Lost Again: Refractive Nostalgia and Video Games

Richy Srirachanikorn

Concordia University, Canada

Abstract

In tackling chronophobia, which Svetlana Boym (2001) defines as the anxiety of deciding how to use our time meaningfully as it depletes, video games become purposeful spaces where we can revisit the things we have lost, or what we anticipate will be lost with time. As such, video games are ideal tools that help us retreat from chronophobia. However, following Boym, I argue that this "does not help us to deal with the future" (2001, p. 351). To revisit or experience what is already "lost" with time through games, players must lose more time and resources in the present to pursue it. This circular use of nostalgia may leave players with chronophobia and in a state of feeling "lost again." This paper presents three case studies where nostalgic players have "found" something generative for their present and future, rather than feeling "lost again." This original solution to chronophobia combines Boym's work, game studies, and nostalgia research, amounting to my contribution of what I call "refractive nostalgia."

Keywords

Nostalgia; Boym; chronophobia; *Roblox Titanic*; *Club Penguin*; *Minecraft*.

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> The disease of this millennium will be called chronophobia or speedomania, and its treatments will be embarrassingly old-fashioned. Contemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about the vanishing present.
>
> —Svetlana Boym (2001, p. 351)

Introduction

COVID-19 is not the only disease of this millennium. Arguably, it is also chronophobia. In her foundational book, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym states that after realizing that time is depleting, we try to "conquer and spatialize time" (p. 49) by seeking out pre-made pasts or futures, what she calls "restorative nostalgia." Crucially, this is powered by chronophobia, the anxiety of not being able to use one's time meaningfully as it depletes. During the lockdowns, living every day at home led people to reminisce about what had been lost to time, pushing one to engage in "reflective nostalgia" (Boym, 2001, p. 50). Katharina Niemeyer (2016) notes that "even if time passes the same way from a physicist's point of view, some of us no longer have the patience to let our experiences . . . [naturally form into] what we once called memories" (p. 28). As such, we also turned to restorative nostalgia through material products that embody the culturally recognizable features of a past we once experienced or a future we hope to grasp.

Reflective nostalgia is a yearning for something personal that has been lost to time, such as one's childhood, while restorative nostalgia is a socially defined loss of something collective, such as a bygone era or "the good old days." The key here is that the time spent reminiscing or dwelling on the past is compounded by chronophobia, which reminds individuals that they are wasting valuable time in the present. To revisit or experience what is already "lost" with time through games, players must lose more time and resources in the present to pursue it. This circular use of nostalgia may leave players with chronophobia and in a state of feeling "lost again." This feeling has arguably led to a nostalgia that "was and is a business" (Niemeyer, 2016, p. 29), manifesting itself as nostalgic artifacts sold by the entertainment industry (Boym, 2007), pouted as recycled political promises to make something great again, and for this paper, as video games that can supposedly bring back the past. As such, Boym (2001) posits that nostalgia will continue to be a human predicament because we are not actually yearning for the "past for the way it was, but for the way it could have been" (p. 351).

Yet, these pursuits do not actually give us back what has been lost to time. Our personal past-the-way-it-was is lost forever, but a commercially or a collectively defined past is preserved as a past that-could-have-been; it lives forever in our collective imaginary. Thus, commercial nostalgia fails to deal with chronophobia (Boym, 2001) or prepare us for the incoming losses of the future (Boym, 2007). We

remain feeling "lost again", constantly losing our money, time, and commitment in the present moment—when we dwell in nostalgia—to retrieve a past that never existed to begin with.

Given a steady rise of research in psychology and neighbouring disciplines looking into the relationship between video games and nostalgia (e.g., Sloan, 2016; Makai, 2018; Wulf et al., 2020), this paper draws on Boym's (2001, 2007) original warning that nostalgia is "never literal, but lateral" (Boym, 2001, p. 354). To be lateral in Boym's case is to acknowledge that nostalgia is not a literal object or location that we can hold, measure, or bring back. Commercial and political nostalgic reconstructions are based on a socially defined present or a future made "to resemble personal aspirations" for retrieving what has been or will be lost to time (Boym, 2001, p. 354). As such, the pursuit of nostalgia with literal objects does not take us anywhere in time, as we are only travelling laterally or within the present. Nostalgia, for Boym, is "not a property of the object itself but a result of an interaction between subjects and objects" (2001, p. 354) within our reach; nostalgia is, in this sense, lateral. So, if our pursuit and possession of literal nostalgia can never provide us with the exact thing that was lost, but only with imitations of it, then what have we really gained other than more yearning? Hence, a lateral use of nostalgia does not free us from feeling what I have defined as being "lost again."

Accordingly, the lateral uses of (1) personal, (2) social, and (3) "creative nostalgia" (Boym, 2001, p. 351) will be discussed, leading to what I call "refractive nostalgia." First, I will explore cases where restorative and reflective nostalgia feature in video games. Boym's (2001) parting gift of creative nostalgia will be briefly touched upon as I introduce refractive nostalgia as a response to the limitations of restorative and reflective approaches to chronophobia. At the heart of this paper is the following question: How can we use video games to engage with feelings of nostalgia for what has been lost to the past, and how can we act on these feelings to prevent such losses in the future? I will conclude that refractive nostalgia must retain the personal, social, and creative uses of nostalgia long enough for individuals to actualize their future in "the way it could have been" (Boym, 2001, p. 351).

Buying Time

Tim Wulf et al. (2018) call the video game medium a "digital time machine" (p. 62) for over three generations of players. While Boym (2001) argues that technologies may never attain what we truly desire because the root of nostalgia is to get rid of chronophobia, video games are nonetheless enthusiastically used to retrieve things that are forever lost to time. With that in mind, I argue that the nostalgic potential of video games allows for various ways of dealing with or delaying chronophobia, including the literal purchase of in-game time.

Niemeyer (2016) has coined the term "digital nostalgia," which describes a yearning beyond the media content or the machine that makes this form of nostalgia possible. It is a "longing for the human relations it created but also their devices, techniques and related user rituals" (Niemeyer, 2016, p. 29). Yet, the retrieving of things that have been lost to time is always underscored by more losses than gains. The cost of committing to fixing an old game console or finding an emulator for one's retrogames can be seen as a "renewed interest [that] represents a devolution in gaming" (Wulf et al., 2018, p. 61) because it is a waste of time. Psychological research conducted by Wulf and Rieger (2018) suggests that it is not the resurfacing of forgotten media that triggers nostalgia. Instead, nostalgia arises from an active effort to recall the memories that accumulated over a lifetime of association with such media. Given this logic, a passion project or an occupation involving old or forgotten media can lead to nostalgia because of the memories and relationships it evokes, rather than the fact that it is historically old (Niemeyer, 2016). By presently engaging—or committing years or decades—with things that are considered "lost", what can we hope to "find"?

During the pandemic, nostalgic media use outperformed other hedonic media (Wulf et al., 2022). Participants who reported feeling stressed engaged with media that gravitated towards gratification and pleasure (hedonism), while anxious participants tended to a "reflective media usage", which Wulf et al. (2022) identified as eudaimonic (p. 2). In their previous work, Wulf et al. (2018) described eudaimonic media as "entertaining because of their potential to evoke critical thoughts and to question people's worldview, leaving the audience in a moved or pensive state" (p. 64). The case for nostalgic media use in an eudaimonic manner is justified if we are reminded that "one is nostalgic not for the past for the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been" (Boym, 2001, p. 351). Nostalgic reflection with eudaimonic media ensures that nostalgia is not a passive feeling of the past, but an active engagement with it (Wulf et al. 2018). One consequence of chronophobia is the reliance on collective nostalgia, which allows individuals who have no personal history with an object—but who have already committed and "lost" time trying to retrieve it in the present—to gain something out of the pursuit. One is "lost again," but something needs to be found or brought back into the present. As such, the chronophobic individual redefines the pursuit for what is lost as something that is socially recognized. This is the case for individuals who no longer play video games but encounter them in the present. Wulf et al. (2018) describe how former players feel a sense of nostalgia by recalling their gaming experiences without having to engage in the act of play. For people who did not grow up playing games, they may also feel a sense of nostalgia when coming across media revivals of old game franchises that they never directly engaged with as a child. By engaging in a nostalgia of an object that belongs to a socially nostalgic

past, individuals may "find" themselves validated as "nostalgic gamers" who used that time meaningfully, or as someone who was "there" when the now-nostalgic object originated.

If we shift the discussion from the past that could be to the one that exactly was, we can discuss some video games that employ restorative nostalgia. Games like *Assassin's Creed Unity* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward & Sledgehammer Games, 2011), and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar North, 2002) are set in mostly accurate historical spaces. The French Revolution, a war campaign against Russian forces in modern-day France, and Miami in the 1980s are all restored, respectively. Yet, for Boym (2001, 2007), a primary goal of nostalgia is not to attain what has been lost, but making what remains meaningful.

To meet such demands, Makai (2018) argues that video games are "mediators of cultural history . . . [and] because they create virtual worlds, they can be used to recreate cities of the past" (p. 11). For instance, after the fire incident at Notre-Dame de Paris, there was hope that the digital counterpart would aid in its restoration (D'Mello, 2019). Unfortunately, this failed because the cathedral in *Assassin's Creed Unity* was not built "for the way it was, but for . . . the way it could have been" (Boym, 2001, p. 351). Players were not given the historically exact cathedral, but a reimagined and interactive version to rope, rappel, and climb around (de Rochefort, 2021). When restorative nostalgia is based on national memory, it becomes difficult to re-experience it in the way the individual wishes it could be (Boym, 2001, pp. 42–45). For instance, the flags of the French Revolution in *Assassin's Creed Unity*, the Eifel Tower in *Modern Warfare 3*, and the iconic beachfront properties of *Vice City* are placed as no-collision assets that cannot be modified by players because they are pasts that are predefined in the current and all future playthroughs—they are definitive. French players who want to take their patriotism for France into the past through *Assassin's Creed Unity* or into the future French war through *Modern Warfare 3* can never actualize it. No matter how hard they try, they cannot play as the French nor save the Eifel Tower from falling. Nostalgia is there, but it cannot be altered because "the way it was," always has been and always will be (Boym, 2001, p. 351).

As a personal anecdote, I played *Roblox Titanic* (Roblox Corporation, 2006) on Roblox, an online webpage that hosts user-created games. I noted down key features of the game, such as the ability to alter time and space, which could reflect the experience of young players using Roblox as a digital time machine. I therefore played the game in search of its nostalgic potential, rather than playing it nostalgically. In the case of *Roblox Titanic,* it is unlikely that the majority of children playing this game will be reflectively nostalgic for the Titanic, as they were born a century after the sinking of the ship and they did not personally see, board, or lose anyone in the sinking. The game is thus experienced as a

“nostalgic remembering [that] is biased toward the positive aspects of the past and tends to disregard what has been negative” (Menke, 2017, p. 629). Our recollection of the Titanic is littered with collective memory through the movies, documentaries, and video games that facilitate this digital nostalgia. Social memory presents a past-that-could-have-been over the subjective experiences of those who lived it as a past-the-way-it-was. In the game, players are given about six real-time minutes to roam the ship before it starts to sink. The currency of the game is Risk Points, which increase every few seconds as the player gets closer to danger. With more points, the player can purchase in-game items that can prolong or alter gameplay to their satisfaction and benefit. If the player wishes to experience the Titanic as a first-class passenger, crew member, or the captain, they can only access the exclusive spaces and its affordances via microtransactions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Buying timed space in *Roblox Titanic*. Screenshot by the author.

Moreover, players who purchase a private server can determine the literal time it takes for the ship to sink, as well as the time of the day, the intensity of the sinking, and even the size of the iceberg (see Figure 2). This experience of the Titanic is no longer the past-that-was, but the past-that-could-have-been as players purchase the ability to control how time will be remembered based on how they choose to spend it. Interestingly, players can also “exchange time” by converting the time spent playing in real life into Risk Points (see Figure 3). The restorative model entices users with something that has been lost—the Titanic—only for them to get “lost again” in the ever-increasing commitment of time and money required to keep pursuing what has been lost and can never be found.

Figure 2. Modification of timed space in *Roblox Titanic*. Screenshot by the author.

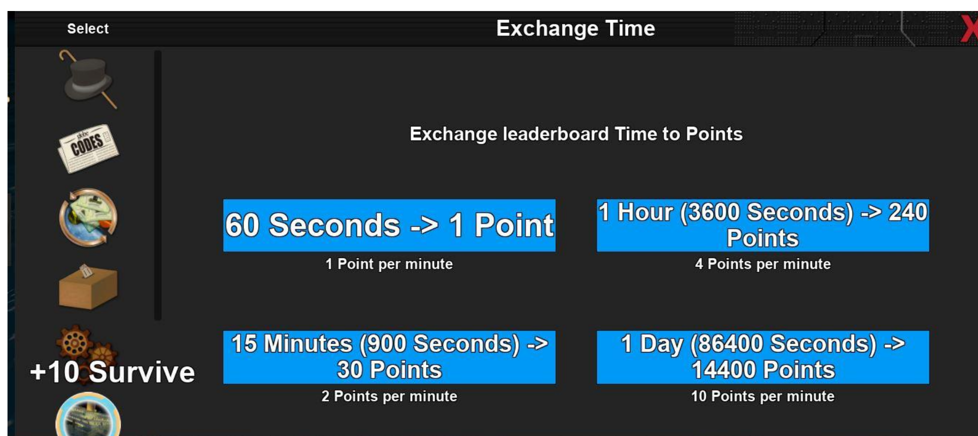

Figure 3. Exchanging time points for space in *Roblox Titanic*. Screenshot by the author.

In its goal to "conquer and spatialize time" (Boym, 2001, p. 49), restorative nostalgia has no future or past. It is a continuous present that exists as a false past or future by those who come to remember it—it is a past-perfect. Such a state is timeless because it is made to never age away, and it is forever "lost" because it is unattainable. Ultimately, nostalgia should not and cannot be concretized into things that are purchasable. When Boym (2001) speaks of restorative nostalgia, she calls it the "American way of dealing with the past" (p. 51), which Niemeyer (2016) sees as "nostalgia [that] was and is a business" (p. 29). As in the case of *Roblox Titanic*, spending more time ironically makes time count more.

Of course, restorative nostalgia may be sufficient for those who wish to sift through a preserved past and use its indisputable memory as a strengthening of collective memory. Yet, the nostalgia I am looking for is one that can combat chronophobia by using the past as told and felt by the player. How can generativity emerge if one is prevented from generating anything at all with it?

Reflective Space

It can be argued that reflective nostalgia acknowledges the distance of a person's from their wishes without having to mimic or lure them. It is all about loss. As such, the person experiencing reflective nostalgia is able to engage in "a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future" (Boym, 2001, p. 55). By using the common landmarks of memory, objects, or media to elevate the subjective account of a collectively defined nostalgia, "collective memory is seen as a playground, not as a graveyard of multiple individual recollections" (Boym, 2001, p. 54). In the case of the pandemic, Wulf et al. (2022) found that nostalgic media helped to distract individuals who used them from the less-than-ideal conditions of the present, while also acting as a "means to turn toward more positive experiences" (p. 263). Below, I offer an example of how a video game experience shifted from a restorative to a reflective form of nostalgia.

Anecdotally, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, a group of Thai senior students used *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011) to restore a version of the high school we attended. While creations like these are not uncommon, as entire countries and planets have been created in *Minecraft*, the game experience leaned away from a restorative to a reflective nostalgia. As I watched one of the seniors build the project, they stated that players entering the restored high school would be unable to place or break blocks, which meant that creating a path to reflective nostalgia would be difficult. It would have been understandable if the players, who were students during the day, had wanted to actualize their nostalgic desires for a high school experience the way it could-have-been. Regrettably, the builders of the *Minecraft* high school also prescribed their restorative nostalgia for the high school of the past-the-way-it-was. Nothing was to be changed, nothing was to be modified. Players logged off their Zoom high school after a whole day as students, only to log on to their *Minecraft* high school not as players, but to remain as students.

Fortunately, this is where the build shifted its model from a restorative to reflective nostalgia. Later in the creative process, the designers set up a Capture the Flag event. The student builders contacted a pastoral leader at the school, legitimizing the game experience into a real-life student event between six teams, or Houses. Students had been assigned to a specific House since the first day of school, so the *Minecraft* event had a personal, nostalgic connection. The competition was further legitimized as it was live-streamed (Pakkapol Lailert, 2021, 33:46-35:00) for members of the wider school community who could not play *Minecraft* but still wished to participate, as if they sat at the bleachers of the digital sports event. Nostalgia became reflective as it drew upon real, personal experiences of the past, rather than enforcing a restored version that could not be altered.

After a day of Zoom classes, home-bound students did not have to return to their *Minecraft* high school as students. On the contrary, they were hunters, defenders, and runners of the competition, while having the opportunity to teach and learn about each other, the school's geography, and what it meant personally for each player to feel and belong to that school. The nature of the game and the setting in which it took place would always remind them that they were students who were passionate about their House team. They could feel nostalgic for the past-that-was and the past-that-could-have-been, notably by being celebrated for the first time as House members who had never participated much in person. Conversely, this use of nostalgia may have been useful in combating chronophobia since students were able to modify the past by playing with it. This nostalgia is active and reflective because the way it is used reflects how we deal with time, place, and chronophobia: it stays personal.

The Social Potential of Nostalgia

Scholarship on video games and nostalgia predominantly cites the work of Wulf et al. (2018), who allude to the beneficial and prevalent effects of nostalgia on psychological well-being as video games and their players "mature together" (p. 60). However, within the "mixed affective state" (Wulf et al., 2018, p. 61) of nostalgia, individual emotions are not the only factors involved. External objects and circumstances, such as the role of old technology and the individual's point in life when using media to be nostalgic, are also important (Wulf et al., 2018). Although nostalgia is experienced subjectively, it involves a collective: the social world, historical events, and definitions agreed upon by social groups.

An example of the social nature of nostalgia comes from the work of Wulf et al. (2020), who asked participants to recall, without a media prompt, their memories of past and recent, solo and social video game experiences. Key findings highlight a strong link between recalling past experiences and feelings of nostalgia (Wulf et al., 2020). Importantly, whether video games were played alone or with others did not seem to influence the experience of nostalgia; the main factor was whether participants remembered receiving support from an online or real-world player (Wulf et al., 2020). The authors identified this experience as relatedness, which is tied to well-being. Thus, it is not necessarily the game that one feels nostalgic for, but it can also be the memory of feeling socially supported within a game. One may therefore feel nostalgic for a console or machine because of the social experiences it provided and continues to provide (Niemeyer, 2016).

If we take the example of branded media objects, the nostalgia we develop for them is also social. To start, Wulf and Rieger (2018) found that parasocial relationships with fictional characters from someone's childhood strongly predicted nostalgia. I would argue that fictional characters are not lone personal beings, but an entity built by and for an

intended collective memory. Marketing campaigns are responsible for the familiarity one develops with such characters during childhood through repeated media exposure. Years later, as adults, individuals may feel nostalgia for the character, with surviving collective sentiments maintained by dedicated communities and re-popularized by throwback campaigns. Social actors and life events that are also intertwined with the (re)exposure of this parasocial character amount to a nostalgia that is "built up over a lifetime . . . [as this] should not be reduced to entertainment effects" (Wulf et al., 2020, p. 181). In reality, nostalgia for an impersonal thing is nostalgia for things that are very much social.

According to Sloan (2016), "the problem of nostalgia" can be seen in "the fuzzy perception we have of the games we revere" (p. 42). This predicament is revealed by juxtaposing old and new "games-on-games" (p. 35) In his analysis, Sloan examines newer games whose mechanics and aesthetics are reminiscent of older titles. When the familiarity evoked by the newer title deviates from past game mechanics that remind the player of the game as it was, the player is faced with a "shattering of nostalgic selectiveness" (Sloan, 2016, p. 42). For instance, the platform design in *Braid* (Number None, 2008) pulls upon the iconic design of *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo R&D4, 1985). Yet, this familiar path will not bring its players back to the halcyon 8-bit world of the Mushroom Kingdom, but rather leaves them feeling lost in a vaguely familiar place. The feeling of nostalgia for the old game acts as a map of expectation that only gets players "lost again" in the newer title. To play *Braid* nostalgically is to enter a place that is more foreign than a return home to the familiar experience of *Super Mario Bros.* With this shattering, one realizes that their nostalgic remembering of the game past-that-was is actually a personal and socially skewed restoration of the game.

Revisiting the past from the present can constitute novelty, even with old memories and old consoles. If we have learned anything from Boym's (2001, 2007) work and Niemeyer's (2016) concept of "digital nostalgia," it is that "nostalgia is about the virtual reality of human consciousness that cannot be captured even by the most advanced technological gadgets" (Boym, 2001, p. 351). Yet, digital technologies are still pursued and politicized for their promise to actualize our nostalgic endeavours, despite needing to rely on our sociability to function (Childress, 2012). The argument here is that there are no inherently nostalgic things, only things that we make as such and become nostalgic for. Thus, a Boymian approach is relevant because it emphasizes a lateral rather than a literal use of nostalgia.

As Boym (2001) remarks, both reflective and restorative nostalgia "use the same triggers of memory . . . [but] tell different stories about it." (p. 49) Using Sloan's (2016) method, video games' "potential . . . to offer . . . form[s] of critical engagement with the past" (p. 36) can help to re-centre the story of why one chooses to personally engage in

nostalgia, despite an abundance of ready-made nostalgias that dictates what one should be nostalgic about (and perpetually chase by purchasing more restorations). In this sense, refractive nostalgia seeks to retain the balance between a personal, a social, and what Boym calls a "creative nostalgia" (2001, p. 351) whenever we pursue our nostalgic desires with machines and media (Niemeyer, 2016), or simply when we remember past experiences (Wulf et al., 2018). Boym's (2001) parting gift is a nostalgia of deep practicality:

> There are fewer and fewer venues for exploring nostalgia, which is compensated for with an overabundance of nostalgic readymades. The problem with prefabricated nostalgia is that it does not help us to deal with the future. Creative nostalgia reveals the fantasies of the age, and it is in those fantasies and potentialities that the future is born. One is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realize in the future. (p. 351)

Here, I am thinking of how the loss of time and money spent on a restorative nostalgia and the failure to preserve lost time through reflective nostalgia leave an individual "lost again." Drawing on Boym, I will show how a generative use of nostalgia's social potential, or refractive nostalgia, ensures that the path towards a future is "born" (p. 351) in the present and that something personal and social is "found." I will now illustrate refractive nostalgia through three games.

Refractive Nostalgia at Play

Once the most popular massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPG) for children, *Club Penguin* (Rocketsnail Games & Disney Interactive Studios, 2005) was a point-and-click Flash game available between 2005 and 2017. Its premise was as simple as its slogan: "to Waddle Around and Meet New Friends" (Club Penguin Wiki, 2021). Players could chat with each other, throw snowballs, and buy furniture, outfits, and pets known as "Puffles." These activities kept players engaged until the introduction of a new event, or party, which occurred each month. These parties ranged from the traditional Halloween, Christmas, and St. Patrick's Day to lore-specific events such as The Fair, Card Jitsu element releases, and storylines from the Penguin Secret Agency (PSA). To signal their participation in the world and history of *Club Penguin,* players rushed to collect party-exclusive items that were offered for a limited time during the month. Reflecting on this, Lance Priebe, one of the game's co-founders, admits: "A missed design in Club Penguin was that parties were our only narrative . . . If I was still designing stuff, allowing communities to launch their own parties would have been really valuable" (Atherton, 2023, pp. 83–84). Priebe continues: Players "essentially collected parties for their social value" (Atherton, 2023, p. 83); to collect items is to also collect the social

potential of being recognized as a "rare" penguin who attended the past, iconic parties that current players may feel nostalgic about.

As any *Club Penguin* player knows, accumulating in-game wealth in the form of coins was a laborious process. Mining for them with one's Puffles, constantly replaying mini-games, or inputting codes to earn more coins took considerable time. Even with membership, a paid subscription service that gave players access to exclusive spaces within each party and the collectibles they housed, the only way to own these collectibles was with coins. Given how rare these items were, new and old players can formulate what constitutes "good" *Club Penguin* nostalgia and who is given that status by the embodied memories they once collected and now wear (see Figure 4). In the absence of an option to buy coins through microtransactions, the time spent playing to collect them became the one true thing that players constantly "lost again." Reflecting further on this point, one may "suddenly realiz[e] how many hours millions of kids spent donating time" (Atherton, 2023, p. 86). Here, the collective understanding was that coins were valuable to members because they allowed them to buy items to personalize their spaces, as well as to non-members because they were proof of time spent on the game. This point is crucial to the social component of generative nostalgia.

Figure 4. Items embodying social definitions of *Club Penguin* nostalgia. Screenshot by Torres 126 (2017).

Applying *Club Penguin*'s example in the context of chronophobia, nostalgia can be reinterpreted from an aversion to the loss of time to a collective admiration by those who have endured it. Thus, to give away coins meant to give away the time that all the players had lost. What is "found" is a social commitment of nostalgic individuals against self-imposed (the decision to lose time by playing the game) or natural (the

excess of time, the loss of time while growing up, etc.) chronophobia. In essence, millions of children were collecting items to set up a "past perfect that one strives to realize in the future" (Boym, 2001, p. 45), where they can live with the status of a penguin who is rare or was "there" at *Club Penguin*'s beginnings. Nostalgia is thus lateral in the sense of situating oneself with the depletion of time (Boym, 2007), aided by a pursuit for a past-the-way-it-could-have-been through this social component of refractive nostalgia.

Arguably, the Coins for Change event in 2007 was the first time that *Club Penguin* players were able to give away some of what they had worked so hard to earn. Set up as an in-game donation system, the event displayed three charities (the World Wildlife Fund, the Elizabeth Glaser Paediatric AIDS Foundation, and Free the Children) to which players could donate virtual coins. Consequently, a portion of *Club Penguin*'s real-world revenue was donated based on how players donated in-game. This was not easy for the children: "Are you going to spend your coins on you or donate them to one of our three charity options?" (Atherton, 2023, p. 86). Is the act of giving away lost time (as embodied by the coins) an act of being "lost again" or is there something to be "found" in it? In-game and at school, I bonded with friends based on which charities they donated to, often trying to predict which one would "win" over the others. How often does a video game effectively pit middle schoolers against each other to debate the importance of building homes, protecting the environment, and providing medical help year-round? Personally, what I lost felt valuable because it did not exist as a reflective past (forever gone) or a restorative past that would determine how I would have remembered *Club Penguin* (forever perfect). This nostalgia is personal because I chose which charity to donate to, but more so because I personally chose to become "lost again" in *Club Penguin* every year. Such an assemblage between media, memory, and machine is Niemeyer's (2016) digital nostalgia, which is a "longing for the human relations it created but also their devices, techniques and related user rituals" (p. 29). Remarkably, the 2011 Coins for Change event revealed that $4.5 million[1] had been donated to charity organizations since 2007 (Club Penguin Archives, 2018). Players kept coming back every year to receive free items made available after each donation reached the Coin-o-meter milestone; yet, I argue that it is more than just free items what motivated a loyal and dedicated return to the annual event.

What started off as an MMORPG challenging itself to teach middle school players about humanitarianism, friendship, and online safety (Atherton, 2023) ended up succeeding in part because of the social relationships that formed in, around, and outside of its parties. Wohlwend and Kargin

[1] This information is provided in a video by one of *Club Penguin*'s co-founders (OfficialCPUK, 2012), but the currency (other than dollar) is unfortunately not mentioned.

(2013) similarly note how children who played *Club Penguin* in an afterschool computer class used the interactions in and out of the game to build new or strengthen existing friendships by teaching classmates watching or playing next to them. In my experience, Coins for Change allowed me to actively pursue a form of nostalgia for a better future—a rare penguin showing off the party items linked to donations made years in the future. More importantly, it gave me the opportunity to live alongside that better future—experiencing the same timeline as the people who received the donations then and who may still be benefitting from them today. This shared future-present does not stop between the donor and the donee.

More broadly, the Club Penguin Society at the University of Greenwich donated £110.66 from its members' contributions to three charities: UNICEF, World Wildlife Fund, and Cancer Research (UoG Club Penguin Society, 2022). It is also notable that most unofficial revivals of *Club Penguin* feature the Coins for Change event with variations (Torres 126, 2018). The latest revival of *Club Penguin, Party Parrot World* (Digital Daylight Enterprises & Rocketsnail Games, Forthcoming), which is currently in beta and is being developed by former *Club Penguin* staff and community members, launched the "One Warm Coat" fundraiser. During this event, the organizers made a US$5 donation to charity every time they received a piece of fan art from the community (PartyMooseHQ, 2022). This demonstrates what Priebe recognized in *Club Penguin* as a legacy that "holds the nostalgia of tradition" (Atherton, 2023, p. 83). Here, we can see the revisiting of a "lost" nostalgic object to time—*Club Penguin*—but its visitors do not leave feeling "lost again" by dwelling in reflective nostalgia or by chasing a restorative nostalgia that promises a return to the original *Club Penguin*. By playing with the past, they are able to generate new relationships in the present and carry a legacy—*Coins for Change*—into the future. This generative practice resembles Boym's (2001) creative nostalgia, which "reveals the fantasies of the age and it is in those fantasies and potentialities that the future is born" (p. 351). Although Boym did not elaborate further on the concept, I am convinced that by playing with the past to generate things for the present and the future, we are able to creatively find solutions to chronophobia.

Beyond *Club Penguin*, there are possible uses of refractive nostalgia in other game titles that evoke the concept of being "lost again" so something generative can be "found." In the introduction to *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), the player can roam around their house and meet their spouse and infant child. After retreating to an underground bunker due to an impending nuclear attack, the player is separated from their spouse and baby as they are placed into cryogenic chambers. While in coldsleep, the player is awakened to the sight of their spouse being killed by a group of intruders who also kidnap the baby. Upon leaving the bunker, the player's present in the wasteland is

a constant journey to unravel a past that can never be again. Nothing in the game can bring back the dead spouse or the child as they were or restore the radioactive ruins back to a world prior to the nuclear fallout. Despite the presence of nostalgic vintage wartime music and pre-fallout world items, "some things cannot be fixed by turning back the clock" (Makai, 2018, p. 7). As players traverse the world, collectible toys are scattered throughout the map in memoriam of the player's lost child, encouraging "a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future" (Boym, 2001, p. 55) as reflective nostalgia. Conversely, restorative nostalgia is also present in the way that interactions with non-playable characters reveal a fixation on shaping a future tied to the past-the-way-it-was (e.g., the ghoulish Vault-Tec representative yearning for a pre-bomb past when he was valued) or the way it could have been (e.g., each faction wanting to define its own future, or the Crater of Atom cult wanting to prolong this radioactive present into the future). Thus, a tug-of-war between the past and future situates the player within a "contemporary nostalgia about the vanishing present" (Boym, 2001, p. 351). They are constantly "lost again."

What can be done here is to pair refractive nostalgia with video games as "mediators of cultural history . . . because they create virtual worlds, [and] they can be used to recreate the cities of the past" (Makai, 2018, p. 11). In essence, what is already lost in the game's present can remind us of a future that we are currently losing in our real world. Instead of a tale about resolving factional ties between the Brotherhood of Steel, the Institute, and the MinuteMen, a *Fallout 4* mod could rename these factions as the United States, Russia, and China, capturing the contemporary and futuristic implications of the past history between these global bodies. Alternatively, renaming the factions as the Proletariat, the Bourgeois, and the Commons could inspire players to draw upon their own nostalgia of their real-world past, where exposure to consumerism and globalization can be "mediators of cultural history" (Makai, 2018, p. 11) in the game's archaic present.

These efforts speak to the work of Simon and Wershler (2018), who assigned readings on modernity, colonialism, and capitalism for a class they taught entirely on a modded version of *Minecraft*. The class assignments did not ask for *Minecraft* builds that represented the past per the assigned readings—this would just be a simulation. Rather, the students were encouraged to "allegorize the readings" (Wershler & Simon, 2021, p. 219), by taking the past-that-was in the readings and attempting to actualize the past-that-could-have-been with the mods and technological constraints of *Minecraft.* Moreover, the professors decided to run the class in Survival mode, which meant that students had to fend off mobs and enemies while foraging for food and shelter. Survival in the game thus became as important as paying attention to class readings. Both required an effort to recognize the student's

objectives in the present (e.g., I want to do well in this class, or I need to learn how to better protect myself from mobs), with an understanding of how the historical objects presented in the class readings relate to their current preoccupations. For example, Simon and Wershler (2018) noted the allegorical relationship students developed between a reading on modernism and the construction of it as a project in *Minecraft*:

> The practicalities of the game required the students (working in groups and discussing their strategies) to adapt their understanding of Safdie's architectural experiment to a fictional world where the consequences are allegorically related to (rather than a simulation of) the actual material and cultural context in which Safdie was working. The idea is *not* to literally represent a real-world context. Instilling infrastructural reflexivity—that is, reminding students that they are playing a game—is a way of pointing out that there are always gaps between models and their historical referents. (pp. 219–220, emphasis in the original)

By consulting with some of their classmates who were more familiar with *Minecraft* and the literature surrounding the assigned texts, students engaged in both a reflective (personal) and restorative (social) nostalgia. The reflective aspect of nostalgia is evident when students who were struggling with the game mourned the time they wished they had spent in the past learning *Minecraft* better*,* or yearned for a past in which their in-game builds could have been celebrated alongside Safdie and other modernist architects. By the same token, restorative nostalgia was responsible for what the students were missing: decades of scholarship that favoured the historical objects depicted in the readings, and the dedicated communities that kept *Minecraft* so culturally relevant that students were able to play their childhood game as a university subject. As argued before, the social potential of nostalgia lies in its ability to direct a subjective experience toward a collective goal.

In the context of refractive nostalgia, which aims to personalize a path to a collective goal, the use of *Minecraft* by Wershler and Simon (2021) is to "poin[t] out that there are always gaps" (p. 220) between the past-that-was and the future-oriented past-that-could-have-been. More importantly, it does not hand over a commercially produced restorative path to that future. The students may have consulted restorative definitions of what they are nostalgic about, but the path here relies on their personal struggle—to survive in Survival mode—and passions—to commit to each mod and unlock its blocks—to craft that future. These efforts echo the philanthropic path of *Club Penguin*'s legacy, which saved it from becoming a memory of a game lost to time after it became inaccessible when Adobe Flash was discontinued in 2020. The same effort can be found in *Fallout 4* by shifting the player's and characters' nostalgia for the fictional pre-fallout game world into a speculative nostalgia for a real world that is constantly threatened by nuclear war and other human-made disasters. With video game's ability to help us

engage critically with the past (Sloan, 2016), we can be critical of how our actions in the present may or may not recreate those same losses. Refractive nostalgia allows for the personal, social, and creative realization that such a future has already been born (Boym, 2001), as long as we ensure that our actions in the present do not lose that future by getting "lost again" in the promises of a literal nostalgia.

Conclusion

In this paper, I introduced the concept of refractive nostalgia in response to the ways in which video games as time machines (Wulf et al., 2018) have been used to deal with chronophobia. By focusing on how players can use video games like *Roblox Titanic* as a form of restorative nostalgia that promises its players a modifiable past, I showed that such uses of nostalgia are only concerned with a past that was always meant for the game alone, restricting the player from engaging with their own personal past-that-was. Ultimately, engaging in restorative nostalgia through video games can only offer prefabricated pasts or futures that are not helpful in dealing with chronophobia. Following a model of continuous attempts to gain access to what was lost, players end up losing money, time, and commitment in this pointless pursuit of a past that was never theirs to begin with.

In contrast, some video games allow for a more personal engagement with the past, like the House competitions held in a *Minecraft* replica of my high school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet even in playing and engaging with a personal past-that-was, the future and the past-that-could-have-been are left untouched. The play experience here is a saturation of loss; the video game acts as a reflective bridge to tie in real-world losses (e.g., not being able to return to school) with a past in which those losses are only amplified (e.g., mourning that inability all the more by having gone to school in the past). For the purposes of this paper, I set out to consider a use of nostalgia that can be generative—one where video games are able to prime us of an incoming loss and evoke what was already gone in order to generate action toward and within a future-present using social, personal, and creative nostalgia.

There is a real nostalgic potential to be discussed in modifying games that feature elements of the real world that we are currently losing (e.g., the ice caps melting) as something lost forever in-game (e.g., sea levels that have already risen to the detriment of human habitation on land). Notably, *BioShock* (2K Boston & 2K Australia, 2007) is set in an underwater city that resembles our own sinking due to climate change, while *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), when (re)played during the uncertain times of COVID-19, reflected in-game the real-world struggle of humans living with the effects of a global pandemic. Moreover, in Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (2012), the player is tasked with the duty of maintaining the collective memory of what humanity represents and how a civilized society should operate through actions that their

group members "will remember." Players engage with their own reflective nostalgia for the things they value most if lost in an apocalyptic future by making choices that restore what a post-apocalyptic society should uphold. Over time, these choices may combine personal, social, and creative engagements with chronophobia through the parasocial relationships that players nostalgically forge with characters (Wulf & Rieger, 2018) and their own experiences as video game players of the present-day world, where such things are not yet lost but could be. These suggestions reinforce the generative nostalgic potential of video games.

I have proposed a use of nostalgia that is refractive because the three components—social, personal, and creative—happen in tandem with any use of video games as time machines. Creative nostalgia, which Boym (2001) appealingly describes as a form of nostalgia that can reveal a future that is already here, could be a path forward, as opposed to a future in which our pursuits could get us "lost again." Unfortunately, Boym does not elaborate on what this might look like as a practice of nostalgia. While I have documented the effects of refractive nostalgia in three case studies, the priority focus of this paper has been to explore a use of nostalgia that can alleviate a state of being perpetually "lost again." The present is not lived in the memory of a potentially "lost" past that belongs to the future, the present is lived as a future-present that is "found" in our ability to play video games in a generative way.

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