



Current Trends in Retro Gaming Research

Jaakko Suominen and Elina Vaahensalo

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June 6, 2019

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Jaakko Suominen

Digital Culture
School of History, Culture and Arts Studies
20014 University of Turku, Finland
jaakko.suominen@utu.fi

Elina Vaahensalo

Digital Culture
School of History, Culture and Arts Studies
20014 University of Turku, Finland
elina.vaahensalo@utu.fi

Keywords

retro gaming, game studies, meta review, methodology

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over ten years ago, retrogaming was recognized as a rising trend in game cultures (Newman 2004; see also Suominen 2008). Retrogaming was then defined as present-day gaming with the use of genuine (1970s - early 1990s) game devices and applications, or emulators for playing old games (Newman 2004). On the other hand, retrogaming was defined more broadly as a general term for subcultures that appreciate old computer games (Saarikoski 2004, 254).

It has been argued that retrogaming actually began to emerge already in the late 1980s and in the 1990s while computer and game hobbyists started to perceive changes in digital game cultures and experience “deaths” of their favorite gaming platforms as well as began individually and collectively nostalgize the earlier forms of digital gaming. (Suominen et al. 2015.) This game cultural turn however, wasn’t really recognized by scholars before retrogaming started to become mainstream and gaining more visible economic importance in the early 2000s.

Retrogaming research has started to appear largely after the year 2007 and have touched various retrogaming related topics, such as retro elements in new games, retrogaming hobbyist cultures, representations of retrogaming, retrogaming journalism, retrogaming’s economic value, as well as retrogaming’s connections to theoretical concepts such as nostalgia (see also Whalen & Taylor 2008).

In this paper, we make an overview of the current retrogaming research and investigate its connections to media mix or ludo mix, at least from two different perspectives. Firstly, we explore how the retrogaming research has perceived different game versions and by-products of games as part of retrogaming cultures, as well as how retro gaming has been recognized in

more general research literature of popular cultural products. Secondly, we study what kind of games have typically been mentioned in retrogaming research literature in order to see what could have been possibly overlooked and how self-critical the retrogaming research has been so far.

The paper offers a synthesis of one sub-area of game studies, as well as helps to reveal connections between game studies and other fields of popular cultural and media studies. In addition, the paper suggests potential new avenues for retrogaming research to pursue in the future.

For this paper, we have examined over 40 research papers and monographs dealing with retrogaming published in the period 2011-2018. We have searched the Google Scholar database using the keyword “retrogaming”, as well as investigated papers that have referred to the most cited (within this database) early on retrogaming (Suominen 2008). We have limited the data to include only publications that explicitly refer to retrogaming instead of including publications that address, for example, “nostalgia in games” or “classic games”. The publications were analyzed based on how they referred to retrogaming. In addition, we analyzed how the concepts of retrogaming and retro games were defined in the publications and how critically the concepts were used. Since in this study, we emphasize making an overview of the current retrogaming research, our data comprises of publications from 2008 onwards.

We have divided the publications in the following categories: 1) publications that directly focus on retrogaming and 2) publications that mention retrogaming as a side note or as a part of more general inquiry.

Based on the ways these publications refer to retrogaming, the first category consists of the following subcategories: a) retrogaming communities and player identity, b) retro game design and case examples of retro games, and c) game experiences and gaming memories.

The second category can be divided into several subcategories as well based on the references to retro gaming: a) utilization of nostalgia in product design and marketing, b) (game)history and oral histories, c) game music, d) online discussion cultures, e) history of media and technology, and f) general nostalgia related to media cultures.

In the first category of publications, retrogaming is dealt from the perspective of player experiences (Gazzard 2016; Heineman 2014), game cultures (Hörtnagl 2016; Allington 2016) and game design (Thibault 2016; Ravi & Ruhaiyem 2016; Sloan 2015). In the second category, retrogaming is approached, for example, from the perspective of commercialization or as part of a larger media culture phenomenon (Goetz 2018, Williams 2014, Zünd et al. 2015). In conclusion, in the first category, approaches appear within game cultures, and in the second, category perspectives come from outside game cultures. Another result of our research is, that in most cases, the concepts relating to retrogaming are examined more critically in publications with retrogaming in a more prominent role. Retrogaming is often uncritically

approached as a sort of buzzword in the publications that only briefly mention retrogaming.

We suggest that further research of retrogaming should engage in a more critical analysis of retrogaming as a concept, for example exploring various reasons for dealing with old digital games, as well as analysis of how the retrogaming have transformed towards newer platforms and games. In addition, one could do more research on retrogaming communities themselves: how do they include and exclude games and platforms in their activities, as well as how do they include or exclude different groups of people.

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