

From Replay to Revisit

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The history of games is never far away for both players and those studying the medium. Writing about games and nostalgia, Taylor and Whalen point out that our historical gaming experiences shape “our understanding of video games and our approaches to their analysis” (2008, 4). The decades-old industry, with generations of gamers, actively references and commodifies the medium’s past within contemporary games under the banner of “retro” (Suominen 2008; Wulf et al. 2018). This paper goes retro too, not in a sense of focusing on reviving nostalgic aesthetics, but in a sense of *returning* to games. We explore what it means to go back to games we have played before, commonly referred to as replaying. The notion of replaying, we argue however, does not describe all the encounters we have with games we played before, encounters which nonetheless can seminally shape our understanding of games in the present and future. As such, we explore the notion of *revisiting* games as a supplement to more traditional notions of replaying. This, we argue, also facilitates a reappraisal of game analysis perspectives often rendered peripheral.

Our interest in revisiting games was triggered by a recent exploratory discussion by Consalvo and Phelps focusing on the notion of re-experiencing media. Here, they specifically explored the interconnectedness between *rereading* of books (and potentially other non-ergodic media) and the *replaying* of games (2022). Outlining potential motivations for replay, they focused solely on linear games featuring unchanging stories. This ensured that the experience between players did not deviate too much and helped them find interesting commonalities between rereading and replaying (2022). Our aim is to significantly expand the scope of discussing and understanding the potential replay experiences of games with different forms of progress (like branching story games, or open-world games), player counts beyond singleplayer, and through paratextual encounters with games. As a verb, ‘revisiting’ also extends the notion of replay experience itself - especially when we consider its

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dual dictionary meaning of considering or taking up again, as well as going to a place again.

To understand the relevance of this dual meaning we can turn to the growing but relatively fringe emphasis on types of gameplay experiences focusing less on the instrumental aspects of games (ie. rules, goals, progression) but instead on the more aesthetic, affective, explorative dimensions of play. Within the industry, some journalistic efforts have through the years shown that such a focus can be a fruitful way to present the gaming experiences (e.g. Dibbell 1999, Rossignol 2008, Dimopoulos 2020). As Gillen argued in his ‘new games journalism’ manifesto, game critics should be considered ‘travel journalists to imaginary places’ whose job was to ‘describe what it’s like to visit a place that doesn’t exist outside of the gamer’s head’ (2004). While this more personal, experiential approach never dominated the style for professional games writing, it struck a chord as a valid alternative to the more tonally objective, instrumentally oriented approaches (cf. Foxman & Nieborg 2016). Within game studies, despite a similar dominant focus on traditional forms of formal game analysis, throughout the years we have seen alternatives too. Scholars for instance have reported back on large online game worlds through ethnographic techniques (e.g. Taylor 2006; Nardi 2010; Carter 2022). More recently, a more experiential approach to understanding the gaming experience has also extended to single-player games (e.g. Fizek 2022, Kagen 2022), including attention for its methodological potential and implications (cf. Van Vught & Glas 2018). Relevant exceptions aside (e.g. Robinson & Bowman 2021), few explicitly discuss the notion of *re*-playing or indeed *re*-visiting, ie. understanding what it means to *return* to games. The focus in our paper is to offer various alternatives perspectives, a few of which are discussed below. The example game is *Assassin’s Creed*, a single-player game that offers (re)visiting (un)known locations, both in-game and through the interplay of text and paratext (ie. associated films and books).

Revisiting in a videogame is often connected with quantifiable completion; for example, in *Assassin’s Creed* games, a location is ‘marked complete’ when all the activities and treasure chests have been accessed. Whether a place may be ‘exhausted’ is questioned by George Perec with his repeated visits to Paris’ Place Saint Sulpice in his book, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (1982). Revisits in a game arguably involve a challenge to the *telos* of the game and, as in Perec, each revisit reveals experiential differences within the repetition, some surreal or even paradoxical. A revisit can also be a reconstruction. A real place of the present or past can be revisited in a videogame reconstruction which, as YouTube videos of *Assassin’s Creed* show (cf. Super Bunnyhop 2019), is both representative and sometimes convincingly ‘real’. It is equally possible to revisit a place in real life after visiting its videogame counterpart. The affective experience of such a revisit blurs distinctions between the real and the imagined. This is further complicated with the eminent possibility that a game recasts a place within very Western perspectives such as the fictional Syria or Jerusalem in *Assassins’s Creed* which has been criticized for its orientalist representation of the Middle East (cf. Šisler 2008).

Revisiting can also relate to the paratextual surrounds of games (e.g. Beil, Freyermuth & Schmidt 2021). Players can for instance revisit games through book adaptations. For example, revisiting the Florence of the games in Oliver Bowden’s book *Assassin’s Creed: Renaissance* is a very different and yet similar experience to the original gameplay. Re-entering a game after having consumed YouTube videos, making-of books, or strategy guides about it does not merely have the potential to change the play experience. An artistic appraisal of a game’s design might for instance impact the focus within a game to a more aesthetic experience, changing the overall perception and play. TParatextual material can thus help us understand why and *how* we revisit games.

The notion of revisiting, then, seeks not to replace but to enrich the notions of rereading and replaying games, both from a leisure and an analytical perspective. We argue it offers rich insights into how and why we return to games and the worlds and ludic experiences they contain.

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