

**«Mops blocking the way» Walking simulators, playful nostalgia, and the aesthetics of unresolved authoritarian pasts in online gaming communities**  
*«Fregonas bloqueando el paso» Walking simulators, nostalgia lúdica y la estética de pasados autoritarios irresueltos en comunidades de videojuegos*

Diego A. Mejía-Alandia  
Tampere University

Luis Navarrete-Cardero  
Universidad de Sevilla

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### Keywords

Post-Communist Nostalgia; Post-Francoist Nostalgia; Player Experience; Reflective Nostalgia; Walking Simulator; Online Parties.

### Palabras clave

Nostalgia postcomunista; nostalgia franquista; experiencia lúdica; nostalgia reflectiva; walking simulator; comunidades online.

## Abstract

This paper considers the two short indie video games *It's Winter* (2019) and *ROJO: A Spanish Horror Experience* (2020) as a comparative case study suggesting that the *walking simulator* genre is an exceptional vehicle for a playful communal exploration of authoritarian pasts, inasmuch as the nostalgic aesthetics and historical backdrops of these games—post-Soviet and post-Francoist nostalgia, respectively—made them go viral in their home countries when released, stirring up controversy in the local press as well as in various digital forums. Following a qualitative method design, our study aims to answer the question: do these games have the desire to become a representation of the past or are they just examples of how new generations of gamers relate to it? With this in mind, we analyzed nostalgic discourses found in the comment sections of online streaming parties, press coverage, and official websites of both games. After analyzing 711 interactions on *It's Winter* and 599 on *ROJO*, we found marked social differences in the discursive approach to the games' nostalgic aesthetics as well as differences across platforms, particularly in the case of *ROJO*. Our analysis shows that these games do not talk about the past in a historical or narrative sense, rather the aesthetic legacy of the spaces represented relates them to historical processes of unresolved national pasts.

## Resumen

Este artículo examina dos breves videojuegos independientes, *It's Winter* (2019) y *ROJO: A Spanish Horror Experience* (2020), como un estudio de caso comparativo para sugerir el uso de su género videolúdico (*walking simulator*) como un vehículo excepcional para la exploración colectiva de pasados autoritarios, en la medida en que sus estéticas nostálgicas y trasfondos históricos —nostalgia postsoviética y nostalgia franquista, respectivamente— los hicieron virales en sus países de origen en el momento de sus lanzamientos, generando tanto controversia como debate en la prensa local, así como en diversos foros digitales. Siguiendo una metodología cualitativa, este estudio apunta a responder a la pregunta: ¿tienen estos videojuegos el deseo de convertirse en representaciones del pasado o, son simplemente ejemplos de cómo las nuevas generaciones de videojugadores se relacionan con el mismo? Con este propósito, se analizan los discursos nostálgicos encontrados en las secciones de comentarios de *streaming parties*, distintas comunidades online y páginas oficiales de ambos juegos. El análisis de 711 comentarios sobre *It's Winter* y 599 sobre *ROJO*, muestra que existen diferencias substanciales en la manera que estos discursos abordan la estética nostálgica de los videojuegos de un país a otro, así como entre plataformas, particularmente en el caso de *ROJO*. Finalmente, el estudio muestra que estos juegos no hablan del pasado en un sentido histórico, sino que su experiencia estética del presente los relaciona con el pasado irresuelto de los espacios representados.

## **Autores**

Diego A. Mejía-Alandia [dmejia@us.es] is Postdoctoral researcher at Tampere University's Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies. He studied literature, creative writing, and literary translation. His research focuses on the concept of nostalgia, its relationship with cultural/national memories and individual/collective identities, and its ties with popular culture. Currently, he works on an individual project on representations of post-communist nostalgia in video games and VR experiences.

Luis Navarrete-Cardero [lnavarrete@us.es] is Professor and coordinator of the subjects *Hybrid Narrative Formats in the Digital Age*, *New Technologies of the Audiovisual Media* and *Videogame Script*, belonging to the Department of Audiovisual Communication of the Faculty of Communication of the University of Seville.

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## 1. Introduction

After the emergence of the genre with the commercial release of *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room and Briscoe, 2012), and its explosion as an aesthetic practice after the critically praised *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2016), *First Person Exploration* (FPE) games, *ambience action games* (Zimmermann and Huberts, 2019), *wandering games* (Kagen, 2022), or *walking simulators* (WS)—as they were originally and derogatorily labeled—have received much critical attention (e.g. Carbo-Mascarell, 2016; Grabarczyk, 2016; Navarrete-Cardero and Vargas-Iglesias, 2018), even more after the release of *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019) (see also Cuadrado, 2022; Ferland-Beauchemin et al. 2019; Jørgensen, 2022; Kagen, 2022; Majewski and Siuda, 2023; Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon, 2019; Zimmermann and Huberts, 2019) as Hideo Kojima's conception of the new *strand game genre*<sup>1</sup>.

Both a disruptive and subversive domestication of the First Person Shooter (FPS) genre (cf. Bowman, 2019; Pinchbeck, 2008b) as well as the self-proclaimed vehicle of a *ghost story*—a sub-genre deprived of the core mechanics of FPS and accompanied by the subsequent distortion of its *underlying politics*<sup>2</sup>—, WS, or rather the cultural concept that the gaming community and game scholars have of them, are considered somehow different, generic (cf. Montembeault and Deslongchamps-Gagnon, 2019), or, in more extreme cases, *not games at all* but mere [digital] *experiences*. Thus, the underlying politics of WS, which have shown a connection with a wide range of issues regarding the human condition<sup>3</sup>, have also sparked a debate concerning the *hegemonic* limits of what does and does not constitute a video game (cf. Bogost, 2017; Bowman, 2019; Navarrete-Cardero and Vargas-Iglesias, 2018).

Certainly, despite the unstoppable process of legitimization experienced in recent decades in the university environment, the video game medium is still considered a clumsy upstart by part of academia, when scrutinized through a narratological prism. For instance, Ian Bogost, one of the key authors of video game theory, questioned, in relation to the narrative character of the so-called WS, whether it is really necessary to tell stories through video games, when other media, such as novels or cinema, offer us more successful and effective narrative experiences. For Bogost, the best interactive stories are currently of poorer quality than those usually offered by novels and films of mediocre quality (2017).

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1 *Death Stranding*, according to Kojima, «[...] is not a stealth game. Could move subjectively but not a FPS shooting game either. By incorporating with the concept of connection (strand), it's totally brand new genre called action game/strand game (social strand system)» (2019).

2 According to Dan Pinchbeck (cf. 2008a), creative director at The Chinese Room and the writer behind two of the most influential WS games, *Dear Esther* (2012) and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2015).

3 From ghost love stories to narratives of redemption and identity, from gender issues to family matters or the philosophy of not having—or not being able to kill—*non-player characters* (NPC).

This devastating judgement is based on the inability of the video game to affect, from the player's interaction, the dramatic arc of the plot and, consequently, the free unfolding of the story's events. This ability, equally non-existent for the reader of novels or the spectator of films, is demanded with imprecise and unfair eagerness from the video game because its differentiating element with respect to those other media, interactivity, should always be at the service of the transformation of the diegesis, when the medium ventures into the tempestuous ocean of narration. If this is not the case, why then tell a story through a video game while ignoring its main feature? Perhaps, the question pointed out by Bogost becomes an aporia that feeds on the excess of power that the author envisions for interactive action, confusing it with the infinite possibilities that only reality can offer us. Implicitly, and perhaps maliciously, Bogost alludes to an impossible request for the current state of videoludic technology, since the deficiencies in artificial intelligence or in the procedural generation of content turn this demand into an unattainable myth that reminds us of Ts'ui Pên's labyrinthine project (Borges, 2015). But apart from this current technical and expressive deficiency according to Bogost, in our opinion, it is not reasonable to achieve this hypothetical and idyllic all-powerful state of the medium because it would penalize its capacity to convey good stories, whether original or not; thus, the free will of the player in the ludic universe goes against the necessary structure that every story, as an act of enunciation, must respect if it wishes to transmit a univocal message. As Jesse Schell reminds us, videoludic stories, like any other, must move toward the unity pursued by the theory of central conflict, avoiding the explosiveness of the combinatory formula offered by the player's multiple and fallacious choices that lead to different endings almost always disappointing for the user:

Imagine an interactive Cinderella story. You are Cinderella. Your stepmother has told you to clean out the fireplace. Do you (1) do it or (2) pack your bags and leave? If Cinderella leaves and, say, gets a job as an administrative assistant, it isn't the Cinderella story anymore. The reason for Cinderella's wretched situation is so that she can rise out of it dramatically, suddenly, and unexpectedly (Schell, 2015: 301).

On the other hand, let us say it bluntly, our faith in the capacity of the current video game medium as a storytelling device does not justify an unconditional acceptance of the level of success achieved by the video game in this task. Possibly, it has been unsatisfactory on numerous occasions. Bogost's judgement is informed by this historical failure; the narrative failure, an issue become a defining characteristic of the video game for many scholars, is solved in the acceptance of its expressive limits. These are mainly in the insufficiency of verbs/actions of video game characters located from the neck down—running, shooting, jumping, climbing, throwing or flying—, as opposed to the verbs/actions of novels and films located from the neck up—arguing, negotiating, talking, complaining or convincing (Schell, 2015: 303). It seems fair to accept, regardless of its capacity for good

storytelling—amply proven, for example, with *Detroit Become Human* (Quantic Dream and David Cage, 2018)—, the idea that the medium expresses itself much more serenely in the configuration of fictional worlds, recreated *ex novo* or from universes previously established by other narrative discourses, than in the classical and traditional creation of stories. In this regard, it is worth remembering that, when video games dilute their essential structure based on rules and mechanics with the aim of telling or narrating stories—like the WS or the works of Cage—, there are always those who remind us that we are not dealing with a video game. In this sense, the WS as a phenomenon has been

[...] associated with a growing number of videogames [sic] deemed to be actively political purely because they drew away from the *ludus* that is bound to characterise them in formal, structural, and ludological terms. Understandably, the propensity of such games to human issues diminishes the significance of their form — resulting in fewer rules and mechanics — and increases their narrative value — resulting in a more emotional slant to their plots. [Moreover, this has led them to be associated] [...] with the moniker «social justice warriors», a pejorative designation intended to highlight the superficial treatment of some of the ideas they espouse (Navarrete-Cardero and Vargas-Iglesias, 2018: 790).

Beyond the power of these strictly narratological arguments, it seems appropriate to point out the extension of the genre to other expressive possibilities not contemplated by this perspective. Thus, this change of approach and gameplay—from the hegemonic FPS to the exploration, ambiance, and narrative discovery used to create a story we find in WS—also helps us recognize the genre’s dual potential. Not only is it heavily informed by the player’s own subjective interpretation (Stang, 2019) of the *gamescape*, but, by design—especially when its visual and acoustic environmental narrative belongs to or represents the family home—, it also works as a trigger for the player’s own nostalgic memories and experiences. This, in return, informs and provides the game with a *postmemory*<sup>4</sup> *feedback, as well as a cultural and historical framework. Moreover, when we talk about memories of a second generation*—or subsequent—that can include transgenerational or muted trauma and strong connections with collective—family and national—narratives and identity issues, it turns WS into a meaningful, transformative playful experience.

In order to corroborate this added value of the genre, in this paper we analyze nostalgic discourses found in the comment sections of online streaming parties, online forums, press coverage, and official websites of two short indie WS, ШХД: ЗИМА / *It’s Winter* (ИЛЬЯМАЗО and sad3d, 2019) and *ROJO: A Spanish Horror Experience* (Moreno, 2020), as a comparative case study suggesting that the WS

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4 «Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right» (Hirsch, 2008: 103). Notwithstanding, these memories do not necessarily come from direct transmission—e.g., oral communication of family memory—, as the trauma could make this impossible, but from other sources of *secondary memory* (cf. LaCapra, 2014), such as third-party testimonies, education, and popular culture, which turns it into *secondary trauma*.

genre is an exceptional vehicle for a playful communal exploration of authoritarian pasts<sup>5</sup> as a practice of *reflective nostalgia* (Boym, 2003).

## 2. Nostalgia and its walkabouts

Let us begin by pointing out that nostalgia no longer corresponds exclusively to pathological anxiety, but has become a public dimension related to a broad cultural symbolism, a gesture that makes it a social emotion (Wildschut et al., 2006).

Although there is a common perception that the discourse of nostalgia can be *foolish* or a straightforward *bad mnemonic practice*, especially when associated to an ideology or nationalistic fantasy that is obsessed with the rebuilding of the past (cf. *restorative nostalgia* in Boym, 2003), there is also a *good type*, or reflective, nostalgia. The latter has different uses and functions as an ethical, and often private, exercise of memory that «[...] dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity» (Boym, 2003: 13)—such as issues of national identity or historical memory, or even cultural and aesthetic appropriation.

Historically, because sentimentality in art has been considered the opposite of good taste, the emotion of nostalgia has been understood pejoratively (Solomon, 2004). This error is based on the idea of missing an embellished past that does not correspond to reality. This idealization of memory, understood as a form of escapist fantasy, leads to self-deception and a passive attitude toward the present and the future.

According to other authors, however, nostalgia is a meaningful emotion thanks to its temporal structure and narrative character (Malpas, 2011), qualities that, in another order of things, relate it to its possible remediation through narrative means of expression—as in the case of the videoludic genre that concerns us. In this sense, as we have already stated, Svetlana Boym (2003) points out two different ways of explaining our relationship with the past that lead to two forms of nostalgia. The first is *restorative* nostalgia centered on the *nostos*, the desire to return to origins. The second form, or *reflective* nostalgia, emphasizes the *algos*, the irretrievable past and the awareness of human finitude. Restorative nostalgia regards our memory as accurate and true, so it seeks the reestablishment of that past state in the present. According to Boym, this type of nostalgia is the foundation of some nationalisms that construct the history of a country through a mythical project.

For its part, reflective nostalgia is related to individual narratives, where an active subject focuses on the reconstruction and interpretation of its past—curiously, as proposed by WS. Moreover, this type of nostalgia does not seek to reestablish lost

<sup>5</sup> Here related to the experience of post-Francoism and post-communism aesthetics in contemporary—but not limited to—Spanish and Russian player communities in *ROJO: A Spanish Horror Experience* and *It's Winter*, respectively.

time, but rather to transiently recover a spirit or mood of an earlier time (Boym, 2003). Therefore, the subject experiencing it can discern the difference between the past and its mnemonic representation.

This typology of nostalgia is neither passive nor escapist in nature; known for being ironic, satirical, inconclusive, or comical, and to have a particular love for details but not symbols, it favors individual and cultural narratives over official ones. Reflective nostalgia can allow us «[...] to distinguish between national memory that is based on a single plot of national identity [...], and social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory» (Boym, 2003: 14) and, in our case, independently of the games' political positioning, or the apparent lack of narrative, or the lack of players' agency.

### 3. Materials and Methods

Through the intersection of two WS video games with the concept of reflective nostalgia, we aim to answer the main question of this research: do these games have the desire to become a representation of the past or are they just examples of how new generations of gamers relate to it?

We conducted a qualitative design analysis of the comments sections on *ROJO: A Spanish Horror Experience (Rojo)* found on the game's official site and—to balance the number with the comments on *It's Winter*—further coverage taken from five popular Spanish websites/forums<sup>6</sup>: Anait Games, Chollometro, Forocoche, Marca, and Vandal (599 comments in total). In the case of *It's Winter*, the comments come from the reviews section of its official Steam Community site (711 reviews). Furthermore, streaming video content for both games was taken from YouTube and Twitch. We have given this collected material the name *interactions* (see table 2).

The answer to our main research question must indeed be sought through a methodology based on a qualitative design. Qualitative research aims to approach the world out there in order to understand, describe, and sometimes explain social phenomena by analyzing their interactions as they occur. This procedure is based on the observation of the phenomenon and «on the analysis of appropriate material, texts, images, films and other similar traces, the product of these interactions and of the experiences of individuals in society» (Flick, 2015: 12).

The qualitative method is no longer defined in negative terms—qualitative research is non-quantitative and non-standardised—but, characterized by «the use of text as empirical material, starts from the notion of the social construction of the realities under study and is interested in the everyday practices and knowledge that refer to the issue under study» (Flick, 2015: 20). In this sense, qualitative

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6 NB most national and regional newspapers blocked the comments sections for the coverage of *Rojo*.



research studies things in their natural environment by trying to make sense of different phenomena and to interpret them from the point of view of the meanings people attach to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Several purely qualitative research perspectives can be defined, all with different theoretical positions, data collection methods, and interpretative approaches (Flick, 2015). For our research we have opted for a hermeneutic analysis, whose elements are described below:

**Table 1.** Qualitative research perspective and approach of this paper. Source: Flick, 2015: 30.

	<b>Hermeneutic analysis</b>
<b>Theoretical position</b>	Genetic structuralism
<b>Method of data collection (<i>Interactions</i>)</b>	Recording of interactions/Photographs Films/Videos Comments on social networks
<b>Method of interpretation</b>	Hermeneutics

Our selected approach to the object of study unites several different methodological currents in order to make it as objective as possible.

On the one hand, the starting point is Lucien Goldmann’s genetic structuralism, a theoretical formulation in which the critic adopts a historical–genetic, we might say—approach to the analysis of a phenomenon, in the belief that there is a homologation with the collective mental structure of the time in which it manifests itself (Goldmann, 1980). In other words, it is possible to point out certain links and connections, regardless of the intentions of the designers of these games, between the historical past to which they allude and their present and current videoludic simulation, because in both instances there are elements of an epoch that has not been surpassed.

On the other hand, the section on the *interactions* of the research is made up of the different data that have been collected in order to carry out the work. We list them below as an empirical corpus and proof of this research’s motivation.

**Table 2.** Research interactions. Source: own elaboration.

Games	Interactions	Website/Forums	URL address
<i>ROJO: A Spanish Horror Experience</i>	198 comments	mmorenos95.itch.io	<a href="https://rb.gy/hhgfv">https://rb.gy/hhgfv</a>
	11 comments	anaitgames.com	<a href="https://rb.gy/bbz75">https://rb.gy/bbz75</a>
	49 comments	chollometro.com	<a href="https://rb.gy/j75oe">https://rb.gy/j75oe</a>
	63 comments	forocoches.com	<a href="https://rb.gy/7s16x">https://rb.gy/7s16x</a>
	49 comments	marca.com	<a href="https://rb.gy/273v7">https://rb.gy/273v7</a>
	229 comments	vandal.elespanol.com	<a href="https://rb.gy/5k60d">https://rb.gy/5k60d</a>
<i>It's Winter</i>	video	mmorenos95.itch.io	<a href="youtu.be/7pww2rKuISU">youtu.be/7pww2rKuISU</a>
	711 reviews	steamcommunity.com	<a href="https://rb.gy/jetxu">https://rb.gy/jetxu</a>
	video	bbc.com/russian	<a href="https://rb.gy/60L1dWqtaq4">https://rb.gy/60L1dWqtaq4</a>

Finally, the hermeneutic perspective of the method (Ricoeur, 1969; Thompson, 1990), ultimately interpretative, is justified by the place from which we analyze both games through the selection of certain recursive themes from video game theory. Indeed, hermeneutics, an articulation of Paul Ricoeur that John B. Thompson modifies *motu proprio* «with the aim of studying the ideology of mass communication» (1990: 405), aspires to understand cultural objects. In our case, it is the relationship between the two games and reflective nostalgia, from the construction of their meaning marked by the historical and social conditions of their production.

In a way, what Thompson proposes is the objectification of interpretation—clearly an oxymoron—through the establishment of a methodology erected specifically to approach the object of study. This new method is materialized in the choice of a certain number of tools, a series of *instruments* chosen in a sampling exercise (Flick, 2015). Thus, in this work, we have decided to deal with certain themes or *instruments* that suit the interests of the study. These essential *instruments*, used in the previous or following sections, are Boym’s nostalgic division and Chapman’s two ludic aesthetics of historical description, that is, a mixture of themes belonging to cultural studies and game studies. While other instruments could have surely been chosen, let us not forget that all interpretation is a constructive operation of the interpreter, who selects and reconstructs by imputing a meaning among many other possible meanings. All hermeneutics is an open process that does not aspire to total mediation, in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s sense (2004), because the interpretative possibilities of a cultural object can never be completely closed (Ricoeur, 1969).

**Table 3.** Instruments for an interpretative analysis. Source: own elaboration.

Instrument	Topics covered	Author
Restorative Nostalgia	Cultural Studies	Svetlana Boym
Reflective Nostalgia		
Realistic Simulation Style	Game Studies	Adam Chapman
Conceptual Simulation Style		

To summarize, our method consists of (1) a historical approach that relates Spain's past to two current video games; (2) a series of interactions that will allow us to calibrate this linkage; and, finally, (3) a pair of instruments that serve as the basis for our interpretation.

### 3.1. ROJO. *A Spanish Horror Experience*

A single-person project designed and developed by Seville-based indie developer Miguel Moreno, now part of the Spanish studio The Game Kitchen, *Rojo* has hints of *survival horror* and *current event game* (Bogost et al., 2010). Although the game does not follow *actual events*, reports about right-wing extremist, neo-Francoist, and neo-fascist violence, hate crimes, and even possible domestic terrorism related to these groups have sadly become common place in today's Spanish press and news broadcasts.

Set in Madrid (Spain) soon after Francisco Franco's exhumation from *el Valle de los Caídos*, on 24 October 2019, *Rojo* uses as backdrop a *necropolitical* (cf. Mbembe 2019) process that «[...] became the cornerstone of a tense political and memorial struggle about [Franco's] regime and his moral and historical legacy» (Ferrándiz, 2022: 212) in Spanish society, an event that continues to have social and political repercussions to this day.

*Rojo's* length is of roughly 20 minutes of gameplay, in which the agency of the player—armed only with a faulty flashlight—is limited solely to the interaction with key objects that develop a scarce script conveyed via text journals. Despite most of its narrative being environmental, both visual and acoustic, its dramatic illumination and style recreate a decadent, immersive, and oppressive atmosphere effectively. Almost inconspicuously, *Rojo's* official website opens with an apparently *candid* question: «Is there anything more terrifying than a fascist?» (Moreno, 2020), inviting the player to explore the apartment of a nostalgic Francoist in search of a missing friend, possibly anti-Franco, hence the *red*. The title of the game alludes in fact to the pejorative way in which during the civil war the members of the national side called the members of the republican side. In this Francoist apartment, bathed in restorative nostalgia,

the war is still going on, so any intruder is considered a red. The player now occupies the role of the missing friend, turning the playing experience into a cyclical machine that confirms the continuation of the war within the apartment's walls.

In nostalgic Francoist era aesthetics, the apartment in question has a realistic Spanish seventies' furniture style and is populated by recognizable *authentic texts* and *realia*<sup>7</sup> of the period; it is filled with references to Spanish material, musical, and popular cultures—including more contemporary Spanish brands such as *Cola Cao*, *Telepizza*, or the gossip magazine *¡Hola!*—as well as characteristically kitsch catholic iconography and Francoist propaganda (see figures 1 & 2).

**Figure 1.** As reflected in *Rojo*, the ideological identity of Francoism is still present in private contexts.



Save for the distance, it is impossible not to relate this Francoist apartment—a space of restorative nostalgia and a communicating vessel with the past—to Carlos Saura's filmic praxis built on the simulation of wartime in his so-called opposition cinema of the early 1970s. Both in *La prima Angélica* (1973) and, especially, in *Ana y los lobos* (1973), the protagonists metaphorically confront the harshness of the war, even though it ended a long time ago. The young girl is the victim of religious hypocrisy, sexual repression and, finally, military authoritarianism that will lead her

<sup>7</sup> *Texts*—e.g., movies, songs, magazines, photographs—and *objects from real life*—e.g., flags, canned food, deck of cards—, respectively, as opposed to texts or objects fabricated specifically for the game.

to a chilling death (see figure 3). The wolves that pursue Ana in the old Castilian mansion, a symbolic and nostalgic representation of Franco's Spain, exercise on the governess a stark violence similar to that which awaits *Rojo's* player.

**Figure 2.** Francoist propaganda and iconography in *Rojo*.



**Figure 3.** At the end of the film, Ana is shaved, raped, and shot in the head by the Spanish wolves.



### 3.2. It's Winter

A two-person project, *It's Winter's* concept is part of an eponymous multi-platform collaborative project. Conceived by Moscow-based poet and musician Ilya Mazo (ИЛЪЯМАЗО), this project includes: a musical album, a play, a book of poetry, a series of short films, animation, and the video game. The ludic portion of the project is designed and developed by Alexander Ignatov, aka *sad3d*, an underground developer from Petrozavodsk (Karelia, Russia).

According to the official Steam Store website's description: «It's Winter is an indie game which genre could be classified as sandbox, post-soviet [sic], sad 3d, russian [sic] sadness. Nothing awaits you: there is no chance to get out, no room for adventures and breathtaking plot. Just a broken radio, refrigerator filled with food, loneliness and endless snow» (Mazo and Sad3d, 2019).

Mnemonically speaking, *It's Winter* follows a different visual strategy than *Rojo*. Instead of portraying realistic graphics or authentic texts and objects, *It's Winter* opts for a generic pixelated style that recreates the atmosphere of the space aesthetically but in a 3D low-fi graphic version. The light, or more often than not the lack of it, plays a fundamental role in the achievement of its ambience (see figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Darkness, endless snow, and cold await the player in *It's Winter*.



Set in an undisclosed contemporary post-Soviet suburban *khrushchyovka*, a mass housing unit composed by a complex of tower blocks from the times of the former USSR, *It's Winter* has no narrative or game mechanics whatsoever. Besides some graffiti, disconnected excerpts of poetry, fragments audible through an old transistor radio—all taken from Mazo's eponymous book and collaborations—, and a handful of interactive common household objects—food, pans or light switches among others—, the game offers free exploration of an, apparently deserted, Soviet-era panel house in winter, the public space between the tower blocks that include a children's playground, and nothing more (see figures 4 and 5).

This doing nothing during the game, abounding in the impossibility of constructing any narrative generated by the protagonist, is part of the ideological project on which the thesis of the experience is based: no space or time for the development of the subject, or the individual, beyond everyday existence, symbolized in the simple exploration and innocuous use of artefacts that neither convey nor exploit any chain of events. The player is imprisoned by his own inability to generate agency to advance the video game system, a painful metaphor for Soviet society.

**Figure 5.** A Soviet-era panel house in *low-fi*, 1960s furniture, darkness, and ennui in *It's Winter*.



### 3.3. From nostalgic to viral

Despite having little [*Rojo*] to no narrative or gameplay mechanics whatsoever [*It's Winter*], because of their nostalgic themes and without any PR, these games went viral—in their respective countries—by the time of their release; afterward, they were covered by both non-specialized press, aka national and regional newspapers, and magazines, as well as by a multitude of online channels and streamers/influencers. Among the latter, full nostalgic streaming parties<sup>8</sup> gathered online to play, enjoy, and discuss their interpretation of the representations of these nostalgic games. The games also caught the attention of international media: *It's Winter* was covered by *Wired* (Milne, 2021) and even BBC News Russia got its own version of an intercultural nostalgic streaming party (see BBC News, 2019).

The discourses that followed these discussions, later extended to the comments sections of the games' respective streams and websites, are the ones that we analyze in this paper.

## 4. Nostalgic WS parties

Whereas the projection of the past these experiences build is mostly [*Rojo*] or completely [*It's Winter*] environmental, and although their oppressive and unique atmospheres use similar tropes, especially those related to WS and *historical games*, their *ludic aesthetics of historical description* (Chapman, 2016)—the ways in which they represent the past (beyond the obvious sociopolitical settings)—are almost diametrically opposed.

Adam Chapman describes two distinct categories of *simulation style* designed to bookend the spectrum of historical representation:

- (1) *A Realist Simulation Style*, the one that *Rojo* follows, where the aesthetics of historical description of its representations are characterized by an inherent *effect of reality*, accompanied by a high degree of audio-visual specificity, detailed visual data loads and referentiality. (Examples of this style include the video game series: *Call of Duty*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Mafia*, or *Red Dead Redemption*).
- (2) *A Conceptual Simulation Style*, at the opposite end of the representational spectrum, with less audio-visual literal, abstract simulations that «[...] tell us about the past without purporting to show it as it appeared» (Chapman, 2016: 70), often built mainly through *procedural rhetoric* (Bogost, 2007), and creating representation through discourse rather than only a simple

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8 We use the term *party* in every sense the word, i.e., as a *celebratory* social event, and as a *group of people* participating in an action or taking one side of a question, dispute, or contest (cf. Merriam-Webster, 2023).



retelling. (Examples of this style include the video game series: *Civilization*, *Victoria*, or *Commander*).

Although Chapman recognizes that these categories are not mutually exclusive—*It's Winter* straddles both styles—, we need to clarify that, even if we could argue that the backdrop of the games *implicitly* refers to *historical memory*, both games, strictly speaking, lack of historicity and are by no means *historical games*<sup>9</sup>. None of these games actually *talk* about [events in] the past—in a narrative or historical sense—or are set in *the actual past* (or an alternative version of said past). In this sense, we are not talking about historical recreations of the periods they imply but about *representations* of a particular historical/mnemonic practice within their respective represented societies. One that happens to have a *contemporary aesthetic overlap*, i.e., in the material, musical, and popular cultures of their representations besides their obvious geopolitical settings. Thus, by extension, the discussion we seek involves a contemporary manifestation of the perception of the Francoist past and Soviet past through the *cultural*—shared memory, based on rituals and objects that shape cultural meaning—and *communicative*—collective memory based exclusively on everyday communication—*memories* (cf. Assmann 2008; 2011) of its players as a specific form of reflective nostalgia.

Dealing with their respective historical processes from a mimetic/aesthetic approach to memory in a *realist* [*Rojo*] or partially *conceptual simulation style* [*It's Winter*], both games arouse sentiments of nostalgia—or sentiments against their understanding of the concept of nostalgia—among the players who, ultimately, are the ones who actually write the story of the games online, whether in streaming parties on various platforms, or in the comments sections of the streamings, the games' respective websites, and press coverage.

#### 4.1. Don't crash my nostalgic party

The tone and ideological standpoint of these discourses, however, differ substantially from one country to another and from channel to channel, even within the same game.

##### 4.1.1. The red party

*Rojo* was something close to an *inside joke* on the streaming platforms YouTube and Twitch, as well as in the comments section of its official itch.io site. The details, the materiality of the environment, and the connections with the Spanish popular cultures, not the (Francoist) symbols, were what captivated the audience: «I loved

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9 Although Chapman argues that the term *historical game studies* refers to the study of those games that in some way represent the past or relate to discourses about it (cf. 2016).

the atmosphere and the details put into the game! I will never have enough *mops blocking the way* and *Cola Cao* boxes!!»<sup>10</sup> (ROJO comments). The game thus turns into a completely aesthetic experience where the memory of fascism is marginal to the *second-hand experience of the past*; this is especially true for younger players, who are able to restore the playfulness to an apparently serious survival horror game with an equally serious political background. Moreno himself gathered positive proof of this fact in a compilation video—available on his itch.io site and YouTube channel—that attests to the aesthetic celebratory extension of these streaming parties on YouTube and Twitch (see [youtu.be/7pwv2rKuISU](https://youtu.be/7pwv2rKuISU)). This compilation, which includes some non-Spanish players as well as a fair number of Spanish streamers and influencers, makes for a good example of satirical, ironic and parodic discourses related to the current image of fascism in Spain.

Besides praises to the developer, the comments posted on these platforms are basically disaffiliated of any political position, something that even some commentators tend to find ironic and suspicious: «a healthy debate over the internet about this game, well that’s indeed debatable!!» (ROJO comments).

On the video platforms, we can see how these streamers—alone or gathered in parties with their followers joining in the comments sections—played, laughed, and even got a fright: «It’s like a survival horror game but with Francoists which scares more than zombies, running from a fascist is awfully amusing and it even gave me a fright. A•! It also has a great ambiance» (ROJO comments). They enjoy this oppressive and yet familiar atmosphere, halfway between *Silent Hill* and a visit to the old family house in a small country town (in what a commentator even humorously described as the *Spanish P.T.*), all this a clear hint of reflective nostalgia.

As a community, these streamers and their followers were happy just to see and hear Spanish popular culture references in a video game<sup>11</sup>, even though some of these are commonly tied to the fascist legacy of the nation, a past that the country has yet to deal with.

As someone born and raised in Spain, I suffered while trying to make my way through this nostalgic apartment because I kept getting excited at the number of traditional Spanish household objects I was seeing, from the old-fashioned kitchen with the *ColaCao* pot in the corner to the furniture design itself. I was so happy to see the stuff I’d grown up with in a video game! The attention to detail was so on point, however, that, no matter how excited I was at hearing «Campanera» playing (*On-A-Vi-de-o-ga-me!!!*), I also recognized all the signals you’d *never* want to find in a place like this; from the moment I crossed the front door, I knew exactly what kind of man I’d find inside this apartment. (ROJO comments).

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10 NB To comply with current Data Protection Law Regulations, all comments on *Rojo* have been translated and slightly modified to maintain the anonymity of the commentators (for *ROJO* comments see table 2). All translations are ours.

11 A sentiment exacerbated a year before by the release of the action platformer *Blasphemous* (The Game Kitchen, 2019) with its Spanish Gothic grotesque aesthetics.

Across web-based platforms, however, it is a completely different story. Besides some players complaining about the length or quality of the product<sup>12</sup>, most of the comments sections are populated by ideological warfare and digressions about historical memory and revisionism. «Since Franco is such a sweet profitable matter to be left behind and focus on the present» (ROJO comments). Nostalgic Francoists—allegedly *players*—have attacked *Rojo*, calling it *monothematic*—«another gratuitous way to spread guerracivilismo. Of course, it does not have any commercial interests, since it's more [like left-wing] propaganda» (ROJO comments)—, labeling it often as a *subsidized communist propaganda*—«from which public subsidy, where from, who and how much has this little game costed us?»—, or, in some cases, going even further and worse: «From the creators of the *Holotale* here comes the *Hologame*»<sup>13</sup> (ROJO comments).

Meanwhile, *non-players* or players that openly reject or simply have had no interaction with the software also tagged it—based purely on its aesthetics—as a *right-wing propaganda*, a fact that led Moreno to tweet the disclaimer: «ROJO does not represent an apology to the Franco regime or its figure. On the contrary, it is a representation of the terror produced by fascist ideologies, fanaticism and extremism» (Moreno, 2020). In any case, that did not prevent the non-informed commentators from tagging it as *left-wing propaganda*, as *malware*, as—a joke in bad taste—*anchored in discourses of the past, just as it happens with the Spanish cinema*—historically openly focused on the period after Franco's death—, as part of some *paranoid* [left-wing] *conspiracy theories*, and, finally, as a game that they *would never install on their devices*.

Although most of the latter interactions do not show the kind of irony or social commentary we seek, in tending as they do to the extremes of historical negationism or to justify current expressions of Francoist nostalgia, they still manage to create a space for an intergenerational dialogue as well as an exploration of the experience of authoritarian pasts in the shared family narratives of the players—though these often tend to clash.

#### 4.1.2. The cold party

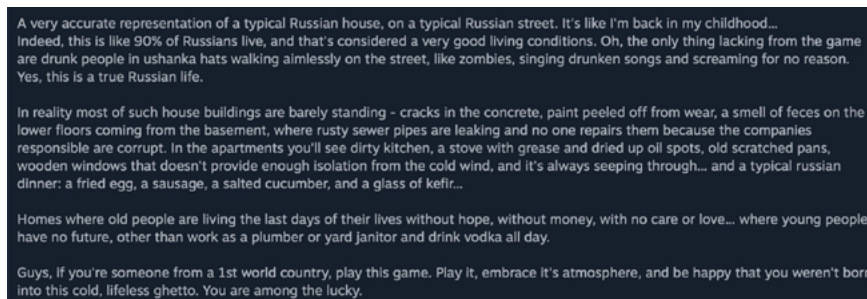
*It's Winter* changes the discourse entirely, as seen from the reviews on its official Steam Community site. Naturally, the aesthetics are openly associated with the Soviet era, but the sentiment of nostalgia here is different: it is ambiguous, both happy and sad (see figure 6).

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<sup>12</sup> Like the fact that the game was built around the free assets of *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) and runs under an older version of Unreal Engine.

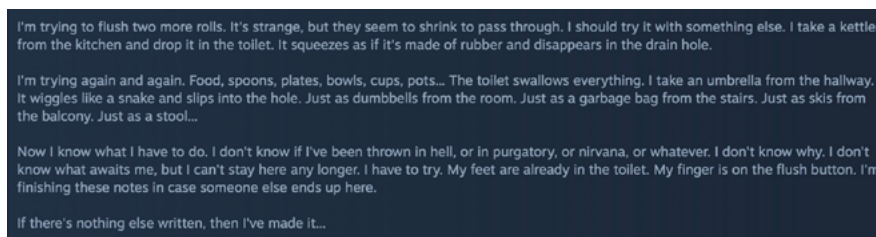
<sup>13</sup> *Holotale* as in the *Holocaust fairy tale*, the antisemitic Spanish version of Holocaust denial; the same logic applies to *Hologame* as a game about something that didn't happen. Our emphasis.

**Figure 6.** Simulating Russia (Valve, 2019).



According to most of the reviews, besides the common complaint about the game's price and length<sup>14</sup>, *It's Winter* is nostalgic about the time period—as a celebration of the players' childhoods—, but has no political baggage or alignment: «it's 1993, the soviet union [sic] has recently fallen and you return from work to the public housing building you call home» (Valve, 2019). Or if it does, it is ironic<sup>15</sup>, critical<sup>16</sup>, or open and free from ideological positions, even though, as happened with Spain, Russian society did not have to cope with its Soviet past, since these transitions meant a democratization without justice (Encarnación 2014; Matos Franco 2018). Furthermore, perhaps because of the nostalgic nature of the *It's Winter* project as a whole and the well-achieved nostalgic ambiance of its ludic portion, most comments tend to be playful yet poetically nostalgic on their own (see figures 7 & 8).

**Figure 7.** Nostalgia meets post-Soviet apocalypse (Valve, 2019).

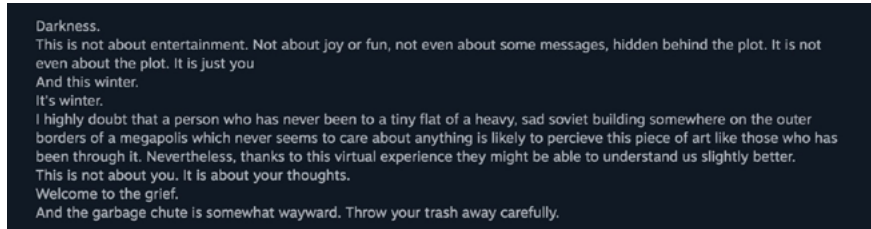


14 *It's Winter's* 8,19 € (9,99\$) price tag, against the *pay what you want* policy of *Rejo* –that includes a free download option–, makes the game less attractive to casual players.

15 «10/10 better than real life!» (Valve, 2019)

16 «Absolute fire. If you're familiar with post-soviet type of cities, from eastern Europe/Russia - this is a must-buy. I've been far away from home for quite a while, and this game was capable of reminding me to not come back» (Valve, 2019)

**Figure 8.** It is not about entertainment (Valve, 2019).



As for the intercultural approach of the BBC News Russia streaming party, it not only proves the atmospheric achievement of the game as a simulation—even calling it a «“Russian life” simulator» (2019)—but also argues that *It's Winter* could easily be interpreted as a *horror* or even a *zombie game* and its ambience not just as post-Soviet nostalgia but as the projection of a possible *nuclear winter*.

## 5. Conclusions

Following an aesthetic approach to nostalgia, the interdisciplinary *instruments* used in our research show that ШХД; ЗИМА / *It's Winter* and *ROJO: A Spanish Horror Experience* do not talk about the past in a historical or narrative sense. Nevertheless, the aesthetic legacy of the spaces represented, coinciding as they do with the ones still present in the players' private spheres and shared family memories, relate the games to historical processes of unresolved national pasts that are sometimes muted but still alive in the public sphere, just as the *interactions* we found can attest.

At opposite sides of the ideological spectrum—Spanish fascism and post-Soviet nostalgia, respectively—, the games' *ludic aesthetics of historical description*—and even the developer himself in the case of *Rojo's* disclaimer—tell us that, though nostalgic about its aesthetics, they do not represent—or desire to become a representation of—the past.

Nevertheless, the *interactions* we find around these two short indie WS games show that, precisely because of the past's aesthetics, they are used rather inadvertently as an excuse to explore the many ways in which today's players relate to discourses about said unresolved past. In this sense, the aspects in which they appear to be lacking—such as the scarce or absent games' narratives or the limited player's agency—unexpectedly create a discursive void for the players to fill, confront, and ultimately argue about online.

Furthermore, the analysis of these *interactions* shows marked social differences in the discursive approach to the games' nostalgic aesthetics as well as differences

across platforms, particularly in the case of *Rojo*. On the one hand, a common discursive approach following the characteristics of discourses of reflective nostalgia—such as the use of satire, irony, or comic relief within a social commentary—can be found on platforms often used by a *younger player community* for streaming and gaming services e.g., YouTube, Twitch, itch.io, and Steam. On the other hand, in *Rojo*'s case, more traditional websites/forums aimed at a *wider public*—not necessarily including *players*—tend to show an inclination toward discourses of restorative nostalgia that include historical denial, misinformation, and even hate speech. Owing to the nature of our data, it was not possible to assess the ages of the commentators; nevertheless, our results suggest a generational gap present in the *interactions* around *Rojo*. In the same vein, this gap seems to be even larger if we take into account the time difference between the countries' transitions to democracy—Spain 1975 (48 years) vs Russia 1991 (32 years)—and set them against their current geopolitical context. All of this, undoubtedly, offers more questions than answers and would require further research.

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