

## Introduction to the Special Issue: the Transmedia Relationship Between Film/TV Texts and Board Games

Bethan Jones

Aberystwyth University

Wickham Clayton

Independent Researcher

### Background and Context

The following group of papers came about via a bemused fascination quickly shared and discussed on a social networking website. Wickham viewed *Battleship* (2012, Dir. Peter Berg) and excitedly posted a statement regarding his experience of the film as an adaptation, and Bethan immediately engaged, albeit from the opposite end of viewing games as interactive paratexts for film and television series. The fascination with which we both took to the subject of board games as the source texts for, and resultant texts of, transmedial adaptation speaks to the interest that we share towards these media forms and the fandom that they generate. Thanks to the primacy of social networking sites, we quickly discovered we weren't the only ones. Within five minutes several academics had replied with the texts they would have liked to study, and within 15 minutes, the idea for this special issue emerged.

It wasn't simply the speed at which this special issue came into being that surprised us, though. The concept of transmedia storytelling has been around for some time, as Matthew Freeman points out in this issue. But very little work has been done to analyse board games as forms of transmedia. Given both their popularity and longevity, we found this to be a significant oversight. Board games are found in a myriad of cultures across the globe, as R.C. Bell notes in his book *Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations* (1979), and board game adaptations of other media are common. Visiting any games shop, comic store or, in some cases book shop, demonstrates that both old and new media can make the transition from screen to board. Such visits can, for instance, elicit purchases of the *Game of Thrones* board game,

multiple versions of *Monopoly* including *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*, the *Nightmare Before Christmas* board game, and at the time of writing this introduction *The X-Files* board game is a month away from launch.

Although peripheral texts like board games are often considered as cynical attempts by corporations to squeeze more money out of a successful film or television series, each of these games, in different ways, functions to provide the player – fan of the visual text or not – with new experiences and ways of seeing the text. Jonathan Gray, in *Show Sold Separately* (2010) analyses the official paratexts that surround film and television – the posters, trailers, interviews, novelisations, toys and computer games – and argues that both of the latter offer gamers the chance to 'perform in and explore both on-screen spaces and those pockets of space just off screen [...] gamers expand the text, changing what it is and how it happens' (2010: 176). Board games thus take elements from the text they adapt, but change these, and change players' relationships with them.

So, given that the term 'transmedia storytelling' has become a common one in media and cultural studies in recent years, where is the analysis of board games? Described by Henry Jenkins as stories told across multiple media, transmedia storytelling is not just an adaptation from one medium to another. Rather,

In the ideal form of TS, each medium does what it does best — so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable

autonomous consumption. That is, you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa (2003).

Video-games are among the media most frequently cited in discussions of transmedia storytelling, and academic analysis of video-games is many and varied. Many texts have made the transition from screen to console, and vice versa: *Resident Evil* was a computer game before it made the transition to film, as was *Super Mario Bros*. *The X-Files* games existed in both PC and Playstation format while the series continued on screen, telling different stories to those already watched by fans, but still existing within and drawing from the fictional universe. However the possibilities of discussing the adaptive relationship between audio-visual texts and board games have only been addressed cursorily, in larger (albeit significant) works about adaptation, transmediation, and convergence. Writers like Henry Jenkins (2003, 2006), Thomas Leitch (2009), and Linda Hutcheon (2006) have all forged ground that can be applied to this particular form of adaptation, but case studies to date are hard to come by.

To this extent, we did not limit our discussion to the process of adapting board games into audio-visual content, or vice versa. Instead, we opened this project up into a discussion of multiple iterations of relationships between media – how these adapted texts function, how they are received, and how they can be theorised. These questions generated a strong response, and ultimately begin to break the surface of understanding these texts, holding them up as worthy of examination by the fact that they are part of our culture, and have cultures built around them.

*Intensities*, as a peer-reviewed online journal dedicated to the study of cult media artefacts, presented itself as an ideal outlet – board games based on audiovisual texts are often primarily aimed at cultures of interest and fandom that have developed around the original texts. Likewise, movies and television shows based on board games come pre-packaged with cultural weight. The resulting phenomena come from a cross-feed of cultural (and financial) capital and, often overlooked, a sharing and alteration of both thematic and narrative information. This interplay between texts, media, and culture is

the foundation of this special issue, with its purpose being to address the widely overlooked consideration of board games as works of (interactive) art, and to explore how they relate to their audiovisual counterparts.

### Themes and Contents

This special issue brings together contributors from a range of academic disciplines. The papers featured offer a wide range of perspectives on the processes of adaptation between screen and board games – from analyses of the games themselves, to the responses of audiences, and to the roles that the games play in furthering fans' interactions with the text(s). We ask how board games can be examined through the model of transmedia storytelling; what processes of adaptation are at work in turning a board game into a film or vice versa, and how do these adaptations or transmedia stories affect the ways in which the different texts are read and understood?

We begin this issue with Adam Brown and Deb Waterhouse-Watson's analysis of the way that modes of narration change according to the nature of the different media involved in this type of adaptation, in their article 'Reconfiguring Narrative in Contemporary Board Games: Story-Making Across the Competitive-Cooperative Spectrum'. Brown and Waterhouse-Watson use case studies of the *Firefly* and *Battlestar Galactica* board games (based on the television shows) to explore game rules and potentialities, particularly to show how players can develop a unique narrative during each game through the tensions created by making choices in play. The way that players act on certain variables, which are based on the parameters defined by the characters they play, can result in a wide range of narrative trajectories, and combined with the decisions made by multiple other players, results in a potential for narrative variety.

Narrative is also a key component in Paul Booth's article 'Playing Dead: Transmedia Pathos and Plot in *The Walking Dead* Board Games'. Booth makes a detailed comparison between the board game adaptation of the comic book *The Walking Dead*, and the board game based on the television show. Booth argues that the latter is an adaptation that does not

engage with the narrative of the source text in a complex way. However, by including consideration of affect and pathos within the design of a board game adaptation, as occurs in the case of the former, the resulting board game can be far more narratively complimentary and emotionally engaging. The comic book board game, Booth argues, considers narrative affect on the player and hence provides a significant example of the way in which the transmediation of a text into a board game can be more than financially beneficial for the makers, but also an enriching experience for the player.

Wickham Clayton examines adaptation aesthetics as a response to the negative critical anticipation of the film based on the board game *Battleship* in his article 'Sea Too? You've Adapted My Battleship!: Problems of Narration and Adaptation'. Clayton begins by addressing the negative manner in which online critics greeted the news that the Hasbro game *Battleship* would be turned into a film, and considers the reasons for this reaction. Following this, he utilises Thomas Leitch's theory of 'postliterary adaptation' to provide a framework for understanding how the process of adaptation was undertaken. Clayton then closely analyses the style, form and narration of the resulting film alongside the rules and aesthetics of the game, to show how the film closely interacts with its source text.

Utilising an industrial-historical approach, Matthew Freeman recounts transmedial marketing through board games in the 1920s and 1930s in his article '*The Wonderful Game of Oz and Tarzan Jigsaws: Commodifying Transmedia in Early Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture*'. *The Wonderful Game of Oz*, based on the novels by L. Frank Baum, and *Tarzan jigsaws*, based on the novel series by Edgar Rice Burroughs and the adapted film series, are the subject of Freeman's two extensive case studies. Freeman shows that transmedial adaptation and commodification for a consumer culture is not a new concept, with these case studies exemplifying how corporate artistic strategy increased the range of storytelling methods and cultural penetration for these franchises.

In 'Unusual Geography: Discworld Boardgames as Paratextual L-Space', Bethan Jones examines how detailed knowledge of the Discworld novels and television adaptations allows the games

to function as paratexts. Jones examines the relationship between canonical Discworld geography and the geography of the board games to examine the role that the games play in affecting fans' meaning-making processes. Jones further suggests that ideas of intertextuality evidenced in the Discworld series, through the concept of L-Space, provide players with new ways of understanding both the geographical spaces of the Discworld and the characters inhabiting the universe.

In addition to these full-length articles, we present four shorter pieces which reflect on board games, transmedia and adaptation in different ways. Karra Shimabukuro's article '*Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game as Liminal Space*' questions the adaptation of gender politics from the television series to the role playing game in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In the introduction, Shimabukuro writes, '*Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game* occupies a liminal space because of the border between gender roles that it inhabits, as well as for the liminal nature of gaming itself'. Shimabukuro outlines show creator Joss Whedon's intent towards feminist narration and characterisation in the series confronts gendered assumptions regarding role playing games, and explores how Whedon's political aims for the show translate into role and game play.

In 'Adaptation and Space: Thematic and Atmospheric Considerations for Board Game Environment Construction', Megan Condis looks at the difference between competitive and cooperative board games. Her two chosen case studies are board games based on *Lord of the Rings* (J.R.R Tolkien's book series) and *Dawn of the Dead* (Dir. George Romero, 1978); the former being cooperative and the latter competitive, which demonstrates a polarity of possibilities within game play. While Condis also looks at adapting narration, her primary argument is that far from being simply an attempt at cheap capitalisation off a popular property, in some games 'interaction turns the game itself into an instrument for creating a story, shaping how players interact with each other and the world of the game to produce a unique interpretation of the original narrative'. In other words, games can do more than increase commercial potential of a franchise; they can also provide a unique method of engaging with the source narrative, so that thematic

possibilities can be explored by playing out a wider range of scenarios.

In 'Playing with Place: Ambiguities of Geography and Citizenship in *The Great Charlie Chan Detective Mystery Game*', Elizabeth Rawitsch compares Charlie Chan texts – the novels, films and board game – to show how the character of Charlie Chan developed from a detective with a particular national heritage to a multinational, metropolitan character with indefinite and ambiguous national and racial affiliations. As an adapted text, Rawitsch argues that *The Great Charlie Chan Detective Mystery Game* is evident as a step in the process of de-nationalising and multiculturalisation of Charlie Chan. Through this investigation, Rawitsch investigates how the game contributes to the overall public conceptualisation of a fictional character that is developed and publicised within a franchise context.

Finally, Ruth Deller combines adaptation studies with fan studies in 'The Art of *Neighbours* Gaming': Facebook, Fan-Crafted Games and Humour'. In this particular article, Deller looks at the Facebook fan community 'The Art of Neighbours', a group dedicated to fans of the internationally consumed Australian soap opera *Neighbours*, who express their love for the show by creating home-made objects, with a particular focus on board games. This case study proves a unique insight into fan practices, particularly how creating gaming artefacts, even more than actually playing the games, becomes a way of extensively engaging with a source text. Deller also explores how humour plays a unique part in *Neighbours* fandom.

These articles are by no means intended as a comprehensive survey of the transmedial relationship between film/television texts and board games, but are intended to start filling in the gap that exists in the academic study of this relationship. As the variety of texts analysed and approaches taken in this special issue demonstrate, the relationships that exist between these media forms lead to more than simply money-making opportunities. There is much more work to be done; more texts can be analysed, different methodological approaches can be taken, and overall this relationship needs more theorisation. However, in this special issue, we aim to contribute a blueprint for how to begin theorising board games,

their related texts and the cultures built around them, and demonstrate that there is considerable potential in studying these artefacts.

### Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank Erin Pearson and Sarah Harman for their help in getting this issue to print. We would also like to thank the peer reviewers who offered their time and advice: Mark Aldridge, Lucy Bennett, Paul Booth, Bertha Chin, Ruth Deller, Jonathan Gray, Dan Hassler-Fforest, Henry Jenkins, Lorna Jowett, Nicolle Lamerichs, Richard McCulloch, Lori Morimoto, Billy Proctor, Denzell Richards, Iain Robert Smith, and Rachel Mizsei Ward.

### References

- Bell, R.C. (1979) *Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations*, New York, NY: Dover.
- Gray J. (2010) *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Hutcheon, L. (2006) *A Theory of Adaptation*, Milton Park: Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2003) 'Transmedia Storytelling', *MIT Technology Review*. Online at <http://www.technologyreview.com/biomedicine/13052/page3/> (Accessed 28 June 2014), 3.
- Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press.
- Leitch, T. (2009) *Film Adaptation & Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.