

## I Miss My Nintendo

by Sarah Hoeynck

Apparently, Millennials are nostalgic. This seems to be the consensus of every online magazine or culture blog. Although such a declaration is low-hanging fruit, it's not wrong. One need only watch a few episodes of the Duffer Brothers' *Stranger Things* (especially season 1) to see that many Americans born in the 1980s long to relive and revel in the glory days of their youth. When we could ride our bikes all around town. When we played wherever we wanted as long as we were back by dinner. When we built treehouses by the creek behind our friend's house. These memories have a hazy, VHS-quality filter over them—everything is genuine, but at the same time fuzzy enough for us to question if it was ever reality.

And I'm no exception to this nostalgia. The theme song to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* often plays in my head. I've gotten into heated discussions about all the ways you could die in Oregon Trail, about the superiority of original Nintendo over Super Nintendo, and about my preference for my Walkman over my Discman. I laugh with my friend Sarah when we remember her enormous brick of a cell phone or how we stretched our corded landline phones into tightropes to have a bit of privacy. Lately, whenever I pop in the tapes of my memories and hit play, I've come to realize that so many of them involve various quirky, unique gadgets. Yes, the 1980s and 90s were a magical time to be a kid because we had more physical freedom, more laidback parents, and less collective cultural anxiety, but it also seems like the emerging personal technology market played a HUGE part as well. And yet, the technology I'm talking about is very different from what children have in their hands today.

The more I watched these home movies in the head, the more I noticed the gadgets. They were everywhere!

Black matte and glitter pagers clipped to belt loops of stone washed jeans.

Giant cell phones like the one Zach Morris would whip out in *Saved by the Bell*.

Portable music players like my Sony Walkman or Discman—relics of the time when kids listened to albums and curated mix tapes.

Cordless and corded phones in all sorts of novelty shapes—I had a soccer ball.

A car phone jutting out of the center console of my uncle's fancy Buick.

A pink tape deck that was later replaced by a bubble-shaped CD player.

Polaroid cameras that catalogued a memorable Saturday night.

The godfathers of gaming consoles—dark gray and black Nintendo, purple and gray Super Nintendo, and super-sleek black Sega.

My Gameboy and the teeny cartridges I would inevitably lose, except for Kirby's Dreamland, my favorite.

Giant, boxy computer monitors accompanied by two-foot towers and floppy discs like Number Munchers, Chip and Dale Rescue Rangers, Carmen Sandiego, and Castle Wolfenstein.

A huge video camera perched on some dad's shoulder at elementary school Christmas pageants.

Enormous entertainment systems with ten different slots for your laser disc player, VCR, 5-Disc CD changer, audio amplifier, chunky speakers, tube TV, fifty remotes, and a place to perch your rabbit ears.

Not every kid had such goodies, but that's what sleepovers and play dates were for! With our *two* VCR's, my family would illegally record movies that we rented from Magic Video, and I

would proudly bring these bootlegs over to my friends' houses for epic movie nights. With the power of the SLP setting, I could get *three movies* on a single tape. Every time I went to my friend Lisa's, I got acquainted with Sonic the Hedgehog and those pointy remotes because I never owned a Sega Genesis. Another friend had a rocking hi-fi system and excellent taste in music, so she would make me mix-tapes from her dad's extensive vinyl and cassette collection.

If a sleepover was coming up, I looked forward to playing with these things at my friends' houses. And whenever I could contribute my own gadgets, from my pink tape deck to the newest version of Super Mario Brothers, pride filled my cheeks. Even as children, we had *ownership* over these things, and since so many of them were portable, we had freedom to take them from place to place and enjoy them. It was so exciting, being a kid and having this eclectic mix of entertainment and communication gizmos right at our fingertips. Whenever I remind my friends of all the different personal technology options we had access to as children, it's a hilarious conversation. At first, they're skeptical, but as I list the thingamajigs we owned, looks of amazement overtake their faces, usually followed by baffled laughter.

Even though the number of devices was insane, upon closer look, it wasn't necessarily an all-you-can-consume technology buffet. Analog ruled the 80s and most of the 90s, and the Internet was still a whisper. So, we were limited to one game cartridge per Christmas, one movie rental at Blockbuster, one album on one cassette, or one phone line (unless you were lucky enough to have parents who got call waiting). We simply didn't have a wealth of options. If you got frustrated and threw that Tetris cartridge against the wall, you couldn't download another game. If you chose poorly at Blockbuster, you were stuck with *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*. If you missed a phone call from Annie inviting you to see a movie because your sister was on the other line, then you were staying in that Friday night. Basically, the physical contraptions were many, but the content

and uses of each were few. Tangible things are fun to touch, but their tangibility, admittedly, makes them limited.

Our situation back then was the exact opposite of today. A few tech companies rule the world, and the gadgets have become fairly homogenous. Pretty much all phones, tablets, computers, and smart TVs—where we game, watch, talk, and work—are some version of a sleek, flat screen. But because everything is online, a tidal wave of choices and options hits consumers and kids every second of every day. We can call and talk to a thousand people at once on zoom or messenger. We can play any video game with any person halfway across the world. We can watch millions of possible TV shows—well, maybe not millions, but it sure feels like that when it takes me two hours to pick something on Netflix.

The thing is, this technological streamlining does not necessarily stimulate young hands and minds. Kids are tactile—they like objects, to touch them with their fingers and to explore. But now, since electronic toys are all a bunch of thin grey or black slabs, the objects themselves have lost their magic for children today. It's simply another screen with boatloads of content hidden inside.

We Millennials, on the other hand, had so many fun toys without the stress of infinite content choices. It's no wonder that we often complain about being overwhelmed by the number of life options available to us. Hundreds of studies have been done and millions of shrinks consulted about this issue. Could it have something to do with the fact that we were raised with far fewer options (technology being only one arena), and now that we are young and middle-aged adults, we are inundated by them? Perhaps we are remembering a simpler life. One where cell phones didn't exist but your friend had a pager that you used to meet up with a couple cute boys at the mall. One where your parents gave you a VHS copy of *Clueless* that you watched over and

over again. One where your first dual cassette tape deck allowed you to make a grunge mix tape. Sure, having our smart phones do *everything* is more convenient than switching out twenty different gadgets. But there was something truly magical about being a child with such an embarrassment of technological riches, especially without the stigma that “screen time” has now. We often heard how “TV will rot your brain,” but that certainly didn’t stop my parents from handing down our old, top-loading VCR to me when I was eight.

As far as childhood goes, a lot of American Millennials hit the generational jackpot. Being a kid came with all the wonder and freedom that we now know helps to nurture and energize children’s brains, and the wacky gadgets we had access to played their part in that wonder. A new iPhone, no matter how fancy, will never match the joy I felt when I received a new Nintendo game on Christmas and proceeded to play it for the rest of winter break. Maybe such a feeling makes me a ridiculously nostalgic Millennial, but at least I have something to be nostalgic about.