

“We could call it a homecoming, or homeward bound maybe?”: The disappearing home in *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* (2024)

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explore the way that nostalgia in videogames is dependent on an unassailable lack in the player, that can be revealed or intensified by their experience with nostalgic texts. I turn to *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* (Square Enix Creative Business Unit I, 2024), which, in its capacity as the remake of a well loved game, comments on how the player’s desire for homecoming precipitates the dissolution of home and the fragmentation of self on encountering their object of desire.

Going against the well-known argument that nostalgia in the culture industries terminates our subjective and political imagination (Jameson 1998; Fisher 2009), recent scholarship in game studies suggests that the self of the past can be recuperated and stabilised, either through returning to the texts of the past (Robinson and Bowman 2022; Toft-Nielsen 2019), or engaging with those that evoke it (Sloan 2016; Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020; Waszkiewicz and Tyminska 2024). While these attempts to rehabilitate nostalgia are useful, their emphasis on the apparent stability of the subject and the past obscures the homesickness that defines nostalgia, and which makes it so experientially and conceptually interesting. With retrogaming, the abundance of games deploying the styles of the past, and the industrial preoccupation with remakes, nostalgic texts have never been so plentiful, and yet player thirst for nostalgia has not abated. It would appear that players’ want for nostalgic texts demonstrates less their desire to overcome their homesickness, than to intensify the yearning for something they feel they’ve lost and cannot recover.

Rebirth is a remake that is uncommonly determined to confront the player with issues of fate and the pains of returning to the familiar. To properly account for it, and to restore the critical ambivalence to gaming nostalgia, I perform a textual analysis of *Rebirth* through scholarship on nostalgia, desire, and homecoming. Contrary to the promise of the past as a thing that can simply be returned to, Janet Donohoe (2016) argues the act of homecoming reveals the temporal discontinuity between the image of the past and its reality, thus exposing the homecomer to the not-at-home-ness of their being (171). Writers on nostalgia such as Susan Stewart (1992) insist the nostalgic enjoys yearning, and so desires the absence that sustains nostalgia rather

than the object to extinguish it (23). For psychoanalysts like Mari Ruti (2018), all subjects believe they've lost something unfathomably precious (*das Ding*), and it's from this absence that all desire emerges (118). According to Ruti, the objects most precious to us are the ones closest to this lost Thing, and thereby intensify our lack and induce subjective turmoil (114). Brendan Keogh (2014) writes on memory as an obstacle to subjective coherence, and Benjamin Nicoll (2024) explains how these to all appearances painful revelations (non-belonging, lack, failure) are made manageable, and even enjoyable, in videogame play. By attending to the remake through these insights, we can chart the ways that absence is the precondition for our being homeward bound, and the thing that makes the image of the past so valuable.

I find that *Rebirth* stages itself as a series of painful homecomings for its characters, and for the player, who is also returning to the familiar via the remake. Each homecoming draws the player's attention to a different obstacle between them and the past they think they desire: memory, time, and death. Whenever one of these obstacles is removed by the game, the object of the past is emptied of the qualities that made it desirable in the first place. Through the play of obstacles then, *Rebirth* keeps nostalgic longing alive while also providing the player the ability to muse on the critical role that absence plays in their desire.

Rebirth suggests that players' attempts to extinguish homesickness through nostalgic texts (whether of the past or just evoking it) is a necessary ruse to experience the homesickness they really enjoy. This means that, when analysing games that players return to, or which offer a sense of homecoming, it's important to note that it's the absence of home that's desired, and not desire's abatement.

BIO

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