Adaptation and New Media: Establishing the Videogame as an Adaptive Medium

On 26 April 2014, at a landfill site in New Mexico, thousands of copies of the 1983 videogame *ET* were found, games that had been buried by Atari after its economic and critical failure. Made and released in just six weeks, the game was intended to be, according to makers Atari, "emotionally oriented" and "based on the film's sentimentality for the alien" (Guins 2014: 216). As an adaptation of one of the highest grossing films of 1982, it was an attempt to build on its success, but players quickly discovered that it had no ludic or narrative depth, that the graphics were inferior (even by 1983 standards), and began returning the game to retailers in droves. As the flaws became manifest, Atari buried the games in a secret location, which quickly became urban myth, until a documentary crew rediscovered it over thirty years later. *ET* cost Atari approximately twenty million dollars for the license alone, and its failure helped bring about the company's subsequent demise; it has since gone on to be described as "the worst game ever" (Guins 2014: 217).

In 2015, videogame adaptations have become much more successful and popular than this unidirectional and unsuccessful beginning suggests: tie-in videogames are frequently made to coincide with film releases, novelisations of videogames are becoming increasingly popular, and films based on videogames are now a common form. Videogames, while still being considered a niche market by some, have fast become a leading and profitable business, and have, in recent years, seen changes in their reception and creation, including their ability to adapt and remediate other media. This chapter considers how the videogame informs adaptation studies, arguing that, while videogames can be analysed using methodologies employed to study other media, they also require new methods of analysis to explicate their interactive and ludic content. The chapter also considers how and why the medium succeeds

(or does not) in adaptation, asking whether the interactivity of videogame narratives extends to greater interactivity in adaptation across media, particularly within entertainment franchises.

As *ET* highlights, videogames did not have a successful genesis as an adaptive medium. *Death Race* (1976), the first direct adaptation from film to videogame, was also the first videogame to incite controversy; players had to "drive cars so as to run over 'gremlins' (which looked like human stick figures) to score points" (Arsenault 2008: 277), a plot similar to the film, on which Roger Ebert (1975) comments, "the winner is determined, not merely by his speed, but also by the number of pedestrians he kills." What proved controversial was not the adaptation itself, or even the content that closely resembled the film, but the interactivity that playing brought to it – the requirement for a consumer to actively kill another for the narrative/game to progress. It is this interactivity that carries adaptation in videogames beyond forms in other media – through direct physical action, rather than solely through visual observation or auditory stimuli. Interactivity is a defining feature of the videogame, and its presence, or its lack, can significantly change how an adaptation is received by players, critics, and the wider community, as with *Death Race,* and also the first videogame to be adapted to film: *Super Mario Bros.*

When it was released in 1993, *Super Mario Bros.* was derided by critics, viewers, and cast alike, and did not even manage to recoup its production budget of forty eight million dollars. While there were many problems with the film's production, one reason that is pertinent to this discussion, is that it captures none of the interactivity of the games. Videogames, more than any other medium, rely on interaction for their progress; players are able to influence the world of the game and this, as Mark Wolf (2001: 114) explains, "is an essential part of every game's structure." Just as interactivity was the catalyst for the controversial reception of

Death Race, its absence was instrumental in the *Super Mario* film adaptation's lack of success. In narrative terms, the *Super Mario* games are not storytelling devices: they use a quest structure that involves attempting to save a princess, while traversing a series of maps/terrains. The success of the franchise is primarily due to player exploration of the game landscape as she attempts to carry out the quest to save the princess. The choice the player has in this exploration is not available in the film adaptation, but is instead determined by the director and cinematography. Furthermore, none of the characters in the *Mario* games have any narrative or psychological depth, and, for the games, this is perfectly acceptable, as players interact with the ludic elements over any narrative, which provide psychological stimulation as they avoid traps and defeat monsters to conquer the landscape. When the game was adapted to film, however, the physical activity that gives the games their interest and dynamism was replaced by physically passive viewing of flat characters navigating the landscape. While the repetitive formula of the journey that Mario makes across the game landscape was valuable for learning ludic skills and conquering the game, it was tedious for the passive viewer who was no longer directly involved in the process. Recognising this, the film's production team attempted to impose an alternative narrative onto the Mario diegesis that diverged from the source material, lacked complexity and dynamism, and resulted in a poorly made film that bore little resemblance to the source 'text' or the excitement of that text. Subsequent film adaptations of videogames, such as *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), occasionally became financial successes due to casting, rather than through success as an adaptation, with the same criticisms being levelled at *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* as had been at *Super Mario Bros.*, indeed, the film review website *Rotten Tomatoes* (Flixter Inc. 2016) gave the film a 19% score. However, the film industry has taken lessons from these adaptations and later films have attempted to create adaptations that achieve greater critical success.

These early attempts at videogame adaptation led game designers and filmmakers alike to consider more carefully the differences and similarities between videogames and films, such as the level of control given to the player/consumer. In a videogame, the player's ludic success is crucial to the success of and completion of the narrative. The player makes choices in the game, which drive the narrative forward. If play ceases, then the game stops and the story stops: the played character will stand still on the screen until the game hardware shuts down or the player resumes play. A film, on the other hand, can (and does) carry on, regardless of any interaction by the viewer; once begun, a film will carry on until the end, whether anyone is watching it or not. Interactivity changes the way that a videogame player interacts with a narrative through identification with and as the played character in that narrative, effectively placing the player in the role of the protagonist – akin to but not identical to an actor playing a character – and asking her to walk a mile in his or her shoes.

Videogames are by no means limited to being adapted to and from film. There is a growing number of videogames that are based on or adapted to the printed page. Two such games are *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012) and *The Wolf Among Us* (Telltale Games 2013), adapted from graphic novels. Both videogames offer narrative dominant gameplay, based on decisions that the player makes on behalf of the character she is controlling, decisions that expand on the source texts. *The Walking Dead* is an episodic videogame based on the zombie apocalypse graphic novel series of the same name (Kirkman and Moore 2011) and influenced by the ABC television series (AMC Networks 2010-present) that also adapts the novels. Set before the events of the graphic novels, the videogame prequel introduces a new set of characters and plotlines, while incorporating familiar aspects of *The Walking Dead* mythology. Here, as elsewhere, franchises expand beyond Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptation proper, and offer a method by which to satisfy fans who demand fidelity by

creating prequels, sequels, and spin-off texts. Both the videogame and graphic novels "explore how people deal with extreme situations and how these events CHANGE them" (Kirkman and Moore 2011: Intro, original emphasis), using a branching structure that allows player to influence the game's narrative direction. These videogames deal with adaptation not only as a cross-media concept, but more widely asks how narratives change their participants and require them to adapt. Both gameplay and narrative are delivered via 'point and click' gameplay (which requires the player to point a cursor at an object on the screen, usually with a computer mouse, and click the mouse buttons to interact with that object), generally precluding more animated gameplay such as fighting and warfare. Instead, the player makes decisions and reacts to situations by interacting with other characters and diegetic objects to influence events, becoming an adaptor of the narrative trajectory, influencing the events that take place in the narrative, and how other characters respond to these events. The play here is decidedly narrative play, and at set points the player is required to make decisions that affect subsequent play, bridging all the episodes and giving the illusion that the player has influenced the narrative, even though the narrative is strictly linear. While the events of the adaptation are preauthored, it appears that the narrative is being created by the player as she engages with the adaptation.

Despite the negative beginnings, videogames have become successful adaptations of other media. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865) was adapted – and remediated – to become *American McGee's Alice* (McGee 2000) and its sequel *Alice: Madness Returns* (McGee 2011). Cathlena Martin (2010: 134) remarks that a narrative such as *Alice in Wonderland* has "gone through an intermediary stage of film and other forms of adaptation, so that multiple incarnations of each have placed [it] into cultural consciousness," and considers that "video games offer the opportunity to analyse and revisit classic children's

literature [and] to explore new and additional facets of the story" (ibid.). *American McGee's Alice* and *Alice: Madness Returns* follow the protagonist, Alice Liddell, as she makes her way through a dark, ruinous wonderland to reach and destroy the Red Queen. Although it is narratively a sequel to the novels written by Carroll, the games integrate much of the original material of the novels to create a new version of *Alice*, one that is mature, dark, and fearless. This adaptation takes the narratives of the Carroll stories, and rewrites them, using cultural references and suggestions surrounding the writing of those stories (including claims regarding Carroll's paedophilic interest in Alice Liddell), to create its own narrative, adding puzzle solving and fighting elements that carry the player through Wonderland as an active, gaming participant. In terms of adaptation studies, this game not only reinterprets and adapts Carroll's *Alice* books; it further revises classic children's stories into a mature, twisted narrative that asks the player to re-evaluate her understanding of the original texts.

Narrative perspective, such as narrative distance or lack of narrative distance, determines the way that a consumer identifies with a narrative; adapting that perspective to another medium changes that identification. How a videogame player views the character that she is controlling is integral to the interpretation of that narrative. Most videogames have the player take on the role of their respective protagonists. *Tomb Raider* is a franchise that began as a videogame and was subsequently adapted across a variety of media, including two film adaptations starring Angelina Jolie, which were subsequently novelised. These adaptations highlight the differences between film, videogame, and the novel identification, both with and as characters. In the videogame, the player controls Lara Croft from a viewpoint that combines first and third person: something I refer to as the decentred perspective. This perspective is dominant in contemporary videogames, mixing the tracking camera with the over-the-shoulder shot, offering clearly defined and externally focalised perspectives similar

to those in film. Encompassing aspects of the third-person perspective, the character is frequently seen on the screen, creating narrative distance between player and protagonist. Structurally, however, the player is offered a visual and auditory perspective similar to that of the first person, with the player positioned as if above the shoulder of the protagonist, rather than situated as if viewing the scene directly through the protagonist's eyes and ears. This creates a slightly decentred position that allows the player to see everything the protagonist sees, but slightly askance from the protagonist's view and, importantly, with a wider field of vision than the character. The decentred perspective, therefore, clearly identifies the character as a separate entity, akin to the third-person perspective, but places the player in much closer proximity to the character's view, allowing her to identify almost – but not quite – as the character. When coupled with the interactivity of controlling the character, this perspective functions much like the proverbial good/bad angel on the protagonist's shoulder, with the player in some cases acting in the role of the angel/devil – making moral choices that affect the character and/or subsequent events within the narrative.

This is not the case in either the film or the novelisation of the Lara Croft videogames. In the film, the third-person perspective is the chief vantage point; although the videogame has clearly influenced the perspective of camera angles and movement, the focalisation has been adjusted to work with the conventions of the film medium. Predominantly presented from a third-person perspective, the film does not use over-the-shoulder shots as often: the camera focuses on the protagonist as the object of the film. However, during the films action sequences, the camera switches between over-the-shoulder shots and reverse angle shots, creating an "insistent and intimate shot-countershot technique" (Monaco 2009: 211) that occupies many points of view. Within the context of the film, switching between shots allows the viewer to both identify with the protagonist as a subject and to see the protagonist as a

screen object. This unfolds in contrast to the decentred videogame perspective, which predominantly shows actions from the viewpoint of the player; the film, therefore, allows the viewer to experience a relaxation from the relentless identification of the videogame perspective, and to experience a more objective identification of the protagonist as observed object rather than identified with subject. The novel combines a third-person external focalisation with an internal, character-bound focalisation. However, the novel also presents the reader with Lara's thoughts, and, thus, moves away from the objective view of her actions to the subjective view of her verbal thinking and emoting, so that the viewpoint becomes internally focalised on Lara. Neither the film nor the videogame chooses to represent these thoughts, although both media are capable of doing so.

The relationship that the videogame has with the printed word is by no means unidirectional, as it was so often in literature to film adaptation; there is a growing selection of novels beyond the Lara Croft franchise that are adapted from videogames. The *Assassin's Creed 2* part of the franchise (Ubisoft Games, 2007- present) has been adapted to novels, and these novels in turn have influenced subsequent games, where they have been readapted back to the videogame. In *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, when playing as the protagonist Ezio Auditore da Firenze, there is the opportunity to complete extra quests and missions that have no direct relevance to the game's completion, with one set of these missions being 'The Cristina Memories'. There are five of these missions to be completed, each resulting in a small cut-scene; these cut-scenes are based on the novel adaptation of *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* (Bowden 2009) and chart the interactions of Cristina, Ezio's lover, with him throughout his life, from his first meeting with her in 1476 to her death in his arms in 1489. These memories bear no relation to the ludic completion or the fictional time of the game itself; they are specifically narrative elements, whose sole purpose is to bring a deeper

narrative understanding of Ezio's character. Here the adaptation does not replace, or even replicate, the gameplay, but brings the novelisation into it to enrich the narrative with literary and filmic traditions.

Narrative is not only being adapted to and from videogames to other media forms and conventions, ideologies are also being adapted across media and cultures. Once again, the active role that the player takes in a videogame means that these ideologies can be explored in new ways with more agency (or with more illusion of agency). The 2007 videogame *Bioshock* (2K Games) is an example of such a game, adapting Ayn Rand's 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged* and, more explicitly, its ideological epistemology of Objectivism. It goes beyond adaptation to present a critique of Rand's philosophy and ties questions of social and political agency and free will to issues of agency in videogaming, creating a metacriticism of the medium via adaptation.

In *Bioshock,* ludic play is inextricable from narrative ideology and, more than that, informs it in new ways. The setting, Rapture, although dystopian and filled with death, is full of movement and sound: water drips, voices re-echo, and ghostly images inhabit rooms. The player must move through these oppositional game spaces into the underwater city's darkest corners in order to discover the narrative of the game's backstory, mostly in the form of audio logs. As part of this exploration, Rand's ideology is didactically represented. Drawing on first-person narration in literature, theatre monologues, and voiceover conventions in film, during the introduction, NPC character Andrew Ryan's voice narrates Rapture's ideology, telling the player that the city was born from his dissatisfaction with American left-wing politics in the Second World War. Finding that there was no place for "men who believed that work was sacred and property rights inviolate" (Fuller 2007: 42), he decided to create

one. This adapts the creation of Galt's Gulch by its namesake, John Galt, in *Atlas Shrugged*, as a place where a man "hold[s] three things as the supreme and ruling values of his life: Reason—Purpose—Self-esteem" (Rand 2007: 1018) in contrast to and opposition to a mainstream society that requires a producer, an individual who is "independent, rational, and committed to the facts of reality, […] and to their own happiness" (Younkins 2013: 168) or entrepreneur to not only be sacrificed by society for the greater good, but to accept this as fair and just. Both settings follow Rand's philosophy; however, where Galt's Gulch remains utopian, Rapture becomes dystopian. The freedom of the inhabitants to do as they wish engenders a society addicted to a drug named ADAM and its derivative, EVE. Just as Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis, causing the Fall from divine grace, so too the use of ADAM and EVE causes Rapture to become dystopian.

However, the adaptation shifts from translation to critique and from adaptation to contesting the original's narrative ideologies. The game is not a simple remediation of Rand's philosophy: it serves as a critique of it; the player is shown both positive and negative views of Objectivism rather than solely Rand's position. In this regard, the adaptation is no different from texts or films that present multiple points of view. However, it goes beyond presenting different perspectives, requiring the player to explore them and make decisions within the narrative that change the narrative trajectory. To critique Objectivism, rather than simply endorse or damn it, the game positions the player as the protagonist, Jack. Predominantly a first-person shooter game (FPS), the player controls Jack as he seeks to escape Rapture. Unlike Rand's novel, but like most videogames, *Bioshock* is concerned primarily with the destruction of enemies, ranging from splicers to the main antagonist, Frank Fontaine. However, the combination of politics, ideology, narrative, and ludology creates a representational fictional form resembling that described by Kendall Walton in *Mimesis as*

Make-believe. Walton (1990: 42) considers the role of "props," which include environmental objects as well as weaponry with which the player interacts, to be "enormously important. They give fictional worlds and their contents a kind of objectivity […], which contributes much to the excitement of our adventures with them." The objectivity extends from fictional worlds and their contents to their political and ideological contents. In the case of *Bioshock,* these props bring "a kind of objectivity" (ibid*.*) to the philosophy of Objectivism, and indeed, some of the props in *Bioshock* are, in fact, sentences of Objectivist philosophy. In this game, the ideology of the adapted text is thus implanted in the environment itself, creating an adaptation that functions on several levels: as a ludic game in its own right, a narrative in and of itself, and as an adaptation of Rand's novel.

Many videogame adaptations immerse the player in a situation that is morally ambiguous, requiring her to question her actions both in a game world, and outside it. *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager 2012) offers the player the ability to do this, within a physically safe environment, while at the same time engaging with the themes and motifs of the source text. Self-reflexivity is an established feature of media (Stam 1992), including film and literature (Poulaki 2014; Huber, Middeke and Zapf 2005). Within the context of this chapter, self-reflexivity is defined as any aspect of a videogame that points towards it as a game, whether its creation, its conceptualisation, the processes by which it is constructed and consumed, and the methods by which it critiques itself. Self-reflexivity is frequently identified with postmodernism, a movement that embraces instability and is characterised by scepticism, the rejection of cultural progress, and the implementation of metanarratives (Sim 2011). The videogame, still a young medium, is becoming increasingly postmodern and self-reflexive, particularly when it subverts traditional distinctions between reality and simulation. Simon Gottschalk's 1995 article "Videology: Video-games as Postmodern Sites/Sights of

Ideological Reproduction" offers a detailed study of the medium as postmodern (Gottschalk 1995). At first, *Spec Ops* appears to be a clone of shooter games such as the *Call of Duty* franchise, using the same tropes and ludic strategies as that franchise. However, the intertextuality of the game to other shooter games is complicated and deepened by its relationship with philosophical literature and postmodern film. The two kinds of intertextuality lead it to question not only the legitimacy of violent occupation in the social world, but also to question the violent ludic structures of the mainstream videogame tropes and conventions that it adopts and adapts. *Spec Ops: The Line* is a loose adaptation of both Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), set in a speculative version of Dubai, which has been destroyed by a series of sandstorms that engulf the city, and as a result has become a dark place, reminiscent of Conrad's Africa and Coppola's Vietnam. *Spec Ops* offers a psychological exploration of its protagonist, Captain Martin Walker, as he makes his way through a ruined Dubai in search of the 'Damned' 33rd Battalion and their commanding officer, Konrad, who have gone missing in the darkness of Dubai, much as the protagonists of *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* undertake their actions against the backdrop of the atrocities of the ivory trade and the Vietnam War, respectively. The discomfort of playing this game serves to deconstruct player expectations of the shooter genre – its pleasures and its rewards – and to map her virtual violence onto real-world situations in which the innocent and powerless die along with the armed enemy. *Spec Ops* offers a commentary on choice in gaming and real life; repeatedly, pieces of dialogue feature Walker telling other characters that he has no choice in the actions he takes: for example, when he responds to Lugo's challenge about the morally dubious use of white phosphorus. Walker insists that there is no choice, despite Lugo's assertion that there is always a choice. The game sides with Walker diegetically, and with Lugo extradiegetically. While the game does not allow diegetic choice, at each point in the game where actions are immoral, even by

the standards of FPS gaming, the player *is* offered a choice: to quit playing. Her continuation of the game, much like Walker's continued journey into Dubai, is a choice, and each time she makes the choice to continue, the game 'rewards' her with more death, more destruction, more discomfort, and more uneasy complicity in Walker's unethical actions. The game also demonstrates the growing sophistication with which videogames can achieve photorealism and thereby become more cinematic, more closely resembling film visually and narratively.

In conclusion, while early videogame adaptations were problematic, clumsy, and unsatisfying to consumers and unprofitable to producers, contemporary videogame technologies mean that adaptations can simulate and engage a variety of media (gaming, text, cinematic scenes, music, and more) to create richly complex, intertextual forms of adaptation. They also offer an interactivity that changes the way in which consumers engage narrative and adaptation. Interaction allows a player to explore, discover, and shape narrative, both narratologically and ideologically, and alter how it unfolds and how it is consumed. While there is a growing body of work examining the cinematic capacities of videogames, their functions as adaptations of other media has yet to receive the same scrutiny. Videogames as adaptations is a rich field awaiting extensive future study. As its technologies continue to change and develop, it promises to continue to change the ways in which we understand, engage, and interpret adaptation specifically and intertextual narratives generally.

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