

Material for **The Secret of Monkey Island** film adaptation

Intentions

The choice to write an outline and a script for a feature film with a story adapted from a 1990 video game comes from the privileged point of view offered by the task. As Ryan (2004) states, “since media present themselves only through individual texts, the problem of passing from observations gathered from the text to principles that describe the medium as a whole is one of the greatest challenges of media studies”.

And also for film studies as well, as Dudley Andrew (quoted in Leitch, 2003) did in his call for the integration of adaptation study, where he reminds us that the distinctive feature of the adaptation, “the matching of the cinematic sign system to prior achievement in some other system, can be shown to be distinctive of all representational cinema.”

A benefit felt also by Dancyger and Rush (1995), who state that “to disregard other forms of writing or to view scriptwriting as an exclusive art form is to cut yourself from a large cultural community with which you have more in common than you might realize.”

Adaptations

Regarding the process of adaptation, Hutcheon (2006) stresses the importance of the “conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing” and, she continues, “as if this were not complex enough, the context in which we experience the adaptation -cultural, social, historical- is another important factor in the meaning and significance we grant to this ubiquitous palimpsestic form.”

Some films in the recent times were based on video games characters and stories,¹ but, as Leitch (2007) states, “so far [...] neither reviewers nor theorists have developed a way of talking about postliterary adaptations that has progressed much beyond sarcasm or outrage.”

¹ wikipedia.org *List of films based on video games*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_films_based_on_video_games#International Accessed on Nov. 14, 2012

The lowly appreciated products of adaptation from video games probably had a bad influence on the discourse, possibly at every level (theory, fan, professional).

Games theory

On the other hand, considering for example the experience of video games on the neurological level, the explanation behind the mental experiences during the fruition of this medium is not simple, and as the cognitive researcher Daphne Bavelier said, “even within video games [...], different video games have a different effect on your brains. So we actually need to step into the lab and really measure what is the effect of each video game.”² The discussion on the different degree of engagement in film and video games would then benefit from a more comprehensive outlook into the same medium.

Therefore, lacking a more appropriate cognitive research we might take a closer look at the gameplay genre of the game, i.e. the specific way in which players interact, in this case the (graphical) adventure game, which is normally perceived by players as the most narrative-driven gameplay genre alongside the text adventure game.

Narrative in the game

As Black (2012) states, “many graphical adventure games, and particularly those produced for the SCUMM engine by LucasArts, were praised by reviewers and remembered by players for the narratives presented to them on-screen as much as, if not more than, any narrativized account of gameplay. In particular, Gilbert's *The Secret of Monkey Island* is a comedic pirate adventure noteworthy for its parody of other games.”

If we would ask a player about the story in this game then the answer would be strikingly similar to the *walkthrough*, which serves to the player to remove narrative obstacles, foretelling the game's ideal story depending on the levels of interactivity and openness (which are generally really are lower in this game and genre than in other games).

As Lindley (2004) states, “linear and interactive narratives form the highest level of pre-designed

² Talks TEDx - *Daphne Bavelier: Your brain on video games*
http://www.ted.com/talks/daphne_bavelier_your_brain_on_video_games.html Accessed on Nov. 17, 2012

time structure, framing low-level simulation processes and intermediate level game moves within a high level structure typically based upon classic models of narrative form.”

There is a single protagonist, the goals (of character/player) are clear: he wants to be a pirate and to begin the *adventure* he has to pass three trials as ordered by the pirate leaders. Even if at first those goals seems to be better understood within what Aarseth (2004) calls *quest narrative*, the reason behind these character/player actions and characterizations in this game are actually better viewed if framed into the comedy genre, something very clear for those who played.

Knowing the audience: two opposite ideas

Which audience should be better considered then, in this process?

The idea of recreating the experience of the player in a different medium as it was lived, nuancing proper elements of genres already present in the game, would may be preferable considering the fans of the game and it would retain for example the initial three trials mentioned before. Hutcheon (2006) reminds us that “when a film [...] announces itself as an adaptation of a particular work, those who like that work turn out for the adaptation, often to discover that only the name remains and there is little resemblance to anything treasured and thus expected.”

The other idea revolves instead around adding backstories, completely changing the plot or forcing characterizations which don't recall the originals, focusing mostly on the film stylistic coding (which in the game was limited by the budget and by the historical/technological constraints of the medium).

The choices made in this adaptation will instead highlight the importance of the reasons of the appreciation from the original audience (an interactive audience, as described by Jenkins (2002)) but at the same time focusing on the perceived consistency needed for a film adaptation.

Working in-between with film theory

The stress on the player experience though, is not important only for the loss of interactivity or for the mistified equivalence in the experiences, since it would be considered as “medium blindness”, a concept proposed by Hausken (2004) delineating a perspective which neglects the significance of the nature of the medium for a comprehension of the object of analysis. At the same time, the concept of “text blindness”, i.e. neglecting the “features of the object of analysis that involve textual conditions” (a “blindness” considered by Hausken especially when reviewing theories on the so-called new media), comes to mind when thinking about privileging the second idea.

Therefore, the decision to submerge the trials in the plot seems in any case inevitable in the film adaptation, which tentatively tries to bridge the gap between the different audiences and media involved. In this sense, instead of parodying video games as in the game, here the focus would be on video game adaptations (for example in the prologue) and at the same time other films and the film itself (as when Mancomb explains the *new* difference between pirates of the Caribbean and buccaneers, not stressed in the outline for the sake of clarity).

Bringing the matter into film theory, the answers to the questions proposed for the analysis of narrative films by Kaes and Rentschler (2006) would then serve as a starting point, a blueprint upon which a construction of a film would highlight the strengths and the faults of the elements taken into consideration (walkthrough,³ gamescript,⁴ playing, watching longplay,⁵ fan creations etc) as they would be experienced by the *dual* audience (or triple considering also players who don't like the game or the genre).

So on one hand there are the people who know the story and played the game, who would be interested in how the game and the narrative experience are rendered in a film, in the fidelity or in the care for maybe not vital details (e.g. establishing shots from camera angles of the game, similar pro-filmic to some extent); on the other there are those who don't, who would instead find clarity in first instance or at least an understandable and compelling story without obscure references and character identification. Even if someone considered the characters in the game as “flat”, the adaptation process itself would give the possibility to “round” them.

3 Christensen *Monkey Island 1 walkthrough* <http://www.worldofmi.com/gamehelp/walk/monkey1.php> Accessed on Nov. 15, 2012

4 Rahman (2003) *The Secret of Monkey Island Game Script* <http://www.gamefaqs.com/pc/562681-the-secret-of-monkey-island/faqs/23891> Accessed on Nov. 15, 2012

5 Amiga Longplay [021] *The Secret Of Monkey Island* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFPFFZs5m_w Accessed on Nov. 15, 2012

Structure and genres

In the outline then are reflected both the screenwriting advices by Dancyger and Rush and at the same time the theoretical frameworks around genres and audience engagement, as it will be clear.

The ironic four-act structure replicates the four parts plus prologue of the game, which starts from the old man scene.⁶ Marked by the flights of the protagonist, since a serious engagement is relaxed "due to a manifest absurdity of the grounds for concern" (Olson, quoted in King, 2002), the intended genre would not be fixed, but it would be a mixture containing foremost a combination of the two different conceptions of comedy. As King (2002) explains, "comedy in the sense of laughter, anarchy and disruption of harmony, and comedy in the sense of a movement *towards* harmony, integration and the happy ending."

As Chandler (1997) points out, "some genres are 'looser' - more open-ended in their conventions or more permeable in their boundaries - than others. Texts often exhibit the conventions of more than one genre." Moreover, "if we are studying the way in which genre frames the reader's interpretation of a text then we would do well to focus on how readers identify genres rather than on theoretical distinctions."

So if comedy should be seen as the prototypical genre (Swales, cited in Chandler, 1997), for the general surreality of the situations, the parody, the anachronisms in the *mise-en-scène*, the dialogue and the slapstick, there will be also elements of adventure genre, for the presence and the defeat of the (only legendary evil?) antagonist in order to save the (really in distress?) loved one (romantic genre) while going through a dramatic (though not definitive) coming-of-age change as explained in the outline.

As Horton (2000) states, "simply to pronounce the word 'comedy' creates an expectation of laughing out loud. And yet no comedy ever written or performed consists of nonstop laughter from start to finish. The degree to which you wish to blend the worlds of the comic and the emotional is yours to chose, having to do with your overall concept of what you wish to create for yourself and for your audience."

⁶ In the script the yellow highlight is for quotations from the game, while the green highlight is for paraphrases.

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