

Film and Game Reviews

Black Widow. Dir. Cate Shortland. Screenplay by Eric Pearson. Perf. Scarlett Johansson, Florence Pugh, David Harbour, and Rachel Weisz. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2021.

The recently released *Black Widow* film gives followers of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) a look at where Natasha Romanoff, AKA Black Widow, has been between *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2016) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2018). The character seemed to be MIA during this time and when we see her again, she has adopted a platinum blonde bob (*Captain America: Civil War* and *Avengers: Infinity War*). Yet that is not all that was different. I could not quite put my finger on it then, but Natasha had more of a presence to her, something that, after viewing her solo film, clicked with me...she was not a new character, she was her own character. She had found her identity in this absence.

Natasha (Scarlett Johansson) seems different because she is free. She is finally free from the psychological control of the Red Room. Since joining The Avengers, she has developed agency, and in exercising that agency she followed her gut, which, in this case, meant betraying the US government and going on the run, seemingly losing her super-heroic family in the process. This is where *Black Widow* picks up.

Prefacing the opening credits, viewers see a snapshot of Natasha's childhood Before Red Room (BRR). This film gives viewers a "before and after" of Natasha, revealing that she was placed with a "family" in Ohio consisting of Alexei (David Harbour), Melina (Rachel Weisz), and Yelena (Florence Pugh), all similarly controlled by Dreykov (Ray Winstone), the vicious director of the Red Room. BRR Natasha had blue hair, converse sneakers and just wanted to be a kid and play with her little "sister." While viewers do not see how Natasha originally landed in Dreykov's grasp, the film implies that she, like many young, forgotten girls, was trafficked. The film does an excellent job of homing in on the reality of the danger of human trafficking with the help of an eerie cover of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." After Red Room (ARR) Natasha underwent intense psychological control that, with the help of Hawkeye, she managed to wake up from. Over the course of the MCU films, viewers have seen Natasha deal with the aftermath of the Red

Room, and it is frustrating to know that she will never fully rid herself of what happened to her.

Viewers are then brought back to 2016, with Natasha on the run after the Avengers disbanded. Changes to her character are obvious; she no longer wears a uniform or a disguise, and she is not running around in heels. She wears her hair up and dresses in more comfortable clothing. This new style is still technically a disguise, but her mission now is comfort and relaxation, something viewers have not seen from her in previous films.

Following an epic fight scene with a brain-washed adult Yelena, Natasha learns that Dreykov still lives and is mass producing Widows. Until now, Natasha thought that she had killed Dreykov. The shift in her demeanor is evident and viewers see the world around her stop as she is forced to confront her past. She knows she must finish the job this time. I cannot help but think that this film would have been drastically different or maybe not exist at all had Natasha confirmed her kill all those years ago. It seems out of character for her, especially fresh from Dreykov's control, to miss a detail like that. This film does answer the question of what Natasha and Clint mean whenever they reference Budapest, but not why they would just assume someone of Dreykov's status to be dead instead of confirming it.

In her second chance to kill Dreykov, Natasha enlists her BRR "family." Despite not being related by blood, the bond they created was strong and it was nice to see Natasha interact with a mother figure. I honestly did not see the collaboration coming, though, as I thought Melina was going to betray her. It was just sad that Natasha was not more compassionate about Yelena's realization that her family was not real. Yelena's reunion with Alexei (aka the Soviet super soldier Red Guardian) makes for a wonderful "father-daughter" moment, but the film sort of pushes Natasha aside at that point to focus on Florence Pugh's acting skills. While this shift in focus is only really evident for this moment, why would the producers choose to let someone emotionally overshadow Natasha in her own film? She knew the family was not real but could have at least done something other than just sit there.

Later, during the film's climactic extended battle sequence, Natasha attempts to kill Dreykov once and for all but discovers that a pheromone lock prevents her from hurting him. Dreykov then falls into the typical villain monologue, revealing his plan. Natasha, determined to wipe her ledger clean, resorts to breaking her own nose to bypass the pheromone lock and thus attack Dreykov. This is an interesting and refreshing choice for Natasha as the MCU has previously avoided injuring her

face with more than just a scratch. She kills Dreykov by using her intellect rather than her sexy fighting pose, though it must be noted that she only gains the ability to defeat him through self-harm.

Now that Dreykov is dead and the Widows are free, Natasha leans into her agency even further by dying her hair blonde. This physical transformation recalls the start of the film, indicating that Natasha has come full circle and can finally be at peace. She now keeps her hair out of her face and seems to have retired the heels for good, which is much different from when we first meet Natasha in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010). She looks more like a fighter than a model now. Natasha leaves her past behind to head back to her Avengers family and, well, we know what happens next (as detailed in *Avengers: Endgame*, 2019, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo).

A Black Widow solo film has been in development since 2004, long before Scarlett Johansson was even cast, and while the delay was unacceptably long, backing the film with a female-led crew made the whole endeavor worth the wait. *Black Widow* was finally released July 9, 2021, simultaneously in U.S. theaters and on Disney+ after multiple delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This film gave Natasha the strength to separate herself from her past, proving that her identity is more than the sum of her trauma. Yes, she was a Widow, but her solo outing proves that she is no longer an unthinking assassin beholden to the whims of evil men. She is taking her training and skills and using them how she feels they should be used, not how she is ordered to use them (echoing her decision to go rogue in *Captain America: Civil War*).

Scarlett Johansson also came into her own with this film. She proved that she is not just the token girl Avenger or the sexy one; she is a leading actress who fronted a successful solo film and found the courage to fight Disney for their breach in contract (Los Angeles Superior Court). It appears Disney tried to shorthand Johansson on her salary when they decided to simultaneously release the film through Disney+ as well as in theaters without renegotiating her contract. The lawsuit was settled for a reported sum of \$40 million (see Hughes), but it stirred up enough buzz for other actors and actresses to reread their contracts and push back against Disney's denial (Lapreziosa).

By the end of the film, the title character no longer wears heels or a low-cut catsuit to battle, nor does she pretend her luscious locks are not getting in her face. Johansson helped make those decisions, ensuring she no longer appears on screen to appease the male gaze; Natasha is not there to complement a man's story and she

certainly is not only there to be half of a lazy romantic storyline. *Black Widow* is her story. She is Natasha Romanoff. Avenger.

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Cosmic Top Secret, Klassefilm and Those Eyes, Nintendo Switch, 2021.

The history of mass media entertainment is replete with adaptations of literary works into film and television; within the past several decades, adaptations of video games into films have met with uneven success. Adaptations of literary works into video games occur, although less frequently. Far less common is the adaptation of a real-life story or documentary into a video game. Danish game company Klassefilm produced one of these rarities in 2018, and its release on the Nintendo Switch in 2021 means the game is now widely available for game scholars and students to experience this unique metaphor for uncovering and dealing with secrets.

Developed by Trine Laier in 2012 while she attended the National Film School of Denmark, the game *Cosmic Top Secret* began as an animated documentary titled *Yderst Hemmeligt (Extremely Secret)* (Dam; Stidsing; Vesti); the next year, the

Danish Film Institute provided additional funding to develop the idea into an adventure game (Stidsing). While the project began as an animated documentary, Laier wanted it to become a game as she believes they “have a huge potential for communicating documentary material” (Dam). As director and screenwriter, Laier presents stories from her life, her parents’ lives, and her country’s government, moving deeper into classified material as the story unfolds. The result is what game producing companies Klassefilm and Those Eyes call a “‘docu-game’ that will appeal to any gamer.”

Cosmic Top Secret follows Danish woman T, for Trine, as she investigates her father’s work with the Danish Defense Intelligence Service during the Cold War. However, with a tagline of “Do we really know each other?” Laier presents the game more as “an autobiographical adventure video game” where “surreal elements, human relationships, history, and secrecy come together to form a complex gaming experience.” The surrealness emerges first in the aesthetics, as the game design mixes photographs with cardboard cut-outs to create a look that is, at times, simultaneously cartoonish and serious.

This approach expands over the course of the game through different levels to produce T’s subjectivity as she works to understand her parents, her history, and her future (which includes giving birth, as the game eventually reveals that she is pregnant). Laier describes the game’s overall design and narrative as the need for a family and a society to deal with their “‘baggage’” as people wrestle with what is “‘worth passing on to our children and future generations’” (Dam). When T becomes depressed, her cardboard body falls apart, and the player must drag her body parts back together to help her get going again. When worried about her elderly father’s depression, the entire world around him goes grayscale, and T must find a way to bring light back into his life. Using surrealism to produce the main character’s subjective experience of events and the narrative is common in film and television, and indeed has become more frequent in independent games, especially those made by women.

What makes *Cosmic Top Secret* unique in this subgenre of independent games is the attempt to replicate the experience of a documentarian or historian attempting to uncover the truth of past events. In seeking to connect with her parents as she is about to become one herself, T conducts interviews and gathers documents and artifacts to understand the work that her father performed with the first electronic computer operated by the Danish government, DASK. Through six levels of play, players learn the history of T’s parents, uncovering secrets along with T about her

parents' lives before she was born as well as about the Danish government's activities during the height of the Cold War. Each level requires players to gather nine pieces of intelligence, and each piece of intelligence is a photograph or document that Laier gathered during her research. The paper collage aesthetic, then, also reflects Laier's work to piece together her family's history through physical media.

In a sense, the game adapts the experiences of watching a documentary, engaging in an archeological dig, and playing a puzzle. Because of its interesting convergent nature, the game would be usefully employed in a course on Danish history. As those do not occur much outside of Denmark, the game is perhaps more interesting for those game scholars and students exploring alternative approaches to develop play experiences. Additionally, digital media scholars would find investigating the blurred genres and authorial intentions of this game fascinating. Serious games are an increasingly important segment of the gaming world, and this game would help address questions of how to balance the fun of play with the seriousness of learning. In some ways, the cartoonish visuals undercut the seriousness of discussing nuclear war and death, but having the entire game be extremely photorealistic would diminish the desire to engage with the game. A final possibility for further investigating this game would be to consider what happens when a livestreamer plays it as a Let's Play video: at that point, are the livestreamer's viewers just watching a documentary, one that has commentary from the livestreamer never intended by the original game's authors?

The game is available on Steam, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, and Apple and Android app stores. When playing it, be mindful of the "paper-like" controls, as T moves by transforming into a crumpled paper ball that can also essentially fly around when jumping (and, when taking the form of a paper airplane, actually does fly around). It may be that the Nintendo Switch Joy Cons were suffering from left stick drift, but I found the controls very touchy and requiring delicate operations to work properly, suggesting that patience is another learning experience received from this altogether fascinating game.

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The Medium, Paolo Granata, 2021.

For Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, successful game design hinges on the notion of meaningful play, a concept they borrow from Johann Huizinga. Salen and Zimmerman explain that all game systems are "designed to support meaningful kinds of choice making" whereby all choices affect "the overall system of the game" (33). Meaningful play arises from "the relationship between player action and system outcome," and therefore the most successful games are those in which the "relationships between actions and outcomes [...] are both *discernible* and *integrated* into the larger context of the game" (34, italics in original). According to Salen and Zimmerman, successful games provide players with discernible and integrated feedback that lets them know they are on the right track and that their choices and actions have meaning. Yet good games also incorporate negative feedback loops to bring balance to the system and prevent players from experiencing boredom; for instance, the *Mario Kart* games introduced the dreaded blue shell to shake things up and put both novice and expert players on a somewhat even playing field. Paolo Granata, a cross-disciplinary media scholar at the University of Toronto, and his students in the Book & Media Studies program were clearly aware of these ideas when they developed *The Medium*, a mostly successful attempt to adapt Marshall McLuhan's book (co-written with his son, Eric) *Laws of Media* into the board game medium.

According to the back of the box, *The Medium* provides players with a "thought-provoking experience [that] encourages us to become aware of the media environment by recognizing its unintended and invisible functions and/or implications." Incorporating elements of both *Catch Phrase* (trying to get your teammate to guess a word or phrase) and the recent board game *Gravwell*

(specifically in the design of the board), *The Medium* uses McLuhan's tetrad (i.e., four questions that can be asked to understand the effects of a given medium) to drive the gameplay. The tetrad consists of the following questions:

1. What does the medium enhance or improve?
2. What does it replace or make obsolete?
3. What does it retrieve or bring back from the past?
4. What does it reverse or flip into? What are its unintended complications?

In addition, *The Medium* draws heavily on McLuhan's concept of the maelstrom (lifted from Edgar Allan Poe's short story "A Descent into the Maelstrom"), which likens contemporary culture to a complex and inescapable vortex that sweeps up everyone and everything. In this context, the vortex serves as the main element of negative feedback (and the game's primary frustration).

The game's components consist of a game board designed to represent the maelstrom (depicted as a colorful swirl), four game pawns, 64 medium cards, eight wild cards (each of which features a quote from McLuhan along with an accompanying explanation), a one-minute timer, a six-sided die, and a clearly and concisely written rulebook. Here it is useful to quote at length the game description provided in the instructions:

The game is played in teams of two or more players. Each round, one team member tries to get their team to guess the medium on the card. Clues take the form of answers to the four questions of the McLuhans' Laws of Media. Teams move along the board when a medium is guessed correctly, pulling themselves out of the maelstrom.

To win the game, players must answer enough questions to escape the maelstrom and cross the finish line. At the start of each turn, each team choose a messenger who draws a card and keeps it secret from all other players. They then roll the die to determine which Laws of Media they will use to provide their teammate(s) with clues about the medium or technology listed on the card within the one-minute time limit. Messengers can give only one clue while their teammates, who may confer with one another, can offer only one response. If they guess correctly, they move forward, but if they guess incorrectly, they pass the card to the next team who must use the next law of media listed counterclockwise on the board. If all teams fail to guess the medium or technology on the card, everyone must move their pieces back one space. The first team to cross the finish line of their track wins the game.

The Medium, which supports two or more players (with no upper limit), does a fine job of mixing learning with enjoyable gameplay, though it often seems more suited for the classroom environment rather than a casual game night with friends (especially if they are of the non-academic variety). A member of my gaming group remarked that the game is fun, but it is not necessarily the first game they would reach for during our regular weekend play sessions. Nevertheless, *The Medium* offers players of all stripes a pleasurable experience thanks to its highly communal nature. Social interaction emerges as perhaps the game's greatest strength, making it an ideal icebreaker activity in nearly any media studies course. *The Medium* promotes and rewards communication between players whether they are on a team or competing with one another, and it encourages active listening so players can build on one another's clues. Moreover, it inspires a great deal of amusing silliness as players struggle to come up with clues or provide incorrect answers.

The Medium's primary drawback is that it might contain too much negative feedback. Between the rule that forces players to move back one space should everyone fail to guess the medium or technology and the Whirlpool Spaces, which send players to a different track several spaces back from their original location, play sessions can be prolonged well past the point of fun (a weakness the game shares with *Monopoly*). This downside might inspire players to implement house rules that remove the rule about moving back one space (my group eventually ignored that rule and just advanced to the next turn without moving back a space). It could also prove detrimental to using the game in the classroom given the time constraints imposed on both teachers and students. Of course, it could be argued that the game successfully adapts McLuhan's writings as it vacillates between pleasurable and frustrating. Despite that one (admittedly rather large) shortcoming, *The Medium* is both fun and educational, offering players an overall pleasant gaming experience while teaching them about the media ecology. In that regard, it achieves a sense of meaningful play.

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