

Playing with the Past: The Pleasures of Nostalgic Design with Playdate

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INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia is crucial in modern gaming through shaping fans' and players' pleasure and establishing standards for content, controls, practices, and distribution. We analyze the Playdate game system and its associated development strategies to explore the value of intentional nostalgic design and its effects on player/creator communities, promoting a virtual alternative utopia for remembering gaming's past and future.

A "longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed" (Boym 2008, xiii), Nostalgia is evident in everything from the persistence of the Pokémon franchise to referential genres like metroidvanias and titles like *UFO 50* (a fictional 8-bit console; Mossmouth 2024). Scholars of player psychology note the feeling influences satisfaction and perceived success (Bowman et al. 2023) and can enhance well-being (Wulf et al. 2018). Nostalgic design, however, centers on specific ideological choices. For instance, Garda (2014) notes the difference between "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgic game design: the former focuses on reinvigorating the past, while the latter imagines another place and time. Each approach reflects different potential cultural meanings and associated pleasures: Restorative nostalgia establishes gamer capital (Consalvo 2009) and privileges a homogeneous (e.g., white, male) gamer/producer set. Reflective nostalgia aids community building, as seen in modding on platforms like the Game Boy Advance (Custodio 2020).

Nostalgia is also an asset in the game industry's broader political economy, encouraging new forms of profit, resistance, and creativity; Vanderhoef (2017) suggests that NES homebrewing can preserve technological value outside the console

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market's fast-paced innovation cycle. This is echoed in work extolling older hardware as playgrounds for creative work (Wilde 2024) and even in new modes of pleasurable expression like chiptune music (Hermes 2024). Nostalgia, therefore, serves player satisfaction and fosters modes of utopian development beyond traditional cultural production.

The Playdate video game console exemplifies this potential. Conceived by Panic Inc. in 2019, the console markets itself as “familiar but unlike anything you’ve ever seen” (Playdate. Order now! n.d.). The system evokes nostalgia among players familiar with the monochromatic Game Boy and similar handhelds. It also reflects older development norms, using the more deliberate, yet haphazard Lua programming language instead of game engines like Unreal/Unity. Yet, Playdate balances these features with “reflective” and utopian nostalgic attributes through its seasonal content distribution model and unique inputs like the hand crank. It does this while remaining a minimally digital, tactile gaming console, using limited development parameters (Nikitin 2024).

As a case in how evoking nostalgia can be utilized to promote a utopian vision of independent gaming, we examine Playdate through the conceptual framework of collective memory – specifically how material artifacts, objects, and their use create a shared memory of events and subjects within broader culture (Sturken, 2007, 2016). This approach lets us understand Playdate as a memory object that triggers specific ideological concerns about what games are, what is lost, and how nostalgic engagement entices and drives players and creators. Ultimately, exploring how these groups engage with Playdate offers insights into the limits of nostalgia in shaping cultural memory and the intersectional pleasures of this imagined landscape.

Given this background, our work is premised on the following questions:

RQ₁: How do communities of practice (e.g., developers, designers) take pleasure in nostalgia during the development process?

RQ₂: How do communities of practice reflect and restore nostalgia in their discourses surrounding Playdate?

RQ₃: How does nostalgia exist at Playdate's platform level (e.g., technical apparatus, hardware, material)?

METHODOLOGY

To address these questions, we are taking a multimethod approach: first, analyzing Playdate as a platform (van Dijck 2013); then, familiar discourses regarding nostalgia; and finally, interviewing console and game developers to identify how they experience nostalgia in their creative process. To understand discourses on Playdate, we are analyzing posts in the device's developer forum “Games” section (<https://devforum.play.date/c/games/6>), which showcase the conception and marketing of original content. We are taking an inductive approach, coding interview and forum data while meeting frequently to see how themes emerge to reach trustworthy findings (Braun and Clarke, 2021, Nowell et al. 2017). We have begun platform and thematic analysis and will complete interviews ($N = 20$) in 2026.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Our platform analysis (van Dijck, 2013) emphasizes how the combination of Playdate's technology, users, usage, and content evokes nostalgic gameplay. The design, color schemes, and crank reflect long-lost systems, while the device's content and technical infrastructure are familiar to those who made or played in the 1990s. Games tend to imitate coin-operated arcade titles, such as *Root Bear*, modeled after the beer-serving game *Tapper*. Nostalgic pleasure is promoted as the platform's primary benefit. Ownership, governance, and business models are distinctly more modern, with distribution based on paid "seasons," their own multisided market, or side-loaded via creator-focused sites like itch.io. These choices represent a revival of pleasurable nostalgia in creative practices, coupled with a focus on decentering game production from modern distribution channels (e.g., Steam, Xbox Game Pass). This is also reflected in background interviews, where developers suggested that part of Playdate's enjoyability was a return to lost coding and playtesting practices.

Forum discussions also evoked nostalgia for more independent creation. Sometimes this is explicit: "I just recently made a devlog that dives further into the inspirations/origins of the game. You can read it here if you're in the mood for some wild west era internet nostalgia." Many posts also compare their games to older ones. Most developers thus place their efforts within a larger history of classic games. These are intertwined with feelings of niche joy: "[...] I already felt like the [Playdate] is the guilty pleasure that every tech nerd needs," one post stated before relating the device explicitly to old and dead technologies.

These posts highlight the desire for nostalgic play, development and "indie" creation, which will be expanded upon in future interviews. Individual practices in design, development, coding, and conceptualizing games within the broader production ecosystem rely on the nostalgic pleasure from an audience that subsists at the periphery of mainstream gaming. In this way, Playdate provides a material object that evokes a utopian past, immediately graspable in the present.

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