A DEBT REPAID. SHOUT-OUT TO VIDEOGAME ADAPTATIONS

JACOPO WASSERMANN

UNIVERSIDADE LUSÓFONA DE HUMANIDADES E TECNOLOGIAS, LISBOA, PORTUGAL

Abstract

Trouble awaits the scholar who decides to study movie adaptations of videogames – or, as they are more commonly called, 'videogame adaptations'. Literary and post-literary biases, an unfriendly critical environment and the lack of systematic references are but a few of the many obstacles on her or his path.

By addressing these issues and attempting to understand them against the historical and theoretical backdrop that informed them in the first place, this paper aims at a reevaluation, however partial, of these productions as symptoms of a self-reflexive tendency present in contemporary commercial cinema.

In the process of nearing a new understanding of these cultural and industrial artifacts, a cross-examination of key concepts belonging to three fields of studies (game studies, film studies and adaptation studies) opens up the possibility of an interdisciplinary cooperation aimed at the adjustment and rectification of mutual assumptions and misconceptions.

Keywords: *cinema, videogame, adaptation, post-literary, convergence, digital, new media*

INTRODUCTION

In November 2014, while conducting research for my master's thesis, I attended a conference dedicated to the social value of videogames. During a coffee break, I chatted with one of the speakers and disclosed the topic of my work: movie adaptations of videogames, commonly referred to as 'videogame adaptations'. This revelation was met with bewilderment, followed by a blunt question: "Why? Aren't they supposed to be really bad?" I decided to start with this personal testimony because it brings to the foreground some of the key issues surrounding videogame adaptations as an object of study. Namely, should they even be studied at all? If so, why? Could intellectual or cultural assumptions of value be inferred from aesthetically unsatisfying artifacts? Are videogame adaptations actually aesthetically unsatisfying? Once again, if so, why?

It is impossible to provide a definite answer to questions that have so much to do with personal taste and subjective frameworks. Likewise, this paper does not ignore that previous attempts at analysis have been and continue being made by scholars of every country and area of expertise. That being said, the lack of balance in the attention devoted to videogame adaptations as opposed to nearly every other form of aesthetic, industrial and/or commercial relationship between cinema and videogames

is quite striking. It seems as if, to the researchers of film and videogame studies, these particular artifacts embody everything that is wrong, uninteresting and merely opportunistic about the relationship between their fields of reference. Even adaptation studies, whose discourse "is potentially as far reaching as you like" (Andrew, 1980, p. 9), have not grown beyond taxonomic interest. Therefore, this paper is meant as a contribution, however humble and limited, to the study of videogame adaptations, which must begin by confronting and understanding its limited investigative appeal.

Due to the inherent necessity of exposing key concepts of three different fields of study and the limited space available to do so, no actual case study will be scrutinized. Let it be known that, in the context of the present paper, 'videogame adaptation' refers strictly to movie adaptations of videogame properties, such as *Super Mario Bros.* (Morton & Jankel, 1993), *Street Fighter* (Steven de Souza, 1994), *Mortal Kombat* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 1995), *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Simon West, 2001), *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (Hironobu Sakaguchi, 2001), to name a few. My goal will be to question the relatively small degree of academic attention dedicated to these movies, and make propositions as to the interest they might collectively and individually serve as objects of study.

First, I will illustrate and synthesize the existing state of the art regarding videogame adaptations in game studies, film studies and adaptation studies. Considering the interstitial nature of such productions, it makes sense that these should be the disciplines of choice for analysis, and that all should be held in equal regard whenever possible. This will prove somewhat tricky at times, given their conflicting stances on what a videogame, movie or adaptation (let alone videogame adaptation) are supposed to achieve.

Secondly, I will locate the highlighted statements within the broader historical context of their respective fields of study. A special focus will be given to the investigative biases that videogame adaptations have routinely been pitted against, suggesting that the lack of a systematic study "has as much to do with the social status of these works as it does with the works themselves" (Smith, 2001, p. 132).

Finally, in light of the preceding sections, I will try and offer an alternative, possible approach to the study of videogame adaptations, one unburdened by the need to locate them among the endless representatives of cinematic intertextuality. Instead, it is suggested that it might be more profitable to consider them as manifestations of a new pull towards the origins of cinema itself. This acknowledgment calls into question

the established dichotomy between the two media, while also reaffirming their mutual independence and irresolvable otherness.

AESTHETIC AND INDUSTRIAL CONVERGENCE

That cinema and videogames are heavily interlinked, both as media and industries, is a well-known truism. It could be argued that, in response to the obviousness of this connection, many scholars have attempted to deny its existence in order to enliven the debate among media-oriented studies. Alexis Blanchet (2010), for instance, while declaring that cinema is the closest relative to videogames, is careful to observe that the roots of the latter are to be found in research and development laboratories of the American army and universities, rather than in film aesthetics. On the other hand, game designer Jordan Mechner (2006) prophesized a future in which defining a videogame as 'cinematic' will be a backhanded compliment. This is not even considering the output of world-renowned authors, such as Espen Aarseth (2001), Markku Eskelinen (2004) or Jesper Juul (2013), who have continuously ridiculed any attempt to approximate videogames to narrative media, including cinema, as acts of 'academic colonialism'.

Despite the understandable claims of partiality and inappropriateness levelled against it, the truism exists for a reason: ever since videogames became a lucrative commodity, a process of convergence towards cinema has started, where convergence is meant as "a force that is setting originally distinct media on a common (i.e., convergent) course" (Elsaesser, 2013, p. 15). The common course shared by videogames and cinema involves an infinity of elements, most of which could arguably be subsumed under three kinds of convergence: industrial, commercial and aesthetic.

Industrial convergence became self-evident in 1976, when the American conglomerate Warner Communications Inc. acquired the videogame developer Atari, responsible for the highly successful arcade and home versions of *Pong*. Following suit, movie studios like Universal and 20th Century Fox launched their own videogame divisions (Blanchet, 2010).

An early example of both industrial and commercial convergence happened in 1982, when producer and director George Lucas established the publishing company Lucasfilm Games (renamed LucasArts in 1990), part of the larger Lucasfilm Ltd. Originally, it served to launch tie-ins based on Lucas' registered properties (such as *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars*), but eventually it also developed its own original content, such as the point-and-click *Monkey Island* saga, or *Grim Fandango*. In the case of Lucasfilm Ltd., said convergence was also technically relevant, since programmers at LucasArts and technicians at Industrial Light & Magic (another company started by Lucas and dedicated to the development of CG effects) could often share hardware and human resources for the development of their content (Blanchet, 2010).

Finally and, perhaps, most controversially, aesthetic convergence has been steadily increasing since videogames became viable assets for media multinationals in the global market. This kind of convergence was not separated, but rather reinforced and dictated by the other two. As early as 1975, the bogus developer Horror Games (which was really a front for Atari) designed the arcade *Shark Jaws*, meant to literally "cash in on the popularity, interest and profits associated with sharks" (Blanchet, 2010, p. 72) following the theater release of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975). Although it cannot technically be considered a tie-in, Blanchet (2010) remarks that the underwater scenario, the presence of a shark-bot and use of the word 'jaws' in the title were all unambiguous referents to Spielberg's movie.

Even after the catastrophic crash of the North American videogame market in 1983, saturated as it was with countless and poorly designed tie-ins (Blanchet, 2010), these products have continued

being among the most financially successful world-wide (Kerr, 2006). Taking the action-adventure videogame *Enter the Matrix* (Shiny, 2003) as a case in point, Diane Carr (2008) observes how its sales were boosted by the extreme popularity of *The Matrix*'s cinematic saga, including its world and characters, rather than any one feature of the game itself.

This in turn suggests that such convergence, be it industrial, commercial or aesthetic, "would thus be the term that disguises the business interests of those who see multimedia primarily as a provider of profit from the exploitation of mono-content" (Elsaesser, 2013, p. 20). This belief is central and recurrent whenever videogame adaptations are discussed by scholars of game studies, film studies or adaptation studies.

Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska note that "the linking together of cinema and games is far from arbitrary in an environment in which some of the key producers and distributors of both forms of entertainment are located within the same media corporations and in which game spin-offs offer substantial additional revenues to the Hollywood studios" (2002, pp. 7-8). On another note, Blanchet (2010) considers videogame adaptations as cinematographic renditions of games' most superficial elements, namely their visuals and some of their thematic or narrative material,

aimed at plots that are both limited and uncharacteristic.

A number of attempts at a reevaluation have been made, though. Thomas Leitch, champion of contemporary adaptation studies, considers that videogame adaptations are vastly dismissed on the basis of "a literary bias that assumes cinema should adapt only originals more culturally respectable than cinema itself and partly on a narrative bias that assumes that stories are the ingredients that make the best movies" (2009, p. 258). His conclusion, however, does not differ much from what has been exposed until now: "postliterary adaptation seems like one more version of business as usual – with the emphasis, as usual, on business" (p. 279).

These extracts are not nearly enough to cover the existing material on videogame adaptations, but they are sufficiently representative of some among the most recurring criticisms. Videogame adaptations are accused of being nothing more than a symptom of the industrial expansion that has brought movie studios and videogame developers and publishers closer than ever. Furthermore, it is implied that cinema would not be the ideal medium to adapt videogames due to its supposedly narrative nature. Finally, when videogames do end up being adapted, the resulting adaptations are disappointing due to their poor faithfulness to the source

material – an inherent vice, according to Matteo Bittanti (2001; 2006), since cinema is unable to maintain the feature that most characterizes videogames, which is gameplay.

Having thus summarized the main objections against any serious, analytical consideration of these movies, it is time to contextualize them against the theoretical and historical backdrop that informed them in the first place. By doing so, it should be possible to determine whether they were inspired by the adaptations themselves or, as Leitch (2009) would have it, by biases integral to the disciplines of reference.

GAME STUDIES' SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

In an attempt to secure his role as a pioneer, in 2001 Espen Aarseth declared the 'official' birth of game studies. He was reportedly motivated by his wish to rescue game studies from the patronizing approach of older disciplines, "such as Media Studies, Sociology, and English, to name a few" (Aarseth, 2001). Remarking that "games are too important to be left to these fields," Aarseth (2001) claimed that subsuming their study under those departments would have inevitably led to the establishment of inappropriate methodologies. This would have resulted in the misguided attribution of features from traditional media onto new media, which Lev

Manovich (2001) famously defined through five, distinguishing principles: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding.

Although traditional media differ from new media such as videogames in many ways, the one question that arguably stirred the greatest debate among scholars (to an extent as to make it impossible to resume it in this paper) was whether the latter retained any capacity for narrative and, if so, in what measure and for what purpose. This theoretical quarrel became widely known as narrativists versus ludologists, a binary opposition that 'ludologist' Gonzalo Frasca (2000) has long since decreed as hyperbolic and inaccurate. Whatever the views on the debate that "never really took place" (Frasca, 2000, p. 1), what seemed to bring together its participants was an understanding of videogames as artifacts based on conflict, just as game designer Chris Crawford had written in his *Art of Computer Game Design*: "Conflict arises naturally from the interaction in a game. The player is actively pursuing some goal. Obstacles prevent him from easily achieving this goal" (1982, p. 12). Whether the conflict is of a primarily ludic or narrative nature is of secondary importance to the necessity of conflict itself. Furthermore, Crawford warns: "Conflict can only be avoided by eliminating the active response to the player's actions. Without active response, there can be

no interaction. Thus, expunging conflict from a game inevitably destroys the game" (p. 12).

Taking this into consideration, it is no wonder that the idea of adapting a videogame into a movie should appear as an oxymoron, especially to scholars of game studies. Bittanti observes that "to stay true to the source (in this case, the video game), an adaptation should conserve at least some of the interactive features of the original. (...) Traditional moviemaking, however, has failed to reproduce or emulate the thrills of video games" (2001, p. 193). Although videogame adaptations are largely targeted at an audience with trans-media competences (Bittanti, 2006), King and Krzywinska reason that it is gamers who are most likely to be disappointed: "Moving from game to big screen offers higher audio-visual quality but, for the viewer accustomed to the specific pleasures of interactivity, the trade-off might be less effective; the dominant sense more negative, one of 'loss' rather than gain" (2002, pp. 16-17).

Other than the lack of interactivity, Patrícia Gouveia (2010) argues that an equally determining factor would lie in the different role played by narrative in both videogames and movies. In the first case, gameplay comes first, and narrative matters only insofar as it enhances user interaction, whereas in movies there is an impression that spectacle

should serve the story. Gouveia's first point seems to be shared by none other than Shigeru Miyamoto, game designer behind *Super Mario Bros.*, who's expressed concern with a narrative trend in videogames: "Younger game creators (...) want to tell stories that will touch hearts. And while I understand that desire, the trend worries me. It should be the experience that's touching" (2015, p. 18). Her second point, however, clashes with some of the most recent views on the development of digital cinema, which argue for the existence of a deeper aesthetic convergence than that which has been admitted until now.

AURA AND REALISM: THEN AND NOW

While game studies have demonstrated a tendency to focus on core, structural elements of videogames, film studies are less concerned with technical specifics and more with the medium's historical, economical, aesthetic, social and psychological dimensions (Blanchet, 2010). This is not to say that the opposite is never true, but while game studies have just moved past its foundations, film studies are well into renovation, part of which has been due to the appearance and development of videogames themselves.

For an extended period of time, film studies have been bound by two incredibly influential concepts: that of 'aura,' as

formulated by German philosopher Walter Benjamin (2005), and 'realism,' as formulated by French film critic André Bazin (1967; 1971). Discussing their implications is rendered twice as difficult by both their pervasiveness and obscurity. Benjamin and Bazin never bothered to provide a clear-cut, unambiguous definition for their creations, and posterity was left to fumble about in the dark. That being said, it would be unwise to overlook their importance in the overall shaping of both the methodology and output of film studies through the better part of the twentieth century.

According to Warwick Mules, "aura is simultaneously the decayed perception of art objects in historical time, and the affirmation of a desire to 'bring things closer'" (2007, p. 1). In other words, 'aura' stands for the property that guarantees the authenticity of an object or art-work, together with everything related to its material constitution and historical origin. That is not the end of it: the authenticity that is synonymous with aura is also responsible for a separation of the auratic object from its non-auratic environment of which the observer is part of. Benjamin (2005) holds that this is true of every human artifact up until the introduction of the mechanical reproduction of images, an integral feature of photography and, therefore, of cinema.

Although mechanical reproduction per se is nothing new, when the process is applied to images the result is an irreversible break of the transmissibility of aura (Benjamin, 2005; Mules, 2007). Thus, the photographic process at the base of traditional filmmaking produces non-auratic artworks since, contrary to what was true of painting, for instance, it would not be possible to isolate an original as opposed to a copy, since the positive itself is the outcome of a negative. Furthermore, the break in the transmission of aura has the effect of democratizing the affected artworks, since the aura's disappearance also makes null the auratic distance from its peers (Benjamin, 2005). It could be argued that Bazin took up where Benjamin left off by analyzing the perception of non-auratic artworks – that is, the relationship between spectator and movies. In this specific sense, realism is nothing more than "the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny. (…) If the history of the plastic arts is less a matter of their aesthetic than of their psychology then it will be seen to be essentially the story of resemblance, or, if you will, of realism" (Bazin, 1967, p. 10).

When it comes to Bazin, there is a common misconception that regards 'realism' as a transparent relationship between the camera and objective reality (Casebier, 1991), resulting in a mimetic and analogical link between the image and its object (Stam, 2000). However, Bazin himself is very clear on the matter:

"The solution is not to be found in the result achieved but in the way of achieving it" (1967, p. 12). The point is not that the camera, in virtue of its supposed capacity to penetrate and represent objective reality, establishes a direct connection with an external object, but rather that it satisfies the spectator's "appetite for illusion by a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part" (p. 12). The image obtained is obviously the product of a myriad formal interventions, starting from the setting of the camera, the choice of the lens, the shot's composition, and so forth. Then again, that is why realism is about "the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny" (p. 10) rather than the restitution of reality itself.

In synthesis, traditional cinema is a medium that operates through realist means to achieve non-auratic ends.

The same concepts that had worked so well for the analysis of celluloid-based filmmaking proved problematic once applied to digital cinema. The introduction of the capacity to translate words and images into binary code "cannot but challenge definitions of what cinema is, and, by implication, must change what we have come to regard as the specific qualities of the medium: photographic iconicity, guaranteeing the cinema's 'reality effect,' combined with the special kind of indexicality, the existential link

with the real, guaranteeing the 'documentary' truth-value that makes the moving image such a special kind of historical 'record'" (Elsaesser, 2013, p. 22).

Despite the fact that computer imaging techniques by themselves have not radically altered the linear conventions of narrative cinema (Bolter & Grusin, 2001), Andrew Darley observes that they "have assumed a central authority in this new mode or genre. (…) In the kind of movies at issue here, elevation of the immediately sensuous constituent vies with our usual means of entry to symbolic meaning, i.e. narrative" (2000, p. 103). Consequently, "spectacle is, in many respects, the antithesis of narrative. (…) In its purer state it exists for itself, consisting of images whose main drive is to dazzle and stimulate the eye (and by extension the other senses). Drained of meaning, bereft of the weight of fictional progress, the cunning of spectacle is that it begins and ends with its own artifice" (p. 104).

The most recurring models of this new kind of spectacle cinema are, unsurprisingly, videogames. Éric Dufour (2011) claims that their influence goes beyond mere looks, and has actually managed to infect cinematic narrative tropes: *The Matrix*'s (1999) fixation on choice is an obvious example, as is the remote-control gimmick of *Avatar* (2009), but so is the grotesque detachment of fictional perpetrators of violence from their heinous acts, as exemplified by action-movie staples like *Die Hard* (1988) or *Commando* (1985).

Logically speaking, videogame adaptations should be equally reliable instruments to investigate the profound and diversified convergence between the two media, but researchers have mostly opted to focus on figurative adaptations rather than literal ones. Elsa Boyer justifies this by stating that, "Beyond simple adaptation and quotation, these interactions between a medium that is interactive and another that is not help enrich or reinvigorate their respective narrative approaches" (2015, p. 60). It is, therefore, the greater process of assimilation of videogame aesthetics and production methods into digital movie-making that should be of interest, rather than the analysis of straightforward adaptation.

If game studies largely dismissed them out of an instinct for self-preservation, film studies could be said to have done so due to an existential crisis. As we are about to find out, adaptation studies were the crisis itself.

ADAPTATION AND TAXONOMY

In spite of Andrew's claim that "discourse about adaptation is potentially as far reaching as you like" (1980, p. 9), adaptation studies are more often than not marginalized in "'An endless series of twenty-page articles'" (Ray, 2001, p. 129). In order to understand how that happened one must retrace its origins, which Leitch (2003; 2009) identifies with the parallel study of film and literature in American faculties during the late forties and the subsequent publication of George Bluestone's seminal *Novels into Films: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema* in 1957.

Leitch remarks that the majority of professors back then did not have specific knowledge of film history or aesthetics, and therefore: "Courses in Shakespeare and film were often courses in Shakespeare through film. Other courses were conducted under the sign of literature, analyzing and evaluating the films at hand as if they were literary works themselves" (2009, p. 4). The approximation of film and literary studies was, in turn, a consequence of the spread of post-structuralism, whose advocates "distinguished themselves by appearing more interested in ideology and theory than in either literature or film per se. But their training in the latter two enabled them to detect the elaborate intertextual, ideological scaffolding that sustained popular fictions" (Ray, 2001, p. 123).

Bluestone's contribution was notable for being among the first to bring up how the study of film in general, and literary adaptations in particular, faced an unjust, literary bias: "because of the cinema's comparative youth, aesthetics has been

tempted to treat it like a fledgling, measuring its capabilities by the standards of older, more traditional arts" (1957, p. VII). Bluestone also lamented that, when analysis of literary adaptations did take place, it tended to focus on the creative licenses taken by the filmmakers in relation to the source material, as if that were somehow a reason for blame. On the contrary, he stressed that "changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium. Finally, it is insufficiently recognized that the end products of novel and film represent different aesthetic genera, as different from each other as ballet is from architecture" (p. 5).

Almost fifty years later, Leitch remarked that not much had happened in the field, to the point where "the most influential general account of cinema's relation to literature continues to be George Bluestone's tendentious *Novels into Film*, now nearly half a century old" (2009, p. 149). Despite Bluestone's aesthetic and normative ambitions, adaptation studies nowadays are largely content with performing a taxonomic function. In her introduction to *Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon declares: "It is the very act of adaptation itself that interests me, not necessarily in any specific media or even genre. Videogames, theme park rides, Web sites, graphic novels, song covers, operas, musicals, ballets, and radio and stage plays are thus as important to this theorizing as are the more

commonly discussed movies and novels" (2006, p. XIV). However, it could be counter-argued through Leitch that "adaptation study is and should be essentially aesthetic. Both categorical studies of adaptation and studies that emphasize analogies among the arts take as their central line of inquiry the question of what makes works of art successful – or what, in the more old-fashioned language adopted by both Horace and Lessing, makes them beautiful" (2009, p. 5).

In other words, if the study of adaptations relinquishes its task to engage in meaningful, aesthetic discourse about the interested artifacts, the only available recourse will be that of eternal reformulation of categories, without any clear idea of their function or significance. While adaptation studies have demonstrated openness of mind towards videogame adaptations, they have done so out of sheer principle, enumerating the changes applied in the passage from one medium to the other without any broader consideration on what that might mean for the study of those specific media.

MOVING BEYOND ANTINOMY

Having thus concluded an admittedly partial attempt at presenting some of the most relevant records on videogame adaptation through the sprawling history of game studies, film studies

and adaptation studies, we can now summarize their positions and mutual relations in three, distinct theses:

a) Cinema and videogames are antagonistic media, one is the 'moral opposite' of the other (held by game studies, refuted by film studies and adaptation studies);

b) Cinema and videogames are specular media involved in a growing process of convergence (refuted by game studies, held by film studies and adaptation studies);

c) Videogame adaptations are deserving of academic research (refuted by game studies and film studies, held by adaptation studies).

At first glance, the only way to successfully study these works would be through thesis c), under the guise of adaptation studies, the only department that substantially recognized them. The next step would be to decide whether film studies could be included in an interdisciplinary effort, mingling theses b) and c), since game studies have repeatedly called themselves out through profuse claims for independence.

The contribution of film studies could highlight the ways in which cinema and videogames prove to be compatible media, but losing the vernacular streak of game studies would be a fatal blow. It is fundamental that one does not lose sight of the formal differences between the two media, lest one loses

the chance of asserting any significant assumption about them with it. Studying videogames strictly through the lens of film theory hasn't proven any more profitable than studying film through the biases of literary studies. In virtue of their peculiar aesthetics and production, the study of videogame adaptations offers the chance to channel the three into a meaningful cooperation aimed at reevaluating calcified prejudices and vulgarized concepts.

The first item on this study's agenda would be to discredit the claim for cinema's inappropriateness to adapt artifacts of digital media, which has been based on its financial profitability and the lack of an interactive interface.

The fact that videogame adaptations are merely an appendix to a larger industrial and commercial convergence makes them no different, in this specific sense, from literary adaptations such as *The Godfather* (1972) or *Jaws*, themselves early products of the industrial method and cinematic style called 'New Hollywood'. According to Thomas Schatz, "the vertical integration of classical Hollywood, which ensured a closed industrial system and coherent narrative, has given way to 'horizontal integration' of the New Hollywood's tightly diversified media conglomerates, which favors texts strategically 'open' to multiple readings and multimedia reiteration" (1992, p. 34). Of course, it would be pointless to try

and compare the critical achievements of literary and videogame adaptations. It is merely suggested that it would be unfair to exclude the latter from academic research due to their role in a marketing strategy they were not even responsible for in the first place.

Cinema's lack of interactivity is a stingier issue. Many attempts have been made to demonstrate how cinema could or could not compensate for it, but none of them final. Benjamin (2005) argues that the photographic medium is eminently tactile, since it did away with the cult-like distance of auratic objects. Vivian Sobchack famously expanded on that intuition, focusing "on the capacity of films to physically arouse us to meaning" (2004, p. 57). On the other side of the barricade separating film studies from game studies, Eric Zimmerman observes that the term 'interactivity' contains endless nuances, and that game studies naturally tended to focus on its more executive side. However, there would also be a cognitive interactivity, which he defines as "the psychological, emotional, hermeneutic, semiotic, reader-response, Rashomon-effect-ish, etc. kind of interactions that a participant can have with the so-called 'content' of a text" (2004, p. 158).

All the adapter would have to do, it seems, is to find "two systems of communication for elements of equivalent position in the systems capable of

eliciting a signified at a given level of pertinence" (Andrew, 1980, p. 13). The principle of equivalence, useful and lean in theory, becomes problematic in reality when moviemakers themselves do not seem to believe in it. French director François Truffaut, for example, polemically raged against it: "I'm not at all certain that a novel contains unfilmable scenes, and even less certain that these scenes, decreed unfilmable, would be so for everyone" (1976, p. 226).

Furthermore, it is not a given that cinema should provide satisfying equivalents for all of videogames' unique features. Douglas Brown and Tanya Krzywinska effectively synthetize their irreducible distance: "The pleasures of watching most fiction-based films designed to be consumed as entertainment can be said to lie in a luxurious submission to the dramatic journey that a given film orchestrates, which the spectator can do nothing to alter. (...) By contrast, the pleasure (and sometimes almost unbearable unpleasure) of games lies in the progressive development, practice and mastery of the skills and knowledge of rules and physics necessary to act effectively within the game world" (2009, p. 88).

In other words, cinema and videogames are media that pursue different goals through different means. Whatever points of contact may be established (presence of narrative, potentiality for

interaction, abundance of spectacle), their convergence is never synonymous with a complete takeover (Elsaesser, 2013). If that is the case, though, videogame adaptations should not also be expected to fulfill the impossible task to keep videoludic performability intact.

Thus, the idea that videogame adaptations are undeserving of academic attention rests largely on the accusation of being instrumental to an industrial and commercial connivance they are not responsible for, and a formal inconsistency that cannot be mended, lest we let go of any shared assumption on what constitutes cinematic consumption (Luz, 2009).

The reevaluation of videogame adaptations as an object of study is only the first step. The following one should be the establishment of what exactly such a study is supposed to achieve. On the one hand, there is no reason why these movies should be considered any less relevant than the much examined *The Matrix*, *Avatar* or *Inception* (2010) for a thorough understanding of contemporary cinema's videoludic aesthetics. On the other hand, it could be rightfully argued that if they failed to bring anything new to the table, academics are doing just fine with what they have. That is why the second item on the list must go a step further and point at a unique feature that videogame adaptations specifically help to isolate and recognize:

the return of the repressed, or the second-degree cinematic source material of videogame adaptations.

It has been shown how videogames as a commercial commodity started out being financially and aesthetically dependent on cinema. This was due partly to the merging of game developers with media conglomerates, and partly to the youth and personal taste of game designers themselves, who were often passionately engaged with counter-culture, science-fiction, role-playing games and popular cinema. The adoption of cinematic visual codes and tropes also had the advantage of exploiting a universally shared imagery of ambience and characters, which in turn helped secure financing and sales (Blanchet, 2010). As time went by, however, the videoludic industry grew to such an extent that, according to Aphra Kerr (2006), its sales surpassed those of film industry. At the same time, the development and growing implementation of computer imaging techniques in celluloid-based cinema, one among the many factors that eventually led to the establishment of digital cinema, opened the door to a new spectacle heavily indebted to videogame aesthetics and conventions. It seems that roles between the two have been exchanged, and cinema is now lagging behind.

What if, instead of subscribing to this thesis, one followed another, perhaps

more provoking proposal? Namely, that when a videogame is adapted into a movie, what ends up being adapted is not any specific content of the game itself, but rather its pure, cinematic imagery? If that were the case, videogame adaptations would not be adaptations of videogames as much as of cinematic imagery itself – that is, a cinematic self-adaptation seen through the prism of videogame property.

Manovich had already expressed this concept through his bold maxim, "Digital media returns to us the repressed of the cinema" (1995, p. 21). Bazin too had argued for something similar when he wrote against nostalgia for silent cinema: "Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented!" (1967, p. 21). Cinematic imagery informed the aesthetics of videogames, only to be influenced in return. What seems to be a subversive, eclectic formalism is really the re-appropriation of a legacy that had always been due. In short, paraphrasing Bazin, videogames are bringing cinema nearer and nearer to its origins. The debt has been repaid.

CONCLUSION

It would be presumptuous to claim that the points made in this paper are wholly original and innovative. A wide variety of material concerning videogame

adaptations is available for consultation and, as time went by, these productions have drawn more and more academic and critical attention.

Blanchet's *Des Pixels à Hollywood: Cinéma et Jeu Vidéo, une Histoire* Économique *et Culturelle* (2010) was an obvious and enormously informative reference, but so was the *Gameplaygag* project by Spanish professor Manuel Garín Boronat (2012), who argues for the formative potential of videogames as educational tools for film history. According to Boronat, videogames have perfected a remediation of silent film spectacle, based on a primacy of sensation upon plot or character.

This does not even take into account the huge reserve of material dedicated to the mutual relationship between cinema and videogames, which would be impossible to enumerate here. However, it seems to me that among the diverse manifestations of that relationship, videogame adaptations have suffered the most, being labelled as either opportunistic or nonsensical. I hope that this paper, its limitations notwithstanding, may have shed some light on why this happened, and helped the case for the study of movies that question the way we think about our favorite media, even and especially when they happen upon each other.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aarseth, E. (2001). *Computer Game Studies, Year One.* Retrieved from http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html

Andrew, D. (1980). The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory. In S.M. Conger and J.R. Welsh (eds.), *Narrative Strategies* (pp.9-17). West Illinois, USA: Macomb.

Bazin, A. (1967). *What Is Cinema? Volume 1*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bazin, A. (1971). *What Is Cinema? Volume 2*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Benjamin, W. (2005). A Obra de Arte na Época da sua Possibilidade de Reprodução Técnica. In *Obras Escolhidas. Volume 3* (3rd ed.) (pp. 207-241). Lisbon, Portugal: Assírio e Alvim.

Bittanti, M. (2001). *The Technoludic Film: Images of Video Games in Movies (1973-2001)*. San Jose: San Jose State University.

Bittanti, M. (2006). L'Incrocio coi Videogiochi. *Cineforum*, *46*, 5-6.

Blanchet, A. (2010). *Des Pixels à Hollywood : Cinéma et Jeu Vidéo, une Histoire Économique et Culturelle*. Houdan, France: Editions Pix'n Love.

Bluestone, G. (1957). *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bolter, J. D. & Gruisin, R. (2000). *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. London, UK: The MIT Press.

Boronat, M. G. (2012). Los videojuegos como herramienta docente para la historia del cine: el proyecto" Gameplaygag". *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, *18*, 425-432.

Boyer, E. (2015). What Video Games Say to Movies, and Vice Versa. *Artpress*, *418*, 60-62

Brown, D. & Krzywinska, T. (2009). Movie-Games and Game-Movies: Towards an Aesthetics of Transmediality. In W. Buckland (ed.), *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies* (pp. 86-103). New York, USA: Routledge.

Carr, D. (2008). Le Regole del Gioco, il Fardello della Narrativa. Enter the Matrix. In M. Bittanti (ed.) *Intermedialità. Videogiochi, Cinema, Televisione, Fumetti* (pp. 143-163). Milan, Italy: Edizioni Unicopli.

Casebier, A. (1991). *Film and Phenomenology. Toward a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Crawford, C. (1982). *The Art of Computer Game Design*. Retrieved from http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~stewart/cs583/ACGD_ArtComputerGameDesign_ChrisCrawford_1982.pdf

Darley, A. (2000). *Visual Digital Culture. Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*. New York, USA: Routledge.

Dufour, É. (2011). *O Cinema de Ficção Científica*. Lisbon, Portugal: Edições Texto & Grafia.

Elsaesser, T. (2013). Digital Cinema: Convergence or Contradiction. In J. Richardson, C. Vernallis and A. Herzog (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media* (pp. 13-44). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Eskelinen, M. (2004). Towards Computer Game Studies. In N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (pp. 36-44). London, UK: The MIT Press.

Frasca, G. (2000). *Ludologists love stories, too: Notes from a debate that never really took place.* Retrieved from http://www.ludology.org/articles/Frasca_LevelUp2003.pdf

Gouveia, P. (2010). *Artes e Jogos Digitais. Estética e Design da Experiência Lúdica*. Lisbon, Portugal: Edições Universitárias Lusófona.

Hutcheon, L. 2006. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York, USA: Routledge.

Juul, J. (2013). *The Art of Failure. An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. London, UK: The MIT Press.

Kerr, A. (2006). *The Business and Culture of Digital Games. Gamework/Gameplay*. Thousand Oaks, USA: Sage Publications.

King, G. & Krzywinska, T. (2002). Introduction. Cinema/Videogame/Interfaces. In G. King and T. Krzywinska (eds.), *Screenplay: Cinema/Videogame/Interfaces* (pp. 1-33). London, UK: Wallflower Press.

Leitch, T. (2003). Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory. *Criticism*, *45*(2), 149-171.

Leitch, T. (2009). *Film Adaptation & Its Discontents. From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*. Baltimore, USA: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Luz, F. (2009). *Jogos de Computador e Cinema: narrativas, avatares e efeitos*. Lisbon, Portugal: Edições Universitárias Lusófonas.

Mechner, J. (2006). *The Hollywood Trap*. Retrieved from https://www.wired.com/2006/04/story/

Manovich, L. (1995). *What is Digital Cinema*. Retrieved from http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/what-is-digital-cinema

Manovich, L. (2001). *The Language of New Media*. London, UK: The MIT Press.

Mules, W. (2007). *Aura as Productive Loss*. Retrieved from http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Mules_Transformations15.pdf

Miyamoto, S. (2015). Soundbytes. *Edge*, *275*, 18.

Ray, R. B. (2001). *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies*. Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press.

Schatz, T. (1992). The New Hollywood. In H. Radner, J. Collins & A. Preacher Collins (eds.), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (pp. 8-36). New York, USA: Routledge.

Smith, G. M. (2001). 'It's Just a Movie': A Teaching Essay for Introductory Media Classes. *Cinema Journal*, *41*(1), 127-134.

Sobchack, V. (2004). *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley, USA: University of California Press.

Stam, R. (2000). *Film Theory. An Introduction*. Hoboken, USA: Blackwell Publishing.

Truffaut, F. (1976). A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema. In B. Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods. Vol. 1* (pp. 225-229). Berkeley, USA: University of California Press.

Zimmerman, E. (2004). Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline. In N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrigan (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (pp. 154-163). London, UK: The MIT Press.