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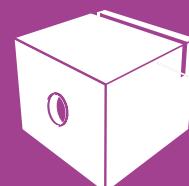
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# **DESIGNING FOR MEANING:**

UNITING CREATIVE AND SCHOLASTIC  
RESEARCH THROUGH COLLECTIVE  
PRACTICES IN EVENT DESIGN

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## **Abstract:**

Practice-based creative research, also known as research-creation, exists in a tenuous position between art and academia. There has been significant, ongoing research into the role of curatorial processes, research, and public-facing events as forms of knowledge production which draw from both traditional informational methodologies and creative or artistic approaches. However, much of the work on this subject is centred on gallery and museum spaces. This paper describes a creative research project carried out by a team of graduate students at Concordia University (Montreal), which aims to bring research-creation into direct, engaged conversation with more traditional forms of academic research through the research collective's development of interdisciplinary symposia. We discuss the importance of taking a design approach, including documentation and iterative practices, in order to create an environment in which creative research and scholastic research are treated as equally important forms of knowledge production. Specifically, we detail how the idea of *meaningful methods* influenced our approach, and how designing for connection and embodied experience are essential to creating event spaces which facilitate interdisciplinary knowledge exchange.

**Keywords:** *research-creation, symposium, nostalgia, meaningful methods, embodied experience, exhibition, event design*

Practice-based creative research, known as research-creation, has emerged in a tenuous position between art and academia. In 'Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and 'Family Resemblances', Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuck argue that research-creation, distinguished by the incorporation of creative practices as a core part of research methodology, can be seen as an *intervention* in the bureaucratic paradigm of academia due to its experimental, processual nature (Chapman & Sawchuck, 2012). As more of a 'newly-recognised' than 'new' form of inquiry, research-creation produces situated knowledge by incorporating practices of experimentation, trial, and iteration (Chapman & Sawchuck, 2012). This form of knowledge creation acts as an *intervention*, directly challenging rigid disciplinary paradigms which demand adherence to and the reproduction of specific methodological, epistemic, and ontological approaches (Chapman & Sawchuck, 2012). A decade later, research-creation has become more widely accepted especially within the field of media and cultural studies. It is now relatively commonplace for large field-specific conferences to solicit presentations and panels about creative research, inviting artists to present their work and findings alongside traditional analyses. At the same time, many conferences make it difficult to share research-creation as typical conference venues lack the facilities to set up installations, viewings, and gallery spaces in which research-creation projects can be viewed or experienced. While a typical conference format allows a creative researcher to share some of the information derived from their work, the inability to share the embodied and situated *experience* of the work can lead to some of this knowledge – often personal and perceptive in nature (Chapman & Sawchuck, 2012) – becoming excluded.

Despite a shift towards a more inclusive academia, a conversational gap remains between these differing forms of knowledge production.

There has been significant, ongoing research into the role of curatorial processes, research, and public-facing events as forms of knowledge production which draw from both traditional informational methodologies and creative or artistic approaches. In 'Sketches for a methodology on exhibition research,' Henrick Treimo (2020) describes how the process of creating museum exhibitions can act as a form of creative research through focusing on a variety of rigorous approaches to objects, texts, and the people within an exhibition. Through creating an experience in which objects come together and are re-interpreted by artists, new connections and experiences can emerge (Treimo, 2020). Similarly, Raul Gschrey (2016), an artist, scholar and curator, describes how curatorial practices that combine both practice-based works and more academic scholarship can create a polyphonic experience which "challenges the linearity and decisiveness of academic reasoning and allows for a less hierarchical and a more open-ended and associative occupation with topics, ideas, and artifacts" (p. 3). However, much of this ongoing research has focused on gallery and museum spaces (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Runnel, 2021; Treimo, Henrik, 2020; Turnbull et al., 2011). There is considerably less work on how creative research can be integrated into explicitly academic events and, most importantly, be brought into direct conversation with each other.

This paper describes a creative research project carried out by a team of graduate students at Concordia University (Montreal), which aims to bring research-creation into direct,

engaged conversation with more traditional forms of academic research through the development of the research-creation collective. This collective explores the generative potential of nostalgia through the application of *meaningful methods*. Instead of developing methods for the study of meaningful objects, this meaningful methods approach aims to study nostalgia through the multiplicity of individual experiences as a source of the phenomenon. To make clear, a meaningful methods approach does not set out to operationalise nostalgia into academic terminology that is then tied to particular methods; it is not about methodology that will measure a phenomenon. Rather, the meaningfulness is assumed as emergent from the collective, polyvocal interactions of attendees, presenters, and research-creation works. The goal is therefore to establish how this polyphony (Gschrey, 2016) can be assembled in a way whereby new connections are formed (Treimo, 2020) and consequently, links to a realisation that nostalgia can be understood in fresh, new, and even surprising ways. By curating multiple approaches and embodiments of nostalgia, a meaningful methods symposium hopes to unsettle disciplinary and broaden specific understandings of its topic. In other words, experiences and knowledge regarding nostalgia do not have to undergo the traditional academic process of being defined, studied with discipline-specific methods, and published. A symposium with a meaningful methods approach treats all of its attendees – including objects and art work – as valuable contributors who possess a myriad of definitions and approaches for understanding nostalgia. During the opening talk at the first Nostalgia Symposium, Richy introduced the meaningful methods approach on the concept of nostalgia which:

...we draw so much from it... that as scholars, we create... rigorous methods to study something meaningful. But on the concept of nostalgia, which everyone here can talk at length about, we are the meaningful method.

Nostalgia research is particularly suited to a meaningful methods approach: it is a resource that everyone possesses as a social emotion (Wulf et al., 2020), can be used to escape (Wulf et al., 2020) or motivate (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2023) oneself from undesirable situations, and it accumulates and develops over time (Sedikides et al., 2015). However, these discussions of nostalgia are centred on the psychological benefits, often for the individual, of using nostalgia to respond to adverse feelings and situations. However, nostalgia does not exist solely in the individual, per its philosophical origin as an incurable longing for home specific to individuals (Ansprech, 1934). Instead, our experiences and discussions of nostalgia have shifted to the collective power of determining what we are to be nostalgic about, and what we understand as nostalgia. A regressive obsession for the past may be socially branded as a patriotic act to Make Something Great Again, and conversely, spending time with memorabilia can be seen as a failure to spend time productively or healthily; she is a 'hopeless romantic, he 'cannot move on', or they 'keep living in the past'. The meaning – and effects – of nostalgia, which are then measured by psychologists, is foremost determined by a collective that individuals later receive and reproduce (Boym, 2001). A meaningful method therefore engages with nostalgia at the collective or social level, because this is the modern-day wellspring from which nostalgia takes its meaning – what do we mean by 'nostalgia' and who defines

these things or feelings as nostalgic? Gschrey (2016) notes that a perceived limitation of a curatorial approach is the loss of the meta-narrative and individual positions, but this can turn out to be a strength if instead of 'providing structured arguments in the direction of a hypothesis, curatorial projects can be effective means of posing questions, raising awareness, and initiating discussion' (p. 3). In the III. Event Flow section, we elaborate on how we designed for nostalgia to be experienced collectively with 'event flow', interactive livestreams, a digital nostalgia board known as 'the Wall', a 'gallery' dedicated to research-creation artifacts, and a canopy area with an artificial campfire for quiet reflection. These opportunities encourage a collective response to nostalgia – how can we mobilise a reflexive attitude towards nostalgia in the artwork, research, and conversations that we practice daily? These questions became the mission for Nostagain to host its annual interdisciplinary symposiums with participation from junior and seasoned scholars, professional and research-creation artists, and members of the public.

The collective's events have included two themed symposia, 'Lost/Again' and 'Time in a Bottle,' as well as workshops and interactive digital artworks. Each event aims to put different types of knowledge production in direct conversation through the inclusion of traditional academic research with research-creation and artistic works. For the purposes of these events, *research-creation* and the knowledge it produces is construed broadly. As described by Chapman & Sawchuck (2012), research-creation can be understood and practiced differently, often overlapping with one another in a manner described as 'family resemblances' (Chapman & Sawchuck, 2012). More important than defining a set of

acceptable practices or formalised knowledge production as prerequisites for inclusion, the collective's events seek to enhance *conversation* across different disciplines and knowledge production practices across varying levels of rank and seniority.

Chapman and Sawchuck (2012) note that research-creation often challenges established scholastic methodological paradigms, noting 'In research-creation approaches, the theoretical, technical, and creative aspects of a research project are pursued in tandem, and quite often, scholarly form and decorum are broached and breeched in the name of experimentation.' Because artistic research remains a relatively new mode of academic knowledge production, there is no standardised methodology for designing events which bring together artists, researchers, and research-creation scholars on an equal footing. The design of these events calls for careful, creative decision-making with close attention paid to the experiences of participants. As we went through the experience of designing this event together, we found ourselves drawing from our diverse backgrounds across research and the fine arts, mirroring iterative processes of critical design. We share our experience with event planning as a form of collectively conducted, practice-based research documented through process deliverables and our own reflections on the event design and planning process. We position our collectively driven research-creation event as more than a successful example of an event incorporating both artistic research and conventional academic research; we see it as an attempt to design an *experience* which creates a compelling, meaningful space through which this knowledge can be understood in a present, embodied, and critical manner.

We centre our approach to event design as a collaborative process through the development of the collective's research-creation symposium. First, we explain why we chose the symposium format for this event, detailing the specific institutional context which helped make this event possible. We also discuss how the diversity of our members' backgrounds influenced the process and approach to designing this event, as well as how the logistical elements of collective event planning helped us establish thorough documentation as part of the design process. Next, drawing from our documentation, we describe the design process as it occurred across five distinct phases: ideation, constructing the call, event flow, event layout, and design for connection and embodied experience. We proceed to discuss the outcome of the first event and how the experiences and knowledge gained through the design process impacted the second event. We conclude this section with an overview of the design process for our second event, focusing on changes made to event flow and layout based on knowledge developed through this iterative design process.

### **Designing a Nostalgia Symposium**

As detailed earlier, the personal, embodied experience of nostalgia as a social and cultural phenomenon is especially suited to interchange between traditional academic research and artistic research. The decision to launch this symposium as a student-led event emerged from a combination of institutional context, the diverse backgrounds of the event organisers, and the approach towards knowledge production which emerges from the combination of the two.

The idea for the event emerged from members of the TAG Lab at Concordia University. The Technocultures, Arts and Games Lab (TAG) functions as a research cluster that brings together students from across Concordia's programs to study and produce games. TAG itself is part of the Milieux Institute, an umbrella organisation that connects a variety of creative research cultures. Many of the organising committee's members were also part of other research clusters, including Speculative Life and Machine Agencies. These research clusters, operating largely at the graduate level, bring together artists and scholars for creative approaches to research across a variety of fields. Our members began to notice a throughline that permeated their projects involving game development, generating stable diffusion images of a speculative past and future using AI, and in their studies of affect and online communities: nostalgia. This individual experience facilitated discussions and knowledge sharing between the members which were essential to the development of the Nostagain symposium.

In casual discussions, nostalgia emerged as a common thread that bridged our experiences as scholars, artists, and gamers. Widely recognised but deeply familiar and personal, nostalgia is present across the games, aesthetics, and media histories that members of TAG pursue, given that most members experience a nostalgia for, and through, digital technologies. Wulf and colleagues (2020) note that the average gamer has enough life experiences combined with a legacy of consoles that guarantees them 'experiences to feel a sense of nostalgia' (p. 84). For members who did not feel as nostalgic for and with video games, they still felt digital nostalgia, which Katharina Niemeyer (2016) defines as

a 'longing for the human relations it created but also their devices, techniques and related user rituals' (p. 29). But at the heart of our conversation is how to use nostalgia for the present and the future. Even if we recognised what we were all nostalgic about, questions surrounding its generativity remained: What connects the retro aesthetics of modern-day indie games with game communities and histories? What connects emerging retro web aesthetics with current work on media archaeology? What visual, aural and ludic vocabularies emerge from nostalgic media? And, looking forward, what is *generated* from the time, energy, and cultural objects explicitly produced due to their nostalgic appeal? What effect might that have on our current media landscape, now and in the future? And, most importantly, how can we connect artistic researchers and traditional researchers across clusters to encourage future discussion and knowledge production on a topic so many of us approach in so many different ways? As Chapman and Sawchuck (2012) note, artistic research often breaches academic decorum and can be an intervention in the neoliberal, bureaucratic knowledge production model. Because this event emerged from our interactions in the Milieux Institute, a place that already fosters alternative practices, breaching decorum was not an obstacle to our event design process. Instead, the challenge became a question of how to design an event which facilitated generative intellectual and creative explorations of a broad topic of interest.

We wanted to understand what links us through a reflexive, playful approach rooted in our relationship with games and interactive digital media. The idea of a symposium format emerged through a reflection on our experiences as junior

scholars attending formal conferences and seminar-style events. Formal conferences are good opportunities to experience new ideas and emerging work, but short question-and-answer periods and rushed panel schedules make it difficult to have sustained, meaningful conversations about topics of interest. Meanwhile, small seminar-style events are informal and low-stakes but often limited to classmates with the same institutional affiliation. As the head organiser, Richy describes,

A 'symposium' felt like it was the middle between the two but also shared aspects of both a conference and a seminar. It was a gathering personal enough to talk about something public, personally. Like nostalgia, a symposium fit the bill of being in between the state of something assumed and something unknown. We wanted to pair the elusive topic and theatre together. What emerged was a 'platform' (that's a word I'd use) for a generative sincerity amongst junior scholars.

Through our experiences as members of TAG and the Milieux Institute at Concordia University, we were aware of ongoing artistic research in several of the other clusters. We envisioned an event that would connect research-creation and academic research and open up additional conversations across clusters of the Milieux Institute. An important secondary goal was to create a public-facing event that would bring members of the community together with early-career academics and artists across local universities, increasing access to information about nostalgia research and, hopefully, sparking conversations that would lead to new projects. Finally, being rooted in game production and game studies,

as well as our identity as 'gamers,' we felt that embodied, present, and ludic experiences were important elements in learning and knowledge production. We wanted to design an event that would incorporate hands-on workshops and individual reflection to collectively and playfully create knowledge about nostalgia. Moreover, as nostalgia is intriguing as a topic of study due to its deeply personal and meaningful nature, we wanted to create a specifically *meaningful* experience which would connect scholastic and creative approaches to the subject.

During early planning discussions, it quickly became apparent that event design would be crucial to the symposium's success. Drawing from our team's diverse backgrounds, a design process emerged through consensus: we would begin with brainstorming/ideation, constructing the call, event flow, event layout, and design for connection and embodied experience. Diversity quickly became our strength, with team members drawing from their previous experiences and their own research-creation practices to inform each part of the design stage. Our members come from a variety of international backgrounds, academic ranks, and are gender diverse, but what mattered most was the variety of intellectual approaches and life experiences. Two members were trained in sociological and anthropological methods, with more of a focus on traditional research output. Two of the members involved in early planning were part of programs specifically designed for research-creation. Three of our members had experience working as practicing artists, interaction designers, game designers and graphic designers. Several members had experience with exhibiting critical artistic work and research-creation projects, and all members had experience

with event planning across a variety of institutional contexts. The diversity in our skill sets and academic training meant that, even in the planning of the symposium, the meaningful method emerged as we shared how nostalgia is perceived and studied by our collective disciplines, and in how we approached (re)defining nostalgia by designing for that year's symposium. The combination of researchers, artists, and research-creation practitioners allowed us to develop this event from a multiplicity of perspectives and approaches. Conducted through a collective practice, our design work mirrors the curatorial approach Gschrey (2016) describes as a midway point between the work of a scholar and the work of an artist. What made our practice especially effective was our focus on continuing the conversations we were *already* engaged in, opening them to a broader audience to explore their generative potential.

## Design, Process, Documentation

### I. Ideation

The design process began with an ideation phase, in which members brainstormed potential elements of the event. Because our collective was scattered in diverse locations across the campus, we were forced to use digital documentation practices to share information and planned using shared digital drives. The ideation process began with the members' participation in the Speculative Life Cluster's symposium. This event brought together scholars and research-creators across the cluster to explain their work, engage in dialogue, and showcase their projects. Some members of our planning committee participated in the event, while other members focused on observing, allowing us to develop our own event from each

perspective. Having the chance to reflect on the Speculative Life symposium allowed us to build from the event's successes and brainstorm new ways to build on the format. Observation

was especially important in this process, with careful attention paid to which encounters and experiences sparked the most generative conversations and connections.

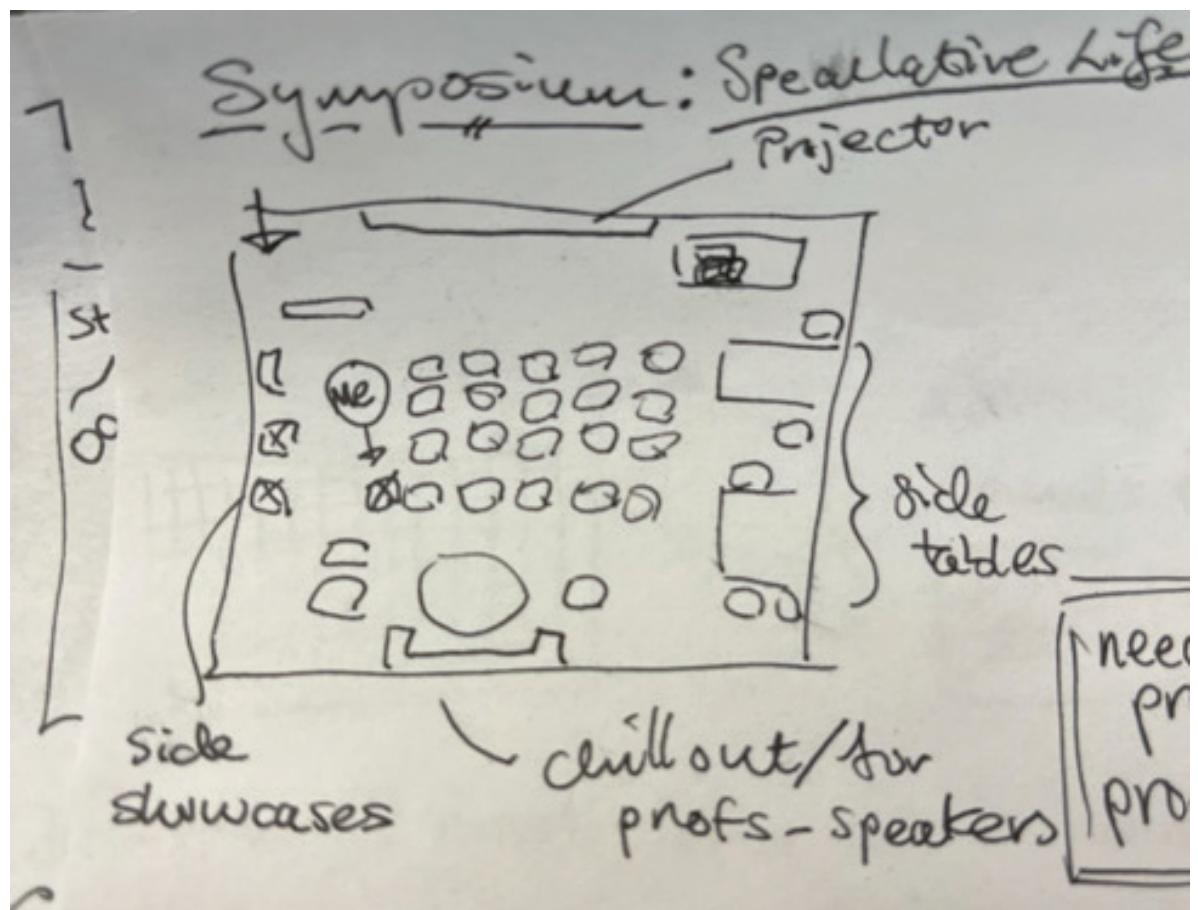


Fig. 1 Image of notes from Research Cluster B Symposium

As the ideation process evolved, two themes emerged: an interactive exploration of nostalgia with an emphasis on art and creation, and the continuation of an academic approach to nostalgia as a research topic. The former is material and physical; it involves movement, exploration of materials, textures, and so on. It is about the encounter of bodies with objects and places an emphasis on the senses and affect. Comparatively, the latter is disembodied and abstract. It is about introspection and reflection through words. The body is often motionless as one listens, assimilates, thinks or communicates. A *meaningful methods* approach requires the fusion of the two in order to evoke collective, emergent meaning-making. To deal with this impasse, we made the decision to plan the symposium by incorporating both themes. Therefore, our members broke into subgroups, using the public digital communication platform, Discord, to work on our ideas. As a tool, the affordances of Discord's platform allowed us to continue the process as our own reflections evolved, while providing a place for the conversations which inspired the symposium to continue.

## II. Constructing a Call

As we moved towards constructing the call for participants, our members gathered the ideas that came from the work in the subgroups, the team meetings we held, and the current trends of nostalgia in media and scholarship. These include the psychological uses and benefits of nostalgia for individuals (see Wulf et al., 2020; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2023), its relevance across academic disciplines (see Becker & Trigg, 2025), and nostalgia that 'was and is a business' (Niemeyer, 2016, p. 29) – a 25% sales increase for Mattel Toys (Kavilanz,

2023) after the worldwide success of the Barbie (2023) film, the exponential rise from 4.7 million to 8.1 million viewers (Stoll, 2024) of the popular video game turned television series, The Last of Us (2023-), and the upcoming A Minecraft Movie (2025) based on the most popular video game of all time, Minecraft (2009-). In short, nostalgia is currently a profitable path for academics and marketers. Through collective deliberation, we came to an agreement on three guiding lines of inquiry which would help us structure an event consistent with our meaningful methods approach. We phrased these as questions for our symposium to address:

1. How do we use digital nostalgia to keep us from forgetting the things we value?
2. To what extent do we forget other things in pursuit of our personal remembering?
3. How can we use our remembering tools to remind us of things we are forgetting?

Crucially, the open-ended nature of these questions sparked a discussion among the organisers that led to two streams of approaching nostalgia. The first, 'Lost Again', was focused on how digitally mediated nostalgia is used to recreate the past through what nostalgia researchers term *reflective nostalgia* (Boym, 2001). The second, 'Time in a Bottle', focused on exploring the ways that *speculative nostalgia* allows people to anticipate (Cheung, 2023) and project possible futures, including those which incorporate elements of traumatic pasts (Tobin, 2021). Together, the streams connected nostalgia with its theoretical body, incorporating the two prominent approaches in nostalgia scholarship, whilst also opening up the space for practical and creative interpretations for artists and non-academics.

As one organiser, Annie, noted,

I feel this part came together in a quite organic way. Honestly, my memory of it is that Richy would come up with a flash, and we would all jump in... We would test it and probe all of its potential, [adding limits and invoking the worst-case scenario], but mostly we would build on it to see where it would lead us. I think our goal was to be direct enough to get stuff ON nostalgia, but also to be broad enough to make sure it was as inclusive of diverse practices, diverse scholars, and diverse fields of research as possible.

Creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and critical exploration *with* breadth in mind was key to cultivating interest from a multitude of disciplines, departments, and institutions. The call for papers and workshops was circulated through the community of local universities and within our own institution, being shared across the departments of Art History, Sociology, Psychology, Creative Arts Therapies, History, Communications, English, to name a few. Ultimately, we received nineteen entries on topics including sound, gaming, material objects, and artistic workshops.

We repeated this approach in the planning of the second symposium, emphasising nostalgia as a topic for research-creation. As before, we began with a broad idea – ‘Time in a Bottle’ – and through group discussion, developed themes, subgroups, and our topic streams, which were ‘Objects of Nostalgia’ and ‘Nostalgic Objects’. Rowena, a member of the organising team reflected: ‘From last year, we found that it’s

not just about what nostalgia makes us feel, it’s also about what nostalgia carries with it and what happens when we try to hold onto things. And sometimes that’s very positive and straightforward, but it can also be complicated.’ Collectively, ‘Time in a Bottle’ drew 34 entries, with submissions for 22 papers and 12 artworks. We view this increased interest as a sign of success, which we attribute to the effort put into constructing a broad call which also allowed us to hone in on some of the questions that were sparked by the first iteration of the event.

### III. Event Flow

One critical element of the symposium’s design involved determining the requirements for the smooth flow of the event. In our original plan, we thought it would be ‘good enough’ to divide our program into five sections, alternating between two speaker panels and workshops led by volunteer organisers. The decision to include two to three speakers per panel was a deliberate choice to ensure more time for questions from both an in-person and a virtual audience. As Derek, one of our team members who attended remotely and moderated the livestream, noted,

It was a totally unique experience to be able to see everything on the virtual side. I was able to point out some technical difficulties, as well as being able to talk to event-goers in chat. Being present in the chat also let me communicate with a few audience members, as well as develop a couple of insights on what could be done better with regards to this format.

We found that the livestream and small panels helped to facilitate more extended conversations. Some panels, however, had an imbalance between creative and scholastic research. It led to lively discussion, but also created an atmosphere in which the presenters were mainly in conversation with the audience, speaking across each other rather than *with* each other.

Arguably, it is the workshops that helped position our event as a symposium rather than a traditional student-led conference. Given that we were located at the Milieux Institute, we chose a central room where all of the panels occurred and assigned the remaining spaces for the workshops, which included a research lab and the break room where slidable doors opened up space for participants to congregate in the hallway. Each workshop accommodated 5–10 participants

who could move freely between the rooms without any time constraint. We found that a synergy developed between panels and workshops. The first workshop session, 'Active Recollection', sparked conversations about layers of organic, personalised nostalgia and artificial nostalgia, while also presenting a *theoretical* challenge to common beliefs of nostalgia as an intrinsically personal experience by providing a parasocial frame to nostalgia. This workshop was followed by the panel, 'Collating Nostalgia', that combined collective practices of nostalgising with materiality and deconstruction of nostalgic items. This interchange between panels and workshops created an oscillating sense of personal nostalgia for the methods, mediums and materials being discussed as a historicised phenomenon by the speakers and workshop leaders. Hence, theory and practice merged together, with one conversation flowing smoothly into the next.

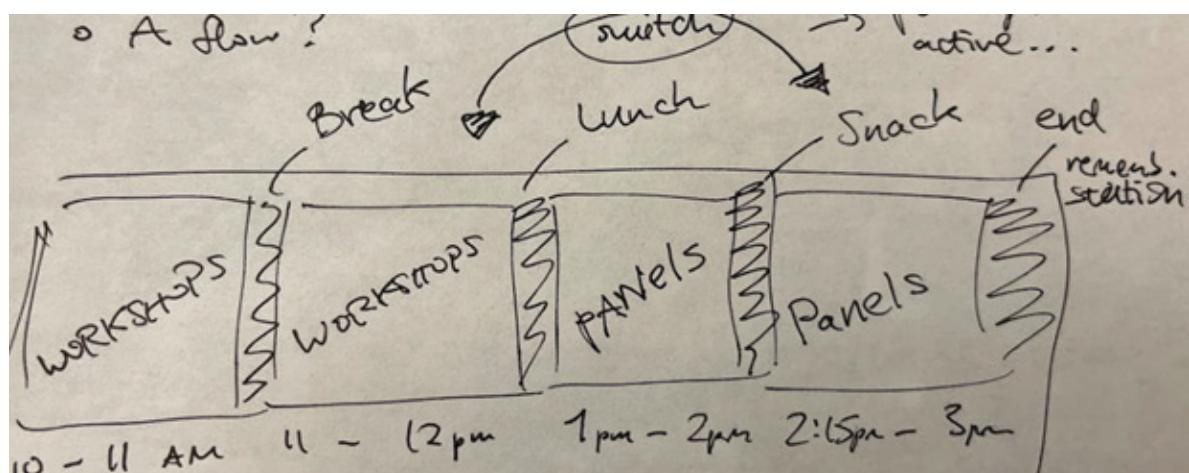


Fig. 2 Image of workshop and panel design

While we found that the alternation between active workshops and panels, of the first event, worked to position the event as a symposium, it caused some difficulties. It became clear that some attendees did not consider the workshops as important as the panels and used the workshop sessions as a chance to briefly exit the event, only returning for the next panel. It also became clear that the fast pace of the workshops was tiring as participants became less engaged at the end of the day. To remedy this, we redesigned the symposium experience the following year, taking into account two types of flow: time and movement.

For this second edition, we found a space that allowed us to feature panels with the traditional arrangement of seats in front of a large screen and an exhibition of artistic works and research-creation projects, in the same room. We also gave the opportunity to artists who submitted their work for exhibition to give artist talks. Instead of having alternating panels and workshops, we planned for a flow that would be comfortable for our embodied participants, providing an environment more conducive to creating a meaningful experience. Crucially, we designed the schedule with an awareness of the demanding nature of sustained intellectual engagement and accommodated fluctuation in energy throughout the day. In our first event, we had witnessed the connections that spontaneously occurred as participants engaged around the coffee station. Hence, for the second iteration, we provided time for those spontaneous connections to emerge by providing ample transition breaks between each session to get coffee, reflect, and converse.

Being able to accommodate an exhibition also led us to change the way research-creation was integrated into the program. Instead of holding workshops, we reserved one area of the space as a 'gallery', featuring video, installation, and interactive artworks. This encouraged participants to circulate and examine the research-creation submissions throughout the day. The morning began with opening remarks and a panel featuring both artists and researchers, some of whom were also exhibiting. In the afternoon, we had a panel session reserved strictly for the research-creation works through a guided exhibition. During this period, artists who chose to attend stood near their installation and conversed with the symposium attendees, allowing for a convergence of nostalgia in its theory, practice, and art. Our research-creation panel resembled that of a farmer's market; attendees, panellists, and bystanders moved between our refreshments table, the row of research-creation installations, and a live podcast taping that interviewed the speakers, all in the same space. We closed on an intimate activity where participants connected with one another to create a time capsule which collected their nostalgic memories of the past, of this symposium, and for the future. As Annie describes this perspective,

[...] we planned for a gradual awakening with the opening remarks that helped slowly pull people into the intellectual space, then moved on with our panels in the morning... the design of it came naturally with the need to manage and respect the levels of concentration and energy. Conferences are demanding and tiring.

We found that this approach was more successful in integrating the research-creation elements of the work with the panels: after seeing the works during the morning and early afternoon, attendees had their curiosity piqued, which led to increased engagement. While people came and went throughout the day, we did not see a substantial decrease of attendees until *after* the research-creation exhibition session. We view this as a strong testament to the importance of research-creation from the standpoint of symposium

organisers, and from the clear enjoyment of our participants and presenters. We found this to be one of the most significant takeaways from the design process: designing for a natural, comfortable rhythm was instrumental in creating the right environment for scholastic and creative exchange. This would not have been possible without taking a practice-based approach rooted in design, underscoring the importance of creative methodologies in knowledge production.

1	Block	Time Slot	Description
2		10:00 - 10:15	Opening Remarks
3	<b>Music and Sound</b>	10:15 - 11:15	
5		11:15 - 11:30	Transition period & Snacks
6	<b>Nostalgic Narratives</b>	11:30 - 12:30	
8	<b>Lunch (12:30 - 13:15)</b>	12:30 - 12:45	
9		12:45 - 13:00	(ONGOING) Podcast Interview
10		13:00 - 13:15	
11	<b>Playing with the Past</b>	13:15 - 14:15	
12		14:15 - 14:30	Transition period & Snacks
13	<b>Research-Creation Hour</b>	14:30 - 15:30	
14		15:15 - 15:30	WRAP UP and Transition period & Snacks
15	<b>Nostalgic Comfort and Complication</b>	15:45 - 16:45	
16		16:45 - 17:00	Transition period & Snacks
17	<b>Research creation practicum</b>	17:00 - 17:15	
18	<b>Concluding Remarks</b>	17:30 - 17:45	
19	<b>Group Photo/Close</b>	17:45 - 18:00	Group Photo

Fig. 3 Image of revised event design

## IV. Event Layout

During our first symposium, we incorporated the space of the Milieux Institute into our event layout plans. The central room, as previously mentioned, held all of the panels. We specifically chose to house the workshops in a research lab and the institute break room on the same floor. Importantly, these spaces converged at a middle hallway, where we placed the refreshments table and displayed an interactive projection that allowed participants to upload images related to their nostalgia. This layout meant that the attendees were always connected to the theme of nostalgia by bumping into

others, or being in the presence of a talk or workshop that engaged with it. Our panellists sat on couches instead of on chairs behind a table to directly connect with the audience. We also set up an area with a small canopy and artificial campfire for people to relax and personally connect with one another. However, this initial space was difficult to manage: the crowd often spilled into the cramped hallway, and there was no natural flow between the partitioned rooms. During the workshops, some participants also chose to relax in the canopied area instead of engaging with the creative activities. As mentioned earlier, designing for movement and flow was an essential consideration during the planning process.

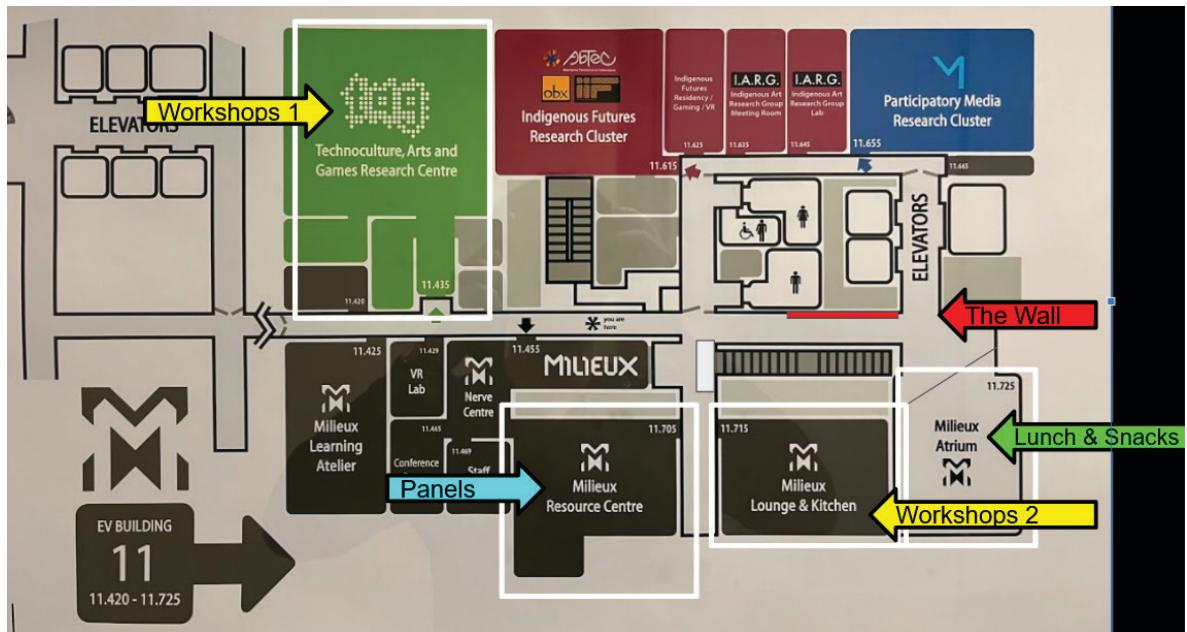


Fig. 4 Image of initial layout design

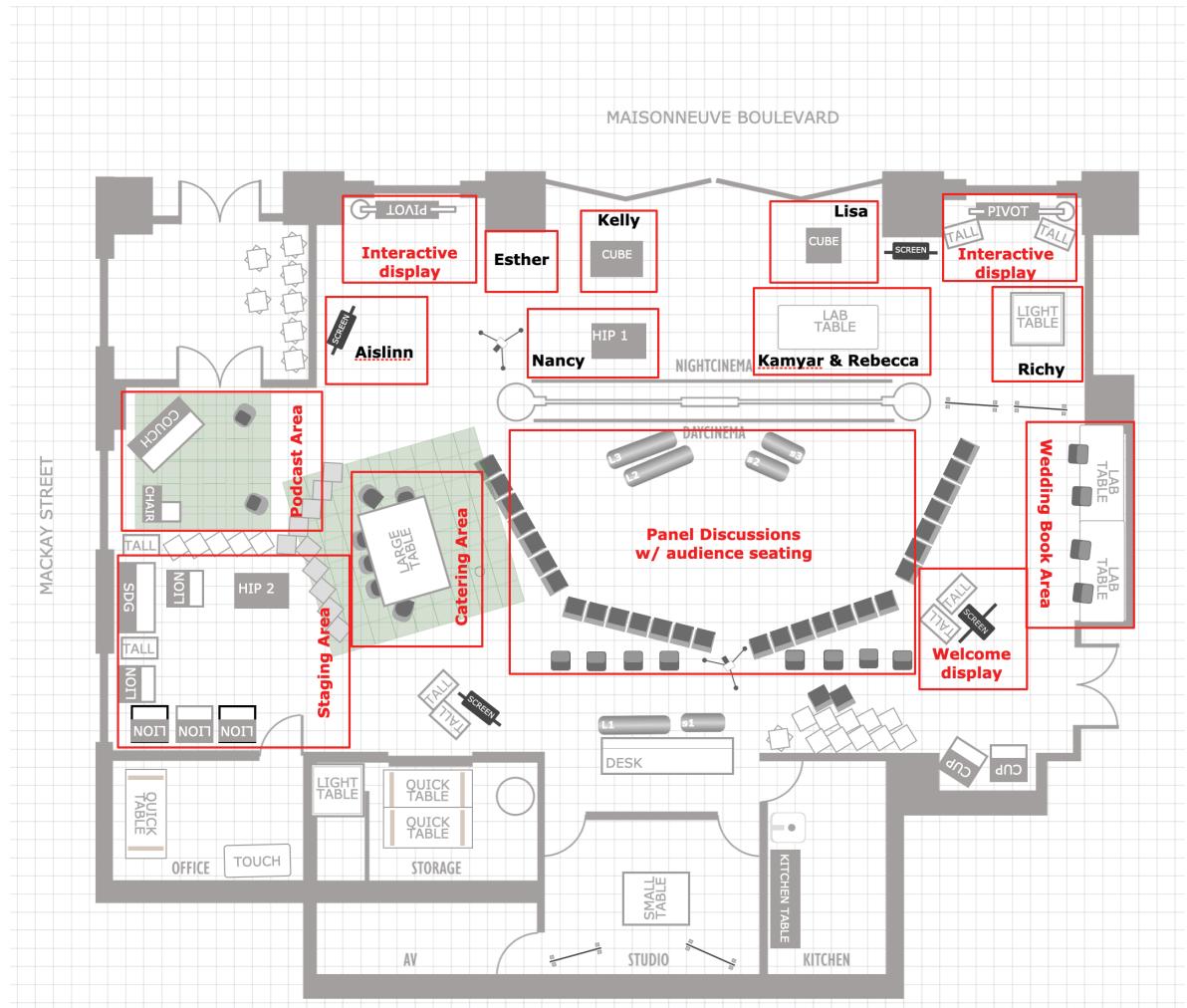


Fig. 5 Image of second layout design

Through trial-and-error, it became clear that the physical layout of the event space was just as important as the symposium's experiential flow.

For the second symposium, we connected with the dedicated event space at Concordia University. The Concordia University 4th Space is a public event hosting room which features modular design elements that can accommodate the most specific of event layouts. We divided one half of the space, closest to the windows, to hold the exhibition; the other side of the room was reserved for a semi-circular seating area facing a motorised projector screen that could be remotely lowered and raised from the ceiling. Like the first symposium, a corner of the space was reserved as the backstage for the organisers, which was situated next to an alcove for a live podcast taping that took place throughout the day. We chose to obscure the view of the seating area from the main entrance so people would be redirected to a nearby station with name tags and coat racks, inviting them to step into the space as the presentation area became more visible by the coat racks. Notably, the 4th Space staff lifted the motorised screen when we announced the 'reveal' of the research-creation exhibition, spatially making the argument that the three elements of symposium – the academic pursuit to develop rigorous methods for studying things with meaning, artistic and creative research, and the *meaningful method* that is already inherent in all of us as nostalgic individuals – were always part of the same whole. We feel that the spatial choreography, given the modifiable event layout at 4th Space, served as a demonstration of our concept of the *meaningful method* better than any descriptive text would.

## V. Design for Connection

An element of the symposium which we have yet to address is our purposeful design *for connection*. Symposia have long been a space in which artists and intellectuals interact and learn from one another. In our first year, our main goal was to help people at our university and at the Milieux Institute connect across universities, programs, and disciplines. This goal informed every aspect of our decision-making: we tried to create a cozy atmosphere, present workshops that encouraged group participation, and a use of space that was committed to sparking generative conversations. To create a playful sense of nostalgia, we set up a nametag station with markers and stickers to remind participants of the simpler times nostalgia often evokes – a practice that helped people get to know each other, which we continued in our second year.

Since we wanted to make our event accessible – and because it fell during the coldest time of the year in Montreal – we opted for a hybrid format, including a livestream. Our online moderator, Derek, recounts their excitement that 'There WAS an audience even for our random student-led symposium on a theme as broad as nostalgia!' with the caveat that, '...we weren't doing ourselves any favours by offering a livestream experience that wasn't professional-looking; in hindsight, even one extra person to handle the camera would have put less stress on our event coordinator, who was running around with a camera.' During the second year, 4th Space was able to provide extensive audiovisual and streaming support, allowing us to have a much more professional digital presence. Derek's feedback was essential to helping us improve our web presence in the second year. They continued,

Both points are reflective of the attitudes we take towards adapting and iterating on our symposia: with each iteration, we try to create more accessible and

approachable ways to learn about nostalgia, whether that be through synchronous or asynchronous means, locally or internationally.

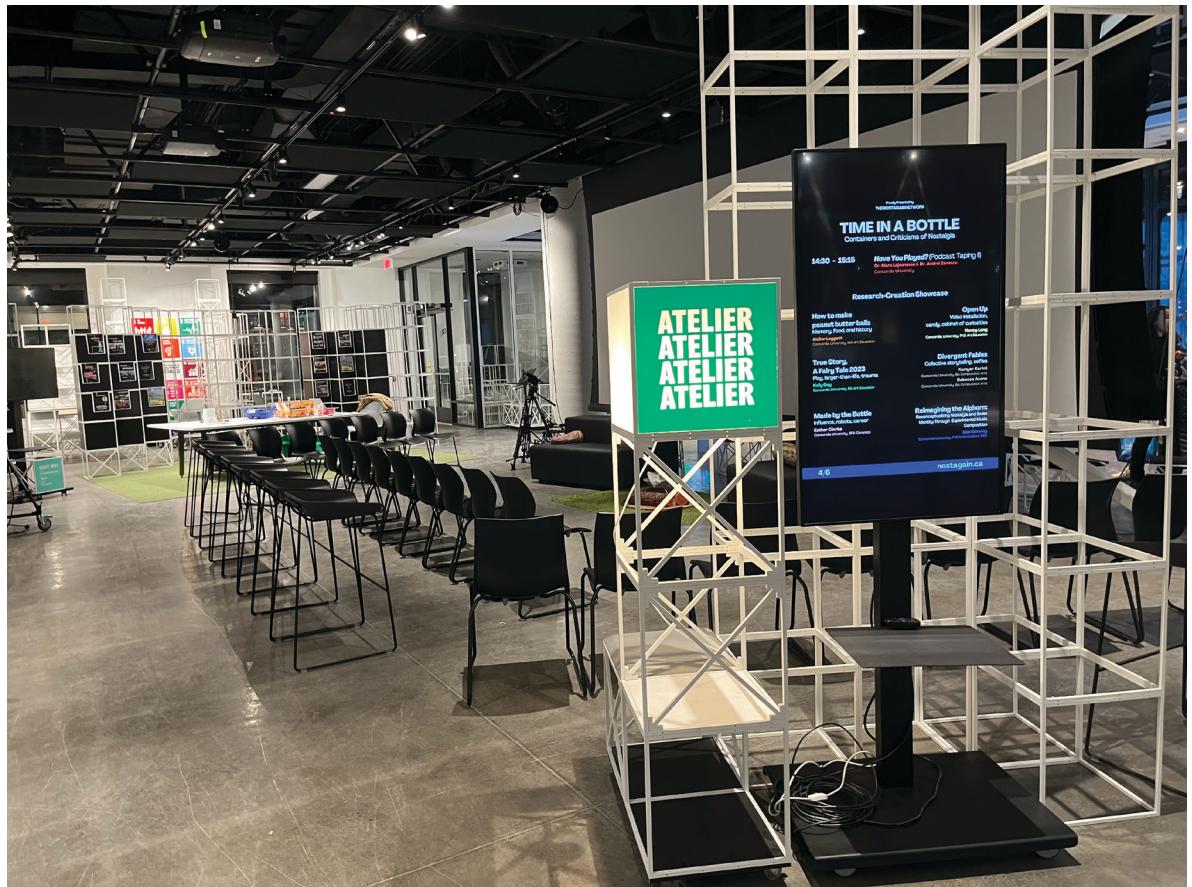


Fig. 6 Image of Event Space

Livestreaming was not the only type of interactive digital media which helped people to connect. A feature of both iterations was an interactive, participatory digital art project called 'The Wall'. The project served a dual function: it created a sense of collective parasocial nostalgia, and it also created a sort of time capsule of the year. The first version of 'The Wall' was an interactive exhibit in which people would upload pictures of items that made them nostalgic for a loss, creating a moving, digital collage which was projected onto the wall of the Milieux Institute's hallway. Sharom, a member of our organising committee who specialises in design, remarked that 'The people who attended last year's asked for another this year! We chose to continue with the interactive work, creating a bottle.' The 'Bottle' was a digital image projected onto two screens at 4th Space, featuring a pixelated look reminiscent of retro video games. This allowed participants to '[tweet] (now that Twitter has been lost to us) on a scroll in a bottle this time. A message shared through a web-front [web-based user interface] and would be immediately live for everyone.' It



Fig. 7 Image of 'The Wall' from the first year

added an additional layer of meaning and creative exploration to the symposium. Sharom elaborates,

Words meant a more precise control over their expression... it was a way for people to nostalgicise as they went through the event... they were not all passive attendees of the event, but a part of an active collective nostalgicisation. Participation meant you could leave something that you felt strongly in that moment, leave a message in a bottle as if lost at sea. Or you could respond to a message you read on the wall, initiating an indirect conversation with its anonymous author.

The 'Bottle' served as a collective memory of the thoughts, feelings, and visions left by attendees, and this proved to be generative as their messages reflected what they experienced from the panellists and artists, but also influenced what they may now become nostalgic for after having read

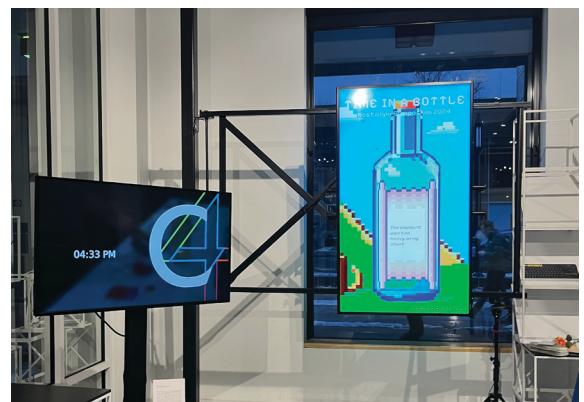


Fig. 8 Image of 'The Wall' from the second year

other people's experiences. The material, historic, and personal nostalgia converged with the display and its engagement as a research-creation of curating and feeling nostalgia-in-action. It also served as a way of showing the direct connections between artistic research and scholastic research, as they worked together to create an archive of information reflecting the meaningful experience of the participants.

## Reflections

As mentioned earlier, the idea of designing an exhibit as a form of collective research is not new. The Nostagain symposium presents itself as a successful case study where research-creation and traditional forms of research are put into direct conversation while holding both forms of knowledge production as equals. With each iteration, our audience and applicants grew from junior scholars in the Montreal area to established academics and professional artists based in the United States and internationally. Our online presence has also proliferated with the livestream of the first event at 16 concurrent viewers to over 70 registered zoom attendees and a fluctuating (but active) audience on YouTube by the second year when it was hosted at 4th Space. This is to say that the conversation between artistic and scholastic research is not just engaging for artists and academics, but also for everyday people who have attended our symposium in-person, online, and retroactively through YouTube.

We feel that a key part of this success is with our organising committee, whose diverse experience in artistic, academic, and curatorial practices has led us to prioritise a design approach to event planning. Ideation, documentation, and group

discussion – all common practices in design – are essential for successfully creating themes which appeal to both artists and scholars. To our knowledge, the case of the Nostagain symposium may be one of the first in North America to publicise how its design process was used with careful documentation to inform future events. Our process was in itself, a form of research-creation, because it was reflective of knowledge production honed in our backgrounds whilst generating new knowledge and frameworks for understanding the topic at hand. We engaged in the meaningful method by reflecting on how our design choices answered questions we launched in our call:

*How do we use digital nostalgia to keep us from forgetting the things we value?* The 'dual function' of the 'Bottle' and 'The Wall' ensure that an aggregate feeling towards nostalgia from our participants' responses are kept across two symposiums. We plan to feature these responses in our third upcoming edition of the Nostagain symposium in February 2025, akin to a time capsule opening for a discussion on the role of digital tools that preserve what we value.

*To what extent do we forget other things in pursuit of our personal remembering?* It is practically impossible for all viewpoints to be included in the timespan of a research event. As our presenters and artists discussed in their presentations, nostalgia operates as a boundary object where personal and collective memory overlap. There is always a kind of memory that is left out in the construction of a nostalgia, echoing Boym (2001) that nostalgia is not about the past as it was, but how we imagine that past to be. As symposium organisers, settling on a theme and panel session for each edition meant that we had

to leave out our personal memories and exclude other viewpoints of nostalgia in the process of reviewing submissions. Given this reality, we focused on highlighting the inherent value that all attendees have about nostalgia – regardless of being a presenter, artist, or an audience member – by employing the *meaningful method*.

*How can we use our remembering tools to remind us of things we are forgetting?* The foci of our two symposiums tackled the use of digital technology – such as video games, cameras, and storage – and the metaphor of the ‘bottle’ – as containers that preserve memory like photo books, boxes, and the practice of buying memorabilia for display. The individual experiences of these practices painted a diverse picture of nostalgia as a political, symbolic, historical, and personal practice.

The combination of interdisciplinary collaboration amongst the team and within the outreach of our calls, the design choices of layout and space to create connection, and the commitment to research-creation in both process and product of the event speaks to the generativity of nostalgia as a boundary object, and a design process as the bridge that actualised these connections. Incidentally, a symposium format is inherently less formal and more discussion-based than a formal conference, allowing for the flexibility to experiment with new forms of intellectual engagement while remaining rooted in the tradition of academic knowledge production.

This type of symposium has a broad appeal, but can also be intellectually intense and demanding due to the level of engagement it demands from participants. Therefore, creating

a comfortable experience which supported connection and interaction was essential for retaining participants and encouraging them to start their own generative conversations. This focus on event flow helped to frame both artistic and scholastic research as integral parts of the conversation, directing attendees’ attention through movement and visual cues; moreover, the layout and physical movement through the space was instrumental in establishing both creative research and scholastic research in conversation with each other.

Giving artists the ability to explain their work through presentations and the research-creation hour positioned creative research as an essential part of the discussion. Artist talks and presentations provided a formal way for the artists to describe their processes and the insights generated through their practice, while the gallery area allowed the conversation to continue. Designing for connection was also important in facilitating these conversations, as it meant that we gave deliberate consideration to creating favourable conditions for dialogue.

While designing an experimental event can be a challenge, documenting the process through design practices allows us to iterate on our approach and develop insights into the design choices which facilitate conversations between artists, scholars, and the general public. One of the most important and evolving questions regarding artistic and creative research in relation to scholastic research is how seemingly incommensurable forms of knowledge production, with varying levels of methodological rigor, can be approached without succumbing to institutional biases favouring a narrow subset

of discipline-specific research methodologies and outputs. We found that one way to place them into deliberate conversation with each other – generative, creative, intense conversation – was to focus on creating a meaningful experience.

We hope that this case study will continue to be generative for event organisers, academics, artists, professors, and the general reader – all of whom possess the *meaningful method* to make a topic such as nostalgia as generative and creative as it was with our symposia. This remains a preliminary exploration of how *meaningful methods* can be applied in event design to place art, academic research, and participants in direct conversation to explore collective meaning-making and situated knowledge production. Future iterations of the event, or future research into the significance of a *meaningful methods* approach, might include incorporating elements of participatory action research or using structured qualitative interviews to better understand the impact of this collective meaning-making process and further clarify the types of situated knowledge it produces.

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