As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Judd Ethan Ruggill entitled Licensed to Shill: How Video and Computer Games Tarnished the Silver Screen and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Phd (Comparative Cultural and Literary Studies).

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This dissertation outlines the material and aesthetic origins of the game film in order to show how video and computer games are altering film’s role in the media economy specifically, and the form and function of the mass media more generally. I argue that game cinematization is emblematic of the culture industries’ (1) new economic practices and (2) aesthetic and technological convergence. Chapter One introduces the dissertation and offers a précis of the history of film-based licensing in the U.S. In the chapter, I suggest that one of the primary functions of American commercial film is to brand and sell consumer goods, and that understanding the origins of this licensing function is crucial to understanding how games are redefining it. Chapter Two provides a political economy of the institutional and industrial factors that made the game film possible, focusing specifically on a sea change in game business during the late 1980s, and the joint Congressional hearings on game violence in the early 1990s. Chapter Three complements Chapter Two’s historical materialist analysis with a textual one, analyzing why game films seem to draw primarily from a single genre—the fighting game. The fighting game’s ability to facilitate “safe looking,” along with the ways fighting games embody the very essence of genre, have helped ease the transformation of game content into film content. Chapter Four revisits Chapters Two and Three in order to show how the material and aesthetic forces that birthed the game film are among the most influential forces affecting film today. The chapter analyzes the evolution of media makers’
attempts to explore and exploit the game medium, and describes the ways games have begun to reshape film business, production, and aesthetics.
CHAPTER ONE
LICENSED TO SHILL

_We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notions of art._

—Paul Valéry, _Aesthetics_¹

_The games of a people reveal a great deal about them._

—Marshall McLuhan, _Understanding Media_²

According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA),

- Fifty percent of all Americans age six and older play computer and video games.
- The average age of a game player is 29 years old.
- Thirty-nine percent of game players are women.
- Computer and video game software sales grew eight percent in 2003 to $7 billion and are expected to show strong growth over the next few years.
- In 2003, more than 239 million computer and video games were sold, or almost two games for every household in America.³
These are gaudy numbers, to say the least. And yet, they speak a profound truth—video and computer games are now as American as apple pie. Americans play games everywhere—at home, at work, at school, on vacation, in bus stations, on cell phones, over the internet. Games are truly ubiquitous, and their appeal transcends gender, class, race and age.

Games are more than just ubiquitous, however; they have begun to profoundly affect America’s economic, cultural and political landscape. The entertainment industry, for example, is radically reorganizing itself in order to more readily tap into games’ vast profit potential. In 2003, Sony announced plans to simultaneously eliminate nearly 20% of its workforce while dramatically expanding its already massive game division (Hoover’s Inc.). When one of the largest media companies in the world is happy to cut one fifth of its most valuable asset, clearly the business of entertainment has changed.

Games are likewise reshaping American culture. Not only are Americans spending more time playing video and computer games, but games are beginning to replace television as the “family” technology. According to the ESA,

- Sixty percent of parents say they play interactive games with their kids at least once a month.
- The vast majority of people who play games do so with friends and family. (Almost sixty percent of frequent game players play with friends, thirty-three percent play with siblings, and about one-quarter play with their spouse and/or parents.)


It is the computer not the television set that families now ritually crowd around each night. The venerable “tube of plenty” is being replaced by the “joystick,” and families are spending their quality time playing Dance Dance Revolution instead of watching Friends.

The U.S. government has discovered the power of games, as well. The Army not only uses interactive war simulations to train its men and women, but to recruit potential soldiers. Released in 2002, America’s Army is a free, multiplayer online game designed by the U.S. Army “to provide civilians with insights on soldiering from the barracks to the battlefield” (United States). The Army claims that the game depicts Army life “in the most realistic way possible” (ibid.). Gamers go through Basic Combat Training at Fort Benning, join regiments such as the 82nd Airborne, and even face incarceration in a virtual Fort Leavenworth should they break the Army code of conduct. And yet, America’s Army is still a game, a simulation with simulated consequences. It elides the very real intellectual, physical and emotional rigors of Army life, and thus makes a powerful recruiting tool. In essence, America’s Army makes military service seem hip, fun and easy.

Games are affecting America’s economic, cultural and political landscape in other ways as well, especially where that landscape is most visible—in the mass media. Indeed, what was once considered mere child’s play is fast becoming the defining medium of the new millennium. Film in particular is feeling games’ influence. Not only have media makers started to divert resources once destined for film into game development, but many films are now shot and edited using techniques and technologies pioneered by
game developers (e.g., computer-based editing, 3D modeling, Alias/Wavefront’s Maya, Discreet’s 3ds max, etc.). Audiences have likewise come to expect the DVD releases of their favorite movies to contain “interactive” features such as the ability to change camera angles and distance on the fly, something games have done for years (e.g., Microsoft Flight Simulator). Even theatrical trailers are being supplanted by game advertisements in local cineplexes.

Many of these changes in film production, aesthetics, distribution, publicity and consumption can be traced to games’ changing role in the media economy. Whereas film scale (i.e., budgets, sets, locations, technology, etc.), star power and audiovisuals once offered branding possibilities unmatched by other media, games have begun to challenge the prevailing practice of using film to sell consumer goods. Film-based product lines, such as the ones that made George Lucas and Steven Spielberg multi-millionaires, have been a staple of media business for the better part of a century. In fact, as I will argue in the second half of this chapter, film’s ability to sell toys, clothes, food and other merchandise is one of the medium’s primary *raisons d’etre*.

However, film is now in the process of being delinked from this “reason for being.” Media companies have discovered that video and computer games too can sell action figures, comic books, t-shirts, food—even movies—and do so far more cost effectively than film. Game development is not only considerably cheaper—with production budgets running in the millions rather than the tens (or even hundreds) of millions—but game brands seem to be just as robust and lucrative as film-based brands. *Street Fighter*, for example, boasts a network of more than one hundred licensing deals
worldwide (Capcom Entertainment). Mortal Kombat has likewise been licensed the world over, resulting in game-branded items such as “a top-rated animated series, a platinum-selling CD, a sold-out, live-event tour, a successful toy line, and a number-one animated home video” (“12/17/97 Press Release”). In just its first five years, the Mortal Kombat brand earned over $4 billion (ibid.). That it was able to do so in an age of advertising clutter and proliferating entertainment sources merely confirms the power of game brands.

The clearest sign that games are actually beginning to displace film in the media economy—as opposed to just offering media makers a branding alternative—is the emergence of the “game film.” Whereas feature films have long spawned game spin-offs (e.g., Tron, E.T., Raiders of the Lost Ark), it is games that are now providing the source material for film. Since 1993, more than a dozen feature-length, game-based adaptations have been released in the U.S. Two more are scheduled to hit theaters in 2004, seventeen are currently in development, and at least seven more are rumored to be in the works (Linder). Game films are emblematic of cinema’s changing fortunes because they are produced to support brands rather than initiate them. This is very different from the way film has functioned since the silent era, when filmmakers began cultivating iconographies whose essence could be easily captured and transferred to other products. For most of the twentieth century, film-branded consumer goods were integral to the movie business, helping, for example, to defray the costs of expansion, inflation and the loss of audiences to competition from other media.
Game films, however, are not designed to supply media makers with brandable content. On the contrary, they are constructed of imagery and narratives that already have been vetted and iconized—in essence, proven profitable—by dozens (sometimes even hundreds) of different markets. Game films are licensed objects as opposed to than licensing objects. What this means, ultimately, is that game films (and the game-based product lines they help constitute) bring with them the promise that commercial film need no longer look nor function the way it has for the better part of a century. If games can brand as effectively as film—and can do so for much less money—film no longer has to brand. Media makers can make their money from games instead, meaning that film no longer has to be constructed of images and ideologies designed to sell ancillary products. Film can simply “be”—it does not have to sell (at least, not beyond the box office). Game branding, in other words, obviates the need for universalizable film iconography, and thus for many of the techniques used to produce, distribute, market and exhibit film.

Game films, therefore, provide a unique opportunity to see first hand the effects video and computer games are having on film and the film industry. In the following chapters, I outline the material and aesthetic origins of the game film as a way to show how video and computer games are altering film’s role in the media economy specifically, and the form and function of the mass media more generally. I argue that game cinematization is emblematic of the culture industries’ 1) new economic practices and 2) aesthetic and technological convergence.

Chapter Two provides a political economy of the institutional and industrial factors that made the game film possible. It argues that a shift in game business in the
late 1980s and the 1993/94 joint Congressional hearings on game violence helped lay the groundwork for game adaptation. Chapter Two also starts to tease out the implications of this adaptation, in particular how the digital technologies pioneered by game developers are redefining film production.

Chapter Three complements Chapter Two’s historical materialist analysis with a textual one, focusing on why game films seem to draw primarily from a single game genre—the fighting game—despite the fact that there are (arguably) more than forty different types of games. The chapter explains how “beat ‘em ups,” as fighting games are also known, borrow heavily from martial arts movie conventions, conventions that among other things allow viewers to safely gaze at the male body despite that body’s potentially disruptive sexuality. This ability to facilitate “safe looking,” along with the ways fighting games embody the very essence of genre, are what have helped ease the transformation of game content into film content. Chapter Three continues to draw out the implications of this cinematization and suggests how the themes and imagery fighting games borrowed from action cinema may yet reshape that cinema.

Chapter Four revisits Chapters Two and Three in order to show how the material and aesthetic forces that birthed the game film are (arguably) the most influential forces affecting film today. The chapter analyzes the evolution of media makers’ attempts to explore and exploit the game medium, and describes the ways games have begun to reshape film business, production and aesthetics. Chapter Four makes plain how the game film and the technological, aesthetic and ideological convergence it signifies require new ways of thinking about media business and culture.
In addition to the aforementioned chapters, the dissertation also includes an annotated filmography, a glossary and an appendix of feature-length films whose subject is video and computer games. While all of these supplemental materials are meant to serve as resources and prompts for further study, the filmography should probably be perused before the rest of the dissertation, especially by readers who are not altogether familiar with the game film. The filmography offers a critical analysis and plot summary of each film in the genre, and thus functions very much like a literature review.

All told, this dissertation uses the game film to see in miniature how video and computer games are affecting the mass media landscape. Before I begin reporting on the study proper, however, I want to offer a précis of the history of film-based licensing. Inasmuch as one of the primary functions of American commercial film is to brand and sell consumer goods, understanding the origins of this licensing function is crucial to understanding how games are redefining it.

Pay No Attention to the (sales)Man Behind the Curtain

No fashion magazine, however skillfully edited, can compete with [Hollywood] when it comes to making it seem imperative to own a particular hat or frock or necklace. Neither adjectives nor photographs nor drawings can make a woman feel about an evening wrap as she feels when she sees it on the shoulders of Irene Dunne or in the arms of William Powell. It is both the glamorous background against which it was originally seen and the, probably unconscious, recollection of what was
said to the lady wearing that high-collared velvet cape which makes it seem infinitely desirable when it is hanging on a clothes rack in the local dry goods emporium.

—Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies*

One of the hallmarks of American film is its ability to sell consumer goods. The glitz and glitter of the silver screen make even the most mundane products “seem infinitely desirable,” and it is in the sale of film-branded ancillary products where much of the money in show business is made. In fact, a film may not even need to have a strong box office to be profitable. The right merchandise can carry a weak film, in effect subsidizing poor ticket sales (e.g., Disney’s *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*).

Given the superabundance of film-branded products on store shelves today, it is tempting to think that film-based marketing is a relatively recent phenomenon. Certainly Hollywood branding has intensified since the 1970s, but using films to sell consumer goods is a practice that actually dates from the early part of the twentieth century. Film branding was part and parcel of the industrialization of the medium. It is no coincidence, for example, that advertisers’ discovery of “the ‘halo effect’ produced by linking such consumer products as soap and automobiles with the names and likenesses of Clara Bow, Gloria Swanson, and Jackie Coogan” (Gaines 29) occurred just about the time the motion picture industry began searching for new sources of capital to help offset the costs of expansion and integration after World War I. Even before there was a Hollywood,
motion picture companies realized that their product's ability to generate ancillary revenue was something worth cultivating.

Some of the industry’s first documented attempts at harnessing film’s selling power came in the form of “how-to” books. Ernest Dench’s 1916 Advertising by Motion Pictures, for example, offered would-be entrepreneurs advice on how to market products through film. Dench included sections on “Selling Automobiles and Accessories by Motion Pictures,” “Selling Shoes by Motion Pictures” and even on “Bringing Out the Individuality of Dry Goods by Motion Pictures” (4). Though Dench and other how-to authors focused primarily on narrative strategies and production techniques for creating films whose sole purpose was to market specific products, their work nonetheless reveals an early awareness within the industry of film’s ability to sell. The rise of the star system in the following decades merely “turn[ed] up the promotional volume and heighten[ed] the pitch of the sell” (Gaines 30), a pitch which grew deafening decades later with the reinvention of the blockbuster and the rise of the “high concept” film during the 1970s and 80s.¹⁰

The motion picture industry of the teens and twenties also experimented with fan magazines as a way to accentuate film’s ability to sell. During the nickelodeon era, magazines such as Photoplay essentially sold studios rather than stars. As Richard Koszarski explains, “favorite actors and actresses, firmly identified with their employers’ corporate trademarks, were used to help establish product loyalty” (259). With the advent of the feature picture, however, fan magazines began to use stars to sell consumer goods. The April 1917 issue of Motion Picture Magazine, for example, contained an ad
inside the back cover showing Earle Williams modeling an Arrow shirt collar. There were other “Arrow Collar” men, as well, and the pages of Universal Weekly, Movie Weekly and Balaban & Katz Magazine swelled with star-based ads for soap, cigarettes and other goods in the twenties. So successful were these ads that movie producers started packaging similar promotional materials with films themselves. These materials, known in the industry as “press books,” were ubiquitous from the silent era through the collapse of the studio system.

Ostensibly intended to help exhibitors draw crowds and fill theater seats—a difficult task during the Great Depression—press books actually were more like blueprints for utilizing movie glamour to sell consumer products. The books included illustrations, photographs, marketing ideas, tie-in suggestions and all kinds of other “promotional advice” for theater owners. Some books, such as the one for Numbered Men (1930), were fairly straightforward, containing ads for clothing, jewelry and other merchandise worn by the stars of the film. Other press books were more elaborate. They featured book tie-ins, magazine offers, ready-to-use newspaper copy, ads for toy dolls and sheet music—even gun tie-ins. As the movie industry (and consumers, for that matter) became accustomed to the medium’s salesmanship, the pitch grew more sensational, in some instances far exceeding the bounds of good taste. As Robert Sennett explains:

For The Scarf (1951), United Artists offered the title neckwear in a variety of colors, despite the fact that the press books featured, on the same page, a publicity photograph of John Ireland attempting to strangle Mercedes
McCambridge with it. Apparently even murder weapons were regarded as
fair game for exploitation and promotion. (76)

At about the same time the press book was starting to come into its own, the
motion picture industry began to reach out to the consuming public with a rhetoric
designed to amplify as well as legitimate the exploitation of film’s ability to sell. Will
Hays, for instance, made selling seem patriotic, stating in a 1930 radio address:

> Motion pictures perform a service to American business which is greater
> than the millions in our direct purchases, greater than our buildings…The
> industry is a new factor in American economic life and gives us a solid
> basis of hope for the future by creating an increase in demand for our
> products. The motion picture carries to every American to every
> American home, and to millions of potential purchasers abroad, the visual,
> vivid perception of American manufactured products. (qtd. in Eckert 5)

Other industry executives recalled the idea of manifest destiny and suggested that
American film could not help but sell, that its ability to peddle was intrinsic to the
medium. In a 1927 lecture at Harvard College, Paramount Picture’s head of sales
claimed:

> If you investigate the automobile situation you will find that the American
> automobiles are making terrific inroads on foreign makes of cars and that
> the greatest agency for selling American automobiles abroad is the
> American motion picture. *Its influence is working insidiously all the time*
and even though all this is done without any conscious intent, the effect is that of a direct sales agency. (ibid., my emphasis)

By invoking notions of patriotism and manifest destiny, the industry was able to turn film-based consumption into something American's should be proud of, something distinctly “American.”

Needless to say, movie marketing intensified and expanded over the course of the twentieth century. Whether it was Clubman golf shirts with a chariot logo sewn on the pocket for Ben Hur (1959), or Star Wars (1977) action figures, the art of American filmmaking became very much the art of trying to devise new and more effective ways to protect the “nut” (i.e., investment capital) in the face of inflation, ballooning production costs and the rise of other media such as broadcast and cable television. The progression of the twentieth century not only saw filmmakers using their films to brand increasingly more expansive and diverse product lines, but cultivating entirely new demographic groups to pitch to. In the 1930s and 40s, the sell was directed primarily toward women.\(^\text{12}\) The postwar years, by contrast, saw advertisers reach out to men, often in ways that seemed to stretch to the limit film’s ability to brand (e.g., the aforementioned Ben Hur tie-in). By the 1970s and 1980s, film branding had moved beyond questions of gender, becoming almost parodic in its excesses and attempts to appeal to every possible demographic. Meehan’s lengthy list of “Bat stuff” is a case in point:

Batman took the United States by storm in the spring and summer of 1989. Tee shirts, posters, keychains, jewelry, buttons, books, watches, magazines, trading cards, audiotaped books, videogames, records, cups,
and numerous other items flooded malls across the United States with images of Batman, his new logo, and his old enemy the Joker. Presaged by a much pirated trailer, Batman the film drew unprecedented crowds to theatre chains, of which the two largest (United Artist Theater Circuits and American Multi-Cinema) distributed four to five million brochures for mail order Bat-materials... Retail outlets filled with Bat-costumes and Joker make-up kits for Halloween; Ertl Batmobiles and ToyBiz Batcaves and Batwings were being deployed for Christmas shoppers. In the specialty stores serving comics fandom, the Advance Comics Special Batlist offered 214 items ranging from $576 to $2 in price. And in grocery stores, special Bat-displays offered children a choice between Batman coloring books, Batman trace-and-color books, and Batman magic plates. It would seem that Batman and his paraphernalia transcend age, gender, and race (47)

Interestingly, the idea that film (at least in its American iteration) has some kind of innate ability to sell has been reiterated by scholars, suggesting that the industrial hype may in fact be based on a kernel of truth. Charles Eckert, for example, writes:

When the first movie cameraman shot the first street scene that included a shop sign or a labeled product (Lumiere? 1895?) all of the elements of a new advertising form were implicit: a captive audience unlikely to ignore what was placed before it, a manufacturer, a filmmaker, and the Platonic idea of Charles Einfeld. The short dramas and comedies of the first
decade of this century, especially those that pictured the contemporary lifestyles of the middle and upper classes, presented innumerable opportunities for product and brand-name tie-ins. But more than this, they functioned as living display windows for all that they contained; windows that were occupied by marvelous mannequins and swathed in a fetish-inducing ambience of music and emotion. (4)

Other scholars argue that film’s ability to sell stems not from technology or the aesthetic filmmakers are able to capture, but from the business practices early film entrepreneurs borrowed from the circus, live theater and vaudeville. According to Janet Staiger, “upon the industry’s initiation in the 1890s, United States film entrepreneurs indicated a desire to duplicate modern selling techniques as closely as possible” (3). Cinema’s bread and butter, the celebrity tie-up, was actually derived from live theater’s attempts at commercial promotion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “As early as 1893,” writes Jean Allen, “Macy’s in New York designed and supplied the gowns for Edgar Rice’s Play, 1492” (487), and “[a]s late as 1912, David Belasco used a set for a play which reconstructed Child’s Restaurant and, in return for this implicit endorsement, Child’s stocked the set with food during rehearsals” (488). Indeed, “[h]aving already borrowed other people’s business practices from adjacent industries such as theater and vaudeville, [filmmakers] copied many of their tactics” (Staiger 3).

Conclusion
Regardless of whether film's ability to sell is intrinsic to the medium or a product of industrial hype (or both), the practice of using film to brand and sell consumer goods has defined the medium for almost a century. This practice, however, seems to be coming to an end. Media makers are now beginning to use video and computer games instead to anchor their product lines.

This shift from film-based to game-based licensing is serious business. It not only indicates that the economics of filmmaking (and indeed branding) are changing, but that film aesthetics and narrativity—which are necessarily shaped by those economics—are changing as well. In the following chapter, I will outline two of the primary institutional and industrial forces underlying these changes.
Notes

A small portion of this chapter was published in “The Gamework,” Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies 1.4 (December 2004): 297-21


4 Ibid.

5 It is important to note that while the military has only recently started making its own games, it has been long been interested in the medium and responsible for many of the major technological developments underpinning its evolution. For example, the U.S. Army was quick to approach Battlezone (1980) creator Ed Rotberg about designing a special version of the game to help train infantrymen to use the Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle (Demaria and Wilson 59). In fact, the MIT research lab where Spacerwar (1961)—arguably the first computer game—was invented was funded by government dollars.

6 To be sure, the practice of creating films to refresh rather than initiate a product line has been done before, most notably in the 1980s when cheap overseas animation allowed toy manufacturers to finance a number of toy-based films (e.g., Rainbow Brite and the
Star Stealer, The Care Bears Movie, My Little Pony: The Movie, etc.). These toy films, however, did not have the same effect on mass media aesthetics and production practices that games are having. See Yates for a study of the effect these toy films did have.

7 See Wolf for a description of these genres.

8 Margaret Farrand Thorp, America at the Movies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939) 108.

9 For fuller treatment of this search, see Hampton or Wasko.

10 For more on the “high concept” film, see Wyatt.

11 Robert Sennett writes that “promotion for Red River (United Artists, 1948) included advertisements for Winchester rifles and small arms (as featured in the picture), with ready-to-order counter displays for your local gun shop” (135).

12 See Berry, Doane and Laplace.
CHAPTER TWO
CORPORATE CUNNING AND CALCULATING CONGRESSMEN:
A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE GAME FILM

The phrase “show business” is uncannily accurate. In Hollywood, as Eileen Meehan writes, “[n]o business means no show and doing business means constructing shows according to business needs” (62). Show business, of course, is more than just production costs and box office revenue. There are distribution accords, product placement contracts, co-production agreements, marketing strategies and merchandising lines. Show business is a constellation of complex negotiations, the sum of which means *Toy Story* toys in McDonald’s Happy Meals and *Batman* videos on MTV. If it can be manufactured, it can be stamped with the *Jurassic Park* dinosaur or Disney mouse ears and marketed to the public. In the crudest (but perhaps most honest) sense, Hollywood films are created not to entertain but to birth and mother a clutch of consumption practices. Films help turn a single investment into an entire network of products and profits.

Naturally, not all film shows are equally adept at creating this sort of network. Adaptations, for example, tend to have an advantage over other sorts of films because they bring with them a pre-sold audience. As John Ellis explains, a film adapted from a novel “trades upon the memory of the novel” (3). The cinematization of a book allows an audience to relive a literary experience (i.e., to remember the pleasure of reading, inhabiting the specific world created by the author, etc.), a recollection that can translate
into critical acclaim, box office success and ancillary profits. In a dated but still telling study, Morris Beja calculates that

since their inception in 1927-28, more than three-fourths of the [Academy] awards for ‘best picture’ have gone to adaptations; and of those, about three fourths were based on either novels or short stories. The figures would be roughly similar for the New York Film Critics Award for “best motion picture,” which began in 1935: about two-thirds have gone to adaptations, and about three-fourths of those were based on novels or stories. The all-time box office successes favor novels even more: of the top twenty money-makers reported by Variety as of 1977, sixteen were adaptations—if you count The Ten Commandments—fourteen of them based on novels. (78)

It should therefore come as no surprise that Hollywood has recently started raiding video and computer games for source material. Beginning with Super Mario Bros. in 1993, nine feature-length, live-action game-based adaptations have been released in the U.S. Two more are scheduled for release in 2003, sixteen are currently in development and at least seven more are rumored to be in the works (Linder). Despite being (rightfully) snubbed by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, game films have done brisk box office business. Mortal Kombat (1995), for instance, earned New Line Cinema and Threshold Entertainment more than $70 million, while Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001) has taken in almost four times that for Viacom and company (‘12/17/97 Press Release’; ‘Box Office Data for Lara Croft: Tomb Raider’). Even the poorly acted and

This generic success and the number of game films currently in the works raises an interesting question: if, as Beja’s data suggest (and the box office numbers for game films seem to corroborate) cinematic adaptations are almost preternaturally predisposed to success, why has Hollywood only recently begun adapting video and computer games? Electronic interactive games have existed since the 1960s, and commercial games since the 1970s. Why the delay?

It is tempting to argue that early games simply could not supply the pre-sold audience or narrative material necessary for cinematization. Compared to contemporary titles, games from the 1970s and 80s seem primitive and their profits puny. The Atari Video Computer System (VCS) version of *Asteroids*, for example, was only 8 kilobytes in size, and a VCS software company such as Activision might gross $65 million dollars on a year’s worth of titles.\(^1\) Today’s consoles and personal computers, by contrast, can handle games hundreds of megabytes in size, and a single title can gross upwards of $350 million.\(^2\)

Comparing profits and processor power is something of a red herring, however. Despite their seeming primitivism, early games were remarkably sophisticated and profitable for their time. Warren Robinett’s *Adventure* (1980), for example, ingeniously exploited the VCS’s limited power to create a vast and nuanced game world. In *Adventure*, the player
assumed the role of an on-screen character (in this case a square cursor) who had to search for a golden chalice and return it safely to a gold castle. Unlike previous games, *Adventure* featured multiple screens where the chalice and castle keys were hidden. To complicate matters, there were also three hidden dragons who could end the game by eating the cursor. The player had to seek out hidden weapons that could kill the dragons. As a final obstacle, a player could only carry one object at a time. (Herman 43)

*Adventure*’s elaborate game world and narrative complexity were key to Atari’s success. The game not only helped Atari gross more than $415 million in 1980, but those earnings jolted parent company Warner Communications’ stock upward by 35% (Cohen 73).

Yet Warner never cinematized *Adventure*, or any other game for that matter until *Mortal Kombat* in 1995. In fact, Hollywood as a whole avoided adapting games for nearly twenty years, despite the medium’s profitability and the fact that “the decision to create a movie is a business decision about the potential profitability of a cinematic product” (Meehan 49). In one sense, Hollywood’s reticence seems logical, insofar as adaptation is an inherently conservative practice. Adaptation reduces financial risk by recycling proven content and consumers willing to purchase that content. However, early games were proven commodities—in a speech to Congress, Ronald Reagan complained that “[t]he total amount requested for aid to all of Central America in 1984 is about $600 million; that is less than one-tenth of what Americans will spend this year on coin operated video games” (Cohen ix). Why did Hollywood wait so long to milk this cash
cow? What were the factors that ultimately eased and encouraged the creation of the game-based film? The answer is as fascinating as it is complex.

The purpose of this chapter is to recount the story of that complex answer, to describe in detail the primary institutional and industrial forces that helped spark and then facilitate the cinematic adaptation of video and computer games. Through analysis of the political economy of game licensing and censorship, I show how a shift in game business that began in the late 1980s and the 1993/94 joint Congressional hearings on game violence contributed to the birth of the game film.

Licensed to Shill

Game business historically has been one-dimensional; it was only toward the end of the 1980s that companies started looking beyond games for games’ sake. Indeed, part of the reason the industry righted itself after its disastrous crash in the early 1980s was that game companies began treating games like films, recycling and repackaging content and imagery across media. In this section, I will describe how the game film genre owes its life to this sea change in gestalt whereby games were re-conceptualized as brandable artifacts.

In the 1960s, few people outside of university computer science departments and the military knew what computers were, and fewer still saw the medium’s entertainment potential. Naturally, would-be game inventors had a hard time securing development capital. Ralph Baer, for example,
demonstrated his [home console] prototype to many television manufacturers like Sylvania, Philco, Admiral, General Electric, Zenith and Sears. All of them marveled at the new technology but all were afraid to make a move on it figuring that the product would damage the television set. (Herman 7)

Things changed considerably, however, in the 1970s as computer chips became more affordable. As Herman explains, “[d]rawn by potentially high profit margins, no fewer than 75 companies scrambled for a spot in the marketplace” (19). Magnavox, Coleco, Fairchild Camera and Instrument, and RCA all released home game consoles, while toy companies Milton Bradley and Mattel produced scores of handheld games (e.g., Simon, Mattel Football, etc.). Mattel eventually even developed its own console, the Intellivision, to compete with the Atari VCS. By far the most significant entry into the electronic game market was Warner Communications. In 1976, Warner purchased Atari from founder Nolan Bushnell for $28 million. The Warner purchase not only helped transform Atari into “the fastest growing company in the history of America” (Cohen 73), but redoubled corporate America’s interest in games. Indeed, 1982 alone saw consumer electronics manufacturer Emerson release a home console; CBS, Parker Brothers and Twentieth Century Fox license and release games for the VCS; and Disney license Tron to Bally and Mattel. As Herman notes,

[e]ven the cereal company Quaker Oats got into the act by buying a company called US Games that had released a few VCS compatible games under the Vidtec label. One of the first things that Quaker Oats did was
license the movie title *The Towering Inferno* from Twentieth Century Fox and turn it into a videogame. (71)

Unfortunately, the game market could not withstand such diverse and unbridled interest, and promptly wilted more quickly than it had blossomed. *RePlay Magazine* publisher Eddie Adlum recalls, “[t]here’s a joke that on June 21, 1982, at approximately 4:30 P.M., the video game business fell over a cliff. People stopped playing them, and operators stopped buying them” (Kent 175). Simply put, the market was oversaturated. There was too much product, much of which was poorly designed and played terribly.

As profits flagged, so too did corporate interest. Potential investors were put off by the market glut, and those already ensconced looked for ways to disengage. Some game companies, like Coleco, recast themselves as “computer” manufacturers to try to keep consumers from being lured away by the promise of affordable personal computers (e.g., the Radio Shack TRS-80 Color Computer, the Texas Instruments TI-99/4A and the Commodore Vic-20). Other companies abandoned games entirely, deciding the fad had run its course. The biggest player, Warner Communications, was also the biggest loser, ultimately divesting itself of Atari after the game company posted $536 million losses in 1983, and $425 million second-quarter losses in 1984. These tremendous losses also prompted an International Trade Commission study on the future of the game market.4

Remarkably, the industry righted itself toward the end of the eighties and again attracted attention. Whereas the market had once been thick with toy companies and electronics manufacturers (the notable exception being Warner Communications, of course), it was America’s media content providers who now shouldered their way to the
front (e.g., National Amusements/Viacom, MCA/Universal, News Corp., Sony, Disney, etc.). National Amusements CEO/COB Sumner Redstone, for example, acquired 16% of game giant Williams’s common stock between October 1986 and February 1987 (Standard and Poor’s, 1987). The following year, Redstone increased his Williams holdings to 24% and sought regulatory clearance to boost the stake to over 50% (Standard and Poor’s, 1988). Though clearance was never obtained, Redstone remained committed to games and today still owns more than 20% of Williams (now WMS) and its former subsidiary Midway (“Midway Games Incorporated”).

Sony too was in the vanguard as the game industry got back on track in the late 1980s. In 1988, the company agreed to provide Nintendo with a CD-ROM drive for its Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES). Sony also hatched plans for a rival console that would be able to play both SNES cartridges and Sony discs. Though the Sony/Nintendo partnership was short-lived, lasting only three years, Sony continued to develop its CD-ROM drive and console. In 1994, Sony released that console—the PlayStation—in Japan, and by 1997 the company had become one of the largest producers of game equipment and software in the world.

As National Amusements, Sony and other U.S. content providers diversified into games in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they brought with them an unusual business strategy—unusual, at least, compared to the prevailing ethos in the years leading up to the 1983/84 crash. Rather than focusing extensively on hardware and/or software as Magnavox, Coleco and even Warner had done, the new game barons looked to use games the way Hollywood uses film—to stimulate ancillary consumption. Instead of
technology, game companies began to emphasize iconography. The new game barons rapaciously bought up, created or partnered with game companies with the intent of generating source material which they could then recycle and repackage over their various divisions. Time Warner, for example, partnered with intellectual property management company Threshold Entertainment to develop an entire product line based on Williams’s popular and bloody *Mortal Kombat* games. The Time Warner/Threshold partnership not only produced print, toy and television adaptations (as well as other tie-ins such as music CDs and clothing), but three feature-length, live-action films. Time Warner even used the *Mortal Kombat* brand to create synergy between two of its divisions. The syndicated, live-action television series *Mortal Kombat Conquest* (1998) represented the first combined effort between New Line Television and Warner Bros. Domestic Television Distribution (“12/17/97 Press Release”).

Since the late 1980s/early 1990s, Disney, MCA/Universal, News Corp. and Viacom also have begun to tap games’ licensing potential. Viacom, in fact, has so aggressively branded Core Design/Eidos Interactive’s *Tomb Raider* that even *Tomb Raider*-brand products have their own subsidiary product lines. The film *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, for example, has its own line of toys, comic books, clothing and souvenirs. While not every game-based product has been successful—*Double Dragon: The Movie* (1994) grossed a disappointing $2 1/3 million (“Film Database”)—the majority have made game branders very happy. The *Mortal Kombat* franchise alone “has grossed more than $4 billion worldwide” (“12/17/97 Press Release”), and the *Street Fighter* series boasts over one hundred licensing deals (Capcom Entertainment).
Game-based licensing has even begun to affect how non-game media companies do business. A recent EMI Music Publishing print ad in *Game Developer* featuring Ozzy Osborne and reads:

Next time they tell you that hitmakers aren’t interested in games, maybe they should talk to him. And while they’re at it, they should also talk to Crystal Method, Avril Lavigne, Snoop Dogg, Marilyn Manson, Megadeth, Sum 41, Outkast, DMX, Judas Priest and all the other chart-topping artists and writers from EMI Music Publishing who are licensing hits to the world’s hottest games. (EMI Music Resources)

Clearly, the nature of game business has changed. Whereas companies once focused obsessively on the technology that enabled games (e.g., chip sets, programming languages and compilers, interface devices, cabinets, etc.), they now stress the iconography that enables game content to generate multiple profit streams. This sea change in orientation has resulted in a plethora of game-based products, most notably the game film. Additionally, the move toward iconography has helped insulate game companies from the volatility that plagues the high tech market, the same volatility that devastated the game industry in the early 1980s. Game branding not only helps turn a single investment into multiple profits, but provides game companies with multiple defenses should a given product fail. One of the primary advantages of a product line is that surplus income from one product can cover losses incurred by another.

**The Politics of Censorship**
Though games and game culture figured prominently in the public discourse of the early 1980s (Pac Man was *Time* magazine’s Man of the Year in 1981), it was the political discourse of the nineties that helped create the game film. In particular, the 1993/94 joint Congressional hearings on video game violence played a pivotal role in game cinematization, reshaping as they did “game” content into “film-like” content (or at least into similarly regulatable content).

Despite disagreement about the impetus for the 1993/94 joint Congressional hearings on video game violence, there is no question about the principal companies involved. Acclaim Entertainment had secured the console rights to Midway’s arcade hit, *Mortal Kombat* (1992), and planned to release home versions for the Sega Genesis and Nintendo Super NES (SNES) in the fall of 1993. Put off by the game’s signature “fatality” moves, Nintendo requested Acclaim eliminate them from the SNES version. Acclaim complied but left the Genesis version uncensored. Predictably, consumers opted for violence. Not only did the Genesis version noticeably outsell its expurgated competitor, but many SNES owners complained they were being treated unfairly. Then Senior Vice President of Nintendo of America, Howard Lincoln, claimed the company “received thousands of angry letters, including a few letters from parents, warning Nintendo not to censor their children’s games” (Kent 466).

The unmitigated violence of the Genesis version drew a more conventional parental response as well, prompting a Congressional inquiry into the marketing of violent video games to children. In December 1993 (and again in March and July 1994), Senators Herb Kohl (WI) and Joseph Lieberman (CT) convened joint hearings before the
Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice (of the Committee on the Judiciary) and the Subcommittee on Regulation and Government and Information (of the Committee on Governmental Affairs) to discuss the subject of rating video and computer games. The Senators reviewed testimony from industry representatives, policy advice from experts on violence and children, letters from concerned parents, articles from *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Los Angeles Times*, and submissions from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). The Senators even reviewed a statement issued by Captain Kangaroo, Bob Keeshan, in which the television personality and child advocate implored the game industry to “[g]ive parents the information needed to make an intelligent, an informed decision as to whether a particular video game is appropriate for their child” (United States 195). The hearings were broadcast on C-SPAN, and the national press delightedly spent reams of paper and considerable air time on both the hearings and the subject of game violence and censorship more generally.

As if all this attention were not enough, a number of trade organizations openly came out in support of the formation of a ratings system during the course of the hearings. The American Amusement Machine Association (AAMA), for example, formed a Parental Advisory Committee to help concerned parents navigate the game market (United States 118). The Amusement and Music Operators Association (AMOA) likewise devoted a portion of its annual business meeting to the game violence problem, imploring “manufacturers of video games [to] address the issue” (United States 117).
Large retail outlets also publicly supported rating games, and many “issued letters of endorsement, including Sears, Target Stores, and Software Etc.” (United States 128).

In addition to an incredible amount of publicity, the hearings also produced a less-than-friendly competition between open and closed platform software developers. In response to Senator Lieberman’s “one-year ultimatum...[to] come up with a ratings or warning label system” (United States 5), closed platform developers Acclaim, Atari, Capcom, Crystal Dynamics, Electronic Arts, Konami, Nintendo of America, Philips, Sega of America, Sony Electronic Publishing, Viacom New Media and Virgin Interactive formed the Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA), a trade organization that proposed establishing the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). Modeled after the Motion Picture Association of America/Classification and Rating Administration (MPAA/CARA) system, the ESRB would require developers to submit a videotape, disk or storyboard containing “the most extreme portions of [their] game” (United States 139) for review, along with a $500 fee.

Open platform developers also banded together and created the Computer Game Ratings Working Group (CGRWG). The CGRWG consisted of six trade associations (including the Software Publishers Association), magazine publishers (e.g., Computer Gaming World), “child development experts such as Dr. Debra Lieberman of Raya Systems” (United States 171) and more than 3000 member companies (notably Id Software, Interplay Productions, LucasArts Entertainment Company, Maxis, Sir-Tech Software). Like the IDSA, the CGRWG proposed a rating board—the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC). The RSAC differed substantially from the ESRB in
that it (a) required publishers to rate their own games via a questionnaire, and (b) threatened stiff penalties for companies that were less than forthright about those ratings.

Despite the fact that the CGRWG represented thousands of companies, and the IDSA but a dozen, the Senators openly “prefer[ed] the IDSA rating system” (United States 184). Lieberman, for example, complained to CGRWG counsel Mark Traphagen that

there is a basic problem that I am concerned about with your system, which is that the rater does not actually view the game, but the rater goes over the questionnaire that is filled out by the producer, so that the consumer cannot have the confidence that the rating is based on an actual viewing of the most potentially objectionable parts of the game (United States 182)

Lieberman also found the CGRWG/RSAC rating icons “a bit confusing” (United States 183), and scolded the CGRWG for its failure to support the IDSA/ESRB plan (a plan that clearly favored IDSA members). A “disappointed” (United States 166) Lieberman stated “I strongly urge you, Mr. Traphagen, to see if you can convince your members to become part of that system as we go on” (United States 184).

Ironically, the ESRB defied its raison d'être, at least as conceptualized by Lieberman. In calling for a rating system, Lieberman expressed concern that ratings not be perverted into a cynical marketing ploy to attract children to more violent games…We must not allow the industry to trumpet a violent rating as a selling point. (United States 3)
And yet, this is precisely what the ESRB promised as it neither mitigated game violence nor imposed any substantial penalty for ratings non-compliance. Like the MPAA/CARA system, the ESRB would function to simultaneously placate parents and titillate youth (the real consumers).

It is important to point out that Lieberman probably recognized the economic value of game violence and knew the ESRB would do nothing to jeopardize that value. After all, he pushed for ratings rather than censorship, despite a personal desire to eliminate game violence altogether. He prefaced the hearings by saying

> [I]et me also make very clear that I am not calling for federal censorship. Nothing in this legislation prevents the sale of even the most violent video games. As a parent, I would love to see the video game industry stop selling this violent material. But, in terms of legislation, I contend that the problem is lack of information. I am calling for more information to be available to the public. (United States 6)

Fellow Subcommitte on Regulation and Government Information member Byron Dorgan (North Dakota) reiterated this “betwixt and between” position, stating

> I do not advocate censorship, nor will I support any legislation that appears to be, in my judgment, censorship...[i]t would be nice if the video game industry could regulate itself and find ways to ensure that graphic violent themes would not be portrayed in children’s games. (United States 9, my emphasis)
Clearly, video game violence was at some level acceptable to Senators Lieberman and Dorgan, provided it was marketed appropriately.

In truth, the Senators probably preferred the IDSA/ESRB proposal not because it was better than the CGRWG/RSAC plan but because it propitiated the powerful companies of the IDSA by ensuring the continued existence (and thus profitability) of game violence. Despite having the power to define game content, the IDSA proposed a system that assigned responsibility to parents and retail outlets. The ESRB would simply rate games—it would not try to lessen the amount or types of violence they contained. The RSAC, by contrast, tacitly argued for a reduction in game violence (or at the very least some sort of accountability) by mandating “compulsory restickering (that is product recalls), as well as monetary fines” (United States 169) for companies that failed to rate their games appropriately. In so doing, the RSAC exceeded Lieberman’s mandate “for more information to be made available to the public.” With its threat of fines and product recalls, the RSAC seemed to hint at the censorship Lieberman wanted (“[a]s a parent, I would love to see the video game industry stop selling this violent material”) but knew was not a viable option (“[l]et me also make very clear that I am not calling for federal censorship”). The RSAC promised to regulate the game industry (albeit weakly), a promise that contrasted sharply with Senator Dorgan’s desire for the industry to “regulate itself.” Despite its projected expense, the toothless ESRB was much more appealing to the laissez faire Congressmen.

In the end, the IDSA/ESRB proposal was not only expensive and represented the interests of a small but powerful segment of the industry, but was partisan by design. As
Traphagen astutely pointed out, “systems [like the IDSA/ESRB] in which a trade association actually has the rating system within it can undermine objectivity and create at least the appearance of favoritism” (United States 168). Not surprisingly (given the economic might of its members), ESRB ratings have become the industry standard, while the RSAC has been relegated to evaluating website content. Ironically, it is the ESRB that is now under scrutiny. A recent Federal Trade Commission report on media violence concluded that the bulk of “games with a Mature rating for violence...targeted children under 17” and that a few “targeted children as young as six” (Federal Trade Commission). It seems Lieberman’s concern that ratings might be “perverted into a cynical marketing ploy to attract children” has been borne out in the rating system he helped establish.

The 1993/94 joint Congressional hearings on video game violence thus set the stage for the cinematic adaptation of video and computer games in two ways. First, the hearings' widespread publicity raised cultural awareness and interest in games, priming the market for game-based products. More importantly, by sanctioning a rating system modeled after the MPAA/CARA system, the Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice and the Subcommittee on Regulation and Government Information effectively reshaped “game” content into “film-like” content. The advent of the ESRB meant that game themes, narratives, aesthetics and ideologies would from 1994 on be evaluated in precisely the same fashion and according to the same standards as film content and imagery. The two media would thus be imagined analogously, or at least regulated as though they were. This confluence has profoundly affected games, literally defining them not by what they contain but by how they mean. Games are now described using the regulatory language
and iconography of film. Just as PG-13-rated films “may be inappropriate for children under 13” (“Voluntary Movie Rating System”), Teen-rated games are “suitable for persons ages 13 and older” (“ESRB Game Ratings”). Indeed, each of the MPAA/CARA ratings categories—G (General Audiences), PG (Parental Guidance Suggested), PG-13 (Parents Strongly Cautioned), R (Restricted) and NC-17 (No One 17 and Under Admitted)—has a corresponding ESRB category—EC (Early Childhood), E (Everyone), T (Teen), M (Mature), A (Adults Only), respectively. This “cinematization” of game content is eerily born out in the way game sales mimic film sales precisely. Three of the top twenty grossing films of 2001, for example, were R-rated, with the remaining seventeen receiving G, PG or PG-13 ratings (MPA Worldwide Market Research 16). The 2001 best selling game list looks identical, with three of the top twenty games rated M (the R equivalent), and the other seventeen rated E or T (equivalent to G/PG and PG-13, respectively) (Interactive Digital Software Association 7). Clearly, more than just game content has been recuperated by the regulatory gestalt of film. The reshaping of game content into film-like content has influenced how consumers evaluate games and how developers conceive of them. Many retail outlets, for instance, will not carry unrated games. Since commercial games are created to turn a profit, game publishers are unlikely to develop titles that do not conform to the ESRB system (and thus would not make it to store shelves). Similarly, many parents purchase games for their children based on ESRB ratings rather than on quality of graphics and game play.

The joint Congressional hearings on game violence, then, signify a crucial moment in the history of video and computer games—it is the moment in which the
federal government and major game companies agreed that the future of gaming lay in the ability to design, build and evaluate games according to the aesthetic and ideological criteria of cinema. It is precisely this moment that helped create the game film.

**The New Show Business**

Despite the tendency in both scholarly and popular studies of film adaptation to emphasize questions of fidelity, *auteur*-ship, representation and the like, it is important to remember that adaptation is as much an institutional and industrial phenomenon as it is an instrumental and generic one. The game film in particular should be understood in institutional and industrial terms because a sea change in game business and the establishment of a rating system helped create a fertile climate for the genre. In fact, an institutional and industrial understanding of the game film is essential given that the move toward game-based licensing has already altered the mass media landscape profoundly. Film in particular has been transformed, its licensing prominence and thus much of its *raison d'être* challenged by video and computer game licensing. Despite a branding tradition that dates to the 1920s, film no longer has to shill. Video and computer games now supply imagery and cachet that can drive extensive ancillary consumption. As a result, film has begun to disconnect from the branding imperative. That is, film no longer has to be the “show” in “show business.”

A game-based film such as *Street Fighter*, for example, is not obliged to stimulate consumption outside of ticket sales and rental revenue. As the beneficiary of an already successful imprint, the *Street Fighter* film merely has to refresh its brand—it does not
have to initiate or drive it. This shift in function has serious implications. For one thing, media makers are starting to reorganize and reinvest resources once destined for film into video and computer games. Sony, for example, is planning to cut nearly 20% of its workforce in 2003 (Hoover’s Inc., “Sony Corporation”). Despite these cuts, the company is expanding its game business—earlier this year “Sony finalized an online sports game partnership with Electronic Arts and announced that it will launch a new handheld Playstation device called PSP by the end of 2004” (ibid.).

This sort of restructuring not only affects the types and quantities of media produced, but also the labor practices involved in such production. Electronic outsourcing, for instance, is rapidly becoming de rigueur in game development and in the production of computer generated imagery (CGI) to enhance and even replace traditional filmic images. High-speed networks such as the one formed by Intel, DEC, Sprint, NonStopNet and IBM can transfer data more than 22,000 times faster than most dial-up connections (or several hundred times faster than a T1 line) (McKay). This incredible transfer rate means that game and CGI development teams need no longer live in the same country, let alone the same city. Developers from around the world can work together virtually. Virtual production has a number of advantages, not the least of which is saving money. Threshold Entertainment CEO Larry Kasanoff claims that virtual production “can shave 20 to 50 percent off production costs” (McKay), in part because studios can employ digital artists from around the world at below-market wages. While this is good news for film and game producers, it is terrible news for developers. Not only are jobs being outsourced and programmers being paid unfair wages, but virtual
production creates new forms of alienation. Virtual production eliminates the centralized workplace and the relationships (both positive and negative) fostered by that environment. Thus as media makers restructure themselves to prioritize new media such as video and computer games, media production will change concomitantly.

So too, in fact, will media aesthetics, or at least film and game aesthetics. It is no secret that film and video/computer games are beginning to resemble one another. One need only look at Wing Commander IV's (1995) transition cinematics or The Matrix’s (1999) “bullet time” to see the convergence. Game and film developers are not only using similar technologies and production techniques, but similar business practices (e.g., recycling and repackaging). Just as many films are shot with an eye toward their eventual transfer to television and its different aesthetics and aspect ratio, games are being scripted to look like the films they may eventually become. Many video and computer games now contain digitized figures based on real-life actors (e.g., Mortal Kombat’s Bruce Lee-alike, Liu Kang), film footage with actual B-movie stars (e.g., Wing Commander IV’s Mark Hamill, Malcolm McDowell and John Rhys-Davies), and complex back stories that play during show mode (e.g., Mortal Kombat II). Hollywood, in turn, is taking full advantage of the unusual mise-en-scène and “camera work” pioneered by video and computer game developers. Many DVDs are now “interactive,” at least in the sense that they allow the viewer to change camera angles and perceived distance from the subject on the fly, according to personal taste. This is something games have done for years (e.g., Microsoft Flight Simulator).
In the final analysis, the game film represents a significant moment for both video/computer games and the mass media more generally. Though seemingly innocuous, or at least so trashy as to be benign, game films are actually profoundly emblematic of the hybridization and synergy of old and new media currently underway in the U.S. culture industries. The birth of the game film speaks of the intimate and intricate connections between economics, politics and popular culture, connections that help shape the games Americans play, the films they watch and the books, television programs, periodicals and other media they consume.

So why, then, did Hollywood wait so long to adapt video and computer games? The truth is, Hollywood had big plans for games all along. Warner’s investment in Atari in the 1970s and Twentieth Century Fox and Disney’s experimentation with games in the early 1980s, clearly indicate that Hollywood was looking to transmute game business into “show business” decades before the first game film graced the silver screen. The bottom simply fell out of the market before Hollywood could act. The expensive lessons learned in 1983/84 have paid off handsomely, however. Hollywood’s early failure to adapt games has been erased by lucrative game-based product lines, consistent if not at times stunning box office returns for game films, and the true marketing genius embodied by an MPAA/CARA-like game rating system designed simultaneously to appease parents and excite youth.
Notes

A version of this chapter is forthcoming in TEXT Technology.

1 Cohen notes that in its “first year in business, 1980, Activision sold $65.9 million in software, for a profit of $12.9 million” (83).

2 A September 2002 USA Today.com article estimated that Take-Two Interactive Software’s Grand Theft Auto 3 “sold more than 7 million copies, at an average price of about $49, for...[a] total near $350 million” (Reuters Limited).

3 Herman writes that “[t]he cost of microchips decreased dramatically in 1974” (18) and by 1976 General Instruments had developed a $5 chip embedded with six games (19).


5 The notable exception here is the Pac-Mania that swept the country in 1981/82. The wildly successful game inspired a top-ten song (Pac-Man Fever), an animated cartoon series (broadcast on ABC) and over 400 consumer products (“The History of Pac-Man”).

6 According to Steven Kent, People at Sega and Digital Pictures claimed that Nintendo encouraged the hearings to stop Sega’s runaway sales. Some people claim that Nintendo director of communications Perrin Kaplan initiated the debates over game violence when she delivered a speech to the National Organization of Women in the fall of 1993. Others claim that Nintendo representatives
went to Washington, D.C., and showed several people in Congress tapes of violent games, in the hope of stirring up trouble for Sega. (466-67)

7 *Mortal Kombat* "fatalities" were secret moves designed to end a match. Depending on the avatar selected, a player could rip out an opponent's still beating heart, tear off his/her skull (with the spinal column still firmly attached) or finish the match in a number of other gruesome coups de grace.

8 Closed platforms are those for which hardware manufacturers control software development through licensing agreements. Games for closed platforms (e.g., Xbox and PlayStation2) will only run on those platforms, and developers must pay for the right to develop platform-specific games. Open platforms (e.g., personal computers), by contrast, do not require development licenses. Anyone can develop open platform software. Though a publisher may release the same game over several platforms, that publisher must still secure the rights for each closed platform.

9 It is important to note that some members of the IDSA also developed open platform software. Electronic Arts (EA), for instance, got its start publishing titles for personal computers and today still publishes open platform games. However, closed platform game development almost always has been where the real money is. Sony's platforms, for example, account for nearly 40% of EA's sales (Hoover's Inc., "Electronic Arts").

10 When asked about the state of the game industry, Software Publishers Association counsel Mark Traphagen responded, "[t]he estimated retail sales last year for recreational software for personal computers was approximately $410 million, as compared with approximately $8 billion for software on the video game platforms" (United States 166).
Senator Lieberman followed with, "Mr. Heistand [senior vice president for Electronic Arts and chairman of the Interactive Entertainment Industry rating committee] has only acknowledged $6 billion of that, so he may be doing better than he thinks he is" (ibid.). Regardless of the actual numbers, open platform manufacturers controlled a tiny portion of the game market.

11 As Traphagen explained, "the shareware and low-cost retail segments of the industry have serious concerns about the cost of obtaining ratings for each of the hundreds of titles they market each year" (United States 175). At $500 per title, the ESRB review costs alone would be prohibitive to most game publishers. Add to that the fact that "small publishers do not produce [the] video tapes or story boards" (United States 170) necessary for review, and would therefore have to invest in both time and equipment, and the ESRB cannot help but exclude all but the largest companies (i.e., the members of the IDSA).

12 "Bullet time" is a cinematic and compositing technique invented for the Wachowski brothers by John Gaeta and his visual effects team at Manex. Bullet time photography involves compositing still shots from an array of cameras into a seamless, animated sequence. See http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/cmp/sfx-bullet_text.html for more on the history and the process of bullet time.

13 Like a film poster, a game's show mode is designed to entice passersby. Show modes differ from game to game but generally include action sequences from the game, a title screen and the high score list. Some games even advertise game-based products during
show mode (e.g., *Mortal Kombat*). Games revert to show mode when not in play mode (i.e., when no one is playing them).
CHAPTER THREE

“EVERYBODY WAS KUNG FU FIGHTING”:
MARTIAL ARTS MOVIES, GENRE AND THE GAME FILM

Although the protagonists might use knives or swords, chains or even occasionally guns, such technology came a long way behind the visually-involving way they used their bodies in a series of nicely judged blocks, kicks, and jabs punctuated by massive leaps and backed by a soundtrack of shrieks and groans. The screen was alive with an ornate choreography of violence that exploited the dance-like postures of traditional Chinese martial arts—a mixture of boxing, wrestling and kick fighting. It was exotic.

—Verina Glaessner, *Kung Fu: Cinema of Vengeance*

Though the purpose of this dissertation is to trace the origins of the game film in order to explore the impact video and computer games are having on film form, function and economy, it is worth pointing out that cinema has in fact been one of the primary shapers of games. In many ways, the game medium has evolved according to the aesthetic and ideological standards of cinema. For example, though computer screens are radically different in both theory and function from the silver screen, game developers nonetheless use cinematic terms such as “frame rate,” “camera movement” and “storyboard” to describe their medium. The ubiquitous animated or digitized interludes
that separate game levels are known in the industry as “cinematics” or “cut scenes,” and trade magazines such as *Game Developer* regularly review development packages featuring innovations in “lighting” and “foley effects.” Commercial games have “art directors,” “voice actors” and composers, whose “scores” and “soundtracks” are often sold in music stores alongside CDs from the latest Hollywood blockbusters.\(^2\)

However, game developers have not been alone in adopting the language and perspective of cinema. Game publishers, scholars and consumers too have embraced the cinematic, especially when the topic of discussion turns to play. Because play experiences are notoriously difficult to describe and quantify (i.e., “What makes a specific game ‘fun’?”), players and critics alike talk about games in terms of their “genre.” That is, they apply cinematic terms used to talk about subjects, themes, plot, and aesthetics in order to discuss styles of play. Admittedly, form and content are very much part of the play experience, but play is also something quite distinct. Play is an “instinct,” says play theorist Johan Huizinga, the “primeval soil” out of which has grown “law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science” (5). Indeed, “[t]he great archetypal activities of human society are permeated with play from the start” (4), including language, myth and ritual.

Nevertheless, game publishers, scholars and players use genre in its specifically cinematic iteration as a means of talking about the play instinct, or rather, the play experience. *Max Payne 2* (2003), for example, is billed as “a violent, Film Noir love story between a cop and a femme fatale murder suspect” (Rockstar Games). The game promises:
• A stunning level of detail: Extremely detailed environments with photorealistic textures, highly enhanced radiosity lighting\(^3\) and extremely lifelike characters (including facial animations & lip synchronization) provide a *visually staggering cinematic* experience.

• *Massive production values – including a motion picture stunt crew,* professional talent for voice acting and graphic novels, motion capture and authentic digital source material from New York City. (ibid., format Rockstar, emphasis mine)

The reviews have been equally “cinematic.” *The Gamer’s Temple* gave *Max Payne 2* the Award of Excellence, explaining that “Max Payne 2 is a cinematic game that plays like an interactive movie, a stylish film noir experience that no gamer should miss” (*The Gamer’s Temple*). *GamersPulse* likewise gave the game its Seal of Excellence, praising “[t]he gritty, film noir storytelling [and] intense bullet time action sequences” (Grimmun).\(^4\) While the scholars at *Frictionless Insight*—which bills itself as “Computer Gaming News, Reviews and Scholarship: From the Serious to the Seriously Fun”—have yet to review the second installment of the *Max Payne* series, they do describe the first game in the same sorts of cinematic terms. Wrathful, for instance, writes that the game’s dialogue “reflects the old film style, with vocabulary and syntax choices befitting a black and white movie about some down-and-out ‘private dick’” (Wrathful). Enkidu too explains *Max Payne* filmically, explicitly referencing not only film noir but the “Hong Kong Blood Opera [movies]…exemplified by John Woo” (Enkidu).
While an extreme example, the discourse surrounding the Max Payne series nonetheless reveals the cinematic origins at the heart of the ways games are classified and evaluated. Games are understood both within and outside of the industry in filmic terms, in terms of genre. However, just as genre is a fairly fuzzy term in film circles, it is even less well-defined for games. Not only are game scholars unable to agree on the number or even the names of genres, their attempts at actually categorizing games by genre are laughably problematical. In The Medium of the Video Game, for example, Mark Wolf has created a taxonomy that includes more than forty different types of video and computer games. The problem, however, is that many of the games Wolf lists appear across several different categories. “Most [video and computer] board games,” for example, “can be cross-listed with Adaptation [games], and many can also be cross-listed with Strategy [games]” (120). “Many fighting games,” likewise, “can also be cross-listed with Sports” (125), and Combat games with Fighting and Shoot ‘Em Ups (122).

Given the widespread use of inappropriate and problematical filmic language to describe artifacts that consistently violate the logic underpinning this language, it is remarkable that the game industry, its consumers and its scholars can even talk to one another, let alone engage in the collaborative production of an extremely lucrative entertainment complex. More remarkable still is the way media makers seem to have latched on to a single type of game—the fighting game—in their attempts to recycle game content across media. Filmmakers especially have relied on fighting games for source material, despite the incredible diversity and hybridity of games and game discourse. Of the ten live-action game-based films released to date, five are direct

Not surprisingly, filmmakers’ interest in fighting games shows no sign of abating. Of the two live-action game films scheduled to hit theaters in 2004, one is a direct fighting game adaptation (*Mortal Kombat 3: Domination*) and the other, a sequel, (*Resident Evil: Apocalypse*) will likely contain the same kind of fighting game-inspired hand-to-hand combat as its predecessor (*Resident Evil*).

Of course, filmmakers’ focus on fighting games is no accident. The genre facilitates adaptation in unique and powerful ways. For one thing, fighting games borrow heavily from martial arts movie conventions, conventions that among other things allow viewers (or in the case of games, players) the opportunity for “safe looking.” Mitigating the potentially disruptive sexuality of the male body (and thereby allowing viewers to safely gaze upon that body) has long been key to Western cinematic storytelling. The fact that fighting games rely on the same well-established methods for doing so has been integral to their cinematization. Fighting games also embody the very essence of genre in the ways they collapse aesthetics, narrative and thematics into a single, “high concept” package. Not only does this collapse make game-based adaptations easily recognizable
(and thus saleable), but it also blurs the very significant differences between games and film. Games’ kinesthesia, for example, hinders rather than helps adaptation.

Just as Chapter Two delimited the major industrial, institutional and instrumental factors that sparked and then facilitated the cinematic adaptation of video and computer games, this chapter outlines the game film’s aesthetic, narratological and thematic origins. It explores the themes and imagery that lie at the heart of the game film. I begin by schematizing the martial arts movie genre and outlining its defining characteristics. I then show how this schema has been distilled by fighting games (and their films, by extension), and conclude by discussing the ways the concept of genre itself has been key to the cinematization of video and computer games.

The Chop-Socky

Though kung fu films are as varied as any type, there are certain characteristics that typify the genre. First and most importantly, “kung fu is a genre of bodies; extraordinary, expressive, spectacular, sometimes even grotesque bodies” (Hunt 2, emphasis in original). Kung fu films showcase the “frenzy of the visible,” to borrow Jean-Louis Comolli’s phrase. They are meditations on the extremes to which the human body can be subjected, and Kung fu bodies are subjected to all kinds of extremes. They are punched, kicked, whipped, strangled, burned and otherwise beaten far beyond what normal human bodies can endure, and these beatings happen many times during a single film.
Kung fu movie bodies give as good as they get, however; they are deadly weapons that for the most part eschew sticks, knives, guns and other “aids” for the purity and brutality of open-handed combat. And yet, the tortures kung fu bodies both dispense and endure in combat often pale in comparison to the tortures they receive mastering the martial arts. *Chinese Boxer’s* (1970) protagonist (Wang Yu), for instance, toughens his hands by repeatedly thrusting them into a wok full of white-hot gravel. *Bloodsport’s* (1988) Frank Dux (Jean-Claude Van Damme) likewise develops the impressive flexibility that ultimately wins him the Kumite—a secret, invitation-only martial arts tournament—by having his legs lashed to saplings and then stretched apart until the pain is almost unbearable.

Beyond the ability to take and dish out punishment, kung fu bodies often possess superhuman abilities. They can leap impossibly high into the air, change direction in mid-flight, and utilize seemingly benign objects (e.g., fans) as deadly weapons. Some kung fu bodies even visually manifest chi and other internal “forces” in the form of the “glowing palm” and other magical fighting techniques. Of course, this superhuman physicality cannot be contained by the limits of the body, and kung fu bodies regularly erupt in atavistic “shrieks and groans” in response.

Like other body genres such as pornography and dance musicals, kung fu films emphasize action over acting. Not only is story used sparingly—generally just to provide a context for the action or to bridge action sequences—but what little story there is tends to serve as more of a respite for the audience (to recover and prepare for the next fight) than an essential meaning-making tool. The channeling of story into brief interludes also
highlights the various kinds of action sequences kung fu films contain. As Stuart Kaminsky explains, “in the Kung Fu film, as in the dance musical, we see the solo number, the ingénue number, chorus numbers and dancing duos” (1974: 129). Likewise, kung fu characters are defined by the ways they move. Some practice “crane” technique, while others are well-versed in “drunken” or “tiger” style. Thus, the narrative bits connecting the action sequences also serve as transitions between different fighting literacies.

In the unfinished *Game of Death* (1978), for example, Bruce Lee must battle a series of enemies in order to ascend a tower. Each enemy has a different fighting style, and therefore each new battle requires Lee to adapt and show off his own extensive library of moves. The narrative framing device of fighting increasingly difficult, distinctive enemies is common to the genre, most often taking the form of the martial arts tournament (e.g., *Bloodsport*), the revenge narrative (e.g., *The Chinese Connection* [1973]), or the protection story (e.g., *Iron Monkey* [1993]).

The idea that kung fu films showcase various fighting literacies indicates another defining characteristic of the genre—the genre’s pedagogy. Often, martial arts films detail the learning process by which the neophyte becomes the expert (e.g., *The Karate Kid* [1984]). However, as Hunt points out, kung fu films don’t just tell stories about learning and transmission; they are, themselves, a form of learning, an ongoing ‘education’ of the audience. Lau Kar-leung’s kung fu films teach us about the traditions and application of Southern Shaolin styles. Bruce Lee explains his ‘no style’ Jeet Kune Do
in the television series *Longstreet* (1972) and in the incomplete *Game of Death/Siwang Youxi* (1972/1978). (4)^12

Interestingly, this pedagogism has continued to define the genre, even as the genre itself has been whitened, Americanized and undergone all kinds of other radical changes. As Hunt explains,

in Jet Li’s sci-fi movie *The One* (2001), the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Jets practice the internal arts *bagua* and *xingyi* respectively, the ‘circularity’ of the former and the straight-line attack of the latter used to express the characters of the antagonists. *The One* may be less ‘authentic’ than earlier martial arts films, but it suggests that the genre has not lost its interest in ‘teaching’ a heterogenous[sic] audience. (ibid.)

Nor has the genre ever lost its interest in the body, an interest that makes the kung fu film instantly recognizable and thus an ideal source for adaptation. And yet, kung fu films rarely explain the body; indeed, when such explanations are provided, they often detract from the action, which is what entices audiences in the first place. It is understandable, therefore, why kung fu films might make good source material for games, and why games based on these films might be easily be adapted back to film. There are no complex narratives or especially thorny themes to negotiate. There is only spectacle, something both films and games are excellent at creating.

**The Beat ‘em Up**
Despite the fact that video and computer games offer storytellers unusual aesthetic and narrative possibilities, fighting games tend to distill rather than deviate from kung fu convention. For the most part, they faithfully reproduce kung fu’s “extraordinary, expressive, spectacular, sometimes even grotesque bodies,” but do so in ways that are both limited and exaggerated.

The most salient limitation is that fighting games rely almost exclusively on a single piece of the kung fu universe—the martial arts tournament—for their setting and style of action. Popularized by such kung fu classics as _Enter the Dragon_ and _Bloodsport_, the tournament setting brings together fighters from around the world to compete in unarmed combat. Fighters must usually win the best of three falls in order to advance to the next round. Whereas tournament films mostly stick to a single arena, however, fighting games feature many. The matches in _Street Fighter 2_ (1991, Capcom) take place all over the world, from the tarmac of a U.S. airbase to a Buddhist temple in India. The sites in _Mortal Kombat_ are even more diverse; in order to win the Mortal Kombat tournament, players must not only battle on Earth, but in Outworld, a parallel universe quite alien to our own.

Diverse though fighting game arenas may be, they are generally only colorful backdrops. With few exceptions (e.g., Vega’s ability to scale the chain link fence surrounding one particular _Street Fighter 2_ arena), they do not affect game play directly. Thus, the physical properties governing combat in fighting games do not change, even though the arenas where that combat occurs do.
This is quite different from kung fu films, where locale is very often what determines the style and even the outcome of combat. In *Kiss of the Dragon* (2001), for instance, Liu Jian (Jet Li) is unable to defeat an Aryan superkicker (Cyril Raffaelli) until he lures him into a narrow office space. Once there, the high-flying kicker cannot attack; his legs keep getting tangled in the furniture. Jian, however, adapts to the situation, modifying his fighting style in order to take advantage of the confined space. Similarly, though Lee’s (Bruce Lee) battle with Han (Shih Kien) in *Enter the Dragon* begins on the tournament field, it quickly spills over into the ex-monk’s weapons museum and mirrored bedroom, forcing Lee to repeatedly change his style in order to counter Han’s “home field” advantage.

That fighting game action is bound and determined by the kung fu tournament is actually one of the primary reasons filmmakers have so consistently looked to the genre. So well-worn in popular culture is the very idea of “the martial arts tournament” that no explanation is required to rationalize the fighting. In a tournament, fighters simply fight; we may occasionally learn why they do so (e.g., revenge, money, fame, etc.), but rarely do we learn why they do so in the manner they do—through unarmed rather than armed combat. The logic underpinning the combat (and thus the tournament setting itself) has been naturalized by its consistent elision in kung fu films, fighting games, children’s cartoons (e.g., *Xiaolin Showdown*), comic books (e.g., *Iron Fist*), and other media.

As a result, fighting games are even more minimally narrative than kung fu films, which makes adapting them a snap. Because fighting game setting, style of action and indeed style of interaction are condensed and signified by the tournament trope, an
enormous amount of textual material that might otherwise be needed to explain the
fighting game world is eliminated. This, in turn, cuts down on the intellectual, creative
and actual work required to faithfully adapt the spirit and content of that world. Since
fidelity is often essential to the commercial success of an adaptation, less material to
account for (and thus to account for faithfully) explains in part why filmmakers have
consistently privileged fighting games over other types in their adaptations.

The fact that fighting games accentuate the kung fu body adds to their appeal to
adaptors. Game bodies are not only bigger, stronger and faster, but more durable.
Whereas Bruce Lee and Jean-Claude Van Damme can be wounded in battle (though
these wounds are rarely serious and actually work to augment the fighters’ impressive
muscularity), the avatars in Power Stone 2 routinely shrug off rocket propelled grenades
to the chest. Virtua Fighter 4’s avatars are similarly invulnerable; they can be punched
and kicked until they pass out—ostensibly sustaining massive amounts of damage as seen
via the game’s heads-up display—yet their bodies remain visibly unaffected. They are,
for all intents and purposes, inviolable, as in fact is almost every fighting game body.
Even games such as Gladiator (1986, Taito), in which the destruction of combatants’
armor is painstakingly animated, leave the actual body alone. Gladiator’s avatars lose
their armor, emit death groans during the coup de grace, and keel over and die, but their
bodies remain intact, and indeed perfect.

The notable exception to this rule is the Mortal Kombat series, in which avatars
can be burned to a crisp, decapitated or even have their spines torn out of their bodies—
provided, of course, players learn the secret button/ joystick combinations to execute these
“fatalities.” It is important to point out, however, that the game does not teach these combinations, nor is it able to actually effect them. Only human players can do so (the computer-controlled avatars cannot), and only through experimentation or by observing or asking other players how. The games thus minimize the idea of the violable body by hiding its possibility. Interestingly, later installments of the Mortal Kombat franchise also include “friendships,” coups de grace in which opponents are not killed but celebrated via rainbows, manga-style dances and other niceties. Friendships too are secret, but they are worth more points than fatalities (a not-so-subtle recuperation of the importance of the inviolable warrior body).

Though partly attributable to technological limitation—animating changes in an avatar’s physiognomy is incredibly resource-intensive, consuming as it does tremendous amounts of memory (for the pre-rendered images) and processor power (to load and animate those images)—the inviolability of the fighting game body owes much to its purpose. The fighting game body is not only a tool for play, and an object of identification, but an object of appreciation. It is to be looked at as much as played, which explains why it is often the most detailed or “realistic” image on the screen (e.g., Mortal Kombat’s large, digitized figures).

This “to-be-looked-at-ness,” to borrow Laura Mulvey’s phrase, is perhaps the primary reason why filmmakers have concentrated on adapting fighting games rather than other types. Fighting games (like kung fu films, actually) facilitate “safe looking.” That is, by placing bodies in combat, fighting games allow male viewers—their primary consumers—to gaze pleasurably at male bodies without anxiety. As Steve Neale notes,
"in a heterosexual and patriarchal society the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed" (281). Otherwise, says Neale, "mainstream cinema [and by extension, the mass media more generally] would openly have to come to terms with the male homosexuality it so assiduously seeks either to denigrate or deny" (286). This is the reason for the unvarnished brutality of so many action movies: sadism signals both "the repression involved and...a means by which the male body may be disqualified, so to speak, as an object of erotic contemplation and desire" (281). It is also the reason why fighting game avatars are so severely punished in the ways enumerated above. Their bodies are meant to be looked at, yet looked at in ways that are not anxiety-producing. Like mainstream cinema, fighting games encourage scopophilia, yet work to deny that pleasure’s erotic component when the subject is the male body. In so doing, fighting games make the perfect source material for cinematic adaptation; they already "embody" the dominant cinematic ideology.

**Genre**

Fighting games’ distillation of kung fu convention, and filmmakers’ focus on fighting games for source material, index the ways genre facilitates adaptation. For one thing, genres function much like brands, collapsing aesthetics, narratives and thematics into recognizable, manageable and of course marketable iconographies. Just as consumers tend to stick with brands they recognize (and therefore trust), so to do they stay with similarly-themed media.
Genre also bridges the significant differences between media, differences that can hinder adaptation. Games, for example, are kinesthetic in ways films simply are not. Game playing is just as much a tactile experience as it is an audio-visual or cognitive one. Games controllers must be touched; for the most part, games cannot be played without direct physical interaction between player and interface. Games likewise take much longer to play than films take to watch. It is not uncommon for single-player games to take thirty hours or more to complete, and multiplayer titles offer virtually unlimited play. The average Hollywood film, by contrast, can be viewed beginning to end in one hundred minutes or so, and films that run long (or at least seem to) often provoke fan ire.

The most striking difference between film and games is ergodicity. According to Espen Aarseth, ergodic media are those in which “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1). This is an “extranomematic” effort, writes Aarseth, in which the reader “effectuate[s] a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of ‘reading’ do not account for” (ibid.). As Ruggill et. al point out, the ergodic medium of the video and computer game requires a great deal of “work”:

Gaming requires strategy, skill, endurance, coordination, concentration, imagination—in essence, hard work. Players must not only decode the “frameworks of knowledge” created by developers, as Stuart Hall might say, but in fact encode these frameworks (or parts of them at least), shaping game worlds and their meanings according to strategy, taste, style
of play, and other broadly acquired cultural responses to all that games have to offer. Gamers actively help create the narrative, thematic and ideological structures that determine the artifactual experience. (8, emphasis in original)20

Film, by contrast, is generally not ergodic. Though watching a film is an active pursuit, requiring all sorts of cognitive effort, “travers[ing] the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement” (Aarseth 2) or the ability to get comfortable in a theater seat. Hollywood cinema, in fact, works hard to eliminate even that cognitive effort, suturing so tightly as it does the viewer into the narrative.

In order to cinematize a game, then, a filmmaker must adapt a kinesthetic, potentially infinite, ergodic text to a noematic, finite, non-ergodic medium. This is a tall order, but one made feasible by the very nature of genre. Despite the great variety of themes, aesthetics and methods of storytelling possible within a given genre—Unforgiven (1992), for example, is a remarkably different Western from The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)—the essence of genre is limitation. Generic structures help media makers “prefer” (as John Fiske might say) certain types of textual readings over others, as well as reference vast meaning sets without having to conjure them.

Limiting possibility in this way is essential for adapting ergodic texts to non-ergodic media because ergodicity involves expanding the role of the “reader” in meaning making. Genre in part corrals this expansion by distilling potential aesthetic, narratological and ideological meanings into tropes, leitmotifs and other semiotic
condensations and forms of shorthand. Genre thus helps filmmakers limit some of the meaning-making possibilities of games, possibilities that are largely unavailable and even undesirable in film (e.g., ergodic play, thirty-plus hours of continuous viewing, etc.).

Games are, in James Newman’s words, “explorative experiences.” They not only allow for but demand play, especially play with structure and form. Film too allows its viewers to play, but that play usually involves manipulating meaning (Fiske; Stuart Hall) rather than form. Movie-goers generally have no control over the sequences and action that take place onscreen. Gamers, however, have (and indeed demand) that control—it is essential to gaming and the pleasures and meanings derived from it. The exploratory experience of games, therefore, is not easily (if ever) reproducible in film, which is why genre and its ability to distill have been key to the cinematic adaptation of games.

Conclusion

Limiting narrative, controlling ergodicity, encouraging safe looking, and providing a set of recognizable tropes have been key to the cinematic adaptation of video and computer games. However, as films become more “interactive,” and games more “cinematic,” the striking differences between the media—differences filmmakers have tried to overcome by focusing almost exclusively on the fighting game genre—are starting to disappear. In the next chapter, I will discuss the implications of film/game convergence, focusing specifically on the ways this convergence has begun to affect film production, distribution, consumption, aesthetics and ideology.
Notes


2 Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (2002, Rockstar Games) alone has seven soundtracks available for purchase (individually or as a boxed set), including a greatest hits CD. Other scores and soundtracks include Myst (Video Game Soundtrack) (1998, Virgin Records), American Mcgee’s Alice (Score) (2001, Six Degrees), Halo: Original Soundtrack (2002, Sumthing Else), Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge (Original Game Soundtrack) (2003, Sumthing Else), and Secret Weapons Over Normandy (Original Soundtrack Recording) (2003, La-La Land).

3 Radiosity lighting is computer-generated lighting that is able to produce indirect illumination and shadows.

4 “Bullet time” is term invented by Andy and Larry Wachowski to describe the slow motion effect they developed for their film, The Matrix (1999). The effect has since been used in a number of other films, and is now being used in games as well. In addition to Max Payne 2 and its predecessor, Max Payne (2001, 3D-Realms), versions of “bullet time” have been used in all kinds of games, most recently in Viewtiful Joe (2003, Capcom). For a fuller description of the effect, see the “Bullet Time Walk Through” at http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/cmp/sfx-bullet_text.html.

5 Genre scholars such as Peter Brooks and Steve Neale have long been interested in the ways the term seems at once to both defy and demand definition. However, the state of
the term is more telling described by film studies textbooks, which as introductions to the field work slavishly to define concepts like genre in order to help the uninitiated learn.

*Film Art* authors David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, for example, write that “there are limits to the precision with which the concept of genre can be applied” (95), while *Understanding Movies*’s Louis Giannetti explains that “[a] genre is a loose set of expectations” (362). Even Richard Barsam, who penned *Looking at Movies*, recognizes the fuzziness of the concept, claiming that “[g]enres play by continually changing rules” (45). The fact that three of the best-known introductions to the field of film studies have trouble defining genre speaks to the term’s fluidity.

6 There are a number of other scholars and developers who have devised categorization systems to organize games, as well. One of the most famous is Chris Crawford, and he actually forgoes filmic language entirely in his “Taxonomy of Computer Games.” Crawford’s taxonomy also contains only two broad categories—skill-and-action and strategy games. Unlike Wolf and many others, Crawford is well aware of not only the limitations of his taxonomy, but of the remarkable (and perhaps even inherent) difficulty of categorizing games. He writes:

I do not claim that the taxonomy I propose is the correct one, nor will I accept the claim that any correct taxonomy can be formulated….The field is too young, the sample too small, for whatever organizing principles there may be to have asserted themselves. The games we now have are more the product of happenstance than the inevitable result of well-established forces. Without a wide array of games there is little
opportunity to choose between games; without choice there can be no
natural selection. It is therefore impossible for us to devise a single
absolute taxonomy.

For an excellent study of the computer game complex, see McAllister.

See the Filmography for a defense of City Hunter.

See Neale (1992), Lehman, Mackinnon, and Dyer, as well as Cohan and Hark and
Stecopoulos and Uebel’s collections.

Perhaps the most bizarre of these superhuman techniques is the “Golden Bell Clasp.”
When struck in the groin, a fighter who has mastered this technique will retract his
testicles into his body, along with the offending fist or foot that has tried to strike them.
For an enlightening (but serious) discussion of this technique and what it signifies, see
Teo.

These literacies often have geographical, cultural and political significance. As Hunt
explains:

The differences between northern and southern Chinese kung fu are
popularly encapsulated in the phrase ‘Northern leg, Southern Fist’. The
north was flat and open, thus the emphasis on high and flying kicks
(supposedly to remove opponents from their horses) and wide stances.
The south was marshy, more crowded and (in the case of Guandong) built
up, thus the emphasis on solid stances and fighting styles adapted to
enclosed spaces. (29)
These and other styles are often used as a kind of shorthand in kung fu films, a way to contextualize and enrich plot elements, action and even character rationale.

12 Here in the U.S., the television series *Kung Fu* (1972) did much the same thing, though it tended to focus more on “Eastern” mysticism than martial arts techniques and traditions.

13 Though Chuck Norris, Michael Dudikoff and Jean-Claude Van Damme are some of the most recognizable stars of the kung fu movie genre, they irrevocably altered its trajectory during the late 1970s and early 1980s. What had once been the province of Asian actors in largely Asian-produced pictures during the 1970s was slowly whitened as American and European production companies started producing and co-producing kung fu movies starring American and European actors. Even well-established Asian stars such as Jackie Chan found that they often had to travel abroad to make movies, though these journeys were largely unsuccessful (e.g., *The Big Brawl*, *The Cannonball Run* [1981], etc.). Conversely, many Anglo actors (e.g., Cynthia Rothrock) were imported to Hong Kong to star in the kung fu movies still produced there.

14 See Ruggill for a discussion of how Bruce Lee’s wounds in *Enter the Dragon* draw attention to (rather than obscure) the striation and separation of his muscles.

15 A heads-up display is an icon or series of icons that provide information about the status of the game. Heads-up displays show things like score, character level, location, health, time remaining in the game, etc.

16 This technique is not limited to cinema and games, however; contact sports such as football do much the same thing.
Developments in voice recognition software and game interface design may yet make this dependence a thing of the past. Already, games such as *Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield*—with its “Quick Order Interface”—allow for limited voice-activated control over non-player characters and game events.

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are notoriously time-consuming, with players devoting months (even years) to play. For example, *Ultima Online* gamer Troy Stolle literally spent half a year earning the money to build a larger virtual home for his online avatar. Of Stolle’s labors, Julain Dibbell writes:

To get the money, [Stolle] had to sell his old [virtual] house. To get that house in the first place, he had to spend hours crafting virtual swords and plate mail to sell to a steady clientele of about three dozen fellow players. To attract and keep that clientele, he had to bring [his character’s] blacksmithing skills up to Grandmaster. To reach that level, Stolle spent six months doing nothing but smithing: He clicked on hillsides to mine ore, headed to a forge to click the ore into ingots, clicked again to turn the ingots into weapons and armor, and then headed back to the hills to start all over again, each time raising [his character’s] skill level some tiny fraction of a percentage point, inching him closer to the distant goal of 100 points and the illustrious title of Grandmaster Blacksmith.

Take a moment now to pause, step back, and consider just what was going on here: Every day, month after month, a man was coming home from a
full day of bone-jarringly repetitive work with hammer and nails to put in a full night of finger-numbingly repetitive work with “hammer” and “anvil”—and paying $9.95 per month for the privilege. As Stolle to make sense of this, and he has a ready answer: “Well, it’s not work if you enjoy it.”

19 Of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, sckorky2 from Cleveland, OH writes

What an amazing cast for such an amazingly bad movie. The movie theater was packed when I went to see this, and by the time the film’s halfway point rolled around (approximately 17 hours later), 50% of the theater had emptied out... The story had real potential, too. But both the acting and the story were soon lost in a movie that was way too long and took itself way too seriously. (sckorky2)

20 As Newman (2003) points out, games are not always entirely ergodic. They contain cinematics, loading screens and other “off-line” components that require no player input. However, these off-line elements make up a very small percentage of the game experience, generally just providing a brief respite from the action or a pretty graphic to entertain the player while the game loads.
CHAPTER FOUR
TARNISHING THE SILVER SCREEN

In the preceding chapters, I focused primarily on the industrial, aesthetic and ideological origins of the game film. Chapter Two, for example, describes how a shift in game business that began in the late 1980s, and the 1993/94 joint Congressional hearings on game violence, were instrumental to the cinematic adaptation of the medium. Chapter Three likewise traces the birth of the game film to the martial arts movie genre and the ways the concept of genre itself helped filmmakers negotiate elements of game play that are difficult (if not impossible) to reproduce in film. Even Chapter One, though it concentrates on film licensing, reveals something of the history of the game film. The idea of the game-branded product (and thus the game-based film) originated in the business practices early film entrepreneurs borrowed from the circus, live theater and vaudeville.

While interesting in their own right, these origins also are useful for understanding how video and computer games have begun to impact film. Specifically, the material and aesthetic forces that birthed the game film a decade ago are today among the most influential forces affecting film as an industry and a product. Media makers, for example, once invested in games as a way to support film. Today, game investment occurs at film’s expense, often in ways that seem reckless and contrary to the health of media business in general. Similarly, filmmakers once worked to contain the qualities that make games unique. Now, they unabashedly try to emulate those qualities, and in so
doing are rewriting the visual language of cinema. Game films not only embody as artifacts media makers’ attempts to explore and exploit the game medium, but the dramatic ways film is changing in response.

The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate those changes. I begin by describing how game investment has become so frenzied recently that it is actually pushing film to the back burner of the media economy. Monies once destined for film are being diverted to games, and the business of making movies is suffering as a result. The process of making movies is changing as well, and I also analyze how filmmakers’ increasing use of game development techniques and technologies is eliminating the need for human actors and other components historically integral to feature film production. I conclude the chapter (and indeed the dissertation) by contextualizing these changes within the broader context of the media economy as a whole. I argue that understanding games is key to understanding the mass media landscape of the 21st century.

**Spellbound**

*Est etiam, ubi profeto damnum praestet facere, quam lucrum*¹

—Latin proverb attributed to Titus Maccius Plautus

In Chapter Two, I talked at length about a sea change in game business during the late 1980s that was instrumental to the creation of the game film. At that time, conglomerates such as National Amusements and Sony started pumping money into game development with the express purpose of recycling and repackaging game content and imagery across media. The idea was not to develop games as an end, necessarily, but
as a means. Investing in game iconography promised an affordable way to generate source material that could then be used to supply the extensive information conduits the conglomerates already had in place (e.g., film, television, publishing, etc.). Thus, while companies such as Time Warner, Disney and News Corp. greedily snapped up game development houses, they did so to feed their bread and butter businesses.

Things have changed considerably in recent years, however. The interest conglomerates once showed in games has become more like an obsession, and film is feeling the pinch. I noted in Chapter One, for example, that Sony recently announced plans to eliminate nearly 20% of its workforce. As a result, even big-time subsidiaries such as Sony Pictures Entertainment soon will lose healthy chunks of their budget and manpower. Sony's game division, however, will not be affected; in fact, that division will be expanded significantly. That Sony is willing to sacrifice a cash cow like Sony Pictures for games indicates just how profoundly games have begun to tarnish the silver screen. Sony Pictures has produced some of the highest grossing films of all time in the last few years (e.g., Spider-Man [2002] and Spider-Man 2 [2004]).

Even more telling is the activity surrounding Midway, the game company (in)famous for developing Mortal Kombat. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, National Amusements owner Sumner Redstone first became interested in Midway during the mid 1980s, and by 1988 had acquired 24% of its common stock. That same year he sought regulatory clearance to gain controlling interest, but was denied by the Securities and Exchange Commission. This spring—some sixteen years later—the 81 year-old Redstone finally became Midway’s majority shareholder. Now he is exploring the
possibility of taking the company private (Hoover’s Inc., “Midway Games Inc.”), a possibility seems likely given that his daughter was just appointed Vice Chairman at his behest.

In and of itself, Redstone’s recent acquisition of and intent to privatize Midway is peculiar. The company is in much worse shape now than when he first tried to gain controlling interest in 1988. Not only has Midway “been against the figurative financial ropes for several years, losing money while getting knocked around by larger game publishers with deeper marketing budgets” (ibid.), but it finished 2003 without a top 20 seller, despite concentrating on just a handful of games. In addition, its recent attempts at debt financing were not particularly successful. An April stock offering of 11.35 million additional common shares only generated $82 million (Standard and Poor’s, “News Headlines”), less than 70% of the company’s net loss in 2003 alone (Disclosure Incorporated). While ripe for takeover, Midway does not appear to be all that worthy of acquisition.

And yet, Redstone paid handsomely to become majority shareholder. The April stock offering added about 20% to Midway’s common shares (Standard and Poor’s, “News Headlines”), and thus 20% to Redstone’s cash outlay. There will be additional costs, too, should the company go private, costs Redstone (as owner) would have to cover personally. As one of the wealthiest men in the world, he certainly has adequate resources, but it seems odd he would waste them on a company whose best days are long gone.
Redstone’s willingness to throw good money after bad is made stranger still by the fact that he owns controlling interest in Viacom, the media giant whose subsidiaries include Simon & Schuster, CBS, Blockbuster, and of course Paramount Pictures. Putting money into any one of these companies makes better financial sense (on paper, anyway) than buying up Midway: Midway’s return on investment is less 7% on money invested five years ago (Standard and Poor’s, “Key Stock Statistics”). In addition, Viacom is in fairly desperate straights at the moment. A run of bad luck has forced the conglomerate to drastically restructure its film operations. Now, film, television and publishing are all part of the same division, and controlling interest in Blockbuster is to be sold off later this year (Hoover’s Inc., “Viacom”).

These kinds of cost-cutting “readjustments” are fairly common for conglomerates, but National Amusements is heavily dependent on Viacom for source material. The subsidiary’s film works supply much of the content that fills the 1400+ movie screens at the heart of National Amusements’s business. In order to keep National Amusements healthy and profitable, therefore, Redstone has to make sure Viacom is in good working order. At the moment, though, he seems more interested in Midway, and is spending a fortune on the game company instead of on ways to right his ailing film pipeline. Clearly, games have cast a spell on Redstone, and big changes are ahead for one of America’s premiere film businesses.

Acting Out
In Chapter Three, I noted that video and computer games have evolved according to the language and perspective of cinema. Game developers, scholars and consumers alike use cinematic terms such as “camera movement” and “cut scenes” to talk about game production, aesthetics, and even play. That the computer screen and the silver screen are markedly different in both theory and function seems not to matter. Cinematic discourse has become game lingua franca, and thus eased the cinematic adaptation of game iconography.

However, games’ growing importance in the media economy is changing the medium’s aesthetic importance as well. Whereas film once shaped games, today games shape film, and filmmakers probe them for visual language, production techniques and thematic and ideological inspiration. The major film studios, for example, have recently become quite fond of motion capture animation (mocap), a means of animating computer-generated imagery that relies on practices and equipment pioneered by game developers. Simply put, mocap is the technical capture of motion data via sensor arrays and computers. During a capture session (which generally takes place on a modified soundstage, though META Motion’s Gypsy 4 wireless system can be used outside), mocap actors don special suits covered with dozens of optical or mechanical sensors known as markers. These markers form a kind of biomechanical skeleton, and when an actor moves around, a digital camera and computer record the skeleton’s movements. The motion data are then processed, refined and used to animate digitally-created characters.
In contrast to programmed digital animation, which is incredibly labor intensive and requires a great deal of time and technical skill to achieve realistic human movement, mocap efficiently, affordably and convincingly reproduces real-life motion. Many animators, in fact, prefer mocap over other animation techniques because it eliminates the need to deal with shoulders, toes and other joints, all of which are notoriously difficult to animate well.

Mocap has been a staple of game development for years, especially sports game development, which trades on realistic player movement. However, the technique is fast becoming de rigeur in film: most of the top-grossing movies of the last few years contain mocapped characters or extensively mocapped sequences (e.g., *The Matrix Reloaded* [2003], *Spider-Man* [2002], *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* [1999]). There have even been entirely mocapped films recently (e.g., *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* [2001]); and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) won an Academy Award this year thanks in large part to its mocapped character, Gollum.

While mocap allows filmmakers to create extremely lifelike computer-generated characters, and thus more readily blend computer-generated and live imagery, it does have its drawbacks. For one thing, mocap tends to capture “movement rather than acting” (Hooks 33). As mocap expert Ed Hooks explains, we humans relate to one another largely through our emotions; captured movement should ideally also expose emotion. Many years ago at the the Disney Studios in Hollywood, Disney’s drawing instructor, Don Graham,
gave a famous lecture about the importance of animating force (impulse) rather than form (movement). In general, 3D [animation] leans heavily toward the animation of form, and mocap tilts even further in that direction....A [mocapped] character decides to move from here to there rather than doing so in response to an emotion. (ibid.)

Some mocap studios now use trained actors in the capture sessions in the hopes of making the motion data more realistic, and thus the animation based on that data more emotionally powerful. The Weta Digital performance-capture stage in Wellington, New Zealand, is one such studio; its work with Andy Serkis (the actor who “played” Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* films) clearly impressed Hooks:

> When I first saw that character come slithering out of the rocks, my jaw dropped. The earmarks of a good actor are all over the place. A prime example is the way Serkis obviously understands Michael Chekhov’s concept of the psychological gesture....When Gollum is being extra crafty, note what he’s doing with his arms and hands. Those are psychological gestures, and they create a complex emotional response in the viewer, capitalizing on the fact that our sense of sight is more powerful than our sense of hearing. (31)

Mocap acting and capture techniques undoubtedly will improve on the whole, but there is another, more profound issue at stake than the tendency to capture “movement rather than acting.” Mocap dramatically alters the role of the human actor in film. Mocap actors, for example, are generally only needed for a few sessions, after which
their recorded movements can be replicated, sutured together and otherwise modified to create all kinds of different animations. In addition, these movements are wholly delinked from the specific human bodies that made them. While some mocapped characters resemble specific stars (e.g., *Shark Tale*'s [2004] Oscar looks suspiciously like Will Smith, the actor who did the voice characterization), there is no real need for them to look or sound anything like the human actors whose movements they borrow. Part of the appeal of computer-generated characters is that they can be made to order.

Mocap therefore seriously calls into question commercial filmmaking’s reliance on the star system, or at least a human-based star system. Mocap allows filmmakers to literally manufacture stars, and to do so cheaply and without most of the give and take involved in dealing with real people (e.g. contract disputes, personal and artistic differences, etc.). There is no need to work with finicky, expensive stars when computer-generated characters can deliver flawless, instantaneous and non-union performances on demand. In addition, digital characters do not age, have bad hair days, get fat, or suffer any of the other “afflictions” that diminish star power. Since Hollywood films are very much defined by their stars, mocap’s increasing presence in feature films presages dramatic changes in how film is produced and produces meaning.

**Machinima**

In Chapter Two, I described how many filmmakers now rely on the same virtual production methods game developers have used for years. High-speed networks, for instance—once the province of game developers looking to import cut-rate digital
textures from China to the U.S.—are now used by filmmakers to acquire computer-generated images and special effects for pennies on the dollar. These networks’ incredible data transfer rate has allowed companies such as Threshold Entertainment to form CGI development teams out of talent harvested from countries that pay below-market wages (e.g., India and China). Virtual teams are able to deliver content at reduced prices and without the physical plant and many of the resources usually necessary for moving image production.

Interestingly enough, this kind of electronic outsourcing (though incipient) may already be passé. Filmmakers have discovered an even more affordable way to create computer-generated images, and indeed entirely computer-generated films. Ironically, this new discovery, called *machinima*, is also derivative of video and computer games, and promises to fundamentally change how films get made.

Short for “machine cinema,” machinima is a form of digital filmmaking that uses computers rather than cameras to capture action. It is

real world filmmaking techniques applied within an interactive virtual space where characters and events can either be controlled by humans, scripts or artificial intelligence. (Dellario and Marino)

What makes machinima unique is that it is created with off-the-shelf computer games. Thus, anyone with time to spare and access to a personal computer can produce high-quality, feature-length animated movies with sophisticated 3D graphics, CD-quality sound, and custom lighting and special effects—all for next to nothing.
There are two primary types of machinima: script-driven and real-time. In script-driven machinima, filmmakers use the programming tools packaged with computer games such as *Neverwinter Nights* (2002) to create, populate and animate virtual worlds. These tools are intended to increase game replay value by allowing players to develop additional levels known as "mods." Interestingly, some mods go on to become successful games in their own right. *Counterstrike* (2000), for example, is a *Half-Life* (1998) mod bought by Sierra Online and packaged for commercial release. The game has become one of the most popular online titles in the world (Valve Corporation), suggesting perhaps that bundling development tools with games may have another, more lucrative end than simply increasing replay value.

At any rate, script-driven machinima repurposes game development tools in order to bring filmmakers' stories to life. As Dellario and Marino explain,

> cameras, characters, effects, etc. are scripted for playback in real-time [using game tools]. While similar to animation, the scripting is driven by events rather than keyframes.\(^8\)

In essence, all filmmakers have to do is "enter" their stories into the computer. The computer then does the laborious task of creating keyframes and animating them. The animations can be recorded as finished products, with no need for editing.

Real-time machinima, by contrast, is more like traditional filmmaking. Instead of creating worlds and then animating them, real-time machinima-makers record gamers, or rather their avatars, interacting in game space. In essence, players "act" using computer-
generated characters as marionettes. The acting is recorded as "raw footage" and later edited and assembled with programs such as Final Cut Pro or Machinima Production Kit.

Part of machinima’s appeal, obviously, is its affordability—it costs next to nothing to create. Other than a source game, all the necessary software is freely and legally available online, as are all kinds of tutorials, user groups and support information. Thus, even ambitious projects are possible for little more than a song:

Clan Phantasm wrote their feature-length film Devil's Covenant set in the far future, with over 15 separate sets, special effects and non-human characters populating their world. It took them a year to make, part-time, and cost them nothing. Strange Company Productions’ last film, Eschaton: Nightfall, is a near-future action nightmare set in the [H.R.] Gigeresque world of H.P. Lovecraft: to produce it on real film would have cost us $1 million at a conservative estimate, but in Machinima we produced it for $300. (Hancock)

Savings like these are largely due to the fact that script-driven machinima combines production and postproduction into one process. Script-driven machinima allows for editing at the data level—where you can add characters, adjust camera angles, create camera moves, fine-tune animation, etc. It’s much like doing a reshoot without having to call back the cast and crew.

(Dellario and Marino)

Again, these are feature-length films. The savings in cost, not to mention time and human labor, are simply incredible.
So too are the possibilities for distribution. Unlike film, machinima is not tied by history and economics to traditional distribution channels (e.g., theaters, broadcast and cable television, DVD and home video, etc.). On the contrary, because it utilizes video and computer game aesthetics, machinima is already geared toward display on computer screens, and thus toward 21st century methods of information delivery such as the Internet. Machinima does not have to be digitized, “panned and scanned” or otherwise manipulated for home delivery. Furthermore, broadband connections, file-sharing networks and other “fat pipe” technologies have made image quality and download speeds effectively irrelevant. High-quality films now can be downloaded quickly and easily by anyone, thereby satisfying media makers’ inveterate interest in on-demand consumption.

Another advantage of machinima is that filmmakers are not limited by convention. As Academy of Machinima Arts & Sciences board member Hugh Hancock explains,

with “virtual cameras” you can develop an entirely new language of film, not hampered by the constraints of the real world, the sheer flexibility of a world where you make up all the rules of physics, the option to add interactivity to films...And on. And on.

There is no need for special shooting permits, tricks for working around unwanted objects in the frame, or indeed any of the other work filmmakers do to negotiate the physical limitations of the camera and the shooting space. With machinima, setting, action, camera position and angle, actors, lighting—in essence, every component used to create moving images—is entirely controllable by the filmmaker, down to the smallest detail.
Thus in addition to tremendous savings and on-demand deliverability, machinima brings with it the promise of artistic freedom. This kind of freedom appeals both to those who make films and to those who finance them, which explains why this new cinematic form is redefining the ways movies get made.

**Conclusion(s)**

Video and computer games unquestionably are reshaping American cinema. Money once destined for film is being channeled to games, filmmakers are adopting game-based production techniques and technologies, and, as I showed in Chapter One, media conglomerates are starting to use games in lieu of film to brand and sell consumer goods. Even the city of Hollywood, California is feeling games’ influence: game giant Electronic Arts recently opened the largest production facility Los Angeles has seen since the Warner studio was built seventy years ago (“Lights, Camera, Action!”). Though EALA was just completed in May, it has already begun siphoning off Hollywood’s best and brightest. Academy Award-winning digital effects supervisor for *Titanic* (1997), Mark Lasoff, is now one of EALA’s studio arts directors, and scriptwriter John Milius (*Apocalypse Now* [1979]) has been hired to write the next installment of the *Medal of Honor* series (ibid.). Film is falling victim to games in much the same way radio did to television, its money and talent moving to a newer and potentially more lucrative medium.

As a result, the silver screen is starting to tarnish. The emergence of 1) a robust, more cost-effective way to brand, and 2) inexpensive and relatively simple methods for moving-making, directly challenge one of the primary sources of film’s cultural cachet.
It is film's branding potential and complex, costly production process that help make the silver screen shimmer. Commercial film budgets, for example, are so large that few consumers can relate to them. Even a modest film costs more money than most people earn in a lifetime. Such excess gives film a rarified air, as does the excessive labor and amount of time it takes to develop a feature film from concept to finished product. Like the "skinny oxygen" of a mountain top, this rarified air turns ordinary images into spectacular images (and a simple, vinyl screen into a "silver screen").

So too does film's ability to brand. As I pointed out in Chapter One, one of the primary functions of American commercial film is to sell consumer goods. Film is able to make the most mundane products seem infinitely desirable. Indeed, this knack for stimulating ancillary consumption is in many ways the medium's reason for being. It was the doctrine guiding film entrepreneurs in the 1890s as they built the industry, and the rationale underpinning the formation of the star system. Some scholars even argue that film's ability to sell is intrinsic to the cinematic apparatus itself, as well as to the aesthetic that apparatus enables storytellers to capture. By this reckoning, whatever magic movies are able to evoke is fundamentally (though not always necessarily explicitly) tied to this branding function. Were it not, commercial film would look very different.

Interestingly, film is not the only medium feeling games' influence. From television shows (e.g., Mortal Kombat: Conquest [Threshold Entertainment]) to comic books (e.g., Tomb Raider [Top Cow Productions]) to CDs (e.g., Grand Theft Auto: Vice City—Box Set [Sony]), video and computer games are affecting the whole of the
entertainment sphere. They now supply media makers with the kind of inspiration and imagery that once only film could. Moreover, games are prompting consumer electronics manufacturers to explore new possibilities for media consumption. Nokia and Sony, for example, have begun building “personal information portals” (PIPs). PIPs are handheld or console devices that combine game systems with cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), digital cameras, wireless and broadband internet connections, HDTV and analog television tuners, DVD/CD/MP3 player/recorders, and other technologies. The appeal of PIPs such as the Sony PSX and Nokia N-Gage is their promise to contain or at least make manageable the proliferating information streams that threaten to overwhelm the modern-day consumer. That this kind of centralization allows hardware manufacturers greater control over the ebb and flow of information seems lost on most consumers, who relish the thought of ridding themselves of yet another burdensome electronic device.

In addition, because media form and content (and thus meaning) are shaped by consumption technologies—television programs look the way they do in part because of the size, shape and resolution of the television set, for example—centralizing consumption cannot help but homogenize media iconography. In order to be consumed via PIP, media products will have to conform to PIP audio-visual standards. Moreover, such standards likely will not show off every product to its best advantage. The tiny screens necessary for handheld PIPs, for example, are not well-suited to reproducing the majesty and detail of a John Ford landscape.
Though media and telecommunications companies have a longstanding interest in "centralized information conduits" (e.g., cable, DSL and home satellite networks,) the centralization of information embodied by PIPs is different. PIPs are game-based, and thus expressly designed to facilitate ergodic interaction. Their emphasis is not so much on information delivery (as with cable, DSL and other centralized conduits) as on the manipulation of information once it has been delivered. PIPs are geared toward extending the direct and tangible sense of authorship intrinsic to game play to other media experiences. As a result, the advent of PIPs portends all kinds of interesting and radical possibilities for meaning-making (e.g., ergodic television shows, open-source movie making, etc.). If the present state of the media economy is any indication, these are precisely the sorts of possibilities that will define media entertainment in the 21st century. Despite the nascence of the medium, games are already the *raison d'etre* and gold standard for all kinds of new media artifacts, technologies and business practices.

It is this broad influence that ultimately reveals the value of my dissertation. As I pointed out in Chapter One, video and computer games are reshaping America’s cultural, political and economic landscape in diverse and powerful ways. They are changing how business gets done, how families spend their free time, how filmmakers make movies—even how the U.S. Army recruits and trains its soldiers. In order to fully understand these changes, it is necessary to understand their origins, and my dissertation specifically works to illuminate the origins of game’s influence on film.

In so doing, my dissertation speaks to what may be *the* issue facing media producers, distributors, consumers, regulators and scholars alike in the coming years—
the digitization of the mass media. Because digital media are incredibly difficult to protect, the fact that film and other media are “going digital” raises serious questions about the feasibility of maintaining and profiting from intellectual property. Digital media can be easily duplicated without loss of content or quality, which makes guarding against unauthorized duplication a real challenge. Indeed, as fast as security experts devise new watermarking and code-obfuscation techniques to safeguard digital intellectual property, hackers find ways to circumvent them. Even secure networks are not particularly secure; the source code for the sequel to the mega-hit Half-Life (Valve), for example, was stolen right from Valve’s intranet, a system that ostensibly was closed to all but the game’s developers (Morris). If media makers like Valve are unable to protect their intellectual property, then they cannot sell it. Time and again consumers have shown a steadfast unwillingness to pay for something they can get for free. This unwillingness, in fact, is the reason for the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998, and the music industry’s tenacious fight against file-sharing networks such as eDonkey2000 and Kazaa. By illuminating the digitization of the mass media on a small scale (i.e., the digitization of film by games), my dissertation provides an entry point for analyzing the implications of this development. Thus, even as I focus on the past by unearthing the history of the game film, my analysis is very much oriented toward media studies of the future. Having completed my dissertation, it is to this future that I now turn.
Notes

1 “There are games which it is better to lose than win.”

2 According to Hoover’s Company Records, Midway released just 28 games in 2003, significantly fewer than the 42 it released the year before (Hoover’s Inc., “Midway Games Inc.”).

3 Midway actually has posted significant losses the last five years (Disclosure Incorporated).

4 Redstone’s total investment in Midway stands at around $586 million (51% of 100 million shares at $11.50 per share, the average price in 2003 according to Thompson Financial).

5 See Theodore’s “A Joint Effort.”

6 For more on sports games, see Scott and Ruggill’s “Simulation or Simulacrum?: The Promise of Sports Games.”

7 The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King won an Academy Award for visual effects.

8 Keyframe animation relies on the creation of still images which are used by the computer as nodal points. These nodal points allow the computer generate a series of secondary frames which when interpolated with the nodal points give the illusion of movement. Keyframe animation is a painstaking process, even though the computer does the actual animation. Creating keyframes demands programmers have both technical facility and artistic ability.

*City Hunter* chronicles detective Ryu Saeba's (Jackie Chan) search for Shizuko Imamura (Kumiko Goto), the runaway daughter of a wealthy Japanese businessman. Saeba tracks Imamura to a cruise ship, but the ship is hijacked by terrorists before he can apprehend her. Saeba, along with a James Bond-like cardshark and two-undercover police officers already on board, overpower the hijackers and save the ship. Saeba then returns Imamura (who has fallen in love with him) to her grateful father.

Though not technically a game-based film,¹ *City Hunter* makes the list because of a *Street Fighter II*-themed fight sequence that takes place in the cruise ship’s arcade. After Saeba is electrocuted by a broken game machine, he hallucinates that he and one of the terrorists are *Street Fighter II* characters. The scene is noteworthy for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that its score consists of a collection of sound bites lifted directly from the game. The costumes too are similarly “authentic,” as are each character’s signature moves (e.g. Chun-Li’s helicopter kick). Saeba even mimics Chun-Li’s victory dance and hand-clap (which are later reprised during the closing credits). The scene is also distinctive within the diegesis itself, being the only overtly “fantastical” in the film. Saeba does have other hallucinations, but they tend to be mildly erotic and
wholly anchored within the limits of the diegesis. The arcade fight scene, by contrast, explicitly violates those limits, casting Saeba as a woman, a sumo wrestler and several other characters from the *Street Fighter II* game world.


The year is 2007 and Los Angeles has become New Angeles, its streets flooded and buildings ruined by a huge earthquake. The city’s social system has been ravaged too, and the police no longer control the streets. Instead, they have cut a deal with local gangs—the police patrol the streets by day, and the gangs have free reign at night. In the midst of this chaos, megalomaniacal businessman Koga Shuko (Robert Patrick) hatches a plan to unite the city: he will steal the pieces of the Double Dragon medallion—a charm that supposedly gives its wearer magical powers—and rule unilaterally. Shuko is only able to acquire half of the medallion, however; Satori Imada (Julia Nickson-Soul) gives the other half to Jimmy and Billy Lee (Mark Dacascos and Scott Wolf) before she is killed. Pursued by Shuko, the Lees join forces with Marian Delario (Alyssa Milano)—a suburban teenager by day and leader of the Power Corps vigilantes by night—and together they defeat their enemy. This victory emboldens Marian’s father, Police Chief Delario (Leon Russom), to clean up New Angeles, and he orders his men to once again patrol the streets at night.
Double Dragon is extremely different in tone from its source game, which begins with a brief cinematic of a woman being brutally attacked and kidnapped by thugs. In the game, the Lee brothers use knives, baseball bats and other weapons to destroy the local gang population and rescue the woman. The film, on the other hand, is much lighter, portraying the brothers as talented but slapstick martial artists who are always mugging for the camera and grimacing in mock pain when their enemies are struck in the groin (which happens quite often).


Like Earth itself, Dr. Aki Ross (Ming-Na) is dying. She has been infected by one of the many alien phantoms that now dominate the planet, phantoms whose soul-stealing abilities have forced humans to retreat into “barrier cities” for protection. Guided by her mentor, Dr. Sid (Donald Sutherland), Ross scavenges the rubble of Earth’s once-great cities looking for the “Eight Spirits.” Sid and Ross believe that combining these spirits will eliminate the phantom menace. They are opposed in their quest by General Hein (James Woods), who argues that the only way to save Earth is to fire the orbiting Zeus cannon straight into the crater where the phantoms (or at least, the meteor that seems to have spawned them) first crash-landed. Hein lets phantoms into one of the barrier cities as a way to force the governing council to choose his plan of action over Ross and Sid’s, but the resulting loss of life and his own near death experience turn him suicidal and
homicidal. He flees to space and the safety of the Zeus cannon, which he accidentally destroys (along with himself) after the ineffectual cannon overheats and explodes. Meanwhile, Ross and her lover/bodyguard, Captain Gray Edwards (Alec Baldwin), find the last spirit and save the world.

In addition to mimicking its source games’ aesthetics (*Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* is the first feature-length film in which computer-generated human characters comprise the cast), the film also tries to approximate their ergodicity. The DVD release, for example, contains the Final Fantasy Shuffler, which allows the viewer to “[b]ecome the filmmaker by re-editing a pivotal scene from the film.” The viewer can then “[c]omplete the edit and play back [her/his] final cut.”

*Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. **Dir. Simon West.** **Paramount and Mutual Film Company,** 2001.

On the anniversary of her father’s death, Lady Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie) discovers a mysterious clock hidden beneath the stairwell of her mansion. Within the clock hides another, more ancient timepiece inscribed with a triangle. Croft takes photos of the unusual artifact to noted clock expert Manfred Powell (Iain Glen), who unbeknownst to Croft is a member of a secret society called the Illuminati. For Powell, Croft’s discovery is a dream come true—the clock holds the key to unlocking the power to stop time, something the Illuminati have been waiting for for 5000 years. After Powell’s soldiers break into Croft Manor and
steal the clock, Croft receives a coded message from her father written before his
death years earlier. The message explains the nature of the clock and urges Lara
to stop the Illuminati. She joins forces with Powell as a way to keep an eye on
him, and after helping collect and assemble the Triangle of Light (an artifact that
gives its possessor the power to stop time), uses the Triangle to revenge herself
upon him after she discovers he is her father’s killer.

Though clearly modeled after James Bond and Indiana Jones, Lara Croft seems
more like a game avatar than a film character. She possesses Jones’ lust for
adventure and Bond’s sophistication and sophisticated toys, but not the moral and
professional obligations that drive those men. Jones, for example, raids tombs in
the quest for knowledge; an archaeologist, he wants to study and preserve the
artifacts he finds. Bond likewise steals in defense of his country; his is a
criminality borne of duty. Croft’s thievery, by contrast, is more ambiguous. At
times she steals for pleasure, and at times for personal reasons (i.e. to bring her
father back to life). This fuzziness allows audiences to supply their own
motivations for her actions, in much the same way players do with game avatars.


This second installment of the series finds Lady Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie)
diving for sunken treasure off the coast of Greece. A volcanic eruption has
uncovered the Luna temple—Alexander the Great’s secret storehouse within
which is fabled to exist a map to Pandora's box—and tomb raiders from all over the world have come in search of gold and artifacts. Croft finds the map but it is stolen by Chen Lo (Simon Yam), a smuggler hired by Jonathan Reiss (Ciarán Hinds). Reiss is a former prize-winning scientist who now develops biological weapons for sale to the highest bidder. Pandora's box is, of course, the ultimate biological weapon, and Reiss plans to use it to kill all but the wealthy few who can meet his price. MI:6 gets wind of Reiss's plan and enlists Croft to stop him. She, in turn, enlists an old lover—soldier-turned-criminal, Terry Sheridan (Gerard Butler)—and together they steal back the map. Croft then ditches the shifty Sheridan, deciphers the map, and travels to Africa to find the box. Reiss ambushes her there and forces the tomb raider to lead him over the dangerous road to the Cradle of Life, within which lies the box in a pool of black acid. In the penultimate showdown, Croft is rescued from certain death by Sheridan, and Reiss gets his just desserts when he falls into the acid. Sheridan then tries to steal the box, and Croft kills him in order to save the earth.

What is particularly interesting about this second Tomb Raider installment is how different it is from the first. Lara Croft is a much weaker character, consistently relying on Sheridan for help instead of on her own strength and courage. This kind of disempowered femininity is much more in line with classical Hollywood's vision of "womanness" than the vision found in the games or even the first film.² It was likely easier (or even preferable) for Paramount to draw on well-established
filmic tropes (rather than on those of the relatively young game medium) once the
game series had been cinematized initially.


The Mortal Kombat tournament is held only once a generation. Should Earth’s
fighters lose again (for the tenth time), Earth will fall to the armies of Outworld.
Unfortunately, Earth’s champions are unprepared: Liu Kang (Robin Shou) fears
his destiny, and has fled the monkish order that was training him; action star
Johnny Cage (Linden Ashby) has begun to believe the tabloids and now doubts
his own martial arts prowess; and since losing her partner, special agent Sonya
Blade (Bridgette Wilson) is unable to trust anyone but herself. Fortunately,
Earth’s champions have a guide—the lightning god, Lord Rayden (Christopher
Lambert). Rayden not only instructs them in the rules of the tournament, but
intercedes on their behalf when Outworld sorcerer Shang Tsung (Cary-Hiroyuki
Tagawa) tries to cheat. Rayden, however, cannot travel to Outworld, and when
Blade is taken there against her will, Kang and Cage must follow alone. Assisted
by Princess Katana (Talisa Soto), the Emperor’s step-daughter and arch enemy,
Kang and Cage rescue Blade. Kang then challenges and defeats Tsung in Mortal
Kombat. The champions return to Earth to a hero’s welcome, but their
celebrations are cut short when the Emperor himself explodes forth from the sky,
once again ready to claim Earth for his own.
Mortal Kombat is very much like its source game in that each fight showcases a new warrior and new fighting techniques. The film also duplicates the game’s famous “fatalities,” the secret death moves players learn to gain extra points (as well as prestige among fellow players). By emphasizing these “Easter Eggs,” or hidden features, Mortal Kombat illuminates the fact that game adaptation often involves more than just the faithful reproduction of a game’s salient aesthetic and thematic elements. Indeed with game films, sometimes it is the inclusion of a source game’s Easter Eggs that defines (and in some cases legitimizes) the adaptation.


This second installment of the Mortal Kombat series picks up where the first left off: Outworld emperor Shao Kahn (Brian Thompson) has forced open a portal to Earth and plans to merge the realms. Once again, it is up to Liu Kang (Robin Shou) and Sonya Blade (Sandra Hess) to save the planet, though this time they must do so without Johnny Cage (Chris Conrad), who is murdered by Kahn at the beginning of the film. Earth’s protector, Lord Rayden (James Remar), is also killed, leaving Kang without the sage counsel he so desperately needs. Kang does not remain mentorless for long; a mysterious Native American warrior named
Nightwolf (Litefoot) helps him unlock his “animality.” Tapping into this inner force and metamorphosing into a dragon, Kang defeats Kahn and saves Earth.

Like *Mortal Kombat*, *Mortal Kombat: Annihilation* showcases the game series’ pantheon of characters, many of whom appear just long enough to be trounced by Kang and his friends. In fact, the film even brings back two slain characters from the previous installment—Sub Zero and Scorpion—suggesting that in game adaptation, visual iconography may be more important than narrative continuity.


*Resident Evil* begins in much the same way it ends, with Alice (Milla Jovovich) awakening dazed, confused and (of course) completely naked. Part of an elite paramilitary team hired to safeguard the Hive—a vast subterranean research complex owned by the Umbrella Corporation—Alice has been knocked unconscious by the complex’s automated defense systems after a thief steals and then releases a deadly virus into the ventilation system. Alice is quickly gathered up by the rest of her unit and together they penetrate the Hive in an attempt to shut down the Red Queen, the supercomputer that has locked down the complex in order to contain the virus. Unfortunately, the virus has mutated the Hive’s scientists into flesh-eating zombies and its guard dogs into super-powered killing machines. In classic horror-film style, the soldiers are picked off one at a time
until only Alice remains, though when she awakens after escaping the complex and being carted away by Umbrella Corp. officials in Hazmat suits, she discovers that the zombies have escaped and ransacked Raccoon City (which lies above the Hive).

Like the *Resident Evil* games, the film both draws upon and violates the conventions of the horror film. For example, all of the action takes place in confined, dimly lit spaces which were once clean but now ooze with filthy water and myriad dangers. However, like the first-person shooters on which it is based, the film uses first person perspective to show Alice’s point of view rather than the killers’. The film also inter-cuts computer-generated maps (much like the ones found in the games) with the action to show Alice’s progress through the Hive. Thus, though Alice and her unit appear lost (a common trope in horror films), the audience knows exactly where they are and the progress of their mission. This kind of information is essential to the games.


Betrayed and murdered by Amakusa Shirou (Marcy Rae), holy warriors Charlotte (Tiffany Grant), Wan Fu (Rob Mungle), Nakoruru (Carol Amerson), Galford (Kurt Stoll), Tam Tam (Drew Scroggins) and Haohmaru (Milton Lawrence) are reincarnated a century later to restore balance to the world. Haohmaru, though,
does not remember his past, and is thus easy prey for Shirou. She slaughters his mother and enslaves the young men of his village, fanning his rage and bringing him under the sway of the evil god she serves. Just before he completely submits to the darkness, however, he is rescued by the other warriors and taken back to his village. There, Charlotte tries to soothe his anger, but Shirou’s spell is broken only when the local children come to visit their old friend. Revitalized, Haohmaru leads the holy warriors into battle against Shirou. They destroy the witch and the evil deity she worships.

One of the most interesting things about *Samurai Shodown: The Motion Picture* is the fact that it predates *Street Fighter*. *Samurai Shodown* was a *Street Fighter II* knock-off, yet it was adapted to the silver screen a year earlier. That *Samurai Shodown: The Motion Picture* even made it to the U.S. is remarkable; though big in Japan, the game was just one of dozens of *Street Fighter II* imitations that flooded arcades in the early 1990s.


*Street Fighter* chronicles General Bison’s (Raul Julia) attempt to ransom captured humanitarian aid workers in the war-torn country of Shadaloo. Unwilling to accede to the self-styled general’s demands, Allied Nations (A.N.) Commander Colonel William F. Guile (Jean-Claude Van Damme) launches an unauthorized but successful sneak attack on the warlord’s fortress. Once inside, Guile
discovers that his good friend, Carlos Blanka (Robert Mammore), has suffered terribly in the general’s laboratories. The former A.N. cadet has been mutated into what was supposed to be the first of an army of super soldiers. Guile tries to euthanize his horribly deformed friend but is stopped by Dr. Dhalsim (Roshan Seth). Dhalsim swears to rehabilitate the creature he was forced to create.

Meanwhile, the A.N. fails to meet Bison’s deadline, and the general calls for his new super soldier to assassinate the hostages. It is Guile instead who emerges from the underground lab, surprising Bison and killing him.

Like other game-based films, *Street Fighter* tries to reproduce faithfully the iconicity of its source game. Not only are all the various fighters present (e.g., Chun-Li, Ryu and Balrog), but the game’s interface is as well. Bison’s floating desk actually contains a *Street Fighter II* console, and he uses its joystick and buttons to control his fortress’s defenses.


This adaptation of *Street Fighter II* details Bison’s attempt to recruit fighting talent for his Shadowlaw crime syndicate. Though he already has a stable of powerful fighters, Bison wants Ryu, a Japanese martial artist who roams the earth like *Kung Fu*’s Kane, doing good deeds and battling other street fighters. Bison, however, is not the only one looking for Ryu; an international task force is also searching for the fighter to warn him of Bison’s plans. When his search for Ryu
fails, Bison brainwashes Ken, Ryu’s old training partner. Ken, though, eventually breaks Bison’s spell, and he and Ryu team up to defeat the villain.

Like its source game, the film relies on the spectacular battles and signature moves of its different characters. The film also mimics the game’s global feel, depicting fights in London, Seattle, Calcutta and China, though like the game, these locales are mostly colorful backdrops rather than essential meaning-making components.


New York City plumbers Mario Mario (Bob Hoskins) and Luigi Mario (John Leguizamo) are down on their luck: Scapelli Plumbing keeps stealing their customers, their truck is badly in need of repair, and their rent is three months overdue. Their luck changes, however, when they meet Daisy (Samantha Mathis), a college student who has her own beef with Scapelli (Gianni Russo). While blasting in an underground tunnel, Scapelli’s men discovered a fossil site full of unusual dinosaur skeletons. Daisy is investigating the site for the university, but her investigation is holding up Scapelli’s plans. When Daisy takes Luigi down into the tunnel on their first date, they discover that Scapelli’s men have flooded it with water. Luigi and Mario manage to save the site, but lose Daisy: she is
kidnapped while they work by dinosaurs from another dimension. The plumbers learn that Daisy is a princess from this other dimension, and that she was smuggled to Earth when the evil Koopa (Dennis Hopper) seized the throne. Koopa now wants to bridge the dimensional barrier and take over Earth, and he needs Daisy’s help. Mario and Luigi track the princess to Koopa’s headquarters, and foil the dictator’s plans with the help of a massive single-celled organism (the de-evolved form of the Princess’s father). The brothers save the princess, re-evolve her father, de-evolve Koopa, and return to Earth.

Unlike most game films, *Super Mario Bros.* features a number of well-known actors (e.g. Hoskins, Hopper and Leguizamo), likely cast to help legitimate the film’s source material. The film, however, had a disastrous box-office run, earning less than $21 million. Every game film since (with the exception of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*) has relied on B-actors instead, suggesting that acting and star quality may be secondary to iconographical fidelity in game adaptation.


When fishermen discover the remains of a genetically mutated creature, WWWC agent Jun Kazama (Edi Patterson) is called in to investigate. The WWWC believes that industrialist and world champion fighter Heihchi Mishima (John
Paul Shephard) has been conducting illegal genetic experiments. Kazama and her partner, Lee Chaolan (David Stokey), travel to Mishima’s island fortress to find evidence of his wrongdoings. On the boat ride there, Kazama meets Kazuya Mishima (Adam Dudley), the estranged son of Heihchi Mishima and a figure who has been haunting Kazama’s dreams. Kazuya Mishima is a man consumed by rage—when he was a boy, his father tossed him over a cliff to test his strength. The fall nearly killed the young Mishima, and left his body and mind horribly scarred. Kazama witnessed the fall, and she too was scarred by it. As a result, she now tries to connect with Kazuya, however he can think of nothing but revenging himself upon his father. He ultimately gets that revenge, though stops short of killing the elder Mishima when Kazuma sacrifices herself so that Kazuya can release his anger. Heihchi Mishima is killed when his stepson, Lei Wuloung (Gary G. Haddock), triggers the island’s self defense mechanism. The film ends with Kazama talking with her young son, whose has the distinctive look of a Mishima.

Like Street Fighter II: The Animated Movie, Tekken: The Motion Picture was localized for released in the U.S. In addition to being dubbed into English, the film was also scored with songs by American artists such as Offspring, Corrosion of Conformity, Soulhat, Stabbing Westward and the Urge.

Adapted from Origin Systems game series of the same name, Wing Commander tells the story of how half-human/half “pilgrim” Christopher Blair (Freddie Prinze Jr.) defies prejudice and overwhelming odds to save Earth from a Kilrathi invasion. A rookie fighter pilot en route to serve on the battleship Tiger Claw, Blair carries a coded message from Admiral Geoffrey Tolwyn (David Warner). According to the message, the Kilrathi have located Earth and are massing for an all-out attack. Unfortunately, Earth’s space fleet is spread out across the universe and unable to return in time to intercept the invaders. Tolwyn’s orders are clear: the Tiger Claw is to defend Earth until reinforcements arrive. Boarding a Kilrathi communication ship left behind in the aliens’ jump to hyperspace, the crew of the Tiger Claw discover the coordinates of the Kilrathi “jump point” (the location they will emerge from hyperspace). In a risky maneuver, Blair pilots a one-man space craft through a quasar to reach the jump point before the invaders, relying on his inherent pilgrim abilities to navigate where no human or computer could. Blair of course survives (unlike the Kilrathi battle cruiser that follows him) and warns Earth. Ships are then sent to the jump point to pick off the alien spacecraft one at a time as they emerge from hyperspace.

Unlike many other game films, Wing Commander was directed by the same person who developed the games—Chris Roberts. As a result, the film’s plot,
action and special effects resemble the games' cinematics (which, incidentally, were a large part of what made the games so financially successful). *Wing Commander* is thus more like an extension of its source games than an adaptation.
NOTES

\footnotetext[1]{City Hunter actually was adapted from a popular Japanese comic.}

\footnotetext[2]{This is not to say, however, that the Lara Croft of the game series is a necessarily unproblematical representation of femininity. On the contrary, her costumes and “pin-up” body certainly speak an antiquated, phallogocentric vision of womanness.}

\footnotetext[3]{“Film Database,” Box Office Guru, <http://www.boxofficeguru.com/s3.htm> (4 May 2004).}
GLOSSARY

**Bullet time:** a term invented by Andy and Larry Wachowski to describe the slow motion effect invented for and made famous by *The Matrix* (1999).

**Coin-op games:** games that are coin-operated. Also known as arcade games.

**Closed platform:** game systems for which hardware manufacturers control software development through licensing agreements. Games for closed platforms (e.g., Xbox and PlayStation2) will only run on those platforms, and developers must pay for the right to develop platform-specific games.

**Console:** a game system that is not coin-operated, and rarely comes with its own screen. Most consoles accept cartridges, CD-ROMs or other portable storage devices, and can thus play many different kinds of games. Consoles are **closed platforms**.

**Ergodicity:** the non-trivial, physical effort involved in the consumption of “interactive” media such as video and computer games. Ergodic devices include joysticks, keyboards, dance pads and other
mechanisms that allow “readers” to directly shape the narrative, thematic and ideological elements that determine the artifactual experience.

**Handheld:** game systems that tend to fit entirely in the hands of the player.

Some handhelds are single-game machines (e.g., Mattel Football), while others can play many (e.g., Gameboy). As of yet, there have been no open platform handhelds.

**Heads-up display:** an on-screen icon or series of icons that provide information about the status of the game. Heads-up displays show things like score, character level, location, health, time remaining in the game, etc.

**Open platform:** game systems such as personal computers that do not require development licenses. Unlike closed platform systems, anyone can develop open platform software.

**Radiosity lighting:** computer-generated lighting that is able to produce indirect illumination and shadows.

**Show mode:** occurs when a game is on but no one is playing. Like a film poster, a game’s show mode is designed to entice passersby. Show
modes differ from game to game but generally include action sequences from the game, a title screen and the high score list. Show modes also act as screen savers, prolonging the life of the cathode ray tube or liquid crystal display on which they run.
APPENDIX A

FEATURE-LENGTH FILMS ABOUT
VIDEO AND COMPUTER GAMES AND GAMING


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