

Hans-Joachim Backe (Ruhr-University, Bochum)

Narrative Feedback

Computer games, comics, and the James Bond Franchise

When *Casino Royale* was released cinematically in 2006, reviewers were quick to point out the many hints the movie had taken from the Bond franchise's recent rival, the *Bourne*-Trilogy starring Matt Damon. Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun-Times* felt that Daniel Craig's Bond was more reminiscent of Damon's Jason Bourne than of any other actor's interpretation of Bond, while Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times* extended this view to the movie as a whole. But Dargis went still further and quoted a number of other influences that were equally easy to spot in the film, arguing that one of the key features of the franchise's success was its ability to incorporate foreign influences.

While it is easy to point out where the James Bond movies have inspired others, the degree to which they have drawn inspiration from other sources often goes unmentioned. The logic behind this ongoing process of influence and feedback is rather elusive, especially as it cannot be judged by studying only the novels or the films. Even if we disregard the affiliation with brands representing a "Bond lifestyle" as well as the merchandising articles and toys bearing the trademark name of "James Bond," we will find that the subject matter of Fleming's James Bond narratives has been transferred to virtually every narrative medium. For over fifty years now, there have been novels, films, comics, radio shows, and computer games about Bond, making it not only one of the most profitable, but probably the most enduring and diverse fiction franchise in popular culture.¹ And there are literally dozens of other franchises with similar subject matter and style, which are constantly exerting influence on one another. In this paper, I will limit my discussion to a number of lesser known contributions to the James Bond myth. Instead of focusing on the franchise's core of novels and movies, I want to present some impressions

¹ As such, they have become a kind of figurehead for attacks against mainstream cinema when the term is used in a derogative sense, designating the products of a profit-oriented movie industry as inferior to an undefined, culturally superior Other (Maase 18).

of its fringe, of computer games and comics, and of the ways in which these peripheral influences produce a feedback on the franchise as a whole.²

When approaching the franchise from a historical point of view, neither the character of Bond nor the way in which his adventures have become the subject matter of a variety of media is without precedent. The almost mythological dimension of the main character and his development (or lack thereof) is a typical feature of serialized heroes. One feature they share is their agelessness. While the Bond of Fleming's novels lived in a coherent timeframe in which he grew at least slightly older while the world around him slowly changed, time in the greater context of the franchise has been completely fragmented. The prime example of the utter disregard for time's progress as we know it in real life has been the re-invention of the movie series with *Casino Royale*, where a new actor is cast in the role, the depiction of her majesty's secret service gets heavily modified, yet some key elements – most noteworthy Judy Dench as 'M' – remain as they were in the previous films. 'M' is the same person who commanded Bond's former incarnation, only slightly older, yet we are told that this is a new start, a world in which James Bond has not yet faced Goldfinger or Dr. No.

The narrative device of having an ageless hero who goes through several re-incarnations has been used by TV-shows (most prominently *Dr. Who*) and comics, especially superhero comics, where it is almost a founding principle. The aura of immortality is the most striking property of the first of masked and costumed vigilantes, Lee Falk's *The Phantom* (1936). The mask and the ring of the Phantom are handed down through the decades to give the impression that he cannot be killed. Especially in the storyworld of DC comics, this has become a tradition in which Batman's sidekick Robin and superheroes such as Green Lantern or the Flash are perpetual masks which get inhabited by different mortals at different times.³

Most features of Fleming's fictional spy can also be traced back to the pop-culture heroes of previous eras. He owes a lot to the Great Detectives of the late nineteenth century (Chirico 199), especially Sherlock Holmes

² For the sake of brevity, I will keep references to other media in the works cited section to a minimum – not the least because most are canonical and therefore easy to find.

³ And the structural similarities to comics don't cease here. Just like them, the James Bond franchise has evolved a number of sub-franchises, most notably "James Bond Jr." and "Young Bond", which have both spawned animated TV series, novels, comic books, toys, and a computer game.

(Arthur Conan Doyle, 1887), as the portrait of Bond commissioned by Fleming alone makes obvious (Tesche 102), and he is indebted to earlier secret agents in fiction. John Buchan's Richard Hannay, introduced in *The 39 Steps* (1915), is a secret agent who shares most of his exploits in and after the First World War with a series of beautiful women. Herman McNeile's *Bulldog Drummond* (1920) is a combination of English and American storytelling traditions, fusing the gentleman and the hard-hitting sleuth. And in W. Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden or: the British Agent* (1928), we find not only a playboyish spy, but also a secret service superior addressed by a capital letter only.

But there is also a lot of the superhuman characters of the pulp novels, most notably Doc Savage (Lester Dent, 1933), in Bond, just as much as of the comic book superheroes, most of all Batman (Bob Kane, 1939) – who may be the only fictional character with an array of gadgets to rival Bond's. The notion of the exotic super-villain can also be traced back to pulps and comics, with characters like Professor Moriarty, Dr. Fu Manchu (Sax Rohmer, 1913), and Ming the Merciless (Alex Raymond, 1934). The preference of characters like Dr. No, Goldfinger and Largo as Bond's first adversaries bespeaks a certain type of xenophobia, which pertains in the original scripts of contemporary Bond films with their Korean and French villains. I mention these influences for two reasons: One, to show the kind of intertextual framework already in place before the first novel spawned a franchise, and two, because some of Bond's antecedents will be of importance later on.

While the film rival the novels in popularity, games based upon Bond are a rather marginal phenomenon. Yet franchise already diversified into games in the 1980s, and since then, dozens of games have been developed with the official license, ranging from a pen-and-paper role-playing game to mobile games for cellular phones. The first product in the then-new sector of commercial computer games, published in 1983 by Parker Brothers for Atari gaming consoles and Commodore 64, was simply called *James Bond 007*, a side-scrolling action game that loosely combined story elements of various Bond films.

It took over a decade for Bond games to become a serious part of the franchise. 1997's *GoldenEye 007* for the Nintendo 64 gaming system was the first game from the franchise to become a critical and commercial success, selling in excess of eight million copies worldwide (Rare, "Press Release"). It

succeeded in adapting environments and events of the film for the requirements of a computer game and in finding appropriate gameplay mechanics, such as non-linear structures and multiple solutions to problems.

In the 1990s, most Bond computer games were reasonably faithful adaptations of films or books, yet games with original stories started to gain importance. There had been earlier products that were not based on previous stories, such as 1993's *James Bond 007: The Duel* or *James Bond 007: Agent Under Fire*, but those had failed to benefit from the additional freedom the original story might have afforded. The 2004 publication of *James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing* – an allusion to Saltzman and Broccoli's film company EON Productions – saw the first interactive narrative which came close to the high production values and the sheer fun of the Bond films. Pierce Brosnan appeared as a digital actor in the game, lending both his looks and his voice to the game's avatar, and Willem Dafoe and Heidi Klum were cast in the roles of super-villain and Bond girl. The result was a degree of Hollywood flair previously unseen in computer games, but there were also remarkable gameplay innovations. To increase the Bond-feel of the playing process, the game awards the player bonus points for spotting "Bond moments" in which especially cool or extravagant actions in the vein of Bond are possible.

Two other developments from that period stand out. One is the adaptation of an older Bond, *From Russia with Love*, in 2005, which not only featured Sean Connery's likeness, but new dialogue recorded by the actor – which is all the more remarkable as Connery has practically retired from acting since 2003. The other innovation a game introduced to the franchise was the possibility of playing the villain. In 2004, *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent* cast the player not in the role of James Bond, but a fellow 00-Agent who falls from grace and finds himself in the employ of Auric Goldfinger and gets set up as the ultimate weapon in the fight against Goldfinger's secret enemy, Dr. Julius No.

The latest computer game in the franchise is *Quantum of Solace*, which also incorporates story elements from *Casino Royale* in an extensive flashback sequence. In accordance with the widespread appeal of the Bond franchise, the game is not exclusive to one game platform (as is customary with other high-profile titles like *Super Mario* for Nintendo consoles or *Halo* for Microsoft's Xbox). The increased importance of computer games within

the franchise can be determined by two further facts: First, all important actors from the movie have collaborated on the game, including Daniel Craig, Judy Dench, and Eva Green. Second, the game's was released to coincide with the *Casino Royale's* DVD release.

Outside the Bond franchise, there are quite a number of computer games which use secret agents as protagonists. There are, of course, adaptations of the other major espionage novels and films such as *Mission Impossible* or *The Bourne Identity*, but also a number of noteworthy original products. While some only use espionage as a pretext (like the *Spy Hunter* racing series), others have re-interpreted it as adventure games, such as *In Cold Blood*, or tactical action games, such as *Hidden & Dangerous*. In one especially creative take on the genre, *Evil Genius*, the player is even allowed to be the super-villain for once. And throughout the 1980s and '90s, there were even bizarre parodies like *James Bond II: Codename Robocod*.

The most important espionage games outside the Bond franchise are the *Metal Gear* and *Splinter Cell* series. They bear a lot of similarities to each other and to Bond, yet retain considerable originality. What they have in common is a certain kind of protagonist – an experienced, physically fit male secret agent –, the use of gadgets, the aggressive nature of their missions, and the involvement with a secret service. In contrast to Bond, both computer game heroes have only occasional romantic relations and prefer stealth and evasion to head-on confrontations and provocation. Quite often, they must accomplish their goals without leaving as much as a single trace, and they kill only if absolutely necessary.

From this common formula, both series derive their own flavor of “tactical espionage action,” as the subtitle to *Metal Gear* defines the genre. This Japanese game takes the superhuman dimension of Bond to an even higher level. Its protagonist, who is only known by his code-name “Solid Snake,” is the clone of the most successful secret agent of the Cold War, code-named “Naked Snake.” As part of a bigger experiment, Solid Snake has retained only the dominant genetic material of his ‘father’ to create a super-warrior. Befitting this legacy, Solid Snake is always pitted against opponents who share his extraordinary qualities – mostly other, evil clones of Naked Snake. In a highly stylized version of our world, Solid Snake battles an Illuminati-like brotherhood of sages and their constantly evolving super-weapon “Metal Gear.” Unlike most computer games, the series makes wide use of symbols, metaphors, and associations, especially in the names

of characters and places, and develops simple conspiracy theories into philosophical, convoluted plot-lines with much room for interpretation. The widespread appeal of the series is mostly based on its aesthetics, though, mostly its pioneering the seamless integration of movie sequences and gameplay.

Splinter Cell and its protagonist Sam Fisher are much more down to earth. Fisher is an agent of the National Security Agency, whose missions range from surveillance to assassinations. He is an expert at staying undetected and capable of stunning acrobatics, yet neither he nor his enemies are super-human. He usually fights terrorists, most of which originate from real-life political hot-spots like the Congo or North Korea. He does his job out of an unfathomable sense of patriotism, but he constantly questions the methods and motivations of his agency. In the last installment of the series, he loses his daughter in a car accident and resigns from NSA, only to be re-recruited as a non-official cover agent. In what is fittingly called *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*, he infiltrates an American terrorist group, and the player can choose into which direction Fisher's loyalties develop. All in all, *Splinter Cell* is deeply rooted in current technology and politics.

Regardless of the modifications in content and tone that sets both series apart from each other and their progenitor, they are highly indebted to Bond, and they acknowledge it. *Splinter Cell: Double Agent* uses the traditional Bond opening of a pre-title sequence, and what is more, it uses it in the same way as *Die Another Day* did, establishing the hero in a life-changing situation that plays out while the opening credits roll. *Metal Gear* goes even further: In the latest installments, the chosen level of difficulty is represented in the avatar's appearance. On the highest level, unlockable only by finishing the game at least once, Solid Snake exchanges his high-tech battle dress for a tuxedo.⁴

⁴ When writing about espionage computer games, one cannot ignore the *No One Lives Forever* series. Instead of carefully adapting the notion of the super-spy to the twenty-first century, *No One Lives Forever* is set in the 1960s, and its blend of parody and homage to the heyday of spy fiction is best described as "Austin Powers without the vulgarity." The protagonist is the female spy Cate Archer, whose work for the ostensibly British secret service U.N.I.T.Y. puts her at odds with the criminal masterminds of H.A.R.M. Cate Archer equals her male peers when it comes to weapons handling, and she has her fair share of gadgets, all of them adapted to a female spy, like the mascara stun gun or the compact code breaker. Oscillating between the garish and the nuanced, *No One Lives Forever* has its heroine chase after French terrorist mimes, only to discuss freedom of choice with the super-villain's Japanese henchwoman a few moments later. The unique tone of the games is most obvious in the climactic fight between its two female lead characters, which takes place in a house that is being carried away by a hurricane.



Fig. 1: Tuxedo Snake

As of yet, the narrative feedback between the espionage computer games discussed here and the Bond franchise has been widely limited to the currently licensed computer games. *Quantum of Solace* bears far more resemblance to *Metal Gear* and especially *Splinter Cell* than to the previous Bond games. Even though James Bond is still quite trigger happy in comparison to Snake and Fisher, there are noteworthy stealth sequences in the latest Bond game, and the stress put on the playing character's ability to seek cover give a defensive quality to fights that was previously only found in more stealth-oriented games. The game version of *Quantum of Solace* is not an adaptation of other computer games, and it still is first and foremost a Bond movie tie-in, yet the influence of games that were themselves influenced by Bond is blatantly obvious.

A quite different form of narrative feedback is to be found in comics based on Bond. In 1958, the success of Fleming's novel *From Russia with Love* sparked interest in a daily comic strip featuring James Bond, but in the beginning, Fleming was skeptical, fearing that the adaptation would not live up to his texts. In the end, he was won over by the generous offer the *Daily Express* had made him (Tesche 101).

The appearance of Bond in the comics differs from what Fleming had in mind. His descriptions and a portrait he commissioned bespoke a slightly dated ideal of masculinity. Comic artist John McClusky did not draw Bond to resemble Sherlock Holmes, as Fleming had suggested, but went for a more contemporary look influenced by actors Robert Taylor and Gary Cooper (Tesche 102) – which is important as McClusky's depiction of Bond has sometimes been credited as one of the main reasons for casting Sean Connery in the role (Tesche 103). But not only does the actor bear a marked

resemblance to his comic progenitor – many scenes in the *Dr. No*-film seem to have been inspired by the panel layout of the comic, and their structures show many parallels.

The mid-sixties Bond-craze was also felt in the comic book industry. Interestingly enough, it did not lead to the same results as it did in the movie business. Instead of producing many imitations, the first step was a world-wide expansion of the publication of the syndicated daily newspaper strips. John McClusky authored Bond comics for over twenty years and produced not only adaptations, but also a number of original stories. Later on, other artists took over, producing e. g. comic book version of films. Translations and re-workings of the British newspaper strip were published all around the globe, but in some regions, the hunger for Bond comics was insatiable. In Scandinavia and South-America, new scenes and sequences were added to the original comics, and from the late sixties on, Bond adventures written by in-house authors were published.⁵ It took some time, but today, translations of the Bond comics exist in almost every language.

Apart from the Bond adaptations, there are not too many noteworthy takes on the spy character in comics. Some are well remembered, especially *Mad Magazine's* cartoon *Spy vs. Spy*. Other productions are mostly forgotten, although some even precede Bond, like the German comic book satire *Nick Knatterton*, developed in 1950 by Manfred Schmidt. Only a few like *Modesty Blaise*, developed by Peter O'Donnell and Jim Holdaway in 1963, are still well known today (Feige 549–50).

One important comic book spy is Marvel's Nick Fury, who was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963 as a soldier, only to be made a secret agent in 1965. When Jim Steranko, a young, but very talented artist and writer, took over *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* from his predecessors, he quickly established it as an avant-garde title with psychedelic visuals and matching stories. Like many of the films competing with Bond, Steranko's comic mixed homages to Bond with parody. Equipped with gadgets that border on the grotesque (like his explosive shirt), Colonel Fury fights one super-villain after another. Many of them draw heavily on Bond's

⁵ The most up-to-date and complete overview of these publications ("Semic James Bond Comic Books – 1989" and "Zig Zag '007' James Bond Comic Books") is found at the unofficial (yet most comprehensive) fan site *MI6 – The Home of James Bond 007*.

adversaries and their respective predecessors: “The Yellow Claw,” for example, is a hybrid of Dr. Fu Manchu and Dr. No. There are even a number of direct references to Bond, for example when Nick Fury gets his equipment from an Englishman called Boothroyd – the name by which ‘Q’ goes in the novels – in *Strange Tales* 153 (February 1966), or when editor Stan Lee is called “Marvel’s James Bond” in the editorial. In *Strange Tales* 164 (January 1967), there even is a man knocking on Fury’s door whose face, posture and tuxedo leave little doubt that this is none other than James Bond.



Fig. 2: Bond in Strange Tales 164

While Jim Steranko did not disguise the fact that his stories and characters were, to put it mildly, influenced by the Bond franchise, there are some elements in his comics that might have in turn been used in Bond movies. Just one example: In a story arc beginning in *Strange Tales* 156 (May 1966), Nick Fury infiltrates the command center of his arch enemy HYDRA, which is a floating artificial island. This idea reappears in 1977’s *The Spy Who Loved Me* with supervillain Stromberg’s Atlantis, an artificial island that even bears some visual resemblance to Steranko’s design. As Fleming does not mention anything of the kind in the novel – it is the one story he insisted be changed drastically for the film version (Tesche 60–63 and 193–201) –, the influence of the comic is quite likely. And there are

many other ideas from *Nick Fury* that we find in later Bond films, such as the luxurious resort on an ice shelf and the invisible car that were central in *Die Another Day*.

One final example will illustrate the degree of artistic sophistication with which comics interact with other media. Only last year, comic superstar Alan Moore contributed to the Bond myth with the – even by Moore’s own standards – highly unconventional *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier*. The eponymous League is a ‘supergroup’ of nineteenth-century fiction heroes such as Allan Quatermain and Captain Nemo, which live in a parallel universe where all the fictional characters from our world’s literature exist as real people. The third book in the series, *The Black Dossier*, is set in England in the 1950s, albeit an England that has been ruled by Big Brother for twenty years. Unsurprisingly, James Bond also makes an appearance. Although he is only called “Jimmy” (for copyright reasons), the Martini-ordering, chain-smoking secret agent is unmistakably Bond.



Figure 3: *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Black Dossier*

Yet Moore’s take on the spy is very unfavorable. Mina Murray, the heroine from *Dracula*,⁶ gets picked up by Bond in a pub, posing as one “Oodles O’Quim” – a rather obvious allusion to Pussy Galore. To impress her, Bond takes her in a cab to Military Intelligence Headquarters. As she stands unimpressed, he tries to rape her, but she fights back and knocks out the

⁶ Oliver Lubrich has remarked a general affinity between the Bond films and Stokers *Dracula* (Lubrich 81).

“nasty little thug,” as she puts it (Moore and O’Neill). When, shortly after, Bond tries to avenge himself with a rocket-launcher pen, he only hurts himself. In the following story, Bond gets reprimanded by his superior ‘M’ (who is, in Moore’s world, Harry Lime from *The Third Man*) for constantly molesting women, and is teamed up with Bulldog Drummond and Emma Peel to find Mina. When they catch up with her, she wins over Drummond by telling him that Bond is a double agent for the Americans and has been the killer of Drummond’s best friend John Night. Mina explains: “The C.I.A.’s Leiter even gave him an Alibi. At the time of Night’s death, he’d been in Jamaica, foiling an Asiatic science-villain. You know, even in the villain’s codename, the Americans were laughing at us. There was no doctor, Mr. Drummond.” (Moore and O’Neill 169)



Figure 4: *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Black Dossier*

When Drummond confronts Bond, the younger man shoots him down and immediately afterwards seduces Emma Peel.

Moore’s version of Bond is not so much a caricature as an attempt at faithfully portraying the flawed character created by Fleming, of which Bond’s ruthlessness, cruelty, and his almost pathological sexual urge are only the most obvious traits. As Moore puts it in an interview: “[...] I think that the James Bond figure has always been a fairly hateful misogynist, and in his earliest incarnation was much more so than the revised and bowdlerized figures that have appeared on the screen since then” (Nevins 196). On a metaphorical level, Bond’s final scenes in the graphic novel have

a poetological element to them, because Bond's killing of Drummond is a violent act of liberation from the predecessor. At the same time, Allan Quatermain, who witnesses the murder, asks himself if that is supposed to be the behavior of the great British adventure hero of his time. This way, in Moore's fiction, the evolution of the 'great British adventure hero' becomes metonymic for British culture at large.

Instead of summarizing my overview of the Bond franchise and its successors, let me point out one aspect of their mutual entanglement I have omitted until now, the involvement of key personages in more than one series. Harry Saltzman was not only producer to the Bond films; he was also responsible for bringing Len Deighton's Harry Palmer to the screen. Also, the close proximity the Bond franchise had to its parodies is nowhere more obvious than with John Gardner's taking over of the novels. He was the author of *The Liquidator* (1964) (which was made into a movie starring Rod Taylor in 1965), a novel about a cowardly spy who is afraid of flying and killing. When he was hired by Fleming's heirs to write new Bond novels, he had already published over twenty books which sold in excess of three million copies (Tesche 391).

When John Gardner resigned as Fleming's licensed successor after fourteen Bond novels in fifteen years, Raymond Benson took over. Benson has also a previous attachment to the Bond franchise (Tesche 96), being not only the author of the James Bond role-playing game *You Only Live Twice II – Back of Beyond*, but also of two computer games from the franchise, *A View to a Kill* and *Goldfinger*. What is more, Benson has recently become the author of novelizations for the two most important espionage franchises in computer games, *Metal Gear Solid* and *Splinter Cell* (Benson 2009). So at least on a personal level, there has been (and will be) an inevitable feedback between the Bond franchise, its peers and its successors.

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