Understanding the Convergence of Video Game and Film Styles

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The digital revolution of humanity is well known for having greatly impacted the forms of media: the digital arts have effectively supplanted the traditional arts: painting pales to the digital masterpiece of Photoshop reality; digital photography frees the photographer from the limitations of the film cartridge; computer-generated imagery (CGI) makes film truly extraordinary; video games put the player into situations that were previously unimaginable. However, video games are mostly considered to be craft and not art, similar to how many modern arts were once considered craft. At the same time, film is considered to be significantly more art-like than video games. Of course, the status of film is disputable, with the television formats varying wildly.

This is especially interesting, as close observation of the interactions of film and video games reveals that there is an intimate relationship. The modern media ecosystem is extremely focused on transmedia movements; the video game adaptation of a movie is extremely common, and the movie adaptation of a video game is gaining momentum. In fact, some of these adaptations have been quite successful, such as the *Tomb Raider*[1] video game that was turned into the *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*[2] movie just five years later. The very existence of this and other films is evidence that film is becoming more video game-like. What makes this possible? Is there an inherent connection between the story-telling modes of the film and the video game that make them similar, and this convergent evolution is just a natural side-effect? Or perhaps it's a cry for recognition by video games, to finally take on a perception as art, while their film ancestor looks on with jealousy, and

[1] Eidos Interactive. *Tomb Raider*. Video game. 1996.
[2] Simon West. *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. Film. 2001.

takes on the elements that made video games successful to regain the fan's levels of attention.

The interactivity of games, especially video games, is indisputable; other media are meant for observation. We can consider this to be an affordance of video games—but how have video games changed since they became viable? One of the first video games, *Pong*, is iconic enough that it is constantly reimplemented by developers, myself included. Pong has few features: the ball and the two moving paddles, one of which may be controlled by a computer player with a simplistic Artificial Intelligence (AI). Analysis of this game shows that it has extremely blocky artwork, and no real story. It seems to be a digital recreation of a similar game that can be played in the analog world: Ping Pong, also called Table Tennis. However, this simplistic beginning does not permanently shadow video games, as many of these decisions were limitations of the computer engines that powered the game, and not the imaginations of those that created it. That is not to say that Pong has some deeper meaning than is visible to the gaming audience, nor that we should go looking for one, but only that the medium did not yet allow the deeper exploration that we expect from our arts.

As the underlying technology evolved, the features of the video game also evolved. This progression can be most easily noticed by following a long-lived game series through the various technological incarnations. An example of this process is the *Mario* series of games by Nintendo. As the computing power of the video game consoles increased, the length of a Mario video game increased; as did the complexity of the artwork and music. Eventually, Mario entered the three-dimensional universe[3], as significant changeover from the two-dimensional platformer earlier games[4]. Although the levels become more intricate, the basic story-line stays the same: Mario must save Princess Peach, who is almost always in another castle. Intricacies do sometimes find themselves getting included in the story-line to differentiate the new game from the previous ones, but the basic principle remains. However, this is not a counterexample to the idea that video games

[3]Nintendo. *Super Mario 64*. 1996.
[4]Nintendo. *Super Mario Bros.* 1985.

are growing to have deeper meaning and therefore worthy of the classification of art, but rather proof that there is a specific video game formula that is in the process of being perfected.

In fact, the formula in which Mario must always save Princess Peach is a trope that can be found in Hollywood films as well, recognizable as "hero saves damsel in distress". This common motif is present even in children's films, such as the Disney's version of Tarzan. Given the human tendency to tell stories of heroism which follow this motif even outside of film and video games, it is safe to say that it affects both low and high art. With this in mind, we find that the further analysis of the development of video games and their relation to film is actually complicated: because of the deep interconnection between the modes expressed in all media, it will be difficult to identify specific elements that are not also shared with at least one other medium. However, we endevour not to show that the connection between film and video games is unique, but rather being strengthened.

Before we can proceed with a case study video game, we must first establish the criteria that we will judge the evolution of the video game towards the film. If this progression actually exists, we expect to find a modern video game with elements of deep and involved story-line, immersive alternative reality that is self-consistent but not necessarily believable within our own universe, there should be a mostly linear structure that can take the form of a narrative, and the game should have a plot structure that is "sufficiently nuanced" that it is not contrived. We instantly recognize that there are games created all of the time that fail this litmus test. This is expected, just as there is film and physical art that is kitsch and of low value.

For this test case, we will evaluate a modern installment of a long-lived game series: *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*[5], directed by Hideo Kojima. *Metal Gear Solid 4* follows in the long line of *Metal Gear Solid* games, which follow the *Metal Gear* story-lines. We will analyze the depth of *Metal Gear Solid 4*, determine how similar it is to modern film, and show that it is a accurate example of the state of modern video game development. While we will focus on *Metal*

[5]Konami. *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*. June 2008.

Gear Solid 4[6], it is necessary to mention some of the predecessor games, both to understand the relevance in the change of the story-line as well changes in mechanics.

Professional opinion of a video game is a great first source of analysis. Experts within the field will offer an opinion, and do a significant portion of the hard work in assessing the value of the entire piece. Since these domain experts are, by definition, *domain* experts, we must consider their inherent biases. We assume that these domain experts will assert value in some scenarios where the value is limited, so we must distrust their judgment in the absolute scale. That said, the value judgment within the relative scale is likely valid. Therefore, we must also show that the absolute value is accurate, which we can do by considering the biases of the reviewer and coerce them into the media studies framework.

The review of *Metal Gear Solid 4* by Jeff Haynes of IGN[7] starts in a fairly typical style, describing the setting of the game-world.

> The world of Metal Gear Solid 4 is quite a bleak one. In fact, in many ways, it's precisely the one that Solid Snake and Otacon have been hoping to avoid. Set six years in the future, war and conflict are no longer a sporadic occurrence with hot spots around the globe; instead, the entire planet is engulfed in constant battle.[8]

At the very opening, we see that the domain expert Jeff Haynes has instantly identified the unique story-line aspect of the game, which reads as the paratext of a recent film. Without significant effort, one could imagine a movie in which the main characters Snake and Otacon have to battle against the dystopian universe they attempted to prevent. We could perform an experiment with a sufficiently large group to see how much of the audience mistakes this game description for a film; unfortunately we do not have the resources to do so at this time. We assert that such an experiment would yield a statistically significant result.

[6] Konami, *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*.

[7] Jeff Haynes. *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots Review*. IGN. June 2008. URL: `http://www.ign.com/articles/2008/06/12/metal-gear-solid-4-guns-of-the-patriots-review`.

[8] Haynes, *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots Review*.

Next, Haynes identifies that Solid Snake's arsenal and methods has been massively expanded, allowing the player to perform many more tactics than previously allowed[9]. This mostly focuses on the addition of "CQC", or "close-quarters-combat", a massive extension of the previous hand-to-hand combat system of the earlier *Metal Gear Solid* games. This allows the player to choose how they approach a problem, giving them the option to be nearly silent through CQC combat moves, or the tranquilizer gun, or even the more traditional run-and-gun. Although the *Metal Gear Solid* series has always relied on stealth, the run-and-gun approach has always been an option, but with varying levels of consequence. However, these choices do not affect the overarching story-line that the player follows. Individual actions may result in certain bonuses, and make the game easier or harder, changing the player's experience; but the story progression is quite linear. The player must guide Snake through the "levels" and complete the mission objective—which of course is natural to Snake, as he is a soldier, everything is just a mission.

Some decisions are relatively major, affecting the difficulty of the campaign, but not the goals. Hynes points out that

> As you move throughout the various environments in the game, you'll come across different militia troops that are fighting the PMCs for control of their locations. Players essentially are presented with two options in this situation: on one hand, players can retain a lone wolf focus, proceeding on their own, fighting PMC and militia alike. [...] On the other hand, they can attempt to gain the trust of these local troops by fighting alongside them, attempting to gain their trust by attacking the PMCs. By building a reputation as a freedom fighter that believes in their cause, the militiamen will aid you in your mission, providing additional fire support during skirmishes and even eliminating PMC soldiers for you.[10]

In allowing some sandbox aspects within the game, *Metal Gear Solid 4* allows—no, encourages—

[9] Haynes, *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots Review*.
[10] Haynes, *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots Review*.

players to take a unique approach to solving the puzzles and fights. The multidimensional aspect of the linear narrative creates a connection between the player and the medium that cannot be replicated with film, which provides the viewing audience with no choice. However, if the film were to be extensible across media formats, this level of interaction would be achievable. However, this requires that the film medium take on some aspects of video gaming, creating a universe in which the audience has some choice. The integration of the game and the audience requires significant nuance: if done poorly, the illusion is lost; but if done well, the audience is brought even deeper into the fictional universe.

The level of integration between the player and Snake is actually a unique topic, as the *Metal Gear Solid* series is famous for breaking the fourth wall. Most of the time, the player is addressed as Snake, but certain interactions refer to the player as someone holding the controller. In *Metal Gear Solid*, a certain boss battle could only be won by switching the controller from the first port to the second. The level of interactivity and story-telling that is achieved by these actions is unmatched by film. It is not possible for the fourth wall to be broken in a manner that is relevant to all audiences, at least without resorting to gags.

Why are all of these techniques effective? How is it that *Metal Gear Solid* employs them in novel ways? The only way to find out is to ask the creator, Hideo Kojima. In an interview with *The Guardian*[11], Kojima recollects that working in video games used to be seen as a low-class position. It was such a low position that Kojima says "there wasn't even a word in Japanese for the job of game designer back then. I would lie at parties. I told people I worked for a financial firm"[12], just to maintain respect from others in society. From this we see that not only are the video games considered craft or perhaps low art, but so are their creators. Kojima, however, was a born story-teller[13], and encouraged by his family to study film and be able to retell the story—he

[11] Simon Parkin. *Hideo Kojima: video game drop-out*. The Guardian. May 2012. URL: `http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2012/may/23/hideo-kojima-interview-part-1`.

[12] Parkin, *Hideo Kojima: video game drop-out*.

[13] Parkin, *Hideo Kojima: video game drop-out*.

was originally intending to become a film maker[14]. It is then absolutely no surprise that Kojima's immense story-telling ability is clearly visible through *Metal Gear Solid*.

In applying the litmus test, we have found that *Metal Gear Solid 4* has an involved story-line, developed by a film maker-turned-video game developer; an immersive universe within which the player has an effect, although the universe sometimes spills over into our own; and a plot structure in which the fate of the world is affected by the player–sufficiently nuanced. As for the issue of the reviewer's biases, we find that the evaluation is within the context of the space, but not obviously so. Using the background knowledge that Kojima was originally intending to direct film, we find that the review is comparable to film critics, and we resolve to accept the statements with less skepticism. In essence, we find that the video game genres are expanding to be considered more art-like and to receive the level of appreciation that film does, mostly outside of the devoted fan-base.

Now that the tendancy of video games to become film-like has been established, through the example of *Metal Gear Solid 4*, we must now evaluate how films are becoming more game-like. For this analysis, we will attempt to find game-like elements within film, by examining film that blatantly copies from video games (adaptations), as well identifying elements of film that were transplanted from video games. Such elements would include viewer-influenced choice, which would mostly be present in episodic films, such as TV shows, video game-like illusions of interativity, i.e., first-person scenes, and also storylines that involve video games at their core.

First, we will consider *The Matrix*[15], in which there are multiple layers of universe and reality. There is the reality of The Matrix, a computer-generated simulation of the world, and the Real World. In essence, The Matrix is a video game in which the stakes are real: your life. Some of the details that *The Matrix* presents can also be considered a social commentary on gamers: the muscles that Neo must build up as he has never used them before are analogous to, but in reverse

[14]Parkin, *Hideo Kojima: video game drop-out*.
[15]Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski. *The Matrix*. Film. Mar. 1999.

processes, the atrophy of a video game addict's body. Furthermore, the process of "jacking in" to the Matrix is a very direct representation of the colloquial term for connecting to the internet in that era. This is especially visible when considering the mechanism for leaving the Matrix, a telephone. This directly makes sense, as online video games at the time would require a modem link.

The Matrix is further interesting because it creates a world in which gamers can live, but sadly has not produced a successful video game. It is unclear why this has occured, but speculation points to the change in the original plot of the film, in which the justification for the existence of the Matrix was to enslave humanity for the computational capacity ofthe brain, rather than the electrical energy generation. This difference in intended plot and produced plot points to a level of sophistication that changes the acceptance rates due to differing levels of suspension of disbelief. It appears that the video game world was too connected to our own reality, while itself breaking a rule of physics in the viewer's reality, preventing a full immersion into the world outside of the time period of a film.

While *The Matrix* is an allegorical video game, *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace*[16] contains a rather famous "pod racer" scene, which is also the subject of the video game *Star Wars Episode I: Racer*[17]. This intense race scene is interesting positioned within the film, as it does not have a significant plot purpose. It is, however, visually stunning, showing off the quality of the computer-generated images and special effects. Many of the visuals focus on showing the intensity of the race, and in some ways, portray the audience as having a connection, if not influence, on the main character controlling the pod. It is entirely of no surprise that a video game which lets the audience do exactly this exists! Here, we observe the synergistic effect between a compelling idea well-presented in film and its actual implementation in a video game. In order to create interactivity for the fan experience, the film incorporates elements that would make a good video game, *and*

[16]George Lucas. *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace*. Film. May 1999.
[17]LucasArts. *Star Wars Episode I: Racer*. Video Game. May 1999.

also produces this video game. The resulting hybrid medium stands much more prominently than the two components.

Another film-video game hybrid is the *TRON*[18] series. An interesting aspect of the film is that the main character is literally sucked into a computer, effectively becoming a participant in the video game. Although not all aspects of the video game are included in the film, the most famous of which is: the Light Cycles. Light Cycles are a futuristic/digital motorcycles, which leave a trail of light; hitting this trail of light will will result in a crash. This game, and related moment in the film, are iconic. Given the age difference between *TRON* and *Star Wars Episode 1*, we find that the technique of synergy between video game and film is quite old, but still being perfected.

This synergy between these games and the films is not just coincidence. It's as if the film was designed to be played. In "The Meaning of Video Games", Steven Jones[19] describes how the popular TV show LOST was influenced by video games to meet this exact design goal. Features of LOST that a resemble a video game include

> Along the way you encounter a series of unexplained phenomena: vices in the trees, cryptic documents, films and videos left behind by previous inhabitants what seems to be invisible monsters in the jungle and powerful anomalies of nature everywhere.[20]

Through these mazes and confusing puzzles, the audience can make theories and try to solve them as they watch the characters do so on screen. Part of the experience of the film is the interaction with other viewers, trying to guess the next move.

The notion of the interactive film is very different from the video game. An audience member cannot directly manipulate the course of events in film like they can in a video game, but they can interact with the universe that it creates through associated media and through the imaginations of collective organization. What does this increased interactivity produce? It produces further

[18] Disney. *TRON*. Film. July 1982; Bally Midway. *TRON*. Video Game. 1982.
[19] Steven E. Jones. *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*. Routledge, Feb. 2009.
[20] Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*.

immersion, which contributed to the success of LOST, TRON, Star Wars Episode 1, and The Matrix.

We hypothesized that there was a mututal attraction between film and video games, and have shown that video games are becoming more high art through their increasing visual and narrative intricacy. Additionally, we have found that the increased video-gamification of film, through the creation of elements that deserve to be manipulated increases audience interaction. Specifically, we find that this convergence is neither a coincidence, nor driven by the same reasons. As video games work to be recognized as art, the creative directors such as Hideo Kojima will no longer be forced to lie about their occupation to get respect. Nor is there jealousy involved on the part of the film creator: the relationship is synergetic, attempting to actuate the audience, although for the selfish reasons of profit. Of course, the audience benefits by getting the ability to experience their content through transmedia transformations and connections.

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