

# Watch a Film, Play a Game – Play a Film, Watch a Game: Notes on the ‘Intermedia- Presence’ of Digital Games in Cinema

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## ABSTRACT:

The present study does not approach digital games per se and in accordance with the, so to speak, matter-of-course habitus, i. e. within the frame of game studies discourse (regardless of the ludology-narratology debate and probably even continuing tension), but rather in a wider cultural context and that by following essentially their relations to other cultural contents and phenomena, cinema in particular. Hence the intermediality discourse is within the pursued reflection applied as, from the point of view of the author, a fruitful framework. Intermediality can be legitimately approached as such a relation between media which, as Petr Szczepanik<sup>1</sup> puts it, 'creates indivisible fusions'. If we accept this thesis and utilize it as a starting point, film – connecting image, word and sound – appears to be intermedial a priori. On the basis of this and in connection with digital games (which, by the way, can be in terms of the aforementioned understood as intermedial a priori, too), such cinematic works of art – naturally, *pars pro toto* – are in the centre of interest here in which the a priori intermedial character of film is in a sense amplified or rather brought to a square (film as 'intermedium<sup>2</sup>') – in this case and context by evincing ties, implicit and/or explicit, to digital games.

## KEY WORDS:

digital games, experience, film, intermedia, intermediality.

## Introduction: Theme Song... in a Loop

What can be perceived at least from the beginning of the third millennium as an undisputable, even ontological and – although there is a lot of supporting evidence also having the shape of various scientific outputs (papers, books, research projects, conferences etc.)<sup>2</sup> – axiomatic fact is that the intermediality discourse is lively indeed. After all, as Jan Schneider already stated in 2008, “the word intermediality has in the contemporary discourse on culture become a relatively frequent term which is modern but also fashionable”.<sup>3</sup> What is, however, more important is the conclusive efficacy of intermediality

1 For more information, see: SZCZEPANIK, P.: Intermedialita. In *Cinepur*, 2002, Vol. 9, No. 22. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <<http://cinepur.cz/article.php?article=5>>.

2 See also: PETHŐ, Á.: Approaches to Studying Intermediality in Contemporary Cinema. In *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 2018, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 165-187. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <<http://www.acta.sapientia.ro/acta-film/C15/film15-09.pdf>>; PETHŐ, Á.: Intermediality in Film: A Historiography of Methodologies. In *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 2010, Vol. 20, No. 1, p. 39-72. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <<http://www.acta.sapientia.ro/acta-film/C2/film2-3.pdf>>; KOŘENSKÝ, J.: Intermedialita – intertextualita – multimedialita – hypertextualita?. In SCHNEIDER, J., KRAUSOVÁ, L. (eds.): *Intermedialita: slovo – obraz – zvuk. Sborník příspěvků ze symposia*. Olomouc : Univerzita Palackého, 2008, p. 9-11.; SCHNEIDER, J.: Intermedialita: Malá vstupní inventura. In SCHNEIDER, J., KRAUSOVÁ, L. (eds.): *Vybrané kapitoly z intermediality*. Olomouc : Univerzita Palackého, 2008, p. 5-15.; SIMONIS, A.: *Intermediales Spiel im Film. Ästhetische Erfahrung zwischen Schrift, Bild und Musik*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2010.; Remark by the author: Determinative are within the discourse also various and, in fact, numerous considerations and discussions on the topic (and, naturally, also beyond the sphere of cinema) written by globally recognized intermediality-oriented 'theoretical headliners' such as Werner Wolf, Irina Rajewsky, Jens Schröter and/or Jürgen E. Müller.

3 SCHNEIDER, J.: Intermedialita: Malá vstupní inventura. In SCHNEIDER, J., KRAUSOVÁ, L. (eds.): *Vybrané kapitoly z intermediality*. Olomouc : Univerzita Palackého, 2008, p. 5.

aply expounded by Á. Pethő as follows: "If we look at the bigger picture, without any doubt, in the past two decades 'intermediality' has proven to be one of the most productive terms in the field of humanities generating an impressive number of publications and theoretical debates. This popularity of intermedial researches was prompted by the incredibly accelerated multiplication of media themselves that called for an adequate theoretical framework mapping the proliferation of media relations. The other factor that propelled 'intermediality' to a wider attention was most likely the fact that it emerged on an interdisciplinary basis that made it possible for scholars from a great number of fields (theories of literature, art history, music communication and cultural studies, philosophy, cinema studies, etc.) to participate in the discourse around questions of intermediality".<sup>4</sup> It remains to be added that the notion of intermediality seems to be productive not only in connection with traditional arts or rather media but also in connection with digital games – and especially when, as here, their links or interrelations with other contents of culture are followed.

With regard to everything that has happened in the field of art theory, film studies, media studies etc. at least within the frame of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it appears to be completely legitimate to understand film as art as well as a medium. And it seems completely legitimate even despite the fact that one can here and there actually come across calling into question the art-like nature of film *in toto* (for instance in connection with blockbuster films or particular genres) or the autonomous/specific media identity of film. Whereas generally it can seem problematic to approach digital games as works of art (although, as for instance Bartosz Stopel<sup>5</sup> argues, probably not entirely justly), it shouldn't appear questionable to approach them as a medium, even an expressive one.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in a sense (in fact mainly on the level of language games) it can be – and, as a matter of fact, in connection with film as well as digital games. Because when it comes to the media identity of both film and digital games, things can get complicated, which is distinguishable also in the following questions formulated by Á. Pethő: "Is film one medium among several others in our culture is it one that combines more than one? Is film (even in its traditional form) an 'intermedium', a 'composite' medium, in other words, perhaps the ultimate 'mixed' or 'hybrid' medium that combines all kinds of media in its texture of signification? Or should we more likely regard it merely as a 'place', a 'field' where intermedial relationships and/or media transformations can occur?".<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the same goes for digital games. For instance, J. Švelch writes about digital games as a multimedia phenomenon (referring to Marshall McLuhan) and then a transmedia phenomenon (referring to Jesper Juul).<sup>8</sup> He also mentions another important substance-related issue that could be epitomized in the form of a question similar to the questions asked above by Pethő: Is a game an artefact or an activity?<sup>9</sup>

4 PETHŐ, Á.: Intermediality in Film: A Historiography of Methodologies. In *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 2010, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 40. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <<http://www.acta.sapientia.ro/acta-film/C2/film2-3.pdf>>.

5 STOPEL, B.: On Botched Cinematic Transformations of Video Games. In CALLAHAN, D., BARKER, A. (eds.): *Body and Text: Cultural Transformations in New Media Environments*. Cham : Springer, 2019, p. 178-181.

6 For more information on understanding digital games as expressive medium, see: ŠVELCH, J.: Co nám říká hra. Teoretické a metodologické přístupy k počítačové hře jako expresivnímu médiu. In *Illuminace*, 2012, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 33-48.; Remark by the author: Interestingly, Jaroslav Švelch finds the strongest argument for the „digital games as medium“-approach in the cultural practice.; ŠVELCH, J.: Co nám říká hra. Teoretické a metodologické přístupy k počítačové hře jako expresivnímu médiu. In *Illuminace*, 2012, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 34.

7 PETHŐ, Á.: Intermediality in Film: A Historiography of Methodologies. In *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 2010, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 48. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <<http://www.acta.sapientia.ro/acta-film/C2/film2-3.pdf>>.

8 ŠVELCH, J.: Počítačové hry jako nová média. In *Mediální studia*, 2008, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 11-12. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <[https://medialnistudia.fsv.cuni.cz/front.file/download?file=2008\\_01\\_01\\_svelch.pdf](https://medialnistudia.fsv.cuni.cz/front.file/download?file=2008_01_01_svelch.pdf)>.

9 ŠVELCH, J.: Co nám říká hra. Teoretické a metodologické přístupy k počítačové hře jako expresivnímu médiu. In *Illuminace: Časopis pro teorii, historii a estetiku filmu*, 2012, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 35.

However, if we – mainly in order to avoid getting trapped in an explication-loop forever – accept the stated point of view, i.e. if we understand both film and digital games as media, the observation of their relationship through the lens of inter-mediality (word division added to emphasize the semantics) simply can't be regarded as improper. Film and digital games, especially as we know and experience them today, have a lot in common. B. Stopel<sup>10</sup> writes terms about „video games/cinema proximity“. As the author points out, the influencing or rather the “inter-change“ between film and digital games is conclusively reciprocal. The aesthetic experience elicited by film is at its core as a rule synesthetic<sup>11</sup> and in connection with the senses relatively complex. The situation concerning the aesthetic experience raised by digital games is similar. On the other hand, the crucial difference, and also regarding the aesthetic experience, is the absence (film) or, on the contrary, presence (digital games) of interactivity. Since this is an absolutely banal rule, so to speak, of (aesthetic) engagement, it comes as no surprise that it can be found in almost every consideration touching upon – centrally as well as peripherally – the topic of digital games-related experience. And the papers of this kind cited in the bibliography below prove it, too: “Although we tend to appreciate many visual, aural, compositional and art-historical qualities of games and films in largely similar ways, interactivity shifts the appreciative focus towards gameplay, exploration, richness of world structure (video games often have much larger storyworlds, populated by vast numbers of characters, than do individual films) or the architectonics of plotlines”.<sup>12</sup>

What's particularly significant in the context of the present study, film and digital games – both being syncretic, both creating as a rule 'indivisible fusions'<sup>13</sup> – can be understood as phenomena which are basically intermedial a priori.<sup>14</sup> After all, when reflecting on transmedia storytelling and seriality, M. Kudláč postulates this: “Notwithstanding the comparatively short history of the video game medium, its syncretic practises are well able to provide a convergent platform in which previous forms are absorbed, as cinema had formerly done by integrating the tradition of theatre, art, literature and music”.<sup>15</sup> In addition, it's not only the tradition itself that is 'imbibed', it's also the (f)actual language or rather the defining means of expression. And this is where it gets interesting within the frame of the present consideration. Naturally, the matter of the media identity of film and digital games as well as the matter of their richly nuanced interrelationships – and also from the point of view of intermediality – are far more saturated, far more complicated and far more complex than clarified above. However, with regard to the object of interest here such an explication-shortcut is by all means acceptable. After all, we focus on just

10 STOPEL, B.: On Botched Cinematic Transformations of Video Games. In CALLAHAN, D., BARKER, A. (eds.): *Body and Text: Cultural Transformations in New Media Environments*. Cham : Springer, 2019, p. 176.

11 Remark by the author: An interesting reflection of the synaesthesia-intermediality relation offers Astrid Winter.; For more information, see: WINTER, A.: Intermedialita a synestezie. In SCHNEIDER, J., KRAUSOVÁ, L. (eds.): *Intermedialita: slovo – obraz – zvuk. Sborník příspěvků ze sympozia*. Olomouc : Univerzita Palackého, 2008, p. 27-43.

12 STOPEL, B.: On Botched Cinematic Transformations of Video Games. In CALLAHAN, D., BARKER, A. (eds.): *Body and Text: Cultural Transformations in New Media Environments*. Cham : Springer, 2019, p. 183.

13 Remark by the author: Petr Szczepanik uses this collocation to characterize the outcome of intermediality.; SZCZEPANIK, P.: Intermedialita. In *Cinepur*, 2002, Vol. 9, No. 22. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <<http://cinepur.cz/article.php?article=5>>.

14 Remark by the author: Put differently, according to Joachim Paech, “(f)ilm is from its beginning an 'intermedia fact'”; PAECH, J.: The Intermediality of Film. In *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 2011, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 7. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <<http://www.acta.sapientia.ro/acta-film/C4/Film4-1.pdf>>.; Remark by the author: Similarly sees the film also Petr Szczepanik.; See also: SZCZEPANIK, P.: Intermedialita. In *Cinepur*, 2002, Vol. 9, No. 22. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <<http://cinepur.cz/article.php?article=5>>.

15 KUDLÁČ, M.: Transmedia Storytelling: The Many Faces of Video Games, Fluid Narratives and Winding Seriality. In CALLAHAN, D., BARKER, A. (eds.): *Body and Text: Cultural Transformations in New Media Environments*. Cham : Springer, 2019, p. 192.

a specific appearance of the film-digital games relation – the ‘intermedia-presence’ of digital games in cinema. In these terms and based on the already mentioned notion of film being intermedial a priori it is the aim, referring to our prior study in the field of cinema,<sup>16</sup> to address such cinematic works of art which by evincing ties to digital games and thus amplifying the very intermedial nature of film function as what we suggest to denote by the expression ‘intermedia’<sup>2</sup>.

In general there are numerous examples of what we understand as cinematic ‘intermedia’<sup>2</sup>. To mention some of them: musical films like, for instance, Damien Chazelle’s *La La Land*<sup>17</sup> (2016) (music-film interrelation), Ang Lee’s *Hulk*<sup>18</sup> (2003) (comics-film interrelation), Gustav Deutsch’s *Shirley: Visions of Reality*<sup>19</sup> (2013) (fine arts-film interrelation), Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge*<sup>20</sup> (2001) (theatre-film interrelation), Peter Greenaway’s *Prospero’s Books*<sup>21</sup> (1991) (literature-film interrelation) etc. Interestingly, cinematic ‘intermedia’<sup>2</sup> often put emphasis on one ‘component’ of film as an ‘indivisible fusion’ – i.e. image (Dorota Kobiela’s and Hugh Welchman’s *Loving Vincent*<sup>22</sup> – 2017, word (Marc Foster’s *Stranger Than Fiction*<sup>23</sup> – 2006), sound (Ola Simonsson’s and Johannes S. Nilsson’s *Sound of Noise*<sup>24</sup> – 2010).<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, there are also numerous examples of such cinematic ‘intermedia’<sup>2</sup> which encapsulate at their very core the digital games-film interrelation. Three of them – namely Tom Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run*<sup>26</sup> (1998), Edgar Wright’s *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*<sup>27</sup> (2010) and Ilya Naishuller’s *Hardcore Henry*<sup>28</sup> (2015) – are fragmentary reflected onwards and that because in a way they, as we endeavour to demonstrate, represent three different appearances of the ‘intermedia-presence’ of digital games in cinema by, within a frame of almost two decades (17 years – from 1998 to 2015), evincing different grades of implicitness/explicitness and, overall, the extent of what’s observed here. What’s additionally interesting is that all three films can be comprehended as experimental since they, so to speak, cross the usual borders and conventions of cinema as a medium as well as as an art form.

Even with respect to everything formulated so far, it should be clear that regarding the actual subject matter or rather reflected material and also regarding the concept of the study per se we can’t and do not intend to touch on all the films which are somehow tied to digital games. Many particular works of art and also such that are current and interesting examples of what is in the centre of our interest here are simply put aside – like, for example, Steven Spielberg’s *Ready Player One*<sup>29</sup> which is not only heavily game-like but as an adaptation of a novel also literature-related and therefore intertextual as well as intermedial at its very core. It also should be clear that we do not want to deal with the intermedial interrelations between cinema and digital games overall (in terms of this, for example, cinematic adaptations of digital games-pretexts are almost completely, so to speak, outside our visual field). In addition, it is really important that by reflecting particular cinematic works of art on the platform of partial, comparison-based interpretations we actually are interested in just one side of the film-digital games relationship, although it

- 16 BOSZORÁD, M.: *Film ako „intermédiu“ na druhú*. Paper presented at XIX. Czech and Slovak Filmologic Conference with the theme *Obraz – slovo – zvuk*. Krpáčovo, presented on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2019.
- 17 CHAZELLE, D. (Director): *La La Land* (2016). [DVD]. Santa Monica : Summit Entertainment, 2017.
- 18 LEE, A. (Director): *Hulk* (2003). [DVD]. Los Angeles : Universal, 2003.
- 19 DEUTSCH, G. (Director): *Shirley: Visions of Reality* (2013, *Dual Format Edition*). [Blu-ray & DVD]. London : Eureka Entertainment, 2018.
- 20 LUHRMANN, B. (Director): *Moulin Rouge* (2001). [DVD]. Los Angeles : 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 2001.
- 21 GREENAWAY, P. (Director): *Prospero’s Books* (1991). [DVD]. New York : Allied Artists, 2016.
- 22 KOBIELA, D., WELCHMAN, H. (Directors): *Loving Vincent* (2017). [DVD]. London : Altitude Film, 2018.
- 23 FORSTER, M. (Director): *Stranger than Fiction* (2006). [DVD]. Culver City : Sony Pictures, 2007.
- 24 SIMONSSON, O., NILSSON, J. S. (Directors): *Sound of Noise* (2010). [DVD]. New York : Magnolia Pictures, 2012.
- 25 BOSZORÁD, M.: *Film ako „intermédiu“ na druhú*. Paper presented at XIX. Czech and Slovak Filmologic Conference with the theme *Obraz – slovo – zvuk*. Krpáčovo, presented on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2019.
- 26 TYKWER, T. (Director): *Run Lola Run* (1998). [DVD]. Culver City : Sony Pictures, 1999.
- 27 WRIGHT, E. (Director): *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010). [DVD]. Los Angeles : Universal, 2010.
- 28 NAISHULLER, I. (Director): *Hardcore Henry* (2015). [DVD]. Burbank : STX Entertainment, 2016.
- 29 SPIELBERG, S. (Director): *Ready Player One* (2018). [DVD]. Burbank : Warner Bros, 2018.

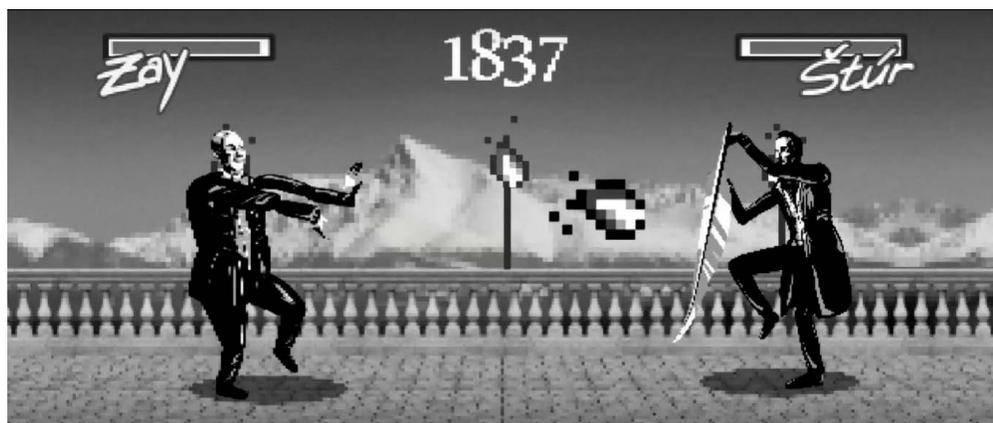
may seem that the title of the study prefigures something else. However, what the play on words in the two-part title really refers to is the ambiguous semantics of the verb “to play” which as a matter of fact connects and at the same time sets digital games and cinema apart. While in the first part of the title we refer to the process of engaging in a recreational activity (a game), the process of taking part in it, in the second part we refer not, as could be expected, to the game-like dimensions of particular cinematic artefacts (experimental or conventional) but to the action by which a film as a rule is, so to speak, set in motion preceding its reception. In this sense one can, and being absolutely truthful, state that a film – unlike digital games – simply is and is not played at the same time. The play on words in the title, the same play on words which is profoundly linked to the act of reception (the act of watching a film or playing a game and also – to certain extent synthezizing – watching a game-like film), at the same time can be understood as a hint regarding our methodology, as that already – although rather implicitly – has been indicated above. The intermedial interrelations between cinema and digital games are thus framewise observed here from the methodological positions of experience-based and interpretation-based aesthetics or rather pragmatist aesthetics (as they are epitomized by the approach of R. Shusterman particularly also in connection with popular culture<sup>30</sup>).

## Opening Cutscene(s)

A character of a young woman fights together with her companions in a series of captivating, vivid and all senses addressing sequences of action first against three samurai-like giants, then steampunk-inspired Nazi zombie soldiers, then orcs while trying to get inside a castle inhabited by dragons and eventually futuristic robotic guards on a train. Moreover, in connection with each of those missions the ‘woman-characters squad’ has to – and outside of each of the mission’s environment itself – gain achievements (map, lighter, kitchen knife). Although these images may be heavily reminiscent of a level-based digital game, in fact they synecdochically represent the plot of Zack Snyder’s *Sucker Punch*<sup>31</sup> (2011). Another, more realistic, example of a film resembling a digital game in terms of its structure/composition is *The Raid: Redemption*<sup>32</sup> (2011) directed by Gareth Evans.) Captured in low graphics quality a character of a man moves quickly on a street, collects a syringe, goes on a rampage, shoots some other characters, then moves even more quickly until eventually his overstrained heart explodes and the ‘game over’ notification appears. This probably could be a fragment of a GTA-like digital game (similar on the game series *Grand Theft Auto*<sup>33</sup>), in fact it’s a hidden post-credits sequence from Mark Neveldine’s and Brian Taylor’s *Crank*<sup>34</sup> (2006). Another – and regarding the context completely different – example of such a use of a digital-games reference and in this case within the film itself can be found in the Slovak partly live-action and partly animated docudrama *True Štúr*<sup>35</sup> (2015) directed by Michal Baláž and Noro Držiak. The character of the Slovak language’s codicator Ľudovít Štúr is in a particular *Mortal Kombat*<sup>36</sup>-like sequence displayed as fighting against his ideological opponent, count Karol Zay (Picture 1). The post-credits sequence from *Crank* can be, however, approached also as an intermedial Easter egg

- 30 For more information, see: SHUSTERMAN, R.: *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Oxford : Blackwell, 1992.
- 31 SNYDER, Z. (Director): *Sucker Punch* (2011). [DVD]. Burbank : Warner Bros, 2011.
- 32 EVANS, G. (Director): *The Raid: Redemption* (2011). [DVD]. Culver City : Sony Pictures, 2012.
- 33 ROCKSTAR NORTH et al.: *Grand Theft Auto (series)*. [digital game]. New York : Rockstar Games, 1997-2013.
- 34 NEVELDINE, M., TAYLOR, B. (Directors): *Crank* (2006). [DVD]. Santa Monica : Lionsgate, 2007.
- 35 BALÁŽ, M., DRŽIAK, N.: *True Štúr*. 2015. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at <<https://www.rtvsk.sk/televizia/archiv/9578/78439>>.
- 36 MIDWAY et al.: *Mortal Kombat (series)*. [digital game]. Chicago : Midway, 1992-2019.

present in a film and at the same time referencing digital games per se. There are more examples of such a creative strategy in cinema, one of them being, for instance, the appearance of Pac-Man on a map depicted in a scene from *Tron*<sup>37</sup> (1982) directed by Steven Lisberger.



Picture 1: The character of Ludovít Štúr in a Mortal Kombat-like sequence

Source: author's screenshot; BALÁŽ, M., DRŽIAK, N.: *True Štúr*. 2015. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <<https://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/9578/78439>>.

A character of a seriously wounded man, at first with a gas mask on, is exiting a building, a few steps from the exit another character of a man with a gun approaches him from behind, suddenly the point of view changes, the camera and thus the viewer enters the head of the first man, then a subtle flash of light appears, the man (and with him the viewer who is, so to speak, at this moment walking in his shoes) stops, lurches and eventually falls to the ground. This easily may be an actual cutscene from a *first-person shooter* (FPS), but in fact it's a short sequence preceding the finale of Luc Besson's *Léon: The Professional*<sup>38</sup> (1994). Another – and by much voluminous – example, regarding the aesthetic experience, of an immersive usage of the FPS-point of view (subjective camerawork) within the frame of an actual film is the iconic, about 5-minutes long sequence in *Doom*<sup>39</sup> (2005) directed by Andrzej Bartkowiak.<sup>40</sup> By the way, a FPS-like sequence is also used at the very beginning of the abovementioned *Crank* depicting the main character as he wakes up and begins to realise why he is feeling so weird (which the viewer can experience to certain extent because of the subjective perspective experience).<sup>41</sup>

37 LISBERGER, S. (Director): *Tron* (1982). [DVD]. Burbank : Disney, 2002.

38 BESSON, L. (Director): *Léon – The Professional* (1994, *Uncut International Version*). [DVD]. Culver City : Sony Pictures, 2000.

39 BARTKOWIAK, A. (Director): *Doom* (2005). [DVD]. Los Angeles : Universal, 2006.

40 Regarding this sequence, see: BEIL, B.: *First Person Perspectives. Point of View und figurenzentrierte Erzählformen im Film und im Computerspiel*. Münster : Lit Verlag, 2010, p. 84-87.

41 Regarding an analysis and interpretation of this sequence, see: BEIL, B.: *First Person Perspectives. Point of View und figurenzentrierte Erzählformen im Film und im Computerspiel*. Münster : Lit Verlag, 2010, p. 108-112.

## Clap 1: Run, Protagonist, Run

*Run Lola Run* directed by Tom Tykwer, one of the most highly regarded contemporary German personalities in the field of cinema, is regarding its very nature an eloquent object of interest when it comes to intermediality (and, moreover, an internally polymorphous one). At least two aspects of the film are in this context – and apart from relationships to digital games – worth the attention and just as pretty apparent: 1. The opening credits sequence which is animated and cartoon-like stylized. (What's not less important here, Tykwer also uses animation within the structure of the narrative itself, when basically separating its partly varying but for the most part actually repeating segments.); 2. The aesthetic experience of Tykwer's feature film is heavily defined by its 'musicality' since the rhythm of the film felt by the viewer in the process of perception is heavily defined by the rhythm of the employed music, particularly by the machine-like beat of electronic (techno) music (Picture 2).



Picture 2: The character of Lola captured by the camera from the side while running

Source: author's screenshot; TYKWER, T. (Director): *Run Lola Run* (1998). [DVD]. Culver City : Sony Pictures, 1999.

In terms of digital games-film interrelations the most important element of Tykwer's cinematic work of art is its structure/composition. *Run Lola Run* consists mainly (there are also two – more lyrical than narrative – 'intermezzos') of three alike episodes whereby each of them ends differently (two of them with death – once of Lola and the other time of Manni, her boyfriend). In this sense Tykwer's film resembles a game play, where the player has as a rule three lives at his disposal. He makes an attempt to complete the mission and when he fails, he has the opportunity to make another attempt – naturally, trying to do something differently, i.e., so to speak, revisit his actions. Similarly, that's what Lola does within the frame of the film. Thus, by using time loop and narrative cyclicality, Tykwer basically appropriates the 'mission failed – restart' logic or rather, mechanism. In addition, since the protagonist is almost constantly in motion – running – while often being in the environment captured by the camera from the side, *Run Lola Run* can be at least partly viewed as a cinematic response to side-scrolling digital games filled with action and, because pushed for time (and, figuratively speaking, threatened by the edge of the screen), thrill or tension.

## Clap 2: Run, Protagonist and Player, Run (and Beat 'em Up)

Similarly to *Run Lola Run*, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* directed by Edgar Wright, one of the most innovative contemporary film-makers in general and a popculture-fanboy body and soul, is incredibly saturated in terms of intertextuality as well as intermediality. First of all, it's important to mention that the film as such is an adaptation<sup>42</sup> of a comic book series written and drawn by Brian Lee O'Malley. And what's also significant, the film points to its comics-roots conspicuously – from sounds being heard as well as visualised on the screen (for example, when the telephone rings) through appearing verbal time and place specifications to sequences in which the main female character Ramona Flowers retrospectively narrates micro-stories encapsulating her past relationships, sequences which actually set black-and-white and, regarding the style, manga-inspired and thus the pretext-inspired comic panels in motion right before the eyes of the viewer.



Picture 3: The character of Scott gaining an extra life

Source: author's screenshot; WRIGHT, E. (Director): *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*. [DVD]. Los Angeles : Universal, 2010.

Concerning digital games-film interrelations, Wright's film is, similarly to Tykwer's, structured as a game. What's however, different is the game which is used as the model. The narrative of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* is in terms of composition built as a level-based game and, in addition, a fighting and also a beat 'em up game. After all, the character of Scott Pilgrim has to stepwise/levelwise fight former lovers of Ramona on a platform of close combat in order to, so to speak, have the opportunity to win her love. Furthermore, in the finale of the film Scott has to fight a relatively large number of opponents before eventually getting into a battle with the ultimate villain, the boss-like character of Gideon. Nevertheless, there are many other elements borrowed from digital games – for instance,

42 Remark by the author: By the way, the comic book series was also adapted into a side scrolling beat 'em up game entitled *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World: The Game* (2010); UBISOFT: *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World: The Game*. [digital game]. Montreal : Ubisoft, 2010.

the mechanism of earning an extra life (Picture 3) or special features, namely the Power of Love-sword or the Power of Self-Respect-sword. Although not repeatedly or as complexly used as in *Run Lola run*, the "mission failed-restart" mechanism is used also in Wright's film – within the frame of the final battle. Not to mention some other partial and for non-players often not as explicit references to the sphere of digital games – like, for instance, the usage of the music borrowed from the game series *The Legend of Zelda*<sup>43</sup>. In comparison to *Run Lola Run* the ending is also interesting. In both films the ending is happy, wherein a pair of lovers leaving the scene hand in hand is depicted. However, Wright's film is manifestationwise more open since after Scott and Ramona disappear behind a white door, the camera moves up and captures a countdown appearing in the sky accompanied by a simple and game-related question: 'Continue?'

## Clap 3: Run, Protagonist, Player and Viewer, Run (and Shoot 'em Up)

As a film embodying in a sense the peak and simultaneously the trough of digital games-film intermedial relationships, the directorial debut of Ilya Naihuller *Hardcore Henry* can be understood On one hand the film is strongly and intransigently holding on to its (inter)medial 'template', namely first-person shooter games, on the other hand by exactly doing this the film – perhaps paradoxically – points, especially in connection with aesthetic experiences raised by it, to its own limits as well as the limits of the cinematic medium in general. Representing what could be denoted as an 'ultra-action' game-like film, Naihuller's experimental piece basically reanimates the Frankenstein subject-matter (Frankenstein-like character) within the context of a storyline resembling a mission-based digital game in which the main character has to – usually by following instructions – get to a location and there carry out a particular action just to gain the opportunity to undergo generally the same only in different particular circumstances. Clearly at first sight, *Hardcore Henry* 'confesses' to inspiration taken from digital games by the usage of the subjective camera. Although such a creative strategy, without doubt connecting the cinematic work with first-person shooter games, may seem attractive because being not conventional in film, it has, as B. Beil<sup>44</sup> calls it, 'deficits'. Beil mentions in this context three problems of subjective camera: the subject getting into a blind spot, the difference between real, natural seeing and the filmic image pretending it and the limitations concerning different expressive qualities of film (for instance, the pace of action or the act of editing).<sup>45</sup> Whereas – if the first deficit is taken into consideration – in digital games the problem of the 'missing' subject can be compensated for example by using cutscenes depicting the subject from the outside, in a film where the hero is faceless for the whole time it really is a problem. And even the mental projection of the viewer into the body of the protagonist while watching the film (and not actually playing it like a game) doesn't solve it sufficiently.

43 NINTENDO et al.: *The Legends of Zelda (series)*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 1986-2019.

44 BEIL, B.: *First Person Perspectives. Point of View und figurenzentrierte Erzählformen im Film und im Computerspiel*. Münster : Lit Verlag, 2010, p. 68-70.

45 Ibidem.

However, the creators of *Hardcore Henry* counterweight in a sense the limits of the aesthetic experience related to film (and not to digital games)<sup>46</sup> and also the deficits of the subjective camera by winking at the audience and especially at the gamers in it. The protagonist, while being barefoot, stumbles over something painfully or falls off a horse, when he intends – maybe encouraged by idyllic Western-music – to ride it. This almost definitely would not happen in a digital game. Such jokes or ironic gestures are used repeatedly in Naishuller's film – Queen's *Don't stop me know*<sup>47</sup> featured in a sequence following the 'kick' raised by some item from a first aid kit, caricatural usage of player's personalisation mechanism (concerning the voice) or, symptomatically, the opening credits as such which combine some euphonic and non-disturbing music and explicit images of pure violence in slow motion (for instance, a knife slowly penetrating someone's neck). With regard to all this *Hardcore Henry* is probably not to be understood as a digital game-like film, which, although trying hard, isn't able to replicate digital games as its model fully, but rather as a filmic pastiche honouring digital games per se – appreciatively albeit with a pinch of irony. In addition, Naishuller's film is maybe more about life and humans in general as it may seem, after all, as J. Malíček put it, "(a) typical 'Doom-like' hero is basically a metonymy of a human in an existential situation" (Picture 4).<sup>48</sup>



Picture 4: The character of Henry while being on his 'existential' mission

Source: author's screenshot; NAISHULLER, I. (Director): *Hardcore Henry* (2015). [DVD]. Burbank : STX Entertainment, 2016.

46 Remark by the author: Referring to thoughts of Jaroslav Švelch (although put out of original context), the viewer can interpret, while the (active) player can interpret and configure.: ŠVELCH, J.: Počítačové hry jako nová média. In *Mediální studia*, 2008, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 14. [online]. [2020-03-14]. Available at: <https://medialnistudia.fsv.cuni.cz/front.file/download?file=2008\_01\_01\_svelch.pdf>.

47 QUEEN: *Don't stop me know*. Track No. 12 on the Studio Album *Jazz by Queen*. [CD]. London : EMI Records Limited, 1979.

48 MALÍČEK, J.: Videohra – výrazový prostriedok populárnej kultúry v postmodernej situácii. In PLESNÍK, L., ŽILKOVÁ, M. (eds.): *O interpretácii umeleckého textu 23. Pragmatika vyjadrovacích prostriedkov umenia*. Nitra : UKF in Nitra, 2001, p. 126.; Remark by the author: Excerpt ad hoc translated from Slovak original by the author of the present study.

## Conclusions: Closing credits

The field of inter-relations between film and digital games – the field where film studies, game studies, intermediality studies etc. touch, overlap and perhaps even collide in a sense – is far more internally structured than we were understandably able to clarify. Thus it's natural that there are many points of view on how to observe and analyse the, so to speak, ontological closeness of the two media. For instance, J. Stallabras simply argues that computer game genres are in thrall of film, while some of them emulate live action film and the others animated/cartoon film – and at more levels.<sup>49</sup> Also the game-like films per se, which were reflected above, could be objects of a more complex and far more thorough analysis and interpretation. The three particular films have a lot in common – all of them are, for instance, filled with action, all of them are vivid and noisy (sometimes literally, but mainly figuratively) and all of them captivate the senses of the viewer, although they are just in the position of anon-player. Interestingly and taking into consideration primarily that very nature of the films as such, one thing is important to accentuate: The viewer doesn't participate in them actively in terms of playerwise involvement, nevertheless, they surely do participate in them actively in terms of perception. And within the process of perception during which the aesthetic experience arises the intermedial interlinks also play a major role – and at more levels. After all, in those three cases (and others, of course, too) the viewer doesn't watch just a simple film, a simple intermedium, but a film fundamentally defined by what we here understand as the 'intermedia-presence' of digital games in cinema – i.e., one particular appearance of what we understand as cinematic 'intermedia'<sup>2</sup>.

A. Ndalianis writes in one of her considerations on digital games (symptomatically, also in connection with film) as follows: "The cross-over between popular culture forms such as films and computer games tests the clear separation between diverse media forms, and this overlap has ramification for genre analysis".<sup>50</sup> One definitely cannot argue with her. Nevertheless, within the frame of ramifications (not necessarily understood as negative) can arise something novel, something that – as it is the case of *Run Lola Run*, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, *Hardcore Henry* and also many other films and not only those mentioned above – gives the opportunity not only to check out but also productively overcome the borders as well as the very limits of the interlinked media (or) forms. And – as we actually can experience it in connection with culture and its contents including, of course, film and digital games, so to speak, on a daily basis – exactly around the borderlines happens what's worth the (aesthetic) attention the most.

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49 STALLABRAS, J.: Jen si hráť. In *Biograph. Magazín pro film a nova média*, 1998, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 45.

50 NDALIANIS, A.: The Rules of the Game: *Evil Dead II... Meet Thy Doom*. In JENKINS, H., McPHERSON, T., SHATTUC, J. (eds.): *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*. Durham, London : Duke University Press, 2002, p. 503.

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