

Publisher as Curator: Devolver Digital's Retro Aesthetic Revival

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Keywords

Devolver Digital, Hotline Miami, curatorial, culture jamming, remediation, retro aesthetics, indie, independent

INTRODUCTION

To curate something is an act of articulation. This paper examines the curatorial role played by independent publisher Devolver Digital. Devolver distributes “boutique” indie games that remediate the arcade action game using retro-styled aesthetics. Since 2011, Devolver has earned a reputation as a curator of quality indie games by publishing and distributing a number of neo-retro titles. This paper draws from the corpus of Devolver’s games for its archive, focusing on their breakout title, *Hotline Miami* (2011), but also including *Luftrausers* (2014), *Downwell* (2015), *Broforce* (2015), and *Mother Russia Bleeds* (2016). These are games made by teams of only a few individuals that, whether due to financial and/or time constraints or not, reject modern developments in graphics and rendering software. While playing *Hotline Miami* for the first time evoked a very particular nostalgia for the 8-bit and 16-bit video games of my childhood, I also recognized that what I was interacting with is an exquisitely dystopian form of computer art. A transgressive form of computer art that deliberately rejects the polish favored by mainstream triple-A produced games while also emphasizing the specific media affordances of the computer as medium.

This paper reads Devolver’s neo-retro games as dialogic instances of “culture jamming” – a memetic form of political communication that recodes recognizable symbols to alert the observer to other problems and motives behind the semiotic surface. These games deny the potential for high definition and near-photorealist visuals that the computer as artistic medium provides. At the same time, they self-reflexively employ multiple various aesthetic techniques, elements, and forms from other mediums in a sustained act of critical intermediality. So while a game like *Hotline Miami* may look like a glitch-ridden relic of 1980s microcomputer culture, it is in fact performing an ideological critique by invoking other formats, histories, and narratives.

This project is about taking the distinctiveness of Devolver seriously. The retro aesthetics employed by Devolver’s games are given shape by the immateriality of the digital format that rests on nothing less than a radical politics of visual literacy. The ways that retro

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2017

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games imbricate and supersede older media formats is a variation on what the great political scientist Joseph Schumpeter termed “creative destruction” (1942). A retooling of orthodox Marxist thought, creative destruction neatly describes the restructuring of an economic base through the usually base-determined forces of superstructure. Being able to parse and decode the meanings of images is crucial in today’s globally networked information society. Retro games, then, are playable forms of culture jamming that take part in a project of reclaiming and reconfiguring meaning through aesthetic devices. Culture jamming is elastic and inherently sociopolitical in that it challenges the commercial and ideological images used by corporations and governments alike. Since images are neither true nor false, what culture jamming does is interrogate the verisimilitude of signs and symbols to understand the messages encoded in cultural products. Of course, one must first be literate in order to read signs.

The indie game scene’s broader embrace of retro aesthetics has not gone unnoticed in the academy but currently remains critically under-theorized. Maria B. Garda has contributed to understanding the role of memory in design aesthetics in her insightful DiGRA essay categorizing two types of retro or nostalgia games (2013). Garda differentiates between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgic tendencies in recent game design (Ibid.). In this instance restorative refers to older, often canonical games such as *Super Mario Bros.* being re-released on modern consoles and hardware, usually through online stores and digital distribution, while reflective nostalgia describes neo-retro games that reference past styles and appeal to player memory. Robin Sloan has usefully applied Garda’s distinction to write about how digital games provide a means of critical constructive dialogue with their own histories and practices (2016). Specifically, Sloan contends that “nostalgia games” – which he defines as “any contemporary game that explicitly incorporates past aesthetics, design philosophies, or emulated technical limitations” – are not simply a means for developers to pander to consumer’s nostalgic longings but instead use pastiche and parody to engage in a form of critical imitation (Ibid.). Sloan compares *Braid* (Blow 2008) to *Super Mario Bros.* (Miyamoto 1985) to argue that neo-retro games can constitute “playable explorations of the past”, importantly providing researchers and designers multiple means to engage with game history (Ibid.).

My paper builds from these papers and draws from the fields of art history and image studies. Describing the poetics of Devolver’s arcade action games expands upon work done on the contemporary indie dev community’s embrace of retro aesthetics in order to better understand the reconfiguration of image and sound relationships in the digital game medium as a whole. On a theoretical level, this project interrogates the field’s ontological conceptions of what elements meaningfully define video games as such. Critically addressing how digital games remediate other visual and narrative strategies is a crucial first step in understanding the broader industrial strategies of game developers and publishers. On an industrial level, my work shows how a small publisher’s process of self-framing can positively disrupt the larger industry. The media affordances peculiar to digital games and their creation of intrinsically ordered-cum-hierarchical utopian spaces make them ideal vehicles for the deployment of ideology. I consider how formally unpacking the artifice of digital game aesthetics and mechanics demonstrates how games are always already in critical conversation with not only their own medium specificity but also the history of the industry and media form itself, as well as other related visual cultures and histories.

OPTIONAL BIO

Morgan C. O'Brien is an amateur coder, stop motion animator, and Amiga 500 aficionado from Scotland. He is currently a Ph.D candidate in the media studies program at The University of Texas at Austin.

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