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Why Old School Is "Cool"

A Brief Analysis of Classic Video Game Nostalgia

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I first played a video game in 1981; I was four at the time. I remember going to my neighbor's house, where a boy a little older than me asked if I wanted to play *PONG*. I asked what *PONG* was, and he showed me a plastic box with wood paneling connected to the television. I am not sure which of the many *PONG* systems it was, but my best guess now is that it was a five-year-old Tele-Games Super *PONG* machine. The system did not have a slot for cartridges; it did not need one, because it only played one game—*PONG*. I was very excited about playing it, but when he booted it up, it seemed unimpressive—just a vertical line down the center of the screen, one shorter line on the far left, and another on the far right. My neighbor gave me one of two detachable controllers with a knob on it and explained that I could move the "paddle" on the right up and down by turning the knob on my controller to block the square "ball" that bounced across the screen. He then proceeded to defeat me in several games before I got bored with losing and left.

Video games have come a long way since *PONG*. Thanks largely to the accuracy of Gordon Moore's now famous prediction that computing capacity would double every eighteen months, video games have become an increasingly sophisticated, immensely popular entertainment medium. The advances in computer power—which in part have been driven by our desire to play more advanced video games—have pushed the medium from its simple, blocky, two-dimensional graphics and synthetic blips and beeps to richly rendered, photorealistic, interactive, three-dimensional environments. All media, of course, are affected by technological advances. The written word, for instance, was changed radically by the invention of the printing press. But new media, tied as they are to quickly developing technologies, change more rapidly. Film, for instance, in just over a hundred years, has developed from its silent, low frame-rate, black-

and-white roots to the vivid colors of computer-rendered animations and surround sound explosions that make our insides vibrate. Television has also changed tremendously in form and content in the past fifty years. In the last couple of decades in particular, both film and television have been enormously changed by the computer revolution that continues to push the boundaries of what is visually possible in new media to fantastical heights. Video games, however, were born in the circuitry of this everything machine that is the computer. It was born and bred in an acceleration engine where rapid change is a constant. Not only do games and technology change rapidly in the personal computer and arcade sectors, but in the video game industry's primary arena—home and portable gaming devices—the technology of production and consumption undergoes radical changes every half decade when new consoles and handhelds make old models obsolete. It is an industry fueled by the promise of a tomorrow of more—more visual detail, more immersion, and more interactive freedom.

One would think that in such a medium (when tomorrow is always better than today, and certainly better than yesterday) that the past would be left behind—"played out," so to speak—but many gamers' lists of their top ten favorite games include classic games right at or near the top. In particular, many older gamers view games they played in their youth as some of the best games of all time—"classic" games played in noisy arcades in intervals measured in quarters and skill. In many cases, players have not played these games in years, having long since lost access to the original systems or arcade machines on which the games were played. Or players have played them emulated on their PCs or redistributed in "Classic" bundles on current consoles, but for some reason, after getting over the glee of familiarity, the players could not help but be slightly disappointed. Some say that these games are not the same, somehow, as the ones they played years ago. Something not quite distinguishable is inauthentic—the sounds, the colors, the feel of the controller, and the smells, even—if they, like me, spent hours playing *Galaga* (1981), *Donkey Kong* (1981), and *Ms. Pac-Man* (1982) in a laundromat close to home, filled with the smell of dirty clothes and strong detergent. These games occupy an important space of memory for many gamers, and are remembered fondly and even nostalgically. Indeed, for some, classic video games have become powerful nostalgic artifacts, not only as reminders of another time and place (a tether to a longed-for past) but as yearned-for states of being, desired spaces in and of themselves—digital homes to which gamers yearn to return. This fact is seemingly at odds with the technology-driven, future-orientated medium of video games, but it is not surpris-

ing when we consider the nature of nostalgia, the revolutionary nature of video games, and the specific characteristics of classic video games.

Nostalgia is the emotional by-product of change. People feel nostalgia—the yearning to return to some past period or irrecoverable condition—because the current condition is somehow different. It is no surprise, then, that in its most extreme pathological cases, nostalgia afflicts those who have suffered the radical and painful changes wrought by war (Boym xvi). It is easy to understand how someone affected by an actual military war would yearn for a return to a time or state prior to the conflict. Like military wars, cultural wars can also cause nostalgia. Marshall McLuhan, in *War and Peace in the Global Village*, states that "every technology necessitates a new war" (98). He says that new technology causes pain and misery (39). This pain is caused by the tremendous changes brought about by technology, and afflicts two main groups—those totally of the old technology and those stuck in the middle between the old technology and the new. Those completely of the old technology long for a return to a past where the new technology does not exist. They reject the new technology and their pain comes from a longing for a return that can never be. Those stuck in the middle experience a different pain—a pain of transition; they struggle with the pain of being caught between two worlds. Those born totally within the new technology do not suffer through these pains, because for them, this technology is not new—it is the state of things.

McLuhan was speaking of the radical changes wrought by new media in the transition from a print to an electronic culture. Most of those playing and studying games were born totally within this age, so much of the cultural change McLuhan describes in his early works does not affect us in this way. Of course, we have our own new technologies to deal with, as the process McLuhan puts forth continues and in fact accelerates in our own digital times. At the center of this technological upheaval is one of the most provocative and pervasive terms accompanying the computer revolution—*interactivity*. It has come to characterize so much of what has seduced us about computer technology, in all its ever-more ubiquitous forms, and peppers the rhetoric of advertisers and academics alike. The majority of the growing number of discussions—ranging from the apocalyptic to the rapturous, about what the computer revolution has done, is doing, and will do to how we write and read, teach and learn, create and play—are at some level grappling with the issues of computer-enabled interactivity. It is this participation within virtual spaces that make video games such a revolutionary medium and video games such powerful sites of nostalgia.

Nostalgia is the yearning to return to a place—to a state of being; and video games are places—they are states of being; and because they are stored, unchanging data, they tease with the hope for a possibility of return, if only we can regain access to them. William Blake's claim that we can "see a world in a grain of sand" seems prophetic in light of the silicon-rendered reality we now can play in with ever-increasing ease (150). Though created in a medium that is constantly changing, and as paradoxical as it may seem within an experience that insists upon movement and change, we cannot help but think of these virtual playgrounds as perfect and immutable constants that we can return to for comfort as our world changes around us. Of course, the nostalgia felt for them are multilayered. Certainly, video games represent times and places in gamers' lives to which they may want to return, but that is merely one superficial aspect of video game nostalgia.

Video games may be, for some, artifacts of a past they want to return to, but video games also offer the seduction of a perfect past that can be replayed, a past within which players can participate, and a past in which players can move and explore. As Lev Manovich says of all new media spaces in *The Language of New Media*, within video games all time is spatialized and all spaces are spaces of navigation (252). Though requiring us to move within them and change within them, they themselves, as a whole, never change; video games are always there, like Keats's Grecian Urn, only set in motion and ready for us to enter in the activities, waiting for us to return to their patterns and repetitions, which we learned like the rhythms of a dance we practiced time and again. Once we learn the rhythms, we are home—player and game, dancer and dance, one and the same. And if, years later, we can only remember the steps and relearn the patterns, we can return to that place and time and dance the dance, or so the seduction goes. However, since nostalgia is a yearning for a return to an irrecoverable condition, it would not be nostalgia if a return were possible. Though we may desire to go back, we never really can. Not because the games are different, but because we as players are different. We have changed, and the games themselves have helped us to change.

Marc Prensky, in his book *Digital Games-Based Learning*, suggests that we are now a part of what he calls the "games generation," which he identifies as beginning with those born in the last forty years or so—a period that not coincidentally coincides with the emergence of what are now called classic video games. While many radical technological innovations have emerged and changed us over the last few decades, altering our formative experiences and our interests, Prensky identifies video games as being particularly influential, creating cognitive shifts in the ways play-

ers learn and experience the world. He is not alone in this research; others (like James Paul Gee in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*) also discuss how video games have changed players as learners and how video games can be used as learning tools. Like our experiences with all media, our experiences with video games change us, as a culture and as individuals. These changes greatly affect players—especially those at the beginning of the "games generation," in the transitional state McLuhan describes—and create a particularly rich breeding ground for nostalgia.

The nostalgia felt for classic video games by those who first ventured into arcades and played the first home console and computer games in the late 1970s and early 1980s is at one level a nostalgia unique to that generation, as one that experienced a profound cultural shift into computer-mediated play and representation. However, the emergence of video games is more than just an historical moment of transition. Video games are a continual source of transition and so, at another level, all of those who have played video games may feel nostalgic about them. In this sense, the nostalgia felt for video games is not nostalgia for a past state before the trauma of the games disrupted us, but a desire to recapture that mind-altering experience of being in a game for the first time. It is a yearning for liminality itself—for the moment of transition. Not the liminality of being caught between the two worlds of pre-video games and video games, but the liminality of being between the two worlds of the real and the game world—of being on the threshold. It is here to which we want to return—to the sheer joy of beginning to know another world and the contrast between that world and the one in which we normally reside.

We may ask ourselves if this process really is revolutionary. After all, in many ways, the worlds of the video games that we immerse ourselves in by learning the rhythm of the games are similar to the worlds created by other entertainment media such as books, television, and film—in which, to varying degrees and with huge variations within each medium, we must also learn the rhythm of things. Certainly, video games share many characteristics with each of these media. Surprisingly, in fact, video games are in some ways closer to novels than much of television and film. All of these media are highly focused on world creation, but in novels, as in video games, significant effort is required to enter this imaginary space. As Umberto Eco tells us in his "Postscript" to *The Name of the Rose*, a novel is first and foremost a world, and entering this world requires effort. Much to the chagrin of his editors, Eco purposely made the first hundred pages of his novel difficult and demanding, because he

insisted that if a reader wants to enter the world of his novel, the reader will have to accept its pace. The novel thus teaches the reader the ideal rhythm of reading it requires. Eco compares entering a novel to climbing a mountain, saying that readers must "learn the rhythm of respiration, acquire the pace; otherwise you stop right away" (520). In short, there is a learning curve involved, and if readers do not get past it, they will never gain entry into the novel. Similarly, if players do not learn the patterns of a video game, they will never fall into the flow of the game; they will never be fully in its world. One can play *Ms. Pac-Man*, for instance, without realizing that each of the ghosts has its own personality—its own pattern of movement of pursuit and retreat—but playing it well requires such a realization. If a player does not learn these patterns, the player will not be able to continue on into the game. Entering these worlds requires effort; the experiences are active ones.

With a book, the reader must interpret the words on the page and imagine the world they describe. They must read on for its events to unfold, and read thoughtfully to understand these events. In fact, if the text is well-written, the reader really *must* continue. Without effort, everything stops, and if the text is compelling, the reader cannot let it stop. The reader wants to keep moving through the text. So it is with video games: players must play on, if the game is a good one, and to play on, players must learn how to play better, learning the patterns of the game in order to continue in it. This process alters players, making return impossible. Film and television, of course, are not entirely passive; they too require effort for entry, though not often to the extent of novels and video games, which often take many hours to get through, and often require rereading and replaying. At the very least, however, viewers of films and television, as well as readers of books and players of video games, must suspend disbelief to become immersed. Sometimes this is not enough, but even when it is, it is a remarkably active feat of self-deception.

All worlds on screen or in print, no matter how strenuously authors and directors and game designers try to cover this fact up, are incomplete and limited. Readers, viewers, and players connect the dots and ignore the gaps to immerse themselves in the texts. Creators of entertainment help us to do this by relying on conventions of the media and the genres that they are working in that draw attention to that which we are supposed to see and what we should expect to see, and away from that which cannot be seen and what is not shown. But video game designers have a tougher time with this, since video games are interactive in ways that other media are not. While video games share much with other media, and much of what they share contribute to the nostalgia we feel for them, it is the ways

in which video games are different that make them particularly suited as objects of nostalgia.

As an interactive medium, video games give over a great deal of control to players that other media retain in the presentation of their content. In part, it is this control and the illusion of freedom that makes play possible and video games enjoyable and memorable. Players enjoy the relative freedom that they have in a game world versus other fictional worlds represented in books, television, and movies; they enjoy the control that they have over video game avatars and the struggle of learning how to succeed in the game world. It is the effort involved—the struggle to learn and overcome—that makes the games memorable, and these memories feed into the process where earlier games are idealized and game-play operates nostalgically for players.

Though freedom and control are key elements of video games, to keep players engaged, video games must also have boundaries and naturalized limitations. A game must have rules and goals, as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman have already delineated (*Rules of Play*). The rules of the game limit the freedom of players, but they also give the game meaning. A game must get players to play it and want to keep playing it. One of the best ways to do this is to make the play meaningful and provide desirable goal states for the players. At the most basic level, to do this, video games must first work. The game world cannot be buggy and crash accidentally. The games need to run on a stable system able to support consistently the space designed within it. Beyond that, the cosmology of the game world must have discernable physical rules: a player must be able to determine that their actions have consistent consequences within the game. Once this is established, game designers can build spaces in which the player can play, but designers still need to get the player interested in continuing through the game. Designers must motivate players to put forth the effort involved in playing. They need to set goals and give rewards; they need to set up a situation that will make players want to succeed at the game and want to learn the rhythm of things, or the player, like Eco's reader, will never make it up the mountain. Players do not feel nostalgic about such games; they forget them. Games players feel nostalgic about are games they put effort into to learn the game patterns and rhythms. People feel nostalgic about games they enjoyed being a part of—games that changed them. The games must offer players the allure of interactivity—the freedom to be in the world of the game—but they must make actions within that world compelling. They must create a place where players not only want to *be*, but a place in which players also want to *do*.

Two of the ways video games do this is through the use of schemas

and affordances. The idea of schemas comes from cognitive psychology and is based on our reliance on past experience in determining our actions in a given place or situation. In one respect, schemas can be thought of as deeply ingrained social conventions. For instance, when we go into a restaurant, those of us who have been to restaurants and learned the restaurant schema know that certain behavior is acceptable or required and certain behavior is not. We wait to be seated, or we place our order at the counter. Variations, of course, exist, and with each new restaurant experience our schema expands and becomes more complex. Game designers can use schemas to reasonably limit or anticipate players' behavior. Classic video games by and large do this quite well. There is not much else to do in *Ms. Pac-Man*, for instance, other than to chomp pellets and to run from and chase ghosts. Newer games sometimes have a more difficult time with this, since they put players in worlds more similar to our own and thus have to contend with far greater expectations of freedom. In *Donkey Kong*, players can only climb, jump, or smash barrels. In many newer games, however, with naturalistic-looking environments, players confuse gaming and real-life schemas, expecting to be able to do things that games may not allow them to do. Players may, for instance, expect that a vase will break when shot or that a door lock will open when shot, but the game world may not be designed this way. In fact, there is likely nothing behind the doors we cannot open. This is a limitation of the game world and it must be naturalized to keep players immersed in the game. Game designers use schemas to dictate what a player can expect to be able to do within the game world. If the video game is a football simulation, for instance, players usually do not attempt to run off the field and into the stands in the middle of the game. The game world does not allow this freedom, but neither do players expect it. The illusion of freedom is maintained and the player stays in rhythm with the game. Remaining within the flow of the game allows the play to be idealized, and to remain in the nostalgic memory of the player.

Another method employed by designers to naturalize gaming limitations, thus adding to the illusion of freedom within the game-space, is building in affordances into the various levels of interface. *Affordance* is a term Donald Norman uses in his book *The Design of Everyday Things*. He defines affordance as "the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used" (9). For example, in a game such as *Donkey Kong*, players learn quickly that they can be killed by barrels thrown down at them by a large ape, so players take into the game world the affordance

that being hit by large wooden objects is a bad thing and respond by jumping over them. In other words, players are given signs about what affordances they can take from the real world and apply to the game world. In doing so, these affordances tie a simplified version of the real world to the representational space of the game world. This aligns the game worlds with a real world that has never existed. As long as these affordances are reasonably consistent and numerous, players allow themselves to overlook the many things that cannot be done in the game-space. All of this, if done well, creates the illusion of freedom of interaction within the game-space, helping players to ignore the gaps and missing pieces in the game world—issues that filmmakers and television show creators do not have to worry about since they always control the audience's movement through time and space.

Thus video games, as a whole, because they are interactive, offer different sets of challenges for both makers and players, and different rewards as well. They put players on the threshold of another world and make players work to enter that world. In the case of classic video games, unlike most new games, it is an experience of being on the threshold of something entirely different—not a real space or a virtual space trying to be real, trying to fool us with illusions of graphic detail, but a distinct, abstract, computer space—a game world of symbolism, graphic minimalism, and ideal forms. New games continue to evolve increasingly complex and sophisticated graphics, incorporate increasingly complex storylines, and in general offer an interactive space for cinema-like representation. As such, they can evoke nostalgia for earlier days in much the same way as cinema, but with the added allure of interactivity. Video games can represent the past as it was, or as it never was, but they can also represent how players wish to remember it, revisiting or revising the past to make players yearn for it, and they can offer players the possibility of not only *being* there but of *doing* things there—of *playing the past.* Because of advances in computer technology, new games can do all of this in ways classic video games could not. They can portray emotions or emotionally consequential events far more effectively than their predecessors. In short, they can evoke the nostalgia that players feel for other objects, people, and places with increasing effectiveness that rivals—and in some ways surpasses—other media. But as transformational play experiences and nostalgic artifacts in and of themselves, newer video games are, in some ways, less powerful than classic games in that the transition between the real world and the game world is less profound.

One could argue, as Marie-Laure Ryan does in *Narrative as Virtual*

Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Electronic Media, that new games "through increasing attention devoted to sensorial representation of the game world" have become more immersive experiences than classic video games (309). This depends, of course, on our concept of immersion. Under such a premise, new video games are more immersive because they represent the game world more realistically and thus require less effort on the part of players to fill in the blanks, allowing them to immerse themselves more easily in the game world. An alternative view—more appropriate to our understanding of classic video games as objects of nostalgia—is proposed by D. B. Weiss in his novel *Lucky Wander Boy*, a work that is in large part about classic video game nostalgia in its most pathological sense. It is a view based on Marshall McLuhan's concept of hot and cold media as put forth in *Understanding Media*, the idea being that video games are heating up—becoming more like films and less like books. Though, as mentioned earlier, all video games require effort on the part of the player, classic video games require more effort in many ways. They are "cool," in McLuhan's sense of the word. Further, because they require more effort and participation than new games, they bring players deeper into their worlds than do new games. "In cool games," says Adam Pennyman, the protagonist of *Lucky Wander Boy*:

> graphic minimalism goes hand-in-hand with the absorptive, World Unto Itself quality that makes these games special . . . When we play these games, the sketchy visual detail forces us to fill in the blanks, and in so doing we bind ourselves to the game world. Even more, we participate in its creation, we are a linchpin, a co-creator, crucial to the existence of the game world as it is meant to be experienced. (66)

Pennyman is an obsessed classic video game fan—pathologically nostalgic—so perhaps he is overstating his case, but his position has some merit.

Classic video games offer players another world to play in, but one that requires effort—even more effort than that required by newer games. It is a space of ideal forms—of abstracted geometry and characters. As points of comparison to other media, painting in the western tradition shows a similar progression of form. As Marie-Laure Ryan points out:

> In pre-Renaissance times painting was more symbolic representation of the spiritual essence of things than an attempt to convey the illusion of presence. Its semiotic mode was signification rather than

> simulation . . . All this changed when the discovery of the laws of perspective allowed the projection of three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional surface. (2)

If the discovery of perspective was a watershed event in painting, so too was the increased processing power of the computer that has allowed for the technologically deterministic advancement of graphical and spatial sophistication in video games. This progression in what can be done in the medium of video games has changed the way players experience them, for the most part. Certainly, while developers can make games more visually sophisticated and realistic, they do not have to, just as paintings do not have to use perspective, and comics can adopt a realistic style or a more abstract cartoonish one. However, by and large, computer, console, arcade, and even handheld games are evolving toward more graphic detail and spatial complexity.

One of the by-products of this advancement has been a gradually growing scarcity of classic video games as original hardware becomes obsolete and more difficult to find. This increased unavailability has in fact added to the nostalgia felt for these games, as objects of an irrecoverable past. Yet as the technology has advanced and continues to advance, we have also seen the development of emulators such as MAME that allow players to play classic games once again on their PCs. More recently, there has been even more widespread availability of these games with the re-release of many classic video games bundled in anthologies for contemporary consoles, as well as video game download services such as the Nintendo Wii's Virtual Console and Microsoft's Xbox 360 Live Arcade. There are also plug-and-play devices that contain several classic console games from Intellivision, Activision, and Atari, and even reconfigured classic gaming consoles such as the Atari Flashback, which takes another step in trying to recapture the original game-play experience with controllers approximating the original.

If the development of video game technology has been a progression, certainly the success of these releases is in part due to the nostalgia felt for them. Of course, part of it can also be attributed to the fact that such anthologies are often good values in terms of game-play per dollar spent, and fundamentally, from a strategic standpoint, the best of classic games are just as fun and engaging and often more so than their more modern counterparts. In addition to the sincere nostalgia felt for these games, the culture of "cool" that values all things retro-chic is certainly being played to by corporate entities ever willing to turn the past into a com-

modity. But what does this renewed availability mean for those sincerely nostalgic for recapturing the magic of their foundational video game-play experiences?

Playing these games again can be a pleasurable experience at a certain level. As play-experiences, the games can still be fun. Add to that the pleasure associated with the feeling of remembering the original experiences one has had with these games, and overall, replaying them can be a rewarding experience. However, as indicated earlier, for many, the experience is not the same. It can never be a true return, and that, of course, is what makes classic games true objects of nostalgia. We may try to recapture the joy of playing these games years ago, but something is not quite the same. Some might suggest that an emulated version of *Dig-Dug* (1982) or a plug-and-play version of *Asteroids* (1979) is not the same, because the controller is different, the display is different, or the emulation is not quite accurate—the sound is off, or the color—but even if these things are true, more importantly, we ourselves are different. In *Lucky Wander Boy*, Pennyman denied this truth and strove for more accurate experiences, moving from emulators such as MAME to the original consoles and arcade games, but he still found them to be lacking. They were missing their aura. He became obsessed with the one game that he could not find emulated, the one game that was in no archive or anthology—*Lucky Wander Boy*. His quest to find this game, to play it once again, and to get to its unattainable third level becomes all-consuming precisely because it is his last hope for return. Whereas all the other games eventually fell short in allowing him the recovery of his former state, the one yet to be rediscovered still held hope. But such a return is not possible. While the feeling of nostalgia can be evoked by these games—while they may remind us of our past—they cannot truly return us there because we have changed. The games themselves have helped change us. This is the essence of classic video game nostalgia and indeed all nostalgia. The past object or event holds us as a desire delayed—an anticipation of what might yet be. In the novel, Pennyman replays possible endings to his story—possible ways in which his dream can be fulfilled. He dreams of going to the game's creator and finding an untouched *Lucky Wander Boy* machine, just waiting for him to play it. He says, in one of Weiss's endings—in the last ending, in fact:

> . . . the *Lucky Wander Boy* machine, enshrined in its very own dark corner, a corner so dark it refused to spit out a single shard of light. I could not think of a single better thing to do, a single better place to

> be, than right in front of that machine. I wanted to want something else, I tried to want something else, but it was impossible . . . This was what I had come to find. (271)

Finally, he did find it and he reached into his pocket full of an infinite number of quarters, and the story ends as he puts his first one in, just as he is about to fall into the game, stop time, recapture the moment, and live in it forever. This is the dream of classic video game nostalgia taken to its pathological extreme—a dream, whether small and restrained as it is in most cases of nostalgia, or large and all-encompassing as it was for Pennyman, that is, ultimately and perpetually, deferred.

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