

Valuable Childhoods: Nostalgia, Intersectionalities, and Vintage Game Fairs

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Keywords

Nostalgia, retro gaming, game markets, ethnography, Mega Drive, game affects

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There are many ways in which academics working together can examine their similar and different histories with games, and how shared histories of play can then be used to explore much broader issues of culture, class, inequality, and intersectionalities of all three. This paper addresses an entanglement with ideas of nostalgia, game reselling, and the epistemic injustice (if not epistemicide) (Bueno, 2024) that wraps around the game playing practices of 90s and 00s non-‘mainstream’ or liminal play spaces, *and* non-‘mainstream’ or liminal identities.

When those of us working with games reach an age where our childhood games and consoles become marketable as ‘retro’ or ‘nostalgic,’ and our favourite titles become re-sellable at a more premium pricing (Ferreira, 2020), then we are forced to renegotiate what our apparently innocent childhood memories can mean in a current moment. In this paper, the authors present a duoethnography (Sawyer and Norris, 2012; González and Campbell, 2022) of their shared player biographies (Mitgutsch, 2013), from across their respective childhoods in Brazil and England, which they frame with a walkthrough of a ‘vintage’ game fair in London. With a particular focus on their childhood memories of their favourite or most memorable Sega Mega Drive games, but also with acknowledgement of arcade experiences and other ‘unofficial’ moments of shared play, they reflect on how nostalgic memory can also be strongly influenced by the senses, particularly in the handling of game cartridges, but also by the location of play and the company with whom play is shared. They think through to what extent these memories are erased by the homogeneity of experience represented by game fairs, and how one can recapture a nostalgia that is somehow both intersectional yet shared across national borders.

The mutual memories of physical, cartridge-based games played on the Mega Drive in the 1990s are considered against looking at those same cartridges now, as they are encountered, second hand, in boxes at a games fair in a shared moment of cultural reflection. Though the authors’ childhood contexts are in many respects disparate, the similarities of their tactile memories around handling, playing, and sharing Mega

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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Drive games is revealed to be markedly similar, raising questions about how artefact-based nostalgia is unavoidably sensorial (Anable, 2018; Dwyer, 2024). Questions are raised in this process about how ethnographic research can find a point of balance between something as personal as lived memory, broader ideas of nostalgia, and objects with a tactile reality.

However, though the sensorial element is necessary for conceptualising nostalgia as a cultural phenomenon, in the case of retro gaming retail, nostalgia acquires a different role, mobilising different affects and attention. In this respect, the methodological frame of our study, namely a walkthrough of a game market, affords us another opportunity to reflect upon our own memories and experiences from the perspective of collective gaming cultures: more specifically, it allows us to consider how the affective value we attribute to certain games can often be quite divergent from the monetary value attributed to them in the context of the game market (Fleury, 2024). The opportunity to revisit such memories, contrasting our experiences, also opened an opportunity to reflect about the intersectional challenges in working with gaming cultures and memories. While our initial identifiers (e.g., ethnicity, lived local culture, gender) would potentially indicate disparate experiences, we noticed substantial similarities in some of our practices, indicating how other factors, such as class (e.g., Vilasís-Pamos and Pérez-Latorre, 2022) can influence such processes, reiterating the importance of seeking interconnected approaches to histories (Swalwell, 2021), and how even in so-called 'mainstream' spaces, certain experiences and knowledges might be erased in historical narratives.

Balancing the affective power of nostalgia for individuals, with the collective market practices of formalised game fairs, which bring together not only game and console resellers, but also vendors of adjacent crafts and fan items, we consider how pleasurable indulgence in shared nostalgia can also be exploited by market forces (Vanderhoef, 2017; Lima and Varga, 2023), not only at the international level of products designed to interpolate certain age ranges and fan groups, but also at the personal in informal collectives around game markets. In reflecting on this exploitation of nostalgia for retro-tech, we end with a comment on what exists 'under erasure' (Derrida, 1997) in the ontological model posed by game fairs, by tying together our lived experiences as 'marked' or 'unmarked' in the discourses of game reselling, and retro cultures.

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