

Preserving Cultural Memory through Narrative Games

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Abstract: This article interrogates four narrative-driven video games as sites for the production, mediation, and transmission of cultural memory. Each title is anchored in distinct modalities of remembrance—ranging from post-Soviet historical and folkloric imaginaries to subjective affective trajectories and speculative, future-oriented mythologies. While situated in divergent cultural and temporal contexts, these works converge in their deployment of immersive storytelling and interactive world-making as mechanisms for negotiating cultural narratives and sociopolitical themes. To structure our analysis, we employ the T.R.E.E.S. framework—Tourism, Responsibility, Exploration, Environment, and Story—as a critical heuristic for examining how ludic design engenders processes of meaning-making and mnemonic inscription. By situating these games within a human-centered theoretical paradigm, we contend that interactive narrative constitutes not merely a representational strategy but a dynamic technology of cultural sustainability and an emergent vector for social innovation.

Keywords: Videogames, culture, heritage

1. Introduction

In an era of rapidly advancing technology, digital platforms are increasingly used to serve the public good – from education and healthcare to cultural heritage preservation. Interactive digital media, especially video games, have a unique capacity in this effort. Games are more than entertainment; they can act as cultural archives, educational tools, and empathy-generating experiences. Recent scholarly work underscores that digital games can facilitate the preservation and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage, engaging users in active cultural communication and ensuring cultural knowledge “surviv[es] over time” through technological adaptation (Wang and Men, 2025). In other words, narrative-rich games can become vessels of cultural memory, carrying stories, values, and histories into the future.

This article examines four narrative-driven video games – *Last Days of Lazarus*, *Sea of Solitude*, *Season: A Letter to the Future*, and *Black The Fall* – and analyzes how each preserves and represents cultural memory. Each of these titles is deeply rooted in personal or collective pasts: from post-Soviet national trauma and folklore to individual emotional journeys and futuristic folklore. Despite their diverse settings, all four games employ immersive storytelling and interactive world-design to engage players with cultural narratives and social themes. Using the T.R.E.E.S. framework (Tosi and Ochoa, 2025), we evaluate each game along these dimensions. This approach reveals how games can serve as virtual tourism to cultural landscapes, as ethical playgrounds fostering empathy, and as narrative spaces encoding history and values. By exploring these case studies, we gain insight into the potential of narrative games to function as digital cultural heritage tools, preserving memory and provoking reflection for players around the world.

2. Post-Soviet Remembrance in *Last Days of Lazarus*

Last Days of Lazarus (Darkania Works/GrimTalin, 2022) is a first-person adventure steeped in the history and spiritual ethos of post-communist Eastern Europe. Set in Romania around the turn of the millennium, the game follows Lazarus, a man returning to his childhood home after his mother’s death, only to uncover supernatural occurrences entwined with his family’s and nation’s past. The developers have described the title as “a letter of love” to Romania, recreating real locations and religious practices within the game world. Indeed, *Last Days of Lazarus* functions like a digital time capsule of Romanian cultural memory: it takes place in a society still coming to terms with its communist past, and its narrative tapestry weaves together historical trauma, Orthodox Christian imagery, and local folklore (Brierley, 2022; Peterson, 2022).

2.1 Tourism

Last Days of Lazarus offers a guided tour of Romanian locales laden with cultural significance. It leads players through intimate spaces—a cramped Soviet-era apartment, a candle-lit village church, a snow-covered cemetery—each filled with authentic details like Orthodox icons and folk art. By exploring these faithfully recreated settings, players effectively become cultural tourists in a virtual Romania, experiencing its post-Soviet atmosphere firsthand. The game’s curated objects and architecture turn the journey into a cross-cultural experience, allowing outsiders to appreciate Romanian heritage from the inside (Brierley, 2022).

2.2 Responsibility

Although *Last Days of Lazarus* does not have branching choices, its narrative places moral weight on the player. Lazarus—and by extension the player—must confront guilt and historical injustices entwined with his family. Solving puzzles to unearth buried secrets becomes an act of remembrance and reconciliation. The game treats collective trauma with gravity, asking the player to honour the memory of a nation’s painful past through empathy. Even without a morality meter, players often feel responsible for acknowledging and “righting” the wrongs of the past (Peterson, 2022).

2.3 Exploration

Exploration is key in *Last Days of Lazarus*. Players scour each environment for letters, photos, and Soviet-era memorabilia that reveal the story. The deliberate pacing encourages absorbing historical details rather than rushing. While the progression is chapter-based and linear, within each chapter players can search every corner, effectively acting as archaeologists of narrative. This interactive uncovering of personal and political history ensures the player actively participates in rediscovering cultural memory (Peterson, 2022).

2.4 Environment

The game’s environments themselves tell stories. The family apartment is rendered with lived-in realism—Orthodox icons on the walls, faded photographs, and clutter that hint at family secrets—grounding the supernatural plot in a tangible cultural space. Folkloric and religious imagery woven into puzzles and scenery (iconography, ritual objects, church paraphernalia) help preserve bits of Romanian intangible heritage in digital form. Each location—from a bleak concrete apartment block to a misty graveyard—is haunted by history, and together these spaces form a digital memorial to Romania’s transitional era (Brierley, 2022).

2.5 Story

Last Days of Lazarus blends family drama, supernatural horror, and historical allegory to explore Romania’s post-communist trauma. Lazarus’s journey to uncover his family’s buried secrets gradually reveals wartime atrocities and communist-era crimes. By using otherworldly elements as metaphors, the game makes confronting this painful history more accessible and emotionally resonant, echoing traditions of magical realism. Ultimately, facing these dark memories—no matter how strange or painful—is shown to be necessary for healing. The story invites players outside Romania to empathise with an Eastern European perspective often overlooked, preserving cultural memory through an immersive, cathartic narrative (Brierley, 2022; Peterson, 2022).

3. Inner Demons and Empathy in Sea of Solitude

Sea of Solitude (Jo-Mei Games, 2019) shifts the focus from national history to personal and emotional memory in a contemporary urban setting. Set in a flooded, nightmarish version of Berlin, the game follows a young woman named Kay as she navigates a submerged city transformed by her feelings of loneliness and despair. In this introspective adventure, Kay herself has become a monster—a reflection of her self-perception—and the other “monsters” she meets are actually her family members and loved ones, each consumed by their own traumas. The game’s concept was inspired by creative director Cornelia Geppert’s real-life struggles with depression and isolation, as well as those of people close to her, lending *Sea of Solitude* a deeply personal authenticity (Favis, 2019; Cintron-Gonzalez, 2023). The result is a poignant depiction of mental health issues through symbolic storytelling and evocative environments that has resonated with many players.

3.1 Tourism

Sea of Solitude takes the player on a metaphorical tour of a young woman’s inner world rather than a real city. As Kay navigates a half-submerged, distorted Berlin, familiar urban sights are twisted by her loneliness and despair. This surreal environment makes the player a tourist in Kay’s psyche, illustrating how a modern city can feel empty and threatening through the eyes of someone overwhelmed by isolation. By “sightseeing” in this psychological landscape, the game fosters empathy for experiences of loneliness that often go unseen (Favis, 2019).

3.2 Responsibility

Though *Sea of Solitude* has no explicit moral choices, its narrative is about compassion and accountability. Kay must take responsibility for her own emotions and also help her loved ones (manifested as monsters) confront theirs. Instead of fighting creatures, the player “wins” by listening, forgiving, and comforting—turning monsters

back into humans through empathy. The game thus reinforces that true responsibility in an emotional crisis is to understand and support, not to battle (Cintron-Gonzalez, 2023).

3.3 Exploration

Sea of Solitude encourages slow, introspective exploration. Players wander the flooded city at their own pace, discovering bottled messages and other remnants of Kay's life that reveal backstory. With no enemies or timers, players are free to linger and reflect as the world subtly changes with Kay's emotional progress (storms calm as conflicts resolve). In this way, exploring the environment becomes a journey through Kay's memories and feelings, allowing players to engage deeply with her emotional narrative (Favis, 2019).

3.4 Environment

The environment is Sea of Solitude's most powerful storytelling tool. Dark waters and storms rage when Kay is overwhelmed by fear or anger, while moments of calm and sunlight emerge as she finds hope. The city is both realistic and surreal: recognizable buildings stand empty amid giant creatures and fantastical weather, symbolising how mental illness can distort one's world. This visual metaphor for loneliness and depression communicates emotional truth across cultures. The game was recognised by mental health advocates for portraying isolation and hope authentically (Oculus, 2019).

3.5 Story

Kay's story in Sea of Solitude is simple yet deeply personal: she learns that she is not alone and that the darkness can recede. Geppert drew on her own and others' experiences of depression (Favis, 2019), giving the narrative sincerity. The monsters Kay faces are her family's and her own inner demons—her bullied brother, her estranged parents, her grieving lover—and helping them also means healing herself. By the end, Kay sheds her monster form by forgiving herself and those she loves. This cathartic journey resonated with many players: some felt understood and others even sought therapy after playing (Cintron-Gonzalez, 2023). Sea of Solitude not only preserves a snapshot of how our culture talks about mental health, but it actively helps people feel less alone.

4. Archiving a World in Transition in Season: A Letter to the Future

Season: A Letter to the Future (Scavengers Studio, 2023) is a serene, meditative adventure explicitly centered on preserving cultural memory. The game is set in a beautiful yet melancholic world on the brink of a great change—the imminent end of the current “season,” which represents an era. The player controls Estelle, a young woman from a secluded mountain village who ventures out for the first time to document the wider world's cultures, histories, and landscapes before they are swept away by this mysterious change. Armed with a bicycle, a camera, an audio recorder, and a journal, Estelle travels as a wanderer-archivist: she records sights and sounds, interviews the people she meets, and assembles a collection of memories—a literal “letter to the future” encapsulating what it was like to live in this time. Season's emphasis on slow, mindful exploration and documentation makes it a contemplative experience, often described by players as a playable travel diary or ethnographic study (Alabastro, 2023). In essence, the game itself is a cultural time capsule compiled by its creators, paralleling Estelle's in-game mission of cultural preservation (Sullivan, 2023).

4.1 Tourism

Season turns gameplay into cultural tourism. As Estelle, you bicycle through picturesque regions and document vanishing cultures by photographing, sketching, and audio-recording your surroundings. The game treats each fictional community with respect—you might record an elder's folk song or photograph a mural of an ancient legend, moments akin to preserving real traditions. With no combat or urgency, Season invites players to explore at leisure, like travellers savouring a foreign land. By acting as both tourist and archivist in this virtual world, the player gains an appreciation for the fragility and beauty of cultural heritage (Sullivan, 2023).

4.2 Responsibility

Season instils a sense of duty to preserve memories. Estelle embarks on her journey because she feels obligated to capture her era's essence for the future, and players share this burden by deciding what to record in her journal. You cannot document everything, so each photo or audio clip carries weight—what you choose to preserve will shape how this world is remembered. The game quietly makes you a curator of culture. It also encourages respectful engagement: in conversations, you can respond with empathy or participate in local

customs (like joining a monk in a final ritual). By slowing down and caring about each story, Season models an ethic of preservation and respect for cultural heritage (Alabastro, 2023).

4.3 Exploration

Exploration is the heart of Season. With no enemies or time pressure, players are free to wander and follow their curiosity. In one valley, for example, you can discover a deserted market, a mural on a cliff, or remnants of a farewell festival—uncovering the story of a community’s final days in whatever order you choose. The more closely you explore and observe, the richer your journal becomes and the clearer the bigger picture grows. Season rewards patience: a faint bell sound or a pattern in graffiti can lead to hidden insights. This gentle, open-ended exploration often sparks reflection; as you coast through sunlit fields or silent streets, you cannot help but contemplate impermanence and change in your own life (Sullivan, 2023).

4.4 Environment

Season’s world is rich with story and sensation. Each location feels like a snapshot of an ending era—say, a town square still adorned with festival lanterns but eerily empty as evacuations loom. The game engages sight and sound equally: you not only see the ruins and sunsets, you also record ambient sounds (wind in chimes, prayers in a temple), which makes you keenly aware of the life in each place. By listening and observing, you actively help memorialise the environment. Nature is treated with reverence throughout; the game shows how deeply cultures are tied to their landscapes. As the “season” (and the world as these people know it) draws to a close, Season movingly portrays how losing a place means losing the culture connected to it. The emotional impact of leaving each area—feeling as if you have said goodbye to a living world—underscores how well Season uses its environment to make players care about cultural and ecological memory (Alabastro, 2023).

4.5 Story

The narrative of Season unfolds through the memories you collect rather than a conventional plot. There is no villain to defeat; instead, the story emerges as a mosaic of personal histories from the people and places Estelle encounters. Key revelations (like the true nature of the “season” change) add poignancy to your journey, but the focus is on preservation. The brilliance of Season’s storytelling is that it makes you care about a world you know is transient. You feel an urgency not to fight against change, but to save what you can of it—photographing a way of life before it disappears. In effect, the player becomes a custodian of cultural memory, much like an oral historian recording stories before it is too late. By the end, when the season changes, the moment is bittersweet: you cannot stop the change, but you have preserved a slice of that world in Estelle’s journal. It is a gentle call to action for our own lives as well: cherish the present and carry its lessons forward as a “letter to the future” (Sullivan, 2023).

5. Remembering Oppression: Dystopian Memory in Black The Fall

Black The Fall (Sand Sailor Studio, 2017) returns us to Eastern Europe – this time through a fictional dystopia rooted in the cultural memory of Romania’s communist era. Often described as a Limbo/Inside-like puzzle-platformer, Black The Fall distinguishes itself by drawing heavily on historical reality. It is directly inspired by the oppressive conditions under Nicolae Ceaușescu’s dictatorship, which lasted from 1965 until its violent end in 1989. The game casts the player as an unnamed machinist (nicknamed “Black”) attempting to escape a grim industrial labour camp in a totalitarian state. Throughout Black’s side-scrolling journey, the game world is filled with imagery and scenarios that reference life under a communist regime: surveillance cameras that shoot on sight, loudspeakers blaring propaganda, giant portraits of the “Dear Leader,” and downtrodden workers obeying routinised commands. These elements are not generic dystopian tropes—they are carefully modelled after real events and iconography from Romania’s communist period. The Romanian developers have noted that Black The Fall was born of personal and collective memory: lead designer Cristian Diaconescu was a child during the 1989 Revolution and vividly remembers the fear and propaganda of that time. The team “tied in their own repressive past” to the game’s design, aiming to convey to players “what it might be like to live under a totalitarian regime” (Fiscutean, 2017; Orosz-Réti, 2023). In effect, Black The Fall is both an interactive memorial and a warning, translating lived historical experience into gameplay.

5.1 Tourism

Black The Fall offers an unsettling tour of a totalitarian society. The game is linear, but it immerses players in a grim recreation of 1980s Communist Romania under Nicolae Ceaușescu. You traverse factories, housing blocks, and train yards that each showcase aspects of life under oppression—forced labour, constant surveillance, ubiquitous propaganda (Fiscutean, 2017). In one scene, actual footage of Ceaușescu’s speeches flickers in the

background, underscoring that this dystopia draws directly from history. For those unfamiliar with Eastern Bloc history, *Black The Fall* serves as a harrowing glimpse into that world—more experiential than a textbook because you are trying to survive it. One critic called it “a fictional journey through a dystopian hellscape” rooted in real Romanian communism (Orosz-Réti, 2023). By placing the player inside this nightmare, the game functions like a playable museum of oppression and forces you to confront a dark chapter of cultural memory.

5.2 Responsibility

Black The Fall confronts the player with uncomfortable ethical trade-offs. Escaping the regime is righteous, but survival sometimes comes at a moral cost. For example, at one point you must use a mind-control device to sacrifice another prisoner as a distraction so that you can slip by—a choice the game forces upon you. Moments like this, where you save yourself by endangering someone else, instil guilt and mirror the cruel dilemmas people faced under tyranny. By making the player complicit, the game highlights the theme of responsibility versus survival. In the end, Black himself makes a small but symbolic stand: he helps pull down a giant wall (evoking the Berlin Wall) as a popular uprising unfolds. The developers do not cast him as a grand hero, but they let you feel the satisfaction of contributing to the regime’s collapse. On a meta level, finishing *Black The Fall* means you have borne witness to its cautionary tale—an “actually existing” dystopia that warns what can happen if we forget the past (Orosz-Réti, 2023).

5.3 Exploration

The lack of freedom to explore in *Black The Fall* is itself part of the storytelling. The game confines you to a narrow, side-scrolling path—fitting for a world where movement and choice are brutally restricted. This imposed linearity makes the player feel the regime’s claustrophobic control firsthand. Even so, you engage in a kind of systemic exploration: each level is a puzzle where you learn how the oppressive machinery works and find ways to subvert it. You observe guard patrols, exploit blind spots in cameras, and use factory equipment to outsmart the system. In one sequence, you march in lockstep with brainwashed workers to avoid detection, briefly experiencing enforced conformity. Occasionally, the camera pulls back to reveal the vast scale of the dystopia—endless factories and countless prisoners—giving you a glimpse of the regime’s scope. Ultimately, *Black The Fall* uses limited exploration as a narrative device: you feel truly trapped until the moment you finally break free (Fiscutean, 2017).

5.4 Environment

The world of *Black The Fall* viscerally evokes Cold War-era oppression. The colour palette is drab grey and black, with flashes of red warning lights and communist stars, immediately signalling danger and control. The environments draw on real historical details: grim factories where humans are treated as cogs, dingy barracks plastered with propaganda, secret nooks where someone risks tuning in to Radio Free Europe (Fiscutean, 2017). These touches root the game’s fiction in actual 20th-century Romania. The developers even include Ceaușescu’s likeness and propaganda speeches, blurring fiction and reality. A powerful visual metaphor comes when Black drives an armoured machine through a towering concrete wall (clearly evoking the Berlin Wall) and steps into the rain-soaked freedom beyond. The sky opens up for the first time, symbolising liberation. In effect, *Black The Fall*’s environment serves as an interactive memorial to life under dictatorship. It preserves the look and feel of that oppressive era in a form players can experience firsthand. Those who lived through similar times have praised its authenticity, while others have found it an eye-opening education in oppression (Orosz-Réti, 2023).

5.5 Story

Black The Fall tells a story of oppression and liberation with almost no words. You begin as a voiceless worker pedalling a factory machine and end amidst a revolution that topples the dictatorship—all conveyed through gameplay and imagery rather than dialogue. The narrative is rich in symbolism: for instance, a small one-legged robot befriends Black and later sacrifices itself to save him, adding a poignant note of friendship in an otherwise brutal world. The game’s message is a warning about how easily freedom can be crushed and how people can be made complicit (the silent workers pedalling in unison). Yet it also offers hope: even the worst regimes can fall. In the final moments, Black emerges to see a flag with its tyrannical emblem cut out—a direct reference to Romania’s 1989 revolution (Fiscutean, 2017; Orosz-Réti, 2023). By explicitly tying its climax to a real historical event, the game ensures the player understands the real-world parallel. Created by developers who themselves remember life under communism, *Black The Fall* stands as both a memorial and a cautionary tale. It transforms personal and collective memories of oppression into a universally accessible story, reminding players that these lessons remain painfully relevant.

6. Conclusion

By examining *Last Days of Lazarus*, *Sea of Solitude*, *Season: A Letter to the Future*, and *Black The Fall* through the T.R.E.E.S. framework, this article has shown how narrative-driven video games function as powerful vessels of cultural memory. Each title transforms individual or collective pasts into interactive experiences: Romanian post-communist trauma, deeply personal struggles with mental health, a fictional world on the cusp of disappearance, and a dystopia reflecting real histories of dictatorship.

While these games differ in setting, mechanics, and tone, they share a commitment to preserving memory through immersive environments, exploratory play, moral or emotional responsibility, and narrative resonance. In this way, they act as digital archives and empathy engines, offering players opportunities to engage with cultural memory not passively but through lived, interactive experience.

The T.R.E.E.S. framework has proven effective in structuring this analysis: Tourism (seeing and experiencing worlds as cultural spaces), Responsibility (facing moral or emotional weight), Exploration (discovering histories and meanings), Environment (world-building as cultural preservation), and Story (narrative as mnemonic device). Together, these dimensions demonstrate how games go beyond entertainment to become cultural artefacts in their own right.

Ultimately, narrative-rich video games can complement traditional archives, museums, and oral traditions as carriers of cultural memory. As this study shows, their ability to immerse players in perspectives and histories fosters deeper cultural empathy and ensures that stories, values, and lived experiences endure in collective consciousness.

7. Ethics declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for the research

8. AI declaration

Open AI chat GPT 5 (Auto version) has been used to double-check the proof-reading and “professional fashion” style required by ad hoc prompt.

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