

Modernities of authenticity in recreated online digital games: A comparative case study

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INTRODUCTION

The search for lost authenticity has emerged as a key motivation for nostalgic desires within the context of digital games (Srirachanikorn 2024). The 21st century saw games transition from largely static artifacts to dynamic, continuously updated live-service experiences (Dubois and Westar 2022). In the case of *Team Fortress 2* (Valve Software 2007), the introduction of a vast quantity of customisable cosmetic items and weapons profoundly altered the game's iconic art style and play experience (Manning 2012; Mitchell et al. 2007; Moore 2011) to a state which bears little resemblance to the original launch version. While many enjoy these additions, there exists a "post-object fandom" (Williams 2016) of veteran players nostalgic for the launch version of *TF2*, which through 18 years of updates has been made inaccessible and superseded by what is perceived as an inauthentic substitution. These tensions were beginning to be felt even 10 years earlier, when in 2014 work began on a community-developed mod today known as *Team Fortress 2 Classified*¹ (Eminoma 2025) which attempts a "re-imagining of the 2008-2009 era of Team Fortress 2" (TF2 Classified 2025). *TF2 Classified*'s approach to authenticity and nostalgia is notable, as rather than presenting a rolled-back version of *TF2*, the mod also incorporates new content aligned with *TF2*'s original aesthetic and game design philosophy.

METHOD

This research presents a comparative case study (Bartlett and Varvus 2017) focusing on *TF2 Classified* and *World of Warcraft Classic* (Blizzard Entertainment 2019) two key instances where the 'lost' authenticity of a game experience has sought to be restored. The comparative case study is specifically informed by notions of modernities in authenticity (Canavan and McCamley 2021), with a focus on postmodern and post-postmodern perspectives. This allows the analysis to step beyond simply acknowledging the basis of authenticity in these restoration projects

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and instead begin probing how different interpretations and philosophies of authenticity inform nostalgic game design practices and play experiences.

MODERNITIES AND AUTHENTICITY

Modernities have stood as useful perspectives to unpack notions of authenticity, with postmodern authenticity deployed to explore the deconstruction of truth and cynicism towards quests for the real (Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Games like *World of Warcraft Classic* (Blizzard Entertainment 2019) have previously acted as examples of nostalgic gaming practices and can be understood through postmodern authenticity. Presented as a recreation of the “Vanilla” *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) gameworld and gameplay mechanics as they were in September 2006, *WoW Classic* offers a long-awaited ‘homecoming’ for nostalgic veterans (Toft-Nielsen 2019; Bowman and Wulf 2023). The nostalgic authenticity in *WoW Classic* allows players to revel in a hyperreal simulation of 2006 Vanilla *WoW* that is based not on accuracy, but rather the sensual pleasures constructed from players’ subjective memories, recollections, lived experiences, expectations and fantasies of Vanilla *WoW* from their nostalgic present. *WoW Classic* is not an exact facsimile of 2006 Vanilla *WoW*; it contains quality-of-life improvements imported from contemporary versions of *WoW* and an updated codebase which goes as far as to reimplement Vanilla-era bugs which no longer (mis)function (Gravelle 2019). Nostalgic play in *WoW Classic* is therefore negotiated and idealised based on what Jenkins (2006) describes as “sentimental myth” and players’ selective memories of Vanilla *WoW*; it is the feigned appearance of Vanilla *WoW* tuned to generate delight for contemporary players’ nostalgic sensibilities (Firat and Dholakia 2006).

ALTERREALITY IN TEAM FORTRESS 2 CLASSIFIED

If *WoW Classic* can be considered a postmodern “genuine fake” (Brown 1996), then *TF2 Classified* represents a type of post-postmodern authenticity as a “fake genuine” (Canavan and McCamley 2021). *TF2 Classified* similarly offers players access to an experience of *TF2*’s early years, but diverges from *WoW Classic* by presenting no guises about the nature of its nostalgic offerings. Beside restoring *TF2*’s original art style and gameplay mechanics, *TF2 Classified* also implements a swathe of content cut during *TF2*’s development, characters and gamemodes from prior *Team Fortress* titles and new content updates aligned with *TF2*’s original development values. Postmodern hyperreality as a logic of authenticity is less dominant here, as *TF2 Classified* makes no claim to recreating the bygone experience of early *TF2* as it originally was. A more applicable notion stands in what Canavan and McCamley (2021) term as “alterreality;” a state contingent on the acceptance of “the multiplicity of truths, interpretations of events, memories and so forth available in any given situation.” *TF2 Classified* draws not just from the memories, expectations and realities of *TF2*, but also from the game’s potentialities embodied in developer commentaries, cut content data-mined from game files, obscure concept art, fan art, fan theories and other paratexts (Consalvo 2017) which speak to hypothetical versions of *TF2* which never came to fruition. In contrast to postmodernism’s deconstruction, the post-postmodern era invites reconstruction and the remaking of reality (Doyle 2018). For *TF2 Classified*, authenticity is not derived from an accurate replication of *TF2*’s launch experience or a tantalising alternative offered under the original’s label. It instead does so by granting access to a hypothetical version of what *TF2* could have been if it

had stayed true to its original philosophies, reconstructed from the collective imaginaries and realities of the *TF2* community.

CONCLUSION

As more digital games see their update histories measured in decades rather than years, modernities of authenticity provide an additional tool to understand the growing complexities surrounding nostalgia, recreation and restoration in game design and play. As the examples in this research demonstrate, modders and developers alike are tapping into players' desires to access game experiences which were not necessarily lost suddenly, but rather eroded over time before many could even acknowledge their loss. What emerges is a plurality of approaches which do not just look to the past, but look forward and parallel to create authentic experiences of nostalgia for players situated in the present.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The mod was previously known as *Team Fortress 2 Classic* until December 8th, 2025 following a request by Valve Software to avoid players confusing it as an official Valve product.