

# THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL ELITE AND POWER IMAGE CONSTRUCTING PECULIARITIES IN CONTEMPORARY VIDEO GAMES (ON THE METRO EXODUS MATERIALS)

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This article studies the phenomenon of video games as instruments of constructing ideas about historical and political reality in the mass consciousness. In the modern world, video games became one of the most popular forms of entertainment along with other types of visual content – cinema, animation, online and print publications, etc. However, due to the specific technical tools, video games represent a fundamentally new means of constructing meanings because they create the effect of the player's immersion and presence in a virtual reality. Such interactivity makes it possible for video games to be especially effective in broadcasting certain values and patterns of behavior to players, forming a specific socio-cultural reality around them. All the mentioned makes video games not only a kind of entertainment but a serious “soft power” tool for modern states. In the study, the authors make an attempt to find out the images and tools that allow modern video games form a certain reality in the mass consciousness. For this purpose, the authors use the case-study as a method of descriptive analysis, B. F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning, Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, and the method of expert interviewing. The authors resort not only to the theoretical understanding of the essence of video games based on foreign and domestic research in the sphere of game studies, but also to a practical analysis of the mechanisms used by the creators of video games to form a specific world view for gamers on the example of the Russian game *Metro Exodus*. The game action takes place in a post-apocalyptic world – an alternative Russia of the future, where people are forced to survive after a technogenic disaster. The game contains a lot of images of the Russian political elite, among which are a member of a secret service, controlling the media and oppressed population –

the personification of the Russian government; a priest, deceiving his flock and connected with the criminal – the personification of the Russian Orthodox Church; the military and employees of the Ministry of Defence, literally “devouring” the population – the personification of militarism and the state of military structures in modern Russia; an oppressive southern autocrat, controlling the oil reserves and oppressing a local population – probably an allusion to the raw materials economy of Russia and related problems. The game’s creators use various visual problems, referring to the modern Russia, for instance, modified emblems with double-headed eagles, architecture which is typical to Russian cities, Russian military uniforms. The game plot is based on the victory of players over negative characters representing the Russian government– according to that, the authors of the article conclude that this video game forms similar patterns of behavior in the minds of players, whose ultimate goal is to overthrow the current state system in Russia. Along with that, the authors conclude that it is quite difficult now to evaluate the degree of emotional perception of these patterns among gamers. This will be possible only if an active protest movement in Russia arises.

**Keywords:** programming visualization, mass consciousness, political image, historical perceptions, entertainment

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**ОСОБЕННОСТИ КОНСТРУИРОВАНИЯ ОБРАЗА  
РОССИЙСКОЙ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ ЭЛИТЫ И ВЛАСТИ  
В СОВРЕМЕННЫХ ВИДЕОИГРАХ  
(НА ПРИМЕРЕ METRO EXODUS)**

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Статья посвящена анализу особенностей конструирования массовых представлений об историко-политической реальности в сознании пользователей современных видеоигр посредством программирующей визуализации. В рамках исследования авторы методологически опирались модель семиосферы Ю. М. Лотмана, семиотический подход У. Эко к мнемотехникам, а также на концепцию «семиотическая диагностика» (И. В. Мелик-Гайказян). Кроме того, работа базируется на положениях теории оперантного обусловливания Б. Ф. Скиннера и теории социальной идентичности Г. Тайфеля и Дж. Тёрнера. Для получения более точных результатов авторами было проведено экспертное исследование, в рамках которого выявлены ключевые особенности современных видеоигр в аспекте особенностей и возможностей их использования в качестве инструмента формирования массовых представлений о реальности в молодежной среде. В ходе исследования авторы делают вывод, что современные видеоигры являются одним из наиболее интенсивно развивающихся сегментов транснациональной массовой культуры, что потенциально превращает их в одно из эффективных средств коммуникации с молодежными аудиториями. При этом современные видеоигры могут выступать в качестве значимого фактора формирования социально-политических и исторических представлений молодежной аудитории, а при высокой степени нарративной идеологизации способны играть роль своеобразных «политических интерфейсов». Кроме того, в работе выдвигается тезис о том, что современная видеоигра обладает важной когнитивной функцией, связанной с влиянием на содержательные аспекты познавательных процессов игроков через программируемую игровую семиосферу. Опираясь на исследования российских и зарубежных ученых, авторы рассматривают видеоигры в качестве особой формы «программирующей визуализации», в которую как в виртуальную семиосферу погружены игроки. В работе показывается, что важное значение в такой виртуальной игровой семиосфере сохраняют алгоритмическая заданность и программируемость символов. Игровой семиозис характеризуется управляемостью смысловыми интерпретациями символов и знаков при помощи программируемого игрового сюжета, выступающего фактором, влияющим на понимание ценностно-смыслового наполнения окружающего игрового мира. В качестве примера, рассматриваемого в статье, выбрана игра *Metro Exodus*. В работе рассматриваются образы российской политической элиты и власти в России, формируемые в анализируемой игре. По итогам исследования авторы обосновывают тезис о том, что игровые объяснительные модели окружающей действительности, воспринятые игроками как реальные, становятся фундаментом для дальнейшего формирования массовых представлений о реальной историко-политической действительности, а представленные в *Metro Exodus* деструктивные образы являются частью механизма мнемонических приемов, непосредственно связанных с когнитивной функцией познания в сложной семиотической системе современных видеоигр.

**Ключевые слова:** программирующая визуализация, массовое сознание, политический образ, исторические представления, эртертеймент

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## Introduction

Political scientists have largely neglected video games, and the political role of the gaming industry has not been seriously examined. However, more scholars, specialists, and experts have recently noted the growing importance of video games in politics. And it is no coincidence. As states and societies grow increasingly globalised, the gaming industry has become more extraterritorial.

Various games are being developed for international audiences irrespective of the player's location. Evidently, in such circumstances, video games become a powerful tool to help "open up" and "softly" penetrate current states' informational, political, and cultural spaces.

In essence, with tens and hundreds of millions of players worldwide, popular video games have become a soft power tool used to help shape the player's perceptions of historical events, the nature of particular nations, and the characteristics of a state included in the game's story.

Although the primary purpose of releasing any video game is to monetise it and maximise profit from the project, the soft influence of video games also has a clear impact on the political sphere. The views of a certain political leader, the social and political situation within a state, and the features of the political regime are transmitted into the target audience's minds in the form of a game. For this reason, the global gaming industry is now actively drawing the attention of political scientists concerned with informational influence in the contemporary world.

It seems clear that the key audience for video games is young people who most actively use gaming systems. As a rule, a young person does not yet have a clear, well-established understanding of historical events, nor an understanding of the countries and nations in which they occurred. We can also talk about the lack of a clear worldview or a solid axiological direction among today's younger generation. Obviously, video games can provide explanatory models of historical reality and current socio-political reality in such contexts [Lopez Naranjo et al. 2024].

Simultaneously, the explanatory content is broadcast in a convenient and entertaining format, which further reduces the critical perception of information among young people, who often have low standards concerning the quality and objectivity of the content they consume [Bowman et al. 2022].

Because of the gaming format's convenience, attractiveness, and international nature, it becomes possible to implicitly influence the social and political perceptions of hundreds of millions of players worldwide, bypassing the barrier of critical reflection of game content. The user's active involvement in the game's story merely reinforces the effects associated with the emerging alternative perception of reality and history, which is not based on objective facts and diverts the player from reality in such contexts.

Simultaneously, the game's story is not inherently neutral since it either reflects the subjective perceptions of video game developers or is designed to achieve the goals of their consumer, who is also interested in broadcasting advantageous, axiological, and explanatory models in the context of the game. As a result, we can assume that video games will be increasingly harnessed in global geopolitical and informational confrontation processes by leading actors in the gaming industry.

The key target audience is and will continue to be young people, who, in the near future, as they mature, will start to act as carriers of national models of historical memory as well as national models of values, meanings, and symbols [Volodenkov 2020]. Clearly, changes in perceptions of hundreds of millions of young people worldwide are instrumental in transforming processes of traditional intergenerational dialogue and value transition from one generation to the next, which can directly influence mass beliefs and perceptions within a country in a matter of years.

The COVID-19 pandemic, with the introduction of quarantine measures and self-isolation regimes and the rapid digitalisation of traditional social relations that ensued, has only exacerbated the situation. The amount of game playtime has increased dramatically during the mandatory self-isolation environment. Consequently, the role of video games in the socialisation of young people deprived of full-fledged traditional offline social interactions has also grown considerably.

Game-based explanatory models are becoming increasingly important for the socialisation of today's youth in the context of the pandemic. As a result, we can also note the growing role of video games as a factor in socio-political transformations at the nation-state level. We are convinced that the importance of video games in shaping young audiences' socio-political and historical perceptions must not be underestimated. After all, Thomas' theorem states that what is real in perception is real in its consequences. In other words, if players perceive virtual explanatory models as real, such models become the foundation for forming actual actions in the real socio-political space.

Today, we can observe the validity and relevance of Herbert Marcuse's position, who considered entertainment one of the key tools of mass control. The only difference is that entertainment in Marcuse's time primarily dealt with television and traditional social classes; today, entertainment has changed significantly to video games geared towards younger audiences – the critical resource of any nation's future.

From our viewpoint, the formation of young people's worldview through video games, the influence on their perceptions of their own history, their nation, state, as well as other states and nations may lead, in Antonio Gramsci's words, to changes in the national "molecular code", to the destruction or transformation of traditional values and the meaning of a nation and to changes in their own self-identification.

At the same time, there are a number of scientific works that analyse the semiotic foundations of video games. One study, for example, revealed the semiotic role of so-called "Easter eggs" (secrets in a computer game to find which you need to perform special actions), which became signs of a special code integrated into the video game [Chasovsky 2012]. Such codes have an important cognitive function in the player's cognition of the virtual universe. On the one hand, these "Easter eggs" draw the player's attention to something important that will help him understand the mission and features of the virtual world; on the other hand, they support the entertaining component of the gameplay.

However, at present, the existing conceptual experience of Russian and foreign semiologists is not sufficiently correlated with practical studies of video game features. In this regard, we consider it extremely important analysing contemporary video games and identifying the axiological components of game content that form an invisible framework of new explanatory models of historical reality and actual reality in the minds of contemporary youth.

### **Research methodology**

This study aimed to capture the negative images promoted in a game that has engulfed hundreds of thousands of people and is aimed at young people to overthrow the current system of government. The following tasks are required to reach this aim: going through the game's main scenario and describing each negative image of the Russian political elite in the Metro Universe (20 years after the atomic war in the 2010s).

We hypothesise that the assumption that the integral effectiveness of a computer game as a tool of memory politics cannot automatically be equated with its popularity among users. To meet the challenges in the

area of memory politics, the computer games narrative must be structured according to the transformation patterns of images of the past within the minds of macro-social communities, as well as the development of a collective identity among its representatives. Furthermore, a computer game's historical narrative should build upon an already established historical mythology and the archetypal characters attached to it.

Our methods combine the descriptive analysis of elements in the form of a case study (the positioning of representatives of Russian political powers and elite in the video game *Metro Exodus*, 2019, B. F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning [Skinner 1950] and Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory [Tajfel, Turner 2004]. In this study, we also considered Yuri Lotman's semiosphere model [Lotman 2022], Russian researcher Irina Melik-Gaykazyan's information-synergetic approach [Melik-Gaykazyan 2022], and Umberto Eco's semiotic approach to mnemotechnics [Eco 2016].

The study involved a series of expert interviews with academics and specialists working in the field of preserving historical and cultural heritage. The sample of experts was formed by selecting the authors of the most cited publications related to the topic of this study from the eLIBRARY.ru digital library site. Forming the pool of experts, we identified 15 experts with degrees in history, political and pedagogical sciences, professional competencies in youth work, as well as experts in the practical implementation of projects related to the preservation of historical and cultural heritage.

The expert interview guide included three sets of questions. The first two were devoted to experts' evaluation of memorial positioning practices in computer games in Russia and Western countries. The third question was dedicated to the disclosure of the potential of games as a tool of memory politics, how it can be fully implemented and the criteria for evaluating its effectiveness. Thus, the first two sets of questions highlighted (in a comparative aspect) practical experiences of using computer games to promote a historical narrative. The third set of questions was used to accumulate expert opinions on the conceptual role of computer games as a memory politics tool and to develop an appropriate explanatory model.

### **Review of special studies**

Currently, there are several scientific approaches to studying the phenomenon of video games. The first is the so-called narratological

approach, in which video games are seen as specific texts in which the narrative plays a central role [Aarseth 1997; Murray 1999; Juul 2005]. Later, critical works [Eskelinen 2001] towards the narratology trend emerged. The question that storytelling alone is not enough to build a video game narrative arose – it is essential to create a narrative situation together with storytellers themselves.

A ludological approach also emerged (as proposed by Gonzalo Frasca), which focused on gameplay. Above all, the ludologists grew interested in the specifics of the game rules that set the pace of competition – getting points, prizes, etc., to take a player to the next level. This approach largely reflected Johan Huizinga's idea that the essence of any game is an "agonal instinct", or competition as an expression of the desire for power. Of course, this does not mean that developments in narratology have ceased altogether. On the contrary, broader interpretations of the narrative have emerged. For M. L. Ryan, the narrative is related to the "conquest of the fictional world", which relates to the action of intellectual agents in the game's semantic conditions [Ryan 2006]. In any case, different theoretical assessments have generated a useful academic discourse in this field [Akbar, Kusumasari 2022; Talanov 2023]. Nevertheless, who is closer to the truth? It appears that the best research strategy would be to combine the developments of narratology and ludology – to incorporate both narrative techniques and the nature of rules, incentives, and interpretations into video game analysis.

Further research on video games has developed within the procedural generation of Ian Bogost, according to which, video games are a new channel and whole art of persuasion. This belief is not solely based on narrative and video content but on the rules of interaction and representation implemented by developers and their customers and sponsors [Bogost 2010]. In essence, Bogost has tried not to oppose but to combine narratological and ludological theories, creating a new scientific toolkit for in-depth analysis of a video game's impact on the player.

Proponents of the procedural model follow Janet H. Murray's thesis according to which video games are unique media because of their procedural nature, due to the functioning of processes that operate similarly to computer processes.

The video game's virtual world sets the framework for political, social, and ethical discourse with these rules. The game rules are not abstract; instead, they are based on certain values of their creators (their sponsors, consultants) [Bogost 2006]. Bogost makes a pretty serious claim – procedural literacy involves the ability to reconfigure essential rules and concepts, and the language all programmable video games

are based on is the language of proceduralism. Using the example of historical games (e.g., *Civilisation*), Bogost has tried to show that they, as software systems, represent the historical process through specific rules of interaction [Bogost 2005]. According to Bogost's model, by following the rules laid out by game designers, the players are heavily influenced by ready-made interpretations of political, historical, and ethical phenomena and issues, which can affect, in turn, their value system.

However, Miguel Sicart believes that the procedural theory sidesteps the very figure of the player as a person, treating the game in an overly instrumental way. According to Sicart, a video game is a kind of balance between reason and ritual. An interesting and productive game involves not only rules but also certain flexibility, manoeuvrability, and choice for the player [Sicart 2011]. It is not only the rules that are important but also how the player complies with these rules. The player may be reflexive, abandoning the determinism of the rules. Sicart's position is perfectly fair in the sense that no one will play an uninteresting game where the rules rigidly regulate everything. Simultaneously, it is important to realise that players cannot wholly ignore the rules of video game developers. Bogost's procedural approach is not a dogma. Initially, it was a compromise and a creative reconceptualization of the narrative and ludological models. Besides, no one stops the procedural approach from being adjusted, improved, and reconceptualised, especially with the advent of multiplayer games incorporating every possible technology, from visualisation and storytelling to the "total immersion" effect of gameplay.

In any case, Bogost made a breakthrough in game studies, supplementing the previous discourse on verbal and visual rhetoric with a discourse on procedural rhetoric. It is important to stress that the contemporary academic discourse on video games has been supplemented by works on stereotypes and country-specific images created by developers. It would be interesting to reconsider such approaches to video games from a semiotic perspective. It is sufficient to recall Lotman's semiosphere concept, whose conceptual framework allows us to consider video games as a special "programming visualization" product in which players are immersed and semiosis occurs. With this approach, the video game semiosis units can include not only text, language, and dialogue between gameplay characters but also clothing, symbols, sounds, music, and gestures in a programmable game universe. Furthermore, algorithmic specification, programmability of symbols, action options, and missions remain critically important. Lotman believed that the substructures of the semiosphere are organized using two coordinate sys-

tems: (a) spatial (external, internal space, and the border between them) and (b) temporal (future, present, and past) [Lotman 2022, 204]. In popular video games, these semiotic coordinate systems are dominant because they are closely related to storytelling, memories, locations rich in historical symbolism, with the presence of distinctive attributes of the “friend or foe” dichotomy. Hence, it can be cautiously assumed that the modern video game has an important cognitive function related to the mechanisms of cognition in gamers through a programmable game semiosphere.

Melik-Gaykazyan’s information-synergistic approach can act as a connecting analytical thread between Lotman’s semiosphere model and our assumption about the “programming visualization” function of modern video games. According to this approach, the most important stages of the information process (generation, encoding, translation, operator formation, and reduplication) are associated with the basic phases of self-organization; any stage of the information process leads to the creation of a semiotic form [Melik-Gaykazyan 2022]. It is noteworthy that Melik-Gaykazyan attaches key importance in the information process to the stage of creating an operator as an algorithm for performing targeted actions.

Simultaneously, the operator factor is associated with both *homo ludens* and the constructed collective dream about the future or the past. Gamer communities are precisely characterised by signs of self-organisation, during which they form a collective dream about the past, present, and future. Through player communities, interpretations of characters, events, images, and symbols are discussed and disseminated, and the political narrative is also disseminated in an entertaining manner. Programming visualization presupposes an initially laid-out video game interface that defines the rules, set of functions, tools, and gameplay units. It is no coincidence that Lev Manovich introduced the term “cultural interface” to explain the use of cultural components by the human-machine interface [Manovich 2018, 105]. It cannot be ruled out that, with a high degree of narrative ideologization, video games can play the role of specific “political interfaces”. In turn, Eco, based on Rosselli’s ideas, suggested that semiotics include special mnemotechnics related to the system of places (Latin *loci*), images of the general iconographic field, and acquiring the function of lexical units. In particular, Eco noted that mnemotechnics’ features influenced medieval society’s eschatological and moral principles [Eco 2016, 79, 248]. This thesis is noteworthy in that mnemotechnics are associated with the cognitive function of cognition, and video games are mainly represented

by visual forms such as locations, images, and symbols. In other words, programmers can offer a certain ready-made worldview picture by putting a special interface and a set of mnemotechnics into a video game, supporting it with narratives, character actions, and mission features. Since images, symbols, actions, missions, and features of a video game are discussed at the level of a player community, as a self-organised system, the illusion of an objective representation of meanings is formed. The algorithmic side of the semiosphere, programmed by visual mnemotechnics, narratives, and images, remains on the sidelines.

So, can video games participate in processes of shaping historical and socio-political perceptions of reality? And what does contemporary research say about it? In his day, C. Schmitt pointed out that the “political” can be found in the precise positioning of the “us versus stranger” binary. But some authors believe that concerns about the manipulative role of computer games are clearly exaggerated [Grishin, Iglin 2015]. Matthew Spokes, for example, believes that in video games like *Ghost Recon 2* or *Splinter Cell*, developers are not purposefully creating the image of North Korea as an enemy. Nor is there a rigid binary opposition between American and North Korean political regimes. Instead, there is a combination of 2 images of the DPRK – comedic and repressive – which leaves the player confused without affecting their interpretations [Spokes 2020].

Simultaneously, Brandon Valeriano and Philip Habel view video games as transmitters of the image of an enemy. According to their observations, the constant positioning of certain states as enemies in combat within first-person shooter games can influence the construction of international threats in the agenda of contemporary society [Valeriano, Habel 2016]. Researchers conducted a content analysis of international relations simulations (*Medieval: Total War; Empires: Dawn of the Modern World; Civilisation; Europa Universalis*), according to which these games are not as politically neutral as they may first seem. They contain militaristic stereotypes, teaching the player that international problems are best resolved with force [Zamaróczy 2017] rather than diplomacy. Artūras Žukauskas also notes the presence of stereotypical images of Soviet and American soldiers in video games [Žukauskas 2018]. This brings us back to Bogost’s idea of procedural rhetoric. Indeed, if the rules link winning to the profitability of war, then we have a persistent stereotype spread through popular media. The workings of such stereotypes were well illustrated by Bogost’s analysis of *Antiwargame* [Bogost 2010], in which players had to manage public opinion, conquer countries full of oil rigs and citizens who became terrorists after bombings.

Instead of studying the rules, country images and stereotypes, a number of authors explore the political aspects of modern historical video games [Talanov 2023; Shevchenko 2023]. While studying the “ludification of culture” (a reference to Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*), Joost Raessens emphasises that some video games are developed immediately with ready-made “ideological spaces” – special virtual universes that aim to convince players of the primacy of certain values [Raessens 2010]. Marcus Schulzke uses similar terminology, finding “ideological maps” in war video games. But he notes that these maps can not only be collectively consumed but also collectively produced, transforming abstract ideological components into concrete player experiences and value systems [Schulzke 2017]. For example, “the ideological map” was included in America’s Army game line-up, supporting a sense of civic cohesion, patriotism, and self-restraint in players with its procedural logic. The main customer for creating such a “map” was officially the U.S. state.

Adam Chapman prioritises video games with historical stories, where content balances culture, rules, and play. The researcher believes that such games must be analysed holistically, ultimately dismantling the interplay of form and content. For instance, by analysing the form, it is possible to understand how a video game can create meanings in ways that neither film nor books can [Chapman 2012]. Part of the aesthetics of games is the developers’ algorithms. Chapman agrees that historical video games function through procedural rhetoric, which, depending on the genre, can influence the historical symbols used by the game to construct meaning. Perhaps this is because the genre of historical video games touches on crucial socio-political topics for a society that they are attracting more and more researchers [Kempshall 2020; Pötzsch, Šisler 2016; Chapman, Linderoth 2015; Volodenkov, Fedorchenko 2015; Fedorchenko et al. 2020; Belov 2018; Belov 2020; Fordham et al. 2020].

Remarkably, in addition to historically themed video games, video games containing a post-apocalyptic narrative also address historical issues, the meaning of social order, political ideologies, values, and scenarios surrounding the social and political evolution of humanity (*Fallout 4*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *DayZ*). The post-apocalyptic narrative is founded on eschatological fears, destructive developments in society and science, fantasy literature, the Cold War, images of the Communist threat, fears of a new world war, the collapse of civilisation, and nuclear disaster. The post-apocalyptic world is often painted as an arena of conflicting factions, a number of which have an ideological mission, including a fascist one (e.g., *Fallout 4*). As Óliver Perez-Latorre effectively

demonstrates in his article, “utopian enclaves” [Pérez-Latorre 2019], in which a character symbolises rebellion or the fight for social alternatives, can reinforce players’ negative stereotypes about insurgencies in contemporary states.

The seemingly superficial and grotesque theme of zombies has also begun attracting the attention of dystopian video game researchers recently [Wintle 2023]. Hans-Joachim Backe and Espen Aarseth [Backe, Aarseth 2013] have studied this topic in detail, examining how it projects socio-political meaning. On the one hand, they believe that the post-apocalyptic theme of zombies prevails in video games because it is the ideal posthuman, alien enemy – the Other. On the other hand, they believe that the zombie apocalypse has political overtones, as zombies are used as an allegory for poverty, slavery, and contemporary consumerism – enduring humanity’s problems [Backe, Aarseth 2013]. For example, *DayZ* provides an extremely stereotypical depiction of Chernarus, a Zombieland resembling an abandoned and impoverished Eastern European country with sparse churches and pubs, where procedural rhetoric further supplies the gameplay with negative feelings. For example, upon losing the automatically updated mini-map, the player starts to feel truly deprived of their rights and becomes lost in the game.

Note that the above studies on the possibility of video games as transmitters of socio-political meanings, images, and historical interpretations do not hinder positive experiences from synthesising narratology, ludology, and procedural approaches.

## Results

The analysis of the expert survey results revealed that the opinions and positions of the vast majority of study participants could be reduced to the following three key judgments.

Currently, video games are one of the most actively developing segments of transnational mass culture and potentially can become the most effective means of political communication for young people across the post-Soviet space in the medium term. Video games not only allow the promotion of a political narrative in an entertaining format but also provide opportunities to organise users into communities of gamers who regularly horizontally communicate with one another and have a consensual understanding of most elements of game symbolism.

The lack of strict genre restrictions and the level of game design technology development allow video game creators to effectively construct vivid images of the past, present, and future based on emotionally

charged symbolism. The latter opens a window of opportunity for developers in terms of shaping players' overall historical-political perceptions and macro-social identity.

Video games provide political actors with the opportunity to implement the principle of global political agitation among young people to an even greater extent than the cinema. Simultaneously, the final cost of video game production in most cases is lower than in the film industry, and the range of tools of influence used is noticeably wider and more appealing.

Let us now move on to the analysis of the game in question. The video game *Metro Exodus* is divided into several sequentially evolving storylines: The Prologue, "Moscow", "Volga", "Yamantau", "Kaspiy", "Taiga", "Novosibirsk", and "Baikal" [*Metro Exodus* 2019]. We will not describe the reasons why the main heroes had to make such a journey. We limit ourselves to pointing out that almost every title corresponds to a geographical location. In virtually every section, the main anti-hero or villains are representative(s) of the government or political elite. In "Moscow", the main villain is an unnamed commander of the special services of Hanse, an economically successful political entity. This man embodies the lies of the Moscow government, which for 20 years has suppressed any dissent and convinced the population—which is hiding in the underground metro from both radiation and mutants—that everyone else has died and there is nowhere else to go. This was made possible thanks to an extensive radio suppression system. "There are enemies all around, and no life outside Moscow"—this could be the slogan for the underground survivors of the atomic war. An interesting reference to contemporary Russia can be found in the stylised image of the Hansa political entity's coat of arms: the double-headed eagle (Figure 1).

In "Volga", the main villain is a local sectarian priest who, through his sermons, has suppressed the will and common sense of the local population and set them back in development by several hundred years. He uses both secular and spiritual power to satisfy his own selfish, lustful desires. The image of a sect leader is characterised by a sizeable pectoral fishing hook, while images of Orthodox icons are found across the game. Using the fishing hook symbol, the game makers highlight ordinary people's "ignorant dependency" on this man and his ideology. An image of Father Silantius is depicted in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 3 is not found in the game but is an official poster online. In this alternative image of Silantius, in which he is adorned with tattoos on his fingers and the back of his hand, we see references to the Soviet and Russian criminal world merged with the church (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 1. A stylised image of the Hansa coat of arms.  
From the video game *Metro Exodus*[Metro Exodus 2019]



Figure 2. Father Silantius. From the video game *Metro Exodus* [Metro Exodus 2019]



Figure 3. Father Silantius (an image only appearing on the official game posters).  
From the video game *Metro Exodus* [Metro Exodus 2019]

Here is how one of the game's heroes describes his job:

Basically, they are just slaves! Real slaves! They work all day long, pray half the night... Everything is according to a schedule, and everything is supervised. Everything, literally everything! The "congregation" decides – well, I mean, it is clear who that is... Silantius (the cult leader)... They do not even have anything of their own – even their trousers are communal! He told them a bunch of lies about electricity, and they were all ears... Not everything is clear, but it's simple—you receive "penance" if you ask questions [Metro Exodus 2019].

In this way, the creator of the Metro Universe depicts the role and image of the church in Russia.

At the secret base in Yamantau, the main villains are defence ministry "cronies"; feral, senior officers who have been feeding upon refugees for 20 years and are looking for survivors at the base. As they torture the heroes, one of the top officers says: "We are the government you deserve!" After overthrowing this cannibalistic regime, one villain attempts to justify himself before the firing squad: "We had no choice!" This is the image of the power of the military and high command in Russia. The striking reference to contemporary Russian power structures, primarily the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, can be seen in the stylised image of the cannibalistic military's coat of

arms (Figure 4). The coat of arms for the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation – a triangular shield elongated at the bottom with two-headed eagles and identically placed ribbons with text – is identical to the cannibalistic military's coat of arms from the secret bunker.



Figure 4. A stylised image of the cannibalistic military's coat of arms.  
From the video game *Metro Exodus* [Metro Exodus 2019]

In the “Kaspiy” setting, the main villain is a cutthroat thug nicknamed Baron who controls the oil and freshwater reserves and holds the local population as slaves. But it is our heroes who help to destroy the villain and launch a war of liberation. This raised a separate question to which we do not yet have a clear answer: Why did the game developers choose to create this location in Kazakhstan instead of Russia?

There is no power vertical in the level “Taiga”. Here, we find two groups, Pioneers and Pirates. Both are the result of an attempt by a certain “Teacher” to recreate Anton Makarenko’s experience of educating children. However, the experiment has clearly failed, and the children grew up and split into several gangs: the Pioneers specialise in catching

outsiders and handing them over to be eaten by wild wolves and bears, while the Pirates prefer to cut off their enemies' toes before killing them.

Upon arriving in Novosibirsk, we are presented with a desolate city where only one boy has survived. There is no image of power and ruling elite in this location, but if we choose to continue playing the game through the "Two Colonels" expansion pack (itself a stand-alone story), we discover that the military used to be in control. First through deception, then through force, they seized from the local population all the antiseptic necessary to partially neutralise the radiation, after which they fled. In order to get out of Novosibirsk, the military shot and killed people with poisonous gas. This is the image of Russia under military rule.

Upon reaching Baikal, our heroes find peace, clean water, and a land free of mutants and radiation. This is where they start to create their own world and are ready to invite any facing oppression from the authorities.

### Conclusions

The *Metro Exodus* video game, released in 2019, contains overt political references. The following vivid and emotionally memorable negative images of Russian authorities and political elite are created primarily for young audiences who consume gaming content:

1) a member of the secret service: controlling the media and deceiving an oppressed population;

2) a sectarian priest: using religion for his own selfish and anti-humanistic purposes while rejecting scientific and technological progress;

3) members of the government and deputy defence ministers: devouring their compatriots by luring them into a military bunker (system);

4) an oppressive southern autocrat whose wealth is built on controlling oil and oppressing a local population that is gradually being turned into slaves;

5) secret service officer: deceiving the local population for personal gain and, when the situation created by himself, worsens, ready to be the first to escape from it, destroying everyone who gets in his way.

It can be assumed that the identified negative images form part of the mechanism of mnemonic techniques associated with the cognitive function of cognition in the complex semiotic system of modern video games. Mnemotechnics strengthen the meanings of the video game semiosphere, obeying the logic of the operator mechanism laid down by

programmers as an algorithm for performing purposeful actions. During video game missions, mnemotechnics are accompanied by clearly politicized narratives.

Simultaneously, the game offers the idea that such evil can be defeated with little power, weapons, dexterity, intelligence, or all of the above. The creators of *Metro Exodus* offer players a ready-made, but rather ambiguous, radical meaning, according to which representatives of the political elite, authorities, and punitive apparatus are strong only when they feel the “state” or system behind them. However, once you start, the entire world created by lies and violence will begin to collapse. Whether such mnemotechnics, procedures, and narratives create a specific type of homo ludens is a substantial and debatable question. However, one thing is clear: all these techniques involve the interaction of a large number of players with the *Metro Exodus* virtual semiosphere, as well as the formation of a community based on the principles of gamers’ self-organisation. This leads to the creation of conditions for constructing a “collective dream about the future, present, and past”.

The degree of emotional perception of these ideas is currently difficult to assess. It will become possible if a solid and active movement arises against Russia’s existing political system and representatives.

Simultaneously, *Metro Exodus* is just one example of a fairly wide range of video games with content that may affect young people’s historical perception. Based on the study, we can conclude that the video game industry is a subject of transforming traditional patterns of historical memory. Video games themselves can act as an effective tool in “memory wars” and in the processes of influencing the mass consciousness of a significant number of players around the world.

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