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Nostalgia's Complicated Role in Contemporary Pop Culture

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Do you remember the wildly successful video game *Flappy Bird*? Released in mid-2013 to horrible reviews, by January 2014 it was the most downloaded application on Apple's App store. Did it become the world's most popular game because of its cutting-edge graphics? No. What about its sophisticated storyline, or its intriguing characters? No. The truth is, *Flappy Bird* didn't have impressive graphics; its look was heavily influenced by retro arcade games of the past, so the graphics were intentionally pixelated. It didn't even have a storyline, either. The game involved bouncing a bird up and down, avoiding objects as you fly it across the screen. That's it. And its characters? Well, there was one, unnamed character: the yellow bird. *Flappy Bird* was the world's most popular game because in a world filled with thousands of video games and apps that featured hyper-realistic graphics, immersive storylines, and complicated gameplay, people preferred *Flappy Bird's* comforting, familiar simplicity. How do I know people preferred *Flappy Bird*? Because the number of downloads speaks for itself.

Flappy Bird isn't the only example of "retro" media content that's been making a comeback lately. Have you seen how many movies are being remade or turned into sequels? What about TV shows? Most of the biggest movies this summer have all been built upon known

relics from the past, such as *The Barbie Movie, Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*, and *Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning Part One*.

But pop culture's love affair with the past isn't new. Over the past several decades, there has been a growing trend of nostalgia in popular culture, with the number of remakes, reboots, and revivals of classic films, television shows, and music at an all-time high. Dozens of old TV shows have also been rebooted in the past few years, old movies are being remade, much of the music that's been released lately has been engineered to sound like it came from the past, and a subset of recent video games either build upon old games (like *Pokémon GO*), or are made to look and feel like old games (like *Flappy Bird*, which I spoke about earlier). This trend has led some scholars to debate whether nostalgia is a positive, or negative, force in popular culture. Specifically, they want to know: is nostalgia a source of creativity and inspiration? Or, is our increasing reliance on nostalgia the sign of a dying culture that's stuck in the past?

According to scholars, the jury is out. Some scholars argue that nostalgia can be a hindrance to creativity and innovation. They point out that when creators rely too heavily on nostalgia, they may be less likely to take risks and come up with new ideas. Others argue that nostalgia can be a positive force in popular culture. They point out that nostalgia can help to connect people with their past and create a sense of community, which can then be a source of inspiration for new creative works. They also argue that consumers are more willing to watch, listen and play with new media content that is familiar to them in some way.

So, then…what if nostalgia can be a source of inspiration for new creative works? What if, by looking back, we can more easily move forward?

In this paper, I will be exploring a number of issues related to nostalgia and popular culture. First, I'll define some key terms, like "nostalgia" and "popular culture". Next, I'll look at

whether the use of nostalgia in popular culture is actually at an all-time high, or if it just feels that way – and if so, why. Next, I'll discuss the current research on nostalgia's impact on our well-being. Then, I'll talk about the bad rap that nostalgia gets within popular culture. Finally, I'll argue that contrary to public belief, nostalgic content, when used correctly, can be a positive force for creating new, innovative content. I'll show that even though all of these remakes and do-overs might make us think that no creative progress is being made, there is actually research that suggests that nostalgia inspires creativity and innovation. In other words, by returning to the past, we can pave the way for creative progress.

Defining Popular Culture and Nostalgia

But before we discuss the current thinking on nostalgia and its relationship to our well-being and with popular culture, we need to clarify what those terms mean.

The author and sociologist Ashley Crossman defines pop culture in her 2021 article, "Sociological Definition of Popular Culture." She writes: "popular culture is the accumulation of cultural products such as music, art, literature, fashion, dance, film, cyber culture, television and radio that are consumed by the majority of a society's population. Traditionally, it was associated with lower classes and poor education as opposed to the 'official culture' of the upper class."

Dictionary.com defines nostalgia as "a wistful desire to return in thought or in fact to a former time in one's life, to one's home or homeland, or to one's family and friends; a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time" (2012). According to leading nostalgia researchers Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, and Routledge, "the Greek words for return and suffering are nostos and algos, respectively. The literal meaning of nostalgia, then, is the suffering caused by the yearning to return to one's place of origin" (2006).

The word nostalgia actually has deep roots, and a controversial history. In fact, according to Routledge, "from the 17th century to the latter part of the 20th century, being labeled as nostalgic meant to be considered ill" (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides & Juhl, 2013). The word nostalgia was first used in the late 17th century, by a Swiss physician named Johannes Hofer. He invented the word to describe what he believed to be a brain disease affecting Swiss mercenaries who were fighting wars far from their homes. He believed that those who suffered from the disease presented with symptoms such as homesickness, weeping, and anxiety. Another doctor, Johann Jakob Scheuchzer, thought that because the Swiss fighters were living in regions in Europe with lower altitudes than the mountains that they were used to, their condition might actually be caused by a change of atmospheric pressure within the brain (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides & Juhl, 2013). Although, the writer David Berry attributes that explanation to Scheuchzer's desire to "rescue his countrymen's reputation from accusations of weakness" (2020).

By the 19th century, however, nostalgia "began to be perceived less as a neurological disease burdening vulnerable populations (e.g., mercenaries, seafarers), and more as a psychopathology similar to depression and experienced by a wide range of individuals separated from and longing for home" (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides & Juhl, 2013). It was only in the latter part of the 20th century, however, that nostalgia acquired a separate conceptual status, and began to be defined apart from the concept of homesickness (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006).

In light of the history of the word nostalgia, it may help to clarify what I will mean when I use the term throughout this paper. I'm using the term to describe the warm, comforting, homey feeling one gets when looking back fondly on a known, bygone time. Nostalgic content is media

such as books, music, movies, and games that are familiar, and come from our past. Without further complicating things, I should add that although notalgia as a feeling is something I'm describing as positive, not all nostalgic content is necessarily good. For instance, I grew up watching *The Wiggles* on television as a kid, but now that I'm older, coming across anything *Wiggles*-related doesn't necessarily give me warm, fuzzy feelings.

Are There More Sequels and Remakes Now?

Now that we've defined nostalgia, and we know more about the history of the word, it may seem as though the use of nostalgia in contemporary popular culture is higher than it's ever been. While there have always been sequels and remakes, increasingly there seems to be nothing else. Whether it's reboots of classic films, television shows, and video games, or the latest sequel in a long drawn-out franchise, these do-overs often recreate the originals with updated special effects or new storylines while tapping into the audience's fond memories of the original. Some examples of recent remakes and reboots include *Full House*, *Saved by the Bell*, *The Super Mario Bros Movie*, *Gossip Girl*, and *How I Met Your Mother*. An example of a recent sequel in a long, drawn-out franchise is "*Fast X*," the 11th movie in the "*Fast and the Furious*" franchise, which came out in May of this year. To illustrate just how out of hand sequels and remakes are becoming, consider the movie *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, which has had three sequels so far, although it originally served as both a spinoff and a prequel to the *Harry Potter* movies (Gruber, 2023). Talk about confusion.

Are there really more sequels/spinoffs/reboots now than in the past, though? Yes. The percentage of original movies has been gradually shrinking since 1978 (Ho, 2020). According to the entertainment writer Max Gruber, "It appears, in recent years, that remakes and reboots have

become the more popular choice for Hollywood and Disney. Disney has favored this trend especially, with the vast majority of its recent films either being connected to an existing franchise or a live action remake of a previous film" (2023).

The Origins of Sequels

Remakes and sequels aren't new, however. According to entertainment author Ryan Lambie, sequels first entered the creative landscape through the medium of literature. Two of the earliest known bestselling novels were *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and "the financial success of these novels immediately prompted publishers to put out numerous follow-up stories to cash in on the interest of the first" (2011). In the 1720s, "*Gulliver's Travels*, in particular, inspired all sorts of spin-off tales and sequels, none of them written by the original novel's author, Jonathan Swift. These included *Memoirs Of the Court Of Lilliput*, written by an anonymous author and published in 1727, and *The New Gulliver*, written by Pierre Desfontaines in 1730. The sequel, then, became a natural by-product of a book's financial success, and soon became a common publishing phenomenon" ((Lambie, 2011).

Cinematic sequels began in the early 1900s, in films like *The Impossible Voyage* (a sequel to *A Trip to the Moon*) and *The Singing Fool*, which was a sequel to the industry's first talkie, *The Jazz Singer*. "By the late-1920s, the Hollywood filmmaking machine had whirred fully into life, and the creation of sequels began in earnest. The first 'talkie', *The Jazz Singer* (1927), prompted Warner to hurriedly create a sequel, *The Singing Fool*, which made even more money than the first film did" (Lambie, 2011).

Why Reboots and Remakes Are So Popular Right Now

Why now? One belief is that the remake/reboot/spinoff genre is so pervasive today because it is a safe financial bet for production companies. Non-original movies now make up a hefty proportion of the highest-grossing movies at the box office (Ho, 2020). Movies are expensive to make, and risky. With a remake or a sequel, there is no need to create a new concept, story, or character from scratch, as there is already an audience who is familiar with and attached to the original. This allows production companies to capitalize on nostalgia and tap into the emotional connection that people have with these characters and stories.

Dr. Matthew Jones, Film Studies lecturer at De Montfort University in Leicester, and a specialist in 20th century British cinema and audiences, tells *Cosmopolitan* magazine,"The most secure option for studios is always going to be something we call a 'pre-sold property', which means a film that has a built-in audience that one can all but guarantee will go and see the film. Meaning films with pre-existing fan audiences. And what types of films have fan audiences before they are even released? Remakes, reboots and sequels do, precisely because they are already properties familiar to audiences and which some people will feel an emotional attachment to already. This is not laziness on the part of the production studios. It's just good, sound financial logic," he adds.

Another reason why there has been such a rehashing of old popular culture relics also has to do with business and the bottom line. Just like people are more willing to see a remake or a sequel to a movie they're already familiar with, they are also more willing to listen to music if it reminds them of the past, or play a new video game if it uses characters from older video games.

According to a survey of over one thousand video gamers, Frontier Communications found that most video game players support reboots. As for the reasons why, "gamers supported

reboots primarily to experience classic games with new ideas (75%). Many also said they support reboots because they enjoy the experience of a classic game updated with better technology (69%), while others pointed to the nostalgia factor (61%). A few noted that they're more likely to enjoy a new game if it's based on one they've enjoyed in the past (22%), so they feel more comfortable spending money on a reboot than a new game."

Nostalgia's Impact On Our Well-Being

Another reason pop culture is filled with nostalgia is because nostalgia makes people feel good, especially during uncertain, stressful times. According to Clay Routledge, a social psychologist and associate professor of Psychology who has studied nostalgia extensively, "Nostalgia positively affects psychological health by improving positive mood, increasing social connectedness, enhancing positive self-regard, and contributing to perceptions of meaning in life. Nostalgia is a psychological resource" (Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides & Juhl, 2013).

Nostalgia's Impact On Creativity

There is much more that Routledge discovered about nostalgia's positive effects on creativity and inspiration, but he isn't the only researcher whose studies have pointed to nostalgia's positive effects on creativity. A research study in 2013 at the City University in Hong Kong investigated the effects of nostalgia on creativity using experiments and questionnaires. Results showed that participants who were primed with nostalgic experience demonstrated higher creativity. "When specific aspects of the nostalgic experience were used to predict creativity, results showed that: (a) nostalgia triggered by social interaction and negative affect was positively related to creativity; (b) nostalgic experience containing tangibles positively

predicted creativity; (c) the total number of triggers and the amount of, but not the positivity or salience of self in, nostalgia narrative contributed positively to creativity" (Ye, Ngan, & Hui).

The Nostalgia/Pop Culture Double Standard

Interestingly, although nostalgia has been shown to be a good influence on us mentally and creatively, nostalgia's relationship with popular culture is more complicated. As David Berry puts it in his book On Nostalgia, "calling something 'nostalgic' or accusing someone of indulging in nostalgia is used as a sort of general slur, an easy shorthand that suggests some level of moral failure or backward thinking without much further explanation needed. This is the kind of nostalgia evoked when someone complains about Hollywood's latest slate of revivals and reboots, or accuses teenagers of appropriating fashion trends from before their birth, or in slightly more serious cases snipes at a political opponent. Its prevalence and its imprecision make the point, though: people rarely seem to have a coherent explanation for why nostalgia might be bad; it's just nostalgia, so it's bad" (p. 34).

The lack of respect that remakes get is not just Dave Berry's opinion, however. Earlier I referenced the Frontier Communications survey that found that the majority of video game players support remakes. In the same survey, however, "63% of gamers thought reboots were shallow cash grabs — regardless of whether or not they'd buy them." The survey results go on to say, "Not only do some gamers view reboots as shallow, but they also think the game industry currently lacks creativity (59%). Slightly more than half of all gamers said that new ideas don't get enough funding to succeed because it's easier to rely on proven concepts and familiar franchises (56%)."

Many critics agree. They argue that nostalgia can be a hindrance to creativity and innovation. They point out that when creators rely too heavily on nostalgia, they may be less likely to take risks and come up with new ideas.

What's interesting is that it's been proven that nostalgia is good for us, but we look down upon it when it shows up increasingly in popular culture. There appears to be a double standard when it comes to creativity, then.

Earlier in this paper, we learned about the studies that researchers such as Dr. Routledge and Dr Wildschut have undertaken to learn more about the positive effects of nostalgia on creativity and inspiration. These scholars have argued that nostalgia can be a positive force in progress and innovation. They point out that nostalgia can help to connect people with their past and create a sense of community, which can be a source of inspiration for new creative works. I believe the same can be said for nostalgia's role within pop culture - it can lead to innovation and creativity. And just as exposure to nostalgia promotes creativity and well-being, nostalgic elements can be used as tools to promote new, innovative, and creative content. There are many examples of brands that are innovating through the use of nostalgia.

The 'Barbie' Movie: Reimagining a Pop Culture Icon

One example of nostalgic content being used to promote something new and innovative is this summer's number one movie release: *Barbie*. This movie took something old and iconic (the Barbie doll) and interpreted it in a new, modern way, by bringing her story into modern times.

To say that audiences around the world are loving *Barbie* is an understatement.

A news article published yesterday states: "*Barbie* has become the highest-grossing movie in Warner Bros. history, beating *Harry Potter And The Deathly Hallows – Part 2* to become the company's highest-grossing film ever. The film is also set to be the highest-grossing film of 2023 globally in the coming days. When it crosses the milestone, *Barbie* will become the 15th highest-grossing film of all time" (Starkey, 2023).

Interestingly, other sequels that were released this summer, such as *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* and *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One* did not fare as well. As of August 28, 2023, *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* has grossed $174.1 million in the United States and Canada, and $381 million worldwide, according to box office stats website *The Numbers*. Due to its expensive budget and marketing costs, the film is considered a bomb, and will be a $100 million loss for Disney. *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One* is also considered to be a box office bomb. According to the entertainment website The Collider, "*Mission*'s failure is almost unprecedented. Following a third weekend gross of $10.73 million domestic, the estimated total domestic gross now stands at $139.23 million. For a movie with a budget of $290 million, this is disastrous" (2023).

While many factors go into what makes movies successful or not, such as ad spending and critics' reviews, I suspect *Barbie* did better than these two movies because they were strictly franchise films, whereas *Barbie* is an imaginative blend of the old and the new. This relates to my thesis that what works best seems to be moving forward by looking back. In other words, what people seem to want are fresh takes on familiar content, whether that content is a character, or a type of music, or a game. Simply looking back and rehashing (such as the latest *Mission Impossible* and *Indiana Jones* movies) isn't as powerful or as appealing as using past content and innovating with it (such as the *Barbie* movie).

Pokémon GO Video Game: A Brand Extension at its Best

When it comes to taking old nostalgic content and repurposing it in a new, creative way to produce something innovative, one of the best examples of this is the mobile gaming app *Pokémon GO*, which used old characters combined with new technology to become one of the most successful video games of all time.

Pokémon GO isn't the first video game to repurpose nostalgic characters. Games featuring old characters like *Donkey Kong* have been revived over the years, and have made money doing so, but it wasn't until *Pokémon GO* came along that a reboot caused so much excitement. I believe it's because *Pokémon GO* perfectly blended the old and the new. Specifically, the game uses old, known Pokemon characters and uses them in a groundbreaking way thanks to augmented reality, which was then a new technology.

What's interesting about *Pokémon GO* is that similar games were released earlier that featured the same gaming technology, but those games didn't have the brand extension appeal that *Pokémon GO* did. As a result, they were commercially less successful. *Pokémon GO* became one of the most popular video games of all time because of its unique combination of new, cutting-edge technology (augmented reality technology), alongside the use of the Pokémon franchise's old, familiar characters. In other words, *Pokémon GO* beat its competition by leveraging the popularity of the 20-year old *Pokémon* franchise, allowing gamers to interact with the nostalgic *Pokémon* world in a new and exciting way (Butcher, Sung, & Raynes-Goldie, 2017).

Taylor Swift's *folklore* Album: Everything Old is New Again

Just as the movie *Barbie* used an old concept to create something new, and the video game *Pokémon GO* took a long-loved set of characters and used them as the basis for an innovative new game, Taylor Swift's album *folklore*, which was released in 2020, used nostalgic elements like "old" instruments and simple lyrics and themes and combined them with new technologies and lyrical arrangements to create one of her most successful albums to date.

John McGrath, a Professor of Music, has done an in-depth analysis of Swift's *folklore* album and its extensive use of retro, old time-y, folk-ish elements. In his article "The Return to Craft: Taylor Swift, Nostalgia, and Covid-19", his thesis is that Swift created the album the way she did as a comforting response to all of the anxiety and turmoil going on in the world at the time, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and political and civil unrest (2023).

McGrath writes about the nostalgic elements present in the music video for Swift's first single "Cardigan," noting: "We're in a log cabin replete with open fire, the kind of warm Romantic environment where one imagines Thoreau writing into the evening. On the wall hangs a faded portrait beside an oil painting of a rustic country cottage." He then asks, "What is being mediated here? Why this turn to *folklore* and indie-folk esthetics in Swift's work? I suggest that this single and, indeed, the album *folklore*, provide a peak example of a societal search for foundations."

Besides the warm, comforting music videos that accompanied the album *folklore*, the lyrics themselves seemed to be about familiar, comforting topics, like cardigan sweaters, and Peter Pan, and the instruments used on many of the songs are from a simpler era also, such as banjos and acoustic guitars. While most of Swift's albums in the past were upbeat and had a pop sound, folklore consists of mellow ballads.

When it was released in the middle of 2020, folklore became a smashing success. According to the album's Wikipedia page, it broke the record for the biggest opening day on Spotify for an album by a female act. It became number-one single on the US Billboard Hot 100. It was the best-selling album of 2020. It also won Album of the Year at the 63rd Annual Grammy Awards (2023).

In keeping with my thesis that nostalgia, at its best, can be used creatively to inspire innovation, it is interesting to note that *folklore* is not a completely "folk" album. I argue that *folklore* is an innovative combination of the old and the new. The album itself was heavily promoted on social media, and many of the visual effects used to create old-looking videos were made possible by modern technology. The instruments used on the album were also not all "old." In fact, according to McGrath, "while the musical accompaniment is minimal in approach, the record as a whole does not shy away from employing electric instruments and synthesizers" (2023). What we have then, is an album that broke sales records because of its creative use of old, familiar elements in new ways.

Secret Sauce

So…. is it safe to assume that the secret to commercial and creative success is to take something old, and make it new? Not necessarily. There appears to be an art to how to successfully use nostalgia in new and innovative ways. A secret sauce.

For instance, there have been many times when the modern use of nostalgia hasn't worked. I wrote earlier about how straight sequels like *Indiana Jones* don't always do well at the box office. I theorized that *Barbie* did well because it reimagined something from the past (the Barbie doll), and updated her "story" in a new, modern way. But too much meddling with

beloved classics can create dissatisfaction amongst certain people. For instance, the remake of the Disney classic *Snow White* that's being made right now has been met with a lot of public backlash. In the new film, the storyline has been modernized to make Snow White more independent, and less reliant on Prince Charming. Also, the "dwarves" are no longer all men, or dwarves, for that matter. These sorts of changes have led to lots of people speaking out on social media about what they perceive to be unnecessary changes to a beloved Disney classic. According to film writer Martin Cantet, in his article, "Is Disney's Snow White Live-Action Remake Destined to Fail?" Disney has already made a number of poor, polarizing decisions that are negatively affecting the public's perception of the movie, beginning with their casting of a Latina actress as the German princess whose skin is supposed to be "white as snow" (2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, nostalgia's relationship with our well-being, and with creativity, is not as complicated as scholars used to believe. Once thought of as a brain disease, nostalgia's slow rise to acceptance as a psychological resource that can boost our moods, foster a sense of well-being, and even promote creativity has been widely researched and documented. Nostalgia's relationship to creativity in popular culture, however, is much more complex. At its worst, the frequent rehashing of nostalgic content can mean recycling the same creative concepts over and over again, leading to creative stagnation. But at its best, nostalgia can be a source of inspiration for new creative works in much the same way that exposure to nostalgia can cause our brains to think more creatively.

Recent successes like the *Barbie* movie and the video game *Pokémon GO* show us that a certain kind of magic is created when new ideas are applied to old brands, characters, or creative

media properties. (In contrast, straight sequels like *Mission Impossible* and *Indiana Jones* did not fare as well as The *Barbie* Movie at the box office). There are nuances to how to successfully combine the old with the new, however. A secret sauce. Too much "meddling" with classics, for instance, can lead to consumer backlash, like what's happening with the new, modernized *Snow White* movie. Much more research needs to be done to better determine what causes some nostalgic reboots to be critical and commercial successes, while others fall flat.

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