Introduction: The Art of Adaptation in Film and Video Games

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> *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.

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.

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