The Cinemafication of Video Games: An Examination of the Effect of Medium on Genre Through the Comparison of Films and Video Games

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A Thesis
in
the Department
of
The Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Film Studies) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September 2024

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Entitled: The Cinemafication of Video Games: An Examination of the Effect of Medium on Genre Through the Comparison of Films and Video Games

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Film Studies)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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Abstract

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Films and video games may initially seem to have more elements in common than not, but upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the two audio/visual mediums are equally as different as they are similar. An effective method to facilitate a lucrative comparative analysis is to examine the two mediums through the lens of shared genres. Game scholars, such as King, Krzywinska, and Wolf, have long argued how to best analyze the topic of genre within the medium of games, and by combining concepts from these texts with the work of film theorists, including Neale and Schatz, this thesis aims to introduce a novel system of generic classification that allows for a better comparison between similar films and games and a closer examination of how games utilize genre. Through the direct comparison of films and games, it becomes apparent that as the video game industry has evolved, games have gradually become more recognizably cinematic, a phenomenon that this thesis dubs as cinemafication, which can best be identified as the consistent trend of video game graphics and narratives increasing in complexity, allowing for more cinematic potential, thereby closing the gap between the mediums of film and games. By closely examining generic case studies of the action and gangster genres, this thesis will apply a novel system of generic categorization in order to explore the intricacies of how genres are affected by the medium through which they are presented.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Dr. Peter H. Rist, for his steadfast guidance and counsel throughout this process, as well as my reader, Dr. Marc Steinberg, for his valuable advice and feedback. I would also like to thank my Grandmother for her generosity and my Mother, for her unending support and encouragement. This work was supported by a generous grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and additional financial contributions from Concordia University.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my loving Mother, without whom I would not be what I am.

In loving memory of Marvin Ekers. Thank you for believing in me.

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Introduction

"It will be both a game and a movie at the same time… Of course, it will be a game. However, if your mother walks in and sees you playing this game, she'll think you're watching a movie. I'm not sure how far we can take it yet."

- Hideo Kojima, HideoTube, 2024
(discussing the visuals and narrative of an upcoming video game)

At first glance, films and video games may appear to share more similarities than differences. They are both forms of audio/visual mediums that are, in most cases, viewed on some form of screen apparatus. It would be reasonable, upon entering a room and seeing a brief moment of a video game playing on a television screen, to mistake it for a film, or at the very least, an animated film. However, as soon as the person sitting in front of the television is observed to be holding and manipulating a game controller, any illusion is shattered. The key, and most inherently obvious difference between films and video games, as well as between all artistic mediums, is the way in which they are consumed. Films are viewed and video games are played, and to continue in that vein, books are read, music is listened to, and so on and so forth. This can, of course, be seen as a gross oversimplification, as it implies a certain lack of cognitive effort on the part of the consumer. Many film scholars and critics would insist that the act of viewing a film includes a mental reading of the moving image as if it were a text, a text fully open to interpretation and analysis. Of course, this is not to say that reading a screenplay is equivalent to watching the film, as this would devalue the importance of the audio/visual nature of the medium, but instead this serves to illustrate that the consumption of works from most mediums is a multifaceted activity. Similarly, an audiophile would no doubt staunchly argue that music is not merely listened to, but physically felt and experienced as the vibrations of soundwaves are not only absorbed by the ears but the whole body. Despite this, it would not be reasonable to mistake someone reading a book for watching a film, and so regardless of the intricacies of the methods of consumption of different mediums, some are far less superficially different from others, and the more subtle a difference, the more effort is required to explain and justify it. The easiest, and perhaps most obvious difference that can be argued between viewing and playing is the notion of passivity versus interactivity. As mentioned, film viewing is not solely passive, as movie-goers can be expected to *actively* interpret what they are watching, and additionally, film genres such as horror and action are likely to have tangible, kinetic effects on viewers, such as scaring viewers into jumping out of their seats or hyping them up into punching the air in time to the actions of on-screen heroes. Likewise, the notion of video games being an interactive experience can be seen as a trivialization of the complex effort required for a player to simultaneously navigate and interact with a game world. Arguments regarding the semantics of using these terms to differentiate video games from films have existed for as long as games have been studied as a distinct artistic medium. Early

games scholar Espen Aarseth argued in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* that since both mediums are interactive in their own ways, video games require a distinct, descriptive attribute, which he coined "ergodic," a term that he defined as the "non-trivial effort (…) required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1997, p. 1). Despite being a commonly cited and discussed argument in game studies from the late 1990's to mid 2000's, the term ergodic as used to describe video games has not penetrated the mainstream lexicon. While the semantic argument of whether or not video games are more than simply interactive persists, the description is still widely applied to the medium. For a degree of simplicity and for the purpose of this thesis, films will be referred to as passive due to the fact that a viewer is typically unable to directly alter the narrative or events depicted in a film, and games will be referred to as interactive since a player is able to directly impact either narrative, events, or both within the world of a video game.

Films and video games have not always shared as high a degree of similarity as they currently do. It would be difficult to use the term cinematic to describe a 1970's Atari game in any meaningful way, let alone the rudimentary first video games like *Tennis for Two* (Higinbotham & Dvorak, 1958) or *Spacewar!* (Russell, 1962) with their simplistic graphics consisting of moving lines on repurposed, phosphorus radar monitors. And while simulated three-dimensional spaces have existed in games since *Maze* (Colley et al, 1973) with its monochromatic, vector-based, wireframe graphics, it would not be until the mid 1990's that the capabilities of gaming consoles and computer hardware reached a level of sophistication able to produce truly three-dimensional environments that allowed for cinematic possibilities. Early 3D games, such as *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software, 1992) achieved the illusion of three-dimensional depth through forced perspective by combining two-dimensional sprites. Sprites are flat images of characters or objects in games. These characters and objects can then be animated within a game environment by rapidly cycling through a set of these two-dimensional sprites, much like a non-linear flipbook. Sprites have no depth and only one viewing angle and therefore multiple sprites representing the same object, each appearing as if from a different perspective, need to be used in order to animate the illusion of an object having multiple viewing angles from various distances. *Wolfenstein 3D* used sprite-based graphics in its ray cast environments to trick the player's eye into perceiving the combined two-dimensional images as a three-dimensional space. This illusion of depth created by changing the size of sprites in relation to how close the player, and by extension the camera, is to them, is in some ways superficially similar to some forced-perspective techniques used in film. While this did achieve a sense in the player of being in an environment with depth, it did little to create opportunities for more cinematic moments. It was not until the introduction of truly three-dimensional game environments, with cameras capable of navigating through them, that video games finally started to become what could be described as cinematic. The first feature length fully computer animated film, *Toy Story* (Lasseter), was released in 1995, proving that believable and engaging stories and characters could be portrayed in virtual three-dimensional space; although, more importantly, it illustrated that virtual cinematography could create the same types of effects as real-life cameras and lenses. 1995 was also the year that *Descent* (Parallax Software), the first game truly set in a three-dimensional environment, was released, taking advantage of the new technology of polygonal graphics in order to render textured, three-dimensional objects and surfaces, and with a control scheme that used six degrees of freedom, allowing the player to move their avatar freely, notably up and down, within the environment. This was a massive improvement from games like

Wolfenstein 3D and *Doom* (id Software, 1993) which, due to the limitations of ray casting, only existed on a flat plane with any height difference being an illusion, meaning it was not possible to look up or down, and as a result, making it impossible to change the angle of viewing along the player's vertical axis when trying to take in the virtual scenery. It was only one year earlier, in late 1994, that game consoles powerful enough to render polygon-based graphics, like the PlayStation and Sega Saturn, were released. This was the beginning of the fifth generation of game consoles, and it marked the pivotal moment not only when games transitioned from 2D to 3D, but also the beginning of the journey of games becoming formally ever closer to films; a journey that becomes more and more apparent with every technological improvement and subsequent console generation. While games from 1995 could never hope to look as good as a film like *Toy Story* which had the advantages of being fully pre-rendered and not having to deal with factors like compression in order to fit on game discs or cartridges, those early games could certainly mimic formic elements.

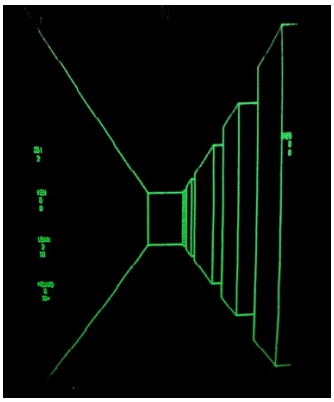


Figure 1 (left): The rudimentary 3D "wireframe" style graphics of *Maze.*
Figure 2 (right): The ray cast graphics of *Wolfenstein 3D* creating the illusion of three-dimensional space while still using two-dimensional sprites.

Games like *Resident Evil* (CAPCOM, 1996) would feature brief pre-rendered cut-scenes that allowed for moments of horror style cinematic breaks in the action-oriented gameplay, and others like *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo EAD, 1996) would give players different options for manipulating the camera beyond a fixed position in order to better look around the environments. *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft, 1997), the first in the series to be in three-dimensions, used the new perspective, and three compact discs worth of storage, to merge the complex narrative structure of role-playing games, with cinematic visuals to create emotional moments that would be right at home in a melodrama film. The infamous cut-scene depicting the death of Aerith in *Final Fantasy VII* includes lighting effects, camera movement, different types of shots, musical pacing, and everything else that would be featured in a Hollywood film. Of course, the graphical limitations of 1997 meant that the scene looked like it was being acted out with plastic action figures without anywhere near the same level of emotion or facial expression of the characters in an animated film like *Toy Story*. *Toy Story* had the advantage of depicting non-living beings as its main cast of characters, so while they still needed to look believable as moving objects and also be expressive and emotive, they did not need to look alive, meaning that there was not as significant a risk of the film's animation falling into the uncanny valley, a factor that video games attempting to depict

living, and dying, humans would have to take into consideration. While the blocky and stiff character models of games from the mid-1990's to early 2000's were inherently unrealistic enough to not have to worry about this, as graphics improved in the mid-2000's characters began to become more realistic and lifelike, meaning that any sort of unnatural physical movements resulting from clunky controls or disjointed gameplay animations, became glaringly obvious and uncomfortably uncanny. The opportunities created by this rise of three-dimensional graphics allowed game designers and writers who had until then primarily worked with text-heavy, role-playing or point-and-click adventure games, styles that for the longest time best facilitated complex and branching narratives while lacking in cinematic visuals, to produce games with equally rich narratives but now paired with visuals capable of cinematic grandeur. This was the case with game industry auteur and known cinephile Hideo Kojima, who had worked on Konami's two-dimensional adventure games *Snatcher* (Matsui, 1988) and *Policenauts* (Kojima, 1994) before working on his first foray into three-dimensional games with the highly successful *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) in which he combined his distinct narrative style with visuals that allowed him to demonstrate his appreciation of cinema through the game's cut-scenes, making for an overall, highly cinematic gaming experience. His work on further entries in the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise (1998-present) over the next seventeen years, until he and Konami parted ways in 2015 (Sarkar, 2015, web), would produce some of the most widely recognized cinematic-inspired experiences found in the gaming industry.

Figure 3 (left): The famous zombie-reveal cut-scene from *Resident Evil* featuring a zombie slowly turning towards the camera in a dramatic zooming close-up, a re-creation of a shot typical of a horror film.
Figure 4 (right): An example of the various lighting effects used in the scene of Aerith's death in *Final Fantasy VII*.

Since the rise of three-dimensional graphics in the 1990's, the visual and narrative elements of video games have been constantly evolving in complexity, allowing for ever-expanding cinematic potential, thereby continuously closing the gap between the mediums of film and games. This phenomenon of games exponentially drawing closer to films, while still remaining a distinct medium is what I dub the notion of cinemafication. It should be acknowledged that the word "cinemafication" was previously used briefly by Lasse Larsen in his 2017 article *Play and Gameful Movies: The Ludification of Modern Cinema* as a sub-category of his proposed definition of ludification to refer to specific gameplay mechanics that directly mimic filmic elements and film narratives structured around games (p. 464-466). It appears that the term has not seen further use in this context even within Larsen's own subsequent works and so, I have felt it appropriate to

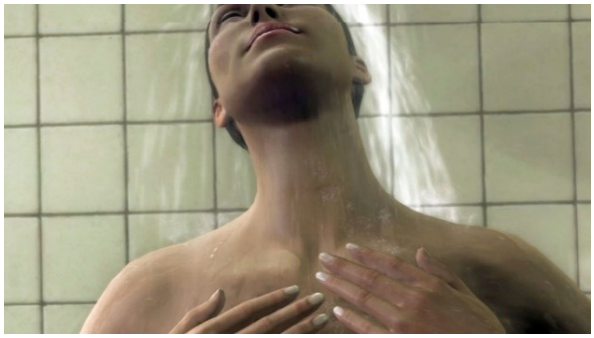
utilize my own definition of the term as it perfectly describes the broader industry phenomena I have observed over many years.

In a brief personal aside I would like to acknowledge the partial inspiration for this thesis. My oldest memories of engaging with the medium of video games was playing *Miss Spider's Tea Party* (Hypnotix, Inc., 1999) on a family Windows 95 PC. As a young child, I enjoyed all aspects of the *Miss Spider* franchise (Kirk, 1994-2009), starting with my Mother reading the spectacularly illustrated books to me, then later watching the animations on VHS, and ultimately directly interacting with the *Miss Spider* characters by playing the computer game. I would come to understand much later that I was, in effect, experiencing a "grand narrative" as described by Eiji Ōtsuka's theory of narrative consumption (Ōtsuka, 2010, p. 106). While applying Ōtsuka's theory can allow one to thoroughly explore connections between works across all mediums when they share the portrayal of a common intellectual property, I became more fascinated with the direct connection between films and video games in a more general sense. As I spent my childhood watching films and witnessing video game graphics evolve from blocky, jagged shapes to smooth, lifelike forms, it became apparent to me that the essence of cinema was becoming a larger and larger component of many of the games I was playing. What I remember most of *Miss Spider's Tea Party* is not its simplistic, child-friendly gameplay, but its visuals, which its mostly point-and-click gameplay allowed to closely resemble the books, and as a result my child self was able to feel more deeply interconnected with a beloved franchise. While this thesis aims to explore the phenomenom of cinemafication, and in doing so propose guidelines for clearer generic taxonomy for video games, I am undertaking this effort as I believe it is important to discuss and attempt to understand how this ever-increasing connection between films and games creates an opportunity for a more interconnected media industry and landscape, where viewers and players alike have more opportunities to experience all aspects of a genre seamlessly across the two mediums.

From the 1990's and the fifth console generation onward, the cinemafication of video games would become even more apparent over the next two console generations as both graphics improved, and game complexity increased significantly with each leap in hardware, both in turn allowing for the presentation of ever more intricate and grandiose narratives. It is this increase in narrative that may be even more important than the visuals when comparing films and video games. Films are visual stories and video games are playable stories. In the cases of both of these mediums, their abilities to tell stories have had to develop and evolve. The early films of the Lumière Brothers did not tell any sort of significant narrative, other than the depiction of the real, as that is all that the primitive technology of the time allowed for. As described by Tom Gunning in *The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde*, these films constitute part of the cinema of attractions, by which the medium itself was the spectacle that brought in audiences (2006, p. 381). *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* (Lumière, 1895) tells no greater a narrative than would be found in a game of *Pong* (Atari, 1972), in both cases the only thing resembling a "story" is simply a visual account of an action having transpired, in the first case workers left a factory and in the second, a game of Pong was played. In the cases of both mediums, it did not take long before consumers wanted more complex themes and stories to be depicted. Soon trains on film were not merely pulling into stations, but being robbed by bandits, and players of games were not just blasting vaguely tank-shaped enemies but defending Earth from invading alien armies. It took cinema roughly twenty years before narratives that a modern

audience would recognize as structured plots became common in the mid 1910's and another fifteen or so for sound to bring in even more storytelling possibilities by the end of the 1920's. This is roughly paralleled in the video game industry, as by the 1980's (twenty years after *Tennis for Two*), games had story lines and plots, but what the 1994 development of 3D did for games was akin to what talkies did for cinema.

By the time the seventh console generation arrived in the mid 2000's, the term "playable movie" was becoming popular to describe the trend of certain games, particularly those produced by the studios Quantic Dream and later, Supermassive Games, focusing so heavily on visuals and narratives, that their gameplay mechanics were drastically streamlined and took a back seat to the overall player experience. This placed the focus on the player experiencing their impact on the unfolding narrative and less on directly carrying out skill-based actions, making them more akin to the experience of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* (Bantam Books, 1979-1998) book. This is definitely an important period for the video game industry when considering this idea of the cinemafication of games; although, I do not believe that this trend could be considered the logical conclusion of cinemafication. The notion of a playable movie directly focuses on the idea that the level of interactivity solely determines the medium of a work. This logic is overly simplistic and flawed, and it does make the act of classifying media difficult when the line between films and games becomes precariously thin, especially when considering films within the "interactive documentary" genre. This will be looked at in greater depth in Chapter 2.

The cinematic visuals of Quantic Dream's 2010 PlayStation 3 game *Heavy Rain* (figure 5 (left) & figure 6 (right)).

Additionally, I am not making the claim that a game's cinematic qualities or potential should be equated with a sense of heightened relevance or advancement. The continued production and critical success of non-cinematic games proves that the forward trajectory of the industry equally encompasses a wide diversity of game types. It could be argued that a puzzle game such as *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012) is less complex than a more cinematic game such as *Metal Gear Solid*, but this does not inherently speak to the value of the works or place them into any kind of hierarchy. The game, *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) contains a massively complex and dynamic webbed narrative structure but features pixelated two-dimensional graphics and in this sense, the game lacks virtually any cinematic potential while simultaneously being more narratively rich than many other visually spectacular three-dimensional games. This also means that while two-dimensional graphics may be less sophisticated on a technical level than three-dimensional, having a pixelated or retro visual aesthetic does not make a modern game archaic. This examination of cinemafication is intended to explore and attempt to understand a wider

industry trend rather than determine artistic value. In comparison, continued advancements in technology have drastically changed the landscape of the film industry over the last century but the existence of visually and auditorily spectacular films such as *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014) does not inherently devalue the existence of films like *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (Hitchcock, 1927) or *Wavelength* (Snow, 1967).

The fact that films and video games share such a surface level similarity while still being entirely different mediums, allows for an interesting opportunity to examine video games via a more traditional film studies approach by directly comparing the two mediums through a shared formic element: genre. The direct comparison of film to video games has been done before, most notably in Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's 2002 canonical text *ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*; however, in that work, the authors went out of their way to deliberately limit how much film theory they imposed on the medium of video games in order to prevent any sort of film studies imperialism from overwhelming the then emerging field of game studies. After more than two decades since the publication of *ScreenPlay*, the field of game studies has begun to fully establish itself within published academia and the video game production industry has become a multi-billion dollar behemoth unarguably distinct from film production, despite a company like Sony having both film and video game production studios, and as a result, this thesis is less concerned with any risk of cross discipline contamination and is instead more interested in the possibilities such an interdisciplinary approach offers. The late 1990's and early 2000's was the period when film and game academia were at their closest with the application of some elements of classic film theory showing the potential to be useful in exploring the game industry at a time of rapid change and evolution. In the decades since, games studies as a discipline has overwhelmingly become focused on pursuing a ludological, and to a lesser extent sociological, approach to understanding video games as a media format. I believe that currently, in terms of formic elements, video games are the closest they have ever been to films and while the two mediums should remain distinct it appears to me that now, when games are as cinematic as they have ever been, is a particularly relevant time to revitalize a film studies approach to examining video games. An approach that is also wholly necessary if it is to fully explore the cinemafication of games. This thesis will explore the differences and similarities in how genres are portrayed in both films and video games, and in doing so, examine how genre is directly affected by the medium through which it is presented. In order to facilitate this comparison, this thesis will rely on the notion that audio/visual artistic works can be broken down into three distinct categories: medium, genre, and subgenre or style. It must be noted that this is in a similar vein to King and Krzywinska's theory that games can be categorized under the four levels of: platform, genre, mode, and milieu (2002, p. 26-27), a theory later expanded upon by Thomas H. Apperley in *Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres* (2006). While this breakdown offers a valuable method of thoroughly analyzing all aspects of a video game, it was designed inherently to somewhat remove video games from direct filmic comparison, and so this thesis will instead use a novel, albeit more general, categorization system in order to make for the clearest parallels and direct comparisons.

Medium is the most straightforward level of categorization. A medium can be seen simply as the method through which a work is delivered to an audience, the very means through which a work is able to exist. Thereby, the medium inherently dictates a work's overall form, and as a

result, has absolute bearing over the other two categories, as a horror film is vastly different from a horror novel or horror video game in almost every aspect from how the content is distributed, consumed, analyzed, reproduced, archived, and so on. The term medium is extremely broad in its reach and often has blurry edges, especially in areas such as performance art and installation art, so of course some degree of ambiguity and crossover is possible. It is also possible for a single artistic work to combine different mediums, such as in the case of multimedia works that can incorporate into a single display everything from film projection, to sculpture, to literature, to anything that is in theory possible; however, it is far more rare for a single "item," for lack of a better word, to be classified as being of more than one medium. If a book became a song, it would lose whatever unique factor made it a book in the first place. Medium is generally the most absolute of the three levels of categorization.

The notion of a work's format or platform should, in most cases, not affect its medium, and I do not feel that these terms are as impactful on the overall form of a work to warrant being recognized as a fourth level of categorization, so instead they will be briefly looked at here. Format is a relatively loose term but can be thought of generally as implying the more mechanical aspect of a work's presentation, for example, is a film digital or 35mm, is it in stereoscopic 3D or is it in black-and-white; however, format is also commonly used to denote the physical form of distribution the work is available in, such as a Blu-ray or LaserDisc. Format may have a bearing on the fidelity or quality of the experience of consuming a work, but little direct affect on the work itself; although, a notable exception would be a film shot with an intended IMAX release that may have creative choices made with the unique aspect ratio specifically in mind. Platform on the other hand, is somewhat more complicated as it means different things depending on the medium in question. Platform in the realm of films and, perhaps more acutely, television, as explored by Amanda Lotz (2017), Ramon Lobato (2019), and Marc Steinberg (2023), usually refers to methods of non-physical, online publishing and distribution, with streaming services such as Netflix or Prime Video being classified as platforms (or portals in the case of Lotz) with films able to be platform-exclusive depending on where they can be viewed. Whereas platforms for video games are described by King and Krzywinska as "the type of hardware system on which a game is played" (2002, p. 26), meaning that they, similarly to film, mostly dictate availability of access. In both cases, platform exclusivity makes for a financial obstacle in the way of consuming media. If a work is exclusive to a single platform, access to that platform must be purchased regardless of whatever other equipment is already owned. If a film is exclusive to Netflix, but a viewer only has a Prime subscription, they must spend even more money to access the content, and likewise a PlayStation console is useless if a player wants to play a game exclusive to Xbox. Similarly, for a viewer to fully enjoy a film in high definition, they would need to purchase a Blu-ray player instead of a cheaper, standard DVD player. For films, besides availability, the only effect platform exclusivity generally has on a film is if it is made by an in-house studio, such is the case for Netflix original series which are, not unsurprisingly, unavailable on Prime, although more often than not, the studio that makes a film in fact dictates the platform of its release as a result of production and distribution contracts, such as Paramount films usually being found on Prime. Platform has a much larger impact in the realm of video games, as the different gaming consoles, platforms in and of themselves, have different hardware specifications, and therefore affect everything from a game's visuals to how expansive environments can be and how many characters can exist on screen at

once. This is more prevalent with older consoles as a game running on an Xbox would almost always have higher visual fidelity than one on a PlayStation 2, and even older systems had entirely unique visual and gameplay styles; however, these differences are far less drastic with current generation consoles as they are generally closer to each other in power specifications. The obvious exception being games made for Nintendo consoles as Nintendo hardware typically takes advantage of physically unique controllers (input devices) that inherently affect how games on those consoles are played. This aspect will be touched on in Chapter 3. Ultimately, while format and platform are influential factors on both mediums, they have little affect on a work's content, only the way it is packaged. This being said, certain factors relevant to platforms, particularly audience statistics, do impact what types of content are made available on which platforms, especially in the case of video games, an example being that games with an anime visual style are often more likely to be released exclusively on a PlayStation console as those types of games have traditionally sold significantly more copies on that platform. As a result, certain types of games, like Japanese role-playing games, are very uncommon among the library of games released for Xbox consoles, but such games are abundant for PlayStation, meaning a significant factor for what console a consumer chooses to buy is the availability of the types of games they are most likely to play. The medium level of classification is the point at which film and video games are entirely different, so in order to create a point of comparison, focus must be placed on the following two levels of genre and subgenre or style.

Genre is by far the most complex and contentious level of classification. The main point of contention is that no simple definition of genre can be entirely agreed upon. The word genre is much akin to the word art in that almost every person is aware of what the terms mean, they can be used in conversation without difficulty, they even have dictionary definitions, but in both cases the closer to a definitive definition for either word is approached, the more problematic such an endeavour becomes. In *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale acknowledges the simplicity of the word genre itself, being the French word for "kind" (2000, p. 9), and genre does serve to denote the different kinds of films, groupings of films that feature "characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar setting" as described by Thomas Schatz in *Hollywood Genres* (1981, p. 6). Rick Altman described in *Film/Genre* that the very knowledge of a genre's conventions, inherently affects how those conventions are interpreted (1999, p. 10). Audiences know a film is a horror movie simply because they know what a horror movie is and is supposed to do. Neale confirms that genres are typically identifiable on sight but argues that such an identification cannot in and of itself be used to define a genre (p. 19). If it walks like a duck, and talks like a duck, it is most likely a duck, but this experience-based-duck-knowledge cannot be used to write the official description of all ducks. Of course, an audience will recognize that a film is a horror movie if the film is scary, but horror films can be scary in different ways, some of which may be atypical or not immediately apparent.

A more simple and practical definition of genre for the purposes of the arguments of this thesis, and one applicable to both films and video games, would be a form of categorization that describes a work's form and content by recognizing common, defining characteristics, motifs, and traits. One of the main factors that all genre scholars agree upon is that genre films are inherently repetitive, which is unavoidable as all films within a genre must abide by the predetermined conventions of said genre, meaning that genre works will always have topics and themes in

common (Altman, 1999, p. 23). This also means that even while a work may be an entirely original concept, certain commonly used elements are almost guaranteed to be present, and so genre conventions have a direct influence on how original a work can be (Schatz, 1981, p. 13). A horror film may have an entirely unique and original monster, but the role and idea of the monster character within the horror genre brings with it common tropes. This is explained by Neale's description of generic iconography which states that certain key, recognizable items, costumes, objects, locations, and other signifiers serve not only their intended on-screen purpose as part of the mise-en-scène, but also act as points of reference and indications of how a film fits into its genre and the conventions thereof, as a result of such indicators' repetitive use within previous genre films (Neale, 2000, p. 13-15). A futuristic looking spaceship would be iconic of the science-fiction genre; however, not every genre work needs to include every iconic object, as a post-apocalyptic science-fiction work would likely have no logical place to feature a spacecraft, but in such a case, the barren/irradiated wasteland landscape would act as its own iconic indicator. A work may also have icons from entirely different genres simultaneously, as works may be of more than one genre. If a film were to have a monster appear inside a spaceship, this would be an indication that the film is part of the sci-fi/horror hybrid genre.

A closer look at the intricacies of genre will be the focus of Chapter 1, as understanding the differences in how genres are handled in both films and video games will be key in comparing the two mediums. The most important difference that will be explored is how in the case of films, the role of genre only really serves a singular role, as described above, to categorize films based on the themes of their content, but when describing video games, genre has two distinct meanings. Genre both describes the themes featured in a game as well as the way in which a game is played. A game can be a horror game, which would give players the expectation of it being scary, and also a third person-shooter game, which would give players the expectation of the way the game's point of view and gameplay will operate. Despite the fact that both of these descriptive categories are commonly referred to as the game's genre, they are obviously not equivalent. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, this issue will be addressed by presenting the concept that video games have two types of genre categorization, those being a thematic genre, serving the more traditional role as used for films, and a technical genre, used to describe elements of a game's mechanics. With these two distinct genre types, and the abundance of hybrid genre video games, it is not uncommon for a single game to be categorized under four or even five genres. King and Krzywinska use the term genre to solely describe the category of gameplay featured in a game, giving the examples of driving and strategy (2002, p. 26), and the separate term of milieu when describing the story and narrative elements (2002, p. 27). Under their classification system an action genre game could be of the horror milieu. While this system of classification is not inherently flawed, it was created with deliberate intent to avoid a more traditional film studies framework, but despite this, the term genre is still regularly used to refer to both levels of classification. I do not intend to propose a wholly novel set of naming conventions but instead, create a system that focuses on clarity of clarification, hence the two forms of genre. My proposed notion of the technical genre does also differ slightly from King and Krzywinska's use of genre as they make a distinction between the type of gameplay featured in a game and how the game is played. They describe the form of interaction as being the game's "mode" and include categories such as first and third-person shooters (King & Krzywinska, 2002, p. 26). I would classify most of these mode categories as

either technical genres in and of themselves or as subgenres or specific styles of other technical genres.

The final level of classification is subgenre, or what is sometimes referred to as a "style". Subgenre describes a key element of a work that fundamentally influences its approach in presenting a genre. In this way, this level acts as a distinct modifier but cannot so radically change a work that it could no longer be considered to conform to its designated genre. Subgenres, or genre styles, indicate the main way a work presents its genre's characteristics. Psychological is a subgenre of horror, and referring to a film as a psychological horror film indicates to an audience the way in which the film will achieve being scary. Subgenres can be general or specific to a particular genre, as you can have a noir-style detective film or a noir-style science fiction film, but it would be difficult to find an example of a psychological comedy. Not all combinations of genre conventions work, and therefore there are many possible subgenre categories that simply do not exist. The terms style and subgenre are essentially interchangeable and either can be used rather effectively depending on the context of what generic element is being described. A subgenre is commonly understood to be a grouping of works within the same genre that all possess further similarities that make them distinctly identifiable without compromising their place within the greater genre (Neale, 2000, p. 9). Style is often used in a similar way when describing a video game's approach to gameplay that fundamentally affects the game's technical genre without actually altering the core gameplay enough to demand a new technical genre. In *Why Video Game Genres Fail: A Classificatory Analysis*, the term "style" is used to identify aspects of gameplay, such as a puzzle genre game being of the tile-matching style (Clarke et al, 2015, p. 22). In conversation, many would refer to a film as being of the slasher subgenre (of horror), but that same film could also be referred to as a slasher style horror film. What is not synonymous with the term style however, is the concept of cycles, which refer to works of the same genre made within a specific and recognized time period (Neale, 2000, p. 9). The "spaghetti" in spaghetti western does not only indicate particular stylistic elements, but also a specific period of production and the conditions that came with that time in history. Cycles exist in both the film and video game industries, and in both cases, are often indications of a fad or trend triggered by the copying of a widely successful work (Neale, 2000, p. 9). An example of a cycle in the video game industry would be the commonly recognized "brown-shooter" of the late 2000's to mid 2010's during which period every publisher of shooter games wanted to capitalize on the massive success of titles such as *Gears of War* (Epic Games, 2006) and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007), games notable for their washed-out, grey and brown, heavy colour palettes hence the "brown" in brown-shooter. Since this level of classification serves as a modifier to genres, in the case of video games, subgenres or styles, where appropriate can be applied to both thematic and technical genres. Certain labels that King and Krzywinska term as modes, such as turn-based and real-time (2002, p. 26), I would consider to be subgenres, as they describe key functions of how games are played but would not in and of themselves stand as distinct genres, nor do they alter games so radically from other games within the same genres that they cease to conform. A strategy game can either be turn-based or real-time, but these two factors only serve to describe how the game creates a strategic challenge; however, if said strategy game used a top-down or isometric camera perspective, that would be a factor on the technical genre level as it would have a bearing on all elements of the gameplay and the overall experience itself, including the stylistic factors.

In Section I, this thesis will first take an in-depth look at how a classical film studies approach to genre can be applied to video games using the three-level classification system outlined here. Following that will be an exploration of the concept of interactivity in audio/visual mediums in order to determine how interactivity affects the nature of films and games, as well as how it can influence the implementation of generic conventions. Once this genre-focused baseline is determined, Section II of this thesis will examine in detail, two genre-based case studies using films and games of shared genres that will be directly compared and contrasted as a method to determine how the medium of a work can influence genres. First, the action genre, and many of its common conventions will be analyzed, followed by the more character-centric gangster genre, with a particular focus on its narrative, character, and environmental elements. The majority of video games used as examples throughout this thesis are large budget games produced by established development studios, commonly referred to as AAA (triple A) games, as these types of games often feature such elements as large-scale narratives, voice acting, complex sound design, and a high degree of visual detail and fidelity. These types of games generally have more obviously recognizable cinematic qualities and can make for better direct comparisons to films as they have a greater potential for sharing identifiable traits. This is not to say that it is impossible to also compare films to indie games, games often smaller in scale and produced with lower budgets and developed by only a few or individual creators, only that the more limited nature of indie development usually results in a greater focus on gameplay mechanics and narratives. The aforementioned *Stardew Valley* is considered an indie game, produced solely by Eric Barone, and while as previously stated the game is narratively complex and mechanically detailed, it does not make for a particularly useful cinematic comparison due to its visual style and text heavy nature. This analysis will highlight the ways in which films and games each handle established genre conventions and how the trend of cinemafaction can be clearly observed. This will also offer an interesting opportunity to observe how a work's medium directly impacts its portrayal of different genres.

Section I

Conventions and Mechanics

Chapter 1: Genre

"Story in a game is like a story in a porn movie. It's expected to be there, but it's not that important."

- John Carmack, Masters of Doom, 2003
(on the relevance of a narrative in Doom*)*

The complexity of a system of classification is entirely dependant on the number of variables and elements that require distinct categorization. As previously described in the Introduction, video games are capable of possessing the same thematic and narrative elements and motifs as found in film, but also feature purely technical, or gameplay oriented, elements that require the same level of classification in order to properly determine where a game falls within the pre-existing conventions of the industry. This means that if the same system of categorization that can be used for classifying films is to be applied to video games, the system will have to be roughly twice as complex. A film can be classified firstly by its medium, then the genre or genres its elements most conform to, and lastly, any identifiable subgenres. Video game classification starts in a similar manner with identifying the medium, but then splits at the genre level with room to define both technical and thematic genres, with both genre types also having the potential to fall into subgenres.

1.1: Generic Conventions

The conventions of film genres are mainly defined by elements such as topic, setting, theme, and characters (Altman, 1999, p. 23) (Neale, 2000, p. 16). These are all key aspects that would affect the trajectory of a work's narrative, and so when considering this proposed technical genre label for video games, the considered elements would have to be equally as influential on a game's gameplay and mechanics. In his 2001 book *The Medium of the Video Game*, Mark J. P. Wolf outlined 42 distinct genres to describe video games, based on Schatz's definition of genre in film. Those genres only described gameplay factors and Wolf intended that they be used in combination with more traditional film genres (Clarke et al, 2015, p. 4). In the over two decades since the creation of Wolf's list, several of those 42 genres have fallen out of common use, as many were crafted with older systems, such as the Atari 2600, in mind. Additionally, while widely encompassing, those genres are rigid and require a game to be placed into the category it fits best. As described by Altman, this leaves little room for genre conventions to evolve or retroactively change (1999, p. 19). By examining Wolf's 42 genre categories, as well as observing the most commonly used genres on modern video game marketplaces such as Steam and the PlayStation Store, it can be seen what technical elements or gamic aspects are most important when defining

a game's genre, particularly for consumer purposes. I believe these crucial aspects are: activity, objective, gameplay, and perspective.

The most straightforward way to isolate common conventions in video games in order to form a technical genre is by looking at what activities a game has the player perform. Some of the genres in this vein that Wolf labeled include collecting and driving (2001, p. 121, 123). These genres describe what the player will be expected to do for the majority of the game's duration and informs prospective consumers what skillset the game will expect them to have upon entering the game. Interestingly, the shooter genre, currently one of the most prominent genres in the gaming industry, is only included on Wolf's list (2001, p. 116-134) as an alternative to the much older shoot 'em up genre which includes more arcade style games like *Galaga* (Namco, 1981). The activities can either be forms of direct action, like driving vehicles or shooting weapons, or passive action, such as with a genre like management games, where a player would spend most of the game observing information and making calculations and bureaucratic-style choices as in the *SimCity* game series (Maxis, 1989-2014). The next set of generic conventions are those related to a game's objective. Wolf states at the beginning of his chapter *Genre and the Video Game* that, "In a video game, there is almost always a definite objective that the player strives to complete…" (2001, p. 115), and while I agree with that statement, I feel that objective is only one of the key factors to determining gamic genres, and not inherently the most important. These include the genres of escape and adventure from Wolf's list and describe what the player will be striving to do, instead of how they will be doing it. This type of genre labeling is less common, as usually the "how" is far more important than the "why," since the act of playing the game is most often the more exciting element. While the ultimate goal of *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo R&D4, 1985) is to rescue the Princess, the game would not be defined as being of the rescue genre, rather it is considered a "platformer," since that term describes the structure of the gameplay. This mention of the platformer category leads into the third basis of grouping conventions; gameplay and the gameplay loop. This is the most common type of genre on Wolf's list, including those such as combat, educational, pinball, platform, strategy, and numerous others (2001, p. 116-134). While some of these genres, notably pinball, are rather self-explanatory, many of the others work best when paired with at least one other technical genre for even more thorough classification. In addition to describing the type of gameplay featured in a game, this type of genre may also describe the game's gameplay loop, the player's experience of consistent and repetitive gameplay (Brazie, 2024, web). This would include the genre of roguelike games which are games that have the player restart a new playthrough after every in-game death. This describes the gameplay loop, but not the gameplay itself, and so genres such as roguelikes should also be described with other applicable genres like adventure or platformer. It is very common for modern games, with all their complexities, to fall under more than one gameplay type genre. Finally, perhaps the most visually apparent set of genres are the those that describe perspective. These are notably absent from Wolf's list but may be some of the most important descriptors for the purposes of marketing. Perspective, in this case, describes where the camera is positioned and how the player is able to view the world of the game. Games can be either two- or three-dimensional, and within that duality they can have the camera view be first- or third-person, top-down, or isometric. Additionally, the camera's movement style can be further described, such as fixed or scrolling. This type of genre in and of itself can never accurately describe a game on its own, as while certain types of games are more

likely to have a specific perspective, they must obviously be paired with at least one other technical genre in order to achieve any clear classification. It could be argued that since perspective serves more to modify the other technical genres, it should instead be included in the style or subgenre level of classification as outlined in the Introduction, but I would argue that perspective is intrinsically important to how a game's mechanics function and should therefore be considered a type of genre. Furthermore, this would mean that common, pre-established genres like the first-person shooter, often abbreviated to FPS, would fit into this proposed system of classification without having to be altered or redefined.

Subgenres behave in almost the exact same way for video game technical genres as they do for genres in film, describing distinct traits specific to a group of games within the same genre. For example, both *F.E.A.R.* (Monolith Productions, 2005) and *DOOM* (id Software, 2016) are in the first-person shooter technical genres and the action and science-fiction/horror thematic genres, yet the two games play remarkably different from each other. This is where properly indicating style becomes important. The more slow-paced, and methodical style of *F.E.A.R.*'s gameplay is due to it being of the tactical subgenre of the shooter genre, indicating a focus on more semi-realistic gunplay and health and movement mechanics, while the fast-paced, spectacle filled gameplay of *DOOM* is indicative of an arcade style shooter, featuring elements like power-ups and jump-pads. Additionally, the two games have vastly different approaches to how they depict horror, with the dark and creepy atmosphere of *F.E.A.R.* being very much psychological, whereas the more cartoonish, demon slaying, gore-filled action of *DOOM* could be described as splatter horror. Just as not all films feature enough elements of a specific generic style that could warrant recognition as a subgenre, many games lack any notable or definable mechanical or thematic distinctions that would require recognition beyond the genre level.

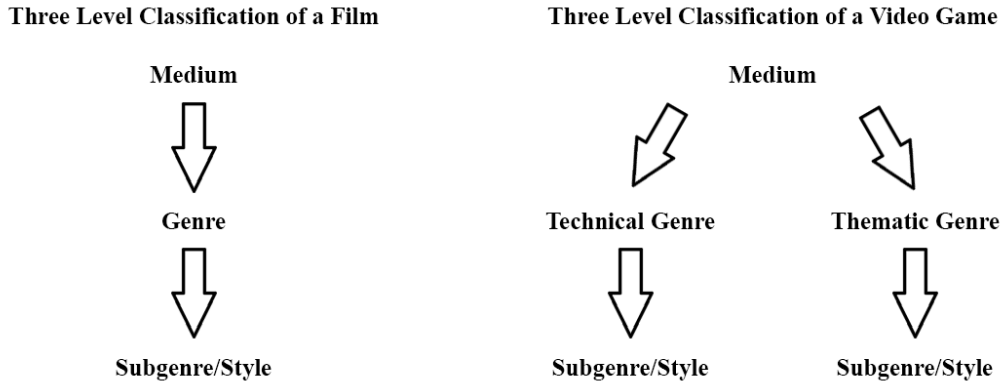


Figure 7: A visualization of the three-level classification system as applied to both film and video games.

At the beginning of *Genre and Hollywood*, Neale mentions that conventions such as runtime are also used to classify films, with labels like feature length acting as a category that could be seen as generic (2000, p. 2). Indeed, categories such as feature and short films are widely used for purposes of marketing, archiving, and awards and could be seen as genres, as to fall into these categories films must abide by and fulfil certain conventions. There is also an audience expectation that comes with these labels. However, while these categories indicate possible production styles and how much time a viewer must dedicate to watching the work, they do not

give any insight as to the content of the film and must therefore always be used in combination with another genre, for example, a feature length comedy or a documentary short film. There are similar instances of these more production-focused categories fulfilling the role of genres within the video game market. Labels such as "AAA" to describe games developed by a large and well funded studio, "indie" to describe games made by individuals or small, independent teams, and even "mobile" which describes games made to function on a smart phone or tablet instead of a console or computer are categories that often indicate factors such as playthrough length, visual quality, mechanical complexity, and cost, among others. An indie horror game is likely to be quite different from a AAA one in many facets and just like their cinema counterparts, these types of labels can be particularly useful for marketing purposes. It is argued in *Why Video Game Genres Fail: A Classificatory Analysis* that specific developers can almost serve as labels in and of themselves, such as in the case of the studio BioWare, which produces games with an often distinct and recognizable vision, such that similar games could be accurately described as BioWare-like games (Clarke et al, 2015, p. 12). This does appear to stretch the definition of genre, or even subgenre/style, beyond a reasonable point, and is more akin to Neale's description of how critics and reviewers will often use made-up or highly specific terms in place of actual genres when describing a work (2000, p. 46). Rather than being considered genre defining, describing games in relation to a specific developer is more closely similar to auteur theory in film studies, where a suspenseful thriller film may be referred to as Hitchcockian when describing its use of formal elements. After the release and meteoric commercial success of *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie Inc., 2001), it was common for critics to refer to other games released subsequently as being "Halo clones" or "Halo killers," and while these labels acting as pseudo-genres were very useful for marketing purposes, they cannot be seen as true genres; however, their time and trend specific nature does indicate that they could instead now be viewed as a cycle within the industry.

This use for marketing and advertising purposes has always been one of genre's most influential aspects, with a film's genre being a crucial piece of information when trying to convince audiences to pay to see it (Neale, 2000, p. 39). This factor may arguably be even more important within the video game market, as the diversity of games that share some of the same genres can be so great, that any vagueness or oversimplification can lead to disastrous recommendations. In *Why Video Game Genres Fail: A Classificatory Analysis*, the game franchises *Super Mario* (Nintendo, 1985-present) and *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games, 1997-present) are discussed as both being commonly classified as simply action games despite the two franchises being different in almost every way (Clarke et al, 2015, p. 6). This is an example of an instance where the implementation of clear classification structure is paramount. Take for example the game *F.E.A.R. 3* (Day 1 Studios, 2011) and the challenges of recommending it to prospective players. If the game was simply described as being of the horror genre, fans of other horror games like those of the *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999-present) or *Resident Evil* franchises (Capcom, 1996-present) could be convinced to purchase *F.E.A.R. 3*, only to discover that it features a first-person perspective which they may dislike compared to the third-person perspective of the other games. Likewise, if *F.E.A.R. 3* was described as a first-person shooter, it may be attractive to fans of the *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003-present) or *Battlefield* franchises (Dice, 2002-present), who may be upset to discover how frightening the game is. In this case, it is equally important to properly disclose both *F.E.A.R. 3*'s technical and thematic genres, as only consumers who like horror first-person shooters will enjoy

the game. This is the same principle that has applied to the film industry for decades regarding hybrid genres as a horror fan who detests science-fiction will most likely not enjoy the film *Alien* (Scott, 1979).

The significant and obvious visual differences between *Super Mario Bros.* (figure 8 (left)) and *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008) (figure 9 (right)) despite both being considered action games, indicating the need for more specific generic labeling.

1.2: Classification

Video games may have the potential to be classified under both technical and thematic genres, but this does not inherently mean that both can be applied to every game. It would indeed be a challenge to try to fit a puzzle-focused game like *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984) into the conventions of more cinematic genres as the game is purely objective-based and lacks a tangible setting or even the slightest semblance of a narrative. This applies to the majority of early video games that were comprised of crude shapes and lines set in front of a black void and the player's goal was nothing more than to survive as long as possible and earn a high score. Despite this, it should be noted that even wholly ludic games like *Tetris* or the racing simulation series *Gran Turismo* (Polyphony Digital, 1997-present) do have the potential for film adaptations; although, in these types of cases said films usually either follow plots entirely unrelated or only superficially connected to the games themselves, as was the case with the infamous 1993 film *Super Mario Bros.* (Morton & Jankel), or are otherwise biopics recounting stories of the games' development or some form of societal impact.

By the mid 1980's and early 1990's, as 8- and later 16-bit, two-dimensional, fully coloured graphics took over, games were finally able to tell more complex and recognizable narratives; although, they were still unable to explore any techniques that could be described as cinematic until the arrival of three-dimensional graphics. While Mario was trying to save a princess, it remains somewhat difficult to define *Super Mario Bros*., and its very limited intertitles, as anything more complex than just being of the action genre. Other games, such as *Final Fantasy* (Squaresoft, 1987) with its comparatively long and complex narrative and world building could be described as fantasy, adventure, and even epic. There is only value in attempting to apply film-centric genre theory to the video game industry if it fits organically. Many modern games continue to be purely gameplay focused, and this fact does not lessen the value of attempting to directly compare the two mediums or disprove my notion of cinemafication but illustrates that while many games are

ever evolving and simultaneously adopting proven cinematic techniques, the video game medium remains distinctly unique from film.

Iconography behaves practically identically for both film and video games as a method of identifying generic signifiers. As an example, Neale lists common visual identifiers of the gangster film including guns, cars, and clothes (2000, p. 16), and the same is true for many gangster genre video games. As a period-piece set in the 1940's and 1950's, the game *Mafia II* (2K Czech, 2010) visually and aesthetically appears very similar to many gangster films from *Scarface* (Hawks, 1932) to *Gangster Squad* (Fleisher, 2013). The game even features period-accurate music for its soundtrack and in-game radio, which is an important factor for establishing genre, as music is perhaps the must noticeable form of non-visual iconography (Neale, 2000, p. 16). The only real difference in the iconography between films and games of the same genre is that none of the icons featured in a game are real. All the classic cars and Tommy guns depicted in *Mafia II* are just animated three-dimensional renders. However, this should not matter, as an item or prop being considered an icon is dependant on its ability to represent a concept, and as such if a digital reproduction of said item continues to represent the concept, it should also be recognized as the icon. Additionally, considering that iconography is applied to animated films in the same manner as live-action ones, it should just as easily be recognized in the computer-generated environments of games. While iconography functions as a result of generic repetition, it does not take much for an icon to tip into the realm of stereotype, and a film that tries to feature an overabundance of icons would quickly devolve into the realm of self-referential parody, and this can also be the result for games that overly rely on pre-established iconography. This could perhaps be argued of *Mafia II*, as it can easily feel when playing through the game, that the narrative is comprised of a series of genre clichés connected by stereotypical action sequences. While this does not directly jeopardize the game's place within the genre, it could easily be declared derivative.

The similar visual iconography between the game *Mafia II* (figure 10 (left)) and the film *Gangster Squad* (figure 11 (right)).

While many genre scholars agree that genre works are inherently repetitive as a result of conformity, Schatz notes that this predictability means that the conventions of genre are most apparent when they are violated (1981, p. 17), and this is also true of video games. Certain technical genres bring with them expectations of tone, just as thematic genres do, and it is often jarring when these tonal expectations are circumvented. Shooter games generate their entertainment value from allowing players to experience action-focused gunplay, often resulting in players killing thousands of non-player characters (NPCs) and kill counts unachievable by even history's most prolific military snipers. These deaths however are generally not meant to weigh heavily on the player, as in most shooter games it is made exceptionally clear that the player is the

good guy and the hoards of enemies are described as faceless terrorists, fascists, sicarios, or something equally as "bad," indicating that killing them is a justified and noble act. Therefore, when a game does put the actions of its shooter protagonist into question, it is extremely noticeable. In appearance, *Spec Ops: The Line* (YAGER, 2012) is similar to numerous other Middle Eastern set, military shooters on the market; however, what makes *Spec Ops* different is that it is an anti-war game. Much like how a film such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Berger, 2022) is an anti-war film that uses the conventions of the war film genre, *Spec Ops* features many of the same mechanics and tropes of other military shooter games, but instead of clarifying the action or focusing on the spectacle of war, it pushes the player to question the morality of their actions. Famously, the game features a level where the protagonist deploys white phosphorous on a civilian target, killing many non-combatants, and while the player cannot choose to avoid this, they are only informed of their target after the fact, a social commentary on the nature of war, following orders, and personal responsibility. While other shooter games may allow the player to utilize chemical weapons purely as a means to dispatch large numbers of enemies and then simply move on, *Spec Ops*' narrative focuses on the fact that soldiers must live with such choices after the fact. If cinema can discover things about the unknown by recording the known, then games have an equal potential to explore the unknown while mimicking the known. A further look at how games handle topics like morality, and even turn them into game mechanic systems, will be taken later throughout this thesis.

1.3: Ludic Mechanics versus Narrative

A significant point of difference between films and video games is that of pacing and duration. A typical film has a runtime of roughly one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours, whereas a AAA video game is considered short if a playthrough lasts only four to six hours, an average sized game is often around eight to twelve, and an expansive role-playing game can be anywhere from twenty to several hundred. Obviously, given this disparity, it would be assumed that video games would require massively more complex and fleshed out narratives to occupy such lengthy playthroughs; however, this is not always the case. The nature of gameplay being the main focus of the duration of a game's length means that only a small portion of that time needs to be occupied with meaningful narrative. The story of an average entry in the *Call of Duty* franchise is on a similar level of complexity as a typical Hollywood action film, and also roughly follows a standard three-act structure. This is possible because most narrative driven video games follow the structure of long levels or periods of gameplay interspaced with cut-scenes or other forms of narrative exposition. This even applies to many role-playing games, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) which features an immensely complicated, interwoven, and branching narrative that can take hundreds of hours and multiple playthroughs to fully experience but can still have multiple hours of exploration and combat-focused gameplay with virtually no story elements or plot progression. To return to the *Call of Duty* example, most entries in the series are comprised of around ten levels, anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes in length, each beginning and ending with a two to five minute, fully animated, cinematic, pre-rendered cut-scene in which the player has no active control. In *Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology*, Gonzalo Frasca also identifies cut-scenes as an integral way for developers to forcibly inject not

only narrative, but acts of fate, into a game's story (2003, p. 227). While this does give developers the opportunity to portray events without worrying about players interfering, it can also lead to some massive ludic/narrative dissonance that can be frustrating to players. During gameplay segments, a character may be able to take massive amounts of damage or be proven as a capable warrior, but then be killed by a single blow in a scripted cut-scene. While this may make sense for the pacing and direction of the narrative, removing the player's ability to interact in order to take something or someone away from them can break immersion, especially if the player feels that their playable character should be reasonably skilled enough to otherwise handle such a situation. In terms of cinematic potential, cut-scenes in older games were commonly presented in cinematic aspect ratios in order to save on computer processing power and video file size, but this also served to even further differentiate these narrative moments out of the player's control from the rest of the gameplay (King & Krzywinska, 2002, p. 17). These conventions continue even in modern games, with cut-scenes often being in 1.85:1 aspect ratio when the active gameplay sections will be in standard 16:9, despite the fact that concerns such as file size and processing power are no longer significant. Sometimes the black bars on the top and bottom of the frame will slowly slide into place to create the effect of a smooth transition from gameplay to cinematic. A particularly important aspect of cut-scenes in games is that they are one of the only ways that the player can be shown events that take place away from their avatar. In most games, the camera is either fixed directly on the player character or at least their immediate surroundings, so if a game needs to depict narrative events occurring in an entirely different area, for example cutting away from the action to show the main villain monologuing in their lair, the easiest way for a developer to do this is through inserting a cut-scene.

In action films, scenes of continuous action may often start to become boring or tedious when longer than ten minutes, but in a video game a single action set piece, such as capturing a bunker as part of a larger battle can take a player fifteen minutes to accomplish. These long, uninterrupted periods of pure action are only made entertaining by the player's active role. In many cases, games with this type of structure can be played purely mechanically while utterly ignoring the story elements. If a player does not care who they are shooting or why they are shooting them, cut-scenes can usually be skipped by a single button press so that the player is never taken out of the action. This would be the equivalent of fast forwarding over all the dialogue heavy scenes of *Die Hard* (McTiernan, 1988) and only watching the physical action, a notion that quite accurately describes *Die Hard Trilogy* (Probe Entertainment, 1996), a game based on the first three *Die Hard* films but comprised only of gameplay levels inspired by the films' action sequences, omitting any exposition and narrative elements. It is important for developers to properly balance a game's cut-scene to gameplay ratio in order to keep the game's narrative engaging and relevant to the player without totally dominating the overall experience. Hideo Kojima in particular is known to push the limits of this delicate balance, with two of the five longest cut-scenes featured in games originating from his own projects (Rawson & Molloy, 2023, web), including the seventy-one-minute epilogue cut-scene in *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (Kojima, 2008), which clearly pushes the ratio of gameplay to narrative exposition to its limits. Forcing a player to watch the equivalent of a short film may be an efficient way of conveying narrative information, but at the expense of preventing them from actively playing through an experience, ultimately defeating the purpose of the work being a game. Additionally, if after every in-game death, a game forces a

player to repeatedly rewatch the same narrative cut-scene before restarting the level, without an option to skip for example, the player may become frustrated or bored and begin to resent the game's story for standing in the way of them experiencing an action sequence. An interesting side note regarding the difference between the gameplay and cut-scene portions of games, is that while players may opt to skip cut-scenes while playing, video sharing platforms like YouTube are filled with compilations of entire games' worth of cut-scenes edited together so that those who, for whatever reason, are unable or unwilling to play through an entire video game, can still experience a game's narrative. These compilations are often titled as *[game title]: The Movie* and have runtimes of around two hours, similar to feature films.

It could be said that in terms of pacing, video games are similar to limited series rather than films, as limited series also usually run eight to ten hours and are divided into roughly hour-long segments that are joined together using cliffhangers or narrative developments, similar to the divided level structure of many games. This can be seen especially in narrative heavy, linear games such as *Dead Space* (EA Redwood Shores, 2008). While *Dead Space* still has many long periods of pure action, the narrative is constantly present through devices like audio communications with other characters delivering updates and interactions with the environment that are constantly changing the player's objectives and understanding of the game's story. A streaming series such as *Reacher* (Santora, 2022-present) structurally has much in common with many video games as the series features a protagonist, present in almost every scene, on a quest to achieve a larger objective by completing several smaller objectives in each episode, with every smaller victory unlocking new information and further objectives, much like a level-based video game where the player works their way up to the final level. Both seasons of *Reacher* even ended in large scale, climactic shootouts, in arena-style environments which are very similar to a video game's final boss fight.

Much of video game studies academia has been focused on discussing the opposition between the narrative and ludic elements featured in games. Ultimately, video games are games first, and storytelling devices second. If a video game lacked any kind of gameplay, it would be nothing more than an animated film. Of course, the inclusion of narrative is not the defining characteristic of cinema either, as many arthouse films lack any semblance of a coherent plot or story, but in virtually all films, the moving image is used to convey, retell, or otherwise display some form of information for viewers to consume. Video games can also do this, but only in addition to being played. Håvard Vibeto states in *The Spectacular Design of First-Person Shooters*, that many game scholars, such as Chris Crawford, argue that a game's audio/visual elements, factors that I would consider to be more cinematic, are less important than ludic elements (2019, p. 16). Vibeto goes on to argue that elements such as visual and auditory spectacle have themselves become integral to video game design, with graphics alone routinely being considered one of the biggest factors by gamers when choosing what games to purchase (2019, p. 19-21). A video game in its purest ludic form may not require any visuals or audio whatsoever, such as early text-based games like *Zork* (Infocom, 1977), but it is undeniable that the video game industry has been striving to constantly increase the realism and fidelity of audio/visual elements. As previously mentioned, games commonly let players experience events similar to those depicted in films, and this is evident in gameplay elements such as environmental destruction physics. Vibeto states that such gameplay elements contribute to the factor of spectacle and are similar to what Geoff King refers to as impact aesthetics in film as well as Tom Gunning's theory of cinema of attractions

(2019, p. 15-19). While it may be relatively easy for a game to place bullet hole textures on surfaces shot by a player for an added point of realism, totally destructible environments are a significantly more complex feat of programming and require a certain level of justification to be included. Games with such mechanics, like *Red Faction* (Volition, 2001) and *Battlefield 4* (DICE, 2013), utilize these for both gameplay and cinematic effect. Being able to blow open or knock down a wall in a shooter game may give a player more approach options, thereby increasing the complexity of the gameplay, but examples of smaller-scale, background destruction, such as leaves falling off a bush when shot, serve only to increase the visual spectacle of the gameplay experience, and I would argue, make for an overall more cinematic one. Of course, hyper-realism does not guarantee cinematic effect. In *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (Kojima, 2001), the player can knock over an ice bucket and then watch as the individual ice cubes slowly melt away which, while impressive technically for the time and almost unnecessarily realistic, does little to contribute to the overall cinematicness of the game and its atmosphere. While it could be said that destructible environments make for a more realistic experience, this is not inherently the case. Shooting a car's gas tank in real-life does not actually make it explode, but this is common movie logic, and something frequently included in video games. Action genre audiences enjoy explosions and so action genre works include them as often as possible. The use of movie logic and more specific cinematic motifs will be examined in further detail later in Section II of this thesis.

Video games also allow for more concentrated and prolonged periods of spectacle that would be unsuitable for inclusion in films (Vibeto, 2019, p. 16). As mentioned, when describing pacing, prolonged exposure to explosions and repetitive gunbattles would quickly become boring if not for the challenge of actively experiencing it. Additionally, in most cases, all of a game's spectacle is directed at the protagonist, and by extension the player, particularly in first-person perspective games, where it is common for effects like mud or blood to splatter across the screen. In a film this is often done to enhance realism and make the audience feel as if they are truly present for the action, but this is usually effective in smaller doses and can otherwise easily become distracting.

1.4: Environmental Storytelling

To now move on from interactions with environmental elements to the design of the environments themselves, one major difference in narrative form and pacing between films and video games is the ability of games to utilize environmental storytelling. Environmental storytelling is a method of indirectly delivering narrative information to the player through objects and details within a game's environment. This can be difficult to properly execute in cinema as, if the information is important to understanding the plot, but too subtly delivered, audiences may miss the information and then be frustrated with their lack of comprehension. Environmental storytelling is often used to portray smaller background stories that are part of the game's overall narrative. An example would be, in a zombie survival game a player may find some zombie corpses leading to a locked room. Inside the room there is a non-zombified corpse and some items the player can pick up. These items could include an empty first aid kit and a gun with a small amount of ammunition. This discovery tells the story of another survivor that fought valiantly but was ultimately overcome and died. Depending on the game, there could also be a note or audio log the

player could pick up that would give backstory or further explanation as to what happened to the unlucky NPC. What is most important to emphasise in this hypothetical example, is that this narrative is supplementary to the overall plot of the game, and not mandatory for the player to participate in. A player less invested in the game's story may simply think nothing more of the room than as a place to pick up a spare gun. Further still, perhaps the locked door is only accessible if the player's avatar is equipped with lockpicks, or it requires a skill-based mini-game to open that not every player can complete. In either of these cases, the game can hide additional narrative elements behind feats of skill. Additionally, as Geoff King mentions in *Die Hard/Try Harder: Narrative, Spectacle and Beyond, from Hollywood to Videogame*, if environmental details are too distracting, it may cause a player to lose focus on the gameplay which could result in a frustrating character death and setback (2002, p. 58). This is not something that can be easily translated to film, as in almost all cases, even if different audience members focus on different parts of scenes, they are all watching the same content. Games can even use elements of environmental storytelling in combination with a multiple ending system so that players who gather more information or clues during a playthrough of a game might unlock entirely different conclusions. Environmental storytelling is also distinct from other forms of non-direct narrative deliveries such as foreshadowing. A level in a game may end with a fight against a sword-wielding boss, and so if the path leading up to the boss-fight room was scattered with dismembered bodies and slash marks on the walls, these context clues would serve more to foreshadow the upcoming confrontation, rather than serve to tell a narrative of their own.

When featured in film, environmental storytelling is often used in combination with more direct narrative devices, such as exposition. In a procedural, a crime scene is an example of an environment that tells a story, but in most films, there will be a character that walks through and explains the crime scene to other characters and by extension, the audience. This is practical as, if knowing all the details of an environment are crucial to understanding a plot, a filmmaker must ensure that the audience is informed. There are examples of a similar approach to this in video games where a game may not directly bestow upon the player information in something as rigid as a scripted cut-scene, but instead will require that the player explore an area and not allow them to move on from it until they have observed all pieces of information deemed crucial. The AMC series *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), and its many spin-offs, frequently utilized environmental storytelling as a form of world building, with background details of the locations the characters visit often telling fragments of stories that had transpired before the events of the show itself. These stories were in most cases not directly addressed by the characters or main episode narratives and instead existed to create a more realistic, lived-in atmosphere and give enthusiastic and invested viewers the opportunity to piece together and theorize about the deeper lore of the show's world. Environmental storytelling can be used any time the aftermath of an event that takes place off screen is shown but is particularly common in the science-fiction and horror genres since, as a narrative device, environmental storytelling inherently lends itself to an air of mystery.

The practice of environmental storytelling also works in tandem with Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric. In *Persuasive Games*, Bogost describes procedural rhetoric as a concept where people are able to learn through the authorship of rules and processes, and this is illustrated in how the rigid nature of games as systems allows them to be used to teach messages or ideas (2007, p. 29-31). In this way, environmental storytelling can be used to convey everything from

mechanics to morals in a manner less direct, or perhaps more fluid and natural, than direct exposition. This is particularly common in simulation style games across many genres, as players can often explore their own ethical judgements within the constraints of the rules and mechanics of the games. These types of moments are often some of the lesser cinematic ones, as they require high levels of player choice and freedom, which is in opposition to the developers having enough control over the player experience to ensure a cohesive narrative. An example of environmental storytelling being used to teach the player gameplay mechanics can be found in *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012). The game features lethal force fields called Walls of Light that will kill the player if they walk through them and are set up to block several pathways throughout the game. A Wall of Light that the player encounters early in the game has a corpse placed on the ground as if he had died trying to walk through it. This, in combination with a do not enter warning sign, indicates to the player that this path is blocked by a lethal trap and that they should look for an alternate route. The player is then likely to notice a fairly obvious power source that when removed disables the Wall of Light, allowing them to continue. This tutorial could just as easily be achieved by text on the screen or dialogue, but this environmental method makes for a more diegetic and dynamic learning experience. Cinema is also filled with similar occurrences where a character may notice a detail that helps them to avoid or overcome a problem, preventing them from experiencing certain death, but while this kind of moment in a film creates an opportunity for a character to be established as cunning or observant, when included in a video game it allows for the player to personally feel equally as cunning or observant, regardless of how contrived or simple the game's puzzle is mechanically.

One advantage of environmental storytelling is its inherent ability to be subtle. In a film, everything that appears on screen is sharing a single frame, and while establishing or long shots may be busy or crowded, the majority of shots in a film will focus on a single subject, and in most of these cases, while action may be taking place in the background, filmmakers will try to avoid anything that is too distracting. The biggest problem with including details or action in the background of a film scene, is that the film is constantly moving forward in time, and a viewer can only really focus on a single aspect of a shot at any one moment. A home viewer may be able to rewind and freeze frame to hunt for easter eggs and background details when watching a DVD or streamed copy of a film, but this is a luxury that theater audiences and network television viewers do not have. This means it is in the interest of filmmakers to not include anything of significance outside of the main subject of a shot, besides instances of minor, but interesting, details or jokes. For example, in *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (Tarantino, 2003) it is not crucial to enjoying or even understanding the plot of the film for a viewer to be able to read the Bride's (Uma Thurman) full name as can be seen in the brief close-up shot of her plane ticket, but for fast enough readers or those with a pause button, it is a fun detail and piece of trivia.

1.5: Inspiration versus Mimicry

While a large portion of this thesis is dedicated to analysing how film-centric genre theory can be applied to video games, and observing the trend of cinemafication in which games are utilizing ever more filmic elements, it is important to note that there is a difference between games that implement cinematic techniques and styles, and those that simply reference famous films. The

game *Dead Rising* (Capcom Production Studio 1, 2006) is a zombie hack and slash game that takes place entirely within a shopping mall and contains a significant amount of social commentary. This is undeniably similar to Zack Snyder's 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*. Does this prove that video games are becoming more like films considering the shared subject material and tone? Not entirely, but it does serve to highlight how the two mediums treat genre in a similar way. As Schatz describes, genres are directly influenced by what is popular with consumers, and as a result, stories and concepts that make money get repeated (1981, p. 16), and this is exactly what occurred in this case. *Dead Rising* is not trying to be a highly cinematic experience that can rival the emotion and influence of its live-action counterpart, it is following and copying what is popular in the current zombie cycle of the horror genre and is granting players the opportunity to put themselves in a legally different enough version of *Dawn of the Dead*. This is to be expected as Schatz also states that genres impress themselves upon the culture itself (1981, p. 16), so it makes perfect sense that genre trends would transcend medium and affect the style of content produced wherever a genre may reside. Taking inspiration from popular and acclaimed films has been extremely common in video games for nearly the entire life of the industry. Countless World War II themed games take inspiration from the opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998), including levels where the player starts in a crowded landing craft and ends with them heroically conquering the beaches of Normandy. But re-creating and allowing players to reenact memorable cinematic moments is entirely different from when a game meaningfully engages with the same settings or topics to create a wholly new narrative experience that fits into and expands upon a traditional genre. The game *Bullet Witch* (Take, 2006) features a runaway baby carriage as a clear visual reference to the film *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925), but the game is otherwise visually and narratively unremarkable and fairly uncinematic. Simply referencing or re-creating cinematic action does not indicate that video games are becoming more cinematic, instead the cinemafication of games can be seen when video games utilize genre conventions and proven cinematic techniques to effectively tell their own stories and present spectacle in ways that are still distinctly unique to the abilities of the video game medium. By examining two genre-based case studies in Section II of this thesis, it will be observed how the two mediums maintain separate strengths and weaknesses, while portraying many of the same genre conventions in noticeably similar ways, with an ever-growing cinematic influence within video games' approaches. Although, before specific examples of genre games can be meaningfully compared to similar films, it is first important to discuss one of the major differentiating factors between films and games in general: the element of interactivity.

Chapter 2: Interactivity

"Every age has its storytelling form, and video gaming is a huge part of our culture. People are enthralled with video games in the same way as other people love the cinema or theatre."

- Andy Serkis, The Guardian, 2010

As has been established previously, films are watched and video games are played, but as 3D graphics and animation techniques improve, games are more and more commonly referred to as "playable movies." The cinemafication of modern video games is an observable phenomenon, but what about the other way around? Some structural elements and narrative motifs from video games can be seen implemented or at least referenced in some modern films and shows, but what about adding actual playable elements to films? Interactive films have existed for over fifty years with the Czechoslovakian film *Kinoautomat* (Činčera, 1967), which held its world debut at Montreal's Expo '67, utilizing a rudimentary audience voting system overseen by an in-theater host to decide what choices would be made by the characters on screen (Mansky, 2019, web). The film only had nine total choices during its runtime, and none of them affected the ultimate ending, but nonetheless it garnered a positive reception from the audiences lucky enough to attend one of its limited screenings (Mansky, 2019, web). Despite keen interest from Hollywood in the film's gimmick, the technology was the property of the Communist State, and as a result, the technology was never made accessible to American studios, with the film ultimately banned for political reasons from theaters even behind the Iron Curtain (Willoughby, 2021, web).

The first ever known instance of polling an audience was in fact six years prior with the Columbia Pictures film *Mr. Sardonicus* (Castle, 1961), although in that case, it was a simple choice between two endings, with the audience encouraged to choose one, with the other most likely never even filmed (Mateu, 2023, p. 76-77). This does mean that the earliest example of audience choice, the precursor to player choice, was nothing more than an illusion; although, this is not surprising considering the eccentric career of William Castle. With Hollywood unable to secure the licensing for interactive film systems from the Soviets, audiences' ability to choose the actions of real actors on screen would not be seen again until the introduction of full motion video (FMV) games which saw popularity through the early 1980's and much of the 1990's.

The first FMV games were exclusive to arcades, as they were printed on Laserdiscs, a format never used by any home game consoles. Later, as consoles became more powerful in the late 1980's and the capacity of data storage devices got larger, especially with the introduction of the compact disc, developers were able to use compressed live-action footage as the backdrop for simple games. In many of these games, players would either make choices between possible narrative outcomes, deciding what clip would be played next for the continuation of a branching, yet linear story, or use a light gun (*a gun shaped controller used for shooting at the screen, common in arcades*) to shoot at digitized actors, where a hit would trigger a clip of them falling over. For

the most part, FMV was used as a graphical gimmick in fighting and shooting games, or games that were in effect, "playable" fictional films, such as the soft-core pornographic FMV game *Plumbers Don't Wear Ties* (United Pixtures, 1993) for the Panasonic 3DO. FMV games owed their popularity mainly to the novelty of seeing real actors perform semi-controllable actions on screen; although, as soon as polygon-based, 3D graphics improved significantly in the 1990's, the heyday of FMV games, and their often, cumbersome controls came to an end. However, this would not mark the end of interactive film and similar media. With the popularization of the internet in the 21st century, interactive media enjoyed a massive resurgence, and now with the high degree of realism of modern video game graphics, the line of distinction between interactive films and video games can be rather blurry.

Figure 12 (left): A still from *Kinoautomat* illustrating the use of different coloured film that could be switched between using coloured projector filters, depending on what choices the audiences voted for.
Figure 13 (right): A screenshot from the game *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015) showing one of the many binary choices the player can make throughout the game that fundamentally alter the course of the narrative.

Despite video game narratives increasing in complexity, the story structure of a branching narrative using a series of binary decisions, similar to those of early interactive cinema and FMV games, has once again seen wide use in playable movie style games such as titles published by Quantic Dream and Supermassive Games as referenced in the Introduction. Additionally, there has been a small resurgence in FMV games, with recent games such as *The Quiet Man* (Human Head Studios, 2018), using high definition live-action video for the game's cinematic cut-scenes. While the characters played by real actors in the FMV scenes are replaced with computer generated models in the gameplay sections, the significantly more advanced graphical capabilities of modern hardware allow these animated characters to closely resemble the actors they are modeled after, something further aided by such factors as the player-controlled camera usually facing the character's back, limiting how often the player sees their face. The fact that these games, which may be those most closely compared to cinema, use mechanics that were originally featured in films, serves to support my theory of cinemafication; although, this reiterates the important question of whether interactivity is the key separating factor between the two mediums, and how much interactivity can be present in a film before it becomes a game.

2.1: Distinction Between Interactive Films and Video Games

The most prominent, modern example of interactivity being used by the film industry is in the realm of i-docs. An i-doc is a work that serves to document an element of reality, be it an event, a situation, or even a societal concept, and does so through an interactive presentation and interface, as described by Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi in *Interactive Documentary: Setting the Field* (2012, p. 125-126). While the non-fiction genre of documentary is almost always associated with the medium of film, that distinction is not as inherently absolute in the case of i-docs. Take for example *Un/tied Shoes* (Ruddy & Lebedovich, 2019), which is an interactive web experience hosted by the Canadian NFB. The work documents the gendered experience of online shoe shopping, and while it does contain limited clips of live action footage, this is only in its attempt to re-create the aesthetic of a high-end retail website that would include embedded moving images and videos. So, if *Un/tied Shoes* is an interactive experience that a participant or "player" can control, should it not then, by definition, be classified under the medium of video games? Perhaps not. I would argue that *Un/tied Shoes* in fact lacks all of the most basic and necessary ludic qualities required of a game, such as challenges or win/loss states. The participant navigates through the replica storefront and selects a desired product page where they can then read a paragraph describing the artist's experience with their gender identity, and upon attempting to actually buy any of the shoes, the participant is reminded that this is an art piece but hopefully they will remember their experience next time they actually buy shoes online. *Un/tied Shoes* is not "played", it is experienced and can be learned from, but for this reason it should be categorized as an i-doc only and not a game as well. While this also does not definitively prove that i-docs should always be classified as films, it illustrates that interactivity alone is not the defining difference between films and video games. Wolf claims that interactivity is the key difference between film and games (2001, p. 114), but I would argue that interactivity alone is only a method through which a viewer or player can access a work's content, and that the nature of this content is what has more affect on determining medium, an example being, if content has ludic elements, it is likely a game. While ludic content obviously needs interactivity to function, the nature of that content should be the defining factor. I-docs are generally considered a genre of interactive film, just as documentaries are considered a genre of conventional film, and if interactivity itself is not the defining factor for determining medium, it can be surmised that most i-docs can be considered films just as much as any other non-documentarian interactive film can be.

As described in the Introduction, on a surface level, viewing can be seen as a passive experience, while playing is a more active experience, but how do these terms apply when describing the consumption of interactive documentary media that may fall somewhere in the middle. The fact that interactivity and active participation are required to fulfill the experience, inherently means the "participant" is more than a traditional viewer, but the fact that most of these experiences cannot be functionally considered games means they are also not truly being played, and therefore the "participant" cannot be a player. As neither description adequately applies, I propose the term "active viewer." More than just a passive audience member, absorbing and interpreting an experience projected in front of them, but not quite a player with the presumed expectation of things like ergodic challenge or escapist enjoyment. The active viewer is best described by having a level of presumed agency, as mentioned by Sandra Gaudenzi in *Strategies*

of Participation: The Who, What and When of Collaborative Documentaries (2014, p. 129), as well as a desire to engage with the interactive experience in order to best consume the information being presented. The active viewer should, however, be considered a purely consumer role, distinct from other labels such as prosumer, as there should be no expectation that an active viewer will also take an active role in the production end of media by performing edits or contributing user-generated content (UGC) (Gaudenzi, 2014, p. 129).

While i-docs in most cases cannot be considered video games, the reverse is also true. While the majority of i-docs lack the ludic elements crucial to games, most games fail to document a depiction of reality, a mandatory quality of the i-doc. Many games, such as Sony's *Spider-Man* (Insomniac Games, 2018) take place in three-dimensional, interactive, and navigable re-creations of real-world locations, in this case New York City; however, the fact that the game focuses on the fictional character Spider-Man and his battles against cartoon supervillains, in effect removes any notion of portraying reality. Although, this does not necessarily mean that a game cannot be both entertainment and documentary. Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi refer to *America's Army* (United States Army, 2002) as being a "docu-game" which they state can be considered as a form of i-doc (2012, p. 126). The four games in the *America's Army* series (United States Army, 2002-2015) were developed and funded directly by the United States Army as a recruitment tool (Schulzke, 2016, p. 303). The games are team-based, multiplayer, first-person shooters in which two teams of players fight in deathmatch or objective-based scenarios. In regard to gameplay, *America's Army* is similar to other, purely fictitious, tactical FPS games like the *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000-present) and *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* franchises (Ubisoft, 1998-present). What makes *America's Army* different is that the game markets itself on its dedication to depicting and representing the reality of life for an American soldier. Before players are able to participate in multiplayer battles, they must complete detailed training courses that mimic military basic training. While in the game itself, healing a wounded comrade may be as simple as pressing a single key, the in-game combat-medic training course does outline real medical procedures. As if to confirm the realism of these tutorials, there have been a handful of reported cases of players being able to utilize the in-game medical training to help those injured in accidents in the real world; although, these are almost impossible to corroborate and are just as likely to be internet urban legends (Dutka, 2008, web).

It is not uncommon for video games to be used for educational purposes, with "educational" itself often used as a technical type genre, as acknowledged in *Why Video Game Genres Fail: A Classificatory Analysis* (Clarke et al, 2015, p. 10); however, learning cannot be in and of itself the only goal of an educational game, there must also be some other challenge for the player to strive for even if it is as simple as a high score. As Andrew Mactavish describes in *Technological Pleasure: The Performance and Narrative of Technology in Half-Life and other High-Tech Computer Games*, video games reward progress by introducing higher challenge and greater spectacle (2002, p. 39), and so as a player progresses through an educational game it is common for the problems to become increasingly more difficult. In an i-doc, an active viewer may navigate an environment and decide what information to consume, but they are not met with any sort of pushback that must be overcome to continue learning. This means that the most significant difference between an educational game and an i-doc or conventional documentary film, is that the latter two do not actively prevent the participant from learning by including fail-states, such as

a game over screen, or otherwise any kind of obstacle that must be overcome by a feat of skill. Additionally, just like the realm of cinema, the depiction of reality is not inherently documentarian. Just as *Saving Private Ryan* would never be classified as a World War II documentary, *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games, 2017) is not an i-doc as, despite being superficially similar in design to *America's Army*, it depicts a fictional and glorified version of historical events. Ultimately, this example demonstrates that for a video game to also be an i-doc, it must dedicate a significant portion of itself to documenting and disseminating real world information to its player or active viewer, but this can be done in either direct or indirect ways, and it need not necessarily interfere with the work being fun to play or experience.

Perhaps the best examples of the true merging of i-docs and video games are the newest entries in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise (Ubisoft, 2007-present). The games of the *Assassin's Creed* series take place in many different historical locations across a wide range of time periods, including 12th century Jerusalem, Victorian England, Revolutionary Russia, among others. However, the three most recent games: *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2017), *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2018), and *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2020) all include a heightened level of historical detail beyond what is necessary for facilitating their narratives and atmospheres. Taking place in ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, and Viking controlled Anglo-Saxony respectively, each game includes an alternate game mode referred to as Tour Mode. This gameplay mode removes most of the traditional gameplay elements from the game, most notably the combat and the assassinations while retaining non-violent game mechanics such as climbing and piloting vehicles, and instead allows the player to control a modern-looking explorer character with full and free access to the game's world map. As the player traverses the game world, now devoid of enemies, multiple narrators will inform the player about the history and culture of the real-world locations that correspond to the in-game re-creations. In practice, it is akin to allowing the player to walk through a tailor-made History Channel style documentary, where the player can decide what to learn about and at what pace. The Tour Modes of each game offer roughly eight hours of content, equivalent to approximately half the length of the conventional gameplay, which obviously indicates that they are not intended to be played in a single sitting. Additionally, the Tour Modes can be purchased independently from the rest of their associated games for a reduced price, meaning players with no interest in the violent main game, can access Tour Mode as a purely educational tool. While this removes any skill-based challenge, it does not make the mode any less of a game, as plenty of story-based games lack combat and instead have a player navigate a three-dimensional and interactive world following a fictional story. This technical genre of games is referred to as walking-simulators, as in practice all the player does is move, and while they almost always depict fictional narratives, they make the perfect vessel for an i-doc. The player has the choice to move about and explore as they wish, while being exposed to the documented information as they go. Furthermore, this tour mode and its ability to allow players to experience distant lands and cultures also somewhat resembles the notion of cinema of exploration as described by James Cahill and Luca Caminati in their 2021 book *Cinema of Exploration: Essays on an Adventurous Film Practice*; although, while the virtual and controlled nature of a video game environment no doubt removes a level of authenticity, it perhaps also creates fewer chances for the problematic and colonial issues which that style of film has traditionally been associated with.

In *Choreographies of Collaboration: Social Engagement in Interactive Documentaries*, Liz Miller and Martin Allor raise the point that i-docs that are too simple may frustrate experienced gamers who expect interactivity to include challenge, while non-gamers may be frustrated with complex control schemes (2016, p. 63), but in this regard, the walking-simulator genre serves as a perfect middle ground. A walking-simulator can present some challenge while maintaining simple controls, examples being, having to move behind a tree to hide from an enemy or stepping on a pressure plate to reveal something hidden. These cases are not especially difficult but are engaging as well as interactive without alienating those less comfortable with playing games. Some walking-simulators can even include win/loss states or game over screens as depending on the game, a player's character may be killed by environmental hazards or simple enemies, and this also means the potential for different endings depending on a player's performance. Walking-simulators are often already dialogue and narrative heavy by their very nature and therefore can make for an effective format to present players with moral choices with consequences. This also indicates that, since both interactive films and video games have the potential to meet the generic conventions required to be i-docs, that the i-doc genre should not be considered as medium-specific to film but can instead be applied to multiple mediums like many more traditional genres such as horror or comedy.

2.2: Player Choice and the Illusion Thereof

One of the most significant ways video games allow for interactivity is through the inclusion of choice, but not all video games include what could be considered true choices. The ability for a player to do things like pause or simply refuse to progress by staying in one level are not actions that could be reasonably recognized as choices. A film viewer can pause a Blu-ray or get up and leave a theatre in the middle of a film, but these decisions exist outside of and do not affect the media. A true player choice is one that has some direct impact on the trajectory of a game's narrative, just as the audience's choices did during the screenings of *Kinoautomat*. The inclusion of true choices makes designing an experience exponentially more complex, while also offering the potential to significantly interfere with a video game's ability to be cinematic. Games like those in the *Call of Duty* series are extremely linear in design and almost entirely devoid of meaningful player choices. Linear games, such as many in the genres of shooters and platformers, are basically long, albeit intricate, hallways the player must travel down, killing any enemies placed in their path on the way to the level exit, with the only real choices perhaps being what weapons or abilities the player uses to perform said killing. All a player can really do is progress in a forward direction and experience the pre-determined narrative. This style of game grants the developer significant power over shaping the player's experience, and therefore allows for more traditionally cinematic narratives. This can be an attractive approach for developers since it guarantees that the narratives and set pieces they create will be experienced by all players.

In *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward, 2011) the Eiffel Tower is destroyed during World War III. This is a massive, dramatic set piece full of spectacle, with a climaxing musical score and shaking camera effects; however, the gameplay practically stops when this occurs. The player is momentarily not targeted by enemy gunfire, and the voices of NPCs explicitly point out and describe what is happening so that the player's focus is directed towards the

predetermined spectacle of a famous landmark being destroyed. This is similar to a film where the camera cuts away from the protagonist to long shots of wanton destruction before cutting back to the protagonist's reaction. Now, the player could of course choose to turn away from the falling Tower, after all, the camera is still under their control, but there is nothing else happening at that moment that would warrant the player looking away. Essentially, it would be similar to a movie viewer choosing to look at the back wall of a theater instead of at the action shown on screen, and in that way, both are choices to ignore the piece of media itself, rather than have any sort of real input on what is happening. While perhaps not a perfect comparison, as despite turning their character away from the action, the player's eyes do remain fixed on the screen compared to the movie goer entirely turning their eyes away from the media itself, both scenarios indicate how external and non-diegetic choices by the consumer cannot reasonably be anticipated by a work that relies on the assumption that the consumer will compliantly pay attention as directed. In some games, even this is not possible, as in moments of such spectacle, control of the camera is taken away from the player entirely, cutting away to the action in a way similar to a film jump-cut, before returning to the player's avatar's point of view. Vibeto describes this loss of control as a trade-off that ensures the player does not miss any of the carefully crafted spectacle (2019, p. 21). By this same logic, the higher degree of choice the player is granted, the less linear a game's narrative can be. Besides drastically increasing the scope of production, this design choice also hugely increases the required complexity of narratives, but more importantly, the inclusion of true player choices, even small ones, removes control from a project director. An audience watching a film is going to, for the most part, experience exactly what the director wants them to, and while different audience members may have different interpretations, the basic narrative remains constant, but as soon as a director allows players to change the narrative themselves, there is no way to control what is specifically experienced. As Miller and Allor clarify, "exhibitors […] become 'context providers' rather than 'content providers,'" and as a result, positions that would more traditionally be considered directors, instead become more akin to curators (2016, p.56).

The original trilogy of *Mass Effect* games (BioWare, 2007-2012) features a massive, over one-hundred hour long narrative. Choices from one game carry over to affect the story of the following games, meaning that a choice a player makes in *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007) may result in characters or entire storylines being absent in *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012). Characters could either die in the first hour or survive the entire trilogy, creating massive deviations in the story. In practical terms, this means that a substantial portion of the game will go entirely unused and unexperienced by some players. A reader of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel is likely to never read many of the pages, as they only jump to the parts relevant to their "read-through," but in the case of a video game, those skipped sections not only had to be written but animated, programmed, rendered, polished, and so forth, just for a portion of the user base to never experience them. Regarding this, Frasca argues that the primary difference between film and game narratives is that game narratives can lack predeterminancy, and as a result the developers and authors are not in fact creating traditional narratives but instead, parameters for scenarios to exist in which the player actually determines the narrative (2003, p. 227-229). Even something as simple as offering the player the option to attack an enemy base from the front gate or rear entrance will make for two unique player experiences, and regardless of whether or not the level ending is affected by such a choice, both options would most likely require unique scripted events and enemy interactions,

meaning two action sequences must be created for only one to be played out. However, this does not necessarily grant each player the feeling of experiencing a truly unique narrative experience but does require significantly more effort on the part of the developers. In order for such a high degree of choice to ultimately feel fulfilling, different endings for a game will need to be crafted so that the player feels like they actually had a tangible impact on a narrative, something *Mass Effect 3* ironically failed to do, with its initial three endings all feeling far too similar.

Regardless of how many different possible endings a developer decides to include, the potential fates of a game's characters and world are ultimately still dictated by the game's writers. The combination of fates that any specific player ends up with can be relatively unique and means that the developers have to be comfortable with not dictating how exactly their narrative plays out, and as a result, what overall message, if any, is disseminated to the player. However, it is very common for one ending, usually the "good ending" to be referred to as the canonical ending. This is not a foreign concept to cinema, with it not being unusual for a film to have different versions which can include additional scenes and even potentially different endings, with these different versions of the same film identified with labels such as theatrical cut, director's cut, extended cut, or even an unrated version with extra violence, sex, or profanity. Studio executives or producers may force a director to change an ending for a multitude of reasons, with said original ending later included on home releases. Films like *I Am Legend* (Lawrence, 2007) notoriously had multiple endings, some considered more satisfying than others, but oftentimes, such as in this case, one ending will ultimately be declared canon for the purposes of creating a sequel. However, other films, such as *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), have multiple, and considerably different, endings that are never truly clarified, even after the production of a sequel. One of the closest comparisons between film and video games in terms of multiple outcomes, is the 1985 film *Clue* (Lynn), which during its original theatrical release, had one of three different endings played randomly depending on the print a theater received. This served to emulate the randomness of the board game it was based on where the conclusion of each game is determined by chance. The 1997 video game *Blade Runner* (Westwood Studios) was not directly based on the plot of the 1982 film, but instead existed parallel to it and attempted to reproduce the narrative ambiguity of the film's multiple ending possibilities by randomly deciding at the beginning of every playthrough which characters, including the protagonist, would be replicants. This meant that the game would always play, and more importantly end, differently, which also served the themes of distrust and paranoia featured in the film.

The ability of a player to influence the meaning of an interactive narrative is one of the unique opportunities the interactive element allows for (Gaudenzi, 2014, p. 134), only as long as these choices are not so powerful as to jeopardise the integrity of the developer's vision and message, if any. This is where the illusion of player choice enters the equation. Options to make choices that have no real consequence or bearing on the narrative can still be thought provoking and create a sense of engagement without forcing the developer to relinquish a significant amount of creative control. The previously mentioned *Kinoautomat*, that introduced audience choice, included fairly limited options that only affected the path the audience took to get to a predetermined ending. Many games do this to appear more complex than they actually are, using choices that ultimately all result in the same outcome, or choices that lead to dead ends, such as a character being instantly killed, something common in titles developed by Supermassive Games,

notably *Until Dawn*. In contrast, a deliberate and obvious lack of any true choices can be used to bolster an overall sense of helplessness, particularly if the game forces the player to do something they would rather not in order to proceed with the narrative. An example of this would be at the end of *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego, 2010), where the player must walk into an unwinnable fight against an army death squad. The player has no way to circumvent this conclusion, and while it could just as easily take place in the form of a pre-rendered cut-scene, the fact that the game forces the player to actively play the scene out, heightens the feeling of hopelessness and increases the emotional impact of the protagonist's death as the player experiences it, rather than watches it.

Fake choices can still be effective in making the player feel as if they are a more active part of the experience than they really are; although, if a choice is too obviously unimportant, it can counteractively break immersion or at least frustrate a player who may feel as if the interactive aspect of an experience is unnecessary. This is obviously a delicate balance. Early in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (MachineGames, 2014), the player's character is psychoanalyzed by a Nazi officer who demands they make selections from three pairs of photographs, telling them that a wrong choice will result in death. Regardless of which photos are chosen, it will be declared the right answer. This is an effective way to create suspense without risking a frustrating player death or implementing trial-and-error mechanics which can be repetitive and boring to play. Even if the player realises that their choices did not in fact matter and had no bearing on the plot, the sequence still succeeds in serving to enhance the atmosphere of the level and setting the game's tone. Conversely, it can be immensely frustrating and even create distrust within the player when a game asks the player to choose between two options, only for one of the options to be predetermined to occur as part of the game's scripted narrative, regardless of player interaction. Similarly to *Wolfenstein*, there is a moment in the game *Hitman III* (IO Interactive, 2021) where the player can participate in a minigame that has them answer verbal prompts by selecting corresponding ink blot images. In this case there is only one correct combination of prompts and blots; however, this minigame is optional and is only played to earn a bonus reward, making it a test of skill rather than

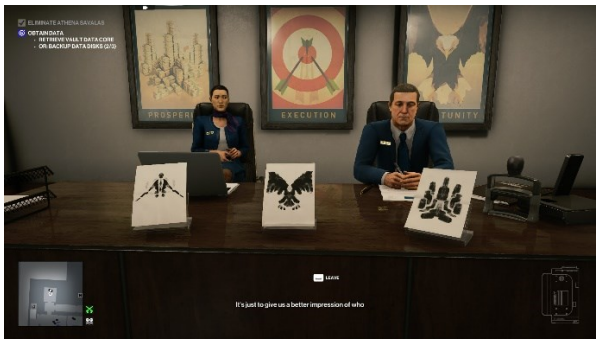


Figure 14 (left): The player having to choose between photographs during an intense Nazi examination in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, with the threat of death clearly represented by the Luger on the table pointed directly at the player.
Figure 15 (right): The more relaxed ink blot test in *Hitman III* where the player is working towards the goal of acquiring a bonus reward. The three art pieces hanging behind the examiners serve as hints as to which blots the player should select.

a potential roadblock. If the player fails, they may be frustrated at missing out on acquiring an advantage, but this loss is not forced on them by the game's narrative and is instead the result of their own mistake, and even if the minigame is lost, the player still has other options for completing

the level with a perfect score. Additionally, the game offers attentive players a guide to success via art on the walls of the test room that correspond to the correct choices, which also reinforces the fact that any failure is entirely the fault of the player, rather than the game punishing them.

As was previously mentioned, ethics and morality are important elements to media such as i-docs, but these can be some of the most difficult factors to successfully apply to player choices in video games. Entertainment games that feature morality systems, where a player can choose to be overall good or evil, usually include overly simplistic, black-and-white choices. A player may choose between heroically saving civilians caught in the crossfire of a battle, or instead use them as human shields to ensure a tactical advantage. The fact that the player themself will face no real-world consequences for what they do inside the digital world of a game, means that a game must find ways to present ethical issues in a way that leaves an emotional impression. Commonly, games will attach a negative ending to evil choices, such as in the game *Infamous* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2009) where if the player decides to perform all of the bad karma actions at key moments throughout the game, they will be given a more hopeless, tragic and depressing ending than the one attached to performing the good karma actions. The game *Dishonored* features significant changes to level design and gameplay depending on whether the player performs good or evil acts, for example, if the player kills civilians in earlier levels, later levels will have more guards and certain areas will have stronger defence measures in place. This is also an example of how many games balance the gameplay differences between moral paths. Evil choices are quite often easier, but result in the player being punished later, while doing the right thing might be more difficult, but often leads to rewards or advantages. This in and of itself is a message on morality, subtly encouraging the path of righteousness and selflessness. While films, especially older Hollywood productions made under the Production Code, include and depict these exact same sentiments, video games allow the player to choose what type of moral journey they wish to experience. This style of "reaping what you sow" delivery of moral messages can also make for a less preachy experience for players as they themselves are responsible for whatever ending befalls them, whereas a film directly delivers a predetermined message as dictated by the filmmakers.

2.3: Interactivity's Influence on Narrative Tone

Many of the choices described in the previous section can equally affect a game's narrative in addition to it's gameplay. The degree of interactivity present in a work is foremost dictated by what is required for the work to fully present its form and themes and is mostly dependant on the medium of the work. A film requires almost no direct interaction for it to be consumed and when interaction is included it brings with it the risk of making the experience more confusing and less effective. All video games require at least some level of interactivity in order to have their ludic elements engaged with, but the amount of interactivity necessary to fulfil this, mainly depends on a game's technical genre. While an FPS game needs almost constant interaction, a game of the strategy, management, or god game technical genres may require significantly less, as after a player gives their orders or sets their parameters, they may be able to sit back for periods of time and let scenarios play out without any further interactions. This does not make one example more of a game than the other, as in both cases, the player is just as actively working towards a goal, only their methods, and how much interactivity those methods require, differ, but this does mean that

both examples have the same ludic qualities. As stated by King and Krzywinska, the factor that makes a game more than just an interactive film is the ergodic nature of games, and their ludic elements (2002, p. 22-25). These gameplay elements do create the risk of subject matter becoming trivialized, as was mentioned when discussing environmental storytelling; a player can always ignore non-gameplay elements to focus solely on progression. Torture has been depicted in multiple entries of the *Call of Duty* franchise, with the player's avatar being either the victim or perpetrator depending on the game, but in both cases the experience has been interactive. While films are also capable of making light of truly horrendous subject matter, such as when Pierce Brosnan's 007 endures months of brutal torture and then leaves his imprisonment bearing little more than a grudge in *Die Another Day* (Tamahori, 2002), actually gamifying an experience by attaching the ordeal to forward playthrough progression can devalue atrocities into being no different than the more mundane gameplay mechanics like picking a lock. A striking example of this can be found in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019) where the player is given the choice of whether or not to summarily execute a captured terrorist in front of his family. Regardless of what action the player decides to take, the game's narrative remains unaltered beyond a single unimportant cut-scene. This is a particularly blatant example of how some of the more brutal aspects of war can be gamified and trivialized.

The game *Ready or Not* (VOID Interactive, 2023) advertises itself as a hyper-realistic simulation of the operations of a police tactical unit; although, despite striving to re-create the practices, gear, and tactics of police officers as faithfully as possible, the game in and of itself does not serve as a teaching tool in the same way that *America's Army* does. Leading up to its release, *Ready or Not* faced significant backlash from games journalism outlets, as some parties took issue with the game transforming highly realistic and extremely violent situations into a form of entertainment. The biggest controversy derived from the developers announcing the planned inclusion of a tactical scenario based on responding to an active school shooting (Lawlor, 2022, web). It can be difficult enough for films, both fiction and non-fiction to depict atrocity in tasteful, or at the very least, non-offensive ways, whether it be for narrative drama or educational purposes, but the risk of jeopardizing the integrity of depicting topics like school shootings or torture are increased when allowing the player to experience it through an interactive simulation. Miller and Allor explain that content can easily become simplified in order to accommodate higher degrees of interactivity (2016, p. 64). This is what may lead to an air of trivialization. In the case of most heavy subject matter, such as war, oppression, terrorism, injustice, and so on, the topic can be successfully explored in an interactive environment, as long as the severity of the topic is not compromised or downplayed in order to achieve a more enjoyable or easier-to-handle interactive experience. Like many war films, the *Call of Duty* games glorify war and combat, but for the most part avoid trivialising war's hardships by including serious and tonally dramatic narratives.

A key difference between the covering of serious topics in video games and films or even i-docs, is that in the latter two, the viewer is almost always a powerless bystander, while in the former the player is usually a participant to some degree. In the i-doc *The Book of Distance* (Okita, 2020), there is a scene where the active viewer is powerless to do anything but witness the protagonist, Yonezo's, sister die in the bombing of Hiroshima. As this i-doc is based on a true story, this intended feeling of powerlessness is meant to emulate the hopelessness and helplessness that the real-life Yonezo experienced as he was interned in Canada at the time and could do nothing to

help her. It is also possible, and rather common, to include this type of powerless bystander moment in video games as well. An example would be the previously mentioned destruction of the Eiffel Tower in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, as regardless of how hard the player fights, they are never able to prevent the scripted, narrative event and are practically forced to watch the event unfold. These types of moments are also commonly achieved through non-interactive cut-scenes, such as in *The Darkness* (Starbreeze Studios, 2007) when protagonist Jackie (Kirk Acevedo) is made to watch his girlfriend Jenny (Lauren Ambrose), who the player has worked to protect, be murdered. As this takes place in a cut-scene, the player does not even have the option to avoid witnessing the event by turning away the first-person perspective camera as can be done in the *Call of Duty* example. Putting a player or active viewer in this type of position can be optimal for a work to achieve maximum emotional impact. For a medium partially defined by its interactivity, taking that interactivity, and its associated power away, can be one of the most impactful things a developer can do, similar to how the conventions of a genre are at their most noticeable when violated. While the active viewer of *Book of Distance* cannot possibly be expected to experience anything close to the immense grief the real-life Yonezo experienced, the tragedy of the event is not trivialised or reduced as the result of any gameplay mechanics. In the realm of entertainment video games, playing as a SWAT officer exchanging gunfire with a school shooter in *Ready or Not* is only, in effect, *visually* different than playing as a German GSG 9 operative fighting terrorists in *Counter-Strike*, but for an i-doc, treating a harrowing situation in any way that reduces the severity of its real-world counterpart would utterly and morally bankrupt the entire experience.

While interactivity may not be the defining factor when categorizing what makes a work a video game as opposed to a film, it still has a significant impact on a game's gameplay which in turn, affects what technical genres can be applied to it. Understanding how a game utilizes interactivity also helps when examining how a game depicts themes and delivers a narrative, if present, which will be integral when directly comparing films and games of shared genres. It is also interesting to note that many modern i-docs and interactive films are often available for purchase from online video game storefronts, such as Steam in the case of *Book of Distance*, and utilize peripherals commonly specific to video games, such as controllers and virtual reality (VR) headsets, further blurring the line in terms of consuming films and games. The next section of this thesis will examine in detail case study examples of films and games from the same thematic genres in order to compare and contrast how each medium handles generic conventions and presents similar subject matter.

Section II

Case Studies in Genre

Chapter 3: The Action Genre

"I think action movies can deliver the true feelings and thoughts of people. Through action films, we can deliver our stories more powerfully and romantically."

- John Woo, Yonhap News, 2017

The action genre can perhaps facilitate the best direct comparison between films and video games. Most games are inherently action focused as a way to maximize interactivity and retain player interest for long periods of time. Even when examining works from other genres, such as science-fiction, it is far more common for those genres to be hybridized with action, making it easier to find a game closer in content to an action-packed film like *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986) rather than a slow-paced procedural such as *The Andromeda Strain* (Wise, 1971). This all-encompassing nature of the action genre is one reason why it has been referred to as a super genre (Clarke et al, 2015, p. 6), as the content and style of works that can be categorized under the label "action" are noticeably broader and more varied than is the case with other, more specific genres. While an older action game, like 1993's *Doom* is practically one long shootout with virtually no narrative to speak of, the majority of modern action games break up action sequences with many filmic elements, such as complex, melodramatic plots, moments of creative cinematography, and intricate staging and use of location. While Vibeto has made it clear that action games have successfully adopted the same style of audio/visual spectacle that has been a staple of the Hollywood action blockbuster for more than fifty years, it is also equally important to observe that as games are becoming increasingly more technically complex and visually realistic, this cinemafication also demands the inclusion of other, perhaps less flashy, cinematic elements, such as character archetypes and intricate and moving narratives.

3.1: Narrative Conventions

In most cases, films of the action genre target and cater to the male audience by fulfilling unrealistic and exaggerated male fantasies, and this remains consistent across mediums to video games, as both action films and games are most commonly produced by men for men (Gallagher, 1999, p. 199) (Anthropy, 2012, p. 8-9). Most action-oriented video games are tonally similar to the James Bond influenced Hong Kong action films as described by Kinnia Yau Shuk-Ting in *Interactions Between Japanese and Hong Kong Action Cinemas*, with the often over-the-top violence diluted with moments of campy, sometimes crude, humour and sexual themes (2005, p. 39). The much-despised game *Ride to Hell: Retribution* (Eutechnyx, 2013) is a prime example of this formula distilled down to its absolute purest, and most distasteful, form, as the game consists of disjointed and often nonsensical action set pieces separated by crude and equally nonsensical sex scenes. While purely action driven games like *DOOM* or *Rainbow Six* may not make for

particularly lucrative direct comparisons to action films as they offer little more than a series of spectacle filled corridors and arenas, *Ride to Hell: Retribution* is what happens when a game is formed around a film style plot structure, but no care is given to including the elements that would make for a cinematic experience. When looking at the action that is present in the majority of games, many gameplay sequences are similar in style to silent cinema era action, with the primary focus on physical spectacle as described by Jeffrey Richards in *Swashbuckling - A Profile of the Genre* (1977, p. 4), since a video game can have twenty to thirty-minute or even longer stretches of pure action or combat with virtually no narratively important dialogue. Vibeto acknowledges the lack of cinematic editing present in gameplay action and states that this requires the presence of constant action targeted at the player to avoid a sense of monotony (2019, p. 29). A single action sequence in a film may be comprised of dozens of quick cuts and edits in order to make the physical action feel even more fast-paced and may even skip minor elements of the sequence such as a protagonist walking from one room to another, but since this is impossible to do in a game as the player controls both the camera movement and sequence pacing, the quantity of available action must be increased. This sort of pacing would be virtually impossible in modern films, with perhaps the exception of lengthy battle scenes in superhero films, and even those are frequently criticized for being drawn out to the point of tedium. King acknowledges that in this regard, action sequences in games often lack the same level of personality than could be seen in comparable film sequences (2002, p. 55), as it can be difficult to craft a more unique scene when the action cannot be curated through the editing process.

In *I Married Rambo: Spectacle and Melodrama in the Hollywood Action Film*, Gallagher argues that, despite being inherently unrealistic, most action films still require the audience to take the film seriously enough that suspense can be achieved and maintained (1999, p. 213) since, if the audience feels that there is nothing at stake within the narrative, all the high-octane action and spectacle would be rather pointless and potentially boring. In comparison, video games do not necessarily need to be concerned about this, as is the case with the original *Doom*, which purposely disposed of narrative in order to avoid distracting from the gameplay itself. The player does not need to care about any characters' motivations or the reason for any of the action, since the player is leading it themself. The action itself is a means to an end and does not require any narrative delivery method to be engaging to the player who is playing purely to experience unrealistic action they would never encounter in real life (Gallagher, 1999, p. 206), much like how Tom Gunning argued that early cinema was itself the attraction that brought people in, rather than what was actually being depicted on screen (2006, p. 381). Players played *Doom* in the 1990's to experience being part of the action in a pseudo-three-dimensional environment, and neither the science fiction setting, nor the demon-focused plot were the attraction but instead, only served to make the action seem more thrilling. Nevertheless, narratives are still very common in games, especially in modern titles, as it can be difficult to achieve an entirely gameplay-driven experience without it feeling repetitive and tedious. In fact, many games feature overly melodramatic plots that can even surpass their film counterparts (Gallagher, 1999, p. 200), with tropes, often not so creatively, taken directly from popular films as mentioned previously in Chapter 1. Game protagonists are frequently motivated by the death of a female family member, a typical film plot device, and narrative twists like betrayals are not only common but often necessary to keep a narrative flowing for the length of a six to ten-hour game, even if much of that time is dedicated to gameplay.

The film *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1* (Wai, 1997) is an example of a film with a very video game-esque narrative structure. The plot sees three different versions of the same day play out over the course of the film, which is reminiscent of how many game narratives can be manipulated by the choices made by the player. The film shows how the same day would play out differently depending on the choices of the protagonist, Gau (Lau Ching Wan), with the narrative forking in radically different directions (Rist, 2006, p. 58), much like choice-dependent action and role-playing games, such as *Until Dawn* or the *Mass Effect* series (Electronic Arts, 2007-present), in which the decisions players make can completely change the trajectory of a game's narrative. Additionally, the second possible day in *Too Many Ways* begins as a sort of reset after Gau and his friends are all killed, which is very similar mechanically to a player dying in a game and restarting a level after respawning, making sure to avoid repeating the same mistakes. These elements of narrative style and pacing work in *Too Many Ways* because of its experimental nature, but other films that feature repeating days, like *Groundhog Day* (Ramis, 1993), *Edge of Tomorrow* (Liman, 2014), and *Happy Death Day* (Landon, 2017) use the repeating mechanic as a central plot element. In all three of those films the protagonists are aware of the repeating phenomena, whereas in *Too Many Ways* only the audience is aware of it and able to compare outcomes, which is in fact closer to the meta of a player learning from their character's repeated deaths. A key distinction to note is that only William Cage (Tom Cruise) and Tree Gelbman (Jessica Rothe), the protagonists of *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Happy Death Day* respectively, are aware of the "win state" present in their repeating scenario, unlike *Groundhog Day*'s Phil (Bill Murray) or Gau. William and Tree both know and understand what they must do to escape their time loops and essentially "beat" their narratives, and in both cases this task or quest is to kill an opponent. On the other hand, while there is a win condition to *Groundhog Day*, that being Phil bettering himself as a person, Phil is unaware of the exact conditions to his success and therefore aimlessly lives through his time loop until ultimately meeting his win condition more out of inevitability rather than by any directed actions. And of course, the hapless Gau is neither aware of his situation nor how to achieve an ideal result based on prior knowledge.

In fact, while the latter three film examples are comparable to standard video game respawn mechanics, *Too Many Ways* could actually be seen as a much more rare example of a film that is similar to a game of the roguelike technical genre, as on each on-screen day, the protagonist makes it as far as they can before dying and then starts again from the beginning but chooses a different strategy and approach. Another, more commonly referenced example of this roguelike style film is *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer, 1998) which, similarly to *Too Many Ways*, also features a scenario that plays out three different ways, although instead of an entire day, the story is limited to a twenty-minute period. Unlike Gau, the titular protagonist, Lola (Franka Potente), appears aware of her scenario, retaining information such as knowing how to disable the safety on a pistol and remembering to avoid a delinquent and his aggressive dog on the stairs, but never goes so far as to acknowledge the time loop directly. What specifically distinguishes *Run Lola Run* from a film like *Groundhog Day* is that the time loop itself is not entirely consistent. In *Groundhog Day*, as well as *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Happy Death Day*, every aspect of the repeated day happens identically between loops unless the aware protagonist directly intervenes, whereas in *Run Lola Run* many details, including the fates of background characters shown via rapid slideshows, are radically different in each of the three versions of the day, regardless of whether or not Lola does anything

noticeably different. This narrative choice could be seen to resemble the randomly generated aspect of many roguelikes, where the world of the game is often considerably different every time the player starts over after a death. The nun suddenly wearing sunglasses during the second loop perhaps most closely resembles random generation within a game, as Lola's actions could not have possibly created this difference which is essentially cosmetic and is very much like when a game swaps random variables in and out to make every new attempt after a respawn feel like a unique experience. The film is also quite obviously an exploration of the notion of the butterfly effect, as well as a discussion on free-will versus predeterminism, as can be seen with the repeating car crash. The butterfly effect itself is a concept not unfamiliar to video games, with many titles, particularly *Until Dawn*, using the ideology as a basis for how player choice may impact a narrative. In *Until Dawn*, every time the player makes a major choice, butterflies appear on the screen indicating that there will be repercussions, although sometimes it may be hours before they manifest. Of course, since video games are still mostly predetermined, scripted experiences, all the possible results of the butterfly effect in a game can usually be easily mapped out and remain somewhat linear.

Figure 16: In *Until Dawn* a single choice can completely alter the course of the game's story, but the player can learn and make different, better, decisions when replaying. In this case, choosing to investigate will instantly kill the character Ashley, removing her from the rest of the game.

3.2: Visual Style

Perhaps equally important to the execution of narrative, visual style and cinematography are key elements of cinema, particularly in fast-paced, heavily edited action films; however, as previously mentioned, these can be some of the most difficult factors to translate over to video games. In most games the camera angle is fixed, either over the playable character's shoulder or in a point-of-view shot, with all movement and subject focus controlled by the player in real-time. Obviously, this makes it difficult to have creative cinematography, but games do find ways to incorporate moments of flashy, virtual camera work. Cut-scenes, as discussed throughout this thesis, are arguably the most important story telling device in video games. Their scripted, edited,

and often pre-rendered nature give developers all the cinematic freedom that can be found within an animated film, offering a creative opportunity to have a game's characters framed by all sorts of different angles and perspectives, allowing for shots utilizing techniques such as frame-inside-a-frame and making it possible to control levels of visibility and lighting. Very low lighting levels and out-of-focus shots are almost never used during gameplay segments, unless as a specific gimmick, since above all else, the player always needs to be able to clearly see what is on screen in order to play. Of course, sometimes hindering a player's vision can aid in enhancing spectacle, such as when mud or blood splash across the screen after an explosion (Vibeto, 2019, p. 27), or the edges of the screen vignette to create a tunnel vision effect when the player's avatar is injured. These types of visual filters in a game can also be used as a façade to evoke cinematic effect, such is the case with *Hitman: Absolution* (IO Interactive, 2012) in which a film grain effect is superimposed over all of the game's visuals accompanied by subtle cracks and pops in the background of the game's audio that are reminiscent of an analog film projector, all in an attempt to create a grindhouse aesthetic to compliment the gritty tone of the game's narrative and setting. Beyond this, some third-party software, such as NVIDIA's ShadowPlay, make it possible for users to add numerous different styles of visual filter overlays, such as film grain, black-and-white, or VHS-style distortion, onto hundreds of compatible games that would not normally feature such filters, allowing individual users to influence and customize the cinematicness of their personal gaming experiences.

One way to include cinematic moments outside of cut-scenes is to have pre-rendered actions such as finishing moves, like in the game *Sleeping Dogs* (United Front Games, 2012) where the player can instantly kill enemies by pressing a button and triggering an animation in which their character throws an enemy into an exposed fan blade or something equally lethal. These brief animations can add moments of choreographed brutality comparable to a Hong Kong action film while utilizing more creative camera work, although often at the cost of breaking up the natural flow of combat and risking becoming repetitive. Often these types of moves are considered as a sort of reward for the player or are otherwise context sensitive. In *Sleeping Dogs,* most of these moves are environment dependant and cannot be overly used, an enemy can only be pushed into a fan blade if a fan is present at the location of a fight and once done, the fan is destroyed and therefore other enemies will have to be dispatched using other methods. In other games, these types of cinematic-like moves may have to be unlocked or charged up, meaning they not only look cool but also give the player a sense of accomplishment. All of these limitations also help to avoid a state of strategic dominance, where one flashy move can be repeatedly abused making the game both repetitive and too easy.

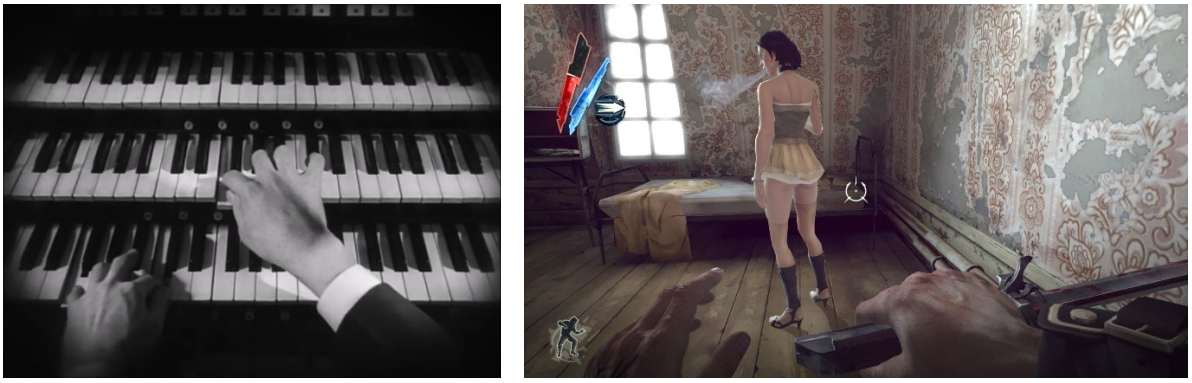
Examples of highly creative or borderline experimental cinematography like the upside-down camera used during the massage parlour brawl in *Too Many Ways*, are much harder to find in video games, as making such sequences playable without being discombobulating or even nauseating can be immensely difficult. It can be confusing for players when a game does something as simple as cutting away from the player's viewpoint to a static shot of something else happening, such as a door unlocking elsewhere in the level. One standout example would be in the game *Driver: San Francisco* (Ubisoft Reflections, 2011) where one level finds the player involved in a car chase, but in an unorthodox twist, the first-person POV actually belongs to the enemy chasing them and the player controls their own car as seen through the pursuer's windshield. This is at first

very confusing for the player, but is easily adjusted to, and makes for a memorable sequence. Other games, such as *Hitman III*, that often require the player to be aware of important events transpiring in different parts of a level, avoid confusing players by using a shot-inside-a-shot where a view of the distant action appears in a small window in the upper left corner of the screen. This way the player is able to continue playing from their normal perspective while simultaneously watching the distant action from a cinematic perspective. Just as is the case with real-world creative cinematography, these types of moments in games are extremely difficult to execute effectively but can make for captivating experiences.

Figure 17 (left): The camera physically flips upside down for much of the massage parlour brawl in *Too Many Ways to Be No. 1*, making the fight even more chaotic and hard to follow.
Figure 18 (right): The view of the player's car from inside the car chasing them in *Driver: San Francisco*. A rare example of experimental cinematography in a video game.

While films like *Too Many Ways* share a structural similarity to the mechanics of some games, there are also examples of films that share a visual resemblance to the player-controlled cameras of video games. Perhaps the first ever use of a proper first-person perspective camera in an audio/visual medium is in the 1931 film *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Mamoulian). Although comprising less than two minutes of the film's ninety-six-minute runtime, these first-person shots are particularly interesting as they feature Jekyll's (Fredric March) hands, at one point playing a piano and later, holding a glass. The placement of Jekyll's hands is centered with his arms protruding from the bottom of the frame. This hand placement is identical to almost every modern first-person video game. Having these hands appear on screen is also important as it means that the character still maintains an on-screen presence despite the fact that the character has become one with the camera and therefore cannot be conventionally pictured within the frame. While the film *The Firebird* (Dieterle, 1934) also included brief first-person shots, the 1947 film *Lady in the Lake* (Montgomery), is the first example of a first-person perspective camera being significantly featured in an audio/visual medium. Aside from a few exposition scenes shot using conventional cinematography, where the film's protagonist, Phillip Marlowe (Robert Montgomery), speaks directly to the audience, the majority of the film is shot from a first-person perspective. While this may make the film feel more immersive, it is clear that the film is not trying to use Marlowe as a stand-in for the viewer in the same way that a game protagonist is supposed to be a vessel for the player. The film's theatrical trailer features Marlowe proclaiming, "You'll see it just as I saw it," and this statement, in combination with the phrase "mysteriously starring Robert Montgomery and… you!" indicate that the audience is intended to be a passenger along for the ride, rather than

feeling like they themselves are a driving force in the world of the film. *Lady in the Lake* is also important as it is perhaps the first instance of fight scenes depicted in first-person. This is the case in the scene where Marlowe strikes police Lt. DeGarmot (Lloyd Nolan), but what is of particular note in this scene is the absence of Marlowe's hands. While in most modern depictions of first-person violence, be it in video games or films, it would be expected that the hands and weapon of the character whose perspective is shown would be visible, but this is not the case in *Lady in the Lake*. In the aforementioned scene, the sound of a punch is heard and then DeGarmot falls to the floor as if struck in the face, with Marlowe's fist never actually appearing on screen. The speed of the inferred punch as well as the synchronization of the sound effect along with DeGarmot's reaction all make the hit believable despite the lack of visible contact. Marlowe's hands do appear elsewhere throughout the film, such as in a scene where he is crawling on the ground, creating the effect of his hands pulling the camera forward as he moves, a scene that very much resembles many first-person cut-scenes in video games. While *Lady in the Lake* was a commercial failure and it would be years until another feature-length, first-person film project would be attempted, it did, more or less, establish many of the visual perspective conventions that modern games rely on.



In the first-person piano shot of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (figure 19 (left)) the protagonist's hands are centered and coming from the bottom of the frame which is similar to the placement of hands in most modern first-person video games, as can be seen when the player enters sneak-mode in the game *Dishonored* (figure 20 (right)).

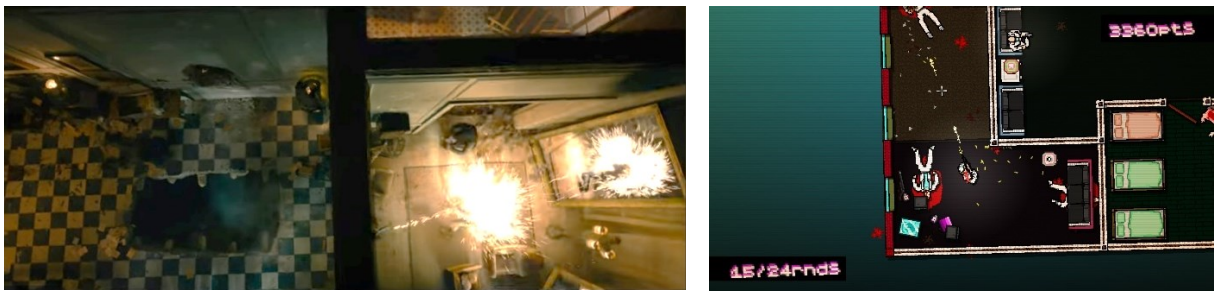
While many of the conventions of the first-person perspective may originate from cinema, most modern uses of this point of view in films are visually referential to video games. At the end of the film *Screamers* (Duguay, 1995), the camera takes on the first-person POV of Joseph Hendricksson (Peter Weller) as he climbs into the escape pod, his hands visibly interacting with the controls in a brief scene very similar to those that could be found in several FMV games of the 1990's. The first-person perspective seems to most often be used in films with military themes that are already closely related to the majority of first-person shooter games. For example, the first combat sequence of the streaming series *The Terminal List* (DiGilio, 2022-present) contains some first-person POV shots and closely resembles the type of tactical action that can be seen in a game like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. These similarities in action between the series and the game likely have more to do with shared subject matter as opposed to any attempt at direct emulation, and the series' first-person POV shots, which lack the presence of the characters' hands, in fact more accurately resemble those of a helmet-mounted camera worn by a real-life soldier, presumably the intended effect, rather than the perspective found in a video game. In contrast, the film *Kandahar* (Waugh, 2023), contains a brief first-person POV shot as part of the helicopter fight

sequence when Tom Harris (Gerard Butler) takes aim at an insurgent and the camera's perspective is directed straight along the length of his gun which protrudes from the middle of the bottom of the frame, a shot that very closely resembles the action of looking down the iron sights of a gun in a modern first-person shooter game rather than the actual angle captured by real-life body-worn or gun-mounted cameras. These first-person shooter perspective style POV shots are becoming more and more common in military action films and shows, but usually only last for a few seconds as part of larger action sequences, as is the case in *Kandahar*, likely serving more as a referential nod to the segment of the audience that overlaps with fans of military action games. This specific style of POV is also not exclusive to re-creation in live-action, as the militaristic anime series *Gate* (Kyōgoku & Andō, 2015-2016) occasionally inserts brief moments of this perspective.

Figure 21 (above left): The first-person perspective shot from the helicopter fight scene in *Kandahar*.
Figure 22 (above right): A first-person perspective of a gun being reloaded in *Gate*, a shot which closely resembles a first-person shooter game.
Figure 23 (left): A typical example of looking down the iron sights of a gun in a first-person shooter as seen in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a film that feels like a video game is *Hardcore Henry* (Naishuller, 2015). The film was shot entirely from the first-person perspective of the protagonist, Henry (multiple performers), using a custom GoPro rig mounted to stunt performers. The film is comprised almost entirely of action, with many long takes and minimal editing or dialogue. In contrast to *Lady in the Lake*, Henry's hands are front and center during most of his action scenes and are often used to brutal and lethal effect much in the way of the hands of a player character in a first-person combat game. Unlike Phillip Marlowe, Henry is a silent character, closer to many first-person game protagonists that lack any voice acting, although this does not really help to make Henry more of a viable stand-in for the audience, as despite not talking, it is clear through his actions and movements that Henry has his own personality. The end result is a film that structurally mimics a video game, with exposition-heavy scenes occurring between action sequences and functioning like scripted cut-scenes between gameplay sections. Additionally, the plot is rather simple and underdeveloped, really only serving as an excuse for the action and

spectacle to exist, much like in action-driven games. However, *Hardcore Henry* can at times feel like a film that merely wears the aesthetics of a video game, just as many games can feel as if they are simply using common film tropes and motifs to appear more cinematic as described in Chapter 1. In this regard, it could be said that *Hardcore Henry* is a film made in the visual style of a video game. Other films have done this in a limited capacity as well, such as the film *Doom* (Bartkowiak, 2005), which was based on the game series but told a unique story using characters created solely for the film and featured a first-person perspective action sequence that was visually similar to the game *Doom 3* (id Software, 2004); although, the film as a whole had a more standard cinematic structure. The film *Hitman* (Gens, 2007), based on the third-person *Hitman* game franchise (IO Interactive, 2000-present) also contains a sequence that pays visual homage to the game it is based on. Early in the film, there is a scene where Agent 47 (Timothy Olyphant) is walking down a hallway, and the cinematography mimics the in-game camera of *Hitman: Blood Money* (IO Interactive, 2006). While it may seem more natural for a film to feature a third-person camera perspective rather than a first-person one, having the camera fixed in a high-angle tracking shot behind an actor's head gives a distinctive video game feel, as unlike a more typical tracking shot, it does not make the viewer feel as if they are following behind the character, but more so watching them make forward progression. While the rest of *Hitman* is shot as a typical action film, this one hallway sequence, despite being significantly subtler than the first-person rampage of the *Doom* film, in practice acts as a signifier to any viewer who has also played *Blood Money*, that these two works are connected. The film, *John Wick: Chapter 4* (Stahelski, 2023), while not based on a video game, does contain one notable instance of video game-inspired cinematography (Robinson, 2023, web). The Paris shootout is filmed from a top-down perspective, and while bird's eye view camera angles are neither new nor inherently video game-esque, the choreographed, rapid-paced gunplay action of the scene strongly resembles the gameplay of top-down games of the twin-stick shooter technical genre, such as *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012). The films *Doom*, *Hitman*, and *John Wick: Chapter 4* illustrate that three of the most common game perspectives, first-person, third-person, and top-down respectively, can successfully be applied to films; although, this cannot be said for all commonly used video game perspectives as it would be difficult to find any significant use of the isometric perspective within cinema.



The visual similarities between the bird's eye view Paris shootout sequence in *John Wick: Chapter 4* (figure 24 (left)) and the top-down gameplay of *Hotline Miami* (figure 25 (right)).

The previously given examples are all films that can be compared to video games predominantly based on visual elements whereas the film *Willy's Wonderland* (Lewis, 2021), resembles a video game through its content and narrative structure. The film's protagonist, the

Janitor (Nicolas Cage), is tasked with cleaning a defunct children's restaurant while fighting off murderous, possessed animatronic mascots in order to get his car back, a plot undeniably influenced by the massively successful *Five Nights at Freddy's* franchise (Cawthon, 2014-present) which would later receive its own official film adaptation in 2023. The Janitor, as a character, embodies the typical video game protagonist. The character is mute, and Cage plays him as a dead-eyed, emotionless being with mechanical and repetitive movements that are particularly noticeable when he kicks in bathroom stall doors, an action that strongly resembles a repeated environmental interaction in a video game. Every other on-screen character speaks in a typical fashion and engages in full, one-sided conversations with the Janitor who only ever responds with a blank stare. Despite this, the other characters all unquestioningly accept and even justify the Janitor's lack of verbal response by saying, "He don't talk much," a narrative technique common in dialogue used in games where silent protagonists' unspoken replies are usually just assumed. The most bizarre, and video game referential, behaviour the Janitor exhibits is his taking of regularly timed breaks during which he consumes energy drinks and plays pinball. This behaviour is so regimented that at one point he stops just before engaging in combat to calmly walk to the break room, something that all characters present, including the animatronic he is squaring up against, simply accept and allow him to do. In an interview, the director, Kevin Lewis, confirmed that this motif was intended to represent the Janitor leveling up throughout the course of the film (Collis, 2021, web). While this is a satisfying explanation, the break-taking "mechanic" could also be seen to resemble other gaming practices such as pausing, or even the common practice of having games recommend that players take regular breaks, as was particularly prevalent for games released on the Nintendo Wii to help avoid player fatigue and encourage healthy playing habits. Additionally, the action of playing pinball in particular, could be seen as a mini-game or some kind of bonus stage, elements usually added as rewards or to otherwise avoid monotony of gameplay. Furthermore, the Janitor does not demonstrate any overt precognition or fourth-wall-breaking self-awareness and the film is even more objective-based than the previously mentioned titles of *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Run Lola Run*. The Janitor is given an objective with clear parameters and a defined reward, a narrative model identical to the structure of quests or missions in numerous video games. What is important to note about *Willy's Wonderland* is that the cinematography of the film in almost no way mimics a video game. The film is edited with lots of rapid cuts combined with complex camera movements and angles in order to reflect the on-screen action. In contrast, the scenes in which the Janitor is cleaning, moments that could be seen to represent the more monotonous elements of gameplay, are filmed as a montage using a wide range of camera angles and shot styles with some moments even sped up as a time-lapse as ultimately, only the exciting aspects of a comparable video game are suitable for a film's narrative. While not financially successful, the film's experimental nature, achieved with a relatively small budget, does serve to demonstrate the potential for video game-style narratives to successfully be adapted for the medium of film. All of these examples serve to illustrate that just as video games can adopt cinematic elements without compromising their ludic nature, films are equally capable of utilizing gamic aesthetic elements while maintaining what makes them distinctly films. While not one of the goals of this thesis, some of the previously mentioned examples serve to indicate that not only is the medium of film influencing the video game industry through cinemafication, but the opposite also appears to be true and the meteoric rise of video games in popular culture has in turn,

influenced the film production industry. The exploration of this topic falls outside the scope of this thesis however, and is a subject for a different venue.

Typically, action films focus on movement, not just in the action but also in the editing and flow of the film. This can make watching an action film a very kinesthetic experience, as an audience can get so immersed in the action, they may start acting out moves from the film while still in their seats. This is less the case with video games, since the player's controller inputs are directly translated into action on screen, intrinsically linking the player to the character's movements; although, it can still be common for gamers to involuntarily move while playing, such as a player turning their controller like a steering wheel during an intense driving sequence despite this offering no actual benefit. Additionally, controller features, most notably vibration, give direct kinetic feedback to the player and can help further connect them to the action. For example, when a player character is shot or otherwise takes damage, most games will have the controller vibrate, and while obviously this is not intended to accurately simulate pain or injury, it helps to make the player physically connected with what is happening on their screen. Over the years there have been other, more niche gaming accessories, such as the 3rd Space Vest released in 2007 which delivered haptic feedback to the wearer's chest when their in-game character was shot. These types of accessories are extremely uncommon, cumbersome to use, and often expensive, and while not used by the majority of players, indicate the possibilities when it comes to creating a kinetic link between gameplay and the player. Nintendo's 2006 Wii home console revolutionized motion-sensitive controls and featured many controllers and peripherals that could capture the movements of players and translate them into gameplay inputs. One such controller is the Wii Balance Board which allows players to perform inputs with their feet. While dance and driving games have long featured feet-based controls through the use of dance mats and pedals respectively, the Balance Board is also sensitive to pressure and body movement meaning it can determine a player's balance while standing on the apparatus. Unsurprisingly, the Balance Board was predominantly utilized by fitness-themed games although, there were other niche applications such as the Japanese region-exclusive horror game *Ikenie no Yoru* (*Night of Sacrifice*) (Marvelous Entertainment, 2011). The game requires the player to walk or run in place on the Balance Board in order to move their character through the corridors of the game's environment, and as the game has the player constantly running to escape from pursuing monsters there is a significant kinetic component to the experience. As a result, a player may be more nervous when anticipating encountering a monster, knowing that they will have to exert physical effort to escape rather than simply because the monster is scary.

This type of kinetic connection would make less sense when watching a film, as the viewer has little reasonable expectation of a direct link to the on-screen action. Even in a film like *Hardcore Henry*, where the action is directed straight at the first-person view, Henry is not truly serving as a stand-in for the audience in the same way a video game avatar does for the player. Perhaps the best example of this type of kinetic connection being attempted for a film and its audience is the 1959 theatrical release of *The Tingler* (Castle). During screenings, random theatre seats were wired with small electric motors that would deliver a shock to some unfortunate audience members during key moments of the film (Brottman, 1997, p. 5); although, this gimmick in combination with other live-action theatrics within the theatre itself, served more to create overall audience hysteria rather than make any sort of direct connection between audience

members and the on-screen action. A more reasonable modern comparison would be the also niche and expensive technology of 4D film, which does not focus as much on delivering the impact of a film's action directly onto the viewer, but instead focuses on trying to make the viewer feel as if they are not observing a film from inside a theater, but rather from within the same environment the action is taking place. Theaters that offer 4D style viewing-experiences commonly feature a mixture of effects including elements such as moving and vibrating seats and atmospheric effects such as fog or mist, temperature manipulation, air movement and even bubbles, all in a seemingly natural evolution of Castle's original gimmick. Immersion is still the goal, but the intended perspective is what is different. As King states, action films show viewers action-packed events, while action video games give players the ability to fight back (2002, p. 62), a view Mactavish supports by explaining that film viewers have no real option but to be in awe of cinematic action, while players become active performers within it (2002, p. 45). In terms of action style, many action games of the gangster/noir thematic genre/sub-genre, like the *Max Payne* series (Remedy Entertainment Games, 2001-present), owe their existence directly to the Hong Kong action films directed by John Woo, with game features such as "bullet time" (when the player can enter a slow-motion state to make shooting large groups of enemies easier) being directly inspired by Woo's use of slow-motion during gun battles. Other common Woo elements like akimbo pistols and characters dramatically diving while shooting have become standard abilities in many games.

Figure 26 (left): The iconic banister slide from the beginning of John Woo's *Hard Boiled* (1992).
Figure 27 (right): Max Payne diving from a nightclub VIP room while shooting gangsters in slow-motion in *Max Payne 3* (Rockstar Studios, 2012), a clear homage to the legendary Hong Kong director.

3.3: Characters

Having previously discussed the narrative and visual conventions of the action genre; it is equally important to also examine the characters that populate the genre's stories and worlds. The vast majority of action films and action video games feature male characters as leading protagonists, a strong indication of their intended audiences (Gallagher, 1999, p. 204); although, both mediums have their notable exceptions such as the characters of Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) from the *Alien* (20th Century Studios, 1979-present) films and Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise (Square Enix, 1996-present). These examples are few and far between however, and oftentimes strong female leads are still sexualized for the male gaze. In terms of character archetypes, the action hero is for the most part, the same between the two mediums, although the

fact that characters in games carry out the actions directed by the player does create some distinction. Many game protagonists could be considered jolly outlaws or lovable rogues, as described by Richards (1977, p. 12), and like their film counterparts, the way games do this is by having their enemies be far more obviously and inarguably evil than their protagonists. For example, Nathan Drake (Nolan North) from the *Uncharted* (Naughty Dog, 2007-present) games is a lovable explorer whose main goal is to sell ancient artifacts for profit, and while he may not be as morally righteous as a character like Indiana Jones, he is nowhere close to evil either. So, in order for the game to avoid having Drake appear utterly sociopathic when he makes a wisecrack in a cut-scene after having killed more than fifty men during a gameplay section, the enemies within the game must be the most vicious, heartless, atrocity-committing mercenaries imaginable, or otherwise actual super-natural monsters, so that the player is not left wondering whether or not they are in fact, the good guy.

Games also utilize the common action film technique of having all the enemies and henchmen be faceless goons that the audience is not meant to identify as people, while also helping to ensure the head villains stand out from their subordinates. This is a production choice in films that can be achieved by having the bad guy actors all wear matching uniforms or ski masks, but in games, this is usually a necessity since digital resources are limited, and so each enemy type will only have one or two different models, meaning the player will be gunning down visually identical enemy units over and over again, which can further add to the dehumanizing process. This may be relatively benign in the case of robots or uniformed soldiers, but just like in some action films, this can become problematic when this dehumanizing is done to marginalized ethnicities (Gallagher, 1999, p. 205). Watching Arnold Schwarzenegger annihilate countless Martian enforcers in *Total Recall* (Verhoeven, 1993) or playing as an American G.I. gunning down battalions of Nazis in a *Medal of Honor* (Electronic Arts, 1999-2020) campaign are relatively harmless power fantasies, but the line begins to blur for some when watching hundreds of Somalians be killed in *Black Hawk Down* (Scott, 2001), or when playing as an SAS soldier running through the slums of Brazil blasting any soccer-jersey-wearing insurgent in sight in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward, 2009). However, neither most action films, nor games tend to handle these scenarios with any sort of social commentary. Traditionally, modern military themed shooter games have taken inspiration for their villains from current news headlines, with noticeable production cycles of games released around the same time all pitting American or British forces against factions such as Russian, Chinese, North Korean, and the entirety of the Arab world, with these cycles usually corresponding directly with America's real-world political tensions at the time. Similar patterns of villain nationality can be seen in long running film series such as the James Bond franchise (Eon Productions, 1962-present). Additionally, the majority of military themed games deal with absolutes in terms of their characters, as they are either friend or foe (Frasca, 2003, p. 231), with very clear black-and-white lines drawn between them, and in most cases the player's only option for interaction is simple violence.

This is precisely where player choice can interfere with a game's attempt to establish tone. A player of an action game can choose to play as a total madman, driving on the sidewalk, recklessly using explosives, or killing civilians, things that diegetically, the protagonist character would never do, and making it more implausible when they are treated like a hero during the scripted story events. *Sleeping Dogs*' protagonist Wei Shen (Will Yun Lee) is an undercover police

officer who in cut-scenes is fairly by-the-book, but due to gameplay mechanics, nothing stops the player from having him take random pedestrians as hostages or push them off buildings. Another example is the protagonist of the *Hitman* franchise, Agent 47 (David Bateson). In all of the *Hitman* games the player is constantly told that 47 is the ultimate assassin, who is never seen and makes all his assassinations appear as tragic accidents; however, this goes directly against the gameplay, as the main focus of the *Hitman* games is putting the player in a sandbox style environment and allowing them to find their own, creative ways to kill a predetermined target. The player can choose to play stealthily, but still kill the target in a very non-accidental way, such as with a gun, but they could also choose more public options with high levels of collateral damage, like explosives. The games try to avoid acknowledging this by using the technique of having a single canonical ending, simply stating that each target is canonically killed by a specific accident that was available for the player to have chosen. The cut-scenes will refer to these assassination methods regardless of how the player chooses to play, meaning that unless the player plays using only the methods the developers have selected, their gameplay segments and cut-scenes will not match up. This type of ludic-narrative collision can be extremely immersion-breaking and result in moments of unintentional hilarity. For example, 47 is always safe when exiting a level, at which point the gameplay ends and a cut-scene of him leaving begins, and while this makes sense when playing stealthily, if the player chooses to fight their way out, when they reach an exit, the enemies will suddenly stop shooting and simply watch 47 walk away. Diegetically this obviously makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. Some games combat this type of ludic-narrative dissonance by having the player instantly fail if they commit an out-of-character crime.

Figure 28 (left): Undercover detective Wei Shen using an innocent karaoke hostess as a human shield in *Sleeping Dogs*, something that does not narratively make sense for him to do, but the player can choose to do so anyway.
Figure 29 (right): Infamously silent assassin Agent 47 detonating a block of C4 on a crowded Chinatown street in *Hitman: Absolution* for apparently no good reason other than the player wanting to do so.

This can be seen with the Assassin Order from the *Assassin's Creed* games, who abide by a strict code of honour, and if the player tries to make their character be anything but a swashbuckling gentleman-hero by killing an innocent street merchant (Richards, 1977, p. 1), they will receive an immediate game over. Some games make this part of the narrative itself with morality systems such as mentioned in Chapter 2. A good example of this is the character of Corvo from the stealth-assassin game *Dishonored*. The player can decide to play Corvo as a gentleman-hero by killing absolutely no one and taking down a tyrannical regime purely through subterfuge,

in which case the player will receive the "good ending" where everyone lives happily ever after, or they can play as a merciless killer, murdering everyone from political targets to innocent courtesans on the street, resulting in the "bad ending" where Corvo is hated and rules over a city of corpses. Instead of simply watching a fantasy play out, the player can decide how it plays out, and they can deliberately choose to go against the traditional, noble action hero narrative.

While a protagonist's actions are certainly important in determining how a viewer or player will relate to them, in video games, the perspective the player views said protagonist through is also significant. The third-person perspective is inherently external, and as a result, the player character is separated from the player themselves. Games of the third-person perspective usually feature fully voice-acted protagonists with more developed personalities and back stories than those in games set in the first-person with there of course being notable exceptions, such as the excruciatingly well-developed protagonist, V (Gavin Drea/Cherami Leigh), in the first-person, role-playing game Cyberpunk 2077 (CD Projekt Red, 2020). In the cases of many third-person perspective games, the separation between player and avatar can create for the player the effect of feeling as if they are venturing on a quest alongside their avatar rather than as the character themself, despite the player being no less in direct control than they would be in a first-person perspective game. While not always the case, this can make it easier for a player to bond and empathize with their avatar rather than with a first-person stand-in who the player is more likely to see simply as an extension of themselves. This external view of the protagonist as an independent entity can be more akin to how a viewer may see a film protagonist. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the player having to walk out and face an awaiting death squad at the end of Red Dead Redemption is particularly emotionally impactful because the game requires that the player do the action themself rather than showing it in a cut-scene. While an unpleasant endeavor under most circumstances, the player is likely to be especially hesitant to push on towards certain death knowing that the action will mean the end of the character they've journeyed and bonded with for the last twenty or so hours of gameplay.

In contrast, in many first-person shooter games, especially those lacking in significant narrative structure, the player character is in fact rather unimportant. Aside from perhaps the occasional cut-scene or a reflection in a mirror, the player will never really see the character model. In many instances of first-person perspective in films, mirrors are an important motif. All but one of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*'s first-person shots feature the protagonist looking at his own reflection, *Lady in the Lake* has Marlowe appear as a reflection in background mirrors at several points, and even *Doom*'s brief first-person sequence starts with a mirror shot. Having the character appear as a reflection is a reliable way to signal to an audience whose perspective and attitude they are viewing the film's environments through. Having a first-person protagonist appear as a reflection during a conversation scene, as is the case in *Lady in the Lake*, also allows for films to include the equivalent of a shot-reverse-shot dynamic that a first-person camera otherwise renders impossible. Mirrors are also present in many first-person video games, initially serving as a flashy and dynamic way for developers to show off how sophisticated their game was, as for early three-dimensional game engines, the task of creating a real-time reflection was very taxing. While not particularly technically impressive for modern games, mirrors do grant developers of protagonist-centric games the opportunity to introduce the player to the character they are playing. *Duke Nukem Forever* (Gearbox Software, 2011) begins with the protagonist in a bathroom with a fully

functional mirror, serving as a character introduction similar to an establishing reveal shot in a film. A notable exception to the common use of mirrors is *Hardcore Henry*, which lacks any instance of Henry appearing in reflections, indicating, in combination with his lack of speech, that he is truly supposed to be a character without an identity. Even with mirrors, a player's view of their character is, for the majority of a game's duration, going to be limited to the character's hands, and more importantly, the gun they are holding. In this sense, the gun itself is really the character, as using said gun to shoot things, or perhaps even smack things within melee-range, is the player's only way to interact with anyone and anything within the virtual environments of many games.

Many video game franchises feature unique weapons that become iconic and instantly recognizable to a specific series, such as the MA5 assault rifle of the *Halo* series (Microsoft, 2001-present); although, this notion of specific weapons as franchise icons is just as prevalent in film, with weapons such as the M56 Smartgun from the *Alien* films and even the lightsaber from *Star Wars* (Lucasfilm, 1977-present). Many first-person games whose protagonists are silent and lack significant personality end up having their default weapon become the most recognizable "character," such as in the case of the crowbar in *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998) or the wrench in *BioShock* (2K, 2007). Additionally, while some games have different character classes that may dictate gameplay style, such as fantasy games having a warrior class that fights head-on and a wizard class that instead uses magic from a distance, many shooter games allow the player to choose what type of gun they want to wield, and these different guns act as de facto classes. A player who wants to fight head-on may choose a shotgun, while a player that wants to remain at a distance may choose a sniper rifle instead. Guns are especially glorified in Hong Kong action films, almost to the point of being pseudo-characters, often being the point of central focus in numerous close-ups and slow-motion moments. This glorification goes even further in the realm of video games, almost to the point of fetishism, as the gun is a permanent physical extension of the player, since many first-

Figure 30 (above): A fully customized AK-47 in *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve, 2012), a game famous for cosmetic upgrades for weapons. The guns are the main objects the player looks at during gameplay, so they serve as de facto characters.
Figure 31 (left): Extreme close-up shot of handguns from John Woo's film *The Killer* (1989), making the weapons look as cool and attractive as possible.

person shooters like *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* do not even offer the option to holster a weapon. The gun is always there, front and center. In some games, the use of guns can be as egregious as shooting a doorknob to open a door or smacking a control panel to summon an elevator. The action film protagonist is a heroic man holding a gun, the action game protagonist is a gun that can make the player feel heroic by wielding it. In most action films, violence is the first option, circumventing any attempts at diplomacy or tact (Gallagher, 1999, p. 211), but in action video games, violence is not only the player's sole option, but also their only means of interaction. As integral to the action genre as firearms are, it is important to recognize that they are far from the only weapons featured within action media.

3.4: Swordplay

For practically as long as video games have existed, there has been perhaps no greater fantasy that players have dreamt of than the experience of wielding a lightsaber. Yet it is difficult to find a video game that truly captures the feeling of wielding one, or any sword for that matter. There is a reason for this, that being the fact that real-world sword fighting, and its choreographed on-screen depictions, are fast-paced, fluid affairs in which the participants continuously switch between acting and reacting with every movement of both their own sword and the blade of their opponent. This is extremely difficult to duplicate in a video game that relies on pre-defined animations and models of collision-detection based on hitboxes (specific points of 3D geometry). In a first-person shooter, a developer can get away with only having one or two pre-determined animations for actions like unholstering, reloading, and firing the different firearms, as a gun is generally operated the same way every time, whereas every flick and swish of a sword will be unique. Most games circumvent this issue by fully embracing a system of repetitive swordplay. To return to the lightsaber example, two games that are often considered among the best for their swordplay are *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy* (Raven Software, 2003) which utilized fairly basic sword moves but combined them with character movement to give the player the feeling of controlling the direction and angle of the blade, and *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* (LucasArts, 2008) which used lengthy button combinations to perform complex but pre-determined sword maneuvers. These two control styles are the most common approaches when it comes to swordplay in a video game, but both definitely have their limitations, especially when it comes to creating a cinematic experience. The more flowing, loose style found in *Jedi Academy* can be very difficult for a game's developer to get right and can easily feel frustrating to control and be wildly inaccurate, while also often looking fairly ridiculous and clumsy, with characters circling each other, hoping that their swords will make contact. This is a far cry from the effortless style and finesse of the duels depicted in swashbuckler films. Combo-based fighting as implemented in *The Force Unleashed* is used much more commonly but has two main drawbacks of its own. Firstly, the action quickly becomes repetitive with players often using the same move over and over due to strategic dominance as for example, if the player discovers that enemies are particularly bad at blocking a specific move, like a downward thrust, the fight suddenly becomes monotonous and unchallenging. While seeing the same handful of slashes and thrusts repeated ad nauseam may easily be perceived as unrealistic or unnatural they can be partially justified by acknowledging that real-life sword masters are trained in specific fighting styles that include clearly defined patterns

of movement. Secondly, the action risks losing the uniqueness that comes from swordplay's deadly intensity, as in many fighting games that feature sword-wielders, those characters could just as easily be swinging bats or using their fists as it can take multiple hits to down an adversary, making for unrealistic, yet often visually more appealing, swordplay. It is this combo-based approach, albeit a more simplistic execution than in *The Force Unleashed*, that has been used in the recent, highly cinematic *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* (Respawn Entertainment, 2019) and its sequel.

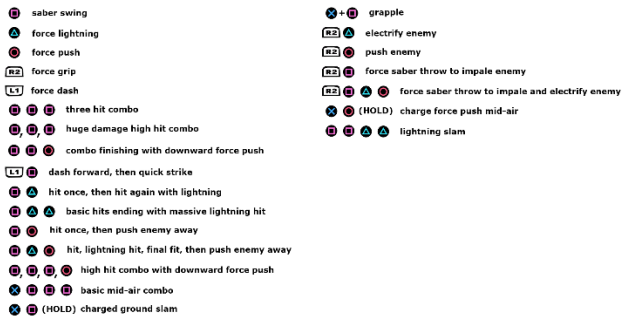


Figure 32 (above left): A list of button combos used for attacks in *The Force Unleashed*.
Figure 33 (above right): The fluid, flailing swordplay of *Jedi Academy*.
Figure 34 (left): The more cinematic duels of *The Force Unleashed*, relying heavily on pre-rendered animations.

Swords, by their very nature, are extremely deadly weapons, with a single strike often being lethal. Sword fights in films usually take one of two forms; a single protagonist taking on a room full of opponents, hacking them down as fast as they come, such as in the House of Blue Leaves' restaurant fight at the end of *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*, or a drawn-out, one-on-one fight like the subsequent garden confrontation between The Bride and O-Ren in which the tension builds with every clash of their swords until coming to an abrupt end with a single, fatal blow. Video games have difficulty achieving either of these scenarios, mostly due to a single mechanic: the health bar. Most games would be extremely frustrating if the player died in a single hit, likewise the challenge would disappear if enemies were equally weak, and so in the majority of games, both the player and enemies can usually survive multiple hits of damage. But this means that the power of the sword as a weapon is significantly reduced when the player battles a low-level enemy that survives multiple whacks to the side of the head with what is supposed to be a razor-sharp katana or an instantly deadly lightsaber. Some games, like *Dishonored*, avoid this by having both the player's and enemies' swords be almost equally deadly, but give both the ability to block and counter blows, meaning that sword combat can last long enough to be engaging without feeling weak, and also requires a certain level of skill and strategy. Additionally, some games state that the first few hits a player takes from an enemy's sword are mere glancing blows or are absorbed by the player's armour. This is actually somewhat similar to the way some shooter games try to explain the player

character being able to survive multiple gunshots. While factors such as bulletproof vests and ballistic helmets can justify a certain level of durability, some games present the idea that the first few bullets the player takes damage from can actually be considered as near misses, with the bullet dealing the killing blow being, in fact, the first true hit. In both cases, these are in practice, excuses that attempt to recover some of the realism that a game must always sacrifice in order to include more fun and balanced gameplay mechanics. Other games lean more towards the hyper-deadly depiction of swords even to the point of extreme exaggeration, such as the case with the *Warriors* game franchise (Koei, 1997-present) where the player takes on hundreds of enemies at once and can often kill more than a dozen with a single slash of their blade. This is an example of the hack and slash technical genre which regularly sacrifices realism for spectacle and can feature either games like the *Warriors* titles with their hyper-deadly, cartoonishly-destructive swords or games on the other end of the spectrum such as *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* (Saito, 2013) featuring enemies capable of surviving dozens of bisecting slashes from a razor-sharp, electrified katana. Both types of hack and slash games, particularly those like *Metal Gear Rising*, have great cinematic potential in terms of spectacle and animation and can resemble more exaggerated fight scenes in films like *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* but almost never resemble anything close to realistic swordplay or grant the player a realistic perception of wielding a blade.

Of course, it can be argued that the ultimate swordplay experience is achieved through virtual reality. With VR controllers, every wave of the hand and flick of the wrist is translated into an on-screen action, removing any need for clunkier pre-rendered animations and allowing players to utilize any fighting style they wish, linking the player directly to the inherent kinetic quality of the on-screen action. However, this can ironically, make the player in fact feel like less of a swashbuckling hero, as sword fighting VR games can very quickly devolve into the player wildly swinging their virtual sword around hoping to hit anything that comes near them. This can partially be a result of modern VR still commonly having difficulties with motion and movement accuracy

Figure 35: The lower-realism, somewhat goofy, graphics of the VR game *Blade & Sorcery* (WarpFrog, 2018) with its focus on player input accuracy.

combined with the fact that most gamers are not in actuality skilled swordsmen. In addition, most VR games lack the higher degree of visual realism present in other modern games as often sacrifices are made to the graphics to compensate for the more technically complex nature of VR

game mechanics. The lack of many pre-determined animations that grant the player the ability to move freely within the game world also limits the realism of character movements. Ultra realistic graphics are also sometimes avoided in VR as they have the potential to cause some players to have negative physical reactions. Possibly the better sword control scheme is the one used by most Wii games, like *Red Steel* (Ubisoft Paris, 2006) in which the player swinging the Wii remote in a given direction loosely translates to a pre-determined katana attack. This combination of player kinetic input and pre-rendered animations is perhaps currently the closest to achieving the experience of being in a cinematic sword fight.

3.5: Location, Setting, and Environment

All factors considered, locations are probably the easiest element for video games to replicate from films, since almost any setting can be reconstructed in a virtual environment. However, locations are not always utilized in the same ways. The classic staircase duel featured in many swashbuckler action films such as in *The Princess Bride* (Reiner, 1987), is an opportunity for intricate choreography and footwork and the constantly changing elevations can be used to symbolize the tide of battle, however this level of visual intricacy and coding is lost in video games, where staircases are simply textured ramps and have no impact on fighting. Most combat-focused games use arena style areas for the player to be able to move around and fight large numbers of enemies, akin to the large visual spectacles in the classic action film adaptations of Sir Walter Scott's works (Richards, 1977, p. 10), except with the camera always, somewhat narrowly, focused on the player character. This severely limits the potential for any creative fight-scene cinematography, examples of which can be seen in many of the films of Hong Kong director King Hu. While many games feature instances of the player having to fight several enemies at different elevations, similar to the inn battle in *Dragon Inn* (Hu, 1967), the character-fixed camera makes it impossible to follow the action itself, such as in the film where the camera follows the path of fired arrows. Since the player must always have the camera focused on their avatar in order to properly maintain control, cinematic elements, like sweeping or establishing shots are usually limited to cut-scenes and are absent from player-controlled gameplay sections. However, this does mean that games are able to feature complex feats of action if they are focused on the player character. Stunts like Jackie Chan's famous pole-slide at the climax of *Police Story* (Chan, 1985), where the camera follows Chan as he slides down multiple stories, can be effectively re-created in a third-person video game since the camera can follow the player character through the course of such a stunt in the same way it follows all of their other movements. Games like *James Bond 007: Nightfire* (Eurocom, 2002) feature moments where the player can trigger scripted instances of visual spectacle called "Bond Moves," during which the camera switches from a first-person perspective to a cinematic angle of the destructive stunt as the Bond theme music is triggered. While this is an example of removing player control to feature more spectacle, like the Eiffel Tower scene previously mentioned in Chapter 2, in this case it is done not as a method to insert narrative cinematography, but as a reward for the player who is intended to enjoy the spectacle they directly triggered while also granting them bonus points to their level score. Some games, such as *Halo 3* (Bungie Inc., 2007), have black bars slide into place at the top and bottom of the screen, mimicking a cinematic aspect ratio when the player enters a new area, while still allowing them to maintain

control of the camera. This method is less jarring than the triggering of a pre-rendered cut-scene, and while it does not allow for any choreographed cinematography, it still acts as a signal to the player that they are entering a new environment and subtly encourages them to have an establishing look around.

Fight sequences in many games are actually quite similar to the tavern fight in the original silent version of *The Mark of Zorro* (Niblo, 1920). The duel takes place in the very video game-esque environment of a large room with lots of obstacles that encourage movement and contains environmental objects like a keg that can help in combat. The fact that Zorro (Douglas Fairbanks) only fights one enemy at a time while the others watch from the edges of the room is comparable to the way enemies in many games will usually attack a player in waves of small numbers in order to avoid overwhelming them and maintain a balanced level of challenge. This is especially common in combo-based swordplay and fighting games, such as the aforementioned Star Wars: The Force Unleashed. Even the fact that the editing constantly follows Zorro's movements with cuts inserted when he moves out of frame is comparable to the character-tracking camera of a game. Interactivity, and particularly destructibility, as mentioned previously in Chapter 2, are important qualities for most action games released after the late 1990's, with breakable windows, exploding cars and barrels, and falling objects like chandeliers, all common elements of action films (Gallagher, 1999, p. 206), and their inclusion in games usually serving as an indication of detail and therefore a gauge of quality.

Figure 36 (left) & Figure 37 (right): Zorro utilizing environmental objects in *The Mark of Zorro* in a way that video game battles would come to resemble.

In a film, well thought out and detail-oriented mise-en-scène can make sets feel more believable and realistically lived in, but in a video game it can also create opportunities for a player to have more options and the freedom to interact with the environment. Games with a focus on physics manipulation, such as *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004), allow players to pick up and interact with objects, many of which are relatively non-essential, that are scattered throughout the game's environments. Just like environment destructibility, interactive physics objects are often seen as a gauge of quality. Just as being able to shoot a hole through a wall helps to increase a sense of realism and immersion, having a pile of individually manipulatable books fall off a table when a player's character bumps into it, helps to establish a level of environmental authenticity, even if it does not offer any direct gameplay benefit as in the case of the previously referenced melting ice cubes of *Metal Gear Solid 2*. In a film, an actor may pick up a cup and set it down elsewhere

simply to add dynamic movement to the scene, so giving a player the ability to also do this, while perhaps trivial, can give the player an enhanced feeling of being an active participant in the game. Environmental interaction can also be implemented in gameplay combat, with mechanics as simple as being able to take a fire extinguisher off a wall, throw it near an entrenched enemy, and then shoot it to cause an explosion. While actions like this may emulate commonly depicted feats seen in action films, it is a fine line between a game's physics mechanics making the player feel like a crafty action film protagonist and being irritatingly tedious. An example would be stacking boxes to get to an out-of-reach window and escape a room. This type of scenario is fairly common in action films where the entire action might take up no more than ten seconds of screen time and is often done through a series of quick edits, whereas in a game, the player must manually complete the task in real time, which when inserted too often, can risk the pacing of the game's action stagnating. While many environments in games are primarily designed with the flow of action or combat in mind, locations are not solely about spectacle filled action set pieces, and it can be more difficult to find comparisons to other common, yet equally important locations. Open-world games, with fully explorable areas, as opposed to more linear games which just take the player from one battlefield to another, are better suited for this comparison. *Sleeping Dogs* features locations iconic to Hong Kong action films, like a restaurant gangster hangout, docks and fish markets, massage parlours, offshore casinos, and many other non-combat oriented places where the player can enjoy other gangster-type activities, like shaking down merchants or betting on cock-fights. The subject matter and sensibilities of action films are far removed from reality (Gallagher, 1999, p. 211), but they are still tied to it and grounded by taking place, usually in relatively believable locations and settings, and for a game, which exists entirely outside of reality to achieve a similar level of believability, its environments must contain a very high level of detail and interactability in order to convince the player that the world of the game could realistically be lived in, while still containing enough explosive red barrels to let the player create some chaos.

In an overall sense, the action genre works very well in both of these visual mediums with the viewer/player in each case able to feel a kinetic connection to the action. Action films, and their meticulous choreography, do generally outshine their counterparts in terms of visual spectacle and style, but the unpredictable interactivity of games does grant the player the power to directly impact what is on screen and alter the course of a narrative, further elevating immersion. The characters of action films can often be fairly basic and clichéd since the focus is on what they do, which lines up well with the often deliberately unmemorable game protagonists that exist to be a vessel for the player to inhabit, although, that does mean a player can also manipulate a protagonist to act in unintended ways. Guns and swords are equally front and center in action films and games to the point of almost being characters themselves, but the intricacies of sword-fighting is definitely a noticeable detraction from realism in games, as it is notoriously difficult to successfully capture the fast-paced and precise movements of live-action actors. Locations are perhaps the most straight forward point of comparison, since in both films and games, locations and settings exist to offer options for creating action. Ultimately, despite each having unique benefits, the action genre is equally tailored to both visual mediums, with films and video games offering chances to explore different aspects of the same material in greater detail and gives audiences the choice of how they want to fulfil their fantasies, whether it be through film's passive observation, or games' active participation.

Chapter 4: The Gangster Genre

"There is no such thing as pointless violence."

- *Martin Scorsese, WENN, 2004*
(discussing the 2002 Brazilian gangster film City of God*)*

The gangster genre is one of the oldest narrative driven genres in cinema. While it can be argued that the gangster film is, in actuality, a subgenre of the well-established crime genre (Wilson, 2015, p. 12), gangster narratives feature enough distinct conventions that many consider it to be its own unique generic entity (Mason, 2002, p. 1). While the duality of criminal versus authority has existed in storytelling since long before the invention of audio/visual mediums, and this cops and robbers formula is a principle aspect of the gangster genre (Neale, 2000, p. 80), the genre distinguishes itself from other procedurals by maintaining a narrative focus on the life of the gangster character and not only their actions and the consequences thereof. In this sense, the gangster film is the antithesis of the detective film, another equally character driven genre, as many elements of a typical gangster film bear a resemblance to the structure of a police drama, only with the roles reversed and the criminal as the lead (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2016, p. xii). Many elements of early twentieth century America, such as rising urbanization and growing societal decay, made for a fertile breeding ground for the rise of organized crime (Wilson, 2015, p. 11), and this coincided with the rise of narrative cinema. In *American Gangster Cinema*, Fran Mason considers the 1912 D. W. Griffith short *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* to be the first true gangster film, as the film not only focuses on the crimes and acts of violence the gangster commits but also depicts aspects of the lifestyle that come from being a gangster (2002, p. 1). Neale disagrees with this, arguing that *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* lacks many of the conventions necessary to be considered a true gangster film, instead stating that the full-length film *Regeneration* (Walsh, 1915) is where the genre truly began (2000, p. 78-79). In the 1920's, at the same time that the feature-length, narrative driven film was becoming increasingly common, American organized crime reached a new level of power and influence thanks to the opportunities created by the implementation of prohibition, so naturally films of the period eagerly took inspiration from the exciting, gangster focused headlines of the time (Schatz, 1981, p. 82). Schatz, along with many other scholars including Mark Reid and Fran Mason, consider Von Sternberg's 1927 film *Underworld* to be the start of the gangster genre cycle that would extend into the sound era and include films like *Little Caesar* (LeRoy, 1931), *Public Enemy* (Wellman, 1931), and *Scarface*, films that would help to establish the genre conventions that modern gangster films continue to abide by. The 1934 Production Code prohibited featuring the gangster as the main character, bringing an end to this cycle and marking a decade-long stagnation of the gangster film until the rise in popularity of film noir after the end of the Second World War.

The conflict between criminals and law enforcement has long been a basis for team separation in games of all kinds, even in an example as simple as the children's make-believe game of cops and robbers. The crime genre inherently offers excellent potential for team-based gameplay as it is one of the most clear-cut examples of good-guys versus bad-guys. While a war game may have to justify why a faction is villainous, a criminal faction comes with the pre-established societal context of being the enemy of all law-abiding citizens. Even early video games, made before narratives were commonly implemented, such as *Lock 'n' Chase* (Data East, 1981), a relatively simple maze game, use the aesthetic of the crime genre to add character and help differentiate themselves from the competition. While the crime genre, and its inherent aspects of conflict and action, is a natural fit for video game narratives, the gangster genre, and its protagonist-centric nature, translates immensely well to many different technical genres of games. The *Grand Theft Auto* action-adventure game series, some of the most prolific video games of all time in terms of both critical and financial success, could be considered works of the gangster thematic genre. While gangsters and other types of criminals have always appeared in video games, the narrative and cinematic complexity necessary to produce a game that could truly be considered of the gangster genre, would not really be available until the early 2000's sixth console generation, the second generation of three-dimensional games, with games like *Grand Theft Auto III* (DMA Design, 2001) on the PlayStation 2 and Xbox. A particularly good direct comparison of gangster films and games can be found between the game *Sleeping Dogs* and the film *Infernal Affairs* (Lau & Mak, 2002), as both are set in Hong Kong, feature an undercover cop protagonist, and are hybridised with the action genre. These two works will be referenced throughout this chapter as their relatively close similarities allow for easily made and relevant comparisons regarding more subtle and specific details.

In many cases, it may seem that the gangster genre serves as a melodramatic offshoot of the action genre, with the focus on the gangster's life as an excuse to show scenes of Wise Guys blowing away mooks with Tommy Guns, but in reality, the genre contains a high level of social commentary on subjects ranging from ethnic relations to capitalist greed (Langford, 2005, p. 139). By putting law enforcement in the role of antagonist, the gangster genre excels at exploring concepts of police corruption and the idea that sometimes the lawman is a monster worse than the gangster he pursues (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2016, p. x). Typically, gangster films are long, very dialogue-heavy narrative experiences, with bursts of intense and ultra-violent action, much like the behavior of real-life gangsters, who mostly act in a business-like manner with the occasional quick, brutal outburst. Similarly, while gangster genre games are often action and spectacle packed affairs, they also tend to include long periods of plotting and downtime, requiring large amounts of dialogue and exposition to carry their often complex and winding narratives.

4.1: Narrative Conventions

The gangster genre's focus on the life and actions of its main protagonists is perfectly suited for narrative driven, single player games where the entire experience revolves solely around the player's character. The selfish and violent tendencies of the gangster translate well into action-oriented gameplay where everything the player does is for their own benefit, such as increasing stats or gaining better gear. It is common for Hong Kong action films and Korean dramas to include

many, long, exaggerated action sequences with little narrative impact, and such sequences are formally comparable to gameplay sections in action games where the player does not merely get to view the sequence, but also experience it. Both *Infernal Affairs* and *Sleeping Dogs* feature the often overly dramatic action and character interaction that are constantly found in East Asian gangster media. While *Sleeping Dogs* does encapsulate some John Woo level mayhem with many slow-motion swan-diving gunshots, the game generally shows restraint and refrains from ever reaching the utterly ridiculous action of the game *Stranglehold* (Tiger Hill Entertainment, 2007), the official video game sequel to Woo's 1992 film *Hard Boiled*, except when it comes to the car chase sequences, which lose any semblance of realism and devolve into fiery demolition derbies. Many video games that focus on American-Italian gangster themes usually end up feeling more like games imitating the conventions of gangster films, rather than true gangster narratives in their own right. The combat sections of games like *Mafia II* can feel as if they could be any third-person, cover-based shooter, but instead of killing aliens or zombies, the player is using a Tommy gun to blow away enforcers wearing fedoras. As if to prove this point, the tutorial level of *Mafia II* takes place during a Second World War battle, with the level playing as if it had been directly plucked from a generic third-person military shooter. Furthermore, one of the first true missions in *Mafia II* tasks the player with robbing gas stations, an objective that seems wholly referential to the opening scene of *Little Caesar*. On the other hand, the East-Asian gangster genre has many games that offer much more authentic-feeling experiences. The diversity of fighting styles featured in Hong Kong action films gives inspiration for combat variety in gangster games, with both *Sleeping Dogs* and the *Yakuza* franchise (Sega, 2005-present) including martial arts fights, knife battles, shootouts, and even occasionally explosives, making gameplay less repetitive, and replicating the flashy chaos of action films.

Figure 38 (left): A screenshot from the tutorial of *Mafia II* which could easily be mistaken for being from a World War II themed shooter game.
Figure 39 (right): A typical combat scenario in *Sleeping Dogs*, taking place in an open environment with lots of potential for martial arts fighting.

While games like *Mafia II* and *Sleeping Dogs* may not be wholly realistic, they are fairly accurate in their depictions of the brutality of gang violence, and while the focus of many gangster films is skewed more towards the melodrama of the gangster's life, the games can more freely embrace the moments of intense action, allowing them to last longer without distracting from the plot. This formula of narrative-heavy, dialogue driven scenes intermixed with sequences of pure action, is almost exactly the same as an action game with narrative cut-scenes between gameplay segments. However, just because the format of a video game fits the formula of a gangster film, it

does not necessarily mean that a video game is able to portray the nuances of the genre to the same depth as that of a film. The real-world gang violence in Hong Kong is severe, so while all the explosions and shoot-outs throughout *Sleeping Dogs* may seem exaggerated, grenade fights are real events that have been known to occur in the streets of Hong Kong (Skipworth, 2012, web). Other aspects of gang behaviour focused on in the game such as the triad-controlled Club Bam Bam are accurate portrayals of their real-life counterparts. Additionally, the rival triad in the game, the 18K, is based on the real-life Hong Kong Triad the 14K and the gang that protagonist Wei Shen is part of, the Sun On Yee, is also based on a real gang, the Sun Yee On (Skipworth, 2012, web). While these thinly veiled pseudonyms would no doubt be incredibly obvious to a resident of Hong Kong, most players in the west would likely have no point of reference and assume the names to be entirely fictitious. Comparatively, films like *Infernal Affairs* feature more generic criminal syndicates that lack any direct real-world parallels, instead acting as representations of East Asian organized crime as a whole. It is more common for real-world criminal organizations to be directly referenced in Mafia focused gangster media, with *Goodfellas* (Scorsese, 1990) being based on real events, and this is also true of *Mafia II* which features a brief cut-scene depiction of real-life Italian Mafia boss Don Calò.

4.2: Visual Style

As mentioned in previous chapters, many of the visual cinematic elements of film, such as creative camera angles and lighting are often more difficult to reproduce in video games, but this becomes increasingly noticeable with more moody and atmospheric genres like gangster. The fact that games like *Sleeping Dogs*, *Mafia II*, and *Grand Theft Auto IV* all came out during the seventh console generation, a time when graphics had a tendency to appear blurry, unfocused, and glossy, actually helps them fit into the gangster genre's visual aesthetic of being washed out, dark, and often damp. All three works have colour palettes dominated by blacks, greys, and beiges which are similar to that of many gangster films including *Gangster Squad* and *Infernal Affairs*. However, the colouring of these games remains fairly consistent throughout their entirety, whereas both films use colour throughout to enrich the atmosphere, especially with the use of green filters in *Infernal Affairs* which help make gangster occupied environments feel sicklier and more corrupt. This is a visual style common to the gangster genre, as the environments are supposed to be as equally dark and menacing as the gangster characters themselves (Schatz, 1981, p. 85). *The Darkness* does this particularly well with its stylized graphics that are dark and gothic, and it features environments that are filthy, both in terms of urban decay as well as literal filth, which all tonally match the demonic nature of its supernatural gangster protagonist. *Sleeping Dogs'* open world also features a dynamic day and night cycle, with the game taking on a more yellowish tint during the night to reflect all the intensely lit signage of Hong Kong's streets, with more rural areas and parks becoming quite dark in comparison. *Sleeping Dogs* cannot afford scenes of almost complete darkness like those featured in *Infernal Affairs* since it would interfere with the player's ability to navigate many of the locations in the game, especially the dark and dreary North Point district, with its many shadowy and dingy alleyways. So, while the game is unable to re-create the exact film aesthetic, it is able to emulate the overall atmosphere, particularly during the gameplay sections that are scripted to take place during in-game nighttime. These sections look very similar

to some scenes from *Infernal Affairs*, as the light sources and numerous neon signs of *Sleeping Dogs*' Hong Kong make the in-game environments hazy, a common look in gangster films. Many open world games also include dynamic weather systems along with day and night cycles in order to increase a sense of their world's realism and prevent the game from always feeling the same every time it is played. These weather mechanics can also be used to help set a tone similar to the large role weather effects play in establishing a film's on-screen atmosphere. Random downpours help to make the American cities of *Mafia II* and *Grand Theft Auto IV* feel even more dreary and bleak and give *Sleeping Dogs* the same damp and steamy atmosphere seen in *Infernal Affairs*.

Examples of visually similar gloomy, low-light shots typical of East-Asian gangster media in *Infernal Affairs* (figure 40 (left)) and *Sleeping Dogs* (figure 41 (right)).

The cut-scenes in *Sleeping Dogs* do a good job of capturing the gangster genre aesthetic, with lots of low angles, tracking shots, pans, and crowded frames. They also feature East Asian cinematic style elements like close-ups of faces, sweeping crane-shots, rapid editing, zoom-ins, and excessive fade-ins and fade-outs. All of these elements are used across the game's many cut-scenes and really help to make them feel like shots taken directly from a gangster film. At times it can feel as if the game is just copying common film tropes and clichés, but this often has more to do with the writing of the scene than the animated cinematography. Additionally, the emotion that can be conveyed by an ultra close-up of an actor's face was difficult to duplicate with the graphical limitations that were present at the time of the game's development. The more recently released game *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio, 2020) is able to achieve a fairly high level of emotional detail on the faces of its characters during cut-scenes, such as in the scene where the character of Yamato Totsuka (Binbin Takaoka) is almost made to cut off his own finger, helping to

The differences in facial detail between characters from *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (figure 42 (left)) and *Sleeping Dogs* (figure 43 (right)) released eight years prior.

achieve a level of believable drama comparable to moments from live-action gangster films. Similarly, the cut-scenes of the American gangster-focused game *Mafia II* include more full body and tracking shots of characters in motion, akin to many scenes from the mafia film *Goodfellas.*

4.3: Characters

As the key component of the genre, gangster media would be nothing without its titular protagonist. The gangster himself is always a violent and remorseless character, and above all else, he is utterly self-serving (Langford, 2005, p. 138). His fierce loyalty to his boss is often just in hope of one day sitting in the seat of power himself. At the same time, gangster media often focuses heavily on the themes of brotherhood and family, particularly in mafia and yakuza media, so earnest loyalty is also a fundamental part of the gangster character. The gang is treated as a mixture of a family unit and a formal corporate organization with levels of management and a strict hierarchy. Though his behaviour may be unpredictable, the gangster is a professional, everything he does is for profit or some form of personal gain, and he craves success or even just the facade of success (Langford, 2005, p. 140). The gangster can be seen as a cheap man in an expensive suit. This inherently self-serving nature makes the gangster an excellent game protagonist, since most actions taken by gangster characters in films are usually to gain wealth, women, or respect (face), and this translates well into a player being rewarded with progressively better level-up rewards and unlockables for playing increasingly more difficult levels. The gangster as a character also allows the player to be rewarded for creating action-film levels of destruction and mayhem without having to worry about collateral damage in a domestic setting (Gallagher, 1999, p. 201), something that other types of action games, with morally good protagonists, cannot include as easily. The gangster often serves as a symbol of anarchy, fighting against the law which serves to enforce society's rules (Schatz, 1981, p. 89). This is particularly true in the *Saints Row* game series (Volition, 2006-2022), which rewards players for causing high amounts of collateral damage regardless of whether or not it benefits them or their gang. The in-game police that try to stop the player serve as a force attempting to preserve the orderly system of rules all of the game's civilian NPCs must abide by, while the player is directly rewarded for causing as much chaos as possible within this societal system.

The often-nonchalant attitudes of gangster characters can make for prime opportunities to inject humour into a game, with crude jokes and post-kill one-liners feeling natural coming from characters who are basically villains themselves. Unlike Nathen Drake from *Uncharted*, there is no need to try to assure the player that they are morally superior to those they are killing, as it does not matter. On the contrary, in some cases the protagonist may clearly be the most evil character in the narrative. In *The Darkness*, the player may be fighting rival gangsters who literally bombed an orphanage, but the player character, Jackie, is possessed by a demon and eats the still beating hearts of his enemies. Most gangster games contain a mix of enemies that are morally superior, such as police officers, and those more evil than the player, including factions such as racist biker gangs. In both cases however, the player will kill not out of a sense of justice, but for personal gain, for example, to escape the police or aggressively take over the biker gang's territory.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, most video games have been made by male developers for male players. Despite this, there are still several examples of action games with female

protagonists, but this is not really the case for action games of the gangster genre. The gangster as a character is almost always a man, and while there are exceptions to this, particularly in East-Asian gangster media, female gangster characters are still usually not the protagonists of narratives. The gang as a family unit is inherently patriarchal in structure, so a narrative including a female character in a position of power is by itself subversive to narrative conventions. There are virtually no examples of gangster games with female protagonists, and very limited use of female characters in action roles, with a few notable exceptions within the *Grand Theft Auto* series, with the main antagonist of *Grand Theft Auto III* being the violent cartel leader Catalina (Cynthia Farrell), and the upcoming *Grand Theft Auto VI* (Rockstar Games, 2025 [forthcoming]) slated to feature one of the first ever female gangster protagonists, Lucia (Manni Parez).

Typically, the portrayal of women in the gangster genre is as property and sex objects. In the criminal underworld there is a lot of profit in human trafficking and the sex trade where women's bodies are valuable merchandise. As stated before, the gangster is a selfish and self-serving character, and as such he always seeks personal pleasure and self-gratification in the company of an attractive woman, and as such a sexy girlfriend or mistress also serves the role of a status symbol (Schatz, 1981, p. 87). *Infernal Affairs* does not really deal with this subject matter, although it is far more present in the Korean gangster film *New World* (Hoon-Jung, 2013), and very prevalent in *Sleeping Dogs.* There are sexualized female characters throughout the game, and Wei makes multiple romantic conquests during the game's story, with each one consisting of a meeting, a single date, and implied sex. The date with Ilyana (Megan Goldsmith) is the most egregious example of this as it consists of a playful parkour race between the two, after which the camera cuts to a nearby lingerie billboard while they engage in suggestive dialogue as stereotypical porn soundtrack music plays until the scene fades to black. After every date the player gains some kind of new permanent gameplay bonus, usually an upgrade to the minimap. Additionally, the woman's phone number is no longer accessible in Wei's phone, preventing any further contact, and in most cases, the woman never appears in the game again. Wei is not always able to end these encounters without repercussions however, such as when he wakes up to an angry voicemail from Not Ping (Celina Jade) ranting about him being a disgusting cheater. *Sleeping Dogs* contains a brief moment of commentary on the Casanova aspect of the gangster lifestyle when Tiffany Kim (Yunjin Kim) breaks up with Wei after their date stating it is unfair that he is allowed multiple, casual partners while she is expected to remain faithful to him. Outside of these scripted dates, the player can also choose to have Wei pay for massages from women in alleyways, which consist of the screen fading to black in combination with a line of suggestive dialogue. These implied sexual encounters grant the player temporary gameplay benefits, indicating that using women for sex literally makes the gangster feel more powerful. Neither *Sleeping Dogs* nor *Infernal Affairs* contain any elements of sexualized violence that are common to the genre, as in *New World* when Shin Woo (Song Ji-hyo) is beaten, stripped to her underwear, stuffed in an oil barrel, threatened with rape, and ultimately shot in the head. *Mafia II* lacks any notable significant female presence whatsoever, aside from Vito's mother and sister who really only serve as motivations for Vito to earn more money in order to better support them; although, the game does also include some rather egregious female sexualization. Some of the game's cut-scenes include female characters clad in lingerie or otherwise revealing outfits, lacking any significant lines of dialogue of their own, doing nothing more than doting on the male characters doing business, making their only role in the

scenes to exist as eye-candy for the player. At one point when the player visits Joe's apartment they can find a woman taking a bubble bath while wearing high heels and stockings. This NPC is not interactable and only exists to satisfy the male gaze, similar to many gangster films that will have an attractive woman on screen as part of the overall gangster genre aesthetic. *Mafia II* also includes one other particularly objectifying mechanic in the form of the game's collectable Playboy magazines. Scattered throughout the game's open world are period-appropriate issues of Playboy magazine that the player can pick up, and then once collected, the player can, at any time, browse their collection from the game's pause menu. These collectables are purely for the player's enjoyment and do not otherwise fit diegetically into the game, as it would be odd for Vito to pause in the middle of a shootout to pick up a pornographic magazine. Other gangster games, such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series, go beyond the implications of sex found in *Sleeping Dogs* and allow the player to hire prostitutes at any time for simulated sex acts, with *Grand Theft Auto V* even featuring the option for a first-person perspective. This is not generally part of any scripted mission and, unlike *Sleeping Dogs*' massages, does not offer the player any sort of gameplay benefit, instead serving only for entertainment purposes. However, this does create an opportunity for the player to directly participate in the act of using women for self-gratification, emulating the behaviour of actual gangsters and in this way, these gameplay elements are just as important for immersing the player in the gangster's lifestyle as is the game's combat.

Figure 44 (left): Early in *Mafia II*, the player can find an unnamed female NPC wearing high heels and stockings while taking a bubble bath in Joe's apartment.
Figure 45 (right): Tiffany scolding Wei, and by extension the player, for cheating on her by going on a date-style side-mission with Not Ping in *Sleeping Dogs*.

Despite the overall negative and degrading portrayal of female characters within the genre, the East Asian gangster narrative often allows for female characters with a higher degree of agency. It is common for women to inhabit positions of power within the criminal organization, such as *Sleeping Dogs'* Broken Nose Jiang (Elizabeth Sung) who ultimately ends up leading the Sun On Yee by the game's conclusion. This would be unheard of in a more patriarchal, western gangster story, in which the only power a woman is likely to exert would be that of a wife or mother who is able to manipulate a husband or son who themselves is in a position of power within a criminal organization. Additionally, strong female characters are also more likely to be present within the police force combating the gangster, such as the aforementioned Shin Woo who sacrificed her life as an undercover operative, although the nature of her demise somewhat undermines the character's impact as a strong female.

In classic gangster media, as one last self-centered act in his final hour the gangster, with no regrets or remorse for his actions or choices, must go down in a hail of bullets, as the ultimate final punishment. This often embarrassing or pathetic "death in the gutter," as Schatz describes it, serves both to punish and humiliate the gangster character for his crimes, but also to discourage audiences from idealizing them (1981, p. 91). This is difficult to include in a game, as the death of the player character means that the player cannot continue to play the game. In *Mafia* (Illusion Softworks, 2002), the protagonist, Tommy (Michael Sorvino), is unceremoniously assassinated in the final cut-scene after becoming a witness for the prosecution. While this may end the game's story, it does not end the gameplay, as completing the game unlocks a "Freeride Extreme" mode where the player is able to continue to explore the game's open world and play side quests, the entire time playing as the now very much dead Tommy. Many open-world games offer post-game content, and it can be disconcerting if this features a character whom the player has just witnessed dying in a gutter. Games will sometimes circumvent this by having the player play the post-game content as a different character from the previously killed-off protagonist, such as in *Red Dead Redemption* when the player controls the protagonist's son after his father's death. This practice of character replacement is often maligned by players as they generally feel far less attachment to the replacement character. This need to humiliate the gangster in death is no longer the mandatory convention for the genre it once was, and in many modern examples, gangsters are killed in visually spectacular ways (Schatz, 1981, p. 105). In some cases, instead of being gunned down, the gangster could face his legal punishment, show regret, or partially redeem himself like James Cagney's Rocky Sullivan at the end of *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Curtiz, 1938). In more modern gangster media, which no longer has to conform to the standards of the Production Code Administration which was dissolved in 1968, it is acceptable, albeit rare, for a story to end with the gangster character finding some sort of personal fulfillment and overall success. While the gangster character is usually killed or punished at the end of a video game, the player is generally not, as in *Mafia*, Tommy is killed in cold blood, but the player is rewarded with more gameplay features. In this regard, the gangster game protagonist is almost like a scapegoat, as the player vicariously commits crime via the character and at the conclusion, the character is the one punished for the player's actions and choices. This separation between the player and their avatar particularly makes sense when considering that the majority of gangster video games use a third-person perspective which, as previously discussed in Chapter 3, inherently creates a divide between player and protagonist.

The undercover police officer is a common motif in East-Asian gangster films, and one based in reality as it is a tactic that the HKPD regularly employs in its war against the triads. Both *Infernal Affairs* and *Sleeping Dogs* feature undercover HKPD officers as their protagonists, and while not set in Hong Kong, the Korean film *New World* also focuses on an undercover officer infiltrating a crime syndicate. Both *Infernal Affairs* and *New World* examine the toll that years of undercover work has taken on their protagonists Chan Wing-yan (Tony Leung) and Lee Ja-sung (Lee Jung-jae) respectively. Both men desperately want to be done with their undercover assignments but are forcibly kept in the field by their superiors. *Sleeping Dogs* instead focuses on Wei balancing his duties as an officer of the law while also maintaining his cover and helping his gangster family, whom he genuinely cares for. While in both of these cases the undercover cops are good and honorable men just trying to do the right thing, as characters they are still subject to

the unfortunate end destined for all gangster protagonists. Chan is unceremoniously gunned down at the end of *Infernal Affairs* after completing his official, police duty. While Wei is not killed, he is betrayed by his superior and many of his friends die, and although he gets his revenge on the treacherous triad leader Henry "Big Smile" Lee (Tzi Ma) and brings his corrupt boss, Thomas Pendrew (Tom Wilkinson), to justice, ultimately winning the day, it is at a great personal cost. *New World* takes a more modern approach and sees Ja-sung fully embrace his life as a gangster and ascend to the position of Chairman of his criminal organization, Goldmoon. He completely turns his back on the police force that betrayed him and goes a step beyond Wei by having his corrupt superior killed. All three protagonists must face hazing and tests to prove their loyalty to their gangs and dispel suspicions of them being moles, with these scenes often being high points of tension as the protagonist may have to choose to cross the line and kill someone in order to maintain their cover. This conflict of moral duality makes the undercover officer particularly well suited as a gangster genre game protagonist as it creates opportunities for impactful and meaningful player choices. Although, while such tests contained within the controlled narrative of a film all but guarantee a moment of tension, by the time such a situation arises in Sleeping Dogs, the player has already likely killed multiple enemies, somewhat reducing the impact of such a moment, and again exemplifying how player autonomy can conflict with a scripted narrative. *Sleeping Dogs* takes the police element even further, letting the player perform “actual police work,” consisting of SWAT raids, shootouts, and sniper assassinations. *Infernal Affairs* and *New World* also show police work, just more subtly, and perhaps more realistically. Most real-world undercover operations are shorter than Chan or Lee’s, as they both remained in their gangs for several years but do take longer than the few weeks Wei spent in his gang, as it is a lengthy process for an undercover officer to rise high enough through the ranks to gain useful evidence (Leung & Lo, 2017, web). In this sense, all three narratives equally sacrifice accuracy for enhanced dramatic effect.

One of the most important concepts featured in the gangster genre is family. While the gang itself can be seen as a character all on its own, it can also be looked at as a family unit, and often the idea of family is portrayed through the characters in immediate relationships with the protagonist (Fedorova, 2019, p. 311). Of course, this is the most apparent in Mafia narratives as the different criminal empires are referred to directly as families and use family names, but family dynamic is equally present in the comradery of even street gang members. In *Sleeping Dogs*, Wei fights against other factions of the Sun On Yee even though they are all part of the same overall organization, but his family are the people within his sect of the gang. This leads Wei to struggle to maintain his position as a police officer while also protecting his triad family members. He is even willing to disobey direct orders from Pendrew to protect his childhood friend Jackie. Contrastingly, in *Infernal Affairs*, Chan wants nothing more than to be free of his fellow gang members, but the idea of family for him is played out through his relationship with Superintendent Wong Chi-Shing (Anthony Wong), the only man who knows Chan’s true identity. Wong is Chan’s only real connection to his true self, and more than just his superior, his only real friend. In both cases, the deaths of these closest friend characters inspire the protagonists to take on their villains with everything they have. The familial unit of the gang can never circumvent the power of structured society (Schatz, 1981, p. 93), and so the gangster’s often-misplaced faith and devotion to his gangster family is commonly the seed of his undoing. In *Mafia II*, protagonist Vito Scaletta’s

(Rick Pasqualone) true loyalty is to his childhood friend Joe (Robert Costanzo), and ultimately this comradery leads them to both being targets of the crime family they had previously worked for. As a result, Joe is kidnapped, and possibly killed, and while Vito survives to appear in *Mafia III* (Hangar 13, 2016), he is left powerless and loses all the influence the player has tried to build throughout the course of the game. At several key moments throughout *Mafia II*, the player is stripped of progress, particularly through the loss of items, and while none of these moments can compare to the dramatic, death-in-the-gutter moment of classic gangster films, they definitely do illustrate that the gangster character is always on the edge of losing it all to society. In *New World*, Ja-sung only really cares about his pregnant wife, his actual family, and it is his determination to protect her that contributes to his complete conversion to the gangster way of life. Mothers have a somewhat negative reputation in the gangster genre, as described by Schatz, a gangster's mother can be a Lady MacBeth style negative influence encouraging him to be increasingly ruthless (1981, p. 105). In contrast to this, Vito's mother wants him to live an honest life; however, ironically, he is convinced to turn to a life of crime in order to save her from debt, an endeavor that leads to his second arrest and prison stay, during which time his mother dies. The gangster character must be punished even if their intentions may be somewhat admirable. The gangster genre also focuses on traditional family events like weddings, funerals, and memorials as important occasions where the gang comes together as a family. Such events are considered sacred, where business is not to be conducted, and ignoring this sacredness is an act of blatant disrespect. In *New World*, the police greatly antagonize the crime syndicate, Goldmoon, by placing a surveillance van outside their chairman's funeral, and in *Sleeping Dogs* the bloody massacre at Winston Chu's (Parry Shen) wedding triggers a full-on gang war.

Figure 46 (left): Wei mourning the deaths of his friend and fellow gangster Winston and his bride after their wedding was attacked by a rival gang in *Sleeping Dogs*, an attack that is considered dishonourable.
Figure 47 (right): Funerals are commonly depicted in gangster films, as seen at the beginning of *New World*, members of Goldmoon attend the funeral of their chairman.

4.4: The Legend of the Gangster

One of the most important things to a gangster is his reputation, often referred to in slang as "face." In films like *Infernal Affairs* and especially *New World*, there is a lot of focus on talking about characters' reputations and on the protagonists rising up through the ranks of their gangs. In *Sleeping Dogs* certain actions and side missions reward the player with face score, and the higher the player's face level, the more perks and privileges they'll be awarded including better prices at vendors, a personal valet, and even more successful interactions with some female characters. In this sense, the game succeeds in making face feel like the valuable and sought-after commodity

that it is. In *Mafia II*, much like Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) in *Goodfellas*, Vito does not himself rise up in the ranks of the mob, but instead accepts job offers from increasingly more important mobsters as the game's narrative progresses. In practice, the player's reward for progressing in the game, is Vito earning more and more trust from those he, and by extension the player, works for. The on-screen gangster is generally supposed to appear as smarter than both his underlings and enemies (Schatz, 1981, p. 86), and this is an aspect that translates especially well to video games which are already power fantasies, so it feels very natural for the player's gangster character to be the most capable person in any given situation.

While *Sleeping Dogs* does not have a true karma system, the player's actions can either increase their triad or cop loyalty scores. Raising these scores unlocks new moves and bonuses. This motivates the player's behavior in ways such as being careful to not kill civilians for cop points or killing enemies more brutally for triad points. The player may have to choose between either "good" or "bad" actions simply for the mechanical reason of getting a certain score, rather than for any ethical reason, as the game awards certain actions with a numerical score, which may lead players to perform actions that do not ethically align or make sense within the narrative plot of the game (Khaled, 2018, p. 10). In order for a player to achieve the highest "clean driving score" on their friends list, they may be led to speed and drive dangerously into oncoming highway traffic, something Wei would not have any actual reason to do. In this way, player immersion in the game's narrative experience is necessary when looking at the game as a genre piece, but too much player immersion in the gameplay can be disruptive. Often it is the mechanics included in a game to create opportunities for the most fun, that also detract the most from any kind of narrative genre analysis. In *Sleeping Dogs,* the player can dress Wei up in the costumes of characters taken from famous action films as well as other Square Enix published games like Agent 47 and Adam Jensen, with several of these reference costumes also offering gameplay bonuses when worn. This both considerably lowers the immersion level of the game and further removes it from gangster genre conventions. Of course, a player can play the game using only appropriate clothing and actions, although that might not be as much fun to play. In the end, it is the player's choices that determine the kind of experience they get out of the game.

Figure 48 (left): In *Sleeping Dogs*, the player can choose to have Wei wear an outfit inspired by the Bruce Lee film *Game of Death* (Lee, 1978), despite this not fitting the narrative or tone of the game.
Figure 49 (right): The player can also choose to have Wei wear the outfits of other game protagonists, with the Agent 47 outfit even offering extra gameplay bonuses of a better weapon and less police attention in *Sleeping Dogs*.

Films like *Infernal Affairs* and *New World* explicitly and passively show audiences how gangsters live and operate, while playing a game like *Sleeping Dogs* gives players the opportunity

to be exposed to the same ideas through their direct participation. Many of *Sleeping Dogs'* gameplay mechanics are completely unrealistic. The ability to take on dozens of enemies all at once, to recover from death at a hospital, and to dive over cover in slow-motion while accurately shooting several enemies in the head with an automatic weapon from across the room, are all completely ridiculous, so of course *Sleeping Dogs* does not give the player an accurate feel for what it is truly like to be a gangster. While a character being able to survive several lethal hits can detract from sword combat, it actually works quite well in a gangster game, since the ability to survive the impossible helps to propagate the gangster as a legendary figure, as in the film *The Killer* when the protagonists continue to fight after being shot several times. Most likely, a game that did accurately portray gangster life would not be as much fun to play considering the life of the average gangster is underwhelming and bleak. Instead, *Sleeping Dogs* allows the player to experience the fantasy of the legend of the gangster, a tough, powerful, invincible, and confident guy who can destroy anything or anyone that gets in his way while also looking badass at the same time. However, *Sleeping Dogs* does not necessarily glorify the gangster lifestyle either. Wei's life is shown to be full of pain, loss, and strife, so while playing as Wei serves as a form of escapism for the player, the player would not want to swap lives with him. Likewise, the films *Infernal Affairs* and *New World* depict a, while less extreme, stylized fantasy image of the gangster lifestyle. A film like *Gomorrah* (Garrone, 2008) is as close to a realistic depiction of the gangster lifestyle as audiences will likely get, and it is a dark, depressing, melancholic, hopeless film, much like a gangster's actual life. So, while a hypothetical game with *Gomorrah's* realism, which could contain such minigames as "selling drugs to twelve-year-olds" would likely teach the player more about actual gangsters, it would not be as much fun to play as *Sleeping Dogs*.

4.5: Location, Setting, and Environment

From his lifestyle to the structure of the gang he is a member of, many of the previously mentioned aspects of the gangster character are influenced by the setting and environment that his story takes place in. Similar to the Western, the gangster genre is very reliant on iconography. Neale references common gangster iconography such as guns, clothes, and cars (2000, p. 16), but in addition to these, Schatz mentions perhaps one of the most important icons of the gangster genre, the telephone (1981, p. 85). Many of the works mentioned so far in this chapter heavily feature the use of telephones, particularly cell phones in those with a modern setting. The phone is one of the gangster's most powerful tools, as it allows him to conduct business from the safety of his home, and in the case of cellphones, from anywhere. Additionally, cell phones are less prone to wiretapping or other forms of traditional surveillance, making for more secure criminal communication. Many conversations in *Infernal Affairs* and *New World* take place over the phone and there are several tense scenes where characters live or die depending on a phone call. In *Goodfellas*, Henry and Jimmy (Robert De Niro), are informed of Tommy's (Joe Pesci) death via a public phonebooth. The telephone, and its prevalence in the gangster genre, serves as a representation of how the gangster will attempt to use society's developments against it. In many gangster games, including *Sleeping Dogs* and titles in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, the player is given a phone that they can access, make calls from, and take photos with at any time during gameplay while also having several missions start with a protagonist receiving a text or call. This

captures the importance of the cell phone to the gangster's lifestyle, further illustrated by many of *Sleeping Dog*'s cut-scenes featuring phone calls. Many open world gangster games, notably *Saints Row 2* (Volition, 2008), use the gangster's cell phone to diegetically explain several gameplay features, such as the game's map being made to look like a phone GPS app, and mission details appearing like notes in a memo app.

Phones are tools of connectivity, and by allowing a player to use one within a game, it helps the player to feel more directly connected to a game world. The cell phone also relates to the theme of surveillance popular in East Asian, and particularly Chinese, cinema (Fang, 2019, p. 6). As an extension of this theme, espionage elements and the presence of CCTV cameras are heavily featured in East Asian films, and this surveillance motif manifests itself within the gangster genre through the presence of undercover police officers as protagonists. *Sleeping Dogs* features several side missions in which Wei uses CCTV cameras to apprehend drug dealers, and both films heavily feature police surveillance, with the police utilizing bugs to listen in on the triad's deal at the docks in *Infernal Affairs* as well as making use of a surveillance van in *New World* to observe the chairman's funeral. Phones can also be a liability for the gangster, such as in *Mafia III* where if an NPC witnesses the player committing a crime, they will run to the nearest phone booth to call the police, who will then hunt the player.

Figure 50 (above left): Important gangster business being conducted on a cell phone in *Infernal Affairs*.
Figure 51(above right): The player is able to access their in-game cell phone, and its many gameplay functions, at any time during *Sleeping Dogs*.
Figure 52 (left): The third mission of *Mafia II* starts with Vito receiving a call on Joe's rotary phone.

Another important icon of the gangster genre is the presence of food (Santos, 2004, p. 209). In many gangster works food is used to highlight the hedonistic and self-interested lifestyle of the gangster character. In *Goodfellas*, food is synonymous with success and the quality of the food Henry Hill enjoys throughout the film reflects the current state of his power and success. In *Little Caesar*, Rico (Edward G. Robinson) is shown eating immediately after committing murder thereby indicating a level of apathy and total self-interest. Food is commonly featured across many genres

of video games as items that can replenish a character's health or modify their stats. In *Sleeping Dogs*, food items, such as steamed pork buns, can grant the player character health and combat bonuses, serving as another example of a background aspect of the gangster lifestyle that is made to have a direct gameplay benefit. Additionally, places that produce food, namely kitchens and restaurants, are often used as hideouts throughout gangster media, cementing the connection between gangsters and food with the act of communal eating in such places further supporting the notion of the gang as a family (Santos, 2004, p. 210-211).

The gangster genre is also very dependent on the geographic and ethnic origin of its source. Gangster films from different countries and regions can focus on and explore very different themes and feature radically different characters. For example, themes commonly highlighted in East-Asian gangster media are loyalty and betrayal, brotherhood, power of seniority, honour, corporate structure, modernism versus traditionalism, and male dominance. East-Asian gangster media also has a tendency to be extremely violent and gory. All of these factors translate over to video game structural and gameplay mechanics. Games like the Japanese *Yakuza* series, while often having cartoonish levels of violence, mainly focus on the social and melodramatic elements of gangsters' lives and relationships (Gallagher, 1999, p. 200), with long sections more focused on world-building and role-play mechanics intercut with said high-action violence. Between its car chases and knife fights, *Sleeping Dogs* allows the player to take a break and eat some street food or get a massage, activities which offer temporary stat-boosts, since these activities make their character "feel good." This also helps with world building by earning gameplay benefits from activities that are commonly seen as background activities in gangster films during the course of the story, further helping to encourage the player to play in a more narratively cinematic way, with quiet periods between scripted action sequences.

While the *Grand Theft Auto* games and *Mafia II* both depict fictionalised and amalgamated, generic versions of American cities, *Sleeping Dogs* does a relatively accurate job of portraying the real city of Hong Kong. Unlike a film that has the benefit of being shot on location, a game has to create its setting from scratch, and *Sleeping Dogs* succeeds in capturing Hong Kong's bustling city streets, expansive network of back alleyways, and lively and crowded night markets. *Infernal Affairs* mainly takes place in the upper-class areas of Hong Kong, and while the early sections of *Sleeping Dogs* are mainly located in the market slums, the player does explore the whole island throughout the game and eventually works their way up to the same high-class district. However, while the gangsters enjoy spending their time in these upper-class areas, almost all of their business is conducted near the docks, illustrating that while they may have power and reach, they do not have enough influence over government authorities to conduct illegal business openly in the overworld and are instead limited to dealing in the underworld. Both mediums do a good job of bringing Hong Kong, and its deep gangster presence, to life on screen. The water and harbours of Hong Kong are featured in both *Infernal Affairs* and *Sleeping Dogs* and smuggling is one of the gangs' primary ventures in both stories, which makes perfect use of the environment. Since Hong Kong is an island and port city, smuggling is rampant so of course the local triads would be involved, along with human trafficking, which is featured more in *Sleeping Dogs*. In *New World*, the criminal organization has a branch in China that is responsible for smuggling, human trafficking, and dealing in bootleg products. This is also depicted in *Sleeping Dogs* as the sale and distribution of counterfeit watches is a focus of the missions that feature Jackie Ma (Edison Chen).

While *Infernal Affairs* and *New World* show viewers gangsters living in Hong Kong and East Asia in general, *Sleeping Dogs* lets players vicariously experience it through Wei, down to the small details, like driving on the left side of the road, having to pay high prices for goods, as the Hong Kong Dollar has a low value, as well as participating in minigames like betting on cockfights, and even singing Karaoke. These types of minigames serve a similar, albeit less explicit, function to the prostitution mechanics in *Grand Theft Auto*, allowing the player to feel like they are immersed in the gangster lifestyle. In a film, these types of activities would often be featured in scenes that depict the quality of the gangster's lifestyle or as background action in exposition-focused scenes in order to facilitate more interesting on-screen visuals than just always having groups of gangsters sitting around talking.

Figure 53 (left): The player can, at any time, seek out and hire a prostitute in *Grand Theft Auto V*.
Figure 54 (right): In *Sleeping Dogs*, the player can choose to participate in other, less action-focused, aspects of the gangster lifestyle, such as betting on illegal cock fights.

An important part of the gangster genre is its use as social commentary. As an audience, the viewer is not necessarily supposed to identify with the gangster, but rather is supposed to be shocked by him and question how a civil society could allow such a character to even be formed. Watching a film allows for this much more reflective viewing experience as the audience is not directly involved in the action, but instead experiences it voyeuristically. This more focused viewing allows for greater clarity when reflecting on the themes of the film post-viewing. When playing a game like *Sleeping Dogs* though, it is easy for the player to get caught up in the immersion of gameplay and not think about the social commentary present in the game (Khaled, 2018, p. 8). *Sleeping Dogs* can also be rather tone-deaf in its delivery of commentary, such as how it can be difficult to take Tiffany's comments criticizing rampant misogynistic hypocrisy seriously when the game also deliberately sexualizes almost every female character.

Even though *Sleeping Dogs*, like many games and films, relies on clichés and stereotypes in its storytelling, the game does excel at representing many aspects of Hong Kong's society and culture. The game's streets are filled with vendors who will aggressively call out to Wei anytime the player comes near them, serving as a seemingly authentic way of establishing the atmosphere of the bustling, vendor filled streets of Hong Kong. Additionally, the streets of *Sleeping Dogs* are populated by far more NPCs than would typically be seen in other games, like *Mafia II* or *Grand Theft Auto IV*, that were released around the same time. The game also includes many accurate references to Chinese culture and superstition. A large portion of the in-game dialogue is spoken in Cantonese, with English subtitles, giving some authenticity to the geographic setting of the game; although, many less important examples of Cantonese dialogue, such as civilians yelling at

Wei for unsafe driving, are not subtitled. By having an Asian protagonist like Wei that is well written and, in most cases, acts like a realistic person instead of a walking caricature, the game does a good job of bringing some ethnic representation to the screen in a way that feels organic and not forced and helps break the circular game development pattern of white developers making white oriented games for white gamers as described by Anna Anthropy in *The Problem With Videogames* (2012, 8-9). Innumerable small details like the traditional shrines Wei prays at to increase his maximum health, the red money envelopes hidden throughout the game-world, and the casual references to the 1997 handover all help to make the world feel authentic, if perhaps not

Figure 55 (left): Wei can pray at shrines located throughout the world of *Sleeping Dogs* to increase his maximum health points.
Figure 56 (right): The crowded and bustling streets of *Sleeping Dog's* Night Market which attempts to re-create the atmosphere of a Hong Kong shopping district.

totally accurate to its real-world equivalent. Late in the game when Wei breaks into Howard "Two Chin" Tsao's (Conan Lee) house, he commits various acts of property damage, but also a few specific actions related to the number four, as in Cantonese the word four is *sei* which is similar to the word *séi*, meaning death, and since the two words sound alike, the number four is considered very unlucky in Chinese culture. Most players, especially westerners, likely would not immediately recognize this cultural reference and so the game explicitly but rather awkwardly explains it through in-game dialogue. It is these kinds of details that elevate *Sleeping Dogs* from being a generic gangster story with a Hong Kong facade, to a story that really feels like it is about gangsters living and dying on the streets of the city. It allows the game to truly be comparable to a film like *Infernal Affairs* which was actually produced in Hong Kong.

The fact that the gangster genre originated in the audio/visual medium of film makes it rather unsurprising that the genre translates well for video game adaptations. The genre's character-focused nature is perhaps its biggest advantage, as video game narratives are almost always character driven regardless of their thematic genre. Additionally, the gangster genre is very often hybridised with the action genre which, as explored previously in Chapter 3, is also a natural fit for video games. Although, gangster narratives do not consist purely of action, and also include complex and often dialogue rich narratives, something that could only be achieved by video games after more cinematic potential appeared with the sixth console generation in the early 2000's. Games like *Sleeping Dogs* are able to contain almost all of the same themes and key elements of the gangster genre that are found in thematically similar films like *Infernal Affairs* and *New World*, while managing to also capture the essence of their visual aesthetic. Gangster games are able to present much of the same social commentary the genre is known for, but whether this reaches and

resonates with players is almost entirely up to their play style and level of immersion. Even the less action-oriented aspects of the gangster's life, such as partying and gambling, which in film serve as opportunities for non-violent scenes of intrigue and tension, also make for interesting minigames or side-missions in games that can help break up the monotony of a gameplay-loop. The gangster genre, through its often ill-fated portrayal of the gangster, is intended to demonstrate to audiences the consequences of self-serving and anti-social behaviour, and this is the case with both films and video games. While films may show audiences how the gangster is often surrounded by wealth and luxury, and games allow the player to vicariously enjoy living the gangster's exciting and action-packed life, both mediums generally ensure that the viewer/player is left with an overall negative opinion of the gangster, with no interest or intent on emulating them.

Conclusion

In May of 2024, the seventy-seventh annual Cannes Film Festival was held, and for the first time, the Festival included an Immersive Competition featuring interactive films presented through virtual and augmented reality. The Festival's official website proclaims this to be "a new era for film" (Durand, 2024, web), a statement I wholeheartedly agree with. The same webpage describes how these interactive films allow viewers to become "active participants" within the works themselves (Durand, 2024, web). This notion of the active participant is seemingly functionally identical to what I described as the active viewer in Chapter 2. This recognition of the interactive film format at a festival as prestigious and influential as Cannes is a significant step towards a wider acceptance of interactive film as being a valid form of cinema, but also acts to illustrate just how close films and video games have become as both industries utilize increasingly complex and similar technologies in their productions. Some of the interactive films screened at Cannes were comprised of a mixture of live action performances and CGI animation. One such example is the film *Colored* (*Noire)* (Giraud & Foenkinos, 2023), depicting the experiences of African Americans during segregation and featuring animated sequences easily mistakable for moments of video game gameplay. Although, in the case of *Colored*, there is still a degree of uncertainty in regard to classifying the work's medium. *Colored* was previously showcased at the 2023 Tribeca Film Festival and is also slated for presentation at the upcoming BFI London Film Festival 2024, and on the official websites of both these festivals as well as Cannes', *Colored* is referred to as an "augmented reality installation" rather than a film. However, the fact remains that the exhibition of a work like *Colored* at film festivals speaks volumes for the acceptance of interactive works being recognized as a form of cinema. Additionally, while not referred to as such in the Cannes program, the nature of *Colored*'s subject matter also means it could be classified as an i-doc, similar to other works like *The Book of Distance*. I mention this event here as it serves to illustrate that, even during the writing of this thesis, the gap between films and video games continues to narrow.


The animated visuals of the interactive film *Colored* (figure 57 (left)) appear very similar to video games such as *L.A. Noire* (Team Bondi, 2011) (figure 58 (right)).

Through analysing genre theory, conventions, and specific examples of films and AAA video games, I believe this thesis has demonstrated that cinemafication is a real, and observable

phenomena, but in addition to that, video games have, while not to the same degree, also influenced the direction of the film industry. Video games have long included elements of film logic to justify additional explosions and mayhem, but it could be said that the destruction depicted in some modern action films is rather video game-esque, as many film viewers' only outside exposure to things like firearms are from playing shooter games and they therefore expect guns in films to act like guns in games. Cinemafication is a more complex concept than simply stating that modern video games look like films. While many modern games boast near photo-realistic graphics, this is only one of the numerous ways in which games have evolved over the last forty years to be more cinematic. The same leaps in computer technology that allow for higher fidelity visuals have also made it possible for games to be grander in scale and more complex, which in turn has granted more room for intricate and emotional narratives and characters, characters now capable of performing both technically and visually spectacular actions at the command of the player. While some games may lean more heavily toward their narratives rather than their gameplay, cinemafication does not rely on a game functionally playing in a manner resembling watching a film as that would lessen what makes the medium unique, instead it is the result of the younger medium of games adopting provenly effective elements from the much older medium of film. The cinemafication of games means that games not only look, but feel more like films, which culminates in being able to describe the act of playing a game as being a cinematic experience in and of itself, including its gameplay, cut-scenes and everything in between.

Though interactivity is often described as the key difference between films and games, it is the stance of this thesis that this is not inherently the case. While it is undisputable that video games are a far more interactive medium, this thesis has provided many examples of interactivity being utilized by film in ways that do not jeopardize the works' filmic nature. While both film and video games can use interactivity to allow for viewers/players to manipulate the trajectory of a narrative, games must include interactivity so that players can experience a game's ludic elements. While ludic elements may be the defining feature of a game, if the player is unable to interact with them, the experience of consuming a game would in fact more closely resemble watching a film. This becomes most apparent when analyzing the scenario of watching someone else play. The person playing the game is a player and the game's ludic elements are being actively interacted with and experienced, but the person watching, whether online or in the room, is a viewer, and while the game being viewed becomes no less of a game, the viewer is not actively interacting with the game's ludic elements, and therefore the game and the player combine to become a show that the viewer is able to watch in the same way they would a film.

Through examining both the action and gangster genres, it appears that the influence of medium on genre can, at times, be rather minimal. Many generic conventions remain consistent between the two mediums which also seem to share many common narrative patterns and tropes. The largest impact medium has on genre is seen in the elements of narrative structure and convention parameters. Medium affects how a work is consumed and therefore the way in which the work must be designed, and these formic differences determine how a narrative can be presented. The more dynamic, player-manipulated nature of game narratives creates opportunities for storytelling techniques that are simply not possible in films. In contrast, the predetermined nature of films allows writers to have more control over the course of a narrative and thereby they are able to carefully craft and mold every narrative detail. While both mediums may feature similar

stories with similar messages, these differences in consumption grant them both unique opportunities to emotionally affect viewers/players. Being so different does also mean that not all genres can be universally applied. I believe that this thesis has demonstrated the necessity and effectiveness of distinguishing between technical and thematic genres when discussing video game genres. Not only does this allow for an easier comparison to film genres, but this structure allows for a higher degree of clarity when defining the important elements of an individual game. By separating the medium-specific technical genres from the more universal thematic genres, it has become clear which specific ludic elements are most important when trying to recognize repeated gameplay characteristics that can be classified as genre conventions, with those ludic elements being: activity, objective, gameplay, and perspective. By combining all of these factors that may be observable within a video game, in combination with any thematic genre present in the game's narrative, if any, it should be possible to create a clear and accurate description of almost any game. The primary purpose of genre is to help consistently separate works into related groups so that audiences can more easily find similar works to consume, works can be more accurately and concisely archived, and patterns and trends can be better observed, and I believe that the methodologies presented in this thesis regarding video game genres help to further this endeavor.

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