

# I Have Seen Hell and it is Nickelodeon Kart Racers

by Madison Butler | Aug 27, 2019 | Essays, Opinion, Video Games | 0 comments



The one thing I could never have predicted about adulthood is just how often I would relive my childhood. At this point, it's a recursive loop of remakes and reboots, cash grabs disguised as nostalgia. And a few weeks ago, it led me directly into the uncanny valley. The uncanny valley has fewer textures than I thought it would.

First, let me explain how I got here.

When I was growing up, we didn't have *Mario Kart*—my first brush with Mario and co. wasn't until college, on my friend's Nintendo 64. Instead, I was raised on a handful of educational PC games whose names are lost to me now, partially because my grandma often gave them to us on burned CDs, sending us home with a handful of slim jewel cases on each of our semi-annual visits. It is also because this was almost twenty years ago.

There are only a few games I remember from that time:

- A search-and-rescue game I played with my brother that I just spent ten minutes looking for but could not find. (It's definitely not *Search and Rescue*, though.) [Note: After several more minutes of Googling I concluded this game was *Matchbox Emergency Patrol*.]
- A Madeline game with a cooking activity involving soufflé, which is where my memory of it ends.
- *Petz 4: Catz and Dogz*, another gift from my grandma that unfailingly crashed after about twenty minutes of play.

And then there was *Nicktoons Racing*, the first of many racing games I would play with my brother. Before *Need for Speed: Underground* and *Midnight Club 3*, we had *Nicktoons Racing*. I only remember flashes of it now: a sandy stretch of Reptar Raceway, the log-lined Wayouttatown track from *The Angry Beavers*, the sound the power-up presents made when you collected them. I can imagine my brother and I, crowded at the computer. I can imagine the way we hunched over the keyboard—black, bulky, mechanical—one of us sitting in the wheeled desk chair, the other in a wooden, hard-backed dining chair. We bickered often, and I'm sure gaming time was no exception, but I don't remember us arguing while playing.

It's not untrue to say I have been chasing the high—or, at least, the nostalgic joy—of playing *Nicktoons Racing* since approximately 2004. Even now, reading the game's Wikipedia page provides a tiny hit of much-needed dopamine.



So imagine my delight last year when a coworker told me about the upcoming Nickelodeon racing game for the Switch. Despite the game's October 2018 release, I completely forgot about *Nickelodeon Kart Racers* until I walked into a GameStop a couple of weeks ago and spotted it on the shelf in all of its multicolored glory.

Obviously I bought it, only to realize that what I thought was going to be a game good for a few days' worth of whimsical nostalgia was a pale imitation of both basically every other kart game that exists and my childhood joy. I'm under no illusion that *Nicktoons Racing* was ever conceived as anything but a way to latch onto the popularity of other kart racing games, and that's even more obvious in *Nickelodeon Kart Racers*.

*Nickelodeon Kart Racers* is a spiritual successor rather than direct sequel to *Nicktoons Racing*, but despite that, to be entirely honest, it's one of the most soulless console games I've ever played. Everything feels stiff, the environments capture none of the animated liveliness of their characters, and the karts just... aren't fun to drive. The mechanics feel clunky. This might be because the button mapping is unconventional, but the auto-accelerate feature and hard-to-control drift mechanics meant I was never really sure how my kart was going to behave. I'm

often too stubborn to *really* pay attention to tutorials, but *Nickelodeon Kart Racers* didn't even give a tutorial to ignore.

What you see is what you get, especially since you start the game with every character and track unlocked. The environments are vibrant but lack the depth that makes *Mario Kart* feel lively and lived-in. When I play something like *Mario Kart 8*, I can imagine the world that exists beyond the track. Even though *Nickelodeon Kart Racers* takes place in the familiar settings of classic Nickelodeon shows, I can't imagine the world beyond. It's as though someone dropped a racetrack in a snowglobe, and the characters you're racing against are the only people alive.



Mario Kart 8's race tracks feel like a world exists beyond them.

In some ways, namely in the characters and shows represented and in the track structure, it feels familiar. It also feels unfinished. It's an echo, an uncanny valley of nostalgia. And I could go on about everything that made this game feel bad to play, but at the end of the day it's just another mediocre game geared toward an audience much younger than me. (At least, I think it is. Do kids still watch *Hey Arnold* and *Rugrats*?)

In that way, too, though, it feels lazy. It feels like every decision made was the safest possible choice. There are so many Nickelodeon properties and characters—Aang and Katara from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* or Timmy, Cosmo, and Wanda from *The Fairly Oddparents*, for example—that would have made the game feel so much more interesting, modern, and relevant. Instead, it's just hollow.

We live in a period of reboots, remakes, and revivals; *Nickelodeon Kart Racers* is endemic of a much larger phenomenon. Beloved properties are an easy sell for most audiences, but sometimes they just aren't as good the second time around. It has never been easier for me to relive my childhood, but I find myself resenting the idea that things need to be remade bigger and better, that they can never truly end.

It's nothing like the recently re-released *Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy* or the gorgeously updated *Spyro Reignited Trilogy* (though these can come with their own set of problems). It doesn't rekindle the joy I felt, sitting at a monstrous computer desk with my little brother, watching him expertly maneuver every course. I would have preferred this game be a better-animated reproduction of the original. At least then it would have preserved the strangeness of the shows that shaped it.

There's also a fundamental difference between something like *Ocean's Eight* and Disney's blatant copyright refreshes on animated titles via a slew of live-action and CGI-animated films. To me, the difference between a good reboot/remake/revival, the determining factor in whether I will pay real actual money to consume the thing is

this: Is it creating space for a previously unexplored perspective, or is it a blatant cash grab with a marketing strategy based equally in nostalgia and hope?

In case you were wondering, *Nickelodeon Kart Racers* falls into the latter camp. We all make mistakes.

What insults me most about the cash-grab philosophy is that the potential of the unexplored perspective is always there, taunting. Having played mostly later-generation consoles, I found playing FFVII somewhat inaccessible despite loving the story, characters, and themes. I don't know that I'll ever complete my save file of the original game, but the remake is easily my most anticipated game of next year because it hints at *more*—more detail, more story, more space for the characters to exist in their world. Video games have come so far in the last twenty years. I think it's especially true of remakes that there's more room than ever to explore the characters, properties, and technologies that have come out since the original.

Video game remakes offend me the least of any other form of remake media for two reasons. First, because they're a form of preservation in an industry that is desperately bad at it. Second, because they make beloved games more accessible to a younger audience (although many games have a long way to go in creating actual accessibility options). Movies and television shows are largely accessible through DVD, Blu-ray, and various streaming platforms. Games, on the other hand, are less accessible as consoles age out of the release cycle and companies end support for them.

And while *Nickelodeon Kart Racers* preserved the general concept of *Nicktoons Racing*, it doesn't do much to make it accessible or enjoyable to its audience. It's easy to see where a kart racing game could have been updated with characters from the half-dozen (at least!) popular shows that aired during the 2000s and 2010s. There was potential for this game to be better and more interesting than it was. Selfishly, I wish that game existed, especially if a studio was going to go through the trouble of acquiring IP rights and developing the game.

But it doesn't exist. At least GameStop gave me a refund.