Attempts to preserve retro game elements or ‘the classic feeling’ through remixing retro elements with modern ones are not a new method. However, it is an effective preservation method. According to Newman, videogame preservation goes beyond simply preserving hardware. In order to deliver “authentic play (and aesthetic) experiences”, it also necessary to determine what are the most significant, qualitative aspects or properties that make a particular videogame what it is (Newman 2012, 122–23). Part of the success of classic characters like Mario is how often they are reused and reimagined (Suominen 2012, 8). Even if you have never played the original Mario games, you have still likely been exposed to the franchise’s most ‘basic’ elements through their various iterations.

However, while the game industry typically aims for continual innovation and reinvention (Newman 2012, 9), the changing market and gaming landscape is allowing for alternative opportunities for remixing retro elements. One notable example includes Mega Man 9, which garnered praise for their gorgeous, realistic graphics. While all three games were made for modern consoles, Mega Man 9 was made in classic retro style, not only to return the series to its roots but also to give players a new story and “the classical feel” (Takeshita 2008).

By studying the approaches developers have used, it is possible to study what ‘feeling’ they were attempting to preserve, what elements were considered most essential, how these elements were translated, and what new meanings occur.

Introduction
Technology has undergone rapid change in recent decades. Schrey describes it as “an era of planned obsolescence, turning yesterday’s appraised new gadgets into today’s decrepit
devices and tomorrow’s waste” (2014, 27). More than analogue media being replaced by digital, digital devices themselves are being rapidly outpaced and replaced by new models and iterations, and video games are no exception. However, instead of retro game elements fading away into obscurity or being dismissed as inferior, players and developers feel nostalgia for them and consequently seek to preserve them through various “retrogaming” practices. Retrograming includes playing and collecting old systems and games, discussions, archives and online museums, and, notably, remixing of retro game elements with modern game design.

Attempts to preserve retro game elements or the “classic feeling” through remixing retro elements with modern ones are not new. However, remixing is an effective preservation method. According to Newman, video game preservation goes beyond simply preserving hardware. In order to deliver “authentic play (and aesthetic) experiences,” it also necessary to determine what are the most significant, qualitative aspects or properties that make a particular video game what it is (Newman 2012, 122–23). For example, part of the success of classic characters like Mario is how often they are reused and reimagined (Suominen 2012, 8). Even if you have never played the original Mario games, you have still likely been exposed to the franchise’s most basic elements through their various iterations.

While the game industry typically aims for continual innovation and reinvention (Newman 2012, 9), the changing market and gaming landscape is allowing for alternative opportunities for remixing retro elements. One notable example includes Mega Man 9, a commercial and critical success that was released in 2008—the same year as games such as Metal Gear Solid 4 and Resistance 2, which garnered praise for their gorgeous, realistic graphics. While all three games were made for modern consoles, Mega Man 9 was made in classic retro style, not only to return the series to its roots but also to give players a new story and “the classic feel” (Takeshita 2008).

According to Inafune, part of what made Mega Man 9 possible was the rise of retrogaming and digital distribution services (Inafune 2008), but an interest in retrogaming traces back to the ’80s. Suominen, Reunanen, and Remes (2015) suggest that the history of retrogaming can be divided into three periods. The first period occurred between the mid-’80s and early ’90s, characterized by the start of video game nostalgization and historicization. Not only were magazines and journalists referring to early gaming as the “good old days” and the “golden age” but they also called games such as Pac-Man and
Asteroids classics, juxtaposing them against newer games at the time. The second period occurred with the first wave of retrogaming from 1997 to 1999. During this period, there was a surge of interest in older games, particularly on internet communities. Players created communities, archives, collections, and emulation supports to preserve the original gaming experience. In response, the media dubbed this phenomenon retrogaming and companies began taking note of a growing demand for it. Then, in the 2000s, companies began the commodification of retrogaming, beginning the third period of retrogaming. Companies released compilations and official re-releases through platforms like the virtual console, which has become an increasingly common practice as the same “classic” retro games are ported across various modern consoles. Not only does this offer a means of preserving and making retro games available but it also gives players a means of experiencing retro games in new ways, allowing retrogaming to cross from a hobbyist practice to mainstream. This, in turn, has helped create a market for new games that intentionally invoke nostalgic elements (Sloan 2015, 527).

As the success of Mega Man 9 demonstrates, players are not simply nostalgic for old games. Players also long for the elements of the era, including gameplay mechanics, characters, and aesthetics. Therefore, as an increasing number of commercial and indie developers experiment with how best to combine modern game elements with retro game elements, it is important to understand the ways in which this manifests in modern game design.

This paper consists of three sections. First, I discuss the definition of retro games, the role of nostalgia, and how different motivations affect game design. Second, I describe three approaches I have observed in my review of modern game design remixing modern and retro game elements:

- Purist remixing, which aims to preserve retro elements as faithfully as possible, such as Mega Man 9 or Shovel Knight
- Renovative remixing, which aims to upgrade select elements while preserving core retro elements, as in remakes like Final Fantasy III
- Derivative remixing, which derives inspiration from select retro game elements while its core elements are modern, as in Bravely Default.

Finally, I discuss the difficulties of meaningfully remixing retro and modern game elements while retaining faithfulness, particularly in terms of preservation.
By studying the approaches developers have used, it is possible to study what “feeling” they were attempting to preserve, what elements were considered most essential, how these elements were translated, and what new meanings occur.

**Retro and Nostalgia**

While the easy definition for a retro game is “an old game”, it is also a vague one. Does a game become retro after a certain number of years are passed? Is it when the game’s hardware is no longer supported or produced? Or is it when its aesthetics are no longer mainstream? Even with the rise in retrogaming and an increase in games, notably indie titles, which use retro styles and elements, they are often called retro-like in their design rather than simply modern games.

Retro can be described as “an outdated style or fashion that has become fashionable again” or an attempt to consciously imitate or derive “trends, modes, fashions, or attitudes” from the past. While games from the N64, PS2, or even Wii are technically “old games,” retro gaming more commonly draws from around the 1980s and 1990s. This could be for multiple reasons. First, commercial marketing for early generation game re-releases tends to emphasize their place as old classics, distinct from modern gaming (Heineman 2014). For example, the North American web page for the virtual console emphasizes “rediscovering” your old favorites, playing classics you “might have missed,” and making your classics better. Second, for many older gamers and game developers, video games and consoles from the ’80s and ’90s are what they grew up with, creating an impression that “old games are from when we were young.” Third, arguably one of the most important reasons is the difference between retro and modern games. While modern gaming is associated with being bigger, faster, complex, and expensive, retro gaming is associated with simplicity, classic characters and gameplay, inexpensiveness, and the basics. These attitudes were felt even in the early ’90s with journalists claiming that, though older games had poorer graphics and sound, they had more original ideas and playability compared to newer ones (Suominen, Reunanen, and Remes 2015). The widening gap between retro and modern technologies since then has only increased these attitudes. This is not to argue that

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1 Wikipedia, s.v. “Retro (disambiguation),” last modified March 8, 2013, 14:03, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retro_(disambiguation)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retro_(disambiguation)); Wikipedia, s.v. “Retro Style,” last modified 22 April 22, 2015, 03:03, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retro_style](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retro_style).
2 “Wii U: Virtual Console,” Nintendo, accessed April 15, 2015, [http://www.nintendo.com/wiiu/eshop/virtual-console](http://www.nintendo.com/wiiu/eshop/virtual-console).
Retro games are better or even that modern games are inferior. However, the fact many retro game elements are absent from modern games has created strong feelings of nostalgia for this time period.

Nostalgia can commonly be defined as a sentimental longing for an unobtainable past. This includes personal nostalgia, which refers to experiences unique to an individual’s memory, and cultural nostalgia, which refers to experiences shared by collective memory. According to Schrey, outbursts of nostalgia for outdated media commonly occur during periods of “media-historical transition” (Schrey 2014, 30). Nostalgia occurs when traces of the past are perceived in the present, allowing people to access the past and remember what has been lost. Though there are negative connotations to nostalgia, including inability to move on from the past or lack of creativity, nostalgia serves a contributive role (Taylor and Whalen 2008). More than simply recollection, nostalgia induces feelings of “longing, absence, and sentimentality” (Heineman 2014), creating a desire to reconnect with the past by bringing past elements into the present.

Though retro and nostalgia both relate to the past and can complement each other, it is important to note that not only are there different manifestations of nostalgia but also different motivations in retro game design. In Garda’s framework, she distinguishes between two manifestations of nostalgia that can be found in retro game design: restorative and reflective. The first attempts return the past as closely as possible, showing less interest in the changes over time and more interest in portraying the original experience. Though restorative practices include collecting old systems and games, they also extend to re-releasing iconic titles on modern consoles and keeping “retro titles alive in the collective memory” (Garda 2014, 3). The second looks back on the past and longs for select aspects of it, viewing the past as a “set of styles [that] serves creativity and artistic erudition” (Garda 2014, 1). Reflective nostalgia is of particular note as it involves referring to and reworking the past into the present, such as creating new installments of established series and characters or creating modern games using retro elements. In her analysis, she notes that games like *Fez* use modern gameplay elements while reflecting the 8-bit aesthetic and platform-adventure games of the ’80s and ’90s. This allows *Fez* to feel like an 8-bit era game without being bound by the limits of pure re-creation. By contrast, a game like *Hotline Miami* uses the retro aesthetic but the developers did not take inspiration from retrogaming nostalgia in its design. The game takes inspiration from noir cinema, old and
new, and uses the retro aesthetic to invoke a general retro feeling rather than invoke feelings for a specific era of gaming (Garda 2014, 4–7).

Suominen and Sivula posit similar points when discussing the differences between a “retrovation” and a nostalgia product (2016). A retrovation describes an innovation that utilizes past knowledge. It can either connect a past object to a new purpose or it can revive an object or practice while retaining a connection to its original purpose. Pokémon Go, they argue, is a retrovation as it connects a familiar brand and set of characters to augmented reality technology. Not only did it become the first AR game significantly popular with mainstream players but it also created a new purpose for Pokémon’s iconic elements. Nostalgia products, such as the NES Classic, are retro objects but they create nothing new and are not resurrected as a unique, new object. Instead, nostalgia products use the largely the same technologies, needs, and contents as they did in the past. While the differences between the two terms are not defined by their nostalgic motivations, they distinguish between using something retro to preserve versus using it to create something new.

As previously noted, nostalgia creates a desire to reconnect with the past. Generally, it manifests an attempt to restore the past or to reflect on and utilize select aspects of the past. On the one hand, from a business point of view, this creates a market that fulfills a growing nostalgic need for retro objects or elements. On the other, from a cultural point of view, nostalgia becomes a means of passing knowledge from the past to the present in a number of ways. First, modern elements are often defined by how they improve upon or refashion themselves from retro elements. As such, by using knowledge of retro elements, we can determine what exactly makes modern elements significant when compared to the retro elements. Second, by re-evaluating and re-representing retro elements, it not only preserves the memory of those elements but also revitalizes them by allowing us to engage with them from a fresh perspective (Grainge 2000, 33).

Thus, while there are many games that contain retro and modern elements, not all types of games are relevant to the purposes of this paper. For example, while a port of a game may include new elements like suspend points, trophy support, or high definition graphics, the original content remains largely unchanged. Though this preserves its original elements, it does not make significant use of or integrate modern ones into its design. In a greyer area exist games such as Hotline Miami and other titles which invoke a retro aesthetic but little else. I would argue that these still fall under remixing retro, as they use retro and modern game elements and may even repurpose retro elements in new, creative
ways. *Hotel Miami*, notably, includes screen flicker, which is associated with retro games but also emulates the feeling of watching on an old TV or a projected movie screen (Garda 2014, 6). However, *Hotline Miami*’s nostalgic motivations are not rooted in retrogaming, let alone the preservation of its elements.

My interests, then, are primarily based on retro-modern games that: first, purposefully integrate retro and modern game elements into their design in a significant manner; second, deliberately invoke feelings towards the past; and third, create something innovative rather than something simply nostalgic.

Three Approaches to Retro-Modern Game Design

The difficulty, however, is not only deciding which elements are the most essential but also how they should be used. For example, combining elements from *Duck Hunt* with *Call of Duty* may technically remix retro and modern game elements but might not necessarily do so effectively. Would this require simplifying *Call of Duty* by reducing it to a single screen and limited shooting capacities? Introducing a dog that helps collect dropped enemies or loot? Or would it simply involve using 8-bit graphics and aesthetics? Arguably, effectiveness depends on intention and what feelings developers wish to preserve as much as the game elements themselves.

For the purposes of this paper, I have narrowed my focus to three approaches to retro-modern game design, categorized by how they prioritize retro elements: purist, renovative, and derivative. Though this is not an all-inclusive list, nor will it account for all types of games, using these three approaches as a starting point that allows us to examine why developers used the retro elements they did and how it manifests in the game design.

First is purist remixing, which usually intends to preserve retro elements as faithfully as possible. As I mentioned earlier, though *Mega Man 9* was developed for modern consoles, it was intended to return to the spirit of the original games. As many positive reviews point out, what makes *Mega Man 9* appealing is that it not only looks like an NES/Famicom game but it also feels and plays like one. In Holmes’ review, he draws attention to the retro visual style and argues that, rather than feeling like pandering, the graphics improve the game. He stated that simple, flat characters are easier to place and absorb, allowing greater focus on the gameplay, and, rather than being distracted by imperfect graphics, are easier to relate to (Holmes 2008). *Mega Man 9* does include some modern elements to appeal to current trends, including: longer cutscenes, optional
challenges, leaderboards and online capabilities, and downloadable content. However, the
game prioritized the original style by simplifying the audiovisuals and gameplay to reflect
what would be possible on the Famicom, even eschewing gameplay features from after
*Mega Man 3* and including an option to cause screen flicker and slow down when there are
too many sprites on the screen (DiMola 2008). According to Takeshita:

> The basics of Mega Man are moving, jumping and shooting. The challenge
> comes from the levels themselves. There’s all these obstacles inside the
> levels that make playing Mega Man a fun adventure game. That’s what we
> wanted to preserve when making this game (Takeshita 2008).

By contrast, while *Shovel Knight* also uses retro style, the creators admit they broke the
Famicom’s limitations for their purposes. Released in 2014, *Shovel Knight* is a Kickstarted
indie title that draws inspiration from retro games such as *DuckTales*, *Zelda II: The
Adventure of Link*, and *Mega Man* for their gameplay and visuals but also from modern
games such as *U.N. Squad* and *Dark Souls* (Williams 2014). For example, the Shovel
Knight’s main mode of attack draws inspiration from the pogo jump from *DuckTales* while
the use of recovering money post-death and from checkpoints to emphasize player death
came from *Dark Souls*. Whereas *Mega Man 9* attempted to accurately return to the past,
*Shovel Knight* was a “rose-tinted view of an 8-bit game” (D’Angelo 2014) that aimed to
respect the NES/Famicom’s core aesthetics and gameplay while enhancing it with modern
game design and subtle technological enhancements. These breaks included using a
hundred times more memory, going over the 54-color limit, and displaying more visuals
onscreen at a time than the NES/Famicom’s visual output could handle. However, the
creators remained faithful where they thought the NES/Famicom’s limitations created
unique experiences. For example, many retro games worked around visual limitations to
support big enemy fights, resulting in a single black screen, the enemy, and the player
character. *Shovel Knight* kept this presentation not out of technological constraints but
because it created a “distinctive and epic feeling” in retro games. Thus, what was once an
element used out of necessity is now a deliberate design choice.

Second, renovative remixing, which usually upgrades select elements while
preserving the core retro elements. Remakes, notably, usually “take an older game that has
Remixing Retro: Preserving the “Classic Feeling”

become outdated and update it for a new platform and audience”\textsuperscript{3}. This works in two ways: first, it “renews” what are considered the most essential elements; second, it “erases” what are considered dated aspects (Mandiberg 2009). For some remakes, this might only be a graphical one. For others, particularly when there is a huge time gap between the game’s original and remake releases, the updates can pile up significantly, creating tension between retaining the original feeling and modernizing the game to match current trends.

For example, \textit{Final Fantasy III} was originally made in 1990 for the Famicom and remade in 2006 for the Nintendo DS. Rather than simply a graphical update, the remake was intended to be a complete overhaul that took advantage of the DS’s capabilities. While some of the updates included modern elements—3D graphics and Wi-Fi messaging mechanics in particular—the core elements such as the main plot, job system, and level design were mostly preserved. However, numerous other elements were changed, both on narrative and gameplay levels. On the narrative level, the four formerly generic, nameless party members were given concrete names, backstories and new events to help flesh them out. On the gameplay level, though the job system remained, abilities were added and dropped, classes were re-balanced, and even the default class was changed from the iconic Onion Knight class. According to the director, they attempted to keep both the original and new players happy. For the former, the game needed to avoid huge changes and be kept the same as much as possible. For the latter, who would be seeing the game for the first time, he says, “we didn’t just want it to be like an old-fashioned game—it needed to have some new touches to it” (Tanaka 2007).

Though the remake got mostly positive reviews and praise for its beautiful graphical upgrades, others noted that some of the preserved elements felt dated or simplistic. Some reviewers argued that that is to be expected in a remake of an old game and that the enhancements improve what was already there; other reviewers argued that the remake did not go far enough in updating the game to match current trends. Bozon’s review criticized the game’s presentation aspects for being “lazy” and “poorly executed” by not taking advantage of the two-screen feature of the DS, especially since that is one of the system’s key features: “the fact that the top screen is inactive for nearly 75\% of the game seemed too poor to be true […] all the action takes place on the bottom screen to allow for touch

\textsuperscript{3} Wikipedia, s.v. “Videogame Remake,” last modified March 29, 2015, 21:05, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game_remake.
control, but the top screen is used only when on an overworld map, or in menus” (Bozon 2006). Other reviewers argue that the game’s old-school design works against it as much as it does for it, ranging from the inability to auto-equip weapons to its limited save points and high difficulty, especially for gamers who have only experienced later entries in the series (McFarran 2007; Villoria 2006). Despite criticisms, however, these reviews often highlighted that, while new gamers might have reservations, fans of retro games or those who grew up with these sorts of games would manage better, a sentiment echoed in many other reviews.

Finally, there is derivative remixing, which usually derives inspiration from select retro elements while the core elements are modern or “new.” As noted above, this approach can be seen in series like Mario but it can also be seen in games that have deliberately drawn inspiration from retro games to create something entirely new, such as Square Enix’s Bravely Default. Square initially attempted a spiritual successor to older Final Fantasy titles through a spinoff called Final Fantasy: The 4 Heroes of Light, which was described as “‘a classic fantasy RPG using today’s technology … [with] [t]he charms of the classic RPG era before RPGs became JRPGs” (Gantayet 2009, quoting Tomoya Asano). It harked back to early Final Fantasy titles through elements such as classic story tropes, the job system, overworld exploration, random battles, and deliberate limitations, such as limited inventory storage. The game also included some of its own quirks, such as the boost and AP system, which controlled which actions the player could perform, but its design was chiefly rooted in retro game elements. Though reviews were mixed to positive, reviewers praised the game for evoking the past while mixing retro elements with modern elements to create something new. Bravely Default was intended to continue this trend.

According to the creators, one of the main challenges of Bravely Default was to create a new traditional RPG but not an old-fashioned or overtly nostalgia-inducing one (Gifford 2012). Though Bravely Default includes nostalgic elements such as the job system, a fantasy story about crystals, and a similar battle presentation to older Final Fantasy games, these elements were included because they were considered something even modern players would enjoy. However, the game’s core elements still distinguish it as unique. The developers felt that for a new intellectual property, it was necessary to create a unique, new gameplay system that would allow them to distinguish themselves from the past. “Bravely Default” has thematic meaning but it is also a reference to the game’s take on the turn-based battle system. Each turn, the player can select “default” to defend and store brave
points or “brave” to use brave points to use another battle action. Interestingly, this was inspired by boss battles in older games, where bosses were capable of using more than one battle action. By allowing the player to do the same, it created a new, more complex twist on turn-based battles. With this and the game’s other modern elements, the end result was a new game that stands on its own, which still “feels” like a classic RPG but is unique at its core.

**Faithfulness and Meaningfulness**

Whatever the intentions of developers, however, there are limitations to remixing retro game elements with modern ones, particularly in terms of preservation.

Lowood describes the three approaches that preserve the past through “enacting a contemporary experience to re-enact a historical experience” (Lowood 2016) as personas: the historian, who interprets events and arranges them into a truthful narrative of the past; the media archaeologist, who interacts with the software itself and experiences the past through feedback from the device; and the re-enactor, who attempts to recreate the past as closely as possible to create an authentic, lived experience. Though they have different methods and motivations, they share similar problems in determining what to acquire, preserve, and analyze. For example, the problem of screen involves the analysis of screen contents to determine whether the most significant surface properties—audiovisual, interface components, responsiveness—look and operate properly. The historian may work around the problem by analyzing gameplay or shifting focus to select materials outside the screen, the re-enactor may focus on what the user looks, sees, and feels, and the media archaeologist may play the device and gain data through playback. Despite these methods all producing useful data, it would still be difficult to fully understand elements like gameplay mechanics, programming, and hidden conditions through the surface details alone.

Arguably, one of the most difficult problems lies in recreating an authentic experience. While this may seem like the most ideal way of preserving and engaging with the past, it becomes difficult in practice. First, this is because, more than simply preserving the original hardware, being truly authentic would require avoiding methods that interfere with the original experience. This ranges from changes to the device itself or its contents to differences in how a contemporary user might interact with it. Second, what people consider an authentic experience is subjective. While some might agree that an 8-bit game
should have 8-bit graphics to be faithful, there is often a difference between the opinions of those curating the experience and those enacting it. This is a common problem with game compilations, where reviewers often critique the selection of games and the quality of conversions (Suominen, Reunanen, and Remes 2015). While the latter is often a technical problem, the former often involves opinions about what counts as a classic or an essential to the era.

In terms of retro-modern game design, these problems become complex. Preservation is often not the primary goal for developers—they also must balance concerns such as how well the game plays, is the game fun, and, ultimately, how will the game be experienced by the player. While, like Lowood’s historian approach, developers must select retro elements and arrange them within the overall game to produce meaning, players are the ones playing the game and interacting with these elements. Player critiques, then, are often based less on how faithfully retro elements are preserved and more on how necessary these elements are in modern gaming. This is partly due to the fact that, even if developers preserve elements are preserved as faithfully as possible, how retro elements are perceived will inevitably change.

For one thing, this is tied to changing audiences. Nostalgia is a natural response to change and has the potential to be a powerful, contributive force. However, as Feanty observes, those born into modern technology, rather than transitioning to it from retro technology, do not experience nostalgia the same way. They did not experience change or loss—things are simply the way they are (Feanty 2008, 27). For the current generation of older gamers, the term “retro games” commonly refers to games from the ’80s and ’90s. Ten years from now, the term may instead be used to refer to games from the 2000s or later. This is not to say that newer gamers do not appreciate current retro elements or cannot feel nostalgic for them, but the experiences they have with retro games are different from those who grew up with them. While an older player may remember trends like high difficulties, simple controls, and the nuances behind why particular aesthetic choices can be essential to the experience (such as Shovel Knight’s use of big enemies on a black background), a younger gamer has likely experienced a whole different set of trends. To them, those will be nostalgic and what they are more likely to remix in the future, raising questions about whether the previous “generation” of retro gaming elements will be preserved.

However, change also relates to the elements themselves. Though preservation involves identifying the most essential elements of a game and carrying it over in some
form, as elements age or mix with other elements, the original elements will eventually transform into something else, become dated, or fall out of use. Even with faithful reuses, not all of a retro game’s elements from the past will be valued in the present. For example, Newman observed player reactions to the iPhone port of Sonic 1, which, like the original game, lacked a save system. Though players acknowledged the port was a great game that reminded them of their childhood, they still wanted a save system because it is “annoying” to have to start over from the beginning after getting game over (Newman 2012, 128). Even in Holmes’ review of Mega Man 9, which had glowing praise for the game, he found that some of the elements felt less like tribute and more like unoriginality, particularly some enemy designs and the final fight itself, considering that to be the least memorable part of the game (Holmes 2008). Just as retro elements become a means of evaluating modern elements, modern elements can be used to highlight flaws of retro elements, raising a question as to whether some elements should be retained for the sake of faithfulness rather than for their intrinsic value.

As Heineman points out, “forging collective memories is a contentious activity, one that is as much about retaining certain elements from the past as it is about losing others” (Heineman 2014). Within a smaller scope, such as an individual game, deciding what are the most essential elements is probably manageable. However, deciding the most essential elements on a larger scale, such as for a large, complex game or even an entire series, becomes much more difficult. For example, the Final Fantasy series is almost thirty years old and has remixed many different elements across multiple games and mediums. Though some elements are constant, each game introduces its own set of elements. Final Fantasy I features a medieval fantasy setting, a turn-based battle system, overworld and dungeon exploration, class-based ability progression, and a story about the Four Light Warriors, who must restore light to the four elemental orbs and save the world. By contrast, Final Fantasy XV features a modern fantasy setting, a mix of free action and menu gameplay, open-world exploration, and a story about a prince and his friends on a road trip to stop a militaristic empire and recover the crystal. Before its release, Final Fantasy XV sparked controversy when it was revealed that the game would not include one of the series’ iconic mascots, the Moogles. Many fans felt that it did not feel “Final Fantasy–like” to exclude them, especially with how much Final Fantasy XV diverged from previous games, resulting in Square Enix hosting a poll to gauge support for including them. There were more than 20,000 votes cast, with 78% in favor of their inclusion, and Moogles were brought back...
(Frank 2016). However, unlike previous Final Fantasy games, where Moogles were sentient creatures and occasional party members, they were included in the form of a good luck charm that could act as a decoy in battle.

Final Fantasy XV is hardly unique in how much it differs from the original Final Fantasy. However, it helps demonstrate the gap that has grown between the series’ past and where it is in the present. The series has cycled through so many gameplay and narrative elements, aesthetic styles, and mechanics that it makes it difficult to define exactly what makes the series what it is. Though Moogles are considered by fans to be iconic to the series, Moogles were not introduced until Final Fantasy III and have not even appeared in every Final Fantasy since then. However, Tabata acknowledged:

Having a Moogle wasn’t necessarily critical to Final Fantasy XV’s game design, but if our development team addressed only the bare essentials, would we and our fans be truly happy with the game? I don’t believe we would⁴.

Ultimately, Final Fantasy XV chose to preserve and integrate this select retro element over others because it had been remixed and preserved across the series until it became essential in the collective memory of its players.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, the video game industry has experienced several transitions in hardware, audiovisuals, gameplay, and storytelling. Just as the shift from 2D to 3D was revolutionary, games are transitioning from 3D to photorealistic, immersive game worlds. This represents a transition in both technology and values: with improved physics engines, players are able to interact with more responsive environments; with improved light and shadow systems, players are able to experience a world that changes over time; with improved facial animations and character models, players can empathize better with characters and their stories (Stuart 2015). Though this line of thinking reflects the industry’s interests in continual innovation and reinvention, the success of games such as Mega Man 9, Shovel Knight, Final Fantasy III, and Bravely Default reflects an alternative desire.

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⁴ “Final Fantasy XV—Moogle Creators Interview” (YouTube video, 4:55), posted by Final Fantasy XV, November 8, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmrycO0hPH4.
Though these are modern games and not perfect re-creations of earlier ones, they still feel nostalgic or retro-like. It could be argued that the inclusion of any retro elements might induce nostalgia in certain players, especially in the case of games like *Shovel Knight* and *Mega Man 9*, which overtly look and play like retro games. However, the same feelings are produced by games like *Bravely Default* that look and play like modern games at their core. This is, partly, due to the fact that developers are also nostalgic for the past.

When discussing their reasoning for certain design choices, developers not only reflected on why they chose to include select elements but also why they chose not to include others. For example, when Takeshita explained why they did not use innovations from versions later than *Mega Man 4* in *Mega Man 9*, he stated that the most important thing about the series was using the basic mechanics of moving, jumping, and shooting to overcome different challenges (Takeshita 2008). Likewise, though *Bravely Default*’s creators stated they did not want an overly nostalgia-inducing game, they still included numerous elements reminiscent of the retro games they drew inspiration from because they found they were still enjoyable despite their age (Gifford 2012). These range from gameplay-based elements like the job system and overworld exploration to narrative-based elements like the four-character party and the focus on crystals. Though the intentions and approaches differ between games, the elements chosen and how they chose to remix retro and modern game elements helps reflect why the developers found these elements significant enough to preserve.

Though I have not covered all approaches to remixing retro elements, the approaches described above have become more common with the changing game industry and rising interest in retro gaming. None of them are necessarily better than the others and, inevitably, the process of choosing which retro elements to preserve will cause others to fade. However, they still serve a key purpose. Not only do these approaches create alternative ways of bringing past knowledge surrounding retro games to the present, but they also serve as a means of accessing the past and remembering what other elements exist. This, in turn, may spark longing and inspiration in others to continue the trend of remembering and remixing the elements that invoke what they consider the “classic feeling.”
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