

# Then, Suddenly, I Was Moved: Nostalgia and The Media History of Games

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## ABSTRACT

Gaming has a past; it cannot escape the rearticulation of genres, traditions and images of its history. The haunting of the present is all the more visible here than in other forms, as non-digital media are bound by types of material traces. But what traces does gaming leave – what breadcrumbs to follow? This paper seeks a telling of the inner life of game history, the force that surges through game culture to forever remember its roots and seek out the infinite regress of its future.

## Keywords

pastness, past, arcades, transmedia, Kittler, Crary, Rosen, materiality,

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It begins with the nostalgia of chalk. After all, chalk is a game technology. For hundreds of years, it has been used to draw the magic circles of tennis and hopscotch courts, to powder hands before a game of billiards or bowls and to turn simple walls into new pieces for our cultural and semiotic chess.

The word 'chalk', is a linguistic technology that means funs and freedoms. In reality, the 'chalk' of a classroom or street art is compounded gypsum (itself a complex technological process), the edges of a tennis court are 'chalked' with titanium dioxide and we 'chalk' our hands and cues with magnesium carbonate.

'Chalk' means our ability to set the rules, to draw the line, to lift the weight. It is our permission to play - the rules we make are limited only by the amount we have and the number of times it snaps off in our hands. Automatically, we associate it with both childhood and the imagination – a technology that lets us carve out games from the world. Purest abstraction. Yet with that comes a sense of the nostalgic; apparently diminished in the transition to adulthood is the native conceptual desire for play. And yet it transforms with us; we draw messages of hate and hope, we colour, we teach children how to make their own worlds.

Discussions of media's various futures are weighted to allow for gestures to be made towards key issues; convergences material and cultural, access, shifts in production and consumption. Underneath these strata moves the fascinating undertow of our pursuits of these histories, the whys and wherefores of our thirst for media. Under the rubric of transmedia and transmediology, we

assess the formation of composites, studying the difference between medias that barely stay stable long enough for us to peer into the microscope. So perhaps another method may be the examination of behaviour, by which technologies (chalk, games, cinemas, nations) will always have to answer.

Part of the ecology of gaming has always been its relationship to the past, as much as its reference to the future. How might a conceptual regime of gaming history equip a sense of media history? Nicholas Esposito's paper "Game Atmosphere Archiving Thanks to Virtual Reality for the Preservation of Video Game Cultural Heritage" is one of a handful of attempts to come to terms with the rapid shifts in gaming ecology that have moved as quickly as the generation that grew up with them. [1] Esposito's work across several papers attempts to map the shifts of gaming's multiple pasts – what is history, when history is only a month ago? Each game machine is usually incompatible with the past, and if not incompatible, the compatibility makes it even more concerned with the modernist notion of the 'pastness of the past'.

The 2005 'Playing the Past' conference in Gainesville, Florida indicates a growing understanding that videogames are not a medium, or even representative of changes in media, but a tracing of the relationship between past and future that uses our bodies as equal parts battleground and quilt. [2]

## 2. GAMING'S GHOSTS

Material traces stick like lipstick to every technological occasion; the labour of key ex-Sega employees visible on the development of Xbox and Xbox 360, the games of Shinji Mikami or Suda 51 deploying telltale signs of the scenario of their development. This realm is not a glossary of facts, but a method by which it is possible to decode game aesthetics. Narratives and ludics offer schemas of playing style, material aesthetics offer a schema of text and audience collisions.

### 2.1 The Ghost of Crary

Those pursuing cinema's shadow have built a tradition of conceptualising shifts in media perception; bearing down on those nexus of technological change and cultural quandary. Jonathan Crary's book *Techniques of the Observer* foregrounds the situations of readiness and perceptual awareness as key for the arrival of the cinematic form at the twilight of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

[3] For Crary, changes in the culture of perception preconditioned the possibilities of cinema, and the slow evolution from early experiments with pre-cinematic technologies through to the closed narrative form are testament to that human trace. The movement from one type of disembodied culture to a more bodily and subjective experience was the soil in which cinema was embedded.

Throughout the book and later essays, Crary is careful to situate technology firmly in the backseat – and it is here that gaming’s modulation of ‘convergence’ can be first conceptualised. Technologies do not converge. Technologies converge on us. To accumulate our perceptions underneath its regimes, it relies on our perceptions having been already realigned. The traces of this chase are perhaps nowhere more visible than in gaming’s history – the ghostly trail of wires crawling after our blood.

The oblique march of gaming genres that dovetail technology, design and audience reformations are a form of boundary dispute between perception and technology; the vertigo-inducing drive for realism in first-person shooters is just one recourse of this fraught relationship.

## 2.2 The Ghost of Kittler

Theorist Friedrich Kittler wrote in his “Gramophone, Film, Typewriter” of the dual traces that occur in the technological moment; the indexical trace between body and history. [4] One element of Kittler’s formulation of most relevance to games is the relationship between history and the record; if it cannot be recorded, it cannot enter history – but will always ‘haunt’ it. [5]

At one critical stage, Kittler forwards the notion that a forever-retreating real passing through the “defile of the signifier” can then become part of history. The representation process requires the obvious element of abstraction, but in this formula an indexical trace is also required; one that leaves a mark on the represented object - for example, the grain of 35mm film camera, the over-saturated and over-defined aesthetics of a new 1080p plasma or LCD screen, the soft melt of chalk on stone, or the heat bleeding off the Xenos chip inside an Xbox 360 console. These are marks that affect our bodily reactions to media, and they ground our material connection to gaming. We tinker with settings, we change the mouse aiming to ‘sensitive’, and in a final linguistic irony, we may add anti-aliasing to our vision.

The indexical trace also leaves with us and our bodies with a sense of granularity. We look, hear and touch games – and perhaps are the “defiler” through which the media must finally pass to become part of gaming history. This second trace is on our skin, in the fleshy sense of our Nintendo thumbs and sore eyes in the dead of night – but more directly in the accumulation of history that we come to know – our knowing-play.

Experienced players are naturally referred to in terms of addicts, as they intermesh with the trace of technology, and the

technology is affected by them in turn. Nowhere is this more explicit or poetic than in the typewriter-as-save-system in *Resident Evil* games; to remember, we must represent. So it is that two files are created, one on solid state memory cards, and another on a quarter-inch circle underneath our right thumb.

## 2.3 The Ghost of Rosen

Phillip Rosen’s book *Change Mummified* finds links between film theorist and historian Andrew Darley and conceptual philosopher Manuel DeLanda:

The digitalisation of perspective and supplementary compositional characteristics researched in the 1960s was one formal precondition for the depictive turn in computer imaging identified by Darley, but it was not the only one. Manuel DeLanda provides a candidate for another such precondition, when he notes that during the this same period, “The whole imaging apparatus of film was modelled mathematically.” [6]

Rosen’s articulation of digital constraints is even more explicit in another passage:

Digital imaging is not just a matter of technically efficient inscription, but of sundering the contact between world and image, and between machine and reference, which is the very currency of the indexical. [7]

The entire task of *Change Mummified* culminates in this lack of currency in the digital; to assert itself as history, the digital employs all the trace elements it can comprehend; Cartesian mathematics, film filters, image resolutions, and so on. More importantly, Rosen critiques convergence as a utopian function of cinephilia that critically underestimates the true undertow of technological convergence; the rearticulation of exchange value by both media and individuals.

Rosen’s understanding is that technology and perceptual shifts dovetail – much like Crary’s formulation. However, the digital experiences a different kind of duress; a need to behave like other representational media. What we demand of digital technology is an appreciation of the past to enable us to conceptualise it. Where else is this more obvious that in the winding chase of computer and video games, referring us to moments in media, myth and history to find us, mark us, and move us forward? Games refer to a occluded set of material situations, in their genre histories (red means health, blue means magic), production histories (Sega design methods differ from Capcom)

## 3. HISTORICAL MOMENTS

Gaming nostalgia, given these historical frameworks, is not about gaming per se, or even nostalgia per se. Rather, we might think of computer and video game play as a type of permanently messy

zone of interference, where perceptual shifts and technological shifts interweave and dovetail. However, technology has to be conceptualized as a force that empowers nothing and delivers nothing – and we can begin more squarely with our material traces of technology’s past.

When we play an Xbox 360, we may come with expectations from our experiences with the Xbox. When we play a Wii, we may come with expectations from our experiences with Nintendo consoles. When we play a stealth action game, we may come with expectations from our experiences with *Thief*, with *System Shock*, or with early MUD environments. When we play a downloaded hacked ROM file of an old arcade classic, we may come with expectations from our experiences with that arcade classic in its native context. In each circumstance, however, we are articulating a memory of a missing trace. Gaming is a pursuit of recapturing lost ground, lost territories, lost memories.

The reference of *Pac-Man* as a historical moment, one summer or date of original release is somewhat counter-intuitive. It took a period of six years for *Pac-Man* to energise arcade spaces growing across the world in the early and mid-80s. What may be rather possible is an articulation of Pac-Man as an ongoing moment. New players are acting as the ‘defiler’ in Kittler’s agency, pushing the Start button for the first time and seeing the faded Namco logo scar another gouge in the pixel map of a 20-year old CRT. So why is this so different that the articulation of cinema, or literature, or chalk, for that matter?

The framing of the digital entertainment environment as the centre of convergence belies firstly the undertow of its motivation; the recuperation of all the collected traces in all media life. The need to transform all myths and moments into playable coda; the need to re-use gaming traditions, the evolution of generic traits, the need to add more of this, more of that, and very rarely less except in terms of pure nostalgia for a purer gameplay model. If cinema are change mummified, games are change reanimated.

#### **4. CASE STUDY: SUPER STREET FIGHTER II TURBO: HIGH DEFINITION REMIX**

*Street Fighter* begat *Street Fighter II* begat *Street Fighter II: Championship Edition* begat *Street Fighter II’ Turbo: Hyper Fighting* begat *Super Street Fighter II: The New Challengers* begat *Super Street Fighter II Turbo* begat *Hyper Street Fighter II: The Anniversary Edition* begat approximately thirty-four ports, collection editions and downloadable iterations.

The format of the game is balanced iteration; competitive elements are thrown into dispute and reorganized. Each new game iteration adds characters, takes others away, add rules, balances characters. Subdivisions of style (*Street Fighter EX*, *Street Fighter Zero/Alpha* and finally *Street Fighter III* are all their own

series) also occurred in illegally coded ‘rainbow’ versions, hacking new dynamics into the basic model of balanced iteration. To play any *Street Fighter II* game is to experience iteration of *Street Fighter II* history, not merely the iteration of the characters.

Nostalgia is a force by which games understand themselves; under the guise of improvement, or more properly, all games being permanently unfinished tasks, by player, developer, and world. So as our skills progress, the games throughout histories and generations have to progress.

So it is with *Super Street Fighter II Turbo: High Definition Remix*, a recapture of a particular moment in history, using new highly-defined sprites with new renderings of the original artwork to create a visually appealing recreation with the gameplay model intact. At stake for the producers is the recapture of nostalgic intent and the movement of the series’ past into a forever accessible present. The game’s title is like a series of onion rings peeling back towards a diminishing original point, but there can never be such a place. Only ‘Street’ and ‘Fighter’ are genre descriptive, and even they come loaded with entire histories of gameplay memory, from *Double Dragon* to *International Karate*, to *Way of the Exploding Fist*. The past iterates and haunts.

Elsewhere, we imagine the reflections of the series on every surface of action games involving bare-knuckle fighting. More recently, Capcom’s 2006 game *God Hand* articulates the early 90s era by stultifying the design according to the limitations of that era and framing the experience around the recapturing of the arcade era during the closure of the Playstation 2’s dominance of the home console market. What is possible is made impossible in *God Hand*, as fruit replenishes health and enemies drop coins – long after the genre would inform design that such abstractions are no longer the norm.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

The material traces that games leave behind and that we leave on games are also currency of the chase between technology and perception.

So it is that nostalgia has been theorized as an energy of leisure, a class situation, and a quintessential dissatisfaction with the present. Its fate has been bound tightly around those of irony, the postmodern, and especially technology. The quality of the past is constructed as a place. It is a never-achieved return but remains a critical form of storytelling, borne out by the recent history of media – especially computer and videogames, which play out their pasts with increasing anxiousness.

Games are often hyper-tensile representations of a present moment; especially simple or arcade situations where repetition and continuity merge to give the present a stuttering, glottal quality. Playable versions of media culture native to other forms (games of films, games of television series, games of toys) detach the pastness from the past and attempt recuperation into the

present in different ways. In this sense, gameplay as part of a transmedia narrative involves a degree of imaginative play about the past; nostalgia refreshed at 60 times a second.

## 6. REFERENCES

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