

Public Memory and Gamer Identity: Retrogaming as Nostalgia

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Abstract

This essay explores the success of retrogaming to show how new public memories about gaming history are being rhetorically constructed. It argues that recent arguments about this history function to reshape the identities of retrogamers and retrogaming communities. After explaining the relevance of public memory scholarship for studying gaming culture in general, the essay provides a study of the discursive practices found within contemporary retrogaming culture. Highlighting the tensions between official and vernacular versions of gaming history, the essay goes on to suggest a rhetorical theory of nostalgia is needed to explain the ways in which retrogamers have negotiated their identity within and against the context facilitated by the gaming industry.

“The double imperative derived from the obscuring of the future and the obscuring of the past makes remembering the distinguishing feature of our time.” (Pierre Nora)

In late 2006, shortly after the launch of their Wii video game console, Nintendo introduced a library of downloadable games available through a service nicknamed the “Virtual Console.”

Author Biography

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This library consists entirely of games that were created for video game systems whose technologies are now considered outdated: Players can pay for, download, and play games for consoles that are no longer in production and are no longer supported by their manufacturers or game developers. In the years since the introduction of the service Nintendo has released over 350 games in their U.S. library and over 600 in Japan (Nintendo.com, 2013). According to an interview from 2008 with Nintendo's President and CEO Satoro Iwata, the service had sold over ten million downloads in just its first few months (Ogawa, 2008). Microsoft and Sony also sell older games through similar models, with both companies seeing strong sales of games that were originally released for older home consoles or previously available only in gaming arcades (1).

The success of these services, which make available what are often referred to as "retro games," has coincided with what seems to be a larger and growing interest by consumers for playing older video games. In the past seven years, game developers have released numerous titles that repackage, reimagine, or group together older games. Titles have included developer compilations, such as the *Sega Genesis Collection*, *EA Replay*, *Activision Hits*, *Intelivision Lives!*, *Taito Legends*, and *Atari Classics*; series specific titles, such as the *Dracula X Chronicles*, *The Sonic Mega Collection*, *The Gradius Collection*, and the *Metal Slug Anthology*; and new titles that provide twists on original games, such as *New Super Mario Brothers* or the *Sega Classics Collection*. This deluge of releases has also seen a corresponding rise of print and electronic media devoted to covering retro games to meet the growing market demand. This coverage has included sections for retro games in existing media (such as print magazines *Game Informer* or the website IGN.com) as well as the development of new content (such as the monthly *Retro Gamer* magazine, website Hardcore Gaming 101, or G4's television show *Icons*). This essay examines this trend and makes an argument as to its significance for contemporary gamers.

More specifically, this essay investigates how the current discourses surrounding retrogaming practices function to shape a collective memory of video gaming history. The construction of this history is often marked by contentious discourse that pits the "official" narratives of video game history offered by game publishers against the "vernacular" histories found in retrogaming communities. The rhetoric that emerges from this back and forth can help us understand not only how gaming history is being created but also how the contestation of public memory constructs authority and identity.

The essay will proceed in four stages, beginning with a discussion of what it means to study retrogaming from the critical perspectives available to scholars of collective memory; here I briefly highlight the similarities and differences between studying games and studying other memory artifacts. Second, I touch on scholarship in the field of game studies, scholarship that offers a variety of methodological approaches to this topic. Third, I introduce retrogaming culture by discussing in greater detail exactly how retro games are being represented and taken up in popular culture, emphasizing points of division between their marketing by the

industry and critical and popular reception by audiences. Finally, I argue that these modern re-presentations of gaming's past teach us much about the construction of gamer identity within contemporary gaming culture.

Public Memory

To study public memory is to emphasize history's rhetoricity. It is a careful analysis of how past events are used to explain, argue for, or shape a particular present. Public memory scholarship has traditionally focused on a wide range of texts that purport to communicate meanings about the past, especially when that past is in some way contentious. Excellent work focusing on public monuments and memorials (Young, 1993), popular and iconic photographs (Harriman and Lucaites, 2003; Finnegan, 2003), film (Biesecker, 2002), newspapers (Zelizer, 1992), biographies (Schwartz, 2000), and other mediums indicate that there is widespread interest in how, when, and why the past is re-presented. A rhetorical critique of memory suggests that the discursive processes that construct collective memory produce not only perspectives on the past but also privilege, situate and/or produce certain kinds of subjectivity in the present. In his volume on public remembrances of Abraham Lincoln, Barry Schwartz (2000) succinctly defines public (or collective) memory (2). He wrote in the introduction:

Collective memory affects what individuals think about the past but transcends the individuals... [it] is a representation of the past embodied in both historical evidence and commemorative symbolism. (p. 9)

Expanding on this notion of symbolism, Gronbeck (1998) wrote that the construction of public memory is necessarily tied to present concerns:

The rhetoric of collective memory works by symbolically building bridges between today and yesterday... the primary movement is not from the past to the present, but the other way around. A society's collective memory is regularly reshaped by today's interpreters so as to make it more useful in the present. (p. 50)

Gronbeck goes on to suggest that studying the rhetoric of collective memory can teach us about not only what specific aspects of history are being remembered and why (e.g. honoring certain historical figures to reinforce a particular value), but also about how a culture communicates with one another. Studying memory, according to Gronbeck, gives us insight into what modes of representation are privileged over others and how individual and collective identities are rhetorically constituted. Often, these identities are defined in relationship to "official" or "vernacular" expressions of memory. Specifically, as John Bodnar (1992) put it, "public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions" (p. 13).

Those who have analyzed disparities between these official and vernacular expressions of history and memory (e.g. Ono & Sloop, 2003, or Schwartz, 2000) explained that “official” discourses are created by and benefit social institutions (e.g. the state, the church, the press, or capitalism), whereas “vernacular” discourses are created by small collectives and individuals to create distinctions within and between groups. Bodnar (1992), in analyzing representations and remembrances of American history, suggests that commemoration is shaped by an ongoing contest between “the advocates of centralized power and those who were unwilling to completely relinquish the autonomy of their smaller worlds” (p. 245). This distinction is pertinent to the study of collective memory for two reasons.

First, because of the disparity in resources available to those invested in perpetuating an official memory or history and those invested in the vernacular, the memories (and practices, traditions, etc.) of the smaller collectives are constantly under the threat of being marginalized and/or erased by those of with official authority. Bodnar (1992) wrote that, for the those who have historically promoted a vernacular discourse, “their cultural expressions and public memory were not always grounded in the interests of large institutions but in the interests of small structures and associations that they had known, felt, or experienced directly” (p. 245). When those institutions gained access to the material resources needed to literally enshrine certain historical texts and events, it became more difficult for the vernacular’s vision to persist; over time the vernacular’s memory drifts towards absorption at best and obsolescence at worst (3). Second, examining the discrepancies in the two discourses (and the related memories) can teach us about how the past “functions as a mediator of meaning” (Schwartz, 2000, p. 17) in different ways and to different audiences. Schwartz (2000) explained that collective memory “embodies a template that organizes and animates behavior and a frame within which people locate and find meaning for their present experience” (p. 18).

It is worth mentioning that the distinctions and boundaries between official and vernacular memory are often fluid. As Rowe (2012) put it, “there is a complex interaction between vernacular and official memory, and narrow definitions of the two groups do not allow for rich understanding of the processes involved with this interaction” (p. 119). That is, while public memory scholars often emphasize points of contention and division between representations of specific histories (e.g. the Warren Commission’s report on the JFK assassination vs. that of conspiracy theorists and filmmakers, the contemporary mobilization of World War II iconography towards different political ends, etc.), they necessarily inform, inflect, and deflect one another at crucial junctures. On this point, a commonly invoked theorist amongst public memory scholars is Michel Foucault, whose archaeological methodology allows one to understand this relationship as it has sedimented through time. For example, in his examination of mental health in *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault (1965) explained that

as for common language...there is no such thing any longer; the constitution of madness as a mental illness...affords the evidence of a broken dialogue,

posits the separation [between authorial and conformist understandings of madness] as already effected, and thrusts into oblivion all those stammered, imperfect words without fixed syntax in which the exchange between madness and reason was made. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence. (p.xi)

Though the implications for competing definitions of gaming history are much less troubling than those Foucault explores in this and other archaeologies, the principle about how official, authoritative statements are contested and constructed in and against that of other effected publics is applicable.

Like any other form of communication in contemporary culture, the communication of memory takes place across a wide range of both traditional and new media. Concerning memory and new media, an essay by Aaron Hess (2007) suggests that video games are a medium that might be critically examined to make sense of how and why past events are being re-presented. Hess (2007) argued that the 2003 game *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* used “narrative memorializing” to give “video game players an active but private role in memory making” (p. 341). Hess explains that video games potentially function in ways both similar to and distinctly different from other artifacts of public memory such as film; he highlights the ways in which the potential for interactivity leads players into active construction and virtual participation in the (selective) history presented in World War II based games like those in the *Medal of Honor* series. Hess also discusses the possibilities gaming provides for players to experience history from a variety of visual perspectives and the extent to which the technological possibilities of the medium construes history as a kind of immediate event in which the player can take an intercessory role. Hess’ focus on single text is representative of a strain of collective memory scholarship that closely analyzes how historical events are represented in a narrative form. This kind of scholarship examines an individual text, such as a film or a novel, to discover how such texts teach audiences about specific moments in the past.

By contrast, the historical narrative that emerges through a reading of the discourse of retrogaming is not focused on one particular text about a specific historical event (e.g. a war, the 1970s, etc.). Instead, the emergent narrative concerns a history of one particular form of entertainment: video gaming. Furthermore, it emerges across multiple sites, discursively constructing collective memory across varying texts and contexts. This memory is contested: It is marked by debate over what games and gamers are included in video game histories, how these histories are preserved, and who has the authority to make these kinds of decisions.

Here, an analogy may be helpful. All major entertainment industries are invested in discovering what older intellectual properties resonate with contemporary audiences; in this respect, the video gaming industry is no different than Hollywood or the music industry. In

the same way that a cable television station like Turner Classic Movies makes selective decisions about what films should or should not be broadcast as a “classic,” the production of retrogaming compilations requires publishers to make choices about what games are worth revisiting. The same analogy holds true for many other forms of entertainment: Record companies often select what “classic” albums deserve remastering and rerelease and publishers determine which older books in their catalog are worthy of reprinting. Additionally, respected critical outlets like the American Film Institute or Rolling Stone magazine—both of whom periodically publish “all-time best” lists—contribute to this process of canonizing certain creative works over others. These lists are then commonly criticized as being unreflective of popular sentiment about the “best” of each respective form of entertainment; public dialogue about which films or albums are worth remembering ensues. Similarly, we might approach the current interest in retrogaming as a kind of public, collective, and thus contentious construction of gaming history.

Methodologically, studying public memory can be understood as borrowing from a wealth of scholarship that address the past, its significance for the present, and the ways in which constitutive features of the social, such as power and subjectivity, get processed through the discourses of commemoration and recollection. Maurice Halbwachs (1992), one of the earliest thinkers about collective memory as such, argued that the critic must discover “collective frameworks” which were “precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society” (p. 40). Halbwachs suggests that communities cannot remember in a vacuum; instead, any public memories about the past are influenced by the concerns of the present. As critics, Halbwachs tasks us with looking at both how and why specific memories are constructed as well as how the frameworks used to construct those memories are themselves sedimented and articulated through time. In this essay, a rhetorical approach to the study of public memory entails an analysis of how practices of commemoration and statements about the past within a particular community intersect with discourses about identity and power. Specifically, I examine how gamers use digital tools and contexts to communicate a particular vision of gaming history in and against one created by the games industry.

Game Studies

As was explained in the inaugural issue of the online journal *Game Studies*, video games “combine the aesthetic and the social in a way the old mass media, such as theatre, movies, TV shows and novels never could” (Aarseth). In order to engage the broad impact of gaming in public and private culture, game studies is a field that encompasses a variety of methodological approaches. Though much of the research in game studies focuses on particular games or on different practices of playing instead of on the culture in and around games (4), there have also been a number of studies that, collectively, offer a strong contextual and theoretical foundation for studying retrogaming culture from the perspective of public memory.

Specifically, citing a growing trend of aging gamers, several researchers in the field of game studies have started to consider the implications of life-long gaming for the video game industry and, more broadly, what those practices mean for game players of all ages. While most of this research isn't focused on public memory per se, the insights it provides into older gamers, their gaming histories, and their gameplay habits are useful for helping us understand how aging gamers think about the games they played while growing up as well as how they view the relationship of classic games to the games of the present.

For example, while studying Baby Boomer gamers, Pearce (2008) found evidence to support earlier research that, for gamers over 30, “one hook...is the power of memory and nostalgia – returning to or referencing classic games or stories can be a strong attractor” (p. 145). By tracing the gaming habits of users that participate in specific web-based communities that cater to gamers in their late 30s to early 60s, Pearce (2008) discovered that many Boomer gamers were particular about the kinds of games they played and on what platforms they played them, that a sizable percentage of those surveyed (28%) could be considered “hard-core” gamers that played games for 20 or more hours a week (p. 154), and that a similar percentage had their first gaming experience in an arcade. These phenomena seems to be international, as a survey (De Schutter, 2010) of even older gamers in Belgium (aged 45-85) confirmed that this demographic consistently valued social experiences and accessible, casual gameplay—two characteristics that marked the arcade boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Further collaboration of this research can be found in Quandt, Grueninger, and Wimmer's (2008) study of German gamers that, contrary to most games scholarship, has a “focus on gamers who were born too early to be socialized with video and computer games during their youth” (p. 29). Quandt et al. (2008) found that older gamers often viewed their game playing as a chance to bond with their younger family members (e.g. children and grandchildren) *and* as something to do “into the late evening hours to *avoid conflicts* of interest and stress *with the partner*” (p. 41, emphasis original). While this research is largely quantitative, it nonetheless provides a clearer cultural context for the critical analysis below by demonstrating the scope of gaming practices by those gamers who are in their 30s and older. This research also tells us that, for many adults who grew up playing games, gaming continues to be a significant part of their lives.

In addition to these quantitative studies about how older gamers approach the industry's past and present, there has been one edited volume specifically addressing retrogaming from a critical perspective. Whalen and Taylor's (2008) *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* examines classic games to “unpack the complex negotiations of temporality and historical representation in games and gaming culture” (p. vii). Like Hess' (2007) essay, cited above, much of Whalen and Taylor's book is devoted to chapters addressing how specific games or game series represent the past. For example, Jankowich's “Visions and Revisions of the Hollywood Golden Age and America in the Thirties and Forties: *Prince of Persia* and *Crimson Skies*” or Campbell's “Just Less Than Total War: Simulating World War II as Ludic Nostalgia” each examine how games function (in modes that are distinct from

other media) to shape a player's perception of events in world history. Moreover, as is the case with this present essay, *Playing the Past* features several chapters that engage questions of how nostalgia for previous games shapes gameplay practices for contemporary gamers. Chief amongst these critical pieces is Matthew Thomas Payne's essay "Playing the Déjà-New: 'Plug it in and Play TV Games' and the Cultural Politics of Classic Gaming" which discusses the design and marketing of game controllers with built-in games that connect directly into a television. Payne (2008) made the astute observation that these games "threaten to efface or supplant other gaming histories that include marginal games and alternative play experiences," (p. 53) such as emulation. Though Payne does not directly address the discourse of retrogaming communities, as we shall see below they share many of the same concerns about how the recent marketing of retro games is constructing an insufficient and problematic history of video games.

More recently, David Murphy (2013) drew on Jacques Derrida's discussion of the archive to consider how arcade emulation (via MAME) might be considered a "'counter archive' that challenges institutional models of preservation" (p.43), Carly Kocurek (2012) has discussed the continued legacy of *Death Race* (the original "violent video game") on contemporary games and gaming rhetoric, and Gillespie and Crouse (2012) interrogated the "nostalgia aesthetic" (p.460) found in various iterations of the *Dungeons & Dragons* brand. The work in these essays, though not focused on the culture around retrogaming per se, all offer additional insight into the themes explored here.

Retrogaming

Retrogaming is certainly not a new phenomenon, as game collectors and enthusiasts have been playing, displaying, and discussing computer, video, and arcade games from bygone eras since as early as the 1970s. Long before the emergence of web-based communities that focused on retrogaming, retrogamers could attend regional and national conventions celebrating early arcade and console games (5). However, it wasn't until the after the penetration of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s that retrogaming as it exists today, as a particular kind of gaming practice, began to take shape. Today, retrogaming encompasses system emulation, publisher compilations, console-based downloads, and fan-based retrogaming websites.

Emulation

Arguably the most significant early catalyst in popularizing retrogaming was the growth of the emulation scene in the mid-1990s. Dedicated coders, often working together via the internet, created Windows or MS-DOS-based software that instructed PCs to emulate the hardware found in older gaming consoles. These programs could then be used to run ROM files copied from the original game cartridges. File sharing websites and software made these ROMs readily available on the web, creating the opportunity for gamers who had long

ago thrown out their original Nintendo or Atari systems and games to once again play old favorites on their computers. Though the gaming industry took notice of these emulators by occasionally pursuing legal action, there was not much of a response to the emulation scene by the original publishers or developers of the games. Perhaps due to variable problems with emulation, the clunkiness of playing console games with a computer keyboard, or the fleeting nature of many ROM websites, retrogaming through the PC has failed to approach the same level of popularity as seen by recent officially sanctioned retrogaming offerings. Nonetheless, as PC emulation has improved and the scene has expanded to include console-based emulation (e.g. savvy gamers can modify a Nintendo Wii to play Sega Genesis ROMs), it remains an important component of today's retrogaming culture.

Its persistence is due, in part, to the fact that emulation offers something beyond the original console experience. That is, emulation not only offers the opportunity to replay older games, but it also affords the potential of experiencing these games in different ways. For example, the AGES Emulator, which emulates the Sega Genesis, Sega CD, Sega 32X and Sega Master System, allows users to play games from a variety of regions, to speed the games up or slow them down, to play them at different rates of sound, to save and load a game at any point, to take screenshots, and to make demo videos or audio logs of gameplay. Other emulators, such as the NesterJ NES Emulator, allow users to play games for the Nintendo Entertainment System on a Sony PSP. Furthermore, it allows users to fast forward or rewind their game while in progress, to enter cheat codes, and to manipulate the graphics (6). Emulation thus offers an opportunity not only to play older games when original hardware reaches obsolescence (and thus serve as an archival tool), but also to experience them in new ways as changes in technology allow (7).

Official Collections

It was not until the early part of the 21st century that retrogaming started to pick up steam as a marketable, profitable part of the gaming industry. The introduction of gaming consoles based on the CD and DVD formats allowed for game developers to publish many older titles on one disc, allowing for some compilations to contain twenty or more games in a single package. The extra storage space also provided publishers with an opportunity to include new content alongside the older games; this content often included video documentaries, concept art, interviews with creators and programmer, bonus levels, interactive menus and other new features for old games that were not available when they were initially released. In addition, many featured modified gameplay in the form of methods to automatically enter cheat codes, to save the game at any point, to skip levels, and, as is true with collections such as *Atari Classics*, play graphically "enhanced" versions of older games.

Retrogamers and game journalists have weighed in on these official compilations, and two themes are common in their critiques. First, many take issue with any tinkering or tweaking to what they consider to be classic games, arguing that the games which have been modified

to appeal to modern audiences have key components compromised. For example, collections such as the *Sega Classics Collection*, which re-creates two dimensional games, such as *Golden Axe* (Sega, 1989) and *Space Harrier* (Sega, 1985), in three dimensions, have been almost universally decried as being unfaithful to the memory of the original games. Second, critics are often quick to question the decisions about which games are designated with “classic” status in these collections. Compilations, such as the *Capcom Classics* series, are often attacked on gaming websites for their exclusion of particular games that are deemed by many participants in retrogaming culture as seminal titles in the history of gaming. For example, the exclusion of a specific version of *Street Fighter II* on the first *Capcom Classics* collection for the PlayStation 2 left many critics cold to the release and sparked some retrogaming websites to suggest boycotting the game, petitioning Capcom, or downloading illegal ROMs of the missing game.

A quick case study of the response to the *Sega Genesis Collection* is instructive. IGN.com’s review of the game notes “A few of the choices and omissions are curious. I’d gladly trade *Ecco Jr.*, *Decap Attack* or *Virtua Fighter 2*...for the *Streets of Rage* trilogy or *Eternal Champions*” (Goldstein, 2006). A similar article was posted by a staff writer at Joystiq.com, who explained that there were many key titles from the Genesis library that were missing: “it wouldn’t surprise me if Sega didn’t make yet another compilation of these games...C’mon Sega! Let me give you more money!” (Yoon, 2006). Modojo.com, a site focused on portable gaming, notes of the PSP version of the *Sega Genesis Collection* that “we can’t help but think the boat was somewhat missed when it came to game selections” (Falcon, 2006). Less congenial in tone were comments by fans on one gaming website:

Exactly...where is streets of rage???

Comix Zone - NOT A CLASSIC

Flicky - DEFINITELY NOT A CLASSIC

Gain Ground - NOT A CLASSIC

Ristar - NOT A CLASSIC

Super Thunderblade - NOT A CLASSIC

Virtua Fighter 2 - NOT A CLASSIC

Although they were fun for a bit...they definitely do NOT deserve to be added. These games could have easily been replaced with REAL classics like Streets of Rage, Revenge of Shinobi, General Chaos, and Gunstar Heroes. SEGA...no wonder you don’t make consoles anymore...sheesh. (user “rivera82falcon” on qj.net)

[...]

Sega should burn in hell for not putting SoR [Streets of Rage] on it. (user “STREETS OF RAGE” on qj.net)

This same game, when discussed on other sites, garnered similar responses. On Sega’s own forums, for example, a user explained

i was happy at first about sega releasing the sega genesis collection until i noticed three screw ups they made with it! first; they made this game for only one system instead of multiplatforms, second; the streets of rage collection was not included, & third; the game golden axe 3 aka golden axe: the revenge of death adder was never released on the sega genesis: not even as an import! i should know because i use to have this system! so sega really screwed up this time! i guess there is no confidence in this company since they only make good game ideas for only one game system & crappy game ideas for all other game systems! (user “neff” on forums.sega.com)

Similar comments in response to other official collections of classic games have been repeated across the web for nearly every compilation that has been published by the industry over the past decade. The tenor of these remarks suggest that some gamers are concerned about how their own version of gaming history is being re-presented; they worry about what specific games are being collected, remembered, and re-played and what other titles are being excluded from these collections.

Console-Based Downloads

While game publishers still release disc-based compilations, more recent success in the marketing of retrogaming has been found through pay-based downloads of older games to newer consoles. All three of the most successful recent gaming consoles – the Nintendo Wii, the Sony PlayStation 3, and the Microsoft Xbox 360 – feature online stores for users to purchase and download older games. The success of these stores is due in part to regular weekly releases of new (older) games for purchase. Nintendo’s Virtual Console, for example, released between 10-20 games (priced between five and ten dollars each) for older consoles every month during its peak sales. In addition, many older game franchises have seen new installments on these download services. The PlayStation Store features re-imagined versions of games, such as *Super Stardust* (Bloodhouse, 1994) and *1942* (Capcom, 1984), and the Xbox Live Arcade features new and enhanced versions of *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980) and *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo* (Capcom, 1996). Additionally, older games can be downloaded to Sony’s PSP, Nintendo’s DSi and 3DS, and to certain smartphones (such as Apple’s iPhone). The marketing materials for these games emphasize the inclusion of “retro” characteristics—simpler controls, 2D graphics, beloved characters, tougher challenges, and other gaming elements that differentiate older games from newer titles.

As was the case with disc-based compilations, public responses to these downloads have been wide-ranging. As we’ll see in the next section, debate and discussion usually focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of emulation, the inclusion and exclusion of certain games and titles, the reasons for region-specific releases (e.g. some games available for download in the United States are not available for download in Europe), and changes to graphics or

other nuances of gameplay. Unsurprisingly, the most fervent discussion of these re-presented retro games takes place in online retrogaming fan communities.

Retrogaming Fan Communities

In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins (2006) wrote that “the concept of the active audience, so controversial two decades ago, is now taken for granted by everyone involved in and around the media industry” (p. 1). Jenkins (8), in the process of outlining the function that fan participation serves in the success of popular entertainment, explained that fan communities are:

Expansive self-organizing groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various artifacts of contemporary popular culture. Fan communities have long defined their memberships through affinities rather than localities. (p. 137)

The web-based communities based on an appreciation for older games are representative of the kinds of communities Jenkins is describing. That is, retrogaming is very much a personal hobby that involves participation in a larger community and culture of like-minded aficionados of older games. There are websites with large user bases devoted to particular consoles (e.g. www.nesworld.com, www.sega-16.com), to specific companies (e.g. www.atari-age.com), and to specific games and franchises (e.g. *Metroid* [www.metroid-database.com], *Rez* [www.autofish.net/shrines/rez/]). The activity and content on these sites is varied but includes reviews of older games, game walkthroughs, interviews with designers, downloads of user-created content, fan-made games based on popular characters, game music, desktop wallpapers, and more. Many of these sites also feature message boards where members can discuss older games, new releases of older games, emulation, collecting, and the other aspects of retrogaming outlined above.

It is on these fan-based websites that almost every official re-release of an older game, whether it is found on a compilation or via digital download, gets debated and analyzed. When members believe that older games have been inadequately reintroduced, they are quick to deride those responsible. For example, the website Hardcore Gaming 101 noted in its review of the 2005 re-release of the 1989 game *Golden Axe* (Sega) that:

The character models are terrible and the backgrounds somehow look worse than the original game. Also, despite how chintzy the whole thing looks, it actually has the nerve to slow down in certain spots. Even if you don't mind the visuals, the game just doesn't feel right... It's shameful, but it's also available... if you feel the need to hurt yourself. (Neo Rasa, GrendalMK2 & Kurt Kalata, n.d.)

This kind of response is mirrored in comments to collections like the *Sega Smash Pack, Volume 1* as found on sega-16.com (user “Rusty Venture”: “Hearing the horrible sound ...in the Smash Pack made me lose faith in humanity, renounce God, and pray for the world to

end.”), in a review of *Midway's Greatest Arcade Hits* on gaming-age.com (“What an absolute disaster. These games are classics, and the only folks old enough to remember these will be put off by the sub-standard conversion done here. These games deserve better treatment.”), and in responses to Nintendo’s virtual console release decisions on vc-reviews.com (“I am extremely disappointed in the Wii VC so far... the content as of late has sucked pretty bad.”).

The generally negative responses to official re-releases are tempered by an interest on these message boards in discussing older games in their original hardware context. Many fan sites, such as *Atari Age*, are dedicated to helping retrogamers collect and catalogue Atari hardware, software, and peripherals. Others feature detailed walkthroughs of how to run old machines with newer televisions, how to reconstruct arcade cabinets, or how to get involved in the many aspects of retrogaming. In other words, the enthusiasm for older games hasn’t been dampened by the current wave of retro-releases; instead, retrogaming communities simultaneously critique new retro-releases while still actively pursuing other ways of reliving and documenting these gaming experiences.

Emulation, official collections, console-based downloads, and fan communities—all of these are important components in the continued popularity of retrogaming. And while they function together to generate and sustain interest in older games, it is the tensions within and between these practices that are valuable for understanding how gaming history is being constructed and contested.

Analysis: Retrogaming and Collective Nostalgia

Understanding the discursive construction and rhetorical functions of collective memory helps us make sense of how and why video game history is being (re)constructed in the contemporary moment. Specifically, when examining how specific kinds of memories are debated as well as how that debate shapes the identity of those involved, it becomes apparent that the rhetorics of public memory have constitutive force. Across those retrogaming practices identified above, this construction takes place at the intersections of official memory, vernacular memory, and nostalgia.

Vernacular and Official Memory

Since retrogaming has been a niche part of gaming culture for decades, it might seem surprising that the industry has only recently taken an interest in marketing older games to consumers. Equally surprising, perhaps, is the backlash against the industry’s efforts to appeal to older gamers by those most involved in this niche culture. As evidenced by the expressions of outrage, hurt, and bewilderment towards industry compilations and downloads, there is a sense among many retrogamers that the older games they love have been exploited for profit.

This kind of criticism is common when communities invested in preserving certain memories are forced to turn over those preservation responsibilities to another, larger (and more public) entity: This is an example of the conflict between an official and vernacular memory

alluded to above. For those uninitiated with the alternate expressions of the past found in retrogaming culture, the official history of gaming as promoted by the industry through compilations, online releases, and other marketing efforts becomes the only way to learn about how gaming has changed over time. For those steeped in retrogaming culture and practices, any history will necessarily fail to capture the richness and complexity found across the many sites devoted to an ongoing process of chronicling the history of classic games. When the industry chooses to publish only certain titles, it runs counter to the character of the discourse in retrogaming communities wherein the classic game canon remains open for debate.

In the past decade then, as retrogaming became more popular and the gaming industry started defining classic games, releasing official emulators for home consoles and mobile devices, and producing retro-oriented products and advertising, retrogaming subculture began to lose its status as the primary authority on older games. This shift in interest and participation in retrogaming, from small groups of hobby enthusiasts to a broader engagement by an aging public, meant that many of the activities that defined the subculture—debating which older games were the best, coding emulators and releasing ROM files, hunting for older games and consoles at flea markets, repairing systems, etc.—had been replaced by mainstream attention for and easy access to retro games. However, in order to understand why this transition has provoked the kinds of contentious discourse that it has, it is also important to understand the function of nostalgia in this contested construction of collective memory.

Nostalgia

Diane Carr, in an essay about the experiences of attendees at the 2002 “Game On” exhibit in London writes that “onlookers *squeaked* with recognition as they spotted the consoles they bonded with 20 years ago” (Carr, 2000, p 163, emphasis added). It is the task of any theory of nostalgia to explain this kind of emotional connection to the past. For many, the term “nostalgia” invokes images of collections filled with old Coca-Cola bottles, Elvis Presley records, sports cars from the 1950s and 1960s, and everything else that we associate with the marketing of mid-twentieth century pop culture kitsch to aging baby boomers. However, to consider popular nostalgia is also to consider consumer culture: Consumers re-purchase items from the past (or that look like they are from the past) so as to have a material connection to a time and place that has passed. As Edward Casey (2000) explained, nostalgia is an emotional response to the recognition of an impossible return:

We are nostalgic primarily about particular places that have been emotionally significant to us and which we now miss: we are in pain (algos) about a return home (nostos) that is not presently possible. (p. 201)

Nostalgia is more than simple recollection (9). Nostalgic memories are accompanied by spe-

cific feelings of longing, absence, and sentimentality. To think nostalgically is to recognize the past as intrinsically better (e.g. simpler, healthier) than the present, but it is also to feel fear and sadness that what was lost cannot be regained. Consuming products from our past is a way to try and (re)connect, on an emotional and personal level with this “better” time; material objects function as symbolic connections to the “home” of which Casey (2000) alludes.

What is interesting about nostalgia in video gaming is that re-released games do, in a sense, afford players the possibility to return to an exact same “home,” a virtual environment that was present when they originally played a particular game and persists in an unchanged state. Because of the technologies associated with the medium, gamers can return to the same virtual spaces that they occupied at an earlier time, thus allowing their nostalgia to be addressed in ways that would be difficult to duplicate in non-virtual environments (10).

This possibility for immersion is of course part of the allure in studying public memory constructed in new media technologies; one can (re)consume items from the past and (re)experience, (re)create, and more directly interact with historical artifacts than is possible through other forms of media. Purchasing a used Nintendo Entertainment System and playing the original *Final Fantasy* game more than twenty years after it was initially released results in a much different kind of nostalgic experience (one that requires one’s physical and mental attention) than can be provided by more passive nostalgic media experiences, such as viewing a film or playing records.

In all of these cases, though, engagement in nostalgic experiences has effects for the present, not the least of which is a reconfiguring of memory. Steve Anderson (2001) explained that, when one studies collective memory, one notices that “additional layers have been built” onto past experiences. These layers are co-constructed by both individuals and larger collectives of people. Retrogaming communities facilitate shared reminiscences about those “homes” to which participants continually return. Therefore, to study the retrogaming boom is to study collective nostalgia.

The excerpt from Nora’s (2000) “Memory: From Freedom to Tyranny” at the beginning of this essay suggests that contemporary culture uses processes of remembering in order to come to terms with the chaos of post-modern society. Nostalgia is one mode of addressing the apprehension of the future and what Nora (2000) calls a shift from a common past marked by permanence and continuity to one that is subject to unending change and revision. Jaakko Suominen (2007), who argues that retrogamers are “middle-aged juveniles,” suggests that retrogaming is best understood as part of this larger cultural trend. He wrote that “retrogaming (action, practice) and gaming nostalgia (the way of recollection and recollection discourse) are a central part of a more general culture of technology and its cultural adaptation” (Suominen, 2007, p. 8).

It is not, perhaps, coincidental that just as older boomers tried to re-live or re-purchase parts of their pop-culture past once they reached middle age, that many gamers are re-discovering older games as they begin to age into their late 30s and 40s. Most recent studies of gamer demographics suggest that the average age of someone who plays games regularly is now somewhere in their early 30s (11). This statistic, which is often used to explain the increasingly mature themes seen in many contemporary games, also helps explain why nostalgia about classic gaming is growing larger and profiting to the extent that it is.

Nostalgia, then is one potential answer as to why there has been a recent retrogaming boom. Furthermore, because nostalgia is an especially personal and emotional form of memory, many retrogamers respond viscerally to any official challenges to their own vernacular views of gaming history. This idea has been further supported by discussion of the place of nostalgia in contemporary gaming across the video game press. For example, Damien McFerran (2012), writing for EuroGamer.net, noted:

Why do I get so animated about games which are two or even three decades old, yet find that my excitement levels are noticeably lower when the latest graphically stunning next-gen title is announced and paraded all over the internet? What compels me to spend so much money on acquiring things that I'm never realistically going to play? The answer, it would seem, is simple. The drug which fuels my maddening desire to own a complete collection of every Neo Geo Pocket title released in the UK is nothing less than pure, undistilled nostalgia.

Echoing this idea are sentiments regularly found across the gaming press, such as “there hasn't been a game released since about 1985 that has made the hairs stand up on the back of my parts” (Rose, 2007), or, in reference to *Final Fantasy VII*, “Maybe it's naive of me to assert that ‘they don't make them like that’ anymore, but it really does feel that way” (Alexander & Hamilton, 2012). The function of nostalgia as a potential impetus for participation in retrogaming culture and as lens through which to analyze games of any era is thus (occasionally) taken seriously by those who take time to consider their practices of playing and consuming video games. It is perhaps these individuals who are most invested in preserving a certain version of gaming history that they believe to be true to their individual and collective pasts: a history that, at times, is at odds with how the contemporary game industry may choose to represent it.

Conclusion

Forging collective memories is a contentious activity, one that is as much about retaining certain elements from the past as it is about losing others. Over time some narratives persist while others fail. As explained above, this struggle is often marked by discrepancies between official and vernacular discourses about the past. As the persistence of memory is facilitated by access to institutional resources and recognition by publics as a cultural authority, vernacular histories are always under threat of being forgotten, overwritten, marginalized, or

erased. Anderson (2001) wrote that the

power and significance of popular memory...lies in its flexibility and intangibility in comparison with “official” histories. Memories, which survive among individuals and communities, are frequently set in opposition to historical discourses. (p.22)

While smaller communities and individuals may be more invested in “authentic” histories and memories of their culture than larger intuitional forces, what matters, according to Anderson (2001), is not a memory’s veracity, but its *functionality*.

What then, is the functionality of the memory presented by official representations of gaming history? Certainly one function is economic: The marketing of retro games functions to create profit for companies whose older games remain popular. This alone, though, does not account for the kinds of reactions to these games that take place in retrogaming communities. Rather, the discourses of retrogaming suggest that the most salient function of this official memory is its capacity to (re)construct the identity of retrogamers. Specifically, by deviating from “official” versions of gaming history, participants in retrogaming culture are transformed from authorities on older games into what Ono and Sloop (1995) called “out-laws.” In other words, when retrogaming goes mainstream, online communities become just as much marked by their oppositional rhetoric as by their interest in older games.

Sloop and Ono (1997) suggest that outlaw discourses “concern judgments made in the practice of everyday life” (p. 60) and are thus used by “a being or group [to] preserve its identity” (p. 63). Participating in a culture that takes an oppositional stance against the official histories of video games offered by game publishers, retrogamers are using use outlaw discourses to define their individual and collective identities. This argument is echoed in Nora’s (2000) suggestion that the construction of collective memory can be directly linked to the emergence of identity:

The idea that it is collectives that have a memory implies a profound transformation of the place of individuals in society and of their relationship with the collective; it is there that the secret lies behind the mysterious emergence of something else: identity. (n.p)

One function of the process of memory construction/ contention, then, is the creation of identity. For participants in retrogaming culture, this (re)constructed identity has been accompanied by efforts to redefine themselves as the cultural authority concerning gaming’s past.

As outlined above, practices in retrogaming fan communities are not limited to registering criticism with those companies that re-release older games. They have also taken steps, both online and offline, that are intended to demonstrate collective expertise concerning video

game history and that often offer a counter to the histories presented through official channels and that continue articulate nostalgia to memory through collective action.

On the web, these practices include community-oriented websites, such as Racketboy.com or RFGeneration.com, which provide articles that function as beginner's guides for new enthusiasts interested in trying out older consoles, price guides, databases, forums, blogs, and other resources that allow community members to define gaming history in particular ways (for example the Zeldapedia, zelda.wikia.com, offers detail on poorly received games in the series that the otherwise-exhaustive Nintendo-produced *Hyrule Historia* encyclopedia does not). In the past few years, retro-oriented YouTube channels such as those run by NES aficionado James Rolfe (the "Angry Video Game Nerd") or Mark Bussler (host of "Classic Game Room") have become "retrogaming celebrities" by attracting millions of subscribers that tune in to hear the unfiltered opinions of fellow retro-enthusiasts on a wide range of older games and video game history more generally (12). The web also offers a host of websites for archiving and downloading older games through both legal means (e.g. Archive.org) and less-than-legal means (e.g. Emuparadise.me), minimizing the archival significance of official compilations or online stores like Nintendo's Virtual Console. These kinds of sites also enable healthy homebrew and ROM hacking communities to flourish on the web, offering yet another opportunity for expressions of vernacular memory through the medium itself. Likewise, annual retro-themed conventions, such as the Classic Gaming Expo (since 1997), the Classic Console & Arcade Game Show (since 2000), and the Midwest Gaming Classic (since 2002), have grown in popularity and size over the past decade, providing an outlet for gamers to gain a familiarity with retrogaming culture. These appeals to a broader public function to provide retrogamers with the necessary ethos to maintain a role in preserving and defining a "vernacular" gaming history, an increasingly urgent task as "official," profit-driven histories are being so rapidly disseminated.

Collectively, these vernacular memories have had resonance beyond their own communities. Retrogaming culture has played an important role in shaping certain kinds of "official" institutional designations of gaming history that are understood to be largely divorced from the assumed profit motives of video game companies looking to cash in on aging gamers yearning for the experiences of their youth. Exhibits, like the Smithsonian's *Art of Video Games*, and collections of out-of-print games and game hardware at libraries, such as Stanford University and the University of Illinois, have involved retrogaming communities, collectors, and other non-industry figures in their processes of prioritizing acquisitions, selecting items for display, and other efforts to at making video game history accessible to the larger public. Though the richest and perhaps most volatile discussions of gaming's past continues to occur within the vernacular discourse of retrogaming communities, these specific kinds of non-industry (yet still "official") discourses are often discussed by retrogamers as "validating" of their authoritative perspective on gaming history (and thus, potential of their individual or collective identities as retrogamers).

This essay has outlined how a variety of retrogaming practices and their associated discourses serve to construct an appreciation of gaming history that stands in contradistinction to those offered by an industry motivated by economic concerns. Moreover, as part of this process members of retrogaming communities rhetorically constitute an identity for themselves that is grounded in nostalgia, expertise, and an agonistic relationship to the modern games industry. That is not to suggest that this vernacular vision is somehow unified or fixed. Future critical analysis into any one of the practices discussed here should yield further insight into how distinct parts of the retrogaming landscape (such as emulation) might address history and memory in specific ways as well as how the discourses surrounding each practice might work to constitute discrete identities within the subculture. Furthermore, as retrogaming expands, new ways of experiencing classic games (such as through touch interfaces on mobile devices) will provide critics with an opportunity to consider how both official and vernacular memories of video game history shift in response.

Endnotes

1. For example, Microsoft has a "Game Room" where users can take their avatars online to play classic arcade and console games and Sony offers games on their PlayStation Network that were made by 1980s and 1990s arcade juggernaut SNK as well as games for the Sega Genesis and original PlayStation.
2. While the term "public memory" and the term "collective memory" are not completely interchangeable, their difference is primarily a question of the size of the population that is remembering. Therefore most theory on public memory is applicable to a study of collective memory and vice versa.
3. Bodnar (1992) adds that longevity is more of a problem for vernacular memory as those "interests lost intensity with the death and demise of individuals who participated in historic events" (p. 247). On the web, there is an even more significant threat to texts caused by the ephemeral nature of the medium.
4. Much of game studies scholarship is invested in an exploration of ludology, the critical assessment of play in social interaction. As this present essay is more concerned with discourse *about* play rather than play itself, studies of game-playing, interactivity, virtual subjectivities, and so on are only of peripheral interest to a study of a discursive, rhetorical construction of memory and identity.
5. For more on early video gaming fan culture, see *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokemon--The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World* by Steven Kent (2001) or *Supercade: A Visual History of the Video Game Age 1971-1984* by Van Burnham (2003)

6. Similar emulators also exist for mobile phones and tablet devices, though few are officially supported by the companies whose games are being emulated.
7. Emulation programs, such as those discussed here, are almost entirely a result of individuals collaborating within a DIY culture. Like those who hack other forms of vintage computer software and hardware, emulation coders ostensibly are interested in the challenge provided by bringing older technology into new contexts.
8. While Jenkins' work provides a comprehensive treatment of fan communities in general, there does exist some excellent scholarship specifically about game-based fan communities. See, for example, Conslavo (2003) "Zelda 64 and Video Game Fans: A Walkthrough of Games, Intertextuality, and Narrative", Newman (2002) "In Search of the Videogame Player: The Lives of Mario", and Sotamaa (2010) "When the Game is Not Enough: Motivations and Practices Among Computer Game Modding Culture."
9. Both the term "nostalgia" and the term "vernacular" have their etymological origins in words that suggest "the local," "native," or "homegrown".
10. Gamers cannot, of course, recreate the contexts in which they initially played older games. However, the potential for re-entering an unchanged game world makes a consideration of nostalgia central to thinking about how gamers produce collective memory.
11. See, for example, the recent publication of a survey by the Entertainment Software Association (2014), which found the average gamer age to be 34.
12. At the time of this essay's writing, many of these channels were embroiled in battles to maintain their channel in the face of mounting copyright problems caused by Google/YouTube automatic content checkers.

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