

# Loud, Pretty, Dumb, and Useless: The Rise of Internet Nostalgia

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## **Prologue: Happy Days Are Here Again**

*Don't you ever fear, I'm always near...and that's for all of time...*  
“Buddy Holly” by Weezer

### **Fall 1975**

In September 1975, the third season of the television series *Happy Days* premiered. The show's third season was a pivotal one, as it saw the series begin an upward trajectory in ratings and popularity that would culminate in spending multiple seasons as the top show on network television and attaining a place in television history (Marcus, 2004). *Happy Days* marked the first significant treatment of nostalgia in television. That is not to say that *Happy Days* was the first show set in the past or the first show to call upon forms from the past. Rather, *Happy Days* was television's first articulation of a postmodern approach to nostalgia – an approach to nostalgia that focuses on an audience's relationship with a past that the audience experienced through technologically mediated popular culture texts (Jameson, 1991). When *Happy Days* began, television was only about 20 years into its existence as a popular consumer technology. So the 1970s was really the first decade when it would have been possible for a television show to air that depicted an era that a living audience had previously had mediated to it via television. *Happy Days*, then, is a critical turning point in the union between technology and nostalgia.

### **Fall 1995**

Two decades after *Happy Days* began its ascent to icon status and began to reshape television as a media form with a maturing sense of its own history, another cultural and technological revolution began. In August 1995, Microsoft released Windows 95. Volumes have likely been written on the impact of Windows 95 on numerous aspects of the development of the internet and the emergence of digital culture. Unlike the case of *Happy Days* and television, though, Windows 95 and personal computing really had no significant history as a broadly popular

consumer technology in 1995. The internet was not legally defined until 1995 and personal computing and digital culture were just in their infancy in the mid-90s (Isaccson, 2014). In other words, Windows 95 can be seen as something more like the *I Love Lucy* of the digital revolution.

Window 95 also included the music video for the mid-90s hit “Buddy Holly” by Weezer, marking the first use of integrated video playback on an operating system (Kinskey, 2014). The video was itself somewhat unique in that it interspersed footage of the band performing the song with footage from *Happy Days* in a way that made it seem as if the song, which references 1950s popular culture personalities, was being performed in 1950s Wisconsin as portrayed in a 1970s television show. On the one hand, it’s a pretty standard postmodern weaving of temporal appropriation (Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001). On the other hand, it is somewhat interesting that for all its future shock, Windows 95 felt a need to lean into nostalgia in such a multi-layered way. It is almost as if Microsoft sensed the scope of all it would become heir to.

This, however, is a different kind of nostalgia than the type discussed in the previous section because it does not involve a technological form reacting to its own history by re-enacting an era that audience members experienced through that technology. In 1995, the soon-to-explode computer and internet industry was not yet a technological form with the lifespan for the particular and more pervasive type of nostalgia described in the relationship between *Happy Days* and television. That kind of thing takes time. That time has now come, though, and that is what this essay is about.

### **Overview**

This essay argues that the aesthetic and business practices that seem to be driving the technology industry are not taking into account the growing appetite for a valid, purposeful, non-ironic use of nostalgia in technology. Audiences will usually tell you what they want. And if

media industries have resisted audience demands in the past it could perhaps reasonably be attributed to the time lag involved in receiving audience feedback. Such is not the case in a Web 2.0 environment. User-generated content suggests a growing interest in nostalgia on the internet (Higson, 2013). Various social media sites are routinely populated with content labeled as “Wayback Wednesday,” “Throwback Thursday,” or “Flashback Friday.” The emergence of the “listicle” as a legitimized form of digital content (Okrent, 2014) has provided users with an opportunity to archive and curate according to their own definitions of social significance. This type of digital curation is a form of participatory culture that exposes schisms between “unofficial” and “official” ordering and valuation of culturally significant texts (Burgess & Green, 2009). One of the most popular types of listicles are those that deal in mid-90s and early aughts nostalgia (Tandoc, 2017). Another specific type of nostalgia has to do with web design and aesthetics from that era. Appendix A features a screenshot that outlines some results from an internet search on the topic.

There are many other trends related to nostalgia in various corners of digital culture. Examples such as retrogaming, nostalgia websites, and the revival of a variety of older franchises on video streaming platforms (not to mention the proliferation of time travel stories in television and film) are just a few examples. Some of these are more directly related to specifically digital technology than others. But all of these examples, and others, point to a particular focus on nostalgia as a part of computer, internet, and technological industries and cultures. Taken together, they mark the *Happy Days* moment for digital culture.

This is actually a fairly predictable and common evolution of any technological form. Nostalgia, for all its ideological implications and tensions, is a common and logical outcome of popular culture, media, and technology (Reynolds, 2011). While the idea of internet nostalgia is

perhaps being treated as something unique and ironic, it is a completely natural outcome when contextualized as part of the corporatization and industrialization of the internet. But whether the technological and aesthetic forces that drive the industry are listening is another matter altogether.

At this point it is necessary to qualify what does and does not count as the type of nostalgia this essay is interested in. The operational definition used here relies on the postmodern conceptualization of nostalgia (Jameson, 1991) to define “internet nostalgia” as nostalgia that is limited to texts, forms, aesthetics, or other form of content that existed during the internet age or that attempts to place the development of contemporary technology into some sort of historical context. That’s a tricky scope. Does the “Gilmore Girls” revival qualify? Yes. How about a playlist of ‘90s songs? That’s on the border. Phil Collins had a top 10 hit in 1990. Jessica Simpson had one in 1999. Jessica Simpson has an Instagram account. Phil Collins will only be seen on Instagram if his daughter posts a picture with him. How about a website that archives and comments on pop culture from the 70s and 80s? No. That is because the cultural artifacts it nostalgizes did not exist in the era of the internet. How about series such as *Stranger Things* or *Halt and Catch Fire*? Probably. That is because, even though they are set in the pre-digital era of the 80s, they comment upon the development of technology in ways that comment upon contemporary technological dilemmas.

This attention to scope is important for two reasons. First, the blurriness demonstrates how internet nostalgia is itself a developing, somewhat infant idea and field of study. Second, the difficulty of clarifying internet nostalgia demonstrates a subversive, clandestine tendency of internet nostalgia that can understandably make it difficult for various pocket of the technology industry to fully appreciate how important a robust use of nostalgia will be going forward.

## **Minimalism Meets Its Match**

It sounds like a good idea. Use just what is necessary for a system to function. That statement seems to sum up the principles of minimalism (Babauta, 2009). In particular, minimalist web design principles have been used to increase user-responsiveness and to maximize performance, all under the guise of an artistic movement (Obendorf, 2009). Commentary on the rise of minimalist web design in the past decade or so highlights a variety of themes and trends. Google is credited as an early pioneer of minimalism in web design (Meyer, 2015), an artistic choice that seems to fit the search engine's early ethos of honesty and earnestness (Hoofnagle, 2009). Minimalism began to infiltrate mobile technologies when the I-Phone abandoned its early skeumorphic design (Stark & Crawford, 2015), a decision that coincided with Steve Jobs' death. Some scholars have even argued that minimalism has an ideological component that challenges the capitalist imperative of the technology industry (Rodriguez, 2017).

What we see, then, is that minimalism is not some foregone conclusion. Nor is its claim to functionality an objective or empirical assertion. It is not some inevitable approach to web design (or other artistic endeavors). Its development is contextual and situated amid a variety of technological, economic, and cultural factors that are particular to what corresponds to roughly the second decade of the development of digital culture. As is often the case with any school of thought, though, it seems as if technology corporations and designers have assigned it the status of self-perpetuating dogma or gospel.

Even minimalism's central practical benefit, making things easier for users, is riddled with some important qualifications that need to be examined. First, minimalism developed in web design during a time when users were still learning how to navigate new digital technologies. Imagine if someone from the 60s, 70s, or even the 80s were asked to navigate today's television

sets. Of course they would be confused. But if we were sent back to that era, we would likely find the televisions to be frustratingly void of function, style, and character. Minimalism is arguably needed when technologies are being learned by a culture. But as that time passes and technological literacy increases, so too does the need for minimalism. Second, making things easier is often lost in favor of adhering to, and extending, the principle of minimalism for the sake of minimalism (Meyer, 2015). Nowhere in all this, by the way, does there seem to be any attention paid to whether consumers preferred minimalism as an aesthetic in the first place. It is completely possible any attraction was more practical than artistic. Minimalism, then, believes its own hype.

As the third decade of digital culture dawns, we see what can be taken as a reaction against minimalist web design in the growing popularity of internet nostalgia. Early web aesthetics, after all, were anything but minimalist. The screenshot in appendix A highlights not only some design elements from the Garden of Eden days of web design, but also emphasize a particular attitude toward this particular brand of nostalgia. Language like “genuinely miss,” “reasons to be,” and “misty-eyed” suggest an emotional pull for internet nostalgia and not some functional or performance related motivation.

Further, it is worth noting that the ideology of any artistic movement shifts. Minimalism may indeed be a reaction against capitalism (Rodriguez, 2017). That is, of course, until large capitalist corporations like Google and Apple institutionalize minimalism. There have been a variety of similar reactions to and against “style” vs. “function” throughout the history of any number of art forms (Kellner, 2016). When blue collar, functional, austerity becomes a tool of the elite class, then historically we see a desire for a return to something grounded in some kind of louder, flashier aesthetic. Bakhtin (1941) developed the concept of the carnivalesque as spectacle to

account for this politically redemptive power of what might be considered low culture and the concept has been applied to a variety of important cultural forms such as rock music (Halnon, 2004), contemporary television (Hughes-Fuller, 2009), and professional wrestling (Canella, 2016).

The carnivalesque and spectacle can take a variety of particular forms. At its core, though, is a sense that it's something lowbrow, gaudy, and transgressive (McLean & Wallace, 2013). Early web design aesthetics featured a variety of principles and practices that can be seen as fitting with the parameters of the carnivalesque. Splash pages, rounded and shaded buttons, animated GIFs, website mascots, stock imagery, large Comic Sans fonts, and other obtrusive elements come to mind as just a few examples. It would be easy to dismiss any desire for a return to such trends as being ironic or simply grounded in an appreciation for the kitsch aesthetic. Such explanations avoid the political and social impulse that nearly always grounds trends in nostalgia (Cite 10). Indeed, there really is no such thing as irony in nostalgia. Rather, claims of ironic appreciation are simply efforts to deflect the political impulse behind nostalgia (Fritzsche, 2001).

The tension between current minimalist web design practices and the brewing desire for internet nostalgia suggests the coming of an ideological clash over dominant technological forms. And it's nothing new. Television was dealing with these kinds of issues in the eras of *Happy Days*, *That 70s Show*, and *Mad Men* (Niemeyer, 2014). Film has dealt with it in numerous eras and contexts (Monk, 2011). Radio has struggled mightily with these issues several times over, but most recently during their attempts to weather the storm of streaming audio (Roesnner, 2016). The first blast of nostalgia for a technological form is perhaps the hardest. It forces a technology or a media form to confront its own history and the limitations of its development to date. It is a moment of crisis and, typically, a moment of reinvention.

Of course, the case of internet nostalgia indicates a flaw in the aesthetic logic of web design – its tendency to try to attach the functional necessity of a particular moment as an artistic choice. In purely artistic forms perhaps minimalism can be a purely aesthetic choice or preference. But in the case of web design it was, at least in part, about what was needed at a particular moment of technological capabilities and user literacy. The emerging turn toward internet nostalgia seems to leave open the possibility that the utility of minimalism is passing because the internet and its associated technologies are evolving. As such, the continued focus on minimalist design principles seems to suggest that the technology industries will be stubborn in adapting to any changing aesthetic preferences of its audiences and to the reality that those preferences constantly change and evolve.

### **90s Babies Strike Back**

The previous section examined how the failure of web designers and technological corporations to adapt to the emerging internet nostalgia serves as an example of aesthetic shortsightedness. There is also a business component to consider when examining the topic of internet nostalgia. For all the political and cultural possibilities of nostalgia, it is also a tendency of popular culture that smart businesses have figured out how to commodify (Sloan, 2015). *Happy Days*, after all, sold a lot of ad time and still sells DVD sets today. To say Hollywood has profited nicely from nostalgia in the past decade would be a comical understatement.

Popular music has proven particularly adept at repackaging its past and reselling it. And, unlike television networks that show reruns and sell DVD sets or movie studios that remake or reboot old stories, popular music manages to integrate forms from the past into its contemporary products. In that way, popular music is to understanding the business side of internet nostalgia what the relationship between *Happy Days* and television is to understanding the overall

inevitability of internet nostalgia. Of course, popular music repackages its old content in various self-contained ways. But what is also done quite nicely is reintroduce it into contemporary culture.

Popular music does this in a variety of ways. Contemporary pop music, for example not only borrows heavily from popular music from several earlier decades, but it also acknowledges these influences rather than running from them (Shuker, 2016). For example, Katy Perry has openly commented on and celebrated the intentional 80s and 90s influences in both her music and in her concert experiences (Woods, 2013). A variety of artists also reference bygone eras in various ways in titles or promotional material. Some prominent examples from the past few years include: Taylor Swift's "1989" album, the Neon Trees single "1983", the Maren Morris song "80s Mercedes" (with its double-barreled nostalgic chorus of: "I'm a 90s baby in my 80s Mercedes"), or the cover art for Adele's "When We Were Young" which features an elementary school picture of the singer.

Popular music also saturates the soundtracks of contemporary popular culture with retro and nostalgic music. Some prominent examples include the use of 80s and 90s music in various commercials, the ironic use of 80s easy listening standards "You're the Inspiration" and "Careless Whisper" in the *Deadpool* film series, or the critically praised (Williams, 2016) use of music from 1987 in the *Black Mirror* episode "San Junipero." Popular music, then, doesn't seek to reestablish or recapture the past. Nor does it isolate its old content to some self-contained corner for older people. Rather, it supplements contemporary technological, discursive, and cultural contexts with flourishes and strokes of nostalgia that serve to broaden meaning and symbolic structure. Whether this approach would be considered "functional" or not probably

depends on the degree to which one sees meaning as a part of function. It is also perhaps only non-minimalist to the degree that layers of meaning are not “essential” to discourse.

Such a model that can provide some insight into how internet nostalgia, with all its presumably laughable carnivalesque tendencies, might co-exist beside the functional practicality of minimalism. There are some aspects of internet and digital culture that lean into nostalgia in such a way. Retrogaming is one example. Serving as a form of entertainment and a central element of digital archiving and preservation (Guttenbrunner, Becker, & Rauber, 2010), retrogaming encompasses a variety of technologies and cultural strategies.

The rise of retrogaming as a subculture not only provides a sense of scope and depth to the evolution of video gaming, it also demonstrates that forms from a technology’s formative years can still offer significant revenue streams. It’s also worth noting that older video games were certainly not minimalist in the aesthetic and academic sense of the term. Older games might pale in comparison to what is possible in video games today. But, in their bid to entertain children being raised on the quick cut aesthetic of MTV, they were certainly concerned with more than utilitarian approaches to function. They were arguably replete with all the bells and whistles available to them at the time. They could also be complex to navigate and perhaps have idiosyncrasies that might seem odd to contemporary audiences. Indeed, the look and experience of many older games could be said to fit some parameters of the carnivalesque. In other words, the rise of retrogaming demonstrates that, in fact, function or even responsive ease of use is not the sole interest of consumers of technology.

Retrogaming also exists alongside contemporary games and many video game players move back and forth between retrogaming and playing new games as a means of contextualizing gaming history (Wade & Webber, 2016). Retrogaming, then, demonstrates that consumers of

technology are, in fact, interested in interacting with, preserving, and reinterpreting the history of technology. This type of activity is not nearly as possible when minimalist design and brute function are the driving imperatives of technology. We see similar historically based uses of technology (Gladney, 2006) at play in various forms of digital curating on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. They may take the form of academic discussions on digital curating (Burgess & Green, 2009; Jenkins, 2006) or they may take the form of “throwback” and “wayback” days of the week on social media. Whatever the context, we see a desire of audiences and consumers to utilize technology in ways that foreground history even if it means losing some functionality or minimalist aesthetic.

It is also worth noting that we are seeing a bit of a trend toward peripheral devices that, in fact, are not based on the minimalist dictate of using minimum resources. Further, many of these peripherals offer either a nostalgic appeal or a functionality that extends beyond the use of the technology itself. Beats headphones serve as an example of a product that is arguably overpriced and doesn't necessarily offer the best product experience. Yet it is an amazingly popular peripheral. According to the dictates of minimalism, there should be a litany of reasons for consumers to eschew Beats headphones. They're bigger than they need to be. The sound quality, at least for the price, is not necessarily superior. Why do you need different colors of headphones? What does a famous spokesperson have to do with functionality? These issues reflect a consumer interest, for better or worse, in something other than functionality and minimalist design in technology.

There are also phone speakers shaped like old telephones or keyboards that look and work like old typewriters that are currently on the market. There are music players that look like record players. Some can even play actual records via the use of virtual turntables. The design

for this particular product has been simultaneously lauded for its technological ingenuity and looked at with appalled handwringing for its focus on reviving vinyl records (Gartenberg, 2017). Because, you know, vinyl is not the most minimalist, functional, efficient way to listen to music. And the geeks can't have that.

Indeed, Apple has received backlash for its attempt to take an approach to headphones that is both minimalist and technologically advanced. The I-Phone 7 did away with the headphone jack, thus leaving wireless headphones as the default option. This set off a debate among the tech press. On the plus side, doing away with wires and another port on the phone adheres to a minimalist philosophy as such elements no longer constitute the minimum tools necessary to achieve sound reproduction. Still, the reception was less than overwhelming. This case demonstrates how technology industries seem slavish to the dictates of minimalism without understanding that there is more to the experience of technology than function. Humans, after all, use whatever technology is created. And there is more to the human experience than just the essentials.

### **Conclusion**

*The kids are disco dancing; they're tired of rock and roll  
Don't bother telling them that drum machine ain't got no soul*  
"Internet Killed the Video Star" by The Limousines

Lost in the sea of the current focus on minimalism in both technology and web design, then, is the seeming inability to question whether consumers want only function. For all the symmetry between the development of the internet and the development of other forms of media such as television and popular music, perhaps the focus on functionality is unique to the contemporary technology industry. After all, its roots seem more removed from art or pre-existing media histories than other prominent technologies. The name Silicon Valley itself implies both

something synthetic and an area that is between and removed from other geographies. Perhaps the very artificiality that the early critics of digital culture lamented (Wilhelm, 2000) is responsible for the hyper focus on utility that seems to plague contemporary technological innovation and design. But the last of the Luddites perhaps turned off the lights and closed the door without ever fully anticipating the natural trajectory of any technology. Within that trajectory consumers gain some level of power at some point. And history is littered with examples of consumers liking stuff that is loud, pretty, dumb, and useless.

Audiences will tell you what they want. This essay demonstrates that there are signs that consumers of digital culture are beginning to speak up in favor of internet nostalgia and an approach to technology that goes beyond minimalism and functionality. The trend toward internet nostalgia is both part of a natural evolution of most forms of technology and media and a signifier that current trends in internet aesthetics have run their course. The trend toward technology that functions in ways that are not purely functional is sending a message that, if not heeded, could lead to missed revenue opportunities for technology industries. This category of trends are somewhat grounded in nostalgia as well but they also point to an evolving consumer base, which is natural considering that there are now adult consumers who have never known a world that was non-digital. Of course, everything runs in cycles. So hang in there minimalist nerds. In another decade or two there will be a nostalgic yearning for your style.

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## Appendix A

### 21 internet scenarios from the 90s and early 00s that will make you ...

[home.bt.com/.../internet/20-internet-scenarios-from-the-90s-and-early-00s-that-will-m...](http://home.bt.com/.../internet/20-internet-scenarios-from-the-90s-and-early-00s-that-will-m...) ▼

Oct 14, 2016 - #90sInternet Let's get nostalgic for a moment, and Tweet stories about ... # random #bored lol downloading off the internet in the 90s... classic ...

### 10 Things We Genuinely Miss About '90s Internet, Because Nostalgia ...

<https://www.bustle.com/.../159061-10-things-we-genuinely-miss-about-90s-internet-b...> ▼

May 5, 2016 - Ah, the '90s. If there is one thing Millennials love, it's the '90s, and when it comes to things we miss about '90s Internet, it feels like the list could ...

### 9 Reasons To Be Nostalgic About the Early Internet - Gizmodo

[gizmodo.com/9-reasons-to-be-nostalgic-about-the-early-internet-1659312938](http://gizmodo.com/9-reasons-to-be-nostalgic-about-the-early-internet-1659312938) ▼

Nov 16, 2014 - They grow up so fast, don't they? It just seems like yesterday that the internet was cruising at 56k speeds and loading horribly designed ...

### Why Nostalgia Has Taken Over the Internet | Time.com

[time.com/3455924/internet-nostalgia-social-media/](http://time.com/3455924/internet-nostalgia-social-media/) ▼

Oct 2, 2014 - Wanna feel old? The answer, according to more and more of the news and social media, is yes.

### Nostalgia - Reddit

<https://www.reddit.com/r/nostalgia/> ▼

reddit: the front page of the internet. ... Whether it's an old commercial or a book from your past, it belongs in */r/nostalgia*. Here we can take pleasure in ...

### A Brief Guide to Internet Nostalgia - VICE

<https://www.vice.com/.../netstalgia-future-laboratory-trend-forecasting-aol-early-inter...> ▼

May 25, 2012 - Hot new trend alert: Getting misty-eyed about how the internet used to be. The Future Laboratory are "trend forecasters". This means they are ...

### Memories from early 2000s internet will bring on the nostalgia – from ...

[metro.co.uk](http://metro.co.uk) › Lifestyle › 00s nostalgia ▼

May 24, 2016 - The internet has come a long way in a few short years that it has been a staple of our lives. Nowadays, the websites that we think are offensive ...

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