

# Nostalgia in Retro Game Design

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## 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 retro gaming 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 games such 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, game design, 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 The outdated aesthetics of the past half-century is now recreated, reconfigured, rediscovered, and recycled in the modern context.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 absolutely contemporary phenomenon can be traced back to 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 the 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 recent medium entered the cultural landscape at the dawn of the postmodern era, during a cultural state of mind that is – paraphrasing Jameson (1991, 279) – nostalgic for the present. Does it make

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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. Moreover, it is noticeable also 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 labeled a genre, which I find highly impractical since it refers to both: *Contra 4* (WayForward 2007) and *Fez* (Polytron 2012). There is a significant difference between creating a game that could be successful on the SNES (Super Nintendo Entertainment System) while it was popular, and designing a contemporary title that is influenced by the 16-bit era, either on the visual or on the ludic level.

To understand this dissimilarity, 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 the 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. However, this does not necessarily imply that nostalgia is a highly personalized emotion, because it often reflects collective memories of a certain generation or subculture.

The age group that I find particularly interesting are the players that grew up playing the first generations of videogames. As such they are the early adopters of this new entertainment medium and, consequently, they constitute the consumer market of the 8-bit and 16-bit era game products.<sup>1</sup> Videogames are an important part of their generational identity. The medium was greatly developed as they matured and gradually became an established art form, while some of them (players) grew up to become game designers. Such a unique situation, when their childhood nostalgia concurs with a 'back to the roots' trend in videogame industry may be the reason for the numerous instances of nostalgia triggers in contemporary game design.

By a 'nostalgia trigger' I understand, for example, intertextual reference(s) to a classic title, as in the case with citations from *Mario* or *Zelda* in *Fez* that fulfill the role of the Proustian madeleine – they make the nostalgist fall into a reverie. In this particular case I mention, the nostalgist is 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 its modes, i.e. 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 were removing Michelangelo's 'final touch' and thus extinguished the historical life of the frescos. The renovation was literally brushing away any mark of time left by candle smoke, soot, or damage. This is what restorative nostalgia consists in: it has 'no use for the signs of historical time patina, ruins, cracks, imperfections' (ibidem, 68). In fact, the same impulse underlies the treatment of vintage computers within the retrogaming culture. The most expensive exhibits are 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 (2007) observes, 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, these circumstances also influence the cultural perception of games in an intriguing way. 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 on collector markets.

Nonetheless, 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. Such an activity, according to Jenkins (2006, 68-74), creates the so-called lovemarks – brands that we are emotionally attached to. This practice is visible in constant reboots of iconic series, e.g. in the recent case of Christopher Nolan-like prequel to *Tomb Rider*. However, these new installments of long established franchises are situated rather in the area of reflective nostalgia, since they reinterpret the original convention. The restorative motivations, on the other hand, are more adequate to comprehend re-releases of retro icons (Suominen 2012, 11-13) on modern platforms.

In this case the aim is to achieve the impossible – 'the perfect port' – that would give the accurate experience of the original gameplay, including all of the technological and inner game details. Unfortunately, in practice it is often highly problematic to even define what 'the original gameplay' should look like, let alone to reconstruct it. The brilliant analysis of the *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sonic Team 1991) case carried out by Newman (2012, 125-37) shows all the possible dilemmas of the restoration practices, i.e. many versions (patches) of the same title or simultaneous multiplatform releases with different specifications.

Restorative nostalgia is easy to observe in Europe, because of the continent's dramatic and destructive recent history. In 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 Warsaw's Old Town is included on the UNESCO's World Heritage

Sites List 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 court painter to the King. Hence, what was rebuilt was not the historic center of Warsaw from the 1940’s, but rather Canaletto’s vision of Warsaw of a particular 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 tireless pursuits of historical accuracy, it needs to be acknowledged that a complete restoration is never possible.

## **REFLECTIVE NOSTALGIA**

Reflective nostalgia restores nothing. It refers to an individual experience, is linked to the process of cultural remembrance (Boym 2001), and is relied on 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 a 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 the collective memories about this period that are transmitted by the 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) specializes 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. Here, it is definitely not the food shortage that one is nostalgic about. The company’s target are young people who would rather not 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 contexts 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 case studies below 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, i.e. a wide group of tools that changed the scale of possibilities for many amateurs and non-professionals alike willing to create their own games. Its introduction to the game industry in the late-1990’s and its growing popularity in the mid-2000’s (Overmars 2012) was of the same importance as the introduction of amateur lightweight camera was to the cinema. For the independent movie makers it meant access to less sophisticated devices and lowering of the entry level competencies, as well as it gave them a chance to develop ambitious and innovative projects. It carried a similar significance for independent game makers and it influenced the rise of the indie game movement.

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 situation calls into 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, on the contrary, *Hotline Miami* is not about cutting edge technology or photorealism.

This 'surreal orgy of violence and neon lights' ('Cactus' 2012), as its author Jonatan 'Cactus' Söderström describes the game, was inspired by the neo-noir movie *Drive* (2011) directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. It is not the first time a game has been influenced by this cinematic style. An earlier example is the late masterpiece among adventure games – *Grim Fandango* (LucasArts 1998). However, one cannot fail to notice an important difference: the title of Lucas Arts was based on the classic American film noir movies, 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 and one of the most intriguing iterations of the neo-noir in modern cinema. Concerning *Drive* Refn, when interviewed, often said 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 claim corresponds with the theories of nostalgia film where '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. In order to 'mesmerize lost reality of the Eisenhower era' George Lucas 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 the '1980's-ness' in the case of *Drive*, are figures of postmodern aesthetic discourse that uses 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 in that he does not even try to produce a sensation of experiencing the pseudo past. The director of *Drive* does not create a pastiche of some 1980's movies, such as e.g. *To live and die in L.A.* (1985), in order to capture the reality of that decade. *Drive* is a pastiche of '1980's-ness' itself. What kind of a pastiche is *Hotline Miami* then?

On the visual level, *Hotline Miami* is very deceptive, emulating the first impression of not being a contemporary game. According to Söderström, the embedded TV noise, also implemented in his earlier *Norrland* ('Cactus' 2010), was supposed to give that game a certain appeal – 'like it's playing on a fictional broken console of some sort' (Uncommon Assembly 2010). We may have a similar experience regarding *Hotline Miami*, where the additional tilt makes it even more odd and unidentifiable as it points out the effect it wants to (re)create – i.e. 'ghosting an old TV set' or being 'projected on a movie screen' (ibidem). To a certain extent it does both: it mimics the act of watching a projection of some 'let's play' recorded with a camera in front of a TV. By all means, it is not a regular

effect achieved on the PC platform or a portable console (the game is being ported to Playstation Vita) and it is not a recreation of any particular cultural practice. *Hotline Miami* evokes 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’ (ibidem.).

*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 (see Bolter, Grusin 1999) of the ‘1980’s-ness’ style of neo-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 rather 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* (Trifix 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); 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-ness’. While ‘1950’s-ness’ 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 an intertextual web of references to 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 implied player (Aarseth 2007) – most likely game director’s (Phil Fish) peer. 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. Yet what if the player is too young to have such experiences? *Fez* has recently been 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 delivers retro games using such emulation software as e.g. DOSBox. Not so 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 its 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-year-old users is larger on GOG.com, the base of 18-24-year-olds is the same on both (Alexa 2013a). This younger group could have started their adventure with games for 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), which 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-bitness’ – but it still generates the sensation of novelty. *Fez* is a desirable game for younger audiences and can be a means of a transition of collective memories instigated by the older players. Still, can we speak about the Proustian nostalgia with regard to something that might be called prosthetic memories – recollections which do not come from a person’s lived experience in any strict sense (Landsberg 2004, 31)? The emotion described by Marcel Proust is associated with individual, 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 personal and the other is collective and detached, while the retro stylistic gesture refers to the 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 demographics show that it is young people, who mostly fit into the age category of the early videogame adopters of the 1980’s, that constitute the majority of audience (Alexa 2013b). 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). Their audiences 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 that enabled 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 and demanding, if rewarding, game for the current 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 have been 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.

Historically speaking, roguelike games form a ‘subgenre of CRPG games, characterized by random-generated content and permanent death’ (Garda 2013). They emerged in the 1980’s on the wave of popularity of *Rogue* (Toy et al. 1980), followed by its many clones (e.g. *Angband*, *NetHack*). With the introduction of 3D graphics in the 1990’s, ASCII graphics roguelikes became an entertainment niche. However, currently this genre is experiencing a renaissance, especially thanks to the indie games community. The first important game in the roguelike revival was *Spelunky* (Yu, Hull 2008) and Justin Ma agrees that it was a great inspiration for *FTL* (Pearson 2012). To the contemporary game designer, probably the most attractive aspect of roguelike game mechanics is the uniqueness of the single game(play) experience. Each walkthrough is different and unrepeatable, because of the procedurally generated environment and lack of the save game mode. This is a very desirable quality in the times when casual games are stigmatized for making the gameplay insignificant. In the *FTL*, the significance of the single gameplay rises with every jump to the next sector of the nebula, each time making the stakes higher and the experience more exhilarating.

As in the case of other titles influenced by roguelikes (e.g. *Binding of Isaac*, *Deep Dungeons of Doom*), *FTL* does not restore the roguelike the way it was but creates a new aesthetic quality. For example, it explores the ideas of permadeath mechanics and procedurally generated environment, but implements them into real-time space combat simulator – not into a CRPG framework. What is more, the stylish 2D graphics with a top down perspective is very retro but it has nothing to do with the original ASCII cursor addressing. Such a recreation of the roguelike genre can be called *neo-rogue* (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 thematic dominants (dungeon crawl, hack’n’slash scenarios)’. Neo-rogue is a style in contemporary game design that centers on the conscious usage of the roguelike poetics in a new cultural and institutional context. In other words, neo-rogue does not restore roguelike, it reflects roguelikeness.

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

*McPixel* (‘Sos’ 2012) is a puzzle game, created by the Polish indie developer Mikołaj ‘Sos’ 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 as preferable to the present. However, this preference is not inspired by an all-embracing disillusionment with today’s world but rather with the current state of videogames as a medium. Since the rise of Nintendo Wii console in 2006 and the outbreak of ‘casual revolution’ (see 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 away and the hardcore audience is often dissatisfied with the current triple-A titles. Nonetheless, 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 it was self-published on multiply platforms (e.g. Windows, Linux, Android or iOS). Its prototype was made by one person ('Sos') 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 an 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 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 the media. It has turned into an arrière-garde, as Reynolds (2011, 11) 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). In the recent past, 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 neo-platformer, *FTL* is a neo-rogue, *Hotline Miami* is a neo-noir while it evokes the cinematic rather than the ludic nostalgia. Finally, *McPixel* can be described as a neo-adventure game but it is more eclectic than the others and exists in a framework of game design that often prefers the use of retro-tools 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 these games are still nostalgic at a very universal level, involving the effect of ‘poverty of the present’ requirement.

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 from the past. If we want to refer to the revival of disco era of the 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 nostalgia continuum (see Figure 1), depending on the given game.



**Figure 1:** The nostalgia continuum.

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 helpful to acknowledge the phenomenon of ‘retro twin’ – i.e. every retro movement appears to have its own twin (ibidem, 426). The discussed indie developers made the medium look back towards the 1980’s-ness, 8-bitness and 16-bitness, as well as the roguelikeness and adventurousness of their childhood games. Nevertheless, the next generation of game designers 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* of today will create a lasting aesthetics, something to be nostalgic about in the future.

## ENDNOTES

1 The 8-bit era periodisation is not universal and differs depending on the country. In Poland, and in Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain in general, 8-bit videogames began to be popular in the mid-1980’s. Even in New Zealand (Swalwell 2007, 270) most of the 8-bit microcomputers had their premiere almost two years later than in the US. What is more, the 8-bit computer architecture was introduced in the mid-1970’s but the most recognizable games of the 8-bit era had come with the American success of the Nintendo Entertainment System in the mid-1980’s.

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 – *neo-retro* – was coined by Ramachandran (2008) but it described games that represent restorative nostalgia, such as *Contra 4*.

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