



## **Familiar Things: *Stranger Things*, Adolescence and Nostalgia**

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This article analyzes how the psychological aspects of nostalgia contribute to the success of the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. After quantifying and contextualizing the extraordinary popularity of the series, the authors outline the nostalgic elements at work within the show, including music, fashion, dialogue and narrative allusions, all of which add to the potentiality for access to viewers. Having established the intensity of the show's nostalgic content and form, the authors then argue that the "comfortable associations" throughout the show contribute to the show's popular appeal and the uncanniness of its horror. In addition to invoking emerging research on the psychological benefits of nostalgia, the article employs cognitive and socioemotional theoretical perspectives to discuss how focusing on characters in early adolescence maximizes the potential impact of the nostalgia, creating fertile ground for growing new affections for identity-building memories and experiences.

Keywords: memories, hyperreality, 1980s, adolescence, nostalgia

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In July of 2016, people commonly asked, *Have you seen Stranger Things?*, and, statistically speaking, the answer was probably *Yes*. By almost every measure used to track success among similar shows, *Stranger Things* has been a monumental hit. The inaugural season of the show had more than 15 million views in the first 35 days, and its second had more than 15 million viewers in three days, with over

360,000 people binge-watching the entire season on the first full day of its release (Otterson 2017). And not only is it watched, *Stranger Things* is a fan-favorite. According to Rotten Tomatoes “Tomatometer,” *Stranger Things* has a 94% approval rating, which is commensurate or greater than other beloved series, such as *Breaking Bad* (96%), *Game of Thrones* (94%), *How To Get Away With Murder* (90%), *Westworld* (86%), *Luke Cage* (86%), and *The Walking Dead* (79%). In fact, *Stranger Things* is the 36th highest tomatoes-rated Netflix series and the 8th highest-rated Sci-fi series. According to IMDb, the first season of *Stranger Things* was the 5th highest grossing tv series, and, among tv series of all time with a minimum of 5000 view votes, *Stranger Things* is in the top 30 in terms of most popular (30th), highest rated (27th), number of votes received (9th), and box office (30th).

One obvious reason for the show’s success is that it has many elements that make for good tv (e.g., excellent writing, casting, set design, wardrobe, timing, score, etc.). The number of award nominations and wins the show has earned since its premiere in 2016 clearly substantiates the show’s high quality across the board. It has earned 19 Emmy nominations (with five wins) and both seasons of the show were rated in the top 10 of television programs for their respective year by the American Film Institute. But what greases the skids for its success even more is how *Stranger Things* exploits nostalgia in order to engage and retain viewers.

Nostalgia’s meaning, particularly in terms of its perceived value, varies wildly, but consensus generally holds that it has to do with romantic assessments of days-gone-by. The Oxford English Dictionary defines nostalgia as “sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual’s own lifetime.” Svetlana Boym, perhaps the most significant theorist of nostalgia of the Twenty-First Century, draws on the word’s Greek roots—*nostos* means “return home,” and *algia* means “longing”—in her definition of nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (2007, 7). In *Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource*, Clay Routledge approaches the concept more broadly, identifying *memory/memories, the past, social relationships* and *happiness* as nostalgia’s primary vernacular associations (2015). As for that last association, the happiness connected with nostalgia is unique in that it is inherently bittersweet. While Routledge maintains that nostalgia is “more sweet than bitter,” nostalgic memories generate much of their power from their less varnished, more “authentic” qualities (i.e. life was more meaningful in the past *because* it was more difficult in the past). For this discussion, however, the most useful definition likely comes from the author Michael Chabon, who described nostalgia as “the feeling that overcomes you when some minor vanished beauty of the world is momentarily restored” (2017). Chabon’s definition succinctly captures the visceral experience many people express about viewing *Stranger Things*, a feeling that the show momentarily brings back to life a world they thought was gone.

*Stranger Things* is far from the first nostalgia-driven television show. Examples of broadcast television programs built around nostalgia abound and include many of the medium’s most legendary offerings: *The Waltons* aired from

1971 to 1981 but was set during the Great Depression; *Happy Days* aired from 1974 to 1984 but was set during the 1950s; *The Wonder Years* aired from 1988 to 1993 but was set during the late 1960s; *That '70s Show* aired from 1998 to 2006 but was set in the late 1970s; and, most recently, *Mad Men* aired from 2007 to 2015 but was set in the 1960s. Nor are television shows that nostalgically depict the 1980s, which is *Stranger Things* milieu, especially new: *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000), *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005-2009), *The Goldbergs* (2013-present) and a short-lived spinoff of *That '70s Show* appropriately titled *That '80s Show* (2002) all aggressively reference the 1980s in numerous ways and predate the debut of *Stranger Things* in 2016. Television programming, in short, has long drawn on nostalgia as a reliable method of audience engagement, deploying era-specific elements that resonate with people who lived through a particular time, along with those curious about it.<sup>1</sup>

*Stranger Things* is, in simplest terms, character-driven science fiction. Like any serialized story, *Stranger Things* features a menagerie of characters, all with their own subplots, but the main story runs through a handful of adolescents in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana. The series's first season focuses on Mike Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, and Dustin Henderson's efforts to locate their missing friend Will Byers, who disappeared on his way home from a lengthy game of Dungeons and Dragons. The boys soon encounter a mysterious girl named Eleven, who becomes an essential member of their group due to her telekinetic powers and obscure connection to Will's disappearance. Older siblings Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers also get involved in the mystery, along with a particularly well-coiffed fellow named Steve Harrington, shortly after their impeccably dressed classmate Barbara Holland similarly disappears. The only adults aware that something nefarious is going on in Hawkins are Joyce Byers, the mother of Will and Jonathan, and Jim Hopper, the town's Chief of Police. The show has two main antagonists: Hawkins Research Laboratory, which is a shadowy organization headquartered in town, and the Demogorgon, some sort of trans-dimensional beast the boys named after a monster from Dungeons and Dragons. All of the principal characters return in season two, and a number of new ones are added, the most important of which is Max Mayfield, a new girl in school who becomes a member of the show's central ensemble.

Overall, the characters are written well and performed ably, and the central plot is imaginative and engrossing, yet these elements pale in comparison to the show's nostalgic charms. *Stranger Things*'s primary source of nostalgic content is its temporal setting, specifically the autumns of 1983 and '84, which allows the show's makers to plumb the aesthetic depths of 1980s culture through locations,

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that *Stranger Things* does differ from all of these other shows in that it is not broadcast television. Being a Netflix show, all episodes in a *Stranger Things* season are provided at once and on demand, which facilitates binge-watching. While it is possible, perhaps even likely, that this method of engagement deepens viewers' investment in the show, encouraging them to not only watch the show but, in a sense, to inhabit it, not enough research exists on how binge-watching alters audience reception to make the suggestion anything more than that, a suggestion.

costumes, music and other aspects of set design and art direction. Taken as a whole, the show overflows with authentic touches, from the specific video games played at the town arcade to the oversized hairstyles characters wear. Indeed, any assessment of *Stranger Things*'s nostalgic content will necessarily be incomplete as the show's invocations of the 1980s are relentless, the makers exploiting every possible avenue, even extratextual ones. For example, many of the adult actors cast in *Stranger Things*, are packed with eighties associational potential, having starred in some of the era's most emblematic films (e.g. Winona Ryder and *Heathers* (1988), Sean Astin and *The Goonies* (1985), Paul Reiser and *Aliens* (1986)). Moreover, in addition to direct references to 1980s movies throughout the show's dialogue—as just one of many, many possible illustrations, when Dustin feels he and his friends are about to be betrayed, he draws an explicit and passionate analogy with Lando Calrissian's betrayal of the protagonists in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)—the show's narrative form is replete with allusions and homages to eighties-style storytelling. Specifically, the show borrows extravagantly from Steven Spielberg, James Cameron and John Carpenter, moviemakers whose 1980s films have come to typify the era. Likewise, the 1980s novels of Stephen King, *Firestarter* and *It* specifically, are also clear inspirations for the show's narrative style and structure. All of which is to say, the main story of *Stranger Things*—kids on bikes trying to outrun and outsmart monsters and government agents—*feels* as if it belongs in the 1980s, keeping in mind that the show's central conflict is fundamentally supernatural and really should not feel proper to any earthly era.

Ultimately, *Stranger Things* is so packed with eighties-ness, it ends up being more eighties than the actual 1980s. In its unyielding pursuit of authenticity, the show, paradoxically, becomes hyperreal, hyperreality being what Jean Baudrillard, in his landmark work *Simulacra and Simulation*, called “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (1994, 1). For example, in the second season of *Stranger Things*, Nancy Wheeler and Steve Harrington, attend a Halloween party dressed as Rebecca DeMornay and Tom Cruise's characters from *Risky Business* (1983) a film that would have been released the previous year within the show's interior chronology. Adolescents in the 1980s rarely dressed up for Halloween, and, if they did, it was not in such niche costumes as that manner of cosplay did not become “a thing,” at least outside of specialized circles, until much later. In the same episode, the show's central quartet of Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Will dress as Ghostbusters for Halloween, yet their costumes are simply too precise and well-executed to qualify as “period correct.” How all of them managed, even with the assistance of dedicated and industrious parents, to put together movie-set-ready jumpsuits without the benefit of the internet, is simply beyond plausibility. In these and many other ways, the show's authenticity comes at the expense of its realism, an important exchange to keep in mind when thinking about the show's nostalgic attributes. After all, as Svetlana Boym suggests with her definition of nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists *or may never have existed*,” nostalgia is not fact-based. In fact, nostalgia's emotional resonance, which functions independent of its verifiability, can explain the intense affinity people feel

for *Stranger Things* and its temporal setting, an affinity that will disregard facts for the benefit of feelings.

Nostalgia originated as a medical concept, developed in the 17th Century by the Swiss doctor Johann Hofer to describe the homesickness experienced by soldiers fighting abroad, and it retained pathological associations until well into the Twentieth Century, at which point psychologists began viewing nostalgia as a response to distress rather than distress itself. Most people now recognize nostalgia as a pleasant experience, relying on it as a coping mechanism when struggling with identity, experiencing periods of heightened stress, or feeling socially isolated (Routledge 2015). These pleasant feelings associated with nostalgia deepen *Stranger Things*'s appeal, but they also contribute to the show's status as a cultural phenomenon. Nostalgia, after all, has a social value in addition to any psychological benefits it provides as it encourages people to bond over common experience, in this case life in the 1980s. The show and the discussion surrounding it, which remain robust, have become a forum for public memory, initiating a collective reverie about the eighties as a shared experience.

None of which is to say that nostalgia is invariably cheery. While people generally experience nostalgia as a positive emotional state, the actual content of nostalgic memories—or television programs that build themselves around nostalgia—can be quite harrowing. As mentioned above, nostalgia is bittersweet, and *Stranger Things* certainly fits this conceptualization, especially when it comes to the show's heavy emphasis on adolescence. Putting adolescents at the center of *Stranger Things* intensifies the nostalgic appeal of the show because of the bittersweet nature of early adolescence, caught as it is between the idyll of childhood and the "real world" of adulthood. The fundamental and universal developmental changes at this time in life are pivotal because adolescents are maturationally vulnerable while concurrently experiencing foundational and identity-defining events, positive and negative, which is why most people view adolescence as inherently turbulent. Indeed, early adolescence's combustible mix of significance and instability make it an ideal conduit for nostalgic affect.

The five characters at the center of *Stranger Things*—Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Will and Eleven—are 12 years old in season one. According to Piaget's Cognitive Theory of Development, this places them at the beginning of the last of his four stages, Formal Operations. Piaget's final cognitive stage starts at 11 years old, and the qualitatively important cognitive changes that occur are an increased ability to contemplate abstract (as opposed to concrete/tangible) ideas, reflect on one's own thoughts, and to reason about what is possible and hypothetical (as opposed to simply processing information that is real). For an adolescent, a whole new world is opened with these developmental changes. Consider, for instance, Mike, Lucas and Dustin as they deal with the apparent death of their good friend Will, and the increasing-but-still-foreign cognitive capacity that has them contemplating what life after death means, for both the living and the dead. In adolescence, people move from the concrete understanding of loss (e.g., being sad, knowing the person

will not come back, etc.) to the enhanced ability to contemplate beyond what is apparent – what happens after death, what happens to our soul. Conveniently and not coincidentally, *Stranger Things* presents a useful allegory for this process: the show's central conflict arises when a bridge is opened between material reality and the “upside down,” an unseen-but-ever-present dimension filled with monsters. The “upside down,” concretizes the world of abstraction that, according to Piaget, adolescence makes available. Rather appropriately, the show's adolescent protagonists contemplate this new realm of experience with a minimum of parental insight or assistance.

With the new cognitive abilities associated with adolescence comes a corresponding limitation in thinking, which Piaget described as adolescent egocentrism, the heightened self-consciousness of adolescents that is reflected in their sense of personal uniqueness and the belief others are as interested in them as they are interested in themselves. Dustin, for instance, cannot understand or forgive Mr. Wheeler's indifference to his needs, brazenly scolding his elder, “Son of a bitch, you're really no help at all, you know that?” The combination of these specific areas of cognitive growth and the accompanying limitations make adolescence a turbulent time socio-emotionally. Because of cognitive changes around 11 years old, individuals start to contemplate concepts beyond a phenomenon's concrete/superficial characteristics, yet they lack the maturity to deal with the “consequences” of these new frontiers being pondered. Many such situations are portrayed in *Stranger Things*, situations as crucial to the show's mood as any chase scene or fight sequence. For example, first kisses are generally innocuous and inconsequential, but certainly metamorphic, and all of these adjectives are brought to life (and our own memory) when Mike and Eleven kiss for the first time. In the same vein, falling in love is a natural part of life, but falling in love for the first time is transformative. Equally, losing love is a part of life, but losing it for the first time is devastating, which is why almost everyone can relate with Eleven when she is overcome with jealousy upon seeing Mike and Max innocently talking in the gymnasium, and why they can forgive her for telekinetically pulling the skateboard from beneath her rival's feet.

People's developing ability to process abstract issues, paired with limited experience actually dealing with them, makes events experienced in adolescence particularly affective. In addition to falling in and out of love, a very common aspect of a developing adolescent's life is changing relationships within the family. Because of the aforementioned cognitive changes that lead to more adult-like thinking and abilities and the onset of puberty and related socioemotional factors (i.e., “looking” like an adult, dating, etc.), adolescents' expectations of who they are and what they want change, which becomes problematic when the shared expectations within families change. Despite pervasive examples in the media, serious conflicts about major issues such as drug use, delinquent behavior, or Demogorgons are comparatively rare. Most of the conflicts comes in the form of everyday/common events, such as doing chores, obeying curfews, and following household rules. Such mundane conflicts are often included in *Stranger Things*,

such as when Mike Wheeler, having been caught stealing money from his sister, is ordered by his parents to get rid of not one but *two* boxes of toys in the opening episode of Season Two, a punishment dense with developmental significance. While the need to find Will or the pending confrontation with the Demogorgon are compelling plot points, the banality of these common and reminiscent interactions between characters increases the familiarity of the show, further contributing to its nostalgic appeal.

Another common and oftentimes bittersweet aspect of adolescence is the evolving and increasingly important relationship with peers, an aspect on clear display throughout the first two seasons of *Stranger Things*. In late childhood, friends are more similar than dissimilar in terms of age, sex, race, attitudes, activities, etc., but, adolescent groups are more formal, more heterogeneous, and more mixed-gender than children groups. The difficulty of these changes can help explain why Eleven unsettles Mike, Lucas and Dustin's friendship; her gender, more than her obscure past or telekinetic ability, poses a threat to group cohesion. Mike and Lucas have a falling out over her, after which Dustin attempts to explain to Mike what's really going on: "What matters is that [Lucas] is your best friend. And then this girl shows up and starts living in your basement, and all you ever want to do is pay attention to her. [...] And you know it. And he knows it. But no one ever says anything until you both start punching and yelling at each other like goblins with intelligence scores of zero" (S1, E6). Toward the end of this conversation, Dustin insists that "you can only have one best friend," a rather childish assessment of the increasingly complex dynamics of their friendship, one that accurately captures the difficult socioemotional stage the characters are in. Indeed, negotiating friendship is a critical part of development, and the representation of it within the show adds another familiar dimension to *Stranger Things*.

Overall, the age of the principal characters of *Stranger Things*, coupled with the show's unwavering commitment to an eighties aesthetic, supercharges its nostalgic affect, which is especially true when considered in the context of identity-formation. Because of changes in cognitive processing and increasingly complex exposure to the world, core features of how people define themselves are shaped in adolescence, which is supported by Erik Erikson, who developed a comprehensive theory of identity development. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development suggests that the main task of adolescence is, essentially, to establish identity by answering identity-related questions (e.g., Who am I? What am I all about? What am I going to do with my life? What is different about me? How can I make it on my own?). These questions, not usually considered in childhood, surface as a common, virtually universal concern during adolescence when people explore different roles and cope with the results of these explorations. Adolescence is the first point in life when a person is physically, cognitively, and socioemotionally mature enough to sort through and synthesize his or her identity and construct a viable path toward adult maturity (Peterson, Marcia and Carpendale 2004). Early adolescence, in other words, is when people think they became the person they

really are. And “It is age,” Douwe Draaisma writes in his book *The Nostalgia Factory*, “rather than the gravity of the circumstances, that seems to be the most important factor when it comes to what we remember best” (77).

Fundamentally, it is not the importance of a thing that makes it memorable; it is, developmentally speaking, *when* we see a thing that determines how readily we recall it later, and our memories of the period between childhood's amnesia and adulthood's hypnosis are consistently the easiest to access. The reminiscence bump, a neurological phenomenon that makes the memories people have of adolescence and early adulthood easier to recollect, helps explain the depth of people's personal reactions to *Stranger Things*, as well as the breath of its cultural impact. After all, the familiar things within *Stranger Things* are especially familiar to people in the most-coveted demographic of television viewers, adults aged 18-49. While assessing the viewership of *Stranger Things* is difficult, primarily because Netflix refuses to share its internal numbers, Nielsen Media Research does have some information about who watches the show, and, according to them, roughly three quarters of the show's viewers belong to the key demographic of adults aged 18-49 (Otterson). Those in the upper end of that key 18-49 demographic are particularly susceptible to *Stranger Things's* nostalgic allure, in that their reminiscence bumps correspond with the show's mid-Eighties setting. Significantly, the reminiscence bump doesn't just accentuate the big stuff, like battling Demogorgons or finding telekinetic friends in the forest; the reminiscence bump makes even unremarkable and everyday events, stuff like playing games with friends or the image on a lunch box, more vivid and memorable (Janssen and Murre 2008). Indeed, the little details that go unnoticed at later ages make a stronger, longer mark during the reminiscence bump, and that means people who grew up in the 1980s are much more likely to appreciate *Stranger Things's* authentic details because those are the details most vividly established in their memories.

As for those in late adolescence and early adulthood, which would be the other end of that key demographic, they, too, are particularly susceptible to *Stranger Things's* nostalgia in that many of them experience a *cascading* reminiscence bump. Studies have repeatedly shown that due to the reminiscence bump, virtually everyone maintains a fondness for the music they heard during their adolescence, but according to Carol Lynne Krumhansl and Justin Adam Zupnick, people also demonstrate a special fondness for the music of their parents' adolescences (2013). Whether this is due to parents pushing formative cultural expressions on their children or other, less deliberate factors, people find the pop culture of their parents' youths especially resonant, and many Americans in their late teens and early twenties find a lot of their parent's favorite pop culture in *Stranger Things*. This cascading reminiscence bump, coupled with the conventional reminiscence bump, places *Stranger Things* in an enviable position when it comes to drawing both ends of television's key demographic, which provides important context for its tremendous popularity and status as a cultural phenomenon.

Season 3 of *Stranger Things* is currently in production, and from information that has been released, the show's formula for success is still in place. A full commitment to the temporal portrayal of the 80s has been confirmed as season 3 will take place in 1985, and new stereotypical characters from the 80s will be added, including a morally comprised politician, a sexist reporter, an advice-offering nurturing older woman, and an "alternative girl," who will likely anticipate the angst-ridden teens of the 90s (Smith 2018). Also in play will be the casting of iconic '80s actor Carey Elwes, who is of course known for his role as Westley in the 1987 cult classic *The Princess Bride*. And the omnipresent adolescent experience will almost certainly remain in its strong supporting role, continuing the established storylines relating to the turbulent familial relationships, the romantic entanglements and the complex peer relationships while likely adding new ones (e.g., the teenagers' internal struggle to both conform and stand out, to be accepted and be independent). Provided the show can continue to provoke sentimental feelings for a time associated with a bittersweet beauty, viewers will watch because what makes it unique is that it really is not. The show is not strange, or, if it is, it is strangely familiar.

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