

# Gameplay to Screenplay: Why So Many Game-to-Movie Adaptations Suck

When pixels meet popcorn, the result so often seems mediocre, messy, and just plain meh. Excitement and anticipation typically clash with abject disappointment when our favourite games are transformed from the PC to silver screen and, more often than not, the transition leaves audiences frustrated. The question begs: why do most on-screen tie-ins appear to miss the mark and falter rather than flourish? What exactly is going on?

## *Milking the Cash Cow*

One of the most prevalent bugbears afflicting not only screen adaptation but modern movie making in general is the short-sighted studio who identify a popular title then rush to exploit existing markets for easy money.

Selling seats to bums instead of making a halfway decent product leads to shallow and cynical output. On top of this, studios exploiting a cash-cow need something for public consumption fast, before the hype and interest die down and the money goes away, so the pressure on production staff to complete a project at speed can be intense. Quality invariably suffers, turning the proverbial cash-cow into a big fat heifer.

## *The Big Divide*

While games and cinema both fall under the category of entertainment, they remain as different as night and day. Games are interactive and time intensive, movies are not. While the average gamer might spend 40 or more hours merrily wandering the wilds of Skyrim, levelling up and building their skill tree, most movie-goers would flee for the hills at the prospect of a 40-hour movie marathon.

Modern games, and particularly sandbox games, can be enormously freeform, players enjoying freedom to explore and choose their own paths, their own quests, and their own story within the imagined world. Movies, by comparison, are linear beasts. Their make-believe realms are constrained by narrative walls; the beginning, middle and end, the act structure, story beats, character arcs, themes and reveals. And all this must be shoehorned into a runtime no longer than 90 to 120 minutes.

Marrying these two widely disparate creatures is a daunting prospect for even the most talented production team. Given the time restraints typically imposed on such teams, little wonder we see more failures than successes.

## *Respect, Reputation and Reverence*

So many game-to-screen adaptations make the same mistake when they attempt to piggy-back on the reputation of an existing IP. The stumbling blocks can be boiled down to a lack of respect for the subject matter, indifference to, or irreverence for, established fandoms and an over-arching ignorance of world lore.

Failure to observe the three Rs results in productions deviating so far from source that any associations appear merely exploitative, not integral. Changes only engage if they vastly improve on the original and this is a rare accomplishment since movie adaptations, by definition, tend to favour only the most popular and successful brands. Fans with skin in the game will feel cheated by this obvious lack of empathy and the result will inevitably bomb.

## *Well, What Did You Expect?*

Not every pitfall can be blamed solely on production crews, writers, and studios. Audience expectations can make or break a movie at the best of times, particularly if the end product fails to live up to promotional hype. In the case of game-to-screen adaptations, the audience already has a firm idea in their mind about what to expect and avid fans will already be emotionally invested, ready to tear their hair out if the result is in any way sub-par. Any movie aiming to win the hearts and minds of an established fanbase faces an uphill struggle compared with unique screenplays whose audiences come in cold, with no prior expectations or comparisons to be made.

But not all is doom and gloom. Studios can hit the tie-in sweet spot, as proven by a raft of successful adaptations, including Silent Hill, Super Mario Bros, Tomb Raider, Arcane and The Last of Us (sequels and second seasons notwithstanding). By entering into a production with sincerity and virtuous motives, a studio can set themselves on the right path from day one. Even if they intend to make a killing on the back of an existing fanbase, they should tread carefully and take their time, employing writers with a genuine love for the source material and time, funds and resources enough to make something worthwhile. All concerned, including the audience, should remember that games and movies are vastly different animals. The big screen will never come close to replicating the experience of a game, but with effort and integrity it might come close.