

# Nostalgia in retro game design

**Maria B. Garda**

University of Lodz  
Institute of Modern Culture  
ul. Narutowicza 65, 90-131 Lodz  
mbgarda@uni.lodz.pl

## ABSTRACT

I distinguish between two kinds of nostalgia in retro game design – restorative and reflective. The former manifests itself in ‘total restoration of monuments of the past’, while the latter ‘lingers in the dreams of another place and another time’. Restorative nostalgia is visible in the retrogaming practices, such as creation of emulators, appreciation of classic titles and remaking them for new platforms. Reflective nostalgia is more detached from the past and sees history of the medium as a set of styles, it serves creativity and artistic erudition. In the article I elaborate on the nostalgic gestures of independent game designers in such titles as *Hotline Miami*, *Fez*, *FTL: Faster than light* and *McPixel*. I argue that retro games are an exceedingly heterogeneous group with different authors having different objectives and motivations.

## Keywords

nostalgia, retro style, aesthetics, history of games

## INTRODUCTION

*The avant-garde is now an arrière-garde.*  
Simon Reynolds

The notion of nostalgia is omnipresent in popular culture that is obsessed with its own history. A certain kind of retromania (see Reynolds 2011) is present in practically every possible aspect of cultural practice from fashion to design to music to videogames. These retro tendencies manifest themselves in a general fascination with ‘the vintage.’ The outdated aesthetics of the past half-century is now recreated, reconfigured, rediscovered, and recycled in the modern context. It is important to notice that retro means focusing on the recent past and not on the classical antiquity or the Middle Ages as it used to be in the case of Renaissance or Romanticism (Guffey 2006, 10). This purely contemporary phenomenon began in the 1970’s, when ‘retro began to revive periods that were well within living memory’ (ibidem, 100). At the forefront of this trend were fashion designers such as Vivienne Westwood whose punk collections of the 1970’s were inspired by the subcultures of the 1950’s (e.g. Teddy Boys). Moreover, the Hollywood movies such as *American Graffiti* (1973) or *Grease* (1978) were a part of that movement, too. At that time the decade of the 1970’s in the US was even called – “The Golden Age of Nostalgia” (ibidem, 18). “The Golden Age of Arcade Videogames” coincidentally started in the 1970’s as well. Videogames as a relatively young medium entered the cultural landscape at the dawn of the postmodern era, during a cultural state of mind that is –

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paraphrasing Jameson (1991, 279) – nostalgic for the present. Does it make videogames and game designers nostalgic *per se*? The purpose of this article is to define the nostalgic motivations of the contemporary game designers and their relation to the medium's heritage.

First of all, nostalgia can be observed in *retrogaming* practices described by Newman (2004) such as: collecting old hardware, creation of emulators, appreciation of classic titles and remaking them for new platforms. As well as, in 'production of large stock of consumer products, textiles, accessories, game related music videos, literature, various artistic work, museum and academic practice (...), online circulation of games oriented information and discussion' (Suominen 2008). Secondly, it is present in the nostalgic gestures of game designers that create modern titles in the so-called *retro style*. This category is sometimes even called a genre which I find highly impractical while it refers to both: *Contra 4* (WayForward 2007) and *Fez* (Polytron 2012)<sup>1</sup>. There is a significant difference between creating a game that could be successful on the SNES (Super Nintendo Entertainment System) in the time of its historical success and designing a contemporary title that is influenced by the 16-bit era, either on the visual or on the ludic level. I argue that contemporary retro games are an exceedingly heterogeneous group with different authors having different objectives and motivations. To understand this divergence, we must remember that there are more than just one (kind of) nostalgia. Boym (2001, 49) distinguishes between *restorative* and *reflective nostalgia*. Basically, the former manifests itself in 'total restoration of monuments of the past' (e.g. refurbishment of Sistine Chapel), while the latter 'lingers in the dreams of another place and another time' (e.g. longing for some aspects of life in no longer existing communist Poland). The difference between them lies in the manner of making sense of our longing and in the way we perceive the object that generates this emotion. In other words, nostalgia is not the property of the object itself but rather it is generated in our innerly experienced relation with it. This does not necessarily imply that nostalgia is a highly personalized emotion, because it often reflects collective memories of a certain generation or subculture. In that context, videogames are the medium of the so-called 'Millennials', or 'Generation Y', that is people born 1982 and later (Kundanis 2003, 5). They were the early adopters of videogames and the consumer target of the games of 8-bit and 16-bit era. With them the medium matured and starting as a part of the pop culture, gradually became an established art form. The videogames thus are an important part of their generational identity. This unique situation, when 'Generation Y's' childhood nostalgia overlaps with the period of the videogames' coming of age, may be the reason for the numerous accounts of nostalgia triggers in contemporary game design. By a 'nostalgia trigger' I understand, for example, intertextual reference(s) to a classic title, as is the case with *Mario* or *Zelda* citations in *Fez*, that fulfill the role of the Proustian madeleine – they make the nostalgist fall into a reverie. In that particular case, the nostalgist is a Millennial, a peer of the game designer and most likely an implied player (Aarseth 2007). Although the references that induce nostalgia might be the same for both modes – the restorative and the reflective – they do instigate different narratives.

## RESTORATIVE NOSTALGIA

To describe the notion of restorative nostalgia, Boym (2001) uses the aforementioned example of the Sistine Chapel renovation, a controversial undertaking that provoked a discussion on the subject of remaking the past and the significance of the artist's testimony. The argument started with the accusation that the conservators are removing the Michelangelo's "final touch" and thus extinguish the historical life of the frescos. The renovation was literally brushing away any mark of time made by candle smoke, soot, or

damage. Restorative nostalgia has ‘no use for the signs of historical time patina, ruins, cracks, imperfections’ (ibidem, 68). In fact, the same impulse can be seen in the treatment of vintage computers within the retrogaming culture. The dream of every collector is not only to have the rarest version of hardware with the lowest possible serial number but to have it in the most intact state, possibly even including the original wrapping.

Retrogaming is about the recollections of the past, which is not an easy task. Even in the case of such a relatively recent technology as microcomputers of the 1980’s, it is difficult to preserve all the elements, both hardware and software. As Swalwell observes (2007), digital media are extremely vulnerable to the processes of the so-called ‘digital decay’. Storage devices become unreadable after some period of time and the life-span of microchips is also limited due to various physical and chemical processes (ibidem, 268). If the game is not copied in time to a different medium it will eventually be lost. However, this situation has also an intriguing influence on the cultural perception of games. Swalwell (ibidem, 263) compares vintage videogames to fine china, such as Wedgwood or Meissen, which is also a mass-produced designer product, exceptionally fragile, difficult in preservation and therefore very valuable in collector markets. She argues that, as in the case of antique porcelain, original examples of retro games are becoming ‘finite in numbers’ and that makes them acquire the Walter Benjamin’s ‘aura’. According to Boym (2001, 68), Benjamin defined ‘aura’ (meaning light in Hebrew) as ‘an experience of distance, a mist of nostalgia that does not allow for possession of the object of desire’. In contrast to visible electronic malfunctions or material damages of computer games, ‘aura’ is invisible and is related to the cultural and historical perception of a work of art or design. Cultural practice of retrogaming and the recent rise of the videogames heritage industry (e.g. numerous museums: Computerspielemuseum Berlin or Museum of Soviet Arcade Machines in Moscow) make vintage games acquire the aura and change their status into that of cultural artifacts.

But restorative nostalgia is not only about collecting, it is also about keeping the retro titles alive in the collective memory. This has been achieved by Nintendo, a company that is ‘successful in raising new (...) *Mario* player generations by combining old game characters with new innovations and playabilities’ (Suominen 2012, 13). Undoubtedly, large companies in the media industry (not only videogame producers) live on their heritage and legacy by developing media franchises based on nostalgia and continuity of their classical series. It is an approach defined by Jenkins (2006, 68-74) as that which creates the so-called lovemarks – brands that we are emotionally devoted to. This practice is visible in constant reboots of iconic series, i.e. in the recent case of Christopher Nolan-like prequel to *Tomb Rider*. However, this new installments of long established franchises are situated more in the area of reflective nostalgia, while they reinterpret the original convention. The restorative motivations are more adequate to comprehend re-releases of retro icons (Suominen 2012) to modern platforms.

*Final Fight: Double Impact* (Proper 2010) is an interesting emulation of an old hit of the 1980’s for the seventh generation of video game consoles. It is a conversion of a side-scrolling beat ‘em up, first introduced to the arcades in 1989 and subsequently very popular on SNES. Yet, the studio decided to re-release not the Nintendo port but the original cabinet version, including the more mature and controversial content. Some reviewers have even called it ‘the perfect port of a retro classic (...) designed to wash over the player like a tidal wave of nostalgia’ (Yin-Poole 2010, 1). The developer’s attention to detail is very impressive, especially in the case of the “Cabinet mode”. The option offers an impression of CRT display that was mounted on the original arcade

machine, including visual simulation of the screen bending and surpassing many other problems that we encounter while plugging-in a retro device to a modern LCD television set (e.g. interlay). Still, not only the experience of the arcade monitor is recreated. Proper Games also imitated the cabinet itself, together with all of its imperfections, such as the dirt and stains on the bezel's original artwork. It is important not to mistake these filters with the 'patina of history', because they supposed to add the realistic touch and are included in an attempt to reach to the amusement arcades of the players' youth. Although tries very hard, it is also a commercial product and has to fit into the modern market reality. The game is targeted mainly at the gamers that played its earliest versions in their childhood, probably with friends as it came with a co-operation mode. Therefore, *Final Fight* evolved and incorporated an option of online drop-in multiplayer. You can still play with your friends, even though they may no longer have the time to actually visit you "like in the old days", because of their other "grown-up" responsibilities. Adult Millennials cannot make the same time investments as they did when they were kids, which results in a popular casual shift in gaming practices (Juul 2010). Even though the *Final Fight* multiplayer mode is very convenient, it loses an important part of arcade gaming as a cultural practice. Amusement arcades were not only about the in-game competition but also about the meta-game being played in the front of the cabinet (ibidem).

Restorative nostalgia is easy to observe in Europe, because of the continent's dramatic and destructive recent history. In the case of Poland, the most representative example of reconstruction was the rebuilding of the historic center of Warsaw that was totally destroyed while the city was razed to the ground by the Nazis in 1944. The reestablishment of the Warsaw's Old Town is enlisted on the UNESCO's World Heritage Sites as 'an outstanding example of a near-total reconstruction' (UNESCO). Warsaw was restored relying on the paintings of Canaletto, 18<sup>th</sup> century urban landscape painter who had painted the city for sixteen years as the court painter to the King. Hence, what was rebuild then was not the historic center of Warsaw from the 1940's. It was rather Canaletto's vision of Warsaw of a certain period, seen through a certain convention of landscape painting – the style of Venetian masters of *vedute*. This example presents the hidden paradox of restorative nostalgia. Regardless of the tireless pursuits of historical accuracy, it needs to be acknowledged that the complete restoration is not possible. Nevertheless, the aim is to get as close to the original as possible.

## REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA

Reflective nostalgia restores nothing. It refers to an individual experience, is linked to the process of cultural remembrance (Boym 2001), and was often used to understand the cultural phenomena of longing towards the bygone communist era in Eastern Europe. A popular example of this phenomenon is the notion of *ostalgie* which describes yearning for some aspects of life in East Germany, nicely pictured in the movie *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003). Reflective nostalgia does not necessarily demand personal memories of the soviet-influenced past and can be based only on collective memories about this period that are transmitted in media.

An interesting case of reflective nostalgia is the Polish trend to recycle elements of communist design in modern fashion, graphics and interior design. The brand *Pan tu nie stal* (eng. You were not standing here) is specialized in street-wear and its name refers to a quintessential communist experience of arguing with a person who wanted to skip the line. What is meant by the line is dozens of people waiting, usually outside of a shop, to buy basic supplies. It is definitely not the food shortage that one is nostalgic about. The

company's target are young Millennials who would not like to wait for their hip t-shirt in a line and they would not like their clothing to resemble the communist textiles when it comes to the quality. The customers expect *Pan tu nie stal* to provide them with comfortable, casual wear with unique design that in a humorous way reflects the objects that they remember from their childhood rooms. *Pan tu nie stal* does not restore communism and has no intention of it. Its design is about recycling popular culture motives from a given historic period, especially from an epoch particularly prone to becoming the object of generational nostalgia.

The aforementioned examples are immersed in the political and ideological context as all of Boym's work on reflective nostalgia is. However, her insightful findings are universal and could be used in another framework, such as retro longing for a bygone time in the history of videogames. In the following case studies I explore the notion of *reflective nostalgia* in game design.

### ***Hotline Miami* and the 1980's-ness**

*Hotline Miami* (Dennaton 2012) was created using Game Maker videogame creator. It is an example of a wide group of tools that changed the scale of possibilities for many amateurs and non-professionals willing to create their own games. Its introduction to the game industry was of the same importance as the introduction of amateur 16 mm camera to the cinema. It made allowance for less sophisticated devices and lowered the entry level as well as gave a chance to develop ambitious independent projects. What is interesting, the use of Game Maker made *Hotline Miami* inferior in the sense of game design to its almost two decades older inspiration – *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA 1997). The first installment of the *GTA* series was created on a dedicated, sophisticated for that time, engine that allowed 3D physics to enable in-game vehicle driving. Söderström's game is a 2D experience with a very linear story, which can sound ironic knowing that *GTA* is perceived as the protoplast of modern sandbox games. This puts under question the narrative of technological advancement, so popular in the game industry, with its emphasis on the development of more realistic graphics with every new generation of consoles. Yet, to the contrary, *Hotline Miami* is not about cutting edge technology or photorealism.

This 'surreal orgy of violence and neon lights', as its author Jonatan 'Cactus' Söderström describes it, was inspired by the neon noir movie *Drive* (2011) directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. It is not the first time a game is influenced by this cinematic style. This already happened in the case of the late masterpiece of adventure games – *Grim Fandango* (LucasArts 1998). However, there is an important difference, the title of Lucas Arts was based on the classical period of American film noir, referring to such highlights of this genre as for example *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Curiously, *Hotline Miami* is a retro game inspired by a retro motion picture, one of the most intriguing iterations of the neon noir in modern cinema. Refn often said in the interviews concerning *Drive* that its visuals were not based on a particular movie or movies of the 1980's but rather on a certain mythology of the cinema of that era. This corresponds with the theories of nostalgia film, in 'which the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history' (Jameson 1991, 20).

According to Jameson (18-20), the first movie of that type was *American Graffiti* (1973), a story of coming of age in the early 1960's. George Lucas in order to 'mesmerize lost reality of the Eisenhower era' did not create 'some old-fashioned "representation" of historical content', but reflected the "1950's-ness" by producing a stylistic metaphor of

that epoch. It is doubtful that the Eisenhower era was self-conscious about its characteristics, but the notion of “1950’s-ness” includes the necessary temporal distance to define the aesthetical essence of the given period. The “1950’s-ness” in *American Graffiti* (1973), or “1980’s-ness” in the case of *Drive*, are figures of postmodern aesthetic discourse that is using pseudo-historical depth and intertextuality to express its fascination with visual retrieval of lost times and places. This cultural practice is called by the French – *la mode rétro*. Jameson observes, that in postmodernism history becomes a set of styles and Refn takes this logic much further, not even trying to produce a sensation of experiencing the pseudo past. The director of *Drive* is not creating a pastiche of some 1980’s movie, like for example *To live and die in L.A.* (1985), in order to mesmerize the reality of that decade. *Drive* is a pastiche of “1980’s-ness” itself. What kind of a pastiche is *Hotline Miami* in that case?

On the visual level *Hotline Miami* is very deceiving, emulating the first impression of not being a contemporary game. The use of historical patina layered upon *Hotline Miami* has a different purpose than the one in *Final Fight: Double Impact*. According to Söderström, the characteristic interlaced TV noise, also implemented in his earlier *Norrland* (‘Cactus’ 2010), was supposed to give that game a certain look – ‘like it’s playing on a fictional broken console of some sort’ (Uncommon Assembly 2010). We may have a similar experience in *Hotline Miami*, where the additional tilt makes it even more odd and unidentified as it comes to point out the effect it wants to recreate – is it ‘ghosting an old TV set’ or being ‘projected on a movie screen’ (ibidem). To a certain extent it reminds both, mimicking the act of watching a projection of some “let’s play”, recorded with a camera in a front of a TV. By any means, it is not an effect that is normal for the PC platform or a portable console (the game is being ported for Playstation Vita) and it is not a recreation of a particular cultural practice as it was in the case of *Final Fight*, where the main idea was to evoke videogame arcade cabinet experience. *Hotline Miami* is evoking an analog experience of some unrecognizable sort. As ‘Cactus’ said in the context of *Norrland*, it was ‘supposed to look retro, although not in a way that is accurate towards old gaming systems’.

*Hotline Miami* restores nothing. It is an interesting example of reflective nostalgia but it does not reflect any particular longing within the medium of videogames. It is a remediation (Bolter, Grusin 1999) of the “1980’s-ness” style of neon noir movies into videogames medium.

### **Fez and the 8-bitness**

If *Hotline Miami* is a remediation of a cinematic style, *Fez* is immersed in the history of videogames aesthetics. The game’s friendly protagonist – Gomez, explores an environment designed to evoke nostalgia within the medium. The innumerable intertextual references to the platform and adventure games of the 8-bit and 16-bit era are around every corner of the 90 degree rotating world. However, *Fez* is not a pastiche of a particular game but more a reflection of the gameplay experience of a certain era. According to Suominen (2008), in the case of retro aesthetics it is often very difficult to determine one single origin of inspiration, such as a particular game or platform. In the case of *Fez* we could try to indicate the platformer *Nebulus* (Triffix 1987), but other important influences include *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985), *Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1986), *Ico* (Team Ico 2001), or *Echochrome* (Game Yaroze, Japan Studio 2008) and the list of the titles could be much longer. But how can *Fez* restore the gameplay experience of the past, while it draws on modern titles too? The answer is simple. *Fez* is not a historical “representation” or reconstruction of *Super Mario Bros.* or

any other title. It reflects the notion to which Jameson could refer to as “8-bitness”<sup>2</sup>, by analogy to his concept of “1950’s-nees”. While “1950’s-nees” is fascinated with the visual retrieval of the 1950’s aesthetics, the “8-bitness” is fascinated with the revival of the 8-bit era aesthetics. *Fez* creates the “8-bitness” feeling by using pixel art and other game design tropes as well as intertextuality with the milestone titles of that period. However, it does not restore the original experience. In other words, the game is nostalgic not for the past the way it was but for the past the way it could have been (Boym 2001).

The pleasure of discovering nostalgic references to the classic games in *Fez* is intended for the Millennial implied player (Aarseth 2007). In that case the nostalgic stimuli of *Fez* should take the aforementioned gamer into the mythical world of childhood memories, just like the Proustian madeleine does. But what if the player is too young to have such experiences? *Fez* was recently ported to the PC platform and became available in the digital distribution on Steam and GOG.com. The latter started as a distribution service originally named “Good Old Games” and delivering retro games using such emulation software as for example DOSBox. Not long ago, GOG.com changed its strategy and started selling new titles as well, next to *Zork* (Infocom 1989) and *King’s Quest* (Sierra 1986). However, the available game library is in majority still composed of old games, which makes the service exceptional in comparison to other platforms. Looking at the possible target, one could expect that the audience of GOG.com should be significantly older than the Steam’s one. Although the age group of 25-34 years old users is larger on GOG.com, the base of 18-24 year olds is the same (Alexa 2013). This younger group could have started their adventure with games from PlayStation (1995) or even PlayStation 2 (2000) consoles, which makes them rather unlikely to know the older technologies.

The lack of personal memories was not a problem in the case of *Pan tu nie stal* and the same rule applies to *Fez*. Reflective nostalgia ‘combines fascination for the present with longing for another time’ (Boym 2001) and that perfectly corresponds with the retro revivalism of *Fez* that ‘views the past with trendy detachment’ (Guffey 2006, 162). After all, it is a highly acclaimed and innovative indie title – longing for “8-bit-ness” – but it still generates the sensation of novelty. *Fez* is a desirable title for younger Millennials and can be a means of a transition of collective memories emerging from the Generation Y. But can we still speak about the Proustian nostalgia in regard of something that might be called prosthetic memories – recollections which do not come from a person’s lived experience in any strict sense (Landsberg 2004)? The emotion described by Marcel Proust is associated with the autobiographical memories (Howard 2012, 641), hence if there is no ‘lost paradise’ to reconnect with, the presence of the madeleine – the stimuli that causes the reverie – seems to be pointless.

The possible solution is that *Fez* evokes two kinds of reflective nostalgia, one is private and the second is collective and detached. The retro stylistic gesture embodies a communal memory of the recent past.

### ***FTL: Faster Than Light* and the roguelikeness**

*FTL: Faster Than Light* (Subset 2012) is a highly acclaimed game that won both: the Excellence in Game Design and the Audience Award at IGF Awards 2013. Its popularity started with the successful crowdfunding campaign on the Kickstarter platform that pledged over \$200,000 for the finishing of the development process. Unlike many other Kickstarters, *FTL* creators did not want to make any stretch goals and decided to finish the game on time. The only extra challenge they had to deal with was having ten times

more beta testers than originally planned. However, this extensive try-out and community support made the game almost faultless and with a very well balanced learning curve. The community that builds around Kickstarter projects is an interesting phenomenon. The audience demographics show that it is young people, who mostly fit into the age category of Millennials, that constitute the majority of audience (Alexa 2013). As a targeted segment they are often lured to the proposed projects by nostalgia marketing. Many of the most triumphant crowdfunding campaigns for games were reboots or spin-offs of classic games produced by the legends of game design, as it was in the case of *Wasteland 2* (Brian Fargo, 325% funded), or *Shroud of the Avatar* (Richard Garriott, 191% funded). Millennials are very responsive to this kind of participatory culture which can be a side effect of the omnipresence of fandom subculture in this particular generation.

The designers of *FTL*, Justin Ma and Derek Wu, wanted to ‘replicate the feeling of being the captain on a starship’ (Pearson 2012), which is a dream of many fans of *Star Trek*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Firefly*, or any other cult science-fiction television series. In fact, the *FTL* modding community already created various mods allowing for the use of famous fictional starships in the game. But *FTL* does not only evoke nostalgia on the visual or the storyline level, the retro aesthetics is implemented in the mechanics as well. Firstly, it is a very difficult game – if rewarding – for the present standards and it still poses a challenge for hardcore players, even on the “easy” level. Secondly, the designers looked for inspiration among the classic titles of the 1990’s with which they are familiar since childhood and early adolescence (ibidem), such as *Fallout* (Interplay 1997) or *X-Wing* (Totally 1993). However, the most influential and decisive were the roguelike games. They form a ‘subgenre of CRPG games, characterized by random-generated content and permanent death, that flourished in the 80s but in the next decade became an entertainment niche’ (Garda 2013). The roguelike games are currently experiencing a renaissance.

As in the case of other titles influenced by roguelikes (e.g. *Binding of Isaac*, *Dungeons of Dredmor*), *FTL* does not restore the roguelike the way it was but creates a new quality. Such a (re)creation can be called *neorogue* (Garda 2013) and it is defined as ‘a rebirth of the roguelike aesthetic paradigm that incorporates the general mechanics model, and certain visual (2D graphics, top down view, space creation) as well as thematical dominants (dungeon crawl, hack’n’slash)’. The first important game in the recent roguelike renaissance was *Spelunky* (ibidem) and Justin Ma agrees that it was a great inspiration for *FTL* (Pearson 2012). In this context *FTL* can be considered as another redefining game within the genre of roguelikes that exemplifies the continuity of its evolution. Neorogue ‘centres on the conscious usage of the most significant aesthetic elements of the genre in a new cultural and institutional context’ (Garda 2013). In other words, neorogue does not restore rogue, it reflects roguelikeness.

### ***McPixel* and the poverty of the present**

*McPixel* (‘Sos’ 2012) is a puzzle game, created by the Polish indie developer Mikołaj Kamiński, that is not as easy to label as the ones mentioned above. Among many inspirations, probably the most visible is the action comedy *McGruber* (2010) – the parody of the *MacGyver* series. But *McPixel* is not reflecting the “1980’s-ness” of the famous television series. This is not even caused by the fact that *MacGyver* was actually aired in Poland in the mid-1990’s, after the collapse of the communist system, therefore its Polish audience belongs to a different age group than its audience in the Western Europe. This local context is not that important, because *McPixel* is primarily nostalgic on a very organic and universal level. It exploits the so-called ‘poverty of the present’



effect (Howard 2012, 643) which occurs when the past is regarded to be preferable than the present. However, it is not an all-embracing disillusionment with today's world but in particular with videogames as a medium.

Since the rise of Nintendo Wii console in 2006 and the outbreak of “casual revolution” (Juul 2010), the game market has grown and diversified, and for that reason it is almost impossible to make a game that will target and come up to the expectations of all audience segments. The rapidly changing circumstances have caused much concern within the community of hardcore gamers. After almost seven years, the narrative of the “wicked” casualization of the contemporary games does not fade out and the hardcore audience is often dissatisfied with the current triple-A titles. However, the situation is not as dramatic as it was anticipated, mainly thanks to the indie sector of the game industry.

*McPixel* is the most independent game in the presented spectrum of games, while its prototype was made by one person during a Ludum Dare competition – an increasingly popular videogame development contest founded by Geoff Howland in 2002. Its 26<sup>th</sup> edition took place during the weekend of 26<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> April 2013 and garnered 2343 submissions, almost a thousand more than previously – in December 2012 (Wikipedia 2013). The event rules are very simple. Individual participants ‘are given 48 hours to create a game from scratch fitting a theme announced at the start of the contest’ (ibidem). The game has to be finished and submitted to the project web page in the given time window, and the source code has to be made available. This last regulation is distinctive for independent games as a community venture since ‘[t]he process of developing independent games is far from being individual endeavor, it is the collective result of the complex interaction among developers, other industry actors within the chain of value, and communities’ (Guevara-Villalobos 2010, 10).

Many of the games created at Ludum Dare are *contemporary retro games*<sup>3</sup>, defined by Kayali and Shuh (2011, 1) as a ‘combination of retro flair with modern, focused gameplay’. In their study they have shown a strong bonding between retro game aesthetics and new independent game mechanics and level design. At one point the authors do identify contemporary retro games as a genre itself (ibidem, 6), which is unjustified and impractical since retro is a very divergent phenomenon that in fact encompasses many genres. What is more, genre in modern game design is always a matter of hybridity. For example *McPixel* is a combination of *Wario Ware* (Nintendo 2003) microgame structure with the ridicule riddles of LucasArts point & click adventure games of the 1990's.

*McPixel* was created within a very active community that cherishes nostalgia. It is also an example of how videogames function in terms of the logic of convergence culture, where the content is created by the users. The game was created in a homebrew manner by a fan of popular culture and it has been developed by other fans (e.g. new levels were added). This amateurish context can be traced in the rudimentary pixel art, which actually makes the game aesthetically unfitting to the times of *Secret of The Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm 1990) or other LucasArts games. *McPixel* is intentionally archaic to such an extent that this feature starts to be the visual dominant in the game. No title in the 16-bit era would like to be perceived as older than it actually was, because graphic advancement and cutting edge animation were important identity markers of the medium at that time. Videogames were the avant-garde of the new media technology, now the avant-garde of videogames is looking back at the history of media. It has turned into an arrièrè-garde, as Reynolds calls it, and it has its origins in the phenomenon of fandom. Nothing can be

more postmodern in terms of blurring the boundaries between the high and the pop culture.

*McPixel* creates new qualities but it is nostalgic about the time when games were different and – in the eyes of a certain community – better. And this preexisting nostalgic motivation makes the game ‘half-longing’, ‘half-ironic’ and very close to the ‘unsentimental nostalgia’ described by Guffey (2006) as the principal drive behind the retro style in modern art. *McPixel* is like a funhouse mirror reflecting the last two decades of history of videogames and pop culture.

## CONCLUSION

Boym says that ‘one becomes aware of the collective frameworks of memories when one distances oneself from one’s community or when that community itself enters the moment of twilight’ (Boym 2001, 80). For the last five years videogames have changed a lot and their development has been affected by such important factors as the introduction of digital distribution, casual revolution, social gaming, and the rise of indie games. All these factors have contributed to the videogame evolution and resulted in the growth of the retro design movement – a trend that is visible not only in games but has been analyzed for some time in many branches of art (Jameson 1991, Guffey 2006, Reynolds 2011).

Nostalgia in retro game design corroborates the fact that videogames are a mature art form, the masterpieces of which evoke reflective longing. I have argued that this nostalgia manifests itself in two ways: (1) by restoring the games of the past and (2) by referring to and (re)working the bygone to reflect a particular decade, a given computer era or a certain genre.

The nostalgic gesture of game designers serves creativity and artistic erudition. These, in turn, are the motivations that underlie every ‘neo’ style in art and could be deemed as constituting a more universal tendency of every medium that relies on self-reference. *Fez* is a neoplatformer, *FTL* is a neorogue, *Hotline Miami* is a neonoir while it evokes the cinematic rather than the ludic nostalgia. Finally, *McPixel* can be described as a neoadventure game but it is more eclectic than the others and exists in a framework of game design that often prefers the use of retrotools in order to create new aesthetic experiences. A similar strategy can be observed in music, where old technologies of synthesizing sound are still being used (Reynolds 2011). However, it can be disputable whether a game that does not directly ask us whether we ‘Get it?’, as in *Fez* when Dot checks if we can see the reference to the *Super Mario Bros.*, is truly nostalgic. Such game studios as OrangePixel or Vlambeer create retro games but theirs are not so sentimental. Vlambeer does not trigger childhood reveries, not because we do not have a given personal memory but because there is no direct intertextual stimuli to start the recollection process at all. I claim that those games are still nostalgic at a very universal level, involving the effect of ‘poverty of the present’ requirement.



**Figure 1:** The nostalgia continuum.

All of the abovementioned games could be called contemporary retro games, but in my opinion this category is inaccurate, since retro is by definition modern – it requires a temporal distance towards the past. If we want to refer to the revival of disco era of 1970’s, whether it happened in the 1990’s or later, we say “retro 70’s”. Similarly, I propose to say “retro 8-bit” – reflecting 8-bitness, “retro 16-bit” – reflecting 16-bitness, and so forth. In the case of more innovative titles I suggest the prefix ‘neo’, as it is already established in other arts (e.g. painting, music or film). Hence, there would be “neo 8-bit”, “neo 16-bit”, etc. In the proposed classification *Contra 4* is retro 16-bit and *Fez* is neo 8-bit, while the movement represented by the creator of *McPixel* can be placed somewhere in the reflective area of the continuum, depending on the given game.

Reynolds (2011) speculates whether this retromania is here to stay or if it is just a passing fad. In order to respond to that question it is useful to acknowledge a certain regularity that every retro movement has its “retro twin” (ibidem, 426). The Millennials made the medium look back towards the 1980’s-ness, 8-bitness and 16-bitness, as well as the roguelikeness and adventuriness of their childhood games. Nevertheless, the next wave of Generation Y will probably do away with this aesthetics and will reach for a different “retro twin”, probably a younger one – from the 1990’s or the 2000’s. But it may also be that the ambitious *arrière-garde* will create a lasting aesthetics, something to be nostalgic about in the future.

## ENDNOTES

1 Although the five years between the release of *Contra 4* (2007) and *Fez* (2012) may seem like a period of time that precludes the comparison of those two games, we must remember that *Fez* was first announced on TIGSource.com on July 17, 2007. Since then, the idea for the game has not changed much, only the development process took so – (in)famously – long.

2 The concept of “8-bitness” allows for the acknowledgment of medium specificity, while the particular era of videogames evolution does not have to reflect the parallel periods in fashion or cinema history.

3 A similar term to contemporary retro games – *neoretro* – was coined by Ramachandran (2008) but it described games that represent restorative nostalgia, such as *Contra 4*.

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