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8-BIT GOES TO THE MOVIES

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Abstract: Since 2013, the YouTube channel Cinefix has offered its followers near-monthly installments of 8-Bit Cinema, a series of short videos in which blockbuster movies like *Titanic* and *Frozen* are reimagined as old school videogames. This essay asks why viewers are drawn to videogame adaptations that they can't play, suggesting eight different ways that audiences (and scholars) might process 8-Bit Cinema—intertextually, interactively, and otherwise. The appeals of 8-Bit Cinema, whose views range somewhere in the millions, would seem to rely as much on the audience's desire for recycled media as for recycled content, compounding a nostalgia for outmoded texts with a nostalgia for outmoded technologies.

Since May 2013, YouTube channel CineFix has hosted monthly installments of 8-Bit Cinema, a series devoted to “[y]our favorite movies retold as old school NES/SNES/arcade games.”¹ Each of the series’ nearly sixty videos, which vary in length from just under two minutes to just over four, and whose sources range from *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986) to *Fight Club* (1999) to *Finding Nemo* (2003), begins with an invitation to “press start,” but 8-Bit Cinema’s audiences can only ever press play; viewers can only ever click to start the videos or stop them. As YouTuber GonkThePowerDroid jokes beneath the 8-Bit remake of *Pulp Fiction* (1994), “I pressed start and it stopped.” The CineFix series openly courts such confusion by combining the audiovisual design of old school videogames with an equally faithful 8-bit game design, one that reflects those videogames’ functions as well as their forms. The 8-Bit *Pulp Fiction*, for instance, reimagines the film’s iconic dance sequence at Jack Rabbit Slim’s as a

¹ Following the release of “Star Wars Trilogy – 8 Bit Cinema” on December 18, 2015, creator David Dutton wrote in an Instagram post that the installment would be the series’ last, but that “maybe we [*sic*] do it again someday.” Indeed, the series returned on August 23, 2016—fittingly, with an 8-bit version of *The Revenant*.

rhythm game in which the player must repeat commands (A, B, up, down, left, right) that stream past pixelated versions of a twisting Vincent Vega and Mia Wallace; the subsequent scene of Vince reviving an overdosed Mia, meanwhile, instructs the player to “Aim and inject [her] with the anecdote” as a red dot bounces along a set of crosshairs, “Power” on one axis, “Aim” on the other—a mechanic that dates back to the earliest golf videogames.² 8-Bit Cinema invites interactivity from its viewers even as it denies that interactivity; the game is already played out, played through. 8-Bit Cinema doesn’t just look like a *Duck Hunt* and quack like a *Duck Hunt*, it swims like a *Duck Hunt*, but a *Duck Hunt* sans Zapper, leaving its hunters upstream.

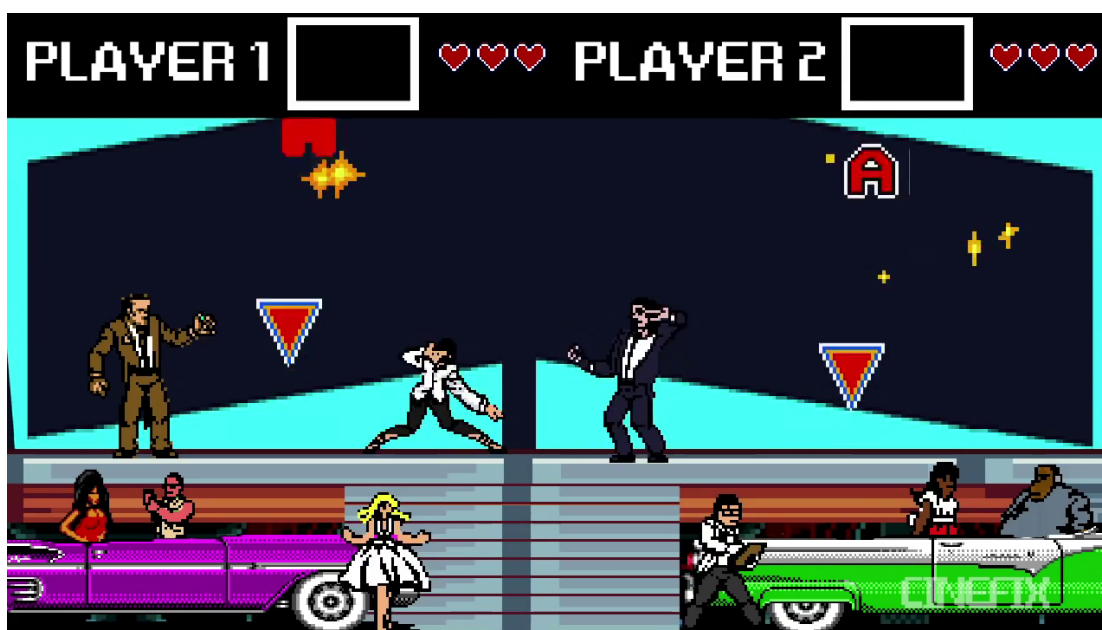


Figure 1: The Jack Rabbit Slim’s sequence in 8-Bit Cinema’s “Pulp Fiction” (screen capture)

The sheer audacity and seeming contradictions of the *Pulp Fiction* video lead WeActOnImpulse Official to ask, “WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS SHIT?!”—a question echoed by countless other commenters under countless other installments of 8-Bit Cinema, and one that I’d like to take up—and take seriously—in this essay. 8-Bit Cinema represents a peculiar convergence of old and new media, a particular collision between cinema and videogames, but its appeal could hardly be called niche (the *Pulp Fiction* video alone has garnered over 1.1

² “Pulp Fiction – 8 Bit Cinema,” YouTube video, 2:29, posted by CineFix, January 7 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gdv55pki5As>.

million views).³ What is the pleasure of watching videogames (or videogame adaptations) you cannot play?

In part, 8-Bit Cinema's pleasures would seem to stem from viewers setting the remakes against their originals, with Genoveva Gomez-Lince calling the *Pulp Fiction* video "cool" but clarifying that "vincent and mia didn't win, they stole the trophy" (no fewer than twelve other commenters make the same observation). Jason Chamberlain somewhat more admiringly writes that "[t]his did a better job of explaining the [film's] chronology ... than anything I've read or watched so far." These intertextual pleasures extend to the video's 8-bit antecedents as well: Jeffrey Van Duyne gives "[p]rops for using the garage from Maniac Mansion - loved that game" (a reference to the video's reference to the 1987 NES title). And many commenters plead for playable versions of the games. TheSutekh offers "\$50 on kickstarter if you develop [the *Pulp Fiction* video] into an actual game I could play on a NES emulator" (8-Bit Cinema's commenters frequently lobby for Kickstarter campaigns). For different viewers at different times, the 8-Bit *Pulp Fiction* is more or less like *Pulp Fiction*, more or less like the movie, more or less like a movie, more or less like a game, and more or less like the game(s) that inspired the video. My own endgame, then, is to offer some provisional terms for thinking about how audiences process 8-bit cinema—eight terms, to be exact, in keeping with the restrictions of the 8-bit bus, which can only transfer eight bits of data (a single byte) at a time.⁴ These terms not only highlight the hybrid nature of 8-Bit Cinema itself but the hybridity required to approach these bite-sized remakes bit by bit, with disparate discourses drawn from game studies, film studies, adaptation studies, animation studies, performance studies, and genre studies.

To take the videos on their own terms first: What does it mean for audiences to process 8-Bit Cinema *as 8-bit*? After all, 8-Bit Cinema is only one planet in a vast 8-bit universe—the name, incidentally, of a YouTube channel devoted to "8 Bit covers of the latest, greatest hits" like Adele's "Hello," Drake's "Hotline Bling," and Rihanna's "Bitch Better Have My Money" (with over 100,000 subscribers).⁵ The 8-bit universe is populated in large part by social networkers on sites like Etsy, Reddit, and Pinterest who delight in recasting canvases, characters, and choruses in the visible pixels and tinny tones of the NES-era, from Van Gogh's *Starry Night*

³ As of August 2016.

⁴ Alan Clements, *Principles of Computer Hardware* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 507.

⁵ "About," 8 Bit Universe, YouTube, accessed November 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/user/8BitUniverseMusic>.

(by Korean pixel artist Jaebum Joo) to the Dark Knight (e.g., the 8-bit Batman stickers for sale in Joshua Hesselgrave's online shop 8-Bit Hero) to "Flight of the Bumblebee" (remixed by YouTuber 8BitUzz, among others). As even this brief survey indicates, 8-bit culture is as high as it is low. To wit: In 2011, developer Charlie Hoey released a fully playable 8-bit version of *The Great Gatsby* online; in 2012, Oliver Miller's 8-bit illustrations of short story openings by Bukowski, Crane, and Kafka popped up on *The Paris Review*'s Tumblr. But 8-bit culture is also as pragmatic as it is aesthetic. On the home front, the 8-bit universe has spawned cross-stitch patterns (a natural fit with the blocky contours of early videogames), 8-bit fireplaces (\$50.00 on Etsy), and 8-bit shower curtains (currently sold out on UrbanOutfitters.com).

While the majority of these homages are user-generated—Read/Write (RW), or non-professional, to borrow Lawrence Lessig's distinction⁶—an increasing number of professional, Read/Only (RO) products and productions have incorporated 8-bit into the fold.⁷ On the page, Ernest Cline's 2011 bestseller *Ready Player One* mined 1980s 8-bit culture for its story of a boy navigating a virtual universe in a dystopian future (a film adaptation from Steven Spielberg is in the works). On the small screen, a 2012 episode of the NBC comedy *Community* ("Digital Real Estate Planning") sent the show's ensemble into a fully animated 8-bit game called *Journey to the Center of Hawkthorne* that later became playable, thanks to one enterprising Reddit user.⁸ And one of the best-reviewed videogames of 2015 was Nintendo's *Super Mario Maker* for the Wii U, which bridged the RO/RW divide by allowing players to design and share their own 8-bit Mario levels.

The big screen has likewise seen a modest rise in 8-bit representation in recent years, starting with Edgar Wright's *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* in 2010—possibly the *Citizen Kane* of 8-bit cinema. Like Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novel before it, the film borrows many of its reference points from 8-bit gaming culture, with its protagonist's pee bar depleting at one point and an extra life appearing on screen at another (references returned to referents in Ubisoft's 2010 retro side-scroller *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game*). In 2013, Disney turned

⁶ Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 28.

⁷ In *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), Liam Burke asserts that the recent glut of movies based on comic books may be due, in part, to devoted comics readers in the 1970s/1980s becoming "gatekeepers" in modern Hollywood. Perhaps the same is true of devoted videogamers.

⁸ The game is available at <https://projecthawkthorne.com/>.

London's Brick Lane into "8-Bit Lane," complete with pixelated pigeons and 8-bit dog shit, to promote *Wreck-It Ralph*, its ode to old-school gaming, which grossed \$470 million worldwide. And in 2015, Columbia released *Pixels*, a \$90-million Adam Sandler vehicle about aliens who assume the form of outsized avatars from *Centipede*, *Donkey Kong*, and *Pac-Man*. Jason Sperb cites *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Scott Pilgrim* alongside 2007's *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters* and 2010's *Tron: Legacy* and as exemplars of a recent turn to "video-game pastiche" in film, one in which "the boundaries of outdated gaming forms are *celebrated* and foregrounded rather than erased."⁹

The irony of both these producer- and consumer-oriented 8-bit homages is that most are only made possible by the affordances of contemporary technology. The big-budget effects of *Pixels*, the mechanics of *Mario Maker*, and Hoey's 8-bit *Gatsby* all originate in newer media, even while they revisit the old; remember that TheSutekh asks for a *Pulp Fiction* she or he can play on a NES emulator, not NES itself—that is, software that allows a Mac or PC to serve as an old console. In this respect, the proliferation of 8-bit cinema lends credence to Bolter and Grusin's claims that "[w]hat is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media."¹⁰ The thrift store logic of 8-bit refashioning suggests a moment at which audiences can and have become nostalgic about "the digital," a moment at which the digital's history is long enough to have left a trail of detritus in its wake. The 8-bit revival speaks to a larger nostalgia surrounding the origins of video game culture (which surely has its analogs in literary circles, cinephilia, etc.).¹¹ Indeed, the label 8-bit is itself somewhat misleading—the makers of 8-Bit Cinema frequently admit their debts to the 16-bit games of the early-to-mid nineties, just as other 8-bit makers freely borrow from the same. 8-bit may dominate as a descriptor only because it nods to the first moment at which videogames were an identifiable (that is, a popular commercial) phenomenon.

⁹ Jason Sperb, *Flickers of Film: Nostalgia in the Time of Digital Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 36-37.

¹⁰ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 15.

¹¹ A nostalgia made apparent in a recent memoir like Michael Clune's *Gameline* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), an autobiography structured around arcade and console encounters.

Just as some cinephiles treasure the primitivism of silent films or early talkies, audiences may value the imperfect nature of an older visual regime that has progressed towards one in which the bit-map precedes the territory, or else overwrites it. Consider a 2013 8-bit remix of *The Matrix* (1999)—that apex of Baudrillard fanfic—that replaces audio from the film with audio from old school videogames, including the hilariously incongruent sounds of Super Mario bouncing, which accompany Neo’s jumps.¹² In collapsing the distance between the 3D gaming era—in its ascendancy when *The Matrix* was released—and that era’s humble, 2D origins in the eighties, the clip raises the question of why we tend to process our contemporary experience through one (supposedly “realer”) gaming aesthetic rather than another (a question reflected in *Ready Player One*, *Community*, and *Scott Pilgrim*). The 8-bit boom may represent one return of the repressed as we dive deeper and deeper into the uncanny valley.

The Matrix clip also raises the question of why 8-bit culture so often takes film as its focus. 8-Bit Cinema not only asks its audiences to process its installments as 8-bit but *as cinema*. “Cinema”—a less medium-specific, more mobile term than “film” (far more games, novels, and television shows are described as “cinematic” than “filmic”)—distances the series from film at a time when that medium or material is disappearing, due largely to the advent of the digital. 8-Bit Cinema becomes an odd interloper in this transition from film to digital, one that may lay that transition bare by making its digital character parodically obvious, rendering movies in the one of the most fundamental of digital formats.

David Dutton, the director behind 8-Bit Cinema, produced his own 8-bit *Matrix* for CineFix—an obvious choice, given its roots in video game culture, but 8-Bit Cinema is full of obvious choices, some of which, like *Finding Nemo* and *Jurassic Park* (1993), already inspired their own video games. 8-Bit Cinema comprises mostly Hollywood blockbusters like *The Fast and the Furious* (2001), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), and *The Hunger Games* (2012)—films that belong to franchises in which ancillary products like clothing, toys, and video games are inevitable; 8-Bit Cinema is just one more strand (if an unofficial strand) in wider web of “tie-intertextuality.”¹³ Like *Scott Pilgrim* and *Wreck-It Ralph*, 8-Bit Cinema may “highlight the history and popularity of video games in a way that paradoxically *reaffirms* cinema’s value in the

¹² “8-bit Matrix - SFSU BECAfest 2013 Winner: Best Sound Design,” YouTube video, 2:44, posted by Phillip Raupach, May 16, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMpZrta2Cwc>.

¹³ Kamilla Elliott, “Tie-Intertextuality, or, Intertextuality as Incorporation in the Tie-in Merchandise to Disney’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2010),” *Adaptation* 7.2 (2014): 191–211.

age of media convergence” and “foreground cinema’s role as the flagship of larger multimedia franchises.”¹⁴

The series also includes less obvious choices, though, like *The Life Aquatic* (2004), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), and *Spirited Away* (2001), smaller films chosen by Dutton himself rather than the commenters or CineFix—films that fall outside of the franchise mold. These various choices highlight the manner in which audiences process 8-bit Cinema as “cinema,” in a curatorial sense of the word. The 8-Bit series reproduces a particular image of cinema (almost exclusively American), from franchise features to independent films to eighties staples like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Scarface* (1983). 8-Bit Cinema represents a convergence of its director’s personal choices, its audiences’ desires, and market demands, like the twentieth anniversary of *Pulp Fiction*, which prompted its 8-bit remake, or the “pretty much 32-bit” *Jurassic Park* installment, tied to *Jurassic World*’s June 2015 release.

The team behind 8-Bit Cinema are not only curatorial in their choices about what cinema to include in the series itself but also in how they represent (or recreate) that cinema. As Dutton explains in a behind-the-scenes video, he, his brother Henry (the series’ composer), and pixel artist Fernando Camarena begin every project by sitting down and rewatching the source movie in its entirety; “doesn’t matter how many times we’ve seen it, we do this every time.” They then “write down every scene and break it down, but we only choose about ten, because we just want to have the most fun scenes that can play out well as a videogame but will still string the movie together.”¹⁵ The 8-Bit *Pulp Fiction* thus moves from the scene at Brett’s apartment; to Marvin’s accidental backseat death; to the cleanup at Jimmie’s; to Jules’s confrontation with Pumpkin and Honey Bunny at the diner; to the dance at Jack Rabbit Slim’s; to Mia’s overdose; to Butch shooting Vincent and confronting Marsellus Wallace. “Zed’s dead baby. Zed’s dead” reads the screen before the credits roll to an 8-bit version of “Misirlou.”

Dutton essentially creates CliffsNotes versions of the movies in a stringing together that strongly recalls the practice of sweding popularized by Michel Gondry’s 2008 film *Be Kind Rewind*, an “elegiac love letter to an earlier moment of movie consumption” and perhaps “the

¹⁴ Sperb, 144.

¹⁵ “8-Bit Cinema Behind the Scenes: We answer your questions!” YouTube video, 8:23, posted by CineFix, December 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2n9QmsSwCyU>.

ultimate expression of film nostalgia in the age of digital cinema,” according to Sperb.¹⁶ In Gondry’s film, a pair of video store workers, Mike (Mos Def) and Jerry (Jack Black) must remake movies like *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Rush Hour 2* (2001), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Robocop* (1987) after a freak accident wipes out all of the store’s VHS tapes. Hamstrung by shoestring budgets and tight schedules, Mike and Jerry seek to reduce each film to its essence—to a couple of iconic lines or shots—as in a sequence in which the pair tackle films ranging from *When We Were Kings* (1996) to *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to *King Kong* (1933); Mike recreates David Bowman’s psychedelic encounter with the Monolith in Kubrick’s classic by traipsing towards a small refrigerator filmed in negative, the tires under his feet meant to represent the craters of a planet. Jerry and Mike’s project not only reflects the curatorial bent of 8-Bit Cinema but its nostalgic impulse as well. Sperb’s description of the film as a “powerful meditation not only on what gets left behind during periods of innovation and transition but on the dangers of being obsessed with constant progress and newness for their own sake”¹⁷ could just as well apply to 8-Bit’s modus operandi of making the new look old, the old look old, or the old look older: oldness for its own sake, or for ours.



Figure 2: Mike and Jerry’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* in *Be Kind Rewind* (screen capture)

In the film, Jerry claims that, “These are not just simple remakes. They’re way more creative,” and the movie’s publicity rollout included its own YouTube channel where users could post their own remakes (“BE KIND REWIND says ‘If You Love It, Swede It!’”).¹⁸ 8-Bit

¹⁶ Sperb, 160.

¹⁷ Sperb, 161.

¹⁸ “Be Kind Rewind,” YouTube, accessed January 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/user/BeKindMovie/about>.

Cinema is merely sweding by another name, sweding by way of rudimentary digital materials rather than by way of rudimentary analog materials—fittingly, since 8-bit and VHS faded in and out at roughly the same time.¹⁹ And the prevalence of 8-bit and sweding on YouTube today points to one final sense in which 8-Bit Cinema is curatorial: in the sense that YouTube *itself* is curatorial, that YouTube becomes a new cinema in the spatial sense of the word, a new picture-house where audiences gather to watch films—or, at least, videos.

8-Bit Cinema's similarity to sweding emphasizes yet another way in which such videos are processed: *as adaptations*. In its intertextual play, 8-Bit Cinema is aimed at what Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, calls knowing audiences, or those audiences who “know the adapted text”—as opposed to “unknowing audiences,” or those who experience the adaptation as they would “any other work.”²⁰ CineFix, the channel on which 8-Bit Cinema appears, bills itself as “the ultimate destination for true movie buffs & filmmakers on YouTube,” a nod to knowingness; its offerings even include a sister series called “What’s the Difference?” that takes users “step-by-step and page-by-page through all the differences between your favorite movies & shows and their source material,” since “[a]daptations are a tricky game.”²¹ CineFix both courts and creates knowing audiences, reflected in its tendency to premier installments of 8-Bit Cinema—itsself billed (remember) as “[y]our favorite movies” not told but “retold”—to coincide with Blu-ray/DVD release dates or anniversaries, occasions for audiences to revisit their favorites. 8-Bit Cinema less readily aligns with CliffsNotes’ typical use—as substitutes for source texts—than their intended use, as supplements that encourage a more knowing attitude towards those sources by highlighting key moments, characters, and maybe even meanings.

Of course, as Jeffrey Van Dwyne’s comment concerning *Maniac Mansion* under the *Pulp Fiction* video attests, 8-Bit Cinema involves the knowingness of 8-bit or vintage videogame audiences as much as it involves the knowingness of cinema audiences. In a behind-the scenes video, Dutton explains that there are two types of 8-Bit Cinema videos: those based on specific

¹⁹ There’s a growing renaissance in VHS that parallels 8-bit’s own: In 2010, Gorgon Video released a clamshell VHS of Ti West’s *The House of the Devil*; film art company Mondo’s recent offerings includes a number of VHS reissues, e.g. 1979’s *The Visitor* and 1981’s *Ms. 45*; and in December 2015, Mashable ran a story on Saturday Night Live cast member Kyle Mooney’s “impressive VHS collection.”

²⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 120.

²¹ “What’s the Difference?” Cinefix, YouTube, accessed November 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1AXWu-gGX6Jmq1jfa0FP2G0gTV4wgptm>.

games and those based on games in general. The first type is those in which “we try to make the movie fit and emulate a preexisting game as much as possible,” so that *The Shining* is modeled on *Maniac Mansion*, the 8-Bit *Blade Runner* is modeled on the 1993 SNES game *Shadowrun*, the 8-Bit *Kick Ass* is modeled on 1987’s seminal beat ’em up *Double Dragon*, and *Anchorman* is modeled on the 1994 RPG *EarthBound*.²² The second type of video, Dutton says, includes those movies that don’t fit into “an existing game perfectly ... so we make up an entirely new game.” He cites *Pulp Fiction* as a representative of this category: “It’s all over the place, just like the movie. We couldn’t really contain it into one game model,” so they included several (e.g. a “dance game,” the bonus round with the adrenaline needle, and a “platformer/shooter”). In both types of video, Dutton, Dutton, and Camarena adapt select sprites from earlier games, using three approaches to creating their art: they “take the preexisting game and we kind of remix it and modify it to match what we want” (e.g. Mega Man becomes Iron Man); they hand draw images before scanning them into Adobe Photoshop; and they occasionally animate over a source photo itself. In all three cases, Dutton offers a brief overview of the pixel art process, encouraging users to engage in their own adaptive activity, their own sweding. Dutton and company’s adaptive play with the films gives way to their users’.



Figure 3: A *Maniac Mansion/Shining* comparison from “Sneak Peeks & Techniques” (screen capture)

²² “Sneak Peeks & Techniques : Behind the Scenes of 8-BIT CINEMA,” YouTube video, 7:39, posted by CineFix, July 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMhCUpfwkMg>.

Ultimately, 8-Bit Cinema compounds the nostalgia of adaptation with the nostalgia of 8-bit culture (the series may be exemplarily nostalgic in that it inspires longing for a game that never existed to begin with). It provokes nostalgia for an outmoded source text (the novel made film, or the film made videogame) at the same time it provokes nostalgia for an outmoded technology (8-bit made 16-bit made 32-bit). But it also provokes nostalgia for an outmoded, or at least an updated, form of videogame adaptation. As Kevin M. Flanagan has observed, “[l]ooked at from a textual angle, the history of videogames becomes a history of adaptation”; he notes that “[s]ince the early days of *Tennis for Two* (1958) and *Spacewar* (1962), videogames have looked to other textual forms, and other media histories, for their inspiration.”²³ 8-Bit Cinema points to the more formal and formalized union of adaptation and videogames in the 1980s (during the stirrings of convergence culture), as official licenses became major selling points for electronic games, much as they had been for board games in the decades prior. A 1987 Nintendo ad from LJN, for instance, tempts players to “re-live the terror of *Jaws*, re-enact the trials of the *Karate Kid*, [and] play the only officially licensed Major League Baseball game” in its new “Interactive” range of games—games that offer “superior graphics and great sounds” as well as “the hottest licenses,” as another proudly proclaims. 8-Bit Cinema stresses that the history of gaming is also a history of adaptation.

8-Bit Cinema not only represents adaptation per se but a particular form thereof; audiences may also process 8-Bit Cinema *as animation*, as specifically animated adaptations. While some 8-Bit installments are drawn from already animated movies (e.g. *Finding Nemo*, *Frozen* [2013], *Princess Mononoke* [1997], *Spirited Away*), most take live-action films for their sources (albeit live action films like *District 9* [2009] and *Sin City* [2005] that may rely heavily on digital animation for their effect). To say that audiences enjoy seeing famous film actors animated in 8-bit style is to overlook the fact that those audiences may simply enjoy seeing said actors animated in the first place. One of the advantages of approaching 8-Bit Cinema *as animation* is that it could turn critics’ attention towards a practice that has remained relatively neglected in both adaptation and film studies. Karen Beckman begins her 2014 edited collection on *Animating Film Theory* by repeating Tom Gunning’s claim that the “marginalization of

²³ Kevin M. Flanagan, “Videogame Adaptation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2016).

animation” is “one of the great scandals of film theory”,²⁴ 8-Bit Cinema, as an especially marginal practice of an especially marginalized form, could reorient animation and film theory, two of media studies’ “most unwieldy and unstable organizing concepts,” as Beckman says. The unwieldy and unstable concept of 8-Bit Cinema lends weight to Lev Manovich’s famous claim that cinema may only represent “*one particular case of animation*” (Manovich likewise classifies digital cinema as “*a particular case of animation that uses live-action footage as one of its many elements*”).²⁵ Viewing 8-Bit Cinema as animation not only highlights the role of animation as an adaptive practice, but videogame animation’s own relationship to the history of film animation, whose arc from 2D to 3D it in many ways paralleled. 8-Bit Cinema may be framed, frankly, as cartoons (hence the audience’s acceptance and enjoyment of their outlandishness). The playfulness of animation and the playfulness of adaptation converge in the aesthetics of 8-bit cinema.

8-Bit Cinema’s playfulness also aligns it with another adaptive practice—one, like animation, that is unfairly maligned by critics and commenters alike, and one that is just as likely to be posited as childish: parody, the preeminent form of adaptation in the digital realm. On one hand, 8-Bit Cinema’s status *as parody* (and thus as fair use) is what allows it to skirt U.S. copyright law. On the other hand, 8-Bit Cinema’s may be measured mainly by its virality—how quickly its videos are tweeted, retweeted, posted and reposted, only to end up on aggregation sites like BuzzFeed or Vulture for further sharing. Much of the cultural capital that 8-Bit Cinema possesses is allocated through the economies of online parody. I have set the economies of online parody against the affordances of adaptation elsewhere,²⁶ but let me say here that the mechanisms of these remakes, like the mechanisms of parody, rely on what humor theorists would call opposing scripts, or two seemingly incompatible semantic situations: in this case not only between the video and the film, but between films and games more generally.

This leads us back to the question with which I began: how do audiences process 8-bit cinema *as games*? Can they even do so? Audiences who watch chess or football or poker, for instance, can (if they so choose) try their hand (or hands) at chess, football, or poker—maybe not with professionals, but with family or friends or strangers in the park or strangers online.

²⁴ Karen Beckman, ed., *Animating Film Theory* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2014).

²⁵ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 302.

²⁶ See Kyle Meikle, “A Book and a Movie Walk into a Bar,” *Comedy Studies* 6.2 (2015): 118-28.

Audiences who watch 8-Bit cinema cannot play the games depicted therein not only because the games are videos, not games, but because the games themselves are not games—the games do not exist. Duck, duck, no goose.

This limited view of spectatorship, though, neglects the fact that plenty of audiences enjoy watching videogames that they can't (or don't) play. As the headline of an August 2014 *New York Times* article proclaims, "In E-Sports, Video Gamers Draw Real Crowds and Big Money." The article details the "lucrative world of professional video game competition, widely known as e-sports," the successes of which "already mirror the achievements of major sports," with sold-out arenas and "at-home audiences larger than those of top traditional sporting events."²⁷ These grand proclamations need not overshadow the fact that many audiences enjoy watching other people play videogames on a far smaller scale. When I assigned the students in my fall 2013 class on games and gaming at the University of Delaware to play through the first chapter of the first season of Telltale Games' videogame adaptation of *The Walking Dead*, most did so in groups of three or four at a time, trading off on playing and spectating, the latter of which many found even more enjoyable than the former. To be sure, Telltale's game (like the studio's adaptations of other series like *Fables* and *Game of Thrones*) has been singled out for its particularly cinematic qualities—with play mainly reduced to Choose Your Own Adventure-style options—but this example highlights the idea that many games can be appreciated as (or in the style of) movies, just as many movies may be appreciated as (or in the style of) games.

Audiences can (and do) play movies. *Pulp Fiction*'s DVD menu invites us to do just that, if not necessarily to *play with* the movie—although we could, of course, in a limited sense, speeding it up or slowing it down, starting it or stopping it, selecting scenes and special features. The movie play of the 8-bit *Pulp Fiction* just involves its own special features, its own scene selections, its own starts and stops, its own speeds. Just as Tarantino's film frames its chronology as a puzzle to be pieced together by the viewer, so does the 8-bit *Pulp Fiction* reshuffle that chronology—omitting certain scenes, including others, reordering them altogether. Just as Tarantino's film is full of playful references to other films, references that may be decoded by

²⁷ Nick Wingfield, "In E-Sports, Video Gamers Draw Real Crowds and Big Money," *New York Times*, August 30, 2014, accessed January 2, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/technology/esports-explosion-brings-opportunity-riches-for-video-gamers.html>.

the viewer, so too is the 8-Bit *Pulp Fiction* full of references—not just to Tarantino’s films but to other games—to be similarly decoded. John Roberts has lately argued for a game-centric approach to another eminently playful director: Hitchcock, whose ludic style is manifest in the director’s “cameos, hidden picture puzzles, and verbal double entendres, [which] function rhetorically to encourage spectators to seek out hidden meanings and secret messages in his work.”²⁸ Building on earlier studies of Hitchcock’s playfulness by Thomas Leitch, Tom Cohen, and D.A. Miller, as well as proceduralist and constructivist models of reception put forth by Ian Bogost and David Bordwell, Roberts “seeks to advance a theory of narrative comprehension as productive play” (183). Robert’s model leaves us with the question of how 8-Bit Cinema may build upon or adapt the forms of play latent in its sources—of whether some films, or some directors, are more playful than others.

Roberts also leaves us with the question of whether it may not be better to think of 8-Bit Cinema *as play* rather than as games. At the minimum, we could consider 8-Bit Cinema as a sort of playthrough or walkthrough of the films adapted in the series—one possible way to watch or rewatch those films. As viewing records, the 8-Bit Cinema videos prove an intriguing parallel to the gaming world’s “highly colorful and detailed strategy guides that tell players all about the game (its characters, maps and geography of the world, weapons, enemies, objects to be found, fruitful strategies to follow, etc.).”²⁹ The highly colorful and detail-oriented installments of 8-Bit Cinema similarly reduce films to their main characters (Jules, Vince, and Butch, the *Pulp Fiction* video’s only “playable” characters), their geographies (the pawn shop, Jack Rabbit Slim’s, and Jimmie’s), their weapons (guns) and enemies (Marsellus Wallace), their objects to be found (the Big Kahuna burger, the briefcase). 8-Bit Cinema videos exist not only as demo reels for games yet to be made but records of films that have been played and replayed—on Blu-ray, DVD, VHS, LaserDisc, etc.—and played and replayed with by Dutton and his crew.

8-Bit Cinema’s installments not only serve as playthroughs of the movies that they adapt but as *plays*, as *performances* of those movies. 8-Bit Cinema may gesture not only to videogames’ convergence with film but with theatre, an arena in which they play an increasingly important role, from the immersive performances of Punchdrunk, like *Sleep No More*, an

²⁸ John W. Roberts, “From Hidden Pictures to Productive Pictures: Hitchcock’s Ludic Style,” *Hitchcock Annual* 19 (2015): 182.

²⁹ James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 97.

interactive restaging of *Macbeth*; to *Steins;gate*, a 2013 videogame stage adaptation that let audiences choose its ending; to “Theater of the Arcade” and “Grand Theft Ovid,” a pair of productions from the Brooklyn’s 2010 Game Play festival—all plays in which play is the thing.

For Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters*—as the title of his book implies—more than games themselves. Sicart argues that games “are a manifestation, a form of and for play, just not the only one. They are the strongest form, culturally and economically dominant. But they are part of an ecology of playthings and play contexts, from toys to playgrounds, from political action to aesthetic performance, through which play is used for expression.”³⁰ 8-Bit Cinema is an expression of play that’s part of a larger ecology of 8-bit videogames, film, adaptation, animation, and parody; to describe it as either a film or a game, a video or a videogame, is to reduce it to only the most culturally and economically dominant forms of description available. Following Sicart’s lead, it may be more productive to think of 8-Bit Cinema as a play context rather than as a plaything; it may be more productive not to think about 8-Bit Cinema videos in productive terms (i.e., as products) at all, but rather to think of 8-bit adaptation in processual terms, as a process or a series of processes shared between differently positioned audiences, including, but not limited to, the animators themselves, the animators they inspire, and the spectators who press play.

The final, or at least the eighth, way that audiences may process 8-Bit Cinema, then, is as a process itself. And to describe that process, we need not only the language of new media and remediation but also, more broadly, of genre. Audiences process 8-Bit Cinema *as genre*; they process the videos generically—semantically, syntactically, and pragmatically, to recall Rick Altman’s categories. For Altman, genres depend upon semantics (their “common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like”) and syntaxes (“certain constitutive relationships between designated and variable placeholders”).³¹ 8-Bit Cinema is semantic in that it involves the common traits and characteristics of 8-bit—and sometimes 16-bit, and sometimes 32-bit—videogames: playable characters, items, literal and metaphorical objects that may change shape slightly depending on the genre of the model game from which they take their contours (RPG, sidescroller, sport). It is syntactic in that it involves a constitutive relationship between those

³⁰ Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 4.

³¹ Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 31.

signifiers, albeit a relationship that excludes the player's assumed role in that constitution. 8-bit homage works very much like *film noir*, as a historically delimited but mobile genre (hence neo-noir), one rooted in adaptation, and one whose status as a *corpus* or as a *style* or as a *world* is still subject to debate.

This debate is key to our concept of genre and of 8-Bit Cinema as such. Beyond their signifiers and signification, genres also more importantly—and most importantly in Altman's revision of his earlier, exclusively semantic/syntactic model—"look different to different audiences ... disparate viewers may perceive quite disparate semantic and syntactic elements in the same film."³² In its tensions and contentions, 8-Bit Cinema stresses genre's pragmatic aspects, squaring with Altman's sense that genres, far from being the "unproblematic product of user sharing," are more often ensnared in an arena "where users with divergent interests compete to carry out their own programmes."³³ Altman's language here—of programmes and sharing and users—echoes the language of Web 2.0, the arena in which 8-bit adaptations proliferate. 8-Bit Cinema is driven by seemingly "divergent interests," seemingly competing programmes—those of cinema and those of videogames—that look less and less divergent, more and more convergent, the longer that we stare at them. If Altman says that one of the central questions in approaching genre is "[h]ow intended readings become identifiable as such,"³⁴ then 8-Bit Cinema presses this question by asking how or why we're wont to read its installments as videos or games, rather than as something else, some other or text or context for which we don't yet have the language. The nostalgia underlying 8-Bit Cinema may ultimately be for a time in which the discourses of cinema and the discourses of videogames could be more readily excluded from each other, if they ever could. Any number of discourses (adaptational, animated, filmic, generic, ludic) come to bear upon 8-Bit Cinema. What the fuck *isn't* this shit?

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³² Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), 207.

³³ Altman, *Film/Genre*, 215.

³⁴ Altman, *Film/Genre*, 212.