

Video Game Romanticism

On Retro Gaming, Remakes, Reboots, Game Nostalgia, and Bad Games

Abstract

In recent years, a relatively new phenomenon in the video game industry has emerged: the reappraisal of games from previous generations by individual gamers in combination with the production of new games aesthetically and/or ludologically clearly based on these older games. The phenomenon has been described as “retro gaming”, “game nostalgia” or “vintage play” and has been associated with parallel phenomena like reboots, remakes, and “bad games” (or *Kusoge*). As a primer for this special issue of the *Journal of Religion, Film, and Media* on “Paradise Lost”, the author identifies and describes all these interrelated but distinguishable notions as forms of “video game romanticism”: they appropriate a romanticized version of our collective past to construct an appealing digital, interactive, narrative complex.

Keywords

Video Games, Romanticism, Retro Gaming, Nostalgia

Biography

Frank G. Bosman is a theologian of culture and a senior researcher at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University, the Netherlands. He is the author of many articles and books on the relation between culture, theology, and faith, and focuses on the role of religion and religious themes in video games. In 2019, he published a synthesis of his previous research on religion and digital games in *Gaming and the Divine. A New Systematic Theology of Video Games* (London: Routledge). In 2022, together with his colleague Archibald van Wieringen he published the monograph *Video Games as Art. A Communication-oriented Perspective on the Relationship between Gaming and Art* (Berlin: De Gruyter).



Fig. 1: Keyrings with a TETRIS (1984) or PAC-MAN (1980) game, produced by Fizz Creations GMBH. Photo by Frank G. Bosman.

Introduction

In October 2022, I was visiting some old friends in Mere, England, who took me holiday shopping at the local B&B Bargains. B&B Bargains is one of those British megastores whose selection of offerings follows precariously the sequence of the seasons and other unidentifiable indicators known only to its own management. Browsing through the Christmas cards of various qualities and USB cables of various sizes, I stumbled upon two very peculiar keyrings – each was a miniature version of an old GameBoyesque handheld offering, either TETRIS (Alexey Pajitnov, various 1984–) or PAC-MAN (Namco, JP 1980; see figure 1).

The TETRIS one promised “original sounds” and “original gameplay”, while both games’ boxes featured screen shots of monochromatic gameplay. The choice of games, one from 1984 and the other from 1980, combined with the adjective “original” seemed to be aimed at adult costumers lured in by a

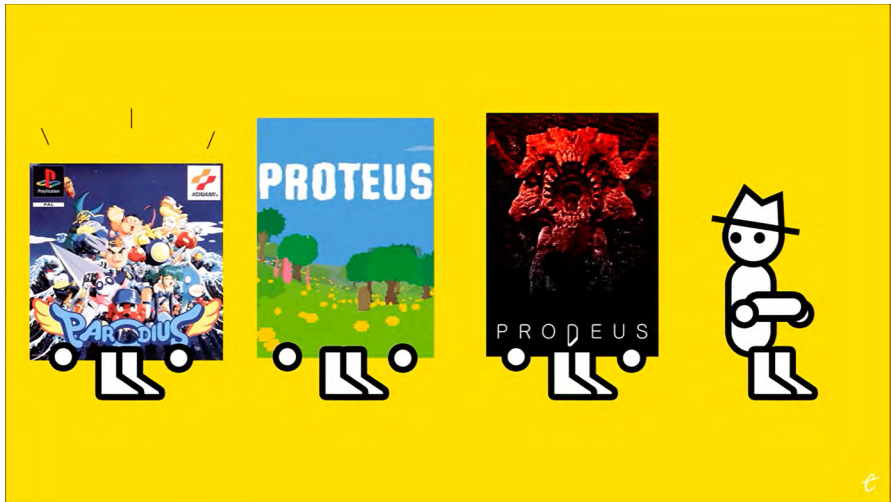


Fig. 2: YouTuber-cum-game reviewer Yathzee sarcastically comments on the similarities in name of the games PRODEUS (2022), PROTEUS (2013), and PARODIUS (1997). © The Escapist.

trip down memory lane. It seems harder to imagine that the younger generations, used to the ludically and aesthetically superior qualities of 21st century games like HORIZON ZERO DAWN (Guerrilla Games, NL 2017) or RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2 (Rockstar Studios, US 2018), would fall for a cheap knock-off of a decennia old device and ditto games.

During the same holiday, I watched one of my favourite video game review channels. Yathzee’s “Zero Punctuation” reviews, published on The Escapist’s YouTube channel (1.22 million subscribers in October 2022), combine the aesthetically pleasing flow of a British storyteller with the sarcastic criticism of a postmodern game enthusiast. In his review of the DOOM clone PRODEUS (Bounding Box Software, US 2022; see figure 2), Yathzee described the games as yet another “boomer shooter”:

The ongoing glut of indie retro boomer shooters has proved the absolute mother fuck out of 20 year nostalgia wave theory. So now I am just trying to think of a way to exploit it. Maybe we could broadcast a popular children’s cartoon in which every episode’s plot is resolved by a character setting themselves on fire, then wait twenty years and buy a controlling interest in every major burn ointment manufacturer.¹

1 Yathzee 2022.

PRODEUS' developer summarizes the game accordingly as

a first-person shooter of old, reimagined using modern rendering techniques and technology. Experience the quality you'd expect from a modern AAA game, designed with retro aesthetics and gameplay that invoke the tech-imposed limits of older hardware.²

Boomer shooters are a “90s-style retro FPS subgenre” that owes its apparent appeal and commercial success to an older gaming audience who fondly remembers the olden goldies of the gaming industry, like WOLFENSTEIN 3D (id Software, US 1992), DOOM (id Software, US 1993), or QUAKE (id Software, US 1996). Not incidentally the first two have seen recent reboots in the form of WOLFENSTEIN. THE NEW ORDER (MachineGames, US 2014) and DOOM (id Software, US 2016).³ Other boomer shooters include games like ION FURY (Voidpoint, DK 2019), PROJECT WARLOCK (Buckshot Software, PL/GE 2018), and NIGHTMARE REAPER (Blazing Bit Games, CA 2022).⁴

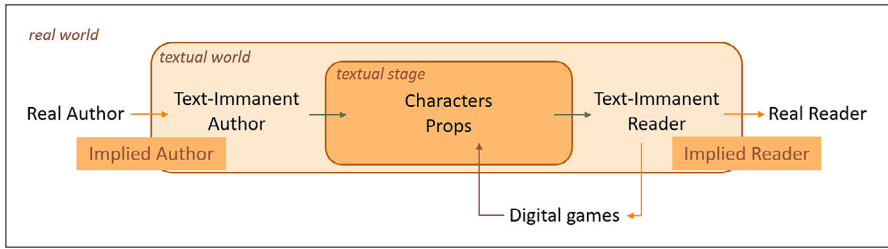
These are only a few examples of a more recent video game phenomenon identified by labels like “game nostalgia” or “retro gaming”. The relative novelty of the phenomenon is of course caused by the also a product of the relative newness of the video game medium. If the majority of adult gamers started playing games as kids or adolescents in the late 1970s and early 1980s, only by the late 2000s and the early 2010s were they old enough to develop feelings of nostalgia for their childhood video games. At the same time, appreciation of older games and/or their aesthetic is not exclusive to older players: younger players are into retro-looking, pixelated games like SHOVEL KNIGHT (Yacht Club Games, US 2014), THE BINDING OF ISAAC (Edmund McMillen, US 2011), or BROFORCE (Free Lives, US 2015).

In this article, I want to provide an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, or rather interrelated complex of phenomena, related to appreciation of “the game old”, including definitions and a typology of material forms. Under the notion of “video game Romanticism”, as I have chosen to name the phenomenological complex mentioned above, I will discuss video games as both subject (entities actively “doing” the romanticization) and object (entities the romanticization process passively is “done to”). In the discus-

2 Bounding Box Software 2022.

3 Macregor 2022; Iwanluk 2022.

4 Fox 2022.



Scheme 1: The unique property of video games in terms of their communication: the entanglement of the text-immanent reader and its in-game character (avatar).

sion of games as the object of romanticization, I will address the interrelated but distinguishable notions of retro gaming, remakes and reboots, game nostalgia, vintage play, and “bad games”.

As to methodology, I will utilize the Communication-Oriented Analysis (COA) of texts (see scheme 1).⁵ The COA distinguishes between the text-internal communication (between text-immanent author and reader) and the text-external communication (between the real author and real reader), and between the implied author and implied reader, posing as the possibility conditions of the communication between the textual world and the world outside the text (also known as “paradigm builders”). This methodology is also applicable to non-traditional texts such as series, films, and digital games.⁶

But video games, as ludo-narrative constructs merging play and storytelling, feature a unique communication feature: the entanglement of the text-immanent reader/player with its avatar-character (see scheme 1 again). This means that the game’s story is told to, by, and through the text-immanent player, although within the limits that the text-immanent author allows. The text-immanent author tells the game-cum-story to the text-immanent reader, as would be the case in any traditional text, like a book or a film. But in the case of video games, this immanent reader is (co)telling the game’s story by making all kinds of in-game decisions by interacting with its in-game avatar (in a quantity and quality that differs according to the game’s genre). This immanent reader-becoming-author is, however, always secondary to the initial immanent author, who guides and limits the space the immanent reader has for following its own path.

5 Bosman / van Wieringen 2022.

6 Cf. Bosman / van Wieringen 2018; 2021.

The COA is very useful in the context of the romanticization of video games in all its shapes, forms, and modes – as I will discuss in detail below – because this methodology differentiates between the various communicative instances that are “responsible” for the act of romanticization. I will return to this point at the end of the article.

One final remark. This article serves as a primer for the special issue of the *Journal of Religion, Film and Media* entitled “Paradise Lost: Presentations of Nostalgic Longing in Digital Games”. Since the articles in this issue deal with all kinds of different but clearly interconnected notions surrounding games and nostalgia, it is instructive first to delve into these ideas, to create a more comparative and methodological outlook. The topic of religion is therefore not specifically addressed in this contribution.

Video Games and Romanticism

The term “Romanticism” (*Romantisme* in French, *Romantik* in German) denotes a specific intellectual movement that started at the end of the 18th century as a protest against the mechanical worldview of the Enlightenment, the politics of the *Ancient Régime*, the dominance of the neo-classical aesthetic, and the practical superiority of Western capitalism.⁷ The Romantics materialized this protest by the idealization (or “Romanticization”) of the “other” in a geographical, psychological, or historical sense: the child, the animal, the exotic, the monster, the lunatic, the primitive, the peasant, and the naive.⁸ These “others” were imbued with notions of spiritual, ethical, and moral superiority that stood in stark contrast to the industrialized, urbanized, and desensitized modern citizen living in one of the major cities of the Western world. The current surge in popularity of everything “medieval” in the form of an idealized depiction of the Middle Ages in novels, films, and games also belongs to this romanticization phenomenon, just as re-enactments of “historical” events do.⁹

Video game Romanticism, as an application of the general understanding of Romanticism to the field of video games, is *the idealization of the past, presumed technologically inferior but culturally, socially and/or spiritually superior to our time, by means of video games*. This idealization or romanticization of

7 Alsen 2000; Travers 2011.

8 Berlin 1999, 6–18.

9 Elliott 2017; Apel 2012, 47–76.

video games can take one of two concrete shapes: video games can be the subject of this romanticization, when games are the means by which the idealization of the past is realized, or they can be the object of romanticization, when games themselves become the material of this idealization of the past. The notion of nostalgia springs to mind as an alternative for video games Romanticism, but since the idealization of the past can also be appealing for those without an active memory of that past, I reserve the former notion for gamers who long for the games they can actively remember having played in their youth. I will address this category in more detail below.

This idealization of the past can be done, and often is done, by means other than video games, like novels, films, or music, but because of the unique communicative property of video games as a medium – their necessarily interactive nature – this form of romanticization is not merely an outside witnessing of the reconstructed past, but far more an *active engagement* with and *actualization* of this past by the player. As Sean Fenty states:

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.¹⁰

When reading a book on medieval knights, watching a movie about the American War of Independence, or listening to a Baroque opera, the reader/viewer/listener may be highly emotionally and psychologically involved in what the medium communicates, but they are technically limited to the position of witnessing what the (text-immanent) author of the story has set out. By contrast, in the case of a video game, as we saw above, the (text-immanent) reader of the game is very much involved in – even needed for – the unfolding of the game’s story. Where some games are more ludically focussed, others are more narratological. Abstract games like TETRIS do not have much of a story to tell, while walking simulators like THE STANLEY PARABLE (Galactic Café, UK 2013) do not offer much of a gameplay challenge. Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that even TETRIS can be narratologically analysed. Janet H. Murray, for example, regards this game as an enactment of laborers in capitalistic societies.¹¹

10 Fenty 2008, 22.

11 Murray 2017, 178.

In the realm of video games, every romanticization happens because of the active engagement of the player, who actualizes this romanticization by the very act of playing the game. The process of romanticization can take place on the level of the immanent reader of the game text, when the idealization of the past is part of the text-internal communication of the game (in the case of games as the subject of romanticization, retro gaming, remakes and reboots), or on the level of the real reader of the game text, when the idealization of the past is done by individual real players (instead of the text-immanent one), who attribute this idealization to the game from an outside perspective (in the case of game nostalgia, vintage play, and bad games). I will address these differences below in more detail.

A game like SUPER MARIO BROS (Nintendo, JP 1983) can be the object of players' nostalgia, who may remember playing the game as a child, but the game does not feature any romanticization in and of itself; it has to be attributed to the game by (real) players. A game like KINGDOM COME. DELIVERANCE (Deep Silver, AT 2018), by contrast, features a romanticized version of the European Middle Ages as a core element of its story and game play, without any need for external attribution of romanticization by individual players whatsoever.

Video Games Romanticizing

The first form of video game Romanticism is when video games are the “actors” in the process of romanticizing themselves, that is, the medium by which the idealization of the past is executed. When video games are romanticizing, they *appropriate a romanticized version of our collective past to construct an appealing digital, interactive, narrative complex*. This appropriation includes medievalism, with games like FOR HONOR (Ubisoft, CA 2017) and CRUSADER KINGS II (Paradox Development Studio, SE 2012), orientalism, with ASSASSIN'S CREED (Ubisoft, CA 2007) and PRINCE OF PERSIA (Ubisoft, CA 2008), and Nordic mythology, with ASSASSIN'S CREED. VALHALLA (Ubisoft, CA 2020) and HELLBLADE. SENUA'S SACRIFICE (Ninja Theory, UK 2017).

The ongoing appropriation of the medieval times in books, games, and films has been given the term “medievalism”. Medievalism, or Neomedievalism, is the notion of postmedieval analysis and usage of medieval phenomena in modern cultural objects, including video games.¹² Richard Utz argues

12 Kline 2014, 4.

that these kinds of modern cultural texts do not so much want to re-enact history as it was as use that history as playful scenery for creative imagination. According to Utz,

Neomedieval texts no longer strive for the authenticity of original manuscripts, castles, or cathedrals, but create pseudo-medieval worlds that playfully obliterate history and historical accuracy and replace history-based narratives with simulacra of the medieval, employing images that are neither an original nor the copy of an original, but altogether Neo.¹³

The Orient, or “the East”, has also been present in Western narratives at least since Antoine Galland’s first European translation of *The Arabian Nights*, in 1704–1717.¹⁴ In this stereotypical depiction, “the Orient” is passive, irrational, and conservative, as famously described by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*.¹⁵ Jack Shaheen in turn demonstrated how Eastern stereotypes have emerged in Hollywood, and Vit Šisler later did the same for video games. Šisler concludes in his famous article from 2008 that the portrayal of the Middle East in games depends on the genre:

Adventure and role-playing games typically portray the Middle East in fantasy or quasi-historical manner, exploiting “Orientalist” imagery, whereas action games and especially first-person shooters present the Middle East in a contemporary and decidedly conflictual framework, schematizing Arabs and Muslims as enemies.¹⁶

With modern awareness of cultural appropriation – the appropriation of the cultural expressions of a minority culture by a majority culture – the Romantic idealization of the past has come under political, cultural, and scholarly scrutiny. One result has been the introduction of political-cultural disclaimers for video games and the deployment of cultural sensitivity officers within larger game-developing companies and publishers. Games and series like *WOLFENSTEIN* (reboot), *TOMB RAIDER* (reboot), and *ASSASSIN’S CREED* (since *ASSASSIN’S CREED SYNDICATE* from 2015) feature disclaimers that seek to

13 Utz 2011, v.

14 Marzolph / van Leeuwen 2004, 556–560.

15 Said 1978.

16 Šisler 2008, 214.

avert claims and accusations of Nazi glorification, cultural appropriation, and heteronormativity respectively.¹⁷

Video Games Romanticized

The second form of video game Romanticism is when video games are the object of idealization, that is, *the medium itself becomes the object of the idealization of the past*, presumably embodying the reconstructed past for which is longed. The longing can be directed towards the software (the games) and/or towards the hardware (the console or personal computer). This second form can take four different modes of its own: retro gaming, remakes and reboots, vintage play, and game nostalgia in the strict sense of the word.

Retro Gaming

The first mode in which video games can be romanticized is retro gaming: *the appropriation of older video games' aesthetics and/or mechanics in modern games*. This is not a return to the older “pixelated” games of the NES 8-bit or the Sega Genesis – on native consoles or through an emulator (see below) – but the reuse of the look and feel of those games in new releases. As indicated earlier, SHOVEL KNIGHT, THE BINDING OF ISAAC, and BROFORCE are well-known examples. As Michael Thomasson summarizes in his chapter on “retrogaming”: “Many new retro games do choose to use more horsepower than their predecessors but keep the feel of classic gaming intact by implementing an art style that mimics or gives a nod to the classics.”¹⁸

This reuse of older games can take aesthetic or mechanical forms. In its aesthetic form, retro games’ designers consciously utilize the “primitive”, low resolution graphics of 8-bit image processing and colour banding. Originally compromises out of technological necessity, these aesthetics become a new style and are sought after for creative reasons alone. The same applies to the clunky, synthesized electronic music by the programmable sound generator usually used in older 8-bit games.

The other form of reuse is mechanical, that is, it lies not in the actual technology involved in making these games in a physical sense, but in the

17 Bosman / van Wieringen 2022, 68–70; Wainwright 2019, 152–183; Bosman, 2015.

18 Thomasson 2014, 341.

mechanics inside the game itself, like jumping, racing, or puzzle solving. Retro games are well-known for the high difficulty spikes and their unforgiving nature, a feature paramount in the reintroduction of limited lives and/or “continues”, also known as permadeath, “the permanent loss of a player’s character in a video game”.¹⁹

Historically, the early games were played in arcades (in the 1970s), where players were encouraged to insert as many coins as possible into the machines, which lacked the technological and practical ability to save a game to continue later. Subsequently, when games were played at home on a console instead of an arcade (in the 1980s), the financial need to limit the number of tries for players was nullified, and the possibility of saving a game’s progress, either by a password, consisting of preset codes, or by a battery-powered save system, was introduced. In recent games, saving is done automatically by the game itself, circumventing the player’s need to save manually.²⁰

The reintroduction of limited lives or permadeath does resemble the old idea of the arcade machines but is, on a deeper level, a response by game developers to demands, made, in particular, by hard-core players who want a challenging game environment in which every decision counts.²¹ While games such as *SPELUNKY* (Mossmouth, US 2008) and *THE BINDING OF ISAAC* feature permadeath prominently, other games, especially in the role-playing genre, like *DIABLO 2* (Blizzard North, US 2000) and *DIABLO 3* (Blizzard Team 3, US 2012), offer “an optional, extra-difficult mode”, which is permadeath.²²

Remakes and Reboots

The second mode in which video games can be romanticized is in remakes and reboots of earlier games. Both remakes and reboots rehash earlier videogames but in slightly different ways. Remakes are *the re-publishing of older games on modern platforms*, while reboots are *the re-imagining of older games in modern games*, sharing key ludic and/or narrative elements. Remakes tend to stay closer to their source material, while reboots are freer of their inspiration. Both forms ensure that older games can be played by new

19 Mazzeo/Schall 2014.

20 Bosman 2018.

21 Griffin 2014.

22 Frome 2016.

audiences by releasing them to modern consoles and PCs, aligning with contemporary computer games' standards, both visually and technologically.

Examples of remakes include *CASTLEVANIA. SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT* (Konami, JP 1997) from the original PlayStation to Xbox360, PlayStation Portable, and PlayStation 4; *SID MEIER'S COLONIZATION* (MicroProse, US 1994) on DOS to *CIVILIZATION IV: COLONIZATION* (Firaxis, US 2008) for Windows and Mac OSx; and *DAY OF THE TENTACLE* (LucasArt, US 1993) for DOS and Classic Mac OS to *DAY OF THE TENTACLE REMASTERED* (Double Fine Productions, US 2016) on Windows, Mac OSx, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Linux, and iOS.

Examples of reboots include *TOMB RAIDER* (Crystal Dynamic, US 2013) restarting the series with the same name that started in 1996 with an identically named game (Core Design, UK); *WOLFENSTEIN. THE NEW ORDER* rekindling the *WOLFENSTEIN* series that started in 1981 with *CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN* (Muse Software, US); *PRINCE OF PERSIA* that reignited the series with the same name that – again – started with an identically named game (Broderbund, US 1989); and the 2013 *DMC. DEVIL MAY CRY* (Ninja Theory, JP) reboot of the *DEVIL MAY CRY* series, started in 2001 (Capcom, JP).

Game Nostalgia

The third mode of romanticized video game is game nostalgia in the strict sense: the *“fond return” of an older generation of players to the video games of their youth*. The wide variety of free and simple-to-use emulators contributed greatly to the realization of this game nostalgia. Emulators are software (or sometimes also hardware) that enables one computer system (the “host”) to behave like another one (the “guest”).²³ Versions are available for – among others – NES, SNES, Nintendo 64, GameCube, Wii, Game Boy, PlayStation, PlayStation 2, and PlayStation 3. A PC is usually the host for the older video games, but some modern consoles, like Nintendo's Switch or the PlayStation Classic, also present the possibility to download and play older games.

Sean Fenty describes this phenomenon:

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.²⁴

23 Dor 2014.

24 Fenty 2008, 20.

Of all the forms of video game Romanticism and its idealization of a past, game nostalgia is the most direct one: it involves older players' pleasing memories of their gaming past. These players play the past they can actually remember, but their reconstruction-by-video-game is nevertheless an idealized one. They want to play the old games because of their association with "simpler" times, with childhood and adolescence, with the family and friends with whom the game-playing was shared. This nostalgia is not a longing for a historical reconstruction of the past, but a reconjuring of an idealized version of that past. As Fenty describes, games "offer the seduction of a perfect past that can be replayed".²⁵

Video games, because of their necessarily interactive characteristic, are perfect for this kind of nostalgia. Fenty again:

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.²⁶

On the one hand, games share the capacity of other (digital or analogue) mediums like books or films to capture the past as it was experienced once upon a time, but on the other hand, games can be interacted with, making the idealized reconstruction of the past interactive, an experience of (re-)creating rather than witnessing one's own past.

Vintage Play

The fourth mode of romanticized video game is another kind of nostalgia, experienced not by those who can actually remember the (idealized) past, but by those who are too young to be able to do so: the reappraisal of older video games by modern players. Again, emulators play a big role in this reappraisal, since they make the older games readily available to new and younger audiences.

This kind of video game romanticization is embedded in a larger cultural trend for vintage, starting with but not exclusive to vintage clothing. Tracy Diane Cassidy and Hannah Rose Bennett identify vintage as the "response

²⁵ Fenty 2008, 22.

²⁶ Fenty 2008, 22.

to the negative publicity and effects of fast fashion”.²⁷ In this aspect, vintage gaming resembles the culinary trend of slowing cooking, in which time, effort, and dedication put into “authentic” hand-made food are most important.²⁸ As Cassidy and Bennett formulate: “Vintage fashion can be seen as a form of stability against a rapidly changing environment, which helps consumers to reconnect with a time gone by where things were simpler.”²⁹

In their longing for “old-fashioned” and “authentic” products, slow gaming *and* slow cooking both betray themselves to be the heirs of Romanticism and its idealization of the past. It is vintage, rather than nostalgia, since most of these slow gamers, like the slow cooks, do not have an actual memory of the past longed for; they long for an idealized version of their collective past.

Kusoge: The Pleasure of Playing Bad Games

We turn now to another category of video game, connected to the previous ones but clearly different from the rest: Bad Games. These games are not “bad” because they feature bad characters or satanic plotlines, but because they are regarded as games of a very low quality. Some older games are sometimes classified as such and, quite paradoxically, appreciated as such. A definition of bad games can read: *often older games that are perceived as severely inferior technically, narratologically and/or ludologically, while at the same time precisely these characteristics become the source of the players’ enjoyment and appraisal*. This appraisal can be *active or passive*, the former involving the actual playing of the bad games, while the latter involves watching other gamers play bad games.

Lists of such games – while the label is highly subjective – usually include BAD STREET BRAWLER (Beam Software, AU 1989), CUSTER’S REVENGE (JHM Ltd., US 1982), DESERT BUS (part of PENN & TELLER’S SMOKE AND MIRRORS, Imagineering, US 1995), E.T. THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL (Atari, US 1982), and THE GUY GAME (Topheavy Studios, US 2004).³⁰ The E.T. game is credited with singlehandedly causing the 1983 video games crash in the United States. While it did not

27 Cassidy/Bennett 2012.

28 Pietrykowski 2004.

29 Cassidy/Bennett 2012, 242.

30 Muir-Taylor 2022.

actually do so, the game has become the symbol of bad games overloading an already saturated market.³¹

Pop culture has always had a fascination with bad works, especially if they are intentionally funny.³² Cinema has its “paracinema”, the enjoyment of bad movies: a subculture of “oppositional taste”.³³ Jeffrey Sconce defines such subculture as aimed at the valorization of “trash” films that “have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate culture” not by giving them any cinematic merit but by using an “ironic reading strategy” that can “render the bad into the sublime”. If cinema has its paracinema, videogames have “kusoge”, a Japanese compound term that combines *kuso* (“crap”) and *gêmu* (“game”), celebrating the same oppositional taste and sentiments.³⁴ But more, games force players to participate in the game’s “badness”. As columnist Clive Thompson summarized: “When a game is bad, it’s just bad [...] It’s impossible to distance yourself from the badness. It’s not like chuckling while watching an actor screw things up, it’s like being forced to screw up yourself.”³⁵

While bad films are witnessed, enjoyed without participation in them; players of bad games do not have that luxury – they have to get their hands dirty, so to speak (for example, in the entanglement of text-immanent reader and avatar in video games). That is also a reason why YouTube shows about people who play these kinds of games are so popular. Emily Flynn-Jones distinguishes between two modes of enjoying *kusoge*: those who enjoy playing bad games, and those who enjoy seeing other people play bad video games.³⁶

Bad games are not necessarily romanticizing or romanticized video games, or vice versa. Nonetheless, bad games and romanticized games do have a tendency to overlap. And just as in the case of nostalgia and vintage play, the label “bad” is placed on these games by individual players. The aesthetic, ludic, and narratological “badness” of games like *E.T.* and *DESERT BUS* is for nostalgic players connected to their childhood, not exclusively to these specific games, but to an era in which video games were generally of

31 Ferreira 2019.

32 Navarro-Remesal 2017, 133–136.

33 Sconce 1995.

34 Therrien 2019, 14; Flynn-Jones 2015, 325–226.

35 Thompson 2007.

36 Flynn-Jones 2015, 335–336.

a lesser quality in comparison to modern ones. In this sense, bad games are simply an extrapolation of the general feel of the games of that era. This reckoning probably explains the appreciation too: it is not the games that are longed for, but what they represent.

Conclusions

In this article, I have given an in-depth exploration of an interrelated complex of phenomena, all associated with the appreciation of older games under the notion of video game Romanticism. All modes of this romanticization include an idealization of the past, either by the world the game conjures or because of the game itself. Because of the interactive nature of video games as a medium, this construction of the idealized past is not simply witnessed, but actively created by the act of playing the game.

From a communication point of view, these different kinds of romanticization of video games are localized in different aspects of the communication process (see table 1). In the case of the romanticizing of video games, the communication takes place by the implied author and implied reader. These “paradigm builders” guarantee possible communication between the world of the text and the world outside the text, including the socio-cultural linguistics needed for any reader to understand the text under scrutiny. The idealization of the past – the Orient, the Medieval, the Nordic – takes place

Category	Communication
Video games romanticizing	text-internal/external (implied reader-author)
Video games romanticized	
Retro gaming	text-internal (immanent author-reader)
Remakes & reboots	text-internal (immanent author-reader)
Nostalgia	text-external (real reader)
Vintage Play	text-external (real reader)
Bad games	text-external (real reader)

Table 1: An overview of the different modes of video game romanticization and their finding places within the textual communication.

not between two texts but in the wider society of a given culture, in our case a Western European one. In the case of the romanticization in a game like FOR HONOR, the idealized past is only recognizable as a familiar cultural-narrative context when the player is initiated into that context: the text-immanent reader has per force been initiated, but a real reader may not have been.

Qua video games romanticized, two out of the four described modes are involved with the text-internal communication (retro gaming and remakes and reboots) and two with the text-external communication (nostalgia and vintage play). While remakes and reboots rely on an explicit intertextual relationship between the original material and the new versions of the games, the retro games have a more implicit intertextual relationship, not with a specific game, but with a genre of games. Nostalgia and vintage play are exclusively tied to the text-external real players of these games, since the identification of any game as “nostalgic” or “vintage” relies on individual players deeming it as such. A game is not intrinsically nostalgic or vintage, but is instead experienced as such. The same applies to the “bad games”: these games are not inherently or objectively bad products – though they could be argued to be so – but are deemed as such by individual players who “hate-enjoy” playing them.

Video game Romanticism in all its forms, categories, and modes unifies the longing for an unspoiled, idealized past by, in, and through the medium of video games. And as long as people continue to play games, this longing will continue too, in every generation again.

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