# ONLINE GAMING IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: PRACTICES, CONTEXTS AND DISCOURSES

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# Contents

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# Abstract

In terms of both production and consumption, video games and gaming are a significant phenomenon in Russia, a fact acknowledged by the authorities and mainstream media. Although internet use in Russia has been a point of academic interest over the past few years, scholars have been slower to research video games despite their increasingly popular position in the media ecology of the region. Similarly, despite the abundance of theory and data on gaming in North America and Europe, game studies researchers have hardly skimmed the surface of the cultures, preferences and activities of gamers further afield. This dissertation investigates the online gaming sphere in Russia, presenting an empirical study of the industry, providing insight into gamers themselves, and analysing the media and political discourses surrounding gaming in Russia.

In this study, I draw upon survey data, forum, website, and blog posts, user comments from gaming forums and analyses of local games to construct a picture of gaming activity and identity amongst gamers. In particular, I show how Russian-speaking gamers present themselves as members of a distinct subcultural group. Online gamers who participated in this study are shown to consume and discuss games in ways that can differ from elsewhere in the world, but they still retain common beliefs about the importance of expertise, taste and self-discipline within the gaming community. They display a great deal of knowledge about the games and communities available to them locally, while also consuming foreign games in selective and critical ways. For the reader conversant with game studies work, the dissertation constitutes a challenge to West-centric theories of gaming and gamers and demonstrates the importance of cultural context in shaping gaming practice.

Throughout the dissertation, interactions between global and local, media and subcultural definitions of 'gamer' are crucial to understanding how gaming plays out in a Russian context. The self-definition of gamers differs greatly from mainstream media concepts of gamers. I contextualise discourses of the gaming self within an analysis of how the Russian media presents gamers as young people in need of moral and emotional guidance. Moreover, I show how contemporary media assessments of games and gamers have much in common with earlier moral panics about Western-inflected media and subcultures, such as rock music and style. Ultimately the gaming landscape in Russia is shown to be full of tensions, and the task of this dissertation is to identify, assess and compare these disparate discourses.

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# Acknowledgements

Life does not always go to plan, and two years after writing my acknowledgements for the first time I find myself revisiting them. Luckily for me, the consistent kindness and patience of my friends and family have not changed, and I can even add some names to this page.

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Calgary, via Bristol, May 2015

# Online gaming in post-Soviet Russia: practices, contexts and discourses

## Introduction

This thesis is an investigation into the practices of, and discourses surrounding, Russian-speaking gamers who play and discuss games online. With the popularity of video games in Russia and Eastern Europe steadily increasing, these virtual spaces now occupy a significant place in the daily media ecology of the region.[1] The market is rising to the challenge; in addition to the established European, North American and Pacific Asian game companies active in Eastern Europe, Russia itself is home to at least several dozen game developers and publishers. More from Ukraine and Poland are actively producing content for the Russian-language market and for markets further afield.[2] The habits of the young people who play games are also attracting some scrutiny, both from political authorities and policy-makers and, more commonly, from the mainstream media. Since 2010, the Russian government has expressed an interest in the videogaming industry both as a valuable place to access and influence youth and as a profitable form of domestic software production.[3] I present here the first substantive empirical study of the domestic game industry and the political and media reactions to the rise of gaming in Russia. In the midst of much discussion about the economics and ideology of games and gaming, this study also offers the reader a glimpse of Russian gamers themselves: their opinions, practices, community spaces and the cultural and media contexts in which they play.

I add to the body of work on the Russian-language internet sphere – 'Runet' – showing how video games are part of a wider network of online activities amongst young Russians. Gaming does not exist in a vacuum, and we see that blogging, video creation, social media connections and forum use are all part of Russian gamers' regular online game-related activities. As well as their complex and multifaceted online environment, gamers in Russia must navigate a unique socio-cultural environment. Drawing upon studies

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[1] NewZoo, *Infographic 2011*, <http://www.newzoo.com/infographics/infographic-2011-russia/> [accessed 26th June 2013].

[2] GameDevMap, search results for 'Russia', 'Ukraine', 'Poland', <http://gamedevmap.com/index.php?query=russia&Submit=Search>; <http://gamedevmap.com/index.php?query=ukraine&Submit=Search>; <http://gamedevmap.com/index.php?query=poland&Submit=Search> [accessed 10th July 2013].

[3] 'Roundtable in State Duma on the topic: 'The role of education and the computer game industry in the formation of values and the patriotic education of our youth', State Duma official website, <http://www.duma.gov.ru/news/273/59606/?sphrase_id=32650> [accessed 28 June 2013].

into Russian youth culture, I demonstrate how political and media attitudes towards videogaming often focus on fears about how game play may hinder a healthy moral and ideological development in young people. The project also requires theoretical context from outside the Russian studies tradition and I turn to game studies work to provide it. Game studies as a formal academic discipline seeks to understand video games and the people who play them in their cultural, social and economic contexts. From educational uses and psychological and social ills, through to feminist readings and assessments of games as art, writers have attempted to understand the games we create, inhabit and play, and the activities and identities present in game communities. The observation has repeatedly been made that an increasing amount of human interaction is playing out in online spaces.[4] Our activities are also taking place *across* boundaries, as we spend ever more time moving between the virtual and the physical realms.[5] Game scholarship and journalism is abundant, and yet the majority of influential literature available has been produced in Western contexts and from Western perspectives. This thesis is, in part, a contribution to game studies which delivers an analysis of Russian video game players and their self-perceptions as gamers.

In-depth English-language work on Russian gaming communities, and studies of non-Western game communities are still very much in the minority in English-language scholarship. There are a few promising early indications of work being done in the Russian studies field which focuses on Russian and Eastern European games and gamers. The lack of Russian-language material also requires writers to spend a great deal of time explaining the history of video games for a Russian audience and rather less time providing their own analysis. Some scholars have begun to interrogate and apply concepts in gaming and internet studies to the Russian gaming sphere. Bryant Paul Johnson's experiences polishing translated video game text for the game company Paradox Interactive suggest to him that the 'semipermeable cultural barriers' between North America and Russia are wearing increasingly thin, offering industry onlookers a glimpse at the processes of their Russian colleagues and an understanding of the games which are popular in the region.[6] Russian games which have won global popularity are also attracting some scholarly interest in the

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[4] Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 2.

[5] There are problems with conceptualising the offline space as 'real' and the online as 'not-real' – indeed, with the advent of smartphones one could argue that we are rarely ever truly 'offline'. Jessica Langer chooses to use the term 'real world', referring to 'what Darko Suvan calls "zero world," the "empirically verifiable properties" surrounding the player, as distinguished from the digitally realized world'. Throughout this work, I use 'offline or 'physical' world versus 'online' or 'virtual' worlds and make the above distinction between the two.
Jessica Langer, 'The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in *World of Warcraft*', in *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, ed. by Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettburg, pp. 87-108, p. 106.

[6] Apperley, p. 155.

West, as recent publications on *Metro 2033*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl* and *Allods Online* show.[7] Elsewhere, Natalia Sokolova has employed concepts such as 'prosumption' (a term describing the phenomenon of consumers who also produce content) in order to understand the prevalence of fan-created content and game additions surrounding the post-apocalyptic survival games *Metro 2033* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*.[8]

In the absence of any focused study of Russian gamers or the Russian gaming industry, a significant part of this work has been to map the online gaming community and give a sense of the games which are played and the priorities which players hold. In this dissertation, I argue that Russian online gaming communities serves as fluid, liminal spaces between the global and the local where new identities can be constructed, spaces of great interest to politicians and great concern to the media because they are perceived to be the preserve of impressionable young people. The dissertation contributes to the body of non-Western game studies work as well as studies of Russian internet culture, showing the culturally-specific discourses surrounding gaming in a Russian context and offering insight into a previously-understudied group of Russian internet users.

## 1. Research context

This section is organised into four parts. First, I show the common perceptions of Russian gaming in the English-speaking media, views which are often erroneous and which echo popular stereotypes about Russians and Russianness. I then turn to a review of Russian digital and new media scholarship, articulating how this dissertation fills a space in research on the Russian digital media landscape. This analysis is followed by work on globalisation and Russian youth culture, a body of work closely linked to digital media studies. Several scholars of Russian digital media argue that use of the internet and social media opens users up to global flows of information and ideas. In the course of this research it became clear that this possibility was greatly concerning to many Russian media sources regarding gamers. Finally, I discuss game studies work, showing how studies have often made assumptions about games and gameplay based on North American and West European players. I also identify scholarship which challenges these West-centric views and demonstrate how my own research represents an important insight into a rarely-studied gaming milieu and community.

## 1.1 Russian gaming through Western eyes

Foreign debates about Russian gamers and gaming are complex and sometimes contradictory. In English-speaking Western countries, Russian internet activity is

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[7] Gernot Howanitz, '*Metro 2033* – More Than a Cinegame?', *Digital Icons*, 8 (2012).

[8] Natalia Sokolova, 'Co-opting Transmedia Consumers: User Content as Entertainment or 'Free Labour'? The Cases of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and Metro 2033', *Europe-Asia Studies* 64 (2012), pp. 1565–1583 (p. 1566).

frequently associated with cybercrime and a kind of online lawlessness. A recent report by market research company NewZoo showed that 75% of gamers in Russia acquire their games illegally.[9] Timur Seyfelmiukov hypothesises that the practice remains rife as 'there is almost no law enforcement going after people playing pirated games or distributing them on the web'.[10] However, Seyfelmiukov also notes that the cost of games is very high relative to average monthly income, and that access to games, pirated or legal, varies greatly across urban and rural locations.[11] Conversely Gabe Newell, co-founder of American game company Valve, suggests that the idea that piracy in Russia is a problem is propagated by 'the people who wait six months to localise their product into Russian'.[12] Newell, like Seyfelmiukov, realises that the social cachet in acquiring new games as they come out is important to Russian gamers.

Simply associating Russian gamers with cybercrime (usually as perpetrators) does not tell the whole story. Despite stereotypes, Russian internet users are very likely to suffer from cybercrime like data loss and identity theft. Data from Kaspersky Lab suggest that Russian gamers are at risk from cybercrime to a greater extent than any other nationality surveyed but Tajikistan.[13] In fact, of 11.7 million hostile attacks against gamers in 2013, 8,813,050 of these were directed at Russians.[14] Russian gamers are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of cybercrime. At its core, then, this strand of discourse is about access and security surrounding gaming in Russia, and how the ability of Russians to access games often unsettles foreign players.

Within English-speaking game communities, conversations about crime and corruption merge with another set of stereotypes about Russian gamers. In EVE Online, for example, Russian players are persistently characterised as aggressive, secretive and cheating, echoing Cold War-era political rhetoric about espionage and machinations behind the Iron Curtain.[15] The English-language gaming media draw upon similar stereotypes,

[9] William Usher, '75 percent of Russian gamers get their games illegally,' *CinemaBlend,* 13th September 2011, <http://www.cinemablend.com/games/75-Percent-Russian-Gamers-Get-Their-Games-Illegally-35054.html> [accessed 5th April 2015].

[10] Timur Seyfelmiukov, 'Welcome to Russia, where most of your friends are video game pirates,' *Kotaku Australia*, 13th October 2012, <http://www.kotaku.com.au/2012/10/welcome-to-russia-where-most-of-your-friends-are-video-game-pirates/> [accessed 5th April 2015].

[11] Ibid.

[12] Frank Cifaldi, 'Valve: Piracy is more about convenience than price,' *Gamasutra*, 24th October 2011, <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/38082/Valve_Piracy_Is_More_About_Convenience_Than_Price.php> [accessed 5th April 2015].

[13] Christian Funk and Maria Garnaeva, 'Kaspersky Security Bulletin 2013. Overall Statistics for 2013', *Securelist*, 10th December 2015, <http://securelist.com/analysis/kaspersky-security-bulletin/58265/kaspersky-security-bulletin-2013-overall-statistics-for-2013/>, [accessed 5th April 2015].

[14] Ibid.

[15] C. Goodfellow, 'Russian Overlords, Vodka, and Logoffski: Russian- and English-Language Discourse About Anti-Russian Xenophobia in the EVE Online Community', *Games and Culture*, online before print, 2014.

repeatedly referencing militaristic or collectivistic aspects of Soviet culture when discussing contemporary gamers from the country.[16] The titles and framing of articles emphasise the 'otherness' of gamers from Russia. An in-depth analysis in online gaming magazine Polygon made clear the Russian reaction to these stereotypes as they are enacted in World War II shooter Company of Heroes 2.[17] Drawing upon interviews with and forum discussion amongst Russian players, the author concludes that 'critics of the game in that country view it as yet another negative portrayal of themselves, the sub-human obedience-bot, primed for violence, ever-ready to throw his worthless carcass into the mill for the greater good'.[18] The comments section of the piece showed that many Russian and Western readers alike agreed with his final statement: 'There can be little doubt that this stereotype is alive and well in Western contemporary entertainment'.[19]

Similar stereotypes about Russia (and, more broadly, post-Soviet states in general) appear in English-language reviews of Russian games. Games like *Metro 2033*, *STALKER,* and the long-running *Heroes of Might and Magic* series have had their international success framed as remarkable, rare, or a sign that game development in Russia and Eastern Europe (the two are often linked in this discourse) is 'maturing'. A broad survey of reviews of these games reveal that reviewers considered them to be, variably, 'under the radar' and 'a sleeper hit'[20], 'destined to be a cult hit'[21], 'unique'[22], 'eerily authentic'[23], 'worryingly accurate'[24], 'bordering on the hubristic' for an 'inexperienced team'[25], 'hard to understand' or possessing 'charming' 'broken English'[26] and 'distinctively Eastern European'.[27]

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[16] Philip Habel and Brian Valeriano, ' Who are our virtual enemies in the world of gaming?' *The Scotsman*, 6th November 2014, <http://www.scotsman.com/news/who-are-our-virtual-enemies-in-the-world-of-gaming-1-3595754>, [accessed 5th March 2015].

[17] Cifaldi, 'Piracy is more about convenience than price'.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Daniel Acaba, 'Metro 2033 review', *Gaming Excellence*, 10th April 2010, <http://www.gamingexcellence.com/pc/games/metro-2033/review>, [accessed 29th January 2015].

[21] Phil Kollar, 'Metro 2033: A Dreary Subway Ride Well Worth Taking', *Game Informer*, 16th March 2010, <http://www.gameinformer.com/games/metro_2033/b/pc/archive/2010/03/16/a-dreary-subway-ride-well-worth-taking.aspx>, [accessed 29th January 2015].

[22] Jim Sterling, 'Review: Metro 2033', *Destructoid*, 30th January 2011, <http://www.destructoid.com/review-metro-2033-202353.phtml>, [accessed 29th January 2015].

[23] Mike Doolittle, 'S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl Review', *Gamecritics*, 24th July 2007, <http://www.gamecritics.com/s-t-a-l-k-e-r-shadow-of-chernobyl-review>, [accessed 29th January 2015].

[24] 'S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl: The end of the world as we know it. It feels fine.', *Computer and Videogames*, 23 March 2007, <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/159290/reviews/stalker-shadow-of-chernobyl-review/>, accessed 29 January 2015.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Jason Ocampo, 'It's got some quirks, but S.T.A.L.K.E.R. delivers a dynamic and impressive first-person gameplay experience you won't soon forget', Gamespot, 19th March 2007, <http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/stalker-shadow-of-chernobyl-review/1900-6167650/>, [accessed 29th January 2015].

Where the politics of Russian games are discussed, it is usually in relation to government intervention or censorship, another way in which Cold War-era stereotypes are revived. A typical example would be the 2013 case of a writer for Gamasutra reaching out to some Russian studios following an announcement that the government intended to offer financial support to studios making 'patriotic' games. Two of the three developers reached for comment were rather cynical about the endeavour, with the third, from 1C-Softclub, offering no definitive opinion but pointing out that there are already patriotic themes in the games their company has released.[28] In addition to encouraging patriotic themes, Russian authorities have discouraged the presentation of certain topics in games, a move which the English-speaking press has criticised. In 2014 the game *Sims 4* was given an adult rating in Russia due to the possibility of the player choosing same-sex relationships for their characters.[29] Authors of articles on this topic were strongly critical; in fact, reading showed that Russia was shown as a hostile place for gaming for reasons of censorship.

Political criticism can sometimes seem spun out of very little proof. For example, when Russian mobile game developer Game Insight moved headquarters from Moscow to Vilnius, Lithuania, Dean Takahashi of VentureBeat suggested in his lede (the introductory headline of the piece) that the move was due to the 'potential for disruption of business in Vladimir Putin's Russia as a result of the Ukraine crisis'.[30] Game Insight founder and CEO Alisa Chumachenko attributed the relocation to a desire to 'consolidate Game Insight positions as a global company as well as to strengthen its presence in Europe;' regardless, the story of a developer leaving Russia for political reasons was evidently considered a much more interesting read.[31] Striking in its absence is any consistent discourse about political activism or discussion amongst gamers. Game players in Russia are apparently considered an apolitical group by foreign onlookers. The absence of a strong strand of political discourse in Russian gaming communities is not entirely disputed by this dissertation; discussions of politics or political initiatives related to games were not mentioned by survey respondents and were rare on gaming-specific forums. However, this

[27] Jason Cisarano, 'Review: From Russia with mutated love', *Gaming Target*, 23rd April 2007, <http://www.gamingtarget.com/article.php?artid=6831>, accessed 29th January 2015.
[28] Mike Rose, 'What Russian developers have to say about 'patriotic' video games,' October 10th 2013, *Gamasutra*, < http://gamasutra.com/view/news/202096/What_Russian_developers_have_to_say_about_patriotic_video_games.php>, [accessed 12th March 2015].
[29] Lucy O'Brien, 'The Sims 4 rated adults only in Russia for the "protection of children,"' *IGN*, 11th May 2014, < http://ca.ign.com/articles/2014/05/12/the-sims-4-rated-adults-only-in-russia-for-the-protection-of-children>, [accessed 12th March 2015].
[30] Dean Takahashi, 'Nervous about Putin? Mobile game publisher Game Insight leaves Russia for Lithuania,' *VentureBeat*, May 29th 2014, <http://venturebeat.com/2014/05/29/nervous-about-putin-mobile-game-publisher-game-insight-leaves-russia-for-lithuania/>, [accessed 12 March 2013].
[31] Ibid.

stands in stark contrast to the research focus in Russian new media and internet studies, where the dominant strand of discourse is that of political uses of new media.

## 1.2 Russian new media and internet studies

Academic game studies remains a novel field in Russia, and resources from Russian scholars are quite limited. A. I. Lipkov claimed in a 2008 book on games that at the time of writing there were no domestic or translated works on video games in Russia. As in the early days of Western game scholarship, writing on the topic tends to lend much weight to theories of psychological damage and youth corruption. Vlad Strukov has noted the current dearth of work on gaming coming from Russia itself, but he posits that Russian scholarship on gaming will develop in the future. He suggests that game studies in Russia will stem from film studies departments rather than media and communication studies as in the West, a prediction which he bases upon the differences in categorising research fields in Russia.[32]

In Western scholarship, Jeremy Morris, Natalia Rulyova and Vlad Strukov argue that new media (defined in their work as 'internet-enabled networked social practice') in Russia, East and Central Europe and Central Asia is characterised by various forms of dissent and reaction, against 'political regimes, local governments, cultural traditions or forces of globalisation'.[33] Although the journal issue that they introduce covers a number of aspects of post-transition new media use in the region, two common theoretical starting points made by the various authors are the potential of new media to foster varied and democratic political discourse, and the uniqueness of the Russian-speaking internet, the Runet.[34] These two themes predominate in literature on Russian new media and the internet, to the exclusion of almost all else (but in particular for this dissertation, the exclusion of gaming and other popular culture online). Of the two topics, the latter is more central to my own study; while I do discuss the impact of political decisions on gaming in this thesis, I focus more on the cultural environment in which Russian gamers play. However, initial forays into Russian digital media studies have tended to take a political view of new media and the internet, and so much existing theorisation into online communities and social media platforms comes from this body of work. I therefore start by briefly outlining some key works in this area.

Julien Nocetti makes three principal claims about the politicisation of internet use. First, governments try to unsettle the dominance of private companies in the internet space

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[32] Vlad Strukov, 'Spatial Imagining and Ideology of Digital Commemoration (Russian Online Gaming)', *Europe-Asia Studies,* 64 (2012), pp. 1584-1604 (p. 1589).
[33] Jeremy Morris, Natalia Rulyova and Vlad Strukov, 'Introduction: New Media in New Europe-Asia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64:8, 2012, p. 1349.
[34] Ibid, p. 1350.

and replace it with their own sovereignty; second, that government legislation cannot keep up with technological change; and third, that the 'internet's centre of gravity will shift,' moving away from the western-centric and becoming more international.[35] He describes Russia's attempts at gaining leverage over global internet governance as 'a leading issue of twenty-first-century global governance,' an assessment which is surely held by many Western news outlets.[36] It is in this highly-charged context that my study seeks to understand gaming, an activity which is not inherently political but nonetheless takes place in a space which is strongly contested by global actors.

This theme of political power in new media was much in evidence in early Russian media studies on television and the print media. Until recently, academic sources on media largely glossed over internet use, noting its increasing use but generally dismissing its popularity and prevalence when compared to more traditional media forms like television. With the exception of some brief studies of the internet as a tool for political parties to disseminate information, or for opposition voices to make themselves heard, studies of new media and the internet in Russia have been rather sparse until now. This is not entirely surprising given that the internet was inaccessible to many Russians until the 2000s. Semetko and Krasnoboka reference a scholarly trend in seeing the internet as having the potential to politically empower citizens reaching back to the mid-1990s, but it was not until ten years later that the topic became truly relevant to post-soviet nations.[37] The authors show the inequality in access to the internet clearly in their assessment that,

> [although] the vast majority of the population remain too poor to buy a newspaper let alone to have access to equipment to get online, the Internet is nevertheless perceived by political elites as fundamentally important to the development of political democracy.[38]

Even in 2008, Ellen Mickiewicz wrote that internet use was 'increasing' and that 'about a quarter of Russia's citizens use the internet'[39]; however, her focus groups reported that it was used primarily at work.[40] By 2009 Birgit Beumers and colleagues acknowledged the internet in Russia to be an important space for subversive or ambiguous political activity, noting especially the potential power of user-submitted political videos on YouTube.[41] More recently, Sarah Oates has suggested that internet media presents opportunities for

[35] Julien Nocetti, 'Contest and Conquest: Russia and global internet governance,' *International Affairs,* 91: 1 (2015), p. 111 – p. 130, p. 112.
[36] Nocetti, p. 113.
[37] Holli A. Semetko and Natalya Krasnoboka, 'The Political Role of the Internet in Societies in Transition: Russia and Ukraine Compared,' *Party Politics*, 9:1 (2003), pp 77-104, p. 78.
[38] Ibid, p. 82.
[39] Ellen Mickiewicz, *Television, Power and the Public in Russia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 14.
[40] Ibid, p. 4.
[41] Birgit Beumers, Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, eds. *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals*, (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 14.

both promoting and hindering the development of democracy.[42] Oates shows how many competing actors work to use the internet for purposes ranging from protest to propaganda. Rather than present internet media as being inherently democratic, she, like Beumers et al, argue it to be a space for a multiplicity of often-contradictory activities.[43] Although the political uses of new media are not frequently brought up by gamers in this study, there were instances in which gaming sites proved important sites for sharing and reacting to information about political attempts to control the internet. This is the only instance of gamers' involvement in political topics in this study and the availability of new media which allowed users to discuss information, and link to other user-submitted media sites like YouTube, was crucial to the discussion.

Runet is frequently described in terms of its uniqueness when compared with a (rarely specifically defined) English-speaking internet. The discussion of Russian political and oppositional blogging dovetails with the theme of political discourse. While blogging is not, of course, confined to Russia, the popularity of LiveJournal among Russian oppositional voices has led to a cluster of articles about how Russians use LiveJournal in specific and unexpected ways. Natalia Rulyova and Taras Zagibalov talk about a 'specificity' to the Russian-language blogosphere, motivated by the availability of LiveJournal but since spreading to other blogging platforms.[44] However, if the features and uses of the Russian blogosphere are specific, the user base is enormously general; the authors list 'President Medvedev, regional governors, writers and poets, celebrities, journalists to ordinary citizens' as writers of blogs.[45] This sense of ubiquity and accessibility is a great departure from earlier views that the internet as a political venue was limited to the urban elite.

The uniqueness of the Runet is also conceptualised in terms of its ability to foster the formation of national, cultural or political identities. Rulyova and Zagibalov argue that this takes place through constructing the 'other', in their article represented by Chinese bloggers.[46] As a tool for political and oppositional discourse, Runet has been the subject of many small-scale studies which focus on a single community or political issue, including Slava Kisilevich, Chee Siang Ang and Mark Last's study of the extent of user self-disclosure

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[42] Sarah Oates, Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 100-101.
[43] Ibid, p. 101.
[44] Natalia Rulyova and Taras Zagibalov, 'Blogging the Other: Construction of National Identities in the Blogsophere', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64:8 (2012), pp. 1524-1545, p. 1530.
[45] Ibid, p. 1530.
[46] Rulyova and Zagibalov, p. 1530.

on My.Mail.Ru and Henrike Schmidt's research into the use of the internet amongst small rural Russian communities.[47]

The above studies reference 'the internet' or 'new media' quite broadly. Close studies of gaming communities and games are essentially non-existent. From existing work, we know about the potential uses of new media, but rather less about the specific, local and personal ways that networked social practices play out. Independent researcher Daria Radchenko does focus her attention on smaller sub-communities of Russian internet users in her work on memes. Just as Schmidt et al report that the Runet is often described as '*nash*' – ours – so Radchenko argues that the creation of memes builds community in a similarly collective way.[48] As we shall see in later chapters, it is not only that Russian gamers articulate how they belong to a global or national gaming community. There are also community-building strategies taking places at a micro level with players grouping around certain websites, genres or games.

While these researchers have argued that new media acts as a tool to build national identity, Robert A. Saunders finds quite the opposite. In his research on Russian internet users in diaspora, he argues that ethnic Russian Runet users living outside of Russia do not consolidate and strengthen their own Russian national identity by using the Russian-speaking internet.[49] Rather, they are open to flows of global information in a way which makes them conduits of globalisation and moves them further away from their counterparts back home.[50] This globalised 'digerati' are not, as some might have predicted, a democratic 'fifth column', but rather outward-looking and concerned with forming links in Europe, North America and Eurasia.[51]

Preliminary study for this project, as well as my own experience in multilingual gaming environments, suggested game- or community-specific networking to be the most typical kind of interaction for gamers. Indeed, as the later chapters will show, gamers were more likely to speak about their specific networks, while media and political discourses tended to group all games and gamers together as a whole. Rather than focusing on the importance of Russian new media as a tool for democratisation, or over-politicising Russian

[47] Slava Kisilevich, Chee Siang Ang and Mark Last, 'Large-scale analysis of self-disclosure patterns among online social networks users: a Russian context,' Knowledge and Information Systems, 32: 3 (2012), 609-628.

[48] Schmidt, Henrike, Katy Teubener and Natalja Konradova, eds., Control + Shift: Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2006), p. 14.

[49] Robert A. Saunders, 'New media, new Russians, new abroad: the evolution of minority Russian identity in cyberspace,' in Birgit Beumres, Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, eds., *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals*, (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 204.

[50] Ibid, p. 204.

[51] Ibid, p. 205.

gamers, I follow Morris's comment about youth and new media in Russia when he observes that,

> One of the most striking insights that new media research in Russia brings to area studies is how "pervasive communication" affects social relationships within societies with a history of ideological, centralized control. By pervasive I mean the kind of hyper‑communication with which many young people have grown up, which functions today as a "virtual prosthetic of the self," part of one's identity, and which is maintained through ongoing social relationships.[52]

It is these questions of identity and social relationships which inform the dissertation. In this study, I seek to understand the extent to which Russian gamers identify themselves nationally or in smaller communities, and how such communities are formed through the internet, be it through various internet sites or through games themselves. Such identity-building does not take place in a vacuum; in the next section of the introduction, I discuss theories of the globalisation of youth culture, asking how using networked digital media can create links with wider global taste communities.

## 1.3 Russian studies: globalisation and youth culture

Russian digital media research touches upon how internet-enabled communication can connect users to a global exchange of information. In the case of online games, many players find themselves (by choice or by server design) playing opposite or alongside foreign players. While Russian government officials worry about the potential impact of American game ideology on young Russians, the young Russians in question are interacting with foreign players in much closer and more personal ways. It is therefore important to acknowledge Russian gaming in a global context.

The theoretical narrative running through this dissertation follows on from research by Douglas Blum, Hilary Pilkington and others, applying their concepts of Russian youth identity and globalisation to the online space. As Blum has identified, 'young people are especially attentive to and absorptive of global cultural trends.'[53] Throughout this study I charted assertions both by the mainstream Russian media and by politicians that gaming was an activity predominantly of interest to young people, a belief generally borne out by the empirical data this dissertation and by demographic data from a range of sources. In keeping with the historical context of similar moral panics over youth activity in Russia from rock music to dancing, I use theories of cultural globalisation amongst young people as a way of understanding how Russian video game communities are understood. A focus on young peoples' activities and subcultures, and concerns over how their practices and

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[52] Jeremy Morris, 'Actually Existing Internet Use in the Russian Margins: Net Utopianism in the Shadow of the "Silent Majorities"', *REGION: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*, 2(2), 2013, pp. 181–200, p. 186.
[53] Douglas Blum, *National Identity and Globalization: Youth, State and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 3.

consumption may have a negative impact on them, are common to mainstream and official assessments of gaming. However, the tendency of Russian authorities and cultural entrepreneurs to position Western-influenced youth cultures as dangerous and subversive to the education and societal integration of the nation's youth has a long precedent with its own features and history. Employing theory which takes into account these cultural precedents has, I hope, allowed this research to avoid divorcing discussions of gaming from their historical context and implying a false discontinuity with the past.

Assessing both public and political opinion about gaming throws into sharp relief the on-going process of nation-building and shows how gaming is viewed by those sections of Russian society which seek to mitigate cultural globalisation, particularly as it affects young people. Narratives about video games and the potential dangers contained therein strongly echoed those of the Soviet authorities in their desire to mediate outside influences. However, Blum has pointed out that even in the highest levels of politics there is some debate as to how much control the authorities should exert over youth activities.[54] His astute contrast of two documents on youth policy shows a deep tension between the aforementioned conservative 'neo-Soviet' (Blum's phrase) approach and a more neoliberal attitude which recognises the value of youth involvement in nation-building and the importance of engaging with global trends and markets.[55] In this context, a study of Russian gamers becomes more than an ethnographic report about slaying internet dragons. Gaming becomes another site of negotiation between local norms and global influences, and thus a potential site of resistance, identity construction and unofficial community building for participants. It is these interactions between global and local and between disparate identities, which Western-oriented game studies often flattens out.

The deep-rooted assumption (which will be further unpacked in the next section) in game studies that gaming practices and goods flow from the West to the 'periphery' shares much with early theories of cultural globalisation.[56] Such theories emphasised a centre-to-periphery flow of ideas, goods and meanings to the extent that globalisation is still sometimes referred to as 'Westernisation' or 'Americanisation.'[57] These early theories were predominantly concerned with the actions of political elites, powerful media structures and large international corporations; the two most-cited must surely be Coca-Cola and

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[54] Blum, p. 133.

[55] Blum is describing the differences expressed in 2002 by two contradictory documents on youth policy. The Ministry of Education's Department of Youth Policy promoted youth initiative and encouraged a Western-inflected youth policy which would 'empower youth to solve its own problems'. On the other hand, a response by the State Council supported by Putin maintained young people to be unfit to decide social priorities and advised maintaining a more paternalistic style of youth policy and moral education. See Blum, p. 133-135.

[56] Pilkington et al, *Looking West?*, p. 3.

[57] Ibid.

McDonalds. The assumption behind these studies is that globalisation is a natural result of people's desire to consume and companies' desire to provide products for consumption.[58] The focus is always on the increasing influence of the global upon the local, with little interest in the more subtle power dynamics of the process. However, subsequent theorists have challenged the centrality of corporations and elites in the globalisation literature, proposing theories of hybridisation or creolisation to describe the 'complexities and adaptation processes that occur when cultural forms derived from one place are forced to make contact with the diverse formations of identity, culture and practice that have emerged elsewhere.'[59] Roland Robertson in particular has called for scholars to complicate the notion of globalisation as a depicting 'a world of local assertions *against* globalizing trends,' instead using the business concept of 'glocalization' to describe how the 'global' and 'local' are two interlinked and simultaneous entities.[60] Using this concept, he argues, allows for analysis of globalisation in a way that does not assume that interactions between global and local imply homogenisation of culture.[61]

Pilkington argues that such theories

> entail a process whereby the periphery receives but reshapes the metropolitan culture to its own specifications, thereby allowing for a model of cultural exchange in which the periphery shows culturally differentiated responses to the Western version of modernity being exported without ignoring the actuality of the power relations involved in economically driven, cultural globalization.[62]

Arjun Appadurai suggests that the concept of 'scapes', various 'dimensions of cultural flows' through which global information is filtered and shaped, offers a structural view of cultural globalisation which takes into account political, economic and historical variables.[63] Ulf Hannerz proposes two key alterations to concepts of globalisation. First, he challenges the casual use of 'globalisation' to denote 'just about any process or relationship that somehow crosses state boundaries,' suggesting instead that the term 'transnational' is a more flexible way of understanding these flows.[64] Second, he sees the use of 'transnational' as a way of bypassing the state-centric assumption implicit in 'international,' pointing out that 'actors may now be individuals, groups, movements, business enterprises, and in no small part it is

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[58] Terry Flew, *Understanding Global Media* (Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan, 2007), p. 163.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Roland Robertson, 'Glocalization: Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity,' in *Global Modernities,* Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson, eds., (London: Sage, 1995), p. 30.
[61] Robertson, p. 31.
[62] Hilary Pilkington and Ul'iana Bliudina, 'Cultural Globalization: A Peripheral Perspective' in *Looking West? Cultural Globalization and Russian Youth Cultures* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 1-20, p. 2.
[63] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 33.
[64] Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 6.

this diversity of organization that we need to consider.'[65] Hannerz urges his readers to take into account the complexity of cultural production at every level, ensuring that the agency of individuals is not overlooked, while acknowledging the part which larger political and economic forces play.

My dissertation recognises the multi-levelled, complex interactions that constitute cultural globalisation, epitomised by Tehri Rantanen's strategy of using data from multiple 'levels' to construct a picture of how media consumers receive, interact with and respond to media. Rantanen focuses on the role that the media play in the process of globalisation, presenting a 'mediagraphy' – an ethnography of media use.[66] She uses this strategy to bridge micro and macro levels of analysis, giving equal weight to individual lived experiences and structural activities of macro level actors.

Blum highlights the need to account for issues of subjectivity and the strategies employed by actors throughout society in dealing with and mediating the effects of globalisation. While we can conceive of globalisation both as an assimilation of Western or core flows and as a hybridisation or creolisation of local and global trends, there is little theorization which explains how the flows themselves are mediated, consumed, and received. Blum contests that 'relatively little work has been devoted to examining how cultural flows produce their effects, including the part played by individual actors in regulating or contesting such flows' and further notes that 'the scholarship to date has also generally emphasized individuals or self-contained groups [...] rather than examining the relationships between actors embedded in overlapping organizational networks'.[67]

The field of internet studies has also produced some works which suggest moving away from Anglo-American paradigms of globalisation and global flows in online spaces. Kyra Landzelius recognises the fluidity and complexity of identity and practice in online settings, and calls for  methodological and analytical tools that are better equipped [...] to engage with identities that are mobile, volatile, composite, (potentially) anonymous, experimental, deceptive or archived; to apprehend communities that are fluid'.[68] As far back as 2000 (a comparatively long time for game studies, although less so for internet studies), Daniel Miller and Don Slater suggested a comparative ethnographic approach to take into account 'how members of a specific culture attempt to make themselves a(t) home in a transforming communicative environment, how they can find themselves in this environment and at the same time try to mould it in their own image'.[69] Regarding the

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[65] Ibid., p. 6.
[66] Terhi Rantanen, *The Media and Globalization* (London, Sage: 2005) p. 13.
[67] Ibid., p. 7.
[68] Kyra Landzelius, ed. *Native on the Net* (London: Routledge, 2006) p. 30.
[69] Daniel Miller & Don Slater, *The Internet: an Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 1.

study of global practices, they write that the internet 'transcends dualisms such as local against global' and instead requires application of 'a complex dialectic through which specificity is a product of generality and vice versa.'[70] Understanding gaming on global and local levels requires analysis of both individual and small-scale actors and of wider, macro processes like economics and political influences. Scholarship on the internet is coming to terms with these complexities; in this next section, I argue that game studies is yet to truly engage with gaming around the world.

## 1.4 Game studies

Video games are still a modern enough medium for the scholarship surrounding them to be in an almost constant state of flux and redefinition. Jesper Juul points out that the video game as we know it has been in existence for perhaps forty years, barely half the time that even the comparatively-modern television has been available.[71] The turbulent early history of academic study on the topic has so far 'been a jumble of disagreements and discussions with no clear outcomes'.[72] Juul's comprehensive game studies text *Half-Real* provides a neat summary of the core discussions in game studies. He identifies significant theoretical conflicts as 'games versus players, rules versus fiction, games versus stories, games versus the broader culture, and game ontology versus game aesthetics.'[73]

Games, game communities and cultures may all be the subject of extended enquiry through a broad range of disciplinary lenses. For example, traditional social science methods like ethnography have been seen as highly applicable for understanding online communities, while media analysis approaches have been used to great effect to analyse specific games.[74] Scholars have drawn comparisons between video game players and cultures and earlier activities like tabletop gaming and music subcultures, positions well supported by a long tradition of cultural studies in the West.[75] However, understanding non-Western gaming cultures can require drawing upon a number of different contexts; gaming histories are not necessarily shared and there exist unchallenged ethnocentric assumptions in game studies which flatten out detail about local gaming activities. In particular, there is often assumed to be a linear flow of games and practices moving from global gaming centres like North America and Japan towards more 'peripheral' regions and cultures.

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[70] Ibid., p. 7.
[71] Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), p. 11.
[72] Ibid., p. 11.
[73] Ibid., p. 11.
[74] See Tom Boellstorff's excellent ethnography of *Second Life* and Bonnie Nardi's anthropological study of *World of Warcraft*, both listed in the bibliography of this thesis.
[75] J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks & W. Keith Winkler, 'Introduction: Fantasy Games, Gaming Cultures, and Social Life' in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, (Jefferson, NC, McFarland & Company, 2006), pp. 1-18, p. 1.

Also common among such scholarly works are pervasive underlying assumptions about access to technology and ICT knowledge, access to games and the universality of certain practices, priorities and modes of play.[76] However, some work is being done to narrow the distance between game studies theory and non-Western game cultures. In recent years, the study of gaming environments in Japan, China and South Korea has been added to the mix. Game scholarship has therefore largely been produced by, and about, wealthy countries with high internet penetration, a reasonable expectation of access to ICTs and domestic game industries which export games globally. Play in resource-constrained environments (even in these comparatively wealthy contexts) is much less researched. Not only do studies of gaming tend to focus on the West, many early conclusions about social and networked play were derived from a limited pool of case studies. As Mia Consalvo and Jason Begy identify, Western-produced MMOs and MUDs with high fantasy settings such as *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest* are overrepresented in games studies scholarship.[77]

Beth Kolko and Cynthia Putnam note the wealth of academic work on gaming in the global North, and assert that study of gamers who play in less privileged environments is as valuable as studies which explore areas 'where resources are abundant, and where gamers' relationship with technology has evolved in the context of that abundance.'[78] Florence Chee's ethnographic work on gaming in South Korean cybercafés (known locally as *pc baangs*) shows a sensitive and experienced understanding of how gaming practices are shaped by local needs and preferences. She articulates the importance of South Korea's recent economic history in providing high-quality infrastructure and demonstrates how fast internet speeds has allowed gaming to develop as a public sport.[79] The public elements of gaming in South Korea are visible on an amateur level too, as a desire on the part of young people to socialise outside the rigid, hierarchical home environment, has led to the massive popularity of cybercafés. Nina Huntemann and Ben Aslinger's recent edited volume, *Gaming Globally*, also highlights the twin influences of cultural milieu and

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[76] For example, Edward Castronova's claims about the centrality of game spaces to everyday life suggest a level and quality of access often unattainable outside of affluent urban centres; Jim Rossignol's assertion that his identity (and the identities of many others) as a gamer surpasses his identity as a European or British citizen is a statement which contains no scrutiny of everyday race, class or gender dynamics.
Jim Rossignol, *This Gaming Life: Travels in Three Cities* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 47.
[77] Jason Begy and Mia Consalvo, "Achievements, Motivations and Rewards in Faunasphere," *Game Studies*, 11: 1 (2011), paragraph 1.
[78] Beth E. Kolko and Cynthia Putnam, 'Computer Games in the Developing World: The Value of Non-Instrumental Engagement with ICTs, or Taking Play Seriously', in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development*, 2008, pp. 46-55, (p. 54).
[79] Florence Chee, 'Online games as a medium of cultural communication: An ethnographic study of socio-technical transformation', (unpublished doctoral thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2012), p. 108.

economic affordances in shaping gaming around the world. In their extremely thorough and considered introduction, the editors declare their intention to explore

> how local, national, regional, transnational, and translocal perspectives can add new levels of complexity to how we assess and experience the formal, textual, and representational content of games; discourses and practices of game development, distribution, policy, ratings, and censorship; historical, geographic, spatial, linguistic, racial, ethnic, and domestic contexts that influence design, hardware and software production; and embodied and networked play practices.[80]

For Huntemann and Aslinger, the vital link between gaming and globalisation must be understood through researching 'the dynamics that affect and refract and enable and disable particular forms and expressions of production, play, and place'.[81]

## 2. What does 'normative' gaming look like? On global gaming and 'the West'

The focus of game studies on Western game cultures, coupled with the dearth of study of Russian gaming, leaves us with concepts of 'normative' play practices and user demographics which are untested in a Russian context.  These broadly West-centric theories of game studies make assumptions about the primacy of certain modes and practices of gaming, assumptions which are slowly beginning to be challenged.  The increasing interest in non-Western game cultures is providing a welcome influx of case studies and expanding understanding of the many different ways in which gamers play. In the absence of a broader survey of global gaming practices, these studies provide some diversity of information about gaming around the world.

### 2.1 Playing 'properly', playing 'normally'

There is a wealth of stereotypes and perceptions in English-speaking media and scholarship about how people around the world play games and interact with others in play spaces. Often these mimic existing national or ethnic stereotypes. Conclusions about excessive gaming habits are often presented in these cases, fuelled by discussions about gold-farming and behaviours triggered by extreme levels of play.[82] There is a preoccupation in the Western media with reporting events considered aberrant, such as the death of one gamer in South Korea from playing video games for over two days at one stretch.[83]  The Guardian has reported one case in which Chinese labour camp prisoners were being forced to play World of Warcraft to earn in-game gold which was then sold by the prison guards

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[80] Nina B. Huntemann and Ben Aslinger, eds. *Gaming Globally: Production, Play and Place* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 2.

[81] Ibid., p. 2.

[82] Gold-farming refers to the practice of intensively harvesting in-game currency and then selling it to other players for real-world money. This activity practically always violates terms of service, and is often associated with organized, low-paid workers in countries like China.

[83] 'S Korean dies after games session', *BBC News*, 10 August 2005,
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4137782.stm> [accessed 25 July 2013].

for real-world money.[84]  Conversely, Jim Rossignol shows Iceland as the perfect location for MMO EVE Online, comparing the country and the game in terms of their shared economic success, technical sophistication and 'bleakly beautiful... forbidding and cruel' landscapes.[85] He points to the high level of internet access and the advanced infrastructure, positioning Iceland as possessing a blend of European charm and culture and American technological proficiency.[86]

In my own research into the hostility towards Russian players in *EVE Online*, I have argued that scholarly analysis of in-game conflict based on real world ethnicity or nationality tends to position instances of conflict as Western players 'pushing back'.[87] Sometimes this is a reaction to non-Western incursion into what is presumed to be a space governed by Western norms, or against what they perceive to be non-normative and game-ruining modes of play by 'foreign' players.[88] There are several instances of national groups within a game environment being perceived as uniquely or especially threatening, or as employing certain strategies or tactics which are not compatible with the preferences of a (usually Anglo-American) majority of players. In *EVE Online*, an early alliance between a large Russian corporation and an American corporation notorious for its 'griefing' behaviour (actions which deliberately disrupt the enjoyable play experience of others) has led to the belief amongst many players that Russians are especially aggressive and expansionist within the game. The official forum has seen several discussions in which players complain about Russians 'taking over' the game, although the percentage of Russian *EVE* players is approximately 5.5%.[89]

Melinda Jacobs similarly reports that in the online game Omerta, Turkish players are frequently denied access to in-game groups – 'families' – on the basis of their nationality. This is due to 'the perception that their primary loyalties are to other members of their own real-life nationality, rather than members of their current family', and to the 'perceived aggressive nature of the Turkish community while playing the game'. [90] Jacobs hypothesises that the tension within the game is fuelled by an incompatibility between aspects of 'Western' and 'Eastern' culture, specifically in this case 'strong beliefs in tradition and [...] 'tightly wrapped... sentiments of honor', which tends to encourage 'honor-

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[84] Danny Vincent, 'China used prisoners in lucrative internet gaming work', *The Guardian*, 25 May 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/25/china-prisoners-internet-gaming-scam> [accessed 27 May 2011].

[85] Rossignol, p. 118.

[86] Ibid, p. 119.

[87] Catherine Goodfellow,  'Russian Overlords, Vodka, and Logoffski: Russian- and English-Language Discourse About Anti-Russian Xenophobia in the EVE Online Community', Games and Culture, 10(4), (2014) 343-364 (p. 2).

[88] Ibid, p. 2.

[89] Akita T, 'EVE demographics, popularity by country, funny stuff', *EVE Online forums*, 28 May 2008, <http://oldforums.eveonline.com/?a=topic&threadID=782711> [accessed 27th June 2013]

[90] Melinda Jacobs, 'Multiculturalism and Cultural Issues in Online Gaming Communities', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 12 (2008), 317-334 (p. 324).   27

redeeming' behaviours'.[91]  However, her use of 'Western' and 'Eastern' is left undefined, and as a result her conclusions echo those of Rossignol and media reportage of non-Western play; 'alien' behaviours which deviate from a Western norm are responsible for conflict in game spaces. The study of norms in online gameplay and the subsequent academic responses to ethnic and national conflicts in games shows a tendency to view Western players as playing 'normally', while culturally distinct variations are perceived as disruptive or incorrect. In game spaces maintained by North American and European companies, at least, there is a presumption that players are, and should be, English-speaking and willing to adapt to a set of broadly Western cultural norms.

## 2.2 Play spaces

The comparative popularity of internet and computer cafes in regions like Eastern Europe, Central and Pacific Asia is frequently held to be an economic necessity, a narrative typified by Kolko and Putnam's depiction of Yuri, a Kyrgyz gamer who plays exclusively over local area networks (LANs) because of the expense of home internet access.[92] The underlying assumption is that the financial costs of owning a personal computer, purchasing the necessary software, connecting to the internet and (potentially) paying for a monthly game subscription push gamers in developing countries into internet cafes. Certainly economics is a factor here, but to interpret the practice of the gaming internet cafes exclusively as a symptom of a less favourable economic climate flattens out regional detail and fails to take into account other factors.

Such interpretations imply a kind of backwardness amongst non-Western game cultures and intimate that future economic progress will naturally allow 'upgrading' to Western styles of play. This is usually presented as gaming at home, with a choice of a PC or a console attached to a television (or, quite probably, both of these in addition to a smartphone and handheld console). Rossignol is quick to point out the way in which many game theories rely on West-centric assumptions about places of play, console or platform preferences and economic power, specifically discussing the centrality of the TV-projected console to the normative family-and-friends gaming experience.[93] In fact, some studies of non-Western game communities have supported the theory that in-person socialising in internet cafes is as big a draw as the ability to play games cheaply. Where gaming takes place primarily in internet cafes, part of the appeal can be the opportunity to socialise with other like-minded people in an offline environment as much as in a game. Rossignol's case study on South Korean gamers suggests that internet cafes – known as pc baangs in the region – are an important meeting place for young people in the absence of a Western-style

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[91] Ibid, p. 324.
[92] Kolko and Putnam, p. 53.
[93] Rossignol, p. 80.

bar culture.[94] Kolko and Putnam, too, highlight the importance of socialising for their respondents, reporting that gamers stressed the 'public and social aspects of their gaming which is not necessarily consistent with gaming in the US, but does resonate with gaming culture in Korea and China.'[95]

In her study of World of Warcraft players in China Nardi has noted that internet cafes are not purely masculine spaces and that there are many women present messaging or watching films; however, high-status game activities like PvP are often coded as masculine and only 10% of her interviewees were female.[96] Similarly, Kolko and Putnam report that although there was a significant female gamer population in Central Asia, women were more likely to use the internet and games at home, again suggesting that female players are not always able or willing to publicly engage with game spaces.[97] The choice to game publicly or privately may thus be shaped or constrained by external factors.

## 2.3 Language barriers

Common language gives gamers the opportunity to interact with others, share information and strategy, benefit from in-game support and reporting functions and use official forums for technical and hardware advice. In many cases game developers (usually in the early stages of beta testing, a development phase which includes some users) actively solicit the opinions and feedback of gamers, sometimes in order to balance out different aspects of the game, sometimes to gather views about a site or interface redesign, sometimes to recruit forum or in-game moderators. This fan-developer dialogue is an integral part of a subculture where many fans have a similar skill-set to the developers and can be productive reviewers or even co-creators in the game sphere. In some cases, developers are keen to draw upon this pool of unofficial labour; Sokolova gives us the example of the Valve Corporation game *Half-Life*, whose developers made software development tools publicly available to aid in the creation of extra game maps and artefacts.[98] To be unable to participate in this two-way flow of information and ideas is to lose out on an important aspect of game culture and to be silenced.

Within MMOs, the ability to interact with one's fellow players is even more critical because so much of this genre requires grouping up with others and cooperating to achieve common goals. In the case of gamers from any linguistic periphery, full participation in these games might ultimately require finding others who speak the same language. Language can be problematic primarily for those gamers who do not speak English, but

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[94] Rossignol, p. 74.
[95] Kolko and Putnam, p. 53.
[96] Nardi, p. 190-1.
[97] Kolko & Putnam, p. 3.
[98] Sokolova, p. 1565.

even those who are geographically and culturally closer to the Pacific Asian game industry may be limited by lack of the appropriate linguistic ability. Kolko and Putnam highlight this problem in the context of the early years of internet access in Uzbekistan. They write that 'keyboards were often in English yet people spoke Uzbek or Russian and needed the Cyrillic alphabet. Operating systems and software were often in Russian which was an additional hurdle to Uzbek speakers (Uzbek is a Turkic language, not Slavic). Printer drivers didn't have the Uzbek character set, there was very limited content online that was relevant to local inhabitants, and keyboarding or typing skills were not common'.[99] Kolko and Putnam discuss purely practical problems, but elsewhere in the world the use of various alphabets may be a deeply political issue, as Orlin Spassov argues in his work on Bulgarian alphabet use.[100] He indicates that transliteration into Latin is often perceived as a threat to local cultural identities, and that it privileges some languages over others.[101] This is clearly the case in gaming communities such as the Central Asian communities Kolko and Putnam discuss.

Another study of local instantiations of gaming practice is Tom Apperley's *Gaming Rhythms*, a comparative ethnography about internet café gamers in Venezuela and Australia. Although he employs significantly different methods to Kolko and Putnam (the latter using large scale quantitative surveys, Apperley adopting a participant observation approach), both studies astutely reveal the strategies deployed by gamers in non-Western contexts so that they may enjoy and engage with games. With language, economics, distribution, hardware, infrastructure and time all presenting their own problems to the gamers studied, the practices of play outlined in these studies look very different from the imagined 'standard'. Apperley found that his participants were aware of their limited options and employed creative workarounds to maximise time spent playing and enjoyment experienced while gaming. In the case of one game, he notes that 'understanding that it was the best of the games available, implicitly involves acknowledging and apprehending the limiting factors in the situation.'[102] Meanwhile, Kolko and Putnam's ultimate focus on gaming as a 'first touch' for ICT proficiency shows that political, linguistic and economic barriers to accessing games create similar barriers to learning vital information technology skills.[103] Clearly, the study of gaming can have broader implications in terms of regional computer and use and expertise, and the ability to develop flexible strategies for access in resource-constrained contexts.

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[99] Kolko & Putnam, p. 6.
[100] Spassov, p. 1487.
[101] Ibid, p. 1487.
[102] Apperley, p. 90.
[103] Kolko and Putnam, p. 54.

Tom Apperley's proposed theoretical framework suggests that we view gaming not as one single practice, but as a network of different activities and innovations enacted within each individual's 'digital game ecology.'[104] Apperley sees this ecology as the 'vast dynamic repertoire of cultures, experiences, games, practices, relationships, and technologies that are drawn upon to produce local instantiations of play'.[105] By seeking to control these variables to the best of their ability, digital game players attempt to harmonise their play with their everyday life. It is this act of harmonisation which Apperley believes is best conceptualised by rhythmanalysis, a tool which links the player's everyday environment with the complex and changing demands of video game play from 'the specific 'situatedness' of a given location, to the vast generality of the digital game ecology'.[106] It demonstrates the 'blockages, disjunctions, divergences, imbrications, and segues' which characterise gaming across the globe and simultaneously allows us to recognise the uniqueness of video games and link them into broader trends of media globalisation.[107]

Apperley presents game choice and activities taking place within and around games as ways of overcoming 'blockages' in the gaming experience by altering styles of play and utilising online resources and cheat codes to ensure a gaming experience compatible with the resources available. In this case what he calls 'counterplay' is a way for local gamers to circumvent the attempts of the global gaming industry to control and regulate its production. This approach offers a compelling way of understanding the local differences in gaming practice, acknowledging as it does the everyday hindrances many gamers face and the different strategies needed to harmonise everyday life and play. Apperley's theory and participant observation case studies are situated within important contextual information about the game industries, economic climates and social milieus of his participants and their locales.

This brief analysis of just a few play spaces, practices and variations shows that normative play is strongly defined by context. So much so, in fact, that Mia Consalvo argues even practices like cheating are rooted in local instantiations of play.[108] Players interact with games in ways that are shaped by their economic affordances, social milieus, cultural backgrounds and access to hardware and software. Despite the potential access issues, gamers around the world (particularly those in resource-constrained environments) are skilled at mitigating access issues. Acknowledging how play is a negotiation between global and local spheres gives us a broadly applicable theoretical framework which allows

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[104] Apperley defines this as 'the technological, industrial and global contexts in which digital games and digital game technology are developed, marketed and consumed.' Apperley, p. 14.
[105] Apperley, p. 9.
[106] Apperley, p. 19.
[107] Apperley, p. 19.
[108] Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, (MIT Press, 2007), p. 127.

comparisons more nuanced than simply noting the degree of difference from a Western norm. In this dissertation, I make use of Apperley's work as a starting point for understanding how regional differences affect game play. His work connects well to existing theorisation on Russia and globalisation; both these sources focus on how globally-available products are received, interpreted and modified in local contexts. As I shall now demonstrate in my research objectives, the interplay between global and local gaming culture is a key dynamic which I seek to analyse in this dissertation.

## 3. Research objectives and questions

The primary objective of this research is to provide insight into a previously unstudied community, both for Russianists and for game studies scholars. Contextually this is a complex task, but I frame the work in terms of common themes and considerations. There is much shared by these two groups of scholars; for example, methods, issues of access, boundary-policing, global communication and overlapping identities. In this study, I focus on the many voices discussing gaming in a country little-studied in terms of its online gaming practices. I also conduct an empirical study of the contemporary Russian gaming industry, showing how different markets intersect, outlining some of the important voices and groups, and demonstrating the kinds of events and media available to fans. This research strategy allows a deep analysis of the contexts in which Russian gaming takes place, while giving space to the opinions and production of participants and the broader Russian online gaming community. I study not only gamers, but also the media, cultural and political environment which shapes their gaming lives, answering the following research questions:

- What are the features of the Russian videogaming industry and audience? What are the barriers to accessing games and game technologies in Russia and how have they shaped the Russian gaming sphere?

- How are Russian games situated within a broader gaming context?

- What are the prevalent media and political discourses about gaming in Russia?

- In what social, cultural and historical contexts do Russian gamers consume and produce gaming content? How are attitudes towards gaming shaped by this historical and cultural context?

- How do Russian gamers view and define themselves relative to their Western counterparts, and to mainstream Russian society?

- How do Russian gamers react to popular mainstream discourses about gaming?

## 4. Thesis structure

### Methodology

Building upon the literature review above, I discuss the various methodologies used in digital media and game studies. I demonstrate how my own study connects to previous works in these scholarly fields, and then outline my research strategy and methods and how they enable me to address my research questions. Finally, I reflect upon the research process and its challenges, paying particular attention to issues of power, gender, community authorship and privacy.

### Games played in Russia

I begin with a brief analysis of common scholarly ideas about what 'normative' gaming and play looks like. I draw upon work on gaming in other non-Western cultures, highlighting the omissions and assumptions in Western game studies to inform this project on Russian online gaming. The focus of the chapter then narrows down to Russian gaming. I produce a broad survey of games available in the region (both Western and domestically produced) and their popularity. Particular local variations and practices are discussed here; the professionalization of electronic sports (e-sports), gaming in public and private, and how games are evaluated and selected by players. Barriers to access are discussed in detail, both practical and social in a discussion of the many factors which may affect participation in Russian gaming communities. The second part of the chapter presents a series of case studies which show how Russian cultural context influences game production.

### Discourses about gaming in Russia

This chapter begins with theoretical discussion about historical attitudes towards youth cultures in Russia. I demonstrate how the characterisation of Westernised youth cultures as deviant and ideologically dangerous impacts Russian gamers. Material from the political and educational spheres is examined to understand official perceptions of gaming as a youth activity. In the latter section, I analyse mainstream and gaming media discussions of gaming and compare the ways in which gaming is portrayed by popular news outlets and by more niche gaming-related outlets. I discuss the differing representations and stereotypes of gamers, and the contrasting approaches which media outlets take when reporting on unhealthy or extreme practices of play. Additionally, I show how specialist gaming sites mediate and encourage the formation of gamer identity, in part by presenting information and articles in ways which foreground the authenticity of the authors as gamers themselves.

### Practices, perceptions and experiences of the Russian-speaking gaming community

Chapter Four is an exploration of gamer identity, practices and opinions, in which I report on the results of my survey and website analysis work. I analyses the ways in which gamers construct and explain their identities as game players. The individual voices of participants

in the Russian online gaming community are heard most clearly here. As will become clear in this chapter, Russian gamers are by no means a monolithic group, and their differing opinions on what constitutes gamer identity and meaningful community interaction show that video game players harbour much ambiguity about their hobby and the practices and meanings which stem from it.

## Conclusions

I conclude the dissertation by returning to the research questions, presenting the findings of the study and showing its wider relevance and application. First, a brief summary of findings highlights key discoveries and articulates how each research question was successfully answered. I then discuss three main themes in this work and show how they contribute to existing scholarship on the globalisation of game culture, on Russian youth in the digital age, and on the tensions between different discourses about gaming in Russia.

# Chapter One: Methodology

In this project, I aim to understand the Russian videogaming audience and industry, both through the eyes of gamers and through media and political discourses about gaming and gamers. I also show how Russian gaming is influenced by and contributes to a global gaming culture, as well as showing how the unique local history and culture affects games and gamers today. Clearly, these research questions cannot be answered using data from any one method. I therefore employ a predominantly qualitative, mixed-methods approach, influenced both by studies of digital media and by scholarship on Russian digital media and youth cultures. In the introduction, I articulated how my work connects to studies of games, Russian youth, globalization and digital media and fills a research lacuna. Following on from the literature review, I now discuss some of the mixed methods studies that inform this work, before moving on to outline my own methodology.

Anne Gorsuch observes in her work on youth in revolutionary Russia that, 'the study of popular culture is by nature interdisciplinary' and, like her, I draw upon a broad spectrum of theoretical work and methods from different disciplines for this dissertation.[109] This is a philosophy shared by many researchers in Russian digital game studies and game studies. Birgit Beumers, Stephen Hutchings and Natalya Rulyova write that 'Russian Media Studies […] is a relatively young discipline into which scholars have tended to enter from three adjacent areas: literary and cultural studies, sociology, and political science'. They apply an interdisciplinary approach to their edited volume to speak to different areas of the complex post-Soviet media environment. Similarly, Dmitri Williams has explicitly called upon game studies scholars to bridge the divide between qualitative and quantitative scholarship, arguing that 'multimethod, multitheoretical approaches are the best way to advance understanding', using triangulation to ensure that each method deployed balances out the weaknesses of the others.'[110] Elsewhere, Hilary Pilkington and her colleagues have applied a variety of ethnographic and sociological methods to several studies on youth and the consumption of post-Soviet media, drawing upon social science and humanities approaches from both Russia and the West. Meanwhile, Russian media studies and game studies borrow their methods from studies of popular culture and film.[111]

## 1. Scope of study

Video gaming is a large and growing industry in Russia, and there is a daunting quantity of material available. In studying Russian gaming culture, I have therefore made a number of

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[109] Anne Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 9.
[110] Dmitri Williams, p. 458.
[111] Beumers et al., p. 5.

theoretical and practical choices in order to render the research more manageable in scope. First, this thesis is primarily focused on discourses surrounding video gaming in Russia. The core data collected is therefore from individuals who play video games and the specialist media which they consume, and from widely-accessible mainstream media outlets. Although the Introduction of the dissertation contextualises Russian gaming within a wider global context, and I reference this theme again in the conclusion, I avoid focusing too heavily on non-Russian discourses.

Second, I concentrate on online gaming; that is, networked game play which takes place in online game worlds or between a few individuals using the internet, and discussions which take place in online communities. I sought in part to understand how Russian players see themselves relative to a wider global gaming community, which meant participants would need to be attentive to trends in gaming. Boellstorff et al. observe that we cannot always identify "precisely bounded geographies or communities in virtual worlds".[112] Social groups, communities and activities are spread over different servers, time zones, communities of practice and offline groups, sometimes over diasporas. I therefore elect to draw a broad circle around those communities and groups which can be said to make up 'Russian gamers'. Although I have gathered some contextual data on non-networked play in Russia, my focus is on those players who game and/or interact on or through the internet. Online mediated communication is the most immediate and accessible way of understanding the kinds of games, activities, memes, slang and debates which are relevant to a global gaming audience. Studies of internet use in Russia consistently show a large overlap between the age demographics most likely to be heavy internet users and those most likely to play games.[113] This dissertation takes advantage of this fact, deploying a predominantly-online research strategy.

## 2. Research design

Gorsuch's assertion that studying popular culture is an interdisciplinary task is apposite, but studying games is also often a cross media endeavour. Gamers game and experience games across multiple media sources. Using a combination of surveys, media texts and game analysis, analysis of informal online discourse and short-term website observation accommodates a spread of media forms (just like the gamers who are the focus of the project). The following methods were chosen for a wide spread of data about gaming in Russian from formal and informal, gamer and non-gamer perspectives. I draw upon

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[112] Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce & T L Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*, (Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 57.

[113] See WCIOM, 'Internet spaces: entertainment, communication and work,' *WCIOM.ru*, 13 October 2013, <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=115018>, [accessed 7 April 2015] and Red Kite International, 'The Russian Gaming Audience', February 1 2010, <http://redkiteinternational.com/frontline/the-russian-gaming-audience/> [accessed 27 June 2013] particularly.

industry data, commentary from Russian industry figures and close readings of games to inform my analysis of the current state of the Russian gaming market. I then turn to game sites and mainstream media outlets for discourses about gamers in their own eyes and in the popular press. Here, too, we see the views of politicians on games, both as a cultural phenomenon and as a potentially useful tool. Finally, I use survey work and online comments from gaming websites to represent the views of gamers themselves.

Data from English- and Russian-language mainstream news and gaming sites, Russian government material and gamer discourse from surveys and comments allow for a process of triangulation. Triangulation – the comparison of multiple data points from different sources and (in this case) methods – is a way of checking claims, corroborating evidence and highlighting a point or concept. In this study, the multitude of different opinions, concepts and aspects of gaming in Russia seemed at times overwhelming. In the first instance, I limited my study in the ways described above. I then ensured that my research questions centred on one of three distinct areas of gaming discourse. Chapter two focuses on the Russian gaming industry, while chapters three and four profile the views and practices of media outlets and gamers respectively. In conjunction with the introduction's discussion of how Russian gamers are described by English-language sources, these sources allow a comparison of key elements of discourse about Russian gamers and gaming.

## 2.1 Survey

A survey was run for thirty days from 26th January 2012 with the goal of gathering specific qualitative data about video game players' self-identification – or not – as gamers.[114] This survey was the primary source of data to answer the research question 'how do gamers view and define themselves?' I also sought data about how gamers might personally reflect upon common mainstream media discourses. It consisted of sixteen qualitative questions about respondents gaming and computer habits and preferences which sought to map out the activities players engaged in and how they perceived these activities in the context of their everyday lives. Four more questions about gender, location, age and profession acted as a point of comparison with available demographic data on Russian (and non-Russian) video game players, and allowed some deeper, although still somewhat limited, analysis of socio-economic status and gender. A link to the online survey was posted in the Russian-language community forums of three different video games: Allods Online, a free-to-play Russian fantasy MMO, World of Warcraft, the ubiquitous subscription-based American fantasy MMO, and EVE Online, a smaller subscription-based sci-fi MMO developed by an Icelandic company. The combination of free and pay-to-play games was a deliberate

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[114] Appendices one and two list the survey questions in both Russian and English.

attempt to make the survey as accessible as possible. Posting only on official, moderated game sites was a feature of the survey methodology required by external ethical constraints, but it did increase the likelihood that only players with an active subscription (who were current gamers) to a game would access the survey. Moreover, I chose games from three distinct cultural and geographic regions in the hope that the spread of respondents would be more diverse. A potential survey link on the forums of the South Korean game Lineage II was dropped at the last minute in favour of EVE Online. This was partly due to a desire to select games familiar to the researcher (so as to better contextualise survey results within specific game cultures), but also because EVE is a game significant for its surprisingly high proportion of Russian players.

During the 30 days that the survey was live 114 people clicked through the first page, an explanation of the study and ethical information. A total of 75 responses were received, of which 64 had all demographic data filled out. The 11 remaining submissions were discarded, some because they were too incomplete to be of use, some because the questions had clearly not been answered seriously. Although participants could choose not to answer questions, I deemed responses with just one or two half-hearted answers to be unproductive for the study. These survey responses not only provided crucial insight into Russian gaming communities from players themselves, but also suggested further avenues of research. Most immediately, survey respondents directed me to a number of game-related websites offering daily news, reviews and editorials, all of which had spaces for users to comment and discuss topics of their choice at length. Again, my priority was to gain an understanding of the interests and habits of gamers in their own words. More broadly, I read from a number of these sites and gathered additional data about the views of mainstream Russian society and the authorities by reading popular news outlets.

## 2.2 Media discourse analysis
### 2.2.1 Gaming-specific websites
The next major source of data was a collection of Russian-language websites about games and gaming. These were read, monitored and analysed to understand common themes of discussion, opinions, memes, popular games and community engagement. I decided to consider gaming website discourse as a middle ground between gamers and mainstream public discourse; something like community spokespeople. This data set therefore provided not only data on the self-definition of gamers (via comments and community-sourced articles) but also data on how each gaming subcommunity positioned itself relative to mainstream media discourses, other gaming communities and a real or imagined global gaming sphere. It is this analysis which answers research questions about identity, self-perception and reactions to mainstream media discourse amongst gamers.

From my experience with online communities generally (and gaming sites specifically), I was able to make some initial judgments about which sites would be most productive for study. Some sites are 'portal' sites, that is, websites which host many different kinds of content and usually act as a gateway for finding diverse kinds of information. Often they are attached to a search engine; Yandex.ru and Mail.ru fall into this category. English-language portal sites would be Yahoo, MSN and so on. These sites rarely offer in-depth information or writing about video games, and it was clear that any gamer with even a rudimentary level of experience would find little useful in them. I therefore excluded them from my media study.

At the opposite end of the spectrum to sites like Mail.ru are websites devoted entirely to video game analysis and critique. Such sites have flourished over the past decade, and even a cursory search brings up more outlets than can reasonably be studied in depth. For the purposes of this analysis, eight sites were selected: Gameland.ru, GameMag.ru, Gamer.ru, GoHa.ru, Igromania.ru, MMORPG.su, Stopgame.ru and WowCasual.ru. The sites were primarily drawn from the survey responses I received, and a list of almost twenty was reduced to a more manageable six based on frequency of mentions, size of community and ease of navigation. To those six I added another two which I had found via Google. One of these I had found to be a busy community which encouraged individual editorials by their staff. The other, while limited to one blogger's observations about his experiences in World of Warcraft and Star Wars: the Old Republic, showed a deep interest in community-building (via an extensive blogroll and an experimental project to encourage online acquaintances to play games together) and self-reflection about gaming.[115]

From June 26th to August 8th 2012, I undertook a weekly analysis of these eight Russian-language gaming sites, gathering data about the kinds of games covered, the language and slang used in posts, community responses to various polls and features of associated forums and other community tools such as comments and scoreboards.[116] Once a week, I read/reviewed all articles posted in the previous seven days, noting particularly coverage given to Russian games, contentious or popular discussions and news of community meet-ups and other in-person events. This six-week period resulted in broader data about how games are discussed and reported on, and the ways websites encourage, discourage, moderate and mediate community discussion.

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[115] A blogroll is a list of other websites posted prominently on a blog, indicating that they are regularly read or at least endorsed by the blog's owner.
[116] See appendix three for details about the websites analysed.

*2.2.2 Mainstream Russian media*

Although a broad range of sources are cited here, four were regularly checked for relevant articles, a selection based off several criteria intended to produce a spread of opinions across the political spectrum and across different target readerships. From the outlets most widely read in Russia, four were selected from various points along the political spectrum, and were further examined to pinpoint ownership. These four are *Argumenty i Fakti*, *Izvestia*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Nezavismaya Gazeta*. These publications are all in the top few newspapers in Russia in terms of circulation. The sources are reasonably varied in political and social opinion, are widely available in both print and online form, and run the gamut from openly state-owned to largely independent of government influence. The archives are all available online and easily and efficiently searchable. Ownership of these sources was as varied as possible, a fact which I hope mitigates biases caused by the heavy involvement of political bodies in the Russian media. 2006 statistics from Beumers et al place all but *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* in the top-rated dailies in Russia, and I was not able to find newer statistics to contradict these figures.[117]

Popular weekly publication *Argumenty i Fakti* has a vast print circulation and readership.[118] It produces a number of supplements on various themes like sport and gardening, and publishes extensive readers' letters and advice columns. Health, relationship and family themes are very prominent. *Argumenty i Fakti* is owned by privately-owned bank Promsvyazbank.  After a brief period under the aegis of Gazprom, *Izvestia* is now owned by the National Media Group, which also holds major stakes in other media outlets such as REN TV and Channel One. The paper is considered to be a quality broadsheet, covering politics, business and world news extensively and sport and culture to a lesser degree. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* is another daily tabloid. Like *Argumenty i Fakti* it is concerned with themes of family, health, and celebrity, and also publishes many stories about family victories or tragedies and notable local events. The chain of ownership leads back to ECN Group, an energy company with close ties to government allies Gazprom. Finally, *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* is a pro-opposition, privately-owned daily run by journalist Konstantin Remchukov. Previously, the paper was part of the Berezovsky Media Group. The publication is focused on opposition politics and social issues, with additional quality coverage of culture, art and sport.

To cut down the vast amount of material that these criteria alone would deliver, the search terms and dates were limited. Material was drawn from publications during the calendar years of 2010 to 2012, using the search term 'komputerniye igri' (computer games). In addition to data gathered in this way, occasional searches for computer games

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[117] Beumers et al, p. 22.
[118] Ibid, p. 22.

or video games on search engines such as Yandex returned articles from smaller, regional media outlets, online news portals and personal opinion pieces in blogs. I drew more selectively from these sources, generally prioritising regional news or events which did not reach the larger outlets over opinion pieces and direct translations of newswire services like RIA Novosti or ITAR-TASS (both of which are state-run).

Discourse analysis was applied to the media articles, with a focus on answering a number of questions. Was the article generally approving or disapproving of video games? Did they make a distinction between Russian and non-Russian games? Were they writing about gamers as a homogenous group, or youth? Who was the author and what was their professional training? What kind of below-the-line commentary did the article receive? Was the news story from Russia, or was it news from a foreign country? By asking these questions, I sought to distinguish between opinions about young gamers and about all gamers, to understand if Russian games were considered with more sympathy in the mainstream press, and to get a sense of how games were regarded as a pastime and as an educational tool.

## 3. Reflections on the research process

There were some key considerations and events during this phase of the research process which are worth discussing in depth. The first two described here relate to how the researcher may affect survey results, and reflect the complex power dynamics inherent in this kind of work. Gender and nationality were both prominent issues to be addressed, but the solutions to the impact of these traits on my research were often in conflict with one another. There was also a tension between using material from communities and forums, while ensuring that those community members could continue to write and post and interact without researcher intrusion. In cases where I was publicly posting survey links, community members were open about their doubts and offered the opinions on many aspects of the study. Below I detail how I coped with these research issues, and reflect upon the process.

### 3.1 Gender and language

Gaming communities have been criticised for being hostile places towards women, and my own experiences have supported that criticism. Early reading suggested that female gamers are less numerous and less visible in Russia than in English-speaking circles, and so to reduce the likelihood that my survey results would be affected, and to avert any hostility towards me, I chose to gender pass. This essentially means I did not reveal my gender. I chose a gender-neutral username, an email address which could not be linked to my real name online, and I used grammatically masculine language in all user-facing content. This strategy was decided long before any fieldwork took place, but as noted in the previous

chapter it quickly became obvious that many Russian gaming sites were not inclusive places for female gamers. However, while avoiding potential abuse based on gender called for an approach which hid some details about me, my position as a Western researcher broadcasting my work to a Western academic audience made the deception somewhat loaded. The position of power which is well known to practitioners of anthropology is usually mitigated by sharing more information about the researcher and being open to approach by participants. In this case, the inverse was necessary. The two conflicting issues were partly reconciled by ensuring that details of the research supervision were available, and by using survey methodology which required potential respondents to opt into taking part, rather than by soliciting responses directly (for example, by email or in person

## 3.2 Privacy and community authorship

Different online forums can have different expectations of privacy and community safeguarding. Visiting the official community of a game or company is not the same as making an account just to view a more specific or personal forum. While exploring forums and blogs for user commentary, I encountered a range of different environments with a wide variety of understandings about how private, exclusive or informal the communities were (or should be). In the most exclusive communities, users were sometimes quite free with offering personal details and stories, photos and potentially identifying information about themselves. Conversely, while the biggest sites did have a community feel to them (with popular members, friendship groups and personal discussions), their users posted with the expectation that their writing would be read by a wide audience, not all of whom were participating in good faith. Blogs were also a difficult area to navigate.

Some were extremely popular and linked widely across the Russian-language gaming sphere as sources of entertainment and information about both Russian and non-Russian games. In these cases, the bloggers tended to have cohesive online presences across several social networking sites, a host of fans and recognisable gaming aliases which formed a kind of personal brand. On the other end of the scale were personal blogs with small readerships, content which sometimes to frequently referenced family life and friends, and commenters who often knew each other in an offline context. This latter group and their commenters were less inclined towards anonymity for their offline identities, sometimes even posting via Facebook or vKontakte with their real names.

Quoting from and referencing these sources comes with a host of responsibilities for the researcher which cannot be easily encapsulated in a single strategy. Does one treat bloggers as authors or subjects? Are communities private or public? Simultaneously, it seems, the answer is both. The ethical tensions inherent in this public-private debate were exacerbated by the position of the researcher in the case. Being, and having been, an active

community member in many different game-related forums and readership frequently made it hard to discern the line between observer and participant. As I discuss below, my ability to respond to forum users with cross-culturally popular memes was a benefit, but this familiarity with (Western) gaming knowledge sometimes gave me an exaggerated sense of how far it was appropriate to react to the forum users and participants I was interacting with. When in doubt, I erred on the side of formality. The sources which I draw upon here are from those sites and blogs which overwhelmingly present themselves as open resources and do not require accounts to view posts and comments.

### 3.3 Fielding questions and critiques from respondents

Participants in the study were quick to critique questions and concepts in the survey, as well as openly discussing their reservations and queries about the project in the forum threads posted. The fact that I might not understand gaming and gamers was of some concern. They were keen to be accurately represented, and my gaming knowledge was seen as vital to my role as an effective and sympathetic researcher. In discussion threads on the EVE Online and World of Warcraft forums, posters' doubts were limited to asking who funded the research and questioning my academic discipline. I attribute this to the fact that I used high-level game characters to post to the forums; my virtual mouthpieces were obviously sufficiently advanced to allay fears that I may be ignorant of the games themselves. EVE Online players were remarkable for their considerable interest in and support for the project, which may also be a result of the game's demographics. The EVE playerbase, at least in 2006, was an average of 27 years old and described as having 'some kind of degree' by CEO Hilmar Pétursson.[119] On the other hand, the account used to post to the Allods Online forum was much newer, reflecting my recent acquaintance with the game. In this case, forum users expressed concern about potential viruses and were more neutral than positive about the research project. Nevertheless, having established my credentials through the game forums, survey participants used the slang and register they were accustomed to, and did not seem to feel the need to gloss or 'translate' for me.

In addition to asking where funding for this research came from, more than one user asked questions about the academic discipline of the study. In one case, the poster stated that if the project was motivated by psychology it was probably academically 'a scam', while others explained their interest in participating by referencing their own higher education. Some returned to the threads after filling out the questionnaire in order to give their opinion on the questions. Most were positive, a few pointed out that an option they would have selected was not available, but generally comments displayed an appreciation

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[119] Vili Lehdonvirta, 'Interview with CCP: EVE currency traders 'going to lose big'?', *Virtual Economy*, October 2006, <http://virtual-economy.org/2006/10/02/interview_with_ccp_eve_currenc/> [accessed 10 June 13].

or understanding of survey design rather than an assessment of their ability to express their opinion. Mixed in with a largely positive reception was the repetition of an ironic meme about 'британские учёные' – britanskiye uchoniye, or 'British scholars'. The meme, very occasionally referenced on the English-language internet but apparently more popular on Runet, satirises the tendency of the British media to produce sensational reports about apparently trivial scientific studies. A Russian internet culture wiki site called Lurkmore, linked to by one respondent, describes the phrase as referring to 'researchers working on insane and idiotic pseudoscientific projects with absolutely no practical value'.[120] Forum users invoking this meme were thankfully somewhat less pithy than Lurkmore, generally making comments about seeing a British scientist 'in the wild', or noting with liberal use of emoticons that 'the British scientists are attacking'. (On the World of Warcraft forum, further mockery on the latter theme was forestalled by my posting a YouTube link to well-known World of Warcraft meme about Leeroy Jenkins, an incompetent player who charges into a pack of enemies and dies instantly. Some internet memes transcend cultural boundaries.)

In this short interaction, the permeability of language/culture boundaries in internet spaces was immediately apparent. The game-appropriate response was instantly understood, although that video is in English. Initially I was concerned that responding to comments in-thread would have a negative effect on discussion; Mickiewicz discusses this problem in her own study on television in Russia, writing that she did not attend focus groups as, 'there could be no easier way to contaminate or nullify the discussion than having a foreigner, even a Russian-speaking foreigner, sitting in the room.'[121] However, my decision to be available to potential survey respondents paid off; I gained a useful insight about the extent to which game-related memes might spread in global gaming environments.

## 4. Data collection and archiving

All internet-based articles used for this study were listed and then archived. First, the media outlet, author, date of publication, title, and a brief synopsis were listed in an Excel spreadsheet, along with a link to the webpage. Next, I applied a series of 'tags' to easily

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[120]Lurkmore.to, 'British Scholars', <http://lurkmore.to/%D0%91%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B5_%D1%83%D1%87%D1%91%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B5> [accessed 21 August 2012]. The above website contains a superb list of links to 'British scholar' projects, including a study to find the perfect formula for a cup of tea, an investigation into whether the chicken or egg came first, and a project which concluded that it is quicker to send news to provincial areas by homing pigeon than via the internet.
[121] Mickiewicz, *Television, Power and the Public in Russia*, p. 8.

identify which common themes appeared in the article. Finally each article was printed to a .pdf file so that they could be accessed even if the original piece became unavailable.

Data from the six-week gaming website analysis were stored in an Excel spreadsheet with a separate tab for each week. Websites were listed in the first column and subsequent columns noted information about current polls, numbers of games from each region covered that week, most popular discussions and so on.

| | A | B | C | D | E | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Site name | Top post | Slang | Poll(s) | Russian games covered | |
| 2 | | | | | | |
| 3 | Блог казуального геймера | COMCON в Guild Wars 2 - присоединяйтесь! | | None | 0 | |
| 4 | Gameland | Открыта регистрация на новом форуме «Страны Игр» | | Сколько игр вы купили на летней распродаже Steam? [http://www.gameland.ru/votes/] | 4 | |
| 5 | GameMag | [ Под микроскопом Digital Foundry: анализ Halo 4 ] | | Управление в серии Killzone [http://gamemag.ru/votes/166/results] | 0 | |
| | | Отчет с презентации XCOM: Enemy Unknown и | | | | |

General 26-06-12 | 29-06-12 | 06-07-12 | 13-07-12 | 20-07-12 | **27-07-12** | 03-08-12 ⊕

*Figure 1. Screenshot of Excel spreadsheet showing an excerpt of data gathered from each website.*

Survey responses were downloaded from the university survey engine into Excel. Data were anonymised and then encrypted using TrueCrypt to ensure that the respondents' usernames could not later be associated with their survey responses.

## 5. Summary

This chapter started with a discussion of methods used in digital media, digital culture and Russian studies. Building upon the earlier literature review, I showed how I chose a selection of these methods that amplified the voices of Russian gamers and gave due weight to cultural context. In keeping with my critiques of West-centred studies of game communities, I used a range of Russian media sources to contextualize my survey results and to analyse in their own right as valuable commentary on the position of gaming in Russian society. I used a process of triangulation to compare view points from different sources, teasing out the tensions between different media outlets, between different types

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of media, and between media and gamer discourses. In the next chapter, I begin my analysis of Russian gaming with a study of the gaming industry and close readings of a selection of Russian games.

# Chapter Two: Russian games and gaming in a global context

This chapter presents an analysis of games, game consumption and the gaming industry in Russia from 2000 to 2014. I demonstrate the scope and growth of game development and consumption in the past ten years, drawing upon industry figures, market research and demographic data from a number of primary and secondary sources. The analysis in this chapter is the first comprehensive English-language study of Russian gaming industry and provides both a recent history as well as a snapshot of the state of play in 2014. The contemporary gaming industry in Russia is thriving, fed by both Russian companies and developers and companies from around the world. My aims here are to present the wider global context for Russian games and gaming, and to then identify the features of the Russian gaming industry and audience. In addition to answering the research questions about Russian gaming locally and its place in global gaming, this chapter lays the groundwork for the analysis in the next two chapters.

I begin with a report on the domestic industry, presenting data on popular genres and platforms, developers and publishers, government intervention and discussion of games and professional associations and events. Next, I discuss the many ways in which games can be acquired and played in Russia, and the specific barriers to access which gamers may experience. These barriers can include economic considerations like cost and payment methods, variable internet connection speeds and high levels of internet and game piracy. I include here analysis of the cultural attitudes surrounding gaming in Russia, from political discussions to debates over censorship. Media discourse about gaming will be further explored in the following chapter. Finally, I showcase some of the variety of games available to gamers in Russia in a series of case studies. I profile some Russian games in detail, analyzing their 'Russianness' and reflecting upon how games are coded as Russian by non-Russian critics.

## 1. Strategies for access to games

Russians gamers play within an economic, cultural and political environment different from their counterparts elsewhere in the world. Unless these differences in environment are addressed, it is impossible to analyse 'Russian' gaming in any meaningful sense. In this section I move away from stereotypes that the Russian market is corrupt or broken (a common perception as I outlined in the Introduction) and present the idea that it constitutes an *alternative* gaming sphere. In this analysis, it becomes clear that economic, linguistic and cultural concerns are frequently circumvented by Russian gamers. Here, I address the topics of economic access to games, game consoles and the internet, spaces of

play, language barriers and internet infrastructure. I show how these strategies shape play dynamics to form a uniquely Russian gaming landscape.

## 1.1 Economics

Speaking to a gaming industry website in 2009, Akella's VP of publishing Vladimir Koudr emphasised how recently Russia's gaming market has developed, stating that '15 years ago it was 100 per cent illegal, just pirated software'.[122] He attributes the popularity of PC games over consoles to this videogame black market, and notes that PC games tend to be cheaper to buy in Russia, while console games are sold at prices similar to those in North America and Western Europe.[123]

Legal copies of games, game consoles, peripherals and computers are often expensive commodities.[124] Game subscriptions and equipment are also not equally accessible, both economically and also regionally. Those who do not have a home computer or console are generally restricted to the titles available at internet cafes, which again is an option which requires (usually hourly) payment. In the case of MMORPGs, a subscription fee is often required to maintain access to the game. This is usually a monthly charge and a substantial sum of money for many players. When I checked in September 2014, access to *World of Warcraft* cost 359 roubles (£5.90) per month while *EVE Online* required a payment of about 720 roubles (€14.95, or £11.90) per month. Both these games are heavily covered on Russian sites and have significant Russian-speaking populations; I use them here to make a meaningful comparison to game studies discourse where, as previously noted in the Introduction, *World of Warcraft* is ubiquitous. In many regions outside of the US and Europe, these companies and others like them offer pre-paid time cards which can be purchased at internet cafes; this allows some level of access to games without having to commit to a regular subscription. More casual MMOs like those available on mobile phones or sites like Mail.ru are free-to-play, but many features can only be unlocked by purchasing a premium account. This 'freemium' model is also present in games such as *Allods Online*, which provide players with much of the experience of a high-end fantasy MMO like *World of Warcraft* for free, but offer a wide range of upgrades and premium items, mounts and time-saving consumables for real world money.

When combined with Strukov's data on the price of new games in Russia[125], these figures suggest that for many players, access to video games may be dependent upon

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[122] Phil Elliot, 'Market Report: Russia', *GamesIndustry.biz*, 9 December 2009, <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/market-report-russia-interview>, [accessed 8 April 2015].
[123] Ibid.
[124] Strukov, for example, reports that in 2010 a popular online game store was selling new titles 'for as much as R2,499 (£52.75),' a high price which he attributes to the seller's desire to make a profit before the product became available illegally (through torrents or pirated copies). Strukov, p. 1590.
[125] Ibid.

gaming models which do not require costly subscriptions or large up-front purchases. Strukov additionally argues that the increasing trend in large Russian cities is to play at home, as broadband services on a monthly basis are cheaper than repeated visits to an *igrovoi salon* – a gaming café.[126] He does not provide specific data about regional internet access or infrastructure; it may be that in less well-connected regions, internet cafes remain cheaper. When these issues are added to the earlier discussion about piracy and mistrust of the financial system, we can conclude that game choice is shaped by a number of external practical and logistical factors.

## 1.2 Language

Russia's categorisation as part of the European game market by international game companies has led to a significant effort being made to localise games for a Russian-speaking audience. This was not always the case; an email conversation with a Russian *EVE Online* veteran revealed that the first Russian localization for *EVE* was so poor that the first piece of advice he and others would give new players was to learn some English.[127] Moreover, the country's position as an influential cultural centre in the Eastern European region has meant that operating systems and hardware compatible with Cyrillic have been available for many years.[128] In the online gaming sphere, the system of separating players into smaller shards or servers in MMOs has long given developers the opportunity to provide servers in different languages, beginning with games like *World of Warcraft* in 2008.[129] The expansion of the game console markets into Russia and Eastern Europe has ensured that console games are shipped with the appropriate language settings, allowing players to access properly-localised games and play with others in their region. Meanwhile, with similar business acumen, the developers of popular Pacific Asian MMOs like *Lineage* are ensuring the continued interest of the Russian-speaking market by providing their games and websites in Russian. Access to mainstream games is therefore not likely to be a problem for Russian gamers, and information and reviews about them are also well represented on Russian-language game websites. More niche and independent ('indie') games, which do not provide translated game text as a matter of course, are less accessible. However, Levada Center statistics suggest that Russians who speak a foreign language are most likely to speak English, and that this is more likely amongst young people and those

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[126] Strukov, p. 1590-1.
[127] Private email correspondence.
[128] As early as 1998, the range of possible Cyrillic alphabets was staggering. However, as one researcher shows, many of the alphabets came with omissions or technical problems. Roman Czyborra, 'The Cyrillic Charset Soup', *Czyborra.com*, 30 November 1998, <http://czyborra.com/charsets/cyrillic.html>, [accessed 20 January 2015]. Nowadays the dominant character sets used for Cyrillic are an updated version of Unicode, Windows Cyrillic set, and KOI. (Strukov, 'Russia's internet media policies', p. 221).
[129] 'Blizzard Entertainment announces launch date for Russian-language version of *World of Warcraft*,' *Blizzard.com*, 30 July 2008, <http://eu.blizzard.com/en-gb/company/press/pressreleases.html?id=10010397>, [accessed 8 April 2015].

who live in an urban centre.[130] Even a cursory look at Russian game-related websites shows that translating or summarising English-language information about games (for example, user-created tactical guides) is quite common, which suggests that even when official Russian material is not available there are strategies which users can employ to gather information. A hurdle harder to overcome is poor local internet infrastructure, which I now turn to.

## 1.3 Internet access

The growth in internet penetration in recent years has been extremely rapid, doubling between 2006 and 2009 and continuing to rise.[131] Data from the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) shows that by summer 2011, 52 million individuals had accessed the internet over the past month, 48 million over the past week and 37 million in the past twenty-four hours (although note that this data was only gathered from respondents over the age of 18).[132] By 2014, the Russian Public Opinion Research Center's annual study showed that 66% of their sample used the internet 'daily', a number rising to 84% in the 18-24 age group and 72% in the 25-34 group.[133]

Internet users are by no means equally distributed across the country. In fact, 2011 data from the Public Opinion Foundation shows that while 15 million users (28% of the total) were located in the central region in and around Moscow, and nearly 75% of the total users resided to the West of the Urals, the three vast regions in the east of Russia averaged just 9% of internet users each.[134] Predictably Moscow was home to 11% of the total users surveyed, and St Petersburg another 5%, whereas 24% of users lived in a town with a population of less than 100,000 inhabitants, and 18% described themselves as living in the country.[135] By April 2012, the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (hereafter VCIOM) could report that 58% of recent survey respondents had stated that they use the internet.[136] An overview of information by FOM, VCIOM, UNICEF and the Russian Federal State Statistics Service clearly shows that the primary digital divide in Russia is between those living in urban centres and those in the regions, both for socio-economic and infrastructure reasons. The Boston Consulting Group who note that internet access in

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[130] Levada Center, *Knowledge of foreign languages in Russia*,<www.levada.ru/16-09-2008/znanie-inostrannykh-yazykov-v-rossii> [accessed 27 June 2013].

[131] UNICEF, *The Runet Generation: An Exploratory Study of the Russian Digital Landscape*, October 28, 2011, <http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/TheRunet_Generation(1).pdf> [accessed 27 June 2013], p. 5.

[132] Public Opinion Foundation, *Internet in Russia: Summer 2011* (Moscow: Public Opinion Foundation, 2011) <http://fom.ru/uploads/files/Internet_Russia_Summer_2011.pdf> [accessed 10 July 2013], p. 4.

[133] 'Internet spaces,' <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=115018>.

[134] Ibid., p. 8.

[135] Ibid., p. 9.

[136] 'Smartphone, tablets or ordinary computers: how Russians access internet?,' VCIOM, April 18, 2012, <wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=660> [accessed May 20, 2012].

places like Murmansk (for example) can be almost ten times more expensive than in centres like St Petersburg.[137]

In addition to a breadth of economic and geographical variations in internet use, there are also a number of different venues and methods used to connect to the internet. 2009 data from the Boston Consulting Group's comparative market report on internet use in Brazil, China, India, Indonesia and Russia suggests that internet cafes are a more important access point for users in more rural and poorer areas of each country.[138] The report, like the UNICEF report and other similar sources, notes the rapid expansion of internet penetration in Russia and the priority placed upon connecting the nation by the authorities. The expansion in provision of internet services, as well as the fact that the majority of young Russians live in urban areas, means that internet cafes are somewhat less important overall to Russian internet users than in other, economically-similar, countries. In fact, UNICEF suggests that 70% of young internet users connect at home, while FOM estimate that over 80% of users overall can access the internet at their home.[139]

Mobile phones are also a popular access point, especially amongst young people. In this demographic, an estimated 45% use the internet on their phones, although this figure decreases with each ascending age bracket.[140] VCIOM similarly find mobile access to be popular, with 32% of users stating that they accessed the internet in that way in March-April 2012 (barely fewer than the 38% of respondents who use a laptop or netbook).[141] The BCG report agrees that mobile access is more significant in Russia than in the West, but also claims that the high cost of 3G data leads many to use broadband for their internet needs when possible.[142] As can be expected, the most active internet users in all the studies cited above are young people; VCIOM reports that 79% of people who use the internet everyday are 'young' (although they do not define the age bracket.)[143]

Russian gamers nominally have access to games in a variety of ways, but that access is in no way equally distributed. From the data presented in this section, it is clear that those in urban centres are more likely to have the income and internet access to consume online games with regularity. In the next section, I discuss the kinds of games which are available in Russia, and how accessible and popular they are.

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[137] BCG, p. 9.
[138] BCG, p. 5.
[139] UNICEF, p. 10.
[140] UNICEF, p. 10.
[141] 'Smartphone, tablets or ordinary computers.'
[142] BCG, p. 11.
[143] 'Smartphone, tablets or ordinary computers'.

## 2. The scope and variety of gaming in Russia
### 2.1 Global industry involvement in Russia

At the time of writing, 2014, the majority of the largest gaming companies in the world have some involvement in the Russian market. This has two implications. First, Russian gamers are not removed from global gaming culture and can share globally-popular cultural references. Second, games are now specifically localised for Russian speakers which makes them more accessible both in terms of language and of appropriately-translated jokes and cultural references. However, companies have been slow to move to Russia and there are still many concerns about the Russian market, in particular piracy and the lack of a strong console user base.

EA officially opened a Moscow office in 2007, one of the earliest internationally-operating game companies to do so.[144] This is borne out by a 2009 interview with Anatoly Norenko, the event director for a major game industry summit, who pointed to EA's new office as an example of how 'major US and European publishers [were] starting to enter the market'.[145] From approximately 2007, other game companies began to trickle in. Blizzard Activision launched a Russian version of *World of Warcraft* in 2008.[146] Blizzard Activision considers Russia part of its European market and in 2013 moved towards a greater integration of Russian and European players by allowing Russian PvP teams to play against English- and German-speaking teams in *World of Warcraft* arenas.[147] Tencent, a Chinese company, made tentative steps into Russia in 2010 with a $300 million (£202 million) investment into a number of Russian technology and social networking companies, a move which also included game portfolios.[148] Lagging somewhat behind, Ubisoft opened an office in Russia in 2014 and cited the recent expansion of the game industry in Russia as its reason for establishing a permanent base of operations on Russian soil.[149] Square Enix are

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[144] 'Game giant is to open its office in Moscow,' *Cnews*, 18 July 2007, <http://www.cnews.ru/news/top/indexEn.shtml?2007/07/18/259207>, [accessed 4 March 2015].
[145] Phil Elliot, 'A Russian Revolution,' *GamesIndustry.biz,* 20 October 2010, <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/a-russian-revolution>, [accessed 8 April 2015].
[146] 'Blizzard Entertainment announces launch date for Russian-language version of *World of Warcraft*.'
[147] Olivia Grace, 'Russian servers to join EU battlegrounds and arenas,' *Joystiq*, 18 December 2013, <http://wow.joystiq.com/2013/12/18/russian-servers-to-join-eu-battlegrounds-and-arenas/>, [accessed 8 April 2015]
[148] 'Tencent to invest $300 million into Russian Digital Sky Technologies,' *RT.com*, 14 April 2010, <http://rt.com/business/tencent-invest-300-million/>, [accessed 8 April 2015] and 'Tencent invests $300m in DST and establishes strategic partnership,' *Tencent.com,* 12 April 2010, <http://www.tencent.com/en-us/content/at/2010/attachments/20100412.pdf>, [accessed 8 April 2015].
[149] Mike Futter, 'Ubisoft Opens Office In Russia To Provide Community Development, Support,' *Game Informer*, 2 October 2014, <http://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2014/10/02/ubisoft-opens-office-in-russia-to-provide-community-development-support.aspx>, [accessed 8 April 2015].

considering a move to Russia as well,[150] while Nintendo have begun selling digital downloads through Yandex in 2014.[151]

Note that Square Enix and Nintendo are both Japanese companies; Japan's heavy focus on console games is probably a less profitable fit for the Russian market which, as Norenko and Bukatina both state, was dominated by PC games until recently and is still strongly PC-oriented. 2014 briefing documents from Square Enix show an interest in emerging markets like Russia not for their interest in consoles but rather for increased access to smartphones, tablets and PCs.[152] However, they denote Russia as 'challenging' and highlight online and free-to-play games as key, suggesting also the possibly of harnessing the considerable local game development talent.[153]

Speaking about the development of the gaming industry in Russia as a whole, Popov noted that in recent years the number of development for consoles increased by 15 percent. In spite of this game for the computer still occupy most of the gaming market in the country. Dmitry Lust, executive producer Biart, explained the difficulties of the transition to consoles and online projects that "the Russian representative office of Microsoft and Sony does not provide any significant support to Russian game developers."[154] By contrast, digital distribution platform Steam has been available to Russian gamers since 2011, and has in fact made significant attempts to be an easily accessible and desirable choice.[155] In this they are somewhat unusual; rather than conceptualise Russia as a challenging market (as Square Enix do) with problems of piracy and a low level of trust in traditional, card or bank account based payment methods, Valve have partnered with Xsolla to allow Russian users to buy Steam credit at kiosks.[156] Valve's policy on releasing games in Russia is an example of an alternative attitude towards a Russian playerbase. Co-founder Gabe Newell argues that incidence of videogame piracy in Russia can be attributed to the slowness with which international companies localize their

[150] Ishaan, 'Square Enix Are Interested In Expanding Into Russia,' *Silicon Era,* 25 December 2014, <http://www.siliconera.com/2014/12/25/square-enix-interested-expanding-russia/>, [accessed 8 April 2015].
[151] Dean Takahashi, 'Nintendo starts selling digital games in Russia through Yandex,' 3 October 2014, <http://venturebeat.com/2014/10/03/nintendo-starts-selling-digital-games-in-russia-through-yandex/>, [accessed 8 April 2015]
[152] Ishaan, 'Square Enix Are Interested In Expanding Into Russia'
[153] 'Outline of Results Briefing by Square Enix Holdings,' 6 November 2014, <http://www.hd.square-enix.com/eng/news/pdf/15q2outline.pdf>, [accessed 8 April 2015]
[154] 'Russian game developers hail foreign colleagues,' *Lenta,* 18 August 2010, <http://lenta.ru/news/2010/08/18/radit/>, [accessed 8 April 2015].
[155] Rachel Weber, 'Steam now supports Russian roubles,' *GamesIndustry.biz*, 13 September 2011, <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2011-09-13-steam-now-supports-russian-roubles>, [accessed 8 April 2015].
[156] Kyle Orland, 'Valve lets Russian Steam Users Pay Cash At Kiosks,' *Gamasutra*, 21 October 2011, <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/38029/Valve_Lets_Russian_Steam_Users_Pay_Cash_At_Kiosks.php>, [accessed 8 April 2015].

games for the Russian-speaking market.[157] The following image from the 2014 end-of-year-sale offers a glimpse of the variety of games available through Steam. Prices are shown in roubles; when I cross-checked these with sale prices in pounds sterling and Canadian dollars, the games were significantly cheaper for Russian customers.



*Figure 2. A December 2014 Steam sale shows original and discounted prices of a variety of gamers, both popular and more obscure.*

Western, Japanese and Chinese game and technology companies have been gradually furthering their interests in the Russian market over the past decade. Russian players greatly benefit from this increased choice of games, but the integration of Russia into the European market is still tenuous. In particular, foreign companies express concern that Russia is high-risk in terms of piracy and fraud, which means restrictions are often placed on Russian game accounts. Region-locked games and IP checking before purchases are made are common strategies. This can make it harder for Russian players to gain and maintain access to online gaming accounts. Paying for games can still be an issue, and while companies such as Valve are making every effort to provide alternative payment methods, players who do not use credit cards risk being flagged as fraudulent. Finally, Russia remains

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[157] Ibid.

a country committed to PC gaming and this comes as no surprise; the newest PlayStation and xBox consoles each cost 21,000 roubles (£228), not significantly less than the US price of $399 (£262).[158]

## 2.2 The Russian gaming industry and audience

While many parts of Russia still lack the internet infrastructure of Japan, South Korea or much of Europe and North America, there is a significant media market and a large population of video game players both on and offline. I demonstrate the changes and developments in game consumption and audience over the past decade, analysis which I draw upon in Chapter Four to discuss the demographic information collected in my project survey. Note that much of the data here comes from English-language market research, so the concept of Russia as an untapped market is often repeated. I try to mitigate this bias with data from Russian-language sources and analysis from Russian industry figures, but such sources are less common. It is also hard to tease apart data about *specifically* Russian games and developers from data on consumer spending as a whole. I therefore begin with some data on consumer and end-user spending, and then narrow my focus to more specific features of the audience and industry.

Data before 2005 is hard to come by; from the lack of information one could almost believe that video games sprung into being fully-formed in that year. Early data tends to take the form of projections for the future rather than current market statistics. PricewaterhouseCoopers report that Russia was the fastest-growing country in EMEA (Europe, Middle East and Asia) in terms of consumer/end-user spending on media in 2005, and predicted that it would continue in this trend, 'averaging 15.7 percent compounded annually during 2006–2010'.[159] A 2008 interview with Russian game developers and publishers 1C-Softclub suggested that the video game market in Russia was worth an estimated $370m in 2007, with about 17 million units sold overall.[160] When placed up against a number of popular uses of the internet, figures from the Boston Consulting Group show that online gaming can draw in about 31% of internet users in Russia.[161] By 2014, market researchers SuperData Research claimed that Russia was responsible for 50% of Eastern Europe's $2.2 billion (£1.44 million) market.[162] A feature of the earlier sources cited here is a focus on rapid growth. SuperData Research's 2014 report reverses this

[158] 'Microsoft's Xbox One to Hit Russian Shelves in September,' *The Moscow Times*, 11 August 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/console-wars-eastern-front-xbox-one-to-hit-russian-market-in-september/504896.html>, [accessed 8 April 2015]
[159] PricewaterhouseCoopers, *Global Media and Entertainment Outlook 2006-2010* (New York, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, 2006), p. 39.
[160] Ben Parfitt, 'Interview: 1C – A Russian Revolution', *MCV UK*, January 16 2008, <http://www.mcvuk.com/features/177/INTERVIEW-1C-A-Russian-Revolution> [accessed 27 June 2013].
[161] BCG, p. 10.
[162] SuperData Research, 'Eastern Europe Digital Games Market 2014', 2014, p. 12.

trend, projecting that after a sharp increase in growth in the past few years, Russia's gaming market would slow in growth between 2014 and 2017.[163] A brief 2014 report on a Ministry of Communications working group on the Russian videogame industry cites 'expert' data which places the Russian gaming market at 'about $1.5 billion'.[164]

53% of respondents to market research by NewZoo stated that they 'spend money on games', with the most popular category being boxed PC and Mac games (for a consumer spending total of USD$360 million in 2011).[165] The next largest spending category was MMOs, on which users spent USD$270 million in 2011.[166] PC and Mac downloads and console games also fared well, while mobile, casual and social networking games lagged behind somewhat with an average expenditure in 2011 of 145 million for each category.[167] Overall, then, the Russian market is strong and growing and Russian consumers have a particular interest in PC games and MMOs. In a 2009 interview, Inna Bukatina (head of international licensing and acquisition at GFI, a Russian-Ukrainian game developer) estimated that the market for PC games was 'at least 5 million gamers'.[168] Early predictions that inexpensive and accessible mobile gaming would be the most popular platform are surprisingly incorrect. Compared to characteristically console-heavy Japanese gaming culture and multi-device households in North America, Russia remains a nation which strongly prefers PC games. Although some sources suggested that mobile and smartphone games would be particularly popular, it seems that the passion for PC games has not been diminished by the increasing access to smartphones, tablets and gaming on social networks.

The PC-heavy gaming culture in Russia may be a result of the difficulty of acquiring many consoles until recently, combined with the rather robust domestic computer industry. Although globally-popular hardware is now available in Russia, older gamers recollect an era where Soviet computers were the only option. The ease with which PC games may be pirated has, I believe, greatly contributed to the perception by foreign game companies that Russian gamers are a particular risky demographic to market to. As we have seen, however, this may be changing with the realisation that kiosk- and timecard-based transactions, as well as early and expert localization, provide gamers with legal game copies which are fun to play and possible to purchase without a credit card.

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[163] SuperData Research, p. 19.

[164] 'Russian Ministry of Communications established a working group to support Russian computer game developers,' Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation, 16 May 2014, <http://minsvyaz.ru/ru/events/31355/>, [accessed 8 April 2014].

[165] Ibid.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Ibid.

[168] Phil Elliot, 'The Russian Front,' GamesIndustry.biz, 19 January 2009, <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/the-russian-front>, [accessed 8 April 2015].

According to statistics provided by Moscow's Gameland media company, the number of active video game players in Russia in 2008 was approximately equal to the sixteen million-strong population of Kazakhstan.[169] A more recent 2011 report by game research company NewZoo into Russian gamers classified 38,000,000 of the country's total 140,000,000 inhabitants as 'gamers.'[170] While it is not always accurate to apply the label 'gamer' to a person who plays video games, this broad data can give a sense of the scope of video game consumption in Russia. By 2013, NewZoo revised their estimate upwards and claimed that there were 46.4 million game players in Russia,[171] and similar research from the same source published in 2014 contained the estimate of 67 million gamers.[172] By contrast, in the Ministry of Communications report cited above, 25 million Russian citizens play computer games 'regularly'.[173] (From the context it is not clear if they are discussing only PC games, or all video games.)

The demographics of Russian gamers differ somewhat from their Western counterparts, with the average age estimated at 23 years old by Red Kite International.[174] By contrast, TMNG estimate the average gamer worldwide to be 33 years old.[175] The fact that the average gamer in Russia is younger than their average global counterpart is attributed here to the comparative youth of the game market itself in the region.[176] A UN report on youth and the internet in Russia struggles to present data on online gaming, describing 'a dearth of research concerning the prevalence and frequency of online gaming among Russian adolescents and young people'.[177] According to one 2010 study cited in the report, '75 per cent of Internet users under 18 years of age who play online games play massively multi-player online games (MMOG)' and the average amount of play time is '6 days per week, 7 hours per day'.[178] They claim that social networking games are played by

169 Red Kite International, 'The Russian Gaming Audience', February 1 2010, <http://redkiteinternational.com/frontline/the-russian-gaming-audience/> [accessed 27 June 2013].
170 NewZoo, Infographic 2011.
171 'Infographic: the Russian Games Market', 5 December 2013, <http://www.newzoo.com/infographics/russia-is-the-number-one-pc-gaming-country-in-the-world/>, [accessed 8 April 2015].
172 Dean Takahashi, 'Russia and Eastern Europe have emerged as one of the world's major game markets,' VentureBeat, 3 July 2014, <http://venturebeat.com/2014/07/03/russia-has-emerged-as-one-of-the-worlds-big-game-markets-exclusive-report/>, [accessed 8 April 2015].
173 'Russian Ministry of Communications established a working group to support Russian computer game developers'
174 Ibid.
175 TMNG Global, 'Videogames to Deliver the Next Growth Engine for Fixed and Mobile Service Providers, Finds CSMG Report', March 11, 2009, <http://ir.tmng.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=110509&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1265485&highlight> [accessed 27 June 2013].
176 Red Kite International.
177 UNICEF, p. 12.
178 UNICEF, p. 12.

another 25 percent of the sample, on average for '5 days per week, 4 hours per day.'[179]
From this we can deduce that gaming, particularly networked gaming, is strongly preferred
by young internet users and constitutes a significant part of their media ecology.

## 2.3 Movers and shakers: developers, events and associations

On the crowd-sourced website gamedevmap, a tool which shows the location of game
development studios worldwide, a search for 'Russia' returns only 55 results.[180] Wikpedia
lists just 24, and some pages are defunct. I was not able to find a conclusive list of mobile
and web game developers, although my awareness of several companies not listed on
gamedevmap or Wikipedia suggest that these crowd-sourced lists fall very short and that
the rate at which companies are created and fail is rather high. Gathering data on the
number and kind of game development studios in Russia is a messy process; crowd-
sourced information on companies is available but barely reliable and more authoritative
sources (like gaming associations or market researchers) do not offer estimates about the
number of studios in Russia. Given the patchy sources noted above, and my own
observations over the past several years, I would estimate that the number of studios is
counted in the hundreds, rather than the thousands, and concentrated mainly in Moscow
and St Petersburg.

Among the many studios which are springing up and dissolving all the time, some
few demand closer attention for their scope of activity and longevity. Mail.ru predominates
in terms of the free-to-play MMO market, currently fielding 26 of these games.[181] The
company benefits from its vast network of other internet-based services; email, blogs,
search engines, casual games, horoscopes and so on. The enormous reach of Mail.ru gives
the company marketing access to a large segment to the Russian internet-using population.
1C-Softclub, a publisher and developer, was initially founded as a software company, but
has for some years been focused on the gaming market. In late 2014, the company had 119
games and game expansions listed on their site and available for immediate purchase. A
short slideshow about the twenty most influential Russian-speaking gaming figures
claimed that games published through 1C-Softclub account for 80% of game sales in Russia,
although they provided no source for the data.[182] In addition, they report that the company
works with foreign companies including "Activision-Blizzard, EA, Sony, Bethesda, Capcom,
Konami, Rockstar, SEGA, 2K [and] Ubisoft" to bring foreign games into the domestic

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[179] UNICEF, p. 12.
[180] GameDevMap search results.
[181] '2D MMORPG,' *Mail.ru,* <http://games.mail.ru/play/mmo_2d/>, [accessed 20 April 2015] and '3D
MMORPG,' *Mail.ru,* < http://games.mail.ru/play/mmo_3d/>, [accessed 20 April 2015].
[182] 'The most influential people in the Russian/CIS gaming industry,' *Kanobu.ru,*
<http://kanobu.ru/special/top20-ex-ussr/en/>, [accessed 20 April 2015].

market.[183] The company Wargaming lacks the infrastructure of Mail.ru and 1C-Softclub; unsurprising as it is a single game development studio rather than a publisher or a social media company. However, its massively multiplayer game *World of Tanks* currently holds the record for most concurrent players online and the company's annual revenue rose from 300 million dollars in 2012 to reportedly over half a billion dollars in 2013.[184] Figures like these may be limited to the biggest and most popular game companies, but they provide us with a current picture of the upper echelons of Russian gaming.

## 2.4 Games and government

Companies like the above are clearly of interest to the Russian authorities due to their economic success. However, they also provide a powerful potential counterpoint to the great influence of global game companies in Russia. The reach and popularity of some of the larger domestic companies is viewed as a ready-made point of access to youth, a point of access which Russian political figures are now attempting to control. Archetypal of early official opinions about video games was a roundtable held in February 2010 entitled 'The role of the educational and computer game industry in the formation of values and patriotic education of youth'. In the meeting report, the Chairman of the Committee on Youth states that 'the task of the state must be to make computer games developed by young people and at the same time preserve the moral and ethical standards of our society, strengthen and promote traditional values'.[185] The roundtable discussion incorporated several topics, from 'vision and innovation' in both the international and Russian game markets, 'domestic use of innovative technologies to create computer games with a patriotic theme', 'the effect of computer games on the philosophical views youth may develop', and the possibility of offering the Russian software industry tax incentives.[186]

In addition to offering financial benefits to encourage the growth of the domestic game industry, roundtable participants recommended that the interactive technology industry should be rolled into the 'Electronic Russia' program, in order to better 'support the production and distribution of games that promote patriotism and a healthy life'.[187] Discussion therefore revolved around the best way to encourage 'appropriate' messages in games without stifling what was accurately recognised as an economically and technologically valuable domestic industry. These two concepts pervade not only the roundtable report but also, as the next chapter will demonstrates, wider public opinion

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[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.
[185] 'Roundtable in State Duma on the topic: 'The role of education and the computer game industry in the formation of values and the patriotic education of our youth'', *State Duma official website*, < http://www.duma.gov.ru/news/273/59606/?sphrase_id=32650> [accessed 28 June 2013], paragraph 1.
[186] Ibid., paragraph 4.
[187] Ibid., paragraph 4.

about games. On the one hand, politicians recognise the importance of technological progress and innovation; on the other, they are reluctant to allow video games to be produced and distributed unchecked due to their ability to disseminate ideological messages not in keeping with those which the government would like young people to receive. The recommendations made here are broadly in line with the Putin administration's push to fund and improve access to technology.[188]

In 2014, Sergey Galyonkin, a popular Russian-language gaming blogger, wrote that the government had reached out to some prominent game makers and invited them to discuss investment into the games industry with the Deputy Minister of Communication and Mass Media, Alexei Volin.[189] The representatives who attended the meeting were Anton Malginov (the head of Mail.ru's legal department), 1C's gaming lead Nikolai Baryshnikov and a spokesman for Russian-Belarusian Wargaming, Yuri Vorotnikov.[190] The Ministry wrote a short, publically-available report on the meeting, arguing that after years of relative government inattention, 'video games should be considered as a part of new media'.[191] The stated goals of the working group were to generally discuss the industry and to 'develop solutions to potential problems', principally piracy.[192] However, while the inclusion of industry figures might support the theory that the working group was focused on pro-industry initiatives, Volin also emphasises the importance of supporting 'those games which perform the tasks of education and of patriotic education of youth'.[193] In particular, the popularity of Soviet tanks in *World of Tanks* amongst Russian players was cited as an example of the value of accurate historical games.[194] In both political meetings there is a sense that game companies that prove themselves useful to government, either ideologically or through economic heft, are entitled to a seat at the table in discussions about the direction of, and protections and benefits afforded to, game developers.

## 2.5 Events, associations and conferences

It would be easy to over-focus on the most powerful game figures and companies at the expense of small studios and independent (indie) developers. During my initial research in 2010 I found only sparse evidence of resources and groups for indie developers, but the

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[188] In a report on Russia's IT development, Peterson identifies six examples of legislation to fund, promote, develop and facilitate sales of internet, telecommunications and IT projects between 2002 and 2004. D. J. Peterson, *Russia and the Information Revolution*, RAND Corporation (2005) p. 27-8.
[189] Sergey Galyonkin, 'Russian parliament is inviting games industry to discuss governmental support and awards', *Red Buzz*, 13 March 2014, <http://red-buzz.com/2014/03/russian-parliament-is-inviting-industry-to-discuss-government-support-and-awards/>, [accessed 9 April 2015].
[190] 'Russian Ministry of Communications established a working group to support Russian computer game developers'
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid.

number seems to have jumped dramatically over the past five years. A second search at the start of 2015 reveals significantly more resources and discussion, much of which is presented on slick, update websites in English and Russian rather than limited to forums and VK or Facebook groups as a few years previously. Followed by 210 Facebook users, the Russian Association of Developers and Publishers of Game Industry is a moderately busy group.[195] Their external site was unavailable at the time of research and there is little information about their current activities. However, in an article written in 2010, Lenta.ru reported that the association was aiming to bring foreign talent to the planned 'Russian Silicon Valley' at Skolkovo.[196]

For example, gamesjam.org has over 1000 projects in progress, and offers a platform for fledgling game developers to arrange game jam events, share builds of their games and discuss game development.[197] The project seems to have started in November 2013.[198] DevNight run similar events starting in 2012 and active in 13 different cities by 2013, including 'Moscow, Kiev, St Petersburg, Dniepropetrovski, Perm and Lugansk,' a significantly wider spread of cities than many Russian-language game events.[199] The event carefully selects applications 'based on motivation', and one blog post reveals that of 150 applicants, 120 were selected to attend.[200] Postmortems of events on the site's blog show an event professional in appearance which books prominent speakers and presents material which taps into common, global game discourse. In the latter case, for example, one event video shows a speaker presenting in front of his slides, one of which is a meme-type image reading, in English, 'ZOMG TEH DRAMA!!' – colloquial internet-speak for 'oh my God, the drama!'.[201] Coupled with the casual register in which the blog posts are written (with text-based emoticons, slang and little cartoon images appearing regularly) the overall tone is of an event which is expertly run, but aimed at a specifically young, internet-savvy, game-loving audience. Little attention is paid to PR, marketing or paying lip service to the usual tenets of professionalism.

Moving away from the individual, novice developer, both large and small companies alike can take advantage of many events and conferences. Some are specific to a genre,

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195 RADIT - Russian Association of Developers and Publishers of Game Industry, Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/RADIT-Russian-Association-of-Developers-and-Publishers-of-Game-Industry/111978518854270>, [accessed 9 April 2015].
196 'Russian game developers hail foreign colleagues.'
197 'Projects,' *Gamesjam.org*, <http://gamesjam.org/projects/>, [accessed 9 April 2015].
198 'What is Games Jam,' *Gamesjam.org*, 22 November 2013, <http://blog.gamesjam.org/post/67684845030/games-jam>, [accessed 9 April 2015].
199 'About #DevNight,' *Devnight.net*, <http://devnight.net/o-devnight/>, [accessed 9 April 2015].
200 '#Devnightdnepr is close!' *Devnight.net,* 19 January 2015, <http://devnight.net/2015/01/389/>, [accessed 9 April 2015].
201 '#Devnightkyiv about game design has taken place,' 29 September 2014, <http://devnight.net/2014/09/devnightkyiv-2014-pro-gejmdizajn-sostoyalsya/>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

platform or company type (social games only, indie developers only) while others are large, over-arching events which are open to all. The earliest example of a long-running event is probably the Russian Game Developer's Conference, or KRI, held annually since 2003.[202] 2013 seems to be the last year for which publicity is available online; however, a ten-year tenure is not insignificant and KRI long predates most other sizeable Russian-speaking gaming events. For many years, the event was a vital enough part of the Russian gaming environment that British online gaming publication Rock Paper Shotgun sent a journalist, Jim Rossignol, to cover the conference. Despite his confusion at the Cyrillic alphabet, Rossignol deemed it 'in many ways [...] a typical games show' and 'a kind of validation of the size and scale of the Russian games industry as it exists today'.[203] Rossignol's commentary also once again points to the issues of infrastructure which render Russia such a unique market; the eight-day train journey from Vladivostok to Moscow meant that the developers of the game King's Bounty were simply unable to attend.[204] Once again, the centrality of Moscow, St Petersburg and Kiev to Russian gaming as an industry hinders potential developers in the further-flung regions.

Dev GAMM is similar to KRI in its locations and its medium-term success. Described as a 'mobile, online and indie game conference for developers and publishers, held in Moscow in 2014 and Kiev in 2013.[205] Prior to 2013 it was called Flash GAMM and held events in Moscow and Kiev each year since 2008 (with the exception of an event in Hamburg in 2013). The website gives information in both Russian and English, although conference rates are exclusively given in US dollars. This is not an uncommon practice; not only do these event sites frequently use US dollars as a common currency, but I noted that when reading game websites, figures in articles would often be given in both roubles and US dollars. In addition to established events like KRI and Dev GAMM, newer conferences and trade shows have been appearing over the past five years. White Nights, a mobile game development and marketing conference, has been held twice annually from 2012 to the present.[206] Sociality Rocks! is a conference on social networking and social games. It was held in Kiev in 2010 and 2011, Kiev and Moscow in 2012 and San Francisco in 2013.[207] Such mobile and social game conferences seem to be more popular in recent years, no doubt due to the proliferation of smartphones in Russia.

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[202] 'KRI Conference 2013,' <http://rgdconf.com/2013/>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

[203] Jim Rossignol, 'Gaming in the Russian cosmos, Part 1,' *Rock Paper Shotgun,* 5 January 2009, <http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2009/01/05/gaming-in-the-russian-cosmos-part-1/>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

[204] Rossignol, '*Gaming in the Russian cosmos.*'

[205] 'Dev GAMM! Moscow 2014,' <http://devgamm.com/moscow2014/en/>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

[206] 'Winter Nights Mobile Game Development and Marketing Conference 2015,' <http://wnconf.com/en/#home>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

[207] 'Kyiv Sociality Rocks! 2013,' <http://en.socialityrocks.com/>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

Game development and publishing in Russia are active fields with the same kinds of conferences, game jams, international links and professional associations as their counterparts in the West and Asia. However, much like access to games which I discussed earlier, events are very much concentrated in Russian-speaking centres like Moscow, St Petersburg and Kiev. Not only does this make attendance a challenge for gamers and game professionals, but it means that games produced in the largest urban locations are a disproportionately large part of a Russian gaming culture in general. Nonetheless, despite the focus on urban centres, game developers are numerous and varied and, as the 2014 working group shows, of interest to Russian authorities. The Russian government has been rather slow to react to the phenomenon of games and still focuses on historical and patriotic education, but also acknowledges the economic potential of the domestic game industry. Although I discuss only Russian developers and events here, during the course of my research I found many more which, although located elsewhere in Eastern Europe, used Russian as their language of operation. This suggests that it is possible to talk about not only Russian gaming, but also a wider and more diverse *Russian-speaking* community of game developers and publishers.[208]

Although most of the events discussed here take place in the urban centres of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, there is a sense that Russian gaming associations are outward-looking and seeking to connect with wider global game-makers. From the hope that a 'Russian Silicon Valley' will attract foreign talent to the prolific presence of English language on event websites, the Russian industry seems to be employing strategies which court global interest.

## 2.6 Publications and conventions for fans

To this point I have focused on the creation, publication and political reception of Russian games. In this section I turn to the different events and publications that are available to fans, a short analysis which provides the context for the discussion of gaming websites in the next chapter. In terms of events specifically for a fan audience, Igromir is the largest and best-known expo in Russia. The mammoth gaming expo has been steadily gaining in size and popularity since 2006, when its inaugural event attracted 25,000 attendees.[209] By 2010, 90,000 people made the journey to attend,[210] and the most recent event in 2014 saw

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[208] A good example of the centrality of Russian in this case would be Sergey Galyonkin, a Ukrainian game blogger who writes extensively about games in Russian and English, co-hosts a Russian-language podcast called *How Games Are Made* and runs the site RedBuzz.com, which collates news stories about specifically the Russian gaming industry in English.

[209] 'IgroMir news,' *Wayback Machine Internet Archive,* 9 November 2006, <http://web.archive.org/web/20061128152557/www.igromir-expo.ru/index.php?type=info&doc=news>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

[210] 'IgroMir 2010 exhibition taken place,' *WebCite,* <http://www.webcitation.org/65Y7IMR6C>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

157,000 visitors across the four days.[211] Such events are not just a way for game fans to passively view new games. Cosplayers are much in evidence, dressing as favourite characters, game companies bring unreleased and beta versions of games to allow players to try them before mass release, and vendors allow fans to purchase game-related merchandise. Much like Rossignol's coverage of KRI, American online game magazine Polygon linked its readers to photographs of the event so that they could have 'a tiny taste of what a Russian take on Comic-Con looks like'.[212] Video games are also represented at the AVA popular culture expo, held annually since 2007.[213] This event caters to fans of many different aspects of pop culture including toys, anime and board games, but also hosts a 'gaming zone' each year where participants can play laser tag, indulge in tabletop gaming or, of course, play and purchase video games. In addition to national events, many smaller, local festivals and events are in evidence.

Print publications have a long and rich history, with the first popular gaming magazine, Video-Ace Dendy appearing in 1993. Its success under that name was short-lived; with more and more complex games becoming available in pirated copy, by 1995 the magazine had changed its name to Velikij Drakon (Great Dragon) and moved away from its focus on the Dendy console. Velikij Drakon (sometimes styled G Dragon) ran until 2004, when it closed due to financial insecurity.[214] By the early 2000s, several print publications about games were being produced in Russia. In a video for Kanobu.ru about the cult Russian magazine GAME.exe, Dmitry Mendrelyuk (from the Komputerra publishing company) talks about a sort of gaming zeitgeist in this period where trading games and learning about Western games suddenly became interesting and widespread enough to demand magazine coverage.[215] The publication Velikij Drakon closed in 2004, a closure attributed by the magazine's publishers to increasing pressure from competition.

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[211] 'IgroMir 2014 and 2014 Comic Con Russia were a success!,' *IgroMir*, <http://www.igromir-expo.ru/news/index#69>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

[212] Brian Crecente, 'Igromir 2014: Russia's biggest game expo in pictures,' *Polygon*, 6 October 2014, <http://www.polygon.com/2014/10/6/6917743/igromir-2014-russias-biggest-game-expo-in-pictures>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

[213] 'About the festival,' *AVA Expo*, <http://avaexpo.ru/about>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

[214] 'History of the magazine,' *Wayback Machine Internet Archive*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20010408155408/http://www.gdragon.lgg.ru/history_of_magazine.html>, [accessed 9 April 2015].

[215] 'The Theory of Games. Game.EXE Part 1,' *Kanobu,* 11 February 2013, <http://kanobu.ru/videos/teoriia-igr/teoriya-igr-gameexe-chast-1-363880/>, [accessed 9 April 2015].
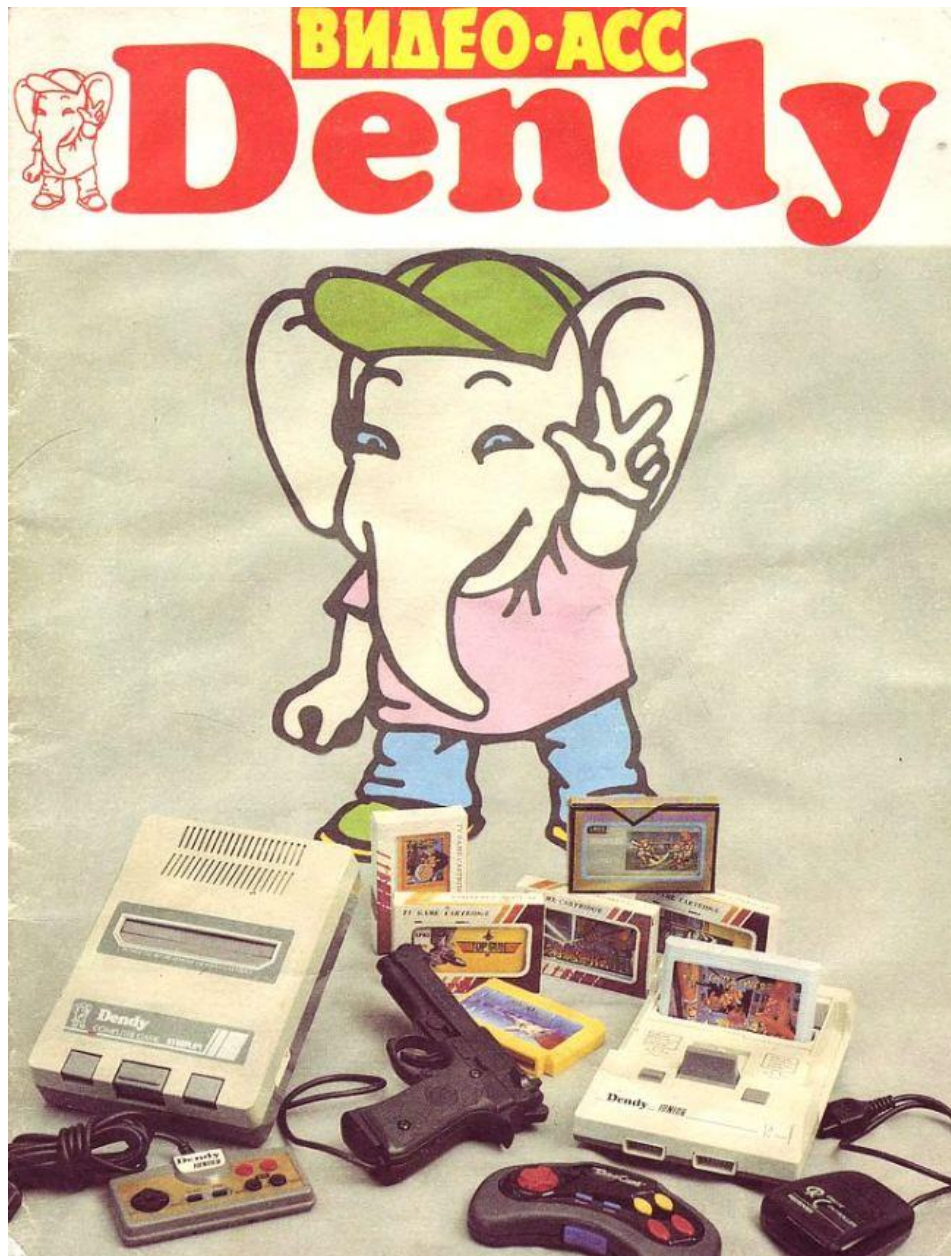
*Figure 3. A cover of the hugely-popular and long-running Video-Ace Dendy.*[216]

The kind of competition which forced earlier magazines to close comes from media like the websites Gameland.ru and Igromania.ru, which have each published a companion magazine in print and online. Both websites have been running since the magazines were first published, and each has successfully managed to not only keep the attention of their readership, but also capitalise upon new technologies and trends. Igromania, for example, runs a show on the American streaming platform Twitch, where staff members play through new games and give running reviews. Although the ultimate fates of the print publications of each company were quite different, successfully transitioning to a more

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[216] Kevin Gifford, 'Game Mag Weaseling,' 29 June 2010, *Game Set Watch*, http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2010/06/column_game_mag_weaseling_wher_6.php, [accessed 20 April 2015].

web-based focus and gaining an audience on other social media platforms has proven to be a sound strategy in an increasingly challenging market.

Gameland's publication, *Strana Igr* (translating to Gameland) was founded in 1996 and ran on a monthly or bimonthly basis until 2013, when the publishers wrote that the magazine was struggling to come up with the full sum need to print the December issue.[217] There was some subsequent discussion about the possibility of crowdfunding future issues.[218] 225 comments followed this article, many expressing sympathy for the demise of the magazine and talking about how long they had subscribed for and what aspects of the publication they had most enjoyed.[219] In one particularly poignant comment, a reader wrote, 'I read SI before the 1998 crisis... read it in the 2000s [...] the magazine still recalls the 2000 years... high-quality paper [...] everything beautiful and stylish. [...] And now... crowdfunding'.[220] When the magazine closed, each issue had cost 290 roubles (£3).[221] In the comments to the crowdfunding article, many commenters expressed that they would contribute between 500-1000 roubles (£5.25 to £10.50) for another issue, and some suggested much more.[222] With a lifespan of almost 20 years, it is clear that the magazine was an important source of information before the rise of videogame websites. Those writing that they had read the magazine since its release surely represent the earliest generation of mainstream Russian gaming.

Igromania's magazine of the same name is still running today and, first published in 1997, is close in mass appeal to *Strana Igr*. When purchased through the mobile or tablet magazine app, each monthly magazine issue costs about £1.30. The print copies cost 205 roubles (£2.20) each and include multimedia discs with a video show, game trailers, wallpapers and other such game-related digital content. The company places the magazine's circulation at 180,000 copies monthly.[223] Perhaps because Igromania.ru has more aggressively capitalised on an internet audience, the publication continues to run and shows no signs of closing.

Long-running publications like those discussed represent an important part of Russian gaming history. I would argue that the popularity and success of these magazines, even through the crisis years of the early 1990s, is an effect of the general strength of the

[217] StranaIgr, 'Tekushshchaya situatsiya,' 20 December 2013, *GameResistance.ru,* <http://gameresistance.ru/?p=56>, [accessed 20 April 2015].

[218] 'SI i kraudfanding,' *DarkWren.ru*, <http://darkwren.ru/igry/si-i-kraudfanding/>, [accessed 20 April 2015].

[219] Ibid.

[220] Ibid.

[221] 'Anons zhurnala 'Strana Igr' #10 (349) 2013,' <http://www.gameland.ru/magazines/si/>, [accessed 20 April 2015].

[222] 'SI I kraudfanding.'

[223] 'OOO Igromedia: Igromania,' *Igromedia.ru*, <http://corp.igromania.ru/im.php>, [accessed 20 April 2015].

print market in post-Soviet Russia as articulated by Beumers et al.[224] However, with the internet becoming increasingly popular (and necessary to play many games), some commentators are suggesting that the demise of the print media in other countries will also affect Russia. Sergey Galyonkin writes extensively about the closure of many gaming magazines over the past five years, suggesting that some of the most popular may be able to eke out more years by distributing digitally, but that overall gaming magazines have a limited lifespan.[225]

## 3. The 'Russianness' of Russian games: three case studies

With the active participation of global game developers and publishers in Russia, as well as the busy domestic industry which I described above, it is clear that Russian gamers have no shortage of choice. Although players may be constrained by economic access or their far-flung location and poor infrastructure, the market for a wide variety of games is diverse and growing. It would not be possible to describe in detail every genre, every franchise and series, every platform and online game available to Russian consumers. However, in this section I try to give a sense of the variety of videogames available to those gamers playing via their PC or smart phone. As this project does not directly cover console games, I focus instead on some of the popular types of game which are available on more commonly-used platforms. First I make a brief analysis of a large number of games, to demonstrate to the non-gaming reader the sort of visual, mechanical and artistic variation which exists. I then present larger case studies of the Russian fantasy MMO *Allods Online*, Russian-Ukrainian, dystopian first-person shooters *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl* and *Metro 2033*, and the unorthodox independent game *Knock-knock*, funded using Kickstarter. In this section, I unpack markers of 'Russianness' in the games: for example, the presence of Russian cultural references and jokes, historical themes presented from a Russian perspective, artistic or literary allusions to a Russian canon and the promotion of Russian cultural traditions to a global audience.

### 3.1 A brief look at genres and styles

Individuals with little time or inclination to play long games may choose only those games which can easily picked up and put down, such as games available on Facebook or VK, or downloaded onto their smartphone or tablet. Common types of games here are city, farm or business-building games, word, number and shape puzzles, pair-matching or item-finding tasks, manoeuvring a character through a maze and fighting enemies in a 'roguelike' game, or using the motion sensing device in a phone or tablet to move an item, figure or dot around a maze or in between obstacles and enemies.

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[224] Beumers et al, p. 21.
[225] Sergey Galyonkin, 'Pro smert' pechatnoi pressyi,' 18 October 2010, *Kanobu.ru,* < http://kanobu.ru/articles/pro-smert-pechatnoj-pressyi-162311/>, [accessed 20 April 2015].
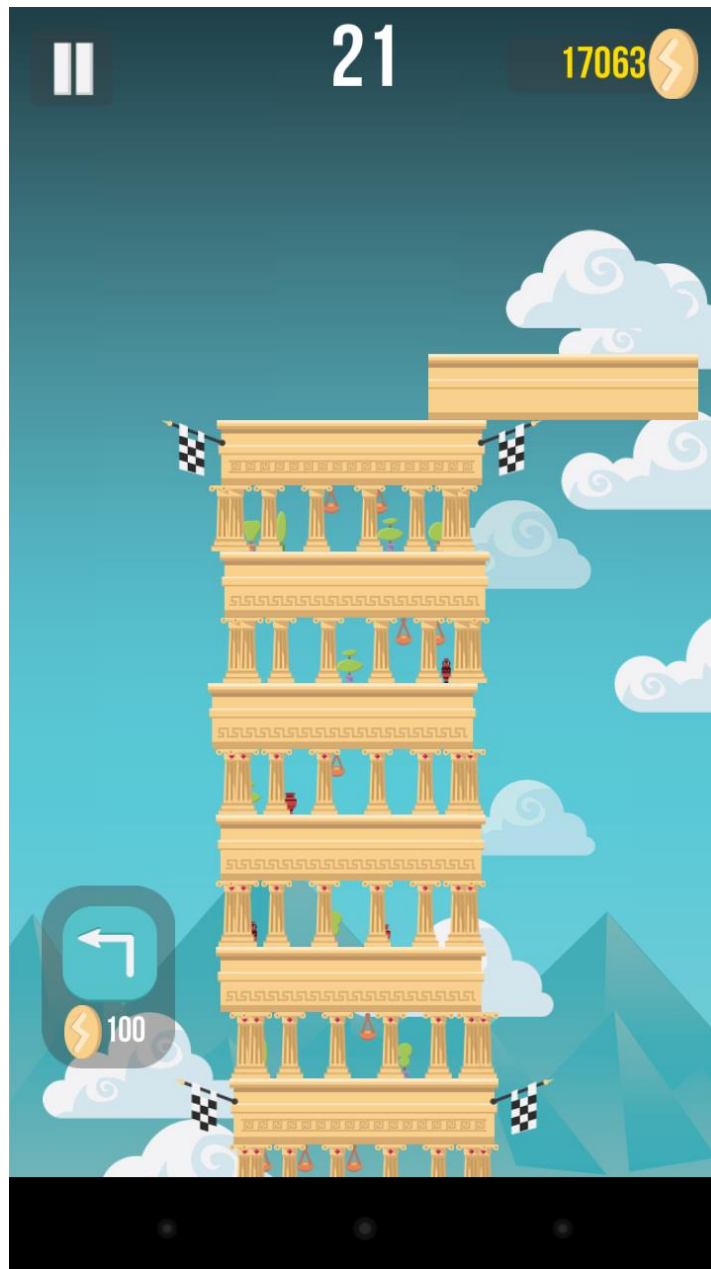
*Figure 4. Mobile phone and tablet game* The Tower. *The player must use careful timing to drop tower blocks precisely atop one another. Every time a block is not perfectly aligned, the game movement speeds up.*
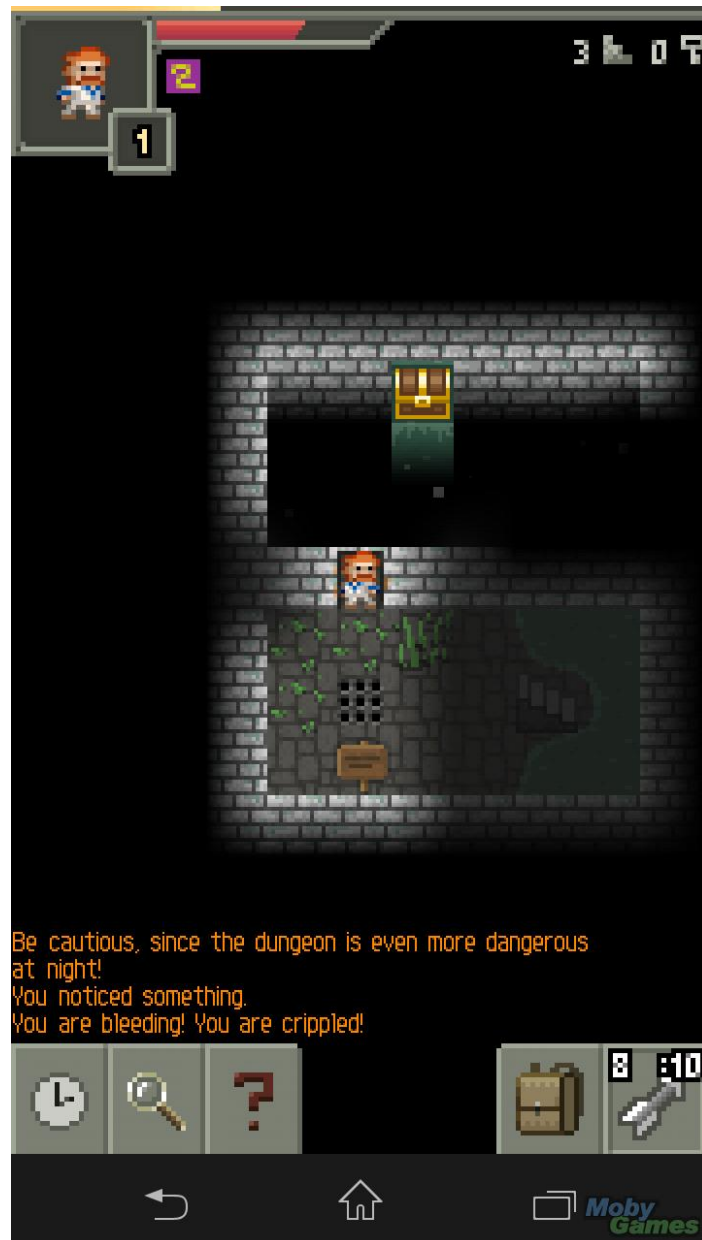
*Figure 5. Mobile phone and tablet game* Pixel Dungeon. *A tiny warrior, mage or rogue character is moved around a dungeon by tapping the touchscreen. To progress, the player must explore increasingly challenging dungeon levels, killing enemies, collecting treasure and armour and solving quests.*

*Figure 6.* MewSim *is a mobile phone or tablet pet simulator in which the player must feed, train and play with a cat.*[226]

[226] 'MewSim,' *Dynamic Pixels,*< http://dynamicpixels.com/32-our-games/115-mewsim.html>, [accessed 21 April 2015].

Role-playing games and first-person shooters are computer games in which the player takes control of a character and looks through their eyes, navigating through the game world to perform different tasks. In RPGs, players most usually complete quests, interact with non-player characters, build relationships, explore scenery and trade. This could take place in any environment, from space exploration to traditional fantasy. In an FPS game, the player is usually entirely focused on solving tasks and killing enemies; if the primary focus of an RPG is the plot, then the focus of the FPS is often tactical problem-solving and military manoeuvring.



*Figure 7. In PC game* King's Bounty: Dark Side, *the player takes control of a character and moves through the world solving quests and becoming more powerful, as measured by the green bar in the centre of the bottom task bar.*

Multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs) and real-time strategy (RTS) are, like FPS games, concentrated on fighting and strategising. However, while RPGs are almost never played with others, and FPS games may or may not be, the MOBA and RTS genres are practically always played over local or internet connections with other people.

*Figure 8. In PC game* IL-2 Sturmovik*, a World War II flight simulator, the player can engage in aerial dogfights with other players.[227] Many choose to use a joystick rather than a mouse or keyboard to add to the realism of the game.*

227 'Fiche du jeu IL-2 Sturmovik Series: Complete Edition,'*Gamekult.com*, <http://www.gamekult.com/jeux/il-2-sturmovik-series-complete-edition-J78359.html>, [accessed 21 April 2015].

*Figure 9. In this image from PC game* World of Tanks*, a player uses bushes as cover as he plans an attack. The list of players on each team are listed on each side of the screen.*[228]

Massively-multiplayer games (MMOs) involve a similarly social kind of play, but where MOBAs and RTSs have one goal in mind, MMOs are characterised by a more free-form environment. Some players like to level up their characters rapidly, becoming more powerful and earning greater weapons. Once they reach the highest level, they can participate in 'end-game' activities such as teaming up with other players to fight powerful monsters. Other players prefer to complete quests, fight other players in arenas or create fictitious personas to interact with one another. A good example of a popular Russian MMO is *Allods Online*, a game which I shall now analyse in detail.

### 3.2 Allods Online

*Allods Online* is a fantasy MMO combining sword-and-sorcery style character and class creation with interstellar travel for high-level players, a combination referred to by the parent company as 'fantasy space opera'.[229] Like much of the Mail.ru stable of games it is free-to-play, but users can opt to purchase special cosmetic items in the real-money shop. In June 2011 Astrum Nival stated that of the 3.5 million subscribers worldwide, 2 million

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[228] 'World of Tanks,' *Mobygames*, <http://www.mobygames.com/game/world-of-tanks>, [accessed 21 April 2015].

[229] *Allods Online,* 'Game Description', last viewed 6th February 2012, <http://en.allods.gpotato.eu/Overview/Description/>.

were playing the Russian version of the game.[230] In a recent book chapter, I have undertaken an extensive analysis of the 'Russianness' of *Allods Online*, arguing that many of the aesthetic and narrative qualities of the game draw on elements of Russian architecture, ideology and spirituality. In this section I re-present this argument and show with screenshots from the game how *Allods* offers its players a distinctly Russian play experience.

Players in *Allods* can choose from one of six races, divided into two factions. Two races, Kanians and Xadaganians, are essentially human, with the former a peaceful, democratic people residing largely in rural areas, and the latter a military-industrial society with a single, autocratic leader living in cities.
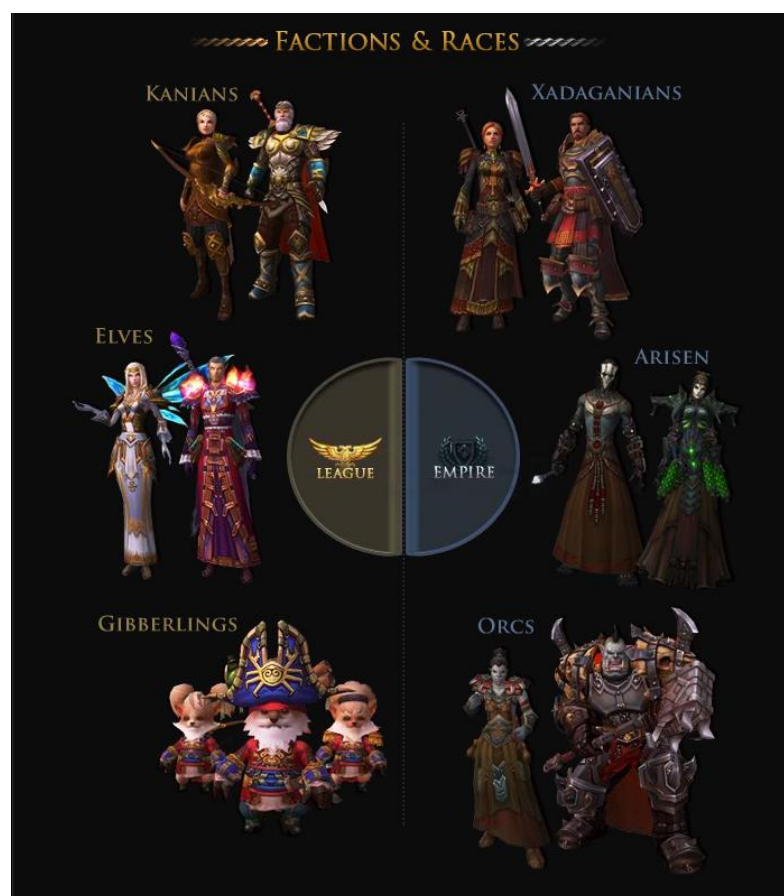


*Figure 10. An example of male and female character from each race in* Allods Online.[231]

These contrasting depictions of quasi-human races echo two similar themes in Russian culture and history: the idealisation of a simple, rural life and the glorification of military power and progress and strong leadership.

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[230] *Allods Online*, 'News post 14.06.2001', <http://allods.mail.ru/news.php?article=986>, [accessed 14 May 2015].

[231] 'C – Factions and Races,' *Allods Online Wiki*, <http://wiki.en.allods.gpotato.eu/races>, [accessed 14 May 2015].

*Figure 11. Players who choose to play as an Orc character begin their game wearing a kind of naval-inspired uniform.*

The physical prowess of the Orcs is highlighted in the early game experience by their uniform (which is modelled on those worn by the Russian navy) and the fact that NPCs (non-player characters like quest-givers) address the new recruits using common military slang. Meanwhile, the Gibberlings are playable as a trio of small, furred creatures and their backstory owes much to traditional Russian folk tales.

*Figure 12. A trio of Gibberlings.*

Most obviously, the existence of three characters controlled as a single avatar reflects a common trope in these tales. Usually the story presents three brothers, sisters, sons or daughters, and significant events are often repeated three times. In *Allods*, the three Gibberlings controlled by the players are always siblings. Moreover, a Gibberling is a key player in the *Allods* story 'Tiny Things are often the Most Important', a tale which is constructed in a way familiar to any student of Russian folklore.[232] The story outlines the discovery of a way to travel the 'Astral', an accidental development which occurs when a foolish character named Swen falls asleep in his fishing boat and drifts over the edge of the island, or allod, where his tribe live. As he floats around, he discovers a magic stone which helps him return home, where he is ultimately hailed as a hero for discovering a way of travelling from island to island. The canonical Swen functions in *Allods Online* lore much as 'Ivan the Fool' in many Russian fairytales; that is, as a simple but well-meaning unlikely hero whose successes are accomplished by a combination of good intentions and good luck.

The cities each draw upon Soviet and Russian historical features, but the game designers have selected different traits to highlight. The League city of Novograd ('New City') is set in the middle of lush woodlands with lakes and villages surrounding the city proper. The city itself has a bustling trade district, a Gibberling region with tiny, circular houses and an elegant Elven quarter which is strongly reminiscent of the Europeanised buildings of St. Petersburg. On the other hand, the Imperium capital Nezebgrad has a more disciplined layout, possessing a number of large squares (each with its own Soviet-style monument) and a vast central plaza dominated by a bureaucratic building which is obviously modelled on one of the Seven Sisters buildings in Moscow and even topped with a red star. Towards the outskirts of the city are several vast factory buildings and industrial

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[232] *Allods Online,* 'Tiny Things Are Often the Most Important', last viewed 7th February 2012, < http://en.allods.gpotato.eu/Overview/Bg/Chapter4.aspx>.

parks. Also visible around the city are a number of small blue kiosks of the kind common in Russian towns; they are occasionally inhabited by a vendor, but more usually are just placed as scenery with a large sign saying 'News' across one side.

Although *Allods* characters do not have homes, both Novograd and Nezebgrad have empty housing which can sometimes be entered and explored. In the case of the League area, houses tend to be wooden or stone and built as if for a single family. In Russia the majority of city accommodation is in the form of apartments; the very outskirts of cities and seasonal summer residences (dachas) are usually individual houses. For this reason, Russian players may well associate the style of housing in the League city with a more rural lifestyle. Nezebgrad, on the other hand, has a number of apartment buildings divided up in a communal style, with arches leading into courtyards – *dvory* – behind the buildings. The high-ceiled flats in the Imperium capital are somewhat shabby and possess no bathrooms or kitchen area. They are modelled on Soviet communal apartments and city life, further adding to the sense that the Imperium can be paralleled with the collective social and military way of life promoted during the Soviet years.

The military aspect of the game is pervasive in the early Imperium quest chains, while combat is a vital element throughout. Esther MacCallum-Stewart has examined the cultural impact of World War II upon *World of Warcraft*, noting a strong theme of technology being portrayed as dystopian or dangerous. She points to the appearance of zeppelins as a symbol of 'progress run amok, often along explicitly totalitarian lines'[233] which suggests 'aggressive colonization, technology outstripping need, and a potentially fascist militarism insinuating itself into normal life'.[234] She posits that this use of military technology as a sign of disaster is indicative of American society coming to terms with the events of the Iraq war by depicting conflict in *World of Warcraft* as simultaneously inevitable and undesirable.[235] Meanwhile, games like *America's Army* have been used for recruitment purposes, drawing upon what Philip Lin and others refer to as the compelling power of the 'military-entertainment complex' in Western society.[236] Based on a series of questionnaire and interview responses, Lin concludes that war games can provide an outlet for gamers' aggression, competitiveness and interest in the military in general.[237] This runs

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[233] Esther MacCallum-Stewart, 'War and Histories in World of Warcraft' in *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: a World of Warcraft Reader*, ed. by Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 49.
[234] *Ibid,* 59.
[235] *Ibid,* 59.
[236] Philip Lin, 'Mediating Conflicts: A Study of the War-Themed First-Person-Shooter (FPS) Gamers'. Paper presented at Videogame Cultures and the Future of Interactive Entertainment, Oxford, UK: July 8-10, 2011, p. 2.
[237] *Ibid,* 7.

counter to the beliefs expressed by many onlookers that violent or combat-based videogames cause players to become more aggressive in everyday life.

Dimitrii Galkin has suggested that themes of violence in gaming might help players to understand the violence which occurs in real life; additionally, he theorises that young men might learn to channel natural competitiveness and aggression into combat gaming so that they can be more productive in their day to day lives.[238] Boys, he believes, are interested in aspects of a game which relate to 'struggle, confrontation, violence and heroism associated with the (male) hero'.[239] These sources suggest a tension between the archetype of the patriotic Soviet hero and the less pleasant reality of modern military service. A game like *Allods*, which draws on both of these issues in a light-hearted way, offers a way of exploring very real cultural and social influences in a less charged space.

Another vital theme in the fantasy genre as a whole, and particularly in fantasy games, is magic and mysticism. *Allods Online* is suffused with magic; the game history, the key events in the narrative and many of the playable classes are all dependent on magic in some way. The game also draws upon the rich body of folklore and folk belief which Russia possesses, blending it with some more recent Christian traditions in the form of Orthodox churches scattered around the gameworld of Sarnaut. Linda Ivanits has remarked on this 'double faith' in her book *Russian Folk Belief*, writing that it blended a general belief in God with 'beliefs about minor spirits, the so-called 'lower mythology' of the folk, and about sorcerers, witches, and other persons thought to possess supernatural powers'.[240] Added to these beliefs were a bevy of superstitions, rituals and tales about various animals and mythical beasts which the average peasant might encounter, were he careless in his devotions to the cadre of spirits which kept him protected. Many of these creatures and dangers are present in the *Allods* world. The player is called upon to defeat, banish or outwit them, or engage in other tasks to thwart them such as relocating grain stores, escorting away characters in danger or carrying magical charms to render them powerless.

Aside from the opposing game faction, the major enemy in *Allods* is an army of demons which, according to the game history are 'creatures from another world [...] evil spirits' with the aim of wreaking destruction and death.[241] The game information notes that they are not particularly intelligent beings, and that they were released into the *Allods*

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[238] D. V. Galkin, 'Computer Games as a Phenomenon of Modern Culture: an Interdisciplinary Study', *Gymanitarnaia Informatika*, <http://huminf.tsu.ru/e-jurnal/magazine/4/gal2.htm>, [accessed 7 February 2012].

[239] *Ibid.*

[240] Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* , (London: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1992), p. 4.

[241] 'The Legacy of the Junes: Astral Demons', *Allods Wikia*, <http://allods.wikia.com/wiki/The_Legacy_of_the_Junes:_Astral_Demons >, [accessed 7th February 2012].

world by accident. Likewise, in Russian folklore there is a repeating motif of peasants inadvertently freeing some spirit or devil but then tricking the simple-minded creature with common sense. W. F. Ryan gives the example of the traditional story of playing cards with a *leshii* (a forest spirit) and suddenly producing a card from the clubs suit which, shaped somewhat like a cross, would scare the spirit away.[242]

Players are also faced with a long list of aggressive animals. In the list of elite monsters the largest group were insects (including several spiders, bees and beetles as well as a tick and a particularly grotesque human-sized locust). Other common enemies include bats, wolves, bears, snakes, boars, rats, birds and a few other forest and wetland animals. The overlap between this list and the kinds of animals traditionally considered powerful or dangerous in magical terms is striking. Bats have been listed as an ingredient in spells or charms, as have bears, birds and frogs, the latter notably to be swallowed whole in an initiation ceremony for a *koldun* (warlock).[243] Birds' behaviours or flight patterns are also frequently referenced as a form of divination; bad omens included a pigeon flying at a window, hearing the calls of screech owls, cuckoos or crows cawing, and hearing a woodpecker pecking a hut.[244] The death of snakes was associated with spells to bring rain and to encourage the benevolence of social superiors in events like court cases.[245] There is also a connection between this list and the kinds of creatures believed to be potential 'were-animals'; that is, witches or *koldun* in an animal's body. Generally speaking, these practitioners of unclean magic were said to take the form of birds, snakes or wild and vicious animals such as wolves and bears.[246] Almost every animal listed in *Allods* resources as an elite enemy has some association with shamanistic, pagan or otherwise folkloric Russian beliefs. This ingrained folklore may not have significance to non-Russian players, but it is nonetheless a powerful element of 'Russianness' in a game which is distributed and played worldwide.

To understand how deeply Russian cultural history has affected the *Allods* gameworld in this regard, it is useful to turn to *World of Warcraft* for comparison. Many of the animals listed above are present in the world of Azeroth too, as well as elementals, harpies, yeti and so forth. The overlap between Russian and Western folk beliefs means that neither game has a truly unique set of opponents and mythical elements. However, the American game draws upon the cultures and beliefs of many different peoples to flesh out the races and regions of the game, frequently assigning the characteristics of 'real-world

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[242] W. F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight: Magic in Russia* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 1999), p. 44.
[243] Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, pages 182, 75, 284 and 73 respectively.
[244] *Ibid,* p. 125.
[245] *Ibid,* p. 197 and p. 188.
[246] *Ibid,* p. 200.

marginalized societies'[247] to races like trolls and orcs and their native regions in-game. By contrast, the human race is modelled upon Western, and specifically Anglo-American, culture. When travelling through the world of Azeroth, the player encounters regions based upon African savannah, tundra, rainforests and desert, all of which are populated by the creatures not of *Western* myth but of the corresponding culture's folklore. In *Allods Online* the reverse is true: the gameworld is shaped according to native Russian folkloric beliefs about animals, were-animals and supernatural beings.

## 3.3 Metro 2033 and S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl

These two games draw upon more recent history than Allods Online, taking as their inspiration the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 and the immediate aftermath. They are a natural fit to be analysed side by side (as Natalia Sokolova does in her article on presumption communities surrounding Russian transmedia projects).[248] In addition to their subject matter, both games are made by 4A studios which, while a Ukrainian studio, employs both Russian and Ukrainian developers. The source material for both games is a Russian book; Metro 2033 is based on the book of the same name by Dmitry Glukhovsky, while STALKER loosely draws its inspiration from Andrei Tarkovsky's film adaptation of the Strugatsky brothers' book Roadside Picnic. The shared Russian-Ukrainian heritage of both games shows the complexity of post-Soviet reflections on Chernobyl. In this analysis, I analyse how the developers treat their source material to produce extended reflections on the perils of nuclear technology and the concept of masculinity in dystopian environments.

### 3.3.1 Central themes and parallels in plot

In Metro 2033, the surviving population of Moscow has retreated into the metro system following catastrophic nuclear war. The story of both the book and the game follows a young man called Artyom, who is sent by a ranger, or stalker (an adventurer who scavenges the surface of the radiation-poisoned city for valuable resources) on a quest to eliminate the so-called 'Dark Ones'. These are humanoid creatures who propagate unbearable fear in humans and who are threatening many of the stations in the system. On the way, he must pass through stations controlled by various factions: nationalists, Socialists and religious cults. Finally, he meets up with the stalker who plans to destroy the Dark Ones using an old nuclear silo on the surface. Dangers on the surface include radiation, mutants and the curious red star on the Kremlin which seems to hypnotise people and lead them to their deaths. The final confrontation sparks Artyom's realisation that the strange voices and

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[247] Jessica Langer, 'Playing Post-Colonialism in *World of Warcraft*' in *Digital Culture, Play and Identity*, p. 104.

[248] Natalia Sokolova, 'Co-opting Transmedia Consumers: User Content as Entertainment or 'Free Labour'?
The Cases of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and Metro 2033,' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64:8, (2012), pp. 1565–1583, p. 1565.

echoes he hears are telepathic attempts by the Dark Ones to communicate and join forces with the humans.

The 2007 game STALKER is much more loosely based on the source book than Metro 2033, and in fact shares more parallels with this game than with either the Strugatsky's book or Tarkovsky's film. In the game, we learn that following a partial repopulation of the Chernobyl area with scientists and soldiers, in 2006 a second meltdown occurs spurred by the mysterious 'C-consciousness' project. As in Metro 2033, the player takes on the role of a questing hero, playing an amnesiac stalker using his intellect and military expertise to evade the dangers of the Chernobyl zone. Throughout the non-linear gameplay, the character finds a group of scientists attempting to understand the inexplicable phenomena at work in the Zone such as the terrifying 'brain scorcher'. It transpires that the C-consciousness is the self-aware remnant of a Soviet mind-control experiment, attempting to bring about world peace. The dangerous fields of disturbance that the stalker encounters are the project's attempt to protect itself, as well as its strategy of 'reprogramming' any stalkers who find it (hence the player-character's amnesia).

### 3.3.2 Distrust of authorities

In each game, the degradation of the environment from nuclear fallout is central to the plot and made clear from the first moments of play. In *STALKER*, the damage is realistically confined to the area affected by the Chernobyl disaster while in *Metro 2033*, it is uncertain how many countries are unsuitable for human habitation. Both games require the player to peel back layers of secrecy to discover the truth; authorities in particular are not to be trusted. The government, as the source of the C-consciousness project, is the principal 'enemy' in *STALKER* and is portrayed as paternalistic and misguided. The inability to control the project forms not only a critique of the hubris of scientists, but also echoes criticisms of the Soviet authorities following the Chernobyl disaster for keeping the extent of the danger secret. Working through clues in *STALKER* as a player, it is hard not to see the parallels between real and fictitious events.

Playing as Artyom in *Metro 2033* elicits similar feelings towards the authorities in the game. However, Artyom's relationships are numerous and complex. He must navigate his father's influence at his home station, the relationship with the stalker who takes him along to the surface, as well as a residual sense of deep resentment towards the Russian government in the pre-dystopian era. Although Artyom has no memory of the latter, the game's use of the Kremlin's red star as a hypnotic, evil force is an obvious reference. Using this powerful symbol of authority as a sign of evil is a clear signpost about the game's political views; more subtly, some non-player character (NPC) dialogue gives the player further proof that the game developers are writing in significant historical critique. For

example, as the player manoeuvres Artyom past the guards in a Nazi-controlled metro station, the following overheard dialogue takes place:

> Guard 1: Do you think we could do it? Take the families and make a break for the League?
> Guard 2: You know what happened to the ones that tried.
> Guard 1: I know. Bastards.

This kind of dialogue can also be heard in a communist-controlled station, strongly implying that many of the game factions are at least partly comprised of press-ganged men. This, too, taps into the fears of totalitarian control that the player experiences through Artyom.

### 3.3.3 Player choice and post-Soviet masculinity

In both games, the player takes on the role of young, male character that has a particular set of goals to accomplish. While minor goals can change as the games progress, the central narrative always pushes the player-character towards a final confrontation. In this, both Metro 2033 and STALKER present the player-character as what Rosalind Marsh describes as a 'questing positive hero', an individual who 'overcomes personal, technical and socio-political obstacles on the way to achieving his goal'.[249] Ultimately, the game player can choose from two game endings. In Metro 2033, Artyom must either fire missiles to kill the Dark Ones, or halt their destruction and open his mind to their telepathic messages. Likewise, the player in STALKER may merge with the C-consciousness project, or destroy it. The choice is between destroying the enemy – or what appears to be the enemy – and subsuming oneself to it.

The latter choice seems at odds with the pervasive themes of strength and self-reliance in the games. Indeed, much of the scenery in each game paints a picture of cultures trying to survive in dangerous times and with limited resources. In *Metro 2033*, the player is provided with no map, only a compass. Visual reminders of the Soviet period are everywhere, in rationing, in collective living, and in old-fashioned telephones still clinging to walls. The player's surroundings in *STALKER* are equally retro, with unlabelled vodka, rather suspect tinned fish, and clunky Soviet weaponry. Maya Eichler's work on gender and war in post-Soviet Russian points to a historical trajectory of 'an uncoupling of masculinity and military service in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise and [a] subsequent resurrection under Putin'.[250] Eichler argues that increasingly, 'military service (and combat) are central to men's identity, whether this is understood as a citizenship duty or a

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[249] Rosalind J. Marsh, *Soviet Fiction Since Stalin: Science, Politics and Literature*, (1986), p. 24.
[250] Brandon Gray Miller, "Review: Militarizing men: Gender, conscription, and war in post-soviet Russia," Slovo, 24(2), 2012, 138-9, p. 129.

necessity of male socialization'.[251] Her assertion that service represents an important part of the concept of the post-Soviet man is echoed in the context of these games, where military strength, resourcefulness and bravery are emphasized over science. In both games, the stalkers epitomise this ideal; in one, as an amnesiac trying to rebuild a sense of self through exploration and survival challenges, in the other as lone wolves standing in contrast to the typical collective living.

Although the creation of these two games spans Russia and Ukraine, they are linked by their powerful post-Soviet reflections on the Chernobyl disaster, their shared Soviet science fiction heritage and their complex relationships with Soviet nostalgia and contemporary masculinity. Each game has a strong community surrounding it, gamers who mod, alter and enact in person different facets of the game. In this short analysis, I have tried to make explicit the facets of the game which have spurred Western onlookers to view them as distinctively Russian, and to show how they provide a very modern reflection upon the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

### 3.4 Knock-knock

Developer Ice-Pick Lodge has released four games to date, generally well-received by critics and united by unorthodox storylines and settings.[252] In the final part of this chapter I examine the most recent game from the studio's small but fascinating oeuvre, *Knock-knock*. In particular, I discuss the crowd funding of *Knock-knock*, a campaign which was presented in both English and Russian and, I argue, uses certain stereotypes of 'Russianness' to draw in a Western audience.

Ice-Pick Lodge's games are characterised by surreal storylines which are bounded by a certain number of 'in-game' days. Rather than being open worlds in which to play, or highly-structured quest-based storylines, the games use elements of both. The play usually has some free choice in how to play out the games, but is ominously constrained by an upcoming event. In *Knock-knock*, the player character must survive a series of nights alone in his house, while disturbing supernatural figures hunt him. Initially it is unclear from the dialogue whether he is awake or asleep, and the character himself expresses doubts as to his sanity.

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[251] Maya Eichler, Militarizing men: Gender, conscription, and war in post-soviet Russia, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 8.
[252] *Pathologic* and *The Void* have each won major Russian awards for 'Most Non-Standard Game' at the Russian Game Developers Conference in 2005 and 2007..
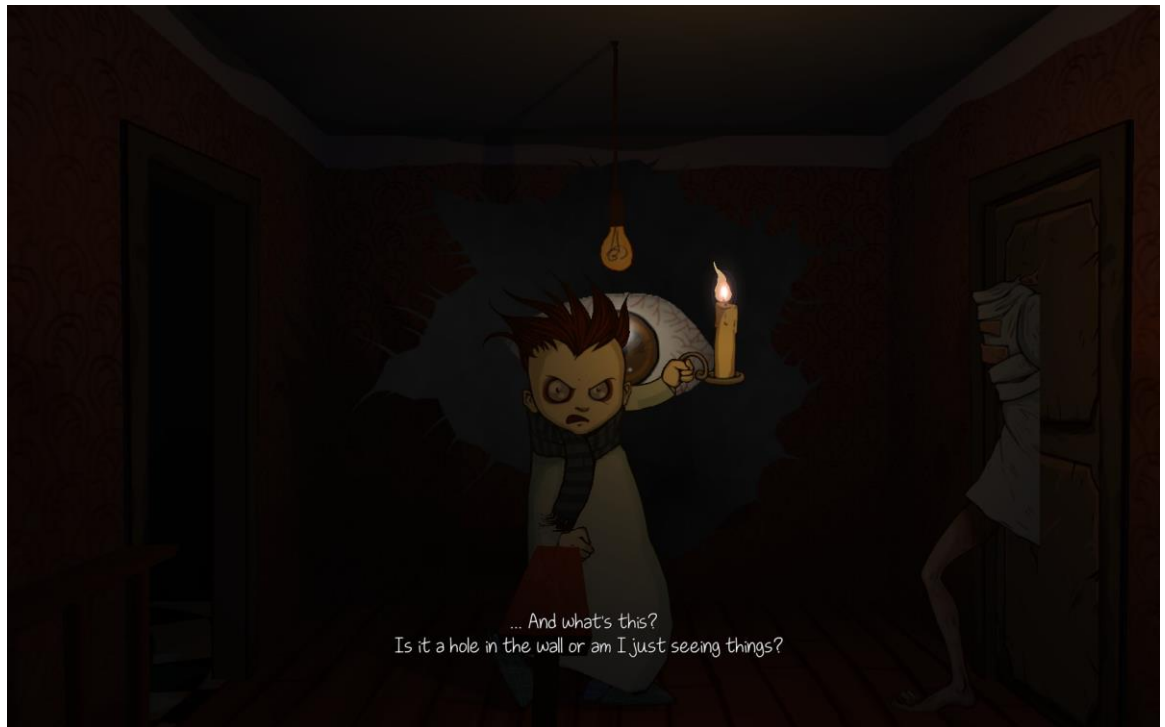
*Figure 13. The central character in* Knock-knock *is an insomniac who patrols his house at night.*



*Figure 14. Turning on lights around the house reveals newspaper on the walls, strange writing and unexpected trapdoors.*

### 3.4.1 Use of Kickstarter to crowdfund Knock-knock

While this chapter has demonstrated that Western and Pacific Asian games are very popular in Russia, the inverse is less true. Games like *World of Tanks* or *Allods Online* have received significant global acclaim, but they are the exception rather than the rule. The developers of these games have access to large production and advertising budgets and, in the case of *Allods Online*, are able to leverage the international reach of their parents companies to connect with global partners and distribute the game widely. A company like Ice-Pick Lodge does not have this global sway, and so the fact that their games have been positively reviewed in the English-speaking press suggests a successful alternative marketing and sales strategy. In August 2012, Ice-Pick Lodge initiated their Kickstarter campaign. Usually, a campaign will provide information about the project, offer several different funding tiers with benefits to backers, and sometimes suggest 'stretch goals' (extended parts of the project which could be completed if the campaign runs over its goal). Mostly the tone of Kickstarter campaigns is practical for, after all, they represent a company trying to attract investment. Ice-Pick Lodge took a very different approach. They created a story in which an unknown person had sent them a number of electronic files and told them that it was vital to produce a game from them.

In late November, 2011, a strange and troubling event has happened to our studio. We have received an anonymous e-mail which suggested that we should produce some "unconventional" game based upon the materials attached to the letter. Such offers are a dime a dozen and most of the time they barely deserve any attention at all, however, this one seemed quite different.

The attachment contained a set of 19 files added to an archive titled "lestplay". The files (snippets of text, scraps of audio recording, video footage fragments) as well as the style and wording of the message itself appeared to be rather disturbing. The surface examination did not reveal anything straightforwardly terrifying, yet we could not escape the feeling that something truly sinister was lurking underneath.
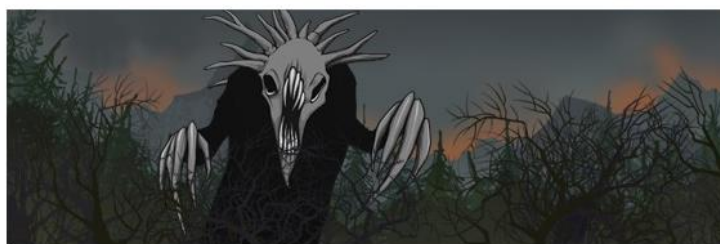
The stranger was begging us to complete the project he has started, yet he also made us well aware of the risk we took as the proposed ludic situation would potentially explain what calamity befell whoever has compiled the ominous archive, thus urging ourselves to meet the same fate.

The unknown Author was a gentleman and a scholar - he stated that he would introduce no boundaries to our creative freedom, yet he insisted that along with the ludic situation itself the items forming the "lestplay" archive should be included into the game, "else everything would be futile".

*Figure 15. The project description for* Knock-knock's *crowdfunding page gives an extended fictitious history for the project, broken up by images from the game art.*

The anonymous sender, who is referred to as the 'stranger' or the 'Author', hints that the materials he sends were compiled by someone who later met a mysterious fate as a result. The premise is that *Knock-knock* will be – must be - created from these materials. Written in convoluted but grammatical English, the syntax of the campaign text strongly indicates a non-native speaker of English. There is a curious mismatch between the use of the casual phrase 'a dime a dozen' and the description of the project as not a game but a 'ludic situation', a phrase which surely sounds strange to a native English-speaker's ear. This might be considered accidental, but for the very deliberate use of a pun. The word 'lestplay' sounds similar to 'letsplay' (a word for a YouTube video where a player plays a game and comments upon their experience), but the use of 'lest' imparts an ominous warning. Create this game from these materials, lest something terrible occur. This clever wordplay suggests to me a writer who is actively striving for a surreal, slightly 'foreign' tone overall.

Indeed, the company biography on Kickstarter describes a studio committed to making games which 'disturb' and have an impact on the player's 'soul and on his destiny'.[253] The surreal, mystical tone adopted by Ice-Pick Lodge was wholly successful. The amount requested on Kickstarter to make *Knock-knock* was $30,000 and $41,021 was raised overall.[254] Ultimately the use of crowd funding proved beneficial not only because the studio could make *Knock-knock*, but also because the uniqueness of a Russian studio crowd funding in English raised the profile of the studio. The novelty of *Knock-knock* garnered media attention in the English-speaking press; both games writers and commenters argued that the game has a distinctly Russian flavour, which European and American studios are somehow unable to imitate.[255] In an interview with *Rock Paper Shotgun*, the game studio's CEO Nikolay Dybowskiy struggled with the notion that Ice-Pick Lodge games are quintessentially Russian, but concluded that, 'culture does exist in the national form, there's no running away from that. We can't run away from our history, our language — and, frankly, we don't want to. It's the national tradition that defines the unique style of each art form.'[256]

[253] Ice-Pick Lodge profile, <https://www.kickstarter.com/profile/1535515364>, [accessed 21 April 2015].

[254] 'Knock-knock,' <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1535515364/knock-knock>, [accessed 21 April 2015]

[255] Alec Meer, 'Knock-Knock. 'Who's There?' Ice-Pick Lodge. 'Uh-Oh.',' *Rock Paper Shotgun*, 27 July 2012, <http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2012/07/27/knock-knock-pathologic/>, [accessed 20 April 2015].

[256] Quintin Smith, 'RPS Interviews Ice-Pick Lodge', *Rock Paper Shotgun*, 3 February 2009, <http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2009/02/03/rps-interviews-ice-pick-lodge/>, [accessed 12th January 2015].

## 4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I sought to make clear the key economic, professional, demographic and political features of the Russian gaming industry and also analyse some Russian-made games, situating my discussion in a wider global gaming context. The first part of this chapter showed that Russia is recognised as a key part of the Europe-Asia game market by global companies. When compared with gaming figures globally, Russia is a somewhat less profitable market than North America or Japan, but has invested significantly more in games than Central Asia. As part of the Europe-Asia market, Russia benefits from input from Western and Pacific-Asian companies in terms of variety of games, access to globally-popular games and quality of localisation, with the latter having greatly improved in just the past five years. Moreover, in my analysis from 2000 to 2014 it is possible to detect a real increase in the quality, quantity and international reach of Russian-made games. Not only do Russian companies produce for the domestic market, but they are also increasingly invested in producing games which will be popular in other countries. This shows a two-way flow of games and game-related cultural material crossing a Russian-speaking boundary, albeit it an uneven one. Similarly, Russia's connection to wider game culture is evidenced by the efforts of Russian game professionals to make their promotional materials widely available. English translations of websites and association events held in urban centres and cities outside of Russia hints at attempts to make events accessible to non-Russian professionals.

Second, a selection of case studies highlighted some of the ways in which Russian games are visibly culturally distinct. The examples shown here deployed recognisable elements of Russian history and culture in ways which create visuals and narratives which diverge from common gaming tropes as articulated by mainstream Western games. *Allods Online*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*, *Metro 2033* and *Knock-knock* were all produced by very different development studios, but each draws upon Russian folklore, history, literature, architecture and cultural jokes. Even *Knock-knock*, a smaller, independent game from a studio with a history of unusual creations, was marketed in a way which demanded that international viewers recognise the game's uniqueness and cultural heritage. In the specific context of the Russian gaming industry, we see space being made for narratives which reflect 'Russianness'.

Sometimes these narratives align with the goals of Russian government, as reflected in the choice of representatives for an official meeting with the Russian Ministry of Communications. In other cases, game developers resist popular narratives and present their own, sometimes critical or satirical, interpretations of Russian cultural values, history and artistic tropes. In the next chapter, I present the results of an extensive analysis of how gaming is viewed in the Russian media, demonstrating that while there is a certain element

of national pride surrounding the existence of a commercially-viable and internationally-operating Russian gaming industry, there is also great concern about how games affect young people.

# Chapter Three: gamers and gaming in the Russian press and public discourse

With the previous chapter providing demographic and industry information and discussion of the content of Russian games, this chapter now focuses more closely on the depictions and perceptions of video gaming in Russia. I ask how attitudes to gaming are shaped by historical and cultural context, framing my analysis with theories of Russian youth culture. As I will demonstrate, gaming is assumed in public discourse to be a predominantly youth pastime, and the concerns raised about video games echo earlier fears about Western-inflected music and fashion. I begin with an historical analysis of theories of youth culture in Russia. Next, move on to my own analysis of the prevalent media and political discourses about gaming in Russia. A broad survey of primary source material from the mainstream print media shows several trends in common with earlier discourses about youth cultures as well as an interest in helping teachers and parents to understand gaming. Finally, the results of a six-week long analysis of articles from eight Russian-language gaming websites shows a parallel set of trends in how the gaming media addresses gamers. For example, narratives of extreme play (play that is seen as excessive, addictive and even life-threatening) are present in both the mainstream and the specialist media about gaming, but are approached in very different ways.

The data gathered for this analysis is from the print media only in order to make a comparison between the mainstream and specialist media; the latter rarely publishes video material that is not an interview or review. There is no real parallel in the gaming media to, say, a mainstream media channel's news broadcast. The aims of this chapter are twofold: first, to present and analyse the different, and often conflicting, media and political discourses about gaming in Russia, and second, to understand how attitudes towards gaming are shaped by Russian historical and cultural context. This chapter is then paired with the voices of Russian gamers in Chapter Four, showing the tensions between mainstream and gamer discourses in the Russian gaming sphere.

## 1. Youth cultures, Westernisation and moral panics in Russia

Concerns about the kinds of meanings and messages gamers derive from video games have been common in English-language media and education circles for many years. The potentially negative effects of video games, particularly upon young people, are still easy to find in the news and in literature from more conservative sections of Western society. Providing a rebuttal to scaremongering claims regarding video games is an important feature of early game studies work. Tom Boellstorff has neatly condensed many of the perceptions and stereotypes surrounding video game fans in his ethnographic study of Second Life. In his

opinion, non-gamers tend to make two key judgements about video games: that they are 'contaminated by capitalism' and that they are potentially dangerously immersive or distracting.[1] These ideas, over-used in the earlier years of video gaming, influenced much sociological and psychological research rooted in the idea that video gaming was a worrying distraction from 'real life'. Anglo-American game studies has largely abandoned these debates, rightly acknowledging that there are more diverse and nuanced discussions to be held about video games; these early doubts and criticisms of the medium are seen as outdated.

For the purposes of this study, however, it is important to acknowledge that in regions where gaming is less established, similar worries are still present and hold additional significance because the games being critiqued are often not locally produced. There is a spectrum of reactions towards video games. Fears over the effects that video games may have on society have led to widespread censorship and condemnation. While in the West moral critiques of video games tend to revolve fairly predictably around the effects of sex and violence on young people, elsewhere in the world (including in Russia) there is an additional worry about negative messages from the West. Public and political concern about moral and ideological corruption via Western video games is common. Nardi reports that characters of the Undead race in *World of Warcraft* were remodelled 'with flesh on their bodies' in response to an order from the Chinese government.[2] Authorities in China were quick to 'purify the internet of anything that might affect national cultural information security or undermine the attempt to promote a harmonious society.'[3] Nardi compares these criticisms of *World of Warcraft* in China to attacks made on video games by Christian groups in the US.[4] In Iran, one strategy has been to use the popularity of video games as a medium to transmit messages considered more ideologically appropriate, as in the case of the Islamic Association of Students' game 'The Stressful Life of Salman Rushdie and Implementation of his Verdict.' Iranian games have also been made about important cultural figures and the regime's military concerns. Journalist Saeed Kamali Dehghan explains that these ideological game projects are an attempt to fight a 'soft and cultural war' against the influx of Western novels, video games, television shows, hairstyles and fashions.[5] If mainstream attitudes towards games in most of North America and Western Europe represent the most permissive end of a spectrum of opinions on games, then these examples from Iran and China epitomise more repressive public opinion and policy.

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[1] Boellstorff, p. 26.

[2] Nardi, p. 185.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Salman Rushdie fatwa turned into Iranian video game', *The Guardian*, 26 June 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jun/26/salman-rushdie-fatwa-iranian-video-game> [accessed 12 February 2013].

In Russia, the pushback against games has fallen approximately in the middle of this spectrum. The self-identified gaming community (visibly and vocally young and male, as earlier analysis showed) acts as a kind of flagship demographic for video game users as a whole, and it is perhaps because of this that gaming has frequently been perceived as a youth subculture. I consider it crucial in the Russian context to take into account this association of gaming with young people. The moral panics which have surrounded gaming in many countries are similar to fears over many other youth subcultures in Russia; these fears still hold relevance today, as Russia seeks to shape an appropriate national identity for its young people in a highly fluid and uncertain post-Soviet environment.

## 1.1 Understanding Russian youth culture

A chronology of Russian paradigms of youth culture shows a set of recurring concepts, some of which persist to the present day. What Anne Gorsuch calls the 'politics of generation' in Russia are closely tied to great ideological and political changes over the past century. In revolutionary Russia the predominant view of youth was one of socialist ideals. The energy of the nation's young people harnessed was vital to the revolutionary effort. However, their lack of discipline and potential corruptibility could spell disaster if left unchecked. The ideal '*podrostok*' – teenager – of the 1920s was young, male, heroic and militarised in the service of revolutionary ideals. As Gorsuch clearly demonstrates, this narrative side-lined other youth, in particular young peasant women.[6]

In contrast to the Western tendency to view youth as requiring training and guidance before they could come of age and fully engage with the culture of the day, the early Soviet perception of culture as 'the living interaction of society and its subjects' meant that youth were themselves a part of shaping society.[7] The concept of '*vospitanie*', which can be translated as 'upbringing' or 'social education', therefore held connotations of reciprocation. Similarly, the Russian *pokolenie* – generation – was not a site for conflict as in the Western theory, but rather for a transfer of a social inheritance. By the 1930s, this responsibility was evident in the changing role that Soviet society saw for its youth. Gorsuch identifies a shift in this period towards a more studious and disciplined ideal for youth, one characterised by "self-discipline, moderation, patience and mastery".[8] Within this rigid paradigm, any forms of non-conformist behaviour were marked as 'delinquent'.

Later Soviet history shows a tendency to view youth as 'constructors of communism' or, conversely, as 'victims of Western influence.' In this context, the correct socialisation of young people has ideological significance for the future of the nation; to achieve this, the Komsomol was used to control both the political and social education of young Soviet

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[6] Gorsuch, p. 4.
[7] *Ibid,* p. 51.
[8] Gorsuch, p. 18.

citizens. Youth sociologists in Russia at the time took a "structural-functionalist" approach, resisting the idea of intergenerational conflict and instead focusing on the correct socialisation of youth.[9] By the 1950s this rigid control was unable to completely suppress subcultural movements like the image-focused *stilyagi*, the *bitniki* (beatniks) that followed and the hippies in their turn.[10] Pilkington notes that from the 1970s onwards, rock music became the common language of the subcultural youth and various music-related subcultures appeared in subsequent waves.[11] These are the *neformaly* groups, 'informal' subcultural youth formations negatively defined by Soviet authorities against 'positive', 'normal' youth.[12] The lifespan of the *neformaly* was brief; indeed, by the 1990s the end of the Soviet Union had rendered the definition useless because there was no longer an organised, officially-defined 'formal' youth against which *neformaly* were considered to rebel.[13]

These post-*neformaly* youth have been conceptualised as a 'lost generation'.[14] As institutional roles were redefined in the late *perestroika* and early post-Soviet period, Pilkington notes that increasingly youth were seen as 'a marginalized and dependent group in need of social protection'.[15] Douglas Blum's fieldwork supports this assessment, showing a strong trend towards 'cultural entrepreneurs' guiding, rather than controlling, youth narratives in less rigid ways. In his work, we see a multiplicity of outlets through which authority figures engage with and (attempt to) shape youth cultures. In particular, Blum identifies a trend towards scepticism about internet use and online cultures, and the potentially seductive and harmful effects these new social arenas may have on vulnerable young people.

## 1.2 Young people and the internet: youth identity 2.0

Positioning Russian gamers as a subset of youth culture may seem incongruous in the light of increasing evidence that game players in general are becoming older. However, in Russian gaming contexts the perception of gamers as young men is alive and not entirely inaccurate. While Chapter Three showed that video gaming is not precisely novel in Russia, it is certainly nascent when compared to the long-standing mainstream gaming movement in the West. Wider debates about the demographic composition of gaming cultures are simply not frequent in Russia; the products, advertising and community discussions are still largely oriented towards young men. Additionally, the moral panics surrounding games in Russian society have firmly positioned gaming as a youth activity, and it is in this context that

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[9] Pilkington, *Looking West?*, p. 104.
[10] *Stilyagi* were a youth subculture known for their preoccupation with style. A 2008 comedy of the same name was released in North America with the title 'Hipsters', which carries approximately the same derogatory overtones.
[11] Pilkington, p. 67.
[12] *Ibid,* p. 104.
[13] *Ibid,* p. 105.
[14] *Ibid,* p. 105.
[15] Pilkington, *Gender, Generation and Identity*, p. 3.

Russian gamers define themselves. Blum suggests that the 'official formulation and public enactment of youth identity represents a key modality through which society goes about reproducing itself;' with this in mind, the presentation of gaming as a youth activity (with all the attendant concerns about behaviour and negative influences which go along with that classification) is significant.[16]

Blum suggests that in the internet age it is increasingly challenging for a society to fully comprehend and mediate global flows of information available to young people.[17] The fear that young people are able to access dangerous, suggestive or inappropriate content online is pronounced amongst his interviewees, and more broadly in political discourse in countries experiencing rapid influx of global information. While Blum does not conduct an empirical study of how youth consume this information, Pilkington suggests that the high consumption of popular culture is one distinctive feature of young people's media environment. The consumption of global popular culture can leave youth 'open to the transnational flow of cultural commodities', a source of tension in inter-generational discourse and between local and global norms and cultures.[18] Multiple influences are at work on young people both globally and locally, and a key part of understanding gaming as a youth culture is recognising how the interplay of global and local media is discussed in Russian society.

As the previous section showed, worries about 'Westernisation' or 'Americanisation' have pervaded Russian discourse about young people. Old fears of negative influence and passive youth consumption are still very much evident in Russian society. However, as the forthcoming analysis of scholarly work shows, there is merit in understanding the ways that young people consume contemporary popular culture to be complex and rooted in local context. In the following discussion, I explore how online identity building can complicate political strategies towards youth in Russian culture through a critical overview of scholarly literature on youth, the internet and Russian youth policy. It is a vital body of work because of the close association of young people with online cultures; if we are discussing online gaming, we must also acknowledge the importance of the online space as a way for young people to interact, share knowledge and create a community for experimentation.

In the context of youth identity formation, we might identify a hierarchy of influences surrounding flows of information. At the top can be placed political and religious authorities, who have the ability (albeit to a varying extent) to mandate the kinds of information which are permitted entry to society. Large corporations, for example in the spheres of media and

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[16] Blum, p. 3.
[17] Blum, p. 3.
[18] Pilkington et al., *Looking West?*, p. 14.

advertising, are potentially influential as they can access a broad audience across a range of media. More subtly, in his study of national identity and globalisation across three eastern European cities, Blum identifies a cohort of actors who 'attempt to foster essentially the same norms and practices both independently and in conjunction with one another as well as the state'.[19] He refers to these actors as 'cultural entrepreneurs'. I follow his definition of this term as 'someone who strategically fashions and activates identity', who 'devotes himself to enlarging the symbolic, solidary resources of the community' by 'framing or mediating flows of ideas' and creating 'overt, ideologized symbols of belonging'.[20] He proposes three levels of entrepreneur; state, sub-state (referring to those working for the state but unable to exert pressure over policy, such as teachers and school psychologists), and non-state actors such as activists, NGO workers and artists.[21]

Blum's primary focus is on official concepts of youth national identity, but his characterisation of a hierarchy of influential organizational networks and cultural entrepreneurs can also be productive in the context of youth cultures. In a youth subcultural network there will be informal cultural entrepreneurs who, to a varying degree, dictate community norms and act as tastemakers. We can compare his three groups of cultural entrepreneurs to the hierarchies surrounding gaming culture. At the top are the politicians controlling official policy on gaming and media. Below them are state-sponsored media and those working with young people such as teachers, and finally, a group of non-state actors who are influential tastemakers within gaming communities. This latter group would include authors, (non-state sponsored) game makers, community website leaders and professional gamers. This group of people may not interface with the state in their attempts to forge symbols of belonging as Blum's cultural entrepreneurs necessarily do, but, I argue, they deploy similar rhetorical and social strategies to shape a cohesive 'gamer identity'. Augmented in this way, Blum's theory is a useful addition to theories of youth subculture for the internet age, as it clearly shows the different groups of decision-makers about gaming and acknowledges the differing tools and strategies which they may use to shape discourses and practices in gaming spaces.

Blum's work highlights the complexity of youth practices in post-Soviet nations and the reactions to these practices by adult authorities, a theme which Pilkington and her colleagues also discuss. His study shows dynamics similar to those between young gamers and the Russian press and authorities, where varied gaming practices and identities across a wide span of ages are conceptualised by the media as psychologically and behaviourally dangerous, Westernised and likely to erode proper moral development. Pilkington et al have

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[19] Blum, p. 140.
[20] Blum, p. 140.
[21] Blum, p. 141.

executed a number of participant observation-based studies into post-Soviet youth culture which work together to suggest that the cultural landscape is increasingly complex, and that navigating this landscape requires a constant process of negotiating and renegotiating engagement with global and local flows. Likewise, in their study of Russian teenagers in diaspora in Israel Nelly Elias and Dafna Lemish have pointed out that the difficulties of forming a stable adult identity can be mitigated by using the internet to gain knowledge and interact with other young people in the same situations. They suggest that the young immigrants they study are overall well equipped to function in local culture, but that they simultaneously retain strong links to their ethnic group in their private lives. The result is a new 'hybrid cultural realm' of blended identities, transnational links and adept use of different cultural elements.[22] As a result of the authors' interviews with these young immigrants, they identified five ways in which the internet proved valuable: as a source of information, as a cultural resource, as a method of communication with others in the same situation, as a means of contacting friends and family in Russia, and as a space for testing new roles and identities.

Online communities can therefore serve as a locus of interaction and identity-building in several different ways, offering a support network, a channel of communication and a place to discover new information and ideas.[23] Just as Elias and Lemish see the internet as part of a 'postmodern experience of diaspora' where identity is fluid, I consider it as important an element of identity-building for young Russians at home.[24] Similarly, Henrike Schmidt and Katy Teubener consider Runet culture to be the spiritual successor to *tusovka* groups, arguing that the 'highly personalized' Russian internet shows similarities to the small, local youth groups of the 1990s.[25] This experience of building an identity across online and offline environments, both globally and locally, renders any concerted official reaction extremely difficult. Youth may build communities online which are both specifically Russian and also subculturally global.

Blum's interviews with cultural entrepreneurs suggest that in wider Russian society, the internet and video games are viewed as more of an ideological or psychological threat to youngsters than a useful tool for learning or an economic benefit to society. He notes that opinion tends to be divided along age lines, so that 'while young people consider the Internet to be useful and enjoyable, and often discount its influence on their general outlook', older

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[22] Elias and Lemish, p. 534.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., p. 547.
[25] Henrike Schmidt & Katy Teubener, "Our RuNet"? Cultural Identity and Media Usage" in *Control + Shift*
*Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet*, Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener and Natalja Konradova, eds., (Books on Demand GmbH: Norderstedt, 2006), p. 15.

people experience 'profound anxiety' about excessive withdrawal into online life. [26] He identifies much of this anxiety as a fear about a new and unknown medium, rather than necessarily the content of the games or internet sites. Moreover, in addition to contributing to a general sense of worry about young people and their activities, discourses surrounding video games tie into existing, specific cultural issues. Acknowledging the legitimate problem of internet addiction as a separate issue, Blum reports that many of his participants believed computer-based entertainment to have a 'psychologically alienating effect'.[27]

These discourses present video games as a cause of anti-social behaviour and degeneration in a way which echoes similar fears over Soviet rock music, for example.[28] Just as rock music was considered by Soviet authorities to have a stupefying and mentally degrading effect on young people, so do the cultural entrepreneurs Blum interviews argue that video game enthusiasm comes 'at the direct expense of literacy'. [29] In his dialogue with these cultural entrepreneurs, Blum identifies a dual focus on psychological development and on moral and aesthetic development. We can gather from discourses in wider society that a substantial element of criticism about video games comes from a fear that they are not a sufficiently *artistic* medium. Russian and Western cultures share this concern; noted film critic Roger Ebert, for example, was vocally opposed to the idea that video games constitute an art form and generally positions them as a form of low culture, incomparable to the greats of literature, art and cinema.[30] As the review of opinions from the Russian media later in this chapter will show, this position is commonplace amongst journalists and commentators and is vocally contested by those who play games.

Video games have also been linked to violence, a constant undercurrent in Russian discourse due, Blum suggests, to the ongoing unrest in Chechnya, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. In a series of attempts to ensure that Russian youths were not influenced by violent elements of other societies, authorities and individuals working with young people have taken steps to curtail aggressive behaviour. Blum reports that the Committee on Youth Affairs in Astrakhan 'launched a crackdown on computer clubs starting in 2001, supposedly due to widespread violations of local health and safety codes.'[31] The committee director issued a statement to the effect that the goal was 'to develop computer clubs, to make them more civilised.'[32] However, during an interview with Blum 'she acknowledged the real issue: the video games

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[26] Blum, p. 89.
[27] Ibid., p. 89
[28] Thomas Cushman, *Notes From Underground: Rock Music Counterculture in Russia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 27.
[29] Blum, p. 89.
[30] Roger Ebert, 'Video Games Can Never Be Art', April 16, 2010, <http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/04/video_games_can_never_be_art.html> [accessed 27 June 2013].
[31] Blum, p. 170.
[32] Ibid.

being played were 'extremely aggressive,' and 'people are sick of such violence.''[33] From the top of society down, then, the key issues in debates over video games are centred about their potentially damaging effects. Themes of violence, psychological addiction and anti-social conduct, withdrawal from traditional forms of education and entertainment, absorbing dangerous messages from other cultures and lack of aesthetic appreciation are popular to the exclusion of almost all other discussion.

I have begun to outline how these theories of youth culture in different contexts can be applied to Russian gaming. As media analysis in the second half of this chapter will demonstrate, emotive themes of violence, psychological development, patriotism, moral upbringing and gendered participation in youth cultures are heavily discussed by Russia's mainstream media in relation to gaming. The country's long trend of viewing Western, imported subcultures and youth practices as subversive or incompatible with the domestic ideologies of the time has influenced the current dialogue on video gaming. Many of these concerns can be traced to a desire to control and mediate the processes of cultural globalisation and limit the negative effects of the new media forms which Russia's youth are exposed to. The academic and media analysis which I now undertake draws upon this concept, demonstrating how mainstream public discourses about gaming express anxiety about the globalisation of youth culture and seek to curtail its effects by limiting youth access to games (via advice to parents) or by using Russian-produced games for education and political purposes. As in Blum's study, this process takes places on a number of levels, from official, political youth policy to the media and 'cultural entrepreneurs'. For the latter part of the analysis, I suggest that specialist or niche gaming websites, although catering to gamers, function similarly to Blum's cultural entrepreneurs. The sites mediate and often challenge negative mainstream views of gaming while still presenting to gamers the positive aspects of playing games such as social interaction, education and exposure to global culture.

## 2. Video games in Russian public discourse
### 2.1 Academic discourse
In the following analysis, I thematically review how video games and gamers are depicted in public discourse, starting with the limited academic sources available and then moving on to the mainstream and specialist media. Two key Russian-language academic works show the conflict in discourses about gaming as a youth culture. The authors acknowledge the many public concerns about gaming and sometimes share them, but they also suggest that the novelty of gaming may not be exclusively dangerous. A review of public and political opinion of video gaming constitutes a large part of both these texts. Galkin suggests that public opinion is divided into two camps: those who consider video games to be harmful

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[33] Ibid.

entertainment, and those who claim them to be a novel space for development. [34] Typically, he notes, the focus has been on children playing games; Russian scholars have therefore been interested in the effects of games on social and psychological development and largely ignored *why* people play. He acknowledges the positive impact of gaming (citing work on educational themes such as healthy competition, coordination and mental aptitude for puzzles) and its use as a training mechanism, but also cites some negative effects which have largely fallen out of favour in Western work.[35] Chief amongst these negative side-effects are 'a lack of moral consequences for in-game actions' and becoming accustomed to excessive violence.[36] Galkin also acknowledges a powerful economic reality, contrasting the general moral sense that violence is wrong with the powerful motive of companies to make what sells. Games rooted in criminal violence such as the Grand Theft Auto series constitute a real threat to society, and it is Galkin's view that the public and politicians 'cannot and must not remain silent' on the topic.[37]

Lipkov draws similar conclusions from his chapter-long review of public opinion. His approach is pragmatic; he recognises the cultural significance of games and calls for moderate discussion which 'avoids extremes of panic and euphoria'.[38] Although he notes with approval a potential government scheme to extend laws about extremism in the media to games, he seems largely to believe that the principal problem is 'the high degree of hatred, xenophobia and international conflict' in society.[39] Following a review of domestic studies on video games and psychology, he concludes that the benefits and uses of games may outweigh risks caused by unrestricted and uncritical access to the medium.[40] Likewise, Galkin acknowledges that violence in video games does not necessarily cause copycat behaviour any more than in other forms of media, even suggesting that games can be a good outlet for male aggression and a 'great alternative to drugs, alcohol and other more harmful forms of entertainment'.[41] These conflicting discourses are a fine example of the complexity of ideas surrounding youth and global media; on the one hand, wary of the negative effects of new media, on the other, intent on understanding it and perhaps harnessing it for the benefit of society.

Furthermore, in a chapter on games and globalisation, Lipkov extensively discusses the positive and negative elements of consuming 'global games', suggesting that games based in history can both expand the empathy of players and also blur their national identity.

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[34] Galkin, paragraphs 60 and 61.
[35] Ibid., p. 61.
[36] Ibid., p. 64.
[37] Ibid., p. 65.
[38] Lipkov, p. 131.
[39] Lipkov, p. 98.
[40] Lipkov, p. 106.
[41] Galkin, p. 66.

Indeed, 'hot topic' games about events like 9-11 are, he believes, an important way for people to cope with cultural trauma.[42] Although he points out that many games with American protagonists are strongly biased – such as when they touch upon terrorism – he freely acknowledges that games are inherently as ideologically charged as any other form of media.[43] For Lipkov, then, games are a vital part of the modern media ecology, offering individuals an outlet for cultural trauma, a way of interacting and cooperating with others and an opportunity for developing mental and physical coordination. However, the criticisms and doubts presented by both authors neatly fit the schema laid out in my previous analysis of discourse surrounding Western(ised) media forms and their potential dangers to young people.

## 2.2 Media discourse

It was clear from my reading of Russian gaming websites, blogs and social media pages that video game players understood 'the media' to be the principal source of misconceptions about gaming.
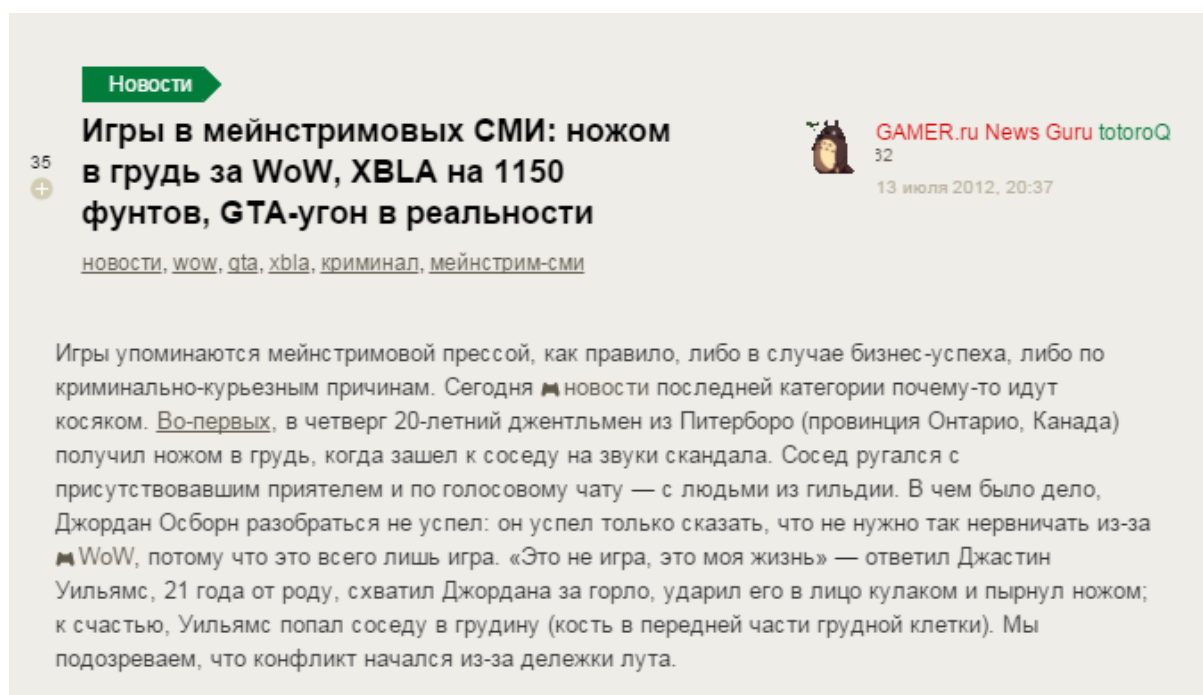


*Figure 16. A gaming website observes that gaming is usually discussed in the mainstream press 'either in the case of business success, or for some kind of curious criminal reason'.*

Daily headlines from Russian media sources show that the topic of gaming is being covered with regularity, an observation which prompted my thematic analysis of

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[42] Lipkov, p. 122.
[43] Lipkov, p. 123.

mainstream media sources. An analysis of game-related articles from the four Russian-language sources selected for this study (*Argumenty i Fakti*, *Izvestia*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Nezavismaya Gazeta*) shows the same few topics and opinions constantly recurring during the research period of 2010-2012.[44] These tropes parallel the categories laid out by Galkin and Lipkov, with fears over childhood and adolescent development the most prominent. However, articles published in the online press differ greatly in their intended audience and so touch upon additional themes like technological education and the rise of social gaming. Here I outline the most common themes which appear in the mainstream media, and discuss how the presentation of these themes differs across various sources. Many of the authors of mainstream media articles are by educators, mental health professionals and teachers, the group that Blum identifies as 'cultural entrepreneurs'.

### 2.2.1 Fears over negative influence

By far the most prominent theme in mainstream media commentary is that of fear over the negative effects of gaming, and how these effects impact young people. Indeed, this theme creeps into so many editorials and articles that it is useful to break the discussion down further into three distinct categories. Firstly, there are those informational articles aimed at parents and families. Secondly there is more specific reportage of cases of extreme play, and finally there is a general trend of articles unrelated to gaming invoking video games as shorthand for 'modern day entertainment of which I do not approve'. I do not specifically discuss the final category here, as the references to games could equally be references to television, science fiction novels, pop music or mobile phones; games are used as a topical scapegoat for young people's apparent lack of interest in opera, literature, theatre or ballet, depending upon the profession of the interviewee or author. The key debate that I analyse here is how damaging video games may be, and in what ways. Psychological, aesthetic and social development is considered to be potentially at risk from video game play and especially from extremely violent games.

Informational articles are typically located in the health or family sections of mainstream newspapers, and most often appear in the vastly popular weekly publication *Argumenty i Fakty*. Often the article will either respond to a rhetorical question presented in the title, or will constitute an interview with a psychologist, teacher or cultural figure loosely based on an aspect of child health or development. For example, in 2011 and 2012, *AiF* published a number of these pieces with titles such as 'Why aren't our children playing outside?', 'How can we preserve the health of our schoolchildren?', 'User or loser? Modern computers both friend and enemy to children'. These pieces revolve around advice to parents about how to encourage their children to engage with books and film, engage in

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[44] For more information about the selection process for sources, refer back to the methodology chapter.

group play with friends, concentrate in school and be communicative with parents and other adults. In each case, video games and internet use are seen as two of the most powerful disincentives to take part in 'wholesome' and 'healthy' activities.

The articles range from polemical to positive in tone based on the author and the source. Some are wholly condemnatory of video games, often (mis)interpreting research to cast games as an inherently dangerous pastime or presenting case studies of extreme play as normative behaviour for gamers. In such pieces, compulsive gaming practice is portrayed as common and often linked to an excess of computer use in childhood.[45] Excess play is also seen as symptomatic of deeper social or psychological problems. Drawing upon research suggesting game addiction is comparable to substance abuse, one *Argumenty i Fakty* article claims that many individuals withdraw into virtual worlds to avoid the hardships of the 'real world'.[46] These everyday problems may be as simple as a struggle with everyday social interaction, or a manifestation of some perceived inadequacy. Furthermore, the piece invokes discussion over post-Soviet masculinity, suggesting that young men use virtual worlds as a way of feeling stronger and satisfying a desire for retributive violence which they cannot enact in real life.[47] Girls and women are not significantly mentioned in these pieces, although the authors are predominantly female.

However, the divide between 'unhealthy' and 'healthy' does not *always* match up with an online-offline binary, despite the way in which the articles are publicised and titled. Some articles suggest that there are appropriate video games available and list the benefits of pedagogical computer activities such as research, coordination or general therapy. For example, an interview with paediatrician Tatiana Semenicheva entitled 'Computers for children just aren't worth it' begins with a lengthy condemnation of how computer use causes poor posture and eyesight and strain upon the nervous system of a child.[48] However, it also contains a full paragraph on the benefits of games using theories of bio-feedback to control heart rate in anxious children, or games which encourage physical exercise. [49] Similarly, psychologist Anna Hyninka suggests that parents be vigilant about the games their children play, but assesses moderate, supervised computer usage as a low risk to child health

[45] Olga Andreeva, 'How to deal with computer addiction and its consequences', *Argumenty i Fakty*, 15 July 2010, <http://www.aif.ru/health/article/36171> [accessed 29 June 2013].
[46] Elena Amanova, 'Game addiction harder to treat than alcohol or drug dependence', *Argumenty i Fakty*, 25 February 2011, <http://www.aif.ru/health/article/41194> [accessed 29 June 2013], paragraph 4.
[47] Ibid., paragraph 6.
[48] Tatiana Semenicheva, 'Computers for children just aren't worth it', *Argumenty i Fakty*, 12 May 2012, <http://www.aif.ru/techno/article/51976> [accessed 29 June 2013], paragraph 1.
[49] Ibid., paragraph 4.

overall.[50] The overarching concern here is the ability to maintain parental control over appropriate media, and to ensure that games seen as therapeutic or beneficial are presented to children in such a way that they find them as engaging and entertaining as the less wholesome mainstream games which these experts decry.

The second category, that of extreme play, often overlaps with informational articles as seen above. However, there are many instances of outlets reporting a single event or research study regarding extreme or aberrant levels of game play. These pieces are never neutral; there is always a condemnatory slant aimed either at the main protagonist or at broader society. One report about a young Taiwanese man who died after a 40-hour *Diablo III* marathon, for example, is followed by a highly critical comment about new technology becoming 'like a religion' amongst young people and condemns other internet cafe users for their inattention.[51] Another piece listing the ten 'most dangerous' video games (based on a study which reviewed which games received most negative press attention) pays attention to instances where extreme play has been linked to violent crime or player death.[52]

In one 400-word article, the author mentions the death of a young Norwegian after a twenty-hour *World of Warcraft* session, but adds that 'not everyone is happy to tolerate the negative influence of virtual reality'.[53] They continue to describe the banning of ultraviolent game Manhunt 2 in the UK, and cite the case of an American lawyer attempting to have the *Grand Theft Auto* series banned in the US, UK and Australia. The article also approvingly mentions a teenage activist group in Germany who try to convince other youngsters to eschew games like *World of Warcraft*.[54] The piece frames the three events and individuals as rare soldiers in the fight against pernicious game influences and warns readers that *World of Warcraft* is 'now the most popular online game on the planet'.[55]  Reader commentary on the article ranges from staunch agreement to declarations by readers that they only play occasionally, and one pointed comment requesting that readers recall their own childhoods when they 'crushed beetles on a bet, acted out horror stories with dolls and mutilated their little faces'.[56] The ages of the commenters clearly vary; while the aforementioned reader recalls beetles and dolls, another reader declares that *World of Warcraft* should be banned, comparing what he believes to be the danger of the game with games from 'our childhood'

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[50] Anna Hyninka, 'The danger begins when you call a child once, twice, three times, and the only answer is silence', *Argumenty i Fakty*, 5 May 2012, <http://www.aif.ru/techno/article/51836> [accessed 29 June 2013].
[51] 'Young man dies after 40 hours playing *Diablo III*', *Argumenty i Fakty*, 19 July 2012, <http://www.aif.ru/techno/news/162653> [accessed 29 June 2013].
[52] Yuri Gevorkian, 'How WoW harms kids: the ten most dangerous video games', *Argumenty i Fakty*, 4 March 2009, <http://www.aif.ru/culture/article/25077> [accessed 29 June 2013].
[53] Ibid., paragraph 7.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., paragraph 5.
[56] Ibid., comments section.

such as Tank Battle or Mario.[57] 'Today's young people,' writes this commenter, 'should abandon [games like *World of Warcraft*], to do sports or read a book'.[58] His cultural references would suggest he was born in the 1980s.

Finally, video gaming is also tangentially mentioned in articles which seem to have no connection to the hobby whatsoever. In these cases, computer use (and particularly internet use and online gaming) are used as an archetypal example of a youth activity of which the author disapproves. Depending on the context of the piece, different aspects of gaming may be highlighted as areas of concern. An interview with stage actress Tatiana Balyaeva reports her worries that the theatre is no longer of interest to young people, and notes that children seem 'lost in virtual worlds' and unable to engage with older modes of entertainment.[59] The focus on virtual and online worlds as an escape from the 'real' world is common to much press coverage of the performing arts. The assumption here is that video games require less mental effort to engage with, with the ultimate effect that young people become unable to appreciate more complex art forms, or become stupefied from a constant diet of 'low' culture and commoditised mass media products. A regular column in *Izvestia* by philosopher Sergei Roganov, for example, holds new forms of mass media responsible in part for 'provocative acts' (including anti-religious and anarchist activity) amongst the young generation.[60]

There is a minor but consistent trend of artists and performers incorporating video game-inspired elements into their work. Sometimes this manifests itself as a stylistic choice or an exploration of a different medium. In other cases, traditional artists are reaching for a common language between themselves and young people. While Balyaeva presents the disinterest of young people in theatre as an unavoidable side-effect of modern technology, there has been a series of classical music concerts in Tomsk in which iconic film and video game music is performed.[61] In late 2012, Tomsk Philharmonic Orchestra launched their 'on demand' programme, containing not only classic video game music from games like *StarCraft* and *Age of Empires*, but also a system whereby vKontakte users could suggest and vote for other pieces that they wished to hear played live.[62] Reportage on these events by the local

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[57] Ibid., comments section.
[58] Ibid.
[59] 'Actress Tatiana Balyaeva: 'The theatre must cleanse, like the banya'', *BNK Information Agency*, 22 September 2012, <http://www.bnkomi.ru/data/interview/15502/> [accessed 29 June 2013], paragraph 7.
[60] Sergei Roganov, 'The fruits of their mother's corpse', *Izvestia*, 28 August 2012, <http://izvestia.ru/news/533846> [accessed 29 June 2013].
[61] 'Tomsk organists to play music from iconic video games', *Vesti-Tomsk*, 21 September 2012, <http://www.vesti.tvtomsk.ru/news-21861.html> [accessed 29 June 2013].
[62] Ibid.

news was favourable, commenting positively upon the large proportion of youngsters in the audience and the clever use of social media to engage with younger fans of classical music.[63]

## 2.2 Games for social benefit

Newspaper sections relating to technology, business and society also cover video game stories. Common tropes here are games in political advertising and public engagement, new technology and games as training tools. Coverage is mixed in tone, and reader comments are equally spread along the spectrum from extremely favourable to absolutely critical. As the previous paragraphs of analysis show, when a gaming initiative or project relates to young people, commentary from both news outlets and readers is likely to be negative. By contrast, the examples I discuss below show that technology and business articles present games as having more potential for economic and business development, and welcome innovation and experimentation.

Throughout the 2010-2012 research period there were a steady number of articles published about the ways in which games were being deployed for training, education and public engagement purposes. These initiatives were spearheaded by businesses, politicians, local government, schools and even the church; all good evidence that despite the many criticisms levelled at video games, they are becoming normalised in Russian society.[64] *AiF* reported in October 2011 that church authorities in Ekaterinburg were working on an educational game, although few details about game content were offered.[65] A statement by the archpriest of the diocese showed an interesting tension between the church's desire to reach out to a younger demographic and the inherent conservatism of Orthodoxy, telling the newspaper that 'the church has never prohibited video games as such. If the game is educational, if it isn't being played in place of lessons, work or prayer, or played all day, there is nothing wrong'.[66]

Games are also frequently presented as simulation-type training tools. There are two main themes of discussion here: games used to teach children and games used as a form of business or personal development for adults. Most games in the former category are government initiatives, with the cooperation of schools or youth groups. *Izvestia* reported a Ministry of Education initiative to introduce games into schools which will provide students

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[63] Ibid.

[64] For typical examples see: 'Church starting to create video games?', *Argumenty i Fakty*, 12 October 2011, <http://www.aif.ru/society/dontknow/7173> [accessed 29 June 2013]; Artyem Kuibida, 'Computer games to be added to school curriculum', *Izvestia*, 10 October 2011, <http://izvestia.ru/news/503490> [accessed 29 June 2013]; 'Fursenko to include video games in curriculum', *Argumenty i Fakty*, 11 October 2011, <http://www.aif.ru/techno/news/95466> [accessed 29 June 2013].

[65] 'Church starting to create video games?', *Argumenty i Fakty*.

[66] Ibid., paragraph 1.

with 'action scripts' for various emergency situations.[67] A budget of 44 million roubles for a suitable prototype game makes this a significant project; coverage from *Argumenty i Fakty* on the same project stated that guidelines demanded work of 'the highest scientific, technical and research level'.[68] Both articles mention that many existing video games have as their premise some kind of natural or man-made disaster to overcome, citing the Half Life series as an example.[69] However, although the project was evidently well-planned and well-funded, reader commentary was extremely critical on pieces from both newspapers, with one poster asking 'What are normal people to do in this madhouse?'[70] Similarly, a local government project to make a video game about road safety for schoolchildren met with criticism from *Izvestia* readers.[71]

Such reader criticism echoes wider concerns about the dangers of children using games, and suggests that adults should not be offering children access to video games even if they are for a pedagogical purpose. However, the connection between such educational games and local or central government means that some detractors are more scathing about the input of politicians than the games themselves; for example, one reader lists a series of quotes from Russian intellectuals extolling the virtues of mathematics, and scathingly finishes with a quote from then-Minister for Education and Science Andrei Fursenko that 'higher mathematics stifles creativity'.[72] Such commentary on political figures, with little relevance to the topic of video games in education, is common underneath these articles.

Conversely, where video games are used for education in a business context, media coverage is much more positive. An *Izvestia* article entitled 'This is not a toy' provided an extensive list of business and financial simulators, noting especially Russian-made options. The latter were assessed to be of less value than their Western counterparts and urging further development in this area.[73] A quote from a manager interviewed for the article states that 'There are currently a large number of adapted and translated games in the Russian business education as well as domestic developments. However, in terms of the number and variety of games we are significantly behind our Western counterparts.'[74] The author presents a compelling case for the value of video games for business training, suggesting that they can improve employee performance in a number of ways including by stimulating interest in a topic, providing an environment to practice theoretical knowledge, engaging the

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[67] Kuibida, 'Computer games to be added to school curriculum'.
[68] 'Fursenko to include video games in curriculum', *Argumenty i Fakty*.
[69] Ibid., paragraph 7.
[70] Ibid., comments section.
[71] Antonina Pashinina, 'Games in a model village', *Izvestia*, 20 December 2011, <http://izvestia.ru/news/510300> [accessed 29 June 2013].
[72] 'Fursenko to include video games in curriculum', comments section.
[73] 'This is not a toy', *Izvestia*, 25 September 2012, <http://izvestia.ru/news/536045> [accessed 29 June 2013].
[74] Ibid., paragraph 3.

players' interest and even challenging existing beliefs and attitudes. There are no cautions here about any potentially negative effects; in fact, the author's only reservation is that without the accompaniment of training workshops and personal tuition, games may not be releasing their optimal potential.

*Novaya Gazeta*'s reportage on academic research into the use of the game Tetris as a tool for coping with trauma was positive, although in the closing sentences the author writes that the game 'does not simply distract one's attention.'[75] In this case, the usefulness of a game is presented as surprising. Once again, the concerns about negative effects of video games are much alleviated when their target audiences is adults rather than adolescents or children. Similarly, where usually Western games are a source of worry because of the messages or influences that young people may receive, in discussions about business and financial training games the authors would prefer to see Russian games for what appear to be reasons of national pride.

## 2.3 Video games and politics in the press

Just as the church and schools have seen video games as a useful method of connecting with a target audience familiar with the medium, politicians have also attempted to harness interest in games for political purposes. A local news website reported one case where the incumbent governor of Bryansk made a number of simple flash games available on his website, in some cases presenting his communist rival as a Nazi officer.[76] Experts and political analysts quoted in the article were universally critical of both the crass political move and of the poor quality of the games in general. One interviewee, the head of a PR agency, suggested that the game was 'obvious overkill and a very good reason to sue, as the characterisation [of the governor's opponent] is offensive.'[77] It is notable that she presented games as a potentially valuable political tool, citing a US government production which allowed players to balance the budget. She stated that this was 'useful' and suggested that the focus of political games should always be 'constructive'.[78] A political analyst interviewed on the topic said the game was 'an extra touch' but was wasted in that particular region as internet use was rather low. (In fact, he noted that it would have been more profitable to produce half a million newspaper adverts for the political campaign than to create such games.)[79]

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[75] ''Tetris' helps coping with memories of traumatic events', *Izvestia*, 11 November 2010, http://izvestia.ru/news/480731 [accessed 27 December 2014].

[76] 'Electorate invited to play with Bryansk governor', *Region Club*, 24 September 2012, < http://club-rf.ru/news/bryanskaya-oblast/elektoratu-predlozhili-poigrat-s-bryanskim-gubernatorom/> [accessed 29 June 2013].

[77] Ibid., paragraph 9.

[78] Ibid., paragraph 10.

[79] Ibid., paragraph 13.

Public commentary on such articles about games and politics often contains – and below the line attracts – criticisms about wasted money and effort. Coverage of the new Ministry of Defence website in *Izvestia* showed very limited tolerance for the addition of games to the portal, and indeed sarcastically titled the piece 'Ministry of Defence creates *Battleship* and *Minesweeper* in place of *World of Warcraft*'.[80] In the article it is reported that the website overall cost 36 million roubles, and while a spokesman for the Ministry is quoted as saying that much of the budget was used on the site rather than the games, the overall preoccupation of the author is the rather low-quality and unoriginal games on offer. The reference of *World of Warcraft* comes from a comment by Dmitri Medvedev suggesting that Russian developers needed to create the equivalent of the popular American title in quality, but ensure that the game promoted interest in Russian history and culture.[81] *Izvestia*'s coverage reports that a competition with a 90 million rouble budget to find a developer for Medvedev's 'Russian Warcraft' was axed due to lack of interest.[82] Russian-made games *World of Tanks* and *IL-2 Sturmovik* are described in the article as 'popular' but not consistent with the government's patriotic criteria.[83] Initiatives to promote Russian games once again meet with less criticism.

In the press, then, money, political orientation, effects on young people and discourses about 'high' and 'low' culture are the focus of discussion. The strands of discourse I have identified in the mainstream media are very similar (although as I will demonstrate in the next section, not identical) to the set of opinions which Blum discovered in his work. The association that Blum and Pilkington find between youth culture and negative Western influence is present in media coverage of gaming and gamers. However, as the next section shows, video game coverage by specialist game sites is structured around different priorities. These assessments of games by mainstream authors stand in stark contrast to the ways that gaming site authors and (as Chapter Four will show) gamers discuss games.

## 3. Presentation of gaming by video game websites
### 3.1 Two types of video game coverage
I devote some space here to exploring two types of video game sites in more depth, before picking out the most important themes in reportage. There is a wealth of online information which is devoted to publicising, discussing and reviewing computer games and I divide these

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[80] Denis Telmanov, 'Ministry of Defence creates *Battleship* and *Minesweeper* in place of *World of Warcraft*', *Izvestia*, 9 January 2012, < http://izvestia.ru/news/511261> [accessed 29 June 2013].
[81] Tom Goulter, 'Russian Prime Minister: Why Not A Russia-Themed WoW?', *Games Radar*, 23 June 2012, < http://www.gamesradar.com/russian-prime-minister-why-not-a-russia-themed-wow/> [accessed 10 July 2013].
[82] Telmanov, paragraph 14.
[83] Ibid., paragraph 15.

sites into two categories: 'portal'-type sites and gaming-specific sites.[84] Enterprises like Mail.ru and Rambler.ru possess gaming sections of their site which range from simple link categories pointing to other online content, to separate mini-sites with reviews, free games and e-stores.
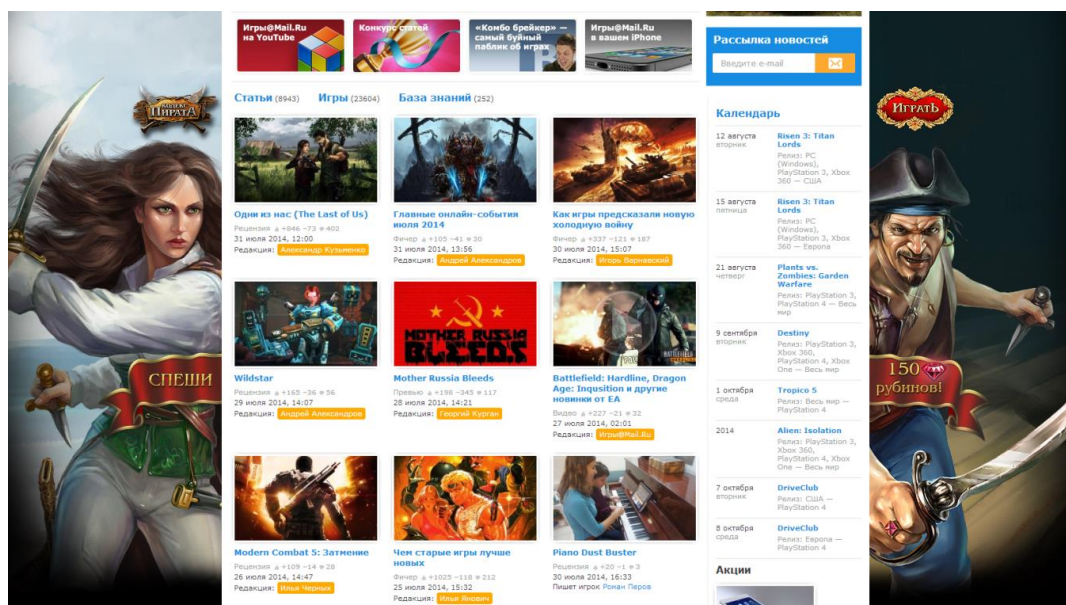


*Figure 17. The main gaming page at Mail.ru, linked prominently on the main page of the site.*
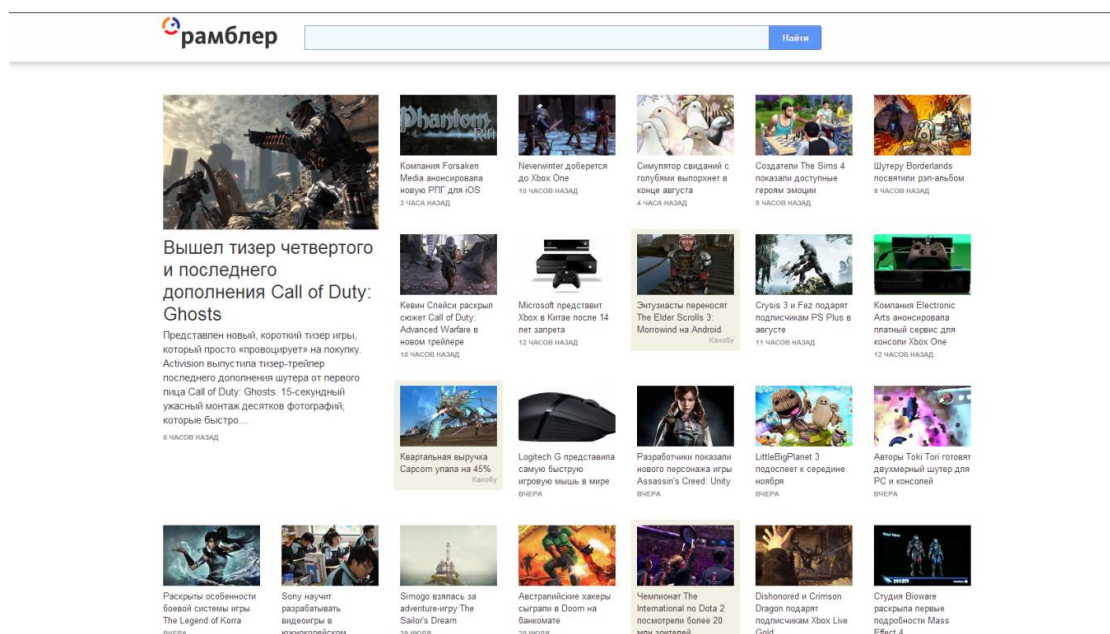


*Figure 18. Gaming news from Rambler.ru, a page accessible directly from the Rambler.ru main page.*

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[84] I define as 'portal' sites those general interest outlets which direct users to a number of subcategories; a Western comparison might be MSN, for example.

Materials like this are largely promotional or feed content from other sites and lack critical discussion of games, as I shall further discuss in this section. Such sites should be viewed as distinct from both mainstream publications and gaming-specific sites for two main reasons. First, they provide little in the way of editorial or authorial opinion, tending instead to present material without comment (such as translated press releases or neutral game descriptions), or to issue non-specifically positive game reviews. Second, these sites are often providing content with the aim of soliciting page views and sales for themselves and partner websites and therefore have little interest in community-building. Portal sites are often much broader in appeal and focused more on popular and well-publicised titles and free and social games than on niche or 'hardcore' content.[85] As a result, there is little for readers to challenge, discuss or engage with, and sites in this category tend to disallow or discourage community building. A lack of forums, poorly-designed or no comment pages, limited space for reviews or user comments, no system of ranking or providing feedback on content and no way of 'friending' or privately contacting other users are typical characteristics.
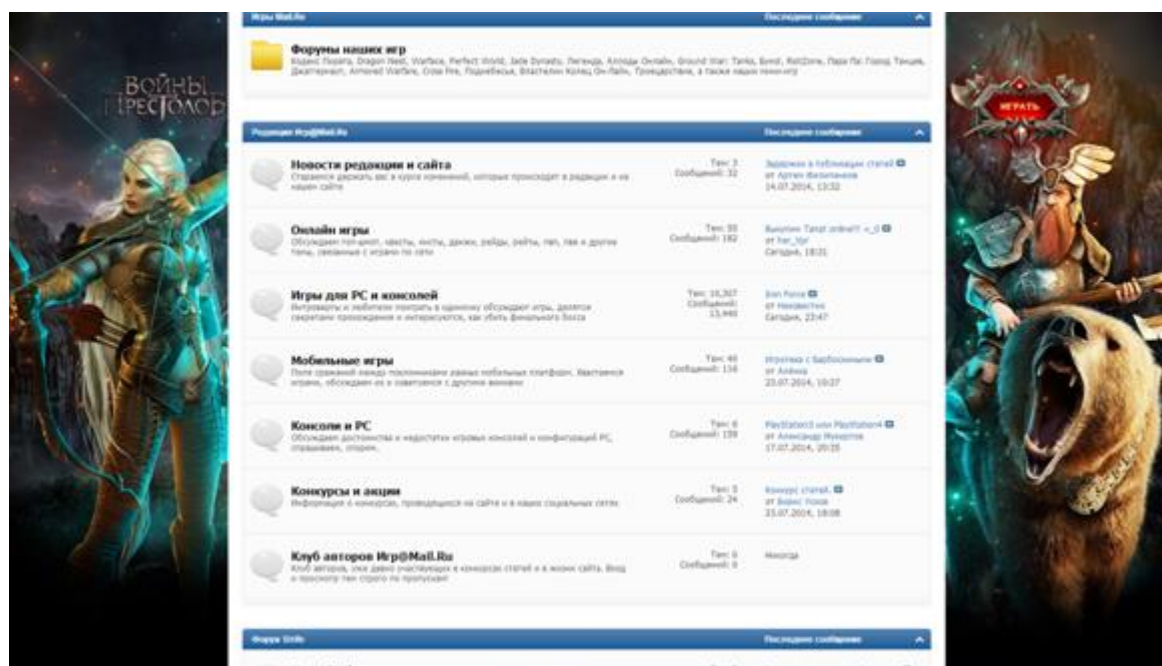


*Figure 19. At the start of this research, Mail.ru provided no gaming forum for its users. A forum has now been created, although as the image shows it is as yet quite empty, and divides its categories much more broadly than any special-interest gaming sites.*

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[85] "Hardcore" is term used to describe games which are considered difficult, complex and requiring much time and research to play well. It is also used to describe gamers who play such games. The antonym of hardcore is "casual", meaning someone preferring less complex games like puzzle games and who plays with less regard for competition.

Mail.ru, for example, devotes a website subsection to a range of video games, from simple browser games to the MMO *Allods Online*. Note that most of the titles covered on the site are owned by Mail.ru. It displays this section prominently in both a sidebar and a tab at the top of the main portal page. The game portal divides games into a number of categories; at the top are versions of poker, dominoes and cards, followed by business simulation ('tycoon'-type) browser games and downloadable MMOs, with mobile phone games pushed further down the page. In a section titled 'Everything About Games,' Mail.ru delivers articles about new games, reviews, opinion pieces and a substantial portion of self-promotion. Although the site reviews and covers popular Western 'AAA' games (that is, big-budget, heavily-advertised games from major companies), a significant proportion of coverage is devoted to Russian-made games. This is no patriotic gesture, however; the company's press material boasts that it is 'Russia's largest online games company' with a roster of 34 MMOs to date.[86] Thematically, 'casual' card and poker games are well-represented, as are mobile games based on drawing, playing cards with friends and puzzles. MMOs are divided between fantasy and military strategy, and are generally free-to-play. It is possible to use the Mail.ru payment client to purchase and download Western games as well as the domestic games on offer. While the site draws in heavy traffic, the aim is to solicit sales and downloads; the opinions expressed by site authors are almost always positive, and there is no real discussion about gaming as a wider hobby. Mail.ru, then, represents the most accessible and commercially successful axis of gaming in Russia. While few self-described 'gamers' would consider Mail.ru a valuable or interesting source of information, or the best place to purchase and discuss games, it is nonetheless an extremely popular site.

By contrast to portal sites, many special-interest sites are built around a similar layout. The sites I reference here are Gameland.ru, GameMAG.ru, Gamer.ru, GoHa.ru, Igromania.ru, MMORPG.su, StopGame.ru, and WoWcasual.info. Heavy advertising, side bars for searches, polls, topic lists and recent content are visible in all eight sites which were monitored for this study.[87] Wowcasual distinguishes itself here, being an individual blog made with the Wordpress platform, but nonetheless the site does run advertisements and maintains a similar sidebar to the other sites in this category. Visually, then, specialist sites distinguish themselves somewhat from more general-purpose sites. They also prominently direct their users to their presence on other social media sites: Twitter, Facebook, VKontakte and YouTube are the most common. While general-purpose sites attempt to draw users in and keep them there in order to generate sales or revenue, special-interest sites encourage visitors to connect across other platforms. Such special-interest sites rarely cover 'casual' or social games.

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[86] Mail.ru, *Mail.ru Group*, <http://corp.mail.ru/en> [accessed 25 June 2013].
[87] Refer to the methodology chapter for more detailed information about the selection process for these field sites.

As with their English-speaking counterparts, many such sites rely on press releases from game companies. Too much of this content, however, can make for dry reading; sites therefore compete to provide videos of gameplay, interviews, analysis, reviews, game guides and cheats, image galleries and editorials. Five of the eight sites selected for this analysis provide content from almost all of these categories. GoHa, Igromania and GameMag are less inclined to offer video content aside from trailers and a few gameplay videos, but compensate with strong community-building affordances (such as up or down voting content, or maintaining busy forums). Wowcasual's output is more limited, but the long, detailed posts about elements of game culture are a hallmark of the blog and are much-discussed in the comments section. In this case, a lack of breadth and frequency of posts is balanced out by a deeper analysis of games. Stopgame provides additional content in the form of flash games and minigames which can be played in the reader's browser. Since these comment systems, forums, galleries and minigames are actively encourage site readers to connect, share opinions and game results and participate, there is a strong focus on the social in contrast to the mainstream perception of gamers as loners.

Through the use of these site features, specialist sites communicate much about their intended audiences, their cross-platform media presence, their authors' presentation as fellow gamers and their focus on a particular subset of the gaming world. I discuss the ways in which specialist gaming sites actively encourage community building and shape identity in the next chapter. Germane to this analysis, however, is that all these sites work to position themselves as uniquely authentic gamer voices, in stark opposition to the kind of portal sites that I described at the start of this section. This presentation of authenticity is expressed both in the way the sites are built and, as I now show, in the way site authors present gaming and deride mainstream media coverage as ill-informed.

## 3.2 Themes in video game site coverage

In addition to creating and reinforcing their own community norms, gaming websites show an awareness of how gaming is presented in the mainstream media, and of the kinds of criticisms made about games and gamers. Generally the criticisms are refuted, but sometimes contributors will present arguments about improving the wider gaming community in ways which draw upon some of the concerns of mainstream commenters. These 'community improvement' type articles can also relate to a facet of gaming largely unknown to mainstream media, but which is of great interest to readers (for example, quality of game narrative, or the use and abuse of crowd-sourcing sites like Kickstarter). I therefore divide the analysis below into two sections: themes and topics which are also covered by mainstream media (including the reactions of gaming commentary to popular news stories about video games), and themes specific to gaming communities.

*3.2.1 Themes in common with mainstream media*

Analysis of mainstream media coverage of games has shown that the Russian press tends to frame video games as, in order of importance, a negative influence upon young people, a novel form of education or as a method of business and skills training for adults. For the most part, the second two themes are disregarded on specialist sites, although there is occasionally mention of the potential of video games for improving leadership or social skills. The crucial difference between mainstream and specialist coverage is that the former tends to be about games designed exclusively for training purposes, while the latter suggests that users can derive benefit from games which are putatively non-educational. Gamers are quick to see the potential benefits in developing gaming skills, often positioning the capacity for logic, coordination and collaborative skills as a built-in feature of video games. However, they also tend strongly to deny that violent games have any inherent capacity to exert a *negative* influence on players. This trend is especially pronounced in stories about extreme play or extreme behaviour surrounding games.

For example, in an article about a Taiwanese teenager who died after playing Diablo III for 40 hours, GameMag are quick to point out that the underlying cause of death was a cardiovascular problem.[88] A second death referenced in the same article is also attributed to cardiac arrest. Commenters on the forum are divided over this story, with approximately half the serious comments seeking to distance themselves from the modes of play enacted by the deceased gamer. The young man is described as 'a fool' because 'the game isn't worth dying over', 'sick in the head', 'mindless', failed by his family members or held up by the mainstream press as an exaggerated example of the dangers of gaming.[89] Some commenters, as in Western media coverage of games, attribute the death to a identifiably Asian style of immersing oneself in games.[90] Another group are more flippant, wryly commenting 'hardcore gamer', 'weakling' or posting their own longest play sessions.[91]

Three similar stories were posted under the title 'Games in the mainstream media' on Gamer.ru.[92] The author prefaces the stories with the observation that mainstream press coverage of games is usually reserved for 'a business success' or a 'criminal or curious

[88] Maxinhell, 'Taiwanese teenager dies after playing Diablo 3 for 40 hours', *GameMag.ru*, 17 July 2012, <http://gamemag.ru/news/podrostok-na-tayvane-umer-posle-40-chasov-igri-diablo-3-79808> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[89] Forum topic, 'Taiwanese teenager dies after playing Diablo 3 for 40 hours', *GameMag.ru*, 17 July 2013, <http://forums.gamemag.ru/topic/97264-подросток-на-тайване-умер-после-40-часов-игры-в-diablo-3/#entry2764162> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] totoroQ, 'Games in the mainstream media: a knife in the chest over *WoW*, £1150 on XBLA, real-life GTA theft,' *Gamer.ru*, 13 July 2012, <http://www.gamer.ru/news/igry-v-meynstrimovyh-smi-nozhom-v-grud-za-wow-xbla-na-1150-funtov-gta-ugon-v-realnosti> [accessed 28 June 2013].

event'.[93] The synopsis of three events (one Canadian *World of Warcraft* player stabbing another, a British 12 year old running up a large credit card bill buying game tokens and a Chinese man throwing people out of their cars in an apparent imitation of *Grand Theft Auto*) is laced with sarcasm and puns. The author criticises the *Daily Mail*'s lack of understanding of game purchase mechanics and points out that 'naturally', the Chinese man in the final story was drunk.[94] Commenters are equally scathing: the father of the British boy is deemed 'apparently retarded' and a quote from the Canadian player about games being 'his life' is met with derision.[95] On Stopgame.ru, reportage about a young American man shooting other filmgoers at a screening of Batman sequel *Dark Knight Rises* attracted almost 200 comments, with opinions ranging from the disturbed minds of Americans through to the usual irreverent mockery.[96] However, the most highly rated comment on the site simply stated 'If people are morons, games have nothing to do with it.'[97]  The article itself criticised a CNN reporter who had attributed the event to the influence of video games; the Stopgame.ru journalist ironically suggested that 'this time, video games won't suffer alone, but together with film'.[98] In these examples and in many others, gamers and game writers distance themselves from narratives of extreme or abnormal gameplay and point out the lack of newsworthiness in mainstream coverage of such stories. Moreover, they are equally critical of Russian and Western mainstream narratives about extreme play, although there is a particular cynicism about the Russian media using Western stories to promote an anti-gaming stance.

By contrast, coverage of political events which may impact on gaming is detailed and knowledgeable, and these topics are approached as serious issues to be discussed. Mainstream articles on these topics are usually judged as insufficiently critical of government motives. For example, a Duma bill said to be aimed at protecting children from potentially harmful online content[99] was minutely discussed at Gamer.ru[100] and GoHa.ru.[101] Commenters likened the legislation to the American SOPA and PIPA bills and pointed out

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[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Waldemar Sidorov, 'The influence of videogames on a regular American shooting', *Stopgame.ru*, 21 July 2012, <http://stopgame.ru/newsdata/15254> [accessed 2 July 2013].

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid.

[99] 'Amendments to the law on the protection of children from information harmful to their health and development', *Kremlin.ru*, 31 July 2012, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/16095> [accessed 28 June 2013].

[100] Forever_recon, 'Analogue of 'The Great Firewall of China', bill 89417-6. An appeal to the State Duma', *Gamer.ru*, 10 July 2012, <http://www.gamer.ru/news/analog-velikogo-kitayskogo-faervola-zakonoproekt-89417-6-obraschenie-k-gosudarstvennoy-dume> [accessed 28 June 2013].

[101] Ub3Rush, 'We may soon see internet censorship in Russia', *GoHa.ru*, 10 July 2012, <http://www.goha.ru/c/archive/item/0/777419.html> [accessed 28 June 2013].

that it would give politicians regulatory powers on a scale with Chinese authorities.[102] Sources cited by authors and commenters were generally not from the mainstream media; a number of internet activists and local employees of outlets like Wikipedia and YouTube were quoted instead. Both the game websites cited above openly declared themselves in opposition to the bill, with Gamer.ru encouraging its readers to sign a petition against the legislation.[103] Gaming sites and their readers called the bill 'dangerous', 'ineffective', 'insane' and made frequent references to *1984*'s Ministry of Truth (in the case of the Gamer.ru article even placing a prominent *1984*-related image at the top of the page).[104] Some commenters professed not to care and expressed disbelief that the bill could be as powerful as detractors claimed, while a small minority expressed satisfaction and suggested that people would post more patriotic material online as a result. Commentary was mostly general (discussing 'the internet' as a whole), but some GoHa users pointed out that the broad criticism of information that 'encourages children to commit acts that endanger their life and (or) health' in the bill could easily be applied to gaming.[105] Specialist sites firmly position themselves in the opposition camp, delivering detailed discussion and quotes from sources outside the mainstream media. They encourage readers to relate the effects of the bill to their everyday lives as gamers and internet users, and imply that supporters of the bill are either ignorant of internet usage and culture, or have sinister motives. Where the politics of internet and computer technologies are concerned, gaming websites are highly critical of mainstream media outlets and shape their discourse to appeal to technologically knowledgeable readers.

### 3.2.2 Region-specific discussion

The gaming websites monitored for this research showed some distinct trends in when and how they covered Russian games and events. Across all eight sites, domestically-produced games were written about in a somewhat greater proportion than their numbers merit, and additionally experienced high levels of interest from readers. On those sites which maintain leaderboards of games and game companies, domestic offerings from companies like 1C-Softclub were consistently present and often at the top of the rankings. On average, 10% of weekly posts covered Russian-language games and game companies, although Wowcasual did not discuss Russian games, GameMag rarely touched upon them, and MMORPG.su devoted an unusually high 25% of their posts to domestic games. In the latter case, the site has close links to Wargaming.net, a Russian company who make free-to-play war strategy games; this may explain the frequent coverage of games which rarely merited more than an occasional news story on the other sites analysed. I included in my tally games produced in

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[102] These two bills, presented as solutions to online piracy and copyright infringement, were strongly criticised for their potentially disastrous impact on free speech and user-generated content; many popular websites like Wikipedia protested by blocking access to their content for a day.
[103] Forever_recon, *Gamer.ru*, paragraph X.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ub3Rush, *GoHa.ru*, comments section.

Eastern Europe, as these were mostly released in the Russian language and often by Russian-speaking teams. Coverage of Western games (which I defined as those made in North America, Europe or Australasia) usually accounted for 60-70% of the sites' output, while games from Pacific Asia made up the remaining 20-30%. Again, GameMag and Wowcasual differed from the norm, as Wowcasual covered only American games and GameMag devoted about 10% more coverage to Pacific Asian games than the other sites. Stories about Russian games were mostly presented in the same way as coverage of other regions; this is a clear contrast to mainstream media reportage, which tended to emphasise the dangers of Western media and the benefits of educational games produced in Russia.

However, more general stories about gaming in Russia were more enthusiastic, especially when the story suggested that domestic games and gamers were being noticed around the world. Gameland wrote with obvious pride about the addition of a Russian-made sports car in the Electronic Arts game *Need for Speed World*.[106] Igromania devoted a large article to a beauty contest whose contenders were drawn from the female player base of the Russian game *Allods Online*; the 'Miss Sarnaut' event attracted enough attention that the winner was photographed for the Russian version of MAXIM magazine, a point remarked upon by users as highlighting the beauty of Russian women.[107] National pride was also in evidence in a story about a Russian hacker who targeted the Apple store. Disillusioned with the 'greedy' developers, he created an exploit for the iOS allowing users to download game additions for free.[108] The Igromania article tends to agree with the hacker's motivations, and refers to him as 'our compatriot'.[109] Game journalists were similarly positive about the introduction of game items relating to the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) into the game *Warface* in a server update close to the Soviet holiday commemorating the 'blue beret' divisions.[110] A GoHa article hails the 'pride and glory of the Russian troops' and urges readers 'don't miss your chance to feel like a blue beret'.[111] In some cases, the sites' enthusiasm for a news piece is not shared by readers. When GameMag posted an E3 advert for game Metro:

[106] Vitaly Guz, 'Marussia Motors in *Need For Speed World*', *Gameland.ru*, 9 July 2012, <http://www.gameland.ru/news/53062/> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[107] Maksim Burak, 'Красота побеждает «Аллоды онлайн», или За что вы, девушки, геймеров любите?' *Igromania.ru*, 13 July 2012, <http://www.igromania.ru/articles/183979/Krasota_pobezhdaet_Allody_onlain_ili_Za_chto_vy_devushki_geimerov_lyubite.htm> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[108] Andrei Chapliuk, 'Russian hacker takes revenge on greedy developers', *Igromania.ru*, 16 July 2012, <http://www.igromania.ru/news/184075/Russkii_haker_otomstil_zhadnym_razrabotchikam.htm> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[109] Ibid, paragraph 2.
[110] '*Warface* celebrates Airborne Forces Day', *GoHa.ru*, 2 August 2012, <http://www.goha.ru/c/archive/item/0/786136.html> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[111] Ibid.

Last Light, to be set in Moscow, forum posters had some criticisms on the topic.[112] One noted that a 'bass Russian voice' would sound 'more colourful', another hoped that the game would not contain 'stupidity, like in the first part where station names were written in English'.[113]

The desire to see Russian games become popular abroad seems to be contingent on the way in which the games represent Russia, and the concessions that they make for a non-Russian audience. In the above examples, commenters expressed pride in some game elements but doubt over how, or whether, they would be translated for foreign gamers. The presentation of 'Russianness' in games is hotly debated in these cases, and players are particularly hostile to the idea of game developers pandering to a foreign audience. While the audiences of gaming sites are obviously interested in the large proportion of articles about foreign games and engage with global gaming products and cultures, there is also a keen awareness of how Russian games and gamers may be perceived abroad.

### 3.2.3 Building a gaming community

Analysis> of the ways in which gaming sites react to media critique is valuable because it demonstrates the awareness that gaming communities have of their position relative to mainstream culture. However, gamers do not exclusively define themselves against portrayals of young people in Russia's print and online media. A strong theme in specialist site coverage was community-building, both in the ways the sites presented themselves (for example, as repositories of community knowledge or as collaborative projects between journalists and readers) and in reportage which enhances a sense of identity and community. During the six-week period in which a selection of sites were monitored, two essays were published which called for community improvement, one in terms of player behaviour and the other in the sphere of AAA game innovation. In a three-part essay series critiquing elements of AAA games, a Gamer.ru writer called for more intelligent game mechanics, more accurate marketing and greater integration of players with developers.[114] Commentary on all three pieces was lively. On the same site, another user submitted a post entitled, 'Let's be friends, guys', lamenting the demise of intelligent commentary in their community and soliciting ways of filtering good discussion from 'trolling'.[115]

The offline lives of gamers are well-documented too, with coverage of meet-ups, structured social events and game-related workshops common. Eight such events were

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[112] Guru, '*Metro: Last Light*: Welcome to Moscow!', *GameMag.ru*, 17 July 2012, <http://forums.gamemag.ru/topic/97257-metro-last-light-dobro-pozhalovat-v-moskvu/> [accessed 28 June 2013].

[113] Ibid.

[114] xopoBod, 'Kill the marketer: a guide to creating the perfect MMO, part one', *Gamer.ru*, 30 January 2012, <http://www.gamer.ru/news/ubit-marketologa-posobie-po-sozdaniyu-idealnoy-mmo-chast-pervaya> [accessed 28 June 2013].

[115] Fulier, 'Guys, let's be friends', *Gamer.ru*, 27 June 2012, <http://www.gamer.ru/gamer-ru/rebyata-davayte-zhit-druzhno> [accessed 28 June 2013].

documented over six weeks: five cybersport tournaments[116] [117], of which three were in Moscow[118] [119] [120], a user-organised meeting of 30 *Allods Online* players in Voronezh[121] and two expos (expositions, or exhibitions), one sponsored by Igromir[122] and one by Gamer.ru. [123] Both expos were also held in Moscow, and a common complaint in the comments sections of these articles was that Moscow was too far away or too expensive to be able to attend the events.

Writers for these sites also expressed an interest in wider demographics of gaming, as well as presenting longer think-pieces about the nature of games, gamers and game culture. Several of the sites chosen for analysis broadcast search data published by Yandex about the search habits of gamers.[124] The division of search terms into 'gamers' and 'casuals' by Yandex met with much approval, with several commenters pleased to be acknowledged as 'proper' gamers rather than being lumped in with those who played casual games. Although the author of Wowcasual did not comment upon this data, he posted several longer essays about his own gaming history. He writes that his lifelong love of computing and games has not prevented him from 'getting two degrees, learning English, meeting girls and marrying one of them'.[125] He questions the belief of stereotypes that 'computer games are a drug and gamers are sick', noting that there are many other hobbies that seem just as childish to him.[126] However, he also explains his disillusionment at the state of gaming as it stands, describing new releases as 'nothing new' and suggesting that video games are yet to mature as a creative industry.[127] (Interestingly, he points out that similar criticisms were made of cinema before it was taken up as an ideological tool by the government, and posits that

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[116] FKS Rossiya, 'Cyber Samara 2012', *Gamer.ru*, 28 June 2012, <http://www.gamer.ru/cybersport/kiber-samara-2012> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[117] Rostislav Gruby, 'Zhitomirsk zerg are coming', *Igromania.ru*, 23 July 2012, <http://www.igromania.ru/news/184531/Zhitomirskie_zergi_idut.htm> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[118] ub3Rush, 'Warfest – large-scale cybersport festival in Russia, *GoHa.ru*, 28 June 2012, <http://www.goha.ru/c/archive/item/0/773132.html> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[119] Igor Erishev, 'GT Academy finals to be held 14 July', *Gameland.ru*, 10 July 2012, <http://www.gameland.ru/news/53068/> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[120] 'Games@Mail.ru took part in Moscow City Games', *Gameland.ru*, 31 July 2012, <http://www.gameland.ru/news/53175/> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[121] Mail.ru, 'Meeting of fans and *Allods Online* staff', *Gamer.ru*, 22 June 2012, <http://www.gamer.ru/allods-online/vtrecha-igrokov-i-razrabotchikov-allodov-online> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[122] Chado, 'Igromir 2012', *Gameland.ru*, 16 July 2012, <http://www.gameland.ru/news/53100/> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[123] Svetakru, 'Gamer LIVE 2012: ready... get set... go!', *Gamer.ru,* 18 May 2012, <http://www.gamer.ru/gamer-live/gamer-live-2012-na-start-vnimanie-marsh> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[124] 'What video game fans search for', *Yandex.ru*, June 2012, <http://www.company.yandex.ru/researches/figures/2012/ya_gamers_2012.xml> [accessed 28 June 2013].
[125] Deckven, 'A Frivolous Hobby', *Wowcasual.info*, 27 June 2012, <http://wowcasual.info/?p=6535> [accessed 28 June 2013], paragraph 2.
[126] Ibid., paragraphs 3 and 4.
[127] Ibid., paragraph 16.

political criticism of games is due in part to their competition with state television and newspapers.) Ultimately, his opinions run close to those of the Gamer.ru editorials cited above. The maturity of the medium, and of its fans, is seen as critical to earning public support and making gaming an acceptable adult pastime. 'Computer games will eventually grow out of short trousers and be on a par with art,' writes Wowcasual's author, 'And until then, we have what we have.'[128]

## 4. Conclusions

Depictions of games and gamers vary greatly between mainstream and specialist sites, although both sets of sources work within identifiable frameworks. Mainstream media coverage is focused on the perils and potentials of video games for children and youth, generally concluding that the medium is to be treated with care and that games played by children should be vetted thoroughly by adults. The Russian media approach issues of games, violence and psychological problems in a similar way to the mainstream British press in the past (and certain reactionary holdouts today). Compare, for example, tabloid articles in a publication like the Daily Mail to the reactions towards these articles in the English-language gaming press.[129] However, in the Russian context, there is additional debate about games as a Western or foreign import, and news stories about violence or antisocial behaviour committed by gamers in other countries highlight the perpetrators' hobby as significant even where the crimes are not motivated by in-game events. A small number of news stories present games as a useful learning tool for children and for business purposes. Articles in the latter category are overall more positive about games, although the benefits of training and practical programs are sometimes described in terms of being exceptional for the medium and distinct from entertainment games.

Those websites which are aimed at gamers are instead primarily occupied with game-related news, reviews and opinion. Aimed at a young, technologically-advanced audience, but not specifically at children, the sites channel much effort into encouraging community building and discussion. Thematically, linguistically and mechanically (through game-like site features), gaming sites attempt to foster community and interaction between users. Sometimes this is based on affiliation with certain genres and platforms, but more usually around a general 'gamer' identity. This sense of community is most obvious where authors and commenters engage with mainstream media perceptions about themselves and

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[128] Ibid., paragraph 25.

[129] Tanith Carey, 'Chilling truth about the video games your children got for Christmas: How titles like Pay Day 2, Grand Theft Auto and Mortal Kombat corrupt children as young as five,' *The Daily Mail*, 26 December 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2529677/Chilling-truth-video-games-children-got-Christmas.html>, [accessed 22 April 2015] and John Walker, 'How The Daily Mail Uses Tragedy To Spread Gaming Fear,' *Rock Paper Shotgun,* 5 September 2012, <http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2012/09/05/how-the-daily-mail-uses-tragedy-to-spread-gaming-fear/>, [accessed 22 April 2015].

their pastime, and commentary on articles about crime, political events or general game culture is more prolific and in-depth than responses to reviews, for example.

Two major differences in perceptions between mainstream and gaming sites occur repeatedly. First, mainstream sites tend to view games as a pursuit most interesting to children and youth, where 'youth' is implied to end around 18 (that is, where parental supervision is no longer required). Articles and advice columns frame gaming as an issue related closely to the upbringing and education of young people, with a focus on how game consumption may hinder a smooth transition into adult life, the workplace and healthy social interaction. By contrast, data from game websites shows that the 19-24 age group are the most common visitors, followed by 25-30 year olds and 12-18 year olds in roughly equal measure. The number of visitors under the age of 12 and over the age of 50 is frequently just one or two per cent.[130] The distinction between 'youth' as children or dependent adolescents and 'young people' as a broader category is never addressed by mainstream sites.

Second, while both kinds of media outlets express a desire to see more Russian game production, the motives are quite dissimilar. Mainstream sites tend to display the fears of Westernisation or negative Western attitudes which have been analysed in earlier chapters. Meanwhile, game-specific sites express frustration at uninteresting Russian games, preferences for good Russian dialogue or dubbing, or a sense of embarrassment at the lack of globally-competitive production, but very rarely challenge the content of Western-made games. As a general trend, mainstream media sites are traditional in their approach to games, and in many ways repeat established patterns of critique towards youth cultures. Discussions of politics and economics are in a minority, but usually contain more in-depth analysis and opinion than the rather lightweight advice columns and opinion pieces which discuss video games and youth. When the mainstream media spotlight acts of violence and link them to gaming, specialist gaming sites are quick to refute any connection between games and violent behaviour. By contrast, the mainstream media rarely discuss the opinions of gamers, solicit writing from specialist sites or highlight positive elements of gaming for young people. The interaction between the two groups of media is one-way, which is to be expected given the comparative reach of established mainstream news outlets and smaller gaming site readerships.

The gaming websites analysed in this chapter present more nuanced and flexible views surrounding gaming than the mainstream sites. They are also less concerned with the impact of games upon children, and tend to view games as another piece of a multi-faceted

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[130] Habrahabr's data are typical, for example. Habrahabr 2010 media kit, *Habrahabr.ru*, <http://habrahabr.ru/i/pdf/habrahabr_mediakit_2010.pdf> [accessed 11 June 2013]

media landscape. In the final chapter, these nuances and views are fully explored through the survey responses received for this research project.

# Chapter Four: the practices, perceptions and experiences of the Russian-speaking gaming community

The previous chapters' analysis shows that Russian game culture is shaped by many practical, ideological and local forces. Games and gamers are both subject to the whims of developers, the economic and practical limitations of their location, top-down pressures from authorities and often-critical media discourses. As I outlined in the Introduction, game culture itself has its own set of norms and rules, and knowledge of how to navigate them is a vital element in identifying as a gamer and participating in that culture. Complex rituals of self-definition are a part of game culture, as they are any other group. This chapter is devoted to understanding the self-definition of Russian gamers by further exploring and unpacking the opinions, experiences and perceptions of Russian-speaking gamers, using survey results and discussions from comments and blogs on specialist game-related websites. My analysis of community-building on specialist game websites builds on Chapter Three's conclusion that game-related media sources in Russia are very aware of how gamers are perceived in the mainstream press. These websites therefore seek to present a professional front, delivering high-quality news and politically-aware commentary. However, they still remain unusually close to their readership by using gaming aliases and informal language to hail readers.

This dual presentation of 'professional' and 'gamer' is indicative of how gamers perceive themselves relative to wider society. Writers are both experts in their field, but also consumers and often fans of the same games which they review and discuss. Voices in the English-speaking gaming media have produced a wealth of critical essays and introspective pieces on the nature of gaming which often speak to this relationship. In Russia, such work is less prevalent but many similar themes can be noted in personal blogs, forum and website commentary and responses to the survey undertaken for this thesis. Using this variety of sources allows a comparison between the kinds of opinions that gamers express through fan sites or commentary, and their opinions as expressed anonymously in a survey. To what extent, then, do the 'imagined' gamer as articulated by gaming website discourse, and the responses to survey questions about gamer identity, correspond to one another?

Through this analysis of specialist media, as well as through survey results, I explore how Russian gamer identity is shaped, and how the nationality and relative youth of the participants affects their engagement with video games. I begin with an examination of specialist game website features, asking how they create or encourage the construction and reinforcement of Russian gamer identity. Next, I report demographic data from the 2011 survey I conducted. I then revisit the idea of barriers to access, investigating the extent to

which the barriers discussed in Chapter Two affected my survey participants. Finally, I undertake a broader analysis of respondents' answers about their gaming lives, activities and opinions.

## 1. Specialist media and community-building

In the previous chapter I showed how specialist site authors report on and often challenge depictions of gamers in the popular press. When reacting to mainstream opinion, specialist site authors position themselves as responsible, educated, expert voices and it is for this reason that I argue they inhabit a midway point between gamers and the mainstream media. However, the opinions of site authors about mainstream media discourse make up only one part of the discourses presented by these sites. Unlike the portal sites discussed in the previous chapter, editorial and authorial opinion permeates specialist gaming sites. Sometimes two different authors will have differing opinions on a game, series or company, or an author will refer to a previous post on the topic and express a change of heart. Some of the larger and more organised sites support multimedia posting, for example vlogs (video blogs). Through these video posts, which are often formatted and presented like a weekly television program, the sites provide high-quality, in-person commentary and discussion and attach faces and voices to popular author names. In a distinct contrast to Western sites of the same kind, authors often (but not always) use gaming aliases rather than their real names; the effect is of a community of gamers rather than of a group of experts disseminating information to non-experts.

Community is encouraged and supported through both site design and author engagement, with extensive opportunity for commenting on articles, posting on forums, 'friending' other users, and sometimes submitting articles to be vetted and posted. In sum, there is a high level of expertise, editorial opinion and user interaction in these sites. They are created, staffed and run by individuals with an interest in gaming, and presented in ways to appeal to gamers, rather than to a more general audience. In this chapter section, I discuss some of the features of specialist sites that contribute to community-building amongst gamers. These sites are important spaces in which gamers can communicate their views, connect with others, discuss events and news and participate in narratives about what gamers are, what they do, and how they play and interact with games.

### 1.1 Layout and visual site features

Seven of the eight sites share a similar layout, with heavy advertising, constantly-rotating banners displaying notable or new content and busy front pages with links to platforms, games, site sections and lists of top content, games and authors. Common linked themes run through the discourse on the sites' pages, the most pervasive those of expertise and experience. All seven community sites present a 'guides' page or tag, and Stopgame also

hosts a repository of cheat codes. Frequent references to gaming 'secrets', 'gurus' and 'experts' are present on all of these sites, often with the implicit assumption that site visitors are looking to become expert players. The sites advertise themselves to be the chosen home of an unspecified number of expert, hardcore gamers ready to guide and foster less expert players. MMORPG.su takes a more moderate tone, suggesting that the content is created 'for both regular and casual players'.[1] (Naturally, the assumption here is that a 'casual' player deviates from the norm.)

The author of Wowcasual, in contrast to the other sites, firmly positions himself as a casual gamer. The site title is '*Blog kasualnogo geimera*', which translates as 'The Casual Gamer's Blog'. Unlike the other websites analysed here, the blog is run by an individual and updates rather infrequently. He focuses on two or three preferred games and states in his 'About the blog' page that 'this blog is for casual players who can only play for a couple of hours a day'.[2] While the large community sites analysed sought to cover a wide variety of games, the single author of Wowcasual almost exclusively discusses *World of Warcraft* and *Star Wars: the Old Republic*, with an occasional detour into other fantasy and sci-fi MMOs. Posts often focus on new expansions, an interesting element of existing gameplay or commentary on community and game culture. Despite the author's claim that he is now a casual player, he is an obviously experienced gamer with a confident writing style and a large group of regular readers.

The sites selected vary in simplicity, from Wowcasual's straightforward blog to the complex game-like mechanics of Gamer.ru, which allows active users to collect trophies and increase their powers on the site. Wowcasual works using standard blog software; the author writes a post and can publish it in a number of user-defined categories such as 'Games', 'Discussion', '*World of Warcraft*' and so on. Visitors to the site may comment upon all the posts using an alias or linking back to their own site. This kind of format encourages readers to engage with the material and with one another, and to visit other sites run by fellow commenters. The larger sites analysed offer even more scope for interaction with forums and more extensive, user-moderated comment systems. Additionally, they prioritise visible and interconnected information over a minimalist format: drop-down menus are a universal feature, posts are tagged with console, game, developer and often author information, and features like galleries and videos of gameplay are linked in posts.

Specialist sites are primarily focused on game releases, reviews and strategy, presenting themselves as welcoming communities where readers can acquire expertise and therefore social capital within gaming circles. Discourse surrounding 'good', 'hardcore' or

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[1] MMORPG.su, *About*, <http://www.mmorpg.su/about/> [accessed 9 April 2013].
[2] Wowcasual.info, *About the blog*, <http://wowcasual.info/?page_id=2> [accessed 9 April 2013].

'girl-friendly' games always works to shore up the notion of gaming as a pastime requiring skill, commitment and specialist knowledge, and additionally presents gaming as an activity which is normatively masculine. GameMag, Gamer and Stopgame all host sections entitled 'Girls' or 'Girl of the day', a feature which collates or profiles attractive women from video games, wider game culture, or the website readership itself. In the case of Stopgame, the section is largely comprised of user-submitted albums and galleries, while the other two sites have a more moderated collection. Being fictitious, or even a cartoon, is no barrier to entry. Female video game characters are hugely popular with multiple press images, screenshots and sometimes fan art depicting them in varying stages of undress. Gamer's section is more cosmopolitan, featuring actresses, socialites and models in addition to gamers, and each 'Girl of the day' article presents information about the woman and her profession. Nonetheless, images are calculated to appeal to a largely male audience and there are few direct quotes from the women profiled. Reviews on these sites occasionally refer to a game as being 'girl-friendly', with GameMag specifically tagging some games as 'girls will approve'. Such games are generally narrative-heavy with easier gameplay modes and rich scenery and music; any games which provide an arena for player-versus-player combat or 'cybersport' are unlikely to be tagged as girl-friendly. As in the mainstream press, these conventions imagine their audience to be young and male, the latter by articulating very specific, gendered categories of games. However, the partial nudity and exaggerated cartoon forms in some of the female images suggests that specialist sites are aiming their material at an adult audience.

## 1.2 Community

Users are encouraged, by the sites' very designs, to comment, interact, share material and connect with the website on other platforms like VK or Twitter. Voting material up or down or rating it further allows site members to make their voices heard in a way which can directly affect the prominence of articles and comments. GameMag is one of the smaller communities profiled here, but has a large number of site affordances which encourage community interaction. The front page is dominated by daily news posts as with many such websites, and also lists the most popular games, forum topics, new releases, authors and commenters for the current week. Users can vote content up or down, including other users' comments. Each registered user therefore has a reputation score based on how well their peers rate their comments and forum posts.
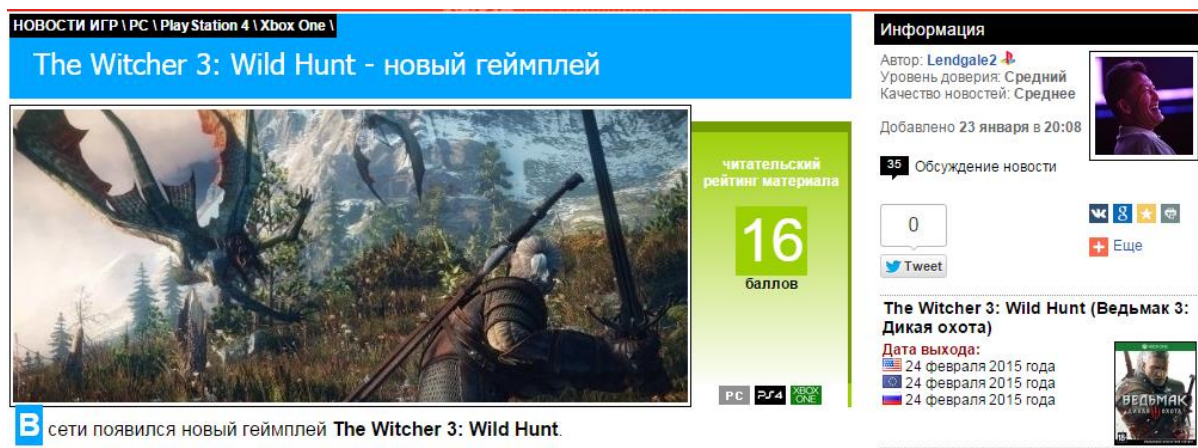
*Figure 20. Centre: the user score of this particular news article. Right: information about the general quality of the author's article is listed under his name.*

Content is highly searchable and a series of tabs at the top of the page allow users to sort site material by game, platform, reviews and popularity. Over time, approving or 'upvoting' material tagged with a console tag (e.g. Nintendo Wii, xBox 360) will cause the user to be sorted into a number of categories showing allegiance to that console. Through this mechanic and the constant updating of popular post and user list on the front page, the site encourages visitors to actively engage with content, upvoting and contributing to raise their profile on the site.  Gamer.ru takes this immersive reputation system one step further, creating a whole RPG-style game out of site participation. The site is described as 'a unique browser-based game' in which members may gain levels by submitting content to the site. Higher levels unlock 'spells' – essentially community privileges including temporarily silencing other members and upvoting content.

Approval from other users once again directly contributes to status and power on the site. Watching commenter interactions and status during the six-week analytical period showed that largely, commentary and material highly rated by other users was indeed more coherent and useful than low-ranked material. The game elements of the site therefore seem to quite effectively promote high-calibre discussion and allow users to jointly decide on priority content. The site information suggests that the community possesses an 'atmosphere of warmth and friendliness', with users 'willing to share their secrets and knowledge', 'help beginners' and 'discuss subtleties with advanced gaming gurus'.[3]

The other sites are less complex. Some allow user-submitted content, some require a moderation procedure before material can be added by users. All have an associated forum or related community and allow users to friend one another and interact in a private or semi-private messaging system. Each site publicly displays community guidelines, most of which

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[3] Gamer.ru, *About the project*, <http://www.gamer.ru/about> [accessed 9 April 2013].

follow the common template of prohibiting obscene and defamatory content. In the case of Wowcasual, the author maintains a page outlining community guidelines, and another telling other bloggers how to contact him and join his blogroll. He is also a founding member of a group of players who maintain guilds across multiple games. The group's members are mainly other bloggers and regular readers of their sites, and their community revolves around creating a pleasant and knowledgeable play environment with a level of accountability for player behaviour.[4]

In the following screenshots, the wide range of games and genres discussed on the sites becomes evident. When compared to the Mail.ru forums, there is more subdivision into genres and platforms as well as space to discuss hardware and software. Specialist game sites situate themselves within a broader gaming and geek culture; Igromania provides subforums for certain popular fandoms such as Star Wars and My Little Pony, while GoHa has a subforum for browser and mobile games.



*Figure 21. GameMag's forum predominantly uses English genre titles.*

[4] Wowcasual.info, *COMCON MMO society*, <http://wowcasual.info/?page_id=6151> [accessed 9 April 2013].

| Раздел |
| --- |
| **Форумы** |

**Служба поддержки** (просматривают: 6)
Подразделы: 🗐 Гарант HotCoins.Ru | pwLVL.ru, 🗐 Гамазавр - цифровые копии лучших игр

**GoHa.TV (стрим сервис)** (просматривают: 6)
Подразделы: 🗐 Перейти на GoHa.TV, 🗐 Новости GoHa.TV, 🗐 Стримеры, 🗐 Учимся стримить вместе с GoHa.TV!, 🗐 Технические вопросы, 🗐 Правила сервиса

**Новые Игры** (просматривают: 301)
Подразделы: 🗐 Новости, 🗐 Статьи и обзоры, 🗐 Обсуждение игр (любых), 🗐 Народные новости, 🗐 Albion Online, 🗐 Black Desert Online, 🗐 Bless Online, 🗐 Camelot Unchained, 🗐 DESTINY, 🗐 Dirty Bomb, 🗐 EverQuest Next, 🗐 Eternal Crusade (WH40K), 🗐 H1Z1, 🗐 Kingdom Under Fire II, 🗐 Life is Feudal, 🗐 Lineage Eternal, 🗐 Lost Ark, 🗐 Naval Action, 🗐 Overwatch, 🗐 Star Citizen, 🗐 Skyforge, 🗐 Tree of Savior, 🗐 TERA (RU), 🗐 War Thunder, 🗐 World of Warplanes, 🗐 World of Warships

**ММО Игры** (просматривают: 759)
Подразделы: 🗐 Новости ММО, 🗐 Let's play и видеообзоры, 🗐 Видео новости, 🗐 Grind.FM, 🗐 ARCHEAGE, 🗐 World of Warcraft, 🗐 LINEAGE 2, 🗐 World of Tanks, 🗐 TERA (RU), 🗐 APB, 🗐 Аллоды Онлайн, 🗐 AION, 🗐 Age of Conan, 🗐 Anarchy Online, 🗐 Blade & Soul, 🗐 C9, 🗐 Champions Online, 🗐 Darkfall: Unholy Wars, 🗐 Defiance, 🗐 DC Universe, 🗐 Dungeons & Dragons Online, 🗐 EverQuest, 🗐 EVE Online, 🗐 Final Fantasy XIV Online, 🗐 Guild Wars, 🗐 Guild Wars 2, 🗐 Hearthstone (раздел переехал), 🗐 Infestation, 🗐 MECHWARRIOR, 🗐 Neverwinter, 🗐 Path of Exile, 🗐 Panzar: Forged by Chaos, 🗐 PLANETSIDE 2, 🗐 Perfect World, 🗐 Ragnarok 2, 🗐 RIFT, 🗐 SW:TOR, 🗐 The Elder Scrolls Online, 🗐 The Secret World, 🗐 LOTR ONLINE, 🗐 Ultima Online, 🗐 Wakfu, 🗐 Wildstar, 🗐 Легенды Кунг-Фу, 🗐 Супер гильдии, 🗐 Архив

**Single & Multiplayer** (просматривают: 143)
Подразделы: 🗐 Мероприятия, 🗐 Новости индустрии, 🗐 Новости - Аркады и Шутеры, 🗐 Новости - RPG, 🗐 Новости - Приключения и Квесты, 🗐 Новости - Стратегии, 🗐 Новости - Симуляторы и Спорт, 🗐 ARMA, 🗐 Battlefield, 🗐 Counter-Strike: GO & etc, 🗐 DIABLO 3, 🗐 DayZ, 🗐 DOTA 2, 🗐 FIFA Football, 🗐 HEROES OF THE STORM, 🗐 League of Legends, 🗐 SMITE, 🗐 StarCraft 2, 🗐 TES V: Skyrim, 🗐 Warface, 🗐 Некомпьютерные игры, 🗐 Инди-игры, 🗐 Форумы гильдий, 🗐 Торговый раздел, 🗐 Архив

**Браузерные и Карточные ММО (ККИ)** (просматривают: 12)
Подразделы: 🗐 Poker, 🗐 MM:DoC, 🗐 Hearthstone, 🗐 Форумы гильдий, 🗐 Торговля

**Мобильные игры** (просматривают: 4)
Подразделы: 🗐 Мобильные новости, 🗐 Игры для Android, 🗐 Игры для iOS, 🗐 Игры на Windows Phone

**Компьютеры: Железо и Софт** (просматривают: 13)
Подразделы: 🗐 Новости, 🗐 Статьи и обзоры, 🗐 Консоли, 🗐 Виртуальная реальность и 3D, 🗐 Trade

**Задушевные разговоры и всяческие базары** (просматривают: 28)
Подразделы: 🗐 Избранное, 🗐 Лабиринт психонавта, 🗐 Фотки, 🗐 Музыка, 🗐 Книги и мп3 книги, 🗐 Читальня, 🗐 Кино, 🗐 Авто / Мото, 🗐 Спорт, 🗐 Дикий Запад

| Все разделы прочитаны |
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*Figure 22. GoHa use mostly Russian forum titles.*

Specialist sites are more likely to use English terms for games and genres. Gameland and GameMag use English terms almost exclusively, GoHa and Igromania write some terms or titles in English. In the case of GoHa, the only game titles written in Cyrillic are those published using the same alphabet. Consciously or not, the use of English for genres, brand names and game titles suggests an audience who are knowledgeable about global gaming trends and terminology and capable of moving back and forth between specifically Russian and more generalised global gaming cultures. These gaming sites invoke membership of a wider 'geek' culture (such as by providing space to discuss popular culture series like My Little Pony), a strategy which almost always references North American tropes of 'geekdom'.

GameMag shows a number of unique linguistic features. The site is rife with neologisms in addition to the transliterations of English words and phrases common amongst all the websites. Their 'about' page describes the site as an '*uberportal*' – überportal – while the allegiance system mentioned above can lead a user to be defined as a '*soneboi*' ('Sony boy'), a '*cosmopolit*' (cosmopolitan), a '*PKkheiter*' (PC-hater) and more. Extensive searching for these terms suggests that they are inventions of the website and not commonly used elsewhere on the Runet.

*Figure 23. Under each article, the reader can see the particular allegiances of the users who voted positively or negatively on the piece.*

Generally, GameMag hails users as a group of gamers to another, suggesting that potential authors can contact the editorial team because they 'are always looking for new soldiers to join our ranks'.[5] Similarly, visitors to Gamer.ru are greeting by a floating bar at the top of the page which reads 'Hello, gamer! Register or log in'.



*Figure 24. The* Gamer.ru *greeting banner.*

In all the sites, use of the informal you ('*ty*' rather than the formal '*vy*') is widespread, even when authors are using their real names and presenting a more formal editorial style. Slang is common not just in articles but also in site text. GameMag's article rating system, for example, presents readers with a useful, colour-coded sliding scale from 0-1 ('complete shit') to 8-9 ('very cool'). Visitors to these websites are therefore hailed informally, as friends and fellow gamers. They are presumed to use, or be capable of understanding, gaming slang, invented game-related words, and gaming terms in both Cyrillic and Latin. This image of the young, technologically knowledgeable and cosmopolitan gamer is constructed through heavily interactive site design, a stake in submitting, up- or down-voting and commenting upon content, language that is informal and articles that cover games from around the world. Next, I turn to demographic data to interrogate the extent to which this 'imagined' gamer audience is accurate.

## 2. Who are the Russian gamers? Interrogating demographic data

There is little publicly-available demographic data on Russian online gamers; most statistics seem to be derived either from market data which takes into account all genres of game, or from figures for specific games. Because such reports stem from sales figures, they are often more concerned with economic data than user demographics. To provide some context about the respondents to my own survey, I added four questions asking about gender, age, location and occupation. For this section, I also draw upon data from a survey by statistician and e-commerce analyst Yuri Bryzgalov which incorporated the same four demographic questions.[6] He promoted the research on three popular gaming sites, including subforums relevant to various MMORPGs. The 16-question survey ran for two days in February 2010,

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[5] GameMag.ru, *Team*, <http://gamemag.ru/team> [accessed 9 April 2013].
[6] Bryzgalov, p. 1.

and received a total of 782 responses, of which 14 were discarded for '[giving] the impression of inaccuracy'.[7] Bryzgalov's survey consisted of multiple-choice or single-choice questions with predefined answers, while I chose a qualitative approach and encouraged my respondents to discuss their practices and opinions at length in an open-ended format. This allowed a more in-depth study of how gamers view and define themselves, as well as providing some data on how each individual's circumstances and choices affected their relationship to games and game culture. In this analysis, I do not just seek to present demographic statistics, but also assess what social, cultural and economic factors have shaped the Russian online gaming population.

## 2.1 Gender

Respondent gender was split at 90% male and 10% female or undisclosed. Such a high proportion of male players would be unusual in the context of a Western online gaming audience, although they do also somewhat outnumber their female counterparts. Bryzgalov notes that his survey respondents were 5.2% female, but that the proportion of women is 'usually considered to be closer to 10%' (although he gives no specific sources for this claim).[8] It is possible that his survey returned a lower proportion of women because he posted the survey link to sites which have a reputation for attracting 'serious' or 'hardcore' gamers, and may not be especially friendly towards, or accessible to, female posters. Demographic data from a number game-related sites suggests that visitors to these communities are up to 20% female, but the friendlier and more accessible sites seemed to have a higher female readership.[9] Women responding to my survey noted that they tended to play video games with their spouse or partner. Additionally, they seemed to be approximately half as interested in PvP combat as the male respondents, but somewhat more interested in communicating with other players (76.9% vs. 64%).[10]

## 2.2 Age

Age categories varied between the two surveys, but the general spread was similar. Bryzgalov records that 12.6% of respondents are under 18, with 1.6% of the total responses under 14 years of age.[11] This PhD research reports only 5% of total respondents to be under 18, although this total may be skewed by the games selected and the kinds of questions asked in the survey. Players between the ages of about 20 and 30 dominated. In my survey, this was represented by a 19-25 and a 26-35 bracket (representing 37.9% and 46.6% of total

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[7] Bryzgalov, p. 1.
[8] Ibid., p. 8.
[9] Further demographic data can be found at the Mail.ru analytics pages for several sites which choose to make their analytics data public. For example, GoHa.ru at < http://top.mail.ru/genderages?id=1059157&period=0&date=&aggregation=sum&#sids=m,f&percent =0> [accessed 11 June 2013].
[10] Ibid., p. 8.
[11] Ibid., p. 4.

respondents respectively). The younger two age groups which participants could select gathered them together in life stages: school-age and university-age. I then elected to group players between the ages of 35 and 50 into one bracket, and those over 50 in a final bracket. The decision to take 35-50 as a larger group echoes the tendency in social science and policymaking mentioned earlier in this thesis to consider under-35s 'youth'. It is relevant in this case because such a framework continues to impact youth policy to the present day; understanding the proportion of Russian gamers who can be considered 'youth' in a domestic context is vital because it shapes the perception of gaming as a youth activity. Meanwhile, my survey reported just two players in the over 50 category and only 3 in the 35-50 category; effectively, respondents over the age of 35 constituted only 8% of my total respondents.

## 2.3 Location

Location data about respondents was acquired with the initial aim of understanding geographical spread. However, this data can also provide some more circumstantial information about participants based on the average economic level and infrastructure availability in each region. For his question about location, Bryzgalov chose to use brackets which reflected the population size of the participant's town or city (in keeping with his purely quantitative approach to the survey). I followed his strategy, but also allowed participants space to specify where they lived, or opt out completely. This was a decision made to ensure that participants who were Russian-speaking or Russian but not living in the Russian Federation itself could be accurately counted. In analysing location data, I first counted the number of countries from which respondents hailed. In addition to Russia itself, there were participants located in Belarus, Latvia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, all of which were formerly part of the Soviet Union and therefore have significant Russian-speaking populations.  Second, I separated responses from those living in a city with a population of more than 1 million. There are twelve such cities in Russia, according to the 2010 census. Minsk (in Belarus) and Kiev and Kharkiv (in Ukraine) also fall into this category. Of 57 respondents to this question, 31 (54.4%) stated that they were from a city of more than 1 million inhabitants. In Bryzgalov's survey, 54.5% of respondents fell into this category. Another 10 of my respondents (17.5%) lived in cities with populations of between 500,000 and 1 million. Twelve respondents reported that they lived in a town with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants, a figure constituting the final 21% of respondents. Bryzgalov further subdivides his respondents into three brackets. According to his data, 18.5% of respondents live in a town of population 100,000 to 500,000, 6.4% in the 50,000 to 100,000 category and

7.4% in towns of under 50,000 inhabitants.[12] In total, then, 32.3% of his respondents live in towns with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants.[13]

As predicted, the most populous areas report the highest numbers of survey respondents. However, the significant proportion of respondents from less populous areas suggests that infrastructure is sufficient to support a healthy population of video game enthusiasts. The higher proportion of respondents from smaller places in Bryzgalov's data may be a result of economics, rather than infrastructure: his survey was available on websites which did not require a game account to view, and were free to access and use. Conversely, two of the three forums on which my survey was posted required a pay-to-play account to post. (While this does not stop directly linking to a post or thread, it is more likely that forum readers are players of the game in question.)

## 2.4 Occupation

The final demographic question about occupation offers similar opportunities for triangulating data to the question on location. From a person's occupation it is sometimes possible to divine their economic level, level of education, and potential access to IT services and knowledge. Bryzgalov's survey design clearly anticipates this analysis with the categories of 'school student', 'college student' (in a Russian context meaning a student studying at a specialised vocational training school), 'university student', 'manual/unskilled worker', 'white-collar worker', 'management' and 'unemployed'.[14] Categories for my survey were 'working (but prefer not to specify where)', 'student', 'unemployed' and 'prefer not to say'. In addition, respondents could describe their job or give a job title; again, I sought here to move beyond Bryzgalov's purely quantitative method and gather data about specific professions. Moreover, I wanted participants to have the freedom to define their current life situation in the most accurate and specific way possible. In this survey, 7% of respondents reported themselves to be unemployed, 26% were students and one did not want to specify; the rest were working. 65.6% of my respondents reported that they had a job, and in addition there was one self-employed respondent and one homemaker. Similarly, Bryzgalov's data shows 5.9% unemployed, 25.2% university students, 4.2% college students and 9.9% school students.[15] He reports that 54% of respondents were in work of some kind; of that total more than half were in white-collar work, and the portions of management and blue-collar workers are about equal.[16] In my own survey, of those who specified their profession eight were working in IT, one was more specifically working in the games industry, and there was one engineer, one scientist, one manager, one photographer, one

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[12] Ibid., p. 2.
[13] Ibid., p. 2.
[14] Ibid., p. 2.
[15] Bryzgalov, p. 2.
[16] Ibid., p.2.

construction worker and one mechanic. Gamers are more likely to be employed than anything else, with students making up about another a quarter of respondents. Of those employed, the majority are in white-collar jobs or the management chain; IT jobs seem most common. This is not surprising, as working in a computer-related field offers individuals both access to equipment and access to knowledge.

Overwhelmingly, then, Russian-speaking online gamers seem to be male, in their twenties and thirties, and likely to be studying or working (probably in a white-collar or management job). They are most likely to be living in a very populous area. The figures from the two surveys above are further supported by audience data from Mail.ru and gaming site Habrahabr.ru, both of which report predominantly male audiences between the ages of 18 and 35.[17] In the same sources, these sites also report about 20% of their user base to be from the Ukraine, and the majority of the rest from Russia.[18] This limited demographic profile provides some other clues about the average Russian-speaking player. His profession and location suggests that he has little in the way of economic barriers to access. Working in a white-collar job or studying shows a high probability of higher or vocational education. Additionally, both his geographical location and his workplace are likely offer the IT and internet infrastructure to support a gaming hobby, as well as proximity to brick and mortar shops which sell games in hard copy.

## 3. Revisiting barriers to, and strategies for, access

In Chapter Three, a number of limitations and barriers to accessing games and game technology were identified and discussed: language, economics, regional geography and infrastructure and political influence or censorship. Chapter Four investigated another, more complex influencing factor; that of socio-cultural attitudes towards gaming. The attitudes of survey respondents and forum users to these barriers were varied but rarely openly articulated. The ability of these individuals to access games and online material is obvious from their participation in this research survey and in internet-based gaming communities. In many cases, being financially, socially or linguistically able to play desirable video games was simply not discussed by these gamers. This may have been because they did not consider there to be anything remarkable about their strategies for play and access, or because they were fortunate enough to have available infrastructure, money and knowledge without a great deal of effort on their part.  Whatever the case, successful participation was a given. When participants did discuss problems or hindrances surrounding gaming activity,

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[17] Habrahabr 2010 media kit, *Habrahabr.ru*, < http://habrahabr.ru/i/pdf/habrahabr_mediakit_2010.pdf> [accessed 11 June 2013]; GoHa.ru analytics for June 2013, *Mail.ru*, < http://top.mail.ru/genderages?id=1059157&period=2&date=2013-06-16&gender=0&agegroup=0&percent=0&aggregation=sum&#sids=m,f&percent=0> [accessed 11 June 2013].
[18] Ibid.

they tended to focus on one key barrier (presumably whichever they considered most responsible for causing tension between how they wanted to play and how they were able to play). The exception to this rule was discussion about socio-cultural norms and attitudes surrounding gaming. As the analysis in Chapter Four has shown, gaming sites in Russia are constantly acknowledging, analysing and refuting public opinion about video games and gamers. Survey and forum participants were therefore acutely aware of, and knowledgeable about, the kinds of attitudes prevalent and were quick to dispel what they saw as largely myths. For this analysis I use the categories laid out in Chapter Three. However, although language barriers and money were referenced, respondents barely touched upon problems of location, infrastructure or political concerns. Respondents from cities were slightly more likely to talk about a wide variety of games and a long amateur gaming career, but no direct information was offered. While Chapter Four showed a tendency for gaming sites to report on political events which might impact internet freedom, and politicians have discussed and even employed games, the gamers surveyed did not seem to acknowledge any effect upon their hobby. Respondents were more inclined to discuss their language preference or abilities, or obliquely reference economic concerns.

## 3.1 Language

A first glance at the languages used in all of the game sites drawn upon in this study shows that generally, Russian-language game titles are written in Cyrillic, English-language games in Latin script, and Pacific Asian games either, depending on whether they are globally recognised, or more obviously targeted at Russian audiences. Those Pacific Asian games which have been heavily advertised in Eastern Europe will be displayed in Cyrillic, but most others (particularly popular releases from big companies) will be referred to by their English designations, in Latin characters. To reflect the fact that both alphabets are routinely used, several sites allow users to toggle back and forth between Cyrillic and Latin characters when viewing games by title. Sites seem to anticipate a level of flexibility and comprehension in both character sets.

For most Russian gamers, it seems that language is not an overriding concern when seeking out and playing games. A wealth of information is available in Russian, and even when game sites list English titles, the familiarity of readers with the games seems to cancel out any problems with comprehension. In fact, when specifically asked whether they preferred to play Russian games or non-Russian games, only 10% of survey respondents stated that they would rather play Russian games compared with 50% who had no preference. Of those who gave a reason for their preference, only half said it was because they are solely Russian speakers. (The other half expressed a desire to support domestic industry.) This question also brought up different functions of language in game communities. One player stated a preference for English-language games 'to improve my

English language, and also to interact with people from other countries'.[19] Another noted that playing on English servers 'reduces the amount of smack talk' (meaning players making inflammatory, insulting comments about one another), although as his observation was written in English one has to assume that he was discussing server culture rather than his own comprehension.[20] Contrary to early assumptions, then, language does not seem to be a significant issue for these gamers, and in some cases the language barrier is actively employed to improve game experience or real-world proficiency. Moreover, the prevalence of Russian-speaking gamers accessing game sites from the countries of the former Soviet Union, America, Canada and Israel suggests that Russia functions as a global gaming centre in the same way that Kolko and Putnam's research shows the tendency for gamers in Central Asia to orient themselves towards Russia rather than North America.[21]

## 3.2 Economics

Economic concerns were not overtly discussed by survey participants. However, of the three official game forums on which the survey was advertised, two require payment to play and the third operates a 'freemium' model, where players can play for free but upgrade in various ways by paying for items. From this it is reasonable to conclude that a gamer who can afford a monthly subscription, or small transactions for game upgrades, is likely to have some spare income. (Moreover, since there are many free-to-play games available in Russia, it is possible to play at internet cafes or at a friend's house for a fraction of the monthly cost of a game subscription.) The survey participants are therefore almost inevitably skewed in favour of those with a socio-economic situation which allows for pay-to-play game activity. Indeed, 50% of respondents stated that they were in work, and another 25% were students and therefore were likely to have access to computers and the internet, if nothing else. With that in mind, only 2% of respondents considered that 'expense' was the most negative effect of their gaming hobby. One respondent expressed a preference for playing on foreign servers of pay-to-play games, explaining that 'such servers have a more adult audience than national (CIS) servers, and these people are much more interesting than brainless children'.[22] The survey for this thesis did not ask for data about people who played on pirate servers; however, Bryzgalov's survey responses suggest that 10% of players use these unofficial play spaces. One of the defining features of pirate servers, along with their lack of official regulations, is that they are usually free to enter and play.

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[19] Respondent 30.
[20] Respondent 19. Apperley defines smack talk as 'Smack-talk describes the lively banter of game players (on- and off-line) that involves the use of deliberately insulting, threatening, or otherwise inflammatory language. While it may be used to bully, distract, intimidate, or otherwise interfere with others, it is also often consensual. Because of its negative connotations, it is often strongly regulated in online virtual worlds.' (Apperley, p. 82.)
[21] Kolko and Putnam, p. 3.
[22] Respondent 8.

## 4. What makes a Russian gamer?

Concepts of gamer identity and being the 'right' or 'real' kind of gamer are multi-faceted. Discussion in previous chapters and above shows that there are a number of barriers to access which spring from economic, linguistic or geographical inequalities, and also that the community itself can be hostile or unwelcoming to different groups. Most pervasively, the persistent belief that a 'real', hardcore gamer is knowledgeable, expert and capable of high-level collaborative play in the 'right' genres of games creates a steep learning curve for those seeking initiation. Under this model, a significant time investment is required to learn not only game rules and patterns, mouse and keyboard skills and technical understanding, but also to build up a network of other gamers to tackle difficult collaborative content. In asking 'what makes a Russian gamer?', I sought to understand the extent to which this mentality was common amongst the target group, and to tease out any inconsistencies between self-identification as a gamer, and views of 'gamers' as a wider cultural group.

In a series of qualitative, open-ended survey questions, I asked participants first how they viewed *themselves* and secondly how they viewed gamers as a group. (Would you call yourself a gamer? Why/why not? How would you define the term 'gamer'?) I then followed up these questions by asking whether or not the respondent would play more if possible, and what the most positive and negative effects of gaming had been for them. The latter questions were designed to focus on the potential side-effects of acquiring gamer knowledge and cultural capital. Was there a significant trade-off in other areas of life? Did gamer identity become more important than other identities and roles? Were popular media narratives of addiction supported by the game practices of the survey respondents?

The results of the first question were quite predictable: 80% of respondents stated that they defined themselves as a gamer. When asked why, half of these respondents reasoned that it was *time spent playing* that made them a gamer (20 individuals). Another 8 said that they were a gamer because they *enjoyed* games, and 6 more said that it was their game *expertise* that made them identify with the gamer label. Other, less popular reasons were 'having played games for many years', 'simply playing games in any form', 'being interested in many kinds of games', 'enjoying team-work' and 'enjoying problem-solving'. In fact, the first of these reasons could loosely be placed in the 'time' category, the middle two in the 'enjoyment' category and the last two in the 'expertise' category. 5% marked themselves as 'unsure' or 'used to be [a gamer], but not any more'; these respondents did not offer further information about their choice. Eight of the fifty-two respondents to the question – about 15% - stated that they did not consider themselves to be gamers. In this group, most

stated that they did not spend enough time playing games to consider themselves gamers. The remainder said that they only played 'casually' or 'to relax'.

When asked about their definition of 'gamer' more generally – that is, when not applied to themselves – respondents used similar categories but with differing frequencies. Most respondents stated that just *enjoying* games was enough to allow identification; another half of this number of respondents suggested that *time playing* was the key factor. (In cases where a time value was given, 'a lot' of time was variably defined as 'two hours per day', 'eight hours per day', 'all of one's spare time' or 'as a second job'.) Another 15% of respondents said that a gamer was someone for whom gaming was an important part of life, although this was never defined in any more detail. The fourth most popular description of a gamer was a person 'addicted to games'; this accounted for fully 10% of the responses to this question.

Discussions of gamer identity, in this limited context, tend to fall into categories already outlined in this thesis. Ideas of time spent, longevity of game experience, quality of game experience and enjoyment are prevalent, and even specific reasons for calling oneself a gamer seem to line up with these three key concepts. Survey respondents were very likely to associate themselves with game culture and identity, usually emphasising their skill or time spent playing. As mentioned in the brief introduction to this analysis, spending a lot of time on gaming is often a prerequisite for gaining the kinds of motor skills and understanding of rules needed to be proficient. It is possible that stating that one spends a lot of time playing games is a way of suggesting this proficiency. However, when respondents discussed the term 'gamer' more broadly, they tended to say that enjoyment of games was the most important factor. This is surprising, in that dialogue about gamer community and identity in the West has frequently revolved around expertise, as in Heather Mello's framing of gaming as a community built upon shared knowledge and acquisition of valuable gaming skills.[23] Survey respondents for this research were keen to associate themselves with tropes of expertise and time investments, but seemed more inclusive in terms of community. Tellingly, the binary of 'hardcore' and 'casual' was alluded to only once; there was no explicit ranking of gamers by skill level or type of game played by respondents. However, because participants' self-description did tend to emphasise the time and skills they had acquired in the gaming sphere, it might be argued that they were implicitly setting up a hierarchy where they, as gamers, were proficient, but other gamers did not necessarily have to meet their own standard.

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[23] Mello, p. 152.

## 5. Game preferences amongst Russian gamers

Participants were also invited to give their opinions about the kinds of genres and games they played. In the light of mainstream media and political coverage about the possible dangers of Western influence and the push to encourage the Russian industry, the survey solicited information about preferences for games from Russia or the rest of the world. It might be expected that a successful government strategy to foster domestic games would result in a high uptake amongst gamers. Data were also collected about the genres of games played by participants, and which game or games they spent the most time playing. Results revealed a preference for non-Russian games, usually on the grounds of quality, as well as a strong tendency towards online and networked games. (This is, of course, partly due to the data collection methods and survey design.) Outside of MMOs, participants played a broad range of genres but always returned to games which could be played collaboratively. Further data in section 6.4 will show that interactions with both online and offline friends, and the ability to make new friends and connect with people were all important elements of these gamers' ecology.

### 5.1 The search for quality

By far the most important factor cited by participants when deciding between Russian and non-Russian games was the quality of the game. Half of the 64 respondents expressed no clear preference for games from any one region, with another 36% reporting that they preferred non-Russian games. When asked to be specific about why this was the case, most responded that foreign games were simply of better quality; alternatively, when participants said they had no preference they were likely to say that the most important thing is that it be a good game. Sympathy or support for domestic industry was in evidence, too; often participants expressed that while they did not consider domestically-produced games to be quality products which compared to non-Russian offerings, they would happily buy them if and when they were enjoyable enough. Quality, then, manifests itself here as a more important attribute than 'Russianness' or 'non-Russianness' (the latter in the sense of Western production perhaps being more desirable in terms of cultural cachet).

Gamers focused not only on game attributes, but also on more peripheral concerns about quality of play experience. One respondent described at length the problems which occurred when one game company sold its game to another company, which was unable to appropriately moderate and monitor the CIS servers. The resulting degradation in play experience was considered by the participant to be a cultural issue stemming from a foreign company having little interest in the play experiences of its Russian clients. Similarly, as we have seen, the server culture on non-Russian games was said to be better by one respondent, who stated that he preferred to play higher-quality Western games for which payment was required, as it seemed the best way to ensure a better play experience within the MMO.

Language issues were rarely mentioned, with just one participant mentioning that he played Russian games as he could not speak English and '[language] optimisation is often very depressing, especially in PC games'.[24]

## 5.2 Genres and games

As would be expected from a survey posted to MMORPG sites, genre data was somewhat biased with the result that 64 of the 65 respondents checked that they played this genre. (Presumably the remaining individual no longer plays, or mis-clicked.) Approximately 50% of respondents played real-time strategies and role-playing games (RPGs), and 35% first person shooters. As the data analysis in section 7.5 shows, interaction with other players and engaging in PvP combat were two popular reasons for playing MMOs, preferences which seem to persist through other genres. Projections from Electronic Arts suggest that online gaming is driving Russia's video game market expansion.[25] Meanwhile, general sales data from NewZoo show MMO gaming to be the second most popular category amongst gamers, after a somewhat vague 'PC or Mac boxed game' category.[26] Interest in and experience with MMOs is further demonstrated by a poll from the administrators of the *Allods Online* forum, which asked 'What experience do you have with MMOs?' Respondents selected an answer based on the number of MMOs they had played before (none but *Allods*, one or two, many) and their character level. Of the 4822 responses, 22% indicated some previous experience with MMOs, and about 40% a high level of experience with other MMOs.[27]

The results of this survey show that *EVE Online* was the top choice of 36% of respondents, which is heavily influenced by the survey methodology but nonetheless is an interesting result. It means that despite their game having the smallest number of players, *EVE Online* forum users were more likely to answer the survey than those gamers clicking through from the *World of Warcraft* and *Allods Online* forums. A strong interest in *EVE Online* was also evident from Bryzgalov's data; 21.5% of his respondents stated that they play *EVE*.[28] Data from these sources show that *World of Warcraft* is consistently one of the favourite individual games, accounting for the favourite game of 23% of thesis survey respondents and a game played by just over 60% of Bryzgalov's respondents.[29] These trends are more widely echoed on the gaming websites discussed at length in Chapter Three; sites which display

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[24] Respondent 55.
[25] Vitaly Petlevoi, 'Russia's video game market to top $1.5 billion by 2015', *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, 11 July 2012, <http://rbth.ru/articles/2012/07/11/russias_video_game_market_to_top_15_billion_by_2015_16295.html> [accessed 11 June 2013].
[26] NewZoo, *Infographic* 2011.
[27] Leane, 'Survey: your experience with MMORPGs', *Allods Online* official forum, 21 January 2011, <http://forum.allods.ru/showthread.php?t=55958&s=e8449bfe4e6b897a0612d704c0e06c4a> [accessed 10 May 2012].
[28] Bryzgalov, p. 4.
[29] Ibid, p. 4.

data about most popular games and genres show a high level of interest in MMOs and RPG games generally. Puzzle games and social games accounted for 20% and 12.5% of favourite genre responses respectively – these are largely defined in a Western context as 'casual games'. Even amongst putatively 'hardcore' Russian players it seems that social and relaxed gaming experiences are desirable.

## 6. Game and game-related practices and behaviours
### 6.1 Addiction

Narratives of addiction and excessive play were often brought up by respondents, although they were approached in ways very different from mainstream media discussions. Generally, the two factors that participants associated with an addiction to games were an inability to tend to real-life concerns such as work and family, and a high amount of time spent playing on a regular basis. This contrasts with the discourses surrounding game addiction that we saw in the previous chapters' outline of mainstream media discussions; in material from those outlets, addiction was strongly tied to aberrant (particularly violent or sexually deviant) behaviour, and problems in child and youth development. Gamers responding to this survey approached the topic of addiction in ways which suggest a stronger sense of agency over the hobby. This is unsurprising on two levels. Firstly, gamers taking this survey were generally adult, whereas the subjects of many mainstream media articles are youths and children. Secondly, gamers were apt to consider playing video games a hobby like any other as opposed to a fundamentally unhealthy or inappropriate influence. For example, one respondent had indicated that she would *not* play more often if given the opportunity and characterised gamers as those who spend 'all their spare time' playing. In the final, open-ended text box she explained that 'My way of life regarding games now is to keep it casual – no fuss, so that the game stays a game and doesn't turn into work.'[30] Her phrasing suggested to me that she had previously played much more, and had since reduced her amount of playing time.

As a brief case study, we can look in depth at the five respondents who defined the term 'gamer' as someone with an addiction to games.[31] All five of these individuals clearly said that they would define themselves as a gamer, although they tended to say that this was because of the amount of time, both chronologically and as a habit, that they had invested in games. None therefore explicitly linked their play habits with addiction, but all stated that they would *not* play more if they had the opportunity, citing 'real life', 'family life' and work as pressing reasons. One stated that he would play '24 hours a day if possible', and two felt that they spent more than enough time gaming and would actually play less if they could.[32] In

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[30] Respondent 28.
[31] These were respondents 5, 6, 26, 61 and 63.
[32] Respondents 61, 6 and 26.

these cases, respondents clearly considered gamer status itself to be indicative of a level of addiction. When they responded to questions about their play habits, they stressed *time played* and implied that cutting down on the number of hours they spent in game would be beneficial.

Bryzgalov's analysis of his own survey data also links time played and the desire to play more or less, in this case by dividing his respondents into 'casual' and 'hardcore' groups based on play time. Time has already been discussed as a marker of gamer status but data about time played is also revealing in terms of more specific gaming habits, such as where these habits intersect with other data about gender or occupation. In his analysis of survey results, Bryzgalov compares the amount of time participants spent playing with other data they gave, finding that on the whole, students were most likely to play between 20 to 40 hours a week.[33] Moreover, schoolchildren were the group who spend the most time in game overall; 17.3% stated that they played for more than 40 hours per week, which Bryzgalov observes is 50% higher than average.[34]

Based on time played, Bryzgalov notes that respondents 'are divided into 'casual' and 'hardcore' in approximately equal measure'.[35] In fact, the distribution of responses across his five time-played categories is remarkably even, although those who play more than 40 hours per week constitute 11% of the total respondents, rather than the 20-23% in the other categories.[36] Bryzgalov points out that 'amongst the people who spend more than 40 hours per week in-game, 58% consider their hobby harmful (23% or 12.5 percentage points higher than average).[37] However, only 11.4% want to give up games, 28% or 4.5 percentage points *below* the norm.'[38] Generally, then, time spent playing and an awareness of how gaming may impinge on 'real' life are linked in these surveys, although respondents do not always specifically link the two when discussing their own play habits. The sweeping generalisations of the mainstream media about addiction and excessive play are absent here, although one respondent notes at the end of this PhD survey, 'Games are evil! Get a girlfriend, find a second or a third job. Get into mountain climbing, caving or extreme sports. And NEVER keep a computer around for little kids.'[39] The mainstream media, conversely, frequently depicts games as damaging, addictive or dangerous in a way that television, books or music are not. Sometimes these discourses related to the perceived addictiveness of the medium, other times to the violence or sexually explicit content presented to players (concerns which are

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[33] Bryzgalov, p. 7.
[34] Ibid, p. 7.
[35] Ibid, p. 5.
[36] Ibid, p. 5.
[37] Ibid, p. 5.
[38] Ibid, p. 5.
[39] Respondent 60.

clearly less relevant to an adult audience than to the child gamers about whom the popular press are often writing).

## 6.2 Expertise

Viewing games in a Western context has shown a preoccupation with expertise as a marker of gamer identity and status. The idea of gaming subcultural capital as being rooted in knowledge (as suggested by Mello), as well as Taylor's work on modeling expertise, show a tendency to conceptualise expertise as the chief mechanic through which a gamer acquires status.[40] For this project's survey, there were no specific questions relating to expertise. When constructing the survey, I had aimed to impose as few of my own perceptions of elite gaming, gaming identity and priorities upon the question as possible. However, participants were quick to discuss their proficiencies and history with games. Additionally, participants were asked 'If you need technical or strategy advice with a game, where do you usually turn?' in an attempt to understand how players might accumulate expertise. In response to this question, most participants (54%) said that they used forums to find advice and information. 30.5% cited Google as a source (and interestingly, none input Yandex or more generically 'search engine'). 'The internet' and 'blogs' were also used, but no further information offered. After forums and Google, just over 20% of respondents said that friends were a source of game information, and another 10% turned to 'other players'. A further 6.8% did not specify a particular source of information, writing instead some variant of 'my own initiative' or 'my knowledge of game mechanics'.

When asked if they had anything else to say about their gaming experiences and practices, respondents were keen to offer some kind of credentials, or make an analysis or assessment of the state of gaming. 'I've been playing since I was 8 years old,' stated one participant. 'I have 16 years of gaming experience starting with Dandy Dungeon [an Atari game] right up to PS3.'[41] His comment references both the longevity of his gaming hobby, and also the variety of platforms he is familiar with. Another respondent implies a long history with games, writing 'Bring back the games of the 1990s, when games were made for enjoyment and not to earn money by turning players into zombies.'[42] Bryzgalov noted the same trend amongst his respondents, summarising that 'Over half the respondents are experienced MMO players who have been engaged in this hobby for over 3 years. During this time the average player has tried more than 4 games.'[43]

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[40] Mello, p. 152.
[41] Respondent 46.
[42] Respondent 51.
[43] Bryzgalov, p. 4.

## 6.3 Game-related proficiencies and activities

Throughout the thesis I have suggested that Russian gamers may need to employ a number of strategies to enter video game communities, such as finding translated or localised games, playing on pirate servers and playing in spaces like internet cafes or friends' houses rather than at home. In addition to understanding the media ecology which Russian gamers construct and inhabit, this section also seeks to map out other skills related to video game play and community engagement. Participants were queried about their IT or video game-related work or hobbies, and if they had none were asked to talk about why. Survey respondents were asked if they took part in a number of pre-defined video game-related activities such as forum participation and moderation, organising events like LAN parties and creating additional game content like maps, levels or add-ons. Additionally, a more open-ended question solicited information about 'other computer work' (both on a personal and professional level) such as programming, site design or building computers.

Only 15% of respondents did not engage in *any* game-related activities including forum participation (from which one must assume that they only read the forums and do not contribute). Of those who said that they did not take part in other video game-related hobbies, the majority stated that it was just a lack of interest, and a quarter said that they specifically lacked the skills to create content or moderate communities. Others reported that they lacked the time or desire to take on extra responsibility, particularly when they did not perceive that 'extra-curricular' gaming hobbies would improve or enhance their game experience. By far the most common activity for participants was forum participation, accounting for slightly fewer than 80% of responses. Forum moderation was a voluntary role of 15.6% of respondents, and another 14% said that they ran a blog. Other activities, such as hosting LAN parties, were less popular but still a feature of Russian gaming life.

As might be expected, the proportion of participants lacking other ICT skills was somewhat higher than the proportion of those who did not engage with other game-related activities, although only 35% did not engage in other computer-related work. The most common ICT skill participants possessed was programming; in fact, 22% of respondents said that they could program, and those who had this skill were more likely to list another ICT-related skill as well. Server management and site design were each skills which 10% of participants had. Finally, about 20% of respondents to this question stated that they did have other IT-related skills (but did not specify what they were), and just under 10% said they possessed 'general computer knowledge'.

Computer-related proficiencies are visibly common amongst the Russian gaming population, which ties into Kolko and Putnam's conclusions about gaming as related to ICT knowledge. Although no causal link can be established in this study, it can be reasonably

suggested that individuals who play video games often have an interest in other computer-related projects, and are therefore unlikely to be entirely reliant on internet cafes (as the ability to experiment on, and augment, these computers is limited). Social and collaborative projects are also popular both within game communities (forums, LAN parties) and more broadly in respondents' computer-related activity.

## 6.4 Socialising, knowledge-sharing and community-building

The interest in socialisation in game communities and game worlds was a theme emphasised by many participants. Respondents drew upon gaming contacts for company, advice, entertainment and news, and listed the ability to meet and interact with other people as the most positive aspect of their gaming hobby. 36% of respondents said that social experiences and new friends were the best part of online gaming, a percentage which beat even the generic 'enjoyment'. One respondent summarised his gaming philosophy simply, saying, 'I try to stay polite and friendly in MMORPGs. I love meeting new people.'[44] About 30% of respondents used friends as a source of information about new video games; this was the third most popular way of learning about new releases and new ideas about what to play after 'news sites' and 'the internet', which each received 31.5% of respondent selections.

Participants were also asked about their socialising habits during gameplay. The survey asked 'If you play video games with other people, with whom do you usually play?' While 14.5% said that they preferred to play alone, this was a relatively unpopular choice. Another 14.5% played with their spouse or partner, and 8% with family. However, the majority of respondents – 72% - stated that they played with online friends and 66% with 'real life' friends. (No data was collected about the overlap between these two groups, or about possible movement from the former to the latter group.) In-game activities also relied heavily on teamwork with other people. While PvP was by far the most enjoyed activity, 45% of respondents also took part in PvE raiding (which usually requires at least five people to participate, depending upon the game). 15% of respondents were roleplayers; roleplay can be paralleled to an activity like tabletop gaming, in that a regular group of players with a common interest and some kind of backstory for their characters often creates the most enjoyable environment. Community-building in this case is of high importance. More generally, the popularity of engaging with not only online but also real-life friends when playing MMOs shows the importance of people in the Russian gaming ecology.

## 7. Reflecting upon gaming as a pastime

The dichotomous presentation of gaming by the Russian mainstream media as educational or dangerous was clearly noticed and often challenged by the participants in this study. Survey respondents structured some of their answers around concepts of addiction and life balance,

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[44] Respondent 33.

skill acquisition and expertise, suggesting that they were keen to dispel preconceptions based on debates defined by the media. However, their conception of gaming is, perhaps predictably, far wider than the depictions presented by mainstream media outlets. When asked in two open-ended questions about the most positive and most negative consequences of their gaming activity, respondents moved far outside the simple framework of educational benefits versus psychological disruption which so many mainstream news sources relied upon. Instead, they discussed friendship, relaxation, and intellectual challenge, contrasting this with disliking losing, frustrations over elements of game design and arguing with partners or family about gaming.

Positive results of gaming fell into two categories: general wellbeing and intellectual challenge. Most of all, respondents valued the opportunity to meet and interact with new people, with 36% of participants choosing social factors as the best part of their gaming experience. Many of these individuals specifically flagged up the importance of making friends and building relationships, as opposed to simply chatting and playing with people. 34% of respondents said that 'enjoyment' was the most positive element of gaming, and another 16% gained a significant sense of relaxation from the hobby. These three positive factors were the most popular amongst the survey respondents, and the focus on a sense of relaxation and wellbeing is in strong contrast to the perception of gaming as violent, disruptive and antisocial by the Russian press in general. 'Escapism' and 'blowing off steam' were cited as positive effects by 8% of participants each, implying that gaming constitutes an emotional release from everyday problems. Emotional fulfilment and good memories were also suggested. Participants also touched upon a deeper appreciation of games as art, with one explaining that

> I consider games art, on a level with cinema, music and literary works. After all, games have writers for the storylines, artists for the images, composers for the music and so on. But I don't consider that they're better than cinema, music, etc. They're all similar, but on different planes of entertainment and leisure. Some play chess, some build models of old ships, some skydive and some play video games. It's all just fun.[45]

Note, however, that while he is clearly invested in legitimising video games as art, he also displays the pervasive tendency of gamers to downplay the effect of games on their everyday life by ultimately dismissing them as 'just fun.'

On the other end of the scale, negative effects of gaming were similarly diverse. Participants tended to categorise their bad experiences as relating to 'real life', social experiences or game mechanics. 10% of participants reported no negative experiences or effects whatsoever from their gaming hobby (while only 2% said that they could not identify

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[45] Respondent 52.

a specifically positive effect). The spread of opinions about the negative effects of gaming shows a striking reversal of mainstream media assumptions. 'Running from problems' and 'arguing with friends and family' were deemed the worst result of gaming by only one respondent each, with 'addiction' and 'withdrawing from real life' chosen by two people each. The proportion of players who believed that gaming was detrimental to other areas of their lives was in this study smaller than players who had problems with other gamers or with frustrations surrounding how the games themselves worked. Problems with other players such as 'losing to others' and 'negative interactions with other players' were more prevalent, as might be expected from a demographic who rated the social aspect of gaming so highly. Gamers were more focused, however, on recounting problems related to games themselves. Just over 8% of respondents said they considered frustrations with technical problems the most negative issue faced while gaming, and another 14% had similar feelings about 'boring game mechanics', complaining most commonly about games which were too repetitive. Perhaps as a consequence of these tedious parts of gameplay, almost 37% of respondents said that the most negative effect of gaming was wasted or lost time. Respondents who elaborated often remarked that it was not the games themselves which caused this problem, but rather tiresome game mechanics, hunting for supplemental information and waiting for other players to arrive. Nonetheless, one respondent somewhat philosophically replied to the question with, 'Perhaps it's the realisation that all games are just a time killer. That is, any time spent in a game is wasted.'[46]

When asked to reflect more generally about their gaming lives in the open-ended question 16, respondents were divided between observations about themselves and observations about gaming in general. Although many respondents opted not to answer this question, those who replied were not afraid of bold statements. Some presented their comments in the form of advice, one deeming games 'great' but warning a hypothetical player 'don't lose your grip on reality'.[47] Similarly, another called games 'a great way to spend your time' and added that 'there are many other wonderful things in life.'[48]A third echoed these sentiments but applied them to his specific gaming habits; 'my way of life regarding games is to keep it casual,' he states, 'so that the game stays a game and doesn't turn into work'.[49] Despite giving information earlier in the survey about their play habits and time spent gaming, these respondents once again move to address common criticisms of gamers as being immoderate in their habits. They emphasise their responsibility and maturity, and recommend that others balance their gaming with other activities and hobbies.

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[46] Respondent 28.
[47] Respondent 38.
[48] Respondent 23.
[49] Respondent 28.

Other respondents focussed on their knowledge of games and what kind of games they would like to see. One wrote a lengthy explanation of his frustrations over a game he played being sold to another company, detailing the decline in Russian-language customer service and the rise in abuse and immature behaviour from other players.[50] He begins by stating that 'There are many problems in online games, so I will discuss just one here,' flagging his experience of gaming.[51] He then details the issues arising from the sale of the game to a different company, noting in particular the company being 'greedy and lazy' and the international community 'ruining the game'.[52] His key criticism revolves around what he perceives to be a company placing money above the player base, with the result that his enjoyment of a game was compromised. Throughout his answer, he gives numerous hints that he is an expert player who therefore feels qualified to comment on the business failings of the game company. (Ironically, his response is riddled with typographical and grammatical errors, and he uses several swear words and derogatory names for people of various nationalities.) No other respondent gave such a lengthy and opinionated answer to question 16, or indeed any other survey question. One respondent said that he 'would like to see more experimentation and bold solutions from game developers', a comment which was frequently expressed on gaming forums by commenters and writers alike.[53] Another expressed an interest in MMOs with no PvP, saying that 'not everyone likes them'.[54]

## 8. Conclusions

The gamers surveyed for this study were largely young men who had a significant amount of experience playing different games. The social element was deemed the most important part of online gaming by a large proportion of respondents, and many broadened their gaming circles by engaging in other gaming or computer-related hobbies and work. This focus on social interaction and knowledge-building contrasts strongly with media perceptions of gaming as antisocial and inherently lacking in educational value. Survey participants and community members were quick to reject many of the stereotypes about their gaming activity, although some drew upon popular narratives of addiction and excess play as a point of comparison for their own, more moderate, gaming practice. Their own self-reporting coincides with Bryzgalov's comment that 'the majority of the Russian-speaking MMORPG community of players are adults who display consciousness about their hobby.'[55] The disjunction between mainstream media perceptions of gaming as 'antisocial' and the gamers' view that social interaction was the best quality about online games may have two causes. First, the media often speak of 'video games' as a homogenous group, discounting the

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[50] Respondent 16.
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Ibid.*
[53] Respondent 43.
[54] Respondent 62.
[55] Ibid., p. 8.

prevalence of games which require teamwork, interaction and collaboration. A video game which can be played alone in a bedroom is not conducive to social interaction; however, a ten-person *World of Warcraft* raid requires sustained, collective effort and communication over a period of several hours. Second, despite the popularity of online games, there may be a tendency to discount online communication as not 'real'. The common narrative in the mainstream Russian press that games prevent children and young people from going outside and interacting face-to-face allows little space for appreciating the internet as a place for quality interactions.

The early indications that Russian gamers would be hindered by various barriers to access strategies for play were not strongly confirmed by this survey; however, it is possible that a number of features of the research methodology affected this result. For a start, the fact that two of the three game forums were frequented primarily by players with a paid game subscription would hinder survey participation on economic grounds. Visible strategies of working around barriers to access were somewhat more discussed in community posts. An inability to afford costs associated with in-person meetings and game events was often lamented. Players also complained about the attitudes of Western companies towards their Russian player base, with the automatic fraud prevention systems used by xBox Live particularly reviled as many players found their accounts banned with no warning, or struggled to transfer content from a US to a Russian account when the localised service was made available. This is a reaction by companies to high levels of software and online piracy in the region, but is read by the ordinary Russian consumer as an unfair barrier to freely accessing content which Western players may consume without such hurdles. Nonetheless, despite these issues the existing barriers to access did not appear as significant to a Russian gaming population as to the Central Asian gamers Kolko and Putnam surveyed.

Other game-related frustrations related to optimisation and language localisation in Russia; however, players often chose not to move to Russian games due to disappointment in the domestic industry. These frustrations ties into existing narratives over quality and desirability of Western products as outlined by Pilkington and her colleagues.[56] Generally speaking, gamers sought games with engaging mechanics, good translation into Russian and ready sources of theory and information surrounding their games of choice. Irritations and negative elements of gaming were often the result of a deficiency in one of those three areas, and the attendant loss of time. The overall picture of the community is therefore a group of people who value playing with others, immersing themselves in their chosen games and who are acutely aware of the ways gaming impacts their daily lives. They are self-aware when

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[56] Hilary Pilkington & Elena Omel'chenko, 'Living With the West' in *Looking West? Cultural Globalization and Russian Youth Culture* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 201-215, p. 204.

queried about their play habits, and quick to distance themselves from what they perceive as immaturity, ignorance and excess play habits. Gamers who play online games show a marked preference for playing with friends over strangers, and therefore belie the media representation of games as a refuge for, and creator of, antisocial and deviant youth.

# Conclusions

This dissertation set out to identify the practices of Russian gamers and to understand the different discourses surrounding video game play in Russia. In the absence of any consistent empirical work on Russian gaming, I began to map the gaming landscape and gathered data on audience demographics, industry sales, genres and events, fan events and conventions and presence of foreign game developers in Russia. This mapping work constitutes a primer on Russian gaming and also formed the basis for much analysis later in the dissertation. By assessing the features of the Russian videogaming industry and audience, I was able to show how gaming in the country differs from and connects to a wider global community of gamers and game industries. Next, I situated this picture of the Russian gaming industry in the appropriate historical and media contexts; an analysis of media and political discussion of videogames was shown to be strongly influenced by Soviet concerns over Westernised youth cultures like rock music. Modern attitudes towards videogaming in Russian were demonstrated to be coloured by fears over negative effects on youth, particularly regarding violence and psychological damage. Finally, I surveyed Russian gamers to find out what they considered to be the hallmarks of 'being a gamer'. In these survey results, as well as in wider discourses on gaming websites, gamers reflected upon popular mainstream discourses about gaming and rejected many common misconceptions. Gaming was identified by these respondents and commenters as being a positive force in their lives, offering them the ability to socialise with people from all over the world, to challenge themselves intellectually and to experience the creativity and narrative power of games.

In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I first present a brief summary of findings from each chapter, showing how I answered the research questions for the study. I then thematically discuss these findings and how they contribute to or challenge existing bodies of literature on Russian youth culture, digital cultures and game studies. In particular, I show the tensions between different discourses about gaming in Russia. Finally, I indicate omissions and potential avenues for further work.

## 1. Summary of findings by chapter
### Chapter Two: Russian games and gaming in a global context

*What are the features of the Russian videogaming industry and audience?*

This dissertation demonstrates that the popularity of gaming in Russia is well-established, and that gamers in the region are enthusiastic and knowledgeable. Distribution from major global companies means that popular foreign AAA titles are available in addition to a thriving

domestic industry. A strong enthusiast press ensures that there is no dearth of Russian-language information about games. At the most superficial level, it can be said that war games, strategy games and MMOs are the most popular genres in the region, and that free-to-play MMOs are widely played. These genres dominate both gaming website coverage and the outputs of local game development studios. Survey respondents from two different surveys rated massively multiplayer, role-playing and strategy games as their preferred genres.

Demographically, Russian online gamers who responded to the project survey were overwhelmingly male, in their twenties and thirties, and either studying or working in office-type jobs. Research conducted by Yuri Bryzgalov supported these conclusions, and showed that while gamers tended to be in the 18-35 age bracket, there were also a significant number of older gamers taking the survey. The highest populations of survey respondents were concentrated in large cities, and most were located in Russia, although at least 5% were scattered throughout the former Soviet Union (again, primarily in the larger cities and towns). Russian online gamers are slightly younger than their American and European counterparts, and this section of gamers seems to be male-dominated to an extent unusual in the West.

*What are the barriers to accessing games and game technologies in Russia and how have they shaped the Russian gaming sphere?*

The high concentration of gamers in urban centres can be attributed to the barriers to access that gamers in the regions experience. Regional internet access has been slower to develop, costs more as a percentage of the average wage, and is not always as fast as is needed to play online games or download games from online stores. Access to consoles like the PlayStation or xBox is also partly affected by cost; these consoles are barely cheaper in Russia than in North America, which puts them out of reach of many. Instead, the personal computer has become the favourite choice for gaming.

*How are Russian games situated within a broader gaming context?*

Gamers located in, or oriented towards, Russia are able to discuss their gaming practices in both a local sense and with an understanding of the global scale of gaming. Many of the gamers who responded to the project survey made clear their interest in seeing the domestic industry develop. The quality of Russian games in comparison to globally popular Japanese, American and Europe titles is strongly contested by players. Forum and comment discussion on the topic was varied, but included such concerns as the level of knowledge in Russian development studios, the quality of game mechanics and art, and the general lack of interest in many Russian titles abroad. The prominence of Russian free-to-play games were

sometimes considered responsible for attracting young, immature audiences and ruining the culture of the game for older players.

Culturally, the games made in Russia are often distinct from their mainstream Western and Pacific Asian counterparts. As I have examined elsewhere, and as Vlad Strukov has also concluded, the MMORPG *Allods Online* draws upon identifiably Russian (and Russo-Soviet) architectural, cultural, folkloric and historical structures and markers.[1] Elsewhere, games like *Metro 2033* and *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* present narratives about dystopia, nuclear war, masculinity and post-disaster society which are inspired by uniquely Soviet science fiction tropes. War games, too, are visibly distinct from other global representations of (for example) World War II. The Soviet characterisation of the Second World War as the Great Patriotic War, and the corresponding historical creation of that event, means that war and military games made in Russia are enduringly locally popular as a genre.

Survey respondents for this project expressed a willingness to interact with people from around the world through the medium of online games. For many respondents, the potential for social interaction with a broad range of people was a major factor contributing to their enjoyment of online games. However, in part because of the association of Runet with piracy and real-money trading, and in part from existing stereotypes about Russia, Russian players who wish to play online games must contend with some hostility from other players. Conflict behaviours in online games on the basis of ethnicity or nationality have been rather understudied in the games studies literature, but this thesis shows it to be a fertile ground for further work.

## Chapter Three: gamers and gaming in the Russian press and public discourse

*What are the prevalent media and political discourses about gaming in Russia?*

Both the Russian print media and policy-makers are significantly concerned with the ideological messages that gamers may receive from globally-popular AAA games. In political circles, this concern manifests itself as a desire to support local game development in making historical games about Russia, or games which emphasise the richness and value of Russian culture as compared to 'Western', most usually American, culture. This discourse ties into an ongoing government strategy of subsidising Russian technology and broadening access to the internet. The development of a strong domestic game industry is clearly viewed as part of becoming a nation with significant global weight in the gaming and technology arenas.

In the Russian media, views of gaming and gamers are almost entirely negative, and less rarely neutral. The media environment is significantly more hostile towards gaming than

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[1] Strukov, p. 1586.

the British or American media are towards games in the West; while there are sources in these latter countries which are often not positive towards games, there are also many examples of publications which routinely review games, discuss significant events in the gaming sphere and publish articles about aspects of gaming culture. Discourses about gaming in Russia instead fall into clear categories and repeat similar tropes and patterns. Primarily, gaming is considered to be not just potentially, but actually *inherently*, dangerous to its adherents. Games are consistently critiqued as being violent, lacking positive role models, encouraging poor behaviour and forming a distraction from 'real life'. Physically, gamers are suggested to be at risk of neurological, optical and physiological damage. Worse, mainstream media commentaries disproportionately highlight narratives of addiction and extreme play, presenting a distorted image of normative gaming practice. Discourses about Western influences in video games are evident in almost every article about youth and games, to the extent that they far outnumber narratives about the Russian industry. Although the Russian authorities are keen to enhance the domestic industry, the mass media seem to find news pieces about addictive and dangerous Western games more profitable.

*How are attitudes towards gaming shaped by historical and cultural context?*

The ways in which the Russian media present gaming share much in common with media narratives about historical Russian youth cultures such as the *stilyagi*'s fashion and rock music. Gamers are presumed to be young enough that they need guidance, although this dissertation shows that the audience demographics contradict common narratives about gamers' youth. Similarly, political authorities have elected to view games as a potentially powerful way of accessing youth and delivering desirable messages about Russian history and culture.

From the perspective of fan consumption, enjoyment of war games (such as those which relate to the Second World War), and the popularity of simulator games like *IL-2 Sturmovik*, speak to a broader cultural interest in military history. These trends need to be situated in regional history and power dynamics. Not only do Russian games contain their own unique ideological and cultural elements, there is a large market for these cultural artefacts in the countries of the former Soviet Union. This phenomenon opens up space for discussing regional political and economic influence in the gaming sphere. To acknowledge that the former Soviet Union remains a strong market for Russian-language games is to recognise that America and Japan are not the only global centres of gaming and game production.

## Chapter Four: the practices, perceptions and experiences of the Russian-speaking gaming community

*How do Russian gamers view and define themselves?*

Gamers active in Russian-language online communities do a considerable amount of identity-building and boundary-work. To construct their gaming identities, they draw upon multiple, complex discourses from disparate sources. Their representations of 'gamerness' are not necessarily consistent across these communities, but they nonetheless share a number of common themes. In some cases, concepts like expertise, fun, and self-discipline about play habits are shared with gamers from around the world. In other cases, Russian-speaking gamers define their preferences and modes of play against an American, Western, or nebulously non-Russian, imagined other. Throughout discussion of gamer identity, Russian gamers also challenged what they saw as incorrect stereotypes.

The survey respondents and community members discussed in this project expressed their own agency as a significant element of gaming life (generally bringing up themes of self-development, discipline, and computer skills and ingenuity). Personal preferences about the kinds of games they played were sometimes woven into longer or more complex narratives about their gaming history, gaming expertise, or general preferences. For example, one young man surveyed explained that he had been playing games since the Atari years, and described his current desire for intelligent and complex games within the context of repetitive, boring modern games. Game preferences and consumption were often demonstrably impacted by external factors such as availability and cost. A small number of gamers were limited in their game choices by language. More subtly, the search for rewarding, non-hostile multiplayer environments led Russian gamers to struggle with their relationships not just with their Anglo-American counterparts, but also with gamers from the former Soviet Union. Although narratives about marginalisation and hostility by Western players were much in evidence, players also pushed back against what was sometimes considered to be incursion by gamers from the 'near abroad'.

*How do Russian gamers react to popular mainstream discourses about gaming?*

Perhaps as a result of the often-hyperbolic characterisation of young male gamers by the popular press, gamers themselves seek to normalise their hobby, rather than radicalise it in the ways which scholars of subculture have described. Survey results showed that gamers address media criticism unprompted, refuting common claims about addiction and violence and pushing back against popular stereotypes by highlighting the importance of social interaction, teamwork, problem solving and exploring other cultures through games. Coverage of some topics on gaming websites act as lightning rods for discussion about how

gamers are portrayed in the media. Cases of extreme gaming (such as deaths following extended gaming sessions) often feature in the mainstream media, and popular coverage is then itself dissected on gaming sites. In almost all cases, gamers argued these events to be rare and entirely a matter of personal irresponsibility or weakness. Similarly, mainstream media claims that gaming is psychologically harmful are derided by gaming websites and their readers, with commenters often listing ways in which they believe gaming to be positive.

Taken together, these discourses show the increasing self-awareness of a gaming culture which is on the cusp of becoming mainstream, and the multitude of reactions to this development from media and political figures who are yet struggling to understand and explain games and gamers. Russia has developed a gaming industry and culture which are informed by their counterparts in the West and in Pacific Asia, but which have their own regional preferences and differences. Global games are popular in Russia but are not immune to criticism, while Russian games are increasingly finding critical acclaim and commercial success in the global market. Meanwhile, Russian media outlets and government representatives have a complicated relationship towards games, viewing them as both commercially important and ideologically suspect. Thus far, the political strategy with regards to games has been to largely ignore them, but in very recent years there has been a growing understanding that games reach a substantial audience and are therefore a potential way of influencing their consumers, for good or for ill. This study comes at a transitional time, as gaming reaches a critical mass in terms of industry and fan power, and media outlets and politicians are being forced to take notice and to respond.

## 2. Implications and applications

### 2.1 Globalisation and Russian gaming culture

This research answers Huntemann and Aslinger's call to explore the local practices of gaming around the world. It collates data and places it within a Russian context, showing in detail how local practices are shaped by a number of forces and external pressures. The domestic market in Russia responds to local preferences in a number of unique ways; prioritising free-to-play titles, focusing on PC games over console games, and making it easy to add game currencies using kiosks or prepaid cards rather than requiring credit card transactions. In some cases, games made by Russian studios make useful comparative cases to demonstrate how Russian games can differ from their Western and Pacific Asian counterparts. Games from these three markets are often discussed, played and prioritised in different ways by Russian gamers, underscoring the way in which a local game culture may draw upon a number of markets. The cultural context in which games are made, and the effectiveness with which they are adapted for, and advertised to, the Russian market affects how Russian gamers receive and assess them.

This dissertation made much use of previous work into non-Western game cultures, using the observations of scholars studying gaming in Korea, Central Asia, Latin America and China to establish an initial understanding of the factors which influence gaming practice and access. Studies and theory about participatory cultures, knowledge communities and sociality in game spaces transferred effectively from Western game studies to a Russian context. However, a critical analysis showed that some assumptions about access, evaluation of games and skills, and places of play were often inaccurate and inadequate for the purposes of this study.

For example, local barriers to access and game preferences were markedly different from not only a Western norm, but also often from established 'alternative' gaming cultures like the famously console-heavy culture in Japan. Regional economics and distribution can have a significant effect on the kinds of games considered desirable; quality copies may allow adequately enjoyable play, or mods and hacks may be used to 'remix' a game and make it playable locally. Apperley has underscored the importance of these kinds of practices, compromises which level the playing field for gamers who are otherwise shut out of certain games.[2] Respondents to this research did not express many economic barriers to play, in some cases claiming that they would rather pay to play in a more exclusive and convivial environment than rely on free-to-play games where young players and unskilled players might prove tiresome. Unlike South Koreans, who enjoy a widespread access to the internet, Russian players are sometime hindered by their location. Living in an urban environment was typical of those who referred to themselves as gamers and consumed a broad selection of games. Gamers from smaller towns were seen to be vocal about their frustrations over Moscow- and Saint Petersburg-focused events and meet-ups. On a broader scale, gamers resisted the Americanisation of their forums and game spaces and showed that spaces which allowed for uninhibited Russian-language discussion were highly valued.

Second, this research shows how understanding of the media culture of the country or region is important. To a great extent Russian gamers actively defined themselves against media perceptions of gamers. The construction of gamers as delinquent, as misguided, as youth in need of cultural education, as potentially violent, is almost inevitable given the ways in which the Russian authorities have historically approached youth cultures in the country. In Western countries, where gaming is a mainstream occupation, and in countries like Korea which have well-established professional gaming cultures, discourses about delinquency and violence are less common. Generally, they are precipitated by a rare event rather than consistently touted as a side-effect of game play. Work on game studies in the West does not

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[2] Apperley, p. 90

– and indeed cannot – account for the particular caution surrounding media which flows from America and Europe. In Russia, narratives of negative influence from abroad abound.

This project also fills a gap in studies of Russian online activity. There is a wealth of discussion about the potential of the internet to serve as a place for free speech and democratisation in Russia, but much less on subcultural and youth discourses online. This research shows that the tendency of the Russian authorities to involve themselves in discussions of youth culture does not presuppose a reaction from members of the youth culture itself. Gamers were seen to be rather apolitical, with the exception of instances where they believed that legislation would hinder their ability to play and discuss games as they saw fit. In this case, a participant-centred approach helped to avoid the problem of over-politicising the discussion. The concerns and opinions of the gamers about their gaming experiences, preferences and identities were in this case a vital point of triangulation with discourses from the mainstream media and from the authorities.

## 2.2 Tensions between discourses about gaming

The discourses identified and analysed in this dissertation came from four groups: politicians, the mainstream print media, online gaming websites and gamers themselves. Each of these groups, as the summary of findings showed, hold an identifiable set of beliefs and opinions about videogames and gamers. Political and media discourses overlap somewhat, most obviously in the area of concern about youth, and discourses from gaming websites and gamers are rather similar due to the great interest in games shared by both gamers and website authors (who are themselves gamers). However, overall there are some significant tensions between – and sometimes within – these very different groups. In the next few paragraphs I highlight the tensions between the various strands of discourse about videogaming in Russia. I pay particular attention to how gamers react to the opinions of non-gamers, a dynamic which is wholly absent in the mainstream media.

In contrast to the high volume of media discussion of gamers, and the equally fierce dissection of media articles *by* gamers, political discourse appears oddly disconnected. Statements about a roundtable in 2010 and an invitation to game developers in 2014 appeared on the official government website, and although the latter was mentioned by Sergey galyonkin's Red Buzz blog the media did not pick up on either. Gaming websites were more likely to discuss political events like the SOPA and PIPA internet piracy bills in the US than post about minor political meetings about games in their own country. The exception was cases such as the reclassification of Sims 4 for the potential to create gay relationships; however, in this case comments tended to devolve into discussions of gay relationships generally rather than the reclassification of the game.

Moving the other way, to date the only point of contact between game representatives (of any kind) and politicians seems to be a few carefully-selected industry professionals from the largest companies. Contact between media and political outlets is also imbalanced. In particular, general derision meets any news that politicians are personally invested in using games in their campaigns. This is not a unique relationship. Media outlets also tend to ignore the domestic industry and devote a disproportionate amount of coverage to outlier cases of extreme gaming from other countries, or to lengthy articles about gaming and childhood or youth development.. Although a broad range of experts (from psychologists to teachers) write about the potential effects of videogames on players, media articles do not include the opinions of anyone from the game industry or audience. The exception to this is the occasional comment from developers of projects for adult skills training.

Gamers are not a monolithic group, despite the popular assumption that they are primarily young men. As demographic data in Chapter Five showed, the gaming population in Russia certainly tends to be young, male and urban. However, qualitative survey responses proved that even within the rather homogenous and limited pool or respondents, opinions about what constituted a 'gamer' were diverse. This dissent is evident on gaming sites, where heated discussion takes place in comments sections and forums daily. Some conversations are low-stakes, revolving around favourite games, contentious design choices or recent game updates which alter some characters' abilities or strengths. Others are much more deeply-rooted; in my site analysis I read debates about non-Russian players playing games on Russian-language realms, arguments about women in games, wholly immature discussions of maturity and discourse on many other themes.

While the gamers studied seek to define themselves using a series of internal criteria such as expertise, they also spend much time addressing, challenging and critiquing mainstream media conception of what gamers are and do. Sometimes, gamers acknowledge elements of accuracy in media discourse, although they frame problematic or harmful gaming practice in very different ways. Both in their critiques and acknowledgements of mainstream media discussions, gamers present themselves as expert and authorities in their own culture. For example, the primary lens through which the media view harmful or extreme play is that of games being fundamentally damaging; stories of gamers dying after gaming marathons or killing others in imitation of a game event are perceived as caused by negative influences from the game. By sharp contrast, gamers reframe such unusual events as being symptomatic of a personal problem such as an underlying mental health issue, or a cultural problem. In the latter cases, (usually) Asian gamers are seen as being particularly susceptible to extreme play due to some quirk of culture which members of Russian gaming communities leave conveniently undefined. Discourses like these are primarily propagated

by specialist gaming sites, which hail visitors as potential members of an elite, skilled community and encourage community participation and self-regulation.

## 3. Further work, or what is (still) to be done

It must first be underlined that the pace of change in the field of gaming and internet research is rapid. Many of the consultancies and gaming media articles cited throughout this thesis suggest that Russia is on the cusp of a gaming boom. As a developing BRIC market, it is expected that access will become ever easier, and that gaming will become normalised as it has in Western and Pacific Asian countries. I do not expect the data used here to be representative of Russian online gamers in even five years' time; however, I do anticipate that data will become more plentiful and market research more common, enriching further academic work. Second, while the pool of respondents and community members involved in online gaming were invested financially and time-wise in their hobby, on a broader level many young Russians have little or no ability to engage so deeply with games (both as a consumer product and as a collective community). The subtle and thoughtful work by scholars like Kolko and Putnam and Apperley show some of the strategies required to access games and game cultures when economic and practical barriers exist. The structure of this research project did not encourage or facilitate the voice of more geographically and economically marginalised gamers in Russian-speaking communities, a frustration omission required for practical purposes.

The use of the internet for data collection made a study of online gamers the most practical option. However, sales data, survey responses and online community discussion shows that offline or non-networked PC and console games are also very popular. A wider concept of 'gamer' would doubtless have allowed a broader data set to be gathered, with the result that the research would yield more substantive implications for gaming in Russia as a whole. As stated during the methodology portion of this thesis, the findings and implications are not to be assumed accurate for all gamers, but rather as typical of a cross-section of online gamers (and specifically those who regularly participate in community reading and discussion). Moreover, I see potential in further work in internet cafes located in small towns and more rural areas. Ethnographic work following scholars such as Nardi, Apperley and Chee would provide a better understanding of the kinds of activities and practices which gamers use to surmount problems of access. As I have argued throughout this thesis, participant-focused study of such regional game cultures must be appropriately contextualised and take into account local instantiations of, and barriers to, game play. My study will, I hope, go some way to expanding academic views of what it means to be a gamer.

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# Appendix 1: survey questions

1. What is your favourite genre of game?
    - puzzle games
    - social games, e.g. on vKontakte
    - MMORPGs
    - real-time strategy
    - action
    - fitness games, e.g. Wii
    - RPGs
    - other, please specify

2. Which videogames do you spend the most time playing?

3. If you play MMORPGs, which of the following activities within the game do you participate in?
    - casual PvE – questing, etc.
    - casual PvP
    - raiding
    - hardcore PvP
    - roleplay
    - auction house trading
    - other, please specify

4. Do you take part in other activities related to videogames?
    - addon writing
    - forum moderation
    - active forum participation
    - website administration
    - blogging
    - LAN parties
    - conventions
    - other (please describe)
    - I don't do any of these things

5. If you do not take part in any of the above, why not?

6. If you play videogames with other people, who do you usually play with?
    - real life friends
    - online friends
    - guildmates
    - family
    - partner or spouse
    - I prefer to play alone

7. Where do you typically find out about new games?

8. How and when did you first start playing videogames?

9. If you need technical help or advice about game strategy, where do you usually turn?

10. Given a choice, do you prefer to play Russian or non-Russian games?
     - Russian, because...
     - non-Russian, because...
     - I don't have a preference

11. Would you call yourself a "gamer"? Why/why not?

12. What does the label "gamer" mean to you?

13. Have you ever disagreed with a friend, family member, peer or colleague about the time you spend gaming?

14. Would you play more if possible?

15. If yes, what is stopping you from playing more now?

16. What has been the most positive effect of gaming as a hobby for you?

17. What has been the most negative effect of gaming as a hobby for you?

18. Are you involved in other computer-based work or leisure activities, e.g. coding, website design, building computers?

19. Would you like to discuss anything else about your game preferences, activities or lifestyle?

20. What is your gender?
     - male
     - female

21. Where do you live?
     - ...
     - do not want to specify, but in a city of more than 1 million inhabitants
     - do not want to specify, but in a city of between 500 000 and 1 million inhabitants
     - do not want to specify, but in a town with fewer than 500 000 inhabitants
     - prefer not to say

22. What is your profession?
     - ...
     - student
     - unemployed
     - employed, but do not want to specify
     - prefer not to say

# Appendix 2: survey questions

**1. В какие жанры компьютерных игр Вы играете?**
- логические/пазлы
- игры в социальных сетях (например, вКонтакте, Facebook)
- ММОРПГ;
- стратегические в реальном времени;
- ролевые игры;
- фитнесс-игры, например, на Wii
- 3D-шутеры, «бродилки-стрелялки»
- прочие (укажите, пожалуйста)

**2. Играя в какие видеоигры, Вы проводите больше всего времени?**

**3. Если Вы играете в MMORPG, в каких из следующих видов деятельности Вы участвуете?**
- PvE (квэсты)
- PvE (рейдинг)
- PvP
- **ролевые**
- продажа или покупка на аукционе
- прочие (укажите, пожалуйста)
- Я не играю в ММОРПГ

**4. Принимаете ли Вы участие в других видах деятельностях, связанных с видеоиграми?**
- создание дополнений к играм
- участие в форуме
- модерирование форумов
- администрирование сайта
- ведение блогов
- LAN party
- конвент/конвенции
- другое (опишите, пожалуйста)
- я не принимаю участия ни в одной из этих вещей

**5. Если Вы не принимаете участие в любой из этих видов деятельности, то почему?**

**6. Вовлечены ли Вы в другие виды компьютерных работ или досуга, связанные, например, с программированием, дизайном сайта, созданием компьютеров?**

**7. Если Вы играете в видеоигры с другими людьми, с кем Вы обычно играете?**
- «реальные» друзья
- онлайн-друзья
- семья
- с другом/подругой или супругом
- я предпочитаю играть один/одна

**8. Каким образом Вы обычно узнаете о новых компьютерных играх?**

**9. Если Вам нужна техническая помощь или совет о стратегии в компьютерной игре, куда/к кому Вы обычно обращаетесь?**

**10. Имея выбор, вы предпочитаете играть в российские или иностранные игры?**
- российские, потому что...
- иностранные, потому что...
- у меня нет предпочтения

**11. Можете ли Вы назвать себя «геймером»? Почему / почему нет?**

**12. Что для вас означает явление «геймер»?**

**13. Вы бы играли больше, если бы была такая возможность?**

**14. Если да, то что сейчас мешает Вам играть больше?**

**15. Какой самый положительный эффект от игры для Вас?**

**16. Какой самый негативный эффект от игры для Вас?**

**17. Хотели бы Вы обсудить что-нибудь еще о Ваших предпочтениях, взглядах, опыте или образе жизни в сфере игр?**

**18. Какого Вы пола?**
- мужского
- женского

**19. Где Вы живете?**
- ...
- Не хочу указывать, но в городе с населением более 1 млн. жителей
- Не хочу указывать, но в городе с населением от 500 000 до 1 млн. жителей
- Не хочу указывать, но в городе с населением менее 500 000 жителей
- Предпочитаю не отвечать

**20. Чем Вы занимаетесь в жизни?**
- ...
- студент
- безработный
- Работаю, но не хочу указывать где и кем
- Предпочитаю не отвечать

# Appendix three: archiving mainstream media articles

| Title | Synopsis | Discourses | Link |
|---|---|---|---|
| How to preserve the physical and emotional health of schoolchildren? | Discussion about how to encourage children to enjoy school: touches upon computer games and TV as a poor babysitting tool, recommends more quality time with parents and more physical activity. | Physical health | http://www.adigea.aif.ru/health/article/28079 |
| Church starting to create videogames? | Ekaterinburg - church plans to release educational game. Quote from the archpriest of the diocese: "The church has never prohibited videogames as such. If the game is educational, if it isn't being played in place of lessons, work or prayer, or played all day, there is nothing | Education, religion | http://www.aif.ru/society/dontknow/7173 |
| Fursenko to include videogames in curriculum | Izvestia reports the intention of the Ministry of Education to introduce games into schools which will provide students with 'action scripts' for an emergency. The project, which has a budget of 44 million roubles for a suitable prototype game, must be completed "to the highest scientific, technical and research level". The article mentions that many games | Education, youth and games | http://www.aif.ru/techno/news/95466 |
| Tatiana Semenicheva: "Computers for children just aren't worth it" | Paediatrician gives critical interview on the topic of children and computers, citing poor posture and eyesight as negative side-effects. On games in particular, she says that "Any computer game, be it with a joystick or "playing position" when the child is playing, jumping, jumping, trying to get in the game, a certain outcome is destructive to | Education, physical health, childhood development | http://www.aif.ru/techno/article/51976 |
| Young man dies after 40 hours playing *Diablo III* | Reports a young man in Taiwan dying after 40 hours playing the game. Critical comment about new technology being "like a religion". | Extreme play | http://www.aif.ru/techno/news/162653 |
| Anna Hyninka, psychologist: "The danger begins when you call a child one, two, three times and the only answer is silence" | Recommends moderate usage and honest interaction between parents and children. On videogames specifically, when asked if there is a way of distinguishing healthy from unhealthy games, she replies, "No need to be an expert to distinguish normal from abnormal game. The most | Childhood development, family | http://www.aif.ru/techno/article/51836 |
| How *WoW* harms kids: the ten most dangerous videogames | Scathing piece on the dangers of videogames, with particular reference to violence, extreme play habits and game-related deaths. References Swedish research on the ten games most reported in a negative light. | Extreme play, violence, childhood development | http://www.aif.ru/culture/article/25077 |
| How to deal with computer addiction and its consequences | A piece on the problems of introducing children to computers too young. Thesis here is that games and computer use are detrimental to healthy mental and emotion development. | Childhood development, family, education | http://www.aif.ru/health/article/36171 |
| Game addiction harder to treat than alcohol or drug dependence | substance abuse, the article claims that individuals withdraw into virtual worlds to avoid the hardships of real life. In particular it suggests that men use virtual worlds as a way of feeling stronger and enacting violence which they cannot in real life. | Health, addiction | http://www.aif.ru/health/article/41194 |