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<center>Benjamin's Aura in Video Game Remastering</center>

Although initially presented as a response to the political ramifications of artistic reproduction and distribution (namely in relation to the Nazi fascist regime of the 1940's), Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has since become an important cornerstone in both art and media theory. Benjamin's concept of 'aura' can be applied to any artistic medium, from painting to film to woodwork and beyond, though many modern critics argue that in the wake of the digitally connected age and mass immediate reproduction, it is now outdated and largely irrelevant. I, however, stand alongside critics like Douglas Davis, who in examining aura in a modern context in his "An Evolving Thesis" argues that the idea still "persists… (though) it must be further transformed… to survive the assault brought on by the digital age" (Davis 384). Indeed, Benjamin's conceptions of aura are rooted in his time in that he considers film a new media and is unable to look farther ahead than cinema with synchronous audio, but sections of his argument are nonetheless still relevant today.

My intention is to examine Benjamin's concept of aura in context of an artistic technology that he and his theory perhaps never imagined: video games. My goal is not merely to view modern games through Benjamin's lens, however, as so much of the concept of aura is focused upon an artwork's position in place and time. Instead, I mean to specifically discuss the recent trend of video game 'remastering', and show what is gained and lost through the process within the framework of artistic aura.

It is first necessary to provide an overview of what Benjamin means when he refers to 'aura'. Benjamin argues an art object's aura exudes from "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin 1168). The concept is perhaps most easily understood when applied to a painting, as changes to the original piece are also essential to aura, such as any physical damage or the item's history of ownership. By extension, if a duplicate of said painting were to be made, whether reproduced manually or by technical means, no matter how accurate it is, it's aura would be "lacking", and it's "authenticity" diminished, as it would not possess the qualities that make the original special (1168). Benjamin describes this relationship as "[detaching] the reproduced object from the domain of (artistic) tradition" (1169). Put another way, one does not view a photograph of the Mona Lisa to see the photograph - the photograph is 'looked through' to try and experience the painting; for all intents and purposes, the photograph itself is worth only the few cents of ink it holds.

Another aspect of aura that is important to this discussion is that of distance, which Benjamin explores when describing the aura of natural wonders, such as mountain ranges. From far away, the sight of the mountain range is beautiful and in full view: here the aura is the strongest. Benjamin goes on to suggest that modern artistic reproduction expresses human desire to have such wonders closer and more easily accessible. Following this logic with the example of the mountain range, if the viewer was to go and stand on the mountain itself, they would certainly be closer, but what made the initial view of the mountains special is lost in the process. Benjamin regards this closeness as the destruction of an objects aura (1170). This relationship of aura and distance can also be applied in a temporal sense, with regards to a sense of nostalgia or appreciation of things far in the past. This aspect of aura is one of the most prominent reasons

why video games are remastered, though before exploring the topic further, it is helpful to explore exactly what makes up the aura of a modern digital game.

Undoubtedly, the aura of an art object like a digital game is more complicated than that of more static art objects. As opposed to the previously explored example of the painting, where the aura is derived from the existence and history of the original object, I argue the aura of a video game is instead the sum of the human experiences created as a result of interaction with its many different integrated parts and influences. Since there can be hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of copies of a game in public circulation, there is no 'authentic' copy which all others are derived from; the authenticity rather comes from the game's emotional and historical impacts upon humans both individually and collectively. First and foremost, one element of a game's aura is the personal connection established between an individual and their own experiences playing, between the player and the game. These experiences constitute anything that has an impact on the player, whether positive or negative, including victories, artwork, story, and even technical bugs and shortcomings - the list is non-exhaustive and truly subjective to each player's tastes. Taking a step back, the next aspect of game aura is connected to any aspects of community that develop inside of or because of a game. The most obvious example of community in relation to video games is multiplayer gaming, either in local or online play, where relationships between players are just as important (if not more so) as the gameplay. Outside of the games themselves, communities also develop in everything from small-scale personal friendships to large-scale player forums and private servers, Youtube celebrities, and even professional 'ESports' leagues, with each one making up part of a game's unique identity. Finally, taking yet another step back, a game's aura is also highly contingent upon the public/critical response, as well as the conditions of the gaming industry as a whole at the time it

is released. This final step is most closely related to Benjamin's considerations of space and time, and includes any cultural influences upon the game, or in turn derived from it. The sum of all these parts makes up something Davis describes as "the originality of the moment" in which a digital art object is encountered (Davis 386). In relation to video games, this 'moment' in a public sense is best defined as the period where the game title is at its height of popularity, a time span that can last from a series of months to years depending on the type of game and its success in the marketplace. Defining the individual player's 'moment' is a bit trickier, but can generally be regarded as the period of time when a player starts and stops playing, or when the main content of the game has been completed. These 'moments' are critical to understanding how aura applies to the process of remastering, but first it is necessary to define the process itself.

Video game remastering has always been dependent on two things: technology and player demand. The first game remasters, or more appropriately named for the period, remakes or ports, were those that moved titled from arcade cabinets to home consoles, as the technology shrunk and allowed for more powerful games to be played without the massive space and cost requirements. There were usually few changes between these remastered titles and their predecessors, save for graphical alterations (such as colour palette swaps) required by the given system and changes to the interface to facilitate the use of a handheld controller instead of a joystick. Game remasters like this were meant to provide game titles to the largest possible audience, and continued until home game consoles (including computers) became affordable and powerful enough that arcade games moved out of the spotlight.

Given that the motivations for releasing these arcade game remasters can be described as primarily situational and economically driven, I do not consider them wholly relevant to my argument. Instead I am concerned with game remasters from the mid 1990's to present, where

games are not just rereleased with as few changes from the original as possible, but rather are 'modernized' with higher resolution graphics and improved performance, and often times have new features added as well. An example of this practice can be found in the remaster of the popular shooter *Halo: Combat Evolved*. The remaster, titled *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary* released in 2011, 10 years after the original first came out in 2001. The first game was a launch title for the original XBOX home console, and the remastered title released on the vastly more powerful XBOX360 (and later again on the XBOX One), promising "remastered graphics", "new challenges, and new fiction to uncover" and "voice commands" via the XBOX Kinect (343). With all of the changes made, the ultimate goal of the game was to allow players, both old and new, to "experience one of the most beloved franchises in gaming history" (343). While the remaster was both commercially and critically successful (scoring an 82 on the influential Metacritic website), I've selected it as an example because it also included a specific feature: the ability to toggle between the updated graphics and the 'original' graphics at any moment during gameplay with the press of a button on the controller. Such a feature both connects to Benjamin's concept of distance, and speaks volumes about why gamers desire games to be remastered in the first place; it will be returned to further on.

I believe that Benjamin's ideas about distance in relation to an art object's aura are applicable when comparing digital game remasters and their originals, though not in expressly the same way that he defines them. Thinking about distance in a temporal sense, Benjamin's argument for the human desire for the 'closeness' of art objects applies to games through player nostalgia, though it is something that extends beyond a desire to play a game merely because it was fun in the past. In his essay "Videology: Video-Games as Postmodern Sites/Sights of Ideological Reproduction", in reference to the influence of digital games, Simon Gottschalk

argues that they have the power to change "global and social landscapes as well as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural codes with which we engage them" (Gottschalk 2). The experiences transmitted by interacting with a video game in this sense are profoundly transformative, both at an individual and at a cultural level. Therefore, an individual could feel nostalgia for a game not just because of the gameplay therein, but also for the transformative effects that game had upon them when first played, especially because most modern gamers generally encounter digital games during their rapidly changing childhood/teenage years. This idea of a transformative period, or moment, can also be connected to Davis' argument for "the originality of [a digital artwork's] moment" being the modern equivalent of Benjamin's aura (Davis 386). Putting the two ideas together, the nostalgia for, or, the desire for closeness of, older digital games then can be seen as an individual not simply wanting to replay a game for the game itself, but also because of their memory of how the game changed them when they first encountered it. What they want, in part, out of remastered games is to somehow get closer to and recapture the original's aura.

Whenever a game is remastered, the most important question asked about it, aside from the quality of the remastering process itself, ultimately becomes 'Does it hold up', or does the game still have the aura it once did? According to Benjamin's argument about the reduced or even destroyed aura of reproductions, the answer is no, a position which game critics seem to support as well. Considering the pace at which the digital games industry has changed and grown since its inception, games that are even just a few years old can seem clunky, and almost primitive by current standards. Using a recent title as an example, influential magazine PCGAMER reviewed the 2016 remaster of the 1993 LucasArts puzzle game *Day of the Tentacle*, a review that was mostly positive with an overall score of 87, except for the caveat that "[the

game's] roots in '90s adventure game design are undeniable" (Kelly). While the history of the development of gaming genres certainly is not my focus here, this comment refers the trend of older puzzle games including extremely convoluted challenges that served to extend gameplay time in compensation for an otherwise brief game due to technical restrictions of the day. Modern puzzle games by comparison are arguably 'easier', though they are significantly longer as a result of the allowances of advanced game technologies. This example shows just one way the industry has changed in just over 20 years time, and there are certainly countless others (many that have occurred within just a few years time, such as the advent of VR technologies). When a remastered game is encountered by a modern gamer then, owing to a familiarity with the conventions of modern gaming, even with modernized graphics and accessibility features, the experience feels foreign or even frustrating by comparison, regardless if they played the original game before. It is not only the game industry that changes, though: the player does as well. As games are interactive transformative experiences, the character of the player is just as important as the game itself. For both these reasons, I suggest that playing a remastered game is similar to the experience of viewing a photograph of a painting. The remastered game acts as a window through which to view, or experience, the original title's moment, it's aura. As both gaming conventions and the players who interact with them change over time however, the aura of the initial experience can never be fully recaptured. This reasoning applies to the concept of distance as well, as while the memory of old gameplay experiences incite the desire to replay old games, when revisited they never play quite as well as they once did.

So if in keeping with Benjamin's argument and a game's original aura is altered or lost through the remastering process, what does the player gain by playing such games? Here it is helpful to return to the previously discussed graphics-switching feature from the *Halo: Combat*

Evolved remastered title. I believe that giving players the ability to switch between the original and the modernized graphics is an attempt on the part of the developers to bridge the gap between the game's original aura, and the auras like those encountered with other modern game titles, a process which generates a new aura for the game somewhere between the old and the new. While this mindset can be applied to all video game remasters, it also presents the greatest division from Benjamin's argument, as through it remasters are at the same time both a reproduction, as well as an evolution. A remastered game is as much a reproduction of something old, as it is a whole new entity; it draws from an existing aura, but also exerts its own. Recalling Davis, this transition is possible because of the subjective and moment-centric auras of digital games. The object-focused auras of other art objects do not facilitate this type of evolution because anything other than the original object lacks authenticity. As most video game remasters are quite literally 'built on top' of the foundations of old games, they still possess some degree of the original's authenticity, while at the same time their modernized features strive to generate something different. Players want remasters like these not just to replay old games and reproduce experiences they once knew, but also to see those same experiences evolve and reflect the ways that they as gamers and the industry as a whole has changed.

Though Benjamin had nothing like digital games in mind when he conceptualized his principles of artistic aura, they are still applicable today, albeit in a modified fashion that reflects the modern digitally connected age. However, just as old video games are remastered to court audiences with aspects of artistic auras both past and present, so too must Benjamin's argument continue to be examined and updated to remain relevant as new forms of digital art emerge. Every piece of art has an aura of some sort connected to it, and as critics look towards the future, Benjamin's principles will certainly continue to direct and inform exactly how they are defined.

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