

Review: *Zen and Slow Games*, by Víctor Navarro-Remesal. 2026. The MIT Press. 224 pp.

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In *Zen and Slow Games* (MIT Press, 2026), Víctor Navarro-Remesal proposes an ambitious and systematic study of a still-diffuse territory within video game design and criticism: Slowness as a style, an aesthetic practice, and a cultural phenomenon. Published as part of the *Playful Thinking* series—a collection of short, accessible books that explore video games from diverse and unconventional perspectives—the book seeks both to accurately describe this contemporary phenomenon and to contextualise it within longer traditions of design, criticism, and cultural context. To this end, Navarro-Remesal analyses numerous video games to illustrate his thesis, making his conceptual framework both tangible and grounded in play practices. Through this, the book enters into dialogue with scholarship on adjacent forms of play, including ambient play (Hjorth and Richardson, 2020, as cited in Navarro-Remesal, 2026, p. 34) and cozy games (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020, as cited in Navarro-Remesal, 2026, pp. 40–41). It also expands Navarro-Remesal's earlier research on Zen modes and slow gaming into a broader framework that defines reflective games, traces their history, and examines their socio-political tensions (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, 2018, 2023; Navarro-Remesal and Terrasa Torres, 2024).

Navarro-Remesal structures the book into four main chapters, preceded by an extensive introduction in which he sets out his three main theses: (1) video games have always been slow, in the sense that slowness has always been present in the medium; (2) video games have been slow in different ways at different moments, reacting to, participating in, and shaping the social, artistic and political conversations of its time; and (3) the vocabulary of slowness is embedded in contemporary socio-political tensions, especially between cultural resistance and corporate co-optation of well-being (pp. 4-5).

One of the book's greatest strengths appears in the first chapter, where the author systematically delimits the category of reflective games.

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Although he does not offer a closed definition in the strict sense, he characterises these games as deliberately slow-paced, calm, non-economical, and meditative experiences, organised around a form of sustained and contemplative attention. As he argues, what “unites them is the underlying attention to the need for reflective-playful thinking” (p. 24). From this premise, he identifies six characteristics that make them recognisable: that they (1) demand a particular type of attention, (2) use time as a technique, (3) are designed to minimise gameplay pressure, (4) are designed to favour elements of meditation, and (5) have a complicated relationship with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, as cited in Navarro-Remesal, 2026, pp. 24–32), understood as deep engagement in an activity, and (6) are designed to favour catalysts. Regarding this final characteristic, Navarro-Remesal understands “catalysts” in the Barthesian sense—a narratological concept denoting moments of relative stasis or low consequence. These catalysts do not substantially alter the fictional world, but give it verisimilitude and texture (Barthes, [1968] 2006, pp. 229–234, as cited in Navarro-Remesal, 2026, pp. 31–32). The author adapts this idea to games through the notion of “ludocatalysts,” interactive moments that invite players to remain within a situation without producing major consequences (p. 32).

In utilising this framework, reflective games require a sustained, slow, and wandering mode of attention; they treat time through waiting, repetition, routines, and dead time as a central design mechanism. Reflective games reduce or remove goals, timers, failure states, and other pressure-based elements, cultivating meditateness by inviting players to pause, observe, and proceed without urgency. They challenge traditional notions of uninterrupted flow by valuing pauses, stasis, and reflective breaks, and they prioritise ludocatalysts, mechanics that celebrate pause, routine, and irrelevance. Importantly, as the author himself emphasises, although they may appear adjacent in tone, cosy games require a different posture of attention: they are grounded in feelings of safety, abundance, and comfort—elements that follow a logic of their own.

The second chapter develops a solid historical genealogy that debunks the idea that slow games emerged with the indie boom of the 2000s. For Navarro-Remesal, slowness has been present in the medium since its inception: In the patience required by parser games, in the spaces for contemplation in certain experimental titles, in the construction of open worlds without strict objectives, and in the development of waiting as a legitimate game mechanic, especially through titles such as *Shenmue* (Sega AM2, 1999, as cited in Navarro-Remesal, 2026, pp. 43–82). The author argues that the arcade model, centred on skill, challenge, and speed, became dominant, leaving many slow and reflective games at the margins (pp. 43–44). This historical reconstruction is one of the book’s most valuable contributions, as it offers continuity where ruptures are usually found.

Chapter Three acts as a hinge between history, design, and ideology. It addresses the emergence of “Zen” as a label for relaxed gaming in the 2000s, especially within the realm of casual gaming. In this, Navarro-Remesal carefully distinguishes “Zen Buddhism” from “Zen” as a marketing buzzword that circulates in the media. In the context of videogames, “Zen modes” eliminated timers, strict scores, and failure states, offering more accessible and less demanding versions of well-known games. Navarro-Remesal presents this phenomenon as both a response to intense forms of gaming and part of a growing market that sold relaxation and wellness as benefits of play (pp. 102–109).

In Chapter Four, Navarro-Remesal explains the transition from “Zen” to “slow,” a label that is gaining traction in parallel with debates on slow culture in cinema, gastronomy, and urban planning. The author shows how slowness acquires its own aesthetic value and how some contemporary games, such as walking simulators, experimental titles, and incremental games, explore temporal dimensions that challenge traditional notions of progress and efficiency. The chapter emphasises that slowness is not simply the absence of action, but a reorganisation of rhythm and attention—a way of prioritising atmospheres, textures, routines, and movements. It also points out how this style has been problematised in debates about legitimacy, which shows that slow practices act as a space of cultural tension and not just as an aesthetic phenomenon.

One of the most interesting points in the book is its reflection on the relationship between slow practices and industrial structures. Although one might think that slowness belongs exclusively to the independent or alternative sphere, the author demonstrates that many big-budget titles incorporate reflective elements, whether through meaningful pauses, contemplative spaces, or gameplay modes that reduce pressure. This observation helps to avoid a simplistic dichotomy between “fast-industrial” and “slow-independent” and allows readers to recognise that slowness is part of the industry's broader stylistic repertoire.

The style of the book is clear, accessible and yet conceptually rigorous. Navarro-Remesal combines philosophical references—such as Eihei Dōgen, Kitaro Nishida, or Byung-Chul Han—with design theory, video game history and contemporary cultural criticism. He also handles sensitive topics such as Orientalism, commercialised spirituality and the tensions between counterculture and the market by carefully distinguishing Zen Buddhism and *zazen* from the commercial use of “Zen” as a label for relaxation, wellness, focus, and consumable inner peace. His writing avoids the temptation to turn slowness into a normative ideal—instead presenting it as a complex phenomenon, capable of both fostering practices of resistance and being absorbed by corporate logic.

The book's conclusion revisits the debate on labels and emphasises the need for a common vocabulary that does not overgeneralise or obscure historical nuances. It articulates the overall theoretical proposal that reflective style simultaneously responds to two fundamental human needs: The need for reflection and the need for playfulness. Navarro-Remesal thus speaks of "reflective-playful thinking" (p. 180), a way of thinking through play that shifts the focus beyond contingent labels like Zen, slow, and casual to instead concentrate on the profound functions that these games fulfil. This conceptual shift from superficial labels to deeper human needs is what allows the author to propose a more flexible framework, advocating for the use of reflective games as a pragmatic or umbrella term, whilst stressing that it should never become a rigid category. In this sense, the book offers teachers, researchers, and designers a useful analytical tool, providing concepts that facilitate the comparative reading of various works without resorting to reductionist taxonomies.

Zen and Slow Games is an important contribution to video game studies thanks to its conceptual clarity, analytical breadth, and ability to articulate slowness as both a stylistic and ideological issue. It provides a solid framework for understanding contemporary practices and contextualising trends that are often presented as novelties. Perhaps its greatest strength is its balance between theoretical rigour, historical sensitivity, and cultural interpretation. For this reason, the book is an essential reference for considering the aesthetic, political, and pedagogical potential of "playing slowly" and for recognising the impact of slow modes of video games on broader debates about attention, well-being, and contemporary life.

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