

Remixing Retro – Preserving the Classic 'Feeling'

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Attempts to preserve retro elements or ‘the classic feeling’ through remixing retro elements with modern ones are not a new method. However, it is an effective preservation method. According to Newman, videogame preservation is not just about preserving hardware. It is also necessary to determine what are the most significant, qualitative aspects or properties that make a particular videogame what it is¹. By doing so, we are capable of preserving a style of how videogames should look, play and feel. For example, part of the success of classic characters like Mario is how often they are reused and reimagined². Even if you have never played the original *Mario* games, you have still likely been exposed to the franchise’s most ‘basic’ elements.

However, while the game industry typically aims for continual innovation and reinvention³, the changing market and gaming landscape is allowing for other opportunities for remixing retro elements. One notable example includes *Mega Man 9*, which was released in 2008 – the same year as games such as *Metal Gear Solid 4* and *Resistance 2*. While *Mega Man 9* was made for modern consoles it was made in classic retro style, not only to return the series to its roots but also to give players a new story and “the classical feel”⁴.

According to Inafune, part of what made *Mega Man 9* possible was the rise of retrogaming and digital distribution services⁵. Retro style games are not only more

¹ James Newman. *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence*. Abington: Routledge, 2012. 122-123

² Jaakko Suominen. “Mario’s legacy and Sonic’s heritage: Replays and refunds of console gaming history”. *DiGRA Nordic '12: Proceedings of 2012 International DiGRA Nordic Conference*, 2012. Vol.10. Paper. 2014.

³ Newman, *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence*. 9

⁴ Takeshita, Hironobu. “He Is 8-Bit: Capcom's Hironobu Takeshita Speaks”. Interview by Christian Nutt. *Gamasutra*, 2008. Accessed February 1, 2015.

http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132146/he_is_8bit_capcoms_hironobu_.php

⁵ Keiji Inafune. . “True Blue”. Interview by Chris Hoffman. *Nintendo Power (Future US)* 231 (2008): 20-22.

readily available but it is becoming more common for newer games to intentionally invoke nostalgic elements⁶, such as an older aesthetic style or homages to retro gameplay elements. As such, commercial and indie developers are experimenting with how best to combine modern gaming with retro elements. By studying the approaches developers have used, it is possible to study what ‘feeling’ they were attempting to preserve, what elements were considered essential elements, how these elements were translated, and what new meanings occur.

This paper will look at: defining what counts as retro and the role of nostalgia; some approaches developers have taken towards remixing retro elements; and limitations to meaningfully remixing retro elements, especially in terms of preservation.

Remixing Retro: What to Remix

While the easy definition for a retro game is ‘an old game’, it’s vague. Is a game retro when a certain number of years are passed? Is it when the game’s hardware is no longer supported or produced? Or is it the technology, such as whether it uses 8-bit sprites or 3-D models?

Retro can be described as “an outdated style or fashion that has become fashionable again” or an attempt to consciously imitate or derive “trends, modes, fashions, or attitudes” from the past⁷. While games from the N64, PS2 or even Wii are technically ‘old games’, retro gaming more commonly draws from around the 1980s and 1990s. This could be for multiple reasons. First, commercial marketing for early generation game re-releases tend to emphasize their place as old classics, unique from

⁶ Robin J.S. Sloan (2014). “Videogames as Remediated Memories: Commodified Nostalgia and Hyperreality in Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon and Gone Home”. *Games and Culture*.

⁷Wikipedia Contributors, “Retro (disambiguation)”. *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.*, accessed May 1, 2015. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retro_\(disambiguation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retro_(disambiguation)); Wikipedia Contributors, “Retro Style”. *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.*, accessed May 1, 2015. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retro_style

modern gaming⁸. For example, the North American webpage for the virtual console emphasizes “rediscovering” your old favorites, playing classics you “might have missed”, and making your classics better⁹. Second, for many older gamers, videogames and consoles from the ‘80s and ‘90s are what they grew up with, creating an association of ‘old games are from when *we* were young’. Third, arguably one of the most important reasons is the associated difference between retro games and modern ones.

While modern gaming is associated with being bigger, faster, more complex, and more expensive, retro gaming is associated with simplicity, classic characters and gameplay styles, inexpensiveness, and the basics. This is not to argue that retro style is better but the fact many retro elements are absent from modern games has created strong nostalgia for this time period.

Nostalgia plays a contributive role¹⁰. More than simply recollection, nostalgia induces a feeling of “longing, absence, and sentimentality”¹¹, creating a desire to reconnect with the past by bringing past elements into the present. On one hand, this creates a market that fulfills a growing nostalgic need for retro objects or elements. On the other, nostalgia becomes a means of passing knowledge from the past to the present. Nostalgia helps highlight what defined games and what are the most essential elements to carry over or return to.

Remixing retro: How to Remix

⁸ David S. Heineman. “Public Memory and Gamer Identity: Retrogaming as Nostalgia”. *Journal of Games Criticism*, accessed April 20, 2015. <http://gamecriticism.org/articles/heineman-1-1/>

⁹ “Wii U – Virtual Console”. *Nintendo*. <http://www.nintendo.com/wiiu/eshop/virtual-console>

¹⁰ Laurie Taylor and Zack Whalen. *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008. 3.

¹¹ Heineman. “Public Memory and Gamer Identity: Retrogaming as Nostalgia”.

The difficulty, however, is not only deciding which elements are the most essential but also how they should be used. For example, combining elements from *Duck Hunt* with *Call of Duty* may technically remix retro and modern elements but it might not necessarily be an effective one. Arguably, effectiveness depends on intention and what feeling developers wish to preserve as much as the elements themselves. For my purposes, I have broken possible remix approaches into three general areas according to prioritization of retro elements: purist, renovative, and derivative.

First, purist remixing, which usually intends to preserve retro elements to be as faithful to the past as much as possible. As I mentioned earlier, though *Mega Man 9* was made for modern consoles, it was intended to return to the spirit of the original games. As many positive reviews point out, what makes *Mega Man 9* appealing is that it not only looks like a Famicom game but it feels and plays like one. *Mega Man 9* does include some modern elements, including: longer cutscenes, optional challenges, an online leaderboard, and DLC. However, the game prioritized the original style by simplifying the audiovisuals and gameplay to reflect what would be possible on the Famicom, even taking out gameplay features that were included in later games and an option to cause screen flicker and slow down when there is too many sprites on the screen¹². According to Takeshita:

The basics of Mega Man are moving, jumping and shooting. The challenge comes from the levels themselves. There's all these obstacles inside the levels that make playing Mega Man a fun adventure game. That's what we wanted to preserve when making this game.¹³

¹² Nick DiMola. “Mega Man 9 to Include Screen Flicker and Slowdown Options”. *Nintendo World Report*, accessed May 5, 2015. <http://www.nintendoworldreport.com/news/16526/mega-man-9-to-include-screen-flicker-and-slowdown-options>

¹³ Hironobu Takeshita. “Mega Man 9: Retro revival's producer talks inspiration, robot masters, and purity”. Interview by Jeremy Parish. *IUp*, 2008. http://www.1up.com/previews/mega-man-9_2

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By contrast, while *Shovel Knight* also uses retro style, the creators admit they broke the Famicom’s limitations for their purposes. Whereas *Mega Man 9* attempted to accurately return to the past, *Shovel Knight* was a “rose-tinted view of an 8-bit game”¹⁴ that aimed to respect the Famicom’s core aesthetics and gameplay while enhancing it with modern game design and subtle technological enhancements. These breaks included using 100 times more memory, going over the 54-colour limit, and displaying more visuals onscreen at a time than the Famicom’s visual output could handle. However, the creators remained faithful where they thought the Famicom’s limitations created unique experiences. For example, many retro games cheated around visual limitations to support big enemy fights, resulting in a single black screen, the enemy, and the player character. *Shovel Knight* kept this presentation not out of technological constraints but because it created a “distinctive and epic feeling” in retro games.

Second, renovative remixing, which usually upgrades some elements while preserving the core retro elements. Remakes, notably, usually “take an older game that has become outdated and update it for a new platform and audience”¹⁵. This works in two ways: first, it “renews” what is considered the most essential elements; second it “erases” what is considered dated aspects¹⁶. For some remakes, this might only be a graphical one. For others, particularly when there is a huge time gap between the game’s original and remake releases, the updates can pile up significantly, creating tension between retaining the original feeling and modernizing the game to match current trends.

¹⁴David D’Angelo. “Breaking the NES for Shovel Knight”. *Gama Sutra*, accessed April 14, 2015. http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/DavidDAngelo/20140625/219383/Breaking_the_NES_for_Shovel_Knight.php

¹⁵Wikipedia Contributors. “Videogame Remake”, *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, accessed May 3, 2015. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game_remake

¹⁶Stephen Mandilberg. “Remakes and Demakes: Logics of Repetition in Gaming”. *stephenmandiber.org*, accessed April 12, 2015. <http://www.stephenmandiber.com/?p=50>

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For example, *Final Fantasy III* was originally made in 1990 for the Famicom and remade in 2006 for the DS. Rather than simply a graphical update, the remake was intended to be a complete overhaul that took advantage of the DSs’ capabilities. While some of the updates included modern elements— such as, 3D graphics and Wi-Fi mechanics – core elements such as the main plot, the job system, and level design mostly preserved. However, numerous other elements were changed, both on the narrative and gameplay levels. On the narrative level, for example, the four formerly generic, nameless party members were given concrete names, backstories and new events to help flesh them out. On the gameplay level, though the job system remained, abilities were added, a mechanic was dropped and replaced, classes were re-balanced, and even the default class was changed from the iconic Onion Knight class. According to Tanaka, they attempted to keep both the original and new players happy. For the former, the game needed to avoid huge changes and be kept the same as much as possible. For the latter, who would be seeing the game for the first time, he says, “We didn't just want it to be like an old-fashioned game - it needed to have some new touches to it.”¹⁷.

Though the remake got mostly positive reviews, others still pointed out that some of the preserved elements feel dated or simplistic compared to later games in the series. Some reviewers argued that it is to be expected in a remake of an old game and that the enhancements improve what is already there; other reviewers argue that it did not go far enough in updating the game to match current trends.

Lastly, there is derivative remixing, which usually derives inspiration from select retro elements while the core elements are new. As I stated before, this approach can be

¹⁷ Hiromichi Tanaka. “Fantasy Reborn Interview”. Interview by Rob Fahey. *Eurogamer*, 2007. <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/fantasy-reborn-interview>

seen in series like Mario but also in games that have more deliberately drawn inspiration from retro games to create something entirely new, such as Square Enix’s *Bravely Default*. According to the creators, one of the main challenges was to create a new traditional RPG but not an old-fashioned or overtly nostalgia-inducing one¹⁸. Though *Bravely Default* includes nostalgic elements such as a job system, a fantasy story about crystals, and a similar battle presentation to older *Final Fantasy* games, they were also considered something modern players would enjoy. However, the game’s core elements still distinguish it as a unique game.

Though the game started as a standard RPG, similar to older *Final Fantasy*, they felt for a new IP and a unique, new gameplay system they could do more. ‘Bravely Default’ has thematic meaning but it is also a reference to the game’s take on the turn based battle system. Each turn, the player can select ‘default’ to defend and store brave points or ‘brave’ to use brave points to use another battle action. Interestingly, this was inspired from boss battles in older games, where bosses were capable of using more than one battle action. By allowing the player to do the same, it created a new, more complex system. With this and the game’s other new elements, the end result is a new game that ‘feels’ like a classic RPG but is a unique at its core.

Remixing Retro: Limitations

However, there are obvious limitations to remixing retro elements with modern ones, particularly in terms of preservation. Even if retro elements are preserved as faithfully as possible how they are perceived will inevitably change.

¹⁸Kevin Gifford. “Bravely Default and the struggle to make a standard (but not stodgy) JRPG”. *Polygon*, accessed May 3, 2015. <http://www.polygon.com/2012/10/17/3517024/bravely-default-and-the-struggle-to-make-a-standard-but-not-stodgy>

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For one, this is partially tied to the changing audience. While nostalgia has contributive merits, it is ultimately an individualized experience. For the current generation of older gamers, ‘retro elements’ may commonly mean games from the ‘80s and ‘90s right now but in ten years, retro elements may instead be games from the 2000s or later. This is not to say that newer gamers do not appreciate current retro elements or cannot become nostalgic for them but the experiences they have with retro games are different. While an older player may remember trends like high difficulties, simplicity, and the nuances behind why particular elements can be essential to the experience (such as, *Shovel Knight*’s use of big enemies on a black background), a younger gamer is likely to have experienced a whole different set of trends. To them, that will be nostalgic and what they are more likely to remix in the future.

However, change also relates to the elements themselves. Though preservation involves identifying the most essential elements of a game and carrying it over in some form, as elements age or mix with other elements, the original elements will eventually transform into something else, become dated, or fall out of use. As Heineman points out, “forging collective memories is a contentious activity, one that is as much about retaining certain elements from the past as it is about losing others.”¹⁹

Arguably, for a smaller scope, such as an individual game, deciding what are the most essential elements is probably manageable. However, deciding essential elements for a larger scale, such as a complex game or an entire series, can become much more difficult.

For example, the *Final Fantasy* series is almost thirty years old and has reused, remixed, and re-released its original elements across multiple games and mediums.

¹⁹Heineman . “Public Memory and Gamer Identity: Retrogaming as Nostalgia”.

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Though some elements are constant, each game introduces its own set of game elements. The first *Final Fantasy* features: a medieval fantasy setting; a turn-based menu battle system; over-world and dungeon exploration; class-based ability progression; and a story about the four Light Warriors who must restore light to the four elemental orbs and save the world. By contrast, *Final Fantasy XV* features: a modern setting; a mix of free action and menu-selection gameplay; open world exploration; and a story about a prince on the run trying to defeat an invading country and recover his country’s crystal.

As many would point out, *Final Fantasy XV* is hardly unique in how different it is from the original *Final Fantasy*. However, it helps demonstrate the gap that has grown between the series’ past and where it is in the present. The series has cycled through so many gameplay and narrative elements, aesthetic styles, and mechanics that it makes it difficult to define what exactly makes the series what it is. As shown with *Final Fantasy III*’s remake, even elements that were considered innovations at the time have become retro elements that are remixed into other games to invoke nostalgia or to be upgraded to the latest trends.

Conclusion:

That said remixing retro elements with modern elements remains an effective means of preserving them. While retro elements have undoubtedly changed over the years, parts of the ‘basics’ survive even after decades after they were introduced.

Though I have not covered all approaches to remixing retro elements, these are some that have become more common with the changing game industry and rising interest in retro gaming. None of them are necessarily better than the others but they approach retro elements in different ways to preserve what they consider the most essential

elements, creating alternative ways to bring past knowledge surrounding retro games to the present.

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