The Cinematisation of Computer and Console Games

Aesthetic and Commercial Convergence in the Film and Game Industries

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Abstract

This thesis examines the growing trend of cinematisation in computer and console games, where both visual styles and industrial practices are concerned. The ever-increasing runtime of cinematic cutscenes in games, and the stylization of game graphics in accordance with established film genres are of primary focus regarding the gaming industry's absorption and interpretation of cinematic visuals. Comparisons of film-game convergence are based on the proliferation of non-gameplay promotional trailers and their role in hype-generation; as well as game producer strategies of franchising, cross-promotion, and initial-sales business model. Comparison is thus accomplished with regards to a number of fundamental similarities in both industries' business and commercial tactics, as stemming from the risk and reward-based investment financing system prevalent in both industries. Finally, a selection of user and industry professional video responses to the aforementioned trends are examined, both for their value in counter-balancing the assumptions of success which often follow staggeringly high initial sales figures; and for their value in layering the depth of film-game convergence even further, as they respond to the recent, filmic trends in games using the very language of film.

Keywords
Games, film, convergence, game industry, film industry, game developers, game publishers, pre-release, hype, marketing, franchising, promotional, trailers, risk and reward, hardcore, mainstream, aesthetic, cut-scenes, cinematic, transitional chasm, EA, Activision, BioWare, CD Projekt, Call of Duty, Dark Souls.
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Introduction

"Why academia has not given more consideration to an industry that has a revenue-generating capacity that rivals film and music remains anyone’s guess. We suspect it has something to do with a reluctance to investigate a medium that is often considered juvenile."

- “Innovation and Marketing in the Video Game Industry,” Gloria Barczak and David Wesley

Games contain film, not only by virtue of the fact that they constantly display animation, but for several years now, computer and console games have commonly contained full-blown cinematic sequences during which little or no gameplay is possible. The practice of announcing and promoting unreleased games still in development by way of cinematic trailers is now commonplace within the game industry. Actual gameplay moments and even entire game designs can be influenced by camera, lighting, and setting techniques attributed to the style of a specific film or film genre. User recordings of game footage increasingly proliferate on YouTube and other video-sharing networks, whether they intend to impress viewers with a display of gameplay skills, provide assistance as a walkthrough, or critically examine the merits of a production from a certain standpoint. Video game reviews, parodies, web series, developer journals, and esports tournament casts abound, combining the discussion of games and gaming with the language of film. Business-wise, the game industry increasingly seems to be turning to certain film-industrial practices where franchising, hype-generation, cross-promotional advertising, and audience-imaging are concerned. Previous studies of game-film media convergence by film scholars have often been anchored in the discussion of cash-in games released as film franchise extensions, thereby ignoring what I argue to be the more basic game-film connection, and the growing trend of cinematisation in the game industry. I argue there are notable stylistic, narratological, and commercial similarities which constitute a deeper connection between these two industries than the film-industrial practice of producing games bearing film licenses in the hopes of extending franchise profits into another medium. Rather than examine film franchise games or game franchise movies, I propose that the practice of franchising in itself provides a link between the two media, in which risk-versus-reward investment financing and industrial consolidation play a large role.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I discuss the cinematisation of computer and console game visuals and narratology by means of cinematic cutscenes, which in recent years possess runtimes near or
equal to that of feature films; as well as aspects of cinematic design embedded in the most popular recent game titles. The following chapter explores how the risk-versus-reward investment financing system in both film and game industries may account for some of the business-industrial links between the two, with special focus on franchising, advertising, and initial-sales models. The final chapter explores a selection of videos created by gamers and game industry professionals as critical responses to game-film convergence, discussed against the background of academically-defined audience-imaging terms, commonly used among both game communities and the marketing divisions of game producers and developers alike.

The thesis’ methodology is somewhat interdisciplinary in approach, referencing terms relevant to media studies from the fields of business and economics when applicable. Quantitative data obtained from previous studies, reports, and journalistic sources is presented in the form of sales figures, revenue, projections, survey data, and so forth. At times, data reported from previous studies is challenged for relevance or assumptive conclusions, and the sources behind all stated figures will be clearly defined. Monetary sums cited are understood to be measured in US Dollars, unless otherwise stated. Theories and data from previous studies relating to games and film are re-examined from new and different angles; and at times re-employed to what I argue constitute relevant areas of application. More qualitative data is also taken into consideration, particularly in the form of reception studies examining audience (more accurately, gamer) responses to the trends discussed in the first two chapters of the thesis. These focus largely on videos created by gamers as a means of articulating and circulating criticism against certain trends within the game industry. Reviews and statistical data in the form of user ratings on well-known sites such as Metacritic are referenced, though not without an examination of the potential blind-spots of such information. Though I was unable to conduct my own production-worker interview with a game developer, I imbed, analyze, and discuss a selection of pertinent interviews from journalistic sources.

As a rule of thumb, the thesis investigates and theorizes upon specific trends within commercial and aesthetic strategies in the film and game industries, resembling smaller sets of case studies in form. Various methods are employed in order to facilitate the analysis of the cinematisation of games, from statistical analysis to the examination of user-made art. It is not my intention to deliver sweeping statements or to make generalizations about two very complex and faceted industrial systems, but rather to examine the instances where I believe they intersect.
The extent to which the games of today incorporate cinematic techniques in presentation and style is remarkable. One would be hard-pressed to find a top-selling game on today's market which included neither in-game cinematic cutscenes, nor announced production by way of promotional, pre-release cinematic trailers. Not only do computer and console games contain animated film footage, making use of cinematographic techniques for narration and establishing mood; they furthermore incorporate filmic styles during actual gameplay moments in a variety of ways, at times attempting to smooth the disjunction between viewing and playing. The 2011, Microsoft-published title *Gears of War 3*, which sold over 3 million units during its first week of release, contains 90 minutes of cutscenes – that is, animated cinematics sequences during which little or no gameplay is possible. The popular hack-and-slash 2010 title *God of War III* contains almost two hours of cutscenes. Capcom's *Resident Evil 5* (2009), having sold over 5.6 million units as of September 2011, contains 80 minutes of cinematic cutscenes. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011), which brought in over $775 million in game sales within the first five days of its release, contains one hour of cinematic cutscenes; as do two other 2011 releases: Naughty Dog's *Uncharted 3* which sold 3.8 million units during its first week at retail, and DICE's *Battlefield 3*, which sold over 3 million units during pre-order. The popular 2008 title *Grand Theft Auto IV* by Rockstar

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Games, which had by September 2011 reportedly shipped over 22 million copies,\textsuperscript{6} contains over 45 minutes of cinematic sequences.

In all of the above examples, cinematics are displayed both as introductions to the game before any actual gameplay begins; as conclusions at the end of the game; and throughout the game's plot, which is progressed by means of gameplay. Whether they are pre-rendered sequences or sequences rendered in real-time using the game's actual engine,\textsuperscript{7} these cutscenes are alternated with gameplay as narratological and mood-establishing elements. While most games generally opt for either pre-rendered or machinima,\textsuperscript{8} some popular titles include both, such as the 2010 releases, Blizzard's \textit{Starcraft II} and Bungie's \textit{Halo: Reach}.

Different developers relate differently to the task of meshing cinematic cutscenes with gameplay. Some games have a markedly different set of in-game visuals contra any cutscenes displayed throughout the game, such as \textit{Starcraft II}, which is an isometric, Real-time Strategy during gameplay but contains a few short, pre-rendered cinematics, in addition to machinima cutscenes presented in yet a third visual style, available only in the single player campaign. Many other recent releases, however, attempt to bridge the gap between in-game, real-time renders and cinematic cutscenes. Titles such as \textit{Mirror's Edge}, \textit{The Witcher 2}, the \textit{Mass Effect} series, the \textit{Uncharted} series, and \textit{Battlefield 3} make use of very minimalistic user interfaces and high-end (at the time of release) graphics and hardware requirements, so that in-game renders are of high enough quality that they may also be used for the production of impressive cinematics. Some titles, such as DICE's \textit{Battlefield 3} or Santa Monica Studio's \textit{God of War III}, use high levels of visual realism and performance-heavy graphics as an advertising point by releasing promotional trailers displaying actual in-game footage (real-time game engine footage) near the same level of production quality as pre-rendered cinematic footage common in promotional game trailers. This should be seen as


\textsuperscript{7} A game engine is the system with which a game is programmed and developed. "Loading, displaying, and animating models [a rendering engine], collision detection between objects, physics, input, graphical user interfaces, and even portions of a game's artificial intelligence can all be components that make up the engine." Source: Jeff Ward, GameCareerGuide.com [See References for full citation.]

\textsuperscript{8} Computer programs "render" images from the mathematical representation of a three-dimensional object, known as "models." Cinematic sequences that use real-time computer graphics rendering are known as machinima productions. Pre-rendered footage, such as the computer effects used in film, are not rendered by the hardware device providing playback. Real-time rendered footage, by contrast, is being actively rendered by computer or console hardware, such as a graphics processing unit (graphics card) which all computers possess.
positive trend, as many game producers hire independent animation studios or create their own in order to produce cinematic trailers to advertise for a game, which, as will be discussed in the following chapter, may bear absolutely no relationship to the actual gameplay.

Games may also attempt to mesh real-time rendered cutscenes with actual gameplay by making them require some user input, such as during dialogue moments where players can select various conversational responses or questions; or through the use of quick-time events, which will be discussed in a later chapter. Still other games employ the use of cinematic cutscenes not for the purpose of plot progression, but to help set the mood and tone of the game in an introductory sequence, such as in the 2009 dark horror RPG, *Demon's Souls*.

The use of cinematic cutscenes in games is not an entirely recent trend. *PacMan*, released 1980, can be considered the first game to include cutscenes, where a short clip of *PacMan* being chased by ghosts, only to eat a cherry and turn to chase them instead, would play between levels. Interestingly, the slapstick-style, situational humour of the *PacMan* cutscenes rather likens the style of many popular shorts from the silent era of film. With the advent of CD-roms in the early to mid 1990's came a wave of live-action recordings being used as cutscenes in games, as an alternative to pre-rendered, computer animated footage, which was also available at the time. In live-action cutscenes, footage of actors filmed with a camera would be played, at notably reduced quality, at various stages of the game's plot, such as between missions in Westwood Studios' *Command and Conquer: Red Alert* (1996) or the EA-published *Wing Commander IV* (1995). Although the inclusion of live-action film footage was quickly rejected in favour of full 3D graphics and improved rendering, the concept of a game-cinema tie-over was by no means lost. While games no longer possess pre-recorded, live-action film footage in such direct form, the use of motion-capture in order to facilitate life-like in-game animations and interactions, during both cutscenes and gameplay moments, has become increasingly common among those publishers who can afford the technology. Rockstar Games, for example, went so far as to implement their own “MotionScan” system in their 2011 title *L.A. Noire* order to motion-capture minute changes in facial expression, so that they might be rendered in-game at a high level of realism. In a promotional pre-release video uploaded by developer Rockstar Games on their website as well as YouTube channel, head of Research and Development Oliver Bao and Writer and Director Brendan McNamara describe the set-up of their facial motion capture technology, which involved multiple cameras recording

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simultaneously at various angles to the actor's face.\(^\text{10}\)

What is important to note here is the level of complication, effort and expense involved in the transformation of recorded film footage to rendered graphics, all done to maintain the aesthetics typically associated with games for player immersion. That is, the actual filming of these scenarios is only the preliminary step in the creation of in-game graphics, done with the intention of producing, in the case of \textit{L.A. Noire}, an experience of active participation in a classic, detective film noir both from and set in the 1950's.

Since the 90's, games have continued to cinematicize their gameplay with continually improved rendering, texturing, and modelling, as well as the now wide-spread use of voice-acting, motion-capture, and even in-game camerawork; whereby a functional camera is often programmed into the game during development, complete with lens glare and splatter effects so that precipitation, blood or fluid sprayed towards the player character will result in visuals mimicking the interaction of various substances on a camera lens. The programming of an in-game camera further allows for a full array of physical camera techniques, such as zoom-ins, close-ups, panning, depth of field effects, shot-reverse-shot, low-angle shots, and so forth, to be employed in in-game conversations and cutscenes, interactive or otherwise.

Modern games relate to film and cinematic styles in a variety of ways. “The dominant camera of videogames,” notes film scholar Will Brooker, “is far closer to that of art cinema than to mainstream Hollywood. The videogame’s vision of ‘reality’ is Bazinian, not Eisensteinian. As cinema, the videogame would be not youthful rebellion, but the mature challenge of the avant-garde.”\(^\text{11}\) While this is both flattering and certainly true of the camera during gameplay, Brooker neglects to discuss the cinematography employed in actual film sequences in games. Depending on their genre, games vary vastly in visuals, gameplay mechanics, length, difficulty, and target-audience. Furthermore, different games may blend and borrow presentational styles established within specific film genres. Cutscenes in action-adventure games borrow from cinematography prevalent in action and adventure films, of which \textit{Uncharted 3} is a good example. Games with crime-based plots, such as the popular, highly grossing \textit{Grand Theft Auto} franchise, sometimes borrow story elements as well as cinematographic styles from popular crime films; for example, the


2002 title *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, set in Miami in the 1980's, was noted for its similarity to *Scarface* (1983) and the television series, *Miami Vice* (1984-1989). First Person Shooters may employ camera and editing styles common in war and action films, as is the case with the *Gears of War* and *Halo* series. Some games incorporate film genre styles in the actual presentation of gameplay as well as during cinematic sequences, such as with the 2010 western adventure game, *Red Dead Redemption*. Film noir has recently become popular as a stylistic trend in game narratology and visual presentation, such as 2011 release *L.A. Noire* or the highly acclaimed, psychological thriller *Heavy Rain* from 2010. Even games from genres traditionally unrelated to film noir, such as BioWare's 2010 science fiction action role-playing game *Mass Effect 2*, mimic the visual style produced by camera techniques typical to film noir, and share some of the genre's most identifiable plot-points and themes, involving crime and crime-solving, police force and criminal relations, and femme fatales.

*Figure 1*: Low-key lighting through the blinds as typical of film noir in the science fiction RPG, *Mass Effect 2*. Screenshot taken by author during gameplay.

In his blog entry concerning use of cinematic design in BioWare's upcoming game, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, Lead Cinematic Designer Paul Marino asserts: “the cinematic presentation of narrative can turn the simplest event into a pivotal moment. It's this crafted layering of camerawork, performance, direction and gameplay that allows us to emotionally invest into the characters and the world around them.”

Though film scholars have been willing to devote entire books to the examination of games based

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on popular film franchises, film studies have by and large been oddly silent on the discussion of the cinematic cutscenes and visual styles employed by games; seemingly ignoring the fact that non-gameplay, animated cutscenes in games are by definition film sequences. While the trained skills, effort, and up to dozens of hours of gameplay input necessary to complete even one title might be seen as an obstacle to the study of film in games by film scholars, the majority of cinematic cutscenes and trailers for games can be viewed at any time on the websites of developers, producers, on game-centric websites, and YouTube. Like the audience favourite Red vs. Blue, user-made machinima productions using various game engines exist as popular webseries on video-sharing sites for original content, such as Blip.tv. Similarly, the increased popularity of “Let's Play” streams, where a player uploads a recording of or actively streams him- or herself playing a certain game, makes the viewing of game footage without actually playing it more accessible than ever before. The entire library of cinematic cutscenes for the games mentioned in this thesis are readily available for viewing on YouTube. A wide variety of film-game aesthetic convergence is hence accessible for study by any film scholar, often even completely free of charge.

Franchising, Advertising, and Consolidation:

Commercial Strategies in the Film and Game Industries

“The popularity of games continues. For a decade, total sales in the industry have rivalled similar figures from Hollywood box office revenues; presently, individual blockbuster introductions such as Grand Theft Auto IV in the first week, estimated $500 MM, now exceed box-office smashes such as Spider-Man 3 ($337 MM) and Pirates of the Caribbean ($309 MM)”

- “Paradigm Shifts in the Video Game Industry,” Peter Zackariasson, Timothy L. Wilson

Transmedia or intra-medium franchising?

The academic study of video and computer games in relation to film has often centered around paratexts, intertexts, and transmedia branding and franchising as forms of media convergence. Scholars are quick to reference similar lists of games produced as transmedia spin-offs to some of the film industry's biggest blockbuster hits – Star Wars, The Matrix, The Lord of the Rings, Pirates
of the Caribbean and so forth; thereby almost exclusively discussing games developed with the intention of capitalizing on the success of a lucrative film franchise. It is my belief, however, that there is a more systematic industrial convergence occurring; which, though perhaps not all-encompassing, has and continues to have significant influence on the game industry, to far greater extent than movie spin-off games (or game spin-off movies) have ever affected either film or gaming.

Films may be turning to game spin-offs and interactive social media to generate buzz, but for several years now, game producers have increasingly been turning to the film-industrial trend of cinematic trailers and pre-release hype to generate high initial and pre-order sales. It is my contention that as game industry revenues continue to accelerate, fundamental game production practices increasingly liken those of the film and television industry, including the proliferation of monolith conglomerates; risk versus reward, investment-based financing; hype-making and viral marketing strategies; intra-medium franchising; and the subsequent developer exploitation and hostile environment for independents which these practices produce.

Curiously, scholars appear to prefer the discussion of games bearing the same title as a recently released film, and owned by the license-holders of that intellectual property, regardless of how poorly these games may have (and more often then not, are) received, both critically and in terms of sales; or, equally curious, the discussion of the variety of flopped, low production-value films based on renowned game licenses. Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and other Media Paratexts* largely lumps the discussion of convergence regarding the film and game mediums into a chapter distressingly entitled, “In the World, Just Off Screen: Toys and Games.”

Not only are video and computer games an indisputably on-screen occurrence, their all-too-common association with children's toys is wholly unsubstantiated. In their 2011 annual study, the Entertainment Software Association (with such notable partners as the ESRB, the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences, the International Game Developers Association, NPD Group, and Video Game Voters Network), reports that the average age of a gamer in the United States is 37, with 29% of gamers over the age of 50. Only a minority of gamers, 18%, were found to be under the age of 18. Furthermore, despite the common misconception that gaming is a male-oriented pass-time (no doubt exacerbated by the unfortunate marketing practices of many game producers), women were found to constitute 48% of the most frequent game purchasers, with “women age 18

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or older representing a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (37%) than boys age 17 or younger (13%). Gray's book was published as late as 2010, when ESA data for the average gamer age was 34. Media scholars cannot in good conscience continue the trend of discussing games based upon what appear to be social and cultural biases and assumptions, while business statistics, surveys, and economic reports consistently disprove these game industry stereotypes. Despite his categorical oversights, Gray does identify a major problem with games created as spin-offs to successful film franchises:

Many of these have also been phenomenal failures, provoking the ire of film and television show fans and game players alike. ET, for instance, produced a game that to many remains a paragon of poor design and cynical product exploitation.  

Though there is a wide variety of more recent examples available, Gray is referring to a game released in 1983 for the Atari 2600, one of the first gaming consoles ever made. In *Hollywood Gamers*, another 2010 release, Robert Alan Brookey devotes a dozen or so pages to the convergence of industrial practices between the game and film mediums. However, the rest of the book proceeds to detail intertextual readings of a number of “Hollywood games:” movie spin-off games produced under film licenses.

Despite a few brief insights, the brunt of game discussion in a film-convergence context seems too often to be based upon products that were by and large quick licensing cash-ins, many of which resulted in critical and financial flops. *The Matrix Online*, one of the movie spin-off games most frequently referenced in discussions of media convergence, was a financial and gameplay disaster. After Ubisoft dropped production of the game, media conglomerate Warner Bros acquired the game's developer, Monolith Productions, and thus began their game publishing career. Warner Bros hoped to “benefit from a bit of cross-pollination between divisions of [their] parent company, globe spanning media empire Time Warner,” including involvement from AOL. Wide distribution networks, however, do not make for solid gameplay. In attempts to address severe gameplay issues and stem hemorrhaging server populations, ownership of *The Matrix Online* was passed first to

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15 Jonathan Gray (2010), *op. cit.*, 188.


18 Ibid.
Sega and then Sony Online Entertainment. These attempts ultimately failed, and game servers were permanently shut down due to lack of players. As a final humiliation, gaming communities recall the failure of what was meant to be a dramatic, in-game closing event before shutdown:

Due to a server glitch, large amounts of players were disconnected before the crushing. The whole event deteriorated into a massive mess [...]. The game became very unplayable, as framerate suffered from the advanced powers, and what was planned to be a last hurrah for the game, turned into a farce that summed up many of the problems that plagued the game since inception.

Media scholars have devoted several books to the paratextual discussion of movie spin-off games, but the amount of attention given to flopped games simply for their possession of a film franchise license seems odd, particularly when little or no mention is made of their sales figures, revenue, or critical or audience reception. Meanwhile, a variety of similarities between the game and film industries in regards to marketing, advertising, and other industrial practices seem to be escaping under the radar of academic study.

The fact of the matter is, neither of these paratextual or intertextual examples of media convergence, whether they be movie spin-off games or game spin-off movies, have been of particular importance to either the film or game industries: not in terms of revenue, critical reception, audience reception, popularity, or development value. Uwe Boll, likely the most well-known director of films based on game titles, is a cultural laughing stock, described by writers for papers such as The New York Times, Time Magazine, and Entertainment Weekly as “the worst director of all time.” One of Boll’s more recent films, “Dungeon Siege, a fantasy film based on a popular computer game, was released at a cost of $70 million, but produced only $3 million in box office receipts after being labeled one of the worst movies ever made.” The most recent Harry Potter film spin-off game, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 1, received all-round low reviews on a variety of entertainment websites, with IGN journalists scoring it as low as 2/10,
describing the gameplay as “painful.” Franchising a film into the game medium or a game into the film medium has yet to be a reliable or particularly successful critical or financial venture, especially when examined in comparison to the staggering figures game franchising solely within the game medium has consistently produced.

For example, the highly popular *MegaMan* series, developed and produced by Capcom, already had nine installments within the first ten years of its creation, between 1987 and 1997. In recent years, this serialization has escalated exponentially. Since 2001, Capcom has been releasing over 50 game titles per year, peaking with 110 titles released during 2009 alone. As of December 2010, the *MegaMan* game franchise had produced a staggering 128 titles, with over 21 million units sold. While the majority of the most popular *MegaMan* titles are platformers, a genre seemingly uncinematic in style, the series has a strong tradition of anime-style cutscenes playing as intros, endings, and between levels; used to inform the player of the plot and storyline progression. *Resident Evil*, another highly successful game franchise by Capcom, makes extensive use of pre-rendered, cinematic cutscenes as a means of in-game storytelling. The *Resident Evil* franchise saw its first title launch in 1996, and now boasts over 69 game titles, having sold over 45 million units worldwide. While many of these titles are understood to be re-releases or ports onto various consoles and platforms, including mobile phones, they still constitute total game franchise sales and, naturally, generate incredible revenue. For example, in 2009 Activision reported global figures of 55 million units sold in their *Call of Duty* game franchise, corresponding sales retail of over $3 billion. In November 2011, global game sales figures for the entire *Call of Duty* franchise exceeded $6 billion, making for a revenue increase of over $3 billion in just two years. *Mario*, at over 260 million game units sold and over 200 game titles produced to-date, rings in as the best-selling game franchise of all time. None of these figures include merchandising or the sales data

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27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.


30 Matt Martin, 17 November 2011, op. cit.
of other franchise-related products, such as comics, movies, TV shows, thematic hardware peripherals, figurines, posters, etc.

I do not mean to suggest that the comparatively low revenue figures of movie spin-off games make them unworthy of study. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the fact that the cinematic game need not be defined by its ties to a specific film license. The discussion of game-film convergence has thus far almost exclusively been done in terms of games as a form of extra income for film franchises, while often ignoring the increasingly substantial aesthetic and industrial links between these two industries. Media convergent games are not merely the bastard children of Hollywood blockbusters, film-franchise addenda or “added value” marketing ploys. With such selective academic focus on the the comparatively few games bearing film franchise licenses, we risk ignoring the larger scale film-game connection: the cinematic game connected by way of its visuals and presentational style to the cinematography of film, and through its business, production and advertising models to those of the film industry. While the practice of transmedia franchising between films and games has been largely unsuccessful, the vast profitability of intra-medium franchising itself forms an underlying industrial connection between film and game industries.

**Cinematic advertising**

Game advertising has exploded in the past few years. Industry giant Blizzard's ability to bring in famous film and television stars such as William Shatner, Mr. T, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Chuck Norris, and musician Ozzy Osbourne to express their appreciation for *World of Warcraft* in a series of internet meme-referencing TV commercials says much about the popularity and reach of games, but also of changing power structures and advertising tactics. The film and television industries may view video games as potential generators of added value to their own franchises, but game producers have increasingly been turning to the language of film and its advertising practices to increase game sales. One would be hard-pressed to find a successful game title released in the past few years which lacked a cinematic pre-release trailer – and, oftentimes, more than one, particularly when a game title is released on several platforms at staggered intervals. One of the best resources for browsing game trailers and cinematics, as well as user-created videos, is the aptly named broadcasting site, Gametrailers.com: a division of MTV networks.

Hype-generating pre-release information, such as cinematic trailers for games, is currently...
distributed not only across the plethora of popular, game-centric websites such as IGN and Gamespot, professional blogs such as Joystiq and Kotaku, and online magazines such as The Escapist or PC Gamer; but also through more traditional or non-specialized channels, such as broadcast television and YouTube. YouTube hits for game trailers commonly reach millions of views during pre-release advertising. *Grand Theft Auto IV*, first released for the PC, then PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 in 2008, earned what was then a record-setting sum of over $500 million in game sales within the first seven days of its release.\(^\text{32}\) In November 2011, another highly popular game franchise, *Call of Duty*, saw its title *Modern Warfare 3* rake in over $775 million in game sales within the first five days of its release.\(^\text{33}\) Over $400 million of those sales were reported within the first 24 hours of release, an event which Bobby Kotick, CEO at Activision Blizzard (of which *Call of Duty* producer Activision is a subsidiary) described as “the biggest entertainment launch of all time in any medium, and we achieved this record with sales from only two territories.”\(^\text{34}\) The reveal trailer for *Modern Warfare 3* had over 19 million views within the first day of its upload on *Call of Duty*'s official YouTube channel alone, six months before the game's release.\(^\text{35}\) Pre-release marketing for *Modern Warfare 3* was vast, including cross-promotional product-placement involving Doritos, Mountain Dew, car marque Jeep, and a variety of Microsoft peripherals; controversially even granting in-game experience boosts to those who retained the packaging of their PepsiCo purchases.

But buyer beware: game producers often hire independent animation studios or create their own in order to produce pre-rendered, promotion trailers which may bear absolutely no relationship to the actual gameplay of the game. For example, EA has hired animation studio Blur, the studio responsible for animating the space sequences in James Cameron's film *Avatar*, to produce three pre-release, promotional cinematic trailers for their upcoming, unreleased MMO, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*.\(^\text{36}\) The first of these was screened at E3 over two years ago in 2009, and has over 7 million views on YouTube to date; as does the second promotional cinematic created by Blur for *The Old Republic*. Blur's logo does not appear anywhere during these three trailers, so the viewer is in no way informed of the animation studio's involvement. As a form of advertising, pre-rendered


\(^{33}\)Matt Martin, 17 November 2011, *op. cit.*


cinematic trailers are a pre-release strategy which has the potential to generate hype without ever showing the actual content of a game, or any content created by the actual game developers. Pre-order sales for video and computer games have likewise been raking in increasingly high figures. In 2008, pre-orders for Gran Turismo 5 in Europe alone were near one million units.\(^{37}\) The following year, pre-orders for sequel Assassin's Creed 2 were up 80% on the original.\(^{38}\) Also in 2009, Europe-only pre-orders for the PlayStation 3 version of Killzone 2 exceeded one million units;\(^{39}\) and, more recently in 2011, pre-orders for Gears of War 3 likewise topped one million units for the Xbox 360.\(^{40}\) All of these titles had cinematic trailers presented as pre-release promotional reveals at E3, the Electronic Entertainment Expo trade fair.

The president of movie production company Sony Screen Gems Clint Culpepper once commented that “You can have the most terrific movie in the world, and if you can't convey that fact in fifteen- and thirty-second TV ads it's like having bad speakers on a great stereo.”\(^{41}\) While game trailers tend to run longer at a bare minimum of one minute, the importance of cinematic trailers seems highly comparable between film and game industries. Regarding the production of movie trailers, David Sameth, head of creative advertising at DreamWorks reported: “We'll spend five months to a year obsessing about them, every single cut and every single moment we use.”\(^{42}\) As the aforementioned pre-order and initial sales figures would indicate, trailers seem just as vital to the video game industry; and franchising seems to be the method of choice in bringing down advertising costs. Ben Feder, CEO at Grand Theft Auto publisher Take-Two, states, “At the end of the day, I’m a businessman, and our profitability speaks for itself. We do have the kind of ‘James Bond’ of the video game business. By that, I mean hits that generate other hits and that every sequel does better than the previous release in that franchise.”\(^{43}\) The marketing and business-model reference made to the famous, long-lived James Bond film franchise does not go unnoticed. When discussing the costs


\(^{41}\) Jonathan Gray (2010) op. cit., 48

\(^{42}\) Ibid, 48.

\(^{43}\) David Wesley and Gloria Barczak (2010) op. cit., 190.
involved in advertising “new” intellectual property, video game analyst Jesse Divinch of Electronic Entertainment Design and Research commented:

On average, to get a new IP in the same league as your Grand Theft Autos, Pokémons, and Mario Bros., you need to spend almost 10 to 20 percent more in advertising, on top of having larger development costs— and trust me, these types of marketing budgets would make a Nike advertising manager cringe. Wii Fit alone had a marketing expense that exceeded $50 million worldwide, 35 percent more than Grand Theft Auto IV.\textsuperscript{44}

Such a risk-filled investment can indeed be successful. After launch, the \textit{Wii Fit} spent 4 consecutive weeks as the best-selling console game week-to-week in Japan,\textsuperscript{45} and in 2009 topped sales charts in the UK for 11 weeks, during which it beat the sales of games within several well-established franchise titles such as \textit{Resident Evil}, \textit{FIFA}, \textit{Call of Duty}, and \textit{Street Fighter} in that region.\textsuperscript{46} However, it should be noted that referring to the \textit{Wii Fit} as a “new IP” may be somewhat misleading. The Wii console had already been out for a year prior to the release of the Wii Fit, including one of the console's launch titles, \textit{Wii Sports}, which has since 2009 essentially been the best-selling single game title of all time,\textsuperscript{47} currently at over 76 million copies sold.\textsuperscript{48} Furthermore, already possessing figures for the top-selling video game franchise in history (\textit{Mario}) as well as the previous best-selling video game of all time (\textit{Super Mario Bros.}), household name Nintendo has a highly unique position relative that of any other developer, publisher, or even corporation; not least for being Japan's third most valuable listed company in 2007, behind Toyota Motor Corp. and Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group – value which the Wii reportedly helped triple.\textsuperscript{49}

In comparison to \textit{Wii Fit}'s marketing expenses of upwards of $50 million in 2008, during the same year, the Motion Picture Association of America claimed to spend a figure equal to half the production cost of a “typical” feature, almost $36 million, on advertising per production.\textsuperscript{50} Gray reports similar figures of $10 million per film in marketing expenditures, plus another $30 million

\textsuperscript{44}David Wesley and Gloria Barczak (2010) op. cit., 191f.
spent in ad buys.\textsuperscript{51}

What do all of these figures tell us? Since one 24 hour period, or even one week is not a reasonable amount of time for most users to acquire, play through, and then spread the good word about a game, pre-release hype in the video game industry, especially in conjunction with franchising, clearly has the potential to be extraordinarily effective. Because high sales figures tend to generate even more buyer interest, initial sales or pre-orders for games are similar in function to the importance of the opening weekend for film releases. A successful opening weekend paves the way for a box office success, and can account for over a quarter of a film's total box office revenues. Of its $240 million gross in domestic box office revenue, \textit{Pirates of the Caribbean 4} brought in over $90 million during opening weekend.\textsuperscript{52} Opening weekend revenue for the most recent addition to the \textit{Twilight} film franchise, \textit{Breaking Dawn Part 1}, accounts for over $138 million of the film's current $220 million total in domestic box office sales.\textsuperscript{53}

Although this rather impressive selection of pre-order and initial sales figures indicate successful pre-release marketing tactics for the games referenced, there is a darker underbelly to this advertising trend. As will be discussed in the final chapter of the thesis, franchising and pre-release hype may consistently be resulting in higher sales figures, but high sales figures do not necessarily indicate gamer satisfaction. For of all its record sales statistics, \textit{Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3} has abysmally low Metacritic user ratings of 2.9, 2.1, and 3.2 out of 10 on the PlayStation 3, the PC, and the Xbox 360 respectively, as averaged from over 15,000 user votes. These figures stand in stark contrast to the 88/100, 81/100, and 89/100 scores for all three platforms as rated by 120 game magazine journalists. One user's review mirrors many of the complaints against \textit{Modern Warfare 3}:

Don't believe the marketing hype, this is the same product rebundled let it die and show investors we're not interested in being sold the same product year after year, the cash cow needs to starve.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51}Jonathan Gray (2010) \textit{op. cit.}, 7; 49.
\textsuperscript{52}Box Office Mojo, "Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides 2011," Website: Box Office Mojo, \url{http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=piratesofthecaribbean4.htm} [Box Office Statistics viewed 27 Nov 2011].
\textsuperscript{54}User ThanatosXR, "ThanatosXR," Website: Metacritic, review posted 8 Nov 2011, \url{http://www.metacritic.com/user/ThanatosXR} [checked 13 Dec 2011].
Multiple gaming sites took notice of this turn of events, as they have with previous titles where critics raved but users booed, such as with Bioware's recent *Dragon Age II*. Just as was the case with the *Dragon Age* series, the first *Call of Duty* game received the highest user scores on Metacritic, with subsequent franchise additions sinking lower and lower in user approval. The fact that game journalists from established online magazines frequently grant near-perfect scores to game titles attached to big franchises, coupled with the proliferation of unfavourable user review averages for some of these titles, has often led to suspicions of corruption in game journalism. For example, in May 2011, Metacritic became embroiled in a scandal when a Bioware employee who had worked on the production of *Dragon Age II* concealed his identity and gave the game a perfect score of 10/10, writing: “Anything negative you'll see about this game is an overreaction of personal preference.” A senior PR manager from Bioware's publisher, Electronic Arts, defended the employee's actions, stating: “That's how it works in the Oscars, that's how it works in the Grammy's and why I'm betting that Barack Obama voted for himself in the last election.” The offending review, however, has since disappeared from the site. The extent to which game review and preview sites such as IGN, Gamespot, and game magazines are influenced by game producers has yet to be the object of professional examination; though it seems evident that some degree of boosterism is indeed occurring. This would be a logical conclusion to draw, as the film and television industries have long exercised the tradition of externalizing risk by cross-promotion: the practice of buying out smaller networks to advertise and promote the parent company's own films.

**Risk versus reward**

The fuelling factor behind these substantial advertising investments appears to be synonymous to both the film and video game industries: both game development and film production demand high up-front costs, and thus are considered by investors to be high-risk ventures. In order to secure future investment opportunities, film studios and game developers alike must churn out regular (and preferably immediate) profits on their previous titles, as suggested in the statement earlier cited by Take-Two CEO, Ben Feder. The risk versus reward investment system appears to be the link

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56 Ibid


58 Brookey (2010), *op. cit.*, 12.
between franchising, advertising, and conglomeration in the video game industry; as well as being responsible for many of the industrial similarities between the film and game industries:

Traditional games are now taking two years and $20 million to develop; MMOGs maybe five years and $50 or a $100 million. Even now, this inflation is producing consolidation in the industry and more will be expected in the future. Vivendi’s Blizzard merged with Activision to form the largest firm in the industry (Mullen, 2008); Electronic Arts offered $2 billion in a hostile take-over bid of Take-Two Interactive and was turned down (Wingfield, 2008c). Others are turning to alternate sources of funding. Sony’s PS3 will get in-game ads (Wingfield, 2008a) and Microsoft has acquired Massive, Inc. apparently with the same idea in mind (Guth and Wingfield, 2006). Other organizations have moved along the lines of offering games for free with revenue generated through advertising and/or in-game purchases (Lawton and Kane, 2009; Schiesel, 2008; Wingfield, 2008b).59

Consolidation and conglomeration in the game industry is, as with the film and television industry, a tactic developed in attempt to lower the risk end of this business system. Mergers, acquisition, and hostile take-overs of smaller companies and independents within or related to the game and film industries are understood as the media industries' response to the notoriously irregular demand curves of the market, in which the few, highly profitable examples I have thus far supplied are understood to be the exception and not the rule to film and game profits.60

In Industrial Phantasmagoria: Subculture interactive cinema meets mass-culture media of simulation, Mikołaj Dymek suggests that while publishers, the central authorities in the game industry, may not be the mafia bankers they are sometimes portrayed as, they do adhere to the business strategy that “the best, i.e. least risky, way of doing business in the video game industry is to own the market.”61 As an example of this attempt to “own” the market, EA, one of the world's largest game publishers, has bought out over 40 studios in 19 countries in the past 20 years; some of which continue to work for the publisher, others of which have been terminated after acquisition.62

In 2008, French media conglomerate Vivendi SA merged Warcraft, StarCraft, and Diablo series developer and publisher Blizzard with developer Activision to produce Activision Blizzard, of which developers Blizzard and Activision are now considered subsidiaries.63 They now comprise

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61 Ibid, 168.
another one of the world’s largest game publishers. In *Screen Practice and Conglomeration*, John Caldwell notes that despite the American Paramount Consent Decrees of 1948, which were intended as anti-conglomerate measures introduced to de-monopolize the media industry and stimulate the growth of independents, five massive media conglomerates once again controlled 90% of the United States media market in 2002. The game industry does not appear to have reached that stage as of yet, though if recent trends of consolidation and conglomeration continue, the number of top-end game publishers and independent developers may continue to shrink.

In a situation recognizable from the film industry, game developers, much like film directors or screen-writers, must sell the rights to the intellectual property they create to producers. The notable difference between film and game industries in this respect is that game development, unlike film production, is by and large not done by a team of industry workers assembled on a project-by-project basis, with little employment stability, who may never have worked together previously or ever again afterwards. Rather, game developers are companies in their own right, though due to ever-increasing development costs they in general cannot function without external financing, and are thereby subordinated by cost-fronting game publishers. In the gaming world, this has been a source of much contention. Concerns have frequently been raised that game publishers hold all too much power over developers, and that publishers exploit the work of young, passionate programmers in frequent bouts of unpaid overtime or “crunch time” toward the end of every project’s completion. In the mid 00’s, for example, EA faced a series of publicized action suits concerning their employment practices, including the famous “EA spouse suit” where programmers were allegedly forced into pulling 85 hour work-weeks with unpaid overtime.

During interview, Dan Paladin, co-founder of the UK independent game studio The Behemoth remarks: “most developers are often forced to take on the creative ideas of their publishers - and as a result, the games they are working on suffer. The problem is the people who aren't making the game are calling the shots on how the games should be made, [...] it's armchair developing.”

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64 John T Caldwell (2008), *op. cit.*, 330.
“It’s a brutal environment out there for an independent,”69 comments Nina Kristensen, co-founder and chief developer at Ninja Theory, developer of the popular hack-and-slash game Heavenly Sword, which sold over a million copies in one year.70 Nick Button-Brown, an EA ex-employee of 9 years who in 2009 switched to independent developer Crytek, admits: “To be honest, there isn't really a model that allows a developer to self-publish.”71 Interestingly, senior producer Reid Schneider of publisher EA Montreal had three years prior placed the burden of bettering publisher-developer relations squarely on the shoulders of developers:

It's your job, whatever position you have on the team, to change the way your publisher thinks. Show them, don't tell them, what they're going to get. Don't hand them a stack of paper, because they're not going to read it... And probably most importantly, don't take no for an answer. If you really believe in your idea, if you really think your idea's good enough, then someone else will as well.72

The concept that the most virtuous of creators can, armed only with the power of their convictions, bend multi-national media conglomerates to their will is a fairy-tale propagated within the film industry as well, and just as fantastical an attempt at concealing power structures there. Though such statements may sound like a call-to-arms for improvement, there is no indication of cooperation given willingly from the side of the publisher, thereby displacing responsibility for change onto developers who potentially stand to lose their livelihood should they fail; insinuating that if a development team is subject to unfair policies or, by extension, if a publisher rejects brilliant ideas in favour of poor ones, the subordinated developers involved probably just didn't want it bad enough.

There are exceptions to this paradigm, however. In April 2011, Japanese developer FromSoftware sold over 1.5 million units of Dark Souls, the spiritual successor to their 2009 release Demon's Souls: a dark horror RPG hailed by critics and gamers alike for its brutal difficulty, unforgiving nature of gameplay, complex character development system, and brooding atmosphere.

[Dark Souls is] best known for a steep difficulty curve which ensures that players will die many, many times, and for punishing harshly for those deaths. It doesn't feature bombastic

FPS set-pieces, cinematic quick-time events, perfectly rendered glistening sportsmen or motion-controlled mini-games. It's a game which has "Noble Failure" stamped all over it from the outset. Yet here we are - 1.5 million units shipped, almost twice the eventual sell-through of its predecessor, *Demon's Souls*. That's 1.5 million units of a practically unknown IP sold in boxes at full price, using precisely the high-value traditional business model that some forecasters confidently predict going the way of the dodo. 73

*Dark Souls*, like *Demon's Souls* before it, did not attempt to target the mainstream audience, or to take control of an entire market and then cater to it. These games appealed to a very passionate segment of the gaming public who prized the punishing challenges and negative reinforcement learning systems considered typical of 'old-school' games developed fifteen plus years ago. The increase in sales from the predecessor to *Dark Souls* largely came about by positive word of mouth from gamers as well as critics. Even sites often considered to be propagators of mainstream franchises, such as IGN, praised predecessor *Demon's Souls* highly, placing it on their list of top 100 modern video games along with the statement, “Remember when games used to be hard? FromSoftware created one of the most difficult, but fair, action titles this generation has ever seen with Demon’s Souls.” 74 As GamesIndustry.biz columnist Rob Fahey notes, “*Dark Souls* sales are important to the industry as a whole because it's something which, according to the prevailing conventional wisdom, shouldn't have happened.” 75 What “shouldn't have happened” is financial success in the game market brought on by an unknown IP without reliance on promotional hype-generation, as opposed to the high marketing budget, cross-promoted, recycled-content games aimed at what is felt to be the mainstream public, which are by and large producing record-breaking sales hits with each subsequent franchise installation. One of the key difference between *Demon's Souls* and *Modern Warfare 3* is that despite the latter's 6.5 million copies sold in 24 hours, user reviews for *Demon's Souls* are consistently highly positive across the board. Just as an art-house film or lower-budget, minor genre film may find a certain audience or “niche” within the market, gather critical acclaim and make an unexpected financial success, games which do not conform to the industrial formula hoping to create assured returned investments can and do succeed.

MMOs, for example, are often considered the highest risk game genre, with many titles failing shortly after release; even when those titles come with established, highly popular film franchise licenses, such as *Star Trek Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*. This is due in part to their enormous


75 Rob Fahey, “Ascended Souls,” *op. cit.*
production costs, and because MMOs cannot, by nature of the fact that they provide a persistent and expanding online world, rely on initial sales and pre-orders alone in order to be profitable. Whether subscription-based or, as is becoming increasingly popular, free-to-play with micro-transactions, MMOs rely on a consistent playerbase of anywhere between thousands to millions of players participating (and paying) on a regular basis. Back in 2004, World of Warcraft had initial launch sales of a quarter of a million – a figure which would be considered paltry by current Call of Duty standards. However, household-name World of Warcraft has the most subscribers of any MMO of all time, and its longevity is legendary in an industry where even a two-year old game is often considered outdated. In May 2011, World of Warcraft had over 11.4 million subscribers. The aforementioned TV commercials for World of Warcraft were not aimed at creating pre-release hype for a game, as with the other cinematic trailers discussed, but as a sort of self-reflective advertising commenting on the game's incredible popularity and reach, using its already existent success to promote further engagement. MMOs, unlike other genres, cannot rely on marketing alone in order to be successful. MMO marketing hype may result in high initial sales, but essential to this genre's financial success is its ability to engage a consistent playerbase, or create actual enjoyment of the game as measured by a community playing (and paying) on a regular basis for years. This is something marketing cannot accomplish.

Megalith publishers risk frustrating and angering players by repeatedly releasing highly hyped games operating mainly on initial and pre-order sales, if those games are consistently met with fan disapproval. In a 2006 meeting with EA's investors, analyst Evan Wilson warned that: “poor reviews and quality are beginning to tarnish the EA brand.” “Despite its large portfolio, Electronic Arts had only one title among the top 10 best sellers during the 2008 holiday season. Retailers criticized the company for producing too many mediocre titles.” The previously-cited Bobby Kotick, CEO of Activision Blizzard, has garnered much hatred from gamers and industry journalists alike for his incendiary statements. “We have a real culture of thrift,” said Kotick during a 2009 presentation at the Deutsche Bank Securities Technology Conference in San Francisco, “The goal that I had in bringing a lot of the packaged goods folks into Activision about 10 years ago was

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to take all the fun out of making video games.” During the same presentation, when asked why he dropped publishing on certain game titles after the Blizzard/Activision merger, Kotick revealed that it was because he felt they were “franchises that don’t have the potential to be exploited every year across every platform with clear sequel potential that can meet our objectives of over time becoming $100 million plus franchises.”

One needs only to Google such terms as “EA sucks,” “EA is evil” or “Bobby Kotick is the devil” to understand what Wilson was referring to: doing so yields dozens upon dozens of hits to popular, well-trafficked gaming forums and websites, where users discuss what they feel to be EA’s long (by gaming standards) history of marketing lies and franchise milking, and Bobby Kotick’s perceived stranglehold on Activision Blizzard. It remains to be seen how this will continue to affect the publishers and conglomerates in the game industry currently risking this uncertain public relations ice.

![Figure 2: Art of Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick, featuring a collage of imagery from Tarantino's film Inglorious Basterds and Activision's game Modern Warfare 3. Posted by user MassiveNine on http://www.funnyjunk.com/funny_pictures/2259484/Bobby+Kotick+is+a+Bastard/](http://www.funnyjunk.com/funny_pictures/2259484/Bobby+Kotick+is+a+Bastard/)

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User Responses to Current Trends in the Game Industry

"Everywhere one looks, simplicity and ease-of-use are triumphing over depth and complexity."
- "Innovation and Marketing in the Video Game Industry," Gloria Barczak and David Wesley

Casual versus Hardcore

I am hesitant to use terms such as “mainstream” and “niche” when it comes to discussing market audiences – as GamesIndustry.biz columnist Rob Fahey writes, “we just happen to stick the "mainstream" label on products that succeed at appealing to a number of niches on a variety of different levels. Talk to ten people about why they like Uncharted, or Halo, or Wii Sports [which are generally felt to be mainstream games], and you'll quite likely get ten different viewpoints and ten different contexts for enjoyment of the game in question.” However, some degree of categorization or terming must take place if I am to meaningfully examine the responses of some, but not all users toward certain game industry phenomena. Therefore, I opt to make use of a (somewhat controversial) distinction which is common among gamers themselves, as well as marketing divisions of game publishers: hardcore versus casual gamers. These categories were even academically detailed in Mikolaj Dymek's Industrial Phantasmagoria: Subculture interactive cinema meets mass-culture media of simulation. As the oppositional phrasing of these terms would imply, there is a certain sense of conflict perceived between these two groups, both from community and marketing perspectives. While Dymek argues that hardcore or traditional gamers are “the industry's life blood,” he also points out that the casual, or occasional gamer is considered by game industry marketing to be the mass-market gamer - a bizarre, but prevalent paradox of the game industry.

The aforementioned Demon's Souls and Dark Souls games are for example, from an industry perspective, considered hardcore as their gameplay ethos of negative reinforcement, steep

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Mikolaj Dymek, (2010), op. cit., 152.
challenges, and debilitating punishments for failure would imply. Contrary to many other games on the market today, which provide hint after hint when players fail at a certain stage, Demon's Souls and Dark Souls gameplay actually becomes increasingly difficult the more the player fails at it.\textsuperscript{84} To many current publishers, a design such as this would seem suicidal. Games are meant to be entertaining: why would anyone consider a punishing game to be fun? However, as sales figures and reviews would indicate, many gamers consider challenge highly desirable. Challenging gameplay is engaging, stimulating, and requires a high level of cognitive participation, reasoning, calculation, strategy and manipulation to overcome; for which it also presents quantifiable outcomes, or rewards. It is a very human pleasure. As a result, Demon's and Dark Souls are two highly respected, highly praised games that received multiple awards from professional gaming magazines and websites, with the predecessor selling at over triple the projected expectations,\textsuperscript{85} and its successor shipping over 1.5 million units shortly after release.\textsuperscript{86} By contrast, despite Modern Warfare 3's record sales figures indicating success on the mainstream market, there was a powerful fan backlash to the game, which currently has an average user score of 2.7 out of 10 on Metacritic from over 15,000 votes.

An interesting aspect of this paradigm is that the term “hardcore” is generally interchangeable with the gaming community term, “old school.” As previously detailed, the punishing nature of Demon's and Dark Souls has widely been recognized as a throw-back to the first arcade and console games, which more often than not also subscribed to this gameplay ethos. Super Mario Bros from 1985, currently still the second best-selling game title of all time after holding first place for over 20 years,\textsuperscript{87} also punished players for failure rather than offer them hints. The fewer lives a player lost during gameplay, the higher their score would be. A misstep of literally one onscreen pixel could and often would cause the player to die; and upon death, the player lost their items and was returned to the beginning of the level - or the game over screen.

\textsuperscript{84} For instance, both games possess a World Tendency system relatively unique to these games, which has a variety of influences upon gameplay, including that whenever the player dies, the “world tendency” of that particular group of game levels or ‘world’ grows darker. One of the effects of a darker world tendency causes enemies in that ‘world’ to deal more damage to the player, and to take less damage from the player. This system is further justified by the logic of the game diegesis, which revolves around demons gaining power through the consumption of human souls.


\textsuperscript{86} Rob Fahey, “Ascended Souls,” op. cit.

\textsuperscript{87} WiiSports Resort Interview, Iwata Asks Nintendo, op. cit.
The usage of the term “old school” implies, of course, that things have changed. There is a notable trend of what can be described as lowered requirements imbedded in the design of today's games, while production costs and marketing efforts and expenses continue to explode. Traditionally, gamers were required to problem-solve in-game: to strategize, test various possibilities, compare results, and draw conclusions based upon the logic of the game world in order to progress in or complete a game. They were required to train up physical and cognitive reflexes to match requisite reaction times in order to proceed; to observe patterns in AI behaviour and accurately predict plausible outcomes in order to overcome challenges designed for them. Of course, this is still mostly true of today's games. Recent years have, however, seen a growing trend of explication in games during and prior to gameplay; and of reducing the level of user input required for game progression. It is becoming increasingly common for current games to tell a player where to go and where not to go, at times without even providing an opportunity for players to make their own attempt first. Combat sessions with increasing frequency inform the player of exactly what tactics they should employ, when, and how; at times even pausing the action to await the prompted input before proceeding. Instead of encouraging players to explore the game-world on their own, games are increasingly including map guides that display onscreen arrows at all times, mapping out the route the player should take before they have taken it. These design aspects reduce demands on gameplay input and therefore, essentially, diminish the role of the player. With such design choices being implemented, it becomes less and less meaningful or necessary for game developers to create open-world games, or script multiple possible solutions or strategies to any single in-game challenge. As a result, this trend can be described as one of game linearization and simplification.

To many gamers, particularly those with years of gaming experience and dozens of titles behind them, such as Dymek's hardcore gamers, this trend elicits reactions of concern and even contempt. As discussed in the previous chapter, highly franchised FPS series such as *Call of Duty* and *Gears of War* appear to generate record sales in today's market. It would be misleading, however, to assume that high consumption necessarily signifies high levels of consumer satisfaction. The amount of concern expressed in regards to the notably lessened degree of engagement, of activeness in what is by definition an interactive medium should not be taken lightly. In a practice seemingly more and more common, particularly among highly grossing titles in current computer and console gaming, the industry is producing titles which require less and less of players by way of gameplay, gametime, and player skill; and, incidentally, place high focus on cinematic styles and

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88 A video game is an electronic program where human input produces onscreen visual feedback, by means of a user interface and hardware peripherals facilitating human-machine interaction.
Hollywood-esque hype generation during marketing and production.

It is my observation that the cinematisation of games is not only a trend of games become more film-like in general, but specifically more and more like the mass-marketed, biggest blockbuster Hollywood film franchises, targeted at what is believed to be mainstream audience. I do not believe that a more cinematic game is doomed, by virtue of its filmic narratology, to necessarily result in a less-challenging game. Both Demon’s Souls and Dark Souls make use of pre-rendered, introductory cinematics that help set the mood and tone of the game before the player creates a character. As previously discussed in the chapter, The Cinematic Game, there are currently a variety of ways to incorporate cinematic moments throughout a game in a manner which layers and adds to the game experience, without detracting from the gameplay. Certainly even more techniques and styles can be developed in the future.

The risk of sacrificing gameplay features, gameplay challenge and gameplay complexity due to the adoption of certain film-industrial practices and cinematic visuals, however, seems highly present. The increased production costs and development time needed to produce cinematic sequences and generate pre-release hype are two glaring potential causes behind this trend. Higher production costs are a point of concern to potential or existing producers employing the aforementioned risk versus reward investment model, who may then demand a more “easily accessible” game in the hopes of reaching a larger market, where the mainstream audience is believed to shy away from challenge and complexity, thereby evening the risks associated with higher expenditures.

Why has this trend emerged? While investigating why console sales of the Nintendo Wii outstripped its better performing, higher-end hardware competitors Sony's PlayStation 3 and Microsoft's Xbox 360, Gloria Barczak and David Wesley employed Geoffrey Moore's theory of the transitional chasm. As described in Moore's book, Crossing the Chasm, “success in high-tech markets depends on making the transition from an early market dominated by a few visionary customers to a mainstream market dominated by a large block of customers who are predominantly pragmatists in orientation.”89 As Barczak and Wesley point out, “achieving this leap requires a different strategy than what one might use to lure early adopters of technology,” because “the mainstream market has different values and requirements than the early market.”90 In order to analyze the relationship between hardcore (old-school or early market) and casual (mainstream

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90 Ibid.
market) gamers, I propose that Moore's model may apply not only to hardware, as in Barczak and Wesley's study, but also to fundamental design trends in software developed for that hardware. Though Barczak and Wesley were referring to gaming console specifics, I propose that in game design itself, simplicity and ease-of-use are increasingly triumphing over depth and complexity. And this trend has not gone unnoticed – not by gamers, nor by developers.

**The Bard: Saviors of Queens**

In March 2011, Polish developer and publisher CD Projekt Red, creators of the critically and user-acclaimed *The Witcher* and *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, made a fake game announcement as an April Fool's joke. Despite high acclaim, with predecessor *The Witcher* winning over 90 awards, including Best PC RPG from PC Gamer, GameSpy, IGN and Play, CD Projekt Red's *Witcher* series is not considered to be one for the casual gamer. In a series of cinematic trailers for their fake game release, “The Bard: Saviors of Queens,” (actual) Senior Producer Tom Gop mockingly announces their development plans for a new instalment, which will address the issues that presumably kept their games from becoming more mainstream. On the corresponding website, saviors-of-queens.com, the fake game's description reads:

> This game is an ultimate answer towards all the players that always wanted easy, short and fun adventure. There's no violence, no complex storyline and definitely no morality. It's a really short game (no more than 2 hours of gameplay with autoplay feature on the easiest difficulty setting) that will not burden you with anything gameplay-related. Let desire, wine and music guide you!

On a fake developer diary video located on the same website, CD Projekt Red's Senior Producer Tom Gop explains, “we've always wanted to listen [to] what people want, and we always made these questionnaires, surveys, and polls to find out what people want. And recently, we find out that the most desired kind of game that people want is a simple, short and yet fun game. People don't want violence, difficult choices, and what's most important, they do not want morality in games. [...] The game even has a new autoplay function, so you don't have to be burdened with gameplay.”

Gop is essentially criticizing gamers for purchasing short, simplistic games that do not challenge them intellectually. What is important to note here is that both *The Witcher* and *The Witcher 2* are quite cinematic games, both featuring cutscenes, with *The Witcher 2* renowned for its intensely high-quality graphics – at release, only the best top-end graphics cards and processors available on

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91 Product Description of the Platinum Edition of The Witcher on Amazon.co.uk [checked 4 Dec 2011].

92 Interestingly enough, part of the advertising campaign for The Witcher 2 included a multi-page nude spread of The Witcher character, Triss Merigold in Playboy Poland magazine, done as digital art. While the books upon which the game series is based describe Triss as having a large, disfiguring scar on her chest, there is no trace of it either in-game or in the Playboy renders of the character.
the commercial market were capable of running the game smoothly on its highest graphics settings.\textsuperscript{93} While cinematic games are often considered mainstream, the actual gameplay design and storytelling themes of \textit{The Witcher} series are not.

Once again, I do not feel that cinematic aesthetics in games need be the cause behind decreases in challenging game design, of which \textit{The Witcher} series is clear evidence. \textit{The Witcher 2} contains difficulty modes that include enemies capable of one-hit kills on the player if these attacks are not successfully parried or avoided, and an “Insanity” mode where one single player character death deletes all savegame data for that playthrough. The history of CD Projekt is itself that of an initially small, foreign independent succeeding in a market swarmed with behemoth producers. CD Projekt's critique does, however, beg the question: would a game that played itself, without requiring any user input to progress the frame, and a run-time of 2 hours, not be considered a film?

\textbf{Press X to win, Press X to not die}

Another frequently satirized gameplay element (or lack thereof) that is unfortunately tied to the increase of cinematic visuals in games is, as the chapter title suggests, the introduction of quick-time events. The gaming expression, “press X to win” or “press X to not die” is a contemptuous phrase used to criticize the proliferation of QTEs in recent years. A quick-time event, or QTE, occurs when the player must respond to a specific on-screen command prompt – for example, being told to press one specific button in order to proceed. QTEs arguably have a long history in console game design, but in recent years have frequently been employed as a gameplay/cinematic compromise. Rather than have the player sit and watch cinematic sequences without actively playing, the player receives a series of command prompts (ie, “press X”) including an image of the colour and shape of the button to be pressed, or motion to be made (for motion-sensitive controllers). The player does not have gameplay agency during the cutscene, but is able to respond with a specific key-press when prompted to do so. Failure may result in anything from a lowered score, a missed achievement, or a restart of the sequence. Some games have involved a level of challenge or depth to QTEs by creating a rapid, complex sequence of prompts; or by involving them in the actual storytelling, such as in \textit{Mass Effect 2}, where QTEs are not necessary to progress the gameplay, but instead correspond to short, optional branches in dialogue.

In 2010, a journalist on Gamesradar wrote an article entitled “The Top 7 least irritating quick-time events.” The title itself implies the generally negative perception of QTEs. Already in 2008, in an article entitled: “Quick time events: tap A if you're tired of them,” Ars Technica journalist Ben Kuchera wrote: “The number of games that use this mechanic are legion, and include some absolutely wonderful titles. Shenmue, Indigo Prophecy, God of War 1 and 2, Resident Evil 4... the list goes on. The problem is an obvious one: you're combining the worst of interaction with the worst of cinemas.” Criticism stems from the fact that QTEs are often highly repetitive and simplistic, breaking up focus on the cinematic cutscene without providing a sufficiently engaging justification for doing so. As a result, the cutscenes shown during QTEs are themselves often very basic and repetitive, such as performing the same attack over and over, or continually sliding down a ramp. Thus, QTEs are often felt to consist of a very simplistic, infantile substitute for gameplay disrupting a generic action sequence. Similarly, players have often complained that their use has become increasingly tied to subordinating gameplay to cinematic renders. The 2010 psychological thriller, Heavy Rain, modelled after film noir, made extensive use of QTEs, for which it has, despite of its otherwise extraordinary acclaim, also been criticized; spawning the internet meme “Press X to Jason” and related parodies, including videos and even a parody game.

BioWare Presents: the State of the Game Industry

Two days prior to the release of Bioware's Dragon Age II, user lljkceski posted a video on YouTube criticizing Bioware's business tactics and development design in relation to the game; focusing mainly on the merchandizing, cross-promotion and commodification of a then yet unreleased title. Entitled “BioWare Presents: the State of the Game Industry,” the 44 second video contains clips of interview footage conducted by Game Trailers with Bioware's Director of Marketing, Gameplay Producer, and one of the writers for Dragon Age II; interspersed with screenshots of the variety of cross-promotional pre-release purchases and 'special offers' for the game that were being advertised at the time. At the start of the video, lljkceski uses footage from two separate interviews with Director of Marketing David Silverman and Gameplay Producer Dan Lazin as they describe their game design ethos: “[Lazin:] We've introduced a system that really encourages you to be consistent.

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[cut to Silverman:] And that's when you press a button, something awesome has to happen. So button, awesome, connected now, in Dragon Age II. Cutting quickly to footage of QTEs in Dragon Age II prompting the player to simply mash the A button repeatedly, lljkceski highlights the dubious quality of such a design statement. What's important to note here is that by editing two separate interviews together, lljkceski is combining statements from two very different BioWare employees – one involved in production, the other in marketing – thus with presumably little detailed knowledge of the actual intentions of the game's designers. As Director of Marketing David Silverman describes the button-awesome paradigm, lljkceski skillfully splices in footage of a very confused looking Gameplay Producer Dan Lazin, who appears to be at a complete loss for words.

The pre-release special offers and deals shown in the video include redeemable codes for Dragon Age II through the purchase of a copy of another game from the same publisher (EA), Facebook events, EA Store 'exclusive' pre-release purchases, unlockables, and cross-overs with game-related websites such as the popular comic Penny Arcade or creator of The Guild webseries, Felicia Day. Almost all of these pre-release deals would grant the user an in-game vanity item for Dragon Age II once the game was released. Game producers, much like film/media conglomerates, are quite fond of these cross-pollinating advertising and hype-generating business strategies; and film scholars often discuss these strategies as forms of audience-medium engagement. Some users, however, such as lljkceski, feel otherwise. Pasting the words “Exclusive pandering!” over the end of his selection of pre-order special offers for Dragon Age II, lljkceski cuts to interview footage with one of the writers for the game, describing the “wildly different directions” the writers were able to take for two of the game's female characters: “the virginal girl next door, and crazy, up-against-the-wall, let's-have-it-on-right-here.”

The association made between the pandering of merchandise and the advertising of stereotyped sex appeal is quite clear.

lljkceski is not alone. The video has over 125,000 views, and the current top-rated comment, at 162 thumbs up, mockingly rearranges a quote from the interviews: “A system that really encourages...”

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99 While all of the 'romanceable' non-player characters in Dragon Age II, both male and female, are in fact bisexual, this was not one of the pre-release sales pitches used in the game's marketing.
you to be consistent. And that's when you press uninstall, something awesome has to happen. So uninstall - awesome, connected now, in Dragon Age II.”

In the video's description field, lljkkeski quotes from the personal blog of Brent Knowles, who was the Lead Designer for *Dragon Age II*'s highly acclaimed predecessor, *Dragon Age: Origins*, which, while also an RPG, was markedly different from its successor in many aspects of game design. *Origins*, for example, was a longer game, with a more detailed character progression system, more player customization and gameplay decision-making power, more exploration options, and contained no QTEs. In the quotes cited, Knowles describes his reasons for leaving BioWare in 2009, expressing displeasure at the “lighter” direction *Dragon Age II*'s design was taking it vis-a-vis its predecessor. “I’m not the same person I was when I started,” writes Knowles, “and BioWare isn’t the same company.”

**If Quake was done today**

Kai Moosmann and Thomas Floeter's YouTube parody video, “If Quake was done today,” had over 900,000 views in only 20 days since its upload on November 1st, 2011. Moosmann describes the video as his “(probably futile) attempt on making a statement about the quality of shooters this generation.” *Quake* was an incredibly influential first-person shooter released in 1996 to essentially universal fan and critical adoration. It was also known for its challenging gameplay, including many in-game secrets (ie, non-linear gameplay features) and a hidden "Nightmare" difficulty mode. Moosmann's video critique contains in-game footage from *Quake* modified to resemble the best-selling, current-day FPS titles. The video begins with a laundry list of unskippable developer logo screens, remarking on the lack of cohesion in current game development – *Modern Warfare 3*, for example, was developed by Infinity Ward, Sledgehammer Games, Raven Software, Neversoft, and Treyarch. The game menu has been modified to include a built-in DLC section, criticizing the recent proliferation of 'Downloadable Content' for purchase; which the largest publishers now use to profit further on already released titles.

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103 DLCs have come under criticism of late for a variety of issues, such as demanding money for extremely minor graphical additions (commonly, new colours for weapons or a new outfit for a character); or, in the case of providing gameplay-influencing items or equipment, granting an unfair advantage to players who have paid
continues, the player is allowed to select from three difficulty modes: “Easy,” “Simplified,” and “Watch the bots do it.” During the loading screen, tips inform the player of such absurdly obvious gameplay functions as “Shoot enemies to kill them!” When the game loads up, the player's gameplay is interrupted by prompts flashing onscreen every few seconds, constantly telling the player what to do, and where to go. Frequent groans of anger and frustration at the pop-ups can be heard. Unlike in the original Quake game, in the video the player is disallowed from any non-linear exploration of the game environments. He is herded by a plethora of prompts to enter a room, whereupon he must engage in a boss-fight combat encounter. However, a metal cage drops down onto the boss, immobilizing the monster completely. The player is free to shoot at a stone block positioned just above, which instantly kills the boss, without any possibility of the player taking damage. Frustrated expletives and the sound of a controller dropping follow.

The modified game footage ends with the text, “What the hell happened?” before showing various speedrun footage from the real game, which required immense precision and control to complete. The video finishes on the words, “When I was your age, we rocked-jumped all the way to school, both ways, in boiling lava.” This in-joke referring to the gameplay mechanics and design of Quake reinforces the connection between “old school” or “traditional” gamers as comprising the hardcore, ie non-mainstream gaming audience; as envisioned by both publisher advertising logic and Dymek's academic analysis of these categories. Interestingly, in response to a question about what he thought of the recent, highly praised game releases Uncharted 3 and Bethesda’s The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, video creator Moosmann writes: “well, I really like Skyrim so far (the crappy hud and menu system not so much), but Uncharted3 ... well it's a better movie than Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull. But it's most definitely NOT a game.”

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104 A bot is an AI program scripted to perform a specific task. This is the same criticism as Gop's "autoplay feature," suggesting that modern games require so little of players that they might as well be playing themselves.

105 Speedruns are recordings of gameplay footage done as quickly as possible, which traditionally required incredible understanding of gameplay mechanics and memorization to complete. Therefore, the faster the speedrun, the more time and dedication the player had put into training for it. They were traditionally done as a competitive activity among highly skilled players.

106 Comment posted by user kmoosmann on 28 Nov 2011, If Quake Was Done Today, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIZtBCpo0eU [checked 04 Dec 2011].
Figure 3: Stills from user ljkceski’s video, “Bioware Presents: The State of the Game Industry,” featuring screenshots of QTEs, a variety of pre-release offers and purchases, and a well-timed frame of a confused-looking Bioware employee; all concerning Dragon Age 2. Located at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMcVZQI6ybW
Conclusions

There is a tendency among hardcore or traditional gamers, understood to represent the life-blood but not the main body of the game industry, to define current cinematic trends in gaming as unchallenging, simplistic, and linear – in other words: mainstream. This association should be understood as a direct response to how cinematic styles and marketing techniques are commonly used in today's biggest blockbuster game titles, and not as pertaining to the concept of film in its entirety. Game producer admittances of money-making intentions are considered by gaming communities to be ignoble and unworthy goals that result in the release of poor-quality titles. It is important to underline that these games are falling under criticism not simply for likening titles, but for their similarities in style and marketing practices to the biggest of Hollywood film franchises.

As development costs skyrocket, game developers find themselves subordinated by cost-fronting publishers, who in turn rely on pre-release hype generation including cinematic trailer reveals, pre-order deals, cross-promotional advertising, series franchising, and simplified game design in an attempt to reach as broad a demographic as possible. In doing so, publishers hope to hedge their investors' bets and secure future investments. Paradoxically, the maintenance of a cross-promoted, highly advertised, multi-franchise portfolio in itself demands tens to hundreds of millions in production cost per title, as well as frequent franchise additions. This paradigm shift may be understood as crossing the transitional chasm between initial and mainstream consumers in high-technology industries. It remains to be seen whether both initial-hardcore and mainstream-casual gamer categorization will continue to co-exist, blend, or if the presumed values and needs of the mainstream market will fully eclipse the interests of marketing- and self-identified hardcore gamers.

Cinematic business and marketing practices, as stylized after Hollywood's biggest blockbuster franchises, are producing games with record-breaking initial sales figures, yet falling under harsh criticism for increasingly linear, simplistic, and homogenous game design. Subsequently, publishers such as EA and Activision come under user and journalistic scrutiny for monopolistic business practices including hostile take-overs of independents in order to seize market control; thus persuading buyers into making game purchases based largely on hype as produced by a system of...
industrial cross-promotion and suspect boosterism.

Cinematic aesthetics are also, however, used for what may be considered the equivalent of art house films: games created by small or notable but independent developers for niche audiences, such as *Heavy Rain*, *L.A. Noire*, or *The Witcher* series. The similarity drawn between art house and these particular titles, however, exists mainly in the realm of audience imagining: these games may be highly cinematic and target a niche audience, but the nature of the cinematic visuals employed is still generally that of current-day, mainstream Hollywood cinematography. While Will Brooker noted that the dominant camera of videogames is more similar to the avant-garde of film than that of mainstream Hollywood, this statement is largely untrue of actual cinematic cut-scenes in games, or their corresponding promotional trailers. This phenomenon can be understood as the game-industrial development of a classical cinematography for games, as influenced by classic and contemporary Hollywood.
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