

Replaying the Past: Wholesome Nostalgia or Morbid Melancholia?

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses an aesthetic strategy shared by *Oikospiel Book 1* (Kanaga 2017) and *Sonic Dreams Collection* (Arcane Kids 2015), artgames that integrate assets ripped from beloved child-friendly gaming franchises like *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sonic Team/various 1991-), *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo/various 1986-) and *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo/various 1981-) into profane, politically charged ludic collages. While they deploy this technique to different effects, I propose that in both cases it becomes a means of highlighting how the nostalgia that pervades digital culture in general and gaming culture in particular (Krapp 2011, xiv) shades into melancholia.

SUPER, SMASHING

Before addressing these two games, it is instructive to introduce another point of comparison: *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Bandai Namco/Sora Ltd. 2018). Smoothly integrating an extensive cast of 'timeless' characters drawn from a wide range of intellectual properties into a state-of-the-art spin on what is now a decades-old template, *Ultimate* foregrounds something true of all videogames: their status as modular assemblages of assets, choreographed by software in collaboration (or competition) with the player. Flaunting its status as a *wunderkammer* of fan-delighting cameos and callbacks, it reminds us of the 'deep relationship between the development of computer games and the development of postmodernity' (both of which posit an image of the world as a 'database') (Azuma 2009, 80), and reflects the continuing currency of 'media mix' approaches designed to capitalize on the 'strong concentration of intellectual property' (Guevara-Villalobos 2011).

As one would expect, *Ultimate* upholds Nintendo's painstakingly maintained image as a squeaky-clean company that has long sought to counter – or at least to exempt its own properties from – claims of gaming's corrupting influence on children (see Lauteria 2015). Today Nintendo specialises in selling parents a vision of gameplay as wholesome digital 'kinwork' (Sinanan and Hjorth 2018), capable of bringing families together. Games like *Ultimate* promise older gamers 'an engagement with the mythical child within' and gamer parents the opportunity to relive early encounters with Mario, Pikachu *et al* through the eyes of their offspring, creating a 'relay... between adult, child, past and present' (Kirkland 2017, 255-6).

FUR AND FETISHISM

It is hard, by contrast, to imagine anyone wanting to play *Sonic Movie Maker* with their parents. Part of *Sonic Dreams Collection*, a suite of minigames masquerading as late 1990s Dreamcast prototypes, it riffs on the *Sonic* franchise's awkward transition

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to 3D and what Alexander (2014) describes as Sonic's metamorphosis into 'an avatar of arrested development' and staple of 'furry porn, where fans seem to prefer to stick with the intriguing cartoons of their youth even as they exit childhood and develop adult tastes'. Foregrounding gaming culture's growing pains, the game evokes the 'queer child' whose gaming habits provide cause for parental alarm (Stockton 2017, 225-6) rather than Kirkland's awestruck 'mythical child within.' Thematically, it draws on 'vore' pornography, with its 'themes of dominance and submission... sexual attraction to unrealistically large or small people... pregnancy fetishes... humanoid animal involvement... and sexual cannibalism' (Lykins and Cantor 2013, 182).

One contributor to the game's Wikia (perhaps one of the game's developers) frames these vore trappings as metaphors for fandom and the 'uncomfortable questions about identity and self' it raises (Cartridge Culture 2015). This reading resonates with psychoanalytic theories of melancholia, wherein the 'pathological refusal to let the dead die' expresses itself in 'cannibalistic' fantasies of incorporating the deceased into one's own body (Berthin 2010, 89; Abraham and Torok 1994, 132). With its distended and distorted bodies, piled in jiggling heaps or nested inside one another matryoshka-style, *Sonic Dreams Collection* links fannish nostalgia to the melancholic's refusal to let go. Unlike *Ultimate*, wherein each asset has its place, here familiar characters stick in the craw and clamour for release.

SICK, SEXY

With its grotesque scenes of bodies in labour (Sonic birthing Tails, Rouge expelling players into a giant playpen through her colon) *Sonic Dreams Collection* also gestures towards the labour of game development, a subject central to *Oikospiel*. Where *Sonic Dreams Collection* evokes Freud's discussions of sexual fetishism, Kanaga cleaves closer to Marx's account of commodity fetishism. Spinning a tale about a team of dogs contracted to make a videogame by an exploitative boss, the game uses assets drawn from Unity's asset store. As Kanaga acknowledges, such amenities represent 'years or decades of saved time... mak[ing] it possible to employ a virtual AAA labor force very quickly' – but devaluing developer labour in the process (pipkin 2017). Where developers usually attempt to disguise such borrowing (or risk incurring the wrath commonly directed at so-called 'asset flips') *Oikospiel* incorporates familiar assets (*Zelda*'s deku tree, Diddy Kong) into hallucinatorily heterogeneous tableaux, using clashing styles and incongruous scales to draw attention to games' seams while affirming what Kanaga sees as the necessity of 'fight[ing] back against copyright law, which favors big players' like Nintendo (idem.).

Here questions of nostalgia, intellectual property law and digital creativity assume an anthropocenic cast. Like *Garry's Mod* (Newman 2004), which Nelson (2018) proposes as one answer to Abraham and Jayemanne's (2017) question 'where are all the climate change games?', *Oikospiel* is 'game made of games' (Nelson 2017). Where, however, Nelson finds the culture of *Garry's Mod* to be largely (if not entirely) 'devoid of subversive or emancipatory potential' (ibid. 11) I argue that *Oikospiel* is prepared to countenance the prospect of brighter futures – provided that digital culture can recognise the melancholy core of its nostalgia and acknowledge what has already been lost.

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