

# Restorative vs. Reflective Nostalgia in *Arcade Paradise*

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The video game arcade's heydays are over in most countries of the Global North, but its legacy as a school for game literacy lives on. Nosebleed Interactive's *Arcade Paradise* (2022) is a sustained effort to recapture the affective essence of what videogaming meant prior to and in the immediate aftermath of the home computer revolution, when the arcade reigned supreme. Its anachronistic mashup of game genres and artistic styles create a panoply of games bearing the ideal type of the arcade on their sleeves. With some cabinets being recognizable recreations of real-life games, while others prove to be imaginative exercises of "what could have been" if modern design principles were applied to arcade cabinets of old, *Arcade Paradise* is an exercise in reconstruction. The paper investigates the nexus at which the popular imagination and the visual iconography of the arcade meet, generating a particular structure of feeling, that of nostalgia (Tannock 1995).

Nostalgia has been an increasingly productive lens through which gaming history comes alive in light of advances in game design and gameplay (Bowman and Wulf 2022). In fact, nowadays, even the video arcade can be considered as a site of digital cultural heritage, where authenticity becomes a site of contestation, with Mochocki even highlighting "affective involvement" (2021) as a key affinity that dovetails nicely with the affective turn in game studies (Anable 2019, Milesi 2023, Waskiewicz and Bakun 2020).

Svetlana Boym has distinguished between two distinct, but interlocking strands of nostalgia (2001). Restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct the past as it should have been felt, its optimism, sweetness and rounded edges offering a Disney version of what occurred, solid but saccharine. Reflective nostalgia is a much more precarious, even sensitive recollection, one which does everything in its power to expose the rose-tinted glasses of restorative nostalgia as a construct with an ideology of its own: that of eliding the complexities and commercial nature of popular culture; in our case – the arcade. *Arcade Paradise* negotiates the demilitarized zone between reconstructive and reflective nostalgia; the cabinets featured in the game employ the visual language expected of 1980s-90s arcade games, but the gameplay itself is much

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more reminiscent of the style of metaprogression inherent in roguelites and more modern casual games. It also features an extensive (but hardly challenging) economic model that exposes arcade cabinets as not just entertainment software stations, but sites of revenue production. Still, the profitability of the games on display are intricately tied to the player's engagement with them, and their unlockable achievements permanently bump the popularity of the games on display. The paper addresses the progression systems as part of an elaborate design decision to take away the arcade-ness of the arcade game games and to incorporate them into the incremental growth of PC gameplay style.

*Prima facie*, the setting and visual presentation of *Arcade Paradise* would seem like a love letter to the good old days, but in fact, the whole game is set up to cast restorative nostalgia against reflective nostalgia. Rather than "rebooting the girl/boyhood" of the protagonist Ashley at the arcade (Kocurek 2015), the process of turning the King Wash laundromat into a profitable video arcade is a task of capturing the breadth of the gaming spectrum with the purchase and careful positioning of the arcade machines for maximum profit, not to mention the constant engagement of the player with the machines in pursuit of "levelling up" the cabinets – a concern that would not be of issue in a real-life arcade. The overarching narrative of the game also pits Ashley and their sister Lesley against Gerald, their father, a hard-nosed, no-nonsense self-made man, who takes umbrage at Ashley's desire to turn the laundromat into a video game parlour, effectively making him the game's antagonist, replaying US society's misguided concerns/moral panic with the arcade as a site of delinquency and a place where problematic youth congregate (Ellis 1984, Hodges 2014).

Restorative nostalgia would be content with recreating the game feel and visual style of actual games of old, but *Arcade Paradise* does more than that: it emphasizes the production and commercial context of early video game development and use by forcing the player to become an entrepreneur of sorts. Reflectively nostalgic images of the arcade nudges the players to consider the labour that goes into operating such an establishment. As such, in Ashley's view, even mundane tasks, such as taking out rubbish or declogging a toilet takes on a ludic overlay, symbolizing their mental outlook on running the business, and propping a mirror up to the player on how soul-sucking adult chores can be gamified, and how hollow they might feel without their ludic incentives.

Finally, the paper proceeds to analyse the myriad of references in gameplay and graphics to crucial milestones in video gaming history, from affectionate remakes of games like *Pong* (Atari 1972) as *Shuttlecocks* or *Qix* (Taito 1981) as *Line Terror*, to the innovative but plausibly arcade-y designs of *Blockchain*, a number-based, Tetris-style puzzle game, or the *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980) meets *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design 1997) design of *Racer Chaser*, which is in itself an *hommage* to GTA's original working title, *Race'n'Chase*. By untangling the web of gaming history woven into the fabric of *Arcade Paradise*, the paper demonstrates the complexities of the cultural history of the arcade, its position in game design, and the emotions they inspire.

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