well as the narrative program based on a tragic gateway) in its own right, whose fortunes no longer have a direct link with the logic of loyalty to the video game.

The film’s aesthetics [a] matches perfectly with those of the original games in their dark and black-saturated atmospheres, probably influenced by the zombie films of George A. Romero. Moreover, while there are several references to the videogame in graphical (character design, locations design, monsters design) and encyclopedian terms (names of characters and monsters, references to Umbrella Corp., a storyline that refers to both the first and second iterations of the video game), the cultural system [e] is independent and the references are secondary because they are transversal and already known. Indeed, the popu-

lar cinematic genre of the horror film previously inspired the videogame, and this facilitated its conversion into a film (for example, a mansion with a hidden laboratory is not a particularly original setting for a horror product). Instead, dynamics [d] work specifically according to the source game: strong, encroaching enemies and an emphasis on escape and dealing with the scarcity of resources in a semi-realistic environment. This mechanic is increasingly present as a cinematic theme because it strengthens the feeling of anxiety and tension through its fusion of action-movies rules. As a whole, the directional relationships between film-video and game-film has added new mechanics to the first medium, able to enrich its expressive potential and enlarge its audiences.

In conclusion, *Resident Evil* is highly coherent [C+] with the video game: the narration is mirrored, aesthetics and dynamics are similar, and only the cultural system is less specific because it is already shared. Aside from that, the dependency of the film is low [D-] because it balanced the connections to the game (present but ancillary) with the more diffuse and reassured horror genre background, avoiding possible problems of accessibility. Finally, though crucially, the attention to the agential dimension of the Resident Evil saga and the fidelity to its semi-realistic approach has fostered an innovative referentiality toward other horror movies.

5. SCOTT PILGRIM VS THE WORLD

Scott Pilgrim vs the World is an unusual film, a true experiment in creating a syncretic language that merges cinema, graphic and videogame aspects. Based on the series of graphic novels by Bryan Lee O'Malley, *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* was distributed in 2010 by Universal Pictures. Its theatrical release results were not remarkable: considering a production budget of \$60 million, it grossed a total of \$47,664,559 worldwide³, even if both critics and comic fans expressed good reactions to the film.

Despite Universal Pictures' planned wide release in North America, the failure can be partly considered as the result of a flawed marketing plan which promoted *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* as a kids/teen film – in Italy the film lasted one week of evening screenings, reduced to afternoon screenings almost exclusively starting from the second week. The film itself, just as the graphic novels, is a hymn to '80s pop culture with a potential audience composed of 20-40 year old males. Instead of planning a wide release, it would have been useful to proceed with a more target-oriented release schedule and a promotion campaign focused on college and university students. It would probably have been a good idea to stress and even promote the link with the graphic novels. The film was revived through home entertainment platforms, achieving the aura of a cult film (Tyler, 2010).

5.1 GAME SOURCE

Scott Pilgrim vs the World is an atypical, yet useful, example for this essay, considering that its source is not a video game, but instead a series of graphic novels

3. Data retrieved from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=scottpilgrim.htm>

that uses videogame level design and aesthetics to build its narrative and visual structures. The original novels (O'Malley, 2004–2010) can be read as a tribute to digital ludic architecture, nerd pride, and the entire '90s game (and nerd) culture: the novels' progression is through [e] levels, power-ups and boss-fights, and references to cults like *The Legend of Zelda* (e.g., the Tri-Force) and *Super Mario* (e.g., the one-up) are frequent. The story [n], set in present-day Toronto, involves a boy (the hero, Scott Pilgrim) who, in order to date a beautiful girl (Ramona, the object of value) fights her ex-boyfriends (the opponents). He reaches this goal using [d] his deep knowledge of game culture itself and its related mechanisms (the same fictional universe partially follows gaming rules such as hero/player supremacy and additional lives), and self-respect as opposed to prejudice about nerds: in other words, a mainly abstract but for someone culturally based (and then tangible) competence. In the end, the aesthetics [a] of the comic is a mix between Western and Eastern tradition with a realistic setting. Together with the film, Ubisoft released a video game for PlayStation Network and Xbox Live, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World: The Game*, that borrows its appearance from the comics and expands the mechanics to a scrolling beat'em up with RPG elements, becoming a sort of link between comics and film (e.g., Scott's head in the game is derived from the comics and it appears in the film in the form of a bonus life icon exactly as it is in the game [a]).

5.2 DESTINATION FILM

The film is a faithful portrait of the comic, produced while O'Malley was finishing the sixth and final volume of the series. The plot [n] is a recap of the wider story described in the source, but it maintains every actant role. In addition, the encyclopedia [e] and the dynamics [d] literally trace the original ones, presenting redundant references to game culture, periodic boss-fights, mechanisms from several digital entertainment genres (from music games to beat'em ups), succeeding in acting as a sort of gamification within the filmic boundaries. The protagonist moves and fights in an unrealistic manner, acknowledging the traditional avatar status that is usually superior to other virtual entities. Aesthetics [a] honour the comic origin with a realistic but peculiar style: for instance, the subdivision of the film's sequences as chapters and some special effects that reproduces the previous medium (e.g., cartoon bubbles) are evidence of this. Moreover, the graphical outcome also relies on further effects that reproduce gaming ones (explosions of coins, power ups, interfaces, electronic voice comments, etc.), enforcing the cultural orientation of the encyclopedian dimension [e].

The explicit adoption of the video game as the main grammar of a different medium (comics as well as films) is preserved. The perspective of the protagonist is a meta one because his cultural background allows him to understand the world and its elements: the reader model is the hero himself, a passionate gamer. Thus, the coherence results high [C+] as the dependency [D+], not in relation to the comics themselves (it would be [D-]) but rather to their cultural

frame: the triumph of a peculiar game culture, relatively popular and vintage (the pixel art is often a matter of style and the arcade era is a cultural memory only for a certain type of spectator), is a gift for long-time gamers but a problem for new audiences. Furthermore, the marketing was directed to target a market that was too young to understand quotes and references to a gaming era older than their own. The short period of the theatrical release also worked against a film that only reached its potential once it was released for home viewing, by which point word of mouth could correct the effects of a poorly focused international marketing campaign.

6. CONCLUSIONS

As a preliminary consideration to these conclusive remarks, the ultimate goal of this work is not to provide metrics for identifying a good quality movie, but rather to suggest guidelines for determining the effectiveness of an operation of cross-media adaptation from digital games to films. In these terms, we believe that such criteria are consistent with the analysis of any translation from an interactive medium to a linear one. A result of the study is the recognition of certain determinants concerning the economic outcome from media translation and the promotional strategy to mediate between model spectator and generic spectator. Consequently, the output of our analysis should work as the basis of a wider model applicable on an economic and cultural level; it suggests an analytic consciousness that, if applied in advance, would allow for reasonable predictions about the chances of success for films derived from gaming sources.

As explained in the introduction, we wanted to provide an overview, summarizing guidelines and frames for the interpretation of an extended number of case studies. We focused on a holistic picture of the transition from an interactive audio-visual form to a linear audio-visual one, an operation that inevitably led to limited attention being granted to specific aspects, such as aesthetics, and does not have the final word on debates of fidelity regarding coherence and dependency (improvable with other disciplines and perspectives such as audience studies and adaptation theory). However, our hope is that, from these premises, further research may arise and deepen specific aspects in order to achieve a greater level of detail and accuracy.

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'Tell no one'

Cinema auditorium as game - space - Audience participation, performance and play

ABSTRACT

Taking Secret Cinema as its site for analysis, this article engages with the question what is ludic at the cinema. Secret Cinema delivers live, immersive, participatory cinema-going experiences and is a complex interaction between film, game, theatre and social media. Through the expansion and reimagining of a film's milieu in both virtual and real spaces, Secret Cinema experiences encourage spectatorial performativity and ludic participation. Through the use of multiple methods, this article presents the formation of a dramatic and playful community in which the impact of game cultures and a ludic aesthetic upon cinematic audience spectatorship is illuminated. Cross-disciplinary in its approach, this article connects the registers of both game and film studies in order to account for this emerging playful engagement with cinematic texts. Through its use of empirical methods, we move towards a fuller understanding of audience experience and affective engagement.

KEYWORDS: *Immersive cinema, Ludology, Secret Cinema, Dramatic Community, Play.*

INTRODUCTION

Secret Cinema (SC) (2007-) launched in the UK with an immersive screening of Gus Van Sant's *Paranoid Park* in a disused railway tunnel, and has since delivered numerous expanded cinematic experiences. SC addresses a growing demand for live, participatory and often visceral cinema-going experiences and is shaping a new and highly profitable event-led-distribution-model. Prometheus made more money as a SC event than at the IMAX premiere and *Grand Budapest Hotel*'s No1 box office position was largely attributable to the £1.1m generated by SC. These events have garnered a huge following of devotees who are willing to pay premium ticket prices to experience highly crafted and augmented collective viewing events around a particular feature film. The experiences have been marketed in a clandestine way via word of mouth and social media in which participants are instructed to 'tell no one'.

From the moment of the tickets purchase, audience members knowingly and complicitly enter an in-fiction space. Dramatic exposition is presented in social media spaces and audience members receive instructions to make preparations before attending the event, such as how to dress and what persona to adopt as part of the instantiation of the film. The interrogation of such a complex and multi-layered experience requires a multi-modal research design, and in this case will be underpinned by a synthesis of the critical concerns and insights of game studies and film studies. Through participant observation of one event by two researchers, a close textual and aesthetic analysis of the experience has been conducted by building on existing film studies conceptualizations. Drawing on the broad discipline of game studies and the centrality of play theory, an analysis of the affect of the experience has been enabled through qualitative questionnaires and interviews both before and after their experience with a randomly selected sample of seventy participants, who responded to a call for participation through social media channels.

A NEW CINEMATIC GAME SPACE

It is *Secret Cinema presents... Back to the Future* (BttF) which is the focus of the analysis of this article. Announced in June 2014, the event sold out 42,000 tickets in the first four hours, and then went on to sell almost 80,000 for the experience which ran throughout the summer of 2014. The cinematic spaces of the world of BttF were actualized as a ludic landscape, in both online and real-world spaces. In what follows, we look at some of the key qualities of this multi-faceted experience to interrogate the extent to which the aesthetics of games and play form can facilitate greater understandings. If this is ludic cinema – what kind of ludos is present here? We will explore the playfulness of the SC aesthetic experience by drawing parallels to the originating BttF cinematic text(s) and their concomitant audience pleasures, interactions and manipulations, whilst also interrogating audience behaviours and affect both during their preparations for, and at the SC event itself. We will draw on the critical vocabularies of the now established field of Game Studies to examine the extent to which the experience as designed assumes gaming or playful literacies on the part of the participant and borrows from or extends existing game aesthetics in the spatialisation and elaboration of the BttF world. In doing so, we will be drawing from influential approaches which draw attention to the aesthetic and affective dimensions of cultural experience as lived and embodied alongside significant critical work which has deployed early twentieth century play theory in the examination of contemporary games in terms of formal qualities but also in terms of player experience (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, Giddings 2008, Giddings and Kennedy 2009, Taylor 2006). In the following we identify some productive areas for close examination – the extent to which navigation and exploration are central features of the experience as both designed and embodied; the function of role-play as a structuring dynamic for participant engagement and also for designer

control and rule formation; the evidence of a system of rewards for expert player/participant performance; the instances of collecting and accumulation as a central element of player engagement with the story as a pre-existing text and in terms of their experience as participants in the SC live event.

ONLINE SPACE – ON BECOMING A RESIDENT OF HILL VALLEY – FROM PAYERS TO PLAYERS

As a participant or player, the BttF experience was shaped and tightly controlled from the moment of successful ticket purchase. Through online spaces and social media channels, participants were able access the fictional spaces of the experience via numerous 'diegetic portals' (Atkinson, 2014b), and invited to get into character. The fictional locale of BttF's 'Hill Valley' was recreated in numerous in-fiction websites as well as in the physical spaces of 'pop-up' stores which opened up in East London in the weeks leading up to the main event in which visitors were greeted and served 'in-character' by Hill Valley residents. There was also the frequent publication of articles (online and in newspaper form) leading up to the Hill Valley fair (the proposed context of the live event), as well as a TV station (HV-TV) broadcasting via YouTube. These elaborations and embellishments of the fictional far exceeded previous events and were aimed at making the shows increasingly interactive and immersive, combining elements common to virtual worlds and pervasive games.

Within the 'fictional' social media strategy – ticket-holders were required to log in to the Hill Valley website using a secret access code that was embedded in an introductory email. Audience members were assigned new identities and issued with printable business cards which they were instructed to bring along to the event, which communicated their new name, address, telephone number and assignation to one of Hill Valley's constituent organizations. Audience members were then given specific instructions of what to wear and what to bring to the event. For example, Hill Valley High School students were required to bring their homework and photographs (at the event students could then decorate their own locker in the school). Town Hall staff members were asked to bring banners, flags, posters and rosettes to support the Mayor Red Thomas re-election campaign (which were then used as props by participants taking part in a pre-screening parade).

Engaging in these activities enabled audience members to begin to immerse themselves into the diegetic fabric of the BttF filmic universe well in advance of attending the event. These interactions also worked on the level of introducing new characters to the audience, who don't feature in the film, but contributed to an expanded diegetic canvas of the fabula of BttF. They also enabled audience members to contribute to the textual spaces of the experience and provide new content for sharing. For example, on the Hill Valley Telegraph staff page – members were asked to write articles on recent (imagined) news,

these were then included on the dedicated website. One of our respondents was clearly delighted to have his pre-event engagement rewarded in this way:

Before the event I wrote a letter to the Hill Valley Telegraph about moving here from New York, which was ‘printed’ online (11b).

Audience members were also provided with instructions on the most appropriate clothing to wear through a downloadable Hill Valley ‘Look Book’. Alongside the issuing of a new identity and the very specific instructions regarding how to engage with the event, these instances could collectively be considered as the ‘rule set’ for BttF as a role playing environment, as we shall now explore below. It is also clear from these pre-experience responses that the participants took pleasure in the elements of role play and performance that were afforded:

I’ve realised you have to put something in to get the best experience. I have a 50s outfits already, I’ve visited the stores and I think I will pretend to be a character when I’m there (10a).

I plan to enjoy the surroundings and interaction with other fans and engage in character roleplaying to enjoy the moment (3a).

These preparations enabled audience members to occupy the physical space of the narrative diegesis of the Hill Valley fair prior to the screening in what we refer to as an intra-diegetic play-space in which participants take on a role through their embodiment of in-world characters to navigate and explore, and immerse themselves in the extensive fabula initially established online.

Players/participants celebrated and shared their preparatory engagements in a series of behaviours which share much in common with Cosplay (see Figure 2). Cosplay is a practice that aligns closely to film-fans, cinephiles, cartoon devotees and gamers (Gn 2011, Lamerichs 2011). In this instance, it was initially very closely policed by organizers and other fans, and in audience-generated tip-sheets – ‘to get the best experience’ (48a).

Despite the presence of a rule-set as described above, since so many of the BttF participants are established devotees and fans of the text, they arrived in their own self-selected identities – many of them choosing to play key central characters from not just the first BttF but also the two sequels. These minor acts of disobedience led to a preponderance of Martyrs, Biffs, Goldies and Docs whose actions and behaviours were easily confused with those of the actual professional actors who shared the landscape. Said one participant:

I always dress as Doc Brown to fancy dress parties and am a bit of an inventor like him! (7b).

This mirrors the on-screen BttF character engagement in constant ‘cosplay’ throughout the trilogy as key characters don decade-specific disguises. This confusion of the participants performative identity through the juxtaposition of conflicting temporal referents created a verisimilitudinal dissonance within the event.

These decorative cosplay activities closely resemble pervasive game behaviours and most specifically the Live Action Role Playing (LARPing) format. The participants consistently described the necessity to be ‘in character’ in order to benefit fully from the experience combined with a consistent recourse to terminology of ‘liveness’ in order to describe the event:

LIVE, immersive, entertaining, exhilarating, escapist, awesome! (17b).

I hadn’t been to the cinema nor had I been to the theatre, it was one massive blend of both that worked so well that it felt like I was actually in the film” (7b emphasis added)

The instantiation and mode of participation was directly similar – characters were ascribed and developed in advance, costumes were adopted and participants were invited to engage with the location, the inhabitants and other ‘players’ as their adopted persona.

REAL-WORLD SPACES

Upon entering the SC site, participants enter the spatialization of the film’s fabula through the actualization of the fictional locale of BttF, in which the chronological ordering of the filmic time and syuzhet (plot) is recreated through the carefully simulated topology of Hill Valley (see figure 1). The approach to the site is marked with a ‘2 miles to Hill Valley’ sign, which leads the audience through Otis Peabody’s farm – Marty’s first arrival point in 1955. As with a theme park the route around the territory was heavily proscribed but difficult to absolutely control and was subject to meanderings and wanderings. The participants play their own part within this highly crafted *mise-en-scène*, as residents of Hill Valley navigating the difference spaces and encountering the different characters in order to accumulate knowledge, experience, and souvenir items. Close to the entrance, and right at the start of the experience participants can be photographed by the iconic and familiar sign for the yet-to-be-built Lyon Estates. Just as Marty McFly is a time travelling visitor to these spaces in the film, participants are at times positioned as tourists/flaneurs and later are able to purchase a disposable camera through which to record their journey and the spectacle. The navigable space dissolves into the Hill Valley town square – a miasma of styles, aesthetics, sounds and sensations.

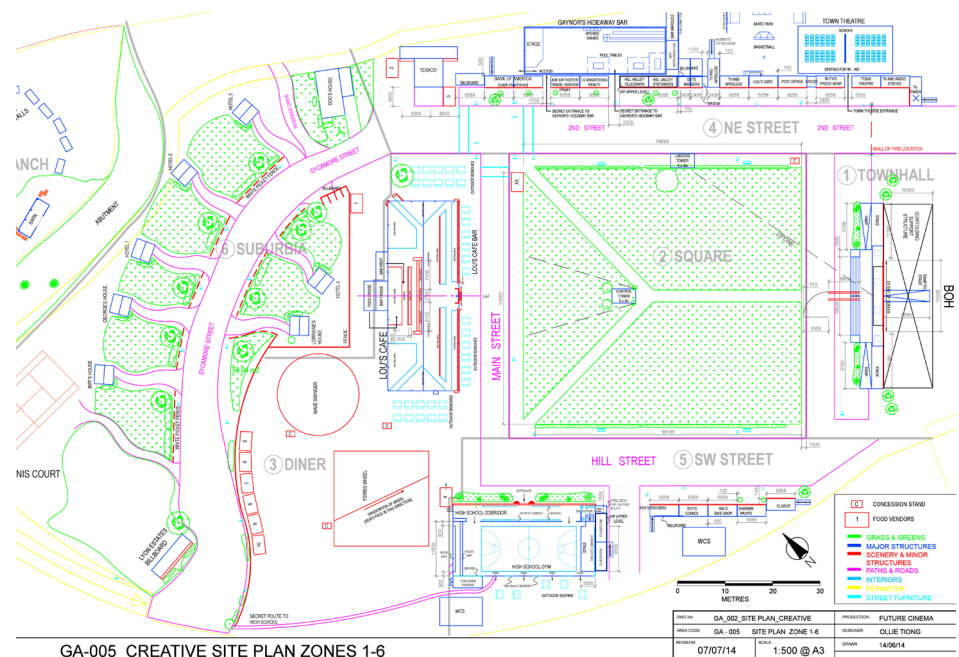


Figure 1 – A plan of the Hill Valley set

The site includes recreations the family homes of the film’s key characters, Lou’s café, the High School, and a plethora of shop fronts. The fabric and iconography of SC’s recreation of Hill Valley is notably drawn from the entire BttF trilogy. This provides a deeper and more expanded frame of reference from which SC has drawn both textual and expositional detail.

Hill Valley’s recreation translates into a ‘film-set’ aesthetic in which all buildings appear as facades fabricated through theatrical flats and materials, and illuminated by stage lighting. The sense of the simulacra of the film set, as opposed to that of a real-world location is further compounded by the context of the Olympic park site which is overshadowed by the highly visible commercialized environment of the present-day consumer Westfield mall and by the UK’s tallest sculpture ArcelorMittal Orbit which looms large over the 1955 landscape. This sculpture is playfully referred to as ‘Doc’s Rocket Propulsion Device’ on the accompanying map of the site.

This conflation of multiple synchronous temporal-visual-referents is further complexified by the audience member’s eclectic/anachronistic dress-styles (as described above). The visual disorientation and temporal incoherence continues throughout the navigation of the various instances of 1950s pastiche and an undeclared corridor through which you can stumble in to a 1980s bar. The confusion of styles across three disparate decades is symbolized by the ubiquitous presence of anaglyph 3D glasses (which can be purchased for £1 in the 80s bar). These have no practical application on-site, instead they are the reproduction of a prop worn by a character in the film. But they can also be seen to act as a coherence device to link the 1950s, 1980s and 2010s – the three key eras in which 3D-cinema technology has been popularised. Moreover, the wearing

of the glasses can be seen to symbolize the knowing mediation of the spectacle that the participants are witnessing, an acknowledgement that these are screen-mediated events, both created and experienced through the prism of the grammar and aesthetics of cinema. The absurd redundancy and silliness of wearing the glasses whilst wandering through the Hill Valley environment also signals a 'lusory' attitude to experience and indicates an affect of being at play (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, Raessens 2014). This is reflected in one participant responses who described the sensation as:

a three-dimensional entertainment experience. You're in the film for the length of the film (1c).

This cacophony of styles and time referents unintentionally mirrors the intrinsic postmodern textual aesthetics of the BttF films, in which scenes contain simultaneous mixed time-period metaphors, cross-pollinating through costume, props, dialogue and mise-en-scène. Time itself is a matter for textual and narrative play, for example, in 1885 in BttF 3 – Marty is seen doing a 1980's moonwalk as the character Mad Dog Tannen fires bullets at his feet. In the same film, we see a modified DeLorean which is a hybrid of both 1950s and 1980s automobile features. Just as alternate futures were envisioned in the films of the BttF trilogy (for example, an alternate 2015 and a dystopic 1985) so too are the alternate histories of 1955 recreated in the spaces and costumes of SC's rendering. The experience presents and perpetuates a version of the 1950s that never existed in actuality through the materiality and digital materiality of the present day.

ROLEPLAY AESTHETICS

The experience includes a number of (interactive) narrative vignettes in which audience members are invited to engage with the fictional characters and with one another in activities and games that relate to a specific context. These included competing in the 'Six at Six' radio competition, participating in a signing lesson at the school, and joining in at a neighbourhood-watch meeting. The street performers contributed to the gamelike experience by providing the mechanism through which further activity and reward could be garnered. These performers would engage or be engaged by the player, at which point they would reveal the fundamental elements of their character and, if the correct series of verbal responses were given, they were able to assign the player a quest, or, in some cases, a simpler immersive experience such as answering questions on a game-show or being told a story. These mini-quests were occasionally rewarded with souvenirs (see figure 2) or participation in the Hill Valley Parade. As one respondent stated:

...we both got enrolled in the apprenticeship program and had to carry out a few tasks to complete this, unknown to us we had drawn a huge crowd and everyone

was cheering us on! amazing. The Texaco guys invited us to take part in the Hill Valley parade before the film, well that was it for me, kid in a candy store! We joined the parade and had to wear Texaco boiler suits and carry a tyre along the route singing the Texaco song! This was a moment, as a massive BttF fan, that I will always remember (7b).

This will be familiar as a structure for creating multiple narratives within one setting to any player who has previously taken part in video-RPG sandbox games or even board-game or live-action variations not based on film text or setting. A notable similarity is the availability of the option for the player to ignore all the quests and even the exploration potential and do something arbitrary or 'normal' in the spaces of the map which weren't reserved for the quest such as sit in a bar and drink. If the player chose this option at the BttF event, instantly the experience would lose most of its 'game' elements and simply become more similar to a themed festival or a costume party. In this same vein, fairground rides featured, demonstrating the curious mixture of immersive action and non-specific revelry, or to deploy the Caillois system of categorisation of play – mimicry (playing a role) andilinx (the thrills of the fair ground). Along with navigation, acquisition is a key part of many game modes, especially RPGs, whether you're collecting coins, bottle-caps or medi-kits, and within the Hill Valley site there were a lot of mechanisms through which this could be achieved, not only by way of the quests as mentioned above. A dress shop which sold fifty-dollar dresses and a record shop selling five dollar albums were key indicators of the organisers' desire to use the experience not only to sell tickets but to sell merchandise (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Audience/player generated content accumulated both in the lead-up to the event and during the experience

The BttF experience facilitated two 'play' modes which would be familiar to gamers; story or sandbox. In story mode gameplay is determined by successful completion of a sequence of events, action or interactions often thinly aligned with an overarching narrative. In sandbox mode players are allowed to interact within the gameworld, complete smaller non-sequential and open-ended tasks. For BttF adept or expert story mode players who knew the precise geographies and temporalities could explore the environment more purposefully and would be rewarded for their successful navigation by being present as the live-enactments took place also allowing them occasionally to play minor roles in this action.

As we loved the film and knew the plot well we had a good idea of where things would be happening when, for example we waited on the residential street for the scene where Marty gets hit by his grandad's car (9b).

Collecting a complete set of these story driven interactive "cut-scenes" is a clear reward for expert engagement with the story mode. These cut scenes, akin to the non-interactive live action sequences of a computer game took the form of reenactments in locations across the site by key characters in the same chronological ordering of the film's syuzhet. These span Marty's arrival in Hill Valley, his encounters with the 1955 version of his parents, and his meeting with Doc. These are uncanny in their emulation – played by actors who resemble their on-screen counterparts in costume, but in features and build – are clearly different. These moments are pre-empted by the growing crowd surrounding the action and through the sudden arrival of 'out-of-character' stunt crew surreptitiously whispering into communications devices in order to cue the live action vehicles and to keep audience members away from their approach. These moments reveal the representational practices of filmmaking 'Style' (Bordwell, 1997) and signal an emerging semiotics of the artifice of film production which is ever-present throughout and arguably characterizes the entire SC experience, a case of the 'text making strange its own devices' (Polan, 1985, p. 662).

Once the screening has commenced the participants are no longer individuals but become part of a community of viewers who engage together in prompted and unprompted behaviours and aesthetic responses. Some of this participant behavior is carefully crafted – just before the screening commences the crowd participates in a 'dance along' which is a fitting prelude to the stillness required for group viewing on a single tier simulated lawn. During this aspect of the experience the players are subject to a "recombinatory aesthesis" as they are surrounded (literally enclosed within) screen and live action re-enactments allowing for an "amplification of affect and effect [as players respond to and experience] visual and kinaesthetic pleasure" (Giddings & Kennedy 2008, p. 31).

The viewing experience of the film is augmented by a number of synchronous off-screen reenactments of on-screen action which include the opening

sequence of Marty’s trip to school set against the Power of Love soundtrack in which he is towed by a vehicle on his skateboard around the 1985 Hill Valley square; the reveal of a replica smoking time-travelling DeLorean; the dramatic chase by the Libyan terrorists and Marty’s arrival in the 1955 town square of Hill Valley. Stunt doubles are used for the main characters in the action scenes – although their costumes are identical, their physical appearances are clearly different – which once again reveals the representational practices of filmmaking style and artifice through the inevitable presence of continuity errors.

As well as these highly choreographed moments of meticulously matched action, actors simultaneously perform key dialogue sequences which include George’s confrontation with Biff at the dance and his subsequent romantic union with Lorraine. These moments which are carefully lip synced (although are invariably ‘out-of-sync’) by the off-screen versions of the characters again invoke a sense of the uncanny, of the familiar made strange. Moreover, these moments of mismatched stunt doubles and out-of-sync dialogue reveal further representational aesthetics of film production. The filmic text(s) of the BttF trilogy also contain such moments during the repeated action, for example, the reenactment of the 1955 scenes in BttF 2 include older (and sometimes different) versions of the actors. This acceptance by the cinema (and SC) audience of the mediation of filmmaking process has become the source of some cinematic fan practices (i.e. spotting continuity errors).

HILL VALLEY SANDBOX & EMERGENT PLAY

At one particular moment an unintentional continuity error occurs, which signals a shift towards the experiences becoming a self-referential and playful text. This occurs in the off-screen simultaneous action in which the two versions of Doc are in-sight of the audience – the stunt version of Doc is still visibly uncoupling from his dramatic descent on the zip wire, whilst the actor-version of the Doc appears on the ground to deliver the next scene. This off-screen (SC) continuity error uncannily occurs at the same scene in the BttF 2 film’s syuzhet in which two versions of the Doc are also (albeit deliberately) visible on screen – the original 1955 Doc is seen setting up the electric rig to the clock from the point-of-view of the 1985 Doc. This unintentionally reflexive, meta-fictional (Waugh 1984, Holland 2007) moment mirrors the postmodern aesthetic of self-reference characteristic of the three BttF films. For example in BttF 3 Marty makes a comment about lack of time, ‘ten minutes, why do we have to cut these things so damn close’ highlighting the characters’ awareness of the film’s creation and the dominant running-out-of-time aesthetic. In another instance, Marty and Doc swap their character’s catch-phrases (‘Great Scott!’ and ‘This is heavy’). In SC, this action of dialogue quotation and re-quotation is an act in which audience members delight, for example, in numerous respondents telling us that they approached the character of Goldie Wilson telling him that he should run for mayor. The audience’s pleasure in the repetition of character lines and catch

phrases is a playful participatory practice evidenced in other instances of (cult) cinematic reception (such as the *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, see Austin, 1981).

Like other forms of live play events and despite the presence of rather precise rules and a tightly controlled environment, the BttF experience produced moments of emergent gameplay. As one participant commented:

It was a completely personal experience that would be unique to each person, depending on how you chose to spend your time and what you happen to stumble across as you explore the world they created (8b).

Emergent play is more open ended and less dependent upon the overarching narrative and more upon elements of chance and the extent to which the participant was willing to engage with others around them. “These occurrences often lead to intensive and fun game experiences, which have not been planned by any designer or participant” (Montola, Stenros & Waern 2009, p. 18).

On arrival at Hill Valley, there was also a school bus recruiting passengers who could travel directly to a point much later in the ‘story’. In this sandbox mode the participants could visit the fair, dance to 80s music, drink cocktails, play videogames & buy 80s themed merchandise, gorge themselves on burgers, fries and milkshakes at Lou’s café and then drink more themed cocktails at the 1950s Enchantment Under the Sea high school dance in the style of the disjunctive, discontinuous, vertiginous and unruly carnivalesque. The story does not entirely drop away of course – SC’s Hill Valley is populated by ‘characters’ from the world of the film delighting the audience with small recurrent set-pieces throughout the environment. The headmaster of the high school, Strickland, is seen issuing detentions, George McFly cycles around the square engaging the audience in conversation, while Police officers reprimand audience members for jay walking. As one participant commented:

I took part in Doc Brown’s experiment (which was hilarious) and got picked on by bullies twice, which was weirdly the highlight for me (3b).

This open mode and the recurrent nature of these behaviours allows for multiple points of view which is also a defining aesthetic feature of the BttF films – whereby similar sequences are repeatedly replayed throughout the trilogy.

Like other forms of game (console, online, pervasive etc.) SC’s BttF can be understood as an event that has been designed, constructed to expect or require specific behaviours, attitudes and literacies on the part of the participants. It is only through these that the event comes into being – key to participation is a willing adoption of this ‘lusory attitude’ – the willingness to engage in the act of playing ‘as if’ (Suits, 1990). In this context, playing ‘as if’ in the world of 1955 as constructed through these film texts. The extent to which the player or participant is willing to ‘give themselves up’ to the required behaviours; to play

out a role consistent with the world as designed is seen by our respondents as key to pleasurable and successful experience. As one respondent articulated:

It is immersive. You play a part in it and have a great time interacting with other actors and ticket holders. The more you put in the more you get out (2b).

This description of appropriate affective engagement indicates the extent to which player effort is rewarded by greater levels of immersion and experience of presence.

CONCLUSION

SC's BttF is an interstitial experience, one that occupies a liminal space between theatre, game and a filmic text; the simulacra of its making and the playfulness of its reception. It is navigated and 'played' by a highly literate audience attune to interactive engagement with cinematic texts through a variety of fan practices and familiarity with video game-play. The event enabled the formation of a playful and 'dramatic community' (Atkinson, 2014a) in which the impact of game cultures and a ludic aesthetic upon cinematic audience spectatorship could be clearly identified. This SC project marks a new point of departure in the evolution of what has been described as the ludification of culture and cultural experience (Raessens 2014).

Our theoretical integration both challenges and begins to extend the textual analysis approach of film studies, through an expanded consideration of the permeation and manipulation of the filmic text beyond the screen and by the audience. By recourse to game studies approaches we have been able to tease out the ways in which the designed elements and player responses can be understood in relation to the mechanics of games and play forms.

Bringing together the critical vocabularies of play theory and film theory within this paper begins to afford some purchase on the complexity of this experience. However, this phenomena marks out new territory and an evolution of a new form of cultural experience worthy of its own critical vocabulary sufficiently nuanced to capture its aesthetic and affective complexity which we hope to have initiated. As games become increasingly cinematic and event cinema becomes more gamelike and playful a new integrative theoretical and conceptual model will emerge.

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Narrative time in video games and films

From loop to travel in time

ABSTRACT

Within the broad framework of audiovisual theories, this paper deals with the analysis of narrative time in video games. Starting with the concept of participation time, which is taken from the interactive media, the now classic concepts of the narratology of film studies are applied to clarify the main mutual influences between the two media in relation to narrative time. Unlike the cinema, the narrative character of video games is not always clear. Generally, video games are always games and often also stories. Certainly, the playable character of these stories confers on them a few specific characteristics that need to be explored.

Two aspects of narrative time are relevant here. Firstly, the loop as an elementary control structure of computer programming and as a characteristic narrative form of time structure in video games, and secondly, the paradox of travel in time in the discrepancy between the time order at the level of the story and at the level of the narrative.

KEYWORDS: *Video games, film, audiovisual language, narrative time, participation time.*

INTRODUCTION

In cinema the action is narrated in the present tense. The screening of the film actualises the story each time, even though it was filmed in the past. For Jost and Gaudreault (1995, p. 111) film time relates states or events from the past which we recall as they unfold. The film image shows how things develop, it shows us the past as it takes place before us, in the present, and takes its time to show it.

According to Neitzel, however, the narrative time of video games must be viewed differently. Here, gameplay is the fundamental and distinguishing characteristic: “The process of playing a computer game thus corresponds to the process of narration. This process leaves behind traces on the level of the discourse, which makes up certain relationships with the level of the story, for example, in respect to temporality” (Neitzel, 2005, p. 236)

The player's actions in the game constitute perhaps the most important difference between video games and other media such as cinema or literature, where the viewer or reader does not intervene. Video games are always games, although they are also often narratives. In the case of narrative games, which are our main focus, the narrated story is determined by the playable nature of the medium. The narrative time in video games will, therefore, largely depend on the player's actions.

In this paper, we will follow the theoretical perspective of narratology for the analysis of narrative time, starting from the adaptation of G. Genette's literary theories to film studies. Naturally, the narratological analysis of video games presents peculiarities that we must fully take into account and that give the key to the fundamental differences between film and video games, although also to their extensive mutual influences. We recall that narratology is presented as the study of narrative and thus is applicable to different media, provided they are narrative.

Given that the discourse is created as such from the experience of its enjoyment, a fundamental distinction to be made with regard to the narrative temporality in video games is the control of time by the player.

In interactive media, according to Maietti (2008, pp. 63–64), there are two types of temporal duration, object-controlled duration and experience-controlled duration. In the first, temporal duration depends on the medium and is independent of its reception, as is the case in film, whereas in the second, the player controls the duration of the game in their action of playing. Generally, MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Game) impose a tighter control over time, since this must necessarily be shared by all the users, whereas in single player games, the player can have greater freedom to control the time. We'll see how this is particularly true for loops, which are used in single-player video games, such as Tomb Raider or Resident Evil but are unviable in an MMOG such as Counter Strike, which imposes a rigid, standardised duration on all participants. Of course, single-player games can have a system-controlled duration, for instance in most racing games, such as Need for Speed, or sports games, including football and others, such as FIFA. Temporality is never a simple factor in any case, given that the narrative is produced from the interactivity of the discourse.

PARTICIPATION TIME: DUAL TEMPORALITY IN VIDEO GAMES

According to Genette (1991 and 1998), dual temporality is required to define a narrative, i.e. there are two temporal components, given that a temporal sequence of events does not in itself define a narrative. Therefore, as regards the dominant temporal relation, in narratives such as books or films, there is a relationship between story time and discourse time, which is required to define any narrative. Eskelinen (2004, p. 39) argues that, based on the traditional definitions of narratology, narrative time in video games should be defined as the relationship between user time and event time.

In this same area of concern, Juul (2005, p. 141) proposes a relationship between what he calls play time and fictional time. Make-believe games have a dual structure, in the sense that the player's actions belong to a different world from the character's actions, but the two are connected. Time is the variable that gives us the key to this relationship because it is time in the real world, play time, and in the fictional world, fictional time, time in which the action unfolds.

Although Eskelinen and Juul use different terms, they refer to the same two concepts as Genette – user time and play time are the equivalent of discourse time and event time and fictional time are the equivalent of story time.

However, in Maietti's view (2008, p. 70) we must avoid the problems involved in determining the duration of an event in the fictional world according to the duration it would have in the real world. In other words, determining play time as the actual time playing can lead to misunderstanding or at least does not contribute to the narrative understanding of the game. Finally Maietti suggests that research should be undertaken into the time of the interaction, the user's access to the fictional world through the interface (Maietti, 2008, p. 72).

Undoubtedly, the application of narratology to the analysis of narrative time in video games raises some issues. In interactive media, the discourse is not completely fixed or predetermined, instead most of it is generated during the interaction or participation. Since time is linear, the story generated is linear. But the resulting text is not all the interactive text, nor does it enable us to fully understand its nature. At this point we must consider the player and the games, and in this sense, the player's time and the game time in terms that are rather more abstract but useful from an analytical point of view.

In this sense, fictional time or time of events can be defined as the story's internal intradiegetic time. Whereas, in our view, game time or user time should refer to the time the game gives the player. This time is written in the rules of the game, but is manifested in playing and should include the ability or possibility that the game gives the player to change the narrative time. This is the equivalent to Genette's "pseudotime" (1991, p. 144) and measures not only the narrative speed but also, as is inevitable in an interactive medium, the modification of the narrative time by the player. This second aspect of user time, the modification of the narrative time, can only take place at the interface, as noted by Maietti (2008, p. 72). We can call it participation time, as it puts the focus on the user's interaction in the game through the interface, in the modification of narrative time through the gameplay. In functional terms, this participation time will express the player's progress in the game, i.e. their linear progress through the discourse via the games.

The narrative time is defined in the same way as in film and literature, as a dual temporality between the story time and discourse time, but in video games there is tension between this narrative time and the user's participation in the game.

In video games, the dual temporality is defined by the story time and participation time. The story time is the same concept as we have seen throughout

the narratological tradition, the internal time in the story which is told, but the participation time is new to the study of video games. It is equivalent to discourse time in film studies but it is not the same, since in film, the narrative time, the duration for example, is fixed in the story and does not depend on viewing. In video games, however, the participation time may be not fixed before playing, and may depend on the player's actions in the game through the interface. For instance, the player's skill can make the climbing of the telecommunications tower in *Tomb Raider*, either a fast and exciting linear adventure lasting 10 minutes or, following successive failures in the ascent, a slow and frustrating repetitive action that lasts twice or three times as long. The story time, and the story itself, are modified by the player's actions.

Before analysing each aspect of narrative time, we must take into account that the participation time depends on the rules of the game. If the rules allow for it, the player can, by their play, modify the narrative time, i.e. the relationship between the participation time and the story time. In other situations, we find a set time, i.e. a time controlled by the system and by the rules. Eskelinen refers to this same distinction as "event time" for games in which the player can change the narrative time and "set time" for those in which the time is set in the rules.

The dual temporality of all narratives –in film, literature or video games– imposes the variables for the analysis of the narrative time, which are, in any event, determined by the relationship between the discourse or participation time and that of the story time. These variables, according to Genette, are order, duration and frequency. We will now focus on the most contentious issues and also those that are particularly distinctive in relation to each of these variables in the analysis of the narrative time of video games, especially in relation to the concept of participation time.

TEMPORAL ORDER: PARADOXES OF TRAVEL IN TIME

Based on Genette (1991, p. 91), but adapted to the peculiarities of cinematic storytelling (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995, p. 112), we can distinguish three possibilities for the organisation of time: linear time –pure chronology, coincidence, respect for order– between the story time and the discourse time; and two types of anachronism, analepsis (–lepsis, take, ana–, after), the subsequent recall of an event prior to the time of the story, and prolepsis (–lepsis, take, pro–, before), where the event takes place before its normal order in the chronology. In the cinema the terms flashback and flashforward are often used, but they have the drawback of referring only to the visuals. Therefore, there will always be a "récit prémie" or first narrative and an anachronism, which is a second narrative, inserted into the first.

In film, it is often the words that indicate an anachronism, its scope and breadth. Flashbacks combine a verbal backtrack with the visual representation of the events. Especially in classic cinema, there are cues and conventions that denote a flashback (gaze into the distance, fade to black, different appearance of the nar-

rating character, the switch from an indirect style –verbal discourse– to a direct one –dialogues–, etc.). There are numerous examples of analepsis in the cinema, from the most classic cinema to the most recent, such as *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *Citizen Kane*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Lola Montès*, *Mr. Arkadin*, and many others.

Flashbacks or analepses have been used in the cinema almost since its inception, and certainly from the classical period to the present day, due to their dramatic effect, increasing the engagement of the viewer who wants to find out how a particular situation has come about. As a linear narrative medium, anachronisms introduce a non-linear order in the storytelling.

Prolepses, on the other hand, are much less common in the cinema than analepses, which are not only common but much conventionalised in their narrative formulas. A film which contains both in a characteristic postmodern narrative puzzle is *Pulp Fiction*.

These two devices, analepses and prolepses, are difficult to apply to video games, due to what could be described as paradoxes of travel in time. Variations in the narrative order present some difficulties in video games, in relation to the fact that the game is a narrative experience that depends on the player's actions to be narrated, which implies that analepses or prolepses will entail a problem of temporal paradoxes. Maietti (2008, pp. 60–61) states that, in interactive media in general, the order of the discourse sets the order of the story, limiting the narrative to a strict temporal dimension in the present tense. If, during an analepsis, the character who is the avatar of the player dies, this creates a contradiction in the present time in which they are still alive. The prolepsis may cause a distortion with regard to the character's and the player's knowledge. If the player obtains new information on the future state of the game world, when they return to their initial position in time, their knowledge will be different from that of their avatar. This difference in knowledge creates a paradox in the game, since the behaviour of the avatar will be based on information that the character cannot possibly possess.

Juul (2005), generally agrees with the above statements, in what he refers to as “chronology of time in game” (p. 147), chronological time. However he makes significant qualifications as to the possibility of there being anachronisms. In principle, games are narratives in the present, and there is a risk of creating temporal paradoxes if analepses or prolepses are introduced. However, there could be external analepses in mystery or detective games, etc., with cut-scenes or objects within the virtual world, i.e. in fictional time, which inform us about events in the past and help to solve the unknowns, such as, for instance, the *Myst* books. Zakowski, in his study of temporality in the *Mass Effect* series of games (Zakowski, 2014, p. 66), also connects the historical encyclopaedia the *Codex* to a link to the past, which he describes as a backstory, when information is provided on events prior to the present time in the main storyline.

The order in the narrative time must not be confused with time travel at the level of the story, where it is not the player who jumps in time, narratively

speaking, but the character within the fictional world. Similar to time travel films, which can be completely linear in terms of the narrative, we can find an example of this in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, where Link travels into the future, and returns to the present at the end of the game, and also the journeys made by Desmond Miles using the Amicus device in the *Assassin's Creed* series. In the cinema, the *Back to the Future* film series is an example of this. In all these cases, they are still linear narratives.

Indeed, the majority of narrative video games found on the market have a chronological temporal order, established by the story. However, in our view this is not due to logical contradictions, which could be quite easily rectified by the use of rules, preventing, for example, a return from the analepsis if the character dies. Regarding the issue of the difference in knowledge, this also occurs in one of the most common video game formulas, the loop, but does not represent a significant narrative contradiction for the development of the game. On the contrary, it is a form of learning by the player, who guides their character using that new knowledge which the character, on the other hand, does not possess.

Eskelinen (2004) defines temporal order as follows: “In computer games this is the relation between user events and system events, or the actions of the player and their interaction with the event structure (happenings) of the game” (p. 40). From the moment we define the order in terms of the relation between user actions and system events, the question is whether or not the user affects the order in which the system events occur: they do in exploration games, but not, on the whole, in arcade games. The difficulty is that we are not referring to the order in a strictly temporal sense of past, present or future with regard to the story and the discourse, but to the moment, inevitably always in the present time, in which the user may or may not change the sequence of events. Indeed, we must study the order in narrative time in video games based on our definition of dual temporality, which we have seen in the previous section. The temporal order depends on the relationship between story time and participation time.

Some video games do not have a pre-established temporal order for the sequence of actions in the fictional world. This is what Herman (2002) aptly terms “fuzzy temporality” (p. 228), an indeterminate or inexact temporality, which heightens the player's enjoyment in that the sequence of actions may vary, as their order is not relevant to the development of the story. The game unfolds in a given space but the different sequences or missions do not have a temporal order pre-determined in the rules. The journey through the space allows indefinite temporality in terms of the order without making the player feeling lost, since they know where they are, and time doesn't matter. We find an example of this in the missions of *Mass Effect*. Although other video games impose a rigid succession in the sequence of actions, this order is, to put it one way, unspecific, in the sense that what really matters is still the spatial journey, which imposes a progression in space rather than a temporal order: a space-

related time. This can be found in many games, such as those of Castlevania: Lords of Shadow or Tomb Raider and Silent Hill games series, etc.

Sometimes, in addition to a spatial anchorage, the passage of time can be established through objects. The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask, which is a very comprehensive game in the way it deals with diegetic time, allows the player to be located at any given time due to the possession (or not) of certain objects, such as the Hero's Bow, which is not lost in time travel. The possession of these objects indicates a linear progression in the game, one moment after another in which the Bow is not possessed.

Space and objects are common devices for marking progression in a game, while the temporal order, in narrative terms, is secondary in video games, unlike the cinema, where this order is narratively essential and always, apart from somewhat experimental exceptions, very clear. In video games, the objects that are possessed or missions that are carried out belong to a participation time, i.e. they mark the progress of the player in the game while the player develops the discourse.

While in the cinema, as we know, temporal order is a common device used, especially analepses or flashbacks, and it carries out narrative functions at various levels, from the characters' psychology to the dramatic power of the story, in video games the narrative time is linear, in an almost always level chronological order. The most powerful device in video games is the participation time, which measures the user's involvement, always within the rules, in the narrative time.

DURATION AND INCOHERENT TIME

Firstly, in video games, the relative duration of participation time and story time is usually identical in that the actions of the game are displayed on a continuous plane. Therefore the most common way in the cinema to change the relative duration, montage, is not present in video games or is insignificant. In the cinema, the identity between the duration of the discourse and the duration of the story is known as a scene (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995, p. 127). The usual plane sequence of games in the first person, third person or in a God-like view indicates that that relationship of duration is strictly identical.

However, we must take into account what Juul (2005) calls "incoherent time" (p. 152), which refers to temporal violations of the game time-fiction time relationship. Juul identifies three types of violation, which are game pause, subjective time, and shorter game time than fictional time. In this last case, the violation comes from comparing fictional time with real time, such as in *Heavy Rain*, in the scene where Ethan Mars has returned from school with his son at the beginning of the game and the kitchen clock shows the story time, which is faster than real time. This treatment of time is only incoherent compared to real time. Juul himself refers to it as projection and it is the same as what is known in narratology as a summary, a summary of the story time in the discourse time, such as in the montage sequences of *The Hudsucker Proxy* or *Up*. In the case of the videogame *Heavy Rain*, the duration is controlled by the

rules of the game, which impose on the player the difficulty of a reduced time to resolve the scene. In this case, participation time is controlled by the rules.

In the other two cases cited by Juul, pause time and subjective time, we can find explanations without turning to the concept of inconsistent time. In many games, the pause or stoppage of play itself by the player, leaves the story time in relative continuation, for example with the hearing of diegetic sounds. Although one might think that this is a narrative dilation, such as the famous slow motion scenes of *The Wild Bunch*, we cannot say that when a video game is paused this relates to any kind of narrative function. Rather, it is the participation time, which pauses the game and with it the discourse. The same applies to what Juul calls subjective time, a short pause that takes place when the player reaches a certain goal and changes level, such as in *Super Mario 64*. It may be considered as a dilation of participation time in relation to the story time, but it is not significant, in our view, in terms of the narrative.

Sometimes story time can be sped up or slowed down using coherent devices at an internal fictional level, such as in *Majora's Mask*. Firstly, again we find a narrative summary, where the participation time is shorter than the story time. In addition, playing the *Inverted Song of Time* halves the passage of time, whereas playing the *Song of Double Time* takes the player straight to night time or the following morning. The two songs are diegetic and therefore slow down or speed up time from a diegetic point of view, which means that rather than a narrative problem this is an intradiegetic modification, as also happened in *The Ocarina of Time*. But this temporal modification, which does not alter the narrative time but the story time, forms part of the participation time, i.e. it is the player who, at all times, chooses to use or not the possibility of playing one song or the other and thereby change the time of the story. Here the progress in the game, which changes the story time, is produced by the use of certain objects.

FREQUENCY: THE NARRATIVE CONVENTION OF THE LOOP

According to Genette (1991, p. 172), frequency refers to the relation between the number of times an event appears in the discourse and the number of times it appears in the diegesis, i.e. the relations of repetition between the plot and the story. It is a mental construct, since a repeated event is never the same, nor is the repeated fragment of a discourse.

Genette establishes the following types of frequency, which are always considered as mental constructs, between the story (S) and the narrative discourse (N):

- Narrating once what happens once (1N/S): singulative narrative;
- Narrating n times what happens n times (nN/nS): an anaphoric type of singulative narrative;
- Narrating n times what happens once (nN/1S): repetitive narrative. Here the story is told from different points of view or using different styles;

- Narrating once what happens n times ($1N/nS$): iterative narration, which implies condensation.

In adaptation to film (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995, p. 131), the types of frequency are almost reduced to the singulative narrative, which is exemplified by almost all the films in the history of the cinema, narrating just once events that happen only once. There are, of course, exceptions, such as *Rashomon*.

Whereas the repeating narrative is an unusual form in the cinema, it has often been said that it is essential in video games, although certainly not in all video games. According to Eskelinen (2004, p. 41) we can distinguish two types of game according to whether the events and actions can happen only once or unlimited times. There is no middle ground: in many games, especially MMOGs, the actions are irreversible, and a previous situation cannot be repeated. In others, it is not only possible but necessary to keep on trying until the solution is found, and this is an option established in the rules of the game and used by the player. Thus, in video games where time is not irreversible, the loop is commonly used as a way of dealing with time.

The loop has become part of the very identity of video games. If the temporal order imposes linearity, and if the duration is identical in the dual temporality, the loop is therefore the most characteristic formula of narrative time in video games. So much so that when the cinema has sought to reflect or take narrative inspiration from video games, it has adapted the loop, which seems very odd. In fact, although until the nineties the use of the narrative loop was unusual and virtually non-existent in the cinema, since then it has been explored by some films, to some extent inspired by the interactive narrative of video games, such as *Groundhog Day*, *Run Lola Run*, *The Rules of Attraction*, *Source Code*, *Triangle* or most recently, *Edge of Tomorrow*.

According to Manovich, the loop is a repetitive narrative. The author, on identifying the three fundamental characteristics of video games, directly linked to the cinema, cites the differential movement, spatial montage and the narrative convention of the loop. In fact the loop, as described by Manovich (2005, p. 392) constitutes the basis of early cinema and computer programming and was used for technical reasons in the first cinema screenings in digital media, just as it was used, for the same reasons, in pre-cinema and early cinema. The loop is inseparable from video games, for instance until a certain objective is reached and the player goes up a level. In this sense we can consider that video games often incorporate a repetitive discourse, where the unity of the story is changed several times in terms of the discourse. Adventure games are perhaps the best examples. *Silent Hill*, *Resident Evil*, *Tomb Raider*, but also *God of War* series, *Death Island*, *Batman: Arkham City*, and many others, force the player to repeat particular moments or scenes of the game to continue to move forward. The loop is integral to progress in the intradiegetic action and it is the player who, subject to the rules of the game, repeats the action however many times they need in order to learn.

For Neitzel, the relationships between story and plot are marked by the fact that a game is basically repetition. Therefore according to Neitzel, the example of Murray on the multiform story of the film *Groundhog Day* is wrong, given that it is a multiform plot, “because the story has only one form. This form, however, is shown in text in several forms on the level of the plot. The story with its intrinsic meaning holds together the repetitions of almost always the same, which are played out on the level of the plot” (Neitzel, 2005, p. 236).

However, from our perspective, to say that a story is repetitive, i.e. in a loop, the repetition must be at the level of the discourse, on the level of the plot, and not at the level of the story, which remains one. This is Genette’s original definition of narratology which is supported by Manovich. According to analysis based on the narrative levels, the character, within the story, does not know that they are repeating the same moment because it is the player who, from outside the story, is repeating an event time and time again. The story time is singular and the participation time is multiple, therefore the loop is produced by the extradiegetic action of the player. This is the difference between a medium that is interactive, video games, and one that is not, film. In video games, participation time can explain the loop. In film, when this narrative form typical of video games is adapted, the player becomes the character, so that they, within the story, learn over successive repetitions how to act.

Whereas in *Groundhog Day* and the other films mentioned above, narrations clearly inspired by the characteristic loop of video games are not strictly loops, since there is a multiple discourse and story. This is a case of a singulative anaphoric narrative and not a repetitive narrative. The fundamental difference is the narrative level at which the repetition takes place: if the repetition is intradiegetic, this is an anaphoric narrative, and if it is extradiegetic, it is a repetitive one.

The case of *Rashomon* is different. We can observe that they are different discourses, and versions, of one and the same story. Here it is the character-narrators who tell, each from their own viewpoint, the same story. Following our explanation, *Rashomon* sets out two narrative levels. The first is the present tense, the narrators, and the second is the flashback, the story told by each of them. It is a structure at two narrative levels, which is similar, but not identical, to that of video games. Indeed, in video games, the player, in leading the narrative, bears some resemblance to a narrator who tells a story, and whom we see in the audiovisual discourse. Therefore, *Rashomon* is a narrative loop.

In video games, the narrative time depends on the relationship between the participation time and the story time: the same story is played several times, as many as necessary for the learning and enjoyment experienced by the player. The loop, then, depends on the participation time, which is external to the story time, and forms with it the dual temporality needed for any discourse.

CONCLUSION

The loop is a narrative device that places tension on the narrative time, i.e. the relationship between the discourse time and the story time. In the cinema, this tension has rarely been explored, and mainly in films inspired by the playable narrative of video games, as a narrative game. In contrast, in the cinema, analepses or flashbacks have a very long tradition, especially from the classical period, and this continues today. This temporal disorder is very useful in narration, allowing very effective devices to be used for linear media, adding to the emotional engagement of the viewer. As we have seen, this is virtually non-existent in video games.

The duration of video games is normally the scene, because cinematic continuity equates the duration of the story with that of the discourse. However, as we have seen, there are discontinuities, which have been especially useful to consider the concept of participation time, which marks the modification of the narrative time by the player, through their participation in the game.

The loop expresses everything said so far. It puts in tension the participation time –discourse time– with the story time. It is the player who, always within the limits of the rules, alters the temporal variable due to their need to learn, improve, understand the dangers etc. and who decides, perhaps because they have no other option, to enter a narrative loop, whose main function is to move the game forward. Here the tension between participation time and story time is clear. This formula, which in some form produces a crisis within the narrative itself, has become a key feature of video games. It has also been transferred to the cinema in films that have played with the narrative, although from a narratological point of view it is not the same type, since the cinema as a medium is not, nor will it be, an interactive discourse, which is a necessary condition of the narrative loop in video games, i.e. a condition of the participation time.

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Bad object 2.0

Games and gamers

ABSTRACT

This is not a history project. Nor is it about video games and the people who play them. Instead, this project focuses on the cultural discourse surrounding digital games as they have been refracted by the lenses of American film and television. This study considers a broad cross-section of Hollywood's depictions of games, tracing their evolution from objects of fascination and technological possibility in the 1970s and 1980s to catalysts for antisocial behavior in the 1990s and 2000s. This evolution maps revealingly onto the changing economic circumstances of the games industry, describing a direct correlation between the economic viability of the industry and its critical depiction in Hollywood.

The chronological trajectory mapped by this project moves through recognizable stages with the goal of placing equal emphasis on specific media examples as well as broad patterns. This illuminates important but easily overlooked distinctions among various genres and platforms of games and how they are imagined on film and television. Arcade games, for example, were subjected to much less withering critiques than their home console counterparts; PC-based games were likewise more commonly granted nuanced treatment in the eyes of Hollywood. How can we explain these differences? A closer look at the evidence offered by film and television at various points in time, viewed in light of the material circumstances of the industries involved, may provide some answers.

The basic contours of this project's argument are simple. From its origins in the 1970s and continuing through the end of the 1980s, Hollywood's vision of games was remarkably accepting; narratives were largely balanced in terms of gender, and the youth culture emerging around games was portrayed with relative dignity. During this time, the games industry was still establishing its foothold in the homes of North America and making its way into the leisure time of families. In spite of stunning profits in the earliest days of the 1980s, the industry suffered a massive collapse in 1983, followed by a rebound of home consoles in the 1990s that placed it in more direct competition with the film and television industries. By the 2000s, console games were thoroughly integrated into American homes, posing for the first time a viable threat to the hegemony of the film

and television industries for domestic entertainment. Throughout this period of ascendance, cinematic tropes of gaming grew more critical, with gamers increasingly associated with a range of antisocial behaviors, especially violence, addiction and repressed sexuality. Ultimately, the project argues that depictions of games on film and television include both a dominant discourse of denunciation and notable exceptions that allow for more complex, alternate readings.

This project was created using the electronic authoring platform Scalar, which allows for the inclusion of a large number of clips – probably too many to expect any individual reader to watch them all. Whenever possible, the argument put forward in each of Scalar’s “paths” has been conceived with minimal dependence on adjacent elements. Readers may also explore this project’s complete collection of clips via the Media Chronology page. The goal of this structure is to enable readers to explore the project according to their own areas of interest rather than by necessarily following a sequence of linear arguments. In addition, the collection of clips included in this article constitutes a sub-archive within the critical media sharing site Critical Commons, where all original media files may be viewed or downloaded for further use. Reader-viewers are thus invited to investigate the media and arguments put forward here not as definitive or exclusive readings, but as interpretive beginnings, which will hopefully be generative of further discussion and research.

INTRODUCTION

This is not a history project. Nor is it about video games and the people who play them. Instead, this project focuses a narrow beam on the cultural discourse surrounding game culture as it has been refracted by the lenses of American commercial film and television. The primary evidence considered in this project is thus not games themselves, but a multitude of examples drawn from film and television in which games and gamers have been envisioned by Hollywood over the past four decades. This study considers a broad cross-section of cinematic and televisual games, tracing their evolution from objects of fascination and technological possibility in the 1970s and 1980s to objects of derision and catalysts for antisocial behavior in the 1990s and 2000s. This evolution maps revealingly onto the changing economic circumstances of the games industry, describing a direct correlation between the economic viability of the industry and its negative depiction in Hollywood. These examples also evince a marked distinction between the consistently critical depiction of home console games and the more generous treatment of games that are PC-based or located outside the home, in arcades or other contexts.

During the 1980s, Hollywood generated a profusion of narratives involving games and gamers, sometimes as part of a central narrative conceit, other times as background or peripheral elements. A thorough history would situate these depictions as part of a dense array of cultural responses to the appearance of game consoles and personal computers in American homes that included adver-

tisements, news reporting, print and radio journalism and much more. Recurrent patterns of cultural resistance and acceptance of new technologies have been usefully documented and theorized by others (cf: Schivelbusch, McLuhan, Marvin, Spigel, et al). While these models have informed my investigation, it is important to remember that this project addresses not the technologies themselves, but the layer of popular cultural discourse that emerged around them on film and television. The overall historical trajectory mapped by this project moves through recognizable stages, but my aim is to focus on specific representational gestures rather than broad patterns. This allows us to make important but easily overlooked distinctions among various genres and platforms of games and how they are imagined on film and television. Arcade games, for example, were subjected to much less withering critiques than their home console counterparts; PC-based games were likewise more commonly granted nuanced treatment in the eyes of Hollywood. How can we explain these differences? A closer look at the evidence offered by film and television at various points in time, viewed in light of the material circumstances of the industries involved may provide some answers.

The basic contours of my own argument are simple. From its origins in the 1970s and continuing through the end of the 1980s, Hollywood's vision of game culture was remarkably accepting; narratives were largely balanced in terms of gender and the youth culture emerging around games was portrayed with relative respect. During this time, the games industry was still establishing its foothold in the homes of North America and making its way into the leisure time of families. In spite of stunning profits in the earliest days of the 1980s, the industry suffered a massive collapse in 1983, followed by a rebound of home consoles in the 1990s that placed it in more direct competition with the film and television industries. By the 2000s, console games were thoroughly integrated into American homes posing for the first time a viable threat to the hegemony of the film and television industries for commercial entertainment. A little more than two decades after suffering near total economic collapse, the games industry would surpass the earnings of the film industry and have continued to far outdistance it in the years to follow. Throughout this period of ascendance, cinematic tropes of gaming shifted to a more uniformly critical depiction, with gamers consistently associated with a range of antisocial behaviors, especially violence, addiction and repressed sexuality. Ultimately, I will argue that depictions of games on film and television include both a dominant discourse of denunciation and notable exceptions that allow for more complex or resistant alternate readings.

COLOPHON

We should be wary of historical models that imply causal relations or direct reflection between the real world and the worlds depicted on film and television. The goal of this project is not to prove that the rising economic threat of

the games industry in general -- or home consoles in particular -- motivated individuals or institutions in Hollywood to systematically work to discredit video games. A great many more factors certainly influence the content of films and TV shows and it is my hope to avoid making assertions that are overly deterministic or historically reductive. However, I believe these questions are worth taking seriously and it is only by viewing the original media themselves that an informed hypothesis may be made. Although the media samples included in this project are not exhaustive by any means, I have made every effort to include as many clips from the most diverse range of sources possible (given the project's parameters), dating back to 1973.

I hope it is self-evident from the project's framing as an annotated/narrativized media archive that my goal is not a scientific evaluation of the media under consideration here. Certain concepts such as the "cultural imaginary" would easily elude any desire for proof that my interpretation is true or data in support of my claims. Instead, I invite reader-viewers to investigate the arguments and observations put forward here not as definitive or exclusive readings, but as interpretive beginnings, which I hope will be generative of further discussion and research.

Finally, I recognize that this project contains a large number of clips - probably too many to expect any individual reader to watch them all. Therefore, whenever possible, the argument put forward in each "path" of the project has been conceived with minimal dependence on adjacent sections. My hope is that this will enable readers to explore the project according to their own areas of interest instead of necessarily following the linear arguments presented by the sequence of paths in this article.

Readers are encouraged to undertake their own investigation of the broad range of media included in the project chronology. The collection of clips included in this article constitute a sub-archivewithin the critical media sharing site Critical Commons, where all original media files may be downloaded for further use or investigation. In addition to the various paths featured in this project, readers are invited to explore the full collection of media samples via the Media Chronology page. Finally, readers are encouraged to deploy the Main Menu drop-down in the upper left of each page to jump to individual paths or pages in any order.

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Documentary film and the (re)production of the 1980s UK game industry

ABSTRACT

As a medium older and more established than the digital game, film has certainly played a role in documenting its trajectories. Through audiovisual essays and narratives we can be introduced to game artifacts alongside the contexts of their creation, distribution and reception. The older medium avoids a problem of abandonware and emulation, whereby games are preserved but are devoid of the temporal specificity and popular excitement often so important to their meaning. Yet there are always problems with such documentation; film, with its limited capacity for immersion, can only represent and relate narratives about gaming. As such, it alienates viewers from the content and mechanics of such games, relegating them to the position of a passive viewer.

This paper looks at three specific attempts to explore the history of the UK game industry. *Micro Men* foregrounds a rivalry between two of the largest UK computer manufacturers, Sinclair Research and Acorn Computers. The film abandons the traditional documentary format in favour of a dramatisation with some added archival footage. Of particular interest and irony is the extent to which the focus of the film is on the competition to produce the BBC's Micro project; while both the aforementioned companies were critical of the state broadcaster's intervention, both competed for the contract mindful of the publicity and sure sales that would be associated with the project. Unlike computer development in the United States or Japan, British computer entrepreneurs relied on public funding even as they publicly denounced the concept. It should not go unnoticed that this film was itself produced by the BBC, and that it seems to feed into more recent attempts to reform the state education curriculum and to regenerate a UK computer culture.

From Bedrooms to Billions, a crowdfunded project by Anthony and Nicola Caulfield is due to come out this September, and relied on the enthusiasm of nostalgic Eighties gamers and younger retro enthusiasts. From donations they have to date raised over £80,000 pounds, around double their initial target. While they interview a number of significant figures in the game industry from the period, it is perhaps noticeable that many of their interviewees remain connected to

gaming in some way and were at least moderately successful. There appears to be little inclusion of those who are now critical of the industry, or who were exploited or marginalised within the game production industry. The title of the film suggests it will be a triumphal narrative for the UK's £2 billion dollar industry, but the finished film remains to be seen.

Opificio Ciclope's 2003 *Spectrum Diamond: The Myth and Legend of Matthew Smith* is an older, more abstract project, created by a collective based in Bologna for Finnish state broadcaster Ele and French network Canal+. Unlike the aforementioned films, the documentary focuses not on the game industry as a whole, but rather on two games, *Manic Miner* and its sequel, *Jet Set Willy*. Their plot was numerous, superficial, but nonetheless foreboding, taking place only a year before the National Union of Mineworkers strike and subsequent destruction of the UK labour movement. Rather than interviewing important figures or creating a conclusive narrative, the documentary focuses on replicating the affective context of the games, speculating about the rediscovery of this obsolete console by a Finnish teenager, Theo. Matthew Smith, the young programmer who would disappear before producing a third sequel, is cast as the Syd Barrett of the 80s, producing tortured art that marks the free fall out of industrialism. While the former titles comprise laudable efforts to narrate the past of the UK game industry, only the latter title is able to transcend representation, providing an experience that is far from linear and profoundly ludic.

A punk microeconomy, the UK video game industry in the 1980s exhibits notable differences from similar markets in the United States and Japan. At this point, the global integration of new media production was far from complete. Today, while the United Kingdom still has a lively development community including some notable mid-size, stand-alone developers, some development franchises associated with larger multinationals, and a number of critically acclaimed indie producers, it can hardly be considered an autonomous industry. Vallance (2014) notes the relatively small number of indigenous producers in the modern development ecology, arguing that among other factors this is responsible for the contemporary lack of concentration of software producers around urban or creative centres. Izushi and Aoyama, (2006) on the other hand, argue that there is little evidence in the UK of communication or creative diffusion between the video game industry and local comic or animation production, as with Japan, or with film production, as the United States. The game industry was dependent upon itself for content and experience. Johns (2006) argues that there is still a distinct European market, dependent upon the region's reliance on the PAL television format, but elsewhere notes historical connections between the UK and US game markets; her work also illustrates that the consolidation of UK developers happened rapidly in the early 1990s. Charting and understanding this trajectory of economic change is difficult process; while there is a range of work in the social sciences on the industry as it exists today, historical quantitative data can only tell us so much about how production was organised. This

paper therefore takes an alternative approach, looking for qualitative illustration in a number of documentaries produced in the recent years.

Little work has been done on documentary films that take games and the cultures surrounding them as their subject, despite the increasing popularity of such films. Fullerton (2008) and Poremba (2011) have looked at the relationship between games and documentary, but their work focuses predominantly on how games have remediated the documentary form. “Docugame” developers produce immersive historical simulations that employ archival material and/or historical characters or events to both educate and ethically or affectively provoke players. Another synthetic medium that fuses documentary practice and gaming is the emergent “e-sports”; while there is an impetus towards live material, the inclusion of formal elements such as narration and the focus on characters outside the game – in this case the pro-gamers – mean that there is certainly also influence from other documentary media. While there are films about the experience of players (see *Frag* and especially *Free to Play*), increasingly the majority of coverage is live or near-live, following the conventions of television broadcasts of sporting events. Kaytoue et al. (2012) study the twitch.tv platform, arguing that casual gamers often prefer to watch other players than play themselves and that this live streaming represents a novel kind of entertainment that further democratises the so-called gaming scene. Carter and Gibbs (2013) note tensions in another popular e-sport community as the developer alternates between restricting tournament rules to make games fully comprehensible to non-players, and encouraging a vibrant, if sometimes opaque, metagame. This synthetic medium of live-streaming games both draws from documentary practices and ensures that the practice of recording gameplay is normalised, benefiting future archives.

In the game preservation community, a split exists between those who would preserve games in a playable form, and those who would prioritise recording gameplay instead. Newman is foremost amongst those who would argue for the latter; in the 2012 text *Best Before* he argues that fundamental problems with emulation mean this established model of preservation is flawed. Newman writes:

That so much of what games have to offer is based on contingencies of play must surely lead us to question the primacy of playable games in the game preservation project and encourage us to consider the possibility of a need to shift the balance from game preservation towards gameplay preservation. [...] While for many it exists as a valuable supplement to the business of game preservation, I wish to suggest that a documentary approach is well suited to respond to the diversity of play and the susceptibility of games to the configurative, transformative acts of play as well as underpinning any project based around the preservation of playability. (2012, p. 158)

Newman shows his enthusiasm for practices such as Speedrunning and for the increasing popularity of so-called Let's Play videos: videos where players post themselves playing contemporary or historical games and commenting on their performance and experience (2013, p. 61). The focus on emulators – software programs that allow games from historic platforms to be played on modern platforms – is problematic for Newman because emulated versions of games both differ from original versions of the game and from each other, making authentic experience impossible. Furthermore, contemporary players do not play games within the same social and political context, their experience of the game situates it not within its artistic, generation milieu but instead as a nostalgic or antiquarian fetish. Documentation of gameplay – whether historical or contemporary – can more properly situate games within their context, while foregrounding the subjectivity of the player's encounter.

Simple video game play cannot, however, tell us altogether too much about the material conditions of development, production and distribution in the video game industry. Furthermore, it is hardly certain that historic games are more than a marginal, passing interest. It is for this reason that longer documentaries about the varied histories of game development are of scholarly interest; both because they can complement more procedurally sound contemporary research in geography, sociology and economics related to the video game industry, but also because their popular reception suggests that this social history of gaming may be of interest to wider audiences. That being said, however, it is clear that documentaries are never neutral. In this paper, it is argued that film and television documentaries have the capacity to illustrate the context in which games are developed, produced and distributed. Documentaries, however, also have their own production contexts; these invariably affect the way in which the content of the documentary is presented, inclusions and omissions. This paper looks at three documentaries on the UK Game Industry of the 1980s; while there is a great deal of room for comparative studies of the way different historical periods or regional markets are presented, that would require a larger study that is beyond the scope of this article.

DREAMLAND: STATE DRAMA IN *MICRO MEN*

Micro Men begins with a short documentary-style clip detailing Clive Sinclair's impact on the electronics industry. This sequence is presented in the style of television special from the period in question; while this sequence is fictional construction made for the movie, its usage of stylistic conventions reminiscent of Eighties news broadcast both situates the events within a particular time period and gives the film an authority as guide. The 2009 television film then shifts into its dominant style, that of the dramatisation. Sinclair is told by the government executives funding his company that certain, more exotic elements of his research are not supportable with taxpayer money; he subsequently explodes with rage at everyone around him, his employees included. Contrary to the

impression given by the leading segment, Sinclair is not the protagonist; this role belongs to his employee and subsequent competitor, Chris Curry. Sinclair then falls into the role of antagonist; he is paranoid, railing against the limitations placed on him by state control and, in a scene that stylistically references the spy thriller, asking his employee Curry to quit and work for him at a secret Cambridge start-up. In the film, Sinclair is initially dismissive of computers despite Curry's enthusiasm for them; Curry instead goes into business with Hermann Hauser, founding Acorn. After Sinclair is given a "golden handshake" by the now government-owned Sinclair Radionics, he appears unsettled until walking past a newsagent sign announcing Margaret Thatcher's ascension to Prime Minister. Sinclair declares a "fresh start", throwing away his cigarettes, selling his Rolls Royce, and entering the emergent computer business. This marks the conclusion of the first act, which has shown the method by which this film will illustrate the game industry of the 1980s. Its predominant focus is on two specific companies and their key players, rather than the industry as a whole; it also is heavily focused on the production of hardware platforms as opposed to software development. By making a dramatisation, the producers of the film inevitably allow inaccuracies in order to facilitate narrative flow; they compensate for this in their use of archival footage, simulated reenactments of such footage (including mock news reports, used in lieu of narration), and the use of authentic consoles as props. These threads are woven into a film that is very much an elegy for a certain imagined British computer hardware industry.

The second act foregrounds the importance of a BBC project to encourage computer education. Both Sinclair and Curry were initially furious at what amounted to state-funded advertising for a single computer product, but were seemingly also upset that the state-operated broadcaster had not decided the computer to be featured through open competition. Perhaps hypocritically, they both wanted a shot. The film shows Sinclair contacting Curry, conspiratorially suggesting they work together to open up the competition; in actuality, Sinclair had never heard of the proposed broadcast when Curry contacted him about it (Anderson and Levine 2012, p. 36). The change is relatively minor, but is an illustration of how Sinclair's personality is exaggerated, while Curry is made to appear more neutral. Acorn, who attempt to match the specifications of the BBC, defeat Sinclair, which insists on its own specifications. The foregrounding of the BBC's intervention and the identification of Curry – the chief executive of the company that would eventually receive the contract to produce its BBC Micro – as the protagonist cannot be ignored for two reasons. Most important is the fact that this television movie was produced for and screened on a BBC channel; it naturally risks becoming a triumphal narrative, a documentation of the computer industry that foregrounds the BBC's (and indirectly the state's) role within it. The irony of the fact that characters such as Sinclair, and indeed Curry himself, are critical of state intervention in industry can hardly be lost.

To a lesser extent this also feeds into the politics of the ascendant computing revival; though the film predates the Conservative electoral victory in 2010, and the subsequent announcement of changes to the computing curriculum in 2012, the ideological concept of a synthetic, even “synergetic” relationship between government and business, particularly high-tech, creative sector business, is not particularly partisan. As Barbrook (2006) and Pratt (2008) have shown, such a partnership was also encouraged in the economic policy of New Labour, the formerly social democratic party in power at the time. A critical fragment of the film is the inclusion of an archival clip wherein Margaret Thatcher demonstrates a Sinclair console to the Japanese prime minister during a 1982 visit; in an associated press conference, Thatcher announces: “I’ll be pursuing the possibility of increased sales in Japan of highly competitive British goods and I know that you’re doing more to try to open up the market for more imported goods and I’ll be hoping to strengthen the industrial and technological links between our two countries” (Thatcher, 1982).

Despite the supposed commitment to free market practices, the government is frequently called upon to support businesses. In return, entrepreneurs are held up as national icons; Sinclair was subsequently knighted. It seems unavoidable therefore that due both to its documentary-drama mode and the context in which it was produced that the film would adopt a “Great People” model of history. Perhaps notable is the fact that the screenwriter for *Micro Men* had produced the screenplay for another BBC historical dramatisation, entitled *Margaret Thatcher: The Long Walk to Finchley*. While filmmaking is a collaborative process and it would be unfair to conflate the production of a documentary on a person with an explicit endorsement of them, this does suggest the type of character that is conducive to the format.

The third act is introduced with a universal frustration. Curry’s staff realise their platforms are unpopular without a large catalogue of games, and consequently produce a lower cost, stripped down console called the Electron. Meanwhile, Sinclair is having trouble breaking into the professional market; his QL is suffering from significant production problems and consequentially delays. Sinclair alternates between shifting his focus to renewable transportation – his often mocked but remarkably prescient electric tricycle – and berating his employees for the delays in production. After Curry is left with a full warehouse, he worries about his staff; after a film minute of contemplation, he decides to run the advertisement highlighting the Electron’s much lower return rate when compared with Sinclair’s competing ZX Spectrum. A fight breaks out when Sinclair confronts him about it, though this scene is exaggerated for dramatic effect. “Poor Clive was made to look like a lunatic” says Curry (Anderson and Levine 2012, p. 44). A subsequent on screen conversation between Curry and his second-in-command Hauser illustrates the dual messages of the film.

“Curry: It’s official, we’re a joke. Hope all the people we have to lay off see the funny side.

Hauser: We’re not a joke, Chris. The bottom has fallen out of the whole market, that’s all. It’s the same for everyone.

Curry: It’s the same for Clive...

Hauser: Does that make you feel better?

Curry: *pauses, smiles* No, it doesn’t.

Hauser: I’ll go and start letting everyone know...

Curry: What are they all going to do?

Hauser: They’re clever people, they’ll think of something... Maybe they already have... (Micro Men)

In the background, there are two project specifications scrawled on a blackboard. The first, the ARM chip, is perceived to be the lasting legacy of the UK computer hardware industry.

The subsequent scene shows Sinclair and Curry reconciling over a pint in a pub. Sinclair extorts the resilience of British amateurs: “the quiet chap scuttling off his shed to work on that idea that he and he alone knows will change the world”. Sinclair then reveals his plans for a flying car, only to have the landlady call “last orders”. The landlady is a cameo by Sophie Wilson, who is in the real world the author of the instruction set for the aforementioned ARM chip and – it is implied – one of the “clever people” mentioned by Hauser. A concluding scene then summarises the problem with this imaginative, if somewhat distracted mindset; footage of the actor playing Sinclair in one of his patent electric tricycles is intercut with footage of Sir Alan Sugar, the entrepreneur with little knowledge of computing that bought his country. The shot then opens up to reveal that Sinclair is riding this tricycle on the highway – a risky procedure – as lorries pass him on both sides. The lorries are branded with the names of the computing giants of today, all American megacorporations. The film is incredibly enjoyable and a good example of effective mixing of dramatic, archival and faux-archival footage. Nonetheless, it appears overly patriotic; one cannot help but relate this to its conditions of production.

HAPPINESS AND LIGHT : CROWDSOURCING REFLECTION IN FROM BEDROOMS TO BILLIONS

The trailer for *From Bedrooms to Billions* opens with enthusiastic games journalist Gary Penn describing the affective environment of the early 1980s: “There was that new frontier, there was a sense of a new medium, there was a sense of a cultural thing occurring, there was a sense that anyone could do anything or make anything happen”.

Jon Hare, an artist and producer for Sensible Software asserts that “we were in a position in the UK where we were ready for something to happen”, while Julian Rignall, another journalist, adds that “it was very new, it was an industry

that was making it up as it went along”. The approach taken by producers Anthony and Nicola Caulfield is described as the “ensemble interview”; rather than using the voice of a single or small group of narrators, they intercut interview footage from journalists and developers in order to produce a coherent narrative through montage. In an interview with the [London] Metro’s David Jenkins, Andrew Caulfield describes how the project was originally pitched to the BBC and commercial networks, the documentary – originally planned as a three part television series – was rejected because games – particularly retro games – were seen as a “niche” interest (2013). After the successful broadcast of *Micro Men*, the show was picked up by the BBC, only to be dropped again after a month.

Caulfield describes beginning research for the project in the late 90s, and being motivated by the absence of contemporary UK developers; he also notes specifically the absence of UK producers, something noted in academic research by Vallance (2014). The producer is cautious about how he talks about the integration of UK developers into foreign supply chains; initially, he cages his statement with “I’m not saying that it’s bad...”, but when the interviewer suggests it might be he affirms that actually “it’s a crying shame”. That being said, the documentary appears to be developing in a different direction than the seemingly patriotic *Micro Men* discussed previously. Here, it is argued that the crowdsourced production has a triumphal narrative, but one that is not overtly about the self-affirmation of British inventiveness. Instead, the documentary is a valorisation of the importance of independent, small-scale developers against larger production companies. Caulfield’s words show the extent of the consolidation also documented in Johns’ (2006) research :

There’s a very interesting statistic actually, in the early ‘90s there was a 22 month period where we saw an almost 78 per cent drop off in financial activity of UK companies working on video games between ’93 and ’95. Which is almost a straight line on a graph. And that means money being generated in the UK by UK businesses and the money staying in the UK. By ’95 most developers were owned by Sony, Ubisoft, and various other companies. So the money was obviously going outside of the UK. (quoted in Jenkins, 2013)

Kuppuswamy and Bayus (2013) look at the vitality of public crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, suggesting that it differs from traditional investment models both in the quantity of investors – there are a greater number of small scale investors – and the quality and level of feedback provided by those who have a stake in the project. The decision by producers Nicola and Anthony Caulfield to raise the funding for their project on Kickstarter and similar platform Indiegogo has invariably affected their product. It is notable that unlike others funded on the platforms, they are not amateurs; both have had considerable success making documentaries and films receiving funding from traditional sources. Employing two different platforms was an unorthodox move, but

one that proved to be successful, gaining a greater degree of public and media interest. While in the earlier, Indiegogo campaign uses photos of the producers in archival photographs from magazines and offers material rewards to large-sum backers, the later campaign uses the social capital of confirmed interviewees, including things such as autographs and personal objects, in order to solicit even greater donations. While a detailed study of the crowdfunding campaign is beyond the scope of this article, it is notable that the funding generated by the project exceeded the initial goals and established a responsive target audience before the campaign had concluded. One can discern a third stage of the campaign in the mailings sent to backers; fans were invited to help source archival footage, suggest possible interviewees, and even perform complex technical tasks to facilitate certain sequences. While this engagement is without a doubt rewarding for fans and will enhance the quality of the finished product, scholars have critiqued the capacity of digital media platforms to entangle fans in forms of unremunerated labour. It is also of importance that the creators of this documentary have a background as producers; while the editing and cinematography is of high quality, it could be suggested that production skills are important for all artists in this emergent world of indie production.

The film was expanded greatly due to fan participation and the flexibility of the funding structure, but was not brought out until long after its projected date of completion, making a review of its content for the initial draft of this article impossible. That being said, however, an eighteen minute clip entitled *Metal* gives a good impression of both the formal structure and the overarching ideological grounding of the film. The title is a reference to “bare metal” coding, the coding in assembly language practiced by early programmers on platforms with limited memory and processing power. One can draw two major messages from this segment. The first is that the limitations of storage formats – which meant computer users had to type in program listings line by line – helped to improve computer literacy amongst the general population, including those who would not go on to become programmers. Another commentator tells us that the network of computer publications acted as an early internet – a distribution mechanism for code, techniques and commentary. Yet the general enthusiasm of early coders also was open for exploitation. Nigel Adlerton recalls convincing a headteacher – who was shocked students would want to attend school any longer than they were forced to – to hand over the keys so they could come in early. Anthony Crowther, another interviewee, recalls that this indulgence went further at his school. Library staff noticed that enthusiastic computer users were skipping lessons to use their computers, and so set them to work producing software that could be sold to other schools; in return, the students got an occasional free lunch. While the computational culture of the 1980s was in some respects more novel and accessible, it is also important that other elements are not obscured: in this case, the problematic use of child labour by school administrators.

In the trailer, to cite another example, an unnamed commentator speaks of the instant acclamation afforded to successful developers: “It was a fame and stardom that none of us were prepared for... and it hurt a lot of people”. The next scene shows Matthew Smith, developer of *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy*, asserting that “there’s a group of people for whom the 1980s was a magical time full of... full of happiness and light.” It’s unclear whether Smith is making this comment sincerely or with a degree of irony; it is also unclear whether the directors are using it to contrast with the preceding and subsequent fragment, or in sequence with them. The next scene is from a 1984 documentary – *Commercial Breaks* (Paul Anderson) – and shows the fall of Imagine Software, as bailiffs lock employees out of their workplace. Along with Imagine’s dissolution, the depression and disappearance of Smith is one of the most well known elements of 1980’s UK gaming mythology. This short sequence is suggestive that the film has the capacity to be self critical of the computational culture of the 80s, but then the film’s criticality is necessarily limited by the biases of its funders, many of whom would not have indulged the producers were it not for a latent and rose-tinted nostalgia that they likely want reflected in the film. The Caulfields are left with an awkward situation; either they abuse the trust of their funders and produce a film that shows all sides of the gaming industry, or they indulge them and produce a film that is simply another form of triumphalism.

SECRET LEVEL: DOCUMENTING DISAPPEARANCE

Spectrum Diamond – produced by Bologna film collective Opificio Ciclope – is the shortest film reviewed here, fitting into an hour television slot. It is also the oldest, having been produced in 2002 and screened in 2003. The conditions of production are also the strangest; while the producers were Italian, the film was made with funding from the Spanish affiliate of French television corporation Canal +, to be screened on television in Finland. They use contemporary footage, but a range of obsolete and dated film cameras, giving the footage an aesthetic that is more dreamlike than dated. Unlike the other documentaries mentioned, it uses a narrator; the narration was the first component to be written, and the documentary has been structured around that. The narrator, however, is hardly an authoritative voice; the producers reveal that they “wanted a phantom presence as a narrator, a spirit child to guide thru the years and cities”. The use of a teenager from a foreign country, too young to remember the subject of their documentary, means that the film has a mythological quality. While *Micro Men* looks at the pioneers of British hardware, and *From Bedrooms to Billions* explores the software industry as a whole, *Spectrum Diamond* looks at a single series and its disappearing creator.

The games – *Manic Miner*, and its sequel *Jet Set Willy* – were produced by Matthew Smith, at the time a teenager. Jenkins (2013) describes their lasting significance: “30 years later and they’re still the best example of a British made video game that actually feels British”. They hold a psychedelic quality,

drawing influences from popular culture, cult media, and current events. Jodi – perhaps the best known producers of game art – created their piece *Jet Set Willy Variations* in 2004 as a tribute to the series, hacking the titles to foreground their psychedelic qualities. *Opificio Ciclope* engage in a similar tribute through the medium of documentary video. They explore not only the games but also the spaces in which they were created; Wallasey, for example, where Smith had lived while developing the game. Many segments of the documentary are shot on antiquated film cameras, with special filters or lenses, making the landscapes they shot seem surreal. This is certainly in line with their stated aim; they “tried to look at England like a multilevel game.” While they don’t directly address the wider context of social, political and economic change, it is certainly implied through some of the interviews and sequences. As opposed to the revolutionary moments portrayed in *Micro Men*, or described in *From Bedrooms to Billion*, *Spectrum Diamond* implies a lost battle, adopting an elegiac tone. An interviewee, identified in the transcript only as “man in the pub”, describes how his environment has changed:

Buses used to be on time. Cheap fares. Everyone was subsidized. People were working. Everybody had a job. Families were happy, you know. Now they’ve just build all the promenade... Looks nice, but there’s nothing there anymore. So it’s like a ghost town, really.
It’s changed over the years like...

There is also a fascination with mythologies. Firstly, there are those referenced in the games, which *Opificio Ciclope* try to understand through local and vernacular sources. There is the “priest’s hole”, for example, a level in the game that has its origins in the hiding spots of 16th Century clerics; the producers ask some of the interviewees to explain it. They are similarly fascinated with in-game characters; in *Jet Set Willy*, the titular character is ordered to rearrange his house by his housekeeper, and the producers encourage an interviewee to speculate on the strange relationship between them. There is also another type of mythology investigated; that of the game’s production, and of the notable disappearance of its producers. The producers claim they “never looked for traces of Matthew Smith, (the girlfriends, the family...), not really”. Yet this is because their film is not about drawing conclusions, or making statements. Instead, it is about using the ambiguous nature of documentation, and the consequential ambiguity of documentary film as a medium. They open a discussion, asking questions not only of experts but of peripheral and even unrelated figures. They create Matthew Smith as a mythological character, a video game character. One source relates that “He was so rich he could use ZX Spectrums to proper-fix tables, because the legs wobbled, or to hold open the door”. Other sources describe his subsequent disappearance. The producers interview other

figures from younger generations; reenactors, who took up the task of producing their own versions of the games they had loved.

After Theo, the teenage narrator, reveals that the disappearing character has been found, it is not an invitation for resolution, conclusion. Instead, they cut to Steven Smith (unrelated), who with others had started a website to track sightings of their programmer hero. Steven Smith relays information received that he was creating new vehicles, or staying in a Dutch commune, or working in a fish factory. Strangely, the narrator joins in, providing information of his own of ambiguous authenticity: “I first met Matthew when he was rich and famous and he still knew how to draw a good party. I recall a free bar under the stairs and magic mushroom tea for all. The rest of evening is lost in a blur”. Steven Smith repeats another myth; that the programmer Matthew Smith is actually a codename for the computer. *Opificio Ciclope* follow an exegetical, speculative approach to the information they have obtained. They mix fiction and folklore in with documentary evidence, though not to make the material easier to digest, as in *Micro Men*. Instead, the inclusion of strange, unrelated statements, characters and material does two things. It creates an interactive, affective environment, similar to that created by a video game, through which the viewer must navigate. In addition, it reflects the winding, quest-like path taken by the film’s producers, who lacked discernible hierarchy or direction. At Software Products, where Matthew Smith worked while producing his second title, one of his colleagues attempted to explain the strange production environment to a visitor: “People see everybody wandering around and think, they’re idle. But as long as they produce a program, we don’t care how they do it. Some of them sleep here” (Bourne, 1984). One might meditate on the extent to which the documentary filmmakers’ loose organisation and random, playful approach mirrored the production conditions of the video game studios where their research subject worked.

CONCLUSION – PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION

This paper has attempted to analyse and contextualise three contemporary documentary films, showing how their portrayals of the British Game Industry are necessarily, though not completely, conditioned by their funding sources and conditions of production. Study of films cannot replace formal research in the social sciences when it comes to understanding the history and modes of production within the industry itself. Yet just as the production conditions of documentaries necessarily affect their content and message, the conditions under which research is produced can similarly affect its conclusions. In thinking about how production conditions necessarily affect – if not shape entirely – practices of documentation and presentation of historical technology usage in the cinematic format, we are implying that other research might be similarly affected. The museum display and the academic paper should certainly not to be excluded from (self-)critical analysis. It is worth noting that none of these

documentary ‘films’ has had a traditional cinematic release; two were released on television, while one has only been available as a DVD ordered from the internet. This should not exclude them from analysis as films, but should indeed encourage a renewed commitment to the notion of “expanded” cinema. This concept, originally advanced by Gene Youngblood in 1970, has been reformulated to apply to documentary-inspired art films in gallery contexts, and material distributed through or as digital media (see Rees et al., 2011). Yet the intersection between video-games and cinema provides another space in which the boundaries of cinema are blurred and its practices are altered.

In a large auditorium above EGX – one of the largest trade shows in Europe with a recorded attendance of over 70,000 – a crowd of enthusiasts took their seats for the eagerly awaited premiere of *From Bedrooms to Billions*. An acquaintance pointed out members of the “retrogaming” scene: journalists from a range of vibrant online (and, increasingly, print-based) communities, veteran developers from the period working on eagerly awaited comeback titles, collectors and archivists whose vigilance ensured the preservation of a great deal of vintage software and hardware. That being said, it was hard not to feel the event was somewhat disconnected from the massed crowds of teenagers below; while indie gaming, following a similar production model to that of games from the era, and retro aesthetics, wherein modern games appropriate low resolutions and limited palette for artistic rather than technical reasons, have become increasingly popular, this has not necessarily translated to a true revival of popular interest. The increased capacity for producers to fundraise amongst dedicated audiences means that projects can be assured of a certain success before they are completed – this applies not just to films, but also books and even projects to replicate hardware.

Many of the published contemporary resources I have been using to study the history and material culture of this era have been self-published; though this practice predates the origin of crowdfunding, recent projects have certainly benefited from the increased visibility and accessibility of audiences. A range of material has emerged, including first hand accounts of working in the game industry, recollections of software and of hardware. While some of the material has been published on larger presses, others have been released by small presses or independently by the authors. Though it is important to note that this does not detract from the value of the source, methods of production, which increasingly means financing and distribution more than material manufacture, have an effect on the presentation of material. A trade off ensues; what works well with Kickstarter backers and other enthusiasts does not necessarily work effectively with the public as a whole. The result may be beneficial for the technical or social researcher, who can make use of technical specifications or intricate recollections that might be edited out of a mass-market book. It may also be more aesthetically pleasing; recent titles have put to shame the trained designers of major labels. The production model of “by fans, for fans” short circuits the awkward processes of legitimation in an empowering way. That being said, this

also excuses the increasing absence of any other model. Graham Smith's editorial on the popular online games magazine RockPaperShotgun, while specific to audiovisual journalism, makes the case well; he notes the absence of the BBC, the UK's public broadcaster, in discourses surrounding video-games (2014). As such, efforts at presentation, documentation and analysis are accountable to corporate interests, whether consolidated and large, or small and diffuse.

This note on the relationship between the provenance and consequential perspectives of three films may seem pedantic, and it is hardly conclusive. Yet as the current UK government continues to significantly overhaul its methods of teaching history and computing, films and other forms of documentary media will have a significant influence on audiences seeking to understand the development of the creative industries. This is not to fault the films mentioned here; rather, I am suggesting a diversity of production methods is important to maintain. If care is not taken to ensure a variety of viewpoints, made possible by a range of possible funding sources, it is easily possible that a skewed perspective might inform future generations of designers, engineers and entrepreneurs. Crowd funding, because of its ability to mobilise and ensure the support of certain audiences, may be incredibly appealing, but it is important that other forms of funding – state funding, funding from corporations, academic and cultural institutions – remain available. Video games, because of their mutability, rely on other media such as cinema for their adequate preservation. Yet as they are themselves becoming (or returning to being) increasingly open to experimental mechanics and aesthetics, we can surely hope that they similarly will encourage significant experimentation in cinematic presentations of their history.

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