

# Expression of Social Conflicts in Historical and Fantasy Computer Games

Angelina Demilkhanova, Oksana Denisova

**Abstract.** Recently more and more people have take interest in computer games, most of them are constructed around topic of shooting war. Full immersion into the space of such events leads to the formation in gamers' perception of such virtual images that often do not coincide with real objects. Similar phenomenon is considered in the works of Marcus Shulzke, Robertson Allen, Matthew Thomas Payne, Nick Robinson etc. In our research we decided to compare the particularities of forming enemy's and hero's images at the perception of gamers who play games with an historical subject (the main part of these games is built on war events because everyday events are not interesting to a game situation) and fantasy conflict.

**Index Terms—** computer games, conflict, enemy image, narrative.

## I. CONFLICT AS SOCIAL PHENOMENON

One of the most obvious social phenomena in modern society is the conflict between nations, ethnic groups, and religious groups. According to data from the World Bank, conflicts have become more widespread within the past 40 years. Within the past 15 years, 16 of the 20 poorest countries have experienced major civil wars. Of those countries that have succeeded in ending their wars, 50% percent these countries have descended into war again within the next five years.

Even with speedy recovery after peace, the return to pre-war levels of life will take much effort by several generations [1].

According to Anthony Giddens the main problem in studying conflict is that it is really impossible to connect different levels of consideration (viewing) and explanation of a conflict. Conflicts are considered from several points:

1. Socio- philosophical level. Conflict is considered from the level of society, social systems, and social classes.
2. Sociological level. Conflict is considered from the level of large social-ethnic groups, states, nations.
3. Social- psychological level. Conflict is considered from the level of small groups and personal interaction.
4. Individual psychological level.

In our research we tried to find a connection between sociological and individual psychological levels.

Some studies [2] made a point about the importance of the influence of video games on political activity. In particular, it has indicated a changing nature of war, on net-centric war and war as simulation.

In the process of conflict escalation the following takes place: narrowing of cognitive sphere, growth of emotional tension as a response to possible harm, decrease of handling the behavior of the opposite side, opponent's resistance and impossibility to accomplish personal interests in a desired scope within a short time, growth of hierarchical rank of violated and protected interests and their polarization, the use of violence, loss of the original subject of disagreement, expansion of temporary and spatial borders of the conflict, increase of the number of participants, and displacement of adequate perception by the other enemy's image (integral perception of opponent, that integrates deformed and illusory features).

The "enemy's image" displaces the objective image during the escalation process. It becomes more dominant in the informational model as evident by such features as distrust, lay the blame on the enemy, negative expectation, identification with evil (enemy wants to destroy everything I value that is why he must be destroyed), submission of "zero sum", deindividuation (anyone who belongs to the group automatically becomes our enemy), and rejection of compassion. All computer games have a conflict in one form or another – political, military, economical. Through resolution of conflict in games gamers feel that they are making history.

Advertisements, game developers' comments, and box art regularly affirm these games' high levels of realism and their capacity to give players an authentic experience of war [3].

Claims of realism tend to be misleading for three reasons. First, video game simulations of real events invariably transform important details. Second, simulated events are embedded in narratives that help to construct those events and their political implications. Finally, events are usually shown from one side of a conflict, which players are encouraged to identify with, thereby establishing the perspectival bias [4]...

## II. COMPUTER GAME AS NARRATIVE AND SIMULACRUM

During the process of creating computer games, the imitation of the world and the simulation of reality is taking place. More and more virtual counterparts of reality take an increasingly prominent position in people's lives. Virtual communication, virtual fun, virtual war, virtual enemies and friends, virtual work and family ... In terms of postmodern philosophy this phenomenon can be called simulacrum, a product of hyper-reality. In Jean Baudrillard's terms [5], simulacrum- is an image that does not exist in reality. The virtual worlds created in the fantasy genre can uniquely be summed up in this category. Games of the historical genre "recreate" the objective reality, keep to real events, and on first impression, are not simulacrum. Nevertheless, it is

Angelina Demilkhanova, Psychology Department, Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan,

Oksana Denisova, Phylosophy Department, Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

impossible to recreate an accurate representation of objective reality within a computer game. The model will be fairly approximate, primarily due to the limitation of technical capabilities (it is impossible in computer simulation to recreate the complete quantity of troops, all terrain features, and personal characteristics of specific people, who influenced the real course of events, etc.). That is why the eventually achieved reality again is simulacrum, inasmuch as it does not accurately simulate historical events, thereby creating reality without being “real”.

The semantic centre of narrative is conflict. The role of computer games is basically constructed around a specific conflict situation. The gamer should resolve this situation to end the game, which is the game’s goal. The end of the conflict in the game is destructive, because the ultimate goal of the game is a series of quests to destroy the enemy. In this sense, there is a pre-understanding of the game from the author’s position as the creator, that at the end of the game as the “evil” will be punished in a certain manner. In other words, the enemy will be destroyed.

In the context of postmodern philosophy, the game can be considered as a narrative, in other words, a fixation in such a way as being the narrative text as processual nature of its self-realization [6]. The history here is considered in a context of story (narrative) about it, and connected with an interpretation of an event. The sense is brought subjectively through the creation of the story’s ending by its “storyteller” – a narrator. The game, as a narrative, allows the gamer, during the game, to combine (change) the position of the subject as “text reader”, who does not know the meaning of the text integrally, and the position of author-narrator as subject, who “knows the end of the story”. The game’s interactive nature creates the illusion of control over one’s own destiny and allows the gamer himself to construct the completion of the events. As author-narrator, the gamer knows that he will ultimately win.

Within the “narrative” framework, conflicts in some essential ways are considered to be as competing stories [7]. Each conflict event is, in the subjects’ consciousness, a personal story that differs from the story of the opponent. Craig Lindley defines a narrative as an experience that is structured in time [8].

In historical games, there is most often an alternative to real historical events from the originally set script. There is the possibility to “reconstruct history”. Even though the quantity of scripts is limited, it is possible to have a considerable number of variations owing to the increase in popularity of on-line games. Nevertheless, the number of scripts in historical games is much less than the games of fantasy genre. For that reason, historical games are often considered “quite boring. If there are 2 storylines – that is good... You can win, or you cannot- that is great, but that is the game. In other words- it is boring” (Quotes are given from interview with gamers).

### III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of our research was to reveal how the “enemy’s image” in computer games can influence one’s on perception of certain various “real” ethnic groups. This

theme was chosen because the game industry possesses a huge segment of the economic market. We can assume that conveying a certain image through computer games will have influence the attitude towards certain ethnic groups. The fixation on the enemy’s image is attributed to such factors as the increase of negative emotions, the expectation of destructive actions from the other party, negative stereotypes and attitudes, and the significance of the object of the conflict.

#### A. Methods

The main methods used in research were: semi-structured interviews, modified version of semantic differential, and quantitative and qualitative data processing. Semi-structured interviews questions regarding game genre preference, the possibility of repeated play, shifting to the other side in the game, moment of the most emotional involvement in the game, desire to change the march of history (for the historical genre), and the importance of winning/losing etc.

The basic scale of semantic differentials were: wise-stupid, clear-dirty, safe-dangerous, strong-weak, deep-superficial, active-passive, warm-cold, relaxed- tense, fair-un fair, truthful- dishonest, real-false, kind- cruel, significant-insignificant, influential-insignificant, compassionate-malevolent, ministrative-harmful, communicative (open)- secretive (closed), hard- soft.

#### B. Participants

The sample included hardcore (Hardcore gamer- gamers who play computer role games most part of their lifestyle. For this type of gamers competitive component of the game is really important.) gamers from Bishkek City (Kyrgyzstan) and Moscow City (Russian Federation). All participants had a higher education, with the average age being 30. Gaming experience ranged from between 15- to 20 years. All participants were male. The sample number was 10 people, due to using the qualitative methods of research. One of the particularities was also that research was conducted in a mixed cultural environment (in the territory of post-soviet countries)

It should be emphasized that when researching gamers, scientists usually pay attention to mental processes – such as attention, memory, and personal features. The peculiarities of computer games are not analysed nearly enough, which is, undoubtedly, of interest. We divided computer games into two groups: games dedicated to fictional worlds (fantasy) and games based on real historical events (historical games). This division differs from the traditional classification of computer games.

### IV. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

If we compare the situations between fantasy and historical games, then both of them are external for present-day gamers. In other words, gamers are outside the framework of these situations, and don’t partake directly in them. Consequently, we can presuppose that the perception of these situations will be similar. At the same time, gamers who are interested in history and who know the details of real historical events, can perceive the discrepancy of events recreated in the game and real events more critically. The discrepancies “will be annoying. If you game in Second

World War, First World War and then suddenly you see a nuke, it is quiet strange...". "If it is shooter- it is not needed anything from shooters in general, you can just shoot, kill..." For fantasy games all discrepancies are allowed, in as much as a world of fantasy exists hypothetically, and parallelly. Its location is not specified, and effective laws do not correspond to "earth" laws. Magical laws functions on par with real laws and characters. They are not anything out of the ordinary, but are perceived as normal. Fantasy games are perceived as "the most fun and there is much that is forgiven there. I mean you can always attribute unrealism to something. In other words, a piano in the bushes, that is normal".

Even if he doesn't win the first time, by using the character's additional lives, he will ultimately always finish the game a winner. The preference of destructive conflict resolution in games may be due to the fact that in social reality there is a ban on expressing aggressive forms of behaviour that can create internal tension. The reduction of tension takes place within the game, where the enemy, who is projected as the image of the real aggressor, is destroyed. The constructive resolution of conflicts in a game situation, is one of the possible scenarios behind the game, but due to its complexity and lower components of action, it usually does not provoke an interest among gamers. "Well, the diplomatic victory, is the most difficult, figuratively speaking, that is when you are chosen as President of Assembly of the United Nations of the world. But you should steeply conduct policy, and to be friends with all men. If you are at war with someone, then you should not oppress them intensely, so you take from them what you want and just leave. I have never reached diplomatic victory. For me it was easier to beat everyone and not talk to anybody".

The game is able to create a special world that is temporarily, from the accepted game's conditions and as far as the game's rules fulfilment, as important as the actual world [9].

Eighty percent of computer gamers prefer destructive conflict resolution, to the possibility of diplomatic solution. Diplomatic solution does not attract most gamers, because it doesn't allow them to act out their aggressive impulses.

All games have different forms of conflicts – political, military, and economic. With conflict resolution in the game, the gamer has the feeling of creating the history.

"Growing up," and making their own computer hero "gussied up", the gamer is "growing", progressing, and acquiring new knowledge and skills along with him. "When you are levelling up for maximum, you will have enough strength to take forty people with you and settle for trying to go and kill someone there. And if it comes in, it can be assumed that the game is already completed". "I really enjoy the games when you have a chance to win. So that from your ability to play and skills like in sport will depend a lot...but not only how long have you been gaming, I mean how you levelling up your computer character. In some moments victory depends on your ability to understand the game, how you can play". Such a process can be compared with the initiation process that is used a rite of passage, whose final outcome is the transition to a new stage of development.

Conflict creates a negative "image of the other" - "enemy's

image". In fantasy role-playing games, the polarisation of game society has clearly defined nature, representing the division of the characters on the side of good and evil. In our research, features of the groups "we" (characters, computer personage) and "they" (enemy) in fantasy games, compared to historical game's, characters (personage) are described as more influential on events; significant, strong and helpful. In historical games, the character is described as more active, hard and stressful. Such features can be explained by the fact that in historical games the issue of the battle is known, and in fantasy games, despite using of magical methods, the issue of the battle is still in doubt. In fantasy games the successful resolution of conflict depends on the efforts of the player. "...The hard time has come and, it is your turn to save people...And after you can see the scenes of the certain battles. And after you begin to game. And you have only one hero you are controlling. And you have super powers". (Pearson coefficient of these characteristics is 0.78).

The enemy in historical games is described as stronger, harder, more significant and safer. The latter may be due to the fact that resources and tactics used in real historical events by the opposing side are known in the first place. In addition, the adversary is considered tense and harmful. The adversary is described as neutral by scales: kind- cruel, relaxed- tense, communicative (opened)- secretive (closed). We can presuppose relativity of these characteristics in the context of real people. It is impossible to say whether or not these qualities are positive and useful. They are situational. In fantasy games the enemy was evaluated as active, significant and strong, but also as harmful, dangerous, cold and indifferent. The enemy in fantasy games is more active, influential, significant, strong and dangerous, cold, harmful and indifferent. In historical games, the enemy is more compassionate, real, truthful, tense, and safe. (Pearson coefficient 0.4.)

The enemy's image in fantasy and historical games does not have a direct correlation, as far as the enemy in fantasy game has no relation to the objective reality of the game and isn't estimated on "human" qualities. The enemy in historical games is seen as a real person to whom human characteristics are applied.

In Western studies [10] there is a tendency to attribute the characteristics of the "enemy's image" created in the computer games to the perception of members of certain nations [11]. In our research, that fact has not been confirmed. The "enemy's image" in computer games has no significant impact on the perception of a real person who belongs to a group identified with the enemy. (Pearson coefficient 0.03)

The character's image, essentially, doesn't have significant differences, and is expressed by such characteristics as: influence on the events, significance, strength and activity, which allows to talk about the formation of the Hero image within gamers inside game reality, regardless of preferred game's genre.

## V. CONCLUSION

According to the research of Ronit Kampfa and Esra Cuhadarb [12] attitude to the conflict can be changed if a

person is a direct participant in this conflict.

One of the illusions that gamers have in computer games is that they have the possibility of creating absolutely new, independent stories of any event (the same as in historical games). The character seems to be significant and can affect any event. In any case, in historical games and fantasy games, the number of possible outcomes is initially limited by the program's developers.

One Feature of these games is total control over the player's character (from the moment of its formation, attributing his abilities and capacity (leveling up), virtually immortality), which forms another illusion - total control over their destiny (including unpredictable random events)

In fantasy games there is the supposed possibility of internal conflict, i.e. conflict of individual-psychological level. As part of historical games the conflict can be considered at a sociological level – conflict between large ethnic groups or nations. Both of these types of conflicts have the same structure.

The Preference of fantasy game genres apparently involves fewer limitations for both the character and the world as a whole (whether in terms of number of possible scripts' events or the technical creation of "pictures"). But both worlds are simulacrum, because the world of historical games is partly a duplicate of real historical events and has some difference in details. The Worlds of fantasy games are a total simulacrum.

The game, as a narrative, allows the gamer, during the game, to combine (change) the position of the subject as "text reader", who doesn't know the meaning of the text integrally, and the position of author-narrator as subject, who "knows the end of the story".

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One of the reasons for the fantasy game's popularity is that creating historical games requires very careful examination of characteristics and technology of the corresponding era. It is also problematic from a technical point of view to recreate authentic details of real historical events within the game. In the fantasy genre, the game does not impose such strict requirements to consistency between different components, which simplifies the process of creating them, thereby reducing time and financial expenses.

By simulating conflicts the game allows the gamer to acts out negative emotions and realize aggressive desires without violating of social and moral norms.

Conflict in objective reality is quite a common phenomenon, manifesting itself in all of society's, as well as in the individual person as a component of their social life. The interest to consider conflicts, simulating in different types of computer games, was sparked in particular because of the popularity of this phenomenon. The game, in summary, is not only a simulacrum, a reality without the real, but is also a narrative allowing gamers to move from the position of the subject- hero to the position of the subject-author (narrator), which allows them to create an alternative version of events.

It is possible to talk about the direct influence of computer

games on formation of attitude to real events and people beforehand, but indirect influence is also possible, for example in increasing aggression, changing ethical values and frameworks, undoubtedly.

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**Angelina Demilkhanova.** Graduated psychology department of Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University in Kyrgyzstan. PhD (candidate of science) in social psychology (Yaroslavl State University, Yaroslavl, Russian Federation, 2009). She is the specialist in virtual reality. Since 2010 works as assistant professor in psychology department of Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan). The main research interests are around the study of virtual reality, cyberspace, computer games. The author more over 20 scientific publications in the field of virtual reality. And author of more 20 publications in other the field of psychology (psychotherapy of addiction, social psychology). One of the co-author of the book about psychology of computer games (Aron Brudny, Angelina Demilkhanova. Doubles. Psychology of game and of virtual reality. Bishkek, 2016)



**Oksana Denisova.** Graduated psychology department of Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University in Kyrgyzstan. PhD candidate in philosophy (Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, Philosophy Department). She is the specialist in conflicts. Since 2003 works as senior lecturer in philosophy department of Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan). The main research interests are around the study of conflicts. The author more over 20 scientific publications in the area of conflicts.

