

# From the Inside of Medium: Analytics of Retro Games

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## INTRODUCTION

The following paper presents an attempt to scrutinize a phenomenon of retro games as a medial form that allows us not only to keep in touch with the past and to transmit the game practices to the new generations of gamers by means of various nostalgic mechanisms, but also to identify the new condition of “computer game” as a medium. In other words, retro game might be considered as one of the manifestations of “matureness” of the medium of computer game, which is defined as a stage when medium starts to reflect on its own form.

## REMEDICATION IN RETRO GAMES

First of all, it is worth to precise that we use term “retro game” rather strict: as “retro” refers to the styles of the past, it can be applicable only to the up-to-date games, not to classical games (although the practice of retro gaming itself implies playing old games). “Style” here is considered in a wide sense: it is not only a visual design, but a style of “playing” which is expressed in game mechanics as well. So “retro game” is a game developed as a reference to the classical or just the old game in its visual or technical core. Moreover, the reference might realise between different media: for instance, *Cuphead* (Studio MDHR 2017) covers both levels: in the visual part, it has allusions on the cartoons of 1930s (collision with animated cinema), and in the gameplay, it uses the similar mechanics as in series of *Contra*, *Metal Slug* or other run and gun and slide-scroll shooters. These examples demonstrate the transition within medium of computer games and interdifferent media: cartoons and games. The process of transmission is viewed as a remediation process (Bolter and Grusin). Due to the following medial nesting, we can observe not only evolution or intersection of media, but also identify how the elements of the new media influence the old media and vice versa.

## NOSTALGIA AND REFLEXIVE GAMES

One of the reason of retro game popularity is a rise of nostalgic mood among the “millennial” gamers and game designers. This feeling is close to what Heidegger (following Navalis) puts in the base of philosophy: “an urge to be at home everywhere”,

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an urge to obtain the world in its entity. During the human history, different media accomplished this operation: the antique theatre with its cathartic effect or the novels of formation (*Bildungsroman*) which played important role in personal education at the Age of Enlightenment, etc. Computer games produce similar effect of entity, complete the structural unity of sensuality, and fill up the real in conditions of its deficit. For different generations these games are different as well. Therefore, the aspiration to reproduction of games “from childhood” uncovers the aspiration to reobtain the feeling of entity. However, nostalgia might be expressed in a different ways. For instance, Maria B. Garda talks about “restorative” and “reflective” types of nostalgia. The first one launches the practice of reproduction of the game process of the past: when we create various emulators of old platforms, remaster classical games and so on. It means that this kind of nostalgia makes us restore the style, the entourage, copy the elements of the past. In contrast, reflective nostalgia refers us to the feelings and emotional experience of the past: when we do not follow the style, but try to reproduce the experience itself. It is not transparent mechanism, as it is not enough to copy game mechanic or graphic, it is necessary to grasp some *non-discursive* element that might launch the nostalgic feeling (like the Proustian madeleine). Robin J. S. Sloan adds one more type of nostalgia in game design – critical, which allows to develop games not only following the old styles, but also to reflect on its elements. It means that game designer keeps a distance to game as a medial form, he/she tries to abstract a game element and to think about it in an analytical way. In this case, retro games not just represent the past, but reconsider it. However, the critical function is not the only one way of reconsideration. It can be even called as a first stage of “reflexive games”. In the research literature we face with the notion “games on games”, which reveals a critical potential of the computer game. It is important to mark, that not all retro games are critical or reflexive, and not all reflexive games, such as *The Beginner’s Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015), are retro. Retro game – if it uses the critical or reflexive mechanism – is quite close to the mature medial form: as it is not only reflects on its game medial elements, but also on *genesis* on these elements. It is a sort of “analytic by game”, which shows how one or another mechanic was born and developed in the context of computer games history. For instance, comparing *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985) and *Braid* (Number None 2008), or *Super Contra* (Konami 1988) and *Broforce* (Free Lives 2015), we do not just reveal the crucial game elements of game, but show how they transform. That comes a bit further the critical intention and identify the medial nature of computer game in progress.

## **BIO**

We are collaborators of the Computer Games Research Laboratory (CGRL). The Laboratory works since 2013. It is based at the Research Centre for Media Philosophy founded in 2007 within the Philosophy Department (now the Institute of Philosophy), Saint-Petersburg State University. The Laboratory hosted two conferences entirely devoted to the computer games research (2013, 2014), since 2015 organized annually computer games research sessions within the conferences of the Centre for Media Philosophy. Two collective monographies “Computer Games: Strategies of the Research” (2014) and “Game or Reality? Game Studies Experience” (2016) were published by the CGRL.

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