Revival

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On the morning of a day like any other, you open your eyes to the sight of your home's stone ceiling. You walk outside. Small children play in the fields, and the chirps of birds animate the air. You check your mail and see you have received a request from the grand elder to meet at the top of the village. With ease and familiarity, you scale the vertical platforms of your settlement in the sky in order to meet the old man at the very top. He informs you the time has come for your grand adventure to begin.

The ground begins to rumble and shake. A bright light, sharper than any you have seen, pierces the sky and an object of monolithic proportions materializes above your head. It shines a bright white gold and it appears to occupy dimensions beyond your abilities of perception. In an instant, the god- like entity teleports you into an altar-like space made of stone. You begin to levitate in mid-air and you watch as the monolith bathes you a column of bright light. The world around you begins to spin around at a mind boggling speed; you feel mystic knowledge flooding into your brain at an incredible rate. Then all at once, it stops. The monolith returns you to the ground, and the light disappears. But it is not over. Just as the large entity fades from your view, you see a small object begin to descend from the sky. It grows larger in your vision, and you see finally as it nears you that it is a small hat. In one final flash of light, it lands squarely on your head. In this moment, the world around you appears odd, being at once exactly the same, yet also different. You realize that you have been granted the power to control a higher dimension: the power of a new perspective.

The above description captures what a player might experience at the beginning of the 2012 game *Fez*. Developed by Polytron Studios, *Fez* follows the story of Gomez, a small two-dimensional creature who lives in what he believes to be a two-dimensional world. However, upon being bestowed with the eponymous Fez hat, he discovers that his world is, in fact, three-dimensional - and that he has the power to rotate it at will. This ability is the central mechanic of *Fez;* with Gomez only able to navigate in two dimensions, the player must rotate the environment around him in order to progress.

Fez is one in a spate of games in recent years that have revisited the visual, aural, and mechanical designs of classic 8-bit style games, characterized by pixellated art, synth-like music, and two-dimensional platform mechanics. On the surface, *Fez* has much in common with its contemporary peers; a screenshot of the game would look right at home with the 8-bit and 16-bit sprite games of yore.

But *Fez* is not a sterile reproduction of those games which have come before it, nor can it be fairly described as a nostalgic visitation of an era long gone. *Fez* is rather a genuine *revival* of the game materials and elements that were common in the classic two-dimensional era of games, and is a cultural text that pays homage to the past while also repossessing older creative elements for use in its own artistic and cultural statements. In one sense, *Fez* is exactly like the games that inspired it; usually operating in a two-dimensional plane, the player largely interacts with the game in a

manner identical to classic platform games, and the art and musical style of *Fez* feel as though they could have been created during that period of computer game history. But the general design of the game, centered around the ability to rotate the world and deal with its three- dimensionality, is such that these game elements are contextualized in a new way. Each two-dimensional gameplay plane in *Fez* exists as only one of several sides of a three-dimensional game world; with the introduction of the rotation mechanic*, Fez* forces the player to visualize Gomez's world in both its two- dimensional and three-dimensional iterations *simultaneously*. Thus, *Fez* at once reintroduces the idea of the traditional two-dimensional platform while also revising it to become something unique. Intensely aware of its own historical and cultural context, *Fez* epitomizes the way in which games as a medium engage in the process of authentic cultural revival and restructuring. In this paper, I will seek to explore how cultural revivals similar to *Fez* abound in the video game sphere, a phenomenon that presents an optimistic and encouraging view of culture in the postmodern age.

As defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, a revival is "the action of reviving something after [its] decline or discontinuance," with the verb form being an intransitive that describes a "return to consciousness" ("Revival";; "Revive"). Though describing the reintroduction of a thing, a style, or an idea, a revival resuscitates what was once thought dead or outmoded. Not simply a fond remembrance of the past, revival refers to a kind of resurrection that inevitably reimagines its subject within a new context. This process, wide and varied in its method and application, is critical to the discovery of future avenues and conduits of cultural currency. Indeed, one must do more than rehash the work of one's predecessors to move forward; in the manner of revival, one must also be willing to renovate, restructure, and even destroy it.

It is interesting to discuss the revival in the context of the postmodern age. By all accounts, cultural critics of decades past predicted our information- saturated present would not be conducive to authentic cultural activity. In his 1936 essay, German philosopher Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," argued that the inevitable future of art and culture lay not in *revival*, but in *reproduction*. As Benjamin describes, art was once highly ritualized; in cave drawings of spirits and statues of gods alike, art served as an instrument to the practice of the rite and the maintenance of the mystic realm as it evolved and changed over time (223–224). Furthermore, art was not simply beholden to its status as an instrument for spiritual ends; by virtue of being man- made, a work of art also existed within a complex set of historical circumstances related to its construction and appreciation (Benjamin). Without the ability to replicate something through the use of mechanical means, Benjamin argued thusly that an object could not escape, as it were, its contextual uniqueness (223). It would take the emergence of new tools for artistic creation - ones that allowed an artist to reproduce a work of art - to finally and irrevocably alter the nature of art as historically placed artifact. The rise of digitized and mechanized methods of artistic production á la camera, microphone, and computer, enabled artists to approach art in an entirely new way: to produce and manipulate it as secularized data, information stripped of its associated context. It is in this way that a painting is rent asunder from its proverbial frame; no longer a singular entity hanging on the wall of a museum, a painting of the modern age exists as layers of a digital raster image, capable of being propagated and displayed on any myriad of digital devices across the world.

This phenomenon bears significant consequences. Artifacts that can be reproduced, as well as artifacts designed for reproducibility, do not simply separate art from context: as Benjamin

describes, they destroy it. The intrinsic relationship between an object and its context constitutes an artifact's "aura" - a particular kind of integrity that speaks to its unique and authentic identity (221). As Benjamin notes, reproduction "substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence;;" in the process of doing so, reproduction compromises the authenticity and authority of the original artifact (221). The realm of the aura thus recedes in importance with reproducible works to the point of becoming non- existent. Mediums born in the computer age such as the computer game epitomize the reproducible work; they are perfectly reproducible and entirely secularized from auratic appreciation.

It was not only Benjamin who proclaimed a potentially stark future for the work of art. In his *Simulacra and Simulation*, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard explored the implications of the aura's destruction for human life and society. Baudrillard argued that reality, the space in which all "auras" may be feasibly said to stem, is itself a fiction - an imaginary construct devised to allow for belief in the absolute. In the words of Baudrillard himself, what humans perceive as real is "a real without origin or reality;;" human meaning-making takes place within a "hyperreal" existence, one in which "reality" in its common connotation is does not exist (1). In place of the real, simulacra emerged: symbols, simulations, and representations that do not hold an original reference point. By holding the effects of reality without bearing the identity of the real, simulacra disrupt the dichotomy between reality and falsity, thus dislodging the notion of the absolutely "real" or "true." The collapse of "reality" signals the rise of a new epoch in human history: a "precession of simulacra" in which representation, rebelling from its origins, separates from reality and encloses itself within a contained loop of self-derivation and recombination (1).

One must wonder what implications we might draw out from Benjamin and Baudrillard's work. One interpretation is defeatist; it mourns the loss of the aura and of the dislodging of the absolute. But there may also be an optimistic interpretation of this unfolding of events. Meaning, rather than losing its value, has been reclaimed as a malleable, human-derived abstract; similarly, the aura has not been lost, rather being altered and revised in a way as to be a more fluid and experiential concept. If we are to look to the media of the modern age in search of evidence to corroborate either the former interpretation or the latter, we will find that it is not entirely either explanation - it is rather a mixture of both.

One need go no further to see that this is the case than to examine the state of affairs in modern music. As we might predict from our time with Benjamin, the rise of recorded music opened the gate for reckless textual appropriation, where songs may be stripped of their original cultural relations on a whim. There is indeed evidence to suggest that this may be the case for music. Websites designed for music propagation like SoundCloud are overflowing with artists cutting and mashing each other's work; one only need to input the search term "remix" on the site to discover hundreds upon thousands of songs that all reuse intact material from other musical compositions.

But there are also musical works that bear a deep sense of cultural sensitivity and care - works that choose to *revive* rather than reproduce. Such is the case with Daft Punk's latest work, *Random Access Memories*. Chosen at the Grammy Awards in 2013 as Album of the Year, *RAM* is a prime example of a revival of musical conventions and production methods long phased out from the musical mainstream (Past Winners Search). As noted in his review of the album, *Pitchfork* writer Mark Richardson describes how Daft Punk took a step away from their "highly influential, riff-

heavy EDM" in order to "luxuriate in the sounds, styles, and production techniques of the 1970s and early 80s." The duo, in an interview with NPR, described a desire with their album to replicate "a certain craftsmanship" that the group enjoyed about musical records produced during this period of time in western music. To do so, the pair chose to craft their songs with real artists rather than with electronic samples, collaborating with Golden Age artists like Nile Rodgers, Giorgio Moroder, and Paul Williams (Yanigun). Utilizing danceable tempos and the kind of instrumentation that characterized these earlier decades, Daft Punk created an album that did not merely dust off an old recording; instead, the group chose to revive, in full force, the musical vernacular and production methods of a prior time.

Daft Punk's own words confirm this line of thought, but also suggest something more. In the same interview, the electronic duo spoke of a desire to make their album "something composite (…) something that didn't really exist" (qtd. in Yanigun). Calling on a vast repertoire of musical skill cultivated throughout their prior work, Daft Punk recast the musical traditions of the past in their own image. Baselines and guitar riffs are organized into impeccably regular loops and timings; robotic voices croon notes of lyrical excitement and melancholy; harsh synths, orchestral overtures, and delicate ballads dance alongside the main disco-esque instrumentation (Daft Punk). By combining these musical elements in novel ways, *Random Access Memories* juxtaposes disparate musical elements such that they inform one another and establish new musical frontiers. The album is, without doubt, a revival - an album that re-establishes the music of the past in the present, reframing it within a new and novel context.

While more examples of revival within music like *RAM* can surely be found, it remains the case that the vast volume of musical creations in the digital age represent the former *reproductive* mode of cultural work rather than the *revivalist* mode. This, however, is not the case with video games. Only truly emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, computer games place themselves firmly after the collapse of the modern era (Video Game History Timeline); they bear characteristics that would epitomize the reproducible artifact. Despite this, games have not served as aura-less husks to the cultural machinery of the postmodern age. Rather, they stand as a medium more than any other in which revival has thrived and reproduction has not.

Take the game *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*. Published and developed by Capybara Games, *Sword & Sworcery* interweaves the conventions of a musical album with those of a video game. Placing the player into the shoes of a young girl named The Scythian, the game seamlessly links the movement of player and plot to a musical score that ebbs and flows throughout. Unlike most video games today, *Sword & Sworcery* does not use three-dimensional polygonal models to render scenes and characters; instead, the game uses sprites, pixel- based art assets that were common in the early days of computer game rendering due to limitations of then contemporary hardware. In choosing to work in the mode of past games rather than merely reproduce and replicate their conventions and content, *Sword & Sworcery* pushes beyond sprite art's artistic and technical boundaries. With the power of higher-resolution, wide color gamut monitors, *Sword & Sworcery's* artistry utilizes color, animation, and shape in a way that could not have been possible in the early days of the video game. In comparison to early sprite-based games, *Sword & Sworcery's* landscapes are massive and awe- inspiring; the in-game world is a beautiful, muted mix of greens, browns, and grays. Through its revival of sprite artwork, *Sword & Sworcery* thus propels the vital force of the games that served as its inspiration into the modern day.

The revival of sprite artwork is not the only kind of revival possible within a game. Video games are far more than mere visual affairs; indeed, one game contains within it multiple individually identifiable yet inextricably connected components, ranging from its storyline to its game engine. It is thus that we now examine another kind of video game revival: the revival of video game mechanics. A game that exemplifies the revival of older video game mechanics is Machine Games' *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. Released in May of 2014, *The New Order* is the third game in a reboot of iD Software's *Wolfenstein* franchise, a series that pits players against a sci-fi-inflected Nazi Germany (Gies). Part of a long-running lineage of first person shooters that finds its beginnings at the genesis of the genre itself, *The New Order* is a game that discards many of the common game conventions and mechanics adopted by most first person shooters today. While single-player campaigns in series like *Battlefield* feature regenerating health and greater physical presence for the player's avatar, *The New Order* utilizes a pack- based health and armor system and grants the player a near-superhuman level of agility (Battlefield 4; Wolfenstein). As described by Arthur Gies in his review of the game for *Polygon*, the developers took mechanics in the *The New Order* "back to [the series'] roots" in the "old school" era of first person shooters, with a gameplay system that even allowed the player to dual wield "every weapon available" and still have the ability to use weapons in "alternate firing modes." In this way, *The New Order* resuscitates the same feeling of environmental traversal and interaction that characterized its ancestral forebears.

But rather than merely reproducing these game mechanics, *The New Order* repossesses and extends their underlying logic. With the flexibility afforded by modern game development engines and software, Machine Games introduced new traversal mechanics for the series, such as sliding to cover, peeking and firing past walls, and even combating the Nazi threat through the use of silenced pistols and other clandestine weaponry. Such elements, with the potential to disrupt the more traditional mechanics of the game, were rather skillfully and artfully integrated as part of a cohesive vision for the game's mechanics and varying play styles. Through dynamically revisiting and revising the original *Wolfenstein's* mechanics, Machine Games sidestepped the sterility and stagnancy of simple reconstitution and created a game which sustains the traditions and conventions that came before it.

It is thus that video games, despite their entirely digital nature, embody a reaffirming vision for the future of cultural creation. Though embattled and forced to constantly redefine itself, the aura lives; in the same way, we may also see that meaning also remains. But their vitality remains contingent on the care they are afforded by their human guardians. If video games are to be any indicator, it would seem that the importance of this cultural stewardship has not been lost. Revivalist video games and other cultural works that work in the revivalist mode demonstrate that our cultural future burns bright.

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