

## **The Retrospective and Retrocursive Stances in Retro Game Aesthetics: How *DuckTales: Remastered* Got the Last Quack**

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As this chapter explores ideas revolving around time, memory, history, and nostalgia, I hope I will be forgiven for opening with a bit of personal history. In the summer of 2019—eight months before the COVID outbreak, which feels like eight *years* ago now—we were on vacation in the East Coast of the United States. The quaint cottage we were renting had a television, so one afternoon my ten-year old son and I zapped around until we landed on the Disney channel, which was ending an ad break and “going back to our *DuckTales* show.” Soon enough, we were indeed looking at a ducky character, but I didn’t recognize her; we figured we were watching some kind of reboot of the classic *DuckTales* show I had watched as a kid (Disney Television Animation 1987-1990). My son had very little familiarity with that show, but he knew a lot about *DuckTales*, since we had played the eponymous “retro” video game for the Nintendo Entertainment System or NES (Capcom 1989), and its modern remake *DuckTales: Remastered* (WayForward 2013)—enough times to “100% it,” in typical gamer speech: to complete it and unlock all of its bonus content.

The episode featured Della Duck, the mother of Huey, Dewey, and Louie, stranded on the moon and trying to rebuild her crashed rocket to go back to Earth. We were immediately amazed by this since the moon is a level we explore in the video games. A couple times during the episode, we heard an upbeat remix of the moon level music from the games, which is one of the most esteemed pieces in the repertoire of NES music, endlessly listened to by fans and covered by musicians of the video game music (VGM) scene. We were gleeful, but unprepared for a moment that, I will say, has affected me profoundly. Della tries to calm the crying baby of a moon monster by singing a lullaby which she used to sing to her boys before they hatched. As she starts singing, front and center with no other distraction, I am struck with a strange feeling: she is singing softly to the main melodic phrase of the NES theme song:

*Look to the stars, my darling baby boys  
Life is strange and vast, filled with wonders and joys  
Face each new sun with eyes clear and true  
Unafraid of the unknown because I'll face it all with you* (DuckTales 2017, season 2, episode 7 “What Ever Happened to Della Duck?!”)

As I sat there wide-eyed in intensely focused listening, I rediscovered the moon theme with older ears and a new perspective; Della’s lullaby was new in some regard, yet utterly familiar, like it had always been there, reassuring like the stars in the vast emptiness of space—which we see on the show as she sings, much like the tears in my eyes were mirrored by the on-screen characters.

This experience of intense affect is a perfect *symptom*, a sign pointing to the existence of something else, which I want to explore in this chapter by using the 2013 video game *DuckTales: Remastered*: what are the differing forms of nostalgia involved (sometimes competing, sometimes partnering) in the “retro” phenomenon, and how do they negotiate our relationship with the past? I will first use theories of intertextuality to describe the 2013 game and how it differs from the 1989 original. Then, with a multidisciplinary set of tools drawn from video game design, video game history, and ludomusicology, I

will leverage the game's particularities to build a new approach to nostalgia and authenticity in retro video game aesthetics, theorizing two *stances* or logics to better understand their workings and ultimately, our relationship with history.

### The Intertextual Network: *DuckTales* as a Palimpsest

Studying the network of relations between *DuckTales: Remastered* and the various other media in the franchise benefits from the framework of transtextuality developed by the French literary theorist Gérard Genette.<sup>1</sup> Transtextuality is an englobing phenomenon which covers the links between two given texts, whether overt or covert. The two relations that are most useful amid those described by Genette are intertextuality—the direct citation or mention of another text—and hypertextuality, by which an original, anterior text (the hypotext) is present as inspiration or source material for a follow-up, successor text (the hypertext), including such practices as parody, pastiche, caricature, or forgery, and excluding commentary.<sup>2</sup>

As a scholar of literature, the question of remakes, remixes, and remasters is not a prime concern of Genette's work, but the principle of the palimpsest still applies.<sup>3</sup> Originally a parchment on which a written text has been erased for later writings, with the erased original still visible, a palimpsestic relationship is one in which a text contains traces or references to a predecessor that we should have in mind as we read. *DuckTales: Remastered* positions itself as the hypertext to Capcom's *DuckTales*, but the 1989 video game is itself a hypertext to Disney's 1987 television series, which is in turn transposing characters and events portrayed in various Disney comic books, strips and animated film shorts starting in the 1930s. All these past texts, however, tend to disappear from consideration as the remaster invites us to view it only in relation to its original game. While further studies could unravel the web of links between all these media occurrences, for this chapter I will focus on the 1989 game and its 2013 remaster (see Figure 1), and the 1987 animated series and its 2017 reboot.



<sup>1</sup> Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> In other words, this chapter on *DuckTales* is not a hypertext of *DuckTales: Remastered*.

<sup>3</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman & Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

Figure 1. Left: *DuckTales* (1989); right: *DuckTales: Remastered* (2013, brightness/contrast adjusted for printing quality).

The 1989 *DuckTales* video game provides no narrative framing or introductory cutscene, which is not uncommon as many games of the period relegated these elements to the accompanying manual. In this case, however, the story in the manual is quite bare-bones:

Uncle Scrooge is a world class millionaire and a lover of adventure. His goal this time is to obtain the five lost treasures that were scattered throughout the world. He is off on his adventure with the help of Huey, Dewey, Louie, and Webby. They will travel with him through the jungles of the Amazon, the snow topped peaks of the Himalayas, the haunted house in Transylvania, the subterranean mines of Africa, and to the surface of the Moon. How many of the lost treasures will you be able to find?<sup>4</sup>

Players control Scrooge as he walks and jumps across somewhat open-ended levels for a 2D platform game of the time. Scrooge uses his cane to whack objects and open treasure chests, and he bounces on it like a pogo stick to drop on enemies or traverse difficult terrain. Across the five levels, players encounter familiar characters from the 1987 show, including the four children, Launchpad McQuack and Mrs. Beakley, and enemies like mummy ducks (visibly inspired by Ka-Hoo-Fu from ep. 7, “Sphinx for the Memories”), space alien Kronks (ep. 8, “Where No Duck Has Gone Before”), the king of the Terra-Firmians (ep. 29, “Earth Quack”), and the sorceress Magica De Spell. When players have completed all levels, the treasures bounce away from Scrooge’s giant computer and a message appears: “Ha ha...if you want to get back the treasures come to Dracula Duck manor.” Players are then sent back to the Transylvania level and confront a vampiric Dracula Duck, then must climb a rope to race against Magica De Spell in vulture form who’s pulling up Flintheart Glomgold. Getting the treasures back wins the game, with newspaper headlines touting that Scrooge remains the richest duck in the world.

There is little narrative rhyme or reason to explain the events that I have described. Who stole the treasures from Scrooge? What is Dracula Duck’s relationship with De Spell and Glomgold? What are their ultimate motives? None of these issues are addressed in the game or in the manual, yet the whole proto-narrative and general concept of the game would easily fit in with the long narrative arc articulated over the first five episodes of the TV series’ first season. In episode 2, “Wronguay in Ronguay,” Glomgold challenges Scrooge to see who can make the most money in two weeks. Scrooge plans to win by finding a lost treasure by following a map in his possession. The adventure takes him (and his gang) to a fictional country in South America, and to Antarctica in a follow-up episode to retrieve another part of the map, eventually culminating in an episode where Glomgold is revealed to have sabotaged their efforts with the help of a supernatural ally. This basic canvas, or some variation on it, would have provided a minimal context to Capcom’s game. Instead, the game remixes elements from the series in somewhat disconnected fashion; for example, the final race against Glomgold to reach the treasure atop the pillar offers a ludic reenactment of the show’s introductory montage that opened every episode, where Scrooge and Glomgold climb a pillar to reach a magic lamp. It seems it’s up to the

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<sup>4</sup> *DuckTales* manual (Capcom USA, 1989), 9.

player to supply an imaginary storyline for the appearances of Dracula Duck, Magica De Spell, and Flintheart Glomgold at the end.

The *DuckTales* video game is a palimpsest through which trace elements of the *DuckTales* show can be seen, much like the show is itself a palimpsest of the prior comics of Donald Duck and Scrooge McDuck by Carl Barks. Both the show and game were hugely successful and timely for a generation of Nintendo kids raised on animated cartoons. When the 2010s brought a two-pronged *DuckTales* revival, however, the animated cartoon and video game were no longer timely, but timeless, their status cemented as “classics.” Understanding their revival requires understanding the mechanics of the retro phenomenon, by which they were brought out of the timeless and back into the realm of timeliness.

### A Synopsis of “Retro” and “Nostalgia” in Video Games

Entire articles or chapters are written about retro games, but the qualifier remains imprecise. Computer scientist John Aycok explores different hypotheses for determining whether a game is “retro:” publication date and historical distance, computing platform, material interface, and visual complexity, eventually concluding that the question remains open.<sup>5</sup> Tim Wulf et al. describe two branches of the retro gaming phenomenon as “playing and collecting old video games and consoles,” and “playing modern games with a ‘retro’ style, such as using older graphics and audio mechanics.”<sup>6</sup> They turn to nostalgia as a hypothesis to explain the interest of gamers in retro games, which act as “a digital ‘time machine’ to their bygone past,” but do not further explore the term “retro.”<sup>7</sup> Researcher and game developer Domini Gee focuses on the retro elements found in contemporary games, framing retro through a game design lens: “While modern gaming is associated with being bigger, faster, complex, and expensive, retro gaming is associated with simplicity, classic characters and gameplay, inexpensiveness, and the basics.”<sup>8</sup>

Games scholar Maria Garda draws on art historian Elizabeth Guffey to better circumscribe “retro” as the recreation, reconfiguration, rediscovery and recycling of outdated aesthetics from the recent past of living memory.<sup>9</sup> She identifies the impulse at the basis of “retro gaming” (the playing and collecting of classic games and hardware and its issues of preservation and authenticity) as *restorative nostalgia*, and the “retro style” or aesthetics as practiced in the development of contemporary “retro modern” games (as Gee calls them) as *reflective nostalgia*. Instead of trying to restore the past, retro modern games are

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<sup>5</sup> John Aycok, *Retrogaming Archaeology: Exploring Old Computer Games* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 1–3.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Wulf et al., “Video Games as Time Machines: Video Game Nostalgia and the Success of Retro Gaming” *Media and Communication* 6, no. 2 (2018): 60–61.

<sup>7</sup> Wulf et al., “Time Machines,” 61.

<sup>8</sup> Domini Gee, “Remixing Retro: Preserving the ‘Classic Feeling,’” *Journal of the Japanese Association for Digital Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2019): 57.

<sup>9</sup> Maria B. Garda, “Nostalgia in Retro Game Design,” In *DiGRA '13 - Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*. August 2014, vol. 7. <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/nostalgia-in-retro-game-design/>, 1; Elizabeth E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

“referring to and (re)working the bygone to reflect a particular decade, a given computer era, or a certain genre.”<sup>10</sup>

As Guffey notes, retro has many nuances beyond the simple backwards glance at the past, covering its uses as a trendy synonym for “old-fashioned”, a period style, an attachment to the values of the past, or the obsolete technologies that must be restored to enjoy the “original experience” in the case of retrogaming.<sup>11</sup> While “retro” might be a noun or adjective with many meanings, it has an even wider use as a Latin prefix in modern languages like French, from the classroom *rétroprojecteurs* (overhead projectors) to the car *rétroviseurs* (rear view mirrors) or officers being *rétrogradés* (demoted) after serious errors. As such, I always felt that using the word “retro” by itself was a shorthand that left a part unsaid: retro stands in for *retrospective* (from *specio*, “to see”). But things are not so simple, and it is precisely in this openness that the prefix reveals its usefulness in distinguishing two stances toward the past.

The first stance is *retrospective*, from *retrospection*, “relating to the act or process or an instance of surveying the past”<sup>12</sup>. It involves *looking* backwards towards the historical past from our contemporary present. It can be nostalgic if there is sentimental longing for something that has been lost. Garda further posits two kinds of “reflective nostalgia:” one that is personal when we have experienced the past ourselves, and one that is detached by evoking collective memories without acting as a Proustian madeleine.<sup>13</sup> The second stance is *retrogressive*, from the Latin *retro* (backwards) and *cursus* or *currere* (“course” or “running”), “marked by stepping backward.”<sup>14</sup> It involves displacing ourselves into the historical past by walking backward while still looking forward, maintaining a perspective of the contemporary present (and future beyond). Designing a “retro game” often participates in both logics, to varying degrees and for different parts of the project. The stances are not meant to be used as classifying boxes to put retro things into one or the other, but to analytically decompose them and identify how and why either stance is used in their constitutive parts.

### **The Retrospective Stance: Retrogaming and Authenticity**

Guffey argues that retro differs from camp or nostalgia because of its ironic, non-serious, and subversive detachment in engaging the recent past, with little sentiment or concern for remote lore, tradition, or historical accuracy: “Retro does not seek out proud examples of the past; it shuffles instead through history’s unopened closets and unlit corners.”<sup>15</sup> This, I would argue, is antithetical to the practices of retrogaming, which are largely devoted to the celebration of classics, both in retro game playing and collecting, and in the creation of retro-style games. Series such as *Super Mario Bros.*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *Metroid*, *Castlevania* and *Mega Man* get more attention in retrogaming than *Aero the Acro-Bat*, *Alien*, *Bubsy* or the Koei Historical Simulation series which are left in the darkened closets of gaming

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<sup>10</sup> Garda, “Nostalgia in Retro Game Design,” 10.

<sup>11</sup> Guffey, *Retro*, 9–10.

<sup>12</sup> Retrospective. (n.d.). *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/retrospective>.

<sup>13</sup> Garda, “Nostalgia in Retro Game Design,” 7.

<sup>14</sup> Retrogressive. (2003) *Miller-Keane Encyclopedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health, Seventh Edition*. <https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/retrogressive>

<sup>15</sup> Guffey, *Retro*, 14.

history; the former are the games getting played, streamed and discussed substantially, consecrated through remakes and remasters for modern consoles, and imitated or used as inspiration by the current generation of game designers who create retro games.

Notably (but not only) through emulation (a choice vector for accessing old video games, given its widespread availability), retrogaming is constantly preoccupied with issues of authenticity and fidelity to the original experience, from software filters reproducing CRT televisions' artifacts to specialized controllers promising the same look and feel of the original hardware. This level of reverence for the past in retrogaming makes it substantially different from Guffey's conception of retro in general. Melanie Swalwell comments on the ironical reality of mass-produced video games being the "contemporary madeleine" for experiencing something of the aura of vintage games, having attained "cult" value following Walter Benjamin's analysis of the artwork.<sup>16</sup> This practice is restorative, as described by Garda; it aims to accurately reproduce the original so that those with lived experience of it may have a personal nostalgic moment, and those who don't can access the collective memory (as communicated through the discourses of video game culture that celebrate the game as a "classic"). As Duncan Flatman summarizes in his review of Guffey's book, "retro constitutes an alternative, non-academic popular mode of history through the agency of collectors and curators, in addition to the artists and designers, but notably excluding professional historians. In this sense, Guffey's account contains an element of historiography."<sup>17</sup>

Aside from playing and collecting games of the past, retrogaming also includes the creation of modern games that employ the retrospective stance, with varying implications. The first practice consists in re-releasing games with as few alterations as possible, ideally as a direct "port" or translation of the source code onto a new platform. However, even when such alterations are minimal, or even wholly absent from a software standpoint, the experience cannot be the same as the original; modern controllers will have different buttons, triggers or joysticks, the audiovisual interface will have better resolution, or a different size of screen (if not underlying technology, as when playing retro games on LED screens instead of CRT monitors), contrast or brightness, or the loading times and memory access speed will be faster, which is to say nothing of the subtle alterations brought by emulators. Guffey recounts Jean Baudrillard's position on retro in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), which he views as re-creations of the past that are disquieting simulations in their perfection, ultimately leading to hyperreality—a reality made of simulations erasing their origins as simulations, or the past rendered invisible by its recreations.

Guffey argues that retro objects are not contentless simulations, but that they offer new content through their configuration. This applies well to the playing of older games over new equipment. Aside from re-released or remastered titles, even the original game cartridges on an original console on a CRT television does not provide access to the original experience. Playing a game from the 1980s today is done with internet content and knowledge about the game and its producers, walkthroughs and guides, and decades of tips and tricks, practice runs or videos that can be watched and studied, and

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<sup>16</sup> Melanie Swalwell, "Moving on from the Original Experience: Games History, Preservation and Presentation," in *DiGRA '13 - Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*. August 2014, vol. 7. <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/moving-on-from-the-original-experience-games-history-preservation-and-presentation/>, 4–5; Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," In *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn, 214–218 (London: Fontana, 1968).

<sup>17</sup> Duncan Flatman, "Review: *Retro: The Culture of Revival*," *Journal of Design History* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 387.

forums and communities discussing it, which all influence how the experience is framed and lived. This extends to the proliferation of devices that enable long play sessions on dedicated screens without negotiating usage time with other family members, or societal discourses about video games that shape what it means to play them. With the retrospective stance, we indeed *look* back on the past, but we do not *travel* there, as the “time machine” metaphor implies. Guffey uses the retro rocket, which provides a counter thrust for a starship’s safe landing, as a metaphor for the role of the retro in bridging past, present and future: “Like these rockets, retro may look back but it also provides a final boost toward something new.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, as Wulf et al. remarked, the preference of people interested in retrogaming for “technologically inferior or less sophisticated games and platforms” is “at odds with the traditional push towards better graphics and faster hardware.”<sup>19</sup> In an immediate sense, retro games are pressing back against the accelerated technological development that fuels the discourse of obsolescence and supersession of games and platforms.<sup>20</sup> This counteracting force, however, is not a unidirectional thrust; retrogaming seeks to integrate the games of the past—a curated past of “classics”—into the forward momentum of gaming culture. Hence the retro phenomenon is not only retrospective, looking back to drag something from the past into the present; it is also retrocursive, in that it walks to the past while keeping its sights on the present and future. Without this future-facing mindset, one would be content to simply gaze nostalgically at the past, without engaging in the issues of obsolescence, preservation, and authenticity.

### **The Retrocursive Stance: Retro Modern in *DuckTales: Remastered***

As game designer and historian Jonathan Lessard states, the rate of obsolescence for video games is so fast that the latest game of today is usually perceived to be the most sophisticated one in a series that began yesterday, retrospectively envisioned as a series of steps in an evolutionary chain.<sup>21</sup> The retrospective gaze thus tends to foster teleology, or the idea that things that happened in the past were slowly progressing toward some inevitable conclusion; for example, when we consider 2D games as “not-yet 3D.” The danger of the vantage point of “progress,” of things that turned out to be, is that we see only the steps that led to the present state of things, and ignore the offshoots and alternative possibilities, the worlds that might have been, the envisioned futures and histories that the past could have yielded. In this sense we join Guffey’s vision: “retro implicitly invokes what is yet to come (...)” and “memorializes not just the Modern past, but also the utopian and optimistic ideas of these earlier eras.”<sup>22</sup> Deploying the retrocursive stance means traveling back to the past and situating ourselves within that space-time, trying to reconstruct the historical present and its horizon of expectations: the state of the art as it was then.<sup>23</sup> The two stances are complementary: one needs to look first with the

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<sup>18</sup> Guffey, *Retro*, 165.

<sup>19</sup> Wulf et al., “Time Machines,” 61.

<sup>20</sup> James Newman, *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession, and Obsolescence* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Lessard, “Histoire formelle du jeu d’aventure sur ordinateur (le cas de l’Amérique du nord de 1976–1999),” (PhD diss., Université de Montréal, 2013). <http://hdl.handle.net/1866/10328>.

<sup>22</sup> Guffey, *Retro*, 23, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Hans R. Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” trans. Elizabeth Benzinger. *New Literary History* 2, no. 1 (1970): 7–37.

retrospective stance to have a global understanding of the situation and a general idea of the destination to be reached, but once we start traveling, we must walk backwards slowly, one step at a time, to keep the focus on the present. Once we reach a point sufficiently close to the object of investigation through the retrocursive stance, we will start seeing other things in the periphery, including the other directions the future might have taken.

Domini Gee lays out three forms by which modern games remix retro game elements: “purist remixing, which aims to preserve retro elements as faithfully as possible;” “renovative remixing, which aims to upgrade select elements while preserving core retro elements;” and “derivative remixing, which derives inspiration from select retro game elements while its core elements are modern.”<sup>24</sup> Using this typology, we can describe *DuckTales: Remastered*’s global proposition as such:

- an overall purist remixing of game feel and mechanics, level design, and overall structure: the game’s original levels are recreated faithfully in their room layouts, dimensions, physics of moving, jumping and pogo-jumping, and enemy and treasure placement (see Figure 1 above);
- an overall renovative remixing of audiovisual elements: graphics are high-definition 3D environments and modern cartoon-style renditions of the classic characters; the soundtrack consists of remakes of the classic 8-bit songs, rearranged for modern instruments;
- derivative remixing in the form of localized additions that modernize the game: levels have new areas interspersed across the faithfully-restored classic architecture, or new quests tasking players with finding a number of items scattered around the level; cinematic cut-scenes have been added to bookend levels, but also at relevant points inside them; every classic song has additional sections with expanded solos or musical breaks; dialogue is delivered in full voice acting; in the overall structure, the game now starts with a supplementary introduction level, and a new ending level.

All the new elements introduced in the remastered game are done seamlessly (nothing signals to the player that “here be newness”)<sup>25</sup> and are rooted in nostalgic gestures to the past. Much of the voice acting is performed by the (surviving) cast from the original 1987 show. As players accumulate wealth, they can spend it to unlock items in a museum gallery of sorts, which consists of artwork for the game (concept art, sketches, backgrounds, characters, etc.); the music tracks from the 2013 game as well as the 8-bit versions from the 1989 game; and finally, digitized animation cels, pencil sketches, and production documents from the original 1987 show. These last items are presented by the game as the ultimate reward, being the last to appear on the unlockables screen, and having costs vastly higher than the other items.

*DuckTales: Remastered* also lifts elements from the original 1987 television series to stage its adventure, tapping on the familiar scenarios to bring them on screen. The very first episode of the 1987 show has Scrooge performing perhaps his most well-known ritual: swimming in his pool of gold. Solicitors enter his office, and he deploys traps against them. During the night, the Beagle Boys break into Scrooge’s Money Bin, and his nephews go there to stop them. McDuck is awoken by the alarm and heads to the Bin, where he eventually fights against one of the Beagle Boys for a treasure map, which then prompts his treasure hunt. *DuckTales: Remastered* opens with Scrooge racing to his Money Bin after the Beagle

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<sup>24</sup> Gee, “Remixing,” 55–56.

<sup>25</sup> This exemplifies the danger of a remake erasing the original, following Baudrillard’s thoughts.



Boys' break-in. The Money Bin is the game's introduction level as the player is eased into the game's controls, encountering the three nephews which Scrooge must free from their Beagle captors by activating the building's traps and defense mechanisms. The level ends in a boss fight against a Beagle Boy in Scrooge's office, the reward being a treasure map that justifies the game's structure of a treasure hunt around the world. Between levels, players get the chance to enact Scrooge's ritual and take a swim in the billionaire's pool of gold.

Many more palimpsestic references to the original show appear through the game. A puzzle has been added to the Amazon level, for which the player needs to collect gold coins scattered around to open the way to an ancient temple; this echoes the 1987 episode 5 "Too Much of a Gold Thing," where McDuck's gang finds giant golden discs placed across a valley that provide entrance to a lost temple in South America. After completing all five levels, the player must venture into Mount Vesuvius for the game's final showdown against Magica De Spell, who is holding the nephews as hostages and requires Scrooge to bring his fabled Number One Dime. This is almost a ludic reenactment of the ending of episode 6 "Send in the clones," where Magica De Spell has taken the dime, one nephew and Mrs. Beakley to her lair in Mount Vesuvius, with Scrooge going there to confront her. But this does more than showcase the tight intertextual links between a hypertext and its hypotexts: it hints toward a reading of *DuckTales: Remastered* that will retroactively shed new light on its original game. The following reading will transform our understanding of nostalgia and retrogaming, from essentially aesthetic, contemplative phenomena into tools for historiography. In other words, we, to cite the classic *DuckTales* theme, "might solve a mystery, or rewrite history!"

### **Quacking a Better Tale: Retro as Historiography**

Appraising the 1989 *DuckTales* video game from a retrospective stance, it can be easy to overlook another major erased text that appears clearly through this palimpsest to 1989 players: Capcom's *Mega Man* series. This connection is widespread enough that many observers affirm *DuckTales* uses the *Mega Man* game engine, even if this is based on circumstantial impressions of similarity rather than official sources.<sup>26</sup> *DuckTales* was indeed created by the same company (and many of the same individuals within it), that worked on *Mega Man* (Capcom 1987) and *Mega Man 2* (Capcom 1988). Taking the retrocursive stance and situating ourselves in the video game landscape of the time allows us to pinpoint these relationships. The yeti boss at the end of the *DuckTales* Himalayas stage looks and behaves suspiciously like Air Man from *Mega Man 2*. On a more obvious structural level, the game offers a stage select screen and lets players tackle them in any order, which is very much the defining characteristic of *Mega Man* games and would not become common in the design of platform games for years.

The similarities are especially useful in identifying *DuckTales*'s lacks. When all levels are completed in *Mega Man* games, players access the "final stage," a series of levels in Dr. Wily's fortress. *DuckTales* underdelivers by simply repeating the Transylvania level exactly as is, leading to a weak finale and an

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<sup>26</sup> Shaun Musgrave, "The 'Mega Man' Factory, Part 3: 'DuckTales' (1989) & 'DuckTales 2' (1993)." *Post Game Content* (blog), February 10, 2016, <https://postgamecontent.com/post/139030353073/the-mega-man-factory-part-3-ducktales-1989>.

unfinished, rushed feel.<sup>27</sup> Another factor contributes to this impression: the paucity of its soundtrack. While praised for its excellence like its *Mega Man* cohorts, *DuckTales*'s musical score is surprisingly sparse in comparison, losing steam and cutting abruptly short in the end. This is evident from a purely quantitative standpoint. Table 1 below details the linear length (in seconds) of every track from each game, which I obtained by listening to the audio files on the Video Game Music Preservation Foundation Wiki<sup>28</sup> and noting the length of the loop section and of the non-looping introduction. Tracks are listed as 4 types: long multi-part musical structures are either T for *theme* when non-looping or S for *song* when looping, and short musical segments are either J for *jingle* or L for *loop*.

<i>DuckTales</i> track	Type	Intro	Loop	<i>Mega Man 2</i> track	Type	Intro	Loop
DuckTales Theme	T	52		Opening and Title	T	82	
Stage Select 3.25 L	L		3.25	Stage Select	L	1.5	5.5
				Game Start	J	6	
				Pass Word	L		6.5
The Amazon	S		39	Airman Stage	S		45
Transylvania	S	5	38	Flashman Stage	S	26	25.5
African Mines	S		31	Quickman Stage	S		38.5
The Himalayas	S		36.5	Crashman Stage	S	13	64
The Moon	S	15	35	Heatman Stage	S		26
Gyro's Flying Machine	S	2	15	Woodman Stage	S	5.5	32
				Bubbleman Stage	S	11	32
				Metalman Stage	S		38.5
Boss Battle	S	4	14	Boss	S	7	12.5
Stage Complete	J	4		Stage Clear	J	5	
Magic Coin	L		1.25	Get a Weapon	L		2.75
				Dr. Wily Map	J	7	
				Dr. Wily Stage 1	S		74.5
				Dr. Wily Stage 2	S		77
				All Stage Clear	J	9	
				Ending	T	68	
				Staff Roll (excluding "Title" reprise)	T	66	
Dead	J	3					
Game Over	J	2		Game Over	J	3	
<b>Total</b>		300 (5:00)		<b>Total</b>		790 (13:10)	

Table 1. Linear length in seconds of composed music for *DuckTales* (1989) and *Mega Man 2* (1988).

The quantitative comparison highlights how *DuckTales* offers no new music past the five core levels, as if the game's developers had to cobble an ending by recycling the Transylvania stage and opening *DuckTales* theme for the ending. The latter does work in reproducing the bookending function of the theme song in animated television shows, but before players get to the final End screen, they witness a

<sup>27</sup> Musgrave, "'Mega Man' Factory." See also *DuckTales: Remastered* producer Ray Jimenez: "We want to do what we felt the original team could have done if they had the resources" in Chris Carter, "Capcom 'loved' working with WayForward on DuckTales," *Destructoid*, March 25, 2013, <https://www.destructoid.com/capcom-loved-working-with-wayforward-on-ducktales/>.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.vgmpf.com/Wiki/>, pages for *DuckTales* (NES) and *Mega Man II* (NES).

symptomatic cut-scene. Whereas *Mega Man 2* has an “All Stage Clear” jingle and two long unique themes, *DuckTales* simply plays the short two-bar “Stage Select” theme, dragging it for an entirely too long 17 loops (50 seconds). Comparing the two games’ “Stage Select” loops also demonstrates how, besides the quantity, the overall complexity of the composition also reinforces *DuckTales*’s comparative bare-bones feel:

Figure 2. The Stage Select theme from *Mega Man 2* (1988).

Figure 3. The Stage Select theme from *DuckTales* (1989).

With its localized additions that expand on the preserved and renovated original, *DuckTales: Remastered* renders the unfinished character of its *DuckTales* hypotext salient. The ending is significantly fleshed out; instead of sending players back to Transylvania, a whole new final stage is offered in Mount Vesuvius, and the dialogue now exposes the motivations of Glomgold and Magica De Spell’s double-crossing plan to resurrect Count Dracula Duck, attaching the narrative strings that were left hanging in the original game. There is also a new introductory tutorial level (the Money Bin) before

letting players select their stage, a practice lifted from *Mega Man X* (Capcom 1993; directly acknowledged in Carter 2013), a Capcom game that followed *DuckTales* by a few years.<sup>29</sup>

*DuckTales: Remastered's* mixing of both retrospective and retrocursive stances is most evident in its soundtrack. Throughout the entire soundtrack, composer Jake Kaufman integrated some retro chip sounds in many of the 2017 fully-orchestrated tracks, and the game allows players to switch the music to the original 8-bit versions—including for the new music that plays on the additional levels, for which Kaufman created technically rigorous arrangements to NES hardware specifications. It features original tracks for the new Mount Vesuvius level, and two pieces for the ending: one for the final boss fight and another one for the (substantially improved) race against Glomgold and Magica to reach the treasure. The music for the fight against Dracula Duck is particularly notable. Kaufman's piece features a long buildup of rising tension spread across two movements totaling 32 seconds that can be likened to a verse and pre-chorus structure, leading into a release of tension with the chorus, which spotlights the central motif of the Transylvania theme (Figure 4). As players encountered it earlier, this reoccurrence subtly highlights Dracula Duck's ties to this place and, more importantly, recalls the original game's ending, further establishing how much the remaster improves upon the original.



Figure 4. The central motif of the Transylvania theme from *DuckTales* (1989).

### The Power of Retro

*DuckTales: Remastered* manifests a complex mixture of both retro stances. Its diagnostic of the original's problems and missed opportunities is rooted in a retrocursive displacement back to its position in 1989 gaming, with an outreach to include some future developments in the genre; its renovative treatment is practiced through a nostalgic retrospective stance on the 1989 game and its 1987 source television series. Through its music, graphics, level and game design, bonus content and narrative, it provides a synthesis of the timeless appeal of its classic design and timely modernization, achieving a retro modern design that stimulates interest in the source material and provides an occasion to reflect on video game history.

So we come full circle, back to the event that opened this chapter: what is Della Duck's lullaby, and the intense affect it evoked in me, a symptom of? More than nostalgia (which undoubtedly plays a part in this) or a signature device from Jake Kaufman (who wrote the 1989 Transylvania theme into the 2013 Dracula Duck theme, but also has a writing credit for Della's Lullaby on the 2017 animated show), I believe there is something in common with what *DuckTales: Remastered* offered vis-à-vis its original: a sense of completion. The moon theme from the 1989 video game appearing in the 2017 animated

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, *DuckTales* also contributed to *Mega Man*, providing the idea of the pogo jump for Rush Coil in *Mega Man 3* (Capcom 1990) and hidden permanent health upgrades for *Mega Man X*; these games all share the same key Capcom personnel. These influences appear when we adopt the retrocursive stance and examine the future from the 1989 *DuckTales'* present.

reboot ties in the loose, disconnected ends together, just as the 2013 video game provides the last quack that completes the long-unfinished business its 1989 predecessor had left in suspension. Maybe the power of retro lies in harmonizing history with our life—strange and vast—, connecting things and having them conform to some higher purpose; in short, making the world feel right.

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