

# Community Resilience and Nostalgia: the case of the Metal Slug saga

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Nostalgia, Gaming Community, Metal Slug

## INTRODUCTION

The *Metal Slug* video game series (1996–present), created and developed by Japanese company Nazca Corporation and subsequently by SNK Corporation, occupies a distinctive place in the collective imagination of gamers of all ages, from veterans of 1990s arcades to younger players accustomed to online and portable gaming – sometimes serving as an intergenerational bridge (Bolin, 2017). Initially a leading example of the run-and-gun genre, the series has since evolved into multiple forms and iterations capable of adapting to new gaming modes and devices: from traditional 2D pixel art to attempts at three-dimensional reworkings, and from score-driven arcade experiences to turn-based tactics and tower-defence titles on smartphones. What has remained constant, however, is the series’ strong identity and powerful imagery within the gaming community: recognisable and iconic characters, a comic-book/anime-inspired visual design, compelling sound design, ease of access, and a fast-paced and immediately engaging gameplay style. In other words, *Metal Slug* may be regarded as a ‘mass’ arcade game, capable of surviving in arcade contexts longer than almost any other title of its era.

Set in a fictionalised context inspired by the atmosphere of the Second World War, the first game follows its two protagonists, Marco and Tarma, as they fight against the ‘Rebel Army’, a faction of corrupt soldiers engaged in acts of terrorism against society (Weiss, 2016). The game fuses a hardcore shooter attitude with striking visuals and vibrant sound effects, resulting in a distinctive and almost inimitable sense of originality. Subsequent instalments (such as *Metal Slug 2*, *3*, *X*, *4*, and *5*), released between 1998 and 2004, introduce new characters – including the female protagonists Fio and Eri – allow players to pilot additional military vehicles such as aircraft and submarines, and enable the protagonists to assume different forms (e.g., mummy, monkey, etc.). Yet, despite these developments, the fundamental narrative remains unchanged (*ibid.*). The iconic status of the series’ characters is also attributable to the influence of illustrator Hayao Miyazaki (Fantoni, 2018) on the

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game's aesthetic: despite its 2D graphics, the visual style – and some of its characters in particular – has repeatedly transcended the original medium. For instance, Fio appears as a playable character in the *King of Fighters* series, and the production of Funko Pop figures representing *Metal Slug* protagonists clearly positions the franchise within the realm of pop culture and nostalgia (Zamzamin et al., 2022). The game's cross-media presence, however, is not confined to the sphere of gaming; it also extends to cosplay communities (e.g., Metal Slug Italian Army), further demonstrating the enduring strength of its fan bases.

## **GEOGRAPHY AND NOSTALGIA**

This work seeks to explore the *Metal Slug* phenomenon by reconstructing its development, localisation, and circulation history and by analysing the characteristics that have contributed to its importance within the international gaming landscape. In particular, localisation is understood not only as a process of linguistic and cultural adaptation, but also as a materially and spatially embedded practice, shaped by the infrastructures of distribution and by the specific contexts of reception in which the game was played. Particular emphasis is therefore placed on the game's geography – that is, the distribution and location of the arcade cabinets that hosted it, especially in Italy (including stationary and mobile arcades, beach resorts, bowling alleys, family restaurants, bars, and even barber shops). This dimension is crucial for identifying the brand as a 'mass phenomenon' and for assessing its still remarkably high degree of recognisability within contemporary pop culture.

Such an analysis is further informed by the perspectives of those who have played – and continue to play – the series, whether for high-score purposes and/or for cooperative leisure. Retro-arcade gaming communities, which remain highly resilient, are central to understanding the dynamics of use, preservation, and development associated with these games (Costalunga & Varini, 2025). In this context, resilience is conceptualised as the capacity of these communities to sustain, reproduce, and reconfigure gaming practices over time, despite processes of technological obsolescence and the progressive disappearance of traditional arcade infrastructures. The Italian community, for example, continues to resist cultural and technological transformations not only through its use of contemporary gaming and communication media (YouTube, Twitch, etc.), but also by maintaining physical gathering spaces (annual meet-ups) and by using original hardware (Neo-Geo MVS and AES systems) alongside emulation, as a way of 'reliving' a distant and nostalgic past (Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, this process can be framed within broader debates in nostalgia studies (Boym, 2001; Becker & Trigg, 2025), which conceptualise nostalgia not merely as a backwards-looking sentiment but as an active and productive cultural force. In this sense, the practices observed around *Metal Slug* oscillate between attempts to reconstruct and preserve an "authentic" experience (e.g., the use of original hardware and settings) and more mediated re-elaborations of that past (e.g., emulation, streaming, and online sharing). These dynamics are closely intertwined with the forms of resilience displayed by retro gaming communities: while some practices support preservation and continuity, others enable adaptation and reinterpretation. Nostalgia thus operates as a mechanism through which players reactivate past gaming experiences in the present, often through hybrid practices that combine digital mediation with embodied and co-present interaction. The challenges of adapting nostalgia to the contemporary world are mediated through such hybrid configurations – and, at times, through practices still firmly rooted in the

past (Wulf, Bowman, Rieger, Velez, & Breuer, 2018; Bowman & Wulf, 2023) – anchored in the physicality of social relationships (Apperley & Jayemane, 2012).

## METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative approach that integrates qualitative interviews, community artefacts, and an in-depth examination of the mechanisms through which gameplay dynamics and community relations linked to the *Metal Slug* series are preserved. The participants – experts in Italian arcade game culture – form the empirical basis for semi-structured interviews, which are then thematically coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006) following a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The study also includes an analysis of documentation (gameplay and high-score recordings) produced by the players themselves, as well as a social network analysis focusing on early online gaming forums (Tipaldo, 2014; Schreier, 2012). In addition, a series of interviews with importers, distributors, and rental service providers active between the late 1980s and early 1990s had been planned to obtain an informed and privileged perspective on the key market actors of the period and to reconstruct, as accurately as possible, the distribution networks and the granular scale of the phenomenon. This combined approach enables both historical reconstruction and interpretative analysis, situating the research at the intersection of ethnography and cultural game studies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2019). Finally, through content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), the study aims to elucidate the saga's processes of adaptation, with the goal of highlighting the transformative limitations inherent in these games.

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