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## **Editorial:**

### **EHGS and Ukrainian Games of War**

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *European Historical Game Studies* (EHGS), an open-access, peer-reviewed journal published by the Faculty of History at the University of Gdańsk. Our mission is to publish high-quality empirical and theoretical research on games across all platforms, digital and nondigital, insofar as they engage with European histories and heritages. In particular, we aim to provide a scholarly platform for historical game research emerging from regions and countries in Europe that remain underrepresented in international Game Studies discourse.

*European Historical Game Studies* is interested in research on games that represent historical settings or processes, reflect their contemporary historical moment, explore alternate or counterfactual histories, or draw on European cultural heritage, including legends and mythologies. The journal is interdisciplinary by design and welcomes contributions from history, art history, heritage studies, historical fiction studies, historical education, narratology, media studies, postcolonial and gender studies, ethnography, cultural studies, political science, and related fields. At the same time, EHGS is explicitly situated within Historical Game Studies, and we expect authors to engage critically with state-of-the-art scholarship in both Historical Game Studies and broader Game Studies.

The mission of *European Historical Game Studies* begins with a thematic issue linked to the annual conference “Games of War,” held at the Faculty of History of the University of Gdańsk since 2024. Focused on a very recent history that extends into the present and beyond, this publication appears at a moment when the relationship between games, history, and lived experience can no longer be treated as an abstract scholarly problem. War has returned to Europe not as a distant memory or a simulation, but as an ongoing reality. This special issue, devoted to Ukrainian games of war, emerges directly from that context.

Historical Game Studies has long examined how games represent the past, how they model conflict, and how players engage with historical systems of violence, power, and agency. Yet the Russian invasion of Ukraine confronts scholars, designers, and players alike with a more urgent question: what does it mean to design, play, analyse, or theorise games of war while war is being fought in real time, by real people, on European soil? The articles collected in this issue approach this question from complementary but distinct perspectives. Together, they demonstrate that Ukrainian games of war are not merely cultural reactions to violence, but complex historical practices that register shifting beliefs, construct meanings, mobilise communities, and preserve testimony.

Aliaksandr Razhkou’s analysis of religious symbols in Ukrainian war games examines how representations of religious institutions and iconography reflect broader changes in public sentiment, particularly in relation to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. By situating game content within wider patterns of trust and disillusionment, this study shows how games can act as sensitive indicators of ideological and institutional transformation during wartime.

A related but spatially grounded perspective is offered by Jagoda Kościelniak’s semiotic analysis of wartime Kharkiv in Ukrainian video games. Drawing on urban semiotics, her article explores how cities under attack are reconstituted through signs, language, sound, and narrative fragments. Kharkiv emerges as a layered system of meanings shaped by memory, destruction, endurance, and everyday survival. Here, games function as semiotic maps of lived urban experience under bombardment.

Emilia Mazur and Kacper Karwacki examine parody and absurdity in independent video games responding to the invasion, demonstrating how humour, exaggeration, and satire operate across mechanics, aesthetics, and narrative. Their analysis situates such games within a broader ecology of transmedial activism, showing how play can transform anger, fear, and outrage into participatory, globally legible forms of critique and solidarity.

The issue expands its analytical scope beyond Ukraine by examining how these games are received and discussed internationally. Anna Sroka and Igor Kwasigroch analyse Chinese-speaking Steam community responses to *Ukraine War Stories*, focusing on language use, emotional expression, and dominant narratives in player comments. Their study demonstrates how Ukrainian games of war circulate within global platforms and encounter diverse interpretative frameworks.

While many of the games discussed in this issue are created under precarious conditions and with limited resources, they nonetheless raise pressing questions about cultural heritage and historical responsibility. Michał Palmąka's contribution addresses these questions directly by proposing a framework for preserving war-related video games as digital testimony. Drawing on archival science and records management, his article shifts the focus from interpretation to infrastructure, asking how such games can be selected, described, stored, and made accessible for future research. In doing so, it positions Ukrainian war games not only as objects of study, but as fragile historical sources at risk of disappearance.

The scale and diversity of this emerging corpus are made visible in Yaroslau I. Kot's work: the first stage of a multi-year research initiative analysing over two hundred games created in response to Russia's full-scale invasion. By mapping Ukrainian-developed games between 2022 and 2025 in a comprehensive open-access database, this contribution establishes an empirical foundation for the field.

Taken together, these articles show that Ukrainian games of war cannot be reduced to a single function or genre. They operate simultaneously as historical arguments, cultural artefacts, political interventions, and forms of testimony. They raise ethical questions about representation and play, but also practical questions about preservation, accessibility, and scholarly

responsibility. Importantly, they remind us that games are not only about history after the fact, but also about history in the making.

Publishing this thematic issue as the first volume of *European Historical Game Studies* is a deliberate editorial decision. It signals that the journal understands Historical Game Studies not as a purely retrospective discipline, but as one that must remain responsive to contemporary history and to the conditions under which historical games are produced, circulated, and interpreted.

We are acutely aware that no scholarly publication can do justice to the human cost of war. This issue does not attempt to speak for those who fight, suffer, or mourn. Instead, it offers carefully situated analyses of games as one of many cultural forms through which war is experienced, contested, and remembered. If this issue succeeds, it will do so not by providing definitive answers, but by opening a space for responsible, critical, and historically informed discussion.

**Aliaksandr Razhkov**

[University of Warsaw, Poland]

## **Features of the Use of Religious Symbols in Ukrainian Games of War**

**[Abstract]:** Major historical events, including wars, can influence people's world-views, including their religious ones. For example, in the context of the armed confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, the level of trust in the Ukraine Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) among Ukrainians fell to 8%, which cannot be attributed solely to the general trend of Ukrainians' disappointment in Christian institutions (since 2021, the level of trust in them has fallen from 63.5 to 60%). Cultural texts, including video games, can serve as markers of changes in public sentiment toward certain institutions. Video games often use religious symbols as a tool for meaning-making and self-promotion. This article, based on an analysis of 187 Ukrainian war video games, attempts to identify how often and in what way religious symbols are used in them, as well as whether the representations of religious institutions in these video games correlate with public sentiment among Ukrainians.

**[Keywords]:** Ukrainian war games, religious symbols, Russian Orthodox Church, public mood, representation of religion

### **1. Introduction**

Wars, armed confrontations of relatively large human associations, quite often influence the understanding of surrounding reality by these groups of people. Thus, wars, being part of collective historical memory, become elements of private mythologies, which include national myths and national

theologies. For example, during the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, individual philosophers and theologians on the Russian side (for example, the well-known philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, whose ideas began to be officially broadcast by the Russian Orthodox Church [ROC] through the World Russian People's Council [WRPC] [Рождков, А.О. 2024]) are trying to create their own theology of war, which would metaphysically justify Russia's military actions in this war. In this context, the official structures of the ROC begin to act as the main ideological mouthpieces of such a theology.

All this, in theory, should cause a reaction of rejection among Ukrainians toward the structures of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). Such rejection should be reflected in cultural texts, which are both a form of reflection and a form of emotional release in the conditions of war. Cultural texts can be seen as a catalyst for a rapid process of self-awareness. One of such a type of text are video games, the popularity of which in the modern world (including in Ukraine) is an indisputable fact. It can be assumed that within video games, which create an escapist space as well as a space of psychological compensation, the mood of Ukrainians finds materialization, on the basis of which it is possible to draw a conclusion about any change in the understanding of the role of individual religious organizations and institutions in Ukraine during the war.

To test this hypothesis, I decided to analyze how religious elements are used in Ukrainian games relating to war created between 2014 and 2024, and to determine whether the representations of religious institutions in these games correlate with Ukrainian public opinion. To achieve this goal, it was necessary to:

1. conduct an analysis of current literature on religious studies of video games to illustrate how religion can be present in the space of video games;
2. use the method of participant observation to analyze Ukrainian games of war (a list of which was compiled and provided by Yaraslau I. Kot [2024]) in order to identify religious phenomena in them;
3. systematize and formalize the information obtained in order to conduct a hermeneutic content analysis of religious content in order to determine both the features of the use of religious symbols in Ukrainian

games of war and to identify ideological images in the construction of which religious phenomena are used.

In conclusion, I note that within in this article, video games are considered to be a cultural phenomenon formed within a certain socio-cultural and socio-historical context, which determines its content. This makes it necessary to turn to the methods of various disciplines, such as, religious studies and cultural studies, etc.

## **2. Peculiarities of the representation of religion in video games**

Before proceeding directly to a content analysis of Ukrainian games of war, it is necessary to say a few words about the features of the representation of religion in video games. Since the study of how religion functions in video games began relatively recently, it is natural that not all the features of this phenomenon of human social life have been studied. The same applies to the question of how a person interacts with religion in the space of a video game.

First, it should be noted that religion itself in video games can be represented as a religious object, religious meaning, religious belief, and religious action.

A religious object, which is represented in the game space at the levels of narration, mechanics, and procedure, is a commodified definitive representation by the developer of some religious phenomenon, or a phenomenon that is somehow connected with religion in the broad sense (Рошков, О.О. 2024). I discuss five levels of narration: theological-metaphysical, ontological, institutional-factional, practical, and personal. I present the level of mechanics as: a means of changing the essential characteristics of characters and objects; a means of gaining access to special opportunities; and a behavioral determinant of the acting forces. Procedure is understood as: the immersiveness of religious plots (by which I mean the process of transforming a religious narrative into an environment within which the player non-trivially comprehends the religious plot from the inside); illustration of

the religious experience of the authors; explanation of game conventions; personification of the acting forces; and a significant historical variable.

Religious meaning is meaning that is formed around a religious object during the player's interaction with the religious object. Religious meanings can be modified during player interactions both inside and outside the game (within the game community), as well as during player communication with cultural actors not involved in game practices.

Religious belief is a set of attitudes formed in a person (during the play process and during out-play activity), which can sometimes determine the style of gaming practices, which can take the form of religious actions.

Religious action is an action of video game actors (players and non-player characters [NPC]) that is filled with religious content. It can be determined both by religious beliefs, thereby manifesting them, and by the logic of the video game itself.

Based on the characteristics of the categories religious meaning and belief, the context in which a video game was created and in which it is consumed will be important for understanding religious aspects of a video game. This forces one to take into account the complex frame structure of "life worlds" (Schütz and Luckmann 2003) both within the game itself and around the game, since the boundaries of these worlds are porous and interpenetrating.

These factors complicate the process of analyzing video games as social phenomena. For example, the following can be used to study them: critical analysis of the discourse in which video games are formed and its reflection in video game spaces; episodic interviews regarding individual episodes of video game experience; video game and net ethnographies; in-depth auto-ethnography; development of special video game software (for example, special modifications for conducting in-depth observations and experiments); the phenomenological hermeneutics of content; empirical triangulation; visualization and formalization (including with the help of Petri nets, that is, objects-circuits necessary for modeling discrete systems); in-depth interviews; quantitative analysis of resources associated with game activity; and deciphering and codifying content produced by players, etc. (Šisler et al. 2018). At the same time, an analysis of the existing literature on the topic of religion in video games, conducted by Gianmarco Gabriele (2023), shows that taking into account the broader context of the formation

of religious concepts in video games and their perception has become possible only since the early 2010s and is interdisciplinary in nature (although the study of religion in video games itself obviously began earlier), which is associated with the gradual development of other related disciplines (for example, digital anthropology and digital sociology, etc.). To this day, the division of methods into “actor-oriented” methods (focused on studying the player and his/her perception of the game world, including religion in it) and “immanent” methods (focused on understanding the context of the game world and the phenomena in it, including religion) of understanding video games remains relevant. However, overcoming this division has been considered a promising task that will allow one to understand how spirituality develops in the space of video games (Gianmarco 2023).

Here, it is necessary to say a few words about the way in which religious phenomena are represented in games and how these representations are perceived by players. In general, during the development of both AAA and indie video games, the original religious ideas of the scriptwriters (which may be the result of a personal crisis of faith) are subject to commodification, during which the ideas take the form of a religion for everyone (not always, but in most cases) that is close to the beliefs of the mass consumer of video games (representatives of the urban middle class). Such a presentation of religion is marked by: playing on occult nostalgia; playing with familiar religious symbolism; non-institutionalization (institutional forms of religion in video games most often have a negative connotation); bricolage (a composition of random, unanalyzed elements of the religious environment of society); the idea of the perennialism (based on a single, unshakable foundation) and the holism (universality) of all religious traditions, which is a distinctive feature of New Age religiosity (Aupers and Houtman 2010); demonstrativity; and folklore, i.e. which can be presented as a result of non-systemic folklorizing in an era of the dominance of deinstitutionalized religiosity (de Wildt 2023). At the same time, commodification can make the original idea lose the character of a social statement with the aim of satisfying the spiritual and aesthetic needs of the majority audience (Aupers and de Wildt 2021). Religious ideas begin to act as a simulacrum, or, as Gianmarco (2023) puts it, a new form of religiosity that, according to

William Sims Bainbridge (2013), enters into active confrontation with traditional institutionalized forms of religion.

However, the process of consuming a video game and its religious content, being presented in the form of a “prosumption” (a consumption of content, during which the process of the non-authorial formation of secondary social data takes place [Silk et al. 2016]), is characterized by the revival of commodified ideas. Video games, having an influence on the gaming audience’s perception of the phenomenon of religion (the greatest influence is exerted on young people of school or student age who have “de-enchanted” and “flexible” models of religious identity [Раждкоў 2024]), contribute to the fact that this very audience enters into active communication, the subject of which is the religious ideas embedded in the ludo-narration of the game. For example, although players almost never take on faith in these ideas (if there is a conversion, it is most often indirect), they can, nevertheless, actively argue with these ideas, rationalize them, try to justify and defend them, and re-evaluate and rethink them (with the subsequent expression of new ideas. Various types of players (skeptics, interpreters, and reflectors), in one way or another, note that video games give them the opportunity to feel the experience of another religious identity and, thus, to understand religion as a category of personal gaming experience, in isolation from institutions and their strict prescriptions (de Wildt 2023). In the absence of a single symbol of faith, the consolidating factor is the video game space itself and the religious gaming experience it presents, which is characterized by a short-term acceptance of religious identity, with the possibility of “playing with identities” (de Wildt and Aupers 2019).

Thus, video games become more of a tool for “experiencing spirituality” than for “religious education” (Raffety and Insa-Iglesias 2023). It is also important that video games encourage people to philosophical reflection and confirm their views in practice (Egerton 2023), which is an important nuance when analyzing video games as means of forming religious identity, including in the form of civil religion, by which I mean quasi-religious concepts that endow the phenomena of social and public life, such as the nation, the state, etc., with the quality of the numinous.

Thus, video games, being the most progressive form of art (which is achieved through their ability not to represent information, but to create

an environment for its perception), really re-enchant the world. However, they achieve this not by restoring religious feelings in their premodern understanding, but by affirming them in a postmodern understanding, where, due to “secularization as the liberation of imagination from institutions,” religious feeling itself loses a number of characteristics, acquiring new ones, turning faith from a constant into a variable, which concerns both the object of faith and the “space of faith” (Bainbridge 2013). The player, being an actor of the video game (but not a subject, since he/she is a game character into which Dasein enters [Leibovitz 2013]), uses it as an “instrument of game faith,” which “experimentally expands spiritual experience as a remedy for boredom,” and, therefore, as a specific instrument of knowledge of God (ritual-game process [Bosman 2019]) or the development of “self-sanctity.”

In all this, it is important to note that representations and game “retextualizations” of religion (Myers 2013) always depend on the social environment in which the games are produced and consumed. Therefore, in the context of this study, the question arises: how are religious elements used to rethink the military conflict in Ukraine? How often do game developers turn to religious themes to illustrate the realities of the current war? Within the framework of my article, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of 187 video games (Kot 2024) produced by Ukrainian developers in the period from 2014 (the beginning of the hybrid war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine) to 2024 (that is, two years of open confrontation between the two states are covered). I attempt to answer the above questions.

### **3. Ukrainian games of war and religion**

The games were selected, through inclusive content analysis, in which I attempted to identify the presence of the entire possible set of religious elements (or those related to religious discourse) in the video games, the list of which was compiled by Kot (2024), based on two criteria: the dedication of video games to the theme of the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine in modern history; the year of development within the

2014–2024 period, that is, the period during which the Russian Federation carried out aggressive actions in one way or another toward the Ukrainian state. It should be noted that I was interested in the entire possible set of religious phenomena (or phenomena referring to religious discourse), even if they did not function as religious phenomena and could not be identified by potential players as religious. Based on this, there is a possibility that another researcher with broader knowledge in the field of religious symbolism could select different data when studying the array of games presented.

As regards religious elements in the space of Ukrainian war games, I note that they are present in twenty-nine titles out of 187 (that is, in 15.5% of cases). Most of these games are low-budget mobile games. Some include indie projects implemented via Steam for PC. The projects are mainly aimed at a Ukrainian audience, as they contain symbols, memes, etc., understandable to a Ukrainian or a person interested in the modern cultural space of Eastern Europe (although these games also have an English localization, which indicates the desire of the authors to demonstrate them to a wider audience than the domestic Ukrainian market). However, in these video games not all religious elements function with equal significance (for example, not all phenomena play a significant function in the game's narrative). At a minimum, I can highlight the following series of functions that religious symbols and ideas play in the space of these games, while I emphasize that the same game can use religious elements with different functionality:

- > context reproduction tool – 13 games;
- > personalization tool – 8 games;
- > play with national/folk symbols – 5 games;
- > dehumanization of opponents – 3 games;
- > narrative storytelling tool – 4 games;
- > ridicule of opponents – 1 game (1 game ridicules the Ukrainian side);
- > pop-cultural commodifications, with the aim of increasing recognition – 8 games.

A few things need to be clarified here. First, the categories listed above can overlap and be used in the same video game at the same time, as will be seen from the data in the table below. For example, the functions of contextualization and personalization very often go hand in hand. It will also

be obvious that the function of personification and dehumanization of the opponent also quite often go together. But, at the same time, it is interesting to observe that ridicule and dehumanization do not go together.

Second, there is a need to clarify what is meant by these categories:

- > context reproduction tool – religious phenomena are used to introduce a person into the socio-historical context of the events in which the video game takes place;
- > personalization tool – religious phenomena are used as a means of representing characters, groups of characters, factions, in a word, active forces, in the space of a video game;
- > play with national/folk symbols – the use of national or folk religious phenomena within a video game in order to attract the audience's attention by arousing a sense of mythological belonging;
- > dehumanization of opponents – the use of religious phenomena as a means of depriving an opponent of his/her human qualities and, as a consequence, justifying violent means against that opponent;
- > narrative storytelling tool – religious phenomena and concepts are used as major elements driving the plot, or are the essence of the content of a video game;
- > ridicule of opponents – religious phenomena are used as humorous attributes, showing the comic nature of the characters in the space of a video game;
- > pop-cultural commodifications, with the aim of increasing recognition – religious phenomena are used as a tool to evoke a response from a mass audience, thereby promoting the video game as a commodity within that audience.

Based on the preceding, it can be noted that religious elements in the space of Ukrainian video games of war more often perform the function of an introduction to the reality of the represented conflict (by restoring the context, as well as creating associations of two opposing sides through their use of characteristic religious symbols), thereby contributing to the establishment of a stronger connection between the representation and the image of this representation, which, as a result, enhances a person's immersion in the game itself. At the same time, it can also be shown that developers quite often play with Ukrainian folklore and universal religious

symbols, commodifying these symbols by using them as a tool that increases the relevance of the game in the eyes of the video game audience, whether this is a matter of simply flirting with national re-enchantment or using religious symbols in meanings familiar to gamers. The use of religious symbols as a tool for showing an ideological opponent in a bad light is also encountered, but less often than they do for the purposes described earlier. The use of religious ideas as a tool for narrating the authors' ideas is also uncommon.

In order to more clearly illustrate what kind of religious symbols are used, for what purpose and in what context, I offer a short table that containing information about religious symbols in each of the games under consideration (see Table 1).

**[Table 1]:** Religious symbols in Ukrainian games of war

<b>Name of the video game</b>	<b>Religious phenomenon</b>	<b>Function</b>
<i>Grand Theft Tractor: Ukraine</i> (PGM Studio 2022)	The Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill (Gundyaev), is mentioned in a satirical context. The image of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow is used.	ridiculing opponents, contextualization, personification
<i>Birds Attack 2022</i> (Novochvatsky and Charchenko 2022)	The image of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow is used.	contextualization, personalization
<i>Javelin Point – Bravery Game</i> (NovaApps Limited 2022)	Using a Muslim skin as a game character.	commodification
<i>Pixel World: Orcs Attack</i> (Demon Dezard 2022)	Demonstration of Russian Army servicemen as evil spirits. Optional skin of game character as demon.	dehumanization of opponents, personalization
<i>Catch Crazy Dictator</i> (Suspense Studio 2022)	Identification of the Russian Federation with Hell.	dehumanization of opponents

Name of the video game	Religious phenomenon	Function
<i>Kremlin 3D</i> (Kary 2022)	The image of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow is used. Universal religious symbols are used as a tool to improve the characteristics of the character.	contextualization, personification, commodification
<i>Ukraine Defense Force Tactics</i> (Spacewalkers 2022)	The image of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow is used.	contextualization, personification
<i>A Community Garden Outside of Kyiv</i> (Maynihn 2022)	Kyiv church architecture is used.	contextualization
<i>Zero Losses</i> (Mareva Collective 2022)	Icons are used as an expression of the protagonist's religiosity. The expression used is: «Да захлебнётся кровью тот, кто усомниться в нашем миролюбии, ибо милосердие наше будет беспощадным!» [“Let those who doubt our peacefulness choke on their blood, for our mercy will be merciless;” erroneously attributed to Jean-Paul Sartre; also found in the book <i>Проклятое Везение. Таурин</i> by Elena Petrova.]	narrative storytelling
<i>The Point of No Return</i> (Treehouse Dreams 2020)	The use of religious attributes (rosary beads, religious inscriptions on the Ukrainian flag) to express the religious feelings of Ukrainians. Religious vision of the protagonist's father in a dream. Religious (Slavic-pagan) call sign of the protagonist.	narrative storytelling, play with national and folklore symbols
<i>Ukraine Defender</i> (Devrifter 2022)	The image of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow is used.	contextualization, personification

**[Table 1]:** con.

<b>Name of the video game</b>	<b>Religious phenomenon</b>	<b>Function</b>
<i>Protect Ukraine</i> (Battle Sim 2022)	Using Ukrainian church architecture as symbols on the map of Ukraine.	contextualization, personification
<i>Hentai Mission Ukraine</i> (Who We Are Games 2022)	The use of Orthodox church architecture in Ukraine.	contextualization
<i>Beautiful Ukraine</i> (QubicGames 2022)	The use of Orthodox church architecture in Ukraine.	contextualization
<i>Ukrainien Agent</i> (UkrainianArmy 2022)	The image of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow is used.	contextualization, personification
<i>Army Clicker</i> (Voxel Game 2022)	Presentation of gameplay in the form of religious events (Easter and Christmas).	commodification
<i>Bavovna Board Game</i> (Ushan 2023)	The card "Konotop Witches" is presented.	play on national and folklore symbols
<i>Nenka Ukraine</i> (3xOnGames 2024)	Satirical representation of Volodymyr Zelensky in religious Jewish attire.	self-ridicule
<i>Deputinization</i> (Myttsi Zabav 2023)	Mention of the expression "Welcome to Hell" at the entrance to the city of Izyum (this was displayed during the First Chechen War at the entrance to the city of Grozny).	commodification
<i>Hollow Home</i> (Twigames Inc. 2023)	Use of holos on individual ability cards.	commodification
<i>Brights</i> ["Брайтн"] (Live Animations 2023)	Active use of representatives of Ukrainian national folklore as game characters.	play on national and folklore symbols

<b>Name of the video game</b>	<b>Religious phenomenon</b>	<b>Function</b>
<i>The City of Mary, Which Does Not Exist</i> (Elfstann et al. 2022)	An icon is used as an expression of the game character's religious feelings.	narrative storytelling
<i>Renlandia</i> (Bychkovskiy 2022)	The characters in the sketches are depicted with halos stylized to reflect national character.	commodification, playing with national and folklore symbols
<i>Defender of Ukraine</i> (Plinio fontes 2022)	The use of a cross on a grave as a symbol of death.	commodification
<i>Welcome to Hell</i> (2022)	The protagonist fights against "hellish forces."	dehumanization of opponents
<i>Ukrainian Revenge</i> (Futuma Games 2023)	The use of Orthodox church architecture in Ukraine.	contextualization
<i>The Most Russophobic Game Clicker Kill Russians Orks</i> (Neos Gaming 2023)	The image of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow is used.	contextualization, personification
<i>Threads of War</i> (KoS 2025)	The use of Orthodox church architecture in Ukraine as a symbol of liberated territories.	contextualization, personification
<i>Twenty-Second: Stories of Underground Kharkiv</i> (Brenntkopf Studio Kharkiv 2024)	Images of Christian saints and folklore myths are used.	narrative storytelling, play with national and folklore symbols

**[Source]:** own elaboration based on: (Kot 2024).

Several observations can be made based on the data provided in the table. First, it can be noted that the topic of Russian Orthodoxy as such is not discussed in Ukrainian war games. Only once is the person of Patriarch Kirill (Gundyaev) ridiculed (PGM Studio 2022), while otherwise the only symbol of the ROC – St. Basil's Cathedral – is more of a symbol of Moscow as the opponent's capital, thus representing rather an image that contextualizes

the gameplay and defines Moscow as an ideological rival (PGM Studio 2022; Novochvatsky and Charchenko 2022; Kary 2022; Devrifter 2022; Spacewalkers 2022; UkrainianArmy 2022; Neos Gaming 2023). Criticism of the ROC or the UOC-MP as institutions is absent in the video games analyzed.

Second, the authors of the works under consideration most often turn to Orthodox church architecture as a means of contextualization and personification. For example, in addition to the example of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, Ukrainian Orthodox church architecture is quite often represented in the games under discussion. The contexts of its use show that it is shown to be a value for which (or for the restoration of which) a struggle is being waged, one in which the player takes an active part (Moynihan 2022; Battle Sim 2022; QubicGames 2022; Futuma Games 2023; KoS 2025).

Third, the use of other religious symbols that are somehow connected with Orthodoxy (most often icons) is an indirect demonstration that the protagonists (or subjects friendly to Ukraine) are Orthodox believers. In this way, Ukrainians are shown as a nation that adheres to certain ethical ideals, which they defend during armed conflict (Marevo Collective 2022; Elfstann et al. 2022). Such a demonstration enhances the effect that is also created by the use of Ukrainian Orthodox architecture. However, how successful such a technique is in the context of the gradual decline of traditional institutional religion is a debatable issue.

Given this observation, it is not surprising that in the video games analyzed there are appeals to folklore motifs and a play on national religious feelings. Such use is in harmony with the ideology of nationalism, which, in itself, is a form of desacralized mythology of the people, and, therefore, can be partially re-enchanted using elements of religious folklore of the twenty-first century. However, such appeals are not frequent, and in terms of content they do not have the necessary level of depth; so they are only signs that can help strengthen the target audience (Treehouse Dreams 2020; Ushan 2023; Live Animations 2023; Bychkovskyi 2022). This equates their use with other commodifications of the religious that are more universal in nature.

Fourth, the dehumanization of the Russian Federation and its military personnel in a game occurs not by presenting Russian religious institutions in a bad light, but by demonstrating Russian opponents as demonic forces (Demon Dezard 2022; Neos Gaming 2023). Russia itself is identified with hell

as the place where evil forces originate. The peaceful narratives of Ukraine's opponents are inverted, revealing their inhuman and anti-divine character.

Thus, the video games presented, if considered not separately but as a whole, as part of a single discourse, present the following narrative. Ukraine is a Christian state, but one marked by religious diversity, as is illustrated by showing Jews and Muslims (NovaApps Limited 2022) and pagans. Ukraine's population shares Christian ethical ideals, although they can profess elements of the folk religion, which illustrates that Christianity in this narrative is not an intellectual doctrine, but rather a civilization-al marker. The war is shown as a defensive one, in which the opponent is a demonic horde, whose center lies in Moscow, the religious architecture of which is not positioned as religious.

This allows me to say that the religious factor in the video games under consideration is used, above all, as a factor that strengthens national identity by supporting the national myth through the use of religious simulacra. However, how these video game religious symbols are perceived by their main audience remains a question, the resolution of which requires thorough sociological study in the future.

Similar observations are observed in a number of third-party games that were developed during the period under review, but were not included in the list analyzed, since the games were not noted by Kot. For example, in the game *Лисиця, яка (не) хоче бути людиною* ["The Fox Who (Doesn't) Want To Be Human"] (Dreamy Wings 2022), the main character, who is presented as a fox-werewolf, illustrates in folklorized categories (that is, phenomena of religious discourse that have lost their former meaning and have become elements of the popular literary tradition) the moment of the beginning of the war and its perception by the Ukrainian population. The project *Watch Out* (It's Ukraine – Not a Game 2023) gives 3D models of Ukrainian cities before and after the war, showing the destruction that the war has brought, placing special emphasis on the destruction of religious buildings. The game *Chess for Ukraine* (Camden.Cook65 2023) is a *re-skin* of regular chess, but it is interesting that traditional Ukrainian Easter eggs with a Christian cross are used to show the pawns. In these three examples there is a flirtation with popular motifs, which Bainbridge (2023) characterizes as repoganization as a metaphor for the disentangling of institutionalized religion into

an individual myth (in this case, I believe, a multiple national myth), and, thus, characterized as a return to freedom. There is also an identification of Christianity with civilization.

## **4. Conclusions**

Summarizing the results of this study, I argue that the set of video games discussed does not reflect radical changes in the attitude of Ukrainians toward individual religious institutions (whether the UOC-MP or the ROC). In general, the topic of institutionalized religion is not touched upon in these video games, which can be explained both by their technical simplicity of execution in most cases, and by their main goal, which is to reflect the realities of war in a recreational form. It can also be explained by their target audience, that is, the mass of the Ukrainian population, who, being still mostly positively disposed towards Christianity, might perceive criticism of institutions as criticism of religion in general.

However, video games illustrate the perception of religion and the religious by Ukrainians. I have observed that in addition to the processes of actualization of the folk religion and the gradual separation of religion from institutions, religion in these games is positioned as part of a civilized and, in some cases, European identity. Thus, there are no open attacks on religion as such in these games. Nevertheless, it is not possible to say that these games allow a player to play a religious identity. It is true to say that they are trying to represent the worldview of the average Ukrainian and to provide an opportunity to play Ukrainian identity in the context of war, thereby strengthening Ukrainian national identity in the context of the current confrontation. This also explains the fact that Ukrainian war games address religious themes in a rather limited way.

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# The Semiotics of Wartime Kharkiv in Ukrainian Video Games

**[Abstract]:** After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ukrainian developers made many video games covering this topic, often as a method of telling their stories and experiences. One of the elements shown in those games consists of Ukrainian cities, such as Kyiv or Kharkiv. Images of them, consisting of signs, symbolism, and meanings, can be discussed through semiotics. Semiotics is a common method of studying different aspects of culture: literature, music, film, religion, etc. One type of semiotics is semiotics of the city or urban semiotics, which explores the general image of the city using different cultural elements that together create a system of meanings. Recently, semiotics as a branch of scholarship has been applied to video games. Using this method, this article discusses the image of wartime Kharkiv in three selected Ukrainian video games, created by authors affected by the Russian invasion: *What's up in a Kharkiv Bomb Shelter?*, *Kharkiv, 23 of August*, and *Twenty-Second: Stories of Underground Kharkiv*. In these games, Kharkiv is shown in different ways and via different elements, like iconic signs, passages of dialog, language, or sound. The ongoing war is a common element in all of them.

**[Keywords]:** Kharkiv, Ukraine, urban semiotics, video games, war

## 1. Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, starting a conflict which continues to this day. One of the Ukrainian cities that has suffered the most is Kharkiv, located in the east of Ukraine, close to the Russian border. Since the

invasion, Ukrainian games covering the topic of war have become widely popular (Zinovieva 2023, 214). In this article, I analyze such games, focusing on the city of Kharkiv, specifically after the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022. To do this I use a semiotic approach, specifically urban semiotics, which provides a methodology that can outline the image of the city not only as an architectural space, but which also analyses other elements such as citizens, language, and culture and shows a picture that is more than sum of its parts.

During my research I found several games the action of which takes place in Kharkiv, including the two titles of *Vona/She* (Gammera Nest 2023), a game about the Kharkiv Museum of Women's and Gender History, and *Son of Perun: Kharkiv* (Brenntkopf Development 2023), which offers a dystopian version of the future city. However, I excluded both from my research, as neither discusses the war, even though they are connected to it in some way. (*Vona/She* was made because of the closing of a museum due to the invasion, and *Son of Perun: Kharkiv* takes place in the post-war future.) Instead, I chose three other games, created during the Russian invasion and made by authors affected by the war. These are: *Kharkiv, 23 of August* made by Petrov Valeriy in 2022; *What's up in a Kharkiv Bomb Shelter* by Dahuanna also made in 2022 (both games are available on itch.io and were made by single authors); and *Twenty-Second: Stories of Underground Kharkiv*, made by Brenntkopf Studio Kharkiv in 2024, available on the Steam platform. All of these are partially biographical and tell stories by citizens of Kharkiv.

## 2. Urban semiotics

Semiotics is a methodology used to determine meanings carried by different systems of signs, both intentional and unintentional. It is mainly used in linguistics, but it is also successfully applied in other branches of academic study. Roland Barthes states: "it [semiotics] aims to take in any system of signs whatever their substances and limits like: images, gestures, musical sounds, and objects" (Barthes 1968, 9).

Many studies point to the symbolic role of the city (Lynch 1960, 4) or even compare it to a discourse containing language (Barthes 1986, 92). One

scholar who stresses the importance of semiotics when studying a city (in this case, a broad understanding of architecture) is Umberto Eco. He writes:

If semiotics, beyond being the science of recognized systems of signs, is really to be a science studying all cultural phenomena as if they were systems of signs – on the hypothesis that all cultural phenomena are, in reality, systems of signs, or that culture can be understood as communication – then one of the fields in which it will undoubtedly find itself most challenged is that of architecture (Eco 1986, 56–57).

In his studies of urban semiotics, Eco specifies two functions of an object. The first is a primary function, that is architectural and “functional” (also called *utilitas*); the other is a secondary function, that is a connotative one, whereby the object becomes a vehicle of symbolic signs. It may seem that the functional aspect is more important and “useful” than the symbolic one, but this is not always the case. As an example, Eco gives a seat, the primary function of which is to be something a person can sit on. But a seat can be many things, such as a throne, carrying many different meanings, such as regalness, dignity, power, etc. In this case, its usefulness as a place to sit is diminished by its secondary aspect (Eco 1986, 64–65).

Mark Gottdiener and Alexandros Lagopoulos point to two different approaches to the semiotics of the city: the first is purely semiotic and focuses “on spatial systems of signification proper which are considered independently from their social contexts;” the second “links such systems with their social contexts through the study of the ideology incorporated in them” (Gottdiener and Lagopoulos 1986, 5).

As the objects of interest to urban semiotics, Raymond Ledrut suggests a broad concept of elements of the city, those which can be associated with it by connotation, for example, elements like food, buildings, or clothes, which all are a part of the “language” of the city (Ledrut 1986, 117–118). Similar views on the subject can be found in the writings of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, which treats culture as a large system of signs consisting of many dynamically related specialized cultural languages (or semi-languages) modeled after natural language. The semiotics of the Tartu-Moscow School analyzes the “languages” of literature, art, mythology, folklore, religion, history, everyday life, etc. (Żyłko 2011, 8–10). The city

can be viewed as a semiotic subject, a form of text containing meanings and a part of a specific communicational situation. Bogusław Żytko suggests that a semiotic object is a part of culture, which combines two functions: the first involves utility, and is instrumental and material, while a second function is as a sign, which is informative and semiotic (Żytko 2007, 67).

This combined framework is applicable to my research, as objects in games also contain those two functions, especially as they involve a narrative simulation of a real city. Elements of Kharkiv, often a copy of a real thing, include both architectural structures and inhabitants, and they carry symbolic meanings, like those of history and war, which are the focus of this article.

### **3. Semiotics in video games**

As semiotic studies clearly show, a city can be an object of this methodological approach, a city both in its real form and as a creation, one often modeled on an authentic place. Therefore, just as in literature or film, semiotics and urban semiotics can be successfully applied in video games. This approach has been taken by several scholars. For example, Gabriele Aroni describes even the act of playing a game as interpreting and acting upon signs displayed on a screen, and, is therefore, a semiotic action (Aroni 2022, 32).

Christophe Bruchansky in his presentation “The Semiotics of Video Games” shows the basic framework of semiotic video game research, and explains the broad possibilities of meanings in games as a multi-modal medium.

Video games immerse the players into an environment that is spatial, algorithmic, but also textual, acoustic and visual. All these dimensions participate in the construction of a mental model that the player enacts by his play. It is that mental model “located in the head of the player” that gives meaning to the video game. The model is conveyed by rules, texts and voices, visual, acoustic and spatial modalities. It needs to remain consistent throughout the game to enable the immersion of the player, who can then make sense of the game’s goal (Bruchansky 2011, 1).

Spatial semiotics are also the focus of Michael Nitsche's *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play and Structure in 3D Game Worlds* (2008), which also underlines the importance of meaning in video game spaces.

The argument here is that game spaces evoke narratives because the player is making sense of them in order to engage with them. Through a comprehension of signs and interaction with them, the player generates new meaning. The elements that are implemented in the game world to assist in the comprehension will be called "evocative narrative elements," because they do not contain a story themselves but trigger important parts of the narrative process in the player. These processes can lead to the generation of a form of narrative (Nitsche 2008, 3).

The image of the city in video games is also discussed by Justyna Janik (2015), Manuel Sánchez García (2020), and Rafał Szrajber, Krzysztof Guzek, and Sonia Jach (2016). The last discuss in broad terms the symbolic value of digitally reinterpreted cities in the context of heritage.

Another approach to building a message based on an urban location involves the creation of whole virtual worlds by interpreting real locations through the lens of their cultural context. It makes use of implicit values, connotations and symbols associated with a given architectural form. Thus, the goal is not to merely reconstruct a particular location as such, but to create a new value based on the existing elements (Szrajber et al. 2016, 235).

## **4. Kharkiv**

Kharkiv was founded in the middle of seventeenth century on the steppe of the Sloboda region of Ukraine. It was a strategically important Cossack outpost, and from the beginning it was heavily contested by local powers. Soon it was settled, under Russian control, by Ukrainian refugees. For the first 150 years of its existence it was sparsely populated, but this changed later when it became a significant and large-scale trade hub. In 1765, it was turned into the administrative center of the Sloboda region of Ukraine, and in 1805, Kharkiv University was established, which contributed to Kharkiv's being seen as a real city. At the beginning of twentieth century, its population

reached 240,000 and the number of Ukrainian speakers was 26%, which was more than in Kyiv, Lviv, and Odesa (Kravchenko 2020, 170–181).

The city gained the image of being a center of education and scholarship/science, which made it more important to Russia than before. As it mainly belonged to the Ukrainian ethno-cultural space, a policy of imperial russification was implemented by its local government starting at the end of nineteenth century. For example names of streets were changed to the names of famous figures of Russian culture. (This was partially reversed in the 1950s.) The Russian language and Russian influence in the city contrasted with the Ukrainian-speaking countryside and was perceived there “as part of the alien, hostile modernity” (Kravchenko 2020, 183–184).

With the collapse of Imperial Russia, in 1917, the Bolsheviks decided that Kharkiv would be established as the capital city of the Soviet Ukraine, mainly because of its proximity to Moscow and its location in the borderlands between Russia and Ukraine. The sovietization of the city progressed, as it became an experimental socialist city, although it lost the status of the capital to Kyiv in 1934 and started to decline and become more provincial. Later the collapse of Soviet Union again strengthened Kharkiv’s image as a borderland city (Kravchenko 2020, 188, 190–192).

Under the regime of Viktor Yanukovich, Kharkiv came increasingly under the influence of Russia and was proclaimed the “capital of Russian culture” in Ukraine at a Russo-Ukrainian conference in 2010, with the support of local elites. Many Russian or pro-Russian organizations started to function in the city, including paramilitary ones that later supported the Donetsk separatists (Kravchenko 2023, 256–257). In 2014, during the Euromaidan protests, pro-Russian unrest began in Kharkiv. Protesters stormed government buildings and hung Russian flags from buildings, calling for independence for the region (BBC 2014). The city continued to struggle and there was conflict between pro-Russian and Ukrainian forces up until 2015 (Kravchenko 2023, 269).

At the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Kharkiv was attacked by Russian forces and was the object of some of the heaviest fighting in Ukraine, as was claimed by a senior US defense official (Kaufman and Lieberman 2022). On May 10, 2024, the Kharkiv region was attacked again, and fighting continues there up to the present (Sabbagh and Roth 2024).

It is worth noting that Kharkiv is linguistically a very diverse city, mostly because of its history of migration. Recently, it has seen migration from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. While most of the older generation in Kharkiv speaks Russian, the younger generation has embraced Ukrainian, which is taught in schools. With most of its population being bilingual, blending of both languages occurs frequently, even in official place names (Malykhina 2020, 60, 99). Svitlana Malykhina also points that native Russian speakers in Kharkiv include Ukrainian vocabulary. With regard to the Ukrainian Government’s approach to the Russian language before the 2022 invasion, she writes: “after the outbreak of the 2014 conflict, the Ukrainian government did not introduce policies specifically to discriminate against the Russian language and Russian speakers in Ukrainian-controlled territories. However, it did place a ban on Russian TV channels to counter pro-Russian television programming” (Malykhina 2020, 60).

## 5. Kharkiv in Ukrainian video games

### 5.1. *What’s up in a Kharkiv Bomb Shelter?*<sup>1</sup>

The game *What’s up in a Kharkiv Bomb Shelter?* (Dahuanna 2022) was made by the itch.io user Dahuanna, mostly during her own stay in a Kharkiv bomb shelter, when she wanted to include her experiences and her friends’ stories in a video game as an artist (Couture 2022).

The game is made in a heavily pixelated style, which can be difficult to read and may evoke feelings of anxiety and confusion. In the first scene, a player can see a housing block surrounded by trees; a fire rages at the top and bottom of the screen. On the left-hand side, a person, the player’s avatar, looks frantically to their left and right. The player can come to the door of the block and is encouraged to enter.

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<sup>1</sup> All of the quotes are identical to the in-game text, with the exception of added punctuation. (I have included periods between phrases originally separated by changing the screen.) Words that are colored or slightly animated in *What’s up in a Kharkiv Bomb Shelter?* are marked through letter spacing.

The next location is the titular bomb shelter, where several people can be seen. The location is still surrounded by fire and is visually confusing. The player may not be sure which places are accessible, how big the space is, or even what the images represent. It seems a conscious design choice to emulate feelings of uneasiness, anxiety, and being out of place. The player can interact with characters they come across by talking with them, and the characters share their views of the situation. There is no music, but there are sounds of explosions and falling bombs. It is worth noting that these are actual sounds recorded by the author in Kharkiv during shelling. Inside the shelter, the sounds of a guitar being played are added; these fit in with a character holding a guitar.

In *What's up in a Kharkiv Bomb Shelter?*, there are two buildings: an apartment block and a local store. The bomb shelter is located in the block, and this is where all the characters live. It can be seen at the start of the game surrounded by trees and fire. If the player leaves the building, it can be seen on fire and being hit by several shells; the trees from the beginning of the game are gone. The bomb shelter is the only part of the building that the player can explore. It consists of two rooms containing boxes, furniture, bottles of water, and blankets. Flames are visible at the edges of the screen; thus, they become part of the shelter although they are outside the shelter's walls.

The store is shown as unaffected by the attack, but it lacks groceries, except for one last loaf of bread. A Ukrainian word *еда* ["food"] is visible on the shopfront.

The main source of signification in the game are passages of dialog with the characters living in the shelter, whose stories are based on ones told by real people, presenting many different points of view on the situation.

One of the recurring themes is a poor mental state, and a sense of unreality that is experienced and clearly expressed by the characters. For example:

- > "When the war is too close, it's hard to believe. It's like everything is a dream. The brain sees and analyzes everything that happens. But it turns off the reaction. At least that's how I explain my feelings to myself."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In subsections 5.1–5.3, the quotations come from the analyzed games unless otherwise indicated.

- > “Without a guitar, I would go crazy here. And you have a hole instead of a heart, did you know that?”
- > “Dude, fetching water is hard core [sic] challenge now. Trying not to cry is a challenge. Life has become like a quest with unrealistically high stakes!”
- > “We already are refugees. Eternal refugees from the [sic] reality.”

Part of the experience is also monotony; it is difficult to tell the precise time.

- > “Today is the 5th day of the war. What day of the week is today? I don’t remember, do you?”
- > “I woke up from explosions, thought it was morning but it was night. Times of the day became indistinguishable.”

People also display other emotions, such as enormous anxiety (and reading the news constantly as a coping mechanism), being afraid for missing loved ones, or anger and hatred toward Russians.

In the game, there is also a mention of the previous, 2014 Russian aggression against Ukraine, and places where it happened.

By the way, I’m from Lugansk. Then, in 2014, it was too much for me. I was being scared by the “Grads” and writing poetry. Now the war has caught up with me. Never mind. Will I leave? No. We already are refugees. Eternal refugees from the [sic] reality. I’ll wait till the end of the war and go to restore Kharkov.

In this case, it is interesting to note that Kharkiv is shown here not only as a city under attack, but also as a safe city, where one can flee from danger, here from events in Lugansk. Of course, it is ultimately proven wrong, but for the person speaking it remains a place where one can stay, even during a war.

Some characters talk about act of kindness during the war, but it is worth noting that not only Russians are portrayed negatively in the game. One of the characters mentions being almost sexually assaulted by other person hiding in the shelter: “I offended Dima last night. He wanted to take advantage of me last night, and I flashed a flashlight into his eyes. Katya, it’s a [sic] war time – we should unite, not quarrel – he said. Well, secondary sexual characteristics is not = a wish to have sex.”

Other characters also mention the very expensive price of gas (2,000 hryvnias), and one incident of domestic violence which one character suffers. She explains this as similar to war.

To be honest, not much has changed in my life. I had nowhere to go from Roo before too. He says he is tired of impotence. He says he wants to stay here, join the militia. I wanted to say to him: "Honey! What do you know about impotence! Try to live for a few years with the egoist that you can't leave, because you have nowhere else to go!" But we can't fight anymore. Without him, I'll definitely die. I used to at least have a bathroom to cry in. So many people here, and you have to pretend all the time that everything is OK. In short, everything is as it was before – only worse.

Animals also appear in the game. One is a dog named Jake, which is called Bomb Runner Dog; it who can hear explosions before its owner. Also, there is a cat, although its visual presentation barely resembles the animal, as it only consists of scattered pixels. This is probably a deliberate choice made by the author, as it shows the animal's mind coming apart, as its behavior changes drastically during the war.

The problem of languages is also mentioned in this game. One character is presented with a Russian-Ukrainian dictionary and reveals that they do not know Ukrainian, which they only learned in school.

Characters also mention raids. Russians throw grenades into shelters. One Russian also appears as a main character's friend whom the player can call, but the friend denies the truth of the character's situation. He says: "It's not true, no one is sitting in a bomb shelter, then everything is propaganda. Our military only bombs strategic targets, civilians have nothing to fear. Ukraine will be demilitarized, and we will be friends again."

The outside of the shelter is deadly. If the player leaves the building too soon, their avatar is killed in an attack represented by big red spots on a black background. Yet, going out at the right time is necessary in order to complete the game by finishing the only quest: getting the last loaf of bread from the local store and coming back to the shelter. If the player succeeds, the following message is displayed and the game ends: "It was the last bread in the store, but you have enough for everyone. 'Hooray!! Hero! Now we have a [sic] bread!'"

## 5.2. *Kharkiv, 23 of August*

*Kharkiv, 23 of August* is a game developed by Valeriy Petrov (2022). It is available on itch.io with the following description:

23 of August is the day when Kharkiv was liberated from the German-fascist invaders. It is also the name of a street in this city, which I have many memories of. After the invasion of Russian troops on February 24, 2022, this street, like many others, was repeatedly bombed. This game is dedicated to all the defenders of my hometown (Petrov 2022).

Although reading Petrov's description a player may think that game is about August 23, 1943, as the date of a historical event, the gameplay happens on the 23rd of August Lane in Kharkiv. The scene is centered on the Monument to the Liberator Soldier and the buildings surrounding it, including an entrance to the metro, streets, cars, people (one of them is a child in a stroller), and birds. The player controls a grey and white rectangle, and has no avatar, which may cause a feeling of being outside the scene and making the player only a powerless observer. The player can point the rectangle at different places represented in the game to retrieve a text. This establishes a straightforward connection between an iconic sign, the textual information assigned to it, and the further meaning of both. After examining enough objects, the screen flashes white and the scenery changes from a peaceful one to a scene of destruction. People and birds are presumably hurt or killed, cars flash their lights or burn, the tree loses most of its leaves, and the metro building is damaged. Only the monument and the memorial to Soviet liberation still stand unchanged. After pressing a key, the following message is displayed: "Glory to the defenders of Kharkov! Death to fascist!" Then the game returns to its main screen. *Kharkiv, 23 of August* has no soundtrack and no sound effects.

As the amount of text in game is limited to short descriptions of objects on the screen, I will cite all of them and offer a brief analysis. (As noted above, the game makes connections of iconic sign with text and meaning.)

Monument, memorial, and banners with the dates 1941 and 1943 (thematically these form one complex):

- > "Once there were battles with the Nazi invaders here. Today there is a monument in honor of the Soviet liberators of the city."

- > “The project of the monument was created by sculptors Yastrebov and Ryk. The monument was erected by a large team of architects in 1981. It is 20 meters high and consist of a concrete frame sheathed with copper sheets.”
- > “Words on the pedestal of the monument say: ‘TO THE SOLDIER-LIBERATOR.’ Locals call the monument simply ‘Soldier.’”
- > “A memorial was built around the monument to the Soldier-Liberator in honor of the Soviet soldiers who liberated Kharkiv from the Nazi invaders in 1943.”
- > “It includes two steles, a monument with the names of military brigades, and two howitzers used during the war.”
- > “Kharkiv was captured by the Nazis on October 24, 1941. It [sic] happened four months after Nazi Germany and its allies has attacked the USSR.”
- > “Kharkiv was finally liberated on August 23, 1943. In December of the same year, the city hosted the first-ever trial of fascist criminals. This trial served as a precedent for the Nuremberg trials.”

#### Buildings:

- > “The Russian authorities promised not to shell civilian objects [sic]. But from the very beginning of the war, Russian troops have been deliberately destroying civilian infrastructure.”
- > “More than 2 [sic] thousand houses, hospitals, and educational and cultural institutions suffered from missile terror. The Northern Saltovka mini-district, where almost 300,000 Kharkiv residents lived, was subjected to the greatest destruction. More than 70% of the houses there are no longer habitable.”
- > “Despite the constant threat of rocket attacks, cafés, restaurants, and shopping centers continue to operate in the city.”

#### Vehicles and public transport (bus stops, metro, cars):

- > “The first bust stop, equipped to protect people waiting for transport from shells, appeared only three months after the traffic had resumed working.”
- > “From the first days of the war, metro stations became a shelter for thousands of Kharkiv residents. The subway reopened more than three months ago, but many stations are still inhabited.”

- > “Public transportation has resumed its work since May 16. Despite the increased shelling since then, it is still functioning, free of charge.”
- > “In the first days of the war, taxi prices increased tenfold. Taking advantage of the desperation of people trying to evacuate from the city, some drivers could demand 500 hryvnias or more for a less than two miles [sic] journey.”
- > “Many people who evacuated after the start of the war left their cars in the city. Some of these vehicles were subsequently given to volunteers who took people out of the city or delivered food to those who could not get it themselves.”

Tree:

- > “A year before the start of the war, there was a plan to build a ‘green frame’ in the city. It would have connected all of its parks with pedestrian and bicycle roads.”

People:

- > “Before the war, 1.4 million people lived in Kharkiv. Since the beginning of the war, almost a third of them have left. Most of those who stayed are older than 60.”
- > “More than 50 people killed by Russian shells in Kharkiv are children.”
- > “On May 26, one of the shells killed a five-month-old baby and his father. The blast wave snatched the child from his father’s arm and threw him onto the roof of a nearby building. Both died on the spot.”
- > “For the last 6 months, more than a thousand civilians were killed by artillery shells and airstrikes in the city and its region.”
- > “On August 17 and 18, Russian missiles destroyed two dormitories. 19 civilians were killed, another 40 were wounded.”

Birds (probably pigeons):

- > “The explosion of a shell that fell near the monument has crippled and killed many pigeons. Volunteers managed to save 16 of them.”
- > “Evacuating from the city, many residents left their animals in closed apartments. Not having the right to break open the doors without the permission of the owners, neighbors and volunteers drilled holes in the doors. Through these holes they gave the animals food and water. Despite these efforts, many animals remained locked inside and died from starvation or stress.”

- > “Near the city, a private zoo, which contained many rare animals, was completely destroyed. Many animals died, and the rest were evacuated by zoo workers. Six of them also died under shelling.”

The elements of the memorial complex are described in a factual and general matter, only giving basic historical and technical information about it. However, mentions of Nazi invaders and Soviet liberators may be interpreted as making an analogy to current Russian invaders and to the irony of the stark reversal of their role. Similar numerical data is also used in other categories of objects (numbers of buildings destroyed, people killed, animals saved, functioning public transport, etc.) but it is focused almost exclusively on Russian violence and the scale of destruction, with other details frequently added to underline the horrible aspects of the war (such as the death of a baby, the Russians deliberately destroying civilian buildings). Despite the straightforward approach to signifiers in the game, signified meanings are very broad and complex. Through the information, the player can get a picture of war-torn Kharkiv: how big and lively it normally is and how much it was affected by the invasion because of the scale of destruction wrought in a densely populated city. Data presented also describes other aspects of the reality of Kharkiv: people hiding in the metro station, kindness (helping animals or others), and people’s evil (taking advantage of desperate victims), continuing life on (opened cafés or the metro), and a lost future (previous plans for Kharkiv that now will not come to fruition). As mentioned before, an interesting point is that player remains mostly disengaged from the game as they have no avatar and cannot interact with objects, except for retrieving information. They can only be a passive observer, witnessing the terrible things happening to the citizens of the in-game Kharkiv.

### **5.3. *Twenty-Second: Stories of Underground Kharkiv***

*Twenty-Second: Stories of Underground Kharkiv* is a game available on the Steam platform and made by Brenntkopf Studio Kharkiv (2024). Even though it is a 3D game, it is described by the developers as a first-person visual novel. The text in the game is in English and other languages, but spoken dialog lacks subtitles and is only available in Ukrainian.

The game takes place mainly in the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August station of the Kharkiv metro, where many citizens are hiding from Russian attacks. One of them is the main character, Maksym Ihorovych. He is a history teacher and he writes a diary about his life in the Kharkiv subway, in what he describes as a branch of history called a “history of everyday life.” The gameplay has a span of several in-game days, during which Maksym just leads his everyday life, makes food, talks with other people, teaches history, writes in his diary, and goes to sleep in one of the subway cars. All the activities have the form of single quests displayed on the screen as text.

Visually, only the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August metro station and Maksym’s apartment are the setting in the game. Visible in the apartment are: a Ukrainian flag, a cup with the Zaporizhzhia *Oblast* coat of arms, a map of Ukraine, and books about the history of Ukraine. A player can also look through the apartment window: the view is apartment blocks and parked cars, and generally, the scene outside is a peaceful one.

In the metro station, there are also displays with various items of information about how to use the subway, written in Ukrainian. One of them is a map of the metro system with the Kharkiv coat of arms.

The main space of the metro is in a state of disarray, much like the real-life situation when citizens of Kharkiv have taken shelter there. There are tents, carpets, blankets, chairs, books, and many other items necessary for daily life. One of the books is a poetry collection entitled *Kobzar* written by Taras Shevchenko, a famous Ukrainian poet, which “has acquired a meaning symbolic of the Ukrainian literary and national rebirth” (Struk 2001). Unfortunately, it cannot be read in-game. The player can interact with some of the objects during quests, mainly with food, books, and a bed.

The game has no soundtrack, only passages of spoken dialog and sound effects. The most prominent sound effects are sounds of shelling at the beginning of the game, as heard from the apartment of the main character. Later, sounds of shelling are only mentioned by different characters, mainly as reasons for sleepless nights and how they are commonplace now and, thus, people start to get used to them.

While passing other people hiding in the metro, close up one can hear their passages of dialog and their monologs, although, as mentioned before, they are available only in Ukrainian.

*Twenty-Second: Stories of Underground Kharkiv* presents a great deal of information about the history of the city in the form of text, mainly as notes and pieces of dialog between Maksym and the other character. The main examples of historical information concern Constitution Square, the Kharkiv fortress, and Danylo Nechai. The Cossack Ivan Sirko, who “symbolizes a watchman defending the entrance to the fortress,” is often mentioned by the main character, sometimes in terms of mythology: “Legends say that he, Ivan, was born with mouth [sic] full of teeth, like wolf [sic], and swam across the rapids of the Dnipro, killed the Devil personally, and caught bullets!”

Some of the facts about situation in Ukraine in 2022 are also given: the formation of the voluntary military unit “*Kraken*,” the role of the football teams in the defense of Ukraine, and the Battle of Shevchenko. The 92nd Assault Brigade, the “Ivan Sirko” brigade, is also referred to; analogies to the historical Ivan Sirko are clear and Sirko is often mentioned in the game.

Maksym also talks about the mindset of the people in the subway: “People are used to the shelling, people don’t go for shelter anymore. Their psychology now is ‘come what may.’ Because they are exhausted by this war, they no longer care about their own safety. Their instinct for self-preservation has become dull, which is inevitable during a war [...]”

Russia and Russians are often mentioned in the game, especially in the context of the war. One of the most important aspects of the city mentioned is its closeness to the Russian border, the status of Kharkiv as a borderland city, and Russia’s military might in comparison to that of Ukraine. Also, two Russian characters appear in the game; they are in stark contrast with each other. One is a Russian woman, fiercely defending Russia, and despising Ukraine:

I’m a Kharkov resident, I’ve lived here for so many years that you’ve never even existed! I’m Russian! From Kursk! And what your government has done to this city is a nightmare! Why do I have to speak your fucking Ukrainian language? I don’t! And I won’t! Kharkiv is a Russian city! Nothing, our guys will come soon, and you Nazis will all become normal in no time!

The other is clearly ashamed of being Russian and swears to be loyal to Ukraine (which is confirmed as an honest pledge at the end of the game). He is described by Maksym in the following way: “He was born in Russia,

but he is definitely not a Russian anymore, I think. He has lost contact with the other side. This gives hope for the future [...].”

The male Russian character also describes his family, which broadens the image of Russian people shown in the game:

They labeled me a Nazi and a Bandera, and now I have no relatives. And to hell with them! I can't believe how much they've been brainwashed by propaganda! Have they cut off the Internet? Have they cut off the world? I don't understand it, I don't understand it at all! How is this possible? Why are they so melted down by the fact that I am a Kharkiv citizen? Damn that fucking Russia! I, a Russian, am being bombed! By our own people! Only what kind of fucking own! Bastards, that's all!

The game shows many aspects of Kharkiv citizens' experiences and attitudes, and events that happened there at the beginning of Russian invasion. Despite a very faithful depiction of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August metro station, the game's main focus is on elements of both Kharkiv's and Ukraine's history and on the feelings and experiences of its citizens. History is shown as an important part of identity in confusing times, when some patterns and parallels between past and present can help one to understand the current situation and oneself.

The people of Kharkiv in the subway show different attitudes toward the situation. Some are scared and remember the beginning of the war, often mentioning being anxious about hearing shelling outside. However, most of the time the most prominent aspect is the fact that being in the shelter for months makes it a new type of ordinary life. It can be seen not only in passages of dialog of the people or in animations of playing children, but also in game mechanics: the player has to repeat the same actions every day, such as talking with a friend, writing in the diary, and going to sleep. Maksym also mentions that he is still working every day as an online history teacher.

Despite the circumstances, *Twenty-Second: Stories of Underground Kharkiv* shows a lot of optimism and hope for the future. Characters mention positive aspects of the tragic situation, such as a feeling of togetherness while hiding in the shelter. Maksym describes people he met there as his “family” and even shows some regret when the subway reopens and

people have to leave it. Many characters display feelings of anxiety about their future life, as not all of them have places where they can go, but at the end of the game short stories of their further lives are shown; all of them have very happy endings.

## 6. Conclusions

All three games analyzed present Kharkiv in a different way, with the ongoing war being a common denominator in all. Each of them uses visual objects and, often connected to these objects, text as a vehicle of meaning. Both *What's up in a Kharkiv Bomb Shelter?* and *Twenty-Second: Stories of Underground Kharkiv* use sound as a symbol of war, mainly the sound of shelling (also mentioned in the text), but the third game lacks any kind of sound. Language is an interesting vehicle and a part of urban semiotics in the games under discussion. All the titles have Ukrainian and English as available languages, but only *Twenty-Second: Stories of Underground Kharkiv* has Ukrainian voice acting and text on posters, book covers, and information signs, showing Ukrainian as the main language of Kharkiv's public space. However, the main source of meaning in all the games discussed here are people. In *Kharkiv, 23 of August*, they are the same category of interactive objects that provide information as animals, cars, buildings, etc., but in the two other games characters provide dialog (or monologues), in which they often talk about Kharkiv and war, mainly about how their lives have been affected by it. In two of the games, the history of the city plays an important role. *Kharkiv, 23 of August* uses historical events as analogies to current Russian aggression, and in *Twenty-Second: Stories of Underground Kharkiv*, history is a part of Ukrainian identity and becomes a way of educating the player's country (the main character is, of course, a history teacher). It is interesting to note that the spatial element of the games is very limited and carries less meaning than other aspects of those games.

The ongoing conflict and its aftermath remain the main theme of these games and the most common semiotic value in them, with Kharkiv being more of a place where one can die or be trapped for a longer period than an

actual city; its culture is mainly connected to the past. Thus, even though all the researched games focus on Kharkiv and even include its name in their titles, in the system of meanings that they generate, the city takes second place to its citizens and the stories that they tell.

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## **The Spectacle of the Absurd: Parody in Video Games as a Tool of Political Satire Relating to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine**

**[Abstract]:** This paper examines the role of independent video games as a medium of partisan expression and alignment with Ukraine during the Russian invasion, with a particular focus on the prevalence and function of parody. Drawing on a corpus of video games (computer and mobile), this study explores how game creators transmute the phenomena witnessed into a set of symbolic ludic objects, which are subsequently employed to craft satirical parodies. These parodies serve to engage with the realities of war, to criticise aggressors, and to construct identities on national and political levels. Our analysis highlights how parody operates across multiple levels of these games, from titles and mechanics to graphics, music, and narrative. By employing humour, exaggerated violence, and cultural symbolism, these games reflect a wartime culture of resistance. They provide a unique lens through which to study the interplay between digital media, identity, and propaganda. This article situates these games within the broader framework of transmedial activism, highlighting their role as new modes of political participation and as agents of globalisation fostering a sense of community and collective agency. This phenomenon underscores how play and procedural interaction can turn unimaginable and abhorrent realities into digestible, reflective experiences. By blending entertainment with criticism, these games offer critical insights into

the intersection of game studies and contemporary socio-political discourse; they transform digital spaces into platforms for activism and resistance.

**[Keywords]:** parody, political criticism, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, satire, war games

## 1. Introduction

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in 2014, it entered its most important stage in 2022, when the Russian Federation launched its so-called “special military operation.” Alongside the evolution of conventional and unconventional warfare, the aspect with the most influence on the public outside the countries directly involved is the transformation of media and the nature of the information received by observers. The role of established media in narrating ongoing events was one of the main arguments in Jean Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995), in which the author discusses fundamental changes in the broadcasting of information. The media of the twentieth century, according to Baudrillard, became a narrative device which created a version of events and reality, forgoing the initial intention of communication: “we [the Western public] are all accomplices in these fantasmagoria [...] as we are in any publicity campaign. [...] today, in our enslavement to information, we constitute the reserve army of all planetary mystifications” (1995, 64). We contend that Baudrillard's position is not fully applicable to contemporary conflicts, such as the Russo-Ukrainian War. Traditional media have lost their monopoly over narrative construction, a role now distributed among various actors, including independent journalists, social media broadcasters, and individuals directly involved in unfolding events. This democratization of war narratives stands in stark contrast to Baudrillard's assertion that the media form a singular, authoritarian force shaping perception. Furthermore, the erosion of centralized control over war reporting has fundamentally altered the nature of its visual representation. The direct transmission of events through live streams and other unmediated formats offers an almost unfiltered, often unsettlingly realistic depiction of war. This transformation and multiplication of sources shift the emphasis from providing an

objective or coherent account of events to privileging the affective impact of information, thereby reshaping public engagement with a conflict.

The age of post-truth (McIntyre 2018) is characterised by a focus on the emotional impact of what is perceived instead of objective information. This, combined with the absence of a reliable framework to distinguish truth from falsehood, causes the two extremes of the dichotomy to merge into a single entity. Contemporary audiences have access to an unfiltered broadcast where tragedy and farce coexist. The modern public can witness the valiant defence by Ukrainian soldiers on Snake Island (Williams and Kirby 2022), the horrific nature of atrocities committed in Bucha (Browne et al. 2022), the abduction of Russian tanks by tractor drivers (NDTV 2022), the struggle of a Russian soldier with a reinforced door in Kherson (WarLeaks 2022), and the looting of items such as toilets by the invaders (Kampmark 2022), merged into a single online spectacle.

Such a contrast between the tragic and the comedic creates a sense of absurdity. We argue that this perspective leads many modern artists and designers to employ humour, particularly parody and satire. Following the 2022 invasion, hundreds of video games addressing the conflict have emerged, with many adopting a comedic tone that portrays the Russo-Ukrainian war via the individual perspective of the developers. We aim to examine the nature of parody within the satirical games created after the invasion. Regardless of personal opinions, we focus on the Ukrainian perspective on the conflict. The first reason for this choice is that we do not have access to the narrative presented by the Russian Federation. Secondly, as individuals residing in Poland, we feel a connection to the target audience of Ukrainian creators. We argue that these games can be seen as a form of partisan political criticism, further undermining the media's control over the narrative of the war.

A parody is a type of expression that transforms elements of the subject matter to evoke a comical and/or critical effect (King 2002, 114). According to Linda Hutcheon, it is a "form of imitation [...] characterised by ironic inversion" (2000, 6). In games, parody is expressed in a multimodal manner – music, narrative, graphics, and even mechanics combine to create a layered experience. Each element contributes to the parody, blending traditional conventions with ironic twists that reinterpret or subvert familiar themes.

There is a paradoxical ambivalence in parody's criticality, as it simultaneously embraces and mocks traits of its subject (Hutcheon 2000).

In this study, we focus on parody employed for satirical purposes. Parody, as a mode of humour, draws on and underscores aesthetic conventions (Krutnik and Neale 1990, 18–19). When used for satire, it becomes a creative method of expression that intentionally imitates, exaggerates, or distorts aspects of a specific subject to deliver critical social commentary (Krutnik and Neale 1990, 18–19). Satirical parody (King 2002, 108) uses humour, irony, and exaggeration to expose contradictions, absurdities, or flaws in its target, whether that be a public figure, institution, or cultural phenomenon. Distinct from parody purely intended for entertainment, satirical parody seeks to provoke critical thought, encouraging audiences to question or reassess the norms, practices, or ideologies it critiques (Rose 1994, 86). In other words, rather than merely imitating, satirical parody goes beyond simple replication, engaging in a critical analysis and challenging the hidden or unacknowledged assumptions associated with the subject. We acknowledge the extensive discourse on this topic and the difficulty many theorists face in distinguishing satire from parody. However, for the purposes of this study, we adopt this distinction as a functional framework.

In video games, parody serves as a mechanism for engaging with cross-media references and inspirations, wielding a transformative power that enables profound social satire (Tosca 2009, 130). Furthermore, as suggested in the introduction to *Video Games and Comedy*, the production of parodies can be understood as a form of game in itself – a playful praxis – with the potential to shape genres (Bonello Rutter Giappone et al. 2022, 9–23). Through the process of repetition with variation, simplified and grotesque versions of the original are created. What lies at the core of game creation is a parodic gesture (Bonello Rutter Giappone et al. 2022, 13).

## 2. Method

Approximately 220 computer and mobile game titles intentionally referencing the theme of Russia's invasion of Ukraine were reviewed, based on

both independent searches and a list presented by Yaroslau Kot in a presentation during the “Games of War” conference in 2024). From this initial pool, around ninety games were identified as containing preliminary indications of parody used for satirical purposes.

Our corpus consists of computer and mobile games, with online games dominating among the former. These smaller-scale projects – published on platforms like Google Play, Steam, itch.io, and similar alternatives – represent a medium that operates with limited oversight, created by individuals for the public. The vast majority of the titles were independent and made by Ukrainian creators; however, in some cases, because of the anonymization of internet spaces, these distinctions were difficult to make.

Overall, it can be observed that many games have low hardware requirements and an internet connection is usually the only necessity in order to interact with them. A notable feature of these games is their ephemeral nature: they often emerge rapidly in response to events but are just as quickly discontinued, frequently because of resource constraints.

Moreover, our corpus was characterized by a high degree of diversity in utilising humorous solutions. Elements of parody were observed at every level and in every aspect of the games – titles, graphics, music, mechanics, and narrative. We observed similarities between the functioning of these games and internet memes,<sup>1</sup> another medium saturated with parody and intertextual references (Shifman 2013). Indeed, the connections to internet memes and their transformations and parodies, as well as the use of their language, are so abundant in our research material that the kinship of games and memes is unquestionable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Internet meme is a popular name for an e-sign composed of a few semiotic elements that draw upon popular and internet culture. These intertextual collages can manifest themselves in diverse forms and degrees of complexity, utilising multimedia formats. Typically, they are presented within humorous contexts.

<sup>2</sup> Authors promote their games by proudly announcing the fact of utilising internet memes. See, for example: *Ukraine Memes Games Steam Bundle* or *Steam Descriptions of Bavovna Included!* (Ironbellys Crew 2023): “[...] a satirical, casual indie game-manifesto [...]. Memes and Easter eggs are included in the price!,” and that of *Putinist Slayer* (Bunker 22 2022): “[...] Kill hordes, dodge, upgrade, eliminate bosses and reach new highest records! With memes from Ukraine.” The games mentioned here, like memes, are both parodied and utilised for parodying.

Another common feature of the preliminary corpus that can be distinguished is the approach to the theme of the conflict. The games described here are largely directed clearly against the Russian side and are characterised by a one-dimensional, non-nuanced stance, although we have also identified a few titles that problematise the situation within Ukraine itself. These were quite rare, as the only examples that appeared in our sample include itch.io titles *No to War: The Game* (notowar 2023) and *Labor Rights Funeral in Ukraine* (Petrov 2022). The first is a retelling of Odessa's controversial practices related to conscription, where the player takes on the role of a skating pacifist trying to avoid being drafted. The game is part of the educational work of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, which advocates for the human right to conscientious objection to military service. It also aims to raise awareness about human rights violations and corruption related to conscription in Ukraine. The second is a short essay adventure that highlights how the government is using war as a pretext to erode workers' rights in Ukraine. In this segment, the player can explore an office and interact with various coworkers, each sharing their negative experiences with the company. Both titles employ humour and obvious parody<sup>3</sup> to criticise, respectively, the military conscription system and the treatment of workers' rights in Ukraine.

After a preliminary identification of ninety titles relevant to our study, we decided to divide the discussion of them into two groups. The first included instances in which games, understood as specific cultural artefacts, are themselves subjected to parody. We consider it important to comment on this phenomenon while conducting a study within the context of game studies, particularly given its notable prevalence in the material under examination. The second group comprises games that parody the observed reality of the invasion. This "state of reality" is a broad framework, including events, characters, objects, symbols, and other elements linked to the conflict. To enhance clarity and focus, we further organised the second category based on the primary target of the parody, enabling readers to navigate the corpus of games more effectively while refining our analysis. Notably, these

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<sup>3</sup> Parody in these titles is mainly visible in their aesthetics, namely the schematization of graphics and the use of visual metaphors, such as the cemetery in *Labor Rights* intended to illustrate the situation faced by workers and their rights, and the caricatured depiction of military conscripts in *No to War*.

thematic categories are not mutually exclusive; a single game may incorporate multiple references, often without clearly prioritising any one element.

The final scope was determined based on creators' declarations, the clear enrichment of the game with signs related to the invasion, and clear indications of satirical parody as described in the previous section. After separating these two categories, we selected representative titles for a given category to confirm the occurrence of parody used for satirical purposes (see Tables 1–4). Next, we conducted an in-depth analysis using the framework proposed by Dan Harries in *Film Parody* (2000), which identifies six primary methods of combining similarity and difference between the parody and its target. *Reiteration* provides an anchorage to the original, setting up narrative expectations that other parodic techniques can then subvert. *Inversion* creates a signifier which ironically suggests a meaning that is contrary to that of the original. *Misdirection* utilises reiteration and transformation and delivers an unexpected turn after initially mimicking the original. *Literalisation* transforms metaphors into literal interpretations or renders non-diegetic elements as diegetic (Grönroos 2013, 29). *Extraneous inclusion* introduces foreign elements to the targeted texts that fall outside its conventions. *Exaggeration* operates by amplifying the lexical, syntactic, and stylistic features of the original text beyond conventionally expected limits. Harries's framework helped us to identify and describe specific parodic transformations that occur in individual titles.

In the next section, we present our analysis divided into two parts corresponding to the two types described above. The subsections consist of a general description of each group and examples of titles effectively exemplifying a broader phenomenon selected based on their representational nature for the given category, ensuring that they offer the reader a diverse and engaging insight into the subject under study. We emphasize that although a creative boom occurred in 2022, new games continue to emerge, disappear, and evolve. Because of the size of the corpus and its (previously mentioned) constantly changing composition, we have decided in this article to document the individual phenomena we observed by providing a limited number of examples for which information was available as of fall 2024 (see Tables 1–4).

### 3. Games subjected to parody

The first mode of parody we address is the parody of games themselves, including references to well-known game titles, genres, and mechanics. Creators adapt themes related to current events into iconic gaming artefacts, effectively transforming cultural references from gaming history into commentaries on present realities. This dual-layered parody highlights how games can serve as both medium and target for satirical reinterpretations. Cultural phenomena and franchises outside of gaming – such as, for example, rare references to the genre of *hentai* (pornographic anime)<sup>4</sup> – also appear in the corpus studied, albeit far less frequently. However, as game studies researchers, we centre our focus on the medium’s self-referential parody.

Notably, many of the original games chosen for parodic transformation would now be considered “retro” emphasising how the technology required to cite and propagate them demands only minimal resources. The accessibility amplifies the cultural resonance of these parodic forms. Moreover, as retrogaming “revives periods that are well within living memory” (Guffey 2006, 100) references to retro games are more readily perceived as parodies because of their established place in cultural memory, making them recognisable across generations. In contrast, parody of more recent titles is harder to identify, as newer games have yet to achieve the same cultural longevity and recognition.<sup>5</sup> We refrain from providing specific examples here because, as the reader may notice, many of the titles discussed below belong to this category (see e.g., Figures 1a–b and 2a–c).

Among the games studied, we identified parodies of specific titles and established franchises within the medium, including most notably *Space Invaders* (Nishikado 1978), *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992), *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design 1997), *Whack-a-Mole* (TOGO 1975), *Snake* (Armanto 1998), *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984), *Minecraft* (Persson 2009), *Counter-Strike* (Valve 1999), *Hong Kong 97* (Kurosawa 1995), and *Hy, nozodu! / Nu, Pogodi!* (Elektronika 1984). In this category, the role of original game elements as a source of re-iteration (Harries 2000, chap. 4) becomes particularly prominent. Parodies

<sup>4</sup> A notable example is *Hentai Mission Ukraine* by Who We Are Games (2022).

<sup>5</sup> To further understand retro games and their significance, see, for example (Garda 2013).

are expressed through the use of distinctive mechanics, graphics, animations, and allusions within their titles. Furthermore, allusions to particular game genres – such as fighters, clickers, and platformers – were identified, alongside broader evocations of entire decades of game design, especially retro pixel art styles that evoke nostalgia without explicitly referencing individual titles. An examination of the abovementioned set of titles and their historical development reveals a clear manifestation of the medium’s tendency towards self-referentiality. This tendency is illustrated by stories such as those of both *Tetris* and *Snake*. Those highly recognisable examples have undergone an almost endless number of iterations and adaptations rising well above those of the ordinary video game model. Another example of this phenomenon is the existence of titles, such as *Hong Kong 97*, which was intentionally created as a parody of the medium itself (Shamdasani 2018). The above information is presented in a clearer manner in the Table 1.

**[Table 1]:** A selection of games from our final corpus, organised according to the original titles they refer to – games as subjected to parody category

Original games	Parody games
<i>Counter-Strike</i> (Valve 1999)	<i>Call Of Ukraine – Multiplayer</i> (SnZGames 2023), <i>Prigazhin Counter Craft 3D</i> (AMCi 2023)
<i>Grand Theft Auto</i> (DMA Design 1997)	<i>Grand Theft Tractor: Ukraine</i> (Pol Grasland-Mongrain 2022)
<i>Hong Kong 97</i> (Kurasawa 1995)	<i>UKRAINE 2022 (УКРАИНА2022)</i> ( <i>Hong Kong 97 parody</i> ) (DongaSSoft 2022)
<i>Minecraft</i> (Persson 2009)	<i>Prigazhin Counter Craft 3D</i> (AMCi 2023)
<i>Ну, погоди!</i> / <i>Nu, Pogodi!</i> (Elektronika 1984)	<i>Маня ловит Ваню</i> (Valentyn 2022)
<i>Snake</i> (Armanto 1998)	<i>Ukraine. Farm. Godot. Farmers. Farmy. 300. Godot Engine Game</i> (Lunariusis 2022)
<i>Space Invaders</i> (Nishikado 1978), <i>Stop the Z Putin Virus</i> (Viriato07 2022)	<i>Russian Invaders</i> (domandlj 2022), <i>U 2022</i> (Giorgos Xeristanidis 2022), <i>Ukraine vs Putin Shootemup</i> (innov8 2023), <i>The Ghost of Kyiv</i> (Ivan-Helsing 2022)

Original games	Parody games
<i>Tetris</i> (Pajitnov 1984)	<i>Kyiv Defence</i> (Cherednichenko and 16 ROMCOM 2023)
<i>Whack-a-Mole</i> (TOGO 1975)	<i>Catch Crazy Dictator</i> (Suspense Studio 2022)
<i>Wolfenstein 3D</i> (id Software 1992)	<i>Escape from Putin's Palace</i> (Vlad Dracul 2023), <i>Kremlin 3D</i> (mod) (Kary 2022)

**[Source]:** own elaboration based on: (Kot 2024) and own query.

Below we provide the analysis of two titles that are representative of the category discussed here. The examples selected illustrate the phenomenon of referencing specific titles, mechanics, and retro gaming in the production of parodies.

*Ukraine. Farm. Godot. Farmers. Farmy. 300. Godot Engine Game* is a game developed by Lunariusis, available on the itch.io platform. Released around 2022, the game is built using the Godot Engine and features gameplay mechanics reminiscent of the classic *Snake* (Armanto 1998). The player controls a tractor topped with a Ukrainian flag, tasked with, according to the game’s description, collecting enemy tanks while avoiding their attacks. These tanks are then “delivered for scrap” by directing them to a designated point on the map. Points are awarded for each successful delivery and are displayed at the top of the screen (see Figures 1a–b).

The gameplay is accompanied by epic music, adding to the intensity and thematic engagement of the experience. It is worth noting that the game was created using publicly available assets and free sample music. Such sharing of ideas, themes, and material is characteristic of the game-making surge described in this work. There seems to be a general consensus among creators engaged in the movement to adopt similar solutions, emphasising their sense of community and solidarity.

In *Ukraine. Farm*, the well-known mechanics serve as anchorage for the original *Snake* to be further parodically transformed by including graphical and thematic references to events from the time of the invasion of Ukraine. Thus, the game pays homage to the previously mentioned abduction of Russian tanks by tractor drivers (NDTV 2022) – an event circulating widely as

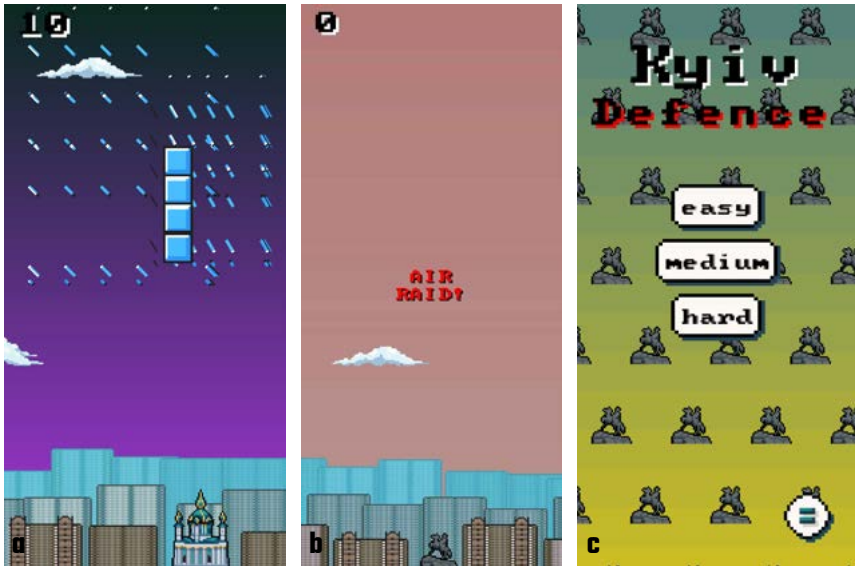


**[Figures 1a–b]:** Screenshots from *Ukraine. Farm. Godot. Farmers. Farmy. 300. Godot Engine Game*. Upon launching the game, the player is greeted by a panel (Figure 1b) displaying the message: “Don’t forget to donate to the Armed Forces of Ukraine; they are protecting our peace. --- Glory to Ukraine!”

**[Source]:** (Lunariusis 2022).

a meme in internet spaces.<sup>6</sup> While the reiteration and extraneous inclusion are what constitutes the parodic nature of the title, its satirical nature stems from the game’s explicit engagement in the discourse on the Russo-Ukrainian war. This is evident, for example, in the opening game panel (see Figures 1a–b), which clearly expresses the creator’s alignment with one side in the conflict. The use of a mechanical reference to the popular *Snake* game gamifies this alignment and conveys a narrative of resistance and mockery of the Russian military.

<sup>6</sup> For a collection of memes referencing the invasion, see, for example, the project *War Memes Museum* developed by Media Center Ukraine (2023).



[Figures 2a–c]: Screenshots from *Kyiv Defence* (2023)

[Source]: (Cherednichenko and 16 ROMCOM 2023).

*Kyiv Defence* (Cherednichenko and 16 ROMCOM 2023) is a mobile game developed by Andri Cherednichenko, in which the player defends an 8-bit rendition of Kyiv. The identity of the city is conveyed through the inclusion of iconic buildings and landmarks on each map. Falling blocks, styled graphically after *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984), intentionally misdirect the player (Harries 2000, chap. 6). This time the game is not about efficiently arranging the blocks but rather removing them by tapping before they hit the bottom of the map. Any blocks that are not skilfully intercepted collide with the pixelated Kyiv, causing an explosion that scatters the pixels into ruins. A points counter is displayed in the upper-left corner of the screen (see Figures 2a–c). The gameplay is accompanied by 8-bit upbeat versions of Ukrainian songs (by@nestir\_) thematically associated with the invasion.

What is particularly interesting in the case of using *Tetris* to narrate the Ukrainian-Russian conflict is the strong Russian context of the original title. In the original Western release by Spectrum Holobyte (*Guerra* 1988), emphasis was placed on graphical references to Soviet imperialism,

including the use of Cyrillic script, the hammer and sickle, St. Basil's Cathedral, the Kremlin, Soviet sports teams, and military imagery. That context may explain why the falling blocks, so characteristic of this Russian-origin game, are used as obstacles to be avoided in its satirical anti-Russian iteration.

This subsection explores how creators parody well-known game titles to construct satire addressing Ukraine's current situation, tackling themes such as air raids and the militarization of daily life. By invoking iconic games' elements – such as the mechanics of *Snake* or the graphics and gameplay of *Tetris* – they engender audience nostalgia, making these new titles more accessible and impactful (Wulf et al. 2018). Both *Snake* and *Tetris* undergo parodic reinterpretation, simultaneously reaffirming and subverting their original meanings through the inherent ambiguity of parody (King 2002, 114).

We highlight this phenomenon to underscore the unique self-referential capacity of games (Bonello Rutter Giappone 2015). By choosing games as their medium of expression, creators gain a distinct opportunity to engage with the history and structure of the gaming medium using its own language. This results in intriguing techniques, in which parodying the medium becomes a means of political and cultural commentary.

#### **4. Elements of invasion-related reality subjected to parody**

One of the criteria for determining whether a game falls within the scope of our discussion was, alongside creators' declarations, the clear enrichment of the game with signs related to the invasion. These signs serve as symbols and elements of a transmedia narrative about the conflict. Below, we offer descriptions of sets of the most commonly encountered signs – objects that are parodied. These are: events (see Table 2), national symbols, weaponry (see Table 3), soldiers, and public and symbolic figures (see Table 4). Despite the ontological differences between these elements, they are all transformed into ludic objects via the medium of video games.

**[Table 2]:** A selection of games from our final corpus, organised according to the parodied elements of reality – events (elements of invasion-related reality as subjected to parody category)

Events	Games
Чорнобаївка [“Chornobaivka”]	<i>Чорнобаївка Україна (квест)</i> (ProZhar 2022), <i>ЧОРНОБАЇВКА: День бабака</i> (Vovchuk 2022), <i>Смерть Ворогам</i> (MoonClock Studio 2022)
“русский корабль, иди на хуй” [“Russian warship, go f*** yourself”]	<i>Russian Warship Go F*ck Yourself</i> (Martian Teapots 2022), <i>Putin (HTML) Message</i> (Viriato07 2022a)
bombing of Kyiv	<i>Kyiv Defence</i> (Cherednichenko and 16 ROMCOM 2023)
Ukrainian farmer towing a Russian tank with a tractor	<i>Ukraine. Farm. Godot. Farmers. Army. 300. Godot Engine Game</i> (Lunariusis 2022), <i>Farmers Stealing Tanks</i> (PixelForest 2022), <i>Ukrainian Army</i> (ukrainian 2022), <i>Grand Theft Tractor: Ukraine</i> (Pol Grasland-Mongrain 2022), <i>Race to Kyiv</i> (Drogowit Pomorski 2022)
looting toilets by Russian soldiers	<i>Pixel World: Orcs Attack</i> (Demon Dezard 2022), <i>RUSLICSTAN INVADES</i> (GLAM AWAY GAMES 2023)

**[Source]:** own elaboration based on: (Kot 2024) and own query.

*Kyiv Defence* and *Ukraine. Farm. Godot. Farmers...* both offer retellings of events that occurred during the invasion, namely the bombing of Kyiv and the viral video documenting a Ukrainian farmer towing a Russian tank with a tractor. Other references to events that frequently appear in the corpus analysed include the following.

Чорнобаївка [“Chornobaivka”] – this term references the battles that took place between February and April 2022, linked to the failed attempts of Russian forces to solidify their position at a local military airfield, which were sabotaged by Ukrainian artillery at least seventeen times.

Games refer to that event by specifically utilising the village’s name most notably in the very titles. An example is *Чорнобаївка Україна (квест)* [“Chornobaivka Ukraine (quest)”] (ProZhar 2022) a game in which the player participates in a text chat between countries discussing the emerging conflict.

“Русский корабль, иди на хуй” [“Russian warship, go f\*\*\* yourself”] – is the well-known response from Ukrainian defenders of Snake Island to the Russian demand that they surrender, which was broadcast on 24 February 2022. For example, this event manifests itself in the form of the title and as an inspiration for the setting in a mini-game *Russian Warship Go F\*ck Yourself* (Martian Teapots 2022) created as part of the game jam Stand With Ukraine Jam that was held on itch.io from March to May 2022. Similarly, it appears in a transformed version in the game *Putin (HTML) Message* (Viriato07 2022a), where the player can click on flags of various countries to generate an analogous message expressed in five languages and directed at Putin instead of the warship.

The name of the town, the broadcast excerpt, and the agricultural machine have become symbols of specific events and are widely recognized as emblems of defiance and resistance against the Russian invasion. They have spread through new media, including video games, and are the central theme of many of them. Referencing these events through game titles, mechanics, and graphics represents another form of “soft propaganda” with a humorous undertone, criticising the aggressor in an accessible and emotionally resonant way.<sup>7</sup>

The process of the creation of new, easily communicable symbols that can be further circulated occurs simultaneously with the reinterpretation and universalization of those already existing through reprocessing. In addition to allusions to events, references to weapons used by the Ukrainian military, such as *Байрактар* [“Bayraktar”], *Джавелін* [“Javelin”], and airforce, undergo those types of processes. They appear in games in titles, as available weapons to be used by the player or even playable sprites as in the *Bayrakadakka* (JyveAFK 2022), a game described as a Bayraktar drone simulator.

These weapons have become new symbols of the Ukrainian military or even of national identity, especially as Ukrainian identity in European discourse is increasingly framed within the context of conflict. Alongside these emerging symbols, established cultural and historical ones such as *соняшники* [“sunflowers”], *гуси* [“geese”], *козак* [“Cossack”], and the

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<sup>7</sup> For a broader analysis of the propaganda functions of wargaming, see (Harrigan and Kirschenbaum 2016).

national colours – yellow and blue – are also employed (see Table 3). National music, or even parodic songs<sup>8</sup> are present as well.

**[Table 3]:** A selection of games from our final corpus, organised according to the parodied elements of reality – weapons and established national symbols

Symbols	Games
Байрактар [“Bayraktar”]	<i>Bayraktar</i> (wiedzmiż 2022), <i>Bayrakadakka</i> (JyveAFK 2022), <i>Ukrainian Bayraktar vs Orcs</i> (andijm 2022), <i>Bavovna Included!</i> (Ironbellies Crew 2023), <i>Deputinization</i> (Myttsi Zabav 2022)
Джавелін [“Javelin”]	<i>Javelin Point – Bravery Game</i> (NovaApps Limited 2022), <i>Saint Javelin</i> (anomalousFrog 2022), <i>Zelenskyy’s Wrath</i> (Helssen 2022), <i>Bavovna Included!</i> (Ironbellies Crew 2023), <i>Deputinization</i> (Myttsi Zabav 2022)
соняшники [“sunflowers”]	<i>Sunflower Simulator</i> (Null Activity 2022), <i>Sunflower Slap</i> (Native Games Studio 2022), <i>Friedens Panzer</i> (Hexenwerk 2022)
гуси [“geese”]	<i>Birds Attack 2022</i> (Novokhatskyi and Kharchenko 2022a), <i>Nenka Ukraine</i> (3xOnGames 2024), <i>The Goose of Kyiv</i> (salopusher 2022)
козак [“Cossack”]	<i>Cossack Drive</i> (eID1abl0 2023), <i>Javelin Point – Bravery Game</i> (NovaApps Limited 2022), <i>Nenka Ukraine</i> (3xOnGames 2024), <i>Cossack Freedom Fighter</i> (Liza and Lemon 2023)
national colours	<i>Deal with Putin</i> (Little-Rena and DVa-Clack 2022), <i>Ukraine vs. OrcZ</i> (Alaric von Teplitz 2022)

**[Source]:** own elaboration based on: (Kot 2024) and own query.

Representations of the characters of soldiers also deserve a comment. Both Russians and Ukrainians, they often retain a humanoid form but undergo humorous graphic transformations. Russian soldiers are frequently depicted as *орки* [“orcs”], zombies, or various animals, while Ukrainian soldiers are portrayed as *кошенята* [“kittens”] and *гуси* [“geese”]. In both cases,

<sup>8</sup> Such as, for example, the popular patriotic propaganda song “Bayraktar” (Kronika24.pl 2022).

these representations draw on widely recognized cultural references,<sup>9</sup> often humorous in nature, which in games take the form of virtual creations that have both a graphic, animated, and diegetic dimension (see Table 4).

**[Table 4]:** A selections of games from our final corpus, organised according to the parodied elements of reality – soldiers and specific characters

Group of characters	Characters	Games
soldiers	soldiers (of both sides)	<i>The Most Russophobic Game Clicker Kill Russians Orks</i> (Neas Gaming 2022), <i>Birds Attack 2022</i> (Novokhatskyi and Kharchenko 2022a), <i>Nenka Ukraine</i> (3xOnGames 2024), <i>Cats at Arms</i> (Halubovskiy 2022), <i>Ukraine vs. Orcs</i> (Alaric von Teplitz 2022), <i>Bunnies vs. Bunnies: Ukraine Edition</i> (Jordan Magnuson 2022), <i>Putin Orcs Defender</i> (pacifism 2022), <i>Pixel World: Orcs Attack</i> (Demon Dezard 2022), <i>RUSLICSTAN INVADES</i> (GLAM AWAY GAMES 2023), <i>UFU Ukrainian Forces Unlimited</i> (RuslanHaru 2022), <i>Bavovna Included!</i> (Ironbellys Crew 2023)
symbolic figures	Привид Києва [“Ghost of Kyiv”]	<i>Ghost of Ukraine</i> (Staryshko 2022), <i>Ghost of Kyiv – Fly Shooter</i> (UlfBjorn 2022), <i>The Goose of Kyiv</i> (salopusher 2022), <i>The Ghost of Kyiv</i> (Ivan-Helsing 2022)
	Патрон [“Patron”]	<i>Sniffer Dog Game</i> (Novokhatskyi and Kharchenko 2022b), <i>Nenka Ukraine</i> (3xOnGames 2024)

<sup>9</sup> Among such linguistic jokes, the term *бавовна* [“cotton”] is notable when used to refer to explosions. It is present in, for example, game titles; see, for example, *Bavovna included!* (Ironbellys Crew 2023) on Steam.

Group of characters	Characters	Games
public figures	Wladimir Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Alexander Lukashenko, etc.	<i>Putinist Slayer</i> (Bunker 22 2022), <i>Putin (HTML Message)</i> (Viriato07 2022a), <i>Stop the Z Putin Virus</i> (Viriato07 2022b), <i>Deal with Putin</i> (Little-Reno and OVa-Clock 2022), <i>Granny Putler</i> (SnZGames 2022), <i>Musk vs. Putin</i> (Palianytsia Charity Initiative 2022), <i>Bavovna Included!</i> (Ironbellys Crew 2023), <i>Russian Invaders</i> (domandlj 2022), <i>FUCK PUTIN</i> (Sunday's Games 2022), <i>Kick the Pu: Beat Dictator</i> (PRICERA 2022)
	Wolodymyr Zelensky, Elon Musk, Joe Biden	<i>Musk vs. Putin</i> (Palianytsia Charity Initiative 2022), <i>Zelensky's Wrath</i> (Helssen 2022), <i>Revenge of Zelensky</i> (cjavad 2023), <i>Ukrainian Revenge</i> (FutumaGames 2023)

**[Source]:** own elaboration based on: (Kot 2024) and own query.

These whimsical (Nenkov and Scott 2014) depictions often balance on the border of the “cute-grotesque” as framed by Daniel Harris: “cuteness [...] must by no means be mistaken for the physically appealing, the attractive. In fact, it is closely linked to the grotesque, the malformed” and “[...] cuteness is ultimately dehumanising, paralysing its victims into comatose or semi-conscious things” (2001, 3, 7). The troubling nature of such aesthetic choices further illustrates the paradoxical nature of using an entertainment medium to create humorous depictions of war.<sup>10</sup>

While orcs are intended to symbolise the brute force and uncivilised nature of Russian soldiers, zombies serve a particularly intriguing function: they depict soldiers as the living dead, emphasising their inevitable downfall and rendering them “ungrievable” (Butler 2009). Such biopolitically troubling representations become tolerable in public reception when directed at the advancing aggressor forces (Train and Ruhnke 2016, 515). In a similar

<sup>10</sup> For example, consider the mobile game *Cats at Arms* by Oleh Holubovskyy (2022) in which players control a Ukrainian cat-soldier who shoots Russian orc-soldiers. The graphic design of both armies can be described as “cute” (see Figure 3a).



**[Figures 3a-c]:** Screenshots from *Cats at Arms* (Figure 3a), *Stop the Z Putin Virus* (Figure 3b), and *Sunflower Simulator* (Figure 3c)

**[Source]:** (Holubovskyi 2022), (Viriato07 2022b), (Null Activity 2022).

vein, *Stop the Z Putin Virus* (Viriato07 2022b) is a game in which Putin himself changes into a zombie, infected by the “Z virus” (see Figure 3b). The association with the letter “Z,” an identification symbol commonly linked to the Russian military, reinforces this imagery.

These representations express a collective affect, channelling widespread frustration, anger, and resistance, and further popularising it. Dehumanisation is accompanied by exaggerated gore aesthetics, which function in a comparable way: they intensify the violence and brutality of the game, making the stakes feel more immediate and visceral, while simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing the shared emotional response of the public towards the aggressor. This highlights the inherent paradox of play and gaming transgression (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020; Jørgensen and Karlsen 2018). In the cases discussed here, the paradoxical nature is very evident and easy to notice, particularly in the aesthetic dimension. Creators and players seek to engage in transgression through the act of creation and playing, by tormenting their opponents, using moral bracketing that causes the moral norms “outside the game” to be suspended and replaced by the “in-game” norms (Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal 2018, 30). However, a truly profound transgression (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, 194) implies the impossibility of participating in such an experience.

An interesting aesthetic deviation from ubiquitous gore can be found in *Sunflower Simulator* (Null Activity 2022), in which Russian tanks are transformed into sunflowers (see Figure 3a). The player aims at them with a crosshair, suggesting that their operators are killed, and upon their bodies, sunflowers – a national symbol of Ukraine – grow. Here the transformation of the non-visible soldiers is significantly subtler and as such less disturbing to the recipients. It is worth noting, however, that this remains an exception – most of the titles discussed here compete in sadistic depictions. To give the reader a more tangible understanding of the phenomenon described here, we provide a specific example below.

*Маня ловит Ваню* [“Manya Catches Vanya”] (Valentyn 2022) – directly references *Ну, погоди!* [“Nu, Pogodi!”], the 1984 Russian game featuring characters from a popular animated series. In this version, instead of the wolf character, a female figure dressed in traditional Russian attire catches dismembered body parts of Russian soldiers rolling down four birch wood



**[Figure 4]:** Screenshots from *Маня ловит Ваню* [“Manya Catches Vanya”] (2022)

**[Source]:** (Valentyn 2022).

slopes, much like the original game’s eggs (see Figure 4). The *Ну, погоди!* itself was a copy of the 1981 *Egg* from Nintendo Game & Watch. Here, the subverted and mocked characteristics of one of the best-known early Russian titles becomes a tool of Ukrainian anti-imperialism.

Although parodying the specific video game title is crucial to the satirical tone of the game, we decided to include it in this part of our discussion because one of its most shocking elements and one charged with meaning is the grotesque depiction of dismembered Russian soldiers. It is important to note that such exaggerated gore representations can transgress limits for some viewers. Based on comments on its itch.io page, criticising the dehumanising nature of depictions, *Маня ловит Ваню* can be categorised as an extreme example of the mechanisms we have discussed in this section becoming for some players a space of profound transgression – one that is unacceptable and as such unplayable (Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020, 194).

Alongside faceless, anonymous soldiers, another important element of invasion-related reality introduced into games are specific, identifiable characters. These include, first, symbolic figures representing Ukraine’s liberation efforts, such as *Привид Києва* [“Ghost of Kyiv”] and *Патрон* [“Patron”] the

dog. Second, there are caricatures of Russian leaders and public figures, such as Vladimir Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko, as well as figures from the international stage, including Volodymyr Zelensky, Elon Musk, and Joe Biden. The latter characters, although graphically depicted in a parodic manner, are positioned within the narrative and mechanics as protagonists or at least as active agents in the conflict. While the visual representation may be exaggerated or humorous, their roles in the games reflect their symbolic significance within the larger context of the war, often emphasising their importance in the resistance struggle.

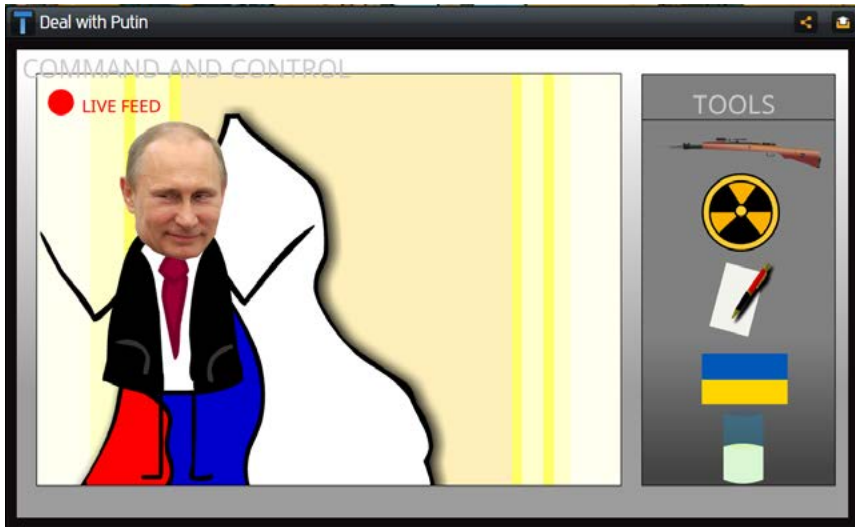
Similar to the case with soldiers, in the aesthetic transformations of both hero and enemy characters, the creators' sadism comes to the forefront, not always consciously, in their attempt to "maim, hobble, and embarrass" (Harris 2001, 5). It is further reinforced in narration and mechanics turned "against" Russia's allies. This reflects a deliberate exaggeration of negative traits and vulnerabilities, adding a layer of dark humour and criticism. The use of such depictions may also be a way to explore the grotesque nature of the conflict, as these characters are dehumanised and subjected to visual ridicule, highlighting the brutality of war through satirical aesthetics.

The majority of the titles that can be mentioned in this category focus on Putin. In these many games, the Russian leader is often compared to Hitler, with linguistic play – such as using the term "Putler" (for example, *Granny Putler* [SnZGames 2022]) – and the use of the Hitler graphic motif signalling fascist ideologies. These games are designed as ways to kill, torture, and rid the world of Putin, essentially using him as a target for violent retribution.

One of them is *Deal with Putin* a straightforward online game developed by Little-Rena and DVa-Clock (2022) on newgrounds.com. Players select from a range of tools to trigger animations depicting direct harm inflicted upon Putin (see Figure 5). He can be shot, obliterated by a nuclear bomb, stabbed with a pen, crushed under a map of Ukraine, or drowned in urine. The game's visual style draws heavily from popular satirical online games and aligns itself with the broader trend of caricaturing and tormenting political figures (Phillips 2018),<sup>11</sup> here with a pronounced focus on the Ukrainian

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<sup>11</sup> For example, in ragdoll games like *Interactive Buddy* (Shock-value 2005), in which the player tortures a doll that can be equipped with the skins of George W. Bush or John Kerry, among others.



**[Figure 5]:** Screenshots from *Deal with Putin* (2022)

**[Source]:** (Little-Rena and DVa-Clock 2022).

cause. The game includes seven unlockable achievements, encouraging repeated engagement. Accompanying the gameplay is a background track titled “The Dictator” (jasont01 2007), which features a digital sample of a quote from George W. Bush regarding dictatorship.

This form of representation featured in *Deal with Putin* and many other titles not only reflects an intense animosity towards the Russian leader but also serves to channel the frustration and anger stemming from the ongoing conflict into virtual acts of vengeance (Murray 2016, 320).

To summarise this category, we note that the diegetic incorporation of the above-mentioned elements further highlights the use of mechanisms of parody (Harries 2000). Their oversaturation in subsequent titles establishes a clear satirical stance towards the ongoing conflict, with sharp criticism aimed at mocking the Russian armed forces. Ludic objects – phenomena distilled into reusable and reinterpretable symbols – serve as tools for structuring experience, extending memory, and shaping associated emotional responses. A game centred on a specific object or event commemorates the existence of that object or event, allowing the myth it generates

to persist beyond the immediate moment. The affective responses elicited by these phenomena are embedded within the game's structure, providing both creators and players with a means to process and navigate the emotions they evoke. While undergoing parodic transformations, these ludic objects are simultaneously simplified and enriched with new critical dimensions. Through their games, creators offer a hyperreal simulacrum of their individual and national experiences, engaging with the paradox of humour by transforming cherished symbols – such as national icons and war-time suffering – into elements that are more easily disseminated through the popular language of parody.

## **5. Discussion**

The people of Ukraine and their allies manifest their agency not only on the battle and political fields but also through transmedial spaces. Games provide a novel framework for situating experiences within a temporal and relational context. Through games, creators capture the attention of players from around the world, sharing their perspectives and propagating Ukrainian culture, albeit in a simplified or trivialised form. By contributing to the trend of creating the games discussed here, the creators are actively participating in negotiating norms of discourse regarding the invasion. Their annihilating laughter at the triumph of the absurd is their moment of freedom (Hariman 2008, 261).

Games related to contemporary armed conflict function as networks of references. They transform sets of signs into ludic objects, which serve as the foundational elements for satirical actions. Above, we have outlined examples of how parodying other games as well as elements directly related to the invasion are featured in the creation of satirical games. With the help of these mechanisms the reality of war itself is transformed into hyper-realistic, mocking representations, in a way that makes possible a processing of what is unimaginable, repulsive, and abhorrent.

A key aspect of this analysis concerns the most prevalent thematic and aesthetic trends that emerge within these games. After reviewing the scope

of our discussion, we observe that the most popular titles tend to be those targeting Putin or featuring orcs or zombies. We speculate that these metaphors are among the most symbolically potent and relevant throughout the invasion. In contrast, games based on individual memes – such as the tractor memes – emerged in large quantities and were produced rather crudely during the height of their circulation, eventually fading away or becoming less prominent. Later titles have shifted their focus from being solely centred on one event, incorporating a broader array of elements, with the tractor serving as just one among many motifs.

As noted above, forms of negotiating the boundaries of discourse through video games often rely on various modes of violence, not only within narration and mechanics, but also through aesthetics. It is not only the game itself but also its chosen parodic convention that facilitates these transgressions (see “ludo-comedic consonance” in Bonello Rutter Giappone et al. 2022). When humour is employed and directed at the oppressor, even dehumanisation may appear harmless (Carter and Allison 2018, 133–52). What is more, the previously mentioned paradox of cuteness (Harris 2001) highlights that aesthetic transformations – commonly understood as expressing positive affect toward an object – can also carry a problematic, violence-laden connotation. It follows that despite the creators’ evident bias, the portrayals of characters from both sides in their cutified, cartoonish form are similarly imbued with the violence of war. Gore and a distinctly pronounced grotesque aesthetic, alongside purely mechanical techniques, are what set the opponents apart from allies. Thus, the selection of monstrous categories (e.g., zombies and orcs) to depict Russian soldiers, contrasted with animalistic ones (e.g., geese and cats) for Ukrainian soldiers, is noteworthy.

The paradox of transgressive actions in video games, which pertains to most of the games discussed here, presents a compelling dilemma. On one hand, player actions within a game can be deeply unsettling when evaluated through the lens of contemporary human rights standards: for instance, in games about torturing Putin, where the player engages in acts that would be considered morally reprehensible in any real-world context. However, the magic circle of the gaming experience provides a form of absolution, framing these actions as acceptable within the boundaries of play. The veil of parody further legitimizes this engagement, allowing players to channel

their emotions in a manner that remains normatively acceptable within the cultural framework of satirical gaming.

Cruel carnival laughter encompasses all – enemies, comrades, players, and creators alike (Bonello Rutter Giappone et al. 2022, 9–11; Bakhtin 1984). These forms of expression – aesthetic and mechanical – do expose and mock the absurd, yet they remain its “accomplices” as well (Baudrillard 1995, 64).

Although there are exceptions, such as the previously mentioned *Labor Rights* and the conscription game, the majority of the games analyzed in this study do not endeavour to provide nuanced critical commentary. They are politically engaged but not necessarily serious (Flanagan 2009). As Hye-Won Han and Su-jin Kim note (2016, 97), in the case of parody games, developers perceive real-world social and cultural problems tragically, yet convey satire and irony through comedic parody. This juxtaposition of the gravity of events with a medium intended for entertainment creates a paradoxical effect. However this paradox serves a clear purpose. A certain lightheartedness (as discussed in parody studies) permits a freer engagement with both information and affect. To quote Robert Hariman, parody cuts its subject to “human scale” (2008, 251). Game scholars examining parody games emphasise that parodic elements and paracausal (Gurney and Payne 2016) qualities enhance the entertainment value of these games, creating accessible and alluring spaces that capture players’ attention. Moreover, the satirical approach, embedded within a parodic aesthetic, functions at the margins of conventional discourse, circumventing established norms of acceptable expression. The perceived “non-seriousness” of these works grants their creators the latitude to depict images and facilitate interactions that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable within mainstream channels of communication. These features invite players to engage in critical reflection on serious themes, thereby facilitating the critical processes mentioned above (Gurney and Payne 2016; Han and Kim 2016).

By using distribution platforms such as Newgrounds, itch.io, and Google Play, these games position themselves as non-threatening artefacts, despite serving as conduits for powerful affective expressions and creative interventions (Flanagan 2009). An illusion of casuality is dispelled, at least in some titles, by information surrounding them such as fundraising efforts

for the front, along with descriptions and comments from creators sharing insights into the situation in Ukraine revealing the games' educational and informational values.

The language of satirical parody becomes legitimised within the realms of independent public actions, coexisting with or even replacing direct discourse. The satirical effectiveness of parody stems from its "irreverent democratisation of the conventions of public discourse" which situates discourse closer to the audience itself (Hariman 2008, 258). It exposes the limitations of dominant narratives that Baudrillard warns of, even if by its own totalising tendencies (Hariman 2008, 254).

Games' procedural and interactive properties propose an alternative to traditional linear media. They are a form of partisan political criticism capitalising on the media literacy of their audience. Interaction with humour directed against political opponents enhances a sense of political efficacy, particularly in situations of heightened anxiety (Becker 2014, 440). Not only do these interactions have this effect, but actively creating such humour likely produces a similar outcome, thus fostering a sense of agency. Parodic deconstructions in the form of games become an affinity space (Gee 2005; Gurney and Payne 2016) promoting not only passive learning but active discussion and a sense of community. It can be noted that while online platforms are often used for spreading propaganda and for surveillance, the space of independent games remains relatively pure of institutional influences. The production of satirical games exemplifies a form of partisan agency that operates beyond conventional frameworks of discourse. Despite often maintaining anonymity, developers and artists demonstrate a clear intent to resist in a manner that fits in with their expertise and creative capacities. These games serve as non-militant instruments of opposition, offering an alternative mode of engagement in the struggle against invasion. The accumulation of affective responses fosters a sense of shared understanding, further solidifying the formation of new communities bound by these collective experiences.

However as the editors of *Video Games and Comedy* note, the "democratising power of laughter" should not be overestimated (Bonello Rutter Giappone et al. 2022, 11–12). Although it provides an opportunity to reinforce communal bonds, it often comes at the expense of cruelty towards the

Other. In the games we examined, it is evident that while the roles of victim and aggressor may shift, the underlying mechanisms of violence and the perpetuation of nationalistic ideologies remain unchanged. As Bonello Rutter Giappone et al. note, “There is a fine line between carnivalesque ridiculing of shared values, brave satire against the tyrants, and cruel mockery of others from the platform of smug conviction in one’s superiority [...]” (2022, 12).

In a situation of heightened risk and during a war that is becoming more intense and violent, it is not surprising that representations of war dominate in the titles we analysed. These are not distant or fictional events but rather transformations of current realities, which both diminishes and amplifies their frivolity. The immediacy of the conflict intensifies representation’s impact, blurring the lines between representation and reality. The violence and ideologies depicted in these games, then, are not merely historical echoes or abstract constructs, but are deeply rooted in ongoing global tensions. This temporal proximity adds a layer of urgency and complicates our understanding of the narratives being portrayed, making them not only more relevant but also more unsettling. The shifting dynamics between victim and aggressor in this context are not just theoretical exercises, but part of a living, evolving crisis, one that challenges the very nature of how we engage with and interpret these representations.

## **6. Final remarks**

Game design functions as a powerful tool for both personal expression and broader cultural communication within a wartime context. Our article provides a limited overview of the phenomenon of parody games related to the Russo-Ukrainian War, highlighting their role in shaping affective responses and political narratives. However, further research is needed to explore their long-term impact on collective memory, their reception across different cultural contexts, and their influence on the broader discourse of war representation in digital media. The games discussed here align themselves with a tradition of political satire, one that has found its place in every medium – from drawings and songs to magazines and monologue (Bonello

Rutter Giappone et al. 2022, 1–24). In this context, the aesthetics and mechanics of parody function as instruments of satire, ultimately serving the purpose of critiquing reality. This criticism is not merely intellectual but affective, aiming to elicit an emotional response. The accumulation of shared emotions fosters the formation of communities, united by a collective sense of agency. Satirical games actively contribute to the construction of national and political identity, with their heightened militarization reflecting and reinforcing facets of contemporary Ukrainian self-perception. This study is, thus, part of a longstanding inquiry into the foundational constructs of national identities. Within the epistemic landscape of the post-truth era, the significance of emotions and affect in the formation of collective identity becomes increasingly pronounced, as they function as cohesive forces that unify communities. In this context, the predominant unifying affect is one of resistance and indignation – an emotive response to the surreal and incomprehensible spectacle of war. The fact that many of these games served as a means of fundraising to support Ukrainian troops at the front further highlights the dedication and commitment of their creators. By directing proceeds towards defence efforts, developers not only show their support for Ukraine but also engage players worldwide in this cause, transforming gaming into a platform for activism. This blending of play and purpose underscores a unique aspect of modern game design, where entertainment intersects with real-world impact, rallying digital communities towards shared goals, and expressing and stabilising personal and political affect.

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## **Chinese-Speaking Steam Communities in the Face of Russian Aggression: The Case of the *Ukraine War Stories* Game**

**[Abstract]:** On February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a full-scale, massive military attack on Ukraine, resulting in an enduring war that persists to the present. The attack drew enormous attention from the global community, which provoked a feeling that the invasion threatened the entire world's stability and should be condemned. The ongoing war has encouraged the creation of numerous thematic games, many accessible through the Steam platform. Players often express their reflections on both the game itself and the topic it addresses in the comments section, which is available to all platform users. This paper presents conclusions derived from the qualitative analysis of approximately 250 comments made by Chinese language speakers on the game *Ukraine War Stories* in terms of language, content, and narrative. We indicate the dominant discourse within the gaming community, taking into account Chinese-language comments concerning their use of traditional or simplified characters, and discuss the emotions conveyed by players' feedback. We believe that understanding these aspects contributes to a more comprehensive view of how the community of gamers engages and interacts with complex global issues.

**[Keywords]:** Chinese language, discourse analysis, Russia-Ukraine war, Steam gaming community, video games

## 1. Serious games and political discourse

Games, whose main purpose is not entertainment (so-called serious games), have emerged as a medium to raise awareness about social, ethical, and cultural issues (Pereira et al. 2012, 53). Additionally, they provide specific information about various phenomena and events occurring worldwide. Thus, they can serve as an information tool, drawing attention to issues that should be disseminated to a broad audience (Khoury et al. 2018, 1885), as well as developing beliefs related to specific topics through experimentation, thereby eliminating the need for experience in reality (Mota et al. 2016, 2398; Raessens 2015, 246). Serious games have the potential to foster the development of empathy among players because of their immersive nature, which makes them a tool that is well-suited in this educational context (Belman and Flanagan 2009, 5) helping individuals to grasp the human impact of real-world issues like war and holding “the vast potential [...] for the work of peace education and conflict resolution” (Darvasi 2016, 19). However, it is essential to consider whether players’ pre-existing biases and deeply ingrained beliefs can be effectively altered by a game or whether these entrenched perspectives will ultimately prevail. It could be argued that a successful serious game should have the ability to alter a player’s worldview or, at the very least, compel players to engage in critical thinking.

Successful serious games should also meet the criterion of enabling the collection of data on player behavior (Samčović 2018, 598), as they assist, among other things, in changing attitudes (Mota et al. 2016, 2398; Gee 2003, 44). This capability can give insight into the effectiveness of the game, facilitate its development, and contribute to academic research through the analysis of data acquired during gameplay or data in the form of feedback. This data can be extracted from game reviews on popular digital distribution platforms, which make possible the collection of a wide range of gamers’ perspectives (Lin et al. 2019, 1), diverse backgrounds, cultures, and regions where media transmission follows a specific path. This diversity of user backgrounds and experiences helps to understand how perceptions of gaming can vary, influenced by local narratives that may be more or less objective, often filtered through various cultural, political, or ideological

lenses. However, games exist in a virtual dimension, a transnational environment, and they cross national borders, with platforms such as Steam being used by players located all over the world. Hence, comments can express opinions about the game and its content, but they also play a role in shaping other players' knowledge, much like the game itself (Jung 2020, 3).

In the context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, launched on a nationwide scale in 2022, this issue is particularly significant from the perspective of global stability and security; it also fosters a broad dialog among gamers about the war. Games such as *Ukraine War Stories*, hosted on Steam, have become forums where the gaming community can engage in discussions about the conflict, express views, and share reflections.

Viewed through the lens of the Chinese language and the Chinese-speaking community on the Steam platform, this matter takes on unique significance and interest, as Chinese can be written in two distinct writing systems: traditional and simplified. The latter is primarily used by citizens of the People's Republic of China, as well as in Malaysia<sup>1</sup> and Singapore,<sup>2</sup> whereas the traditional script is utilized by Taiwanese and Hong Kongers (Liu and Hsiao 2012, 689). This is of great importance given the political narrative of the war adopted by the media in these territories. According to the Chinese official position, China maintains a neutral stance (Song 2023, 21). However, this neutrality can be viewed as a strategic calculation to protect Chinese economic and political interests. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China has published a twelve-point statement outlining its approach to the Russian-Ukrainian situation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [China] 2023). Among other issues, the statement addresses the sovereignty of all countries, the abandonment of a Cold War mentality, the resumption of peace talks, and the cessation of hostilities, as well as the cessation of unilateral sanctions. Notably, the first two issues can be taken as directed toward the US and NATO, suggesting that they should not interfere in the politics of other countries. This may be particularly relevant in the

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that in Malaysia, the Chinese language is not recognized as an official native language; however, the "Chinese language education system is relatively superior" (Yan 2022, 134).

<sup>2</sup> One of Singapore's official languages is Singapore Mandarin Chinese, which differs from Standard Mandarin Chinese.

context of support for Taiwan. Mainland China views Taiwan as a rebellious province that should reunite with the People's Republic of China (Tworkowski 2023, 37). In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukraine's situation is sometimes compared to the Taiwan issue, which, however, differs in geopolitical and legal contexts (Zreik 2023, 13). Nonetheless, China's stance on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict may have far-reaching consequences for future international relations, especially concerning the tensions surrounding Taiwan.

By contrast, the official position of the Government of the Republic of China (Taiwan) toward Russia's decision to attack Ukraine is one of firm condemnation. According to a statement by the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian invasion is a threat to regional and global peace and stability. Taiwan has pledged to continue cooperating with the United States and other countries to help end the war in Ukraine, including by joining international sanctions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [Taiwan] 2022). The war in Ukraine has significantly affected Taiwanese perceptions of defense issues, highlighting an increased need to prepare for national defense (Hsiao 2022, 4).

Yichi Chen's (2024) research found that Chinese and Taiwanese media, despite similarities in agenda-setting, reflect different political goals. In the Chinese media, the war is described as a result of US actions (as opposed to China's promotion of peace and cooperation), with key terms such as "hegemony" and "cold war" frequently appearing in reports. Additionally, the media prominently feature the official statement's emphasis on peaceful solutions (Chen 2024, 3–4). In contrast, the prevailing narrative in Taiwanese media portrays Russia as a dictatorial and brutal state that has attacked Ukraine and violated human rights and describes Ukrainians as heroes fighting for freedom and democracy (Chen 2024, 3–4). The Taiwanese narrative also emphasizes globalization, diplomacy, and cooperation with the US, including criticism of the Chinese Communist Party (Chen 2024, 6).

Remarkably, a study by Deniz Aksoy et al. (2024) suggests that media reports regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine have increased Chinese support for the use of military force, with many expressing pessimism regarding peaceful solutions. This implies that the public is not convinced of the effectiveness of the Chinese government's official stance of neutral peace.

Consequently, it can be deduced that, following the outbreak of war, the issue of defense has become more significant for both Taiwanese and Chinese communities, indicating a heightened sense of insecurity. This development, in turn, shapes and fuels social debates on both security and sovereignty.

## 2. About the game

As stated by Tetiana Zinovieva, “video games serve as a powerful deep media tool of Ukrainian society to resist Russian aggression” (Zinovieva 2023, 226). *Ukraine War Stories* is one such game. It is a documentary, paragraph-based visual novel released for Windows computers and available for free on Steam. The game was published on October 18, 2022, by Starni Games, a Ukrainian studio founded in 2013 (Starni Games 2022), whose games are thematically centered on the issue of armed conflicts. *Ukraine War Stories* meets the assumptions of the genre: the gameplay is designed for a single player, there is a progression through decisions made, and the entire narrative experienced by the player is conveyed through descriptions, passages of dialog, overview graphics, and music. The game also features a system of consequences for the player’s choices, showing how the morale and resources of the group change after a particular option is chosen. It includes three scenarios based on true stories from the first months of the war in 2022, depicting events in the Russian-occupied territories of Gostomel, Bucha, and Mariupol (Kovpak and Lebid 2022, 107).

As regards the graphic development of the game, authentic war photographs are used in the background (Zinovieva 2023, 220), which have been digitally processed by applying a drawing-style filter. The interface consists of a panel displaying a portrait of the interlocutor, text provided by the game, a preview of statistics and resources, and a board with various options. The game’s music can be described as relatively dark, industrial, and tension-building, resembling film scores used in dramas or thrillers. It is not mechanically correlated with the gameplay.

The creators declare that they do not and will not profit from the game; their goal is to share the experiences of people suffering from the war in

Ukraine with the largest possible audience (Steam 2024; StarniGames 2022). Additionally, it is worth noting that the project was created by a small team from Kyiv, working during the war from their office in Ukraine. One of the creators survived the tragedy in Bucha: “[one of the guys from our team] had to hide with his family in the basement of the garage for a week until they were able to evacuate. His house was ransacked by the Russians along with many other houses in the village” (Steam 2024; my translation). This indicates the developers’ strong commitment to authentically portraying the war experience in a game meant to move players on an emotional level. The game’s content, based on a true and dramatic story, may significantly influence the nature of players’ comments, who may focus more on the message, themes, political background, and references to reality, and less on the gameplay and technical aspects of *Ukraine War Stories* as an interactive medium.

According to data recovered from Gamalytic, the game recorded approximately 37,700 downloads (Gamalytic 2024), while VG Insights reports a total of 30,870 downloads (Video Game Insights 2024b). This can be considered a significant success, given that it is an indie game and that these numbers were achieved through organic reach, as the game did not have any marketing investment. For comparison, the commercial game “Death from Above” (developed by Rockodile and published by Lesser Evil on February 22, 2024), an action-oriented drone simulator, set during the Russian invasion of Ukraine and priced at \$9.99, has sold approximately 9,200 copies on Steam (Video Game Insights 2024a).

In the context of our article, it is also worth mentioning that the game is available in eleven languages, including Chinese (in both traditional and simplified writing systems), significantly increasing its accessibility to a wide audience. However, the game does not have a Spanish version, despite Spanish being one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. This may be due to localization priorities, as well as limited resources and budget. It is important to bear in mind that the game is a pro-bono project.

We chose to discuss *Ukraine War Stories* for several reasons:

- > game genre – it focuses on narrative, making it a representative medium for studying players’ reactions to the depiction of real-world events in games;

- > availability – it is available for free;
- > education and emotions – it has an educational value and emotional aspect;
- > contextual relevance – because of its political and social implications, the game can generate comments that reflect broader political and social narratives concerning the Russian-Ukrainian war.

### **3. Methodology**

In this article, we assume that language is fundamental in the construction of social reality and identity (Gee 2014); thus, we employed a methodology of digital discourse analysis, focusing on the content of players' comments posted on the *Ukraine War Stories* game page on the Steam platform. As noted by James Paul Gee (2014, 61), all meaning is local. This approach allows us to understand how localized utterances and their meanings influence society, shape perceptions of reality, and affect further communication and discourse. The main point of discourse analysis is to discern "how individuals use language in specific social contexts" (Dick 2004, 201). In this understanding of critical discourse analysis, language is viewed as a tool that actively shapes reality, with the manner of expression reflecting the speakers, their relationships with others, and their perception of reality. This, in turn, influences social behaviors and reinforces certain ideologies. Discourse analysis further examines the intricate relationship between language and identity, particularly how language is employed to construct both individual and collective identities (Gee 2014, 28). In this article, we focus on Chinese-speaking gamers.

This research was conducted to understand the dominant discourse within the Chinese language communities of gamers on the game and its context and to discover how individuals use the Chinese language in their reviews to construct and communicate their beliefs, emotions, and evaluations, as well as why they use it in these specific ways. Here we adopt the perspective of José P. Zagal et al. that "game reviews are one of the primary forms of video game journalism and are also one of the prevalent forms

of discourse about games” (Zagal et al. 2009, 215), but at the same time, we acknowledge that these reviews can also reflect broader player opinions on various issues associated with the game, with the game itself catalyzing the expression of such views.

In the analysis, we considered 262 reviews written in Standard Mandarin Chinese, the official language of both the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China. Based on the assumptions made earlier (geographical distribution, cultural and political context), it can be concluded that most comments written in simplified Chinese characters are likely to come from Chinese citizens, while comments in the traditional Chinese script are likely to come from Taiwanese citizens.<sup>3</sup>

All comments analyzed below have been extracted from the “reviews” section of the Steam platform. In the initial stage of the research, we extracted the data using a screen-based approach (Androutsopoulos 2013, quoted in Kreis 2022, 78), followed by a close reading of the comments to identify patterns and categorize our observations (as in Tovares 2022, 28). The comments were analyzed for convergence in Chinese and Taiwanese narrative, cognitive statements, content (including semantics and keywords), valuation and tone (positive, neutral, negative), and the affective statements involved in their content (including emotional reactions expressed through language), based on the assumptions of a three-dimensional analytic framework that includes text, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough 1992, quoted in Dick 2004, 205). The discourse identified in the comments is specific to the context of the game, the cultural background of the players, and the global issue under discussion. By analyzing reviews it can be demonstrated how certain linguistic choices are tied to specific identities and viewpoints.

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<sup>3</sup> However, it is important to note that this information is not confirmed and cannot be directly obtained from the platform.

## 4. Quantitative data

At the outset, it should be noted that, according to the statistics of the Steam platform, the overwhelming majority of comments made in various languages are positive (874 out of 998). This trend may reflect the general reception of the game as a piece of art, but it may also indicate an anti-Russian perspective regarding the conflict. Consequently, the comments may reveal users' attitudes toward the war more than they reflect an objective assessment of the game's quality by Steam users. The majority of comments was posted during the initial post-release period, with the largest number appearing on the release day, October 18, 2022 (239 positive comments and 35 negative comments).

A total of 261 comments were posted in Chinese, accounting for over 26% of all reviews, which is an interesting result. However, the quantitative distribution of reviews seems to be logical, as the Chinese community accounts for as much as 12.3% of Steam users (Carless 2023), placing it second in the platform's overall community.

In simplified writing, 208 comments were posted, of which 34 (16%) were marked as negative. In traditional writing, 53 comments were posted, none of which was negative. This data provides preliminary insight into the differences in the Chinese-speaking community's attitude toward the game and/or the armed conflict.

## 5. Qualitative analysis

### 5.1. Convergences in content, narratives, and emotions within the Chinese language

Regardless of the writing system in which the comments are constructed, the Chinese-speaking community predominantly comments on the real conflict rather than on the game itself. They exhibit a unified sentiment of sympathy toward ordinary people, whom they consider the real victims of this war. The players are particularly moved by the fate of civilians, expressing

sadness and incomprehension as regards armed conflict, while simultaneously showing pessimism, noting the repetitiveness of history and the fact that people fail to learn from past mistakes. The community condemns war in general, wishes for its end, and frequently expresses a desire for world peace in its comments.

A common keyword for the Chinese-speaking community can be identified as 平民 *píngmín* “civilian, ordinary person” and its synonyms, including 人民 *rénmín* “people, nation, citizens” and 民众 (民衆) *mínzhòng* “masses, population, general public.” These terms are consistently used in comments to describe the main victims of the conflict: individuals who are not involved in warfare yet suffer as a result. These expressions, therefore, appear in contexts of compassion, concern, and solidarity, as well as the desire for others to live without fear and violence. An example of such a comment is as follows:

不管是什么战争 · 受苦的永远都是人民 ·

*Bùguǎn shì shénme zhànzhēng, shòukǔ de yǒngyuǎn dōu shì rénmin.*

No matter what kind of war it is, ordinary people always suffer.

In contrast, comments openly supporting Ukraine<sup>4</sup> (comprising 13% of those in simplified characters and 34% of those in the traditional writing system) are dominated by the slogan 荣耀属于乌克兰 (榮耀歸於烏克蘭) *róngyào guī yú Wūkèlán*. This phrase is a direct translation of the Ukrainian national greeting Слава Україні (*Slava Ukraini*) “Glory to Ukraine,” which is used globally to protest against Russia’s aggression and to express support for Ukraine.

In both the comments written in simplified and traditional Chinese scripts, *Ukraine War Stories* is frequently compared to the title *This War of Mine* (released in 2014 by 11 bit studios, a Polish developer). These games are regarded as mediums that effectively describe the impact of war on ordinary individuals.

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<sup>4</sup> We considered comments openly supportive of Ukraine if they contained explicit expressions of support, characterized by emotional and encouraging slogans expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people in the face of the conflict.

## 5.2. Divergences in narrative - comments in simplified Chinese characters

The comments written in simplified Chinese characters are generally cautious and subdued, with relatively fewer emotional overtones, reflecting a sense of calmness and a striving for balance. Most users maintain a neutral tone, which aligns with the official approach of the People's Republic of China to the conflict. In their comments, they express the view that it is impossible to verify the truth and authenticity of the events presented, despite a great desire to do so. For these users, the reality of the Russian-Ukrainian war is not straightforward. To express this balanced approach they often use the reference to the colors 黑白 *hēibái* "black and white," stressing the difficulty in making clear assessments and drawing simple conclusions that distinguish between good and evil.

While maintaining neutrality, the players refer to the shared heritage and roots of Russians and Ukrainians, urging others to avoid unilateral perspectives and to promote the values of peace and love. Thus, they lament that despite advances in technology and humanity, the world remains governed by the law of the jungle, through which patterns of violence (such as rape, as referred to in the game's plot) are reproduced. In this aspect, it is emphasized that smart people should not ingratiate themselves with and support either side of the conflict, especially considering that China is not a direct party to it. Thus, they aim to protect China's overall interests:

我身为中国人，不想在这场战争中站队哪一方，我仅仅并不希望这场战争导向一个不利于中国的结局。

*Wǒ shēnwéi Zhōngguó rén, bù xiǎng zài zhè chǎng zhànzhēng zhōng zhànduì nǎ yī fāng, wǒ jǐnjǐn bìng bù xīwàng zhè chǎng zhànzhēng dǎoxiàng yīgè bù lìyú Zhōngguó de jiéjú.*

As Chinese person, I don't want to take sides in this war, I just want this war not to lead to an outcome unfavorable to China.

首先，台湾是我国的一部分，其次，我希望世界和平。

*Shǒuxiān, Táiwān shì wǒ guó de yībùfèn, qícì, wǒ xīwàng shìjiè hépíng.*

First of all, Taiwan is part of my country, and secondly, I hope there will be peace in the world.

This desire for world peace frequently appears in comments, particularly through expressions such as 愿世界和平 *yuàn shìjiè hépíng* “may there be peace in the world” or 愿战争早日结束 *yuàn zhànzhēng zǎorì jiéshù* “may the war end quickly.” These phrases can be seen as key expressions within the Chinese narrative.

Some comments criticize both parties, indicating that each has ulterior motives and inflames emotions, leading to feelings of contempt toward both nations. This contempt is expressed through the use of pejorative and insulting terms for Russia and Ukraine, such as 俄狗乌贼 *égǒu wūzéi* “Russian dog, Ukrainian squid.” The comments highlight the ineptitude of the Ukrainian government and President Zelensky, often referred to as a provocateur, with the remark that despite these issues, “sinister” Russia should not interfere. Steam users also describe the Russian-Ukrainian war as a propaganda war or a conflict between “white thugs.”

It is worth noting again that comments openly supporting Ukraine constitute only 13%, while those openly supporting Putin’s actions are even fewer, at 2.9%. Additionally, there are comments expressing anger at Russian actions, but these too are in the minority (only 4.8%, with the comparison of Putin to Hitler occurring only once). All of these comments, however, are decidedly more emotionally charged, featuring expressions of rage or a desire for death. These emotions are underscored, among others, by the use of acronyms such as TMD (他妈的 *tāmā de* “fucked”), other curse words in Chinese slang, and pejorative euphemistic terms based on homophony. These are directed at both Russians (鹅匪 *éfěi* literally “goose thug” referring to ‘Russian thug’; 蛾子 *ézi* literally “moth” referring negatively to the term “Russian;” and 俄罗斯食人机器 *Éluósīshí rén jīqì* “Russian man-eating machines”) and Ukrainians, as well as Chinese who mindlessly support one-side (黄俄滚孝 *huáng’é gǔnxiào* “yellow Russian fanatic,” 鹅友 *éyǒu* literally “friend of the goose” referring to “friend of Russia,” 精俄 *jīng’é* “pro-Russian,” and 精乌 *jīngwū* “pro-Ukrainian”). Chinese individuals are particularly criticized by the players for their support of Russia, with ironic comments suggesting they change their citizenship to Russian and pointing

out their failure to remember Russian crimes against the Chinese people. Examples are:

众黄鹅孝子必将下地狱。

*Zhòng huáng é xiào zǐ bì jiāng xià dì yù.*

All blindly devoted Chinese supporters of Russia will go to hell.

去TM的战争 · 去TM的纳粹主义 · 去TM的俄罗斯联邦。

*Qù tā mā de zhànzhēng, qù tā mā de nàcuì zhǔyì, qù tā mā de Éluósī liánbāng.*

Down with the fucking war, down with the fucking Nazism, down with the fucking Russian Federation.

Players criticize not only the unreflective adoption of propaganda but also the moralizing tone of the game's developers. This is particularly evident in comments emphasizing that the game is biased, propagandistic, and brainwashing, with a narrative that whitewashes Ukraine and demonizes Russians. Therefore, players advise caution against potential manipulation. Some accuse the developers of attempting to manipulate players' thinking and believe that games should not serve as political tools, suggesting that *Ukraine War Stories* was created to solicit donations for Ukraine. Some players argue that the political manifesto embedded in the game is overly strong and cannot be regarded as a source of reliable information. Thus, as a result of frustration, some comments exhibit a stronger tone (for example, "game for idiots," "game for clowns," and "junk game"), also employing vulgar language (for example, 傻逼遊戲 *shǎbī yóuxì* literally "fucked up game").

看评论我真的服了 玩了个洗脑游戏就去反俄长点脑子吧。

*kàn pínglùn wǒ zhēn de fú le wán le gè xǐnǎo yóuxì jiù qù fǎn É zhǎng diǎn nǎozi ba*

Reading the comments, I really can't believe it. They played a brainwashing game and now they are against Russia. Use some brains.

可惜steam没有中间值评价 · 作为一款免费的宣传和和平小游戏我觉得还可以 · 但是政治色彩太严重了 · 甚至会提到俄做的事情比纳粹更严重啊 [...] 作为打发时间的小游戏可以 · 不建议太用政治眼光去看这个游戏 ( 一开始就是被12种语言竟然有中文和绘画插画吸引了 ) 。

*Kěxī Steam méiyǒu zhōngjiān zhí píngjià, zuòwéi yī kuǎn miǎnfèi de xuānchuán hépíng xiǎo yóuxì wǒ juéde hái kěyǐ, dànshì zhèngzhì sècǎi tài yánzhòng le, shèn-zhì huì tídao É zuò de shìqíng bǐ Nà\* cùì gèng yánzhòng a [...] Zuòwéi dǎfā shíjiān de xiǎo yóuxì kěyǐ, bù jiànyì tài yòng zhèngzhì yǎnguāng qù kàn zhège yóuxì (wǒ yī kāishǐ jiùshì bèi 12 zhǒng yǔyán jìngrán yǒu Zhōngwén hé huìhuà chāhuà xīyǐn le).*

It's a shame that it doesn't have a neutral rating on Steam, as a free game to promote world peace it's fine, but it has too clear a political tone, and it's even mentioned that what Russia did is worse than Nazism. [...] As a game to kill time, it's fine, but I wouldn't recommend looking at it too politically (I was initially attracted by the choice of up to twelve languages, including Chinese, and the illustrations).

Interestingly, some comments appear to indicate subtle support for Ukraine, hidden between the lines. This may suggest a fear of contradicting China's official stance, but also a clear desire to break away from its narrative. In this context, there are comments expressing opposition to all forms of aggression and criticizing the tacit acceptance of inhumane actions, cruelty, and impunity for the perpetrators, referred to as fascists (without explicitly naming the aggressor).

我不知道哪一方是对的 · 我只知道侵略者必亡 ·

*Wǒ bù zhīdào nǎ yī fāng shì duì de, wǒ zhǐ zhīdào qīnlüè zhě bì wáng.*

I don't know which side is right, I only know that the aggressors must fall.

Comments directly labeling Russia as the aggressor are present, but they are in the minority. More frequently, Chinese commenters view the West, NATO, and the United States as the true enemy, blaming them for the outbreak of war and positioning them as opponents in the conflict with Russia. These comments exhibit cynicism and criticism toward U.S. war policy, often referring to the United States as “Western war merchants.” Zelensky is accused of provoking the Russians with his efforts to join NATO. This is perceived by users as a threat to Russia's security. Commenters mention the “fascist U.S. regime,” U.S. “genocide” against its own citizens, and the West's double standards regarding wars. The game's narrative is sometimes described as Western capitalist propaganda that demonizes the Russian military, and there is criticism of the extreme nationalism depicted in the

game. These comments are interspersed with communist propaganda slogans and support for the Chinese government.

全世界的无产者应该联合起来，而不是给资本家卖命，充当统治阶级的屠刀砍向追求解放的民众。

*Quán shìjiè de wúchǎnzhě yīnggāi liánhé qǐlái, ér bùshì gěi zīběnjīā màimìng, chōngdāng tǒngzhì jiējí de túdāo kǎn xiàng zhuīqiú jiěfàng de míngzhòng.*

The proletarians of the whole world should unite, not serve the capitalists by becoming a tool of the ruling class to suppress people who want liberation.

究竟是谁造成的乌克兰战争？是北约，或者再说明白点，是美国！美国才是全世界最大最恶心的战争贩子！

*Jiūjìng shì shuí zàochéng de Wūkèlán zhànzhēng? Shì Běiyuē, huòzhě zài shuō míngbái diǎn, shì Měiguó! Měiguó cái shì quán shìjiè zuì dà zuì ěxīn de zhànzhēng fànzi!*

Who really caused the war in Ukraine? It's NATO, or to be more precise, it's the United States! The United States is the largest and most repugnant/warmonger in the world!

愿乌克兰人民抗击俄帝国主义侵略、北约集团、本土寡头政府的战争胜利。

*Yuàn Wūkèlán rénmín kàngjī É dìguó zhǔyì qīnlüè, Běiyuē jítuán, běntǔ guǎtóu zhèngfǔ de zhànzhēng shènglì.*

May the Ukrainian people prevail against the imperialist aggression of Russia, the NATO group, and the local government of oligarchs.

Numerous reviews mention a variety of political situations and refer to world history, including events such as the aggression of the USSR and Nazi Germany during World War II, Stalin's crimes, the Sino-Japanese War, the coup in Guatemala, the American mission in Afghanistan, the Iraq War, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the history of Sino-Russian relations. These events are also often linked to criticism of the United States. One of the most intriguing commentaries includes a poem titled "Report from the Besieged City" (in Polish, "Raport z oblężonego miasta") by Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, written in 1982 and translated into Chinese. This poem is used by the review's author to criticize China's official position, arguing that opposing the United States does not necessitate supporting another oppressive

aggressor attacking a sovereign state, and *vice versa*: opposing a Russian attack does not equate with supporting the United States. This critical stance is also reflected in another user's comment, who claims to have experienced harassment from Chinese state institutions and fellow citizens for publicly supporting Ukraine.

An interesting phenomenon is the masked self-irony of the Chinese people in some of the comments. Below is an example of one such review, which has been marked as "useful" by 333 users and "funny" by 181 users, indicating that it resonated with a significant number of the audience:

想到在战争中死去的每一个乌克兰人都有1/6的几率投胎中国,我的眼泪就止不住地往下掉。

*Yī xiǎngdào zài zhànzhēng zhōng sǐqù de měi yīgè Wūkèlán rén dōu yǒu 1/6 de jīlǜ tóutāi Zhōngguó, wǒ de yǎnlèi jiù zhǐ bù zhù de wǎng xià diào.*

Tears come to my eyes at the thought that every Ukrainian who died in the war has 1/6 of a chance of being reincarnated in China.

On the one hand, this may appear to be an attitude of criticism and dislike toward Ukrainians. However, after careful analysis and consultation with a native speaker, it becomes clear that it reflects compassion and concern for the future of Ukrainians. The comment suggests that Ukrainians, in their next phase of life, may have to face life in China, which is expected to mean bringing further difficulties and challenges for them.

There is little apparent commentary on the game design itself in the reviews. Some isolated comments point to a well-constructed plot, which is mostly considered an asset. However, there are also criticisms regarding poor playability, inadequate mechanics of choices, and dialog inappropriate for characters' ages, rendering them stereotypical and one-dimensional. Despite its classification as an *eroge* (adult visual novel), players indicate that, in this category, the game can be considered a failure.

In the comments written in the simplified system, there are no hashtags or emoji's. Instead, users who explicitly oppose one side use international slogans emphasizing solidarity with Ukraine (for example, *Slava Ukraini*, "I stand with Ukraine," and "The victory belongs to Ukraine"), opposition to armed conflict and dictatorship (for example, "fuck all wars & dictatorships," "fuck war," and "PEACE AND LOVE"), and their political views ("fuck

putin,” “down with XJP,” “Stand with Russia,” and “destroy the nazi”).<sup>5</sup> These additions and slogans in English are meant to draw the attention of a wider, non-Chinese-speaking audience to the views of the comment authors.

### 5.3. Divergences in narrative - comments in traditional Chinese characters

Comments written in the traditional Chinese character system are notably more emotionally charged in terms of reactions experienced to the atrocities depicted in *Ukraine War Stories*. The game’s narratives are regarded as depressing and disturbing, but they also shift players’ perspectives on war, encouraging a more nuanced understanding that considers the deeper problems of armed conflict, particularly the suffering of civilians and helplessness experienced in the face of losing loved ones. The game is recognized by the community as immersive and captures the atmosphere of war, inducing strong emotions, including sadness, pain, powerlessness, or dread.

這是個由好幾個悲劇組成的遊戲。如果要玩，那請做好一個晚上都睡不著的準備。我是個國二的普通的男孩。我不否認我之前把戰爭想得很簡單。因為我壓根就沒想過失去親人的痛苦。我也沒想過面對敵人的入侵。我該有多無助。但在這遊戲中，我那些沒想過也不想的事情都發生了。連幾分鐘的人物故事刻畫都可以讓我身歷其境。非常好的遊戲。也希望世界再也沒有戰爭。也希望台灣可以和平。不要發生戰爭。

*Zhè shì gè yóu hǎo jǐ gè bēijù zǔchéng de yóuxì, rúguǒ yào wán, nà qǐng zuò hǎo yī gè wǎnshàng dōu shuì bù zháo de zhǔnbèi. Wǒ shì gè guó èr de pǔtōng de nánhái, wǒ bù fǎurèn wǒ zhīqián bǎ zhànzhēng xiǎng de hěn jiǎndān, yīnwèi wǒ yāgēn jiù méi xiǎngguò shīqù qīnrén de tòngkǔ, wǒ yě méi xiǎngguò miàn duì dírén de rùqīn, wǒ gāi yǒu duō wúzhù, dàn zài zhè yóuxì zhōng wǒ nàxiē méi xiǎngguò yě bù xiǎng xiǎng de shìqíng dōu fāshēng le. Lián jǐ fēnzhōng de rénwù gùshì kèhuà dōu kěyǐ ràng wǒ shēnli qǐjìng, fēicháng hǎo de yóuxì. Yě xīwàng shìjiè zài yě méiyǒu zhànzhēng, yě xīwàng Táiwān kěyǐ héping, bù yào fāshēng zhànzhēng.*

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<sup>5</sup> When transcribing the slogans written by users in English, I retained the original notation as written on the site.

This is a game built on many tragedies. If you are going to play it, be prepared for a sleepless night. I'm an ordinary middle school sophomore, I won't deny it – before that I thought about war in a very simple way, I never thought about the pain of losing loved ones, and I never imagined how helpless I would feel in the face of an enemy invasion. However, in this game, all those unimaginable and unwanted thoughts came to fruition. Even a few minutes of reading the description of the characters allowed me to empathize with their situation. A very good game. I hope there will be no more wars in the world, and that Taiwan can live in peace, without war.

As illustrated by the commentary above, the issue of Taiwan's security and the tensions caused by its situation with China are being raised alongside the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Players are critical of the government of the People's Republic of China and the Chinese regime. Figures of Marx and Lenin are commented on ironically as the “ancestors” of the Chinese. Additionally, the term 小粉紅 *xiǎo fěnhóng* (literally “little pink” or “little red fan”), which Taiwanese use to describe young cyber-nationalists, is invoked in the context of criticism of the Chinese. Users reproach them for their lack of access to free media and suggest that they should return to watching propaganda content on Chinese state television, rather than engaging in meaningful discourse. These strong negative emotions toward the Chinese are expressed through sarcasm directed at Chinese nationalists, as well as through insensitive and direct comments; some users even wish death upon the chairman and the Chinese Communist Party. This condemnation is evident in reviews opposing both China and Russia.

普丁会死 · chinazi也会死 · 世界最终会回到它本来应该是的样子 ·

*Pǔdīng huì sǐ, chinazi yě huì sǐ, shìjiè zuìzhōng huì huídào tā běnlái yīnggāi shì de yàngzi.*

Putin will die, the Chinazis [a pejorative term combining the words “China” and “Nazi”] will also die, and the world will eventually return to the way it should have been from the beginning.

The content of the comments often pays tribute to Ukrainian soldiers, including those defending the Hostomel Airport and encircled Kyiv, the 93rd Brigade, and the AZOV fighters on the frontline in Bakhmut, as well as the victims of the Bucha massacre. The comments include slogans such as “free

Ukraine,” “long live Zelensky,” and “glory to Ukraine,” as well as more uncensored slogans such as “fuck Russia” and 黃俄傻 *huáng'é shǎ*, literally “yellow Russian fucker,” a vulgar term for a Chinese citizen supporting Russia. Additionally, some comments describe the situation with statements like “Russia is murdering Ukrainian civilians.”

One commentary recalls the figure of Ceng Sheng-Guang, the first Taiwanese volunteer to join the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine and die in combat against Russia, thus becoming the first East Asian soldier killed in that war. Another review mentions the Taiwanese government’s assistance in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Similar to the comments written in simplified characters, users cite quotes from writers, both Chinese and foreign, including George Orwell and Guo Lanying, regarding the betrayals or atrocities of armed conflict. They also make references to world history and the current geopolitical situation, mentioning the USSR’s help in repelling the Japanese invasion while stressing that present-day support should be directed toward Ukraine, the victim of a fascist attack.

Users praise the developers for basing the story on true events, considering it the most important aspect from a game design perspective. However, on technical issues, criticism is directed at the low playability, monotonous music, and underdeveloped sound design. Players confess that because of the limitations in playability, *Ukraine War Stories* can hardly be classified as a game.

說不上是遊戲·不過很有那個氛圍·讓你設身處地感受到那種平民陷入戰爭的無奈與可憐·也讓你感受到戰爭的殘酷和可怕

*Shuō bu shàng shì yóuxì, búguò hěn yǒu nàgè fēnwéi, ràng nǐ shèshēn chǔdì gǎnshòu dào nà zhǒng píngmín xiànrù zhànzhēng de wú'nài yǔ kělián, yě ràng nǐ gǎnshòu dào zhànzhēng de cánkù hé kěpà.*

You can’t call it a game, but it has the right atmosphere and lets you feel the helplessness and misery of civilians caught up in the war, as well as the brutality and fear that come with it.

Users making comments using traditional writing often include the Ukrainian slogan Слава Україні *Slava Ukraini!* “Glory to Ukraine” in their reviews. Another recurring slogan is 天佑烏克蘭 *tiān yòu Wūkèlán* “may

God protect Ukraine,” while a common hashtag is #RussiansATerroristState, frequently used globally in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

## 6. Discussion

Serious games based on true war stories enable the gaming community to better understand the course and consequences of war. They provoke reflection on complex social, political, and moral issues, which are subjected to extreme tests under conditions of war. The ability to comment on such games on publicly accessible platforms like Steam allows gamers from diverse backgrounds to engage in discussions, share perspectives, and debate complex issues, thereby providing developers with valuable feedback on their projects. Additionally, these platforms amplify voices marginalized in traditional media and include the perspectives of those directly or indirectly affected by the war, facilitating a multidimensional analysis of the geopolitical and social discourse among gamers.

The analysis of Chinese-language comments on the game *Ukraine War Stories* on the Steam platform leads to the conclusion that the game itself is of secondary concern. Users primarily focus on the political context of the real conflict, as the review section becomes a platform for expressing personal attitudes toward the involved parties, as well as a broader discussion on wars and their consequences. The platform allows comments to be made anonymously, which enables users to express their beliefs relatively freely, even those that diverge from government policies. In authoritarian states, such expressions, if made openly, could be subject to punishment. Unfortunately, this is also a breeding ground for increasing conflicts and divisions among players from different backgrounds.

Chinese-speaking users of Steam predominantly show empathy and compassion for innocent victims of war. Their deep understanding of the realities of war enables them to perceive the perspective of civilians and identify with them. This empathy can lead to a greater commitment to humanitarian and peace-related issues.

The lexeme 平民 *píngmín* can be seen as a symbol of the shared gaming experience within the Chinese-speaking community, which, regardless of individuals' country of origin, is united in compassion for the innocent victims of the conflict. These comments indicate the importance of considering the real consequences of war for ordinary people. They testify to the significant impact of the game in evoking emotions among players.

However, because of the geopolitical diversity of Chinese-speaking players, particularly between those from China and Taiwan, the analysis revealed two distinct attitudes, both probably guided by the same goal of defending respective national interests. The first is the quasi-neutral and balanced attitude of the Chinese, which aligns with the official stance of the People's Republic of China. Chinese players often refrain from taking sides directly (or criticize both of them) and express skepticism regarding the veracity of events as presented by non-Chinese media. The skepticism may stem from censorship and a tradition of restricting access to alternative sources of information by strong Chinese propaganda and a state narrative that often undermines the credibility of foreign media. In contrast, the second attitude is an emotional one from Taiwanese players, who unequivocally oppose the invasion of Ukraine and the use of weapons. Taiwanese players view the Ukrainian resistance as a reflection of their struggle for independence in the face of potential aggression by the People's Republic of China. The data provide evidence of differences in the interpretation of historical narratives and their impact on contemporary attitudes, as well as differences in the policies promoted in China and Taiwan. This offers insight into the dynamics of conflict and differing attitudes toward war.

The game generates significant controversy, especially in the context of the perception of games as a medium used to spread propaganda and the subjectivity of its narrative. The perception of the game and its content is certainly influenced by local discourse, which shapes the content of reviews even before players engage with the game. Each player approaches *Ukraine War Stories* with a specific cultural background and his/her own beliefs, which heavily influence their interpretation of the content presented in the game. Comments from the Chinese-speaking community, however, not only reflect personal beliefs but also broader social narratives. For instance, an anti-Western narrative is evident in comments written in simplified Chinese,

while a discourse centered on the struggle for sovereignty is prominent in comments written in traditional Chinese.

The findings demonstrate the potential of using the Steam platform and gamer comments as a tool for collecting data on attitudes, behavior, emotions, and language, which can serve as a valuable resource for analyzing the social and psychological aspects of armed conflict. The content of the comments reveals the controversial nature of the topic and the complexity of social divisions related to political issues. In sensitive topics such as war, the gaming community and Internet users, in general, seem to be the most outspoken and candid, partly because of the relative anonymity afforded by digital interactions and the use of avatars. Evidence of this fact can be observed in some of the more bold comments from Chinese users, whose non-mainstream voice is often silenced on a daily basis. Consequently, one can conclude that the comments are genuine and the analyzed data reflects authentic emotions and opinions, allowing one to gain insight into the true sentiments of language users. This also confirms that qualitative digital discourse analysis in the context of comments on game distribution and sales platforms can be a meaningful approach, providing valuable insights into the attitudes and dynamics of a specific social group.

The research presented here holds value not only in a historical or psycho-social context but also from the perspective of linguistic studies. Narrative is constructed through language, and the values and attitudes toward war are encoded in the words used by players. Semantic analysis thus becomes a valuable source of information about players' reactions and emotions, as well as the intensity and diversity of those reactions and emotions. Identifying keywords and repetitive phrases, decoding slang and vulgarities, and recognizing irony and sarcasm, among other forms of expressions, help understand how individuals cope with difficult topics. Pragmatic differences within the same language reveal how local contexts influence narratives, particularly evident in the study of Chinese, the official language in two geopolitically and socially divergent countries.

There may be possible limitations in this study. The author of this study is the sole interpreter of the data, and as such, the interpretation may be influenced by personal biases, cultural understanding, and subjective perspectives. Despite rigorous efforts and consultations with native Chinese

speakers, there may have been selective attention to certain themes and lexemes, potentially shaped by the author's linguistic and cultural background. This highlights the possible need for triangulation, in which multiple researchers could independently analyze the same dataset and compare their perspectives. Additionally, the reliance on the Steam platform as the primary source of data represents another limitation. The platform caters to a specific gamer culture that may not be representative of broader national populations. Thus, it should be considered that the conclusions drawn pertain only to the community gathered around the platform. Furthermore, because of the anonymity of the comments, there is a lack of detailed information regarding the demographic profile of the participants, such as their age, personal background, and education levels. The nationality of the commenters can only be inferred based on the writing system used in their comments.

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## **Preserving Wartime Video Games: Criteria and Methods in the Context of the War in Ukraine<sup>1</sup>**

**[Abstract]:** The ongoing war in Ukraine has influenced various aspects of cultural production, including video games. Unlike traditional forms of historical documentation, video games provide interactive experiences that capture emotions, testimonies, and unique perspectives on war. This paper explores the significance of preserving video games developed during the war in Ukraine and proposes a methodology for their preservation processes. It outlines criteria for selection, methods of digital storage, and potential institutions responsible for their preservation, such as archives, libraries, and museums. The study also discusses technical and legal challenges, including issues related to DRM (Digital Rights Management), digital decay, and copyright laws. In addition, it examines the public reception of these games, highlighting both positive feedback and controversies surrounding their ethical matter. By treating war-related video games as valuable historical testimonies, this research argues for their systematic preservation to ensure accessibility for future research and the public. The findings emphasize the role of video games as a contemporary form of war documentation and the necessity of dedicated institutional efforts to secure them.

**[Keywords]:** cultural heritage, digital archiving, video game preservation, Russia-Ukraine war, war testimonies

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<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges the use of OpenAI's ChatGPT in the linguistic editing of this article. The tool was used to enhance grammar and academic register, without changing the substance of the arguments.

## 1. Introduction

The ongoing war in Ukraine has profoundly affected both soldiers and civilians. For many, direct participation in or witnessing the consequences of the conflict has been a traumatic experience. In response, numerous individuals – both amateurs and professionals – have begun creating various forms of cultural expression, including not only board and table-top games but also video games. These games, often produced under unstable and dangerous conditions, represent an emerging form of digital testimony.

Preserving such materials poses significant challenges. Recent studies have shown that a vast majority of video games – especially those distributed digitally – are at risk of disappearing over time (Winslow 2023). Given the unique circumstances of their creation, war-related video games developed during the Russian invasion of Ukraine require special attention, including tailored selection criteria and archival methods.

This article proposes a structured approach to preserving these digital testimonies. Its aim is not to theorize about war-related games as a general cultural phenomenon, but to present a practical framework for their selection, classification, storage, description, and accessibility (Palmąka and Piąt 2023, 74–85). The following research questions underlie my analysis:

- > What criteria should be applied for the preservation of the games created during the conflict in Ukraine?
- > Which institutions are best suited to store such testimonies?
- > What are the key technical and legal challenges in preserving war-related games?
- > What method of description should be used for these testimonies?
- > How can these games be more accessible to potential future researchers and users?

The proposed methodology draws primarily from Polish archival and records management science. Although originally designed for the Polish State Archives, this approach can be adapted to other institutions dealing with digital heritage. The analysis is supported by case studies of selected games and examples of current preservation practices, legal contexts, and institutional frameworks.

## 2. Literature review

The question of how to preserve video games emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This discussion was primarily driven by the fragility and instability of existing data carriers, the disappearance of older games from public access, and the growing recognition of video games as both a public good and a form of cultural heritage. Institutions such as the Library of Congress in the United States began efforts to collect, catalog, preserve, and study commercially released games. These initiatives laid the foundation for the first theoretical frameworks and practical approaches to video game preservation, which later developed into an academic field of study (Waters and Garrett 1996; Winget and Murray 2008, 1).

Currently, there are two dominant approaches to video game preservation in the literature. The first focuses on institutional frameworks, aiming to theorize or describe institutions dedicated to the archiving of video games. These studies primarily address the preservation of commercially released games (Winget and Murray 2008; Wood and Carter 2018), often overlooking independent developers who create games under extraordinary circumstances, such as armed conflict. A second group of publications takes a more technical and legal perspective, examining barriers to preserving not only the games themselves but also related materials (Harkai 2022), as well as the communities involved in game archiving (Dym et al. 2023). While these studies make important contributions to the field, they do not offer a methodological framework specifically for war-related video games or address their role as digital testimonies.

## 3. Characteristics of war-related games

During the ongoing war in Ukraine, several noteworthy video games have been released. One example of a war-related game connected to the conflict is *Putinist Slayer* (Bunker 22 2022). In this game, the player shoots at aliens whose faces are replaced with those of Russian politicians. It can be described as a meme-like expression or an emotional reaction of its creator

(Zinovieva 2023, 216–217). Another title is *What’s up in a Kharkiv Bomb Shelter?* (Dahuanna 2022), which was developed as a distraction from the horror of the bombardment of Kharkiv in 2022 by one of the survivors and later released in Lviv. This game serves as a valuable source for studying the experiences of civilians during the bombing of the city.

A third example is the well-known collection of visual novels titled *Ukraine War Stories*, which presents testimonies of civilians from Gostomel, Bucha, and Mariupol. The gameplay primarily involves selecting dialogue options to advance the narrative (Starni Games 2022). Another title is *Death from Above*, a drone simulator in which the player operates a drone to destroy enemy vehicles, clear mines, and carry out tactical missions. An interesting feature is the ability to explore a wide area, classifying the game as a sandbox (Rockodile 2024). Additionally, there is a multiplayer first-person shooter (FPS) titled *Glory to the Heroes*, which is expected to be released in Early Access in 2025 on Steam. The game emphasizes tactical combat and allows players to choose from a variety of roles (Deaf Tone Games 2025). These examples represent a new form of documenting wartime memories and emotions through interactive media.

Most of the games mentioned above have been recognized by the gaming community and press for their unique narratives and perspectives on the war. For instance, the website for *What’s up in a Kharkiv Bomb Shelter?* features numerous comments from players, including messages encouraging Ukrainians to resist Russian aggression and thanking the developer for sharing their personal experience (Dahuanna 2022). *The Guardian* also published an article highlighting games that share perspectives on the war in Ukraine. The author briefly describes several titles and emphasizes their testimonial value (Evans-Thirlwell 2022).

In contrast, some titles have sparked public debate. An article discussing *Death from Above* raises ethical concerns about profiting from war-related content (Goncharenko 2023). Opinions on the game have been divided. While some players criticize it as propaganda, others appreciate its gameplay and argue that it was unfairly targeted by Russian review bombing (GOG.com 2025b). On Steam, *Death from Above* holds a “Very Positive” rating (91%) (Rockodile 2024), whereas its Metacritic user score, based on five reviews, is notably lower at 6.8/10, reflecting its controversial reception

(Metacritic.com 2025). Another game, *Ukraine War Stories*, has a “Very Positive” rating (87%) on Steam, with over one thousand player reviews. Some users accuse the developers of spreading Ukrainian propaganda, but the majority praise the game for its emotional storytelling and its encouragement of resistance to Russian aggression (Starni Games 2022). These examples demonstrate that games related to the war in Ukraine are part of a broader public discourse. They serve not only as entertainment but also as testimonies of the conflict.

#### **4. Criteria for preservation of the games**

Video games constitute a vital part of our contemporary cultural heritage. Unlike traditional media such as books or films, video games are inherently interactive, enabling users to actively engage with the presented narrative. This interactivity is particularly significant in the context of war-related games, as it allows players to simulate, witness, or emotionally process the everyday experiences of civilians and soldiers during conflict.

As Espen Aarseth (1997) argues, video games are ergodic texts, that is, narratives that require nontrivial effort from the player to progress. This distinguishes them fundamentally from passive media, where reception is largely linear and observational. In the context of war-related games, interactivity translates into a simulated experience of agency, choice, and consequence, which is particularly relevant when portraying trauma and survival.

For archivists and other professionals interested in preserving war-related video games, the preservation process cannot be limited to the software or source code alone. The entire experience consists of narrative content, user interface, decision-making structures, platform limitations, and emotional design. These elements, taken together, contribute to the full testimonial value of a game and require a specialized archival approach.

One of the most widely discussed examples of a game addressing civilian experiences in wartime is *This War of Mine* (Zieliński 2014). Although the game provides a strong emotional narrative, it was developed in a peaceful and stable environment. In contrast, the situation is very different for games

created under direct war conditions, such as during active bombardment or displacement. Another issue is the difficulty of discovering and documenting such titles, especially because of the sheer volume of new releases. In 2024 alone, over 15,000 games were published on the Steam platform, a significant increase compared to previous years (Statista 2026). Statistically, only a small fraction of these games address the war in Ukraine, underscoring the need to preserve them systematically.

In order to identify which games should be preserved, it is necessary to define clear criteria for their selection. The following section proposes a classification system based on narrative content, authorship, and production context.

**[Table 1]:** General criteria for the archival selection and specific criteria for the selection of the video games discussed

General criterion	Specific criterion
importance of the creator	creation of the game during the invasion
historical significance of the creator	the impact of the narrative presented
information value	narrative of personal experiences during the invasion
uniqueness of information	non-use
uniqueness of the texts	non-use
typicality	popularity of the game genre
uniqueness	innovation in mechanics and presentation of war experience
age	preservation of all games created before 2025
degree of preservation	number and quality of surviving copies, rarity

**[Source]:** own elaboration based on: (Robótka et al. 1989, 39–42), (Palmąka and Piłat 2023, 76).

The first general criterion focuses on the conditions under which a specific video game was created. Priority should be given to preserving games developed during the invasion itself. These titles are important because they

serve as immediate emotional records created by direct witnesses to the war. Games developed outside Ukraine can be preserved later.

The second general criterion concerns the narrative dimension of the testimony. Some war narratives are more historically significant than others and are likely to become primary sources for future scholarly research.

The third criterion relates to individual emotional experiences. Different people perceive and remember events in different ways; thus, each personal experience carries unique informational value.

The typicality criterion highlights the need to preserve representative examples of common game genres. These can serve as references for research and study.

The uniqueness criterion emphasizes the importance of preserving games that are innovative in their mechanics or in how they present war experiences. These titles may serve as case studies for future research.

The age criterion addresses the practical need to limit the scope of preservation. It is not feasible to preserve every game released. For the purposes of this project, the cut-off point is set at the end of 2025. This decision is justified by two factors: first, three years will have passed since the full-scale invasion began, and eleven years since the start of the recent Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Studies indicate that ten years is often enough for video games to become effectively lost (Winget and Murray 2008, 1). Second, a potential ceasefire or resolution to the conflict may shift the production context, which means that future games will likely be developed under less extreme conditions.

The final criterion suggests prioritizing rare games and securing the best-quality copies of each preserved title and related materials.

It should be acknowledged that a similar methodological approach was employed by Yaroslau Kot in the *Ukrainian Games of War* database (Kot 2026). The author classifies entries not only according to the technical form of the ludic work (game, DLC, mod), but also according to narrative categories, such as *Games of Support*, *Ukrainian Cultural Renaissance Games*, and *Patriotic Literacy and Educational Games*. Furthermore, the database includes additional metadata, such as information on availability and game genre. The overall structure and level of detail demonstrate a high degree of

methodological rigor, indicating that the database was developed in a highly professional manner and merits scholarly recognition.

## **5. Potential institutions and practices**

Once the selection criteria have been established, it is equally important to consider the types of institutions capable of preserving these materials. When organizing such content, it must be acknowledged that many games may become unplayable over time because of software and hardware obsolescence. Therefore, the institutions responsible for preservation must be able to provide appropriate long-term storage conditions.

In Poland, several organizations meet these requirements. One of the most prominent is the National Digital Archive in Warsaw, which primarily preserves photographic and audiovisual documentation. However, its charter explicitly states that it may also store digital materials with an “established and defined structure” (BIP 2022, par. 6, sec. 2). Other state archives may also preserve video games through donation agreements signed between the archive and the creator or owner of the game (art. 15, sec. 4, Act of 14 July 1983, on National Archival Resources and Archives, Journal of Law No. 38, item 173). Although the act does not explicitly mention video games, it refers more broadly to materials related to science and technology as well as culture and art, which allows video games to be interpreted as falling within this scope.

Support for this approach also comes from examples outside Poland. One of the leading institutions in this field is the Computer and Video Game Archive at the University of Michigan, established in 2008. According to a 2018 study, the archive holds over 8,000 games for various platforms. Users can browse the catalog and play selected titles on-site, with access typically granted for one hour per session, extendable depending on demand (Wood and Carter 2018, 188–193; University of Michigan Library 2025).

Libraries are another type of institution well-suited to preserving this kind of testimony. University libraries, in particular, are designed to support academic research. For instance, the University of Gdańsk Library Regulations

state: “The library’s tasks include preserving cultural heritage, conservation, study, and storage” (BIP 2024, par. 3, sec. 3; my translation). A specific subcategory of such institutions, known as media libraries, specializes in the preservation of music, film, and video games. In my opinion, this category is particularly appropriate for storing materials related to war-related games (Skoczyński and Grysa 1997, 59–60).

One prominent example of this type is the Library of Congress in the United States. As of 2019, it held nearly 5,000 video games, along with game guides, gameplay footage, advertising materials, industry periodicals, and some source code collections (Library of Congress 2019). Other libraries, including municipal and private institutions, may also serve this function if they have sufficient funding and qualified staff.

Museums represent another institutional model. Games can be treated as cultural artefacts worthy of preservation. Unfortunately, no public museum in Poland has yet expressed interest in preserving war-related video games. Private museums of computing and gaming in Poland tend to focus on commercial releases and retro hardware rather than on contemporary testimonies of conflict (Kraków Arcade Museum 2025; Wrocławskie Muzeum Gry i Komputery Minionej Ery 2025; Warszawskie Muzeum Komputerów i Gier 2025). Preserving such documentation is often not financially possible for them.

However, several international museums are actively engaged in video game preservation. The National Videogame Museum in Sheffield, United Kingdom, founded in 2008 and operated by the British Games Institute, preserves not only games but also gaming platforms, documentation, advertisements, and interviews with developers (National Videogame Museum 2025). Another example is The Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York, founded in 1969. Its collection includes over 40,000 video game-related items such as consoles and manuals. The museum ensures long-term preservation through dedicated storage facilities and also operates the World Video Game Hall of Fame which has inducted 45 games since 2014 (The Strong National Museum of Play 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). While these institutions primarily preserve commercial products, they offer valuable models of good preservation practices.

Additionally, the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History has launched an initiative focused on collecting, preserving, and analyzing testimonies related to the war in Ukraine. It is conceivable that video games could also be incorporated into this preservation effort (Venken 2025).

There are also non-profit private initiatives devoted to video game preservation. One of the most notable is the Video Game History Foundation, founded by Frank Cifaldi. This organization works to preserve all forms of video game history, including magazines, art books, history publications, source codes, and development documentation. It also conducts educational activities such as blogs, podcasts, and museum exhibitions (Video Games History Foundation 2025).

Another non-profit effort is the Software Preservation Society, which focuses on games released for the Commodore 64, Atari ST, and Apple II. The organization maintains a list of archived games and those that are sought; however, no formal reports have been published since May 2010 (Software Preservation Society 2010).

These examples provide potential models and inspiration for organizing repositories for games related to the war in Ukraine.

## **6. Technical and legal challenges**

All of these institutions and initiatives face significant legal and technical challenges, most notably related to copyright. The majority of games are protected under copyright law, which prohibits copying and storing them without the explicit permission of the creator. As a result, games cannot be preserved by public institutions unless appropriate legal conditions are established. Since many creators do not make their games available free of charge, dedicated legislation may be required to enable their preservation (Harkai 2022; Dym et al. 2023). To avoid legal conflicts, institutions should establish formal agreements with the creators or rights holders.

Another common issue involves Digital Rights Management (DRM), a form of software protection that prevents unauthorized copying. DRM systems

often require a constant internet connection, which complicates the preservation process (Karthik et al. 2020, 1–2). Some preservation initiatives have addressed this issue by bypassing or removing DRM. For example, the GOG<sup>2</sup> digital distribution platform offers games without DRM (GOG.com 2022). In 2024, GOG also launched the “GOG Preservation Program,” which ensures that selected games are regularly updated and patched to remain compatible with new operating systems (GOG.com 2025a).

Most of the war-related games discussed in this article were released via digital distribution platforms such as Steam or itch.io. This means that they lack physical copies, which simplifies storage and access but creates other vulnerabilities. To access these games, users typically require a PC with an internet connection and access to the relevant distribution platform. Institutions may consider maintaining their own servers to store purchased or donated games. This approach offers protection against removal from commercial platforms, which can occur for reasons such as licence expiration, lack of updates, or censorship. Furthermore, developers may alter game content post-release, highlighting the risk of relying solely on digital distribution (Švelch 2019, 5–13).

One important issue is digital decay, the process by which digital content becomes inaccessible or unrecoverable over time. Storing games on institutional servers or media library systems can help mitigate this risk. For titles released on physical media, proper environmental storage is essential. This includes secure storage spaces, acid-free boxes and sleeves, and climate control (15–24°C and 20–50% humidity) (NeoOnline Store 2026). Data from physical carriers can later be transferred to institutional servers for long-term access.

Preserving mobile games presents additional challenges. Accessing and studying these titles requires compatible mobile devices or emulators. For Android games, the emulator BlueStacks is recommended (Now.gg 2025), while iOS games can be emulated using the Remoted iOS Simulator in Microsoft Visual Studio (Microsoft Corporation 2024). Installing mobile games

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<sup>2</sup> Good Old Games (GOG) is a digital distribution platform founded in 2009 by the Polish video game company CD Projekt SA. It focuses primarily on selling and preserving classic and obsolete video games, although it also offers contemporary titles (No-clip 2018).

requires software package files: “.apk” (Android Package Kit) for Android and “.ipa” (iOS App Store Package) for iOS (Android Developers 2019; Raz 2017). Games may be removed from platforms like Google Play or the App Store, necessitating extraction from existing devices where the games reside as executable files or packages. One of the most effective ways to ensure access to these titles is by uploading them to the Internet Archive, making them publicly available from anywhere in the world (Internet Archive 2004).

## 7. Archival description and standard

Studying video games as testimonies of the war in Ukraine should be conducted through a structured process. The first stage involves preliminary research, which includes identifying the conditions under which a specific game was created. This may involve collecting supporting documentation and conducting interviews to determine the game’s origin and, if unknown, to identify the creator.

Once the origin is established, the next step is selecting an appropriate storage institution. The archival arrangement of the materials must then be determined. Games may be ordered alphabetically by the creator’s name or grouped by genre. After organizing the materials, each game should be assigned a unique identification number using a *numerus currens* system. The final step is the creation of detailed metadata and a full description in digital form (Palmąka and Piąt 2023, 79–84).

The metadata structure can be based on the international standard ISAD(G), which defines several descriptive areas:

- > identity statement area;
- > context area;
- > content and structure area;
- > formal and technical description area;
- > conditions of access and use area;
- > allied materials area;
- > notes area;
- > description control area.

Each area contains specific elements. For example, the identity statement area includes:

- > name of the institution;
- > institution reference code;
- > file reference number;
- > title;
- > date(s);
- > extent and medium of the unit of description (quantity, bulk, or size).

The context area should contain:

- > name of the creator(s);
- > biographical history;
- > game genre;
- > date of release;
- > name of the developer and the publisher;
- > immediate source of acquisition or transfer.

The formal and technical description area includes:

- > type of data carrier;
- > save format – file compression type;
- > data carrier capacity;
- > name of the game engine;
- > minimal system requirements;
- > recommended system requirements;
- > language(s) of the game;
- > has the game been moved to another carrier? (all information about the transfer should be given, original and secondary carriers);
- > technical condition.

The conditions of access and use area consist of:

- > conditions governing access;
- > conditions governing reproduction;
- > copyright information;
- > information about age rating and content rating (e.g., PEGI).

The allied materials area should list the name of the person preparing the record, the date of the record's creation, and details about related materials.

The notes and description control areas may include additional contextual

notes and references to auxiliary bibliographies (Palmąka and Piąt 2023, 82–84; International Council on Archives 2000, 13–35).

## 8. Conclusions

Video games are not only a significant part of our cultural heritage because of their interactive nature, they also serve as valuable testimonies of contemporary armed conflicts. The proposed criteria and adapted archival methods, including the use of ISAD(G), offer a practical framework for preserving games related to the war in Ukraine. To ensure their long-term survival, suitable institutions such as archives, libraries, or museums must invest in necessary infrastructure: servers for storing digital files, computers for playback, and physical space for storing traditional data carriers. Internet access is also recommended to enable comparison with other digital resources related to the war.

Treating these games with scholarly attention and respect and ensuring their future accessibility are essential not only for researchers but also for preserving the memory of individuals who lived through the conflict. Their digital testimonies deserve a place in the collective historical record.

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# **Ukrainian Games of War: Born in the Flames of Invasion**

**[Abstract]:** While the geopolitical and human consequences of the war dominate international discourse, a less-examined but arguably equally significant cultural phenomenon has emerged as never before: the development of video games as a reaction to and means of war. As the war in Ukraine has unfolded, Ukrainian game developers, along with international studios, have been creating video games that reflect, respond to, and preserve the history of the invasion. This article, which focuses on Ukrainian-developed games from 2022 to 2025 that address the ongoing war in Ukraine, represents the first published output of a multi-year research initiative involving the analysis of over two hundred titles. It presents preliminary insights, outlines future research directions, and includes a catalogue of 200+ video games created in response to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022.

**[Keywords]:** games of war, game studies, Ukrainian games, Ukrainian war, war in Ukraine, historical games

## **1. Introduction**

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has transformed not only geopolitical realities but also the cultural and creative landscape of Eastern Europe. While the war's political, military, and humanitarian dimensions have dominated global attention, a parallel process of cultural resistance has been unfolding within the digital sphere (see e.g., Pamment et al. 2023). Among its most dynamic and revealing manifestations is the rapid

emergence of video games created in direct response to Russian aggression. These games, developed by Ukrainian creators both within the country and across the diaspora, represent an unprecedented convergence of art, activism, heritage preservation, and digital resilience (Games Gathering 2025).

Historically, video games have served as tools for both entertainment and profit, as part of the global industry. Yet the Ukrainian case presents a unique chapter in the history of interactive media: games are being developed during an ongoing war, amid displacement, destruction, and existential uncertainty. These works not only document and interpret real events but also contribute to the broader struggle for cultural survival and international awareness. They provide players with emotionally charged, interactive representations of conflict, functioning as digital archives of national experience, trauma, and endurance.

This article presents findings from the first stage of the Games of War project, an ongoing research initiative and dataset that catalogues and analyses more than 200 games developed by Ukrainians since 2022 in response to Russia's invasion. The project's central aims are (1) to create a comprehensive catalogue of Ukrainian-developed games addressing the Russian invasion; (2) to map diverse functions these games perform during crisis, ranging from therapeutic and psychological support to political resistance and cultural advocacy. By examining these games as cultural artefacts and instruments of resilience, the project seeks to expand scholarly understanding of how video games as interactive media operate under extreme historical circumstances.

Preliminary findings suggest that these "Games of War" constitute a distinctive subgenre within global war-provoked game production. Unlike conventional war games, which often strive for ambiguous moral symmetry or detached realism, Ukrainian wartime games tend to present a clear ethical stance: the defense of homeland and humanity against aggression and oppression. Their narratives foreground civilian suffering, solidarity, and heroism, while their mechanics invite players to participate in acts of care, survival, rebuilding, or symbolic resistance and justice. In doing so, they challenge dominant paradigms of war representation in digital culture, which tend to frame conflicts as morally ambiguous "gray" zones with all sides equally

right/wrong (McKee and Porter 2009) and open new spaces for collective memory-making (Funkenstein 1989; Klein 2000).

The article situates the Games of War project within broader interdisciplinary debates, introduces the methodology of data collection, categorisation, and outlines key trends within the dataset.

## **2. Research background and rationale**

Video games have long been recognized as a medium capable of engaging with complex historical, social, and ethical issues. Titles such as *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014) and *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft Montpellier 2014) have explored the human cost of conflict, often placing players as witnesses or participants in morally ambiguous wartime roles *Hell Let Loose* (Creative Assembly / Team17. 2019) and *Hearts of Iron IV* (Paradox Interactive 2016). However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated a distinctly new wave of game production, one rooted in immediate historical experience, collective trauma, and urgent resistance. Unlike earlier war-themed titles that typically drew upon distant, often fictionalized conflicts, Ukrainian wartime games are being created under conditions of ongoing violence, displacement, and national struggle with distinct ethical polarization. This makes them both primary sources and cultural responses – artifacts of lived history.

The relationship between war, media, and memory has been widely discussed in the humanities (Erl 2017), yet video games have only recently entered this conversation as instruments of cultural documentation (Bontchev 2015). Scholars such as Aarseth (2019), Bogost (2007), and Chapman (2016) have emphasized the potential of games to shape historical consciousness through procedural and interactive representation. Building upon these theoretical insights, this research extends the discussion into the context of real-time war, examining how Ukrainian developers mobilize game design as a vehicle for testimony and emotional resilience. The immediacy of their production blurs the lines between creation, survival, and activism.

Prior to 2022, the Ukrainian gaming scene was already vibrant, though largely integrated into global entertainment markets (EGDF 2023). Russia's invasion radically transformed its functions and motivations. Many developers transitioned from commercial production to creating games with explicitly civic, psychological, or patriotic objectives (Twigames Inc. 2026; Marevo Collective 2025). These games often prioritize impact over profit, becoming tools of communication and resistance: raising funds for the war effort, spreading awareness, or countering propaganda through storytelling and satire.

### **3. Project “Games of War”'s objectives**

The primary aim of this research is to examine how video games created during Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine (2022–present) function as tools of cultural expression, memory-making, and political resistance. Previous publications have only referenced several such games, overlooking the broader scope of production and missing the opportunity to draw meaningful conclusions (Zinovieva 2023; Korshunov 2022; Evans-Thirlwell 2022). By systematically researching and cataloguing Ukrainian-developed games and related community projects, this study seeks to build a reliable, comprehensive, and current resource that supports interdisciplinary inquiry across game studies, cultural memory, digital heritage, and media studies.

The rationale for this research is threefold. First, there is an urgent need to document and preserve these games before they disappear – many of them are small-scale, browser-based, or created under precarious conditions, making their survival uncertain (for example, *For the Victory of Ukraine! War* [Dream Team UA 2022]). Second, a systematic analysis of their themes, aesthetics, and functions will provide new insights into how societies use interactive media and games during wartime, their functions magnified by conditions of ongoing crisis. Finally, it aims to investigate the political and communicative dimensions of wartime game development, including its role in propaganda and countering propaganda, the promotion

of Ukrainian language and culture, and global engagement through interactive storytelling.

In addition to its core goals, the *Games of War* project pursues several auxiliary objectives. These include: (1) classifying war-related games by purpose, genre, and social function (for example, differentiating between Games of War UA, Games of Support, Cultural Renaissance Games, and Patriotic Literacy Games, etc.); (2) establishing a typology of wartime game production; to provide an open-access dataset of the catalogued games; and (3) providing an open-access dataset that enables international researchers to conduct comparative, longitudinal, and cross-cultural research on digital media, war, and cultural resilience.

Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of cultural resilience in the face of war, positioning Ukraine's digital creativity as a vital component of global cultural heritage. Through these objectives, the project seeks not only to advance scholarly insight into wartime interactive media but also to preserve a vital corpus of digital heritage created under conditions of existential threat.

## **4. Methodology of cataloguing and dataset description**

This project employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to systematically document, analyze, and interpret video games developed by Ukrainian creators during the ongoing Russian invasion. The methodology integrates digital ethnography, content analysis, and data cataloguing to capture both the breadth and depth of wartime game production. The research follows the principles of transparency, reproducibility, and ethical sensitivity, particularly when handling culturally and politically significant materials.

### **4.1. Exclusion and inclusion criteria**

Data collection is continuous, allowing for updates as new games emerge. The core dataset includes Ukrainian-developed video games created or released after 24 February 2022 that directly or symbolically address the

Russian invasion and/or its consequences. Game sources are diverse and decentralized. They include: major digital distribution platforms such as Steam (creat. 2003; Valve Corporation 2026), itch.io (creat. 2013; Leaf Corcoran 2026) the App Store (creat. 2008; Apple Inc. 2026), Google Play (creat. 2008; Google LLC 2026), and Game Jolt (creat. 2003; Game Jolt Inc. 2026); official developer websites and social media accounts; Ukrainian media outlets, technology and gaming portals, Ukrainian YouTube game bloggers and influencers; industry events with Ukrainian game showcases such as Games Gathering and GameOn; individual interviews and direct inquiries within game development communities.

To ensure the coherence and relevance of the dataset, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied:

- > only fully autonomous game projects were considered – titles requiring another game as a foundational platform (such as mods, DLCs or expansions) were excluded;
- > games must have been developed or co-developed by Ukrainian individuals, studios, or collectives, with authorship demonstrably tied to the Ukrainian creative community;
- > the catalogue includes only games developed and/or released after 24 February 2022, marking the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion;
- > included titles must be thematically, visually, or symbolically connected to the invasion, whether by representing specific events, depicting wartime experiences, or engaging with symbolic or allegorical forms of wartime expression;
- > only publicly accessible works were included – either completed games or playable prototypes made available via digital distribution platforms or developer websites;
- > non-interactive works – such as visualizations, simulations, or artistic pieces lacking ludic or narrative structure – were excluded, as they fall outside the definitional scope of games for this study.

Collected games are undergoing a manual coding and thematic tagging process, in which each title is classified according to its primary purpose, genre, social function, and developer. This classification contributes to a broader typology established in earlier stages of the research.

## 4.2. Other categories of games

Although the dataset released with this article includes only the “Games of War UA” category, the full typology encompasses other groups: Mods and DLCs; Games of Support; Ukrainian Cultural Renaissance Games; and Patriotic Literacy and Educational Games.

The category of Mods and DLCs comprises community-created modifications and downloadable content for pre-existing commercial games that incorporate Ukrainian symbols, narratives, or missions related to the invasion. Functioning as rapid-response tools of political and cultural engagement, these works – such as the *Arma 3 – Ukrainian Armed Forces Mod* (Svaróg 2022), *Workers & Resources: Help for Ukraine Pack* (3Division 2024), or Ukraine-themed content in *Minecraft* (PippenFTS 2024), *Roblox* (Lukas 2022) and *Squad* (Squad 2025) – require distinct methodological strategies due to their derivative nature.

The analysis also identified the category of Games of Support. These titles are created by foreign developers to promote humanitarian aid, international solidarity, and fundraising for Ukraine’s defense and recovery. While modest in production scale, they often make significant emotional and social contributions through symbolic storytelling and integrated donation mechanisms. Examples include *Ukraine vs. OrcZ* (Alaric von Teplitz 2022), *Grand Theft Tractor: Ukraine* (PGM Studio 2022), and *Defiance: 2nd Russo-Ukrainian War* (Dockter and Herman 2024).

Another category, Ukrainian Cultural Renaissance Games, consists of titles designed to preserve, reinterpret, or revitalize Ukrainian cultural heritage, folklore, and language as acts of cultural resistance. These games highlight national mythology, traditional crafts, and historically suppressed cultural narratives. Examples include *De Libertate: Ukraine 1917–22* (KioviaGame 2023), *Rukavychka* (Holy Pangolin 2022), *Sich Tactics* (Gard Interactive n.d.), and *Famine Way* (STELLARIUM.gaming n.d.).

Patriotic Literacy and Educational Games merge entertainment with civic education. Teaching Ukrainian history, geography, culture, and national symbols through quizzes, decision-making scenarios, or gamified lessons, such games are often produced by schools, NGOs, or grassroots initiatives.

Representative titles include *History of Ukraine* (MindSprintGames 2023), *Вікторина: Грай Українською* [“Quiz: Play in Ukrainian”] (Anemos llc. 2023).

Together, these categories illustrate the breadth of wartime game production and the diverse functions interactive media serve during ongoing conflict. They offer rich material for future research.

### **4.3. Ethical considerations**

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the conditions under which many of these games were created, this research adheres to strict ethical standards. All materials are cited with full attribution and drawn exclusively from publicly available information, ensuring respect for creators’ intellectual property. Politically sensitive content is treated with caution: descriptions are factual and non-judgmental, and the reproduction of harmful imagery or narratives is avoided.

The study also protects the privacy of vulnerable individuals and communities by refraining from disclosing any non-public personal data about developers or players without their explicit consent. The analysis remains attentive to the broader context of war, displacement, and trauma in which these games emerged, emphasizing respectful and empathetic representation throughout.

All data handling and dissemination practices conform to the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA 2023) and the General Data Protection Regulation (European Union 2016).

### **4.4. Data description**

The *Games of War UA Dataset* currently documents over 210 titles (Kot 2025), encompassing standalone games, browser-based projects, and community-driven independent works. It serves as a structured foundation for investigating the social, cultural, and psychological functions of wartime interactive media. Each entry in the dataset includes metadata that enables multidimensional analysis of games production, design, and purpose. Core metadata fields include:

- > English title – the title of the game in English; please note that not for all games it is the main title, some projects could be found only in Ukrainian language;
- > alternate title – the title of the game in Ukrainian or alternate English title;
- > developer – individual or collective authorship;
- > availability – availability status: “available” – accessible for players; “unavailable” – not accessible on platform it was published; in development; “withdrawn [date]” – if we know when exactly the game was withdrawn by the creator; “in redevelopment” – game was published and available, then creator withdrew it and changed status to “in development;” “early access” – incomplete version of the game available for players for feedback, but the project is still in development and final release yet to be announced; “available (edited)” – the game had changes to gameplay, narrative and/or title;
- > platform – release platform: PC, mobile, browser, or other;
- > release date – the year (and month, if available) of public release;
- > genre – genre of the game, as defined by its developers or distribution platform;
- > source – link to the website or store where the game is/was available.

The dataset is openly accessible as an Excel file, published alongside the online version of this article in the first issue of the *European Historical Game Studies* journal. It is available through the academic journal platform of the University of Gdańsk (UCN 2026) and permits reuse and redistribution with proper attribution. The *Games of War UA Dataset* is conceived as a living archive, to be continuously updated to reflect the evolving landscape of Ukrainian wartime game production. Version control will be ensured through systematic timestamping, with changelogs recording all additions, modifications, and corrections.

## 5. Limitations

While this article presents a comprehensive dataset of Ukrainian wartime games, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the rapidly evolving nature of wartime game production makes it difficult to capture every title released since 24 February 2022. Some projects are shared on obscure platforms, circulate privately, or remain unreleased, thus eluding systematic documentation.

Second, archiving and digital preservation pose significant challenges. Many of these games are ephemeral, disappearing due to political, logistical, or technical factors. Browser-based and community-created works are particularly vulnerable to such loss (Palmąka 2026).

Third, despite efforts at careful verification, limited transparency within some online communities and collaborative development environments can obscure the provenance of certain titles – especially on platforms such as itch.io (Leaf Corcoran 2026).

Fourth, the ongoing conflict continually reshapes the production, content, and accessibility of games. Consequently, interpretations of their narratives, functions, and social roles remain fluid, shifting in response to military and political developments.

Finally, analysing games created under conditions of war and displacement requires a heightened degree of ethical sensitivity. Accurately contextualizing these works – while avoiding the imposition of external bias – remains an ongoing methodological challenge.

## 6. Future development

Planned expansions for 2025–2027 include the addition of several new catalogue fields: mechanics, visual style, narrative or thematic focus, and the declared or inferred purpose of each title (e.g., education, resistance, therapy, fundraising). The dataset will also be updated to incorporate newly released Ukrainian games and relevant mods addressing the continuing conflict. Enhanced thematic coding will be applied to account for emerging

subgenres and evolving social functions. Further developments may include cross-referencing the dataset with related digital heritage initiatives in Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and other countries. Where ethically and legally permissible, the dataset will also integrate player engagement indicators and reception metrics to deepen the understanding of audience interaction and cultural impact.

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