

LAN is Dead, Long Live LAN

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

For gamers today, whether they were active or not in the late 90s to early 2000s, the LAN (local area network) Party appears to be a long-extinct creature. Prior to advancements in internet and communication technology, many real-time multiplayer games, like *Counter-Strike* (Valve 2009) and *Unreal Tournament* (Epic Games 1999), had graphics that far exceeded the limits of internet connections at the time (k, 2024, p. 7). Eager to experience smooth, reliable multiplayer, players began hosting in-person LAN parties. Attendees of a LAN Party would bring their own computers or gaming consoles and establish a LAN connection via a switch or router, using the fast speeds of local connection to play together. However, as computer towers transitioned into laptops and company-hosted multiplayer servers became more and more powerful, LAN Parties began to fade away.

Despite its relative absence in the here and now, the phrase “LAN Party” continues to evoke images of community-centric fun — crowded rooms filled with PCs, late nights turned into early mornings, and an abundance of junk food. Even though LAN parties are not present in the same capacity now, they possess an enduring spirit, which has carried into the present an outlook towards computing that is adventurous and bold. As merritt k writes, there is a fondness associated with these events, driven by our current moment where “communications technology paradoxically seems to produce a sense of disconnection for many people.” The photos of groups of people coming together, united by computers, appear strange at a time when online activity is viewed as responsible for a great deal of personal and political hostility. It is the frustration of this incongruity, the difference of computing and gaming culture from then to now, that images of the LAN Party soothe.

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Providing not just a promise of, but a very real example of “a world in which ownership of software and play belonged more to individuals than corporations” (k, 2024, p. 9). We argue that a longing for the LAN Party is more than just a manifestation of the frustrations with current gaming culture and technology industries, it is a model of practices and attitudes towards computing that are being adopted today.

We acknowledge that nostalgia, both at large and for our specific purposes, has the potential to soften the issues of the past. Modern nostalgia about the LAN Party tends to overlook the fact that these spaces were often white, male-dominated, and hostile to women (k, 2024, p. 9). Regardless of these very real flaws, our understanding of nostalgia, borrowed from Carly Kocurek's use of the concept in *Coin-Operated Americans*, is not interested in a full-scale revival of the past, but instead is searching for a way we can learn from it, examine its many intertwining threads, and apply those to the shortcomings of the present, particularly with regards to gaming and technology (Kocurek, 2015). We see a longing for the LAN Party in the same way Sean Fenty presents video game longing, as an opportunity to return to a moment when we experienced “the sheer joy of beginning to know another world,” when computing and gaming were younger, subversive, and experimental (Fenty, 2008, p. 23).

Our research pulls from observations of our own lived experiences, as artists, researchers, and educators in the field of games, and importantly, as post-LAN gamers ourselves. We have witnessed, like many of our colleagues, new gamers and game designers, born and raised in a world where gaming has always been a large corporate endeavor, and where gaming communities are developed almost entirely online. While the specific eras of nostalgia have changed throughout the years, recently from the 90s to the 2000s, gamers continue to look back on LAN Parties due to a shared dissatisfaction with gaming culture under big, mainstream technology companies. A look back at the LAN Party shows us a time when access to computer software, tools, and parts was more common, and when planned obsolescence did not seem to haunt every new release of technology. While the LAN Party certainly wasn't a social or technological utopia, LAN Parties still have the potential to show us a path forward and inspire us to work toward a culture of gaming and technology that is liberated from corporations.

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