The Evolutionary Logic of Childhood in Retro Game Design

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Keywords

childhood, recapitulation theory, retro aesthetics, evolution

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This presentation focuses on *Evoland* (2013), *Undertale* (2015), and *Baldi's Basics in Education and Learning* (2018) – three video games embracing various types of retro design – and argues that the logic behind their employments of childhood, understood as a cultural construct, can be traced back to G. Stanley Hall's recapitulation theory.

Originating from, and subsequently questioned by the natural sciences, where it postulated that the biological evolution of a given species is mirrored by the individual development of its representatives, the recapitulation theory proved inspiring for cultural and pedagogical conceptualizations of childhood. The idea of a parallel between the *homo sapiens* evolution and the socio-psychological development of a child inspired Hall's influential theorization of youth, groundbreaking in its argument for the significance of adolescence and teenage identity (Hall 1904). The contemporary humanities find Hall's output highly problematic due to its prominent connections with scientific racism and eugenic theories (Bederman 1995). What, however, is most relevant for this presentation is the very conceptualization of childhood as indexing evolutionary process, or at least historical transformation – in the proposed discussion applied to the video game medium.

The analysis aims to track down a specific tendency within retro game design rather than generalize about it, because digital games' engagements both with their own history (Garda 2014) and with constructions of childhood are multifarious and far from uniform. Christopher Goetz (2018) analyzes the economic "queerness" that brings together the very categories of games and children in how they both imply pursuit of pleasure and loss rather than productivity. In critical as well as popular discourses, video games are often depicted as an attribute of children's culture (Ermi and Mäyrä 2003, Fromme 2003), and ascribed positive or negative potential with regard to young people's intellectual, moral, and psychological development. Also aesthetic and narrative inspirations with childhood in video games, exemplified, among others, by the *BioShock* series (2007-2014), *The Last of Us* (2013), or *My Memory of Us* (2018), constitute a prolific area for critical exploration.

This particular presentation is focused on the three case studies in which the dynamics between childhood and the medium's past makes relevant contributions to the games' meta-reflective layers. In *Evoland* the childlike character design and cartoonish gameworld aesthetic visualize the game's meta theme – video games' technical

evolution. While the protagonist does not expressly progress from child to adult on the visual or narrative level, his evolving attacks, combat modes, weapons, and design subscribe to the maturation paradigm employed, first and foremost, to illustrate the growth of the game medium.

Undertale's narrative layer acknowledges, though does not centralize, the player character's youth. The aesthetic naivety of the protagonist's appearance and of the entire gameworld resonates with the game's narrative and procedural exploration of pacifism (Seraphine 2018), as well as its retro design. Bringing those two qualities together, visual cuteness and childishness may be seen as a tool of meta-game irony confronting the combative and power-oriented gameplay conventions established in the course of the game medium's history.

Baldi's Basics . . . engages childhood on the aesthetic, narrative, and gameplay levels in order to construct a meta-medium commentary on 1990s' edutainment (Couture 2018). The game's uncanny character designs, some of which clearly allude to child drawings, not only help in establishing the player's position as a pupil, but also bring out the visual awkwardness of the educational games popular in the 1990s. The game employs childhood as a crucial factor in the development of its ironic and meta-reflective potential both by combining the apparently innocent edutainment convention with the gameplay structure of survival horror (Couture 2018) and evoking the nostalgic context of a specific generation's game-related experience.

Thus, the analyzed childhood-as-evolution logic reveals itself as paradoxical. It reinforces the games' critical meta-reflections on the history of the video game medium and helps them challenge its conventions. In doing so, however, it simultaneously subscribes to a paradigmatic tradition of othering and objectifying childhood for the sake of an intellectual project (Jenks 2005).

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