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Video Game to Movie Adaptations: The Role of Narratives

Owen Amaral

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Video Game to Movie Adaptations:
The Role of Narratives

By: Owen Amaral

Advisor: Professor Joanna Church

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Abstract

With the increased presence of video games in the cultural zeitgeist, film producers in both Hollywood and the Japanese market are continuing to create adaptations of games into films. Hollywood, however, has struggled to create critically and commercially successful adaptations, while the Japanese market was able to find a formula that works far sooner. By examining the narrative techniques utilized in film adaptations and their respective source materials, a number of important factors come to light in determining the success of an adaptation. Managing scope, evaluating genre, and determining target markets all play a key role in the success of a film. A number of films are examined in close detail to discover these patterns, including *Street Fighter*, *Warcraft*, *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, and *Persona 3 the Movie*. Lastly, three franchises in particular are highlighted for breaking away from the typical world and story adaptation frameworks: *Final Fantasy VII*, *Pokémon*, and *Kingdom Hearts*. These films all add something unique to the adaptation process and are indicative of the industries' willingness to experiment.

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What are Narratives?

When developing any form of media, a wide variety of factors go into constructing a narrative. First, and most overt, is the story. This aspect includes the text of the media, covering the plotline, action, and themes that make up the core of the story. Characters are also crucial, with their internal and external struggles and relationships bringing the story to life. Setting details regarding the time and place of a narrative, along with worldbuilding, provide much of the additional depth that can hook fans in. Lastly, especially when dealing with franchised pieces of media, lore and canonicity play an important role in narrative. Lore is regarded as the background information that helps to give worldbuilding additional depth, and canonicity determines whether or not a piece of media is considered to be part of the official story, or if it is an external piece of media with no impact on the main storyline as a whole.

While all of these elements remain true to all forms of media, certain aspects of narrative are unique to audio-visual mediums, such as plays, television, movies, and video games. Score plays a big role in how a visual medium tells its story, and can be effective in enhancing setting, setting the tone, and accenting action. In addition, editing can greatly effect pacing and clarity of the text. Lastly, the camera can be utilized in a number of different cinematographic techniques to change the way the viewer experiences the world the director has created. While these techniques were originally developed in different mediums, video game directors have adapted them to better fit within the art form.

In addition, a number of the traditional aspects of narrative are different when examined within a video game. Story can vary wildly depending on the genre of game. Some games, such as those in the action-adventure genre, tell traditional, linear stories. However, some games, often referred to as open-world or sandbox games, allow for the player to have complete control

of how the story is experienced, with events often occurring in different order depending on the individual player. One example of this style would be *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, in which the player can choose to skip large portions of the plot if desired. Lastly, some games are purely focused on gameplay, with no attention paid to story at all, such as those often seen in arcades. Characterization is also changed wildly, again thanks to the nature of the interactivity within video games. In a role-playing game such as *Mass Effect*, in which the player is given control over the main characters' decisions, the player can decide major character details, such as gender, relationships, and morals. For this reason, the developers need to create several different characters that can play the same role within a story, depending on what the player decides.

Narratives in Gaming Throughout History

In terms of storytelling mediums, video games have had a fascinating rise to prominence. Unlike movies and television, which were created specifically for the purpose of broadcasting and distributing media, video games started out as mere amusements. With the technology available to the burgeoning arcade scene, most aspects of narrative had to be presented externally. With most games having simple, 8-bit graphics and only able to use text to convey story, narrative had to be delivered through arcade marquees or borrow intellectual property from other franchises and world events (Zalot). Popular arcade games such as Pac-Man and Dig Dug were able to create iconic characters, but the vast majority of the characterization occurred outside the games, with animated television series, advertisements, and marquee artwork. Game tie-ins with movies, TV, and comics were, and still are, common, as it is often easy to reskin existing game tie-ins with characters (Moore, 184). Many early games were based on movie or television tie-ins, allowing them to utilize predeveloped characters that the audience were already familiar with, so that the games did not need to take time building them up. As

technology improved, and games became more complex with each passing generation, developers and directors began experimenting with the medium as a means to convey stories.

Prominent creative thinkers, such as Shigeru Miyamoto and Ken Williams, began to rise to prominence as the home console market exploded and home computers began to be widely distributed. These minds would often step into the role of director, leading the story, art, and development teams towards the future of gaming. Companies such as Nintendo and Sierra were pushing the boundaries in terms of storytelling, with franchises such as *The Legend of Zelda*, *Super Mario Brothers*, and *King's Quest* standing out as pioneers in breaking gaming away from basic arcade conversions to full-fledged adventures. While the early home gaming platforms, including the Nintendo Entertainment System and computers such as the Commodore 64, were by no means complex, companies were able to start to branch into new genres. Notable amongst them was the role-playing game, also known as the RPG. This was one of the first genres where narrative is a necessity rather than an afterthought. In order to allow the player to fall into the role of a character on the screen, a narrative needs to be built to engage the player first.

Soon, as games grew ever more complex, characters gained voices and scores began incorporating full orchestras. Video games were able to incorporate many of the trappings afforded to the movie and television industry, and with them came further development of video games as an art form rather than pure amusement. In modern times, big budget productions from the likes of Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft are similar in scale and complexity to many modern-day movie franchises (Rechsteiner). In addition, smaller independent games are often willing to abandon some of the traditional aspect of gameplay to focus on utilizing the unique aspects afforded to games as unique forms of art and media. Publishers such as Devolver Digital and Annapurna Interactive have found wild success by seeking out interesting games, such as

Journey, *Gone Home*, and *Reigns*, that abandon many of the traditional elements of gameplay to tell a story. All of these games choose to focus on the exploration and interactivity unique to games, and feature little to no traditional action-focused gameplay. Video games are unique among media types as they inherently have some form of interaction, which opens a world of creative space not often seen in television or movies. Entire generations of children have grown up with video games as their primary form of escapism, with game franchises often seen as cultural touchstones on the same level as *Star Wars*.

Why Adapt?

Since the days of antiquity, stories have been adapted from one medium to another. Classical Greek tales were adapted for stage plays, oral traditions were recorded in literature, and some of the first ever silent films were adapted from classical tales. Adaptation has been a contentious subject for critics and fans alike, as a well-crafted adaptation can bring new life to a story, but a flawed one can be ripped apart for the slightest inconsistencies. One needs only look to the critical reception of a film version of a Shakespearean play or the fan outrage at the latest comic book film to see the fine line screenwriters have to walk while creating an adaptation. The movie industry has historically been troubled by one particular medium when attempting adaptation: video games.

The choice to adapt a video game into a movie makes logical sense to Hollywood boardrooms. These are massive franchises with reach across a wide variety of demographics, with the video game industry as a whole accounting for \$11.6 billion in spending during the second quarter of 2020 (Clement). Many modern franchises have years to decades of storytelling and worldbuilding to draw upon, with a built-in fanbase eager to see new content about their favorite characters. In addition, most game franchises slated for adaptation are tried and true, with

clear indicators as to why this franchise in particular has survived the test of time. In the past though, Hollywood often stumbled with adapting games into films. Meanwhile, even when Hollywood was seemingly unable to create an adaptation that was critically or monetarily successful, or even beloved by fans, Japan was able to crack the code first. Hollywood's focus on blockbuster productions and a willingness to abandon canon create weaker narratives in adaptations, while Japan's willingness to innovate and its greater ability to match scope creates stronger narratives.

Mechanics of Adaptation

When adapting any two unique mediums, especially ones like film and video games which share similarities in construction, a number of elements and techniques need to be considered and employed to ensure the adaptation proceeds smoothly. The first is what kind of adaptation will best fit the film and game pairing. The two main types of adaptations are world and story. A story adaptation directly lifts the plot of a game, and recreates it using the language of film, while changing very little about major details. These adaptations may choose to abandon side stories, extraneous characterization, and background information, but will typically endeavor to keep the heart of the story intact. This style of adaption is incredibly common with the world of film, with countless films being released that are adaptations of a wide variety of media, including books, plays, and musicals. By contrast, a world adaptation will take the characters, setting, lore, and other elements of narrative and tell a new story set in the same world. This is a common technique for video games without clearly defined stories, where gameplay is the primary focus of the game, such as *Street Fighter*. This style of adaption is rarer in films, but has seen a recent boom with the rise of the comic book movie. Often these films take bits and pieces of a character's background and story to create a new narrative, rather than

being direct retellings of a specific comic plotline. While they may use comic plotlines as a framework, the characters in the cinematic universe are often unique to the point where the plot changes to fit their personalities.

When a company is considering creating an adaptation, one major aspect of the game that requires examination is the genre the game belongs in. This will typically play a major role in determining what style of adaptation the franchise is suited to. If the franchise in question is a role-playing game or an action-adventure game, which typically features lengthy, clearly defined plots, a story adaptation will likely be best suited. On the other hand, if a game is focused on gameplay, like a platformer or fighting game, which typically have simple narratives but strongly defined characters, a world adaptation suits it well. Another important consideration is the scope of the game in question. This will often determine the run time of the film, or whether or not the film will require multiple sequels to fully tell the story. There is a significant challenge present in adapting a Japanese role-playing game that spreads its plot into 100+ hours of total playtime since mass-market films often don't exceed three hours in runtime. Finally, the aesthetics of the game should be considered. If a game has cartoonish graphics, it may be best suited for an animated film, as was shown with the *Angry Birds* movie released in 2016. By contrast, if a game is more grounded in reality, a live action adaptation may not feel out of place.

Literature Review

Overall, little has been written in the academic world about the adaptation of video games into movies. This is most likely as a result of video games being seen as a “lesser” art form until recently, as well as the relative modern nature of video games, as games with in-depth stories are a modern concept. One article that does exist, however, is titled “Vicarious Play and the Paradox of the Video Game Movie,” written by Peter Gutiérrez and published in periodical *Screen*

Education in the Spring of 2013. This article explores how video game adaptations have failed in the past, and theorizes about the shortcomings of several different adaptations, including *Resident Evil* and *Mortal Kombat*. The author's primary theory about why these movies fail is focused aesthetic and simulated gameplay. The author theorizes that since movies are unable to include the active participation that is inherent in a video game, movies based on games tend to fall flat and are unable to engage the audience.

Another viewpoint is viewing video game adaptations from a cinematography point of view. Will Brooker talked at length about this viewpoint in his article "Camera-Eye, CG-Eye: Videogames and the 'Cinematic'," written for the Spring 2009 edition of *Cinema Journal*. This article also talks at length about how films often resemble games in terms of mise-en-scene but mentions that adaptations will often not try to replicate the player's experience one-to-one. The author goes on to mention how video games have impacted the cinema, drawing parallels between modern use of CGI and large-scale action scenes in movies, and how often that aspect of a film gets labeled as videogame-style. The author concludes by explaining the impact movies have had on gaming, explaining the rise of cinematic gaming experiences.

When looking at adaptation theory, one important aspect that needs to be addressed is the way that narrative is depicted within video games. In the article "From intertext to outcome: an archeology of classic video game narrative" by Michael Zalot, published in the *Atlantic Journal of Communication* in 2018, the author examines how narrative was depicted in classic video games. He discusses how in the mid 70's to early 80's, video game narrative tended to focus on singular characters, linear narratives, and relied on multimedia techniques to form narrative connections. One example of this would be Nintendo's *Donkey Kong*, which was able to connect quickly with audiences thanks to its connection with *King Kong*. Major aspects of external media

that the author touches upon include cabinet artwork, advertisements, real-world contests with physical prizes, and borrowed story elements, such as the Cold War. The article presents a methodology for dissecting the different kinds of narrative connected to classic video games and provides an archeological analysis framework to categorize different games. The author finishes by giving a brief overview into how narrative evolved beyond the arcade days into home console releases.

Modern video game development brought with it a new wave of narrative techniques. The idea of how video games develop their narratives and incorporate storytelling within play was explored in the article “Doing Game Studies: A Multi-Method Approach to the Study of Textuality, Interactivity and Narrative Space” by Diane Carr, Gareth Scott, Andrew Burn and David Buckingham in the February 2004 edition of *Media International Australia*. In this article, the authors sought to answer a variety of questions regarding player engagement with a game, including interactivity, narrative, and role-play in order to determine how game studies should evolve as a field of research. The author emphasizes the importance of the player in game studies and determines how ideas such as player agency and motivation can impact a game’s narrative. The authors conclude that the field of games studies is multidisciplinary and explains that the relative youth of this field of research leaves plenty of room for opposing ideas and further development.

While the topic of video game to movie adaption is lightly researched in the academic field, some work has been done in the opposite direction. In the article “Adaptation and New Media” author Michael Ryan Moore explores the world of video games based on movies for the third volume of *Adaptation*. He discusses how narratives, themes and rhythms are preserved in the adaptation process, and goes into the difficulties of creating an interactive media experience

based on a non-interactive one. He also discusses the continued growth of “new media”, which is defined as media created for digital, rather than analog, communication. Since video games are considered digital, and film analog, he argues that it creates a set of unique differences when it comes to how audiences engage with what they are consuming. While the challenges are vastly different between the types of adaptations, the points Moore discusses are important to understanding the divide between media generations.

While academic literature about video game to movie adaptations may be light, plenty of research has been done into other forms of media to movie adaptation. By far the most common type of adaptation is book to movie, as both forms are well respected in the scholarly field. One such article that examines this type of adaptation is “Introduction: Reading Movies” by Peter Dickinson in the Spring 2002 edition of *Essays on Canadian Writing*. This film provides an excellent deep dive into various book to movie adaptations and provides a solid framework for how narrative can be examined when one medium is adapted into another. This article also discusses an important aspect of adaptation studies, which is that historically, studies of this nature tend to focus exclusively on book to film, ignoring other populist forms of media. While this article cites plays as an underserved source material, the arguments it makes can be easily translated to other underserved mediums.

In terms of plays, the works of Shakespeare have been a popular choice for adaptation since the early days of cinema. In the article “A Cinema for Shakespeare,” written by Sidney Homan in the March 1976 edition of *Literature Film Quarterly*, she explains the tumultuous history of Shakespearean adaptations up to that point. She cites the critical and popular reception of a number of different films and dissects how each one is able to appeal to a different subsection of viewers. While this article is dated, it provides an excellent framework to separate

viewers into different categories, and the categories she comes with can be easily translated into a modern setting.

Main Observations

When examining the film adaptations, a number of important factors came to light that informed how successfully the adaptations translated the narratives across the two mediums. The first was identifying the scope of the game in question, and properly planning the narrative structure to best tell the story within the limited time of a film. Second, it proved crucially important that the film studio carefully consider what made each game franchise unique, and how those elements could be implemented or enhanced to create a final film that was attractive to preexisting fans. Lastly, the involvement of the original creative leads of the game in the production of the film often had an impact on how the adaptation process would be perceived by the existing fanbase. Important creative leads include the directors, writers, artists, developers, and other individuals involved in the game production process. All of the above factors played a key role in how an adaptation was received, but some of the films had additional quirks that made them unique.

History of Adaptations in Hollywood

With the ever-increasing popularity of video games toward the end of the 20th century, especially with the runaway success of the Nintendo Entertainment System after the Atari market collapse, it became clear that video games would become a permanent fixture in the cultural landscape. As a result, Hollywood began to incorporate video games into movies, including movies based around video games and, eventually, adaptations. The first movie released to directly feature video games as a core element was *Tron*, the 1982 Disney film that featured

cutting edge computer animation. This would set the tone for video game films going forward, with them frequently being directed at a younger audience, and often focusing on action and adventure, or exploring themes of childhood and growing up.

The first proper adaptation would be the infamous *Super Mario Bros.*, released in 1993. With the release of this film, a financial failure that resulted in a \$28 million loss for the Buena Vista pictures, a number of troubling patterns begin to emerge in the world of Hollywood adaptations (Box Office Mojo). First, the movies often wound up with mediocre or awful performances at the box office and were almost universally panned by critics and fans alike. Some films retained a cult following, such as the campy *Street Fighter*. Most, on the other hand, are regarded as forgotten failures, such as *House of the Dead* and *Postal*. Second, most of these films are not produced in-house by the publishers of the games themselves, instead relying on Hollywood production houses to create the adaptation. This is an unavoidable issue in the adaptation process; however, the involvement of the original game publisher can vary wildly depending on the production. A lack of involvement can in turn lead to a variety of different problems, chief among them being faithfulness to the source material, as was the case with the *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil* films. Third, high profile video game movies have primarily been aimed at a mass-market audience, limiting their ability to create a film that dives too deep into the small details within some of the franchises they adapt. This broad market appeal means that existing fans often feel patronized, and while most films are able to make their money back, they are not as financially successful as other blockbusters. One example would be 2018's *Tomb Raider* only making a box office profit of \$181 million on a budget of \$94 million, while *Black Panther*, in the same year, was able to make \$1.1 billion on a \$202 million budget (Box Office Mojo). Some films have been made on a tighter budget and target more specific markets;

however, none of them have been handled gracefully enough to reach critical success, with 2005's *Doom* in particular failing to hit its relatively small \$60 million budget (Box Office Mojo). Lastly, Hollywood is far more concerned with creating live action movies, which occasionally proves to be a challenge with adapting games with fantastical character designs and settings.

Throughout the history of Hollywood adaptations, several genres have emerged as particular favorites. The first, and most prominent, is the action-adventure and role-playing game genres. These films include *Super Mario Bros.*, the *Lara Croft* franchise, *Assassin's Creed*, and *Warcraft*. This genre provides an excellent base for an adaptation, as games in this genre often contain movie-like plot structures already and can easily be translated into genre-targeted films for the movie market. Another common genre for adaptation is the fighting game, which provides a good framework for a martial arts movie with a strong focus on characterization. The two franchise staples from this genre to see adaptations are *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*. Lastly, there has been a number of horror game adaptations created, although they are frequently adapted into action films with a horror aesthetic, matching the gameplay styles of the games. *Resident Evil* and *Doom* are the highest profile adaptations in this genre, with the Paul W.S. Anderson-directed *Resident Evil* franchise in particular managing to remain financially profitable across all five films in the franchise (Box Office Mojo). By adapting within the existing Hollywood genre types, films are often able to find an audience outside of the preexisting fans

Film Breakdown – *Street Fighter* (1994)

Street Fighter is one of the longest running and most wildly popular franchises in the one-on-one fighting game genre. Starting its life in 1987 in arcades, it has gone on to spawn 96 different titles with a total of 46 million units sold as of 2021 (Capcom). The franchise has a

rogue's gallery of different characters, with well over 100 throughout all the mainline and spin-off games. Throughout the years, *Street Fighter* has primarily focused on the gameplay side of development, especially in arcades, with story modes often providing a loose connectivity to the fights the players partake in. The franchise, however, found success in other purely storytelling mediums, with several animations, manga, comics, and a few live action movies coming out to various degrees of success. One aspect of *Street Fighter* that likely assisted in this success is the bright and colorful cast of characters.

Of the multitudes of characters seen throughout the *Street Fighter* franchise, several stand out as series highlights. The franchise icon and principal protagonist is Ryu, a Japanese martial artist who travels the world entering fighting tournaments with his friend and rival Ken. The franchise really started to take off with the second entry, which introduced many iconic characters to the series, including Chun-Li, M. Bison, Guile, Cammy, and Vega. All these characters feature exaggerated costuming and personalities, a standard practice in the fighting game genre to help players differentiate between two characters on the screen with a quick glance. This type of characterization is like that utilized in comic books, which lends the franchise an ability to quickly be adapted into serialized stories. Within the games, what story there is often based entirely off character interactions, with each game typically having one overarching villain who is involved with some sort of fighting tournament. Each fight will often be accompanied with a few lines of banter between the fighters, playing off each of their respective personalities. While this works well in a video game, as players of this genre are often far more concerned with the mechanics of the game itself, it poses several problems when attempting to translate it into a live-action movie.

The 1994 film *Street Fighter*, directed by Steven de Souza, follows the exploits of Guile and a group of his allies as they attempt to rescue a group of hostages from the villainous M. Bison. With a Rotten Tomatoes score of 13% and a worldwide box office of \$99 million dollars, it was divisive on release (Box Office Mojo). The film is a campy, light-hearted action flick that suffered from harsh reviews from critics and the audience alike upon initial release, with David Kronke of the *Los Angeles Times* describing the films as “95 minutes of random explosions, jaw-dropping plot holes, wooden acting and special effects that would have made Ed Wood Jr. proud” (Kronke). In the years since, however, the film has gained a cult following thanks to its ridiculous plot and several memorable scenes. The narrative is not as deep as other adaptations, but it is able to make solid use of the existing characters to tell an engaging, if not complex, story. The plot itself was created entirely for the movie, borrowing little from the already anemic *Street Fighter* story. On its own, the film is able to use the superficial trappings of the franchise to tell a decent enough story for what it set out to do. However, while the film may be an enjoyable watch, it has a few critical flaws that hold it back from being an excellent adaptation.

One flaw often cited as a reason for the failure of this movie is a lack of faithfulness to the source material. This is especially evident in the way that the characters are presented, which varies a significant amount from the source material. The one inspired casting choice is Raúl Juliá as the villain of the film M. Bison. This was Juliá’s final performance before his untimely death, and he is able to inject the character with the right kind of campy energy to let him shine as the standout performance. Other characters, on the other hand, are not quite so lucky. Jean-Claude Van Damme’s performance of the hero Guile, who is meant to be American but is played by a very Belgian actor, is not especially effective in his role, seemingly being there for his marital arts skills alone. Series mainstays such as Chun-Li and Ryu are shunted to the side, a

shame as the additional diversity in the main cast would have been welcome. However, the worst choice would have to be Kylie Minogue as Cammy, as the Australian pop star is not able to convey the level of strength that fans would have expected from the character. Since the *Street Fighter* franchise is so heavily reliant on the strength of the characters, these weak casting choices meant that fans of the games were left disappointed by the lackluster portrayal of some of gaming's most iconic characters.

Another flaw in the adaptation process is the lack of a clearly defined narrative to draw upon for the film. While *Street Fighter* is not known for its narrative, it would have been possible to adapt the tournament format of the games into a classic martial arts flick. However, the director chose to deliberately distance the film from the games by creating new story elements and recharacterizing some of the key figures to match. This may not have been a terrible idea, but the execution leaves a lot to be desired. The plot feels hastily assembled, with little care given to ensuring that characters were properly explained and motivated. In a cruel twist of fate, while the film was trying to differentiate itself the games, it abandoned the simplicity that made the games attractive in the first place. Film was, at the end of the day, not the best medium for these characters. The fact that the games were far more concerned with pushing characters over plot meant that film, a medium that relies on plot, was not the best choice for adaption. This would be proven with the success of the comics and animated television series, which were able to tell smaller stories that let the characters shine, rather than relying on creating film length plots out of caricatures.

Film Breakdown – *Warcraft* (2016)

The *Warcraft* franchise is one of the all-time important examples in the history of gaming on the PC. Starting its life as a real-time strategy game on MS-DOS in 1994, it would later

explode into worldwide success with the launch of one of the most impactful massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) in *World of Warcraft*. Utilizing the high fantasy setting of Azeroth, the franchise tells the history of this land, including the conflict between the Alliance and the Horde. The series features many mainstays of the high fantasy genre, including elves, orcs, goblins, dwarves, and trolls amongst others. Much of the worldbuilding is done in the same mold as the *Lord of the Rings*, with rich lore and complex societies that have been developed over years of different game releases and external pieces of media.

Throughout the *Warcraft* series, most of the lore development and worldbuilding has occurred in two main places: the games and the novels. The novels are considered to be canonical within the series and are typically focused on filling in the gaps in storytelling not explored within the games. The vast majority of these novels are used to explain the story through the points of view of various main characters that are not playable within the games, such as *Arthas: Rise of the Lich King* by Christie Golden and *Illidan* by William King. Within the games, two different styles of storytelling are utilized. The real-time strategy games have a definitive story, but the player engages with it as an omniscient narrator. The MMORPG, on the other hand, has the player taking the role of a small part of a much larger conflict. By utilizing these two mediums, Blizzard, the developers behind *Warcraft*, is able to tell a large-scale epic story through a wide variety of different viewpoints, helping to engage the audience with the world they are creating. However, this success in creating a complex world with its own history would come back to haunt them when they sought to create a movie adaptation.

The *Warcraft* movie, released in 2016 and directed by Duncan Jones, seems like a great idea on paper. While its Rotten Tomatoes score of 28% is not impressive, it was able to make

\$439 million worldwide in the box office on a budget of \$160 million (Box Office Mojo). The franchise is full of great stories that could be adapted into a film, especially the ones laid out in the novels. It is easy to picture this film acting as the first in a long line of high fantasy epics in the style of *Lord of the Rings*. All of the base elements were there, but the filmmakers made a few crucial errors that led the narrative in this movie to be less than ideal. One major flaw that was clear to critics and audiences alike is that the film tried to fit far too much into a single movie. The *Warcraft* lore is deep and complex, and as a result it is difficult to try to explain everything within a single movie. As a result, the movie comes across as an incomprehensible mess to an audience unfamiliar with the source material. As Nguyen Le of Chron explains: “viewers who know little of the "Warcraft" game must do a bit of rushed processing during exposition. And those who are familiar with the storylines have to sit through info dumps” (Le). The filmmakers fell into a classic pitfall faced by anyone trying to adapt a video game: scope. The director and writers failed to properly recognize the story that they needed to tell if they wanted to create a single film. The plotline that they chose involves hours upon hours of gameplay and would be nearly impossible to convey within a single mainstream film. If the studio had taken the risk and greenlighted a full series of movies, the franchise might have been able to rival *The Lord of the Rings*. Their failure to manage scope, however, proved too much for the plot to overcome.

As a result of the mismanagement of the scope, *Warcraft* also suffers in its characterization. Since the film tried to do far too much, no characters were truly able to shine. The production chose to focus on a section of the lore that is heavily driven by action and intrigue, not by characters. While this section of the lore, which consists of the Orcish invasion of Azeroth and the beginning of the Horde & Alliance feud, is crucially important to the lore as a

whole, it is not a good entry point to the series. There is little time for the audience to become familiar with the characters, relying instead on hoping that the audience is able to intuit motivations through actions. While this may work well in many genres, the inherent suspension of disbelief required in the high fantasy genre creates an additional hurdle for fans unfamiliar with the franchise to overcome. The film seems to place much of its energy into characterizing Gul'dan, the villain of the movie, and the one character whose motivation is clear from the start. The film would have benefited greatly from focusing on one of the games or books in isolation, placing its energy into building up a single protagonist that other characters can work off of in future franchise entries. By doing this, the franchise could have focused on one of the many beloved characters of the later series, such as Thrall or Jaina, and could have explored the events of this movie in later franchises, or through smaller expository scenes. This film ultimately is indicative of how important choosing the correct story to tell is when producing an adaptation.

History of Adaptations in Japan

Unlike Hollywood, Japan began adapting video games into movies with animated features. The first ever anime film to be released based on a video game was *Super Mario Bros.: Peach-Hime Kyushutsu Dai Sakusen!*, released in 1986. This began a trend of animated films that continues to this day, with the most prolific franchise being *Pokémon*. This franchise along with *Yo-Kai Watch*, *Fate/stay night*, and *Final Fantasy* are the only ones to receive proper worldwide releases, with several movies that pertain to franchises without the same level of international recognition only focusing on the Japanese domestic market. Many of these films are made on far smaller budgets than Hollywood production, and as a result are often financially successful, if falling short on critical reception. In addition, the practice of creating anime and

manga adaptations of video games is far more common in the Japanese market, directly leading to consumers being more accepting of adaptational changes.

Live action films are less common in the Japanese market, with the first, *Forbidden Siren*, being released in 2006. A majority of these films are adaptations of horror games, which generally translate well into the film medium. The exceptions to this rule are *Ace Attorney* and *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, which fit into the legal drama and crime thriller genres respectively. These films mostly target an older audience than their anime counterparts, and as a result are able to utilize film techniques to tell subtler plots. The Japanese market seems to have developed a better ability to understanding of what goes into a good adaption, and the importance of managing scope and picking narratives that will best translate onto the film screen. These early advantages gave Japan the edge over Hollywood when adaptations were first being developed, and Hollywood would need to catch up.

Film Breakdown – *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (2007)

Yakuza is an action RPG beat-'em-up series that started life in 2005 on the PlayStation, and is still ongoing to this day, with the latest release occurring in 2020. Developed by Ryu Ga Gotoku studio and published by Sega, the series is a crime drama with some comedic elements, with the first six installments following the story of ex-yakuza gangster Kazuma Kiryu and his dealings with the organization he used to belong to and society at large. Many games in the series include several playable protagonists to give the games a feeling that the player is actively engaging with a crime drama and seeing several different plotlines each unfolding independent of each other until they converge in the final act. Each game acts as an independent story, but the characterization carries over to give the whole series a cohesive narrative that draws the audience in. The main plot of each game is played straight, telling the story of how ties to the yakuza

affects people in a wide variety of ways. Kiryu is trying to leave that life behind and form a family with his adopted daughter Haruka. The story of how these two characters came to interact is explored in the first game in the series and provided the basis for the movie adaptation.

The narrative of *Yakuza* translates perfectly into a movie adaptation, which was titled *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* when officially released outside of Japan. The plot is easy to understand, built on the framework of a preexisting movie genre, and succinct enough to easily translate to a film. A first-time viewer is able to quickly understand the motivations and backgrounds of each character and immediately immerse themselves into the plot. Since the narrative of the game series is largely based on tropes that already existed in the crime movie genre, it is easy for non-players to suspend their disbelief and watch the film fully independently from the games. In addition, while the game itself is lengthy, a large majority of the storytelling is presented through cutscenes, so there is little lost in adaptation when the gameplay element is removed. The gameplay consists primarily of fighting, so it is easily translated in filmed action scenes. While the framework of the game provides an excellent base for adaptation, the filmmakers were also able to make a few key cuts that enhanced the adaptation process.

While the core story of each entry in the *Yakuza* series is a crime story, the games are renowned for their utilization of side stories and minigames. The game's more humorous elements shine in these moments, as there is inherent humor to seeing a grizzled ex-gangster playing darts and racing slot-cars in his free time. In addition, the side stories are often more humorous in their tone, which gives the games an element of levity to balance the often-dour and self-serious tone of the main storyline. However, the filmmakers decide to forego these ideas in adaptation, a move which greatly helps the adaptation in feeling like a proper film. Many of these elements make sense in the flow of gameplay, as there are often clear distinctions between

gameplay and story sections. However, trying to shoehorn in these humorous elements into an otherwise straightforward crime drama would have thrown the audience for a loop, especially if the viewers were unfamiliar with the source material. Some of the humor is still present, but it is smartly utilized to enhance characters such as Goro Majima, who is characterized as an unhinged semi-antagonist to Kiryu. Balancing the tone was a necessity in a game with wide tone shifts, and the filmmakers were able to execute it perfectly.

Another factor that greatly enhanced the adaptation experience is the general aesthetic of the game. Since the cast is entirely humans, and the setting is a pastiche of an urban Tokyo neighborhood, the film version has the look and feel of the video game, despite being entirely live action. The only cartoonish elements of the game are emphasized violence effects during the fight, which the filmmakers are able to translate well onto the screen. When considering the medium during the adaptation process, a common hurdle is that video games, with very few exceptions, are entirely animated. When companies are considering franchises to be adapted, they far too often try to do live-action versions of games with cartoonish or exaggerated aesthetics. By seeking out a franchise that has a more realistic style, far less of the game's identity is lost in translation.

Film Breakdown – *Persona 3: The Movie* (2013-16)

The *Persona* franchise, published by Atlus and directed primarily by Katsura Hashino, is regarded as one of the cornerstone franchises of the Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG) genre. Originally conceived as a spin-off to the much older *Shin Megami Tensei* series, the franchise has become a wide success across multiple console generations and the games are beloved by both critics and fans alike. The series focuses on explorations of the subconscious mind, and this takes many different forms throughout different titles in the series. In *Persona 3*, the main

characters, who form a group called the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad, or S.E.E.S., investigate a time anomaly known as the Dark Hour, a period of time after midnight in which a select few can enter a tower inhabited by creatures known as Shadows.

The in-game story follows a player-named protagonist (named Makoto Yuki in the movie adaptation) as he moves into a new high school and discovers that he is one of the few people who can experience the Dark Hour. Upon this discovery, he awakens to his persona, Orpheus, and joins SEES in the investigation of Tartarus and its link to the Dark Hour. The game's story unfolds over a year of in-game time, represented as the four seasons and tying into Makoto's school career. In addition to the story-relevant events that occur on set dates, the game allows for the player to do a wide variety of activities in the time in-between, ranging from forming social bonds with the cast of characters to improving the player's statistics through extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, and other such events. The story is presented primarily through visual-novel style text boxes; however, there are some voice-acted scenes and in-game animated cutscenes.

The film adaptation of the game is divided into four parts, each having a run time of approximately one hour and 30 minutes. The films share the main title *Persona 3 the Movie*, with their subtitles being: #1 *Spring by Birth*, #2 *Midsummer's Knight's Dream*, #3 *Falling Down*, and #4 *Winter of Rebirth*. The films tell one continuous story, sharing the seasonal structure of the game, with each subtitle being a play on words indicating the season that the film is set in. The film is a fairly typical Japanese-style animated film, leaning heavily on the art style represented within the game, especially the in-game character designs. In addition, the film borrows some of its structure from the manga adaptation of *Persona 3*. The adaptation of the film was produced by Aniplex and Atlus, with A-1 Pictures handling the creation. The films

were released theatrically in Japan, with their respective release dates being November 23, 2013, June 7, 2014, April 4, 2015, and Jan 24, 2016.

The primary problems that arise when attempting to adapt a *Persona* game, and role-playing games in general, is that their stories are often told in-game over 100+ hours of player time. This can often lead to the screenwriters needing to distill a story down to its bare minimum, which can leave the audience confused, dissatisfied, or both depending on the elements of the story that are kept in or discarded. The *Persona 3* movies, and to an extent the television anime produced for *Persona 4* and *5*, solve this problem by recognizing that a story of this magnitude cannot be told within the runtime of a single film. By planning at the outset to produce an entire series of films, the screenwriters are able to get a grasp of the scope of the story and determine at the outset what is the most important aspects of the story that need to be represented. This takes the form of excluding many of the side characters and interactions that are present in the game but are not crucial to the plot as a whole. Makoto's interactions with many of the other characters are either trimmed down or are implied to happen within the various time skips that occur within the film. While this can leave a viewer who is inexperienced with the plot of the original game lost at times, the film is still able to develop the character interactions well enough to allow for the climax of the story to be as effective as it is in the game.

One of the strongest developed characters in the film is Elizabeth, the attendant of the Velvet Room. This is surprising, given the film's deliberate choice to leave much of the Velvet Room lore unexplored by the film. The Velvet Room is one of the few overarching plot devices throughout the *Persona* franchise, with each game's respective attendant and the character of Igor acting as semi-guides and semi-narrators throughout the game. The film, however, decided to eschew exploring that lore, a choice that helps to enhance the viewing experience. The

screenwriters realized that since this concept isn't relevant to the plot directly, they can leave its machinations for the audience to ponder later, and the focus can be redirected to interpersonal relationships between the characters and events more directly related to the plot. In doing this, the character of Elizabeth, who is an outsider to the world that the protagonist live in, is able to shine brighter than she did in the games, since the audience is not directly interacting with her as a part of the core gameplay loop. This makes her scene in the fourth film with Makoto especially memorable, as she provides him with the wonder and innocence he requires to break him from his current bleak perspective on the world, acting as the catalyst for the protagonist's decision to go out fighting for the fate of the world.

Overall, *Persona 3* is a fantastic example of the story-based style of adaptation. The source material was excellently chosen, with a strong, linear narrative that can be directly translated to a screenplay without having to sacrifice clarity in storytelling. Strategic choices allowed the filmmakers to make the cuts necessary to preserve beloved characters without having to succumb to bloated runtimes and confusing plot structures. The medium was well chosen, with the art style of the *Persona* franchise translating to big-budget Japanese animation perfectly. This film stands as a standout in the world of adaptation, and the lessons it provides should be studied carefully by anyone in the industry.

Non-Standard Adaptation Techniques

Several different films, or media entities that could be described as films, have come out over the years that do not fit into the regular framework world or story adaptations. These outliers include films that play with their canonicity, films that were never released in theaters or as home releases, and films that act as direct sequels within a series' timeline. Most of this experimentation has occurred within the Japanese market, with some bleed over into the western

markets. These unique adaptations provide a chance to see what the future of adaptations could hold and helps to show the importance of understanding the target audience of a film.

Using Films as a Direct Sequel – *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* (2005)

Final Fantasy VII is commonly considered to be one of the greatest video games ever made, frequently entering the top 100 all-time lists for various different publications, and holding an impressive score of 91 on Metacritic. An entry in the ever-popular *Final Fantasy* series of Japanese RPGs, it tells the timeless story of a mercenary group working to defeat an evil corporation and becoming involved in a potential conflict that could spell the destruction of the world. Following the character of ex-soldier Cloud, the plot follows his unlikely group of allies in uncovering the secrets behind the Shinra corporation and defeating one of the most iconic villains in video game history, the One-Winged Angel Sephiroth. The narrative has captivated gamers since its 1997 release, and is continuously adored by fans of the genre, with long-lasting commercial potential highlighted by the success of the recent remake of the game, which had its first part launched in 2020 and later parts still in development.

The initial success of the game led Square Enix and director Tetsuya Nomura to consider how to continue to develop the beloved characters of the game. Due to the nature of the *Final Fantasy* franchise, main entries in the series rarely acted as direct prequels and sequels to each other. The company took the world and characters developed in *Final Fantasy VII* and chose to create a multimedia franchise around it titled *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII*. As one would expect, this franchise consisted primarily of spin-off games, encompassing the remake, *Before Crisis*, *Dirge of Cerberus*, *Crisis Core*, and *Ever Crisis*. The franchise would, however, produce one film that was directly included in the continuity of the games, a style of adaptation that was rarely seen in 2005. Before this, most adaptations of video game titles stood outside of

continuity, acting as external pieces of media that wouldn't be considered part of the cannon of the series. This film, titled *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, would mark a noticeable shift in how films could be used within a game franchise.

Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children is an enigma in the history of video game to movie adaptations. Due to the nature of its direct-to-video release, box-office numbers are not available, however, the film currently holds a 50% on Rotten Tomatoes. By its very design, it is not meant to be enjoyed by people unfamiliar with the franchise. The characters are poorly explained, major narrative details are assumed to be already understood by the audience, and entire plot points are left purposefully unresolved since it is designed to be a part of a greater whole. For the most part, a viewer unfamiliar with the source material will not get much from the film outside of impressive for the time computer-generated animation. However, unlike other adaptations that wind up alienating non-fans, *Advent Children* was written, directed, and marketed as providing a story for existing fans first, without worrying about broad market appeal. By doing this, the film was able to act as a direct sequel in line with the games, rather than a traditional adaptation. In addition, the film was packed with a brand-new style of computer-generated animation, which gave it a reason for non-fans to seek it out anyway. Even if the plot and characters are not important to a viewer, it is still easy to enjoy the film for what it is.

Having a film act as a direct sequel for a game is a technique that has yet to be explored outside of this specific franchise. One major hurdle is that it would require a devoted fanbase that would be willing to view the film. Game genres that tend to generate this kind of fanbase require deep lore, memorable characters, and a story structure that allows for sequels but doesn't rely on gameplay for story beats. Genres that match include role-playing games and action-adventure

games, since these games often are the most story-driven within the video game space.

Franchises that could create a sequel in this vein include *The Legend of Zelda*, *Fallout*, *The Elder Scrolls*, or *Dragon Age*. All of these franchises have taken the time to develop their respective worlds to the degree that fans would more than likely be willing to experience stories told outside of the gaming medium. Most of these franchises have seen success outside games themselves, mostly through comics and novels. However, the limited appeal of requiring external knowledge makes the prospect unattractive, which is a shame given that the fans would be more than willing to go and see it. Since film studios in the modern era prefer safe choices, they are less willing to take that chance, which holds back the possibilities of adaptation.

Playing with Cannon – The Pokémon Franchise

In the pop culture landscape of the 21st century, *Pokémon* has proven itself to be a contender for one of the most universally recognized gaming franchises. Starting as handheld series of Japanese RPGs for the Nintendo Game Boy console, the franchise has exploded into a juggernaut of spin-off games, television series, movies, trading card games, merchandise, and other such products. The series focuses on the creatures known as Pokémon, and their interactions with the human populations of the various different regions explored in a wide variety of media properties. With the series celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2021, it currently consists of eight generations of main series games, 24 seasons of the television anime, 23 animated and one live-action film, several dozen manga series, and a pile of spin-off games. What makes *Pokémon* unique in the pantheon of gaming franchises is its cross-media appeal and symbiotic relationship between the various different platforms the franchise has appeared on.

Unlike many other franchises, the film adaptations, and the games of the Pokémon franchise work together to form a cohesive whole, rather than acting as traditional adaptations.

Unlike other adaptations, which are reliant on the source material for a majority of the plot and lore details, the various different mediums combine together to create the narrative as a whole. The television series and the various animated films often include characters that are both wholly unique to them and characters borrowed from the game. The vast majority of the non-game media projects focus on the adventures of Ash Ketchum, who acts as an insert character for the player-created main character present in the main series of games. Since Ash interacts with many characters from the game, such as Pokémon professors and gym leaders, the audience is able to impose their own gameplay experience onto the films, and vice versa. The character of Ash Ketchum, however, is developed enough that the films can stand alone without the need for audience interaction with the games. This, in large part, is why the Pokémon franchise has been able to ascend from merely a game franchise to the global phenomenon it has become. The characters, especially the Pokémon creatures themselves, have ascended from video game sprites to cultural icons, with Pikachu in particular becoming an unofficial mascot for the entire country of Japan.

While the Pokémon franchise certainly takes the crown for most films created, narrative quality itself remain varied. This varied quality is reflected in the Rotten Tomatoes' scores for these films, which range from 15% to 71%, with a general trend upward. The films overall are designed to be watched by a young audience, so they don't have particularly complex plots. Many stories are simple, but often well executed adventures expensing the world of Pokémon in the process. Thematically, the films often tackle issues relevant to their young audience, including friendship, self-identity, and teamwork, and succeed on that front rather well. The majority of the films are focused on a "legendary" Pokémon, which are Pokémon that only appear once in the games and are coveted by players. Utilizing this sub-category of Pokémon

makes each film feel unique, and the use of recognizable Pokémon as the major players in the plot helps to attract fans of the games both young and old. Another benefit of using these animated films to deepen the lore of the franchise is the ability to further characterize some of the key NPCs in the games. Often characters in the game, especially the gym leaders, are only seen for short periods of time, and are rarely given scenes devoted purely to deepening characters. The films often allow their personality to develop, further deepening the audience's investment in the story of each region.

Beyond the animated features, the franchise saw the release of one notable live action CGI hybrid movie in 2019. *Pokémon: Detective Pikachu* is an adaptation based loosely on the spin-off game *Detective Pikachu*, released for the Nintendo 3DS worldwide in 2018. The film borrows little from the plot of the game itself, only the concept of having a Pokémon-Human detective duo solving crimes in a city. The film itself is a fun movie, with middling critical response but easily making its money back on the production and providing fans of the franchise with a solid representation of Pokémon in the Hollywood landscape. With a respectable 68% on Rotten Tomatoes and a \$434 million worldwide box office, the film can easily be considered a success (Box Office Mojo). One major benefit of adapting the Pokémon franchise is that there is a low barrier to entry for understanding the franchise. Unlike other massive franchises with decades of worldbuilding and lore, the Pokémon concept is simple enough that so long as an audience can accept these fantastical creatures as being a part of this world, the filmmakers are able to tell nearly any story they want. The franchise has proven over the years that it can be enjoyed by parents and children alike.

The plot is a simple mystery plot, focusing on discovering the origins of a mysterious drug that has flooded the streets and is causing Pokémon to turn into wild animals. This movie is

an excellent example of how a narrow scope can seriously benefit a production in the long run. The movie doesn't focus on explaining every minute detail, rather only explaining the broad strokes of the world to the audience and letting the rest of the worldbuilding occur naturally during character interactions. This approach to worldbuilding provides several benefits to the adaptation process. First, it is able to strike a balance between being clear to viewers who are not familiar to the franchise while not alienating existing fans who already know what is going on. Often adaptations that focus too much on explaining every aspect of the lore can come off as being overly complicated, turning off new fans while providing nothing new for existing fans. Another benefit provided by this approach is that it allows new stories to be told, which provides reason for existing fans to watch. Lastly, a narrow scope forces the filmmakers to create a plot that matches the medium. One reoccurring problem with the adaptation process is that most video game narratives are far too sprawling and complex to be adapted directly into a shortened film format.

The greatest strength of the Pokémon film franchise is its accessibility. Nearly any filmgoer, no matter the demographic, can likely find something to enjoy within these movies. The simplicity of the Pokémon concept lets filmmakers tell any story they want to, without feeling shackled to the conventions of adaptation. By letting the films exist independently from the games, with unique characters, themes, and locations, many of the typical pitfalls of adaptation can be avoided. Fans rarely feel like they've been betrayed, non-fans are able to understand the concept, and filmmakers can create narratives built for the screens. The Pokémon film methodology, especially with the success of *Pokémon: Detective Pikachu*, appears to have had ramifications throughout the industry. Only time will tell how future movies will be

received, especially the much-hyped new animated *Super Mario Bros.* movie; however, the path that Hollywood adaptations appear to be proceeding down is a bright one.

Cutscenes as Movies – The Kingdom Hearts Franchise

Kingdom Hearts is an action role-playing game that was first released in 2002 for the PlayStation 2. Developed by Square Enix, and primarily directed by Tetsuya Nomura, this series is ongoing to this day, with three games in the main numbered series, and a number of spin-off games released between for a total of 11 games, not including rereleases and updates to previous titles. The franchise's presence on a wide variety of platforms and console generations has led to the development of a devoted fanbase, which is assisted by the unique selling point of the franchise. The series follows the adventures of Sora and his gang of friends, and features characters from a number of external franchises, including *The World Ends with You*, *Final Fantasy*, and most notably, a wide variety of Disney properties. Donald, Goofy, and Mikey can all be considered part of the main cast, with one of the game's selling points being the ability to visit various worlds based on Disney movies, including *Aladdin*, *Hercules*, and *Alice in Wonderland*. Thanks to the utilization of these Disney worlds, *Kingdom Hearts* is put in a unique position when it comes to characterization. Since the audience is likely familiar with the Disney characters from their respective movies, the cast of unique characters created by Nomura have built in relationships to play off of, helping audiences to immediately connect with them, despite the inherent stylistic differences between the western-style animation of Disney and the Japanese-style animation of the characters unique to *Kingdom Hearts*.

One aspect of storytelling that makes *Kingdom Hearts* particularly interesting to fans is its unique approach to lore and worldbuilding, as it is one of the few gaming franchises in which all of its spin-off games are canonical. Every game, no matter how inconsequential, has had

some tidbit of story that proves crucial to understanding the plot as a whole. This was especially true of the second game released in the series, *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*. As this was a spin-off handheld title, traditional wisdom at the time led fans to believe that nothing of particular importance would happen during the plot of this game. However, a number of crucial plot details were included in the game, including the fate of Sora after *Kingdom Hearts*, the introduction of a number of key players in later games, and the first appearance of Organization XIII, who would be the primary antagonists of *Kingdom Hearts II*. However, as there was a 13-year gap between *Kingdom Hearts II* and *III*, Square Enix needed to catch new fans up on the plotline of the series. This unique approach to storytelling, combined with the wide swath of consoles that the games appeared on, necessitated the rerelease of the games in the PlayStation 4 bundle *Kingdom Hearts: The Story so Far*, which contains *Kingdom Hearts: HD 1.5 Remix*, *HD 2.5 Remix*, and *2.8 Final Chapter Prologue*. While these bundles included HD remakes of larger spin-off titles, including *Chain of Memories*, *Birth by Sleep*, and *Dream Drop Distance*, Square Enix and Nomura decided to take a novel approach to handling some of the smaller games, such as *358/2 Days*, *Kingdom Hearts χ*, and *Re:coded*.

As the plot for this series grew ever more complex, and Square Enix decided that the games would be rereleased in HD, Nomura chose to release *358/2 Days* and *Re:coded* as remastered cutscene compilations, functionally creating movie adaptations of these two games. As both of these games were originally designed for handheld consoles, with both titles originally released on the Nintendo DS console. This hardware imposed serious limitations on the graphical fidelity and gameplay complexity of both of these games, so the choice to focus on only remastering the story cutscenes makes logical sense. Another important consideration is that of all the *Kingdom Hearts* titles, these two in particular have smaller, far more linear narratives.

358/2 Days tells the focused story of a single character, Roxas, and his experiences within Organization XIII. The narrative unfolds over 358 and a half days (hence the name) and is far more insular than the world-hopping, grand stakes adventures of some of the aforementioned larger titles. This character-focused narrative can be told without necessitating the inclusion of the grand-scale boss fights that occur during gameplay loop of a traditional action RPG.

However, one knock against this formula is that it misses some of the smaller character moments that occur during the core gameplay loop, weakening some of the relationships between Roxas and some of the less story relevant members of Organization XIII. Despite that shortcoming, the story is still able to maintain much of the emotional weight baked into the original game, with the twist regarding Roxas' companion Xion in particular still providing the viewer with the emotional gut punch of the original.

Re:coded operates on a similar wavelength; however, its narrative is a direct lead-in to *Kingdom Hearts II*, while *358/2 Days* is more of a side story. *Re:coded* follows the efforts of several characters exploring a corrupted journal, represented in-game as a datascape in which a digital version of main character Sora relives the events of previous games to uncover the secret of a message present in the journal. The game serves as the storyline introduction to Naminé, a key character throughout the franchise. This game in particular has virtually no plot important details within regular gameplay loop, therefore, it loses nothing by being released as a cutscene compilation. This compilation technique is a unique way to functionally adapt a video game to a movie, without having to go to a movie studio. Since these adaptations were included in bundles with actual game remakes, they didn't need to worry about marketing themselves to anyone not interested in the franchise as a whole. Rather than letting these stories go to waste, or devoting valuable developer resources into creating remakes, Nomura recognized the opportunity to reuse

the cutscenes he had already directed and ensure that a new generation of fan could enjoy these stories. However, the third game to get this treatment was notable in a few ways.

Unlike the previous two games discussed, *Kingdom Hearts χ* was still ongoing at the time of *Kingdom Hearts: 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue*'s release. As a browser-turned-mobile game, the long-term narrative was still unfolding, however, Nomura seemingly wanted to include some aspect of that story in the release. As a result, he directed a one-hour long film called *Kingdom Hearts χ: Back Cover* to be included with the remake of *Birth by Sleep* and release of *A Fragmentary Passage*. The film focuses on a set of characters unique to the χ spin off series, the Foretellers. This group of characters would have an active role in the ending of *Kingdom Hearts III*, so it was imperative that players uninterested in the side series know who they are and what their significance in the plot is. The film does an excellent job of portraying this concept, focusing on this insular group and their interpersonal conflicts. From a narrative perspective, this film acts as an excellent primer for both the (at the time) yet-to-be-released *Kingdom Hearts III* and the χ series as a whole. It managed to deliver background information, build suspense for the upcoming title, and garner interest in the ongoing mobile experience. Square Enix and Nomura again proved that movie studios are not required to make competent films, and the whole process can be contained in-house. With the right marketing behind it, these film adaptations can punch well above their weight and serve a key role in developing a franchise-wide narrative.

Conclusion

When creating a film adaptation of a movie, a number of different factors need to be considered during the creation process to ensure that the narrative structure of the game is preserved in the process. The first is identifying the scope of the game series and planning the movie accordingly. If the game franchise is a science fiction or high fantasy epic with thousands

of pages of lore and worldbuilding behind it, it will be an insurmountable challenge to condense it into a film, as was shown with the bloated *Warcraft* film. To ensure that an audience who is unfamiliar with the source material is able to understand and enjoy the film, the film producers should choose a story that is easily digestible when condensed, such as *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*, or should choose a part of a larger franchise that stands on its own without requiring unnecessary background information, which the *Pokémon* franchise is able to do with regularity. Another solution would be to create a world adaptation, which is able to create a story tailor-made for film, while still providing the characters and worldbuilding aspects that already existing fans are looking for.

The second crucial factor to consider is what aspects of the franchise fans are attracted to, and how best to tailor a film to ensure those fans are satisfied. If a franchise is famous for its characterization, then the film production should focus on creating a story that best incorporates the characters and casts the roles appropriately to ensure fans are satisfied, with *Street Fighter* facing some difficulty in this regard. For a franchise that prides itself on worldbuilding, then the film should seek to show some aspect of the world that justifies being filmed, rather than feeling like a generic film with a thin veneer of the game's lore. Lastly, if a game franchise has a captivating story, then the film should seek to create an adaptation that is loyal to the source material, even if changes need to be made in the adaptation process as was proven with the *Persona 3* films. Most of the time if a game franchise is chosen for adaption, it is already popular. There is always a reason for that popularity, and the film should tap into that reason to attract old and new fans alike.

The third, and final, factor that can ensure adaptations preserve narrative structure is to work with not only the publisher of the game, but with the creative leads behind those games.

Typically, the director of a game plays a similar role to the director of a film, controlling a good portion of the creative direction and narrative choices within the game. However, due to the increased complexity within game development, there are often several other directors, including art, gameplay, development, story, and animation. When creating an adaptation, it is important to include all of these creative leads in the creation process, as video games are as much of a collaborative medium as film, if not more so. Directors such as Tetsuya Nomura, of the *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy* franchises, was able to bring something new to both mediums when allowed to experiment. Film creation is an inherently different process to video game development, often taking less time and having a more centralized creative process. Narratives in video games are created and presented differently, therefore the adaptation process should ensure that all aspects of the game are represented and effectively shown on screen.

The Japanese film industry was more successful with its first adaptations due to a number of these aspects. Thanks to a focus on animated features, a tighter control on focus, and a history of anime adaptations of other media, video game adaptations were able to be more faithful to the source material, without sacrificing financial profit. Some of the most successful video game-based adaptations in early years were the Pokémon movies, and even saw some financial success in worldwide markets. Hollywood's focus on blockbusters in the 90's and 00's hindered their abilities to experiment with the adaptation format, and a string of high-profile flops damaged the reputation of adaptations for years to come. In recent years, Hollywood seems to have found a format that works, with *Detective Pikachu* and *Sonic: The Hedgehog* proving to be successful financially and popular with the public at large. The future looks bright for video game to movie adaptations, and hopefully the unique narrative style of games is able to find a home in the movie-watching public at large.

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