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Introduction: Games, Gaming, and Interactive Aesthetics in Contemporary Chinese and Sinophone Cinema

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Abstract: Relatively few scholarly works or research publications in English have taken up the question of the relationship between Chinese cinema and Chinese games, a topic that is ripe for exploration and the focus of this special issue. There are key related works that focus on transmedia storytelling and the cross-media development of Chinese intellectual properties (IPs), as well as rich literature on literature-to-film and literature-to-game adaptations. In this introduction, we'll first review the extant literature on games, films, and interactivity in Chinese cinema and then provide a historical overview of the development of English-language scholarship on games and film interconnections. The introduction finishes with an overview of the works in this special issue and their contributions to this area of research.

Keywords: games–cinema relationship; adaptations; transmedial storytelling; Chinese and Sinophone films; game aesthetics

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In 2009, the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* presented a special issue on "Chinese Cinemas as New Media" edited by Helen Hok-Sze Leung and Audrey Yue. For our purposes, only one of the articles in that issue addresses the intersections of game and film, as Kim Mui Elaine Chan maps the "ludological dynamic" of multiplayer

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online role-playing (MMO) games that emphasize movement through open world structures to the aesthetics of the Hong Kong film *Ming Ming* (Dir. Susie Au 2006). This comparison comes at a time when MMO games like *World of Warcraft* were extremely popular among Chinese players. Li et al. (2023) contend that the 2008 film *PK.COM.CN* should be considered the first Chinese interactive film. In this case, the interactivity comes into play at the level of the film's production as "the audience could choose to participate in the movie's subject matter, script selection, director, cinematographer, and actors" (2) through an online voting system. We also see Zhu and Zhang (2023) discussing the development of interactive film using augmented reality and virtual reality to create a stronger sense of immersion in the work, albeit without any specific examples. More recently, Zheng et al. (2024) directly address the integration of film and game, arguing that "Chinese fantasy film narratives should be centered on film-game fusion" but that the current technologies for interaction are currently not fully capable of supporting said fusion; as a consequence, they recommend improvements in immersion, cross-media circulation, and "story expansion perspectives" (1).

1 A Brief Game Studies Primer

In the early 2000s, as game studies was beginning to coalesce into a distinct field of study, several proponents of this new field argued that it needed its own distinct methods and theoretical lenses to examine games as objects of study that were, by virtue of their interactive nature, not literary texts and not new forms of cinema (or new media, as then generally understood). Noted game studies scholars such as Aarseth (2001, 2004) and Juul (2001, 2003) suggested that analysis of video games should not be based on narrative structure (a common approach for analyzing literature and film), but should instead focus on interactivity, interface, and the formal qualities of games that are not present in other art forms. This stance of developing methods in opposition to an established approach was dubbed the "ludology vs. narratology" debate, but it became clear that only the proponents of ludology were engaging in the debate, and most game studies scholars see both approaches as complementary rather than antagonistic. In 2005, Janet Murray presented "The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology in Game Studies" as a keynote at DiGRA (the Digital Games Research Association conference), where she describes "ludology" as both an ideology and a method:

> The ideology can perhaps be called game essentialism (GE), since it claims that games, unlike other cultural objects, should be interpreted only as members of their own class, and only in terms of their defining abstract formal qualities. Separate from this ideology is a methodology

> which is also called "ludology" but which could perhaps be better named computer game formalism (CGF). As a methodology, CGF emphasizes the formal properties unique to video games and attempts to analyze them and to create descriptors that can be used to classify and compare specific instances of game form. (Murray 2005)

While games have often been analyzed through the varied lenses of narrative, literary studies, cinema, it becomes apparent that games cannot be fully separated from other art forms; in the case of narrative, Murray (2005) notes that "those interested in both games and stories see game elements in stories and story elements in games: interpenetrating sibling categories, neither of which completely subsumes the other." In the end, Murray asserts that "games are not a subset of stories; objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories" and that the field must "recognize the difference between the useful formalist methodology and the distractingly prescriptive ideology of game essentialism." As she concludes (and we would agree), "game studies, like any organized pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multi-dimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving."

The narratology-versus-ludology moment highlights a key challenge for game studies in defining the object of study: is it the game-as-designed, the activity of play in general, specific gameplay, the process of designing of games, the economics of games as an industry, or the study of the community of gamers? We would contend that all these approaches are easily taken up under the umbrella of game studies, even though some of these approaches can be found in other fields such as sociology, economics, literary studies, and others that apply their own field-specific methods and theoretical lenses to games. Indeed, contemporary game studies draws on a wide range of methods, some of which come from literary studies (narratology in particular), anthropology, film studies, and others. Newer approaches focusing on digital games examine the procedural rhetorics that serve as the foundation of the game (Bogost 2010), or the role of algorithm and database in both design and experience of gameplay (Galloway 2006; Liu 2016). Two key approaches that are common in the scholarship of games and gaming are reading games as literary forms and analyzing games as visual or cinematic forms. Both approaches tend to narrow the available avenues of investigation, as they are constrained by our expectations and experiences of studying these related forms that are not themselves games. Compounding the methodological challenges are games that explicitly draw on prior forms, such as visual novels (VNs) and full-motion video (FMV) games.

Visual novels range in complexity and gamification, but most are linear narratives with a few branches that follow from reader choices (readers of a certain age may remember "choose-your-own-adventure" books; many VNs are the digital versions of that genre). Some VNs don't really include *any* choices and are essentially

illustrated short stories. But some of the more interesting ones, for our purposes, have many branching options and are more game-like overall – a great example of the fully realized version is the Chinese VN *Invisible Guardian* (*IG*, 隐形守护者), which was the highest selling title on Steam (one of the major global game distribution platforms) in 2019. Although *IG* has some minor animation effects, it is primarily composed of text and still image, so it doesn't fall into the FMV category, although we have seen it misidentified as such. As a visual novel, *IG* features a wealth of very complex and nuanced branching paths that can lead to many different stories with different endings; compared to other VNs, it has quite high replayability. However, as our focus in this issue is on games and film, we will set aside VNs as outside the scope of our interest.

This special issue examines and complicates the relationships between games and films. To be sure, questions about this relationship are not new: scholars have wrestled with how to articulate the relationship between games and film and the works featured in this issue continue to tease out those connections and disconnections. As Meskin and Robson (2010) argue, video games belong to the category of the moving image but also lie outside of it (548); our interest is not in placing games in a specific taxonomy – we are interested instead in the overlaps and blurred lines between games and film and how each form has been influenced by and influences the other. Seemingly straightforward approaches to considering the role of interaction, the choice of point of view, or the role of narrative all become more complicated the more we consider both the wide range of games and gaming approaches and innovations and evolution of cinema. Indeed, as King and Krzywinska (2002) note, "it is easy to set up an opposition between game-playing and film-viewing that falls into an overly simplistic distinction between 'interactivity' or 'activity,' on the one hand (games), and 'passivity' on the other (cinema)" (146), and we hope not to chase such distinctions in this issue.

One useful framework for examining the games–cinema relationship is that of "remediation" developed by Bolter and Grusin (1999). Remediation, or the ways new media incorporate and use older media, either wholly or by reference, can be seen as occupying a continuum between transparency and hypermediacy. Transparency (which they also refer to as immediacy) is "a style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium" (272–273), whereas hypermediacy highlights the new features, making explicit the rupture from the older media styles; hypermediacy "emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object" (31). Bolter and Grusin specifically use the example of video games drawing on film-as-prior medium as one example:

> The feeling of immediacy in *Myst*, as in other games of this genre, is generated in large part by the player's expectations derived from the medium of film. … The game can only attempt to

> satisfy the viewer's desire for immediacy by seeming to put her in a film. Her sense of immediacy comes only through an awareness of mediation. (98)

Cinema tends toward a sense of immediacy, hoping to immerse the viewer in the experience of the film, whereas games often foreground hypermediacy by virtue of the interface, pauses in action through the use of cut-scenes, shifting between continuous action and turn-based modes. There are exceptions in each form of course, and those exceptions tend to be places where the lines between film and game modes blur the most. In the following sections, we present examples first of cinematic influences on video games, video game influences on cinema, and finally a consideration of new forms that merge the two. In the first section, many examples of cinematics within games would be considered "transparent" in Bolter and Grusin's terms, as they are designed to feel like the medium being represented, somewhat paradoxically drawing the player's attention out of the immediacy of the game, often making them more aware of the distinction between the two media than a smooth layering of the new and old media working in tandem.

2 Cinematic Influences on Video Games

Perhaps the most obvious film-to-game influences are represented in game paratexts, like cinematic trailers used for marketing purposes that often include not just depictions of gameplay but additional storytelling elements that are not present in the game, as well as voice-over narration provided in the style of trailers for films. An extension of the trailer is the "game movie" – a film composed from cut-scenes and gameplay that conveys the narrative of the game in the form of a noninteractive video. These game movies are often much longer than traditional cinema and the players who make them take on the role of film editors, although they typically simply piece together the materials in a linear fashion and don't make artistic choices about inclusion, exclusion, or providing alternative point of view (POV) perspectives. Game movies are stand-alone media. They are not records of a player playing the game: the player is for the most part removed entirely, leaving only the game elements that are not interactive, such as cut-scenes.

Cut-scenes are not always cinematic and do not always include a narrative element, but they almost always serve as transitions from one scene of gameplay to another. The earliest cut-scene in a video game is the brief animation that appears between levels of *Pac-Man* (1980), depicting the eponymous character first being chased by monsters, then in a follow-up scene, chasing the monsters that are now vulnerable to Pac-Man's legendary appetite. Most contemporary cut-scenes are quite cinematic, and as King and Krzywinska (2002) explain, they often employ the "same

expository devices as cinema" such as "camera movement, shot-selection and framing … using a combination of long shots, mid shots and close-ups to provide orientation for the player" (142). Perron et al. (2019) note that cut-scenes suspend regular gameplay "in order to convey plot, characterization, and spectacle" and "typically function as rewards for the player, as markers of progress along the way, and as regular respites from the intensity of action" (39).

Klevjer (2014) argues that cut-scenes "set up a separate cinematic space in parallel to ordinary game space, which redefines rather than necessarily excludes player agency" (301) although players do not have control over the scene. In this wresting of interactivity away from the gameplay, cut-scenes can be used to generate suspense, as Frome and Smuts (2004) suggest, "not by highlighting their unique ability to be interactive, but, to the contrary, by limiting interactivity at key points, thereby turning players into helpless spectators" (13). There are some extreme cases of course, particularly with end-scenes that take place after the final gameplay has been completed. In these cases, the end-scenes function with a great deal more immediacy/transparency (in the remediation sense) than the game experiences that precede them. These end-scenes have led Brown and Krzywinska (2009) to suggest that while a game player's relationship to a game is "even more intrinsically dialogic than the reader's relationship with the literary text or a film … games do tend to climax with a passive, highly cinematic and spectacular movie, allowing the players to sit back and view in relaxed, passive comfort the outcome of their efforts" (94).

However, as Rawson (2023) contends, cut-scenes, while "important when it comes to storytelling … often using different forms of animation to make them stand apart from the game," can sometimes be jarring if not well-integrated or if they continue outside the scope of their narrative task or facilitation of a transition: "there's a balance between cut-scenes and gameplay that some creators seem to struggle with." The longest current end-scene takes place at the end of *Metal Gear Solid 4* (2008), clocking in at 71 min. The game developer, Hideo Kojima, appears to see himself as more director than game designer and is well-known for extensive cut-scenes and end-scenes. His game *Death Stranding* (2019) includes a 31-minute cut-scene, and as Rawson notes, "while the game received good reviews, at some point you've got to wonder if you're playing a video game or just watching TV."

3 Video Game Influences on Cinema

Perhaps the most obvious influence of games on film is the development of movies based on video games, often accompanied by transmedia storytelling as part of the marketing. The first feature-length animated feature based on a video game was *Super Mario Bros*: *The Great Mission to Rescue Princess Peach!* (Dir. Masami Hata

1986); the first live-action feature was *Mirai Ninja* (Dir. Keita Amemiya 1988), both produced in Japan. The US followed suit in 1993 with a live-action version of *Super Mario Bros* (Dir. Rocky Morton and Annabel Jankel). As Larsen (2019) points out, alongside such adaptations are films that use games to frame their narrative composition such as *Wreck-It Ralph* (Dir. Rich Moore 2012), *Gamer* (Dir. Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor 2009), *Tron* (Dir. Steven Lisberger 1982), and *Tron*: *Legacy* (Dir. Joseph Kosinski 2010). In 1985, *Clue* (Dir. Jonathan Lin), based on a board game rather than a video game, attempted to include a key game mechanic by providing multiple endings; however, audiences had no way to select any of the three endings and were simply shown whichever one was in place in the copy given to the theater where the film was viewed.

Beyond adaptations to film, however, video game aesthetics and technologies have had a significant impact on cinematic expression. *Run*, *Lola*, *Run* (Dir. Tom Tykwer 1998), for instance, utilizes the mechanic of the respawn – the reappearance of the player at the start of an unsuccessfully completed level – as the protagonist "replays" the films narrative until an optimal outcome is reached (Grieb 2002). Playing with point of view is another key game technique experimented with in cinema. While there are cinematic experiments with first-person point of view that are clearly not drawing on video games (such as 1947s *Lady in the Lake*, directed by Robert Montgomery), several contemporary examples are clearly drawing on video game aesthetics for their first person POV, such as the frenetic action of *Hardcore Henry* (Dir. Illya Naishuller 2015) – considered the first mainstream action movie to be shot entirely in a first-person perspective – and the fight sequence between the main characters in *Doom* (Dir. Andrzej Bartkowiak 2005), which mimics the experience of gameplay fairly directly.

Much prior work on game influences on film has focused on visual references, settings, pacing, and genre conventions across media (Kallay 2013; Maziarczyk 2023; Papazian and Sommers 2013). Lasse Juel Larsen (2019) contends that modern films have been influenced by video game play worlds, quest structures, interfaces, play experience, and game structure, using examples including *Mission Impossible* (Dir. Brian de Palma 1996), *Getaway* (Dir. Courtney Solomon 2013), and *Edge of Tomorrow* (Dir. Doug Liman 2014) (which also uses the respawn mechanism of *Run*, *Lola*, *Run*, but with a stronger sense of gamification as applied in its story). Many of the same exemplars appear in other considerations of the film–game relationship; for example, writing for *The Ringer*, Jake Kring-Schreifels (2021) notes that "there's always been a two-way street of influence between the film and video game industry … [n]ow more than ever, the two industries and their consumers are in constant dialog with each other, and the line between them is becoming blurrier and blurrier."

4 Merging Film and Game

One of the earliest examples of merging game and cinema (albeit not interactive per se) is machinima – using game contexts and game mechanics to tell new (usually unrelated) stories or to create music videos or other cinematic forms not usually derived from games. Kallay (2013) defines machinima as "a film … made solely using game engine animation, mostly achieved through the manipulation of the in-game camera option. Over such manipulated animated images the machinima creator layers voice-overs (according to the script written by the machinima creator) and edits the piece" (87). The first machinima is *Diary of a Camper* (1996), which takes place inside id Software's *Quake* video game, presenting dialog through on-screen text messages. Around the same time that anonymous gamers created *Diary of a Camper*, Chinese media artist Feng Mengbo (冯梦波) released *Taking Mt. Doom by Strategy* (智取 Doom 山, 1997), merged footage from the video game *Doom* with the revolutionary opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (智取威虎山). As Sara Tucker (2001) notes, "Much of Mengbo's work since the early 90s has been variously influenced by the style, content, or cultural implications of video games, which greatly interested him as an adolescent." He continued this interest in the *Quake* Series, 1999–2008, which placed images of the artist himself inside the game world: his in-game avatar carries a video camera and films the game action around him while asking questions about what those actions might mean. This kind of machinima merges external cinematic resources into the game, bringing the form further into a film/game hybrid, although like other machinima, it is not interactive (i.e., it is meant to be viewed, not played).

Another approach that blurs the film/game boundary is embedding a movie inside of a game, the most famous example of which is director Spike Lee's *Livin' Da Dream*, which appears inside of the basketball-based video game *NBA2K16* (2015). The movie begins with a live action description from director Lee, showing off the motion capture technology used in its production and ends with interviews with the director and producer. As Russworm (2018) notes, "opening the film with live action and concluding the film with personal interviews works to repetitiously insist on the project's status as a film" and the descriptions of the projects in the interviews ("it's not just a game"; "our feature film") "clarify the project's proper form as cinema" (205). Russworm goes on to assert that using cumulative cut-scenes as "storytelling in video games as cinema is one way of acknowledging that the synergy between game and cinema often convincingly blurs many of the traditional, formal distinctions between the two mediums" (202).

A more direct inclusion of the use of game mechanics and gamification in cinema appears in interactive films. In some cases, such interactive films simply allow for

viewer choices to select a different ending or branching points in the narrative, mirroring the visual novels noted above. Interactive movies using audience voting mechanisms to drive narrative choices first appeared in the 1960s (William Castle's *Mr. Sardonicus* 1961, Radúz Činčera's *Kinoautomat* 1967), although most such films converged on a single choice for an ending. With the shift to digital media and streaming services, individual viewers can now make choices that affect the structure and endings. Perhaps the best-known recent example is Netflix's *Black Mirror*: *Bandersnatch* (Dir. David Slade 2018), which begins with a brief tutorial that explains how viewers can make choices that will lead to one of five different endings. Interactive film has received more scholarly attention than many of the other forms that integrate game interaction and cinema, particularly by those who focus on digital narrative (Abba 2008; Ben-Shaul 2005; Hales 2015, Rezk and Haahr 2022). However, because the examples that gamify the viewing experience the most are relatively new, we see an opportunity for much more work to be done in this area.

While interactive films blur the line between game and film, it's important to note that to date, like machinima, the interactive elements in the above examples are limited. Indeed, much of the confluence of games and film appears to happen at the level of style rather than in terms of interaction. Other examples where the cinematic experience is being replicated by games include streaming gameplay ("Let's Plays") and recordings of gameplay that are watched by spectators.

Full-motion video games are similar to both visual novels and interactive films in that there are scripted scenes, and the player drives choices of which scenes play out; these scenes are shot on film or video using live actors following a number of different scripts (depending on the branches available). These games are typically composed of a series of film clips whose action can be determined by text-based choices either overlayed on the film or provided in a separate interface. Games that use animation, even if the animation was based on live actors using motion capture to produce, would not be in this category. FMV games are not a particularly new development: the first game designed using full-motion video, *Night Trap*, features clips of actors filmed in VHS, which you as the player watch on surveillance cameras, debuted in 1992. In 1996, *Wing Commander IV* featured actors shot on film on extensive sets (including film stars Mark Hamill and Malcolm McDowell) that the player interacts with via branching dialog sequences between animated game actions. Because of the FMV components, the production cost was much higher than other games at the time and despite the game's success did not make a profit. Unlike interactive movies, which feature only filmed sequences that are presented in response to user input (and no other game mechanics), most games featuring FMV layer the filmed sequences into more traditional game mechanics. Games using FMV as the main user interface are still relatively uncommon, although recent releases such as *Isle Tide Hotel* (2023) and other FMV games produced by Wales Interactive

(UK), and ALT Lab's *Breakout 13* (2023, China) have received favorable reviews. The integration of FMV and gameplay in *Breakout 13* in particular is very sophisticated and certainly blurs the line between game and cinema.

Interactivity can also take place not just between the player and the game (or the viewer and the film) but also between the game developers, the game players, and the larger gaming and viewing community through practices such as "Let's Play" streaming and reaction videos. A clear example of this kind of community interactivity can be seen with the case of the extremely popular and critically acclaimed video game *Black Myth*: *Wukong* (黑神话：悟空, Game Science 游戏科学 2024). The game is essentially an adaptation or retelling of the classic *Journey to the West* (Xiyou ji 西游记), where the player controls the protagonist, Sun Wukong, also known as the Monkey King. The game is layered with six high-quality animated cut-scenes that convey the narrative expression of each game chapter; each cut-scene was created by a different team of animators and presented in a specific style. The game designer has noted that his focus was on the story portrayal and visual style first with game mechanics and play as a secondary consideration (Zhang 2024). In China, the game is seen as a vehicle for demonstrating Chinese culture to a wider audience, and Western audiences have been enthralled not just by the gameplay but by the cinematic aesthetics employed in the cut-scenes as well as the overarching narrative. As Zhang Yang (张扬), who interviewed the Game Science team for China's *Xinhua* news site concluded, "a game can be considered as a form of expressive art like film, music, or theater" (Zhang 2024).

The community interaction can be seen in recordings of streamers playing the game and reacting to it as they play, often chatting with their viewers (who send comments in a text chat window) as they experience both the game and the cinematic cut-scenes. These viewers often supply explanations of the cultural traditions or the original story to help the player fully engage with the narrative. In addition to these playthroughs are reaction videos, where people react to specific game play moments, but also to the stories presented in the cinematic interludes. These cut-scenes have also been compiled into game movies that run over 3 h long. As designer Feng Ji (冯骥) suggested in an interview, a kind of "chemical reaction" occurs through the combination of traditional Chinese culture with advanced technology, the best visuals, and "reasonable gameplay" – based on reactions of streamers this combination appears to create a strong esthetic and affective connection between the player and the game.

5 In This Issue

This special issue includes five critical essays on games, gaming, and interactive aesthetics in contemporary Chinese and Sinophone cinema and media. Engaging

Chinese and Sinophone film studies in dialog with scholarships in game studies and media theory, this special issue inspects how games and gaming can transform or even reshape cinema through new experiences of interactive aesthetics through AI-generated algorithms, multiverse narratives, psychological mazes, game montages, and gamified gazes and points of view. Building on extant scholarship on game culture, media theory, and interactive cinema, we are interested in essays that examine the mutual adaptations of games and cinematic productions. Drawing from Lev Manovich's media theory, we consider the effect of computerized gaming and computer-assisted gaming on traditional filmmaking, filmmakers' diversified approaches to the introduction of computerized gaming to cinematic production, and the impact of new media and its own conventions on the film industry and the process of filmmaking. Manovich observes that it is difficult to "draw a strict line between interactive movies and many other games that may not use traditional film sequences yet follow many other conventions of film language in their structure" (Manovich 2002, 288). By exploring interactive movies and games structured around film-like sequences and simulating interactions with real people, we ask how the cinematic apparatus contributes to the players' experiences and is reconfigured through interactive video game play. Manovich observes the cinema is "the original modern 'multimedia'" (50), and that the intersections between game aesthetics and cinematic production could evoke new reflections on cinematicity in media history. As Gurevitch (2013, 172) argues, "notions of the 'cinematic' are now being redrawn by production techniques and consumption practices of the games industry, rather than the other way around." How then do game patterns, role-playing game (RPG) and virtual reality (VR) technology bring multifarious narrative potentials, such as nonlinear plotlines, and facilitate new forms of immersive audience experience and interactivity? How does the process of gamification contribute to new perspectives to cinematic spatio-temporality, narrative architecture, and visual representations? How does gameplay in interactive cinema challenge or transform our understanding of film auteurism, gendered subjectivities, and shifting demarcations between public and private, between human and nonhuman species? What new perceptions can eco-conscious video games contribute to studies of contemporary Chinese eco-cinema? In what ways can we reconceptualize works in Chinese and Sinophone cinematic history through the lens of game studies, be it virtual reality films, video game-based animations, or popular time-travel themed *xianxia* films?

Expanding current scholarship on game aesthetics in Chinese and Sinophone cinema studies, a major contribution of this special issue is its coverage of contemporary Taiwanese VR film productions. In 2017, director Hsin-Chien Huang (黃心健) collaborated with American media artist Laurie Anderson on their VR work *La Camera Insabbiata/Chalkroom* which won the Best VR Experience Award at Venice Film Festival. In 2021, seven immersive Taiwanese VR works including "The Sick

Rose" (病玫瑰, Dir. Zhi-Zhong Tang, Yun-Hsien Huang), "The Starry Sand Beach" (Dir. Nina Barbier, Hsin-Chien Huang), "Samsara" (輪迴, Dir. Hsin-Chien Huang), and others were shortlisted in competition at the Venice Film Festival. In 2022, Taiwanese VR film "The Man Who Couldn't Leave" (無法離開的人, Dir. Singing Chen 陳芯宜) explores the White Terror era during the 1950s, won top prize in the immersive category at the Venice Film Festival. Many of these prominent works resort to the interactive nature of VR to bring audiences nascent immersive experiences, connecting local artists, programmers, and filmmakers with international networks through coproduction. As critics have observed, the global impact of Taiwan's VR films has asserted Taiwan as "an international player that collaborates with creative forces from around the world." Seminal themes explored in recent Taiwanese VR films include reflections on environmental crisis, disappearance of indigenous languages, and the history of Taiwan's White Terror era.

Three essays in this special issue provide much-needed study in this field. Fengyun Zhang's article offers an examination of Taiwanese video game *Detention* (*Fanxiao* 返校, 2017) and its namesake film and television series adaptations. Resonating with Marianini's examination of the function sound constructing an immersive reality in VR film, Zhang explores how audiovisual design and nostalgic sound elements in video games craft a personalized narrative for the gameplayers and grant them the power to reflect on, reconstruct, and even play with and against the past. The essay compares the video game, its film and television adaptations and their diverse engagements of ludic aesthetics in representing collective trauma and personal redemption against the backdrop of Taiwan's history of the White Terror period. Zhang pays close attention to the diverse and nuanced affective models in transmedia storytelling and analyzes how these esthetic forms allow for the enhancement of creative possibilities in expressing personal and political sentiments. Resonating with the theme of gameplay as a form of political resistance, Gabriel Remy-Handfield analyzes how media artist Hsin-Chien Huang's VR film *Bodyless* (*Shishenji*, 2019) and discusses how the film's VR experience enacts a techno-hauntological esthetic by allowing viewers to embody the wandering spirit of a political prisoner who died during Taiwan's martial law era. Engaging Bliss Cua Lim's notions of immiscible time and heterogeneous space, the essay discusses how Huang's VR film portrays blended temporality by casting Taiwan's authoritarian period "as a premonition of an oppressive technological future." The essay contextualizes Huang's work in contemporary Taiwan's VR art ecosystem and probes how VR films allow filmmakers and media artists to explore new ways to express memories, indigenous spirituality, and ethical responsibility. Desiree Marianini's study of VR film *Madame Pirate*: *Becoming a Legend* (Dir. Morgan Ommer and Huang Dan-Chi, 2022) focuses on the role and impact of sound in VR films. Marianini observes that sound elements in this VR film construct an immersive reality experience for the

viewer-turned-user and shape viewers' interpretation of the narrative. Marianini discusses how the combination of 3D live-action theatrical mise-en-scène and painting in Tilt Brush creates macro-sequences in which sound elements advance viewers' emotional responses and sensual immersion. As Marianini observes, VR, by activating six-degrees-of-freedom (DOF) experiences, VR transforms viewers' experiences and maximizes the impact of sound in guiding the viewers' journey in the narrative.

Two other essays in the special issue contribute to the question of interactive gameplay, game affect, and viewers' immersive experiences from divergent theoretical approaches. Xiaochu Wu takes to actor-network theory (ANT) to analyze a Chinese indie film *An Elephant Sitting Still* (大象席地而坐, Dir. Hu Bo 胡波, 2019). Drawing from game theory and video gaming experiences as methods to reconsider the interrelationship between film characters and cinematic spectators, Wu proposes that audience engagements as envisioned by Hu Bo's film could be considered as "the player–avatar interaction in first-perspective role-playing games (RPGs)." The film's transformation of the cinematic viewer to game actants transcends established esthetic paradigms of social realism in Chinese and Sinophone cinema. Considering Hu Bo's film through the prism of actor-network theory permits novel understandings of cinematic techniques, nonhuman subjects, and dehumanized secondary characters as nonconventional actants of affective experiences such as desire, fear, apathy, and anxiety in a role-play game. In comparison with VR films that resort to creating immersive spaces for personal sentiments and intimacy audio–visual experiences, Hu Bo's film transforms cinematic approaches to affective experiences through the lens of video game aesthetics. Shasha Liu's essay examines the transmedia adaptations of *Jade Dynasty* (JD 诛仙), by comparing *JD* adaptations in various media forms such as video games (since 2007), TV dramas (2016), films (2019), and animation series (since 2022). Liu's study of *JD* as a major IP franchise focuses on related intermedia interactions in the context of seminal turning-points in China's evolving digital media ecology in the last two decades. In particular, Liu argues that *JD*'s rise as a major IP signifies an algorithmic, computer-generated calculation method that contributes to and shapes as shared infrastructures in today's Chinese and Sinophone digital media industry. An examination of *JD* as an IP franchise is important in that it highlights and probes "the common mechanisms shared by digital media, particularly between video games and online social platforms."

The above essays bring new intersectional understandings of transmedial game aesthetics and transmedial storytelling. Jesper Juul holds that games, if sharing the same rules, are transmedial and can be realized in different media, although the ecology of game media may support games in varied ways. Games "can move between different media – sometimes with ease, sometimes with great difficulty" (Juul 2005, 48). Juul identifies "game implementations" and "game adaptations" as two situations in

which game media supports the translation of games. Whereas game "implementations" into another media "map one-to-one correspondences between all the possible game states," game adaptations are marked by the omission of real-world details, as is seen in adaptation of physical game in video games (49).[1] When a video game IP is adapted for film and television, it further creates possibilities of transmedia storytelling. As Jenkins (2003) describes, in transmedia storytelling, "each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption." Jenkins's discussion of transmedia storytelling provides an instrumental theoretical parameter in the consideration of transmedia franchises' incorporation of VR experiences, as essays by Fengyun Zhang and Shasha Liu illustrate in this special issue. For Jenkins, transmedia storytelling prioritizes the notion of "extensions" that produce "complex fictional worlds" by incorporating game mechanics and elements in an effort to expand the storyline and create new understandings about the characters, the plot, and the storyworlds. In other words, narrative extensions in transmedia storytelling create "a world which always expands beyond our grasp." Concurrently, "transmedia storytelling practices may expand the potential market for a property by creating different points of entry for different audience segment" (Jenkins 2007). Drawing from game designer Neil Young's term "additive comprehension," Jenkins observes that in transmedia storytelling, each additional text builds in elements "which enhance the experience of people reading across multiple media" and forces viewers/audiences to reinvent the fictional world as a whole (Jenkins 2007). Fengyun Zhang's essay expands Jenkins' discussion of transmedial storytelling by showcasing how the film and televisual adaptations of the video game *Detention* "exemplifies franchising practices from the geographical, industrial, and cultural margins." Transmedia adaptations also rewrite the video game's focus on "memory as remedy" and open up narrative incongruities in recounting Taiwan's historical trauma about the White Terror era. Shasha Liu's discussion of *Jade Dynasty* as an IP and transmedia franchise references current scholarship on transmedia storytelling by engaging Jenkins in dialog with studies by Dal Yong Jin (2020), Heather Inwood (2014, 2022), Jinying Li (2020), and others, with a focus on reconsidering *JD*'s IP formation through video game and televisual adaptations in the context of media ecologies, commercial drives, and monetization mechanisms in Chinese game industry.

1 Jull makes this argument in 2005, but contemporary games actually do include a wealth of real-world details, from realistic physics to the inclusion of real locations; *Black Myth*: *Wukong*, for instance, has been praised for its realistic inclusion of famous locations in China.

The essays in this special issue also address the complex relationships and mutual esthetic influences between cinema and video games. Wolf (1997) looks at shared theoretical issues in video games and film, including "spectator positioning and suture, point of view, sound and image relations, semiotics, and other theories dealing with images or representations" (Wolf 11). Wolf holds that both film and video games engage "the use of on-screen and off-screen space in the creation of a diegetic world" (Wolf 11), although video games often traverse through diverse spatial structures and surpass cinematic space in creating ways of organizing space in the diegetic world (Wolf 22). Building on the discussion of the convergence and cross-fertilization of video games and film by Wolf and other scholars (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Manovich 2002; Perron and Wolf 2009), the special issue of *G|A|M|E* (Issue 5, 2015) was dedicated to exploring the question of "what is cinematic in video games and what is ludic in cinema." In their introduction essay, Riccardo Fassone, Federico Giordano, and Ivan Girina (2015) argue that video games and cinema could be reconceptualized in a wider shared "audiovisual tradition" and that it would be productive to trace "connections across their contents, structures and modalities capable of surpassing compartmentalized medium specific positions" (6). The special issue contains nine essays covering a wide range of topics including documentary film and the (re)production of the 1980s UK game industry, narrative time in video games and films, the cinematic auditorium as game-space, gameplay in (video)ludic movies, as well as reconsidering video games, cinema, Bazin, and the myths of simulated lived experience. Notably, scholarship on the cross-fertilization of Chinese and Sinophone cinema and game studies is still scarce, although recent publications on Chinese and Sinophone game cultures have offered expanding coverage of games and gaming in the context of transmedia interactions and new media ecology (see Guo et al. 2024). This special issue fills in the gap of current studies by offering five essays on this topic.

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