

## Sea, Too? You Adapted my Battleship!: Problems of Narration and Adaptation

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### Abstract

Using Thomas Leitch's model of 'postliterary adaptation', which envisions adaptive potentiality for texts outside the strictly literary with Leitch using the example of *Clue: The Movie* (Dir. Jonathan Lynn, 1985) based on the Parker Brothers game *Cluedo*, this article analyses the formal and structural elements of the 2012 film adaptation of the Hasbro game *Battleship* (Dir. Peter Berg), and how this was accomplished utilising elements of the source text. Beginning with cynical responses to initial announcements that a film adaptation of *Battleship* would be going into production, this article observes the grounds on which this cynicism was built, particularly regarding minimal narrative potential. Following this, and using theories of narration and adaptation, the article explores the process of adaptation based on the film's stylistic and narrational mechanics, and ultimately demonstrating the gap between pre-emptive critical assessment and theoretical models of film construction.

**Keywords:** Postliterary Adaptation, Battleship, Clue: The Movie, Board Games, Narrative, Formal Analysis, Film Aesthetics, Film Criticism, Eye/Camera, Complex Representations of Media.

In 2008, Hasbro announced that there would be a forthcoming adaptation of their game, *Battleship*; an announcement that was met with collective cynicism. Writing for the *Rotten Tomatoes* film review website, Jeff Giles titled a very straightforward report on Hasbro's long-range adaptation marketing strategy, 'Hasbro, Universal Roll Dice On *Monopoly*, *Battleship*, More', and included the sarcastic sub-header 'Aren't you glad the strike's over?' (2008). This is in reference to the Writers' Guild of America strike of 2007-2008. More scathing is Margaret Lyons's statement for *Entertainment Weekly*, 'Wait, what kind of horrible world do I live in where I'm resigned to and unsurprised by a movie version of a guessing game?' (2009).

However, a film *was* made of *Battleship*, which successfully adapts most elements of the board game in accordance with contemporary adaptation theory. In light of this, I will be analysing *Battleship* as a case study in postliterary adaptation, and how it works in practice, addressing the features of the game *Battleship* before moving on to the formal qualities of

Hollywood narration. In doing this, I aim to demonstrate in depth why the news of a *Battleship* adaptation was met with cynicism by critics. Following that, I will address how *Battleship* works as a postliterary adaptation in practice, with a close observation of how the individual elements of the board game are communicated through the aesthetic qualities of the film. Finally, I will address various adaptation theories that are applicable to the resulting *Battleship* film text, to ultimately demonstrate how the initial critical response failed to foresee the possibilities in the production of film adaptations from sources outside traditional literary sources.

The fact that *Battleship* is a game that doesn't seem to lend itself easily to adaptation is at the core of the critical cynicism shown. As noted by Lyons, there is little room for narrative development due to the fact that the game is largely based on formalised guesswork. On the website *Geeks of Doom*, contributor 'The Movie God' observed that 'At first, the announcement that a *Battleship* movie was even being made was confusing, but now that we've seen fellow

Hasbro product *G.I. Joe* have a moderately successful theatrical showing, nothing seems too crazy. In a way, this will of course just be a Naval movie with the toy brand behind it, as no actual storyline exists from the game' (2009). Indeed, the game of *Battleship* appears to contain minimal possibility for directly transposable creative character development as well as narrative standing, unlike another significant, and relatively successful board game adaptation: *Clue: The Movie*.

*Cluedo* or *Clue*, its U.S. title, is a murder mystery game where players adopt one of six distinct identities, in an attempt to solve a murder that occurs prior to the start of play. Within the game, the characters, the murder weapons, and the geography of the play space are all explicated and mapped out, providing, in its own way a minimal story – a story which creates distinct parameters and much space to develop something more narratively complex. *Battleship*, as noted by the aforementioned critics, does not appear to have as much distinct narrative potential.

Thomas Leitch, utilising what he terms 'postliterary adaptation', begins with a case study of *Clue: The Movie*, and manages to establish a framework applicable to *Battleship*. According to Leitch, postliterary adaptation can be defined as 'movies based on originals that have neither the cachet of literature nor the armature of a single narrative plot that might seem to make them natural Hollywood material' (2007; 258). This is a direct address towards the initial concerns regarding conceiving *Battleship* as potential material for a filmic adaptation. As *Battleship* was released after Leitch's monograph was published, he analyses *Clue: The Movie*, as a significant comparable text, which he deems 'one of the earliest postliterary adaptations' (2007: 260). In his description of *Clue* as an adaptation of the game *Cluedo*, Leitch notes,

The film is compelled both to omit several distinctive features of the game – the cards, the interactive pursuit, the questioning they make possible – and to specify many details the game leaves blank (the expressions on suspects' faces, the look of the mansion in which the murder takes place, a definitive solution out of hundreds of possible solutions) (2007: 261).

Leitch continues, 'To these familiar features the film adds a linear narrative. Lacking the card play that makes the game depend on interactivity and the process of elimination, it is compelled to invent new clues to a new mystery' (ibid.). Ultimately, Leitch points out, 'Of course, neither *Clue* nor any of these other board games provides anything like enough circumstantial detail for a feature-length film, but movies have been rising to the challenge of filling out skeletal outlines since the earliest days of adaptation' (2007: 262).

### Rules of Engagement

Let us look at how the game itself is played. *Battleship* is a game intended for two players, each with his/her own individual board, which is comprised of two flat segments positioned perpendicularly to each other. The vertical portion of the board is placed parallel and adjacent to the opposing player's vertical board segment, in an attempt to prevent the opponents seeing each others' board.

Each board segment, vertical and horizontal, contains a 10 x 10 grid labelled by letter and number, with each box containing a hole for a peg. On the horizontal board segment, the players attach, in whatever pattern s/he chooses, a group of ship-designed pieces of different sizes: a patrol boat containing 2 peg spaces, a destroyer containing 3 peg spaces, a submarine containing 3 peg spaces, a battleship containing 4 peg spaces, and an aircraft carrier containing 5 peg spaces. Accompanying the board and pieces are a set of red and white pegs for each player.

The players then take turns calling out a specific grid position (i.e. C-3, F-7, etc.). If that position is inhabited by one of the opposing players' pieces, that player calls 'hit'; if not, 'miss'. If it is a hit, the opposing player places a red peg in the corresponding position on their piece, and the caller places a red peg on the corresponding position on the vertical grid on his/her board. If the position called is a miss, a white peg is used instead.

When all the holes in a game piece are filled, the player says 'You sunk my battleship'. The game continues until all of the pieces on a single players' board have been 'sunk.' The horizontal board is used to help each player keep track of the grid positions they have called, and to visualise which pieces have

been taken out of play. It is this final point where the 'strategy' comes into play. The caller needs to identify which pieces are left, and where the corresponding piece points are located relative to each other. Ultimately, the pieces do not move, each player guesses positioning, and the board layout is rigid in its mathematical precision.

Therefore, while there is enjoyment in trying to guess the patterns created by one's opponent, there is difficulty in rendering it as cinematographically engaging. In order to understand precisely why this may be, it will prove useful to discuss tenets and standards of contemporary Hollywood narration in order to understand how films are constructed and tell stories, to highlight the disparity between *Battleship* the game's conceptual framework, and the information mainstream cinema attempts to communicate, and how it goes about doing this.

### Sea Yarns: Story Outside the Grid

*Battleship*, as a Hollywood film and apparently conceived as a big-budget potential summer blockbuster by the studios and makers, would be subject to very rigid aesthetic demands in order to deliver on audience expectations in terms of both generic and standardised narration strategies. David Bordwell has written much on this subject, outlining what he deems to be the manner of formal Hollywood narration strategies. It is useful here to evoke Bordwell to address possibilities of narrative and its potential links to *Battleship*.

In order to discuss narration accurately, Bordwell utilises two terms appropriated from Russian formalism: 'fabula' and 'syuzhet'. According to Bordwell, 'the fabula embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field' (1985; 49). In other words, the fabula is how a story looks, and what it contains, regardless of construction. On the other hand, 'The *syuzhet* (usually translated as "plot") is the actual arrangement and presentation of the fabula in the film. It is not the text in toto [emphasis and parentheses in original]' (1985: 50). Bordwell further explicates, 'It is a more abstract construct, the patterning of the story as a blow-by-blow recounting of the film could render it' (1985: 50). In short, the fabula can be deemed the elements of the narrative,

while the *syuzhet* is the arrangement thereof in any work. While Bordwell dedicates a lot more time and space in his writing to clarify and detail these terms, what I have outlined here helps to demonstrate how contemporary Hollywood creates narratives, what viewers tend to expect from Hollywood narratives, and why the lack of these elements in the game of *Battleship* resulted in scepticism from critics.

To build on this, in *Hollywood Incoherent*, Todd Berliner, who draws extensively from Bordwell in writing about what he perceives as 'narrative perversity' (2010: 5) in 1970s Hollywood cinema, details in several steps in what he sees as the standard methods for creating narrative perversity in this period. What is implicit in his list is the fact that these run contradictory to narrative strategies of classical Hollywood. The four elements he outlines are: 'Moral or ideological incongruities' (2010: 26), 'Factual contradictions' (ibid.), 'Logical inconsistencies' (ibid.), and 'Characterological inconsistencies' (2010: 27). This denotes that traditionally, Hollywood films exhibit, respective to Berliner's points: consistency with moral and ideological viewpoints, facts that respond appropriately to either narrative information or the viewer's own observations, a narrative that follows a logical trajectory, and characters that behave in a manner thoroughly consistent with their development.

A game of *Battleship*, either on its own terms or as a potential adaptation into a self-sufficient narrative, does not readily evoke either traditional or perverse narrative structures, unlike *Cluedo* which inherently suggests the narrative form of a murder mystery, which can utilise either traditional or perverse narrativity. In *Battleship*, moral and/or ideological differences are only considered as far as the assumption can be made that the two fleets are battling based on differences thereof. An adaptation could go into such detail, but would need to develop characters in order to act as mouthpieces for these beliefs. In play, the only facts that can be traced are: a) the position of the various ships, and b) the location of shots fired. This can be portrayed as consistent, but in terms of a compelling narrative it is a rather dull detail. Logically, *Battleship* really follows the processes of deduction based on hits and misses. While this could be interesting in terms of developing plot, it wouldn't be sufficient to drive a feature length film.

Finally, in order to have characterological consistency, characters would need to be developed in adaptation, as none exist within game play.

Bordwell, in making an argument for the continued use of classical Hollywood narration in contemporary cinema, explicates, alongside the three act structure (2006: 27-29) and the more arguable 'mythic journey' (2006: 33-35), the continued use of the 'character arc' (2006: 29-33). In Bordwell's succinct terms, 'Given a flaw, the character must conquer it' (2006: 30). The three-act structure is denoted by the specific elements of character arc based on information obtained, character decision, and character action, in broad terms. The case of *Cluedo* is significant in that the game already has seven built-in characters, the dead person whose murder the players try to solve, and six player roles-cum-suspects, each with identifiable traits (largely aesthetically based). This is conducive to direct adaptation if personalities and backstories are further developed, which they were in *Clue: The Movie*. While there is a lack of existing, unique, and identifiable characters in *Battleship*, the game itself does lend itself to a possible three-act structure. To speculate on a potential narrative for the game, ignoring the actual film, the first act could consist of the engagement in battle, ending with the first hopeful ship-sinkings. The second act could involve the exchange of fire, creating a shift in balance from the advantage by the protagonist-fleet, ending with the protagonist-fleet in a seemingly hopeless position. Finally, in the third act, the protagonist-fleet could potentially overcome their hopeless position to defeat the antagonist-fleet. Or, additionally, the first two acts could be something wholly different, leading up to a third act consisting of the cinematic equivalent to game play. In these two options for structure, *Battleship* demonstrates a possibility for adaptation. However, the potential for a 'mythic journey' only exists within the second option, and isn't particularly hopeful based on the nature of the game. That said, the resulting film actually adopts it as the foregrounded core of its narrative formula. In light of these problems as well as the single advantage, let us look at how the narrative for the film adaptation is structured.

### Captain's Log: Progress of the Voyage

The culture critics and bloggers expressed a shortsighted concern that a board game with a design like that of *Battleship* would meet severe narrative and aesthetic obstacles when being adapted to film. While questions of value are best left to another article, a textual observation will show that, on some levels, it was a successful adaptation.

The plot of *Battleship* primarily follows Lt. Alex Hopper, an undisciplined U.S. naval officer whose brother, Stone, is successfully rising in the ranks. Alex is in a romantic relationship with Samantha, who is the Admiral's daughter. However, his laziness and antics threaten both his career and his relationship with Samantha. Samantha's father, Admiral Shane, informs Alex that after the next routine Rim of the Pacific Exercise, he will be dismissed. However, during the RIMPAC, aliens land in the ocean near them, as well as in other key locations worldwide, in order to engage them in battle and take over the world. In the process, Stone is killed and Alex is left in charge of a battleship. An exchange of fire occurs, both on land and at sea, eventually sinking Alex's ship. Alex enlists the help of Navy veterans caring for a historical battleship to take this sturdy relic out to sea to eventually engage and defeat the aliens with the help of other ships in the fleet as well as international allies. Alex overcomes his self-doubt and finds the strength and discipline he needs to carry on a career in the Navy, earning the respect of Admiral Shane, who, it is suggested, is to give Alex permission to marry Samantha. Although this entire narrative had to be invented for the adaptation, this ultimately becomes one of the elements that, according to Leitch, the film must fill in, as the game leaves it blank.

Furthermore, the adaptation strategy used by the filmmakers aligns with what Alex Symons calls 'remediation': 'I use the term remediation to mean the practice of transferring content from one medium to another, as well as the adaptation of the content as a feature of that transference – thus creating a "new" text' (2012; 29). In effect, the overall aim is to take the board game, and create a new film text which utilises elements of the game to inform the film's narrative and style. This, in spite of a seemingly ostentatious plot summary, is rendered rather

successfully in a few different ways.

First, the use of colouring and lighting is a potent point of aesthetic linkage. The 1967 rendering of the game released by Milton Bradley had opposing boards in two distinct colours: red and blue. This is reflected in the general palette of visual design. All scenes and sequences involving the navy, and specifically Alex, are presented primarily in blue. The uniforms have a blue tint, as does the sea and ships, and the interiors of the ships are lit to reflect this. However, red appears frequently and brightly as a counterpoint to blue surroundings. In an early sequence between Alex and Stone in a bar, red and blue lighting are featured as backgrounds to the shot/reverse shot framing of a conversation between the two, highlighting the opposing viewpoints of the two characters. Following that, red frequently appears, piercing the blue visual template, often indicating danger. This occurs inside ships, with a red emergency light indicating a problem. This is also apparent when Samantha and two men on land enter a remote communication tower, which is being used to send signals to a larger alien fleet for attack. As they move around inside of this dark, primarily blue-lit tower, red lights and controls shine brightly in contrast to the overall colour template. This can be read as placing the viewer in the position of a player with a blue board, noticing opposition and danger from a red board, and the red pegs indicating a hit. This reveals a tendency towards utilising complex adaptation strategies, which I will describe later. However, even more elements of the game are drawn into the construction of the film.

As an extension of the colour template, the translucent aquamarine colour of the peg grids appears in a significant point within the film. At key points in the film, the *mise-en-scène* depicts what I would term the 'eye/camera' of various aliens and their targeting machinery. The overall colour template of this imaging is the same translucent aquamarine as the peg grid. To further solidify this connection, the imaging also, to isolate a target, divides the screen into a grid, and, as a reflection of my previous point, the target, once isolated, flashes red, indicating danger to that person or object. Additionally, when alien guns fire into the ships, they rapidly spray a large number of shells into their targets, which lodge

themselves into the ships very closely in a straight row. As the point is lodged in the ship, the body of the shells appear as long, cylindrical protrusions with flat ends, a visual interpretation of the pegs inserted into the ship-piece holes that, once full, indicates a sunken ship. In the film, once a row of shells has spanned the length of the ship, it explodes and sinks. Therefore, through these elements, the entirety of the aesthetic design of the board game is appropriated and adapted into a filmic rendering. However, the various spoken cues utilised within game play are also rendered in the film, to a certain extent.

The verbal element of the game, as discussed, involves three different lines to be delivered as relevant to play. As the grid segments are called out by each player, the player receiving fire calls either 'Hit', or 'Miss'. These two words are dotted throughout the battle scenes in the film by spotters on the battleships. Acting as lookouts, they call either 'Hit' or 'Miss' as relevant to the results of delivered fire. While the words themselves are directly derived from the game, the side of play has shifted. Instead of one side informing the other of the result of the opponent's 'aim', the spotters are informing their own side of the results. This is rendered as a necessity, via the fact that the aliens do not speak the same language, or even communicate in a similar manner to the humans, and therefore would be unable to communicate the information in this way. That would remove this particular element of adaptation. Additionally, the line delivered by the player who loses a game piece, 'You've sunk my battleship', is utilised, but reworked in spite of the fact that it could have been directly replicated. Once Alex and his crew enlist the help of the elderly Navy veterans to send an outmoded but powerful ship into battle, they quickly engage the alien ship in battle. In the course of the battle, a hit rocks the ship. As this occurs, one of the veterans says, 'They ain't gonna sink this battleship, no way'. In the case of all of these lines, each spoken element of the game is not transposed directly into the film, but become an adapted element unto themselves. The first two are adapted as a necessity, the latter, unnecessary, but the film appropriates this particular element for its own purposes. For those who have played the game, these verbal elements are highly familiar, and potentially anticipated and sought

throughout viewing, demonstrating the way that the film specifically adapts these elements in order to interact with the familiarity and potential expectations of the viewers. Apart from this, player positioning is also an element subjected to adaptation.

*Battleship*, through the inclusion of aliens as the antagonists, manages to successfully adapt the experience of being involved in game play. In spite of the fact that the aliens are inside ships that do not resemble pieces utilised in game play, they successfully embody the concept of an aggressive opponent easily identifiable as not-oneself.<sup>2</sup> By placing the narrative, and hence the viewer, on the side of the humans, a group presumably easier to identify with than the aggressive aliens, we, in turn, identify with the 'battleships', which more closely resemble the player's pieces. In other words, we are placed firmly on the side of the game board that we view during play, while the alien ships effectively act as surrogates for the unseen not-oneself opponent. Though, in play, we know the pieces are similar to ours, they remain unseen throughout play as necessary for the guessing element of the game. Therefore, as unseen in play, the alien ships not only aesthetically create a significant separation between protagonist and antagonist, especially for the viewer unaware of the differences in battleship models, but also create a visualisation for the opposing not-oneself game pieces and player.

In spite of initial reservations by critics and the problems created by the gap in the structure of *Battleship* the game and standards of contemporary Hollywood narration, the film *Battleship* managed to utilise most elements of the play within the filmic adaptation. While we can see how it has been adapted more or less completely, it proves useful to observe adaptation theory to understand precedent for its methods. While little is written on the manner in which board games are rendered into audiovisual media, relative methods of adaptation can help establish a framework for future analysis of this particular type of remediation.

### How We Got Safely to Harbour

A fundamental explanation for the initial scepticism, and ultimate textual result, of adapting the board game Battleship into a movie, is established by Linda Hutcheon, when she writes 'that

the appeal of adaptations for audiences lies in their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty' (2006; 114). While critical expectation may acknowledge that the level of potential repetition is highly limited as a result of the intricate and rigid nature of Hollywood narration, Hutcheon asserts that difference is equally important, thereby rendering a game-to-movie adaptation wholly viable. Furthermore, other adaptation theories exist that can be applied to *Battleship*, demonstrating how it is by no means anomalous as an adaptation either in conception or execution.

The resulting movie adaptation of *Battleship*, I would argue, adheres to Lars Elleström's conception of 'Complex representations of media' (2013; 122). According to Elleström:

Complex representation of specific media products may be focused on all kinds of characteristics, from formal and abstract traits to features that are related to content. In practice, the form and content of a specific motion picture, for instance, are indissolubly interconnected, but a representation may still focus on one or the other (2013: 122-3).

This is placed in opposition to his definition of 'Simple representations' (2013: 120), whereby 'A media product may *hint* at, *allude* to or *refer* to another medium, it may *mention* or *name* another medium, and it may *quote*, *cite* or *comment* on another medium [emphasis in original]' (ibid.). I argue for conceiving *Battleship* as a complex representation due to its total incorporation of the game's aesthetic elements into the fabric of the film text, as well as the overarching attempt to situate the viewer in the experiential position of single-sided game play through its human protagonist/alien antagonist identificatory dyad. While the use of the verbal cues could be seen as reflecting the template of simple representation, Elleström does include the suggestion that complex representations can include 'anything between' (ibid.). This is particularly relevant to demonstrate a gap in the reasoning of the critical writing that expressed scepticism towards the potential of an adaptation of *Battleship*.

While the game has seemingly little in terms of narrative structure with which a film adaptation can engage, a film is more than the screenplay.

Narrative and plotting comprise a single element of a film's overarching aesthetic. The visual and design elements of a text such as the game of *Battleship* have demonstrated significant potential for filmic re-creation and representation. Therefore, the extent to which Elleström's conception of complex representation can be applied to the film *Battleship* shows that, often, films are often glibly conceived as conduits for narrative, instead of a greater aesthetic experience.

As part of this strategy of complex representation, Regina Schober creates an argument regarding the transmedial networking of multiple sources within a single adaptation, what she calls 'connection' (2013). Most useful is Schober's work on *The Social Network* (Dir. David Fincher, 2010) as a case study in remediation. Schober's thesis is demonstrated in her acknowledgement of the fact that the film is an adaptation of Ben Mezrich's book *The Accidental Billionaires: Sex, Money, Betrayal and the Founding of Facebook* (2009). Schober writes, 'Not surprisingly, the film has been widely received as a quasi-documentary about the real company's founding, disregarding Mezrich's book as source medium' (2013: 105). In short, the widespread usage of Facebook, along with the news reports that covered the rise of Facebook, all contribute towards both the manner in which the film's narrative is constructed as well as the way the film is viewed and understood. Using this as a model for remediation, *Battleship* the film ultimately contains a narrative and form that not only stands as an adaptation of the board game, which can be highlighted during the film's opening where fast, sweeping aerial shots of battleships are superimposed with the title in bold capitals, but also is informed by genre filmmaking, particularly a science fiction and action blend not dissimilar to the films of Michael Bay, as well as the linked knowledge of the game's origination in its current form during the escalation of the Vietnam War,<sup>3</sup> which comes into play when the old battleship and the Navy veterans enter the story, most of whom look old enough to have served in that conflict. Even if this reading of *Battleship* the movie specifically meets with contention, Schober's work on remediation as networked connections provides a significant explanation for the means by which a board game such as *Battleship* can ultimately be adapted to film.

This is where, returning to Leitch, *Battleship* proves a key example of postliterary adaptation, which follows the lead of *Clue*. Leitch precisely defines the way in which *Battleship* the game had the potential to be the subject of filmic adaptation, and how the adaptation itself was ultimately articulated. I have described how exactly the film creates a narrative structure and utilises the elements of the game towards both structural and aesthetic purposes, and how it ultimately, as Leitch says, 'fill(s) out (the) skeletal outline'. *Battleship*, while overtly omitting 'distinctive features of the game', finds a way to re-imagine and incorporate them into the game, (i.e., aliens as the not-oneself opponent), and manages to 'specify many details the game leaves blank' (i.e., the crew of the battleship, and visualising the explosions/sinking ships). It appears as though *Battleship*, ignoring questions of value, successfully adapted the game through the level to which elements of the game were incorporated into the text.

Though it seems that the game was utilised thoroughly in its adaptation into a movie, the underlying question behind the critics sceptical of the project's conception can be distilled into: Why? For that, Colin MacCabe has a succinct response: 'The cinema promotes a new form of adaptation in which the relation to the source text is part of the appeal and the attraction of the film' (2011; 5).

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an explication of this, see my own PhD thesis, *Bearing Witness to a Whole Bunch of Murders: The Aesthetics of Perspective in the Friday the 13th Films* (2013: xxiv). Online at: <http://roehampton.openrepository.com/roehampton/bitstream/10142/302655/1/Clayton%20George%20Wickham%20-%20final%20thesis.pdf>. In very general terms, it refers to a first-person shot.

<sup>2</sup> I refrain from using the word 'other', as, within gameplay, it is arguable whether the opponent is conceived as 'other', and would be a presumptuous claim. The difference is small, but, I feel, significant.

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned, Milton Bradley released the first mass-produced American version of the game in 1967, in the middle of the Johnson administration.

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