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BOLD SMUGGLERS AND DIY HEROES: COLLECTIVE MEMORIES AND ERASURES OF SLOVENIAN GAMING HISTORIES

ABSTRACT

*The article explores how gaming cultures in socialist Yugoslavia – particularly in Slovenia – are remembered and commemorated today. Drawing on the technostalgic momentum that has seen renewed interest in peripheral gaming histories, we examine how Yugoslavia's unique geopolitical position and socialist experiment in self-management fostered vibrant do-it-yourself (DIY) computing and gaming cultures. Focusing on key memory sites – primarily the book *Prva Bitnost* and the documentary *Tehnika ljudstvu – we*: 1) outline the contexts of the emergence of Yugoslav games in the 1980s; 2) analyse how they are being narrativised through nostalgic lenses in the present; and 3) critique the exclusions embedded in these narratives. It is argued that these commemorative practices often reinforce mnemonic hegemony privileging male-coded heroism and entrepreneurial myth-making, while marginalising women, queer voices, and class-based experiences.*

KEY WORDS: Yugoslav video games, collective memory, technostalgia, Slovenia, gender and gaming, DIY computing

Drzni švercerji in naredi-si-sam junaki: kolektivni spomini in izbrisi slovenskih igričarskih zgodovin

IZVLEČEK

Članek raziskuje, kako se danes spominjamo in obujamo igričarske kulture v socialistični Jugoslaviji – s poudarkom na Sloveniji. Tehnonostalgični zagon je v zadnjih letih spodbudil večjo pozornost na periferne zgodovine videoiger, med njimi tudi do jugoslovanske računalniške in igričarske scene, ki je izhajala

iz specifične politično-ekonomske ureditve in naredi-si-sam tradicije. V prispevku analiziramo ključne spominske prakse in kraje spominjanja – predvsem knjigo Prva bitnost in dokumentarec Tehnika ljudstvu –, da 1) orišemo kontekst razvoja prvih videoiger v Sloveniji, 2) preučimo, kako so ti časi danes obujeni skozi nostalgичne pripovedi, in 3) izpostavimo izbrisane dele te zgodovine. Trdimo, da ti spominski konstrukti pogosto utrjujejo »spominsko hegemonijo«, kjer prevladujejo zgodbe o moškem junaštvu in podjetniški drznosti, medtem ko so izkušnje žensk in manjšin ter razredne razlike potisnjene ob rob.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: jugoslovanske videoigre, kolektivni spomin, tehnonostalgija, Slovenija, spol in igre, DIY računalništvo

1 Introduction

In 2024, the legendary Slovenian student radio Radio Študent (Radio Student, RŠ) – a politically progressive broadcaster – celebrated its 55th anniversary. The station, known for its critical stance, has long been a hub of creativity, theoretical innovation and musical experimentation, and thus had much to celebrate. On May 8, at the event co-organized by RŠ and Računalniški muzej (the Slovenian Computer History Museum), it chose to highlight a part of its past that is especially fondly remembered by teenagers of the 1980s. During that decade, Radio Študent had a Software Editorial Team that developed the idea of broadcasting Sinclair ZX Spectrum video games over the radio waves. The games were then recorded onto tapes, played, replayed, and exchanged among gaming enthusiasts. The May event was devoted to revisiting this history and its key figures – smugglers, pirates, and DIY pioneers – who have since taken on legendary status. Later that night, RŠ once again transmitted the 1984 game *Kontrabant* (Contraband) over its radio signal.

The authors of this article are currently involved in the ARIS-funded Slovenian research project “Remembering the Early Digital Age”, which focuses on studying the cultural and collective memories of technological transformations, with a special focus on the overlooked region of former Yugoslavia.¹ What struck

1. The project “Remembering the Early Digital Age: Cultural-Studies and Media-Archaeological Perspectives on Technotopism, Technopessimism, and Technostalgia” (TAP N6-0302; 1.8.2023 – 31.7.2025) is headed by PI Natalija Majsova and funded by the Slovenian Research Agency. The research included in the article was also supported by the ARIS project “Mnemonic Aesthetics and Strategies in Popular Culture: Murals, Film, and Popular Music as Memory Work” (J7-50215) and by the ARIS research and infrastructure programme “The Production of Meaning and Knowledge in a Time of Crisis: Cultural, Religious and Scientific-Developmental Aspects of Societies in Slovenia, the Balkans, and Europe”.

us as particularly compelling about this celebration of old technologies and games and the communities that used and played them is that this forms part of a renewed, post-2010s crest within a three-decade-long post-socialist cycle of technostalgia in Slovenia and the wider post-Yugoslav space. The collective urge to remember is co-produced by overlapping memory publics – former home-computing hobbyists and demosceners, editors and publishers, curators and museum professionals, retro-gaming clubs and online forums and younger enthusiasts encountering these histories second-hand. As such, it engages not only with past technological successes and failures but also with their selective revival and remediation, offering imagined alternative socio-technological trajectories and political possibilities through local storytelling – in form of books on local gaming histories, documentaries on regional technological trajectories and heritagisation processes focusing on these technologies.

In this article, we focus on renderings of early local gaming histories in the Slovenian context, a part of a wider trend that can be linked to memory practices that several scholars have described as technostalgia (van der Heijden 2015; Campopiano 2014; Pinch and Reinecke 2009). We understand this concept to mean the affective investment in outmoded media and practices, expressed through collecting, restoring, remediating and retrospective storytelling that serve biographical, communal-heritage and critical functions. In the post-Yugoslav context, this technostalgic turn focuses both on Yugoslav large-scale technological projects and companies that once offered the potential of an alternative technological development, as well as on 1980s DIY computing and video games, shaped by self-management and semi-peripherality. The latter is relevant as it reveals how media technologies such as video games both construct and mediate memories of a specific historical moment and how video games – important techno-cultural artifacts in their own right – have themselves become objects of memory work (van der Heijden 2015). This dual dynamic – how games remember and how we remember games – forms the central focus of this article.

Memory is not simply about recalling the past but about constructing meaning in the present. As scholars in cultural memory studies have long argued, remembering is a selective, mediated and often contested process. We understand cultural memory as a process and a practice – an ongoing performance in which stories, artefacts and technologies are mobilised to shape shared understandings of the past (e.g. Rigney 2008). Following Ann Rigney's (2018) call to interrogate the cultural politics of memorability and examine how narrative forms shape collective recollection, we focus on how early personal computing and gaming cultures in Yugoslavia, specifically Slovenia, are being remembered today.

Building on the dual focus outlined above, we pursue our argument in two parts. The first part of the article offers a contextual and historical overview of 1980s gaming cultures in Slovenia and wider Yugoslavia – marked by non-alignment, self-management and subcultural openness – and develops close readings of locally developed titles now considered canonical to show how they encode alternative memory scripts that reflect, subvert or reimagine late-socialist realities. The second part of the article turns to the present, analysing how early local gaming cultures are remembered, curated and mythologised across books, documentaries, museums and retrospectives; we show how these commemorations often crystallise around male-coded heroism, nationalist myth-making and techno-optimistic progress narratives. Juxtaposing game-level narratives with contemporary memory work allows us to ask not only what is remembered but how, by whom and with what exclusions.

2 Historical overview: Yugoslav computer cultures and gaming contexts

Yugoslavia's unique geopolitical position after World War II – marked by the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 and its later role as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement – shaped both its ideological and technological landscapes. The socialist self-management system attempted to chart a "third way" between planned and liberal economies, promoting values such as self-reliance, collectivism and egalitarianism (Eby 2020; Ramšak 2018; Založnik 2017). Though state-promoted, these values filtered into everyday life and cultural production, including the emerging scenes around computing and games.

Yugoslav socialism was not monolithic. The public sphere evolved considerably between the 1960s and 1980s. Praxis School, a group of intellectuals promoting a humanist, anti-dogmatic interpretation of Marxism, called for open public discourse in the Marxist sense (Križan 1989), and by the late 1970s, a more autonomous civil society emerged, animated by punk, feminist and artistic movements that experimented with alternative subjectivities (Mastnak in Cvar and Žbontar 2024; Založnik 2017). This shifting ideological terrain enabled the flourishing of vibrant subcultures – including fanzine writers, DJs, amateur programmers and hackers – who increasingly used new media, including video and computing technologies, as tools of self-expression and critique.

For the generation that came of age confronting the Yugoslav socialist state's official system of ideas, particularly after the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980, the concept of "freedom" became central (Spaskovska 2017). As Ljubica Spaskovska argues, this notion of freedom was primarily associated with freedom of thought,

speech and expression. Importantly, for many activists, especially up until the late 1980s, freedom did not necessarily imply the dissolution of Yugoslavia or the abandonment of socialist self-management. Rather, it reflected a desire to rearticulate and rethink the dogmas of socialism itself (Spaskovska 2017).

Within this specific historical trajectory, the use of technology in Yugoslavia also evolved. The introduction of computers and the emergence of a national computer industry can be traced back to the late 1950s. This development resulted from a combination of targeted training of Yugoslav scientists abroad – particularly in countries like France –, domestic industrial and military development and joint ventures with the Soviet Union during the so-called Thaw, a period marked by the USSR's gradual cooperation with Yugoslavia following Stalin's death in 1953 (Jakić 2014: 111). In this context, a high level of technological expertise developed in industrial and research contexts,² supported by university programs promoting computer science – e.g. electrical engineering, maths and, from the 1980s, newly founded specialized computer science programs (Šepetavc et al., forthcoming).

In his study on the history of the Yugoslav Galaksija computer, Eby (2020) emphasizes the importance of computing technologies in meeting the demands of logistical optimization during Yugoslavia's rapid industrial development. This, in turn, accelerated the growth of the domestic computing industry. With rising living standards in the 1960s and 1970s, computers also slowly found its way into some private homes in the 1980s. Even though local computer production was well under way – in Slovenia spearheaded by the technological state-owned company Iskra Delta –, computer hardware and software were still mostly imported from different parts of Western Europe (e.g. Germany, UK etc.) through neighbouring Italy and Austria (Jakić 2014).

However, access to personal computers remained limited due to their high cost. Standard consumer-grade systems such as the Iskradata 1680, Sinclair ZX81, or Commodore 64 were several times more expensive than the average monthly salary of a Yugoslav worker (ibid.). Foreign currency restrictions vital to Yugoslavia's macroeconomic stability made legal importation difficult, while the domestic computing industry struggled to meet demand (Eby 2020). These conditions birthed a culture of improvisation, piracy and DIY hacking, especially in the politically charged atmosphere of the 1980s.

Thus, the intersection of material scarcity, ideological flexibility and subcultural creativity gave rise to a distinctly Yugoslav gaming culture. This ideological

2. E.g. Jožef Štefan Institute and the technological company Iskra Delta in Slovenia, Ruđer Bošković Institute in Croatia, Institute Mihajlo Pupin in Serbia etc.

flexibility combined the ethos of socialist solidarity and self-reliance with the gradual seepage of gritty entrepreneurial practices that created a space where both collective values and individual initiative could coexist and feed into creative game-making practices. The games that emerged in this period – text adventures like *Kontrabant* or educational simulators like *Eurorun* – encoded these contradictions: they were born from scarcity but saturated with imagination, commenting on the liminal geopolitical position of Yugoslavia and the creativity of its people.

2.1 The landscape of game publishing and development

While Yugoslavia never became a major gaming hub, the region nevertheless witnessed a period of vibrant amateur production. During the 1980s, pioneering local developers created a number of versatile and experimental games, often operating with no budget and driven by enthusiasm rather than industry infrastructure (Handžić and Ribić 2024). Most of these games were produced by hobbyists and some became cult hits, widely played and remembered by a generation of gamers.

In Slovenia, there is a relative scarcity of in-depth analyses on the topic of early digital culture development – most of the available information is dispersed across archival sources, individual hobbyist developers, old computer magazines, and a few rare exhibitions or initiatives. However, in 2022, Sergej Hvala published *Prva bitnost: od rojstva videoiger do konca njihovega otroštva* (*First Bit/Becoming: From the Birth of Video Games to the End of Their Childhood*, Jazbina Publishing), a comprehensive cultural and technological overview of the development of video games. The book traced the evolution from the earliest coin-operated machines to the breakthrough of consoles and PCs, with a particular emphasis on the Slovenian contribution. The book also offers insight into video-game publishing of that time and, most importantly, shows how the use of technology was gradually becoming standardised and thus formalised.

During the 1980s, a small but notable ecosystem of publishers developed, including Xenon, Suzy Soft and Radio and Television Slovenia. And due to a vibrant homebrew scene, a number of games were self-published. In Slovenia specifically, many games took the form of adventure titles, though developers also produced a significant number of educational programs. These ranged from learning tools – such as Esperanto or mathematics tutorials – to applications like Radio Študent's *Moja gospodinjska pomočnica* (*My Housekeeping Assistant*, 1985, Radio Študent), a program that allowed users to input ingredients from their kitchen and receive recipe suggestions. The range of content was broad, from

utilitarian to humorous to problematic. Some games had simple mechanics with questionable goals – for example, *Ljubezen je bolezen* (Love is Sickness, 1987, Dragomer Beni), in which the player's task was to "seduce the girl" (Retrospec – Ljubezen je bolezen n.d.).

Along with gaming publishers, other players such as the computer magazines *Moj mikro* (My Micro), *Delo revije* (Delo magazines), and later, from the 1990s, *Joker* and *Megazin*, as well as ZOTKA, Zveza organizacij za tehnično kulturo (ZOTKA, the Association of Organizations for Technical Culture) played invaluable role in popularization of the gaming culture.³ *Joker*, which also hosted the influential online forum for computer enthusiasts Mn3njalnik, is still active today.⁴

Moj mikro especially served as a central platform for exchanging programs, games and information. It was published monthly between 1984 and 2015. In an interview, Ciril Kraševac, alongside Žiga Turk – the magazine's first editor – elaborated on the context in which the publication was developed: the first accessible eight-bit computer, the further popularization of Spectrum, the formation of the pirate market for different products and games (Hvala 2022: 102). *Moj mikro* brought together experts from different disciplines, e.g. from electronics to robotics, it published source code (e.g. in BASIC) for games submitted by readers and offered lessons in different programming languages, coverage of the domestic tech industry, exploration of DIY hardware and monitoring of broader trends, including fairs (ibid.: 103).

More recently, Jazbina has taken up this legacy, continuing it as a publishing house – for instance, by publishing the magazine *Jazbina*⁵ and books such as the aforementioned *Prva bitnost*, *Odčepnik in triglava opica* (*The Plunger and the Three-Headed Monkey*, 2023) and the upcoming *Druga bitnost* (*Second Bit/Becoming*), all dedicated to the histories and memories of video-game cultures. We will come back to the book *Prva Bitnost* as an important medium of memory in the second part of the article. We now turn to the games that the Yugoslav youth were developing and playing in the 1980s.

3. The Yugoslav computer landscape included several other popular magazines, like *Bit*, *Svet kompjutera*, and *Računari*.

4. The forum also has a section called *Starinarica* (The Antique Shop), described as follows: "Nostalgic memories of retro rigs and games – from the Spectrum and Game Boy to legendary PC classics. 3dfx FTW!"

5. The magazine is also available on floppy disk, a format that deliberately invites nostalgic engagement and activates memory not only through content but through medium-specific materiality. This revival of obsolete technology functions as more than just a retro aesthetic – it becomes a performative gesture that reenacts past modes of access and use, thereby deepening the affective resonance of the memory it meditates.

2.2 Games encapsulating memory of Slovenia

Here, we take a closer look at several key titles that appear frequently in historical accounts of Slovenian gaming, each of which reveals something distinct about the cultural, political and technological contexts in which they were created. The games, recently becoming popular once more – especially *Kontrabant* – are (re)interpreted by the (nostalgic) recollections of the people that made and played them, which offers us an important lens into memory production, framing and negotiations by the gaming communities themselves.

Among other things, the (memories of) the games offer insight into the specificities of socialism in 1980s Slovenia, particularly in relation to the development of personal computer culture. For example, as Matevž Kmet explains in an interview with Sergej Hvala, owning a computer at the time was considered subversive, since it was generally neither importable nor purchasable through official channels – hence the emergence of a pirate market and a smuggling culture (Kmet in Hvala 2022: 95) that is reflected in the games themselves.

Kontrabant

Kontrabant (Contraband) was the first Slovenian video game, created in 1984 by students and Radio Študent colleagues Žiga Turk and Matevž Kmet. The game was written using Quill, which was a popular software package for creating text adventure games for the ZX Spectrum and other 8-bit computers in the 1980s. Turk explains in an interview with Hvala that:

the Quill was essentially a dream engine for creating adventures, and for the first Kontrabant, I took it apart to the extent that I managed to integrate the Slovenian characters č, ž, and š. For the sequel, we even added sound and images (Turk in Hvala 2022: 92).

GitHub user janezd adds that the game:

[...] features everything from the 1980s: the HR 84, the Attache, licensed television sets, and Dr. Rogelj's fortress. The capital of the homeland is a white city east of Zabreg, a passport is required to cross the border, and computers are bought with Deutsche Marks in Munich (<https://github.com/janezd/Kontrabant-web>).⁶

6. The elements from this quote present a collection of objects and references that illustrate the Yugoslav 1980s: a car with a license plate from 1984, a typical smuggler's attaché case, the fictional "fortress of Dr. Rogelj" echoing villains from Yugoslav comics and films, and the "white city east of Zabreg" (a clear allusion to Belgrade as the capital). Further, the requirement of a passport to cross borders indicates the bureaucratic reality of the time, while the mention of computers bought "for marks in Munich" is explaining

The figure/trope of the smuggler became a recurring trope in 1980s Yugoslavia, especially among the youth who would “smuggle” Western goods from across the border and *Kontrabant* is no exception.

A text-based adventure game set in Yugoslavia and parts of Europe, it draws on well-known Slovenian tales and myths – most notably classical national smuggler legends such as the story of the heroic Martin Krpan⁷ – and connects them to the everyday realities of the 1980s.⁸ As the computer magazine *Moj mikro* wrote in their review of the game in 1984:

The game Kontrabant was written with the desire to give the first Slovenian cassette something truly homegrown. From the title screen, you are greeted by Martin Krpan, the witches of Slivnica, and a knight from Celje. This is a classic adventure game set in Yugoslavia and parts of Europe, vividly illustrating how, in our country, one can most easily come by a computer (Moj mikro in Retrospec – Kontrabant n.d.).

The objective of the game is to build a microcomputer system: somewhere deep within the game’s destinations are a TV, a tape recorder and a microcomputer which the player must locate and assemble. Once assembled, the player assumes the role of a smuggler tasked with transporting the components home, navigating a series of obstacles and checkpoints. If successful, and without resorting to

the practice of acquiring ZX Spectrum, Commodore or other Western technologies through West Germany. Together, these elements reconstruct the symbolic and material environment of late-socialist Yugoslavia and its grey zones of exchange.

7. Martin Krpan is a fictional character from a story by Slovenian author Fran Levstik, first published in 1858. Krpan is portrayed as a strong and self-reliant smuggler who illegally transports English salt – not salt per se, but saltpetre, used in making gunpowder – across the Habsburg Empire, yet ultimately becomes a national hero by defeating a foreign warrior who killed the emperor’s son. The tale is widely interpreted as an allegory of Slovenian resilience, ingenuity and subversive heroism. Since its publication, it has become a foundational text in Slovenian national mythology, often symbolizing resistance against foreign domination and bureaucratic oppression.
8. Along the Yugoslav border with Italy and Austria, “shopping tourism” normalised small-scale contraband of jeans, coffee, electronics and other items. Nečák writes that at its 1970s peak, up to six million Yugoslav shoppers visited the Italian city of Trieste annually (Nečák 2000). These cross-border routines and their moral economies are well documented in studies of petty smuggling in border regions such as Vojvodina (Archer and Rácz 2011), and have since been reframed as heritage through projects like Smuggling Anthologies (a joint endeavour by the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rijeka (HR), Mestni muzej Idrija (SI) and Trieste Contemporanea (IT)) and Lasciapassare/Prepustnica, which curate memories of everyday smuggling across the Yugoslav border.

cheats, the game would provide a secret password that could be sent to the creators in exchange for a promised reward: a ZX Interface 1 (1st prize) and a pack of beer (2nd prize).

In practice, however, few of the players made it to the end of the quest (Moj Mikro in Retrospec – Kontrabant n.d.) – the game had a reputation for being extremely difficult and frustrating to complete. Nevertheless, it captivated players – some of whom played as families –, who became deeply invested in cracking a storyline that mirrored their lived experiences of smuggling. In reality, the contraband in question was not mostly computers, but more mundane goods like washing detergents and jeans. In his analysis, Hvala also points out that *Kontrabant* did not feel only humorous or playful, but also subversive – subversiveness, as explained by Kmet, was the spirit of that time (Kmet in Hvala 2022: 94):

that was that kind of spirit, we were the right age and all of us were, in a way, just fooling around. Not because we had agreed to criticize the authorities – it's just how we lived. It was 1984, and we only had six or seven years left. We could mock things, and of course, we did. Back then, it was simple – we had a single, common "enemy" that was just begging to be ridiculed (ibid).

In the interview with Hvala, Kmet explains that the game was written during his compulsory military service in Yugoslavia, where he even had his own office with a Spectrum and a TV (Kmet in Hvala 2022: 92). Kmet also adds that their intention was not to make the first commercial game – they made it simply because it was possible and because it was something new (Kmet in Hvala 2022: 93).

This atmosphere of creative experimentation and subversiveness was reflected at every turn and played an important role in the creation of the first games, and ultimately also in the reception of computer-related products. The game's popularity eventually led to a sequel, *Kontrabant 2*, this time featuring illustrations enhancing the storyline.

Eurorun

The success of *Kontrabant 1* and *2* spearheaded Žiga Turk, Matjaž Kmet, and a few like-minded collaborators to form their own software label, XENON, and develop a number of ZX Spectrum games (Stanojević 1986).

Eurorun, informally referred to as *Kontrabant 3*, was a 1985 adventure game that also functioned as an educational programme. Through gameplay – structured around completing tasks and navigating Europe – the player learned about the characteristics, landscapes and customs of various European countries, albeit often presented through reductive national stereotypes. Although the

figure/trope of the smuggler still remained central, the player was now no longer just a smuggler engaged in illicit activities, but rather a budding cosmopolitan: traveling internationally, expanding their horizons, and acquiring a sense of “becoming European”.

The goal of the game was to complete various tasks and smuggle culinary delicacies from different countries – such as Albanian cognac, Italian spaghetti, Polish vodka and German potatoes – to a Yugoslav taverna in Belgrade, where the player would consume them all in a final feast. On their travels, the players would also encounter important European figures – Dracula, Napoleon and the Danish Little Mermaid. An important characteristic of the game, reflecting Yugoslav liminality on the border of the Iron curtain, was that the players could travel both to the West and East of Europe without limitations, as long as they were vigilant when crossing the border with their contraband. The game was developed by Žiga Turk, Matevž Kmet and several other collaborators, e.g. Igor Bizjak and Samo Fosnarič, as well as Barbara Železnik, one of the very few women mentioned in historical accounts of the period’s game development (Hvala 2022: 85). Her name appears in connection with several Slovenian games from the time, yet she is neither interviewed nor commemorated in any of the sources currently available to us.

Released in 1985 and published by Xenon, the game is preserved as downloadable TZX/Z80 tape images, with included manuals and a map.

Bajke

Železnik also wrote the third game we want to highlight, *Bajke* (*Tales*), released in 1986 by Xenon (Slovenia) and Suzy Soft (Croatia), which is slightly more complex than *Eurorun* (Hvala 2022: 87). The game continues with the adventure motif but is, most importantly, based on the magical realist book by Slovenian author Janez Trdina (first published in 1882 under the title *Bajke in povesti o Gorjancih* / *Tales from the Gorjanci Hills*). Once again, the game draws on national literary heritage and builds upon national cultural memory and tradition. It is a graphic adventure in which the player seeks a treasure and completes tasks such as: “find a man who has hanged himself in desperation and make a jacket out of his skin”.

At the time, reviewers were smitten with the game, especially because it was seen as a technological success and, as Hvala argues, was the most fairy-tale-like and the most successful and appealing of all Xenon’s games (Hvala 2022: 87). Every location came with different illustrations for day and night settings – something that was considered a world-class achievement at the time (Kastelec 1986 in Retrospec - Bajke n.d.).

While these games were modest in scope and means, they offer telling insights into how technology, identity and politics intersected during late socialism – from the boundaries of the sayable under self-management and non-alignment to everyday bureaucracies, border regimes and Western-leaning desires negotiated through satire and allegory. Yet perhaps even more revealing is what happens to these games after their initial moment – how they are remembered, retold and remade. Memory does not simply preserve the past; it shapes it.

In the following section, we examine how Slovenian and Yugoslav gaming histories are being integrated into contemporary cultural memory, often in selective and ideologically loaded ways.

3 Memorialising technology and gaming cultures

Across Europe, the commemoration of technological and industrial pasts is well established; in the post-Yugoslav space, by contrast, the heritage-making revolving around socialist-era technologies has been slower to consolidate and often politically fraught, as the association with state socialism renders such legacies ideologically sensitive (Petrović 2013). Since the 2010s, however, a renewed turn toward memorialising local technological histories has emerged, reflecting the specificity of Yugoslavia's political-economic and cultural contexts and the uneven dynamics of post-socialist transformations. Rather than confirming a monolithic "socialist bloc", these practices – and our analysis of them – complicate that picture by foregrounding internal diversity, competing temporalities and divergent institutional trajectories. One long-running track, visible since the 1990s, reframes these histories through nationalist lenses, appropriating regional and transnational pasts to fit contemporary political narratives (e.g., Šepetavc et al., forthcoming). As Kuljić notes, cultures of remembrance readily become resources for emerging nationalisms and historical revisionisms (Kuljić in Vidmar Horvat 2024, 5). A more recent counter-current centres on the technological and cultural potentialities of the socialist past, animating speculative visions of alternative regional futures often gathered under the label Yugofuturism (Brezavšček 2025). Important for our understanding of (technostalgic) memory of games and gaming cultures of the Yugoslav 1980s is the notion of cultural memory and the question of "how culture mediates individual and collective memory and gives it substance, form, and social reach" (Rigney 2016: 67). Cultural memory is not a fixed product of the past, but a dynamic and contested process shaped by present-day needs and perspectives (van der Heijden 2015: 105). As several memory studies scholars (e.g. Rigney 2008) argue, memory should be understood as a practice – an ongoing, performative

act of storytelling and mediation. It is kept alive through repetition, circulation and adaptation; what matters is not merely that something is archived, but that it can provoke renewed circulation and resonance.

In this light, technologies such as games, documentaries, publications and digital archives become the key media of memory, shaping how the past is made meaningful and shared. Mediation and remediation of memory – e.g. through forms such as narrativized accounts, images and interactivity – determines both the legibility of memory and its social reach. Importantly, as cultural memory studies have shown, it is not individual media but their interplay across platforms – understood here as the venues and infrastructures of circulation (e.g. publishers, broadcasters, film festivals, and streaming services, museums and galleries, online forums and social media and digital repositories and archives) – that often stabilizes and disseminates particular versions of the past (Rigney 2008; Erll and Rigney 2009).

This dynamic and processual understanding of memory also invites a critical reflection on nostalgia, specifically the role it plays in shaping contemporary perceptions of the past – in this case the Yugoslav techno-cultural one. As Susan Stewart argues in *On Longing*, “nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as felt lack” (Stewart 1993: 23). In this view, nostalgia is less a faithful recollection of historical experience than a narrative desire for a constructed past – one shaped as much by absence and longing as by memory itself.

In the post-Yugoslav context, this is particularly resonant. As Velikonja, writing about the phenomenon of Titostalgia (nostalgia connected to the Yugoslav leader and the old country) notes, nostalgia may be understood as a:

complex, differentiated and mutable, emotionally charged, personal or collective, (non-)instrumentalized story which, in binary terms, celebrates romanticized lost times, people, objects, feelings, smells, events, spaces, relationships, values, political and other systems – and simultaneously, in sharp contrast with a devalued present, mourns their loss (Velikonja 2008: 25).

As Svetlana Boym (2001) argues, nostalgia can represent a dangerous abyss of uncritical engagement with both past and present. At the same time, she emphasizes its potential as a reflective tool. Boym distinguishes between two modes of nostalgic remembering: restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. The former centres on *nostos* (the desire to return home) and is characterized by an effort to reconstruct an idealized past in the present. In doing so, it often flattens

historical complexity and glosses over contradictions. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, is tied to *algia*, the sense of longing or pain. Rather than seeking to restore the past, it engages it critically and opens it up to reinterpretation, ambivalence and multiplicity. This mode of nostalgia allows the past to become a site for questioning and reimagining alternative futures.

In the context of former Yugoslavia, technological developments from late 20th century have only recently attracted focused attention from official regional historiographers – including academic researchers and members of the gaming and creative computing communities (cf. Benić 2017: 14; Hvala 2022; Jakič 2014; Retrospec n.d.). Many of these accounts tend to foreground “elaborate national (sociotechnical) imaginaries” (Šepetavc et al., forthcoming).

In Slovenia specifically, memories of the early digital age have resurfaced across multiple media platforms and commemorative spaces: (1) popular books such as *Prva Bitnost* (a history of computer games in Yugoslavia; Sergej Hvala 2022); (2) documentaries – for example, *Tehnika ljudstvu / Technology to the People*⁹ (Slobodan Maksimović 2015), which explores pioneers of the Slovenian/YU pirate scenes and early game development; and *Iskre v času – Svetovni računalniški podvig / Sparks in Time – Worldwide Computer Adventure* (Jurij Gruden, 2021), which focuses on Iskra Delta, a prominent Slovenian technological firm during the Yugoslav era; and (3) grassroots places of commemoration, such as the Computer History Museum in Ljubljana, which opened its doors in 2022.

These examples function as sites of memory (Nora 1989), where stories of local technology and gaming are produced, curated and re-circulated. They are a potent force in shaping both public memory and cultural identity, especially when specific narratives of the past are circulating across multiple media forms. In terms of research, these documentaries, books and sites then serve as cultural artefacts through which we can observe how mnemonic hegemony (Hammar 2019) operates within the field – how certain memories become culturally dominant or “official”, while others are excluded, silenced or rendered invisible.

The excavation, framing and heritagisation of early digital experiences in the post-Yugoslav space thus generate specific themes, values, tropes and practices that demand critical attention. It is crucial to examine how these widely circulated technostalgic narratives provide a shared cultural channel through which gaming memories are not only transmitted but also reified and ideologically structured (Stewart 1993).

9. As Gal Kirn reminds us, documentary *Tehnika ljudstvu* can be read within a longer genealogy of Yugoslav cultural policy: from the 1950s onward, workers’ self-management seeded cultural infrastructures – cinema clubs, houses of culture and amateur film circuits – that later provided the milieu for DIY computing and media cultures (Kirn 2023).

In the following section, we show how two of the aforementioned sites of memory – the popular book *Prva Bitnost* and the documentary *Tehnika ljudstvu / Technology to the People* – narrativize the Slovenian gaming past through nostalgic lenses, but also through acts of omission and erasure.

3.1 Smugglers, pirates and entrepreneurs

How, then, are Slovenian (and broader Yugoslav) gaming histories constructed in cultural memory? What kinds of tropes emerge in stories about the regional early digital age? The media sources analysed tend to centre around narratives of rebellion, ingenuity and subcultural freedom. These are often stories of youngsters (exclusively men) navigating a rigid political and technological environment, carving out spaces of autonomy and play within it.

Both *Prva Bitnost* and *Tehnika ljudstvu* are nostalgic in their aesthetics. The book – the sequel of which has already been announced – actually begins with the quote in which one can detect a semantic dialectic between modernness and unmodernness – a relation that can be identified as a central element in the ways of memorializing and commemorating local technological histories:

ZX Spectrum. Commodore 64. Amstrad CPC. A black-and-white cathode-ray television set. A joystick. My mother's cassette player. A small screwdriver. Nintendo Entertainment System. Game Boy. Game Gear. A handful of cartridges [...]. To the uninitiated, this is merely a pile of plastic and metal junk, destined for bulky waste disposal. It should be disassembled as soon as possible and repurposed into something modern. Yet therein lies the crux: in its unmodernness. In the sensation akin to spotting a vintage car on the road—so distinct from the homogenized sheen of contemporary vehicles that your heart skips a beat. Trailing behind it, in a cloud of exhaust smoke, hover memories (Hvala 2022: 7).

To reiterate Boym's argument that nostalgia can also function as a productive tool of reflection (Boym 2001), the content of early Slovenian computer games – such as *Kontrabant*, *Eurorun*, and *Bajke* – mediates tropes of smuggling, national mythology, and the overcoming of absurd obstacles through wit and persistence.. In these memory narratives, the protagonists are frequently cast as resourceful underdogs: young men smuggling computer parts and cassette tapes through Austrian and Italian borders in beat-up Yugo cars, running from customs officers, hiding in the bushes, and hitchhiking home. Others are remembered as pirates who reproduced and sold popular games at local markets or through classified ads in computer magazines.

The described modes of remembrance can be understood as strategies that involve a romanticization of the pioneering spirit surrounding the arrival of

personal computing – an emergence that, at least in Yugoslavia, coincided, as Mitja Velikonja puts it, with a *cultural and artistic renaissance* during the early 1980s.

Together with the decline of Yugoslavia in economic, political, and social terms, you know, the culture erupted as such. [...] There are two phases of the '80s: This eruption of the popular and alternative culture of civil society in the beginning of '80s (Velikonja in Yugoblok n.d.).

This *atmosphere* – marked by the ambiguity between the decline of the Yugoslav political and social frameworks on the one hand, and a spirit of subversiveness, humour and mockery of authority on the other – can be clearly observed in Kmet's reflection on the motivations behind making games: there was no overarching intention to critique the authorities; rather, as he notes, "it was simply how we lived" (Kmet in Hvala 2022: 94).

Velikonja's analysis – particularly his insights into the role of youth in Yugoslavia – offers a valuable framework for interpreting the emergence of gaming culture. Velikonja explains that during the 1980s, young people were unintentionally constructing a new Yugoslav cultural identity precisely through their distancing from the Yugoslav past (Velikonja 2021; Velikonja in Yugoblok n.d.). Maša Kolanović further provides an incisive account of this historical moment, designating it as "decadent socialism" – her term for the 1980s in Yugoslavia, a period marked by the paradoxical coexistence of socialist structures and the increasing incorporation of Western consumer imaginaries into the mainstream cultural agenda (Kolanović 2018).

Such an attitude was pervasive and significantly influenced the development of early video games as well as the reception of computer technologies, ultimately shaping the emerging gaming culture. As one of the most legendary figures of this scene, Jonas Žnideršič, known by his pseudonym *SatanSoft*, recalls in the 2015 documentary *Tehnika ljudstvu*: "We were Robin Hoods. Stealing from the rich, giving to the poor." After a pause, he adds with a smirk: "Though ... not completely free of charge."

This and other scene in the documentary are also enriched by a subtle visual interplay of objects on the set that evoke associations with the 1980s: an old car, a black market trader at the marketplace standing beside a handmade DIY stall bearing a modest sign reading "100 din", a Spectrum in a washing-powder box (demonstrating the ways in which computers were smuggled), and other details that quietly evoke the era's atmosphere.

Referring to Hvala's aforementioned quote, a key component of technostalgic narratives is the tension – and interplay – between modernity and unmodernity,

where the unmodernity is retrospectively reframed as something “cool” and becomes part of a canonized technostalgic script.

While emotionally resonant, such narrativizations of memory also contribute to what Hammar (2019) calls mnemonic hegemony, as already mentioned. The histories of computing pioneers are often grounded in personal recollections, retrospectively politicized and framed as an alternative to the Yugoslav political system. Most of the computing which is remembered in these media sites of memory was indeed happening outside the Yugoslav state structures and was often seen as a youth revolt against the rigid communist Party of old men – beaten by the changing times – that had an ambivalent attitude towards computers. In *Tehnika ljudstvu* for example, Žiga Turk, the first Slovenian DIY game maker and programmer describes the 1980s computing scene as “a story of civil disobedience”.

However, the local gaming trajectories could easily be read also as an awakening of the dynamic free and capitalist market, where the ever-increasing demand meant that smuggling and piracy were not only a revolt against the socialist state on the one hand and capitalist corporate gaming structures on the other, but – at least for some time and for some people – a profitable side activity and early smallbusiness experiment. Rather than adhering to a grand ideological metanarrative (e.g. Alberts and Oldenziel 2014), these stories privilege individual agency and improvisation, often infused with a fascination with how personal computers and video games were evolving. At the same time, the recollections evoke a sense of solidarity. The small group of DIY Spectrum computing pioneers is represented as embodying “the culture of collectivism, which was still very much alive in Yugoslavia” and which is still often evoked in the recollections of the age as an important factor for the production and exchange of first homebrew video games and the subsequent construction of game infrastructure – publishing houses, the RŠ software department and the computing magazine *Moj mikro*. One could even provocatively argue that Radio Študent functioned as something akin to what we would now call a digital innovation hub – offering, at the time, a fertile environment for the development of creative computing.

3.2 Exclusions and Mnemonic Hegemonies

To fully understand how memories of the early digital age and computing cultures are constructed, we must also examine what – and who – is left out of these narratives, as remembering is often inseparable from processes of exclusion, erasure and silencing. This is particularly relevant in the case of Yugoslav technological memory, where dominant narratives tend to marginalize class dynamics, gendered experiences and rural-urban divides.

Early personal computing was (at least in our local context) not unconnected to class and in particular to the divide between urban and rural environments (Jakić 2014), something most sites of memory have not seriously touched upon. As Jakić writes, import bans on computer equipment was in place through the large part of the 1980s, but this was not “sufficient to deter the well-educated urban youth, which had lost its respect for authority and developed a keen curiosity in the possibilities of the new technology. Only the lucky few could afford to buy a home computer for themselves” (ibid.: 119).

Class is often insufficiently addressed in the recollections of the cultural development of early computer games. This absence can be interpreted through a threefold dynamic. First, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was, at least at the level of official ideology, conceived as a classless society, in which class distinctions were ideologically denied. However, cultural production – particularly the Black Wave cinema of the 1960s – offered some of the earliest and most critical visualizations of class difference, social marginalization and inequality (Levi 2007). Second, during the transition to post-socialism in the 1990s, class did not disappear but rather changed in form, becoming more ambiguous and multifaceted. Although the structure of class became less “clear-cut” than in state-socialist times, class dynamics remained central to understanding post-socialist societies. Similarly, Ost (2009), writing about post-communist Poland, argues that while political and cultural elites often refuse to engage in class discourse, they simultaneously acknowledge that class structures and inequalities are crucial for understanding the nature of social transformation. A similar paradox is evident in countries like Slovenia, where official political and cultural narratives tend to present class as an outdated or already-resolved issue – especially within the teleological framework of European Union integration. As a result, class becomes both politically invisible and structurally central. Third, the ideology surrounding digital technologies reinforces this erasure. Californian Ideology (Barbrook and Cameron, 1995) promotes a techno-utopian narrative in which information and communication technologies (ICTs) are imagined as inherently democratic, participatory and emancipatory. However, as Mariën and Prodnik (2014) argue, this ideology systematically marginalizes the concept of class by framing digital access and technological advancement as neutral or universally beneficial. In doing so, it silences critical discussions about the structural inequalities embedded in digital systems and infrastructures. To sum up: because this recollection of early digital culture takes place within a post-socialist framework, class is effectively erased in both ideological modes – socialist and post-socialist – and consequently also in the digital-cultural objects under analysis.

Another striking omission is connected to gender. Women in early computing and game recollections are basically absent. They only make an appearance rarely and almost never in a flattering way.

One young woman appears on the first cover of the aforementioned influential computer magazine *Moj mikro*, which was initially edited by Žiga Turk. Recalling how they selected the first cover image, Turk explains that he asked his colleague from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Andreja, to pose for the photograph. In the documentary *Tehnika ljudstvu*, he adds: "In this picture, she looks quite surprised to see computers. We spoke recently over Skype, and it seems to me that she still doesn't know how to use computers very well."

The rise, fall and marginalisation of certain stories is a constitutive part of the dynamics of cultural memory. And this includes stories of women who appear either as naive observers – "surprised to see computers" – or are erased altogether. Such gendered representations are reproduced throughout the sources that recall the period. In *Tehnika ljudstvu*, one interviewee (a pirate who sold Spectrum games) reiterates the divide, noting that the girls were at the Commodore booth – reportedly because their fathers, i.e. the older generation, owned Commodore computers, while the young male gamers, smugglers, and pirates, who apparently had their own computer autonomy, preferred Sinclair ZX Spectrums. But because these were two distinct hardware subcultures, often framed as being in rivalry, and because most of the recorded memories come from the self-designated Spectrum gatekeepers, the full picture remains skewed.

This underlines the urgent need to recover and reconstruct the histories of women and other marginalized groups in early computing. In the regional (post-) Yugoslav comparative look at the recollections of female computing pioneers – computer scientists in the region that started their careers in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s – interviews revealed that some had access to home computers (many of them Spectrums), played games and used computers creatively, but were part of different computing cultures, a nuance overlooked in narrations of the period. As one of the interviewees, a renowned computer scientist Barbara Koroušić Seljak, pointed out: "I was interested in programming, not gaming" (Šepetavc et al., forthcoming).

A shift toward examining memorial dynamics demands, among other things, a deeper understanding of the structural factors that allow certain collective memories to become hegemonic – or, conversely, to remain obscured until conditions permit their re-emergence in the public domain.

4 Conclusion

This article explored how Yugoslav and Slovenian gaming cultures both reflected and helped shape the socio-political landscapes of the 1980s, and how they are remembered and reimagined today. In the first part, we showed how locally developed games like *Kontrabant*, *Eurorun*, and *Bajke* encoded alternative scripts of everyday life in late socialist Yugoslavia, often through irony, subversion and playful resistance. In the second part, we analysed the processes of commemorating these games and cultures in the present: through books, documentaries, museums and online forums. We demonstrated how these memory practices are shaped by technostalgic scripts that celebrate male subcultural heroism, entrepreneurial defiance and DIY ingenuity, while often marginalizing the roles of class, gender, and non-urban actors.

As scholars such as Geoff Eley have argued, memory plays a crucial role in identity formation, offering “a way of deciding who we are and of positioning ourselves in time” (Eley 2005: 556). In this sense, remembering Yugoslav digital culture is not merely a backward glance, it is also a way of narrating present-day identities and cultural horizons. The romanticized 1980s often evoked in technostalgic narratives are tied to a techno-optimistic imaginary: the belief that access to technology could empower individuals and reconfigure society. But this vision has shifted.

A telling example comes from the game *SKB Papi*, a beloved and much-discussed late-1990s Slovenian game featuring a piggy-bank character running through the game’s landscape to collect money. Developed for a Slovenian bank SKB and often installed on school computers, the game was educational and whimsical, it encouraged children to collect coins. While remembered fondly today, *SKB Papi* also reflects a turning point: a moment when gaming culture was no longer centred on resistance or imagination but embedded in the logics of financial discipline and capitalist aspiration. As such, it marks a transformation in both digital culture and collective memory – a nostalgia stripped of political edge, pleasant and consumable, but no longer charged with the possibility of an alternative future.

By placing the games themselves alongside their contemporary commemorations, this article has aimed to demonstrate that memory is not merely a retrospective act but an active and mediated cultural practice. Drawing from cultural memory studies, we emphasized that what is remembered and how is shaped by narrative form, media affordances and power relations. Technostalgia emerges here as a particularly ambivalent mode of memory: it can open the space for alternative imaginaries and cultural critique, but can also domesticate the past into apolitical

longing. Following scholars such as Rigney, Velikonja and Boym, we argue for a more reflexive approach to memory work – one that is attentive not only to content but also to exclusions, silences and the materialities of mediation. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a broader understanding of how regional digital cultures are being canonized, remembered and contested in the post-socialist present.

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