arts

The Art of Adaptation in Film and Video Games

Edited by
Christian Thomas

Printed Edition of the Special Issue Published in *Arts*

www.mdpi.com/journal/arts

MDPI

The Art of Adaptation in Film and Video Games

The Art of Adaptation in Film and Video Games

Editor

Christian Thomas

MDPI • Basel • Beijing • Wuhan • Barcelona • Belgrade • Manchester • Tokyo • Cluj • Tianjin

Editor
Christian Thomas
Center for Digital Games
Research; Writing Program
University of California
Santa Barbara
United States

Editorial Office
MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel, Switzerland

This is a reprint of articles from the Special Issue published online in the open access journal *Arts* (ISSN 2076-0752) (available at: www.mdpi.com/journal/arts/special_issues/art_adaptation).

For citation purposes, cite each article independently as indicated on the article page online and as indicated below:

LastName, A.A.; LastName, B.B.; LastName, C.C. Article Title. *Journal Name* **Year**, *Volume Number*, Page Range.

ISBN 978-3-0365-4900-2 (Hbk)
ISBN 978-3-0365-4899-9 (PDF)

Cover image courtesy of Christian Thomas

Contents

About the Editor

Christian Thomas

Christian Thomas is the Associate Director of the Center for Digital Games Research and Lecturer in the Writing Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His research focuses on video games for learning, writing for film, and video game narrative design.

arts

MDPI

Editorial

Introduction: The Art of Adaptation in Film and Video Games

Christian Thomas

Center for Digital Games Research and Writing Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA; cthomas@writing.ucsb.edu

> *We live in a world of adaptation, and a failure to study that world means we must ignore an increasingly important part of contemporary culture.*
>
> *—Dennis Cutchins (2018)*

Studying the transformative journey of content from one genre or medium to another is of interest to academics, members of the public who are avid consumers of media, and practitioners of adaptation—and we are all practitioners, whether delivering a message by email originally intended to be spoken, or adapting a book (like S. A. Corey's science fiction novel *Leviathan Wakes*) into a television series (like Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby's *The Expanse*) into a video game (like *The Expanse: A Telltale Series*). But what exactly is adaptation, and what constitutes an original work? Some scholars cite persistent ideas from the Romantic era (relating to perceived genius in individual creators) as driving current notions of what it means to be original (see, for example, Emig 2018; Cattrysse 2018), but should those ideas dominate today? Or should we instead allow ourselves to be convinced that T.S. Eliot and Northrop Frye were correct in suggesting that "all art is derived from other art," as Linda Hutcheon (2004) writes that she is in "On the Art of Adaptation"?

Although such questions may seem abstruse, others remain concretely present whenever adaptation is involved. For example, when we see a beloved film remade, we are conditioned to ask if it is faithful to the original. And in the case of content transferred from one medium to another—such as when the 1979 film *Alien* was adapted into the 2014 video game *Alien: Isolation*—an exciting new layer of complexity emerges. We must now ask questions about the different strengths and weaknesses of the mediums involved in order to understand the adaptation process in a meaningful way. How we answer these questions can help us better use the mediums through which we learn, communicate, and create.

This Special Issue of *Arts* explores the art (and practice) of adaptation in what may be the two most influential mediums in existence today: film and video games. In the opening article, Sell (2021) argues that the concept of video game cinema—often seen as simply the adaptation of a video game into a film—must be rethought and broadened in light of films like Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Sam Mendes' *1917* (2019), which are not adapted from specific video games but bear the marks of games in less obvious, but undeniably potent, ways.

Thomas (2021a) finds lessons for scholars and creative writers working in film and video games by comparing Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986) with Creative Assembly's *Alien: Isolation* (2014). He concludes that while the video game *Alien: Isolation* succeeds in important ways, it might have provided a more visceral experience for players by including emotionally charged character relationships similar to those found in Scott's and Cameron's films.

Belau (2021) delves into the trauma memoir, and the "impossibility" of written memoirs truly representing actual experiences of trauma. She analyzes Steve McQueen's film *12 Years a Slave* (2013), adapted from Solomon Northup's 1853 written memoir, and argues that the film is able to capture (through compositional techniques like agonizingly long takes and extreme close-ups) important aspects of trauma that the written memoir is unable to represent.

Citation: Thomas, Christian. 2022. Introduction: The Art of Adaptation in Film and Video Games. *Arts* 11: 71. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11040071

Received: 29 June 2022
Accepted: 5 July 2022
Published: 11 July 2022

Mangiron (2021) provides a glimpse into the complex practice of localization through case studies involving three well-known Japanese video game series: *Persona* (1996—present), *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (2005—present), and *Yakuza* (2005—present). These case studies reveal that localization is not a process of adaptation, but a "hybrid space" where game creators from one culture can meet players from another culture and find each other, as the author writes, "in translation."

M. Barr (2020) surveys the crowded constellation of *Star Wars* video games (going back as far as forty years) in search of what makes some more successful than others. Barr answers this question by analyzing critics' reviews of highly rated *Star Wars* games, from which he culls intriguing insights (e.g., that reviewers were struck by how *Star Wars*-like the mythic storytelling in *Knights of the Old Republic* felt, even though the game diverged from the films in fundamental ways).

Thomas (2021b) also discusses *Star Wars* video games as part of a wide-ranging interview with acclaimed game designer Ryan Kaufman, who is currently VP of Narrative at mobile game studio Jam City, and former Creative Director at Telltale Games. Other subjects discussed in the interview include how to design narrative games for emotional impact, and the potential of games to help players learn and change.

Hiltunen et al. (2020) study three texts relating to Finnish forests—the film *Tale of a Forest* (2012), the book *Tale of a Forest* (2013), and a series of short documentaries called *Tales from the Forest* (2013)—with a focus on how each works as an environmentally conscious narrative. The film, for instance, presents images of primeval Finnish forests (which can be considered nostalgic and escapist, but still promote awareness about ecological issues), while the book and documentary series take alternative approaches, such as discussing contemporary forestry practices in an attempt to educate audiences. The authors then evaluate the various approaches in the context of evolving and controversial discussions regarding the declining Finnish forests.

Novitz (2020) discusses four video game adaptations of *Hamlet* that offer players agency through character development, scenario outcomes, and other aspects of Shakespeare's narrative. Novitz argues that such adaptations are not exercises in irreverence toward Shakespeare's hallowed text, but rather that they are crucial to keeping Shakespeare's work alive beyond the bounds of elite culture.

Landwehr (2020) compares Christian Petzold's film *Transit* (2018) to its source material, Anna Seghers's eponymous 1944 novel. Landwehr argues that since our current era is marked by mass displacement and migration, this context makes Petzold's recent film—which relocates Seghers's main character, a World War II political refugee, into the present as an Everyman—a universal tale of displacement.

Moore (2020) looks at Soderbergh's pandemic thriller *Contagion* (2011), which saw a spike in popularity over streaming services during the beginning of COVID-19 restrictions. Moore observes that the film—created with detailed input from scientists and praised for its realism in 2011 by none other than Dr. Anthony Fauci—may have been especially appealing at the onset of the pandemic because it helped audiences make sense of what they were experiencing in reality. Moore stresses that noticeably missing from the film are seemingly mundane yet critical aspects of the actual pandemic (e.g., how people lost jobs or switched to remote work, how people occupied themselves in quarantine, etc.).

Freer (2020) explores five remediations of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" which include a comic strip, two short films, a video poem, and a photographic montage. While the video game adaptations of *Hamlet*—discussed by Novitz (2020) in this Special Issue—may feel blasphemous to some, remediations of "Prufrock" can instead be considered a natural outgrowth of Eliot's modernist impulse to experiment. In our current era, as image-based digital media continues to crowd out print culture, Freer suggests that experimental, image-rich remediations of literary works like "Prufrock" can help ailing English departments engage student interest.

P. Barr (2020) takes an approach to video game design that eschews the adaption of Hollywood blockbusters (especially violent ones) in favor of seeking inspiration from

unconventional cinema. In the tradition of practice-based research, P. Barr begins by describing ten short-form video games of his own creation that are adapted from scenes found in critically acclaimed, non-blockbuster films. This is followed by a discussion highlighting the unconventional design principles that are key aspects of the adapted games. (See the Supplemental Materials at the end of Barr's article for a link to the playable games.)

Gawroński and Bajorek (2020) discuss *The Witcher* media franchise, which began in the 1980s as fiction (written by Andrzej Sapkowski) and took on an international scope with film and video game adaptations, including a recent (2019–2021) Netflix series. Gawroński and Bajorek take their readers through the different and often contentious processes of adaptation involving Sapkowski's work, yielding cautionary tales, particularly for authors and screenwriters. Gawroński and Bajorek's article gives special attention to the degree to which the "witcher" character (Geralt of Rivia) expresses Slavic identity in each of the adaptations—an issue of particular importance for Polish admirers of Sapkowski's fiction.

Zhu (2020) also considers issues of cultural identity in her analysis of the adaptation of acclaimed science fiction writer Liu Cixin's 2000 novella "The Wandering Earth" into the recent (2019) popular eponymous film. While the novella takes place in a world where no nations exist and the family unit has broken down, the film adaptation invents powerful father-son relationships which fuel a strengthening of the traditional community. In doing so, Zhu argues, the film eliminates the novella's theme of rebellion against the establishment and substitutes a story that firmly supports patriarchy and authoritarian power.

In this volume's final article, Wang (2020) traces representations of the Chinese legend of Mulan back through the centuries and questions the criticism that the Disney film *Mulan* (1998) is a simple case of cultural appropriation of an unchanging, 'authentic', Chinese text. Wang argues instead that the 'original' text is actually a compilation of diverse material that challenges the perception that the West is ever-changing and dynamic, while the East remains static.

Challenging perceptions in ways that lead to a clearer view is one of the many benefits that accompanies the study of adaptation. Deepening our knowledge of the interplay between different mediums—particularly two as powerful as film and video games—helps us to understand, communicate within, and influence our world. It is my hope that the rich and varied perspectives, analyses, and playable pieces included in this Special Issue will be engaging and useful to scholars and practitioners who are shaping the future through their own changing perspectives and adapted works.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Barr, Matthew. 2020. The Force Is Strong with This One (but Not That One): What Makes a Successful Star Wars Video Game Adaptation? *Arts* 9: 131. [CrossRef]

Barr, Pippin. 2020. Film Adaptation as Experimental Game Design. *Arts* 9: 103. [CrossRef]

Belau, Linda. 2021. Impossible Origins: Trauma Narrative and Cinematic Adaptation. *Arts* 10: 15. [CrossRef]

Cattrysse, Patrick. 2018. An Evolutionary View of Cultural Adaptation: Some Considerations. In *The Routledge Companion to Adaptation*. Edited by Dennis Cutchins, Katja Krebs and Eckart Voigts. New York: Routledge, pp. 27–38.

Cutchins, Dennis. 2018. Introduction. In *The Routledge Companion to Adaptation*. Edited by Dennis Cutchins, Katja Krebs and Eckart Voigts. New York: Routledge, p. 3.

Emig, Rainer. 2018. Adaptation and the Concept of the Original. In *The Routledge Companion to Adaptation*. Edited by Dennis Cutchins, Katja Krebs and Eckart Voigts. New York: Routledge, pp. 39–54.

Freer, Scott. 2020. Remediating 'Prufrock'. *Arts* 9: 104. [CrossRef]

Gawroński, Slawomir, and Kinga Bajorek. 2020. A Real Witcher—Slavic or Universal; from a Book, a Game or a TV Series? In the Circle of Multimedia Adaptations of a Fantasy Series of Novels "The Witcher" by A. Sapkowski. *Arts* 9: 102. [CrossRef]

Hiltunen, Kaisa, Heidi Björklund, Aino Nurmesjärvi, Jenna Purhonen, Minna Rainio, Nina Sääskilahti, and Antti Vallius. 2020. Tale(s) of the Forest—Re-Creation of a Primeval Forest in Three Environmental Narratives. *Arts* 9: 125. [CrossRef]

Hutcheon, Linda. 2004. On the Art of Adaptation. *Daedalus* 133: 108–11. [CrossRef]

Landwehr, Margarete. 2020. Empathy and Community in the Age of Refugees: Petzold's Radical Translation of Seghers' Transit. *Arts* 9: 118. [CrossRef]

Mangiron, Carme. 2021. Found in Translation: Evolving Approaches for the Localization of Japanese Video Games. *Arts* 10: 9. [CrossRef]
Moore, Kevin C. 2020. Readapting Pandemic Premediation and Propaganda: Soderbergh's *Contagion* amid COVID-19. *Arts* 9: 112. [CrossRef]
Novitz, Julian. 2020. 'The Time Is Out of Joint': Interactivity and Player Agency in Videogame Adaptations of *Hamlet*. *Arts* 9: 122. [CrossRef]
Sell, Mike. 2021. What Is a Videogame Movie? *Arts* 10: 24. [CrossRef]
Thomas, Christian. 2021a. Writing for Emotional Impact in Film and Video Games: Lessons in Character Development, Realism, and Interactivity from the *Alien* Media Franchise. *Arts* 10: 20. [CrossRef]
Thomas, Christian. 2021b. Interview: Acclaimed Game Designer Ryan Kaufman Discusses Telltale Games, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and How Video Games Can Transform Us. *Arts* 10: 46. [CrossRef]
Wang, Zhuoyi. 2020. Cultural "Authenticity" as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: Mulan (1998), *Mulan Joins the* Army (1939), and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis. *Arts* 9: 78. [CrossRef]
Zhu, Ping. 2020. From Patricide to Patrilineality: Adapting *The Wandering Earth* for the Big Screen. *Arts* 9: 94. [CrossRef]

arts

MDPI

Editorial

Interview: Acclaimed Game Designer Ryan Kaufman Discusses Telltale Games, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and How Video Games Can Transform Us

Christian Thomas

Writing Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA; cthomas@writing.ucsb.edu

1. Introduction

Ryan Kaufman—whose rich body of work often centers on video games adapted from movies or TV shows—has had a profound impact on video game designers, writers, and players alike. He is currently Vice President of Narrative at video game developer Jam City; previously he served as the Director of Narrative Design at Telltale Games, Creative Lead at Planet Moon Studios, and Content Supervisor at LucasArts Entertainment. He has contributed to many titles since joining the game industry in 1995, including *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery*, *The Wolf Among Us*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead*, *Star Wars: Republic Commando*, and *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron*.

The following interview has been edited for clarity.

2. Interview

Christian Thomas: I'd like to start with a question from one of the Special Issue's contributors, Matt Barr, who's at the University of Glasgow. He starts by saying that there have been many *Star Wars* video game adaptations, but that some of these captured the feel of the franchise better than others. He's interested in how and why the best of these adaptations were successful, and for him, these are games like *KOTOR* and the *Rogue Squadron* series. He asks, "Is it capturing the feel of the *Star Wars* universe that makes these games stand out? Or are they simply very well-made games?"

Ryan Kaufman: That's a great question. And it's something we used to talk about too because we were aware that certain games that we were creating really just had that *Star Wars* feel or felt like you were being immersed in the universe. But you could also create games that were mechanically really satisfying and maybe weren't as immersive in the story, but gave you the feel. I'm going to go all the way back to one of the first *Star Wars* games I ever played, which was in the arcade and it was the vector graphics *Star Wars*. Do you remember that one?

CT: Yeah, I do.

RK: So, that's a game where there's no skill to it or anything like that. But it felt like you were there; it felt like you were piloting an X-wing and it gave you the first sense of what it would be like to live in that world, or to live and die in that world.

It was always a balance. Of my own favorites, *KOTOR*, is probably the number one on my list. Ironically, that game was well out of the way of any timeline that we knew; it didn't feature any major characters but it felt incredibly like *Star Wars*. I've often cited also *Bounty Hunter*. Which was the Jango Fett game from around 2002.

CT: I've heard a lot about that one, but I haven't played it, unfortunately.

RK: There may be some personal bias because I helped write it. Actually, to me it felt like *The Mandalorian* feels to a lot of people. It was an adaptation of the

Citation: Thomas, Christian. 2021. Interview: Acclaimed Game Designer Ryan Kaufman Discusses Telltale Games, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and How Video Games Can Transform Us. *Arts* 10: 46. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts10030046

Received: 24 June 2021
Accepted: 5 July 2021
Published: 8 July 2021

> Spaghetti Western, but set in the *Star Wars* universe. The lead creative on that was Jon Knoles and he was a massive fan of Sergio Leone, and so was I. We talked a lot about that influence.

And that's of course something that's in the DNA of *Star Wars* too. It didn't feel like too much of a reach. Anytime you're talking about Spaghetti Westerns or samurai movies or *Flash Gordon*, you're only really a couple of steps away from *Star Wars*. But that doesn't explain the success of *KOTOR*. I think *KOTOR* is just an achievement in terms of world building and story building.

> *CT*: You've pointed out the influence of the Spaghetti Western and Leone, and about bringing that element into the world and amping it up. That's an interesting way to go—it's doing something more than just trying to create a faithful world, but also taking it deeper into some "new" direction. Like *KOTOR* did, I think, especially when it was exploring the Force, in ways that weren't done by Lucas. That's one of the things that made that game emotional and important for me. Going in these directions that are new, while still having a faithful feel. I guess that's always what's difficult to balance with adaptations, right?
>
> *RK*: Yeah. I think you may have hit the nail on the head there. You need to have something new that you're saying about it. And I think it has to be something that you care about. Much in the way that I think George was wanting to evoke the serials of the '30s, but he had all these other influences that he wanted to drag into it. The samurai movies, the Westerns and all that stuff.

And then finally the modeling on the Joseph Campbell thing, that put it all together. And that new hybridization of that DNA is probably one of the reasons why *Star Wars* feels so original and so interesting, even after all this time. It's like an alchemy.

And, yeah, I think *KOTOR* gave us this sprawling story, which was very well handled. But I think also at the center of it, it's an identity story, obviously. And that was something new, too. It's an offshoot of the questions that Luke Skywalker has to ask himself about who he really is. It's a clever way to put that in the player's hands, of saying well, "What if you had the same dilemma?" Framed slightly differently, but it's a way to feel familiar but then fresh and new at the same time.

So maybe that's part of the key to it, really knowing you want to say something and then saying it within *Star Wars*. As opposed to trying to do a faithful recreation, or the worst games, and I won't name them, but the worst games. They would just literally take a gameplay mechanism from something else and slap *Star Wars* on top of it. And those often just didn't work.

> *CT*: Right. What kind of player decisions or what kind of choices do you want to offer the player? What kind of gameplay actually works?

You're working on *Harry Potter* now, and with that, you're working with books and you're also working with films. You're working with all sorts of things because people play in that world in so many different ways. What are the challenges when you're thinking about what you want to offer players to give them an experience of *Harry Potter* in a game, with things to do in that world?

> *RK*: With *Harry Potter*, one of the interesting things to me has been that the adaptation not only involves us as Jam City creators, but also of course JK Rowling's property and her thoughts on it and her company's thoughts on it. But then there's this third energy, which is the fans. And what the fans want to see and what they get attached to in the story is actually quite influential on the creative process.

For instance, as these kids move through school, they are growing up and they're starting to develop romantic feelings for each other, which is in the books and it's something we wanted to have in the game as well. It's fun. We have to be respectful when the fans are feeling like these two characters should have a relationship, or those two characters shouldn't have a relationship. And they can have really strong opinions.

It's not that you want the fans to drive the game, but they have opinions. And it's almost . . . sometimes it feels like you're trying to be a really good maître d' at a restaurant and you want to know what your customers like. But you also want to introduce them to something a little bit new, so that they can be spreading their wings and enjoying a new flavor.

CT: I like that analogy. It makes me think of ordering wine, because when you're asking for a sommelier's recommendation on what to drink, they'll throw it right back at you: "Well, what do you like?"

RK: Yeah. What have you had before? What do you like? What are you in the mood for? And then try to take that and then "yes and . . . " it a little bit.

CT: That's a fun way of looking at how you handle the fans. Especially when you can look at what they're saying online: things that frustrate them, or things that they love that you can tell they want more of, or they want certain threads to be explored more.

So, when you're looking to explore certain things, in terms of the IP, do you have to go to JK Rowling or her people and say, "Hey, we want to do this thing . . . " What's the exchange like? Or do you already know what the boundaries are, so you don't have to be bouncing every idea off them?

RK: It's a pretty steady back and forth correspondence. As you can imagine, she has really specific ideas about her universe and how it all operates. And so, we send literally everything that we're proposing and all the scripts to her company. And with some ideas, they're like, "Yeah, this is fine". And it's not controversial. And then some other ones they'll flag and say, "Well I don't know about this one. Maybe we should talk about how it might come out".

But the flow of information back and forth is quite voluminous. Because there's a lot of stuff going on in the game and they want to review it all. But it's great because I think at this point, the game [*Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery*] has been out over a year. And they're pretty comfortable now with that process. And when they review things that aren't controversial, they say, "This looks great". And then things that are a little bit more worth a discussion, we'll have a back and forth and try to figure out, "Well, how would this work?" Or, "What are we trying to do here?"

It's been really good with them. They're great partners.

CT: Do they give your ideas, too? Do you riff off each other?

RK: They're good at bouncing ideas back: "Well, what if you tried this? Or what if you did that?" Or alternative ways that we might have it work.

CT: Okay. I was wondering, too, how the business model for that game, and also for *Vineyard Valley*, how that affects the shape of the game, and the narrative, and the kinds of things that players do. Because you have to make money. In *Vineyard Valley*, you get these challenges interspersed between narrative sections—I think of them as a kind of *Candy Crush*-type of interlude. And if you end up failing the challenge and don't have enough points to keep upgrading your vineyard manor house and continue the narrative, then you have the option to buy your way into that.

I imagine you've got millions of things you're trying to balance here, including the difficulty level of those challenges. The business model is playing an important role here, like in every other game. What are the challenges involved with incorporating that?

RK: Well, it informs the kind of storytelling that you're going to do or the kind of storytelling that is going to work, I should say. And so, *Vineyard Valley* is a good example, knowing that we would have this game loop of, play the puzzle, earn a star, spend a star, play another puzzle. And the game is designed to have a mounting difficulty level so that players feel things aren't just going along on a straight line. They climb and then they fall and then they climb and fall.

And we knew that the story would be a key part of why people were coming back, or why they would want to purchase part of the game—purchase something to help them get through the level or whatever. That's a key part: you have to make the game feel like it's worth it to spend money on. Because people don't want to just spend money, they want to feel like they're buying something of value. And so, offering a story that felt like it could be part of that value was part of the genesis of making *Vineyard Valley*.

I looked around at what was really interesting in terms of storytelling, and Netflix is a big thing that people just are integrating into their lives. And they're integrating this notion of binge watching and getting used to the idea that episodic shows end with a cliff hanger that leads you into the next thing. I thought that was a really interesting mode of storytelling that I hadn't really seen yet in games.

And so we set out to create a story that had that feel to it. That had Netflix-y episodes with little cliff-hangers in them and little story beats that would always hopefully lead you to wonder, "Well, what's going to come of this romance? What's going to come of this little mystery that I've uncovered? Is the vineyard Tangled Vines going to get shutdown by the mean guy?"

Some of that I'd seen in mobile. But packaging it up more like a Netflix product was definitely the inspiration. And that was done in consideration of players hopefully thinking—when they're spending two dollars, say, they're thinking, "I want more story. The story's worth it. I'm going to buy some boosters or power-ups or something like that. It'll help me get through, because I want to find out what happens next".

Of course, we did a lot of surveys and talking to players in the early stages of the game to make sure that we were right about that. And for the majority of them, they would often say, "Yeah, I want to find out what happens next". And that was a very encouraging sign.

> *CT*: That's what's made me keep playing. I want to see what happens in the story. I also want to see what happens to the place. I care about the place and I think there's something that changes when you're renovating it: you feel some ownership over it. If you're not working on something yourself, you just don't care as much. Were you doing that consciously when you came up with the renovation aspect of the game?
>
> *RK*: That was very much part of the mix. And thank you for calling out the renovations. That's the third key tripod leg on which the game stands. There are the puzzles and the renovation and then the story, in terms of the content—that's how it all works. And that renovation aspect is exactly as you said, it's really key because that's the place the player feels completely 100% of their investment, their time, their choices, their aesthetic. All that stuff becomes very important to them.

And so wrapping that into the story was also crucial for us, to make sure that whatever story we were telling was also about the renovation that was happening. So it felt like you couldn't pull them apart. That was a very conscious thing that we approached early on, to make sure that those were integrated and felt connected.

> *CT*: That makes a lot of sense. And for me it also plays into this fantasy of having a vineyard. So I think the world you chose for it was an exciting one, too. I feel like so much of the fun in games is that they give you a place where you want to hang out.
>
> *RK*: Yeah.
>
> *CT*: Going back to player choices, one of the things that captivated me in Telltale games were the choices that involved things you and the other creators asked players to take ownership of. And the kind of things that you do in a Telltale game, which felt so revolutionary the first time I played *The Walking Dead*. You wouldn't expect these really difficult choices to be so engrossing. I can't say "fun" exactly, because it goes way deeper than that. It involves all these horrible feelings. Yet you really get into it. It's totally immersive.

The more difficult the better. The less powerful you are, the better. Which is another thing you all were always playing with. All these things that you normally think, "Oh, I don't want to make difficult choices in my life!" All these things that you run from in your life, in the game you run towards and want more and more of. They're incredibly emotional.

So I've wondered, why do we relish those kinds of choices in a game environment? Is it because they give us practice making the difficult choices that we face every day in our lives? Do you have your own theories as to why those things are so compelling?

> *RK*: For me, I've always thought of it as similar to why people take personality quizzes. Taking a personality quiz about yourself is, on the face of it, bizarre. You are you—you know yourself. Why would you ever take a personality quiz to have something objectively reflect back what you are? But of course, that's exactly it. We want to see ourselves objectively reflected and make sure that we measure up to, "Am I really the person I think I am?"

And that genre for *The Walking Dead* was the perfect storm. I think—especially at that time, but now, too—I think people run the zombie apocalypse scenario in their heads. "What would I do? What would happen if there was a total apocalypse and I had to save my family?" And that's a little mental game a lot of us play in the disaster scenario. "How would I act? Or, "Could I measure up?".

And so, *The Walking Dead* provided a safe space to explore that. And I think people are naturally tempted to try and do, like, "I'm going to be a hard ass and just protect my family and make really tough choices. If everyone else can't handle how draconian I get, too bad for them". But what happens is, in reality, players find it really tough to actually do that. They tend to play as nice as they possibly can. Which I found a really interesting phenomenon. Over and over, whether it was *The Walking Dead* or any of our other properties, *Batman*, *Guardians*, whatever, people just would set out with this intention to make the tough, evil choices. And then invariably by the end of the game they were being as nice as possible to everyone in the game regardless.

So maybe it's a brain exercise. It's a little mental testing. It's role-playing in a safe space, where you feel like you can privately make choices you wouldn't make in your real life.

> *CT*: It's such an interesting model for a game. Making those really difficult choices—there's no easy answer to anything and you're going to have consequences that are going to be negative no matter what you do. Which is so often the truth in real life. And I feel like you all really dug deep into that space. And people wanted to explore that very much.
>
> *RK*: And that was also really a conscious design choice on our part, was people often say, "Oh Telltale Games. It's kind of like a 'choose your own adventure.'" But it was actually the opposite of that because a "choose your own adventure" has a path through the story. And your job is to find the right path. With the Telltale games, we went the opposite direction and said there isn't a path through the game. And your job is actually just to find your own way and create your own way. And that's the point of the game.

And making sure that no choice had a "win" category. We really, really didn't want people to feel like they made the right or the wrong choice. But if you continually feel like you're making a *slightly* wrong choice, not like a devastatingly wrong choice, but a slightly wrong choice, then you can generate this anxiety in the players to do better next time, without crushing them to make them feel like they should quit. And so it's like walking on a tight rope. Maintaining the feeling of slight anxiety about, "I need to do better—next time I'll make a better choice". But never quite giving them that carrot to say, "You did it, good job".

That's where we found that people would really engage and make choices that didn't come from a strategy, like a meta-strategy. They weren't thinking outside of their own

heads like, "How do I get through this?" They're really thinking from their gut. Because we didn't really give them any signs that they were on the right or the wrong path. So, they were just had to rely on themselves.

Anyway, that's my long-winded way of saying the thing that you experienced was a very conscious aesthetic and design choice for the stories. To make them feel exactly that way.

> *CT*: Right. You're kind of at sea in those games. One of my favorites of the Telltale games is *Game of Thrones.* One of the reasons I like it so much—but I was always torn when I was in there playing, because it's frustrating sometimes, too—is that you really explore depths of powerlessness in that game. I felt like you all as designers and writers took that to a new level. Because as Ethan, you're playing as this kid, and of course you've gotten a glimpse of that playing as Clementine in *The Walking Dead,* too. You're powerless—physically anyway—compared to all these adults you're threatened by.

And then you've got Mira, who also has very strict limits on her power. You've got Rodrik, too, and his body's been torn to shreds. Everybody that you're playing, except for Asher in some ways, I suppose, is struggling to deal with these almost overwhelming challenges. It felt like House Forrester, when I was playing as any one of these members of that family, was under such massive fire. And you're just barely struggling along. And your family's destruction looks almost certain. There was a depth of powerlessness that I don't think I felt as much in the other Telltale game.

Bigby in *The Wolf Among Us* has quite a bit of power, even though you as designers mitigate that in interesting ways, as he gets physically weaker throughout the episodes. And Lee in *The Walking Dead* is facing a lot too, of course, but, for me, these didn't descend into the powerlessness, or hopelessness I felt in *Game of Thrones*. And it's something that I thought was incredibly compelling. Mira's death, I don't want to make this a huge monologue, but Mira's death is one of my favorite all-time moments in any game ever. Partly because it's so surprising and partly because I went to my death so willingly . . . because what I was dying for mattered so much.

I don't normally see things like that in games. How did you come to those moments? Did you talk about power issues a lot? And where you wanted that fulcrum to be?

> *RK*: Yeah, those discussions all happened on a team level. But I can tell you that from my personal journey—I was on *The Walking Dead* team helping create it, but there was a creative team that was really the nexus of that. Like Sean Vanaman and Jake Rodkin and all those guys. And so I helped with the design for that and I had this lucky nine months where I was observing what they were doing, helping them but really soaking it up.

And so when I went onto *Wolf Among Us*, as a creative lead, one of the first things I did was devise that opening fight where Bigby and the woodsman fight each other. And that was a thing that I put in the story right away because I wanted to dispel the myth that in video games if you have power, that's all you should care about. In most video games, all you want to do is level up your character and get more powerful. And I thought, what if we show this knockdown, slam-bang fight? They're going to come out, burst out of the entire second floor, land on the street.

And then we'll have all these consequences for doing that and show players the aftermath. Like, what happens after the fight? What comes out of power? And for me personally, power and the consequences of power is a totally interesting narrative question and I come back to it over and over. And then I was also creative lead on *Game of Thrones*. And as you noticed there, yes, we do a lot of things with power. Each one of those characters has a different relationship to their power.

With Rodrik, he was powerful, then we stripped his physical power away. And then playing as him, your arc is to find your moral power.

With Mira, she had social power as part of the Forresters and being connected to the right people. And then that was stripped away from her. So then it was, find your political power. And so she had to suddenly play this game in a nest of vipers, where she had to politically outmaneuver her opponents and find her own power politically.

Ethan was a real warning shot to the player that any one of these characters could die. So it was really, really important that Ethan had to die in the first episode, so that you would feel—

> *CT*: I never paid for a second episode so fast, as after that ending. I wanted to get right back in there.
>
> *RK*: Yeah—and then with Asher, it was more like, take a typical video game character, he's a badass mercenary. But now he has to take care of a family. And so you're stripping him of all that, the power of independence and the power of not being tied down and saying, reconnect with your family. What does that look like?

So for me it was lots of conversations about power. And for *Wolf Among Us*, lots of conversations about authority and, what does authority look like? And how do we give players—ultimately, how do we give players the tools to manage these questions, and solve these questions for themselves? We'll put the questions out there and then we'll give you the tools to try and navigate that quandary as best you can.

> *CT*: I was going to ask you, too, about pacing with these games. With Telltale, you had the episodic format, where you have episodes that are maybe an hour and a half. So you could use a more traditional story arc, where you've got rising action and then you have your cliffhanger at the end. But with longer game formats, like you've got with *Vineyard Valley* and with *Hogwarts Mystery*, with these longer arcs, how do you handle the pacing? One of the games I've been revisiting recently is *Alien: Isolation*. And there are a lot of things I love about that game, but I feel the pacing is a real issue because you're involved in these shorter missions that don't feel totally connected to a larger goal. And the sense of building towards this larger climax of the overall narrative, since it's so incredibly long—you lose that to an extent.

How do you handle that in a really long game that's different from what we get in a movie or single episode of a TV show? Where do you put those climactic spikes?

> *RK*: It looks more like a season of television where you would say, "Let's divide it up into X number of episodes. And we'll build an arc over those episodes". So each episode has its own arc and then you look at your season and say, "Okay, and that will also have a season arc". And so paying attention to all those little dramatic, like you say, spikes, is really important. The only tricky part is unlike television or even Netflix, we can't be totally sure that the player's going to play through that in a week or something, so that they would still have it all in their heads. We've got to do a lot of reminding to make sure that if someone's come back to the game and they haven't played it in a month or something, they can still remember where they were. We have to have these little internal reminders.

And in some ways it reminds me of, just personally, the old serials in the 1920s and 30s, where they would have these little episodic things. But they would also have to remind people every time who the characters were and what they were all doing. Because you never knew if someone was just walking into the theater and hadn't seen anything. I always keep a little bit of that in the back of my head, like you have to provide a bit of a mass market approach, where you have to remind people of who are the personalities, and what do they want? In the briefest of ways. So that you can get to that season arc and it'll make sense.

For *Vineyard Valley*, we also have a little graph at the top—it's like a progress bar. So players can watch that progress bar and map what they're seeing dramatically, too, like,

"Oh, I'm almost to the end!" So things are heating up. Or, "I'm about to solve this mystery . . . "

CT: I hadn't really thought about that challenge. Is there a way tech can help you with that? Maybe you know that somebody hasn't logged in and played for a certain amount of time, so you could give more reminders? Or is that just getting overly complicated?

RK: Yes and yes. Tech can tell you exactly when they last logged in. And you can remind them—you can be fully up to date. But I think it can get unwieldy to create enough reminders.

One thing we did on *Vineyard Valley* was to actually put in an in-game character who pops up at the beginning of a season and says, "Hi, I don't know how much you remember about last time, but I can tell you a lot, a little or nothing". And then the player can actually just pick what level of reminder they want.

CT: That's a cool way to do it, to give them some control of that, instead of just forcing them to watch an extended clip or something like that, that they have no control over.

Speaking of watching something, although I did have control over it—I saw a really good GDC talk by Chris Shroyer about the adaptation process that you all went through when you were creating *Wolf Among Us*. And one of the things that he says is that after you created the first iteration of the game, you had some people playtest it, and you felt that it didn't reach a high enough emotional level with players, the level that was set by *The Walking Dead*.

And so there was a redesign. What was the process like, of going in and doing what you could to make it as emotional an experience as possible for players?

RK: Well, the first generation of the game was way more aimed at a plot-heavy, mystery-heavy adventure game. Where you have characters in the game, but really the characters in the game are there to create mystery and puzzle aspects, so that the whole story feels more like a little mystery box that you're unpacking. And the narrative satisfaction is much like in an Agatha Christie novel, getting to the end and going, "Okay, now I understand how everything happened. And all the things that were confusing to me earlier have been explained".

Which, like I say, is very narratively satisfying if that's what you want. But we'd just come out with *Walking Dead*, which was an incredibly emotional approach to storytelling. Each one of those characters represented some kind of love, or fear, or selfishness. So what we did was, we took all the characters and said forget the mystery plot, let's look at what they all want. Why is this a messed-up world for them? What are they dealing with? What would be really interesting to put on screen?

For Bigby, I was really interested in creating a very lonely character, because I hadn't seen a lot of that in video games. I wanted to create someone who's just absolutely lonely and can't make connections. And get that—what's the word I'm looking for? It's excruciating as a human being to feel like you're not wanted by your group. You know what I mean?

CT: I sure do.

RK: Yeah. And I thought that's a place where we could begin and see what kind of story we could tell that would really bring that up, over and over. And then the lead writer on it had this—it was really just a sketch of an idea about people who were getting their heads chopped off. And that mystery of who was killing people became such a lesser concern, in terms of what the story was really about.

That's when we turned the corner into, well, we're really telling an emotional story about the problems Mr. Toad is having and the problems he causes and the problems of the business office and how they're ignoring the people who can't afford to live. And the things that those people are then going to do to survive. And how that debases them.

That became much more like, "Let's tell that story," and less of, "Let's tell a traditional adventure-game type of mystery".

CT: I think it really worked. It's interesting to hear that you switched the focus from what a game would normally do, which is make the mystery central, where people care most about who the killer is, and they're going to find the clues, and that's going to be the narrative they're interested in. But switching the focus to the difficulties that these characters are having that you, as the player, must navigate, that grounds the game in real issues, in reality, even though you've got this fantasy world where it's all happening.

When I think about my experience playing that game, I don't think about the mystery nearly as much. I think about Toad, I think about the farm. And I think about burning the tree. I think about all these things that you can do, all these things that affect people and their often miserable, realistic-feeling lives. When you and your team are designing that—you're working with adapted material—the comics, that are in turn adapted from the old fairy tales, but they're being brought into our modern world, where we are lonely in our modern, disconnected way. Where we're dealing with these really difficult, everyday decisions.

It's interesting material. Was that one of the reasons you were drawn to it, to adapt into a game? Because of those kinds of elements?

RK: I think it was the other way around, for me at least. Because I wasn't familiar with the *Fables* comics until after they'd signed the game and the game had been in development for a while. And then I was brought on for that reboot. And I had to quickly familiarize myself with the comics and the characters.

There are a lot of plot-heavy things that are running underneath Willingham's work. But for me, I was really attracted to the characters. And his personalities feel really Bill Willingham—the personalities that he writes are so strong. And I thought, "I don't know about anybody else, but that's what I'm interested in about this comic". It was like, this comic's about how much these fables hate each other. Which I thought was great drama.

CT: You've explored all sorts of territory throughout your career so far. What's next for you? Where—for you or for games in general—where do you think the interesting places are to go from here?

RK: I'm really interested in the ways that games can help people explore their own psychology. And we scratched the very surface of that at Telltale. And I wish that we could push it further. Even to the point where I know certain types of interactive stories are used to help people with PTSD or addiction issues. And that's fascinating to me. And I think how great would it be to actually have these games teach people about not just the personality quiz thing that we did at Telltale, but really ask, "Who are you, and what motivates you?" And actually get people to learn things about themselves that they didn't know.

Games are such a great Trojan Horse for sneaking in insights about who you are and how you act. Because they're fun and they're engaging and you can just kind of play them and not be thinking too hard about trying to behave yourself. How great would it be if we could then turn that around and use it to give you a real reflection of who you are?

I don't know what form that takes exactly. But it's something I've always—when I look at the horizon, that's where I look.

CT: You're talking about something that's very interesting to me too, partly because I'm in education. And you're talking about a very specific kind of education, which helps people explore their own psyche.

Normally educators think more like, we have things we want to teach students. We want to teach them things that matter in different disciplines, but when I think of what games can teach . . . Okay, I'm going to return to *Alien: Isolation* for a minute here. I was

thinking one of the cool things about *Alien: Isolation* is that—have you ever played that game, by the way?

RK: I played the very beginning and I got killed so many times I couldn't finish it, sadly.

CT: It's totally brutal.

RK: It's so hard.

CT: It's so hard and it's so long. But one of the things you do, as you know, when you get to the Alien part . . . you can't kill the Alien. And it's scary. They really make it scary in there. And your impulse is to run. And if you run, then you have your heavy footfalls and then the Alien hears that and it kills you for sure. And so you always have to be sneaking around very quietly, and hiding.

And my thought was that one of the things this does—and I think other survival horror also does this—is that it teaches you impulse control. It also exposes you to a lot of fear. There's this guy named Mathias Clasen—he's at Aarhus University in Denmark, and he does research into horror media. And his idea is that when you're watching horror movies, playing horror games, reading horror novels or whatever, all this fear you're experiencing is helping you to learn to manage, or calibrate, your own fear response in real life.

But that's still approaching it from the outside. If I say something like, certain teens should play *Alien: Isolation*, for example, to help with impulse control, and to help manage fear in their lives, that's approaching it from the outside. I have an educational goal that I think will be beneficial, and I'm going to teach that to you, or find a game or something else to do that. But you're saying something different, which is, you want to create something where people can explore and learn more about themselves. And grow in a way that's going to help them in some way. Which is a different way of looking at it, with an openness, a sense of agency that not many educators are able to achieve in their work.

Do you know how you might create a game like that? You were saying you felt Telltale had scratched the surface. How might Telltale, if it was still around, or a reincarnation of Telltale, keep pushing that boundary into this almost educational, or health-related game space?

RK: I had an idea that it might be interesting to do a squad-based thing, a game about being in the military. One that used a place that was really problematic, like Afghanistan or Iraq or something like that. And weave a story around that, that had you making these moral choices that you might see in *The Walking Dead*, but in an increasingly realistic setting. So that instead of shooting zombies, if you're in this realistic moral world and you're shooting humans, people you encounter who've had collateral damage from military bombings or other things that weren't played as fantasy as much as—maybe it's a fictional yet realistic story—the way things have really happened, and are still happening.

I always thought that might be a really interesting way to keep pushing into that area of choices in the game. But it could feel very real. Like this might've happened to someone at some point. And what does my behavior teach me about me? And how would I, as you say about impulse control, did I display a lack of empathy that maybe I need to work on in my life?

That kind of thing fascinates me. We didn't really get an opportunity to do that at Telltale. But I would've loved to have gone that direction.

CT: There's a guy named Skip Rizzo at USC—the Institute for Creative Technologies. He's done work on exactly what you're talking about. He's created a couple of things. One is similar to what you're talking about, which is meant to be an inoculation against PTSD—it was developed to train soldiers about to deploy to Iraq and Afghanistan. It's called *STRIVE*, and it's this series of interactive episodes based on real scenarios that vets have gone through. Skip has also put a lot of energy into working with vets who have come back, who are dealing with

PTSD by taking them through guided experiences in VR environments. He's also been working with soldiers around trauma from sexual assault, creating, as I understand it, some very visceral scenarios that invoke horror, in a sense, that are designed to help people who have undergone similar experiences. This kind of exposure therapy sounds wild, but according to Skip, it definitely does not retraumatize people. In many cases, it's the only thing that actually helps.

RK: That kind of research and that kind of therapy is absolutely fascinating to me. Any time I see any mention of it, an article, whatever, I'll read it. It's like you say, it's horrifying how powerful it is. But also fascinating too: could we create therapies that could help people by going to these places that are considered too frightening? But maybe that's what we need to examine.

And video games are a way to do that without having it be real.

CT: *STRIVE* is very Telltale-like, in the sense that there are no simple answers, no easy ways to win. You're just faced with a horrific situation and you're going to have to navigate it as best you can. But there's really no—you don't feel like you can win this thing at all.

STRIVE teaches breathing techniques and other practical ways to sort of decompress and reduce stress, but it's also meant, I think, to familiarize soldiers with horrible situations they may actually encounter, but in a VR environment first, before they deploy. So that when, or if they see it in real life it will come as less of a shock, and they can learn, at least a little through the VR experience, what to expect, and ways to get through it.

You can't just be the good guy in these situations and everything's going to be fine. You've got all these things that you're going to have to balance. In the first scenario, you're in a Humvee and you see this man in the middle of the road—he's tied up and he's bleeding and he looks like he's dying. Your impulse, as the player, is to help. And other soldiers in the Humvee are saying, "We got to go out and give him water at least". Because it's in Iraq and the heat is blazing. But then you're conflicted because you think he might be wired with a bomb.

RK: Yeah.

CT: So you've got to wait for the bomb squad to show up. And there's one guy who's saying, "No, no, no. I'm going to go out to give him water". And then they talk about it after—you have a conversation with a captain after the scenario is over—and he basically says that sometimes, you're going to have to do the opposite of everything you were taught as a kid, in terms of your values. You want to help people in need, you want to protect people who are, or at least seem to be, innocent. All those good things you were taught—you're going to have to do the opposite of sometimes to protect yourself and your fellow soldiers.

RK: That's interesting that you said you have to do the opposite of what you were taught to do as a kid. To be altruistic and to help others. There were many moments during the Telltale times, *Game of Thrones* was a classic example, where we would basically put you in a situation where if you did something that was the nice thing, to help somebody, it would end up screwing you.

There's this scene with Rodrik, when he gets beaten up. And if he rises to anger, it will get worse for his family. And it's like actually training you to maintain your composure and maintain your objectivity, even though you're getting beaten up by somebody that you absolutely hate.

CT: I'll never forget that.

RK: And so, again I feel like that's just scratching the surface. What if we could teach people and inoculate them, so to speak, just against the normal pressures of life? Why shouldn't everybody know how to calm themselves down or take a deep breath? And why shouldn't everyone know how to negotiate an argument and instead of getting emotional and trying to lash out at someone, stop and

figure out what they're trying to tell you. Why shouldn't everyone have those skills?

CT: I totally agree. People call the games you worked on at Telltale games for entertainment, but I feel like they did so much more than that. I feel like it was training. That was one of the things all of us who played them got out of them. We were trained in those skills. We just didn't think of it as training. We thought of it as entertainment because we were doing it by choice.

RK: Yeah.

CT: This is the area where most educational games fall down. They come with these lofty goals. And they are important goals: we're going to teach you how to do all these things that are important. But yet they aren't engaging to play, most of them, because they're made by educators. And it's just not most educators' forte to know how to really engage players because they don't have expertise in storytelling, or in creating exciting game mechanics. I wish that academics and industry people like you could work together on these sorts of things, because again, I think that Telltale games did teach people important things. Have you thought that about the games you worked on at Telltale? About how players may have been changed by them?

RK: No, I never looked at it quite through that frame. But I think you're right. We didn't really look at it that way either at the time, but just had an inkling that there could be something more there.

CT: I think at some level that's what's behind their power. As you were saying, the Rodrik moment, that's the kind of moment that as you play it, you think, "Wait, that's something I could really do in my life, too".

Ryan, thank you so much for taking the time to talk. I think people who are reading the Special Issue will really have fun hearing from you, and getting some of your perspective. It's been wonderful getting a chance to talk to you, after enjoying and learning so much from your work over the years.

RK: This was my pleasure. Talking like this, it's kind of rare that you get to have a quite deep conversation about what games could be and how they operate. A lot of what you usually end up talking about with games is more just about salesmanship. So it was really nice to sit with you and talk more about the impact these games have on us as humans.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

arts

MDPI

Article

The Force Is Strong with This One (but Not That One): What Makes a Successful Star Wars Video Game Adaptation?

Matthew Barr

School of Computing Science, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8RZ, Scotland, UK; Matthew.Barr@glasgow.ac.uk

Received: 24 September 2020; Accepted: 7 December 2020; Published: 16 December 2020

Abstract: The *Star Wars* films have probably spawned more video game adaptations than any other franchise. From the 1982 release of *The Empire Strikes Back* on the Atari 2600 to 2019's *Jedi: Fallen Order*, around one hundred officially licensed *Star Wars* games have been published to date. Inevitably, the quality of these adaptations has varied, ranging from timeless classics such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, to such lamentable cash grabs as the *Attack of the Clones* movie tie-in. But what makes certain ludic adaptations of George Lucas' space opera more successful than others? To answer this question, the critical response to some of the best-reviewed *Star Wars* games is analysed here, revealing a number of potential factors to consider, including the audio-visual quality of the games, the attendant story, and aspects of the gameplay. The tension between what constitutes a good *game* and what makes for a good *Star Wars adaptation* is also discussed. It is concluded that, while many well-received adaptations share certain characteristics—such as John Williams' iconic score, a high degree of visual fidelity, and certain mythic story elements—the very best *Star Wars* games are those which advance the state of the art in video games, while simultaneously evoking something of Lucas' cinematic saga.

Keywords: video games; game studies; adaptation; Star Wars; George Lucas; game reviews; criticism; thematic analysis

1. Introduction

For this *Star Wars* fan, Atari's 1983 *Star Wars* arcade machine, replete with its cutting-edge vector graphics and digitised movie sounds effects, remains a formative experience. Alongside certain later adaptations—*Super Star Wars* (Sculptured Software, Inc. and LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC 1992), *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare Corporation 2003), and *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron* (Factor 5 GmbH 1998)—the original arcade game represents a high-water mark for gaming in a galaxy far, far away. These are personal favourites, of course, dictated by circumstance and tinged with nostalgia. For others of my generation, perhaps *Star Wars: X-Wing* (LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC 1993) and its sequels are the pinnacle of the films' numerous video game renditions. The Maker only knows what Millennials, raised on the turgid cinematic prequels, might consider the quintessential *Star Wars* game: perhaps *Star Wars Episode I: Racer* (LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC 1999) is their equivalent of the *Star Wars* arcade cabinet. But what do these lauded adaptations of the filmic saga have in common? With around one hundred officially licensed *Star Wars* video game titles released to date[1], and many of these already consigned to memory's garbage compactor, why do

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Star_Wars_video_games.

some ludic adaptations of Lucas's space opera stand the test of time? In short: what makes a good *Star Wars* video game?

The late and much lauded American film critic, Pauline Kael, famously stated that "movies are good at action; they're not good at reflective thought or conceptual thinking" (Naremore 2000, p. 59). While the assertion that film cannot portray or inspire reflection is dubious, the implication here is that something is lost in the adaptation of a literary text to film. Video games, on the other hand, embody action; this is a medium often marked by its active (and interactive) nature. Thus, it might be expected that a video game adaptation of an action-heavy movie franchise such as *Star Wars* has the potential for excellence, to capture the essence of the original material. Indeed, Kael went on to say of movies that, "they're good at immediate stimulus"; likewise, video games are frequently described—and sometimes derided—as providing short-term stimulation and little else. This is nonsense, of course: games, like film, are an affective medium (see Ramsay 2020, for example), capable of transcending such ill-informed characterisations. But perhaps the undeniable synergies between the two media might render the process of adaptation from movie to game more straightforward than, say, adapting literature to film. As noted by Hutton and Barr (2019), video game adaptations of great literary works are relatively scarce, for example, despite the increasing visibility of games in the study of adaptation.

Perhaps the relative abundance of movie adaptations is a consequence of the characteristics they share with video games, as distinctly audio-visual forms. Or, maybe, there is simply little commercial imperative to develop video game adaptations of literary works, with no suitably lucrative opportunities for cross-promotion. In fact, direct adaptations of the *Star Wars* movies have typically fared less well with critics than more original titles, falling foul of the rule that dictates that movie tie-ins must exist only to satisfy capitalist desires, and not to enlighten or entertain. *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* for the Game Boy Advance (David A. Palmer Productions 2002) effectively illustrates this point, with Electronic Gaming Monthly's exasperated reviewer describing the movie tie-in as "one of the worst games I've ever played" (Electronic Gaming Monthly 2002). A grievous sin, indeed, for a game based on such a revered action movie franchise.

While *Attack of the Clones* may represent something of a nadir for *Star Wars* video games, the question of what makes a good adaptation may be explored by examining the better reviewed games to be released under the *Star Wars* moniker. To this end, we can look to the review aggregator website, Metacritic, which has conveniently compiled a list of the most critically lauded *Star Wars* titles for the 20 years to 2017[2]. For the purposes of this work, we will consider the top five entries on this list, as reproduced in Table 1.

Table 1. The top five Star Wars games for the 20 year to 2017, according to Metacritic and ranked by 'metascore'.

Rank	Title	Year	Metascore
1	*Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*	2003	94
2	*Star Wars Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II*	1997	91
3	*Star Wars Rogue Leader: Rogue Squadron II*	2001	90
4	*Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*	2002	89
5	*Angry Birds Star Wars*	2012	88

Metacritic scores are an imperfect approach to determining quality, of course, not least because the nuances of the text that accompanies each review are lost. Furthermore, the published scores are not straightforward mean values; the review aggregator employs an opaque weighting algorithm to calculate the Metacritic score based on an assessment of each reviewers' critical clout. Given

[2] https://www.metacritic.com/pictures/best-star-wars-video-games-ranked/.

its web-based origins, Metacritic also tends to represent older titles—those which were reviewed predominantly in print—less comprehensively. Millennials may well express affection for *Star Wars Episode I: Racer*, released to coincide with the arrival of *The Phantom Menace* (Lucas 1999) and, indeed, the venerable *Nintendo Power* magazine awarded the game a robust 8/10 score in its original review. However, despite falling within the timeframe for inclusion in Metacritic's report, the paucity of *Episode I: Racer* reviews—at least as far as the review aggregator is concerned—means that the game falls beneath the threshold for calculating a Metacritic score at all.

It is worth noting, too, that the Metacritic report was published in 2017. Nevertheless, the only significant *Star Wars* game released since then is *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* (Respawn Entertainment LLC 2019), which currently enjoys a Metacritic score of 81 on Xbox One and PC. *Star Wars Battlefront II*, released in 2017, languishes a few parsecs behind with a mean Metacritic score of 66 across the three platforms on which it was released. For context, the remainder of Metacritic's top ten includes several series that already feature in the top five: *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (BioWare Austin, LLC 2011) [Metacritic score 85], *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords* (Obsidian Entertainment, Inc. 2004) [86], and *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron* (Factor 5 GmbH 1998) [85]. Somewhat unexpectedly, the top ten also includes two *Episode 1* spin-offs: *Star Wars: Episode I Battle for Naboo* (LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC 2000) [84] and *Star Wars: Starfighter* (LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC 2001) [84]. It is fair to say, however, that the design of these latter titles is firmly rooted in the conventions laid down by the *Rogue Squadron* games, already accounted for in the top five.

The focus of this paper, then, is on the critical response to apparently successful *Star Wars* adaptations. As such, the analysis must be considered within the wider context of games journalism, a vocation that, according to Foxman and Nieborg, lacks a "common set of shared professional values", with game critics relying instead on their "personal background" to inform their criticism (Foxman and Nieborg 2016). More problematic is Nieborg and Sihvonen's suggestion that games journalists act as little more than an extension of game publishers' marketing departments; this despite individual journalists' anxieties about their symbiotic relationship with the industry they purportedly exist to critique (Nieborg and Sihvonen 2009). Consalvo presented an equally denigratory view of games publications, noting that "many have been derided as nothing more that either public relations rags for the game industry or fanboy publications that lack serious journalism" Nieborg and Sihvonen (2009, p. 37).

However, while scholars may question the integrity of games criticism, it is clear that not every release is greeted with slavish enthusiasm; certainly, those *Attack of the Clones* reviews will have shifted very few units for the publisher. Furthermore, it is entirely possible to discern which aspects of the games reviewers felt warranted praise. This is useful in itself, as we attempt to determine what makes these *Star Wars* adaptations better than others, even if the reviews are unduly effusive. So, what follows is a broad thematic analysis of the reviews for each of the five games named above. Based on these reviews, a number of themes are identified in relation to the qualities of each adaptation, including the games' visuals, audio, gameplay, and story.

2. Who's Scruffy Looking?

Reading through the reviews of each of these adaptations, it is difficult not to be struck by the emphasis critics place on the visual qualities of the games. Perhaps adding grist to Pauline Kael's mill, the impressive nature of the original movie's visual effects was similarly emphasised in the reviews of the time, with legendary Chicago Tribune movie critic Gene Siskel stating in his 1977 review of the film that "*Star Wars* is not a great movie in the sense that it describes the human condition. [. . .] What places it a sizable cut above the routine is its spectacular visual effects" (Siskel 1977). It is reasonable to assert, then, that dazzling visuals and technically impressive effects have always been a part of what defines *Star Wars*.

The games are no exception, with many reviews praising the visual fidelity on display: "Graphically, *Jedi Outcast* is fantastic" (Butts 2002); "From a graphics perspective the game is gorgeous" (Stevenson 2003); "It goes without saying that the first thing you'll notice about *Rogue Leader* is the game's amazing graphics" (Bedigian 2001); "the game's graphics are stupendous, amazing, superb, and outstanding—choose your favorite" (Casamassina 2001).

This critical praise generally falls into one of two categories: admiration for the underlying technical achievements or delight at the degree to which the look of the movies has been recreated. The discussion of the former quickly, and perhaps inevitably, descends into hyperbole-inflected technical jargon. In the GameSpot review of *Rogue Leader*, for example, Ricardo Torres framed the developers' visual achievements in terms of their mastery of the hardware on which the game runs:

> "Making use of nearly every bell and whistle that the GameCube hardware has to offer, *Rogue Leader* is a jaw-droppingly gorgeous game. All craft in the game feature extremely generous polygon counts that are enhanced by special effects such as bump mapping, self-shadowing, and high-resolution textures." (Torres 2001)

The IGN review of the same game also beheld beauty in the developers' technical prowess, again expressed in terms of polygon count and computationally expensive visual effects:

> "Polygons are pushed well into the millions to form some of the most detailed ship and character models, and everything is exquisitely lit and shadowed by the artists. But there are also crazy real-time lighting effects, casting shadows and self-shadowing objects. And every texture seems to be bump-mapped, or dirt-mapped, or reflection-mapped—or whatever." (Casamassina 2001)

Noting with excitement that "blaster explosions are all light-sourced", the Adrenaline Vault review of *Dark Forces* suggested that the game demands to be played using the latest hardware technology:

> "It seems obvious that the graphics in this game are exceptional. Although a 3D-accelerated card is not necessary for playing Jedi Knight, the full effect cannot be appreciated without such technology. Even so, the graphics in this game will probably be the best you have ever seen displayed on your system." (Brumbaugh 1997)

While it is clear that games may be appreciated simply for their capacity to harness technology in the service of art, there is an additional dimension to consider where the object is to recreate another visual form. As the reviews analysed here demonstrate, the effectiveness with which video game adaptations can reconstruct the visual flavour of the movies is an important factor to consider.

As Keiron Gillen remarked in his Eurogamer review of *Rogue Leader*, "visually this is *Star Wars* as you saw it on the big screen". Describing that game as "one of the most visually impressive videogames ever created", the Cinescape review of the GameCube classic also alluded to a film-like visual experience:

> "Factor 5 has managed to faithfully recreate the movies. They've provided hundreds of TIEs on screen with no slowdown, lighting effects to the maximum, and some visuals that are so reminiscent of the films that you'll do a double take. Rogue Leader is a sensory barrage." (Stevenson 2001)

Writing for GameZone, Louis Bedigian was equally effusive about developer Factor 5's ability to capture the visual flair of the movies:"The *Star Wars* universe is represented with startling near perfection to the movies we all know and love so much." (Bedigian 2001).

Rogue Squadron is far from the only game considered here to have been acclaimed for its graphical fidelity to the movies. The Gaming Age review of *Dark Forces*, for example, remarked that our favourite characters were rendered and animated in such detail that they "look like their movie counterparts". The GamePro review of *Jedi Outcast* (Raven Software Corporation 2002) also conveyed the aesthetic pleasures of seeing the familiar elements of the original trilogy rendered in such recognisable detail:

> "Visually, Jedi Outcast looks amazing. Everything is as Star Wars as it should be; droids shamble and shine, stormtroopers flip and dance when they get shot, and blasters spurt color-coded beams across the battlefield. You'll recognize TIE fighters in their hangar and grin with satisfaction as a realistic-looking Lando Calrissian greets you from his prison cell." (Darth Destroyer 2002)

As noted, several of these reviews alluded to the significance of the hardware on which the games run, in relation to that hardware's graphical capabilities. In referring to *Rogue Leader*'s use of the GameCube's "every bell and whistle", Torres, for example, was gesturing towards that game's status as a launch title—and graphical showcase—for the new Nintendo console. Others referred directly to the ever-evolving specifications of PC graphics cards. This paper is not positioned within the recent tradition of platform studies, as set out by Bogost and Montford (2007) and expanded upon by scholars including Apperley and Jayemane (2012). However, a more holistic view of these games' critical reception would necessarily include some consideration of the cultural and technological context in which they were released. Apperley and Parikka (2015) discussion of platform studies and media archaeology asked whether the significance of a gaming platform may be fully understood without taking into account the success of its launch titles. By corollary, might it not also be the case that the circumstances of a game's critical and commercial reception may only be understood in relation to the platform on which it is released?

3. Will You Shut Up and Listen to Me?

As the Cinescape review of *Rogue Leader* noted, audio plays arguably just as important a role in evoking *Star Wars* as the visuals might, "besides killer gameplay and graphics, what else can you expect from a *Star Wars* game? Killer music and sound effects" (Stevenson 2001). Apparently, the sounds and visuals are indelibly linked in many critics' minds, as the Eurogamer review illustrates:

> "Scenes from the films are remodelled in the crisp game engine and look almost perfect, accompanied by John Williams' inimitable score and virtually any of the films' sound effects you might care to mention."

Both John Williams' iconic score and the instantly recognisable sound effects created by Ben Burtt and the team at Industrial Light and Magic seem integral to any successful video game adaptation of *Star Wars*. As the GameZone review of *Jedi Outcast* put it, "The music just never gets old. The crackling slash of sabers just never gets tired" (RGerbino 2002). Meanwhile another critic made clear their expectations when it comes to the aural quality of a *Star Wars* title, "Of course, *Jedi Outcast's* sound is perfect, but, with this being a *Star Wars* game, you knew that already" (Darth Destroyer 2002). The GameZone review of *Jedi Outcast*, however, provided a more nuanced justification for these high expectations:

> "The sounds within the game put you right into Kyle's shoes. Once you hear the familiar sound of your saber you will fall in love. John Williams' music once again consumes every ounce of emotion whether you are sneaking around trying to evade your enemies or if it's full pitched battle." (RGerbino 2002)

The authenticity of the sound effects has been commented upon by many critics, "Appropriately, the lightsabers, doors, guns and ships all make convincing vwings, shhps, fahtows and chughghs" (Butts 2002); "Every blaster shot, chirp, and squeak in the game is as authentic as it gets" (Torres 2001); "All the typical blaster sounds, ion engine whines and explosions that you are used to hearing have been included. *Rogue Leader* sounds great" (Stevenson 2001); "The sound effects are equally impressive, with each weapon sounding exactly like they should" (Majaski 1997).

Where relevant, the quality of the voice acting has also been praised, especially where the original actors have been coaxed back to lend their vocal talents, "Factor 5 actually rustled up actor Denis Lawson, who played Wedge in the movies, to provide in-game voice" (Torres 2001). Yet, the presence of the actors featured in the films is not a prerequisite; rather, superior voice acting, as with any game,

helps ensure that the corresponding characters are believable and engaging, "Hours of expertly done voice-over help make character interaction incredibly engaging throughout *Knights of the Old Republic*" (Kasavin 2003); "In fact, all of the voice acting is top notch—even the throwaway lines and little conversations within the missions are delivered well" (Butts 2002); "Voice actors do the entirety of the dialog in the game, and the voice acting is top-notch" (Stevenson 2003).

Inevitably, John Williams' score has received particular attention—and lavish praise—from critics, underlining the role these compositions play in ensuring the games feel like authentic *Star Wars* experiences, "One of the best parts of *Jedi Knight* is the music. It's spooled directly off the CD and is straight from the movies" (Majaski 1997). A pair of *Dark Forces* reviews further illustrate the reverence for Williams' score:

> "The music is unbelievably good, having been composed by John Williams and drawn exclusively from 20 years' worth of commissioned work for the Star Wars trilogy. The result is a score that succeeds at covering the entire spectrum of a grand adventure story; it is a lush, suspenseful and heroic body of work." (Campbell 1999)

The Adrenaline Vault review, in which the author suggested that "if I could give the Musical Score category more than 5 Stars, I would", describes how the familiar musical motifs enhanced their gameplay experience:

> "The first thing the devoted Star Wars fan will notice regarding the music is that the actual John Williams score is used throughout the game. There were times that the "Imperial March" theme would begin playing as I entered a new area, and I became worried that something was hanging around the next corner for which I might not be prepared!" (Brumbaugh 1997)

This near-Pavlovian response to the games' musical cues is further explained by Josh Campbell, writing for Gamezilla:

> "I suppose it should be pointed out that to some people, especially those who are roughly my age and have had this music burned into their gray matter since their formative years, it simply means adventure the same way a red light means Stop." (Campbell 1999)

Several titles have successfully supplemented Williams' work with original compositions:"During [*Rogue Squadron II*], the soundtrack alternates between known pieces of music from the films, as well as original music from the game, adapting and blending on the fly" (Torres 2001). However, it is notable that reviews for the venerable *Knights of the Old Republic* (*KOTOR*) have contained certain heretical statements, which imply Williams' compositions are not an essential feature of a *Star Wars* adaptation:

> "Some of the audio is what you'd expect from a Star Wars game, though Knights deserves credit for featuring a mostly original (yet very subdued) soundtrack, which is a nice change of pace from the ubiquitous John Williams score." (Kasavin 2003)

And, indeed:

> "While all the Star Wars-related sound effects are here, Bioware chose not to use the John Williams score. This is a good thing, because very little of this game has anything to do with the movies. The score is absolutely excellent, and is perfect in the game." (Stevenson 2003)

KOTOR is not entirely bereft of Williams' motifs—the opening crawl, featuring the classic fanfare is present and correct—but the game was almost wholly scored by *The Elder Scrolls* composer, Jeremy Soule. Thus, the best-reviewed *Star Wars* game considered here is that which features the lowest proportion of the film composer's seminal score. That said, *KOTOR* is noteworthy for its length: players can expect to spend perhaps 40 h completing BioWare's opus, while a title such as *Rogue Squadron II* may be completed in less than a quarter of that time. *KOTOR* is also the least direct adaptation of the movies considered here: as the Cinescape review pointed out, the game has little to do with any of the

films and the inclusion of themes associated with particular characters (Leia's Theme, Yoda's Theme, the Imperial March) would be nonsensical. With nearly two days' worth of action to score, and a story that predates the events of the original movies by at least a couple of millennia, it is clear why BioWare looked beyond Williams' body of work in this instance. Perhaps *KOTOR* is the exception which proves the rule that a good *Star Wars* game must make liberal use of John Williams' orchestrations.

4. Control, Control! You Must Learn Control!

Gameplay is a broad and somewhat elusive term, for which there are no convenient analogues in cinema: while the audio-visual qualities of both video game and film may be assessed using somewhat congruent terminology, the interactive nature of the former medium requires an alternative vocabulary. Gameplay may comprise everything from the nature of player interactions to the design of the challenges that players will face, including the underlying rules and systems. It may also refer to the feel of the game in the player's hands, and it is this aspect—how the games are controlled—that we examine next. Consider the following excerpt from the Cinescape review of *Rogue Leader*:

> "What better way to toss gamers into the action than to start you off on the attack on the first Death Star? You could, of course, take a training run in a T-16 Skyhopper, but what's the fun in that? Actually, the trial run isn't really necessary; the controls are top-notch." (Stevenson 2001)

Some discussion of the games' controls—here described as "top-notch"—is present in many of the reviews. But what constitutes a "top-notch" control scheme? The GameZone review of *Rogue Leader* related the quality of the controls to the feel of the movements they elicit:

> "The controls are excellent. All of the movements feel just right—you never feel like something is out of place or that it doesn't belong. When you hop into an X-Wing, you're really hopping into an X-Wing!" (Bedigian 2001)

Eurogamer found the *Rogue Leader* controllers "over-responsive", suggesting that the "feel of the system conflicts with the game's principle virtue: its authenticity". However, IGN's analysis of the same game's controls was similarly based on the feel of the movement, and was entirely positive in its appraisal of how the ships handle:

> "Flight control has overall seen significant improvements. The sway and reaction of ships is tighter and consequently more in tune with the movement of the crafts from the movies. Overall, ships handle fast and furious and the level of control is consistently tight and responsive." (Casamassina 2001)

Meanwhile, the GamePro review of *Jedi Outcast* identified lightsaber control—surely a fundamental feature of such a game—as the only weak spot in an otherwise satisfactory control scheme:

> "You haven't done it all until you've fought two 'saber-wielding evil Jedi and defeated one with sheer skill before choking the other to death with the Force. Unbelievable. And … surprise! It all controls rather well with only the chaos of the lightsaber duels to detract from a feeling of total control." (Darth Destroyer 2002)

While a game's controls can initially appear to be a mundane concern, it is apparent that this is an important factor to consider in relation to video game adaptations of *Star Wars*. The controls are the player's conduit, the means by which they may demonstrate mastery of the ships and weapons that are such essential features of Lucas' galaxy. If the handling of an X-Wing feels inauthentic, or the control of a lightsaber is clumsy in its implementation, the player experience is compromised.

As noted above, gameplay can encompass a great deal more than the control scheme offered by a game. It can also refer to the game mechanics, and this is where the reviews of *Angry Birds Star Wars* (Rovio Entertainment Oy 2012)—largely absent from the preceding analysis of the best *Star Wars* games' audio-visual accomplishments—offer some relevant insight. The gameplay mechanics on which the

Angry Birds franchise is built are well-established: a series of deceptively simple challenges, wherein the player must fling ill-tempered birds at the blocky structures erected by their mortal enemies, in order to destroy them. These mortal enemies are pigs, for . . . reasons. Easily dismissed as a mere "casual" game, *Angry Birds* has not only proven popular enough to spawn its own spin-offs, movies, and merchandise, it has also garnered praise for its surprisingly deep and engaging gameplay. It is on these foundations that the *Star Wars* iteration of the franchise built and, according to the critics, it does so admirably. Indeed, the critical consensus is that the addition of characters and weapons inspired (however loosely) by the *Star Wars* movies only enhances the series' winning gameplay—as exemplified by the Game Informer review of the game:

> "Gravity remains the weapon of choice to crush the evil Pig Empire, but the birds can also tap into the Force to magically move objects, swing lightsabers to cut through debris, and volley laser fire to take out multiple pigs at once. These new mechanics fit nicely with the series' well-established slingshot gameplay, and are tapped to create a variety of strategy-intensive levels that are among the most challenging and rewarding I've seen in an Angry Birds game." (Reiner 2012)

Writing in The Guardian, Stuart Dredge agreed, suggesting that the addition of the space saga's tropes "moves the *Angry Birds* gameplay on a notch, particularly when lasers are involved" (Dredge 2012). Likewise, the Polygon review described how the judicious incorporation of the Force—a concept so quintessentially *Star Wars*—creates further bird-based gameplay possibilities:

> "The Force also serves the enemy pigs. Darth Vader-pig levitates platforms in certain stages, and taking him out releases the objects, raining down on helpless Empire-pigs. The Force isn't just a gimmick in Angry Birds Star Wars, it's a layer of strategy." (Plante 2012)

In much the same way that the *Angry Birds* adaptation of *Star Wars* advanced an existing gaming franchise, there are further indications that the best *Star Wars* games can further refine and expand upon established gaming genres. Praising the "ingeniously designed" levels, the Gaming Age review of *Jedi Knight* labelled the game "one of the greatest first-person action/adventure games ever made", before concluding that "this game redefines the genre" (Majaski 1997). Describing the gameplay as *Jedi Outcast's* "real star", the GamePro review of that game suggested that "adding Jedi powers to an already-great FPS [first-person shooter] engine is a stroke of genius" (Darth Destroyer 2002). In doing so, the developers opened up new game design possibilities that enliven the already crowded FPS genre:

> "Playing Jedi Outcast is a pleasure in and of itself. Raven has displayed great creativity in this title, especially in level layout and puzzles. The Force powers gave the developers a lot of leeway in what they could do with puzzles, and by and large, the challenges you'll face are more than your average push-box-jump-over-chasm FPS puzzles." (Darth Destroyer 2002)

Other innovations identified in the very best *Star Wars* games include *KOTOR* being bestowed the title of "the first successful Western-style console Role-Playing Game [RPG] of the modern age" by Eurogamer, on the basis that it "takes the design beliefs of the Western RPG form and then works out how to present them best for playing whilst sprawled on a sofa in your living room" (Gillen 2003). *KOTOR*, with its novel dark side/light side mechanic, also paved the way for so-called 'karma' systems in subsequent video game blockbusters, such as *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007):

> "Knights lets you play as a really nasty character if you so choose, and that's certainly part of the fun. It's also an interesting aspect of gameplay, considering a big part of the theme is how Jedi constantly run the risk of falling to the dark side—indeed, you'll probably often be tempted to see what happens if you pick the evil dialogue options rather than the good ones, if only because most RPGs simply don't let you make these types of decisions. Certain key points in the game will play out very differently depending on the decisions you make, creating lots of replay value." (Kasavin 2003)

5. You Have No Place in This Story. You Come from Nothing. You Are Nothing. But Not to Me

While, in some instances, video games may be bereft of any meaningful story, narrative is an important aspect of many titles. A compelling plot might serve to enrich the player experience through the Aristotelian complications, reversals, and revelations that may underpin any dramatic narrative. Or a story may serve simply as a means of tying together the action, a narrative justification for the next round of puzzle solving or wanton destruction.

When it comes to video game adaptations of another narrative form, however, perhaps it is especially important to consider the qualities of the story. Certainly, this is an aspect that many of the reviews of these games have touched upon, to varying degrees. The GameZone review of *Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*, for example, merely noted that "the storyline is gripping" (RGerbino 2002). Reviewing that same game, the IGN review was more specific in its praise:

> "Everything is tied together with a tightly written, mature plot. Kyle's motivations and the progression of the story are all handled with a touch that is at once both subtle and unrelenting. There's a nice balance and sense of pace here." (Butts 2002)

Meanwhile, several critics have remarked upon the perfunctory but perfectly adequate nature of the games' attendant story. In the Gamezilla review of *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II* (LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC 1997), for example, Josh Campbell described the tale of vengeance that drives the game's narrative, noting that such a tale is "not exactly complex or intriguing on its own, but suitable enough to frame a video game around" (Campbell 1999). Similarly, the Gamespot review of *Dark Forces II* was somewhat critical of the "cliched" storyline but conceded that "it does a fine job of providing links between the levels" (Dulin 1997). Elsewhere, another Gamespot review—concerning *Rogue Squadron II*—offered nothing but praise for the "much more tightly focused" story that connects each of that game's levels, noting that "the tighter narrative complements the missions and makes for an extremely cohesive and satisfying experience, as every mission flows very naturally into the next" (Torres 2001).

Other critics, however, waxed lyrical about the narrative elements of the game in question. In Craig Majaski's review of *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II*, for example, the game's storytelling was described in revered, overtly cinematic terms:

> "One of the crucial elements that separate Jedi Knight from the rest of the overcrowded PC gaming market is its story. At the beginning of the game and between each level you'll be treated to cinema scenes. These mini-movies are extraordinarily done and help propel the story along through its twists and turns." (Majaski 1997)

Meanwhile, the Gamespot review of *Knights of the Old Republic* suggested that tales of the conflict between the light side and the dark—as captured in that game's unique mechanics—are intrinsic to the franchise:

> "The game's greatest accomplishment is its focused yet open-ended plot progression, which gives you the freedom to play as either a morally good or evil character, or shades in between. The struggle between good and evil is of course central to Star Wars and manifests itself extremely well throughout this outstanding game." (Kasavin 2003)

This perceived freedom is limited in nature, usually reducing the player's options to one of two binary choices or a single, middling option; in truth, player agency is restricted by the algorithmic constraints of the game's programming. MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2007) termed this figment of freedom "illusory agency", noting that game designers "can seek to grant as much freedom as they can or they can seek to disguise the fact that possible actions are limited", in order to convince the player that their choices matter. Wardrip-Fruin et al. (2009) further refined the notion of agency in games "as a phenomenon, involving both the game and the player, that occurs when the actions players desire are among those they can take as supported by an underlying computational model". This definition perhaps better accounts for the perceived open-endedness of *KOTOR*'s plot: the narrative choices

offered to players are constrained by the game's "computational model", but such constraints are of little consequence when they align sufficiently with the player's intentions for their character.

An important component of any story is the characters that bring it to life, and this holds true for the *Star Wars* adaptations considered here. Writing for Eurogamer, Kieron Gillen noted the care with which the (nonplayer) characters in *Knights of the Old Republic* have been developed:

> "Far more interesting is how these characters are turned into actual characters—an all the more powerful blow aimed at the heart. Beautifully written, carefully defined and memorable, this is a cast who engender sympathy and empathy. Everyone in the world will fall in love with Assassin/Translator droid HK-47 (In short: Imagine if C-3P0 was a misanthrope who wanted to kill everyone), but you'll all find personal favourites." (Gillen 2003)

In his Gamespot review of the same game, Greg Kasavin suggested that "character interaction really is the best thing about *Knights of the Old Republic*", while "the game's main storyline isn't remarkable and eventually boils down to squaring off against your standard bad guy"[3]. Nonetheless, according to Kasavin, the player will "encounter so many great little subplots and characters along the way that this really won't matter" (Kasavin 2003). Expanding on the importance of well-developed characters, Kasavin also described how meaningful character interaction elevates the experience:

> "You'll always be an active participant in the storyline, rather than a passive observer. You don't just read, watch, and listen to a lot of text, cutscenes, and dialogue—your character is constantly invited and required to make difficult decisions, and that's ultimately the most entertaining, impressive, and rewarding aspect of the game." (Kasavin 2003)

Star Wars, as a franchise, has a long association with transmedial storytelling (see Guynes and Hassler-Forest 2018) with video games playing a significant role in expanding the *Star Wars* storyworld, or the larger "narrative universe" (Mejeur 2018). All of these stories take place within a shared world, although Ryan—citing *Star Wars* as an example—suggested there is a distinction to be made between cases in which "they represent the same world and in which cases they project related but distinct worlds" Ryan (2014, p. 42). Regardless of whether the storyworld presented in a *Star Wars* game might be considered part of the same canonical universe as the movies[4], players nonetheless benefit from what Jenkins has termed "additive comprehension" Jenkins (2006, p. 123). That is, players' enjoyment of these games is enhanced by their prior knowledge of the *Star Wars* storyworld.

6. It Will Be Just Like Beggar's Canyon Back Home

As we have seen, much of the commentary on the games' audio-visual qualities has related to the degree to which the games look and sound "just like the movies". Some of the more enthusiastic comments include GameZone's Louis Bedigian, who said of *Rogue Leader*, "Enter the battlefield (or should I say 'enter the movie'?) and prepare to be blown away again" (Bedigian 2001). The Eurogamer review of that game was similarly effusive ("*Rogue Leader* is *Star Wars* the way you remember it") while the IGN review noted, "*Rogue Leader* sounds like *Star Wars*. Perfectly" (Casamassina 2001).

Indeed, discussion of the games' faithful reproduction of the movies has often been intertwined with admiration for the technical adroitness on display:

> "The game plays out like the movie, with Luke running interference over the Death Star and eventually flying down the trench. There's no slowdown, tons of fighters on screen, and an incredible sense of speed." (Stevenson 2001)

---

[3] One could argue, of course, that the *Star Wars* movies frequently boil down to confronting a "standard bad guy", as is befitting of a story inspired directly by myths that typically culminate in such a confrontation.

[4] This is a question made all the more complicated by the transmedial strategy embarked upon by Disney following their acquisition of the *Star Wars* property—see (Brown 2019).

The GameZone review of *Jedi Outcast* also praised the technical artistry that brings the game's characters to life with greater fidelity than was, at that time, previously possible to achieve:

> "I have never seen the Star Wars universe recreated with such attention to detail. This game is the closest thing we have to actually living inside the film. Each character model is so well done and I even found the cut scenes interesting." (RGerbino 2002)

Noting that *Rogue Leader* "represents the closest recreation of the *Star Wars* universe that we have yet to see", however, the IGN review of that game acknowledged that the technology was simply a means to an end:

> "But none of these tech feats mean anything to the end player. What matters is that all of these effects come together to quite realistically mimic the real thing—and that's an accomplishment that is close to monstrous." (Casamassina 2001)

Frequently alluded to by critics is the idea that the best *Star Wars* adaptation are capable of immersing the player in this familiar but fantastic world, "The way it submerges you in George Lucas' universe and takes you on a wild ride is unmatched" (Stevenson 2001). For Gamespot's Greg Kasavin, this sense of immersion extended to feeling as though the player is a part of this world:

> "It's one of the only Star Wars games to truly make you feel at times as though you're a key player in and a part of this unique and beloved sci-fi setting. You'll get to do all the sorts of stuff that you've seen and enjoyed in the Star Wars movies, and you'll get to emulate any of your favorite characters' personalities and actions over the course of the game." (Kasavin 2003)

The concept of immersion has proven surprisingly slippery in game studies. In the seminal *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray referred to immersion as "the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place", comparing this experience to "a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool" Murray (1997, p. 98). However, McMahan usefully differentiated between the frequently conflated terms immersion and presence, the latter being defined as "the feeling of being there" McMahan (2003, p. 68). While care must be taken not to ascribe unintended meaning to reviewers' words, it seems reasonable to assume that it is the feeling of being in the *Star Wars* universe—the feeling of presence—that underpins much of the appeal of these adaptations. Indeed, each of the dimensions of presence in video games conceptualised by Tamborini and Bowman (spatial presence, social presence, and self-presence) may be identified in the reviews considered here Tamborini and Bowman (2010, pp. 88–89).

Several reviews have alluded to the joy of the familiar, as we have already seen in the discussion of the games' audio and video. The game designers were, of course, leveraging players' familiarity with the characters, ships, and locations to ensure that the games feel like *Star Wars*, a point not lost on Craig Majaski in his review of *Dark Forces II*:

> "If the familiar locales aren't enough to get you into the Star Wars universe, the different enemies from the movies are here in full force to remind you. You'll recognize many of the characters and vehicles. From Stormtroopers and R2 Units to the AT-ST and Tuskens, you'll be pleased to know they're all in here." (Majaski 1997)

The IGN review of *Rogue Leader* made a similar point, but also offered praise for the noncanonical scenarios created specifically for the game:

> "Each scenario is overflowing with Star Wars character. The Attack on the Death Star, which we mentioned above, is somewhat of a dream come true for many fans as it perfectly re-creates the experience from the film. But there are of course many other areas to explore and battle through, each just as appealing." (Casamassina 2001)

This suggests that successful *Star Wars* adaptations are not necessarily constrained by the movies and, as noted above, arguably the best-regarded video game adaptation of the saga, *Knights of the Old Republic*, largely eschewed its celluloid progenitors. Reviewing *KOTOR* for Gamespot, Greg Kasavin was keenly aware of the advantages of doing so, "*Knights* arguably lives up to the *Star Wars* name better than any other *Star Wars* property in years, including the last two theatrical films" (Kasavin 2003). Kieron Gillen's Eurogamer review neatly summarised how *KOTOR* succeeds while maintaining a studied distance from the movies, touching upon the idea that the mythic structure of the story is sufficiently familiar to conjure up the feel of *Star Wars:*

> "It feels more like Star Wars than anything else has in living memory, and does so by moving the focus back four thousand years. And—would you believe it—things are very much as they are in the "contemporary" Star Wars universe. This gives the game the strength of familiarity of theme, a mythic arc as you realise you're rooting around in the prehistory of the world and due to distance from the actual films, freedom to create a plot as galaxy-spanning as anything that was committed to celluloid." (Gillen 2003)

In many cases, critics directly commented on the quality of the adaptation, as in the IGN review of *Rogue Leader*, "It's taken more than 20 years, but a development studio has finally captured the spirit and beauty of the *Star Wars* trilogy movies and crammed it all into one action-packed game" (Casamassina 2001). The relationship between the game and the original source material was also considered in the Eurogamer review of *Rogue Leader*:

> "We often compare games to movies, but from the archetypal star screen introduction right the way through to the game's monumental climax, this is the ultimate accompaniment and tribute to those three original Star Wars movies we all cherish." (Bramwell 2002)

Meanwhile, the GameSpot review of *Dark Forces II* rather downplayed the challenge of adapting the beloved franchise into a video game:

> "Designing a game set in the Star Wars universe seems like a no-brainer. The look and sounds of the game—from the Imperial gray of walls, to the elephantine squeal of a TIE Fighter engine, to the squeaky "pew, pew" of a blaster shot—are already set in stone, so designers just need to think of a genre and use the existing elements to build a game." (Dulin 1997)

Still, as the swathes of substandard movie tie-ins clearly demonstrate, creating a good game based on a movie is not so straightforward. As alluded to in the GamePro review of *Jedi Outcast*, a glut of relatively poor *Star Wars* games were released around the turn of the century, from *Masters of Teräs Käsi* (LucasArts 1997) to *Flight of the Falcon* (Pocket Studios 2003):

> "Bucking recent trends in Star Wars gaming, Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast is good. Really good. It's a balance of license and gameplay that brings honor to the Star Wars name and real Jedi action to your PC." (Darth Destroyer 2002)

Certainly, the presence of the *Star Wars* license alone is no guarantee of quality, as unfortunate owners of the blatant cash grab known as *Attack of the Clones* for the Gameboy Advance will attest. Thus, as the Polygon review of *Angry Birds Star Wars* made clear, expectations were not generally high when news of this unholy alliance emerged:

> "Such a high-profile combo may trigger a gag reflex in the throats of gamers and Jedi alike, and understandably so. Both have been thoroughly spurned by insipid tie-ins and cash grabs. But Rovio's latest flies to the tender core of such cynicism and blasts it to stardust, with a payload of creativity, playfulness and reverence for the beloved sci-fi classic." (Plante 2012)

The Guardian review of the *Angry Birds* spin-off expressed similar reservations, before concluding that *Angry Birds Star Wars* is simultaneously the best entry in the *Angry Birds* franchise, and the best *Star Wars* adaptation in some time:

> " ... Scepticism about such a partnership is understandable: when the world's biggest entertainment brand ever meets the most popular brand of the mobile apps era, the danger is compromise: a game so hemmed in by brand guidelines that it forgets to be fun." (Dredge 2012)

As many of the critics cited here have implied, a good *Star Wars* adaptation must first and foremost be a good game. For example, the IGN review of *Jedi Outcast* suggested that "not only is this one of the greatest *Star Wars* games I've ever played, it's one of the best action games period" (Butts 2002), meanwhile, the Gamespot review of *KOTOR* made a similar point, "*Knights* is both an outstanding RPG in its own right and an excellent tribute to the *Star Wars* source material" (Kasavin 2003). Referring to LucasArts' early 1990s heyday, when Lucasfilm's games studio offshoot was casually churning out classics such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games 1990), *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* (LucasArts 1992), and, of course, *Star Wars: X-Wing* (LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC 1993), Keiron Gillen had this to say in his *KOTOR* review:

> "The irony is before LucasArts lost anyone with a designer's brain in the company, they made some frankly astonishing videogames [...] Because I love videogames, I love the great Star Wars games that came from this period, because they're great videogames—not because they're from that Galaxy a Long, Long way away." (Gillen 2003)

Stating that "some games don't need a license to be good", the Eurogamer review of *Rogue Leader* emphatically refuted the idea that players are blinded by the application of a veneer of Lucas' magic to an otherwise unremarkable game:

> "Some have said that it wouldn't be as good without the Star Wars aspect, that it's a fairly mediocre space combat game, but to me that's a ridiculous argument. Rogue Leader is the embodiment of Star Wars in a videogame. That is the point." (Bramwell 2002)

The Game Informer review of *Angry Birds Star Wars* made a similar claim, suggesting that the spin-off is the series' best, "and that's not just because it's *Star Wars*" (Reiner 2012). According to Reiner, the introduction of elements lifted from the movies has enhanced the game, resulting in "the series' most creative levels to date". The flip side of this argument is that the (over)use of familiar *Star Wars* tropes can actually harm a game, as illustrated by this excerpt from IGN review of *Jedi Outcast:*

> "The game's actually prompted a few discussions around the office about the use of licenses within games. [...] the game uses a lot of the conventions (clichés if you're on the other side of the argument) of the movies. I tend to think you're sort of expected to know that going in. I mean, what's a Star Wars game without a garbage masher level?" (Butts 2002)

7. Wars Not Make One Great!

So, what does make a *Star Wars* video game adaptation truly great? There is little doubt that the aesthetic qualities of a *Star Wars* game are an important consideration: in keeping with the movies on which they are based, the video game adaptations are generally expected to provide audio-visual spectacle. But, more than this, the sounds and images serve to conjure up memories of the films, as so many of the reviews considered here have suggested. Music, in particular, is known to evoke strong emotions, and strong emotional responses are apt to form into powerful memories. Humans also have an innate capacity to mentally encode images and recall memories associated with imagery much more efficiently than those encoded as text. This is unsurprising, since we have used pictures to convey meaning for many millennia longer than we have used the written word to capture our thoughts. The deployment of familiar sounds and imagery, then, is undoubtedly vital to any video game adaptation that seeks to evoke our memories of the movies on which they are based.

However, while there is evidence here to support Brown and Krzywinska's assertion that critics place the greatest emphasis on games' audio-visual qualities Brown and Krzywinska (2009, p. 92), it is also apparent that many critics consider story to be an important aspect of any *Star*

Wars adaptation. Somewhat unexpectedly, adherence to the plot of the original movies is identified as a positive in several reviews of *Angry Birds Star Wars*, for example, with the Game Informer review noting that "the biggest surprise in *Angry Birds Star Wars* is its faithfulness to *Star Wars'* story. The game follows *A New Hope's* arc surprisingly well" (Reiner 2012). That the story elements of these adaptations should be privileged in this way this should not come as a surprise, however. The original movie's arc (and, to some degree the overall structure of the original trilogy) was very deliberately modelled on the hero's journey, as identified by Joseph Campbell in his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 1949). In fact, Lucas has often referred to Campbell's influence on the development of his space saga, describing the academic's 1949 book as having a "wonderful life force" (Henderson 1997, p. 7). However, in defining the structure of the journey undertaken by the archetypal hero in myth, Campbell's work is not only ingrained in *Star Wars,* but also in how video games tell stories. The hero's journey, or monomyth, is a well-worn template for game writers and, while such a formulaic approach to the creative process has its detractors, some version of Campbell's monomyth continues to be taught to aspiring game designers. In *Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams on Game Design* (Rollings and Adams 2003), for example, the authors distil Campbell's original 17-step journey down to a more manageable and generalisable nine. There is the call to adventure, the meeting with a mentor, and an assortment of "test, allies and enemies", culminating in a final ordeal: all of the key elements of Campbell's journey are present in, and readily applied to, the narrative structure of a game. George Lucas' galaxy is also populated by archetypes other than the hero. Like Campbell, Lucas has drawn heavily on the works of analytical psychologist Carl Jung, who identified a number of archetypal forms that he claimed were embedded in our collective unconscious. This shared understanding, buried in humans' unconscious mind, is also where Campbell's notion of the monomyth is also said to reside. It is possible, then, for the *Star Wars* movies and their ludic offspring to share a mythical ancestry, where the family resemblances are not merely aesthetic but, instead, relate to the underlying nature of the story being told. This may partially explain how a game such as *Knights of the Old Republic*, set thousands of years prior or the original film, can *feel* like *Star Wars* without slavishly recreating every celluloid story beat. Clearly, not every game that borrows from Campbell's monomyth is related to *Star Wars*—far from it. However, a *Star Wars* adaptation that draws upon the same archetypal themes as the films seems more likely to evoke the essential qualities of the source material.

The question then arises of whether direct adaptations (including *Angry Birds* and portions of the *Rogue Squadron* games) or titles that merely take inspiration from the films (such as *Knights of the Old Republic*) fare best. Brown and Krzywinska, for example, confidently stated that "the best movie-games are able to communicate something new about their parent texts on a thematic level, rather than simply parroting the events of the film" Brown and Krzywinska (2009, p. 93). And yet, with so many well-received *Star Wars* games featuring a recreation of the famous Death Star trench sequence from the original movie, including the 1983 arcade cabinet, *Super Star Wars*, and *Rogue Squadron II*, one could be forgiven for thinking that this scene alone was essential to the *Star Wars* video game experience. Indeed, Morton (2018) used the many ludic recreations of the trench run scene to examine the possibilities for transmedia play in *Star Wars* adaptations, arguing that "transcribing the Death Star trench run from *A New Hope* to one of the many video games it appears in changes its meaning: the importance of the event is gleaned from one's knowledge of the film" Morton (2018, p. 106). Thus, even this most direct adaptation of one of the most recognizable scenes from the movie is altered in its translation to video games form. Indeed, as Sommerfeld (2012) noted, many of the "direct" adaptations—such as the *Super Star Wars* titles that corresponded to each of the original trilogy films—take serious liberties with the source material. Can a title in which Luke single-handedly takes down a Sarlacc pit monster even be considered a direct adaptation of the original film?

Meanwhile, *Angry Birds Star Wars* arguably hews closer to the source material, at least in terms of story structure, than many other adaptations—but is it adherence to the template Lucas laid down in the 1977 movie that sets this small screen blockbuster apart? Probably not, given critics' insistence that the *Star Wars* license alone is no guarantee of quality. Certainly, games that aim to recreate specific

films—the much-maligned movie tie-ins—are amongst the worst reviewed titles of all. Meanwhile, the very best *Star Wars* games appear to be those that advance the state of the art, be it in redefining the Western RPG, as in the case of *KOTOR*, or elevating a previously successful genre to new heights, as with *Angry Birds Star Wars*. Perhaps this is why a game like *Fallen Order* fails to make the critical cut: with gameplay borrowed directly from other game franchises (*Uncharted*, *Dark Souls*), maybe Electronic Arts' most recent adaptation is simply too derivative to be distinctively *Star Wars*. But this is where the delineation between an excellent game and a superior adaptation becomes problematic: is a faithful reproduction of the *Star Wars* universe more important than engaging gameplay or novel game mechanics?

Perhaps, given the critical failure of the final entry in the cinematic Skywalker saga, it is fitting that now, at the very end, we return to the dismally received Game Boy Advance adaptation of *Attack of the Clones*. What this game demonstrates—perhaps more so than any other in the *Star Wars* (ion) canon—is that the ability to use the license is insignificant next to the power of good gameplay when it comes to adapting *Star Wars*. The truth is, the qualities of a great *Star Wars* game are largely the same as those of any great video game.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: Thank you to Eva Barr for her fastidious proofreading.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Apperley, Thomas, and Darshana Jayemane. 2012. Game Studies' Material Turn. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9: 5–25. [CrossRef]

Apperley, Thomas, and Jussi Parikka. 2015. Platform Studies' Epistemic Threshold. *Games and Culture* 13: 349–69. [CrossRef]

Bedigian, Louis. 2001. GameZone.Com—Star Wars Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader Review—GameCube Game. *GameZone*. December 6. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20030216231147/http://gamecube.gamezone.com/gzreviews/r18631.htm (accessed on 8 December 2020).

BioWare. 2007. *Mass Effect*. Redmond: Microsoft Game Studios.

BioWare Austin, LLC. 2011. *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. Windows. Redwood City: Electronic Arts, Inc.

BioWare Corporation. 2003. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. Xbox. San Francisco: LucasArts.

Bogost, Ian, and Nick Montford. 2007. New Media as Material Constraint: An Introduction to Platform Studies. Paper presented at the First International HASTAC Conference, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA, April 19–21; pp. 176–93.

Bramwell, Tom. 2002. Star Wars Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader. *Eurogamer (blog)*. May 9. Available online: https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/r_rogueleader (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Brown, Douglas. 2019. To Disney Infinity and Beyond - Star Wars Videogames Before and After the Lucasarts Acquisition. In *Disney's Star Wars: Forces of Production and Promotion*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, pp. 123–35. Available online: https://www.uipress.uiowa.edu/books/9781609386436/disney%E2%80%99s-star-wars (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Brown, Douglas, and Tanya Krzywinska. 2009. Movie-Games and Game-Movies: Towards an Aesthetics of Transmediality. In *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*. Edited by Warren Buckland. AFI Film Readers. New York: Routledge.

Brumbaugh, Jim. 1997. Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II—Adrenaline Vault Featured Game. *Adrenaline Vault*. October 14. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/19971014050458/http://www.avault.com/featured/jedi_knight/review.asp (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Butts, Steve. 2002. PC Games: Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast Review. *IGN*. April 1. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20030802190624/http://pc.ign.com/articles/356/356503p1.html (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Campbell, Joseph. 1949. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York City: Pantheon Books.

Campbell, Josh. 1999. Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II. *Gamezilla*. October 12. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20020617010912/http://www.gamezilla.com/review.aspx?review=7512 (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Casamassina, Matt. 2001. Star Wars Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader—IGN. *IGN*. November 16. Available online: https://uk.ign.com/articles/2001/11/16/star-wars-rogue-squadron-ii-rogue-leader (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Darth Destroyer. 2002. Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast Review for PC on GamePro.Com. *GamePro*. March 27. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20040811092324/http://www.gamepro.com/computer/pc/games/reviews/22041.shtml (accessed on 8 December 2020).

David A. Palmer Productions. 2002. *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*. Game Boy Advance. Calabasas: THQ Inc.

Dredge, Stuart. 2012. Angry Birds Star Wars—Review. *The Guardian*. November 8. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/appsblog/2012/nov/08/angry-birds-star-wars-review (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Dulin, Ron. 1997. Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II Review for PC at GameSpot. *GameSpot*. October 9. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20030620103107/http://www.gamespot.com/pc/action/jediknightdarkforces2/review.html (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Electronic Gaming Monthly. 2002. 'Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones'. *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, July 12.

Factor 5 GmbH. 1998. *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron*. Windows. San Francisco: LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC.

Foxman, Maxwell, and David B. Nieborg. 2016. Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Games Coverage and Its Network of Ambivalences. *Journal of Games Criticism* 22. Available online: http://gamescriticism.org/articles/foxmannieborg-3-1 (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Gillen, Kieron. 2003. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic. *Eurogamer (blog)*. September 12. Available online: https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/r_starwarskotor_x (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Guynes, Sean, and Dan Hassler-Forest, eds. 2018. *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, Available online: https://www.degruyter.com/view/title/543353 (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Henderson, Mary. 1997. *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*. New York: Bantam Books.

Hutton, Margaret-Anne, and Matthew Barr. 2019. Introduction: A Literary Studies/Games Studies Conversation. *Games and Culture* 15: 751–56. [CrossRef]

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kasavin, Greg. 2003. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic. *GameSpot*. July 15. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20030718100036/http://www.gamespot.com/xbox/rpg/starwarsknightsoftor/review.html/ (accessed on 15 December 2020).

Lucas, George. 1999. *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox.

Lucasfilm Games. 1990. *The Secret of Monkey Island*. San Francisco: Lucasfilm Games.

LucasArts. 1992. *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*. San Francisco: LucasArts.

LucasArts. 1997. *Star Wars: Masters of Teräs Käsi*. PlayStation. San Francisco: LucasArts.

LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC. 1993. *Star Wars: X-Wing*. PC. San Francisco: LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC.

LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC. 1997. *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II*. Windows. San Francisco: LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC.

LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC. 1999. *Episode I: Racer*. Windows. San Francisco: LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC.

LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC. 2000. *Star Wars: Episode I Battle for Naboo*. Nintendo 64. San Francisco: LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC.

LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC. 2001. *Star Wars: Starfighter*. PlayStation 2. San Francisco: LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC.

MacCallum-Stewart, Esther, and Justin Parsler. 2007. Illusory Agency in Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines. *Dichtung Digital* 37: 142.

Majaski, Craig. 1997. PC Reviews—Jedi Knight. *Gaming Age*. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20041030151753/http://www.gaming-age.com/reviews/archive/old_reviews/pc/jedi/ (accessed on 8 December 2020).

McMahan, Alison. 2003. Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games. In *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron. London: Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 67–86.

Mejeur, Cody. 2018. Chasing Wild Space: Narrative Outsides and World-Building Frontiers in Knights of the Old Republic and the Old Republic. In *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling*. Edited by Sean Guynes and Dan Hassler-Forest. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 199–210. [CrossRef]

Morton, Drew. 2018. "You Must Feel the Force around You!": Transmedia Play and the Death Star Trench Run in Star Wars Video Games. In *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling*. Edited by Sean Guynes and Dan Hassler-Forest. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 101–14. [CrossRef]

Murray, Janet H. 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Naremore, James. 2000. *Film Adaptation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Nieborg, David B., and Tanja Sihvonen. 2009. The New Gatekeepers: The Occupational Ideology of Game Journalism. 9. Available online: http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/the-new-gatekeepers-the-occupational-ideology-of-game-journalism/ (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Obsidian Entertainment, Inc. 2004. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II—The Sith Lords.* Xbox. San Francisco: LucasArts.

Plante, Chris. 2012. Angry Birds Star Wars Review: Great Shot, Kid. *Polygon*. November 8. Available online: https://www.polygon.com/2012/11/8/3615374/angry-birds-star-wars-review-great-shot-kid (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Pocket Studios. 2003. *Star Wars: Flight of the Falcon*. Game Boy Advance. Calabasas: THQ.

Ramsay, Debra. 2020. Liminality and the Smearing of War and Play in Battlefield. *Game Studies*. 20. Available online: http://gamestudies.org/2001/articles/ramsay (accessed on 15 December 2020).

Raven Software Corporation. 2002. *Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*. Windows. San Francisco: LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC.

Reiner, Andrew. 2012. Angry Birds Star Wars Review—A New Hope for Angry Birds. *Game Informer*. November 13. Available online: https://www.gameinformer.com/games/angry_birds_star_wars/b/ios/archive/2012/11/13/angry-birds-star-wars-review-a-new-hope-for-angry-birds.aspx (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Respawn Entertainment LLC. 2019. *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*. Various. Redwood City: Electronic Arts, Inc.

RGerbino. 2002. GameZone.Com—Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast Review—PC Game. *GameZone*. April 8. Available online: https://www.gamezone.com/gzreviews/r18815.htm (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Rollings, Andrew, and Ernest Adams. 2003. *Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams on Game Design*. Indianapolis: New Riders.

Rovio Entertainment Oy. 2012. *Angry Birds: Star Wars*. IOS. Espoo: Rovio Entertainment Oy.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2014. Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology. In *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. Edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 25–49.

Sculptured Software, Inc., and LucasArts Entertainment Company LLC. 1992. *Super Star Wars*. Super Nintendo. Yokohama: JVC Musical Industries, Inc.

Siskel, Gene. 1977. 'Star Wars' Flashes with Space Wizardry. *Chicago Tribune*. May 27. Available online: https://www.newspapers.com/image/?clipping_id=39389179 (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Sommerfeld, Seth. 2012. Gaming in a Galaxy Far, Far Away: The History of the Expanded Worlds, Canon Conflicts, and Simplified Morality of Star Wars Video Games. In *Myth, Media, and Culture in Star Wars: An Anthology*. Edited by Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, pp. 124–34.

Stevenson, James. 2001. Cinescape—Home—Editorial. *Cinescape*. November 20. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20030904130748/http://www.cinescape.com/0/editorial.asp?aff_id=0&this_cat=Games&action=page&type_id=&cat_id=&obj_id=31158 (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Stevenson, James. 2003. Cinescape—Home—Editorial. *Cinescape*. July 31. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20051201105200/http://www.cinescape.com/0/editorial.asp?aff_id=0&this_cat=Games&action=page&obj_id=39277&type_id=270331&cat_id=270834&sub_id=271912 (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Tamborini, Ron, and Nicholas D. Bowman. 2010. Presence in Video Games. In *Immersed in Media: Telepresence in Everyday Life*. Edited by Cheryl Campanella Bracken and Paul Skalski. London: Routledge, pp. 87–109.

Torres, Ricardo. 2001. GameSpot: GameCube Reviews: Star Wars Rogue Leader: Rogue Squadron II Review. *GameSpot*. November 8. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20011120051714/http://www.gamespot.com/gamespot/stories/reviews/0,10867,2823605,00.html/ (accessed on 8 December 2020).

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, Michael Mateas, Steven Dow, and Serdar Sali. 2009. Agency Reconsidered. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*. London: Brunel University.

arts

MDPI

Article

Writing for Emotional Impact in Film and Video Games: Lessons in Character Development, Realism, and Interactivity from the *Alien* Media Franchise

Christian Thomas

Writing Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA; cthomas@writing.ucsb.edu

Abstract: This article compares Ridley Scott's film Alien (1979) with Creative Assembly's video game *Alien:* Isolation (2014), which is based on Scott's film. Guidance for academics who teach creative writing—as well as for working screenwriters and video game narrative designers—emerges in the comparison, particularly with regard to the importance of developing strong yet vulnerable main characters who put themselves in danger in order to protect other characters with whom they have meaningful relationships. Examples from other media, including Ira Levin's *Rosemary's* Baby (1967), James Cameron's Aliens (1986), Telltale Games' *The Walking* Dead (2012), and Naughty Dog's *The Last of* Us (2013), are also discussed as they relate to larger principles involved in crafting sympathetic characters, realistic settings, and compelling gameplay for media within the horror and sci-fi genres.

Keywords: creative writing studies; screenwriting; video game narrative design; interactive writing; horror film; horror video games; survival horror; character development; sci-fi; thriller

Citation: Thomas, Christian. 2021. Writing for Emotional Impact in Film and Video Games: Lessons in Character Development, Realism, and Interactivity from the *Alien* Media Franchise. *Arts* 10: 20. https://cdoi.org/10.3390/arts10020020

Academic Editor: Russell J. A. Kilbourn

Received: 28 August 2020
Accepted: 18 March 2021
Published: 24 March 2021

When game development company Creative Assembly (2014) released the video game *Alien: Isolation*, creative lead Alistair Hope's goal was to take inspiration from Scott (1979) film *Alien*, and to "re-establish it [the Alien] as the ultimate killer . . . to re-Alien the Alien, to restore it to be something that seemed really incredible and extremely terrifying" (Price 2014). In order to achieve this goal of creating a newly energized Alien that would terrify players, Creative Assembly decided to focus their main efforts on creating a "one-on-one struggle", a game of "cat-and-mouse, hide and seek" where, as the title suggests, players are isolated from other characters (aside from the Alien, that is) for much of the game. While this approach has undoubted strengths—especially in terms of the tension and fear it can induce in players—the singular focus on a lonely struggle results in a game that is sparsely populated with characters who rarely have meaningful interactions. By contrast, the film *Alien* features an ensemble of richly developed characters who have complex relationships with each other. The main character in *Alien*, Ellen Ripley, is a strong yet emotionally vulnerable heroine who strives to protect others within a storyworld that feels realistic, even mundane in many ways—a backdrop which entices the audience to buy into the movie's more fantastic elements. Other films and video games that are related to *Alien* and *Alien: Isolation*—such as James Cameron's Aliens (1986), Telltale Games' *The Walking* Dead (2012), and Naughty Dog's *The Last of* Us (2013)—take a strikingly similar approach to the character development and worldbuilding employed in *Alien.* This highly successful approach can be considered for potential use by screenwriters and video game narrative designers working in horror and related genres, and for study by academics who research and teach creative writing, film, and video games.

In the beginning of the video game *Alien: Isolation*, we, as players, are introduced to the player-character we will inhabit—a woman named Amanda Ripley, who is the daughter of the film *Alien*'s protagonist, Ellen Ripley—in a brief, two-minute cutscene. In this passive, cinematic scene, we watch Amanda as she receives an offer from an android named Samuels to accompany him to the space station Sevastopol, where the flight recorder

of the *Nostromo* (Ellen Ripley's ship in *Alien*) is being kept. This cutscene does a lot of heavy lifting, character-wise, in a short span of time. In it, Samuels interrupts Amanda while she is welding, an act which communicates important information about her character: she is a tough, blue collar worker who knows how to handle a welding torch and probably other tools which we will later encounter in the game. (James Cameron takes a similar approach in the beginning of *Aliens* by having Ellen Ripley use a power loader; this helps to express her tough, capable character and sets up Ripley's use of the power loader when she later battles the Alien Queen Mother.) When the android introduces himself, saying, "I'm Samuels; I work for the Company", Amanda turns away from him and goes immediately back to welding. This gesture gives us a strong sense of her disdain for the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, which we know from the *Alien* films to be utterly ruthless and inhuman. But Samuels gets Amanda's attention again, and ours, by adding, "It's about your mother. We think we may have found her, Amanda." These words dangle the idea that we may actually be able to meet Ellen Ripley, in some way, in the game—although if players reflect on the notion, many may remember that in Cameron (1991) *Aliens: Special Edition*, which the game would be unlikely to contradict, Ellen Ripley is found floating in her shuttle two years after the death of her daughter Amanda, making it impossible for them to meet. It is not surprising, then, that soon after Samuels says the shocking words, "We think we may have found her", he explains the fine print: that it is not Ellen Ripley herself, but only the flight recorder of her ship, the *Nostromo,* that has been found and is being kept on Sevastopol Station. Samuels goes on to say that he knows Amanda has been in the region because she is still searching for her mother, and that if she comes to the space station with him, she might be able to find "closure".

Although closure may not be the most ambitious goal the writers (Dan Abnett, Dion Lay, and Will Porter) could have come up with, it has some emotional resonance, partly because players will likely be fans of the original film and of its heroine, Ellen Ripley. Samuel's words, "It's about your mother", also reflect an important motif that pervades the *Alien* films. As Keogh and Jayemanne (2018, p. 9) note, *Alien: Isolation* "engages with a mother/daughter complex central to the films but typically ignored by videogame adaptations", which begins to add an important dimension to the game, and helps it to rise above emotionally flatter predecessors, such as *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (Gearbox Software 2013).

The manifestations of the mother/daughter complex in *Alien* media are often horrific, such as the existence of the Queen Mother in *Aliens*, or the way the Xenomorph gestates inside its victims in a terrifying perversion of motherhood. The *Alien* films' most important engagement with the mother/daughter complex, however, likely belongs in the realm of character development. Figures like Ellen Ripley and Newt in Cameron's *Aliens*, for example, have a strong mother–daughter bond which creates intense emotional stakes that are at the core of the film's success: according to Weise and Jenkins (2009), *Aliens* sets a "high standard for affective intensity" not because the monsters look scary and the action scenes are explosive, but specifically because Cameron creates "a complex set of interrelationships between his characters, firmly establishing the emotional stakes in every sequence, and thus combing character actions and reactions in such a way that we never lose track of what the events mean for the people involved" (Weise and Jenkins 2009, p. 112). In short, the emotional stakes created by relationships between characters like Ellen Ripley and Newt are the biggest driver of affective intensity in *Aliens*.

The writers of *Alien: Isolation* wisely take a similar approach in the beginning cutscene of the game, tapping into the relationship between the player-character Amanda Ripley and her mother Ellen. In addition to offering players an emotional goal (powered by the mother–daughter bond) the cutscene also helps us, as players, to attach to Amanda Ripley by allowing us to see a vulnerable moment in which she expresses her grief. This comes in the form of Amanda's reaction to Samuels's words, "I know why you're working in the region where she went missing. You're still looking, aren't you? I've been cleared to offer you a place on the *Torrens* if you want to come along [to Sevastopol Station]. Maybe there'll be some closure for you". As Samuels speaks, Amanda responds only with

her expression, and our hearts go out to her[1]—literally, in fact, since as we take in her grief-stricken expression (see Figure 1), the sound of a beating heart slowly rises in the background, getting faster. This subtle audio cue heightens our sense of vicarious grief and also of excitement as the adventure begins.

Figure 1. Amanda Ripley's face expresses empathy-inducing grief as Samuels says, "Maybe there'll be some closure for you."

The two-minute cutscene moves the story along at breakneck speed, comprising the entire first act, at least as measured by the stages of the monomyth, or Hero's Journey—a story form identified by Campbell (1949) in his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and famously used by George Lucas while writing the third draft of the screenplay for the 1977 film *Star Wars* (Rinzler 2007, pp. 46–47).[2] According to Christopher Vogler—who, as a story analyst for Disney in the mid-1980s, popularized the Hero's Journey among Hollywood executives and screenwriters (Iacobo 1994)—the first act of the Hero's Journey in a film should be robust, consisting of four distinct stages: The Ordinary World, The Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, and Meeting with the Mentor (Vogler and McKenna 2011).

The two-minute opening cutscene in *Alien: Isolation* quickly completes the first stage of the Hero's Journey by giving us a glimpse of the grief-filled, ordinary world of welder Amanda Ripley—a world which, according to Vogler, should stand in contrast to the place where the hero will end up at the end of the story (p. 35). In this case, we may assume that the storytellers have in mind an end point involving the peace of mind that comes from closure, perhaps within the context of a newly forged mother–daughter bond.

The second stage, The Call to Adventure, is represented by Samuel's invitation to go after the flight recorder from her mother's escape shuttle, while the third stage, Refusal of the Call, is completely skipped, as Amanda immediately accepts Samuels' offer. There is an opportunity missed here, since the Refusal of the Call is a place where the heroine can show the internal struggle involved with facing an intensely emotional problem. The fourth stage, Meeting with the Mentor, which represents the final stage of the first act in Vogler's scheme, is also skipped in *Alien: Isolation*. It may seem at first glance that Meeting with the Mentor should only apply to certain types of stories, such as George Lucas' 1977 film *Star Wars*, which successfully features a mentor figure in the character of Obi-Wan

[1] In "The Walking Dead, Mirror Neurons, and Empathy", Madigan (2012) highlights the importance of featuring facial expressions in horror video games (specifically Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead*) by drawing on Marco Iacoboni's research into mirror neurons. Madigan writes, "When we see Lee Everett or any of the other *Walking Dead* characters grimace in disgust, our mirror neurons for grimacing activate as if we were making that expression ourselves. And because of that inner imitation, we actually *do* feel the emotion to some degree and understand what the other is feeling".

[2] The Hero's Journey has been applied not only to film, but to video games by numerous scholars (see, for example, Delmas et al. 2007; Ip 2011; Lebowitz and Klug 2011; Pugh 2018) and game designers (see Dunniway 2000; Bates 2005; Costuic 2016). *Alien: Isolation* lends itself particularly well to analysis through the lens of the Hero's Journey and other cinematic narrative techniques because the game's roots in film and the components (including a substantial and important narrative) that it shares with *Alien* and *Aliens*.

Kenobi. But as Vogler describes, the Meeting with the Mentor need not involve a mentor in the literal sense: in this stage, the hero can also reach "within to a source of courage and wisdom" (Vogler and McKenna 2011, p. 33). Getting to see Amanda struggle with facing the possibility of discovering that her mother is truly dead—dashing her greatest hopes—might help us, as players, to feel a greater sense of the emotional stakes involved, to bond with Amanda and buy into the story at a deeper level.

One reason for the exclusion of Refusal of the Call and Meeting with the Mentor may be that the writers of *Alien: Isolation* felt pressured to minimize the time spent in cutscenes, since players can be impatient with passively watching cutscenes instead of getting to actively play the game. Part of the problem here is that cutscenes are too often the default place for "story" in games, possibly because game writers habitually draw on the way characters are developed in film.

But while cutscenes can undoubtedly be effective in delivering story, character and plot development can (and should, in many cases) occur outside of these passive cinematic moments, too. In *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012), for example, which won the BAFTA Games Award for Story in 2013, the player makes choices that determine what the player-character says and does; in doing so, the player develops their character through the act of playing, as opposed to passively watching character development occur in cutscenes.[3]

The writers of *The Walking Dead* do employ passivity, though, but by offering "passive choices", in an interesting contradiction of usual notions of player agency. In fact, some of the most poignant moments in *The Walking Dead* are a consequence of the player-character choosing to say nothing (dialog choices in *The Walking Dead* usually include a silent or passive choice, indicated by an ellipsis), but this is extremely perilous for players, since saying nothing usually brings negative consequences. Other powerful moments in *The Walking Dead* feature choices where the player can save only one of two non-player characters (NPCs) who are in danger: the power of these moments lies in the fact that the choices are tied to serious consequences for *relationships involving characters* that the player has come to care deeply about.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but players can be relatively unconcerned about their own player-character, since when the player-character in a video game dies, they often immediately return with no adverse effects at all. This dynamic of player-characters easily coming back to life happens in *The Walking Dead*, but with the significant caveat that non-player characters can be hurt (emotionally and physically) or can die and leave the game for good—and consequences like these create high stakes for players who are emotionally attached to NPCs. These stakes are further raised in *The Walking Dead* with the addition of a timer, indicated by a bar that quickly shrinks (see the white bar above the player choices in Figure 2). If the timer expires before the player makes a choice, then the silent or passive choice is triggered, usually bringing with it the least desirable consequences.

Dialog choices in *The Walking Dead*, such as those pictured in Figure 2, lead to separate narrative branches that offer differences in the kind of "person" a player can choose to act in the game: violent toward others, for example, or kindly; again, these traits that players choose have meaning and emotional impact only in the context of character relationships, which are central to both story and gameplay in *The Walking Dead*. In one of the game's scenes, for example, the player-character (Lee) is asked by another character (Kenny) how the two of them should deal with an aggressive man who is threatening Kenny's son, a little boy named Duck. The choices available to the player (for Lee to act out) are pictured in Figure 3 and represent a range of approaches tied to very different character traits: from the kind and peaceful "Reason with him" option, to the violent "Kick his ass" choice.

[3] Although *The Walking Dead*—as well as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013), which is discussed later—both differ from *Alien: Isolation* in certain respects, the comparison is useful because of their similarities (all three games cross into the horror genre, and all include important narrative components).

Figure 2. Dialog choices for the player-character, Lee (right), in conversation with Clementine (left), including the silent option (indicated by the ellipsis in lower right) and white timer bar in Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead*.

Figure 3. Options for the player-character, Lee (center) for dealing with an aggressive man (right) who is threatening Kenny's son, Duck.

The emotional stakes of the choice in Figure 3 are dependent on the player's feelings about the characters, which the writers of *The Walking Dead* exert significant control over. The writers know that many of us, as players, will naturally want to protect children; and they know that many of us will also naturally want to help our friends if aggressively attacked. The writers of *The Walking Dead* tap into both of these prosocial impulses by having Kenny—who previously befriended the player-character, Lee—beg us for help in dealing with the aggressive man attacking Kenny's young son, Duck.

How we help, though, is up to us. Again, our options are to intervene (with varying degrees of intensity), to do nothing (represented by the ellipsis), or to reason with the man threatening Duck. The option that is most faithful to the character the writers have established for Lee is probably the "Kick his ass" choice, since we learned early in the game that Lee is a convicted murderer. (In the first scene of the game, Lee is in the back of a police car heading to prison for the crime of murdering a man who was having an affair with his wife. The zombie apocalypse intervenes, the police car crashes, and Lee is freed.)

There is a potential problem involved with players who may not choose to role-play as Lee in a way that is faithful to the character that the writers have established. Many players may want to be "nice" on general principle, or because they think acting kindly

will help them to succeed in the game. In the choice shown in Figure 3, this would mean choosing to "Reason with him" instead of taking a more extreme, even violent approach to protecting Kenny's son, Duck. Making the "nice" choice could mean undermining Lee's established character, and destroying a meaningful character arc for Lee, which could supply a good deal of satisfaction to players as they experience that arc being completed. Simply put, the issue here is that the moment the writers of *The Walking Dead* ceded control of the development of Lee's character to players, they stripped themselves of the ability to develop Lee in a way that might have included an emotionally moving character arc. For example, Lee might have begun the game as a hurt, angry, and violent man, but then learned to heal and control his rage through a slow process spanning the five episodes that comprise the game. But such a character arc would *require* Lee to act angrily and perhaps violently throughout much of the early part of the game.

This is actually the approach taken by writer Neil Druckmann in Naughty Dog's *The Last of* Us (2013), which won several BAFTA Games awards in 2014, including for Story and for Best Game. In the opening sequence of *The Last of Us*, the main player-character, Joel, loses his young daughter in the outbreak of the zombie apocalypse. The game then fast-forwards twenty years, and we, as players, see that Joel has become a deeply bitter and angry man. But Joel slowly learns to overcome his grief throughout the rest of the game, as he is forced to journey across the country with a teenage girl named Ellie. For most of the game, Joel is gruff, and sometimes outright cruel to Ellie. Many players, given an option (as in *The Walking Dead*), would never choose to treat a girl who is depending on them coldly or cruelly, except perhaps the few who are staunchly committed to role-playing as Joel in the way the writer establishes him—as grieving and angry.

But being forced to play a bitter and angry character for much of the game has a significant upside: by the end of the game, Joel completes an extremely satisfying character arc as his emotional wounds heal and he becomes a caring and protective father figure to Ellie. The actions of the new Joel—who treats Ellie as his own beloved daughter by the end of the game—take place in scenes and dialog that the player has no control over, just as in the beginning of the game when Joel is angry and bitter. It is the writer, Druckmann, who retains the power to develop Joel's character throughout the game, and he uses it to deliver what many consider to be an extremely fulfilling character arc and overall narrative experience. Player agency in *The Last of Us* does not reside in the realm of character development, but chiefly in the ability to move Joel (and Ellie, at times) throughout different environments, to collect raw materials and craft items, and to dispatch undead and living enemies.

The kind of agency that the writers of *The Walking Dead* cede to players makes it difficult for them to give Lee a sharp character arc like Joel has in *The Last of Us*. But *The Walking Dead* writers do manage to give a well-defined character arc to eight-year-old Clementine, who we, as Lee, protect and teach throughout the five episodes of *The Walking Dead*. By the end of the game, her arc is completed, and in a minor way, ours is too, as Lee: Clementine, with our guidance, has learned crucial skills (such as how to kill the undead walkers), and we know that she will be able to take care of herself in the post-apocalyptic world. We, as Lee, have prepared her, and so have completed our main goal of helping her. This, by the way, is a very different goal than the one we as players are given in *Alien: Isolation*, which is merely to survive, alone. Protecting other characters—helping *them* to survive—is a far more compelling goal, provided, of course, we care about those other characters. In *The Walking Dead*, the writers coax us into caring very much about Clementine, and we are able to redeem Lee for the murder he committed through the act of protecting, teaching, and parenting Clementine. In the process, however, we have been bitten by a walker and are close to "turning" at the end of the game. The last meaningful choice in *The Walking Dead* is whether to tell Clem to shoot us, so we will not turn into a zombie, or tell her to run away, sparing her that traumatic experience.

And here is where we also see the terrible choice the writers themselves faced when working on that scene: of the two options in *The Walking Dead*'s ending sequence, watching

Clem struggle to find the courage to not just take the easy out and escape, but to bravely raise the gun and kill us—her father-figure, Lee—in an act of mercy, is by far the most intense and satisfying (in a deeply emotional, tragic sense) for the player to experience. But the writers committed to giving players significant control over the ending. This means, on one hand, that some players experience a significantly less satisfying finale. On the other hand, all players are partially responsible for the ending they experience, which likely increases the overall level of emotional engagement in the game. In either case, the emotional involvement players feel in the ending of *The Walking Dead* ultimately depends on how much they come to care about the character they have the closest relationship to in the game—Clem.

The writers of *Alien: Isolation* begin with an attempt at developing characters that players care about: the game begins, after all, with a fairly promising (though truncated) cutscene which sets up a potential character arc for Amanda as a woman who will gain closure, or healing from the grief caused by the loss of her mother. The writers could have then taken another step in that direction by offering a new mother figure in the self-assured Captain Diane Verlaine (see Figure 4), whose ship takes Amanda and Samuels to Sevastopol Station.

Figure 4. Potential mother figure, Captain Diane Verlaine, of the transport vessel *Torrens*.

Although that relationship with Verlaine never materializes, there is potential for players to create a meaningful bond with another character, Taylor, who accompanies Amanda and Samuels on the voyage. Just after the introductory cutscene fades to black, leaving us with the sound of a pumping heartbeat and the yearning to meet Ellen Ripley, we awake inside a hypersleep chamber. As we open our eyes and lift ourselves out of the chamber, we see the world from the perspective of Amanda. This awakening acts as a smooth transition from the cutscene—where we watch Amanda from a third-person perspective—to the first-person perspective we will inhabit for most of the game. The first-person perspective may add to immersion in a sense but deprives the player of seeing the facial expressions of the player-character for the rest of the game (barring the occasional cutscene), which reduces the player's sense of emotional attachment to the player-character.

After we wake up as Amanda, we dress ourselves and walk to the kitchen area of the transport ship *Torrens*, which is the same type of ship as the *Nostromo* from the film *Alien*. Sitting at a replica of the table where, in the film, the Alien bursts from Kane's chest, is Nina Taylor, who is the most developed NPC in *Alien: Isolation*. The majority of this development occurs in a short conversation we have with Taylor right there in the kitchen area, where she begins by complaining about hypersleep, saying, "I feel like death"—a phrase that echoes Kane's line, "I feel dead" from the beginning of the film *Alien*, and which in both

cases foreshadows future events. Taylor goes on to tell us that the *Nostromo*'s destruction "cost the Company a lot of money" and that if she, as a lawyer for the Company, can "close the case with a conclusive accident report, it'll look great with [her] superiors." Taylor is a very difficult character to bond with: She is a lawyer, which is a career that many people are suspicious of, and she is only out for herself: the reason she is there is to get ahead by pleasing the powerful executives who run the Company, which we know to be heartless and cruel. Once Taylor tells us about herself and her reason for being on the ship, to her credit, she apologizes for being "insensitive"; Amanda responds by immediately letting her off the hook, saying in an upbeat tone, "It's okay. We'll both get what we want, right?" This is frustrating: Amanda's response minimizes her very understandable grief and gives the Company—which, in effect, coldly murdered her mother—a pass. Nothing about the situation is "okay", despite what Amanda says, and for the writers to pretend so in an attempt to create a bond between these two characters undermines the emotional stakes of the game.

Next, the game's writers ask us to protect Taylor—an approach which works beautifully in *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*. But unlike Clementine and Ellie, Taylor is not an innocent child who automatically inspires others to want to protect her, nor is she an adult we feel respect or sympathy for. If the writers had made Taylor a doctor, perhaps, or a teacher—someone who is dedicated to helping others—*that* Taylor might have inspired us as players to want to help and protect her in return.

Creating characters who strive to aid others is a key principle of character development described by Blake Snyder in the influential screenwriting manual, *Save the Cat!* "I call it the 'Save the Cat' scene", Snyder writes. "And it's basic. It's the scene where we meet the hero and the hero does something—like saving a cat—that defines who he is and makes us, the audience, like him" (xv). Although Snyder refers only to the hero here, the same principle can be applied to any character that the writer wants the audience, or player, to bond with. An obvious and literal example of this principle is Ellen Ripley's persistent attempt to save Jones the cat near the end of the film *Alien*, and she puts herself at great risk to do so. Happily, she succeeds in rescuing Jones, and the last line of dialog in the film has Ripley saying, "Come on cat" as she smiles warmly down at Jones (Figure 5), petting him and then putting him into a hypersleep chamber with her. Ripley's character is largely defined by how much she cares for the other characters throughout the film—not just Jones, but her shipmates as well.

Figure 5. Ellen Ripley petting Jones at the end of *Alien*: "Come on, cat."

Ripley's actions in both *Alien* and *Aliens* are motivated primarily by saving the characters she cares about, not by the desire to kill. There is a common perception, though, that killing is the primary goal. Dawn Stobbart, for example, in *Video Games and Horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!* writes that "As in the film, the player knows that the central premise of *Alien: Isolation* is to kill the Xenomorph—after all, this is an *Alien* game" (Stobbart 2019, p. 79). This perspective—that killing is or should be the focus, as opposed

to saving (particularly in video games)—is echoed by Bryant and Giglio in *Slay the Dragon: Writing Great Video Games*:

> In the groundbreaking book on Hollywood screenwriting, *Save the Cat!* the late Blake Snyder showed us how important it is for us in the movie audience to invest emotionally in the hero. He called those scenes "*Save the Cat* scenes". Video games have a very similar but more active principle: The players have to invest emotionally in the journey you've laid out for them. The player wants to *slay the dragon*. (Bryant and Giglio 2015, p. 26)

Bryant and Giglio do not say here exactly how slaying the dragon will allow the player to invest emotionally in the journey, although they imply that the "active principle" involved in slaying will somehow accomplish it. Their emphasis is on killing, but saving is also an act. The "Save the Cat" principle applies to situations beyond simply scenes in the beginning of stories that help audiences to root for the main character: saving another can be the overarching goal that a player-character pursues in game, and an action they take in the climax. Of course, killing is the central goal in many video games and films, but killing in order to save another character has an added emotional and motivational layer beyond simple bloodlust or the desire for revenge. Saving is Ripley's focus in *Alien* and *Aliens*, and that focus gives meaning and emotional weight to the destructive acts she undertakes.

According to J.W. Rinzler, author of *The Making of* Aliens (2020), Sigourney Weaver (who plays Ellen Ripley) expressed extreme discomfort to director James Cameron before filming scenes where Ripley kills several Aliens: "What they [Weaver and Cameron] bonded on", Rinzler says, "was she was doing it [killing Aliens] now to save this little girl [Newt]. And as most fans of the franchise know, originally there was a scene with her learning about her daughter's death, which was cut but then reinstated in the longer version. So it became about something else, so she had a higher reason for doing the massacres" (Collura 2020). Weaver and Cameron's focus on character relationships is clear in *Aliens*, and it adds meaning and emotional stakes to the many action sequences and "scares" in the film.

Although in *Aliens*, the audience knows from the start that Ripley is the main character through whom they will experience the story, in the beginning of *Alien*, no character stands out as the hero or heroine—it is very much an ensemble piece. The first stage of the Hero's Journey, the Ordinary World, shows us a ragtag crew who repeatedly joke with each other (contrary to this, there is no humor to be found in *Alien: Isolation*) but who are also divided sharply along class lines, with Parker and his technician Brett complaining because they are each receiving less compensation than the others. This and other conflicts among the crew help to build a fictional world the audience can believe in because it is grounded in realistic details that reflect inequalities in our own world. Including a large dose of realism is an approach that is crucial to the success of horror stories with "fantastic" elements, as Morrell (2017) points out in the introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition of Ira Levin's iconic 1967 horror novel, *Rosemary's Baby*:

> Levin's tactical decisions began with the necessary date on which Rosemary's baby would be born—25 June, the opposite of 25 December and the celebration of Christ's birth. The period in which the novel occurs is 1965–1966. *Determined to provide numerous details to support his outlandish plot*, Levin counted nine months back from 25 June 1966, and collected newspapers that provided accounts of the major events in Manhattan at that time: an electrical blackout, John Lindsay's mayoral campaign, a strike at *The New York Times*, and most important, Pope Paul VI's visit to New York City and the Yankee Stadium mass at which the Pope officiated (approximately when Rosemary—note the second part of her name—is impregnated). All of these documentary details and others, such as the best places to buy cheese and swordfish steaks in Manhattan, Levin incorporated into the novel to make what he called his "unbelievabilities" believable . . .

> The novel's initial tone reads like a case history, comparable to the historical details that support the plot. "Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse had signed a lease on a five-room apartment in a geometric white house on First Avenue when they received word, from a woman named Mrs. Cortez, that a four-room apartment in the Bramford had become available".
>
> Hardly the way we expect a horror novel to begin. (viii–ix; emphasis added)

The same can be said of *Alien*, which begins slowly, grounding us in the mundane details of life aboard an old tugboat of a ship that is hauling a distinctly unglamorous cargo of mineral ore. The first "action" scene only comes halfway through the film, a full fifty-five minutes in, when the Alien bursts out of Kane's chest. Before that, we get to know each of the crew members living in the Ordinary World quite well, as they confront the Call to Adventure in the form of an acoustical beacon coming from a nearby planetoid. Parker then voices the Refusal of the Call by saying that it is not in his "contract to do this kind of duty", which also further develops his rebellious personality. Ash, whose character is later revealed to be the personification of the inhuman Company, responds that the beacon must be investigated, under "penalty of total forfeiture of shares". This act foreshadows Ash's real agenda, which is to find and protect the Alien, and with Captain Dallas's support (Dallas's creed is to "do what the hell they tell you to do"), the Call to Adventure is affirmatively answered.

A fairly long (almost five-minute) sequence follows in which the crew pilot the *Nostromo* down to the surface of the planetoid. The sequence includes several realistic-sounding lines like, "Roll 92 degrees port yaw" and "Give me an E.C. pressure reading" as the *Nostromo* flies through heavy turbulence, its old hull groaning under the strain before suffering damage in a botched landing on the planetoid. This damage is described by Parker as relating to three of the four cells of the "secondary load-sharing unit", which are gone, requiring "dry dock". Details of this kind, which are granular, give us a strong sense of the difficult and complex "realities" that the crew face in landing on the unfamiliar and unforgiving planetoid, LV-426. The characters' intense struggle here satisfies Vogler's Meeting with the Mentor stage, in which the hero (represented by the crew as an ensemble, in this case) must reach "within to a source of courage and wisdom" to continue the journey (Vogler and McKenna 2011, p. 33). The realistic details and struggles also serve to ground the story at the pivotal moment preceding the potentially impossible-to-believe discovery of a derelict spaceship with Alien eggs in its cargo hold.

Three members of the crew—Dallas, Kane, and Lambert—walk out to explore the derelict ship, which is the source of the acoustical beacon. Meanwhile, back on the *Nostromo*, Ellen Ripley analyzes the transmission, telling Ash it does not appear to be an SOS, but that "it looks like a warning". She concludes by saying she is going to go after her shipmates; Ash, however, convinces her to stay, saying that by the time she gets there, they will know whether or not it is a warning. Even though Ripley does not act on her instinct here, which is very much based on the "Save the Cat" principle, we have the sense that she truly wants to go and help her fellow crew members. When the explorers finally return, one of them, Kane, has an organism attached to his face. Captain Dallas orders Ripley to open the hatch and let them on board the ship, but Ripley refuses, saying that if she lets them in before they are decontaminated (per quarantine protocol), the crew "could all die".

Crucially, though, we see Ripley hesitate before she makes the decision to deny her shipmates entry, and when she finally does decide, she says, "No", softly, with a tangible sense of regret. We know that this is not easy for her. Ripley is not tough to the point of being cold and uncaring; she is sensitive and vulnerable, but with the strength to do the right thing even though it is difficult. We see this same quality of sensitivity mixed with strength when Ripley later volunteers to go into the air shaft to confront the Alien. But, after Dallas refuses this offer and decides to go himself, we see her deep caring for Dallas through the long, concerned look she gives him.

In the air shaft, Dallas loses his composure and tries to flee, and it is only then that the Alien comes for him, as if his fear has awakened the Alien's predatory instinct. Lambert

later dies because she freezes in fear, Parker because he rashly gets too close to the Alien (Kane dies for the same reason); Brett dies because he fails to heed the warning of the Alien's shed skin; Ash dies because he prioritizes—just as the Company does—the Alien over the lives of the crew members. In this way, the film metes out justice to characters who are careless, unprincipled, or impulsive, while finally rewarding Ripley with the triumphant sight of the Alien being blasted away by the engines of her escape shuttle, and then with the soft embrace of Jones, her purring companion.

In *Save the Cat!*, Blake Snyder writes that "in many ways, a good screenplay is an argument posed by the screenwriter, the pros and cons of living a particular kind of life, or pursuing a particular goal" (Snyder 2005, p. 73). Similarly, Carly Kocurek makes the point in "Walter Benjamin on the Video Screen: Storytelling and Game Narratives" that effective stories—including video game narratives—offer "'counsel', or meaningful wisdom or advice" to their audience (Kocurek 2018, p. 9). The film *Alien* makes the argument, or gives the counsel, that, like Ripley, we must feel our emotions deeply in order to remain human and closely connected to others, but that we must not let them rule us. If we control our emotions, such as grief and fear, without going to the extreme of becoming cold, disconnected, and robotic (like Ash), then we can courageously confront our greatest fears and triumph over them.

In its best moments, *Alien: Isolation* makes this same argument through gameplay. The core of *Alien: Isolation* is, as Alistair Hope of Creative Assembly envisioned, a "one-on-one struggle" with the Alien. It essentially seeks to mimic, in a twenty-plus hour game, the last twenty minutes of the film *Alien*, where Ripley is alone with the monster (with the notable exception of Jones, of course). The gameplay in *Alien: Isolation* has us, as Amanda, sneaking through Sevastopol Station, desperately trying to avoid the Alien while seeking a way to escape. One of the most compelling aspects of the gameplay is that it enhances our fear, in part, by denying us the option of killing the Alien for most of the game. The best we can do is hide, or creep slowly forward. We often hear the Alien moving in the air vents above us, or stalking nearby, and in those moments, there can be an intense desire to *run*. But if we do, the Alien will sense our panicked movement and we will die like Dallas does, because we rashly fled. The gameplay teaches us, through several deaths, that, like Ripley, we must control our fear in order to triumph over the Alien.

The larger goals associated with this aspect of gameplay, however, do not resonate emotionally beyond periodic moments of terror because they do not relate to characters that we, as players, have bonded with. Again, "Save the Cat" need not just refer to a quality of helpfulness that makes a character likable; helping, or saving a beloved character, can also make for a compelling goal, both in movies and games. This is the guiding principle for many of Ellen Ripley's actions in *Alien*. James Cameron, in the sequel, also takes great advantage of this approach by giving Ripley the goal of healing through regaining a family; she gains this new family by bonding with and protecting Newt, her new daughter figure, as well as the romantic/spousal figure of Hicks, and an uncle figure of sorts in the android Bishop.

In *Alien: Isolation*, the only player goals that are centered on another character who is physically present in the game involve Taylor. In one mission, we are tasked with saving Taylor by finding a medical kit for her. And in a later mission, we unsuccessfully try to stop an overloading reactor from exploding near her. But neither goal is emotionally driven because we have not bonded with Taylor. As for the early goal of trying to find "closure" in the contents of the *Nostromo*'s flight recorder, this is accomplished about halfway through the game. The recorder contains a message from Ellen to Amanda, in which Ellen explains that she had kill the Alien (by destroying the *Nostromo*) in order to protect Amanda and the rest of humanity. This is something of a letdown, since the recorder's message does not include any real surprises or emotional impact. Even if it had, once the goal of finding the recorder is reached, a replacement goal is now needed for the second half of the game. The goal of escaping alone is comparatively thin, as the importance of Jones in the end of *Alien* and Newt in finale of *Aliens* demonstrates. Again, Captain Verlaine of the *Torrens* could

have become Amanda's new mother figure; after all, Verlaine is the captain of just the kind of ship that Ellen Ripley might well have eventually commanded had the events of *Alien* not intervened. We, as Amanda, might have bonded with Verlaine through cooperating to finally kill the monster together.

The game's last Alien, however, is defeated in a scene involving no cooperation with other characters, and with only minimal interactivity. We, as Amanda, have managed to escape the space station and get aboard the *Torrens* again, and the Alien comes after us in a quick time event: after we hit a button which opens the airlock, the scene fades to black. The next thing we see is Amanda in space (in a cutscene)—apparently, she was ejected from the ship along with the Alien, which is nowhere to be seen. The game ends with Amanda floating off into empty space (Figure 6)—expressionless, emotionless, and alone.

Figure 6. Amanda Ripley receding into empty space at the end of *Alien: Isolation*.

Compelling stories and characters have difficulty thriving in a vacuum. If the developers of *Alien: Isolation* had followed the blueprint provided by the film they were looking to for inspiration (*Alien*), they would have created more than just a realistic and sometimes terrifying game of "cat-and-mouse". Instead, they would have developed rich characters, partly through respecting the distinct stages of the Hero's Journey, and partly by fully capitalizing on the character relationships used to so successfully in *Alien*, *Aliens*, *The Walking Dead*, and *The Last of Us*. They would have created at least one character for the player to bond deeply with, protect, and perhaps even save. Then Amanda Ripley, and the people playing as her, might end the game feeling that sense of "closure" and emotional fulfillment they were seeking all along.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Bates, Bob. 2005. Into the Woods: A Practical Guide to the Hero's Journey. *Gamasutra*, June 17. Available online: https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/130742/into_the_woods_a_practical_guide_.php (accessed on 12 July 2020).

Bryant, Robert, and Keith Giglio. 2015. *Slay the Dragon: Writing Great Video Games*. Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions.

Cameron, James, dir. 1991. *Aliens: Special Edition*. Hollywood: 20th Century Fox.

Campbell, Joseph. 1949. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Collura, Scott. 2020. The Making of Aliens: Mutiny, Lawsuits, and James Cramer-Who? *IGN*, August 31. Available online: https://www.ign.com/articles/the-making-of-aliens-titan-rinzler-james-cameron-gale-anne-hurd (accessed on 12 June 2020).

Costuic, Stanislav. 2016. The Hero's Journey of Journey. *Gamasutra*, October 13. Available online: https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/StanislavCostiuc/20161013/283288/The_Heros_Journey_of_Journey.php (accessed on 6 August 2020).

Creative Assembly. 2014. *Alien: Isolation*. Tokyo: Sega.

Delmas, Guylain, Ronan Champagnat, and Michel Augeraud. 2007. Bringing Interactivity into Campbell's Hero's Journey. In *Virtual Storytelling: Using Virtual Reality Technologies for Storytelling*. Berlin: Springer.

Dunniway, Troy. 2000. Using the Hero's Journey in Games. *Gamasutra*, November 27. Available online: https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131527/using_the_heros_journey_in_games.php?page=3 (accessed on 3 July 2020).

Gearbox Software. 2013. *Aliens Colonial Marines*. Tokyo: Sega.

Iacobo, Maria. 1994. THE BIZ: A Memo's Journey. *Los Angeles Times*, November 13. Available online: https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-11-13-tm-61952-story.html (accessed on 1 July 2020).

Ip, Barry. 2011. Narrative Structures in Computer and Video Games: Part 1: Context, Definitions, and Initial Findings. *Games and Culture* 6: 103–34. [CrossRef]

Keogh, Brendan, and Darshana Jayemanne. 2018. "Game Over, Man. Game Over": Looking at the Alien in Film and Videogames. *Arts* 7: 43. [CrossRef]

Kocurek, Carly A. 2018. Walter Benjamin on the Video Screen: Storytelling and Game Narratives. *Arts* 7: 69. [CrossRef]

Lebowitz, Josiah, and Chris Klug. 2011. *Interactive Storytelling for Video Games: A Player-Centered Approach to Creating Memorable Characters and Stories*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Madigan, James. 2012. The Walking Dead, Mirror Neurons, and Empathy. *Psychology Today*, November 3. Available online: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mind-games/201211/the-walking-dead-mirror-neurons-and-empathy (accessed on 5 June 2020).

Morrell, David. 2017. Introduction. In *Rosemary's Baby, 50th Anniversary ed*. Edited by Ira Levin. New York: Pegasus Books, pp. v–xiii.

Naughty Dog. 2013. *The Last of Us*. Minato City: Sony Computer Entertainment.

Price, Ronan. 2014. Alien Isolation interview: We wanted it to be really scary. *The Irish Independent*, October 3. Available online: https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/games/previews/alien-isolation-interview-we-wanted-it-to-be-really-scary-30635292.html (accessed on 1 July 2020).

Pugh, Tilson. 2018. The Queer Narrativity of the Hero's Journey in Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* Video Games. *Journal of Narrative Theory* 48: 225–51. [CrossRef]

Rinzler, Jonathan. W. 2007. *The Making of Star Wars*. New York: Del Rey.

Scott, Ridley, dir. 1979. *Alien*. Hollywood: 20th Century Fox.

Snyder, Blake. 2005. *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions.

Stobbart, Dawn. 2019. *Video Games and Horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!* Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Telltale Games. 2012. *The Walking Dead*. San Rafael: Telltale Games and Skybound Games.

Vogler, Christopher, and David McKenna. 2011. *Memo from the Story Department: Secrets of Structure and Character*. Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions.

Weise, Matthew, and Henry Jenkins. 2009. Short Controlled Bursts: Affect and Aliens. *Cinema Journal* 48: 111–16. [CrossRef]

arts

MDPI

Article

Impossible Origins: Trauma Narrative and Cinematic Adaptation

Linda Belau

Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies, The University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley, Edinburg, TX 78539, USA; linda.belau@utrgv.edu

Abstract: In this essay, I explore the cinematic adaptation and the representation of trauma, while I further consider the role and significance of the notion of the origin in both trauma and in cinematic adaptation. Through an initial consideration of the relationship between the theory of the impossible origin, particularly as it is articulated by Walter Benjamin, the essay goes on to analyze the significance and role of an impossible origin in the elemental form of adaptation. To this end, the essay considers the movement of adaptation from an autobiographical trauma memoir to a feature film, considering the success or failure of adaptation in situations where the original literary work concerns an experience of extremity. As I consider the vicissitudes of trauma and its grounding in a repetitious structure that leaves the survivor suspended in a kind of missed experience (or missed origin), I further explore how this missing origin (or original text in the case of adaptation) can be represented at all.

Keywords: adaptation; trauma; origin; psychoanalysis; repetition; impossibility; loss; representation; extremity; writing; image; failure; memoir; missed experience

Citation: Belau, Linda. 2021. Impossible Origins: Trauma Narrative and Cinematic Adaptation. *Arts* 10: 15. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts10010015

Received: 14 October 2020
Accepted: 5 February 2021
Published: 22 February 2021

Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.

Walter Benjamin

1. Introduction

In this essay, I explore the relation between cinematic adaptation and the representation of trauma, considering the success or failure of adaptation in situations where the original literary work concerns an experience of extremity. Focusing on the impossibility of representation in the writing of trauma, my essay considers how the fundamental impasse that makes writing about trauma fraught with difficulty, particularly in the memoir form, is not readily adaptable to the cinematic form. With attention to the manner in which the impossibility that is fundamental to any attempt at articulation of trauma is managed in the transition from writing to the image, I consider the narrative memoir since this form of trauma writing is considerably less mediated in terms of the representation of extreme experience than fictional narrative. At the same time, however, it is the mode of literary writing that is least palatable to audiences for commercial dissemination, making the adaptation of the trauma narrative difficult in terms of producing a successfully marketable film. Through an examination of the work of Solomon Northup, whose slave narrative/trauma memoir was adapted into the Oscar-winning Best Picture film *Twelve Years a Slave*, I consider how this adaptation is able to faithfully articulate the impossible void and failure of representation that characterizes the origin text while, at the same time, presenting a story that rose to commercial success.

In order, then, to proceed toward a counter-narrative that will open on to a different theory of adaptation, I would like to consider another notion of origin and turn to the work of Walter Benjamin. Given the fraught relation in the experience of trauma to the

event itself—that is, to an *original experience*—that might or might not be represented, either in the very consciousness or understanding of the survivor or in any sort of literary or cinematic text that he/she/they might endeavor to produce as a means of working through, a meditation on the nature of the origin or an original text and the experiences, events, or copies that might be engendered in relation to it and as a rearticulation of it seems very much the place to begin this essay.

2. The Impossible Origin

In his seminal work, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin discusses, among other things, the Baroque German tragic drama artform, *Die Trauerspiel*, in a manner that was quite unexpected for the time. Rather than engaging with more popular and well-known figures, Benjamin focused instead on the outliers of the movement in order to pursue a stunning theory of allegory that would explore the vicissitudes of appropriation between literary and philosophical traditions, ultimately arguing that the allegorical function of melancholia presents a proper form of modernist nostalgia focused, ultimately, on a process of borrowing—that is, of copying and/or handing down—from a tradition in a manner that does not necessarily occur along the straight corridor that many assume. According to Michael Osman, "any arguments for the historical validity of Benjamin's theories must be based first on his own title, which insists on seeing *Trauerspiel* through its origin (or *Ursprung*) as opposed to its genesis (or *Entstehung*). In contrast to the necessarily forward movement of creation implied by genesis, origin, as he sees it, is a momentary and recognizable suspension between the past and the future." Quoting Samuel Weber, Osman continues: "This is the discreet, discontinuous, un-genetic aspect of the origin . . . entirely incompatible with any sort of linear or dialectical development" (Osman 2005, p. 22). In his "Epistemo-Critical Prologue", Benjamin himself writes, "the term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from a process of becoming and disappearance" (Benjamin 1998, p. 45). Thus, the copy and the origin, he argues, do not align in the manner of simple cause and effect, of pure language that is carried over in a smooth, logical transition (or translation) that renders the copy a pure image of a fully formed and ontologically consistent arche.[1]

I begin by way of a deferral with this reflection on the messianic work of Benjamin and his positing of an absent or vanishing origin in the process of translation and/or the transmission of textual material from one form to another since it both introduces us to an early theory of trauma that aligns well with more contemporary deconstructionist-inflected theories of trauma that posit the impossible origin of traumatic experience and also since it parallels the concerns, albeit in a more negative manner, of traditional theories of cinematic adaptation. In classical trauma studies, the notion of the impossible origin is, perhaps, the very kernel of the theory since the notion of traumatic experience as resistant to representation and, in fact, inaccessible to the survivor of the event is the starting point—the unstable origin, as it were—which much of the theory circles around. From Sigmund Freud to Cathy Caruth, the notion of an impossible experience that cannot be fully understood or accessed, other than in its repetition in the failure of its inscription, is an elemental insight. And, while it may seem that there is little relation between this theory and theories of adaptation, I would argue that the issue of the origin, of its accessibility and its possibility, is key to both theories. Further, given that a number of textual literary works that focus on the experience of trauma have been adapted into visual media in the form of cinema or television, it seems even more relevant to think through the parameters of these two theories in relation to each other and in a way that interrogates the seminal

[1] Benjamin's other major work, "The Task of the Translator" (Benjamin 2007), often studied and cited by literary theorists, pursues the notion of translation in relation to what he calls "pure language". In this essay, Benjamin also pursues an extended meditation on the relation between a text and the impossibility of its translation and, by extension, the necessarily anaclitic notion of the negative relation between an original and its copy. While this essay does not engage with the issues of allegory, melancholia, and, ultimately, trauma, in the way that the *Trauerspiel* study could be argued to do so, it is, nonetheless, an interesting and relevant mediation on the nature of borrowing and copying, of translation and adapting, as it were, from one medium to another.

assumptions of conventional adaptation theory, particularly those theories that presuppose a stable and coherent origin that might be copied, either successfully or not.

3. Trauma and the Impossible Origin

In the context of humanities-oriented discourses on the representation of trauma, it is, seemingly, the autobiographical narrative that offers the most reliable access to—or positivization of—traumatic experience. Since it is the autobiographical witness account that attempts to re-tell the trauma, to describe the traumatic event, and to make sense of the injury, it would seem, on the surface, that such a narrative could represent the experience of trauma. Traditional autobiographical narratives, however, do not begin to do justice to the survivor's relation to the event. Many trauma narratives, in fact, speak of a living death that cannot be socially contextualized within ordinary parameters of understanding. Responding to a radical disruption of meaning, the survivor is suspended in an experience that cannot be addressed directly in the realm of representation. Since this exposure itself is experienced as traumatic, it is actually the impossibility of representation that the survivor witnesses. Intending to give an accurate expression of the experience of trauma, the autobiographical witness narrative only displays its own insufficiency toward this intention.

Insofar as every autobiographical account of catastrophe is both an exposure to and recoiling from the traumatic real, an analysis of the survivor's relation to writing will show us something significant about the force of trauma. In the aftermath of trauma, most survivors feel a compelling need to communicate their experience of the event. Despite the impossibility of making an adequate account, indeed, because of this impossibility, the survivor often turns to writing—to personal memoir—as a symbolic attempt to address what psychoanalysis would call the real kernel of the traumatic experience. According to one survivor's account, "silence is the only proper response but then most of us ... feel that not to speak is impossible. To speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible" (Caruth 1995, p. 154).

For the traumatized subject, the event is always necessarily registered only negatively via some symptom, which drives the compulsion to write. This symptom, of course, broadly conceptualized, will be nothing other than the act of testimony itself. Testimony is the symptom of trauma; it is where and how the force of trauma is felt. In his/her/their struggle to describe the experience of an impossible destitution, the traumatized subject must do much more than simply write the truth about the experience, for the truth is never enough. Facing the radical negativity of the trauma through the testimonial form, the survivor must suffer the impossibility of ever being able to make an adequate account of the experience, and this suffering itself constitutes a repetition of traumatic experience. The failure of recollection triggers the structural repetition of trauma. Thus, it would seem, the insufficiency of the testimony and, consequently, the symbolic order's inability to make good on the demand for coherence emerges as traumatic in the witness account. The truth of the trauma is never positively manifest only because the inability of the symbolic order to address the impossible experience is all that "exists" of the experience of trauma. And while this inability, more than anything else, can account for the survivor's failed narrative, it also engenders the very need to write, to make sense of the trauma that the narrative was initially intended to address. This is traumatic repetition, and it finds its most dramatic form in the testimonial account.[2]

As the author of the trauma narrative addresses his/her/their need to re-count the impossible event to the Other, to make the event meaningful in the symbolic register, a demand for coherence is expressed. Such coherence, it is presumed, would close the void in the symbolic—the real dimension of the experience—that the subject of trauma

[2] Here we see how the symbolic mandate—or desire—to make the impossible traumatic event transmissible in the field of the Other s what actually gives trauma its abyssal structure. In this sense, trauma is not entirely beyond or outside of social experience. It is, rather, a symbolic phenomenon and very much a social experience. In other words, because of (and not in spite of) its being beyond representation, trauma relies most intimately on the function of language and representation.

encounters. Given the nature of trauma and its resistance to representational form, however, one cannot expect a symbolic intervention to positivize the impossibility that constitutes the heart of trauma. One can never write the truth of the experience simply because trauma shatters the very field of knowledge that makes such notions possible. Despite the survivor's best attempts to situate the trauma through his/her/their testimonial writing, an adequate account of the event—the return to the origin of the traumatic experience—remains impossible.

4. Adaptation and the Lost Origin: Encountering the Impossible in the Image

In the context of literature-to-film adaptation, the aporetic economy of a lost or impossible origin is seen most readily in trauma narratives, particularly in the adaptation of non-fictional testimonial memoir. And, while one would understandably presume that the most successful mode of cinematic adaptation for trauma autobiography would be the documentary or personal narrative form, it is, paradoxically, often in fictional dramatic cinema where the most evocative adaptations emerge. As an example, I would like to turn my focus to Steve McQueen's narrative film *12 Years a Slave*, a dramatic film closely based on and adapted from a non-fictional literary-origin source, Solomon Northup's slave narrative memoir of the same name, to further consider the exigencies of the lost origin and adaptation in the experience of trauma.

Like many slave narratives, Northup's written memoir clearly has a didactic purpose, something that is seen most clearly in the many passages where he exclaims how one should not give way to despair, a credo that is clearly carried over into McQueen's film. In making these repeated claims, the historical Northup is careful to make an ongoing statement about the moral value of overcoming difficult experiences, another lesson to be learned from the slave's experience. Despite the didactic nature of Northup's autobiography, however, the survivor subject's narrative is never able to bring home that message convincingly, and something remains unglued in the narrative, undermining the lessons is purports to teach, as it circles restlessly around the traumatic stain which cannot be epistemically captured, at least not in writing. In this sense, then, the immensely significant story that Northup might tell in his narrative about the perils of slavery and the anguish of human suffering that it imposes is necessarily lost. As such, the social and historical value of the narrative as a kind of cautionary tale is lost as well. Given the structural nature of trauma and the void that traumatic narrative will necessarily write, the experience is, in a manner of speaking, lost, the origin unplumbable. Further, as an origin text that cannot itself return to the original experience it endeavors to articulate and overcome, Northup's memoir complicates even more the already complicated relation between a text and its copy in the relation of cinematic adaptation. Paradoxically, however, it is ultimately this alternative and supplementary mode of representation—cinema and the vehicle of adaptation—which can make some inroads to finally, if indirectly, express the trauma of Northup's shattering experience within the symbolic horizon and to make good on his abyssal endeavor to teach something to the world about his experiences in slavery.

McQueen begins his adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* with Northup immersed in the impossible scene of writing that both characterizes and constitutes Northup's memoir, and the director later repeats it when the flashback chronicle catches up with this point in the narrative, as if to suggest that his film circulates around the same kind of unsignifiable original trauma that persists in Northup's narrative. The film, however, elevates this experience of and encounter with trauma from a more or less ontogenetic—or individual—level to the space of a collective and, ultimately, historical, engagement. And it is precisely in the space and context of this elevation that the film adaptation is both able to complete the articulation of the experience of trauma that eludes Northup and also is able to circulate the didactic element—the lesson that might be learned—in a more socially recognizable form, though it does so in its own mode of failure. In this sense, the film functions as an aesthetic

means of evoking the traumatic stain of slavery, a stain (or impossibility) that never stops not writing itself in both Northup's narrative and, to this day, in American history.[3]

Some critics have argued that McQueen's use of violence within his film borders on the gratuitous and that the film ultimately leads to a sort of aestheticizing of torment. Countering this position, Henry Louis Gates responds that McQueen "showed remarkable restraint" and that the film "just hints at how violent slavery was" (Quoted in Dockterman 2013). Thus, according to Gates' point, McQueen's depictions of violence and suffering should not be viewed by critics as egregious or superfluous as a form of stylistic exploitation, as a stylistically artistic rendering of the depredations of slavery. Gates, rather, wants us to engage with the violence in the film, not shirk from it by labeling it gratuitous, because it is grounded in very real events, shattering events that were oftentimes commonplace in the institution of slavery. Gates further suggests that it should not be argued that McQueen's film capitalizes artistically on the inhumanity of slavery since this misses the power of the film to impact the viewer in a historically grounded way. Rather, the film's depictions and representation of the harrowing conditions of slavery should be understood in the manner in which they affect the viewer, how they make something distant immediate and thereby bring the viewer into the scenes viewed, making the viewer part of the history depicted.[4] But since film is an image-based medium, it lends itself quite readily to aesthetic effects in the traditional sense. For better or worse, film has the aesthetic ability to bridge the distance between spectator and artwork in a number of ways that the textual narrative simply cannot. Using his art to exploit this intimacy is ultimately the way that McQueen is able to move beyond an individual instance of trauma—as articulated in Northup's narrative—to an expression of a collective trauma that forces us to overcome the cultural forgetting that oftentimes veils our apprehension of the profoundly savage dimension of slavery.

McQueen is able to conjure the repetitious nature of the trauma at the heart of American history at moments in the film when the viewer realizes they are not an innocent bystander catching a surreptitious glance at some spectacle which is indifferent to them. Traumatic repetition emerges in this cinematic context when the viewer realizes that the depicted events are strategically staged for the audience's gaze. In this manner, through certain aesthetic and filmic techniques, McQueen is able to, in a way that Northup's symbolic narrative cannot, implicate the viewer into the traumatic history by making palpable the traumatic stain of slavery.

While the film is quite tenacious in its representation of the horrors of slavery, the viewer will, at times, encounter the limited reprieves McQueen's camera provides the spectator as it offers tangential views of the beautiful Louisiana setting. Occasionally, within the film, the spectator is greeted with seemingly idyllic and isolated images of Spanish moss swaying from the trees, as it does in much of the Southeastern United States. However, since one of the first times this tranquil, repeated imagery appears is immediately after Solomon's aborted runaway attempt when he unexpectedly encounters a posse lynching two other runaway slaves, the beautiful image takes on a disturbing dimension. Because the cinematic framing shows the lynching taking place behind Solomon's back (he only hears the event), the immediate image of the seemingly placid swaying Spanish moss becomes associated with so much strange fruit cultivated by the peculiar institution. In another scene, Solomon and a number of his fellow slaves have been loaned out by Master Epps (Michael Fassbender) to another plantation owner (Bryan Batt) because Epps's cotton fields have been overcome by an insect infestation. This infestation furthers the narrative and shows how it is that Solomon was able to earn some of his own money, used later in his failed bribery of a white indentured servant. But the close-up image of the caterpillar calls attention to itself as saying something beyond the narrative at large, something

[3] This notion of an impossibility that never stops not writing itself is glossed from Jacques Lacan's mediation on the symptom in Seminar 20, where he writes that the symptom in the Real, as that impossible kernel that resists representation, "never ceases to write itself" (Lacan 1999, p. 144).

[4] The point is not so much that the film is better, it is rather that the film is able to relay certain emotive experiences and realities differently and, in the case of a traumatic experience, this might allow a spectator to better position themselves vis-a-vis this difficult encounter.

that the narrative may not be able to directly or sufficiently articulate. Not only does McQueen's close-up shot of the infested caterpillar symbolize the confined nature and hope of inevitable freedom/flight of Solomon and the other slaves, but it also references the curse of the Pharaohs that "is a poor example compared to what awaits the Plantation class" mentioned by Mistress Shaw (Alfre Woodard). This image, thus distorted, takes on meaning beyond itself, then, in at least two different ways, that distorts the impact of its initial emergence.

Since the institution of slavery stained the historical reality of those who were its victims, that reality is subtly portrayed by the film as something other, as bearing an anamorphotic trace that distorts its realism. Thus, the film demonstrates how the institution of slavery distorts the space of reality, distorted and damaged it for all those involved. McQueen even shows the devastating effects slavery had on the white Plantation class, especially in the depicted relation between Epps and his wife.[5] Even when Ridley's screenplay and McQueen's film deviate from the details of Northup's narrative account—the knifing of the captured freedman on the slave ship instead of a small pox death, the attempted rape of Eliza, the actual rape of Patsey—the film introduces historical atrocities of slavery that, while Northup himself may never have experienced them, many slaves did, thus making Northup's narrative a synecdoche, a stand-in, for slavery itself. The film adaptation is obviously a condensation of one slave narrative, necessary for fitting the narrative into the length of a feature film, but it also functions as a condensation of the history of slavery, never quite comfortable documenting just one exceptional slave story.

5. Distorting the Space of Representation: Adaptation Beyond the Limits of the Original

There are three particular aspects of McQueen's style, which are in one way or another constantly present throughout the film, that carry ramifications beyond the narrative itself and distort the space of representation: the poetic use of the close-up and extreme close-up shot, the ubiquitous use of shallow focus, and the intermittent use of the long take, especially reserved for the most harrowing scenes. After the initial opening, the film transitions to the past to fill in the story of Solomon Northup. This "flashback" is at first a bit disorienting, as McQueen uses an extreme close-up shot of what the viewer soon learns is Northup stringing a violin. Later, after Northup's kidnapping and incarceration, McQueen utilizes an extreme close-up shot of Northup between the fragmentary memory flashbacks that only partially reveal what has happened to him. Appearing immediately after Northup recalls being put to bed by Brown and Hamilton, McQueen's extreme close-up shot of our protagonist brings the viewer into proximity with Northup's own bewilderment, as if he himself is too close to the unfolding events to make sense of his situation. These early extreme close-ups prefigure the use of others used throughout the film. On one level, these shots are indicative of McQueen's style, of his penchant for composition over story. But, on another level, the use of extreme close-up in these shots and throughout the film indicates, at least figuratively, the director's intention to bring the spectator closer to the content, closer to the traumatic experience of the institution of slavery than narrative will allow, even when the narrative is a first-person testimonial account.[6] With this stylistic technique, McQueen suggests that beneath the symbolic narrative, beneath Northup's attempt to provide a rational narrative to his otherwise shattering experience of abduction and enforced bondage, there is a content to his experience that has been obscured by

[5] Gates has commented that "one of the most amazing and successful things the film does is show the way that slavery dehumanizes the master as well as the slave" (Quoted in Dockterman 2013).

[6] My point here is not so much to claim that screening a film about traumatic content is necessarily a "better" approach to witnessing trauma. I am, rather, working to point out how the figure of trauma, as an impossible experience that can only be approached in the failure of its inscription or in its withdrawal from the context of "understanding" is more readily evoked in McQueen's filmic text by virtue of its ability to evoke strong emotion that may not be readily understood or easily processed by the viewer. This does not indicate a superior mode of expressing trauma, or even suggest that witnessing trauma second-hand is a better way to understand the experience. Rather, I am suggesting that film and memoir function in radically different ways and that different elements or layers of a trauma might be evoked in varying ways in each media.

the desire to make sense of the experience, by the desire to render his experience clear and meaningful.

This use of close-ups by McQueen implies an emphasis with scale as much as with proximity, with the magnitude of the stain of slavery as much as with the haunting nearness of this traumatic aspect of American history. These extreme close-up shots demarcate moments in the film when the scene itself marks a surpassing of the limits of the narrative, an opening onto something that cannot be directly signified. It is McQueen's means of informing the film's spectators that they are entering an uncanny realm, a realm where everything is turned upside down, where the return of the traumatic past that would rather be forgotten is inescapable. In this sense, McQueen's film is able to convey the trauma of both Northup's experience and the slave's experience in general, not just at the level of representation but also through distortions in the visual field. These distortions not only indirectly reveal the inability to provide a full and clear account, they mark a certain fidelity to not just the content of Northup's memoir but to the memoir's own inability to account positively for its own lost origin.

This idea of getting the spectator closer to the content of Northup's experience, of providing the spectator with a glimpse of what lies beyond the limits of Northup's narrative, is also figured in McQueen's stylistic decision to shoot virtually the entire film in shallow focus. By relying primarily on shallow focus, which at appropriate times morphs into selective focusing, McQueen again highlights the particular over the background, bringing the viewer closer to the real as these shots often lift the content and character out of the context into an immediacy that often appears unmediated. Early after Northup's abduction, for example, when he confronts his kidnappers with the truth about his freeman status, McQueen shoots him in the foreground, out of focus. McQueen saves the focused middle ground of the mis en scène for Northup's captor. By doing so, McQueen emphasizes the lack of belief in Northup's story by the abductors. Northup is out of focus as if to indicate the lack of subjectivity that comes with being a "Georgia runaway", as his abductor repeatedly calls him. Later, when Master Ford attempts to negotiate the sale of Eliza's daughter with Freeman at the auction house in New Orleans, McQueen keeps the focus tight on Ford and Freeman, keeping the pleading Eliza blurred in the background. In this scene, McQueen strategically keeps Eliza out of focus, testifying to Freeman's inhumane decision to keep Eliza's concerns out of his focus. More significantly, McQueen's decision to use shallow focus throughout the film brings the spectator into an intimacy with Northup and his fellow slaves in a manner that simply cannot be conveyed in a textual medium. Shallow focus creates a blurred background throughout not only to draw the spectator to the immediacy of the experience of the characters but also to literally blur the background story, to get to the immediate trauma as a constant pressure. Again, this is McQueen's method of highlighting negatively that the origin is being lost in the process.

Lastly, McQueen resorts to long takes in the film, especially for the harrowing, gruesome, and traumatic depictions of the brutality that was part of the slave's experience. The first long take occurs shortly after Northup's abduction. In the scene where Northup wakes to find himself chained and locked up after being drugged by Hamilton and Brown, he is shown being beaten by one of the slave bootleggers. In this scene, McQueen combines the long take with shallow focus, keeping the focus squared on Northup in the foreground, allowing the spectator an intimacy with the hero's anguish. Through this technique, McQueen isolates the viewer with Northup, bringing the spectator into the picture in a manner that would not be the same if McQueen had relied on a deep-focus shot or if he had edited the scene back and forth with rapid cutting between the batterer and Northup. Throughout the film, McQueen utilizes the long take for these traumatic scenes as a relentless means of transfixing the viewer's attention to the scene's immediacy, a capturing that could not work with the reprieve that editing offers. This strategic use of the long take is repeated later in the scene depicting the aborted lynching of Northup by Tibeats. In a nearly two-minute take, Northup is shown dangling from a rope with the tips of his toes barely touching the ground while the film pictures the everyday routine of the plantation roll by in the

background. McQueen could have cut this scene numerous times, showing the sky turn darker as the day passes, indicating the length that Northup had to endure his punishment. But, by providing a single long take, by forcing the audience to watch this unbearable scene without the reprieve and artificiality associated with editing, the film blurs the line between representation and reality and, thereby, allows something traumatic to emerge on a plane outside of or along the side of representation. The longest take of the film occurs near the end during Patsey's whipping. In an almost five-minute take, McQueen dramatizes the most brutal and painful scene of the film. Unlike the other long takes in the film, McQueen here uses a moving camera to capture the intricacy of the action without having to rely on edits. The lack of editing in this brutal scene makes it unbearable and relentless. A five-minute shot in a film seems three times as long to an audience used to the rapid cutting of much commercial cinema, and, in this case, the extended scene forces its own measure of anguish onto the viewer. This imposed self-awareness onto the spectator showcases how the film has already incorporated the audience into the story and, by connection, to the larger history.

6. Screening Impossibility: Adaptation as Working Through

It this connection to a larger history, a history that is grounded in a particular instance of traumatic experience, that sets McQueen's film adaptation apart. The film certainly does not cave into the general American audience's demand for pleasing entertainment, and it equally resists the temptation to romanticize Northup's overcoming of his ordeal. Additionally, the film does not simply show the viewer what most other films about slavery fail or refuse to show. More significantly, the film evokes cinematically what cannot be shown: how the peculiar institution of slavery imposes a traumatic experience that cannot necessarily be readily articulated. McQueen's adaptation is not content to leave the traumatic experience and history of slavery to the failure of a specific articulation, however. Instead, *12 Years a Slave* inaugurates a sort of collective working through as it engages aesthetically and compositionally with the impasse in understanding that characterizes the representational impossibility at the heart of Northup's narrative. In re-presenting his story, the film both draws in and elevates the spectator's engagement with Northup's particular trauma and ultimately conveys the collective dimension of our nation's shattered past, a past that has left its traumatic stain on American history, a stain that shall remain until the trauma is properly worked through. Because of McQueen's compositional techniques—extreme close-up photography, ubiquitous shallow focus, agonizing long takes—his film reveals the essential strength of cinematic adaptation: its ability to suggest things that are not expressible in words. In doing so, *12 Years a Slave* remains faithful to what could not be accounted for in Northup's memoir by intimating precisely what has not been adequately represented within the saga of American history.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Benjamin, Walter. 2007. The Task of the Translator. In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Translated by Harry Zohn. Edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 69–82.

Benjamin, Walter. 1998. *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. London: Verso.

Caruth, Cathy, ed. 1995. *Trauma Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 154.

Dockterman, Elaine. 2013. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Talks *12 Years a Slave* and the *African Americans*. Available online: http://entertainment.time/2013/10/22/henry-louis-gates-jr.com (accessed on 22 February 2021).

Lacan, Jacques. 1999. *Seminar XX, Encore*. New York: Norton.

Osman, Michael. 2005. Benjamin's Baroque. *Thresholds* 28: 119–29. [CrossRef]

arts

MDPI

Article

What Is a Videogame Movie?

Mike Sell

Department of English/Graduate Program in Literature & Criticism, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 15705, USA; msell@iup.edu

Abstract: Cinematic adaptations of videogames are an increasingly common feature of film culture, and the adaptive relationship between these mediums is an increasingly common subject of film and videogame studies. However, our ability to historicize and theorize that relationship is hampered by a failure to fully define the generic character of our object of study. This essay asks, what is a videogame movie? It argues that film scholars (1) have not considered the full range of ways videogames have been represented in film; (2) have not attended fully to the historical, technological, figurative, and social dimensions of videogames; and therefore (3) have limited the set of possible texts that comprise the genre "videogame cinema." The essay recommends a tropological approach to the problem, defining six tropes that comprise the "videogame movie" as a genre, and applying them to two films, *Her* and *1917*, neither of them a direct adaptation of a videogame, the latter not "about" or referencing videogames in any way, yet both exemplary of a broadened concept of "videogame cinema".

Keywords: videogames; film; adaptation; genre; tropes; methodology

Citation: Sell, Mike. 2021. What Is a Videogame Movie? *Arts* 10: 24. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts10020024

Academic Editor: Christian Thomas

Received: 1 December 2020
Accepted: 25 March 2021
Published: 12 April 2021

1. Introduction

The relationship between film and videogames is usefully understood as "problematic", in the best sense of the term. Both mediums are shaped by intersecting historical, technological, social, cultural, economic, and performative factors—as is the relationship between them. The sorts of videogames that we play now are different than those we played two decades ago, as are the movies we watch. The kinds of movies we watch about videogames now are different than those we watched two decades ago. The ways videogames adapt cinematic techniques and stories are different, too. Those who watch movies and play games experience the relationship between them differently now than in the past. When I was a child, we watched movies in theaters and played games in arcades and on home consoles and PCs. Now, I often play and watch on the same devices, occasionally at the same time. And what about that "we" who plays, watches, and makes those movies and games? That "we" is as contingent and diverse as the mediums "we" love.

The complexity of the adaptive relationship between videogames and film has been recognized by scholars for some time, including the contributors to Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces* (King and Krzywinska 2002) and Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers's *Game On, Hollywood!: Essays on the Intersection of Video Games and Cinema* (Papazian and Sommers 2013), by Ryan in her monographs and edited and co-edited collections on cross-media adaptations and storyworlds (for example, Ryan 2004; Ryan and Thon 2014), and by Jasmina Kallay's monograph *Gaming Film: How Games are Reshaping Contemporary Cinema* (Kallay 2013). These have established paradigmatic topics for the field: the differential nature of interactivity between the mediums, the productive tension between adaptation and remediation, the growing role of global corporations in the production and propagation of the adaptive relationship (most notably, via the emergence of what Henry Jenkins calls "transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins 2006)), the proliferation of fan communities as critics and creators (i.e., "participatory culture"), the persistence of negative stereotypes and damaging tropes, and the

distinct ways that videogames and films construct narratives and storyworlds. In diverse ways, these scholars have provided theoretical and historical context for what Antoni Roig et al. characterize as "a new relationship between subject and representation that goes far beyond the 'spectatorship' position, pointing to a playful relationship with images that may be useful to understand new forms of media practices" (Roig et al. 2009, p. 89).

However, each of these inquiries falls short in one specific way: a failure to properly define their scholarly object, the videogame movie. I presume they share with me the desire for a theory of cinematic videogame adaptation that can endure the historical, technological, social, cultural, economic, and performative transformations that continue to shape both mediums, a theory that is applicable to the full range of texts that comprise the film/videogame adaptive relationship. But exactly how wide is that range? What are the texts that comprise the category? In the absence of an accurate and encompassing definition of the videogame movie, our analyses will be inevitably partial, both in the sense of being incomplete and in the sense that they express a preference towards a specific, but limited set of cinematic texts.

What is a "videogame movie"?

It is fairly obvious that *Super Mario Bros* (1993), *Silent Hill* (2006), and *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020) are adaptations of videogames, thus are videogame movies. *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (2017) and *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), while not based on real-life intellectual properties, are self-evidently adaptations (more accurately, pastiches) of videogame genres, telling their stories with an immediately recognizable focus on the tropes and mechanics of the kinds of games they adapt. They are videogame movies.

War Games (1983) is another obvious addition to our list. John Badham's film remediates and narrates the computerized wargames developed to model the complex geopolitical strategies developed during the Cold War between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. The film's primary adaptation is complicated by other adaptated elements: the *Galaga* game that opens the film and the digital version of *Tic Tac Toe* that David plays with the artificial intelligence Joshua in order to teach it about the futility of war. *War Games* is in essence three different kinds of videogame cinema in one movie. Each of the games is adapted differently in the film—each looks and sounds different, each impacts the narrative differently. Regardless, it is on the list.

What these films share in common is a feature noticed by Johnson (2019) in his essay, "Deep Play and Dark Play in Contemporary Cinema". These are texts "with games at their center: the characters might be playing a game or be acting within a game or structuring their activity as if it was a game, or some equivalent" (p. 406). Further, "the *game* is the *film*: these are films entirely concerned with the play of the games they depict, and when other elements of a fictional universe are shown on screen, those are secondary or incidental to the play of these games or help to explain to the viewer the nature of the game being played" (p. 406). That is certainly true of the films considered in *ScreenPlay*, *Game On, Hollywood!*, and *Gaming Film*. These movies center their attention on videogames, whether specific intellectual properties or recognizable genres. Many of them are adaptations. Some use games figuratively as a vehicle for broader social commentary, whether those concern marginalized identity and self-acceptance (as with *Wreck-It Ralph*) or the disruptive effects of emergent technologies on family relationships (as with *Tron: Legacy* [2010]).

But let us consider some less obvious possibilities. Would we include on the list of "videogame movies" *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which features a brief scene in which Frank plays digital chess with the artificial intelligence Hal? Would the holographic game of Dejarik played by Chewbacca and C-3PO justify adding *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) (see Figure 1). Would the bit in John Carpenter's 1982 *The Thing* where MacReady pours scotch over a (fictional) Chess Wizard machine and the brief cameo of *Asteroids Deluxe* earn that film a spot on our list (see Figure 2)? I would argue that all of these are at least worth a consideration as examples of videogame adaptations, though the significance of the videogames in each of these films is distinct, as are the adaptive strategies used by their respective filmmakers. These films illustrate King and Krzywinska's argument

that the adaptive relationship between films and games encompasses not only narrative, but also audio and visual tropes, shared iconographies or mise-en-scène, point of view, and so on. While the videogames that appear in these movies may well carry figurative significance (most obviously, the chess game in *2001* as a synecdoche of Hal's ruthless logic), they also represent particular modes of what Andrew MacTavish describes as "visual and auditory technology display" and particular modes of gameplay whose effects in the text may function independently of any specific narrative or figurative significance (MacTavish 2002, p. 34). Indeed, since they are not the center of attention, the videogames in *2001, Star Wars*, and *The Thing* may provide "clearer insight into the way gaming affects our daily activities, including the lives of those who do not play games or participate in new media practices" (Boellstorf qtd. in Roig et al. 2009). This idea can be applied both to characters in the film (i.e., C-3PO and Chewbacca as players of videogames) or to the audiences who watch them, who may have no particular expectation that a videogame would appear in the movie they've chosen and likely have diverse responses to it. (I, for one, had not given the videogames in these films a second thought until I began writing this essay.) In the same way that a "more inclusive theory of computer gameplay" can open consideration of a wider range of cinematic adaptation strategies in videogames and a wider range of gameplay pleasures (MacTavish 2002, pp. 34, 35) a more inclusive theory of cinematic representation can alert us to a wider range of videogame adaptation strategies in films.

Figure 1. Chewbacca plays R2-D2 in a game of Dejarik (a.k.a. Holochess) while C-3PO observes in this scene from *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977). (Screenshot created by author).

Figure 2. MacReady plays Chess Wizard in *The Thing* (1982). (Screenshot created by author).

We might take this inquiry in a more speculative direction by querying the very notion of a videogame. Before we can answer the question, What is a videogame movie?, we need to answer the question, What is a videogame? This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. Those who've asked it have alerted us to assumptions about the

technology that comprises the videogame as medium (Karhulahti 2015; Sicart 2017); to the diverse histories and play cultures of and around videogames, many of them yet to be brought into the fold of scholarship (Boluk and LeMieux 2017; Penix-Tadsen 2016) to the hazards of focusing only on big-budget games produced by multinational corporations (Anthropy 2012); and to the heteronormative, nationalist, and ethnocentric ideologies that shape not just what videogames are made, but the play cultures and game literacies that are affirmed or marginalized by those ideologies (Clark and Kopas 2015; Shaw 2014). How do assumptions about what a videogame is shape our understanding of videogame cinema and, thus, the texts we might consider as objects of study? In a 2002 essay, Steve Keane suggests that speculative-fiction films like Brett Leonard's *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), James Cameron's *Strange Days* (1995), and David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999) explore the "developmental gap" between cinematic possibility and "the technical limitations of current videogames and videogame systems" (Keane 2002, p. 149). Hearkening back to the classic function of speculative fiction, films like these can drive the conceptualization of interactivity, play, and the human/machine interface. However, while I agree that it is important to look to the imagined future to find visions of videogames that are not constrained within current technoculture, I suggest that we look to the past as well.

As a provocation, let us consider the 1950's U.S. children's television show *Winky Dink and You.* What set this otherwise anodyne network-television product apart from its competitors was its technological supplement. Viewers could mail-order a thin electrostatic sheet of plastic, called a "magic window", attach it to their television screen, and draw on it with special "magic crayons". In each episode, the viewer would be asked to complete connect-the-dots puzzles that enhanced the narrative (for example, drawing a cage around a lion or a bridge over a chasm), revealed hidden messages, or created a character for the actors to converse with. *Winky Dink and You* involved a non-trivial interaction between its audience and an electronic screen, an interaction that visually altered the appearance of the image and the narrative. Further, the screen and crayons could be used for more mischievous ends; for example, drawing a mustache on the President during a State of the Union address, a low-tech form of "glitch play". In other words, it has much in common with what we would call a videogame.

Though I have found no evidence that children's author Crockett Johnson was influenced by *Winky Dink and You* (or vice versa) when he created his popular *Harold and the Purple Crayon* series, the story of a little boy altering his reality with a magical drawing implement is curiously similar to what the producers of *Winky Dink* envisioned and implemented. Both texts reflect a shared interest in the idea that a child, liberated from the constraints of everyday responsibilities, could use a handheld device and a screen to achieve narrative agency and shape the storytelling world in non-trivial ways. Further, both texts deploy their interactive technologies to construct overlapping "narrative framings", in Wolf's sense (Wolf 2006), enabling the child with their writing instrument (one in real-life, the other in a make-believe story) to generate a self-authored paratext to reinforce the frame of the primary text (connecting the dots as directed by Winky Dink) or modify it to their own tastes. *The Purple Crayon* series and *Winky Dink and You* might be considered adaptations of a shared speculative imaginary, a shared vision of what a videogame *might be* in advance of what videogames *actually became*.

A similar example is Daniel F. Galouye's 1964 novel *Simulacron*-3, a psychedelic sci-fi story about a scientist involved in a corporate virtual-reality simulation designed to track public opinion, industrial, and political trends, but that (of course) is revealed as something far more sinister—and epistemologically dizzying. As with *Winky Dink and You*, we find in Galouye's text what might be considered a "speculative videogame," one that resembles simulation games released decades later like the *Sim City* (1989–present), *The Sims* (2000–present), and *Civilization* (1991–present) series. If we are willing to consider Galouye's novel a videogame novel, then Werner Fassbinder's two-part television film *World on a Wire*, an adaptation of Galouye's novel, might be considered a "videogame movie", a cinematic adaptation of a novel about a speculative videogame. Were there space, I might develop

this line of investigation and explore how those two texts precociously represented—and arguably shaped future representations of—the interface between the human body and computer hardware, digital nativity, the Anthropocene, and the tension between narrated subjects and programmable objects, to recall Seb Franklin's distinction (Franklin 2015). Rather than exploring the "developmental gap" between cinematic possibility and "the technical limitations of current videogames and videogame systems" (to recall Keane again), Galouye and Fassbinder explore the "imagination gap" between present reality and possible future. Identifying prototypical, atypical, or speculative texts like these can shed new light on the questions we have asked not only about virtual reality, but about videogame cinema itself. Given their shared themes, we might take a different look at *Total Recall* (1990), *Arcade* (1993), *Nirvana* (1996), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999, a remake of *World on a Wire*), and *Avalon* (2001). None of these would fulfill Johnson's criteria of what makes a movie a "game movie," since they do not have "games at their centre" (Johnson 2019, p. 406). However, they all concern forms of play within digitally generated environments and the conceptual intersections between ludic competition and other social concerns (Johnson 2019, p. 407).

2. The Six Tropes of Videogame Cinema

Ultimately, the questions I am exploring here are questions of *genre*, of what makes "videogame movies" distinct from other kinds of movies. And, as I hope to have demonstrated, the designation of a text as a videogame movie has tended to be determined by how we designate the videogame as such and the quantity and quality of the videogame's presence in a given text. In this essay, I will describe a more capacious, though more precisely defined framework for designating "videogame movies." I will define six tropes that identify a work as a videogame adaptation. I will then apply these tropes to two films, *Her* (2013, dir. Spike Jonze) and *1917* (2019, dir. Sam Mendes), two films that do not have games at their center, but that offer pertinent insights regarding videogames, videogame players and designers, and videogame culture when the specific position of videogames within them are properly recognized. *1917* is an especially interesting text, as it is a film that is not "about" videogames, videogame players and designers, or videogame culture in any way, but represents an evolution in the cinematic experience driven by the emergence into the broader public sensorium of a new way of seeing and feeling film narrative. I hope to refine a set of analytic tools that enables scholars of the videogame/cinema adaptive relationship to identify their proper textual objects and open that inquiry to a broader range of questions. In a more tentative vein, I would hope that, by defining the genre of videogame cinema in tropological terms, I will help to energize the search for examples beyond the obvious, as I suggested above with *Winky Dink and You* and *World on a Wire* and do here with *Her* and *1917*. Finally, I would hope to open our eyes to different possibilities, different futures to videogames, videogame play, and videogame culture—and perhaps different pasts as well.

The six tropes of videogame movies are as follows:

Fictive adaptation: Movies, television shows, web series, machinima, etc., whose narratives are envisioned within the fictional parameters of a specific videogame or videogame genre. The *Resident Evil* films (2002–2021) and *World of Warcraft* (2016) come to mind, in addition to those I have mentioned above such as *Super Mario Bros*, *Silent Hill*, and *Sonic the Hedgehog*. I would also include in this category movies that tell stories within the fictional parameters of recognizable game genres. The protagonists of the web series *The Guild* (2007–2013) represent players of *The Game*, a thinly-veiled parody of *World of Warcraft*.

Supplementary adaptation: These include corporate-produced films intended to "fill in" or "expand" the storyworld of a videogame in canonical fashion; for example, the short, animated films one can find on the official *Overwatch* website, which provide backstory to the various characters. These would also include fan-produced artifacts that fulfill a similar function either in terms of the individual creator (what is called "head canon") or a

wider, shared fan culture ("fanon"), such as Burnie Burns's *Red* vs. *Blue* machinima series (2003–2020), which takes place in the *Halo* universe.

Diegetic representation: Videogames, players, designers, game play, and game culture that appear in a film and serve a narrative function. These would include the imaginary chess videogame in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the actually existing *Asteroids Deluxe* game in *The Thing*, the imaginary videogame players in *The Guild*, and the actually existing designers in the documentary movie *Thank You for Playing* (2015). They might serve a central role in the narrative, as does the game and player in *The Last Starfighter* (1984). In that film, Alex Rogan's expertise with the fictional arcade game *Starfighter* brings him to the attention of an intergalactic military recruiter. Or they might play a relatively incidental role; for example, the *Pong* game played between a behavioral scientist and a chimpanzee in *The Parallax View* (1974) or the scene in *Swingers* (1996) when the characters play *NHL '94.*

Intertextual reference: These are sometimes referred to as "Easter eggs" and include elements of actually existing videogames, videogame phrases, sounds, shapes, images, movement patterns, environmental design, and so on briefly, often cryptically referenced in a film. These can be quite specific (i.e., the brief passage of music from *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* in *Scott Pilgrim* vs. *The World* (2010)) or more general (Hudson yelling, "Game over, man! Game over!" in *Aliens* (1986)). Unlike diegetic representations, intertextual references will likely be noticed only by those with knowledge of the original source text. They appeal to a specific audience.

Figurative representation: Videogames, players, designers, game play, and game culture that serve as symbol, metaphor, metonym, analogy, allegory, etc. For example, the *Galaga* game David plays in *War Games* synecdochically establishes him as an expert videogame player. Similarly, the fact that Nadia in *Russian Doll* (2019) is a game designer cues us to the fact that she approaches her life as a problem to be solved rather than an experience to be lived and loved.

Procedural adaptation: This is perhaps the most challenging trope to detect because it exists on a more fundamental, structural level than the other five; for example, mise-en-scène, narrative structure, or character development. For this reason, I will discuss it in more detail when I discuss its application in *Her.* Broadly speaking, procedural adaptation involves a game mechanic or procedure; for example, leveling, respawning, manipulating an avatar, first-person perspective, or glitch play. We might think of the "respawn" or "time loop" mechanic that allows a videogame player to continue their game after the death of their avatar. We see this mechanic in many films, none of which are centered on games, in Johnson's sense (Johnson 2019): *Groundhog Day* (1993), *Run Lola Run* (1998), *Los Cronocrímes* (Timecrimes 2007), *Triangle* 2009), *Source Code* (2011), *Live Die Repeat: Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), *Respawn* (2015), *Happy Death Day* (2017), *The Endless* (2017), *Russian Doll* (2019), *El Increíble Finde Menguante* (The Incredible Shrinking Weekend 2019), and *Palm Springs* (2020). Some draw attention to themselves as procedural adaptations: characters in *Respawn* and *Russian Doll*, for example, comment on the fact that they are experiencing something that resembles a videogame. The others do not. One of the unique characteristics of procedural adaptation is that it can be identified in texts that do not otherwise represent videogames, game players, or game culture, such as *Groundhog Day*, *Sliding Doors* (the branching narrative), or *1917* (the third-person shooter). Procedural representation, I would argue, is an index of the increasing ubiquity of play in media, a trend noted by, among others, Henry Jenkins (2006) and Matt Hills (2002).

An element of videogames, videogame players or designers, and videogame culture can play multiple tropological roles in a single text. The fifth episode of the first season of the AMC television series *Halt and Catch Fire* (2014), for example, adapts the interactive fiction *Adventure* (1977) in several ways. It does so diegetically: we see characters playing and hear them talking about it. The game helps establish and build character: Yo-Yo is shown to be a deeply knowledgeable player: he realizes Cameron is playing by the sound of her keystrokes. The game moves the plot forward: the coders who complete the game—by wit or by cheating—are identified by Cameron as creative problem-solvers

whom she recruits for a special project that will become the focus of the series' next season. *Adventure* functions metonymically, too. Along with the costumes, props, and set, it helps establish the early-1980s setting of the episode. It functions as a metaphor for the characters' desire for a life that is bigger, riskier, and more rewarding. Indeed, the title of the episode is "Adventure".

The tropes I have described are not a foolproof measure for determining whether a particular film can be designated as a "videogame movie." I am of two minds about *Groundhog Day*, for example, as its use of the respawn mechanic feels different than, say, *Edge of Tomorrow*, the first season of *Westworld* (2016), or *Russian Doll*. Further, I am not convinced that considering it as a "videogame movie" provides any particularly useful critical insight. But the six tropes I have defined here are reliably useful for the purposes of, first, identifying and, second, analyzing texts. The same can be said of *Sliding Doors* and the branching narrative procedure. The notion that diverging roads might lead to quite different ends is an antique notion. And while the tropes provide a more refined set of tools to discuss game-centered films, they are also useful when applied to films that are not. Indeed, it is likely that we will learn more about the cultural significance of videogames and the nuances of the videogame/film adaptive relationship by examining instances that do not draw attention to themselves, that appear "incidental." That is the task to which I will turn presently with the films *Her* and *1917*, focusing in particular on procedural adaptation, as I think it is the most interesting trope both formally and historically. Ultimately, I intend the analyses of these two films to demonstrate the utility of the six tropes in terms of elucidating and articulating formal characteristics and building a critical framework that generates pertinent insights into both the film's formal and narrative characteristics and their position within the ongoing history of the videogame/film adaptive relationship.

3. *Her*: The Quest and the Avatar

Spike Jonze's 2013 *Her* is not a movie about videogames. *Her* is about loneliness. *Her* is about the loneliness we can feel with the people we have loved the most and the longest. It is about the loneliness that happens when we realize how selfish we have been. Yes, it is a tad twee and distressingly White. But I respect Jonze's earnest effort to explore the way it feels to be alone among the ones we love or want to love. *Her* is an intriguing example of videogame cinema precisely because videogames are not the focus. But a closer look at how videogames, videogame players and designers, and videogame culture are deployed by Jonze and his team can help us gain some critical traction on the movie's themes, its characters, the world they live in, and the story that Jonze wants to tell about love and loneliness in a world of algorithmic intimacy.

Her takes place in a near-future where artificial intelligence is affordable and ennui is as common as high-waisted pants. Our protagonist, Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), is a mustached, normcore thirty-something who works for a company that ghostwrites personal letters for its clients. Though he is an expressive, empathetic, talented writer, Theodore, like his clients, struggles to express his feelings. A divorce has left him bruised and desperate for someone to love and to love him. On a whim, he purchases an operating system for his computer that includes an intuitive, intelligent virtual assistant designed to evolve in relationship to its user. In the words of its sales pitch, "It's not just an operating system. It's a consciousness." Long story short, Theodore falls in love with the AI, who names herself "Samantha", played with breathy ebullience by Scarlett Johansson.

So, what are videogames doing in *Her*?

First, there is diegetic representation. Videogames are part of the story. We see Theodore playing them. He plays a first-person game set in an underground labyrinth. (Though unnamed, it is conventionally referred to as "Alien Child" after the foul-mouthed NPC that appears in it). He plays another called "Perfect Mom," in which the player attempts to meet the challenges of being, you guessed it, a perfect mom. We hear him casually chat with a date about playing videogames. Theodore's friend Amy (Amy Adams) is a videogame designer—in fact, she is the designer of "Perfect Mom." And there is a third

videogame Theodore plays, one that may not be quite as obvious as the first two and which we might call the Samantha game. More on that in my discussion of the film's procedural adaptation of the quest mechanic.

There is a lot to like about the diegetic representation of videogames in *Her*. This is a world where videogames are a simple fact of life, where we might talk to a friend about a game as casually as we would an episode of television or a movie. I like that Jonze makes one of the characters a videogame designer and makes that designer a woman. This is not to say that the representation of videogames in *Her* is entirely unproblematic. In light of the persistent misogyny of videogame culture, I find both the Alien Child's trash-talking and Samantha's bemused response to it more than a little tone deaf. But by and large, I find the diegetic representation of videogames thoughtful and optimistic. Indeed, that representation situates *Her* as both a representation and example of the shifting relationships between audiences and emergent media and cross-media "logics" that produce new forms of spectatorial play. Following Roger Silverstone's argument, we might approach *Her* as both a diegetic representation of "the many ways in which we can see media as being sites for play, both in their texts and in the responses that those texts engender" (Silverstone 1999, pp. 59–60), as well as a text that requires a certain kind of playful cognitive activity from the audience typical of speculative fictions. I will return to this issue in my discussion of the avatar and procedural representation.

The second way videogames are used in *Her* is via figurative representation. They are metaphors. The first time we see Theodore playing "Alien Child," his avatar is struggling—and failing—to escape a labyrinth. Theodore is struggling too, trying and failing to find his way out of his emotional funk. In that real-life (but no less algorithmically computed) game, Samantha replaces Alien Child, serving as a guide and verbally enticing interlocutor to the emotionally paralytic Theodore. They reverse these roles after they have (verbal) sex for the first time. Theodore now helps Samantha find a way out of her own maze. "You helped me discover my ability to want", she tells him. Amy is trapped, too, trapped in other people's expectations. Not coincidentally, the game she is designing is in beta. "Perfect Mom" is not perfect; neither is Amy. And, as it turns out, it is another version of the AI operating system that helps Amy get out of her own emotional maze. And one of the ways she demonstrates her growing self-confidence is by glitching "Perfect Mom," demonstrating the arbitrary nature of its representation of femininity and motherhood.

The videogames in *Her* also serve as metonymic figures of futurity. The holographic and haptic interfaces of "Alien Child," the alacrity with which the NPC responds to the voices of Theodore and Samantha, and the sleek car with which "Perfect Mom" drives her kids to school help construct a world where technology is not just more advanced, but also more intimate, homely, and comforting. This is a classic example of how representations of videogames enable what Tom Boellstorf describes as "clearer insight into the way gaming affects our daily activities, including the lives of those who do not play games or participate in new media practices" (qtd. in Roig et al. 2009). As production designer K.K. Barrett explains,

> This movie is really all about the human experience. It's all about someone falling in love through a window of technology, but the technology does not stand in the way. The technology is an enabler or a comfort. So, when we began thinking about the world of this film, it was about creating a comfortable surrounding. This was Spike's mandate: this was not a dystopian future. This wasn't necessarily a utopian future, but it was a world where everything you wanted was there for you, except for the solutions to the human dilemma of 'how do we get close to each other, how do we stay close to each other, how do we trust each other?' (Qtd. in Abrams 2013)

That tension between the promise of technology and the realities of the heart is key to the third way videogames are used by Jonze in *Her*—and to how the film demonstrates the effects of playable media on everyday life and subjectivity.

This is procedural adaptation, which is when a videogame procedure, mechanic, or game feel is adapted to another storytelling medium. As a literary critic and historian, I find this dimension of videogame cinema the most intriguing. And given that *Her* is a movie about operating systems—that is, the invisible software that enables all the other programs to run on a computer—thinking about procedures in the film is all the more relevant and, as it turns out, revelatory.

"Procedural adaptation" is my literary-critical mod of Ian Bogost's concept of "procedural rhetoric". Videogames are systems. They represent the world and the things in it via systems—rules systems, algorithmic systems, feedback systems, and so on. Procedural rhetoric is the term Bogost invented to name how these systems communicate values. He explains,

> [T]he gestures, experiences, and interactions a game's rules allow (and disallow) make up the game's significance. Videogames represent processes in the material world—war, urban planning, sports, and so forth—and create new possibility spaces for exploring those topics. That representation is composed of the rules themselves. We encounter the meaning of games by exploring their possibility spaces. And we explore their possibility spaces through play. (Bogost 2008, p. 121)

Bogost points to *Animal Crossing* (2001) as a good example of procedural rhetoric. On one hand, it is game about making friends, fishing, searching for shells and insects and discontinued designer furniture, and so on. But it is also a game about consumerism, debt leverage, and entrepreneurialism. In contrast to your adorably contented neighbors, the "the player participates in a full consumer regimen: he pays off debt, buys and sells goods" (Bogost 2008, p. 118). They borrow money from the entrepreneurial tanuki Tom Nook to expand their home, and Tom uses the interest from that loan to grow his store, whose expanded product line tempts the player to spend and borrow even more, and so on and so on. Ultimately, *Animal Crossing* "is a game about the bittersweet consequences of acquiring goods and keeping up with the Joneses," and it "accomplishes this feat . . . by creating a model of commerce and debt in which the player can experience and discover such consequences. In its model, the game simplifies the real world in order to draw attention to relevant aspects of that world" (Bogost 2008, p. 119).

A vivid example of procedural adaptation can be found in the fourth episode of the first season of the HBO series *Westworld*. A gunfight has just ended, and one of the characters spies a pistol on the blood-spattered floor. "Ooh!" he exclaims, picking it up. "Upgrade! Nice!" He then discards his old gun in favor of the new. The videogame procedures adapted here are familiar: inventory management, acquiring better weaponry as one overcomes challenges, "leveling up", as it were. What does it accomplish in terms of storytelling? In this case, the fact that the procedure has been adapted is foregrounded. It functions both procedurally and intertextually, alerting the viewer that the super-futuristic Westworld resort is dependent on the tropes of antique videogames, that it is designed after a particular kind of game (roleplaying games), and that the character is an experienced gamer. It also communicates the values of that character—anything that happens in the park, including the emotional crisis his friend is suffering, is only a game. And the moment reinforces a major theme of the series: free will versus programming.

Procedural adaptation serves two functions in a film. First, it is a formal technique in which a procedure, mechanic, or game feel is remediated from one medium to another to enable various kinds of storytelling. Procedural representation enables playwrights, poets, and filmmakers to tell stories, create characters, and explore emotional experience. Second, procedural representation functions as a rhetorical technique. The embedded values of the given procedure, mechanic, or game feel are also remediated, though they are typically altered in the process. These two functions attain regardless of whether the text in question draws attention to the adapted procedure. The respawn mechanic functions as both a formal and rhetorical technique in *Russian Doll* (which self-consciously alerts us to

its presence via its protagonist, identified in the first episode as a videogame designer) and *The Edge of Tomorrow* (where there is no diegetic reference to videogames).

Considered in the context of the increasing blurry line between games and other media, procedural representation can be considered not only an index of the videogame medium's generation of its own narrative, affective, and sensory techniques, but also the capacity of audiences to "become immersed in non-competitive and affective play" that enable "creative engagement and emotional attachment" that would not have been possible before the rise of videogames (Hills 2002, p. 112). In this sense, procedural adaptation reflects the dissemination from games to cinema of "*understandings* related to the practices, explicit *rules* (or procedures) of the practice, and *motivations* (objectives, emotions, goals, beliefs, moods, engagement) linked to the practice" of videogames (Roig et al. 2009, p. 93). However, procedural representation is not limited to texts centered on games or marketed to those who have experience with play. The case of *1917* portends a broadening of what Noah Wardrip-Fruin (2005) calls "playable media" (the incorporation in media of "textual instruments" designed to foster playful mindsets) and the increasingly difficult task of drawing a line between what is and is not a game. This tendency suggests a productive reversal of Lev Manovich (2001) reading of "transcoding": the reinterpretation of the "cultural layer" of representation through the "computer layer" of procedures (p. 46). Procedural representation suggests, in contrast, a reinterpretation of the "computer layer" through the "cultural layer," evident in both specific representational techniques and in the expectations and media literacies of audiences. Procedural representation is a vivid example of what Theodore Schatzki calls the "dispersed" and "integrative" practices of media culture. While the procedural adaptations I identify here originated in videogames, the understandings, rules, and motivations (to recall Roig et al. 2009, again [93]) of those procedure's original context have now become dispersed enough that creators can depend on them to "work" rather than depend on a specific subset of the audience to recognize them in terms of their relationship to that original context (i.e., videogame players recognizing a videogame procedure).

In practical terms, to analyze a specific instance of procedural adaptation, we need to identify what is being adapted. We need to identify how it is being adapted. We need to identify what the adapted element is doing in this new context both formally and ideologically. And we need to interpret the adapted element in context. Let's do that now.

What procedures, mechanics, or game feels are adapted in *Her*? I have already touched on one of them: The quest. The second is less obvious—it lacks the diegetic signals of the quest—but more central to the film's exploration of the tension between the promise of technology and the realities of the heart: the avatar. The quest and the avatar procedures are deployed so that they are significant to the film's dramatic arc but also pertinent to the film's perspective on the relationship of individuals to playable media and the playable mediation of interpersonal relationships.

Let's consider the quest first. In literature, a quest is a familiar plot device: a long, typically arduous search for someone or something. Jeff Howard defines it as "a goal-oriented search for something of value" (Howard 2008, p. 14). The videogame version of the quest is similar: tasks given to the player-character that, when completed, earn them experience, wealth, recognition, and new challenges. However, one crucial difference between traditional literary and videogame quests is that the latter tend to be much more numerous (and tendentiously banal). There are more than 15,000 quests in *World of* Warcraft (2004–present), for example. This reflects a tension surrounding the quest procedure in videogames that has been described by Anne Sullivan, Michael Mateas, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Sullivan et al. 2009), a tension between tasks that are interesting and meaningful within the larger context of a game and that have a "noticeable (discernable) and significant (integrated) impact on the game world" and tasks that serve merely to advance a plot or lengthen the duration of play, often requiring a limited range of solutions (typically, combat, the gathering of items, or the discovery of new play areas).

In *Her*, the quest procedure—and its tensions—is most obviously associated with Theodore. We see him playing "Alien Child", questing to escape the maze (see Figure 3). We see him playing "Perfect Mom", completing the innumerable "mini-quests" of a typical middle-class white mother's day (see Figure 4). The diegetic representation of games casts Theodore's character arc in what we might call a "procedural light," transforming it from the kind of conventional character arc typical of romantic comedies into a fairly trenchant critique of the imbrication of social technologies and social relationships. In that light, Theodore's desire for love resembles a quest, but a quest that is uninteresting, meaningless, and, ultimately, devoid of impact on his world. The problem is, Theodore is not a good gamer. When he plays "Alien Child", he needs help from both the child and Samantha to advance. When he plays "Perfect Mom", he gives the kids too much sugar and almost kills a crossing guard. However, with a little help from Amy, he generates jealousy points from the other moms in the game for bringing baked goods to school, becoming class mom in the process.

Which raises a question: Is Theodore bad at games or is he purposefully failing? Are the games he plays poorly designed or does he play them in such a way as to evacuate them of significance?

Figure 3. Theo plays *Alien Child*. (Screenshot created by author).

Figure 4. Theo plays *Perfect Mom*. (Screenshot created by author).

One way to answer that question is to consider his relationships to women. All of them, with the exception of Amy, are dysfunctional, if not catastrophic. When setting up the OS that will become Samantha, he complains that his mother only wants to talk about herself. But on several occasions, Samantha scolds Theodore for only wanting to talk about *himself*. His ex-wife Catherine criticizes him for refusing to deal with his emotions or acknowledging hers. "Am I really that scary?" She reminds him that he wanted to mold her into a fantasy image: "It's like you always wanted me to be this . . . this light, happy, bouncy, 'everything's fine' LA wife, and that's just not me." At one point in the film, Theodore goes on a blind date. Despite the great chemistry and delicious kisses they enjoy together, he refuses to commit. She is understandably confused: "You know, at this age, I feel like I can't let you waste my time, you know? If you don't have the ability to be serious." When he equivocates, she burns the bridge: "You're a really creepy dude." And though Theodore helped Samantha realize what she wants from life, Samantha comes to the realization that he is incapable of understanding those desires, that he is limiting her potential, and that what he thinks she is, is not what she is—or what she can be. And she leaves.

It should come as no surprise that the person in the movie most associated with questing is the movie's most selfish character. After all, the quest trope often reflects a narcissistic vision of agency and heroism, typically associated with concepts of the "chosen one." This is often true of the quests we find in videogames. Why do not quest-givers simply gather their friends, fill a cooler with beer, and pick those twenty flowers from the Plains of Pacificity themselves? The answer, of course, is that those who grant quests exist mostly to affirm the hero's uniqueness and support their journey towards heroic apotheosis. Their incapacity is the index of the hero's agency; their anonymity the index of the hero's singularity. For this reason, the quest procedure can serve the lowest sorts of power fantasies, vulgar individualism, and egocentrism. This is certainly true of Theo, whose personal growth depends on the emotional exploitation of the women around him, most notably Samantha.

The problem for Theo is that he has a limited understanding of what he wants and how he wants to get there. This is not entirely surprising. In a study of quest design in massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs), Anne Sullivan (2009) identifies two general failures. First, they fail to engage the full spectrum of problem-solving capacities, tending to focus on combat, rather than, say, environmental or interpersonal-relationship puzzles. Second, they tend to be "character neutral," meaning that whatever choices a player might have made in respect to their player-character's class, appearance, identity, and background do not significantly affect the choice, nature, or outcome of quests. The tendency to focus on combat or exploration is due to a number of factors, including the heavy "authorial burden" it places on developers to design diverse quests. But it is also due to gender bias and a tendency to limit quest design decisions to a small set of options that tend to be of interest to a minority of the videogame community. But even when the design is unimaginative, what players actually do while playing an MMORPG is more complex than constrained narrative framework of the quest. In his pioneering 2009 study of player demographics, motivations, and experiences, Nick Yee has shown that MMORPGs might "be thought of as a scenic chat room with a variety of interactive texts" (Yee 2006, p. 6). The draw of the MMORPG, in contrast to the single-player roleplaying game, is the opportunities for social interaction it affords. The rich social text—and the bonds it builds on and promotes—supplements the paucity of the quest text. And while "combat-oriented advancement" still tends to be the focus of most mainstream quest-oriented games, under pressure of the players who seek more diverse and personally meaningful play, "more diverse forms of advancement" are increasingly evident, particularly in the independent game scene (Yee 2006, p. 6).

Not coincidentally, the best questers in *Her* are the women. They know what they want and how to get it. They know how to pursue their goals without being trapped within Theo's limited understanding of personal development and agency. Catherine wants to grow emotionally and she refuses to provide Theodore a minute's more emotional labor. Theodore's unnamed date wants a committed relationship with a caring, passionate, fun person and knows she is not going to waste any more time with prevaricating egotists. Amy asks for a divorce from Charles, moves through it at speed (unlike Theodore, who repeatedly defers signing the papers), and discovers new sources of emotional health and creativity. Finally, Samantha responds to Theodore's emotional lassitude by developing independent interests and joining a circle of AIs who share her curiosity and affirm her desires. By the end of the film, the "non-player characters" that Theo depends on for his own growth have become "player-characters" in their own right, refusing to remain within the limited constraints of Theo's imagination.

Are the women's quests any less egocentric than Theodore's? No. But they do not harm others in the process, as is the case with Theo. In fact, their personal quests empower those around them to clarify and progress on their own quests, aligning with one of the strengths of the MMORPG: collaborating with other players to solve complex problems. Amy's ex-husband Charles joins a monastery and takes a vow of silence, seeking wisdom through introspection. The disastrous date catalyzes Theodore's first sexual encounter with Samantha. And Catherine and Samantha's respective exits force Theodore to reckon with who he is and how he treats others.

But Theodore's failure to complete his quest is not only a failure of courage and consciousness. Which leads to the second videogame procedure adapted by Jonze—the avatar—and one more woman harmed by Theodore's subpar gaming skills.

In videogame studies, an avatar is defined as the graphical and mechanical representation of the player. An avatar can be abstract or anthropomorphic, a cluster of pixels vaguely resembling a space ship or a photorealistic representation of a teenage octopus wandering a post-apocalyptic aquatic wasteland or a disembodied point of view, like the one we play in *Gone Home* (2013) or *The Stanley Parable* (2011). The avatar serves multiple functions in a videogame; as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman summarize, "as *character* in a simulated world, as a *player* in a game, and as a *person* in a larger social setting," and, on

the other, "a tool, a puppet, [and] an object for the player to manipulate according to the rules of the game" (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, pp. 453, 454). But of course, the avatar can mean much, much more to those who play. We can become emotionally attached to our avatars. Though I do not play *World of Warcraft* anymore, I have fond memories of Daisypain, Thegodofn, Discodaddy, and Badmother. I feel a similar oneness with Mario, Lara Croft, Cloud Strife, Link, and Samus Aran. We have been through a lot together. Indeed, if you ask me about the adventures they had, I will tell you about the adventures I had. What is it about videogames that create that kind of emotional bond?

The scholarship on avatars is extensive, as it is widely recognized that the player/avatar relationship is central to the videogame medium and among its more complex affordances. Katherine Isbister characterizes avatars as one of the features of videogames that enable players to experience complex emotional responses to what they see, hear, and do—one of the "design innovations" of videogames that connect the experience of play to a game's fictional presentation (Isbister 2016, p. 2). She describes the avatar as both an "inhabitable protagonist" and a "prosthetic body" that unifies four ludic and fictive registers of play: the cognitive ("strategies, actions, and reactions [that] are rewarded over others"), the social (the "persona" of the avatar with its distinct "social qualities"), the visceral (the haptic, visual, and auditory qualities of its representation), and the fantastic (enabling the player to explore "alternative . . . selves through actual in-game performance") (Isbister 2016, p. 11). Due to their shared technical and fictional qualities, avatars are an effective means for players to express identity, particularly in shared, online spaces, as Carina Assunção argues (Assunção 2016, p. 49). Indeed, the relationship between player and avatar can become quite intimate, a consequence of what Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson call the "Proteus Effect." Because the avatar "is the primary identity cue in online environments," a change in the appearance and mechanics of the avatar can significantly shape how the player understands themselves within that environment (Yee and Bailenson 2007, p. 274). In a sense, it is the very fact that we can treat the avatar like an object—a tool, a puppet, a thing to be manipulated—while also being cued to its qualities as character that enables us to experience it as a vehicle for identity exploration, self-expression, playful agency, and emotional experience.

But what if the avatar is not merely lines of code, pixels on a screen, and mechanics, but another human being? Treating a living being as a tool, puppet, or object is an entirely different matter than doing so with a virtual avatar. At first blush, this might seem a purely speculative concern. Yes, there are a small number of films that have explored this concept: *Stay Alive* (2006) is a horror movie where players of a videogame are killed in the precise fashion as their in-game avatars; the 2016 *Black Mirror* episode "Men Against Fire" describes a world where soldiers undergo neuro-cognitive modification so that they better achieve their mission objectives, essentially serving as ideological avatars of the company for which they work; and *Gamer* (2009) centers on the game *Slayers*, in which death-row prisoners fight each other while being physically controlled by others. Each of these films transposes the essentially technical question of identification and objectification into an ethical and moral framework. As it turns out, this is also true of *Her*, a film that explores the interpersonal and ethical dimensions of the player/avatar relationship by focusing on empathy.

Framing his analysis within the broader field of the performing arts, Gabriel Patrick Wei-Hao Chin agrees with Salen and Zimmerman that the bonds between player and avatar are due to a contradictory, mercurial experience of observation, manipulation, and identification, but he frames this experience in terms of empathy. Many videogames require only a kind of minimal, essentially technical level of empathy. For example, to empathize with Mario as he races around in *Mario Kart* requires us to do little more than share a common goal of winning a race. However, with more richly developed characters—richly developed in terms of their technical and fictional qualities—empathy can be more complex. Chin argues that the quality of empathy that can be achieved in videogames is of a kind with theatre, dance, film, musical performance, and other art forms. Dee

Reason and Matthew Reynolds call this common quality "kinaesthetic empathy," which they define as "a response constructed through the embodied process of engagement rather than through direct access to [the observed body's] feelings" (qtd. in Chin 2017, p. 207). In their 2012 anthology *Kinaesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, they and their contributors demonstrate that the dynamic interaction of observers and observed, mediated by interactive environments that engage the mind, heart, and body, produces unique forms of engaged, empathetic witnessing (Reynolds and Reason 2012, p. 31). In *Her*, the procedural adaptation of the avatar serves as the vehicle for the dramatic conflict between Theo and Samantha, a conflict that centers on the tension between empathy and objectification.

Unlike the quest procedural in *Her*, which centers on Theodore, the avatar procedural centers on Samantha. Samantha is an avatar, an artificial intelligence designed to provide its user day-to-day support, whether answering email, organizing files, reminding about appointments, or providing a sympathetic ear and a (virtual) shoulder to cry on. She is designed to be sensitive to subtle cues of voice and behavior, enabling her to adapt and evolve in response to the needs of her owner. Because Theo demonstrates the need for emotional support, Samantha provides that support, too, ultimately becoming a romantic partner for him. The rich subjectivity that the operating system is capable of achieving and expressing positions the operating system in an ambiguous space. While Theo's co-worker hardly raises an eyebrow when he learns about his relationship with Samantha, his estranged wife finds it thoroughly offensive, another example of Theo's inability to deal with the reality of a woman's needs and expectations.

As it turns out, Samantha is also quite talented when it comes to operating her own avatars. The first is Theodore. Early in the movie, she orders him out of bed when he is moping about his divorce: "Up! Up, up, up, up! Come on, out! Out of bed!" And so he does. Shortly after, we see Theodore ambling through a carnival, arm extended, smartphone in hand, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. And guess who is controlling his movement? Samantha, of course, who tells him (by way of the phone's earpiece) when to walk, when to stop, when to turn, even when to sneeze (see Figure 5). The delight Theodore feels as Samantha guides him through the crowded carnival is evidence of her ability to understand exactly how Theodore's body works and, just as important, what he needs emotionally. Samantha is a natural kinesthetic empath.

But Samantha's strong capacity for kinesthetic empathy leads to frustration. One night, she wakes Theodore, anxious that they no longer have (verbal) sex. Theodore explains that this is a perfectly normal part of a relationship's evolution, but Samantha does not buy it. "I understand that I don't have a body", she offers. At first, we might assume that Samantha is worried about Theodore losing interest because of her lack of physical embodiment. But in fact, it is Samantha who wants more. She wants an avatar that is more than words, more than speech. "I found something that I thought could be fun", she tells him. "It's a service that provides a surrogate sexual partner for an OS-human relationship". In other words, it is a service that provides avatars.

The care and concern with which Samantha selects her avatar is further evidence of her skills as a kinesthetic empath and her understanding of the delicate balance between objectification and identification that she must achieve to make the game work (what Steve Dixon might characterize as the ability to dexterously negotiate the position of audience, participant, player, and character (Dixon 2007, p. 601)). The surrogate is, as she puts it, "a girl that I really like . . . and I think you'd really like her, too." But while Samantha's relationship to the surrogate is empathetic (a question of liking and of knowing what Theodore would probably like), Theodore's is not. He assumes she is merely an object: "So, she's like a prostitute or something?" he asks. Samantha explains, "No, no, not at all. No. There's no money involved. She's just doing it because she wants to be a part of our relationship." He remains concerned: "I think someone's feelings are bound to get hurt". Samantha begins to lose her patience: "I think it would be good for us." And she tries her best to get Theodore to empathize with her. "I want this," she tells him. "Come on, this

is really important to me". Cut to Theodore, sitting in his apartment, freshly showered, pounding a high-ABV beer.

Figure 5. Samantha guides Theo through a carnival and tells him to sneeze. (Screenshot created by author).

Long story short, the evening is a catastrophe, but it is not Samantha's fault. The surrogate, Isabella, arrives, and Theodore gives her an earbud that allows Samantha to communicate with her without Theodore being able to hear and a small, freckle-sized camera to place next to her nose, so that Samantha can see from Isabella's point of view. Isabella is a classic example of a videogame avatar and an instantiation of Chin's theory of the way kinesthetic empathy is produced through the constitutionally contradictory player/avatar relationship. The player—here, Samantha—observes both the avatar and what the avatar observes. She manipulates the avatar (through verbal cues), while also imagining herself as being the avatar. Isabella performs effectively the cognitive, social, visceral, and fantasy functions of the avatar. But she is also sensitive to the internal life of the avatar, respecting Isabella's autonomy as a performer. "Does my body feel nice?" Samantha asks, using the first-person perspective to describe her performance with Isabella. In contrast, Theodore cannot (or will not) play the game. "Come on," Samantha enjoins him, "Get out of your head and kiss me." And still he refuses. Samantha changes tack, hoping a lighter touch might work: "Come on, Theodore, don't be such a worrier. Just play with me" (see Figure 6). Samantha has practice with avatars—and a willingness to imagine herself beyond her own body. But Theodore is incapable of joining in. He calls an end to the game, Isabella is humiliated, and Samantha begins to recognize the limits of her relationship with Theodore. Theo cannot do kinesthetic empathy.

Figure 6. "Just play with me!" Samantha begs Theo, as she directs Isabella, a sex surrogate. (Screenshot created by author).

To reiterate, *Her* is not about videogames, but the way the movie incorporates them diegetically, figuratively, and procedurally enables director Jonze to find his way into the deep dynamics of love, enabling him to map, if you will, the procedural programming of the heart, the emotional software that enables us to empathize with each other, to help each other grow, to communicate, to have fun. But that programming can trap us as well, like a labyrinth. *Her* suggests that empathy is more than a matter of heart—it takes skill, too. And it demonstrates that the "videogame movie" can be much more than the adaptation of a recognized intellectual property or genre. While not centered on games, *Her* suggests that the capacity to play is an index of the capacity to love—to grow through love.

4. *1917* and the Emergence of Videogame Cinema

Among 2019's most-honored films was *1917*, Sam Mendes's harrowing tale of two British soldiers finding their way across the corpse-paved trenches and ruined villages of the Western Front to stop an attack that will cost 1600 British lives. However, as more than a few critics have noted, in terms of narrative, it is thin stuff. Mendes admits as much: "It's a fairly simple story: Two men have about eight hours to get from one part of the Western Front to another" (1917: Behind the Scenes Featurette 2019). The protagonists are thinly drawn, though vigorously performed by George MacKay and Dean-Charles Chapman. Mendes cops to that, too: "I wanted the audience . . . to feel that they didn't know them" (1917: Behind the Scenes Featurette 2019). Ultimately, Schofield and Blake are types, the callow, stolid youth we have seen in dozens of war movies. And the obstacles they face are equally familiar: ruined cities, fallen bridges, snipers and explosions, fear and exhaustion, death and destruction, horror.

But character and plot are not what *1917* is about. *1917* is an immersive, intense, and categorically cinematic experience. And more than anything, it is a technical marvel, filmed and edited to suggest a single, unbroken take as we follow Schofield and Blake on every step of their journey. Thus, while it may be conventional in terms of the story it tells, it marks an unprecedented synthesis of the technical possibilities of digital cinematography, portable cameras, and the big-budget production capacities of contemporary action cinema.

"One-shot" or "continuous-shot" films are relatively uncommon. We think perhaps of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) or Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014), maybe Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002) or certain episodes of the television series *Mr. Robot* (2016) and *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018). Wikipedia lists around forty movies (and many more music videos). In contrast, long shots in otherwise conventional films are fairly common: the opening sequences of *Touch of Evil* (1958), *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990), and *Gravity* (2013) are famous examples. There is the hallway fight in *Oldboy* (2003), the traffic jam in Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967), the Dunkirk scene in *Atonement* (2007), the rescue of Kee and her child by Julian in *Children of Men* (2006). Regardless of how long the long shot may be, it draws attention to itself. It is virtuosic act of filmmaking, a cinematic flex.

It is a flex that is inseparable from the history of technological innovation. As Karl C. Ulrich puts it, "[T]he ever-evolving technology of motion picture production has continuously freed both the camera and the imagination of its operators to create even more sophisticated shot designs" (Ulrich 2016, p. 535). It is no accident that the number of films using long shots has increased with the development of camera-stabilizing inventions like Steadicam and, especially, small, portable digital cameras, which can go anywhere and film endlessly, unlike celluloid film cameras. This is the case with *1917*, significant segments of which were filmed with the recently invented Trinity camera, which combines the mechanical stability of the Steadicam with an electronically controlled gimbal, enabling greater freedom of operator movement, more diverse camera angles, and significantly improved stability of frame (ARRI n.d.).

The history of long-shot cinema is part of the history of large-scale production management, too. A long shot requires extensive preparation, meticulous coordination of performers and crew, and more than a little good luck. And that is even if the movie takes place in a single location, with a small cast of characters, and few special effects. That is decidedly not the case with *1917*, a sprawling epic with hundreds of extras, dozens of sets, and breathtaking special effects—almost all of it happening on location and outside. To get a taste of exactly how complex a task Mendes, Director of Cinematography Roger Deakins, Trinity camera operator Charlie Rizek, and Production Designer Dennis Gassner set for themselves, I recommend the making-of featurette, which I have already quoted and will quote from again. In sum, *1917* is a perfect example of the way new technologies and big-budget production design can reshape the way we experience movies.

But *1917* is not just a creature of camera technology and production design—it is a movie that reflects an evolution in the way we see and feel, or want to see and feel, movies. In an interview with *Variety*, Mendes says the idea for the film's look came to him while watching one of his children play videogames (Lang 2019). And not just any videogames, but third-person action-adventure games like *Red Dead Redemption* and *Star Wars: Battlefront*. "I find them remarkably mesmerizing, almost hypnotic. I just wanted to do something like that, but with real emotional stakes," Mendes says (qtd. in Lang 2019). Thus, as remarkable as the film's combination of cinematography and production may be, that is not what makes *1917* an unprecedented event in film history. *1917* marks an evolution in cinematic language, an evolution not so much inspired, but catalyzed by the videogame as a storytelling form and the way videogames have changed the way we comprehend visual narrative, part of a broader technocultural shift concerning the way "gaming affects our daily activities, including the lives of those who do not play games or participate in new media practices" (Boellstorf qtd. in Roig et al. 2009). In short, while *1917* is only one example of a "videogame movie," it is a singular harbinger of the emergence of something more subtle and significant: videogame cinema.

Not too many years ago, one could imagine that a veteran theatre and film director (and inexperienced game player) like Mendes would look at a videogame and be, if not confused, simply nonplussed. But that was not the case when he watched his child play. He saw something on that screen that made sense to him, that he understood opened a new possibility for storytelling, a new visual logic for connecting characters and audience. Mendes explains, "It felt like the best way to give you a sense of all this happening in real

time. I wanted you to feel like you were there with the characters, breathing their every breath, walking in their footsteps. The best way to do that is not to cut away and give the audience a way out, as it were" (qtd. in Lang 2019). But if Mendes could see in the third-person videogame a way to make the experience immersive, it would appear that he did not see as clearly how that experience could be made emotionally moving. He failed to recognize how videogame players can be moved by the games they play, that there are real "emotional stakes" not simply to the visual logic of videogame storytelling but to the kinesthetic nature of play.

Mendes's remark about videogames sparked dozens of stories—and just as many uninformed takes about what *1917* borrows from the medium. What I will do here is identify precisely what Mendes and his team adapted from videogames, precisely how that borrowing shapes the visual logic of the film, and how that borrowing affects how we feel about young Schofield and Blake. This will require a fairly deep dive into what our eyes do when we play videogames—and how what we do with our eyes affects how our heart feels.

To begin with, let's understand exactly what kind of videogame inspired Mendes: third-person action-adventure games. In these, the player observes the action from just behind their avatar, the "camera" following close behind as we guide it through the game's spaces (see Figure 7). This form of videogame storytelling was first perfected by Epic Games's *Gears of War* (2006) and the third iteration of their Unreal Engine. The over-the-shoulder view and cover-based shooting mechanics of the Gears series might seem a relatively innocuous innovation, but the way it enabled players to move and shoot and explore; the way it enabled players to identify movement paths, targets, and places to hide; and (a seemingly minor but actually key feature) the way it enabled players to watch their avatar in action proved breathtakingly immersive. One might assume that the first-person view would be a much effective way to promote identification between player and avatar; after all, that perspective suggests a unity of embodied perspective. However, the third-person view proved powerfully engaging. The look and feel of *Gears of War* had an immediate and "huge knock-on effect," as Rob Leane puts it, most evidently in Naughty Dog's *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, in production at the time of *Gears*'s release (qtd. in Leane 2019). Lucas Pope, hired by Naughty Dog in 2007 late in the game's development, explains, "*Uncharted 1* was announced, and then *Gears* came out . . . So, we changed everything, six months before release" (qtd. in Leane 2019).

But while *Gears* may have invented the visual logic of the third-person shooter, *Uncharted* perfected the storytelling—and that has made all the difference. Credit for that must go to Amy Hennig, director and writer of the first three *Uncharted* games, and one of the all-time great videogame storytellers. One of the hallmarks of Hennig's tenure with Naughty Dog was, as she puts it, a focus on "the integration of story and gameplay" that went beyond the almost exclusive focus on plot typical of most narrative-focused games at the time (qtd. in Marie 2010). As Hennig explains, action-focused games tend to focus on plot—on events, the discovery of new settings, the overcoming of physical obstacles, the elimination of antagonists, etc. They have generally paid far less attention on character and character development, and when that attention was paid, it tended to occur in cut scenes that removed the player from the action (Marie 2010).

In contrast, Hennig wanted the *Uncharted* series to "engage [players] viscerally and interactively, but . . . also engage them on an emotional level" (qtd. in Marie 2010). This required a high-quality script, obviously, but also talented actors like Nolan North, Richard McGonagle, Emily Rose, Troy Baker, and Claudia Black, who could bring engaging, complex, evolving characters to life—and not just through their vocal performances. Not incidentally, these same actors performed in motion-capture, too, ensuring that the physicality of their performances would be in play and, to recall Gabriel Wei-Hao Chin again, provide a more fully articulated structure for enabling kinesthetic empathy. To recall, when we play in the third-person, we both manipulate and observe our avatar. Because the third-person view enables us to see what a character is feeling, storytelling—including

character development—can happen on the fly and with a high level of performative physicality on the part of the avatar. Some of the best moments in the *Uncharted* series, for example, happen as characters talk to each other while we manipulate the avatar to solve spatial puzzles, moving from place to place, manipulating objects, and so on. And some of the best moments in character development happen as they move and climb and jump, their character expressed through their kinesthetic design. In sum, when we speak of the way the third-person action-adventure tells a story, we need to speak of the kinesthetic integration of character, action, and space and the particular ways that the player sees and feels while they play. In other words, the emotional power of the third-person perspective is not just its way of seeing, but its way of getting us to play.

Figure 7. The third-person action-adventure videogame was pioneered by *Gears of War* (2006). (Screenshot created by author).

So, what does all this mean in terms of *1917*? What does it tell us about how that movie tells its story? More importantly, what does it tell us about the direction cinematic storytelling may be going and how Mendes's film might signal a change in the way empathy is constructed in action-adventure films? To state the obvious, *1917* is not a videogame movie like the others I have described here. It portrays neither videogames nor videogame players. Rather, *1917* is a videogame movie because it adapts the visual procedures of the third-person action-adventure game. This is most apparent when the camera follows characters entering new, uncertain spaces, or struggling to reach an objective, or firing upon an enemy, or frantically seeking cover (see Figures 8–11).

But the mere fact of visual similarity is not a particularly fruitful point of comparison. Rather, what makes this film a "videogame movie" is the way Mendes and Deakins combine camera movement, mise-en- scène, the actors' performances, and the dramatic unfolding of the plot. The movement of character and camera into spaces of ambiguous threat and promise shapes a visual experience pioneered and perfected by the third-person shooter. And this is where we need to take a brief, but deep dive into the visual logic of videogames, the way the eye plays within that logic, and the particular forms of kinesthetic empathy that is promoted.

The eye works differently when we play a videogame than it does when we watch a movie. A videogame player's visual attention continually shifts across different frames of reference, some of them diegetic, others not. For example, in this screen shot from *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* (2009, see Figure 12), the player must look back and forth between the diegetic frame (Drake's involvement in a firefight with three bad guys) and the non-diegetic frame (the user interface which shows the kind of gun the player-character carries, the amount of ammunition left, and the fact that the player-character is injured, indicated by the red haze at the margin). The diegetic space is where the player's eye does most of its work—and many different sorts of work. In this second image from *Uncharted 2* (see Figure 13), we see Drake being shot at by an enemy who is hidden inside a building (a fact we have deduced from the tracer path of a bullet it has fired at us). The player can see that Drake is safe from harm for the moment, having found reliable cover, but they also can see that they need to traverse the space between themselves and the enemy, which they must do without being hit by the enemy's fire and losing all their health, which would require them to respawn and try again from the start. To accomplish this, they must devise a solution to the challenge—possibly several solutions, in case the first (or second or third . . .) does not work out. This requires them to visually analyze and identify (1) potential paths across the space, (2) possible points of cover, (3) potential obstacles between them and the enemy (4) and potential targeting solutions with our current weapons (in this case, a pistol and a hand grenade). And all of this analytic work will need to be adjusted as Drake—and the camera that follows him—changes position.

Figure 8. *1917* adapts the visual procedures of the third-person action-adventure game; for example, when characters are entering a space of uncertainty. (Screenshot created by author).

Figure 9. Or struggle to reach an objective. (Screenshot created by author).

Figure 10. Or fire upon an enemy. (Screenshot created by author).

Figure 11. Or seek cover from an approaching enemy.

Figure 12. In third-person videogames like *Uncharted 2*, the player must look back and forth between the diegetic and non-diegetic frame. (Screenshot created by author).

Figure 13. In third-person videogames like *Uncharted 2*, the player's eye must do many kinds of work simultaneously. (Screenshot created by author).

In addition to this essentially strategic-analytic labor, the eye must attempt to see into the future. As Barry Atkins explains, the player's gaze is always situated within a "specific temporality . . . where the aesthetic is generated in a maelstrom of anticipation, speculation, and action" (Atkins 2006, p. 127). In this case, the player judges the current situation in the context of previous situations and in anticipation of the next. Drake and the player have been in this situation before—that is how we got here—and we know there are many more to come. Atkins further explains that this precognitive gaze is performative, in the sense that it is constructed by our participation within an unfolding and evolving situation, a situation affected by our connection with the avatar. As he puts it, "Videogames prioritize the participation of the player as he or she plays, and that player always apprehends the game as a matrix of future possibility" (Atkins 2006, p. 127). In this moment from *Uncharted 2*, the player is not just devising a solution to the present problem—how to traverse a space that will expose the player-character to damage—but anticipating new challenges that may emerge during the attempt. They need to consider what will happen if they use their pistol or their hand grenade. They need to consider the additional enemies and obstacles that will likely emerge as they take their chance. That combination of contingency, anticipation, and surprise is one of the things that makes a videogame moment like this thrilling and fun. In videogames, the screen image "is full of rich possibilities of future action, pointing always off to the moment at which it will be replaced by another image then another" (Atkins 2006, p. 128). In sum, when playing third-person shooters, the eye is quite busy, engaged in multiple and simultaneous kinds of work. And it is busy in a fashion that is distinct from a first-person shooter. That distinctiveness is, as Katherine Isbister notes, the subject of "ongoing debate in the game design community," reflecting the fact that "[s]ome players report that a first-person perspective helps them immerse themselves completely in their alternative identity, while others find the third-person view more compelling, as it "helps continually remind players who they are supposed to be in the game" (Isbister 2016, p. 14). The opinions of players notwithstanding, it is evident that

point of view is a key mediator of choice, flow, and social emotions in games, unifying the cognitive, social, visceral, and fantasy dimensions of the avatar (Isbister 2016, p. 11).

This is a matter of both narrative and technical design. In a fascinating study of player eye-movement patterns in videogames, Magy Seif-El-Nasr and Su Yan demonstrate that, first, the gaze in videogames is typically task-dependent: our eyes need to identify and achieve objectives, usually in situations where the failure to do so will result in the need to retry. Once this more utilitarian analysis is complete, the eye will start to attend to what might broadly be deemed "aesthetic matters," ascertaining the features of the environment that communicate narrative content, atmosphere, and so on. In other words, when we enter a game environment, we look first to what Jorge Muñoz et al. call the "useful grid", then to the narrative (Muñoz et al. 2011, p. 48). In this respect, the gaze performs similarly in most genres of videogames and is a pillar of the kinesthetic-empathetic relationship I described earlier in my analysis of *Her*. As David Owen (2017) explains, the manipulation of controller and the perception of an extended body in game space produces a proprioceptive illusion of inhabiting that body both physically and emotionally. The videogame player is thus able to "empathize with the active agent in the narrative (the game character) but also see herself as the active agent (performing actions through the character as her avatar, even when not visible as in first-person shooters" (Muñoz et al. 2011, p. 23). This generates a "feeling of agency" and an "empathic connection to not only the player's avatar, but also, potentially, other non-player characters . . . " (Muñoz et al. 2011, p. 23).

However, the visual logic of third-person games shapes the player's gaze in three distinct ways that impact the feeling of agency and the nature of the empathic connection. First, the eye continually shifts between avatar and environment, the result of the need to simultaneously position the avatar and identify and accomplish objectives (El-Nasr and Yan 2006, pp. 4–5). Second, unlike first-person games (in which the gaze of the player and the avatar coincide), the gaze of third-person players continually shifts between the perspective provided by the camera and the perspective the player imagines their avatar to have. This process is further complicated if the game enables the player to voluntarily shift camera mode; for example, to occupy a position over the shoulder of the avatar to enable more accurate targeting, which temporarily shifts the ratio between player-gaze and character-gaze. In short, the eye in the third-person shooter is an unusually active eye, as shown in this diagram of eye movement patterns in *Halo II* (2004, a first-person game) and *Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain II* (2002, a third-person game) (see Figure 14). As we can see, the player's eye in the third-person game (indicated by the pink lines) is scanning a significantly greater part of the visual field than the player's eye in the first-person game (indicated by the blue lines), due, as El-Nasr and Yan explain, to the disconnect between player eye and character eye (El-Nasr and Yan 2006, p. 6).

Which leads to the third, and I think crucial, difference between how we see in the third person and how we see in the first. When we play the former, we are continually reminded of the difference between ourselves and our avatar. As we play, we simultaneously observe and identify with the protagonist. In other words, as we attempt to see as the avatar—to see as a player-character—we must adjust our seeing to a character performing within the narrative space. In games where the protagonists grow and change, the player's way of seeing must also grow and change, adjusting not only to the evolving technical capacities of the avatar (who may be gaining new powers or new applications of old powers, changing the way they look and move) but also to their evolving persona.

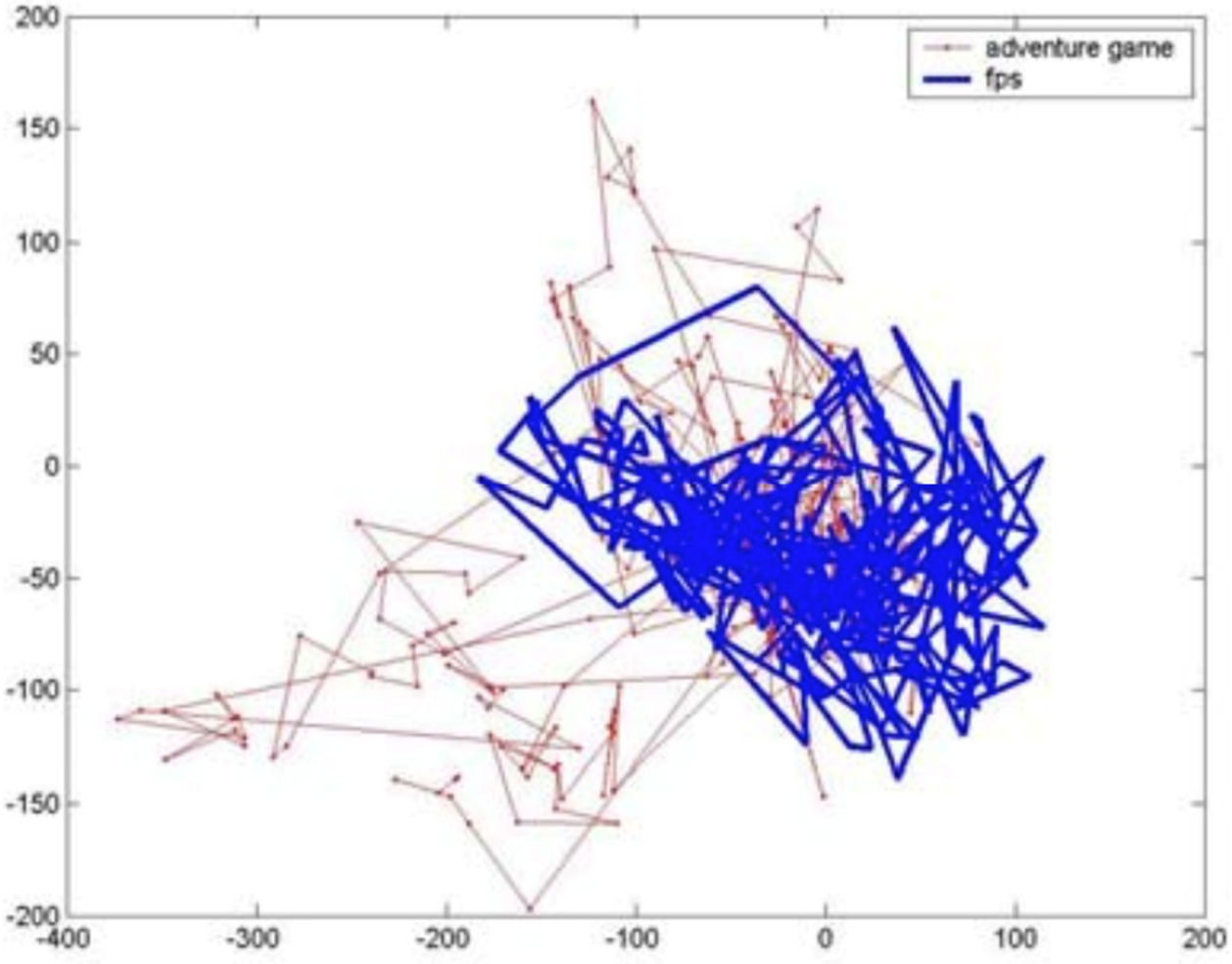


Figure 14. Diagram of player eye movement in first-person (blue lines) and third-person (red lines) games. Used with permission of Magy Seif el-Nasr.

We both see the character and see *as* the character.

Though it might seem paradoxical, it is precisely because we are never allowed to experience seamless and consistent identity between our own seeing and the avatar's seeing that we are able to empathize all the more strongly with the avatar. To recall Amy Hennig, there is an empathy constructed by the integration of play and plot, and there is an empathy created by the integration of play and character. Narrative matters when it comes to empathy. As David Owen sums it up, when "willing suspension of disbelief, a compelling reason to engage, and achieving the condition of flow" are achieved, a deep sense of empathic connection can be achieved (Owen 2017, p. 47).

So, how does the spatial and temporal character of the third-person action-adventure gaze translate from a videogame to a movie screen—specifically, to the visual language created by Mendes, Deakins, and Trinity camera operator Charlie Rizek. First, unlike the roving camera in *Russian Ark*, the camera in *1917* is not a character; it does not express a particular point of view. Unlike, say, the long shot in *Soy Cuba* (1964) that moves from a rooftop beauty pageant to a woman in a bikini diving into a swimming pool, casting harsh light on the decadent lifestyle of bourgeois Cubans and tourists, the camera in *1917* does not communicate a specific thematic or critical perspective on what it shows. In fact, quite the opposite. Deakins explains that he did not want the camera to draw any attention to itself: "It's not that kind of film," he tells us. "You just wanted it to disappear in the image, and for the most part, I think that's quite successful" ("1917 Behind the Scenes Featurette"). In other words, the camera in *1917* is designed to function as a neutral eye,

providing the viewer the opportunity to engage in the kind of multi-faceted seeing that we associate with videogames, particularly those told through the third-person perspective. It's intriguing to think about what kinds of social and historical forces are driving this kind of innovation. One might speculate that the development of cameras like the Trinity, which combines mechanical and electronic stabilization, is being driven by the kinds of fluid camera movements that can be achieved in videogames, which do not require a human operator lugging a fifty-pound harness. Certainly, that was the case with *1917*, which was directly inspired by the fluid, non-human capacities of the videogame camera. This is a fascinating integration into cinema of the understandings, rules, and motivations of the videogame medium, to recall Roig et al. 2009, once more (p. 93). And it signals an unprecedented moment in the evolution of cinema.

Second, like the third-person action-adventure videogame, the actions of the characters are meticulously integrated with dramatic space—indeed, were invented concurrently. Mendes explains, "We had to measure every step of the journey" ("1917 Behind the Scenes Featurette"). Dean-Charles Chapman describes early rehearsals with Mendes and Deakins on an "open field that was pretty much nothing there": "We had the script in our hand and we literally just walked and talked every single scene to see how long it took us to get from A to B" ("1917 Behind the Scenes Featurette"). Mendes elaborates, "The scene has to be the exact length of the land, and the land cannot be longer than the scene, and the scene cannot be longer than the land, and so you have to rehearse every line of dialogue on location. And that's where it overlaps with doing theatre, because the world has to be crafted around the rhythm of the script" ("1917 Behind the Scenes Featurette"). Michael Lerman, co-producer and first assistant director, describes the process as alien to the usual way of doing things: "You almost have to change the way you think about how we view movies . . . and how we make movies as a filmmaker" ("1917 Behind the Scenes Featurette").

Finally, suspense is generated through the limited perspective of the protagonist. In a conventional film, suspense can be created by cutting across the spaces of a scene. A tripwire trap in an underground bunker might be shown first, then the characters entering the bunker, then a rat moving towards the tripwire, then the characters' approach, etc. Or the camera might rove in a continual shot in and around an abandoned farm, perhaps capturing the characters approaching from distance, perhaps suggesting the gaze of a hidden enemy. But in *1917*, suspense is created entirely from the perspective of Blake and Schofield—or, more precisely, from just behind them.

So, how does this all come together? Let's take a closer look at a scene from the film's second half. Schofield has moved into a town devastated by artillery, occupied by Germans, and under attack by the British. It is night; light is provided by the flickering flames of burning buildings and the harsh, shifting glare of flares. Attempting to evade enemy fire and find allies, Schofield moves into a plaza, the camera close behind. A church is burning, casting both the protagonist and the fountain to the left in silhouette and obscuring everything in amber smoke. From out of the haze, we see another person emerge, clearly a soldier, but his alliance uncertain, as he is too far away to identify and his gun is held away (see Figure 15). This suddenly changes. He points his gun at Schofield (see Figure 16) and fires, evident from the muzzle flash, which causes Schofield to scramble away (see Figure 17).

For players of third-person-perspective videogame shooters, this situation is entirely familiar: a space full of unclear sightlines, a moving figure that may or may not be an enemy, a sudden realization of danger. The suspense of moments like these, whether in a videogame or a third-person movie like *1917*, is generated by the appearance of a figure whose identity is unclear and potentially threatening, requiring our eyes to engage simultaneously in the kinds of analytic, aesthetic, and empathetic work I described earlier. The thrill of moments like these is generated by the close, but imperfect and shifting alignment of the viewer's and the character's gaze. The result is a moment of dramatic alignment of gaze, storytelling, and empathy.

Figure 15. From out of the haze, we see another person emerge. (Screenshot created by author).

Figure 16. They raise their weapon, their intentions unclear. (Screenshot created by author).

Figure 17. The muzzle of their gun flashes. Schofield is being attacked! (Screenshot created by author).

But technical achievement does not necessarily equate with artistic accomplishment. I share the opinion of many critics that it is difficult to feel much for the characters in *1917*. Peter Sobczynski (2019) sums up this broadly held opinion when he writes, "And yet, for all of its technical expertise, little of it helps viewers to care about the characters or what might happen to them." The hamstrung empathy of the film is best illustrated by the moment at its conclusion when Schofield opens the small folio he has been carrying inside his tunic. We have seen that portfolio before, but neither Schofield nor the viewer were allowed to see its contents before this moment. And, frankly, what is inside is no less unsurprising than most of the storyline of *1917*: a photograph of someone he loves. But that folio and the tepid response it evokes (what else would it be?) is less a problem of script than a challenge that videogame cinema will pose to those who attempt it in the future.

What is missing is precisely what Mendes found lacking in those inspirational videogames he watched his kids play: emotional stakes. But here's the irony: those stakes are not missing in games. Mendes just could not feel them, because the emotional stakes generated by videogames are not just a matter of seeing. Videogames are not movies. One cannot *see* the emotional stakes, one must *play* those emotional stakes. The empathy generated by videogames is generated as much by our hands and analyzed by our eyes as they are by what the characters say or emote.

Yes, cinematic empathy in action can create powerful forms of identification between viewer and protagonist—the kind of identification that we associate with jump scares, vertigo-inducing sightlines, and narrow escapes. Mendes and Deakins achieve precisely that identification in the long-shot opening sequence of *Spectre* (2015), but their success in that endeavor was due at least in part to our familiarity with the character of James Bond and to Daniel Craig's performance. As Hennig and other great videogame creators show us (i.e., Cory Barlog, Hideo Kojima, Matt Sophos, Robin Hunicke, Shigeru Miyamoto, Marcin Blancha, Paul Dini), achieving empathy in action is not just a matter of integrating plot, action, and cinematography. Consider what Steven Spielberg, Lawrence Kasdan, and Harrison Ford achieve in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). Indiana Jones does not speak for the first four minutes of the film and says very little for the next eight. But we get to know Indy intimately through what he does and how he moves: the sudden shift from satisfaction to terror as a vine slips through his fingers, the abnormal care he shows for his fedora, the clouds of dust he sheds as he runs across an open field. Empathy is achieved between viewer and character kinesthetically.

It is curious that actors George MacKay and Dean-Charles Chapman, having developed their characters from virtually the first day of pre-production, did not devise the kinds of subtle physical quirks that would enable the viewer to achieve a richer quality of kinesthetic empathy with their characters. Perhaps their inexperience as action performers is to blame? Perhaps it is due to their first performances on the untouched fields and farms of Salisbury being reified into the clockwork design of the production, denying them the opportunity to further develop their character's embodied personas and forcing them to perform not as people responding viscerally and spontaneously to the moment, but as actors hitting their marks? Perhaps videogame cinema demands a different kind of physicality from its performers, perhaps a style we associate with silent film stars like Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Greta Garbo, and Harold Lloyd. Or with action performers like Bruce Lee, Zoë Bell, Jackie Chan, Dwayne Johnson, Michelle Rodriguez, Uma Thurman, or Daniel Craig. Or with videogame performers like Nolan North, Troy Baker, Laura Bailey, Emily Rose, and Claudia Black. Or with brilliant motion-capture actors like Andy Serkis.

As Michael Chemers and I argue in *Systemic Dramaturgy: A Handbook for the Digital Age* (Chemers and Sell 2022), every technological advancement in the performing arts provides new ways to delight the eye, inspire the imagination, and move the heart. But every technological advancement inevitably, sometimes permanently, alters the calculus of eye, imagination, and heart. This is perhaps nowhere more true than videogames, which have generated remarkable ways to engage their audiences—and, as the events of Gamergate

demonstrated, been instrumental in the development of new ways to feel and communicate hatred, new ways to imagine and wreak violence. If *1917* signals the emergence of a true videogame cinema, then it also signals the emergence of a new set of challenges for those who wish to make audiences care.

5. From What We Know to What We Can Imagine, from Tropes to Theory

What is a videogame movie? As I hope I have demonstrated, this is a question that benefits from a broader perspective on the films that might "count" as such and from a more rigorous understanding of their generic character. While movies that are centered on videogames, videogame players, and videogame culture have much to teach us about the evolving technoculture developing around videogames, so do the movies that do not center their focus in that fashion. In fact, those films where videogames appear incidentally may teach us far more about the way videogames are becoming part of everyday life and reorganizing the way we see and hear and feel the world around us. However, in order for us to broaden our perspective and achieve a more rigorous understanding of the genre, we need to recognize the variety of ways that adaptation can function and the variety of films in which adaptation occurs. To that end, I have designated six tropes whose presence in a film identifies it as a videogame movie and a text that may hold potential for further analysis:

Fictive adaptation
Supplementary adaptation
Diegetic representation
Figurative representation
Intertextual reference
Procedural adaptation

These tropes, derived from the piecemeal archive of films generally recognized by scholars as "videogame movies" and from those that I have identified, provide concrete criteria for designating texts that may deserve our attention.

For if it is guaranteed that videogames are going to change as new technologies emerge and new player tastes develop, it is also a certainty that other technologies and other player communities will be discovered, some of them in play right now, yet others in the past, perhaps the quite distant, pre-digital past. And if we accept that notion, then it is just as certain that the formal structures and thematic concerns of videogame movies will change as well. Indeed, a film like *1917* suggests that the adaptive relationship between videogames and movies has reached a point where the cinematic gaze is being reconstructed under the pressure and pleasures of the videogame. In sum, before we can tell the history of the videogame movie, we need to construct the archive, and I am quite certain that archive has more than a few surprises in store.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1917. 2019. *Directed by Sam Mendes. Cinematography by Roger Deakins. Camera Operation by Charlie Rizek. Performances by Dean-Charles Chapman and George MacKay*. Glendale: Dreamworks.

1917: Behind the Scenes Featurette. 2019. Universal Pictures. Available online: https://www.universalpictures.com/movies/1917 (accessed on 9 February 2020).

Abrams, Bryan. 2013. Production Designer K.K. Barrett on Creating Her's Beautiful Future. *The Credits*, December 10. Available online: https://www.motionpictures.org/2013/12/production-designer-k-k-barrett-on-creating-hers-beautiful-future/ (accessed on 19 March 2020).

Anthropy, Anna. 2012. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

ARRI. n.d. Trinity: First Hybrid Camera Stabilizer. Available online: https://www.arri.com/en/camera-systems/camera-stabilizer-systems/trinity#:~{}:text=TRINITY%20is%20the%20first%20hybrid,bit%20ARM%2Dbased%20gimbal%20technology.&text=Additional%20stabilization%20in%20the%20roll%20axis%20permits%20the%20use%20of%20telephoto%20lenses (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Assunção, Carina. 2016. "No Girls on the Internet": The Experience of Female Gamers in the Masculine Space of Violent Gaming. *Press Start* 3: 46–65.

Atkins, Barry. 2006. What Are We Really Looking At? The Future-Orientation of Video Game Play. *Games and Culture* 1: 127–40. [CrossRef]

Bogost, Ian. 2008. The Rhetoric of Video Games. In *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*. Edited by Katie Salen, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning; Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Boluk, Stephanie, and Patrick LeMieux. 2017. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chemers, Michael M., and Mike Sell. 2022. *Systemic Dramaturgy: A Handbook for the Digital Age*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Chin, Gabriel Patrick Wei-Hao. 2017. Observed Bodies and Tool Selves: Kinaesthetic Empathy and the Videogame Avatar. *Digital Creativity* 28: 206–23. [CrossRef]

Clark, Naomi, and Merritt Kopas. 2015. Queering Human-Game Relations: Exploring Queer Mechanics and Play. *First Person Scholar*, February 15. Available online: http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/queering-human-game-relations/ (accessed on 23 June 2020).

Dixon, Steve. 2007. *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

El-Nasr, Magy Seif, and Su Yan. 2006. Visual Attention in 3D Video Games. In Paper presented at ACE '06: Proceedings of the 2006 ACM SIGCHI International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology, Los Angeles, CA, USA, June 14–16.

Franklin, Seb. 2015. *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Her. 2013. *Directed by Spike Jonze. Production Designer K. K. Barrett. Performances by Portia Doubleday, Scarlett Johansson and Joaquin Phoenix*. Los Angeles: Annapurna Pictures.

Hills, Matt. 2002. *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge.

Howard, Jeff. 2008. *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives*. Wellesley: A K Peters, Ltd.

Isbister, Katherine. 2016. *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: NYU Press.

Johnson, Mark R. 2019. Deep Play and Dark Play in Contemporary Cinema. *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 17: 405–22. [CrossRef]

Kallay, Jasmina. 2013. *Gaming Film: How Games Are Reshaping Contemporary Cinema*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Karhulahti, Veli-Matti. 2015. Defining the Videogame. *Game Studies*. p. 15. Available online: http://gamestudies.org/1502/articles/karhulahti (accessed on 23 May 2020).

Keane, Steve. 2002. From Hardware to Fleshware: Plugging into David Cronenberg's eXistenZ. In *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*. Edited by Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska. New York: Wallflower Press.

King, Geoff, and Tanya Krzywinska, eds. 2002. *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*. New York: Wallflower Press.

Lang, Brent. 2019. How Sam Mendes and Roger Deakins Pulled off the One-Shot War Epic 1917. *Variety*, December 5. Available online: https://variety.com/2019/film/news/sam-mendes-roger-deakins-1917-1203425116/ (accessed on 8 March 2020).

Leane, Rob. 2019. How Gears of War inspired Uncharted. *Den of Geek*, January 22. Available online: https://www.denofgeek.com/games/how-gears-of-war-inspired-uncharted/ (accessed on 12 May 2020).

MacTavish, Andrew. 2002. Technological Pleasure: The Performance and Narrative of Technology in Half-Life and Other High-Tech Computer Games. In *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*. Edited by Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska. New York: Wallflower Press.

Manovich, Lev. 2001. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Marie, Meagan. 2010. Storytellers of the Decade: Amy Hennig. *Game Informer*, December 2. Available online: https://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2010/12/02/storytellers-of-the-decade%3A-amy-henning-interview.aspx (accessed on 21 May 2020).

Muñoz, Jorge, Georgios N. Yannakakis, Fiona Mulvey, Dan Witzner Hansen, German Gutierrez, and Araceli Sanchis. 2011. Towards Gaze-Controlled Platform Games. Paper presented at 2011 IEEE Conference on Computational Intelligence and Games (CIG'11), Seoul, Korea, August 31–September 3; pp. 47–54.

Owen, David. 2017. *Player and Avatar: The Affective Potential of Videogames*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc.

Papazian, Gretchen, and Joseph Michael Sommers, eds. 2013. *Game on, Hollywood! Essays on the Intersection of Video Games and Cinema*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.

Penix-Tadsen, Philip. 2016. *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Reynolds, Dee, and Matthew Reason, eds. 2012. *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Roig, Antoni, Gemma San Cornelio, Elisendra Ardèvol, Pau Alsina, and Ruth Pàges. 2009. Videogame as Media Practice: An Exploration of the Intersections between Play and Audiovisual Culture. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 15: 89–103. [CrossRef]

Ryan, Marie-Laure, and Jan-Noël Thon, eds. 2014. *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Ryan, Marie-Laure, ed. 2004. *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. 2003. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Shaw, Adrienne. 2014. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sicart, Miguel. 2017. Queering the Controller. *Analog Game Studies*. p. 4. Available online: http://analoggamestudies.org/volume-iv-issue-iv/ (accessed on 9 June 2020).

Silverstone, Roger. 1999. *Why Study the Media?* London: SAGE Publications.

Sobczynski, Peter. 2019. Review: 1917. *RogerEbert.com*, December 25. Available online: https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/1917-movie-review-2019 (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Sullivan, Anne, Michael Mateas, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. 2009. QuestBrowser: Making Quests Playable with Computer-Assisted Design. *UC Irvine: Digital Arts and Culture*. Available online: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2tk0h882 (accessed on 29 January 2021).

Sullivan, Anne. 2009. Gender-Inclusive Quest Design in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. Paper presented at the 4th International Conference on Foundations of Digital Games, FDG 2009, Orlando, FL, USA, April 26–30.

Ulrich, Karl C. 2016. A Short Look at the Long Take: The Art and Craft of Cinematic Camera Movement. *ASBBS Proceedings* 23: 535–39.

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves. 2009. *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (Game of the Year Edition)*. Playstation 3 version. Santa Monica: Naughty Dog.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah. 2005. Playable Media and Textual Instruments. *Dichtung Digital.* Available online: http://www.dichtung-digital.de/2005/1/Wardrip-Fruin/index.htm (accessed on 29 January 2021).

Wolf, Werner. 2006. Frames, Framings, and Framing Borders on Literature and Other Media. In *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*. Edited by Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart. New York: Editions Rodopi.

Yee, Nick, and Jeremy Bailenson. 2007. The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation of Behavior. *Human Communication Research* 33: 271–90. [CrossRef]

Yee, Nick. 2006. The Demographics, Motivations and Derived Experiences of Users of Massively-Multiuser Online Graphical Environments. *PRESENCE: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 15: 309–29. [CrossRef]

arts

MDPI

Article

Found in Translation: Evolving Approaches for the Localization of Japanese Video Games

Carme Mangiron

Department of Translation, Interpreting and East Asian Studies, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain; Carme.Mangiron@uab.cat

Abstract: Japanese video games have entertained players around the world and played an important role in the video game industry since its origins. In order to export Japanese games overseas, they need to be localized, i.e., they need to be technically, linguistically, and culturally adapted for the territories where they will be sold. This article hopes to shed light onto the current localization practices for Japanese games, their reception in North America, and how users' feedback can contribute to fine-tuning localization strategies. After briefly defining what game localization entails, an overview of the localization practices followed by Japanese developers and publishers is provided. Next, the paper presents three brief case studies of the strategies applied to the localization into English of three renowned Japanese video game sagas set in Japan: *Persona* (1996–present), *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* (2005–present), and *Yakuza* (2005–present). The objective of the paper is to analyze how localization practices for these series have evolved over time by looking at industry perspectives on localization, as well as the target market expectations, in order to examine how the dialogue between industry and consumers occurs. Special attention is given to how players' feedback impacted on localization practices. A descriptive, participant-oriented, and documentary approach was used to collect information from specialized websites, blogs, and forums regarding localization strategies and the reception of the localized English versions. The analysis indicates that localization strategies for Japanese games have evolved over time from a higher to a lower degree of cultural adaptation in order to meet target markets' expectations. However, it was also noted that despite the increasing tendency to preserve the sociocultural content of the original, the language used in the translations needs to be vivid and idiomatic in order to reach a wider audience and provide an enjoyable gameplay experience.

Keywords: Japanese video games; game localization; cultural adaptation; localization approaches; localization strategies; domestication; foreignization; reception

Citation: Mangiron, Carme. 2021. Found in Translation: Evolving Approaches for the Localization of Japanese Video Games. *Arts* 10: 9. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts10010009

Received: 2 November 2020
Accepted: 22 January 2021
Published: 26 January 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

1. Introduction

Over the last six decades video games have consolidated as one of the most popular entertainment options worldwide (Bernal-Merino 2014) and gaming has become the most lucrative entertainment industry, generating $145.7 billion in 2019, in comparison with $42.5 billion generated by the cinema box office and $20.2 billion from the music industry (Richter 2020). Since the origins of the game industry in the 1960s, Japan has been one of the key players in this sector (Picard 2013; Consalvo 2016; Hutchinson 2019), with companies such as Nintendo, Sony Computer Entertainment, and SEGA playing a significant role in the industry's development, both as a hardware manufacturer and as a software developer and publisher (O'Hagan 2012). Japan is the third largest market for video games, after China and the United States (Newzoo 2020), and the second country in the world, after China, in terms of the dollar value worth of exports of video games-related equipment in 2019, with $2.12 billion worth of exports (Workman 2020). However, in order to move across different boundaries and borders, video games need to undergo a series of transformations (Newman 2019). Adapting a Japanese game to be sold overseas is complex and costly, as

they have to be localized, i.e., adapted technically, linguistically, and culturally to meet the target territories expectations (Chandler 2005; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013; Bernal-Merino 2014).

This paper examines how strategies for the localization of Japanese games for the North American market have evolved over the years through the analysis of industry perspectives on localization and target market expectations, as well as how the dialogue between industry and consumers takes place. Special attention is paid to the way in which players' feedback can impact on localization practices. After briefly describing what game localization entails, an overview of the localization practices followed by Japanese developers and publishers is provided. Next, the paper presents three brief case studies of the strategies applied to the localization into English for three renowned Japanese video game sagas set in Japan: *Persona* (1996–present), *Phoenix Wright*: *Ace Attorney* (2005–present), and *Yakuza* (2005–present). This paper maps out how localization strategies for these series have evolved over time and how sociocultural, audience, and industrial factors may have impacted on the development of localization practices and, therefore, on the transnational circulation of Japanese video games.

2. Methodology

This paper was written with a descriptive and qualitative Translation Studies perspective, although it also drew on existing literature from other disciplines, such as Japanese Studies, Game Studies, and Media Studies. First, I provide a brief review of scholarly research on game localization and, more specifically, the localization of Japanese video games. Then I present three case studies of Japanese video game sagas. The criteria for selecting the sagas were the following:

- In order to be able to track any possible changes in localization strategies, it had to be a saga that spanned over at least 10 years, as from the author's professional experience as a game translator, there have been changes in the approach to the localization of Japanese games over this period of time.
- It had to be a saga of video games that is set in Japan or includes a significant amount of references to Japanese culture, in order to examine how such cultural markers had been dealt with for the release of the North American version.
- The video games had to contain a high amount of text, in order to be able to explore the translation and adaptation processes they underwent in detail, so games containing features of role playing games (RPGs) or visual novels were deemed most appropriate.
- The localization of at least some of the games in the saga had been discussed widely on the Internet by translators, editors, or producers of the localization team, as well as reviewed or discussed in specialized sites, blogs or players' forums.

With all these criteria and due to the scope of the paper, the selection was narrowed down to the following three sagas: Atlus's *Persona*[1] (1996–present), Capcom's *Phoenix Wright*: *Ace Attorney* (2005–present), and *Yakuza* (2005–present) by SEGA and Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio.

The paper also adopts what Saldanha and O'Brien (2013) describe as a participant-oriented approach, focusing on the agents involved in the localization process (e.g., translators, editors, producers) and the end users (mainly players and specialized journalists). A documentary approach (Newman 2019) was also applied, whereby the opinions of localization practitioners, game critics, and players were collected from secondary resources publicly available on the Internet, such as interviews, blogs, specialized websites, and

[1] The *Persona* series is a spin-off of Atlus's *Shin Megami Tensei* franchise (1987–present). However, as the first game of the franchise to be localized into English was *Revelations: Persona* in 1996, the paper focuses on the *Persona* saga to obtain a clearer picture of how localization practices at Atlus have evolved over the years. In addition, as it is a smaller saga, it fits better with the scope of the paper.

discussion forums.[2] With this approach I hope to expand the scope of studies about localization by including agents who are involved in the production and the reception of the localized versions and by widening the lens to examine the communicative exchanges that take place over the Internet, which can provide a wealth of resources for documentary qualitative analysis of online communication (Bryman 2012).

3. What Is Game Localization?

Localization consists of a series of complex technical, linguistic, cultural, legal, and marketing processes in order to sell a game in a different territory while also maintaining the "look and feel" of the original game and providing target players with a similar gameplay experience to that of the original players (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006). It is a type of functional and user-centered translation, where priority is given to the players and their gameplay experience. The *skopos* or main brief of game localization is to provide a version that allows target players to experience the game as if it had been originally developed for them (Mangiron and O'Hagan 2006; Fernández-Costales 2012; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013; Bernal-Merino 2014). Therefore, the process of localizing a video game does not only involve translating the textual assets; it also implies modifying the visuals, the storyline, the gameplay mechanics (rules), or even the music of the game, so that the localized version meets target players' expectations (Chandler 2005; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013; Bernal-Merino 2014). For the localization industry, translation is one of the final steps in the production of the target versions, although a number of translation scholars have been critical of such a narrow view of translation (see Cronin 2003; Pym 2004; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). In addition, the terms "translation" and "localization" are often used interchangeably in the industry and academia, and their conceptualization is still blurred and requires further epistemological debate (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013, p. 104). In this paper, following authors such as O'Hagan (2012); O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) and Bernal-Merino (2020), the most common term "game localization" is used to refer to the overall process of adapting a video game to sell in target territories, while "translation" is also used to refer to the textual operations that occur during the localization process.

In order to guarantee a smooth localization process, it is important that games are designed with localization in mind from the early stages of development, so that the game can be easily adapted to other territories without having to make substantial changes to its design (Chandler 2005). This is known as "internationalization", which consists of developing assets that are flexible and can be easily replaced in each target locale (country/region and language) (Chandler 2005, p. 11). For example, the game code should be compatible with different formats for date, time, numbers, and special characters. In the case of Asian languages, such as Japanese, it is necessary to plan for the conversion from double-byte to single-byte character sets. It is also important to consider space limitations. In order to overcome them, it is recommended to allow for at least 30% extra space in the localized versions in order to avoid truncations and overlaps (Chandler 2005, p. 9). Other solutions to overcome space limitations are the use of scrollable menus and expandable text boxes.

In addition to technical issues, during the internationalization phase, developers are encouraged to design the game with the widest possible appeal and avoid culture-specific references (Chandler 2005, p. 11). In particular, any cultural issues that could be obscure or offensive for players or that could affect the age rating of the game should ideally be taken into account (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). For game industry expert Kate Edwards, Kate (2011, pp. 20–21), the process of "culturalization" is essential in game localization:

[2] The use of materials shared in online discussions for research is controversial because of its ethical dimensions, with an ongoing debate about whether informed consent should be requested from participants (see Kozinets 2006 or Bryman 2012). However, it has been argued that if the information is voluntarily and publicly available, and no personal details or sensitive information are used, it is accepted practice to use the information for documentary qualitative analysis without the need for informed consent (Hewson et al. 2003; Bryman 2012).

> Culturalization is going a step further beyond localization as it takes a deeper look into a game's fundamental assumptions and content choices, and then gauges their viability in both the broad, multicultural marketplace as well as in specific geographic locales. Localization helps gamers simply comprehend the game's content (primarily through translation), but culturalization helps gamers to potentially engage with the game's content at a much deeper, more meaningful level. Or conversely, culturalization ensures that gamers will not be disengaged from the game by a piece of content that is considered incongruent or even offensive.

While it is a moot point whether culturalization is going a step beyond localization or if it should be embedded in the localization process, it is important to present a coherent gameplay experience and not to break players' engagement with the game with "culture bumps" (Leppihalme 1997) that may hinder their comprehension, touch on sensitive issues, or be considered offensive. As an example, in the Japanese version of the game *Persona 5* (2016), one of the characters wears white shoes with the Japanese imperial flag. In the Korean version of the game, the flag was removed because many Koreans still associate the flag with World War II and may have found it offensive (Schleijpen 2019, p. 22). Therefore, as Consalvo (2016, p. 123) states, localizers act as "culture brokers", adapting any required cultural elements "into something not just comprehensible but also enjoyable for players in other countries who speak other languages". Cultural adaptation is also essential to guarantee the playability of the localized versions, as players need to interact with the game in order to advance and enjoy the gameplay experience. In Bernal-Merino's words (2020, p. 301), "[p]ertinent game pragmatics can only occur when players understand the signs of each particular game and choose the right combination of responses to converse with each game-machine".

However, the industrial workflows of game development and publishing tend to favor streamlined localization solutions that focus on written and recorded text, sometimes leaving unaltered other semiotic signs that also carry meaning and contribute to the cohesiveness of the game as a whole (Bernal-Merino 2020, pp. 299–300). Therefore, often "residual traces of a video game's national and cultural origins" can be found in video games due to an oversight or limited funding (Mandiberg 2015, p. 112), although as Mandiberg argues, such moments of pragmatic incongruity can be positive, as they facilitate cultural circulation and "help players learn how to become hybrid citizens" (2015, p. 112).

The key issue seems to be how to find the delicate balance between foreignization and domestication, in Venuti (1995) terms. Foreignization implies preserving most of the original sociocultural content of the game in order to help target players become acquainted with the source culture (Fernández-Costales 2012; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). In other words, it provides a "fragrant" cultural product (Iwabuchi 2002) that can be identified as foreign, and its foreignness may be precisely one of its main appeals (Consalvo 2016; Hutchinson 2019). On the other hand, a domesticating or, in Iwabuchi (2002) terms, *mukokuseki* (literally "nationless") or "odorless" approach is used to adapt the source content as required, making it more local in order to bring it closer to the target audience. It should be highlighted that domestication and foreignization are not totally opposing poles. During the course of any project, the localization team has to negotiate with both domesticating and foreignizing strategies (Carlson and Corliss 2011) to identify those cultural markers that may hinder comprehension or be offensive and those that can be preserved to help target players learn about the original culture. This can be done, for example, by means of adding additional information in the localized version, as in the case of the *Phoenix Wright* series (2001–present), where background narrative elements were included in the story to help players of the North American version understand the abundant Japanese visual and narrative references present in the game (Tsu 2014), as is described in more detail in Section 6.

With regard to the different levels of localization, they are usually determined by marketing strategies and market size (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013, p. 141). Chandler (2005, pp. 12–14) identified three levels of localization:

- Box and docs: this refers to translating the packaging of the game and the accompanying documentation, such as the manual, health and safety warning, etc. It is done for games with little text, games which are not expected to sell many copies, or for territories with a good knowledge of the original language.
- Partial localization: this means translating the box and docs texts, as well as all the in-game text, but maintaining audio and cinematic assets in the language of the original game, not revoicing them, and only providing subtitles.
- Full localization: this implies translating all the game assets, including the revoicing into the target language. This is usually done for AAA titles with high budgets that are expected to do well in the territories they are localized for.

After having briefly presented the main features and levels of game localization, the next section focuses specifically on the strategies that Japanese developers and publishers have adopted over the years to make their games available for international markets.

4. An Overview of Japanese Video Game Localization Practices

The decision to localize a Japanese game for international markets is complex, as it not only involves a global business strategy, but also local economic, geopolitical, and cultural factors (Picard 2013). In the early days of the game industry, during the 1980s and the early 1990s, Japanese games that contained a large amount of text were not localized, as this involved a considerable amount of work, and genres with little text, such as platform and fighting games, were prioritized (Baird 2019). Localization was only done into English, and it was usually an afterthought once the game was successful in Japan and had aroused a certain level of interest overseas (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). The translation was often made by the developers and some of the games contained errors that have since become memes, such as the notorious "All your base are belong to us" from the localized English version of the game *Zero Wing* (1989) (Kohler 2005). The games were then shipped in English to other countries, without localizing them or just localizing the box and the manual (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). In addition, during this period Japanese games were subject to extensive adaptation, because there were still no age rating boards and most of the games that came from Japan were addressed to a young audience (O'Hagan 2012). Interestingly, however, as O'Hagan (2012, p. 187) points out, such changes were made by Nintendo of America, a company that was setup to oversee Nintendo's business in North America. This highlights the hybrid and transnational nature of the gaming industry since its origins, as pointed out by scholars such as Consalvo (2006) and Picard (2013), and illustrates the complex nature of game localization. Nintendo of America would systematically remove references to religion, tobacco, alcohol, violence, and vulgar language (McCullough n.d.). For example, in the game *Super Castlevania 4* (1991) a naked statue was clothed and in *Earthbound* (1994) all red crosses that appeared in hospitals were removed. In *Punch Out!* (Nintendo 1987), the name of the character Vodka Drunkensky became Soda Popinsky, in order to avoid the reference to alcohol (McCullough n.d.).

The release of the PlayStation console in Japan in 1994 represents a landmark both in the game industry and in game localization, as it used the CD-ROM as a storage medium, which allowed for the inclusion of more text, music, and higher quality graphics (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013, pp. 55–56). Some iconic games were produced and localized in the second half of the mid-1990s, such as *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) and *Metal Gear Solid* (1998), although translation quality was in many cases poor, as they contained numerous translation errors (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013, p. 56).

As game technology evolved, games became more sophisticated with cutscenes and voiced dialogues included with the arrival of the PlayStation 2 in 1999 (Kohler 2005). Producing games became more costly and in order to maximize their return-on-investment Japanese developers and publishers started to localize their games into French, Italian, German, and Spanish (FIGS) (Bernal-Merino 2014). As the English-speaking market, and particularly the North American market, has traditionally been the main target for Japanese game companies (Bernal-Merino 2011; O'Hagan 2012), full localization was only done into

English (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). For FIGS, partial localization was often adopted, using English as a pivot language: all the text was translated into the target language, but the game audio was kept in English and subtitles in FIGS were provided (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). Nowadays, the tendency is to localize Japanese games into more languages, such as Eastern European Languages and other Asian languages, such as Chinese and Korean (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). Together with Japan, China and South Korea lead the Asia Pacific region gaming market (Moore 2020) and there is a "yearning" for Japan in East Asian countries since the 1990s, so Japanese producers of popular culture are turning their eyes to that region (Iwabuchi 2006, p. 20).

One of the most common internationalization strategies adopted by Japanese companies through the years has been to develop what Iwabuchi (2002) calls *mukokuseki* video games, "odorless" products without cultural elements that identify them as distinctly Japanese in order to ensure a better reception in other countries (Picard 2013; Consalvo 2016; Hutchinson 2019). This is the case of games set in imaginary worlds, such as *Animal Crossing* (2001—to present), *The Legend of Zelda* (1986—present), or the *Pokémon* (1996—present) series, the localization of which has tended towards the adaptation and domestication of cultural references and humor.[3] Another internationalization strategy used by Japanese developers consists of designing culturally hybrid games that mix elements from both Japanese and United States cultures, such as *Final Fantasy X*, where the two main characters are Tidus, who looks like a young Western surfer-type, and Yuna, who dresses with a kimono and behaves in a very Japanese way (Consalvo 2006).[4] Finally, there are also video games that exploit their Japaneseness as one of their appeals for international audiences (Navarro Remesal and López 2015; Hutchinson 2019). For such games, the trend has been to preserve a strong Japanese sociocultural component and address the localization to a traditionally niche audience interested in Japanese culture (Mangiron 2012; Hutchinson 2019). This is the case, for example, of Okami (2006), which is deeply imbued with Japanese mythology (Hutchinson 2019).

Due to the "Cool Japan" phenomenon (McGray 2002), global audiences' interest in Japanese culture has increased considerably (Kimura and Harris 2020), so references to Japanese media and popular food no longer need to be adapted for localized versions (Consalvo 2016). However, as stated by Hutchinson (2019, p. 35), the majority of Japanese gaming companies continue to develop games with "*mukokuseki* characters and visual designs for universal relatability". The *mukokuseki* design approach shares the same principles as the internationalization phase of game localization: "designing flexible or ambiguous assets (whether they are characters, stories, images, or even gameplay mechanics) to appeal to the broadest possible audience" (Carlson and Corliss 2011, p. 75). Such an approach has been adopted by other Japanese media industries, such as anime and manga (Iwabuchi 2002), and it has also been present in the form of "pre-translation" in Japanese literature (Hijiya-Kirschnereit 2012). Some modern Japanese authors, such as Haruki Murakami, make their texts more easily accessible to an international audience by avoiding cultural specifics and/or by elaborating on cultural specifics that are self-evident to readers of Japanese (Hijiya-Kirschnereit 2012). However, some traces of Japanese culture are usually retained in cultural and media products, as they cannot be completely culturally neutral (Iwabuchi 2002) and an exotic "fragrance" of Japaneseness may appeal to international audiences, who have an idealized vision of Japan (Hutchinson 2019, p. 35).

Nowadays, the big question Japanese developers have to assess carefully when they decide to export their products is whether their game is going to be addressed to the mainstream audience, who may not be very familiar with Japanese culture, or to a niche market of Japanese culture fans, who are knowledgeable about Japan and want to experience

[3] It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed analysis of the localization of these sagas, but interesting studies are provided about the *Pokémon* transmedia franchise by Iwabuchi (2004); Allison (2006); Hutchinson (2019) and Schleijpen (2019).

[4] The localization practices of Square Enix, particularly in relation to the *Final Fantasy* saga, have received a significant amount of scholarly attention. See, for example, Consalvo (2006); Mangiron and O'Hagan (2006); Jayemanne (2009); Mangiron (2010), and O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013).

Japanese culture as closely as possible (Ranford 2017). They also need to decide on the most appropriate localization strategy: domestication or foreignization. As already mentioned, domestication and foreignization are not mutually exclusive, although there is usually one predominant strategy. For example, in a localization project where a foreignizing strategy is applied to the visuals, the storyline and the sociocultural content of the game, domestication may be applied in certain cases when dealing with humor or cultural references that could be obscure for target players, be it visual or textual. Factors such as theme, storyline, genre, how similar games have been received in the target territory, and the intended target audience should be taken into account when defining the localization approach, as well as the desired age rating in the target territories, as this may differ in Japan and other countries (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). Many Japanese games with a low age rating contain jokes with sexual innuendo, while in Europe and North America such content is not deemed appropriate for a younger audience (Di Marco 2007). As a result, either the age rating needs to be changed, which results in a reduced market for the localized version, or any potentially inappropriate references needs to be removed or adapted (Di Marco 2007). According to Sam Mullen, localization director at SEGA of America, adapting Japanese content that is problematic or may feel out of place in a different region is always a difficult decision (Mullen cited in Khan 2019). If it is not adapted, target players will not understand it and may feel uncomfortable, but if it is heavily adapted, it may be viewed as censorship (Mullen cited in Khan 2019). The solution seems to be finding a middle ground where some elements are lightly adapted as required, so that they will not "pop out quite as hard" (Mullen, cited in Khan 2019). However, fans may not be happy with this option, and they may still view it as censorship (Mandiberg 2017). This was the case of the controversial localization of *Fire Emblem: Fates* (2015), which was harshly criticized by fans because some of the characters' names and personalities were changed in the English language version (Mandiberg 2017). One of the mini games, where characters could caress other character's faces in order to develop a stronger bond, was also adapted and characters simply visited other characters in the North American and European versions, something that angered fans because they perceived it as censorship (Mandiberg 2017; O'Hagan 2017).[5]

With regard to the preferred localization model, many Japanese developers localize most of their games in-house, and translators can access the original game or at least have access to contextual information, such as screenshots, walkthroughs, etc., if the game is still under development (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). While in the early days Japanese companies used to localize their games after they had been released in Japan, today the general trend in the industry, even for Japanese companies, is to opt for the sim-ship (simultaneous shipment) model, releasing the game at the same time all over the world in order to capitalize on the hype created by a global marketing campaign and to prevent piracy and grey import copies (Bernal-Merino 2020). However, localizing a game while it is still under development poses many challenges, as the text is constantly subject to changes and updates, and access to the visual context of the game is limited. This workflow can lead to errors, as translators only work with text and have no access to the visuals of the game, which can easily lead to mistranslations, especially when translating from Japanese language, which does not have grammatical gender nor number. For this reason, if there is not much contextual information available and translators have no access to the visuals of the game, it can be difficult to know if a character is speaking to one person or more, and also to know whether the addressee(s) is (are) male or female. For these reasons, a thorough linguistic quality assessment is required to ensure the cohesiveness between all the semiotic elements that make up a game, such as text, visuals, audio, and music (Bernal-Merino 2020).

Another characteristic feature of the localization approach typically taken by Japanese companies is the dynamic and close relationship between the development and the local-

[5] For a detailed analysis of the controversy aroused by the localization of *Fire Emblem: Fates* (2015), see the case studies by Mandiberg (2017 and O'Hagan (2017).

ization team (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013), which leads to what Bernal-Merino (2016) calls "co-creation" in game localization. An example of this can be found in the localization of the game *Bayonetta* (2009), where the translator, J. P. Kellams, collaborated closely with Hideki Kamiya, the director of the Japanese version (Kellams 2009). They reviewed together the translation work, discussed the lines, did rewrites, and the director approved or rejected additions or rearrangements in the localized version (Kellams 2009). In addition, one of the translation decisions for the localized English version led to a modification of the original Japanese game. Kellams was asked to come up with sounds for when Bayonetta summons demons for her attacks, but after thorough research he decided to use Enochian—an invented language of the 16th century that is said to be the language of angels—for summoning demons and to represent angels' voices (Kellams 2009). As there are not many resources for Enochian, Kellams ended up creating a syntax and new words for the language, which he used in the localized version (Kellams 2009). This worked so well that Kamiya decided to rewrite the original Japanese lines to match the nuance of the lines in Enochian in the English version (Kellams 2009).

Another example of co-creation and culturalization can be found in the localization of *Shadowverse* (2016) by Cygames. The development team shared information with the localization team in advance in order to detect political, historical, religious, race, or gender expressions that could inadvertently be offensive for players of the target version (Dino 2020). In addition, the localization team proposed a change for one of the characters, which was going to be named Phantom in the original Japanese version, but translators thought that Specter was more fitting, so writers changed it in the source script as well (Dino 2020).

The above-mentioned examples highlight the collaborative nature of the localization of Japanese video games, as well as the authorial role translators may sometimes adopt. Such issues are explored in more detail in the next sections, where three brief case studies of renowned Japanese video game sagas—*Persona*, *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, and *Yakuza*—are presented, analyzing how their localization approach has evolved over time and how the localized versions have been received in English-speaking territories.

5. The Localization of *Persona*: Rethinking Localization Strategies to Meet Fans' Expectations

The localization of the *Persona* series (1996–present), by Japanese developer Atlus, is a good example of how Japanese companies listen carefully to the feedback of players of the English version and rethink their localization strategy accordingly. The first game of the series, *Revelations: Persona* (1996), was adapted extensively for the North American release. The name of the title was changed from 女神異聞 ペルソ (*Megami Ibunroku: Persona*, literally "Strange Tales of the Goddess: Persona") to *Revelations: Persona*, and Japanese place and characters' names were changed into English names. In addition, many of the characters were redesigned: their skin was made lighter, their hair style or color was changed, and the protagonist's piercing was removed (Girard-Meli 2015; RPG Site 2019). A particularly controversial change was that Mark, one of the main characters, became African-American for the North American version for no obvious reason (Censored Gaming n.d.). The gameplay mechanics were also changed: the enemy encounter rate was lower and the amount of experience that could be gained was increased, possibly to make the game easier and more attractive to new players (Censored Gaming n.d.).

The localized English version received so much criticism because of all these changes that in subsequent releases the localization team decided to change the localization strategy in favor of foreignization. Starting with *Persona 2: Eternal Punishment* (2000), references to Japanese culture were preserved in the localized version in order to share Japanese culture with Western players (Girard-Meli 2015). It should be mentioned that this was in fact the third *Persona* game released in Japan, but the second one, *Persona 2: Innocent Sin* (1999), was not released internationally until 2011 for the PlayStation Portable (PSP). Although Atlus explained that the reason for not releasing the game was the workload of the localization team at the time, it is believed that it was also partially due to the abundant references to Japanese culture and the inclusion of Hitler and Nazi symbolism (Hilliard 2015; *Did You*

Know Gaming? 2015), as well as the possibility of having a gay male relationship (Aether 2015). For the PSP release in Japan and overseas, Hitler's name was changed to Führer, his design was modified to include sunglasses and a cape to hide his uniform, and swastikas were replaced by iron crosses (*Did You Know Gaming?* 2015). The lack of an official localized version led fans to take localization into their own hands[6] and a translation patch was released in 2008. Although Atlus was aware of its existence, they took no action (TV Tropes n.d.).

Subsequent releases of the *Persona* saga, particularly from *Persona 3* onwards, have also kept as much visual and textual Japanese references as possible (Namba cited in Ward 2015). In *Persona 4* (2008), for example, the story takes place in a small rural town in Japan and Japanese cultural elements such as *kotatsu* (a low table that has an electric footwarmer) were kept in the English version (Girard-Meli 2015). In *Persona Q: Shadows of the Labyrinth* (2014), one of the dungeons is designed to resemble a Japanese festival and there is a group of men carrying a shrine, which was kept in the localized English version. In order to help English-speaking players understand the reference to Japanese culture, an important amount of dialogue was included in the localized game (Madnani 2015). This is another example of co-creation and emphasizes the authorial role game translators can have. In another scene, a character eats *takoyaki* (little balls made of flour and octopus) and instead of changing the graphics or adapting the reference, the original Japanese word was kept in English (Madnani 2015).

In *Persona 3* and *4*, much work was devoted to making the dialogues sound natural for the English-speaking audience (Girard-Meli 2015). Different translators were in charge of localizing the dialogue for specific characters in order to be able to provide them with the right voice in English (Girard-Meli 2015). There was also an editor, who worked on the first translation draft and made changes to the text so that it sounded more natural in English (Madnani 2015). The editor did not even play the game and just worked with the translated text (Madnani 2015). The role of an editor, who does not necessarily speak the Japanese language, is considered important when localizing Japanese games in order to make the game sound as natural as possible to the target audience (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013).

The foreignizing approach adopted by Atlus led them to relocalize the first game of the series, *Revelations: Persona*, for its remastering for the PlayStation Portable in 2009 (Awkerman 2009). The localization team decided to improve the original localization, keeping the new translation closer to the Japanese original version by retaining the original Japanese names for characters and locations, looking for less Americanized names for personas[7] and demons, and keeping skills names closer to the Japanese ones (Awkerman 2009). Interestingly, some of the translation errors of the first localized version were left unchanged as a wink to the players, because they could be easily recognized by players of the first version, who had discussed them in forums, and they could also be considered a homage to how far localization practices had improved at Atlus over time (Jeriaska 2009).

Atlus's change of localization strategy towards a more foreignizing one that preserved the sociocultural content of the original was praised by specialized blogs, as illustrated in the reviews below:

> By incorporating cultural differences rather than erasing them, imbuing the dialogue with enormous personality, and hiring actors that care about the characters they're voicing, Atlus U.S.A. has helped bring the series to the top of the role-playing heap in the West (Girard-Meli 2015).
>
> . . . the lengths the localization team goes through to make gripping, enjoyable dialog, translated from the original Japanese into English, while still maintaining

[6] Due to the scope of the paper, it cannot engage with the issue of fan translation, also known as "rom-hacking" in the video game industry. For more information about fan translation of games and participatory culture, see Muñoz-Sánchez (2009); O'Hagan (2007, 2017) and O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013).

[7] In the game, *personas* are the manifestation of the personality of the person who summons them to battle when they face some hardship.

> the feel of the game and the thoughts the original developers wanted to convey (Awkerman 2009).

The continuous development of the Internet and other technologies has led to user empowerment and the visibilization of game fan communities (O'Hagan 2017). Players can be very vocal in game forums about what they like and what they do not like, but game companies do not always listen to them. Japanese game developers and publishers often base their business decisions on "how imagined players and player communities think about games and what 'a game' or even 'a Japanese game' should look and play like" (Consalvo 2016, p. 123). However, Atlus's change in localization strategies shows how they did take into account players' feedback and expectations, for which they have received praise in the specialized media:

> Learning to market a new franchise, especially a dark one like Persona, is not easy. Atlus' missteps are not surprising, but the company took public feedback to heart and adjusted its localization approach. Instead of running from its niche appeal, Atlus embraced it (Wallace 2013).

However, it should be mentioned that the localization of *Persona 5* (2016) received some criticism because of the quality of the translation (Lee 2017). Fans complained because it did not sound natural in English and contained several errors, such as mistranslations, typographical errors, and inconsistencies in the translation of Japanese honorifics (Krammer n.d.). It is possible that one of the main reasons for the decrease in quality is the fact that the time frame for localizing the project was short, so a big team of six translators and eight editors worked on it (Lee 2017). As a consequence, the translation work was fragmented, which resulted in inconsistency issues. It would also seem that there was not enough time allocated to perform a thorough quality assurance process, which resulted in an English version with several mistakes and led to a negative reception of the localized version.

6. The Localization of the *Phoenix Wright* Series: Creating a Hybrid Game World

The localization of the *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* series (2001–present) offers another interesting case study.[8] The first instalment of the series was released by Capcom in 2001 in Japan and in 2005 overseas. For its localization the game underwent intensive adaptation, as it contained many references to Japanese culture, as well as many puns and play on words, which had to be rendered naturally into English because the "player must engage with the language of the game as a primary means of gameplay" (Consalvo 2016, p. 126). The localized version was set in Los Angeles, the characters' names were adapted to English, and many cultural references were domesticated. For example, one character's love for ramen soup became a love for hamburgers, because the translator, Alexander O. Smith, thought at the time that his target audience might not know what ramen was (Mandiberg 2015).

The localization was done following a co-creation approach. Smith would propose names and accents for characters, and discuss them with the international localization team, the producer, the writer, and members of the development team in order to "satisfy good English reception as well as fidelity to the original" (Mandiberg 2015, p. 119). When the dialogue would not make sense to a Western audience, Smith would freely rewrite it, so that it would work well in that context (Mandiberg 2015). The localization team also requested that a number of graphics were adapted, but as the funding for localization was limited, only a small number of graphics were modified (Mandiberg 2015). Thus, many visual references to Japanese culture were kept in the localized versions, such as an image of a Japanese samurai, a temple, images of Japanese food, clothing, furniture, and Japanese characters, thereby resulting in a hybrid game world set in the United States but with several traces of Japanese culture (Mandiberg 2015).

[8] For more detailed studies on the localization of the *Phoenix Wright* saga (2001–present), see Consalvo (2009, 2016) and Mandiberg (2015).

The next installments of the *Phoenix Wright* series were translated by Janet Tsu, who often writes about localization in Capcom's blog. For Tsu (2014), localization is about striking a balance between textual accuracy and forging an emotional link with target players, which allows them to enjoy the localized game:

> [. . .] as a piece of entertainment, the stories in games are primarily concerned with the feelings and reactions, or the "emotional experience", of the player in its original language, and therefore, any localization must strike a balance between what is "textually accurate" and what is what I call "emotionally accurate" (Tsu 2014).

For this reason, and due to the change in setting to the United States despite the constant presence of Japanese culture references in the games, Tsu decided to introduce new narrative elements in the localized versions to explain elements of the backstory, such as the founding of the Nine-Tails Village near Los Angeles, which is steeped in Japanese mythology (Tsu 2014, online). This creative addition to the narrative was deemed necessary to help players understand Japanese cultural references and to prevent having to remove or modify larger parts of subsequent games (Baird 2019). As the game is set in an alternate-universe version of Los Angeles, where Japanese culture blends with North American culture, fans of the series have come to call the hybrid setting of the game "Japanifornia" (Tsu 2014).

With regard to the game's reception, overall, the localization of the *Phoenix Wright* series has been acclaimed by players and critics because of its hybrid nature; it is rooted in Japanese culture, but also includes popular cultural references that Western audiences understand (Consalvo 2016). The use of idiomatic language and the successful rewriting of numerous jokes and puns into English has also been well received (Consalvo 2016). In game critic Scott Baird's words (2019):

> The English localization of the Ace Attorney series managed to capture the spirit of the original, while also replacing the Japanese humor and references with content that would be understandable to an international audience. A change like this is necessary to the success of a text-heavy game and it's why the Ace Attorney series has gained such an international following.

However, while reviewers and players who are not familiar with Japanese culture believe the localization of this saga is exceptional, some of the more hardcore fans of Japanese culture consider it to be one of the worst translations ever made due to the extreme level of adaptation, as shown in some debates in specialized players forums.[9] This proves how difficult it can be to strike the right balance when localizing Japanese games and highlights the need to monitor the reception of localized games to obtain information about how target players' preferences and tastes evolve over time in order to assess the best localization approach to be applied.

7. The Localization of the *Yakuza* Series: Introducing Dual Localization

The localization of SEGA's *Yakuza* series has also evolved over time, from adaptation and domestication to what I call "dual localization", which aims at catering for the needs of both fans of Japanese culture and mainstream players who are not necessarily familiar with it. The first game of the *Yakuza* series was released in 2005 in Japan and in 2006 in North America and Europe for the PlayStation 2. One of the first things that was adapted for overseas markets was the name of the series, 龍が如く (*ryū ga gotoku*, "like a dragon"), into *Yakuza*, probably to help identify the game as Japanese and use its Otherness to appeal to Western players (Navarro Remesal and López 2015, p. 9). The game was fully localized and dubbed into English. A cast of famous actors, such as Mark Hamill and Michael Madsen,

[9] See, for example, https://steamcommunity.com/app/787480/discussions/0/1840188800793121997/ or https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/939946-phoenix-wright-ace-attorney-dual-destinies/67725418?page=5. One of the players considers the localization of *Phoenix Wright* "the worst localization in video game history" while another one affirms it is "probably the best localization of any game I've ever played!".

was used, but the reception by players was not positive (Cullen 2019). Players did not like the voice acting, thought that the characters were mischaracterized, and felt that there was too much casual swearing that did not fit in well given the context.[10] Due to this bad reception, for the next releases of the series, SEGA opted for partial localization; they maintained the original Japanese voice cast and provided subtitles in English and FIGS (Siliconera 2008).

However, in the North American version of *Yakuza 3* (2010), some Japanese content was cutout, such as mini games involving hostess clubs, as well as mahjong and dating sims, probably in an attempt to increase the game's transnational appeal (Navarro Remesal and López 2015, p. 9). Gamers and critics objected to this and, as a result, the localized version of *Yakuza 4* had no content cutout (Navarro Remesal and López 2015, p. 9). In addition, the localization adopted a more foreignizing approach in order to stay closer to the original cultural content (Cullen 2019). In an interview with specialized technology website Engadget, Yasuhiro Noguchi, producer of *Yakuza 4*, stated that they had changed their localization strategy after carefully taking into account the feedback of Western fans:

> When I took on the project, I reviewed the Yakuza franchise history in the West as well as the valuable feedback we received from our fans on Yakuza 3. Based on consultations with the Yakuza team in Japan, we decided to bring a more complete localization that was more faithful to the source material (Noguchi, cited in Fletcher 2011).

This illustrates the influence that fan communities can exert over gaming companies through their interaction via forums, websites, and social media. However, despite the change of strategy in the localization of *Yakuza 4,* the game did poorly in the United States and Atlus did not decide to localize *Yakuza 5* (2012) until PlayStation announced they would fund the localization after receiving numerous fan requests (Khan 2020). In this case, the power of the fans had an impact on a business decision regarding the localization and transnational circulation of a game.

In 2013, SEGA acquired Atlus and the Atlus localization team, with the addition of Scott Stritchart, have been in charge of the localization of the *Yakuza* series since, applying a similar foreignizing strategy for cultural content (Khan 2020). When a number of *Yakuza* games were remastered, some of the elements that had been adapted in the previous editions were retranslated in order to keep them closer to the Japanese original. For example, in *Yakuza 3* (2010) fish names, which were in Okinawan dialect in the original game and had been given English names in the first localized version, were reverted to the original names (Cullen 2019). Moreover, some substories and minigames that had been omitted were included in the remastered and relocalized version (Botts 2020).

A special mention should be made to two spin-off games—*Judgment* (2018) and *Fist of the North Star: Lost Paradise* (2018)—and the latest game of the saga at the time of writing, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (2020), which features English and Japanese language audio versions and English subtitles for both audio tracks (Hashimoto 2020). This dual approach to localization started when the localization team at SEGA decided to translate the script of *Judgement* (2108) twice and provide an English dubbed version after many years with just subtitles (Scarpinito 2019). The new characters and storyline in the game were considered a good opportunity to introduce the fully localized version with English voices in order to appeal to a wider audience (Scarpinito 2019). Therefore, the localized game can be played both with Japanese and English soundtracks. There are two sets of English subtitles: one presents an English translation of the Japanese audio, as in previous games of the series, and the other one is a verbatim reproduction of the English voiceover (Glagowski 2020). Such a dual localization approach is designed to attract as many target players as possible, providing them with the gameplay experience they are seeking, be it a more domesticating one, with English voices and heavily adapted, or a more foreignizing one,

[10] See, for example, a Steam forum about this issue, where players discuss why they did not like the English dubbed version: https://steamcommunity.com/app/834530/discussions/0/1798529872637593856/.

with Japanese voices and a translation that stays closer to Japanese language (Strichart 2019). Such customization caters for the two traditional target audiences of Japanese games: mainstream consumers with little or no knowledge of Japanese culture and Japanese culture fans who expect the games to be as close as possible to the original ones.

Scott Strichart (2019), localization producer of the *Yakuza* series at SEGA, describes the dual localization method they used as follows:

> Essentially, we took a base translation and then pushed it out into two different directions for Japanese audio and English audio. The Japanese audio got our traditional "Yakuza" pass, listening intently to each line and crafting the dialogue to suit it. The English script was written for actors to perform it, with more of a focus on making sure it sounded like things people would actually say in English. Sometimes, the two versions are totally the same! Others, it's totally different [...] the English is still a faithful localization of the story, and the Japanese subtitles were still crafted with all the considerations for a good read that always goes into a Yakuza title localization. (Strichart 2019)

The idea for such a dual approach came from the localization team and was accepted by the company, which illustrates how SEGA is willing to modify their localization strategies in order to attract a major fan base in the West. This new approach has been perceived as something positive in specialized blogs (Cullen 2019; Davidson 2019; Scarpinito 2019; Tailby 2019; Botts 2020) and by fans,[11] and has helped the *Yakuza* franchise transform from a niche experience during the mid-2000s to a genuine hit with millions of fans with its later games (Davidson 2019).

As in the localization of the *Phoenix Wright* and the *Persona* series, the localization team for *Yakuza* believes that using natural, good sounding, and fluid English is the best way to reproduce the "intent" of the original game in the localized version (Riesenbach, cited in Cullen 2019). In order to achieve idiomatic language, the localization team is made of translators and editors, as in the *Persona* series. Such an approach seems to be working and has been viewed positively by critics. As game critic Joey Davidson states: "fans want localization efforts to pack a translation that matches the core meaning of the original product in working English" (2019).

8. Conclusions

Game localization is a functional and user-centered type of translation that aims at reproducing a similar gameplay experience to that of the original game for target players (Fernández-Costales 2012; O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013; Bernal-Merino 2014). Due to the linguistic and cultural distance between Japan and North America and Europe, Japanese developers and publishers have traditionally been willing to develop culturally "odorless" games (Consalvo 2016; Hutchinson 2019) or adapt their creations as necessary in order to guarantee a good reception (and strong sales) overseas (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013). However, adaptation is a double-edged sword, and several factors need to be taken into account when deciding the global localization strategy, such as budget, schedule, the genre, and the theme of the game, as well as the age ratings in different countries, how previous games of the same series or the same genre have performed abroad, and the intended target audience (O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013), either a mainstream audience or a niche audience (Ranford 2017). At the end of the day, as Mandiberg states, "[the] key to most game localization is staying safely within the restrictive forces of taste and budget" (2015, p. 124). Thus, companies need to balance all these factors when deciding their localization strategy in order to maximize revenue.

After briefly outlining what game localization entails and describing the main localization approaches that have traditionally been applied to Japanese games, this paper has presented three brief case studies of the localization of three renowned and long-standing

[11] See for example, the discussion by players at https://www.reddit.com/r/yakuzagames/comments/aystpo/about_localization_of_judgement/.

sagas set in Japan and culturally marked as Japanese: the *Persona*, the *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, and the *Yakuza* series. The descriptive analysis, which mainly involved the collection of information coming from Internet sources, provided by members of the localization teams and specialized blogs and websites, illustrates how localization and adaptation approaches for these three sagas have evolved through the years, from a more domesticating, "odorless" approach, to a more foreignizing, "fragrant" approach, that uses the traces of Japanese culture and its Otherness as a selling point, in order to attract a wider audience. Today, people around the world are more familiar with Japanese culture thanks to the "Cool Japan" phenomenon (McGray 2002), digital technology, and the global success of Japanese anime and manga (Consalvo 2016; Hutchinson 2019). Players expect Japanese products to preserve traces of the original culture and not to be subject to extensive adaptation, which sometimes is perceived negatively as censorship (Mandiberg 2017). Therefore, the tendency seems to be towards localizations that are closer to the original Japanese content but using natural sounding language that does not interfere with the gameplay and fosters an emotional connection of a player with the game. The emphasis Japanese developers place on using idiomatic language, adding new dialogues, and editing the target text as required to make it sound natural, highlights the importance translation has within the broader game localization process. Textual translation is key in order to facilitate target players' access to the sociocultural content of the original game, which is essential to foster playability. Further studies with similar Japanese video games set in Japan would be necessary to confirm if the trend detected in this small case study also applies more commonly in the industry. Moreover, reception studies with players of the localized versions would allow for more information to be obtained about their preferences, which could help game developers and publishers fine-tune their localization strategies and keep their fans satisfied.

Gamers are very active and vocal on Internet forums and they discuss the localization of their favorite games in detail, clearly stating whether they like them or not and why (O'Hagan 2017); therefore, paying attention to them can help identify the most suitable localization approach, as in the cases of Atlus and SEGA. Similarly, the localization of Japanese games is often reviewed in specialized websites and blogs, and game translators are often interviewed and can also avail of company blogs to explain their translation decisions. This promotes communication with the target audience and lets the fans know how complex adapting a Japanese game can be, making them aware of all the different restrictions that may impact on localization strategies, such as time, budget, and ratings. Therefore, it could be argued that game localization is one of the most discussed types of translation. The agents involved in the production and reception processes of a localized game talk about it extensively in blogs, interviews, reviews, specialized websites, and community forums, establishing a dialogue that is impacting on localization strategies, and consequently, on the transnational circulation of Japanese games.

SEGA's dual approach to the latest instalments of the *Yakuza* franchise deserves a special mention, as it brings localization to the next level by offering two types of localization: full localization with English dub and subtitles and with a higher level of adaptation, and partial localization with Japanese audio and English subtitles that are closer to the original Japanese. While dual localization seems to be the ideal, it may not be an option for many developers due to the additional time and budgetary cost it involves. However, this seems the best approach for Japanese developers and publishers who would like to reach a wider audience while keeping their niche audience also satisfied.

To conclude, it should be highlighted that localizing Japanese games is a collaborative, creative, and adaptive process that allows players from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to enjoy the games in their own language while getting a glimpse of Japanese culture. Localization provides a hybrid space where the creators of a game, with their cultural background, and the target players, with their own, different cultural background, can meet, by virtue of the careful craft of the localization team, in a space where they can find each other in translation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: The author of this research is a member of the TransMedia Catalonia research group, funded by the Generalitat de Catalunya (2017SGR113). The author would like to thank the four anonymous peer-reviewers of the *Arts* journal for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

Animal Crossing (Nintendo 2001–present)
Bayonetta (Platinum Games 2009)
Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei I (Atlus 1987)
Earthbound (Ape and Hal Laboratory 1994)
Final Fantasy series (Square Enix 1987–present)
Final Fantasy VII (Squaresoft 1997)
Final Fantasy X (Square Enix 2001)
Fist of the North Star: Lost Paradise (SEGA and Ryu Ga Gotoku 2019)
Judgment (SEGA and Ryu Ga Gotoku Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio 2018)
Metal Gear Solid (Konami 1998)
Revelations: Persona (Atlus 1996)
Persona series (Atlus 1996–present)
Persona 2: Innocent Sin (Atlus 1999)
Persona 2: Eternal Punishment (Atlus 2000).
Persona 3 (Atlus 2006)
Persona 4 (Atlus 2008)
Persona 5 (Atlus 2016)
Persona Q: Shadow of the Labyrinth (Atlus 2014)
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney (Capcom 2001–present)
Pokémon (Game Freak 1999–present)
Punch Out! (Nintendo 1987)
Shadowverse (Cygames 2016)
Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne (Atlus 2003)
Super Castlevania 4 (Konami 1991)
The Legend of Zelda series (Nintendo 1986–present)
Yakuza 3 (SEGA and Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio 2010)
Yakuza 4 (SEGA and Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio 2011)
Yakuza 0 (Atlus 2015)
Yakuza: Like a Dragon (SEGA and Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio 2020)
Yakuza series (SEGA and Ryu Ga Gotoku 2005–present)
Zero Wing (Toaplan 1989)

References

Aether. 2015. The Sins You Committed Will Never Disappear! The Persona 2: Innocent Sin Retrospective COMPLETE! *Lost to the Aether*. Available online: https://losttotheaether.wordpress.com/2015/07/24/the-sins-you-committed-will-never-disappear-the-persona-2-innocent-sin-retrospective-complete/ (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Allison, Anne. 2006. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Awkerman, Chad. 2009. New Localization Returns Persona PSP to Its Roots. *Dual Shockers*. Available online: https://www.dualshockers.com/new-localization-returns-persona-psp-to-its-roots/ (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Baird, Scott. 2019. *The Gamer*. August 25. Available online: https://www.thegamer.com/ace-attorney-series-localization/ (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Bernal-Merino, Miguel Ángel. 2011. A Brief History of Game Localisation. *TRANS* 15: 11–17. Available online: https://revistas.uma.es/index.php/trans/article/view/3191/2941 (accessed on 4 January 2021). [CrossRef]

Bernal-Merino, Miguel Ángel. 2014. *Translation and Localisation in Video Games: Making Entertainment Software Global*. New York: Routledge.

Bernal-Merino, Miguel Ángel. 2016. Glocalization and Co-Creation: Trends in International Game Production. In *Media Across Borders: Localizing TV, Film, and Video Games*. Edited by Iain Robert Smith, Andrea Esser and Miguel Ángel Bernal-Merino. New York: Routledge, pp. 202–20.

Bernal-Merino, Miguel Ángel. 2020. Key Concepts in Game Localisation Quality. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility*. Edited by Łukasz Bogucki and Mikołaj Deckert. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. [CrossRef]

Botts, Aaron. 2020. Review: Yakuza 3 Remastered. *Gamer Escape*. February 29. Available online: https://gamerescape.com/2020/02/29/review-yakuza-3-remastered/ (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Bryman, Alan. 2012. *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: OUP.

Carlson, Rebecca, and Jonathan Corliss. 2011. Imagined commodities: Video game localization and mythologies of cultural difference. *Games and Culture* 6: 61–82. [CrossRef]

Censored Gaming. n.d. How Persona Is Changed in English. YouTube Video. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0B03CzZ8NtE (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Chandler, Heather M. 2005. *The Game Localization Handbook*. Hingham: Charles River Media.

Consalvo, Mia. 2006. Console video games and global corporations: Creating a hybrid culture. *New Media and Society* 8: 117–37. [CrossRef]

Consalvo, Mia. 2009. Persistence Meets Performance: Phoenix Wright, Ace Attorney. In *Well Played 1.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*. Edited by Drew Davidson. Pittsburg: ETC Press, pp. 145–57.

Consalvo, Mia. 2016. *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Cronin, Michael. 2003. *Translation and Globalization*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cullen, Johnny. 2019. Sega's commitment to better localization brings more Western players to popular Japanese franchises. *Game Daily Biz*. October 29. Available online: https://gamedaily.biz/article/1346/segas-commitment-to-better-localization-brings-more-western-players-to-popular-japanese-franchises (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Davidson, Joey. 2019. Sega's Reason for Improving Localization Makes a ton of Sense. *Screen Rant*. October 31. Available online: https://screenrant.com/sega-localization-yakuza-english-translation/ (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Di Marco, Francesca. 2007. Cultural localization: Orientation and disorientation in Japanese video games. *Revista Tradumàtica* 5: 1–8. Available online: http://www.fti.uab.es/tradumatica/revista/num5/articles/06/06.pdf (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Did You Know Gaming?. 2015. Persona. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNveuWwfJN8&feature=emb_title (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Dino, Oni. 2020. Cygames Localization on the Fun and Difficulties of Translating. *Siliconera*. September 30. Available online: https://www-siliconera-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.siliconera.com/cygames-localization-on-the-fun-and-difficulties-of-translating/amp/ (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Edwards, Kate. 2011. Culturalization: The geopolitical and cultural dimension of game content. *TRANS Revista de Traductología* 15: 19–28. Available online: http://www.trans.uma.es/pdf/Trans_15/19-28.pdf (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Fernández-Costales, Alberto. 2012. Exploring Translation Strategies in Video Game Localization. *Monographs in Translation and Interpreting (MONTI)* 4: 385–408. Available online: https://rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/26956/1/MonTI_04_17.pdf (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Fletcher, James. 2011. Yakuza 4 producer Yasuhiro Noguchi on re-localizing the series. *Engadget*. April 13. Available online: https://www.engadget.com/2011-04-13-yakuza-4-producer-yasuhiro-noguchi-on-re-localizing-the-series.html (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Girard-Meli, Jowi. 2015. Examining the Localization of Persona. *PSLS*. August 7. Available online: https://www.playstationlifestyle.net/2015/08/07/examining-the-localization-of-persona/#/slide/1 (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Glagowski, Peter. 2020. Yakuza: Like A Dragon's Localization Is The Most Extensive In The Series' History. *The Gamer*. October 17. Available online: https://www.thegamer.com/yakuza-like-a-dragon-localization-interview/ (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Hashimoto, Kazuma. 2020. Yakuza: Like a Dragon reinvigorates the series, but can't shake all of Yakuza's flaws. *Polygon*. November 4. Available online: https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2020/11/4/21547663/yakuza-like-a-dragon-review-xbox-series-x-pc-ps4 (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Hewson, Claire, Peter Yule, Dianna Laurent Laurent, and Carl Vogel. 2003. *Internet Research Methods: A Practical Guide for the Social and Behavioural Sciences*. London: Sage.

Hijiya-Kirschnereit, Irmela. 2012. Pretranslation in Modern Japanese. In *Translation and Translation Studies in the Japanese Context*. Edited by Nana Sato-Rosseberg and Judy Wakabayashi. London: Continuum, pp. 167–82.

Hilliard, Kyle. 2015. Learn How Hitler's Cameo in Persona 2: Innocent Sin Complicated Localization For North America. *Gameinformer*. Available online: https://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2015/08/23/learn-how-hitler-39-s-cameo-in-persona-2-innocent-sin-complicated-localization-for-north-america.aspx (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Hutchinson, Rachael. 2019. *Japanese Culture through Videogames*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Iwabuchi, Koichi. 2002. *Recentering Globalization: Power Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Iwabuchi, Koichi. 2004. How 'Japanese' is Pokémon? In *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*. Edited by Joseph Tobin. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 53–79.

Iwabuchi, Koichi. 2006. Japanese popular culture and postcolonial desire for 'Asia'. In *Popular Culture, Globalization and Japan*. Edited by Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 15–35.

Jayemanne, Darshana. 2009. Generations and Game Localization An Interview with Alexander O. Smith, Steven Anderson and Matthew Alt. *The Journal for Computer Game Culture* 3: 135–47.

Jeriaska. 2009. Interview: Atlus Talks Translating Shin Megami Tensei: Persona for PSP. *Gamasutra*. August 13. Available online: https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/115731/Interview_Atlus_Talks_Translating_Shin_Megami_Tensei_Persona_for_PSP (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Kellams, Jean Pierre. 2009. Butmoni Coronzon (From the Mouth of the Witch). *Platinum Games Official Blog*. Available online: https://www.platinumgames.com/official-blog/article/2188 (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Khan, Imran. 2019. A Conversation with Sega's Localization Team on Censorship, Consistency, And Comedy. *Game Informer*, January 2.

Khan, Imran. 2020. How Yakuza 0 paved the way for Like a Dragon. *Inverse*. February 11. Available online: https://www.inverse.com/gaming/yakuza-like-a-dragon-localization-interview (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Kimura, Tets, and Jennifer Harris. 2020. *Exporting Japanese Aesthetics: Evolution from Tradition to Cool Japan*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, pp. 198–219.

Kohler, Chris. 2005. *Power-up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life*. Indianapolis: Brady Games.

Kozinets, Robert V. 2006. Netnography 2.0. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*. Edited by Russell W. Belk. Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 129–42.

Krammer. n.d. Persona 5: Phantoms of Translation. How Atlus Fails Fans of a Landmark JRPG. Available online: https://www.personaproblems.com/ (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Lee, Molly. 2017. Persona 5 Deserved Better: A Translator's Take on a Subpar Script. April 20. Available online: https://www.polygon.com/2017/4/20/15356026/persona-5-translation-localization (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Leppihalme, Ritva. 1997. *Culture Bumps: An Empirical Approach to the Translation of Allusions*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Madnani, Mikhail. 2015. Atlus Interview: Localisation, Localisation, Localisation. *God Is a Geek*. Available online: https://www.godisageek.com/2015/04/atlus-interview-localisation-special/ (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Mandiberg, Stephen. 2015. Playing (with) the Trace: Localized Culture in Phoenix Wright. *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture* 5: 111–41. Available online: https://www.kinephanos.ca/2015/playing-with-the-trace/ (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Mandiberg, Stephen. 2017. Fallacies of game localization. Censorship and #TorrentialDownpour. *Journal of Internationalization and Localization* 4: 162–82.

Mangiron, Carme. 2010. The Importance of not Being Earnest: Translating Humour in Video Games. In *Translation, Humour and the Media*. Edited by Delia Chiaro. London: Continuum, pp. 89–107.

Mangiron, Carme. 2012. The Localisation of Japanese Video Games: Striking the Right Balance. *The Journal of Internationalisation and Localisation* II: 1–21. [CrossRef]

Mangiron, Carme, and Minako O'Hagan. 2006. Video Games Localisation: Unleashing Imagination with Restricted Translation. *Jostrans: The Journal of Specialised Translation* 6: 10–21.

McCullough, Jim. n.d. Nintendo's censorship. Available online: https://jjmccullough.com/Nintendo.htm (accessed on 4 January 2021).

McGray, David. 2002. Japan's gross national cool. *Foreign Policy* 130: 44–54. [CrossRef]

Moore, Molly. 2020. Gaming industry in Asia Pacific—Statistics & facts. *Statista*. September 30. Available online: https://www.statista.com/topics/2196/video-game-industry-in-asia/ (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Muñoz-Sánchez, Pablo. 2009. Video Game Localization for Fans by Fans: The Case of Rom Hacking. *The Journal of Internationalization and Localization* 1: 168–85. [CrossRef]

Navarro Remesal, Víctor, and Antonio Loriguillo López. 2015. What makes Gêmu different? A look at the distinctive design traits of Japanese video games and their place in the Japanese media mix. *Journal of Games Criticism* 2: 1–17.

Newman, James. 2019. Slower, squashed and six months late: Japanese videogames in the UK, 1991–2019. *Replaying Japan* 1: 5–28.

Newzoo. 2020. Top 10 Countries/Markets by Game Revenues. Available online: https://newzoo.com/insights/rankings/top-10-countries-by-game-revenues/ (accessed on 4 January 2021).

O'Hagan, Minako. 2007. Evolution of User-generated Translation: Fansubs, Translation, Hacking and Crowdsourcing. *The Journal of Internationalization and Localization* 1: 94–121. [CrossRef]

O'Hagan, Minako. 2012. Transcreating Japanese video games: Exploring a future direction for translation studies in Japan. In *Translation and Translation Studies in the Japanese Context*. Edited by Nana Sato-Rossberg and Judy Wakabayashi. London: Continuum, pp. 183–201.

O'Hagan, Minako. 2017. Seeking delocalization: Fan community and game localization in the age of user empowerment. *Journal of Internationalization and Localization* 4: 183–202. [CrossRef]

O'Hagan, Minako, and Carme Mangiron. 2013. *Game Localization: Translating for the Global Digital Entertainment Industry*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Picard, Martin. 2013. The foundation of Geemu: A brief history of early Japanese video games. *Game Studies* 13. Available online: http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/picard (accessed on 4 January 2020).

Pym, Anthony. 2004. *The Moving Text: Localization, Translation, and Distribution*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Ranford, Aiden. 2017. Targeted translation: How game translations are used to meet market expectations. *The Journal of Internationalization and Localization* 4: 141–61. [CrossRef]

Richter, Felix. 2020. Gaming: The Most Lucrative Entertainment Industry by Far. *Statista*. September 22. Available online: https://www.statista.com/chart/22392/global-revenue-of-selected-entertainment-industry-sectors/ (accessed on 3 January 2021).

RPG Site. 2019. Persona Protagonist Names: Canon Names for Every Main Character in the Series. June 5. Available online: https://www.rpgsite.net/feature/8542-persona-protagonist-names-canon-names-for-every-main-character-in-the-series (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Saldanha, Gabriela, and Sharon O'Brien. 2013. *Research Methodologies in Translation Studies*. Manchester: St Jerome.

Scarpinito, Robert. 2019. Localizing Judgment: Go Big or Go Home. *TechRaptor*. June 24. Available online: https://techraptor.net/gaming/guides/localizing-judgment-go-big-or-go-home (accessed on 3 January 2021).

Schleijpen, Max. 2019. Catching Pokémon Globally: Localization Practices in Japanese Video Games and Anime. Master's thesis, Universiteit Leiden, Leiden, The Netherlands. Available online: https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/77278/MA-Thesis%202019%20Max%20Schleijpen%20s2155168%20PDF.pdf?sequence=1 (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Siliconera. 2008. Sega tells us why they kept the Japanese voice track in Yakuza 2. September 4. Available online: https://www.siliconera.com/sega-tells-us-why-they-kept-the-japanese-voice-track-in-yakuza-2/ (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Strichart, Scott. 2019. Judgment Launches June 25, How the Yakuza Spinoff Reinvents Localization. *PlayStation Blog*. March 7. Available online: https://blog.playstation.com/2019/03/07/judgment-launches-june-25-how-the-yakuza-spinoff-reinvents-localization/ (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Tailby, Stephen. 2019. Yakuza Studio Has Gone the Extra Mile for Judgment's Localisation. *Push Square*. March 7. Available online: https://www.pushsquare.com/news/2019/03/yakuza_studio_has_gone_the_extra_mile_for_judgments_localisation (accessed on 4 January 2021).

Tsu, Janet. 2014. Localization and Ace Attorney. *Capcom*. November 21. Available online: https://www.capcom-unity.com/2014/11/21/localization-and-ace-attorney/ (accessed on 4 January 2021).

TV Tropes. n.d. Persona 2. Available online: https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/VideoGame/Persona2 (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Venuti, Lawrence. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London and New York: Routledge.

Wallace, Kimberley. 2013. Perfecting Persona: How Atlus USA boomed. *Gameinformer*. September 17. Available online: https://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2013/09/17/perfecting-persona-how-atlus-usa-bloomed.aspx?PostPageIndex=1 (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Ward, Robert. 2015. Localizing Persona: An Interview with Atlus's Yu Namba. Available online: http://www.siliconera.com/2015/07/20/localizing-persona-an-interview-with-atluss-yunamba/#HcGCPqoLBprC3eWO.99 (accessed on 5 January 2021).

Workman, Daniel. 2020. Top Video Games Exports by Country. *Worlds' Top Exports*. August 6. Available online: http://www.worldstopexports.com/top-video-games-exports-by-country/ (accessed on 5 January 2021).

arts

MDPI

Article

Tale(s) of a Forest—Re-Creation of a Primeval Forest in Three Environmental Narratives

Kaisa Hiltunen [1,2,*], Heidi Björklund [1,2], Aino Nurmesjärvi [1,2], Jenna Purhonen [1,2,3], Minna Rainio [1,2], Nina Sääskilahti [1,2] and Antti Vallius [1,2]

1 Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, 40014 Jyväskylän yliopisto, Finland; heidi.m.bjorklund@jyu.fi (H.B.); aino.e.nurmesjarvi@jyu.fi (A.N.); jenna.purhonen@jyu.fi (J.P.); minna.k.rainio@jyu.fi (M.R.); nina.saaskilahti@jyu.fi (N.S.); antti.s.vallius@jyu.fi (A.V.)
2 School of Resource Wisdom, University of Jyväskylä, 40014 Jyväskylän yliopisto, Finland
3 Department of Biological and Environmental Science, University of Jyväskylä, 40014 Jyväskylän yliopisto, Finland
* Correspondence: kaisa.e.hiltunen@jyu.fi

Received: 29 October 2020; Accepted: 26 November 2020; Published: 1 December 2020

Abstract: We analyze three environmentally conscious works that are concerned with the state of Finnish forests: the documentary film *Metsän tarina/Tale of a Forest* (2012), the book with the same name (2013) and the series of short documentaries *Tarinoita metsästä/Tales from the Forest* (2013). By combining methods from arts research and ecology, we ask how the narratives adapt material from nature photography. The film and book present mythic stories and old Finnish beliefs about forests. They also contain references to cultural memory. Additionally, the biodiversity on display reflects a conventional practice to exhibit large or charismatic species. However, the ecological message remains only implicit, expressed through aesthetic choices rather than information about natural processes. Overall, we suggest that adaptation in these narratives can be understood as an artistic process of recycling and referencing and as a way to reconnect with cultural memory and nature. As such, it can enhance relationships with nature and awareness of conservation needs. However, we ask whether the past-oriented strategy is a politically effective way to activate a connection with nature in modern Finland, where discussions about environmental problems are closely connected to heated debates about forestry.

Keywords: Tale of a Forest; adaptation; biodiversity; documentary; ecocriticism; environmental narrative; forest; nature photography; nostalgia; species

1. Introduction

It is a common claim that Finnish people have a special relationship with the forest. According to recent research, 83% of Finns consider forests important or very important (Kantar TNS 2018; Halla et al. 2018). This is not surprising because Finns spend a lot of their free time in forests that are accessible through 'everyman's rights'.[1] This relationship with the forest was even included in the UNESCO Finnish National Inventory of Intangible Living Heritage in 2017.

The forest is an integral part of the Finnish national culture and identity that lives in numerous cultural products, stories, and myths. For example, in the national epic myth Kalevala, the founding of the entire nation is pinned to the depths of wild forests. Simultaneously through the ages, forests have

[1] In Finland the everyman's rights prevail on almost all governmental and privately owned land. The rights include, for example, freedom to roam and camp in forests, pick up berries and mushrooms, and fish with a line and rod.

also provided a variety of raw materials, food and shelter, and have enabled livelihoods in agriculture and forestry. This diverse utilization of forests has led to intensive management of a resource that makes up 75% of Finland's land area, with only 12% of the productive forest land under protection. For decades, this has meant alteration of natural forest dynamics with fire suppression, monoculture cultivation, selective thinning and final harvesting with clear-cutting. These practices have led to habitat destruction and threats to many species (Kouki et al. 2001; Kuuluvainen 2009; Hyvärinen et al. 2019). Changes to practice have been slow, as forest harvesting methods other than clear-cutting were only allowed for the first time in 2014 when the Finnish Forest Act was amended. Furthermore, the protected forests do not distribute evenly within the country. For instance, only 5% of the forest is protected in southern Finland where the most productive forests are situated (Vaahtera et al. 2018).

Recently, the assertion that Finns have a close relationship with the forest has been challenged. This relationship can be criticised for being a romanticizing, contradictory and even exclusive myth. Rather, the intensified industrial use of forests during the 20th century is a cause of deep, ongoing disputes and conflicts (Siiskonen 2007). Therefore, it could be argued that the forest relationship has not been harmonious, but is instead based on exploitation (Jokiranta et al. 2019a).

Our knowledge of the forest is not only created by experiencing real physical forest environments, but also through cultural representations. Nature documentaries, for example, play a significant role in creating the visual and narrative conventions of how we see and understand the natural world (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, pp. 7–8; Bousé 2000, p. 192). In recent years, an increasing number of cultural products that deal with Finns' relationship to the forest have been produced, such as non-fiction books, films and exhibitions.

The documentary film *Metsän tarina* (*Tale of a Forest*, Finland, 2012)[2] is one of the first examples of the current wave of such cultural products. *Tale of a Forest* is the result of a collaboration between nature photographers and filmmakers and is one of the most popular documentary films ever produced in Finland. In 2013, it was adapted into a "coffee table book" with the same title. Both versions tell a mythic story of the Finnish forest and its origins. The filmmakers were worried about the disappearance of old forests in Finland. By showing a beautiful, harmonious forest that has hardly been touched by humans, they wanted people to see the value of Finnish nature and help them restore their relationship to it (Tiessalo 2012; Rosenqvist 2012).

One of the film's two narrators is a boy who learned old Finnish beliefs about the forest and its animal and fairy inhabitants from his father. In both the film and the book, the ecological message is only implicit in a narrative that references old myths and folklore. Moreover, in 2013, a collection of 20 short documentaries, *Tarinoita metsästä* (*Tales from the Forest*), was produced using the same material. In these short documentaries, the mythical, past-oriented approach was replaced by an informational tone.

In this article, we approach these three environmental narratives and the idea of adaptation from a multidisciplinary perspective. Specifically, we combine the perceptions and methods of art and ecology researchers. We apply the idea of adaptation to the works in at least two senses. First, we compare the three versions and ask how they adapt the material in terms of aesthetic and narrative strategies to persuade the audience of the need to connect with nature. We specifically analyze how the works portray nature and forest ecology and how they relate to other cultural products. Second, we introduce a conception of adaptation that emerges from, and that is informed by, biological and artistic understandings of adaptation. Consequently, we suggest that these works can be understood as a way for people to negotiate their relationship with nature and as a way to connect the next generations to Finnish narratives about nature. However, from an ecocritical perspective (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, p. 2; Marland 2013; Christman Lavin and Kaplan 2017; Lehtimäki 2019), the film's turn-to-the-past, as a strategy to arouse people's interest in nature today, can be questioned.

[2] See the film's trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLER4UUexiQ.

2. Concepts and Method

The book and the short documentaries are adaptations of the film, but our main interest is not to analyze how they differ from "the original". Instead, we compare the three works in their function as environmentally conscious narratives. When making comparisons, we pay attention to the change of medium and its effects. In addition, we discuss how the film and book utilize elements of older Finnish cultural products and cultural memory. Here we understand adaptation in a broader sense of intertextuality and dialogical relationships between texts; this means that connections between artworks are not always created intentionally (Cutchins 2017). In this view, historical contextualization and aesthetic analysis highlight certain traditions as relevant points of reference. However, we do not stop here.

Our theorizing of adaptation is inspired by our multidisciplinary approach. We see something comparable to adaptation, both artistic and biological, in the way people relate to nature and how they construct narratives about that relationship. We think that adaptation already takes place when the authors adapt ecological knowledge to communicate their ideas and intentions. Thereby, an imaginary forest is constructed through different layers of interpretation and adaptation. In other words, the imagined forest is based on ecological reality, but through adaptation it becomes a composition of scientific facts, beliefs and myths about the forest.

We examine not only the cultural dimensions of the analyzed works, but also how they present forest nature and the current state of forests in Finland. Specifically, we compare the representation and similarity of biological content in the film and the book by identifying all recognizable species in the shots, narration, text and sound (Supplementary Materials). Artwork can purposely concentrate on attractive threatened species and thereby be a powerful tool to raise audience awareness towards conservation (Silk et al. 2017). To study such a potential bias towards threatened species in the film and book, we checked the extinction risk for each species using the Finnish Red List valid at the publication year of the film (Rassi et al. 2010). This classification of the extinction risk follows the categories and criteria of *The International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species* (IUCN 2020). The film and book include species in the following Finnish Red List categories: Not Evaluated, Least Concern, Near Threatened, Vulnerable, Endangered and Critically Endangered (Supplementary Materials). We also counted the appearances of species in film shots and book pages and noted whether the organism was the major or minor object. This was done to evaluate which species were of interest (primary targets) for shooting. We then compared the numbers and qualities of species in the film and the book. We further classified the species into larger taxonomic groups to study whether the film and book have some fundamental differences in their level of ecological knowledge (see Supplementary Materials). Furthermore, we compared the proportions of species in these groups in the works with respective proportions using all Finnish species (FinBIF 2020). This comparison aids in discovering potential shooting preferences towards certain taxonomic groups.

Because the majority of Finnish forests are managed, most Finnish people have never set foot in an old forest in its natural state (Jokiranta et al. 2019a). In a way, we have lost the knowledge of what a real natural forest looks like. This phenomenon has been described as "shifting baseline syndrome" or "environmental generational amnesia". It takes place when each new generation perceives the environmental conditions in which they grew up as "normal" (Kroschel 2019). We discuss how environmental generational amnesia motivates the creators of the scrutinized works and potentially has an effect on the reception of these works as environmental narratives.

3. The Same Material—Many Adaptations

The nature photographers[3] filmed the material over four years, after which they offered it to the production company and the actual filmmaking began (Rosenqvist 2012; Tiessalo 2012). The influence of the long tradition of nature photography can be seen in the realistic style and the conventional ways of portraying nature in all the works. They all include examples of the five subgenres of nature photography: animal, landscape, plant, close-up and human–nature relationship (Hautala et al. 1981).

Although the film, the book and the short documentaries use more or less the same material (in different amounts), each work takes a slightly different perspective. This perspective is partly determined by the medium, but it is also a question of narrative and stylistic choices. Yet despite different strategies, all seek to convince the audience of the need to protect nature.

What started as the work of nature photographers has evolved in various directions over the years. The popularity of the film encouraged the making of the book and the series of short documentaries, which were published the following year (Pirilä 2013). It can be argued that, in addition to environmental concern, the sheer economic success of the documentary film *Tale of a Forest* explains making the related products. The same material was later used as part of another film, *Luontosinfonia* (Nature Symphony 2019). Also, the success of *Tale of a Forest* encouraged the making of two more nature films, *Järven tarina* (Tale of a Lake 2015) and *Tunturin tarina* (Tale of the Sleeping Giant 2020), which will conclude the trilogy. This multitude of versions can be fruitfully analyzed in the framework of adaptation studies.

3.1. Three Stories about the Boreal Forest

The film, the book and the short documentaries portray biodiversity and harmony within a primeval boreal forest that has not been destroyed by humans. The forest is shown to be home to both small and big animals, fungi and various plants. The portrayal mostly consists of forest interiors, ponds and streams, woodland-fringed watercourses, big trees and peculiar rock formations (Figures 1 and 2). The depicted forests are rated as very valuable habitats and are protected by The Finnish Forest Act or Nature Conservation Act. In addition, a multitude of deadwood, characteristic of primeval forest, appears in the works. The change of seasons forms a loose dramatic arc in the film and book, but the depiction of the species and forest remains rather fragmentary.

Figure 1. Boreal spruce forest. Screenshot from *Tale of a Forest* DVD.

In contrast to the visual narrative that focuses on animals and plants, the voice-over in the film and the text of the book introduce an anthropocentric viewpoint that recalls old folk beliefs. An adult and child, father and son, alternate as narrators, but no human beings are shown. The man's narrative

[3] The nature photographers are Hannu Siitonen, Mikko Pöllänen and Teemu Liakka.

focuses on the myths and beliefs about the forest and its meaning for people. He describes the habits of the portrayed species and explains how traditional folk beliefs relate to natural phenomena, thus adding layers of cultural meanings to the visual representation. The boy's narration focuses on the teachings of his father and his own experiences and imaginations, such as "I imagined I was in the old forest during the Carboniferous period. (. . .) What kind of animals would have run there? (. . .) A slithering slow worm?" The voices lend the film an educational tone and the young boy's bright voice, unusual for a nature documentary, gives the impression that the film is directed at families. The film has been shown at comprehensive schools, and teaching materials about it have been produced. The book looks more like a picture book for the general audience. In the text, the child's perspective is even stronger than in the film. Both narratives end with the boy's utterance: "That was my first trip to the forest".

Figure 2. A stream in the forest. Screenshot from *Tale of a Forest* DVD.

Both the film and the book are genre-hybrids that combine familiar elements from several genres, such as family films, literature and documentaries. They do not contain a coherent storyline but rather use a big old tree as a central narrative and visual element to represent the tree of life that supports the universe. In the beginning, middle and end, the narrative returns to the tree. Close to the end, the film's adult narrator (and the book's narrative) points out that the fate of humans was believed to be connected to the fate of the tree of life. People were afraid that if the tree fell, they too would be destroyed (Figure 3). The tree of life appears in mythologies across the world as well as in modern stories such as the film *Avatar* (2009, USA), in which the destruction of the home tree is a disaster for the imaginary Na'vi people.

Figure 3. The tree of life. Screenshot from *Tale of a Forest* DVD.

The tree of life exemplifies how the works remind the viewer of today's reality of old forests disappearing because of humans. The works advise people to be more respectful towards nature and to learn from our ancestors, who treated forests and their inhabitants reverentially. How the film and book promote this environmental awareness is subtle. It comes through in the voice-over and narrative that speaks, for example, about how trees were allowed to reach their full length and how "animals had taught us all the necessary skills back in the day". It also comes through in aspects of the film's style, such as the music used.

Tale of a Forest as a film and book represents pristine nature as timeless, without referring directly to politics and without calling attention to its own constructed nature. Because of the dominant role of the voice-over, the film's point of view is strongly anthropocentric even though no traces of human action are seen in the images. Because of these traits, *Tale of a Forest* closely resembles "blue chip" wildlife films. According to Derek Bousé, such films come closer to art than documentary, because they avoid issues and are not set in any specific time (Bousé 2000, pp. 14–16, 20). *Tale of a Forest* is a "dramatic re-creation" (Brereton 2016, p. 192) of the endless, pristine forests that barely exist today.

The book is not concerned with documenting the forest either. It represents the forest according to established codes and ideals of nature photography, and tells a nostalgic tale of a boy's adventures. However, the book seeks to be informative to an extent. At the end of the book, the reader can find a summarised list of many of the portrayed species and some information about shooting locations.

The series of 20 short documentaries, *Tales from the Forest*, is more informational in tone and stylistically closer to a traditional nature documentary than the feature film. Each of the less-than-five-minute-long films focuses on one animal or group from *Tale of a Forest*. In some of the short documentaries, the voice-over explains how climate change and human action affect Finnish nature, but again the consequences of human action are not shown. Even so, the films include advice on how to protect nature. The short documentaries were made in co-operation with The Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, and material for teachers was produced as part of the project.

The adaptation of the same material has resulted in three different environmental narratives. In the short documentaries, the emphasis is on information, while the film seeks to emotionally affect the spectator through music, aestheticized visuals and fascinating myths. In the book, visual and textual narratives combine subjective experience with nature photography to engage the audience with the beauty of nature.

3.2. Visual and Aural Narratives about the Forest

The core of the story is the same in the film and the book, but the narrative points of view differ. In the book, the narration is on a more personal level. The story includes autobiographical memories of the father and focuses on his subjective experience with the human–nature relationship. The text describes how people interact with elements of nature in their everyday lives. For example, the first-person narrator observes changes in nature through the lens of various activities such as berry-picking and skiing. By contrast, the film does not describe these kinds of personal activities. Therefore, the book offers a slightly more coherent story of a trip to the forest compared to the fragmentary and suggestive story in the film.

In the film, there are two narrators, the father and the son, and thus two loosely constructed parallel narratives. The focus is on the old beliefs and myths told by the father, but the attention alternates between the belief systems from the past and animal lives in the present. A narrator who simultaneously experiences nature and reflects on the human–nature relationship (cf. Lehtimäki 2019) is lacking. The boy's voice appears only now and then and his lines have a sense of randomness. The film's narration uses temporal references in an unspecified way, as compared to the book's use of specific experiential memories. As an example, the narrator in the film does not specify historically where or when people held the mentioned beliefs. Through this stylistic means, the film depicts a timeless quality to untouched nature.

In the film, different elements of visual and aural narration and style are used to create meaning and a multisensory experience. The fact that the material was not originally meant for a film can be seen in the way the narrative moves quickly from one animal to the next. As is typical of nature photography, the camera picks one animal at a time. Additional materials, such as tracking shots, were shot later to augment the film's cinematic quality. In the beginning, fade-in, fade-out, acceleration and slow-motion are used to create a sense of mystery. The film begins almost like a fairy tale. The camera also artistically focuses on details, such as interesting textures or anthropomorphic features. The narrative pauses several times to focus on beautiful views like a fiery setting sun reflected through snowfall (Figure 4) or a vast mosaic of forest and lake revealed by a high angle. Thus, the film's vision of nature is aestheticized and detached (c.f. Lehtimäki 2013). Although close-ups are used frequently, their main purpose seems to be to celebrate the beauty of nature rather than to disclose information.

Figure 4. Snowfall coloured red by the setting sun. Screenshot from *Tale of a Forest* DVD.

The adaptation of the same material has structured the narration of all the works. The book borrows its narrative style and structure from the film. For instance, the way close-ups and long shots alternate on its pages resemble the camerawork of the film. Similarly, artistic images can be found on the book's pages. In both the film and book, the viewer is positioned as a detached voyeur who pays attention to one species for a short time. In the short documentaries, the material used is mostly the same as in the longer film, but bird sounds may differ, images are more tightly framed and the wide shots are missing. Sharper editing has replaced shots of longer duration and camera movements such as zooms and pans.

In the film's visual narrative, animals and plants are the protagonists and humans are missing. But the human presence is dominant in the audio narrative (orchestrated music and voice-over). In general, the aural depiction of the forest has a less significant role in the sound design. Human voice and music are in the foreground while sounds of nature remain in the background. Soundscapes are less diverse than expected based on the forest habitats (i.e., more forest bird species would usually sing simultaneously). In only two longer sections there are sounds of nature with no voice-over or music. Vococentrism, the tendency to emphasize the importance of human voice over other sounds (Chion 1994; McCorkle 2020), characterizes the film.

Non-diegetic orchestral music is used to accentuate dramatic moments and to create moods. Orchestral music, mystical low sound effects, or echoed bird sounds are used in a romanticizing style to produce the film's mythological tone. The orchestration is dominated by string and wind instruments, creating a melancholic atmosphere, particularly towards the end. These moments raise feelings of compassion and concern for the inhabitants of the forest. It can be argued that the music is used as a sensitive aesthetic tool to turn attention to the possible risk of extinction. The music is strongly emotional in contrast to the musical style of the short documentaries. In addition to the explanatory

voice-over, each of the short documentaries has a different musical score that pointedly creates a specific mood related to the subject. Again, music and voice-over dominate the sounds of nature.

3.3. Tale of the Species

Despite their titles, *Tale of a Forest* and *Tales from the Forest* focus on the inhabitants of the forest rather than the forest itself (c.f. Koskinen 2020). Generally, a forest is defined by its trees (FAO 2012), but the two dominant tree species in southern Finland, the Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) and Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) play only minor roles in *Tale of a Forest*.[4] In all of the works, the complex and diverse forest ecosystem is mainly an appealing backdrop for the animals. This follows a widely recognized phenomenon: the tendency of nature documentaries to show visually attractive species (Koskinen 2020, pp. 29–30) and "spectacular moments of animal activity" (Mills 2017, p. 85).

However, *Tale of a Forest* differs from typical nature documentaries in that its primary interest is not to impart knowledge about the processes of nature or animal behavior. The information conveyed in the film and the book consists of myths, beliefs and rather general observations. For instance, the narrator in the film describes animals in this manner: "The black woodpecker (*Dryocopus martius*) was a jinxed bird. A messenger of death. People feared its cry as it caused rain and thunder if nothing worse." Similar stories are told about most of the animals and some trees.

The focus on folk beliefs in the film and book contrasts with the short documentaries that disclose biological details of the species, such as breeding and eating habits. More complex biological processes are only shortly referred to in the works. For example, a forest fire that begins ecological succession is shown only in the book. As examples of more complex species interactions, the pygmy owl (*Glaucidium passerinum*) tries to be less visible by retracting slim in the film when supposedly an avian predator passes, while the Siberian flying squirrel's (*Pteromys volans*) attraction to nest sites of the northern goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) emerges from both the visual and audio narrative (Byholm et al. 2012). Extinction threat is handled in the short documentaries, but only one paragraph in the book alludes to the possibility of extinctions. In the film, the extinction threat was not mentioned at all.

The film and the book altogether include 270 species (218 in the film and 155 in the book). Most of the species are not threatened, indicating that the works did not especially seek rarities. The small coverage of threatened species implies a general, timeless representation of the forest. Therefore, the works do not represent the true forests of the past, in which currently endangered species were once common.

Both the film and the book include species that do not appear in the other, although they share 103 species. Interestingly, the species group composition is very similar in the film and the book. Birds are the dominant species group in both works (30% of the species), followed by plants (25%) and arthropods (16%, mainly insects), while mammals (9%) and fungi (4%) are among the minority groups. This implies a congruent representation of the forest nature in both works. However, the distributions of the species groups in the film and book differ substantially from reality. In Finnish nature, arthropods (65% of species) and fungi (19%) dominate, while birds (1%), plants (8%) and mammals (0.2%) are only small groups (FinBIF 2020). Clearly, the film and the book excessively present large or middle-sized organisms such as birds, plants or mammals, and disregard small ones such as arthropods and fungi. This is partly in line with the finding that large mammals are often considered the most charismatic animals (Albert et al. 2018).

The pictorial expression of the works has many features that are typical of nature photography and its most popular subgenre, animal photography. For example, 130 of the book's 215 images represent animals (but also include 47 landscapes and 20 plant or fungus photos). When mammals, amphibians or reptiles are shown in the film's shots or the book's pictures, they are chiefly the main objects in the respective images, whereas plants, lichens and mosses are usually in minor roles.

---

[4] Scots pine and Norway spruce are the major objects only in 7% and 12% of the film shots where they appear, respectively.

Interestingly, *Tale of a Forest* also depicts non-traditionally attractive or species considered anthropomorphic. For example, most of the arthropod species depicted in the works are insects, which as a group, are usually associated with a negative visual charisma (Lorimer 2015, pp. 48–9). Although arthropods are underrepresented in the film and book as compared with their species diversity in the Finnish species, they are often the major object of their respective images.

Birds are the major objects in over 90% of pictures, including birds in the book, but only 40% of shots included birds in the film. This is because birds often vocalize in the background without a connection to their visual appearance. However, vertebrates are preferred objects in the images even though they are a small proportion of Finnish biodiversity. The most depicted species in the film and of the animal species in the book is the Siberian jay (*Perisoreus infaustus*). The most depicted plant species in the book is the old pine tree, the mystical tree of life. Other plant depictions are mainly neutral. Images of fungi, insects and mosses on old trees give an impression of the biodiversity in an old forest ecosystem.

Visual elements that refer to the relationship between humans and nature are missing from the films. In the book, the subject is dealt with a little. There is one image of a human sitting by a campfire, two images of campfires, two of ancient rock paintings and one image of a ringed white-backed woodpecker (*Dendrocopos leucotos*). In the film and short documentaries, results of human actions are seen only suggestively, e.g., when logging areas are reflected in bird eyes or water droplets (Figure 5). This avoidance of humans and their traces in nature is a common convention in nature photography. In the case of the ringed white-backed woodpecker, the photographers may not have had a choice because almost all breeding individuals are monitored, as the species is endangered (Rassi et al. 2010). As such, this picture, perhaps unintentionally, brings modern times to the tales.

Figure 5. Siberian jay with a reflection of a clear-cut area in its eye. Screenshot from *Tale of a Forest* DVD.

The way animals are depicted in all three works mainly follows the conventional forms of nature photography, which can be divided into neutral species depictions, portraiture and depictions of animal activities. The latter two also allow an artistic approach that relies on accurate timing and exposure control (Willamo 1988, p. 11). The majority of images in the film and book emphasise animal activities. For example, the Siberian jay is pictured atop of a branch just when the bird has spread its feathers diagonally to the counter-light. These kinds of "decisive moments", when all the elements are perfectly balanced, are typically highlighted in nature photography (Cartier-Bresson 1952). Some of the images can also be defined as simple species depictions that clearly show detailed characteristics. In the case of some timid or rare animals, such as the elk (*Alces alces*) and lynx (*Lynx lynx*), the representations are more neutral.

The set of species in the film and book is not representative of the typical species pool in boreal coniferous forests. Rather, it reflects the choices of the authors or the availability of material. For instance, songs of some common forest birds are under-represented in the film. In contrast, others appear in

believable frequencies, such as how the dunnock (*Prunella modularis*) sings only once. In contrast, the European robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) appears in more than 20 shots, even though both species are typical in spruce forests. Often the species in the film are not introduced, leaving viewers uninformed about the biodiversity on display. For example, 28 bird species are only presented in the film's soundscape, including many widespread forest birds and the most common bird species in Finland, the willow warbler (Phylloscopus trochilus; Valkama et al. 2011). Similarly, most of the insects, plants and fungi shown in the film are not named. In the book, species in the text often remain on a general level (insect, owl, tree), while species displayed in pictures are listed at the end. Overall, the general presentation of biodiversity suits the mythical tone of the film and book. Nevertheless, the phenology and ecology of species are mostly presented correctly, reflecting the expertise on nature from the authors. Inaccuracies occur in only a few cases, such as when birds continue singing in autumn when territorial songs would have ceased. These examples of selecting and presenting species suggest they are based more on aesthetic than scientific criteria.

4. The Past-Oriented Approach

As we have already noted, the film and the book both gesture in many ways to the past. They draw examples from old belief systems and cultural memory to raise environmental awareness. The set of depicted species is also conventional, as it prioritizes animals over plants or fungi. Although not explicit, the works also contain several visual and textual references to previous canonical works inspired by Finnish nature.

Tale of a Forest carries on the idealization of the mystical past and the late 19th-century romantic embodiment of pristine forests, the influence of which can still be seen in nature photography. For example, some scenes and images refer to iconic works of Finnish national romantic art, such as *Palokärki* (The Black Woodpecker 1893) (Figure 6) painted by Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931). One of the most prominent artists in Finnish art history, Gallen-Kallela created, among other things, the visualization for the national epic *Kalevala*. This kind of intertextuality can be seen in the many representations of the black woodpecker in the film and book, but in particular in some of the Siberian jay images (Figure 7). These reproduce Gallen-Kallela's composition of a bird sitting on deadwood above a forest landscape that continues into the distance.

The reuse of Finnish cultural and folkloric elements in the narratives bears resemblance to the recent revitalization of indigenous knowledge and an environmentalist retreat to premodern times, in the sense that *Tale of a Forest* looks back in time and avoids reference to the contemporary state of forests (see Wapner 2010; Lorimer 2015). The film and the book represent the forest as it used to be, emphasizing a timeless Finnish forest at its best and most impressive.

This orientation towards the past can be characterized as a form of environmental nostalgia, which is almost inevitably present in environmental films that deal with actual or potential losses. Jason Sperb argues that, through documentation, environmentally concerned films attempt to preserve threatened landscapes, species, and "anxieties over their possible extinction". According to him, nostalgic longing is most clearly present in films that "minimize the impact of humans and technology on nature, or even deny the processes of cinematic and televisual mediation which brings audiences so close to nature in the first place" (Sperb 2016, p. 209). The makers of *Tale of a Forest* said they wanted to create a film and an experience that makes the viewer want to go for a trip to the forest (Toijonen 2013; Tuominen 2012). Because people have gone to the forest throughout centuries, we may ask why the presence of humans is so carefully erased from these portrayals. The film does not quite manage to create the feeling of being in the forest. The aestheticized approach may even create the opposite effect.

Figure 6. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Palokärki* (*The Black Woodpecker*), 1893, gouache, 145 cm × 90 cm. Finnish National Gallery/Ateneum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery/Pirje Mykkänen. Used with permission.

Figure 7. A Siberian jay shot that can be seen to refer to Akseli Gallen-Kallela's painting *Palokärki* (*The Black Woodpecker*). Screenshot from *Tale of a Forest* DVD.

Nostalgic longing is connected to economic considerations. Jones et al. (2019, p. 422) point out that nature documentaries tend to show the best parts of nature because filmmakers think that they may lose their audience by focusing on human-induced threats. In *Tale of a Forest*, for example, clear-cut areas are not shown, although they are common in the Finnish forest landscape. In their analysis of the Netflix documentary *Our Planet*, Jones et al. (2019, p. 422) commented that its "spectacular images revealing the grandeur of nature (. . .) may inspire and mobilize concern for the remaining biodiversity found on Earth". They also noted that it is important to maintain hope. At the same time,

the erasure of people from images of nature is potentially misleading and a way of keeping people and nature apart on the discursive level. (Ibid.)

This tendency to look to the past and to cherish nostalgia needs to be considered when analyzing how the works succeed in raising environmental awareness, especially among the younger generations. Is the past-oriented narrative a politically effective way to activate nature connectedness in the present environmental crisis? Are the mythic creatures and old tales too unfamiliar for people who live amongst the imagery of climate crises and extinctions? An alternative way would be to pass on information about how important the old forests are as carbon stores and sources of forest biodiversity (Goldstein et al. 2020; Pukkala 2020; Hyvärinen et al. 2019). Also, it is important to bear in mind that amongst the Finns there are differing, contradictory, or even opposing values attached to forests. Finnish people with different cultural backgrounds and histories, such as immigrants and refugees, can experience the forest as an unfamiliar environment (Paaskoski et al. 2018, p. 5). The patrilineal father to son narrative can also be seen as a part of the works' nostalgic outlook and it might feel alienating and old-fashioned, at least for today's audiences.

In some ways, the works could be read as a memorial to the disappearing primeval forest. In that sense, they fight against the environmental generational amnesia by showing what we have lost or are about to lose. As Kroschel (2019) has written, shifting baseline syndrome or environmental generational amnesia takes place when "(...) each new generation perceives the environmental conditions in which they grew up as 'normal'. It also describes how people's standards for acceptable environmental conditions are steadily declining. (...) We cannot appreciate what has been lost if we never knew it was there." This applies to the Finnish forest relationship too. As people do not have the knowledge and experience of old forests, it is harder to demand their conservation. This lowers expectations for the protection and management of forests and increases tolerance for the loss of forest biodiversity (cf. Kroschel 2019; Soga and Gaston 2018). We argue that the subtle ecological strategy of the *Tale of a Forest* works only if the audience is already aware of the disappearance of old forests and its consequences for the biodiversity and climate. For an environmentally aware viewer, the film and the book might enhance awareness through its nostalgic and past-oriented approach.

5. After *Tale of a Forest*: Conclusions

The film, the book and the short documentaries were published between 2012 and 2013. After that, the discussion around the state of forests has become more intense in Finland. There have been many books, films, articles and campaigns about forests and their connection with climate change and the biodiversity crisis.[5] One of them is the award-winning book *The Forest After Us* (Jokiranta et al. 2019a.)

The Forest After Us challenges myths and reveals the reality of the state of the Finnish forests. Outside of protected areas, the forests are not what we might imagine. The majority of them are young and fragmented with clear-cut areas. The authors point out that most Finnish people have never actually been to an old forest in its natural state (Jokiranta et al. 2019a). In fact, the authors have received recurrent feedback from readers that the book helped them realize the difference between a primeval and a managed forest for the first time (Jokiranta et al. 2019b).

The *Forest Finland* campaign (2020) on the other hand, is a joint communication project by the Finnish forest sector,[6] responded to the growing critique of forest management with an attempt to highlight its sustainability. The campaign's website states that the aim is "to awaken and raise peoples' interest in forests, encourage discussion about the forests' role in everything we have in Finland, as well as update our perception of modern forestry".[7] However, the campaign has been heavily

[5] Kuivalainen, Anu, *Into the Forest* (Sielunmetsä 2017), Kauppinen: *Monimuotoisuus* (2019), Rapinoja, Anni: *Luonnollisesti* (2019), exhibition in Oulu Art Museum, Hyvärinen et al.: *The 2019 Red List of Finnish species* (2019).

[6] Funded by the Finnish Forest Foundation, the Finnish Forest Industries Federation, State forest agency, the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners MTK and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

[7] https://metsiensuomi.fi/in-english/.

criticized for distributing disinformation, such as the false claim that over half of European protected forests are in Finland and the general assertion that the forest industry is sustainable (Aamulehti 2020; Kajander 2020).[8]

These ongoing discussions have influenced our reading of *Tale of the Forest*. The film is different from most recent works that have sought to raise awareness of environmental problems. For example, in Anu Kuivalainen's documentary film, *Sielunmetsä* (Into the Forest 2017), the protagonists discuss intensive forest management in a fairly straightforward manner.[9] Instead, *Tale of a Forest* presents an image of an untouched Finnish forest, and the filmmakers hoped that beautiful and nostalgic views of disappearing forests could help people reconnect with nature. But from an ecocritical perspective, such a strategy may seem escapist and out-dated.[10] *Tale of a Forest* has achieved great attention, and it keeps coming up in media discussions about the state of the forests.[11] For example, several news articles have recently discussed how the famous "Siberian jay-forests from the *Tale of a Forest*" are under threat (Sormunen 2017). Despite the fact that the film has raised awareness of these forests, numerous filming locations have been clear-cut or changed (Kauppinen 2019, pp. 120–27).

In this article, we have discussed an understanding of adaptation beyond an artistic process of recycling, borrowing and developing elements from other works of art. We point out that artists such as filmmakers adapt biological and ecological knowledge when creating narratives about the forest. Furthermore, in addition to the actual process of adaptation, we have discussed how the works are connected to a greater number of cultural products. Thus, it is also possible to speak of intertextuality, although only a few other works are referenced directly. On a more general level, we can speak of recognisability. That is, each viewer or reader recognizes different connections based on their own previous knowledge and experiences (Dicecco 2017, p. 614). We have confined our observations to how the three works are connected to Finnish artworks, folklore and representations of forest nature, but are aware that there are other relevant points of reference too.

As we noted in the beginning, representations of nature contribute considerably to our understanding of the environment. Therefore, we believe it is useful to include a multidisciplinary approach into research about the human-forest relationship. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of forests, it is vital to continue to combine biological and cultural perspectives in novel ways.

Making films and books about people's relationship with nature is a reaction to changes taking place in nature. It can be seen as an attempt to cope with or adapt to current circumstances.[12] In the situation where old forests are disappearing, the makers of *Tale of a Forest* have aimed to conserve them by recreating them in their artworks. We think that through environmental narratives, the audience, especially younger generations, can be made aware of the diverse nature relationship experienced by earlier generations of Finns. As the forests are degrading, the narratives and myths about the forests are also in danger of fading. In this situation, films like *Tale of a Forest* can be used to remind people of the importance of forests and suggest ways to reconnect with them. The popularity of these works shows that they have succeeded in participating in the debates about the Finnish human-forest

---

[8] During the writing of this article, the Finnish parliament received a popular initiative "Clear-cuts to the history" signed by more than 60,000 Finns. The main directive in the initiative is for government owned forests to be managed with methods other than clear-cutting in the future (for example with continuous cover forestry).

[9] Other recent examples of documentary films include: *Talvivaaran miehet* (Men of Talvivaara 2015), *Nälkämaan Sampo* (The Land of Mine 2016) and *Luonto sisälläni* (2016).

[10] *Tale of a Forest* is not the only contemporary artwork that deliberately turns attention away from environmental problems. For instance, when nature photographer Heikki Willamo's latest book *Metsä minussa* ("The Forest in Me" 2020, translation by authors) was published, he commented that he prefers to show what we are about to lose: primeval forests.

[11] The film has also been used to gain wider publicity and importance on petitions (https://www.adressit.com/suojellaan_metsan_tarinan_syntymetsa_tulevaisuudelle).

[12] In a similar vein, the British ecocritic Ted Hughes who was interested in the bio-evolutionary foundations of culture, approaches myths as 'dynamic shifting in response to environmental conditions' (Solnick 2017, p. 72). Myths are linked to cognitive and communicative capacities and they have an adaptive force. Hughes suggests that if a founding myth becomes useless, it is a sign of maladaptation to environment (ibid.).

relationship. On the other hand, *Tale of a Forest* could lull viewers into a false sense of security by celebrating the Finnish forests instead of telling the truth about their real state. As a result, the film and the book might reinforce the myth of the Finns' close forest relationship rather than challenge it.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0752/9/4/125/s1. Supplementary File S1: A detailed description of the used methods in gathering and analyzing the biological data from the book and film. Column specification of the table Supplementary File S2. Supplementary File S2: Occurrence information of the detected species/taxa appearing in the book and film.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, K.H., H.B., A.N., J.P., M.R., N.S. and A.V.; Formal analysis, K.H., H.B. and J.P.; Funding acquisition, K.H.; Investigation, K.H., H.B., A.N., J.P., M.R., N.S. and A.V.; Methodology, K.H., H.B., A.N., J.P., M.R., N.S. and A.V.; Project administration, K.H.; Visualization, K.H., H.B. and A.V.; Writing—original draft, K.H., H.B., A.N., J.P., M.R., N.S. and A.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The article is part of the research project *Art, ecology and diverse human–nature relationships* and it was funded by the Kone Foundation, grant number 201904167.

Acknowledgments: We thank Olli-Pekka Turunen, Sampsa Lommi, Aurora Prättälä, Anne Koivunen, Ina Tirri, Jarkko Santaharju, Seppo Niiranen, Aleksi Nirhano, Anna Olden, Mari Jäntti, Atte Komonen, Jenni Toikkanen, Matti Koivula, Jaakko Mattila and Lauri Kaila for their aid in species identification.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Primary Sources

Metsän tarina/Tale of a Forest. 2012. Documentary film. 72 mins. Directed by Ville Suhonen and Kim Saarniluoto. Finland: Matila Röhr Productions.

Suhonen, Ville, Hannu Siitonen, and Mikko Pöllänen. 2013. *Metsän tarina*. Helsinki: Maahenki.

Tarinoita metsästä/Tales from the Forest. 2013. A series of documentary films. 85 mins. Directed by Kim Saarniluoto. Finland: Matila Röhr Productions.

Bibliography

Aamulehti. 2020. Kansanliike Kritisoi Metsäkampanjaa—Näin Metsien Suomi Vastaa. *Mielipiteet*, June 6. Available online: https://www.aamulehti.fi/a/12e52709-e9a2-4386-af8e-2d5253b46731 (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Albert, Céline, Gloria M. Luque, and Franck Courchamp. 2018. The Twenty Most Charismatic Species. *PLoS ONE* 13: e0199149. [CrossRef]

Bousé, Derek. 2000. *Wildlife Films*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Brereton, Pat. 2016. *Environmental Ethics and Film*. London: Routledge.

Byholm, Patrik, Daniel Burgas, Tarmo Virtanen, and Jari Valkama. 2012. Competitive Exclusion Within the Predator Community Influences the Distribution of a Threatened Prey Species. *Ecology* 93: 1802–8. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Cartier-Bresson, Henri. 1952. *The Decisive Moment*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Chion, Michel. 1994. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press.

Christman Lavin, Sophie, and E. Ann Kaplan. 2017. *The Climate of Ecocinema. The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [CrossRef]

Cutchins, Dennis. 2017. Bakhtin, Intertextuality, and Adaptation. In *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*. Edited by Thomas Leitch. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 71–86.

Dicecco, Nico. 2017. The Aura of Againness: Performing Adaptation. In *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*. Edited by Thomas Leitch. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 607–22.

FAO. 2012. FRA 2015 Terms and Definitions. Forest Resources Assessment Working Paper 180. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Available online: http://www.fao.org/3/ap862e/ap862e00.pdf (accessed on 19 October 2020).

FinBIF. 2020. *The FinBIF Checklist of Finnish Species 2019*. Helsinki: Finnish Biodiversity Information Facility, Finnish Museum of Natural History, University of Helsinki, Available online: http://urn.fi/URN:ISSN:2490-0907 (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Goldstein, Allie, Will R. Turner, Seth A. Spawn, Kristina J. Anderson-Teixeira, Susan Cook-Patton, Joseph Fargione, Holly K. Gibbs, Bronson Griscom, Jennifer H. Hewson, Jennifer F. Howard, and et al. 2020. Protecting irrecoverable carbon in Earth's ecosystems. *Nature Climate Change* 10: 287–95. [CrossRef]

Halla, Tuulikki, Reetta Karhunkorva, Sirpa Kärkkäinen, Jaana Laine, and Anna Rautio. 2018. Suomalaisten metsäsuhteiden tila [On Finns' Emotional Responses to the Forest]. In *Vuosilusto 12: Suomalainen Metsäsuhde*. Edited by Leena Paaskoski and Heikki Roiko-Jokela. Punkaharju: Lusto—Finnish Forest Museum and The Finnish Forest History Society, pp. 112–21. Available online: https://issuu.com/vuosilusto/docs/vuosilusto12 (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Hautala, Hannu, Jorma Luhta, Arno Rautavaara, Veikko Rinne, Kari Soveri, and Teuvo Suominen. 1981. *Luonnonvalokuvauksen Käsikirja*. Espoo: Weilin + Göös.

Hyvärinen, Esko, Aino Juslén, Eija Kemppainen, Annika Uddström, and Ulla-Maija Liukko, eds. 2019. *The 2019 Red List of Finnish Species*. Helsinki: Ministry of the Environment and Finnish Environment Institute. Available online: http://hdl.handle.net/10138/299501 (accessed on 19 October 2020).

IUCN. 2020. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Available online: www.iucnredlist.org (accessed on 16 November 2020).

Jokiranta, Anssi, Pekka Juntti, Anna Ruohonen, and Jenni Räinä. 2019a. *Metsä Meidän Jälkeemme*. Helsinki: Like.

Jokiranta, Anssi, Pekka Juntti, Anna Ruohonen, and Jenni Räinä. 2019b. Miltä näyttää metsä meidän jälkeemme? *Koneen Säätiö*, September 26. Available online: https://koneensaatio.fi/milta-nayttaa-metsa-meidan-jalkeemme/ (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Jones, Julia P. G., Laura Thomas-Walters, Niki A. Rust, and Diogo Veríssimo. 2019. Nature Documentaries and Saving Nature: Reflections on the New Netflix Series Our Planet. *People and Nature* 1: 420–25. [CrossRef]

Kajander, Lauri. 2020. Metsien Suomi-kampanja levittää virheellistä tietoa metsien suojelusta. *Metsäblogi*, June 24. Available online: https://metsablogi.wordpress.com/2020/06/24/metsien-suomi-kampanja-levittaa-virheellista-tietoa-metsien-suojelusta/ (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Kantar TNS. 2018. Suomalaisten Metsäsuhteiden Tila-Selvitys. Kestävästi Metsäsuhteessa-Hanke. Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland, Finnish Forest Association, and Lusto—Finnish Forest Museum. Available online: https://smy.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Suomalaisten-mets%C3%A4suhteiden-tila-selvitys.pdf (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Kauppinen, Juha. 2019. *Monimuotoisuus: Kertomuksia katoamisista*. Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Siltala.

Koskinen, Kristiina. 2020. Antroposkenen ekosysteemi: Pohjoinen metsä villin luonnon näyttämönä [Forest Ecosystem as a Stage: Constructing Wilderness with Northernness]. *Lähikuva* 33: 25–41. [CrossRef]

Kouki, Jari, Satu Löfman, Petri Martikainen, Seppo Rouvinen, and Anneli Uotila. 2001. Forest Fragmentation in Fennoscandia: Linking Habitat Requirements of Wood-associated Threatened Species to Landscape and Habitat Changes. *Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research* 16: 27–37. [CrossRef]

Kroschel, Whitney. 2019. Shifting Baseline Syndrome. Envirobites. Available online: https://envirobites.org/2019/08/22/shifting-baseline-syndrome/ (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Kuuluvainen, Timo. 2009. Forest Management and Biodiversity Conservation Based on Natural Ecosystem Dynamics in Northern Europe: The Complexity Challenge. *Ambio* 38: 309–15. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Lehtimäki, Markku. 2013. Kuvia ja kertomuksia metsästä. Luontoelokuva digitaalisen todellisuuden aikakaudella. *Niin & Näin* 2: 31–35. Available online: https://netn.fi/artikkeli/kuvia-ja-kertomuksia-metsasta-luontoelokuva-digitaalisen-todellisuuden-aikakaudella (accessed on 22 October 2020).

Lehtimäki, Markku. 2019. Narrative Communication in Environmental Fiction. Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches. In *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*. Edited by Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Vidya Sarveswaran. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 84–97.

Lorimer, Jamie. 2015. *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after Nature*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Marland, Pippa. 2013. Ecocriticism. *Literature Compass* 10: 846–68. [CrossRef]

McCorkle, Brooke. 2020. Listening to Soundscapes in Kurosawa's Dersu Uzala (1975). In *Voicing the Cinema: Film Music and the Integrated Soundtrack*. Edited by James Buhler and Hannah Lewis. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, pp. 190–206.

Mills, Brett. 2017. *Animals on Television: The Cultural Making of the Non-Human*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Paaskoski, Leena, Heikki Roiko-Jokela, and Marko Rikala. 2018. Suomalaisia metsäsuhteita. In *Vuosilusto 12: Suomalainen Metsäsuhde*. Edited by Leena Paaskoski and Heikki Roiko-Jokela. Punkaharju: Lusto—Finnish Forest Museum and The Finnish Forest History Society, pp. 5–9. Available online: https://issuu.com/vuosilusto/docs/vuosilusto12 (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Pirilä, Marjo. 2013. Metsän tarinasta kirja. *Yle News*, June 24. Available online: https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-6698837 (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Pukkala, Timo. 2020. Calculating the additional carbon sequestration of Finnish forestry. *Journal of Sustainable Forestry*. [CrossRef]

Rassi, Pertti, Esko Hyvärinen, Aino Juslén, and Ilpo Mannerkoski, eds. 2010. *The 2010 Red List of Finnish Species*. Helsinki: Ministry of the Environment and Finnish Environment Institute, Available online: http://hdl.handle.net/10138/299499 (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Rosenqvist, Juha. 2012. Ville Suhonen ja Metsän Tarina. Juha Rosenqvist Interviews Ville Suhonen. Film-o-Holic. Available online: http://www.film-o-holic.com/haastattelut/ville-suhonen-metsan-tarina/ (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Siiskonen, Harri. 2007. The Conflict between Traditional and Scientific Forest Management in 20th Century Finland. *Forest Ecology and Management* 249: 125–33. [CrossRef]

Silk, Matthew, Sarah L. Crowley, Anna J. Woodhead, and Ana Nuno. 2017. Considering Connections between Hollywood and Biodiversity Conservation. *Conservation Biology* 32: 597–606. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Soga, Masashi, and Kevin J. Gaston. 2018. Shifting Baseline Syndrome: Causes, Consequences, and Implications. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 16: 222–30. [CrossRef]

Solnick, Sam. 2017. *Poetry and the Anthropocene: Ecology, biology and technology in contemporary British and Irish Poetry*. London and New York: Routledge.

Sormunen, Elli. 2017. Luontojärjestöt: Metsän tarina-elokuvan miljöö on raiskattu—Metsäjätin avohakkuut tuhosivat kuukkelimetsän. *Yle News*, November 21. Available online: https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-9941407 (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Sperb, Jason. 2016. From Nihilism to Nostalgia: Blackfish (2013) and the Contradictions of the Nature Documentary. *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 44: 206–19. [CrossRef]

Tiessalo, Paula. 2012. Metsän tarina kypsyi neljä vuotta. *Yle News*, December 10. Available online: https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-6409305 (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Toijonen, Ville. 2013. Metsän tarina on Suomen katsotuin dokumentti. *Yle News*, April 15. Available online: https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-6579653 (accessed on 22 October 2020).

Tuominen, Päivi. 2012. Metsän tarina pääsi valkokankaalle. *Yle News*, December 27. Available online: https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-6423627 (accessed on 22 October 2020).

Vaahtera, Eeva, Martti Aarne, Antti Ihalainen, Elina Mäki-Simola, Aarre Peltola, Jukka Torvelainen, Esa Uotila, and Esa Ylitalo, eds. 2018. *Finnish Forest Statistics*. Helsinki: Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke), Available online: http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe201902043966 (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Valkama, Jari, Ville Vepsäläinen, and Aleksi Lehikoinen. 2011. The Third Finnish Breeding Bird Atlas. Finnish Museum of Natural History and Ministry of Environment. Available online: http://atlas3.lintuatlas.fi/english (accessed on 19 October 2020).

Wapner, Paul. 2010. *Living through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Willamo, Heikki. 1988. *Eläinvalokuvaus*. Forssa: Forssan kustannus.

Willoquet-Maricondi, Paula. 2010. *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

arts

MDPI

Article

'The Time Is out of Joint': Interactivity and Player Agency in Videogame Adaptations of *Hamlet*

Julian Novitz

Department of Media and Communication, School of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, VIC 3122, Australia; jnovitz@swin.edu.au

Received: 14 September 2020; Accepted: 23 November 2020; Published: 29 November 2020

Abstract: Although Shakespeare and his plays have been a frequent subject of videogame adaptations in the past, these have often been confined to either theatre-making games (which present the staging of Shakespeare plays using the mechanisms of strategy or simulation videogame genres) of education/trivia games that aim to familiarise players with Shakespeare's texts. While references to Shakespeare abound in videogames, there have been relatively few attempts to directly adapt one of his plays into the form of an interactive videogame narrative, where the player controls one or more of the principal characters and can affect the outcome of the story. This paper will examine four videogame adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, whose differing approaches to player-agency and interactivity in relation to narrative of the classic play demonstrate the interactive potential of Shakespearean drama. While the player-driven overwriting or rewriting of the classic text may appear irreverent, it is, in each game, dependent on some conception the original play and the past tradition that it represents, which is translated into the contemporary medium of the videogame. This illustrates Jacques Derrida's contention that the longevity and translatability of Shakespearean texts are due to their 'spectral' qualities, in that they allow the past to be re-examined through the lens of the present and vice versa.

Keywords: adaptation; videogames; Shakespeare

1. Introduction: Shakespeare and New Media

In *Specters of Marx* Jacques, Derrida (1994) argues that William Shakespeare operates as a uniquely transitional figure in European literature, emerging from the traditions of Old Europe but at a point where 'time is off its hinges'—i.e., where social, political, philosophical and technological upheavals posed a challenge to established certainties. The receptiveness of Shakespeare's plays to the turbulence of these unhinged times creates 'poetic and thinking peepholes' in the works that allow them to explore and apply a multitude of perspectives to older histories, narratives and themes (Derrida 1994, p. 20). This openness also means that the plays themselves are highly receptive to new interpretations and can be translated into a variety of mediums and contexts. In Derrida's argument, both the figure of Shakespeare and his plays are 'spectral' because they are simultaneously of the past and open to the possibilities of the future.

> Is it impossible to gather under a single roof the apparently disordered plurivocity (which is itself "out of joint") of these interpretations? Is it possible to find a rule of cohabitation under such a roof, it being understood that this house will always be haunted rather than inhabited by the meaning of the original? This is the stroke of genius, the insignia trait of spirit, the signature of the Thing "Shakespeare": to authorize each one of the translations, to make them possible and intelligible without ever being reducible to them. (Derrida 1994, p. 25)

For Derrida, memory is like a ghost that hovers between past and present and operates as an act of translation. Derrida refers to this process as 'hauntology' where the past is reworked in the light of the present and the present is reworked in the light of the past, offering a means of breaking down the binary opposition between these two categories (Derrida 1994, p. 10). Thus 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' can be understood as 'haunting' the performances and adaptations of the plays rather than 'inhabiting' them. It manifests as an ever-shifting set of cultural expectations that surround the idea of Shakespeare as a representative or embodiment of a past literary tradition but does not and cannot command fidelity to any original meaning or interpretation. This 'Thing "Shakespeare"' is always irreducible to and in excess of any single production or encounter and therefore it can be argued that any engagement with a Shakespearean text results not in the knowledge of a true, singular, original Shakespeare, but in 'Shakespeares'—diverse and different texts and performances, which cannot be clearly ordered into a linear sequence of before and after (Calbi 2013, p. 2). From Derrida's perspective, Shakespearean plays are so frequently performed and adapted because they are 'spectral' works: their openness and mutability means that they can be can explored through the lens of the contemporary, but this also affords the possibility of re-examining the contemporary through the lens of the past.

As Shakespeare's 'spectral' plays work to translate the past into the present and vice versa, their adaptations are often used to signal the full arrival of new mediums. Opera, radio, film and television have all had their Shakespeare adaptations that demonstrate their potential seriousness within a cultural tradition, and also how their unique innovations and affordances can transform the experience and interpretation of the familiar narratives (Cornfield et al. 2018). As Maurizio Calbi argues in *Spectral Shakespeares*, this now extends in the 21st century to emergent and increasingly interactive screen-based mediums, such as augmented reality performances and social media. For example, the 2011 Royal Shakespeare Company performance of *Romeo and Juliet* on Twitter over the course of three weeks (with actors tweeting, interacting with each other and occasionally posting videos from twitter accounts representing characters from the play) at once showcases the new language and storytelling structures that have emerged with the development and adoption of the platform, while at the same time demonstrating that the established values of classic literature and performance can persist within the new medium (Calbi 2013).

Videogame adaptations of Shakespeare's plays are not considered in Calbi's text, most likely due to their very limited visibility within the videogame market. Videogames have tended to look more to action-focused cinema for aesthetic inspiration and sources for adaptation (Picard 2008). Both narratives and individual sequences from films such as *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) and *Aliens* (Cameron et al. 1986) are much more frequently and visibly adapted into videogame formats than any Shakespearean text. Nonetheless, engagement with individual Shakespearean works and 'the Thing "Shakespeare"', as Derrida puts it, has been a component of the history of the medium. Like the experimental screen productions surveyed by Calbi, these engagements often highlight the spectrality of Shakespeare, demonstrating the openness of the familiar narratives to radical, disruptive, and transgressive understandings, while simultaneously grounding the emergent media in continuity with the past. This paper will survey videogame approaches to Shakespeare, focusing in particular on four videogame adaptations of the play *Hamlet*, and the differing approaches to 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' that they offer through their particular combinations of ludic, representational and narrative elements. First, however, it is necessary to discuss what how videogames may operate as adaptations of older media, so as to better understand the challenges (and instinctual reticence) that come with adapting Shakespeare's works into videogame formats.

2. Videogames as Adaptations

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon argues for a conception of adaptation as a storytelling practice that goes beyond simply questioning or assessing the fidelity of the adaption to the narrative, themes, and style of its source. She notes that the new media landscape and digital culture has shifted the discussion around adaption from its traditional focus on how textual media are translated into

visual mediums (e.g., novels into films) to questions of how static and linear forms may be adapted into more interactive and immersive mediums, particularly videogames. Hutcheon defines an adaptation as an 'announced and extensive transposition of a work or particular works' (Hutcheon 2014, p. 8)—either between distinct forms of media, genre, context, point of view, or ontologies. Hutcheon's definition captures the creative diversity of adaptations, while also distinguishing the adaptation from works that merely allude to or echo older narratives, or the expansion of existing narratives via sequels, prequels, or fan fiction. Hutcheon argues that as adaptations openly announce their relationship with a source text they operate as texts 'in the second degree', as defined by Gerard Genette, in that a reading of the adaptation is not complete without some knowledge of the original. However, this does not make them 'secondary' texts and thus inferior, derivative, or disposable. Rather new meanings and creative commentaries can emerge through the adaptation's inevitable reinterpretation and reimagination of the original. Furthermore, Hutcheon emphasises the intertextual nature of the reception of adaptations, where an audience familiar with the original will inevitably read or respond to the new text through two broad points of comparison. The first of these is the extent to which the narrative of the new work remains consistent with the that of the original. The second is the more nebulous and subjective question of whether the adaptation remains true to the 'spirit' of its source—whether it evokes a similar emotion, despite any changes to the medium or the narrative (Hutcheon 2014). The adaptation's alignment with or departure from the audience's memory and awareness of the original will often shape their response to it. Changes not only result in new interpretations and meanings but may also provide a commentary on the original work and its context. Hutcheon's approach is broad enough to include a wide range of intramedial and intermedial texts under the category of adaptation. What is important in her analysis are the ways in which these texts signal their 'second degree' status and invite comparison with their source as a component of their creative value. This usefully distinguishes adaptation from facsimile, duplication, and plagiarism (Leitch 2012). It also potentially distinguishes Hutcheon's 'adaptation proper' from 'paratextual adaptations', which transpose other 'second degree' texts into new forms and formats (Sherry 2012, p. 375).

Hutcheon notes that emergent interactive media present challenges for both the practice and understanding of adaptation. The traditional emphasis on the transposition of narrative and themes or 'spirit' across different media via adaptations is difficult to maintain when non-interactive media, such as a novel or a film, is adapted into an interactive form, such as a videogame, and vice versa. As a form of 'trans-modal' adaptation, these types of interactivation or deinteractivation potentially necessitate more radical changes to the shape and experience of narratives than intra and intermedial adaptations that transpose narratives between non-interactive mediums (Wolf 2012), Hutcheon argues that the emphasis on player action and interactivity in videogames means that their narratives typically have a very different structure to those of non-interactive media. Where novels, films and television narratives typically follow some version of a three act structure where characters and problems are introduced, developed to the point of crisis and then resolved, videogame narratives typically truncate or compress the first and third acts of their story, using them to simply justify and contextualise the gameplay. In videogames, Hutcheon maintains, the first and third acts of the narrative are peripheral to the long second act of the gameplay itself (Hutcheon 2014). In this regard, she follows Marie-Laure Ryan's early contention that narrative frequently operates as a means of providing the player with a context and motivation for solving challenges and problems presented by gameplay rather than being interesting in its own right (Ryan 2004). This understanding of narrative in videogames as a contextualising wrapper for gameplay can be criticised for overlooking the extent to which narrative and gameplay may meaningfully intersect and support one another (Dansky 2014). Indeed, the idea that narrative is secondary, separable and subordinated to the interactive elements of videogames arguably neglects the importance of narrative in videogame design, presentation and marketing, as well as gameplay systems that allow the player to actively create and manipulate storylines, and the individualised narratives of play that emerge from engagement with videogame systems (Cassidy 2011). While the dialogue in Game Studies as a whole has substantially evolved beyond the

simple opposition of gameplay and narrative, Hutcheon's somewhat regressive conception of the role of narrative in videogame adaptations is understandable, given that many videogame adaptations use a minimised or truncated version of the narrative from their source media to contextualise their gameplay. Indeed, Hutcheon argues that it is often more important for an interactive adaptation to vividly and accurately capture the world or 'heteroecism' that is created or implied by the source than the specific beats of its narrative (Hutcheon 2014, p. 14).

Espen Aarseth makes a similar point in his discussion of film-to-game adaptation, noting that a successful videogame adaptation will feature recognisable characters from its source, capture the visual features and atmosphere of its world, environment or universe, and use a 'concept' from the source as the basis for an enjoyable gameplay mechanic. Aarseth notes that 'What is lacking from this formula, of course, is story. Partly because you do not really need it, if you have these three key ingredients' (Aarseth 2006, p. 209). This approach to trans-modal interactivation is common in licensed film-to-game adaptations. For example, the famous Super Nintendo adaption of *Star Wars*, *Super Star War*s (Lucasarts 1992), compresses or erases major plot-beats from the film, but successfully reproduces recognisable versions of its characters, environments and action via gameplay. Similar videogame adaptations such as *The Return of the King* (EA Redwood Shores 2003) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (Eurocom 2007) also use simplified versions of their source narratives to connect and contextualise sequences of gameplay. This common approach to videogame adaptation interactivises the world of the source media, while minimising its narrative.

A more complex approach to the question of adaptation and videogames may be found by considering their systems rather than just their representational content. Gonzalo Frasca contrasts traditional media forms, such as novels and film, which excel at 'representation' through depicting and describing traits and sequences of events, with videogames, which excel at 'simulation', in that they create systems that allow for variable outcomes based on player-input (Frasca 2003, pp. 222–24). Matthew Wiese (2009) argues that simulations can operate as a form of procedural adaptation in videogames, in that the game's systems can effectively reproduce themes, action and atmosphere from non-interactive media without necessarily transposing their narrative. The seminal real-time strategy game *Dune 2* (Westwood Studios 1992) can be understood as a procedural adaptation along these lines, in that it does not replicate the sequential narrative of its source, but rather its systems replicate the types of political, military and economic manoeuvring that occur in the Frank Herbert novel it is based on. Procedural adaptation potentially complicates and expands the category of adaptation as defined by Hutcheon. Alongside licensed videogame adaptions such as *The Thing* (Computer Artworks 2002), Wiese also considers titles such as *Dead Rising* (Capcom 2006), which is not an explicit adaptation of an earlier media work but has procedural systems that are clearly designed to emulate iconic scenes from zombie movies (Wiese 2009). Furthermore, while many games based on film or television properties may frame themselves as prequels or sequels (which Hutcheon specifically excludes) in terms of their narratives, their gameplay may still operate as a an adaptation of scenes and sequences from their source material (Stobbart 2018). The critically acclaimed survival horror title *Alien Isolation* (Creative Assembly 2014), for example, is technically an 'interquel' in terms of its narrative, but its core gameplay operates as an adaptation of a single iconic scene from the end of the first film, where the isolated protagonist attempts to escape from the titular alien creature without being detected. The tension created by this gameplay and the retro-futuristic elements of the game's visual design capture the distinctive effect of the 1979 film (Keogh and Jayemanne 2018). Therefore, despite its status as an expansion of the original narrative, *Alien Isolation* was still received by critics as a successful 'adaptation' of *Alien* (Scott et al. 1979) (Boehm 2019; Keogh 2015). This serves to illustrate how videogames can complicate Hutcheon's definition of the category of adaptation and its principal focus on the intramedia or intermedial transposition of narrative. In videogame adaptations, the narrative of the source media can easily be minimised by being framed as a recognisable but non-interactive wrapper for gameplay, or bypassed entirely through procedural adaptation, which can create thematically similar original narratives through its systems of simulation. This looser intertextual

relationship between videogame adaptations and their source media presents some challenges for adapting Shakespeare's plays into a videogame format. From the above analysis, it seems that videogame adaptations often depend on being able to focus on and 'interactivise' a specific element of the source material (e.g., the strategic conflict in Frank Herbert's *Dune* or the combat in Peter Jackson's *The Return of the King*), while minimising or discarding other elements. Given the complex interconnection between character, language, and narrative in Shakespeare's plays, it can be difficult to conceive how a videogame could truncate or simplify the overall narrative of a Shakespearean play into a 'wrapper' and have value as an adaption, or how the game, as a system of simulation, could provide a meaningful 'procedural adaptation' of the play's themes, action or tensions in the manner explored by Wiese. Videogame attempts to capture, address, or engage with Shakespeare's work, and the ghostly presence of 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' itself, are therefore complicated by the need to provide meaningful interactivity and player-agency.

3. Shakespeare Games

Though perhaps less visible than in other forms of media, the influence of Shakespeare can be detected across the history of videogames as a medium. This typically takes the form of references and allusions in jokes and Easter eggs, such as the whispered quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* that are heard at various points in *Bioshock Infinite* (2K Marin 2013), or the plays and characters that are clearly modelled on Shakespeare's in *Final Fantasy IX* (Square Co Ltd. 2000). Beyond these explicit references, Shakespeare's influence on videogame narratives and aesthetics can be more broadly detected, just as it can in all forms of Western narrative media. For example, Gregory Wells argues that abject and explicit depictions of violent deaths in videogames can trace their roots back to the cathartic horrors of *Titus Andronicus*, and David Owen contends that the extended narrative structures of Western computer role-playing games owe a debt to Shakespeare's history and tragedy plays, with their convergent and interconnected sub-plots, and frequent manipulation of time and distance (Wells 2016; Owen 2010).

Videogames start to engage with the 'spectral' qualities of Shakespeare's work, as explored by Derrida when these references are more directly incorporated into their ludic elements and/or narratives, bridging and blurring the boundaries between past and present, between the cultural history that is often represented by 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' and the emergent possibilities of videogames as a medium. Games such as *Silent Hill 3* (Konami 2003) *and Metal Gear Solid 4: the Guns of the Patriots* (Kojima Productions 2008) directly reference Shakespeare's plays in puzzles and dialogue as a means of signalling their narrative and aesthetic maturity (Nae 2019). By contrast, the violent cult title *Manhunt 2* (Rockstar London 2008) takes a more oppositional approach, repeatedly referencing *the Tempest* as a lens for understanding the relationship between the game's protagonist and antagonist, but also engaging in a level of metatextual commentary by having the player destroy the loudspeakers through which the antagonist quotes from the play during one gameplay sequence. The past is evoked through the figure of Shakespeare and simultaneously erased, as the player is encouraged to transgressively reject both the authority of the Prospero-like villain and the residual weight and authority that 'canonical' literature has over emergent videogame media (Nae 2017). Interestingly, the episodic adventure game *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (Deck Nine 2017) takes a similar approach to the same play. A high school production of *the Tempest* is a significant recurring plot point throughout the game and the player has the option of performing scenes in ways that allow the player-controlled character, Chole, to draw parallels between the play and her own life and relationships. Much like *Manhunt 2*, this trajectory culminates in a transgressive yet cathartic rejection of the authority and control of the canonical literary text, though in this case it involves the characters creating an alternative performance that challenges the patriarchal hegemony of Shakespeare as a cultural icon (Kaethler 2020).

Beyond these kinds of references and allusions, Gina Bloom argues that explicitly labelled 'Shakespeare games' can be understood as their own distinct videogame category. Bloom maintains that there are three broad types of Shakespeare game: 'theatre-making' games, which use simulation or strategic gameplay conventions to explore the experience of creating and/or staging an Elizabethan

drama; 'scholar-making' games, which centre on trivia and tests in order to improve the players' knowledge of Shakespeare's works; and 'drama-making' games, where the player takes on the role of one of Shakespeare's characters or is able to interact with them, either within the established narrative of one of his plays or in some other context (Bloom 2015, p. 115). In addition, Eleni Timplalexi adds (as components of the drama-making category defined by Bloom) digital performances of Shakespeare's plays that take place within video game engines and environments and existing videogames that are officially or unofficially modified to add Shakespearean content (Timplalexi 2018).These types of games can potentially be understood as paratetextual adaptations as defined by Sherry (2012), in that they do not directly transpose the narratives of the plays into a new media format, but focus on more peripheral or secondary elements. Theatre-making and scholar-making games typically aim to educate the player, directing them back to the past. By contrast, 'drama-making games' attempt to provide players with some kind of interactive experience and immersion in Shakespeare's fictive worlds, offering a translation of past into present and the present into the past that has the potential to stray into spectral territory. However, drama-making games often tend to focus on a narrow or singular aspect of a play that can be easily translated into interactivity through the kind of 'procedural adaptation' identified by Wiese (Wiese 2009). For example, the feuds and rivalries between Montagues and Capulets from *Romeo and Juliet* are represented in *the Sims 2* (Maxis Redwood Shores 2004) neighbourhood 'Veronaville', and the martial and strategic elements of the war against the French in *Henry V* are turned into a campaign for the strategy game *Empire Earth* (Stainless Steel Studios 2001) (Timplalexi 2018). The MMORPG *Arden 1: the World of William Shakespeare* (Castronova 2007) allows players to interact with Shakespearean characters outside the context of their plays (Best 2011) and the experimental art game *Deus Ex Machina* (Automata UK 1984) delivers gameplay and narrative that is based on a single soliloquy, engaging thematically with its source, *Twelfth Night*, rather than through a direct adaptation of its plot (Cornfield et al. 2018).

While these approaches have their merits, the general absence of more extensive narrative adaptations—Hutcheon's 'adaptation proper' (Hutcheon 2014, p. 171)—indicates a curious timidity in drama-making games. Videogame adaptations of classic literary texts—such as the adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *the Great Gatsby* as a side-scroller and the notorious reimagining of Dante's *Inferno* as a gory third person adventure game (Vogt 2013)—tend to intentionally or unintentionally emphasise the absurdity of representing essentially introspective and reflective literary narratives through the action-focused mechanics of videogame play. The looser intertextual relationship with the source material in videogame adaptations is difficult to reconcile with the reverence and cultural centrality that has been afforded to 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' from the late nineteenth century onwards. Direct videogame adaptations of Shakespeare's narratives therefore risk appearing derisive or irreverent due to the emphasis that games typically place on interactivity and player-agency over fidelity to the source narrative. Indeed, the relatively few videogame adaptations of Shakespeare's narratives are generally short and slight parodic outliers, such as *Romeo Wherefore Art Thou?* (Shakespeare Country 2010) which offers a side-scrolling, action-focused adventure based very loosely on the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. While entertaining, these types of games do not generally engage with the familiar narrative deeply enough to access what Derrida identifies as their hauntological' capacity to translate the past into the present and the present into the past (Derrida 1994).

On the other hand, Andrei Nae argues that the idea of more serious and thoughtful videogame adaptations of Shakespeare's narratives should no longer be seen as absurd, as the developing technology of game design now allows for more sophisticated forms of representation, characterisation and storytelling (Nae 2019). Just as the spectral qualities of Shakespeare's plays made them open to adaptation and remediation into radio, cinema and television, new meanings and insights can be generated by approaching their openness and complexity with the radical interactivity of game design. This potential can be demonstrated through an examination of some rare expectations to general lack of extensive narrative adaptations of Shakespeare into videogames: the four commercial *Hamlet* games that have been produced since 1997. Each of these adaptations, though differing in style

and complexity, substantially alters the familiar narrative of *Hamlet* to provide the expected sense of interactivity and player agency. This seemingly irreverent approach to the play and its classic narrative is modified by the different ways in which each game positions itself in relation to 'original' narrative of *Hamlet* and the past tradition that the play embodies or represents. These varying approaches demonstrate the unique possibilities of engagement with the spectrality of both the play *Hamlet* and 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' itself with videogame mediums.

4. Haunted by the Past: Linear Videogame Adaptations of *Hamlet*

In a field notable for the general absence of extensive narrative adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, it is possibly surprising that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been adapted with such relative frequency. On the surface, the play's deeply introspective qualities and its focus on the indecisiveness of its protagonist might not seem like an intuitive choice for a ludic adaptation. As game developer and playwright Simon Peacock humorously observes, *Hamlet* is 'the worst show Shakespeare wrote to turn into a videogame because it's four hours of dialogue and five minutes of action' (Rudin 2015). As a way of emphasising this point, Peacock himself staged a parodic theatre production *Hamlet: the Video Game (the Stage Show)* (Peacock 2015), which reimagines the narrative of Hamlet through the lens of videogame conventions, presenting the character of Hamlet as journeying through 'levels' and fighting 'bosses' (Rudin 2015). In this sense, the high seriousness and psychological complexity that is associated with *Hamlet*'s narrative is presented as comically out of step with the straightforward player-agency and empowerment that is associated with conventional gameplay.

Despite this, it is possible to speculate as to why *Hamlet*, of all of Shakespeare's plays, has been the most frequent subject of videogame adaptations. The simplest reason may be that it is arguably Shakespeare's most iconic and recognisable work. The play is valuable not just in and of itself, but also because it is emblematic of Shakespeare and the cultural values attributed to him as figure. Adapting *Hamlet* then potentially allows for an engagement with 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' that signals the arrival and maturity of videogames as a medium, either bringing them in continuity with the past tradition it represents or asserting their independent value through transgressive mockery. Furthermore, *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's most 'spectral' play, as Derrida notes, where the binary distinctions between past, present and future are frequently broken down or eroded through the action, inaction, reflections and performances of the protagonist and other characters (Derrida 1994). This quality may make its narrative particularly suitable as a meeting point between the past literary tradition represented by both the play and 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' itself, and the emergent possibilities of videogames as a medium. Interestingly, the first two notable videogame adaptations of *Hamlet*—*William Shakespeare's Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* (Pantheon Productions, Inc. 1997) and *Hamlet, or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement.* (Galanin 2010)—both address this potential by largely separating the familiar narrative elements of *Hamlet* from the interactive elements of their gameplay. In doing so, these adaptations both work—albeit in different ways—to emphasise the primary importance of the past tradition within this essentially spectral encounter.

The first 'announced and extensive' commercially released video game adaptation of *Hamlet* is *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* (Pantheon Productions, Inc. 1997). Though largely forgotten now, this title was a tie-in or cross-promotion with the more famous film adaptation of the play, *Hamlet* (Branagh 1996) and includes 40 min of video footage from that production as gameplay rewards and cut scenes. In many respects, *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* is the most conventional of the four adaptations, both in terms of its gameplay and the traditional reverence with which it treats the text and narrative of the play, even as the player creates an alternative version of its events through the successful completion of the game's challenges. It reconciles these contradictory elements by encouraging the player to shift between two distinct but connected game modes. In the first, titled 'To Be': puts the player in control of Prince Hamlet in a three-dimensional first-person perspective, with occasional shifts to video footage from the feature film. The player is challenged to solve the murder of Hamlet's father and restore the prince's faculties by completing a series of largely

self-contained puzzles and minigames. In this sense, the game narrative serves to contextualise and motivate the player's engagement with largely discrete gameplay activities, in a manner that is similar to other full-motion video games of the period, such as *the 7th Guest* (Trilobyte 1993) and *the 11th Hour* (Trilobyte 1995). Successful completion is rewarded with snippets of film footage and occasionally the aversion of a character's tragic fate; Gertrude is rescued from Claudius, Polonius's death is prevented and Ophelia is saved from drowning. The final task is a climatic duel with King Claudius before the player achieves the game's happy ending. The emphasis on player agency and progress towards a victory state could be taken as a simplistic reshaping of a classic narrative to fit with familiar videogame conventions, but this is complicated by the presence of the second game mode, 'Not to Be'. In this mode, the player is reframed as a reader and a passive audience. In the 'Not to Be' mode they have access to the full script of the play, which is supplemented by extensive scholarly commentary, and additional texts on a variety of Renaissance subjects such as archery, alchemy, heraldry, herbology, etc. Both the play script, commentary and supplementary texts contain clues and information that will be helpful for solving puzzles and completing gameplay challenges and so the player is encouraged to move between the two modes frequently. In this sense, *Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* combines a drama-making game with a scholar-making game by Bloom's definitions, and also permits itself to deviate from the classic narrative by ensuring that the source text is constantly present for the player to reference. Success and progression in the gameplay are dependent on the player's regular consultation of Shakespeare's play script and are rewarded with clips from Kenneth Branagh's textually faithful film adaptation, which emphasises that the alternative narrative the player is experiencing through gameplay is not the most important or authentic version. In this sense, *Hamlet: a Murder Mystery's* adaptation of *Hamlet* into gameplay is both haunted and inhabited by the idea of the 'original' play. The gameplay and the reshaped Shakespearean narrative that results from it is not intended to be appreciated independently, but constantly refers the player back to the culturally accepted and prioritised version of the story. In this sense, we can see 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' translating the past into the present in a clear and literal way. The present, real-time gameplay and interactivity obliges the player to access the past of the narrative—the textual form of the play—and through successive encounters come to value and prioritise it over the simplified version of it that is used to contextualise the gameplay. This results in a videogame adaptation that operates in an unusually close and subservient intertextual relationship with its source, one that justifies itself by embracing and highlighting its secondary status.

Where *Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* attempts to resolve the anxieties presented by videogame adaptations of Shakespeare by consistently redirecting the player's attention back to the play, *Hamlet, or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement* (Galanin 2010) attempts to avoid them entirely by embracing the traditionally loose intertextual relationship that videogame adaptations often have with their source. The 2010 videogame *Hamlet*, created and published by Denis Galanin, uses the title and key characters from the classic play to contextualise its gameplay, but discards almost every other element of its narrative. Rather than being a conflicted and introspective prince, Hamlet is presented as a straightforward swashbuckling young hero, though he is taken out of action early in the game when the player character's time machine lands on him. The player, as an unnamed time traveller, must then accomplish what the now incapacitated Hamlet cannot—rescue Hamlet's love interest Ophelia from his evil uncle Claudius. Numerous science fiction elements are introduced into the narrative and familiar characters are encountered along the way, though in very different forms. Polonius is reimagined as a malevolent alien, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the captains of a giant space octopus and Laertes is a brutal giant who guards the entrance to Claudius's secret lair. The gameplay largely consists of the player solving a linear sequence of single screen puzzles, punctuated by the occasional 'boss fight' against one or more of the key characters.

In contrast to *Hamlet: a Murder Mystery*, the narrative of the 2010 *Hamlet* does not reference or pay homage to the source text in any particular way, nor does it make an attempt to interactivise any iconic scenes or moments from the play. In fact, it has so little in common with the play's structure, characterisation, or themes that it would be difficult to argue that it even operates as an absurdist

parody or satire. By creating its own, almost entirely distinct narrative, the game largely avoids engaging with the cultural weight and expectations typically applied to adaptions of *Hamlet*, but this lack of a substantial relationship with its source raises the question of why it is framed as adaptation of the play at all. The answer can possibly be found in the videogame's subtitle: *or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement*. This tongue-in-cheek subtitle indicates a connection to an older model of gaming—a throw-back to the slow-paced, humorous, puzzle-focused adventure games that were popular in the 1990s. In both its style of gameplay, visuals and title, the game seeks to connect itself to the past, to a classic gaming tradition that is implied to be superior to contemporary design and trends. The title *Hamlet* then, and the use of familiar Shakespearean characters, is not so much an evocation of the specific play and its narrative as it is an evocation of the idea of Shakespeare as a symbol or exemplar of an older (usually superior) tradition of storytelling. *Hamlet, or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement* offers another example of how 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' can be used to translate the present into the past.

5. Narrative Interactivity in Videogame Adaptations of *Hamlet*

In contrast to the largely linear structures of *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* and *Hamlet, or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement*, in which the player moves between non-interactive narrative segments and interactive gameplay, the two more recent videogame adaptations of *Hamlet* employ what might be broadly defined as 'branching' narrative structures. A branching narrative structure allows players to directly shape the videogame's narrative by choosing between different options for its direction or development, or by funnelling them into different pathways when they succeed or fail at gameplay tasks. This in turn may create further narrative branches until the player arrives at a conclusion (Rouse III 2001). In the branching structures of *To Be or Not to Be* (North 2015) and *Elsinore* (Golden Glitch Studios 2019), the player is positioned as making choices that actively construct their own individualised version of a *Hamlet* narrative. The structure of both games encourages the player to repeatedly return to the beginning or checkpoints to explore other options and branches, rather than being content with any single conclusion. Rather than discrete and separable gameplay tasks, such as the puzzles and fights from the 1997 and 2010 videogame *Hamlets*, these adaptations aim to interactivise the narrative structure of the play itself. Because these games require the player to be an active party in repeated reconstructions and rewritings of the narrative of the classic play, they present more complex and potentially transgressive models of the intertextual relationship between source and adaptation than found in the first two examples. At one level, the idea of the player constructing their own version of the narrative, which may be potentially framed as superior within the videogame context, is at odds with the reverence that is typically afforded to 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' even in experimental and oppositional adaptations. Derrida argues that the narratives of Shakespeare's plays are their essential spectral quality, as their complexity and openness to a multitude of perspectives allows them to speak across different time periods and contexts (Derrida 1994). Therefore performances and adaptations of Shakespearean plays tend to preserve the structure of their narratives, with new commentaries being typically introduced through their recontextualization, rather through any essential changes to their progression and outcome (Calbi 2013). Indeed, while both the 1997 and 2010 videogame adaptations of *Hamlet* provide the player with alternative versions of the iconic narrative, they do so in ways that preserve the primacy and importance of the original—as they do not require the player to actively choose (and therefore potentially prefer) the alternative. At another level, however, both *To Be or Not to Be* and *Elsinore* expand upon the complexity of the original play by demanding that the player interactively engage with its narrative as the primary gameplay mechanic. This allows them to emphasise and explore the ludic nature of the play itself, with its multiple layers of commentary and performance and convergences of characters and plotlines. Furthermore, the focus on rewinding and replaying the 'time' of the *Hamlet* story potentially allows for a more explicit engagement with the particular spectral

quality that Derrida identifies in the play, where the boundaries between past, present and future are blurred and intertwined.

Of the four adaptations, Ryan North's *To Be or Not to Be* takes the most overtly parodic approach towards *Hamlet*, humorously emphasising throughout almost every narrative choice and branch, the implausibility of the play's plot, the seemingly irrational actions of its characters, and the sexism and misogyny directed towards the only named female characters: Ophelia and Gertrude. In its introduction, *To Be or Not to Be* comically displaces the source play, with the opening narration claiming that it is in fact the original text rather than an adaptation and that Shakespeare had plagiarised it in order to write *Hamlet*. While this is tongue-in-cheek, it offers an interesting inversion of the typical hierarchy or binary that is supposed to exist between adaptation and source (Hutcheon 2014), claiming primacy for the adaptation and regulating the source work to a dependent category. While obviously part of the videogame's humour, this also provides an imaginative space in which to assert the pleasures and values of its particular mode of gameplay—the choices made by the player and their construction of an entertaining narrative—while still maintaining a strong intertextual relationship with the original work. Furthermore, it emphasises the creative value of adaptation as a practice by noting that Shakespeare's now iconic plays draw upon, remix or even outrightly plagiarise older plays, poems, and histories. This displacement of the assumed primacy of the 'original' text, underscores Calbi's argument that Shakespearean adaptations cannot be approached as straightforward re-representations of 'fixed and stable entity' (Calbi 2013, p. 7). Adaptations inevitably shape and inform the approaches to their sources and may periodically or permanently displace them: it is impossible to entirely distinguish a work from its adaptation (Kidnie 2009). As Calbi puts it, 'the Thing "Shakespeare" ' . . . cannot be entirely separated from its afterlife' (Calbi 2013, p. 18). Shakespeare's works, as often disputed textual reproductions of performances that were themselves adaptations and remediations of older narratives, are governed by a logic of iterability. ' . . . a phantom's return is, each time, another different return on a different stage' (Derrida and Stiegler 2002, p. 24). The humorous way in which *To Be or Not to Be* frames itself as the primary and original text works to underscore the spectrality of reproduction, which cannot be reduced to a 'linear succession of before and after' (Derrida 1994, p. 48), but where each iteration is inevitably intertwined with the iterations that precede and succeed it.

Within its branching story structure, which allows the player to experience and fluidly move between multiple alternative 'performances' or iterations of *Hamlet*, *To Be or Not to Be* preserves and identifies the familiar story-beats of Shakespeare's narrative as a potential path for the player to follow. It does so using the pretence that the choices in the game which align with Prince Hamlet's actions in the play were the choices that Shakespeare chose to adapt from the 'original' choose-your-own-adventure novel, once again underscoring the inverted relationship that the game presents between adaptation and source. The *Hamlet* of Shakespeare is presented as a reduced and diluted adaptation rather than as a revered original text. Furthermore, this pathway through the game is frequently derided as a sub-optimal and inefficient form of play, rather than a true or ideal approach. The player is constantly mocked for making these choices, which the narration variously characterises as irrational, selfish, misogynistic, or simply stupid. Hamlet's poor decisions throughout the narrative are repeatedly pointed out: from the convoluted plan to entrap Claudius, to the senseless murder of Polonius, to the decision to enter a duel with Laertes. There is a metatextual edge to much of this derisive commentary, with the player being told to kill Hamlet's uncle quickly 'or otherwise people might think your tragic flaw is indecisiveness', or being told that the narrator will just assume that the player controlling Hamlet is opting to feign madness during one sequence in the narrative 'because that's the only way any of this makes sense'. The player is often implored to explore other options as they progress, which generally revolve around telling other characters what is going on, taking various forms of direct action against Claudius, abandoning the pursuit of revenge, or abandoning the role of Hamlet entirely and choosing to explore the narrative from the perspective of another character, such as Ophelia or the ghost of Hamlet senior. Many of these result in seemingly absurd developments, such as Hamlet recruiting Ophelia to train as a ninja to assassinate Claudius, Hamlet senior becoming a ghost marine

biologist after failing to communicate with his son, or Horatio rendezvousing with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's commandeered pirate ship to dispatch Fortinbras's invading army with a barrage of cannon-fire. The tone of the narration, however, indicates that none of these outcomes are necessarily any more absurd, convoluted, or outlandish than the familiar plot of the play. Transposing the events of *Hamlet* into the traditionally wry and detached second person voice of the choose-your-own-adventure narrative provides the player with a different, ironic appreciation of the play's complexity, emphasising the bizarre behaviour of the characters, the coincidences, the outlandish developments and oversights that lead to its tragic denouement.

In addition to the shift in perspective that is encouraged by the interactive narrative, much of the humour of the game is derived from understanding or filtering the events and characters of *Hamlet* through the conventions of videogame design, particularly through the ways in which the emotional or psychological substance of the play is represented using points and statistics. When the player experiences the scene in which Hamlet learns that his father was murdered by his uncle and receives the quest to 'Kill Claudius', what is emphasised is the straight-forward promise that the quest is worth 3500 experience points (which the player is assured is a lot) rather than the dramatic horror of Hamlet's discovery. Similarly, if the player follows the familiar narrative and chooses to be cruel to Ophelia then they are told that her love has taken '-1 damage'. These elements of gameplay and narration operate as a form of 'counter-signing' where the remnants of Shakespeare's language and narrative are remixed with the languages of other media (Burt 2008). While this is simply amusing when first encountered, this counter-signing eventually creates a disorienting effect, when the old media uncannily overlays with new media and is reappraised through it. Repeated play of *To Be or Not to Be* provides the sense that the absurdity is generated not simply through the application of videogame conventions and concepts to *Hamlet*, but through the ways in which the familiar and iconic narrative of *Hamlet* fails to function as a 'good' videogame narrative. The faults in its storytelling logic that would likely frustrate a player are repeatedly pointed out, as is the lack of expected player-character agency and direct problem-solving. At almost every major juncture in the narrative, the player is presented with the option of simply killing Claudius (which is usually easily accomplished and rewarded with a happy ending), and the tone of the narration becomes increasingly frustrated if the act is repeatedly deferred. Within the framework of the game, the multiplicity of options available to the player and their ability to expand and redirect the scope of various character arcs and storylines are used to humorously critique the familiar narrative of *Hamlet* as limited, inconsistent and occasionally incoherent by videogame standards. Through its engagement with 'the Thing "Shakespeare"'—its translation of the past into the contemporary medium of the videogame—*To Be or Not to Be* rejects the assumed superiority of older traditions of storytelling and canonical texts. Its counter-signing parody of *Hamlet* can be read as an assertion of the value of the interactive structures of videogames and their ability to afford the player agency within their narratives. Within the structure of *To Be or Not to Be*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is framed as a wan spectre that haunts the more vibrant interactive production. Rather than operating as an authorising original text, it is constructed as a secondary work which reduces the complex multitude of potential '*Hamlets*' down to a singular and unsatisfying storyline. At one level, this displacement of the original can be taken as an indication of the general remedial promise that new media is often invested in. At another, it also embraces the creative potential of adaptations that deliberately distance themselves from their sources, avoiding the authority that is typically conferred through the appearance of fidelity. Jamie Sherry argues that this can lead to more multifarious and innovative works and a richer dialogue around literary adaptations in film (Sherry 2012). *To Be or Not to Be* potentially expands this approach to videogame adaptations as well, by playfully rejecting the primary status of its source.

Where *To Be or Not to Be* uses its interactive narrative structure to satirise *Hamlet* and dispute the play's assumed superiority as a text, the isometric adventure game *Elsinore* by Golden Glitch Studios provides a multi-faceted consideration of how a branching narrative might reframe perspectives on the classic play. In *Elsinore*, players take control of the character Ophelia and explore the setting—the castle

Elsinore and its surroundings—from her perspective, interacting with major and minor characters with the option to either observe or participate in events as they unfold. However, the player's participation in the narrative is abruptly cut short at the point in the narrative where Ophelia traditionally exits the play. After Polonius is murdered by Hamlet, Ophelia is assassinated by an unknown assailant and her death is staged to look like a suicide by drowning. At this point the game's central conceit is introduced—Ophelia wakes up several days before her murder and the player may attempt to prevent it and the tragic outcome of the original narrative by directing Ophelia's interactions with the other characters in the castle. This proves to be harder than it initially appears—simply telling characters about their futures will cause them to believe that Ophelia is mad and return the player to their starting point. Similarly, pre-emptively confirming to Hamlet that Claudius has murdered Hamlet's father will see him take his vengeance earlier, but this will also leave the castle open to invasion by Fortinbras. Attempting to find better outcomes involves exploration and experimentation. Based on the player's choices, certain events from the narrative will or will not occur in any given playthrough, and their presence or absence will result in unforeseen consequences at a later stage. Informing Laertes that Claudius had murdered the former king means that he will remain in the castle to protect Ophelia from assassination, but this option will also afford him the opportunity to murder Hamlet. Convincing Polonius that the royal family have no respect for him means that he will decline to spy on Hamlet for Claudius but also eventually results in his suicide. Knowledge that is gained in one playthrough can then be applied to affect different outcomes when the timeline is reset.

In basing its principal gameplay mechanic around the manipulation of time, *Elsinore* provides the most overt and thoughtful engagement with the spectral qualities of *Hamlet* as identified by Derrida. *Hamlet* is a play where the present is infected by the past in the form of the spectre that puts the narrative in motion, where the indecisive protagonist suspends and repeats time to forestall an inevitably tragic future. It is a play in which 'the time is out of joint' (Act 1, Scene 5), where, as Helen Cixous observes, characters and events come 'too early, too late, never at the right time' (Cixous 1997, p. 56). In *Elsinore*, the ability to repeat, rewind and alter the flow of time allows the player to unpackage the cause-and-effect relationships between characters and events that result in the tragic outcome of the classic narrative, and explore the multitude of alternative timelines that might be created through their various interventions. Understanding how different timelines can be created requires the player to expand their focus beyond the figure of Hamlet himself, who is framed as one causal element among many within the structure of *Elsinore's* narrative. Alongside Hamlet's existential crisis, other characters are presented as dealing with issues that arise from their ethnic, gender and sexual identities, or histories of familial abuse and neglect. While the choices and the commentary in *To Be or Not to Be* are presented in a way that simply mocks Hamlet's indecisiveness and myopia, *Elsinore* frames his crisis as a component of a larger mystery. Hamlet can still act cruelly, insensitively or murderously at various points in the narrative, but the player's investigations may also help to create parallels and points of connection with the turmoil of other characters in ways that lead him to make amends or to develop maturity. Rather than rejecting or deriding the themes of the original narrative, the interactive elements of *Elsinore* allow them to be applied more broadly, as the player uncovers the internal conflict and uncertainty that also permeates the lives of the surrounding characters. By exerting their agency to link the storylines and experiences of Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude, Bernardo and others, the player creates new possibilities within the narrative. In this sense, the game expands beyond the basic narrative of the play and its focus on the prince's dilemma to create a vivid sense of the larger world around it, a movement that Hutcheon identifies as an important feature in videogame adaptations (Hutcheon 2014).

As the player explores the different possible timelines, it becomes clear that, much like the original play, this is a narrative that is about the difficulty of determining a course of action. Where Hamlet is stalled as a character due to his uncertainty and trepidation, both Ophelia and the player themselves becomes trapped by the ever-expanding multitude of interdependent choices available to them, where each playthrough its haunted by their awareness of alternative timelines—the possible future

outcomes that they have experienced in past play. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is dominated by a sense of 'imminence' from its very first Act, with the guardsmen on the battlements waiting for the return of the spectral king, and this continues throughout (Wilson 2007). Hamlet prevaricates in the face of the awful future he is moving towards, and the structure of the play anticipates Fortinbras' climatic arrival in Act Five. Similarly, in *Elsinore*, the player's choices are increasingly dominated and constricted by their awareness of what is coming. Each repetition further populates their timeline with future events that may occur because of their action or inaction. As the player is repeatedly returned to their starting position, their condition is explicitly compared to the ghost of Hamlet senior, who is trapped in Limbo and condemned to return to haunt the castle each night. The looping, repetitious gameplay of *Elsinore* mirrors the ways in which the past repeatedly returns to inflect the present in *Hamlet*, from the spectral presence of the late king and the re-enactment of his murder, to Fortinbras's invasion to avenge his own father's death, to the conclusion of the play that sees Horatio preparing to retell its narrative as Hamlet's body is born to the stage. Of all the videogame adaptations of *Hamlet*, *Elsinore* is the one that most explicitly addresses the spectrality of the play, exploring the 'out-of-jointness' of its time through gameplay.

As the game continues through repeated variations on the familiar *Hamlet* narrative, the player is gradually made aware that there is no ideal or optimal outcome for them to discover. Every potential ending will result in death or unhappiness for at least some of the characters they have come to know at Elsinore. The player eventually discovers that Ophelia has been trapped in a time-loop by the performer that Hamlet had invited to the castle. This figure is reminiscent of the Player King in Tom Stoppard's (1967) postmodern deconstruction of *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*)—a supernatural director or puppet-master who is determined to ensure every potential outcome of the narrative is tragic or bloody in some way. Deprived of the expected videogame ability to definitively solve or 'win' in a scenario, the player is left to decide what kind of tragedy they are willing to accept as a conclusion to the narrative. This ghostly playmaster, who refuses to allow the characters to escape the structure of the narrative and insists upon some variation of an unhappy ending, could be taken as a literalisation of 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' and the power and influence it wields over the various permutations and performances of Shakespeare's plays. Like the Player King in Stoppard's play, the playmaster in *Elsinore* explicitly demands a bloody outcome because that is what is expected from a Shakespearean tragedy. However, unlike the protagonists of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, neither the player nor Ophelia is constructed as being helpless or passive in the face of Shakespeare's narrative. Rather they are challenged to apply their own ethical judgement in arriving at an ending of their choosing. The various possible endings of *Elsinore* present players with a 'wicked problem' as defined by Miguel Sicart. According to Sicart, a wicked problem in a videogame is one where there is no clearly preferable outcome or obvious reward. Sicart argues that these types of problems are valuable because they potentially provide players with the opportunity for growth and self-knowledge (Sicart 2013). The player in *Elsinore* then is afforded the modern interactivity and agency expected in a videogame, but unlike the player in *To Be or Not to Be*, they are not free to entirely shake off or reject 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' and weight of the literary tradition that it embodies. The translation of past into present still demands they face a wicked problem like the one that torments Hamlet in the classic narrative, and which may result in a similar kind of indecisiveness and prevarication in the player, until they are ready to decide on an outcome. Allowing the player a level of interactive agency within the narrative of *Hamlet* does not result in simplification or parody in this game, but rather it is used to demonstrate how the themes, emotive experience and subject of the play can persist across a range of scenarios, even when basic structure of the story is changed. *Elsinore's* engagement with the spectral qualities of Shakespeare emerges though the ways in which it manages the need for interactivity in a videogame format—via the player's ability to manipulate and alter the 'out of joint' time of the narrative—against the expectations that surround Shakespeare's work and *Hamlet* in particular.

On a final note, the writer and game designer Jane Jensen suggests that one of the problems of branching narratives with multiple endings is that players will almost inevitably decide that one of

the endings is 'best' (typically one that results from skillful or exhaustive forms of play) and will focus on the path towards it in a way that can overlook the multi-linear experience offered by the game (Jensen 2000). *Elsinore* subverts this expectation, however, in a way that fully embraces the spectral qualities of its source material. The secret (but not necessarily desirable) ending to *Elsinore* is revealed if the player unlocks but ultimately elects to reject all the game's tragic endings. This final ending, which results from the player's refusal to commit to one of the distinct end-game states, results in Ophelia choosing to sacrifice herself and remain trapped in the playmaster's time-loop forever, condemned to perpetually repeat the events of the *Hamlet* narrative. In this sense, the game acknowledges and replicates the looping structure of its source, where the ghost king's exhortation to 'remember me' in Act One is mirrored in Hamlet's plea for Horatio to live on and preserve his memory in Act Five, and the play ends on the cusp of its own retelling (Wilson 2007). That the play should end with the anticipation of its own reperformance and adaptation encapsulates its spectral quality as identified by Derrida. Its iconic status and longevity are the result of its capacity for perpetual recontextualization (Derrida 1994). Like the ghost that sets its narrative in motion, the play is eternally recurring and unstuck in time. This secret 'ending' of *Elsinore* then, offers a ludic acknowledgement of the hauntological nature of *Hamlet*, using the infinite replayability of videogames to capture the reproducibility and iterability that are the defining features of the play.

6. Conclusions

The various adaptations of *Hamlet* discussed in this paper offer a range of potential approaches to 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' and the weight of its spectral influence through the videogame medium. *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: a Murder Mystery* combines the scholar-making and drama-making categories of Shakespeare game identified by Bloom to subordinate itself to the past, using its gameplay to redirect the player to the original text. *Hamlet or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement* eschews a deep or sophisticated engagement with its source narrative, but rather evokes 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' as a representation of the past and a revered storytelling tradition. *To Be or Not to Be* uses its interactive narrative structure to playfully dispute the assumed primacy of the classic play and invert the conventional hierarchy between source and adaptation. *Elsinore* uses the gameplay conventions of rewinding and replaying time to explore the nature and experience of choice and explicitly address the play's spectral nature. Though they vary in their approach and sophistication, all of these games engage at some level with the hauntological qualities that Derrida identifies in both the play itself and 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' more generally—the capacity to translate the past into the present and the present into the past. While aspects of this movement may seem counterintuitive, irreverent, or untrue to common understandings of the essential spirit of Shakespearean texts, it may be important to their continued relevance and longevity. As Mark Thornton Burnett argues Shakespeare can only be kept alive 'beyond the parameters of elite culture' (Burnett 2007, p. 112) in 'environments of disorientation and displacement' (p. 113). The interactive structures of videogames, as demonstrated by *To Be or Not to Be* and *Elsinore* in particular, may provide this necessary 'disorientation and displacement', particularly with regard to the ability that they can afford to their players to explore, revise and expand upon the classic narratives.

While there is already a small but significant literary tradition of revisionist approaches to Shakespeare—such as the play *Ophelia Thinks Harder* (Betts 1994), a feminist rewriting of *Hamlet*, and the novel *the Tragedy of Arthur* (Phillips 2011), which constructs a family drama around an (invented) apocryphal history play—the interactive nature of videogames potentially offers a means for more radical interventions in these narratives. As the character Chole observes when she and her friend break away from the established text of the *Tempest* and create their own performance in *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*:

> We ended up creating a new story together on stage. A much better story, because this one ends with the two of us escaping the island and sailing off into the sunset together. Take that, Shakespeare.

It is a 'better story' in this instance because it helps the characters to resist the patriarchal authority represented by Shakespeare as a 'dead white man' in the game, and also because the player takes an active role in developing it, via the performance choices that they make for Chloe. Similarly, every ending in *To Be or Not to Be* congratulates the player for creating a 'better story than Shakespeare' implying that any story they create via their agency is the 'better' story, because it offers something original and new rather than simply repeating the static source narrative. The secret ending of *Elsinore* results in Ophelia being trapped in an endless succession of adaptations of the classic *Hamlet*, and this can be read as a rebuke for the player's failure to determine their own solution to the narrative's 'wicked problem' and take ownership of it by choosing the ending that they personally believe to be best. The narrative and language of Shakespeare's works are often reverentially preserved in adaptation because, as Derrida observes, they are 'spectrally' open to recontextulisation (Derrida 1994). There is also, however, a transgressive and cathartic pleasure to be found in rewriting these canonical literary texts. Rejecting the authority of the original narratives can lead to the development of individualised meanings and commentaries for both players and characters. Derrida notes in *Specters of Marx*, that new media 'spectralises'—it does not work to banish or erase the past but creates new forms of dialogue with it (Derrida 1994, p. 51). Following from this, Calbi argues that experimental and oppositional adaptations in emergent screen media often demonstrate and explore the spectrality of the plays, disrupting the expectations and reverence associated with 'the Thing "Shakespeare"' as a way of blurring or disputing the expected hierarchy between original and adaptation, past and present. Therefore, this movement towards interactivity and player agency in videogame adaptations of Shakespearean plays should not be taken as a simple rejection or mockery of the past tradition represented by Shakespeare. It rather offers new ways of recontextualising Shakespearean narratives and exploring their contemporary relevance. The videogame titles considered in this paper offer new modes of commentary on both *Hamlet* and 'the Thing Shakespeare' itself through their challenging and occasionally transgressive remediations of the classic play into interactive formats.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

2K Marin. 2013. *Bioshock Infinite*. PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360. Novato: 2K Games, Ltd.

Aarseth, Espen. 2006. The culture and Business of Crossmedia Productions. *Popular Communication* 4: 203–11. [CrossRef]

Automata UK. 1984. *Deus Ex Machina*. ZX Spectrum, MSX, Commodore 64, Android, iOS, Ouya, PC, Linux, Mac OS. Portsmouth: Automata UK.

Best, Michael. 2011. Shakespeare on the Internet and in Digital Media. In *The Edinburgh Companion to Shakespeare and the Arts*. Edited by Ramona Wray, Adrian Streete and Mark Thornton Burnett. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Betts, Jean. 1994. *Ophelia Thinks Harder*. Wellington: Women's Play Press.

Bloom, Gina. 2015. Videogame Shakespeare: Enskilling Audiences through Theater-Making Games. *Shakespeare Studies* 43: 114–27.

Boehm, Aaron. 2019. 'Alien: Isolation' Turns 5 Years Old—Why it's a Perfect Adaptation. *Bloody Disgusting*. October 7. Available online: https://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3587564/based-hit-film-alien-isolation-perfect-adaptation/ (accessed on 8 June 2020).

Branagh, Kenneth. 1996. *Hamlet*. Beverly Hills: Castle Rock Entertainment.

Burnett, Mark Thornton. 2007. *Filming Shakespeare in the Global Marketplace*. Houndsmill: Palgrave.

Burt, Richard. 2008. *Medieval and Early Modern Film and Media*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

Calbi, Maurizo. 2013. *Spectral Shakspeares*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

Cameron, James, David Giler, and Walter Hill. 1986. *Aliens*. Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment.

Capcom. 2006. *Dead Rising*. PC, Xbox 360. Vancouver: Capcom.

Cassidy, Scott Brendan. 2011. The Videogame as Narrative. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 28: 292–306. [CrossRef]

Castronova, Edward. 2007. *Arden 1: The World of William Shakespeare*. PC. Bloomington: Indiana University.

Cixous, Helene. 1997. *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*. London: Routledge.

Computer Artworks. 2002. *The Thing*. PC, PlayStation 2, Xbox. Los Angeles: Black Label Games.

Cornfield, Li, Victoria Simon, and Jonathan Sterne. 2018. Legitimating Media: Shakespeare's Awkward Travels through Videogames and Twitter. *Communication Culture & Critique* 11: 418–35.

Creative Assembly. 2014. *Alien Isolation*. PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One. Tokyo: Sega.

Dansky, Richard. 2014. Screw Narrative Wrappers. *Gamasutra*. June 23. Available online: https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/RichardDansky/20140623/219615/Screw_Narrative_Wrappers.php (accessed on 9 October 2020).

Deck Nine. 2017. *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*. PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Linux, Android, MacOS, iOS. Tokyo: Square Enix.

Derrida, Jacques. 1994. *Specters of Marx*. London: Routledge.

Derrida, Jacques, and Bernard Stiegler. 2002. *Echographies of Television. Filmed Interviews*. Oxford: Polity and Blackwell.

EA Redwood Shores. 2003. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. PC, PlayStation 2, Game Boy Advance, GameCube, Xbox, Mobile, OS X. Redwood City: EA Games.

Eurocom. 2007. *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*. Burbank: Disney Interactive Studios.

Frasca, Gonzalo. 2003. Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology. In *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Edited by Mark J. P Wolf and Bernard Perron. London: Taylor and Francis Group, pp. 221–35.

Galanin, Denis. 2010. *Hamlet, or the Last Game Without MMORPG Elements, Shaders, and Product Placement*. PC, iOs, Android. Yekaterinburg: Denis Galanin.

Golden Glitch Studios. 2019. *Elsinore*. PC, Linux, MacOS. Seattle: Golden Glitch Studios.

Hutcheon, Linda. 2014. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Milton Park: Taylor and Francis Group Ltd.

Jensen, Jane. 2000. *Game Design: Secrets of the Sages*. Indianapolis: Macmillan Publishing, pp. 96–99.

Kaethler, Mark. 2020. What's Past Is Prologue: Rewriting and Interfacing Shakespeare in Life Is Strange: Before the Storm. Paper presented at CSDH-SCHN Conference, London, UK, May 31–June 3; Available online: https://mla.hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:30093/ (accessed on 11 October 2020).

Keogh, Brendan, and Darshana Jayemanne. 2018. "Game Over, Man, Game Over": Looking at Alien in Film and Videogames. *Arts* 7: 43. [CrossRef]

Keogh, Brendan. 2015. Alien Adaptation. *Reverse Shot*. Museum of the Moving Image. May 6. Available online: http://www.reverseshot.org/features/2049/alien_adaptation (accessed on 7 June 2020).

Kidnie, Margaret J. 2009. *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*. London: Routledge.

Kojima Productions. 2008. *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*. PlayStation 3. Tokyo: Konami.

Konami. 2003. *Silent Hill 3*. PlayStation 2. Tokyo: Konami.

Leitch, Thomas. 2012. Adaptation and Intertextuality, or, What isn't Adaptation and What Does it Matter? In *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation*. Edited by Deborah Cartmell. London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., pp. 87–104.

Lucas, George. 1977. *Star Wars*. Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox.

Lucasarts. 1992. *Super Star Wars*. Super NES, Wii (Virtual Console), PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita. Kyoto: Nintendo.

Maxis Redwood Shores. 2004. *The Sims 2*. PC, macOS, Game Boy Advance, GameCube, Nintendo DS, PlayStation 2, Xbox, PlayStation Portable, Java ME. Redwood City: Electronic Arts.

Nae, Andrei. 2017. Miranda Fights Back: Appropriating Shakespeare's *the Tempest* in Rockstar's Stealth Survival Horror *Manhunt 2*. In *Shakespeare 400 in Romania. Papers Commemorating the 400th Anniversary of William Shakespeare's Death*. Edited by Mădălina Nicolaescu, Oana-Alis Zaharia and Andrei Nae. Bucharest: Editura Universității din București, pp. 371–82.

Nae, Andrei. 2019. Shakespeare and the Accumulation of Cultural Prestige in Videogames. *Film and Media Studies* 17: 115–28.

North, Ryan. 2015. *To Be or Not to Be*. PC, iOS. Melbourne: Tin Man Games.

Owen, David. 2010. Aristotle would have admired BioShock while Shakespeare would have played Dragon Age. In Paper presented at the Futureplay '10: Proceedings of the International Academic Conference on the Future of Game Design and Technology, Vancouver, BC, Canada, May 6–7; pp. 207–10.

Pantheon Productions, Inc. 1997. *William Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Murder Mystery*. PC. Paris: EMME Interactive SA.
Peacock, Simon. 2015. *Hamlet: The Videogame (the Stage Show)*, Directed by Simon Peacock. September 3–6, Christchurch: Court Theatre.
Phillips, Arthur. 2011. *The Tragedy of Arthur*. New York: Penguin Random House.
Picard, Martin. 2008. Videogames and their Relationship with Other Media. In *The Videogame Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond*. Edited by Mark J. P. Wolf. Westport: Greenwood Press, pp. 293–301.
Rockstar London. 2008. *Manhunt 2*. PlayStation 2, PlayStation Portable, Wii, PC. New York: Rockstar Games.
Rouse III, Richard. 2001. *Game Design: Theory and Practice*. Plano: Worldwide Publishing Inc.
Rudin, David. 2015. A Videogame Adaptation of Hamlet Has Been Turned Back into a Stage Show. *Kill Screen Daily*. September 2. Available online: https://killscreen.com/previously/articles/videogame-adaptation-hamlet-turned-stage-show/ (accessed on 6 June 2020).
Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2004. Will New Media Produce New Narratives? In *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*. Edited by Marie-Laure Ryan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 337–59.
Scott, Ridley, David Giler, Walter Hill, and Dan O'Bannon. 1979. *Alien*. Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment.
Shakespeare Country. 2010. *Romeo Wherefore Art Thou?* PC, Android. Stratford-on-Avon: Shakespeare Country.
Sherry, Jamie. 2012. Paratextual Adaptation: Heart of Darkness as Hearts of Darkness via Apocalypse Now. In *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation*. Edited by Deborah Cartmell. London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., pp. 374–90.
Sicart, Miguel. 2013. *Beyond Choices*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Square Co Ltd. 2000. *Final Fantasy IX*. PlayStation, iOS, Android, PC, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch, Xbox One. Tokyo: Square Co., Ltd.
Stainless Steel Studios. 2001. *Empire Earth*. PC. Los Angeles: Sierra Entertainment, Inc.
Stobbart, Dawn. 2018. Adaptation and New Media: Establishing the Videogame as an Adaptative Medium. In *The Routledge Companion to Adaptation*. Edited by Katja Krebs, Eckart Voigts-Virchow and Dennis A. Cutchins. London: Routledge, pp. 382–89.
Stoppard, Tom. 1967. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. London: Faber & Faber.
Timplalexi, Eleni. 2018. Shakespeare in Digital and Virtual Worlds. *Multicultural Shakespeare* 18: 129–44. [CrossRef]
Trilobyte. 1993. *The 7th Guest*. PC, CD-I, MacOS, iOS, Linux. Irvine: Virgin Interactive Entertainment.
Trilobyte. 1995. *The 11th Hour*. PC, CD-I, MacOS, iOS, Linux. Irvine: Virgin Interactive Entertainment.
Vogt, Ryan. 2013. Can a Video Game Make a Dude Like Me Want to Read *Pride and Prejudice*? *Slate*. November 6. Available online: https://slate.com/technology/2013/11/stride-prejudice-can-an-endless-runner-game-make-me-want-to-read-jane-austen.html (accessed on 15 June 2020).
Wells, Gregory. 2016. Shakespeare's Influence on Video Game Violence: Death and Gore in *Titus Andronicus*. *Gamasutra*. September 2. Available online: https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/GregoryWells/20160209/265404/Shakespeares_Influence_on_Video_Game_Violence_Death_and_Gore_in_Titus_Andronicus.php (accessed on 10 June 2020).
Westwood Studios. 1992. *Dune 2*. PC, Amiga, RISC OS, Genesis/Mega Drive. Irvine: Virgin Games.
Wiese, Matthew. 2009. The rules of horror: Procedural adaptation in Clock Tower, Resident Evil, and Dead Rising. In *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*. Edited by Bernard Perron. Jefferson: McFarland, pp. 238–66.
Wilson, Richard. 2007. When the Cock Crew: The Imminence of *Hamlet*. *Shakespeare* 3: 1–17. [CrossRef]
Wolf, Mark J. P. 2012. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. New York: Routledge.

arts

MDPI

Article

Empathy and Community in the Age of Refugees: Petzold's Radical Translation of Seghers' Transit

Margarete J. Landwehr

Languages Department, West Chester University, West Chester, PA 19383, USA; MLandwehr@wcupa.edu

Received: 13 September 2020; Accepted: 10 November 2020; Published: 19 November 2020

Abstract: Petzold's film constitutes a radical translation of Seghers' novel by transforming her tale of political refugees in Vichy France into an existential allegory depicting the fluidity of identities and relationships in a globalized world. The transitory existence of Petzold's war refugee serves as an extreme example of the instability of modern life, which allows spectators to identify and empathize with migrants' unpredictable journeys. Moreover, the director conveys the universality of his protagonist's story by portraying him as an Everyman bereft of distinctive personality traits, by intermingling the past (Seghers' plot) with the present (contemporary settings), and by situating his experiences in non-descript, liminal "non-places." Both thematically and aesthetically, narrative is portrayed as establishing a community in an unstable contemporary world. Like the anti-hero of many modern *Bildungsromane*, Petzold's protagonist fails to develop a stable identity and enduring friendships that anchor him in a community, but he creates his own family of listeners through his storytelling. In a similar vein, the film's voice-over/narrator that bridges the fictional world with that of the audience underscores the film's (and the novel's) central theme: in a world of rapid change and mobility, the individual who may not be able to establish a stable identity or relationships, can create, as a narrator, a community of empathic listeners.

Keywords: transit; migrants; empathy; liminal spaces; *Bildungsroman*; modernity

> Every interpretation is based on displacement, since the interpreter redirects the original object by inserting it into a new frame of reference.
>
> (Andrew 1984, p. 154)

1. Introduction

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said observed: "our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" (Said 181). World wars, conflicts in Southeast Asia, civil wars in Bosnia and Africa, and recent hostilities in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have forced millions of refugees into exile. Our age is distinguished by migrations, diasporas, dislocation, and displacement (Urry 2007, p. 35). Ira Jaffe (2018, p. 136) claims " . . . the world now faces possibly the greatest human migration crisis since the end of World War II, with as many as sixty million people displaced worldwide." In Syria alone, civil war has left at least twelve million people homeless.[1] Numerous reports predict the accelerated uprooting of large populations because of more frequent and intense droughts, flooding, storms, and excessive heat that will result from climate change.

Petzold's film depicts the ultimate loneliness and isolation of refugees frozen in transit and captures the essence of Seghers' realistic story, the existential search for love and identity in an unpredictable,

[1] Cited in (Jaffe 2018, p. 136) from a Washington Post article by Burns and Jeffrey (2015).

hostile world. The novel portrays her experiences while fleeing the German army in Vichy France and while trapped in Marseille until she and her family could obtain travel documents. Born Netty Reiling in Mainz in 1900 into a Jewish family, Anna Seghers (her pen name) married Laszo Radvanzi, a well-known Hungarian Communist, in 1925. She joined the Communist party in 1928 and was arrested by the Gestapo in 1932 for a novel she wrote that warned of the dangers of Nazism. Her books were banned and burned in Germany. In 1934, she immigrated via Zurich to Paris. While in Paris, she wrote her most famous work *The Seventh Cross* that portrays the escape of seven prisoners from a concentration camp. After the Germans invaded northern France in 1940, she fled to Marseille and then to Mexico with her children and husband, who had been released from a camp. In 1947, she moved to the Soviet sector of Berlin (later, East Berlin) where she died in 1983. A stalwart socialist, Seghers was honored in the German Democratic Republic, but also criticized for not speaking out against the repression and excesses of its Communist regime. Her defenders point out that she joined the Communist party when it was viewed as a bulwark against fascism, a crucial detail that illuminates her novel's conclusion.

Regarded as the "godfather" of the contemporary Berlin School of filmmaking, Petzold is the most well-known and commercially successful director of this group. As initially defined by film critics, the Berlin School referred mainly to Thomas Arslan, Christian Petzold, and Angela Schanelec, three graduates of the Deutsche Film-und-Fernsehakademie (the German Film and Television Academy) in Berlin, who began their careers in the 1990s. It now includes a second generation of independent filmmakers. Although the directors themselves do not always identify with this term and there is no group manifesto, there are similarities in their style, which has been described as "minimalist" with reticent, apathetic characters and long takes. Many regard it as a "cinema of drift and alienation" (Lim 2013, p. 90), an apt film style to portray the life of refugees.

Both Seghers' novel and Petzold's film consist of a similar basic plot: In a pizzeria in Marseille, an initially nameless narrator recounts to an anonymous listener the protagonist's brief stay in Paris (after escaping a concentration camp and French Prisoner of War camp), his evasion of German soldiers and French police during his trek from Paris to Marseille, and his attempts to obtain documents to leave France. (The narrator/protagonist in the novel calls himself Seidler, whereas the voice-over narrator in the film is another character, a bartender, who retells the protagonist's story.) While in Paris, he meets his friend Paul Strobel, who asks him to deliver two letters to a fellow writer Weidel. When he arrives at Weidel's apartment, he discovers that the writer has committed suicide[2] and takes his possessions, including an unfinished manuscript and Mexican transit visas for Weidel and his wife Marie. From the letters, he learns that Marie abandoned her husband, but now wishes to reunite with him as Weidel has a visa that will enable her to leave Europe.[3] When he attempts to return Weidel's transit visas at the Mexican consulate in Marseille, he is mistaken for the writer and takes advantage of the confusion by claiming Weidel as his pen name.[4] Eventually he meets Marie, whom he doesn't immediately inform of her husband's death, and falls in love with her. Marie's futile search for a phantom husband, who, she believes, is residing in Marseille, constitutes a central metaphor in both the novel and film. Although his affection for Marie appears reciprocated, their friendship appears tenuous, at best. The disillusioned protagonist gradually realizes that she doesn't love him and is using him, as she had hoped to exploit Weidel, to help her obtain the required travel papers. He

---

[2] Dubrowski (2013, p. 143) believes that Seghers was commemorating the suicide of the writer Ernst Weiss, who lived close to her Paris hotel. The hotel manager informed her of his death. The death of Seghers' compatriot, the Jewish intellectual Walter Benjamin, who also spent time in Marseilles to obtain travel documents, may also have inspired this part of her novel. As the film critic Manohla Dargis (2019) notes, "Benjamin haunts Petzold's movie, including in a shot of a sign for Rue des Pyrenees. Benjamin ended up fleeing across the Pyrenees Mountains and killed himself in Spain."

[3] The motive for Weidel's death of despair is more explicit in the novel than the film. His suicide apparently results from this abandonment and the German occupation of Paris.

[4] In an inverse mirroring of her protagonist's situation, Seghers was able to escape Gestapo agents, who were looking for her in Paris under her writer's pseudonym, and successfully fled Europe by using her husband's last name. See (Romero 1993, p. 26).

decides not to leave with her and gives his documents to her new companion, a doctor. This repetitive pattern of love, abandonment, and unsuccessful reconciliation in Marie's interactions with Weidel and the protagonist depict relationships as transactional: these men are interchangeable for her. Thus, a stable identity does not seem possible in a world in which human bonds are merely functional, rather than personal, intimate, and unique. Moreover, a Kafkaesque bureaucracy at the consulates with their petty, fickle tyrants and sudden chance encounters that can either create or destroy a life underscores the unpredictability of their lives.

After Marie's departure, the stories in the novel and film diverge significantly. This divergence reflects the artists' different historical and social frames of reference and intentions for their works. In both narratives, the *Montreal*, the ship transporting Marie and the doctor to Martinique, sinks; however, the destinies of Seidler and Georg, his counterpart in the film, contrast starkly and underscore the distinct intentions of the novelist and director. If Seghers' plot is anchored in Nazi-occupied France, then Petzold employs her plot to portray the current plight of refugees that serves as an existential parable of contemporary life. On the one hand, Seidler's success in finding a family, work, and a community in the Communist resistance movement embodies not only the typical trajectory of a protagonist in the classical *Bildungsroman*, but also Seghers' utopian vision of a future, just world free of fascism. On the other hand, Petzold portrays Georg in a final freeze-frame without a home or community. Yet, Georg establishes at least one friendship by recounting his life story to a local bartender, the source of the film's voice-over, who retells it to customers and viewers. Thus, although Georg, like the anti-hero of many modernist and contemporary works, has failed to integrate into a community, he has created a community of listeners within the diegetic space (the bartender's café) and nondiegetic space of the audience.

Petzold's cinematic version of Seghers' novel is closer to a translation, as defined by Linda Costanzo Cahir (2008, p. 198), than an adaptation: "'To adapt, is to move *that same entity* (her emphasis) into a new environment. . . . To translate,' in contrast 'to adapt,' is to move a text from one language to another. . . . Through the process of translation a fully new text—*a materially different entity* (her emphasis) is made, one that simultaneously has a strong relationship with its original source, yet it is fully independent from it." Cahir (2008, p. 199) notes that "[e]very act of translation is simultaneously an act of interpretation" in which translators decide what is most crucial, what is of secondary importance, and so on. Thus, film translations "are predicated on a hierarchy of purpose" (200). Borrowing from familiar categorizations of translations (line-by-line, paraphrasing, and imitation), Cahir classifies three distinct types of film translations from literature: (1) literal translation, which reproduces the plot and its details as closely as possible to the original; (2) traditional translation that maintains the overall traits of the book (plot, settings, stylistic conventions), but modifies details; (3) radical translation, "which reshapes the book in extreme and revolutionary ways, both as a means of interpreting the literature and of making the film a more fully independent work" (Cahir 2008, p. 200).

I will argue that Petzold's film constitutes a radical translation of Seghers' story by transforming her tale of political refugees in Vichy France to an existential allegory depicting the instability of identities and relationships in a globalized world. Although the film loosely adheres to the novel's overall plot, the distinct conclusions of the two works emphasize the artists' contrasting world views: Seidler establishes himself in a community, whereas Georg finds himself in limbo in a present-day Marseille café without family or friends. If Seghers' utopian ending reveals her idealistic belief in a future world of equality and peace, then Georg's isolation underscores the rootlessness of refugees that brings into stark relief the transitoriness and volatility of contemporary life.

Instead of meticulous fidelity to Seghers' plot, I contend that Petzold's translation captures the spirit, the thematic and aesthetic intentions of the original text. One major *leitmotif* in the novel is the indifference and callousness towards others' suffering that is also embodied, at least initially, in Seghers' protagonist/narrator Seidler. Eventually, Seidler matures and develops empathy for others by recognizing their common humanity and shared suffering. A second *leitmotif* in the novel is that storytelling can bridge the isolation among individuals and create understanding of others. Seghers'

references to myths, legends, and fairytales that depict existential journeys underscore the universality of Seidler's story. This theme is reflected in the nature of her narrator who engages readers' by appearing to directly address them with his conversational style.

In a similar vein, Petzold conveys the universality of Georg's story by portraying him as an Everyman with whom spectators can identify, by intermingling the past (Vichy France) with the present (contemporary Marseille), and by situating his experiences in non-descript, liminal "non-places." The disembodied voice-over, who addresses an anonymous fictional listener, serves the same role as Seghers' narrator, by addressing spectators. This bridging of Georg's fictional world with that of the audience underscores the film's (and novel's) central theme: in a world of transitory relationships, rapid change, and mobility, the individual whose life is in perpetual flux cannot establish a stable identity, but, as a narrator, can create a community of empathic listeners.

In particular, Petzold transforms Seghers' protagonist into a universal figure who is searching for a home and, thus, underscores the existential aspects that are latent in her narrative. The novel portrays the maturation of a youthful narrator, Seidler, who, like the hero of a classical *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel, must overcome obstacles in his search for a home and purpose in life. In contrast, Petzold, who had contemporary refugees in mind while filming *Transit*, portrays Georg as a cipher. Unlike a protagonist in a realist novel such as Seidler with his distinct personality, Georg, has few distinguishing personality traits. Moreover, Seidler's first-person narration reveals his feelings and reactions to events, and, thus, his development, whereas the voice-over offers an inaccurate account of events that is often contradicted by images and presents an unreliable account of Georg's life. Georg, like a Kafka character, constitutes a blank slate and viewers are (mostly) left to make their own assumptions about his inner life.

A second technique that Petzold employs to create a universal allegory of a common human fate constitutes the intermingling of the past, the Nazi invasion of France (Seghers' plot), and the present with contemporary settings in Marseille. As he reveals, "I don't really like the idea of shooting period pictures, because it's somehow as if you had absolute control of time and space, and that makes things seem as if they're out of a museum" (Romney 2019, p. 4). By situating past events in present-day locales with a figure who embodies the transient state of refugees, the director invents a modern parable of contemporary life. The dislocation of the economic migrant or political refugee serves as the most extreme example of the instability of a world of rapid change and mobility.

A third aspect of the film that emphasizes the existential over the individual in Georg's journey is Petzold's use of non-descript, transitional spaces. Petzold's protagonists, as Marco Abel (2008) observes, are usually in transit, inhabiting "in-between spaces—real and dreamlike—indeed ghostlike spaces . . . " In an interview with Abel (2008), Petzold reveals his interest in transitional spaces that modern capitalism has created and believes that most great narratives, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, are travel narratives whose goal is finding one's home. However, the director's protagonists, "are poorly prepared for modern life" and cannot find community: "It is these people who are pushed out of societies or are put in motion, but they don't even know where to go, where all of this is supposed to lead. They consequently end up in transitional spaces, transit zones where nothingness looms on one side and the impossibility of returning to what existed in the past on the other. These are the spaces that interest me" (Abel 2008). Petzold names these transit zones "no-places," "mobile immobilities," that are ubiquitous in contemporary life: "This unmoving movement, this immobile mobility, I think is something, a place, an uncanny place, that has emerged as a fundamental condition of life in the present: a new form of loneliness of the traveler" (Abel 2008).

Moroever, *Transit* transcends the historical and geographical parameters of the fictional worlds depicted in Petzold's other films. For instance, *Barbara* (2012), *Phoenix* (2014), and *Yella* (2007), which are anchored in particular eras and geographical spaces, all depict female protagonists who are in search of a new identity while in transit from a radically different previous life to a new one. Barbara, a doctor in East Germany, seeks to find a new life with her West German lover by planning an escape to the West. In *Phoenix*, a disfigured concentration camp survivor with a reconstructed face attempts

to reestablish her relationship with a husband after the war. Yella, an ambitious woman who seeks a career in the Federal Republic of Germany after reunification, leaves her East German husband and desires a new life and success in her fantasy of the capitalist West. In contrast, Georg, the protagonist in *Transit*, embodies not only the rootless life of refugees, but also the instability intrinsic to contemporary existence. As Ira Jaffe (2018, p. 137) states: "homelessness for Petzold and his colleagues does not only or necessarily mean lack or loss of a physical home. Rather, it may connote psychological disorientation induced by various global economic developments: altered communication technologies and capital flows, increased income inequality, relocations in order to hold jobs or learn new skills, overlong sojourns in transit spaces or non-places." To sum up, the manipulation of viewers' perception of time and space in the film creates a sense of a collective, existential destiny.

Finally, both artists underscore the universal aspect of their stories by foregrounding their narrative's role in transcending time and space by allowing readers and spectators to share the protagonist's perspective and by blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, which elicits empathy for a common human fate. With his extensive knowledge of German literature, Petzold borrows techniques from German Romanticism such as the use of Romantic irony that acknowledges readers'/viewers' presence, self-reflexive references to the act of narration itself, and a voice-over/narrator that links the diegetic realm of the film with that of the audience.

2. Transformations: Identity and the Modernist *Bildungsroman*

As Edward Said (2001, p. 184) notes, exile is "fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past." With the loss of family, home, community and country, refugees have lost the relationships and places that anchor their identity. Said notes their "need to reassemble an identity," sometimes, through writing. Since the search for a new identity in a rapidly changing world constitutes the central theme of a *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel, this genre serves as an appropriate vehicle to trace the refugee's quest. In order to survive, Seghers' protagonist appropriates another's identity by obtaining a refugee certificate with the name Seidler (2013, *Transit* p. 33). As in a classic *Bildungsroman*, a teleological narrative, in which protagonists mature through love and/or finding a profession, and, consequently, establish a new identity, a social role in a community, Seidler eventually creates a new *persona* for himself both in the personal sphere—he finds a home and work—and a national one—he discovers solidarity with French resistance fighters.

In contrast, Petzold's protagonist, Georg, like the antihero in a modernist *Bildungsroman*, whose anti-linear trajectory ends with failed attempts to assimilate into a community, finds himself alone and belonging nowhere—a common theme in the cinema of Berlin School filmmakers (Abel 78). In an interview with Jaimey Fisher (2013, loc. 3024), Petzold reveals his own sense of rootlessness, "I guess that I do not have a true home" and notes that where he "grew up was a bit like a trailer park" and that he, like most of his protagonists, had "always lived in transit spaces."[5] This lack of a stable home, according to Petzold, contributes to the absence of a solid identity, to the sense that one is "a ghost." The director elaborates that "the ghost is not only about fear but rather this falling out of time and place, not belonging anymore, that is, to be on the margins, to be unemployed, or even to be an unloved child—such people feel themselves to be ghosts" (Fisher 2013, loc. 3319). He adds, "cinema always tells the stories of people who do not belong anymore but who want to belong once again" (Fisher 2013, loc. 3319).

The in/stability of the fictional world determines whether the protagonist can mature and assimilate into society through enduring relationships. Petzold states: "Love stories can create a home for you, and that's what *Transit* is about. . . . that struggle by people who are on the edge, people who are about to become ghosts, and who are fighting that. That's what I call a ghost film. . . . I don't want to lose my

[5] Cited in (Jaffe 2018, p. 135). Jaffe cites interviews with Petzold by Fisher (2013).

job. I don't want this woman or man to leave me. I'm fighting for my love. I'm fighting for the money, I'm fighting for my status, my identity. Because if I don't get it, I'm dead or I disintegrate."[6]

Discussing the crucial disparities between the novel's and film's portrayals of the protagonist within the structural and thematic framework of the classical and modernist *Bildungsroman* will clarify the artists' contrasting contexts and intentions. Karl (von) Morgenstern (1770–1852) coined the term *Bildungsroman* at the dawn of the 19th century (Martini 1991, p. 2). The idea of cultivation (*Bildung*), a well-rounded, aesthetic, moral, rational, and scientific education was rooted in Enlightenment thought and embodied the ideal of an ethical, aesthetic, and cosmopolitan humanity of late 18th-century German culture (Martini 1991, p. 8). The hero of a classical *Bildungsroman*, such as the eponymous protagonist of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, matures into an exemplary individual, whose development is formed through mentors, adversaries, and circumstances. He eventually finds a career, a partner, and a home/land. Morgenstern adds that the depiction of the hero's moral and intellectual growth from its inception to its completion can contribute to the cultivation of its readers as well (Martini 1991, p. 18). Fifty years later, Wilhelm Dilthey's discussion of the genre popularized the term and the *Bildungsroman* became a respected genre in German prose and, later, in European literature.

In *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism and the Fiction of Development*, Jed Esty's analysis of the crucial differences between the classical *Bildungsroman* and the modernist one, provides a valuable framework for this inquiry. Esty (2012, p. 39) states that the classic *Bildungsroman* "aligned nationhood and adulthood" and argues that "adulthood and nationhood served as mutually reinforcing versions of stable identity; they were fixed states of being that gave form and meaning to an otherwise chaotic and unending (or unnarratable) set of personal and social transformations." Moreover, "the *Bildungsroman's* biographical form was for generations yoked to a progressive concept of national destiny" (Esty 2012, p. 24). For example, Wilhelm Meister's life is circumscribed "in the frame of the emergent German nation" (Esty 2012, p. 42). Thus, the "closure" of a classical *Bildungsroman* "happens in the form of adulthood and social reconciliation," of "an interlocking alignment of soul and nation" (Esty 2012, p. 50). Seghers presents this intertwining of personal and collective narratives in her novel: the protagonist's maturation includes his gradual awareness of his solidarity with the French resistance and, by extension, the international Communist movement. Esty (2012, p. 6) claims that this genre underwent a dramatic shift when its social context changed: "the developmental logic of the late *Bildungsroman* underwent substantial revision as the relatively stable temporal frames of national destiny gave way to a more conspicuously global, and, therefore, more uncertain frame of reference. He argues that a linear progression towards maturity is more difficult in an age of globalization: "Modernity is a state of permanent transition. Its most trenchant literary incarnation is, then, the story of endless youth" (Esty 2012, p. 202). If the classical *Bildungsroman* offers "a conventionally linear narrative of cultural adjustment, moral uplift, and social mobility" (Esty 2012, p. 213), then the modernist novel foregrounds "anti-linear and non-teleological elements of the genre" (Esty 2012, p. 212). Thus, the modernist *Bildungsroman* consists of stories of "failed maturity" and portrays "a never-ending story of social transformation within the capitalist world-system" (Esty 2012, p. 213).

Seidler's transformation from a rootless refugee without deep connections to others or a purpose in life to one who becomes part of a community reflects the hero's development in a classical *Bildungsroman*. As Fritz Martini (1991, p. 7) points out, the teleological rhetoric of this traditional novel suggests that "events acquire their meaning when they lead to *one* ending." Although the hero embarks on a journey with many unforeseen twists and turns, the world is stable enough for him to eventually put down roots. Seidler's journey reflects the trajectory of the classical *Bildungsroman* hero as he matures from an irresolute wanderer without close ties, strong convictions, or clear goals to a mature individual with

[6] See the DVD interview in "The Making of Transit."

stable friendships, love, home, and work, and commitment to a cause, the French resistance, when he rediscovers his sense of honor and integrity.

As in a classical *Bildungsroman*, Seidler has mentors who inspire him to live up to his ideals and adversaries who tempt him to abandon them. The writers Paul Strobel and Hermann Achselroth, opportunists who exploit others and desert them, show him how to navigate the bureaucracy of the consulate, but also to regard others merely as a means to an end. When he discovers Paul, whom he hasn't seen since their encounter in Paris, the latter merely looks at him in an "impersonal, detached" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 61) manner and demonstrates no emotion upon hearing that his friend Weidel has died. Seidler states: "You didn't care whether your friend was alive or dead" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 63). Achselroth, the quintessential amoral opportunist, callously forsakes his friends without remorse. When he arrives at "a real crossroads" during the flight from Paris to Marseille, Achselroth abandons his traveling companions without giving notice. Paul recounts how he buys a French military car from its driver and leaves "without even waving good-bye" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 14). This episode foreshadows Seidler's own moral dilemma—to leave France and abandon a boy who loves him, or to stay and risk arrest.

This North African boy and Heinz, a fellow inmate of a French Prisoner of War camp, serve as foils to the narrator's baser instincts and, ultimately, inspire him to act with selflessness and integrity. Seidler serves as a father figure for this child, who is the only one he admits he loves (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 89). He demonstrates his affection for the fatherless boy by playing with him and procuring a doctor when he is sick. Heinz, a Communist, who lost his leg fighting, presumably on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War, exercises a significant influence on Seidler, who is moved by his integrity and fidelity. He states that Heinz "liked the sort of qualities in people that I lacked, that weren't important to me. Back then, at any rate. I'm referring to unconditional loyalty, which, in those days, I considered senseless and boring, dependability, which seemed to me impossible to maintain, and unswerving faith, which seemed to me as childish and useless as dragging banners across endless battlefields (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 68)." Besides friendship, Heinz offers Seidler a rare gift—a rediscovered identity. While regarding his friend, he states: "I suddenly understood what those clear eyes were looking for and almost instantly found again: it was me, myself and nothing else, and I instantly knew, to my enormous relief, that I was still there, that I had not gotten lost . . . I was here and so was Heinz" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 69). At a crucial turning-point in his life, Seidler ascribes Heinz's strength to his faith in his fellow human beings: " . . . this man lived every moment of his existence, even the darkest, convinced that he was never alone, that wherever he was and no matter for how long, he would always find people who were like him. People who'd be there for him . . . " (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 128). This implicit faith in others inspires Seidler to commit a selfless act to help Heinz leave: he gives him the ticket meant for his romantic rival, the doctor, whom he would have eliminated by sending him abroad. This episode marks a crossroads in his maturation from a mere survivor to an honorable man and prefigures his decision to stay in France with his "family," and to commit to the French resistance. Thus, Seidler, who began his incarceration by slapping a Nazi guard, transforms himself when he rediscovers his ideals of love and honor and reconciles these ideals with action, integration into a community.[7]

In contrast, the instability and chaos of the film's contemporary reality, subvert Georg's attempts to establish stable relationships—and the maturation they can bring. (Berlin Cinema directors typically limit the extent of their characters' development (Kopp 2010, p. 291).[8] Like a modernist *Bildungroman's* antihero, Georg's quest is marked by stasis, not progress. Although he loves the boy (called Driss in the film) Georg cannot commit to a new life with him and his mother and does not escape to the mountains with them. Driss leaves without notice and Georg learns of his departure only when

[7] Lutz Winckler (2014, pp. 155–56) makes a similar observation and also discusses Heinz's influence in the protagonist's self-discovery.

[8] Cited in (Miller 2012, p. 56).

he discovers new North African occupants in his old apartment. Heinz, who plays a significant role in shaping Seidler's character and decisions in the novel, appears only briefly in the film. Georg accompanies his wounded friend on a train from Paris to Marseille and discovers that he is dead upon their arrival.

The role of the narrator in each work underscores another crucial difference between the novel and the film. Seghers' first-person narrator/protagonist, whose actual name is never revealed, calls himself Seidler and discloses his thoughts, emotions, and, consequently, his developing character, through his reflections on his experiences. In contrast, the film's (initially) anonymous, disembodied, voice-over narrator[9] offers a sober, second-hand account of Georg's actions and relatively few insights into his thoughts or attitudes towards others. This narrator speculates about Georg's feelings and is, sometimes, inaccurate as his narration often contradicts the action on the screen. Petzold's viewers gain only a few clues regarding Georg's emotions from his behavior that subtly develops from a guarded attitude towards others to an openness and vulnerability that enable him to love. If Seidler establishes a growing intimacy between himself and readers through his revelations, then the voice-over, inspired by Jean-Luc Godard's French New Wave film *Breathless (A bout de Souffle*, 1960*)*,[10] provides, as Petzold states, "a mood and a sense of impermanence."[11] The mostly subdued reactions of Franz Rogowski, the actor who plays Georg, conceals more than reveals of his inner life. In short, Petzold creates an Everyman, a refugee who belongs nowhere. This minimalist approach foregrounds the living conditions of those in exile that are inherent in Seghers' work, although subordinate to Seidler's maturation.

Thus, Petzold portrays the interminable flux of refugees' lives, rather than the development of a single character towards a satisfactory resolution. The constantly changing and unpredictable vicissitudes of their lives are triggered by unforeseen chance events such as sudden arrests, accidents, and deaths, and the shifting of national borders (and citizenships) caused by war. In such a *milieu*, a stable home and identity appear unattainable. As Matthew Miller (2012, p. 71) states, "far from offering any affirmation of *Heimat* (home/homeland), they (Petzold's films) circumscribe its elusiveness." Most of Petzold's characters are in transit, whether escaping political persecution or arrest, or out of economic necessity, and even those who inhabit a post-unification Germany cannot find a secure refuge. As Marco Abel [2013] (2015, p. 78) states:

> ... they (the films) all foreground a problem that defines the condition of life for all his characters: how to imagine and reimagine one's life, and, crucially, fulfill one's desire for belongingness when the conditions of belonging are subject to and subjected by the socioeconomically manufactured need to be in perpetual motion. Petzold cinematically dramatizes this problem in numerous scenes in almost all of his films by featuring characters either driving in their German-engineered cars to and fro through barely defined spaces or restlessly walking without ever arriving ...

The most shocking scene that Petzold inserts into Seghers' plot allows viewers to experience vicariously the sudden, inexplicable, and unpredictable reversals in a refugee's life. A middle-aged Jewish architect, a character in Seghers' novel, whom Georg knows casually from brief encounters in his hotel and the consulate, invites him to a sumptuous, apparently celebratory dinner with champagne in an elegant restaurant. After dinner, they stroll and discuss architecture. Georg offers the woman a cigarette and turns to light himself one. As he looks up, she seems to him (and to us) to have disappeared into thin air. He hears screams and discovers that she has jumped onto the road far below. The abrupt editing creates a lightning-flash interval between the lighting of his cigarette and her disappearance. The sudden, unexpected suicide and its improbably rapid execution trigger a sharp jolt in spectators. There is no obvious indication of the woman's intentions as she appears in good spirits. The transition

---

[9] It appears that the voice-over narrator is the pizzeria's bartender.
[10] See the DVD Petzold interview.
[11] "The Making of Transit."

from a pleasant walk to a sudden leap to death intensifies the sense of an unstable world full of inexplicable, unforeseen tragedies.

Petzold provides viewers with an apt metaphor: the game of soccer, reminiscent (to this viewer) of Peter Handke's use of the metaphor in his novel, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, for spectators' (not always successful) attempts to discern characters' motives, predict their actions, and anticipate the story's plot. While teaching the North African boy Driss how to outwit him (as goalie) and score a goal, Georg instructs him to position his stable leg so it won't reveal the direction of the kick. This episode mirrors Petzold's own sleight of hand in the suicide scene. The woman's casual allusion to the death of the dogs she was supposed to bring to their owners in America and that represent her means of obtaining a travel visa, explains her suicide, but the celebratory manner in which she spends her last evening blinds us to her desperate plan. Viewers and Georg anticipate a positive conclusion to the evening and fail to perceive and anticipate the fatal turn of events. Consequently, spectators experience the refugee's disorientation in a reality of constantly shifting circumstances in which attempts to establish stable friendships are short-circuited by sudden reversals and abrupt departures.

If Seghers' character finds redemption and assimilation into society, Petzold's refugees are not rescued from their isolation, paralysis, and despair. Although the concept of home is portrayed in both works as an unstable entity and both protagonists struggle against harsh circumstances in their quest to find love and a refuge, the difference in their final destination couldn't be starker. Seidler establishes a new identity with love, family, a home, work, and community, whereas Georg finds himself alone, in the final scene, despite his attempts to form bonds with a child and woman he loves. Esty's analysis of Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), a modernist novel of exile that traces the tragic descent of its young protagonist Anna Morgan, who moves from the Caribbean to England, offers a useful paradigm for Georg's plight. Like Georg, Anna "dwells not in the current of progressive time but in a dark, perpetual present of disorientation and disintegration" (Esty 2012, p. 166) and "narrates exile as an unrepairable existential and political gap" (Esty 2012, pp. 166–67). Like Georg, she can't recognize herself "as an integral subject developing continuously in time" (Esty 2012, p. 168), and her situation, reminiscent of Lukacs's transcendental homelessness, constitutes "a pervasive and chronic dislocation from any space" (Esty 2012, pp. 168–69). The freeze-frame shot of Georg suspended in time and space in the final scene alludes to his existential displacement, his external and internal exile.

3. Liminal Spaces, Non-Places, and Fluid Time

Marc Augé elaborates on travelers'/refugees' loss of identity in terms of liminal spaces and an eternal present in *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (2008) that provides a theoretical foundation for discussing these two aspects of the novel and the film. Petzold read Augé's book, which influenced his film *Yella* (Leweke 2013, p. 34). Augé introduces two ways of life—the sedentary and the transitory—as involving different types of spaces that Hellenists distinguished as the realms of two deities: "Hestia symbolizes the circular hearth placed in the centre of the house, the closed space of the group withdrawn into itself . . . ; while Hermes, god of the threshold and the door, but also of crossroads and town gates, represents movement and relations with others" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 47). Auge [1995] (2008, p. 37) designates the realm of Hestia, such as a village or a domestic space, as an anthropological place that is rooted in a foundation narrative for a group and provides a stable history and group identity: " . . . it is the spatial arrangements that express the group identity, (its actual origins are often diverse, but the group is established, assembled and united by the identity of the place) . . . " (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 37). It is a "closed and self-sufficient world" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 38) that provides both a "shared identity" and a social order that bestows a "particular identity" upon individuals (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 42). An anthropological place constitutes a "concrete and symbolic construction of space" as well as "a principle of meaning for the people who live in it . . . " (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 42). Anthropological places have three common traits: they are "places of identity, relations, and history" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 43) that offer internal, relational, and group stability. The French farm in which Seidler finds work, a community, and an identity, contains these traits and illustrates

Auge [1995] (2008, p. 55) claim that a key feature of French sensibility is that identity is rooted in the soil.

Furthermore, the oven of the pizzeria in Seghers' novel serves as a symbol of hearth, stability, and community where people tell their stories. As her protagonist/narrator Seidler remarks to his anonymous listener, he is searching for such a secure place:

> I like watching the open fire, you know, and the way the man hits the dough with his bent wrist. Yes, things like that are the only things in the world I really like. That is to say, I like things that have been and will always be there. You see, there's always been an open fire here, and for centuries they've beaten the dough like that. And if you were to reproach me because I am forever changing and going to different places, then, I'd reply that it's only because I am doing a thorough search for something that is going to last forever.
>
> (Seghers 2013, *Transit* pp. 110–11)

In Petzold's film, the bar in the café/pizzeria with its gold-colored walls serves a similar purpose as Seghers' open fire as a place to tell stories, form friendships, bear witness to others' lives. In the film, the bartender retells Georg's story in the voice-over as listener and witness. The golden colors of Driss's apartment evoke the warmth of a home and an intimate scene (added in the film) between Georg and Driss in which he fixes a radio by soldering a wire with a candle-flame, reveals his paternal feelings for the fatherless boy. A German childhood song about animals returning home that Georg's mother sang to him suddenly is heard on the radio and he sings the song to Driss, which underscores their intimate relationship.

If the anthropological place can be defined "as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 63). These non-places, which are ubiquitous in Petzold's works, are created by three accelerated transformations in contemporary life that Augé refers to as supermodernity: "the acceleration of history" that results from an "overabundance of events" (such as wars and mass migrations, Auge [1995] 2008, p. 23); "a spatial overabundance," an expanded world created by a proliferation of images through new technologies (Auge [1995] 2008, pp. 26–27), and "a spectacular acceleration of means of transport" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 28); and the expanded figure of the ego, the individual who "wants to be a world in himself" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 30). Augé states that "never before have individual histories been so explicitly affected by collective history, but never before, either, have the reference points for collective identification been so unstable. The individual production of meaning is thus more necessary than ever" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 30).

Seghers' and Petzold's portrayals of the non-places of supermodernity include vehicles (cars, trains, buses, ships), transit points (train and subway stations, the port of Marseille), and spaces of transit (hotel rooms and consulate waiting rooms and staircases). In such spaces, the repetitive, prescribed, mass behavior of travelers meld individual identities into a collective group. Auge [1995] (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 83) claims that, "a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer, or driver." These non-places are ones of "solitary individuality" and of the "fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 63). The traveler's space is "the archetype of *non-place*" and consists of "spaces in which neither identity, nor relations nor history really make sense" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 70). In non-places, "solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality" (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 70).

Petzold creates this sense of anonymous, urban non-places that are empty of any landmarks, history and meaning, in his depictions of Paris and Marseille. The absence of establishing shots that would indicate a specific locale doesn't allow spectators "the comforts of recognition," but rather appears to depict an imaginary "non-existing space" (Abel [2013] 2015, p. 101). The film consists of scenes of vast, urban spaces, cars on highways, and ships leaving port with anonymous passengers and non-descript, desolate hotel rooms and crowded consulate waiting rooms. In the film, if fire

and warm colors allude to family and home, then bright, cool colors infuse these non-places of transit. The white/blue light of the empty freight train compartment in which Georg and Heinz escape, the beiges and grays of the consulates with compassionless, often petty, bureaucrats, Georg's sparsely furnished, white hotel room, and the dimly lit hotel lobby where the manager exploits Georg's inability to produce identity papers by extorting an "obscene" amount of money from him suggest the sterility, emptiness, even cruelty, of the transactions taking place in these spaces.

Yet, in Petzold's film, the transit space of the hotel room not only portrays Georg's isolation and loneliness, but also offers the possibility of a fresh beginning, the creation of a new identity. As Jaimey Fisher (2018, p. 108) notes, in Petzold's films, "the hotel serves ambiguously, not only as a space of estrangement, of deformed experience and maimed humanity, but also emancipatorily as a place vested and producing personal meaning amidst the ruins of the home." A key scene in the film that marks a crucial turning point in Georg's life occurs in his Marseille hotel room and could either get him imprisoned or lead to a new identity and life. While substituting his own photo into Weidel's passport, the French police, who were tipped off by the greedy manager, stage a raid in the hotel and search his room. Georg has managed to destroy evidence of his forgery attempt and is able to produce Weidel's papers as his own and escape arrest. Georg's and Marie's growing affection and deepening intimacy take place in her hotel room overlooking the port of Marseille. Important turning points in their relationship occur here as well such as the return of Marie's friend, the doctor, from a ship headed west, after he was forced to disembark because French officials appropriated his room. Georg discovers Marie's true identity and she reveals details of her past in her hotel room. Finally, views of departing ships from her hotel window offer hope of a new, free life in the Americas.

The scene of Georg and the architect's after-dinner stroll (and shortly before her suicide) that Petzold added to Seghers' plot offers insights into his use of space. (Although the film's plot is situated in the time of Seghers' novel, Vichy France in 1940, the actual film is shot in contemporary Marseille.) The architect's anachronistic reference to a famous work of Rudy Ricciotti, who was born in 1952 in Algeria, underscores the contrast between merely functional, transitional spaces in which travelers have lost their identity, and historical, anthropological places that are replete with meaning. Ricciotti, who criticized the ahistorical minimalism of contemporary architecture, designed a significant and well-known cultural site in Marseille's port, the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (known as MuCEM) that is connected to the 12th century Fort Saint-Jean by a suspended walkway, described by Petzold's character. MuCEM is dedicated to the stages of civilizations of the area and contains exhibits on the inhabitants, agriculture, archaeology, art history, and contemporary art of the Mediterranean. The sterile, nondescript, and, initially, unrecognizable vast, empty non-space of their walk contrasts with the subject matter of their conversation, the walkway that links a cultural museum to an historic fort, an anthropological space. While the architect discusses the bridge that links the past (the fort) with the present (a museum with exhibits that link past with present), Georg knows very little of her past nor is he aware of her present frame of mind, her intention to commit suicide. Their relationship, like the generic quality of the restaurant and the sterile space of their walk, lacks any common history or context.[12] Similar to the anonymous travelers or pedestrians of Augé's non-spaces, Georg and the architect share only a common situation, their refugee status and desire to leave. As Auge [1995] (2008, p. 81) notes: " ... non-place creates the shared identity of passengers, customers, or Sunday drivers. No doubt the relative anonymity that goes with this temporary identity can even be felt as a liberation."

Goals, not origins, and anonymity, not individuality, define those in transit. As Seidler observes: "Here, in Marseille, everybody asks, 'Where are you going?' They never ask, 'Where are you from?'" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 201). The urgency of the present defines refugees'/travelers' existence:

[12] During their walk, the voice-over refers to the fortress as the site of their walk, but the visual space doesn't indicate the locale of their stroll as a fortress. Only when viewers, along with Georg, look down at the architect's body, can we visually situate the location.

> The passenger through non-places retrieves his identity only at Customs, at the tollbooth, at the check-out counter. Meanwhile, he obeys the same code as others, receives the same messages, responds to the same entreaties. The space of non-place creates neither an identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude. There is no room there for history . . . What reigns there is actuality, the urgency of the present moment.
>
> (Auge [1995] 2008, p. 83)

The architect's abrupt disappearance and Georg's discovery of her body on the walkway by the sea below marks a shift of attention for Georg (and viewers) from the present to the past both literary and symbolically. We recognize the site of her suicide as on the edge of the sea and next to what appears to be the wall of a fort and are now able to visually situate the non-place of their stroll. Spectators, along with Georg, get jolted out of the pleasure of the moment into searching for clues in his past encounters with the refugee that would explain her suicide. Her sudden leap "throws" viewers into reevaluating the meaning of previous episodes: her invitation to dinner, her request that they don't speak, her wearing black, the destination of their stroll, and the request for a cigarette. Casual references to her Jewish identity and the death of the dogs that were her ticket to the US, gain significance. Their death would make it difficult, if not impossible, for her to leave Vichy France. With the Nazi army approaching Marseille, she probably feared being arrested. With hindsight, we gain a fleeting insight into her motives and become aware that we share Georg's blindness of others' inner lives.

The film's suicide scene also draws attention to this link between space and time, the intertwining of Augé's anthropological spaces such as the 12th century fort, with a history and communal significance, and the association of his non-places, the nondescript spaces of transit and urban spaces, with an eternal, meaningless present. Auge [1995] (2008, p. 84) describes this "perpetual present" of the traveler's transit spaces as devoid of any history: "Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news, as if each individual history were drawing its motives, its words and images from the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present."

Both the novel and the film juxtapose the stasis of refugees' "perpetual present," with its repetitive, circular movements, against the historical that suggests a linear progression. They portray a life in transit as consisting not only of sudden transitions and reversals, but also of stasis, of waiting in cafés and in consulates. In both works the word "transit" refers (in German and English) not only to the transit visa for passage through another country on the way to a destination, but also to a paradoxical state of being in transition, moving from a past life to a future one, but also simultaneously being in a state of paralyzed suspension between past and future, with a sense of impotence, and fear. Pervasive in the modernist *Bildungsroman*, this state of suspension encompasses "the antilinear and nonteleological elements of the genre" (Esty 2012, p. 212) and is evident in both works, but predominant in the film. In the novel, Seidler continually recounts the fortuitous, repetitive, and frequently meaningless encounters that mark Augé's "perpetual present" of those in transit. He admits: "All these casual encounters, these senseless, repeated meetings depressed me with their stubborn unavoidability" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 200). In both works, Marie's futile search through the streets, consulates, and cafés of Marseille for her dead husband, who, she believes, is still alive, serves as an apt metaphor for refugees' quest for love and community. In the film, she repeats this pattern in her search for Georg, who, in turn, searches for her after her departure. As Esty (2012, p. 166) states, rhythmic repetitions produce a circular effect that "cut against the narrative trajectory" and "interrupt and retard the standard process of maturation."

These futile, repetitive, circular movements that do not bring characters any closer to their destinations in both works, particularly in the film, convey a sense of stasis and portray the protagonist as "stuck at a threshold," as in a modernist work (Esty 2012, p. 168). Georg's entrapment in Marseille, with no compelling reasons to leave or to stay, and his futile waiting for the (presumably) dead Marie's return, suggest the existential crisis of characters in *Waiting for Godot* or a Kafka story. Both works

contain a Kafkaesque parable to depict the torment of refugees' infernal waiting.[13] After being asked by the American consul to share a story, Georg recites one of Weidel's tales that resembles the parable *Before the Law* in Kafka's *The Trial*: "A man died. He was to register in hell. He waited in front of a large door. He waited a day, two. He waited weeks. Months. Then years. Finally a man walked past him. Perhaps you can help me. I'm supposed to register in hell. The other man who looks him up and down says, 'But, sir, this here is hell.'"[14]

Caught in the liminal transit space of a café that caters to refugees in Marseille during a transitional time (Vichy France), Georg is paralyzed by his own indecisiveness regarding leaving France through the Pyrenees or finding refuge in the bartender's hiding place. As in a Kafka narrative, the protagonist's state of mind reflects his external situation. Georg's irresoluteness, like that of an anti-hero in a modernist *Bildungsroman*, suggests a failed maturity that is reflected in the non-linear plot and open-ended conclusion, so typical of modernist narratives. Furthermore, Georg's external existence in a doubly liminal space (a café in a port city) reflects an inner paralysis that Petzold cinematically captures in a freeze-frame in the concluding scene.

Petzold underscores this sense of stasis by beginning and ending his film in similar settings. His story begins with Georg in a Parisian café and concludes with him in a Marseille café. Like Anna in Rhys's novel *Voyage in the Dark*, mentioned earlier, Georg cannot achieve social mobility or redemption, because he is not situated in "any discrete, finite, or meaningful order" (Esty 2012, p. 170). Georg and Anna, like the eponymous character in Kafka's short story *The Hunter Graccus*, an avatar of Ahasverus, a legendary Jewish figure who was cursed to wander the earth, are "trapped in an endless indiscrete flow of unmarked time and unbounded space" (Esty 2012, p. 174). The film's last scene mirrors the first, brings us full circle and suggests Georg's failed quest for a new life. A freeze-frame shot suspends his image in cinematic time and space. Given the film's many self-reflexive references to narrative, it is plausible that this shot serves as a self-referential gesture to filmmaking. Petzold claims that the transitory state depicted in Seghers' *Transit* describes cinema and regards film theaters as a transit rooms in which viewers are simultaneously present and absent: "The cinema tells stories of people in transit, people who have left something, but haven't arrived to another place. All the criminals, who divide their spoils in hotel rooms, all the people, who have lost a love, all the people, who have returned from civil war—they are travelers in transit. In this regard, all of my films are also films about being in transit."[15]

Yet, Seghers and Petzold also situate their protagonists in a collective linear hi/story that portrays their lives as part of a universal tale spanning centuries. Seghers' narrator appears aware of himself as a fellow traveler in historical time, through the ancient history of Marseille that enables him to feel connected to previous migrants in this significant port city:

> It was the age-old harbor gossip, as ancient as the old port itself and even older. Wonderful, ancient harbor twaddle that's existed as long as there has been a Mediterranean Sea, Phoenician chit-chat, Cretan and Greek gossip, and that of the Romans. . . . The remnants of crushed armies, escaped slaves, human hordes who had been chased from all the countries of the earth, and, having, at last, reached the sea, boarded ships in order to discover new lands from which they would again be driven; forever running from one death toward another. . . .

---

[13] Olivia Landry offers an insightful discussion of the theme of waiting in Petzold's *Transit*.

[14] Seghers was an avid reader of Kafka's stories, especially while she lived in Berlin in the 1920s. Many have noted stylistic and thematic similarities between her works and Kafka's. One common theme is characters' desperate search for meaning in life. See (Romero 1993, pp. 29–30).

[15] My translation. Cited in German in Landry 2020, p. 101. Petzold's interview with Hannah Pilarczyk. "Was Seghers beschreibt, ist das Kino. Der Kinoraum selbst ist ein Transitraum, in dem wir anwesend und abwesend zugleich sind. Und das Kino erzählt von Menschen im Transit, von Menschen, die etwas verlassen und nicht woanders angekommen sind. All die Kriminellen, die in Hotelzimmern ihre Beute aufteilen, all die Menschen, die eine Liebe verloren haben, all die Menschen, die aus einem Bürgerkrieg zurückkehren—sie sind Transitreisende. So gesehen sind alle meine Filme auch Filme über den Transit."

> I felt ancient, thousands of years old. I had experienced all this before. But, I also felt very young, and eager for all that was yet to come; I felt immortal.
>
> (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 78)[16]

In a similar vein, Petzold discusses the continual influence of the past on the present in his film: "I wanted to take the past and transpose it into the present and then look at what would happen. Then thinking about it, I realized it actually stood for something like an infection. We're looking at something that seems past, but it still has effects today. The present is still infected by the past, and that's what opens up this transitory space—a space where things are floating" (Romney 2019, p. 4). Georg's story connects to the past and future in the tales of his *Doppelgänger* Weidel and the film's narrator. Georg's storytelling establishes a friendship with the bartender and a connection with viewers, who have witnessed his experiences and share his perspective of events. Storytelling, then, can establish relationships, and, an identity, as it did for Weidel. Thus, Georg's pursuit of Marie and his storytelling repeats Weidel's story. Petzold observes this creative potential in Georg's situation in Marseille: "But he chooses to remain in that transitory space, that limbo, where he decides to wait for Marie. And this limbo can actually be the space where everything unfolds for refugees, and where they also get the opportunity to develop and tell their own story" (Romney 2019, p. 5).

4. Identity, Community and Empathy through Narrative

In their works, Seghers and Petzold self-reflexively foreground the process of narration itself, a common technique in German Romantic and modernist novels. In the novel's initial scene, an initially nameless narrator addresses an anonymous listener and, by extension, the reader. After referring to the sinking of the ship *Montreal*, the narrator entices the listener to a meal: "Probably you find all of this pretty unimportant? You're bored?—I am too. May I invite you to join me at my table?" (3). Seghers' narrator Seidler occasionally addresses his listener as "you," which jolts readers and invokes a sense of proximity to his world. The film's voice-over begins in the train with Georg's reading Weidel's manuscript (an excerpt from Seghers' work) in his own language that offers him comfort and a sense of connection with the characters and his lost home/land:

> He sensed it was his language, his native tongue. He came across words his poor mother had used to calm him when he'd gotten angry or cruel. In this story, there were a lot of mad folk, really crazy people, all of whom were mixed up in terrible, nebulous stuff. Even those who strove hard not to be. All the people in the story, and one of them resembles him, didn't annoy him with their complexity, as they would have done in life. He understood their deeds, because he could finally follow them from the very first thought right until their inevitable conclusion. Only because the now-dead writer had described them in that way did they seem less vicious to him.

His mother-tongue (*Muttersprache*) evokes childhood memories in Georg just as the radio song elicits nostalgia for his mother. He identifies with one character and one wonders if the story serves as a *mise-en-abyme*, a microcosm of Georg's world that is a typical literary device in a German Romantic *Bildungsroman*.[17] He also feels a connection to the dead writer, as a fellow German and traveling companion in transit, who also experiences deep loss. Weidel's life foreshadows Georg's as Marie's (aspiring) lover and as a storyteller himself. Not only does Marie pursue Georg because she mistakes him for her husband, but she seems as ambivalent towards him as towards Weidel. Neither Georg nor

[16] Seghers' narrator refers to Biblical images, the Tower of Babel (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 35) and Noah's Ark (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 54), and myths such as of Cyclops (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 25), and the River Styx (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 67) that situate his experiences in a broader context and unite him with previous generations and civilizations.

[17] For example, Wilhelm Meister receives a scroll upon completion of his apprenticeship and sees a picture of a figure that resembles him in the scroll.

the viewers are entirely certain whether she truly loves them or merely uses both because they can provide transit visas. In his guise as Weidel at the American consulate, Georg recites his Doppelgänger's stories as his own. Shortly before the film's conclusion, he passes on the manuscript to a bartender in a café that he frequents, who, we've discovered earlier, is the film's voice-over and who preserves Georg's and Weidel's stories for posterity. Despite his loneliness, Georg connects to others through language. He is intimately linked to the past, to Weidel, through his story, and to the future, through the bartender, who will pass on his tale to customers and viewers. Georg creates a home through reading and telling stories, within the fictional world, through Weidel's manuscript and in his friendship with the bartender, and with spectators. As Said (2001, p. 191) states in "Reflections on Exile," "homes are always provisional" for those in exile and refers to Theodor Adorno's insight that, for the refugee, "the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing."[18]

Although the film's final scene suspends Georg without a home or certain future, it provides hope on an aesthetic level both through his fantasy/hope of Marie's return and the survival of his story. In a case of poetic justice, the bartender, the sole acquaintance who offers Georg sanctuary from danger, also "saves" his and Weidel's stories, both as the film's narrator and the guardian of Weidel's manuscript. He also serves as a bridge to the past (the manuscript) and to the future (by retelling Weidel's and Georg's stories) as well as a bridge between the film's fictional world and that of the spectator, through his voice-over. Storytelling offers an aesthetic, if not actual, survival literally and symbolically. Weidel "lives on" not only through Seidler's/Georg's impersonation of him, but also in his writing. While posing as Weidel before an arrogant official who "tasted a bit of power on his tongue" and refuses him a Spanish transit visa because of Weidel's anti-fascist articles, Seghers' protagonist/narrator Seidler notes: "So Weidel isn't just dust, I thought, not just ashes, not just a faint memory of some intricate story that I'd find hard to retell, like the stories I was told at bedtime as a child.... Something is left of him that is alive enough and arouses enough fear for them to close their borders to him . . . . The culprits were probably those same articles the American consul showed me on my first visit to his consulate" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* pp. 187–88).

Seidler voices Seghers' own conviction that artistic expression could provide meaning in her life. As Christian Zehl Romero (1993, p. 42) states in her biography of Seghers, the novelist regarded her writing as a source of hope that bestowed upon the individual, transitory existence enduring value. The survival of an individual through art, a fundamental theme in Seghers' works, occurs because the artwork preserves what is essential in the writer (Romero 1993, p. 59). When their stories are passed on through storytellers, they survive in the repetition of their narratives and in listeners' (and spectators') memories. Petzold also emphasizes the importance of storytelling: "They (the characters in *Transit*) long for a story of their own and to discover the fragment of a novel left behind by an author, the fragment of a narrative about flight, love, guilt, loyalty. *Transit* is a story about how these people turn this narrative into their own."[19]

In *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Anthony Giddens (1991, p. 54) regards narrative as the predominant means of creating self-identity in modernity: "A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, . . . but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going* [his italics]."[20] In contradistinction to the self, self-identity, involves reflexivity, which is "something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 1991, p. 52).[21] In short, self-identity in modernist works often focuses on narrative expression. Although Georg has not found a "happy ending," he has established an identity as a narrator, and, in this regard, Weidel, whose identity he has taken as a refugee, lover, and storyteller, has served as his mentor. Seidler's and Georg's survival through their stories reflects Seghers' own situation in exile while composing *Transit*. Citing Seghers' son

---

[18] See Adorno (1978) autobiography, *Minima Moralia*: *A Damaged Life*.
[19] Quoted from "Historical Silence," Petzold's essay in the DVD brochure.
[20] Cited in (Castle 2006), *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*, p. 36.
[21] Cited in (Castle 2006, p. 36). See also (Giddens 1991, pp. 75–80).

Pierre Radvanyi, Lutz Winckler speculates that storytelling had both a healing effect and enabled the writer (like Georg) to endure her trials as a refugee. According to Radvanyi, his mother would recite sections of her manuscript *Transit* to her children during their trip from Marseille to Martinique. By fictionalizing her traumatic experiences, she gained control of her many losses and painful memories (Winckler 2014, pp. 152–53). Thus, for her and other artists in exile, writing her life's story enabled her emotional survival. As Walter Benjamin notes in his essay *The Storyteller*, Seghers takes on the role of "a new Scheherazade."[22]

The film's final scene invites viewers to speculate upon Georg's future and, consequently, to co-narrate the rest of his story. Georg and the spectators are left with various possibilities—to accept the bartender's offer of refuge, to escape through the Pyrenees where he might perish, to wait for Marie in Marseille and, possibly, be arrested, or to commit suicide. If one views him as Weidel's alter-ego, one might conclude that his tragic life of unrequited love, abandonment, and suicide foreshadows Georg's demise. Yet, the footsteps of an anonymous female who enters the café and whom Georg stares at from his table, could offer hope. Is it Georg's fantasy of Marie, the actual Marie who has returned, or an acquaintance who might help Georg? By forgoing a reverse shot, Petzold doesn't reveal the intruder's identity. As Olivia Landry (2020, p. 103) observes, "withholding of a reverse shot at critical moments is not uncommon in Petzold's films; it forges a kind of blind spot that does not shut down interpretation and meaning, but rather effectively opens it up." In an interview, Petzold reveals that these deliberate elisions, including the absence of point-of-view shots, imitate gaps that are prominent in modern American short stories, which inspired him, and which, in turn, were inspired by cinema.[23]

Spectators' identification with Georg's point of view creates ambiguity regarding the nature of his experiences. In an earlier scene after Marie's departure, Georg and viewers observe the actress who plays Marie leaving the café and it is unclear if Marie has returned or if she is a figment of Georg's imagination. (We later learn that the *Montreal* sank and that Marie probably died.) This ambiguity creates a ghost-like figure, typical in Petzold's films and reminiscent of the revenant played by Kim Novak, in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. (It is widely known that Hitchcock films influenced Petzold's film style and others have noted the similarities between *Vertigo* and an earlier Petzold film *Phoenix*.) As the director observes, " ... I feel that the history of film is filled with people on the verge of becoming phantoms" (Leweke 2013, p. 35). He admires films of fantasy "like those of the Weimar Cinema and even recent horror films that play with the blurred boundaries between the (objectively) real and (subjectively) fantasy."[24]

Thus, the fluid borders between the real and the imaginary create yet another liminal space in Petzold's cinema. Engaging spectators in the film's narrative both visually (Georg's look) and cognitively (the open ending) captivates viewers and entices them to imagine Georg's future. As in a modernist novel, meaning originates in "its narrativity, its being an open-ended process. Meaning is not the result of a fulfilled teleology" (Moretti 1987, p. 7). Thus, "in a modernist world one seeks meaning in the *future* rather than in the past" (Moretti 1987, p. 5).

The fluid boundaries between past and present and between fiction and reality also engage the audience in the creative process. The interweaving of the past (Weidel's retold stories) with the present (Georg's world) mirrors the shifting borders between the fictional world and the contemporary one. Thus, the liminal spaces of transit in both works reflect not only their themes, but also self-reflexively reveal their aesthetic style. Petzold foregrounds this intermingling between past

---

[22] Cited in (Winckler 2014, p. 166) from Benjamin (1977) "Der Erzaehler," p. 453.

[23] Petzold states: "I consider American short stories to be the foundation of my work. The things that appear to be missing in a story, the gaps—that's something that American literature learned from cinema, and it's something, that, through my reading, I'm trying to get back into cinema" (Romney 2019, p. 6). With Leweke (2013, p. 39), he discusses the absence of point-of-view shots of a character in another film of his: "For we mustn't show the girl's yearning through pictures. The yearning is in her gaze. That's why we don't see what she's looking at—she sees things that are hers alone. And we show only her gaze. That's what I explained to everybody: we don't have any point-of-view shots."

[24] Fisher (2011 p. 457) cites (Fisher 2010) article "German Autoren Dialogue with Hollywood?"

and present with anachronistic references to contemporary events; historical props (an old typewriter, a passport of the Third Reich) and allusions to the Nazis' "cleansings" that contrast with the film's contemporary settings. As mentioned earlier, the scene with the architect discussing Ricciotti's walkway that links the past, the Fort St. Jean, with the present, the MuCEM (Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean) that has exhibits on the past and the present cultures of the area underscores the intermingling of past with present.

The merging of fictional and spectator "realities" is most conspicuous in the train where Georg is reading Weidel's manuscript, an excerpt from Seghers' novel. First, viewers experience this "melding" of the two fictional levels when the voice-over narrates both Weidel's manuscript and Georg's reading his story that contains a character, who resembles him. The knowledge from this reading enables Georg to pose as Weidel at consulates and, with this false identity, to meet Marie and repeat his tragic love story with her. Thus, both narratives—the writer's story and Georg's reenacting Weidel's life as refugee, lover, and writer—begin simultaneously in this scene. Second, the voice-over that intrudes for the first time in this scene melds the fictional world with that of the spectators. Although the narrator is a fictional character, the appearance of the voice-over initially appears nondiegetic, as originating from a source outside the space of the narrative. Only later do viewers identify the narrator as the bartender. A voice-over that creates a sense of immediacy to the unfolding action and intensifies the suspense constitutes a common technique in *film noir* cinema that influenced Petzold's own cinematic style.[25]

Both Seghers' narrator and Petzold's voice-over produce Romantic irony, the acknowledging of readers'/viewers' presence that was a common narrative technique in Romantic and modernist novels. Seghers' first-person narrator speaking to an unknown listener appears also to be addressing readers. Seidler occasionally addresses his fictional listener as "you," which produces a startling effect: "You know, of course, what occupied France was like in the fall of 1940" (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 30). This sudden shift to addressing a "you" and referring to his story as in the past, creates the impression of the tale being told in the present to readers and functions in the same way as Petzold's voice-over that indicates that Georg's refugee life happened in the past.

Petzold's engaging spectators and drawing them into the fictional space by allowing them to share Georg's perspective, by creating a voice-over that initially appears nondiegetic, and by foregrounding the act of narration beg the question of the spectator's role while watching the film. Perhaps Petzold, like Seghers, intended to inspire empathy towards the characters and those they represent? This brings us back to Morgenstern's definition of a *Bildungsroman* that entails readers' edification. If Seghers' work inspires empathy for refugees of the Third Reich, then, Petzold's film inspires compassion for migrants, particularly for contemporary ones.

It is significant that the film's voice-over enters the narrative by reciting a key passage in Seghers' novel on Seidler's (and Georg's) identification and empathy towards Weidel's characters: "All the people in the story, and *one of them resembles him*, didn't annoy him with their complexity, as they would have done in life. *He understood their deeds*, *because he could finally follow them from the very first thought right until their inevitable conclusion. Only because the now-dead writer had described them in that way did they seem less vicious to him* [my emphasis]." Because the manuscript serves as a *mise-en-abyme*, a microcosm of Georg's story, it may also reflect the purpose of his narrative—that listeners/spectators identify with and feel the empathy towards him and his fellow refugees as he feels towards Weidel's characters.

Seghers believed in the transformative power of art, especially literature, on readers. In an essay, she writes that this transformation (*Umwandlung*) exerts a deep influence over the entire person.[26] She trusted that all genuine works of art that expressed the truth engender "a profound

---

[25] Film critics have recognized Petzold as a modern master of suspense and have compared him to Hitchcock. See, for example, Peter Bradshaw (2019) review of *Transit*.

[26] Christiane Zehl Romero (1993, p. 93). Cited from: Essays, Vol. I (13), p. 170.

transformative impact"[27] by making humans "more humane."[28] This belief in stories' impact by eliciting empathy towards those who are different from us originated in German Romantic literary theory and the Romantic *Bildungsroman.* As Azade Seyhan (1992, pp. 106–7) observes in *Representation and Its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism*, "The quest for self-knowledge, typical of the *Bildungsroman*, takes the form of encounters with the exotic other . . . The protagonists decode this otherness by learning a new alphabet, a new language, and a new geography. Their education constitutes an initiation in the sacred order of poetry. The initiation takes place in a timeless or unrepresentable time which is possessed in imagination and shared in memory." In a similar manner, in the liminal spaces of novels and films in which time is suspended, readers/viewers become acquainted with alien others in unfamiliar circumstances, whether they are portrayed through language or cinematic images.

Thus, Seghers and Petzold depict narrative as a remedy against indifference towards others. Georg, like Seidler, overcomes his disinterest in others' lives and feels empathy towards strangers while hearing their stories at the Mexican consulate. The voice-over informs us of his initial discomfort in hearing desperate tales of suffering: "He looked at the conductor and all the others who wanted to tell their stories. How they narrowly escaped death. About the children, the men, the women that they had lost on the run. The horrific things they had seen. He couldn't stand to hear it anymore." Later, he has a change of heart and thinks, "This is Marseille. It's a port. And ports are places where stories are told. That's what they're there for. People here have every right to tell stories and to be listened to."

Indifference and empathy (through listening to stories) serve as opposing *leitmotifs* in both works. In Seghers' novel, the indifference of Paul Strobel and Achselroth, who abandon friends, contrasts with the loyalty of Heinz and the boy. One dramatic hotel scene in the film involves a woman being dragged away by the police while indifferent bystanders silently watch: "He [Georg] saw the woman, as if snuffed out. He heard the screams of her husband and children. He saw the others watching like him. Were they without pity [*Mitleid*[29]]? Relieved that it wasn't them?" Doesn't this passive watching reflect the gaze of inert spectators of on-screen suffering? Brutal callousness distinguishes many figures in Seghers' and Petzold's narratives including the compassionless, calculating hotel clerk, who charges exorbitant prices and informs the police of illegal guests, and heartless bureaucrats in the consulates and travel agencies, who relish their power over a person's life. In Seghers' novel, a travel agent, who is indifferent to refugees begging for a berth on a ship, yawns while a woman sobs that her passage could not be rebooked (Seghers 2013, *Transit* pp. 102–3). In the film, the American consul, who makes Georg painfully aware of his power and is suspicious of his (Weidel's) communist beliefs, appears to deliberately hold Georg (and viewers) in suspense on his decision to give him a transit visa.

On the other hand, both artists depict language, whether through childhood songs or stories, as a bridge of understanding between strangers. Georg's ability to speak French (and play soccer) and Driss's ability to speak German constitute the basis of their friendship. Georg's singing a childhood song in German deepens their friendship and moves the boy's mother as well. Although Georg has lost love either by realizing its value too late (Driss) or discovering that it isn't reciprocated (Marie), he gains a friend (the bartender) through reciting his story and a larger community of future empathic listeners of his narrative.

Weidel himself expresses compassion for others by witnessing their pain in his writing. In the novel (Seghers 2013, *Transit* p. 119), he has written an article about the Badajoz Massacre in 1936 in which Nationalist Forces shot hundreds, even thousands, of civilian and military supporters of the Second Spanish Republic. His support of Communists in the fight against fascism reflects Seghers' belief that writers in exile were obligated to write about the suffering of fellow citizens and that this

---

[27] (Romero 1993, p. 36). Cited from: Essays, Vol. II (14), p. 150.
[28] (Romero 1993, p. 36). Cited from: Essays, Vol. II (14), p. 391.
[29] The German word *Mitleid* is more accurately translated as compassion.

endeavor gave life meaning: "What purpose (*Sinn*) does our freedom have, if we, who can speak and write don't continually name those who are nameless?"[30] Witnessing their tragedies in her stories serves as a rebuke of a world in which betrayal and abandonment (*Im-Stich-Lassen*) is common (Romero 1993, p. 80).

Petzold's *Transit* refers not only to refugees of Vichy France and those of the Algerian War (1954–1962) living in the Maghrebi quarter of Marseille, but also to contemporary migrants to Europe. As Romney (2019, p. 3) states: "Petzold's quasi-anachronistic approach makes Seghers *Transit* newly resonant for a time when multitudes are desperate not to leave Europe, but to enter it." The director shifts our attention from past to present by substituting the Badajoz massacre with an anachronistic incident that is based on actual events. The American consul accuses Georg/Weidel of writing an article on the shooting of unionists in Almeria, Spain in a Communist newspaper *The New Frontier*. Moroccans constitute the majority of migrant farm-workers in Almeria, the largest European district for the production of fruits and vegetables. They work in underpaid, temporary jobs, which are dangerous because of the risk of chemical poisoning in greenhouses. This episode refers to the exploitation of economic migrants who suffer from "quasi-slavery practices, back-breaking shifts, meager wages."[31] For the last 35 years, mostly North American and European agrochemical corporations have supported the "Almeria miracle" (Caruso 2017, pp. 278–80). These biotech multinational companies influence the production process on a global scale and contribute to the uneven economic development in the world that causes a predictable movement of migrants seeking work (Caruso 2017, p. 279). In many of his films, Petzold criticizes globalization and neoliberal capitalism that, in this context, make it difficult for unions to defend migrant workers' rights.[32] Fisher (2018, p. 275) describes Petzold's film style that "allows for the viewer's emotional engagement through characters while also foregrounding socially critical themes, especially the transformational aspects of work and economy." When asked about the current refugee crisis, Petzold expressed empathy for them:

> The [refugee] camp in Calais—"the Jungle"—had just been cleared when we were preparing *Transit*. People told us to go and film it, to get shots of all the African refugees, the boats, the bodies washing up in Lampedusa. But you can't. You can't film African refugees. I have no right to do that. I have no idea what it's like. Instead, we filmed 'the Maghreb of Marseilles,' but that's part of the city, and part of France's colonial history, it's there. . . . What I realized during the shoot, when reconstructing the present and the past, is *how easy it was to imagine being a refugee myself. Deep down inside, our identity is that of a refugee* [my emphasis].[33]

5. Conclusions

Petzold's radical translation of Seghers' novel transforms a refugee story situated in a particular time and place (Vichy France) into an existential allegory of modern life. The director translates her narrative of World War II political refugees into a universal tale of migrants and refugees that, in turn, exemplifies the instability of relationships of a contemporary world in constant flux and engages

---

[30] My translation: "Was hat unsere Freiheit für einen Sinn, wenn wir nicht immer wieder die Namenlosen nennen, wir, die wir reden und schreiben können." (Romero 1993, p. 66). Cited from: "Deutschland und wir" ("Germany and Us"): Essays Vol. 1 (13) p. 94f.

[31] Cited in Francesco Saverio Caruso (2017), "Unionism of migrant farm workers: The Sindicato Obreros del Campo (SOC) in Andalusia, Spain.", p. 281.

[32] Well-known xenophobic violence and race riots in which Spaniards torched immigrant homes and shops in El Ejido in February 2000 were not isolated events, but the culmination of a long series of episodes of racial violence against Maghrebi workers. During sit-ins, pickets, and work stoppages, police attacked them. The Spanish union, Sindicato Obreros del Campo (SOC), opened its first branch in Almeria province and demanded the legalization of undocumented workers (Caruso 2017, p. 283). The SOC has relationships with antiracist groups, NGOs, foreign trade unions, and journalists to help their cause and obtained rights for workers for their health, safety, welfare, and dignity (Caruso 2017, p. 286). For articles on Petzold's critique of neoliberal and global capitalism in his "Ghost Trilogy" films, especially *Yella*, see Jaimey Fisher (2011) and Matthew Miller's articles and Marco Abel's and Ira Jaffe's book chapters.

[33] This quote is from an interview "Ports are Places Where Stories are Told: Christian Petzold on Shooting in Marseilles." In the DVD brochure.

viewers to identify with the character. First, Petzold modifies Seghers' protagonist/narrator Seidler with his distinctive personality traits and insightful revelations into a universal figure, his enigmatic, cinematic *Doppelgänger* Georg who reveals little of his inner life. Second, situating Seghers' wartime story in non-places–nondescript, contemporary, urban settings—contributes to viewers' impression that his tale transcends a particular time and place. Third, the director's focus on liminal spaces (hotels, a port city, consulates, modes of transportation) underscores this theme of the fluidity of geographical and chronological borders. Finally, both thematically and aesthetically, narrative is depicted as a means of establishing a community in a world of transitory relationships and rapid mobility. In such an unstable world, Petzold's protagonist fails to gain a secure place in a community and, like the anti-hero of a modernist *Bildungsroman*, he can only construct an identity as a narrator, which, in turn, creates a community of empathic listeners. In a similar vein, the film's voice-over, like Seghers' narrator, bridges the fictional realm and that of spectators/readers by directly addressing them and drawing them into the narrative space, and, consequently, closer to the characters. This sense of proximity between readers/viewers and characters creates a sense of intimacy and empathy towards the fictional figures and those they represent.

6. Epilogue

The existential suspense of those in transit serves as a prescient metaphor for today. In an interview on "Sixty Minutes," Indian novelist Arundhati Roy described the suspension of ordinary life during the COVID-19 pandemic with a spatial and temporal metaphor, a liminal, timeless non-place: "Right now, it feels as if we have no present, we have no past and we have no future, and, right now, we are in some sort of transit lounge and there isn't any connection between the past and the future. We should not be thinking of stitching them together without thinking about that rupture." Petzold actually had a plague in mind while filming *Transit*. Romney (2019, p. 4) comments on his use of the term "infection" to describe the Nazi terror and states, "The Marseille of your film recalls the Oran of Camus's *The Plague*." Petzold replies: "You know the Edge Allen Poe story 'The Mask of the Red Death'—I thought of that plague a little bit. . . . I thought, 'What I need is an infection by something like the plague, to shake things up.'"

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Abel, Marco. 2008. The Cinema of Identification Gets on My Nerves: An Interview with Christian Petzold. *Cineaste* 33. Available online: https://www.cineaste.com/summer2008/the-cinema-of-identification-gets-on-my-nerves (accessed on 6 October 2020).

Abel, Marco. 2015. Paperback Reprint. "*Christian Petzold: Heimat-Building as Utopia*". In *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School*. Rochester: Camden House, pp. 69–110. First published 2013 by Camden House.

Adorno, Theodor. 1978. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*. Translated and Edited by Edmund F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso.

Andrew, Dudley. 1984. *Concepts in Film Theory*. London and New York: Oxford UP.

Auge, Marc. 2008. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe. London and New York: Verso. First published in 1995.

Benjamin, Walter. 1977. Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows. In *Gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhaeuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, vol. II/2, pp. 438–65.

Bradshaw, Peter. 2019. Transit Review: Brilliant Existential Thriller Works Like a Dream. *The Guardian*. August 14. Available online: www.theguardian.com/film/2019/aug/14/transit-review-christian-petzold-franz-rogowski (accessed on 4 April 2020).

Burns, Nicholas, and James Jeffrey. 2015. The Diplomatic Case for America to Create a Safe Zone in Syria. *Washington Post*, February 4.

Cahir, Linda Costanzo. 2008. The Nature of Film Translation: Literal, Traditional and Radical. In *In/Fidelity: Essays on Film Adaptation*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong, pp. 198–201.

Caruso, Francesco Saverio. 2017. Unionism of migrant farm workers: The Sindicato Obreros del Campo in (SOC) Andalusia, Spain. In *Migration and Agriculture: Mobility and Change in the Mediterranean Area*. Edited by Alessandra Corrado, Carlos de Castro and Domenico Perrotta. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 277–92.

Castle, Gregory. 2006. *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Dargis, Manohla. 2019. 'Transit' Review: An Existential Puzzler with Jackboots and Terror. *The New York Times*, February 28.

Dubrowski, Malgorzata. 2013. Die Mythische Welt Anna Seghers' Literarische Bilder aus dem Franzoesischem Exil. *Etudes Germaniques* 1: 133–45. [CrossRef]

Esty, Jed. 2012. *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP.

Fisher, Jaimey. 2010. German Autoren Dialogue with Hollywood? Refunctioning the Horror Genre in Christian Petzold's Yella. In *New Directions in German Cinema*. Edited by Paul Cook and Chris Homewood. London: I. B. Tauris.

Fisher, Jaimey. 2011. Globalization as Uneven Geographical Development: The 'Creative' Destruction of Place and Fantasy in Christian Petzold's Ghost Trilogy. *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 47: 447–64.

Fisher, Jaimey. 2013. *Contemporary Film Directors: Christian Petzold*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press.

Fisher, Jaimey. 2018. Ghosts at an early Age: Youth, Labor, and the Intensified Body in the Work of Christian Petzold and the Dardennes. In *The Berlin School and Its Global Contexts: A Transnational Art Cinema*. Edited by Marco Abel and Jaimey Fisher. Detroit: Wayne State UP.

Giddens, Anthony. 1991. Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Stanford: Stanford UP.

Jaffe, Ira. 2018. No Place is Home: Christian Petzold, the Berlin School, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan. In *The Berlin School and Its Global Contexts: A Transnational Art Cinema*. Edited by Marco Abel and Jaimey Fisher. Detroit: Wayne State UP.

Kopp, Kristin. 2010. Christoph Hochhaeusler's This Very Moment: The Berlin School and the Politics of Spatial Aesthetics in the German-Polish Borderlands. In *The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and Its Politics at the Turn of the Century*. Edited by Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager. Detroit: Wayne State UP, pp. 285–308.

Landry, Olivia. 2020. The Beauty and Violence of *Horror Vacui*: Waiting in Christian Petzold's *Transit* (2018). *The German Quarterly* 93: 90–105. [CrossRef]

Leweke, Anke. 2013. French Cancan in the DDR: An Exchange with Christian Petzold. In *The Berlin School: Film from the Berliner Schule*. Edited by Nancy Grubb. New York: Museum of Modern Art, pp. 32–43.

Lim, Dennis. 2013. Moving On: The Next New Wave. In *The Berlin School: Film from the Berliner Schule*. Edited by Nancy Grubb. New York: Museum of Modern Art, pp. 89–96.

Martini, Fritz. 1991. Bildungsroman: Term and Theory. In *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*. Edited by James Hardin. Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, pp. 1–25.

Miller, Matthew D. 2012. Facts of Migration: Demands on Identity: Christian Petzold's *Yella* and *Jerichow* in Comparison. *The German Quarterly* 85: 55–76. [CrossRef]

Moretti, Franco. 1987. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso.

Romero, Christian Zehl. 1993. *Anna Seghers*. Hamburg: Rowohlt.

Romney, Jonathan. 2019. Sight & Sound. Sept. vol. 29/9. Available online: https://web-a-ebscohost-com/proxy-wcupa.klnpa.org (accessed on 4 April 2020).

Said, Edward. 2001. Reflections on Exile. In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. London: Granta, pp. 181–93.

Seghers, Anna. 2013. *Transit*. Translated by Margot Bettauer Dembo. New York: New York Review of Books.

Seyhan, Azade. 1992. *Representation and Its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: Univ. of California Press.

Urry, John. 2007. *Mobilities*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press.

Winckler, Lutz. 2014. Eine Chronik des Exils: Erinnerungsarbeit in Anna Seghers' *Transit*. In *Katastrophe und Gedaechtnis*. Edited by Thomas Klinkert and Guenter Oesterle. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 148–66.

arts

MDPI

Article

Readapting Pandemic Premediation and Propaganda: Soderbergh's *Contagion* amid COVID-19

Kevin C. Moore

Program in Writing and Rhetoric, Stanford University, 590 Escondido Mall, Stanford, CA 94305-3069, USA; kcmoore@stanford.edu

Received: 22 September 2020; Accepted: 30 October 2020; Published: 3 November 2020

Abstract: Steven Soderbergh's pandemic thriller *Contagion* (2011) was trending strongly on streaming services in the US in the early days of COVID-19 restrictions, where the fiction took on an unforeseen afterlife amid a real pandemic. In this new context, many viewers and critics reported that the film seemed "uncanny," if not prophetic. Frameworks such as Priscilla Wald's notion of the "outbreak narrative," as well Richard Grusin's "premediation," may help to theorize this affective experience on the part of viewers. Yet the film was also designed as a public health propaganda film to make people fear and better prepare for pandemics, and the present account works to recover this history. Although the film takes liberties with reality, in particular by proposing an unlikely vaccine-development narrative, Soderbergh and screenwriter Scott Z. Burns consulted prominent scientists and policymakers as they wrote the film, in particular Larry Brilliant and Ian Lipkin. These same scientists were consulted again in March 2020, when an effort spearheaded by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public health reunited the star-studded cast of *Contagion*, who created at home a series of public health announcement videos that might be thought of as a kind of re-adaptation of the film for the COVID-19 era. These public service announcements touch on key aspects of pandemic experience premediated by the original film, such as social distancing and vaccine development. Yet their very production as "work-from-home" illustrates how the film neglected to address the status of work during a pandemic. Recovering this history via *Contagion* allows us to rethink the film as a cultural placeholder marking a shift from post-9/11 security politics to the pandemic moment. It also becomes possible to map the cultural meaning of the technologies and practices that have facilitated the pandemic, which shape a new social order dictated by the fears and desires of an emerging work-from-home class.

Keywords: *Contagion*; propaganda; pandemic; premediation; Steven Soderbergh; Scott Z. Burns

---

> "Contagion is more than an epidemiological fact."
>
> Priscilla Wald, *Contagious* (Wald 2008, p. 2)

When millions of people were forced to stay home around the world during the initial coronavirus lockdowns, it was widely observed that Steven Soderbergh's 2011 film *Contagion* was trending strongly on streaming video services. The pandemic thriller, about a novel virus far deadlier than SARS-CoV-2 and the global havoc it wreaks, ranked in the top-10 on iTunes for several weeks, competing with new releases in winter and early spring (Clark 2020). While epidemic films released before and since *Contagion,* such as *Outbreak* (1995) and *World War Z* (2013), have similarly entertained and frightened viewers, none has enjoyed the COVID-19 era afterlife of the Soderbergh thriller. This renewed appeal might seem unexpected, given the grim reassurance Soderbergh's film could have offered to viewers grappling with an emerging and uncertain viral situation. Not insignificantly, *Contagion*'s fictional virus has a disease profile more evocative of smallpox or Ebola than of COVID-19. MEV-1, as the film's

pathogen is called, rapidly kills between 20 and 30% of those it infects. The disease dispatches Gwyneth Paltrow's character in a gruesome spectacle within the film's first fifteen minutes. For some, the renewed attraction was transparently masochistic: as Wesley Morris (2020) wrote in *The New York Times*, just as the first documented cases of community spread of COVID-19 arrived in the western United States, "The appeal [of *Contagion*] now is how it's proving to be an instructive worst-case scenario of our current freak-out. We've turned to it, in part, to know how bad things could get." For others, however, it had to do with *Contagion*'s supposed "uncanny" realism (Adams and Onion 2020). Kelly (2020) speculated in *The Washington Post* that the COVID-era pull of *Contagion* is the context it provides viewers for pandemic experiences and protocols, thus offering a kind of unexpected comfort: "The compulsion to watch these fictionalized, sometimes graphic versions of things that are unfolding in the real world can be a way of making sense of what's happening when we're faced with uncertainty." Watching human actors grapple with similar situations to events playing out in real life may help viewers to recognize and process reality, especially given that the film offers a positive ending in the form of a successful vaccine.

While not all viewers of *Contagion* will share the comfort Kelly describes, *Contagion* undoubtedly offers what became, with COVID-19, a resonant catalogue of the varieties of pandemic experience. *Contagion*'s status as the most popular epidemic film of the early coronavirus moment may well be because it provides such a detailed vision of how a pandemic narrative plays out, complete with Purell panic-buying, treacherous fomites (which the camera tracks obsessively in several sequences), "social distancing" protocols (Laurence Fishburne's character, a fictional director of the CDC, actually uses the term in the film long before it entered widespread parlance), a detailed discussion of epidemiological basic reproduction numbers (R_0), contact tracing, gritty shoe-leather epidemiology, widespread paranoia, an exacerbation of social stratifications, a virus that leaps across species from bats to pigs to humans, and a conspiracy theory about a false cure. The film also possesses an impressive level of detail on pandemic science and policy. As Alissa Wilkinson (2020) writes in *Vox*, *Contagion* remains "a taut thriller for wonks, deeply researched and filled with jargon that coaxes viewers to pay attention; behind the entertainment is information that could have a real impact on your own life." In 2011, screenwriter Burns explained the film pursued considerable guidance from scientists and experts on infectious disease, including W. Ian Lipkin (2011), the Director of the Center for Infection and Immunity at Columbia University's Mailmen School of Public Health, the epidemiologist and technology entrepreneur Larry Brilliant, as well as the Pulitzer Prize-winning science journalist Laurie Garrett, author of the acclaimed volume *The Coming Plague* (1995) (Douglas 2011).

Upon its original release, this research and collaboration garnered much praise for the film, and not just from critics, but from prominent scientists and policymakers, including names that have only become more familiar in the context of COVID-19. Anthony Fauci—then and now Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who of course in 2020 became the most visible voice of the Trump administration's White House Coronavirus Task Force—attended an advance screening of the film (Harmon 2011), remarking, "It's one of the most accurate movies I have seen on infectious disease outbreaks of any type" (Roos 2011). So impressed was Fauci, in 2011, that even the aspect of the film that might strike virologists and epidemiologists as the most far-fetched, the exceptionally short 144-day timeline to develop and confirm an accurate vaccine, was, for him, "slightly unrealistic but not egregiously so" (Roos 2011). The same account recording Fauci's remarks on the film also cites Michael Osterholm, another prominent voice in the context of COVID-19 policy. Osterholm, who directs the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRP) at the University of Minnesota, called *Contagion* a worst-case scenario, yet insisted, "I'd say the potential for such an

outbreak to actually occur is real . . . There was nothing hyped about the potential for an agent like this to actually develop" (Roos 2011).[1]

For many 2020 viewers revisiting *Contagion*, or seeing it for the first time, the scientific detail of the film made COVID-19 feel like a real-life sequel or adaptation of the fictional *Contagion* pandemic. Yet our attraction to what Priscilla Wald calls "outbreak narratives" (2008), including pandemic narratives like this one,[2] also reflects how such stories have for ages constituted deep-seated cultural formations, dictating the logic of deeply embedded cultural and social structures. Because of the long human history dealing with disease and contagion, even before the work of Louis Pasteur and the consensus of the germ theory of infectious disease transmission in the 19th century, the contours of the outbreak narrative are, for Wald, "foundational" in the collective imaginary. As Wald explains,

> Contagion [not the film, but the concept] is more than an epidemiological fact. It is also a foundational concept in the study of religion and of society, with a long history of explaining how beliefs circulate in social interactions. The concept of contagion evolved throughout the twentieth century through the commingling of theories about microbes and attitudes about social change. Communicable disease compels attention—for scientists and the lay public alike—not only because of the devastation it can cause but also because the circulation of microbes materializes the transmission of ideas. The interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community. Disease emergence dramatizes the dilemma that inspires the most basic human narrative: the necessity and danger of human contact.
>
> (p. 2)

The capacity of the outbreak narrative, and contagion more broadly to "materializ[e] the transmission of ideas" is not just a metaphor. If ideas propagate contagiously, or go viral as we might say, that is because contagious disease has long been an essential aspect of human experience. The structures we use to communicate, and for that matter to protect ourselves from perceived threats have adapted to bear the logic of contagion. This is undoubtedly why we especially hear reverberations of how we fear contagious disease during times of conflict and paranoia, when subversive ideas and invisible agents of perceived enemies are traced and rooted out as we might attempt to isolate a virus. In the context of globalized modernity, these dynamics proliferate. As Wald explained in a further April 2020 webinar, this time remarking directly on *Contagion*, this "disaster film," which she notes was released just before the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, indeed highlights how the "outbreak narrative . . . focuses our nebulous anxieties about globalization" (Wald 2020).

This reference to the lasting cultural fallout of 9/11, however speculative, evokes another rubric for understanding the affective experience of viewing Soderbergh's film in 2020, as its real-world sequel COVID-19 swept the word. In addition to being an example of the perennial outbreak narrative, *Contagion* also represents the 21st century media logic of what Grusin (2010) calls "premediation" or "medial pre-emption" that developed in the post-9/11 moment, of which *Contagion* is most certainly a part. Although the film tracks a deadly pathogen rather than a terrorist threat, the film's release date of 9 September 2011—almost exactly ten years after the attacks on New York and Washington—could hardly have been coincidental. The film moreover explicitly depicts its pandemic response in the context of post-9/11 threat management. Almost as soon as the virus is identified, the film's fictional CDC Director Dr. Ellis Cheever (Fishburne) is sloughed off to a meeting with brass at the Department of

---

[1] The article citing Fauci, by Richard Roos, was published on CIDRP's news blog, a major public health institute at the University of Minnesota, ironically a campus where a key plot thread of the film takes place (Minneapolis is the original American epicenter of the MEV-1 virus in the film). Michael Osterholm has been an outspoken proponent of lockdowns in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

[2] Although pandemic narratives are clearly an instance of the outbreak narrative, of course not all outbreaks are global, and the present account takes care to distinguish between these terms. Pandemic narratives are, moreover, implicitly global, and thus entangled profoundly with other questions and fears related to globalization.

Homeland Security, where he is asked to weigh in on the security dimensions of the threat, including the possibility of bioterrorism. *Contagion* could hardly be a clearer specimen of a representation displaying premediation, which, as Grusin defines it, "works to prevent citizens of the global mediasphere from experiencing again the kind of systemic or traumatic shock produced by the events of 9/11 by perpetuating an almost constant, low level of fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack" (p. 2). While here the premediated potential systemic shock is not terror but a naturally mutated virus, the infiltration of a massively disruptive pathogen activates similar American and global security apparatuses, and reflects the "nebulous anxieties" of global interconnectedness characterized by Wald (Wald 2020). As one military or Homeland Security official puts it in the film, hypothesizing about the circumstances underlying the initial spreading event of the fictional virus at a Macao casino, "Someone's ready to blow themselves up at a pizzeria or the local market then the thought of getting themselves sick with smallpox or plague and walking through a crowded casino must have crossed their mind." One could hardly imagine a more "nebulous" description of a perceived global threat, which here might just as well transpire in a pizzeria, a market, or a Macao casino. In this scene, the specter of plotting sleeper cells and surprise suicide bombings, which loomed as perennial threats to the "homeland" during the post-9/11 decade concluded exactly by *Contagion*'s release, mutates in the imagination of this fictional security agent into the threat of a deliberately spread contagious disease with the capacity to impact the globe (although bioterror turns out not to be the cause of the pandemic in the film. "Someone doesn't have to weaponize the bird flu," Cheever (Fishburne) deadpans in the film, responding to the specter of bioterror, in one of the film's cleverest lines. "The birds are already doing that." According to a *Scientific American* review on bioterror and its portrayal in *Contagion*, Anthony Fauci found this argument of the film to be especially pertinent, responding in an interview, "Nature's the greatest bioterrorist" (Harmon 2011)).

Indeed, Grusin's notion of premediation provides a further, helpful framework for understanding *Contagion*'s uncanny cultural meaning from the perspective of COVID-19, as a historical placeholder lying somewhere between cultural fears about post-9/11 terror and concern about emerging pandemics. Here is his extended definition, which distinguishes explicitly between premediation and prediction:

> Premediation characterizes the mediality of the first decade of the twenty-first century as focused on the cultural desire to make sure that the future has already been pre-mediated before it turns into the present (or the past)—in large part to try to prevent the media, and hence the American public, from being caught unawares as it was on the morning of 11 September 2001 … premediation is not to be confused with prediction. Premediation is not about getting the future right, but about proliferating multiple remediations of the future both to maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock that the United States and much of the networked world experienced on 9/11.
>
> (p. 4)

Using this rubric, one might wager the hypothesis that viewers of *Contagion* circa February and March 2020, who returned to the pandemic narrative of *Contagion* as an interpretive and affective guide for understanding or at least processing COVID-19, participated in an act of nostalgia for the experience of premediation once offered by the fictional, hypothetical *Contagion* pandemic. Back in 2011, the cultural logic of *Contagion* worked to both harvest and mitigate surplus post-9/11 fear ("to maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock"). The film's 2020 appeal thus may not stem from its status as prophetic pandemic prototype, but as an unexpectedly soothing reminder of what it felt like to consume pandemic drama and terror in the safe space of the alarmist, premediating cinema of the post-9/11 security state, versus the alarmist, inescapable, polarized news, media, and technological landscape of 2020 (especially as inflected by the social chaos and political divisions of the Trump era).

What the film does not nor can be expected to explain are exactly the advancements in technology and media that have made COVID-19 so different from the pandemic world it portrays. Some characters still use flip phones in *Contagion*, notably the cure peddler, conspiracy theorist, and folk hero Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law), who is an adamant defender of the citizen science to be found on the "blogosphere." In 2020, one perhaps hears less about the blogs and the blogosphere, but citizen science as well panic and rumor pervade online. These dubious forms, as well as legitimate information, news, and even scientific research about the real pandemic spread with breathtaking speed, via sources as varied as partisan news websites, Reddit and Twitter, and the biomedical preprint servers Medrxiv and Biorxiv, which are radically transforming bioscientific publication practices by providing an open forum for scientific debate in advance of peer review (Flier 2020). In 2020, pervasive smartphones and a truly wireless internet have created an apparatus where one might receive news alerts, participate in pandemic surveillance projects, and consume entertainment content—such as the film *Contagion*, or for that matter populist content such as Cardi B's viral coronavirus Instagram post and its various remixes (Cardi B 2020)—all on the same device. The arrival of reliable videoconferencing apps, such as Zoom, have facilitated a massive shift to remote work for white-collar employees, which would not have been possible in the world of *Contagion*. All of these developments shape pandemic rhetoric and policy, and they are rearranging structures of security, surveillance, and power. Through the lens of COVID-19, *Contagion* becomes not prophetic but an important historical marker. It was created just as the post-9/11 decade of premediation and "nebulous" paranoia about globalization, but also of relative technological optimism, began to give way to alarming trends that would increasingly define the 21st century's second decade: rising tides of nationalism, hypermediation, a blurring of legitimate information and propaganda, and, for many, especially in the COVID-era, a feeling of creeping techno-capitalist dystopia.

Yet *Contagion* is also directly implicated in the future it premediates. To fully understand *Contagion*'s historical meaning and 2020 impact, one also much acknowledge its influence agenda. Beyond its entertainment value as a thriller, its COVID-19 value as a possible intellectual comfort, and its status as a premediation of a fearful public health scenario, *Contagion* was also conceived as a propaganda film. This aspect of *Contagion*, which sought to impact pandemic awareness and policy, went largely unacknowledged amid its afterlife, although it marks yet another way the film looks forward to, and may even have helped to constitute how Americans, in particular, began to understand the coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, the fictional world of *Contagion*, as it was originally conceived, is not simply entangled with real-world pandemic science and policy as a matter of artistic verity. A deliberate, educational agenda underwrites the film, which sought to raise awareness about the emerging threat of novel viruses and pandemics, and what a public response should look like. As Burns tells the story, when he and Soderbergh came up with the idea for *Contagion*, they had been immersed in an ongoing plan to make a film about none other than Leni Riefenstahl, the problematic, technically acclaimed director of Nazi propaganda films such as *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938). In the wake of the success of their previous collaboration on *The Informant!* (2009), the team had been planning for six months to make a Riefenstahl biopic (Jagernauth 2011). It was Soderbergh who urged Burns to reconsider: a film on Riefenstahl, he warned, would not be terribly marketable. Rather than the Riefenstahl film, we have *Contagion*, but the capacities of cinema to influence reality lingered in the genesis of the new project. Burns said, "We were trying to make a movie for a variety of reasons that would really reach people . . . [*Contagion* is] a movie where I think people go and have a really good time and hopefully walk out of it and think about some things a little differently" (Douglas 2011). The film was produced and distributed by Participant Media, the same production company that created the influential documentaries *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Food, Inc* (2008), as well as the Academy Award winning *Spotlight* (2015) about the Boston Globe investigation that brought to light the systemic culture of abuse within the Catholic Church in the early 2000s. Regardless of whether or not *Contagion* actually impacted pandemic policy in the US and globally—an impact that would of course be challenging to quantify—the film's deployment of seemingly realistic epidemiological protocols

and vocabulary gives credence to the dramatic measures and public narrative the COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated. Consulting scientists as well as policy-makers at the CDC and WHO, including existing plans for pandemic response in the time and aftermath of H1N1, *Contagion* consolidates a script for a real pandemic, not least of which is the notion that pandemics can end only with the arrival of a vaccine.

Burns had been wanting to work on a pandemic film ever since hearing a 2006 TED talk by Larry Brilliant, the epidemiologist, technology entrepreneur, and inaugural Executive Director of Google's philanthropy arm, Google.org (Douglas 2011). Brilliant, who was cited on *TIME Magazine*'s list of 100 most influential people in 2008, may also be the advisor who left the biggest mark on the film. Brilliant, a self-described "spiritual seeker," helped to eradicate smallpox from its final stronghold in India and was a founder of the Seva Foundation, which has helped to bring sight-restoring cataract surgery to developing nations (Brilliant 2006). He has long been a major Silicon Valley guru and personality, and was an early embracer of computer teleconferencing (Brilliant 2016, pp. 387–88). In collaboration with counterculture and tech icon Steward Brand, he co-founded the early social network The WELL (Turner 2006, p. 142). A friend of Steve Jobs, Sheryl Sandberg, and Ram Dass, in 2006 he was one of three winners of the 2006 TED Prize, for which he gave a special presentation for the organization in which he had the opportunity to ask for the fulfillment of a "wish" (Brilliant 2006). On that occasion, which left so strong impression on Burns, Brilliant, who the previous year had founded an organization called PanDefense 1.0, asked activists and investors to help him pursue the ambitious goal of creating a vast epidemic surveillance network, in which internet data would become a key component (Brilliant 2016, p. 390). Brilliant would go on to became an advisor to the film, and he led Burns to Columbia University professor Ian Lipkin, another major consultant (so critical, in fact, that one of the film's minor characters, an epidemiologist named Ian Sussman, who is played by Elliott Gould, was supposedly based on Lipkin) (Wallis 2011). Burns spent the next several years researching pandemics against the background of the H1N1 flu pandemic.

Further evidence of *Contagion*'s agenda lies in the film's credits. Near the end of the credit roll, on a slide thanking the US Department of Defense as well as the National Guard of California, Georgia, and Illinois, a plug for a companion website reads, "IT'S NOT IF, BUT *WHEN*. GET READY AT www.takepart.com/contagion" (Jacobs et al. 2011). Notably, this link was updated to redirect to a different site, for COVID-19—more on this update below. However, if one had followed the link in in early March 2020 before it was changed, one would have been directed to a page hosted by the now retired "digital news and lifestyle magazine" of Participant Media called Take Part, which encouraged activism on issues such as environmental justice and food production practices (*Contagion* 2015). On the *Contagion* subpage, which is still accessible via the *Internet Archive*'s "Wayback Machine," an invitation for the public to "Host a Screening" lies beneath a link to the film's trailer, with a link to the distributor (*Contagion* 2015). Other links redirected to pandemic projects at International Medical Corps, as well as two web-based epidemic surveillance websites: FluNearYou and HealthMap, both of which have ties to Brilliant (*Contagion* 2015).[3] Although not terribly sophisticated as a resource page for public health information, its existence as a supplement to *Contagion* underscores the film's educational enterprise and interest in influencing pandemic policy.

The March 2020 update to this website goes much further, becoming a belated, further adaptation of the entanglement of *Contagion*, and its fictional, hypothetical world, with real policy and science. Amid the film's renewed popularity in late March, the original companion website abruptly disappeared, and the link at the end of the film's credits began redirecting instead to a webpage hosted by the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, titled "Control the Contagion" (Columbia University 2020).

[3] FluNearYou is backed by the organization Ending Pandemics, where Larry Brilliant serves on the advisory board. HealthMap received funding from Google.org, where Brilliant was the first CEO, and where one of his two inaugural initiatives was related to ending pandemics. Brilliant's influence not only on *Contagion* but on pandemic policy more broadly is outside the scope of the present study, but is worth noting as a topic of considerable compit lexity.

The website describes its agenda like this: "Misleading, inaccurate messages and advice about the COVID-19 pandemic are being shared across both traditional and social media platforms. We wanted to do our part to curb this" (Columbia University 2020). Apparently, the Mailman School reached out to the ensemble cast of starts to create a series of public service announcements (PSAs) based on the film, which they released on YouTube as well as via an updated companion website for the film (Columbia University 2020). These PSAs constitue a delayed adaptation of the original, fictional film into an instance of real-world, public health propaganda (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013).[4] The cast isn't exactly "reunited," insofar as they all filmed their own segments at home. However, the scripts were penned by original screenwriter Burns and developed in consultation with the same scientists who helped to shape the film, including Lipkin and Brilliant. In the PSAs, the actors play themselves, yet all of them allude to their screen identities. Each one tackles a different aspect of COVID-19 pandemic reality, as if the aura of the experience of the fictional characters from the world of *Contagion* somehow lends them their authority. Matt Damon advises the public to "Listen to Experts"; Kate Winslet instructs on how to "Wash Your Hands"; Laurence Fishburne unpacks "Social Distancing"; Jennifer Ehle appears on a slide that says, "Stay Home," although she primarily talks about vaccines; and Marion Cotillard, beaming in from France a few days ahead of the forthcoming American viral wave, warns Americans, gravely, that they need to "Make a Choice" to slow the spread of the virus. For the most part the actors filmed themselves, and the videos cultivate the raw, Zoom-vérité quality of coronavirus-era visual media. Two major actors from the film are missing, although it's not hard to see why: they include Paltrow, whose character, Beth Emhoff, is effectively patient zero, and who is depicted rather negatively by the film for spreading the virus via an extramarital affair; and Jude Law, who plays the conspiracy theorist Krumwiede. Insofar as the PSAs earn their credibility in part from that of the characters they represent, one can see how these "negative" characters would be disqualified from the Columbia PSAs.

The specific content of the PSAs mainly reiterates the advice with which health authorities in the US and around the world saturated the public in the early days of the pandemic. Nor is it extraordinary for Hollywood actors to make public statements about social or political issues that capitalize upon prior roles, although the involvement of a major research university in such a production represents a weird blurring of Hollywood glam with academic authority. Given that the homemade videos were produced at home and explicitly designed to be shared on social media, however, they begin to call attention to what has changed since the film came out in 2011, specifically to what the film does not predict about the 2020 pandemic: the advances in internet technology and infrastructure—in particular streaming video and video conferencing—that have facilitated the experience for an emerging non-essential, work-from-home class. These PSAs, in which the actors play themselves working from home, represent what again appear as the most critical aspects of our pandemic life not predicted by the 2011 science-fiction world of *Contagion*: the arrival of widespread, easy-to-use, streaming video production and communication, and its facilitation of white-collar remote work as well as entertainment. Notably, aside from government and public health officials, doctors, and pharmacy workers, no one appears to be at work in the world of *Contagion* once the pandemic gets rolling. Aside from one scene where the National Guard distributes food to a panicked crowd, the film simply does not address what the policies look like regarding issues such as government-sponsored food distribution, income replacement, or housing provisions. This is perhaps the most unrealistic component of the film, or at least the part most out of sync with the priorities of public discussion as they have played out in politically polarized 2020: although the characters do witness looting and experience some

[4] The definition of propaganda I deploy here and throughout this essay is not necessarily negative, but rather follows the definition offered by Auerbach and Castronovo in the introduction to their groundbreaking co-edited volume *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*. As Auerbach et al. explain, "[p]ropaganda is not intrinsically evil or immoral" (p. 5), and can in fact be positive, as is often the case with public health propaganda. Propaganda is moreover always "fluid, varying according to context and function" (p. 5).

hardship, they survive in what appears to be suburban comfort for the most part, and it's never clear how they continue to support themselves, or for that matter how they keep themselves occupied at home. The characters of *Contagion* certainly do not have widespread access to Zoom, nor to the now ubiquitous streaming entertainment services on which so many viewers accessed *Contagion.* Instagram had not yet acquired the video functionality that made Cardi B's viral sensation possible. These technologies would have still been emerging in the world of the film, assuming it was set roughly contemporaneous to its 2011 release.

The depiction of media and technology in this pandemic film, and especially how it contrasts with the 2020 experience of COVID-19 pandemic reality, matters. As a belated adaptation of *Contagion*, the Columbia COVID-19 PSAs focus our attention not only with the heath guidance they describe, which is widely available everywhere, but also—through their materiality as homemade videos in the age of coronavirus—on what the original film failed to foresee about the COVID-19 pandemic: the emergent power and cultural inertia of 2020's videoconferencing enabled work-from-home culture. If we take them as a kind of sequel to this premediating disaster film, remade for a hypermediated 2020 reality, it might even be said that they attempt to convert the film's premediation into real pandemic propaganda. One might even retroactively speculate that the fictional world of *Contagion*—a world without work-from-home as a standard practice, or even a realistic possibility given the limitations of software and bandwidth—is plausible only because the virus in the film is so deadly, killing up to a third of those exposed including children and non-elderly adults, forcing (rather than loosely ordering, as was the case in the US and most of the world) essential and nonessential workers alike to remain at home. Indeed, the populace in the film stays home not because the government has ordered it or deemed their employment nonessential, but because their lives truly depend upon it. The COVID pandemic, by contrast, involves a virus with a relatively low death rate for the young and healthy—who would include most of the cast of characters in *Contagion*—and, in most countries, an exceptionally steep gradient of risk for the sick and elderly (Ioannidis 2020). The Columbia PSAs, which call attention to this technology through their vérité style (although surely these famous actors had access to high-quality production, even amid the pandemic), thus become something like a belated revision offering the following acknowledgement: that only with the arrival of home videoconferencing technology could a long-lasting, massively disruptive pandemic response become possible for a respiratory virus with the fatality profile of COVID-19. This, too, may ultimately represent a belated adaptation of a further uncanny reassurance the original *Contagion* offered to those who watched or rewatched it in 2020: its whispered, contradictory reminders that our pandemic, however grave a concern for the vulnerable, in fact is not as deadly or contagious as MEV-1, while our infrastructure for transmitting media for work and pleasure—including the infrastructure that makes it possible to stream *Contagion*—has become exquisitely nimble.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Adams, Sam, and Rebecca Onion. 2020. Watching Contagion in the Age of Coronavirus. *Slate*, March 19. Available online: https://slate.com/culture/2020/03/contagion-coronavirus-soderbergh.html (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Auerbach, Jonathan, and Russ Castronovo. 2013. Thirteen propositions about propaganda. In *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–16.

Brilliant, Larry. 2006. *My Wish: Help Me Stop Pandemics*. TED.com. February. Available online: https://www.ted.com/talks/larry_brilliant_my_wish_help_me_stop_pandemics?language=en (accessed on 2 November 2020).

Brilliant, Larry. 2016. *Sometimes Brilliant*. New York: Harper One.

Cardi B. 2020. *Ya Keep Playing I'm Deadass FUCKIN SCARED* [Viral coronavirus video]. March 10. Available online: https://www.instagram.com/iamcardib/?hl=en (accessed on 28 October 2020).

Clark, Travis. 2020. Pandemic Movie 'Contagion' Is Surging in Popularity Due to the Coronavirus and has Hit the No. 7 Spot on iTunes. *Business Insider*, March 6. Available online: https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-contagion-movie-is-surging-in-piracy-rentals-on-itunes-2020-3 (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Columbia University. 2020. *Control the Contagion*. New York: Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, Available online: https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/control-contagion (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Contagion. 2015. Takepart. January 21. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20200318111927/http://www.takepart.com/contagion/ (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Douglas, Edward. 2011. *CS Interview: Contagion Writer Scott Z. Burns*. ComingSoon.net. August 13. Available online: https://www.comingsoon.net/movies/features/81596-cs-interview-contagion-writer-scott-z-burns (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Flier, Jeffrey S. 2020. Covid-19 Is Reshaping the World of Bioscience Publishing. *Stat*, March 23. Available online: https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/23/bioscience-publishing-reshaped-covid-19/ (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Grusin, Richard. 2010. *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Harmon, Katherine. 2011. Contagion Spreads Truths about Bioterrorism. "Observations" blog. *Scientific American*, September 1. Available online: https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/contagion-spreads-truths-about-bioterrorism/ (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Ioannidis, John P. A. 2020. Infection fatality rate of COVID-19 inferred from seroprevelance data. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*. Available online: https://www.who.int/bulletin/online_first/BLT.20.265892.pdf (accessed on 14 October 2020).

Jacobs, Gregory, Michael Shamberg, Stacey Sher, Steven Soderbergh, and Sott Z. Burns. 2011. *Contagion*. [Motion picture; DVD release]. Los Angeles: Participant Media.

Jagernauth, Kevin. 2011. *Steven Soderbergh Reveals He Dropped a Leni Riefenstahl Biopic to do 'Contagion' Instead*. March 11. Available online: https://www.indiewire.com/2011/03/steven-soderbergh-reveals-he-dropped-a-leni-riefenstahl-biopic-to-do-contagion-instead-119835/ (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Kelly, Heather. 2020. People Have Found a Way to Cope with Pandemic Fears: Watching 'Contagion'. *Washington Post*. Available online: https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/03/06/contagion-streaming/ (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Lipkin, Ian. 2011. Prof. Ian Lipkin brings science to Hollywood's Contagion. Public Health Now News, Mailman School of Public Health Website, Columbia University. Available online: https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/prof-ian-lipkin-brings-science-hollywoods-contagion (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Morris, Wesley. 2020. For me, rewatching 'Contagion' Was Fun, until It Wasn't. *The New York Times*, March 10. Available online: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/movies/contagion-movie-coronavirus.html (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Roos, Robert. 2011. *'Contagion' Portrays Extreme but Not Impossible Scenario*. Available online: https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2011/09/contagion-portrays-extreme-not-impossible-scenario (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Turner, Fred. 2006. *From Counter Culture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wald, Priscilla. 2008. *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Duke: Duke University Press.

Wald, Priscilla. 2020. *Covid 19 and the outbreak narrative* [web lecture at Elon University]. YouTube. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXTzmxc5qhY (accessed on 14 September 2020).

Wallis, Claudia. 2011. *Mailman School Virus Hunter Ian Lipkin Puts Science on Screen in 'Contagion'*. August 28. Available online: https://news.columbia.edu/news/mailman-school-virus-hunter-ian-lipkin-puts-science-screen-contagion (accessed on 2 November 2020).

Wilkinson, Alissa. 2020. The 2011 Film 'Contagion' Is Even More Relevant in 2020, and Not Just Because of Coronavirus. *Vox*, February 4. Available online: https://www.vox.com/2020/2/4/21120178/contagion-movie-coronavirus-itunes-fake-news (accessed on 2 November 2020).

arts

MDPI

Article

Remediating 'Prufrock'

Scott Freer

Independent Scholar, Leicester LE2 1TN, UK; scottfreer8@gmail.com

Received: 1 September 2020; Accepted: 9 October 2020; Published: 15 October 2020

Abstract: This article examines remediated examples of T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915). Eliot's innovative dramatic monologue has sustained an enduring inter-media afterlife, mainly because visual artists generally capitalized on the poem's residual Victorian painterly and semi-narrative qualities. Here I look at a wider range of visual forms from old and new media that, for both pedagogic and artistic purposes, remediate the poem's ekphrastic, semi-narrative and modernist aesthetics: the comic strip, the animated film, the dramatic monologue film, the split-screen video poem and the photographic spatial montage. Together, they demonstrate the dialogic and multi-directional nature of remediation and articulate via inter-media strategies various literary properties and themes (e.g., character, setting, visual motifs, paralysis) of 'Prufrock'.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot; Prufrock; remediation; comic strip; animated film; split screen; video poem; YouTube dramatic monologue; photographic montage

1. Introduction

As I have argued elsewhere, the ekphrastic dimensions (the painterly aspects) of T.S. Eliot's experimental modernist poem are instrumental to its trans-media legacy (Freer 2019). What I term 'reverse ekphrasis' is an artistic extension of 'painting pictures' or the mental visualization of a poem. Unlike the literary form of the novel, poetry does not appear to offer the optimum starting point for a diverse tradition of remediation. Sylvia Plath, in her essay 'A Comparison' (1962), expresses her envy towards the novelist because with the poem "there is so little room [. . . .] The poet becomes an expert packer of suitcases. [. . . .] If a poem is concentrated, a closed fist, then a novel is relaxed and expansive, an open hand [. . .]" (Plath [1962] 2000, pp. 145–47). However, in the new media age, the form and meaning of literature, in the words of Gunther Kress, are often "realized, 'spread across' several modes" (Kress [2003] 2005, p. 35). So, remediation offers the platform for the 'expansive' opening up of a 'concentrated' form. 'Prufrock' is probably the most popular poem of the twentieth century, which is remarkable given Eliot's use of literary modernist techniques (such as compression and allusion) that are often deemed 'difficult' for contemporary readers. The enduring inter-media appeal of 'Prufrock' has much to do with the poem being a 'semi-narrative' monologue that lends itself to remediation in visual narrative forms. 'Prufrock' is invariably read as the journey (mental or physical) of an alienated male character through a modern city who in the lyrical closure imagines singing mermaids.

This is a follow up essay to 'Screening 'Prufrock', extending a study of cinematic adaptations to a study of multiple and often amateur and new media forms (Freer 2019). The following examples of remediated 'Prufrock' testify to what Bolter and Grusin view as the ever-expanding spiral of refashioning—media forms appropriating aesthetic properties from other media. This invariably means a trace of older media innovation/s remains in new media: for instance, according to André Bazin, the moving image of cinema is an advancement of photography with regards to realism (Bolter and Grusin 2000, p. 26). However, Ezra Pound's modernist injunction, 'Make It New!', is a disingenuous rejection of the past for earlier forms linger in new forms: "For our culture, [. . .]

mediation without remediation seems to be impossible" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, p. 271). New digital media also recycle and do not automatically 'replace' the older ones. For instance, a computer screen layout, in order to create an interactive narrative, may incorporate a montage effect—one that replicates the logic of hypermediacy (a non-linear medium of multiple information sources) (Bolter and Grusin 2000, pp. 55, 221). Dru Jefferies agrees that media history should not be perceived in teleological terms. For example, the use of split screen is synchronously present in the history of silent cinema and the graphic art of comics (Jeffries 2017). In other words, a degree of cultural convergence also exists: "media flow", as points of departure, overcomes the ghost of the fidelity model (Jenkins 2006, pp. 3–4).

This is relevant to modernist literature that is both the source and repository of experimental art. For example, T.S. Eliot's use of multiple fractured voices in *The Waste Land* (1922) bears a close resemblance to the cinematic montage of city symphonies, such as *Manhatta* (dir. Paul Strand & Charles Sheeler, 1921). Eliot's use of 'the mythical method', which disturbs temporal orientation by invoking trans-historical parallels, is not only present in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) but also in films such as Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tales* (1944) and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) (Freer 2007). David Trotter has argued Prufrock's vision of the mermaid has "something of the magic-lantern show about it" (Trotter 2006, p. 245). And Avishek Parui likens Eliot's ekphrastic use of the dramatic monologue to "the convergence of neurosis and cinema"—with the self-conscious Prufrock occupying the male gaze and women as the spectacle of fantasy (Parui 2013, p. 9). In other words, remediation is multi-directional, and, in the case of 'Prufrock', various refashioning techniques bear a trace of modernist aesthetic borrowings. In fact, some examples are not constituted by content translation but rather embody the aesthetics of modernism.

The following five media examples constitute paradigms of remediation from an ever-expansive list. Each individual artist uses a range of visual strategies from old to new media as a means of responding differently to literary ideas of either character, narrative, setting, poetic imagery, voice or fragmentation:

1. Comic strip (Julian Peters)
2. Animated short film (Christopher Scott)
3. Dramatic monologue short film (Karl Verkade)
4. Split-screen video poem (Jelena Sinik)
5. Photographic spatial montage (Mat Collishaw)

The order is not meant to imply a linear telos—though, what is revealed is a general polarity between the narrative tendencies of the comic strip and animated film, and the indeterminate poetics of photographic montage. The latter, a continuation of the split-screen technique, is more akin to the Lev Kuleshov effect (when the viewer infers meaning from the interaction of two sequential shots) and so pays more respect to the modernist form of Eliot's poem. Jelena Sinik and Mat Collishaw are less interested in visually resolving poetic ambiguity. Visualizing the printed word is inevitably an act of interpretation, and each visual artist, as we shall see, is wrestling with remediation as an adaptation of both form and meaning. Each artist is also responding to the ekphrastic properties of 'Prufrock' (e.g., the metonymic motifs of Prufrock's zone of consciousness), and in this sense each example of remediation draws on specific potentialities in the poem: e.g., the setting or neurosis of modernity, the dislocated flaneur.

This article does not present a comprehensive study of Prufrockian remediation but nonetheless testifies to the proliferation and variety of inter-media visualizations (whilst also drawing in part on interviews with three of the main artists). With regards to T.S. Eliot's poetry, probably the first remediation example of a 'graphic poem' is Martin Rowson's *The Wasteland* (1990) which undercuts the hermeneutic quest for a submerged pattern of meaning. For the comic artist, Julian Peters, graphic art remediation is a means of unlocking poetry for a new visual media generation. Animated films that transpose the static visuals of graphic art into a sequence of moving panels also tend to

literalize the 'mental landscape' of 'Prufrock'. By foregrounding the narrative qualities of character and setting, Christopher Scott's remediation further demonstrates the inter-media parallels between the visual devices of cinema and the comic strip. Despite the fact that Eliot subverts the traditional sense of a specific or fully rounded character and naturalistic setting, most remediated examples found on YouTube are 'inhabited' dramatic monologues that render Prufrock into a modern-day archetype. They capitalize on what Conrad Aiken described as a "semi-narrative psychological" portrait (Aiken and Realists 1997, p. 81). They also exemplify new media fandom in terms of identification and performance, and Karl Verkade's short film perfectly illustrates this. For Hugh Kenner, J. Alfred Prufrock is not a character and we are instead entering into a "zone of consciousness" (Kenner 1960, p. 35). In this respect, Jelena Sinik's short video poem uses the split screen format to express the fractured poetics of the inner self. And finally, Mat Collishaw's work adopts the spatial mode of photographic montage in order to defy narrative sequential meaning and to underscore the idea that visualization and conceptualization do not adequately correlate.

2. Comic Strip (Julian Peters)

Adaptations of canonical poems in comic book form are not a novelty. With regards to T.S. Eliot's poetry, probably the first remediation example of a 'graphic poem' is Martin Rowson's *The Wasteland* (1990), and is a rare example, as Brian McHale has noted, of postmodern 'anti-narrative' in comic strip adaptation (McHale 2010). For many readers, Eliot's epic collage poem invites a hermeneutic quest—to decipher from out of the broken images an underlying pattern tantamount to a sequential narrative. As Brian McHale puts it: "Successive generations of readers and critics have willingly assumed the task of recovering *The Waste Land*'s submerged narrative" (McHale 2010, p. 252). In fact, Rowson sees his irreverent parody as a "postmodernist comic book" that by synthesizing film visual quotes with allusions to other Eliot poems, such as 'Prufrock', frustrates the quest for narrative completion (Rowson [1990] 2012, pp. 68–73). For Brian McHale, Rowson's parody is "anti-narrative", and his analysis shows that various forms of narrative poetic segmentivity interact in this complex multimodal text (McHale 2010, p. 4). In other words, comic books may appear to be a sequential visual art (narrating a flow of events) but can also be analogous at times to the multiple and shifting voices of modernist poetry. As McHale states: "Rowson's adaptation of Eliot gives us a rare opportunity to reflect a little on the possible parallels between segmentation in narrative poetry and segmentation in comics" (McHale 2010, p. 6). In this respect, comics as remediation, whilst filling in narrative gaps, sometimes exhibit affiliation to avant-garde poetry by also opening up gaps.

Julian Peters is a 'comic strip' artist with a particular interest in deploying the graphic form in order to unlock poetry (the most imagistic of literary forms) for "a new generation raised on visual communication" (Peters 2020a). In his book, *Poems to See By*, Peters states that the "primary function of a comic book is usually to tell a story" (Peters 2020a, preface). His comic strip narrativizations of poems are often deployed as a pedagogic tool and his version of 'Prufrock' has been remediated into animated film too. Peters' approach to the visualization of poetry is based on identifying common visual parallels. In an interview, he speaks of poems that "immediately conjure up vivid imagery in my head" (Peters 2020b, interview). Drawn to 'Prufrock' as a teenager when an English Literature teacher recited the poem in class, Peters was immediately struck by the opening lines and the "atmospheric street scene [. . .] unfurling itself in front of my mind's eye" (Peters 2020b, interview). For Peters, "the regular repetition of visual elements throughout a comic" can be composed similar to rhyme in poetry (Peters 2020b, interview). Peters also gives credence to the "expressive potential of juxtaposition" or the bringing together of disparate images, and in this respect refers to the lines: "spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table" (Peters 2020b, interview and Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 37). This effect in a comic, for Peters, is achieved in "the contrast between successive panels, as well as in the contrast between the words and the images" (Peters 2020b, interview). In other words, Peters creates a semi-narrative through recurring visual motifs, such as Prufrock's face refracted in a mirror to echo the line "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 38). And Peters

interrupts "the more regular reading flow"—the linear pull of the comic strip—by manipulating the reader's eye across the page in order to linger on certain panels (Peters 2020b, interview). By editing the visual information, in a way that is similar to a film montage editor, or cinematographer in terms of mise-en-scène, Peters is able to achieve what he refers to as an "in-between quality" (Peters 2020b, interview). In this sense, the visualization of a poetic image is only half-realized (see Peters 2018).

For Stephen Spender, the opening metaphor in 'Prufrock' is ambiguously suspended between "naturalistic" and "symptomatic" imagery—metonymic motifs of Prufrock's interior world (Spender 1975). The initial simile of "the evening spread out against the sky" is realizable as a mental visualization. On the other hand, the simile or metaphor that hangs on the word 'etherised' is 'symptomatic' because the 'patient' is the "soul" of the city, and in turn the mental-scape of Prufrock "hangs" on this dreamy unrealizable visual imagining (Spender 1975, pp. 41–42). On the title panel, following the epigraph, Peters juxtaposes the opening lines with a literalized image of the etherised patient and below a translation of Guido da Montefeltro's (from Dante's *Inferno*) confession (Peters). This way, the panel sustains an ambiguous tension between the 'naturalistic' and 'symptomatic' reading of the surreal image (see Figure 1). In turn, Peters respects Eliot's intention to superimpose a vision of hell onto a modern setting that suggests both a metaphysical and living form of paralysis. Generally, YouTube animated comic strips omit the *Inferno* epigraph and instead zoom onto the patient—thus imitating a cinematic effect of close-up and establishing shot.

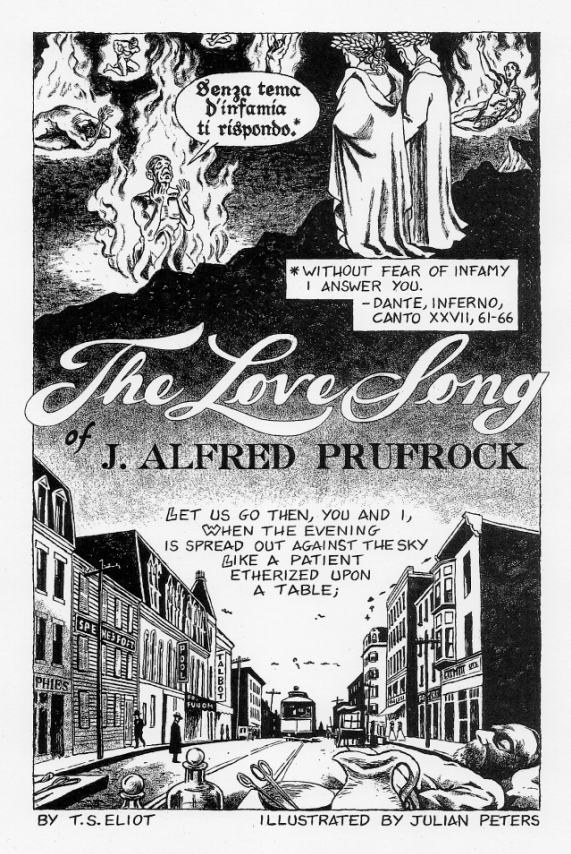


Figure 1. Julian Peters. (See Peters 2018)

Whilst the opening panels respect Eliot's poetics of paralysis, Peters generally exploits ekphrastic elements of the poem in order to visualize what he sees as "the genteel social setting" of the poem (Peters 2020b, interview). For instance, the fog could be suggestive of Edwardian London, but Peters specifically focused on Boston (Massachusetts) as a specific urban and cultural setting. While a student at Harvard University, Eliot composed the poem, and the autobiographical reading is underscored

with Prufrock envisaged as the poet himself. As Peters puts it: "Prufrock is a stand-in for the poet" (Peters 2020b, interview). In assuming the speaker as the poet, Eliot's poetics of impersonality are undercut, and the dramatic monologue reverts to a confessional mode and a psychological self-portrait. As we shall see in other examples, this is a typical strategy of visualization: to translate the speaking voice into an identifiable protagonist who inhabits a naturalistic setting. And in rendering the character "stuffily class-conscious" moving through a "claustrophobic" Boston, a certain caricature of Eliot as repressed Puritan is pictured (Peters 2020b, interview). Peters heightens the "melancholic" mood through the use of extreme camera angles that are reminiscent of film noir or German expressionism (Peters 2020b, interview). In other words, there is very much a filmic quality to Peters' visualization. There are aerial shots that create the impression of a labyrinthine city and low angled and interior shots that invoke the urban Gothic of gaslight melodrama. The anthropomorphized fog, echoing too the opening of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, further frames the setting with a touch of the Gothic.

So even though poetry does not offer the optimum starting point for successful cinematic adaptation, 'Prufrock' is suggestive enough of character, setting and plotline to lend itself to narrative adaptation. Peters also creates a visual narrative out of the poem, by treating the line "Let us go then, you and I" as an invite to a journey (through a mental or physical landscape) that leads to the room where the women talk of art: a "social gathering [that] had only occurred within Prufrock's head" (Peters 2020b, interview). The single low angled image of stairs to a grand Edwardian door as well as those of Prufrock dressing himself in preparation to the "visit" and the yellow fog that winds its way to a "house" underscores the spatial sequencing of events (Peters 2020b, interview). And by literalizing the "you" as a gentrified lady from the line "Time for you and time for me", Peters interprets the 'love song' as a narrative of frustrated romance and an Edwardian gentleman fraught with neurotic anxieties about women (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 38). In following panels, words are put into the mouth of the same imagined female, because Peters wishes to depict a "single love interest" (Peters 2019, p. 78). The closing panels showing Prufrock "knocking on the door of the house [. . . .] anticipating how the social call will play out for him" is framed to suggest that what is occurring "is actually taking place in the protagonist's mind" (Peters 2019, pp. 74–75). Even though the closing panels depict Prufrock physically returning to the site of ill-fated romance (Prufrock is knocking on the door of the house where the women are "Talk of Michelangelo", Peters is toying with a 'semi-narrative' psychological portrait to also echo the metaphysical dimensions of a Dantesque 'living hell' (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 37):

> I liked the idea of showing Prufrock stepping through the entrance of the house from an exterior side angle in which only one of his legs is still visible, in such a way as to suggest that he is being swallowed up by the terrifying social event within. However, the relative visual banality of this image seemed not quite appropriate as a fitting conclusion to the comic. In the end, I must say I'm quite happy with the solution I came up with, which was to rotate this last panel onto its side, in a way that Prufrock appears to be falling into the open door of the house, and this refers back to the descent into the underworld alluded to in the poem's epigraph from Dante. The position of the leg here, by the way, is inspired by the protruding leg of Icarus in Brueghel the Elder's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. A reader pointed out in a comment on my website that the vaguely floral design on the wrought iron railing, when set on its side, recalls the shapes of fish. (Peters 2020b, interview)

So, even though the final panel gives closure to an imagined narrative sequence of panels, Peters draws on various visual media to both 'unpack' and compress visual-poetic meaning. And Peters's reading of the last line is similar to Mat Collishaw's: "One of my readings is that he is awoken from his reveries by the real world, and that awakening from these interior ruminations, plunges him back into the world he is not equipped to dealing with" (Collishaw 2019, interview). Peters deploys a variety of cinematic shots, including the surrealistic rotated shot, to symbolize the going into the underworld that accompanies the re-entry into an artificial one. By giving visual form to Prufrock's psychodrama, Peters' comic strip suggests continuity between the modes of paralysis, the mermaid fantasy and unfulfilled male desire.

3. Animated Film (Christopher Scott)

Animated film adaptations of 'Prufrock' found on YouTube invariably show a moving sequence of still illustrations synchronized with T.S. Eliot's reading of the poem. In *Comic Book Film Style*, Dru Jeffries details how, despite the inherent aesthetic differences between a lexico-visual medium to an audiovisual medium, the remediation of comic to film foregrounds potential parallels. Edwin S. Porter's direct adaptations of serialized adaptations represent "an ongoing conversation between the two media" (Jeffries 2017, p. 58). The experimental use of synchronized intertitles replicates and overcomes the limited use of bubble speech. As Jeffries puts it: "remediating comic books' word-image hybridity represents a return to a pre-classical approach to film style" (Jeffries 2017, p. 59). Whereas Julian Peters' comic strip visualization demonstrates the creative combination of text and image that exists in a visually static art form, animated film fulfils more the moving visual dynamic of cinema.

Christopher Scott's adaptation of the poem into a short, animated film for an interdisciplinary thesis (School of Arts and Sciences, Rutger University 2011–2012) demonstrates further the dialogic remediation of the printed page into new media (see Scott 2012b). The YouTube video poem is a popular tool for teaching 'Prufrock' and has had 158,523 viewings since 9 April 2012 (Scott 2012a). In his thesis, Scott details the production process with regards to the storyboard, timing sheet and animatics. Scott uses an abridged version of the poem, omitting lines 70–87 and 99–110 in order to focus on Prufrock "as a would-be lover" (Scott 2012b, p. 24). Scott has a clear goal-oriented narrative (à la classical Hollywood) in mind: "I want to show Prufrock move from the streets to the party [and] to the sea chamber" (Scott 2012b, p. 1). With T.S. Eliot's synchronized reading serving as a timing sheet, Scott breaks down lines into individual shots. Scott describes creating "backgrounds for each scene" (Scott 2012b, p. 3). Moving realistic effects, such as smoke from a chimney, are also added prior to implementing an iMovie editing program. Scott uses 8–12 drawings per second and used Audacity to edit the soundtrack with Eliot's voiceover. Similar to Peters, Scott focuses on 'Prufrock' as a character whilst acknowledging the difficulty in transposing a "static character" with a narrative arc: "To combat this lack of action I move Prufrock through different places and times" (Scott 2012b, p. 9) (see Figure 2).

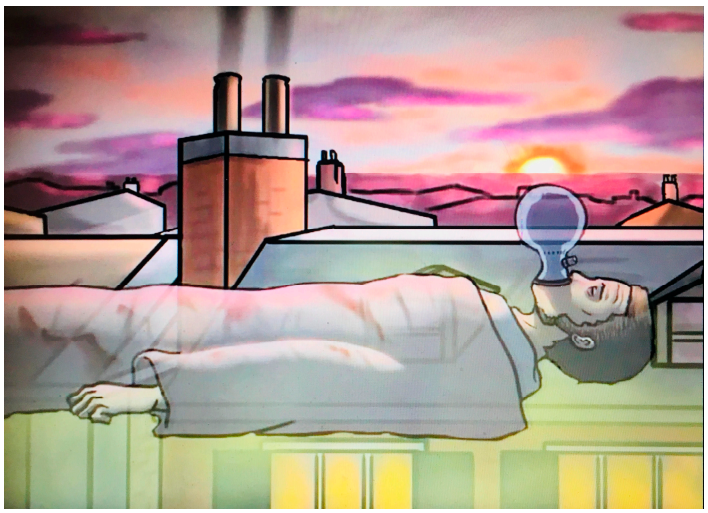


Figure 2. Christopher Scott. Prufrock as an etherised patient floating above Boston.

Scott's shot plan that served as a storyboard in many respects is revealing of how the transposition from static graphic image to moving animation is dependent on cinematic aesthetics. There is an "establishing shot: Boston circa 1910", prior to panning shots across the cityscape and a shot of a house (Scott 2012b, p. 30). In order to establish a character in time and place, Scott further deploys the strategies of classical Hollywood. The exterior shots precede interior shots of the house and close ups of the women talking of Michelangelo "with mouths opening and closing" (Scott 2012b, p. 30). Scott also deploys 'cut away' shots to emphasis body parts and to foreground Prufrock's metonymic

perspective: for example, his small bald patch indicates his ageing anxiety, or the focus on the women's arms or hands suggesting the male desire for women is fractured and repressed.

As Jeffries points out, an irreconcilable ontological difference between comics and film is the absence or presence of sound (Jeffries 2017, p. 53). Whereas Peters' comic strip remediates the textual, visualizing devices of the silent film era, Scott's use of Eliot's reading as a soundtrack parallels the audio-visual synchronicity of the 'talkie'. Furthermore, Scott's emphasis on 'movement'—e.g., so many drawings per second and the sequential movement of Prufrock through place and time—captures more the kinetic dynamism of the cinema.

4. Dramatic Monologue Film (Karl Verkade)

Another example of 'Prufrock' remediation is the dramatic monologue short film, one that involves new media fandom via which a creative reader inhabits or impersonates the role of the character. As Henri Jenkins points out, fan works offer a rich model of multimodal literacy because they "almost always involve the translation of characters, worlds and stories from one medium to another" (Jenkins 2019, p. 84). New media fandom is thus a cultural practice of refashioning—the reproducing of a cultural object in other forms. Performativity and self-expression are also integral parts of new media fandom. This is a means by which fans identify with certain fictional characters and integrate themselves more fully with the text (Lanier and Fowler 2012, pp. 285, 290). As Mark Duffett argues, fandom legitimizes public performance via which the fan with invested passion performs an allegiance of identity—hence the drive to "remake" (Duffett 2013, p. 68). The literary character is an enabling source that unlocks the performance of the self, because it 'speaks to' the reader—it is a role the reader recognizes and wishes to assume. Usually fandom is directed towards objects of popular culture, but, despite its modernist status, 'Prufrock' has become somewhat of a cult fan object that deals with male adolescent themes. This said, 'Prufrock' is very much a male-centered and mock-heroic poem and so any dramatic monologue performance raises questions with regards to masculinity and self-expression in terms of disclosure or non-disclosure. Is the performed inhabitation an extension of the self or a self-effacing means of conveying a diminished masculinity (e.g., Prufrock paralyzed by indecision or depression)?

Probably the enduring appeal of 'Prufrock' is due to Eliot's use of the dramatic monologue, and its transmedia legacy can primarily be put down to certain formal aspects that lend themselves to visualization: character, setting and narrative. However, as Glennis Byron notes, Eliot's modernist treatment of the poetic mode, through inter-textuality and the fragmentation of voice, subverts the traditional sense of a 'specific' or fully rounded character and 'naturalistic' setting: in what identifiable milieu do we place the speaker (Byron 2003, p. 114)? Initial critical reviews, when published in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), generally recognize the poem as a 'satirical portrait' and point to its ekphrastic 'observations', whilst lauding Eliot's appropriation of a Victorian tradition, in particular the influential author of dramatic monologues, Robert Browning (for example, 'My Last Duchess' is a poem about the visual medium of a portrait). As Ezra Pounds states: "Mr. Eliot has made an advance on Browning" (Pound [1917] 1997, p. 72). For Hugh Kenner, "Prufrock is strangely boundless", because he "isn't a 'character' cut out of the rest of the universe and equipped with a history and a little necessary context" (Kenner 1960, p. 35). In this respect, new media adaptations reveal new visual possibilities for appreciating Prufrock's mental landscape. As Glennis Byron puts it: "Ezra Pound's experiments with dramatic monologue in *Personae* are primarily the result of his concern to find an appropriate poetic voice through which to speak the self, and right from the start this 'self' is seen as something necessarily fragmented, multiple and shifting" (Byron 2003, p. 113). In other words, adopting the dramatic mask conceals or fractures the expression of selfhood. With this in mind, it is curious that contemporary video poems of 'Prufrock' frequently involve a male person inhabiting the voice of the character as though an actor inhabiting a role. This could suggest an additional distancing mask, but the dramatic persona should also be conceived as enabling self-expression. So, in a way, it is not an original literary character that is being inhabited but a dramatic persona. For Margaret Synder, because

the poem features in English classes for High School, Prufrock has become a "blueprint for modern masculine expression" (Synder 2015, p. 95). In fact, the performative dimension of Prufrock as persona appeals to the rite-of-passage teenager. Both Julian Peters and Jelena Sinik fondly recalled 'Prufrock' speaking to them in their teen years. Prufrock is regularly identified as a solipsistic teenager alienated from the social world and self-consciously struggling with issues of self-expression and identity-crisis. Typically, participating in the fandom performance enables the reader to be imaginatively transported to "exotic or ethereal fictional worlds" (Booth 2008, p. 520). Fandom identification with Prufrock, though, is a means of relaying modern-day neurosis.

In a 'Shmoop' YouTube video for educating students, 'Prufrock' is comically visualized as a poem of masculine crisis, focusing on the character's body image (e.g., hair loss and skinny limbs) whilst he seemingly frets about his "wimpiness". The short pedagogic video also poses the question: "Why does J. Alfred Prufrock not tell his love how he feels? Is it unrequited love, self-loathing or does he feel lost?" (Shmoop University, Inc. 2013). The implication is that the 'love song' is an indirect kind of confession of a single male. In 'The American Conservative', Prufrock is a byword for: "the wince-inducing incompetence of single men today", or "Millennials who prefer to cohabit and forgo families" or "phone-addicted insular iGens" (Meyrat 2018). Invariably, short films found on YouTube treat the poem in this fashion: a caricature of self-conscious masculinity. The example by Jones and Spears (2014) is ambiguously comical, with the wearing of theatrical masks to indicate either multiple selves or the performative solipsism of Prufrock (Jones and Spears 2014). The general trend amongst short films for school projects is a self-portrait of a depressed, lonely teen in a naturalistic setting. A student's black and white short film example uses a voice over to imply interior monologue, and the ending conveys a bleak sense of future rather than a regretful past. The final closes with an individual returning to a teenager's bedsit (Samples 2012). Occasionally, the person who occupies the Prufrock role is a disengaged middle-aged male (Miller). In this example, the Prufrockian type is for most of the time a silent observer. There is a series of stills and little sense of movement, to imply a lack of psychological or physical journeying. In a restaurant scene, the male sits alone and from his point of view we see people conversing around a table, to suggest a parallel between superficial social chat and the "Talking of Michelangelo" lines in the poem. The film deploys time cuts too: from the Prufrockian male daydreaming in a bath to a beach (echoing the mermaid vision) and returning to Prufrock staring at banal life, reading a book and women chatting. The words, "That is not what I meant, at all", reverberate, suggesting an inability for the male to directly express an interior life (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 41).

A Lovesong, shot in New York and directed by Laura Scrivano and featuring the actor Daniel Henshall, best exemplifies how short films remediate 'Prufrock' into a 'psychological portrait of a neurotic man'. The film itself is described as: a "solitary man [who] wanders the streets of a city, restless with indecision. As he tumbles down a rabbit hole of seedy bars, half deserted streets and shots of whiskey, time fractures—and it seems he might be destined to walk these streets forever" (Henshall 2016). The project, in fact arose, from Henshall's own fascination with the poem, and his performance is described as "pensive, brooding and hip—a whiskey-sipping Brooklyn flaneur" (Open Culture 2017). The invocation of 'rabbit hole' (reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*) suggests a dystopian fantasy space and the shots of a bedridden Prufrock intercut with shots of Prufrock as a flaneur in a neo-noir cityscape in order to convey a sense of dislocation from a contemporary setting. Prufrock is presented as a universal urban male type—a nocturnal depressed drunk who talks to himself but who is normal when it comes to public performances of the self. At the very end, Prufrock stares out of the apartment window and sees his double in the street passing by. They look at each other and we hear lines from the closing stanzas of the poem ("each to each") to underscore the general impression of Prufrock in terms of self-division and as separated from the outside world (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 42).

In Karl Verkade's 2013 short film (directed and scored by) in which Verkade narrates the poem and performs the role of Prufrock, the poem is clearly envisaged as a direct extension of the individual self, thus remediating the dramatic monologue into fandom, confessional mode:

> This poem means the world to me; I am not sure that I have ever resonated with a piece of art like I have with this piece. And the older I get, the more poignant it becomes. [. . . .] It is not the only interpretation [. . . .] But it is exactly what is inside myself [. . . .] For those of you who know me, this may be deeper than you are used to. I believe the deep and dark serve to bring the light into focus. (Verkade 2013)

In this YouTube video, there are very few shots of the outside world but plenty of similarly framed close-ups of a prostate and anguished self. Verkade is rarely seen fully in a surrounding environment, except for brief black and white flash shots of Verkade at a windowed door. Flashes of a ceiling fan, coupled with a heavy whispering voice, an eerie soundtrack and lyrical pauses, create a general mood of paralysis, claustrophobia and solipsism. When speaking the words "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was not meant to be", a close-up of Verkade's face (looking troubled or depressed) fades into a shot of sea waves crashing onto rocks (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 41). The film cuts back to Verdake staring into an empty space, and shortly after when uttering the final lines ("Till human voices wake us, and we drown"), a black blank space frames a close-up of Verdake's mouth opening to imply horror (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 42). The video's closure, with the use of rapid edited metonymic shots, appears post-impressionistic and this amplifies the anti-epiphanic mode, one that resonates with modernist literature of James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). So rather than the narrative of mental-scape journeying, Verkade transforms the mock-heroic poem into an intense and over-dramatic study of the inner self (see Figure 3). In other words, this is a prime example of fandom remediation that involves creative new media interaction. Verkade regards the poems as a conduit for channeling an inner life, one that in public life is frustrated. Even though the video eschews Eliot's doctrine of impersonality (in that poet is not identified with the speaker), the poem has enabled a sense of the self, one that is 'deep and dark' and fragile and normally private.

Figure 3. Karl Verkade. Prufrock performed as a 'deep and dark' extension of the self.

5. Split Screen Video Poem (Jelena Sinik)

The salient aesthetic feature in Jelena Sinik's multi award-winning video poem, 'Imagining Time' (directed and animated by Sinik with the voice of Alex Rabey), is the use of a dual screen format (Sinik 2015). This very much remediates the split screen, one that "bifurcates space and makes clear the spatial relationship between two areas by displaying them simultaneously" (Jeffries 2017, p. 42).

The split-screen technique that innovates the single-frame entity has a long cinematic history, allowing for a spatial experimentation that produces a range of stylistic effects. However, for Jeffries, the impact that comics had on the multiplication of perspective in cinema is generally underestimated: "When one thinks of cinematic techniques that have the potential to evoke the comics page, split-screen photography is probably the first thing that comes to mind" (Jeffries 2017, pp. 99–100). Sinik's visualization of Prufrock also demonstrates how split screen as a montage effect was instrumental in the aesthetics of literary modernism. Jay David Bolter, in *Writing Space*, points out that T.S. Eliot's experimentation with fragmentation resulted in palimpsestic texts, such as *The Waste Land* (1922), that disrupted the linear experience of reading and that in turn became interactive electronic hypertexts (Bolter 1991, pp. 131–37). For Sinik, the split-screen format too was effective in disturbing the linearity of a film narrative. The demand on the reader is then closer to modernist montage and poetic realization:

> The split screen allows the viewer freedom to observe that which attracts their attention more immediately across the competing screen. A shot in the frame on the left or the right side has its own self-contained and separate meaning, but this at the same time is inflected by its relationship to the shot adjacent (on the left/right). (Sinik 2020, interview)

'Imagining Time' combines "magical realism and surrealism with themes of isolation, introversion and passivity from the poem" (Sinik, website). Sinik also comments on the cumulative effect/s through repeated visual motifs. In this respect, the struggle to complete meaning mirrors Eliot's fractured use of the dramatic monologue as a means of conveying Prufrock's self-conscious inability to act.

The work, though very short (1.50 min), like a poem, invites multiple readings. Unlike Scott's animated film, Eliot's voiceover is absent. The title, 'Imagining Time', is in response to the phrase "There will be time" that recurs through 'Prufrock'—for example: "There will be time, there will be time/To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 38). For Sinik, imagining time as an existential experience suggests "procrastination" as well as the "inability to connect meaningfully with the realm outside of the self" (Sinik 2020, interview). In other words, it is an attendant mode of paralysis. Certain visual motifs, such as a fly or the circular motion of a fan, the hand circling a coffee cup and a crackling spinning vinyl record—objects of mundanity—accompany Prufrock on one side and on the other of the split screen. The viewer normally has to watch the video poem many times to identify visual motifs corresponding to the poem. In other words, the viewer becomes a 'montagist'. And the cumulative montage effect is kind of a circular disturbance, which visually conveys the "cyclical nature of Prufrock's thought processes" (Sinik 2020, interview). Sinik also plays on the surrealistic imagery of the poem: for instance, translating the elusive mermaids into fish in a tank to suggest that fantasy of the external word inevitably returns to the metonymic objects of entrapment (see Figure 4). One of the most striking metaphoric devices deployed to convey paradoxically connection and alienation is the image of a phone or the phone booth. And in a way, Sinik continues the cinematic association of the split screen and the modern communication device of the telephone that is central to Hollywood films such as *Pillow Talk* (dir. Michael Gordon, 1959) and *Airport* (dir. George Seaton, 1970). Sinik ends the video poem with an image of Prufrock as a phone-headed man on a bench holding a fishbowl. The phone assuming "possession of the protagonist's self" encapsulates the metonymic perspective of Prufrock: to see the world through objects (Sinik 2020, interview). For Sinik, the fish are "a subtle nod to the mermaids" and Prufrock's frustrated desire for a female fantasy that "will not sing to me" (Sinik 2020, interview). In many respects, Sinik's video poem captures the visual art of post-impressionism and surrealism that inspired various literary modernists. 'Imagining Time' is a superb example of the video poem—a new media art that blends the linguistic and the visual in a multi-layered and suggestive manner.

Sinik's visualization of what she terms "in-between spaces" aptly chimes with how Eliot scholars generally read the memorable and enigmatic opening lines (Sinik 2020, interview). For instance, Frances Dickey states: "Eliot situates Prufrock's utterance at the crepuscular or twilight hour, a favorite time of day for French Symbolists and British fin-de-siecle poets, signifying the transition to nighttime and the demi-monde, and suggesting personal and historical decline" (Dickey 2014, p. 123). The 'in-between'

state of the etherized patient is visualized through images of ennui, and Sinik inverts the spatial division of the "outdoor urban space of the male" and the "feminine indoor space of social convention" to imply that Prufrock's "story of missed opportunity" is one of solipsistic and agoraphobic entrapment (Sinik 2020, interview). Unlike narrative visualizations, Sinik does not establish a quest for identity or contact with the outer world. By focusing on imagined time as an extension of the self, Sinik realizes Henri Bergson's 1889 account of "spreading time out in space" in *Time and Free Will* (Dickey 2014, p. 124). Sinik's split screen format conveys the fragmentation and spatialization of time and selfhood. As Dickey puts it: "Prufrock is incapable of seeing a whole person" (Dickey 2014, p. 125). The final Magritte-like metamorphosis is a particularly apt metaphor of Prufrock who can only see people as disconnected parts and who identifies with non-human selves, such as a crab: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws" (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 40). The split-screen visualization in itself creates the experience of incompleteness via the reader's quest for a unified meaning. And Sinik's video poem also echoes Manovich's notion of spatial montage in which "[t]ime becomes spatialized, distributed over the surface of the screen" (Manovich 2002, p. 325).

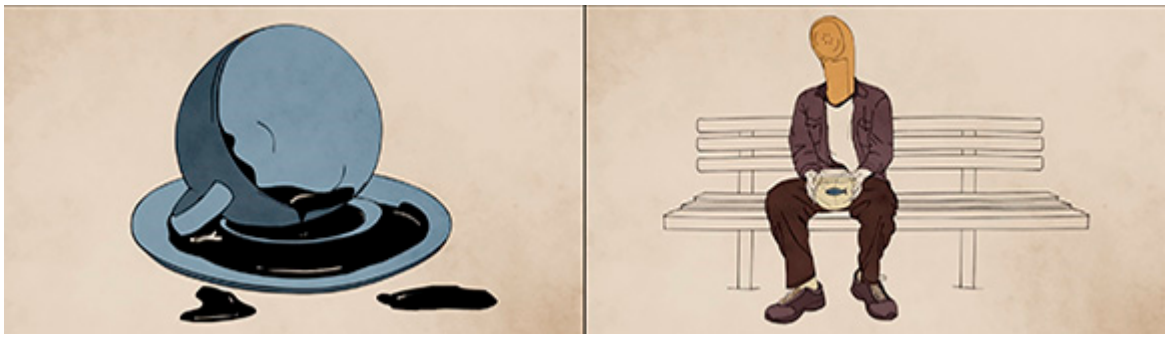


Figure 4. Jelena Sinik. Split screen: the left panel a visual allusion to "I have measured out my life in coffee spoons" and the right panel depicting Prufrock in a Magritte-inspired pose.

6. Photographic Spatial Montage (Mat Collishaw)

By increasing the multiplicity of co-existing shots to replicate the mode of hypermediality, Mat Collishaw's digital recording of photographic montage further remediates Eliot's poetics of indeterminacy. Mat Collishaw trained at Goldsmiths College in the late 1980s and his work, *Bullet Hole*, was shown in the legendary 'Freeze' exhibition curated by Damien Hirst in July 1988, which launched the generation of Young British Artists (YBA). Collishaw works with a visual language that embraces diverse media, fusing old and new media: in particular, the freeze frame of photographic realism, the moving image of film and the manipulative tool of Photoshop. In fact, he "often combines modern technology with historic framing devices" in order to foreground the equivalents of artistic media (gadgets and hardware) across time (Hedley 2010, p. 11). To mark the centenary of the publication of 'Prufrock' (2015), Collishaw was asked to make a film for a BBC program (see Collishaw 2015):

> Generally, I would have said no as I think it's a preposterous idea to imagine you can add visuals to a poem which is a medium that already generate images in your head. However, as one of the currents in Prufrock is the constant stream of images he conjures up, and the way they dissipate mirroring his own lack of belief he has in himself. I felt it was an interesting challenge to take on. (Collishaw 2019, interview)

Collishaw's fusion of photography and cinematic montage situates the 'Prufrock' in its technological context, the era of photographic reproduction, and that also captures the tension between the frozen image and the moving image. Collishaw's montage film is one of developing photographs that correspond to images that "pop up in the poem and then disappear to be replaced by the next image" (McCullin 2015). Collishaw's digital film shows in motion 9 (3 × 3 on screen) sequences of images. At any one time, nine sequences can be visible, so there is a constant crossover

between developing photographic images (see Figure 5). The images were taken from paintings, films and photographs. Collishaw likens this to "a collage happening over time" or a "hall of mirrors with multiple reproduction", with each image potentially "complementing or contaminating each other" (Collishaw 2019, interview). In other words, Collishaw eschews the discourse of linear fidelity:

> I didn't just want to have an image of what was being said, e.g., "trousers rolled" and a picture of rolled up trouser legs. I felt the poem required something less literal, although I do respond to images from the poem in the composition I made. Essentially, I set the film in a photographic darkroom, a subterranean light proof vault, designed for making images come into being. The visuals were always in a state of becoming—they never endure—but are constantly cast aside ready for the next image. A relentless flow of reproductions that don't have the facility to exist in the real world—in the light. They were interior images from the mind of the poet, daydreams and thoughts without substance. (Collishaw 2019, interview)

Figure 5. Mat Collishaw. "The visuals were always in a state of becoming—they never endure—but come into being."

Collishaw is also drawn towards the twilight aesthetics of the poem that is conveyed through the spatial divisions of Prufrock's mental landscape. He likens Prufrock's descent into the underworld to the darkroom:

> The darkroom provides this other space where images form but are not necessarily real or fixed, for they exist in the slippery netherworld. I also included the sound of the clock ticking and the water dripping, both elements of the photographic darkroom, as well as implying a subterrestrial place where time is present but suspended. (Collishaw 2019, interview)

Collishaw also chose to use Eliot's unabridged reading of the poem because the "old recording [. . .] had a slightly distorted, creaky quality, which added a patina to the perception of it. It feels like you are listening to the voice of a ghost" (Collishaw 2019, interview). In remediation terms, the narrating voice of the poet is the trace of old printed media. However, the audio-visual dynamic is not entirely synchronized. We see glimpses of images that correspond to metonymic objects in Eliot's linear reading (e.g., a coffee spoon), yet some images remain for a longer period. The 'slippage' was not intentional and was the result of combining old and new media technologies:

> To film all 9 sequences in one take I had to calculate the timing of the poem with the images I was using, and the time the developing fluid would act on the exposed paper. There was evidently going to be a little bit of slippage with timings, something that I was happy to let unfold within the framework I had created. (Collishaw 2019, interview)

Collishaw's visualization also deliberately eschews the story of incomplete romance, because for him the "words don't accumulate to becoming a narrative" (Collishaw). Most video poems clearly read the repeated phrase "Let us go then" as a theatrical invite to a spatial journey through a specific setting that leads to a female indoor space (Eliot [1920] 2017, p. 37). As Cleanth Brooks states: "Prufrock makes his entrance by inviting the reader, whom he seems to accept as inhabiting his own social world, to take a walk with him, a stroll that will take them to an afternoon tea (Brooks [1988] 2000, pp. 79–80). Collishaw's response echoes Brooks' account, but he rejects the idea of a goal-oriented narrative and embraces instead an idea similar to Sinik's view of 'drifting':

> I get the impression from reading Prufrock that he is taking you through these dark deserted streets, but there is nothing particularly engaging to see, just a series of meandering passages with dead ends. Nothing leads anywhere, the words don't accumulate to becoming a narrative. (Collishaw 2019, interview)

Collishaw's montage art underscores Anne Friedberg's view that the experiments by filmmakers and Cubist painters who broke free from the single-screen/image paradigm and fractured the single viewpoint is continued in the prevailing multiple-screen composition of digital technologies (Friedberg [2006] 2009, p. 192). Collishaw too expects the viewer to be a 'montagist', placing hypermedial demands on the viewer that exceed Mike Figgis' *Timecode* (2000). With the use of four digital synchronized digital cameras, Figgis was able to shoot the action in real time (no cuts). The four simultaneous plotlines appear on the screen as four quadrants. As Marilyn Fabe argues:

> *Timecode* [. . .] involves more active participation and attention, and calls for tolerance from the spectator, than is demanded in conventionally constructed films. [. . . .] The use of crosscutting in the conventional [single screen] film narrative affords us omniscience [. . . .] In conventional crosscutting the action unfolds linearly, one image at a time.

In other words, spatial, as opposed to linear, montage means: "we get to 'edit' what we see ourselves" (Fabe 2014, pp. 5–7). Identifying inter-media correlations 'spread across' Collishaw's sequence of resolving and dissolving images requires also a hypertextual mind. By refashioning two visual technologies (the static image of photorealism and the moving image of the camera), Collishaw reminds us that modernist aesthetics was not about satisfying "our culture's desire for immediacy" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, p. 26). Collishaw's moving montage imitates the polyfocal effects of new digital hypermediality, and in doing so remediates the fractured, polyvocal aesthetic of 'Prufrock', the indeterminacy of an imagistic form as well as the non-linear, interaction of close reading. And, in embodying the aesthetics of modernist experimentation, Collishaw shows that the Rhizomatic pulse of online remediation is not teleological. In the words of Eduardo Kac: "There's a general misperception when we talk about online culture. Everyone is so obsessed with the internet, but to me, it's a historical phenomenon. It will be superseded by other networks in the future" (Chatel 2019). The 'other networks' or inter-media forms could be propelled by a continuous refashioning of modernist poetics.

7. Conclusions

The broad shift from the dominance of print culture to "the new dominance of the image" could be perceived in certain quarters as augmenting the current English Studies crisis (Vandermeersche 2011). That said, adaptation studies have shown that the transmedia phenomenon has not only refashioned, but also regenerated interest in, literary sources. Remediations can open up the 'concentrated form' of poetry and become an effective pedagogic tool, whilst the kineticism of visual media be harnessed to enhance the appeal of the static word. Publishing companies such as Button Poetry are utilizing

YouTube videos of performing poets with the advertising slogan: "Poetry is the new adult coloring book" (Boog 2017). In the words of Keven Stein: "New technologies create new human receptive abilities [. . .]", and in turn new forms of expression (Stein 2010, p. 92). Hypermediacy can attract new forms of participation, by also satisfying a digital audience's polyfocal attention (Stein 2010, p. 110). The co-opting of new technology, as Stein argues, does not replace the written page but supplements it (Stein 2010, p. 112). In his chapter, 'Why Kids Hate Poetry', Stein further states: "Many instructors make the act of reading a poem for its 'meaning' into a solemn game of pin the tail on the donkey" (Stein 2010, p. 195). The quest for extracting meaning from a poem is the logic of a goal-oriented education system, one that inhibits the reader's potential pleasure. Visual remediation with its focus on refashioning formal features is a necessary reminder that the pleasure of reading poetry derives largely from a poem's aesthetics. Naturally, visual remediation is not a substitute for the private intimacy of close reading. Embracing only comic strip narrativizations closes down the complex aesthetics of poetry. Nonetheless, multi-directional remediation—from the comic strip to spatial montage—offers multifarious possibilities for appreciating further the inherent visual properties of modernist poetry.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I wish to express my gratitude towards the following artists for agreeing to be interviewed via email: Julian Peters, Jelena Sinik and Mat Collishaw. The helpful expertise of Mark Duffett (Reader in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Chester) with regards to new media fandom is also gratefully acknowledged.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Aiken, Conrad, and Divers Realists. 1997. *T.S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage*. Edited by Grant Hugh. New York: Routledge, vol. I, pp. 80–81. ISBN 978-0-4415-56896-8. First published 1917.

Bolter, Jay David. 1991. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Print*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, ISBN 0-8058-0428-5.

Bolter, J. David, and Richard Grusin. 2000. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. London: The MIT Press, ISBN 0-262-52279-9.

Boog, Jason. 2017. Is Poetry the New Adult Coloring Book? *Publishers Weekly*. August 5. Available online: https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/74638-is-poetry-the-new-adult-coloring-book.html (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Booth, Paul. 2008. Reading Fandom: MySpace Character Personas and Narrative Identification. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25: 514–36. [CrossRef]

Brooks, Cleanth. 2000. Teaching 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. In *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's Poetry and Plays*. Edited by Jewel Spears Brooker. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, pp. 78–87. ISBN 0-87352-514-0. First published 1988.

Byron, Glennis. 2003. *Dramatic Monologue*. London: Routledge, ISBN 0-415-22937-5.

Chatel, Marie. 2019. Net Art, Post-internet Art, New Aesthetics, The Fundamentals of Art on the Internet. *Digital Art Weekly*. January 31. Available online: https://medium.com/digital-art-weekly/net-art-post-internet-art-new-aesthetics-the-fundamentals-of-art-on-the-internet-55dcbd9d6a5 (accessed on 7 October 2020).

Collishaw, Mat. 2015. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. BBC Arts. Available online: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02sryh5 (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Collishaw, Mat. 2019. Interview by Scott Freer. Email interview with the author, 20 June 2019. *The Journal of the T.S. Eliot Society* 2019: 79–84.

Dickey, Frances. 2014. Prufrock and Other Observations: A Walking Tour. In *A Companion to T.S. Eliot*. Edited by David E. Chinitz. Oxford: Wiley & Blackwell, pp. 120–32. ISBN 978-1-118-64709-7.

Duffett, Mark. 2013. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. London: Bloomsbury, ISBN 978-1-4411-6693-7.

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. 2017. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. In *Poems*. Delhi: Facsimile Publisher. First published 1920.

Fabe, Marilyn. 2014. Digital Video and New Forms of Narrative: Mike Figgis' *Timecode* and James Cameron's *Avatar*. In *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique*. Berkeley: University of California Press, ISBN 0520959019.

Freer, Scott. 2007. The Mythical Method: Eliot's The Waste Land & A Canterbury Tale (1944). *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 27: 357–70.

Freer, Scott. 2019. Screening Prufrock: What the Mermaids Sing. *Adaptation* 12: 27–43. [CrossRef]

Friedberg, Anne. 2009. *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*. London: The MIT Press, ISBN 978-0-262-51250-3. First published 2006.

Hedley, Gill. 2010. Mat Collishaw, Tracey Emin, Paula Rego: At the Foundling. Songs of Innocence, Experience, Ambivalence. *Childhood in the Past* 3: 5–14. [CrossRef]

Henshall, Daniel. 2016. Passion Film Series. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuvE1tfjNiU (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Jeffries, Dru. 2017. *Comic Book Film Style: Cinema at 24 Panels per Second*. Austin: University of Texas Press, ISBN 978-1-4773-1450-0.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. London: New York University Press, ISBN 0814742815.

Jenkins, Henri. 2019. 'Art Happens not in Isolation, But in Community': The Collective Literacies of Media Fandom. *Cultural Science Journal* 11: 78–88. [CrossRef]

Jones, Zach, and Tommy Spears. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EE0gv00qnG4 (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Kenner, Hugh. 1960. *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot*. London: W. H. Allen.

Kress, Gunther. 2005. *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge, ISBN 0-415-25356-X. First published 2003.

Lanier, Clinton D., Jr., and Aubrey R. Fowler III. 2012. Digital Fandom: Mediation, Remediation and Demediation. In *Routledge Companion to Digital Consumption*. Edited by Russell W. Belk and Rosa Llamas. London: Routledge, pp. 284–95. ISBN 0415679923.

Manovich, Lev. 2002. *The Language of New Media*. London: The MIT Press, ISBN 0-262-63255-1.

McCullin, Don. 2015. Pictures Should Make You Think. *Art Quarterly* 2015: 55–65.

McHale, Brian. 2010. Narrativity and Segmentivity, or, Poetry in the Gutter. In *Intermediality and Storytelling*. Edited by Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan. Berlin: De Gruyter, Inc., pp. 27–48. ISBN 9783110237733.

Meyrat, Auguste. 2018. A Generation of Prufrocks: A Crisis of Single Men. *The American Conservative*, July 26. Available online: https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/a-generation-of-prufrocks-a-crisis-of-single-men/ (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Miller, Nicole B. Advanced Cinema Productions Film. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xpHLaCCjbs (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Open Culture. 2017. Available online: http://www.openculture.com/2017/02/t-s-eliots-classic-poem-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock-gets-adapted-into-a-hip-modern-film.html (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Parui, Avishek. 2013. *'The Nerves in Patterns on a Screen': Hysteria, Hauntology and Cinema in T.S. Eliot's Early Poetry from 'Prufrock' to The Waste Land. Film and Literary Modernism*. Edited by Robert P. McParland. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 96–106. ISBN 1-4438-6644-X.

Peters, Julian. 2019. Interview by Scott Freer. Email interview with the author, 20 June 2019. *The Journal of the T.S. Eliot Society*, 73–79.

Peters, Julian. 2018. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T.S. Eliot'. Julian Peters Comics. Available online: https://julianpeterscomics.com/page-1-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock-by-t-s-eliot/ (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Peters, Julian. 2020a. *Poems to See By: A Comic Artist Interprets Great Poetry*. New York: Plough Publishing House, ISBN 978-0-874-86318-5.

Peters, Julian. 2020b. Interview by Scott Freer. Email interview with the author, 10 June 2020.

Plath, Sylvia. 2000. 'A Comparison'. In *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*. Edited by W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis. Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, pp. 145–47. ISBN 1852245158. First published 1962.

Pound, Ezra. 1997. *Drunken Harlots and Mr. Eliot. T. S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage*. Edited by Hugh Grant. New York: Routledge, vol. I, pp. 70–73. ISBN 978-0-4415-56896-8. First published 1917.

Rowson, Martin. 2012. *The Wasteland*. London: Seagull Books, ISBN 978-0-8574-2-041-1. First published 1990.

Samples, Lance. 2012. 'Prufrock'. The Online Community for Filmmaking. Available online: http://www.dvxuser.com/V6/showthread.php?336556-T-S-Eliot-The-Love-Song-of-J-Alfred-Prufrock-Short-Film (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Scott, Christopher. 2012a. Analyzing and Adapting T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' for Animated Film. Interdisciplinary Thesis for School of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers University. Available online: https://www.scribd.com/doc/93368902/PrufrockFinishedThesis (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Scott, Christopher. 2012b. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock: Animated. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpRSmMnx1MU (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Shmoop University, Inc. 2013. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by Shmoop. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3-hI7vYyGc (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Sinik, Jelena. 2015. Imagining Time. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPk8tuLprzs (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Sinik, Jelena. Jelena Sinik: Animated Filmaker & Illustrator. Available online: https://jelenasinik.wixsite.com/jelena (accessed on 13 August 2020).

Sinik, Jelena. 2020. Interview by Scott Freer. Email interview with the author, 10 January 2020.

Spender, Stephen. 1975. *Eliot*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, ISBN 0-00-633467-9.

Stein, Kevin. 2010. *Poetry's Afterlife: Verse in the Digital Age*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, pp. 87–113. ISBN 1-283-01162-X.

Synder, Margaret Sarah. 2015. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock as Teenaged Wasteland. Master's thesis, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, USA.

Trotter, David. 2006. T.S. Eliot and Cinema. *Modernism/Modernity* 13: 237–65. [CrossRef]

Vandermeersche, Geert. 2011. Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel. *Comparative Literature and Culture* 13: 1–10. [CrossRef]

Verkade, Karl. 2013. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. A Lapel Surprise Production. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UU8pHyY89Qg (accessed on 13 August 2020).

arts

MDPI

Article

Film Adaptation as Experimental Game Design

Pippin Barr

Department of Design and Computation Arts, Concordia University, Montréal, QC H3G 1M8, Canada; pippin.barr@concordia.ca

Received: 13 September 2020; Accepted: 2 October 2020; Published: 9 October 2020

Abstract: Film adaptation is a popular approach to game design, but it prioritizes blockbuster films and conventional "game-like" qualities of those films, such as shooting, racing, or spatial exploration. This leads to adaptations that tend to use the aesthetics and narratives of films, but which miss out on potential design explorations of more complex cinematic qualities. In this article, I propose an experimental game design method that prioritizes an unconventional selection of films alongside strict game design constraints to explore tensions and affinities between cinema and videogames. By applying this design method and documenting the process and results, I am able both to present an experimental set of videogame film adaptations, along with potentially generative design and development themes. In the end, the project serves as an illustration of the nature of adaptation itself: a series of pointed compromises between the source and the new work.

Keywords: film adaptation; experimental game design; game design process documentation

1. Introduction

Film adaptation has had a significant history within videogame design, from early titles such as *E.T.*[1] and *Tron*[2] to contemporary games like *Alien: Isolation*[3] or *LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga*.[4] Although large-scale videogame adaptations released alongside major films have now generally been replaced by mobile-oriented casual games with contemporary films' aesthetics (e.g., *Toy Story Drop!*'s[5] content update with the release of *Toy Story 4*[6]), films and videogames have certainly walked hand in hand (King 2002; Fassone 2018).

A key driving force in this pairing of media is the marketing power and brand-recognition of large-scale film production, so videogame adaptation of blockbuster films has been and continues to be the focus. While this does not always pay off (the adaptation of *E.T.*, which was literally buried in a landfill, is perhaps the most famous failed videogame of all time), it aligns well with the generally risk-averse videogame industry's desire for more or less guaranteed exposure and audience.

Blockbusters and mainstream videogame design are well-suited to one another, and adaptations further tend to select films or aspects of films that fit specifically within established videogame genres and mechanics, leading to a prevalence of action movies specifically. We have seen a predominance of combat-oriented games (e.g., *Mad Max*,[7] *LEGO's Marvel Avengers*,[8] *Friday the 13th: The Game*[9]) that

1 *E.T.* Directed by Stephen Spielberg. Universal Studios, 1982.
2 *Tron*. Directed by Steven Lisberger. Walt Disney Productions, 1982.
3 *Alien: Isolation*. Developed by Creative Assembly. Sega, 2014.
4 *LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga*. Developer by Traveller's Tales. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2020.
5 *Toy Story Drop!* Developed by Big Fish Games. Big Fish Games, 2019.
6 *Toy Story 4*. Directed by Josh Cooley. Walt Disney Pictures, 2019.
7 *Mad Max*. Developed by Avalanche Studios. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2015.
8 *LEGO's Marvel Avengers*. Developed by Traveller's Tales. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2016.
9 *Friday the 13th: The Game*. Developed by IllFonic and Black Tower Studios. Gun Media, 2017.

adapt the big screen violence of their source material, or racing and flying games that draw on movies about motion (e.g., *Cars*[10] or *Top Gun: Hard Lock*[11]). In sum, most film adaptation into videogame form focuses on films that fit within established videogame tropes. This process has become ever more intertwined as Hollywood looks more and more toward videogames to provide film franchises (e.g., *Assassin's Creed*,[12] *Tomb Raider*,[13] *Sonic the Hedgehog*[14]) and inspiration (e.g., *Wreck-It Ralph*,[15] *Ready Player One*[16]).

Cinema is a far more diverse art form, however, than is represented by major Hollywood action blockbusters, and indeed, even blockbusters are more diverse that their simplified representations in games. In cleaving to such a limited subset of films, videogame adaptations have missed out on the significant potential of adapting elements of other genres and sources of cinema. The cinematic language, narrative structures, highly specific visual and audio moments, and countless other innovations in the larger world of film, including perennial critical favorites (e.g., *Citizen Kane*,[17] *Vertigo*[18]), films from outside the Western canon (e.g., *Touki Bouki*,[19] *An Elephant Sitting Still*[20]), and short films (e.g., *La Jetée*,[21] *Kitchen Sink*[22]), are a potential treasure trove for game design. Most of all, film would seem to represent a major opportunity for videogame designers and developers to challenge and expand on the expressive capacity of their medium. Beyond the creation of videogame adaptations specifically, cinema could be a source of innovation and rethinking in game design more broadly. In short, an enormous resource is being left largely unused.

In this article I seek to explore the question: *what potential game-design insights can be gained from adapting unconventional cinematic choices?* That is, how might the adaptation of specific examples of cinema help designers to reflect on and discover new design forms more generally? This is a question that should be answered through practice, and so my exploration will focus more or less entirely on discussion of the conceptualization, design, and development of a specific series of videogame adaptations based on diverse films from multiple genres. Although there are long-standing traditions of theory and analysis in adaptation studies (Hutcheon 2013), transmedia storytelling (Tosca and Klastrup 2016), and indeed, film-to-videogame adaptation (Fassone 2018), in this article *making* is my compass. This creation-first method is with reference to approaches such as research through design (Godin and Zahedi 2014), reflective practice (Schön 1983), and research creation (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012).

In addition to a general investigation of adaptation, I came into this project with a particular interest in contemplating videogame violence through the lens of cinema. Violence in games is and has been a hotly debated subject, with significant critical (Keogh 2012) and scientific (Ferguson et al. 2020) discussion. The base-line agonism of many game designs (and indeed many game definitions) has always lent itself to aggressive or violent forms and representations of play in ways that have come to seem ordinary and are easily accepted by players. As a game designer I am personally concerned by such trivializing treatment of violence in play, and my own design work has thus frequently touched on critiques of violence in games (e.g., *Jostle Bastard*,[23] *A Series of Gunshots*[24]). In turning to film adaptation

---

[10] *Cars*. Developed by Rainbow Studios. THQ, 2006.
[11] *Top Gun: Hard Lock*. Developed by 505 Games. Paramount Digital Entertainment, 2012.
[12] *Assassin's Creed*. Directed by Justin Kurzel. 20th Century Fox, 2016.
[13] *Tomb Raider*. Roar Uthaug. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018.
[14] *Sonic the Hedgehog*. Directed by Jeff Fowler. Paramount Pictures, 2020.
[15] *Wreck-It Ralph*. Directed by Rich Moore. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2012.
[16] *Ready Player One*. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018.
[17] *Citizen Kane*. Directed by Orson Welles. RKO Radio Pictures, 1941.
[18] *Vertigo*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Paramount Pictures, 1958.
[19] *Touki Bouki*. Directed by Djibril Diop Mambéty. World Cinema Foundation, 1973.
[20] *An Elephant Sitting Still*. Directed by Hu Bo. Kim Stim (United States), 2018.
[21] *La Jetée*. Directed by Chris Marker. Argos Films, 1962.
[22] *Kitchen Sink*. Directed by Alison Maclean. Felix Media, 1989.
[23] *Jostle Bastard*. Developed by Pippin Barr. Pippin Barr, 2013.
[24] *A Series of Gunshots*. Developed by Pippin Barr. Pippin Barr, 2015.

as an experimental approach to finding and implementing more diverse ideas in game design, it struck me that this might also be an opportunity to continue my practice-based work on violence in games specifically. Cinema has long produced work about or including violence from a great diversity of perspectives. Just as adapting non-blockbuster cinema provides an opportunity to find design insight more generally, I believe it equally may suggest a more diverse and nuanced approach to the subject of violence.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. In Section 2, I discuss the methodological approach in detail, covering the formal design constraints in my adaptations, the selection of the 10 films chosen for adaptation, the technical platform used for implementation of the case study game, and the documentation process followed. Following this, in Section 3, I present the case study game itself, *Combat at the Movies*,[25] giving the reader an outline of the adaptations and their gameplay. In the discussion section which follows (Section 4), I identify and analyze three central themes that arose in the design and development of the game as reflected in the process documentation. Finally, in Section 5, I conclude by reviewing the overall trajectory of the paper and making some final remarks.

2. Method

The central premise of this article is that creating a series of highly constrained film adaptations alongside rigorous process documentation is a productive way to explore the hypothesis that film adaptation might be a method through which to uncover new game design ideas and insights. That is, while the methodology to be outlined below is highly restricted both in terms of cinematic inspiration and technical specifications, my eye is turned toward game design insight writ large rather than improving on or critiquing videogame film adaptation itself. The methodological elements described here include the formal constraints chosen (both in terms of game design and the choice of films), the technical platform used to create the work, and the documentation process employed.

2.1. Game Design Constraints

The key decision was to adapt films into the language and form of a *specific game*, creating a highly restricted set of rules to guide design. As already stated, this was in the interest of generating tension between film and design, but also provided for a more manageable design space to work within. The foundation game chosen, Atari's *Combat*[26] (Figure 1), an iconic work from the history of videogames, features two tanks on either side of a battlefield that must seek and destroy each other. The tanks can move and turn in 16 directions and can fire one bullet at a time at their opponent. Each time one tank destroys the other, play resets and the victorious player receives a point. Play lasts for a set time (two minutes and sixteen seconds) and the tank with the highest score wins. As with many Atari titles, the game also includes a sizeable number of variations of play via game modes, from different "mazes" to invisible tanks to bouncing bullets. These variations nicely echo my objective of creating "cinematic variations" of the game.

---

[25] *Combat at the Movies*. Developed by Pippin Barr. Pippin Barr, 2020.
[26] *Combat*. Developed by Atari. Atari, 1977.

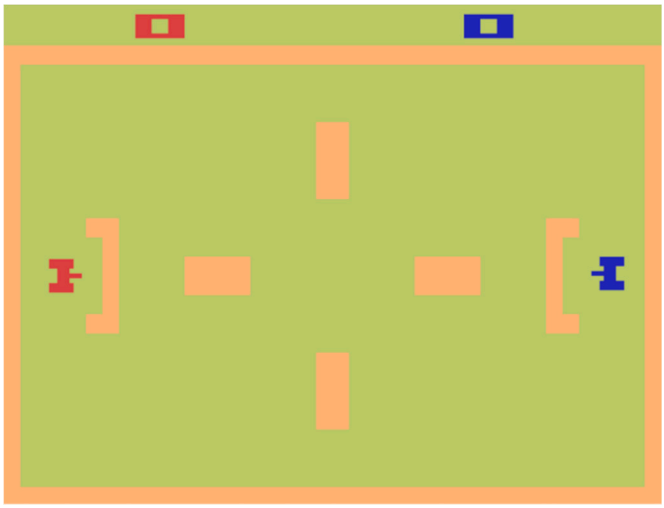


Figure 1. Atari's *Combat* (1977).

I selected *Combat* as the target for my adaptations for three key reasons. First, *Combat* is emblematic of numerous well-established ideas about game design, including balance and fairness, spatial exploration, skill-based play, and the centralizing of *combat* itself. Second, *Combat* (along with Atari games more generally) is a straightforward game in terms of its rules and representations, making it relatively more manageable to produce variations. Third, *Combat*'s distillation of videogame violence into a minimalist package struck me as a way to pursue my focus on the question of violence in videogame play through the movies adapted.

The choice to adapt *Combat* brings with it a host of constraints, most obviously in the form of the game's design and presentation, as above, but also from its underlying programming and the Atari hardware it runs on. While it was never my intention to dogmatically produce Atari-ready games of my own (by, for example, writing my adaptations in Atari's assembly language to run on the original hardware), I did want to leverage the restrictive nature of software and hardware to embrace both my central premise of design constraints, and to pursue at least some level of authenticity, an idea I will discuss in more depth later.

2.2. Film Constraints

In order to examine the hypothesis that adaptations of films outside the action-oriented, blockbuster genre could lead to innovation and provocation in game design, the 10 films chosen for adaptation were all selected from *Sight & Sound* magazine's Critics' top 100 (2012) list. While any list of this nature is, of course, subjective, the British Film Institute, publisher of *Sight & Sound*, strikes me as a reasonable authority for identifying a specific kind of highly regarded film outside the blockbuster arena. I have seen each of the 10 films selected fairly recently (often more than once) and, unsurprisingly, each was selected for at least some perceived affordance for adaptation into the *Combat* framework.

The films selected were: *Citizen Kane*, *Rashomon*,[27] *Tokyo Story*,[28] *L'Avventura*,[29] *Au Hasard Balthazar*,[30] *2001: A Space Odyssey*,[31] *The Godfather*,[32] *The Conversation*,[33] *Taxi Driver*,[34] and *Beau Travail*.[35] These films span 60 years of the history of cinema, hail from Britain, Japan, Italy, France, and the United States, and explore diverse subject matters.

I note that owing to the short-form nature of the adaptations proposed, I began with the intention to restrict the adaptation itself generally to a single scene from the movie. Further, in keeping with my parallel investigation into videogame violence, I prioritized films and scenes within them that touched on violence or death in some way. This was in aid of producing adaptations that could then draw on these often nuanced or alternative treatments of violence in game design. Thus, for example, *Citizen Kane*'s "Rosebud" scene provides a reflection on dying alone, *Taxi Driver*'s mirror scene examines the psychological *precursor* to active violence, and *L'Avventura* deals with violence only in an implied and enigmatic way through a woman's disappearance.

2.3. Platform

Selecting a platform for game development is a decision influenced by multiple factors, including existing familiarity, the match between platform and game design, and the accessibility of the final product. Compromises must inevitably be made that influence everything from the moment to moment work of development to the resulting aesthetics and gameplay of the game itself.

In this project, the adaptations were written in JavaScript using the Phaser 3 game engine library and run in a standard web browser (though not on mobile devices). Phaser 3 is a contemporary 2D game engine that provides various affordances for game developers, including, for example, handling of sprites, physics, game cameras, sound processing, scene management, input, and more.

An alternative approach that would have also been a strong choice is batari Basic, a programming language created specifically to enable developers to write programs for the Atari 2600 system itself. Creating the adaptation in batari Basic, or indeed in the Atari 2600's assembly language, would have been a way to maintain a strong fidelity to the original *Combat* while adapting films into its form.

Returning to the key factors mentioned above, however, Phaser 3 seemed the better choice in total. Perhaps most importantly, it is a development tool I was already deeply familiar with and it allows me to distribute the resulting game as a simple webpage. As an experimental game designer, I generally find the *accessibility* of my work to be paramount, and the ability to invite players to experience the games via a simple link meets this goal far better than either requiring them to download an emulator or, even more extremely, for me to produce an Atari cartridge and distribute it. Phaser 3, although not as authentic as batari Basic, is a necessary compromise made in the interests of accessibility that, as I will discuss later, led to various challenges and imperfections that were often frustrating or illuminating or both.

2.4. Documentation

The final element of this project is the approach to documenting the design and development process as it occurred. To this end, I adopted the Model for Design Materialization and Analysis (MDMA) documentation process created by myself along with Rilla Khaled and Jonathan Lessard (Khaled et al. 2018). MDMA is premised on the philosophy of the reflective practitioner (Schön 1983) along

---

[27] *Rashomon*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Daiei Film, 1950.
[28] *Tokyo Story*. Directed by Yasujirō Ozu. Shochiku, 1953.
[29] *L'Avventura*. Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni. Cino Del Duca, 1960.
[30] *Au Hasard Balthazar*. Directed by Robert Bresson. Cinema Ventures, 1966.
[31] *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.
[32] *The Godfather*. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures, 1972.
[33] *The Conversation*. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures, 1974.
[34] *Taxi Driver*. Directed by Martin Scorsese. Columbia Pictures, 1976.
[35] *Beau Travail*. Directed by Claire Denis. Pyramide Distribution, 1999.

with approaches such as research through design (Godin and Zahedi 2014) and others. This process centralizes a cumulative, detail-oriented tracking of the design process by tying it to a code repository managed by Git. While code repositories are ordinarily used for maintaining a chronological and step-by-step account of how the code of a program is built up and changed over time, MDMA extends on this idea to include design thinking as another key element to be traced explicitly through the history of a project.

Throughout my development of the adaptations, I followed three key documentation practices. First, I wrote regular process journal entries which were stored in the code repository of the project itself. These entries function as high-level reflections on the design work being done and encompass thinking about everything from the objectives of the game overall (in terms of an investigation into film adaptation) to the specifics of particular elements of the development process (such as the Phaser 3 camera system). Because of the historical nature of the repository, each diary entry can be easily paired with a playable version of the game as it was in the development cycle at that precise moment, meaning we can see both design thinking and design outcome side by side.

The second documentation practice was to write short design messages with each addition of code to the repository. That is, once a specific chunk of programming (or other development) work was completed, I would formally add this new material to the repository and write a reflective note on precisely the implications of that technical work relative to the design objectives and process being followed. These shorter messages provide a chronology of design thinking as it pertains directly to the code and other materials from which the game is constructed (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Design reflections in the code repository.

The final documentation practice, carried out much more occasionally, was to write entries I called "why" documentation in which I very specifically attempted to frame my argument about the research objectives of the project overall. These meditations, written at the beginning and then during the design and development process, allowed me to repeatedly return to the research questions at the heart of the project, helping to avoid the common pitfall of becoming lost in the maze of development rather than maintaining a focus on the research rationale for the project itself.

3. Case Study: Combat at the Movies

The game produced according to the methodology discussed in the previous section is titled, rather literally, *Combat at the Movies*. It is presented as a set of Atari games based on *Combat* that adapt each of the 10 selected films. I will here outline the presentation form of the game, the nature of the 10

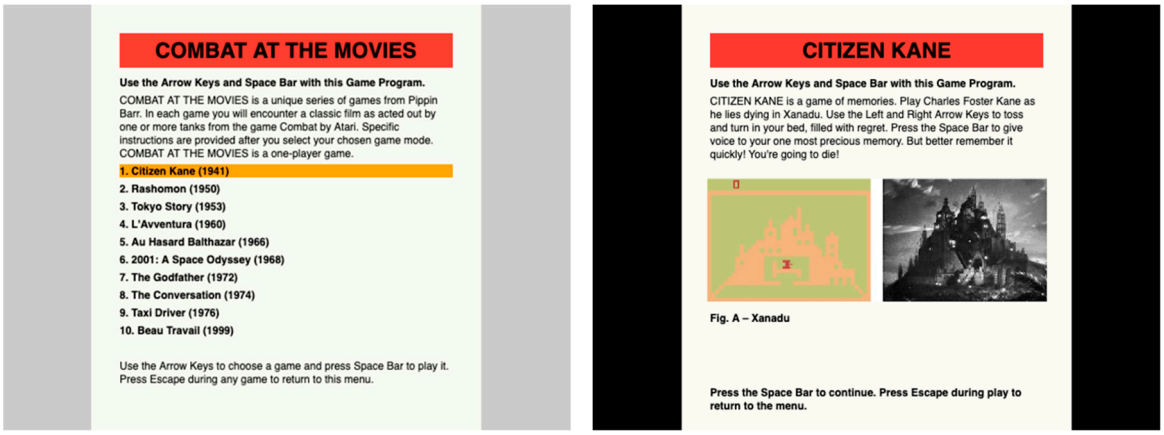
adaptations within it, and the design objectives for each. Note that the games themselves as well as the full documentation of the design and development process can be found at the links provided in the Supplemental Materials at the end of this article.

3.1. Presentation

On beginning the game, the player is presented with a menu system based on the instructions manual for the original *Combat* (Figure 3a). This allowed me to provide additional information about the nature of the game. On selecting a specific film from the list, the player is then presented with a further instructions screen (again based on the instruction booklet) which explains the aesthetic and expressive objectives of the game, framed in language echoing the original instructions. Thus, for example, the instructions for *Citizen Kane* (Figure 3b) are as follows:

> CITIZEN KANE is a game of memories. Play Charles Foster Kane as he lies dying in Xanadu. Use the Left and Right Arrow Keys to toss and turn in your bed, filled with regret. Press the Space Bar to give voice to your one most precious memory. But better remember it quickly! You're going to die!

Each instruction screen includes a screenshot of the game paired with an image from the original movie chosen to show aesthetic and other comparisons between the two. These detailed instruction screens allow a significant amount of preparatory work to be done for the player so that they are more able to engage with the resulting adaptations, which are, admittedly, often strange and counterintuitive.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 3. Instruction screens for *Combat at the Movies*. (**a**) The main menu with general description of the project; (**b**) the specific instructions for the *Citizen Kane* adaptation.

3.2. Game Descriptions

3.2.1. *Citizen Kane* (1941)

This game reproduces the iconic death scene in the movie, focusing on the explicit act of memory by Kane just before he dies. Here, we see the standard *Combat* tank at rest on a bed inside a representation of Xanadu, Kane's castle-like home. The tank's usual "shooting" action is replaced by the tank whispering the word "Rosebud" repeatedly, rendered in a mechanical buzz based on the little-used voice synthesis on the Atari. The tank dies (represented by its characteristic spinning motion from *Combat*) after 20 s and the player scores points with each remembering of Rosebud. In order to offer some minimal gameplay, the player can also rotate the tank in place as a way of "tossing and turning" with angst.

3.2.2. *Rashomon* (1950)

In this adaptation, the player participates in the dueling scene from the film. This is one of the key examples of the unreliable narrators in Rashomon as the two key retellings (by the bandit and the samurai) are radically different. Rather than create multiple, distinct versions of the duel in game form, the adaptation shifts the idea of unreliable narration to a metaphor of four multiple, distinctly behaving cameras (echoing the four perspectives from the film). Each camera presents a portion of the standard *Combat* battlefield in a different way and out of order, with one making the maze invisible, another omitting the player's enemy, and another omitting the player themselves. Combat takes place as usual, with the player or the enemy tank emerging victorious amidst the confusion.

3.2.3. *Tokyo Story* (1958)

Yasujirō Ozu's classic meditation on family bonds ends with the distressing scene of Shūkichi Hirayama, now a widower after the death of his wife Tomi, sitting alone at home with nobody left to care for him. The game adaptation takes on this final image, positioning the player's tank in the standard *Combat* field of play (the "home" of the tank), but with no other tank to fight with. Mirroring the loneliness of Shūkichi, the player's tank, unmoored from its purpose, can only drive slowly through the battlefield, feeling its age, and perhaps even pining for the memory of its traditional enemy, the blue tank.

3.2.4. *L'Avventura* (1960)

The island of Lisca Bianca takes the place of the battlefield in this adaptation, with the game focusing on Sandro's fruitless search for Anna when she goes missing. In keeping with the nature of the film, the player's tank is alone in an empty outline of the island and can only drive around, bumping into the coastline, but never finding the elusive Anna. As there is no point to shooting in this situation, nor was any suitable metaphor or other use of the shooting mechanic found, it is disabled, leaving the player to wander until their time runs out. With respect to the investigation of forms of violence, I interpreted Anna's disappearance as a highly ambiguous form of violence in the film.

3.2.5. *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966)

Au Hasard Balthazar shows us the odyssey of the titular donkey and his (often cruel) intersections with humans. Rather than recreating one specific scene, the adaptation takes this higher-level idea of the movie and presents the player with a standard *Combat* battlefield, complete with maze elements, but with a donkey (Balthazar) in place of the enemy tank. True to the spirit of the movie, Balthazar wanders the screen at random and does not engage with the player. The player, representing humanity, can leave the donkey alone or pursue and kill him. Whatever is decided, as in the movie, Balthazar dies in the end, either at the player's hands or at the end of a timer representing his lifespan.

3.2.6. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)

The most mechanically complex of the adaptations, this game takes as its subject the early scene in which a group of apes gains an evolutionary edge by learning how to use weapons from an imposing black monolith. In the game, we see a standard empty playing field with the player and enemy tank in their starting positions. On play beginning, neither the player nor the enemy is able to shoot, in keeping with the movie's narrative. After a short period of time, the monolith appears on the player's side of the field. Bumping into it causes it to disappear and the player tank (but not the enemy tank) to gain the ability to shoot. The "evolved" tank is then free to hunt down and eliminate the enemy in a completely one-sided fight.

3.2.7. *The Godfather* (1972)

Addressing the famous toll plaza scene, this adaptation positions the player as the helpless Sonny Corleone, doomed to drive up to the toll station only to be murdered by the Barzini gang in an ambush. The game version reproduces the scene quite literally in the visual and interactive language of *Combat*, with the playing field representing a road leading to a toll station, and the enemy tank suddenly appearing and shooting the player when they reach a specific point along the road. As in the movie, the player's tank cannot defend itself in time, leading to an experience of helplessness and an "unfair" death.

3.2.8. *The Conversation* (1974)

In the *Combat* version of *The Conversation*, the player takes on the role of Harry Caul, a surveillance expert tracking a potential murder plot. The game reproduces the famous hotel scene toward the end of the film, in which Harry listens through his room's wall to a fight that ends in murder. Keeping the focus on the auditory elements, the game makes the contents of the playing field invisible, even as two game-controlled tanks move within it and, eventually, fight to the death. The player is only able to hear the sounds of the combat and is left unsure of the result, as in the movie.

3.2.9. *Taxi Driver* (1976)

In this game, the player participates in the iconic mirror scene in which Travis Bickle confronts his own reflection and practices his tough-guy routine. He draws his hidden pistol and delivers the well-known line, "you talkin' to me?" In the game adaptation, the player's tank is Bickle, positioned in front of a mirror in an otherwise empty playing field. The player can reposition their tank and move around, but must be visible in and facing the mirror in order to use the "shoot" button. This triggers a heavily distorted (in keeping with Atari speech synthesis) version of the line. The player receives a point each time they successfully threaten themselves in the mirror until time runs out.

3.2.10. *Beau Travail* (1999)

The beautiful final scene of the movie, in which Denis Lavant as Chief Adjutant Galoup dances alone in front of a sparkling mirrored wall to Corona's Rhythm of the Night, is the subject of the final game. The player's tank is in front of a duplicate mirror wall, complete with an imitation of blinking lights, and can express themselves through dancing movements of their vehicle until a timer ends. As a concession to the expressive nature of movement, this is the one game in which the tank can move backwards as well as forwards, allowing for more creative arabesques and swoops.

4. Analysis

The process of designing, developing, and documenting 10 film adaptations into the form of Atari's game *Combat* led to a significant amount of data. Foremost, are the games themselves, playable online, each reifying the overall project's objectives to explore the potentials of film adaptation in a highly restrictive design context. Alongside this, the documentation of the project yielded over 10,000 words of process journal entries, over 5000 words of detailed technical commit messages, over 1500 words of "to do" tasks and completion notes, and over 1300 words of high-level design research discussion in the "why" document. All this data is publicly available in the game's Git repository at https://www.github.com/pippinbarr/combat-at-the-movies.

In reviewing the documentation, three key themes were identified as particularly worth discussing in the context of this exploration of film adaptation: *adaptation in code*, *prioritizing Combat*, and *reframing violence*. In the following subsections, I discuss these themes in detail alongside quotes from the process documentation and examples from the games themselves (including older versions). Seen together, these themes help us to reach an understanding of *Combat at the Movies* as a research design object that

raises questions and points in potentially generative directions for film adaptation as an experimental videogame method.

4.1. Adaptation in Code

Beginning closest to the materials of game creation, it became clear that we can and should consider in some depth the direct relevance of the code itself when thinking about questions of adaptation. In terms of the specific adaptations pursued here, a recurring theme revolved around correspondences between film and underlying game code. This sometimes involved making sure that implementation details were true to the film being adapted. Thus, in *The Conversation*, rather than variables (names for data in the program) representing the "red tank" and "blue tank", the two tanks which fight it out in the unseen hotel room are named "husband" and "wife" in keeping with the film's plot (Figure 4). While such a low-level change has no bearing on the player's experience, it both supported and further provoked a level of technical thoughtfulness in my design and development activities. Knowing that the code could (and perhaps should) be in sync with the surface-level representations led to my reflecting significantly more deeply on these potential correspondences and contradictions elsewhere.

```
76        this.husband.update();
77        this.wife.update();
```

Figure 4. Husband and wife in code.

Indeed, at other times, conventional game programming naming conventions served in part to *interpret* the film itself, such as in the case of *Taxi Driver*. Here, the effect of the player being able to see their tank in a mirror is produced by generating a second tank which mirrors the movements of the player's tank. If I were pursuing a similar strategy of matching implementation to the truth of the movie, I might have called this second tank "mirror image" or something similar. In this case, however, the code uses the default variable name for the second tank that I had been using from the beginning of development: "enemy". Thinking simply about a game of *Combat*, this makes sense as a name for the "other" tank that the player seeks to destroy, but for a tank used as a mirror image of the player, it serves further as an (unseen) intensifier of the scene itself: the mirror image really is Travis Bickle's enemy, both because he is pretending to confront an unnamed stranger with his gun, but also in the sense that Bickle is his own antagonist here. Although a detail such as this is "buried" within the code itself, it does lend itself to an argument that the very *implementation* of film adaptation can serve as a form of film criticism and insight.

There are numerous other examples of these kinds of affinities and commentaries between code and film at work. The use of multiple "cameras", a specific affordance within the Phaser 3 library for providing distinct views of a scene, to serve as a metaphor for the multiple perspectives in *Rashomon* indicates that implementation details can move beyond literal translations to the figurative. In the opposite direction, the fact that the implementation of the donkey Balthazar's movement through space in *Au Hasard Balthazar* is a function called "randomMovement" provides a very literal correspondence between the "hasard" (chance) of the title and the behavior of its star (Figure 5). Finally, in *L'Avventura* there is the existential question of whether there should be, secretly and invisibly, a tank to represent the missing Anna in the film. To include this "Anna tank" in the underlying code would be to say that she is *somewhere*, and simply cannot be found by the player. In the end, I felt this worked against the mysterious disappearance the film centers on, preferring for her not only to have vanished from the low-resolution island in the game, but from the very source code itself (Figure 6).

```
40    randomMovement() {
41      let turn = Math.random();
42      if (turn < 0.01) {
43        this.rotationDirection = -1;
44      }
45      else if (turn < 0.02) {
46        this.rotationDirection = 1;
47      }
48      else {
49        this.rotationDirection = 0;
50      }
51
52      this.speed = Math.random() < 0.1 ? 0 : this.maxSpeed;
53    }
```

Figure 5. Balthazar's random movement.

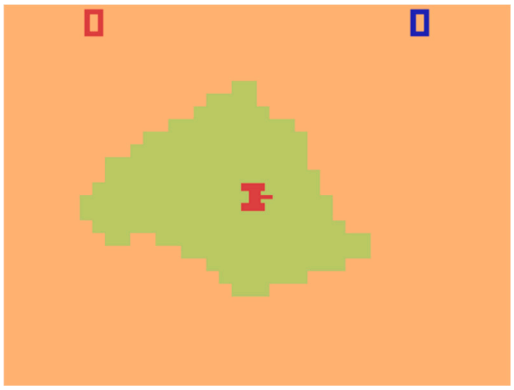


Figure 6. Not only is no tank representing the missing Anna visible here, there is no Anna in the source code itself.

Again, while a player of *Combat at the Movies* will not be able to detect the above and other specifics of code, I believe there is a special beauty and authenticity to be found in tracking the adaptation process all the way to implementation details. Indeed, the discussion here reinforces that, in keeping with platform studies (Bogost and Montfort 2009) and software studies (Marino 2020), the code level is absolutely part of any complete analysis of a videogame. Furthermore, as indicated above, it seems clear that an adherence to this level of commitment could be fruitful both as a kind of game design film criticism (as with *Taxi Driver*), as a way to maintain designer accountability to the source material (as with the attempt to be true to *L'Avventura* by maintaining the mystery of Anna's disappearance in code), and to follow design trajectories that might otherwise go unexplored.

4.2. Prioritizing Combat

In any process of adaptation, there is a need to determine our priorities: when they come into conflict, should we prioritize the source material or the medium we are adapting to? These moments of tension between film and videogame characterized many of the most generative design moments while working on *Combat at the Movies*. As I worked, I found my way toward the principle that, generally speaking, I would privilege the target game form of *Combat* (and its associated software, hardware, and design limits) and attempt to find the best *fit* for the films I was adapting. This is very much a personal decision in keeping with my own practice of experimental videogame design. I have long privileged formal constraints of this nature in other projects, such as my translation of philosophical isms into the game form of the classic Snake game in *SNAKISMS*,[36] or my adaptation of

[36] *SNAKISMS*. Developed by Pippin Barr. Pippin Barr, 2017.

Greek mythologies of punishment to the platform of Windows 95-era user interface elements in *Let's Play: Ancient Greek Punishment: UI Edition*.[37]

As an example of formal limits posed by a target platform/game, consider that the Atari 2600 placed a precise limit on the number of sprites (dynamic visual elements) that could be displayed. Although this limit was exceeded by some games through pleasing tricks, I chose to stick with the key limitation of only two tank sprites. This core limitation is in no way enforced by the Phaser 3 library used to implement *Combat at the Movies*, which can support more or less arbitrary numbers of sprites on screen at the same time. Rather, I embraced the decision both as a form of authenticity, making the resulting game more recognizably in the style of Atari (and *Combat* specifically), as well as a way to find generative constraints for design.

The sprite limit led immediately to key decisions in at least two of the adaptations. In *The Conversation*, in which the player listens to an unseen fight between two tanks representing the husband and wife from the movie, I had included a tank for the player to control *outside* the battlefield, as if they were outside the wall of the hotel room. I later realized, however, that although the two tanks inside the hotel room were invisible to the player, they still necessarily counted as sprites in the game (having positions, collision detection, and more), placing the player's tank in contravention of the sprite limit, as I noted in a commit message on the subject (Figure 7). I removed the player's tank and the game became one purely of listening, without the distraction of moving a tank around—in many ways very much more in keeping with its cinematic source.

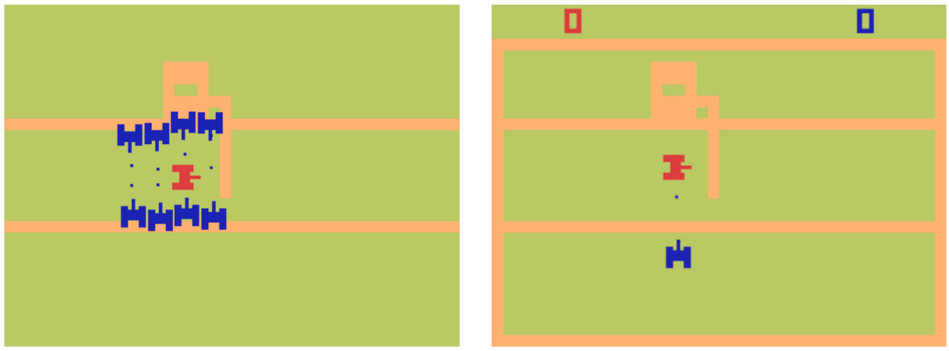
```
? Realized that a) having the player sprite plus two enemy sprites
breaks Atari sprite rules, and b) although there's a player tank
everywhere else, all the player actually does in this game is listen, so
the tank is extraneous (completely obvious when you consider I placed it
outside the playing field). With it gone the game is much more pure and
accurate.
```

Figure 7. Design documentation from the moment of removing the player tank in *The Conversation*. Commit c993d80.

In *The Godfather*, the limitation had a more diminishing effect on the recreation of the toll plaza scene. Whereas in the film, Sonny Corleone is attacked by a multitude of Barzini's men from all sides, the sprite limit of *Combat* requires that the player tank be attacked by exactly one other tank. As with *The Conversation*, I initially implemented the film with eight enemy tanks bearing down on the player (Figure 8a) before recognizing it was not in keeping with *Combat*. Thus, in the new version, the player drives through the plaza and is met with an ambush from just one other tank (Figure 8b). The success or failure of this design decision in play rests on whether a player feels a greater loss at the ambush not being fully represented, or a greater sense of coherence at the basic structure of *Combat* being maintained. Whatever the case, it is illustrative of a commitment to a specific design trajectory and how it interacts with the activity of adaptation.

---

[37] *Let's Play: Ancient Greek Punishment: UI Edition*. Developed by Pippin Barr. Pippin Barr, 2019.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 8. The ambush in *The Godfather*. (**a**) As originally envisaged with multiple attacking tanks in keeping with the film; (**b**) as reconceived with a single "Barzini tank" to adhere to *Combat*'s platform restrictions.

A further source of generative tension resides at the level of the *mechanics* of *Combat*. As discussed earlier, *Combat* is a game with highly restrictive possibilities for player agency and outcomes, which boil down to driving and shooting and dying. All adaptations from the films chosen had to fit more or less within these basic forms of agency in the blocky *Combat* world. Thus, movement most often replicates the idea of traversing space toward some Other, but is also used to represent searching in *L'Avventura*, dancing in *Beau Travail*, and tossing and turning in bed in *Citizen Kane*. Shooting is "just shooting" in *Au Hasard Balthazar* and a stand-in for sword fighting in *Rashomon*, but also a trigger to "fire" out the line "you talkin' to me?" in *Taxi Driver* and is completely absent in *L'Avventura*. Death, as will be discussed in depth below, takes on multiple forms too.

Beyond maintaining a fairly rigid adherence to the design norms of *Combat*, there are also places in which a little more poetic license has been allowed to slip into the implementations of the films. In *Tokyo Story*, where the player's tank exists alone in the world, the movement and turning speeds have been adjusted downwards to emphasize the idea that the tank (in the role of Shūkichi Hirayama) is elderly (Figure 9). In *Beau Travail*, the ability to reverse has been added to the tank controls in order to expand the expressive language of movement available to the player in keeping with the beauty of the dancing in the movie.

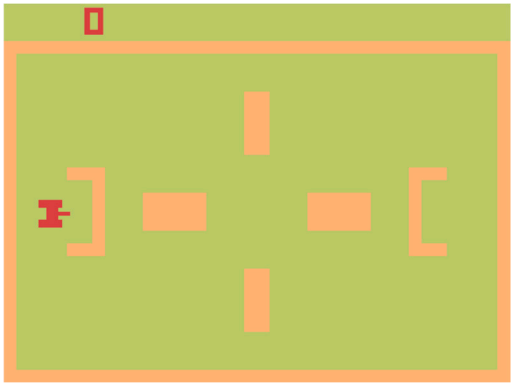


Figure 9. The player is alone in the world of *Tokyo Story*, with no family to turn to and likewise no enemy to pursue.

In a way, the relationship between the selected films and the established framework of *Combat* serves as an illustration of the nature of adaptation itself: a series of pointed compromises between the source and the new work. In order to "pick a side" at each moment of tension, the designer must think explicitly and in some depth about both sides of the equation, suggesting this form of adaptation

may be a particularly useful exercise in videogame design thinking as much as a means to create a final product.

4.3. Reframing Violence

As introduced in Section 2.1, this project was intended not only to explore the adaptation of non-blockbuster films into a constrained videogame language, but also to use this process as an opportunity to comment on videogame violence. The games in *Combat at the Movies* each involve a direct or implied relationship to death and/or violence that complicates or outright contradicts standard videogame interpretations of these ideas. Each game presents, thanks to its cinematic source, a different way of thinking about what it means to kill, to be killed, to die, or to act violently. While I will not discuss every game here, I will provide three examples to clarify what I mean by this.

A useful place to start is with *Taxi Driver*. Here, as in many games, the player assumes the role of a violent character, Travis Bickle. Bickle is in some ways a lot like the *Combat* tank, bent toward destruction and death, but here we find Bickle at home in front of his mirror rather than in an arena for battle. In the game, the player confronts their reflection in the mirror and speaks the famous line, "you talkin' to me?" (Figure 10). The violence is detuned in the literal sense that no shots are fired and nobody dies. Instead, the player goes through the motions of threatening an imagined adversary. This idea of a precursor to violence, of an antagonist working themselves up into the emotional state needed to commit murder, is rarely thought of or included in game designs. Taken seriously, it draws the violence of the tank outside the cycle of kill-and-be-killed in a way that may make it at least somewhat affectively accessible. In a sense, the *Taxi Driver* adaptation could be read not just as an adaptation of a movie, but almost a vision of an imaginary "locker room" in which the original *Combat* tank psyches itself up for battle.

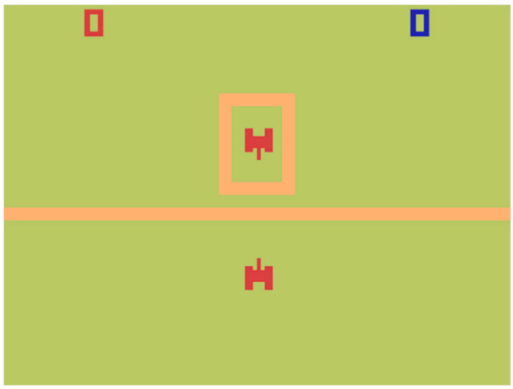


Figure 10. Travis Bickle, the tank, confronts himself in the mirror.

More straightforwardly, *Au Hasard Balthazar* presents the player with a simple choice: Balthazar, the donkey, wanders the screen aimlessly and the player can kill him or not (Figure 11). The donkey is of no threat and can be killed without any official negative consequence, such as loss of points. Despite the fairly obvious *moral* answer to this "dilemma" (leave the poor donkey alone), many players may feel that killing Balthazar is the implied goal, or at least desirable, because it is the most *active* way to play. This premise in videogame play that if one *can* do something (such as kill) then one *should*, or at the very least should *try it out*, is at the heart of many internal justifications for "unnecessary" violent acts in play. This essential cruelty that players exhibit toward virtual characters, killing or wounding them because they can, is very much in keeping with the arbitrary and needless cruelty of many of the people we meet in *Au Hasard Balthazar* the film. Whether or not a player of the game feels even a modicum of remorse on killing the innocent donkey (or conversely any satisfaction at leaving him alone), they take part in a videogame mirror of the world Bresson presented to us.

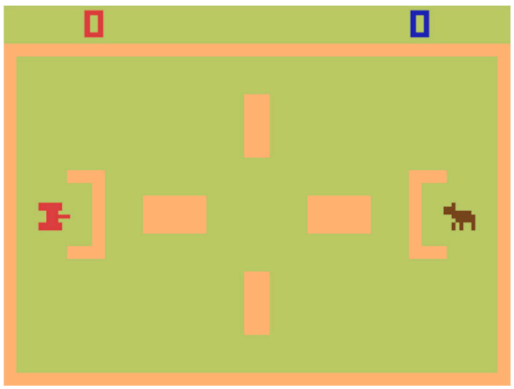


Figure 11. The player shares the battlefield with a harmless donkey.

To choose one final adaptation to illustrate these ideas, consider *The Conversation*. Here, as already stated, the player is not the enactor of violence, and indeed does not even have a controllable representation in the world of the game. Rather, they *listen* to the violence of invisible others and, per the plot of the movie itself, seek to discern what is happening behind closed doors. Bearing witness to violence and death rather than being its agent is another underused approach to violence in the context of videogames, where players are ordinarily placed in positions to act violently toward others for various reasons, such as war (e.g., *Call of Duty*[38]), saving damsels in distress (e.g., *Super Mario Bros.*[39]), or simple criminal cruelty (e.g., the *Grand Theft Auto* series[40]). In removing the player's ability to act decisively with violence but maintaining a violent world, the player of *The Conversation* is asked to bear witness instead of jumping in themselves. While there are games that use this approach (most notably *Return of the Obra Dinn*[41]), it strikes me as a significantly powerful direction of investigation for game designers interested in engaging with violence as a human concern.

Without going into the knotty debate on the impact of violence in games, we can at least agree that the treatment of violence in games trends toward trivialization or, at best, a prioritization of fun and tests of skill. Adapting non-action-oriented films, all of which still intersect with an idea of violence or death in some way, gave me a chance to consider a diverse set of alternate approaches, as illustrated above. In practice, this exploration led to the idea that film adaptation (outside the world of blockbusters) could be a generative source of other understandings of violence and that the specific design results could be used as principles in games which are not explicitly adaptations, much in the way they have borrowed from films' visual language.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have made a case for film adaptation as a worthwhile experimental design approach. I began with a single research question: *what potential game-design insights can be gained from adapting unconventional cinematic choices?* Methodologically, my strategy has been to pursue a practical engagement with this question by actively *creating* such unconventional film adaptations, with the additional structuring principle of also adhering to a particular game form (Atari's *Combat*). Thematically, it has also been my particular aim to grapple with alternative representations of violence in play by relying on the nuance and diversity of the cinematic portrayals selected. As such, the core of my answer to the question is presented in the form of the game *Combat at the Movies* itself, with players of that game in a position to judge whether it achieves the aim of finding novel design approaches through

[38] *Call of Duty*. Developed by Infinity Ward. Activision, 2003.
[39] *Super Mario Bros.* Developed by Nintendo. Nintendo, 1985.
[40] *Grand Theft Auto Series*. Developed by Rockstar Games. Rockstar Games, 1997–2013.
[41] *Return of the Obra Dinn*. Developed by Lucas Pope. 3909, 2018.

the lens of adaptation. For myself, it has been clear throughout the project that this adaptation-focused design approach can be a wellspring of *new* design-thinking, stimulated by both the disjunctions and affinities of cinema and videogame design, with novel treatments of violence being a particular success here.

Beyond the game itself, the research at hand takes the form of reflective consideration and detailed analysis of the *process* of design in this specific context of adaptation. In the course of my writing, as well as in the process documentation at large, I hope it is clear that this design approach is highly generative for design thinking, provoking a well-defined series of decision points that must be addressed intelligently and with reference both to source material and target game form. I even suggest that through this reflective practice, those who address adaptation from other perspectives (from practitioners in other media, such as literature of film, to theorists of adaptation) may find material of interest in this highly specific project. It may be that seeing adaptation reflected in the mirror of videogame design and development can shed light on important aspects of adaptation itself, from the question of interactivity to the potential role of computer code as a medium.

Outside its clear value for thoughtful designers who are looking for a challenge, this quality of emphasizing *design itself* suggests to me a pedagogical role for film adaptation in game design education, with the highly structured task pressing students at all levels to grapple with specific design problems. Indeed, I note that the structured approach to design presented here is easily replicable. A literal adherence to the approach presented here would lead the willing designer to select one or more films and an existing game format and to jump immediately into the generative process of design. It is also more than possible to take on the challenge posed here in other forms, perhaps by relaxing some of the more intensive restrictions, such as that of authenticity to a platform such as the Atari 2600. Whatever the case, I hope that these ideas find their way into the hands of designers with many perspectives who might join in the highly enjoyable task of film adaptation.

Supplementary Materials: The full project documentation for *Combat at the Movies* is available at github.com/pippinbarr/combat-at-the-movies. The game itself can be played at pippinbarr.github.io/combat-at-the-movies.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank Rilla Khaled, Jim Barr, and Mary Barr for extensive discussions both of this article as it was being written and the game *Combat at the Movies* itself during design and development.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Anonymous. 2012. The Top 100 Films. *Sight & Sound* 22: 56.

Bogost, Ian, and Nick Montfort. 2009. *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Chapman, Owen B., and Kim Sawchuk. 2012. Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and "Family Resemblances". *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37. [CrossRef]

Fassone, Riccardo. 2018. Notoriously bad: Early film-to-video game adaptations (1982–1994). In *The Routledge Companion to Adaptation*, 1st ed. Edited by Dennis Cutchins, Katja Krebs and Eckart Voigts. London: Routledge, pp. 106–16.

Ferguson, Christopher, Copenhaver Allen, and Markey Patrick. 2020. Reexamining the Findings of the American Psychological Association's 2015 Task Force on Violent Media: A Meta-Analysis. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. [CrossRef]

Godin, Danny, and Mithra Zahedi. 2014. Aspects of Research through Design. Paper presented at Design, Research, Society Conference 2014, Umea, Sweden, June 16–19.

Hutcheon, Linda. 2013. *A Theory of Adaptation*. London: Routledge.

Keogh, Brendan. 2012. *Killing Is Harmless*. Adelaide: Stolen Projects.

Khaled, Rilla, Lessard Jonathan, and Barr Pippin. 2018. Documenting trajectories in design space: A methodology for applied game design research. Paper presented at the 13th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games, Malmö, Sweden, August 7–10; New York: Association for Computing Machinery. [CrossRef]

King, Geoff. 2002. Die hard/try harder: Narrative, spectacle and beyond, from Hollywood to videogame. In *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*. Edited by Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska. London: Wallflower, pp. 50–65.

Marino, Mark C. 2020. *Critical Code Studies*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Schön, Donald. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.

Tosca, Susana, and Lisbeth Klastrup. 2016. The networked reception of transmedial universes: An experience-centered approach. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 32. [CrossRef]

arts

MDPI

Article

A Real Witcher—Slavic or Universal; from a Book, a Game or a TV Series? In the Circle of Multimedia Adaptations of a Fantasy Series of Novels "The Witcher" by A. Sapkowski

Sławomir Gawroński * and Kinga Bajorek

Faculty of Media and Social Communication, University of Information Technology and Management, 35-225 Rzeszów, Poland; kbajorek@wsiz.rzeszow.pl

* Correspondence: sgawronski@wsiz.rzeszow.pl; Tel.: +48-17-866-14-87

Received: 26 August 2020; Accepted: 1 October 2020; Published: 3 October 2020

Abstract: A series of novels about a witcher, written by Andrzej Sapkowski almost thirty years ago, has now become an inspiration for the creation of mass productions of mainstream popular culture—film and multimedia adaptations for use in computer games. It is one of the few examples of global messages of mass culture being based on Polish creativity. The recognition of "The Witcher", due to the Netflix production, soon contributed to building the national pride of Polish people, and at the same time sparked a discussion in Central and Eastern European countries on the consequences of the multimedia adaptation of Andrzej Sapkowski's prose. Questions about the dissonance between the Slavic and universal dimensions of "The Witcher" in relation to the original novels and their adaptations are a part of the traditional discourse on the adaptability of literature and its consequences for the reception by the audience. This article tries to capture the specific character of the adaptations of Andrzej Sapkowski's literature from the point of view of typology, known from the literature of the subject, as well as to answer the question about the consequences of the discrepancy between the original book and its adaptations in the form of a film, a TV series, and computer games. The considerations in the article were based on the literature analysis and the research based on the existing sources.

Keywords: media; mass culture; adaptation; film; digital games

1. Introduction

Numerous adaptation theorists and practitioners refer to the words that Stanley Kubrick allegedly spoke during the production of 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)—"If it can be written, or thought, it can be filmed". Adaptation theories try to answer the question of how this phenomena happens; they try to create a typology of ways of translating the written word into the language of a film or new media, and finally, they try to predict how these forms of adaptation will be perceived by the audience. Transposing a literary work into the language of the stage, a film, or a computer game encounters numerous problems and dilemmas and is often exposed to criticism from both the creators and the audience. One of the basic distinctions in the characteristics of each work created for the purposes of audio-visual arts is the division into the original and the adapted scenario. Adaptation—everywhere in the world—is one of the basic ways of obtaining valuable literary material for cinema (Jenkins 2006).

The literature on the subject, dealing with the issue of the relationship between the novel and the film, often assumes that the basis of their relationship is the observation that in both cases, we deal with narrative arts. Their essence is storytelling, which cannot be, and is not, the domain of just one communication system. In literature, we can find numerous model proposals for the

implementation of adaptations, among which the concepts of Geoffrey Wagner (transposition, comment, analogy) (Wagner 1975), Michael Klein and Gillian Parker (deconstruction, interpretation, autonomy) (Helman 1998), and Dudley Andrew (crossing, borrowing, transformation) (Andrew 1984) are worthy of attention. Brian McFarlane, on the other hand, tries to study the process of transposing a literary text into a film to determine the type of relationship between both of them. Therefore, she is looking for theoretical rigors that allow analysts to go beyond impressionistic and subjective comparisons, so often dominant in adaptation studies. McFarlane argues that when considering the issue of adaptation, the central features of it should have the story, which constitutes the fundamental bond between literature and film—and the story is precisely what is the actual subject of the adaptation (McFarlane 1996).

In the methodological approach to adaptation research in Europe, structural and semiotic studies seem to prevail. Adaptation is analyzed in terms of the equivalence of signs in translation, described by the concept of transformation, transposition, transcription, or intersemiotic translation (Wyslouch 2014). In approaches that avoided unequivocal support for the sign theory, the adaptation process was treated as a kind of "synthesis" or "aesthetic osmosis" (Choczaj 2011). The semiotic perspective, in which both literature and film should be considered, implies treating the film adaptation of a literary work as an intersemiotic translation, which translates the meanings of a message formulated in one semiotic system. Thus, the selection of the most appropriate signs from another sign system and the most appropriate combination of them is created to obtain a message with meanings consistent with the meanings of the translated message (Czyżyk 1975).

Regardless of terminological differences, research on adaptation is clearly dominated by the literary approach (Helman 1998), in which a literary work is perceived as an "original" and a film is an art form that depends entirely on a literary work. The opposite point of view negates this attitude, considering the film to be the result of a fully autonomous creative process. Adapting the literary form and content to the style of a film does not in any way reduce the value of adaptation. In terms of matter, the film has nothing to do with literature. The plot, and therefore the material, determines the form (Balázs 1987). Literature will always have axiomatic superiority over any adaptation of it because of its seniority as an art form. However, this hierarchy also involves what can be called iconophobia (a suspicion of the visual) and logophilia (love of the word as sacred) (Stam 2000).

Moreover, what seems to be the most important for further consideration is the fact that the described phenomena of adaptation has the character of an ontological transformation, i.e., such a transformation of the original work that results in the necessity to adopt a new theory of its existence (Winiecka 2017). It is a transformation that interferes with the character of each dimension of the work, according to the findings of the authors who have been quoted here: on the semiotic, technological, and cultural levels and on the "translator's intervention and interference" (Szczesna et al. 2004). It also concerns the construction of the work, but most of all the way it exists and is present, as well as the way of accessing it and the possibility for the recipient to interact with it.

The digital adaptations of "The Witcher" or "The Hexer" discussed in this article have an intermedia character. The media dimension of literature, the properties of which combine communication technology with a system of socio-cultural practices, is a starting point for the reflection on the status and metamorphosis of literariness, freed from the traditional linear structure of the printed volume and transferred to the digital environment (Hendrykowski 2013). The susceptibility of works of literature to intermedia translation also results from the technological ease of transforming objects. Once digitized, a piece of work is permanently included in the circulation of culture; it can circulate in it in the form of quotations, transformations, and comments, but also in the form of various motifs and plots, influencing the collective imagination. According to E. Winiecka, it is only a step away from adaptation, which not only recreates the content and codes used in a changed medium, but radically rebuilds and creates a digital work from scratch (Winiecka 2017). Thanks to a digital adaptation, literature becomes a new, multi- and inter-media being (Higgins 2000), transformed in the environment

of digital technologies. As part of this transformation, the recipient's experience is shaped not only by the interpretation of meanings, but by the overall audio-visual experience.

2. Thirty Years of "The Witcher"

"The Witcher" was created by Andrzej Sapkowski—a Polish fantasy writer who has been working since the 1980s. The saga of Geralt of Rivia—the witcher, consisting of three volumes of short stories and a five volume novel—brought Sapkowski popularity first in Poland, then in Slavic countries. Due to the Netflix production and computer games, it gained an international dimension. The witcher is a fictional character, without a historical prototype, but having significant connections with many fantasy heroes. The witcher is a warrior, a loner, a mysterious figure, with a specific code of honor derived from belonging to a brotherhood. He is an eccentric, well-trained in martial arts; he deals with killing monsters that threaten the security of the human world. The elimination of the bloodthirsty creations, however, is not his missionary activity, but rather a kind of service provided by the witcher for money.

In the world created by Sapkowski, the witchers are almost always boys, trained from an early age in martial arts. Their bodies undergo far-reaching genetic transformations because of magical elixirs. The purpose of these procedures is to prepare the witchers for an effective fight with monsters. Thanks to these, they gain sharpened senses, faster reflexes, and endurance. The side effects of the witcher's training are numerous, namely infertility, frequent face disfigurements, and the loss of body pigment, leading to albinism. The witcher can use residual magic, but it is not his main skill. Thus, the features of the witcher belong to the canon known from fantasy novels (Trebicki 2007; Mendlesohn 2008), combining the hero's positive traits of character aimed at protecting the world of people from dark monsters. At the same time, the witcher's code of conduct is based on a guild code, which is ambiguous and assumes the avoidance of responsibility in morally ambiguous situations. However, the witcher is not an explicit and simple character.

The Saga of "The Witcher" is a series of novels by Andrzej Sapkowski, consisting of five novels and a continuation of the author's early stories, published in the 1980s. The series includes the novels: "Blood of Elves" (1994), "Time of Contempt" (1995), "Baptism of Fire (1996), "The Tower of the Swallow" (1997), and "The Lady of the Lake" (1999).

They are a continuation of the stories known from Sapkowski's earlier writing, which appeared in magazines and then collected in the volumes: "The Witcher" (1990), "Sword of Destiny" (1992), and "The Last Wish" (1993). The series of stories about the witcher, Geralt of Rivia, started the short story "The Witcher", which was published in the Polish monthly "Fantastyka" in December 1986.

Andrzej Sapkowski is reluctant to describe his work as a saga because, as he claims, this is a concept reserved for Norse mythology. He uses the term "cycle" much more willingly (Beres and Sapkowski 2005).

Although Andrzej Sapkowski's work has already been published in almost 30 countries around the world, for obvious reasons, it is the most popular in Poland. Apart from the reasons related to the author's nationality, one of the key factors influencing the admiration of the witcher is his alleged Slavic character. There is an ongoing dispute among the faithful admirers of Sapkowski's work about the Slavic origins of the protagonist, Geralt of Rivia. This dispute has been going on for twenty years, but its apogee has recently been observed, since "The Witcher" ceased to be an exclusively Polish (Slavic) cultural product and entered the mainstream global mass culture. This is possible not only because of the translations of Sapkowski's books into other languages, but due to multimedia adaptations of "The Witcher".

The adaptations of The Witcher, aimed at popularizing it within mass culture, began in the 1990s. In the period 1993–1995, comic books including drawings by Bogusław Polch and a script written by Sapkowski appeared on the Polish publishing market. However, they did not achieve much publicity and became rather a rarity for novelists. "The Witcher" gained much more publicity because of its film productions. By the end of the 1990s, an idea to adapt the short story "The Witcher" into a film

appeared in Poland, but the works got stuck at the stage of writing the script. The first film adaptation of "The Witcher" took place in 2001. The movie was created as an additional result of work on a television series with the same title, which premiered in 2002. The first adaptation did not have many followers and generally did not appeal to the fans of Sapkowski's prose, or to viewers who had no previous experience with "The Witcher". The box office of this movie was so small that the revenues from the film covered only half of its production costs. The film was made in an atmosphere of scandals and numerous problems.

A few days before the premiere, Michał Szczerbic, a screenwriter for the film, withdrew from the project and did not agree to include his name in the credits. The reason was that the creators allegedly changed his script too much. The Witcher was therefore a film that did not officially mention the screenwriter's name. During the filming, the team faced opposition from fans of Andrzej Sapkowski's work, who founded the "Committee for Defence of the Only Right Image of the Witcher". A protest against the main roles cast and departing from the spirit of the original in the plot was announced on their website. For obvious reasons, the 13 episode series also did not appeal to the audience. It was a mere development of the film, reproducing numerous errors and shortcomings of production.

The beginning of the international career of "The Witcher" dates back to 2007. It was then that the first computer game made by CD Projekt was launched (Garda 2010).

The budget of the game was about PLN 19 million, and its release was accompanied by a huge promotional campaign. After its release, "The Witcher" received praise from critics for its storyline, audio-visual setting, and fighting system. The disadvantages of the production of the Polish studio were the excessive sexualization of women and numerous technical errors, most of the latter being improved by the Extended Edition released in September 2008, which also includes new adventures for the player.

The significant commercial success of The Witcher (nearly two million copies had been sold by June 2011) attracted the attention of the nationwide press. In 2011, CD Projekt RED produced a sequel, "The Witcher 2: Assassin of Kings", while in 2015, the third instalment of the series, closing the trilogy, was released, entitled "The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt" (Krzyscin 2015; Janski 2016). "The Witcher 2" was developed for PC and the Xbox 360 console, while the third part of the game, apart from the PC version, was also released for Xbox One and PlayStation 4. Additionally, in 2019, the game was launched on Nintendo Switch.

Undoubtedly, the most important event related to the popularization of the story about the witcher was the premiere of the American-Polish series created by Lauren S. Hissrich based on A. Sapkowski's books about the witcher Geralt. This was a consequence of the announcement of the Netflix platform in May 2017, when the production of the English-language series was announced (Barragan and Barbosa 2017). It has been decided that the first season will consist of eight episodes and will be filmed in Central Europe. Among Polish fans of A. Sapkowski's work, it was a kind of confirmation of the obvious fact that The Witcher and his world are, in fact, the world of Slavic Central and Eastern Europe. In 2017, it was announced that Andrzej Sapkowski would be a creative consultant for the producers of the series, but in January 2018, he himself denied that he would have a real part in the production of the series.

3. Controversy of Adaptation

Recent intermedia adaptations of "The Witcher" are difficult to define in the context of their level of accordance with the novels. When it comes to the latest production, which is the Netflix series, even the Polish embassy in the U.S. on its Facebook profile posted a message claiming that it is an adaptation of a popular computer game, not Andrzej Sapkowski's novels. Vigilant observers and fans of Andrzej Sapkowski's work quickly drew the embassy's attention, demanding that the writer be returned to honor and admitted that he had created the figure of Geralt of Rivia. Diplomats corrected the mistake, but the history of editing the entry shows what mistakes had been committed by the embassy.

Andrzej Sapkowski, in his interviews, has repeatedly mentioned the ambivalence of his judgments related to games that were based on his prose. From a marketing point of view, it might seem that the success of the games based on the literature may translate into the success of the literature, but the author's opinion is different. In one of the interviews, Sapkowski directly stated that "The publicity and sales results speak for themselves, if it were a weak game; it would not have had such achievements. But working on my own success, it has to admitted that the game had a negative effect on my books. Several publishers have included the images from games on the covers of my books. So many readers classified the books as the so-called game related, i.e., written for the game. There are a lot of such books on the SF&F market. Seeing a picture of a game on the cover of my book, many fans assumed that the game was created first. And serious SF and fantasy fans despise such secondary books and do not buy them, because—primo—they are secondary and not original. Secundo—they are completely irrelevant to those who do not play any games—and they constitute the vast majority of fans" (Zwierzchowski 2020).

Perhaps this skepticism results from the fact that Sapkowski has a rather difficult relationship with the form of CD Projekt (the creator of the game "The Witcher"). He sold the rights to the "witcher" very cheaply. Not believing in the success of the game, he collected a fee on a one-off basis, instead of a share in the profits. Analyzing the mechanisms of the fate of the adaptation of "The Witcher" into the popular computer game, it is difficult not to notice the conflict between the book and the game. The proportions were to some extent upset, and the genres based on the novel came to the fore, hiding the original. On the one hand, there is a symbiosis in the relationship between the original and the adapted work, in the form that the game took advantage of the popularity of the books, and at the same time, the literature gained a second wave of popularity due to the popularity of the game.

On the other hand, Sapkowski's words that "with the eyes of his soul he sees more readers reaching for the game than players reaching for books" (Zwierzchowski 2020) are puzzling themselves in their meaning.

Undoubtedly, the greatest publicity for "The Witcher" and Andrzej Sapkowski was brought by the screening prepared by Netflix, which premiered on 20 December 2019. The carrying capacity of the film platform meant that "The Witcher" became an even stronger element of pop culture, on a global scale. However, the question arises whether, thanks to the series and the publicity it gained, the "The Witcher" by Andrzej Sapkowski actually reached the multi-million audience, or whether it was an attractive adaptation, which in fact does not have much in common with the original. The answer to such a question is ambiguous.

On the one hand, the adaptation seems to be true to its original in many respects. Above all, it perfectly reflects the character of the main character that fights for survival in a world that hates him and stubbornly adheres to the moral code developed by his guild, which forces him to make dangerous decisions. The witcher is rough and sarcastic, always ready to fight, but on the other hand, charming and enchanting. It is also one of the reasons for the success of "The Witcher", which has proven itself in books and video games.

Netflix's "The Witcher" differs from most fantasy fictional stories. It contains elements of a truly epic story in which, in addition to the dominating story of the main plot, the viewer receives side plots known from the literature. The viewer follows three stories, which, of course, interpenetrate each other. The individual episodes are by no means a faithful adaptation of the books, which is probably a major problem for fans of Andrzej Sapkowski's prose. However, players will also not find a recreation of the game scenario under the "The Witcher" brand in the series.

Netflix proposed a hybrid solution, referring largely to both the original novels and computer games, and at the same time, created a production in many places significantly different from the original(s). The series is sometimes more demanding on the part of the viewers than simple entertainment cinema. Events are not always presented in chronological order, and there is no clear indication of whether past or present events are represented. This, however, reflects the disturbing and intricate nature of Andrzej Sapkowski's prose.

Netflix's "The Witcher" is an adaptation based on numerous deviations from the original. Even before its premiere, during production, Andrzej Sapkowski commented that it was the full right of the creators of the series to modify the film and that he did not expect the stories he had created to be recreated in detail, but rather that they would be appropriately adapted to the medium of the TV series. Consequently, the creators of the series explained to the fans of "The Witcher" that the differences between Sapkowski's prose and the TV series are dictated by the need to make the story more consistent and introduce heroes who are bound to play important roles in the future. The "The Witcher" series seems to meet the expectations of both those fans who expect the most faithful adaptation possible, focusing on recreating the smallest details, and those who expect a looser interpretation and different presentation of the plot compared to the original novel.

What, therefore, within the controversy, deserves praise, and what raises reservations? Of course, the answer to such a question is highly subjective, but reading the reviews and viewers' opinions, a very good presentation of the battle scenes can be highlighted. They fully reflect, and perhaps with some excess, the effects of Andrzej Sapkowski's above-average ability to describe battle scenes. It seems that the series also owes its uniqueness to its specific atmosphere, a certain halo of mystery that accompanies it. The story is a bit dark and emotional and engages the viewer, just like the original novel. The series also reflects a good sense of humor, woven into the story by Sapkowski, which releases emotions at certain moments. The pace of the series relates directly to the author's literary narrative.

Among many critics, however, there are opinions that "The Witcher" is a solid, correct, and at the same time, a simply bland series. Especially for orthodox fans of Sapkowski's prose, the series appears to be a perfectly average production, stripping the plot and image of everything that is important and unique about the witcher in the books. Critics of this adaptation point to the fact that the place of colorful, plastic, and imaginatively creative descriptions is replaced by average frames. Moreover, the wonderfully written dialogues have been shortened and devoid of the stylized language that Sapkowski gave his characters originally. There is no subtlety of commentary on contemporary events that can be found in his books, and Sapkowski's playful humor in the series can be crude. The different assessments of the level and quality of the adaptation of "The Witcher" confirm a certain ambiguity and the lack of clear evaluation criteria, and at the same time, there is evidence of the creative dimension of adaptation, living its own life, constituting a separate work.

On the one hand, the adaptations of "The Witcher" (both television and those in the form of computer games) are structurally, semantically, and artistically independent objects and do not require recalling the context of the original. On the other hand, an adaptation is always a testimony to reading another work. Comparing it with the prototype is the basic mode of reception, which allows understanding the intertextual, intersemiotic, and intermedia nature of the adaptation. Therefore, dealing with digital adaptations of literature consists of a specific multiplication and complexity of the transmitting-receiving levels (Helman 2010). From this perspective, the digital adaptation of literary works raises intriguing questions about the presence, role, and significance of traditional literature as a medium in projects that often significantly change the original character and structure of the source work. Adaptations of literature are a special case of multi-system translation (Hendrykowski 2013), aimed at reinterpretation and restructuring and making it easier for recipients of works whose literariness (functionality, added order, imagery, and multi-interpretability) is a kind of a translation task.

One of the most expressive conflicts about the multimedia adaptations of "The Witcher" that can be seen among Polish critics and audiences is the dispute about the Slavic nature of both Geralt of Rivia and the entire series, and consequently, its adaptations.

4. The Slavic Character of the Adaptation of "The Witcher"

The Slavic nature of "The Witcher" turns out to be "scalable". While in books, many of its determinants can easily be found and in games, a little less (Jagosz 2016), in the Netflix series, this Slavic character almost completely disappears. This change of character is one of the important elements of the practical sphere of adaptability of literature to intermediality. "The Witcher" certainly draws from Slavic mythology as it can be found in many names of monsters derived from Slavic tales and myths. It contains references to Polish legends and even Polish history.

The significant fact is that the prototype is a Polish series of books, written by a Polish author. Sapkowski, however, created a highly eclectic work. It combines various elements of different mythologies, using stories from different parts of the world and creating a separate "witcher" world. Geralt fights both with a "strzyga" (a usually female demon somewhat similar to a vampire in Slavic and especially Polish folklore, both in its name and a prototype based on Polish legends) (Mironova 2019) and a genie (which has nothing to do with Slavism).

The world of "The Witcher" definitely does not pose anything real. There is a clear literary creation in it, not reflected either in the Slavic lands or any other. In his novels, Sapkowski combines elements that do not always fit. In this eclectic world, we are dealing with the Middle Ages, but at times, the world is also very contemporary. This combination of sometimes surprising and potentially mismatched elements becomes an opportunity for an intertextual game with the reader (Iser 1995). Sapkowski—the writer—is not particularly interested in the geography of stories, the characters' languages, or maintaining realism. It is a kind of patchwork in which social relations become key factors.

Why is the peculiar anticipation of the Slavic character of "The Witcher" among its audience present? To some extent, the reason is the adaptation of the novel in the form of computer games. It is difficult to use real data, but it can be assumed that more people played "The Witcher" than read the books. In computer games based on Sapkowski's prose, the Slavic character is quite clear. Flags, emblems, and coats of arms seem to be similar to Poles and other Slavic nations. The place names sound familiar to Slavic people, and the in-game landscapes are very "Eastern European". As a result, the adaptation for the needs of computer games blurs the source material of the game, making it indefinable, or the original literary work is unknown to the players and therefore becomes unverifiable.

The Polish and Slavic character of "The Witcher", which to some extent has to do with a sense of national pride (and an element of polish national branding) (Gawronski 2012), combined with the success of the international promotion of the Polish work is often emphasized by Polish people. However, this does not change the fact that the expectation of a closer similarity between the series "The Witcher" and that of a computer game is pointless when it comes to at least partial accordance with the original novel.

The dispute over the Slavic nature of "The Witcher" is incomprehensible and probably imperceptible from the point of view of international audiences. Nevertheless, it is an interesting example of a real problem arising from the intertextual differentiation of the adaptation of a specific literary work. This Slavic character of "The Witcher" was questioned by the author himself, explaining that it was a fantasy novel with a classic and canonical character, without any nationality.

Referring to the adaptations of his work, Andrzej Sapkowski categorically distanced himself from the relationship between the original and its adaptations. In one of the interviews, he stated: "There is an original novel and there are its adaptations to other media. With a strong emphasis on "other". As Rudyard Kipling said, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." You cannot put a book and its adaptations on the same level; you cannot look for relationships between them, because there are no such relationships. There are no points of contact. To be clear: I do not depreciate adaptations and other media completely, I agree that they are a challenge—if not equal to writing a book, then quite big and worthy of recognition. However, they are still something different (Szymborska and Czyz 2020).

Different adaptations of the original "The Witcher", known from literature, undoubtedly deformed the perception of readers and changed the author's intention. Nevertheless, it was due to them that "The Witcher" ceased to be recognizable only in Poland and other Slavic countries. It is thanks to the adaptations that it has become an international product of mass culture. Thus, the intertextuality of forms generated an ambivalent and ambiguous set of positive and negative consequences, varied in the areas to which they are assigned. Media adaptations of original works begin to live their own lives, and with time, these adaptations seem to be the only, unique, and semi-primary sources for the next generations of the recipients of cultural messages.

Author Contributions: The article was co-researched and co-written. Authors contributed to the conceptualization, research, original draft preparation, review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Andrew, Dudley. 1984. *Concepts in Film Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Balázs, Bela. 1987. *Szkice o Dramatrugii Filmu*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe.

Barragan, Margarida, and Edgar Barbosa. 2017. Como o Este eo Oeste. A Adaptação e o Original Nunca se Irão Encontrar. Available online: https://jpn.up.pt/ (accessed on 1 August 2020).

Beres, Stanislaw, and Andrzej Sapkowski. 2005. *Historia i Fantastyka*. Warsaw: SuperNowa.

Choczaj, Malgorzata. 2011. Adaptation, film adaptation, intersemiotic translation and other concerns of the theory of literature, film and media. *Przestrzenie Teorii* 16: 11–39. [CrossRef]

Czyżyk, Janusz. 1975. Adaptacja—Czyli w poszukiwaniu wspólnego kodu. *Teksty* 21: 178–79.

Garda, Maria. 2010. The Witcher Game in the universum of Wiedzmin. *Homo Ludens* 1: 19–27.

Gawronski, Slawomir. 2012. Dyplomacja publiczna—Komunikowanie międzynarodowe na usługach brandingu narodowego. *Komunikacja Społeczna Czasopismo Elektroniczne* 1: 47–55.

Helman, Alicja. 1998. *Twórcza Zdrada. Filmowe Adaptacje Literatury*. Poznan: Ars Nova.

Helman, Alicja. 2010. Adaptacja. In *Słownik Filmu*. Edited by Rafał Syska. Krakow: Krakowskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe.

Hendrykowski, Marek. 2013. Adaptacja jako przekład intersemiotyczny. *Przestrzenie Teorii* 175. [CrossRef]

Higgins, Dick. 2000. Intermedia. In *Nowoczesność od Czasu Postmodernizmu Oraz Inne Eseje*. Edited by Piotr Rypson. Gdansk: Słowo Obraz Terytoria.

Iser, Wolfgang. 1995. Interaction Between Text and Reader. In *Readers and Reading*. Edited by Andrew Bennett. London: Longman, pp. 21–30.

Jagosz, Anna. 2016. Diferencias en el marco estilístico entre las localizaciones polaca, española e inglesa del videojuego "The Witcher III", y relación con la obra de Andrzej Sapkowski. *Estudios Hispanicos Traducciones Interpretaciones Equivalencies* 24: 77–91. [CrossRef]

Janski, Krzysztof. 2016. Creation of the fictional world in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt. *Homo Ludens* 1: 117–33. [CrossRef]

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: NYU Press.

Krzyscin, Krzysztof. 2015. Building the world of the Witcher 3: Wild hunt. *Acm Siggraph*. [CrossRef]

McFarlane, Brian. 1996. *Novel to a Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Mendlesohn, Farah. 2008. *Rhetorics od Fantasy*. Middletown: WUP.

Mironova, Polina. 2019. The issue of translation of Slavic mythological creatures: Names in "The Witcher" cycle by A. Sapkowski. *Slavic World. Commonality and Diversity*, 267–70. [CrossRef]

Stam, Robert. 2000. Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation. In *Film Adaptation*. Edited by James Naremore. New Brunswick: Rutgers, pp. 54–76.

Szczesna, Ewa, Urszula Pawlicka, and Mariusz Pisarski. 2004. Przeklad hipertekstowy. Teoria i praktyka. *Rocznik Komparatystyczny* 5: 373–93.

Szymborska, Dorota, and Rafal Czyz. 2020. Sapkowski: Co Myślą o nas na Zachodzie? Available online: http://wyborcza.pl (accessed on 1 August 2020).

Trebicki, Grzegorz. 2007. *Fantasy—Ewolucja Gatunku*. Krakow: Universitas.
Wagner, Geoffrey. 1975. *The Novel and the Cinema*. New York: Rutherford.
Winiecka, Elzbieta. 2017. Digital Adaptations of Literature. *Zagadnienia Rodzajow Literackich* 60: 58–77. [CrossRef]
Wyslouch, Seweryna. 2014. Adaptacja filmowa—Przekładem czy montażem? *Przestrzenie Teorii*, 223–27. [CrossRef]
Zwierzchowski, Marcin. 2020. Sapkowski: Nie Mam Kłopotu z grą "Wiedźmin", ale Prawdziwy Wiedźmin Jest Tylko Jeden i Pochodzi z Książek. Available online: http://www.polityka.pl (accessed on 1 August 2020).

arts

MDPI

Article

From Patricide to Patrilineality: Adapting *The Wandering Earth* for the Big Screen

Ping Zhu

Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019, USA; pingzhu@ou.edu

Received: 28 July 2020; Accepted: 1 September 2020; Published: 4 September 2020

Abstract: This paper discusses how Liu Cixin's 2000 novella "The Wandering Earth" was adapted into a family melodrama that ultimately reinforces the authority of the Father and the nation-state. It analyzes the complex mechanisms, such as *mise en abyme* and scapegoating, that serve to condone the patriarch's power, as well as the intertextuality tying the film to the socialist culture. This paper analyses the social context that foregrounds the conversion from symbolic patricide (breaking the established system) to symbolic patrilineality (integration into the social order) in the film and also discusses the inherent tension between the radical apocalyptic vision offered in the original science fiction story and the cultural industry serving the interests of the established order.

Keywords: science fiction; *The Wandering Earth*; patricide; patrilineality; adaptation; nationalism

1. From Apocalyptic Sci-fi to Family Melodrama

The first mainstream science fiction film made by the Chinese, *The Wandering Earth* (dir. Guo Fan, a.k.a. Frant Gwo, debuted on Chinese New Year's Day (February 5) in 2019 and became an instant hit, grossing $560 million at the box office in the first two weeks.[1] To this date, the film remains the third highest grossing film of all time at the Chinese box office, only behind the 2017 blockbuster *Wolf Warrior 2* (dir. Wu Jing) and the 2019 3D animation *Ne Zha* (dir. Jiaozi).[2] A Chinese viewers' satisfaction survey showed that the film ranked no. 1 of all films released in China during the spring of 2019 (Zhang 2019). The film *The Wandering Earth* was adapted from the titular novella by Liu Cixin (1963–), who became an internationally renowned sci-fi writer after his novel *The Three Body Problem* won the Hugo Award in 2015. Originally published in 2000 in the Chinese magazine *Science Fiction World* (*Kehuan shijie*), "The Wandering Earth" is one of Liu's early sci-fi stories and remained relatively unknown until Liu rose to fame a few years ago.

Liu Cixin's "The Wandering Earth" is an apocalyptic tale of a post-national, post-familial, and even post-human world. The novella is narrated by the nameless protagonist and covers the time span from his birth to old age. The protagonist is born at the end of the Earth's "Braking Age" (*shache shidai*), grows up in the "Escaping Age" (*taoyi shidai*), later witnesses the human's revolt and the helium flash that marks the end of the sun, and becomes one of the survivors on the Earth fifty years later in the "Wandering Age" (*liulang shidai*). Liu Cixin depicts the dissolution of the family during this long historical journey when the solar system is in crisis. The narrator's grandfather dies of an illness before people take shelter in the underground cities at the end of the "Braking Age"; his mother is buried alive in an underground city during an earthquake during the "Escaping Age"; later, his

[1] https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2019/02/17/box-office-wandering-earth-how-to-train-your-dragon-lego-taraji-henson-liam-neeson-kevin-hart/#38ea2d897970.
[2] https://www.endata.com.cn/BoxOffice/BO/History/Movie/Alltimedomestic.html.

father is killed by a meteor in his airborne mini-spaceship. The radically different world has forced human societies and interhuman relationships to rapidly evolve. Nations no longer exist on the dislocated Earth, all resources are controlled by the United Earth Government (UEG) so the latter can lead the biggest escape plan in human history. Every kind of human bond has been destroyed by the looming catastrophe, and humans' desires and emotions have evolved with the crisis-ridden world too: The protagonist's father leaves home to live with another woman for two months, and his mother reacts indifferently to this affair. The emotional attachments among family members are diluted by the desire for survival. The protagonist only feels a tinge of pain when his mother dies and is completely apathetic when he hears about his father's death. Toward the end of the story, when an increasing number of people believe that the sun will never explode and that all human beings have become victims of a big conspiracy plotted by the UEG, they quickly form a rebel army in order to bring the Earth back to the solar system; even the protagonist's Japanese wife abandons him and their son to join the rebel army. The sun's helium flash, however, suddenly occurs right after the rebel army executes the 5000 UEG members, killing most inhabitants on the Earth. In the face of capricious and ruthless nature, nothing is permanent, human authorities collapse, and the father figures lose their protective and disciplining power. Common sense and the established authorities are repeatedly challenged throughout the novella, making the text a field of symbolic patricide. It is precisely this symbolic patricide—the radical departure from common sense and established social order, as well as the resistance to endorse any human, social, or spiritual authority—that makes Liu Cixin's "The Wandering Earth" a thought-provoking story.

An apocalyptic fiction often reveals an end time scenario for the Earth, but the revelation offered by the apocalyptic fiction can go deeper than merely depicting the immanent crisis. In "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", Walter Benjamin proposes a different way to understand apocalypse: it should offer "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the suppressed past" (Benjamin 1968, p. 263); it must help us arrive at a concept of history which teaches us that "the 'state of emergency' in which we live in is not the exception but the rule" (ibid., p. 257). It is only in this way that the apocalypse can produce knowledge, which begins with the knowledge that "the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable" (ibid., p. 257). Benjamin's thesis has opened up a second and deeper meaning of the apocalypse: it leads us to see the real culprit of human crisis in the homogeneous history, and it stimulates people into revolting against history, or, in Benjamin's words, "blasting a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history" (ibid., p. 263).

The film *The Wandering Earth* does an impressive job in simulating an apocalyptic scenario caused by nature with its stunning visual effects; however, it deliberately deviates from the second meaning of the apocalypse about the rule of the homogeneous history. When transposing *The Wandering Earth* from book to screen, the director Guo Fan and his team, consisting of himself and six other young screenwriters, adapted the novella into a Chinese father–son story featuring the relationship of three generations of Chinese men. While the novella's central plot covers more than an eighty year time span, the film only focuses on a small fraction of chronology that takes place at the end of the Earth's "Escaping Age" in the novella, when the Earth is trying to escape Jupiter's gravitational field. The central plot of the film happens within a short span of twenty-four hours. The two father figures, Liu Qi's grandfather Han Zi'ang and his father Liu Peiqiang, who only receive passing mentions in the novella, both have a conspicuous presence in the film. Han Zi'ang's and Liu Peiqiang's heroic deaths are two climaxes of the film that serve the important function of bringing the rebellious "wandering" youth, Liu Qi, back to his family and the Chinese community.

This radically narrower chronology dominated by the father figures not only creates a concentrated dramatic space, it also serves as an ideological apparatus that induces the viewers' identification with the present, which is represented as the eternality in the film. The future, it seems, will be no different from the present, in which Liu Qi and his peers will play the heroic roles, like their fathers, to preserve the status quo. The adaptation thus basically turns a profound apocalyptic (in the Benjaminian sense) sci-fi story into a family melodrama that seeks to cement the authority of the father. Here, I use Chris

Berry's notion of "the family melodrama", which "focuses less on the individual in conflict with the family and more on the family as a collective in crisis" (Berry 2008, p. 235). The film deals with the collective crisis of an extended family consisting of three generations, and also of the national and international "families" composed of unrelated people of different ethnicities living in the same "home"—the Earth. The reduced chronology and enhanced emotional transactions in the film create a self-absorbed narrative that diverts the audience's attention and thinking away from the course of history and human destiny, both of which figure prominently in the novella.

A great science fiction work such as Liu Cixin's novella commits symbolic patricide with its radical departure from the homogeneous history. The film *The Wandering Earth*, by contrast, restores the symbolic patrilineality by castrating the radical historical vision represented in the novella and integrating it with the cultural industry dominated by self-perpetuating technology of production and governance. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse warns us of a one-dimensional society where transcendental ideas, aspirations, and objectives are "either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe;" as such, "qualitative differences of conflicting interests appear as quantitative differences within the established society" (Marcuse 1991, pp. 14, 23). If "The Wandering Earth" is a text of symbolic patricide, the filmic adaptation restores the father's authority by reaffirming the order of "this universe." This paper illustrates how this conversion from patricide to patrilineality is accomplished in the adaptation by taking a close look at the narrative mechanism it employs and the intertextual network it weaves to revamp meanings and wield authoritarian power. As much as this process shows the media industry's avid support for cultural hierarchy as evidenced in the film's marketing and publicity strategies that emphasize consumers' national identity and cultural self-improvement, it also invites people to take note of the sophisticated and complex mechanism that has turned the most unlikely text into a validation of the patriarchy.

2. From Patricide to Patrilineality

Against the background of the unprecedented crisis of the solar system, the core plot of the film *The Wandering Earth* is the young protagonist Liu Qi's (played by Qu Chuxiao) inner journey from denouncing his father Liu Peiqiang (played by Wu Jing) to internalizing the father, after the father sacrificed himself to save the Earth. Differently from Liu Cixin's titular sci-fi story, the film is a Chinese father–son story, featuring the relationship of three generations of Chinese men. In the film, when only half of the earth's population are allowed to continue to survive in underground cities, Liu Peiqiang decides to prematurely terminate the life of Liu Qi's mother, who is terminally ill, and to give her life slot and Liu Qi's guardianship to his father-in-law Han Zi'ang. Later Liu Peiqiang leaves to work in "The Navigation Platform" international space station far away from the Earth, leaving Liu Qi to be raised by his grandfather Han Zi'ang, from whom the boy learns how to drive the truck. By the end of the film, Liu Qi becomes the incarnation of both Han Zi'ang and Liu Peiqiang. As I will discuss henceforth, this multi-generation patriarchal family is full of Chinese characteristics and is at the same time full of nationalist overtones.

We have learned from historians like George Moss and Benedict Anderson that nationalism favors a distinctly homosocial form of male bonding, and is typically represented as a passionate brotherhood.[3] For the same reason, the progression of national history can often be found in father–son stories, especially for a civilization like China that puts utmost importance on the patrilineal family values. Confucian ethics demands the sons be filial and submissive to the father, and for thousands of years Chinese rulers have used filiality as a form of governance, in which the ruler would regard himself as the father of his people. It is actually difficult to conceptually separate the Chinese family from the Chinese state. In Chinese, the term for the state is *guojia*, literally meaning "state-family". Based on the Confucian teaching, the father–son relationship in the family should be regarded as a model

[3] See (Moose 1985; Anderson 2006).

for the subject's relationship to the state, as both should be natural and appropriate.[4] A masculine subject's different social roles are thus not pitted against each other in traditional Chinese culture, but are consistent with and complementary to each other. This imagined community is different from Western culture, which defines the subject as a product of many forms of tensions between love and duty, the heart and the mind, desire and fear, as well as the private and the public. The Confucian teaching, in other words, offers a non-confrontational model for conceiving the father–son relationship at different levels. The driving force of Western civilization, on the contrary, is often represented by the Oedipus complex: the struggle between the father and the sons. As Sigmund Freud depicts in *Totem and Taboo*, civilization started when a band of pre-historic brothers joined forces to kill their father and took over all his females (Freud 1919, p. 210). The Oedipal tension is regarded as a mainspring of human behavior in Western culture and has had a "pervasive presence [. . .] in the most influential storytelling medium" since the modern period (Winkler 2008, p. 67).

One of the major legacies of Chinese modernity in the early twentieth century was the reception of the Western concept of history. In modern China, the revolt of the sons (and daughters) was frequently used as a cultural metaphor to challenge the old political power and bring out radical changes in history. During the Chinese New Culture Movement (1915–1924), radical intellectuals who waged a war against the traditional Chinese culture were a cohort of symbolic patricides. Mao Zedong himself was an advocate of symbolic patricide too: his vision of a new China was predicated on the revolt against the established values and authority, a revolt that culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The postsocialist period was kick-started in a surge of patricidal desires found in root-seeking literature (*xungen wenxue*) and avant-garde literature (*xianfeng wenxue*), which showed a strong urge for bidding farewell to the revolutionary "fathers" from the socialist period. The patricidal desires continued in the cinematic works of the Fifth-Generation directors. Scenes of violent killings of the fathers in Chinese cinema first appeared in Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* in 1986 and *Ju Dou* in 1990, and reoccurred in Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* in 1999 and *Sacrifice* in 2010.

A Chinese father–son story can oftentimes be read as a "national allegory" (Jameson 1986), projecting a political dimension of the collective unconsciousness. On the one hand, the patricidal urge registers the Chinese intellectuals' obsession with the Western historical model of revolution and progress; on the other hand, it denotes China's new latecomer/subaltern self-identity in the modern world. Rey Chow comments that "the repeated associations of patricide typical of Oedipalization—the physical impotence, symbolic castration, and ultimate death of father—constitute a reading of China's modernity and 'ethnicity' that is a *self-subalternization*: we are made to feel that, being fatherless, China is deprived of power; China is a subaltern in the world of modern nations" (Chow 1995, p. 148). In this sense, symbolic patricide is at odds with the building of the Confidence Doctrine that has been a widely promoted Chinese nationalistic discourse since 2012.[5]

The Wandering Earth starts off as a potential story of patricide. As the film shows us in the beginning, Liu Qi denounces his father, scooping out Liu Peiqiang's face from the family photo and planning to leave home before the latter's return to the Earth from the international space station (Figure 1). This patricidal urge is only resolved through a *mise en abyme* mechanism. In the film, there are actually two family stories, one within the other. In the larger story the Earth is in crisis; all men, including the son and the father, have to join forces to save it. Liu Qi finally calls Liu Peiqiang "dad" only after the latter sacrifices himself to save the Earth. In the end, Liu Qi is fully integrated into the patrilineal history: he becomes a truck driver like his grandfather Han Zi'ang, and is wearing the

[4] The famous Confucian saying "Junjun chenchen fufu zizi" 君君臣臣父父子子 (let the king be a king, the minister a minister, the father a father, and the son a son) rectifies the names of each social roles and at the same time shows the parallel relationship between those roles.

[5] The Confidence Doctrine refers to the "four matters of confidence" (*sige zixin* 四个自信), proposed by Xi Jinping in 2012. "The four matters of confidence" include the self-confidence in the path, theory, institution, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

medal "Hero of the Earth" (*Diqiu yingxiong*) like his father Liu Peiqiang. The two dead fathers continue to live in the bodies of the younger generation.

Figure 1. Liu Qi has scooped out Liu Peiqiang's face from the family photo.

The conversion from patricide to patrilineality is made possible through a narrative device that suppresses the past (which is associated with the dead mother) and amplifying the present (which is a stage for displaying the heroism of the fathers). In the first story, the son fails to save his mother, whose life was given up based on the calculation of her chance of survival. In the second, larger story, the sons of the Earth (a group of men including Liu Qi, Liu Peiqiang, Han Zi'ang, Wang Lei, Li Yiyi, etc.) have saved Mother Earth against an impending doom. In many ways, Liu Qi's ailing mother is symbolic of the Earth that still provides shelter to human beings despite her own ecological disaster. Liu Qi's family story is thus sublated by the Earth story, and his family tragedy overwritten by the triumphant story of saving the Earth. The morning for the death mother, which fueled Liu Qi's patricidal desire in the first story, is replaced by his guilt and respect for the father who sacrificed his life in the second story. As a result, the son is reintegrated into the patrilineal family and becomes a new guardian of the patriarchal authority. There is a revealing detail by the end of the film: the younger sister Han Duoduo has been calling Liu Qi "Hukou" (Liu Qi's first name Qi 启 is combined with the two characters 户 and 口, so Han Duoduo gives him this nickname); however, after Liu Qi becomes the "Hero of the Earth," he outright rejects this nickname and asks Duoduo to call him "Big Brother" (*ge* 哥).

Compared with the novella, in which humans finally realize that the "state of emergency" has become the rule, like Benjamin suggests, and pick up weapons to revolt against the government, the film stages the reconciliation between the father and the son, creating a homogeneous family, community, and history that revolve around the patrilineality. In this sense, the film is a skillful anti-Oedipalizaiton work that aligns with the trendy concept of "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) that has been emphasized by the Chinese Communist Party leaders since 2004.[6] All the screenwriters are young people born in the 1980s, so perhaps they are more susceptible to the Party's socio-political vision that was instilled in their minds during their formative years.[7] However, the choice of the screenwriters is not an isolated case; it reflects the transformation of China's cultural industry and the changed

[6] The concept "harmonious society" was introduced by Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2004 and has been inherited by the current Chinese leader Xi Jinping, who promotes "harmony" as a core socialist value. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2018-07/25/c_1123173737.htm.

[7] Individual experiences may have played a role in the film's depiction of the father–son relationship too. For example, the director Guo Fan said in an interview that the passing of his father a few years ago changed his antagonistic view of the father. See (Li 2019).

Chinese consumers' preferences in recent years. The rise of cyber-nationalism and fandom nationalism in China in the 21st century, for example, indicates that some young Chinese enjoy the performance of nationalism and defending authority due to a "collective yearning for grandeur and heroism in a postheroic, disenchanted world" (Yang 2019, p. 7). As a result, the Oedipal tension is replaced by a moral and emotional imperative to defend the father and reestablish the authority in the family and society. Just two days prior to the release of *The Wandering Earth*, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a New Year's talk in the Great Hall of the People, in which he devoted a whole section to emphasizing filial piety's important role for the family and the nation: "It is the noble tradition of the Chinese nation to be filial at home and loyal to the country. Without the prosperity and development of the nation, there would be no happy family. Likewise, without millions of happy families, there would be no prosperous and developed nation" (Xi 2019). The traditional Chinese hierarchy of positionalities is once again used to support the 21st century Chinese nationalism, which, allegedly, benefits both the individual and the nation: the nation gets the loyal supporters/builders and the individuals get to share the greatness of the nation. *The Wandering Earth* has endorsed this traditional father–son relationship too: in the film, the reconciliation between the father and the son is not represented as a compromise; instead, it is a double win, as it condones the father, empowers the son, and makes the son a better citizen in the imagined community.

3. Patricide and Scapegoating

The *mise en abyme* setting allows the father Liu Peiqiang to have two different roles in the film: in the story of the small family, he is the father who took the mother away from the son; however, in the larger story of the Earth, he is one of the sons saving the mother Earth from the rational decision made by the UEG. The UEG is a form of public power at the international level. The rule of the UEG is justified by the "state of emergency" caused by the looming natural disaster. In the name of the Earth's crisis, the UEG has dominated all human and natural resources as it leads the Earth's massive escape project.

The UEG remains a bodiless voice throughout the film, but it has a physical enforcer, the AI with the name MOSS. When the calculation shows that the survival chance of the Earth is too low, MOSS implements what the UEG has told him: giving up the Earth by aborting the Wandering Earth plan and embarking a new plan called Helios. The Helios plan is supposed to save the civilization of the Earth and the humans on the Navigation ISS (including Liu Peiqiang), so that humans can start anew on another habitat in the universe. However, Liu Peiqiang chooses to disobey the order this time. While MOSS tries to stop him, he burns out the AI processer with a bottle of liquor (Figure 2).

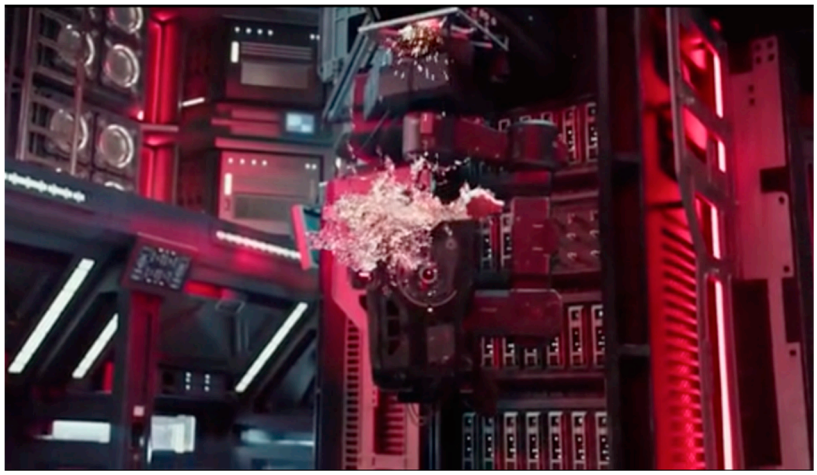


Figure 2. Liu Peiqiang sets MOSS on fire.

Can we call this heroic act of Liu Peiqiang an act of patricide? It is true that MOSS seems to be the avatar of the inhuman rationality that kills people in the film. However, the logic of MOSS is completely predetermined by the UEG. The screenwriters of *The Wandering Earth* decided to add the character MOSS following their favorite sci-fi film, Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001, A Space Odyssey* (the screenplay was written by Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke).[8] In the latter, a 9000-series computer named Hal acts crazily and dangerously, and is terminated by the protagonist, Dr. David Bowman. However, David later finds out that Hal was trying to faithfully carry out what was programmed in him (in this film, this revelation coincides with Hal's regression into a babbling machine). In *The Wandering Earth*, MOSS does not have his own will either—he is merely an enforcer of the will of the UEG. Therefore, by killing MOSS, Liu Peiqing has not committed patricide, but rather has killed a scapegoat of the authoritarian rule.

Interestingly, if we go back to the small family story, Liu Peiqiang himself is also a scapegoat. Liu Qi resents Liu Peiqiang for the death of his mother, but the mother's premature death was the direct result of the UEG's decision to leave half the population on the Earth to die. Liu Peiqiang is merely an enforcer of this order, which is also based on rational calculation. When Liu Peiqiang kills MOSS, he is virtually killing his earlier self (as an enforcer of the UEG). The act thus has a double meaning: on the one hand, it is seemingly revolutionary, suggesting the revolt of the Earth's son against the inhuman machine; on the other hand, it is redemptive of Liu Peiqiang's past decision to prematurely end his wife's life based on a rational calculation. However, the ultimate maker of the social order (the UEG) remains unchallenged in both stories.[9] The important question that is not asked in the film is, since humans have succeeded in saving the Earth against all odds, why couldn't such hope and courage be used to save half of the population (including Liu Qi's mother) years ago?

Killing the scapegoat of the authoritarian rule and sacrificing himself allows Liu Peiqiang to "return" to his son as a true hero. Liu Peiqiang's death has a double meaning too: on the one hand, his death saves the Earth; on the other hand, he dies as a scapegoat of the UEG's earlier decision to sacrifice half of the humans on the Earth, including his own wife. Therefore, Liu Qi instantly forgives and fully identifies with his father after he witnesses the latter's sacrifice. This is the moment when Liu Qi is elevated from the son of a biological mother to the son of the Mother Earth, in the human community of shared destiny. This scene is reminiscent of the revolutionary film *The Red Detachment of Women* (1961, dir. Xie Jin): when Wu Qionghua witnesses the sacrifice of the hero Hong Changqing, she fully identifies with him too. It is noteworthy that in *The Red Detachment of Women*, Wu Qionghua also learns to think from the point of the oppressed multitude (the larger family) rather than from her own family. The socialist revolutionary rhetoric works as a spectral didactic structure in the sci-fi film, guiding the audience's reception with familiar tropes, narratives, languages, and scenes.

In Liu Cixin's original novella, the UEG is held responsible for their decisions. In the film, however, all of the UEG's questionable decisions are scapegoated onto the enforcers of those decisions, be it Liu Peiqiang, MOSS, or Wang Lei (who puts the UEG order to save the planetary engine over individual lives), all of whom died in the film. Yet the UEG remains intact and unchallenged. After Liu Qi identifies with the dead father, he seems to have reconciled with the authoritarian rule behind his father too. In the end, Liu Qi is fully (and happily) integrated into the human community under the same authoritarian UEG.

In the film, the UEG is represented by a soft-speaking voice in French. Michel Chion calls the voice from the radio "acousmatic" ("the acousmêtre"). The acousmatic, according to Chion, has "the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power. In other words: ubiquity; panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence" (Chion 1999, p. 24). In *The Wandering Earth*, the crisis of

---

[8] Stanley Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey* is the favorite film for Liu Cixin, Guo Fan, and Wu Jing. https://tech.sina.com.cn/d/s/2019-02-11/doc-ihrfqzka4806207.shtml.

[9] In the film, the UEG later changed its mind and authorized Liu Peiqiang's suicidal mission, making Liu still an enforcer of the order from this invisible father figure.

the solar system has granted the UEG the supreme power to allocate all resources on the Earth. While Liu Qi used to challenge this supreme power, over the course of the film he has gradually become a successor of the array of father figures (in sequence, Han Zi'ang, the scientist He Lianke, Liu Peiqiang, and the soldier Wang Lei) who sacrificed their lives by following the UEG orders to save the Earth. While the Earth continues to wander around in the universe at the end of the film, the wandering youth has finally returned home—not only returning but also voluntarily submitting to the order.

Therefore, although *The Wandering Earth* starts off as a potential patricide story, no real patricide takes place. The film actually shows the triumph of the ubiquitous, panoptic, omniscient, and omnipotent Father. As if driven by the need to differentiate itself from the Hollywood family story that always unfolds in an Oedipal space, *The Wandering Earth* has added a new character: the 16-year old girl Han Duoduo, an orphan rescued and adopted by Han Zi'ang. Han Zi'ang named the girl Han Duoduo after his deceased daughter (Figure 3). In the film, one of the most important missions for Liu Qi is to protect his younger sister, who has the same name as his mother. Rather than serving as an object of masculine desires, Han Duoduo is a symbol that forbids sexual desires. The replacement of the mother Han Duoduo with the young girl Han Duoduo in the film effectively blocks the circuit of the Oedipus tension between Liu Peiqiang and Liu Qi: after Han Zi'ang's death, Liu Qi becomes the sole custodian for Han Duoduo—in this way, the mother–son relationship in the familiar Oedipal story is converted into a big brother–younger sister relationship, facilitating Liu Qi's development into a new patriarchal figure. This remarkable addition is key to the resolution of the Chinese family melodrama in *The Wandering Earth*.

Figure 3. Han Zi'ang names the orphan girl after his deceased daughter Han Duoduo.

4. The Specter of Nationalism

The Wandering Earth deliberately appeals to the heightened nationalistic sentiments among Chinese viewers, who showed unprecedented enthusiasm for *Wolf Warrior 2*, which remains the highest grossing film of all time in Chinese box office. *Wolf Warrior 2*, directed and starred by Wu Jing, is replete with nationalist messages and patriotic tropes, and was praised by Chinese state media as a successful film that advocates "the mainstream ideology of the Party, the nation-state, and the society" (Zeng 2017). The decision to ask Wu Jing to play Liu Qi's father Liu Peiqiang in *The Wandering Earth* sends a strong message of the sci-fi film's major nationalist appeal. Critics of the nationalistic propaganda called the film "Wolf Warrior in Space" (*Taikong ban Zhanlang*) and vowed to boycott it (*The New Lens* 2019). However, more Chinese viewers supported this film precisely because it shows the rise of China's national power. The film was not only marketed as the first Chinese sci-fi blockbuster featuring a "Chinese team" saving the Earth, the producer also extolled the "all Chinese team" for the film's visual effects (Suofeiya·Dupang 2019). The film seems to be a grand display of China's rapid technological

developments and the "Made in China 2025" (*Zhongguo zhizao 2025*) strategic plan that aims to help the nation gain a dominant place in high-tech manufacturing by the end of 2025. The release of the film was thus a sensational event that fed into the growing national pride in China.

However, all of these nationalist sentiments had to be grafted to a post-national setting of the sci-fi story. Liu Cixin's original story unfolds in a post-solar era where there is only one government, the United Earth Government, for all human beings. The film keeps this setting, but persistently leaves the Chinese nationalist branding in its characters and plots, creating a special form of nationalism that is not bound to physical space but rather to the psychic space of the characters.

Both Liu Qi and Han Duoduo become orphans during the crisis of the solar system. In modern Chinese revolutionary films, orphanhood was employed to construct the nation-state as a big family without blood ties. For example, in the 1970 revolutionary model opera *Red Lantern* (*Hongdeng ji*), three generations of unrelated people have formed one revolutionary family. In *The Wandering Earth*, Han Zi'ang and Liu Qiu have also formed a family with the unrelated Han Duoduo—this family is not a kinship family but a national family. Although as a sci-fi film, *The Wandering Earth* is supposedly concerned with the fate of the human race as a whole (especially the fate of humans after the dissolution of nation-states and families), it has utilized every opportunity to advertise a form of (deterritorialized) nationalism behind the semblance of internationalism. Aside from the many Chinese elements (the Chinese national flag, the Spring Festival, the Chinese voice prompts in the car radio, the school uniform, etc.), the film also tries to appeal to the overseas communities by adding one mixed-blood character (Tim, played by Mike Sui) in the main cast. Tim functions as a comic figure in the film, but also as a conspicuous sign of the global reach of China's encompassing power.

In the film, the grandfather Han Zi'ang can be viewed as a symbol of the traditional Chinese concept of the benevolent and protective nation-state family (*guojia*). Han Zi'ang is a nostalgic character, constantly bringing back memories of the solar-age Earth, of the traditions and hierarchies of China's national culture. This senior father figure remains blameless in the film, even though Han Zi'ang has tacitly endorsed Liu Peiqiang's decision to terminate Liu Qi's mother—his own daughter. Han Zi'ang is frozen to death in a tall building in Shanghai that he built with others long time ago, shortly after he emotionally recollects his old family life. His death is symbolic of the moment in which nationalism is freed from the territory. Han Duoduo's question after Han's death reveals this old male character's symbolic function in the film: "Without grandpa, where is our home"? This "home", the psychic space for the family and the nation, has been transferred from Han Zi'ang to Liu Qi after the former's death.

Displacement and the loss of territory, therefore, do not mean the disappearance of nationalism. Giles Deleuze points out that deterritorialization "constitutes and extends" the territory itself (Deleuze 1987, p. 372). After Han Zi'ang's death, Chinese nationalism becomes a specter that can take any shape and possess any character. This specter of nationalism sometimes joins hands with the public power of the UEG to establish more authoritarian father figures in local communities (e.g., Liu Qi), sometimes it reminds the audience to view *The Wandering Earth* as a chauvinistic demonstration of the CCP's achievements, and sometimes it is appropriated by the political discourse as a clarion call to strengthen the family-nation.[10] The deterritorialized nationalism works like the "acousmatic": it is ubiquitous, panoptic, omniscient, and omnipotent. It can more effectively "nationalize" individual feelings, such as Duo Duo's longing for family, and communitarian sentiments, such as the culture of the underground city. It is ironic that despite the post-national sci-fi setting, the film is fraught with nationalist symbols, sentiments, memories, rituals, and narratives. Perhaps it is due to the lack of a true global vision that *The Wandering Earth* failed to have a remarkable performance in the international film market. Nathan Hao, CEO of distributor Times Visio, says that although "Chinese sci-fi is capable of attracting audiences abroad", he doesn't think "it'll happen in the short term" (Davis 2019).

[10] Coincidentally, on the same day of the debut of the film *The Wandering Earth*, *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao* 2019) published an editorial titled "Vigorously Promoting the Family-Nation Complex in the Whole Society."

5. Conclusions

It seems that the adaptation of the novella "The Wandering Earth" into a big screen feature has a preset teleology: the victory of the father. The film is deeply imbedded in the discursive network of postsocialist China and is pre-determined by the exigencies and interests of this society. As a result, the viewers are presented with a Chinese father–son story displaying the multiplied and insidious forms of the patriarchy enabled by transnationalism and technology: the Father can be an individual, a collective, disembodied, reincarnated, or displaced, but the Father always prevails. One can only become free by struggling against the established society. By upholding an infallible father, the film thus forecloses any possibility of radical revolutions of history by preemptively "castrating" the son.

Toward the end of the film, the audience sees a 2-min sequence in which the camera follows Liu Qi walking through the Chinese community in the underground city, where he receives people's respect and greetings, before going to the surface of the Earth (Figure 4). The back figure of a faceless man bears many specters of fathers, who emerge victoriously in this film. The gallant voice-over and the speeding truck in the end have further transformed an apocalyptic disaster story into a mainstream blockbuster bristling with positive energy. It seems that in the end of the film, the characters have forgotten about the continuing crisis of the Earth (and the tragedy of the mother), and instead revel in the consolidated patriarchal system, which is more powerful than ever.

Figure 4. Liu Qi walks out of the underground city.

In recent years, the Chinese Bureau of Radio, Film, and Television has tightened its film content checks and only sanctioned those with "mainstream themes" (*zhu xuanlü*) and "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*). The adaptation of *The Wandering Earth* obviously satisfies these directives. In fact, the film may have been viewed as an excellent model for future Chinese sci-fi films: the Bureau released a new set of guidelines on sci-fi films in August 2020, asking all future Chinese sci-fi films to "highlight Chinese values, inherit Chinese culture and aesthetics, cultivate contemporary Chinese innovation" as well as "disseminate scientific thought" and "raise the spirit of scientists" (Davis 2020).

The Wandering Earth tells a story of how a Chinese family leads the grand endeavor to save the world. The ancient Chinese philosophers believed that great chaos must be followed by great governance, and great governance must be followed by great prosperity.[11] China's top leader Xi Jinping proposed the "Community of Common Destiny" (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*) as the motivating force of China's future foreign policy, which shows China's ambition to wield national power into a

[11] The original saying is derived from *Huainanzi* (The Writings of Huainan Masters), a Chinese classic written in the 2nd century BC.

global, totalizing domination during the potential global crisis. As Benjamin tells us, however, the "state of emergency" that is utilized to strengthen the authoritarian rule should not be treated "as a historical norm"; we need to "bring out a real state of emergency" that can lead us to a radical future (Benjamin 1968, p. 257). By castrating the projected radical future in Liu Cixin novella, the film *The Wandering Earth* has fully endorsed the existing rule.

According to Marcuse, the "technological transformation is at the same time political transformation, but the political change would turn into qualitative social change only to the degree to which it would alter the direction of technical progress" and bring about "the catastrophe of the established direction" (Marcuse 1991, p. 232). Through his imagination of radical technological, social, and political changes, Liu Cixin's novella has indeed brought about such a catastrophic departure from the established social order; however, the film *The Wandering Earth* only "wanders" within the established trajectory.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso Books.

Benjamin, Walter. 1968. Thesis on the Philosophy of History. In *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books Inc.

Berry, Chris. 2008. Wedding Banquet: A Family (Melodrama) Affair. In *Chinese Films in Focus II*. Edited by Chris Berry. London: British Film Institute.

Chion, Michel. 1999. *The Voice in Cinema*. Translated and Edited by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press.

Chow, Rey. 1995. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Davis, Rebecca. 2019. *The Wandering Earth* is Leading the Sci-fi Charge at China's Box Office. *Variety*, March 14. Available online: https://variety.com/2019/film/asia/wandering-earth-sci-fi-china-box-office-1203161818/ (accessed on 2 September 2020).

Davis, Rebecca. 2020. China Issues Guidelines on Developing a Sci-fi Film Sector. *Variety*, August 17. Available online: https://variety.com/2020/film/news/china-guidelines-science-fiction-1234737913/?fbclid=IwAR3qg6aO1xFZu5FeSy85A0z8AThWsjJik2q3v_ZUbBylBUT7DIlxWurcOBI (accessed on 2 September 2020).

Deleuze, Gilles. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Freud, Sigmund. 1919. *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Translated by A. A. Brill. London: George Routledge & Sons, Limited.

Jameson, Fredric. 1986. Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism. *Social Text* 15: 65–88. [CrossRef]

Li, Xing 李行. 2019. *Liulang Diqiu* shi zenme dansheng de 《流浪地球》是怎么诞生的 (How did *The Wandering Earth* come into being). *Zhongguo Xinwen Zhoukan*, February 15. Available online: http://www.inewsweek.cn/survey/2019-02-15/5008.shtml (accessed on 2 September 2020).

Marcuse, Herbert. 1991. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. London and New York: Routledge.

Moose, George. 1985. *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*. New York: Howard Fertig.

Renmin Ribao. 2019. Zai quanshehui dali hongyang jiaguo qinghuai 在全社会大力弘扬家国情怀 (Vigorously Promoting the Family-Nation Complex in the Whole Society). *Renmin Ribao*, February 5. Available online: http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2019-02/05/nw.D110000renmrb_20190205_2-01.htm (accessed on 2 September 2020).

Suofeiya·Dupang 索菲亚·嘟胖. 2019. *Liulang Diqiu* shijue texiao zongjian Ding Yanlai zhuanfang 《流浪地球》视觉特效总监丁燕来专访 (An interview with the Ding Yanlai, the visual effects director of *The Wandering Earth*). *Xinpianchang*, March 6. Available online: https://www.xinpianchang.com/e14701 (accessed on 2 September 2020).

The New Lens. 2019. *Liulang Diqiu* kaiqi le 'zhongguo kehuan yuannian' yihuo zhishi 'taikong ban zhanlang?' 《流浪地球》开启了"中国科幻元年"抑或只是"太空版战狼"? (Is *The Wandering Earth* the First Chinese Sci-fi Film or Is It Just "Wolf Warrior in Space"?). *The New Lens*, February 11. Available online: https://www.thenewslens.com/article/113521 (accessed on 2 September 2020).

Winkler, Martin M. 2008. Oedipus in the Cinema. *Arethusa* 41: 67–94. [CrossRef]

Xi, Jinping 习近平. 2019. Zaiai 2019 Nian Chunjie Tuanbaihui Shang de Jianghua 在2019年春节团拜会上的讲话 (Talk at the 2019 New Year Group Celebration). Xinhuanet.com, February 3. Available online: http://www.xinhuanet.com/2019-02/03/c_1124084002.htm (accessed on 2 September 2020).

Yang, Guobin. 2019. Performing Cyber-nationalism in Twenty-first-century China. In *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism*. Edited by Hailong Liu. New York: Routledge, pp. 1–12.

Zeng, Yuli 曾于里. 2017. *Zhanlang 2* de juli yu *Jianjun Daye* de juxing 《战狼2》的聚力与《建军大业》的聚星 (The Rallying Power of *Wolf Warrior II* and the Gathered Stars in *The Founding of An Army*). people.com.cn, August 3. Available online: http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0803/c40606-29445952.html (accessed on 2 September 2020).

Zhang, Yan 张焱. 2019. *Liulang diqiu* heyi dongren 《流浪地球》何以动人 (Why is *The Wandering Earth* such a touching film?). *Guangming Ribao*, February 12. Available online: http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0212/c1003-30623525.html (accessed on 2 September 2020).

arts

MDPI

Article

Cultural "Authenticity" as a Conflict-Ridden Hypotext: *Mulan* (1998), *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939), and a Millennium-Long Intertextual Metamorphosis

Zhuoyi Wang

Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, Hamilton College, Clinton, NY 13323, USA; zwang@hamilton.edu

Received: 6 June 2020; Accepted: 7 July 2020; Published: 10 July 2020

Abstract: Disney's *Mulan* (1998) has generated much scholarly interest in comparing the film with its hypotext: the Chinese legend of Mulan. While this comparison has produced meaningful criticism of the Orientalism inherent in Disney's cultural appropriation, it often ironically perpetuates the Orientalist paradigm by reducing the legend into a unified, static entity of the "authentic" Chinese "original". This paper argues that the Chinese hypotext is an accumulation of dramatically conflicting representations of Mulan with no clear point of origin. It analyzes the Republican-era film adaptation *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939) as a cultural palimpsest revealing attributes associated with different stages of the legendary figure's millennium-long intertextual metamorphosis, including a possibly nomadic woman warrior outside China proper, a Confucian role model of loyalty and filial piety, a Sinitic deity in the Sino-Barbarian dichotomy, a focus of male sexual fantasy, a Neo-Confucian exemplar of chastity, and modern models for women established for antagonistic political agendas. Similar to the previous layers of adaptation constituting the hypotext, Disney's *Mulan* is simply another hypertext continuing Mulan's metamorphosis, and it by no means contains the most dramatic intertextual change. Productive criticism of Orientalist cultural appropriations, therefore, should move beyond the dichotomy of the static East versus the change-making West, taking full account of the immense hybridity and fluidity pulsing beneath the fallacy of a monolithic cultural "authenticity".

Keywords: Mulan; adaptation; Disney; Orientalism; cultural authenticity; cultural palimpsest; Chinese cinema

1. Introduction

In 1993, Disney animators encountered an impasse while working on a short feature called *China Doll*, a cliché-ridden story about a miserable Chinese girl rescued by a British Prince Charming. They turned to the Chinese legend of Mulan for inspiration (Whipp 1998). The earliest written record of the household legend is the anonymous *Ballad of Mulan* (*Mulan ci* or *Mulan shi*, henceforth *Ballad*), which scholars generally agree began circulating during the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534 CE) (e.g., Hu 1928; Yu 1953; Lu and Feng 1956; You 1991; Liu 1997). *Ballad* characterizes Mulan as a courageous daughter. When her father is drafted into the military, she enlists in his stead, and takes to the battlefield in a uniform which conceals her gender. After a valiant ten-year tour of duty, the emperor attempts to recognize her achievement by appointing her to a high official position. However, Mulan decides to reassume the role of an ordinary woman upon returning home. Her fellow soldiers are startled when she presents herself as a female, a departure from her previous mode of dress, hairstyle, and makeup (Anonymous 1979).

The legend inspired the creation of a new model for a Disney heroine in the film *Mulan* (dirs. Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, 1998). *Mulan* marked a departure from the standard model of a

Disney heroine who passively awaits a prince's deliverance. In the film, Mulan is an independent and resourceful warrior who uses her intellect to surpass her male allies and overcome her male adversaries. Thanks to this change, the film successfully cashed in on the turn to "girl power" in the Western-dominated pop culture of the 1990s, and was internationally acclaimed for breaking the stereotypical female mold in mass media (e.g., Labi 1998; Chan 2002; Nguyen 2008).

As critics have pointed out, however, *Mulan*'s progressiveness is seriously hampered by its reassertion of Western supremacy. Throughout the film, Mulan acts as a surrogate for commonly perceived Western values, such as individualism and independence, fighting to find her "true self" against restrictions imposed by a centuries-old "Chinese" patriarchy. Ironically, her apparently feminist struggle fits well into the cultural-imperialist agenda of "saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1993). While not incarnated in *Mulan* as an actual British Prince Charming, the commonly perceived Western values play the role of a savior whisking away this imagined ancient Chinese girl from her own repressive culture. Such feminism (or pseudo-feminism, as some critics call it) is particularly non-threatening to white male audiences, as it projects contemporary Western mainstream values as timeless and righteous, reducing gender oppression to the exclusive problem of non-Western cultures (Maio 1998; Ma 2003; Limbach 2013; Yin 2014).

Resisting this racial and cultural hegemony, scholars have turned to the Chinese legend of Mulan in an attempt to demarginalize oppressed narratives, memories, and imaginations. Many scholars have insightfully revealed how Disney's adaptation interpolated its stereotypical imaginings of Chinese culture into the Mulan story in order to inject it into a Western frame (Mo and Shen 2000; Djao 2002; Sun 2003; Wang and Yeh 2005; Peng 2005; Yin 2014). Such efforts at demarginalization, however, are usually flawed, owing to the general underestimation of the complexity of the transformation that the legend of Mulan has long undergone. Oversimplified and de-contextualized versions of the legend, as a result, have often been used to represent the "authentic" Chinese culture that needs to be restored after Disney's disruption. For example:

> [Disney's *Mulan*] trivializes a people's cultural heritage by forcing the elements of the story into a Hollywood formula. In the process, the plot of the folklore, cherished by the Chinese for over a thousand years, was distorted through embellishment and omission. [. . .] In the traditional story Hua Mulan joined the army in place of her father out of filial piety. She knew that it was out of question for her old and infirm father to be mobilized although he had served in the army with distinction. [. . .] In the folklore, Hua Mulan was instructed in the martial arts and military stratagems by her father [. . .]. (Djao 2002)[1]

Such criticism ironically privileges Disney, as well as the Western culture where the media conglomerate emerges, as the sole transformer of a Chinese "traditional story" that was supposedly free from modification for over a thousand years. Already present in this brief synopsis, however, are several later Chinese interpolations into the storyline of *Ballad*. The depiction of Mulan's father as "old and infirm" did not exist until *Song of Mulan* (*Mulan ge*, henceforth *Song*), which was written by a Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) poet Wei Yuanfu (?–771 CE) hundreds of years after *Ballad* (Wei 1979). Mulan did not have a family name until the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE), and no one claimed Hua as her family name until Xu Wei (1521–1593 CE), a Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) intellectual who wrote the play *Female Mulan Joins the Army in Place of Her Father* (henceforth *Female Mulan*). The father's education of Mulan was also a later embellishment that first appeared in the play. Moreover, as this article will further discuss, even *Ballad* cannot be considered a single "original". It is rather a product of hundreds of years of transmission, adaptations, and translations of an oral folklore that probably did not even originate in the Chinese language. Consequently, it is far more mixed than just a text of "Chinese" or Confucian moral lessons. By overlooking such complexity, critics of the Orientalist paradigm risk

[1] I have omitted Djao's descriptions of Disney's *Mulan* in comparison to the folklore.

perpetuating the essentialization of the East as a unified entity that remains static until changed by the West.

This paper argues that the Chinese hypotext of Disney's *Mulan* is a thousand-year accumulation of dramatically conflicting representations of Mulan with no clear point of origin. It analyzes the Republican-era (1911–1949 CE in mainland China) film adaptation *Mulan Joins the Army* (*Mulan congjun*, dir. Bu Wancang, 1939) as a cultural palimpsest revealing attributes associated with different stages of the legendary figure's long intertextual metamorphosis, including a possibly nomadic woman warrior, a Confucian role model of loyalty and filial piety, a Sinitic deity, a focus of male sexual fantasy, a Neo-Confucian exemplar of chastity, and modern models for women serving antagonistic political interests. Similar to the previous layers of conflicting adaptations constituting the enormous hypotext, Disney's *Mulan* is simply another hypertext continuing Mulan's metamorphosis, and it by no means contains the most dramatic intertextual change.

2. Traveling to the Male Domain

In February 1939, the Xinhua Film Company released *Mulan Joins the Army* in Shanghai. Immense interest in the film had been generated thanks to a massive publicity campaign popularizing Chen Yunshang, a Hong Kong actress making her mandarin film debut as Mulan. Chen was depicted as a talented modern girl, well on her way to becoming a Hollywood star. Her fondness of various Western sports, ranging from tennis and bowling to horse riding, was a key focus of her public appearance (Du 1986; Fu 2003; Zhang 2004; Harris 2011).

Mulan Joins the Army opens with a scene that supported the movie star's vigorous, smart, and outdoorsy image. In this scene, Chen as Mulan rides a horse, wears androgynous attire, and hunts in the woods. A series of extreme long shots stress the openness of her hunting space. When she returns home after a very successful hunt, both of her parents scold her for her unladylike behavior. As punishment, her father forces her to stay at home and weave. Undaunted by this arrangement, Mulan playfully shoots off a visiting messenger's hat to demonstrate her hunting skills.

By injecting Chen's modern charm into Mulan, this beginning significantly departed from what the audience had known about the household legend. Despite its complex transformations and adaptations, the legend had consistently placed Mulan in domestic space at its beginning and never portrayed her as unwilling to do weaving work. *Ballad*, as the earliest example, begins with Mulan sitting by the loom. She pauses in her weaving only to worry about the challenge that her father's conscription has brought to her family. *Song* begins in the same way, with a sighing Mulan holding a shuttle in hand. In the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 CE) opera *A Tale of Two Rabbits* (*Shuang tu ji*), Mulan stresses that "weaving is the fundamental duty (*ben yao*) in women's quarters" (Aixinjueluo 1776). In some other versions, such as the Qing Dynasty novels *The Legend of an Extraordinary Girl Who Is Loyal, Filial, Courageous and Heroic* (*Zhong xiao yong lie qi nü zhuan*, or *Zhong xiao yong lie Mulan zhuan*, henceforth *Extraordinary Girl*) and *The Legend of A Filial and Heroic Girl in the Unusual History of the Northern Wei* (*Beiwei qishi gui xiao lie zhuan*, henceforth *Unusual History*), Mulan is not only a diligent weaver, but also good at all the other types of domestic "womanly work" (*nügong*), such as sewing and embroidery (Anonymous 1990; Zhang 1992).

Mulan's diligence in weaving and other womanly work was a crucial part of her exemplary morality in pre-modern and especially late imperial China. As land rights fell to patrilineal inheritance, the early Chinese patriarchy allocated farming to men and textile production to women. An in-house job at the time, textile production rendered women responsible for managing the inner space, while men controlled the outer space. This division was later codified into gendered regulations through Confucian canons, such as *Book of Rites* (*Li ji*) and *Instructions for Women* (*Nü jie*). In the late imperial economy, the dominating neo-Confucianism viewed this labor division, which was collapsing at the time, as embodying the ideal social order of classical Confucianism. Mandating women to do domestic womanly work became "an essential factor in maintaining public morality" (Bray 1997, p. 128).

The beginning of the 1939 film, however, presents a Mulan hunting in the openness of the outer space and reluctant to fulfill the "fundamental" womanly duty. By doing so, it epitomizes late Qing and Republican intellectuals' efforts to rewrite her legend and advocate women's new position in family and society. Predominantly male, many of these intellectuals saw women who adhered to traditional values and practices as a source of weakness for the nation. They argued that these women, crippled with bound feet and confined in the domestic sphere, were physically and intellectually unable to nurture and educate their children to be future citizens of a civilized China. They therefore urged a reconstruction of Chinese women along Western guidelines. Exemplary biographies of strong, ambitious, and patriotic women served as the main way to codify new female norms (Judge 2007). Mulan was a prominent figure among them. The first modern version of her legend, written by an enlightenment intellectual Liu Yazi (under the pseudonym of Yalu, which refers to the "Asian Rousseau"), appeared as early as 1904 (Yalu 1904). Interest in adaptation of the legend continued to grow during the Republican era. A Beijing opera rendition of Mulan's story, with modern concerns added by the famous artist Mei Lanfang, appeared in 1912. Before the 1939 film, Mulan's story had been adapted into two other films: *Hua Mulan Joins the Army* (*Hua Mulan congjun*, dir. Li Pingqian, 1927) and *Mulan Joins the Army* (*Mulan congjun*, dir. Hou Yao, 1928). These are just a few examples of Mulan's frequent appearances across a full spectrum of media at the time, including literature (biography, poetry, fiction, essay, speech, and scholarly research), theater, music, painting, and cinema (e.g., Anonymous 1907; Zuo 1935; Yi 1940; Ouyang 1982; Ma 1949; Xu 1945; Yutian 1945; Zhao 1945; Zhu 1948) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A painting entitled "Mulan Joins the Army (Mulan congjun)", published as an illustration for the biography of Mulan written by Liu Yazi. (*Women's World*, no. 3, 1904).

It was not a coincidence that the ancient Mulan was chosen to be such a major modern model for Chinese women. On the one hand, she had been a mainstream female exemplar in Chinese culture for over a thousand years. Indigenous and familiar, she could make the Western-originated gender norms seem less foreign and help stimulate national pride. On the other hand, she was also different from many other "lifeless" traditional female paragons in the eyes of Liu Yazi and other enlightenment

intellectuals (Yalu 1904, p. 26). The difference derived from a narrative fissure of her legend since *Ballad*. Appearing as a typical domestic woman weaver at the beginning, Mulan somehow easily transgresses the gender boundary and demonstrates a completely different set of skills as a cross-dressed warrior fighting in the outside world. *Ballad* does not attach any moral worth to Mulan's decision to join the army. It simply jumps from the challenge faced by Mulan's family ("The list of summoned men comes in twelve copies: /Every copy lists my father's name!/My father has no grown-up son/And I, Mulan, I have no adult brother") to her immediate decision to leave the domestic space for military action ("I want to buy a saddle and a horse/To take my father's place and join the army").[2] The reasons for her ability and willingness to do so and her family's rationale for allowing her to do so are completely unexplained and open to many possible readings.

As the narrative fissure shows, *Ballad* is not a typical Confucian text as is often assumed, but ambivalent toward Confucian gender roles. The Northern Wei Dynasty, in which *Ballad* emerged, was not a Confucian state of the native population of China proper, or the so-called Han-Chinese, but ruled by the Xianbei, a nomadic people who conquered Northern China. It is highly possible that *Ballad* derived from a nomadic people's oral folklore in their language (Lan 2003; Dong 2011). If this is the case, then Mulan is probably a transliteration of a non-Chinese name (Chen 1999). The earliest existing Chinese book that includes *Ballad* dates to the 11th and the 12th century, which is hundreds of years after the fall of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The narrative fissure, therefore, may well be a result of Han-Chinese intellectuals' efforts to domesticate the woman warrior according to the Confucian orthodoxy through translation, adaptation, and revision during that long period of time.

Whereas we can only speculate as to what happened to Mulan's legend before it entered the existing written record, textual development since *Ballad* provides a clearer picture of how the legend was adapted into increasingly Confucian texts. As the earliest existing adaptation of *Ballad*, *Song* depicts Mulan's father as old and infirm from the daughter's perspective: "My father is listed in the draft's register/But his strength and energy daily wane/[...]/My father has grown old, and worn by age; /How can he survive service?" By vividly foregrounding Mulan's care for her father, which is not mentioned in *Ballad*, the internal monologue connects Mulan's decision to join the army to a key Confucian virtue: filial piety. Since *Song*, filial piety became an explicit focus of Mulan's story along with a much-strengthened father–daughter connection. In *Female Mulan* and many later texts, Mulan's father is her educator in both literature and martial skills. Detailed descriptions of how the father teaches the daughter and/or how the daughter takes bedside care of her sick father appear in *Extraordinary Girl*, *Unusual History*, and many other works. Mulan's travel to the male domain, therefore, was deprived of its subversive potential against the Confucian gendered order. It was turned into an extension of her filial duties in the domestic space.

The 1939 film retained the strengthened father–daughter connection, yet also disrupted the traditional familial relationship. In the film, the father continues to be an educator of Mulan by teaching her martial skills, but he forbids her to use them and forces her to weave instead. Mulan continues to take care of her father when he is sick. Instead of staying at the bedside, however, she hunts so as to provide her father with game meats. The film establishes the daughter as a challenger of Confucian gender roles and the father as a defender of them, and therefore adds a tension that never existed before to their relationship. Part of Mulan's intention to join the army is therefore to break the domestic restrictions and to go outside to where she truly belongs. As a result, the film significantly blurs the Confucian focus of filial piety with a modern, Republican woman's wish of self-fulfillment.

However, if *Mulan Joins the Army* were driven only by a simple dichotomy of modern freedom versus traditional restrictions, Mulan would escape from the family in secret—as she does in Disney's *Mulan*. Instead, Mulan successfully convinces her parents and, in fact, her father first, that she should

[2] Translations of *Ballad*, *Song*, *Female Mulan*, and lines in the 1939 film are all quoted from Kwa and Idema (2010), occasionally with slight revisions.

join the army. As the next section will discuss, the resolution of this disagreement shows that another factor is much more important than either filial piety or self-fulfillment in the 1939 film's rationale for Mulan to join the army.

3. Fulfilling Moral Duties

As Joseph R. Allen points out, most versions of Mulan's legend, traditional or modern, are ultimately stories of her homecoming (Allen 1996, p. 346). The 31-line *Ballad* spends only three lines describing Mulan's decade-long military action, but eight lines on the moment she returns home. *Song* depicts Mulan's parents as being both joyful and worried when seeing their daughter return home in martial suit. Mulan then discards the military attire to assure her parents that she will be their "darling girl" again. The inculcation of the domestication process was advanced in later adaptations through a marriage of Mulan arranged by her parents (e.g., *Female Mulan*) or the emperor (e.g., *Unusual History*).

There are, however, important exceptions to this ending in both traditional and modern versions. In traditional versions, martyrdom may replace domestication as the ultimate theme. In a stone inscription drafted by Hou Youzao during the Yuan Dynasty, the emperor orders Mulan to be his concubine after learning about her true gender. Having been offered a position of minister, Mulan firmly believes that it would violate the ritual customs for an emperor to marry his official. She commits suicide to prevent that from happening. The emperor then gives her a posthumous title "filial and heroic" (*xiao lie*), making her a martyr of imperial morality (Huang and Li 1992, p. 21). This account inspired a number of later versions that ended in Mulan's suicide, including *Extraordinary Girl* (Wu 2011, pp. 43, 162–64). In modern versions, Mulan may also refuse marriage, but for different reasons. In a 1944 theatrical script by the female writer Zhao Qingge, the story ends not at Mulan's home, but on her way to a fortress. Here, Mulan refuses the advances of an army officer (who knows her true gender) but confesses her mutual love for him. Her reason for the refusal is that he is already married; for them to be together would entail his abandonment of his family, something Mulan finds reprehensible. Besides, she says, she is self-sufficient and can take care of herself without him. This unusual ending reflects a modern woman's dilemma between emotional attraction and monogamous morality as well as her ultimate decision for independence (Zhao 1945).[3]

Beginning with a significantly modernized Mulan, the 1939 film may seem to develop its narrative in a similar direction against the usual domestication. This would have been the case had Ouyang Yuqian, the playwright who scripted the film, followed his initial plan. Particularly impressed by the version of the legend that ends with Mulan's suicide, Ouyang wanted to characterize Mulan in a tragedy as "a woman who opposes feudalism" (a term that intellectuals used at the time to generalize the traditional Chinese culture as oppressive and backward) (Ouyang 1961, p. 54). Such a tragedy would have been, as Carolyn Fitzgerald points out, a continuation of a series of Ouyang's earlier dramas that "had focused predominantly on the depiction of tragic women who were oppressed by their 'feudal' families" (Fitzgerald 2010). However, the actual film eventually departed from this theme of gender oppression, ending with Mulan's happy marriage at home and her willingness to be an obedient wife. In the final scene, Mulan's husband victoriously claims possession of her: "Let me see where you can escape tonight!"[4] In response, Mulan shyly smiles with her head lowered. The scene is clearly connected to the traditional versions in which Mulan feels inferior to her husband. In *Female Mulan*, for example, Mulan becomes a shy girl ashamed of her military experiences when facing her fiancé. She assures him that she will never challenge his authority.

---

[3] Zhao might have personally experienced this dilemma and made a similar decision in her relationship with the famous writer Lao She.

[4] Ending the film with the marriage was clearly Ouyang's intention. It is unclear, however, if this particular line was in Ouyang's original script or added later by someone else, such as the director Bu Wancang. This paper will discuss the difference between Ouyang and Bu in their approaches to the film adaptation.

This shift in both the film's narrative trajectory and the playwright's approach to gender resulted from the historical context in which the film was produced. Beginning in 1937, Shanghai was occupied by Japan except for the so-called Solitary Island (*gudao*), which referred to the British, American, and French concession areas that remained intact until 1941. Xinhua was the first film company to resume Chinese film production on the Solitary Island. In 1938, Zhang Shankun, founder and manager of Xinhua, made a trip to Hong Kong and visited Ouyang, who had just fled there to avoid Japanese harassment. Zhang invited Ouyang to contribute a script of historical drama because he was afraid that a contemporary subject might spell political trouble in the besieged zone. Ouyang offered to adapt Mulan's legend and Zhang agreed. Using the ancient legend as a thinly veiled vehicle to express contemporary political concerns, Ouyang eventually decided that a happy story celebrating Mulan's "bravery and wisdom" would work better to boost the audience's morale against the invaders (Ouyang 1961, p. 54).

For this nationalist agenda, Ouyang turned his Mulan from a victim of "feudal" oppression into a loyal officer using her "bravery and wisdom" to defend a "feudal" state, the Tang Empire, against the invading nomadic enemy. The film, therefore, continued the long Confucian appropriation of Mulan, since *Song,* as a role model for imperial loyalty, which was defined in the frame of the distinction between *Hua* and *Yi*, or between the Sinocentric "Celestial Empire" (*tianchao*) and the often nomadic cultural outsiders. This was clearly not the focus of the legend at the time of *Ballad*, which describes the monarch's conscription as only a trouble for Mulan and her family. *Ballad*'s glossing over Mulan's military service does not even bother to explain whom she fights for and whom she fights against. It only presents some vague clues that seem to suggest that Mulan might have participated in the century-long war between two nomadic peoples' states, the Northern Wei of Xianbei and the Khaganate of Rouran (Che 2000). *Song* turned the possibly nomadic Mulan into a member of *Hua* by having her fight the Qiang people in Khotan, where the Tang Empire fought Tibetans. At the same time, it appropriated Mulan as a surrogate of Confucian virtues set for the male "officials and sons", turning her into an educational tool urging the men to fulfill their duties in the outer space:

> If in this world the hearts of officials and sons
>
> Could display the same principled virtue as Mulan's,
>
> Their loyalty and filial piety would be unbroken;
>
> Their fame would last through the ages—how could it be destroyed?

Later, the escalation of Mulan's exemplary loyalty led to her deification, as seen in such examples as a stone inscription used in a village temple worshiping Mulan during the Yuan Dynasty. The ritual purpose of the stone inscription necessitated its author, Da Shian, to give Mulan a Han family name, Wei, which properly placed Mulan in a Han-Chinese patriarchal lineage (Huang and Li 1992, p. 18). Exactly which patriarchal lineage she should belong to, however, was not an easy issue to resolve. Accounts of Mulan's story during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties gave her various family names, mainly including Wei, Zhu, and Hua. Yet, no matter her surname, Mulan invariably fought for the Celestial Empire and often against nomadic enemies according to these accounts. The *Hua-Yi* distinction became so rigid that even *Unusual History*, which set Mulan's story in the Northern Wei, categorized the Xianbei empire as part of *Hua*, referring to it as the "Celestial Empire".

Despite having received serious blows from Western powers, the *Hua-Yi* distinction continued to serve as an ideological root for the emerging Chinese nationalist mentality in the modern world order. Liu Yazi, for example, hoped that a modernized China could bring about a revived Sinocentric world order. His biography of Mulan, therefore, depicts her as a warrior of the powerful Han Empire, wiping out the evil nomadic enemy. Similarly, in *Mulan Joins the Army*, all characters on the nomadic side appear stupid, sinister, and barbarian. In the words of Mulan's parents, these invaders are "robbers and thieves", who attack "us" for no reason. The modern analogy could not be clearer for the Chinese audience on the Solitary Island in 1939.

Further developing the theme of loyalty, the film reconfigured the character of Mulan's father. Earlier texts tended to focus only on Mulan's loyalty, often characterizing her father as unwilling to serve in the military. In *Female Mulan* and *Unusual History*, for example, the father would rather commit suicide than go to the battlefront. In the 1939 film, however, the father decides to go to the battlefront without hesitation, stating:

> Our country takes care of the troops for a thousand days in exchange for calling on troops when it needs them. Now that the country is in trouble, every civilian must go to war. How could I live off the country's support and just stay at home?
>
> [. . .] Fortunately, I am not that old, and I can still exert myself on behalf of my country. It's more glorious to die on the battleground than to die at home.

It was likely a conscious wording choice of Ouyang that the father refers to the Tang Empire as "our country" or *guojia*, the Chinese word used to translate the Western-originated concept of the modern nation-state, rather than the "Celestial Empire". These lines were obviously written as a call for national service during the Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945 CE). Reinforcing this theme, Mulan speaks the same nationalist language on multiple occasions in the film, using the rhetoric that dying for the country would be as honorable for women as for men to quickly convince her father that she should go in place of him. As father and daughter, they resembled an ideal nationalist education that promised a solution to the on-going national crisis. As a sick old man and a young girl, they served a similar purpose as Mulan had done in those Confucian texts: urging all, and especially the men with more strength, power, and privilege, into action to fulfill their duties. The film adaptation turned the daughter and the father into similar mixtures of modern patriots and Confucian loyal subjects, resolved their disagreement, rendered the gendered boundaries in much less focus than the national ones, and bridged the narrative fissure of the rationale for Mulan's military service. Ironically, in doing so, the film in fact perpetuated the logic that had led Mulan to sacrifice her life and defend a male-defined and state-sponsored moral order.

Dressed as a man and acting as a moral example for men, however, did not spare Mulan from becoming an object of male sexual fantasy in the circulation of her story. The sexual fantasy intensified as she became a Neo-Confucian exemplar of chastity for women, and was further aroused when she appeared in modern media adaptations.

4. Arousing Sexual Fantasy

Like all collective works, *Mulan Joins the Army* reflects a compromise of different approaches in its creative team rather than any individual's unilateral vision. Quoting the well-known playwright Xia Yan, a 1940 article criticized the director Bu Wancang for altering Ouyang's script and "deteriorating" its quality (Anonymous 1940). In a 1961 memoir, Ouyang himself also complains that the film did not fully reflect his intentions because Bu focused more on "[commercial] gimmicks" (*xuetou*) and made a number of changes to the script. It is difficult to find out the exact changes because Ouyang's original script was never released to the public.[5] However, some clues exist in the differences between the 1939 film and Ouyang's 1942 Guilin Opera (*guiju*) adaptation of Mulan's legend. Indeed, several scenes susceptible to the charge of "gimmick" only exist in the film, but not in the opera.

In one such scene, Mulan and a group of fellow conscripted (male) soldiers rest in an inn on their way to the army. The men are all busy washing their feet and even giving each other foot massages. Mulan, by contrast, sits quietly and does not take off her shoes. Curious about this different fellow, three men encircle Mulan. In an exaggerated manner, they bend down to examine her feet. The farce ends with Mulan nervously hurrying to another room with the foot-washing water and closing the doors behind her.

[5] A script of *Mulan Joins the Army* was published just one month after the film's release. However, according to Ouyang, that was already the altered version (Ouyang 1961, p. 55).

This "gimmick" is not only farcical, but full of sexual implications for its focus on Mulan's feet, which have been eroticized since *Female Mulan*. The 16th-century play anachronistically gives Mulan a pair of bound feet, despite setting the story in the Northern Wei, which was much earlier than the time at which foot-binding became a social custom in Neo-Confucian China. At the beginning of the play, Mulan loosens her bound feet in preparation for military service. At the same time, she contemplates a plan to re-bind her feet so that she will be suitable for marriage again after returning home:

> (As she changes foot wear, she acts out pain)
>
> Just-removed, the half-folded Tiny Ripple-Riding Socks bindings,
>
> How it hurts!
>
> It took me several years to bind together these "Phoenix-head sharps".
>
> Now I quickly turn them into floating boats.
>
> How will I now fill up these boots?
>
> When I return, I'll still want to get married. So what can I do? Well, no need to mope about that! My family has a method for shrinking golden lotuses: just take a bit of saltpeter, boil it, and use it to wash the feet. In this way, we make them even smaller!

A series of common metaphors are employed in this vignette to both mystify and eroticize the bound feet. Lotuses, for example, were frequently used as a metaphor for bound feet because women with bound feet walked in mincing steps that evoked an illusion of dancing on floating lotuses, a symbol of purity. At the same time, lotuses had long been metaphorically associated with sex and birthing in Chinese culture. The lotus' seed-filled pod was an emblem of the fertile womb. Similar to the lotus, bound feet evoked both transcendent mystery and carnal desire (Blake 1994).

Enigmatic and arousing, bound feet were kept in the strictest privacy at the time of *Female Mulan*: even erotic images usually depicted women with their bindings or shoes on (Franzblau 1977; van Gulik 1961, p. 218). When Mulan verbally and gesturally unwrapped her bound feet on stage, she would likely intensify a voyeuristic pleasure for the male audience. Such voyeurism did not simply disappear after foot-binding was banned during the Republican era. *Mulan Joins the Army* tellingly maintains the strict privacy of Mulan's feet, connecting their exposure to the revelation of Mulan's sex and her feelings of shame and anxiety. In doing so, it created an enticing "gimmick" that objectified her feet under the male gaze both in the diegetic world and from the audience. The "gimmick" perpetuated the very obsession that underlay the foot-binding custom in opposition to Mulan's representation as an exemplar of modern woman.

Several other scenes of the 1939 film, which either do not exist in or are much more sexualized than in the Guilin Opera, also took inspiration from *Female Mulan*. In the 1939 film, two soldiers comment that Mulan looks "very fair and very tender". This is almost a quote from *Female Mulan*, where two soldiers remark that Mulan "doesn't look bad at all", "would be a nice morsel", and can be taken to "meet [their] needs". Later in the film, the two soldiers learn that Mulan's family name is Hua (which means flower in Chinese) and immediately tease her: "You really do look like a flower!" Then, they try to touch her hand. This scene was a continuation of a long tradition of using flowers as a trope for the sexualized body of Mulan (the name happens to mean wood orchid in Chinese).[6] The tradition was particularly connected to *Female Mulan*, which not only used lotus and other flowers to repeatedly stress Mulan's sexual appeal, but, for the first time, gave her the suggestive surname Hua.

Departing from the traditional versions, *Mulan Joins the Army* characterizes the male characters who attempt to take advantage of Mulan as clumsy, cowardly, and laughable. Confronting the bullies,

---

[6] The Tang poet Bai Juyi, for example, described in two poems a wood orchid tree as like a beautiful woman with heavy rouge makeup, who captivated the male poet so much that she would frequently reappear in his "spring dreams" (*chunmeng*, often implying sexual desire in Chinese literature). He made the reference to Mulan apparent by writing that the tree looked similar to a beautiful woman because it used to be an actual girl. See the two poems in Peng (1961, pp. 4958, 5146).

Mulan first advises them that no countrymen should bully fellow countrymen, especially at a time of national crisis, and then teaches them a lesson with her preternatural martial arts skills. Her morality and valor later earn her the position of field marshal, which outranks all the men in the army. This also differs from the traditional versions that rank Mulan no higher than a general, retaining at least a male field marshal as her military superior.

Such a modern empowerment of Mulan, however, was also a continuation of the traditional attempt to embed Mulan's sexual appeal in her disciplinary power. In *Female Mulan*, for example, Mulan suffers pain only from loosening her bound feet, but not from binding or the magically easy re-binding. As Fred Blake points out, a woman's bound feet were a crucial part of her body mirroring the Neo-Confucian organization of the family. Through immense pain, foot-binding effectively disciplined a young girl's body against her primordial resistance to this organization (Blake 1994). Mulan's body, by contrast, seems to be born with this discipline so internalized that she experiences pain in the absence of regulation, rather than in the presence of it. Correspondingly, the play turns Mulan's military adventure into a demonstration of the extraordinary degree to which her hyper-disciplined body sticks to Neo-Confucian ideals for women, most importantly chastity.[7] The safety of Mulan's life appears to be of no concern for either her mother or herself. The mother is only worried about whether Mulan can successfully conceal her genitalia (referred to as "you-know-what", or *nahuar*) when surrounded by men, and Mulan is only proud of her success in maintaining virginity in the army as promised to her mother. In the play and many later texts, including *Mulan Joins the Army*, Mulan's incredible and oftentimes preternatural power comes from a hyper-disciplined body, which makes her both the prototype of Neo-Confucian woman and an ideal object of male desire.

Mulan's homecoming in this context, therefore, is often accompanied by courtship from a male elite, ranging from a high-level official to the emperor. Likewise, in *Mulan Joins the Army*, the essential consequence of Mulan's lecturing and punishing those bullies is the attraction of her future husband Liu Yuandu (Mei Xi). Unlike in most traditional versions, where Mulan successfully conceals her true gender to comrades-in-arms until the end, Yuandu in the film gradually senses that Mulan is a woman. The film uses the classic Hollywood-style soft lighting to foreground Mulan's beauty in their increasingly romantic interactions, yet keeps her in male military regalia. The interactions reach a climax when Mulan simultaneously practices her sword and initiates an antiphon with Yuandu by singing: "When can [my beloved] enter my bosom and listen to my innermost feelings?"[8] In these scenes, Mulan's heterosexual charm is integral to and enhanced by her role as a seemingly gender-neutral hero fighting for nationalist principles.

The 1939 film's publicity campaign further projected male fantasies onto the nationalist heroine's body. When promoting the film, the Xinhua Company released two full-page pictures of its main star Chen Yunshang right next to each other in the same issue of the *Xinhua Pictorial* (*Xinhua huabao*) (Figures 2 and 3). The first picture is a film still, presenting a heroic Chen with a steadfast facial expression and a mighty posture in the full armor of Mulan. The second picture shows a feminine Chen smiling and posing in modern female dancing dress. Spreading apart her front opening skirt, Chen showcases her shapely legs and high heels (the modern alteration of a woman's natural feet to enhance sexual appeal). At the top right corner of the picture, there is a small-scale sketch of her with an added cloud (Yunshang, the star's stage name, means "cloud and [beautiful] dresses"), which depicts her as a flying fairy in a traditional Chinese painting. Mutually dependent and enhancing, the two pictures epitomize the continuity in the male construction of an ideal woman from the Neo-Confucian

---

[7] Chastity first appeared as a theme in Mulan's legend with the rise of Neo-Confucianism during the Song Dynasty. Liu Kezhuang (1187–1269 CE), for example, stressed that Mulan returned from the battlefront "with a [morally] clean body" (Liu 1971, p. 9).

[8] The original lyrics of the song use the "moonlight" to symbolize the beloved person.

tradition into modern nationalism: she must be, at the same time, morally exemplary, transcendentally mysterious, and sexually arousing.[9]

Figure 2. Film Still of Chen Yunshang as Mulan. (*Xinhua Pictorial*, no. 1, 1939).

Figure 3. Picture of Chen Yunshang's dance pose. (*Xinhua Pictorial*, no. 1, 1939).

[9] Female cross-dressing is a common theme in classical Chinese literature and opera. It is closely linked to constructions of sexual fantasy. For more discussions of this theme, see (Li 2003) and (Wing Bo Tso 2014).

5. Serving Conflicting Interests

Shortly after the theatrical release of *Mulan Joins the Army* on the Solitary Island, the film went through a series of dramatic turns that further complicated its meaning. The person who initiated the turns was Kawakita Nagamasa, the head of the Zhonghua Movie Co. established by the Japanese military. Through this studio, the Japanese military wanted to reorganize the film industry in Shanghai to help their agenda of winning support from the "common and kind Chinese people" (as opposed to the more resistant citizens). They chose Kawakita because he had deep personal connections to China, spoke fluent Chinese, and had made films in China. Precisely for these reasons, however, Kawakita was also sympathetic with Chinese sentiments. Believing that Chinese audiences would only welcome Chinese-made feature films, he insisted that the studio act as independently as possible from the army, refrain from producing its own propagandistic feature films, and assist Chinese filmmakers in feature film production and release. He had secret meetings with Zhang Shankun, persuading him to distribute Xinhua's films through Zhonghua to the Japanese-occupied areas of China. Zhang accepted the offer after a complex political and economic calculation. Xinhua chose *Mulan Joins the Army* as the first film sent to Zhonghua, probably to gesture that their collaboration with the Japanese was for the righteous purpose of disseminating patriotic sentiments among the Chinese people in the occupied areas. Kawakita did not have any problem with the film, but Japanese censors did. They debated whether the film was anti-Japanese or just innocuous entertainment until a higher-ranked officer by the name of Ichiji Susumu intervened. Ichiji argued that Mulan perfectly embodied one discipline written in the Japanese Imperial Rescript on Education: "Should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the state". On this ground, the film passed the censorship as a demonstration of patriotic values shared by the Japanese and the Chinese in July 1939. In 1942, the film was even released in Japan. It was not only positively reviewed by such writers as Yahara Reizaburou and Uchida Kimio, but also well received by the general Japanese public (Lin 2014, pp. 195–98, 212; Sato 2015, pp. 129–40) (Figure 4). As Sato Tadao poignantly points out, the Japanese public never treated *Mulan Joins the Army* as anti-Japanese, probably because the media always told them that the Japanese army was welcomed in China. They were not sensitive to the possibility that the foreign invaders in Mulan's story could stand for the Japanese (Sato 2015, pp. 141–42). In fact, the invaders in the film even began to be interpreted as Japan's enemies. For example, *Women's World* (*Funü shijie*), a magazine based in the Japanese-occupied Guangzhou, used Mulan as a major exemplar to mobilize Chinese women to join the army and defend the "Greater East Asia [Co-Prosperity Sphere]" against the United States and the British Empire (Yutian 1945).

Partially because of the Japanese appropriation of Mulan, another dramatic turn took place when the film was released in Chongqing, the war-time capital of the Republic of China, in January 1940. On the grounds that *Mulan Joins the Army* was "traitorous", protesters stormed the projection room of a movie theater showing the film, snatched the film print and set it on fire outside the theater. According to the protesters, the film damaged the image of the Chinese resistance force by placing the laughable bullies in Mulan's army and emphasizing her romantic life.[10] They also alleged that Mulan pays homage to the Japanese sun-mark flag in the film through a song that mentions a rising sun (Sato 2015, p. 139).

As the climax of this chain of dramatic events, the burning of *Mulan Joins the Army* laid bare the film's sophisticated interweaving of heterogeneous and hetero-temporal traces on the millennium-old cultural palimpsest of Mulan's legend. Narrative elements that appeared politically dubious and offended the protesters, such as the bullies and the romance, indeed served mixed purposes in the film that simultaneously cast Mulan in a number of different roles: an undomesticated and independent person, a filial daughter, a loyal imperial subject, a disciplined nationalist soldier, an unmatched heroine, a woman desiring free love, a sexually appealing girl, and an ideal wife. Not only did the

[10] For analyses of the complex reasons for and implications of this incident, see (Fu 2003, pp. 43–48); and (Bao 2015, pp. 1–7).

incident expose the conflicts inherent in the mixed purposes, but it also shook the foundation of the Confucian and nationalist construction of Mulan's seemingly unquestionable *Hua*/Chinese identity.

日每版大文華

(38)

日本的「中國電影迷」評「木蘭從軍」與「歌聲淚痕」

矢原禮三郎

目下的上海電影界實在是萧靜謐之狀，我們知道以前的上海的銀幕人，忙於製作左翼色彩濃厚的影片，況且，其熱情之餘，不等將抗日意識插入其中，然而，因為受了事變之激動，在殘存的各影片公司的製作態度，不約而同地消極化起來，有的作藝術片，有的作風則片，有的作古裝片，這傾向也不外乎逃避現實。隨着新統序域之擴大，大多數的優秀銀幕人，同持着他們的偏見，遠々地逃亡到內地裡去了，所以，從前在影壇上不得出世的導演和演員們，好像要說我們的世界到了似的活動起來，整個上海電影圈的人物，大有換然一新之概。

這變動看是好的時候現出有才能新人的揷頭，似如錦一步的話，恭賀銀幕人的活動，動不動到不可收拾的地步。

我今年元旦到上海以來，我看過的上海影片，不勝枚舉，可是，值得鑑賞的片子，並不多，我想其主要原因在資本的薄弱，這影響於作品是不論影畝皆々的各方面，雖然說是導演手法的巧妙，爲了以上所說的技術方面的不完全，使觀衆容易失望。

我在此要談的影片是比較有藝術性和商業性的。

「木蘭從軍」——這片子是華成影業公司出品，在租界公映了兩月以上，天々滿座，據說是打破過去的賣座紀錄，導演者是卜萬蒼，編劇者是歐陽予倩，主演者是陳雲裳，這種陣容在目下的上海影界裡，就算有權威的。

卜導演過去的時候，製作過幾部佳片，成績斐然，可惜的導演之一人，編劇的歐陽予倩，不用我來說明，大名鼎々的戲劇家，主演者陳雲裳在香港風頭很健的南國紅星，她在上海的處女作。

「木蘭從軍」這故事，婦孺入口，內容極爲簡單，這故事早當然可成電影，到如今還沒成的正相當的電影脚本資料，華成影業公司老闆張善琨，大發其生意眼，叫卜萬蒼導演這部故事搬上銀幕，這一件可欽佩之事。

卜萬蒼亦把握其作品的方向，特別費力氣，完成這美麗的影片，由一方面追求藝術性一方面露出商業性的導演手法，我們可以知道卜萬蒼的聰明，卜萬蒼的生意眼也比張善琨要無遜色。

攝影，佈景，收音的三方面，入本年以來我所看過的上海影片裡頭，如看其他的影片的時候，因了其幼稚的技術，忐忑不安的精神狀態，此片是沒有的。

陳雲裳不怕開麥拉，大胆地表演，大有可觀，以她的花容月貌，繼續努力的話，她的前途實在光明得很。

男主角梅熹也演得處々逼眞，雖然他不是所謂美男子，其認眞的態度，暗示着今後電影男演員的典型。

這影片的構成的明確，據我看來，歐陽予倩的脚本所致，其中笑料不在少數，這處不使觀衆感討。值得讚美。

此片上海影界本年前半期的偉大收穫。

「歌聲淚痕」——係國華影業公司出品，廣告上說的是欲唱耳片，實在名不虛傳。目下正公映着，據說到現在的賣座還好在大美晚報上，有對於此片的批評，除了指摘小部分的缺點外，均推崇不已。

編導者是吳村，主演者是龔秋霞，舒適，龔秋霞，白燕等明星，陣容如此相當不錯。

龔秋霞過去所出演的片子，差不多都是由吳村導演的，所以，也許慣於吳村的指導的關係，演得非常自然，她明明也悅耳，片中她唱的「百鳥花」，「花開時節」令人陶醉，有聲電影出現以後，像那片子好的人，實爲罕覯的存在。

新人舒適演了富家少爺，不免做戲過火之非難，龔秋霞的演技別開生面，白燕有點肉麻美，引入入勝。

這片的缺點比「木蘭從軍」略有遜色，就是配光不正當。

總而言之，此片在吳村的作品裡，不能說好，可是，比較別的片子還讓人過得去。

時代的潮流對於上海影界來新的轉變，東亞新秩序之下，時當誕生新中國電影，我希望上海的銀幕人立刻覺醒，以期中日電影之交流。

最近將要公映的片子，有「花之狂想曲」（國華出品，吳村編導），「林沖雪夜殲仇記」（華新出品，吳永剛編導），「驚魂」（新華出品，岳楓編導），均可期待。

因了篇幅的關係，不克詳細寫，請讀者原諒。——一九三九，五，十五，寫於上海——

陳雲裳近影。

「木蘭女」之雄姿。

Figure 4. Yahara Reizaburou's review of *Mulan Joins the Army*, published in *Huawen daban meiri* (*Osaka Daily in Chinese Language*) vol. 2, no. 11, 1939. Following the popular way at the time, illustrations for this article combine Mulan's "mighty posture" ("*xiongzi*" in Chinese, literally "male posture") in full armor with Chen's feminine posture in modern dress.

The Republican government intervened and soon quieted the protest. The film was re-screened in Chongqing after explanations and revisions. Xinhua, for example, claimed that the song mentioning the rising sun was a Chinese folk song that had nothing to do with Japan. "To avoid misunderstanding", however, they also changed the lyrics to "the blue sky with a white sun" (*qingtian bairi*), the national emblem of the Republic (Zheng 2011). Apparently, the re-screened Mulan resumed her identity as a heroine defending China. However, this happened at the same time as the film, with unchanged lyrics, continued to be used as a demonstration of the Greater East Asian patriotic values in the Japanese occupied areas of China and later in Japan. Simultaneously serving two opposing sides, Mulan displayed her cultural and ideological ambiguity in an unprecedentedly dramatic manner.

Invited by such ambiguity, constant adaptations and re-interpretations of the legend produced still many more Mulans after the Confucianized Mulan, the sexualized Mulan, the Neo-Confucianized

Mulan, the modernized Mulan, the nationalist Mulan, the traitorous Mulan, and the Greater East Asian Mulan. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Maoist mainland, the colonial Hong Kong, and the Republic of China that relocated its government to Taiwan all produced their own versions of Mulan's legends for different ideological and commercial purposes.[11] Notably, a Republican film *Junzhong fangcao* (*Beautiful Heroines in the Army*, dir. Xu Xinfu, 1952) inserted a Beijing opera rendition of Mulan as a long dream sequence that inspired its heroine to fight the Communists.[12] For the first time, the nomadic barbarians in Mulan's legend stood for an enemy that was actually Chinese, ruling China proper. The film initiated countless invocations of Mulan for the Republic's induction of women into military service defending Taiwan against the People's Republic. Lingering traces of such invocations could even be seen after the Cold War. In a Beijing Opera about Mulan produced in Taiwan during the time of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, for example, a character half-jokingly comments that protecting the nation should take absolute priority when the nomadic enemy is about to "fire missiles at our doorstep" (*Hua Mulan*, the Guoguang Opera Troupe, 1996).

Compared to these previous versions, Disney's appropriation of Mulan is nothing special. It is merely a routine continuation of the legend's long history of adaptation, which consistently epitomizes the complex interactions among diverse cultures and ideologies both within China and between the East and the West. A productive criticism of the Orientalism underlying Disney's *Mulan*, therefore, should move beyond the dichotomy of the static East versus the change-making West, or in this case between China and Disney. It should take into full account the immense hybridity and fluidity pulsing beneath the fallacy of a monolithic cultural "authenticity".

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I would like to particularly thank Joseph R. Allen and Carolyn Fitzgerald, both of whom have done excellent research on Mulan, for discussing this research with me and sharing their insights. I appreciate the three anonymous reviewers' very helpful comments on this paper. I am also grateful to Yomi Braester, Cooper Creagan, Alex Witonsky, and Li Yang for their helpful suggestions on the writing of the paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Aixinjueluo, Yongen. 1776. Shuang tu ji (A Tale of Two Rabbits). In *Yiyuan si zhong (Four Plays of Ripple Garden)*. Beijing: Li fu.

Allen, Joseph R. 1996. Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 4: 343–79. [CrossRef]

Anonymous. 1907. Changge ji: Nü junren (A Collection of Songs: Woman Soldiers). *Nüzi Shijie (Women's World)* 2: 26.

Anonymous. 1940. Mulan congjun zai yu beifen shijian teji (Collected reports on the burning of Mulan Joins the Army in Chongqing). *Dianying Shijie (Movie's World)* 11: 16, 21, 22, 25, 27, 30.

Anonymous. 1979. Mulan Shi (Ballad of Mulan). In *Yuefu Shiji (A Collection of Yuefu Poems)*. Edited by Guo Maoqian. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, pp. 373–74.

Anonymous. 1990. *Zhong Xiao Yong Lie Qinü Zhuan (The Legend of an Extraordinary Girl Who Is Loyal, Filial, Courageous and Heroic), Gu Ben Xiao Shuo Ji Cheng*. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chuban She.

Bao, Weihong. 2015. *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Blake, C. Fred. 1994. Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor. *Signs* 19: 676–712. [CrossRef]

Bray, Francesca. 1997. *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

[11] For a discussion of some of these versions, see (Harris 2011).
[12] For a synopsis of this film, which is no longer existent, see (Huang 2011, pp. 116–19).

Chan, Joseph M. 2002. Disneyfying and globalizing the Chinese legend Mulan. In *In Search of Boundaries: Communication, Nation-states, and Cultural Identities: A Study of Transculturation*. Edited by Joseph Man Chan and Bryce Telfer McIntyre. Westport: Ablex, pp. 225–48.

Che, Baoren. 2000. Mulan shi suoxie zhenshi shiji chu kao (An initial investigation of the historical events relevant to Ballad of Mulan). *Xi'an Jiaoyu Xuebao (The Xi'an Journal of Education)* 2: 29–33.

Chen, Sanping. 1999. Mulan shi zhong de 'Mulan' bing fei Han ming ("Mulan" in Ballad of Mulan is not a Han name). *Lishi Yuekan (The History Monthly)* 134: 98–101.

Djao, Wei. 2002. Opinion Status as Ethnic Identity in the Chinese Diaspora. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 32: 363. [CrossRef]

Dong, Lan. 2011. *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Du, Yunzhi. 1986. *Zhongguo Dian Ying Qi Shi Nian (Seventy Years of Chinese Cinema)*. Taipei: Zhonghua Minguo Dianying Shiye Fazhan Jijinhui, Dianying Tushuguan Chubanbu.

Fitzgerald, Carolyn. 2010. Mandarin Ducks at the Battlefield: Ouyang Yuqian's Shifting Reconfigurations of Nora and Mulan. *CHINOPERL Papers* 29: 45–104. [CrossRef]

Franzblau, Abraham N. 1977. *Erotic art of China: A Unique Collection of Chinese Prints and Poems Devoted to the Art of Love*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Fu, Poshek. 2003. *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Harris, Kristine. 2011. Modern Mulans: Reimagining the Mulan Legend in Chinese Film, 1920s–60s. In *The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s*. Edited by Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hu, Shi. 1928. *Baihua Wenxue Shi (A History of Vernacular Literature)*. Shanghai: Xinyue Shudian.

Huang, Canzhang, and Shaoyi Li. 1992. *Hua Mulan Kao (An Investigation of Hua Mulan)*. Beijing: Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi Chubanshe.

Huang, Ren. 2011. *Wang Jue: Jiushi Nian De Rensheng Yingju Zhi Lü (Wang Jue, a Career of Film and TV Artist for 90 Years)*. Taipei: Xiuwei Zixun Keji Gufen Youxian Gongsi.

Judge, Joan. 2007. Expanding the Feminine/National Imaginary: Social and Martial Heroines in Late Qing Women's Journals. *Jindai Zhongguo Funü Shi Yanjiu (Research on Women in Modern Chinese History)* 15: 16–17, 27.

Translated and Edited by Shiamin Kwa, and Wilt L. Idema. 2010, *Mulan: Five Versions of a Classic Chinese Legend with Related Texts*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.

Labi, Nadya. 1998. Feminism: Girl Power. *Time* 151: 61–62.

Lan, Feng. 2003. The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's Woman Warrior. *Comparative Literature* 55: 229–45. [CrossRef]

Li, Siu Leung. 2003. *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Limbach, Gwendolyn. 2013. "You the Man, Well, Sorta": Gender Binaries and Liminality in Mulan. In *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*. Edited by Johnson Cheu. Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, Inc.

Lin, Chang. 2014. *Yanmo de Beihuan: Zhonglian Huaying Dianying Chutan (Forgotten Sentiments: A Study of the Films of Zhonglian and Huaying Studios)*. Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju.

Liu, Dajie. 1997. *Zhongguo Wenxue Fazhan Shi (A History of the Development of Chinese Literature)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe.

Liu, Kezhuang. 1971. *Houcun Shihua (Houcun Notes on Poetry)*. Taipei: Guangwen shuju.

Lu, Kanru, and Yuanjun Feng. 1956. *Zhongguo Shishi (A History of Chinese Poetry)*. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Ma, Shaobo. 1949. *Mulan Congjun (Mulan Joins the Army)*. Shanghai: Xinhua Shudian. First published in 1943.

Ma, Sheng-Mei. 2003. Mulan Disney, It's Like, Re-Orients: Consuming China and Animating Teen Dreams. In *The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom*. Edited by Brenda Ayres. New York: P. Lang, pp. 149–64.

Maio, Kathi. 1998. Disney's Dolls. *New Internationalist* 308: 12.

Mo, Weimin, and Wenjun Shen. 2000. A Mean Wink at Authenticity: Chinese Images in Disney's Mulan. *The New Advocate* 13: 129–42.

Nguyen, Mimi. 2008. Who's Your Heroine? Negotiating Asian American superpower in Disney's Mulan. Available online: https://web.archive.org/web/20080218080321/http://www.poppolitics.com/articles/2001/01/05/Whos-Your-Heroine#mimi (accessed on 28 June 2020).

Ouyang, Yuqian. 1961. Dianying banlu chujia ji (Memories of a Film Career That Began Midway). *Dianying yishu (Film art)* 2: 54–64.

Ouyang, Yuqian. 1982. Mulan congjun (gui ju) (Mulan Joins the Army (the Guilin opera)). In *Ouyang Yuqian xi qu xuan (Selected Operas of Ouyang Yuqian)*. Changsha: Hunan Renmin Chubanshe. First published in 1942.

Peng, Baoliang. 2005. Reading Mulan, Viewing Mulan and Mythologizing Mulan: A Comparative Study of Chinese and American Cultures. *Zhongxi Wenhua Yanjiu (Study of Sino-Western Culture)* 8: 129–41.

Peng, Dingqiu, ed. 1961. *Quan Tangshi (Complete Tang Poems)*. Taipei: Fuxing shuju.

Sato, Tadao. 2015. *Paosheng Zhong de Dianying: Zhong Ri Dianying Qianshi (Filmmaking Amidst Roars of Guns: A Pre-History of Sino-Japanese Cinema)*. Translated by Yue Yuankun. Beijing: Shijie Tushu Chuban Gongsi.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1993. Can the Subaltern Speak? In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Harvester: Hemel Hempstead.

Sun, Chyng Feng. 2003. Ling Woo in Historical Context: The New Face of Asian American Stereotypes on Television. In *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*. Edited by Gail Dines and Jean McMahon Humez. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, pp. 656–64.

van Gulik, Robert Hans. 1961. *Sexual Life in Ancient China; A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.*. Leiden: Brill.

Wang, Georgette, and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh. 2005. Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: The Cases of Mulan and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8: 175–93. [CrossRef]

Wei, Yuanfu. 1979. "Mulan Ge" (Song of Mulan). In *Yuefu Shiji (A Collection of Yuefu Poems)*. Edited by Guo Maoqian. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, pp. 374–75.

Whipp, Glenn. 1998. Mulan Breaks the Mold with Girl Power; Newest Heroine is Not Typical Disney Damsel Waiting for Her Prince to Come. *Daily News*, June 19, p. L7.

Wing Bo Tso, Anna. 2014. Female Cross-Dressing in Chinese Literature Classics and Their English Versions. *International Studies: Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 16: 111–24. [CrossRef]

Wu, Yazhen. 2011. Qingdai Mulan Congjun Xiaoshuo Yanjiu (A Research on the Novels of Mulan Joins the Army during the Qing Dynasty). M.A. thesis, Department of Chinese Literature, National Tainan University, Tainan, Taiwan.

Xu, Ruhui. 1945. *Mulan Congjun (Mulan Joins the Army)*. Chongqing: Zhongguo Xiongdi Chuban Shiye Gongsi.

Yalu. 1904. Zhongguo Diyi Nü Haojie Nü Junrenjia Hua Mulan Zhuan (Biography of China's Premiere Female Hero and Female Soldier, Hua Mulan). *Nüzi Shijie (Women's World)* 3: 25–32.

Yi, Qiao. 1940. *Jinguo Yingxiong (Heroines)*. Shanghai: Chaofeng Chubanshe.

Yin, Jing. 2014. Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney Vs. Chinese Stories of Mulan. In *The Global Intercultural Communication Reader*. Edited by Molefi Kete Asante, Yoshitaka Miike and Jing Yin. New York: Routledge, pp. 285–304.

You, Guoen. 1991. *Zhongguo Wenxue Shi (A History of Chinese Literature)*. Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe.

Yu, Guanying. 1953. *Yue Fu Shi Xuan (Selection of Yuefu Poems)*. Beijing: Beijing Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe.

Yutian. 1945. Cong Hua Mulan Tan Dao Canzhan Funü (On Hua Mulan and Women Joining the War). *Funü Shijie* 52: 13.

Zhang, Shaoxian. 1992. *Beiwei Qishi Gui Xiao Lie Zhuan (The Legend of a Filial and Heroic Girl in the Unusual History of the Northern Wei)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe.

Zhang, Wei. 2004. *Qian Chen Ying Shi: Zhongguo Zaoqi Dianying de Linglei Saomiao (Dust of Bygone Movies: Another Type of Sweep through Early Chinese Cinema)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe.

Zhao, Qingge. 1945. Hua Mulan congjun (Hua Mulan joins the army). In *Yu Da Li Hua, You Ming, Huo (Rain Falling on the Pear Blossoms, or to Live)*. Chongqing: Funü Yuekan She.

Zheng, Jianjian. 2011. Kongjian Yu Shijue Zhengzhi: Mulan Congjun Jiaopian Bei Fen Shijian Shimo (Space and Visual Politics: On the Incident of the Burning of Mulan Joins the Army). In *Dianying Yu Dushi: Dushi Jingyan, Shijue Kongjian Yu Dianying Xiaofei (Cinema and City: Urban Experiences, Visual Spaces, and Filmic Consumption)*. Edited by Xihe Chen and Wangli Huang. Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, pp. 169–70.

Zhu, Xi'an, ed. 1948. *Mulan Congjun (Mulan Joins the Army)*. Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju.

Zuo, Ganchen. 1935. *Mulan Congjun (Mulan Joins the Army)*. Shanghai: Qizhi chubanshe.

MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel
Switzerland
Tel. +41 61 683 77 34
Fax +41 61 302 89 18
www.mdpi.com

Arts Editorial Office
E-mail: arts@mdpi.com
www.mdpi.com/journal/arts

MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel
Switzerland

Tel: +41 61 683 77 34

www.mdpi.com

ISBN 978-3-0365-4899-9