Chapter 2
The Inescapable Intertextuality of Blade Runner: The Video Game

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ABSTRACT

The video game adaptation of Blade Runner (1997) exemplifies the challenges of adapting narrative from traditional media into digital games. The key to the process of adaptation is the fictional world, which it borrows both from Philip K. Dick’s novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (1968) and Ridley Scott’s film Blade Runner (1982). Each of these works provides different access points to the world, creating an intertextual relationship that can be qualified as transmedia storytelling, as defined by Jenkins (2006). The game utilizes the properties of digital environments (Murray, 2001) in order to create a world that the player can explore and participate in; for this world to have the sort of complexity and richness that gives way to engaging interactions, the game resorts to the film to create a visual representation, and to the themes of the novel. Thus the game is inescapably intertextual, since it needs of both source materials in order to make the best of the medium of the video game.

INTRODUCTION

Philip K. Dick did not get to see Blade Runner (1982), the film based on Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (1968) He did see a twenty-minute reel showcasing its visual effects in a private screening. According to Sammon (1996, p. 284), Dick had strong reservations about the capacity of Hollywood studios to adapt his novels up to that point and was rather unimpressed with the scripts he had read so far. What he saw on the screen, however, surprised him so much he told Ridley Scott, the film director, that he had managed to show the world the way Dick had pictured it in his head. “I recognized it immediately. It was my own interior world. They caught it perfectly.” (Boonstra, 1982). A few months before he died, Dick wrote to the Ladd Company, producers of the film, to express his enthusiasm about another segment he had seen on television, remarking that Blade Runner would revolutionize what people thought
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science fiction was (Dick, 1981). Initially, the film was a commercial flop (Redmond, 2008, p. 8), but time proved Dick right in yet another example of his capacity as a visionary. *Blade Runner* is a landmark in the history of film and a constant in every list of the best films of science fiction of all time.

Adapting Philip K. Dick’s novel to the screen was a challenge. It is a complex work with many characters and interweaving themes, and several of the key scenes are difficult to narrate visually. It took two writers (Hampton Fancher and David Peoples) to write the screenplay, along with constant input from the director, Ridley Scott. Reportedly, Scott never finished reading the original novel, and Peoples did not read it at all; Dick was not involved in the process and publicly expressed his outrage at Fancher’s first script (Sammon, 1996, pp. 51-70). The process was contentious all throughout, although the final version of the screenplay pleased the novelist, the screenwriters and the director.

It was the visual presentation of the world that convinced the author that the final result may be worthwhile. In his letter to the Ladd Company, he demonstrates little concern with the adaptation of the story—audiences could now really see the world he had created. In his prose, Dick was a master of world building, creating characters and conflicts, as well as unstable and ambiguous ontologies. The visual descriptions, however, were not always relevant to his world. While Fancher was writing his version of the script, Scott encouraged him to look at what lay outside the windows (Sammon, 1996, p. 53), thus turning the attention to where the characters lived in order to understand them better. *Blade Runner* revealed the key to adapting science fiction to film – and to interactive media – by focusing on the world. *Blade Runner*’s influence has also extended beyond film—the first video game inspired by it came out a couple of years after the film’s release. *Blade Runner* (1985) took the music soundtrack by Vangelis as the basis of its inspiration, since they could not acquire the rights to the film itself (“On the Tail of Replidroids”, 1986). It took a further fifteen years, and the release of the Director’s Cut of the film in 1992, for *Blade Runner* to have a worthy video game adaptation. *Blade Runner*, the video game (1997), was revolutionary at the time because of how it turned Ridley Scott’s film into an interactive environment. Unfortunately, the game has been somewhat forgotten by video games history because there have been no re-releases of the game for current operating systems.¹

*Blade Runner* – the game – shows how the challenges of adapting Dick’s novel also extend to digital media in general, and to video games in particular. It also shows a productive strategy to adapt narrative from traditional media to video games, by focusing on the fictional world instead of the plot structure. In the process, the game draws strong ties to both the film version and the original novel in order to create that world and as part of the attractive to play it, creating an inescapable intertextuality that players participate and revel in.

Part of the game’s appeal derives from the knowledge the player may have of the original sources, since the game combines Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* with its filmic counterpart, *Blade Runner*. These two sources help generate the game world and the challenges that the player has to face. Because of the strong and purposeful connections between the game and its sources, we could consider their relationship an example of transmedia storytelling, as each medium provides access to interconnected narratives based on the same fictional world.

**Intertextuality as the Foundation to World Building**

The term *intertextuality* is generally attributed to Julia Kristeva (1980), who combined the systematic approach to language of Ferdinand de Saussure with Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas of language within their social context. The term itself invokes the intersection between content (subject), reader (addressee)