

## Container Podcast: Digital Nostalgias: Anemoia Online - Transcript

00:00:06:15 - 00:01:12:00

Hannah Uguru

Hello and welcome to Understanding Digital Nostalgia through John Koenig's Anemoia. A podcast from Container magazine. My name is Hannah Uguru, this episode's host. And I'll be in conversation with John Koenig, who coined the term Anemoia in his 2021 book, A New York Times best seller, The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows. I love looking at history and how we view the past and the future through the lens of digitization, especially with the advent of artificial intelligence, also known as AI.

As someone who sits in between the millennial and Gen Z generations as millennial. I think it's interesting to look at nostalgia from this angle as perspectives from both older and younger generations resonate with me. With this in mind, I've been thinking about the concept of digital nostalgia as it relates to feeling reminiscent of a time period you've never experienced yourself.

During this research I came across the term Anemoia, a word coined by John Koenig in his Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows. I'm joined by John today to discuss.

00:01:16:00 - 00:04:21:04

John Koenig

Anemoia: nostalgia for a time you've never experienced. Looking at old photos, it's hard not to feel a kind of wanderlust, a pang of nostalgia for an era you've never lived through. Longing to step through the frame into a world of black and white, if only to sit on the side of the road and watch the locals passing by.

These are people who lived and died before any of us arrived here who sleep in some of the same houses we do and look up at the same moon. Who breathe the same air, feel the same blood in their veins, and live in a completely different world. It's a world still covered in dust from the frontier, a world of adults whose lives are hammered out by hand, a world of front porches, of fires to light.

In the evening of conversations over a fence, you'd feel the energy of the boulevards, teeming with crowds gathering to tell dirty jokes, awaiting news reports or criss crossing at random, just barely dodging the horses. You could hear the voices of hardscrabble homesteaders calling in their children for their one and only family photo. Or look around at the architecture of the old City, whose ornate limestone canyons fade back into a ghostly haze dotted here and there with people lounging in the windows trying to escape the oppressive summer heat.

You'd watch as they carried on with their lives that seem so important, trying to read their faces or look into their eyes so piercing and otherworldly, their gaze fixed elsewhere. They have no way of knowing that their story has already been written. If only they could look around the way you could. They could relax and soak in the atmosphere of the moment.

Of course, to them it wasn't all flickering silence and grainy black and white. They saw vivid color rushing by in three dimensions, heard voices and deafening stereo confronted smells they couldn't escape. For them, nothing was ever simple. None of them knew for sure what this era meant or that it was even an era to begin with. At the time, their world was real.

Nothing was finished and nothing was guaranteed. That world is now gone. If the past is a foreign country, we're only tourists. We can't expect to understand the locals or why they do what they do. We can only ask them to hold still so we can capture a photo to take home with us. So we can pretend to ourselves that we've learned anything at all about who they were and what it was like to live in another time.

The photo itself means very little in the end. Maybe maybe all we ever wanted. Maybe all we ever wanted was the frame so we could sit for a few minutes in a world of black and white with clean borders that protect us from the rush of time like a tide pool just out of the reach of the waves. So clear and still you can see your own reflection.

So it derives from the ancient Greek for wind and mind. So its wind mind. It's inspired by anamoesis, which is a condition when a tree is worked by strong air currents until it seems to bend backward, leaning into the wind. Pronounced Anemoia.

00:04:22:23 - 00:04:28:06

Hannah Uguru

Could you talk me through how you came up with that word and even how you came up with that concept?

00:04:28:20 - 00:05:43:17

John Koenig

The word particularly is driven by nostalgia because I just I love the feeling of Greek, ancient Greek. I just picture columns and allegories. So I knew it had to be derived from Greek. It was just a beautiful image to me of trees leaning, leaning backward where the wind was coming from. So I just found that a beautiful image.

But for me, I've always been a really nostalgic sort. There's a site, which has a ton of really crisp photos from the 1890s. The 19 tens, the 1950s, and they're in such a high quality that you can just feel like you're just stepping through the frame. I felt that so powerfully, even when the frame was really dirty and dusty and you had to use your imagination of kind of figure out what was going on in a lot of old video clips and Super eight footage.

I get that sense as well. And in some ways I love looking at old recordings of even, you know, the sixties and the fifties on Super eight and in 16 millimeter, because it requires you to invest some imagination in it. It's so shaky and so grainy. It's almost like reading a novel to me that something about the world, it's just mysterious and enchanting that way.

And I found myself longing to go back to that time, even though I myself was born in 1983. I've never experienced it.

00:05:44:03 - 00:05:49:17

Hannah Uguru

Why did you feel that sense of connection to the 1960s and fifties in particular?

00:05:50:05 - 00:07:09:21

John Koenig

It's probably built into my culture as an American For the baby boomers, that was when home was. And so you're kind of fed into that just because it's in the air. That's one theory. But I think on a basic level, you know, for me at least, nostalgia is about a kind of longing for a story when the world is as open ended and, you know, everything is kind of in a whirlwind around you.

You want to feel like you're part of the flow of time. You don't want to be a blip in the, you know, a blip in a oblivion. So if you did go back, even even to the sixties or the fifties, you knew where you were going. These people, you know, if you walked through the frame into into some of these photos and these videos, these people had a future.

They didn't know it at the time, but you know it now. And I think that's that's part of what makes it intoxicating. And that's I think what I try to get at in the definition as well. It's not just a fantasy of going back and living then. It's a fantasy of knowing what the future is going to be.

And I certainly feel that longing, especially now when everything is just so fast and chaotic and there are so many voices they have to to sort out. But if you could go back and, you know, figure out where all this was was going and hold that in your head as you walked through the streets, I think that would just be relaxing.

If nothing else, it would be empowering in a way.

00:07:10:05 - 00:08:19:08

Hannah Uguru

Yeah. Thank you for that. And there's also this sense that while this may be a universal phenomenon, this concept may also be unique to our time period. In particular, as you've mentioned, kind of like this idea that they knew they had a future. I think you meant that more of the fact that, like we are now living in their future.

So you can see that from a temporal perspective, but you can also imagine not from like a political perspective, a sociopolitical perspective, looking at like climate change

and artificial intelligence as well. And from that, you can kind of argue that this concept of Anemoia, even though it may have been prevalent for all history, such as even during the French Renaissance or most renaissance, as it happened in the past, on a more intimate level, we have all this information also fingertips through digital archives.

Like one click away on the internet and you can see how people were living in the eighties, in the nineties, even in the ancient Greek times. ET cetera. Which wasn't present for past generations. And also we have, like, these overwhelming anxieties about our future.

00:08:19:23 - 00:09:40:07

John Koenig

And yeah, I think our relationship with the past is is really different now. I mean, you know, we see Star Wars now in a much higher resolution than anyone did in 1977. And, you know, Peter Jackson restored World War One footage. So it feels like you're there with A.I. You can listen to Elvis cover Baby Got Back and he's never felt more alive.

On the one hand, the past is really tantalizingly close in a way that it never was before. It used to be that you saw a movie in the theater, and then a couple of weeks later it vanished. And you could never you know, you could talk about it, but you could never recapture that. If something aired on TV, it was gone.

And so there was sort of a just the sense of a, you know, time rushed away from you and you had to sort of be present in the moment. That could be one thing that we are really nostalgic for is the sense of, you know, that the present is real and that it matters. And and that's one thing that A.I. is kind of shaking up.

Used to be the past was sort of face to face and handwritten letters. Now, you know, I see some insightful product review or, you know, a bad political tweet. It might have been a bot. So there's a longing to engage, but then a realization that, hey, you know, you never know whether someone's real or not. So anyway, these are these are all factors, I think.

00:09:40:17 - 00:11:21:16

Hannah Uguru

Yeah. And also once something had aired on TV, you couldn't go back to it unless there's a rerun. Even going back to the 1930s, when people go to the cinema to consume media, once they did that, they couldn't watch it again until I don't think they can watch it. I don't think any type of long term video capturing and I'm not sure when videos were invented.

I think so maybe the seventies. But before then there wasn't even a way of like capturing and storing something for a later time. And then even going back to the 1800s, you'd have to attend a live event. You would have to go to the theater or go to a concert in order to even capture music. Right. And with this in mind, I kind of want to talk about the development of Web 2.0.

So it's easier than ever to find and curate niche insular communities and bypass mainstream entertainment and even the news with more specialist platforms such as WeChat, Instagram and Tik Tok now on YouTube. But even within that, we have micro communities that are dedicated to certain interests or even certain periods. We have social media accounts that are dedicated to noughties nostalgia and are often run by people who weren't even alive during that period or they were born during that period.

So people that are like 22 running Y2K nostalgia pages, yeah, I'm seeing this more in like younger generations because we're now living in an audiovisual age which is dominated by digital media as opposed to print media is again going back to that idea of digital archives and it becoming much easier to define an individual aesthetic, but harder to define a shared aesthetic.

00:11:21:17 - 00:12:20:01

John Koenig

Yeah, I think, you know, for a lot of us, the idea of having an experience is inseparable from sharing and sharing an experience. And if media is fractured and, you know, even religion is and philosophies are all heavily atomized, that there's there is no us, there's no shared reality. I've always skeptical of TV and pop culture. But now I kind of miss what pop culture was even in the 1990s where everyone was watching Seinfeld and Friends.

But there's nothing like that now. I find myself even nostalgic about shopping malls, which I was never a big fan of, but they sort of united people in a way that social media, especially just sort of Balkanized and fractured, even COVID, would have been our best bet to unite everyone on Earth, you know, all facing the same problem at the same time.

But it all hit everyone. And it's such a unique way that it didn't really feel like it. It brought us together. It feels like it kind of, you know, made you feel like you were living in your own world.

00:12:20:10 - 00:12:22:11

Hannah Uguru

And what do you think the turning point was?

00:12:22:21 - 00:15:37:06

John Koenig

I think it's probably got to be the Internet. I mean, you know, it's an easy tell if people are nostalgic for Y2K. I lived through it. I don't know if I would want to go back there. But, you know, there's something about the Internet that feels like, you know, when you use a cheat code in a game and so there's kind of a longing for mystery, I think.

And I think especially now, the Internet feels small in a way that I think I certainly feel a certain pulse of nostalgia for like 2011, 2012. That was kind of the wild West of the Internet when, you know, there were microblogs and lots of fun little flash projects. But now, I mean, the cliché about the modern Internet is it's the same, you know, for social networks reposting screenshots of each other.

It's not so much experimentation as it's just best practices to go viral. There's kind of a cynicism there. I sort of longed for a time of mystery and silliness. And I think the Internet kind of shatters that. And in a way. And there's also the fact of just hearing so many other voices, the world is multipolar.

And so, you know, if you want to feel like the hero of your own story that we all do, there's something about the Internet and the communication that sort of ruins drama, you know, like thinking of sitcoms like Seinfeld or something. Most of the plots would not work these days if they were. They had a cell phone in their pockets.

We long for a time when the world was mysterious and it needed our help to try to interpret it. And we had to guess just to get through the day. There's something about nostalgia that I think is truly universal across generations. The buildings in Washington, DC are all influenced by their neoclassical. They're influenced by ancient Greek styles, which, you know, are 2000 years old.

The ancient Greeks were then obsessed by their own, you know, earlier, simpler age, like they were deeply nostalgic people. Everyone's going through a lot of confusing times. And so they long for when the world was simpler again. But of course, a lot of that requires some distance to convince yourself that the world was simple. And that's part of my definition, is that the world was not at all simple in these in these times.

It was just perhaps wasn't recorded with as much nuance as we would like. My two year old daughter just this morning was saying to me that when she gets older, she wants to be a baby because she sees what her little brother how is how I treat him? And, you know, she already misses that. She's too. I had to explain to her, like, here's what you have to remember is that, you know, he can't do anything.

You know, he drinks milk and he sleeps and that's all you can do. But you have all this, this wondrous, you know, life experiences you can have. And I think that's sort of a microcosm of what we're all kind of forgetting when we're so nostalgic is that the past was not at all a simpler age.

TikTok in particular fascinates me. I had to quit about a month ago because it was just it was too much information, but it kept trying to convince me that for some reason that generations were like the primary division line between people. There was always like, Millennials are like this and boomers are like this. And, you know, Zoomers and, and all this, which I found fascinating because I've never really thought of generations like that.

Transcription Part 2 -

00:00:00:08 - 00:00:03:18

Hannah Uguru

Was there much talk about Gen X as a youth culture?

00:00:04:16 - 00:00:59:14

John Koenig

A little bit. I mean, I, I loved that book that the term generation Gen X came from a book by Douglas Copeland and it was about, you know, disaffected youths and how they felt their world was no longer defined and it was all sort of shifting around and corporatized. And, you know, it's a very sort of lost and cynical book.

So the irony that that book could kick off a sort of obsession with categorizing, I think is pretty rich. And I think Douglas Copeland acknowledges that as well, that there's so many variables to that, that to try to, you know, give a personality or a sense of fate even to what a boomer is or a Gen Xer is, is I don't know.

It's a thorny and complicated question that people love to talk about. I don't know. But at the time, I just considered myself a person, you know, I don't think I thought too much about a Gen Xers.

00:00:59:14 - 00:02:52:23

Hannah Uguru

And yeah, I think there's a renewed obsession with generations and age in general on social media, particularly tick tock on Twitter, especially TikTok, because it's defined as this Gen Z app. Therefore, if you're over 25 or whatever on your own TikTok, it's like, oh, like, I don't know, it's just like this is, is this this obsession with age and pathologizing your behaviors according to the year you basically I was watching a video essay on how we live in an orgy of visual society now as opposed to print society in the past.

And it talked about how the TikTofication of information sharing is kind of promoting binge consumption because it rests on like this model of virality where women consume, engage and then dispose of it within 5 minutes. And that kind of relates to like the boom and bust model of late stage capitalism. We have so much access, easy access to like anything, like if you want to go somewhere to a different country, you can book a ticket today and be on the plane tomorrow if you want to eat something from another part of the world, you can do that.

If you want to buy something, engage in a certain fashion trend you can do now. I mean, you can Google whatever and buy it. You can even buy a on a knockoff on Shia in for like £5, and then it's at your will tomorrow, right. With that context in mind, information sharing is so accessible and so quick that we can indulge in many different personas and identities.

And this goes beyond the generational references to culture and fashion a few decades prior, where you had to go through that analog process, if you will.

00:02:52:23 - 00:03:33:22

John Koenig

All these choices that we have that is really stressful. I think, you know, on the one hand it's freedom. But I mean, I have a definition in the book called With Will, which is sort of the the burden of freedom. It certainly feels like a capitalist problem, is that we are individual consumers and now everything is on our shoulders, including moral responsibility, like recycling and our own carbon footprint.

But also what kind of style do we want to embody? What kind of identity do we want to take on to ourselves? That's a lot of decisions to make, and that's it's a really chaotic and stressful way to live. And so I think, you know, that can help inform new nostalgia. The digital animoji, as you call it.

00:03:33:22 - 00:03:43:01

Hannah Uguru

Yeah. And you talked about your personal interest in the 1950s and sixties and wanting to be in that time period. Were your parents born in the fifties?

00:03:43:01 - 00:04:13:21

John Koenig

They were, you know, 1954 and 56. So I'm sure that's you know, there's a it's getting into psychoanalysis now, but I'm sure that's that's related to it. But I guess sort of later on then that the pattern breaks because I just I love the 1890s for some reason. I think there's the the birth of modernity and trying to figure out how we deal with technology and hold on to the old country is just something that fascinates me to this day.

That's always kind of been there and that's certainly still there for me.

00:04:14:02 - 00:04:41:15

Hannah Uguru

I also have a fascination with the Victorian era because I feel like it acts as a bridge between the past, past or in history in my mind and the modern age, because this was a time of rapid invention. And I think we're also again living in a time of rapid invention, but it's just happening a different rate or within a different arena where it's now instead of physical inventions, we're now doing digital inventions.

00:04:41:15 - 00:05:22:18

John Koenig

Yeah. And you know, the the interesting thing about digital is that it doesn't age. You know, that used to be the thing about any medium that you would record in is that the paper would yellow and fall apart and old recordings would degrade. Even VCR. VHS tapes would degrade as you watched them, which is a little bit like memories biologically, every time you draw up a memory, it's like creating another copy.

The details change and degrade. And so there's something very familiar about media that encode memory that are lossy, as they say. But now if everything is lossless and shiny, it gives me the feeling that we are mortals, but the world is not.

00:05:23:01 - 00:06:11:00

Hannah Uguru

And that's the real fear with the development of artificial intelligence in general. I've been doing a lot of research on, but this is common fear that robots will take, all of our jobs will be replaced, etc. But then I guess we can't imagine life being different to how it was for generation before, why you would actually need a job.



You would actually need human input for the world to go around. And it's very scary to think of as not needing to do anything in order for the world to maintain itself, even though that's kind of like a pipe dream for like many of us, to not have to work again and again. I think that was about was a concept mentioned in your book, I think around anticipation of like a moment and we finally get to that moment and like, you know, don't go you, you're scared of experiencing it.

00:06:11:10 - 00:07:10:05

John Koenig

Yeah. The thing about AI and I guess the Internet in general that I find deeply disturbing is that what I expected the benefit to be is that knowledge is universally available, turned out to be the opposite. Now, of course, the marketplace is just about to be flooded with misinformation and disinformation. And because it's so easy to just, you know, put ChatGPT on it and then it'll spout out some B.S. That sounds really good.

I find it really eerie. The first industries that it's coming after are the creative ones. You know, they do really good paintings. In some ways, I kind of prefer them to human artists, and that's kind of shameful to say as far as time goes. The idea that now we're competing with people in other generations because they're still alive, like it's David that we're signed, allowing his voice, I think, to be cloned for A.I., for future documentaries.

So now, I mean, I've done some narration work in the past, so now I have to compete with the great David Attenborough. You know.

00:07:10:22 - 00:07:20:01

Hannah Uguru

He's allowed to, I guess, for want of a better phrase, sell out to AI, because he's I mean, he's like 80. He's already made as well.

00:07:20:01 - 00:07:21:13

John Koenig

Yeah, he's 93.

00:07:21:13 - 00:07:25:00

Hannah Uguru

I think he made his money. He doesn't care about being priced out.

00:07:25:07 - 00:07:47:16

John Koenig

Yeah. And he, but he is the best. But I mean the point, I mean if we're, you know, in 20 years, we're still watching Harrison Ford at age 30 running around the jungle. Someone has to compete with with Harrison for 230. So doing Indiana Jones in 20 years, even though he will have died before then, perhaps we're going to still have to compete with with some of the ghosts in our past.

00:07:48:18 - 00:07:59:05

Hannah Uguru

You talked about how you felt like a certain interest in the 1950s and sixties when you were younger. How did this manifest?

00:07:59:16 - 00:08:43:21

John Koenig

I think it was the Apollo missions. It was John F Kennedy inaugural address, where he has this sort of interesting habit where he talks about things that happen in this century. It's a fascinating way to think of yourself as a part of a century. I don't think we really uses the word century a lot anymore. A lot of it felt that everyone was united and pushing towards something.

And of course, the sixties were a very divisive time. But something was very idealistic about the turn of 1962, 61, you know, all this decolonization was happening, and it just felt like the world as we know it was born. Then there's something I don't know inspiring about that feeling, that sense of that the future is open and what do we do now?

00:08:44:19 - 00:09:09:06

Hannah Uguru

I feel like the 1960s does seem a lot more modern than the 1950s, but I think that's because of the widespread use of color photography and video in that time. And also maybe it's because my parents were born then, maybe they were born in the fifties. I would feel like the fifties were the turning point for modernity of the 1950s.

For me, feels like a transitional point from audio to visual.

00:09:10:08 - 00:09:36:07

John Koenig

Yeah, yeah. There's there's definitely something to that. Maybe also something about having just been through World War Two. History itself was a horrifying slog that we've been through. You know, if you go much further back than the 1950s, I don't think a lot of people would want to time travel much further than that just because quality life would have plummeted beyond it.

The birth of our modern world was happening then.

00:09:36:07 - 00:09:40:22

Hannah Uguru

Yeah, I think postmodernism is said to start in the 1950s.

00:09:41:13 - 00:09:47:16

John Koenig

Yeah, that's that's actually a great point because a lot of the 1950s is very modernist. It's a fascinating era.

00:09:48:06 - 00:10:02:08

Hannah Uguru

And on the more sinister side of that, a lot of young men today, or young white men to be specifically of this being for the 1950s and sixties as well, but for a different reason. Have you heard of tribes wives?

00:10:03:00 - 00:10:04:10

John Koenig

Yeah, trad wives. Yeah.

00:10:04:19 - 00:10:33:18

Hannah Uguru

This kind of return or yearning to return to traditionalism in the face of hyper modernity, primarily by young white men, but also I've seen it from some young white women as well. I find that interesting. I guess it's a longing to return to when they were this standard, because I don't think anyone that's not a white person would want to in the West anyway, would really want to return to the 1950s.

00:10:34:01 - 00:11:01:02

John Koenig

Of definitely, women couldn't get credit cards in America at least until the seventies and their own names. Divorce basically wasn't legal. Even if you were really suffering in your marriage, there were so many basic things that we don't question now that they had to face. A lot of it is just an imagined fantasy of how the world was that if anyone actually had the ability to time travel and got even, just a little taste of it, they would be like, okay, this is not at all what I thought it was. They would run from it.

00:11:03:15 - 00:11:34:18

Hannah Uguru

So in your definition of Anemoia, you likened those in the present going back to the past or imagining the past as tourists. And it's interesting to think about it from my perspective. I think I already mentioned, but I have really deep interest in Victorian era, so I talked about the act as a bridge between the historical archaic world to what we know is the modern world today. And I would really love to go back to Victorian era, but of course I'm a black woman, so. [Laughs]

00:11:34:18 - 00:11:37:19

John Koenig

Right, there's some problems there.

00:11:37:19 - 00:12:13:02

Hannah Uguru

Yeah, I mean there were some black people in the UK in the 1800s. I've seen the documentation of black Victorians in Britain, and also what we know is black magic or Voodoo and also a lot of witches around that time. And it was interesting to hear about the ghost stories from that time period. And I think it was Mary Laveau. She's known as the Voodoo priestess of New Orleans. I find that really interesting. Despite all the horrors of history, those elements make it really interesting to go back and play. But as a tourist, that's.

00:12:13:02 - 00:12:52:09

John Koenig

Actually a great point because a lot of history has been whitewashed in the telling. For example, there were a lot of black cowboys in the Wild West. Our perception of history. There's more about us perhaps than it does about them, in the same way that a lot of tourists, as they travel around, they shape what they want to see.

You know, I studied abroad in Africa. I was in Cameroon, and I was all too aware of the expectations that I brought into it and how they were continually being overturned, even though I tried to be like, okay, I'm here to see the real Africa. But that impulse kept me from seeing the real Africa, you know, because I kept trying to bend my perceptions in a certain way or tried to have it be anything other than what it was.

00:12:52:12 - 00:13:03:09

Hannah Uguru

So before we close out, is there anything else that you want to add, either relating to your Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows or of a concept of animal or digital nostalgia?

00:13:04:14 - 00:14:08:13

John Koenig

I think there's a sense that these days that the world has been defined. It's been defined for us. And I think the reason that I wrote the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows is to try to get people to remember that it is up to those who are alive to define their own era for themselves. We don't have to take our worldview from those who built it in the past.

We can feel free to define it and redefine it as we wish. We don't have to take how they define words too seriously or the constitutions they wrote. We, I call them Nowlings, the people who share the same world at the same time. It is up to the living to define our world for ourselves, for our satisfaction. That's important to me, and that's important, I think, to what the concept of the book is. And in the context of digital nostalgia, that's something to remember, is we are alive.

It is our job to make this world what we want it to be, and we are not beholden to the people who built this world. They are well and truly gone.

00:14:09:07 - 00:14:43:23

Hannah Uguru

You've been listening to a podcast from Container Magazine, an online magazine, exploring the humans processes and motivations behind creative technology.

You can find out more at [containermagazine.co.uk](http://containermagazine.co.uk)

And to learn more about John Koenig's Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows head over to [dictionaryofobscuresorrows.com](http://dictionaryofobscuresorrows.com).

You can find me your host, Hannah Uguru, on Instagram with the handle [@hannahtheguru](https://www.instagram.com/hannahtheguru) and follow my blog for updates at [hannahthefashionguru.wordpress.com](http://hannahthefashionguru.wordpress.com).

