Film Reviews

Jon S. Baird, director. *Tetris*. Apple Studios, 2023.

Tetris, inspired by Dan Ackerman's *The Tetris Effect: The Game that Hypnotized the World* (2016), details the events game developer Henk Rogers experienced while pursuing the distribution rights for the titular game Alexey Pajitnov created. The film also focuses on the friendship between Rogers and Pajitnov while the former obtained the rights to distribute *Tetris* from the latter's place of work—Soviet state-owned company Elektronorgtechnica (ELORG). *Tetris* primarily takes place in Moscow in 1988, during the waning years of the Soviet Union. Director Jon S. Baird took some creative liberties with his vision for the film, but overall followed the historical events accurately.

   Tetris highlights the journey of game developer Henk Rogers, who obtained the rights to distribute *Tetris* in Japan. This leads Rogers to the Nintendo Company, which agrees to help him sell the game. While at Nintendo, Rogers sees the "Game Boy" and gets the idea to obtain the rights to *Tetris* on handheld devices. What follows is a race between three different individuals: Henk Rogers, Kevin Maxwell (the CEO of Mirrorsoft, who gave the distribution rights to Henk), and Robert Stein (who owns the rights to sell *Tetris* globally). The stakes surrounding the race between these three men are amplified when it is revealed Stein only has the global rights to *Tetris* for computers—leaving every other distribution method in fair play. While disadvantaged due to a lack of money and under constant threat by Russian surveillance, Rogers ultimately receives the rights to distribute the game thanks to the friendship he formed with Alexey Pajitnov. Rogers and Pajitnov would go on to create the Tetris Company in 1996, controlling the rights to license the game that would sell half a billion copies worldwide and continues to be played by many people today.

   In 1988, the Soviet Union was under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, who instituted two key concepts in Soviet Russia two years before the events of *Tetris* took place. These ideas were *Perestroika* (reforms) and *glasnost* (transparency in government). Gorbachev is depicted in the film as having a connection to Kevin Maxwell's father, Robert. While the two did meet, there was "never a meeting between the media moguls and Gorbachev" for the rights for *Tetris*.[1]

1 Wenlei Ma, "Tetris movie: What really did and didn't happen in Soviet

Tetris follows the actual events well, but the story of Henk Rogers securing the rights to *Tetris* was far less eventful in reality. Baird added unnecessary, albeit entertaining, drama, most of which came from a corrupt Communist Party official named Valentin Trifonov. While he proved to be a looming presence, there is no evidence that he existed. Trifonov was responsible for leading a car chase against Rogers and Pajitnov during the climax of the film. Rogers himself said, "It's an exaggeration, but we did feel the pressure from the politburo…"[2] The cars involved could be seen becoming pixelated whenever they came into contact with any obstructions, implying the scene was a fabrication. Creative liberties were also taken with Rogers' translator. As the film goes on, it is revealed that she is a KGB agent—much to Rogers' surprise. However, in an interview, Henk Rogers stated he knew his translator was KGB, revealing yet another sacrifice of the truth to increase the entertainment value of the film.[3]

Tetris' total runtime is almost two hours, encompassing roughly a year's worth of events in a single film. Baird was able to tell the story he envisioned through fast-paced cinematography to make sure *Tetris* captivates the audience. The film incorporates action-packed sequences and drama when the story calls for it. While it is not a bad idea to make a movie entertaining, it does hurt the historical accuracy of the events that transpired. *Tetris* appeals to those wanting to learn about the origins of the best-selling videogame, and anyone interested in videogame history in general. It is an enjoyable movie that will certainly captivate college students. Although the film does include inaccuracies, it keeps most of the events intact and serves as a good historical retelling.

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2 Ma, "Tetris movie," *News.com.au*.
3 Phil Hoad, "Tetris: how we made the effective computer game," *The Atlantic*, June 2, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/jun/02/how-we-made-tetris