Between preservation and nostalgic fantasy. Approaches to fanmade remasters.

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EXTENTED ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present issues related to alternative forms of game remastering through community modifications. Remasters and remakes are a popular element of contemporary digital game publishing, studied from the perspectives of nostalgia and platform studies (Brown 2024; Neill Hoch 2020). However, I propose to extend these perspectives to include the previously under-researched role of game mods as one form of game remastering. A form that is all the more important as an alternative to the industry practices and carries different meanings. The return of games in the form of remasters is inextricably linked to game consoles. Platforms with pre-defined hardware configurations have kept games in time, which had to be adapted to their capabilities, usually limited in relation to the PC version. It is console users who benefit most from them, through technical upgrades or, in some cases, simply the possibility of running the game on a new generation of hardware.

Given the openness of the system to file modifications, the main field for modders comes with PC games. Through a grassroots commitment to improving commercial titles, we are dealing with both a transgressive activity that is part of prosumerism and cognitive capitalism (Frelik 2016). Thus, for example, in Espen Aarseth and Pawel Grabarczyk's classification of game versions (2019), they mark the presence of graphic mods only as different versions from remasters. As I will show, especially in the case of PC games, the notions of mods and remasters can be identical in content and form. The difference in the context of creation makes it necessary to describe this phenomenon separately, taking into account the analysis of the discourse related to game remasters. For the purposes of this presentation, I would like to highlight three categories of fan made remasters that I consider particularly relevant in terms of the functions they fulfill and their relationship to the digital games industry:

- Modding as archiving: Games are constantly disappearing from official access. According to a recent study, more than 80% of pre-2010 games have

disappeared from sale (Salvador 2023). While fans cannot restore official access to withdrawn games, they can facilitate the launch of classic games by introducing compatibility with new operating systems and hardware (Barbier 2014). Modders go a step further by introducing the usual quality-of-life improvements and graphical upgrades typical of remasters. It is important to note the grey context of these activities. As noted above, the mere fact of modifying games is sometimes a violation of insufficiently detailed licensing agreements (Kretzschmar and Stanfill 2019). In the case of 'abandoned' games, the issue of users obtaining copies of the game should also be considered. In some cases, such as the *NOLF Revival project*, mods are available for download along with cracked versions of the withdrawn games *No One Lives Forever* (Monolith Productions 2000). Thus, it can be argued that in such cases there is a symbolic community takeover of the game and its co-creation in order to preserve future access. Although amateur archivists face similar issues of restorative nostalgia to professional developers of retro game ports (Garda 2013).

- Modding as an alternative to an official release: Commercial remasters and remakes are not always seen as valuable improvements to a game, even when they are well received. Games like *Silent Hill 2* (Bloober Team 2024) are not so much upgraded upon the original, but rather transformations of it into a different, modernised game. At the same time, Konami chose not to provide access to the original game (Konami 2001). At the same time, however, *Silent Hill 2: Enhanced Edition* (Town of Silent Hill 2024) was released, an unofficial remaster of the classic horror game to modern HD standards. The improvements are therefore less radical than in the official release. However, such an alternative also applies to games whose original versions are still available but no longer supported by the IP owners, such as *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997). The title lived to see the *Echo-S 7* modification (Tsunamods 2023), which introduced full voice acting. Combined with numerous modifications offering high-resolution character models and backgrounds, it makes the game's presentation more similar to later entries in the series, while retaining the original's game design as a turn-based JRPG, as opposed to the action-adventure formula of *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix 2020).
- Game mods as a playground for new technologies: These projects connect gaming communities to the games industry most closely while exploiting cognitive capital (Dyer-Witheford and Peuter 2009, Postigo 2010). On the one hand, allowing fans to officially work on modifying and improving games ennobles fan-made upgrades as valuable as professional game production. However, this is an apparent equilibrium, in which the long-standing activities of modders, although they may be commercialised, as in the case of the remake of *Half-Life* (Valve Corporation 1998) under the title *Black Mesa* (Crowbar Collective 2020), ultimately increase the recognition of corporate IP. This means that these official mods are still burdened with the consequences of playbour (Kücklich 2005, Sotamaa 2007). Another issue concerns Nvidia and its RTX Remix toolkit. The company encourages fans to remaster old game assets using AI and add ray-tracing effects. The latter element in particular is questionable, as it turns classic games into a space for testing new technologies and altering their visual layer in a way that

contradicts the original artistic vision (which could not assume reliance on technology that did not exist at the time).

The paper will provide a critical perspective on grassroots game remastering initiatives as an under-researched practice in the face of current discourses on nostalgia and game preservation. It will be argued that despite the argumentation of fidelity to the original experience, modders also fall into the trap of imposing a contemporary interpretation on classic games. In the face of these practices, James Newman's theses (2012) about the disappearance of games as creations set in a specific temporal context, which new versions will not recreate, remain accurate. Even if fans aim to be more faithful to the source material than the developers.

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