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It's All Just An Old Videogame

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Obsolete Graphics

> Love, in essence, arises in solitude when its object is not around, and it is directed not so much at the one or two people you love as at an image constructed by the mind, loosely connected to the original.

–– Victor Pelevin, *Chapaev And Void* I remember my favourite activity in childhood was to go to a forest with my friends, spend half a day there and return back home with a sack of full stories, pleasant tiredness and a childish mind jammed with happiness, all of which you'd probably forget next morning but remember much much later. We were building bridges over small rivers, shallow, cold and fast, running away from dogs, climbing up on trees. We were making real traps: pits covered with branches, logs falling from a tree, threads hidden in bushes – all intended, of course, only for countless monsters we wanted to see caught the following day. We were travelling deep into that forest to find treasures or see mythical fern flowers. In the spring, after snow

drifts melted, the fields got muddy and dangerous as quicksand, and we were travelling through them to gather birch tree juice. You make a cut on a tree and put a small groove in it, so the juice could slowly drip into a bottle underneath it, the bottle you collect the next morning and enjoy the drink. During summer, every year we had a three-month break from school during which we were making bows from juniper and tried to measure whose arrow flies further or higher, tired to shoot crows, unsuccessfully, though. One day, we saw a pillar of black smoke like in *Lost*, which was running on TV at that time. We approached it and found an abandoned campfire with a mysterious big cow skull. What had happened there?

I remember the video games I played during the same time. The first game I played was on Dendy, an unofficial hardware clone of one of Nintendo's consoles widespread in Russia. The first game on PC (which I needed solely for education, by the way) I played around 2006. It had around 128 megabytes of GPU memory, 512 megabytes of RAM, one core CPU, and a 112-gigabyte hard drive. Before the internet, we didn't have an opportunity to choose what to play – we played everything we could borrow or copy from each other, sometimes using a couple of rerecordable CDs. You were lucky to have "an adult" friend, who could generously supply you with new games. You could buy them too, of course, prices were ranging from 100 to 300 rubles, if I recall it correctly, but I believe only a few of the disks we bought were official editions. Playing a new game was a major event similar to the last day of the school before the summer break, birthday or New Year. For

some of the games, the abovementioned specs of our PCs were insufficient but we played them anyway. A game could freeze for a dozen minutes when a new location was loading or even when you push a save button. You had to wait patiently for it if you wanted to save your progress in the game. You could go outside and upon returning still see how it was “saving”. Sometimes it crashed, “out of memory” or something. Some games were laggy but we didn’t know what fps was, apart from it glowing yellow in one of the screen’s corners while you were using Fraps to record your epic endevours, and what should be the right amount of it. The game was Gothic III, the one I got accidentally. I didn’t know about the series before and the fact the third game was the worst – like everything else abovementioned, it did not matter.

Every game had an interesting story, characters and revolutionary gameplay mechanics I’d never seen before. What still keeps fascinating me the most is how good the quality of graphics was. Can you remember? The recent progress in CGI seems insignificant and shallow. Not even talking about the CGI uncanny valley period that happened sometime after that, many modern games look worse than what I remember from my childhood. They all had high-res textures, models with billions of polygons, shaders and shadows, anisotropic filtering and ambient occlusion or whatnot, and virtual worlds were truly endless. It all was nearly perfect and still can influx my brain with vivid imagery in a way modern games cannot.

But this idyll collapses when on an unfortunate occasion you see a game’s screenshots somewhere on the internet or, oh my God, decide to

play this game after 10-15 years of not even seeing it. After you find a way to run the old game on a modern PC or at least manage to download the game itself, you face the bitter truth. The graphics are not the same anymore. How am I not playing a hyper-realistic action about spies or colourful fantasy where I am a brave dragon annihilator? What happened? The game is old. Its graphic is old. Something is off and you don't know what. Similar to when you meet an old pal from school after the same 10-15 years and realise it is not fun being together anymore. Sadly, nothing is wrong but 'the friendship for life' is gone. You don't write to each other anymore or even remember your faces. Everything dissolved and disappeared.

This sad realisation is transient but it's profound. Your nostalgia works in the context of your memory but doesn't work outside of it. You realise, it has all been merely a story you've been telling to yourself all those years, a victorious picture that 'a winner' painted for themselves, a map with no territory, a cherrypicked and refined composition assembled from a pile of scattered old photographs. When it faces the reality, even the most colourful memory shutters, drown down to Lethe's depth, and you realise it's all just some bootleg game with bleak colours nobody cares about but you, not even the real you, the sentimental you lurking somewhere in your head.

Toská And Nostos

> It's always like that with Russia: you marvel and weep, but when you look closer at what you're marvelling at, it may make you vomit.

–– Victor Pelevin, *Chapaev And Void* "Nostalgia" consists of νόστος (*nóstos*), meaning "homecoming", which is a Homeric trope that often includes an epic hero returning home by sea, including Ulysses himself, and ἄλγος (*álgos*), meaning "sorrow" or "despair". The nostos part doesn't have to be "physical".

Dwelling in the past, fumbling through memories, and watching old photos or video records is enough, in fact, more than enough, even more, that's the gist of it. For if nostalgia lasts long enough and nudges you to reach closer to that object you've been mnemonically and emotionally wanking about, shaking and drooling all around in spiritual anamnesis, that memory nostalgia train you've been riding on crashes against the wall. You thought the object is there, beyond the tunnel, a dark, wet and cold place you can travel through and finally see the sun and spring Alpine meadows again, but there is a wall, the wall built by you out of bricks carried from the past, the mirror-wall you see yourself in, and you are fucking miserable. You realise that hitting walls is painful. More so if you are on a high-speed train with a broken emergency brake. No stop, no turn, that's now how trains of thought work, and your sentimental you gets smashed against the wall, experiences pain, those "sorrow", "despair", and "anguish".

But what if it's not possible at all? What if there's no tunnel and the ride

has no end, the object, its destination, doesn't exist or is located too far from the railway. What if a ride, a long enough longing for somewhere else, a place, or a time, even if you've never experienced it, becomes the pain itself?

There's the Russian word "toská"[1] (noun /ˈtō-skə/), which is often roughly translated as sadness, melancholia, or lugubriousness. Howbeit, this word is among others for which there's no direct alternative in English, hence you can't translate it without losing some of its meanings. This is not just my opinion, here's what Nabokov said about it:

> "No single word in English renders all the shades of toska. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody of something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom." While there's no toska in English, similar words do exist in some other languages, such as "saudade" in Portuguese, a feeling of sadness or nostalgia, lack of something lost. But I still think toska is unique. It's clear and opaque, abstract and concrete at the same time, and can encompass many things, some of which are highly contextual. Translators have tried to find a good substitute for toska, but there never

> has been an ideal solution. Here are a few examples from Dostoyevsky (thanks Armen Zakharyan for the examples).
>
> *The original, "Crime and Punishment", about Raskolnikov:*

... он не знал, куда деться от тоски своей. (almost literally, he didn't know how to escape his toska)

*And here's how it's translated:

Pevear & Volokhonsky: ...*he didn't know where to flee from his anguish**.

Michael R. Katz: ...he didn't know where to hide from his anguish.

David McDuff: ...he was quite simply overwhelmed by his depression.

Ready Oliver: ...there seemed no escape from his anguish.

Constance Garnett: ...he did not know what to do with himself to escape from his wretchedness. Although you can see there's no single way to translate that word, "anguish" (extreme mental pain, distress, or anxiety) seems like a good candidate. Howbeit, "anguish" doesn't contain in itself those ennui and boredom inseparable components of toska.

"Normal" nostalgia, or nostalgia per se, doesn't have to be sad and anguishing. Often, it's just a sentimental longing about the past events, sprinkled with some regrets that time has passed, supported by pleasant memories, just another tool to escape the mundane. This is the form of nostalgia media abuses these days, whether it's a yet-another-remake,

sequel or even an original actively referencing and borrowing from a specific period of time. They know it makes you feel good, it's an appealing new old world to escape to, refined and romanticised, often up to the point of being concentrated like sugar syrup able to make your cheekbones droop. Howbeit, there's a more profound form of nostalgia that shares a special bond with toska. Painful and unresolvable nostalgia for or time or a place, such as when you're away from home and cannot come back at that time, or a feeling that the grass was greener but now there's no grass at all, just a wasteland, are a few examples among when nostalgia and toska start playing together or even become synonymical in some of their shades.

Andrei Tarkovsky believed that such a form of nostalgia is unique to Russians travelling or living abroad and it's even deeper than toska, "almost a disease":

> ..."an illness that drains away the strength of the soul, the capacity to work, the pleasure of living.."

..."a profound compassion that binds us not so much with our own privation, our longing, our separation, but rather with the suffering of others, a passionate empathy..." He conveyed this idea and his personal experience in his film, *Nostalghia*, where the protagonist, a writer, travels to Italy to do research about one Russian composer, but nostalgia aroused by homesickness starts haunting him.

The film is sedate and slow and consists of many long takes, symbols

and dream-like sequences. The last scene features an 8-minute long take where Andrei Gorchakov, the protagonist, tries to carry a lit candle through a pond without letting it extinguish. The camera follows Gorchakov carrying the candle and goes back with him when he starts another attempt.

I'm not going to put here my interpretations of this sequence – there's no need for that because Tarkovsky already explained it himself in his dialogue with Oleg Yankovsky, the actor playing Gorchakov. 'If you can do that,' Tarkovsky said to him, 'if it really happens and you carry the candle to the end–in one shot, straight, without cinematic conjuring tricks and cut-in editing—then maybe this act will be the true meaning of my life. It will certainly be the finest shot I ever took—if you can do it, if you can endure to the end.'

After the candle scene, there's the last, final shot in the film. In black and white, we see Gorchakov and a dog resting on the grass of the Abbey of San Galgano, but contrasting this piece of Italian architecture, we see a Russian wooden house and landscape in the background. Perhaps, you can find many interpretations of that shot, too, but I think it is just a perfect, sublime depiction of nostalgia caused by homesickness and loneliness, that kind of nostalgia Tarkovsky claimed to be unique to Russians, the one he experienced himself. In this type of nostalgia, you, like both Andreis, are forever trapped in one place whereas your heart lies somewhere else. Your nostos cannot be done, for there's no sea, no ship, your Ithaca has sunk, and you're not even Ulysses.

Mechanics Of Memories

> Mum. When I hear the word ‘discourse’, I grab onto my simulacrum.

— Victor Pelevin, The Helmet of Horror The transcendental poetry of Tarkovsky’s *Nostalghia* shows that cinema is capable of visualising even such personal and complex things as memories and nostalgia. While Tarkovsky focused on capturing sensations, emotions and time in long hypnotising takes, another example I’d like to share with you plays with editing instead, visualising nostalgia and the nature of memory in a sophisticated sequence of shots.

Kevin Parker, known as Jesus with a guitar among his fans, a multi-instrumentalist behind Tame Impala, released his fourth album *The Slow Rush* in 2020. The album combined Tame Impala’s psychedelic roots with soft rock, pop and a gentle touch of disco creating a special ‘timeless mood’ as if you were in the 1970s and the 2010s at the same time. The main theme that weaves through every song is the passage of time, the past events and the future prospects. One of the tracks, *Lost In Yesterday* is a song about our topic today – nostalgia and the malleable nature of memories. Parker wrote about how we can dwell on our past choices and events without obsessing over them, instead, embracing traumatic events and moving on.

What I love the most about the track is its music video. Directed by Terri Timely (a perfect surname for the occasion), the video is a throwback trance that outlines time's distorting effect on memories.

It presents us with a wedding filmed with a continuous tracking shot. The camera flies through the hall and shows guests, a cake, and Kevin Parker with a band playing on a stage. Once the camera makes a full circle, we face a waiter's back and the tracking shot starts again (and the screen's aspect ratio changes gradually).

It might sound like *Groundhog Day* but unlike in that film, every cycle in *Lost in Yesterday* doesn't show the same events in exactly the same way. At first, we see a dull party with basic food and drinks, cheap Tesco cake, passive-aggressive guests and an awkward atmosphere and a pregnant bride. Then with every camera's flight over the hall, we're presented with new and improved flashbacks, literally. It upgrades the memories of the wedding making it more lively, majestic and luxurious and its participants happier and put together. With each cycle, we see nicer and nicer food and drinks, fancier and fancier clothes, more and more people. Now they dance and celebrate. The bride is no longer pregnant and the couple is excited to get a slice of the cake (not Tesco anymore). But in the end, this romantic utopia's violently awakened as the pregnant bride from the first scene returns, destroys the cake and ruins the party, leaving everyone, including us, shocked. The end.

Kevin Parker and Terri Timely show there that everything is not always how we remember it. What we see is produced at the point where the

imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation and 'eventually terrible memories turn into great ones,' as the first verse of the song says. Details and emotions get distorted by time. We forget about the reality of our past and get 'lost in yesterday'.

Julian Barnes wrote in his novel *The Sense Of Ending*, which widely explores the nature of memory, 'The memory becomes a thing of shreds and patches. It's a bit like the black box aeroplanes carry to record what happens in a crash. If nothing goes wrong, the tape erases itself. So if you do crash, it's obvious why you did; if you don't, then the log of your journey is much less clear.'

The drama in the music video unfolds in a similar way. We see a romantic utopia until a bad memory resurfaces, forcing us to recall a true reality. Often we choose to remember the good things and erase any memory that didn't bring us joy. 'So if they call you, embrace them. If they hold you, erase them.'

The same with old games, childhood friends or other things from the past. Some of them are good and cause warm feelings you can put yourself in like a blanket, grab a cup of hot chocolate, sit by the window, and, feeling safe and cosy, glance at how the outside is raining itself. The others are bad. They stall and haunt you dragging further into the woods to see fern flowers to almost get lost, or nudge you to fall from an improvised wooden bridge to cold water and get sick. Or show an image of a dog chasing you, you fall, scratch your knees and hands and mess up new clothes in blood and dirt. Or an image when the snow

has just melted and you go into muddy spring fields and the earth engulfs you deeper and deeper into the mud until your grandfather pulls you out saving your life.

Regardless of good or bad, the real essence of events gets diluted with time and what is left is a story we tell about our life to ourselves, colourful and poetic, the one we value and love, but a merely story.

Notes

1. Stressing “a” is important, otherwise, it sounds weird to me, as weird as if it’s even changed its meaning.

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