Console to Movie Success, Leveraging Nostalgia, and Introducing Subversion in The Super Mario Bros. Movie

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ABSTRAK

Keywords:

Video game adaptation, Nostalgia, Subversion of gender roles, Fidelity and Transformation, Audience Engagement

This research examines the success of "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" by leveraging nostalgia and introducing subversion. The adaptation process from video game to film often fails, as seen with previous attempts like "Warcraft" (2016) and "Street Fighter: The Legend of Chun-Li" (2009). However, "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" (2023) succeeded by retaining core elements of the original game while innovatively transforming its narrative and character dynamics. The movie's success is attributed to its nostalgic appeal, faithful yet refreshed character portrayals, and the subversion of traditional gender roles. By making Princess Peach a mentor and strategist and providing Mario a hero's journey from an ordinary plumber to a savior, the film connects with both old fans and new audiences. This study utilizes Andrew Tate's theory of fidelity and transformation, along with perspectives on nostalgia, audience engagement, and gender role subversion, to analyze the movie's reception and success.

INTRODUCTION

Adaptation from one medium to another is an ever-evolving industry with the constant thirst of innovation and new narratives. This process is not merely a transfer of content but a creative transformation that crosses boundaries, encompassing various forms of media such as film, television, theater, and video games (Kennedy-Karpat, 2020; Perdikaki, 2016). This is done so that it allows the stories to reach new audiences and delve into different dimensions. Every medium has its own distinct methods and opportunities for storytelling, which makes the process of adapting stories both challenging and exciting. One kind of adaptation that recently became more focused on would be adaptation that came from video game (Oktaviana et al., 2023; Yusa et al., 2024).

The decision to adapt a video game franchise into a film is a rational choice for Hollywood executives. These franchises have extensive influence over a diverse range of demographics, and with spending for video game as much as $56.6 billion in 2022 globally. On the surface, this is a "cash grab" for any big-name executives or directors out there. However, history has shown that the extensive influence of video game does not necessarily translate to an adaptation (usually movie) that is well liked by the audiences or sold well in the market. For example, Warcraft (2016) made over $400 million at the box office, even though it only got a 28% rating on Rotten Tomatoes (Maharani et al., 2024; Rohmawati, 2020). Number that will make studios want to make more movies like it in the future. Street Fighter: The Legend of Chun-Li (2009) adapted from the famous street fighter game series ended up as critical and commercial failure (IMBD, n.d) while Hitman: Agent 47 (2015) which is based on the popular video game series hitman suffered from generally unfavorable reviews. Fans often complained that these movies are done with the sole purpose of getting quick cash without a care in the world about the quality of the plot or even its fidelity to the original source which is often a source of disappointment for long time fans. These movies show how Hollywood's s focus on blockbuster productions and a willingness to abandon canon create weaker narratives in adaptations that resulted in decades long curse of movie adaptation from video game leaving bad taste on fans worldwide.

Quite a shame as many game franchises have years or decades of stories and world-building to draw from, and fans are always excited to see new things about their favorite characters. Many new series have stories and world-building that span years or even decades. Fans are always excited to see what new things happen with their favorite characters. There are clear signs as to why this brand has stood the test of time. From all the aspects of the video game itself, the adaptation into a movie should have turned out well if done properly.

The fact is that it was only recently with the release of decently successful Detective Pikachu (2019) and Sonic the Hedgehog (2020) that video game adaptation got back again into the mainstream media. In fact, it was only until the massive global success of the Super Mario Bros. Movie back in 2023 that we could see a prime example of how an adaptation from video game to movie done well so that it garnered favorable reviews across generations and at the same time financial success. The movie itself received a 95% audience score (Rotten Tomatoes, n.d) and $1.36 billion earning in the global market. Therefore, this movie adaptation deserves further research into how it was able to come out successfully especially in grabbing the interest of old and new fans.

The synopsis and extra information of the movie as taken from the official website (2023) are as follow, "While working underground to fix a water issue, Brooklyn plumbers Mario (Chris Pratt) and brother Luigi (Charlie Day) are transported down a mysterious pipe and wander into a magical new world. But when the brothers are separated, Mario embarks on a quest to find Luigi. With the assistance of a Mushroom Kingdom resident Toad (Keegan-Michael Key) and some training from the strong-willed ruler of the Mushroom Kingdom, Princess Peach (Anya Taylor-Joy), Mario taps into his own power. The Super Mario Bros. Movie features an extraordinary comedic cast, including Jack Black as Bowser, Seth Rogen as Donkey Kong, Fred Armisen as Cranky Kong, Kevin Michael Richardson as Kamek and Sebastian Maniscalco as Spike, plus a special voice appearance by Charles Martinet, who has voiced the characters of Mario and Luigi in the Super Mario games for more than 30 years. From Nintendo and Illumination-creator of the global blockbuster Despicable Me, Minions, Sing and The Secret Life of Pets franchises-The Super Mario Bros. Movie is produced by Illumination founder and CEO Chris Meledandri and by Nintendo's Representative Director and Fellow Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of Mario, after more than six years of close bond and discussions between the two. The film is co-financed by Universal Pictures and Nintendo and will be released worldwide by Universal Pictures."

The writer will use a theory and several angles or perspectives that will be employed in this paper to analyze why the movies become successful. The theory would be Fidelity and Transformation by Andrew Tate (1984) to determine what has remained and changed along with the analysis on why the parts that remained and changed are selected properly that the movie became successful. The angles that will be looked further into would be the status adapted text itself, the nostalgia elements, the changes in modes of engagement and finally a fresh spin in the narrative that introduced subversion of gender roles to the plot.

Changes and remain the same in the adaptations through the concept of fidelity and transformation. Described in his book Concepts in Film Theory (Aisha, 2022; Ardianto, 2014). Andrew's chapter titled "Adaptation" proposes that the process of adapting a literary text into a film can be categorized into three modes: borrowing, intersecting, and transforming. Borrowing in filmmaking refers to the act of utilizing "material, idea, or form" from a narrative text. By doing this, the narrative text retains authority over the story. The reputation of the original is used to bolster the new version, and by referencing the literary text, it prompts the audience to evoke novel or particularly impactful elements of the previous piece. When intersecting is employed to generate an adaptation, the original text is conserved in its most authentic manifestation, as the disparities in both media are acknowledged and the narrative essentially remains "unassimilated" in the adaptation. This frequently arises due to a fear or unwillingness to adjust, as the filmmaker is reluctant to modify or compromise the authenticity of the original. Andrew's final method is transformation, where a fundamental element of the original is retained while the adaptation assumes a different shape. The filmmaker will strive to capture the essence of the text. The filmmaker must identify visual representations within their medium for elements that are expressed verbally in the original text. Matilda belonged to the third category as the core of the movie which is the power dynamic that is essential to the plot still stays the same and the differences come from how it is represented. After all, Andrew argues that fidelity and transformation are not mutually exclusive, and that a successful film adaptation will often balance both aspects. In his theory, fidelity is not simply about reproducing the letter of the original text, but rather about preserving its spirit and essence. This allows for creative adaptations that can still capture the essence of the original work, even if they deviate from its literal content. After determining the theory and angles to be looked at, we can answer the question on why and how the movie adaptation was hugely successful.

This study aims to analyze the success of "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" by examining how this film makes use of nostalgia and introduces subversions in the story. The study will explore how nostalgic elements of the classic Super Mario video game are translated into the film, and how subversion strategies are used to appeal to a wider audience, including a new generation that may not have an emotional connection to the original game. The study also aims to identify the key factors that contribute to the film's commercial and critical success. This research is expected to provide in-depth insights into effective strategies in adapting popular video games into feature films. By focusing on the use of nostalgia and subversion, this study can be a reference for filmmakers and producers in developing media adaptations that are able to appeal to various audience segments. In addition, the research can also help the film industry understand the evolving market

dynamics and consumer preferences, as well as offer new perspectives on innovative ways to connect pop cultural heritage with contemporary trends.

METHOD

The research method employed in the paper "Console to Movie Success, Leveraging Nostalgia and Introducing Subversion in The Super Mario Bros. Movie" is qualitative analysis, utilizing the theoretical framework of fidelity and transformation by Andrew Tate. This method involves examining what elements of the original video game remain unchanged (fidelity) and what elements are adapted or transformed (transformation). The study focuses on multiple perspectives: the status of the adapted text, the nostalgia elements, the changes in modes of engagement, and the introduction of subversion in gender roles.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The first angle to consider is the status of the adapted material itself (Kosim, 2021; Sutianah, 2022). The Mario Bros franchise would be considered a best-seller with its iconic character Mario being an iconic character worldwide. The status of best-seller, however, does not guarantee the success of its adaptation, although it can provide certain advantages. Popular video games often come with a built-in fan base, which can drive initial interest and box office sales during the opening weekend (Kusumawati & Aurellian, 2021). The week after, it becomes clear that best-seller material is just a mere status. Mario franchise was already popular in the 90s and a live action adaptation was made during that time. The 1993 film Super Mario Bros., featuring John Leguizamo as Luigi and Bob Hoskins as Mario, diverges significantly from the video games it is based on. The movie exhibits a somber and peculiar atmosphere that failed to resonate with both dedicated Mario enthusiasts and casual cinema audiences. Centered on two plumber brothers entering a dinosaur universe to save Princess Daisy, the 1993 live action film bombed both financially and creatively. Producer Roland Joffe was adamant that this film would be edgy despite the wishes of the network, declaring it would not be suitable for children. Given most Mario fans at the time were young, this action was clearly strike one. It most certainly did not help that this vision ran counter to that of filmmakers Rocky Morton and Annabelle Jackal, who felt (justly so) the network was right in aiming for a children's film.

The directors tried to save what they could, which as we all know was probably as valuable as attempting to scoop water out of the Titanic as it sank, therefore this resulted in a lot of daily rewrites of the plot. The film faced a strong negative reaction from both viewers and reviewers, which deterred Nintendo from attempting to adapt their other well-known franchises into film and television projects for three decades. Most critics slammed the film for its plot, tone, and lack of faithfulness to the source material and therefore resulted in backlash which resulted in the movie landing in the category of "worst movies list". In general, what the people hated at that time were the total detachment from source material and the unfamiliar aura of the movie itself (Rodriguez, 2021). People have known that the world of Mario as brightly colorful, full of adventure, and filled with quirky fun as Mario stomped his way through enemies, moving platform, and spiky turtle-like creature. When the new version came out, it was exactly just what the older audiences who grew up with the games wanted. Furthermore, the choice of animation is much closer in to the original one that people know and love compared to live action film which had real (and ugly) scaly dinosaurs play the iconic cute Yoshi and an unintimidating man to play the scary monster Bowser. Therefore, I would say that the new Mario movie leveraged the feel of nostalgia well by employing a familiar setting and aura and therefore successful in capturing the interest of avid fans of the franchise while avoiding the sins of its predecessor.

Adapting any two unique mediums certain components and strategies must be considered and used to guarantee the adaptation runs without problems (Ananda & Amiruddin, 2019; Darman, 2020). The first would be what sort of adaptation would fit the two mediums (in this case game and movie) most. World and story adaptations are the two primary forms of adaptations. A story adaptation involves directly transposing the scenario of a game into a film, while making few alterations to the significant elements. These adaptations may opt to discard side tales, unnecessary character development, and background material, but they will usually strive to preserve the essence of the plot. This form of adaptation is exceedingly prevalent in the realm of cinema, with several films being produced that are adaptations of a diverse range of media, such as books, plays, and musicals. In contrast, a world adaptation involves using the existing characters, setting, lore, and other narrative aspects and using them to create a new story within the same world. The Super Mario Bros. Movie employed the second one by keeping the aura and world of the original material (as explained in the previous paragraph) and building on a new story that appeals to the mass audiences. This is important to do as movies based on video game story worlds often fail due to the stark differences in audience experience and expectations between interactive gaming and passive film watching and therefore must compensate in another

aspects. To address this, filmmakers often focus on enhancing narrative depth, character development, and emotional engagement, which are more naturally suited to the film medium.

The appeal and popularity of video games do not solely rely on their storylines or characters (although many games excel in these aspects). Instead, it is the unique experience and gaming moments that they provide to the player that make them enjoyable and widely favored. Moreover, video games frequently possess an abstract quality that is absent in films, so allowing ample space for the player's imagination. During the 1980s, children who played Mario did not simply perceive him as a superficial character - a two-dimensional, pixelated figure with poor fashion choices. On the contrary, Mario's character was sufficiently abstract to allow players to project their own desires onto him, enabling them to envision themselves as the protagonist of their own personal journey. Even the most visually accurate video games of today enable this phenomenon to a certain extent. Movies lack interactivity and just showcase the studio's rendition of the game's characters, environment, and mechanics, aspects that are typically left to the player's imagination. Therefore, a fresh and enchanting plot must be made to entice the audiences especially the new ones to come and watch the movie. Moreover, the new movie also decided to use the classic zero to hero trope for the main character Mario which gives him a compelling background so that people sympathize and support him as a character. In fact, this is a wise decision on the movie part because in the original materials, many of plot just drop Mario right into the start of the adventure as the maker assumes that Mario is so well known that an introduction is not needed. Mario was never given an in-depth characterization in the game and therefore the compensation done by the movie is indeed a good choice. In the movie, Mario and his brother Luigi started as regular plumbers who are struggling to promote their business. The recent failure of their venture has made them disheartened and therefore made Mario believes that he will be a good for nothing. It was only until he has to breakthrough his own limitation and save the world that he discovers that he could be so much more than just a problem. The character of Mario becomes a symbol of nostalgia and at the same time newfound wonder. This is where the fidelity and transformation make sense as the director has made it possible to leverage nostalgia from the place and character while at the same time avoid the dreaded passive interaction in movie medium.

Historically, video games have been criticized for their gendered and sexualized depictions, where male characters are portrayed as strong and authoritative, while female characters are often subordinate or objectified. When we looked further into the plot of the movie, it has left the old idea of "damsel in distress" which are staple in Mario games. In the modern era, audiences increasingly demand more nuanced and equitable representations of gender roles. Time has changed and so does the taste of people looking for entertainment.

For the movie, it took a different turn when Princess Peach was revealed to be the one who taught Mario the skills needed to save the world, becoming a mentor, and establishing herself as an important figure in the movie. In addition to that, she is also the figurehead of the kingdom instead of a princess who is always kidnapped without any fighting back. Mario, on the other hand, was not a prince in shining armor anymore from the beginning like what the game described him to be. Both are the clearest signs of a break in the traditional sense of gender. We can see this phenomenon through the lens of gender performativity by Judith Butler. Basically, Butler (1990) explained that gender is not an inherent identity but rather a series of acts and performances that are socially accepted and repeated, which can be subverted through non-conforming actions. Subvert basically means to overthrow (something established or existing) and this is the fresh part of the plot that also made the movie successful in the first place. A fresh new look on how the story of Mario can be shown to the audiences. We will look at Princess Peach and Mario for this part of the paper.

Princess Peach goes against the idea of how female is supposed to be protected and weaker hence requiring protection all the times. At the start, she trained Mario how to move across platforms which she could do with ease. In addition to that, she serves as the strategist in the war against Bowser and negotiator to the neighboring kingdom. Even when she is captured and forced to marry bowser, she still has a trick up her sleeve by freezing Bowser and stopping the cage from dropping the lava using a "ice flower power-up" item. She has the self-determination to make things go in her favor even when it is risking her life instead of just waiting for things to get better. According to Manzanera-Romána and Brändleb (2016) self-determination in a woman is to show the competence in swallowing fear and taking the risk (Manzanera-Román & Brändle, 2016). This is a stark difference to her game version where she is always the damsel in distress like the Paper Mario (2000) and Super Mario Odyssey (2017) where she just waited for someone to save her when she is "again" kidnapped.

Mario, on the other hand, starts as a pessimistic person who thinks that he does not have what it takes to save the world. It is only when he discovers the value and his love toward the world and Peach that he fights until the end without any hesitation. Although, as a writer of this paper, I will not claim that this a perfect version of subversion. This is because as the male main character, he is the one who was given the role of saving the world in critical moment in the end. Highlighting that "male" in movie is still regarded as the hero who saves the day. Yet, this is done with the cooperation with Peach at the last battle with Bowser. This is not to belittle the attempt of subversion in this movie but more to illustrate the fact that the subversion did work in

attempting to make the plot fresh but not in a sense of completely flipping the gender roles at the end of the day. Incomplete but acceptable to most audiences watching.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, we can see that the success of the movie itself comes from combinations of leveraging the right amount of nostalgia from the source material, correct compensation in the change of modes of engagement, and attempt for fresher through subversion of gender roles. In term of fidelity and transformation, they have kept the correct amount of familiarity and to a certain degree, a good transformation to the character and plot.

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