

Reconstructing Yugoslav past through Roblox games

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INTRODUCTION

Historical video games, as mimetic cultural products, engage in a creative process of evidence selection and narrative construction (Chapman 2016). Such games provide unique opportunities for players to interact with historical narratives, not only by interpreting them but also by actively shaping their own experiences through gameplay (Chapman 2016). Therefore, these games play a significant role in shaping perceptions of the past influencing cultural and social identities. As Landsberg (2009) notes, this process has the potential to shape individual identities and politics, highlighting the importance of historical video games as tools for education and cultural reflection.

In this context, user-generated online games—platforms where players create, share, and play games made by other users—emerge as salient digital spaces for the construction and remediation of collective memory through both game content and associated online communities, such as Discord channels. Roblox stands as a leading example, with over 24 million games and 9.5 million developers, offering a uniquely accessible environment for both game creation and consumption (Roblox Corporation 2025).

Following these perspectives, this study focuses on Roblox historical games about Yugoslavia.

POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES, VIDEO GAMES AND MEMORY

In the context of collective traumas associated with war, historical video games take on an even more significant role. These digital representations serve as powerful

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mediators of traumatic memories, offering new avenues for engaging with difficult pasts (Kansteiner 2017). By simulating war-related experiences, games can provide a form of "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg 2004), allowing players to engage with historical traumas they did not personally experience. This can contribute to collective memory formation and negotiation, but also presents risks of trivializing or misrepresenting complex historical traumas, eventually reinforcing nationalist narratives (Schulzke 2013). Furthermore, in post-conflict societies these games can become sites of contested memory and identity formation (Baillie et al. 2019). They may serve as virtual spaces where conflicting narratives about the past are negotiated, potentially exacerbating existing tensions or contributing to reconciliation efforts, depending on their design and reception. In particular, due to past experiences with totalitarian regimes in the CEE region, there is a growing interest in the intersection of video games and heritage or remembrance (Mochocki et al. 2024, Rizvić et al. 2024), especially tied with territories dissolved along with the Eastern Bloc, such as Yugoslavia (Gonzales Zarandona et al. 2018). However, such studies focus on games connected to educational (Hartman 2017) or institutional contexts (e.g., museums) (Camarda 2024), while there is a gap in the literature concerning historical user-generated games. Knowing that post-Yugoslav War generation actively shares online content addressing historical insights in opposition to traditional media, frequently shaped by nationalistic or ethnopolitical agendas (Absoth and Griesbeck 2024), Roblox, as both a platform for game creation and a social environment, represents an interesting space to explore.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

Hence, this research deepens the complex mediation of historical events and cultural trauma tied to the Yugoslav past, aiming to understand how Roblox players engage with said past and trauma through symbolic and discursive negotiation.

To do so, we adopt a mixed-methods approach. On the one hand, a visual analysis (Holmes, 2013) of game environments and character designs is conducted, while on the other, Discord and Roblox chat logs tied directly to the sampled games are analyzed through inductive thematic analysis (Guest et al. 2011). The sample of games (N=2) is constructed using Roblox's search engine, utilizing keywords such as "Yugoslavia," "Jugoslavija," "SFRJ," "SFRY," "Yugo," "Tito," and "Marshall Tito" to identify relevant games.

Visual analysis of the Roblox games enables a comprehensive investigation of the designers' historical imaginaries embedded in the virtual worlds they produce. It focuses on 1) the symbolic elements referring to a "universal Yugoslav identity" (Hartmann 2016) present in the virtual environments: from historical sites (i.e. well-known buildings, monuments, infrastructures), to socialist symbols (i.e. Yugoslav flag and emblem) and goods from that past (i.e. YUGO cars); 2) the preservation or destruction of those elements (Gonzales Zarandona et al. 2018) (i.e. undamaged flags vs burning flags); 3) explicit reference to the 90's wars (i.e. well-known battlefields, military equipment or buildings, flags of individual states) (Rizvić et al. 2024). In games where peculiar character skins are present, they are also examined to understand how players embody historical figures or archetypes from the period. Complementing this dimension, the inductive thematic analysis of Roblox and Discord channels, when available, provides insight into how players interpret,

discuss, and negotiate the historical narratives presented in the games. This aspect of the research examines the discourse surrounding historical accuracy, personal or familial connections to the past depicted, and the potential for these user-generated games to serve as places where collective memory is creatively manifested, preserved, and contested.

UNDERSTANDING YUGOBLOX: PRELIMINARY AND EXPECTED RESULTS

This ongoing research aims to develop a typology of historical mediation forms based on the characteristics of the virtual worlds (and eventually character representations) and user discourses by the thematic exploration of the two case studies. This typology will consider factors such as: 1) Level of historical accuracy and detail in game environments; 2) Presence of competing or conflicting historical narratives; 3) Use of historical symbolism and iconography; 4) Predominant genre; 5) Depiction of violence and trauma.

Preliminary findings suggest a spectrum of representational approaches, ranging from attempts at historical accuracy to more ideologically-driven depictions. Some games strive for a degree of geopolitical realism, allowing players to explore multiple national perspectives. Others adopt a more militaristic focus, potentially glorifying conflict.

Player's discourse in associated Discord and Roblox channels provides insight into how users interpret and engage with these historical narratives. A range of attitudes emerge, from genuine interest in learning about the conflict to more concerning instances of nationalist rhetoric or historical revisionism. This suggests how the interplay between game design and player interaction creates a dynamic space for negotiating collective memory and national identity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Roblox games navigate the complexities of representing and mediating Yugoslav collective memory and trauma. It also highlights the tension between playful engagement and commemoration, as well as the potential for these virtual spaces to serve as sites of historical learning and misrepresentation or even political radicalization. By examining how traumatic historical events are remediated through gameplay, visual design, and player discourse, we contribute to broader discussions about the role of digital media in shaping collective memory and historical understanding. The findings will be relevant to scholars in game studies, memory studies, and digital humanities, as well as educators and policymakers concerned with historical education in the digital age.

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