Kosmonaut's log: Field notes on the politics of nostalgia in ludic representations of Soviet space exploration

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the last fifteen years, researchers in the fields of game and digital cultures have shown an increasing interest in the concept of nostalgia, the latter seen as either reflecting games, gaming hardware and culture as *consumption* (Baltezarević and Milić, 2021; Cuff and Terry, 2017; Harris, 2020); as a marginal subculture in the form of *retrogaming* (Suominen, 2007; Wulf et al., 2018); or as a postmodern vehicle of *re-mediation* of history, memory, and identity (Chapman, 2016; Correa de Mello and Martin Mastrocola, 2019; Heineman, 2014; Makai, 2018; Navarrete-Cardero and Vargas-Iglesias, 2018)—i.e. through games' [popular] music (Ivănescu, 2019) or its material culture (Bowman et al., 2022)—, among other approaches.

Although nostalgia as a cultural phenomenon is much older (cf. Boym, 2001), what we understand today as *retrogaming nostalgia*—i.e. the entirety of computer/video games history—began to take shape within the Cold War period (1947-1991). The end of this era, with the German Unification and the demise of the USSR[1], saw the emergence of yet another form of nostalgia conceived within the former East German territories: the concept of *Ostalgie*[2].

Nevertheless, this is not an exclusively German phenomenon, since almost every former Eastern Bloc territory has bred its own variety of *post-communist nostalgia*[3]. These phenomena are not only well documented but play an important part in their countries' popular culture also through their significant socioeconomic impact (Boym, 2001; Goscilo, 1997; Rabinbach, 2004). Likewise, since post-communist nostalgia is usually also a matter of controversy[4], it has been studied by a variety of fields—cultural, literary, and film studies especially have covered its both written and audiovisual fictional representations for almost thirty years (see Figure 1). This paper intends to extend this interdisciplinary knowledge and apply it to the analysis of video game representations in yet another case of capitalization of post-communist nostalgia[5]: the trend known as *Space Nostalgia*.

Figure 1: The epitome of nostalgic representations of post-communist societies, the film *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Becker, 2003) explores almost every manifestation of *Ostalgie*.

The conquest of space motif did not disappear either inside or outside the political, mythological, and popular culture spaces of modern Russia[6]. What was once the promise of an achievable heaven on Earth—from the first space flights to the later abstract notion of the utopia manifested in sci-fi literature (Kohonen, 2011)—has now found a comfortable home in the indie video game scene. Proof of this trend and objects of this analysis are the games *Lifeless Planet: Premier Edition* (Stage 2 Studios, 2014), *Little Orpheus* (The Chinese Room, 2022), *The Great Perhaps* (Caligari Games, 2019), and the VR series *Red Matter* and *Red Matter 2* (Vertical Robot, 2018; 2022).

As Roman Privalov and other commentators have pointed out (Andrews and Siddiqi, 2011; Boym, 2001; Maurer et al., 2011; Siddiqi, 2010), in modern Russia "[...] space culture and space politics are commonly seen through the lens of nostalgia and commodification of memory that allows both economic and political capitalization" (2022, p. 52). Although I have observed that these ludic representations do not follow this tendency too seriously, they certainly use space nostalgia's rhetoric and aesthetics while adding some postmodern layers to the mix. This includes the intersection of the appropriation of the legacies of the Soviet space exploration program and the rich literary sci-fi scene found in the former Eastern bloc, mixed with the commodified memory of the Great Patriotic War (the Soviet term for WWII) and a good portion of Western—or *globalized*—popular culture (see Figure 2).
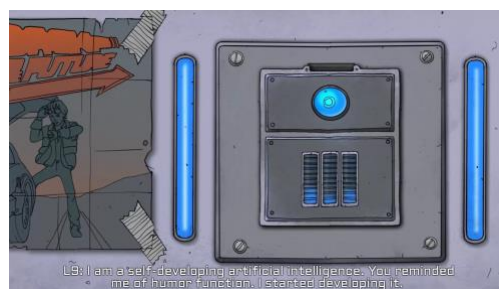

Figure 2: The cosmonaut's AI companion in *The Great Perhaps*, "L9", and a recognizable movie poster build the environmental narrative, while also giving a nod to two of the game's main popular culture references.

The latter addition not only serves to commodify the post-Soviet memory for a broader audience of players but often also brings a healthy touch of irony and parody to the

otherwise dark, gloomy representations of an at times seemingly impossible communist past and of future post-communist human realities. As such, the games' narratives adopt the aesthetics of the brilliant future promised by the conquest of space, not in the way it *was*—a socialist utopia—but in the way it *can be*—a late capitalist post-apocalyptic dystopia.

These representations are, however, far more connected with the post-communist present than with the former communist future or past, and the use of post-apocalyptic settings is motivated by a critical spirit rather than for the sake of a mere *fictional façade*. Nevertheless, the image of the hero they portray is completely generic. In fact, apart from *Little Orpheus*, none of the heroes in the games examined even have a name or personal features. While this emphasizes the hero's non-individualistic nature, it also employs a *one-size-fits-all* approach to space exploration that exists independently from any Soviet fantasies[7]—a form of vicarious *prefabricated* experience found in other media as an *aesthetic colonization* (Jameson, 1991) or *ersatz nostalgia* (Appadurai, 1996)[8].

In this sense, it is logical that the protagonists in these games all inherit the Soviet legacy in terms of iconography but that they also receive an inverted depiction as carriers of socialist values. Therefore, instead of carrying all the utopian transcendent qualifications needed for the future, the protagonists are not playing the optimistic, romantic, patriotic, and heroic representations conceived by socialist realism. Nevertheless, they do represent a new kind of humanism, one that looks stranded, lost and, ultimately, alone.

These postmodern nostalgic cosmonauts not only invite newcomers to play on the futuristic ruins of an era that seems remarkably old-fashioned, but my ongoing research shows that these melancholic representations ultimately also contrast with a narrative that pleads for hope in common humanity and environmental responsibility. All the while, in a meta-nostalgic way, these games also reflect on memory, time/progress, and the human [in]ability to learn from its—future—past.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Both events coincided with the 1991 launch of the last, primarily 2D, home console: the Super Famicom/Super Nintendo.

[2] From the German words *Ost* "East" and *Nostalgie* "nostalgia". The longing for various aspects of everyday life in the times of the former German Democratic Republic by its former citizens.

[3] Also known as: *Ostalgia* or *Eastalgia* (nostalgia for the Eastern bloc), *post-socialist* or *post-Soviet nostalgia*, as well as *Soviet chic* or *communist kitsch*.

[4] An issue of national memory and identity mainly on account of its *transideological glocalized* nature and its connections with fashion, consumption, and material culture.

[5] The current proposal is the first of a series of papers on the politics and aesthetics of representations of various trends of post-communist nostalgia in video games, digital narratives and experiences.

[6] We must not forget that even when the Soviet space exploration program was current, by nature it was already nostalgic for the future.

[7] In fact, these new versions of old Soviet everyday-life heroes are more akin to tragic retrofuturistic versions of David Bowie's Major Tom from "Space Oddity" (1969) which is, in some regards, their main model and influence.

[8] Take for example the alternative reality created for the Apple TV+ Series *For All Mankind* (2019-present) where U.S. space nostalgia is unironically fabricated and based on its Russian counterpart.