

A [W]hole in One. Balkanization, Empire, and the Apocalypse as Playground in *Golf Club Nostalgia*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Following Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter’s hypothesis that “*video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire*—planetary, militarized hypercapitalism—and of some of the forces presently challenging it”¹ (2009, xv), and in line with Robbie Fordyce’s call for political interpretations of games experimenting with new forms of social organization in their imagined political futures (2020), this paper considers the aesthetics and nostalgic discourses found in the post-apocalyptic playground portrayed by the indie video game *Golf Club Nostalgia* (Demagog Studio 2021) as signs of a process of *balkanization*² of its gameworld.

The paper thus presents a close reading that uses as a framework the concepts of *Balkanism*³ (Todorova 2009), *Empire* and *multitude* (Hardt and Negri 2000; 2004), as well as literature on the aesthetics of *space nostalgia* (Andrews and Siddiqi 2011; Gomel 2014; Privalov 2022), *post-communist nostalgia* (Boym 2001; Todorova and Gille 2010; Rekić 2015), and other examples of post-communist games (see Fraser 2019; Seiwald 2021; Leiderman 2022; Réti 2023) to carry out an aesthetic and narratological analysis of a direct play of the game.

Developed by Demagog Studio—an independent collective from Belgrade (Serbia) specialized in content creation for “a generation that will live to witness the III [sic] World War” (Simić and Stanković 2018)—, the self-proclaimed “interactive satire” (Nesterenko 2021) and transmedia⁴ “Radio-drama” (Simić 2019) *Golf Club Nostalgia* (henceforth *GCN*) is driven by simple 2D mini-golf-like gameplay mechanics as a vehicle for narrative. Set in an undefined post-apocalyptic future around the 2040s, in the game’s story a *Great Ecological Catastrophe* has forced the big corporations to migrate to *Tesla City*—on Mars—abandoning the rest of the humanity to their fate. Now, among the limited pleasures the hostile Red Planet offers, the new Martian citizens can take space flights to Earth in their leisure time and enjoy a round of golf among the toxic ruins of human civilization—suddenly turned into a post-apocalyptic playground for the ultra-rich.

To portray its gameworld, *GCN* employs an array of environmental narrative cues that, on the one hand, satirize the meme, Internet, and Silicon Valley’s cultures while, on the other hand, *inadvertently* linking the game to its developers’ experience of former Yugoslavian politics and aesthetics through a mix of Yugoslavian Brutalist architecture (see **Figure 1**), a series of antifascist memorials and futuristic *Spomeniks*⁵—Serbo-Croatian for *monument* (see **Figure 2**)—, and the phantom ruins of Belgrade during the war as architectural and ideological backgrounds—nevertheless, never

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referencing their origins or inspiration thus emphasizing a globalized POV. Meanwhile, *GCN*'s soundtrack and script both reference contemporary globalized material, political, and popular cultures that *ludoform* (Aarseth and Günzel 2019) Earth into a retro-nostalgic post-apocalyptic playground, in turn transformed into minigolf-like courses by its golf mechanics. This way, *GCN* provides a representation which, based also on present untenable consumerism and environmental challenges, works as a gateway between humanity's present and a possible post-apocalyptic future—although a portrait of the present, at best, is difficult to idealize even nostalgically.

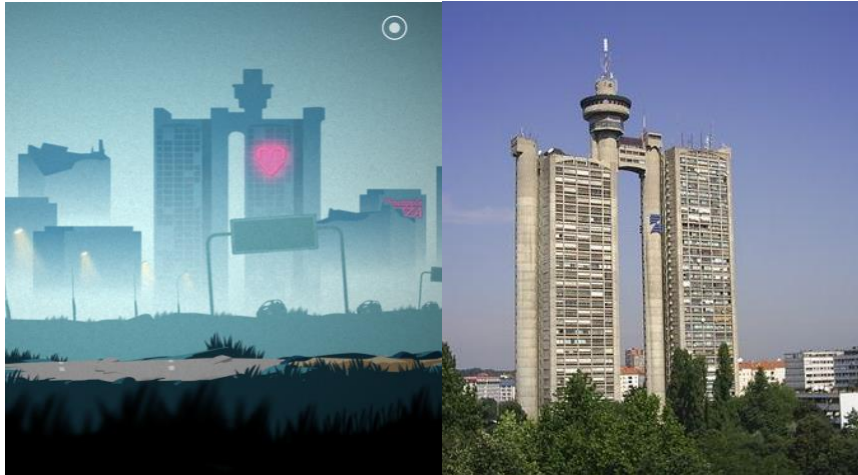


Figure 1: An example of Yugoslavian Brutalist architecture: *GCN*'s post-apocalyptic landscape (left) vs. Belgrade's Genex Tower (right).



Figure 2: Despite their disparate origins and semantics, the *Trumpism* "covfefe"⁶ and the *Monument to the Revolution* (Yugoslavia 1967)—an abstract *Spomenik*—populate the post-apocalyptic playground of *GCN*.

From Donald Trump's unintelligible references to post-pandemic *new normal* realities, from *anxiety support stuffed bears* to future mutant radioactive fauna, the game's plot, intertextuality, and environmental narrative all point to a certain imminent collapse of Earth's environment and human civilization. Notwithstanding, *GCN* also constructs a cultural memory that challenges the tropes found in other post-communist and space nostalgia games⁷ by balancing the longing for socialist lost futures in these representations with a firm—yet playful—*prepper* message to the current generation.

GCN follows Charley, a pilot from the original *Mars mission*, on his last round of Holes on Earth. Homesick, Charley struggles to fit in the new Martian society and, as other former earthlings do, he listens to his favorite program *Radio Nostalgia from Mars* (RNFM) while he plays alone among the ruins. The main of three narrative layers, RNFM⁸ sets the mood and the pace of the game as its charismatic host airs stories of its listeners featuring their earthly and Martian experiences along with music from their past (the 2030s). Both the listeners' stories and the music reflect and are deeply connected with the game's themes—ecology, loneliness, post-humanism—and set the tone to the stage/hole depicted on the screen thus working as audio vignettes from the pre- and post-apocalyptic human future.

Nevertheless, as a narrative device, RNFM portrays a new kind of social organization—a *corporate ruled Martian society* after the apocalypse—, which as a social experience is similar to Hardt and Negri's concept of *multitude*⁹ (2004) rather than to a multicultural approach to a post-apocalyptic civilization. This experience is emphasized by the fact that, like Tesla City and the rest of the socioeconomical, cultural, and technological structures that make life possible on Mars, RNFM is privately-owned by an entity solely known as *Corporate*, a materialization of the concept of *Empire*—a new form of sovereignty that emerged from the capitalist production in the globalized world (Hardt and Negri 2000).

In this sense, this paper argues that *GCN's* aesthetics and RNFM's nostalgic narrative strategies, as in the case of *balkanization*, do not simply refer to the parcelization or fragmentation of the game's society, but that, as a metaphor, they also depict discourses of “dehumanization, deaesthetization, and the destruction of civilization” (Todorova 2009, 36). Furthermore, since the game's landscape is loaded with ideology, as also happens with *Balkanism*, “the political may also be in the method of representation, rather than in its content” (Bjelić 2005, 5). Accordingly, this not only makes the game's post-apocalyptic playground a relevant space for studying new forms of social organization in video games, but Demagog Studio also seems to be starting an innovative trend by turning *GCN's* universe and its following games—i.e. *Highwater* (2023) and *The Cub* (2024)—into *survival manuals* which intend to prepare players to meet the needs of the upcoming apocalypse.

Keywords

Post-Communist Nostalgia, Post-apocalyptic Narratives, Space Nostalgia, Environmental Narrative, Balkanism and Balkanization, Empire and Multitude

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ENDNOTES

¹ Emphasis in the original.

² Designated by Maria Todorova as an "abstract cultural demon" (2009, 36), *balkanization* has been used with a political connotation rather than in a geographical sense since the end of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, its derived terms, the adjective *Balkan* and the verb *balkanize*, are both part of today's political and cultural vocabulary and mostly used as a metaphor.

³ Introduced by Todorova, the term *Balkanism* has also been understood *as a critical study of colonial representation* (Bjelić 2005, 5) which in some nuances resembles Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*.

⁴ *CGN* uses additional media to convey the story including three short video clips—available on YouTube—featuring original music from the game, plus the digital art book/graphic novel *Charlie's Odyssey* that covers the protagonist's background story and can be unlocked after finishing the game.

⁵ Commissioned by Tito (Josif Broz) and erected in countryside fields all over former Yugoslavia, these abstract Space Age monuments not only commemorate antifascist resistance and WWII battle sites but also defy traditional ideas of war monumentalism by showing how, as Lidija Merenik writes, "Yugoslavia early got rid of socialist realism as the official art" (Weiss and Linke 2018) leaving abstraction to reign over figuration.

⁶ *Covfefe* is a nonsense word. During his presidency of the United States, on the midnight of May 31, 2017, Donald Trump tweeted “Despite the constant negative press covfefe”, instantly becoming an Internet *meme*.

⁷ Such as the video game series *Metro* (4A Games 2010-2019) or *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* (GSC Game World 2007-2023) and other space nostalgia games like *Lifeless Planet* (Stage 2 Studios 2014), *Little Orpheus* (The Chinese Room 2022), *The Great Perhaps* (Caligari Games 2019), or the VR series *Red Matter* (Vertical Robot 2018; 2022).

⁸ Both the listeners’ stories and original music come from various styles, sociocultural backgrounds, ethnic origins, and languages including English, Russian, German, Spanish, and Italian. RNFM has high production values and not only works as the game’s soundtrack but can also be enjoyed on its own on all streaming platforms as *Radio Nostalgia from Mars. Golf Club Wasteland: Original Game Soundtrack* (Berry and Simić 2022).

⁹ Hardt and Negri introduce the notion of *multitude* as “the living alternative that grows within Empire” (2004, xiii). As a concept, *multitude* is different from other similar notions such as the *people*, the *masses*, or the *working class*, since *multitude* “is neither an identity (like the people) nor uniform (like the masses), the internal differences of the multitude must discover the common that allows them to communicate and act together” (xv). Accordingly, it is a concept suited to the new Mars society represented in the game.