

UNIFICATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCE METHODS IN RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S VIDEO GAMES DURING RECRUITMENT

The purpose of the article is to study the unification of methods of psychological influence in video games of the russian federation during recruitment. The author analyzes the content of the video game «The Best in Hell» and identifies the directions for further use of unified methods of psychological influence in national narratives by the russian federation. Another important part of the study is the analysis of a real-life example of the russian federation's use of a gaming industry product to recruit young people into the armed forces. During the research, the content analysis method was applied, which allowed the identification of specific game elements used to manipulate players' mind and their perception of military service. The comparative analysis method enabled the identification of similarities and differences in approaches to recruitment through video games. The analysis of the narrative component of video game products enables the main narratives used to foster patriotic sentiments and glorify combat actions among young people identification. The classification method allowed the systematization of various manipulation methods and provided them with a structured form for further analysis. The article provides a classification of manipulation features in video games used for recruitment into the armed forces of the russian federation. The essence of the comparison of psychological influence methods used in different countries for recruitment through video games is compiled and explained. The understanding of the effectiveness of these methods in the context of modern information operations has been improved. The article creates a classification of signs of manipulation in video games used for recruitment into the armed forces by the russian federation. Based on the analysis of the content of the video game «The Best in Hell», the understanding of the psychological impact of video games on the minds of players is improved. The model of the influence of video games on the formation of behavioral attitudes and patriotic sentiments among young people is formalized. New approaches to the use of video games as tools for information and psychological operations are analyzed, which allows for a better understanding of their potential for recruiting. The study describes the potential for psychological influence on target audiences through video games, during recruitment to the armed forces. This will help to expand the understanding of the interaction between video games and recruitment, helping to analyze the impact of modern information technologies on the minds of young people. This research will help to create more effective strategies for using video games in the national interest, particularly in the context of recruitment, as well as in developing strategies to counteract the recruitment campaigns of the russian federation.

Keywords: *video game, propaganda, unification, methods of psychological influence, signs of manipulation, recruitment, gamer, «The Best in Hell».*

Introduction

The full-scale armed aggression of the russian federation against Ukraine demonstrates that digital technologies are now integrated into every aspect of our lives. Therefore, one of the most powerful means of psychological impact on the cognizance of target audiences is conducting information and psychological operations by creating specific effects in video games.

Problem Statement. In the modern information society, information and psychological operations are becoming increasingly widespread and sophisticated, utilizing technological means to achieve operational and strategic goals with fewer costs than conventional methods. Special attention is given to video games as powerful tools for shaping public opinion. The

development of video games that recreate specific military narratives or ideological foundations allows for the alteration of worldviews and behaviors among large groups, particularly among the youth, who are active participants in gaming culture and a potential recruitment base for the armed forces. States like the russian federation are already investing significant resources in the development of their domestic gaming industry, indicating a strategic approach to using this tool in information warfare.

The problem lies in the fact that the large-scale use of video games by the russian federation as a tool for information and psychological operations will have significant long-term consequences for the reinforcement of combat fronts in the Russian-Ukrainian war with young volunteers. Therefore, this

phenomenon requires thorough analysis and the implementation of active countermeasures to control it.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Studies [1; 2] outline the theoretical framework of the potential for psychological influence on target audiences through the gaming industry and video games. The possibility of actively engaging target audiences in this type of information content is analyzed.

Study [3] provides information on promising areas for attracting gamers in the armed forces. Articles [4; 5] outline the experience of using gamers in the armed forces of the United States and South Korea. Articles [6; 7] contain information on the planned financing of the gaming industry in the Russian Federation. Article [8] is devoted to an overview of the transformation of the gaming market of the Russian Federation in the context of the sanctions policy of Western countries. Articles [9; 10] describe the future propaganda product of the Russian Federation – the video game «The Best in Hell». Article [11] provides a list of game franchises with anti-Russian rhetoric.

The goal of the article is to unify the methods of psychological influence in video games of the Russian Federation during recruitment.

Video game research can be used by states to implement national narratives. Another important part of the study is the analysis of a real-life example of the Russian Federation's use of a gaming industry product to recruit young people into the armed forces.

Principal Research Results

While at first glance, it may seem that there is relative peace in the international arena, economic and diplomatic conflicts persist constantly. Simultaneously, the real battle unfolds in the informational space, where wars are less visible but no less aggressive. Such wars are significantly cheaper for the aggressor, as influencing through information costs less than conventional means like missiles or tanks. Modern war strategies are concentrated in the virtual realm, where changing the opponent's worldview using informational tools – such as literature, cinema, and video games – is more critical than inflicting physical harm.

Indeed, the virtual world increasingly captures fragments of our reality. It programs our behavior, drawing us away from the real world for hours on end, especially when young people are engrossed in video games.

In his study [2], G. Pocheptsov notes that «video games, more than cinema and literature, «cut off» a person's contacts with the real world, forcing them to immerse themselves in it. The player follows only the main actions, not paying much attention to the secondary ones, through which the main influence on consciousness takes place». More than 60 years have passed since the creation of the first video game, and today almost half of the world's population plays video games on their computers, consoles and mobile phones.

Video game developers, working together with a staff of sociologists, psychologists, and marketers,

create games that manipulate the virtual world so that players feel the satisfaction of victory for «their» people, religion, or ideology over «others». Although games seem to be interactive, where the player can choose their actions, the reality is that since victory is the necessary outcome, the options for behavior are predetermined. Thus, games are not just recreation, but a means of forming and reinforcing certain patterns of behavior that players can unconsciously transfer from the virtual world to real life.

The experience of Western countries in using video games in national interests is being actively studied in the Russian Federation. Currently, this urgent need is dictated by the course of hostilities in Ukraine. The article by Lenta.ru [3] states that «there is a problem of providing qualified personnel», «the question of where to get and how to train UAV operators is still open». At the same time, gamers have several advantages over other persons liable for military service, such as their interest in military weapons and equipment, which makes it easier to recruit them for military service. Equally important is the high speed of reaction, the ability to focus on several indicators at once and make quick decisions, which is important not only in virtual reality but also in real-world combat operations.

The Command of the Royal Netherlands Navy also noted these patterns and decided that gamers are quite suitable for piloting military UAVs. After that, in 2020, the fleet's first cyber team, KM Esports, was formed to play Counter Strike: Global Offensive. Not only is an active recruitment campaign for the armed forces being conducted at organized tournaments, but it turned out that the tournaments themselves have an effective recreational effect for the military themselves.

The US Army does not hide its interest in gamers either. For example, «in November 2018, the spokesperson for the U.S. Army Recruiting Command, Kelly Bland, announced the emergence of a special esports team» [4]. In the US Army, military gamers not only defend the honor of the army in tournaments and conduct recruitment campaigns, but also test new military software applications – simulators for aviation pilots and drivers of military equipment, software for remote control of weapons, etc. In the context of information and psychological influence, it is interesting that military gamers use the technology of streaming popular games on Twitch and YouTube (online demonstrations of their play). During the game, they act as agents of influence, communicate with the target audience, trying to popularize military service among them.

South Korea engages professional gamers for the needs of the army as well. Their tasks include «not only testing computer aviation simulators, but also developing recommendations for their designers» [5].

Returning to the Lenta.ru article [3], I should note the words of Dmitry Smith, President of the Russian Computer Sports Federation, «there will be a deferral for e-sportsmen, but then, when the time comes, they

will serve in a specialized company where their skills will be in demand. Given modern weapons, they will be effective and will be able to bring maximum benefit to their homeland». It is a natural assumption that such «specialized companies» can serve as a recruiting base for Russian military hacker groups such as APT28 and Forest Blizzard.

Such successes of Western countries and their own experience have led to the fact that «by 2030, the Russian authorities intend to allocate up to \$50 billion to establish companies for the development and publication of video games» [6]. This sets a rather high bar for video game production by 2030: 25 high-budget video games (about \$2.7 million per game) and about 40 medium-budget games (about \$700 thousand per game). Of course, such significant financial transactions will be under the control of the authorities – the «Russian Internet Development Institute» [7] and the subsidy body – the «Internet Initiatives Development Fund», created on the initiative of Putin v. v. To sell future products to the domestic target audience, a specialized online trading platform – «VK Play» [8] has also been created, whose board is closely connected with the Russian bank «Sber». It should be noted that since 2020, the owner of 50% plus 1 share of Sber PJSC has been the Russian National Welfare Fund, controlled by the government of the Russian Federation. This fully proves the assumption that the Russian authorities have taken total control over the gaming industry, at least among high and medium-budget gaming projects. At the same time, under Western sanctions, low-budget Russian gaming companies have almost lost markets for their products and will be forced to join the «state» video game sales platform one way or another. This will impose certain ideological requirements of the Kremlin on their products.

And this ideological order of the Kremlin is already being actively implemented. For example, a team of developers from Vladivostok (Russia), the «NoName Company», announced the development of a tactical shooter called «The Best in Hell», based on the feature film of the same name by Alexei Nagin.

The topic and the source material add to the project's resonance: the focus will be on the Kremlin's interpretation of the battles near the city of Popasna, Luhansk region, which took place in early 2022. The main characters will be the fighters of the private military company Wagner, who were directly involved in the assault on the city. Also, judging by the presentation of the project [9], one of the founders of this company, Yevhen Prygozhyn, will be another protagonist of the game (Figure 1).

Thus, we can note that the graphic component of the video game, including the use of realistic face models, highly detailed graphics and a consistent visual style, plays a key role in creating an immersive gaming experience. Such graphics not only improve the aesthetics of the game, but also enhance its

psychological and emotional impact on the player to form behavioral models and enhance patriotic moods.

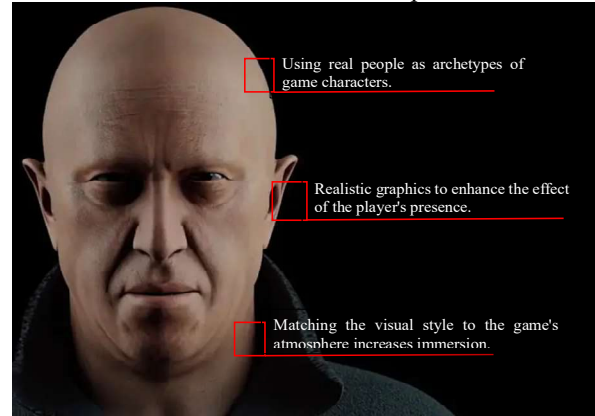


Figure 1 – Analysis of the graphic component of the video game «The best in Hell»

As A.E. Bobrov notes in the study [1]: «It is important that during the war among the real stories there are examples of not just courage, but great courage and self-sacrifice that will infect others and lead the nation to victory. And if there are no such stories, they are invented. A continuous stream of defeats is extremely necessary to chop off, because the psychological state of people changes, hands fall, which during the war should not be allowed».

And that's exactly what the target audience will find in the Best in Hell video game. «Real stories of fighters collected during the year are used» [9], the video game's description reads. During the presentation of the video game, the developers showed battles in open spaces and in dense buildings, as well as the work of a mortar crew as part of counter-battery combat - the latter is declared as a full-fledged independent game mechanic. Also, teammates should play an important role in the gameplay – without them, according to the developers, «you won't be able to last a second in battle» [9]. The developers are planning a full-fledged cooperative mode for four players. Such game mechanics will encourage players to look for like-minded people on the Internet to make the game easier to play. Often this leads to the emergence of thematic forums and groups on social networks, which will only strengthen the advertising, engagement and narrative component of the project.

Although this project is being developed on the graphics engine of the last generation – «Unreal Engine 4», it should be noted that the developers have done a fairly good job on the graphic component. At the same time, according to a thematic source [9], the team of «NoName Company» plans to release the first demo version of the video game in early summer this year.

A representative of the company also hints at the ideological component in an interview [10]: «We believe that today there is a lack of patriotic game projects based on the historical events of modern Russia, which we are in today. Therefore, this is not only a game project, but also a social one, but it is important for us that the game is interesting».

It is worth noting that the announcement of this project was widely supported not only by the thematic publications of the Russian video game industry, but also by numerous Russian bloggers, news media and Telegram channels associated with the Wagner PMC, such as «PMC Wagner Summary» and «Wagner Unloading». Analysis of the comments indicates absolute support and anticipation of the video game's release. It is compared to another successful Russian game project - *Escape from Tarkov*. In this game, the player also tried on the role of a fighter for a Russian private military company and fought back against the US intervention. Moreover, the aforementioned game project became popular not only in Russia, but also gained popularity in the United States.

The study of the game project «The Best in Hell» opens several narrative features, which, predictably, will have the following similar projects, namely: strengthening the popularization of the ideas of militarism and the threat of the existence of the homeland from external opponents; integration of narratives in defense of so-called «traditional values», for example, faith and family (Fig. 2).

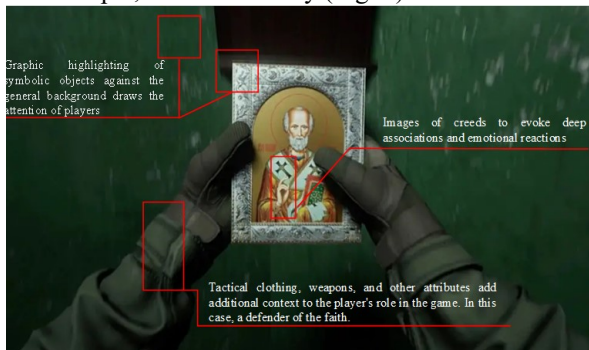


Figure 2 – Analysis of the integration of narratives in the video game «The Best in Hell»

Integrating narratives into a video game through visual elements such as symbolic objects, religious symbols, and tactical equipment is a powerful tool for creating a profound emotional and psychological impact on players. Such elements make the game more exciting and help players form strong associations with certain values or ideologies. This allows developers to communicate complex narratives and form behavioral attitudes in players using visual means to enhance emotional impact. The success of integrating narratives and changing the behavior of the target audience will be facilitated by techniques to enhance immersiveness in a video game (Fig. 3).

The combination of personalized equipment elements and the use of interactive cinematic segments in a video game significantly increases immersion, allowing players to dive deeper into the story and feel an emotional connection with the characters. This allows not only to create a more convincing gaming experience, but also to effectively influence the perception of players, forming the necessary emotional reactions.

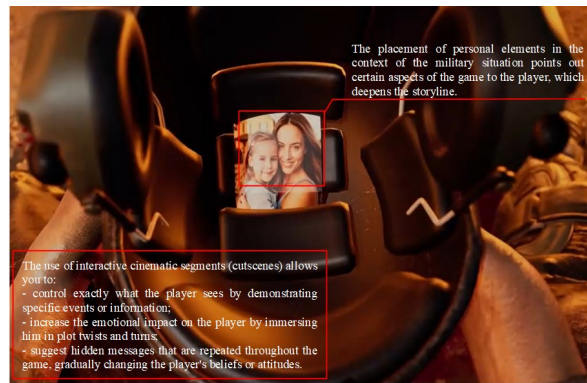


Figure 3 – Analysis of the immersion in video game «The Best in Hell»

These include:

heroizing the activities of the private military company Wagner and enhancing the image of service in the ranks of the Russian armed forces, including through the demonstration of high-quality weapons and equipment;

using the technology of myth design, the players will be imposed with the Kremlin's vision of the course of hostilities and the causes and consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war in general;

the use of specific in-game mechanics will provide a wide range of tools for covert influence on:

romanticizing the war as a phenomenon and showing it as a non-fearful exciting adventure;

social activity of players to find like-minded people and involve them in the theme of the video game;

the significance and fateful role of the player for the country, but only as a submissive soldier of the Kremlin regime;

the use of artificial intelligence to control the player's opponents, the soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. On the one hand, this technology improves immersiveness, but on the other hand, the complicated passage of battles against «Ukrainian soldiers» will cause players to have targeted negative emotions associated with numerous Kremlin fakes about the activities of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Using a comparative analysis, we will compare the classical «open» and covert methods of psychological influence of recruitment into the armed forces in order to identify the results that contribute to the implementation of information activities of the armed forces of the Russian Federation (Table 1).

The comparative analysis in Table 1. clearly illustrates how video games can be used not only as a means of entertainment, but also as a powerful tool for information and psychological influence on young people aimed at attracting them to military service through the covert formation of certain attitudes and beliefs.

Thus, traditional methods of psychological influence for recruitment focus on direct involvement and open informing of the target audience, while covert methods play a more important role in recruitment using video games.

Comparison of methods of psychological impact during recruitment

Classical (open) methods of psychological impact	Methods of hidden psychological impact through video games	Results that contribute to the realization of:
Advertising in the media (fluctuations in the level of accessibility of the target audience)	Development of video games with patriotic and militaristic content (the target audience is self-involved in the product)	strengthening national identity and patriotism, creating a favorable picture of military service
Career fairs in military commissariats, «open days» in military units (limited territorial coverage of the target audience)	Creating groups in social media and forums around military-themed video games (wide coverage of the target audience; the possibility of pre/post-tests of products)	forming communities of like-minded people, strengthening social ties and supporting the ideas of military service in them (threats to the homeland, forming an image of the enemy, etc.)
Personal recruitment through military commissariats and recruitment centers (a passive method that is implemented, usually when the target audience itself applies for services)	Implementation of scenarios in video games that form a positive perception of military service (an active method of interaction with the target audience that helps to change their behavior)	manipulating the perceptions of the target audience about military conflicts; reducing the perception of real risks from the desired behavior of the TA
Recruiting videos showing the benefits of service (provide incomplete information to the TA about military service; low immersiveness)	Implementation of mechanics in games that simulate real military operations (high immersiveness; simulation of combat experience and rewards for successful completion)	creating the illusion of real military service experience, increasing interest in military careers
Information sessions and seminars, e.g. in institutions where the TA studies (low trust in the agents of influence in front of the TA)	Use of well-known platforms for video game streaming and interaction with the TA (self-involvement of the TA in video game streaming; initial credit of trust in agents of influence based on common interest)	engaging the TA through the interactivity of social communities, which enhances the formation of a favorable attitude towards the topic
Use stories about heroic deeds of military personnel (as a rule, messages should be based on real events with real people)	Use of stories about «heroic» deeds of the russian military (may have no or partial connection to real events/persons)	creation of a positive image of the military and military service in public perception; heroization of the russian-ukrainian war («SMO»), the image of a Russian serviceman)

Targeting such psychological influence and using it through game mechanisms that discreetly motivate young people to military service is the most effective. This is fully consistent with the current strategy of the russian federation – to conduct conditionally voluntary recruitment into the armed forces, postponing the socially unpopular decision on forced mobilization.

This circumstance raises the question: what response can the Ukrainian government and the gaming industry make at this stage? Unfortunately, Ukraine cannot currently invest millions of dollars in the development of numerous domestic gaming projects that would ideologically support resistance to russian aggression. However, the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine is currently in numerous negotiations with Western gaming companies to introduce Ukrainian localization into their game projects. This will encourage Ukrainian youth to abandon russian translation and help to remove the virtual borders of the «russian world». Gamers themselves are not sitting still either. A compiled list

[11] of video games of various genres in which you can fight against soldiers of the russian federation, or the USSR is gaining popularity on the Internet.

Conclusions and Perspectives for further research

Video games, therefore, prove to be an effective means of psychological influence, since their ability to allow the manipulation of influence on players is significant and this influence often goes unnoticed. Video games not only entertain, but also form the worldview of players, affect their emotional and ideological attitudes by implementing scenarios that reflect state propaganda and militaristic views.

The use of video games for recruiting purposes highlights how modern technology is changing approaches to mobilization and military training. Video games used in the context of covert recruiting greatly broaden the spectrum of impact on the target audience, giving them not only entertainment, but also shaping their ideological positions and worldview through interactive scenarios.

Methods of overt psychological influence during recruitment, which typically include direct information dissemination through advertising, are giving way to more covert and psychologically effective approaches through video games that allow for a deeper impact on consciousness.

In this context, video games not only promote military service but also simulate military operations, foster a favorable attitude towards military actions, glorify specific ideological narratives, and can present certain historical events in a desired light. They contribute to the creation of social communities that facilitate socialization within certain ideological frameworks and push the target audience towards actual military service. These mechanisms of informational and psychological influence prove to be

particularly effective in situations where classical methods may be perceived as too direct or have negative social perceptions, such as forced mobilization in the Russian Federation.

The presentation of video games such as «The Best in Hell» illustrates how the Kremlin's interpretation of the Russian-Ukrainian war can be used to romanticize the image of military courage and heroism, while ignoring real war crimes and violations of international conventions.

At the same time, the involvement of gamers in real-world military operations is used to recruit qualified drone operators and cybersecurity specialists, which indicates the pragmatic use of video game skills for military purposes.

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УНІФІКАЦІЯ МЕТОДІВ ПСИХОЛОГІЧНОГО ВПЛИВУ У ВІДЕОІГРАХ РОСІЙСЬКОЇ ФЕДЕРАЦІЇ ПІД ЧАС РЕКРУТИНГУ

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Мета статті. Метою статті є дослідження уніфікації методів психологічного впливу у відеоіграх російської федерації під час рекрутингу. Проведено аналіз контенту відеоігри «Лучшие в аду» та визначені напрями подальшого використання російською федерацією уніфікованих методів психологічного впливу в національних нарративах. Також важливою частиною дослідження є аналіз реального прикладу використання російською федерацією продукту ігрової індустрії для рекрутингу молоді до лав збройних сил.

Методи дослідження. Під час проведення дослідження застосовано метод контент-аналізу, що дозволило виявити специфічні елементи гри, які використовуються для маніпуляції свідомістю гравців і їхнього сприйняття військової служби. Метод компаративного аналізу дав змогу виявити схожості та відмінності у підходах до рекрутингу за допомогою відеоігор. Аналіз нарративної складової відеоігрової продукції дав змогу виявити основні нарративи, які використовуються для формування патріотичних настроїв і героїзації бойових дій серед молоді. А метод класифікації дав змогу систематизувати різні методи маніпуляції та надати їм структуровану форму для подальшого аналізу.

Отримані результати дослідження. У статті наведено класифікацію ознак маніпуляцій у відеоіграх, які використовуються для рекрутингу до лав збройних сил російської федерації. Складено і пояснено суть порівняння методів психологічного впливу, які використовуються в різних країнах для рекрутингу через відеоігри. Удосконалено розуміння ефективності цих методів у контексті сучасних інформаційних операцій.

Елементи наукової новизни. У статті створено класифікацію ознак маніпуляції у відеоіграх, що використовуються для рекрутингу до лав збройних сил російською федерацією. На основі аналізу контенту відеоігри «Лучшие в аду» удосконалено розуміння психологічного впливу відеоігор на свідомість гравців. Формалізовано модель впливу відеоігор на формування поведінкових установок і патріотичних настроїв серед молоді. А також проаналізовано нові підходи до використання відеоігор як інструментів інформаційно-психологічних операцій, що дозволяє краще зрозуміти їх потенціал для рекрутингу.

Теоретична та практична значущість статті. Стаття описує потенційні можливості психологічного впливу на цільові аудиторії через відеоігри, зокрема, під час рекрутингу до лав збройних сил. Це дасть змогу розширити розуміння взаємодії між відеоіграми та рекрутингом, допомагаючи глибше аналізувати вплив сучасних інформаційних технологій на свідомість молоді. Дані дослідження дозволять створити більш ефективні стратегії для використання відеоігор у національних інтересах, зокрема, в контексті рекрутингу, а також у виробленні стратегій протидії рекрутинговим кампаніям російської федерації.

Ключові слова: відеогра, пропаганда, уніфікація, методи психологічного впливу, ознаки маніпуляції, рекрутинг, геймер, «Лучшие в аду».

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