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Red Comrades Save the Galaxy: Early Russian Adventure Games and the Tradition of Anecdote

Alesha Serada

Abstract

Red Comrades Save the Galaxy is one of the most popular adventure game series from the early period of game development in Russia in the late 1990s. It presents adventures of characters borrowed from the century-long tradition of the Russian anecdote, most fertile in Soviet times. The majority of late Soviet anecdotes reused tropes from popular films, such as *Chapayev* (1934), and TV series, such as *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1973) or *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson* (1979). Some of the first experiments with the ludic medium relied on the same folklore material, which led to the birth of the 'Russian quest' adventure game. The same anecdotes inspired the new post-Soviet Russian novel in the 1990s, such as *Chapayev and Void* ([1996] 2001) by Victor Pelevin. In this chapter, we will examine this particular sub-genre to find out what was specific about Soviet/post-Soviet humour, and how exactly it revealed itself in early Russian adventure games.

Keywords: *Russian humour, anecdote, folklore, history of games, Chapayev, 'Russian quest', Stierlitz, Sufi.*

Introduction: What Is a Russian Anecdote?

In the Russian 'linguasphere', an anecdote is a distinct and well-established oral genre of storytelling. It is still alive in post-Soviet territories across language barriers, even though it cannot compete with the political humour in print, on TV and in electronic media, still available but increasingly censored in Russia (Gel'man 2015, p.79-80). A canonical Soviet Russian anecdote is short, fictional, and expected to end with a comical 'punch' (Melnichenko 2015). Anecdotes about the semi-legendary commander of the Red Army, Vasily Ivanovich Chapayev, are the longest-running series of Soviet anecdotes, a storytelling tradition no less than a century old.

The influential Soviet folklorist and philologist Vladimir Propp described the anecdote as involving "the unexpected, witty denouement of a brief narrative" (Propp [1984] 2012, p.34) that exists in a loosely defined territory between folk humour and the folktale. The researcher of late Socialist culture Alexei Yurchak defines it as "a short, formulaic joke that can be repeated by different people in different contexts" (Yurchak 2005, p.273). It does not have an author, but its narrative structure is faithfully reproduced through decades of circulation, in some ways similar to modern 'memes'.

Anecdote is a genre of folklore originating in oral communication, which makes it a typical example of an active, performative "speech genre" (Bakhtin [1953] 2010) that aims for a particular effect on its implied audience. Thus, strictly speaking, we should see the exemplary realisation of this genre in the act of telling an anecdote, not in the text of the anecdote as such (Shmeleva and Shmelev 2002). Anecdotes as a local cultural form gained enormous popularity in the USSR: telling anecdotes became a widespread cultural practice in the 1920s-1930s, and then again from the late 1960s to Perestroika (Davies 2007; Yurchak 2005). Their popularity later diminished due to the loosening control of Soviet censorship over the press (Yurchak 2005). Writing down or publishing an anecdote changes the way it circulates in a community, and affects its vitality as an oral genre.

Digital media offer the next step in remediation of a story that previously circulated as an anecdote. As we will see in this chapter, many developers of early Russian video games experimented with Soviet anecdotes and transposed them into the digital ludic form. Most of these early games do not live up to the creative standards of today's game development, but at the time, their developers made a notable contribution towards the construction of a new, post-Soviet identity. Meanwhile, similar creative work was carried out in the local literature. It is agreed (Kuritsyn 1997; Saprykin, 2019) that early Russian postmodernism reached its apex in the novel *Chapayev and Void* ([1996] 2001), written by the popular Russian writer Victor Pelevin. Both in early video games and literary fiction, fragments of old homely folklore became important puzzle pieces of the post-Soviet identity at an early stage of its formation.

Part 1. The Tale of Chapayev

According to previous studies, Russian anecdotes took their initial shape in the times of the First Russian Revolution in 1905 (Shmeleva and Shmelev 2002; Melnichenko 2015). Thanks to the writings of Vladimir Propp, famous for his work on fairy tales, we can reconstruct the genealogy of the anecdote in the USSR and even before that. In his view, anecdotes are closely related to fairy tales due to their specific relationship to reality, which is crucial for understanding different genres of folklore. In a folktale, of which a fairy tale is a subset, "events that did not occur and could never have occurred are recounted with certain intonations and gestures, as though they did actually take place, although neither the teller nor the listener believes the tale" (Propp 1984, p.20). This characterisation also perfectly describes the Soviet Russian anecdote - and indeed, Propp concludes that an anecdote is essentially a folktale in his other essay 'Genre composition of the Russian folklore'. He sees anecdotes as a variation on a well-defined genre of folktales - folktales about ordinary people: "Borderlines between folktales about ordinary people and anecdotes cannot be established", he writes (Propp 1998, p.32), which means that Soviet anecdotes were not told to be believedDespite being firmly grounded in the socio-political reality, Soviet anecdotes remained a fantastic genre, much like fairy tales or ancient fables. Late Soviet anecdotes often rely on the means of creating comic effect that Vladimir Propp identified as 'incongruity' (Propp [1976] 2009) ('alogism' in the Russian original). Even today, this particular type of incongruity, or, to be precise, deliberate alogism, remains the most widely used rhetorical device in late Soviet anecdotes about Stierlitz. Stierlitz is a fictional Soviet secret agent who infiltrates the SS headquarters just before the Second World War in the beloved TV series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1973).The comical effect in these particular series of anecdotes is most often achieved by wordplay (Belousov 1995).

Stierlitz shot Muller in a rush. A death squad arrived in Arash the very next morning (Melnichnko 2015:4552, my translation – A.S.).

In another popular anecdote Chapayev mishears that his subordinate Pet'ka is writing an 'opera' about him, when in fact Pet'ka is writing a report about Chapayev for the KGB *opera*tive (Melnichenko 2015:4355). On a more genePropp traced this rhetorical device back to the Middle Ages in Europe and the Middle East, where it was associated with the legendary 13th century Sufi teacher and humourist Nasreddin. The following is an example of an anecdote about Nasreddin:

'Why do you always answer a question with another question, Mulla?'

'Do I?' (Shah 1983, p.66).

Even today, many contemporary anecdotes retain similarity to traditional genres of short dialogic forms found in ancient literatures. In fact, the abovementioned example is still told in the Russian-speaking context as an anecdote about Jews. Based on the previous studies of humour, Misha

Melnichenko notes that it was not impossible for a Persian fable to resurface as a Soviet anecdote (Melnichenko 2015). He focuses on a particular series of absurdist anecdotes - the anecdotes about Armenian radio that parody responses of radio show hosts to the correspondence from listeners:

‘This is Armenian Radio! Our listeners asked us: What is the difference between the constitutions of the USA and the USSR? Do not both countries guarantee the freedom of speech?

Our answer: Yes, but the USA’s constitution guarantees freedom *after* speech’ (in Smirnova 2014, p. 340).

‘Will we still have money when Communism comes?’

‘Someone will, someone won’t’ (Melnichenko 2015:466)

This joke mocks the understanding of Communism as an inherently moneyless social order, as explained by Marx and Engels ([1888] 2008). *The Communist Manifesto* was an important part of the ‘shared vocabulary’ in the official Soviet discourse, although not many Soviet citizens actually read it.

‘Is there life on Mars?’

‘No, same as here’ (Melnichenko 2015:1892).

The alogism of this anecdote suggests with a hint of irony that the real life in the USSR is not worth living. If we turn to Western pop culture for comparisons, we may find the same sentiment in the line "Life? Don't talk to me about life", dropped by Marvin the Paranoid Android in the original radio version of *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (Adams 1985, p. 43). Meanwhile, expressions of such mood were completely absent from the cheerful official Soviet TV and radio broadcasting.

As a genre, Soviet anecdotes reflected the all-encompassing politicisation of daily life by the state media (Davies 2007; Ioffe and Oushakine 2013). They served as a form of ‘collective consciousness’ (Smirnova 2014): firstly, even the least concerned Soviet citizens would reflect on official political messages and comment on them in the relatively safe spaces where anecdotes were told. Secondly, anecdotes often demarcated the boundaries between different social groups and identities. The three most popular categories of anecdotes are political, erotic and ‘ethnic’ ones about other ethnicities of the multinational USSR, such as Jews, Chukchee (indigenous people of Siberia), Ukrainians, Georgians and Armenians, amongst others.

As mentioned earlier, Russian anecdotes can be seen as a subset of fantastic ‘folktales’. This folklore category encompasses magical fairy tales and unbelievable tales about ordinary people. This may sound surprising, as Chapayev was a real historical figure, although not an ‘ordinary’ person. Vasily Ivanovich Chapayev was a Red Army commander and a hero of the Russian Civil War (1917-1923) that followed the Great October Socialist Revolution in 1917. The earliest stories about Chapayev circulated as memories of real events, told in an increasingly ornate manner that would eventually elevate these stories to an almost legendary status. Propp brings up these stories about Chapayev as an example of 'skaz' (as opposed to ‘skazka’, which is a folktale in Russian), a contemporary (in his time) epic tale based on real events (Propp [1955] 1984, p. 150). ‘Skaz’, according to Propp, is a distinct genre of oral storytelling that embodies “the art of narrating something seen and lived” (Propp [1984] 2012, p.32), with substantial creative contribution of the storyteller. He is nonetheless aware that many recorded instances of ‘skaz’ describe fantastic and supernatural events that may not actually have happened at all. To Propp, the most important feature for his classification is that,

unlike the folktale and especially the fairy tale, the skaz – including any supernatural events – would be believed by both the teller and the listener.

The most important part of Chapayev's canon, the first Soviet 'blockbuster' film *Chapayev* (1934) remained popular for decades. It was based on fictionalised biography of the real life heroic commander Chapayev, written by his former subordinate Dmitry Furmanov and first published in 1923. Although it would be a stretch to call it 'superheroic', what we see is not what actually happened, but what could have happened. Propp refers to this realistic mode of storytelling when he describes how a folktale is adapted into a work of realistic literature (Propp [1984] 2012, p. 20). Both the book and the film that was based on it incorporated the earliest 'true stories' about Chapayev, which ranged widely on the scale between the believable 'skaz' and the unbelievable 'anecdote'. There are tales about Chapayev in both of these genres in Russia in the first half of the 20th century (as mentioned in Propp [1955] 1984, [1984] 2012, but also, see Melnichenko 2015 for early anecdotes about Chapayev). In general, Socialist Realism, the officially prescribed mode of storytelling exemplified in *Chapayev* (1934), had a peculiar relationship with perceived reality. The Communist ideology fundamentally changed not only the daily life of people, but also how they thought of and interacted with the world around them. It could be argued that it shifted the common forms of storytelling deeper into the domain of the fantastic, where Soviet war heroes and pioneers acquired the qualities of superheroes and saints (Leont'eva 2005). Chapayev, as well, underwent the transformation from a historical figure to a fantastic character in an expanded fictional universe that eventually spawned a series of video games.

As researchers of the Soviet daily life, from Yurchak to Oushakine (2013), Lipovetsky (2007) and Melnichenko, have shown, there was no ordinary - everything was political. Such thorough ideologisation provided the Soviet audience with a shared vocabulary of tropes for instant mutual understanding, and these tropes became the building blocks for canonical Soviet anecdotes (Melnichenko 2015). Even the anecdotal comeback of Chapayev in the late 1960s might have been inspired by the actively celebrated fiftieth anniversary of the October revolution (Abram Terz, as cited in Yurchak 2005, 274) that occupied the official discourse for a while. This coincides with departure of the generation of storytellers who met Chapayev in person and could tell a 'true story' ('skaz') about it.

Many Soviet anecdotes refer to historical contexts: in anecdotes about Chapayev, it is the Russian Civil War. Anecdotes about Chapayev, however do not take place in the real war, but in a fictional universe unfolding around the heroic 1934 Soviet film under the same name. For instance, *Chapayev* (1934) introduced a new character – Anka the Machine Gun Woman, named after Anna Furmanova, the wife of the original writer and an important contributor to the film's script. Anka became a key character in the following series of anecdotes and, eventually, appeared as a playable character in the video games based on them. Another immensely popular character is the already mentioned Soviet secret agent Stierlitz. Upon closer inspection, this historical background turns out to be the film set from the TV film series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1973) - and even this fictional world is constantly deconstructed through alogism and absurd humour. This is not the historic reality, but a virtual reality constructed by media. From the perspective of Russian anecdote studies, Shmeleva and Shmelev even suggest that Chapayev and Stierlitz should be included in the category of 'TV personalities', together with the real politicians and performers shown on Soviet TV (Shmeleva and Shmelev 2002).

Folklore research rarely considered anecdotes a worthy object of study in the times of the USSR – after all, sharing a political anecdote could result in detention. Curiously, the knowledge about joke-making (as well as its possible consequences) circulated in the form of meta-jokes (Davies 2007; Astapova 2020). As an illustration, we may turn to an anecdote from the 1970s, registered in

Melnichenko's academic reference book under number 4449 and first recorded in 1981. This points to three of the most popular motifs, then merges them into one: "A computer wrote a typical anecdote of 1976: Vasily Ivanovich [Chapayev] visits Anka at night and finds Pet'ka and Stierlitz at her place. And both are Jews" (Melnichenko 2015, my translation). The joke suggests that the computer, or, to be precise, some form of artificial intelligence, analysed a corpus of jokes that were popular in the middle of the 1970s. In its output, it used four of the most popular characters – Chapayev, Pet'ka and Anka from the Chapayev canon together with Stierlitz. Much in the spirit of the contemporary fan culture, this imagined artificial intelligence puts Stierlitz together with Pet'ka and Anka in the same bedroom scene, as this is the only way in which Chapayev can see that both Stierlitz and Pet'ka are circumcised. This anecdote shows that Chapayev was still one of the most frequently encountered characters in Soviet jokes of the late 1970s; generally, meta-jokes demonstrate that the jokes about Chapayev, Stierlitz and the Siberian natives Chukchee were particularly popular (Astapova 2020, p.77).

Speaking about Chapayev in the post-Soviet context, it is impossible to ignore the cult magical realist Russian novel *Chapayev and Void* (also known as *Buddha's Little Finger* [US] and *Clay Machine Gun* [UK] in English translations) by Viktor Pelevin, first published in 1996. This novel is often considered the first major work of post-Soviet literature and the most important Russian novel of the 1990s (Saprykin, 2019). Pelevin conducted a literary experiment: he transplanted the character of Chapayev, as presented in historical and folk anecdotes, back into the (quasi-)realistic background of 1910-20s Russia. Chapayev's subordinate Pet'ka became the decadent poet Pet'ka Void and a narrator character in Pelevin's novel. As a part of his literary game, Viktor Pelevin directly compares Chapayev to Nasreddin and suggests that the anecdotes, and not Furmanov's book, represent the 'historical truth' about Chapayev (Pelevin [1996] 2001). This particular 'alogism' is further developed in the character of the Red Army commander who appears to be a great mystic and a spiritual teacher to Pet'ka Void – a revelation that did not seem particularly absurd in the intellectual and economic climate in Russia of the late 1990s.

Part 2. Chapayev's Post-Soviet Afterlife

Russian anecdotes became an important inspiration for the game industry in Russia, which experienced explosive growth between 1995 and 2000. Many adventure games in development at the end of the 1990s-beginning of 2000s borrowed familiar recurring characters from folk humour, such as Chapayev and Stierlitz, and sometimes created original characters based on Soviet Russian anecdotes, such as the Pilot Brothers, a comical duo of animated characters parodying Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson as presented in anecdotes. The last two entered Russian folklore after the success of the Soviet TV series *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson* in 1979-1986.

Bratya Piloty (Pilot Brothers) is often mentioned as the first original specifically Russian game, with its unique themes, genre-defining qualities and humour that is impenetrable to gamers from other cultures - at least, according to the Russian game critics (Kapitzyn 1997; Dubrovskaya and Tsykalova 1997). The first game about the duo was developed in cooperation with the animation studio Pilot and published by C1 in 1997. Six more sequels followed. Apart from Pilot Brothers, this characteristic sub-genre of new Russian adventure games included a game about Stierlitz in development for the third major publisher Akella (there is no evidence that it was ever released), and an ironic 'superhero' Captain Pronin from the short-lived company "Home Computer" (Dubrovskaya and Tsykalova 1997). *Styrlitz: Operation BUST*, the first game from another comical game series about Stierlitz, was launched on April 1, 2000 by a different publisher, Buka. Finally, Lieutenant Rzhevsky, yet another popular character – this time associated with obscene anecdotes in the

setting of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* – became the main character of an adventure game published by Buka in November 2000.

Back in 1997, in a major review for the magazine Game.EXE, Nataliya Dubrovskaya and Olga Tsykalova labelled this genre "lubok quest" (Dubrovskaya and Tsykalova 1997). Lubok was a unique standalone genre of visual folk art in 17th – early 20th century Russia, very similar to the Japanese Ukiyo-e prints: cheap colour prints that depicted humorous, heroic, sometimes erotic or political scenes.

Fig.1. *A Bear Chilling with a Goat. A classic Russian ‘lubok’, 18th century* (Bakhtin and Moldavskiy 1962)

Main features of the 'lubok quest', according to game journalists, were folklore-related humour, easy gameplay, and an immortal and infinitely resourceful hero. The local humour of these games, often absurd and self-referential, made it particularly difficult to translate them for an international audience. This moniker did not stick; today, this subgenre is remembered as ‘the Russian quest’ (Nikiforov 2020).

The game *Red Comrades Save the Galaxy* (1998, S.K.I.F., Buka Entertainment), the first one from the Red Comrades series, is of particular interest to us. Together with the novel *Chapayev and Void* published two years earlier, it represents the important contemporary reincarnation of Vasily Ivanovich Chapayev in pop culture, having cultural significance and being fondly remembered by the audience (a later TV series *Chapay’s Passion* in 2013 disappointed both critics and viewers). The game was developed by the small studio S.K.I.F. and published by the major company Buka in 1998. The latter supposedly responded to the success of their competitors C1, who had published *Pilot Brothers* a year before. Like most original titles of that period, *Red Comrades Save the Galaxy* is a comical adventure game that combines elements of point-and-click games and various puzzles tied together by a fantastic story about an alien invasion. It has three playable characters based specifically on the characters from the anecdotal tradition - Vasiliy Ivanovich Chapayev, Pet’ka and Anka the Machine Gun Woman. The game spawned eight sequels between 1999 and 2009; like most ‘Russian quest’ games, they were universally disliked by game critics for their repetitiveness, simplistic sexual jokes and lack of inventiveness and logic in game puzzles. The sequels still enjoyed moderate popularity among Russian gamers at the time, but only the first three parts were reissued later in 2016-2017, to mostly negative reviews from the next generations of gamers on Steam.

Fig. 2. Screenshot from the game Red Comrades Save the Galaxy (1998)

The comical effect of *Red Comrades Save the Galaxy* relies on knowledge of the Chapayev canon, including the anecdotes about him. The game acknowledges the rich tradition of folk humour, and deliberately mixes it with pop culture tropes such as alien invasion and space travel. The characters in the game even tell absurd jokes about themselves to intensify this incongruence, or 'alogism'. Let us discuss one of these anecdotes in detail: in its attempt to be 'meta', it brings together two seemingly incongruous cultural phenomena such as early Russian computer games and anecdotes about Chapayev:

"Vasiliy Ivanovich <Chapayev> was very fond of beekeepers. And Tetris. Once in a while, he would collect no less than two dozen beekeepers, put them at the edge of the ravine and start giving orders: right hand up - jump! Left leg forward - jump! He would spend entire days like this" (Red Comrades Save the Galaxy).

It is too early to read this joke as nostalgic, as we would the references to Pong in Telltale's *Sam and Max* (Giappone 2015). Pocket Tetris consoles made in China were still all the rage in post-USSR countries in the 1990s. The joke has no 'punch' – it is supposed to be funny simply because it is absurd. The Beekeeper is a character in the game, so the anecdote is intended to be a hidden threat to him in the game's fictional world. If we imagine the game of Tetris, or preferably, the erotic GagBoy Tetris from another popular Russian quest *GAG The Impotent Mystery* (1997), where the tiles of the Tetris game-within-the-game are represented with naked human figures, we may be able to visualise the picture that supposedly made the writers of this joke laugh at their own creation.

The game world of *Red Comrades Save the Galaxy* shares several distinctive features with the fictional world of Pelevin's postmodernist novel *Chapayev and Void,* published two years before. Just as in the novel, its setting is a patchy remix of the Russian Civil War and the post-Soviet nineties, coated with an explosive amalgam of pre- and post-Soviet political and cultural discourses. Some of the similarities between the book and the game can be explained by their shared intellectual climate of the 1990s, with its curiosity about Tibetan mysticism, Chinese Taoism and the Japanese ethical code of samurais, and the glamour of the emerging mafia capitalism represented by "new Russians".

Pelevin in his turn had looked for inspiration in the whimsical worlds of video games since his early work *Prince of Gosplan* in 1991. This short story, also in the style of magical realism, imagines the work of 'inner cogs' of the Soviet-planned economy as a play-through of the video game *Prince of Persia* (1989). Naturally, as soon as we suddenly find ourselves in the 'real' Persia in the story, it contains a reference to the Sufi tradition in the form of a relatively long historical anecdote explaining how to win the game of Soviet central planning (Pelevin, 1998).

Chapayev and Void owes even more of its imaginativeness to the anecdotal tradition than do Pelevin's previous works – as well as to Sufi mysticism, as admitted in Pelevin's foreword. In the final Chapter (10), the narrator finds himself among a group of patients in a psychiatric ward; they are telling anecdotes about Chapayev, and the narrator explains to them that these anecdotes in fact point to a higher spiritual truth; he had lived through similar events himself in his own mystical experiences. Namely, *Chapayev and Void* cites five anecdotes about Chapayev from the academic collection by Melnichenko, registered in the 1980s, and archived under 4379A, 4380A, 4390A, 4409A, 4432 (Melnichenko 2015) - the writer further develops and incorporates these into the plot. Constructed in such a way, Pet'ka Void's experiences – or delusions – continue the epic tradition of anecdotes about Chapayev and transform their playfulness into philosophical exercises in Pelevin's novel.

In its turn, *Red Comrades Save the Galaxy* demonstrates the same playful approach to its folklore material as *Chapayev and Void*. As a result, it recreates the same surrealist atmosphere, albeit by the different means of an interactive adventure game addressed to all audiences. The most striking coincidence (and probably a direct homage to Pelevin) is the scene in the game where Chapayev and Pet'ka encounter a Buddhist monk who is trying to meditate near an urban underground passage in the middle of a rye field, and their task in the game is to help him achieve nirvana.

Fig. 3. Screenshot from the game Red Comrades Save the Galaxy (1998)

Chapayev dies while crossing the river Ural in the canonical film (Chapayev, 1934). In the game, Chapayev and Pet'ka cross Ural in an airplane, which ends up crashing. This episode is followed by another cutscene with a distinctly Pelevinian atmosphere: after coming to their senses, Pet'ka and Chapayev engage in an unexpected philosophical discussion about the difference between life and

death. This discussion is conducted in almost the same tone as in *Chapayev and Void* (Ural is a mystical 'symbolic river of absolute love' that they cross in the novel). Needless to say, Buddhism and philosophical debates in general are otherwise absent from the Chapayev canon in literature and film, as well as from earlier anecdotes about him.

Responding to and commenting on the existing political situation is one of the purposes of Soviet anecdotes. Naturally, it is also present in the game series. A later re-release of *Red Comrades Save the Galaxy* even included a portrait of Vladimir Putin stylised as the Russian Emperor in the secret headquarters of the monarchist White Army. The original version, launched in 1998, includes a curious slip of the tongue from one of the characters – a White imperialist general who mentions Boris Yeltsin, the first president of democratic Russia, in place of Vladimir Lenin. This punchline has a far-reaching meaning: Lenin established the USSR, and Yeltsin established democratic governance in Russia – either one of them would be an enemy to a monarchist.

This doubling of historical reality finds a direct analogy in *Chapayev and Void*. Pelevin's character Pet'ka Void perceives the stereotypical Moscow mafia of the 1990s from the perspective of 1918 (and also through the lens of his cocaine habit; fake cocaine also comes into play in *Red Comrades*). Cocaine or not, these two perspectives coincide in cunning details. The terror of Cheka, the predecessor of the KGB, chimes with the criminal environment of the 1990s. The parallels between the historical events of the 1910-20s and 1990s often make for the 'punchline' of the game about Red Comrades.

Part 3. Playing with Humour and Taking it Apart

Red Comrades Save the Galaxy not only directly quotes several anecdotes from the well-known tradition, it also transposes at least one of them into ludic form (unfortunately, not the one about Tetris). At least one puzzle scene is an adaptation of the actual Soviet anecdote, as recorded in 1980 (Melnichenko 2015, 4378A), which goes like this: Pet'ka disguises himself as a woman driving a horse carriage to cross the camp of the White Army. Upon his triumphant arrival at the camp of the Red Army, "That's nothing, - he says modestly, referring to his own art of disguise, - Unharness Vasily Ivanovich [meaning Chapayev]!" (Melnichenko 2015, 4378A). Crossdressing Pet'ka works as a comical build-up to the deliberately absurd image of Chapayev pretending to be a horse, unexpectedly successful in the context of the whole operation. Accordingly, Chapayev and Pet'ka have to dress up as a woman and as a horse respectively in the game to cross the bridge guarded by the White Army. The guards in the game "do not get the joke", though: they react to it as if it was a bad prank but still let the characters cross the bridge. Two more anecdotes based on wordplay (4438 and 4440A in Melnichenko's corpus of texts) are present in the game, but not adapted into game puzzles – the characters simply reproduce well-known jokes in a dialogue, such as Pet'ka's misunderstanding the word 'mandates' ('mandates' is homophonous with 'you are a c**t' in Russian).

Such absurdist alogism does not guarantee the comical effect. Despite its early success among Russian gamers, *Red Comrades* is not particularly funny even to a native speaker, and especially today. However, Russian players can laugh at Pet'ka telling bad jokes within the game, because they recognise the structural elements of the anecdote genre and can see when they are applied without proper skill. This failure to tell a joke becomes another joke in the game. In the end, could the game be more about deconstructing folk humour rather than its revival?

I suggest that creative deconstruction reaches its aim when the jokes stop being funny, but a larger picture remains meaningful to us. If we define an anecdote as a performative oral genre, a failed performance means the death of an anecdote as an instance of its genre. Meanwhile, an adventure

game, as a genre, still works for its players in this particular case: maybe not the best one, but still perfectly playable.

'Spoiling' the jokes was also Pelevin's goal in *Chapayev and Void*, within a more general perspective of post-Soviet postmodernism that often deconstructed the Soviet myth (see Kuritsyn 2000). Just as in *Red Comrades*, narratives borrowed from anecdotes are replayed as events actually taking place in the fictional world, but this produces different effects: horrifying, rather than funny or silly. Inspired by ancient and modern mystics, Pelevin creates two worlds: the supposedly 'real' world of the psychiatric ward in 1990s' Russia, and the 'antiworld' where Pet'ka finds himself in his delusions. By approaching Soviet anecdotes as if they were real stories, the writer makes this dark 'antiworld' feel uncomfortably real and even horrifying. During his time at the psychiatric ward, Pet'ka tells absurd folklore anecdotes about Chapayev and Kotovsky as if they were historical anecdotes about the real events, with real injuries and casualties. From Pet'ka's own perspective, he shares his lived experience, in the same mode as the storyteller of an early 'skaz about Chapayev' would do. These stories are met with discouraging silence from other psychiatric patients. These are still valid Soviet anecdotes, also archived by Melnichenko – but in this context, they do not land because the listeners perceive them as possibly true stories, reacting with horror rather than laughter. In the modern media, we can observe a somewhat similar procedure of deconstructing humour in the film *Joker* (2019).

Connections between humour and horror have long been observed in earlier cultural traditions. We can rely on their interpretation by the renowned medievalist Dmitry Likhachev who explored the roots of Russian culture. Comical effect in Russian folktales and medieval literature is achieved by referring to a fictional carnivalesque 'antiworld', where the common order of things is inverted and everything is turned upside down: people pull carriages instead of horses, and bears enjoy the party with goats (as in an "old jesters' play" from pre-Christian times (Bakhtin & Moldavskiy, 1962) depicted on the 'lubok' above). Developing Bakhtin's ideas in relation to the origins of the Russian culture, Likhachev also noted that this tradition, at least in folk literature, would dry out as "the antiworld started to resemble the real world too much" (Likhachev 2001). As an example, he brought up the death carnival of 'oprichnina' in the darkest times of Tzar Ivan the Terrible (who, according to Likhachev, still possessed an extraordinary sense of humour himself). In a similar way, the Russian Civil war becomes a surreal carnival of death in *Chapayev and Void*, where its warlord, the historical baron von Ungern, serves as the angel of Death. This expands the fantastic universe of Chapayev into unexpectedly dark territory, as opposed to the video game that never takes itself seriously.

The symbolic Void that Pet'ka represents is not just the abstract Taoist concept. It also stands for the future of the characters in their early post-Soviet years. The prospects of survival in the new economic mode seemed rather bleak to them, especially against the exuberant backdrop of the Russian banditry painted by Pelevin in a colourful but realistic manner. This post-Soviet pessimism often found expression in a particular shade of sarcastic humour known as '*stiob'* in the Russian language: it becomes the leading tone in *Red Comrades Save the Galaxy*, as well as in other adventure games. 'Stiob' means inventive but snarky humour mixed with scorn: there is nothing sacred, everything must be deconstructed and laughed at, particularly the symbols that bear meaning important to others. Instead of an entertaining metacommentary, 'stiob' provides a direct and often unforgiving caricature of the subject, which results in self-destructive tendencies and a generally pessimistic mood among anecdote tellers.

Yurchak sees the origins of 'stiob' in late Soviet humour and in the inner conflict of the intellectual elite: "The humour did not target some abstract 'them' (the system, the dissidents), but looked inside" (Yurchak 2005). The relationship between the system and the dissidents is not as antagonistic as it

may seem: in fact, there would be no dissidents without the system, and the intellectual elite depends on its existence. Arguably, anecdotes about Stierlitz also reflect this ambiguous and often painfully self-aware position of the Soviet intelligentsia (Belousov 1995; Lipovetsky 2007; Jens 2017): the Soviet secret agent Stierlitz is notoriously bad at disguise, but the fascists allow him into their headquarters anyway. However, an early adventure game about Stierlitz, *Operation BUST* (2000), is itself an example of rather crude 'stiob' at Stierlitz that replaced the original absurdist humour with uninventive sexual references. Unfortunately, the same thing happens in all sequels of *Red Comrades*.

Metatextuality is often mentioned as one of the distinguishing features of Soviet anecdotes. Speaking of such framing, Yurchak describes the ritual of "collective repetition and enjoyment" in a group of people who would retell old and already familiar anecdotes to each other. The elements of surprise and resolution are absent in such situations; the original intent is sharing for the feeling of community. Shmeleva and Shmelev describe the same cultural practice and even quote the same metatextual anecdote about telling anecdotes as Yurchak, specifically noting that this anecdote exists in many forms. They suggest the existence and popularity of a separate oral genre, "an anecdote reminder" (Shmeleva and Shmelev 2002, p.22), while Astapova describes them as meta-jokes (Astapova 2020):

> 'A company gets together, people in it have given numbers to all the well-known jokes. "Joke number 72!" Laughter follows. "Joke number 354!" Laughter follows. A neophyte has to tell the joke, and as he wants to pretend he knows this tradition, he says out of the blue, "Joke number 811!" The others say, "Not in front of the ladies please!" [presumably this number refers to a ribald joke] (Melnichenko 2014:661, quoted from Astapova, 2020).

Is this also the case with the humour of *Red Comrades*? It certainly addresses the audience that knows and loves anecdotes about Chapayev, but it hardly ever becomes intentionally metafictional as a game, unlike early 'adventure games' in the USA (Giappone 2015). Early Russian adventure games rarely 'break the fourth wall' or play jokes on their players in an intentionally clever way. Instead, they presented themselves as metatextual framing devices, as a stage for their characters to tell familiar anecdotes once again - and in this way, such games functioned as 'anecdote reminders'. Russian gamers already had access to Western games thanks to endemic piracy. What the developers sought was something local and specific, something to connect with players on the affective level, and to contribute to their own real life quest for new collective identities amidst the ruins of the USSR. This is why minor characters in *Red Comrades Save the Galaxy* are so realistic: they represent social types (a barmen, a bouncer, an alcoholic war veteran, a fashion photographer, a model…) that would be an indispensable part of big city life in the 1990s. Dubrovskaya and Tsykalova even humorously call *Pilot Brothers* "a sex symbol of our lost generation" (Dubrovskaya and Tsykalova 1997). As Viktor Pelevin wrote in *Chapayev and Void*, this generation "was programmed for life in one socio-cultural paradigm, but has found itself living in a quite different one" (Pelevin 2001), and this experience was the primary object of reflection in all types of the Russian-speaking media until the end of the 20th century.

Conclusion and Discussion

Today, we may look at such games as *Red Comrades* as "anecdote reminders". The game itself is not particularly funny: its artistic merit is limited to slapstick comedy and echoes of the rich tradition of Soviet (not always specifically Russian) animation. However, to a post-Soviet gamer, it is funny precisely because it is about Chapayev, Pet'ka and Anka. It recalls the anecdotal tradition, still alive in the player's cultural background. Players' sentiments towards these awkward, kitschy characters are based on affectionate, even nostalgic, recognition and self-identification – not with the playable characters themselves, but with the folklore tradition they come from. Formerly, anecdotes served

as a shared language to describe the sometimes absurd Soviet reality; later, games based on these anecdotes reflected the challenges of living through the ‘roaring’ 1990s.

The transmedia journey of familiar characters cardinally changes the way the stories about them are told. We should see it as a procedure similar to translation, or “transposing an oral genre into the written form" (Shmeleva and Shmelev 2002). In our case, an oral genre of speech has been transposed into the ludic medium of a comical adventure game, seemingly without much friction: both anecdotes and non-serious adventure games willingly abandon realism and defy logic in favour of absurdist humour. Still, even well-known jokes did not land when replayed as virtual re-enactments; why replay them at all, then? Likhachev suggested that one of the most distinguishing features of medieval humour in texts was its turn onto the readers themselves, in the process of reading: the readers are laughing at themselves while they read (Likhachev 2001). Readers playfully interact with a relatively underexplored medium (early medieval literature, in Likhachev’s case) and extract humour from the very act of this interaction. The same can be said about the players of early ‘Russian quest’ games.

Laughing at oneself while telling an anecdote destroys the joke unless it is a self-aware, potentially deconstructive act. Was this also the case with adventure games in Russia? Did they also destroy the anecdotes they were based on by making them not funny? Today, we do not see internet memes based on Soviet anecdotes; the changed landscape of media and the modes of its circulation took uncensored expressions of one’s political views elsewhere and wrapped them into a different form. As far as we know, early adventure games became the latest, and probably the last meaningful segment of Chapayev’s legendary journey, a very late instance of his postmodernist deconstruction in the Russian culture – deconstruction still best accomplished in *Chapayev and Void*.

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Keyterms (8)

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