NEON RetroFest Is Back in Time

If you're longing for the days of big hair and shoulder pads, A-ha's "Take On Me" and Wham's "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go," then head to NEON RetroFest (neonri.com), a celebration of 1980s culture, August 24 – 26 at the Crowne Plaza Hotel Providence-Warwick.

In the immortal words of the Huey Lewis and the News, "So take me away, I don't mind/ But you better promise me, I'll be back in time."

The festival includes live performances by some 20 "synthwave" electronic music groups including Waveshaper, Future Holotape, Glitch Black, Glass Apple Bonzai, Rolly Mingwald, Mellow Fields and Facexhugger, as well as Providence locals Triangle Forest and Lame Genie. There are dozens of vintage arcade games and retro gaming consoles to play, and you can try rolling your 20-sided dice with old-school roleplaying games like Dungeons & Dragons. Shop at an 80s-themed "mall," then stay up an all-night to watch cult films such as "Krull" and "Mac and me."

There are also oodles of guest speakers and panelists, including retro tech YouTube celebrity The 8-Bit Guy; Tim Lapetino, the author of "Art of Atari"; the editors of the Cold War-era popular and outsider culture magazine *We Are the Mutants*; West Coast Synthwave guru Aleks Bonilla; and Cyberpunk illustrator and game designer Rob Shields; video gaming personality and commentator CornshaqGaming.

Full disclosure: I'm giving a talk called "How D&D Changed The World." With Peter Bebergal, I'll also be nerding out about '80s pop culture during a "live broadcast" of our faux, recreated public access TV show "Intelli-vision."

But lest you think the three-day gathering is merely an exercise in nostalgia for the era, NEON begs to differ. The organizers says the festival isn't so much about remembering 1980s culture and memorabilia as it is creating a chance "for guests to experience the future as imagined by the past." That's the core of "retrofuturism," which looks at the ways an earlier era depicted the future.

NEON RetroFest aims to capture the excitement when internet and digital culture was new, and when we were both enamored of its potential and a bit wary of its perils.

 "Most of our core staff grew up during the time period NEON is centered around, and its art, film and literature impacted us in profound ways," says Amanda Grosvenor, NEON's co-founder and business manager. "Computers and the internet came of age at the same time we did." Grosvenor says that the

NEON's programming "tried to select as many elements as possible that tapped into that vibe of what it felt like to be on the forefront of a thrilling technological revolution, before it became 'the norm' and lost a lot of its sense of magic and adventure."

That vision of the future includes cyberpunk, as seen in films like *Blade Runner* and *Liquid Sky*, and the sci-fi novels of William Gibson and Philip K. Dick.

NEON also taps into the imagery and sensibility of new shows like Netflix's "Stranger Things" and the "San Junipero" episode of "Black Mirror," and movies like the 2011 film Drive and this year's *Ready Player One*.

"While every single element of NEON is something close to my heart," says Grant Garvin, NEON co-founder and director, "what has made working on it especially fulfilling is being able to find the elusive places where all of the parts that make up NEON converge. This is where retro-futurism transcends our collective nostalgia and becomes something more."

For some, there are plenty of parallels between our current culture and the 1980s. "There's this hyper-clean, well-ordered society we live in, but it feels like it's on the verge of collapse," says Brendan Britton of Triangle Forest. "There are weird new gadgets in our lives, and some of them are spying on us. Finally, we are slowly remembering that the stockpile of nuclear weapons we have created are still sitting beneath our feet, and less trustworthy people are in charge of them. Perhaps we will inherit the dystopia imagined for us in the '80s in our own time?"

In the meantime, "Don't bet your future, on one roll of the dice. Gotta get back in time."

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