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Between Pixels and Play: the role of the photograph in videogame nostalgias

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Abstract

The histories of videogames are so often contained with nostalgia for the screen, for the arcade, console, computer or game box design, and for the experience of playing itself. Various amateur photographs now archived on Flickr allow us to remember beyond the stereotypical, albeit iconic imagery of *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980), and *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978). The essence of play becomes captured in the photograph, as a “collective memory”, and “reflective nostalgia” (Boym 2001) for the places, times and actions inherent in the histories of the early 1970 and 1980s videogame era. It is through debating the so often implied “reconstructed nostalgias” (Boym 2001) offered by videogame companies to consumers in their re-makes of classic game titles that this paper explores “reflective nostalgia” of videogames by examining the role of photographs taken during the act of playing these games. In doing so it reframes 1980s videogame nostalgias beyond the “mediated space” (Nitsche 2008) of the screen and instead moves towards the “play space” as another way of keeping these histories alive.

Keywords

arcades, history, preservation, photograph, nostalgia

Introduction

Since the introduction of arcade games in general use during the 1970s by companies such as Midway and Atari in the USA as well as Taito, Namco and Nintendo in Japan, players have come to know and recognise popular games in mainstream culture again and again.¹ Well-known titles such as *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* have since been ported to home consoles, during the late 1970s and 80s at the time when the arcades were around, and subsequently through next generations

¹ For a comprehensive history of arcade game development see Donovan, Tristan. (2010). *Replay: A History of Videogames*. Lewes: Yellow Ant.

of consoles and gaming platforms. Players can now pick up versions of *Pac-Man* on a smartphone or tablet device, or play it bundled in Anniversary editions of Taito's *Space Invaders* as released on more modern consoles such as the Playstation 2 in 2004. As Murphy (2012) notes, ports of games such as *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders*, are commonly available on mobile phones, allowing for portability and a nod towards gaming's past. The interactions of 1970s and 1980s gaming are abundant in recent years, as manufacturers continually try to resell popular game ideas in a multitude of ways. One such example, explored by Guins (2006) in his essay about Objects of Media is the Namco II *Ms. Pac Man 5 in 1 TV Games*. As Guins (2006) notes,

"Namco II Ms.Pac Man 5 in 1 TV Games are 'plug and play' games programmed into a nostalgic 'joystick' controller. The 'retro' controller replaces the antiquated home console. The 'video game that the material interface attempt to reprise loses its medium specificity when it appears at a different resolution on plasma or LCD screens. The marketed 'authenticity' is out memory of 'having played' not where and how we played. In this instance, the 'new' masquerades as the 'old'"

Similarly, the iconic imagery of such games has also been rebranded on mugs, t-shirt designs, wall coverings, key-rings and other related memorabilia sold for both gaming aficionados or those seeking to keep up with the rise and fall of 1980s pop culture appearing as fashion statements in clothing stores on the high-street (amongst other outlets). As Kline et al (2003) discuss this rise in merchandising continues after the 1980s as companies (including videogame companies) strive towards infiltrating the youth market with popular culture memorabilia and tie-ins as a way of continuing not only the success of the brand, but hopefully capturing new audiences. This growing trend for nostalgic memorabilia, for those that actually remember the time of the product's creation, and for those that feel the need to remember or celebrate a time gone by, means that imagery is constantly re-made, re-branded and traded upon in commercial enterprise. Swalwell (2007, 265) defines this as "technostalgia" as companies "cash in on this rediscovered interest in early titles with re-releases of 'classic' game titles".

Although players can experience games through their multiple remakes on various machines, the original platforms are often not accessible, meaning that the games being played are done so in graphical and gameplay content only. The moments of play in the remake provide a connected experience through the represented of the original pixelated (or vector) graphics afforded by machines of that age, and a link towards the initial gameplay in terms of timers and limited sets of control mechanics (such as the left and right events transferred to a controller rather than a joystick). In many ways these recreations can be seen as nostalgia linked not only to the games themselves and their limited graphical outputs, but also for the time that those games were once played in. As much we can attempt to recreate the graphics of past videogame titles, this reconstruction can never be in its complete form. However, alongside this corporate driven perception of nostalgia keeping particular franchises alive, the nostalgia of game players and their previous experiences with gaming practices also allow us to experience archives of photographs related to game histories in a variety of ways.

The etymology of the word nostalgia, as Boym (2001) notes, is in the combination of the terms *nostos* meaning “return home” and *algia* meaning “longing”. Therefore, the nostalgia for the pixel and related 1980s graphics comes from not only a longing for place(s) that those games were played in, but also a the time associated with those places as we wish to return (or time travel) to that destination. “In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress” (Boym 2007). In much the same way, the player’s nostalgia for older games is a way of attempting to recapture that time; the time of implied freedoms and the time of play that these gaming experiences could possibly create. In his chapter about “classic videogame nostalgia” Fenty (2008) discusses how both time and place work in videogame nostalgia in particular as he recognises the nostalgia players feel might be for the place of the arcade and the sights, sounds and emotions that brings, or a particular place in time where we unboxed our first console, or went to a friend’s house to play a new game. It is this notion of place that becomes of particular importance as we start to examine the photographic images

found of arcade gaming in the 1980s, as Sontag (1977) notes, “photographs actively promote nostalgia.”

It is by utilizing the archives available online that this paper seeks to discuss the role of these images found via the website flickr.com. The collector and/or enthusiast of games gone by are now often digitizing their experiences, memories and photographs of play. It is for this reason that this article examine some of these practices as a way of showing how fan nostalgia as demonstrated in photos of arcade game playing on Flickr can be used as a way of adding to our knowledge of game histories by exposing the spaces, times and people at play.

Documenting the era of the arcade platform

“Today the video game arcade persists as a nostalgic space, an entertainment gimmick, or a nerd mecca for the truly dedicated” (Kocurek. 2012)

In her discussions of ‘Coin-Drop Capitalism: Economic lessons from the Video Game Arcade’, video game scholar and historian Kocurek recognises that arcades were not purely visual in their screen displays, they also provided audiences with the sight of flashing sounds from the arcade cabinet itself, beckoning players into its realm. Similarly Kocurek outlines the sounds of play emitted not only from the machines themselves, but the arcade room loudspeakers, and children’s birthday parties that may have been taking place. This recognition of the play space and the remnants that this type of play created highlights how these types of linked experiences extend into the communal spaces around the arcade machine and beyond. These distinctions of ‘arcade-ness’ also work to show the platform specificity of the arcade machine, in conjunction with the social and cultural activity these machines and their players could create.

Built to be entertainment machines, distributed to and housed in public houses, purpose-built game play areas (such as the Trocedero in London), along sea-side piers, amusement arcades housing gambling machines, the arcade game was a standalone device. Yet for all of its singular game nature, the arcade naturally

attracts groups of players; those playing the game(s) themselves, those waiting to play and those watching out of sheer enjoyment, providing commentary and maybe in the hope of learning further secrets of play. As Herz (1997: 50) notes, “By the end of 1981, the arcade had become a fixture of American urban and suburban life and the after-school hangout of choice for millions of teenagers”; a statement that rings true in other countries at the time as well, even if the arcade in question was not on the same scale.

Both Herz (1997) and Donovan (2010) chart the rise in arcade game culture, through histories of mechanical machines, more traditional amusements and pinball culture that was already around before games such as *Pac-Man* demanded player’s attention and money. Alongside the related graphics that are commonly remembered in their pixelated form, the arcade created a social atmosphere, sometimes one that was associated with an ‘underworld’ of black market dealings, crime and gambling, but also one that encouraged a communal, social space of play outside of the home. The arcade was not just about putting money in, level progression and high-score creation (although these were obviously driving factors). The affordances of the arcade machine created a play that was not fully re-creatable in the home environment. Sitting or standing at cabinets meant that players were not only using their mental abilities, but also physical ones to last the duration of play. The body and mind would be subject to the pressures of the arcade’s joysticks, button pressing and also commentary from those surrounding the player to motivate them or hope that they lose so that they could be the next challenger to try and succeed. These pressures of the gaming body are captured in videogame scholar and ethnographer Apperley’s (2010) notion of “situated gaming” and the body is recognised as part of the wider spectrum of material processes associated with digital games and play. As a response to Amis’ recorded interviews with *Pac-Man* players, Apperley (2010, 34) outlines how “the material residue imprinted on the body through play—in the form of blisters, aches and strained retinas—are indicative that the body is an important node in game networks.” It is by noting the affordances of the machine, along with the body and the social spaces of arcade game play that we can look to photographs captured in the 1970s and 1980s as a

way of documenting a wider experience than the games themselves.

In the growing area of research surrounding game preservation and game histories, photographs of game play have started to emerge as these repositories become more accessible. As part of her research into the preservation of digital games in Australia and New Zealand, Melanie Swalwell (along with Janet Bayly) curated an exhibition of photographs of arcade game culture in the 1980s in New Zealand.² This exhibition was presented online via the Mahara Gallery as a way of displaying and collecting the imagery for others to see. Unlike Flickr, which exists as a largely open, user-generated, participatory platform in order to store user's photographs, the photographs curated by Swalwell and Bayly were the result of finding such imagery in newspaper archives from that time. The outcomes included "forty-six photographs [combining] the work of some of New Zealand's best known documentary photographers – Ans Westra, Christopher Matthews, Robin Morrison - with images in the archives of Wellington's Evening Post and Auckland's Fairfax newspapers" (Swalwell 2011). Around a similar time, the work of Ira Nowinski's "Bay Area Video Arcades" was also revealed as being donated to the Stanford Library that is also known for documenting and preserving facets of digital gaming history. Unlike Swalwell's exhibition, Nowinski's photographs are not openly available online, but remain in the archive for those wishing to seek them out in their original form. However, as with other announcements, some of these photographs have been revealed in numerous press releases and online articles documenting the find and the role they might play in game preservation. What does link Swalwell's exhibition to the "Bay Area Video Arcades" work is who took the photographs and how this might link to the composition of the imagery they display. Both sets of images were taken by news photographers as part of their own documentation of arcades for particular purposes. As such Swalwell (2011) recognises the hesitancy in analysing these images as a media scholar, noting, "The imperatives of news photography require dramatic images, and so we might want to consider the role of press photographers in creating images. To what degree did they actively arrange and

² For further information about the 'More than a Craze' exhibition, see here: <http://old.maharagallery.org.nz/MoreThanACraze/index.php>

invent these images (stand here, do this)? For instance, is it possible that people actually held hands while playing ‘Space Invaders’...?”

Whilst this hesitancy remains in possible examinations of amateur photographs posted online, the archive of photography sharing platforms, including that of Flickr.com allow us to see another set of photographs depicting arcade games and arcade culture during the 1980s. Rather than posed for or by news photographers, these images capture everyday life within the arcade from a different perspective, that of the player or player-observer, with these images belonging to many of those people who played these games. Although these are now curated as part of particular groups on Flickr acting as sites for collective nostalgia, these images also help with our understanding of the time and space of the arcade as well as the games being played.

Curated nostalgia and the (online) archive

In her research about the role of Flickr as a platform for understanding how our cultural heritage can be archived, Terras (2011, 687) comments how “...Flickr, provides an easy and intuitive hosting platform for individuals who wish to participate in digitalizing cultural heritage.”

It is by understanding the properties of Flickr as a “Web 2.0” platform enabling a large amount of users to access it that Terras (2011) recognizes the role of “amateur digitization” practices that are facilitated by the communities using the site. Videogame scholars, preservationists and archivists, Stuckey et al (2015) also observe the role of these communities in their examination of retrogaming sites produced by hobbyists and fans as a way of extending the museum and allow for game content to be preserved and explored by a variety of interested parties. As cultural historian Suominen (2011) notes the Internet is both an archive and a “memory machine”, yet it is this concept of memory and cultural heritage that is debated by van Dijck in her own interpretations of Flickr. As a researcher interested in the relationship between media technologies and cultural memory, van Dijck (2010) draws upon Hoskins (2009) definitions of “networked” or “connective”

memory rather than “collective memory” as a way of being able to theorize Flickr as an online platform. As such van Dijck challenges the notion of Flickr as an archive; a debate that will be discussed later on in this article.

Founded in 2004, Flickr.com is an online photo hosting service that is free to use by members of the public. Each user has their own account and dedicated space in order to upload digital photographs and video, to add titles, tags and comments to this information, as well as separate photographs into groups and/or sets. As with other user-generated online platforms, there is also the ability to share photographs with people that have similar interests in common groups. Here, users retain their own online identity as a user of Flickr and add their photographs to a community of people wanting to collect photographs around a certain theme. This is an act of curation in its own right, with groups acting as sites of self-selection for those wishing to share common interests on a particular theme. Grouping together photographs in this way also makes it easier for others wishing to find related imagery, combined with the short-form tags that can also be added to help with the searching process. This rise in participatory culture and the “collective intelligence” (see Jenkins 2006 and Stuckey et al 2015) of users exposes this desire to post about ourselves and the images we have taken on social media sites. Now what was once hidden in personal home collections, sheds, lofts and sideboards, is more accessible to a wider audience, to those that can search, see and potentially download for their own collections.

Therefore, not only is the web an archive of information (see Parikka 2012, 114), but it also becomes a useful search engine of the everyday images that can now be scanned and captured in digital form online. These cultural histories are not only important in terms of the growing area of videogame histories starting to appear in academic discussions, but also as a way of aiding the preservation of such artefacts as debates on capturing and curating digital media continue to attract similar discussion and debate. At the same time, these archives act as catalysts to reframing nostalgia away from the portrayed notion of “reconstructive nostalgias” (Boym 2001) of 1980s game design (that are not possible in terms of gameplay) and instead towards a method of understanding the “reflective nostalgia” (Boym 2001) that

these photographs potentially enable. It is through this frame of “reflective nostalgia” as offered by the photographic image that we can start to examine the memories of the times they were taken, not only through the images themselves but by the commentary offered up by those posting imagery online in a collective or “connected” (Hoskins 2009) memory of a time and place once experienced. As design historian, Guins (2004) notes, “The screen space of game play is only one space within which video games intrude.” Therefore, it is vital to go beyond the screen image and even recorded interactive play sequences (as often documented on YouTube) in order to further analyse the other facets of videogame culture, in the variety of spaces that are available to us in order to not only archive this material but tell (other) game histories. We can see this demarcation of game and play spaces through the work of videogame scholar Nitsche (2008) who identifies “five main conceptual frames for the analysis of game spaces” ranging from the “mediated” and “rule based spaces” of both display and machine to the “fictional”, “social” and “play” spaces that link to activities beyond the screen spaces created by designer and machine. The photographs taken during arcade play in the 1980s in the UK and the USA allow for a further investigation into the “play” spaces of arcades further as a way of piecing together another part of the arcade gaming history puzzle. In these instances it can be seen that one person’s nostalgia becomes another person’s archive.

Although masked by a “reflective nostalgia” (Boym 2001), as some of these images are posted by fans in an act of remembrance, the ability to find and attempt to ‘read’ these images starts to move towards another aspect of collecting information in the preservation of digital games and play. The images also highlight the memories of another time and place that they might now long for, as well as allow others to draw on similar experiences in their own episodes of nostalgic longing. As noted by media theorists Swalwell and Stuckey (2014) fan communities online, aided by discussion forums, as well as self-contained sites for particular gaming platforms such as the ZX Spectrum, play an important role in the preservation and understanding of not only the games themselves but also the people playing them. Taking this into consideration, it was by searching Flickr for terms such as ‘arcade’, ‘games’, ‘UK’,

'1980(s)' that various individual pages, as well as groups dedicated to these keywords started to emerge. Instead of being taken by dedicated newspapers, or known documentary photographers, these photographs started to reveal slightly more about the 'everyday' aspects of arcade culture in the UK at that time. However, as with the other posed photographs found in newspaper pages, these images also have to be read carefully as the meanings behind them are interpreted. The photograph has to be viewed as part of a wider context of game playing, as the frequent, temporal elements of play cannot be captured. As Sontag notes (1977, 22) "Each still photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep to look at again". Therefore, what we choose to capture in the still frame, is not necessary the whole narrative of events taking place that day. But what these photographs can reveal is one part of what the photographer felt they should capture to sum up life in that moment of the space and time of the arcade.

Reading nostalgia and frames of reference

A first glance at the Flickr group, "Growing up in the Arcades: 1979-1989" reveals that it has 521 Members, 173 Photos and 8 discussions. As well as the ability to comment on individual photos in the user's photostream or in the groups they are connected to, each Flickr group has a discussion forum to be used by those wanting to explore further connections in relation to the images. Whereas the majority of the 8 discussions are people seeking copyright clearance or higher resolution scans of images, there are a few other discussions that relate to the title of the group as well as a few memories of particular arcades once visited that users hope will be represented at some point in the future, such as the Video Voyage arcade in Lynchburg, VA.³ Although another facet of fan remembrance of the arcade and hints at a nostalgia for their own connections to arcade games, these discussions do not provide as rich an insight into what some of these arcades offered compared to the photographs found in the group.

There is not space within this text to explore all of the photographs in the group, so

³ <https://www.flickr.com/groups/arcades/discuss/72157626526729764/>

for the purposes of this article, three images have been chosen in order to show how the play space of the arcade was once utilized, how related commentary on the images helps to further emphasize the nostalgic recollections of the 1980s and how the arcade game can be found in a variety of places. As Barthes (1977, 37) notes, “...all images are polysemous”, with the reader being able to choose (or ignore) particular signifieds. As such we can read images in different ways, although as Barthes continues to explain, text alongside an image helps to fix or “anchor” its meaning. In this instance, the photographs found on Flickr.com not only expose the sites of play through the image but also through the related caption and metadata attached to that image. This collection of data shows one of the notable differences between the documentary photographs that have been archived and/or exhibited and the online, user-selected photographs on Flickr as to how they showcase the respective stories they are capturing. The documentary and/or newspaper photographer will often display images that fit the theme of the article they are writing, to tell a particular version of events, or promote particular ideologies about the state of arcade games at the time. In contrast the fan images capture moments that are important in the narrative of family, or social events, what van Dijck (2007) would term to be “memory narratives”. Therefore, although the photographer curates each image, the narratives of the separate images are slightly different due to the perceived audiences they were taken for. This in itself is useful our understanding of game histories, again, as a way of generating different perspectives on arcade culture at that time.

On a secondary level, these photographs not only need to be read in a particular way due to the nature of the photographic medium, but also have to be read with the understanding that they have also been self-selected, digitised and put online in another act of deliberate framing. As Matt Hills (2002) notes in his discussions of fan culture, fans can be performative as to how they interact with and communicate their affections to particular TV series, game franchises and so on within popular culture. The performative nature of the player is also present in not only the space of the arcade that is captured in the image, but the image itself as it is presented online. In this instance, the user actively chooses to present themselves (or part of

themselves and their gaming identity) through this potential filtering and uploading of online content. Unlike the Bay Area Arcades or the previously mentioned More than a Craze exhibition documentary style photographs, these uploaded images are in colour, showing a representation of the game cabinets at the time and their potential allure to prospective gamers. The images are not all necessarily of playing the games, but of remembering the other facets of the arcade to those that entered it.

In Smithy No.7's image, 'Playing OutRun & Paperboy in 1986' two boys are standing at the arcade machines Out-Run and Paperboy respectively, presumably with the boy facing the camera being known to the photographer in some way.⁴ The image's description notes that the photograph was taken in Hunstanton in Norfolk, at the side of Thomas' Arcade, presumably at some point in 1986. The details themselves are probably pieced together by Smithy No. 7 as he tries to place the image in a wider spectrum of memories from that time, probably including the time and space of the image and the depicted age of the boy in the photograph. Alongside the description of where the image was taken, a reference is also made to the t-shirt the boy in the image is wearing as a clear reference to the 1980s and the style of clothing once worn. This also dates the image and relates to the performance of the user-curator in what they choose to reveal as important in putting the image online. Alongside the boy facing the camera, the photograph also reveals another boy playing *OutRun* holding the arcade machine's steering wheel and staring with intent at the screen as to not break his concentration. This player does not want to pose for the camera, presumably because he is mid-game and doesn't want to lose the money he has put in and/or his place in the virtual race. Whether the other player is known to Smithy No.7 or not, it is not clear, but as *OutRun* is also mentioned in the title of the image, the game itself is an important part of the image for the user. A further investigation of the user's profile and photostream shows that an edited, cropped version of the *Paperboy* and *OutRun* image is used as the user's avatar, hinting that he is in fact the same person as in that image. Although most of the rest

⁴ The image can be found at:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/30227674@N00/8372471993/in/pool-arcades>

of his photostream does not feature pictures of arcades, the user clearly felt the need to scan the original analogue photograph and post it online. It now exists in three groups about videogames, retrogames and the 'Growing up in the Arcades' group as a way of aligning the image with these particular focus groups on Flickr.

Much like Smithy No.7, other users in the group also went to the effort of scanning and uploading images from their experiences of playing arcade games in the 1980s. One image is that by Richie W of Bob's Gameroom stated as being from the 17th August 1985.⁵ Rather than being a photograph depicting a public arcade, this time the space of the arcade is a friend parent's basement that has been turned into an arcade room by those that own it. Whereas people collecting arcade game cabinets as nostalgic pieces and/or collectors items is now a part of preserving these games, the image shows how some members of the general public also owned their own arcades at the time outside in order to create their own private arcades. In this private space of a now public photograph, the image is of people not looking at the camera but instead they appear to be dancing around the room, moving between the spaces of the arcades depicting a jovial atmosphere and they might casually glance at another player's game that is off-screen. This image is not one necessarily focused on the games themselves, although titles such as *Asteroids*, *Tron* and *Dragon's Lair* are clearly on view. Instead the image captures a moment of the party and the sense of how people were enjoying the space. Interestingly, the games are the focus of other's users comments, such as one that just states, "Dragons' Lair!" either out of remembrance or enthusiasm (or both) for that particular game. Another one of the photographs found within the group belonging to Richie W's photostream depicts another evening at Bob's Gameroom on the 17th November 1985 and once again emphasizes the atmosphere as one not solely being concentrated on games.⁶ The space appears to have been used as a social hub of activity, with people talking to one another and having a drink in between possible plays. Although there is a player in action captured near the back of this image, he is not the focus of the photograph, and instead the wider sense of the social space

⁵ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/39758941@N06/7521542246/in/pool-arcades>

⁶ <http://www.flickr.com/photos/39758941@N06/7521541910/in/pool-arcades>

created by the arcade is highlighted. Again, another user comment linked to the image notes how there are “...an excellent collection of some of the best cabinet’s in 1 row!” emphasizing some knowledge but again, also enthusiasm for the machine. Unlike the deliberately posed imagery offered by documentary photography or by holiday photography that can often include posed images, such as that found by Smithy No.7 of the Hunstanton arcade, both of these images reveal more about arcade games in the 1980s. These images show how arcades were captured and treasured by people not just in public spaces, but also in the home, drawing together communities of people interested in playing or using the space in a variety of ways.

As a final contrast to the public, holiday arcade of the British seaside, and the private space of an arcade room in someone’s basement in the US, the final image to be examined instead shows how arcades were found in other public spaces around the world. Whereas many of the photographs in the group are focused on people’s birthdays, which are often photographed events, and subsequently the amusement arcades people would visit on such occasions, the last image shows “Me playing a stand up Donkey Kong arcade game at the St Louis Greyhound bus station in the 1980s.”⁷ Unlike the other photographs that focus on the player’s faces, or contain spaces frequented by lots of people, this photograph frames a cluster of arcade machines in the middle of the station with one boy standing at the Donkey Kong cabinet. The image is framed in such a way that it is not possible to see the screen of the game, but instead we can see the slightly awkward stance of the boy as he is stood next to the machine. The distance of the photographer away from the boy at the arcade means that it is not clear as that the boy is actually playing the game, and we are only able to rely on this fact from the “anchorage” (Barthes 1977, 38) of the text from the user underneath the image on display.

The reason as to why this photograph was taken is not clear as there is no further commentary from the person that posted it to the Flickr group or follow up comments from other people that have seen it. It is possible to make assumptions about how the photograph may have been taken as part of a set of other holiday

⁷ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/benchilada/7180304860/in/pool-arcades/>

photographs with the family using the bus station as a departure point for a trip out somewhere. It may also be that the boy in the image lived near the Greyhound bus station, but without a further dialogue with the person who uploaded the photograph these facts remain unknown. The act of the user curating their own content both in terms of scanning old photographs and uploading them to Flickr, and also adding them to particular groups means that the analogue photo album that this image may belong to now becomes out of sync as choices are made about what is or isn't shown. Interestingly this is the only photograph of the arcades by this user posted to the 'Growing up in the Arcades' group, however, on further inspection of the photostream it is attached to, there is another photograph of the user playing a *Dig Dug* arcade machine that he had (presumably at home) when growing up.⁸ This image belongs to other groups on Flickr associated with gaming and arcades such as 'Retro Gaming' and 'Coin Operated' but for some reason he has chosen not to include it in the same group as the *Donkey Kong* arcade photograph. In our attempts to trace game histories, the ability to search Flickr becomes part of the toolkit for finding other groups, other photographs and potentially other stories across different photostreams.

Conclusion

"We live our lives in the middle of things. Material culture carries emotions and ideas of startling intensity" (Turkle 2011, 6)

The Flickr archive celebrates the arcade cabinet as an object of desire, recording the material object without us being able to physically touch it. However, this object is not capable of the type of "restorative nostalgia" offered by Boym (2001) in her categorisations of longings for other times and other places. The arcade cabinet can be re-played in 2016, in a lone room, or with others, but the recreation of the exact moment of its inception is not possible. However, the arcade cabinet as a trigger for nostalgic remembrance remains an important part of gaming history and potential preservation (see also Guins 2014). Similarly, the archived photographs of professionals and the players of the 1980s allow us to add another part of this

⁸ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/benchilada/7573190218/in/album-72157604850938110/>

remembrance to the overall stories of gameplay during this time. It is in these photographs that we can remember that play goes beyond the screen, beyond the pixelated aliens, Power Pills and *Donkey Kong* barrels. Instead the archives or “databases” (van Dijck 2010) of photographs help to show the sites and spaces of play during various arcades in that period. Here the archive allows for another text to be read and another part of game history to be kept. Of course, these archives have their limitations, in that the image alone cannot provide the whole story, and further work to provide a full visual ethnography (see Pink 2013) of what is found online would help to create a further archive of work in order for these images to be read alongside a full commentary from those taking or uploading them. Similarly, van Dijck (2010, 6) discusses how “Flickr is not just a neutral information system; it is value laden and plays a role in determining the wider social and cultural order of information.” Yet as much as “Flickr has become an instrument to shape common views of the world” (van Dijck 2010, 7), the conscious decision of the user to source, scan and upload memories of the arcade allows us to view these images on the platform as part of a deliberate archive, as much as the site is also a constantly changing “database” (van Dijck 2010). Although the downside of this for the researcher is that Flickr cannot be a reliable archive as users may leave photographs online but abandon their profiles, thus remaining out of contact for any potential follow up work. Similarly, the information left about each image is not always as comprehensive as it would be if it were found in a more deliberate archive as the intentions of the user in posting images are not necessarily the same intentions as an archive actively seeking to record and preserve images.

Despite these challenge, and the fact that the images, and the platform that are displayed on, both have to be read with caution, as is the nature of any photographic image, or website, the photographs of this era help add to the archive of potential trigger objects in being able to tell these stories. They can act as conversation starters for future research into places that once housed arcade cabinets, as the machines themselves may no longer be there, but a memory and history of place can still be built upon and uncovered further. As a platform, Flickr also helps to add to current discussions about archival practices as Terras (2011: 687) notes in her own

examinations of Flickr.com, cultural resources “created by enthusiasts and hosted on Flickr can inform the library, archive, and cultural heritage community about best practices in constructing online resources and communities and reaching relevant audiences in the process.” In turn these online archives and growing databases of information can help us shape our own and others understandings of where some of these arcade game activities took place and when. In doing so, we can go beyond nostalgias for retro gaming, and start to reveal some of the other histories of play and games available to us as parts of the digital preservation puzzle.

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