

Nick and Choose { NICK ALTSCHULLER }

CAN'T BUY A BUCKET

Nostalgia is no slam dunk.



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I THINK IT WAS *STREET FIGHTER III*. Or maybe it was *Mortal Kombat* I was playing when my father first snuck up behind my usual perch on the couch to say, “You’re not going to play those things when you’re older.” He instead preferred that I “read challenging books.”

My dad thinks of video games as a waste of time. This stance has always struck me as ironic, as it comes from a man who brags about once being able to spend all day at the movies for a nickel.

The fact is, my generation was the first to be born into the era of video games as an influential pop product, an effect only accelerated by games moving out of the arcade and into the home. We’re a generation of cartridge blowers, of Genesis defenders. Ask any guy between the ages of 30–39 about the *Contra* code and get ready for an immediate recitation of directions and letters, an involuntary response as natural as blinking or breathing. While my father may have been awed by the deeds of Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*, I marveled at the unstoppable force that was Bo Jackson in *Tecmo Bowl*.

One of my childhood’s most iconic games was 1993’s *NBA Jam*. The premise was simple: a two-on-two battle between professional basketball stars. The gameplay was outlandish, with players performing acrobatic dunks from outrageous distances. Secret characters, like Bill Clinton, could be unlocked, and a comic voiceover peppered the action with taglines like “He’s heating up” and “Boomshakalaka!” which have become part of the sport’s actual lexicon. Riding the popularity of the NBA’s heyday and featuring life-like player models—an innovation at the time—*NBA Jam* made over \$1 billion in quarters.

Released earlier this month for Xbox 360 and PS3—it came out in October for Wii—*NBA Jam*’s sentimental hold on my peer group can be seen in a Gchat conversation I had with *Improper* sports editor Rich Levine.

Rich: We on for *Jam* tonight?

Me: just bought it

Rich: BONER

Yes, products like *NBA Jam* are a direct call to our adolescent selves. As Rich explains, it’s all

about nostalgia. “I can suddenly get back to my teens,” he said.

Nostalgia was also the first word from my friend John, a man who owns every system from the Neo Geo to the Virtual Boy, and an *NBA Jam Tournament Edition* T-shirt. Explaining *NBA Jam*’s appeal, he said, “It’s one of those games that anyone can pick up and play.”

And we did, at which point we were almost immediately reminded of perhaps the game’s greatest strength—infighting. *NBA Jam* has few rules, little strategy and only one guiding principle: Victory is never assured. As such, it’s easy to feel cheated, and half your time is spent complaining. As the rounds progressed, the swearing increased, insults were lobbed and farts were directed at faces. I suppose the adult equivalent would be arguing politics.

Solo play throws the game’s biggest negative into relief—its lack of depth. Amazingly, the core content hasn’t changed at all in 17 years, and different modes like 21 and Backboard Smash aren’t worth more than a glance. In nostalgic cinema terms, they’re the needless CGI aliens added to reissued editions of *Star Wars*. Online play, however, is a welcome addition, evoking the near-forgotten social pressure of arcade play without the anxiety of having to ask your parents for more quarters.

After our final contest, Rich concluded that he liked the game, but it didn’t quite bring him all the way back. “That’s probably my fault,” he said. “Got too old.” John, on the other hand, has since contacted me repeatedly, looking for a rematch.

My enthusiasm splits the difference. Were *NBA Jam* a downloadable title with a corresponding price point (as its producers originally intended), I’d say it’s an essential purchase for anyone who once longed for a pair of Reebok Pumps. However, its current \$50 price is a prohibitive toll for memory lane.

But, with disc in hand—and much to my father’s consternation—I’ll continue to play, perched on my own couch, on a TV that sits between my armchair and bookcase. My Xbox next to *Anna Karenina*. The games stacked next to my copy of *Moby Dick*. Fittingly, my current station in life at a point somewhere in between. ***

Send your stories and suggestions to nick@improper.com.

Age doth not
wither?



Impersonals

T'D OFF

TO THE T OPERATOR ON
A POWER TRIP:

You threatened me with arrest for fare evasion after I had paid at Arlington Station on Saturday night. I ride the Green Line every day from Longwood, and have even been issued a \$5 “This Is Not a Fare” voucher for past mess-ups on your end. I travel to Roxbury on a weekly basis to play with children at a shelter for homeless teen mothers, and I work as a graduate student at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. I wasn’t attempting to evade the fare. When you started screaming, I reswiped my card to pay the fare and then proceeded on my way. I kind of wish you had called the cops to arrest me, but I have better things to do. How about you?

Anonymous

To the jackasses on Harvard St.:

I’m not sure if you were drunk or stoned—or just a bunch of jackasses by nature—at 6:30 pm on Nov. 9. There were about 10 of you, male and female, all around college age, walking up Harvard St. in Brookline toward Coolidge Corner. Families, many with small children, were on the sidewalk that evening, yet you chose to yell curses and “hate” words while you waved your hands in their faces. What if that was your child or grandma? Maybe this is pardonable after a night out in Allston, but acting like this at 6:30 pm on a Tuesday makes you pathetic.

Harassed on Harvard St.

To flag-fliers:

I was told in grade school that the American flag shouldn’t be flown in a damaged condition. Crossing the Mass. Ave. bridge on Veterans Day, I saw Old Glory on the side of a building with a more-than-six-foot rip in it. A lot of good people gave their lives for that and, sadly, are still doing so today. Do it right, or not at all.

Proud American

Unrequited crush? Bad hair? Need to vent? Send your e-mails of love and spleen to impersonals@improper.com, or visit improper.com/impersonals.