THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF FILM PRODUCTION AND MEDIA STUDIES

Crossing Screens: The Visual Language of Video Games and Film

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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Film Production
with honors in Film Production

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* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

Film and video game's relationship to one another as mediums can be described as a parasocial relationship between an admiring fan and a celebrity who is unaware/disconnected from the fan's admiration. Video game cinematography is awarded and judged upon its' replication of film cinematography. Meanwhile, a majority of the live-action, video game film adaptations do not faithfully recreate the cinematic and iconographic elements of the video game being adapted. However, with advancements in computer generated imagery, editing, and camera rigging, there has emerged a new layer or rather space for live-action filmmakers to consider: The space where the capabilities of what can be filmed are limitations of reality (gravity, location, etc.). There is now the artificial space where these limitations can be removed. Video games have a long history with cinematography within this artificial space since the fifth generation of video game consoles. This history resulted in video games developing a visual language specific to its medium, but now contemporary films are trying to replicate this visual language to an extent to achieve certain cinematic qualities. This essay will discuss how live-action films are drawing influence from video game's visual language and the film industry's desire for point-of view, fluidity, and scale.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

KZXcellent from KZXcellent.com for granting me permission to utilize his footage from his *Final Fantasy VII Remake* and *Devil May Cry 5* let's plays.

World of Longplays and Spazbo4 for providing archival video game footage of *Resident Evil 4.*

IGN for providing footage of *Ghost of Tsushima*.

Chapter 1

Introduction

With the launch of the fifth generation of video game consoles, the video game industry was introduced to three-dimensional (3D) polygon graphics and optical disk storage in the late 1990s. These technological advances allowed game developers to utilize an artificial 3D space when constructing cinematic cutscenes for their games. The limitations of a video game's cinematography was now dictated by the programmed limits of the camera by the game's programmers. Moreover, the power to display video files led to the popularization of full motion videos, which are pre-rendered animation and/or live action film inserted into a video game. With these new possibilities, video games were influenced by and utilized the cinematic conventions of film to construct its emerging visual language. For instance, Metal Gear Solid, the most prolific cinematic video game of the fifth generation, draws heavy influence from films ("Media influences on the Metal Gear series"). However, video games' cinematic relationship with film was one-sided during this time period. Film continued to be a separate artistic medium to video games and did not adapt any elements of video games' visual language even with the rise and prominence of video games in popular culture. However, the current film industry has experienced drastic developments in film equipment and software. The advancement of realistic computer-generated images, motion capturing, and digital cinematography grants live-action films access to artificial 3D space. Moreover, the improvement of camera rigs and usage of drone footage has lessened the physical limitations of camera movement. With these technological advancements, it begs the question of whether films' visual language will adapt

and/or emulate video games' visual language due to video games having a longer history with artificial 3D space and unrestricted cameras. After comparing and contrasting multiple video games and live action films, it became evident that films have been slowly, but surely incorporating elements from video game's visual language to convey the same qualities that are expressed in video games for the last decade.

Chapter 2

Fluidity of Action and Speed

One emblematic characteristic, which showcases film's budding intersectionality of visual language with video games, is speed and, more specifically, the fluidity of action. Action-adventure video games such as *Devil May Cry 5* have very selective and precise control over the speed of their game's animations, especially playable characters' moves, in order to convey the thrill and seamless action. Films' emulation of this cinematic quality is evident in action films speeding up footage to replicate a fluidity in action. For instance, in *Kingsman: The Secret Service,* Harry Hart gets involved in a brawl in a pub after a gang arrives to attack Eggsy in retaliation. During the fight sequence, the close-ups and medium shots of Harry Hart hitting or swinging at the gang members are artificially sped up through editing.

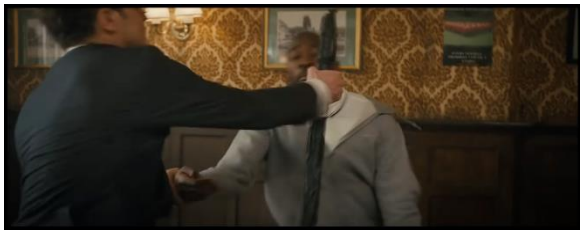

Figure 1. Vaughn, Matthew, director. *Kingsman: The Secret Service*. 20th Century Fox, 2014.

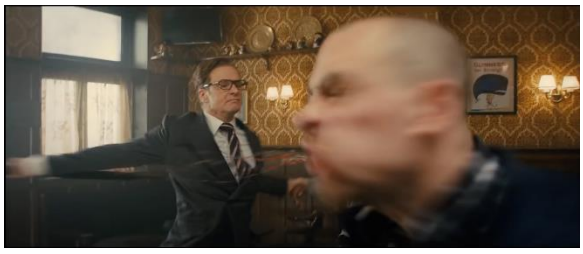

Figure 2. Vaughn, Matthew, director. *Kingsman: The Secret Service*. 20th Century Fox, 2014.

Hart's attacks and movement are so seamless due to the increased speed of footage that the progression of his moves throughout the sequence become a conscious blur. More

specifically, the audience recognizes Hart punching one of the gang members with his umbrella, but there is so little time for the audience to fully register the move before he immediately whips the umbrella to hit another gang member due to the increased speed of the footage. This is no different from video game players controlling Dante, Nero, or V from *Devil May Cry 5* during one of the game's fights where the player comprehends which buttons, they are pressing and the resulting string of attacks and weapon changes.

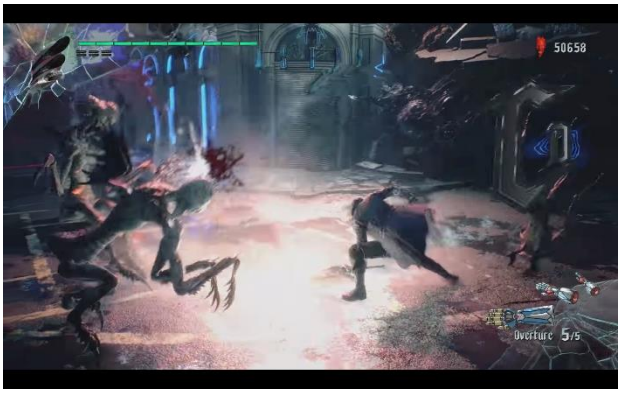

Figure 3. Itsuno, Hideaki, director. *Devil May Cry 5.* Capcom, 2019.

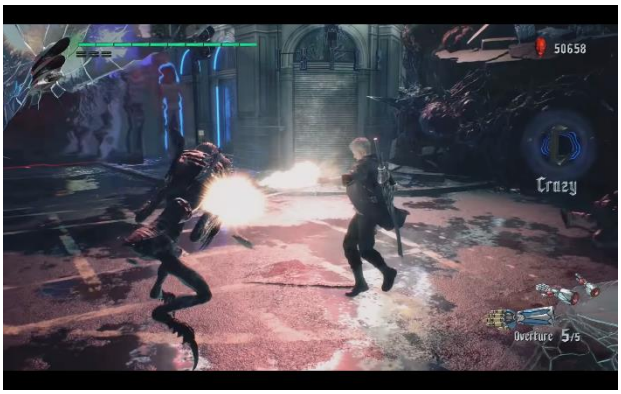

Figure 4. Itsuno, Hideaki, director. *Devil May Cry 5.* Capcom, 2019.

However, there's little in-between for attacks that the next move is already on the screen as the player is thinking of two moves ahead. Both the player and the audience are experiencing the phenomenon of action fluidity as they are enraptured by the adrenaline rushing action before them. *Kingsman: The Secret Service*'s quick cinematography exemplifies the cinematic quality

of speed found in video games such as *Devil May Cry 5* because it replicates instantaneous action.

Additionally, artificially speeding up footage through post-production editing is not the only instance and technique where action films showcase the growing influence of video. The pacing of *John Wick*'s cinematography during its fight sequence can be described as fluid. Though the film's fight scenes are not as brisk compared to *Kingsman: The Secret Service,* every gunshot or punch John Wick executes is on a precise and prompt rhythmic beat, which the camera compliments by flowing with John Wick's attacks. Comparing the film to *Devil May Cry 5*, once again, one will notice how John Wick's movements and attacks are being strung together similarly to a video game character. One can envision a player pressing a button on their controller to shoot John Wick's gun and/or execute other moves. For example, the camera's movement during the night club scene is tied to John Wick's movements through dollies and trucks. The placing of *John Wick*'s cinematography displays how contemporary films are taking influence from video game's visual language without the need for post-production.

Another cinematic technique, which illustrates film emulation of video game's visual language, is slow motion. Though slow-motion might appear as the complete opposite of the increasing speed previously explained, slow-motion ties into the fluidity of action as it still affects the flow of action on the screen. In *Devil May Cry 5,* slow motion is used for a multitude of reasons from cueing players to beware of a specific attack from an enemy to emphasizing the destruction of attacks. Most importantly, the finishing blow to the last enemy in a scripted encounter in *Devil May Cry 5* is heavily slowed down. The purpose of altering the speed of the finishing blow's animation is to enhance the momentum of the playable characters moves and reward the player with a moment of catharsis for finishing the fight.

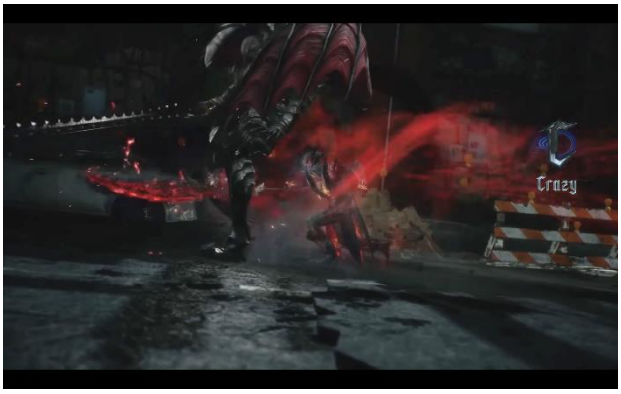

Figure 5. Itsuno, Hideaki, director. *Devil May Cry 5.* Capcom, 2019.

Kingsman: Secret Service utilizes slow-motion to achieve the same effects. At the climax of the film, Eggsy has a final showdown with Gazelle who is the secondary antagonist of the film. Utilizing editing once again, the film slows down Gazelle's attacks to illustrate how extremely close she was to hitting/killing Eggsy.

Figure 6. Vaughn, Matthew, director. *Kingsman: The Secret Service*. 20th Century Fox, 2014.

These moments of slow-motion in *Kingsman: Secret Service* are similar to how video games utilize slow-motion in its cinematography because the slow motion emphasizes the lethality of Gazelle's leg attacks, which is one of the purposes of video games utilizing slow motion for action fluidity. The similarity is even more notable when Eggsy and Gazelle decide to charge at one another for a final decisive blow and the film slows down as the two fly towards

one another. This decisive blow in *Kingsman: Secret Service* is no different than the finishing blows in *Devil May Cry 5* as both mediums utilize slow-motion to emphasize their characters' finishing moves. Moreover, the usage of slow-motion in the shots of *Kingsman: Secret Service's* decisive blow sequence showcases how film is emulating how video games frame their characters, which is a crucial connection of intersectionality. One aspect about video game's usage of slow-motion is it allows for more clarity in the action along with fluidity of action. For example, there is a cutscene where Nero, a playable character from *Devil May Cry 5*, is simultaneously spinning in the air and attacking enemies who are attacking his van. The game developers choose to utilize slow-motion because it allowed the developers to have Nero to compose two-thirds of the frame without confusing the player watching the cutscene. Having the cutscene being set at regular speed would make the medium and close up shot angles in combination with the action disorientates the player. By utilizing slow-motion, the player is able to see the intended framing of a shot without the speed of footage interfering. This is further supported by the usage of slow-motion during combat such as the finishing blow as it ensures the player sees the entirety of the attack and character. *Kingsman: Secret Service* does the same thing to provide clarity in crucial moments of action sequence such as the Gazelle showdown.

Chapter 3

Point of View

The growing presence of video games in film's evolving visual language is also noticeable in the similarities in how film and video games convey point of view. A great example of film utilizing video game's point of view is *John Wick*. Though *John Wick's* action sequences resemble many live action films created before it, the film contains similar cinematic qualities to action games such as *Resident Evil 4* and *Devil May Cry 5*. For one, *John Wick* contains sequences where the camera replicates common camera angles used in video games for its' cinematic point of view. During the fight sequence at the nightclub-spa, the camera is positioned behind John Wick and has his figure take up approximately two-thirds of the screen. This gives the shot the appearance of an over-the-shoulder camera angle, which is a popular camera angle in video games. For a more supporting comparison, one can look at *Resident Evil 4*, the pioneer of the over-the-shoulder camera's popularization in the sixth console generation, and immediately notice the strong similarities between *John Wick's* cinematography and *Resident Evil 4*'s cinematography.

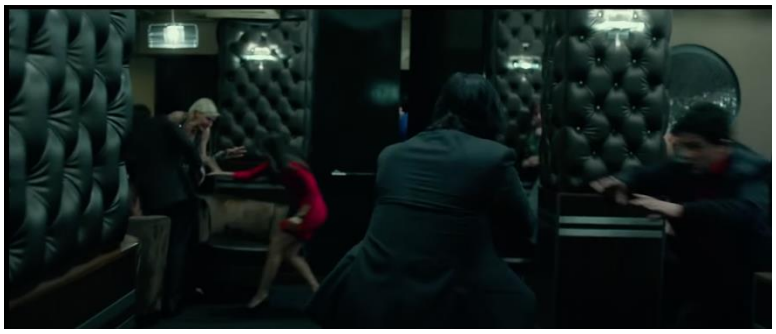

Figure 7. Stahelski, Chad, director. *John Wick*. Lionsgate, 2014.

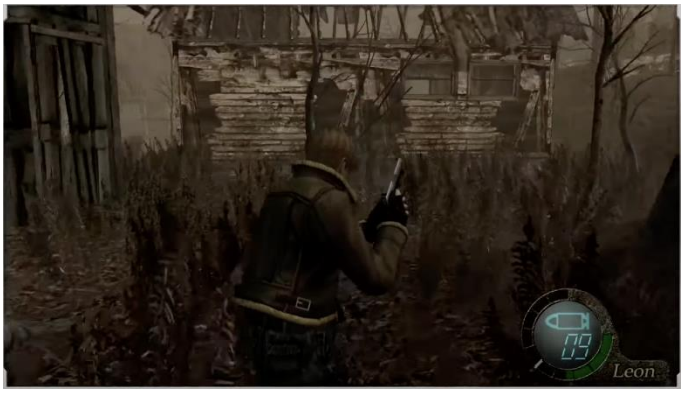

Figure 8. Mikami, Shinji, director. *Resident Evil 4.* Capcom, 2005.

It's almost a replication with both mediums setting their main characters in the center and composing about two-thirds of the frame in accordance with the rule of thirds, but their position in the frame also allows for the audience to see enough space in order to absorb the surrounding environment. This allusion to video games is even furthered by the camera dollying and trucking to follow John Wick much like how the camera's movement of following behind Leon in *Resident Evil 4*. These shot-comparisons showcase how video games' visual language has entered the collective unconscious of film. Moreover, *John Wick*'s usage of the over-the-shoulder camera angles to attain the same purpose/goal. *Resident Evil 4* utilizes the over-the-shoulder camera angle for its point of view to build anticipation and tension as the player can clearly see any incoming enemies from this angle/perspective. *John Wick* achieves the same effect its audience by utilizing the over-the-shoulder camera angle. With this camera angle during this segment of the nightclub-spa sequence, the viewer witnesses the next bodyguard's attack before John Wick even sees it. The result of utilizing this specific camera angle is it creates a moment of suspense as the audience has a moment and the point of view allows the audience to see and then anticipate the approaching bodyguards and their attack.

Additionally, the composition and, more specifically, framing of John Wick throughout the film illustrates another point of intersectionality between film and video games through emulating video games' points of view. *John Wick*'s cinematography in fight sequences ensures John Wick's body is very visible to the audience through the usage of medium or medium-long shots, which depict about two-thirds of him. These camera angles ensure the audience sees his whole body, especially his arms and hands, while he cleanly executes or takes down his enemies. Now one of the characteristics of a video game's point of view is the near visibility of the playable character's body. The reason why point of view in video games is linked to the visibility of the playable character is that more space on the screen means more space to showcase the character's animations. For instance, *Devil May Cry 5* has the camera angled to ensure Dante, V, and/or Nero take up about two-thirds of the screen. The camera even dollies out when the characters fight in the air or utilize specific moves, which further showcases the game developers' willingness to establish a clear point of view as a part of their game's visual language. *John Wick*'s fight cinematography embodies this visual language characteristic of point of view because the film utilizes medium shots to distinguish John Wick's movements, take downs, and attacks.

Chapter 4

Scale

Most importantly, a blossoming point of intersectionality between film and video games is scale. In video games such as *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake,* scale works a crucial cinematic characteristic of a game's visual language because video games utilize scale to immerse its players into its game world. Scale has also been utilized to convey the possible dangers or rather challenges of its game's terrain and/or enemies. Through the evolution of computer-generated images, film has begun to scrape the same cinematic quality of video game's visual language. *Avengers: Endgame,* a contemporary film containing the industry's most leading computer-generated imagery-based technology for its time at release, attempts to emulate video game's cinematic quality of scale. *Avengers: Endgame*'s emulation of video game's visual language is evident in the film's depth staging and complimentary camera movements of its expansive, unrealistic landscapes. Video games often utilize depth staging to convey scale as most developers code their game's camera to be latched onto and follow the playable character(s). So in order to present the player the scale of an object or location, the game developers use depth staging to shift the player's attention from the character(s) to the background environment.

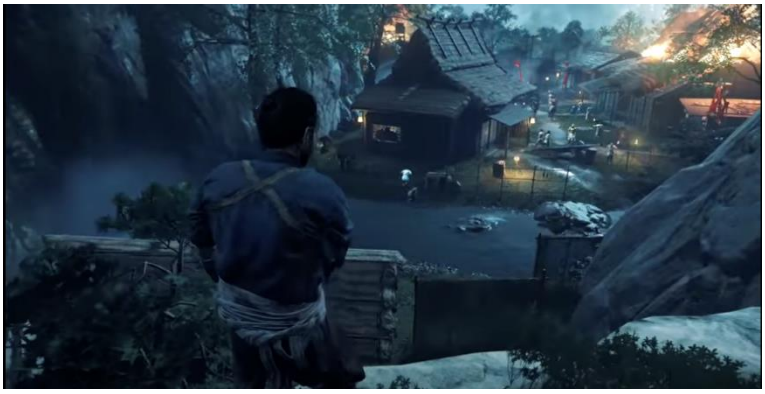

Figure 9. Connell, Jason and Nate Fox, director. *Ghost of Tsushima.* Sucker Punch Productions, Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2020.

For example, *Ghost of Tsushima* uses depth staging through its environmental design, which frames the focus from Jin Sakai (the game's playable character) onto the background. For instance, the game utilizes depth-staging at the beginning of the game to illustrate the Mongol's invasion of the village. The stones surrounding Jin and Jin, himself, act as a border similarly to a photograph, which naturally causes the player's attention to be drawn away from the rocks to the village. As a result, this technique of depth staging through environmental framing emphasizes the background image of the village. The movement of the villagers further draws the player's attention from the foreground of Jin to the background. The transfer of attention from Jin to the village also conveys the scale of village to player as the depth-staging foreshadows the impeding obstacles of the environment and the overall size of the area to player. Returning to *Avengers: Endgame*, it becomes noticeable that the film demonstrates the same depth-staging to convey scale to its audience like in *Ghost of Tsushima* and it draws influence from video game's visual language.

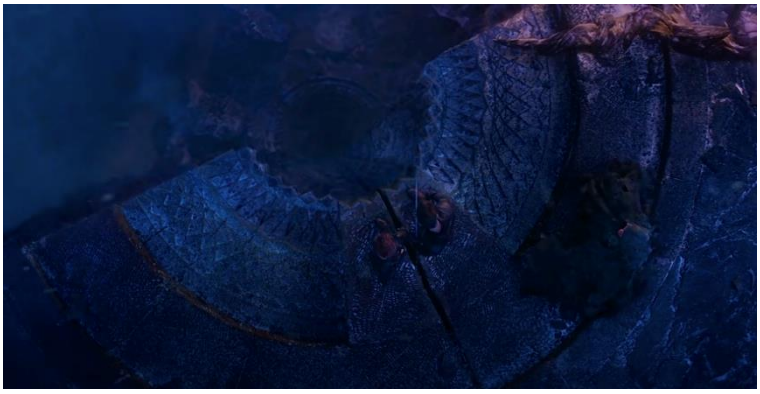

Figure 10. Russo, Anthony, and Joseph Russo, director. *Avengers: Endgame.* Walt Disney Studio Motion Pictures, 2019.

When Hawkeye and Black Widow travel to Vormir, there is an overhead-shot of the two characters staring down the cliff. The shot utilizes depth-staging similar to games such as *Ghost of Tsushima* and because the camera frames Hawkeye and Black Widow to appear small in comparison to the bottom of the cliff. The half-circle opening of the cliff also acts as an environmental framing device. So the audience's attention naturally shifts from the two characters to the bottom of the cliff. By utilizing depth staging in the same manner as video games, the depth-staging in this shot illustrates the massive scale of the cliff because of the shot's environmental framing. As a result, *Avengers: Endgame* conveys the magnitude of the bottom of the cliff to the film's audience.

Additionally, the film's camera movement during the Vormir shot further demonstrates the film's attempt to convey video game's visual language by emphasizing the significance of the cliff's depth and size. The camera trucks diagonally to the upper right during the overhead shot. It acts as a cue to the viewer to shift their focus from Hawkeye and Black Widow, the foreground, to the bottom of the cliff, the background. The impact of these camera movements is that the audience is guided to take-in the scale of the cliff and the distance it would take to reach its bottom. Video games such as *Final Fantasy VII Remake*'s visual language utilizes similar

techniques in order to demonstrate scale within the game's environment. At significant points of the video game, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* removes the player's control over the camera to quickly dollies and trucks its camera to encapsulate certain environmental objects or people in the background like a destroyed building in order to convey its' significance to ongoing narrative at said moment and give the player more information on the setting's scale. For example, the game developers designed a segment where the player's control over the camera would be removed to showcase sector one's combusted mako reactor in order to convey the extensive scale of the reactor's destruction. When *Avengers: Endgame* is put in comparison to how *Final Fantasy VII Remake,* it becomes evident *Avengers: Endgame* emulates the visual language of video game because the film is utilizing similar techniques such as camera movement and environment frame to achieve the same portrayal of the scale of its' impressive environments. By the film's visual language showcasing and drawing influence from video games, *Avengers: Endgame* demonstrates films beginning to achieve video games' visual language through using similar techniques of depth-staging and camera movement.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Though films such as *Avengers: Endgame* are not quite at the same level in regards to the depiction of scale as video games have established, it does establish how film is being influenced by the visual language of video games. The intersectionality between these two mediums is evident through film gradually adopting the cinematic qualities of scale, point of view, and speed/fluidity, which are prominent characteristics of video game's visual language. As time moves forward and film industry's technology reaches another heightened level of computer-generated imagery or camera rigs, it is most likely the cinematic intersectionality will continue to occur until there is a blatant point where the audience's naked eye can detect the similarities between film and video games without much outside analysis.

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Russo, Anthony, and Joseph Russo, director. *Avengers: Endgame.* Walt Disney Studio Motion Pictures, 2019.

Vaughn, Matthew, director. *Kingsman: The Secret Service*. 20th Century Fox, 2014.

ACADEMIC VITA

MARIE WEAVERLING

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University August 2018 – May 2022
Bachelor of Arts, Communications (Film-Video)
Minor: English and Creative Writing
Dean's List: Seven out of seven completed semesters with one semester pending
Penn State Altoona Honors Program: August 2018 - May 2020
Schreyer Honors College: August 2020 - Present

COURSE PROJECTS

- Researched and wrote a paper on the various writing formats of video game narratives.
- Filmed and edited six short films, which range in genre from stop-motion animation (*Octo's Quest*) to informational documentary (*Alec on the Amazon & Genetically Rescued Organisms).*
- Wrote 'Progression and Contradictions: An Introduction to Mayne Reid's *The White Squaw*'.
- Wrote an abstract for the Flight 93 Memorial.

PUBLICATIONS

- *The Tale of Daniel and Lyre*, a short film which won *The Sims*'s Spark'd Storyteller Challenge.
- *The Plate*, a visual poem published by Penn State's Hard Freight Literary Magazine.
- *Flight Custodian*, a short story, and two poems (*White Leaf* and *Eating My Pierogi*) on Live Wire.
- *Circle and Tri*, an animation created with Animation-Ish which received a nomination at the Greensville Film Festival.

COLLEGE ACTIVITIES

Mezzo-soprano / Alto in Ivyside Pride Choir

- Participated in the Defiance Requiem where we sang Verdi's Requiem with Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Ally of Pride Alliance

- Served as the recording assistant during the filming of Penn State Altoona's Drag Show.
- Assisted in decorating Altoona's downtown plaza for the city's first Pride Parade and Pride Alliance's float.

Puppeteer in the production of *The LasTree*

- Performed in four productions at two different locations.

Camera Operator in Penn State's Nitty Talks
Game Designer in PSU Game Design/Development club

INTERNSHIPS

Skittles and Homeland Security Commercials March 2022
Camera Production Assistant

- Assisted the 1st Assistant Camera and Cinematographer.

- Learned the specificities of a camera's wiring and how to properly wrapping cables.

The Pale Blue Eye February 2022
Job Shadowing with Cross Creek Production
- Observed the relationship and communication between Director, Cinematographer, and Choreographer.
- Witnessed procedure and protocol when handling pyrotechnics on set.

814 July 2021
Second Assistant Camera, Director of Continuity, and Clapper Loader
- Prevented inconsistencies between scenes and takes including background actors crossing the scene.
- Wrote thorough notes on the continuity sheet to help the director select the best take.
- Assisted the director with pre-production in Movie Magic, equipment handling, and setting up crafts.

VOLUNTEER WORK
Camp Curtain Call
Assistant Costume Director June 2017 – July 2017
- Created costumes for children for a theatrical production with the costume director.
- Assisted children and counselors with crafts and activities at the camp.

COMPUTER SKILLS
Unreal Engine 4, Eclipse, Java, Microsoft Office, Movie Magic, YouMeScript, Celtx, Macintosh software, Adobe software, Blender, Source Filmmaker, Animation-Ish, and Vroid Studio.