

Frostpunk: Lessons from Contemporary Polish History

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Keywords

Frostpunk, authoritarian state, Polish People's Republic, biopolitics, history, religion

This presentation aims to draw a comparison between *Frostpunk* (11bit studios 2018) and contemporary Polish history, as well as current Polish politics, and analyze how the game mirrors them rhetorically and what solutions appear in the process of remediation.

Frostpunk is a survival city simulator. In order to make it in the freezing weather, the player has to implement a set of laws from one of two paths: Order or Faith. Laws such as Neighbourhood Watch, Morning Gathering, Propaganda Centre, Prison (in Order path), or House of Prayer, Evening Prayers, Faith Keepers, Public Penance (in Faith path) are primarily introduced so that the citizens' hope is high, and their discontent is low; but every law comes with a setback. Further down both paths setbacks are more severe; and at the end of both paths awaits a totalitarian state.

Most research on *Frostpunk* rightly places it in the context of climate crisis (Frelik 2022, Alfonsin 2022) and biopolitics (Kłosiński 2020, Savaş 2022, Setlak 2021, Fijak and Stokalski 2019, Dolkemeyer 2020, Salo 2020, Zielonka 2019), often drawing a comparison between the world of the game and the possibilities and dangers of real-world legislations. However, there is another important context to *Frostpunk*. The game was developed by 11 bit studios established and based in Poland and can be read as a synthetic commentary on the contemporary Polish history and current Polish politics.

From the 1940s to 1989, Poland was a part of the Eastern Block and a socialist, one-party state governed with Marxist-Leninist principles in mind. The Order path in Frostpunk relates to the authoritarian rule of these years with their propaganda, censorship, invigilation, and martial law; and multiple events triggered by laws from the Order path mirror actual historical events. Moreover, the history of the Polish People's Republic cannot be told without the history of strikes and walkouts, the most important ones happening in 1956, 1968, 1970/71, 1976, 1980/81, and 1988/89. These outbursts against totalitarian laws and poor governance is explored in an expansion to Frostpunk titled *The Last Autumn*.

In communist times, Catholicism, the dominant religion in Poland, was contextually related to opposition. This relationship started centuries ago, and due to the fight between the state and the church, it was strengthened in the Polish People's Republic (PRL). Being religious was an obstacle in careers; John Paul II is accredited for fighting the socialist state; priests often supported the anti-communist opposition and

have been spied on, which sometimes led to violence — perhaps the most well-known case was the murder of a priest Jerzy Popiełuszka, the chaplain of Solidarity, by the secret service.

In 1989, the process of transformation from the Polish People's Republic into a democratic and capitalist country, the Republic of Poland, has been started. Religion was to be commonly accepted as well as embraced in public life. Now, Catholicism is taught in public schools; religious symbols and rituals are present in public spaces, including state-funded television and government facilities; and finally, religious views are the ideological front of the conservative ruling party, PiS (law & justice), which has led, among many other legal and cultural changes, to the famous 2020 near-total ban on abortion in Poland which resulted in country-wide protests. The influence of the Catholic church on public life in Poland is prevalent, and although it is mostly informal, it is easy to see a comparison between the newest events and *Frostpunk* laws from the Faith path such as Faith Keepers.

During the presentation, I will draw a more detailed connection between laws and events in *Frostpunk* and their possible inspirations from contemporary Polish history. The focus of the presentation will be on how *Frostpunk* itself is rooted in its historical moment, and how it presents the Order path seemingly from the perspective of a generation that does not fully (or at all) recall the actual life in the Polish People's Republic, while the Faith path is presented with a sort of immediacy that accompanies current political commentary (Chapman 2016). The question of memory is especially interesting, because it is the memory that is often at risk in an authoritarian state (Mink and Neumayer 2016), and yet a fictional remediation of PRL in *Frostpunk* both enters the discourse with the popular, often second-hand memory of the communist pasts as well as propagates it. Finally, I would like to address the procedural rhetorics (Bogost 2007) of the game that presents political life as a dichotomy and offers the highest rewards to those that can stop themselves from going down any path — or at least going *too far*. This seems to be an extremely apt commentary on Polish political life, often seen and acted out as a negotiation between two evil powers; and, perhaps, even an inspiration to think out of this, for the lack of a better word, box.

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