

The art of war: examining the visual narratives of Ukrainian video games

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Abstract

This article focuses on the visual narratives of Ukrainian war-themed video games, analysing how they depict the Russia-Ukraine war and contribute to the national narrative of resistance and resilience. Using cultural, structuralist and critical approaches, the research examines the portrayal of cultural heroes, chronotypes, values, and carnival mechanisms in these visual narratives. This article analyses how visual elements in Ukrainian video games reflect and respond to contemporary socio-political realities and how Ukrainian game developers navigate the complexities of their nation's history, memory, and identity while contributing to ongoing discourses surrounding resistance and resilience. The study identifies key Ukrainian narratives: the sanctity of Ukraine's borders (map), new war topos, and the invasion-centred timeline; Ukraine's global mission against evil; individual contributions to national victory; and the carnivalesque nature of the Ukrainian culture. Computer game narratives deconstruct enemy propaganda, highlight Ukraine's resilience, and inform the global community about events in Ukraine.

Keywords: video games, visual narratives, national narratives, Russian-Ukrainian war, deconstruction of propaganda, post-truth.

Introduction

In the era of digital media and global connections (Aikat, 2019; Axford, 2018; McLuhan, 2011; Shepherd, 2004), visuality has become the most important in shaping the perception and understanding of reality (Barry, 1997). With the exponential growth of visual content, the role of visual storytelling has risen to prominence (Maki & Shammari, 2023). The experience of reading stories has moved towards the visual area, audiences are used to watching stories and communicating via visual means (Luhova & Yakubovska, 2016). The realm of video games has emerged as a powerful medium for storytelling and expression (Kreminski & Wardrip-Fruin, 2019; Mukherjee, 2015; Sheldon, 2022). Beyond mere

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entertainment, video games have increasingly become platforms for learning (Gee, 2003), exploring complex narratives (Ensslin, 2022), socio-political themes (Dahya, 2009), and even acts of war-resistance (Zinovieva, 2023; 2024).

The full-scale invasion of the Russian aggressor on the territory of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 caused not only active military actions, but also the breakdown of many Soviet and imperial narratives. The destruction of the grand narratives that are still alive today was clearly manifested in the visual narratives broadcast by modern media: memes, caricatures, in modern art, and video games. The role of video games as tools for expression, propaganda and counter-propaganda has gained significant attention.

This article delves into the visual narratives of Ukrainian video games, elucidating their role as a form of media resistance to dominant narratives in the contemporary socio-political landscape. The concept of media resistance, particularly within Ukraine, holds profound significance. Ukraine has grappled with internal conflicts, external pressures, and a struggle for sovereignty for many centuries (Subtelny, 2009). In the face of these challenges, various forms of media, including video games, have emerged as platforms for social solidarity, and resistance to Russian aggression.

The article aims to shed light on how war-themed video games contribute to the national narrative of resistance to external aggression and shape the narrative of resilience.

The task of the research is to critically analyse the formal structures and elements of visual narratives in video games (visual embodiments of cultural heroes, values, norms, traditions and paradigms) in order to understand how they convey messages of unity and resilience, emphasizing the game's ability to deconstruct hostile narratives, confront falsehoods and to inform the world community about events in Ukraine.

Our research focuses on the visual narratives of Ukrainian video games as a social practice among game developers from a cultural perspective, using structuralist and critical approaches.

To analyse visual narratives, we selected 26 video games thematically focused on the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The sources of the sample were game platforms "Steam", "Game for change", "Itch.io", "Gamedev.dou.ua", "Google play", "Texty". Reviews of video games about the war in Ukraine were also the starting point of the search (Danylov, 2022; 2023; Priamyi, 2022; Trykisha, 2022). Screenshots were taken to analyse visual scenes of video games, identify recurring themes, motifs, and narrative structures in various games. This made it possible to trace the images and symbols used in the games. Investigating the best-known video games about military happenings in Ukraine since 2022 enabled propose their typology (Zinovieva, 2023; 2024). On this basis, the visual embodiment of national narratives of resistance and resilience is considered.

1. Background

The hidden influence of video games on the mass consciousness is not a new topic. The works on the video games in the future of ideological war (Schulzke, 2017), their use for speculation on history (Gaufman, 2023; Schulzke, 2013), and simulation of international conflict (Schulzke, 2014) are significant.

Mantello (2012) analyses strategies for negotiating subjectivity and sovereignty by using video games for US special forces. C. Mead sees video games as a process of simulating future armed conflicts for train soldiers, treat veterans, and entice new recruits (Mead, 2013). Scientists have coined the name “joystick soldiers” to denote the politics of playing in military video games (Huntemann & Payne, 2009). Corbeil and Payne (2019) explored how the events of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States affected military video games.

Researchers have focused on studying the Russian-Ukrainian war through digital games since 2014. There are various studies of Ukrainian issues, including investigations into vernacular geopolitics (Lassin, 2024), analyses of the war as an influence operation or Russian propaganda (Terry, 2023), changes in e-sports trends are considered (Nessler & Shtrum, 2024). It is noteworthy that in Ukrainian journalism, even before a full-scale invasion in Ukraine, the question of visual narratives of the resistance was raised (Chadiuk, 2020). There are also scholarly studies of images of resilience as cases for a visual restorative narrative (Dahmen, 2016). Our research focuses on how Ukrainian video game narratives can counter enemy propaganda. We used the methodologies of Pocheptsov (2022), Howard (2014), and Bahador (2015).

It is important to note that the resilience of Ukrainian society during the war became the subject of research interest as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Scientists distinguish the following components and factors that contribute to the stability of Ukrainian society in the conditions of a full-scale war: formed civic identity, patriotism, unity and motivation, flexibility of citizens, institutions of civil society and the Ukrainian government’s knowledge, and awareness of the sources and nature of war (Reznikova & Korniiievskiy, 2024). We show that video games are one way to counter aggression and build resilience.

There is a significant tradition of research into the theory of narratives and storytelling (Herman et al., 2008; Kreiswirth, 1992; Lyotard, 1984; Shelkovnikova, 2013). Narrative and storytelling as objects of research appear in various fields of knowledge: philology, philosophy, cultural studies, pedagogy and psychology. Today, in the conditions of information wars, the problems of textual construction of world pictures, manipulation of mass consciousness through storytelling and description of events acquire particularly acute importance within the limits of journalistic research. The work by Berger and Luckmann (1991) is worth mentioning, because our research concerns the construction of national narratives (as a form of reality) by game designers as “merchants of ideas”. This angle of the

issue creates the need to consider the commercialization of narrative practices of video games: popular narratives are sold, narratives are created to sell.

Based on the works of Foucault (2003), narratives are understood as a pattern of thought, built-in norms, and values, determined by the dominant culture. It is important to determine the role of video games in the mental shifts of society that transform the system of cultural values, norms, paradigms, ideals, behavioural patterns, etc., in the conditions of war and post-truth.

However, despite a very rich historiography, questions remain to this day about how war-themed video games contribute to the national narrative of resistance to external aggression and shape the narrative of resilience.

2. Definition of the main concepts of research

The use of basic categorical research concepts applicable to video games needs to be clarified. The terms “narrative” and “storytelling” are very widely used in scientific circulation and are common in popular scientific publications. To this day, there are different opinions about their exact definitions. This also applies to the cursory terms “visual narrative” and “visual storytelling.” In our previous work (Luhova, 2020), we discussed in detail the difference between these concepts, but it is worth returning to them in the context of the visual world of war games and their media role.

The “visual narrative” is understood as any story told using visual means, i.e. as a product of visual storytelling (Shcho take vizualnyi, 2020), as a generic sense to denote anything being illustrated (Pimenta & Poovaiah, 2010). “Visual storytelling” refers to those techniques that convey a message through engaging and thoughtful visuals. According to this logic, the visual narrative includes a wide range of media products: comics, memes, photo projects, documentaries, cartoons, advertising, video games, i.e. any entertaining visual product.

“Telling” is the meaning-making centre for both terms. Storytelling is the art of telling stories, and narrative is a description of events from a certain point of view (Perekladaiemu slovo naratyv, 2024). However, the concept of “narrative” is much deeper, dating back to the times of Ancient Greece, when it denoted a part of the speaker’s speech; it also has a rich and extensive historiography within the framework of formalism, dialogic theory, new criticism, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics and phenomenology, neo-Aristotelian theory, structuralist, semiotic theory, post-structuralist and deconstructionist theory.

Lytard’s point of view is decisive when narrative is understood as a form of cognition and construction of ideas about the world, which forms the so-called “grand narrative” (“dominant narrative”). A grand narrative refers to a text that sets a system of frameworks in which individual historical texts in the broad sense are written, defining what history actually is (Lyotard, 1984). So, when it is about narrative, it is not just a story/retelling/narrative, it is an idea of the world, a person’s

place in this world, a system of values and norms. The narrative organizes human experience into a text composed of signs – oral, written, or formed by other signs, such as images. A narrative can be an artistic or journalistic, scientific or other verbal text, or a system of knowledge – mythology, religious or scientific theory (Shelkovnikova, 2013). The visual narrative refers to the concept of “narrativist turn” (Herman et al., 2008; Kreiswirth, 1992), which asserts the narrative nature of non-textual objects in the traditional sense.

Storytelling dates back to ancient rhetorical practices and the genre of medieval Latin literature “*Exempla*”, which were instructive stories, parables and examples from life, used in sermons and reasoning as a method of strengthening the emotional and motivational impact on the audience, and creating the effect of personal involvement (Gurevich, 1983).

In the MDA gameplay description model (Hunicke et al., 2004), the mechanics component (rules of the game) creates a game narrative (it is the game mechanics that assesses actions in the game space), and the “dynamics” and “aesthetics” components produce game storytelling.

It is important to note that the algorithm of the game, both system and plot, is determined by the rules. But it can be a goal mechanic (game rules) or a specific manipulation mechanic (game rules). The “game-rules” create its “narrative” (moral and ethical output or algorithm), and the “play-rules” do game storytelling.

The “narrative” of a computer game brings into being a moral conclusion formed by the player during and after playing the game. In games, this is created with the help of rules that define the criteria for success and failure, the progress of the player. The narrative of the game as a carrier of the main meaning (moral and ethical conclusion, instruction, goal of the game) has numerous interpretations in different situations of cognition, and storytelling is always specific according to the communicative context.

Thus, the visual storytelling elements of computer games focus on the topos plot development as a symbolic journey of the hero (Campbell, 2008, p.28), a stream of events (McKee, 1997), including visual objects, characters, setting, textual accompaniment, sounds, and music – all the things that make a game engaging. Instead, the game “narrative” is created by the game-rules and its goal, thus forming a moral conclusion. The “narrative conclusion” is closely linked to and develops through the “storytelling” art.

3. Visual narratives in Ukrainian War-themed video games

After the Russian invasion, video games based on the Russian-Ukrainian war started to appear in the gaming market. These games incorporate real-life events and sources, adding emotional impact and depth to the gaming experience. Computer games have become a significant aspect of mass media, offering a way for people to engage with the story of wartime Ukraine. Currently, the task of elements of visual

narrative resistance and resilience in Ukrainian video games about war is becoming a challenge.

We built the analysis of visual narratives according to two groups of criteria. These are the culture universals (Bakhtin, 1984; Carroll, 1984; Fischer, 2007; Murdock, 1932; Naidorf, 2002), and criteria for the resilience of society (Reznikova & Korniiievskiy, 2024).

Universals of culture are the most general concepts of culture, a system of means by which ideas about the world are formed in culture. It is a chronotope (Bakhtin, 1984), a hero of culture (Carroll, 1984), an integrator language (Fischer, 2007; Naidorf, 2002).

The analysis of the topos of Ukrainian video games about war provides valuable material for understanding perceptions of the scale of war, which does not focus only on the territory of Ukraine. Game events of the Russian-Ukrainian war can take place both in a separate room (Tsebro Games, 2023), and in space (Bunker 22, 2022). Screenshots of the visualization of the topos of war games are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Visual scales of war topos in games



“Putinist Slayer” (Bunker 22, 2022)

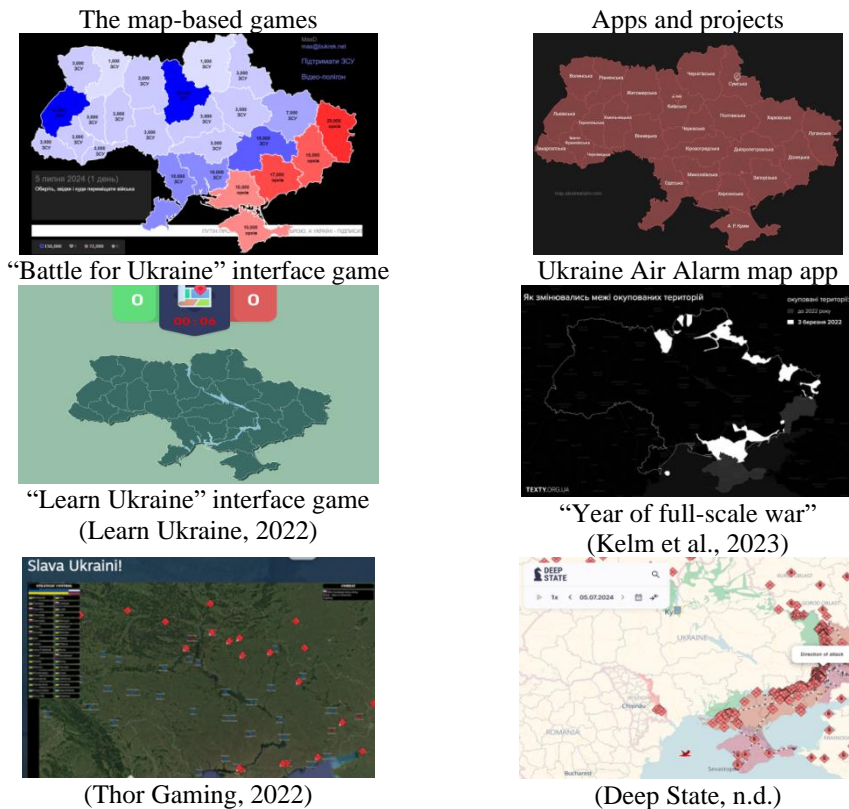


“One More Day”
(Tsebro Games, 2023)

The idea of the integrity of the country, its unity, and the inviolability of its borders is of special, sacred importance for Ukrainians. Therefore, the games build their mechanics (rules and settings) based on the map of Ukraine (MaxDmax, 2022; Thor Gaming, 2022). In “Battle for Ukraine”, the map of Ukraine schematically depicts the movement of Russian troops. By clicking on the highlighted marks, the player gets a task, accepts the mission, and learns about the composition and number of the enemy group, as well as the number of Ukrainian fighters who will face the enemy. The player needs to fire either small arms or a grenade launcher at enemies moving in a column past them. The enemy either has armoured vehicles or tanks and grenade launchers or a numerical advantage in manpower (MaxDmax, 2022). The map is the basis for the game “Learn Ukraine” (Learn Ukraine, 2022), created to study the geography of Ukraine based on military records. These games have the same visual canvas with the “Alert” application, which Ukrainians use to track

Russian air strikes. The map of Ukraine is the main image of the journalistic project of the independent online publication “Texty.org.ua”, entitled “Year of full-scale war” (Kelm et al., 2023). It is also worth mentioning the interactive map project for studying the war in Ukraine (Deep State, n.d.). See Figure 2.

Figure 2. Screenshots of map-based games and projects about military operations in Ukraine

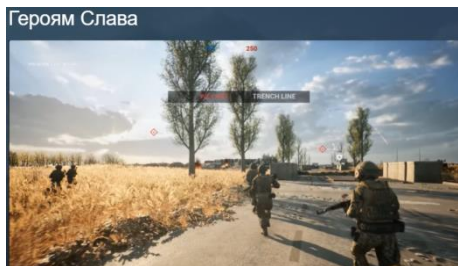


The game topos also focuses on the most famous battle sites of the Russian-Ukrainian war. For example, the village of Chornobayivka in the Kherson region is known for the fact that the Russian army systematically suffered losses there, which became the basis for many Ukrainian anecdotes. This location is the basis for the game's topos "Chornobaivka. The Day of the Groundhog" (Vovchuk, 2022). Bucha, Mariupol, and Gostomel are the main event locations in the game "Ukraine War Stories" (Starni Games: Ukrainian studio, 2022). In the game "Glory to the Heroes" (Spacedev Games, 2023), events take place in real locations, accurately reproduced with the help of terrain data and photogrammetry. The first-days of war Kyiv (Marginal act, 2023), and post-war Kharkiv (Brenntkopf Studio Kharkiv, 2023) are

visualized in gloomy war pictures in a horror style. Kyiv sowed with symbols of the city of the times of Soviet brutalism: Hotel “Salyut”, “Flying Saucer” on Lybidska, and typical 16-story Kyiv “panels” (Danylov, 2023), hinting at the pernicious connections with Soviet history and its consequences today.

Zmiiny Island is the center of events of the mini-game (Martian Teapots, 2022). On February 24, 2022, the Russian flagship “Moskva”, together with the patrol boat “Vasyl Bykov” launched an assault on the Ukrainian island of Zmiiny, where 13 border guards were located. “Moskva” called on the border guards to surrender in exchange, and received an insulting rejection (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Screenshots of video game topos about the Russian-Ukrainian war



“Glory to the Heroes”
(Spacedev Games, 2023)



“Russian warship, go [...] yourself”
(Martian Teapots, 2022)



Kyiv (Marginal act, 2023)



Kharkiv
(Brenntkopf Studio Kharkiv, 2023)

In Ukrainian war-themed games, a significant topic is the portrayal of the “before” and “after” effects of the full-scale invasion that began on February 24, 2022. This pivotal moment marked a mental shift for the Ukrainian people, despite the ongoing aggression from modern Russia starting in 2014. Visual representations in video games illustrate this change through shifts in colours, details, and tonality within scenes (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Time visualization in the game “One More Day”



Source: Tsebro Games, 2023

All of the above makes it possible to trace a certain evolution of the perception of the war dynamics. At the beginning of 2022, most games about the Russian invasion were focused on military events. The games are full of carnival laughter semantics, faith in victory. The second year of the war are mostly shooters depicting a post-apocalyptic sad picture of the world, or strategies with an alternative history of Ukraine. For example, “Brutalism22” (Marginal act, 2023), “Son of Perun Kharkiv” (Brenntkopf Studio Kharkiv, 2023).

The only game about peace and post-war reconstruction was “Rebuild Ukraine” (Izotov, 2022). Izotov created the game in a bomb shelter. It is a game about the restoration of Ukraine. The goal is to shift children’s attention toward positive activities. The player recovers ten cities, such as Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mariupol, among others. Players need to click bricks on the screen to restore Ukrainian buildings and monuments. It motivates players to think about the future of Ukraine and to plan its recovery. The game “Simulator of Ukraine 1991” (Almost Games, 2023) was released on September 22, 2023. This game is a global strategy primarily focused on Ukraine after leaving the Soviet occupation. The player can control Ukraine with the opportunity to change history and intervene in the events of that time. It is also possible to interact with the regions of other countries through the influence mechanics, increasing the amount you can buy or annex foreign territories. The games of 2023, which affirm the Ukrainian self-identity of the cities that the Russian aggressor deliberately mistakenly calls “historically Russian”, deserve attention. For example, this is the case with the game “Wild Field: Odesa”.

The main character of this quest game is a Cossack who helps the settlers in the lands of Khadzhibey-Odesa. The game has a Ukrainian flavour, Cossack artifacts, etc. (Gladkyi, 2023).

Cultural heroes embody the most characteristic features of a culture, they are not ideal characters, but they are necessarily recognizable for a certain culture, often mentioned in anecdotes. In video games about the Russian-Ukrainian war, such heroes are war artefacts that symbolize Ukrainians. This is a tractor that stole a Russian tank (PixelForest, 2022), a Bayraktar TB2 drone (Trykisha, 2022), and the Ghost of Kyiv airplane (Devrifter, 2022). The last is the hero of urban legends about a participant in the Russian-Ukrainian war, an ace Ukrainian pilot. This legend became so popular that an article about it appeared on Wikipedia (Nelson, 2022; Pryvyd Kyieva, 2022). Each game has a story that begins with a hero's journey. Even if the hero is not embodied in a spiritualized form in the game, he is usually associated with a person or an animal. Dictionaries interpret the term "living" as the ability of an object to move freely. In computer games, it can be anything: balls, cars, dots, etc. (Luhova, 2020).

People and animals also become personifications of everyone from the Ukrainian community. These are volunteers (Tsebro Games, 2023), civilians (Starni Games: Ukrainian studio, 2022), dog Patron (Danylov, 2022), duck (Birds Attack, 2022) and others.

These characters embody ideas of help, togetherness, empathy, heroism, courage, and humour. The Patron dog helps detect explosive objects and demining fields (Danylov, 2022). He is the hero of many digital and non-digital games. As of July 5, 2024, the Ukrainian educational platform "Vseosvita" offers 463 didactic games with this character (Library of methodical materials, n.d.). Cartoon small animals that symbolize Ukrainian soldiers are the heroes of the game about the events on Zmiinyi Island "Russian warship, go [...] yourself" (Martian Teapots, 2022). Duck is the hero of a game that satirizes the narrative of the Russian propaganda about biolaboratories (Birds Attack, 2022).

It is worth emphasizing the positive tone of many video games about war, which depict events ironically or cheerfully. For example, the anecdotal story of hijacking a Russian tank by a Ukrainian tractor is accompanied by the music of a Ukrainian hopak. Patron the dog and the duckling are depicted as characters from children's cartoons. The game about Zmiinyi Island (Martian Teapots, 2022) is also shown in a children's aesthetic (simple fun forms, simple rules). The simple, childish, positive aesthetics of games can be assumed to help fight against the instructions of Russian propaganda, ridiculing and reducing their status to children's fiction, and anecdotes (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Screenshots of video games heroes about the war in Ukraine



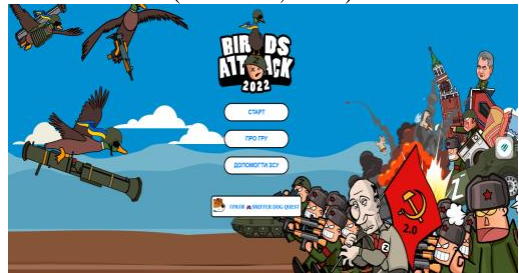
“Ukrainian fArmy”
(PixelForest, 2022)



Ghost of Kyiv in “Ukraine Defender”
(Devrifter, 2022)



“Sniffer Dog Quest” (Danylov, 2022)

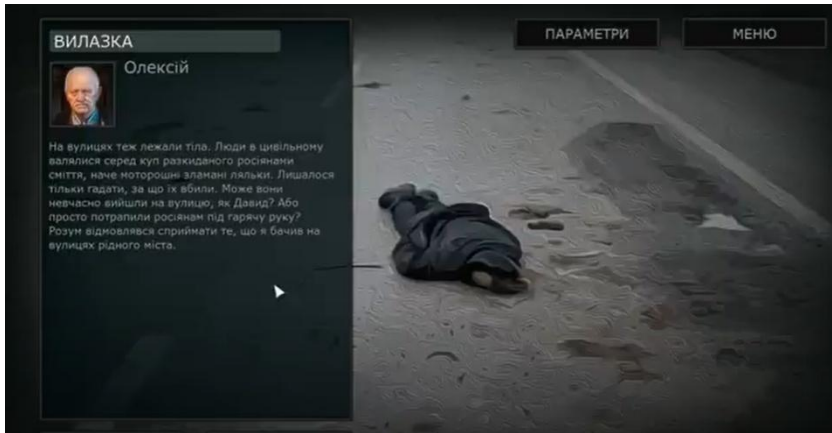


“Birds Attack” (N., 2022).

However, there are video games with dark, dramatic visuals. Their role is no longer to ridicule the enemy, but to demonstrate the consequences of war. The most striking is the game “Ukraine War Stories” (Starni Games: Ukrainian studio, 2022). The game is a collection of three visual novels about the tragic fate of people from three Ukrainian cities – Bucha, Mariupol and Gostomel. The game is set in the initial months of the war, focused on civilians living under Russian occupation. Real events inspire each story. Players must assist the heroes in surviving (Figure 6).

The culture hero, a mythological demiurge character who brings good (knowledge, salvation, etc.) to his people exists in tandem with the trickster antagonist (Carroll, 1984). This binary logic can also be traced in video games (Figure 7).

Figure 6. “Ukraine War Stories”



Source: Starni Games: Ukrainian studio, 2022

Figure 7. “Putinist Slayer” game screensaver



Source: Bunker 22, 2022

Games are built on binary oppositions: “hero – enemy”, “defender – invader”, “good – bad”. Oppositions are emphasized with visual national identification: colours, national symbols, recognizable images and locations. This may indicate the unacceptability of the idea of negotiations with terrorists, the absence of compromises, the presence of a clear value orientation and the protection of the Motherland. The games use the state symbols of the aggressor country to visualize their defeat (Spacewalkers, 2022).

Through binary oppositions, the player’s choice of the side he plays for, the civic identity is formed (Reznikova & Korniiievskyi, 2024). An example is the game

“Whose tank is this?” created by data journalists. The player’s goal is to learn to distinguish between the tanks of the Ukrainian and Russian armies (Drozdova et al., 2022).

However, it is not typical for Ukrainian video games to look for images of cultural heroes (personality cults), focusing on recognizable national characters that each symbolize the Ukrainian people. Each “hero of culture” in the games about the Ukrainian war also faces an antagonist in which certain guidelines of Russian propaganda are emphasized. For example, Patronus, the dog in the game, is opposed and hindered by the bear character “quilter with the letter Z on his paw and a Soviet star on his Russian cap” (Danylov, 2022). Russian ships are associated with trash and junk. Because the game is one of the levels of the big environmental project “Tresh is Fun”. Its main characters are animals that burn garbage and junk, among whom, this time, there were also Russian soldiers and Russian ships (Martian Teapots, 2022).

The enemy is depicted as evil: Russian propagandists, politicians and military as alien invaders “Putinist Slayer” (Bunker 22, 2022), the Russian army as groups of orcs (Pacifism, 2022) or zombies (Angel Games, 2024). It seems that the games dehumanize the enemy. However, these characters are endowed with human flaws. “Putin’s orcs want to plunder vodka and washing machines, and slaughter all” (Pacifism, 2022). The choice of the orc’s image is based on journalistic precedents. Since 2014, when the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbas took place, the Ukrainian military gave Russian invaders the nickname orcs. In 2022, not only soldiers, but also Ukrainian politicians and journalists began to call the Russian army orcs on their social media pages. On the official page of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the invaders who tried to occupy the city of Okhtyrka were called orcs (Sonchkovskaia, 2022).

The thesis of dehumanizing the enemy is refuted by a game that tries to understand the world of the invader “Zero Losses” (Marevo Collective, 2023; Priamiy, 2022). The games portray a bleak and depressing post-apocalyptic world. The picture is quite terrible and sad. The objective is to ensure the success of special operations with no casualties. The protagonist is tasked with various missions such as transporting and cremating fallen soldiers, delivering supplies, and locating a missing battalion.

The games that focus on teaching political and military strategy are rich in cultural artefacts of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Their main narrative is an understanding of the systemic determinism and connectedness, the geopolitical complexity of events taking place in the modern world, in particular in Ukraine, knowledge of “civil society institutions and the Ukrainian government, citizens’ awareness of the sources and nature of the war” (Reznikova & Korniiievskiy, 2024). For example “Power & Revolution 2022 Edition” (EverSim, 2022) is a part of “Geopolitical Simulator 4”, a comprehensive political simulation game in which players can take on the role of either a world leader or opposition party leader striving

for power and influence. The video interlude begins with a speech by Volodymyr Zelenskiy, appealing to Western allies to help repel the Russian invasion. Gamers can play as Ukraine, any of the NATO countries, or even Russia – though the developers do not highlight this feature, and instead suggest saving Ukraine. To tackle the ongoing conflict, several approaches can be taken, including engaging in military opposition against Russian support tanks, arming the Ukrainian army, imposing financial sanctions on Russia, reducing the domestic rating of the Russian president, or convincing China to oppose the conflict without causing it to escalate. The game “Power & Revolution” tackles a range of important issues related to the complex situation in Ukraine. Players have to navigate challenges such as aiding refugees, accessing supplies from allied bases, evaluating the costs of war, negotiating peace treaties, and managing the impact of the president’s popularity on the front lines. By engaging with the game, players gain insights into the intricacies of international affairs impacting Ukraine. It underscores the understanding that there are no easy solutions or quick fixes to address all of Ukraine’s issues permanently.

4. The video games in the era of “post-truth”

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary selected “post-truth” as its word of the year. This term refers to situations where objective facts hold less sway over public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. It is intriguing that the dictionary shows that the prefix “post” refers not only to “the time after an event, but also signifies” the time when the specified idea becomes insignificant or irrelevant (Oxford Languages, 2016). In the post-truth era, the media are becoming increasingly important not only as a tool for deconstructing narratives, but also as a field of “discursive struggle for truth” (Angermuller, 2018).

As we grapple with the implications of the post-truth era, it becomes apparent that both analytical and emotional approaches to understanding the world are necessary. Journalism, journalistic education, and the gaming industry must embrace these dual perspectives as vital media tools. In a society where emotions wield significant influence, this paradigm is more pressing than ever.

This blurring of truth and fiction aligns the concept of “post-truth” closely with “fiction”, where reality is shaped by narratives. The erosion of traditional notions of truth, coupled with the decline of postmodern concepts, has led to a crisis of trust in contemporary society. Narratives, whether real or fictional, weave together a tapestry of events, facts, and impressions. In the realm of video games, these narratives hold immense power, offering users a means of engaging with and understanding the complexities of our post-truth world.

In the landscape of post-truth and total-fiction, video games seamlessly integrate, speaking not in the language of facts but in emotions, and narratives considered as a collection of interconnected real or fictional events, facts or impressions that make up a narrative text. While video games may not adhere to the

journalistic standards of transparency and objectivity, they serve as potent tools in navigating this era. In a world where objective facts often take a backseat to emotional appeals and personal beliefs, video games offer a unique avenue for engaging with and constructing narratives.

The game's aesthetics (Hunicke et al., 2004), as chosen by the developer, play a significant role in how the recipient perceives the information. These design elements are necessary to make the player feel the right emotions. The emotions experienced by the player are pre-programmed through the use of graphics, music, texts, settings, and chosen gameplay. "Fun" is considered an emotional state with no pragmatic goals. Game designers view it as an emotion that does not have to be positive. The "fun" of a game refers to its ability to stimulate or de-stimulate the player. This "fun" determines the player's role, be it a "ruiner", a "consumer", or a "creator". Games are distinct from learning and journalism because of the influence of "fun" (Kim et al., 2015). Such an ambivalent understanding of "fun" can both help deconstruct hostile narratives and distract the player from positive deconstruction. However, this ambivalence is harmonized by the carnival character of the Ukrainian laughter culture, which is manifested in the games.

A separate group of games consists of those where the central character is the president of the aggressor country (Makarenk, 2022; MasterCodeCSharp GameStudio, 2023; Native Games Studio, 2022; Tornado Games, 2022). These games rely on bodily aesthetics to punish the Russian dictator, as a virtual puppet, using various instruments of physical torture, even sunflower. The mechanisms of carnival culture that originated during the 2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine can explain the explicit and obscene visual elements in video games (Zinovieva, 2005). Video games, through their utilization of carnival mechanisms, such as role inversion, wide universality, total freedom, mockery of patterns, and exposure of fears and injustices, are crafting a new narrative in the annals of human history. Games serve as potent tools for deconstructing enemy narratives and falsehoods. They operate akin to memes, jokes, and folk humour, employing satire and humour to highlight the absurdity of misinformation. By subverting traditional beliefs and revealing hidden truths, these games reshape perceptions of the world, treating it as a malleable text open to interpretation. Carnival laughter simultaneously denies and affirms, kills and revives: "It is aimed at everything and everyone (including the carnival participants themselves), the whole world is presented as funny, perceived and understood in its aspect of laughter, in its fun of relativity" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.11). Today, carnival functions in the same way, but computer games about the Russian invasion, numerous memes or demotivators media texts (Góra, 2014), and pranks on social networks, and messengers are already leading the way.

Games that mock enemy narratives reduce lofty political myths to a grotesque caricature, hyperbolizing or primitivising their negative aspects. These games destroy the established Russian narratives about "Russia's greatness", "Russian army and navy invincibility", "Russian army honour", "good Russians", "Russian

culture spirituality”, “Russian peace”, “Russian world, and the Slavic peoples’ brotherhood”, “internal conflict of fraternal nations”, “small problems in Mariupol”, “biological laboratories”, etc. These are the games: “Putinist Slayer”, “Ukrainian army”, “Russian warship, go [...] yourself”, and “Putin Bingo 2023”. The genre of such games is determined by the developers as action, comedy, satire, and memes. The finale of joke games is consistent with the deconstruction of the game event, as its functions become limited due to the loss of the primary support for the object. As a result, it acquires a new quality, which consists in the uniqueness of its secondary function (Zinovieva, 2008). Therefore, through such games, which are a certain reflection of ideas about the picture of the world, the very picture of the world is deconstructed. In this way, video games not only entertain but also challenge prevailing narratives, inviting players to participate in the creation of a new world-view narrative – one where truth is not fixed but constantly negotiated and redefined.

Conclusions

The visual storytelling elements of computer games include plot as a stream of events, visual objects, characters, setting, textual accompaniment, – all the things that make a game immersive. Instead, the “narrative” as a moral conclusion of the game is created by the game-rules and its goal. Visual narratives possess a unique ability to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, communicating complex ideas and emotions with immediacy and universality. Within the media, visuals serve as potent tools for suggestion, evoking powerful emotions, shaping opinions, and prompting action.

The analysis of a sample of video games about the Russian-Ukrainian war made it possible to identify the following narratives:

- the idea of the unity of the country and the inviolability of Ukrainian borders, embodied in the sacralisation of the map of Ukraine and the sacralisation of combat locations of Ukrainian cities;
- the world mission of Ukraine in the fight against evil, visualized in the increase in the scale of the topos of war (space, world); and is also personified in binary oppositions of heroes;
- a new countdown of historical time from the date of the full-scale invasion, a time section for before and after the invasion, tracking the changes during the war: textual accompaniment, contrasts of colours and tones, the change of the interior from order to chaos, from symbols of life (e.g., flowers, a tidy room, children’s toys and books) to symbols of death (broken toys, burnt things, destroyed room, etc.);
- the special contribution of each person as a part of the Ukrainian people in the future victory: each cultural hero (anecdotal, cartoon character etc.) turns into a cultural hero (demiurge) in the game;

- carnival freedom as a manifestation of the people's will: rejection of personality cults through carnival inversion of roles; laughing culture that destroys the pathetic aggressive narratives of propaganda. It is the carnivalesque nature of the Ukrainian culture, its culture of laughter that forms a narrative of resilience and helps fight fakes and propaganda in the conditions of the information war of the post-truth era.

According to Berger and Luckmann, "reality takes on massive proportions when entire social strata become its carriers" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 145). Games help Ukrainians exhibit and cultivate aspects of social stability (Reznikova & Korniiivskiy, 2024). Via the game's role, an individual "participates in a social world", which "becomes subjectively real to him" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 91), "not only in the narrower cognitive sense but also in the sense of the "knowledge" of norms, values and even emotions" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 94). This creates and legitimises a new "symbolic universe" and a new national paradigm of "common-sense knowledge", which constitutes the reality of the everyday life of an ordinary member of the Ukrainian society.

Most analysed games favour images of war, while few of them are devoted to the theme of peaceful restoration of the country. We remain hopeful that the narrative of victory and of a peaceful Ukraine will strengthen in the near future.

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