

## Visual and cultural references to Spain in the video games Pokémon Scarlet and Pokémon Violet

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### Abstract

The video games combine programming and cultural creation, which serve as the basis for this new digital culture. The video game Pokémon is a great example of this because it has used different countries as inspiration for constructing spaces and other elements of its gameplay. Specifically, in *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Pokémon Violet* (Nintendo, 2022), the saga's most recent instalments there are cultural references to Spain, an object of study that has received scant academic attention to date. Drawing from this premise, the research objective is to analyse the visual representation using a qualitative methodology, namely, content analysis for the purpose of identifying the visual and cultural references on the basis of an established set of variables: spaces (gaming-narrative, symbolic and psychological), characters (player and non-player character; main and secondary) and objects (action-oriented and environmental). The main results disclose that the Japanese company Game Freak has represented aspects of Spanish culture, with their nuances, to develop the ninth generation of this video game, borrowing architectural and artistic elements from cities located in different regions, plus typical foodstuffs and economic activities including agriculture and livestock breeding. We identified references to different Spanish regions, such as Andalusia (Granada, Cordova and Cadiz), the Basque Country, Catalonia, Castile-La Mancha, La Rioja, Murcia, Cantabria, Valencia and Majorca.

Keywords: video games; Pokémon; cultural references; visual references; Spanish culture.

### 1. Introduction

Video games have ultimately become a mass phenomenon, a state of affairs that was rightly predicted by Levis (1997) some years ago, for they have overcome social barriers and are present in the daily lives of most of the population, especially children and teenagers (Calderón Gómez and Gómez Miguel, 2023). After swiftly creating a niche for themselves in contemporary culture (Sepúlveda Castro, 2020), they have evolved 'from being solely a technological form of entertainment, through being narrative instances, to being tools for social transformation' (González, 2014, p. 134).

Having said that, it is convenient to recall some of the initial research that led to theories, case studies and analytical models relating to video games in diverse scientific fields and from different epistemological approaches. This line of research actually got underway not that long ago in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, when researchers began to consider the interesting possibilities of this field of knowledge and to delve into them. These studies included that of Murray (1997), who understood video games as a narrative medium, the PhD dissertation of Frasca (2007), who used discourse analysis as a reference, studies of their psychosocial effects like that performed by Raessens and Goldstein (2011), as well as the semiotic approach in more recent research conducted by Pérez-Latorre *et al.* (2017) and Parra Bravo (2023), among others.

It is also important to recall that video games combine programming and cultural creation, which serve as the basis for this new digital culture and which exert a huge influence on users at a social, psychological, cultural, pedagogical and technological level, with their own socialisation roles (Molina, 2020). The video game industry integrates localised cultural references into global titles in order to enrich narratives and appeal to diverse audiences, adapting them through localisation processes that go beyond mere translation. These incorporations circulate internationally, fostering cultural hybridisation, while also entailing risks of stereotyping, as evidenced in certain Latin American productions that respond to externally imposed representations. With regard to the ways in which this cultural vehicle exerts its influence, the video game industry embeds localised references within entertainment products that circulate globally (Nye, 2004; Hutchinson, 2021). This can be observed, for instance, in *Pokémon GO* (Niantic, 2016), through the development of events such as *Hanami* in Japan or themed hunts linked to local festivals in Chester (United Kingdom), aligning in-game challenges with national celebrations. Furthermore, storytelling currently occupies centre stage in the digital environment, with video games being one of the most outstanding media (Parra Bravo, 2023), for 'they possess their own arsenal of resources that allow for a wide range of discursive proposals' (Maté, 2017, p. 101).

It is precisely from the perspective of digital narratives that a great deal of research has been conducted on the issue of space in game studies (Maté, 2017). In this connection, there are many variations, such as the narrative potential emerging from the evocative design of spaces (Jenkins, 2004) and the relationship between players, devices and discursive spaces based or recurring spatial constructions (Nitsche, 2008).

In this vein, Maté (2017, pp. 99-100) insists that 'space is one of the most studied areas of video games, especially when compared to the number of works devoted to issues like temporality, casts and the interactive dimension'. To this Venegas Ramos and Gutiérrez Manjón (2021) add that video game settings are designed to attract the attention of players and to represent the iconography inherent to their narrative universe.

Additionally, in the construction of spaces in some genres like that of platforms, the city serves as a backdrop, this being particularly the case in the beat'em up genre (also known as 'street fighting'), in which it plays a dramatic role, being practically transformed into another character, as occurs in alleys, underground settings and marginal areas, all rife with danger (Maté, 2017, pp. 102-103).

However, Maté (2017, p. 103) also notes that the city would be the theme and the key point of a game which would subsequently lead to a popular series and numerous imitations, such as the precedent of *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989). Here, the city is not an environment that is inhabited or explored but a space that is designed from scratch, for players assume the role of heads of government who observe the proceedings from a distance and whose objective is to found a city on an empty piece of land and to divide it into plots for building residential, commercial and industrial areas, as well as conceiving a system of public services, energy generation and distribution, health coverage, security forces, different levels of education and green and recreational areas. In keeping with the object of study, it should be recalled that Pokémon, 'like most games to a greater or lesser extent, borrowed references from the material world for its design [...] and has evolved thanks to its game mechanics but above all to its continuous hybridisation with the material world' (Navarro-Redón, 2021, p. 631).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Video games versus culture

According to experts, the foundations of the growth of video games that is being currently witnessed were laid during the COVID-19 pandemic (Álvarez, 2023, p. 6). Be that as it may, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that 'the video game sector was declared a cultural industry in Spain in March 2009 by a parliamentary cultural commission' (Constenla, 2009). Additionally, before the pandemic, Anyó Sanyol (2013, p. 247) already contended that video games occupied a central position from a socioeconomic perspective, for 'they are the first mass cultural product emerging directly from computer technologies and, in an industrial sense, their turnover is comparable to that of other major global cultural industries. Yet they also represent one of the most prosperous and representative cultural disciplines of our time' (Venegas Ramos, 2018, p. 328), for they are expanding rapidly as a global cultural phenomenon (Álvarez, 2023, p. 7). Although the truth is that video games also draw from other artistic languages and cultural references, like cinema, comics, painting, fiction series, sculpture, architecture, literature and so forth (Álvarez, 2023, p. 10), employing them as creative strategies. Although nor is it a secret that games as a cultural practice and theme of representation have been present since time immemorial (Palavecino, 2023) and that the digital kind are a cultural construct that offers players narrative experiences (Parra Bravo, 2023). It is this interaction and dependence of players with respect to game rules and mechanics that differentiates video games from other cultural and recreational artifacts (Klevjer, 2001).

The introduction of video games in current cultural consumption routines marked by the increase in the use of screens and more consumption time 'is unexpected but positive' (Álvarez, 2023, p. 9). However, 'the use to which a specific video game is put and the social classification it is given depend more on the place it occupies in cultural practice than on its technical specifications or even its narrative form' (Anyó Sanyol, 2013, p. 250).

In the international field of video game development, there are no good or sufficiently faithful representations that refer precisely to the identity-related element of 'Spanishness'. In productions of this sort, there is recourse to stereotypes that do not offer an accurate description of a country's history, such as flamenco and paella in the case of Spain. In other words, their representation of characters and elements are based on clichés of Spanish culture (Venegas Ramos and Gutiérrez Manjón, 2021). Examples of such caricatures include the video games *Soul Calibur*, including characters like Don Flamenco and Cervantes de León, and the playable version of *Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup*, in which the members of the Spanish squad wear costumes similar to those worn by bullfighters (Delgado, 2019, p. 4). In light of this, Venegas Ramos and Gutiérrez Manjón (2021, p. 581) consider that the video game as a representative medium of the Spanish social imaginary, in both the national and international industries, is apparently edified on a series of platitudes that distort the country's cultural and historical heritage.

In this respect, the sector taking a more independent approach to video games has also begun to develop those that include Spanish cultural elements. Worthy of note is *Maldita Castilla*, a game released in 2012, whose action is set in some regions of Spain and Europe in the Middle Ages, while also resorting to myths relating to Spanish history, based on *Amadís de Gaula*, one of the most popular medieval literary works (Venegas Ramos and Gutiérrez Manjón, 2021). At this point, it is important to stress that *Maldita Castilla* inspired the video game

*Blasphemous* (The Game Kitchen, 2019), although there are also other games based on the same concept. In their study, Acosta Riego and Navarrete Cardero (2017) perform a deeper enquiry into this topic.

Until now, the video game as a medium for representing national cultural references has therefore been fundamentally based on the use of stereotypes to paint a picture of Spanish reality. In this respect, cultural references in video games contribute to player identification and to global consumption patterns, as highlighted by authors such as Consalvo and Paul (2009). In addition, video game design borrows national symbols, which are often recontextualised in ways that flatten, reshape or exoticise local identities (Shaw, 2017; Gray, 2020). This tendency can increasingly be observed in video games developed in Spain which vindicate certain cultural or identity-related elements of its culture, such as the reference to Holy Week in the aforementioned *Blasphemous* (The Game Kitchen, 2019). Although in this case its creators confessed that more than from Holy Week, they had drawn inspiration from the iconographic legacy of the context in which they had been brought up (Venegas Ramos and Gutiérrez-Manjón, 2020). In this regard, Venegas Ramos and Gutiérrez Manjón (2021, p. 571) state that 'the artistic references employed are the result of an aesthetic decision which, by appropriating a specific visuality and applying it in a completely different context, can make a work significant'. Likewise, in this case there are not only references to spirituality, Baroque visuality and Andalusian heritage as historical-artistic elements of the video game, but also the work of the artist Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) (Venegas Ramos and Gutiérrez Manjón, 2021, p. 575).

Moreover, video games, as a form of cultural communication, are shown to shape global perceptions of place and identity. This is due to the fact that they function simultaneously as symbolic representation and as a space of transnational social interaction. Through worlds, characters, and mechanics, imaginaries of what constitutes "the West" or "the national" are disseminated and transformed into playable experiences that influence how these places and subjects are conceived beyond the screen (Trattner and Kienzl, 2019).

## 2.2. The Pokémon saga

Pokémon (Nintendo, 1996) is a globally successful and popular consumer product (Iwabuchi, 2004) which has been studied in different fields of research including company management (Tobin, 2004), economy (Moreno, 2003), commerce (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2003), society (Haiven, 2012; Elza 2009), geography (Juhász and Hochmair, 2017), culture (Bainbridge, 2014; Iwabuchi, 2002) and textuality (Jordan, 2004; Gibson, 2002).

Pokémon derives from an a frequently used expression among youngsters in Japan, meaning 'pocket-sized monsters' (Patten, 2004). The initial objective was to promote a place in the city that was disappearing as a result of rapid urban development in Japan (Shelton, 1999). It was a space in which exploration was awarded with items, an idea promoted by its creator Satoshi Tajiri, when faced with the impossibility of fully engaging in his favourite pastime: capturing insects. Tajiri declared that 'when you get your first bike, you want to go somewhere you've never been before. That's like Pokémon' (2009, para. 3).

The main aim of Pokémon is to explore an interactive setting which is indispensable for the game's development, since it is activated as the player reconnoitres it (Easterling, 2010) looking for the creatures hiding there. The most novel aspect is exploration as a necessary action for developing the game and reaching the final objective, viz. capturing wild creatures and training them to fight among themselves. Under the slogan 'gotta catch 'em

all', players have to look for and capture all the creatures inhabiting the Pokémon world, as explained in a background story in which the player is a child living in a village who has to find and capture as many creatures as possible to complete the game (Navarro-Redón, 2021).

The saga began with a role-playing game (hereinafter RPG) launched by the Japanese software company Game Freak and distributed by Nintendo. It was released exclusively in Japan in 1996 as a console RPG called *Pocket Monsters Aka and Midori: Red & Green*, without ever crossing the country's borders. Initially, the story was based on helping Professor Oak in his research by capturing creatures inhabiting the fictional world, while the region's trainers confronted one another (Boito and Mercadal, 2017). As a new feature, it was now possible to connect two Game Boy consoles and for players to exchange different creatures, thus promoting a swap culture in which they could evolve to become even more extraordinary beings. To this end, the connections and exchanges between players were necessary for there to be encounters in the shape of battles in pursuit of becoming the best Pokémon trainer (Bainbridge, 2013). Following its success, it was decided to launch it in the international market in 1999, under the different name of *Pokémon Red & Blue*, subsequently followed by the release of *Pokémon Yellow*, before ultimately becoming a mass phenomenon and increasing its national sales (De Vries *et al.*, 2017).

To this first series, which included these three initial games, were added subsequent instalments offering players the opportunity to explore new spaces and to capture new species, each corresponding to a different generation. Over the years, it gradually consolidated its position as an entertainment company, the second generation of the video game becoming Nintendo's most popular, second only to Mario Bros (Gómez Aragón and Martínez García, 2017). In addition, it was gradually adapted to other consoles and portable devices, while being expanded to encompass a total of nine generations from 1996 down to the present day. In this respect, the video game's evolution has been determined by new technological and graphic developments (Navarro-Redón, 2021). As a result, its interactive design and storyline have both undergone far-reaching changes with a large number of additional creatures, objects, settings and characters. Thanks to its fun and appealing aesthetics, Pokémon has become a household name among the general public, regardless of sex, race or age (Azuma, 2001).

In light of the foregoing, Pokémon offers players ways of interacting with the natural environment, making it seem as real as possible (Hertz, 1999), for which reason the design of all the generations of the video game is based on a specific geographical place in the real world. It is currently a social and cultural model (Bainbridge, 2014) resistant to technological developments and with the ability to adapt to become the 'first multimedia cultural industry' owing to its level of convergence (Moreno, 2003, p. 207). The cultural features, imagery and ideas, closely linked to the image of a country and associated with a consumer product, are what Iwabuchi (2004) calls 'cultural odour'. This concept refers to the perceptible trace of a media product's cultural origin, such as video games or Japanese anime, which evoke nationally associated stereotypes that are positively received in international markets. Iwabuchi (2002) is highly critical of the ways in which this 'odour' is deliberately diluted in order to achieve a state of 'odorlessness', whereby Japanese content is rendered seemingly universal when exported globally. In his analysis, he shows how franchises such as *Pokémon* or *Super Mario* eliminate specific Japanese markers (such as local names or dress styles) in order to appeal to Western audiences without explicitly evoking Japaneseness.

As with other video games, in each generation Pokémon has used not only visual but also cultural references, both literal and discursive, to design indoor and outdoor spaces (see Table 1). Furthermore, the game provides an urban point of reference that represents a specific characteristic of the landscape which enables players to get their bearing and guides them in the environment in question (Lynch, 2015).

Table 1: Pokémon's visual and cultural references by generation

Generation	Year of release	Name	Country
First	1996	Red, Green, Blue & Yellow.	Japan
Second	2000	Gold, Silver & Crystal.	Japan
Third	2003	Ruby, Sapphire & Emerald. Remakes: Fire Red & Leaf Green.	Japan
Fourth	2006	Diamond, Pearl & Platinum. Remakes: Heart Gold & Soul Silver.	Japan
Fifth	2010	Black & White (with a second version).	United States
Sixth	2013	X & Y. Remakes: Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire.	France
Seventh	2016	Sun & Moon. Remakes: Ultra Sun & Ultra Moon.	Hawaii
Eighth	2019	Sword & Shield.	United Kingdom
Ninth	2022	Scarlet & Violet.	Spain

Source: own elaboration

In the first four generations of Pokémon, the Japanese archipelago is used as a reference, fully exploiting the country in all its dimensions. The first is set in a world called Kanto, drawing direct inspiration from the eponymous Japanese region. The action of the second is set in the universe of Johto, corresponding to the Japanese regions of Chubu and Kansai. The third generation also includes references to Japan, in this case the region of Kyūshū, identified as Hoenn in the video game. As to the fourth, the fictional Sinnoh is modelled on the region of Hokkaido (Naranjo Bejarano, 2016). In addition to being inspired by Japanese regions, in these four generations there is also a direct cultural identification with the country through the creation of creatures and objects, the design of the indoor spaces and the game's aesthetics (Kelts, 2007).

Until the fifth generation, Pokémon had not used any other country as a visual and cultural model for the game's spatial design. The first different country to be chosen by the franchise was the United States in the fifth generation, specifically New York State (especially the districts of Manhattan and Brooklyn) and New Jersey, this region being called Unova in the video game. In this generation, some regions of China are also represented at a lower level (Navarro-Redón, 2021). Following this new development, the saga has continued to exploit the aesthetics, culture and geography of other countries in the world in the rest of its generations. The sixth generation is inspired by France, the seventh by Hawaii and the eighth by the United Kingdom, using their cultures to design and create fictional environments and spaces called Kalos, Alola and Galar, respectively. As regards the ninth and last generation, Spain – the object of study here – has been used as a reference, a spatial context called Paldea in the video game

### 3. Methodology

This study focuses on two video games called *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Pokémon Violet* (Nintendo, 2022), both belonging to the ninth generation of the saga, in which there is reference to cultural elements from Spanish cities, an interesting topic for members of the scientific community working in the field of game studies. The main research objective was to analyse the representation of the Spanish landscapes and urban environments (including their monuments, buildings, parks and tourist attractions) in the video games *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Pokémon Violet*. This main objective was supplemented by a secondary one, namely, to study the visual or symbolic cultural elements defining this generation of Pokémon and which refer to the social and cultural identity of Spain.

On the other hand, several research questions were formulated:

- P1: How is Spain as a reference represented in the video game's universe?
- P2: What video game elements are used most when culturally representing the place?
- P3: Are these video games a medium capable of disseminating artistic and cultural references at a textual or visual level that offer a faithful reflection of Spain at an international level?

In order to meet these objectives, the qualitative methodology used was a descriptive-interpretative content analysis (Krippendorff, 1990), for the purpose of identifying the visual and cultural references on the basis of an established set of variables. These were selected from the literature on game study parameters within the field of video game analysis.

First, characters are understood as fictional agents within the game world that proactively interact with the player, integrating ludic action and narrative depth (Planells, 2015). In his fictional synthesis, Siabra Fraile (2012) divides characters into two categories. On the one hand, characters may be player characters (PC) or non-player characters (NPC), and either main or secondary depending on the events unfolding in the narrative; on the other hand, objects are conceived as key elements of the game world that support interactivity and ludic narrative (Planells, 2015). These objects may be action-oriented or environmental, depending on whether they allow characters to interact with or manipulate them—thus affecting gameplay progression and mechanics—or whether they serve to create atmosphere or act as decorative elements within the game settings, densifying the fictional environment without primary interaction.

Second, in his classificatory study of spaces and ambience, Planells (2015) identifies three types: gaming-narrative spaces, which enable the occurrence of events, rules, and player progression by operating on both plot and game dynamics, and are therefore analysed in terms of gameplay (mechanics) and narrative (emergent or structured stories); symbolic spaces, which consist of cultural and ideological codes operating on thematic levels and are examined through signs, objects, and agents that generate cultural or metaphorical meanings within the fictional world; and psychological spaces, which are related to character construction and provide information about them, and are thus conceived as a subjective domain where individual experiences, emotional perceptions, and interactions with the environment intertwine. In this sense, space is not passive but actively shapes mental well-being and human relationships—such as lived experiences, emotional motivations, or social relations—since characters possess variables of psychologisation and agency that further densify the virtual diegesis.

Lastly, following Navarro Remesal (2016), the aim was to determine whether the references were visual, textual or mixed with an eye to identifying the extent to which they faithfully reflected the originals. In the analysis of the visual or mixed references, the level of iconicity of the images (Villafañe, 2002) was used as a variable to gauge their similarity to the real places. In sum, the analysis sheet developed with the aforementioned variables is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Analysis sheet

Video game variable		Name of variable	Type of representation	Level of iconicity	Spanish visual-cultural reference
Spaces	Gaming-narrative		Textual		
	Symbolic		Visual		
	Psychological		Mixed		
Characters	PC/NPC				
	Main/secondary				
Objects	Action-oriented				
	Environmental				

Source: own elaboration

The study sample initially considered 17 video game variables, but only those deemed most relevant were applied in the analysis. This convenience sample responds to methodological criteria, as it seeks to maintain coherence with the stated research objectives. Accordingly, the variables selected in the analysis sheet (shown in Table 2) are considered the most significant and best aligned with the theoretical framework due to their relevance and pertinence. Moreover, retaining an excessive number of variables may result in an overburdened model, introduce superfluous information, hinder analytical clarity, and reduce the interpretability of the results.

#### 4. Results

The results obtained from the content analysis of the three video game variables studied here are presented below. Regarding the first sub-variable, corresponding to spaces, seven places with a gaming-narrative role and a mixed representation, viz. textual and visual, were identified (see Figure 1). According to their level of iconicity, the seven places are figuratively represented because they are defined by the representation of figures, these being understood as objects resembling recognisable images (Villafañe, 2002).

Figure 1: Spaces represented in the video game *Pokémon Scarlet and Pokémon Violet* that have their visual-cultural reference in Spain



Source: own elaboration from photographs of the video game

The first identifiable place in the video game is Sierra Napada, a snowcapped mountain range representing the highest point in the region, whose visual reference is Sierra Nevada, in turn the mountain system with the highest peak in the Iberian Peninsula. Visually speaking, it is a region covered with snowcapped mountains resembling its Spanish counterpart. At a textual level, moreover, its name is very similar to that of the original, for only two letters have been changed.

On the other hand, the city called Meseta is the capital of Paldea, the place where the action takes place, which has elements borrowed from several Spanish cities in its design. For instance, the architecture of the Orange and Grape Academies feature *trencadis*, or *pique assiette*, mosaics in reference to different places and buildings in Barcelona, such as the Parc Güell, a public park surrounded by gardens. The two other most evident references to Barcelona in the video game city are the Hospital de Sant Pau, a modernist building with more than 500 years of history and regarded as the largest in the world, and the basilica of La Sagrada Família, designed by the architect Antoni Gaudí as a project for the people and which is still under construction. In the same vein, the central square of the city of Meseta recalls Madrid's and Palma de Majorca's Plaza Mayor insofar as it has similar elements. Another place evoking Spain in the video game is the village of Hozkaiku, a Basque term meaning 'cold'. Its architecture bears some resemblance to that of the small villages of the Basque Country and La Rioja (Ezcarav), above all as regards the spiral pattern of the cobblestones and the buildings made of stone and wood and covered with slate roofs.

As regards the space called Bosquejada, located in the region of Paldea, it calls to mind the Oma Forest in the province of Biscay, representing a halfway point between nature and human civilisation. This video game setting features a forest whose trees are painted with representations of different geometric figures, humans and

animals similar to those appearing in the Oma Forest, a land art intervention by the sculptor and painter Agustín Ibarrola. The village of Cahíz, the Sendero Cahíz and the Gruta Caleta, the next places appearing in the video game all clearly referring to Spain, have to do with the southern region of Andalusia. At a textual level, these are direct references to the province of Cadiz and its beach of La Caleta, but visually speaking, the architecture of the fictional village is based on Andalusian folklore. The region features villas very similar to Andalusian farmhouses, long white sandy beaches characteristic of the Andalusian coast and a lighthouse similar to those to be found in the province of Cadiz.

Another place appearing in the game which can be associated with Spain is the village of Altamía, which contains a mixture of elements typical of the region of Castile-La Mancha, with windmills and wetlands with wooden bridges that call to mind those of Tablas de Daimiel National Park. The village also features aspects inherent to the region of Murcia, like, for example, large market gardens and labyrinths of flowerbeds characteristic of Tentegorra Park in Cartagena. Additionally, the name of the village is inspired by the Cave of Altamira, located in the Spanish municipality of Santillana del Mar, in Cantabria.

The last video game sub-variable corresponding to spaces is Leudal, a city based on that of Valencia with visual references to its port. The city's colourful buildings are modelled on those lining the promenades of localities in the region of Valencia like Villajoyosa with their multicoloured façades. The modern construction of the stadium, the buildings and the glass houses recall Valencia's Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias, an artistic and scientific complex famous for its futurist architecture. Another noteworthy example is the logo of Mercaplétora, the supermarket of the city of Leudal, which is very similar to that of the Spanish supermarket chain Mercadona, founded in Valencia. Lastly, the city has references to Madrid in that the buildings forming part of the five towers area in the video game evoke the capital's Cuatro Torres and the Torres Kío.

The second variable analysed here corresponds to the characters (see Figure 2) of which mention should go to seven, five of which are PCs and two, NPCs. As to the former, all the characters are secondary and, according to their level of iconicity, figurative representations. In addition, the PCs display a mixed representation, being identified in the video game as Pokémon. The first two are Smoliv, an olive-shaped Pokémon, and Arboliv, a creature resembling an olive tree, both highly representative of Spanish flora. For its part, Lechonk is a Pokémon similar to an Iberian pig, also typical of the country's fauna. Continuing with the PCs, there are Fidough and Dachsbun, two Pokémon whose ears call to mind *ensaimadas*, a spiral-shaped pastry from the island of Majorca, and whose faces resemble that of the Lady of Elche, a bust whose hairstyle is still copied in the region of Valencia. Falling into the same category, the Pokémon Flamingo is a faithful reflection of the pink flamingos inhabiting the country's saltmarshes. The last PC is the creature Tauros of Paldea in reference to the eponymous Pokémon appearing in the first generation of the video game. In this instalment of the saga, however, it has a more Spanish shape for it is based on the country's fighting bulls.

Figure 2: Characters represented in the video game *Pokémon Scarlet and Pokémon Violet* that have their visual-cultural reference in Spain



Source: own elaboration from photographs of the video game

As regards the NPCs, their representation in the video game is exclusively textual. The first is Mencía, one of the main characters whose name is borrowed from a variety of grape grown in Spain. The second is a preppy secondary character called Galletano based on Cayetano, a name that is frequently used in Spanish popular culture to refer to immaculately turned-out individuals belonging to the upper classes.

To end with, with respect to the third sub-variable corresponding to objects (see Figure 3), there are only three whose representation is exclusively visual. As with the rest of the variables analysed above, according to their level of iconicity they are figurative representations. One such object, the map of Paldea which is an adaptation of that of Spain, is action-oriented because it is essential to the narrative flow. As to the other two objects, which are environmental or circumstantial, these include the letterbox, which is identical to those found in Spain, and the pictures decorating the home of the main characters of the video game, which are evident representations of Spanish folklore, such as the female flamenco dancer and the patios typical of the city of Cordova.

Figure 3: Objects represented in the video game *Pokémon Scarlet and Pokémon Violet* that have their visual-cultural reference in Spain



Source: own elaboration from photographs of the video game

## 5. Conclusions

Our main research objective was to analyse the representation of the landscapes and urban environments based on Spain appearing in the video games *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Pokémon Violet*. Acknowledging that the study sample is not fully representative but rather illustrative in nature, the analysis identified references to different Spanish regions, such as Andalusia (Granada, Cordova and Cadiz), the Basque Country, Catalonia, Castile-La Mancha, La Rioja, Murcia, Cantabria, Valencia and Majorca. The place names appearing in the video games, albeit with slight modifications and elements characteristic of their landscapes and urban environments, are borrowed from these regions. The natural environments include the beaches of Cadiz, the mountain range with the highest peak in Spain located in the province of Granada and the wetlands and saltmarshes found in different parts of the country.

Additionally, the video games contain elements that have marked Spain's sociocultural identity, including cultural artifacts and artworks. In this connection, there are rural environments like Hozkaiku, a place conjuring up Basque culture, with its singular architecture, the spiral pattern of the cobblestones and buildings made of stone and wood also characteristic of La Rioja. Likewise, there are other artificial architectural elements featuring trencadis mosaics, a decorative technique using ceramic shards, glass, marble and other materials, in allusion to different places and buildings in the city of Barcelona. Other urban spaces include Madrid's and Palma de Majorca's Plaza Mayor, an open-air public space representing the collective spirit of the Spaniards where cultural and leisure activities are carried out in the country's cities. This combination of natural and urban spaces and environments highlights the versatility of Spain as a video game setting, while also reinforcing the idea of the biodiversity of its habitats, as well as that of the Pokémon inhabiting them.

As part of Spanish identity, there are also references to the country's cuisine, agriculture and livestock breeding. This is achieved by giving some the characters recognisable shapes, such as the olive, the Iberian pig, the fighting bull and the pink flamingo inhabiting the country's saltmarshes. This can also be seen in the features of some of the characters, specifically their ears in the shape of *ensaimadas* – a pastry – typical of Valencia.

The inherent Japanese cultural odour of this franchise is interwoven with Spanish references in the Paldea region, which is designed as the starting point of the game. From this locus, Japanese elements such as Koraidon and Miraidon (rooted in the terms *korai* and *mira*) are hybridised with Spanish cultural markers. For instance, the character Fuecoco wearing a hat and the character Lechonk (an Iberian pig) are combined with the dish *Klawf al ajillo*, prepared using the claws of the Pokémon Klawf and olive oil, thus creating a form of 'recentering globalisation' in which Japanese cultural odour permeates Spanish references without fully subsuming them.

In sum, the Japanese company Game Freak has represented aspects of Spanish culture, with their nuances, to develop the ninth generation of this video game, borrowing architectural and artistic elements from cities located in different regions, plus typical foodstuffs and economic activities including agriculture and livestock breeding. Without forgetting, of course, values and customs, reflected by the figures of the female flamenco dancer and the Cayetano. The flamenco dancer, as a popular Andalusian expression linked to the gypsies, is a female prototype who can be seen in the country's fairs – sociocultural events held all over Spain for a similar purpose – wearing the traditional dress. Yet flamenco also refers to a type of Spanish music, which emerged in Andalusia,

characterised by singing, dancing, guitar music and rhythmic percussion instruments with different styles. On the other hand, the Cayetano is the name given to a prototype of monied citizen who usually wears classic designer clothes, originally belonging to a wealthy Andalusian family.

Nevertheless, the references analysed may be understood as acts of cultural homage as well as commodified forms of exoticisation, insofar as many settings and creatures function as a recognition and valorisation of local icons (such as landscapes of the Iberian Peninsula or gastronomy), thereby fostering affective identification rather than mockery. Moreover, the regions are constructed as stylised tourist destinations, designed to differentiate each instalment within the global market through easily consumable traits, including iconic monuments or gastronomic and aesthetic tropes. This selective use of signs stylises the national in order to render it marketable, producing a form of exoticisation that reinforces the value of the franchise as a transnational brand rather than as a tool for cultural understanding.

In conclusion, Spanish history and traditions are reflected in the peninsula of Paldea represented in *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Pokémon Violet*. Nevertheless, we believe that it would be interesting to perform an in-depth analysis on the colours used in them for the purpose of opening new lines of research, for scarlet is the colour that symbolically recalls the mountains of Spain, as can be seen in the game's initial map. For its part, violet (it is important to recall that it is called *Pokémon Púrpura* in Spanish, i.e. purple) is associated with royalty and mystery, while also being linked to Lent, which is characterised by the fasting and penance of the Nazarenes participating in the Holy Week processions. This figure, which recalls characters appearing in other video games like *Blasphemous* (The Game Kitchen, 2019), represents one of the most relevant Spanish cultural traditions. Accordingly, we suggest analysing the symbology of the colours appearing in the video games on the basis of Spanish culture with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the relationship between social reality and new forms of entertainment.

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#### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### **Ethical statement**

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of scientific research and did not require additional ethics committee approval.

#### **Declaration of AI usage**

No generative AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

#### **Data availability**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request.

**Author contributions**

	Álvaro Linares Barrones	María Nieves Corral Rey
Conceptualization	X	
Investigation	X	X
Methodology	X	X
Resources	X	
Supervision	X	
Validation	X	X
Visualization	X	
Writing - original draft	X	X
Writing - review & editing	X	

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