

# How Video Game History Shows Us Why Video Game Nostalgia Is So Important Now

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## Introduction

We are all nostalgic about one thing or another and nowadays, many of us are nostalgic about the video games they played as children or teenagers.

No reason is necessary to be a nostalgic player. But some reasons can be easily identified. The first one is a common temporal effect: we often to look back to 20 years ago. It can explain why we play games from the eighties now (for example thanks to the *Namco Museum* compilations). It also can explain why the video game nostalgia mainly began in the nineties, since the first popular video games were released in the seventies (for example: *Space Invaders*, 1978, see figure 1). Another reason is that video games have come to our pockets in the nineties thanks to the handheld consoles and now thanks to cell phones. This kind of hardware is not powerful enough for current video games. So, publishers have converted old games for handheld consoles and cell phones. For example, *Namco Museum* can be played on the Nintendo Game Boy Advance and we can find a lot of converted Super Nintendo games on this handheld console. We also have to take into consideration the numerous emulators that allow the players to play old games on recent computers. This way of playing has been more and more popular since the Internet is widely used to exchange game files. MAME (Salmoria, 2002), for example, allows us to play thousands of arcade video games on a recent computer. Hence, emulation is one more opportunity for the players to express their nostalgia although it raises numerous legal problems (Pettus, 2000; Conley *et al.*, 2004).

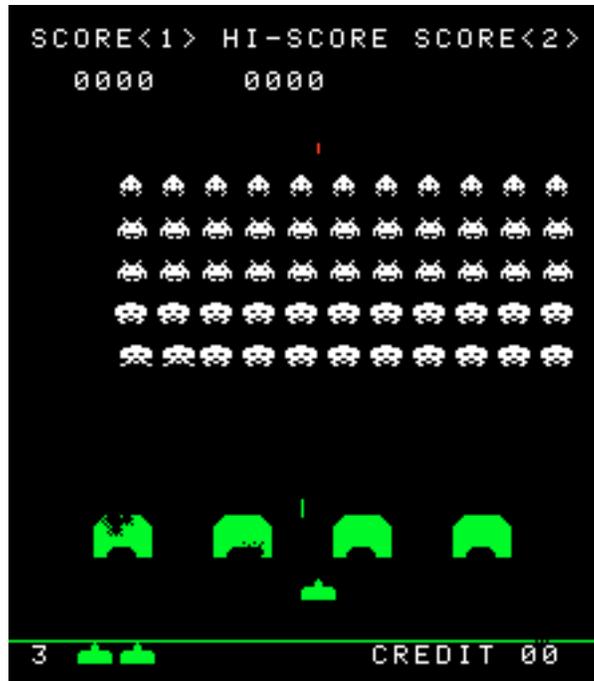


Figure 1: *Space Invaders* (1978).

But the video game nostalgia goes further than compilations, game conversions, and emulation. Publishers go further than software: they offer us hardware. The Namco 5-in-1 Arcade Classics (also known as Lansay Tivi Pad) is a good example of that. It is a joystick that can be directly plugged to your television. It contains several video games from the early eighties, including the famous *Pac-Man* (1980). It is not the first of the kind, but it is one of the first of the current nostalgia wave and it is widely distributed. The Namco 5-in-1 Arcade Classics is more than games, more than software: it is a joystick, it is hardware. Thus, the video game nostalgia leaves the virtual world of video games and comes into the real world: the joystick looks like the joystick of an arcade cabinet and, on the sides of the joystick, there are game art stickers as we can find on the sides of an arcade cabinet. It means that it is more than nostalgia about games: it is nostalgia about the video game culture. Games are not enough: we need hardware and cultural elements. Of course, it comes with standard nostalgia objects, such as tee shirts, mugs, figurines, books (Sellers, 2001; Forster, 2005), and so on. One conclusion could be that the video game industry is now old enough to be considered as a cultural form (Esposito, 2004) and old enough to generate nostalgia like other big industries.

Apart from the first reasons that we have just presented, we can wonder what the players like when they play old video games. We will answer this question by identifying four periods in the video game history. For each period, we will see some reasons to like the games of this time. Then, we will explain how the major changes of the last period makes many players prefer old video games.

## Periods

When we consider the history of video games (Kent, 2001; Kline *et al.*, 2003; Cario *et al.*, 2004), we can identify periods. It can be done following different ways: decades (seventies, eighties, etc.), console generations (8 bits, 16 bits, etc.), market variations, and so on. So, the number of periods can be different from one author to the other. The periods which we present here focus on game

generations. This is a possible set of periods that can be used to explain video game nostalgia. Our starting point is the first commercial game: *Computer Space* (1971), which is the arcade version (see figure 2) of *Spacewar!* (1962).

Here are the four periods we can identify. From 1971 to 1978: pioneers' success (first years). From 1978 to 1983: genre development (also known as golden age). From 1983 to 1994: strong ideas (less technological limits). From 1994 to nowadays: recent games (CD-ROM, 3D, PlayStation, PC, big productions, less diversity, online games).



Figure 2: *Computer Space* (1971) arcade cabinet presented at the Game On 2004 exhibition in Lille (France).

## First Years

From the pioneers' success period (1971-1978), we learn what an arcade video game is. For example, *Pong* (1972, see figure 3) shows us that a very simple game could be fun only with minimalist graphics, minimalist sounds, and easy to understand commands. In this kind of game, we can appreciate the raw aspect: the direct access to the game. We can also appreciate to play historical games as we like to watch prehistoric paintings. It can be a great feeling.



Figure 3: *Pong* (1972) arcade cabinet presented at the Game On 2004 exhibition in Lille (France).

## Genre Development

From the genre development period (1978-1983), we learn how diversified the video games can be (sports, adventure, fighting, etc.). The genre list can be different from one author to another: from three genres (action, adventure, and simulation) to dozens of them. For example, Mark J. P. Wolf (Wolf, 2001) identifies 41 genres (that sometimes go beyond games, for example with diagnostic cartridges): abstract, adaptation, adventure, artificial life, board games, capturing, card games, catching, collecting, combat, demo, diagnostic, dodging, driving, educational, escape, fighting, flying, gambling, interactive movie, management simulation, maze, obstacle course, pencil-and-paper games, pinball, platform, programming games, puzzle, quiz, racing, rhythm and dance, role-playing, shoot'em up, simulation, sports, strategy, table-top games, target, text adventure, training simulation, and utility.

Now, some examples of the diversity of this period. *Adventure* (1980, adventure): your goal is “to rescue the Enchanted Chalice and place it inside the Golden Castle where it belongs” (from the manual of the game). *Defender* (1980, shoot'em up): your goal is to rescue humanoids and to shoot enemies. *Qix* (1981, abstract action, see figure 4): your goal is to fill a threshold percentage of the screen. *Pole Position* (1982, driving simulation): your goal is drive as fast as you possible.



Figure 4: *Qix* (1981).

It is interesting to note that a genre can be defined by a game (Chris Crawford, 2003). For example, *Doom* (1993) defines what a First Person Shooter is (even if it is not exactly the first one). Then, we can easily understand why some players like to play these first of a kind games (even if graphics and sounds are not wonderful): it is like being very close to the genre spirit, it is like coming back to roots.

### Strong Ideas

From the years between 1983 and 1994, we learn that strong ideas bring games to success. Strong ideas make games different from the others: original, innovative, revolutionary. This period allows the rise of these strong ideas thanks to more powerful hardware for better graphics and sounds. Playing these game makes us feel the great creativity of this period.

Here are some examples (see figure 5) of strong ideas (Esposito, 2001): new powerful ideas (*Tetris*, 1985), deep gameplays (*Bubble Bobble*, 1986; *Shinobi*, 1987), big enhancements of known ideas (*Arkanoid*, 1986; *R-Type*, 1987), genre crossings (*The Legend of Zelda*, 1986), innovative narrative elements (fights in *Battle Chess*, 1988), complex system simulations (*Sim City*, 1989), multiplayer fun (*Bomberman*, 1990; *Super Mario Kart*, 1992), leading unintelligent animals (*Lemmings*, 1990), simple and strong ideas (*Pang*, 1990).



Figure 5: some video games based on strong ideas (*Tetris*, 1985; *Bubble Bobble*, 1986; *Shinobi*, 1987; *Arkanoid*, 1986; *R-Type*, 1987; *The Legend of Zelda*, 1986; *Battle Chess*, 1988; *Sim City*, 1989; *Bomberman*, 1990; *Super Mario Kart*, 1992; *Lemmings*, 1990; *Pang*, 1990).

The hardware of this period also allows the rise of beautiful games, for example (see figure 6): *Prince of Persia* (1990), *Xenon 2* (1990), *Sonic the Hedgehog* (1991), and *Street Fighter II* (1991).



Figure 6: some beautiful video games (*Prince of Persia*, 1990; *Xenon 2*, 1990; *Sonic the Hedgehog*, 1991; *Street Fighter II*, 1991).

## Recent Games

Finally, from recent games (1994-now), we learn about the future of video games. Indeed, we can see the current period as a period of transition from strong ideas to the next period. The current period can be understood as some years that are necessary to set a technological context: display (3D), storage (CD-ROM and DVD-ROM), network (Internet).

These technologies came with popular hardware such as the Sony PlayStation console and the PC computers. And the size of the hardware market changed the video game market. During this period, publishers focused on big productions, sometimes by integrating several gameplays in a single game. The Le Diberder brothers analyses this evolution like that:

Wargames, skill games, racing games, and even fighting games and shoot'em up games will be simple stages in simulators that will combine them.

(Le Diberder, 1998, freely translated from French)

Today, this technological context is set. Especially, we can notice that all 2006 consoles are ready for online games (this is not an optional feature). It means that the next decade will probably be an exciting period. Firstly, because the video game will benefit from the current technological context. Secondly, because the publishers will probably take into account lessons from the current video game nostalgia. Recent innovative gameplays show that. Game designers come back to strong ideas

by taking advantage of new hardware, for example a camera for *Eye Toy: Play* (2003) on the Sony PlayStation 2 console and the second screen of the Nintendo DS for *Pac-Pix* (2005, see figure 7).



Figure 7: *Pac-Pix* (2005).

Regarding the current period (1994-now), we can imagine that, around 2015, the video game nostalgia will focus on games of this period. The players will probably like to play games related to technological innovations. Here are some examples. The first cell shading games: *Fear Effect* (2000) and *Jet Set Radio* (2000, also known as *Jet Grind Radio*, see figure 8). The first CD-ROM games, for example: *Myst* (1994). The first online game for the first natively online console (Sega Dreamcast): *ChuChu Rocket!* (2001).



Figure 8: *Jet Set Radio* (2000, also known as *Jet Grind Radio*).

## Nostalgia

As we have just seen, the current period brought major changes. These changes can explain why the video game nostalgia is so important now.

As the Le Diberder brothers said, current big productions provide less diversity. Then, players can look towards the video games of the game development period. Another common observation is that recent video games are easier than older ones. Indeed, recent games can usually be finished easily using backups. Then, players can look to the video games of the strong idea period to face harder challenges. They also would like to play the games of this period if they think that recent games are not original enough. A lot of strong ideas were found before 1994. After that, it has been more difficult to find this kind of ideas.

Playing games on PC computers is not always easy: some installation problems can occur. Then, players can look towards the video games of the previous periods which are easier to access. Besides, CD-ROM and DVD-ROM games generally came with cut-scenes, more than before. Indeed, publishers want to take advantage of these media and often offer cut-scenes which are sometimes very long. So, players who prefer to be active (instead of being passive in front of cut-scenes) can also look to the video games of previous periods.

One of the major changes of the last period is 3D. 3D is a great technology to enhance immersion in game worlds, but it also comes with annoying problems. Firstly: camera problems. Frequently, the camera does not offer us the best viewpoint in some kinds of 3D video games. This is why a lot of games offer commands to manipulate the camera. So, the players who do not want to manage camera problems can look to 2D games. Secondly: harder exploration. When some objects hide other ones, exploration of a 3D room for example can be longer than the exploration of this room using a 2D view. This is one of the pleasures of 3D games, but it can also be considered as a waste of time. We can also notice that a map is often provided in 3D games. Then, we could say that, in these cases, 3D is not enough: an additional 2D view is necessary to explore the game world comfortably. Thirdly: no more pixel art. In 2D games, each view is completely intentional. Each

screen is a total creation. In some cases, an artist designed the color of each pixel. Year after year, pixel art in video games has become more and more mastered. Then, it has made the characters and the game worlds more and more engaging. We have already given examples of beautiful games in our strong idea section. Indeed, this period contains a lot of beautiful 2D video games. But 2D games did not stop with the end of this period. Some kinds of video games still propose 2D games today, especially: shoot'em up games (for example: *DoDonPachi*, 1996; *ESP Galuda*, 2004) and beat'em up games (for example: the *King of Fighters* serie, see figure 9). And of course, we can still find a lot of 2D games on the Web or on small devices such as cell phones. Nevertheless, the players who like the efficiency and the beauty of 2D graphics can enjoy games of the strong idea period.



Figure 9: *The King of Fighters '99: Millennium Battle* (1999).

## Conclusion

We saw that, beyond the common reasons for nostalgia, each period of the video game history give us additional reasons to be a nostalgic player. Then, a player who likes arcade games, diversity, strong ideas, and 2D games, will obviously play old video games. This player will be a retro gamer.

These remarks give us guidelines for the next period which starts, this is our feeling, with 2006 consoles: easy access to the games (easy to install if necessary, fast to launch), easy access to the game worlds (not too long cut-scenes, well managed cameras), strong ideas by taking advantage of the new innovative hardware, strong artistic value, strong gameplay identity.

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