

Playing with the Past: Computer Games as a Tool for Historical Memory Transformation of the Events of the World War II

Griban I.V., Griban O.N.*

Ural State Pedagogical University, Yekaterinburg, Russian Federation

**Corresponding author. Email: oleg@griban.ru*

ABSTRACT

In the modern conditions of the politicization of history, when real “memory wars” often unfold around interpretations of historical events, computer games are not just a means of entertainment, but also have a significant impact on the process of formation and transformation of images of the past. One of the most popular historical storylines for the creators of computer games was and still remains the Second World War. Game developers offer users their own version of events, which does not always coincide with the real one, providing an opportunity not only to become a participant in key battles of the Second World War, but also to change the course of history and influence the outcome of the battle. "Games of the past" to a greater extent attract representatives of young people who spend a significant part of their free time behind a computer screen and with mobile devices. The article analyzes the features of the representation of the past in computer games, the plot of which is associated with the events of the Second World War.

Keywords: *historical memory, World War II, a computer game, representation of the past, the image of the past, memorialization, game studies*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2020, it will be 75 years since the end of World War II - the largest conflict in the history of mankind, which left an indelible mark on the historical memory of all the peoples who took part in it to one degree or another. The further events of 1939 - 1945 go into the past, the more abstract and mythologized is the image of war that is formed among the younger generation. On the one hand, for all the main countries participating in this conflict, war remains an urgent topic (under the influence of modern political events, historical and public discussions continue about the causes and culprits of the outbreak of war, its consequences and the price of Victory), but, on the other hand, it is almost no longer there are eyewitnesses of events, carriers of "living memory". The ideas of modern youth about the Second World War are based on feature films and television programs, often of very dubious quality; computer games, often distorting the most obvious historical facts; periodically held commemorative events and anniversaries, in the framework of which the most important is often missed - behind the template phrases and emotional performances, the essence of the tragedy unfolding in the world in 1939 and putting entire peoples on the brink of survival is blurred. One of the sources of forming ideas about the events of the past today is computer games. One cannot disagree with the opinion

of the Russian researcher S.V. Belov, who emphasizes that the scale of the impact of computer games on the formation of the historical memory of youth is much wider than, for example, in fiction: “The effectiveness of the impact of video games is supported by the breadth of audience coverage. The general circulation of the novel by A. Fadeev “The Young Guard” for the period 1946–2017 amounted to 27 million copies. For the period 2003–2014 more than 100 million visitors passed through the Louvre halls. For comparison, the number of sold copies of the Call of Duty series of games for 2003–2016 reached the bar of 250 million” (Belov).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

If in the XIX - early XX century. the authority of science and education as a means of forming historical memory was undeniable, then in the XXI century. - the century of information technology and unlimited flows of information, such traditional commemorative tools as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, exhibitions and even films, if not lose their relevance, then gradually fade into the background. Modern youth spends most of their free time on the Internet, preferring to receive information on the World Wide Web, rather than in libraries and

museums (Griban, p. 239). The history “with a capital letter”, which is understood as a science, as an area of professional knowledge, is opposed to history formed in modern culture by various means: from numerous television shows to computer games, from historical reconstructions to interest to genealogies. We can say that there is a "virtualization of history and historical memory." In this article, we will address the topic of reflecting the history of World War II in computer games. The phenomenon of computer games is covered in sufficient detail in modern domestic scientific literature. The term “computer game” refers to a variety of games in which the computer acts as the host or partner in the game, and situations arising during the course of the game are displayed on the screen (Griban, 2017, p. 33). In the Russian scientific literature, the terms “computer game” and “video game” are often used as synonyms, although in colloquial terms the term “computer game” is more often used when it comes to games on a personal computer. Recently, thanks to the proliferation of tablets and smartphones, mobile video games have become increasingly popular, the advantage of which is that you can use them anytime, anywhere. While the influence of computer games has been thoroughly studied at present in the framework of the scientific field of game studies, mobile video games and their impact on the formation of historical representations have not been practically analyzed by domestic authors.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The article discusses the main trends in the development of computer games with historical content, characterizes the key areas of game research as a tool for the formation of historical memory. Analyzing the most common games in the last decade, the authors attempted to identify what the influence of computer games on the formation of historical memory of the events of the Second World War can be, and what images of the past can be fixed in the minds of modern youth. One of the key questions for Russian researchers today remains the question of whether it is possible to prevent the negative impact of video games on the formation of the ideas of Russian youth about the past.

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of the research is to study the features of representing the events of the Second World War in the most popular computer games, identifying their potential as a means of commemoration.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

The study of computer games is an interdisciplinary field of science and requires the use of methods of history, psychology, sociology, computer science, and philosophy.

When writing this article, the methods used included observation, analysis of domestic and foreign scientific literature, content analysis of forum materials for gamers, a comparative analysis to characterize different versions of games, a historical and descriptive method for presenting specific software products, and a classification method. In addition, general scientific methods were used, including, among others, analysis, synthesis, deduction and induction. The methodological basis of the study is the concept of historical memory.

6. RESEARCH RESULTS

6.1. Modern approaches to the study of computer games in the context of memory studies

The phenomenon of computer games is covered in sufficient detail in modern domestic and foreign scientific literature. Researchers are particularly interested in why millions of people around the world spend billions of hours playing games using computers, smartphones, tablets and game consoles; Why are computer games attractive not only for adolescents, but also for adults, well-educated and successful people? American researcher J. Harris notes that computer games, as a rule, are skillfully designed and constructed by developers and customers, taking into account the psychological characteristics of players (Griban). One of the key areas of research within the framework of game studies is the study of the problem of psychological dependence of gamers, as well as the impact of games on value attitudes and personality consciousness. So, V. Makarenkova writes that video games are “a widely used form of influence on people with the aim of transforming their moods, feelings, will in the right direction, as well as introducing the necessary ideological and social attitudes into consciousness, the formation of certain stereotypes of thinking and behavior” (11). Computer games as a channel for broadcasting ideological images and clichés are considered in the work of A.E. Belyantsev and I.Z. Gershtein. According to the authors, this channel is convenient, which is predetermined by two aspects: “firstly, the enthusiasm of the player, which simplifies the access of information to the subconscious level, and secondly, age characteristics (most often children and youth play computer games, whose ideological and political preferences have not yet been determined to a large extent)” (6, p. 280). When describing modern games, researchers pay attention to such quality as realism: “increased detail of facial features, highly textured environment and lighting and shading effects, which are usually described (both by developers and reviewers) as functions that contribute to the graphic, mimetic realism of the game. You can also understand these attributes as factors that help create the “reality effect” of the game” (Rejack).

A lot of attention in the modern scientific literature is given to the typology of games. For the purposes of this article, we are interested in the classifications applicable to games that have a historical context. So, K.V. Yablokov in the foundation of the classification lays the types of computer games: the first computer military historical strategies, or wargames; role-playing computer games; adventure games, or quests; global historical strategies, as well as real-time strategies (16). The classification of M. S. Ivanov is applicable to historical computer games, distinguishing: role-playing and non-role-playing computer games. Role-playing computer games are games in which the player assumes the role of a computer hero, that is, acts as a real historical character or an imaginary computer hero. Non-role-playing computer games imply that the player does not assume the role of a computer hero, as a result of which the psychological mechanisms of the formation of dependence and the influence of games on a person's personality have their own specifics and are generally less powerful (10).

N.A. Maslenkova rightly notes: the impact on historical memory is due to the fact that "computer games can not only visually recreate past events, but precisely offer alternative options for the development of history ... Moreover, computer games, unlike a book or cinema, allow the player to participate in changing the past and in creating that story, which was not in reality. The player receives precisely personal experience, albeit virtual, of the experiences of historical events modeled in the game" (Maslenkova).

While Russian researchers are focusing on the problem of overcoming addiction to games, and politicians and some officials urge to ban some computer games in Russia, or to rid schools of smartphones and gadgets, foreign researchers are increasingly turning to the problem of using video games in the educational process - for example, in the teaching of humanities (Beavis, Fordham, Gros, Rejack). Thus, already in 2015, American researchers drew attention to the fact that "today's youth has grown up immersed in technology and is increasingly relying on video games to solve problems, communicate and find entertainment" (Brad M. Maguth, Jonathan S. List & Matthew Wunderle). According to D. Spring, games must be used in the educational process, especially in the teaching of history, since "a video game offers much greater potential for creating and presenting history than any other entertainment or interactive media" (D. Spring). Thus, the development of a methodology for the use of computer games with historical content in the teaching process is the most relevant area of foreign research in the framework of game studies.

6.2. Reflection of the events of the Second World War in computer games

According to German researchers, over the past 35 years, more than 500 computer games have been developed, the plot of which is somehow connected with the history of

World War II (Reymann-Schneider). The fact that most historical games are dedicated to this particular conflict can be explained by a number of reasons. Firstly, the history of this war is known to one degree or another by everyone. Secondly, the scale of the conflict, unprecedented in terms of coverage of the territories involved, allows game developers to choose a wide variety of locations, which is hardly possible in relation to any other war. Thirdly, a large number of military equipment and weapons are also of interest to gamers (Ibid.). All computer games, to one degree or another reflecting the history of World War II in their plot, can be divided into several categories.

One of the area of video games that attracts modern gamers is games that present an "alternative story". So, one of the first series of computer games "Wolfenstein", which has been published since 1981, is dedicated to the Second World War. The games of the series contain alternative historical and fantasy elements, quite freely interpreting the history of the Second World War. For example, in 2017, the game *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* was released, in which events begin in 1961 alternative America, where National Socialism won the Second World War. The player, along with the main character, William Blaskowitz, must find new allies and liberate the United States of America occupied by the Nazis.

It's interesting how the game progressed before the start of sales: for example, a video was shown with the release of the fictional American television show "German or Kaput!" from the game universe, the key idea of the video: in a world where German will soon become the only language, it's time for everyone to start studying it. After the game was released, YouTube removed Mick Gordon's humorous video clip due to "hate speech", as the song "Changeover Day", which is present in the game, sings about the superiority of the German language over English (Sigabatulin). The game turned out to be very popular all over the world, including Russia, having received the awards "Shooter of the Year - 2017", "Game of the Year - 2017", "Best Story" in popular domestic and foreign gaming publications.

In 2019, *Wolfenstein: Youngblood* was released. Events unfold in 1980 in Paris, captured by the Nazis, which is to be saved by the daughters of Blaskowitz - Jess and Sophie (with what they successfully cope together with the player). An interesting view is on the development of the game by the senior game director Andreas Ojerfors, who said that it was difficult for him to work with colleagues in modern conditions, since the topic of the fight against Nazism has become more politicized since the time of *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*. The reason for this is the growth of "right-wing extremism" in the Western world and especially on the Internet, which is "strange and disappointing" (Gamescom 2019).

Today, games that can be played using mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets are especially popular. Due to the increasing availability of devices based on the operating systems Android, iOS, iPadOS, the number of users playing such games is growing. A feature of most

games is their network nature, which allows users from different cities and countries to unite to jointly pass complex game stages. One of these games is the World War Heroes action (more than 10 million installations on Google Play; such statistics are hidden in the AppStore). The developers note that in the game there are 7 battle places of the Second World War, 4 types of military equipment of the USA, USSR, Japan and Germany, 57 types of weapons. Interestingly, game modes are described in detail, not historical events and the ability to "influence" their course in the game. This reflects the interests of the target audience of the game (age marking in the AppStore 12+, in Google Play - 16+): the game mechanics and entertainment are more important, not the connection with the story. This can be seen in other projects of the game developer - the company Azur Interactive Games Limited, which implements a variety of games of this genre that use other locations.

Another game that has been installed by more than 5 million Android device users is World at War: WW2 Strategy MMO, created by Erepublik Labs from Bucharest. The gameplay is built in the genre of strategy: the gamer is invited to lead the military operations of the Second World War on behalf of historical characters (B. Montgomery, J. Patton, E. Romel, K.K. Rokosovsky), making strategic and diplomatic decisions to win the war. Very popular is the direction of games such as a first-person shooter, which in the broad sense is defined as a game in which on-screen vision represents the character's perspective, and the main part of the action includes shooting. For example, Glu Games Inc from San Francisco developed the shooter "Frontline Commando: WW2 Shooter." In the App Store, the description of the game contains the following appeal: "Free Europe from the Nazis, defeat the troops of the invaders, defend Stalingrad, make your way to the center of Berlin and lead the allies to victory! You will determine the course of history! " The players are further recommended to "improve combat skills on the battlefields in Belgium, Italy, Germany, Russia and other countries, defeat the enemy, eliminate snipers and destroy convoys, armored

vehicles and tanks in order to win and save Europe." The game is designed for users over 17 years of age, which is explained by the following wording: "Frequent / very frequent scenes of realistic violence." In order to protect young smartphone users from such games, the device must be configured by parents, which is rarely realized in practice.

Games of the domestic developer - AppsCraft company are more historic. They issued three military strategies: "World War II: Real-time Strategy", "World War II: Western Front", "World War II: Eastern Front". The total number of downloads of games on Google Play is more than 800,000. In the descriptions of the games there is a historical reference on what events this or that release is tied to. Also in the game itself there is a brief description of a historical event in which the user is currently involved. However, in the reviews, many Russian-speaking users note one drawback of this series of games, namely: the impossibility of choosing the side of the battle. So in the issue of the Eastern Front, the game begins with the events of September 1, 1939 - with an attack on Poland. In this mission, the player will play on the side of Germany.

Games that simulate tank battles are in great demand among mobile device owners: World of Tanks Blitz, War Machines: Tanks, Tanktastic - 3D tanks, Armor Age: Tank Wars, and naval battles World of Warships Blitz . The developers note that the technique is historically accurate. Typically, hostilities take place in places where real historical events took place, but often realistic military equipment takes part in battles in fictional locations.

Video game developers also create applications using modern technology. For example, augmented reality technology in the World of Tanks AR Experience app. The program allows you to see the tank of the times of World War II in real size on the screen of the gadget, fitting it into the user's environment.

7. CONCLUSION

The 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II in 2019 demonstrated once again that for all the main countries participating in this conflict, war remains an urgent topic (under the influence of modern political events, historical and public discussions continue about the causes and perpetrators of the outbreak of war, its consequences and price of Victory). The farther away from us the events of 1939 - 1945, the more true is the assertion that the image of war today is formed independently of those who fought, from those who studied the war in the archives. The image of war is becoming less and less determined by the memory of the participants, by the professionalism of historians, and more and more depends on the needs of the day and political aspirations.

A review of computer games about World War II allows us to draw several conclusions. Firstly, it is indisputable that World War II became the plot for a large number of computer games of various genres and degree of reliability, which indicates the interest in the military-historical subjects of both developers and players. The increased availability of smartphones and tablets has led to an increase in the number of mobile games, the advantage of which is that you can play anywhere and anytime. Secondly, game creators often strive to show historical events with a "winning" side for the customer country (for example, showing the decisive contribution to certain events of individual military units or specific soldiers, showing the enemy in a negative light). Considering that the majority of computer games about

World War II, presented on the Russian market, were created by foreign developers (mainly American), they propagandize an American view of the history of World War II and often create a negative image of the USSR. The most successful Belarusian project that entered the European market was the game “World of Tanks”. Thirdly, some games contain the possibility of using an alternative plot or choosing the side to be fought for, “changing history”, transforming ideas about past events. Thus, computer games have a significant impact on the formation of ideas about the past, especially among young people. With the proliferation of mobile games, this influence becomes even stronger. The study of the disadvantages and advantages, features and consequences of the formation of historical memory through computer games, apparently, in the near future will become an actual area of research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article was prepared with the financial support of the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (project No. 18-59-00010 Bel_a “Memory of the Great Patriotic War: directions, trends, memorialization practices in Belarus and Russia”).

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It is hardly possible to avoid the spread of the influence of such a form of representation of the past as computer games. However, it must be understood that the emergence of new means for forming images of the past does not cancel out or substantiate the old. The idea of a ban on any products also seems dubious: in the age of widespread digitalization of the living space and the spread of gadgets, any attempt at prohibitions only fuels interest in the prohibited product. In our opinion, the only right way to influence the process of historical memory formation is to create and promote domestic software products that are high-quality and attractive to a youth audience not only in Russia but also abroad. Apparently, a promising direction is the development and implementation of the methods of using computer games as a means of studying history in the educational process.

The study is sponsored by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (Project No. 18-59-00010 Bel_a “Memory of the Great Patriotic War: Directions, Trends, Practices of Memorialization in Belarus and Russia”).

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