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Now You're Playing with Power: Nintendo and the Commodification of Nostalgia

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NOW YOU'RE PLAYING POWER: NINTENTO AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF

NOSTALGIA

by

Steve Cuff

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ABSTRACT

NOW YOU'RE PLAYING WITH POWER: NINTENDO AND THE COMMODIFICATION
OF NOSTALGIA

by

Steve Cuff

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017
Under the Supervision of Professor Michael Z. Newman

This thesis explores Nintendo's past and present games and marketing, linking them to the broader trend of the commodification of nostalgia. The use of nostalgia by Nintendo is a key component of the company's brand, fueling fandom and a compulsive drive to recapture the past. By making a significant investment in cultivating a generation of loyal fans, Nintendo positioned themselves to later capitalize on consumer nostalgia. The commodification of fan nostalgia is evident across multiple platforms, from the development of the Virtual Console digital game storefront to the use of pastiche and remediation in multi-generation, Nintendo developed franchises. Additionally, Nintendo frequently places their heritage front and center and creates tightly controlled spaces to guide fan discourse and continue to shape the Nintendo legacy on their terms.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The lifeblood of the Nintendo brand is nostalgia. This is perhaps most evident in the company's 2013 annual report which prominently features the words, "I grew up with Nintendo's games" on the cover and is followed by a 10-page collage of Nintendo images from the past interspersed with objects from the present. A pixelated mushroom is vertically spliced together with its contemporary high-definition counterpart and a modern and a three-dimensional Mario is pictured leaping from his original two-dimensional form.[1] The fusion of the familiarity of the past with the excitement of the present is an apt summation of Nintendo's place in the contemporary, mainstream video game industry. The series of nostalgia-inducing pictures ends with a stark, black and white image of Mario with glossy, high-definition eyes reflecting the face of a child and the caption, "Nintendo grew up with you too."[2] The proclamation that Nintendo has "grown up" seems, at first, counterintuitive. Since the company's rise to prominence in the video game market during the 1980s, Nintendo's brand image has been intrinsically tied to adolescence and a dogged devotion to creating a video game-focused analogue to the whimsical world of Walt Disney. Like Disney, the Nintendo of today extends far beyond the video game consoles and software that made the company famous. Its various intellectual properties have crossed-over into the world of film and television, and the iconic characters, many of whom were made famous decades ago, have adorned everything from bed sheets to soup cans. Nintendo certainly has grown - perhaps out more so than up - and the company's longevity and ubiquity

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[1] Nintendo Company LTD., 2013 Annual Report, March 2013.
[2] Ibid

have spawned a rabidly devoted fan-base with a deep interest in both the games of the past and the modern day iterations of Nintendo franchises.

Nintendo's trajectory and business strategy have been markedly different from both past and present competition. While other major console manufacturers like Sony, Microsoft, and at one point, Sega, engaged with an aging core video game player demographic by pushing 'mature,' sexually explicit and violent content, Nintendo has continued to focus on inclusive, family-friendly games. The company has no shortage of detractors for taking this approach. Numerous critics have painted the company as outdated, out of touch and generally unwilling to follow contemporary industry norms.[3] These arguments downplay the importance of the vast advertising and marketing strategy changes Nintendo has enacted in the last decade to capitalize on the unique, nostalgic retro-gamer demographic.

The Nintendo of the past was fully invested in cultivating the "Nintendo Generation," a colloquial term for the millions of children and young adults who came of age during the company's decade-long period of dominance during the 1980s and 90s. Nintendo's rise corresponded with the stabilization of the video game market following a market crash set into motion by the decline of the former industry leader, Atari, and a general lack of software quality control.[4] Nintendo's strict licensing agreements and unparalleled advertising efforts resulted in the global video game market reaching $2 billion in gross profit by 1990—a 30 percent increase from the prior year.[5]

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[3] Paul Tass, "The World Is Nintendo's (If Only They'd Take It)." *Forbes*. February 28, 2015; Chris Kohler, "What the Hell Is Wrong With Nintendo?" *Wired*. December 5, 2013.
[4] Randy Nichols, *The Video Game Business*. (London: British Film Institute, 2014): 35.
[5] Ibid, 37.

During this period of unprecedented success, Nintendo had a profound impact on children's culture in North America and the broader video game industry. The company's most prominent character, Mario, at one point had more name recognition among American children than Mickey Mouse.[6] Nintendo had, as Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter suggest, colonized the video game market by branding it with their name.[7] Like Xerox and copiers or Kleenex and tissues, the Nintendo name became at one point interchangeable with 'video game.' Nintendo's characters, licensing, and branding completely absorbed an entire generation of video game players. Kline and Dyer expand on the notion of brand colonization, stating, "a child's attention, time, desires, ambitions, and fantasies became attached to the Nintendo World…Minds, bodies, and social interaction are thus increasingly occupied by Nintendo activities and products."[8] Nintendo's profit-driven aggression allowed them to occupy a position of brand hegemony over a fledgling medium and culture which spawned a legion of lifelong fanatics. The Nintendo of today still fosters a unique ecosystem of hardware, software and paratexts, but now with special attention paid to the desires of its older fanbase.

Nintendo's contributions to the nostalgia-gaming segment of the video game industry deserve critical attention to better understand how the history of past games influence the present. In this thesis, I will explore Nintendo's commodification of nostalgia. Nintendo is a particularly interesting example of this practice because of their reliance on existing, decades-old characters and properties to appeal to both longtime, older fans, as well as children who are not as familiar with the Nintendo brand. Nintendo's practice of repackaging the familiar past is

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[6] J.C. Herz, *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired Our Minds.* Little, Brown and Co. 1997. 134.
[7] Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005): 125.
[8] Ibid, 126.

carefully balanced to accommodate the video game industry's manufacturing of obsolescence and obsession with providing new and 'revolutionary' experiences. The company's relationship with nostalgia relies not only on Nintendo's production of cultural objects, but also on consumer's engagement with retro-inspired Nintendo games. The consumer response to the Nintendo Virtual Console, a digital download service focused on providing players access to retro video games, as well as Nintendo's selective repackaging of older products, often highlight the dissonance between nostalgic Nintendo fandom and the company's own goals for engaging with younger audiences. This dissonance is evident on internet forums, social media, and Nintendo's own MiiVerse platform where fans squabble over Nintendo's handling of various classic (and not so classic) franchises.

This project will attempt to show that Nintendo's particular brand of nostalgic construction, and any subsequent fan engagement, fuels a compulsive drive to recapture the past. Prior criticism of popular culture and nostalgia warns that this fixation on the past is inherently detrimental to creativity and criticism in the present. Furthermore, past studies of nostalgia and media texts often attempt to identify uniform responses to implied nostalgia without considering the individual and collective contextual memories around the text. To better understand the complex relationship between nostalgia texts and their audiences, it is crucial to examine the ways in which the Nintendo mines the past for 'new' content, which franchises are prone to being reworked or remediated, and the role of fans in negotiating the terms of their own potential exploitation. Additionally, it is important to highlight the intersection of Nintendo's commodification of nostalgia with the company's longstanding commitment to maintaining a family-friendly image.

Literature Review

The Video Game Industry

Dozens of texts have been published on the history of video games; however, most of these texts tend to ignore or gloss over the industrial history and economic issues related to the medium. In *The Video Game Business*, Randy Nichols argues that by contextualizing video games as commodities, it becomes possible to "see how clearly video games are tied to a variety of social trends as well as other cultural industries."[9] Nichols also suggests that the video game industry can only be fully understood once historical texts move beyond simply repeating when games were produced and which game designers were involved in their production.[10] Many of the existing historical studies of the video game industry (particularly those which examine games as commodities) consider video games to be a part of the toy industry. By designating them as toys, video games have been frequently lumped in with children's culture, and their appeal to older audiences has been ignored. Nichols argues that video games are a unique cultural industry, and their business model is actually a hybrid of the toy industry and home computer industry.[11] The contemporary video game industry has grown far beyond the modest toy store sales of its humble, unstable beginning. As of 2015, game sales are expected to exceed $22 billion in revenue and celebrate a full decade of grossing more than the domestic film industry.[12] Additionally, games are an integral part of the marketing and branding of a wide variety of intellectual properties in popular culture, covering everything from television shows

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[9] Nichols, 12.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid, 12.
[12] "2015 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry: Sales, Demographics, and Usage Data." The Entertainment Software Association.

and sports to breakfast cereals.[13] Video games are now a fully-formed, global industry that

competes with and compliments other culture industries while appealing to a diverse audience.

Nostalgia

There is no unified approach or comprehensive theory to inform the academic discussion

of nostalgia. For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to provide a working definition for the

term to situate it the broader field of cultural studies. Fred Davis addresses this subject by

positioning the study of nostalgia as an examination of how we collectively and individually long

for the idealized past. Davis views nostalgia specifically as a concept that applies to memories of

lived experience, separating the term from what he calls an "antiquarian feeling," which refers to

a distant, or pre-biographical past.[14] Morris Holbrook expands on this broad description and

defines nostalgia as "a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) toward

objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely

circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even

before birth)."[15] By favoring 'common objects,' Holbrook's definition fails to account for the

individual experiences which fall outside of the realm of popular culture and are just as capable

of evoking intense feelings of nostalgia.

Historically, the use of the word nostalgia can be traced back to the early 17th century,

where it was considered by physicians to be a debilitating and contagious disease. Nostalgia, as a

treatable illness, was primarily spatial and deeply personal—a longing for the space of a distant

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[13] David Bloom and Marc Graser, "Hollywood Game to Cash in on Licenses" *Variety,* May 27-June 2. (2001). 10.

[14] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, (Free Press, 1979): 11-12.

[15] Morris B Holbrook, "Nostalgia and Consumption Preferences: Some Emerging Patterns of Consumer Tastes," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 20 (1993): 245.

homeland.[16] The 'disease' eventually became classified as an incurable temporal condition as the

old world gave way to industrialization. This shift, as discussed by Svetlana Boym, is marked by

a desire to not only experience a place in the past, but for a time that once was.[17] Modern

temporal nostalgia relies on memory but not necessarily in the literal sense. Rosenzweig and

Thelen conclude that nostalgia mixes fractured memories freely with imagination and desire to

reconstruct the past into a fantasy reassembled from the point of view of the present. A person

may feel nostalgic for anything in the past—good, bad or otherwise. Nostalgic reminiscence

gives individuals the opportunity to keep the past alive by romanticizing a perceived simpler or

better time.[18] Objects, memories and media from childhood seem to be particularly prone to this

sort of fetishization, and individuals who grew up under harsh or less than ideal conditions still

tend to romanticize their adolescence.[19] Historian David Lowenthal notes that while nostalgia

might be what drives people to recapture the past, the past is ultimately unrecoverable. Still, this

form of looking back on the past remains a key component of making sense of the present as

well as grappling with issues of personal identity.[20] Lowenthal also warns of the potential

dangers of nostalgic obsession and posits that remaining fixated on the unrecoverable past saps

the creative vitality of the present.[21] Ryan Lizardi echoes Lowenthal's fears, arguing that the

melancholic, individualized consumption of nostalgic media validates a more passive and

solitary lifestyle. Turning his criticism specifically to the video game medium, Lizardi argues

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[16] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (Basic Books, 2001): 18.
[17] Ibid, 23.
[18] Roy Rosenzweig, and David P. Thelen. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, (Columbia UP, 2000): 17-18.
[19] Ibid, 43.
[20] David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge UP, 1985): 4.
[21] Ibid, 11.

that games encourage "an uncritical view of history" and "…reify the user's nostalgia, compromising their capacity to learn from the past to confront the problems of the present."[22] While the video game industry certainly has economic motivation to tap into the familiar past and does so frequently, Lizardi's reductionist approach fails to address the individual agency of the players as they engage with video games created by companies like Nintendo, which are clearly focused on eliciting nostalgia. Prior research indicates that video games, nostalgic or otherwise, provide opportunities for adult players to both engage with and resist dominant discourses.[23] I argue that while participating in nostalgic play, players still have capacity to view games from a contemporary critical perspective. The ability to actually engage with artifacts from the past provides a means of recontextualizing objects in the present. Nintendo carries the burden of producing games that simultaneously appeal to their fans' memorialization of the past while continuing to build an audience of new, younger players.

Postmodern Nostalgia and Pastiche

Modern nostalgia is reliant on wistful longing for the irrecoverable, but postmodern nostalgia presents the idea that there is an opportunity for the irrecoverable to become attainable and, to a degree, reduce the gap between past and present. Postmodern nostalgia no longer relies on the tension between past and present as its defining characteristic. Instead, postmodern nostalgia recycles artifacts from the distant and recent past and makes the experience of connecting with the past more obtainable than ever before. While the video game medium is ripe with opportunities to experience postmodern nostalgia, not all of the philosophical framework of

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[22] Ryan Lizardi, "Downloading and Playing and Explicit and Implicit Past," *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media*, Lexington Books, 2015. 100-101.
[23] Felan Parker, "The Significance of Jeep Tag: On Player-Imposed Rules in Video Games," *Loading*, Vol. 2 No. 3 (2008).

postmodernism, as defined by Frederic Jameson, necessarily applies. Jameson characterizes

postmodern cultural production as a result of the breakdown between the high and low culture

divide and a weakening of historicity.[24] Jameson also contends that one of the most significant

features of postmodern texts and, by extension, postmodern nostalgic texts, is the use of pastiche.

Pastiche, as defined by Jameson, is "the neutral practice of mimicry."[25] Using *Star Wars* as an

example, Jameson describes the different ways the film can be experienced by an audience. For

young viewers, *Star Wars* can function simply as an adventure film. Older viewers have the

opportunity to connect with the movie on a deeper, more nostalgic level as it recalls the Buck

Rodgers-style serial adventures of past decades.[26] Thus, the production of postmodern nostalgia

texts and use of pastiche is viewed by Jameson as the recycling past artifacts and tropes in a

manner that does not ironically deride the original text it imitates, celebrate the past, or

regressively revive the past unchanged.

     For the purpose of this study, I will adopt a slightly different understanding of pastiche

that separates the concept from Jameson's postmodern definition. Jameson argues that without

the derision or laughter found in parody, pastiche can cause temporal confusion, which alters

how the past is perceived. Richard Dyer, whose work will inform the analysis of pastiche in this

thesis, challenges Jameson's cynical argument and suggests that it is unlikely an audience would

ever confuse a pastiche for the historical genre or text it imitates.[27] The past that pastiche imitates

is merely an idea of what the past was. This memory or idea of the past is always selective or

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[24] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Duke UP, 1992): 3-6.

[25] Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings On The Postmodern, 1983-1998*, (London: Verso, 2009): 5-6

[26] Ibid.

[27] Richard Dyer, *Pastiche*. (Routledge, 2006): 123.

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inaccurate to some degree.[28] Furthermore, pastiche utilizes elements from the past not to deceive the audience or rewrite history, but rather to be identified as clearly signaling the past. Additionally, Dyer refutes Jameson's claims that pastiche is always *just* the act of neutral imitation of prior works and intrinsically tied to triviality and pointlessness.[29] Imitation is not unmediated reproduction, and the very act of imitation implies an evaluative attitude towards the subject. Nintendo's use of pastiche is rarely, if ever, neutral. The signaling of elements from past games in long-running Nintendo franchises is not a cold exercise in recreating retro-style. Nintendo's use of pastiche is a deconstruction of classic genres, texts and tropes which embraces the emotions and nostalgia of their audience without judgement. The concept of pastiche is critical to understanding the relationship between nostalgia and video games because it allows us to "…feel our connection to the affective frameworks, the structures of feeling past and present, that we inherit and pass on. That is to say, it can enable us to know ourselves affectively as historical beings."[30]

Collective Memory

Contemporary analyses of nostalgia also emphasize the social bond created through collective nostalgic experience and the formation of collective memories. Barry Schwartz defines collective or 'public' memory as something that "…affects what individuals think about the past but transcends the individuals… [I]t is a representation of the past embodied in both historical and commemorative symbolism."[31] Bruce Gronbeck expands on this notion stating that by linking the past and present symbolically, "society's collective memory is regularly reshaped

[28] Ibid, 124.
[29] Ibid, 9
[30] Ibid, 180.
[31] Barry Schwartz, "The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory," *Social Forces* (2000): 374.

by today's interpreters so as to make it more useful in the present."[32] Collective memory tells us what specific aspects of history are being remembered, how they're being remembered, and also how individuals communicate these ideas with one another. Collective memory emerges from the intersection of institutional, 'official' history and the vernacular expression of memory.[33] Collective memory can be seen as one of the key indicators of the tension between creators of cultural products like Nintendo and nostalgic fan communities. Collective memories can be used to reinforce history or remind people of facets of history that have been omitted or strategically altered.

Game Studies and Nostalgia

Game scholars who have examined the relationship between video games and nostalgia have primarily focused on the ludic (i.e. play or action) and aesthetic elements within video games, which function as nostalgia triggers. The tendency to reduce video games to action in game studies scholarship is evident in the work of Markku Eskelinen and Jesper Juul, [34] [35] and perhaps best embodied by Alexander Galloway, who firmly asserts that "[i]f photographs are images and films are moving images, then video games are actions. Let this be word one for video game theory."[36] Drawing heavily from this formalist game studies methodology, Sean Fenty argues that the interactivity of games, as well as the control afforded to players, produce the foundation of what makes games memorable and, by extension, particularly effective at

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[32] Bruce Gronbeck. "The Rhetorics of the Past: History, Argument, and Collective Memory," *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases*, University of Alabama Press, 1998. 57
[33] Ibid, 58.
[34] Markku Eskelinen "The Gaming Situation," *Game Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2001).
[35] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. MIT Press, 2005.
[36] Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, (U of Minnesota Press, 2006): 2.

evoking nostalgia.[37] Fenty extrapolates on this point and posits that the boundaries and

limitations within games create challenges for the player to overcome, which, in turn, gives

games "meaning."[38] Within this theoretical framework, the author creates a list of guidelines that

video games *must* have to create meaning and thus have the capacity to later trigger nostalgia,

stating:

> The game world cannot be buggy and crash accidently…Designers must motivate
>
> players to put forth the effort involved in playing. They need to set goals and give
>
> rewards; they need to set up a situation that will make players want to succeed at
>
> the game and want to learn the rhythm of things, or the player, like Eco's reader,
>
> will never make it up the mountain. Players do not feel nostalgic about such
>
> games; they forget them[39]

Fenty's rules are incredibly limiting and privilege ludic elements, as well as video games

that are ostensibly good, without considering anything outside of the in-game space, including

gaming as a social and cultural practice, which can contribute to feelings of nostalgia. Brendan

Keogh's phenomenological approach to video game criticism, which favors an examination of

"the coming together of the player and the video game in a cybernetic circuit…across both the

actual and virtual worlds of play,"[40] provides a better framework for exploring the experience of

nostalgia in-game while acknowledging other factors outside of the game text which may

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[37] Sean Fenty, "Why Old School Is "Cool": A Brief Analysis of Classic Video Game Nostalgia," *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*. Ed. Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor. (Vanderbilt UP, 2008): 27.
[38] Ibid, 24.
[39] Ibid, 25.
[40] Brendan Keogh, "Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games," *Journal of Games Criticism*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2014): 4

contribute to nostalgic feelings. This style of criticism is evident in the work of Anna Reading

and Colin Harvey who conceptualize nostalgic-play in the 2003 *Battlestar Galactica* video game

as a rearticulation of past ideas in terms of both video games and the broader mythos and

aesthetics from the *Battlestar Galactica* feature film and television series.[41] Reading and Harvey

argue that nostalgic play is affective, defined by "the drives, feelings, emotions, and motivations

that characterize all human experiences," and motivated by the interrelationship between the

gameplay and nostalgia.[42] They describe the key to nostalgic play as the way a player is

"influenced both in terms of his or her physical body and the wider 'body of relations'—that is to

say the ways in which he or she is both culturally and socially situated."[43] The player, memory

and context are not separated and provide a useful framework for examining nostalgic game

texts, which reject more conventional approaches to the analysis of video games.

The Commodification of Nostalgia

Traditionally, video games have been viewed as a popular medium for adolescents and

young adults and provided ample opportunity for the commodification of children's play.[44]

However, the popularity of the Nintendo Wii, the rise mobile gaming platforms, and an ageing

player base has significantly broadened the core video game player demographic.[45] The most

recent report from The Entertainment Software Association shows that the average video game

player is 35 years old,[46] indicating that a large portion of players are from the previously

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[41] Anna Reading and Colin Harvey, "Remembrance of Things Fast: Conceptualizing Nostalgic-Play in the Battlestar Galactica Video Game," *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*. Ed. Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor. (Vanderbilt UP, 2008): 164.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid, 176.
[44] Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greg De Peuter, *Digital Play:* 60.
[45] "2015 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry" The Entertainment Software Association.
[46] Ibid.

discussed Nintendo Generation, which grew in the wake of the video game industry resurgence of the mid to late 1980s. The video game industry, now more than ever, is in an excellent position to capitalize on the childhood nostalgia of players.

The commodification of nostalgia has been largely overlooked in game studies scholarship. Jaigris Hodson, one of the few scholars who has written about the subject, claims that games like *Beatles Rock Band* capitalize on a romanticized ideal of 1960s culture, rewriting the band's history while providing emotional value for consumers. By spanning the group's entire career with clean-cut idyllic avatars of the various members, *Beatles Rock Band* functions as a remediation of the Beatles image throughout decades of film, music, television appearances and merchandising. Hodson concludes that in this process the *real* people who make up the Beatles are lost in the process of branding, and the branded image of the Beatles is empowered in this process to neutralize portions of the band's counter-cultural history in favor of the brand commodity. For Hodson, the commodification of nostalgia is "the relationship between our longing for the past and our existence in a commodified present."[47] It is then the burden of the player to resist the dominant ideology presented in commodified nostalgic texts and adopt oppositional readings to branded content.

Despite the ability to resist the trappings of nostalgia, Oren Meyers notes the pervasive public desire to return to 'the good old days,' which intensifies during periods of turmoil and change.[48] Meyer's observation can be easily applied to the video game industry, where obsolescence is actively manufactured, and the ability to play the games of the past can be lost as

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[47] Jaigris Hodson, "When I'm Sixty-Four: Beatles Rock Band and the Commodification of Nostalgia," *Loading*, Vol. 6, No. 10 (2012): 86-87.
[48] Oren Meyers, "The Engine's in the Front, but its Heart's in the Same Place: Advertising, Nostalgia, and the Construction of Commodities as Realms of Memory," *The Journal of Popular Culture,* Vol. 42 No.4 (2009): 738.

technology deteriorates. Daniel Marcus argues that this desire to return to a simpler time is a product of political and entertainment spheres mutually reinforcing the importance of the past.[49] The simplicity and conservative wholesomeness of the prominent game franchises during Nintendo's heyday are a stark contrast to contemporary popular video games. The nostalgia for these games from the past provides companies like Nintendo ample opportunity to commodify consumer nostalgia.

The commodification of consumer nostalgia for video games generally follows a three-phase cycle: from novelty, to forgotten trash, and then onward toward renewed novelty once players begin to experience nostalgia.[50] The final "afterlife" phase, as explored by Raiford Guins, is where games persist beyond their intended utility and lifespan. Guins argues that to understand the complex relationship between video games and nostalgia, it is important to remain mindful of the spaces "off screen, inside games, as well as around them."[51] These spaces contextualize games and remind us that they are complex objects. By not limiting the value and meaning of a video game's lifespan to just the playable software, we develop a deeper understanding of how formative experiences with video games, paratexts, ephemera work together to spark interest in extending and repurposing the games of the past.[52]

Building on the insights of Hodson and Guins, Robin Sloan draws a distinction between the commodification of nostalgia in terms of nostalgia as a subjective experience and nostalgic

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[49] Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics*. Rutgers UP, 2004. 5.
[50] Melanie Swalwell, "The Remembering and the Forgetting of Early Digital Games: From Novelty to Detritus and Back Again," *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 6 (2007): 255-73.
[51] Raiford Guins, *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife*. (MIT Press, 2014): 7.
[52] Ibid.

objects more generally.[53] In other words, nostalgia is commodified selectively, and the potential

for profitability is valued over nostalgic representation. These representations are a response to

an audience's desire to reconnect with their fondly remembered (and heavily mediated) past.

Through his analysis of *Gone Home* and *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* (both contemporary games

with decidedly retro aesthetics), Sloan concludes that commodification is inherent in

nostalgically constructed game spaces, and that video games are a powerful nostalgic medium.

Similarly, Nathan Altice identifies selectively commodified nostalgia in Nintendo's *NES Remix*;

a compilation of several retro Nintendo games which appeals to older players while also

exposing younger players to the Nintendo legacy.[54] Rather than recreate titles in a fashion similar

to the Virtual Console, Nintendo's *NES Remix*, as Altice argues, repurposes classic games to

teach the grammar of nostalgic play to younger players who lack the ingrained knowledge of

someone who has played Nintendo games for decades.[55]

Sloan and Altice's findings echo prior research by Jaakko Suominen, David Heineman,

and Natasha Whiteman, all of whom identify broader issues of commodification and fan

community interaction in the construction of retrogame nostalgia. The renewed desire to

consume classic video games extends far beyond the games themselves. Suominen notes that the

"product-making of nostalgia does not only mean the making of new editions of Pac-Man, Pong

and Super Mario, with extras and digital remastering" but also includes the production of various

cross-media merchandise and paratexts.[56] Whiteman argues that the development of fan

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[53] Robin J.S. Sloan "Video games as Remediated Memories: Commodified Nostalgia and
Hyperreality in Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon and Gone Home." *Games and Culture* (2014): 6.
[54] Nathan Altice, *I Am Error* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015): 325-326.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Jaakko Suominen, "The Past as the Future? Nostalgia and Retrogaming in Digital Culture,"
The Fibreculture Journal, Vol. 11 (2008).

affiliations to certain games and characters, as well as fan community discourse, deeply impacts the responses and interpretations to contemporary products.[57] Heineman discusses the ways in which fan practices often differ from the motivations of major game companies like Nintendo, which can result in drastically different discourses in relation to video game history.[58] All of these studies relate back to the previously discussed approach to game studies championed by Keogh: the study of the use of nostalgic video games without separating form from content or any broader industrial and cultural influences. In the case of Nintendo, the company's unique relationship with their fans and approach to branding cannot be separated from the value of their games as nostalgic texts.

Methods

To better understand Nintendo's commodification of nostalgia, I will combine several research methods. In the broadest sense, this project will be an industry analysis of Nintendo's contemporary marketing and advertising strategies, with a specific focus on the Virtual Console and the company's multi-console generation game franchises. I will use Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's examination of Nintendo's early branding practices as a model for my own study. Kline et al. argue that Nintendo's licensing, game design and sophisticated marketing cemented the company's place in popular culture while simultaneously stabilizing the North American video game industry. I argue that Nintendo's initial cultural impact in the 1980s in conjunction with the aging core video game player demographic provides the foundation for the company's contemporary marketing and branding strategy, which capitalizes on fan nostalgia

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[57] Natasha Whiteman, "Homesick for Silent Hill: Modalities of Nostalgia in Fan Responses to Silent Hill 4: The Room," *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*. Ed. Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor. (Vanderbilt UP, 2008): 32-50.

[58] David Heineman, "Public Memory and Gamer Identity: Retrogaming as Nostalgia," *Journal of Games Criticism*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2014: 1-24.

through the remediation of the familiar past. Furthermore, I argue that Nintendo's ongoing commitment to family-friendly entertainment allows them to court the next 'Nintendo Generation' by appealing to the past generation's nostalgia and harnessing the buying power of parents.

My chapters explore the relationship between Nintendo and the aforementioned nostalgic, Nintendo Generation consumers. I will specifically examine the tension between Nintendo and their fans as they reconnect to the past (for better or worse) through contemporary and retro Nintendo games. To accomplish this, I will examine trade and popular press articles related to Nintendo's current branding strategy to identify the company's shift toward nostalgic marketing. To contextualize this information and illuminate the connection between Nintendo and nostalgic fan identity, it is equally important to examine Nintendo's marketing in the mid to late 1980s when their seeds of brand nostalgia were sown. I will also analyze the aesthetic and ludic elements of the *New Super Mario Bros.* and *NES Remix* series (as well as any related paratexts) to understand Nintendo's use of pastiche to appeal to the nostalgia of veteran Nintendo fans while introducing a new generation of fans to Nintendo's legacy. Finally, I will look at fan discourse on Nintendo's MiiVerse platform and online forums in relation to Nintendo's handling of retrogames on the Virtual Console to better understand how nostalgic Nintendo properties are recontextualized by fans in the present.

Chapter Descriptions

This thesis consists of four chapters. The first chapter overviews the existing body of literature related to my subject, an outline of my methodology and a more detailed description of each individual chapter. Chapter two focuses on the launch and development of Nintendo's retro-focused, Virtual Console platform. I argue that Nintendo's clear shift in marketing and branding

strategy during this period was equally invested in recapturing their former fans through the commodification of player nostalgia. Additionally, I will analyze the fan discourse surrounding the Virtual Console and the subsequent tension between Nintendo and their consumers. This tension illuminates the concerns and values of longtime Nintendo fans as they wrestle with the authenticity and availability of repackaged retro titles. Furthermore, spaces where fan discourse occurs (both official and unofficial) provide opportunities for individuals to resist the nostalgic reconstructed past presented by Nintendo.

Chapter three will examine Nintendo's use of pastiche in their long-running, multi-console generation franchises. My analysis focuses primarily on the *Super Mario Bros.* franchise. The release of the first *New Super Mario Bros.* title coincides with the same period of time when the aforementioned Virtual Console platform launched and Nintendo began to wholeheartedly embrace the legacy of their various intellectual properties. I will also analyze the *NES Remix* series as an example of a postmodern re-tooling of various classic Nintendo franchises and the embodiment of Nintendo's stated ethos of appealing to young and old players concurrently. Nintendo accomplishes this by blending nostalgic appeal with contemporary design choices aimed at young children. Keeping with the theme of Nintendo blending the old with the new to broaden their market, I will also explore the use of *NES Remix* as both a remediation of the 1990 Nintendo World Championship competition and the foundation for the nostalgia-fueled 25th Anniversary Nintendo World Championship held in 2015. Finally, I will examine the influence of NES-era Nintendo on the contemporary retro-pastiche game, *Shovel Knight*.

Chapter Four will serve as a summary of this project as a whole. The chapter will also discuss the limitations of my research and address the broader cultural implications of the

commodification of nostalgia. Following in Nintendo's wake, other companies have begun to embrace repacking, reconfiguring and re-releasing older games for new audiences at an accelerated pace. Furthermore, pastiche and retro aesthetics have become commonplace in original contemporary video games which have found critical and commercial success in an industry fixated on obsolescence and the allure of new technology. Nintendo's successful commodification of Nostalgia speaks to an ever-growing nostalgia trend, visible across multiple mediums. Selling the past to consumers is now just as important as selling them the future.

Chapter 2

Commodified Nostalgia and the Virtual Console

In the spring of 2005, Nintendo CEO, Satoru Iwata, took the stage at the Tokyo Game Show to officially announce the company's latest home video game console, codenamed The Revolution.[59] At the time, Nintendo was struggling to remain viable in the increasingly competitive home console market, falling to a distant third place behind Microsoft and Sony. The Revolution would eventually be released as the Wii, and, as many analysts and scholars have noted, the system's combination of accessibility and affordability would briefly reposition Nintendo as the top video game console manufacturer in the world.[60] Nintendo's Wii has been lauded as instrumental in broadening the contemporary video game consumer base. A key component of Nintendo's approach to expanding the core video game consumer base is the retro game digital download service launched on the Wii known as the Virtual Console. As the first digital-download platform on a home video game console specifically geared toward capitalizing on player nostalgia, the Virtual Console stands as a key example of leveraging retro commodities in order to market toward nontraditional and lapsed video game consumers.

This chapter traces Nintendo's contemporary strategy of capitalizing on consumer nostalgia, which has been cultivated through careful marketing and brand management over the course of the last several decades, and explores how Nintendo's nostalgic construction contributes to the broader trend of the commodification of video game nostalgia. I argue that the Virtual Console provides a space curated by Nintendo which simultaneously celebrates and commodifies nostalgia. I also consider the complex relationship between nostalgia texts and

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[59] Reggie Fils-Aime, "Nintendo Keynote Address," Keynote, Tokyo Game Show, May 2005.
[60] Nintendo Co., Ltd, Annual Report 2016 for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2016, https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/pdf/2016/annual1603e.pdf.

audiences in order to examine how Nintendo leverages the past to find "new" content and present it to consumers as commodified nostalgia. Fan discourse, in particular, provides valuable insight into the tense relationship between Nintendo and consumers as they engage with the games of the past emulated on the Virtual Console in the present.

Cultivating the Nintendo Generation

Nintendo's current position in the home video game console market is a direct result of the company's initial strategy for positioning themselves as a top player in the global video game market. By examining the conditions which helped to cultivate a generation of devout fans, Nintendo's present day strategy of commodifying fan nostalgia becomes clearer. When Nintendo launched their first home video game console, the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in America in 1985, retailers were still reeling from a video game market crash caused by the over-saturation of low-quality games and consoles which was largely perpetuated by then-market leader, Atari. The rise of multi-tasking home computers also called into question the consumer need for dedicated home video game consoles.[61] To counter the negative connotation associated with video games in the retail marketplace, the NES was given a drastic cosmetic and marketing makeover. Nearly every instance of established video game semantic cues were scrubbed from the Nintendo brand. The NES game cartridges were referred to as "Paks" and the system itself was referred to as the "Control Deck."[62] In 1985 alone, Nintendo spent tens of millions of dollars convincing consumers and retailers that the NES wasn't *just* another machine for playing video games, going so far as to give the console an Americanized, VCR-like appearance.[63] Nintendo's

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[61] Altice, *I Am Error*, 16-17.
[62] Masayuki Uemura, "The Genesis of Nintendo Power," Lecture, from The NYU Game Center Lecture Series, New York, October 10, 2015.
[63] Ibid.

Trojan horse approach was enough to make the initial release of the NES a modest success and breathe new life into the American video game market, while direct competitors like Atari and Coleco continued to flounder.

To maintain their momentum, the company began to extend the Nintendo brand to ensure their intellectual property became a ubiquitous presence in popular culture. Nintendo's long-term success cannot be attributed to clever marketing alone, but rather an acute awareness of their competitors' shortcomings and the leveraging of their sizable market share to influence the production and consumption of video games. By the late 1980's, NES games were in high demand, but Nintendo's stringent licensing policy for NES Game Paks prevented developers from flooding the market. Each individual game required a specific microchip available only from Nintendo in order to work on the NES. Nintendo hoarded the chipsets, eventually causing a global microchip shortage.[64] By utilizing the shrewd business tactic of rationing out the microchips infrequently, Nintendo was able to build consumer loyalty and curb the amount of low-quality software which had plagued previous consoles by other manufacturers. Furthermore, the inability to meet growing consumer demand only made the NES and its games that much more desirable.

In order to cultivate a generation of diehard 'Nintendo Kids,' the company took steps toward closing the loop between production and consumption. As discussed by Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greg De Peuter in their study on the branding of the Nintendo Generation, the company accomplished this by developing a series of promotional activities which built a sense of community and support for devoted NES players while simultaneously

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[64] Gregory Powell, "Microchip Shortage Kills Video Game Supply, but Santa may get Most of the Blame," *Memphis Business Journal*, December 19, 1988.

collecting valuable marketing and demographic data.[65] Nintendo pumped millions of dollars into

organizing hundreds of fan clubs and creating a telephone tip line which allowed access to

trained 'Game Counselors' who provided assistance to players long before the days of free,

online game walk-throughs. The tip line was an unprecedented success and at its peak fielded

over 50,000 calls each week from adolescents who often called multiple times in a single day.

Nintendo's phone service was a direct line to the minds of their customers and provided the

company with valuable consumer information as well as additional revenue from the hefty per-

minute cost for calling. According to former Nintendo executive Peter Main, Nintendo Game

Counselors asked as many questions as they answered in order to better tailor future games to

their consumers.[66] Video game industry analyst Peter Blargh points out that, perhaps more

importantly, the experience of calling the tip line "bonded players to [Nintendo]"[67]. Essentially,

players felt good after receiving help from the company, which in turn lead to increased trust and

more purchases.

The closing of the loop between consumption and production began with fan clubs and

tip lines, but was solidified with the introduction of *Nintendo Power* magazine. Unlike other

popular video game focused magazines of the era, *Nintendo Power* was not sold on newsstands

and was instead marketed as an 'insiders only' product. The newsletter subscribers received the

first issue for free and then were required to pay a fifteen-dollar subscription fee. Critics were

initially baffled by *Nintendo Power*'s launch and scoffed at the idea of a magazine dedicated to a

single toy being sold at a premium price through direct marketing. Gail Tilden, a former

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[65] Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter, *Digital Play:* 125.

[66] Ibid

[67] Raymond Roel, *The Power of Nintendo,* Direct Marketing, September 1, 1989.

Nintendo Power editor, countered the criticism by pointing out that *Nintendo Power* readers at the time weren't just consumers, they were "fanatics" and charging for a high-quality magazine gave the company a platform to provide them with "information about the Nintendo brand" at every available opportunity.[68] Tilden's description of the company's fan base perfectly sums up the religious devotion of young Nintendo consumers during this period. If Nintendo was the religion of America's youth, *Nintendo Power* was their Bible.

"Information about the Nintendo brand" is not the most accurate phrase to describe the bulk of *Nintendo Power*'s content.[69] The magazine may have been light on traditional advertisements, but the content from cover to cover functioned as a sustained advertisement for all things Nintendo. *Nintendo Power*, which ostensibly resembled similar video game magazines, was Nintendo's propaganda mouthpiece and by 1990 also the most popular children's magazine in circulation. Scholar Henry Jenkins once described *Nintendo Power* as "techno porn for children," stating, "children spend hours ogling the fascinating places they might visit in a new game, eyeing the magazine's uncloaking of those secret sites to which they so far have failed to gain access."[70] Jenkins' description keys in on an important aspect of *Nintendo Power*'s success: It was the glossy, colorful images of the Nintendo universe and not the editorial content which captivated the young audience. Just like the popular "Now you're playing with power!" advertisement campaign from which the magazine's name is derived from, *Nintendo Power* promised both exclusive insider knowledge and glimpses of advanced virtual worlds never before seen on a home video game console. More importantly, the children who stared wide-

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[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Henry Jenkins, ""x logic": Repositioning Nintendo in Children's Lives," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 14, no. 4 (1993): 55-70.

eyed at these digital worlds each month were only looking at Nintendo approved images which could only be experienced on Nintendo hardware.

Nintendo's impact on children's culture in North America and the broader video game industry during this period cannot be understated. At its apex at the end of the 1980s, Nintendo products, by conservative estimates, accounted for nearly eighty percent of the home video game console market and twenty percent of the overall toy market.[71] Colloquially, the Nintendo name became interchangeable with the term video game. Like Disney's famous mouse and other omnipresent popular culture mainstays, Nintendo's video game franchises were not limited to a single medium. The Nintendo brand was nearly inescapable for young consumers, and Nintendo characters were carefully molded into brand celebrities from digital worlds which expanded far beyond their humble 8-bit beginnings. Even if a child didn't own an NES or spend their free time poring over the pages of *Nintendo Power*, they were bombarded by the brand through Saturday morning cartoon series like *Captain N* and *the Super Mario Bros. Super Show*, as well as movies like *The Wizard*—a long-form commercial for soon-to-be-released *Super Mario Bros. 3* masquerading as a feature-length film for children. The Nintendo name was slapped on every imaginable home product from bed sheets to backpacks and Nintendo-branded toys lined store shelves.

Nintendo's dominance in the video game industry stretched into the 90s with the release of the follow-up to the NES, the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES), however their popularity waned as the market aged and expanded. The core video game player demographic continues to age and, as of 2015, the Entertainment Software Association reports that the average

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[71] Nichols, *The Video Game Business*, 35-36.

player is no is no longer a legion of devote adolescents, but rather adults well into their 30s.[72] The contemporary core video game audience is a demographic with disposable income and strong nostalgic ties to the Nintendo universe and the video games of decades past which dominated the pop-culture landscape. Unsurprisingly, in the last decade, Nintendo has taken measures to broaden their own marketing and business strategy in order to leverage the nostalgia of aging Nintendo Generation.

The Virtual Console

At the height of Nintendo's power in 1988, Nintendo of America VP Peter Main joked that the company was perpetually "catching up to yesterday" to meet demand. More than twenty years later, the company continues to try to catch up to yesterday in a different sense. No longer are they struggling to meet the consumer demand for their products, but instead Nintendo is dialed in on recapturing the imagination of former Nintendo fans by commodifying player nostalgia. The commodification of Nintendo nostalgia is most evident on the "Virtual Console," a digital download service which provides access to a carefully curated selection of video games from the 1980s and 90s, launched alongside the release of the Nintendo Wii home console in 2006. Functionally, the Virtual Console is similar to other contemporary digital storefronts like Apple's iOS marketplace, with a "walled garden" platform, wherein Nintendo has absolute autonomy over the pricing and distribution of digital content. Essentially, the walled garden approach ensures that games—all of which at one point in time appeared on a past Nintendo console, remain in the Nintendo ecosystem. The Virtual Console's announcement coincided with the debut of the Nintendo Wii at the 2005 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3). During the Wii's

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[72] Entertainment Software Association, "Essential facts about the computer and video game industry," (2015).

first demonstration at E3, Nintendo of America President Reggie Fils-Amie reminded attendees that only they could boast of selling two-billion games in just over two decades. The Wii was positioned by Nintendo as the "ultimate backwards-compatible console," capable of downloading 20 years of video game history. The promotional video which followed the announcement of the Virtual Console was met with thunderous applause as images of past Nintendo Systems and games were sucked into the animated disc-drive of the Wii. The video presents the Wii not just as a new console—bigger, stronger, and faster than the last, but also as the new home of Nintendo's historically significant back catalog.[73]

The Virtual Console was initially designed specifically for the Nintendo Wii, but has since been added to the Nintendo Wii U home console and the Nintendo 3DS portable console released in 2012 and 2011, respectively. Players access the Virtual Console storefront through Nintendo's eShop channel. Once purchased, Virtual Console games appear on the home screen of the Wii, Wii U or 3DS alongside modern games and other applications downloaded by the player. Rather than segregate retro content, Nintendo leverages their history to court an older generation of players while exposing a younger generation of players to the legacy content which has influenced contemporary games.

The Virtual Console does, in a sense, digitally preserve retro games which are otherwise unplayable on modern video game consoles. However, Nintendo seems less interested in using the Virtual Console to preserve the past than it is in using decades of valuable intellectual property to charge consumers a fee to conveniently engage with their Nintendo nostalgia. As Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen note, the Virtual Console's reconfiguration of the old within

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[73] Reggie Fils-Aime, "Nintendo Keynote Address," Keynote from The Electronic Entertainment Expo, 2005.

a new, shiny package can fuel the fetishization of Nintendo's past.[74] The Virtual Console game

library, however, is not limited to just titles developed by Nintendo. Nintendo's past home

console competitors also are given a home for their long out of print franchises previously

unplayable on contemporary platforms. The service houses between 200 and 600 games, which

varies based on the Nintendo console platform (Wii, Wii U or 3DS) and region (North America,

Japan or PAL), and includes games from home consoles, portable consoles and personal

computers manufactured by SNK, Sega, NEC and Commodore. On the Virtual Console,

Nintendo's history of heated competition with these former rival companies is scrubbed clean

and each digital title is assimilated into the broader Nintendo universe. By funneling a breadth of

titles from multiple platforms and numerous video game console generations under Virtual

Console umbrella, Nintendo commodifies not only Nintendo nostalgia, but also video game

history in a broader sense. The promise of the Virtual Console is not unlike a 90s schoolyard

dream—owning a single piece of hardware capable of playing everything from *Super Mario

Bros.* to *Sonic the Hedgehog* and beyond. In practice however, the Virtual Console stands as an

example of the difficult task of attempting to recreate the experience of playing a video game on

modern technology in a manner which lives up to the lofty expectations dictated by player

nostalgia.

"The Classics Made Better!"

It is important to note that the Virtual Console does not simply unify the retro games it

plays host to, but instead engages in a new kind of stratification wholly dictated by Nintendo.

Super Mario Bros., originally released on the NES, can be purchased and played on every

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[74] Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen, "Playing the Past: An Introduction" in *Playing the Past,*
ed. Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 3.

modern Nintendo platform which supports the Virtual Console. Most Virtual Console games, and in some cases, entire retro console catalogs are not as easy to access. Many of the retro platforms available on the Wii Virtual Console, such as the SNK Neo Geo and NEC TurboGrafx-16 were not carried over to the Wii's successor, the Wii U. The Nintendo 3DS does not fare any better, with multiple segments of the Virtual Console gated off for customers who have not purchased the latest iteration of the handheld console. The solution, of course, is to buy completely into the new digital retro-market created by Nintendo. Only by purchasing all of Nintendo's consoles which feature the Virtual Console can a player truly access the full catalog of licensed retro games.

Players are provided with access to beloved and, in some cases, difficult to find, games from the past through the Virtual Console, but the presentation of these games raises questions of authenticity for players and illustrates the difficulty inherent in accessing and engaging with games designed for different game consoles over the course of multiple decades. Nintendo's solution to this problem is a series of hardware products which fuse traditional Nintendo design aesthetics and values with contemporary technology. This approach of precariously balancing innovation with familiarity is most apparent in the Nintendo's Wii remote controller. When held vertically, the Wii remote provides gyroscope-powered motion controls. When the controller is rotated and held horizontally, the directional pad and button layout mimic's Nintendo's own original NES controller design. For Virtual Console games which require more complex control schemes, Nintendo recommends purchasing the Classic Controller—a hybridization of the 90s-era Super Nintendo controller and a contemporary dual-analog joystick controller.

A Virtual Console game is markedly different from a physical copies of a retro games in that it is considered new, even if the game itself was originally released decades ago. As digital

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titles, they are also stripped of any ephemera and paratexts which may have accompanied the

original release. No longer engaging in the ritual of blowing on dusty game cartridge contacts is

a welcome reprieve in the age of the digital retro download, but the loss of thick instruction

manuals filled with game-lore and play tips strips the context from many Virtual Console games.

For many players, this is a bittersweet nostalgic experience. While the marketing for the Virtual

Console

promises the platform is a "one-stop shop for the greatest games of all time" and the

place where "classics are made better,"[75] the selection process for these games remains

inscrutable. The key to Nintendo's early success and the creation of their devout fan base was, in

part, due their commitment to maintaining a degree of closeness with their fans. In contrast, with

the Virtual Console, present-day Nintendo remains distant, refusing to disclose how or why

particular games are included or excluded. Nostalgia is deeply personal—something which

remains unaccounted for when nostalgia is transformed into a commodity. Although The Virtual

Console may falter entirely or to some extent, in recreating the experience of playing the games

of the past, the service's enduring popularity proves that the allure of trying to recapture the past

remains a strong motivating force for the aging Nintendo Generation.

Tap Here to Access the Past

Virtual Console games occupy a space where they function as both commodities and

advertisements for the brand of the broader Nintendo universe. Nintendo's popular line of

Amiibo figurines perhaps best embodies this strategy. As a stand-alone product, Amiibo are six-

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[75] "Wii U - Virtual Console from Nintendo." Nintendo - Official Site.
http://www.nintendo.com/wiiu/eshop/virtual-console (October 8, 2016).

inch-tall plastic trophies and symbols of devotion to the Nintendo brand. Amiibo are not dolls or action figures; they are static and meant for display on bookshelves or one of Nintendo's own licensed, retro-tinged display cases. Beyond their functionality as collectibles and displayable symbols of brand loyalty, each Amiibo contains a microchip which allows its owner to tap the figurine on the Nintendo Wii U tablet or the Nintendo 3DS portable console to activate digital content. This digital content is where Nintendo continues their longstanding tradition of building a relationship between players and the Nintendo brand. After activating the digital analogue of their real-world toy, players are encouraged to personalize each figurine with a nickname. The same microchip which allows for the near-field communication (NFC) process also allows each Amiibo to remember player-actions and, with certain games in the Nintendo library, allow users to play alongside or against their toy. Thus, the Amiibo is not just a physical representation of fondly remembered characters, but a dynamic hybrid of game and toy which remembers the player as well.

When Nintendo Senior Marketing Director Bill Trinen announced Amiibo at E3 in 2014, he was quick to point out the expressed purpose of the figurines, stating "Collect your favorite figures then battle, train, level-up and form your own unique bond with them."[76] Once this "bond" is created, Nintendo is positioned to leverage the player-Amiibo relationship to influence purchase decisions. After activating an Amiibo, players are encouraged to download *Amiibo Tap: Nintendo's Greatest Bits*, a free application available on the Nintendo eShop. When a player activates their Amiibo inside of *Amiibo Tap*, their Amiibo will present them with a gift, which, when unwrapped, contains a demo of a classic Nintendo game available for purchase on the

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[76] Bill Trinen, "Nintendo Keynote Address," Keynote, from The Electronic Entertainment Expo, Los Angeles, California, 2014.

Virtual Console. Rather than consisting of a single linear portion of a Nintendo game, each gift game is broken down into "scenes" which the player can cycle through and play in any order over the course of a three-minute time limit. Each scene is carefully plucked from its respective game to serve as a highly-concentrated digital emissary for the Nintendo brand. Players are plopped down into fan-favorite levels and boss fights devoid of context and spanning a multitude of Nintendo titles from the company's NES and SNES era. Ultimately, the dual-purpose of *Amiibo Tap* is to expose new, younger players to Nintendo's legacy content while simultaneously offering older players a bite size sample platter of iconic moments from classic Nintendo games in order to whet their appetite for nostalgic play.

Instead of linking Amiibo characters directly to the games from their respective franchises, *Amiibo Tap* instead randomizes the game gift presented to the player. This, in turn, incentivizes subsequent Amiibo purchases, as players are teased with the unknown game treasures which could be locked away in their figurine. Satoru Iwata describes the process as one designed to "pleasantly surprise you and make you feel as though you have just exchanged a game cartridge."[77] It is seemingly Nintendo's goal then to not only incentivize Amiibo purchase, but also intrinsically link the *Amiibo Tap* experience to the act trading and sharing games with friends as an adolescent. The days of swapping a well-worn copy of *Super Mario Bros.* for *The Legend of Zelda* on the playground may be behind you, but Nintendo is more than willing to step up and offer a facsimile which keys in specifically on nostalgic desires.

Of course, as the player makes their way through the various scenes within the demo, an omnipresent link to purchase the full game from the Virtual Console hovers just to the right of

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[77] Nintendo Co., Ltd, Third Quarter Financial Results Briefing for Fiscal Year Ending March 2015, accessed November 13, 2015, https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/en/library/events/150217/.

the cropped game screen. Once the player has reached the aforementioned time limit, they are informed via a pop-up message that they can either tap their Amiibo again for an additional three minutes of playtime or simply purchase the title directly from the Virtual Console to experience the full game. The Amiibo, as a marketing strategy for classic Nintendo franchises, is presented in a manner similar to thinly veiled advertorial style Nintendo honed with *Nintendo Power* in the 1980s and '90s. The glossy, full-color game images promising adventures in far-off worlds are instead replaced with brief gameplay snapshots promising a return to the games of the past. The added bonus of an option to instantly purchase games encourages impulse buying, while further dissolving the barrier between past and present as well as game and sales pitch. By bringing players to the Virtual Console storefront, they are then exposed to the full-breadth of available retro games, encouraging further purchases to satiate each player's nostalgic cravings.

The Past is a Foreign Donkey Kong Country

An important aspect of commodified nostalgia on a closed platform like the Virtual Console and the Virtual Console game scenes of *Amiibo Tap* is the ahistorical nature in which the past is presented. Historian David Lowenthal, borrowing a phrase originally penned by L.P. Hartley, asserts that nostalgic experiences innately reshape the past to serve the interests of the present, stating, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."[78] The new, Nintendo-sanctioned past as accessed in the present is one which only superficially recreates a bygone era. As such, the fan discourse surrounding the Virtual Console provides an excellent opportunity to examine the relationship between fans, the Nintendo brand and retro game

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[78] David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 390.

commodities. Additionally, fan discourse emphasizes the strained relationship between Nintendo and fans who desire to experience the past recreated in its totality.

Online fan conversations related to the retro games on the Virtual Console frequently highlight the contentious discourse between official game history offered by game publishers and the vernacular histories and nostalgic memories of retro game enthusiasts. As noted by Natasha Whiteman in her study of the *Silent Hill* video game franchise fanbase, publically displayed fan disapproval provides an excellent source for examining how nostalgia influences fan expectations and the pursuit of textual authenticity.[79] In a case study of retro game compilations and re-releases, David Heineman identified several key points of conflict between retro gamers and game companies.[80] Specifically, Heinemen notes that most fan ire is aimed at tweaks to gameplay and graphics in order to appeal to modern audiences.[81] Any distinguishable differences between the original game and the rerelease were decried as unfaithful to the memory of the game and dismissed as inauthentic mimicry. Additionally, the inclusion or exclusion of specific games on retro game compilations—especially those deemed 'inferior'—were also heavily criticized.[82] Most of the retro game enthusiasts' remarks indicate that, on some level, customers are concerned with how their own version game history clashes with what companies believe should be remembered, replayed, and excluded from being played on contemporary video game consoles. For these fans, who often self-identified as collectors, the porting, converting, reimagining and rereleasing video games are continuously muddling a notion of definitiveness.

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[79] Whiteman, "Homesick for Silent Hill: Modalities of Nostalgia in Fan Responses to Silent Hill 4: The Room" in *Playing The Past,* 33.
[80] David Heineman, "Public Memory and Gamer Identity: Retrogaming As Nostalgia", *Journal Of Games Criticism* 1 (2014): 1-24.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.

The pursuit of an authentic gameplay experience by nostalgic players, which extends beyond the game software and into the physical realm, is at the forefront of retro game and Virtual Console related discourse. On popular video game forums not affiliated with Nintendo such as NeoGAF, NintendoAge and Reddit's "Retro Games" subreddit, users frequently discuss strategies for creating conditions to better mimic their childhood experiences playing video games. For players who may be too young to have specific memories of these games, the same conditions remain essential for inviting them into a seemingly authentic world of retrogaming which they did not experience the first time around.

The conditions under which the games are played are often positioned as being just as important as the games themselves. On NintendoAge, a Nintendo-focused website for retro video game collectors, many users brush off the Virtual Console entirely for its perceived inauthenticity. In a discussion labeled *Wii virtual console vs real games*—which in the title alone segregates and devalues Virtual Console games—users vent their frustrations for the Wii, with the near-consensus opinion that "[the] Virtual Console is just an emulation of the NES (and a bad one at that), so there's no substitute for the real thing."[83] As the thread title indicates, Virtual Console games are not seen as "real" games by these retro game collectors. Reddit user rich0038's post on a forum thread titled *How to recreate retro gaming experience?* succinctly summarizes the general sentiment expressed by individuals who are interested in nostalgic play: "Personally I play the real consoles, with real cartridges, on an old crappy CRT. Nothing beats that!"[84] What makes the consoles and cartridges more "real" to these players is their existence as

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[83] Ouendan, April 24, 2009, "Wii virtual console vs. real games retrogaming," *NintendoAge*, http://nintendoage.com/forum/messageview.cfm?catid=5&threadid=18662

[84] Rich0038, February 27, 2014, "How to recreate retro gaming experience?: retrogaming," *Reddit*, https://www.reddit.com/r/retrogaming/comments/1z0re0/how_to_recreate_retro_gaming_experience/.

physical, real-world objects which are also period appropriate. The "old crappy CRT" remark

points to one of the major technological shortcomings of the Virtual Console's commodified

nostalgic play. On the Virtual Console, retro games run in crisp, higher resolution, devoid of

scanlines and artificially cropped to fit on modern widescreen televisions. On older CRT

televisions, retro games, on the original console hardware, run in their native 4:3 aspect ratio,

just as they did when they were new decades ago. This in turn is largely viewed by the

community as more authentic and the 'right' way to play retro games.

The quest for a more authentic play experience is undermined by the Virtual Console's

method for bringing retro games onto modern video game consoles: emulation. Raiford Guins,

while discussing the presentation of games in museums, notes that emulation is not an attempt to

"resuscitate or reawaken" games on obsolete hardware.[85] Instead, emulation is the simulation of

video games and a way to experience retro gameplay in the present, removed from its historical

context.[86] The reality of the limitations and purpose of emulation on the Virtual Console do not

necessarily align with the hopes of players who want the past preserved in its entirety. The

reaction of players—specifically older players driven by nostalgia—and their propensity to

pursue era-appropriate environments for gameplay highlight both the elusiveness nostalgia and

the relentless pursuit of authentic experiences by fans.

Equally important to nostalgic video game consumers is being able to play the right

version of a specific game when they access it through a digital service like the Virtual Console.

It is unclear, however, which version of a game has any sort of true claim to definitiveness.

Another popular practice on retro game-focused forums is the meticulous cataloging of the

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[85] Guins, *Game After*, 36-39.
[86] Ibid.

various bugs, glitches and problems players encounter with games re-released on the *Virtual Console*. The forum on the popular video game-focused website, *Penny Arcade* has an entire thread dedicated to this practice which hinges on the thesis that *Virtual Console* Games are inherently flawed:

> The Wii's Virtual Console promises to deliver games to us "as we remember
> them." Unfortunately, it introduces many changes and glitches due to the method
> (emulation). The ability to improve the resolution for most N64 games (some
> were already 480i) means that this promise does not mean that they won't fix
> typos, bad translations, original glitches, etc. For instance, Donkey Kong Country
> fixes many of the glitches I discovered (though some were probably already fixed
> in subsequent cartridge revisions).[87]

This particular example identifies a number of major concerns players have with Virtual Console titles, particularly Nintendo's use of emulation. Emulation is the process by which Nintendo digitally mimics older hardware via their own proprietary software in order to run older games on their current consoles. Some players, predominantly those with a fixation on the technical minutia of games, contest that this process introduces new problems to old games while simultaneously failing to address the bugs and glitches found in games upon their initial release, decades ago. Furthermore, while digitally downloaded patches to update contemporary games is both commonplace and often discussed openly by game developers, the press, and players, the practice of revising games after their release was far less common throughout the 1980s and '90s. From a practical standpoint, without any clear external indicators, it is incredibly difficult

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[87] Inchinisan, May 21, 2007, "Virtual Console Glitch," *Penny Arcade*, https://forums.penny-arcade.com/discussion/20963/virtual-console-glitch-thread.

for the average consumer to identify if multiple versions of cartridge exist and what noticeable

changes, if any, were implemented by the game's developer.

Nintendo does not disclose their emulation process nor do they inform players which

version of a game they are purchasing. The frustration expressed by players at these

discrepancies ranges from the noticeable, but inconsequential, to the vague insistence that

something just doesn't feel right. The aforementioned *Penny Arcade* forum post zeroes in on

Donkey Kong Country, fastidiously criticizing a minor variation on the game's pause screen,

stating "Donkey Kong Country rope/vines continue swinging when paused, though they appear

to be still during the pause. This does not happen in DKC v1.0 (vines freeze properly)."[88] Other

players find that these minor changes and slight variations, combined with their slick, modern

presentation completely mar the nostalgic experience. On similar forum thread found on

Gamespot, players' remarks reinforce this observation, stating "The game play is very much the

same, but the music sounds more crisp [sic] and the graphics are updated - but as I play it, the

authenticity is off. Nostalgia makes no sense if you're dealing with something that is superior to

the original."[89] Other players echo this same sentiment, replying with "Basically, I'd gladly give

up some shelf space and be tethered by a cord in order to get the full, genuine experience" and

"For whatever reason, the classic games played on a Cartridge has a better feel to it than Wii

play. Know what I mean?"[90] Once again, authenticity, or how closely a nostalgic experience

mimics the past, is upheld as sacrosanct despite being unobtainable.

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Heirren, July 15, 2014. "Vintage NES/SNES or Wii virtual console - what is your preference?," *Gamespot,* http://www.gamespot.com/forums/games-discussion-1000000/vintage-nessnes-or-wii-virtual-console-what-is-you-29414642/

[90] arkephonic, July 15, 2014. "Vintage NES/SNES or Wii virtual console - what is your preference?," *Gamespot,* http://www.gamespot.com/forums/games-discussion-1000000/vintage-nessnes-or-wii-virtual-console-what-is-you-29414642/

On Nintendo's own digital space for social game discussion called The Miiverse, players populate forum spaces for individual retro games and long-running series with posts celebrating and memorializing games from the past. Just as the Virtual Console functions as a space to consume fondly remembered retro games, The Miiverse often takes the form of a digital hub to engage in the broader social aspects of nostalgic consumption. In stark contrast to the lamenting of *Donkey Kong Country's* inauthentic presentation, the players on the game's Miiverse forum flood the page with posts which celebrate nostalgia for the game and Nintendo enthusiastically and unabashedly. Players actively seek out validation for their nostalgia from other who have fond memories of the game.
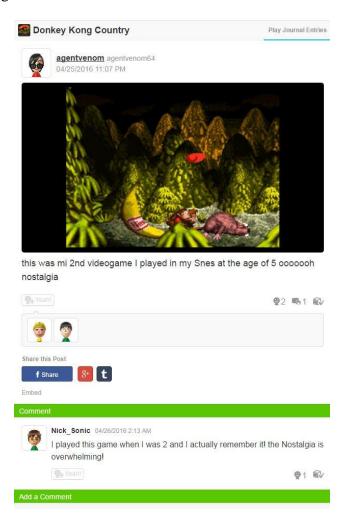

Figure 1: A typical Donkey Kong Country Miiverse post

For these players, the Virtual Console becomes a virtual watercooler where likeminded players can share their own memories and nostalgically reminisce with others who have had similar experiences both in game and as adolescents.

Outside of Nintendo's officially sanctioned Miiverse forums, players openly express their anxiety in regard to ephemeral nature of Nintendo's digital marketplace and a lack of true ownership of the digital retro games found on the Virtual Console. Whether or not a game will show up on the Virtual Console and how long the game will remain available to download and play is never disclosed to players by Nintendo. It is not uncommon for popular titles to disappear completely without warning or explanation. The previously mentioned *Donkey Kong Country* was one of the first major titles to be unceremoniously dropped from the Virtual Console in 2010.[91] *Tetris*—another title which, while not originally developed by Nintendo, was instrumental in popularizing the company's Gameboy handheld console—was also removed from the Virtual Console in 2014. The murkiness and complexity of licensing agreements for decades-old games produced before the advent of digital distribution creates a great deal of instability on the Virtual Console platform even for games which are, ostensibly, 'Nintendo games'. Further fueling fan anxiety is the fact that once a game is removed from the Virtual Console, it cannot be re-downloaded by the player. Games are also tied to the console itself, rather than the player, preventing consumers from engaging in the popular practice of sharing games with friends or transferring a game from an old console to a new one. Once a console succumbs to mechanical failure, or if Nintendo chooses to no longer support the Virtual Console

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[91] Donkey Kong Country was released by Nintendo in 1994 but developed by Rare Ltd—a company currently owned by Nintendo rival, Microsoft. The game once again appeared on The Virtual Console in 2012. Nintendo did not clarify why it was initially removed or why it returned.

on an obsolete platform, the games which were once available will essentially disappear into the digital ether. While the prospect of eventually losing the digital re-releases of retro titles is likely, if not inevitable, the purpose of commodifying nostalgia is not preservation or historical documentation. The Virtual Console is not a true reflection of the past so much as it is a distortion which represents Nintendo's ideal past brought to life in the present.

Beyond the Retro Revolution

The reactions by these players points to a reluctance to fully embrace Virtual Console games as authentic digital recreations of their physical counterparts. In one sense, the Virtual Console clearly scratches a nostalgic itch. On the other hand, the retro game as a piece of software is only a small part of the broader nostalgic experience. Nostalgia for the media and pop-culture artifacts the Nintendo Generation engaged with decades ago is both temporal and spatial, while simultaneously encompassing deeply personal experiences as well as collective memories. By stripping retro games of their context and repackaging them as digital nostalgia commodities, Nintendo loses key extra-textual components of nostalgic play. Still, the Virtual Console and the desire to remediate the past remains a core component of Nintendo's business strategy. New games, and old games made new again, by Nintendo all feature a cast of iconic characters who have been remediated, reinvented and recreated perpetually since the company's earliest foray into the realm of home video game console manufacturing. As the Virtual Console marches steadily toward its own ten-year anniversary, Nintendo's content strategy has shifted to reflect the nostalgic desires of a new, younger generation. Weekly releases of NES and SNES from the company's golden era have largely dried up, replaced by an influx of titles popularized

on the Gameboy Advance.[92] The cycle of nostalgia ensures that once games gain renewed novelty as their audience matures into adulthood, Nintendo will remain poised to capitalize on their desire to revisit the past. By funneling retro games into a tightly controlled, curated space Nintendo is able to leverage their legacy to alter their own history and turn the wistful longing for a by-gone era of video games into a commodity.

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[92] Kyle Orland, "Don't expect more Game Boy, SNES downloads on modern Nintendo systems," ArsTechnica.com, http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2015/10/dont-expect-more-game-boy-snes-downloads-on-modern-nintendo-systems/.

Chapter 3
Remixing Retro: Playful Pastiche and Nostalgia Commodities

For over a decade, Nintendo's Virtual Console has stood as a key component of the company's strategy for leveraging their past to commodify player nostalgia. The launch of the Virtual Console was certainly a watershed moment for Nintendo—a testament to their commitment to finding new ways for consumers to engage with their nostalgic yearnings for Nintendo's various games from the past. Nintendo's interest in reimagining and repurposing the games and characters of their past, however, extends far beyond the advent of the Virtual Console. This chapter will explore Nintendo's use of intertextuality and pastiche in their multi-generation franchises as it relates to their commodification of consumer nostalgia. The analyses will include game texts that emphasize Nintendo's strategy of leveraging familiar iconography from the company's history to satiate nostalgic desires while simultaneously appealing to new, younger players. By keeping one foot firmly planted in the past, Nintendo uses these franchises to encourage greater fan investment over time by leaning heavily on brand familiarity. I will also discuss how Nintendo nostalgia influences the development of Nintendo-like pastiches in video games outside of Nintendo's own first-party titles. Nintendo's influence is reflected in the growing trend of nostalgia driven, retro-pastiche titles finding success in the broader video game industry.

Remaking Mario

Nintendo has gone to great lengths to extend the lives of their iconic characters. *Super Mario Bros*. (1986)—the game which helped propel the NES to commercial success and

establish Nintendo's de-facto mascot—has been remixed, remastered and re-released on nearly every Nintendo hardware platform since its initial release.[93]

Mario has been the star of many spinoffs which leverage nostalgia specifically. The character experienced a retro-makeover in 2006 in the form of the *New Super Mario Brothers* (NSMB) series. In the world of *NSMB*, the old and new Nintendo converge. The blending of the past and present is evident in the game's television commercials which alternate between gameplay from the original 1986 *Super Mario Bros.* and *NSMB*.[94] Footage of Mario obtaining the series' iconic mushroom, which causes the diminutive protagonist to power up, is used to transition between the classic and new visual style, while an upbeat, modern remix of Koji Kondo's iconic *Super Mario Bros.* theme plays to complete the new game's aesthetic.[95] For older players, or former Nintendo Kids, the commercial promises the familiarity of the past combined with the high-definition graphics and amenities associated with contemporary games.

The gameplay of *NSMB* takes a similar approach. While past Mario games offered familiar imagery in increasingly larger and more diverse settings (*Super Mario World*, *Super Mario Galaxy*) or the technological feat of shifting from two-dimensional to three-dimensional play (*Super Mario 64*), *NSMB*'s novelty is grounded almost entirely in its playful remediation of the past. Nintendo's reworking of the visual, audible, gameplay and narrative elements of the original *Super Mario Bros.* complements the company's overarching goal of appealing to older and younger players simultaneously. In *NSMB* the three-dimensional character models are limited to a side-scrolling, two-dimensional plane to mimic the playstyle of the original *Super*

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[93] Altice, *I Am Error*, 16-17.
[94] *New Super Mario Bros. Commercial*, video, 2006, https://youtu.be/jUnFmf4yhvY.
[95] Ibid.

Mario Bros. series. The game's soundtrack integrates new, original compositions with remixed modern versions of classic tunes. The sound effects, like the soundtrack, also lean heavily on audio cues repurposed from prior Mario games. Mario's early 3D adventures are also given a nod through the incorporation of animation sequences and abilities from *Super Mario 64*. By focusing on remediating and reconfiguring content, Nintendo appeals to nostalgic players and new players concurrently through a game which is both brand new and still immediately familiar for players.

Figure 2 – Above: The first level from the original Super Mario Bros.

Below: The same level referenced in NSMB with the castle from Super Mario 64 visible in the background.

The ongoing *NSMB* franchise is an example of Nintendo's use of pastiche to essentially hail longtime fans through recognizable cues. The use of pastiche is often framed in the context

of Fredric Jameson's hyper-critical analysis of the term as it relates to postmodernism. For Jameson, pastiche lacks the critical edge of parody or the overt praise found in an homage. Jameson views pastiche as strictly neutral imitation and largely without cultural value, stating

> …in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is gang to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past.[96]

As discussed in chapter one, Nintendo's use of pastiche does not fit Jameson's mold of blank mimicry. Instead, pastiche in series such as *NSMB* can be better understood as a clever play on a familiar form and Nintendo iconography, similar to Richard Dyer's analysis of the use of pastiche in film noir and other genre films.[97] Just as a neo-noir film like *Body Heat*, as discussed by Dyer, uses the stylistic flourishes found in classic film noir while simultaneously remaining a (at the time) contemporary film, *NSMB* creates its distinct aesthetic through repurposing classic *Super Mario Bros*. iconography on modern Nintendo hardware.[98] Pastiche is not often thought of as an artist repurposing their own work, but the repetition of familiar elements is essential in other longstanding media franchises such as Star Wars, Star Trek and James Bond. Like these media franchises, the mash-up of *Super Mario Bros*. history found in *NSMB* is not a neutral retread of the past, or, in the words of Jameson "the imprisonment of the past,"[99] but a recreation

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[96] Jameson, *The Cultural Turn,* 5-6.
[97] Richard Dyer, *Pastiche*, 119-130.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 6.

of the familiar in a novel way which invites players to notice references which they may have a nostalgic attachment to.

While pastiche may lack the overt criticism or praise found in parody and homage, respectively, the argument that pastiche is simply blank mimicry is flawed. *NSMB*, like many Nintendo franchises, is a balancing act between the old and the new. It is not a thoughtless recreation of a classic Mario game. Nintendo is highly selective in choosing which retro elements it includes and which aspects of Mario's universe remain in the past. The inclusion and omission of certain elements from past Mario games in *NSMB* is an acknowledgement by Nintendo that parts of the classic Mario formula can be changed for contemporary audiences. For example, the crushing difficulty of retro games is toned down significantly, favoring minor setbacks instead of a trip back to the game's title screen when a player loses all of his or her lives and receives a game over.[100] Players are also given a plethora of new movement option for Mario, from backflips to stomps and wall jumps, which in turn provide players with more options for avoiding obstacles and progressing through a level. In sum, these changes and other tweaks to the classic Mario formula function as criticism while the game still clearly presents itself as pastiche.

Nintendo's own assessment of how the *NSMB* games fit into the broader Nintendo universe calls out this mix of the old with the new specifically. On Nintendo's website, they hail *NSMB* as both a return to Mario's classic two-dimensional platforming roots and (true to its name) a "new" adventure unlike any Mario game before it, stating "The great thing about *New Super Mario Bros.* is that it takes everything that was so spectacular about the original series and

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[100] The extreme difficulty of NES-era games is often referred to colloquially as "Nintendo hard.".

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takes it to the next level… Never before has 'New' been so dramatically understated."[101] The

emphasis on the "New" part of *NSMB* is key to understanding Nintendo's game design and

marketing philosophy. Broadly speaking, the video game industry, as noted by James Newman,

obsessively desires to maintain a sense of forward motion towards better, faster and newer

technology.[102] Nintendo, more so than their competitors, seems focused on not just creating new

games on new hardware, but repurposing the old and familiar to make the new more palatable.

Nintendo still follows a cycle of planned obsolescence—the idea that technology is created with

the assumption that games and hardware will be usurped, by newer, better technology. At the

same time, the use of their own history also indicates an interest in planned revivification, a term

coined by sociologist Fred Davis to explain the reinvigoration of the past to appeal to present day

consumer nostalgia.[103] The process of planned revivification is not limited to the Mario franchise

or its various spin-offs.[104] Planned revivification stands alongside the digital re-release of classic

titles on the Virtual Console as a pillar of Nintendo's ongoing strategy to both capitalize on

player nostalgia and capture the imagination of new fans discovering the company's retro-

inspired games for the first time.

A Link to the Past

In an early review of *NSMB*, critic Joe Dodson harangues the game's use of pastiche,

postulating that Mario can never truly be "new" again.[105] Dodson's criticism echoes many of

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[101] "New Super Mario Bros.", *Nintendo.Com*, http://www.nintendo.com/games/detail/ad5a45fd-b1c2-403c-970a-9e3ffa35a5b8.

[102] James Newman, *Best Before* (New York: Routledge, 2012): 44-45.

[103] Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 132-138.

[104] Mario has been featured, in some capacity, in over 200 Nintendo produced video games making him one of the most ubiquitous characters in video game history.

[105] Joe Dodson, "New Super Mario Bros Review", *Game Revolution*, 2016, http://www.gamerevolution.com/review/new-super-mario-.

Jameson's concerns about the nature of pastiche, specifically its value as art.[106] Jameson takes

his critique of postmodern pastiche a step further, suggesting that pastiche is a mechanism for

our "cultural amnesia" and erodes or changes our understanding of history.[107] It is improbable

that a player would confuse a new Nintendo game like *NSMB* with the retro Mario titles it draws

its inspiration from. This does not mean that Nintendo does not use other avenues to tinker with

or update their own history and capitalize on consumer nostalgia. *The Legend of Zelda* series in

particular has played host to numerous remakes which leverage the series' nostalgic market

value to pull older games and players back into the cycle of consumption. These remakes are

noticeably different than the games found on the Virtual Console. Virtual Console games

emulate retro games in an attempt to present them seemingly as they were, with the added

benefit the modern conveniences provided by contemporary technology. The remakes of classic

titles, on the other hand, seem less interested in pixel perfect emulation and are instead focused

on selling consumers versions of games which are deemed both new and better by Nintendo

while drawing attention to the revisions and enhancements specifically. Also, unlike the digital-

only Virtual Console storefront, remakes of classic Nintendo games receive full retail releases on

physical media, giving the games a sense of prestige in Nintendo's game catalog.[108]

The first enhanced *Zelda* remake was *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D*, released

on the Nintendo 3DS portable game console in June of 2011. The official website for *Ocarina of*

Time, in a similar fashion to language used on the official website for the Virtual Console,

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[106] Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 6.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Occasionally (but rarely) there is some crossover between Virtual Console games and remakes. Nintendo released a remake of *Super Mario 64* on the Nintendo DS in 2004. This version was released on The Virtual Console in 2016 alongside the original game.

promises "…one of the most critically acclaimed games of all-time, made even better!"[109] A list of the game's features boasts of new gyroscope-enabled motion controls, a touchscreen interface and fluid, stereoscopic three-dimensional graphics.[110] These changes are positioned alongside classic artwork from the original game and the promise that this new version will "satisfy new and seasoned players."[111] This ensures that the game is positioned as both a timeless classic and still cutting-edge. In addition to reaffirming Nintendo's commitment to court both new and nostalgic players, The *Ocarina of Time* remake emphasizes the complex relationship between itself and its historical reference point. The game's creator, Shigeru Miyamoto, discusses his decision to revisit and remake past Nintendo titles, stating

> There's a new generation, and, naturally, today's elementary and middle-schoolers don't know a thing about *Ocarina of Time*. The people who played on the Nintendo 64 system in grade school are already in their mid-twenties. So I thought it was probably okay to remake them now. That was one reason…The biggest reason for me personally was that I myself wanted to see the majestic scenery of Hyrule in stereoscopic 3D…In all honesty, wanting to get that sense of really 'being there', in 3D, was a very big factor behind this.[112]

Miyamoto's attitude toward remaking past titles, indicates that he views Nintendo games as fluid works of art waiting to be altered. *Ocarina of Time 3D* is the current "best" version of the game, but it remains an iteration destined to be revived and superseded once again.

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[109] "Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time 3D", *Zelda.Com*, 2016, http://www.zelda.com/ocarina3d/#/home.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.
[112] "Iwata Asks: Nintendo 3DS Titles", *Nintendo.Com*, 2016, http://iwataasks.nintendo.com/interviews/#/3ds/how-nintendo-3ds-made/4/7.

By reintegrating these games back into the cycle of consumption, remakes also give Nintendo the opportunity to have their games discovered or rediscovered, re-experienced and reassessed by players. Reviews of *Ocarina of Time 3D* wax nostalgic while alleging "The in-game graphics never quite lived up to the concepts crafted by Nintendo's artists; Those discrepancies are now gone."[113] This puts the writer in the odd position of suggesting that the updated visual presentation of *Ocarina of Time 3D* is definitive and representative of how the game's creators intended for the original game to look. Similarly, a review in Wired magazine asserts that "[Nintendo] didn't paint over the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel — they just filled in some of the cracks,"[114] indicating that the game's latest iteration has finally fixed flaws which only manifested with age and may or may not have been considered by consumers and critics when *Ocarina of Time* was originally released in 1998. Nintendo's enhancement of *Ocarina of Time* is similar to George Lucas revisiting the original *Star Wars* film trilogy to recut scenes and digitally enhance others. Taken as a whole, this discourse echoes Nintendo's own marketing which uses the promise of an enhanced nostalgic experience to promote older games which are revived and made new again.

Retro Remixed

Alongside remakes of classic titles and efforts to leverage Nintendo iconography as pastiche, Nintendo has also begun to explore ways to deconstruct and reconfigure past games into new series which present an alternate means to engage in nostalgic play. This strategy can be seen prominently in Nintendo's *NES Remix* series of games. *NES Remix* and its sequel harness

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[113] Richard George, "The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time 3D Review", *IGN*, 2011, http://www.ign.com/articles/2011/06/17/the-legend-of-zelda-ocarina-of-time-3d-review.
[114] Chris Kohler, "Review: Ocarina Of Time 3D Reminds Us Why Zelda Is Best Game Ever", *Wired*, 2011, https://www.wired.com/2011/06/ocarina-of-time-3d-review/.

the power of familiar Nintendo aesthetics, gameplay and characters in a series of recontexualized mini-games which focus on specific elements from classic NES titles available in full on the Virtual Console. For instance, in the *NES Remix* version of *Donkey Kong* (1985), each core mechanic from the game is broken down into individual, escalating challenges. Players are first asked to make Mario (né Jumpman) hop over three barrels. The subsequent challenges ask Mario to jump over an increasingly larger number of barrels, collect certain items on screen and, eventually complete a full level from the original game. Each challenge is timed and, collectively, each group of challenges for an individual retro title rarely exceeds 30-to-45 seconds. Completing the challenges quickly and without error earns the player more stars, which are then used to unlock additional challenges.

As Nathan Altice astutely points out in his textual analysis of *NES Remix*, the game, at first glance, does not present itself as something specifically designed for older, nostalgic players interested in reliving their halcyon days.[115] The use of three-star rating system as a form of in-game currency necessary for progression is borrowed wholesale from popular contemporary mobile games like *Angry Birds* and *Candy Crush Saga*. The short bursts of gameplay similarly mimic the style and pacing of the aforementioned mobile titles. Each classic title also receives a visual facelift, with crisp high-definition graphics and a shadowbox-like effect added to in-game visuals to further delineate the *NES Remix* compilation titles from the original games they draw inspiration from. The very structure of the majority of *NES Remix* further supports Altice's argument. The original NES titles that *NES Remix* uses as its foundation were largely devoid of in-game tutorials to ease players into each game experience. For young and new players, each mini-game challenge functions as a teaching tool for the broader full game experience. Players

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[115] Altice, 326.

are expected to both perform and perfect isolated actions before they are allowed to move forward and engage with new mechanics which build on their prior knowledge and achievements. Many elements of *NES Remix* do not remix classic NES games, but instead restructure them in a way which exposes new players to Nintendo's heritage by easing them into the demonstrably different world of retro games.

Altice predominantly sees the *NES Remix* series as a retro divide—old content altered to appeal to young players in the same way the Virtual Console serves older, nostalgic players.[116] While it is true that the NES Remix games have appeal for younger players, this view obscures the game's underlying nostalgic appeal. *NES Remix* works as both an introduction to retro Nintendo content and a means to provide older players with new ways to engage with their nostalgia. The titular remix levels, which can only be accessed when a player completes all of a game's introductory challenges, alter familiar mechanics and add new wrinkles to make the games significantly more difficult abstractions of the titles they are based on. In these challenges, players are asked to complete familiar *Super Mario Bros.* levels while constantly running, defeat Donkey Kong without jumping and navigate the dungeons of *The Legend of Zelda* while the screen twists and warps to obscure the player's view. Each of these remix levels are presented in a manner which directly challenge a player's nostalgia fatigue. Older players may have played (and replayed) these classic titles several times, but *NES Remix* offers the alluring prospect of a nostalgia fix for players who have "seen it all."[117]

The *NES Remix* series also hails older, nostalgic players directly through Championship Mode, a separate competition where players contend for a high score on an online, arcade-style

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[116] Ibid.
[117] "NES Remix", *Nintendo.Com*, 2015, http://nesremix.nintendo.com/.

leaderboard. Championship Mode is designed specifically to mimic the 1990 Nintendo World

Championships—an enormous marketing spectacle and competition which toured across the

United States at the height of Nintendo's popularity and influence during the NES era.[118] Players

across three different age groups were invited to pay to compete in a series of timed mini-

challenges across three different NES games to earn a place on global leaderboard and win

prizes. The allure of prizes from the competition was only a small piece of Nintendo's overall

goal. The event also gave Nintendo an opportunity to charge attendees to play new and

unreleased NES games. Don Coyner, Nintendo's advertising manager during the initial Nintendo

World Championships tour, explained, rather bluntly that the purpose of the events was to get

new products into the hands of their audience and "drive consumers into the stores."[119]

The same strategy of enticing consumers to participate in events which serve to promote

the Nintendo brand is also visible in the *NES Remix* series. In this instance, however, the

competition is used to drive consumers to Nintendo's past games rather than give them a glimpse

of the company's future. As players progress through remixed levels and Championship Mode,

they are exposed to diegetic prompts to purchase the full version of the remixed game, and other

games in the series, from Nintendo's eShop and the Virtual Console.

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[118] Paul Jarvey, "The Nintendo Tour Is Game Heaven, Gimmick.", *Worchester Telegram & Gazette*, April 18, 1990.
[119] Cara Tuzzolino, "Nintendo Zaps The Consumer Market.", *Incentive*, May 1991, 165.

Figure 3- An example of the in-game advertisements featured in the NES Remix series.

In addition to promoting real world purchases within the game, the series also ties in to larger external marketing campaigns. *NES Remix 2* launched shortly before the announcement that Nintendo would be bringing back the Nintendo World Championships for the first time in 25 years. The new Nintendo World Championships took place at retail locations across the country where players attempt to earn a high score in the *NES Remix 2* championship mode for an opportunity to compete for prizes at live event during the 2015 Electronic Entertainment Expo.[120] The resurrection of the Nintendo World Championship in conjunction with Nintendo's revamped retro properties show that once again, Nintendo's keen awareness of their own legacy informs their strategy to commodify fan nostalgia. In many ways, this parallels Nintendo's use of *Amiibo Tap* to expose new players to classic games on the Virtual Console. Unlike *Amiibo Tap*—a free game designed to expose players to short demos of purchasable retro games, *NES Remix* is a full retail title which cheekily weaves online purchasing prompts into gameplay while actively

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[120] Jennifer Weekly, "Nintendo World Championships Return After 25 Years", *TIME.Com*, 2015, http://time.com/3858219/nintendo-mario-kart-super-smash-bros-pokemon-championship/.

promoting a contest designed to drive consumers to physical retail locations as well. The promise

of a new, remixed experience is used by Nintendo not only attract players, but also to fuel a

much larger integrated marketing campaign.

Making More Mario

The *NES Remix* series represents the newest breed of games which harness Nintendo

nostalgia. These titles do not just reintroduce players to legacy content—they restructure

established formulas to expand the definition of what Nintendo's classic intellectual property can

and can't be.[121] This playful approach, which is more than a casual nod to the world of

unlicensed, experimental game modification and emulation, is even more pronounced in

Nintendo's *Super Mario Maker*—a game where individuals create their own Mario levels and

share them in a global online community where they can be played. *Super Mario Maker*

illustrates Nintendo's interest in co-opting fan labor into a Nintendo-controlled ecosystem where

pastiche, recycling and reiteration of classic Mario game elements creates an ostensibly endless

nostalgic gameplay experience.

Super Mario Maker is a tool as much as it is a game. Players are given a grid-like canvas

with a static, familiar background from a prior two-dimensional Mario game. From here, the

player selects from a list of blocks, enemies, power-ups and obstacles to construct their own

Mario level. Each user-created level is tied to era-style chosen by the player, ranging from the

original *Super Mario Bros*. to the more contemporary *New Super Mario Bros.* In addition to

altering the audio-visual presentation, each style also incorporates the physics and move sets of

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[121] Altice, 329.

their respective era. A completed level can be uploaded and played by the *Super Mario Maker* community once the creator is able to beat the level themselves.

On its surface, *Super Mario Maker* is, quite literally, a tool to make Mario games. In practice, however, it is also a game which boils Mario down to its core ethos of encouraging discovery. *Super Mario Maker* levels are not Mario levels, both in the sense that they are not officially created by Nintendo and because they rarely resemble levels that might be found in a traditional Mario game. The familiar Nintendo-created Mario level is used as a jumping-off point instead of an implied goal and experimentation is encouraged from the start. The game's mandatory tutorial begins with the original 1-1 level from *Super Mario Bros.* Players are immediately asked to begin deconstructing and reconstructing the familiar scene to their liking while text prompts embolden players to test out different combinations of enemies and terrain to develop new creations. The resulting player-created levels are often eclectic Mario collages which lean on Mario-pastiche while still amplifying unfamiliar elements. The generic Mario level form in *Super Mario Maker* is acknowledged and then twisted, while discouraging blank parody or a simple Mario homage.

A common criticism levied against *Super Mario Maker* is that while it may provide an endless stream of often nostalgic content created by and for fans, the content rarely reaches the level of quality in Nintendo produced Mario games. A scathing critique from Michael Thomsen in the *Washington Post* summarizes this viewpoint.

> *Super Mario Maker* is a bad comedy. Released in coordination with the 30-year
> anniversary of *Super Mario Bros.,* it indulges players in the fantasy that they'd be
> good at making video game levels. This sort of self-deception has become
> common in the age of digital consumption, and while there's something utopian

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in *Super Mario Maker*'s appeals to community participation and sharing, the

game quickly collapses into a scratch sheet of horrible ideas and levels you'll

regret having played. It's a tool for the mass production of cultural refuse, single-

use distractions that fail to replicate the spirit of the original.[122]

Setting aside the subjectivity of what constitutes a good *Super Mario Maker* level, Thomsen

posits that the game exists to indulge players in the act of replicating Mario levels. While this

might be true in some cases, *Super Mario Maker* tends to yield levels which ignore rote

replication and indulge scenarios which intentionally go beyond anything previously included by

Nintendo in a Mario game.

By pushing the limits of *Super Mario Maker*, players frequently embrace the playfulness

of pastiche. Michael Z. Newman argues that foregrounded form and pastiche in independent

films is sometimes playful and game-like and encourages social cohesion through shared

expectations and experiences.[123] Similarly, *Super Mario Maker* players produce levels which are

knowingly playful exaggerations and appreciated by other Nintendo fans who share levels with

each other as a community. The game consists entirely of user-created Mario levels, so the act of

engaging with other players through sharing, rating and commenting on levels is an important

element of the experience. *Super Mario Maker* is also used to create levels where other game

franchises are filtered through the lens of Mario's aesthetic and gameplay. The tools of Super

Mario Maker become tools to create side scrolling *Legend of Zelda* levels, physics-based puzzles

and digital Rube Goldberg machines.

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[122] Michael Thomsen, "Super Mario Maker Is An Engine For Circulating Horrible New Mario Levels", *Washington Post*, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2015/09/15/super-mario-maker-is-an-engine-for-circulating-horrible-new-mario-levels/.
[123] Michael Z Newman, *Indie*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 145

Figure 4 - A Super Mario Maker level which incorporates elements of The Legend of Zelda

As a game creation tool, *Super Mario Maker* allows player to engage with their Nintendo

nostalgia while creating new, unique Nintendo experiences guided by their knowledge of the

Mario franchise. The game also provides an army of nostalgia-fueled fan laborers who create the

Super Mario Maker community within the infrastructure provided by Nintendo.

Retro Reborn

Nintendo's efforts to use their past in new, first-party developed titles remains a key

strategy in their efforts to commodify consumer nostalgia. In the last decade, games inspired by

classic Nintendo franchises from the 1980s, but created by third-party video game developers,

have found success on modern video game platforms as well. Many of these rely heavily on

parody to lampoon the 8-bit video game era (*Retro City Rampage*, *Retro Game Challenge*),

satirize common video game genre tropes (*DLC Quest*, *Braid*) or hold the past up as idyllic in the

form of an homage (*Mighty Gunvolt*, *Battle Kid*). One of the most critically acclaimed and

commercially successful of these retro-inspired games is *Shovel Knight*, released on the

Nintendo Wii U, Nintendo 3DS and PC in 2014.[124] Unlike the aforementioned games, *Shovel*

Knight stands as an excellent example of NES era, Nintendo-inspired pastiche.

     Shovel Knight achieves its retro aesthetic and gameplay feel not by finding inspiration in

a single classic NES game, but from a variety of retro games and the nostalgic idea of what these

games represent. In *Shovel Knight*, players navigate a map with set, divergent paths which

resembles the over world in *Super Mario Bros. 3*. Each level on the map has a specific theme and

unique boss knight much in the same way the NES *Mega Man* series tasked players with

defeating robot masters. *Shovel Knight* traverses the 2D levels, which are created in the classic

NES platformer-style mode. The player defeats enemies by using a pogo attack inspired by the

NES *DuckTales* games and utilizes special abilities which often resemble the special weapons

found in the classic NES *Castlevania* games. Even the game's titular protagonist is a sly

reference to the inclination of NES developers to create games with hyper-literal titles and

absurd characters.

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[124] "Feat Unlocked: One Million Copies of Shovel Knight Sold", *Yachtclubgames.Com*, 2016, http://yachtclubgames.com/2016/04/feat-unlocked-one-million-copies-of-shovel-knight-sold.

Figure 5- Left: Shovel Knight's map. Right: Super Mario Bros. 3's map

Most importantly, Shovel Knight revels in the generic form of the NES game and exaggerates tropes to display what Richard Dyer defines as "generic form qua form" or, pastiche.[125] *Shovel Knight* fits well into Dyer's analysis of pastiche, genre and history as they relate spaghetti western films. Just as spaghetti westerns give us what Dyer calls a "sense of Europeans doing Americanness without quite inhabiting it," *Shovel Knight* creates a sense of NES-ness and nostalgic familiarity while remaining an original, new game.[126] By drawing from a variety of influences, *Shovel Knight* avoids stodgily remaining faithful to any source material. Unlike remakes or games on the Virtual Console, *Shovel Knight*'s ambiguous NES-ness highlights the best of the NES era while avoiding a backlash from players who discover their positive nostalgic remembrance does not match their modern play experience.

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[125] Dyer, 102.
[126] Dyer, 103.

Not every element of *Shovel Knight* is pastiche or completely beholden to the NES-era. Pastiche works in the game as a default template, while subtle iterations and tweaks update the game for contemporary audiences. *Shovel Knight* programmer David D'Angelo details how his team approached this process during the game' development.

Shovel Knight is a game that embraces the look of NES classics, but has some major differences when examined closely. When setting out to develop the game's aesthetic and play style, we at Yacht Club Games had a few goals in mind. Instead of emulating the NES exactly, we would create a rose-tinted view of an 8-bit game. What if development for the NES never stopped? How would an 8-bit game feel and play if developed today? We imagined the gameplay would benefit from modern design lessons, and the tech would receive subtle but substantial upgrades.[127]

The differences which make *Shovel Knight* impossible to play on the NES while still feeling like an NES game are subtle. Without detailed technical knowledge of the NES system's capabilities as a platform and a keen eye for spotting the discrepancies, it's likely the "substantial upgrades" D'Angelo references go unnoticed by some players. Unlike *NSMB*, *NES Remix* and *Super Mario Maker*, *Shovel Knight* is not instantly recognizable as a modern game. *Shovel Knight* does not emulate an NES-developed game to the letter and instead presents itself as the idea of what NES games are to nostalgic players. By drawing inspiration from a variety of NES-era sources, *Shovel Knight* can also potentially drum up interest in games that are actually from

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[127] David D'Angelo, "Breaking The NES For Shovel Knight", *Gamasutra.Com*, 2014, http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/DavidDAngelo/20140625/219383/Breaking_the_NES_for_Shovel_Knight.php.

the NES-era. This possibility is not lost on Nintendo, who published the independent title in Japan and supported the game's physical retail release.[128] *Shovel Knight* was eventually ported to Sony and Microsoft platforms as well, which increases the likelihood of players with less modern exposure to the Nintendo brand to be exposed NES-era style game content.

Nintendo's support of *Shovel Knight* is one small cog in a much larger ecosystem designed to capitalize on nostalgia for Nintendo's past. By reviving, remixing, reimagining and remaking classic Nintendo titles, the company maximizes the value of their intellectual property through the commodification of player nostalgia. Games developed by Nintendo emphasize closing a production-consumption loop, which uses nostalgia and accessibility to draw new and old players towards games which encourage subsequent purchases and brand exposure. By supporting titles third-party games which are influenced by Nintendo, the company reaches beyond their own platforms to attract new players who are hooked by the generic nostalgia for the bygone NES-era generated by retro game pastiche.

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[128] "Shovel Knight In Japan!", *Yachtclubgames.Com*, 2016, http://yachtclubgames.com/2016/03/shovel-knight-in-japan.

Chapter 4
Conclusion

This thesis explores Nintendo's past and present games and marketing and links them to the broader trend of the commodification of nostalgia. The use of nostalgia by Nintendo is a key component of the company's brand and helps to fuel fandom and a compulsive drive to recapture the past. By making a significant investment in cultivating a generation of loyal fans and establishing the Nintendo name as something synonymous with the term video game, Nintendo positioned themselves to later capitalize on consumer nostalgia. The commodification of fan nostalgia is evident across multiple platforms, from the development of the Virtual Console digital game storefront to the use of pastiche and remediation in multi-generation, Nintendo developed franchises.

One of the points I wanted to emphasize throughout this project was Nintendo's keen awareness of their own unique position in video game history and the contemporary game industry. Nintendo is often viewed as a family-friendly company which creates video games specifically for children. While Nintendo's image certainly remains family-friendly, my analysis of their games, digital distribution storefront and marketing suggests the company is heavily invested in courting new and old players simultaneously. Additionally, Nintendo frequently places their heritage front and center and creates tightly controlled spaces to guide fan discourse and continue to shape the Nintendo legacy on their own terms. The wide array of elements which contribute to nostalgia and make it ripe for commodification supports my argument that the relationship between players and nostalgia texts extends beyond simply gameplay.

As discussed in chapter two, Nintendo used their early success in the 1980s to develop a series of shrewd business tactics to make their intellectual property a ubiquitous presence in

American homes and popular culture. Nintendo used their success to create a generation of deeply loyal, young fans colloquially referred to as the Nintendo Generation or Nintendo Kids, and allowed the company close the loop between consumption and production by creating a sense of community and support, while leveraging fan investment to collect valuable market and demographic data. As this intensely loyal fanbase matured into adulthood, Nintendo launched the Virtual Console to reconnect with older players and provide the opportunity for them to once again engage with the games they enjoyed as children in a simple way on a modern platform.

Nintendo rekindled the concept of a Nintendo Kid community by creating the MiiVerse; a game-specific suite of integrated discussion forums which encourages fans to share both strategy and fond memories in a heavily moderated environment. For Virtual Console games, the MiiVerse is often a site dominated by nostalgic reminiscence and anecdotes. Both the Virtual Console and the MiiVerse exemplify Nintendo's commitment to fostering positive discourse between nostalgic players and the company's desire to present retro games in a carefully curated, ahistorical way. By selectively placing hundreds of retro games on the Virtual Console (many of which were not developed by Nintendo or ever appeared on Nintendo hardware previously), Nintendo is able to enhance their appeal to nostalgic players while simultaneously incorporating new retro games into the broader Nintendo universe.

Nintendo also uses their retro-inspired titles to embed advertisements for other games. This practice further supports the argument that Nintendo uses player nostalgia in tandem with new content to appeal to a wider audience. Embedded advertisements are a core feature of *Amiibo Tap*, wherein players are given short timed demos of classic Nintendo games and are then prompted to purchase the full game from the Virtual Console. *Amiibo Tap* serves as an introduction for young players to unfamiliar, older games and a brief taste of nostalgic gameplay

for older players. Like *Amiibo Tap* the *NES Remix* series integrates Virtual Console game advertisements directly into gameplay as well. At the same time, *NES Remix* teaches younger players the basics of several classic NES games through slowly escalating, tutorial-like challenges. For older players, the remix levels in *NES Remix* provide enhanced challenge and new ways to play retro titles by altering familiar gameplay elements and aesthetics.

Aside from their use of classic retro games to commodify player nostalgia, Nintendo also incorporates elements of pastiche and nostalgic fan labor into their modern game franchises. Nintendo has the benefit of large roster of recognizable characters and games, which have been updated and iterated upon for decades. As such, the company carefully balances the unfamiliar elements in new games with recognizable audio, visual and gameplay cues. The language used in marketing materials, and carried over into fan and critical discourse, generally praise this approach. Games in franchises like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Super Mario Bros* promise all of the modern amenities and state-of-the-art graphics found on contemporary game consoles but without disrupting too many of the comfortable and familiar elements found in the franchises. The implication here is that, for Nintendo, its games are in a constant state of reassessment and change. This is particularly true in the company's high-definition remakes of older titles, which explicitly are marketed as upgraded versions of universally beloved games.

Nintendo uses their history, popularity and familiar iconography to create (in theory) an endless supply of nostalgic gameplay. This is evident in *Super Mario Maker* where the player-community builds and uploads their own *Super Mario Bros.* levels. Aside from utilizing nostalgic fan labor, Nintendo pastiche often arises in the form of Nintendo-like games created by other developers. These titles, which are inspired by classic NES-era graphics, sound and gameplay, feature common retro game tropes specifically to hail retro game fans. These NES-

like games are still developed for modern consoles and with the added knowledge of the flaws and technical limitations of the games they are influenced by. Nintendo-like games frequently do not feel like relics plucked from the past, but instead present an idealized representation of the 8-bit era which Nintendo flourished in.

There is plenty of discussion to be had on the topic of commodified nostalgia in the video game industry and the use of retro-pastiche in modern games. The purpose of this project, however, was to specifically focus on Nintendo and their unique, influential position as one of the oldest and most successful video game console manufacturers. Nintendo has carved out a singular space in the industry with a large stable of recognizable characters and a commitment to manufacturing their own hardware. Nintendo's tight control over their intellectual property and ongoing interest in their own heritage, combined with an enthusiastic fanbase, provides an excellent subject for studying how a company capitalizes on fan nostalgia over time.

Beyond Nintendo, the market for video game nostalgia continues to grow at a steady pace. Nintendo's present-day competition has integrated their own digital storefronts specifically focused on retro video games. Sony, in particular, has taken steps to integrate a PlayStation Classics section into their online store, which provides access to dozens of games released originally on their PlayStation and PlayStation 2 consoles. Other third-party developers have also contributed to an Arcade Archives section on the PlayStation store which features a plethora of titles from the 1980s and '90s. In 2016, Sega, once Nintendo's chief competitor in the home video game console market, created their own virtual hub designed to integrate with downloadable PC versions of several classic games. Once installed, the hub acts as a launch

screen for Sega's retro games and is designed to mimic the look of 1980s bedroom, complete with a virtual simulation of a CRT television.[129]

Outside of video games, the use of commodified nostalgia in the broader realm of popular media and culture is highly visible and, in many ways, parallels Nintendo's own efforts to leverage their valuable intellectual property. As discussed in Chapter 1, the ability not only to long for, but to engage with media that provoke feelings of nostalgia has grown significantly in the last decade. In the past, old toys, films, music and television shows were often inaccessible and limited to the realm of nostalgic memories. With the growth of digital streaming services, online storefronts, and diverse online fan communities, objects of nostalgic desire are no longer constrained to just these memories. Individuals with enough disposable income and internet access can now find a massive amount of past media to satiate their nostalgic desires and other fans to share their memories with.

The practice of rebooting and revitalizing media franchises from the past also continues to grow. Just as Nintendo remains dedicated to finding new ways to present their classic franchises from their golden era to now, younger players, many popular films and TV shows from the 1980s and 90s have likewise been resurrected. In 2016 alone, films in the *Ghostbusters*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Star Wars* and *Independence Day* franchises all received theatrical releases. Meanwhile, Netflix dedicated a significant portion of their original programming to resurrecting beloved television series like *Degrassi*, *Full House* and *Gilmore Girls* complete with original cast members and not-so-subtle references to the series' respective

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[129] "Get Ready To Load The SEGA Mega Drive Classics Hub". 2016. *SEGA*. http://www.sega.co.uk/news/sega-mega-drive-classics-hub.

pasts. Netflix also found success in utilizing 80s pastiche in the show *Stranger Things* in the

same way Yacht Club Games utilized retro video game pastiche in *Shovel Knight*, combining

period-appropriate aesthetics with distinctly modern sensibilities. Forbes magazine has gone so

far as to declare 2016 "the year we hit peak nostalgia."[130] Whether or not that is true remains to

be seen, but it is undeniable that nostalgia-related media is steadily growing segment of popular

culture which deserves additional critical analysis.

Aside from narrowing my scope to focus only on Nintendo, I also did not address the

cultivation and commodification of nostalgia by Nintendo in countries outside of the United

States. Each territory has their own unique relationship with the Nintendo brand and, as a result,

Nintendo's strategy with the Virtual Console, in particular, differs significantly based on region.

While Nintendo flourished in Japan and the U.S. during the NES-era, they faced stiff

competition in Europe from the wildly popular Sega Master System and a strong personal

computer market.[131] In essence, there simply was not enough time or room to explore this topic

at length. An analysis of Nintendo's regional strategies for capitalizing on player nostalgia on a

global scale is a topic worthy of its own study.

I also analyzed several more texts over the course of my research which I did not discuss.

I limited my study to a short list of games and franchises which I felt were emblematic of the

topics discussed. I address games which incorporate Virtual Console content directly (*NES

Remix, Amiibo Tap*) or stand as tent pole franchises in the Nintendo universe (*The Legend of

Zelda, Super Mario Bros.*), in order to keep the scope of the project reasonable and focused. It is

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[130] Dani Di Placido, " 2016: The Year We Hit Peak Nostalgia", Forbes.Com, 2016,
http://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2016/12/30/2016-the-year-of-nostalgia.
[131] Tristan Donovan, *Replay*, (East Sussex, England: Yellow Ant, 2010): 174-175.

worth noting that Nintendo does not take a one-size-fits all approach to tapping into player nostalgia for their games. Certain celebrated games, like, for instance, the *Kirby* franchise are more tightly controlled and lean heavily on pastiche. Other franchises, such as *Metroid* and *Star Fox* are now developed outside of Nintendo and routinely alter their visual style, core mechanics and tone significantly game-to-game. Once again, a comparison of all of Nintendo's long-running, active franchises would be a massive undertaking worthy of consideration in future research.

Finally, it's worth noting that Nintendo's strategy for commodifying nostalgia is constantly evolving. While I have positioned the launch of the Virtual Console as a pivotal point where Nintendo began to actively court fans through the use of nostalgia, it appears that Nintendo may be undergoing another important transition today. Nintendo's recent foray into the mobile game space with the augmented reality title, *Pokemon GO!* and the pastiche-heavy *Super Mario Run* provide an insightful look at how Nintendo nostalgia functions outside of an official Nintendo platform. The release of the popular plug-in-and-play NES Classic, which provides fans with an easy-to-use, high-definition version of mini-NES pre-programmed with 30 classic games, demonstrates that even after more than a decade of Virtual Console releases, high-definition remakes and retro remixes, the desire to engage with Nintendo nostalgia remains as strong as ever.

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