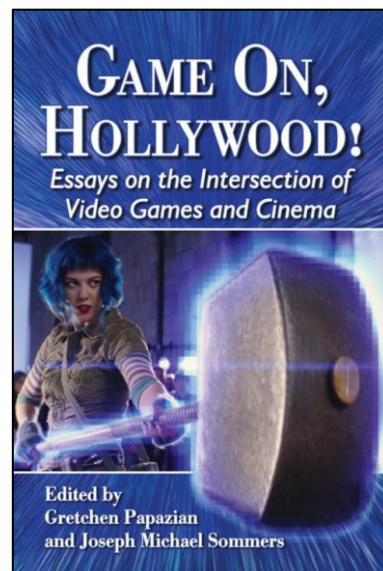


## Reviews

**Game On, Hollywood! Essays on the Intersection of Video Games and Cinema**, edited by Gretchen Papazian and Joseph Michael Sommers. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, 2013. 226 pp, £32.50, ISBN—978-0-7864-7114-0. Language: English

As I write this review, my 8-year-old son is playing *Minion Rush*, a game adapted from the films *Despicable Me* (2010) and *Despicable Me 2* (2013). While I am thinking about the significance of the intersection between film and games, he is taking part in it, chasing down bad guys and having fun pretending to be one of Gru's minions. This is the sort of convergence Papazian and Sommers cover in their collection of insightful, interesting essays. They open with a vignette similar to mine—the appearance of the film *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) at the time they were putting the finishing touches on the volume—and see it as ‘a perfect amalgam’ for their book, which helps to explain the ‘progressive movement towards a long-coming convergence of film and video game’ (2). What makes their collection of 13 essays stand out is the clear organization provided by the editors and the focus on close readings of individual texts in each chapter. As the editors declare, the case study approach is ‘much needed at this moment in the field of adaption study’, for it reveals ‘how cross-textual readings and analysis can be done and how specific texts might be understood in relation to the emerging theories of media and narrative in our time’ (3). This approach helps to further the field of convergence culture and should be seen as a potential source of inspiration for scholars studying film and game intersections in Russia, Eurasia, Central and Eastern Europe. Papazian and Sommers write that their collection cannot possibly be comprehensive, but instead might act as ‘an engaged, thoughtful, provocative launch pad’ for further study.



In their succinct introduction, the editors map out the paths the volume takes. The study of film and video intersection, they write, is one that should move beyond the narratologist/ludologist debate. Instead, they draw attention to the way narrative operates within different media forms. As the essays demonstrate, films and games, even when based on the same story or universe, function differently because they employ different story-telling me-

chanics. In the end, Papazian and Sommers stress that close readings of film and game convergence help us understand the 'ways, workings, and possibilities of story in the present moment; as well as draw attention to 'modes of storytelling' and 'the sociological conditions of storytelling' (13). In this view, media convergence is ultimately an '*in-process* art' (14).

To delve into these issues, they divide their volume into three parts. The first, 'The Rules of Engagement,' examines stories that move from a media that tells (mostly film) to one that asks for interaction (mostly games). Katrin Althans situates the Buffyverse, a world that originated with the film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) and subsequent TV series, and how games such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* (2003) subsequently altered the story. By situating the game within the history of the Gothic, Althans argues that game-playing allows participants to transform the traditionally passive Gothic heroine into an active agent of her own fate. In her essay on the difference between torture porn on screen and in games, Deborah Mellamphy also sees the game-player as an active agent, provocatively concluding that games such as *Dead Rising* (2006), which encourages players 'to create violent and gory images' and to 'become an active maker of such images' (42) can be 'cathartic' (46) to an individual accustomed to viewing torture porn passively on movie screens. In a different vein, Jason Buel interprets a number of recent games, including *Red Dead Redemption* (2010) and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), as ones employing the conventions of the Western. This genre, which 'fundamentally deals with struggles between wilderness and civilization, between the future and the past, between industrialism and agrarianism' (57) now has a new life in games, a life Buel suggests elevates the games to a higher level of artistry and offers a commentary on how video games illustrate contemporary concerns. Ben Bunting, Jr., reverses the focus of the section by examining how *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2003) should be understood as a successful example of game-to-film adaptation because the movie 'recognizes that is a film ... and only a film' (58). In a final chapter, Marcus Schulzke takes this focus further, advocating that 'adaptions from video games should focus on not only filling in the gaps in story and character development left by the video game but also on creating new interpretive challenges that can lead audiences to become invested in the text' (72). Successful adaptations, in short, recognize the differences between media and create their worlds with the differences in mind. At the same time, the authors in this section stress that games allow players to take an active role in storytelling, one that contrasts with the more passive role of moviegoers.

Part Two, 'The Terms of the Tale,' explore contexts within adaptations. Aubrey Anable's chapter on the game *The Warriors* (2005), which was based on the 1979 film of the same name, examines how the 25 years that have elapsed matters in terms of how we might understand the story in both. While the film captured the malaise and images of urban decline from the 1970s, the game, she argues, is 'more about an ahistorical nostalgia for a dangerous and grim city (87).' Two subsequent chapters take up well-known figures (one historical the other fictional) and how games have altered their stories. Dante Aligheri, as Denise Ayo illustrates in her chapter about the 2010 game *Dante's Inferno*, now can be a 'scythe-wielding badass' (101). While this transformation might seem to be an extreme one, Ayo argues that the game is a successful, autonomous adaptation that also makes sense in the context of the writer's own attempts to wrestle with the sin of pride. David McGowan focuses on James Bond and

the 2010 game *GoldenEye 007*, a Wii update on an earlier game that also updated to include Daniel Craig as the star of the game even though the Bond film by that name starred Pierce Brosnan. The switch highlights the way the series works, one that continues to enjoy extraordinary popularity, as well as the way games can themselves retell stories first narrated on film. The final chapter, Stewart Chang's wonderfully entitled 'Zombie Stripper Geishas in the New Global Economy' (to be fair, all of the chapters have imaginative titles), delves into the ways games created elsewhere—in this case, Japan's *Yakuza 3* and *Resident Evil 5*—come with problematic sexual and racial aspects that reinforce unconscious stereotypes held by American consumers, particularly in regard to Asian women. Specific contexts—the passage of time, the adaptation of characters from previous stories, the transfer of a game created in one country to another—affect the way that convergent culture functions.

The final section, 'Stories, Stories Everywhere (and Nowhere Just the Same),' turns to narrative forms within convergent cultures. Michael Fuchs studies 2010's *Alan Wake* as an example of a game that 'revels in its narrative potential' (144) and one that crafts a storyworld in its own right. The world of *Star Wars* is of course a well-known storyworld, but, as Felan Parker argues, the transmedia franchise it has spawned, particularly its games, offer spaces where players can counteract, disrupt, and construct the *Star Wars* canon. Gamers also confront difference in the 2009 game *Afro Samurai*, one that TreaAndrea Russworm situates as a 'polycultural' product (the creator is Japanese, the hero African-American) as well as a game that should be understood in terms of how it highlights problems of stereotype, race, and parody. Finally, Lisa Disenberry tackles the biggest transmedia franchise of them all, Disney, in her study of the 2010 game *Disney Epic Mickey*. She concludes that the game relies on players' nostalgia for and familiarity with Disney history, attitudes that in turn help to reify the larger franchise. In the end, the chapters in this section make a persuasive case for the ways that games can tell, retell, or reshape stories.

*Game On, Hollywood!* is a rich collection that should interest all scholars of convergence cultures. The editors have skillfully put together a coherent, provocative collection of essays that chart new directions in the field. The chapters are all relatively short and therefore easily digestible, ensuring that the volume's aim of serving as a launch pad for further study is accomplished. In the spirit of this directive, one further direction to take would be to offer more studies written from the players' actual experiences. Many of the essays in this volume build arguments upon the ways the authors imagine players to interact with games and films, but do not cite evidence from game-players themselves. A second, related direction would be to involve more scholars from an even greater range of disciplines, including Anthropology, Sociology, and History (to name three that spring to mind): the contributors to this volume mostly come from the 'traditional' (if one can use that term to describe studies of film and game convergence) backgrounds of English, Media Studies, Film Studies, and Communications. Adopting an anthropological approach might, for example, help scholars determine if players do feel nostalgic while playing *Disney Epic Mickey* or *The Warriors*.

For readers of this journal, *Game On, Hollywood!* can serve as a launching pad of a different kind. In many ways, the approaches taken in Papazian's and Sommers's volume follow those in the recent *Digital Icons* issue devoted to 'cinegames' (issue 8). The focus on story and storytelling in *Game On, Hollywood!* could prove to be a productive line of inquiry

for film and game convergences in Russia, Eurasian, Central Europe, and Eastern Europe. How do games based on films (and vice versa) retell or subvert stories? How do games in this part of the world employ specific genres, narrative conventions, or historical contexts in their products? And how do games produced elsewhere get understood in Russia, Poland, or Kazakhstan? How, in other words, might an 8-year-old Russian experience *Minion Rush*? These are some of the immediate questions that spring to mind after reading this excellent volume.

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