

Arts & Entertainment

Is it Finally Game on for Video Game Adaptations?

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NEW YORK (AP) — Is there a more woebegone movie genre than the video game adaptation? This is the pantheon of “Max Payne,” “Wing Commander” and “Assassin’s Creed.” In the 27 years since the first video game movie, “Super Mario Bros.,” these adaptations have been so regularly mocked that you might think the genre was — like a teetering fighter in “Mortal Kombat” surrounded by chants of “Finish him!” — on its last legs.

And yet, Hollywood is increasingly viewing video games as one of the ripest, richest veins of intellectual property outside of comic books. Even as much of the film business slowed over the



This image released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows the character Detective Pikachu, voiced by Ryan Reynolds, in a scene from “Pokemon Detective Pikachu.” In 2019, “Detective Pikachu,” based on the Nintendo game, grossed more than \$400 million worldwide. (Warner Bros. Pictures via AP)

last year, the hunt for the kind of IP that has fueled an overwhelming share of worldwide box-office ticket sales has continued unabated.

The video game movie isn’t finished. It might even be just pressing “Start.”

On Friday, Warner Bros. will release a new, rebooted “Mortal Kombat” 26 years after the first adaptation of the martial arts fighter. It was then just the fourth video game movie, coming on the heels of “Double Dragon” and “Street Fighter,” with Jean-Claude Van Damme. This was well before the IP land rush started by Marvel’s success more than a decade later. “Apollo 13” was the No. 2 film at the box office in 1995.

Now, a bloodier, R-rated “Mortal Kombat” signals a new cycle for video game adaptations. After years of misfires and flops, it’s lately seemed like a new level has been unlocked for one of the movies’ most derided genres. In 2019, “Detective Pikachu,” based on the Nintendo game, grossed more than \$400 million worldwide for Warner Bros. Last

year, “Sonic the Hedgehog” became the genre’s highest grosser; a sequel is already under way. Netflix, which on Wednesday suggested it may invest more deeply in gaming, has found one of its biggest hits — the streamer’s answer to “Game of Thrones” — in “The Witcher.” The Henry Cavill-led series is based on a fantasy novel series that found fame as a popular video game.

No one is engraving Oscars or Emmys yet. But it may be that video game adaptations aren’t cursed, after all. They were just going through some growing pains.

“Comic-book IP is the biggest IP in the world right now and yet it took 40 years to really get into the spotlight and it took 50 years to become the biggest thing,” says Matthew Ball, a venture cap-

seemed more niche at some point,” says “Mortal Kombat” filmmaker Simon McQuoid, an in-demand director of commercials who’s previously worked on ad campaigns for Sony’s PlayStation and “Halo.” “I get the feeling people are OK pushing that forward and being a little mainstream with things.”

Many video game adaptations have had prolonged or even torturous developments, suggesting the industry is still figuring out how to tackle these properties. “Mortal Kombat” was in development for a decade. Infamously, “Sonic the Hedgehog” was forced to redesign its animated protagonist after an outcry from fans. There are reasons that video game movies get ranked from “least bad to absolute worst.”

Some have suggested the mediums are inherently distinct. Roger Ebert maintained video games aren’t art and “by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control.”

But someone, eventually, may crack the code of the video game movie. In the years since Ebert wrote that in 2015, games have developed in atmosphere, narrative and character. They are more cinematic. More filmmakers are gamers, themselves, and they’re interested in plumbing virtual worlds while staying true to a game’s spirit.

“The importance of the source material has become something that 20 years ago people didn’t really care about. They nodded at it,” says Johannes Roberts (“47 Meters Down”), director of the upcoming “Resident Evil” reboot, “Welcome to Raccoon City.” “There’s definitely a real understanding that you need to believe and love in it. I think studio execs get that, that it is an important thing, that you can’t just take the name and run with it.”

Roberts’ film, currently in post-production, follows six “Resident Evil” films, the longest-running video game movie franchise. It’s set for release in November from Sony Pictures, which next February will unveil a long-awaited adaptation of the game “Uncharted” by director Ruben Fleischer (“Venom,” “Zombieland”), with Tom Holland and Mark Wahlberg.



This image released by Paramount Pictures shows Sonic, voiced by Ben Schwartz, in a scene from “Sonic the Hedgehog.” Last year, “Sonic the Hedgehog” became the genre’s highest grosser; a sequel is already under way. (Paramount Pictures/Sega of America via AP)



This image released by Netflix shows Henry Caville in a scene from the series “The Witcher,” based on a fantasy novel series that found fame as a video game. (Katalin Vermes/Netflix via AP)



This image released by 20th Century Fox shows Michael Fassbender as Callum Lynch in a scene from “Assassin’s Creed,” a film based on the video game series. (Kerry Brown/20th Century Fox via AP)

Pipelines are getting crowded. A long-in-development, Steven Spielberg-produced “Halo” series is planned for early next year on Paramount+. Netflix will premiere a “Resident Evil” series in June; the streamer also has an “Assassin’s Creed” series in the works. Last month, Sony and PlayStation Productions said they would produce an adaptation of the hugely popular game “Ghost of Tsushima” with “John

Wick” director Chad Stahelski. Launched in 2019, Sony’s PlayStation Productions is uniquely poised between moviemaking and video games. The production company is also making an HBO series of the “The Last of Us,” a celebrated third-person post-apocalyptic adventure game. That the project attracted “Chernobyl” creator Craig Mazin is for many observers a sign of a

rising stature for video game adaptations. “I’ve noticed in the last year that there is this awareness that they’re sitting on something that is quite interesting and not as mined as it should be, or could be,” says Roberts, who says he’s approaching “Resident Evil” the way he would a Stephen King novel. “I’m interested to see how all the other movies tackle it. It’s a fascinating time for sure.”