The Perils of Nostalgia: Starcraft Remastered and our repackaged past

Opinion

August 15, 2017

by Eron Rauch

When it was first coined in the 17th century, nostalgia was described as a disease. Today, it's spread all over mass media, including games.

Here at a beach in Busan, South Korea—or "the Mecca of esports," as its mayor calls it—a throng of fans with glowing thundersticks gather as the sun sets. Skyscrapers studded with crawling LED lights are visible in the distance as arcing spotlights land on the sprawling stage to illuminate the salmon pink suits, white pants, and bellowed introduction: "Tonight we are going to play *StarCraft* like ten years ago! It is exactly the same! We're going to repeat the glory... Even the generation that wasn't born back then— anyone can play this game!" The fans stand and shout back. Twitch chat is spamming memes like a racing heartbeat. As this launch event for the re-release of *StarCraft Remastered* kicks off in earnest, the bearded English-language casters bellow "What we know of as esports started here!" as a host of famous players line up to play their historic grudge matches.

But what's the point of this hype? Why spend all this time and money trotting out these celebrities aging past the threshold of the 12-34 target demographic for a few show matches at a beach resort? Why the global media push to show off simple features like zoom and a 16:9 aspect ratio, bracketed onto game two decades old? Why glorify a few thousand PC cafes in Korea by giving them exclusivity for two weeks before releasing this game to all the rest of the global consumers? In the era of Steam sales, who even makes players walk to a neon-lit corner storefront and pay by-the-hour to play a videogame?

ZOOM Scene from the *StarCraft Remastered* event in Busan, South Korea.

If you only listened to the PR spiel, it would make this all sound like a triumphant return. Yet leaving aside the past-prime celebrities, looking beyond the misty memories of early esports, and despite incredible revenue, the Blizzard part of Blizzard-Activision is not even close to being the leader in esports that it was during the heyday of Korean *StarCraft*.

Blizzard is wrestling with a stalled league launch of what should have been the biggest esport in a decade with its other fast-paced science fiction game, *Overwatch*. The company has a highly successful esport card game that infamously siphons away *StarCraft* players to *Hearthstone* ("Hi!" Artosis). Blizzard's MOBA, *Heroes of the Storm*, which also uses many *StarCraft* characters, is limping along but never came anywhere close challenging the market dominance of *DotA2* and *League of Legends*. This is to say nothing of the direct sequel of *StarCraft*, called *StarCraft 2*, which has been steadily losing clout as a force in competitive videogaming for the last few years.

As excited as I am to see true legends like Flash, Bisu, and Jaedong play each other on a sprawling, flamethrower-studded stage that evokes the glory days of Korean pro-gaming kitsch, when I look at it from an outsider's perspective, I can't for the life of me fathom why Blizzard thinks the answer to the gaps in its esports portfolio is "more and older *StarCraft*." I never even played the original *StarCraft*. Hell, I didn't even play a real time strategy game until *StarCraft 2*, which was released 13 years after the original. Nonetheless, for some damn reason, I feel a strong pull into imagining that I have a fondness for those good ol' days of *StarCraft* glory.

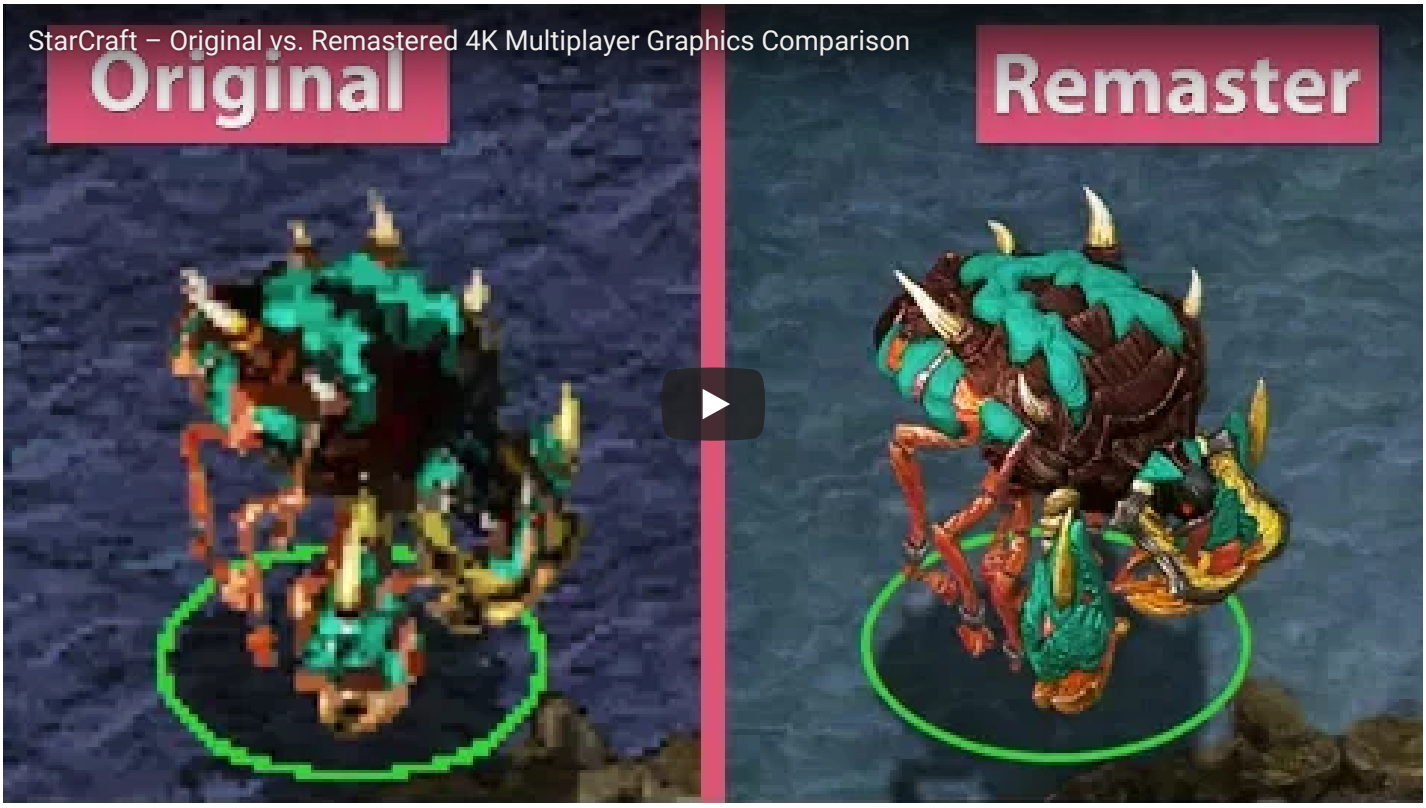
ZOOM

Despite lacking a personal history with the game, the showcase event for *StarCraft Remastered* still made me really hyped up. So my ultimate question is: how is it that I can have a powerful nostalgia for a time and place I was utterly absent from, and unaware of, at the time it happened? My fascination with the whole celebration around the release of this game, stems from a belief that I can catch a glimpse of the answer there. During these hours of unfettered hype and nostalgia for *StarCraft Remastered*, with its 1080p recreations of famous rivalries, you can see something happening that goes beyond a longing for a simpler past. When the announcer yells "We're going to repeat the glory!" while a dazzling array of HD projection mapped screens twirl the product's updated logo, you can see something much more specific: the production of pre-packaged nostalgia that comes with its own artificial past for people who, like me, never experienced that past.

We are in a present filled with relentless reproductions of the past clamoring for our approval.

Just look at the fervor for mini Super Nintendo systems, endless Metrovania platformers, and interminable reboots of dead franchises. Here is an imagined-but-potent mythologized past we can long for together (and buy). Videogames are hardly the only perpetrators here. Just take a glance at the movies or TV and you'll have even more of these mutant re-remembered products with things like *Ready Player One*, *Spider Man*, and *Stranger Things*. We are in a present filled with relentless reproductions of the past clamoring for our approval. Like a Space Marine surrounded by Roaches that, instead of acid, are spewing ever more detailed variations of our past, we are surrounded with a forever regurgitated now. Look, you can zoom in now and really see the new smoother animation of the puking!

Let's step aside from nexuses and spawning pools a moment and talk a bit about the underlying force at work: nostalgia. Coined in 1688 by medical student Johannes Hofer, the faux-Greek term originally referred to a physical illness. Specifically, it referred to an intensely painful longing for absent, distant things, such as a hometown or a summer-past. The symptoms Hofer described were bizarrely broad, including loss of appetite, bowel problems, and lesions, but the end result was always a withering away into a passive death owing to "afflicted imagination."



During the American Civil War, nostalgia outbreaks were common. But in the decades following, as conceptions of psychology and mental health developed into a distinct medical field, nostalgia starts to disappear as a disease. Most of its pathological aspects were folded into other illnesses like depression and what would come to be called PTSD. It was during the World Wars, coincidentally commensurate with the rise of modern consumer culture (such charted in works such as *Century of Self*), that nostalgia starts to have the meaning we now know.

According to a coalition of researchers who surveyed the phenomena in a paper titled "Nostalgia Past, Present, and Future," our current definition of nostalgia has "the self almost invariably figured as the protagonist in the narratives and was almost always surrounded by close others. In all, the canvas of nostalgia is rich, reflecting themes of selfhood, sociality, loss, redemption, and ambivalent, yet mostly positive, affectivity."

My initial interest in the origins of nostalgia comes from wondering how this meticulously produced *StarCraft* re-release event lured me into thinking I was part of an imaginary but attractively gilt vision of esports past. While our individual experience of recollecting bitter-sweet re-imaginations of the past with ourselves as the main focus might be "mostly positive," nostalgia is increasingly leveraged to influence citizens and consumers. This is made explicit in Svetlana Boym's work on the political history of nostalgia. She explicitly examines how different kinds of nostalgia are now used by leaders and institutions to influence the way its citizens view the past and act toward the future.

ZOOM *Starcraft*, just like you remember, with more fire.

One of Boym's key general observations is that: "In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time as space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition."

Boym makes a subtle distinction between two kinds of modern nostalgia at work in the world. "Restorative nostalgia," she writes, "is at the core of recent national and religious revivals. It knows two main plots—the return to origins and the conspiracy." The other type, reflective nostalgia, "does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones. It loves details, not symbols."

Boym's description for restorative nostalgia has implications not just for our current political climate but the particular ways nostalgia-blinded, macho, self-aggrandizing "gamers" cling to a fundamentalist vision on the videogame community. Continuing with her observations about those who use manufactured nostalgia to rile up their supporters, Boym is incredibly clear in her warning that "the danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home with an imaginary one. In extreme cases, it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unelected nostalgia breeds monsters."

"The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home with an imaginary one." - Svetlana Boym

Radical icon Angela Davis has also made some relevant observations about the dangers of commercialized nostalgia's ability to suppress political history. In her classic essay "Afro Images Nostalgia," Davis sees how her iconic hair style, and African American protest history in general, is being increasingly co-opted as a nostalgic fashion statement, one which pushes aside any political lineage and "effectively erased [its history] by its use as a prop for selling clothes and promoting a seventies fashion nostalgia." What is particularly troubling to Davis is how readily we seem willing to cede our memory of history to endless recreations by massive for-profit corporations, "encourag[ing] the atrophy of such memory."

ZOOM

Whether it is erasing the contribution of women, LGBTQ, and people of color to computer science and videogames, or the nationalist online meme engine's asinine claims that women can't be real gamers, these are the very "atrophied memories" that Davis warns of. Faux-golden ages (filled with dangerously exclusive shadows) that are training grounds for a nostalgic attitude, available for pre-purchase for only $14.99. It's hard not to look at these sorts of massive spectacles of repackaged history and see neon lights flashing: "Tune in to the stream for a sneak peak of your more glorious imagined past!"

But one of the oddest things in texts about nostalgia is a constant caveat. In one way or another, almost every researcher, historian, and philosopher suggests that nostalgia contains the seeds of its own transcendence. The suggestion seems to be that variants of reflective (as opposed to restorative) nostalgia has potential to reconnect us with the past and thus expand our imagination of the future.

These are the very "atrophied memories" that Angela Davis warns of.

Angela Davis wraps up her essay by invoking British art historian John Berger, quoting: "The living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history." Indeed, when you look at personal histories, they can reveal curious details that would have otherwise remained hidden, such as the prevalence of women's esports teams prior to social media.

Even Boym, one of political nostalgia's harshest critics, states: "In the end, the only antidote for the dictatorship of nostalgia might be nostalgic dissidence. Nostalgia can be a poetic creation, an individual mechanism of survival, a countercultural practice, a poison, and a cure. It is up to us to take responsibility of our nostalgia and not let others 'prefabricate' it for us."

ZOOM The *Remastered* event contained video from Starcraft's last big stage in 2004.

What "nostalgic dissidence" might look like in the realm of videogames, I have no clue. And I certainly don't feel like any nostalgia-filled *StarCraft Remastered* tournament is the alpha nor omega of this conversation. But there are some interesting hints for how we might try to work through these dictatorial attempts to control our desired past, looking at Jason Feifer's attempt to pinpoint when "The Good Ol' Days" actually were so good over at Slate.

We could all spend a little more time discerning which memories of the past are seeded by people trying to influence us.

Feifer's work shows that those of us, like myself, who struggle against the abuses of longing for a manufactured past can accidentally be callous toward the common and sometimes usefully idiosyncratic attachments to the pasts of other people. As he points out, "Americans have their work cut out for them, pointing to a future that's worth embracing over the past... and it won't be accomplished just by disproving the golden age. But if we can all be a little more aware of the stories we tell, and why we tell them, then at least that's a start."

For every corporate paean about *StarCraft* being the greatest esport, there are thousands of people remembering a diverse and complex version of their individual past. We could all spend a little more time discerning which memories of the past are seeded by people trying to influence us, and which memories of the past contain hidden revelations that might suggest a better future. So while I have every reason to be disgusted by the deluge prefabricated nostalgia that politicians and companies try to hawk to my malleable sense of the past, let's not forget that that very capacity to imagine also allows us to share and calibrate our memories to build a richer future.

#	STARCRAFT (SERIES)
#	ESPORTS
#	STARCRAFT REMASTERED

RELATED READING

Japan's best Dragon Ball FighterZ player grabs top title with a near-flawless victory

ICYMI: Pokken just crowned its first American world champion

ICYMI: Dota 2's esports scene has turned into a real-life sports anime

5 games you missed in August

Opinion: Against games using dead kids as plot devices

READ MORE OPINION

Featured Sites

Wowhead
Lolking
TF2Outpost
DayZDB
Hearthhead

Database Sites

Wowhead
Lolking

Addon Sites

MMOUI
WowInterface
ESOUI

About

About ZAM
Advertise with us
Privacy Policy
Terms of service