

# The Call of Queue. PRL Heritage and Nostalgia in Contemporary Polish Game Culture

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## ABSTRACT

The public memory of the Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL) remains a contested one thirty-five years after the communist<sup>1</sup> regime collapse. The official, state-sanctioned narrative safeguarded by the National Institute for Remembrance paints PRL as the Soviet puppet state, focusing on the political oppression and a heroic resistance from the Church-backed Solidarity movement. But for the generation born in the last decade of PRL and during the Transformation (the period of pro-democratic, free-market reforms), the bygone communist era is a source of nostalgia for a welfare state, especially as the shortcomings of neoliberal capitalism introduced after 1989 became more and more evident (Nycz 2013, Siewior 2020, Kobielska 2021).

This nostalgic discourse frequently turns towards PRL's tangible heritage: material artifacts (especially from 1980-ties), communist-era architecture or photographic evidence of every-day life are cherished by the aesthetic movement called "duchologia" (literally "ghostology", a pun on Derrida's "hauntology", see Drenda 2016). Such appreciation is considered an attempt to diverge from the official story of "fighting the Communism" and include vernacular memory of the everyday-life in the public memory discourse (Jeziński & Wojtkowski 2016, Piechota 2021, see also Bodnar 1994). And a highly successful one: it resulted in the renewed appreciation of Polish design and architecture from 1960-ties, the return of popular food brands, PRL-inspired fashion, and a large selection of books, movies and TV series set in the period. Naturally, the trend does not omit Polish game culture.

The PRL nostalgia amplified by images of tangible heritage first entered the board game culture, with the game *Kolejka* (*The Queue*), published by National Institute for Remembrance in 2011. Designed to educate about the shortage of everyday products

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in the late PRL period, and targeted towards the domestic audience, it turned out to be a major success due to both entertaining mechanics and the nostalgic value (Larkin 2017, Wojdon 2021). Similar games followed, including a PRL re-skin or Reiner Knizia's *Great Wall of China* and PRL edition of *Monopoly*. Digital games turned out to be more resistant to the allure of communist-era signifiers, considered unappealing for international audience – yet recently they made their way to the horror *The Medium* (analyzed by Krobová et al 2022 regarding shared cultural trauma) and upcoming *Unholy*.

In this analysis, we will focus on a way board- and digital games offer a unique way to present and possibly resolve PRL memory tensions. As already evident in *Kolejka* example, an attempt at presenting the 1980s economic crisis through the game medium was quickly re-appropriated as a source of entertainment. Following games solidified the usage of PRL tangible heritage as aesthetically pleasing and nostalgic, even though most games in question does not shy away from presenting every-day struggle of the late communist period: standing in the long queue to obtain basic products is the most common topic for board games, and horror is the genre of choice for digital ones.

We consider three reasons behind the phenomenon. The first one is the overall attitude toward PRL tangible heritage in contemporary Poland, explained above. But there are additional qualities, making games especially adapt in reconciliating the memory of the crisis and poverty in 1980s with the appreciation of material artifacts of the aera.

Firstly, the competition to obtain limited resources or collects hidden items is a common game culture trope, often related to the colonial and imperial ideology (Ford 2016, Mukherjee 2017). As the logic of game rules isolates objects material culture phenomena from their original context to make them game objects with curated affordances (Bogost 2006), it is easy to create game where the exploitation of natural resources does not lead to environmental disasters, or cultural treasures are just trinkets to be picked up by an appreciative discoverer, without any use besides counting towards the game completion.

Games we analyze rely on a similar logic. The limited quantity of basic resources and the struggle to obtain them was a source of distress for people living in Poland in the 1980-ties. In a game, they are just a commonly accepted and popular trope. Moreover, items to be collected are presented as trophies without immediate use, collectibles instead of essentials. This way game logic provides the common ground for two conflicting memory discourses – the one focusing on the aesthetic appeal of PRL design, and the other highlighting the difficulty to obtain everyday items. In games, standing in line is just a fancy pastime, and the failure to get the desired object does not reduce the quality of life.

This logic is amplified by the third, slightly paradoxical issue. Numerous items and places featuring in contemporary games are indeed modelled after PRL tangible heritage. It does not mean, though, those products they were available for citizens of communist Poland. A lot of high-quality products, nowadays associated with PRL, were produced for export only, with an explicit purpose to project an image of Poland as a successful, modern state across the Western block. In the collective memory of PRL, such items are already labeled as unavailable luxury, and therefore moved away from the narrative of everyday life hardships: for example, hotel Cracovia featuring in *The Medium* was available to foreigners and Communist Party dignitaries and does not resemble the communist-era resort in a slightest. Therefore, the tragic plot of the game is removed from the common memory of PRL and relocated in the realm of aspirational fantasy.

This way, the very logic of common game mechanics: object collecting and resource gathering, provide a natural platform for the common, vernacular memory of the late PRL. But in doing so, it paradoxically solidifies the posthumous triumph of the communist state propaganda: objects and buildings created to project exaggerated, false image of PRL's prosperity abroad not only still denote it for international audience, but also serve as anchors for PRL nostalgia.

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## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> We use the term for the period Communism was nominal state ideology in Poland (1945-1989), for clarity. While aware of the controversy, we do not partake in the discussion whether PRL was actually a communist state.