

# On Time Compression and *Déjà vu*: Remastering, Remaking, Modding, and Performing *Final Fantasy*

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**Abstract** *This chapter explores remasters, remakes, and mods with particular attention to Final Fantasy VIII Remastered. The performative and temporal dynamics of playing this game suggest a new approach to the concept of performative multiplicity as outlined in Performativity in Art, Literature and Videogames (Jayemanne 2017), mediated by Paolo Virno's discussion of déjà vu.*

## Introduction

This chapter arose from an invitation by the editors of this volume to contribute an updated reflection on the monograph *Performativity in Art, Literature and Videogames* (Jayemanne 2017; hereafter *PALV*). The present volume's theme of 'live performance' offers an opportunity to critically revisit these ideas and, in particular, the concept of *performative multiplicity*: a notion that seeks to engage media theory in accounting for the complex entanglements of human and computer performance in videogames. In this chapter, we will theoretically expand on the concept of performative multiplicity by means of the theme of temporality, with specific reference to *Final Fantasy VIII Remastered* (Square Enix, 2019, hereafter *FFVIII Remastered*) and Paolo Virno's concept of *déjà vu*.

*PALV* theorises the embodied, complex interactions we have with and through digital games in terms of multiplicity. In practice, however, the case studies in the book tend towards the analysis of single-player games and the performances discussed are mainly single-player performances. Since the publication of *PALV*, digital games and their strategies for producing 'liveness' have shifted against a backdrop of significant and ongoing transformations. Methods used in the book are largely textualist and perhaps smuggle in some of the belated temporality of reading a text that is already written. While there are discussions of multiplayer situations (for example the discussion of the *Counter-Strike* map *de dust*, the strange collective performance of *Twitch Plays Dark Souls*, and horror games featured in the rise of some

major streamer celebrities), the method developed for analysing videogame performances is largely employed to understand them as texts performed by individual players and as viewed from a final decisive enframing (the 'Game Over'). In emphasising the 'conclusive' moment of the Game Over in its case studies and in particular its discussion of temporality, *PALV* only gestures towards methods that deal with *ongoing* and *distributed* performances as facilitated by digital games.

In short, the concept of performative multiplicity as developed in *PALV* could be more *multiple*: expanded to better take account the complex developments that have led to new configurations and phenomena of videogame-mediated play and performance.

Questions around what it means to perform in digital games have been further intensified by processes such as the 'platformification of cultural production' (Nieborg & Poell 2018). This refers to the way that technological platforms (often run by social media or gaming companies) are affecting how culture is made, disseminated, and interpreted. Digital games have both contributed to and been changed by platformed modes of play, such as the rise of Let's Play type performances that seek to attract wide audiences. Scholarship on performativity in the context of digital games more generally has expanded knowledge on key areas such as livestreaming (e.g., Ruberg & Cullen 2020, Tran 2022) and e-sports (for example in Nick Taylor's [2020] discussion of 'movement performance'). Landmark studies such as those by Cote (2021), Gray (2020), Fickle (2020), and Trammell (2023) have demonstrated the complexities and diversity of performance in gaming's virtual worlds, providing new tools, theories, and methodologies.

Here we will consider how videogame 'remakes' and 'remasters' evoke historical performances and engage with the multiplicity of performance itself. Unlike the immediacy and contemporaneity that live service games aim towards, remakes, remasters, demakes, and similar ludic cultural productions take entire performative multiplicities as their object. They are more than repetitions of 'what it was like' to play a videogame on a different technological platform, at a different time, and in a different cultural milieu. In practice, they are oriented to emerging technical and social dynamics that must trace multiple temporal margins, going beyond the games industry's tendency for repetition that de Peuter and Dyer-Witherford (2009, 46) term 'studied unoriginality'.

First, this chapter will give a precis of the theory of performative multiplicities. Second, it will explore these ideas through the example of *Final Fantasy VIII Remastered*. Finally, it will explore the temporal complexity of playing *FFVIII Remastered* to propose Paolo Virno's notion of *déjà vu* as a way of thinking beyond the method offered in *PALV*.

## Performative multiplicities

What is meant by the term ‘performative multiplicity’? The concept aims to complicate commonplace notions of what it means to perform in videogames, cutting across human and machine actors. Often, for a videogame player to perform an action, they undertake a specific input: Press ‘X’ to jump, for example. This may seem like a straightforward ‘unit’ of performance: a building block from which extended performance within the game is composed. However, complexities quickly arise with such a conception. If we consider a version of the ‘same’ game on another platform (say on PC rather than console), material specifics become important: The jump action may be mapped to a different button, or the shape of the controls may mean the player is less successful than if they were playing on a controller. In digital games, discrete performances are shaped by design and technical apparatus – always related in complex ways to other aspects of the game. The idea of the performative multiplicity aims at accounting for the relations of potential and actuality in digital games.

Digital games are capable of facilitating a dizzying range of performances that need not be neatly arranged in time. Players may find themselves in a situation where it is unclear what constitutes a felicitous performance in the first place – what Espen Aarseth has described as an ‘aporia’ (Aarseth 1999). Other key scholars such as Angela Ndaliansi (2004) and Ian Bogost (2008) have also registered this aspect of digital games in explorations of neo-baroque ‘labyrinths’ and Alain Badiou’s notion of the ‘count-as-one’ (2005) respectively. In aporia, we experience not a clear and distinct set of performative units that comprise the game, but a *performative multiplicity* as such. This multiplicity precedes and conditions any actual performance. Where Aarseth’s notion of aporia has potentially negative connotations, *PALV* suggests ‘euporia’ as another experience: the exhilarating sense at the start of an open-world game that we can potentially strike off in a myriad of directions.

In RPG games, the player-character (PC) or ‘avatar’ is often a character with a strongly generic nature. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks 2011) casts players as ‘The Dragonborn’, the player-character of *Dragon Age II* (BioWare 2011) is a male or female ‘Hero of Kirkwall’, and the protagonist of *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020), simply called ‘V’. These characters are highly customisable by players in terms of behaviour and characteristics, but are designed so that certain aspects override any given instance or performance. All the non-player characters (NPCs) in *Cyberpunk 2077*, for example, address a generic ‘V’ in their voice lines, which means they can appear to react to many configurations of both the PC and the game state. Player-characters such as V or The Dragonborn are thus both a specificity (the particular path a player has taken), and a generic potential (the set of performances available to all players across many different playthroughs, in other words: a performative multiplicity).

*PALV* acknowledges these experiences: Rather than thinking about how performative units of play become extended instances of play, it proposes a method that begins with the multiplicity and analyses how particular performances arise from it. The key distinction is whether the performance is continuous or discrete in nature. Continuous performances (such as when a mouse movement proportionally shifts the field of view in a first-person game) are termed *illudic* acts. Discrete performances (such as when players must move blocks to complete a puzzle) are termed *perludic* acts. These terms are modified versions of J.L. Austin's categories of 'illocutionary' and 'perlocutionary' speech acts, and theoretically informed by the work of Wilden (1978) and Bateson (2000). Where action games are more oriented to illudic acts, with frenetic activity and close mapping of human and machine action, adventure and puzzle games may be more oriented to discrete decisions and a slower pace (although these are genre tendencies, not absolutes).

A useful example that can be used to explore this method for describing performance in digital games is *Bloodborne PSX Demake* (LWMedia 2022). In this 'demade', the PS4 game *Bloodborne* (FromSoft 2015) is remediated to evoke the PSX era of gaming. This is achieved most obviously by means of graphical style (evoking CRT displays, low poly models) and audio design that legibly map on to the original game. However, the demake also references *Bloodborne* at a performative level, particularly where controllers are used. Illudic acts are transformed to evoke a previous set of performative relations between human manual input and game apparatus. Rather than pushing analogue sticks (which were not part of the initial PSX controller and only added later in the DualShock revision) for movement or to pan the camera, the PC is moved with the D-pad. Shoulder triggers, which were used for actions such as attacking or countering in the PS4 game, now pan the camera left or right. Along with wry references to saving on memory cards, or the low-poly models that signify a bygone era of gaming, it is the re-mapping of forms to draw together two distinct performative multiplicities (*Bloodborne* and the PSX platform) that allow the demake to work.

By the same token, perludic acts are also carefully considered. The overall effect of the game recapitulates *Bloodborne* closely in terms of what players do and experience – at least initially. The opening of *Bloodborne* is faithfully recreated in the retro visual and audio style, including the ritual of blood transfusion and early encounters with bosses Father Gascoigne and the Cleric Beast. After this initial period of performative fidelity, the demake has the liberty to depart from the referent game and introduce new areas and opponents, such as the late-game Winter Lanterns. The final perludic act of the demake departs from the original game completely, with players confronting a novel secret boss called 'Gilbert, the Outsider', which reimagines the fate of an NPC from the source game.

## Performing memory

The method developed in *PALV* also seeks to account for the temporality of performances. To do this, it adapts the concepts of *diachrony* and *synchrony* to the analysis of digital games. Diachrony indicates the splitting of a performative multiple – say, as a branching path in a narrative-led game or dialogue tree. Each branch is distinct from every other and different branches cannot be experienced in any one performance of the game. Synchrony indicates when performative multiplicities converge – as in a critical cutscene containing a major story beat, which will play in all performances of a given game no matter the specifics of that playthrough of the game. The *Bloodborne* PSX *Demake* works by initially generating a sense of synchrony (precisely mapping the early gameplay of *Bloodborne*) and then opening up to new forms of diachrony (the freer design of later parts of the game).

These concepts complement the illudic/perludic dyad, and together the terms enable a characterisation of how games shape temporal experience (*PALV*, 276). What is initially experienced as a highly diachronic aporia where players are still figuring out how illudic and perludic acts relate in this particular game (the ‘yet-to-be-played’) is gradually moulded into the diachronic-synchronic balance of the mature play experience (the ‘can-be-played-with’) and finally the highly synchronic Game Over (the ‘always-will-be-played’). While *PALV* does draw on structuralist theory, what is being developed is a method for analysis and not an ontological account of temporality: Diachrony and synchrony are tendencies, not essences. Every performance will generate some margin of these tendencies. The Game Over is the core example of synchrony in *PALV*, the ultimate point of convergence for a given playthrough of the game. This indicates the mental model that players are actively developing in the course of play: an intuition of what the game will be like when diachronic potentials are exhausted and have come to signify the maximum synchrony available to the system.

In the fields of game history and preservation, scholars have examined problems of how to recreate the sense of keeping games ‘alive’. What it means to preserve digital games is not only a question of hardware, code, or metatextual materials. It also involves decisions about what it means to preserve an interactive or configurable text. As noted above, a game can vary significantly depending on the platform on which it is played, leading preservationists to debate what constitutes a ‘genuine’ performance of a classic game. Analysing the PAL version of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, James Newman, citing Melanie Swalwell, critiques techniques which risk ‘the normalisation of the NTSC version’ that suppresses the meaningful differences found within the PAL version which was released in other regions.

This presents a real challenge. This is not merely in recognition of the near fetishistic adherence to “historical accuracy” that Swalwell recognises in many

“game-lovers” who act as both curators and audiences for game preservation and history work, but because of the utterly transformative nature of these technologies on the operation of code and the manifestation of games and gameplay (Newman 2019).

Newman's view is focused through historiographical and curatorial practice on digital games, which he has described as ‘unstable objects’ (Newman 2012), while Swalwell (2007) has described game preservation as a complex process of both ‘remembering and forgetting’.

Newman's discussion leads beyond technical questions of NTSC vs PAL game versions: To preserve a game is not simply an ‘originalist’ question of the right technology, hardware, or software. It is also a question of performance and *how* the game is played because different players bring different value and capabilities to their performance (and from a nonhuman point of view, certain technical conditions are not reproducible). Newman's argument lands on a specific performance style – the Any% speedrun of *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* – and the normative multiplicity encoded in the game's official guidebook, which incorporates narrative and worldbuilding material oriented to evoking and supporting an imaginative experience. Speedrunners ‘subvert the game's space and time as set out in its official guidebook [...] in order to move from the start to the finish of the game in as speedy a manner as possible, the Any% speedrunner is better thought of as not charting a route through the representational space produced by the game's engine, or along its narrative arc, but rather as traversing and pathfinding through the game's code and data structures’ (Newman 2019, 11). These peculiar and bespoke performative multiplicities change the game, rendering it an unstable object in new and unpredictable ways, and are creative acts in their own right: inventing new illudic and perludic acts that were never intended by the game's creators.

As the work of game history scholars such as Swalwell and Newman, and the example of the *Bloodborne PSX Demake* indicates, entire platforms and performative multiplicities become objects of memory and creative transformation. The demake strongly evokes the performative multiplicity of *Bloodborne* and the PSX platform. Once this initial set of powerful recognitions has taken place, the demake exercises its own distinct design sensibilities. In the case of speedruns, Newman also emphasises the importance of paratexts in shaping these performances. Each case indicates how the provisional closure indicated by the discussion of synchrony in *PALV*, exemplified by the ‘Game Over’, is overly normative. Certainly, videogames may drive towards a Game Over state that, by design, conditions all the actions a player may have taken in the game. But as the above examples show, players are capable of creating performative multiplicities that resist, transform, and exceed what was designed.

## Replaying and remastering *Final Fantasy*

We will now turn to the case study of *Final Fantasy VIII Remastered*. The *Final Fantasy* series is an intensive source of ‘fan folklore’ (Bukac & Katic 2023), and while *Final Fantasy VII* is perhaps the most prolific single-player site for this activity, there is also significant current interest in the immediate sequel. What does it mean to ‘remaster’ *Final Fantasy VIII*? And what does it mean to replay it, considered through the notion of performative multiplicities?

Scholars of the *Final Fantasy* franchise have noted many serial and synchronic elements and themes that characterise *Final Fantasy* games across platforms, from mobile to single-player console or PC, to MMOs (Perreault et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2021). A ragtag group of heroes is faced with a vast, apocalyptic threat that lurks behind the world’s endemic political and economic strife (Hutchison 2017; Millburn 2016). Luminous crystals gift superhuman powers, enabling the summoning of godlike allies amidst soaring operatic scores (Thompson 2019). Ancient, advanced civilisations have vanished, leaving foreboding ruins and dreadful superweapons. ‘Chosen Ones’, often young women, are marked with mysterious auras and stand or dance at the boundary of life and death – as Victor Navarro-Remesal (2017) has put it, these figures such as *FFVII*’s rebel leader Rinoa Heartilly or *FFX*’s elegiac Yuna, ‘channel and limit the access to the power at stake in their games’.

These elements, many of which conform to Ndaliansis’ (2004) criteria for neo-baroque works, are key to the recognisability and consistency of the game series across decades of production, even as technologies, culture, and prevailing design norms have changed so markedly (van Ommen 2018). *FFVII* was a landmark game for the Playstation platform, using CD technology to include both expansive gameplay and full-motion video cutscenes. *FFVIII* followed on from its immediate predecessor’s heady admixture of fantasy and science fiction, although it leavened this recipe with a dose of stylistic realism. Gone were the blocky, evocative character models in the field. Instead, the game opted for realistically proportioned PCs. More of the pre-rendered backgrounds were based on real-world locales, and the team aimed for an international, cosmopolitan atmosphere.

This era of *Final Fantasy* also saw a changing of the guard with Hironobu Sakaguchi moving towards an executive producer rather than director role. His influence still seems prevalent, however, in the game’s commitment to advancing a cinematic style of storytelling alongside the RPG gameplay mechanics. Sakaguchi was working on the CGI movie *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* during the production of *FFVIII*. Indeed, *FFVIII* contained even more FMV cutscene material than *FFVII*, and included impressive transitions between pre-rendered and gameplay sections that sometimes superimposed the latter over the former, maximising further the capabilities of the platform. Visually and thematically, the setting of *FFVIII* somewhat departs from the ‘antitheistic themes’ (Greenfield-Casas 2017) of grim indus-

trial dystopia, body horror, and ecological collapse of *FFVII*. Instead, the game's settings tend towards sunny fishing villages and lavish ballrooms in what art director Yusuke Naori called a 'bright, fresh Final Fantasy' where 'light emerges from the darkness'. However, in spite of the shift in visual tone and characterisation, *FFVIII* arguably does maintain an 'intensely existential tenor' (Sykes 2016).

The realist style of the character models and the more grounded setting adds gravitas to the predicament the player characters find themselves in. *FFVIII* is a game about teen soldiers who are trained to conduct battlefield interventions and special operations. The game's narrative is highly linear (Bjarnason 2020), although players can explore an open world. The teens, led by protagonist Squall Leonhart, are empowered by entities known as Guardian Forces (GF) via the 'Junction' gameplay system, which allows each GF to enable certain statistical upgrades and the assignment of specific spells to character ability scores. The GFs are beings which draw on global mythological imagery in what Escande (2023) has identified as 'database fantasy'.

The player characters' military capabilities come at significant psychological cost in the form of memory loss – *FFVIII* improved on its predecessor by giving us not one amnesiac hero PC, but a whole party of them. The students are known as SeeDs, and trained at an institution known as Balamb Garden. The opening act of the game begins with a difficult task for a group of SeeD students – fending off an invasion of the small city of Dollet by the militarily powerful nation of Galbadia. Protagonist Squall Leonhart emerges as the leader of the group in this trial by fire. After a range of missions, the PCs are sent to support a rebel cell, led by another central character, Rinoa, against Galbadia. This leads up to an assassination attempt on the new Galbadian leader, the Sorceress Edea. It is after this that most of the more supernatural plot elements are introduced.

As the game continues, the player characters learn that they in fact all grew up in the same orphanage. They have forgotten this in the intervening years due to their training with and use of the Guardian Forces, which displace memories as a byproduct of their ability to enhance battle skills. For this reason, they have also forgotten Edea, who was in fact the matron who raised them. In later conflicts and developments, it is revealed that her actions are influenced by a sorceress from the future named Ultimecia. This sorceress wishes to achieve 'time compression' – bringing together past, present, and future such that there is only one existence. Together, the game's protagonists allow Ultimecia to achieve time compression, so that they can defeat her in the compressed future and thus save the present. Squall finally witnesses Ultimecia passing her powers to Edea in the past, thus beginning the whole cycle of the game. *FFVIII* thus ends on a powerful image of synchrony that ramifies across levels of narrative, imagery, player agency, and gameplay – a time loop, where all game actions are brought into lock step with one another. For all the efforts of the protagonists to bring about a diachronic potential within their world, the loop of the

sorceress's power suggests an underlying repetition, the interpretation of which has caused much debate among the game's fans.

The official remaster of *FFVIII* largely tends towards closely re-presenting the narrative structures and gameplay of the original, while updating them for contemporary hardware platforms. *FFVIII Remastered* registers the cinematic ambitions of the original release. This is realised partially by improved character models (although the lack of similar improvement in the backgrounds remain a point of contention), but also at the level of gameplay through the inclusion of boosts. These enable players to speed up or eliminate repetitive elements of the original such as random combats, to make the party invincible, or to remove the need to consistently 'draw' magic from enemies. The boosts fundamentally change the game, removing the synchronic 'grind' that the original required as a core design element, and highly favouring narrative and cinematic-style experience.

This remaster can be compared to the *FFVII Remake*, which is completely rebuilt at the technical level. The 'Active Time Battle' quasi-turn-based combat of *FFVII*, wherein the opposing sides face off and engage in perludic exchanges, is replaced with a real-time system that incorporates illudic movement through the game space. The remake also introduced new metatextual and thematic elements which dramatise the difference between the games. Key among these are the new 'Whispers' characters, spectral beings who oppose any attempts by either players or player characters to depart from the plot of the original game (and indeed pastiche the originalist attitudes identified by Swalwell; see Booth and Jayemanne (2021).

However, an exploration of *FFVIII* fan culture shows a range of attitudes beyond originalism or fidelity to the original game. Unsurprisingly, there is a commonly expressed desire for a full remake of *FFVIII*, commensurate to that of the higher-profile *FFVII*. As one poster puts it on the r/FinalFantasyVIII subreddit, noting the inclusion of multiple timelines and divergent realities in *FFVII Remake*:

But Square, for real? They're taking THE theme that would have been the perfect match for a potential FF8 Remake and they're expanding it in FF7, which is a world that didn't have anything about time travel or time compression or whatever at all. While I don't mind it, again, this means that it is very likely that any FF8 Remake will not involve the same concept and themes. (u/the-sirsteed, 2023).

For this fan, the relation between remaster and remake extends to the level of the-matics, and in particular elements in *FFVII Remake* such as the Whispers that hint at multiple timelines and parallel realities that were part of the plot of the original *FFVIII*. However, the fan discourse remains at the level of individual texts: The introduction of these themes to *FFVII* through characters such as the Whispers and meta-textual devices is not simply an aesthetic decision but clearly a self-aware attempt

to address the platformised environment in which cultural production increasingly takes place. It addresses itself to paratexts (Wright 2023), internet discussion, and streaming culture in a way that *FFVIII Remastered* cannot, adhering as it does much more closely to the original game narrative and systems. As a remaster, its remit appears to fundamentally rest on the production of the same, with marginal upgrades, to new monetisable platforms. By contrast, the remake is rebuilt from the ground up and relies more on broad semiotic similarities than enabling older technology to run on newer hardware with relatively modest tweaks. In this way, the remake can encompass its own legacy within its narrative content, absorbing what came after it in the creation of a new text from the body of the original.

Fan reception of *FFVIII Remastered* goes beyond forum debates, however, and includes technical and aesthetic modifications to the game distributed via less formal channels than the official releases. The theme of time compression is a key point of contention in a mod for the *Final Fantasy VIII* Steam release called *Succession*. It was released initially in 2019, the same year as the official *FFVIII Remastered* and has been updated several times since, by a developer who goes by the username 'percialdulac' (hereafter 'PD'). The pitch of the mod is neatly summarised by PD themselves as a *remaster*, only one that is focused on the story: 'If you can create an HD remaster of the graphics, can you create an HD remaster of the story?' The goal of the mod is nothing less than a complete overhaul of the story of *Final Fantasy VIII*. Apparently nearly every line of dialogue has been altered in some fashion, and the entire revelatory crux of the game, that the Guardian Forces cause amnesia in their users, is written out of the game.

Similarly, the entire theme of time compression is removed as PD believes it was 'poorly explained and poorly executed' in the original release. *Succession* is notable for both its shape and its scope. It operates from a position that a game's writing can be changed in such a way that the entire aesthetic experience will not only be altered but improved. Reading through the various official and discussion posts that PD has made, and seeing the conversations happening around the mod, it is clear that the audience is fairly limited. However, those willing to experiment with this total rewrite have engaged in some robust discussion about what it means to augment, add to, and make *better* a mass-media object like *FFVIII*. PD describes their work as '[...] a script edit in the technical sense. I approached the story like an editor with a very rough first draft. I streamlined the plot, refined the character development, and punched up the dialogue' (PD, 2019).

Of course, this requires a mental model of the media object that asserts that there are gaps or insufficiencies in it, that with just enough tinkering that you could make it complete as an object. *FFVIII* is a game that is plagued by discussions of bad translations and inaccurate character transposition into English, and the rumour has been around since the 1990s that fixing this translation would automatically make the game *better*; PD, however, found that those translated scripts were

too close to the original to serve as a template for improving the game's narrative. It is also notable that PD is willing to tinker based on feedback and possible better revisions – the mod was last updated in late 2022.

## *Déjà vu*

There is something at stake in the relationship between the demake, the remake, and the remaster, a privileging of different dimensions of what is being revived, remembered, and augmented. While they may seem superficially similar in intent (to keep an old game 'alive' and facilitate performances of said game into the future) or form, as we have seen they each employ very different strategies to establish a relationship to a prior game text. If we talked about these things in purely pragmatic dimensions, we could play a kind of Ship-of-Theseus game, multiplying differences and similarities indefinitely.

*PALV* and its terminology for analysing ludic acts is useful for describing these differences within the context of each specific performative multiplicity. However, the weaknesses of using this method to think *across* performative multiplicities are also clear and accentuated by the focus on single-player experiences. If in *PALV* the idea of the Game Over is the key example of synchrony, designating a regulative mental model and convergence point for the multiple performances that comprise a given game, the variety of phenomena surrounding *FFVIII Remastered* show that the nature and status of the 'whole' of a game is an intensive locus for contestation and creative production in its own right. Rather than convergence, we have seen considerable divergence. Square Enix's professional developers and fans such as PD have very different understandings of what it means to remaster *FFVIII*, with the former concentrating on technical aspects of the game, while the latter is invested in a script rewrite to remove major plot points such as amnesia and time compression. These are not diachronic possibilities that are contained within a single performative multiplicity (this or that ending, this or that playstyle), but very different approaches to the task of remembering and revivifying *FFVIII*.

As such, here we suggest one way of thinking across performative multiplicities in the form of Paulo Virno's *Déjà vu and the End of History* (2015). In this book, Virno plays out Bergson's distinction between actual and virtual through the key figure of *déjà vu*. Virno describes the experience of *déjà vu* as 'the memory of the present' – a formulation that is seemingly paradoxical. Memory would seem inherently oriented to the past; how is it possible to remember our perception of the present? For Virno, what appears in *déjà vu* is a 'false recognition' in which we become spectators of our own capacity-to-be. It is not a chronological past or discrete event that is retrieved by memory (because what is being remembered never actually happened). Instead, it is the pure form of the indefinite 'past-in-general': a pure potentiality or faculty that accompanies and precedes any particular actualisation. Usually, the orientation of

memory to specific events or scenes, to the chronological flow of time and events, prevents perception of the faculty of memory as it exists as a *not-now*, as a virtuality: 'The past-in-general accompanies every actuality like an aura' (Virno 2015, 19).

This inextricable link between virtuality and actuality also obtains in Virno's reading of other faculties such as that of language (Saussure's *langue* being read as a generic capacity that is not exhausted in any one speech act), disposition towards pleasure, labour power, or the capacity to act. In this understanding, the virtual is not a ghostly 'model' for the actual, nor a resource that is consumed in the process of becoming-actual. Virtual and actual are distinct, but they co-exist in any action both as a stream of previous actualities and the non-presence of the faculty to act.

Every act has a *double past*. On the one hand, the mass of previous actualities that preceded it in time and, in some measure, caused it. On the other hand, enduring potential, which has no home within chronological progression and is always and on each occasion anterior to whatever is inscribed therein (Virno 2015, 113).

Some of this discussion may be familiar from the way that performative multiplicities have been described above and in *PALV*. While we cannot explore here the full range of Virno's philosophical discussion in *Déjà vu and the End of History*, we will touch on the way that he gives a *public* character to the experience of *déjà vu* beyond its usual understanding as individual psychological state – thus enabling an approach to the platformised aspects in which contemporary games are enmeshed.

The key aspect here is Virno's connection of the experience of *déjà vu* with Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, which McKenzie Wark has glossed as 'a way of describing a certain pathology in the contemporary culture of the over-developed world' (Wark 2015, online). In contrast to diagnoses of an 'end of history' and the possibility of genuine change, Virno instead sees a hypertrophy of memory, a hypermnnesia that makes *déjà vu* a generalised condition. 'Nietzsche maintains that an overabundance of memory paralyzes action, cuts off the future and encourages melancholy [...] But no *authentic* past is of such considerable authority as to impose such a dependency' (Virno 2015, 41–43, emphasis in original).

From Nietzsche's three historiographic stances (monumental, critical, and antiquarian), Virno focuses in particular on the antiquarian. The antiquarian venerates 'the past, as it really was, in its totality, without missing out the slightest detail. For the antiquarian historian, *everything* deserves to be kept alive in memory: the village *fete*, an incidental comment that just slipped out, the humble 'almost vanishing traces' of history' (Virno 2015, 52). As Wark elaborates, it is a form of 'disabling nostalgia'. As this occurs as part of Virno's critique of postmodernism, we might also think here of Lyotard's notion of performativity – the drive to arrive at 'the best pos-

sible input/output equation' (Lyotard 1984, 46) which in its own drive for maximal efficiency actually precludes other modes of being.

Demakes, remasters, and remakes display the doubling effect Virno outlines. These use various strategies to refer to the past of a performative multiplicity. In different ways, they negotiate an originalist gesture that refers back to an object, but also risks antiquarian piling-up of innumerable specificities in search of the 'true' game. At the same time, both professional corporate releases, and scrappy products of fan culture assert a generic, virtual potential-to-create. *FFVII Remake* is full of moments that are the same as the ones we played before, but with a difference: They happen later; they don't happen at all; they are reconfigured into other set pieces in order to return the familiar in the guise of the new. By the same gesture, the remaster has similar functions, constantly asking us if the thing we are playing is 'original' or not. 'Remaster' implies the correction of minor mistakes or the attainment of an original intent, as in the 'remastering' of music from original elements. *Déjà vu* enters the situation for *FFVIII Remastered* in that we might imagine that is what is happening, that the characters should always have been this way, or the menus should have been this way. The virtuality of that past object, as a series of half memories and potentials, is arrested into a firm shape that becomes a saleable commodity.

If we return now to the opening critique of *PALV*, that the theory of performative multiplicity is insufficiently *multiple*, it is possible to be more precise with attentiveness to Virno's discussion of *déjà vu*. The discussion of synchrony and the Game Over can be supplemented with the scholarship on platformisation and theory on historical time. To what degree can we play the 'same' game over time? What is at stake in any live performance? Are we activating antiquarian possibilities and forms of nostalgia that foreclose on possible futures? While the dyads of illudic/perludic and diachrony/synchrony remain useful for the detailed analysis of particular videogame performances, the official *FFVIII Remastered*, and PD's Succession Mod are more than diachronic realisations of the 'same' *FFVIII* performative multiplicity: they are genuinely different. Or better, to merely say that they are diachronic with respect to one another – temporal splittings, but within the perspective of the 'same' game – would be to impose too much of a relation of similarity on what are very different performative multiplicities. Of course, following Virno, the virtual subtends every performance, every act, every live performance – it just so happens that demakes, remakes, and remasters have developed this out through various strategies, and brought the resulting *déjà vu* before a public.

The divergence in the results does however lead to Wark's critique of Virno's book as seeming 'less than contemporary': His discussion of inexhaustible generic faculties and potentialities has philosophical value, but in this account 'Environment – nature – never pushes back [...]. Virno is still thinking through the categories of language and speech act rather than those of information, noise, probability and entropy' (Wark 2015, online). The resources available to *Bloodborne PSX Demake* devel-

oper LWMedia and Succession modder PD are very different to those of the professional developers at Square Enix. While such questions shift the terrain from metaphysics, they are critical in the present, as the antiquarian drive to ever-greater technological intensity conditions what it means to perform in digital games (Abraham 2023). This said, Virno's abstractions have strong conceptual value in light of attempts by online creation platforms such as Fortnite and Roblox to re-orient themselves away from 'games' and towards 'experiences' (The Verge 2021), the concoction of 'multiverses' which enable maximum extraction of value from canonised pop cultural icons, or the claims by vast corporate concerns towards building 'the metaverse' as a singular frame mediating a universalising antiquarian impulse. Platforms seek to elide their provenance in digital games, while developing new strategies for enclosing human capacities for memory and creativity in a singular metaverse: producing live performance in a way that, in the sales pitch at least, will have no Game Over. In light of such powerful claims to forgetting, techniques for remembering and critiquing the contingencies that condition how we remake, remaster, and de-make live performance in digital space and time, seem to be necessary.

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