



# THE GOLDEN AGE OF VIDEO GAME REMAKES AND REMASTERS

A Virtuos study on key factors in successful game renewals

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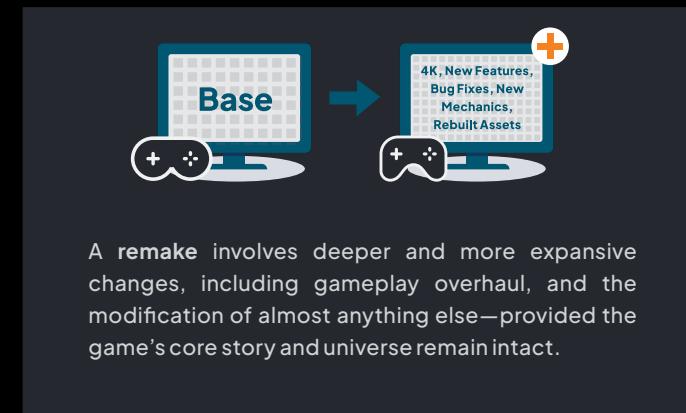
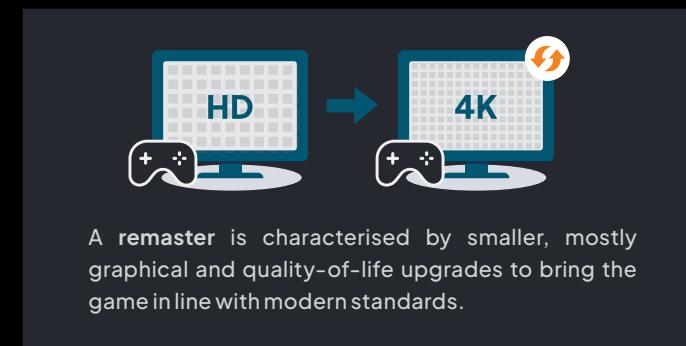
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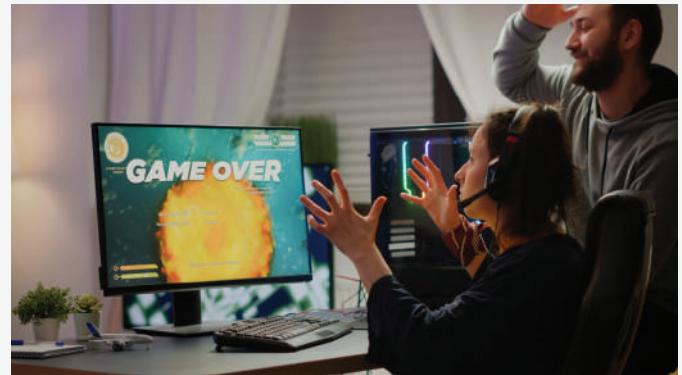


# INTRODUCTION

2023 has been the year of remakes, remasters, and ports. Between March and June, they accounted for **9 of the 10 top-rated games**,<sup>1</sup> and **3 of the top 10 game releases**.<sup>2</sup> Analyst firm **Nielsen** also found that digital revenue for the top video game remakes nearly doubled in 2020 vs 2018.<sup>3</sup> This resurgence has led the industry to dub this era as the **golden age of remakes and remasters**.

What accounts for the remarkable success of game renewals in today's highly competitive market? To understand this, this study explores perspectives of both gamers and game developers.





## **Millennials are a key driver for the resurgence of remakes and remasters.**

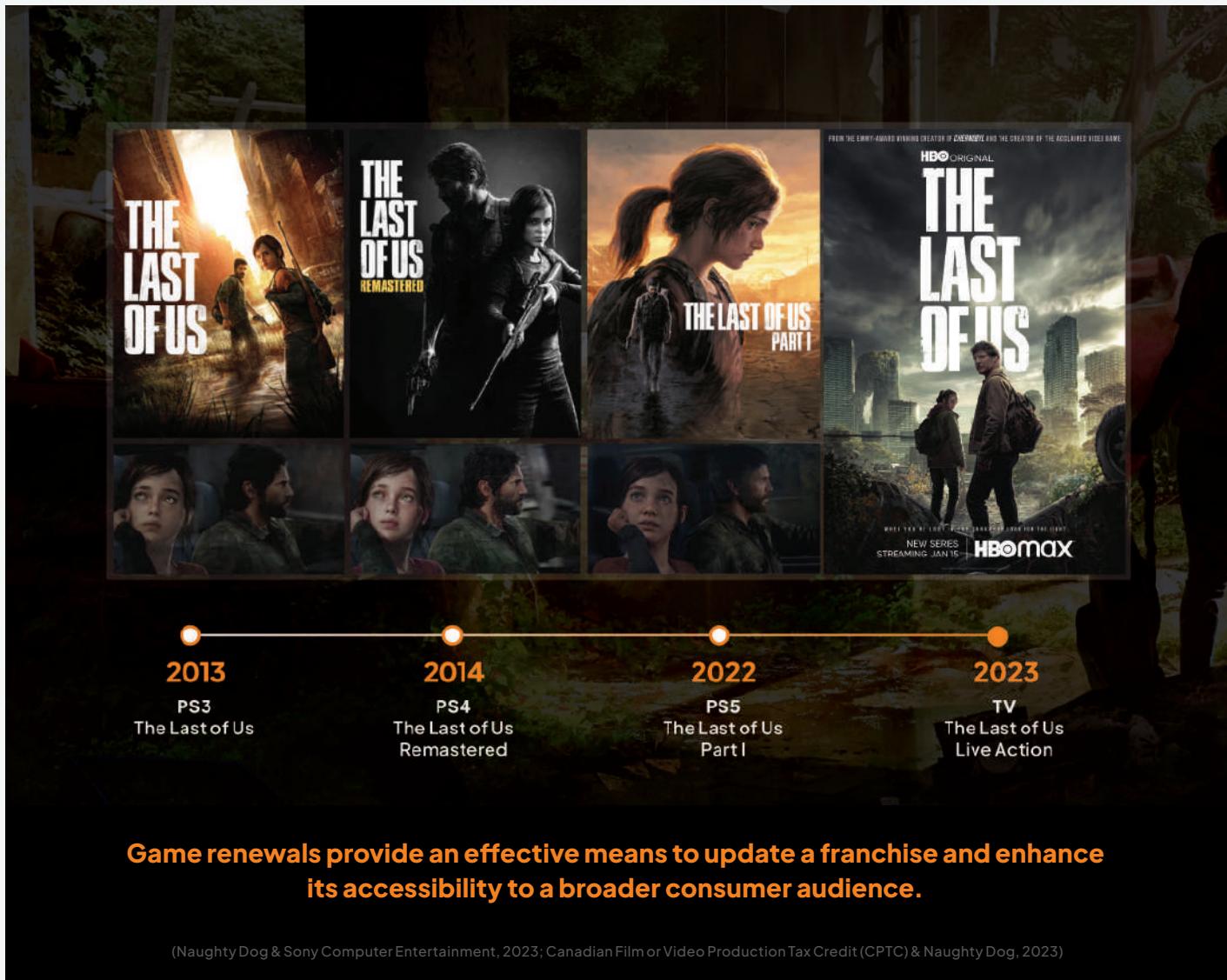
Games market research company **Newzoo** found that 80% of millennials play video games.<sup>4</sup> They grew up in the 80s and 90s alongside the evolution of video games, and currently play many of the games that are being remade and remastered. These game renewals sweep gamers in a wave of nostalgia that harks back to their childhood memories.

Now working adults with access to disposable income, millennials form a key market that drives demand for remakes and remasters. And they aren't gaming less in adulthood either. Research conducted by **ExpressVPN** found that millennials remain engaged with gaming throughout their lives and maintain a higher level of engagement with games as compared to other generations like Gen Z, even throughout their adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

## **Market-tested games reduce risk while generating additional revenue and engagement with wider audiences.**

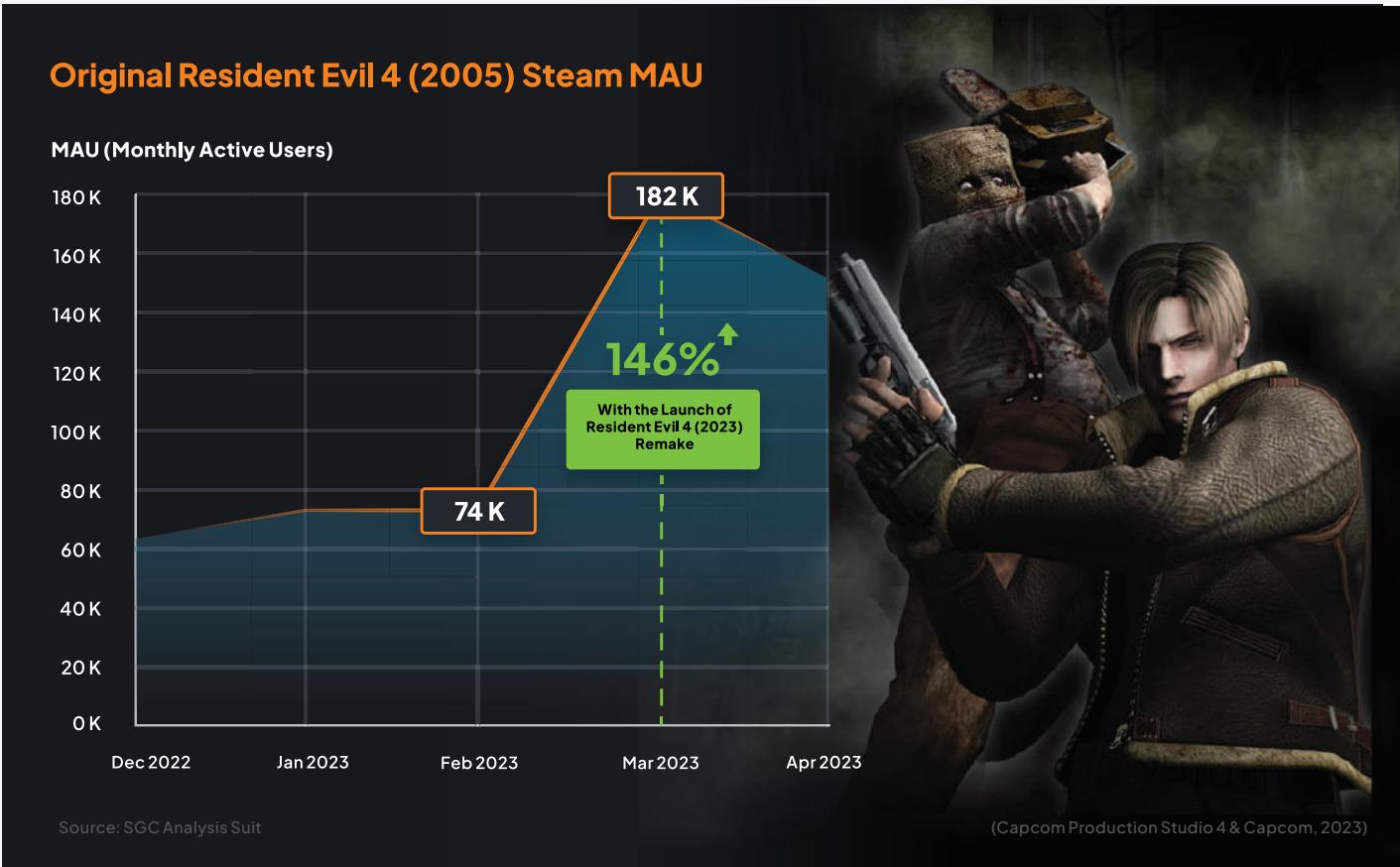
Over the past years, game developers have been facing increased pressure created by rising consumer expectations for high-quality content at quicker rates, brought on by rapid technological advancements (e.g., graphic engines, performance, online capabilities) and intense market competition. To cater to these demands, developers require bigger teams and longer production timelines.

Market corrections from the industry's unsustainable growth during the Covid-19 period have led to both developers and investors taking a more financially conservative approach to reduce the margin for error. Paired with the current economic climate comprising high interest rates, inflation, slow growth, and rising costs, some developers have turned their attention to game renewals, using market-tested games to reduce their development risk while delivering a great product.



**The Last of Us**, created by **Naughty Dog** and **Sony Interactive Entertainment**, first launched to huge commercial success in 2013. With each new console generation, **Naughty Dog** released an updated version—a remaster in 2014 after the release of Xbox One and PlayStation 4 (PS4), and a remake in 2022 after the release of Xbox X|S and PS5.

This meant that the game was always updated and in line with contemporary expectations, allowing the story, characters, and gameplay to remain at the top of gamers' minds, no matter the hardware generation they were playing on. Still relevant 10 years after its first release in 2013, *The Last of Us* even sparked a successful drama television series in 2023.



Similarly, other developers can also use remakes, remasters, and ports to keep a franchise relevant, maximise its consumer base, and create anticipation for future entries. On top of generating their own sales and engagement, game renewals create positive externalities in engagement for the original games they are based on. A [Newzoo](#) study showed that releasing updated versions of *Uncharted: Legacy of Thieves*, *The Last of Us*, *The Witcher 3* and other games re-engaged dormant player bases and monetised previously untapped audiences.<sup>6</sup>

For example, the launch of the *Resident Evil 4 remake* on March 2023 led to a significant 146% increase in MAU for the original *Resident Evil 4* (2005) on Steam versus February 2023. This boost may be attributed but not limited to the following factors:



Players on older hardware unable to play the latest version but who want to join the hype



Players revisiting the original game before experiencing the remake



Players interested in comparing both versions to spot differences

Regardless of a player's motive, the release of a remake, remaster, or port benefits its existing game version – if done right.

**So how can developers maximise the chances of success for their remakes or remasters?**

**Spoiler alert: success appears to be largely determined by two factors:**

**1. The right timing**

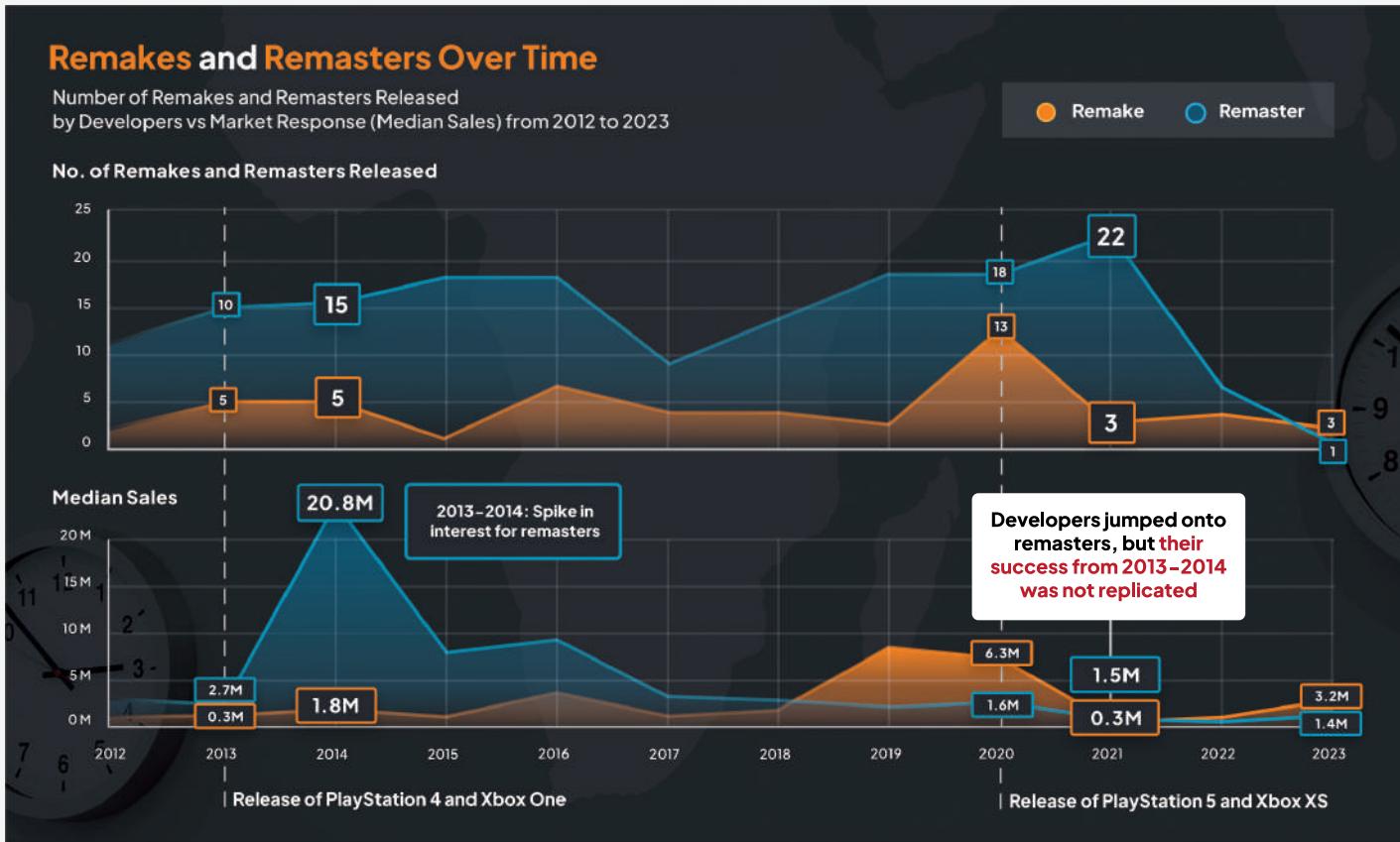
**2. Making the right changes**



# IS THERE EVER A RIGHT TIME TO REMAKE OR REMASTER A GAME?

With the help of data partners **IDG Consulting** and **Strategic Game Consulting (SGC)**, Virtuos collated a dataset of over 200 remakes and remasters alongside their sales figures since 2012 for this study.

“Owners”, a metric from SGC denoting the number of unique players with a game installed in their library, was used as an estimate for the number of copies sold. Valuable insights were gleaned through analysing that dataset together with consumer reviews and interviews with developers of leading game renewals.



## [1/3] To remake, or to remaster, that is the (first) question?

2014 saw a massive spike in popularity of remasters, right after the release of PS4 and Xbox One. When that generation of consoles released, developers were quick to remaster using the latest graphical capabilities to breathe new life into the visuals of their most successful and loved games in the market. Players reacted positively, as reflected in the high median sales for remasters in 2014. Some of the most popular remasters that year include **Grand Theft Auto (GTA) V**, **The Last of Us Remastered**, and **Halo: The Master Chief Collection**, which were released within 2 years after the launch of their original versions.

However, players' enthusiasm for remasters steadily declined in the next few years. The success in 2014 was not replicated in the next generation with the release of the PS5 and Xbox X|S in 2020. According to Nielsen, graphical upgrades have reached diminishing returns as the market demands higher standards of enhancements and innovation.<sup>7</sup> This, along with increased backwards compatibility, might have resulted in a weaker value proposition for players as they would be purchasing the same game on newer hardware with only graphical improvements.

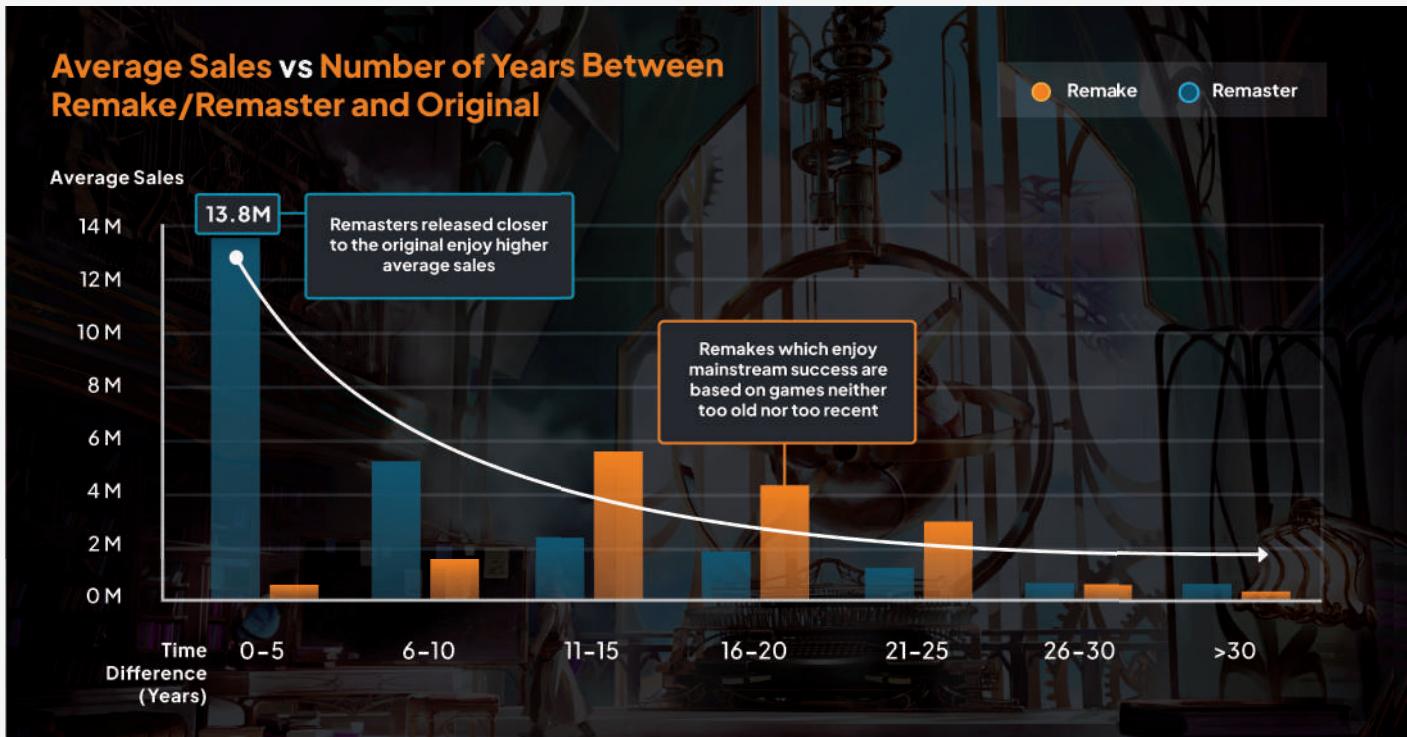
Instead, the release of the PS5 and Xbox X|S saw remakes flourish. Denoted by a spike in both the number of launches and median sales, developers harnessed the increased capabilities of the new console generation to add more substantial gameplay changes to existing games—to the delight of gamers. 2020 saw the release of popular remakes like **Final Fantasy (FF) VII Remake** and **Demon's Souls** (2020). And 3 years later, 2023 is the first year in our dataset where there were more remakes launched than remasters.



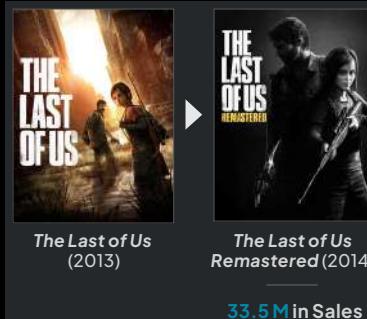
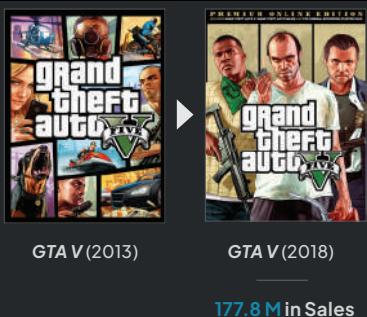
**As noted, the release and sales of remasters and remakes are significantly affected by console generation cycles.**

The next generation of consoles is expected sometime in 2028, according to forecasts by Microsoft.<sup>8</sup> The Nintendo Switch 2, however, is rumoured to release in early 2025,<sup>9</sup> providing a more immediate opportunity for developers to expand the reach of their titles and tap on an expanded player base.

With the next console generation, it is likely that remakes will continue to flourish, but whether remasters would thrive depends on the extent of technological and graphical improvements from the current generation of consoles.



Many of the top Remasters in the 0-5 years category were released in 2014



(Rockstar North et al., 2024)

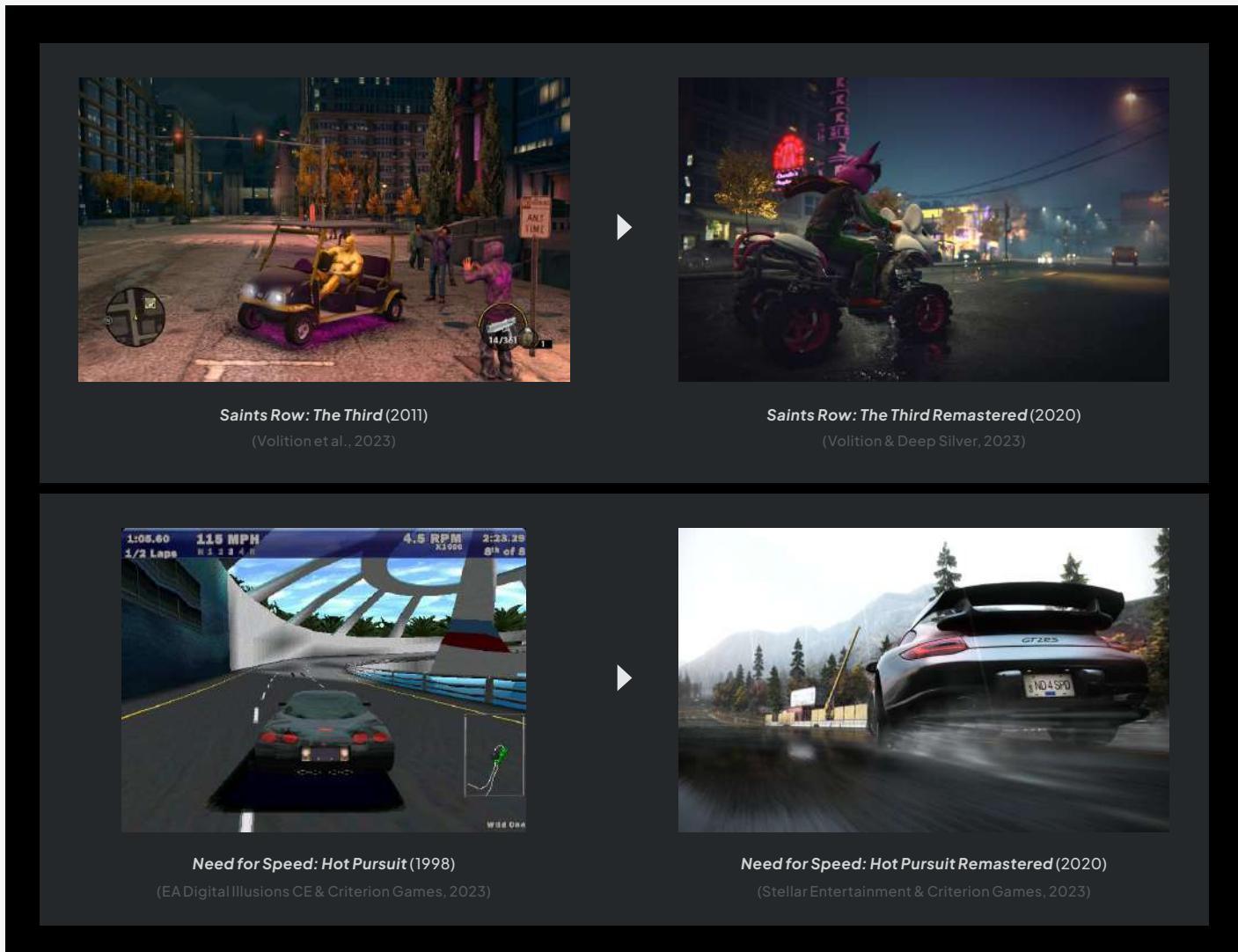
(Naughty Dog & Sony Computer Entertainment, 2023)

(United Front Games & Square Enix, 2023)

**[2/3] Data shows that game remasters released sooner after their original versions tend to sell better on average, as the titles remain fresh in gamers' minds and can better maintain gameplay competitiveness with modern titles.**

The most successful category with 13.8M average sales belonged to the remasters launched within 5 years of their original versions, and are mostly based on successful AAA titles that were still fresh in players' minds. A majority of these remasters were released in 2014, with the new console generation to maximise accessibility and coverage, while their original titles were still relevant in the market.

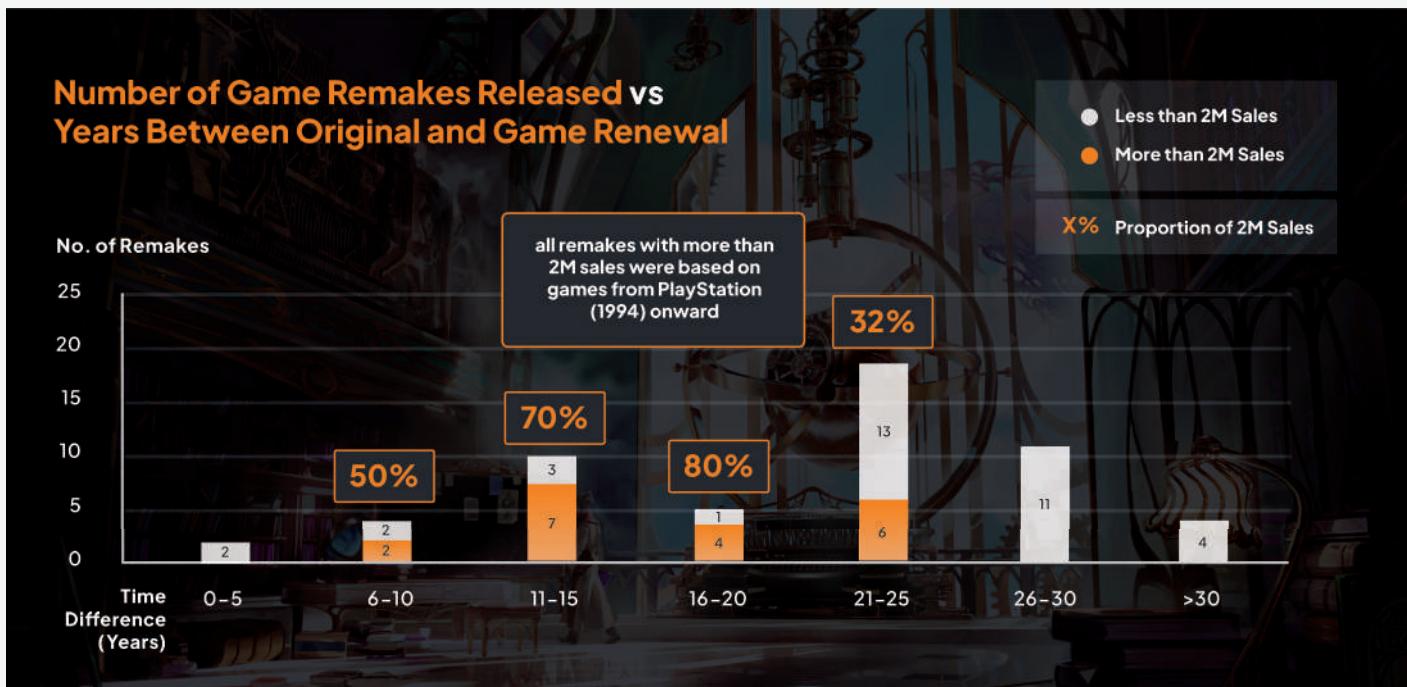
Analysis has shown that during this hardware refresh cycle, remasters of more recent games (0-5 years old) performed better on average than remasters of older games, as the dated gameplay carried over in older remasters struggled to compete with more modern titles. Players jumped at the opportunity to re-experience their favourite games in HD, as denoted by the high sales of remasters in 2014. Some examples include *GTA V*, *The Last of Us Remastered*, and *Sleeping Dogs: Definitive Edition*.



Interestingly, the same strategy was not widely adopted by developers for the launch of the next console generation in 2020–2021. Developers instead backtracked two generations and remastered games from the PS3 and Xbox 360 catalogue for the newest generation of consoles—again, likely due to the lack of substantial graphical capability upgrades from the 2013 generation to the 2020 generation of consoles. As a result, the average time gap between original and remastered games in 2020 is about 19 years, as compared to an average of 7.5 years in 2014.

However, the 2020 remasters did not share the success that their 2014 counterparts enjoyed. Focusing primarily on graphic enhancements, the gameplay and storylines of remastered games from a decade ago were less competitive compared to modern titles in 2020, leading to lower sales compared to those released sooner after their source material in 2014–2015. Some remasters in that period include **Saints Row: The Third Remastered** (2020) and **Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit Remastered** (2020).

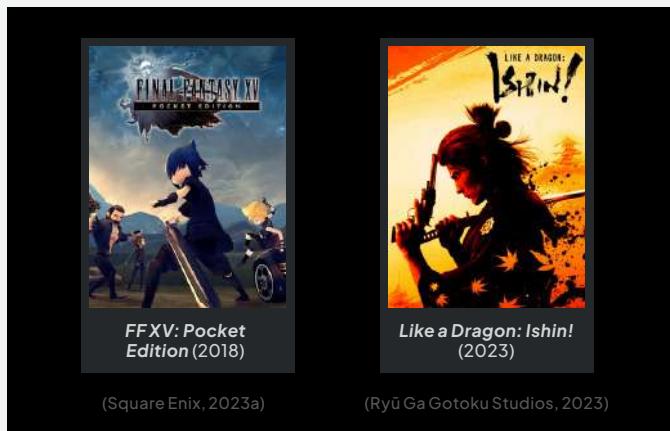
**Marvel's Spider-Man Remastered** (2020) instead opted for the same approach as most developers in 2014, releasing only 2 years after the original game to massive success and gaining a spot as one of the best-selling remasters of 2020–2021.



### [3/3] Remakes tend to be successful if enough time has lapsed for technological advancements to enable gameplay enhancements

Looking at remakes, the story is less clear. Remakes find success when key hardware and software developments allow meaningful additions and resolution of pain points in the original games. Historically, developers have preferred to remake games over a decade old, with only 4% of remakes in our dataset having a time gap of 0–5 years between original and remake (versus 21% for remasters). As remakes are usually larger and more expensive as compared to remasters, the investment and development timeline dissuades developers from releasing a remake too soon after their reference material.

To understand the nature of successful remakes, the proportion of remakes that exceeded 2 million copies sold—which would put a remake in the top 35% of all remakes in our dataset—were explored as an indicator of success. Looking at the trend, the soonest a remake hit over 2 million copies sold is 9 years after the original—namely, *The Last of Us Part 1* (2022) and *Odin Sphere: Leifthrasir* (2016). However, even after 9 years, the necessity of *The Last of Us* remake was called into question by some players in the community,<sup>10</sup> given how well the original graphics and narrative held up against modern standards.

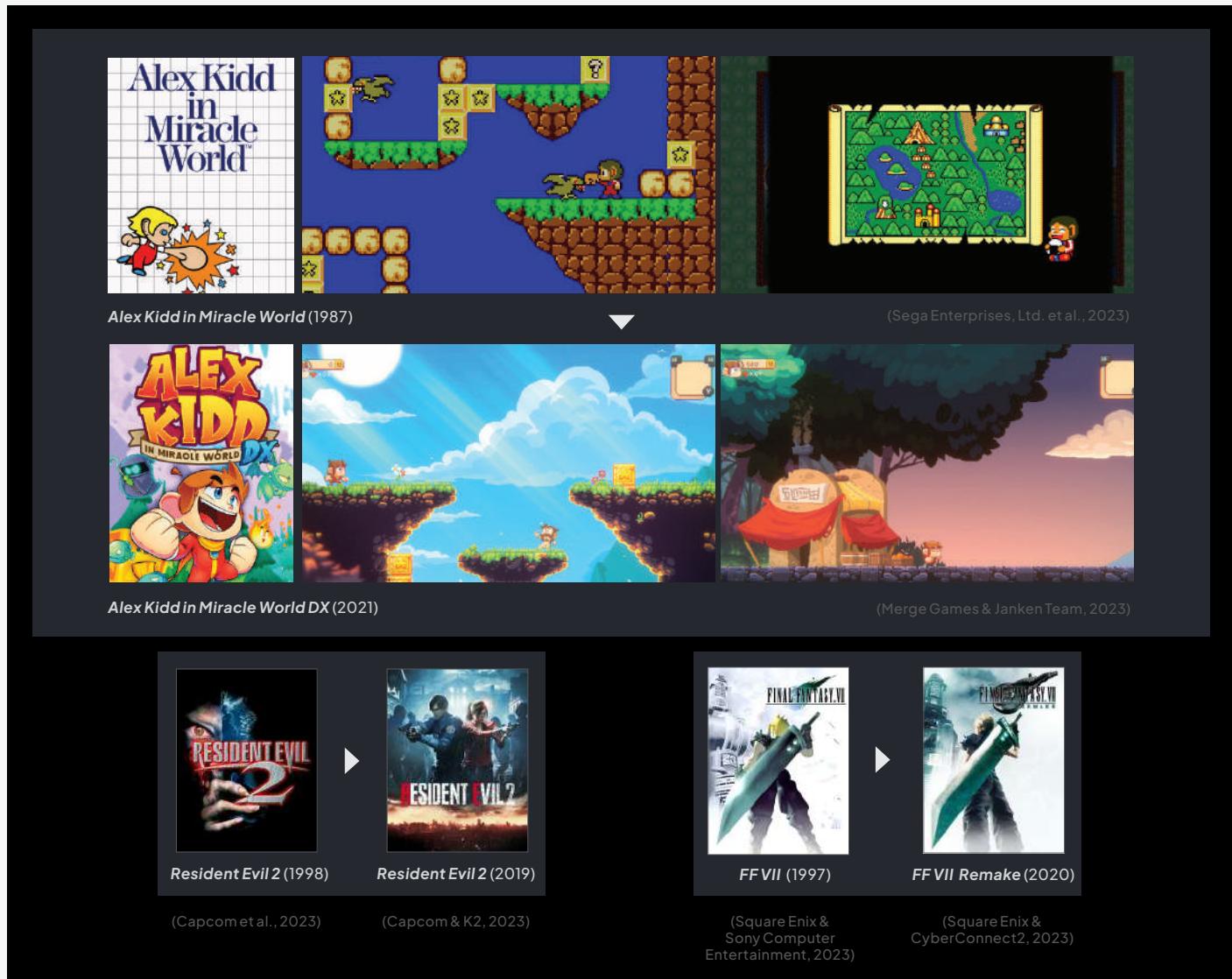


As a result, most remakes with a time gap shorter than 10 years are smaller releases aimed at increasing accessibility such as *FF XV: Pocket Edition* (2018, 2 years gap) and *Like a Dragon: Ishin!* (2023, 9 years gap), which sought to bring their games to handheld devices and the Western market respectively.



When looking to remake a game under a decade old, developers should determine if their remakes will present a sufficient value-add for players, justifying a full game purchase price. Factors to be considered include how well the original game holds up in current times, relevance of the genre, modern competitors, and new available technologies.

Conversely, remaking a game over 2 decades old carries the risk of facing lower competitiveness against modern counterparts and being positioned as a retro game—a niche category. While these games excel in appealing to nostalgia and retro gaming enthusiasts, they might struggle to compete with newer titles boasting contemporary gameplay.



For example, according to data from Quantic Foundry, the mean age for players of the 2021 remake of *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* is 31, significantly higher than the average of 25 across all games. The original PlayStation (1994) holds the oldest game references for remakes with over 2 million copies sold, marking the threshold for a remake reference to be considered modern enough to compete with contemporary counterparts according to the dataset. Remakes based on PlayStation games include *Resident Evil 2* (2019) remake and *FF VII Remake* (2020). With due care to title selection, graphics and gameplay, history proves that even remakes of games from the mid 90s are able to find success and mass appeal amongst modern titles.

While data shows that remakes selling over 2 million copies historically tend to be released 9–25 years after their original games, title selections should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. For instance, the lower limit might shorten if hardware cycles become shorter in the future. Developers should pay close attention to hardware developments in relation to their reference games to determine if it is the right time to remake it. On the other hand, a potential reference game might fall before the PlayStation era but still be relevant based on current player trends and preferences. Considered in context to players and the wider market, excellent remakes have the potential to find success no matter when the original was released.

Balancing the value of nostalgia and contemporary demands is therefore key to the success of any remake and remaster. The next section explores how developers can be better equipped to strike that balance upon deciding on a title to re-introduce to the market.

A photograph of a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a green t-shirt and large black headphones. He is holding a guitar neck in his left hand and a small white object in his right hand, looking down at it. In the background, there is a lamp and a keyboard on a desk.

# IS CHANGE ALWAYS A GOOD THING?

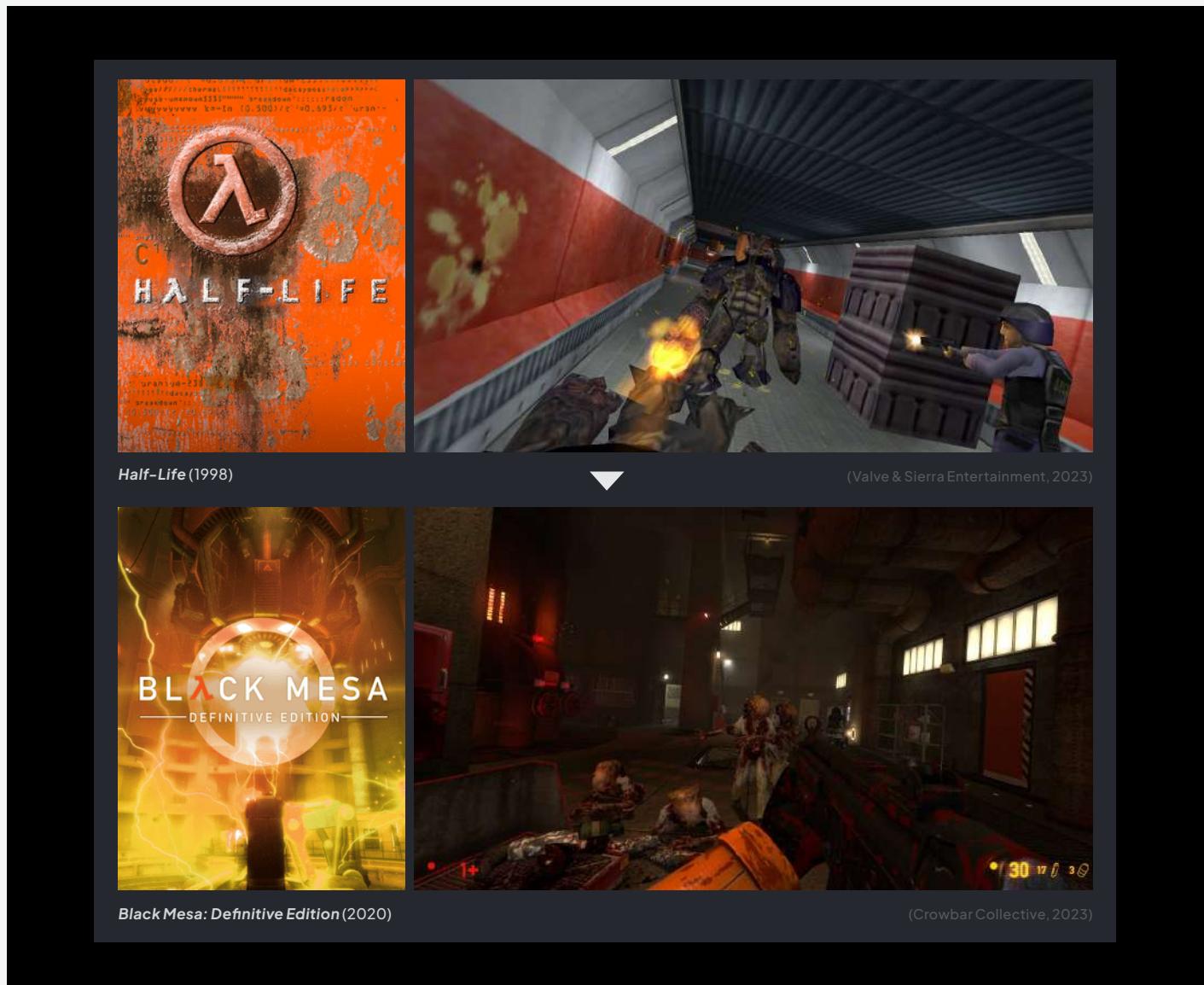
Following the deliberation on which projects to undertake and the timing of their release, the subsequent and substantial challenge for developers is how to optimise their chances of success.

A portrait photo of Jake DiGennaro, a man with long brown hair and a beard, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt, smiling.

Jake DiGennaro, Chief Revenue Officer of Virtuos, sums up the intricacies of developing remakes and remasters:

*"The primary criterion, and indeed the challenge, for a successful remake lies in discovering that delicate balance between preserving the essence of the original gameplay experience and meeting the contemporary expectations for graphics and gameplay."*

In the upcoming sections, the focus shifts to a review of successful game renewals to glean the valuable dos and don'ts of making changes to classic titles.

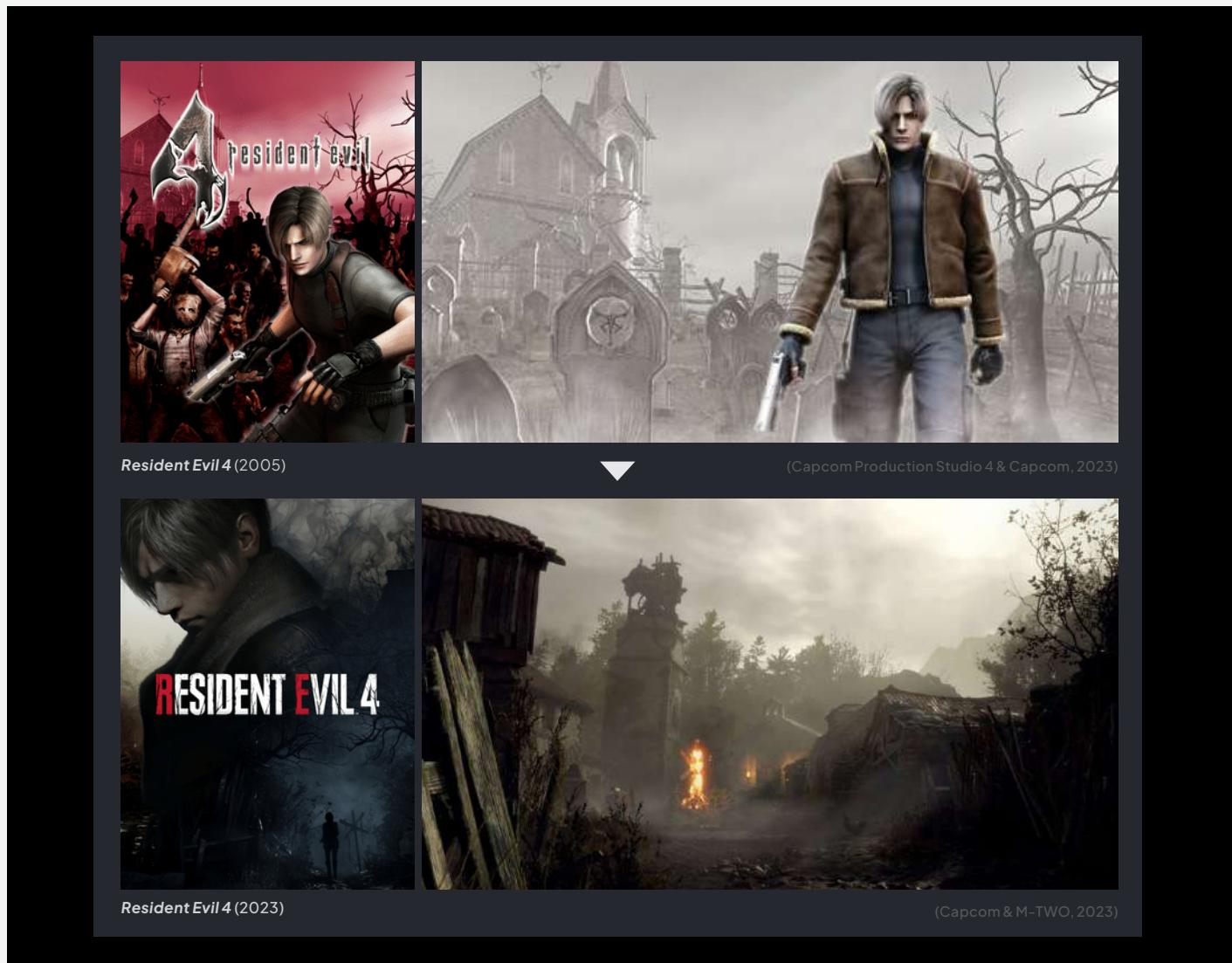


## [1/2] Stay authentic and pay tribute to the original

Research revealed that nostalgia occupies a central place in the allure of title renewals for gamers who seek to relive their cherished experiences with the original games. For instance, 36.5% of *Black Mesa* (a 2020 remake of *Half-Life*) Steam players have also played the original *Half-Life* (1998) on Steam.

**Developers of game renewals must identify, analyse, and accentuate the most nostalgia-inducing moments for players.**

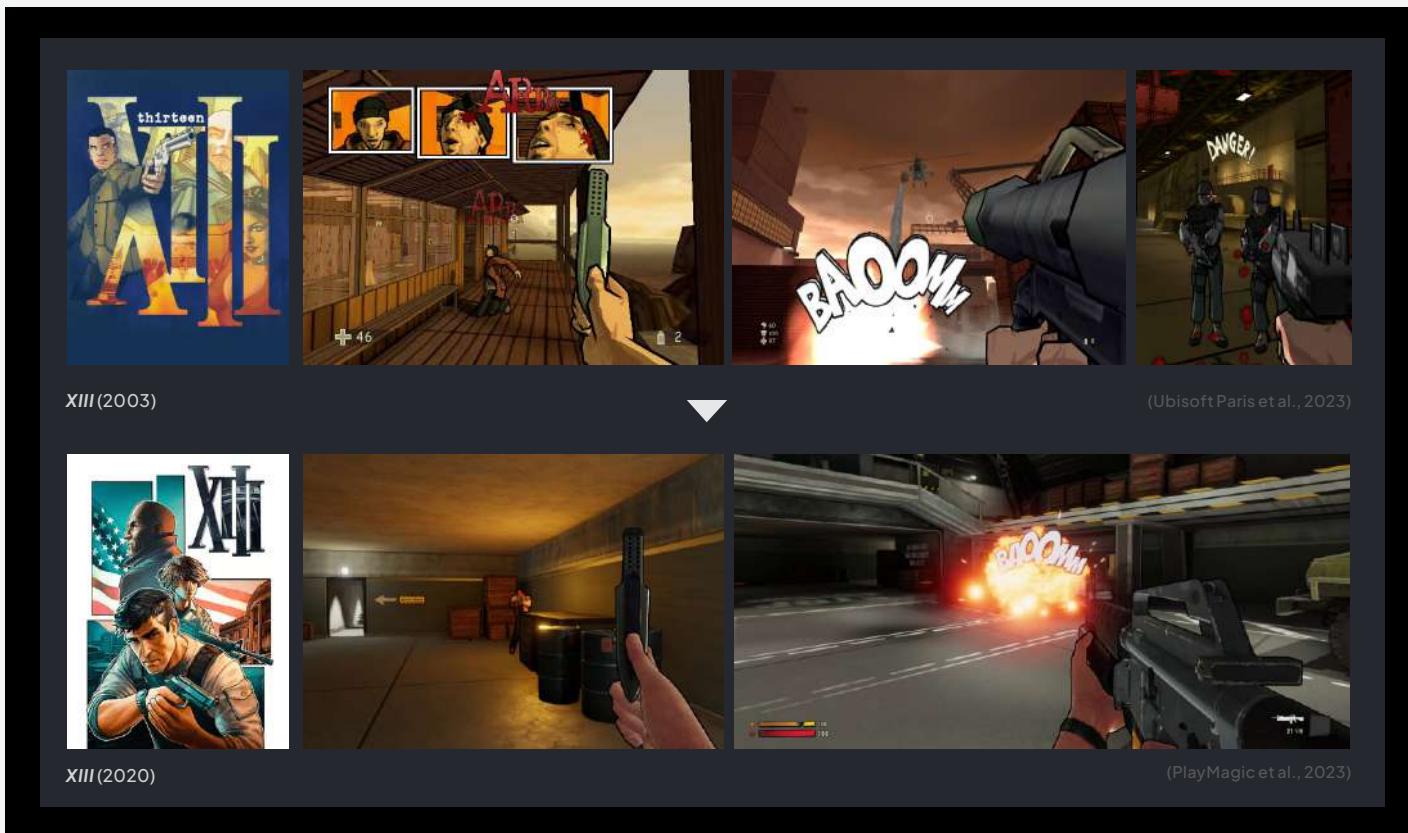
Players' memories of their favourite games are usually centred around iconic moments and levels, rather than a cohesive memory of the entire gameplay experience. These instances will vary based on the source material and may encompass a wide range of elements, from the first-time encounter with a particular location to a beloved character's iconic line of dialogue.



Developers of the **Resident Evil 4** (2023) remake were aware of that, from recreating the Del Lago Easter egg to revoicing beloved cheesy lines such as “Where’s everyone going? Bingo?”.

A top nostalgic feature identified by the development team, as shared by **game director Yasuhiro Anpo** during an interview with Vice, was the main village area. The team invested considerable effort to ensure that the village’s design and overall experience retained its original essence. Although they recognised shortcomings in replicating the exact layout by today’s standards, they were meticulous in finding a balance between incorporating new elements and retaining the core elements from earlier prototypes.<sup>11</sup>

According to player reviews, **Resident Evil 4** (2023) remake was positively received by both returning and new players, reflecting the developers’ success in capturing the essence of the original title. Overall, it was observed that nailing the key moments in game renewals checks off crucial boxes for returning players, who constitute a significant portion of the target audience, and ensures that they receive a gratifying experience that does justice to their memories of the original.



Creating a remake or remaster also gives developers the advantage of having reference material and hindsight, which are typically absent when crafting a new IP. Developers can leverage this advantage by conducting a thorough examination of the critical reception of their source material within the context of market preferences and trends at the time. This analysis enables them to identify the elements that resonated with players and subsequently incorporate these beloved aspects into the updated version.

One example is when the *XIII* (2020) remake was released to an “Overwhelmingly Negative” rating of 9% on Steam.<sup>12</sup> In addition to technical problems, one of the frequent grievances pertained to the shift away from the original’s graphic novel aesthetic to a fusion of cell-shaded design and realism. For long-time fans, the stylised art style was a fundamental characteristic associated with the game, and integral to its core experience that sets the game apart.

Conversely, in the case of the *FF VII Remake* (2020), the development team viewed style and presentation as changeable aspects for the remake. However, the characters, world, and story were so dearly cherished that the team approached any potential alterations to these elements with great caution, as revealed by co-director Naoki Hamaguchi.<sup>13</sup> In addition to having over 7 million copies sold, an analysis of reviews validates the accuracy of their assessment, as 51% of the 2,000+ positive user reviews on Metacritic referenced either the story or the in-game world in the remake.

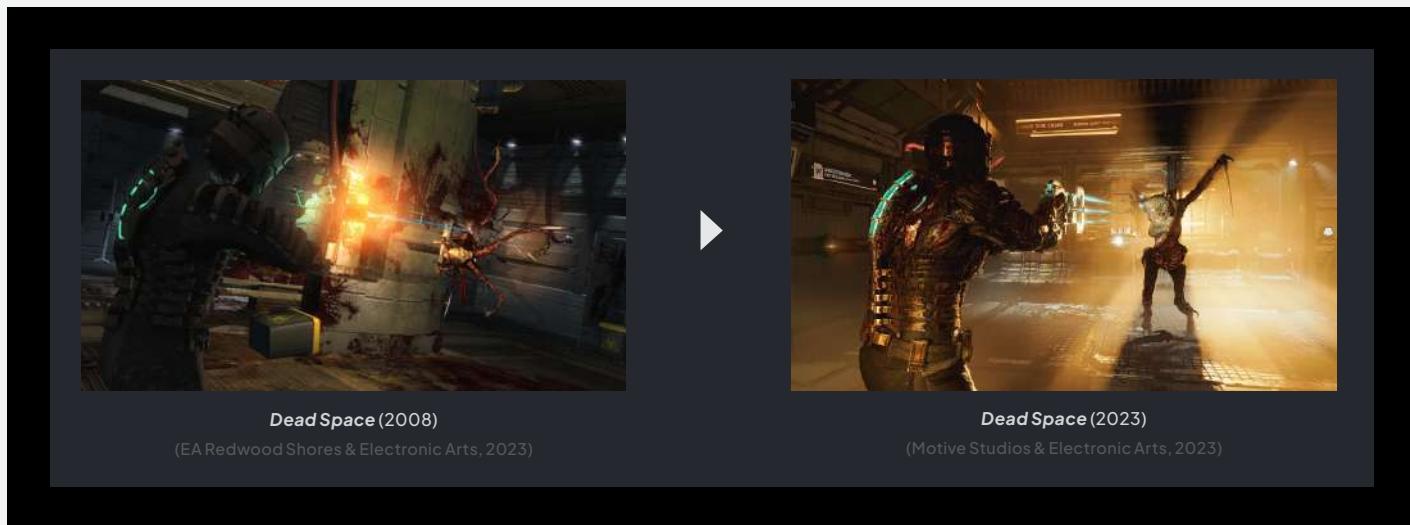
**When making game renewals, it is imperative to engage in research to ascertain the elements cherished by players and ensure they are preserved throughout the update.**



## [2/2] Align with contemporary market demands

The most successful game renewals contemporize the original game to stand on equal footing with modern titles, while staying true to the essence of the original game. With a broader and newer audience in mind, game renewals should aim to measure up to current-day gameplay and graphical standards. When introducing modernity into a remake or remaster, alterations should be made thoughtfully and aligned with a broader objective, rather than being introduced for the sake of an update.

**Before deciding what changes to make, developers should establish a clear vision of what they want their remake or remaster to add to the original.**



For instance, the **Dead Space** (2023) remake wanted to reinforce the elements that made the original great by using technology to push immersion to greater heights. **The Resident Evil 4** (2023) remake's development team, however, noted that modern games usually involved more than one way to solve problems and decided to focus their efforts on introducing player choice in the remake.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, the **Demon's Souls** (2020) remake development team committed to adhering to the original formula as much as possible, with a primary focus on enhancing the overall experience with quality-of-life changes to allow the brilliance of the source material to shine through.

When Virtuos worked on porting **Dark Souls: Remastered** (2018) to the Switch, the team discussed and aligned on prioritising a smooth framerate over visual enhancements due to the dynamic gameplay that relied on quick reactions. This allowed the Virtuos team to streamline their efforts, re-arranging assets to ensure a reliable 30fps across all experiences from Blighttown to the huge boss battles. Upon securing this, the team were then able to use any remaining performance reserve for visual enhancements, such as the ambient occlusion technique to create more dynamic lighting.<sup>15</sup>

While there is a myriad of possible changes that can be made to any remaster or remake, a well-informed vision ensures that all aspects of the renewal align to a unified goal. This coherence is essential to deliver a consistent and enjoyable experience for players.

**Developers should actively recognise any outdated elements within their games and align them to current standards.** The games that serve as the foundation for remakes and remasters are, after all, products of a different era and context. Prevailing trends, player expectations, and technological constraints significantly shaped the decision-making process. These aspects may reveal a game's age and thus should be recognised and enhanced to ensure a smooth transition into the modern market.



Resident Evil 4 (2023)

(Capcom &amp; M-TWO, 2023)



Dead Space (2023)

(Motive Studios &amp; Electronic Arts, 2023)

In the *Resident Evil 4* (2023) remake, they noticed that the quick time event (QTE) mechanics, rarely seen in modern games, felt outdated. The Krauser boss fight, originally based on QTEs, needed an overhaul. The team decided on a knife parrying mechanic, a markedly more modern solution, and implemented it throughout the rest of the game. This quickly became one of the most beloved gameplay additions in the remake. In eliminating outdated components, developers can often find creative ways to incorporate more modern features to elevate the gameplay experience and make the title feel at home among top contemporary titles.

When embarking on game renewals, developers should take advantage of new technologies to alleviate player annoyances and amplify the strengths of the original game. *The Demon's Souls* (2020) remake enhanced immersion by tapping on the PS5's new audio technology. Utilising the Tempest 3D AudioTech engine, they crafted a 3D sound sphere enveloping the player, enabling them to pinpoint a dragon by its roar and perceive projectiles whizzing past their ears.

When Virtuos remastered *L.A. Noire* (2017) for the PS4, Xbox One and PC, the team understood that atmosphere played a key role in the game experience. As such, they put extra care into recreating the 1940s L.A. smog, a key visual component of a city skyrocketed into an industrial centre by dramatic events like World War II earlier in the decade. To do this, the team used new shader technology and ambient occlusion to create a smog that subtly immersed players as they traversed through the city. That, and other careful applications of new technologies, helped Virtuos recreate an atmospheric L.A. for players to explore. Players and critics picked up on this too—Greg Wheeler of The Review Geek said in his review of the PS4 version, “The setting of L.A. itself is brilliantly realised too and the detail put into the world and the buildings in particular make it a joy to explore with the various streets and locales in the City Of Dreams brimming with character”.<sup>16</sup>

For *Dead Space*, the 2023 remake of the horror game sought to heighten uncertainty and tension by creating an AI-powered “Intensity Director” to customise dynamic events for each playthrough without overwhelming the player. Using technological advancements to solve critical pain points and elevate strengths ensures that new technology is implemented in the most effective places, allowing developers to elevate the player experience of their game renewals far beyond that of the original.



# CONCLUSION

In summary, the best-selling remakes are based on reference titles old enough to add new life to, but new enough to maintain some familiarity with modern titles. Conversely, the top remasters are released as soon as possible while their reference titles are still relevant. The best-selling remasters were also observed to be timed to release with the hardware refresh cycle. However, the likelihood of success for this strategy in future hardware generations will depend on the extent of graphical and technological advancements from one generation to the next.

When making creative decisions, the most successful game renewals maintain authenticity, and honour the original by accentuating its key nostalgia-evoking moments and uniqueness. This should be balanced with clear goals to modernise and enhance the strengths of the original game.

It is important to note that exceptions exist, and that developers tailor their choices to their specific projects and circumstances. Virtuos trusts that these insights will aid developers in crafting top-notch game renewals and seizing the opportunities presented by this prevailing trend in the video game industry.



# NEXT STEPS

**Interested to expand your game's reach to multiple platforms and give your classics a new lease of life?**

Virtuos provides diverse types of adaptations:

- **Remake & Remaster:** Bring your game to multiple platforms with up-to-date gameplay and camera angles, upgraded models, textures and animations, new lighting & VFX, and set dressing.
- **Culturalisation:** Adapt your game to match target market preferences and regulations.
- **Parallel Development:** Develop your game for simultaneous launch on multiple platforms.

Some adaptations Virtuos has recently contributed to:

- **The Settlers: New Allies** (PS4, Xbox One & Switch)
- **The Outer Worlds: Spacer's Choice Edition** (PS5, Xbox Series X|S & PC)
- **Gundam Evolution** (PS4 & PS5)
- **Horizon Zero Dawn** (PC)
- **NieR:Automata The End of YoRHa Edition** (Switch)
- **Marvel's Midnight Suns** (PS4 & PS5, Xbox Series X|S, & Xbox One)
- **Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age** (PC/PS4/Switch)
- **Bioshock: The Collection** (Switch)
- **Dying Light: Platinum Edition** (Switch)

Contact Virtuos to unlock new possibilities today!

[partner\\_relations@virtuosgames.com](mailto:partner_relations@virtuosgames.com)



# ABOUT VIRTUOS

**Founded in 2004, Virtuos is one of the largest independent video game development companies. We are headquartered in Singapore with over 3,700 employees across 21 offices in Asia, Europe, and North America. Specialising in full-cycle game development and art production, we have delivered high-quality content for more than 1,500 console, PC, and mobile games. Our clients include 23 of the top 25 gaming companies worldwide.**

## Content Creation

### Standalone Art Content

- Concept Art
- 2D & 3D Assets
- Animation
- Lighting & VFX

### Unified Art Content

- Levels
- Characters
- Cinematics

## Engineering

- Engine Enhancement
- Tool Development
- Rendering Upgrade
- Performance Optimisation
- Feature Development
- Networking & Infrastructure

## Game Development

### Adaptation

- Remakes & Remasters
- Simultaneous / Post Launch Ports
- Culturalisation

### Post Launch Content

- Full DLC Development
- Additional Content Creation
- Live Service Optimisation

### Gameplay Design

- Level Design
- NPC & Encounter Design
- Quest & Narrative Design
- Gameplay Extension

### Game & IP Development

- Prototyping
- Full Game Development
- IP Creation

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