

# Videogames as remediated memories: commodified nostalgia and hyperreality in Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon and Gone Home

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## Abstract

In the last decade, the maturation of the first generation of gamers has underpinned growing discussion of nostalgia for and in videogames. This paper considers how the search for a connection to our past can be satisfied through consumption of the richly remediated memories represented in nostalgic videogames. *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* and *Gone Home* are analysed framed by Baudrillard's theories of consumer objects and simulation. These videogames make extensive use of 1980s and 1990s cultural referents. In particular, they embed references to media (such as music, film, and television) that epitomise memories of these periods. The aim of the paper is to discuss the ways in which the videogames commodify nostalgia in order to fulfil a consumer need for retrospection, and to examine the extent to which they provide a simulation of cultural memory that blurs historical reality with period modes of representation.

*Keywords:* hyperreality, memory, nostalgia, remediation, videogames

### Introduction

Over the course of the 7<sup>th</sup> generation of videogames (approximately 2005-2013 and including the Xbox 360, Playstation 3, and Wii) there has been a growing fascination with collective memories of both videogames and gaming culture. Nostalgia for videogames has become prevalent within gaming communities and, subsequently, in associated media and product consumption. The nostalgic value of videogame hardware has stimulated retention or collection of outmoded technologies (Bell, 2004), with a noteworthy example being a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) cartridge that made headlines when it was added to eBay with a first bid of \$4,999 (BBC News, 2014). Marketing companies and retailers have sought to latch on to gaming nostalgia by designing and selling products that rekindle memories of packaging and music from late adolescence (Edge Staff, 2012). But perhaps the most significant development of all during the 7<sup>th</sup> generation has been the mainstream integration of classic games into modern gaming platforms, as Talyor and Whalen identify:

Wii's Virtual Console, notably, seems to make the old new again - bringing it back in a shiny package - while also preserving most of its "classic" qualities. This reconfiguration of the old within the new follows the logic of nostalgia that combines the past and the present in a way that can cause the past to become a fetish. (Taylor and Whalen, 2008, p.3)

As we enter the 8<sup>th</sup> generation of videogames, the reselling of classic videogames via online delivery platforms has become a common practice that all of the main console manufacturers cater for. However, in addition to the re-emergence of retro games on modern consoles and computers for mainstream consumption, we are now also seeing increasing evidence of nostalgic content within original game design. This includes critical pastiches of classic game series, such

as the pastiche of *Super Mario Bros.* in *Braid* (Blow, 2008), as well as more sweeping pastiches of gameplay design from a particular period in gaming memory, such as the attempt to revive the extreme difficulty of the 1980s platformer in *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010). Videogames inspired by the aesthetics and design of classic games have not only become more common but also both more popular amongst a wider audience and more celebrated by critics. Notable examples include; *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen and Himsel, 2011) which is based upon the play style of the classic *Legend of Zelda* series, *Evoland* (Shiro Games, 2013) which traces the graphical and stylistic history of both the *Legend of Zelda* and *Final Fantasy* series, *TowerFall Ascension* (Thorson, 2013) which was inspired by developer's memories of *Super Smash Bros.* and *Bushido Blade*, and *Shovel Knight* (Yacht Club Games, 2014) which pays homage to the visual design of NES games. Today, consumers have access to a wide range of original videogames that build upon nostalgia for past videogame series, styles, forms, and mechanics.

All of the above is concerned with nostalgia for videogames, including past videogames technologies, content, and culture. We can draw two key observations at this point. Firstly, we could argue that the emergence of strong feelings of consumer nostalgia for videogames could have been anticipated. After all, the videogames industry has quickly developed over a relatively short space of time. In less than forty years we have seen a plethora of significant technological and creative leaps in videogame design and development. Videogames culture and consumption has grown exponentially, and as a consequence most adults today have witnessed the rapid evolution of the medium. Videogames that consumers thought were revolutionary at the time were ultimately surpassed within a few years, if not months. As the complexity and quality of videogames has increased, fond memories of past gaming experiences have grown to the point that a commodification of videogame nostalgia was inevitable. Secondly – and of most

importance to the current paper – we must observe that the commodification of videogame nostalgia within contemporary videogame design is only part of the picture. With a mature, media-savvy audience of gamers who feel nostalgia not only for past videogames but also for past film, television, music, and fashion, we are now seeing an increasing number of videogames that seek to integrate cross media references into their design in order to satisfy the wider nostalgic urges of consumers.

Jenkins (2006) theory of convergence anticipates the flow of content and sharing of audiences across old and new media, and Bolter and Grusin's (1999) theory of remediation describes the strategies that can be used to appropriate and build upon older media forms within new media such as videogames. In videogame design, it is a useful technique to incorporate the codes and conventions of other media forms that are emblematic of specific periods in time. These remediated images can appeal to the nostalgic desires of contemporary gamers, many of whom have a broad appreciation of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century media culture. One of the most comprehensive examples of cross media referencing in a recent videogame is *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013), which uses the narrative genre of alternative history and the science-fiction theme of parallel universes to weave a variety of 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture references throughout its storyworld. In fact, *Bioshock Infinite* mixes nostalgic references, for example by taking music from one time period (such as music by 1980s new wave band Tears for Fears) and adapting it to an early 20<sup>th</sup> century folk music style. The end effect is the embedding of nostalgic references within nostalgic references, to the point where historicity is replaced by an ambiguous image of the past.

The aim of the current paper is to discuss how videogames can make use of a variety of mediated references to the past in order to create a commodification of nostalgia. The two

videogames selected for the current study are *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2013) and *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013). These are henceforth referred to as BD and GH. Both videogames were released across various platforms in 2013; BD on May 1<sup>st</sup> as a digital download for Playstation 3, Xbox 360 and Windows PC, and GH on August 15<sup>th</sup> as a digital download for Mac OS X, Windows PC and Linux. These videogames made for a fascinating comparison for a number of reasons.

Firstly, both made extensive use of cross media nostalgic content within their narratives, worlds, and in their promotional materials. Specifically, the overall visual and audio designs of both videogames infer period genres of film, television, and music in addition to past videogames. BD is a first-person shooter in which the player takes control of Sergeant Rex Power Colt, a cyborg commando charged with locating and eliminating the head of a renegade cyborg army in a post-apocalyptic alternative 2007. The videogame is heavily inspired by the 80s sci-fi action movie genre, which it parodies through comedic critique. GH is a first-person exploration videogame that is firmly focused on narrative rather than challenge. Set in the Pacific North West in the mid-90s, players of GH take on the role of Kaitlin Greenbriar, the eldest daughter in a family of four. Kaitlin returns home from a trip to Europe but finds that none of the other members of the family are home. By exploring the house the player learns about the troubles, conflicts, and heartaches suffered by the family whilst Kaitlin has been away: primarily the coming of age story of younger sister Samantha. GH alludes to Riot grrrl music and is heavily influenced by 90s television series and consumer culture<sup>1</sup>.

Secondly, these two videogames can be considered broadly representative of the output generated by AAA and Indie game studios, offering an interesting comparison between large and small-scale productions. Ubisoft Montreal had achieved exceptional commercial and critical

success with its PC and console game releases in the lead up to *BD*, and in 2013 was one of the largest and most prolific games studios in the world. Indeed, *BD* itself was a modification of the recently-released AAA title *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012). By contrast, *GH* was the first title released by The Fullbright Company, a studio comprised of just four development staff (The Fullbright Company, n.d).

Finally, both videogames have been well-received by consumers and critics alike. In less than two months it was reported that *BD* had surpassed 500,000 sales (Mallory, 2013), demonstrating its immediate commercial success. Despite arriving at a time when many new videogames were seeking to make cross media connections to the recent past, *BD* ended up being one of the most successful nostalgia games of the year, likely due to both the popularity of its cult references amongst core gamers and a cleverly designed marketing strategy. *GH* was reported to have made 50,000 sales in its first month of release (Gaynor, 2013), which can be regarded as a strong commercial success for an Indie title. Like *BD*, *GH* has achieved a remarkable degree of success in terms of sales and consumer response, which is likely a combination of the power of its nostalgic content and the strength of its environmental storytelling. The qualities of the cross media nostalgic references in both videogames will be addressed throughout this paper, which will hopefully shed more light on why these two videogames have been so successful. At the time of writing the Metacritic score for the Xbox 360 version of *BD* is 80 based on 51 critic reviews, while *GH* has a score of 86 based on 55 reviews. Amongst other accolades, *GH* went on to win Polygon's Game of the Year 2013 (Grant, 2014).

This paper comparatively analyses *BD* (played on Xbox 360) and *GH* (played on Mac OS X) through consideration of their use of cross media nostalgic references. In order to achieve

this, the study of nostalgia in media in general and in gaming in particular served as a key point of reference. Bolter and Grusin's (1999) discussion of remediation in new media, including videogames, was important in the analysis. Specifically though, two of Jean Baudrillard's seminal works - *The System of Objects* and *Simulacra and Simulation* - were used as a framework to critique the simulation of 1980s and 1990s popular culture within the two videogames.

Firstly, both videogames were played through in full in order to come to an understanding of their gameplay design, narrative, context, and structure. Although data could have been collected at this point, playing the videogames first meant that BD and GH could be experienced from the perspective of a gamer, allowing the the researcher to become more immersed in the game worlds and narratives without the need to break flow. If play was regularly interrupted at this stage in order to capture data, it is likely that much of the richness of the videogame environments and gameplay would have been missed. After the videogames were completed once, they were played through again but with the analytical framework in mind. On the second play, notes and screenshots were recorded that built up a dataset that was subsequently analysed in order to reveal uses of mediated nostalgia. The dataset comprised three categories: visuals, text, and observations. These three categories were aligned in rows, with each row representing one entry in the dataset. The visual data were screenshots captured from the videogames that showed pertinent visuals, gameplay, or narrative elements. The text data category included narrative text such as dialogue and descriptions found within the videogames. Finally, the observation data were notes taken by the researcher that related to any text or visual data that was captured. Once the dataset was complete, the data were analysed using the identified framework. In particular, the study looked to discuss how narrative design, production

design, and sound design served to commodify a nostalgic yearning for late 20<sup>th</sup> century media culture.

### Nostalgia and Videogames

Initially posited as a medical condition in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, nostalgia was defined as a form of “extreme homesickness” with symptoms identified as being “despondency, melancholia, lability of emotion including profound bouts of weeping, anorexia, a generalized “wasting away” and, not infrequently, attempts at suicide” (Davis, 1977). These symptoms were associated with a spatial displacement – literally being away from home – but, as the term transitioned into popular use, the displacement shifted to a spatiotemporal one. In other words, nostalgia has come to be understood as a melancholic longing for a space in time. Negative connotations of nostalgia strengthened following the development of modernist thinking in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This stemmed from nostalgia being conceived as the binary opposite of the modernist ideal of progress. In examining this past-future dichotomy, Pickering and Keightley (2006) state that “if a dogmatic belief in progress entailed an ardent longing for the future, nostalgia as its paired inversion entailed only an ardent longing for the past”. In this sense, many critics of nostalgia could dismiss it as backward looking. This is a notion that Pickering and Keightley vigorously oppose in their paper, arguing that nostalgia should “be seen as not only a search for ontological security in the past, but also a means of taking one’s bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present”. As well as the suggestion that nostalgia is the negative opposite of progress, it has also been put forward that it is the subjective opposite of the more objective discipline of history (see Lowenthal 1989). Where history values rigour and scholarship, nostalgia is instead seen as emotional and selective. However, Cook (2005)

proposes a more balanced approach to the relationship between history and nostalgia, conceiving them as end points on a scale of memory representation, rather than binaries that indicate high and low quality modes of recollection.

Today, nostalgia is associated with the study of collective or public memory with specific emphasis on loss and longing, and with focus on both the subject (the feeling of nostalgia) and the object (the thing which embodies nostalgia). As Radstone (2010) states, it is “both a way of knowing the world – or, better put, a way of knowing worlds – and a discourse on knowledge”. It is a broad definition, but nostalgia is a complex sociological means of familiarising and positioning ourselves with the past, and one that is of clear importance to media studies. In particular, how nostalgia is commodified through media representations is noteworthy. As Heineman states:

To think nostalgically is to recognize the past as intrinsically better (e.g. simpler, healthier) than the present, but it is also to feel fear and sadness that what was lost cannot be regained. Consuming products from our past is a way to try and (re)connect, on an emotional and personal level with this “better” time (Heineman, 2014)

In the current paper, we ought to consider the commodification of nostalgia as distinct not only from nostalgia as a subjective experience (the feelings of nostalgia felt by the consumer-gamer) but also from nostalgic objects more generally. As a commodity, a nostalgic object undergoes a transformation whereby it must be considered in terms of profitability and market value primarily, and nostalgic representation second. In other words, while the nostalgic qualities of a videogame are likely to attract consumers, the nostalgic content is required to fit within the core elements of the videogame that make it a profitable product (e.g. the delivery platforms, the gameplay design, the technological and artistic expectations of contemporary audiences etc.) The

commodification of nostalgia within and across media has been examined in previous studies. In her analysis of E.M. Forster's *Howards End*, Outka (2003) discusses how "creating nostalgic spaces in the present requires that they be both constructed and, to various degrees, commodified". Tudor (2012) identifies the selling of a fictive past through nostalgia for American 1960s television culture in the series *Mad Men*, whilst Marcus (2004) examines representations of the USA in the 1950s and 1960s through the lens of 1970s cultural revival. The development of commodified nostalgia as an American cultural style is discussed by Grainge (2000). In videogames, Hodson (2012) provides an analysis of *Beatles Rock Band*, demonstrating how nostalgia for a musical brand and era can be commodified to appeal to consumers' memories and emotions. In all cases what we see is effectively the appropriation and transformation of situated nostalgia so that it fits with the requirements of contemporary media, politics, and audiences. Nostalgic representations in media respond to an audience need – the need for a link to a remembered (if mediated) past – but exist within a sphere of contemporary influences. This is not a window to the past, but the annexation of the past in order to reconfigure it as a commodity. For example, in discussing the Baby Boomer generation as gamers, Pearce (2008) identifies in her review that nostalgia (for classic games as well as classic stories) can be utilised to sell videogames to this diverse demographic.

As acknowledged in the introduction, nostalgia is increasingly evident as a force within videogame production, reception, and associated cultural activity. Furthermore, the commodification of nostalgia within videogame design and consumption can be approached from two perspectives: the commodification of consumer nostalgia for videogames (repackaging, revisiting, or reimagining past designs and aesthetics), or the commodification of consumer nostalgia for a range of historical and mediated referents as a means of enhancing the appeal of

an original videogame product. In academic study, the former has arguably received more attention. For example, Swalwell (2007) discusses how videogames can progress from initial novelty to detritus, with games literally being thrown away and forgotten about. But she also highlights that a third phase of renewed novelty emerges as gamers begin to experience nostalgia. This subsequently forms the foundation for renewed consumption and the sale of classic games, for instance through the digital distribution channels discussed earlier. Suominen (2007) asks whether there is a yearning for “learned rules or fictional worlds constructed in earlier gaming situations, or both together” but also identifies the wider commodification of retro games culture to include listening to and producing music, making and buying clothing, and associated products of graphic design. Whiteman (2008) considers videogame nostalgia from the point of view of the fan communities that develop affiliations with classic games, and in turn how these affiliations affect interpretations of and responses to contemporary products based on the earlier works. Heineman (2014) also discusses the role of fans that engage with classic videogames, and in particular how fan practices and the motivations of the games industry can lead to variations in the discourse of videogames history.

While studies have analysed the nostalgic representation of the past in media such as television and film, some argue that videogames are particularly disposed to nostalgic engagement. Fenty (2008) states that “it is the ways in which video games are different that make them particularly suited as objects of nostalgia” (pp.24-25). The active and participatory nature of videogames both strengthens our memories of past media and facilitates more powerful satisfaction of nostalgic desires through nostalgic play. Using McLuhan’s (1964) definition of hot and cool media, Fenty argues that videogames are cool (and closer to novels than they are to hot media like film) due to the fact that much more effort is needed to engage with and interpret

a videogame than a movie. And classic videogames from the late 1970s to early 1990s are in effect cooler – more effort was required on the part of the player to engage with and make sense of these videogames due to their low audio-visual fidelity. In summarising the nostalgic quality of videogames, Fenty states that:

... they can evoke nostalgia for earlier days in much the same way as cinema, but with the added allure of interactivity. Video games can represent the past as it was, or as it never was, but they can also represent how players wish to remember it, revisiting or revising the past to make players yearn for it, and they can offer players the possibility of not only *being* there but of *doing* things there – of *playing the past*. (Fenty, 2008, p.27)

In the videogame we therefore find a powerful nostalgic medium, capable of providing consumers with the ability to return to and even manipulate the past, satisfying nostalgic desires not only for past gaming experiences, but also for the films, music, and popular culture of the past. We also see that the now established history of the videogame form has led to an audience of gamers who share collective memories of classic gaming technologies, software, and associated cultural activities. It is clear from the literature that nostalgia for videogames is a growing area of research, but there is a need for further study into cross media nostalgia within original videogame design.

### Systems, Simulation, and Remediation

Baudrillard has proven to be a useful source for framing videogames research (Simon, 2007) not only because of his discussion of simulation and postmodern media culture but also because of his ability to make readers “think about the world and reality differently” (Toffoletti, 2011, p.4). This capacity to interpret videogame imagery from an alternative perspective was one

of the main drives behind the selection of Baudrillard's work for the framing of the current paper. The rationale for the selection was bolstered by the fact that Baudrillard often discussed the place of nostalgia within consumerist society. Two of Baudrillard's seminal texts were used to develop a critical framework for the study of nostalgia: *The System of Objects* (2005, originally published 1968) and *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994, originally published 1981). While *The System of Objects* provides a foundation for analysis of the content of videogame worlds, *Simulacra and Simulation* compels us to consider the boundaries between virtual reality and 'real world' references.

In *The System of Objects* Baudrillard argues that objects must become signs in order to be consumed. To Baudrillard, the role of a consumer object is primarily the communication of a message. He initially discusses this through two discourses, which he terms the objective (functional) and subjective (non-functional) discourses of objects. Baudrillard's functional system emphasises how the consumer can engage with organisation of objects in order to serve their needs, and in turn how object arrangement can impact on the ambience of a space. The functional system of consumer objects is useful in our analysis of a videogame environment specifically because it concerns the system of assets as a whole. Baudrillard argues that properties of an object such as colour, material, shape, and design can be considered functional, but that the functionality of any individual object is best considered in terms of it being "a combining element, an adjustable item, within a universal system of signs" (Baudrillard, 2005, p.67). In videogames, functionality is typically considered in terms of the intentionality of an object and how this is embedded within the user experience. According to Calvillo-Gómez, Cairns and Cox (2010, p.51) functionality is fundamentally about "the ability of the tool to perform the desired task". What Baudrillard suggests is that functionality is not just about how

well the code is designed to facilitate player agency, or how well the interface communicates information. Instead, we should consider the meta-functionality of videogame objects and how they combine to create a universal sign that supports a desired atmosphere, with atmosphere being defined as the “systematic cultural connotation at the level of the objects” (Baudrillard, 2005, p .49). As Baudrillard explains, discrete objects no longer have “individual presence” such that they can be considered independently, but instead have:

... an overall coherence attained by virtue of their simplification as components of a code and the way their relationships are calculated. An unrestricted combinatorial system enables man to use them as the elements of his structural discourse. (Baudrillard, 2005, p.23)

As regards subjective discourse, Baudrillard’s describes a non-functional system of objects that is concerned with symbolism. This can be highlighted through the role of antique objects, which he argues exist “merely to signify” (Baudrillard, 2005, p.77). He states that antiques represent a "nostalgia for origins and the obsession with authenticity" (Baudrillard, 2005, p.80), and that this nostalgia is effectively a "narcissistic regression" where the search for origins characterizes a fundamental need to be closer to childhood (and the mother as a source of knowledge), and the search for authenticity a desire to locate original craftsmanship (the father as creator).

Baudrillard underlines that consumers need “regressive escape”, which they can attain by “using objects to recite themselves, as it were, outside time” (Baudrillard, 2005, p.103). One of the most pertinent illustrations that Baudrillard offers on antique objects is the notion of restoration (2005, pp.81-85). Here, Baudrillard discusses the example of restored farmhouse ruins to demonstrate the need to form a connection to the past. Much of the ruins of the farmhouse are removed, replaced, or changed, with the vast majority of the restoration actually consisting of a modern,

functional building. The example is a compromise between modernity and history, between progress and nostalgia. We can see a similarity between this example and modern videogames that seek to embed nostalgic content. When Mäyrä's (2008) core and shell model for game studies is applied, it is clear that many nostalgic videogames place symbolic content within a modern structure. In other words, these videogames tend to have a modern core (modern technologies, engines, gameplay programming) and a nostalgic shell (audio, visual, and narrative designs indicative of a bygone age).

In the second text used to frame this study, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard makes the argument that systems of signs have come to replace reality, and that media are active in the creation of representations that no longer align with real world references. Consumers are unable to make clear distinctions between simulations of reality and reality itself, leading to a prevalent hyperreality within consumer society. In a hyperreal world nothing is unmediated due to the ubiquity of simulations, and the simulations become our new reference points. Baudrillard describes a four-step process through which reality is replaced by pure simulation, and argues that this process supports the manifestation of nostalgia:

When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality - a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. (Baudrillard, 1994, pp.6-7)

Baudrillard emphasises that simulated realities emerge from a nostalgic desire to return to historical referents, that they create new origin myths and new authenticities, and that ultimately these simulations suppress the original referent, making it more diluted, more distant. In videogames as in other media, this association between the loss of a real referential and the need for regression can be understood through the act of the medium itself becoming a referential.

Baudrillard's view on the hyperreal is that any medium will increasingly look to find a "correspondence with itself" (1994, p.47) in the search for a referential. Using cinema as an example:

Cinema plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths, remakes the silent film more perfectly than the original, etc.: all of this is logical, the cinema is fascinated by itself as a lost object as much as it (and we) are fascinated by the real as a lost referent. (Baudrillard, 1994, p.47)

This perspective is helpful when it comes to examining how videogames make reference not only to the videogame form as a means of achieving a sense of nostalgia, but also to other media forms. When we play a videogame with a period setting, we can question to what extent the videogame contains historical representations: references to the events, people, and culture of the period. But we can also question to what extent a videogame attempts to utilise period media referents as a means of achieving a connection to the past, through the appropriation and manipulation of conventions, styles, and practices.

As we have already established, nostalgic content within videogames often involves a degree of self-correspondence. However, it is clear that we make use of multiple media sources to record or even generate memories (Garde-Hansen, 2011), and within a media saturated world many of us now have complex mediated connections to the past. Baudrillard argues that our memories of past times are increasingly based on our experience of media representations (in literature, television, film) rather than through direct experience. According to Baudrillard, media representations can be seen to replace reality, with the effect that mediated images can in fact feel more real to us than historically accurate records. Bolter and Grusin discuss how new media pay homage to earlier media forms by building upon or refashioning their codes and

conventions. This acknowledgement and integration of the past into progressive media forms aligns with Pickering and Keightley's (2006) positive view on nostalgia, and therefore draws a striking connection between nostalgia as a sociological concept and the remediation methods used by new media such as videogames. In particular, Bolter and Grusin identify immediacy and hypermediacy as two strategies used in the process of remediation. Immediacy stresses the transparency of the experience by masking or otherwise negating the medium, whilst hypermediacy actively embraces and draws attention to the medium. In relation to videogames, Bolter and Grusin state that "the distinction between the more hypermediated and the more transparent games often turns on whether the primary remediation is television or film" (1999, p.91). Television is regarded as being subject to hypermediation more so than film, in that the interface is more apparent and more readily acknowledged, while film tends towards immediacy, immersion, and the concealment of the medium. When examining commodified nostalgia within videogames, it is therefore important to consider the influence and incorporation of other media forms, in particular television and film. A longing for the past can include memories of retro gaming, but memories of gaming are inevitably interwoven with memories of media culture more widely. As Bolter and Grusin's work makes clear, videogames actively engage in remediation of older forms such as film and television. Consequently, nostalgic value can be evident not only through references to the ideas of past, but also to the media of the past.

### The Virtual System of Objects

Much of BD's interface and game world is built upon a system of props, costumes, fixtures, furnishings, and architecture that is characteristic of a sci-fi action film set from the 80s. In the game world we see 80s visions of technological progress, brightly coloured screens and

gadgets, and cybernetic enhancements. However, *BD*'s objects are characteristic of 80s culture more generally. Visually, the most notable connection to the period in *BD* is the use of colour palettes, typography, and graphic design that are typical of 80s consumerism and fashion. One of the best examples of this is the title screen itself, created by graphic designer James White of Signalnoise (see Figure 1). The title makes striking use of hot pink against an electric blue background, uses contrasting 3D metallic and drop-shadowed graffiti text, and incorporates computing-inspired graphics into the design. All of these visual objects are independently functional but, as Baurdillard notes, their meta-functionality as a combinatorial system of graphic objects is much more powerful. The functional role of this system is to create an atmosphere that is an unmistakable homage to 80s popular and consumer culture, albeit one that is unashamedly yet affectionately scathing of 80s taste. The 80s-inspired visual styling is apparent throughout all areas of the game design, including the game world itself. Set in an alternative post-apocalyptic Earth, *BD* uses the dystopian trope of nuclear fallout to present a world that glows in garish colours. This world symbolises a contemporary fondness for what is now perceived to be a distasteful visual style. It might be a world threatened by mutant monsters and laser wielding cyborg armies, but the visual design of the world could easily be mistaken for a memory of an 80s disco complete with neon signage and dancers wearing brightly coloured spandex. While the visual presentation of *BD* is unquestionably a remediation of period media culture (which we shall address shortly), the systematic cultural connotation achieved by the videogame's graphic style is more wide-ranging, providing consumers an opportunity for narcissistic regression to a broader range of 80s youth culture.

The trailer for *BD* is an apt summary of the videogame's complex system of objects (see Figure 2). Presented as a trailer recorded on VHS, this video embeds snippets of television

programming (including 80s-styled advertisements and exercise videos) in order to enhance the authenticity of BD as a game of the period. The characters and world of the videogame are rendered in the style of a Saturday morning action cartoon, and potential associated merchandise is even shown at the end of the trailer. All of these objects are presented as authentic antiques of a past time. Individually they are indicative of 80s consumerism and cultural style, but they are much more successful when combined as the faux VHS recording. This trailer could be a genuine advert for a new videogame in the mid-1980s, hurriedly recorded over one of mum or dad's VHS cassettes. By applying Baudrillard's theory of antique objects, we can see how these game objects satisfy both the need for regression to childhood experience and the desire to perceive and handle authentic craftsmanship. BD is presented as an extensive if imperfect memory of youth in the 80s, whilst also providing an authentic recreation of consumer practices and technological limitations. This is nevertheless a restoration rather than a genuine artefact of the past. Just like Baudrillard's restored ruins, the objects contained within BD are there to symbolise the past, but the structure (the videogame design, graphics engine, and gameplay) is modern. Indeed, as a modification of the modern FPS *Far Cry 3*, BD is a sharp contrast between a technically sophisticated core and a shell comprised of antiquated objects. In other words, this is nostalgia commodified rather than faithful nostalgic representation.

GH like BD can be considered a Baudrillardian restoration: a modern game design for a modern audience, but decorated with antiques that commodify nostalgia in order to enhance the appeal of a gaming product. The primacy of the modern design of the game can be evidenced in the developer's initial reasoning for a mid-1990s setting: that "it was set in the '90s because they didn't want players to find their sister's cell phone, read her texts and get the whole story right there" (Sinclair 2014). Despite this concern about how a contemporary audience might respond

to a flaw in the design, the period setting is arguably one of the most important aspects of GH's production.

In GH, rather than a system of objects that is connotative of a period film set, the player is continuously presented with and encouraged to scrutinise a variety of consumer objects that are indicative of 1990s USA. From the start the player stumbles across objects as diverse as textiles, food and beverage containers, electronics, and furnishings that are instantly recognisable as products of a Western 90s environment. As the developers describe in an interview, this effect was the result of a meticulous process of appropriating period references and simulating them within the world of GH:

Zimonja, 35, found design inspiration in the American consumer's Bible: "We got a Sears catalogue from 1992 on eBay, full of ghastly furniture. We scanned things from that and then Kate Craig, our environment artist, turned them into 3D models." Gaynor adds: "The core lies in a place that feels familiar and believable. It's all about being immersed in the atmosphere." (Nye Griffiths 2013)

The explanation of the end effect as being an immersive atmosphere is noteworthy, given that this is the term that Baudrillard (1994) used to describe the "systematic cultural connotation" that can be achieved when objects are considered part of the universal system of signs. In GH, these items have individual functionality: written notes and answering machines are used to further the narrative; cassettes are used to trigger Riot grrrl music; lamps are used to illuminate the environment. However, the universal function of the system of objects in GH is greater than the sum of its parts. Figure 3 shows a small selection of the vast number of objects in GH that combine to create an authentic American 90s atmosphere: a backpack with a garish geometric design emblematic of the early 90s; a cereal box complete with a skateboarder wearing a

reversed baseball cap composited over bold shapes; basket and whitewashed furnishings; a teen board game parodying the iconic 90s game Dream Phone; VHS tapes, audio cassettes, and period media technologies; printouts on dot-matrix printer paper. The overwhelming functional role of this system of objects is to create the atmosphere of a 90s household, saturating it with so many objects that most players will discover objects that they will find familiar. Again, this familiarity serves to commodify a wide range of nostalgic emotions experienced by consumers, and this in turn enhances the appeal of the videogame.

While GH incorporates recognisable real world objects into its environment design, the use of objects as cultural signifiers is particularly powerful. As shown in Figure 4, objects of cultural consumption populate much of the game world: mix tapes with hand written track listings; amateur fanzine production; written notes on control combinations for *Street Fighter*; television listings and cabinets filled with recorded films and television series; a pastiche of Sassy magazine that is evocative of young feminist principles and alternative music illustrative of the period; a collage comprised of period celebrity imagery. By placing a wealth of consumer objects in the world, the game designers effectively create an authentic representation of a space in time: a museum of period artefacts that the player can both pick up and manipulate as individual antiques and also appreciate as part of the wider atmosphere. By adding on top of this an additional layer of objects that reflect the interests, ideas, and actions of people living in the environment, a much stronger connection to the time period is established. These are no longer objects that existed in the period, but objects that were meaningful to people who lived in this time and space. When it comes to satisfying the urge for regression to childhood, these items go beyond the familiar patterns, designs, and technologies scattered throughout the GH house.

Instead, the player can look to the mix tapes, VHS recordings, and handwritten notes and establish a cultural rather than merely a physical connection to the 90s.

The representations of period consumer culture in both BD and GH are evidently framed by contemporary tastes and aesthetic judgements. Specifically, we can regard these videogames as simulations that are shaped by the vision and intentionality of the developers, who exercised their creative license and subjective interpretation of 80s and 90s culture and consumerism. For example, as discussed above, GH established an atmosphere of 90s culture by developing a system of objects based on period reference images of consumer products, many of which were regarded as ghastly. In the in-game commentary entry 'Ugly Mug' the developers expand on this by explaining that, while many of the consumer objects that exist in the game are visually disgusting, the repulsiveness of a 3D object was actually a benchmark for acceptance. In this simulation of an early 90s American household, purposefully ugly objects replace historical references with new truths, new origins, and new authenticities. For a contemporary audience, the worlds presented in both BD and GH are more authentic than historical reality precisely because they pervert the style of 80s and 90s objects, and appeal to our memories of bad taste through selectiveness and exaggeration.

#### The Hyperrealities of Blood Dragon and Gone Home

In the previous section we examined how the objects within BD and GH could be analysed according to Baudrillard's functional and non-functional discourses. Both videogames establish an appropriate period atmosphere through placement and manipulation of objects emblematic of their target decades. However, having considered these period objects, it is evident that 'real world' referents are not the only technique used by the developers to transport

us into the recent past. Both videogames look to remediate the media styles and conventions of the periods. They appropriate and blend these cross media influences, showcasing the referential power of the videogame form. In effect, BD and GH are hyperrealities, not historical representations.

Returning to Bolter and Grusin's strategies of remediation for a moment, it is worth recalling their view that, within videogames, the dominant remediation strategy (immediacy or hypermediacy) is typically determined by the medium selected for remediation: in other words, whether the videogame is looking more towards film or television as its reference. As identified in the introduction, BD can be considered a remediation of film (specifically the 80s sci-fi action film, albeit through a lens of VHS recordings or straight to VHS films) and GH a remediation of television (specifically 90s teen dramas and supernatural television series). We could therefore expect that BD would lean towards immediacy, whilst GH would lean towards hypermediacy. However, the truth is not so straightforward. As Bolter and Grusin discuss, remediation in new media is built upon the dual logic of immediacy and hypermediacy, and so new media such as videogames aim for transparency whilst simultaneously drawing attention to their form. BD and GH are played from a first-person view and present worlds that players can openly explore and act upon, offering a level of immediacy and agency that diminishes references to other media forms and that maintains immersion. At the same time it is plain to see that these are hypermediated videogames with narratives that make extensive reference to period film, television, music, and videogames.

The narrative in BD is principally delivered via voice-acted dialogue and cut-scenes. The voice acting is particularly notable due to the casting of cult 80s sci-fi action actor Michael Biehn – star of *The Terminator* and *Aliens* – as lead protagonist Rex Colt. A deliberate choice on the

part of the developer, Biehn serves not only to add a level of authenticity to the cheesy lines delivered by Rex, but also to establish an in-joke for those familiar with the genre. Rex interacts with a cast of characters that could have stepped out of any low budget 80s action movie: the badass soldier buddy (T.T. Spider Brown), the intelligent love interest named like a Bond girl (Dr Elizabeth Darling), and the super soldier who switches sides (Colonel Sloan). Interactions between the characters typically involve one-liners that resemble the style of low budget action screenwriting. Dialogue also draws upon common sci-fi action movie tropes, such as the use of techno babble and referencing a sidekick's wife and kids shortly before his heroic death. The following dialogue is taken from one of the early cut-scenes in BD in which Rex and his partner, Spider, attempt to disable an enemy installation:

REX: We found the mainframe.

BRIAR PATCH: Secure that intel.

REX: Work your black magic, Lieutenant.

SPIDER: Hey, don't be hating the brother for his skills now.

FEMALE AI: Alert. Unauthorized access detected, Kimble Bunker. Enter passcode.

MALE AI: You have twenty seconds to comply!

REX: Spider.

SPIDER: Shit, I know, I know!

MALE AI: Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

FEMALE AI: Failsafe countermeasures active. Beginning pre-launch diagnostics.

Initiating decapitation stroke protocols.

BRIAR PATCH: The helo's picking up multiple heat signatures converging on you.

REX: It's moving into position, Lieutenant. I'll cover you!

SPIDER: You better!

HUD: Objective. Protect Lieutenant Brown while he hacks the mainframe.

SPIDER: I have to hard jack the system. But this could burn out my main cortex CPU.

REX: Just come back in one piece! You've got a wife and kid waiting for you.

SPIDER: Rex... if this doesn't work. You tell them... you tell them I died for my country.

REX: You tell her that yourself you hear me?

While the dialogue makes reference to 80s film, the cut-scenes used in BD instead remediate 16-bit graphics complete with pixelated forms, reduced colour palettes, and limited animations that parody the low fidelity of 16-bit videogames. From this we can note that, in addition to being a videogame about 80s media culture, BD is also a videogame attempting to find correspondence with its own medium (much like Baudrillard's example of cinematic remakes of classics). Cult sci-fi and action films of the 80s are the major point of reference and remediation in BD, but the developers (and subsequently the consumers attracted by BD) seek a reconnection with videogame styles of the past. The 16-bit cut-scenes nevertheless achieve a nostalgia feedback loop: the graphics could be from a SNES or Sega Mega Drive videogame, but the content is a remediation of classic sci-fi action. The introduction to the game, for example, pays homage to the dystopian world of the Terminator films, and specifically references the nightmare premonition experienced by protagonist Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (see Figure 5). Beyond the cut-scenes, we also find remediation of early FPS design inadequacies in BD. This is particularly apparent in the allocation of objectives to the player (which are often described in a banal manner that draws attention to the videogame form – an example of which

can be seen in the dialogue above) and in the tutorial (which Rex openly mocks as being dull, laborious, and at odds with a realistic narrative).

In many ways the design of GH also seeks correspondence with past gaming. Most of the objects described earlier can be selected and examined, reflecting a style of interaction that offers a reconnection with the exploratory virtual environments of videogames such *System Shock* (Looking Glass Studios, 1994). Compelling the player to explore the world through exhaustive probing of objects can be considered a remediation of the classic point and click adventure, for example videogames such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games, 1990), whilst the staging of a first person, narrative-driven journey harks back to *Myst* (Cyan, 1993).

Primarily, though, GH uses period styles and conventions of television in order to progress the narrative. Instead of character interactions and cut-scenes, GH makes use of both diegetic and non-diegetic voiceover. Diegetic voiceover is handled through the use of voice messages that can be accessed via telephone answer machines. By using period phones and answering machines, the game integrates an audio-visual likeness of 90s consumer electronics into the interaction and narrative design. As regards hyperreal representation of 90s culture, however, the non-diegetic voiceover in GH is perhaps more interesting. These voiceovers are triggered when the player finds notes left by other characters, with a strong focus being on journal entries from younger sister Sam, whose voiceovers directly address the player as Kaitlin. The voiceover style is reminiscent of the voiceover narration used in early 90s television series *The Wonder Years* and *My So Called Life*. The content is typically focused on the angst and troubles of teenage, white, middle class Americans, while the style of writing and speech is active, personal, emotional, and conversational. The following example is taken from one of the entries unlocked early in the game, labelled Sept. 6, 1994 “First Day of School”:

Oh my god. You are so lucky you finished high school before we moved into this house.

So, it's the first day of school, and there I am, introducing myself to the class, and I say that I just moved into the house on Arbor Hill. All of a sudden EVERY kid in the room turns and just STARES like I suddenly transformed into a mutant. I just stood there, wishing pretty hard for a rewind button. Because now maybe nobody knows my name, but they all know who I am: "The Psycho House Girl."

Great.

Through use of narrative techniques that reference the styles and themes of teen television dramas, a simulation of 90s life is achieved. This is a remediated memory rather than a reflection of reality. Sam is a teenager with issues of identity, sexuality, friendship, and family relationships: common themes in 90s teen dramas. Sam narrates to the player through her journal entries much like the TV shows mentioned above. Indeed, voice actor Sarah Grayson – who plays Sam – confirms in the game's commentary that *My So Called Life* was a key piece of research for her when preparing to give a more natural presentation of a 90s teenager.

Besides the remediation of teen drama, GH also references two notable themes of 90s television and film: the paranormal and the conspiracy theory. In particular GH embeds references to the television series *The X-Files* and the 1991 Oliver Stone film *JFK*. These references are initially recognised as objects that we could include as part of the overall system of objects discussed earlier. Kaitlin's father Terrence is a writer of sci-fi alternative history involving President Kennedy. His own books as well as related research materials can be found throughout the house. Sam is a fan of *The X-Files* and hangs protagonist Fox Mulder's famous I

Want to Believe poster on her bedroom wall. As confirmed in the commentary, VHS recordings of *The X-Files* and *JFK* also belong to Sam and Terrence respectively (see Figure 6). Beyond the objects, however, GH is presented as a mystery rather than a typical teen drama. From the start the house appears to have been abandoned, and everything from the unrepentant thunder to the flickering of lights and creaking of floorboards suggests the paranormal. The player can find books on the paranormal, a Ouija board, and notes that suggest a haunting. The house could easily be a setting for an investigation by Mulder and Scully. The player's investigation of the house reveals more and more mysteries. Many clues offer only partial explanations, and most of those often lead the player to jump to conclusions that ultimately prove false. On top of the remediation of teen drama, then, GH's also remediates cult sci-fi and conspiracy theory in order to produce a simulation of a 90s paranormal mystery.

One of the most apparent uses of cross media referencing within BD and GH is the use of music and sound design. The soundtrack of BD was one of the earliest aspects of the design to be finalised. As game designer Dean Evans has discussed (Turi 2013), the soundtrack, produced by Australian composers Power Glove, was a response to a list of 80s film and music references that he provided. Key references included John Carpenter's *The Thing* and *Escape from New York* (McAllister 2013), which helps to set the tone of early 80s sci-fi action in original tracks such as Omega Force. The opening track Rex Colt again provides a pastiche of *The Terminator*, linking the hero of BD to the film series through the remediation of the iconic industrial drumbeat.

GH's soundtrack can be broken into two categories of music composition and implementation: the appropriation of Riot grrrl music (which, as discussed earlier, is accessed through the playing of cassettes) and an original score by Chris Remo (which is played as ambient music and to accompany journal entries). As with the voiceover narrative, these two

applications of music are fundamentally distinguished as diegetic and non-diegetic. This allows for a notable distinction in their style. The Riot grrrl music communicates the passion of youth and, in particular, the discontentment felt by young women in early 90s America. Triggering Riot grrrl tracks takes action from the player (searching for cassettes, inserting them into cassette players and hi-fis) providing a much more transparent and immersive remediation of this musical genre. On the other hand, Remo's score is more passively integrated into the videogame.

Although it accompanies events that are triggered (i.e. the accessing of journal entries), its application is closer to that of a television soundtrack, supporting the themes of the narrative by establishing a mood that complements the emotions and thoughts of Sam and the atmosphere of the house. Remo identifies an explicit link to television music in his commentary entry 'Original Score'. Here, Remo explains how a very particular early 90s aesthetic was desired. The television series *Twin Peaks* served as a principle point of reference, as did the sound of the Fender Rhodes electric piano.

In both videogames, the narrative and sound design help to support a pure simulation of the past. By focusing on media referents, BD and GH are not responding to consumers' search for historical truth. Instead, these videogames create a virtual representation of consumer memories. Despite the fact that the house in GH is a faithful visual embodiment of American life in the 90s, it is the remediation of 90s television narratives and styles that adds authenticity to the game as an object of nostalgia. Similarly, BD's connection to the 80s is made more strongly through movie tropes, videogame references, and musical styles than representation of historical objects of the period.

## Conclusion

In this paper the construction of nostalgia-laden virtual worlds within videogames was discussed framed by Baudrillard's theories of consumer objects and simulation and Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation. Through an analysis of BD and GH, it was shown that the connection to the recent past exhibited by both videogames was established through the explicit use of mediated rather than historical referents. Unlike many recent nostalgic videogames that have primarily sought correspondence with past videogame design, BD and GH draw upon a range of media referents to great effect. The designers of these games identified a consumer desire for time travel to their childhood, and satisfied these desires by allowing players to enter worlds saturated by representations of period media culture. In effect, the games successfully recreated the past by remediating popular media of the 1980s and 1990s.

By applying Baudrillard's thinking, the intention behind this paper was to seek to understand how cross media nostalgia operates within videogames, which is arguably the medium that most typifies his notion of pure simulation. With simulation considered to be the process of the replacement of reality, it is interesting to note Baudrillard's take on how the prevalence of simulation within our society can lead to a change in aspiration:

The imaginary was the alibi of the real, in a world dominated by the reality principle.

Today, it is the real that has become the alibi of the model, in a world controlled by the principle of simulation. And, paradoxically, it is the real that has become our true utopia - but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object. (Baudrillard, 1994, pp.122-123)

At first glance, neither BD nor GH is a literal representation of the 'real' that Baudrillard highlights here as a utopian ideal. It has been shown that both videogames are concerned with heavily mediated pasts. BD is evidently a pastiche of 1980s cult sci-fi action movies, electronic

music, and action videogames, while the seemingly authentic world of GH is also in fact a mediated past: a vision of the 1990s filtered through television conventions, Riot grrrl music, popular culture references, and adventure games. However, when examined more closely, we can see that these videogames are ultimately concerned with reality, not fantasy. When the consumer plays BD or GH they are not simply transported into an imaginary world set within the parameters of period media conventions. Instead, they are transported to the living rooms and bedrooms of their youth: to the sofas where they sat transfixed by the television screen, to the beanbags where they lounged listening to bootlegged cassettes, and to the beds where they lay playing cartridge-based videogames through the night. It is this memory of the real that is most valuable to the consumer seeking catharsis through participation in a richly nostalgic simulation. Baudrillard's claim that the real has come to be our utopia in an age of simulation therefore appears pertinent, as does the melancholic realisation that the reality which we seek is now lost to us. Videogames such as BD and GH are part of a body of contemporary gaming products that seek to remediate the past and appeal to our desire to connect to our younger selves. What this paper has shown is that videogames, because they are capable of referencing virtually all of the media forms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are a particularly powerful medium for the commodification of nostalgia.

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Figure 1. The title screen from *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*



Figure 2. Stills from the *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* trailer



Figure 3. Objects that reference a typical 1990s household in *Gone Home*



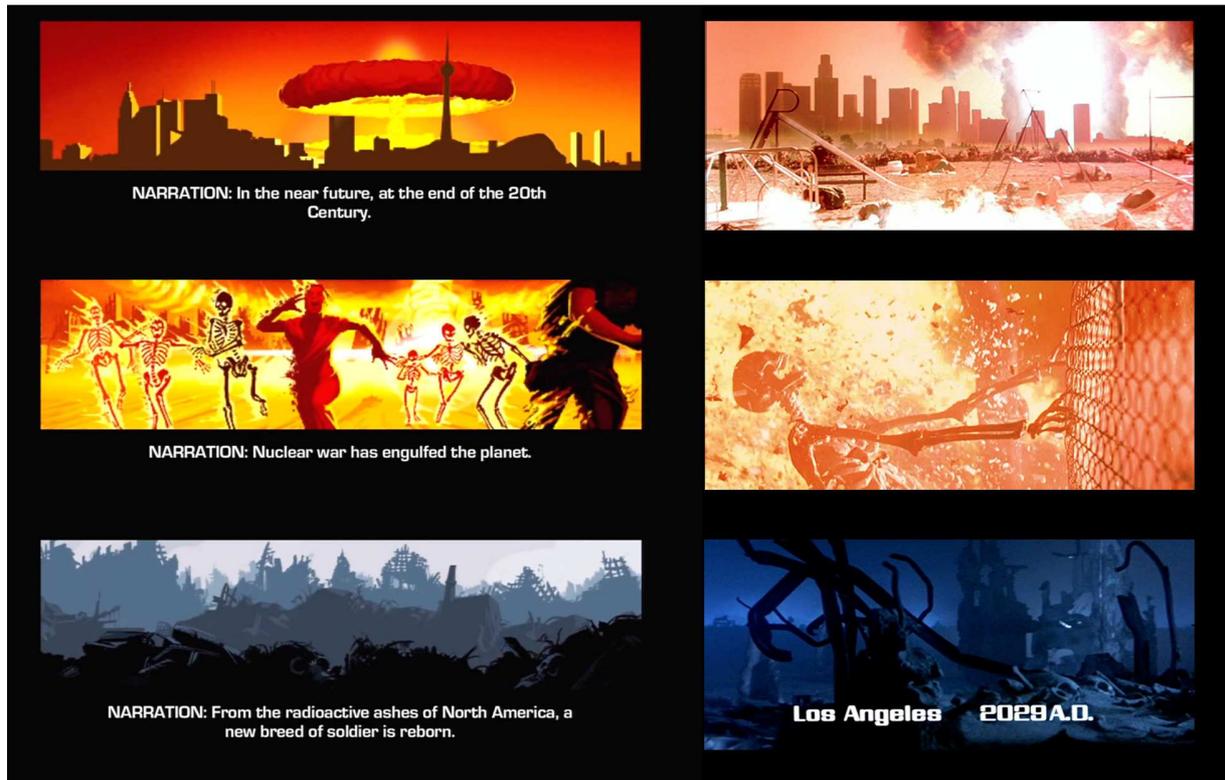


Figure 5. On the left, screenshots from an early cut-scene in *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*. On the right, comparative stills from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991, top and middle) and *The Terminator* (1984, bottom).



Figure 6. VHS recordings of *JFK* and *The X-Files*, Sam's I Want to Believe Poster, and a book owned by Terrence about the death of JFK.

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, it could be observed that both BD and GH offer perspectives on sexuality and representation in videogames, which makes for a perhaps unexpected connection. BD mocks common action movie and videogame tropes such as the heterosexual alpha male hero, sexual conquest over the female lead, and excessive violence – all of which are pertinent topics in contemporary debate surrounding representation in videogames. GH offers an alternative take on gender and sexual representation in videogames to BD: instead of critiquing clichéd representations of masculinity and heterosexuality, GH tentatively and subtly explores female characters and sexual identity in a manner that is not at all common in videogame design.