Interpreting the Soviet Legacy in *Atomic Heart*:

Nostalgia, and Cultural Reflections of Post-Soviet Generation Players

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Abstract

The action of a video game *Atomic Heart* takes place in an alternate Soviet world that combines historical and futuristic elements. This unusual setting provides an intriguing research niche for studying how games as digital media interact with collective memory and cultural perception of the post-Soviet generation. This study examines how the post-Soviet generation reflects on the game's depiction of an alternative Soviet history from the perspective of players' perceptions and emotional reactions. The analysis especially focuses on how players interpret Soviet-era symbols in the game in relation to their personal and cultural backgrounds.

The research uses a methodological approach that combines Gillian Rose's visual analysis with semi-structured interviews. The visual analysis is used to provide contextual understanding of the game's visual elements, complementing the more nuanced outcomes conducted through interviews. While semi-structured interviews delve into players' emotional and interpretive responses, exploring how visual elements of Soviet culture represented in the game resonate with their personal stories and collective memories.

The results of the study highlight the complex relationship between the cultural background of players from post-Soviet countries and their experience with *Atomic Heart*. The players have demonstrated a range of emotional connections, such as nostalgia and critical reflection, caused by both direct and indirect encounters with Soviet history. The study shows that *Atomic Heart* not only entertains, but also serves as a medium for cultural reflection and historical discourse, to rethink the narratives of the past through the lens of modern perceptions.

Ultimately, this study aims to broaden the discussion about how digital games such as *Atomic Heart* are shaped by cultural memory, offering new insights into historical narratives and their impact on contemporary cultural understanding. By documenting and analyzing the cultural and emotional impact of media representations of Soviet history, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the role of digital games in modern cultural discourse, especially among the post-Soviet generation.

Keywords: *cultural memory, mediated memories, Soviet nostalgia, post-Soviet generation, mediation, remediation, Atomic Heart, video games, alternative history.*

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Introduction

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

— William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun

This insightful observation from Faulkner captures the essence of *Atomic Heart*, a video game that immerses players in a vividly reimagined Soviet era. It blends historical elements with a futuristic imagined future to explore the enduring influence of the past on the present. *Atomic Heart* is set in an alternate universe where the technological ambitions of the Soviet Union have achieved incredible success. However, these achievements get out of control, which leads to a robot uprising against the USSR itself and a large-scale disaster. Players navigate a landscape that is both familiar and alien, where historical elements blend with futuristic fantasy narratives, inviting both thought and reimagination of historical elements.

Its unique setting and narrative approach not only captivated players, but also raised many questions and various discussions, including its historical representation.

Since its release, *Atomic Heart* has become a cultural sensation, quickly gaining popularity outside of traditional gaming circles. It topped the *Xbox* charts as the biggest new release of 2023, ahead of titles such as *Hogwarts Legacy* (Romanov, 2023), and its soundtrack, with a remix of *Komarovo* [Igor Sklyar's song, 1985]*,* revived the song's popularity, charting on Russian music platforms (Kravchuk, 2023). Although the game has received mostly positive reviews around the world, as evidenced by approximately 80% of positive reviews on *Steam* [video game digital distribution service], it also attracted controversy. The depiction of hypersexualized content, including phone sex and sexually explicit character designs, led to arguments over thematic choices (Tikhonov, 2023). Moreover, *Atomic Heart* has been criticized in Europe for potentially spreading "Russian propaganda" (Kovtun, 2023), complicating its perceptions and fueling discussions about how cultural products are influenced by and influence broader political contexts.

Nevertheless, despite—or perhaps because of—its provocative portrayal of the Soviet past, the game attracts the attention of many and becomes an interesting subject for study.

The choice of *Atomic Heart* as a case study is due to its rich symbolic content and unique setting, offering a "what if" scenario that differs from actual historical events. This allows for the study of how alternative history can negotiate our understanding of real events, making it

an ideal subject for studying the interaction between media representations and cultural memory.

This study aims to explore the dynamic interaction between players and the video game *Atomic Heart*, focusing on how its alternate history setting and rich Soviet-era symbolism influence the collective memory and cultural perception of the post-Soviet generation. The study aims to document and analyze players' emotional and cultural responses to the game's reimagined Soviet past, exploring how their cultural and personal backgrounds shape their experiences, emotional responses, and interpretations of that past.

By analyzing how *Atomic Heart* integrates into players' lives and influences their views and interpretations, the study will determine how the game contributes to contemporary understanding of historical narratives through individual experience. The goal is to offer a comprehensive understanding of how modern media such as video games can alter collective memories and influence current cultural understanding and historical perspectives. This study will fill a gap in understanding the emotional and cultural impact of media representations of Soviet history on post-Soviet generations, improving our understanding of the role of digital games in contemporary cultural discourse.

The emphasis on the post-Soviet generation is especially relevant. This population group, which did not directly experience the Soviet era but is still influenced by inherited narratives, represents a transitional phase of cultural memory. The game's setting resonates deeply with this audience, tapping into themes and images that are part of their collective memory. This demographic's unique perspective is critical to understanding how Soviet history continues to influence modern cultural perspectives and memory.

Since the research delves into the emotional and cultural reactions of the post-Soviet generation, one of these emotional reactions is nostalgia, as frequently observed within this demographic in various memory studies. The study of post-Soviet nostalgia exemplifies a collective historical memory characterized by deep emotional resonance and significant ideological implications (Mazur, 2019, p.181). As cultural and commercial interests have reignited attention to Soviet-era themes in media, fashion, and design, this resurgence of post-Soviet nostalgia has notably influenced contemporary culture and politics (Kalinina, 2014, p.14). By investigating these emotional connections and the resurgence of nostalgia, this research aims to understand how societies revisit and reinterpret their pasts.

Based on the goals of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How does *Atomic Heart* depict Soviet times through visual elements such as architecture, color schemes, and everyday life cultural artifacts?

RQ2: How do players perceive and reflect upon the elements of the Soviet era present in *Atomic Heart*?

RQ3: How does the post-Soviet generation reflect on their personal and cultural backgrounds in relation to their perceptions of *Atomic Heart's* Soviet representations?

The first question is important because a game's visual elements are the primary vehicle for conveying its narrative and themes. By examining architecture, color schemes, and artifacts, this study attempts to understand how the game reconstructs and represents Soviet aesthetics and ideology. Analyzing these visual elements will reveal how the game combines historical accuracy with artistic interpretation to create an immersive environment that engages players both visually and emotionally.

The second question concerns players' perceptions of the game's depiction of the Soviet era, focusing on their interpretations, reflections, and emotional reactions. Understanding this allows the study to evaluate how the game engages players with historical themes and the extent to which these themes evoke thoughtful reflection or nostalgic feelings, thereby influencing players' understanding of history.

The third question deepens the personal impact of the game on post-Soviet players with direct or familial ties to the Soviet era. It seeks to explore how their personal and cultural histories influence players' experiences and their perceptions and interpretations of the Soviet past in the game. This analysis is critical to understanding how personal and collective memories shape interpretations of cultural and historical narratives.

Research outline

The dissertation begins with an *Introduction* section that sets the context for the *Atomic Heart* case study. It defines the research problem, outlines the objectives of the study, and presents the guiding research questions.

Following this, the *Literature Review* section will present a theoretical framework for an analysis that will delve into cultural memory, nostalgia, their mediation, and their specific application in the Soviet context and video games.

Next, the *Methodology and Methods* section will present the methodological framework, detailing the qualitative methods used, such as visual analysis and interviews, and describing the sampling methods and thematic coding processes used to analyze the interview data.

Visual analysis: exploring Atomic Heart's aesthetic landscapes will discuss how *Atomic Heart* uses visual elements such as architecture, color and everyday objects to create immersive environments and how these elements can be interpreted.

Next, in the section *Interviews analysis: exploring players' perception of the USSR in Atomic Heart*, the perception of the Soviet Union by players in *Atomic Heart* will be explored. It will cover initial impressions, emotional connections, cultural influences, and reflections on the game's representation of the USSR, its historical accuracy, the use of irony and satire, and their impact on historical narratives.

Finally, the *Conclusion* section will discuss the results of the visual and interview analysis, answering the research questions posed at the beginning. It will also address suggestions for improvements and topics for future research.

Literature review

Introduction

This literature review begins by examining the concept of memory, focusing on its collective and cultural aspects, and the ways in which it links personal experience and public consciousness, influencing historical perception. The discussion then turns to the dynamic nature of cultural memory to understand how symbols and narratives of the past are reinterpreted in a contemporary context, evoking historical reflection. The review further delves into the topic of nostalgia, particularly its role in cultural memory, and explores how it facilitates emotional and reflective engagement with historical events. In addition, the review explores the topics of mediated memories and nostalgia to understand how memories are formed and transmitted through various media. It also examines how mediated nostalgia can be a powerful tool of reflection and manipulation in cultural and political contexts. Finally, the review discusses existing research on the depiction of the USSR in video games, examines how these depictions influence player perceptions, and identifies gaps in existing research.

Memory: collective or cultural

Memory is "the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level" (Assmann, 2008, p.109). This faculty acts as a crucial bridge, connecting personal experiences with the collective consciousness of a society. The continuum of memory spans from the biological mechanisms that provide personal memories to the collective memories deeply rooted in cultural practices. The evolution of memory research, particularly noticeable since the 1980s, highlights the complex interaction between individual and collective memories in shaping our understanding of the past.

The 20th century, filled with a variety of traumas, from genocides to political repression, pushed societies to collectively introspect about their past. According to Blight (2009), this period of reflection not only revived suppressed narratives, but also led to the reimagining of marginalized stories through the lens of art and media. This transformation points to a growing public interest in the dynamics of memory—both remembering and forgetting—stimulated by the broader socio-political context and the rise of identity politics.

The relational nature of memory, developed by scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs, emphasizes the deeply social essence of memory. Halbwachs (1992) argues that personal memories are invariably embedded in the context of collective experience. This interaction significantly influences the formation of individual identity and forms the basis of social collective identity.

Halbwachs (1992) articulates the concept of "collective memory" as an active past shaping present identity, a concept that contrasts with autobiographical memory, which, although personal, is influenced by social norms. His theories suggest that memory becomes history when the past "is no longer included within the sphere of thought of the existing groups" (Halbwachs, 1980, p.106), that is when it extends beyond the living communication of groups, moving into "objectivised culture" such as texts and rituals. This transition highlights the difference between lived memories and historical records, which may not always correspond directly to lived experience. Jeffrey Olick expands the concept of collective memory, focusing on its formation through public discourses and cultural narratives (Olick & Robbins, 1998; Olick, 1999). It highlights the role of cultural artifacts and commemorative practices in creating shared histories and identities, illustrating how societies embody and preserve the past to build cohesion and maintain collective solidarity.

Art historian Aby Warburg's pioneering concept of "social memory," (Assmann, 2008, p.110) which emphasizes the role of images as memory carriers in cultural contexts, further enriches the discourse on memory. Warburg's research, especially through his "Mnemosyne" project, was aimed at exploring the "afterlife" of classical antiquity in Western culture (ibid). Specializing in iconic memory, Warburg's methods influenced the broader field of cultural memory, a concept later explicitly defined and expanded in scholarly discourse. An example of this is Thomas Mann's Joseph novels, where he attempts to reconstruct a specific cultural memory, thereby addressing European cultural memory and its Jewish roots in times of anti-Semitism, underscoring the profound link between visual culture, historical reception, and collective identity (ibid).

Building on the work of Halbwachs and Warburg, Jan Assmann (1995) makes significant contributions to the understanding of collective memory, introducing the concepts of communicative and cultural memory, which provide insight into how societies preserve the past. Communicative memory, echoing Halbwachs' idea of collective memory, lives within the framework of everyday interactions and is limited to a period of one hundred years (ibid,

p.127). On the other hand, cultural memory, which aligns with Halbwachs' idea of "history" and builds on the pioneering efforts of Warburg and Mann, extends beyond any one individual's lifespan to encompass the collective knowledge and practices that underlie society (ibid, pp.128-133).

Therefore, Assmann defines cultural memory as "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (Assmann 1995, p.126). This definition highlights how cultural memory facilitates the transmission of values, beliefs and historical narratives from generation to generation, thereby fostering a sense of continuity and collective identity.

Although the literature review touches on issues of identity formation as they intersect significantly with memory studies, the primary purpose of this study is to examine the cultural responses of players, leaving identity shaping for future research. Therefore, the focus on cultural memory in the analysis is important because it illuminates not only players' perceptions of historical elements in *Atomic Heart*, but also how these elements resonate with their specific cultural and historical context.

By further exploring cultural memory as a dynamic and active process, this research aims to deepen the understanding of how contemporary beliefs are formed and how they influence players' interactions with the game.

Dynamics of cultural memory

Although Jan Assmann describes cultural memory as seemingly static, focusing primarily on stable symbols, his work reveals the dynamic nature of cultural memory through its active interaction with symbolic representations and contemporary contexts. This active interaction and constant evolution highlight the variability and adaptability of cultural memory that goes far beyond a simple set of immutable symbols.

Firstly, he highlights how our memories are enriched not only through interactions with people, but also through interaction with tangible symbols such as monuments, foods and landscapes that form our collective memory (Assmann, 2008). These symbols, Assmann explains, "do not have a memory of their own, but they may remind us, may trigger our memory, because they carry memories which we have invested into them" (ibid, p.111). These findings of cultural symbols serving as active participants in memory formation are

particularly relevant to the analysis of *Atomic Heart*. The game's depiction of the Soviet era uses such symbols, inviting players to examine and re-evaluate their historical significance, thereby enriching their cultural consciousness.

Next, Assmann delves deeper into the dynamics between historical heritage and current realities, noting that "cultural memory works by reconstruction, that is, it always relates its knowledge to the real and contemporary situation" (Assmann, 1995, p. 130). He further explores the concept of reflexivity, emphasizing the capacity of cultural memory for self-reflection and evolution, as manifested in the practical reinterpretation of social practices and how societies construct their collective self-image through cultural symbols (ibid., p. 132). These ideas about the reconstructive and reflective properties of cultural memory provide a compelling basis for analyzing *Atomic Heart*. The game engages players in a reflexive dialogue with Soviet history, embodying Assmann's ideas by a possibility to change the perception of the past. Consequently, this interaction between narrative and player response highlights cultural memory as a dynamic and evolving process.

Building on Jan Assman's framework, Aleida Assmann and Ann Rigney introduce additional layers to the dynamic nature of cultural memory.

Aleida Assmann emphasizes that we are more likely to forget than to remember and this "continuous process of forgetting is part of social normality" (2008, p.97). It encourages us to actively retain and prioritize some memories over others. This results in a dynamic interaction between what is preserved in public memory (the canon) and what lies dormant in the archives, waiting to be reinterpreted (ibid, pp.98-99). Also this forgetting tends to be the norm due to a lack of cultural resources (Rigney, 2005, p.15). It implies that culture is constantly being created and maintained through processes such as selection, representation, and interpretation (ibid). In other words, culture is not something static or predetermined but is actively shaped by individuals and communities as they make choices about what to emphasize, how to portray it, and how to understand it. In the analysis, this selectivity is critical to understanding how *Atomic Heart* deals with the complexities of Soviet history, engaging players in a process that blurs the boundaries between remembering and forgetting. Play becomes a means through which historical narratives are not only presented, but also questioned and reinterpreted.

Further, Rigney argues that cultural memory is primarily formed through "vicarious recollection" (2005, p.15). in which memories are formed through representations rather than

direct experience. This process emphasizes the influence of mediated forms such as texts, media and communicative acts, especially when events extend into the past. Consequently, individuals and groups construct their historical understandings from cultural artifacts and practices, and memories circulate and are transmitted through these mediated forms. Video games such as *Atomic Heart* can serve as modern vehicles for Soviet narratives. Using gameplay and storytelling, the game not only promotes remembrance of the Soviet era, but also reinterprets it by demonstrating the influence of cultural practices and memory-shaping techniques on the creation of collective memories.

The concepts of mediation and remediation, as articulated by Bolter and Grusin (1999) and expanded by Rigney (2016), further highlight the dynamics of cultural memory. Mediation involves using various media, such as print, images, film, and social media, to shape our understanding of the past (ibid, p.69). Remediation transforms this content across media platforms, ensuring stories remain relevant and accessible (ibid). This ongoing process ensures that historical narratives resonate with contemporary audiences and remain embedded in our collective consciousness. Detailed exploration of these concepts and their connection to the analysis will be further discussed in the *Mediated Cultural Memory* section.

From the studies discussed, it appears that adopting a dynamic view of cultural memory to analyze *Atomic Heart* allows for a detailed examination of how the game negotiates perceptions of the Soviet era. This approach emphasizes the role of mediated, indirect memories and the ability of cultural symbols to trigger and transform collective memory. By focusing on the symbolic elements of a video game, the analysis delves into the processes of selectivity, reflexivity, and adaptation that underlie the evolution of cultural memory. Taken together, these dynamics highlight how cultural memory is not a static repository, but a vibrant, evolving dialogue between past and present, mediated by gameplay, that influences players' interactions and understanding of their cultural heritage.

Memory and nostalgia

Memory serves as the foundation of nostalgia, a concept extensively explored in fields such as psychology. As detailed by Cavanaugh (1989, pp.602-604) the act of remembering is inherent in the nostalgic experience. This memory, according to him, is not just a memory of the past, it is imbued with an emotional layer that gives the memory a bittersweet longing that can change our perception of the past, making it more idyllic than it might actually have been

(ibid, p.603). This emotional interaction with our memories is critical to maintaining our sense of self and continuity over time (ibid, p.604).

Batcho's work complements Cavanaugh's ideas by emphasizing that nostalgia does not simply reflect a longing for the past, but actively deepens the emotional significance of memories, especially those associated with relationships and key life events (1998, p. 428).

Thus, memory is not simply a recollection of the past, but a complex emotional interaction that can influence the perception of the past. This interplay of memory and emotion in nostalgia is not just a personal experience but is intricately linked to how media portray and evoke the past.

In media studies, this interpretation of nostalgia is especially significant. Media not only reflect but also influence collective memories, weaving personal nostalgia into broader cultural narratives. Jan Assmann (1995) expands on this idea through his discussed concept of cultural memory, which shows how individual memories merge into a collective cultural structure that defines group identity and continuity. His work illustrates how cultural memory acts as a repository of collective experiences and symbols, enriched by layers of individual nostalgia that contribute to collective storytelling.

These dynamics are critical to understanding how media such as the video game *Atomic Heart* interact with and represent collective perceptions of the Soviet era, using nostalgia to both reflect and influence those perceptions. Thus, the study of nostalgia, especially its role in cultural memory and media, will be a major focus of this dissertation, and its underlying concepts, dimensions, and dynamics will be explored in subsequent sections.

Conceptualizing nostalgia

Rooted in the Greek words nostos (return) and algos (pain), nostalgia encompasses a complex set of emotions and feelings associated with longing for the past. Its evolution extends from a medical diagnosis to a romanticized feeling that ultimately leads to a psychological and cultural phenomenon. A turning point in the definition of nostalgia was Davis's distinction between "nostalgia" and "homesickness" (1979). He showed how terms such as "warmth", "old times" and "childhood" gradually became symbolic representations of nostalgia (ibid, p.4). Batcho (1998, p.428) further refined this definition by portraying nostalgia as a sentimental longing for past moments or places filled with joyful memories, thereby presenting it in a predominantly positive light and promoting self-actualization.

In contemporary discourse, within the realms of culture and sociology, Svetlana Boym (2001) provides a nuanced understanding of nostalgia as a cultural and literary trope. According to Boym, nostalgia is "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (ibid, p.xiii) It encompasses a complex mix of emotions, including yearning, sadness, and longing, often triggered by memories of a cherished place, time, or experience from the past. Svetlana Boym says that

> At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress (ibid, p.xv).

She implies that nostalgia offers refuge from fear of the future, inviting a return to the comfort of a familiar and often embellished past. This view is echoed and expanded upon by Bauman's concept of "retrotopia," which he defines as the desire for an unreachable utopia—a carefully constructed, idealized version of the past located in the consciousness of the present (2017, Introduction). Bauman's retrotopia also reflects a desire to retreat from the complexities and uncertainties of contemporary society into a simplified, romanticized version of the past (ibid.).

Boym (2001) further identifies two different modalities of nostalgia: *restorative (or utopian)* and *reflective (or ironic)*. Restorative nostalgia is characterized by a desire to "rebuild the lost home" and "manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past" (ibid, p.41). In other words a desire to return to an idealized past, recreating or reviving past traditions, customs and values (ibid, pp.41-48). It is an attempt to reconstruct a sense of continuity and identity, much like Bauman's "retrotopia" in its pursuit of a golden age of perceived stability and belonging. A case in point is the restoration of the Sistine Chapel, which aimed to restore the frescoes to their original splendor but has been criticized for potentially erasing the historical essence of the work of art, suggesting a tension between preserving and idealizing the past (ibid, pp.45-48).

In contrast, reflective nostalgia, as Boym describes it, acknowledges the impossibility of returning to the past, instead promoting a critical engagement with memory (ibid, pp.49-55). It encourages exploration of the complexities of the past, embracing its joys and sorrows without idealization, thereby enriching understanding of the present and identity. Boym mentions that "restorative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory" (ibid, p.49). Although they may draw on the

same symbols and memories, these forms of nostalgia diverge in their narratives; restorative nostalgia leans toward collective symbols and shared traditions, while reflective nostalgia delves into personal stories and the nuances of individual memories, often deferring the idea of return (ibid). Reflective nostalgia, according to Boym, often takes on a more "ironic and humorous" tone compared to its serious restorative counterpart (ibid). She argues that even deeply emotional memories tinged with nostalgia do not free people from compassion, judgment or critical reflection (ibid, p.50). This form of nostalgia provides a dual engagement with the past, providing emotional resonance while promoting critical evaluation and self-reflection.

Boym highlights the Nostalgija Snack Bar in Ljubljana as an example of reflective nostalgia (ibid, pp.51-55). Rather than replicating a specific historical period, the cafe playfully incorporates Yugoslav pop culture into a modern Central European café setting. It merges nostalgia with contemporary tastes, showcasing the fluid interaction between the past and present. Instead of glorifying the past, the snack bar offers a whimsical exploration of shared memories, using humor and irony to engage in reflective nostalgia subtly.

The analysis of *Atomic Heart* will primarily use the concept of reflective nostalgia, consistent with the goal of exploring players' critical engagement with the past within the *Atomic Heart* gaming experience. This perspective allows one to explore the nuanced ways in which the game uses historical settings and themes not only for their aesthetic value, but also as tools to stimulate thought, emotional engagement, and perhaps criticism or satire of the Soviet era. This approach makes it easier to decode the deeper historical and ideological themes embedded in *Atomic Heart*, especially in its presentation of Soviet history, politics and ideology.

Moreover, taking reflective nostalgia into account also acknowledges the potential insights that may arise from considering elements of restorative nostalgia. This aspect of nostalgia may resonate with players who have direct or familial ties to the Soviet era, influencing their gaming experiences and perceptions. It may also explain why players may be drawn to video games like *Atomic Heart* that evoke a nostalgia for the past or a desire to experience an idealized version of history. This form of nostalgia can influence how players interact with the game's setting and narrative, seeking comfort or familiarity with recreated Soviet-era symbols and environments.

Delving deeper into the nostalgic studies, Fred Davis (1979) presents a detailed look at the individual and social functions of nostalgia, complimenting Boym's focus on the subjective and cultural dimensions of longing for the past. Davis distinguishes between personal nostalgia, which is rooted in individual memories and experiences, and collective nostalgia, which is associated with shared cultural memories that cause collective longing. This concept allows us to explore the nuances of how *Atomic Heart* deals with nostalgia by connecting individual experience to broader collective memory, much like Halbwachs (1992) distinction between individual and collective memory.

Fred Davis (1979) also discusses the distinction between direct and indirect experiences of nostalgia, highlighting how individuals may engage with nostalgic feelings differently based on their personal encounters with the past. Holak, Matveev and Havlena (2008, p.173) expand on it, defining that

> direct experience refers back to events in the individual's own life, while indirect experience results from stories told by friends or family members or from information in books, movies, or other media.

In other words direct memory could involve revisiting a childhood home, listening to music from a particular era, or reminiscing about past events. On the other hand, indirect experiences of nostalgia may occur when individuals encounter representations or reminders of the past through media, cultural artifacts, or shared stories. They further categorize nostalgic experiences into personal, interpersonal, cultural, and virtual types, where personal nostalgia draws from one's direct encounters, interpersonal nostalgia comes from sharing others' memories, cultural nostalgia is tied to collective experiences that shape group identity, and virtual nostalgia is influenced by media representations (ibid).

In their study, they also identify categories of nostalgia that are particularly resonant in the Russian context (ibid). This understanding complements the research of the nostalgic feelings of the post-Soviet generation towards Soviet times. Nostalgia can be categorized as direct, stemming from personal encounters with Soviet elements in childhood and throughout life; indirect, generated by common living conditions where three generations often share a small space, intertwining their history and Soviet heritage; and cultural, a form of nostalgia that serves as a collective longing for the symbols, music, and traditions of the Soviet era, influencing everything from public holidays to fashion. This common feeling unites generations, merging memories of the past with modern generations memories. This is not

just a nostalgia for the past, but a way to maintain a sense of shared history and continuity amid rapid social change and globalization.

Mediated memories and nostalgia

Mediated cultural memories

The previous discussions on cultural memory explored how it extends beyond direct, live communication. Assmann (1995) suggested that cultural memory goes beyond the framework of live communication, it is transmitted mainly not through direct interaction with it, but rather indirectly. This perspective was supported by Rigney (2005), who highlighted that individuals and groups often construct their historical beliefs through media, particularly when revisiting events from the distant past. This highlights the mediated nature of memory transfer.

José van Dijck further develops this idea by evolving the concept of cultural memory from mere representation to active mediation, positioning material records as crucial mediators between individual experience and collective memory, and between past and present (2004, p.270). Van Dijck emphasizes that mediated memories, including personal events recorded privately and individual collections of cultural content preserved through various media, are critical in shaping our autobiographical and cultural identities (ibid, p.261). This perspective highlights the dynamic and interactive nature of media as an integral tool in the development of both personal narratives and shared cultural heritage.

Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (2009), on the other hand, focus on the communal aspects of cultural memory. They argue that

> cultural memory is itself premised on the idea that memory can only become collective as part of a continuous process whereby memories are shared with the help of symbolic artefacts that mediate between individuals and, in the process, create communality across both space and time (ibid, p.1).

This means that this process of mediation is dynamic and constantly influenced by how memories are represented and disseminated through various symbolic artifacts (ibid). This dynamic process of mediation is critical to understanding how cultural memory develops. The media doesn't just convey information; it actively shapes our understanding of the past. By conveying our experience of historical events, the media set the agenda for how societies remember and forget, constantly reconfiguring relationships with the past (ibid, p.2). This

mediation involves not only the reproduction of past media, but also the transformation of these media forms to meet modern needs - a process known as "remediation".

The concept of remediation by Rigney discussed earlier emphasizes how media content is transferred from old media formats to new ones, constantly revitalizing and creating relevant historical narratives for modern audiences. This process acknowledges that consumers bring their historical and cultural knowledge to their media interactions. They don't approach the media empty-handed; instead, they bring a wealth of accumulated knowledge and memories. This pre-existing cultural memory shapes how they perceive and interpret new media within the context of their own cultural experiences.

In this analysis, the process of mediation in *Atomic Heart* exemplifies how play serves as a contemporary channel of cultural memory. By actively reimagining elements of the Soviet era during gameplay, the game provides a reflexive and critical engagement with the past, underscoring the nuanced role of media in shaping collective memory.

Similarly, remediation in video games like *Atomic Heart* brings historical narratives to life for contemporary audiences. By using modern gaming technology, the game refreshes the aesthetics and ideologies of the Soviet era, offering a dynamic reimagining of historical events. This not only makes the past accessible but also engages players in an active reinterpretation and critique of historical contexts. The game's approach serves not just to satisfy players' nostalgia but also encourages them to critically engage with and reflect on the past through the lens of modern sensibilities and technologies.

Mediated soviet nostalgia

The examination of Soviet nostalgia in media, especially within the post-Soviet context, provides a compelling case study of how nostalgia is not only remembered but actively constructed and manipulated. Scholars like Ekaterina Kalinina offer insightful analyses of how nostalgia for the Soviet past is represented, constructed, and engaged with through various media forms, including television, film, digital platforms, and public commemorations (2014, p.19). She argues that Soviet media not only inform viewers about history but also recreate historical experiences, fostering deeper engagement with collective memory, social continuity and nostalgia (ibid, pp.135, 147, 157-159). Kalinina observes that television programs from the 1990s and 2010s use

a wide variety of archived media content, including clips from dramatic, newsreel and documentary, cartoon and propaganda films, to help an older group of viewers revisit their past experiences and to educate a younger group about the history of their country and the life of their ancestors (ibid, p. 135).

In other words, these media stimulate memories, encourage discussion of the Soviet experience, and encourage reflection on the past, while introducing younger generations to their cultural heritage. However, representations of the past vary depending on the medium and genre (ibid, p.228). Documentaries like *Nasha Gordost'* [Our Pride] celebrate Soviet achievements and lament losses, while programs like *Legendi SSSR* [The Legends of the USSR] use humor and irony to portray historical events, focusing more on daily life and entertainment (ibid, p. 151-156). Therefore, these differing representations contribute to varying perceptions among audiences. For example an individual, involved in the creation of these programs, expressed a stronger sense of nostalgia evoked by the second program, since she "associates nostalgia with the remembering of everyday life rather than with more official aspects of the Soviet universe" (ibid, p.156).

This distinction underscores the importance of understanding how media representations not only influence individual and collective perceptions of the past but also serve as a bridge between past and present experiences, influencing cultural beliefs in post-Soviet societies.

Experiencing post-Soviet nostalgia

The concept of post-Soviet youth's nostalgia for the Soviet past further illustrates the relationship between media representations and nostalgic longing, shedding light on how this generation experiences and interprets nostalgia in contemporary discourse.

Zlotnikova and Kuimova (2021) delve into this phenomenon of youth nostalgia for the Soviet era, viewing it through the lens of idealization and romanticization. They argue that young people who didn't live in the USSR are attracted by "psycho-emotional reactions", such as the value of friendship, love for life, collectivism, stability, etc., which are missing in the present (ibid, p.137). Therefore, they "скучают о том, чего им не предлагает действительность" [they miss for what reality doesn't offer them] (ibid). Their findings highlight a common belief among young people that they fear an uncertain future and may perceive it negatively, contributing to a nostalgic attachment to the perceived comforts of the past (ibid, p.141). This tendency towards nostalgia correlates with earlier discussed Bauman's

concept of retrotopia (2017), which explains how the past is idealized against the backdrop of a changing temporal landscape.

Sapogova's insights (2019) further illuminate this phenomenon, suggesting that limited knowledge of the past enables uncritical positivity and the extraction of inappropriate meanings, contributing to the creation of mythologized representations of the Soviet era.

On the other hand, Smolina's analysis of nostalgic online communities sheds light on the nostalgia experienced by people growing up during the Soviet era, portraying it as a form of "collective therapy" based on shared childhood memories (2014, p.135). For this demographic group, reflecting on their Soviet childhood serves as a means of self-identification and social connection (ibid, p.136). Smolina also emphasizes that memory often privileges the positive and meaningful aspects of the past, effectively presenting the Soviet era in a more vivid light through the lens of childhood memories (ibid).

Mandy Duijn expands on the theme and highlights how selective attention to the positive aspects of Soviet life (2020, p.26), facilitated by online communities, allows for collective expressions of nostalgia (ibid, p.31). This selective nostalgia not only serves as a coping mechanism for the present, but also serves as a platform for critical reflection on the past (ibid, p.22). By focusing on the more vibrant aspects of Soviet life, people in these online communities experience a form of collective nostalgia that both acknowledges the complexities of history while fostering a sense of collectivity and resilience in the face of contemporary events.

Recognizing the varied ways in which nostalgia is experienced and expressed enriches our analysis of *Atomic Heart's* cultural meaning and impact, and will be crucial for interpreting interviewees' subtle responses and understanding their nostalgic connections.

Generally, as observed, nostalgia can serve as a powerful emotional anchor that enhances social cohesion and personal sense of belonging through collective memories. However, this same mechanism may often be leveraged by political entities to manipulate public sentiment.

Soviet nostalgia in political discourse

Svetlana Boym's (2001) analysis shows that nostalgia operates as a powerful tool in politics, serving as both an emotional salve and a mechanism for shaping public perception, especially in the Russian context. According to her "nostalgia works as a double-edged sword: it seems

to be an emotional antidote to politics, and thus remains the best political tool" (ibid, p.58). This duality highlights the complex role that government and media play in manipulating nostalgia. By celebrating the positive aspects of the Soviet era and hiding its shortcomings, promoting Soviet values and myths, reconstructing important Soviet events, and using images of Soviet leaders such as Stalin and Lenin in a humorous or light-hearted manner in the media, the government effectively promotes nostalgic remembrance of the Soviet era (ibid, p.57-71). Such strategies therefore not only divert attention from contemporary governance problems, but also create a national identity that looks favorably on the past, thereby giving current leaders significant political leverage.

Mazur further discusses how nostalgia plays a key role in societies that have experienced significant upheavals, such as wars or revolutions (2019, p.184). He introduces the concept of "nostalgia of catastrophes," where nostalgia goes beyond mere emotional memory and becomes a psychological response to traumatic change, using reconstructed positive images of the past to counteract negative experiences of the present (ibid). This form of nostalgia often creates myths about a "golden age,"—a past era idealized as a time of peace, prosperity, and harmony, effectively using nostalgia as a political tool to shape public opinion (ibid). Mazur outlines several forms of these nostalgic myths: prosperity myth, which extols an utopian vision in which everyone prospers; achievement myth, that celebrates an era marked by unprecedented progress in various fields; strength myth, which honors notions of national greatness and heroism (ibid, pp.198-201). These myths glorify past successes and heroism that are widely recognized by citizens as highlights of their history (ibid, p.203). The propagation of these myths serves state interests, using nostalgia not only as a means of healing, but also as a control mechanism to consolidate power and shape public opinion.

Developing this theme, Tselykovsky discusses how political discourse uses Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia (2001), using these "golden age myths," to idealize the Soviet past and reinforce a narrative of historical greatness (2023, p.35). Examples of this include actions such as the adoption of a new national anthem to an old Soviet tune, as well as the use of Soviet symbols in public events such as Immortal Regiment (commemoration of relatives who died in the war) marches and Victory Day celebrations, which strengthen national identity and social unity (ibid, p.38).

In contrast, Boym's reflective nostalgia (2001), which includes a more nuanced and often critical view of the past, dominates media representations (Tselykovsky, 2023, p.36). This

form of nostalgia encourages reflection and dialogue, helping to balance celebration of the Soviet era with critical examination of its complexities (ibid). Its purpose is to provide a means to overcome historical trauma and promote a more balanced relationship with history, as seen in media depictions of the collapse of the USSR that involve collective reflection rather than mere glorification (ibid, p.37).

On the other hand, Sullivan's analysis suggests that "if the Russian government seeks to propagate feelings of Soviet nostalgia for political purposes, then it does so at considerable risk to the livelihoods of its own citizens" (2022, p.139). Thus, such nostalgia promotion poses risks to both the perceived legitimacy of a government and the well-being of its citizens, suggesting that its use should be approached with caution (ibid, pp.139-140).

Additionally, Sullivan suggests that nostalgia for the Soviet Union may decline as the generation with first-hand memories of the USSR decreases and young Russians adapt to new social norms (2022, p. 137). Conversely, Mazur (2019, p.204) acknowledges the potential for reducing nostalgia, but also suggests that it may be increased not by personal memories, but by idealized myths about the Soviet past. This growth may be driven by a nostalgic cultural climate, social pessimism, and a crisis of ideological and political leadership, which highlights the enduring influence and complexity of Soviet nostalgia in Russia's social and political structure.

This dynamic between declining first-hand nostalgia and potential growth fueled by cultural myths highlights the importance of studying post-Soviet demographics. As direct experience of the Soviet era fades, inherited cultural memory plays an important role in shaping contemporary views. This shift opens up the prospect of exploring interactions with Soviet-era elements in *Atomic Heart,* exploring how these inherited narratives influence current perceptions of history.

Although this study does not primarily focus on the propaganda aspect of Soviet nostalgia, it does acknowledge its potential influence on public perception and collective memory. The exploration in *Atomic Heart* shows how players interact with the game's content in ways that reflect a complex relationship with the past—engaging critically with the representations rather than receiving them passively. By analyzing these interactions, the study seeks to understand how cultural memories influence contemporary views of history among the post-Soviet generation and how these memories are negotiated through modern media platforms like video games.

USSR in video games

Rapid digitalization has led to the fact that video games have turned from simple entertainment into an integral part of mass culture (Tselykovsky, 2023, p.410), asserting their role as comprehensive cultural artifacts. As noted by Pavlovsky (2023, p.18), a video game combines literature, spatial and visual arts, music, game mechanics and program code, allowing us to say that a video game is a "unified work of art". Thus, he believes that video games significantly increase the possibility of influencing cultural memory through interactivity and involvement, reflection on lived experience and through spatial images, and virtualization and simulation of historical worlds (ibid). This level of immersion in the virtual world is not available to other media.

As Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen (2008, p.2) suggest, video games establish a clearly mediated relationship with history, situating them alongside genres like fantasy, science fiction, and sports within the gaming industry. Citing games like *Call of Duty* and the *Swift Boat* as an example, they demonstrate that

> games can use history for the purposes of politics, education, historical revision, or entertainment, but in all of these instances, a sense of nostalgia establishes the relationship between the real present and a virtual past. (ibid)

Video games are thus becoming a key media platform, providing a complex and engaging way to explore and interpret the Soviet past. They connect personal agency with collective memory, allowing players to experience first-hand the complexities of history and reflect on its implications in a modern context.

Portrayal of USSR in video games

Tselykovsky's analysis (2023) delves into the portrayal of the Soviet Union in both foreign and Russian video games, exploring how these representations intersect with historical and cultural perceptions. It is noteworthy that the Soviet Union is often associated with the Great Patriotic War within Russian political symbolism (ibid, p.411). Therefore, when depicting war in foreign titles like *Command & Conquer: Red Alert*, *Hearts of Iron*, and others, the USSR is typically an aggressor with ambitions to dominate the West (ibid, p.412). However, according to Belov in Tselykovsky's study, players' personal connections to Soviet culture - through family ties and Soviet cinema - help them develop a more nuanced view of the USSR, softening the negative images found in these games (ibid).

Conversely, Russian video games offer a more diverse representation of the USSR (ibid). *Atomic Heart,* for example, imagines a utopian communist society, weaving elements of Soviet everyday life into its narrative to tap into the nostalgic feelings of some Russian gamers (ibid). On the other hand, *ATOM RPG* paints a grim picture of nuclear war and a grim post-apocalyptic future (ibid).

These alternate history video game studies serve as a reflective tool for players, asking them to "replay" history and consider different trajectories of the Soviet Union. The genre not only entertains, but also encourages players to think critically about and reflect on the complexities of Soviet history.

Building on the discussion of historical representation, it is essential to explore how nostalgia is specifically mediated and manifested within these games, impacting players' engagement with history.

Nostalgia in Atomic Heart

Postnikova and Igaeva note the presence of a more aestheticized nostalgia in games like *Atomic Heart*, where visual appeal and intricate details take precedence over deep historical context and complex storylines (2023, p.87). This emphasis on visual appeal, they say, reduces the player's ability to use their imagination and interpret the content more deeply (ibid, p.88). They explain this by saying that modern video games increasingly prioritize commercial gain and visual gratification, abandoning the intricate storytelling and semantic complexity of earlier games (ibid).

Nikolai (2023), in his analysis of nostalgia and post-apocalyptic futures in *Atomic Heart* and Fallout 4, has a similar opinion. He highlights how nostalgia is often mediated through elements that resonate with familiar media, such as the cartoon *Nu, pogodi!* or songs by Alla Pugacheva (ibid, p.255). These cultural references, he argues, play a more significant role in shaping players' perceptions of the past than the games' narratives or the deeper political and cultural meanings they might convey (ibid). Therefore, games influence the historical imagination, changing ideas about the past, present and future, and making nostalgia more superficial and focused on immediate interests. This causes memory and thinking about the future to become less reflective and more pragmatic (ibid, p.256).

While previous studies provide valuable insights into how video games represent and mediate nostalgia, they still examine it primarily from a commercial or superficial perspective, with

less attention paid to how it influences cultural memory and reflective engagement of young people growing up in post-USSR realities. These studies begin to address these issues, but mostly limiting the research to theoretical analysis rather than supporting it by empirical evidence. Therefore, this research gap leaves open questions about how nostalgia evoked by video games interacts with broader social narratives and historical understanding.

Additionally, there is particularly little research on how players' cultural heritage and personal experiences influence their perceptions of Soviet elements in games such as *Atomic Heart*. Examining how players reflexively interact with these historical elements can shed light on the nuanced interactions between personal experience, cultural context, and interpretations of nostalgia in games. This approach can improve the understanding of how modern people interact with and reinterpret historical narratives in interactive media.

Methodology and methods

Methodological approach

This study focuses on a specific case study of the *Atomic Heart* game to explore how players in the post-Soviet sphere perceive and interact with the depiction of the Soviet Union in the *Atomic Heart* video game. The choice of case study methodology, based on Flybjerg's (2001) advocacy of the "power of good example," serves as a fundamental method for understanding the complex layers of human experience and behavior. This approach is particularly effective in providing the rich contextual knowledge that is necessary for a deep and nuanced understanding of reality, as Flyvbjerg emphasizes the importance of using detailed case studies to identify insights that may be missed by broader surveys (pp. 71–72). Taking into account Flybjerg's phronetic approach, this study involves a reflexive analysis that goes beyond simple evaluative or definitive answers. Instead, it aims to delve into the intricacies of how specific visual and narrative elements in *Atomic Heart* emotionally resonate with players, exploring how these elements influence their perceptions and understanding of the Soviet past.

This methodological choice is closely aligned with the aims of this study, which aims not only to catalog reactions, but also to interpret the meanings behind these emotional reactions. The adoption of qualitative research methods is critical in this endeavor as it allows for in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perceptions. These methods facilitate the observation, description, interpretation, and analysis of how people experience, act, and perceive themselves and their environments (Bazeley, 2013, p. 4).

Employing a range of qualitative methods further strengthens the rigor of the research and deepens the understanding of these complex social experiences (Brennen, 2017, p. 5). Therefore, the methodology of the study includes two main stages: visual analysis and semi-structured qualitative interviews.

The initial stage of the methodology involves visual analysis, which aims to examine the visual choices of game design, how they affect the structure of the game world and potentially impact players. Although Gillian Rose emphasizes the power of visual analysis to uncover the social meaning of images (Rose, 2016, p. 377), in this study the visual analysis serves primarily to provide contextual background and deepen the understanding of interview responses. Therefore, the basis of the analysis revolves around qualitative interviews, which

allow to obtain genuine reactions and insights directly from the players. Through this approach, a comprehensive understanding of how *Atomic Heart* resonates with people in the post-Soviet region is aimed to be provided, highlighting the emotional and cultural connections they draw from their gaming experiences.

Visual analysis

Gillian Rose's methodology offers a structured approach to analyzing visual content, emphasizing the importance of understanding the different contexts in which images operate (2016). Within its framework, this includes four sites: the production site, which details the creation of the image; image site focused on visual content; circulation site that studies where and how an image travels; and the audiencing site, exploring how the image is perceived and interpreted (ibid, pp. 24-46). With regard to computer games, Rose advocates what she calls "compositional interpretation," which, while recognizing the technological aspects of image production, is fundamentally "concerned with the image itself in its compositional modality" (ibid., p. 84). Thus, the analysis of the video game *Atomic Heart* will primarily focus on the image site, reflecting on how visual elements contribute to the game's atmosphere and thematic expressions. This approach is not only about examining the aesthetic components, but also understanding how these visuals convey the deeper themes and ideas that make up the game's narrative. Additionally, the study will examine the audience site to evaluate how different players may emotionally engage with the game depending on their cultural and personal backgrounds (Appendix 1).

Rose also emphasizes the significance of the three modalities—technological, compositional, and social—within her four-site model, each serving as an aspect through which an image can be analyzed (Rose, 2016, p.25). In this study, attention will be given to all three modalities, with a particular focus on the compositional (as Rose suggested) and social aspects. Compositional modality is critical as it helps to understand how the game's visual structure influences the player's perceptions and emotions, while social modality is important for examining how *Atomic Heart* reflects and critiques various social phenomena, offering insight into both historical and modern social discourses.

Recognizing the sheer volume of possible images in modern computer games, Gillian Rose (ibid, p. 63) highlights the impracticality of analyzing every visual element. Therefore, to make the analysis of *Atomic Heart* more manageable, the focus was placed on three important themes: architecture, color, and everyday life objects. These areas were specifically

chosen because they strongly reflect the visual and thematic dynamics of the game, thereby allowing for a focused and meaningful exploration of its artistic elements.

The image sampling approach is based in part on Bainbridge's method described by Rose of collecting visual data by taking screenshots during gameplay, which he later categorizes into themes and analyzes (ibid, p.64). However, unlike Bainbridge, who collected 22,000 screenshots without pre-selecting topics, this study uses a more targeted method. By aligning the screenshot process with predefined thematic categories, the analysis is simplified and focuses more closely on images that significantly contribute to *Atomic Heart's* narrative and aesthetic structure.

Although this approach can be considered somewhat subjective, the main goal was a thorough familiarization with the visuals of the game and creating a contextual basis for the interpretive method of interview analysis.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews

The study used qualitative research involving semi-structured individual interviews to gain access to the values and understandings of the interviewees (Byrne, 2018, p.469). An interview guide (Appendix 2) was developed and refined through a pilot interview that eliminated similar questions and added new ones to better understand players' emotions and perspectives on emerging topics. The final set of questions was designed to be flexible and changeable throughout the dialogue, such as changing the sequence depending on responses or introducing additional questions to delve deeper into the topic (Brennen, 2017, p.29). Some similar questions were retained in the interview guide to capture the varied responses of the participants and ensure that no subtle nuances in their responses were overlooked.

The interview guide was structured around three main themes: perceptions of Soviet elements and associated emotions, views on and reflections on the representation of the USSR in the game, and cultural background to assess familiarity with the USSR and its influence on its portrayal. Therefore, the questions were designed to be consistent with the main research objectives.

Ethical considerations were critically important in the study. Participants received a written consent (Appendix 3) form describing the purpose of the study, preserving their anonymity, and a note that sensitive political topics may be discussed (Byrne, 2018, p.476). The form made clear that the study was not intended to support or criticize the Soviet Union or any

associated ideologies, emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers. At the start of each interview, verbal consent was also secured to confirm participants' agreement to record the session. During the interview, participants were not asked directly about their political views; however, they were given the freedom to propose such topics during the discussions if they wished. Participants were also informed of their right to refrain from answering certain questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. This method takes into account the sensitive nature of Soviet-era topics while respecting the right of participants to share their points of view at their discretion.

Exploring sensitive topics, even indirectly, is critical for several reasons. First, it allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and emotional reactions to the game, which are often intertwined with their historical and cultural context. Second, discussing these topics can provide valuable insight into how contemporary people in post-Soviet states interact with and reinterpret their histories, contributing to broader discussions about memory, identity, and media influence.

A total of ten interviews were conducted online via Zoom, mostly without video, to ensure the comfort and anonymity of the participants. The decision to eliminate video was made to create a more relaxed environment in which participants might feel less self-conscious and more willing to share information openly. While capturing emotions is important, the priority was to make participants feel comfortable and safe, with the belief that this approach would lead to more sincere and open responses. The duration of these interviews ranged from 20-30 minutes to 1-2 hours, depending on the participants' responsiveness and willingness to answer questions.

Sampling

As recommended by Seale (2018, p. 365) and Jensen (2012, p. 270), this study used non-probability and purposive sampling methods. The target audience for the study included people who had either completed or played the *Atomic Heart* game, as well as those who spent their formative years in the former Soviet Union. Thus, the key criteria for selecting participants included their age, the city of their upbringing and gaming experience.

To ensure a diverse and representative sample, a snowball sampling method was used (Seale, 2018, p. 365), starting the search through personal acquaintances, who then referred to other potential participants. Recognizing the limitations of the snowball method (ibid.), especially

its tendency to obtain samples of participants with similar experiences, this approach was complemented with volunteer sampling, recruiting participants from online communities. Outreach efforts extended to the *Atomic Heart* player communities on *Discord* and involved interactions with viewers during live broadcasts of the game on *Twitch*. These platforms are popular among gamers all over the world. Notices were posted inviting interested parties to participate in interviews about their experiences with *Atomic Heart*. This strategy helped to reach players willing to share their ideas.

Combining sampling methods turned out to be effective in diversifying our sample, attracting 10 players with more or less different experiences, from different cities and even countries in the post-Soviet region (Appendix 4). Study participants came from a wide range of regions, including major Russian cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg and Rostov-on-Don, as well as more distant locations such as Yakutsk, Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and Pavlodar in Kazakhstan.

The age of the participants varied: from 1984 to 1999. It is important to note that even those born in 1984 and 1987, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, were still considered relevant for the study. Although they were born before the official collapse in 1991, the socio-political upheavals that led to the collapse began in the 1980s with Gorbachev's rise to power and the beginning of *Perestroika* (dramatic changes in the economic and political structure of the USSR), (TASS, 2021). This background suggests that even the earliest participants spent their childhoods in conditions not unlike those of their younger peers born in the mid-to-late 1990s.

To ensure the anonymity of the study participants (Byrne, 2018), their real names were not mentioned in the study. Instead, each participant was assigned a digital pseudonym, such as "Interviewee 1," "Interviewee 2," etc. By using common identifiers, the risk of revealing personal information was minimized while ensuring clear and systematic organization of interview data.

Analyzing data

Before delving into the qualitative analysis, all the interviews were transcribed. Given that the interviews involved participants from the post-Soviet space, they were conducted in Russian. Accordingly, both transcription and subsequent data analysis were carried out in Russian. For reference, an English-translated version of one of the interviews is available in Appendix 5.

Drawing on the interpretive methodologies outlined by Kuckartz, all transcripts were carefully read, focusing on the research questions while identifying key phrases, which were color-coded to indicate different themes (2014, pp.50–51). This process allowed the generation of initial open codes (Appendix 6) noted directly in the transcripts (ibid, p.23). Patterns, emic terms, repetitions, and other important textual elements were also carefully noted, adhering to the recommendations of Bazeley (2013, p.167). These open codes helped to capture the literal meaning conveyed by the interviewees and make it easier to compare their responses.

Based on the initial coding phase, the analysis progressed to identifying analytical codes (Appendix 7) that organized the various open codes into coherent categories (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 25). These analytic codes were created to be precise yet comprehensive, following Bazeley's (2013, p.158) recommendations to avoid labels that are too broad or narrow, thereby capturing essential aspects of the data while providing a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study. Similar analytical codes were then grouped into thematic codes and organized under common themes (Appendix 8). These thematic codes provided a structural framework for presenting the results of the interview analysis.

Finally, to enhance the organization and accessibility of the analysis, the responses from interview participants were compiled into a table based on the identified themes, categories, and subthemes (Appendix 9). Inspired by Kuckartz's thematic matrix method (2014, pp.80-81), this structured approach facilitated the comparison, interpretation, and conclusion drawing from the data. Presenting the data in tabular form significantly helped in summarizing the ideas and improving the clarity of the findings.

Visual analysis: exploring *Atomic Heart's* aesthetic landscapes

Introduction

Atomic Heart is a dynamic shooter developed by the Russian-Cypriot gaming studio Mundfish. The game takes place in an alternate version of the USSR in the 1950s. In this reimagined world, the technological revolution transformed society by integrating advanced robotics, Internet capabilities, and holographic technology into everyday Soviet life. This combination of historical and futuristic elements creates a visually vibrant setting that combines the aesthetics of Soviet-era communism with an advanced technological empire, providing a unique ground for exploration.

Against this backdrop of a futuristic yet ideologically complex society, a sudden robot uprising threatens a utopian existence characterized by ideal cities, automated lifestyles, and ambitious space exploration efforts. Players take on the role of Sergei Nechaev, a Soviet intelligence agent tasked with uncovering the causes of the uprising and preventing the collapse of this carefully constructed world.

The main purpose of this visual analysis is to provide a contextual basis for the upcoming interview analysis. By examining the visual language of *Atomic Heart* and its representation of the Soviet era, this analysis seeks to enrich the understanding of the game's aesthetic strategies and their narrative significance. Focusing on three aspects such as architecture, color schemes and everyday objects, the analysis will show how these elements are used to recreate and interpret the aesthetics of the Soviet era. Through an examination of these visual components, the study aims to uncover the deeper meaning of game design choices and explore how they enhance the thematic structure of the game world. Additionally, the analysis hypothesizes about players' potential reactions to these elements, suggesting how different visual cues may influence player perception and engagement depending on the visual and narrative context of the game. This preliminary research will set the stage for more in-depth analysis in subsequent interviews, where actual player reactions will be explored.

Architecture

The world of the USSR *Atomic Heart* combines such architectural styles as constructivism, brutalism, modernism and others. It combined softness and power, inflexibility and airiness,

organics with metal and concrete, which emphasized the idea that nothing is impossible (Mundfish, 2023, p.100).

Stalin's high-rise

In *Atomic Heart*, the player's introduction to the utopian science city *Chelomei* (Fig.1) on a flying platform immediately immerses him in a carefully crafted image of Soviet greatness. The most striking structure here is the design bureau headed by the country's chief scientist, Sechenov—a high-rise building built in the Stalinist Empire style, specifically Moscow State University building (Fig.2), but with futuristic elements. Historically, Stalin's high-rise buildings, built between 1947 and 1957, were monumental in size and ornate, designed to demonstrate the architectural prowess and ideological power of the USSR, as well as to become a symbol of the new city (Dobrenkaya, 2013, p.170).

Figure 1. Atomic Heart's screenshot of Chelomei and the Stalin's high-rise

Reimagining this Stalinist architecture in the game's futuristic setting, which combines Soviet historical elements with speculative technology, may have different potential reactions among players. For example, the recognition of Stalinist architecture may evoke a sense of pride or nostalgia for some players, reminiscent of the Soviet myth of global dominance and great achievement. For others, especially in a game that combines past and future, it may controversially highlight the failure of the utopian promises associated with these buildings.

By including such iconic buildings, *Atomic Heart* engages players in dialogue about history, memory, and the enduring influence of cultural symbols.

Figure 2. Aerial View of the Moscow State University Campus (Source: Kopytov)

Five-story panel buildings

In the utopian flying city of *Chelomei*, alongside the Stalinist high-rise, stands a contrasting array of ordinary Soviet five-story panel buildings (Fig.3), home to the city's scientists and employees. They reflect real panel houses or *Khrushchevki*, which arose as a result of the post-war need to provide housing for the urban population in the 1950s and 60s, which were efficiently manufactured in factories and assembled on site within 15-20 days (Krasnaya Vesna, 2020). They were among the first mass-produced residential buildings available to ordinary Soviet citizens.

The depiction of these iconic structures in *Atomic Heart* may cause players to do a double take. For many, the familiar design of these prefabricated houses, ubiquitous in many cities, can evoke a sense of nostalgia or evoke memories of a simpler life characterized by the same living conditions. Conversely, their placement in the shadow of a grand Stalinist high-rise may encourage players to reflect on the socio-economic divisions of the Soviet era. This stark architectural contrast serves as a visual metaphor for the hierarchical stratification of Soviet society, where the grandeur of elite buildings contrasted sharply with the modesty of mass housing.

Figure 3. *Atomic Heart's screenshot of five-story buildings against the backdrop of Stalin's high-rise building*

In addition to the previously discussed buildings, *Atomic Heart* includes many inspiring structures such as houses, playgrounds, theaters, bus-stops, monuments and more, that cannot be covered in detail here. For example, notable statues the game features are *Call of the Motherland* (Fig.4), modeled after the Volgograd *The Motherland Calls* (Fig.5) and a couple statue (Fig.6), reminiscent of the Moscow *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* (Fig.7).

Figure 4. *Atomic Heart's screenshot of "Call of the Motherland" statue*

Figure 5. *"The Motherland Calls" statue (Source: Galyamicheva)*

Figure 6. *Atomic Heart's screenshot of a couple statue*

Figure 7. *Worker and Kolkhoz woman (Source: Konov & Mukhina)*

However, these elements are harmoniously adapted to the futuristic setting of the game; in particular, the traditional symbols of the hammer and sickle in the hands of *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* are replaced by a polymer-based energy sphere.

Overall, such futuristic reimaginings in the game not only serve as a visual tribute to historical artifacts, but also reimagine them in the game's unique techno-utopian narrative. This blending of past and future elements enriches the game's world, creating a multi-layered experience that invites players to explore a familiar but distinctly altered vision of the Soviet legacy.

Color

Color analysis involves the study of hue (color), saturation, and value (light), which are critical to highlighting certain elements and affecting mood and atmosphere in an image (Rose, 2016, pp.64-65). In *Atomic Heart*, color plays a key role, highlighting the game's alternative depiction of the Soviet past and enhancing its visual impact.

Surreal utopia

In the same utopian flying city of *Chelomei* (Fig.8) the cityscape features streets and houses painted in typically muted colors, but these are in stark contrast to the vibrant, bright red decorations of streamers, balloons, garlands and posters. Historically, red symbolized revolutionary fire and fury in the USSR and was the dominant color in Soviet symbolism, often used during national holidays (Belyukov, 2014). The use of red in *Chelomei*, where the festive procession takes place, is not only historically resonant, but also enhances the thematic depiction of Soviet celebrations in the game. In addition, the color red can evoke strong emotions such as passion and danger, influencing the atmosphere of the game and the player's experience (Joosten & Lankveld & Spronck, 2010).

Figure 8. Atomic Heart's screenshot of Chelomei city street

Chelomei's color saturation is close to natural, but the red ones, enhanced by exposure to sunlight, are especially bright. This treatment creates visual tension between the soft pale tones of the background and the bright red accents, providing a balanced aesthetic (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 198). Moreover, the overall brightness and white lighting give the scene a surreal, dream-like appearance where colors appear more vibrant than in reality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 228-235). This may highlight the game's case study of an idealized but unattainable utopia.

Dark dystopia

In contrast to the utopian, sunlit exteriors of *Chelomei*, the game also features darker, more ominous settings, such as the archive within *Vavilov's* underground scientific complex. This place, designed to store samples of seeds bred to sow other planets (Mundfish, 2023, p. 74) is characterized by its steel storage cubes and walls adorned with illustrations of astronauts (Fig.9).

Figure 9. Vavilov's underground scientific complex Vega 9-1 (Source: Algidsilence)

It is noteworthy that in contrast to the sun-drenched outdoor areas, indoor locations are often shrouded in darkness, like this archive. Although red remains the dominant color, here it appears not as a bright red, but as a deeper burgundy shade. This change in color tone helps create a tangible atmosphere of danger. Dim lighting enhances this effect, creating an atmosphere of uneasiness and anxiety (Andersson, 2022).

The contrasting use of color and lighting in the game's outdoor and indoor spaces can highlight the thematic tension in the narrative: a surface utopia masking a more sinister underbelly. The bright, festive hues of the city's public spaces contrast with the dark tones of the secret underground complex, visually highlighting the discrepancy between the public image of progress and the private, potentially dangerous activity hidden from view.

White horror

Laboratory conditions at the *Atomic Heart*, such as the surgical laboratory of the *Pavlov Biomedical Complex* (Fig.10), are particularly harsh and alarming. These hidden underground facilities conduct secret experiments on both animals and humans (Mundfish, 2023, p.56). The interior of the surgical laboratory is a dirty white room, with white walls, ceilings, shelving, large flasks in the middle of the room, filled with ominous, dark, blood-like substances.

Figure 10. Surgical laboratory of the Pavlov Biomedical Complex (Source: Algidsilence)

The color scheme is predominantly white and gray, highlighted by dark splashes of blood that dramatically disrupt the sterile environment. The low saturation and clinical whiteness of the laboratories evoke a sense of purified control, suggesting a space where science and order have supposedly triumphed. However, the presence of bloodstains disrupts this pure image, creating a narrative of violence and chaos that destroys the superficial order.

The dim lighting in these laboratories increases feelings of tension and anxiety. The shadows deepen and the corners darken, hinting at danger nearby. The contrast between the sterile environment and the bright blood stains visually embodies the dark side of scientific progress and the ethical dilemmas it presents.

Overall, *Atomic Heart* uses color strategically not only for visual impact, but also as a storytelling device that may enhance the game's surreal Soviet setting. The contrast between the vibrant utopian exterior and the dark dystopian interior deepens the narrative and enriches the player's immersion, illustrating the dual nature of progress in the game world.

Everyday life objects

In *Atomic Heart*, the game environment is rich in everyday objects reminiscent of Soviet times, which enhances the quality of immersion. For example, players encounter soda fountains (Fig.11) reminiscent of the machines popular from the 1950s to the 1990s, which are now being revived in modern shopping malls (Kirilina, n.d.). Additionally, the game features *Soyuzpechat* kiosks (Fig.12), the stalls which were once placed throughout the Soviet Union for distributing newspapers. Although less common, they are still present in modern urban landscapes, their name and appearance have been updated (Hanukaeva, 2013).

Figure 11. Atomic Heart's screenshot of soda fountain

Figure 12. Atomic Heart's screenshot of newspaper stoll Soyuzpechat

The gaming environment also features convex TVs broadcasting episodes of the Soviet cartoon *Nu, Pogodi! (Well, wait a minute!)* (Fig.13), known among both the Soviet and post-Soviet generations. Many of these items serve primarily as decoration, but their presence in a futuristic setting as elements of a bygone era can be seen as anachronisms—elements misplaced from their proper temporal context. These anachronisms can not only enhance the

setting and immersion, but also deepen the game's atmosphere and evoke a sense of nostalgia.

Figure 13. Atomic Heart's screenshot of convex TV showing 'Nu, Pogodi' cartoon

In addition to these decorative objects of everyday life, *Atomic Heart* also includes objects that engage players in a more dynamic way. For example, a controllable car (Fig.14), modeled after the real *Moskvich-408* (Fig.15), which allows the player to move around the map in open areas. The car is also painted in a vibrant red color, which may reference Soviet aesthetics and provide a prominent presence throughout the game's vast expanse.

Figure 14. Moskvich car in Atomic Heart (Source: Rotten-eyed)

Figure 15. Real Moskvich-408 (Source: Ganiev)

Additionally, the game uses iconic Soviet-era consumables as interactive items to aid the player. Condensed milk (Fig.16), for example, is used to increase strength and restore health.

Its packaging, with its distinctive blue and white *GOST* (Interstate standard) label (Tarasenko, n.d.), has remained unchanged for decades and can therefore be instantly recognized by those familiar with Soviet and post-Soviet consumer goods. This inclusion can also be associated with military canned goods (ibid), which adds a level of realism to the game's setting.

Figure 16. Condensed milk in Atomic Heart (Source: Rotten-eyed)

Figure 17. Vodka in Atomic Heart (Source: Rotten-eyed)

Vodka (Fig.17), another consumable item in the game, serves as a defense boost during combat. Although its brand is not specified, the inclusion of vodka may serve as a stereotypical but internationally recognized symbol of Soviet culture. It can also reinforce the game's cultural references, enhancing the realism and depth of the gaming experience among both Soviet and foreign players.

Overall, these interactive items add dynamism. These objects, while practical in game, can also carry significant cultural resonance, bridging the historical with the creative and enhancing the gaming experience for players both those familiar with Soviet history and those discovering it anew.

Interviews analysis: exploring players' perception of the USSR in *Atomic Heart*

Introduction

This study focuses on the dynamic relationships players form with *Atomic Heart*, exploring how the game integrates into their lives and influences their perceptions. Focusing on the post-Soviet generation, this study aims to uncover the emotional and cultural reactions evoked by the game's portrayal of Soviet elements. The analysis will explore how players' cultural backgrounds and personal histories may influence their participation in the game, affecting their emotional responses and the meanings they derive from depictions of the USSR. This approach aims to understand the broader role that *Atomic Heart* plays in shaping contemporary interpretations of historical narratives within individual experiences.

The discussion begins by examining how players initially shaped their perception of the Soviet Union and its image, through mediated sources, personal experiences and collective memory. The analysis then explores players' emotional connections evoked by these personal or cultural memories, focusing on the emergence of nostalgic sentiments. Additionally, it delves deeper into how these emotions are shaped depending on cultural and geographical background. The analysis also touches on player perceptions of the potential use of video games for propagating nostalgic sentiments about the USSR. Finally, it critically analyzes how players reflect on a variety of themes including the game's representation of the USSR, its historical accuracy versus the creation of alternative realities, the use of irony and satire within the game's narrative, and how the game encourages rethinking and questioning past historical narratives.

Understanding the past: the influence of mediated knowledge on Soviet perceptions

In the study of cultural memory, the key point is the transformation of significant historical events into recognizable symbols in the public consciousness, embodied through visual and narrative symbolism (Mazur, 2019, p.195). This analysis begins by examining how post-Soviet players formed their initial understandings of the Soviet Union.

First of all, players often derive their knowledge of the USSR through a mix of mediated channels, including academic education, family narratives and media representations. Some

participants noted that they obtained more reliable knowledge from scientific and educational sources like lectures or documentaries, rather than from the familial narratives. For example, Interviewee 1 remarked:

> It is some nearly-scientific calculations that have a more qualitative impact, that is, where you are told factual data. That is, these are not just some stories from your family, because they can be colored personally, some kind of then, perhaps, there is an interest there, to embellish one's youth and all that. But when they tell you exactly the facts about what happened, how it happened, who, with names, surnames, deeds, years, and so on, it gives you greater confidence in it, that what they say is true.

This observation underscores the importance of mediated information in shaping a nuanced understanding of historical events, as covered in literature review by scholars like Assmann, Rigney, and Van Dijck. However, Interviewee 7 points out that even seemingly reliable sources like textbooks can carry biases, noting that

> If people tend to add personal opinions and positions and often exaggerate or understate, then textbooks and documentary materials can clearly convey information, but at the same time some of it may be edited or hidden intentionally, and also modified for various purposes.

Thus, people do not accept historical information uncritically, but consult various sources to form a more informed opinion.

Moreover, players' personal encounters with remnants of the Soviet past, such as architecture and public monuments, also play a significant role in shaping their perceptions. Interviewee 5 shared:

> We encounter a lot in our lives. Even now... I even look at photographs now, there are Soviet separate bus-stops that look very beautiful, very beautifully made. They are still present in our time. That is we have some echoes that we can base on

Such encounters underscore that Soviet architectural styles continue to influence the present landscape, serving as a source of updating the image of the past (Mazur, 2019, p.196).

Thus, the image of the past, formed under the influence of multidirectional factors, usually turns out to be quite contradictory, including both positively and negatively colored elements (ibid). Players' perceptions of the USSR are similarly ambiguous, influenced by a variety of narratives they encounter throughout their lives. This complexity in their responses is exemplified by the mixed sentiments expressed by participants:

> All these sources had a very ambiguous influence, there are many contradictions everywhere, but I myself can no longer live this experience. (Interviewee 3)

I have always had 2 sides, someone always said something good, and someone bad, so I treat this as something that happened and passed, leaving its mark on history and memory. (Interviewee 4)

These reflections highlight Maurice Halbwachs's theory that collective memory is shaped by the social context in which people live. According to Halbwachs (1992), memories are filtered through various social influences such as family, education, and the media, shaping interpretations of historical events. This framework helps clarify the varied responses of players resulting from their unique experiences and exposure to different social narratives.

Moving forward, *Atomic Heart* can serve as a medium itself providing a way through which gamers can form opinions about the Soviet past or critically reflect on it, echoing themes discussed in the literature review.

Deepening the connection: from collective symbols to nostalgia

Atomic Heart skillfully evokes memories through its vivid depiction of Soviet symbols, effectively tapping into cultural memory, as Jan Assmann says: symbols serve as triggers for the memories we attach to them (2008).

In this analysis, participants frequently identified and reacted to these symbols, demonstrating the game's effectiveness in invoking the past through its detailed representation of Soviet aesthetics. Players recognized symbols such as the red color inherent in communist symbols, the Stalinist Empire building, parks similar to *VDNKh* (park exhibition of national economic achievements), statues, posters with appealing slogans, street soda machines, holidays with marches, old musical hits in modern adaptation and much more. Interviewee 3 notes:

You can recognize the Soviet style, everything is red, Soviet architecture, Soviet posters all around. There are a lot of Easter eggs; starting from architecture - Stalinist high-rise buildings, VDNKh, and even Lenin statues that stand everywhere. During the flight over the city they showed a lot of things, including 'Rodina-mat' zovyot!' ['The motherland calls', statue]. From scientific and technological progress, such as space flight, to the cartoons 'Nu, pogodi!' ['Well, wait a minute!', soviet cartoon]. Everywhere there are motivational posters about the working class, the collective farm, May Day and similar. Naturally, there is the endless struggle with the USA, with the capitalists. There are also a lot of references to Soviet films, even to pirated mono-voices of films, and the music played everywhere is familiar, very fitting.

The presence of these specific Soviet symbols in the game environment not only enhances the authenticity of the setting but also activates a shared memory space among players, aligning with Assmann's concept of cultural memory where symbols serve as "conduits of memory" for collective experiences.

Applying Assmann's theory, symbols act as reservoirs of cultural meaning that players tap into, evoking not only recognition but also emotional responses based on their own life experiences. For example, players were connecting objects from the game with those that they encountered in life:

> There are these houses there, I remember my city. For example, like the area where my grandmother lived, these five-story buildings. Is very similar. (Interviewee 5)

> By the way, the refrigerators were similar to the one my grandfather had, the carpets on the walls in houses are omg, many people had them in childhood. (Interviewee 2)

Thus, study participants often found echoes of their personal past in the game's settings and objects, demonstrating how personal and collective memories are intertwined. This recognition of familiar objects, combined with the emotional connections they evoke, leads to feelings of nostalgia. As stated in the literature review, this feeling represents a longing for the past that can be very personal.

Although in *Atomic Heart* some of the nostalgic connections coincide with personal nostalgia because they are rooted in direct personal experience, many of them extend to what Davis described as indirect nostalgia (1979), arising from cultural artifacts and symbols rather than from direct personal experience. This broader form of nostalgia, which Holak, Matveev, and Havlena (2008) call cultural or virtual nostalgia, resonates with people who share a common cultural background, encompassing experiences that are mediated through shared symbols and narratives rather than directly experienced. For instance, Interviewee 5 gives as example of American society's nostalgia for the 80s:

> Let's give this as an example. There is, let's say, American society, which is very nostalgic for the 80s. When 'Stranger Things' [an American science fiction horror drama series, Netflix] came out, there was retro music, retro games, and even people who, in fact, are our age, they still may feel some kind of nostalgia. (Interviewee 5)

This phenomenon is similar to what is observed in *Atomic Heart*, where even players who have no direct memories of the USSR era experience a form of nostalgia brought on by the rich array of cultural symbols and settings of the Soviet era.

Interestingly, while all players acknowledge some form of nostalgia, about half note that their lack of personal memories from the USSR era means their nostalgic feelings are likely less and different from those who directly experienced that time. This observation highlights a generational divide (Romanova & Fedorova, 2021, p.11) in the perception and understanding

of historical events and symbols, suggesting that the younger generation may interpret or reinterpret these events and symbols differently from the older generation.

Despite not having lived through the era, players often feel a connection to it, since they encountered many echoes in life. They called it "unknown" (Interviewee 3) or "acquired" (Interviewee 1) nostalgia, that is, rather one that does not miss the USSR, but its "entourage" (Interviewee 10) and the Soviet elements present in their childhood and life. Therefore, players in general experience a warm nostalgia during the game, mostly associated with everyday objects and personal memories from childhood rather than the more formal and official aspects of the Soviet Union (Kalinina, 2014). Interviewee 3 described this familiar feeling as "meeting a childhood friend", implying how deeply these cultural elements are ingrained in collective memory.

"We" for collective nostalgia

The analysis highlights the players' repeated use of the word "we", which suggests a strong sense of belonging to a particular group or generation with a shared historical and cultural heritage, especially in relation to the Soviet past. This collective pronoun not only emphasizes a shared experience, but also reflects a shared perception of the story.

Examples of "we" use include:

> Because we almost didn't experience it. (Interviewee 3)
>
> Since we all grew up with this; we watched a lot of Soviet cartoons; here we are, my generation grew up with some kind of Soviet influence on us. (Interviewee 2)
>
> We have some echoes that we can base on. (Interviewee 5)
>
> Its echoes haunt us to this day, and we can still immerse ourselves in a sense of nostalgia. (Interviewee 7)

These instances of "we" highlight the collective experiences of participants bound by shared cultural and historical contexts. Such statements highlight the collective memory of the Soviet era, influencing their perceptions and assessments of the past. Moreover, the use of "we" often signals collective nostalgia, especially when discussing shared experiences or national phenomena, such as when watching Soviet cartoons. This use highlights the deep sociocultural connection that is part of a broader collective identity, as described by Jan Assmann (2008), where shared narratives contribute to collective memory and identity. The phrase "its echoes haunt us to this day," as noted by Interviewee 7, signifies the enduring

influence of the Soviet era on modern generations, illustrating how the past continues to shape contemporary cultural and social practices. In light of this, Smolina's observations show that interacting with these shared memories through *Atomic Heart* not only entertains, but also strengthens players' self-identity and fosters a sense of belonging (2014, p.135). Thus, the game acts as a vital link connecting the post-Soviet generation with its cultural heritage, which constantly influences its collective identity.

Restorative and reflective nostalgia

The analysis further delves into the expressions of nostalgia articulated by participants through Svetlana Boym's concepts of restorative and reflective nostalgia (2001). These concepts provide a framework to understand the diverse ways in which individuals relate to and interpret the past, particularly through historical and cultural representations in media.

Initially, it was examined whether the participants wanted to return to the Soviet past. Most expressed no interest in a literal return, but some expressed admiration for the retro-futuristic USSR depicted in the game, complete with advanced robotics. A statement from Interviewee 3 illustrates this point:

> I would like to live in the reality of this game rather than in the era of the USSR, but I would like to transfer some moments to the modern world, I don't think that would be bad.

This reflects a blend of reflective nostalgia, where elements of the past are appreciated but without a desire for a complete return, suggesting an integration of select historical elements into modern life.

Additionally, Interviewee 5 recalls a scene from the Soviet film *Operaciya Y* ('Operation Y'), emphasizing the structured and ordered nature of Soviet society:

> There was some kind of pattern, structure, absolutely every cog is responsible for something, every person in society is responsible for something.

Despite the recollection coming from a film, a medium that can romanticize its subject matter (Zlotnikova & Kuimova, 2021), this memory points to an appreciation of the era's positive attributes. However, this participant, along with others, critically evaluates the past, recognizing the differences between idealized view of equality and the harsh realities. For instance, Interviewee 2 contrasts the perceived ease of life in the past—free education, guaranteed housing, and employment—with harsh realities such as food shortages requiring

trips to Moscow for staples such as meat. This juxtaposition of an idealized past with its practical problems embodies reflective nostalgia, where the past is assessed critically rather than nostalgically recreated.

Conversely, Interviewee 1 provides a prime example of restorative nostalgia. He highlights the stability, security, and technological progress of the Soviet Union as positive qualities, idealizing the past, but "excluding the conspiracy of leadership," thereby selectively recalling an era without political repression. He expresses a desire to return to this purified version of the past, characteristic of restorative nostalgia and Bauman's retrotopia (2017), where the past is not only idealized, but also seen as a preferable alternative to the present:

> To return to this reality, not an illusory one, but the one that actually existed, of course, I don't know who wouldn't want to, if to describe it like this. The contrast with today is just like day and night.

Interestingly, this participant is deeply engaged in political discourse and possesses a broad knowledge of the subject, unlike the others. This contradicts Sapogova's assertion that limited knowledge about the past usually leads to an uncritical, positive attitude towards it (2019). Rather, this participant's extensive understanding appears to contribute to a selective and idealized perception of the Soviet era. While some players may lack comparable depth of knowledge and maintain a generally neutral stance toward the Soviet Union, they nonetheless express occasional criticism of it.

Therefore, although the past cannot be relived, representations of it can evoke a range of emotional responses, from reflective contemplation to nostalgic longing. These reactions are deeply intertwined with individual experience, cultural background, and the mediated nature of historical knowledge.

Cultural contexts and player responses to Soviet nostalgia in the game

While many players appreciated the nostalgic elements of *Atomic Heart*, their connection to the game's depiction of the Soviet era varied significantly due to cultural and geographic differences. For example, Interviewee 4, who grew up in the remote northern region of Yakutsk (Russia), noted the lack of influence of Soviet architecture in her childhood due to the local climate, same as the other elements, leaving Soviet cartoons and songs as the main nostalgic motifs. Similarly, a player from Kazakhstan (Interviewee 9) described his experience of the game as encountering something "new" rather than nostalgic.

In contrast, players from Moscow, the Moscow region, St. Petersburg and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) noted that Soviet elements were widespread among them, making encounters with these elements almost inevitable. As Interviewee 1 stated, "it was impossible to avoid meeting them," highlighting the deep-rooted presence of Soviet culture in their daily lives..

This variation highlights the profound influence of cultural heritage and physical environment on how people perceive the Soviet Union in the media and experience nostalgia. This also influences their interpretation of the historical events depicted in the game.

In comparison, the perceptions of players from different backgrounds indicate that those from Russia and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) are likely to have a richer and more nuanced interaction with the game due to their familiarity with its cultural context. Thus, nostalgia plays a vital role in the game for players of the post-Soviet generation. As Interviewee 5 put it, it "helps to relive some of your childhood, it adds atmosphere and keeps you in the game".

Therefore, they mention that most likely foreigners would not be imbued with the spirit of the USSR as much as people from Soviet and post Soviet background. Interviewee 2 explained:

> Probably the Soviet Union is further from me than from those who lived there, but at the same time it is closer to me than to people from other countries, for example. So some things seem familiar to me, but for them it will be new, I don't know. I think they wouldn't be able to experience *Atomic Heart* the way I do, for example, with all these references, jokes and Easter eggs, they probably wouldn't understand them.

Moreover, while some players speculate that foreigners may perceive the game negatively due to the negative perception of the USSR in the world, others believe that the unique and rare setting may generate interest for them. Interviewee 1 draws a parallel with the perception of similar games such as *Bioshock* and *Fallout*, where players are drawn to their exotic, retro-futuristic settings:

> There was Bioshock and Fallout, for example, and players there also perceive these games quite well, because it is such an exotic, such an interesting retrofuturism. And they are not even critical of this, although it says that in Fallout, it talks about the terrible things that the USA did, how they treated their people, that it was practically a dictatorship and how it treated neighboring countries

In this context, the concepts of mediation and remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Rigney, 2016) discussed in the literature review become especially relevant. As Rigney notes, mediation of Soviet history through *Atomic Heart's* gameplay introduces players to a past that is both familiar and new, offering a remediated version of Soviet history that may appeal to or

repel players based on their pre-existing cultural memory and international perceptions of the Soviet Union. The game's dynamic blend of historical narratives and modernized cultural symbols keeps it relevant and engaging for a diverse audience, demonstrating how media can transform collective memory.

Overall, these ideas confirm that cultural proximity greatly enriches a player's interaction with a game, allowing for a more immersive and culturally resonant experience, while players from different backgrounds can appreciate the game for its novelty and unique aesthetics. This underscores the significant role that mediation and remediation play in shaping how cultural memories are experienced in contemporary digital formats.

Reframing the USSR: reflexivity and representation in gaming

Game of the contrasts

Atomic Heart is a striking juxtaposition of the idealized Soviet utopia and the harsh reality of a totalitarian regime. The game begins with an optimistic depiction of the USSR, filled with technological advances and architectural wonders, symbolizing a forward-thinking, progressive society. This reflects actual Soviet propaganda, which often emphasized scientific achievements and industrial progress as evidence of the superiority of the socialist system. However, as players progress, the narrative reveals the main elements of the dystopia: robots out of control, uncontrolled experiments, and the dark underbelly of a society under surveillance and control. Interviewee 10 vividly conveys this contrast:

> God knows what's happening at the facility, people are being killed by robots in combat mode, "sprouts" are getting out of control. But the weather is "whispering". The sun is shining, Soviet music is playing on the radio, as if nothing had happened. As if that's how it should be, that nothing bad happened.

This surreal dissonance highlights the often stark divide between the communist ideal and the actual reality, where social decline and oppression were masked by a "façade of normalcy" and the cheerfulness of state-controlled media.

Interviewee 3 expands on the theme of hidden negativity, noting that the game's depiction of the Soviet era is "devoid of any depressive moments, that is, it is more likely a game on positive feelings than negative ones". She highlights how the game selectively focuses on more benign aspects of the Soviet era, such as the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and significant technological progress, while glossing over more troubling historical realities:

Soviet era is presented as if parts of it were taken out that reflected poorly on it, we are shown a peaceful atom, scientific technological progress with enormous robotization, monumentalism, and it does not raise any questions for you in the context of this game (Interviewee 3)

Despite this selective glorification, Interviewee 3 suggests that the game's setting and storyline seamlessly integrate these images, making them seamless elements of the game world. This approach can keep players from critically considering the complexities or potential shortcomings of the technologies and ideologies presented.

Conversely, Interviewee 1 notes that the game can also exaggerate negativity, suggesting a bias in portraying the USSR as harsher than some may have perceived. In his opinion, this image is consistent with how the Soviet era is usually presented in liberal narratives created to resonate with international audiences and increase the game's appeal in the global market.

By exploring this duality, *Atomic Heart* not only entertains, but also invites players to consider the complexities of Soviet history through a lens that simultaneously celebrates and critiques, echoing Boym's concepts of restorative and reflective nostalgia (2001). This duality allows players to interact with the past in a critical and immersive way, providing space for reflection and re-evaluation of historical narratives.

Historical accuracy

Alternative realities and missed opportunities

When examining *Atomic Heart's* depiction of the Soviet era, players note a mixture of both authentic and fantastical elements that contribute to the game's unique portrayal of an alternative history. Interviewee 2 notes the presence of similar to reality features such as social achievements and interpersonal interactions, as well as narrative parallels with the historical trajectory of the USSR, documenting its rise to greatness followed by its eventual collapse.

Interviewee 1 expands on this theme by suggesting that the game creates a possible alternative history within Soviet material culture, such as technological progress that might have been similar since 1955 if different priorities had been set. He appreciates this historical re-imagining, but criticizes the ideological overtones presented in the game:

That is, an alternative history could well be exactly like this within the framework of material culture. For example, alternative history might have included color television as early as 1955. The delay in color television in the West until the 70s was more a

matter of priorities than technical limitations. And in this sense, the attitude is positive. But what kind of ideological background there is inside, well, of course, negative, because, firstly, in principle, such a state could not exist on the basis on which it existed... These are ideas purely from modern science fiction, which now sees attempts to control people and everything else. And it induces this into the future... The main problem of the future is that there is no future there as such. It's present, just repeated again. The present but with flying cars or interstellar travel or laser machines. It's all the same. Capitalism and endless wars, poverty and class disunity of people, that is, the extremely rich, the extremely poor... That is, well, the future that has no future. (Interviewee 1)

Thus, the player expresses the idea that the game uses historical and cultural images of the USSR to create an alternative world, where technological progress exists without social changes and retains certain cultural characteristics, representing not the historical USSR, but a possible future. As a result, such an alternative future is merely a re-projection of the present with some technological improvements, but without changing the fundamentals of social structure, such as class divisions or capitalism. This vision of the future as an extension of the present, where old problems are simply repackaged, emphasizes that although the external world may be changed by technology, fundamental social and economic systems remain unchanged. This "future without a future" reflects the tendency of modern media to project existing problems and trends into future scenarios without offering radically new visions of the future.

This vision of lost potential or wistful admiration for the technological ambitions of the Soviet era may evoke a sense of nostalgia, not for the Soviet era as it was, but for what it might have represented in terms of technological potential. Interviewee 10 describes this feeling as "a sense of missed opportunities. What if? As the saying goes". This reflects Svetlana Boym's concept of nostalgia, which uses the past to reflect on the present and explore unrealized future possibilities, rather than simply recreate the past (2001).

Some players, however, believe that the game's depiction of the USSR accurately reflects real-life Soviet ideology. Interviewee 7 notes uniformity in clothing—"faded gray and white with dull contrasting colors like yellow or green" which, according to him, may indicate mass control and communist ideology. Interviewee 5 suggests that "if the Soviet era had continued, it would look exactly as in the game", meaning that it would have resulted in an apocalyptic scenario very similar to the one depicted in the game.

These divergent views may be influenced by the players' experiences, including their political level of interest and indirect knowledge of the USSR shaped by modern media.

Additionally, it is possible that the previously described portrayal of current social issues in media, including *Atomic Heart*, may influence how these games are perceived and interpreted.

Anachronisms

Exploring the historical accuracy of *Atomic Heart* further, it becomes apparent that the game uses a mixture of modern elements with the Soviet past, creating intentional anachronisms. These anachronisms contribute to a sense of multi-worldness, blending different realities to create a complex narrative layer (Zhurkova, 2024, p.71).

For example, Interviewee 1 highlights the adoption of modern corporate behavior, such as the use of instant messaging and email for communication, which stands in stark contrast to the more traditional face-to-face meetings or large gatherings typical of the Soviet era. This insert not only highlights the juxtaposition of time periods, but also reflects the game's attempt to appeal to modern players through the use of familiar modern practices. Similarly, Interviewee 2 notes the inclusion of modern slang, clothing, and hairstyles that resonate more with today's cultural norms than those of the mid-20th century. Additionally, the soundtrack features Soviet hits reimagined with techno elements that pair well with the game's intense action scenes. Most players responded positively to this modernized portrayal of the music.

Moreover, players noticed that the game used exaggerated clichés to portray the Soviet image, which increased its appeal. For example, it includes stereotypes such as "theaters, ballerinas, trains, funiculars and a fancy subway built by a worm", as noted by Interviewee 3. Additionally, Interviewee 1 highlighted the depiction of iconic Russian "babushkas", images recognized throughout the world . Therefore, by mixing stereotypes of the Soviet and modern eras, the game becomes accessible not only to the post-Soviet generation, but also to an international audience.

However, not all the players reacted positively to such anachronisms. Interviewee 3 expresses a critical point of view, pointing out rude language and and gestures that would be unfamiliar and culturally inappropriate in the USSR, claiming that these elements violate the historical atmosphere of the game:

> Petrov [one of the game's characters] shows his middle fingers there, which most likely was something completely unknown in the USSR, and such moments ruin the atmosphere, at least for me.

Interviewee 7 also comments on minor aesthetic inconsistencies in the game's design, noting that the style of the underground complex differs from authentic Soviet architecture, leaning more towards retro-modernist rather than purely Soviet design.

While these anachronisms are consistent with the concept of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Rigney, 2016), increasing the game's appeal and accessibility to modern audiences by weaving modern elements into the historical structure, they can also compromise historical authenticity and risk creating an unpleasant experience for those familiar with the culture or seeking a more historically accurate representation.

Atomic Heart vs. historical reality

In the study of players' perceptions of historical accuracy in a game, it became apparent that participants generally did not view the game as a literal representation of historical events or social norms.

For example, Interviewee 6 emphasized that the game's setting in a fictional alternate universe inherently limits its historical parallels to the real history of the Soviet Union. Similarly, respondents 4 and 5 made a clear distinction between the game world and reality, indicating that they did not connect the game's narrative to any real historical events. Moreover, Interviewee 3 noted that while the game amplifies certain elements of Soviet culture for dramatic effect, it is ultimately meant to be an engaging and exaggerated form of entertainment, not a serious historical study.

Despite the players' explicit statement that they do not connect the game to the actual story, their earlier discussions paint a different picture of interaction and reflection. When players were not directly questioned about historical accuracy, they exhibited serious analytical thinking. They carefully examined the game's depiction of various aspects of the USSR, compared these representations with their understanding of Soviet history, and critically assessed thematic parallels and inconsistencies. This behavior indicates that while they may not view the game as a literal historical narrative, it actually encourages them to reflect meaningfully on and revise historical narratives.

Thus, while direct questions about historical accuracy elicit responses that separate the game from reality, broader conversations reveal that players do connect with the game on a deeper historical level.

Irony and satire

Irony, sarcasm, and humor are central to the player's gaming experience in *Atomic Heart*, serving as powerful tools for addressing serious historical and cultural topics in an accessible manner. The game cleverly uses these elements to highlight the absurdity of the Soviet era and the contradictions that arise when ideologies collide with technological advances.

One of the examples is the conductor scene described by Interviewee 1, where formalism and bureaucracy come into comical contrast with the chaos and destruction happening around. In this scene, a robot demands for a train ticket when everything around is destroyed and robots are killing everyone. This illustrates classic Soviet bureaucracy, which is often characterized by rigid adherence to rules and procedures, even in situations where such strictness is clearly impractical or counterproductive. This scenario highlights the absurdity and often ineffectiveness of bureaucratic systems, raising questions about their functionality in times of crisis.

Further, the whole twist in the plot is ironic, as Interviewee 2 points out: "plans to use robots against the United States turn against the USSR itself". This twist can serve as an ironic critique of over-reliance on technological advances and military power, illustrating the broader idea that attempts to control and manipulate such forces can lead to unforeseen and often disastrous results.

The protagonist's persistent irony, as described by Interviewee 3, further enriches the narrative:

> everything is ironized by the main character's remarks. When you need to find something, you run after it throughout the entire location, and then he says the phrase: "And what, scientists do this every day?! Bullshit." In general, you understand that these things are an established part of the processes in all games, and without this it would not be so interesting to play, and the developers themselves make fun of it.

This comment from the protagonist serves not only as humorous relief from tense moments, but also as a critique of established gaming clichés, suggesting that game developers are aware of these conventions and intentionally break them to increase engagement and challenge player expectations.

Moreover, Interviewee 5 highlights ironic elements of the game, which play on stereotypes about the Soviet Union:

> One of the most ironic and satirical moments was the refrigerator named Eleonora. Why? It wasn't just for comic relief; it also poked fun at the notion that there was no sex in the Soviet Union, only love. Yet, it embodies only vice, only sex, sheer desire, and nothing more.

Thus, the game satirizes the inconsistency between the public façade of sexual purity and the underlying human realities. This sharp satire not only entertains but also invites reflection on the societal and cultural contradictions of the Soviet era.

These examples of irony and satire in *Atomic Heart* resonate with Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia (2001), which encourages a nuanced, often critical view of the past, facilitating a balanced engagement with history. This form of nostalgia fosters reflection and dialogue, allowing players to reconsider historical events and cultural dynamics in light of their absurdities and contradictions. This approach aligns with media depictions that encourage a critical reassessment of the Soviet era, moving beyond mere glorification to engage with its complexities and challenges.

Critique vs. Propaganda

By exploring the portrayal of the Soviet past within a futuristic framework, certain themes may emerge, including the potential promotion of nostalgic sentiments associated with Soviet ideology. However, analyzing the responses of the respondents, it becomes clear that the game primarily fosters critical thinking, rather than serves as a means of nostalgic propaganda. With its subtle and often satirical treatment of Soviet themes, the game emphasizes entertainment and creative exploration, avoiding strict adherence to historical accuracy or propaganda messages.

For example, Interviewee 5 emphasizes that *Atomic Heart* is an independent project that is not associated with any government agenda. This independence allows for greater creative freedom, demonstrating the developers' intent to entertain and provoke thought rather than promote a political message. Echoing this sentiment, Interviewee 4 notes:

> There's no need to look for some deep meaning in this, some kind of propaganda of the USSR or vice versa of capitalism. This is just entertainment

Additionally, Interviewee 1 suggests that traditional government propaganda does not fit the dynamic nature of video games, which are often too modern and flexible for heavy-handed government use. Meanwhile, Interviewee 6 advocates for the apolitical nature of cultural

artifacts such as video games, which should allow players to freely interact with historical content, without contemporary political overtones.

This understanding among players supports the idea that the game uses reflective nostalgia, a concept distinct from the restorative nostalgia often found in government propaganda (Boym, 2001; Tselykovsky, 2023). As a form of media, video games like *Atomic Heart* provide a platform for reflection and criticism rather than uncritical glorification of the past. Therefore, *Atomic Heart* serves as a vehicle for reflection and critique, enriching the dialogue about cultural memory and offering alternative perspectives on the Soviet era.

Rethinking the past

While examining whether *Atomic Heart* prompts players to think about the real history of the Soviet past, it becomes evident from participants' opinions that the game may be more impactful for those out of the Soviet and post-Soviet space. This suggests that the game could serve as a gateway to historical exploration, particularly for players outside the cultural milieu of the former Soviet Union.

Interviewee 1 highlights the complex dialectical interaction with the game's content, suggesting that even those who initially criticized or dismissed the Soviet portrayal might be urged by their skepticism to engage more deeply with historical texts or analysis:

> Even if you initially react with disdain, thinking 'Oh, this is just Soviet propaganda! I need to read more of this anti-Soviet propaganda'. And he will go, start reading, and accidentally wander into some analytical article, which was compiled by a truly left-wing person, who will critically rethink it all and, by chance, maybe something will switch in his mind. And he will get involved. That is, by rejecting something, you come into contact with this something.

On the other hand, some have noted that the game's vivid depiction of Soviet life - its architecture, ballet and music - can arouse curiosity and encourage players to further explore these aspects. According to Interviewee 6, the game has a noticeable impact even in post-Soviet regions, where Soviet-era songs featured in the game have become popular again, indicating that the cultural references in the game resonate enough to influence contemporary cultural consumption.

However, it is important to note that while the game may inspire thoughts about history, it does not necessarily promote a comprehensive understanding as it contains little actual historical content, as discussed in the previous sections. As such, *Atomic Heart*, while not

designed as an educational tool, serves as a springboard for personal exploration and learning about historical topics. Its alternative history and rich cultural references act as catalysts, encouraging players to engage with and explore the Soviet past. This involvement varies significantly between individuals and depends on their prior knowledge, personal interests, and the depth of their interaction with the game.

Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis was to examine how the video game *Atomic Heart* depicts the Soviet era through its visual elements, and to evaluate how players of the post-Soviet generation perceive and interpret these images. The study aimed to explore the emotional and interpretive responses evoked by the game, with a particular focus on how these responses are influenced by the personal and cultural background of the players. The ultimate goal was to improve our understanding of how modern media, like video games, can influence collective memories and contemporary cultural and historical perspectives. The research questions posed at the outset of the study guided this analytical process, and subsequent sections will provide answers and discuss the findings.

How does Atomic Heart depict Soviet times through visual elements such as architecture, color schemes, and everyday life cultural artifacts?

The visual analysis aimed to provide a contextual basis for the following analysis of the interviews. It focused on studying how the game *Atomic Heart* represented Soviet symbols, analyzing images from the game using Gillian Rose's four-site method.

Analysis revealed that the game intricately depicts Soviet times using elements such as architecture, color schemes and artifacts of everyday life, combining their historical authenticity with futuristic elements. This analysis provides insight into how the game's visual elements not only recreate the physical attributes of the Soviet era, but also address deeper thematic issues such as utopia, ideology, and memory.

The architecture combines styles from different times and futuristic design, in which iconic buildings such as Stalinist high-rise buildings are side by side with ordinary five-story residential buildings. They may evoke recognition of cultural objects, as well as create a contrast that reflects the social hierarchy of the Soviet era and provoke historical reflection. The game's color schemes symbolize ideological themes and influence emotions. The use of red symbolizes ideological themes, while the saturation and brightness highlight the contrast between the depicted utopia and its dystopian reality. Additionally, everyday objects such as soda fountains, Soviet cartoons, and others add authenticity and nostalgia to the game's setting, activating memories and inviting reflection on the continuing influence of the past on the present and future.

Analysis of these visual elements reveals that *Atomic Heart* uses a complex visual language to depict the Soviet era in a way that is both reflective and provocative. Aesthetic choices of play in this way can evoke emotional responses and nostalgia, as well as stimulate critical reflection on Soviet history. This approach not only entertains, but also highlights the role of historical memory in media, demonstrating *Atomic Heart* as an effective example of visual storytelling in video games.

How do players perceive and reflect upon the elements of the Soviet era present in Atomic Heart?

One of the focuses of the interview analysis was studying the emotional reactions, opinions and interpretations of players of the post-Soviet generation in relation to the elements of Soviet themes presented in the game.

First, players recognize and react to the Soviet-era symbols embedded in the game's design. These include the iconic red color, Stalinist architecture, parks similar to VDNKh, Lenin statues, Soviet posters and musical hits, carefully integrated into the game world. These elements not only enhance the authenticity of the game, but also evoke a sense of nostalgia, emphasizing the deep connection players have with these symbols, even if their understanding of the Soviet era is based primarily on indirect sources such as family stories and the media.

A predominant number of study participants reported emotional connections and a certain sense of nostalgia, which they described as unknown or acquired, based on familiar things from childhood and life. These emotional responses are explored using Svetlana Boym's (2001) concepts of restorative and reflective nostalgia. While most players value elements of the Soviet past without wanting to return it, a minority idealize its stability and progress, selectively remembering only the positive aspects. This selective memory emphasizes how people interact with and interpret historical narratives based on their personal experiences and mediated historical narratives.

Interestingly, the game's alternate history setting also promotes a sense of what could have been, allowing players to imagine a different trajectory for Soviet society and technology. This aspect adds depth to their participation, encouraging them to think critically about historical narratives and the impact of technological progress.

The game's use of satire and irony allows players to interact with the Soviet past in a critical and entertaining manner. These elements highlight the absurdity of the Soviet bureaucratic system and the contradictions within its ideological structure, promoting a reflexive engagement with history that echoes Svetlana Boym's concept of reflexive nostalgia.

Although the players acknowledge that the game does not reflect historical reality and do not in any way link the game to reality, their discussions demonstrate a deep level of engagement with the game's content, reflecting on how it fits or diverges from actual Soviet history. They interpret elements of irony and discuss alternative historical outcomes, showing that while the game may not require a comprehensive historical reappraisal, it does stimulate thoughtful reflection on historical topics.

Thus, the goal of the game was not to provide an accurate historical narrative, but rather to entertain and inspire players to reflect on the past through an alternative portrayal of the USSR and a vision of what could have been. These reflections enrich discussions of cultural memory and present different perspectives on the Soviet era. This approach emphasizes the role of games not only as entertainment, but also as an effective means of cultural reflection and historical discourse.

How does the post-Soviet generation reflect on their personal and cultural backgrounds in relation to their perceptions of Atomic Heart's Soviet representations?

Another focus of the analysis was to understand how players of the post-Soviet generation responded to the Soviet elements presented in *Atomic Heart*, based on their cultural experiences and personal backgrounds.

The analysis showed how study participants navigated their understanding of Soviet elements through a variety of sources, including family histories, formal education, and media portrayals. These sources influence their view of the Soviet era and therefore how they interpret and react differently to the game's portrayal of that time. For example, family stories could often be embellished, while academic sources and the media provided a more balanced and factual basis. The variety of sources gives players a wide range of knowledge, allowing them to approach the game's Soviet symbols and aesthetics with various reactions, from nostalgic resonance to critical analysis.

There are marked differences in responses among players depending on their level of political activity and historical knowledge. Those more involved in political history may idealize

aspects of the Soviet social system, while others less aware of historical specifics tend to approach the game's themes in a more critical and reflective way.

Moreover, emotional reactions to the game largely depend on the cultural background of the players. For example, for those with direct cultural ties to the Soviet past, *Atomic Heart* resonates deeply, as encounters with familiar objects from life deepen this emotional response. Conversely, players from regions less influenced by Soviet culture or with a different cultural background view these elements as exotic and new, that did not evoke such strong nostalgic feelings.

Overall, the game incorporates realistic Soviet symbols into its virtual environment, effectively engaging with the concept of collective memory, conceptualized by Jan Assmann (1995; 2008). These symbols connect players through shared experiences, triggering emotional responses that often blur the boundaries between personal and collective memories. This interaction deepens the feeling of a certain collective nostalgia, which is reinforced by the players' frequent use of the word "we" in discussions, suggesting a shared experience and memory of this generation. This collective aspect highlights their shared historical and cultural heritage, which continues to influence their perceptions and present lives.

To summarize, the post-Soviet generation is reflecting on its cultural and personal origins in complex ways as it interacts with Soviet representations of the *Atomic Heart*. Their experiences and the mediated knowledge they have acquired form a multifaceted view of the past, which in turn influences how they perceive and interact with the game's depiction of the Soviet era. This dynamic interaction again highlights the role of games as a means of cultural reflection and historical discourse.

Final reflections

While this study provides valuable insight into post-Soviet generations' emotional and cultural reactions to *Atomic Heart*, it could be improved in several ways. For example, including a larger and more diverse number of people in the analysis, especially from various post-Soviet countries. This could provide a deeper understanding of the different ways people interact with Soviet representations in video games. Additionally, it would be interesting to consider the perspectives of the *Atomic Heart* developers themselves, which would provide

valuable context and insight into their intentions behind the depiction of Soviet themes in the game.

Looking to the future, there are several directions for future research. For example, it could further explore how interaction with Soviet-era imagery in video games affects players' cultural identity, especially among post-Soviet demographics. Understanding how these experiences shape people's sense of self-worth and collective belonging could provide valuable insight into the role of media in identity formation. Additionally, examining foreign players' perceptions and emotions when encountering Soviet imagery in *Atomic Heart* will provide comparative insight into the influence of cultural background on interactions with historical content in games.

Continuing this research may therefore deepen our understanding of how the media shape our views of the past and present, and how people and societies interact with cultural heritage in the digital age.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Visual analysis table

Architectural object	Production site	Image site	Audience site
Chelomey	Stalin's empire building. Reflected the achievements of the USSR in the field of architecture and engineering in *Atomic Heart* the main scientist of the country bases there	Retro-futuristic Stalin's huge building in the middle of the flying platform city. Covers the most part of the city	recognition and some nostalgic feelings/ or a critique on government's failure of the utopian promises
Five-story panel buildings	Post-war mass produced residential buildings in the game scientists and staff of the city live there (usual people, workers)	Yellow five-story buildings in the background of Stalin-high rise building, decorated with red decorations and agitating posters	nostalgic feelings, or hierarchical stratification of Soviet society
Color	**Production site**	**Image site**	**Audience site**
Chelomei Hue: red	symbolized revolutionary fire and fury in the USSR the game uses red color a lot	Red bright contrasting color, decorating the Chelomei streets and houses as ribbons, balloons posters and so on	historically resonant, enhances the thematic depiction of USSR, may evoke strong emotions
Chelomei Saturation	may intentionally brighten red to focus on player's attention on it	low-saturated soft and pale colors contrasting with bright high-saturated red	reflects the recognition of soviet theme, celebrations
Chelomei Value: light	-	sunny, brightens the whole picture and red color	surreal, dream-like scene, highlighting the idealized but unattainable utopia
Vavilov Hue: dark red	-	room with dark burgundy red walls	feeling of danger

		with illustration of astronauts	
Vavilov Saturation	-	low-saturated, red light saturated close to reality	complementing the dangerous atmosphere
Vavilov Value: dark	may intentionally darken the room to create feelings of danger	dim lightened room	increasing feeling of danger and anxiety
Pavlov Biomedical Complex Hue: white-gray	-	white and gray colors of the room, highlighted by dark splashes of blood	bloodstains that create sense of chaos and violence among the white sterile white laboratories
Pavlov Biomedical Complex Saturation: low	-	low saturation, almost black and white, only blood stands out	sense of emotionless, violent place
Pavlov Biomedical Complex Value: dim	-	dim lighting in the room with shadows in the corners	may increase feelings of tension and anxiety
Everyday Objects	**Production site**	**Image site**	**Audience site**
Soda fountain	popular from the 1950s to the 1990s, were the only place where you could buy soda, becoming popular nowadays in the game you can buy 1 soda glass there	white with red soda machine where you can buy soda, outside in the city street	enhances soviet atmosphere, may cause nostalgic feelings
Newspaper stoll	were throughout the Soviet Union, distributing newspapers, now less common in the game you can speak to a seller and know all last news	newspaper stoll, no different in design from the house in the background, with a seller inside	enhances soviet atmosphere, may cause nostalgic feelings
Nu pogodi, cartoon on TV	convex common TV, famous cartoon was	in the dark room you can see only bright	enhances soviet atmosphere, may

	watched by everyone is USSR and after\n\nin the game you can often meet those tvs showing cartoon in different rooms and locations	screen with cartoon, can watch through about 20 episodes there	cause nostalgic feelings
Moskvich car	real Moskvich-408\n\nin the game it helps moving throughout the map, can break or explode of damage	usually inserted in open air bright locations, bright red car that catches attention, easy to find	can add realism and additional interaction with Soviet objects, can add interest or feelings of nostalgia
Condensed milk	blue and white GOST design didn't change through generations, was actively produced during canned food production for armies,\n\nin the game is consumable, used as a booster of strength and health	blue-white can, main character opens it with the knife and drinks, usually it's in the "backpack"	can add realism and additional interaction with Soviet objects, can add interest or feelings of nostalgia
Vodka	in the game is consumable, used to increase armor in the fights, when you drink it you get dizzy and blurry	unknown design of vodka, dark bottle	can add realism, can serve as a stereotype and is recognizable among various players

Appendix 2. Interview guide (translated to english)

General questions about the gaming experience

1. What year were you born?
2. What city are you from?
3. Please tell us about your general gaming experience and impressions of the game *Atomic Heart*?
4. What got you interested in the game *Atomic Heart*? (why did you start playing?)

Perception of elements of nostalgia for the Soviet period

5. What visual elements in *Atomic Heart* did you find most striking and memorable? Why?
6. Please describe elements or references reminiscent of the Soviet era that you encountered while playing *Atomic Heart*?
    a. Were there any moments in the game when you stopped to consider certain visual details or Easter eggs associated with the Soviet era?
    b. To what extent does architecture and interior design reflect the Soviet period in your opinion?
7. How do you feel when games include Soviet elements?
8. How do visual elements of the Soviet era (such as architecture, technology, and everyday objects) affect the atmosphere of the game and your gaming experience?
9. How do the art and design in *Atomic Heart* help you become more immersed in the game? Do they enhance the feeling of nostalgia?
10. Did you feel nostalgic when you played *Atomic Heart*?
    <u>if yes:</u>
    a. At what points in the game did you feel nostalgic? Bring examples.
    b. How do you perceive nostalgia? (Something nice and warm or as memories that evoke rather sadness?)
    c. What role do you think nostalgia plays in the game *Atomic Heart*?
    <u>if not:</u>
    a. Why? Were there any other feelings?
    b. If there was no feeling of nostalgia specifically for the Soviet Union, was there a kind of nostalgia for childhood? (Soviet cartoons, etc.)

11. How do you think *Atomic Heart* uses Soviet-era nostalgia to engage players? Does it involve you?

Representation of the Soviet Union

12. How do you think *Atomic Heart* represents the Soviet era as a whole?

13. Were there moments or elements in *Atomic Heart* that you feel idealize or glorify the past, especially the Soviet era, as if wanting to restore it? Could you give examples?

14. Did the image of the Soviet era in the game make you want to go back to that time or want to relive certain aspects of that era today?

15. Were there any moments in *Atomic Heart* that made you look at events or phenomena of the Soviet era in a new way? For example, an encounter with a certain object or scene that caused you to think about the past.

16. Were there any moments in *Atomic Heart* where the past was shown with irony, sarcasm or humor? How did they influence your opinion of the game?

17. Can *Atomic Heart*, by presenting a fictional Soviet world, help to better understand or reflect on the real history and culture of that era? Why or why not?

18. Do you think that *Atomic Heart* can be perceived as part of state propaganda promoting a certain image of the Soviet Union? Why do you think so?

Influence of personal/cultural background and memory

19. How well are you familiar with the history and culture of the Soviet era?
    a. Where did you mainly learn about Soviet history? (for example, in educational institutions, from family stories, media, books, films, etc.)
    b. How do you think these sources influenced your understanding? or the perception of the Soviet era?

20. Have you ever encountered objects, symbols or artifacts associated with the Soviet era (for example, at home, on the street, in museums; family heirlooms, etc.)? Could you describe them and give examples?
    a. What meaning do these objects have for you, and how do they contribute to your personal connection with the Soviet past?

21. Do you think your life experiences, background, or where you're from influences how you experience nostalgia when playing *Atomic Heart*?

22. How do you think players from different cultural backgrounds might experience this game?

23. How would you compare the portrayal of the Soviet Union in *Atomic Heart* with your own ideas about it? Are there any similarities? What about the differences?

Final questions

24. Did playing *Atomic Heart* change your perception of the Soviet era? If so, how?
25. Is there anything you'd like to add about your experience with *Atomic Heart* or its depiction of the Soviet era that we haven't covered?

Appendix 3. Consent form (translated to english)

Consent Form for Participation in the Study

Hello and thank you for your interest and willingness to participate in my research. My goal is to study how players perceive Soviet elements in video games and whether these elements evoke feelings of nostalgia in them. I'm also interested in how the players' cultural background influences their perception of these elements.

It is important to emphasize that this study is <u>not intended</u> to criticize or glorify the Soviet Union. I strive for an objective and comprehensive analysis, avoiding evaluative judgments. Please note that the interview may cover political issues. It is important to understand that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers here, and every opinion is valuable.

The interview may take approximately 20 to 50 minutes.

What is required of you:

- Answer questions honestly and in detail, according to your personal impressions and opinions.
- Understand that your responses will be used anonymously and confidentially for research purposes.

Your Rights:

- Your participation in the study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time without any consequences.
- You have the right to anonymity and confidentiality of your responses. No personally identifiable information will be collected or distributed.

Consent: By signing this form, you confirm that you have read the terms of participation in the study, understand your rights and responsibilities, and consent to participate.

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix 4. Participants information (sampling)

Interviewee №	Gender	Year	City / Country	Date of interview	Length of interview
0 (pilot)	M	1987	St. Petersburg, Russia	20.03	24 min
1	M	1984	St. Petersburg, Russia	24.03	1h 58 min
2	F	1997	Voskresensk, Moscow region, Russia	30.03	51 min
3	F	1999	Voskresensk, Moscow region, Russia	27.03	39 min
4	F	1999	Yakutsk, Sakha Republic, Russia	22.03	33 min
5	F	1998	Vyazma, Smolensk region, Russia	06.04	34 min
6	M	1996	Voskresensk, Moscow region, Russia	03.04	27 min
7	M	1999	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	29.03	30 min
8	M	1999	Moscow, Russia	28.03	22 min
9	M	1995	Pavlodar, Kazakhstan	05.04	20 min
10	F	1996	Rostov-on-Don, Russia	30.03	24 min

Appendix 5. Interview example (translated to english)

What year were you born?

1998

And what city are you from?

Vyazma, Smolensk region

Please tell me about your gaming experience and impressions of the *Atomic Heart* game in general.

I liked the game, I won't say that the plot is super cool, but it's quite interesting, addictive, good gameplay, very beautiful visuals, which was extremely unexpected. Few people expected anything from this game, but overall I really liked it. Musical accompaniment is generally a separate art form.

What initially attracted you?

More like the setting, maybe, and the musical accompaniment. I wanted to feel this environment myself.

What visual elements did you find most striking and memorable?

Twins, of course. It was probably one of the most striking visual elements. But they are really beautiful, meaning they are really well made. And I liked very much these initial scenes, that is, the initial quest, when he arrived on this futuristic boat, this aerial city, how the robots were mixed there. The park is Soviet, in fact, Soviet buildings, these are Soviet machines, telephones, but at the same time there are robots walking there. It was very cool. This is one of the best scenes. Also, I don't know whether or not to use the DLC [additional content created for an already released video game], but I really liked the aerial hotel in the first DLC, which, where the rooms are, they all hang in the air and are connected by such bridges, and there each dome, in fact, represents some kind of zone . Very nicely done.

Were there any moments where you stopped to look at certain visual details? Any Easter eggs related to the Soviet era?

It was the beginning... I looked over everything, poked around everywhere. Vovchik [a male looking robot], who plays 'Na nedelku do vtorogo' [song 'Komarovo' by Igor Sklyar], totally hooked me. That was the beginning. And now what else, in the theater, I stopped a lot. The ballet theater there. It's also very beautiful there, everything is made so pompously. And I stopped practically at every radio to listen to the music

And to watch cartoons?

Watch cartoons, yes, definitely watch cartoons, yes. It was very cool. Well, by the way, about the territory of Limbo... No, it probably impressed me the least, by the way. Because, well, this is something so abstract. Exactly this, it happened a lot in games, so... Oh, well, by the way, it's a little confusing in my head. We went outside, right, in the original game?

At some point... Yes, we drove there in a Moskvich. There was a village...

There was, I think, a park that was somewhat similar to VDNKh [park exhibition of achievements in Moscow]. There was a boss fight. Yes, that's where I stopped, in terms of my urban planning activity I just stood there, telling the chat. Look, they even made a storm drain, check it out. Look. Paths laid out, gravel, gravel fill, take a look.

By the way, my next question is about architecture. To what extent do you think architecture and interior design reflect the Soviet period?

Well, I can probably... I didn't experience the Soviet Union directly... I can say what we have left from the Soviet Union. That, and what's there in the photographs, from the grandmothers, from the stories. I can also say, based on the opinion of others who experienced the Soviet Union, that they probably did a good job. They really tried to convey the atmosphere, the architecture. Well, in general, yes, especially since I focus a lot on the beginning because it was probably one of the most vivid manifestations. Because of those houses, I remember my town. For example, the district where my grandmother lived, those five-story buildings. Very similar. Just neater and prettier. Not like that in real life.

Yes. Utopia it is..

Yes, yes, yes. Well, and then, these regular parks... Oh, there was a Stalinist high-rise, which everyone thinks is Moscow State University. Yes.

And how do you feel about games incorporating Soviet elements?

Absolutely fine, it's part of history, part of the era, part of some architecture and ideology, so... Why not? It looks interesting, unusual, it seems there was nothing quite like it before, approached partly with humor, even satire, so why not? Quite good, actually."

What do you think about how these visual elements of the Soviet era affect the game? More precisely, the atmosphere of the game.

They really hit on nostalgia, even if you didn't actually live through that era. You still feel as if you're experiencing it. Let's take this as an example. There is, let's say, American society, which feels strong nostalgia for the 80s when 'Stranger Things' [american series on Netflix] came out, with retro music, retro games, and even people of our age can feel some nostalgia.

Even you, who didn't live in that era, with a different mentality, still feel some nostalgia, even though you didn't experience it yourself. So, I think it works the same here, that even if you're younger, you can still experience this nostalgia because you encountered these elements at your grandmother's, at your parents'. So, you can immerse yourself a little bit.

So, does this picture, this design help immerse you better into the game somehow?

Yes, of course, of course. To feel the atmosphere.

So, did you feel nostalgic when you were playing?

Partially, yes, of course.

And can you recall any moments when you felt nostalgic?

Most likely, there were moments when we entered, for example, Baba Zina's [grandma character] house, and you immediately thought, damn, it's just like grandma's summer house.

Yes, it seemed like a little hut.

Yes-yes-yes. But inside it really looks just like a summer house. Like you've come to grandma's summer house. There was tea set out right there with all sorts of treats, with jams and so on. I think there was even a small garden at that moment. Yeah. I just don't remember if in the original plot part we went into houses, that is, into residential ones.

Well... for example, we ran around a village at the beginning, there were houses there too. Among the sunflowers, remember maybe?

But they were more like summer houses. In the DLC there was more of a bit, as if it were apartments, and it actually resembled the apartment where I lived as a child. That is, there... I don't remember there being a sideboard, unfortunately. Actually, I don't think there was a single sideboard in the game. Surprising. But there were, I know, elements that were... I forgot what it is called, it spins records. A record player for vinyl records, that's what it's called I guess. An old one like that.

What is nostalgia for you? How would you describe this feeling?

Well, in this context, nostalgia is warmer, with a homely atmosphere. Like that. That is, some memories of childhood still surface. Just when you came to grandma's, grandma would put on those records, turn on cartoons for you on that pot-bellied TV. Sometimes there were also playgrounds, I remembered, those iron swings, very dangerous.

That's when we found the train ticket, right?

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. There were playgrounds, including those tires set in the ground. Yes, so nostalgia is childhood.

So, we've touched on this a bit, but what do you think is the role of nostalgia in *Atomic Heart*?

It attracts and draws you in, that is, it helps you partially immerse yourself in childhood. For some into childhood, for others into youth. And it adds just such an atmosphere, and it somehow keeps you in the game. And it's not bad, all the games keep you engaged with some features.

How, in your opinion, is the Soviet Era represented in *Atomic Heart* overall?

Satirically. It's a big satire. Presented with humor. I believe that many have commented, including that you are either parasitizing on the theme of the Soviet Union or, on the contrary, trying to promote some ideology. I think it's just satire, it's humor. And also to show the beauty too. Because there were many beautiful buildings in the Soviet Union that are preserved to this day and are considered cultural objects. So with respect as well.

Then do you think there were any idealizing moments in the game?

No. No, I don't think so. It's satire. Just a setting.

Did the image of the Soviet era in the game make you want to return to that time or experience certain aspects of that era?

No. No, actually, because... Why? I would return to the game, but the truth is the last third DLC was crap. So I would return to the game, because, again, to listen to the music again, to play with all those weapon customizations, to shoot at the Vovchiks [robots].

> ***And if to visit in the game itself, would you like that?***
>
> I would live for a day in the hotel from the DLC. I don't remember what it's called. Ah, it's called 'Lyogkaya' ['Light']. I'll send you a photo. That's it. In that hotel I would live.
>
> ***I see, 'Lyogkaya'***
>
> It's not light at all. Very beautiful visual effect, very coolly made. And here's what I was talking about, that each zone represents something.

Were there moments in *Atomic Heart* that made you look at the events of the Soviet Union anew, or reconsider them, or maybe provoked some reflections on the past?

More no than yes. No, no, no. I don't even know what else to add.

Okay. So, you mentioned sarcasm earlier. Maybe you can recall specific moments where the past was shown with irony, sarcasm, or a joke?

Yes. Yes, there were many such moments where the joke about the phone call at the very beginning was also cool. Now I will remember what other mocking moments there were. Yes, there are many actually. Hard to remember. I just played it a year ago, I've just opened it now,

just to at least look at the pictures to remember something. Ahh! I don't know if I can say this in an interview, whether you will use it or not, but I think one of the most ironic, mocking moments was Eleanora the refrigerator. Why? She was not just a comic relief, but also laughed at the idea that there was no sex in the Soviet Union, there was only love. And she embodies only everything depraved, only sex, sheer desire, and nothing more. So I think she is one of the most mocking characters.

So, do you think this fictional Soviet world can help you think about real history, there, like when playing you are like 'Damn, what was it like?' ?

Maybe partially it can, that is, there, well, probably not for me specifically, but generally it can, that is, make you go read something about, for example, Soviet scientists, about developments, study the architecture, that one Stalinist Empire, how parks were built, but I studied that for five years at the institute, so... It wasn't so interesting for me. Read about, I don't know, our art, about our ballet, which is still at the top, go listen to music. Listened to music in the game, went and listened to the original.

Yeah. Do you think *Atomic Heart* could be seen as part of state propaganda, promoting a certain image of the Soviet Union?

No. No, it's not even a state project, it's a private project, so I think the guys who created this game didn't even think about that. They just, I think, took the setting and promoted it as they saw fit. So, I believe there's no propaganda at all in it. Even sometimes there is anti-propaganda.

So, next, I have questions about your cultural background. How well are you familiar with the history of culture during the Soviet era?

Honestly, not so much. But I superficially know from stories, well, I know some architecture, though I don't remember all of it. We encounter much in our lives. Still... I'm even looking at photographs now, there are separate Soviet bus stops, which look very beautiful, very beautifully made. They are still present in our time too. That is, we have some echoes that we can rely on, but to delve into history, honestly, I can't tell you much. I don't know. I don't remember history well, in general.

Okay. Where did you mostly learn about Soviet history? Including superficial knowledge

School, university.

Any media, films?

Films, yes. Well, then if we go like that... Naturally, you get your initial knowledge there, I don't know... School, the basics like that. If we talk about scientific... That is, school,

university, and beyond... It would be Soviet movies. By the way, yes, I completely forgot about them. Again, music… I mention music a lot because I really liked it in the game. A lot. Well, I don't know, you go out in Moscow at VDNKh, there's all the Soviet splendor. Now you went and studied it, walked through all the pavilions. Looked outside, looked inside, something like that.

How did these sources influence your understanding and perception of the Soviet era? That is, for example, you took something from textbooks, something from films, there in the films, for example, there might be something idealized or not, somewhere there might be more negative, from family stories there, for example, what they told you. How do you think they influenced your perception of the Soviet era?

Of course. To some extent, of course, they influenced. I don't know... Although they say, the Soviet Union, this... Communism, all that stuff. This, by the way... I remember from a movie. I think it was 'Operaciya Y' ['Operation Y', soviet film]. And there was a moment about lunches, that they necessarily had this worker's lunch, soup, a second course, and always kompot [drink of boiled berries]. That is, there's still this some kind of regularity, structure, absolutely every screw, it's responsible for something, every person in society is responsible for something, and looking there, I don't know, at the Stalinist Empire, at VDNKh, there were still impressions that it was in the center, so to speak, expensive and rich. Very expensive and rich and pompous. But on the other hand, we know about brutalism, too. That also reflects the era, too. About something... massive, big. I rely on architecture, so I will go from there. Something heavy. That is, on the one hand, we get beautiful, expensive, rich, and on the other hand, something heavy, bulky. And they somehow exist, these two styles in one era, and, it seems to me, like the state of people. That is, someone actually lives... richly, although in communism everyone is equal, but no. I think not. There was still division. Well, and someone lives quite heavily by talons and so on. Someone gets paid in food and wallpaper.

So, I think you already touched on that you encountered these, all sorts of Soviet objects in life.

Of course, we all encountered them. Yes

Did you have any Soviet things at home or... maybe there were many such things in your city?

Yes, of course. There were many. From those children's playgrounds to the sideboard at home. That is, well, I can probably remember some small things. Well, aside from the general construction. That is, some things in the apartment, things at grandma's. That is, again, this

old vinyl player, not these new trendy ones, but specifically an old one. A huge television, I remember, those huge TVs. There was a cassette player. There was this radio, which has a huge strip, and there you have to twist and turn something, completely unclear. But, it works. I saw a Soviet refrigerator. My grandma had one. It was also convex. So probably some elements of the interior. Well, the general visual of the same houses, five-story buildings, and so on. Those, I think, five-story buildings, they went a bit further in time, I don't remember. When there was the thing that everything had to be done the same, that is, they worked for speed, not for visuals.

So, do you think your life experience, where you are from, your past, affects how you experience nostalgia in *Atomic Heart*?

I think so. Because I partially lived in it as a child. Not in the Soviet Union, I mean, but with elements, so to speak, of the Soviet Union. I lived with them, I heard them. That is when there... again, music plays on the radio, you watch Soviet movies with grandma as a child, some old books, surroundings, so that... Well, I said that the game basically sends you into nostalgia about childhood, so it was specifically childhood that influenced it.

So, players with a different cultural past might perceive this game differently, right?

Yes, yes, yes. They will likely just rely on whether it's a beautiful picture, an ugly picture, a cool song, not a cool song.

> *But they won't feel the emotions we feel, right?*
>
> No, they won't feel them, I think not. I think this is closer to people from the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States].

We're coming to the end. How would you compare the depiction of the Soviet Union in *Atomic Heart* with your own perceptions of it?

I think that if this whole thing continued, it would look exactly like that. If this era continued, it would most likely look just like that.

> *Like if we went into progress, then...*
>
> Well, I don't know why, but it seems to me like something real. Yes. It could really exist.

So, and the last question. Did the game change your perception of the Soviet era?

No. Well no, it's still a game, after all. I don't associate the game with the real world. So no.

And that's all, unless you want to add something.

I don't know what else to add. I think I, in general, said the same theses in different words. Because... Well, many questions were similar, and it's actually difficult for me in that sense,

because I didn't live, first of all, in the Soviet Union. I'm not deeply immersed in that culture, except for what was in my childhood. Really.

Well, that's basically what interests me. In fact, everything you said was useful to me.

So then, the game is unlikely to change your worldview. In principle, I think no game can... Unless it's philosophical, psychological or something, then it cannot change your worldview. It can just... What is a game for? Games are to entertain you. In this regard, the game does very well, because it entertains you, it immerses you in some memories, when you go like 'oh damn, I had something like that', 'oh, damn, I saw something like that!'. So, that's it.

Appendix 6. Open-coding example

Transcript	Open codes
4. Расскажите пожалуйста о своем общем игровом опыте и впечатлениях от игры "Atomic Heart"? В целом играю я достаточно много в разные игры, люблю всякие мочилки, интересные сюжеты. Я бы сказала я казуальный игрок, то есть не особо люблю хардкор, но также не выбираю легкие уровни, люблю изучать мир игровой, рассматривать объекты разные, проходить сторонние задания, хоть и не все. То есть мне нравится вот это виртуальное взаимодействие с игровым миром, особенно когда он необычен. В Атомик Харт мне в целом понравилось играть, меня прямо поразил визуал и атмосфера игры. Хотя убивать роботов в какой-то момент надоедает так как они лезут практически отовсюду и в целом в игре легко умереть. Что еще, персонажи были прикольные, сама история хотя кому-то показалось слабой, как по мне мне всё понравилось в этом плане, я старалась не сравнивать эту игру с другими, поскольку это первая такая масштабная игра русских разработчиков, и меня это удивило, хотя количество багов с начала выпуска игры конечно иногда портило впечатление…	люблю изучать мир игровой мне нравится виртуальное взаимодействие с необычным игровым миром поразил визуал и атмосфера убивать роботов надоедает, они лезут отовсюду персонажи были прикольные, сюжет понравился баги в начале выпуска игры иногда портили впечатление
5. А чем вас привлекла игра "Atomic Heart"? Вообще когда я увидела трейлер игры, или мне кто-то его скинул, я посмотрела и просто такая «вау, советский союз, восстание роботов в советском союзе» это же так необычно, так ново и интересно, как они покажут советский союз с роботами? Какую историю расскажут? Плюс графика мне показалось была крутой, по сравнению с другими играми которые русские создают вообще, и ещё мне запомнились веселые какие-то моменты, например, про бабу Зину кричащую что «всем пиздец», мне это показалось очень забавным, я вообще в целом люблю такое, черный юмор, ирония и тд. Просто само осознание того, что	вау - восстание роботов в ссср, так ново и интересно графика показалась крутой было забавно, я люблю такое, черный юмор, ирония
а) Были ли в игре моменты, когда вы останавливались, чтобы рассмотреть определенные визуальные детали или "пасхалки", связанные с советской эпохой? Да, смотрела мультики, рассматривала эти плакаты кричащие о техническом прогрессе, вообще там очень много деталей если на них обращать внимание, я даже увидела весы как раньше стояли в магазинах и на рынках, это забавно. Остановилась скушать эскимо, читала газетные вырезки какие-то, кстати там был еще памятник военным с вечным огнем, примерно такие же как в любом городе стоят. А еще когда пролетали над городом там была огромная статуя женщины с мечом в одном моменте, очень напомнила мне ту, что я видела однажды в Волгограде «родина-мать зовёт», и другие статуи с серпом типо сельское хозяйство, и похожие статуи на ВДНХ. Насчёт пасхалок, кажется я натыкалась на информацию, что они использовали разные отсылки из советских и не только фильмов и книг, но мне самой трудно было их заметить в игре, поэтому не знаю что сказать.	увидела весы как раньше стояли на рынках там был памятник как в любом городе стоят сейчас мне трудно было заметить многие отсылки
б) Насколько архитектура и дизайн интерьеров отражают советский период, по вашему мнению? Ну как по мне, так особенно в первые яркие 30 минут прямо очень всё отражало советскую эпоху, конечно возможно в игре всё это слишком гиперболизировано, но вот то что они собрали в игру, все эти вещи, было прям ощущение что да, как советский союз наверное. Ммм… ну естественно там конечно присутствует	прямо очень всё отражало советскую эпоху было ощущение что это как ссср

Appendix 7. Analytical coding example

Example of the part of analysis in Russian:

Open codes	Example	Analytical codes
ностальгия не по ссср, а по советским вещам из детства	некая ностальгия есть, может и не по советскому союзу, но по советским вещам из детства и жизни да	ностальгия по детству
я ела ее с детства и продолжаю есть сейчас	меня покорила белорусская сгущенка, я ела ее с детства и продолжаю есть сейчас.	личные воспоминания и ностальгия
у родственников были ковры на стенах	Ковры опять же на стенах узорчатые, у нас у дедушки с бабушкой было очень много таких ковров и у родственников также они висели на стенах.	личные воспоминания и культурное влияние
мультики и музыка отсылают в детство	Потом когда видела мультики или слышала музыку советскую, ну прямо отсылает тебя в детство.	ностальгия через культурные элементы
её интонация мне показалась знакомой	непонятные моменты, как когда я говорила про Терешкову и ее интонацию, которая мне показалась знакомой, то есть в какие-то моменты простреливает, то с чем ты в жизни встречался.	ассоциации с ссср, связь с реальностью
возвращают тебя в детство или знакомые места	конечно это приятные воспоминания, которые возвращают тебя в детство, ну или незнаю, какие-то знакомые места	ностальгия по детству

Translated to English example:

Open codes	Example	Analytical codes
nostalgia not for the USSR, but for Soviet things from childhood	There is some nostalgia, maybe not for the Soviet Union, but for Soviet things from childhood and life, yes	childhood nostalgia
I have eaten it since childhood and continue to eat it now	I was captivated by Belarusian condensed milk. I have eaten it since childhood and continue to eat it now.	personal memories and nostalgia
relatives had carpets on the walls	The carpets on the walls are again patterned; my grandparents had a lot of these carpets and our relatives also had them hanging on the walls.	personal memories and cultural influence
cartoons and music send you back to childhood	Then when I saw cartoons or heard Soviet music, well, it directly sends you back to childhood.	nostalgia through cultural elements
her intonation seemed familiar to me	weird moments, like when I talked about Tereshkova and her intonation, which seemed familiar to me, that is, at some moments it shoots through, what have you encountered in your life.	associations with the USSR, connection with reality
takes you back to childhood or familiar places	Of course, these are pleasant memories that take you back to childhood, or, I don't know, some familiar places	childhood nostalgia

The topics appearing from analytical codes:

исследование игрового мира
вовлечение в игровой мир,
привлекательный сеттинг
впечатления от визуала, восприятие
критика геймплея
положительные впечатления от игры
технические проблемы - ухудшение
восприятия
привлекательный сеттинг
впечатления от визуала
эмоциональная реакция на юмор
эмоциональная связь с культурными
элементами (способствует увлечению
игрой)
восприятие игрового мира и СССР
(способствует погружению)
ассоциации с сссp
узнавание советских элементов, связь с
реальностью
личные воспоминания и культурное
влияние
ассоциации с сссp
опосредованные исторические знания
личные воспоминания и культурное
влияние
личные воспоминания и культурное
влияние
узнавание общедоступных советских
символов
незнакомство с культурными элементами
ассоциации с сссp
ассоциации с сссp, сравнение с
реальностью
объединение ретро и модерна
личные воспоминания и культурное
влияние
отсутствие личного опыта,
опосредованность знаний
ассоциации с сссp, узнаваемость советской
атмосферы
привлекательность советской тематики/
сеттинга
культурная аутентичность (формирует
погружение)
привлекательность визуальных элементов
(погружение)

привлекательность визуальных элементов
(погружение)
альтернативная история, узнавание
культурное наследие
личные воспоминания и культурное
влияние
ностальгия по детству
личные воспоминания и ностальгия
личные воспоминания и культурное
влияние
ностальгия через культурные элементы
ассоциации с сссp, связь с реальностью
ностальгия по детству
коммерческая ностальгия
эмоциональная связь (погружение?)
ассоциации с сссp, сравнение с
реальностью
альтернативная история
сравнение с реальностью
отсутствие политической осведомленности
(не может критически судить)
восприятие атмосферы
изображение советской эпохи
восприятие атмосферы
восприятие альтернативной истории
восприятие альтернативной истории
(ностальгия по тому чего никогда не могло
бы быть??)
восприятие исторической точности
эмоциональная реакция на юмор
восприятие исторической точности,
рефлексия о прошлом
восприятие альтернативной истории
отношение к советской эпохе, восприятие
использования ностальгии?
восприятие игры
восприятие использования ностальгии
отсутствие личного опыта,
опосредованность знаний
отношение к советской эпохе
отсутствие политической осведомленности
восприятие сссp
личные воспоминания и культурное
влияние, опосредованное узнавание
истории
культурная близость, наследие
культурное влияние

личные воспоминания и культурное влияние
культурное влияние, наследие
культурное влияние (влияние прошлого на настоящее), формирование идентичности
культурное различие
культурная близость, культурное влияние
культурное влияние, восприятие игры
ассоциации с ссср сравнение с реальностью

восприятие игры
альтернативная история, сравнение с реальностью
совмещение прошлого и настоящего
эмоциональное восприятие
привлекательный сеттинг
восприятие исторической точности
восприятие игры, культурное восприятие?
восприятие исторической точности, функция развлечения

Uniting those topics under the themes:

Тема 1: Восприятие визуала игры
Исследование игрового мира
Вовлечение в игровой мир
Привлекательный сеттинг
Впечатления от визуала
Привлекательность визуальных элементов и их влияние на погружение
Технические проблемы - ухудшение восприятия
атмосфера
Тема 2: Восприятие советского образа в игре
Ассоциации с СССР, сравнение с реальностью
Изображение советской эпохи
Привлекательность советской тематики/сеттинга
Стереотипизация
Восприятие использования ностальгии?
Альтернативная история
Совмещение прошлого и настоящего
Тема 3: Ностальгия и культурная память
Эмоциональная связь с культурными элементами
Личные воспоминания и ностальгия
Ностальгия через культурные элементы
Коммерческая ностальгия
Ностальгия по детству
Тема 4: Культурное влияние
Культурное наследие и его значение
Личные воспоминания и культурное влияние
Культурное влияние (влияние прошлого на настоящее),
Культурная близость, культурное влияние
Культурные ассоциации с СССР и его узнаваемость
Восприятие игры разными аудиториями
Тема 5: Историческая точность и рефлексия
Опосредованные исторические знания
Отсутствие политической осведомленности (не может критически судить)
Восприятие исторической точности, рефлексия о прошлом
Восприятие альтернативной истории (ностальгия по тому, чего никогда не могло бы быть)
пропаганда?
Фокус на развлечении (не на истории)
Тема 6: Ирония и юмор
Реакции на юмор и сарказм
Сатирическое изображение ссср

Uniting topics under the themes, translated to english:

Topic 1: Perception of game visuals
Exploring the game world
Involvement in the gaming world
Attractive setting
Impressions from the visual
The appeal of visual elements and their impact on immersion
Technical problems - deterioration of perception
atmosphere
Topic 2: Perception of the Soviet image in the game
Associations with the USSR, comparison with reality
Soviet era image
The appeal of the Soviet theme/setting
Stereotyping
Perception of the use of nostalgia?
alternative history
Combining past and present
Topic 3: Nostalgia and cultural memory
Emotional connection with cultural elements
Personal memories and nostalgia
Nostalgia through cultural elements
Commercial nostalgia
Nostalgia for childhood
Topic 4: Cultural Influence
Cultural heritage and its significance
Personal memories and cultural influence
Cultural influence (impact of the past on the present)
Cultural affinity, cultural influence
Cultural associations with the USSR and its recognition
Perception of the game by different audiences
Topic 5: Historical Accuracy and Reflection
Mediated historical knowledge
Lack of political awareness (cannot judge critically)
Perception of historical accuracy, reflection on the past
Perception of alternative history (nostalgia for something that could never have happened)
propaganda?
Focus on entertainment (not on story)
Topic 6: Irony and humor
Reactions to humor and sarcasm
Satirical depiction of the USSR

Appendix 9. Thematic matrix example

Parts of the big matrix:

город	Питер	Воскресенск	Воскресенск	Якутск	Вязьма
участник	1	2	3	4	5
узнавание советских элементов	там все эти памятники гигантские, автомобили, правда, надерганы из разных советских эпох, но все равно ты в принципе, что-то понимаешь /	робот Терешкова начинает с тобой говорить, у неё была такая манера речи ну прямо как будто она звучала из СССР // Здания кстати блочные очень похожи на те в которых я живу, естественно они из советских времен // постройки, плакаты с лозунгами, телевизоры с советскими мультиками, всё было в красных тонах и с серпами и молоткани, ещё автоматы с газировкой, про которые нам рассказывали и показывали в фильмах // кстати там был ещё памятник военным с вечным огнём, примерно такие же как в любом городе стоит. А еще когда пролетали над городом огромная статуя с мечом казалась она называлась «призыв родины» очень напоминала мне ту, что я видела однажды в Волгограде «родина-мать зовёт», и другие статуи с серпом отмечающие сельское хозяйство, и похожие статуи на ВДНХ	узнается советский стиль, все красное, архитектура советская, кругом советские плакаты, роботы тоже необычные, робот с усами, или робот с лицом как у куклы (терешкова вроде), выглядит забавно // начиная от архитектуры (сталинские высотки, вдих, там в пролете над городом показывали много чего, родину мать, даже статуя ленина еще стоит), научно техническим прогрессом (полет в космос)захаичиван мультиками «ну погоди». Везде лезут мотивицаоциный плакаты, про рабочий класс, колхоз, 1 мая и тому подобное, естественно захватывает бесконечная борьба с сша, капиталистами	плакаты коммунизма, здания, архитектура конечно же в первую очередь привлекает внимание на тему СССР, все эти «товарищ»	похожий парк на ВДНХ // Парк советский, по сути, советская застройка, вот, советские вот эти автоматы, телефоны, но при этом там ходят роботы. Это было очень клёво
отражает ли ссср	нету сути Советского Союза, то есть хочу сказать, что да, визуал есть, но нету сути, к сожалению, суть не передана	особенно в первые яркие 30 минут прямо очень всё отражало советскую эпоху, конечно возможно в игре всё это слишком гиперболизированно, но вот то что они собрали в игру, все эти вещи, было прям ощущение что да, как советский союз наверное	отражает хорошо	безусловно архитектура и дизайн очень сильно отражает эту эпоху, но не стоит забывать что это стимлинг, или ссср-панк футуризм этот, совмещение старого с новым	что осталось у нас от Советского Союза. Вот, и там, то, что там по фотографиям, по бабушкам, по историям. Я и по мнению других, кто застал Советский Союз, могу сказать, что, скорее всего, они хорошо сделали // они прям постарались атмосферу, архитектуру сумели передать
стереотипы	там визуал очень богатый все-все культуры, но только может быть, назовем это словом, ну, клише, наверное, но как бы такие характерные черты для советского дизайна, ну и в принципе ретро футуризма такого небольшого, но с советским уклоном // баба Зина, такая стандартная модель, «russian babushka». То есть, всё это, естественно, для прикола сделано для западных людей, которые прекрасно знают, этих babushkas.	даже если в игре преувеличено как-то показывается образ ссср, то, мне кажется это не настолько заметно, особенно для меня, посколько я не жила в советском союзе // в самом начале, всё такое величественное, всё просто идеально, СССР самая продвинутая и классная страна мира. Я тут скорее не об идеализации я бы сказала, это как будто такое стереотипное преувеличение	когда ещё вот эта робот Терешкова начинает с тобой говорить, у неё была такая манера речи ну прямо как будто она звучала из СССР, как мне показалось, недавно я даже была в Москве и слышала какое-то объявление на корабликe, которое звучало абсолютно также, // Здания кстати блочные очень похожи на те в которых я живу, естественно они из советских времен // колодцильными кстати, похожи были на тот, что стоят у моего деда, ковры на стенах в домах это прям вообще, у многих они были в детстве	На протяжении всей игры встречаешься с гиперболизированными клише про советский союз: театр, балерины, поезда, в тоннеле фуникулеры, червь который прокладывает метро	
сравнения элементов игры с реальными	Вот эта высотка, в которой сидит у нас Сеченов, ну, это же копия, сталинской высотки, прямая. // у меня в Питере, вот, выйдете на Московский проспект, вот если начинаете двигаться там, ну, у нас немножко отойти, вот там, вот обводного канала, и так чуть-чуть туда уходить, то там вот просто сталинское строительство.			некоторые здания похожи на советскую архитектуру, плюс учтено много процессов, везде лежат ковры, только на окнах (в жилых интерьерах), в театре тоже красные ковры дорожки такие, мебель похожа на советскую, в больших зданиях чувствуется советские масштабы, типа подвесить в главном здании самолет, картины везде висят, колонны, высокие гигантские помещения	но роботы и машины это капец как круто, если бы реально так было	там вот эти вот домики, я вспоминаю свой город. Например, где район, где бабушка жила, вот эти вот пятиэтажечки. Очень похоже. Прямо. Только более аккуратно и красиво. В жизни не так. // дом бабы Зины на бабушкину дачу похож // Вот в DLC больше было вот кусочек, как будто квартиры, а там уже похоже именно на квартиру, в которой я в детстве жила
отношение к советским элементам в играх	у меня есть какое-то небольшой предвзятое отношение к Советскому Союзу, но всё-таки оно имеет критический элемент. И когда Советский Союз показывают в играх, которые, тем более, сделаны не только на наш рынок, они сделаны больше на западный рынок. Конечно, у меня	Просто само осознание того, что именно какие-то знакомые тебе вещи, с которыми ты в какой-то степени связан внедрили в игру, в шутер, это прям очень завлекает	Ну это необычно, потому что такие элементы создают что то новое, не похоже на другие игры. В какой игре еще можно найти и выпить баму сгущении например, или поездить на москвиче, или попробовать задавить ежа	Если это как забава и развлечение, то это ну есть свои фишка своя изюминка, так что отрицательно точно не отношусь…	Абсолютно нормально, это часть истории, часть эпохи, часть тоже архитектуры какой-то идеологии, поэтому... Почему бы и нет? Это выглядит интересно, необычно, такого, мне кажется, прям было, чтобы частично с юмором к этому подошли, с

город	Воскресенск	Воскресенск	Якутск	Вязьма	Воскресенск
участник	2	3	4	5	6
способствуют ли эти объекты связи с советским прошлым	из-за того что я только что сказала что вот они всегда вокруг меня, эти объекты, думаю у меня с ними поэтому достаточно глубокая связь. Возможно мне вот, мое поколение выросло с какими-то влиянием советского на нас, однако конечно наши характеры сильно отличаются, а также наша открытость ко всему сейчас.	современные постройки, вдохновленные образами советской эпохи, до сих пор вызывает восторг // Мне очень нравится советская мебель и ковры, обожаю			В целом никакого значения, кроме как внешне приятного глазу дизайна. Кому то наоборот не нравится советский сеттинг, а кому-то архитектура. Мне же кажется это всё достаточно привлекательным и оригинальным.
влияние опыта на ностальгию в Атомик харт	Конечно влияет, ведь я уже сказала что я близке к советскому союзу чем например граждане иностранных государств, поэтому мне некоторые вещи кажутся знакомыми, а для них это будет новым, не знаю мне кажется они не смогли бы прочувствовать Атомик Харт так, как я, например, со всеми этими отсылками, шутками и пасхалками, они бы возможно их не поняли.	Да, влияет, потому что в игре очень много пасхалок именно для стран снг и россии.	ковры, они очень сильно прям в детство, они меня прям в деревню, к бабуле переносят,	Думаю, да. Потому что я в этом частично в детстве жила получается. Не в Советском Союзе, в смысле, но с элементами, так сказать, Советского Союза. Я с ними жила, я их слышала. То есть когда так... вот опять же, музыка по радио играет, советские фильмы ты в детстве смотришь там с бабушкой, какие-то книжки старые, окружение, так вот.	определенно да. Так как некоторые моменты показанные в игре напрямую вызывают воспоминания из детства.
отношение людей с другим прошлым		Не знаю, если они негативно настроены по отношению к советскому союзу, то возможно и не играли бы даже, хотя для обычных геймеров которым нравятся шутеры, это просто очередной шутер, побегать по союзу поубивав роботов	также как и для меня, что-то новое, либо те кто негативно относятся не захотят вообще играть даже	Они скорее будут просто опираться, что красивая картинка, некрасивая картинка, клёвая песня, неклёвая песня. // не прочитают, думаю, нет. Я думаю, это ближе к людям из СНГ.	По поводу игроков с других регионов - думаю, этою может привлечь не каждого // Я думаю, что игра набрать как много критики в свою сторону, так и наоборот, привлечет людей из другой культуры поинтересоваться историей и культурой союза
Сравнение ссср с собственными представлениями об ссср	сходства наверное будут в каких-то достижениях, в обращении людей друг к другу, хотя конечно матом они вряд ли так грубо выражались, но моё впечатление это не испортило, я вообще люблю ругательства. Потом может сходства типа остроумия, как шли шли в величию, а ошав всей игрой не развивалося. Но насчёт этого не уверена, трудно всё таки сравнивать такую фантастическую историю про роботов и ретрофутуризм с реальностью.	Вообще все похоже на то, как выглядел ссср по рассказам нашего деда // , ссср в игре выглядит так, как нам рассказывали о нем взрослые родственники. Общее сказано что прям 100%, потому что понимаешь что это альтернативная реальность, в жизни все было иначе.	что мы типа передовая страна в космос летаем, а потом мы в говне. Лучшее образование, а сейчас где мы сидим? Бесплатная медицина - а итог какой?	Я думаю так, что если бы эта вся тема дальше продолжилась, она бы выглядела именно так. Если бы эта эпоха дальше продолжилась, она скорее всего бы выглядела именно так.	сходства определенно есть. Разработчики игры взяли именно те вещи, с которыми невозможно промахнуться. Они не сделали что-то совершенно новое, а просто заслужили советский сеттинг в сверхтехнологичное будущее
Альтернативная история	трудно всё таки сравнивать такую фантастическую историю про роботов и ретрофутуризм с реальностью.	Некоторые вещи и правда прославляют прошлое, но ты все равно понимаешь что это все таки альтернативная вселенная, а не реальный мир. // Общее представление наверное похоже на игру, но я бы не сказала что прям 100%, потому что понимаешь что это альтернативная реальность, в жизни все было иначе. Ты просто не обращаешь внимание на вещи, которые происходили в реальном мире (типа космической гонки…	смотришь на старые какие-то элементы окружения и в то же время можно обратить внимание на что-то новое, например машины летающие // вот честно для себя сказу я особо с ссср не ассоциирую игру, для меня это была как альтернативная вселенная, что по сути так и есть	Я не связываю игру с реальным миром	Так как всё это таки вымышленная альтернативная вселенная, у неё не так много исторического общего с реальной историей союза.

город	…ресенск	Воскресенск	Якутск	Вязьма	Воскресенск	Бишкек
участник	2	3	4	5	6	7
роль ностальгии		ну наверное ностальгии отведена одна из главных ролей, было большое государство было, много людей, не далекая сравнительно эпоха, некоторые ведь еще в памяти людей, особенно в пространстве бывшего ссср.	для тех кто не знает ссср это будет привлекать, для тех кто любит - тоже будет привлекать, а для тех кто ненавидит - это будет отталкивать	Она завлекает и привлекает в том числе, то есть окунуться в то... Вот, она помогает окунуться частично в детство. Кому-то в детство, кому-то в юность. И она добавляет как раз такие-то атмосферы, и она тебя как-то утягивает, нет не утягивает, а удерживает тебя в игре	Игра смогла зацепить всех, кто как либо, даже в меньшей мере знаком или связан с культурой советского союза. Чего стоит одна только музыка. Благодаря игре люди резко приобщились к таким песням как "ты замуж за него не выходи", "комарово", "и ленин такой молодой" и т.п. Атомное сердце смогло зазвать людей.	Начальная локация наверное самый большой фокус на ностальгию,что дает игроку погрузиться в эмоции и заинтересоваться игрой
использование ностальгии вовлечение		это скорее выражается в образах по советской эпохе, лишенной каких то депрессивных моментов, то есть это скорее игра на положительных чувствах, нежели отрицательных, в плане образов, но игра не грубить и в каких то моментах нелепости того, что нам представляют разработчики // В общем сеттинг ностальгирующий, но потом тебя вовлекают в игру и другие моменты	безусловно используют, тем завлекают атмосфера, ты повлияешься в это время, ссср времена, отношения, архитектура	Она завлекает и привлекает в том числе, то есть окунуться в то... Вот, она помогает окунуться частично в детство. Кому-то в детство, кому-то в юность. И она добавляет как раз такие-то атмосферы, и она тебя как-то утягивает, нет не утягивает, а удерживает тебя в игре	Для вовлечения игроков из СНГ? Определенно - Да. Большинству СНГ игроков интересен данный сеттинг и всегда классно поиграть и насладиться тем, что тебе знакомо. Мне это также нравится	Начальная локация наверное самый большой фокус на ностальгию,что дает игроку погрузиться в эмоции и заинтересоваться игрой
образ ссср в Атомик харт		советская эпоха представлена так, как будто из нее выпущи все те, которые плохо на ней отражались, нам показывают мирный атом, научно Технический прогресс с огромной роботизированностью, момунентализм, и он у тебя не вызывает вопросов в контексте этой игры // ссср в игре выплдит так, как нам рассказывают о нем взрослые родственники. Общее представление наверное похоже на игру, но я бы не сказала что прям 100%, потому что понимаешь что это альтернативная реальность, в жизни все было иначе.	если хочешь увидеть хорошее, то увидишь хорошее, если плохое - то увидишь плохое, все зависит от того как ты сам это воспринимаешь	Сатиристично. Это большая сатира. С юмором представлены. Я не считаю, что это просто сатира, это юмор. Я в том числе можно частичную красоту. Потому что в Советском Союзе очень много красивых построек было, которые сохраняются и по сей день, и считаются объектами культуры. Поэтому с уважением в том числе.	Сверхдержава, опережавшая побед в ВОВ. Не смотря на то, что союз в сюжете игры пережил страшную биологическую катастрофу "черную чуму", которая уничтожила большую часть населения союза. При этом, СССР всё равно возводит невероятные летающие города утопии и имеет лучшие технологии и учёных во всем мире. Роботы стали неотъемлемой частью общества. Они помогают людям в быту и выполняют всю грязную работу.	Мне кажется,как и во многих случаях сама тематика была передана через собирательные образы - пропаганда, величие, культ личности, гигантизм, контроль населения в консприрологии.
идеализация		Некоторые вещи и правда прославляют прошлое, но ты все равно понимаешь что это все таки альтернативная вселенная, а не реальный мир. Поэтому не вознивает чувства что кто-то хочет восстановить.	всё прям не идеализируют, но и не прям прям плохо понимаешь что это все таки альтернативная вселенная, а не реальный мир. Поэтому не вознивает чувства это что кто-то хочет восстановить.	Нет, я считаю, что нет. Это сатира. Просто сеттинг // многие коммментировали в том числе, что вот вы тут парантируете на тему Советского Союза, там, наоборот, идеологию какую-то пытаетесь продвинуть. Но это сатира я считаю	Лично я не заметил таких желаний и призывов в игре. Это всего лишь игра, она не должна к чему либо призывать. Достаточно эмоций, которые она дарит	уверен,что встретил элементы которые хотели бы вернуть не, но слушая НПС по улицам ,нередко можно было услышать фразы по типу: Как же хорошо что мы живем в этом городе,нам несказанно повезло. , Кто бы мог подумать,что советская наука так сильно продвинется и теперь мы стали лидерами мирового всего мира лидерами , Спасибо товарищу Сечину и т.п.
вернуться в прошлое		хотелось бы пожить в реальности этой игры, нежели в эпоху ссср, но некоторые моменты, хотелось бы перенести в современный мир, не думаю, что было бы плохо.	Нет. Но я вот этот выдуманный СССР мне бы хотелось попасть на пару дней, там футуризм, там роботы, там хочется побывать, а вот в реале СССР нет.	Нет. Нет, на самом деле, потому что... Зачем? Я бы на денёк пожила в гостинице из DLC	Думаю нет. Если бы была возможно попасть в тот период на время и вернуться обратно, то возможно я бы совершил такое путешествие. Если попасть туда и прожить жизнь в СССР - то нет. Все мы знаем чем, к сожалению. закончилась история советского союза.	