Remastered, Remade, Reimagined?

RUDOLF MAXIMILIAN SCHREIER — THINKS WAY TOO HARD ABOUT THIS KIND OF STUFF

What do you get when you produce a sequel to a sequel to prequel to an alternative time line of a classic video game? Either you generate such linguistic gems as "Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix", or you just decide to remake the original – or is it "reimagine" it?

Just to make this clear: This is not going to be rant about sequel- and prequel-mania. The consequences of trying to confuse fans as much as possible have gone so far as to prove that pirates are, in fact, equal to ninjas[1]. That alone should tell anyone to stay away from the topic.

What I am going to talk about is in fact what studios produce when they run out of ideas how to annihilate any kind of coherence in the canon time line: Remakes and Reimaginings. These are recreations of the earlier games of a series, either approached faithfully (remakes), or with sacrilege in mind (reimaginings).

Originally, the idea came from the world of movies. For example, the "Friday the 13th" series went through 10 sequels (the 3rd one ironically called "The Final Chapter") between 1981 and 2003, before receiving a reboot in 2009, which, confusingly enough, was simply titled "Friday the 13th". A similar fate is readily approaching the "A Nightmare on Elm Street" franchise, with the North American release of the identically named remake having taken place in April 2010.

It works for games, too

Apparently, these movies did well enough to make game publishers realize that they could do exactly the same: Before, there had been reissues such as the Final Fantasy series for Nintendo DS, which upgraded the graphics, and adjusted translations, but not a great deal of remakes and reimaginings; but possibly due to the revival of video game classics through download platforms like Steam, Xbox Live Arcade, and the Wii Virtual Console, studios have started to rehash their classics:

The 198X NES classic "Bionic Commando", which had itself been an arcade port, has seen a 2.5D remake as "Bionic Commando Rearmed" in 2009, with a sequel to this remake planned for 2011. Additionally, a direct sequel to the original (with the same ruddy title), but in 3D with all new gameplay was released in 2009 – and yes, the timelines of releases won't get less twisted. But these are the boring cases: Remaking a game is something that every sensible programmer new to a language or library does first, and sequels are the bread-and-butter line of video game production.

Remake failures

More interestingly, after 3 numbered sequels and 2 unnumbered prequels to the 1999 PlayStation original, 2010 has brought us "Silent Hill: Shattered Memories" for Wii, PS2 and

PSP. Doing away with pretty much everything from Silent Hill 1 save the protagonists' names and the outset of the plot – of course with the addition of functionality to exploit the abilities of the Wiimote simply because it's possible – it has been met with different reactions. Not really surprising, considering that combat has been completely removed in favor of highly scripted chase sequences, a harsh contrast to the 2008 "Silent Hill Homecoming", which had been criticized for the exact opposite, i. e. overemphasis of combat. Apparently (and oh so surprisingly), the best mixture has been the one from the original, and it hasn't been equaled ever since.

For the fans of the corresponding Capcom franchise that I can already hear crying out: The 2002 GameCube remake of the 1996 original "Resident Evil" has been described by its creator and lead designer Shinji Mikami as "70% from the original", and that doesn't seem to be far off from the truth, as it is one of the few games to be honored with the near-perfect score of 39/40 by the "Weekly Famicon" magazine, ranking it amongst legends such as "Super Mario 64", and "Final Fantasy X".

When you've just gotta catch 'em all

And while I am no fan of the series, I feel obligated to mention the best-selling RPG franchise of all times with over 193 million sold copies of 43 titles: Pokémon.

Seeing the great success of their first generation games "Red" and "Green", and later "Blue" and "Yellow" for the North American market, it did not surprise fans that sequels to the series were in the making. Although slowly running out of colors, Nintendo continued to release the versions "Gold" and "Silver". Strictly speaking, so far these had all been alternative versions of the same game or direct sequels.

With the 2000 release of "Pokémon Crystal", however, came the first remake of an earlier game (in this case "Silver"), a trend which continued with the 2003 remakes "FireRed" and "LeafGreen", which were based on the original "Red" and "Blue" versions. In case you aren't confused yet, there has also been a remake of "Ruby" and "Sapphire", titled "Emerald", "Diamond" and "Pearl", titled "Platinum" (boy, they're getting really creative now!), and just this very year, North America saw the release of "Heart-Gold" and "SoulSilver", which dominated the sales charts of March.

Future trends

But it's not only the "grand standards" of video games mentioned above that fall prey to the trend. Thanks to the great success of console gaming networks all around, retro-gaming is coming to the masses, and video game developers everywhere are jumping at the chance. You can expect to see remakes, reimaginings, remastered versions, "extended" releases, "Director's cuts", "Anniversary editions", all around the gaming globe, wherever bits of cash can be grabbed from hardcore fans. If you want to stay updated on the topic, you might want to check out GamerBytes[2], a spin-off of the popular gaming site Gamasutra[3] focusing on the handheld and downloadable console games market.

It may not be my place to dream, but maybe, just maybe, all of this means the end for WW2 shooters.   ⌘

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[1] http://www.google.com/search?q=zelda+pirate+ninja
[2] http://www.gamerbytes.com/
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