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The Art of the Game: Issues in Adapting Video Games

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On the face of things, movies and video games are similar mediums. Both engage extensively in visuals and audio, both can indulge in speculative fiction, and there is a healthy amount of sharing of inspiration and content. However, this does not guarantee successful adaptations from one form to another. Movies adapted from video games are notorious for being simply terrible, but little academic attention has been paid as to why *these* adaptations in particular seem so unsuccessful in every way, from audience reception, critical response, and monetary returns. This issue is based on fundamental differences in the medium. Games are, at their core, based around rules and goals, and the inevitable predictability and reliability of those rules do not make for exciting adaptations. Games also place the player at the center of the meaning-making process, a position that feels almost privileged in comparison to the more voyeuristic position of the film audience. Movies must adapt with a greater consciousness of these fundamental differences in media, or else the video game movie curse will continue to claim new victims.

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1. An Introduction of the Problem

> This is an unprecedented challenge to aesthetics; it is difficult to think of an event so momentous as the emergence of a new art: an unprecedented challenge and a new opportunity. (Peter Wollen, 1972)

In the 19th century, the world witnessed the birth of a new art form. Narratives could now play out across a screen, where people could act out the stories that were once limited to page and song. It would be several decades before the medium would mature into its full power, and audiences could see film as true art, but the seeds of that new medium began with the grainy, silent images of the 1880s and 1890s. Art, as it turns out, must begin somewhere, whether in the crude imitations of horses and hunters on cave walls or the simple blocks and movements of the first rudimentary video games.

It has been some time, then, since a new art form has been created, and the advent of new technology has allowed it to happen in our lifetime. On the crude computers of the late 20th century, pixels didn't just move across the screen; audiences could now direct elements of the narrative experience and participate in it. Much like those first movies, these were just the nascent attempts in what would soon dominate popular entertainment across the world.

When movies first began their foray into serious art, not all people were so sure in film's ability compared to more tested forms, like the novel or opera. Linda Hutcheon notes that Western culture has a certain preoccupation with logophilia (the love of the word) and iconophobia (the suspicion of the visual): "So often film's relation to literature has been characterized as a tampering, a deformation, a desecration, an infidelity, a betrayal, a perversion. The deeply moralistic rhetoric of such characterizations belies the fact that what is at stake here is really a question of cultural capital" (109). For decades, it has been film that has been the interloper on classical narrative, perverting the work of the great authors. It is a cultural habit, apparently, to have a healthy amount of doubt regarding new mediums of narrative.

Video games are currently in the process of being accepted as art. Some critics, especially those within art forms already accepted into the academic establishment, hold that video games cannot be art. Movie critic Roger Ebert made a bold claim in 2005 regarding video games' ability to be art:

To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.

Ebert's claims fall along common themes regarding video games. Ebert values theater, poetry, literature, film, and music as art, but video game creators simply haven't produced such refined experiences as these established mediums. In his opinion, rather than being a source of cultural education and improvement, video games instead detract from a person's ability to be "cultured, civilized, and empathetic." Ebert is not especially unique in his views, but with each year, his arguments hold less validity.

The question of artistry in video games has been a source of great debate in the last two decades; one defense of video games comes from Grant Tavinor, in his book *The Art of Videogames*. Tavinor asserts that video games unite several forms that are already accepted as art:

[Video games] involve their audiences through structural forms—including visual representations, games, interactive fictions, and narratives—that have cultural precedents in other artworks and non-artworks. When represented through the digital medium of videogames, however, these forms are productive of new possibilities in artistic creation . . .Equally, videogames also engage us in ways that are precedented in previous forms of culture and art: they inspire us to judgments of perceptual beauty, they involve us in interpretation, and they arouse our emotions. But they also modify this participation by representing the player and their agency within a fictional world. (12-13)

For Tavinor, video games have perhaps not achieved those heights that Ebert expects, but that does not mean that they cannot. He claims that, while games don't reach the "moral sensibilities" of the player like other media do, games are "beginning to share the concerns and forms of the traditional arts" (195).

Tavinor asserts that video games are an artistic medium and are as capable of producing art as any other medium.

For some, video games' similarity to cinema means that video games must contain narrative in order to have the same meaningful capacity. Since some in the field hold that video games don't have that ability to convey a traditional narrative, they then cannot be art. Video game scholar Ian Bogost suggests that it's irrelevant if games can or cannot, because that is not the purpose of video games:

> To use games to tell stories is a fine goal, I suppose, but it's also an unambitious one. Games are not a new, interactive medium for stories. Instead, games are the aesthetic form of everyday objects. Of ordinary life. Take a ball and a field: you get soccer. Take property-based wealth and the Depression: you get Monopoly. Take patterns of four contiguous squares and gravity: you get Tetris. Take ray tracing and reverse it to track projectiles: you get Doom. Games show players the unseen uses of ordinary materials.

In Bogost's view, video games are put to better use when focusing on the interaction between the player and the virtual environment, rather than directly with characters and narratives themselves. As Bogost claims, "Film, television, and literature all tell [stories] better. So why are games still obsessed with them?"

The counterargument to Bogost's ideas is simple. Humans are drawn to stories, wherever they are. Beyond having interesting interactions with virtual objects, players often ascribe narratives to their actions even when none are presented directly by the game. Therefore, games will always contain a narrative. Take, for example a FIFA soccer game. A player could be performing badly in the first part of the contest but overcomes the opponent by the end. Even if the game did not code that particular series of events, the player understands that an underdog narrative occurred, and can be emotionally moved by that. These can be thought of as incidental narratives: ones that are not planned by the game but are understood as narratives anyway. In addition to incidental narratives, many video games use narrative successfully in a traditional sense. Take, for example, *The Witcher* series. Each game is rife with dialogue, visual action, and information scattered throughout the world. The characters and plots are

clearly known to the player, in a specific series of events that the game designers planned. Even though there are multiple choices and branches in the game, each branch still comprises a narrative. This is more closely related to narrative as seen in cinema and novels. Scholar Dave Herman describes narrative in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*:

> Rather than focusing on general, abstract situations or trends, stories are accounts of what happened to particular people—and of what it was like for them to experience what happened—in particular circumstances and with specific consequences. Narrative, in other words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change—a strategy that characterize phenomena as instances of general covering laws. (3)

Narratives can also be events that happen to the player, even in virtual space. It is a logical assumption that players would make sense of the phenomena occurring on screen, even if it is not precisely as planned by the game designers.

Whether or not narrative is conclusively present in games, incidental or otherwise, the question of game's status as art is still a raging debate. Game designers have also taken up the challenge of art within games. A subgenre has branched off of the traditional purpose for creating video games. Rather than strictly for entertainment, these creators attempt to craft an artistic experience for the player. An example can be found in *That Dragon, Cancer*. This game isn't in the same vein as popular shooter games like *Call of Duty*. Rather, it is an artistic rendition of a family's experience with their son's cancer diagnosis. Consisting of conversations between family members and doctors, the game blends the family's narrative with simple games. In one, the child Joel is a baby knight fighting a dragon named Cancer, meant to represent his brain cancer diagnosis. The player throws spears at the dragon and jumps over obstacles, while Joel's parents tell a similar bedtime story to their children. The mechanics are a bit clunky, and sometimes the player is relegated to simply clicking around the screen to discover the path forward. The game does not need to be perfectly coded to convey its message. The game is not meant to entertain, but to recreate some fragment of the emotional turmoil of going through the cancer diagnosis of a child.

Moments of the game are breathtaking, even in their simple aesthetic: the beginning of one chapter shows a darkened amphitheater, where in the center a child, Joel, plays. Before continuing down to the child, Joel, the player must turn on the light, which reveals the amphitheater to be an operation room, and Joel in the center is undergoing radiation. The dreamy blending between scenes and meanings makes the game difficult to follow at the pace players are used to; this is not the time for lightning-fast reflexes or intuition. Rather, it is a digital space for reflection.

It would be difficult to say that this game makes someone less cultured, less civilized, and, above all else, less empathetic. Ebert's criticisms fall flat in front of this simple game. If the empathizing narrative element of video games are acknowledged, games aren't so separate from so-called legitimate forms of media. However, there is usually a large degree of mobility and adaptation between traditional artistic media. Typically, adaptation between mediums leads to at least a few successful pieces of media, both in terms of popular success and success in the eyes of critics. *The Lord of the Rings*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *Great Expectations* are only three examples of film's long love affair with literature. However, it has been an issue for nearly as long as there have been video games that adapting from games as a source material leads to dramatically unsuccessful pieces of media. In the words of Kamilla Elliott, video games are a victim of Badaptation.

Elliot begins with the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of an adaptation: "The action or process of adapting one thing to fit with another, or suit specified conditions, esp. a new or changed environment, etc." For Elliot, the common approach to adaptation studies focuses almost entirely on successful adaptations, or ones that suit their new environment. Instead, Elliot wishes to propose a method of thinking about adaptations that do not suit their new environment, and refers to a phrase created by J. Krauss and developed by Constantine Verevis: "badaptation" (18).

This issue of badaptation is notorious in Hollywood. Dozens of video game movies have been released across numerous genres since the inception of video games. Beginning with *Super Mario Bros.*

in 1993[1], Nintendo began a long tradition of video game movies that received a miserable critical response. A video game movie typically denotes a movie adapted from video game content, though the definition can also include movies that explore themes or experiences of video games, such as *Ready Player One* (2018). Surprisingly, the movies that are not adaptations typically perform better than ones that are directly adapted, which presents the issue: what is it about video games, either in their narratives, characters, or experiences, that create such bad movies? My aim in this essay is to discover just what that something is. But, before facing these issues, it may first be useful to ascertain the current standing of video game scholarship.

1. The State of the Field

The study of video games is built on a foundation of anthropology. Before digital games were created, scholars like Johan Huizinga, a Dutch historian, were laying out theories for understanding play and interaction. Huizinga, in his landmark 1938 study *Homo Ludens*, asserts that human culture is inextricably tied up in play, in every facet of life. First, Huizinga lays out clear definitions of play: (1) play is freedom, (2) play is not "real" life, (3) play is distinct from "ordinary" life as to locality and duration, (4) play creates order, and (5) play is not connected to material interest (8-10). Huizinga states that play is not only a human feature, as can be seen in animals who engage in play: "Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing" (1). Huizinga then goes on to apply his ideas of play to various aspects of human culture, like war, law, scholarship, and art. Each, Huizinga suggests, is predicated on notions of play that he set forward earlier. Huizinga, writing so long before the emergence of video games, established the beginning of games studies solidly within the realm of anthropology, the effects of which can still be seen on the field.

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[1] This essay is limited in scope to American releases, which excludes Japanese-only releases like *Super Mario Bros.: Peach-Hime Kyushutsu Dai Sakusen!* (1986) and *Running Boy: Star Soldier no Himitsu* (1986). The corpus is also limited in terms of time; only movies released after 2000 will be considered, in order to focus on releases after both video games and cinematic special effects have matured.

Video games studies would not resemble the fields of film or literature for several decades after video game's invention. In fact, there began quite a bit of resistance to being joined into the same category of narrative studies. In the late 20th century, those studying early video games split into two camps: the ludologists and the narratologists. The ludologists, who counted Jesper Juul, Ian Bogost, and Gonzalo Frasca among their number, argued that video games, because of their interactivity, are inherently, radically different from other forms of media that came before, and so should be studied accordingly. Notably, this includes breaking away from the notion that video games can hold narrative in any way, as Jesper Juul argues. Juul claims, "In computer games the player is given a liberty to explore and understand the structure of the unreal game world, and to get better at handling it. Adding more story to this inevitably leads to less freedom and less game, and to the player playing the game fewer times" (*A clash between game and narrative*). Here, Juul draws a line between interactive and non-interactive media; for games, narrative interferes in the video game's ultimate purpose, which to allow the player to interact and understand the virtual world.

On the other side of the field, narratologists suggest studying video games with many of the tools developed by film and literary studies, especially in terms of narrative. While the narratologists do not erase the importance of participation in games, they focus on how games uniquely put forward stories. Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* explores the type of narrative that computers could produce, and asserts that, rather than the linearity of the novel or film, virtual media are procedural, participatory, encyclopedic, and spatial (72). Murray focuses on the idea that narrative will be transformed in the new medium, not replaced, and the changes produced here should be studied. While the ludology versus narratology debate is infamous in the field of video game theory, there are some that suggest the conflict is more of a constructed battle; rather than narratologists disregarding play, and ludologists disregarding narrative, Michalis Kokonis suggests that the critical approaches are largely similar, and scholars shouldn't be arguing quite so much about constructed labels.

As the field moved beyond the narratology versus ludology debate, game scholarship has proved to be more interdisciplinary that originally thought. Many scholars have explored the use of games in

education, like James Paul Gee in his landmark *What Videogames Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Researchers have produced a plethora of research on video games and psychology; topics like violence, reaction times, and learning are popular angles explored in the field (especially violence, as popular media would have their audiences believe). Ian Bogost, a major voice in the field of video game studies, explores several fields in *Persuasive Games*. In it, Bogost analyzes the use of video games in advertising, education, and politics. Video game studies is an amorphous field, but has produced interesting work in its short life.

Another angle of video game studies approaches issues from the field of computer science. Works there tend to explain issues from the perspective of a video game designer, much like some works approach literature from the angle of writing craft. *Rules of Play* by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman acknowledge the need for critical study of games: "The proper way to understand games is from an aesthetic perspective, in the same way that we address fields such as architecture, literature, or film" (3). Here, Salen and Zimmerman acknowledge that some of those who write from a programming standpoint tend to avoid the humanistic inquiry that occurs in literary and film studies, but advocates that this is needed to truly revolutionize the field.

Currently, the field of video game studies continues to explore new avenues of inquiry. Scholars continue to battle the popular image of the video game as infantile and morally-corrupting and attempt to fight the stereotypes of the gamer as a young, white, heterosexual male. One thread of thought explores the influence of white supremacy in video games; in the aftermath of events like GamerGate, where gamers harassed female game designers and journalists, and *Call of Duty*'s airport shooting scene, TreaAndrew M. Russworm argues that digital media producers are obligated to face how their games fuel or allow the growth of white supremacy and rampant sexism. Russworm calls the field to acknowledge the presence of games that support white supremacy, but also to recognize that video games can also be a site of subversion, in the presence of queer games and indie games produced by minorities.

2. The State of the Issue

To say something is going wrong in video game adaptation may be an understatement. Across two of the main movie reviewing websites, Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic, video game movies perform miserably before critics. Video game movies clock in at an average of 25%[2] on Rotten Tomatoes and just over 3/10 on Metacritic. These movies fair better from the point of view of the general audience, with Rotten Tomatoes measuring the audience average at 47% approval. This problem was even worse before 2010, when the Rotten Tomatoes critical average clocked in at 17% and Metacritic at 2.9/10[3]. Post-2010 averages show 31% on Rotten Tomatoes and 3.7/10 on Metacritic.[4] Based on these numbers, it is easy to see that video game movies simply do not perform well, though they are improving. The question remains: why?

This issue has not been satisfyingly answered in an academic context. Outside of academia, several movie and gaming journalists have attempted to explore this issue. Mathieu Chin-Quee with *Shifter* asserts that, while some video game movies do make money, "there has yet to be a film that both fans of the original property and fans of movies can point to and say: 'Yes. That is a great film.'" Chin-Quee does say that there are great stories to be told within the medium of gaming and points to *Uncharted, The Elder Scrolls, The Witcher*, and *Warcraft* as examples of great storytelling in video games. Chin-Quee gives three suggestions for how to create a video game movie that doesn't fail: don't create the movie just for game fans, don't get in the way of the cast and crew, and treat video game franchises like any other franchise. Chin-Quee ends on a rather pessimistic note, saying that we have yet to see the one movie that could save this "dying genre."

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[2] According to Rotten Tomatoes: "The Tomatometer score represents the percentage of professional critic reviews that are positive for a given film or television show. A Tomatometer score is calculated for a movie or TV show after it receives at least five reviews. When at least 60% of reviews for a movie or TV show are positive, a red tomato is displayed to indicate its Fresh status. When less than 60% of reviews for a movie or TV show are positive, a green splat is displayed to indicate its Rotten status."

[3] Part of the answer here is Uwe Boll, a director responsible for several of the early, big-name adaptions. Boll's six adaptations clock in at 17% on Rotten Tomatoes, despite the mainstream original games like *Far Cry* and *Postal*.

[4] It is a tricky thing to claim a work of media is intrinsically good or bad. For this essay, the aesthetic worth of a movie is based on several things: critics' responses, audience scores, monetary returns, and general online reputation. This should not be taken as a perfect method of analysis; some movies in the past, like the 2016 reboot of *Ghostbusters*, received certain scores because of sexist outrage at the all-female cast, rather than an objective approach to analyzing the aesthetic success of a work. While using online metrics is not a sure objective way of judging a movie, it is a useful tool when looking for general responses to a work.

Rob Gordon also attempts to tackle this issue in an article for *Screenrant.* Gordon asserts that there are some accomplishments in this genre: *Mortal Kombat* is "a fun action romp" while *Silent Hill* has "some genuine unnerving moments." However, most other video game movies, while enjoyable, don't quite qualify as "good." *Resident Evil*, *Prince of Persia,* Angelina Jolie's *Tomb Raider* movies, and *Need for Speed* are all guilty pleasures, in Gordon's opinion. Gordon claims that the reason for this drought resides in the medium of video games:

> The framing of a video game is very different from any other kind of media, and this in turn means that there's little by way of correlation when it comes to adaptation. Games often have a habit of leaving space for player autonomy, which in turn deliberately causes the appearance of gaps in characters and plots for the player to fill. In some of the most important titles in the video game world, the player is either left entirely as an open canvas or left with no personality whatsoever.

Gordon points to the protagonist of *Half-Life* as an example of this principle; utterly silent and dependent on the player for all actions, the game's Gordon Freeman is a "void with no personality," made specifically for the player to step in to. This does not make for easy material to translate into a film. However, Gordon argues that even creating a character from scratch can lead to a "tonal shift" in the material. The new character could be at odds with the original drive of the plot and nailing down a specific character can deprive the plot of the flexibility it originally had. Gordon points to *Doom* as an example of this, where creating a specific protagonist left the movie without the same "gut instinct" that the game had.

Gordon also points to issues in pacing, active thought, and methods of worldbuilding as reasons for video game movie failure. Players control just how quickly the plot occurs in a game; they have control over the actions of the player and, in some games, the path of the story itself. Likewise, Gordon argues that enjoyment in video games comes from moments that movies cannot replicate: "prolonged shootouts in action games, a particularly fearsome puzzle to overcome, or a long, silent journey in a role-playing game." Gordon claims, rather poetically, that "it's as difficult to adapt a daydream to the cinema

as it is a video game." Another issue Gordon points out is the method in which setting is conveyed. Video games are unique in that worldbuilding can be a completely optional endeavor. For instance, in *Mass Effect*, worldbuilding occurs across "information logs, dialogue options, and even by living in the game world for such a long time as a player." Players can choose whether or not to engage in this optional material. According to Gordon, video game movies fail because video games are fundamentally impossible to adapt into a movie.

Less attention has been paid to video game adaptation in the academic sphere. In *Game On, Hollywood,* editors Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers discuss two issues vital to the question of adaptation. The first is the suggestion that video games employ "fourth person" point of view: "rather than the kinds of plot events or character development/psychology at the center of film/literature texts, game texts emphasize the making of place. . . and the collective 'who" (player, avatar, game designers) of 'who is making the story'" (9). For Papazian and Sommers, the player now inhabits the position in the center of the artistic piece. Distinct from other methods of point of view thus far employed by other media, video games place the player in the position of creator. The game is not about a character, but the player themself. The two quote Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's idea of remediation, that media "sometimes echo each other, sometimes harmonize, and sometimes create absolute cacophony" (11). This idea deals more directly with the issue of adaptation. Another critic, Robert Stam, goes on to claim that there is no original text in terms of adaptation, and instead argues that adaptations are part of the "ongoing whirl of intertextual references and transformations, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation with no clear point of origin" (11). Stam's bold statement places all adaptations on the same level of cultural value. The creation of media becomes an organic thing, growing ever more complicated as branches twine and grow together. While Stam is right that adaptations should be seen as part of a web, rather than an automatically inferior product, he does not address the issue of when an adaptation is, in the end, an aesthetic failure.

The idea of adaptation put forth by Stam suggests that narratives and experiences created in a given artistic medium are simply physical distillations of an abstract ur-text, a mediumless idea that can

be presented in a variety of forms. Some mediums may lose some nuance of the ur-text, or allow a different experience, but every adaptation is simply a version of that abstract thought. The differences among the mediums are simply a difference in how the story is produced and consumed. While this is an attempt to prevent bias in terms of mediums (as, historically, novels have been valued over film, and now film over video games), this way of looking at narratives across mediums does not allow for an easy way of discussing stories that are not successful in remediation. It is this gap in knowledge that I seek to fill with this thesis.

To do this, I will explore genres of movies that were derived from the plots of video games. First, I will analyze children's movies; here, it is easy to see how the narrative in games relies on rules, and how this does not translate satisfyingly to movies. Next, I will discuss action movies and the often-frustrating experience of losing autonomy within a narrative. Role-playing games present an experience where the player is the protagonist and hero, and where pleasure is derived from player accomplishments, rather than vicarious pleasure found in movies. Ultimately, video games are a new medium, and with that comes new rules. Video games require a sense of predictability in order for the player to learn how to reliably interact with the game, and this requirement for structure and predictability does not translate well into different forms. We also must take into consideration that in video games, the player is the star of the show; taking the player from that position and relegating them to the audience removes a large degree of autonomy from the player, and that process, whether conscious or not, can be a source of frustration. It is possible to adapt a video game into a good movie, as a few of the items in this corpus suggest, but it must be a careful, conscious process; otherwise, audiences are left with a predictable, frustrating mess.

2. Learning the Rules in Children's Movies

From time to time as these creations [Pokémon] encounter one another, a noisy but inconclusive battle erupts, and then matters subside until general lassitude dictates further combat. The pre-fab characters are rudimentary. The time travel has no genuine impact on the story, and never for an instant does doubt about the outcome generate fear or suspense. Brock could be talking about the film as a whole when he wisely observes at one point, "This is getting bad, guys."

Naturally messages are buried in this story like pills in cat food. Friendship matters. So does the environment.

Here's one more. When it comes to entertainment, children deserve better than "Pokémon 4Ever." (Van Gelder)

The above review is not surprising for a film that earned less than a million dollars in its box office debut. *Pokémon 4Ever*, the fourth movie in Pokémon's foray onto the big screen, received a decent enough reception in Japan, but failed miserably in America, receiving many reviews with the same disappointment as shown by Lawrence Van Gelder. Characterized like this, it is no wonder that video game movies are called cursed.

Van Gelder's review hints at many of the underlying problems of not only children's game-to-movie adaptations, but at the issues of video game adaptations at their core. Van Gelder hints at the tone of inevitability of the movie: the characters are simply chugging along towards the final battle, and the resolution afterwards. It is the same movie as the other Pokémon movies, simply dressed up in new characters, graphics, and Pokémon species. Under the glamour of time travel and new villains, *Pokémon* movies all share the same underlying predictable mechanics.

This presence of rules is not a surprise, as video game critics have discussed the implications of rules within games since video games existed. One of the most notable early adopters of this idea is John Huizinga, in his book *Homo Ludens*. The study, published in 1938, explores play and games in culture long before the first video game would be made. Huizinga asserts that all play has an element of tension,

something that the player wishes to resolve. He offers the examples of a baby reaching for a toy, or a girl playing ball. Games not only test a player's "courage, tenacity, resources, and. . . desire to win" but also "his 'fairness': because, despite his ardent desire to win, he must still stick to the rules of the game" (11). Rules, then, give meaning and value to the player's efforts to end the tension:

> These rules in their turn are a very important factor in the play-concept. All play has its rules. They determine what "holds" in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt. Paul Valéry once in passing gave expression to a very cogent thought when he said: "No skepticism is possible where the rules of a game are concerned, for the principle underlying them is an unshakeable truth. . ." Indeed, as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over. The umpire's whistle breaks the spell and sets "real" life going again. (11)

Huizinga emphasizes the ephemeral status of the game. It exists purely in the mind, and it depends entirely on if the players are invested in its existence. Players must always be aware of the goals and rules of a game, or else it does not exist. It can be deduced, then, that games are made up of a goal and rules; the goal is always complicated by the rules, which are meant to create tension and, presumably, fun. Not only is the player acting upon the play-world, but the play-world, through its rules and restrictions, is acting upon the player.

Many decades later, video game theorists are still wrestling with the ubiquity of rules in games. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman lay out clear principles for understanding rules within play:

> Rules limit player action.
>
> Rules are explicit and unambiguous.
>
> Rules are shared by all players.
>
> Rules are fixed.
>
> Rules are binding.
>
> Rules are repeatable. (122-123)

This list asserts that clear, predictable rules are vital to games. Players must know how to interact with the game in order to progress. In addition, rules can be somewhat arbitrary. In a game of arm wrestling, it is entirely arbitrary that a contestant cannot use their other hand to win. The contestants must obey the rules, or else meaning breaks down. If the rules can be broken, then "winning" the game with both hands does not hold the same meaning as playing by the rules.

This process is even more binding in virtual games. Take, for example, a Pokémon battle. Within the original games, battles are bound by numerous rules, most of which the player does not have the option to break. The instruction booklet that accompanies *Pokémon Diamond* lays out the rules of trainer battles:

> If you make eye contact with a Trainer, or walk in front of one, they will challenge you to a battle. You cannot run from a battle against a fellow Pokémon Trainer. The battle will continue until a winner is decided. If you are victorious, you will be rewarded with prize money. (15)

Certain interactions are blocked for the player; they cannot choose to deny or leave the battle, and the battle must continue until one of the trainers runs out of Pokémon. The challenge here is in its lack of choice. Players often must battle in order to progress in the game, and so if the player loses, they must continue to train until they can beat the trainer that is blocking them. Repetition is vital here in order for the player to understand the rules and learn how to succeed within them. Games are not games without fixed, explicit rules.

Of course, games are not the only medium that is bound by rules. By some definitions, all narratives use rules to an extent. The nuance here, in terms of adapting from video games, is not in *what* the rules are, but in *who* must follow those rules, and if there is a change occurring in the transition from game to movie. One method for explaining the function of rules within a cinematic narrative, as compared to an interactive one, can be found in Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*. There, Propp takes a corpus of Russian folktales and breaks them down into their barest components: a family member leaves, a rule is given, the rule is broken, etc. Propp suggests that all folktales can be reduced to not only simple

phrases, but into an equation-like presentation. It becomes rather codelike; one tale is reduced to the following list of characters:

$$\gamma^1 \beta^1 \delta^1 A^1 C \uparrow \left\{ \frac{[DE^1 \; neg. \, F \; neg.]}{d^7 E^7 F^9} \right\} G^4 K^1 \downarrow [\text{Pr}^1 D^1 E^1 F^9 = R s^4]^3$$

Propp then goes on to claim that being able to "decompose" folktales into these equations is "extremely important for any science" (99). This speaks to the 20th century desire to legitimize literary studies as a scientific endeavor, but also to the expectations we as readers have of the media we consume. Romantic comedies can be broken down into similar equations. *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, a recent teen romcom, follows a plot that can be broken down into simple phrases:

> Heroine's quirk established.
>
> Family member commits act that, later, will be revealed.
>
> Heroine faces consequences of that act.
>
> Heroine devises plan with future love interest to fix the issue, to mutual benefit.
>
> Couple falls in love.
>
> Heroine misunderstands a situation, leading to heartbreak.
>
> Misunderstanding is resolved, and the couple reunites.
>
> Set up for inevitable sequel.

Replace these phrases with letters and symbols, and something like Propp's equation can emerge. When looking at movies, and other media, at a general enough level, it becomes apparent that certain moves are made in certain genres, and audiences have rough expectations for just what is about to happen. While there is still some room for surprise, and some movies can pull off sudden genre-defying twists, movies that are utterly unpredictable tend to irritate audiences: movies must hold on to a thread of a standard plot, of narrative logic. They can disrupt rules, but they must always operate with relation to those rules. For example, it is within the bounds of the rules of a romantic comedy for the main couple to not end up together in the end, but it is not permissible for one of the characters to suddenly burst into flame, or have any event happen that is too dark.

This is quite different than the expectations held for game players, as Salen and Zimmerman have described. While games designers are held to similar constraints of genre, the rules for players are of a different breed. The rules of a Pokémon battle do not transfer to the silver screen as easily, because such strict constraints for the hero or heroine feel alien in a movie. Take, for example, *Pokémon 3: The Movie*. Within the plot of a young girl missing her parents and using ancient relics to bring parental figures forcefully into her life, all conflicts in the film are expected to follow the general gist of a Pokémon battle. Ash and his friends must make their way up a tower encased in magical ice in order to save Ash's mother and the countryside. As the trio ascends each floor, the little girl faces them in a Pokémon battle, seeing each encounter as part of a dream. First, Brock takes on the girl, Molly, in battle, allowing Ash and Misty to continue on their search. In the next floor, Misty takes her turn in battle. Both Misty and Brock are defeated in the systematic, rule bound contests; despite the fantastical, chaotic scene, each battle follows the typical turn-based combat that stops only when one Pokémon is unable to continue fighting. Even the final battle between Ash and a mythical being called Entei seems to follow a mechanical back-and-forth, despite a supposed threat of death. Even in fantastical plots full of danger, Pokémon holds tight to the mechanics that define the games, even to the detriment of their success.

Critics, of course, caught on to this. Released in 2001, the movie's affectionate tagline on *RottenTomatoes* is as follows: "Critics say that the third Pokémon movie has a better plot than its two predecessors. This is not enough, however, to recommend it to those not already a fan of the franchise." One critic in particular seemed to catch on to the strict mechanical origin of the games:

> As in the previous longform spinoffs of the TV series, the makers stress big action sequences over the whimsy and humor of the small-screen cousin, but the action here tends to be clunky and repetitive. More problematic is the feeble human story that tries to say something about the will of one child's imagination but comes off as a misguided hostage drama. (Koehler)

Koehler goes on to say, "The contests within the larger contests are at least a respite from the wearisome sections showing Molly in a clueless daze, creating a stasis that begins to grip the movie as a whole." This

taps into the essence of the problem here: the creators based the movie on the core game mechanics, that of the Pokémon battle and struggle to become a master Pokémon trainer, rather than elements of the game that resemble movies the most.

One might argue, and many have, that video game movies are unsuccessful because game narratives are juvenile and too simple to create a satisfying movie experience. Robert Ebert has voiced his opinions on video games more than once:

> Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control. . . I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art.

Ebert here draws distinct lines between art and not-art. Art requires a strong authorial control to direct audiences into approved experiences, experiences that culture the audience, "civilize" them, make them empathetic. Audiences are cattle who require an Author with a cattle prod, an Author who is not afraid to apply that cattle prod to the delicate ego of any of his or her charges if they stray from True Interpretation. Along with the strong currents of a patriarchal, Western canon-centric, formalist approach to understanding literature and art, Ebert also touches on the idea that games are not art because they do not deal with serious enough content. Ebert's comments come in the wake of the release of *Doom* in 2005, and many movies and games have come out since then (though Ebert's opinion did not shift). However, claiming video game movies are not successful because they don't deal with serious enough content is not quite enough to explain away the situation.

Take, for example, Hollywood's recent burst of comic book movies. There are undeniable similarities; both games and comics have existed not quite as a counterculture movement, but something adjacent to mainstream culture. Both have easily identifiable conventions. For games, this was the 8-bit art style, the penchant for violence and guns, the centering of the player within world-changing action. For comics, these conventions are the art style, the comic pane layout, the penchant for multiple reboots

of the same characters. However, while these forms are similar, the comic book adaptation is by far much more successful than the video game adaptation. Marvel Film Studios alone has made $22 billion since 2008, and cinched the record for highest gross income in the world for *Avengers: Endgame* (Berg; Brevet). While there is still a sense of distinction from serious films (note that *Endgame* is the highest grossing film in history, but was only nominated for an Oscar for Visual Effects), it can generally be stated that comic books are finding more success, both in a popular sense and in a critical sense, than video game adaptations. This suggests that it is not just the penchant for science fiction that is complicating the adaptation process; rather, it is the difference between a (relatively) static narrative and an interactive one.

Take, for example, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. Distinct from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, this animated movie plays with its relationship with comics as a medium. The art style of the movie is largely inspired by comics; look closely enough at some scenes, and there are small dots making up the colors of the characters. Comics panels are used to emphasize scenes, and voice bubbles pop up to draw attention to lines. Whenever a new Spider-character is introduced, a montage of turning comic pages summarizes their history. Most of all, the movie plays with the idea of the comic reboots. Spiderman's classic enemies construct a machine that accidentally brings iterations of Spiderman from different dimensions. Seeing the many superheroes on screen together is an effort to understand the relationship between these different reboots; how do we make meaning across multiple generations of comics when the story seems to "restart" every few years? Despite focusing in on the concept of the reboot, which is something usually foreign in terms of Hollywood film, the movie does still follow the genre expectations of the Hollywood movie. Plots move forward in expected ways, and while the film is visually reminiscent of comic books, the cinematography is not so foreign as to disrupt the normal method of viewing and understanding movies. *Into the Spider-Verse* does what video game adaptations should do: don't ignore what makes video games unique, but rather find ways to integrate them into the medium of film.

An example of an adaptation not following this principle is easy to find. *Angry Birds*, an adaptation of the mobile game of the same name, is in many ways a traditional children's movie. Critic

James Berardinelli calls it an "ephemeral diversion" and asserts that the expectations for the film are rather low: "asking more of this movie would be unfair—even if the cost of watching it is considerably higher than the cost of playing it." New York Times movie critic Glenn Kenny says that the movie "settles into the current default mode of animation humor." While several critics mention the thinly veiled xenophobia at the heart of the film (if only those pigs had stayed on their island . . .), the movie largely deviates from the game itself. Other than the core idea of birds being lobbed at evil pigs, there is not much of a traditional narrative in the game. To compensate for this, the writers of *Angry Birds: The Movie* made up a plot surrounding a bird with anger issues in a calm (politically correct?) society. The only time where the mobile game is directly recognizable comes at the climax of the film, when Red, the angry bird, unites his island via anger over their stolen (unborn) eggs and plots to get them back by lobbing various birds into the pig town. The slingshot scene comes abruptly and then is done; the movie moves back on to the plot, and the slingshot is forgotten.

While *Angry Birds* might make a fine children's distraction, the movie is a bad video game adaptation. The writers took the name of the franchise and little else when creating the movie. While some video game movies fail for copying the experience of the game too closely, as in Pokémon and its adherence to predictable battle mechanics, *Angry Birds* does the opposite. It was quite obvious where gameplay was being mimicked in its single scene, and outside of that the game was largely forgotten.

There are more than enough examples of children's movies failing to adapt video games well. Are there any that could be called successful?

Compared to other video game adaptations, *Pokémon: Detective Pikachu* is a certified success, both in terms of money and critical reviews. *Detective Pikachu* is different from the typical Pokémon movie. Not only is this live action, with CGI Pokémon running around, but it also deviates from the core mechanics of the Pokémon universe. The region displayed in the movie has banned Pokémon battles, saying that they are immoral. This throws the typical Pokémon formula on its head. The movie can no longer center around brute force or battle tactics. Rather, it is a mystery, focusing in on the relationship between a boy and his amnesiac father who happens to be trapped in the body of a Pikachu. While the

movie has a chaotic energy that turned some viewers away, it did perform rather well with audiences and critics:

> The strength of the film lies in the way it playfully undermines the Poké-verse, poking holes in a thing that, when reduced to its essentials, seems just real silly. Much like last year's Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse, Pokémon: Detective Pikachu looks itself in the mirror and remarks on what it sees there. And while it doesn't pull off the trick nearly as well, there's something admirable about a film that isn't afraid to have some fun with a property so established—and beloved—by its core audience. (Acovino)

Detective Pikachu works because it turns away from the traditional approach to Pokémon. It takes the familiar elements of the games and previous movies and creates a new, alternate world where viewers can experience things that they simply can't via a video game. While the previous movies and games are about physical competition, this movie shows a world where Pokémon are integrated into humankind's way of life. In the games, non-player characters are static, standing in one place with a few lines to say if the player gives them the chance. As the plot moves forward, some characters are given roles to play; there is usually the best friend, the mentor, the final boss. This brand of isolation, while giving the player a world to explore where opportunities always wait for them, does not give them a sense of what *living* in that world would be like. The rules of combat and action do not permit casual experiences, since the default method of interaction is to battle; this is the hole that *Detective Pikachu* fills. The movie allows audiences to see what a world with these fictional creatures would be like. Growlithes and Arcanines, both dog-like Pokémon, aide police, and a Machamp directs traffic in the film. While the narrative of the film does deal with dramatic happenings in the Pokémon world, it is a new angle on the franchise to see, in live-action and CGI, what the Pokémon world could be.

Games and movies fulfill different needs and desires. Whereas movies allow audiences to observe a detailed imagined reality, games usually can't provide the same type of immersion. Movies are constructed observations. Every item in the scene, every person, every line, is carefully constructed to form a unified experience. Compared to games, the entirety of a movie experience is curated by the

production team. Games provide a very different experience, dictated not by a director but by the rules programmed into the game. Games provide a chance to actively engage with a simulated reality, at the cost of the level of experiential control a movie has. Players perform actions in different orders, fail and try again, or skip parts of the game. There is much less authorial control in how a person can experience a game, versus a movie, because control lies in the relationship between player and rules. Games create a new point of view: fourth person, as is proposed in *Game On, Hollywood*. This, ultimately, suggests a core aspect of video games that films lack: "Only a video game gives us the sense of being in control, of being the author of our destiny" (Parkin 154-155). Audiences watch stories, while gamers make them.

To make a successful adaptation, movie makers can learn two lessons from children's movies: adapt with awareness of the rule-centeredness of games and provide experiences that games as a medium can't typically convey. Movies that engage with the spirit of a game but don't try to literally translate a game into a movie are more successful adaptations, at their heart, than movies that try to be excessively faithful to the source material.

3.   Heroes and Voyeurs in Action Movies

> There's nothing duller than watching somebody else play a game—so what might have
>
> made for exciting action scenes tend to become mechanical exercises in first person-
>
> shooter monster-blasting. (Newman)

When *Doom* came out in theaters in 2005, it was not to favorable reviews. The game, a science fiction first-person shooter focused on invading hordes from Hell, is a staple in the video game community and can be claimed to be an entry in the video game canon, if such a thing exists. However, the movie was not quite so exciting. Rather than using the game's plot, the script writers created a narrative about a pathogen on Mars that turns people into monsters, which the protagonist must prevent from reaching Earth. Not much of the film has anything to do with the game, except for one scene. Near the end, when the protagonist is turned into a super soldier via a good version of the pathogen, the film suddenly switches from a standard action film to a first-person point of view as the protagonist brutally fights his way through the base. It is nearly a mirror image of the game, where gore is shown up close. It is a jarring moment, but it is interesting in its attempt to give such a visual callback to the video game. However, it is also somewhat nauseating, and may make gamers in the audience twitch their mouse hand or trigger finger as they unconsciously attempt to take over control of the camera angles. It is no surprise that Kim Newman penned such a stinging critique of the movie.

These are common complaints, and perhaps an easy answer to the question of video game adaptations. If video game movies are failing, perhaps it is simply because video games are only fun to play?

Dawn Stobbart in *The Routledge Companion to Adaptation* makes similar claims. Citing the film *Super Mario Bros.* as an example, she claims that the strongest draw for the *Mario* games is exploration, which is frustrated in film by the cinematographer directing the camera. She also notes that the characters in the game often have no narrative depth, which is "perfectly acceptable, as players interact with the ludic elements, which provide psychological stimulation as players avoid traps and defeat monsters to conquer the landscape, over any narrative." This suggests that the most important relationship in games is

not between player and player-character, or player and non-player character, but player and environment. Stobbart also notes that the repetitive nature of the *Mario* games makes for good gameplay, as it gives players plenty of time to master the physical skills needed to succeed in the game. This, however, makes games tedious to watch, especially when the player becomes a viewer who is no longer directly involved in the process. To circumvent these issues, the creators of *Super Mario Bros.* the film "attempted to impose an alternative narrative onto the Mario diegesis that diverged from the source material, lacked complexity and dynamism, and resulted in a poorly made film that bore little resemblance to the source 'text' or the excitement of the text" (383). This scathing but valid take on the film suggests that the failure of the *Mario Bros. Movie* lies in the creators' failure to replace the game's flat narrative with an exciting new one. Video games, because they are interesting only when physically interacting with them, must be given new, more exciting plots in order to create a successful movie, according to Stobbart. While there are similarities in Stobbart's and Newman's articles, and they may have rung true in 2005 when Newman penned her thorough critique of *Doom*, it is a less valid argument in 2018, when Stobbart is writing.

Video games must be fun to watch; otherwise, more people wouldn't be watching online game streaming than HBO, Netflix, and Hulu combined, and that's only those who subscribe. Including those who watch videos without subscribing (which can't be done on the before-mentioned sites), the "worldwide gaming video content audience" numbers 665 million people, and that number is likely to grow by 2021. Gaming content on YouTube garnered 517 million views in 2016, and Twitch, a site dedicated only to streaming game content, brought in another 185 million. This is compared to the 130 million HBO subscribers, 93 million Netflix subscribers, and 81 million Pandora subscribers in the same year (Bailey). This means that video game streamers are drawing massive audiences compared to online streaming services. While game streamers often provide humorous commentary in addition to being skilled at the game, it can be concluded from these numbers that games are fun to watch. As Simon Parkin claims,

> Video games are closer to music than film in this regard. Games and music both allow
> their performers to interpret the experience that the creator decided, adding personal

inflections and character to make the piece their own. They allow their players to accent, to flex, to showboat, to be virtuosi. In this sense, arcades were the public venues for video-game performance, where skilled players could show off their talent to a watching crowd. (24)

If this analogy is true, then people watch game streaming for much the same reason they might go to a concert rather than play a piece themself or listen to a recording. What, then, makes the *Doom* movie so much less attractive than the video game?

Besides the centrality of predictable mechanics, as explored in the previous section, games also tend to evoke different emotions than movies. Will Wright, a game designer for *The Sims*, claims, "People talk about how games don't have the emotional impact of movies. I think they do—they just have a different palette. I never felt pride, or guilt, watching a movie" (qtd. in Isbister 1). Wright suggests that games *do* evoke these emotions, and others, in ways that movies can't. Games interact with a different part of the human mind than movies do; rather than observing the actions of another person, games make the options and choices of the player central to the meaning of the story. These are not secondhand emotions, caused by fear or embarrassment or joy for a character, but emotions as a response to the player's own actions. Changing a narrative experience from an interactive medium to a voyeuristic one takes more than adaptation; it becomes a new creative object. Entertainment in movies is derived from the act of watching; in games, it is the act of interacting. To successfully create a movie based on a game, this must be accounted for.

Similarly, Simon Parkin explores via interviews various reasons that people interact with games. His suggestions range from a desire to wile away time, to achieving new levels of success, to being able to discover new worlds and locations. Other reasons he explores are a desire to exercise empathy, or evil with no real repercussions. Others might desire mystery, belonging, a place to hide, or a place to heal. Some want to engage in a world where rules are easy to understand and easy to rely on, unlike the real world. Parkin does suggest some urges that movies could fulfill, like mystery or healing, but the

difference is that the player is virtually (and physically, in terms of interacting with the controller) performing these actions, rather than watching someone else perform them.

Another answer to this question of an adaptation's worth might be frustration. In 1996, before there was a name for the video game movie curse, Brian McFarlane claimed that the process of adaptation was not so much one of translation, but a creative act in itself. Christian Metz emphasizes the act of interpretation in adaptation. The adaptation from novel to film has specific consequences: "the reader 'will not always find his film, since what he has before him in the actual film in now someone else's phantasy'" (112). An adaptation is not a neutral remediation; the process of adaptation requires first an interpretation from the source material before it can be recreated in its new medium. Since creative works can be open to multiple interpretations, this can cause friction if the adapter's vision disagrees with the viewer's vision. This can be as harmless as whether or not a character has facial hair or not, or a disagreement with the fundamental meaning of the original work. So, the adaptation process, at least from novel to film, leaves open a space for frustration to grow in the viewer.

In adapting games to film, it is important to note what the audience loses in the transition. The player loses the ability to act on the text in the same, active way; rather than interacting on a physical level, directing a player or the game world itself, the player has only control of their own interpretation of a film. As Stobbart notes, games that rely on exploration, like *Super Mario Bros.*, surrender that power of exploration to directors and cinematographers. This transfer of power can be frustrating for viewers. In "On the Art of Adaptation," Linda Hutcheon notes that recognition is a driving force in the pleasure of watching adaptations: "For us in the audience, part of the very real pleasure of watching adaptations lies in recognition and remembrance. But it is equally true that part of the also very real masochistic fear provoked by adaptations lies in recognition and remembrance" (111). In a novel to film adaptation, Hutcheon argues that recognizing characters and plot is part of the fun; it is pleasurable to recognize Elizabeth Bennet on screen. However, it can also be a frustrating experience if the object of recognition is not in the expected form. Take, for instance, the backlash against the casting of a black woman as Hermione in the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. After being played by white Emma Watson in

the movies, the play moved in a different direction, citing the ambiguous "brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever" line that the author, J.K. Rowling, wrote on Twitter. Rowling faced backlash for the casting choice, saying, "I had a bunch of racists telling me that because Hermione 'turned white' -- that is, lost (color) from her face after a shock -- that she must be a white woman, which I have a great deal of difficulty with" (qtd. in France). It became a cause of frustration for racist fans of *Harry Potter* to see an actress play a character who did not resemble their own perception of the original material. In video games, this frustration also occurs when someone who previously had a large degree of power in a narrative suddenly is relegated to a voyeur, watching other, powerful people win in a game world that once revolved around the player.

This centrality extends beyond the merely mechanic. While it is true that games cannot physically function without the player, there is also a distinct role that the player inhabits within game worlds. More often than not, players are given a privileged position in the story; they are not only the protagonist, but a hero of epic proportions. It is important to differentiate between the mechanical privilege a player-character is given in a narrative, where they are the thrust of action, and the moral privilege a player-character may have. Often, player-characters are the heroes of the show, literally. The player is there to kill demons, defeat nefarious organizations, rescue the helpless, save humankind. Players are rarely asked to be the bad guy, and if they are, it is an option among more morally palatable choices.

An example of this can be found in the *Lara Croft* movies. Based on the *Tomb Raider* video games, the movie follows Lara Croft as she travels the world to collect artifacts and break into sealed ancient ruins. In the games, the player controls Lara, a smart, alluring British aristocrat who is capable of miraculous physical feats and can hold off any number of mercenaries. Across the dozen games, Lara typically faces tremendous odds and incredible stakes; in the most recent release, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Lara must stop a Mayan apocalypse. It can be seen, then, that the player in the games operates in a powerful position in relation to the game world. The simulated world depends on the player's continued interaction and success in the game, in a way that non-interactive media can never achieve. This relationship between the player and the artistic object makes the player feel wanted and needed, rather

than the more aloof relationship between movie and viewer. The loss of this personalized, important position becomes obvious when the game is adapted into a movie.

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider was released in 2001 to lukewarm reviews. While it did recoup its budget, the movie clocks in at a 33 on MetaCritic, meaning that it averaged a generally unfavorable review. Its sequel, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*, faired only slightly better at 43. While the movies suffer from their own issues in script writing, part of the issue here is how the movie was adapted around the player's role. In the games, the player is the center of meaning-making. Plots don't have to be utterly ingenious to produce a good game; rather, the pleasure of a game stems from the marriage between interaction and that plot. The player must see their actions as having a meaningful impact on the narrative. Sometimes, to make the connection between player action and narrative movement clear, game makers must sacrifice intricacy for clarity. It makes sense, then, that the *Tomb Raider* games follow somewhat familiar arcs, generally mirroring an *Indiana Jones* aesthetic. Movies, however, aren't given the same allowances. Simplified, sometimes nonsensical plots like *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* and *The Cradle of Life* just don't cut it. Added to that is the issue of recognition, as we have seen. The player recognizes that, in the game, they were the savior of the world, but in the movie, they have lost that power. They are simply there to watch Lara perform stunts and collect artifacts.

Some movies attempt to mitigate this loss of autonomy by overcompensating. Take, for instance, *Need for Speed*. The video game was a standard racing game, devoid of any characters and focused instead on racing and buying newer, better cars. The film adaptation had the challenge of creating an entire plot and cast of characters. In the game, the player interacted on the world via their car, and so still could act autonomously on the game world. In the adaptation, this control was still lost, and in addition, a new person had to completely replace the player in this role. To mitigate this, Tobey, the main character of the movie, was created with nearly no personality. It was perhaps an interesting experiment in audience projection onto protagonists, but it ultimately created a strangely robotic character: "Aaron Paul is a truly fine actor who is given neither much to do here or any guidance on how to do it. Consequently, he spends the entire movie glowering, summoning his best Charles Bronson hero voice" (Bernardin).

The lesson to learn here is perhaps simple: don't make a video game movie. Instead, make a movie, consciously distancing the plot and characters from the familiar elements of the original game. One of the most successful video game adaptations comes from a surprising source. *Rampage*, released in 1986 as an arcade game, is ironically devoid of the typical cinematic plot. Players control three monsters (a King Kong knock-off, a Godzilla knock-off, and a mutant wolf) and destroy a city for points. The game revolves around destruction and eating people. Out of the many games to choose to adapt, this was perhaps one of the most surprising choices in 2018. Directed by Brad Peyton, *Rampage* presents an almost entirely new narrative. A government program goes wrong and mutant serums rain down from space, landing in a gorilla enclosure, in a forest, and in a swamp. The three creatures from the original game make an appearance, with a mutant crocodile taking the place of the copyright-risk Godzilla. Surprisingly, the movie performed rather well:

> Director Brad Peyton's latest "Let's smash a city with Dwayne Johnson" feature may be based on a video game, but it plays like a live-action cartoon, one that doubles as a fantastical journey into the imagination and sensibility of a 10-year-old boy, complete with rude hand gestures and goofy declarations of badassery: "You mess with me, you mess with my friend, mother. . ." It's not that the result is good, exactly, but it is kind of impressive to see adults so in touch with their inner child.

While the movie comes across as a somewhat silly romp, and isn't anything Oscar-worthy, it did succeed in being an entertaining movie, more so than almost every other video game adaptation. One is that the movie adaptation came long after the video game exited public consciousness. While a few sequels to the original *Rampage* did come out in the early 2000s, they were not successful enough to make themselves known to the public eye. Therefore, most of the people going into the movie didn't have clear expectations or memories attached to the narrative. Secondly, the experience of the movie tried to distance itself from the experience of the game. Giving the movie a narrative independent from the game allows the movie to exist in its own right, rather than being a lackluster remediation. Lastly, the protagonist, a Dwayne Johnson-type hero, was a far cry from the protagonist that the players inhabited in

the original game. Rather than following the creatures themselves, the movie gave the audience Davis Okoye. This interrupted the recognition process and allowed the audience to see Davis as the hero, rather than being frustrated by their sudden lack of power over the rampant destruction.

Ultimately, a vital aspect of the video game medium is the focus on the player. Meaning, inevitably, stems from the player and their actions. It's logical that it would take a deliberate process to translate an interactive experience into a voyeuristic one, but that cannot happen until that process is named and understood. Adapters must take care of how gamers and non-gamers perceive their movie; to recognize too much of an experience that they once had a large degree of control over can be disappointed to players, especially if it is a badaptation. To circumvent this issue, in addition to being wary of rule-based logic, script writers also need to change the narrative to provide a new experience, rather than a recycled one. Movies fulfill a different need than games, and so they should reveal a different experience of the source material than games.

4. Notes Towards Future Adaptations

> Anyone who's played a video game (and the film is certainly evocative of one, with its soldiers clanking around in multi-weapon mech suits) will immediately realize how cleverly the premise evokes the experience: Cruise's William Cage can try anything, die in the process, and reboot. There's no further save point, but at the very least he can learn from his experience. (Sims)

For those who play video games, the premise of *Edge of Tomorrow* is familiar. Soldier William Cage must fight against aliens, and dies in the process. However, he continues to wake up on the same morning of his final battle, as if someone decided to reload a save on their game. *Edge of Tomorrow* is also the most successful movie in this corpus; clocking in at 90% on Rotten Tomatoes and a 71 on Metacritic, the movie generated some of the only positive buzz around video games in film. Ironically, it is adapted from a Japanese novel, not a video game. This movie, rather than being adapted from a video game, is rather *about* video game mechanics.

Movies about video games consistently perform better than movies directly adapted from video games. Some of this might be a suspicion of adaptations, as Hutcheon has discussed. *Edge of Tomorrow*, in its original plot and characters and its focus on what makes video games different from other media, becomes a positive example of video games in the cinema. These movies about video games but not based on them display the very guidelines for adaptations that I've proposed here.

My findings here may be summarized in the following "rules":

1. Give video games the benefit of the doubt when it comes to their artistic nature.

2. Acknowledge narrative in games, wherever it may be.

3. Adapt with consciousness about game mechanics.

4. Play with the source material.

5. Provide something that video games cannot.

6. Don't leave room for the audience to "project" themselves.

First, to do video games justice in the process of adaptation, one must understand their status as an artistic object. They are not some medium undeserving of critical consideration, but they are a new medium, which may require new ways of thinking about narrative. Whether it is in traditional forms, delivered via characters and visual action, or incidentally, through the accomplishments and failures of the player, narrative is conveyed to the player. To understand the experience of the game, we cannot limit our understanding of narrative to the linear forms found in traditional film and literature. Instead, video games allow for a multiplicity of experiences. A game cannot be experienced the same way twice, even by the same person.

The process of adaptation also needs to account for rules. Video games are, at their core, a series of rules and goals that operate in different ways than film. Rules are meant to complicate a player's experiences while they strive towards their goal; players must understand the rules intimately, memorize reaction times and interactions, to master a game. To adapt this into film, the adaptor needs to understand how to make these rules palatable for audiences. Formulaic encounters may be par for the course in games, but make for boring movies. Therefore, adaptors must step away from a reliance on rules, even if it seems contradictory if those rules are at the core of the game (such as *Pokémon: Detective Pikachu*'s lack of kosher Pokémon battles).

While the adaptation process should move away from rules, it shouldn't move away from play. Just as *Edge of Tomorrow* picks a common video game mechanic and expands it into a movie, adaptors shouldn't shy away from what makes video games unique. However, the process of picking medium-specific quirks should be calculated.

Movies and video games exist to provide different experiences, and so film writers need to translate between two very different emotional palates. It can be assumed that more game controllers have been thrown than remotes and popcorn buckets; emotions like anger, guilt, and satisfaction are much more personal to the player in video games than in movies. Video games ask the player to come take a seat at the table. It is vital for the film to, in a sense, relegate the audience back into the role of audience. Rather than creating an actor for the audience to project themselves on to, like the protagonist in *Need for*

Speed, writers need to create complex characters who are interesting to *watch.* Otherwise, the player will look around the film world and only see where they once had power.

Lessons in adaptation can be learned, then, from movies that aren't adaptations in themselves. A final example can be found in *Wreck-It Ralph.* The Pixar movie is based on the question: what if video games were alive? Taking the classic arcade game aesthetic, *Wreck-It Ralph* follows the villain of one game, Ralph, as he explores several other games in the arcade and becomes friends with Vanellope, a competitor in a candy-based racing game. The movie takes some core mechanics of games and adapts a traditional movie plot around them. Taking the concept of a glitch as the main villain, the movie shows Ralph overcoming stereotypes and becoming a hero. This film follows the ideal process of adaptation: select source material but provide a sort of narrative that video games can't. In a good video game movie, audiences can indulge in a fantasy in which video game characters have autonomy separate from themselves. *Wreck-It-Ralph* is, in a way, a satire of the adaptation process from game to film. On the screen, Ralph becomes a character of his own, with desires, mistakes, and relationships all his own. Approaching video games like this, as artistic creations worthy of careful adaptation, might just break the video game curse.

Appendix: Filmography

<u>Children's Movies</u>

The Angry Birds Movie. Directed by Clay Kaytis and Fergal Reilly, performances by Jason Sudeikis, Josh

     Gad, and Danny McBride, Sony Pictures, 2016.

The Angry Birds Movie 2. Directed by Thurop Van Orman, performances by Jason Sudeikis, Josh Gad,

     and Leslie Jones, Sony Pictures, 2019.

Pokémon 3: The Movie. Directed by Kunihiko Yuyama, OLM, Inc., 2000.

Pokémon 4Ever. Directed by Kunihiko Yuyama, OLM, Inc, 2001.

Detective Pikachu. Directed by Rob Letterman, performances by Ryan Reynolds, Justice Smith, and

     Kathryn Newton, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2019.

Pokémon Heroes. Directed by Kunihiko Yuyama, OLM, Inc, 2002.

Pokémon the Movie: I choose you! Directed by Kunihiko Yuyama, OLM, Inc, 2017.

Pokémon the Movie: The Power of Us. Directed by Tetsua Yajima, OLM, Inc, 2018.

Pokémon: The Movie 2000. Directed by Kunihiko Yuyama, OLM, Inc, 1999.

Ratchet & Clank. Directed by Kevin Munroe, performances by James Arnold Taylor, David Kaye, and

     Paul Giamatti, Rainmaker Entertainment, 2016.

Spy Kids 3-D: Game Over. Directed by Robert Rodriguez, performances by Antonio Banderas, Carla

     Gugino, Alexa Vega, and Daryl Sabara, Dimension Films, 2003.

Yo-Kai Watch. Directed by Shigeharu Takahashi and Shunji Ushiro, performances by Karuka Tomatsu,

     Tomokazu Seki, and Etsuko Kosakura, OLM, Inc, 2014.

<u>Action Movies</u>

Assassin's Creed. Directed by Justin Kurzel, performances by Michael Fassbender, Marion Cotillard, and

     Jeremy Irons, 20th Century Fox, 2016.

BloodRayne. Directed by Uwe Boll, performances by Kristanna Loken, Michael Madsen, and Matthew

     Davis, Boll KG Productions, 2006,

DOA: Dead or Alive. Directed by Corey Yuen, performances by Jaime Pressly, Holly Valance, Sarah
        Carter, and Natassia Malthe, Dimension Films, 2007.

Doom. Directed by Andrzej Bartkowiak, performances by Karl Urban, Rosamund Pike, and Dwayne
        Johnson, Universal Pictures, 2005.

Far Cry. Directed by Uwe Boll, performances by Til Schweiger, Emmanuelle Vaugier, and Michael Paré,
        20th Century Fox, 2008.

Hitman. Directed by Xavier Gens, performances by Timothy Olyphant, Dougray Scott, and Olga
        Kurylenko, 20th Century Fox, 2007.

Hitman: Agent 47 Directed by Aleksander Bach, performances by Rupert Friend, Hannah Ware, and
        Zachary Quinto, 20th Century Fox, 2015.

In the Name of the King: A Dungeon Siege Tale. Directed by Uwe Boll, performances by Jason Statham,
        Leelee Sobieski, and Ron Perlman, Boll KG Productions, 2007.

Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle. Directed by Jake Kasdan, performances by Dwayne Johnson, Jack
        Black, Kevin Hart, and Karen Gillan, Sony Pictures, 2017.

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider. Directed by Simon West, performances by Angelina Jolie, Jon Voight, and Iain
        Glen, Paramount Pictures, 2001.

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider—The Cradle of Life. Directed by Jan de Bont, performances by Angeline Jolie,
        Gerard Butler, and Noah Taylor, Paramount Pictures, 2003.

Max Payne. Directed by John Moore, performances by Mark Wahlberg, Mila Kunis, and Beau Bridges,
        20th Century Fox, 2008.

Need for Speed. Directed by Scott Waugh, performances by Aaron Paul, Dominic Cooper, Rami Malek,
        and Imogen Poots, Walt Disney Studios, 2014.

Postal. Directed by Uwe Boll, performances by Zack Ward, Dave Foley, and Chris Coppola, Boll KG
        Productions, 2008.

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time. Directed by Mike Newell, performances by Jake Gyllenhaal, Ben
        Kingsley, and Gemma Arterton, Walt Disney Studios, 2010.

Rampage. Directed by Brad Peyton, performances by Dwayne Johnson, Naomie Harris, and Malin

      Akerman, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018.

Street Fighter: The Legend of Chun-Li. Directed by Andrzej Bartkowiak, performances by Kristin Kreuk,

      Neal McDonough, and Michael Clarke Duncan, 20th Century Fox, 2009.

Tekken. Directed by Dwight D. Little, performances by Jon Foo, Kelly Overton, and Cary-Hiroyuki

      Tagawa, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009.

Tomb Raider. Directed by Roar Uthaug, performances by Alicia Vikander, Dominic West, and Walton

      Goggins, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018.

Warcraft. Directed by Duncan Jones, performances by Travis Fimmel, Paula Patton, and Ben Foster,

      Universal Pictures, 2016.

Movies About Games

 "Bandersnatch." *Black Mirror*, written by Charlie Brooker, directed by David Slade, Netflix, 2018.

Edge of Tomorrow. Directed by Doug Liman, performances by Tom Cruise, Emily Blunt, and Bill

      Baxton, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2014.

Ender's Game. Directed by Gavin Hood, performances by Harrison Ford, Asa Butterfield, Viola Davis,

      and Hailee Steinfield, Summit Entertainment, 2013.

GameBox 1.0. Directed by David and Scott Hillenbrand, performances by Nate Richert, Danielle Fishel,

      and Patrick Kilpatrick, Lionsgate, 2004.

Gamer. Directed by Neveldine/Taylor, performances by Gerard Butler, Michael C. Hall, and Amber

      Valetta, Lionsgate, 2009.

Pixels. Directed by Chris Columbus, performances by Adam Sandler, Kevin James, Michelle Monaghan,

      and Peter Dinklage, Sony Pictures, 2015.

Ralph Breaks the Internet. Directed by Rich Moore and Phil Johnson, performances by John C. Reilly,

      Sarah Silverman, Gal Gadot, and Taraji P. Henson, Walt Disney Studios, 2018.

Ready Player One. Directed by Steven Spielberg, performances by Tye Sheridan, Olivia Cooke, and Ben

Mendelson, Warner Bros. Production, 2018.

Scott Pilgrim vs. the World. Directed by Edgar Wright, performances by Michael Cera, Mary Elizabeth

Winstead, and Kieran Culkin, Universal Pictures, 2010.

Tron: Legacy. Directed by Joseph Kosinski, performances by Jeff Bridges, Garrett Hedlund, and Olivia

Wilde, Walt Disney Pictures, 2010.

Wreck-It-Ralph. Directed by Rich Moore, performances by John C. Reilly, Sarah Silverman, and Jack

McBrayer, Walt Disney Pictures, 2012.

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