



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2024.1.3>

UDC 94(73).092
LBC 63.3(7Coe)

Submitted: 26.06.2023
Accepted: 18.11.2023

REFLECTING THE COLD WAR IN “ATOMIC HEART”¹

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The present study is devoted to the study of the influence of artifacts of the symbolic politics of the USA and the USSR on the positioning of the respective socio-political systems in modern video games. The article includes the content of the “Atomic Heart” video game studies and analysis from the point of view of the theory of social memory and symbolic politics. *Methods and materials.* A certain number of methods were used to solve the actual tasks in the article. In particular, case-study methods and elements of structural and comparative analysis were used. *Analysis.* The game “Atomic Heart” was chosen as a research case. The choice of the case is due to the high popularity of this game both within Russia and internationally, as well as the connection of the plot to the topic of the confrontation between the USSR and the United States after World War II and the presence of a wide representation of the symbolism of this conflict inside the game (up to the reproduction of real campaign materials). On the one hand, the ways of representing the USA in Soviet propaganda and their interpretation by video game developers are studied. On the other hand, the positioning of the Soviet Union by game designers and screenwriters by exploiting the images and stereotypes of perception that were formed in Western culture during the Cold War is examined. *Results.* The author concludes that, when forming the in-game symbols, the developers actively exploited the resource of Soviet aesthetics; however, Cold War narratives in Western mass culture works played a significant role in shaping the project’s emotional, semantic, and value content. The main reason for this decision was most likely economic, as the game was created with the expectation of generating the main profit in foreign markets as a commercial product. However, this decision actually contributed to the resuscitation of the functional qualities of the symbolic legacy of the Cold War and the use of its narratives to correct the perceptions of the target audience about the USSR and its role in the confrontation between the two blocs.

Key words: Cold War, USA, USSR, “Atomic Heart”, image of the enemy.

Citation. Belov S.I. Reflecting the Cold War in “Atomic Heart”. *Vestnik Volgogradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya 4. Istoriya. Regionovedenie. Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya* [Science Journal of Volgograd State University. History. Area Studies. International Relations], 2024, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 26-33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2024.1.3>

УДК 94(73).092
ББК 63.3(7Coe)

Дата поступления статьи: 26.06.2023
Дата принятия статьи: 18.11.2023

ОТРАЖЕНИЕ ХОЛОДНОЙ ВОЙНЫ В ИГРЕ «АТОМИК HEART»¹

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Представленное исследование посвящено изучению влияния артефактов символической политики США и СССР на позиционирование соответствующих общественно-политических систем в современных видеоиграх. В статье изучается и анализируется содержание видеогры «Atomic Heart» с точки зрения теории социальной памяти и символической политики. *Материалы и методы.* В статье был использован определенный методологический инструментарий для решения поставленных задач. В частно-

сти, были использованы методы case-study, а также элементы структурного и сравнительного анализа. *Анализ.* В качестве исследовательского кейса выбрана игра «Atomic Heart». Выбор кейса обусловлен высокой популярностью данной игры как внутри России, так и на международном уровне, а также привязкой сюжета к теме противостояния СССР и Соединенных Штатов после Второй мировой войны и наличием внутри игры широкой репрезентации символики этого конфликта (вплоть до воспроизводства реальных агитационных материалов). Исследуются, с одной стороны, способы репрезентации США в советской пропаганде и их интерпретация разработчиками видеоигр, а с другой – позиционирование Советского Союза гейм-дизайнерами и сценаристами при помощи эксплуатации образов и стереотипов восприятия, сформировавшихся в западной культуре в период холодной войны. *Результаты.* Автор приходит к выводу, что при формировании внутриигровой символики разработчики активно эксплуатировали ресурс советской эстетики, однако эмоциональное, смысловое и ценностное наполнение проекта определялось в первую очередь нарративами произведений западной массовой культуры, созданных в период холодной войны. Данное решение было продиктовано в первую очередь экономическими соображениями, поскольку как коммерческий продукт игра создавалась в расчете на получение основной прибыли на зарубежных рынках. Однако данное решение фактически способствовало реанимации функциональных качеств символического наследия холодной войны и использованию ее нарративов для коррекции представлений целевой аудитории о СССР и его роли в ходе противостояния двух блоков.

Ключевые слова: холодная война, США, СССР, «Atomic Heart», образ врага.

Цитирование. Белов С. И. Отражение холодной войны в игре «Atomic Heart» // Вестник Волгоградского государственного университета. Серия 4, История. Регионоведение. Международные отношения. – 2024. – Т. 29, № 1. – С. 26–33. – (На англ. яз.). – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2024.1.3>

Introduction. Video games are one of the main forms of leisure activities nowadays, especially for younger people. According to the research conducted by DFC Intelligence in 2020, the total number of people on Earth who regularly spend their time playing video games surpassed the number of 3.1 billion gamers.

It expectedly poses a question on the role of videogames as a resource of symbolic politics, in particular, their simple forms as the politics of memory or identity politics towards the scientific community.

There are a lot of conversations on this issue in the expert community. However, a closer scrutiny of the scientific development of the issue allows us to conclude that there are lots of serious information gaps in it.

Foreign researchers, specializing in the sphere of game studies, analyze the symbolic narratives in video games either primarily from the standpoint of marketing or within the framework of interpreting images of the present and future, as well as the influence of the socio-cultural context on the positioning models when creating game images. The theme of images of the past in video games was predominantly revealed within the framework of political activism influence on the historical context actualization in game plots according to general mass culture trends [1; 14; 23; 25; 26].

Russian specialists in the sphere of game studies take a greater interest in using historical images and narratives connected with them in video games. However, game content is usually analyzed outside the context of theories of social memory, political mythology, or symbolic positioning.

Many authors analyze video games only as a resource for popularizing some knowledge and forming an interest in certain spheres of historical knowledge among a younger audience [6; 7; 10; 17].

Researchers also place more emphasis on the practices of stigmatization or glorification of certain game images, studying the reasons and consequences of their usage residually, outside the context of the patterns of memorial image perception by a broader audience [8; 11–13; 32].

Research models, devoted to the study of the practices of forming images of specific countries and macro-social groups, line up in a similar way [5; 19–22].

The question about channels and methods of information transmission is accurately elaborated in the works, which are devoted to using video games as an instrument of political communication, but at the same time, there is a lack of attention paid to the subject matter of video games [16; 33].

Many researchers reveal the symbolic meaning of video games within the frames of studies connected with the content's influence on gamers' perception, thinking, and behavior [4; 18; 24; 28; 29].

31]. However, explanatory models are used in most works. Moreover, researchers are seriously influenced by social conjuncture through the ongoing public discussion about the danger of video games; researchers often stand in as supporters or opponents of one of the opposite points of view.

Therefore, the degree of study of this issue is characterized by a fairly high degree of fragmentation and lacunarity, as well as the presence of traces of the influence of social and political conjunctures.

It is also important to emphasize the general lack of an empirical base in most studies, as far as the practice of symbolic politics is concerned. Most of them are based on the study of game projects, which have lost their relevance for the gaming community at the time of writing a work.

This work is intended to fill in some identified information gaps by studying the “Atomic Heart” content from the point of view of social memory theory and symbolic politics. “Atomic Heart” is one of the most popular game projects on a global scale in 2023.

In the first instance, it appeals to narratives constructed on the basis of the symbolic heritage of the Cold War culture – the historical period, which is actively actualized nowadays by the Russian elites and elites in Western countries in the framework of public positioning of the confrontation around Ukraine.

The aim of this research is to evaluate the probable influence of the elements of memorial positioning of events and cultural tropes of the Cold War in the “Atomic Heart” content on the social memory of the primary audience of the mentioned game.

Materials and methods. The empirical base of the research was formed during the “Atomic Heart” content study during this game passing.

The research methodology is based on a case study and the elements of structural analysis and comparative analysis combined.

The theoretical basis of research appeals to a combination of functional [3; 15; 27] and cultural-semiotic [2] concepts of social memory.

Analysis. A direct analysis of the cultural heritage of the Cold War influence on the audience of the “Atomic Heart” must be necessarily preceded by the theoretical model of the relevant interaction description.

E. Durkheim noted that culture is a resource for collective consciousness moderation. The latter

allows for the use of culture as a means of reproducing large social groups. Culture imposes on the community a certain set of universal values, narratives, and norms of behavior (they are commonly claimed to be the “cultural code” in political journalism). That way, culture becomes a factor in regulating the behavior and thinking of groups of people, establishing the limits of what is allowed and the perceptions of encouraged and censored practices. But the necessity of observation of attitudes, broadcasted by society, is justified not only by rational argumentation, which is oriented on the cognitive side of mentality, but also by appealing to its affective side. Views on the norm and its limits are primarily formed by the authority of the ancestors, whose memory is sacred. At this time, the cult of ancestors and continuity requires compliance with memorial conformism: all members of society have to interpret, preserve, and pass out of the mind different events or single episodes of the past in the same way [9, pp. 72-75].

M. Hal’bvaks highlighted such qualities of collective memory as selectiveness, sketchiness, and propensity for structured recomposition. The researcher pointed out that the picture of the common past is constructed around the most significant events in the history of social corporations (which M. Hal’bvaks labeled as “memory figures”). The latter are highly distant from the historical original and are the result of reconstruction with a low degree of detailed elaboration. At that time, relevant images are primarily formed on the basis of symbols, which have deep emotional saturation. Maintaining memorial conformism is provided by the discursive framework’s presence. The discursive framework is the canon, according to which a member of the community must adjust his views on history [15, pp. 53-55].

R. Bastide managed to justify the statement that the system of ideas about the common past and its dynamics are largely determined by the community structure, and by changes in its organization over time, and by the introduction of cultural and technological innovations [3, p. 94].

P. Nora proved that an increasing layer of memories of the collective past turns into an object of “cultural memory” as time goes on. As the witnesses of some events pass away, a gap between the past and the present arises, which can be reduced only in the framework of conscious reflection of the past, which is conducted not in

the scientific form (historians' knowledge of the past is often lacunary, fragmentary, and suggests the presence of many alternative interpretations), but with the help of hystorical myth-creating. This term means a simplified, and therefore consistent and comprehensible, model of the past, constructed on a basis of emotionally filled symbols, memorial rituals, and ideas about the heroes and victims of the past worship necessity (which form the "duty of memory" complex). At the same time, myth is predominantly formed in the space of artistic culture [27, pp. 57-61].

These ideas worked out in Ja. Assman's conception of cultural memory. He managed to note that collective ideas about distant events, especially those that are related to a moment of observation for more than 80 years, are predominantly formed by specialists in the spheres of culture and education. They act within the frameworks of certain social control and use actualized ideas about the events of the past as an instrument of explaining, strengthening, or delegitimizing some present-day processes, institutions, or developments [2, pp. 104-107].

Consequently, a considerable part of ideas about the past of any community is a historical myth, constructed by emotionally saturated symbols in order to reproduce identity and legitimize existing institutions through their sacralization with the help of exploiting the "duty of memory." At the same time, it is the works of mass culture that play a crucial role in the relevant institutions and complexes of symbols forming. As a result, the views of a broad population about one historical event or another are often formed by works of art, which replace real historical sources.

Taking the mentioned specifics of social memory into consideration, we need to establish that the "Atomic Heart" game is a resource that constructs the ideas of its primary audience about the historic period of the 1950s, in other words, about the opening phase of the Cold War. In this case, we can ignore the fact that we are talking about the game, whose genres are "alternative history" and "science fiction," because in fact we are talking about reproducing the image of the USSR of the 1940s – 1950s, which was formed in American mass culture during the Cold War.

The memorial discursive framework of the game sets the image of the Soviet Union as an advanced technological power in general, whose

achievements in the field of science, however, are due to a rude violation of human rights and the very principles of humanism. Neuropolymers, in particular, which are the basis of Soviet robotics, were created in the process of mass experiments on humans and animals, supposing injuring them, murdering them, and so on. In this case, we can even assume that there are certain parallels between the plot tropes popular in Western culture regarding experiments on human beings and the history of the Japanese Unit 731. It is also important to consider that the process of creating a neuropolymer is literally reduced to processing conscious people and animals. At the same time, it is emphasized that both the victims of experiments and the people who became "raw materials" for the production of polymers were not, for the most part, criminals, sociopaths, etc. Thus, the Soviet leadership ensured the technological development of the country through mass crimes against its own citizens. Besides, the Soviet Union is shown as a country in which technological progress is not limited to ethics.

At the same time, the developers of the game defined clearly that communism is a utopia: despite the appearance of robots that release USSR citizens from routine work, people do not use the free time for self-development and morally degrade. The latter is demonstrated, among other things, in the form of sexual deviations (through the mention of sexual acts with robots, which have become a hobby of representatives of the nomenclature).

It is also noted that the logical development of communist ideas can be the complete erasure of a person's personality and his dissolution in the collective, as part of the implementation of the neural network project "Collective 2.0."

The presence of a developed socio-economic differentiation in Soviet society and the complete isolation of the party elite from the lower classes of society are also indicated.

It should be noted that the Soviet Union is credited with having plans to establish total world dominance. At the same time, it is planned to be achieved not with a direct military invasion but with a global conspiracy based on imitation of attempts to establish partnership relations with Western states. In particular, the USSR supplied robots abroad for free, as it was humanitarian aid. However, the real goals of the Soviet project are completely different. On the one hand, robot

deliveries are designed to ensure the growth of unemployment and social discontent in the West.

It is significant that the Soviet leadership plans to use nuclear technologies as a tool of blackmail, which echoes the manipulation of the audience's fears of using nuclear weapons inherent in the mass culture of the Cold War.

At the same time, it is emphasized that the United States, despite its technological gap, remains a global economic leader, surpasses the USSR in terms of living standards, and is gradually winning the Cold War through the use of sanctions.

Results. All these points allow us to assert that, in general terms, the image of the USSR in the game in question corresponds to the negative image formed around the Soviet Union in American popular culture during the Cold War period [30, p. 72]. The latter is accomplished by the exploitation of the corresponding system of images and perception stereotypes, accepted and replicated by the Russian cultural elite back in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is about an aggressor country with an expansionist orientation under the rule of an authoritarian regime. Its socio-political model significantly diverges from ideological declarations. However, this does not prevent the use of official ideology as an effective tool for controlling the behavior of the masses. Even having technological superiority does not allow the USSR to challenge the economic leadership of the United States. Moreover, the dependence of the Soviet Union on economic ties with the West is critically significant.

At the same time, it should be noted that the image of the USSR created in the game still cannot be completely identified with the American construct of the Cold War period. Probably for the sake of creating a unique game world (i.e., for commercial reasons), the developers actively exploit the aesthetics of the Soviet period,

reproducing it in a "vintage" key down to the smallest household details. Due to this, the image of the Soviet Union acquires external attractiveness (ensuring the consolidation of the players' interest in the project), which significantly distinguishes it from analogues formed in the American popular culture of the Cold War period.

Political motives are unlikely to have influenced the negative portrayal of the USSR in the game. Firstly, the game as a product was focused primarily on Western markets and therefore was built taking into account the perceptions and attitudes of the main target audience. Secondly, modern video games in general are characterized by an emphasis on deconstructing positive images of the past or future (it is enough to recall the games of the Bioshock franchise or the Cyberpunk 2077 project). Thirdly, it is important to take into account that the image of the USSR, including in the context of the history of the Cold War, was actively stigmatized in modern Russian culture, as a result of which the negative image of the Soviet Union began to be perceived by many representatives of the cultural establishment of the Russian Federation as "natural" and authentic.

In general, we can conclude that the image of the USSR in the game will contribute to the consolidation of negative stereotypes previously formed by mass culture among Western gamers.

Instead of an afterword. As the author of the article, I understand the controversial nature of some conclusions regarding the assessment of the degree of influence of the "Atomic Heart" video game on the formation of images of the USSR among US gamers. That is why I invite all those who have already passed the game "Atomic Heart" to apply for participation in in-depth interviews (see Figure).



a



b

Figure. QR-code to apply for an interview and get brief information about the study:

a – in Russian; b – in English

NOTE

¹ This work was supported by the Russian Science Foundation under Grant № 22-18-00305, <https://rscf.ru/en/project/22-18-00305/>, “The images of enemy in Cold War popular culture: their content, contemporary reception and usage in Russian and U.S. symbolic politics”, Herzen University.

Исследование выполнено за счет гранта Российского научного фонда № 22-18-00305, <https://rscf.ru/project/22-18-00305/>, «Образы врага в массовой культуре Холодной войны: содержание, современная рецепция и использование в символической политике России и США», РГПУ им. А.И. Герцена.

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