

## Critical Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse in *UFO 50*

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**Abstract:** *This paper offers a political reading of Mossmouth's UFO 50, a collection of fifty retro-style games that evoke the aesthetics and design principles of 1980s gaming. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's concepts of the 'nostalgia mode' and the 'utopian impulse', I argue that UFO 50 uses nostalgia not as a superficial longing for the past, but as a political gesture that challenges the current state of the video game industry. By creatively appropriating the past, UFO 50 critiques the complacency of modern game production and consumption, urging us to imagine alternative futures and reclaim the creativity and risk-taking that characterized earlier eras of game development. However, through its meta-narrative, the game also cautions against uncritically preserving the past, reminding us that, while we can learn from them, every historical period is flawed. Ultimately, UFO 50 is a critically nostalgic work that refuses to accept the present conditions of the gaming industry.*

Keywords: UFO 50 / Nostalgia / Philosophy / Fredric Jameson / Postmodernism / Nostalgia Mode / Politics / Utopia

*UFO 50*, a collection of fifty retro-style games developed by Mossmouth, is more than a nostalgic homage to the 1980s gaming era. It is a deliberate, politically charged intervention into the contemporary video game industry which uses its nostalgia critically. By recreating the aesthetics, design principles, and limitations of 1980s gaming, *UFO 50* challenges the complacency of modern game production and consumption. Its nostalgia should be understood not a passive longing for the past, but as a form of political refusal - a rejection of the current socio-economic conditions of the games industry and a call to reclaim the creativity and risk-taking that characterized earlier eras of game development. I will argue that *UFO 50* can be productively viewed as a counterpoint to what Fredric Jameson called the 'nostalgia mode', which he famously argued to be typical of postmodern cultural production. For Jameson, contemporary culture and art typically involve superficial pastiche of historical styles and aesthetics which uses them as window dressing rather than serious historical contextualization or critique. In contrast, *UFO 50* uses nostalgia in a more critical and politically charged way, aligning more closely with Jameson calls the 'utopian impulse' of cultural forms dedicated to "the imagination of alternative social and economic forms." (Jameson 2005, xiv) *UFO 50*'s

nostalgia makes a critical point about the past and current states of the games industry, urging us to reclaim some of the beneficial aspects of gaming's past that we have lost in coming this far. *UFO 50's* nostalgia is one which refuses to accept the present's social conditions: it critically engages with the past in an explicit refusal to give up on the idea of an alternative future, founded upon a desire to learn from the past in the hope of making the future better. This point is underscored by its optional meta-game, which functions as a cautionary tale which reminds us of the necessity of critically engaging with the past and only taking what is beneficial for us in the present from it, rather than viewing the past through rose-tinted glasses and uncritically preserving it.

### Fredric Jameson: The Nostalgia Mode and the Utopian Impulse

The etymological roots of the word 'nostalgia' in the Greek words 'nostos' (return home) and 'algos' (pain) indicate that its original meaning was homesickness. (Online Etymology Dictionary) But the modern meaning of nostalgia is more suggestive of time than place, denoting a wistful longing for the past, a sentimental remembrance of how things used to be. Nostalgia plays a prominent role in contemporary popular culture, to the point where it seems humanity has developed an obsession with its recent cultural past, with cultural forms endlessly repeating older iterations of themselves at the expense of anything genuinely *new* emerging. The music critic Simon Reynolds captures this nicely in a book called *Retromania*, dedicated to the way this phenomenon manifests in popular music.

Once upon a time, pop's metabolism buzzed with dynamic energy, creating the surging-into-the-future feel of periods like the psychedelic sixties, the post-punk seventies, the hip-hop eighties and the rave nineties. The 2000s felt different. *Pitchfork* critic Tim Finney noted 'the curious slowness with which this decade marches forward.' [...] If the pulse of NOW felt weaker with each passing year, that's because in the 2000s the pop present became ever more crowded out by the past, whether in the form of archived memories of yesteryear or retro-rock leeching off ancient styles. Instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present's own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel. (Reynolds 2011, x-xi)

This phenomenon of the present becoming increasingly crowded out by the past can be observed everywhere throughout contemporary popular culture. Think, for instance, of the abundance of game shows produced every year, despite the fact that what historians generally take to be the first quiz show (*The Brooklyn Eagle Quiz*) aired over a hundred years ago. Or the 'Marvel Cinematic Universe', which has released thirty-four films since 2008 (with at least

eleven more in production) based on comic book characters from a franchise which is over sixty years old. *The Simpsons* (which first aired in 1989) is still on air, in its 36<sup>th</sup> season. The mainstream video game market has long been dominated by sequels to long-established franchises (*Call of Duty*, *Pokémon*, *FIFA*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *Mario*), alongside remasters, remakes and ports. Everywhere you look in popular culture, you can find evidence of the prevalence and power of nostalgia, the grip which our cultural past continually exerts on us at the expense of the present having a discernible identity of its own. As Merlin Coverley evocatively put it, we live in “the atemporality of a present in which the past no longer dies.” (2020, 12)

In his 1991 book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson offered one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most influential cultural analyses which also argued that nostalgia plays a significant role in contemporary culture. As Roberts explains,

Jameson’s approach to the postmodern condition has always been thoroughly Marxist. Where previous theorists had looked at postmodern poetry, or art, or architecture, as a style or a series of styles, Jameson was the first to link it directly to socio-political circumstances – to history, in other words. [...] so what postmodernism is (for Jameson) is the expression on an aesthetic and textual level of the dynamic of ‘late capitalism’. (Roberts 2000, 111-112)

Jameson understands contemporary popular culture as an expression of late capitalism, of a globalized, consumerist, capitalist society in which everything is more commodified than ever, people are more alienated than ever, and the capitalist order is stronger than ever, such that it has become impossible for us to imagine a coherent alternative to it. Slavoj Žižek would later paraphrase Jameson, saying that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. (Žižek 2012) This resonates with how the cultural theorist Mark Fisher spoke of our historical situation as one of “‘capitalist realism’ – the widespread belief that there is no alternative to capitalism.” (Fisher 2014, 27)

Jameson argues that the popular culture produced under late capitalism is embroiled and implicated in capitalism’s cultural logic, meaning that the human condition under late capitalism is reflected in our dominant cultural forms, from which simultaneously serve to reinforce the capitalist order, keeping us placated and unable to imagine an alternative to it. ‘Dominant’ is an important word here, because Jameson is by no means claiming that *all* art

produced conforms to this idea, but that the type of art which forms the main subject of his critique is the dominant form of art produced under late capitalism.

In this sense Postmodernism is ‘merely’ a cultural dominant. To describe it in terms of cultural hegemony is not to suggest some massive and uniform cultural homogeneity of the social field but very precisely to imply its coexistence with other resistant and heterogeneous forces which it has a vocation to subdue and incorporate. (Jameson 1991, 158)

In what follows, I will argue that, within the context of the games industry, *UFO 50* should be understood as one of these ‘resistant forces’ that challenges the current state of the industry, and forms a significant counterpoint to the kind of art that Jameson analyses as being characteristic of the cultural production of the late capitalist order.

Jameson argues that one of the key characteristics of culture under late capitalism is the dominance of the ‘nostalgia mode’, in which popular culture incessantly engages with and fetishizes the past, but in a superficial manner devoid of serious historical critique or attempt to imagine a world different from the one we currently live in. Any actual resemblance to the past occurs merely on the surface level, as he explains regarding films, for him one of the pre-eminent media forms of late capitalism:

Faced with these ultimate objects - our social, historical, and existential present, and the past as ‘referent’ - the incompatibility of a postmodernist ‘nostalgia’ art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent. The contradiction propels this mode, however, into complex and interesting new formal inventiveness; it being understood that the nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned ‘representation’ of historical content, but instead approached the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image, and ‘1930s-ness’ or ‘1950s-ness’ by the attributes of fashion (Jameson 1991, 19)

In films made in the nostalgia mode, the representation of the past is largely achieved through glossy images, fashion styles and iconography, operating purely on the surface level without a proper interrogation of social reality or serious historical contextualization. As Roberts explains regarding the film *Titanic*, the “clothes and the *look* are appropriate to the historical period, but the characters and their motivation, the dialogue and whole dynamic of the film operate on the level of continuous 1970s-1990s present.” (Roberts 2000, 128) In nostalgia films, we may get a faint impression of how the past looked, but actual historical consciousness of the past is not achieved – the ‘past’ accessible in nostalgia films never really existed in the way it is presented. The films function as ‘pastiche’, rather than ‘parody’, a benign recycling and reproduction of

styles and images, rather than an imitation of style for the purpose of social critique. The past is treated not as a vehicle for the interrogation of social reality, or for challenging the status quo, but for reinforcing it. In the nostalgia mode, the past gets stripped of its historicity and power so it can be commodified, incorporated into the capitalist infrastructure.

Claiming that the nostalgia mode is characteristic of the (postmodern) cultural logic of late capitalism, on the surface level, might be taken as a claim that *all* culture and art produced under late capitalism conforms to the nostalgia mode. Given the staggering variety of culture and culture forms and creative contexts on offer, this seems highly implausible. But this is a criticism that Jameson is sensitive to: “I am very far from feeling that all cultural production today is ‘postmodern’ in the broad sense I will be conferring on this term.” (Jameson 1991, 6) Rather, Jameson is claiming that postmodern art and the nostalgia mode represent the dominant cultural form of our time, the one with the most power and influence, but only one of many possible “other resistant and heterogeneous forces which it has a vocation to subdue and incorporate.” (Jameson 1991, 159) While nostalgic postmodern art may be the cultural dominant of our time, and might try to subdue and incorporate other cultural forces, human culture still the potential to resist the dominance of the nostalgia mode. Culture still has the potential to challenge the status quo and imagine new forms of social configuration. It still has the potential to seriously engage with the past in a manner which moves beyond superficial pastiche to social critique, to use nostalgia not as a superficial longing for a past that never was, but as a way of challenging us to learn from history and reclaim lost aspects of our social past which would be beneficial to us today.

Culture therefore still has the potential for what Jameson throughout his career called ‘the utopian impulse’: the power of thought and culture to aid humanity in “the imagination of alternative social and economic forms” (Jameson 2005, xiv) and conceive of a different, better world than the one we currently live in. Human society has existed in many forms throughout history, so our collective historical past should be a treasure trove of ideas for imagining different societal forms. But our capacity and impulse to use the past as such has been diminished under late capitalism, as the past’s revolutionary potential becomes occluded in the nostalgia mode. (Where it is hidden in plain sight, on the surface.) Jameson’s work is a call to reclaim the revolutionary potential of culture and reawaken the utopian impulse. Utopian art

can potentially allow us to break the spell of ‘capitalist realism’ by “keep[ing] alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one.” (Jameson in Roberts 2000, 106)

In what follows I will argue that *UFO 50*, being a collection of fifty retro games evoking the 1980s, might initially seem to exemplify Jameson’s nostalgia mode – but to read it as such is a mistake. It is rather a deliberately, politically charged intervention into the state of the games industry which uses nostalgia critically, to challenge its current state and helps us imagine a different future for it. It therefore closely aligns with Jameson’s ‘utopian impulse’.

### *UFO 50*

Developed by Derek Yu, Jon Perry, Eirik Suhrke, Paul Hubans, Tyriq Plummer, and Ojiro Fumoto and published by Mossmouth, *UFO 50* was one of the most critically-acclaimed video game releases of 2024. It is a remarkably ambitious achievement, a collection of fifty fully-realized games (many of which are excellent) all meticulously developed in a consciously retro style where each game is made to look as if it was designed and released in the 1980s. The games are presented as the output of an obscure (fictional) game development company called UFOSoft, the history of which can be found in information presented in the game selection screen, and which is expanded on in the optional meta game. Upon first glance, *UFO 50* appears to fit within Jameson’s nostalgia mode. The game’s retro aesthetics, pixel art, and 1980s-inspired design seem to evoke a superficial longing for the past. However, as we shall see, *UFO 50* subverts this expectation through the nature of the games themselves, the story of UFOSoft as a company, and its optional meta-game which deepens this story. As well as being a charming, well-produced and ambitious collection of games, *UFO 50* is an interrogation of the creative conditions of game production, what kind of games are produced today, what made the games of the era it recreates so special, and what we might learn today from an engagement with the game design of the past. Its nostalgia is a critical nostalgia, representing a utopian impulse which uses the past to challenge the status quo of the present to keep alive the possibility of an alternative future.

Let’s begin with the games themselves. There is a large variety on offer, in terms of genre, tone, length and scope. Games like the racer *The Big Bell Race* can be completed very quickly,

whereas the RPG *Grimstone* can take dozens of hours. The generic labels given are accurate for the time, but some games in the collection are arguably better described with more modern naming conventions. *Pilot Quest*, for instance, today would be known at least in part as an 'idle' or 'incremental' game and *Rock On! Island* a tower defence game, whereas *Barbuta* and *Mortol II* could be called 'metroidvanias'. Many games in the collection are light-hearted, accessible and suitable for children, but the point-and-click adventure *Night Manor* is a genuine horror experience, and the narrative of the secret 51<sup>st</sup> game *UFO Tower* touches on mature, unsettling themes. Regardless of their content, each game is a fully fleshed-out experience, and there is a fictional 'intertextuality' to the collection: many of the games make references to each other and in some cases are directly connected in the same franchises and narrative universes. The stealth game *Rail Heist* is set in the same world as the RPG *Grimstone*. *Mooncat* is a spiritual sequel to *Barbuta*. The *Campanella* games form a franchise which includes three mainline titles, the spinoffs *The Big Bell Race* and *Pilot Quest*, and *Planet Zoldath* as a rudimentary predecessor. *Zoldath* features an earlier, less charismatic version of the franchise's protagonist, Pilot, and his ship, the *Campanella*, who later become mascots for UFOsoft. Various characters, such as Pilot, his bounty-hunter sister Isabella, and the space pirate Alpha, crop up in various games throughout the collection either as protagonists in their own games or as optional playable characters in others.

It quickly becomes clear from playing any of the games in *UFO 50* that its reproduction of 1980s gaming extends much deeper than the surface level, transcending the superficialities of Jameson's nostalgia mode, in which the past is represented solely through surface elements, in visuals, styles, and sounds. The surface elements certainly do recall this period of gaming history, but below the surface, in the gameplay and underlying design philosophy, the collection's engagement with this historical period is thoroughgoing, taking care to reproduce the technical and graphical limitations and gaming conventions of that period with often uncompromising fidelity. The collection's deliberate recreation of 1980s gaming aesthetics - pixel art, limited controls, minimal tutorials (etc.) - forces players to confront the differences between past and present gaming experiences. This confrontation is not merely an exercise in retro charm, it is a critique of the modern gaming industry's reliance on polished, user-friendly designs that often prioritize marketability over creativity, mystery, tension and challenge.

Perhaps the first game in the collection, *Barbuta*, is the best example of this. Since it is the first, it is the game most new players will probably try first. There is no title screen, no music, and the player is simply placed directly into the first room of the game. *Barbuta* is an unforgiving, slow platformer/metroidvania where the player must explore a castle, uncover its secrets, gradually uncover more and more of the map and progress to the end. It really feels like a lost classic of early 80s gaming, right down to the technical and graphical limitations of that period. The player character moves excruciatingly slowly and jumping is sluggish, with the player having no control over what happens to their character mid-air. You die in one hit, and combat is difficult, with it being necessary to be right next to an enemy to hit them with your sword. There is a map, but it contains as little information as it is possible to contain and still be called a 'map', consisting only of a grid of blank squares to let you know which square you are currently in. There is no tutorial, and you are given no guidance whatsoever apart from being told to 'liberate the castle' on the game selection screen. This lack of handholding is reinforced from the very first moment of the game. You begin in the centre of a room, with the natural inclination in a platforming game being to move to the right. If you take one step to the right as you begin *Barbuta*, a section of the ceiling will fall on you, killing you instantly and making you lose your first life.

Contrast *Barbuta* with many (perhaps most) games made today. There will usually be a tutorial, with mechanics, controls and objectives clearly explained. Characters will move quicker, be more responsive and easier to control, their abilities will be more complex, there might be 'quality of life' features to make your time in the game easier. In its commitment to recreating the sensibilities and conventions of a particular period, *Barbuta* is uncompromising and rejects all of this. Compared with the slick, information-first production of today, *Barbuta* may not be that enjoyable to modern audiences and, like most of the games in the collection, if released as a standalone game would probably not have performed well in the current market. For modern audiences, especially for younger gamers, playing *Barbuta* forcefully requires you to adapt to a time that is not yours, and in doing so makes you question your own time. Playing it gives you a genuine impression of early gaming history which moves beyond the superficiality of Jameson's 'nostalgia mode', where the recreation of the past takes place not only on the surface level of sound and images, but gameplay, design philosophy, and experience – at the expense of the conventions in gaming we have come to expect today.



While *Barbuta* might be *UFO 50*'s best and most uncompromising example of its critical confrontation with the past, this confrontation is present throughout the collection. All the games in it are made within limitations which call to mind those of 80s gaming, and the sheer variety on display is itself a testament to how much can be achieved without the technological and graphical advances that have taken place in the past forty years. This is why *UFO 50* is a double-edged sword: one the one hand, you are confronted with the limitations and frustrations of this period, but on the other, you are also shown what made games from this period so intoxicatingly mysterious, addictive, and ultimately enjoyable. As Derek Yu, one of *UFO 50*'s developers, explains in a 2024 interview in *The Guardian*,

Everyone on the team loves the mystery and allure of 80s games [...] You weren't always sure what kind of experience you were in for, and that alone added an air of tension and excitement...They weren't afraid to let you get a little lost as you played. Despite the limitations of the hardware, they felt more adventurous in their design. (May/Yu 2024)

*UFO 50* is a reproduction of the past that shows us not just how far we have come when it comes to video gaming, but what we have lost in coming this far. Technological capability has increased, graphics have become almost photorealistic, but in the process we have lost some of the mystery, tension and allure which characterized the games of the 1980s. By refusing to make all the information about a game available to the player, the player is forced to discover it themselves, and that alone adds a particular sense of adventure lacking in many games made today, despite the massive advances made since the 80s. *UFO 50* forcefully reminds us of the allure and mystery characteristic of this era by reproducing it, by letting it irrupt into our present moment. It bears witness to a time when technology was more limited, but in their design, games were often more mysterious and captivating than many made today. None of the games here would have seemed massively out of place in the 80s, and yet are enjoying critical and commercial success in the present. This is why, while nostalgic, *UFO 50* represents the utopian impulse: it testifies to the fact that we do not need photorealistic graphics, teams of hundreds of developers, or tens of millions of dollars to make games that captivate people. Even today, we can learn from the game design techniques, conventions and philosophy of the past the change and diversify contemporary game production.

*UFO 50*'s 'History'

Having looked at the games themselves, we can turn to how *UFO 50* develops its argument through its fictional history. *UFO 50* is presented as a lost collection of games made by an obscure fictional developer called UFOSoft for a fictional series of games consoles called the LX. In the ‘cracktro’ of the game, the Mossmouth developers are pictured finding an old LX console in a garage, before the game boots up with a picture of the LX console and the words ‘play forever’. Once inside the collection, all fifty titles are already unlocked and the player can choose which order to play them in as they like. The games are presented ‘chronologically’ according to the fictional history of UFOSoft as a company, with information available for each game which gradually reveals some of the history of the company and its fictional staff. There is also (optionally) a meta-narrative to be found through a complex scavenger hunt which takes the player through most of the games in the collection, leading to a secret 51<sup>st</sup> game which adds a further critical edge to the story of UFOSoft and the vision of *UFO 50* as a whole. (We will return to the meta story later.) Already in the basic history sketched out on the game selection screen, we can see an indication of the overall argument the game is making about the games industry and the conditions of game design. This is another way in which *UFO 50* moves beyond Jameson’s nostalgia mode: it does not just reproduce the past in the form of fifty games which faithfully recreate a historical period, it ties these fifty games together in narrative form and uses that narrative to critique the conditions of the games industry. This alone makes it more than a pastiche of the kind typically found in the nostalgia mode.

In its ‘history’, we learn that UFOSoft originally started life as a business software company called LX Systems, which only turned its attention to game design after one of its employees, Thorson Petter, designed the game *Barbuta* on company time and almost got fired for it. (The symbolism here is obvious: artistic creativity finding tension with the corporate pursuit of profit.) But rather than fire Petter and continue focussing all its time solely on business software, LX trusted Petter’s creativity and began to lean into the games industry, publishing more games under the name of the company and eventually making its own series of consoles: the LX-I, LX-II and LX-III. The games in the collection get more sophisticated as the technology the company is working with grows more sophisticated and the company becomes more self-assured as a design outfit. Eventually, the easy-to-learn-hard-to-master platforming game *Campanella*, in which the player controls a space ship navigating through levels of increasing complexity, becomes a surprise hit for the company, spawning a franchise and inspiring LX Systems to rebrand as UFOSoft. UFOSoft builds on its previous successes,

crafting a shared creative universe between its games and their characters, much as companies like Nintendo have done with characters like Mario and Luigi. UFOSoft flourishes as a game company because it trusts the creativity of its employees, takes risks based on their creativity, and turns its attention away from purely business-oriented pursuits to artistic exploration and the production of enjoyment. *Polygon*'s review of *UFO 50* touched pertinently on this, saying that the collection should be understood as

a metafictional narrative argument that we all benefit when the same people have the opportunity to make multiple titles together. In an industry plagued by layoffs and closures, *UFO 50* imagines a group of people who made 50 games together, building off of successes and taking wild swings throughout their career. (Morley 2024)

*UFO 50*, with remarkable commitment to its narrative fiction, undertakes the reproduction of a particular era of game design, and an idealistic mode of game production in which people have the opportunity for prolonged collaboration with the same colleagues, in which the companies they work for trust their ideas, allow them to take creative risks, and give them the creative space not only to work together, but play the kind of games they want to make together. (As we see with *Attactics*, the game was even delayed because the UFOSoft team apparently wouldn't stop challenging each other to versus matches.)

This vision is in stark contrast with the industry today, which is plagued by layoffs and an increasingly stale AAA industry in which games have become so expensive to make that companies take less creative risks and are overseen by corporate interests, which often focus the creative energies of studios on games they are not well-equipped to make (like singleplayer studios making live-service looter shooters) and closing them down when they fail. Through a deliberate recreation of game design's past, *UFO 50* articulates a vision of game design and running a game design company that seems more easy to imagine taking place in the 1980s than taking place now, one that might come across as a naïve, over-idealized, rose-tinted version of the past but one which, nonetheless, it was once possible to imagine. The creative vision of the history of UFOSoft arguably calls forth a lost future for the socio-economic conditions of game production, in the hope of reclaiming it and shaking the industry out of its current conditions. It makes the argument that freedom and risk taking are paramount to video game creativity, and that game developers benefit from being able to develop long-lasting creative relationships with each other, and make better games, more consistently, as a result.

### UFO 50's Meta Story

If we stopped at what we have said here so far, *UFO 50* would still be a remarkable game, and would still function as a powerful nostalgic critique of the games industry. However, through its optional meta story, it offers a further critical edge to its appropriation of the past. The meta game functions as a reminder to not over-romanticize the past, but to learn from it, and keep the good elements of it for taking forward into the future while overcoming the bad. It shows us that even though certain elements of the past may be fruitful and may have been better in some sense, there is no perfect, ideal time in history that we should uncritically recreate in our present. There is always something that must be overcome in the past even as we learn from it. This critique arguably parallels the one Nietzsche makes in his great early essay *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, where he distinguishes “between a monumental, an antiquarian and a critical species of history.” (Nietzsche 1997, 67) Where monumental history celebrates the great people and events of the past and antiquarian history preserves and honours heritage and culture, these two types of history must be balanced by a critical eye, lest “the past itself suffers *harm*: whole segments of it are forgotten, despised, and flow away in an uninterrupted colourless flood, and only individual embellished facts rise out of it like islands.” (Nietzsche 1997, 70) When engaging the past in the way utopian art has the potential to in Jameson, we must take care not to view the past uncritically as a false utopia, but take care to learn from its mistakes as well as its great achievements. Through the narrative of its meta game, *UFO 50* articulates this very idea.

In the pause menu of *UFO 50*, the player can access a ‘terminal’ into which codes can be input in the following format only: ‘XXXX-XXXX’, two blocks of four symbols each. If you read the ‘history’ section for *Night Manor* on the game selection screen, you find that the developer listed as ‘GREG-MILK’, which can be input as a code on the terminal. Once you have done so, a logo resembling a mountain appears in the terminal, above a grid consisting of forty-nine zeroes and a one, arranged into five lines of ten, just as the fifty games of *UFO 50* are arranged on the selection screen. The one is placed where the game *Mini and Max* is, which has a small room in it with the same mountain logo in. If you pause the game and go to the terminal when in this room, the following message appears on the terminal: “Fifty games for you to search through, what a hunt I have for you! I offer up this starting clue: turn your skin a shade of blue.” (Mossmouth 2024) This clue leads you to the game *Camouflage*, in which you can change the colour of your skin to blue. Pause the game when you’ve done so, and another message appears

in the terminal, and so on. There are at least twenty-five clues in this scavenger hunt, so I will not go through them all. But after you figure out the seventh clue (found by standing under the purple moon in *Barbuta*), the following code appears in the terminal: 'EXEC-MIAS'. Inputting this code into the terminal opens *UFO 50*'s secret 51<sup>st</sup> game: *UFO Tower*, developed by Gregory Milk. *UFO Tower* takes place in the UFOSoft offices, with the player taking on the role of a very sad-looking Gregory. The first part of the game is quite short, and finishing it rewards the player with another clue for the scavenger hunt, which leads to several more clues, then back for more *UFO Tower*, and so on, for four parts of *UFO Tower* in total.

Exploring *UFO Tower* and interacting with every item and NPC reveals a lot of information about UFOSoft as a company, about the people who worked there, and the games they made. But to concentrate on what's most important, we learn that Gregory Milk was the one tasked with assembling *UFO 50* by Tao Nemeru, the boss of UFOSoft who took over the company in its final years, depicted in *UFO Tower* as a grasshopper. It becomes apparent through the lore to be found in the environment that Nemeru's corporate investment in the company was the beginning of its downfall. Once he became CEO, working conditions deteriorated, the workers became stressed and unhappy, some left, and the fabric of UFOSoft as a creative outfit began to come apart at the seams. This lends extra weight to part of the argument made in the fictional history of the company I outlined earlier: that being controlled by corporate interests that operate solely in the pursuit of profit does not make for an environment conducive to good gamer production. But *UFO Tower* adds an extra element to this argument which I would like to solely focus on here.

Nemeru has a particular agenda, being particularly obsessed with the collection of games Milk is tasked with preparing. Nemeru says "the library you're building will be a shining light for humanity in the dark days ahead. Soon you and I will be gone, but that beautiful archive will live on. Remember: one day work will end, but play is forever!" (Mossmouth 2024) Nemeru elaborates on these ominous remarks in a secret buried deep in the game *Mini and Max*, where the mountain logo is revealed to actually be a grasshopper leg. When certain conditions have been met, you can find Nemeru in *Mini and Max* in the same room where the scavenger hunt began, where he says "when the higher intelligence has arrived, only play will still have value." (Mossmouth 2024) Interestingly, this is a reference to a philosophy book by Bernard Suits

called *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (2005) that Nemeru is revealed in *UFO Tower* to always be handing out to his employees. (And remember, Nemeru is portrayed as a grasshopper.) “Suits’s argument is that in the ideal conditions of Utopia, game-playing would be everyone’s primary activity. But he understands Utopia in a specific way: as a world in which all work or instrumental activity has been eliminated.” (Hurka in Suits 2005, 12) Nemeru’s vision is Suits’ vision: a world in which work has been eliminated, so the primary activity of humanity is game-playing. Nemeru wants UFOSoft’s games to be at the forefront of that new world, and works hard to bring that situation about, becoming obsessed with the preservation of games for future generations as much as their release – hence charging Gregory Milk with the task of assembling the *UFO 50* collection.

We can take issues with Suits’ conception of utopia and the idea that game-playing would be the thing of primary value in a post-work world, but the idea of preserving games for future generations so people can enjoy and get value from them is not inherently a bad thing. In a way, *UFO 50* is an attempt at something like this kind of project: by making new games in a retro mode, it preserves the spirit of these older types of games so people can enjoy them in our contemporary time. People can know what it was like to play games that were made in this era, even if they’re technically new games, and the present-day industry can learn from the games of the past. But the main point of the narrative of *UFO Tower* is about the dangers of preserving the past: it can lead us to an uncritical view of what the past was actually like, an over-romanticization of it that overlooks its problems. This is the view of UFOSoft we get just from looking at the history it presents to us in the game selection screen: of a vibrant, cooperative, utopian games company full of talented, hardworking people who consistently made great games together. And no doubt this is what they were at some point, but *UFO Tower* shows this is not the whole story.

At some point, Tao Nemeru and his overbearing, ex-military project manager Ian Spinzer (portrayed as an evil-looking insect) took over UFOSoft. Nemeru started funnelling the company’s profits into his lofty preservation project, and started overworking his employees, with Spinzer acting as his enforcer. The company became unhappy, overworked, overstressed, and chaotic. While they still managed to make good games, it was clear that something was wrong behind the scenes, which is why Gregory Milk ended up inserting *UFO Tower* into *UFO*

50 in secret, to bear witness to this side of the company's history. But it was about one particular incident here that holds the most importance for Milk. Throughout the experience, it becomes transparent that one of the employees of UFOSoft, a game developer called Chiffon Bola, disappeared under mysterious circumstances, with it being heavily implied through circumstantial evidence that she died in the underground car park after being murdered by Spinzer, who then covered up her murder. This happened after Bola went to confront management about the conditions at UFOSoft, which Gregory Milk feels guilty about because, as an encounter with Bola's ghost reveals, they were supposed to confront management together.

If the non-meta game aspects of *UFO 50* are about how great the game design of the 80s was and how we could learn from it, *UFO Tower* is a cautionary message about uncritically preserving the past rather than interrogating it. This reinforces that idea that *UFO 50* is a game about more than superficial nostalgia, and another indication of its operating at the level of social commentary rather than pastiche. The whole point of the meta game is that fact that preserving the past without interrogating its flaws is dangerous. As such, it responds to Jameson's work on the nostalgia mode and the utopian impulse in two ways: firstly because it overcomes the superficial historical representations of the nostalgia mode and secondly because it underscores the need for a serious critical engagement with the past as a way of socially critiquing the present. It emphasizes the need not for a passive, wistful nostalgic longing for the past which retreats into comforting illusions about it, but for a revolutionary appropriation of the good aspects of the past for taking forward into the future, to change the world for the better.

#### Conclusion: *UFO 50* Beyond the Nostalgia Mode

*UFO 50* is a nostalgic game, but should not be understood as the passive reproduction of nostalgia for nostalgia's sake, or in terms of what Fredric Jameson called the 'nostalgia mode' of late capitalist cultural production - which only superficially engages with the past at the expense of social critique. While *UFO 50* critiques the superficiality of the nostalgia mode, it also embodies what Jameson calls the 'utopian impulse': the latent desire for a better future that often underlies nostalgic representations of the past. For Jameson, the utopian impulse is not a naive belief in the possibility of a perfect society, but rather a critical engagement with

the present that seeks to imagine alternative futures so we can begin to construct them. In *UFO 50*, this utopian impulse is evident in the game's celebration of creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking, as well as its critique of the modern gaming industry's reliance on corporate interests and marketability. Through its secret game - *UFO Tower* – it adds an additional layer to the critique, showing us that we should not let ourselves be obsessed solely with preserving the past. In Tao Nemeru's case, it allows him to brush aside the death of a human being for the 'greater good' of his preservation project, and UFOSoft as a company. It also drives him to impose unfair, damaging conditions upon his workforce, and ultimately leads to the ruin of the company. *UFO Tower* is a cautionary tale about letting ourselves be led astray by an uncritical obsession with the past of the kind which arguably dominates our pop-cultural landscape today. Instead, we should critically appraise the past in the hope not just of repeating it, but of taking its lessons (both good and bad) and using it to build a better future. If *UFO 50* is a celebration of gaming's past through creative reiteration, *UFO Tower* is its conscience, and a warning of the dangers of doing this uncritically.

*UFO 50* is a meta-fictional gaming articulation of the utopian impulse, of the power of culture to imagine different social configurations. In this sense, it is a deeply political game. It refuses to accept the current conditions of the gaming industry, and it refuses to give up on the possibility of a better future. In its utopianism, it resonates powerfully with the famous speech that Swen Vincke, the boss of Larian, made at the 2024 Game Awards:

A studio makes a game because they want to make a game they want to play themselves. [...] They didn't make it to increase market share. They didn't make it to serve the brand. They didn't have to meet arbitrary sales targets, or fear being laid off if they didn't meet those targets. Furthermore, the people in charge forbade them from cramming the game with anything whose only purpose was to increase revenue and didn't serve the game design. They didn't treat their developers like numbers on a spreadsheet. They didn't treat their players as users to exploit. And they didn't make decisions they knew were short-sighted in function of a bonus or politics. They knew that if you put the game and the team first, the revenue will follow. They were driven by idealism, and wanted players to have fun, and they realized that if the developers don't have fun, nobody was going to have any fun. They understood the value of respect, that if they treated their developers and players well, the same developers and players would forgive them when things didn't go as planned. But above all they cared about their games, because they love games. It's really that simple. (Vincke, in Chalk 2024)



*UFO 50* embodies this spirit of creative independence, nostalgically appropriating a particular historical period of gaming to argue that we can learn from it and get ourselves to the point that Vincke describes, while simultaneously cautioning us about the danger of uncritically celebrating our history and letting superficial nostalgia and preservation for preservation's sake dominate cultural production. Ultimately, *UFO 50* is a reminder that nostalgia can be more than just a longing for the past - it can be a tool for imagining alternative futures. By engaging with gaming's past, *UFO 50* challenges us to think critically about the present and to imagine a future where creativity and innovation are once again at the heart of game development, where corporate interests do not determine game production, and where technological sophistication is not the hallmark of a good game.

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