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# *Lies of P* and a Real Boy in Fake *Bloodborne*

## Nostalgia and Critique in Soulsborne Fandom

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## Abstract

Nostalgia as a longing for a place or time can simultaneously act as an invitation toward belonging and also as a barrier that divides. Utilizing Svetlana Boym's (2001) framework of restorative and reflective nostalgia, this study undertakes an analysis of press coverage (n=8) and fan comments on YouTube videos (n=400) addressing the digital videogame *Lies of P* (2023) as a nostalgic trigger. Understanding *Lies of P*, both in press coverage and fan discussion was often laden with nostalgia for the 2014 videogame *Bloodborne* and various adaptions of the children's story *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. In the case of fan comments in particular, reflective nostalgia, which allows for the possibility of both longing and critical thought to manifest together, emerges strongly as fans contest their understandings of videogames and childhood stories. *Lies of P* as a nostalgic trigger precipitates fan participation in analysis and critical reflection of media they might otherwise consider above critique. Understanding such gaming and gaming-adjacent spaces where critique and affection blends offers further insight into the social and technical structures that facilitates boundary maintenance.

## Keywords

Nostalgia; digital games; boundary maintenance; *Dark Souls*; Soulslike; affect

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**The directive to "git gud" when encountering repeated failure** in digital game fandom spaces can act as both a derision and a call to cohesion. Particularly among Soulsborne players, there are pressures to delineate boundaries between themselves and other players and to share in collective engagement to better understand and succeed in the games they play. The present study uses qualitative multimodal discourse analysis to explicate how videogame press coverage and fan discussions regarding NEOWIZ and Round 8 Studio's *Lies of P* (2023) both challenge and reinforce

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conventional ways of understanding in-group belonging, videogame genre, and children's literature through the framework of nostalgia (Boym, 2001). *Lies of P's* replication of Japanese developer FromSoftware's design conventions and utilization of narrative elements from *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883) importantly generates reflective nostalgic discussion, creating opportunities for fans to be critical of their own prior understandings of other games and children's literature. These interactions and analysis occurring on a platform as public and accessible as YouTube comments also has implications for how nostalgia interacts with boundary maintenance among fans.

FromSoftware's *Bloodborne* (2014) served as a reoccurring point of interest when commenting on *Lies of P*. While some user comments contested other's enjoyment of *Lies of P* based on a presumed unfamiliarity with 'actually' playing *Bloodborne,* more frequently affection for *Bloodborne* was tied to a critical re-evaluation in comparison to *Lies of P.* Comparing *Lies of P* to *Bloodborne* was often reflective and critical in addressing the differences between the games and articulating the flaws of *Bloodborne*. Additionally, fan comments that placed *Lies of P* alongside *The Adventures of Pinocchio* and its multitude of adaptions moved users toward reflective nostalgia, as their memories were rearranged and modified by new information and possibilities, and thus resisted the more conservative impulses of restorative nostalgia.

## Nostalgia

Nostalgia broadly has served as a framework through which scholars explicate retrogames (Payne, 2008; Suominen, 2008), "neo"-retro game development (Garda, 2013; Sloan, 2016), and retrogamers' community practice (Heineman, 2014; Payne, 2008; Swalwell, 2007). However, thinking outside the boundaries of retro and neo-retro games, nostalgia can be an equally compelling force in the marketing and enjoyment of newly released digital games (Neill Hoch, 2021).

Boym (2001) describes nostalgia as being laterally oriented, rather than being directed toward the past. Nostalgia originates from a sense of longing for home, which is possibly spatial but more importantly temporal. This feeling is never an accurate depiction and says more about the present and potential futures than it does the past. Contemporary social and political divisions can thus be controlled and exacerbated by nostalgia. Boym explains that nostalgia is paradoxical in the sense that it facilitates a sense of belonging and emotional bonding, but this sense of belonging can be transformed into an acceptance of authoritarianism and division between in- and out-groups. In order to belong, others must subsequently be excluded, and authoritarian systems promise this belonging to in-group members by denigrating the out-group. However, nostalgia is also not uniform. Boym goes on to differentiate between restorative and reflective nostalgia. These are tendencies, or "ways of giving shape", rather than firm distinctions between types (2001, p. 41). The same trigger can invoke both these different tendencies.

She explains that restorative nostalgia "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home", while reflective nostalgia "thrives in … the longing itself, and delays the homecoming" (Boym, 2001, p. xviii). Restorative nostalgia in fact does not admit to being nostalgia at all, but rather a preservation of absolute truth and tradition. This renders restorative nostalgia as ultimately conservative and useful to authoritarian projects. Restorative nostalgia feeds conspiracy. She writes that "conspiracy is used pejoratively, to designate a subversive kinship of others, an imagined community based on exclusion more than affection, a union of those who are not with us, but against us" (2001, p. 43). She then directly links these patterns of inclusion and exclusion to pogroms, Nazism, Stalinism, and the Red Scare, which all "operated in response to conspiracy theories in the name of a restored homeland" (p. 43). Restorative nostalgia favors the illusion of presenting the past as intact and coherent and does so through selective representation.

Reflective nostalgia instead reckons with the fact that the past was not actually as it was remembered. It potentially prompts critical thought alongside its affective longing. There is no expectation of return to a mythical homeland in reflective nostalgia, and in fact it "suggests a new flexibility … The focus here is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the mediation on history and passage of time" (Boym, 2001, p. 49). And, perhaps most critically, reflective nostalgia "reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgement or critical reflection" (pp. 49-50). Evidence of judgement and critical assessment are indicative of a reflective tendency in otherwise affectively oriented expressions and reflective nostalgia calls the idea of an absolute truth into doubt.

Ultimately Boym (2001) draws an ethical distinction between the two, writing that reflective nostalgia "resists both the total reconstruction of the local culture and the triumphant indifference of technocratic globalism" (p. 342). While restorative nostalgia, having some possibility of allowing for belonging outside of ethnicity or nationalism, "can also be politically manipulated through newly recreated practices of national commemoration with the aim of reestablishing social cohesion, a sense of security and an obedient relationship to authority" (Boym, 2001, p. 42). And, as noted above, that cohesion is achieved by erecting rigid boundaries around who does and does not belong. Given the increased attention to far-right extremism in videogame communities (Davies, 2022; Massanari, 2024; Romero-Medina & Vilasís-Pamos, 2023; Türker & Gök, 2024), a fuller understanding of the manifestations of nostalgia in videogame fandom spaces is necessary because of its potential to underpin and reinforce these dangerous cohesions.

## *Soulsborne and Soulslike games*

Soulsborne titles are action role-playing videogames (action-RPG) developed by Japanese developer FromSoftware—particularly those created under the direction of Hidetaka Miyazaki, including *Demon Souls* (2009), the *Dark Souls* series (2011, 2014,

2016), and *Bloodborne* (2015). Known for the inclusion of challenging boss fights, 'metroidvania' map design, indirect storytelling, losing significant progress upon dying, and precise-timing button inputs during combat, Soulsborne games are often considered more difficult to play and narratively understand than other action-rpg titles. Soulsborne has also emerged as an aesthetic category over time (Kunzelman, 2020). *Lies of P* is explicitly identified by both gaming press and fans as a 'Soulslike' game. Soulslike games draw some level of inspiration from the FromSoftware Soulsborne games but are developed by other companies.

What titles can be considered Soulslike (or even Soulsborne) games is contested by fans. The notion of *genre* has been somewhat fraught in videogame studies, though it undoubtably is utilized in the marketing of videogames (Apperley, 2006; Arsenault, 2009; Clarke, Lee, & Clark, 2017). The fuzziness around the applicability of genre to videogames is present in the contestation of what games belong and do not belong to the Soulslike genre. There is no universal agreement regarding which aspects of the Soulsborne games must be included, varying from mechanics, settings, narrative devices, and even art styles, to be considered a Soulslike. Some titles that are developed by FromSoftware themselves are contested as to whether they are Soulsborne games. Among Soulsborne and Soulslike fans, *Bloodborne* is often considered the "best" of the genre (particularly prior to the release of *Elden Ring* in 2022, though some will argue *Elden Ring* is not a Soulsborne title). With a Metacritic metascore of 92 (universal acclaim) and user score of 8.9 (generally favorable; as of October 2024) *Bloodborne* outperforms *Demon Souls* and all three *Dark Souls* titles in these review metrics.

## *Soulsborne and fandom boundaries*

Given the punishing mechanical and oblique narrative difficulty of Soulsborne games, there is a reliance on community support and labor, whether it be tactical, emotional, or analytical (Robinson, Czauderna, & Gillern, 2023; Schniz, 2016). Online paratexts such as wikis, guides, and reddit posts become important resources for completing the games. *Bloodborne*'s lore community has also gained scholarly attention (Ball, 2017; Payne, 2023). Soulsborne games, *Bloodborne* included, tend to include limited cut-scenes and little explicit narrative content as the player progresses through the game. Instead, the world's lore is conveyed through written item descriptions on weapons, armor, consumables, and other key items visible from the games' menu screens. This information is often fragmentary and sometimes contradictory. Ford (2024) compares these fan practices of assembling lore to digital folklore, though acknowledging that is not the "pure" form of folklore where no single author exists. Instead, he argues "*Souls-as-folklore* has the problem of there being a concrete authorial authority, while still demonstrating a similar *mode* of storytelling, one which is more akin to traditional folklore than to modern, author-centric mass media" (pp. 56–57; emphasis in original). Soulsborne fan communities discuss and contest the meanings of the fragmented lore within the game and seek to put these pieces into a coherent framework.

Furthermore, the mechanical difficulty of playing Soulsborne games have given way to a proliferation of fan-maintained wikis and walkthroughs covering everything from finding out-of-the-way items, the 'best' way to level your avatar, and specific enemy guides. Andriano (2024) has written how the "incompleteness" of *Dark Souls* can be read as a deliberate strategy to move the player toward Zen practice and depersonalization as they engage in play. However, fan practice around these games also seeks out a process of producing coherence through community action and creating affinity spaces (von Gillern, Robinson, & Czauderna, 2024). Soulsborne and Soulslike games thus both necessitate collective intelligence practices and continue to support communal online spaces where fans contest what it means to be a fan of such games. Given that the games are, in fact, difficult to play already restricts the potential audience that is willing to engage with these titles. YouTube comments directed at a Soulslike title, rather than a more bounded, specialized fan community, offers opportunity for engagement in discussion that is perhaps not so tightly bounded.

Fandoms more generally have long been shown to actively contest the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in online and offline spaces (Gonzalez, 2016; Honeycutt, 2005; Smith, McLaughlin, & Osborne, 1997; Stanfill, 2013). Aggressive behaviors such as trolling have also been conceptualized as a way of creating both community and boundaries between and within online spaces (Graham, 2019; Li, Cheung, Shen, & Lee, 2022). Trolling is also heavily associated with gaming spaces, particularly in multiplayer games. However, more than merely being destructive, trolling behaviors can also serve communal and normative functions (Cook, Schaafsma, & Antheunis, 2018; Hivert-Bruce, & Neill, 2020; Schlegel, 2021). Among some Soulsborne players, concepts such as accessibility are rejected to uphold existing boundaries (Pakkinen, 2023). Boundaries delineating who can and cannot speak within fandom in regard to critiquing games becomes visible in online communication platforms. As discussed above, notions of inclusion and exclusion in imagined communities can be initiated and supported by nostalgia.

## *Pinocchio and Disney fandom*

*Lies of P* takes its narrative inspiration from Carlo Collodi's 1883 children's novel *The Adventures of Pinocchio.* Not quite a folk tale in the proper sense, as the story of the mischievous wooden boy was not passed through generations as an oral tale before being written down, Collodi's novel nonetheless has become something like a folk tale since its publication (Heisig, 1974). Adapted perhaps most notably by Disney in 1940, there were at least three further adaptions (again, one by Disney) released in 2022 alone. Children's literature more broadly, whether it be in the form of folktale, fairytale, or Disney spectacle can contribute to lifelong character development (Griszbacher, Kemény, & Varga, 2022), reinforcement of cultural values (Do Rozario, 2004), and pleasure (Wawryk, 2008) extending into adulthood.

There is a rich body of research regarding Disney and nostalgia addressing topics as diverse as live-action remakes (Kennedy-Karpat, 2020; Lizardi, 2020), theme parks (Robson, 2019; Smith & Conrad, 2020), and new media spaces including streaming services (Nikolova, 2023) and podcasting (Kiriakou, 2017). Much of this work has emphasized Disney products' trend toward restorative nostalgia, promoting conservative views of the past (Zornado, 2017) and future (Robson, 2019).

# Method

In order to analyze the nostalgic manifestations circulating around *Lies of P*, the present study draws from a selection of videogame publication articles (including *Polygon, IGN, PCGamer, Dark Side of Gaming*, and *Kotaku*, n=8) and user comments in response to YouTube video reviews (n=400). The videogame publications cover a selection of perspectives originating from pre-game coverage, game reviews, and reactions to DLC announcements. Emotional responses to and narrative understanding of videogames originate not only from the game as text itself, but also surrounding paratexts (Consalvo, 2017; Seiwald, 2023). These publications offer insight into how *Lies of P* has been discussed in paratexts, particularly in the context of previous Soulsborne and Soulslike games, as well as allowing for a point of comparison between topics and themes emerging from media publications and topics and themes emerging from YouTube fan comments.

Publicly posted comments were collected from four YouTube review videos and included a mix of videos originating from videogame media outlets and those created by personality-driven content producers (IGN, gameranx, Iron Pineapple, and Fextralife). Three of the four videos garnered over one-million views by the time of data collection (January 2024). The fourth video, posted by Fextralife, received significantly fewer views (approximately 170,000). Fextralife, however, corresponds to a more specific set of resources, specializing in roleplaying games and specifically notable for their wiki resources for Soulsborne and Soulslike titles. Top-level comments (and up to the first ten responses) were collected from each video until the total set included 100 comments derived from each video. YouTube comments, like other digital communication tools, can be a space of knowledge sharing and co-construction, though it is important to note that this is not always the case (Henderson, Selwyn, & Aston 2017). Dubovi and Tabak (2020) have found that in regard to the phases of knowledge construction using Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson's (1997) coding scheme, YouTube comments tend to fall into Phases 1 and 2 of "sharing/adding opinions" and "negotiating meaning". There are also comments that do reach Phases 3 (elaborating), 4 (proposing synthesis) and 5 (consensus/applying constructed knowledge). Some work of collaborative knowledge construction does occur in YouTube comments and demonstrate evidence of critical thinking and analysis. All comments collected are in English and thus may not be representative of discussion around *Lies of P* taking place in other languages.

Sharing thoughts and reactions in a highly public YouTube comment section may not be as intense an involvement as the more complex collective knowledge manifestations of Soulsborne/Soulslike players noted in prior research. However, it is productive to not only focus on those players who exert the most effort in their participation, but also to intersect with fan spaces in less laborious ways, that nonetheless still signal engagement and belonging. High-effort practices are not the only means of participation that contributes to gaming fandom. Indeed, high-effort practices, such as making review videos in the first place—when not formally aligned with gaming media outlets—creates opportunities for other fans to engage in these lower-effort (but still reflective) practices in a public setting. There are fans who think quite critically and complexly about games like *Bloodborne* and *Lies of P*, but do not have the time, resources, or desire to engage with higher-effort fandom practices. While not quite 'true' lurkers as they are posting comments, the definition of lurking has variability within scholarship (Edelmann, 2015, 2013; Ferguson, 2022; Sun et al, 2014). It is not clear from these YouTube comments alone the extent of any given commenter's level of engagement with fandom more broadly, but an understanding of nostalgia in these lower-effort participations does offer insight into how and where fans may encounter new information. And these online spaces can be crucial in processes of radicalization as fans move between more open and closed communities.

In the context of understanding radicalization, Doosje and colleagues (2016) identify phases of radicalization. Prior to group membership, sensitivity plays a key role in vulnerability to increasingly radical messages. At the micro level, they identify that personal uncertainty can lead an individual towards a group that "provides them with clear norms and values", and at the meso level, social connections and in-group belonging leads to a "cognitive opening" where they may advance to joining a radical group (2016, p. 81). Seemingly innocuous spaces both online and off can contribute to sensitivity. However, they may also introduce information and social connections that contribute to de-radicalization, such as the introduction of new viewpoints, including those originating from others perceived as part of the group (2016, p. 82). Public, open online spaces like YouTube comments thus have the possibility of contributing both to radicalization and deradicalization.

Both media publications and fan comments were qualitatively assessed through multimodal discourse analytical techniques, which consider not only the text, but also the formatting, graphical, video, and auditory relationships between elements (Bateman, 2008). Online videogame publications often make extensive use of imbedded images and videos. The fan comments were frequently in dialogue both with the originating video but also other discussions occurring within the comments, even when not replying directly to another YouTube user. Qualitative reading of selected articles and comments revealed emerging themes throughout the set, particularly concerned with nostalgia.

# Contesting *Bloodborne*: Restoration and reflection

More than any other game, FromSoftware's 2014 PlayStation 4-exclusive title *Bloodborne* served as a reoccurring touchpoint throughout both publication coverage and the YouTube fan comments. Boym (2007, p. 15) acknowledges that the same "triggers of memory" can generate both restorative and reflective nostalgia. And in the case of media coverage and Soulsborne fans, *Lies of P* stirs nostalgic feelings for *Bloodborne* and subsequently generates a range of affective and analytical responses to that nostalgia.

## *Videogame publication coverage and restoration*

Video game publication coverage seems unable to cover *Lies of P* at all without demonstrating affection for *Bloodborne.* Fenlon (2023) titles *PCGamer*'s article '*Lies of P* is so blatantly *Bloodborne* that I feel bad for liking it'. It is worth considering here that *Bloodborne*, even ten years after release, is not playable on the PC. In Northup's (2023) review of the game for IGN, *Bloodborne* is explicitly named seven times, including the first and last paragraphs. *Bloodborne*'s specter is inescapable. Beyond the gameplay similarities to Soulsborne titles, Northup describes the emotional resonance of knowing what is about to come next in *Lies of P*, despite the game just being released. A fan familiar with Soulsborne conventions will be able to predict the fates of non-playable characters they have only just encountered for the first time. Partway through Northup's review is an interactive poll for "Which children's tale should be turned into a grisly soulslike next?" further reinforcing *Lies of P's* connection to other Soulslike games and encouraging readers to think of the game in the context of other Soulslike titles, rather than a distinct game. Argüello (2023), writing for *Polygon,* includes that *Lies of P* "leans heavily on *Bloodborne* nostalgia". And that nostalgia in the videogame publications is largely restorative. There is no question that if you love Soulslike games, you must love *Bloodborne*.

In one of the strongest restorative nostalgic manifestations in the analyzed publication texts, Papadopoulos (2023), for *Dark Side of Gaming*, includes in his article covering the *Lies of P* demo that a *Bloodborne* mod had already been published. He calls the mod "amazing" as it added iconic *Bloodborne* weapons into the demo. This article is very short, only 265 words in total, and it devotes a paragraph, 55 words or about 20% of the article's total length, to the *Bloodborne* mod that quite literally recreates the weapons of the earlier game into the new one. *Lies of P's* demo is used to restore a small piece of *Bloodborne* with better graphics, smoother gameplay, and make it playable on the PC. The desire to restore *Bloodborne* using the shell of *Lies of P* is materialized. There is little discussion of the faults of *Bloodborne* in press coverage, instead the positive qualities of *Lies of P* are equated to the successes of the Soulsborne games and *Bloodborne* in particular. Winslow (2023), for *Kotaku*, writes that

*Lies of P's* developers "truly understand what makes the Japanese studio's game design so compelling". Soulsborne titles are largely conserved as the high benchmark Soulslike games must attempt to surpass, and they never quite do.

However, there are some moments when these publications touch on aspects of *Lies of P* which at least deviate from the Soulsborne template and offer glimpses of reflection. Winslow (2023) notes that the narrative of *Lies of P* is easier to follow, and its combat more closely resembles FromSoftware's *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019) but still returns again and again to the *Bloodborne* comparison. Press articles desire *Lies of P* to be a return to *Bloodborne* but do highlight some of the ways in which it is not the decade-earlier title. Fenlon (2023) notes that *Lies of P* runs "at a much smoother 60 frames per second" when compared to *Bloodborne,* which was limited by the PlayStation 4's technology. Northup (2023) praises the game's weapon construction mechanic, which is unlike *Bloodborne* and indeed something of an innovation within the genre. While affection for *Bloodborne* was evident in reviews, so too was some capacity to articulate how *Lies of P* offered improvements in some areas.

## *Fan comments and contestation*

*Bloodborne* was also repeatedly invoked in fan comments. The most strongly restorative comments often took on characteristics of boundary maintenance. Schwalbe and colleagues (2000) describe boundary maintenance within a framework of understanding inequality. While some boundaries are maintained through the use of force, day-to-day separation between dominant and subordinate groups are most often maintained through institutions and ideologies. Two processes they identify for stratifying groups concern the interrelated concepts of the transmission of cultural capital and controlling network access (2000, pp. 431–432). Having the right kind of knowledge and skills might admit an individual into a valued school or invited to the socially advantageous golf outing. This then leads to admittance into a social network that further enhances belonging to the desired group.

Present throughout the YouTube comment data set are constatations between fans regarding who belongs to the group of Soulslike players. Those without the correct knowledge and experience are discouraged from then participating in further discussion, but importantly on YouTube these derisions do not actually restrict further participation, as they might in a more bounded fandom space. Some user comments explicitly derided other's excitement for *Lies of P* based on a presumed unfamiliarity with 'actually' playing *Bloodborne*, "you have only Xbox and never played the real Bloodborne...shameful". This comment then contains four laugh/cry emojis further reinforcing the idea that not having played *Bloodborne* made the idea of participation in a discussion regarding *Lies of P* "laughable." This was in response to another commenter acknowledging they enjoyed playing the *Lies of P* demo. In another comment, a less aggressive but similarly boundary invoking response to a comment expressing enjoyment in playing *Elden Ring* and thus wanting to purchase and play *Lies of P* suggested, "maybe you should play Bloodborne first". While this comment is not

nearly as hostile as the first exchange, it nonetheless asserts playing *Bloodborne* as a form of cultural capital. From this perspective, those without *Bloodborne* experience do not have a voice in the discussion, even as it applies to subjective claims like enjoyment or affect.

This preservation of the boundaries between those who are knowledgeable and those who are not distinctively take on a quality of restorative nostalgia, in that it seeks to preserve or reassert a cultural legacy (Boym, 2001). However, this imagined past is itself a fiction and itself is marshaled to reinforce inequalities. In the case of *Lies of P,* restoring the primacy of *Bloodborne* within the Soulslike genre appears with some regularity throughout the YouTube comments, as it did in the gaming publications.

While in some cases the desire to return to *Bloodborne* was indicative of restorative impulses, more notably comparing *Lies of P* to *Bloodborne* and other Soulsborne titles became far more reflective in addressing the differences between the games. Users were even more openly reflective than the publications in working through how *Lies of P* both drew from other titles, while also making transformations and improvements. In one particularly detailed comment, a user explained *Lies of P* "takes all the best elements and gets rid of all the bad ones. No run backs, no one shots, a ton of optional mini bosses, perfect parry from Sekiro, dashing with i-frames from Bloodborne [list continues]". Another fan actively draws connections across the genre in response to the video review, writing:

> The moment I've exited the cart into Krat without anything to go on was a very similar feel when I played Demon's Souls in 2009. The combat mechanics in Lies of P, albeit using the same monologue of the founding fathers - I cannot say that this is an exact replica of the coding found in such titles. Again, this level of playing really did remind me of Demon's Souls (2009) where my first death whispered: "Yes, this is back to basics!"

Rather than highlighting the aesthetic and gameplay similarities between *Bloodborne* and *Lies of P,* this fan instead focuses on the affective engagement with the *Lies of P* title while still acknowledging their nostalgia for *Demon Souls*. They articulate that the feeling of playing *Lies of P* was more akin to the first Soulsborne title released nearly fifteen years earlier. Rather than invoking the more widespread discussion point of *Lies of P* resembling *Bloodborne*, this fan instead centers their own experiential knowledge of the genre to understand their enjoyment.

Comments that overly criticized *Lies of P* were, in fact, rejected by other commenters.

> I originally wanted to hear your criticism of the game because criticism is good. But you're going out of the way to copy paste this in many comments … It's just very bland hate with no critique to support the claim.

Comments such as these were indicative that criticism of games was welcome, but only if they were supported by actual evidence. Fans were frequently able to analyze *Lies of P* in light of *Bloodborne* and other FromSoftware titles and *Lies of P* was found to be a better game in some aspects.

> I'd say this game on avg has better bosses than a fromsoft game. Not as good as the best that fromsoft has to offer, but I'd take a whole game of enjoyable good bosses over a long game with a lot of meh bosses with some amazing bosses sprinkled in. … Like the bosses are genuinely something I wish fromsoft themselves would look at and take inspiration from.

In the same comment thread, another fan expresses, "they took every best part of the Souls games and combined it with the best parts of Sekiro and Bloodborne. There was only 1 completely BS boss (swamp monster boss), but that's ¼ of what FromSoft puts in". These comments often blended affection for FromSoftware titles with reflective discussion of their shortcomings. While there was no unified consensus regarding the way in which *Lies of P* improved upon the Soulsborne games, individual fans highlighted a number of aspects which they personally felt were superior, even if they rarely believed that *Lies of P* was better than "the best" FromSoftware had to offer.

*Lies of P* created and encouraged an opportunity for an active reflection on and critique of *Bloodborne.* Restorative nostalgic notions where *Bloodborne* (or other FromSoftware titles) were immune from criticism or comparison to anything other than *another* Soulsborne title were rejected in favor of closer assessment of the older titles' shortcomings, whether they be in areas of storytelling, boss balancing, or level design.

## Pinocchio and reflection

Discussions of *Pinocchio* as the narrative inspiration for *Lies of P* also served as a point of departure for nostalgic engagement. While some press coverage labeled *Lies of P* as a "dark reimagining of" (Northup, 2023) or "loosely based on" *Pinocchio* (Winslow, 2023), Fenlon (2023) questioned whether the idea to create a game like Bloodborne arose first, and the connection to *Pinocchio* was a matter of public domain convivence. Diaz (2023), writing well ahead of the release of the game notes that *Pinocchio* has had prior filmic horror adaptations, so a dark adaptation of the wooden boy's story was nothing new. However, most media reviews of the game focus more heavily on the connection to Soulsborne titles than the game's narrative content. Nostalgia for *Pinocchio* was largely absent from the press articles.

YouTube fan comments which discussed the game's connection to *Pinocchio* pointed out that fairy tales in general were already darker and more distributing than Disney's versions of the same stories and more frequently expressed nostalgia than the gaming press. This nostalgia almost exclusively trended toward reflective. Pinocchio, despite holding some similarities with fairy tales, is, strictly speaking, not a fairy tale at all. However, Heisig (1974, p. 24, emphasis in original) does conclude that it "has *become* something of a folktale tradition over the years". There is enough treatment of *Pinocchio* as if it were a fairytale/folktale that these frames can offer considerable insight to contemporary fans' nostalgic impulses toward the story, and subsequently their discussion of the application of Pinocchio in *Lies of P.* In referencing Disney's *Pinocchio* (1940) one user noted the film was "pretty dark for them. Child slavery, Body change horror, and getting munched on by a giant whale". Another user commented, "dude, virtually all classic children's stories were dark until Disney turned public domain tales into sanitized cartoons". A follow-up comment again points out that the Disney version of *Pinocchio* was dark. When placed into the context of other Disney films that fans may have watched their childhood, *Pinocchio* possessed some horror elements which seemed to align with the Soulsborne games already. Fans also used the original narrative of *Pinocchio* as a starting point for thinking about larger issues, "[it] has a lot of pretty dark implications about our development as humans, and to see a soulslike game embrace that world is very intriguing to me".

Fan comments, when addressing the game's adaptation of *Pinocchio* were almost always positive and often affectionate. If anything, when negative sentiments were expressed toward the game's narrative setting, it was that the game did not seem to be *Pinocchio enough*. One fan writes, "saw nothing Pinocchio-ish there, except of naming here and there. Anyone?" Another fan expressed that they wished the dichotomy between "puppet" and "human" choices was more pronounced. Essentially, they thought that the game should capitalize on its *Pinocchio* origins further:

> The only thing that I dislike is that there is no real choice between puppet and human choices, you need to choose human otherwise you miss your character growth, some cutscenes … overall everybody since the beginning treats you as a human.

Fan comments also recalled affective experiences with the *Pinocchio* story. "I find Lies of P very intriguing from a setting standpoint (I mean I did watch Pinocchio over and over as little kid)". It is of note that Soulslike titles are not typically marketed as approachable to the average videogame player. They are understood to be extremely challenging. It would likely be difficult for a fan of *Pinocchio* but not Soulslike games to play *Lies of P.* The core audience for the title would likely be fans of the genre, rather than fans of the setting/narrative content. However, this comment goes on to explain that they want to try to play *Lies of P because* of its connection to *Pinocchio*, knowing that it will be difficult to play and not necessarily a game they will succeed with at first. Their emotional connection to the story was enough to bring them to a game they

otherwise would not play. There was also noticeable excitement and interest in future 'fairytale' adaptations. The end of *Lies of P* invokes *The Wizard of Oz* as the next adaptation. Fans seemed positive about this idea, as well as the possibility of an *Alice in Wonderland* Soulslike, and discussion of a *Jack and the Beanstalk* game; though, several users within this exchange referenced *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005, remake in 2018) as similar to any possible Jack and the Beanstalk Soulslike.

Fleckenstein (2003) develops a concept of "slippery texts" that allow for an evolving literacy and blurriness around what the text actually is. This slipperiness often comes from a proliferation of adaptations over time and across various media. In a gameplay-based study of *American McGee's Alice,* a 2000 'dark fantasy' videogame adaptation of Lewis Carroll's novels, all players generally found the adaptation elements enjoyable (Mackey, 2007). While one participant did not necessarily enjoy the violence of the game, she nonetheless found the adaptation enjoyable. The nostalgia expressed in the YouTube comments regarding *Lies of P* similarly express enjoyment and excitement, rather than questioning the adaptation of *Pinocchio*. Slippery texts may themselves be more likely to prime reflective, critical processes in audiences, even when accompanied by nostalgia, because of their perceived flexibility (Mackey, 2011). Soulslike games, which can offer radical transformations in how a narrative is presented (primarily through item descriptions) hold the potential to further reinforce reflection, rather than restoration. Videogames in general may be less accessible than other media adaptations, given both hardware (Luo & Johnson, 2020) and physical requirements (Aguado-Delgado et al., 2020). The added difficulty of the Soulslike genre may both further limit the players who have access to the adaptation and thus drive that limited player base away from restorative nostalgia, as encountering the media object itself is difficult and "un-sanitized" in contrast to Disney adaptations (Fleming, 2016).

What is most compelling in these exchanges from the perspective of understanding nostalgia's place in videogame fandom is how productive these comments are in offering up new possibilities and thinking through alternatives. Users actively engage in considering how children's stories they find nostalgic can be translated into the Soulslike format, rather than treating such stories as somehow sacred and immutable. The transformation of stories they enjoyed as children into games in a genre they are currently fans of creates reflection regarding both narrative and gameplay possibilities. Like discussions that compared *Lies of P* to *Bloodborne*, placing *Lies of P* alongside *The Adventures of Pinocchio* and its multitude of adaptions moved users toward reflective nostalgia where their memories are rearranged and modified in light of new information and possibilities for understanding. This is in direct contrast to much of Disney nostalgia, which trends toward more conservative, restorative nostalgia (Robson, 2019; Zornado, 2017).

# Conclusions

Throughout both the videogame publication coverage and YouTube comments, nostalgia emerges as a key component of understanding how *Lies of P* opens up possibilities for critique of games and stories that might otherwise be considered above criticism. Fans invoke their nostalgia regarding *Bloodborne* specifically, and Soulsborne games more generally, in ways that convey both longing *and* critical analysis. *Bloodborne* is often considered Soulsborne at its best, a benchmark that other games can approach, but cannot quite reach. *Lies of P* is then frequently understood, both in press and in fan reactions, as indivisible from *Bloodborne* nostalgia. The YouTube comments in particular not only share in restorative nostalgia that continues to hail *Bloodborne* as an unreachable standard, but also take a clearly reflective turn. In sharing comments about *Lies of P*, whether they have already played the game or not, fans evaluate the virtues and shortcomings of *Bloodborne* in relation to the *Lies of P*. *Lies of P* invoking *Bloodborne* creates a space where fans can critically evaluate their nostalgic praise for *Bloodborne*, while still being allowed to experience longing. Their affection does not have to be denied. While there are moments of such reflection in press coverage, it is more strongly present in comments where fans reflect on their own personal experiences with both games.

Also present is nostalgic engagement with the story of *Pinocchio* as both children's literature and Disney product. Given that both the press coverage and fans commenting on review videos have most likely come to *Lies of P* as fans of Soulslike games, rather than Disney or children's literature fans, it is notable that moments emerge where fans are engaging in critique of media they engaged with in childhood. In these comments there is very little turn to restorative nostalgia, and engagement is almost entirely reflective.

Important here is how the open nature of YouTube comments prevents strict regulation of which fans can and cannot participate in sharing their perspectives and reactions. While some comments are far more restorative in nature, holding *Bloodborne* above and apart, these attempts at boundary maintenance are ineffective on YouTube. Reflective nostalgia appears right alongside these more conservative reactions. Future research should consider more bounded digital gaming fandom spaces where reflective critique is restricted and how nostalgia manifests in discussion among fans who might otherwise be vulnerable to radicalization. Do more private, tightly knit digital gaming spaces manifest restorative nostalgia over reflective? Furthermore, uncovering perceptions of in-group and out-group affiliation in fandom settings can shed light on whether spaces like YouTube comments and the imagined community they might precipitate, act as a viable source of alternative perspectives for members of these more regulated groups. What are the fandom spaces which allow for reflective nostalgia to flourish, including the introduction of new ideas and social rewards for critical thought?

Ultimately, reflective nostalgia can serve as a point of departure for understanding and critiquing existing systems being maintained through momentum and tradition. Being able to engage in a critical, but still loving analysis of videogames with others who one might consider part of their in-group has potentially important outcomes for those searching for a sense of belonging. By acknowledging that memories are flawed and incomplete, nostalgic impulses can be martialed to actually break apart or question the 'perfection' of a treasured artefact or perspective. Fans, even in a format as unstructured as a YouTube comment section have a desire to engage in reflective work and actively introduce new perspectives, even if those thoughts might not be fully developed. Importantly, the nostalgic trigger, in this case, *Lies of P*, does not need to be universally 'better' than the artefact it's disrupting, it only needs to be better in *some aspects* in order to serve as a site of critique. Developing a capacity for critique, while still acknowledging that the affective longing for a particular time and place has its value, has the potential to reach those individuals searching for a sense of community without leaving them vulnerable to those who might exploit them.

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no known conflicts of interest for this research.

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