# "The Game is On": Re-Imagining and Re-Booting Sherlock Holmes in Film and Television in the 21$^{st}$ Century

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Since his first appearance in 1891, as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes has had the unique privilege of being considered a living entity. His first appearance was in *A Study in Scarlet* published in Beeton's Christmas Annual for 1887. The story was not a popular success, but it led to the writing of *The Sign of Four*, which appeared in Lippincott's in 1890. The two books were enough to prompt an editorial request to Doyle to write a series of short stories. The stories came to be collected in book form as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*. Despite Doyle's attempts to kill off the character in the sinister and climactic tussle with arch nemesis Dr. Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls, the overwhelming demand from the readers resulted in the revival of the character.

With an immense fan following in the early part of the 20$^{th}$ century, there was a deluge of articles in prominent magazines, books and,by 1932, scholarly biographies of Holmes and Watson were released, debating and exploring finer points of biographical details of both characters. Unlike other fictional characters Sherlock Holmes evoked a direct identification by the readers .This fetishization resulted in a complete erasure of the role played by Doyle in creating the fictional world of Holmes.In its place was the obsession of readers with a fantastic character, his apparent disconnect with concerns of the mundane world, his arrogance and supreme confidence and a desire to explore this "geography of the imagination". Indeed Sherlock Holmes set the trends as far as fan following was concerned, something we see replicated in the present day obsession evoked by characters created by Rowling, Tolkien and others.

Following the success of Holmes, a spate of detective stories followed, usually variations within the genre set by Doyle and his predecessors. The extreme eccentricity of many of the new detective heroes suggests

that writers had to be extremely creative to make the detective story dramatically interesting: Craig Kennedy, the scientific detective; Professor Augustus S.F.X. Van Dusen, the Thinking Machine; Max Carrados, the blind detective; and the Old Man in the Corner, who spent his time in a London teashop tying and untying knots in a piece of string.

In order to understand this wave of popularity for a fictional character we must understand the period which contributed to his creation. The late 19th and 20th century witnessed significant attempts to reconcile the traditional and the modern in Britain and America. Adherents of positivism,materialism and scientific as well as literary naturalism often presented a bleak picture of human existence,governed by bestial instincts that were reducible to mere chemical and physical processes. The character of Sherlock Holmes celebrated the central tenets of modernity, not just rationalism and secularism but also urbanism and consumerism. Like many of Doyle's readers, Holmes also yearned for enchantment, confessing to his "love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and hum drum routine of everyday life"(Saler).

He was acclaimed as an icon of modernity as he utilized reason in a manner that was at once magical and adventurous rather than purely instrumental fashion. Saler believes that he expanded the definition of rationality beyond a narrow means of confining oneself to instrumentation to include the imagination. The term he uses is "the scientific use of imagination" or rather animistic reason .His method of solving cases by relating seemingly discrete facts to a more encompassing and meaningful configuration whose integuments were derived from a combination of rigorous observation, precise logic and lively imagination .Holmes triumphs over his fellow investigators because they tend to miss everything that is not presented directly before their senses or are unable to interpret creatively those facts.

Holmes's dramatic use of animistic reason was the mass culture's exemplification of a complex of ideas that circulated as part of the fin-de-siècle revolt against the dominant discourses of positivism, materialism and scientific naturalism. Doyle was influenced by his predecessors in

the field especially Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne who introduced fantastic tales based on the process of ratiocination. Holmes went on to extol the romance of reason in sixty narratives published over four decades. The tales seek to celebrate the quotidian, "the commonplace" as an infinite source of wonder. The character of Holmes is as much a victim of modern reason as he is in Watson's words 'the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen' .Trapped in the iron cages of reason, the banal routine of modern life bores him and at times he resorts to cocaine for stimulation .As he states in *The Wisteria Lodge,* "Life is commonplace, the papers are sterile; audacity and romance seem to have passed for ever from the criminal world"

Yet, with a case, the sense of adventure is restored as "mystery stimulates the imagination' Holmes serves as an icon of modernity because he served as an example of as well as provided the means to re-enchant the modern world. Combining reason and imagination in a light synthesis he was able to vivify inert facts and reveal underlying correspondences; the readers could apply this example of animistic reason to their own lives and many applied it to the Holmes canon itself. It had helped to legitimise the idea that readers could indulge in their imagination without losing their reason .Indeed by engaging in such imaginative play they could bring the two together.

By emulating Holmes's deployment of animistic reason, readers could immerse themselves in imaginary worlds without relinquishing practical reason and remain enchanted. Many believed that the concept of 'play' had been driven out of the modern world by the advance of instrumental reason. In their definitive study of the concept of the game *Homo Ludens* Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois (1938) posit that "the sad conclusion forces itself upon us that the play element in culture has been on wane ever since the eighteenth century "(p233).

But the widespread belief in the actual existence of Sherlock Holmes is an indication of the wider acceptance of reason and imagination in everyday life as well as the extension of leisure and the spectacularization of culture in the forms of mass literature, films and television and radio.

This encouraged and enabled individuals to play without relinquishing their grip on reality (Combs).

Holmes's continued life as a serial character was extended thanks to the new media emerging at the end of the 19th century. His appearances in illustrated mass circulated magazines, stage performances, radio and screen appearances ensured a lasting appeal unlike other popular literary characters that preceded him. Another factor was the proliferation of Sherlock Holmes societies in the Inter-War period .The sharing and acceptance of these imaginary worlds are also indicative of how acceptable and alluring these virtual worlds became in the early decades of the 20th century .There has been an evolution from the establishment of Baker Street Irregulars in 1934 to the denizens of online computer gaming worlds and the enthusiasts of fantasy role – playing games. The synthesis between "objectivity" and imagination embodied by Holmes through animistic reason has been a way of combating modern ennui.

Krasner posits that Conan Doyle makes concealment and revelation doubly complicated .The stories are not structured around the protagonist's detecting but around the narrator's frustrated desire to behold and comprehend that detecting .Not only must Holmes reconstruct the story of the crime; Watson must construct the story of Holmes's reconstruction. Watson uses the stories as a way into Holmes's life and a way of staking his claim as Holmes's friend.

The filmed detective story from 1903 most often featured Sherlock Holmes as the Holmes stories were enormously popular almost everywhere in the world. American Biograph made *Sherlock Holmes Baffled* in 1903, and Vitagraph turned out *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in 1905. In 1908 came *Sherlock Holmes and The Great Murder Mystery*, an American release which drew inspiration from Poe as well as Doyle. The Holmes mythos seems to have been flexible enough to have tolerated all sorts of borrowings from other sources.

Doyle himself is said to have had some stake in a series of Anglo French adaptations of his short stories especially *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The first American Holmes feature starred

William Gillette and was based on his stage adaptation; this film appeared in 1917. Other such efforts could be cited, but probably the first really successful Holmes film was a 1922 re-make of the Gillette play produced by Samuel Goldwyn, starring John Barrymore and Roland Young as Watson. When it was released in London the exhibitors chose to title it as Moriarty! When sound came to the movies in 1926, it opened the screen to the detective story and the realistic crime story and also the reconciliation of a basically cerebral plot with the demands of good action melodrama.

Detective films embodied pure escapism, but some critics contend that they are also astonishingly accurate mirrors of modern man's changing outlook on life and society.

Sherlock Holmes can be attributed to be a combination of the Cerebral Sleuth as well as the Transcendental Sleuth. As a Cerebral Sleuth he is usually distinguished, and for the most part, an intellectual and condescending to the lowly, intellectually inferior beat policeman. In these stories, the viewer is given the same chance as the detective, by making the process of detection possible through information given in the story, to solve the crime. The final solution must follow a rational, deductive process. On the other hand as a Transcendental Sleuth, he is a moral man, uncommitted to any institution, save justice, a loner, and a permanent stranger.

He finds moral victory, not in the ultimate punishment of a criminal, but, rather, finds justification in preserving himself as a moral being. He is, in the final analysis, the apotheosis of everyman of good will who, uncertain of his own values and certainly alienated by the values of his time, seeks desperately and mournfully to live without shame, to live without compromise to his integrity. In addition, the transcendental sleuth finds himself usually at odds with the offices of law enforcement, and often finds himself caught in the middle between corrupt individuals in society and the corruption within the police forces themselves.

Perhaps, it is the romanticized ego fulfilling self-identification with these characters that make them, by far, the most popular of all detective films. Many of the plots are similar, and while you don't know exactly how the detective in question will solve a particular case; it is a certainty that he will solve it, and most likely it will be as violently as is allowable on screen. The transcendental sleuth exists just within the law and is always just a step ahead of local law enforcers in solving a crime.

While adaptations of Sherlock Holmes's adventures have continued unabated the canon has been challenged time and again. Huizinga and Caillois believe that storytelling constitutes a form of game between narrator and listener where the latter is held "spellbound" at the control and discretion of the former. Caillois refined the idea in his later study *Games and Men* (1958) and gave six characteristics that defined game as an activity that is fun –an activity chosen for its light – hearted nature, separate –circumscribed in time and space, uncertain –the outcome of the activity is unforeseeable, non-productive –participation does not accomplish anything useful, governed by rules and fictitious –it is accompanied by the awareness of a different reality.

As a late 20th century phenomenon, different fields and disciplines have demonstrated an interest in videogames and their study. The Humanities have approached the concept of gaming with the question "What meanings are made through games?" Researchers like Elizabeth Bruss have focused on the relationship between the author and reader as competitive, mixed motive and collaborative. Bruss suggests that games are mixed motive with the author providing clues and hints at various points. This is useful in describing viewer's responses in experiencing cinematic games particularly film makers whose objective is to create confusion ,obfuscation and ambiguity.

This also serves in their understanding of the interaction between filmmaker and viewer and also tactics used in a particular work. Peter Hutchinson in *Games Authors Play* distinguishes between game and play with game more controlled and organized form of play where some sort of "rule can be seen in operation "or where "a clear method is adhered

to". Therefore a literary game is "any playful, self-conscious and extended means by which an author stimulates his reader to deduce or to speculate by which he encourages him to see a relationship between different parts of the text or between the text and something extraneous to it". (74)

Other devices listed by him include enigma, parallel and vacillating narrative that form the basis of many narrative games .It is useful because it draws attention to games that appear in other related arts including cinema, a more complex medium than literary texts, and also provides the filmmaker with more potential for constructing games.

Strategies like re-imagining and re-booting have been used to understand 21st century interpretations of Sherlock Holmes. *Re-imagine* as a concept has become popular in reference to remakes which do not closely follow the original. The terms are used by creators in the marketing of films and television shows to inform audiences that the new product is not the same as the old one. Plot structures sometimes may have tongue in cheek references to the original, with characters of the same name and similar concepts, while remaining significantly different from the original.

Reboot in context with serialised fiction involves discarding much or even all previous continuity in the series and start with fresh ideas. The Tabula rasa of the canon is wiped out as irrelevant to the new storyline and the series starts over as if brand new. With a reboot the older continuity is largely discarded and replaced with a new canon.

Therefore re-imaginings and re-booting as techniques, with a new narrative style, genre evolution and a sophistication of material enable a new generation of spectators experience a core story reintroducing it in smaller and easier to understand instalments. It refocuses the story on its most important elements and abandoning many subplots and overgrowth of minor details. Reboots may also serve changing audience expectations as to storytelling style, genre evolution and sophistication of material. The imagining of a franchise often leads to controversy within established fan communities as to which is more legitimate or more popular. While reimagining and rebooting are often associated with the

terrain of video games and comic books yet we can analyse how these can provide a refreshing insight into older texts. *Sherlock Holmes* and *Sherlock* are two recent examples of reimagining and rebooting the iconic Sherlock Holmes in film and television.

*Sherlock Holmes* based on a story by Lionel Wigram and Michael Robert Johnson and reimagined by director Guy Ritchie was released in 2009.The film has several allusions to earlier Holmes stories like *Silver Blaze,The Man with the Twisted Lip, The Adventure of Copper Beeches, The Sign of Four,A Scandal in Bohemia, The Boscombe Valley Mystery.* The eponymous detective presented in a more corporeal avatar rather than cerebral has echoes of the late 20th century action heroes instead of the armchair ratiocination evoked by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's classic 19th century London detective. Images of Sherlock Holmes, largely formed by the classic '40s movies starring Basil Rathbone as Holmes and Nigel Bruce as Watson has been set aside, to bring in the complex and pleasingly contradictory delineation found in Doyle's stories.

The detective hero was always an extraordinary man, and always because of his penetrating intelligence, his sharp intuitions, sometimes even his psychic powers. Holmes is the model of a superior being, a superman by virtue of several qualities. In addition Holmes conveys the aura of chivalry, of patronising autocracy and essential conservatism which appealed to readers of the Strand .Watson on the other hand represents the commonplace, who serves as an interpreter and chronicler of Holmes's work. According to Haynsworth the repeated and overt juxtapositions of Holmes's perspective and Watson's are important .They direct our attention to the process of negotiation between competing values and imperatives that is ultimately identified in these stories as the primary goal of detection itself.

Set in late-Victorian England the story begins against the backdrop of a ritual killing of five women and a crackling high-tension sequence in which Holmes and Watson foil a satanic rite by the movie's villain, Lord Blackwood . In this opening we get a special glimpse into a peculiar quirk of Holmes's brilliant mental powers. He is able to envision in

advance an entire sequence of blows he will deliver to an opponent, a kind of slow motion instant pre-play, which enables us to break down Holmes's thought processes and forming a visual counterpart to his explanatory asides. Holmes is a man who needs constant challenges to keep pace with the warp-speed workings of his formidable intellect.

Robert Downey Jr. convincingly portrays the sleuth's descent into a manic-depressive funk that sees him looking dishevelled and half-crazed, and focuses heavily on Holmes's anti-social and eccentric side. Downey's rendition of Holmes is part superhero, part mystic rock star and part steam punk sleuth. Somewhere between sloppy and slovenly, he literally zones out to play what ultimately is a game with the diabolic Blackwood along with the enigmatic Irene Adler. Lord Blackwood's character is an acknowledgement of the age's concern with spiritualism, matters related to the occult, magic and mysticism. Ritchie brings in a supernatural villain to combat a superhero detective.

The director's agenda was clearly to make a very contemporary film as far as tone and texture is concerned. Jude Law's Watson is transformed from the conventional medical practitioner into a wise-cracking man of action with fists of fury. The CGI-enhanced turn-of-the century foggy London spectacularly captures the brutishness of industrious expansion in the overwhelming gray and brown tones of the scenes and in a way anticipating criminal underbelly of the city . The London Bridge is in mid- construction. Labourers build massive ships on the piers of the Thames. The fight sequence reprises Ritchie's house style seen in *Snatch* and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* while depicting the squalor and anomie of modern urban existence. The brilliantly choreographed fight sequence brings in the detective's expertise as a bare-knuckled pugilist with a decidedly contemporary touch.

*Sherlock* is a British television series created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss. It is a contemporary reimagining of Doyle's detective stories and stars Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes and Dr.Watson played by Martin Freeman. The first series of three 90-minute films A *Study in Pink, The Blind Banker* and *The Great Game* was transmitted

on BBC One and BBC HD in July and August 2010.It sets aside the original Victorian setting for the urban sensorium of present day London. Though it breaks free from a canonical treatment of Doyle, especially Jeremy Brett's definitive rendition of the sleuth in the Granada Television series, yet in many ways it is consistent with the author's vision.

Most television viewers revere the role essayed by Brett and the analytical relentless enthusiasm he brings to the character .Yet for a 21$^{st}$ century audience ,a detective in a frock coat and deerstalker hat may not present the same appeal, and the settings and the concerns of the age may appear remote. In *Sherlock,* the detective still has a Baker Street address, an arch nemesis in Jim Moriarty, dysfunctional relations with his brilliant brother Mycroft, plays the violin, and a police colleague called Lestrade. He identifies himself as a "highly functioning sociopath" who sees the world around as a battlefield and life as an elaborate game of survival.

The 21$^{st}$ century Sherlock uses modern technology, such as texting, internet, and GPS, to solve the crimes and has a website to chronicle his findings. According to  the director of two episodes of *Sherlock* Paul McGuigan, this is in keeping with Conan Doyle's character, pointing out "in the books he would use any device possible and he was always in the lab doing experiments ... It's just a modern-day version of it. He will use the tools that are available to him today in order to find things out".

Clues are displayed on screen, in the manner of a complex video game reflecting the speed of Sherlock's thought processes and Watson's dispatches to the *Strand Magazine* are replaced by a blog. Addressing changing social attitudes and broadcasting regulations, Cumberbatch' s Holmes has replaced the pipe with multiple nicotine patches.

Although the events of the books are transferred to the present day, existing elements are incorporated into the new characters to "ground the forthcoming tales in reality, and appease ardent fans of the classic tales"; for example, Martin Freeman's Watson has returned from Afghanistan  after being injured in combat  while the fictional Watson was invalided home after serving in the Second Anglo-Afghan Wars of 1878–1880. Yet he rises above the white noise of the gadgetry to seek

meaning in signs in the everyday world which escapes the notice of the other investigators. What assures his success is his ability to foil his opponents and adversaries by predicting their moves. Just as games require the player to choose a strategy to be victorious, Sherlock uses an optimal strategy to stay a step ahead of the police in solving the most baffling of crimes.

Tom Sutcliffe for *The Independent HYPERLINK "http:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Independent"* in his review wrote, "*Sherlock* is a triumph, witty and knowing, without ever undercutting the flair and dazzle of the original. It understands that Holmes isn't really about plot but about charisma ... Flagrantly unfaithful to the original in some respects, *Sherlock* is wonderfully loyal to it in every way that matters". The two writers clearly want to lead their audience through an adventure they will not forget. Games therefore in the perspective of the directors include elements that are both serious and playful "The game," as this modern Sherlock puts it, "is on."

Peter Hutchinson in *Games Authors Play* posits that "the terms 'play' and 'game' are used in modern criticism but always without wider consideration of their role." Many of the devices of postmodern literature such as irony, allusion, parody and pastiche can be perceived as aesthetic games exploited for some time. Such preponderant and extensive use of game like devices and structures are increasingly apparent in the world view shaped by recent productions in film and television. While both Downey and Cumberbatch dazzle the audience with their own distinctive treatment of the character of Sherlock Holmes it is evident that re-booting and re-imagining texts can open up scope for the play of multiple interpretations of character. By setting aside formulaic treatments, the spectators reconsider this 19th century detective in a new light.

According to computer pioneer Joseph Weizenbaum, the Digital Age has brought us to a "point where almost every genuine human dilemma is seen as a mere paradox... that could be untangled by judicious applications of cold logic derived from a higher standpoint."

The appeal of Holmes and his portrayals on screen and television continues in the 21$^{st}$ century, reiterating the dichotomy of whether truth is being governed by empirical science or human experience. Though film and television productions have different impact factors yet re-booting and re-imagining texts can bring out a different perspective on characterization. With his love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life, Sherlock Holmes in the contemporary re-imaginings is dynamism incarnate and the proof lies in the critical acclaim received by these two productions and the much anticipated sequels in 2011 and 2012.

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