

# Some results of the Sociological Study «Computer Games and the Politics of Memory»

## Некоторые итоги социологического исследования «Компьютерные игры и политика памяти»

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify the distinctive features of Russian gamers. The tasks include determining the conditions for politicization of gamers, discovering their political and symbolic preferences, considering the potential of computer games with a historical plot in shaping the politics of memory of the whole country. The main methodological optics are the principles of sociological survey. The communication capabilities of computer games were interpreted using Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism model. The results showed that the respondents mostly choose the single-player mode in computer games; therefore, the working hypothesis that gamers are trying to switch to the multiuser mode has not been yet confirmed. Although it is not yet clear how the situation on the market and among gamers will evolve in the future. Therefore, a rather controversial topic now arises for further discussion. Most respondents confirm the fact that historical events are distorted through computer games, but players interpret this as an act of creativity rather than intentional political manipulation. It is noteworthy that there are two distinct categories of players who are interested in the history of the 20th century and the Middle Ages. These periods are extremely important for the development of political identity since the medieval period is associated with the historical roots and formation of the country, and the 20th century is associated with significant turning points for Russia. Computer games are becoming an important communication channel that is open to politicization. First, the possibility for such politicization is determined by previous cases of distorting historical facts. Second, the survey showed that the gaming community in Russia is ready to contribute to the protection of historical truth. Third, the fact that Russian gamers need clear and recognizable political symbols in computer games with a historical plot is fundamentally important.

**Keywords:** computer games, politics of memory, digitalization, history, sociological research, political symbolism, stereotypes, Herbert Bloomer, Symbolic Interactionism.

## Аннотация

Целью статьи является выявление специфики аудитории российских геймеров, задачами – определение условий политизации геймеров, обнаружение их политико-символических предпочтений, рассмотрение потенциалов компьютерных игр с историческим сюжетом в формировании политики памяти целой страны. Основной методологической оптикой стали принципы социологического анкетирования. Коммуникационные возможности компьютерных игр интерпретированы с помощью предложенной Г. Блумером модели символического интеракционизма. Результаты показали, что респонденты в основном выбирают одиночный режим игр, следовательно, рабочая гипотеза о том, что геймеры стремятся перейти на многопользовательский вариант компьютерных игр, на данный момент не подтвердилась. Хотя пока не известно, как ситуация на рынке и среди геймеров будет складываться в дальнейшем. Поэтому наметилась довольно дискуссионная тема для дальнейшего обсуждения. Большинство респондентов признает факт искажения исторических событий посредством компьютерных игр, но игроки интерпретируют это как некий акт творчества, а не целенаправленную политическую манипуляцию. Примечательно, что среди игроков отчетливо видны две категории, интересующиеся историей XX в. и средних веков. Выявленные периоды чрезвычайно важны для формирования политической идентичности, ведь средневековый период связан с историческими корнями, становлением страны, а XX в. с крупными переломными моментами для нашей России. Компьютерные игры становятся важным коммуникационным каналом, открытым для политизации. Во-первых, возможность такой политизации определяется уже существующими прецедентами искажения исторических фактов. Во-вторых, опрос показал, что сложившееся в России геймерское сообщество готово участвовать в защите исторической истины. В-третьих, принципиально важным наблюдением является тот факт, что у российских игроков существует большой запрос на ясные и узнаваемые политические символы в компьютерных играх с историческим сюжетом.

**Ключевые слова:** компьютерные игры, политика памяти, цифровизация, история, социологическое исследование, политическая символика, стереотипы, Герберт Блумер, символический интеракционизм.

## Introduction

Computer games are increasingly transforming into a popular form of political communication for modern citizens, and not just for youth. This process is caused by several factors.

First, scientific and technological progress and the wide spread of social media lead to the evolution of human consciousness and behavior. There is the "mosaic thinking" effect (the term introduced by F. Girenok) that does not imply logical transitions between categories (as opposed to conceptual thinking) and is characterized by the individual receiving very fragmented information through the visual imagery and vivid memorable images. As Umberto Eco once noted, humanity is moving into the "new Middle Ages" because of preferring images that attract attention rather than long texts. The "mosaic thinking" effect led to the emergence of the concept of the "phygital world," according to which the former enthusiasm of Generation Y (millennials) in social media is gradually replaced by a hybrid lifestyle of the following Generation Z. Representatives of this generation consider the real physical world in close connection with the virtual online world.

Second, computer game developers often use historical facts and personalities to create an exciting storyline. Surely, the main goal of developers is to attract the attention of gamers to their products. But the problem is that emotional triggers (features of the game plot and instructions to keep an individual's attention) [3] create risks leading to the destruction of historical thinking due to the appearance of stereotypes and even persistent historical fakes. The phygital world provides a key to understanding the fact why computer games constantly use a combination of genuine historical facts and fiction, which sometimes provokes young people to doubt the reality that has not previously been reinterpreted. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the distinctive features of Russian gamers. The tasks include determining the conditions for politicization of gamers, discovering their political and symbolic preferences, considering the potential of computer games with a historical plot in shaping the politics of memory of the whole country. The working hypothesis suggested that gamers seek to switch to a multiuser (multithousand) computer game mode, which leads to new political challenges and consequences for society and the state.

## Scientific literature review

Before proceeding to the study itself, it is important to identify the most significant research papers dedicated to assessing the role of computer games in forming the politics of memory and manipulating the public mind. A famous American scientist studying the social effects of computer games is Ian Bogost. For example, in his monograph, he analyzes in detail the games (similar to the early *Antiwargame*) that contain many stereotypes about politics, culture, and religion of different nations [2]. He notes that in the *Antiwargame*, gamers need to manipulate citizens and conquer eastern states that have oil reserves. The militaristic stereotype is obvious. It is noteworthy that after a missile hits all civilians in this game turn into terrorists, and this is also a rather crude political stereotype.

Evren Şar Işbilen from Istanbul University found out that students already get information about the historical process and the past of human civilization from computer games with historical plots (*Assassin's Creed*, *Call of Duty*, *Age of Empires*, *Age of Mythology*, etc.) [5], whereas researchers from Glasgow and Cardiff carried out a content analysis of 57 games and found that Russians as an "enemy image" are ahead of aliens and terrorists [7].

Today, some countries understand the importance of computer games as a new political communication channel where the public can internalize meanings and values. Thus, the USA pursue a purposeful politics of memory using the patriotically oriented computer game *America's Army* [6]. M. Shulske notes that this game has a value basis in the form of the so-called "ideological map," which instills a sense of duty, honor, and patriotism in the gamers—the traits clearly opposed to the image of a terrorist. So far, Singapore [4], Turkey, Argentina, and the Czech Republic have only experimented with the politics of memory. In most countries, no nationwide politics of memory has been formed yet.

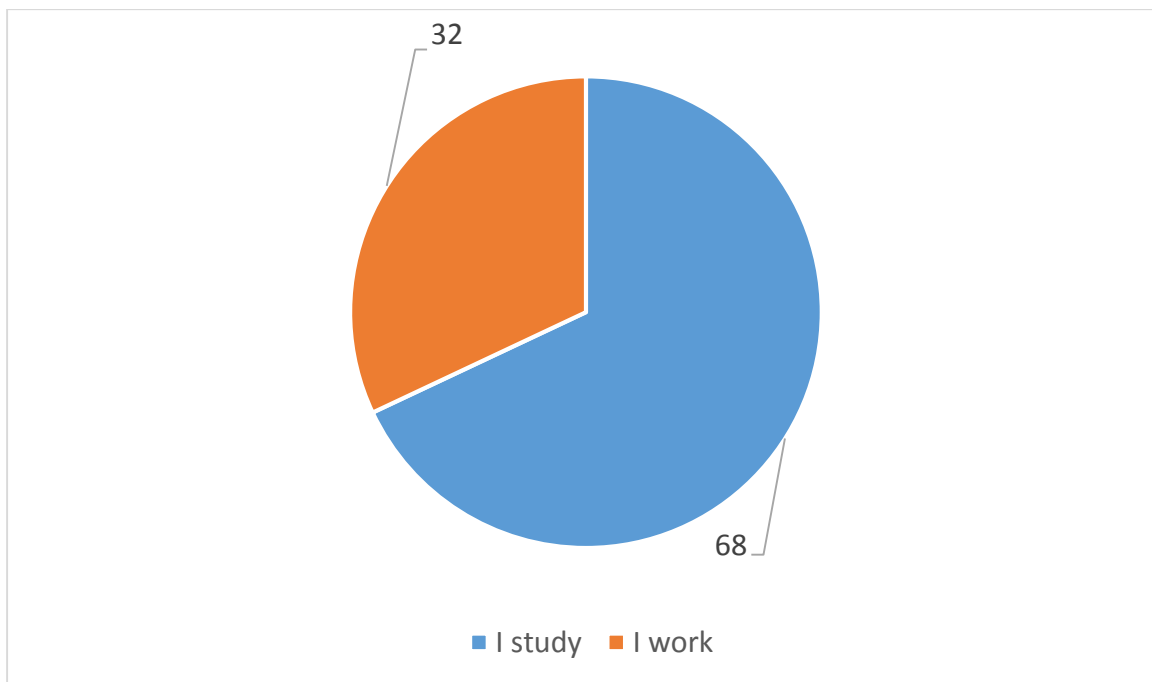
## Methods

The basic methodological research optics initially supposed to use the principles of a sociological survey. To simplify the calculation of the results, a special questionnaire was used (see Appendix 1) based on a Google form. The questionnaire contained 22 open and closed questions. Links to the online questionnaire were posted on gaming forums. Open questions implied the possibility of several answers. Percentage calculation was carried out in the automated Google system. The survey was conducted in November 2019.

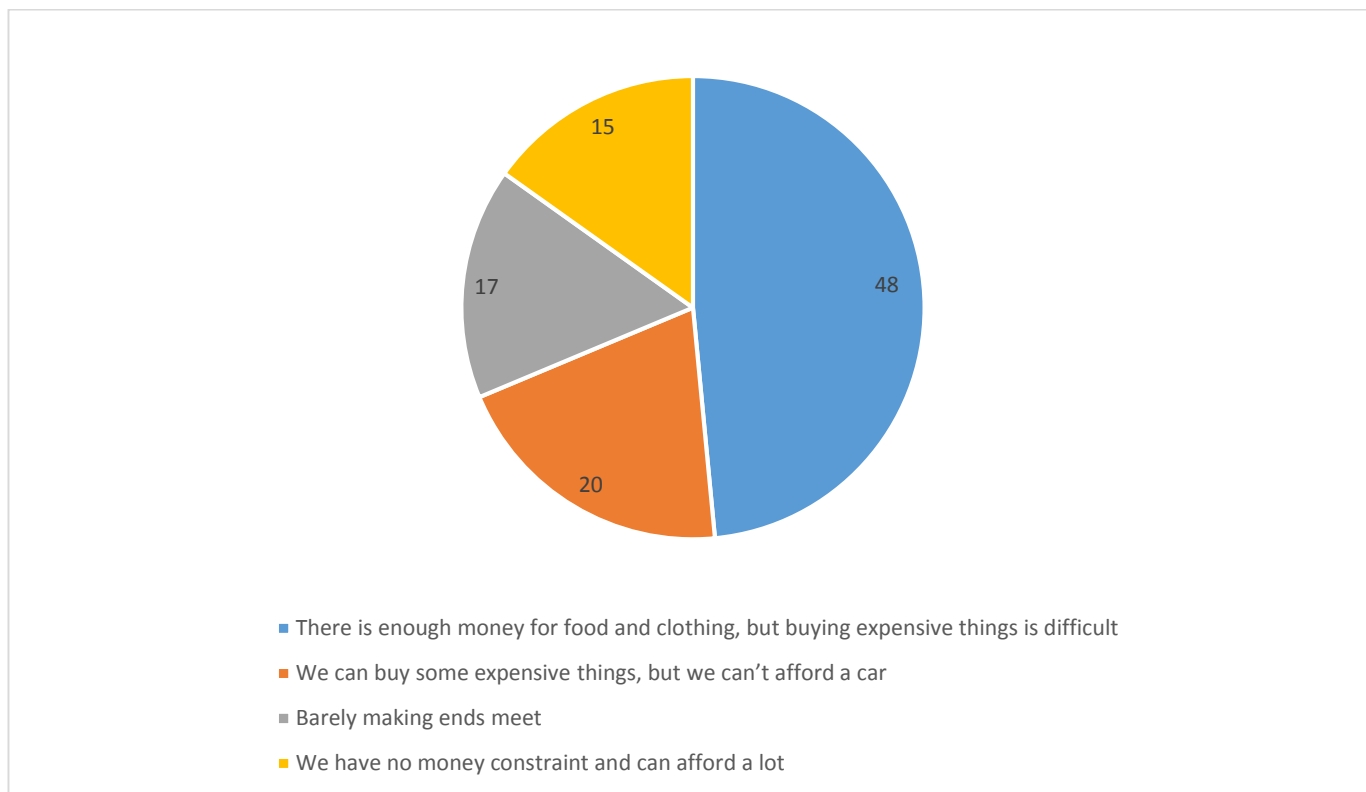
The number of respondents was 1,100. Most of the respondents live in Moscow, the Moscow Region, and Saint Petersburg. Other regions also participated in the survey, including the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Tyumen Region, Syktyvkar, Vorkuta, Sakhalin, etc.

### Results

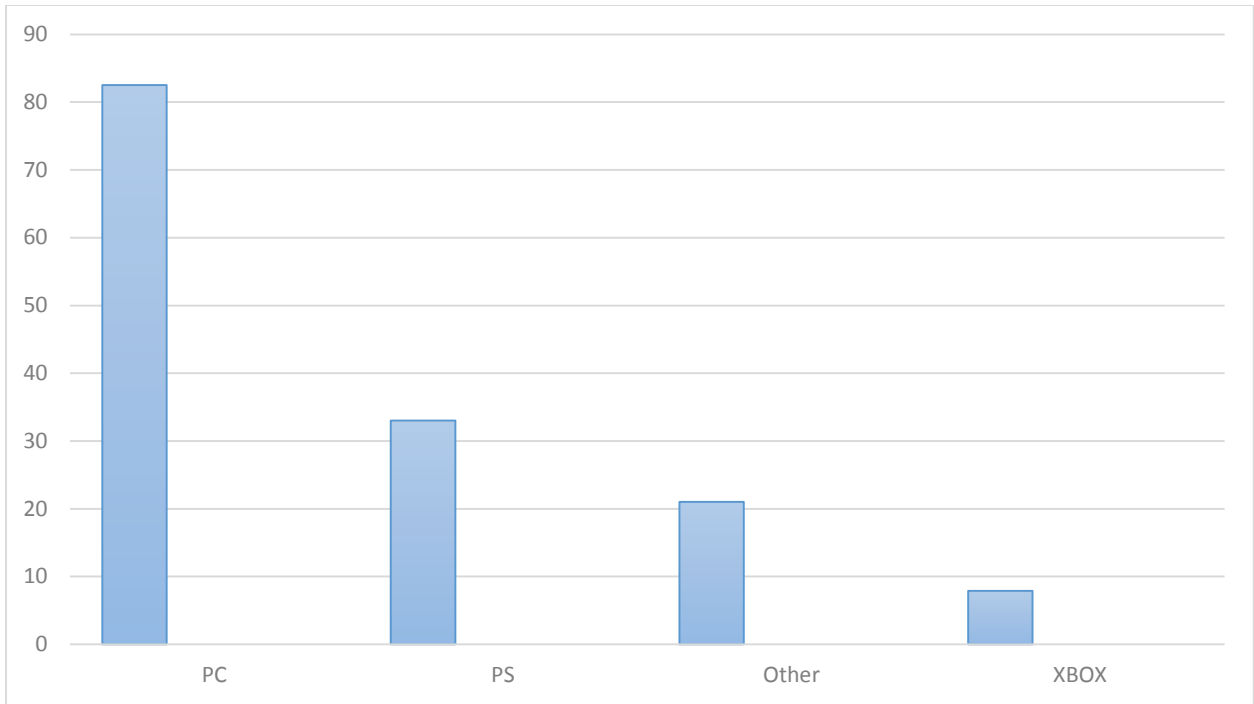
Most gamers (75%) are male. The gamers' age mainly ranges from 16 to 21, they are students (68%) and sales or IT employees (32%). Among those who study, 63% are university students (they checked "university not completed"), while 14% are college students. The most interesting results are shown in the diagrams (see figures 1–14).



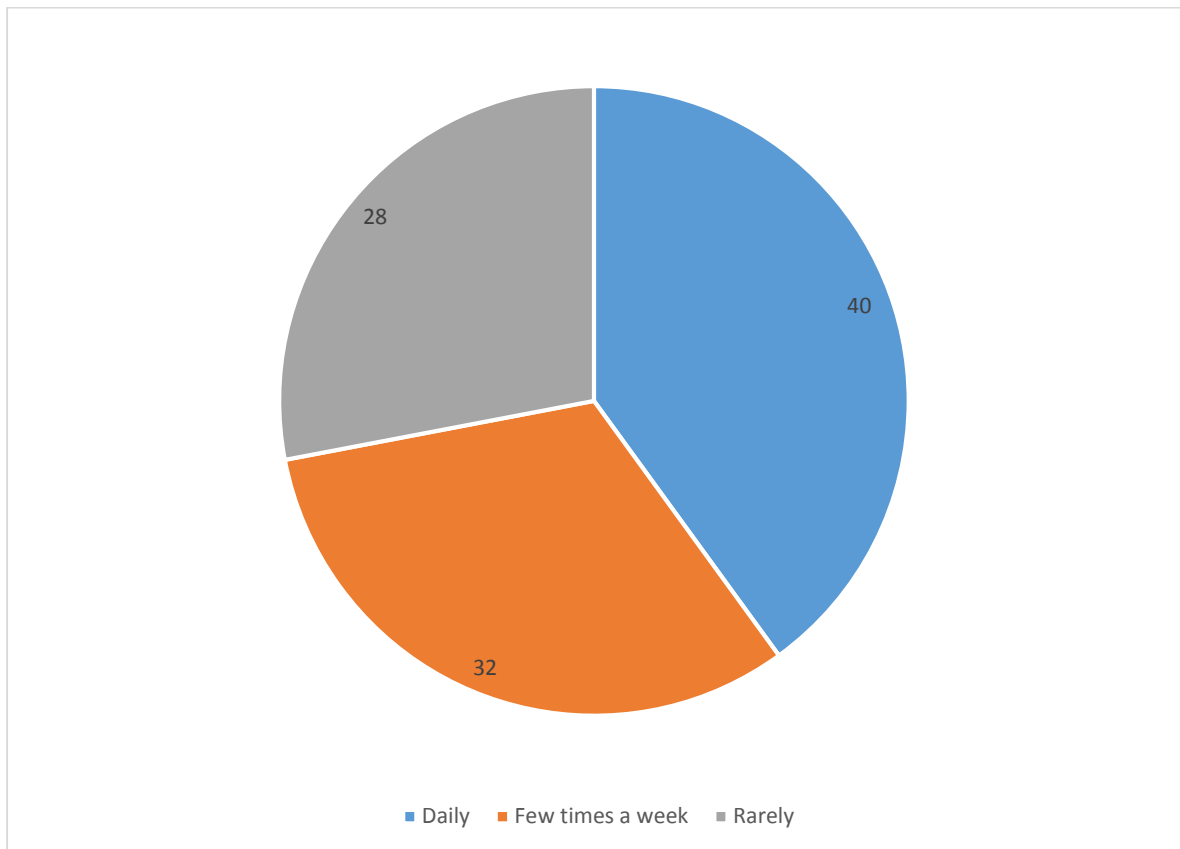
**Figure 1.** Employment status of Russian gamers (%)



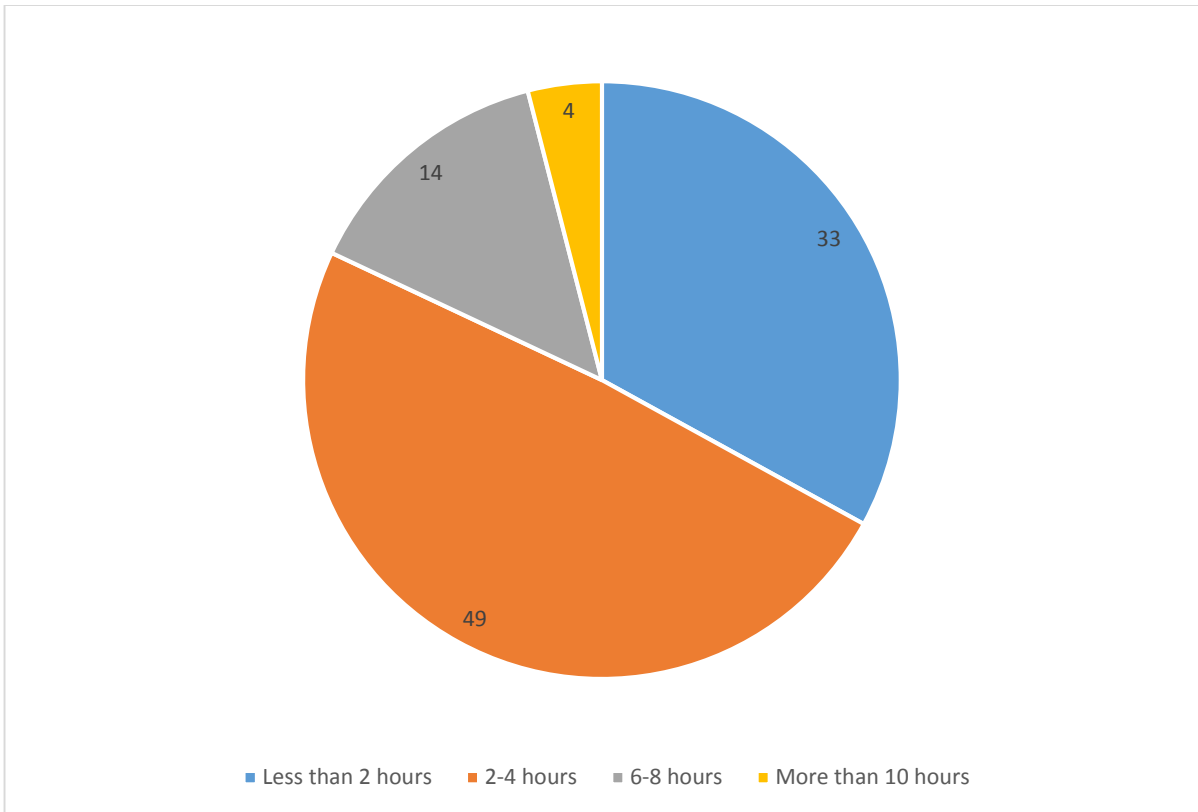
**Figure 2.** Social identification of Russian gamers (%)



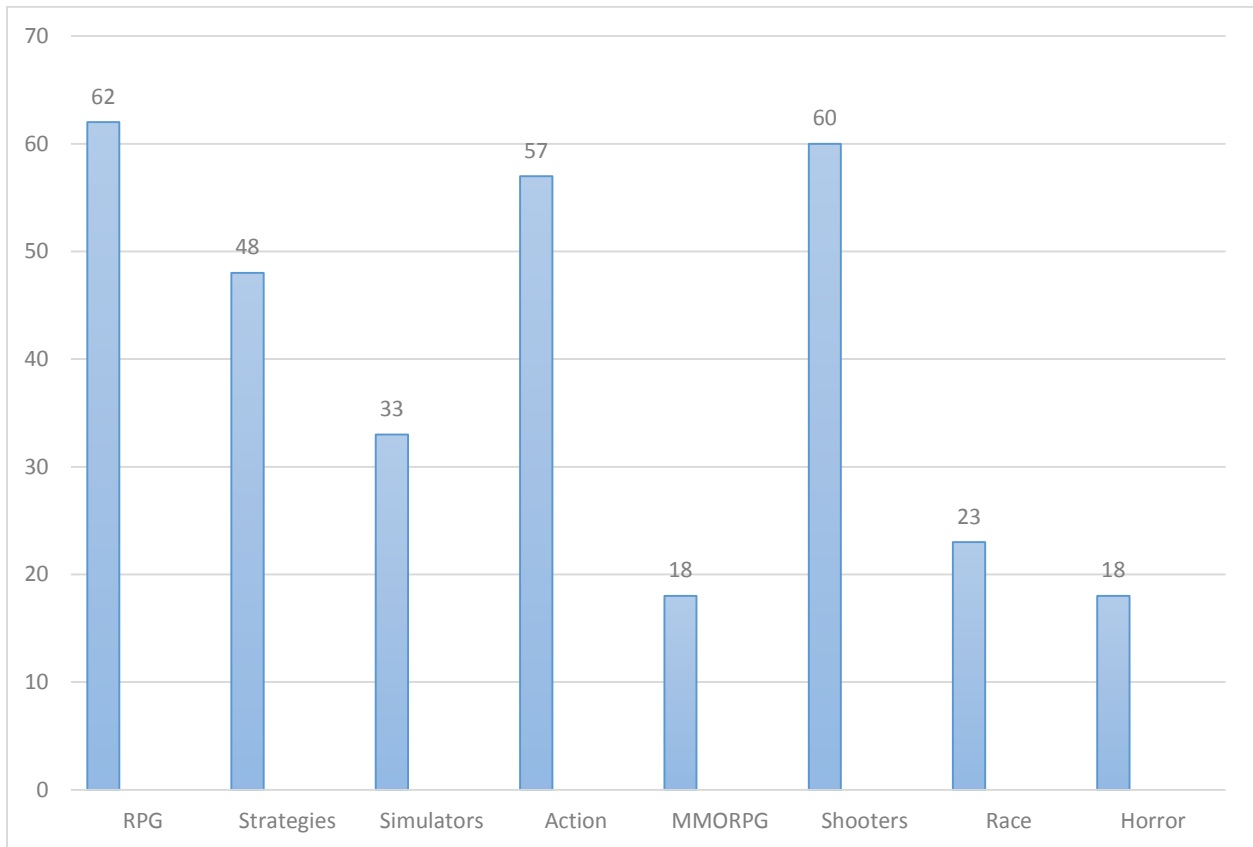
**Figure 3. Popular gaming platforms**  
(%, a multiple-choice question)



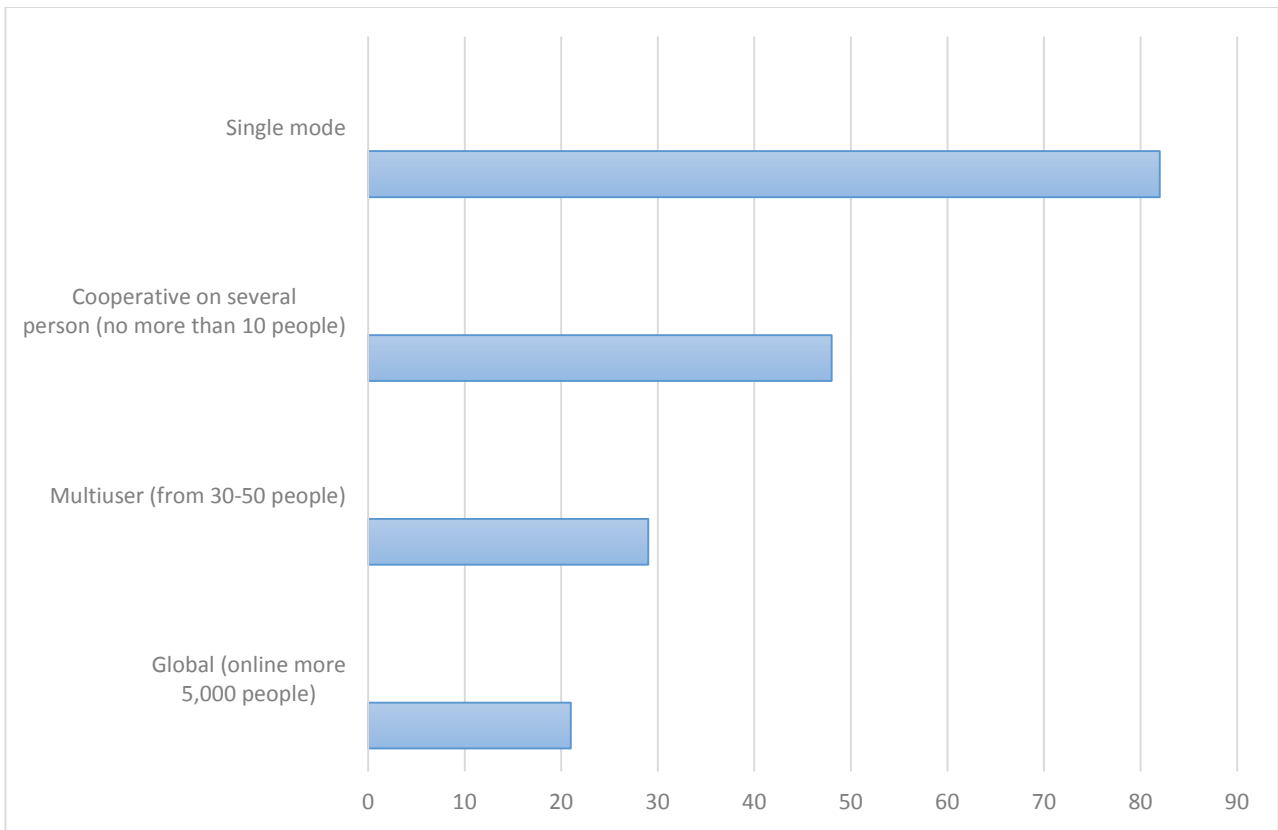
**Figure 4. How often do you play computer games? (%)**



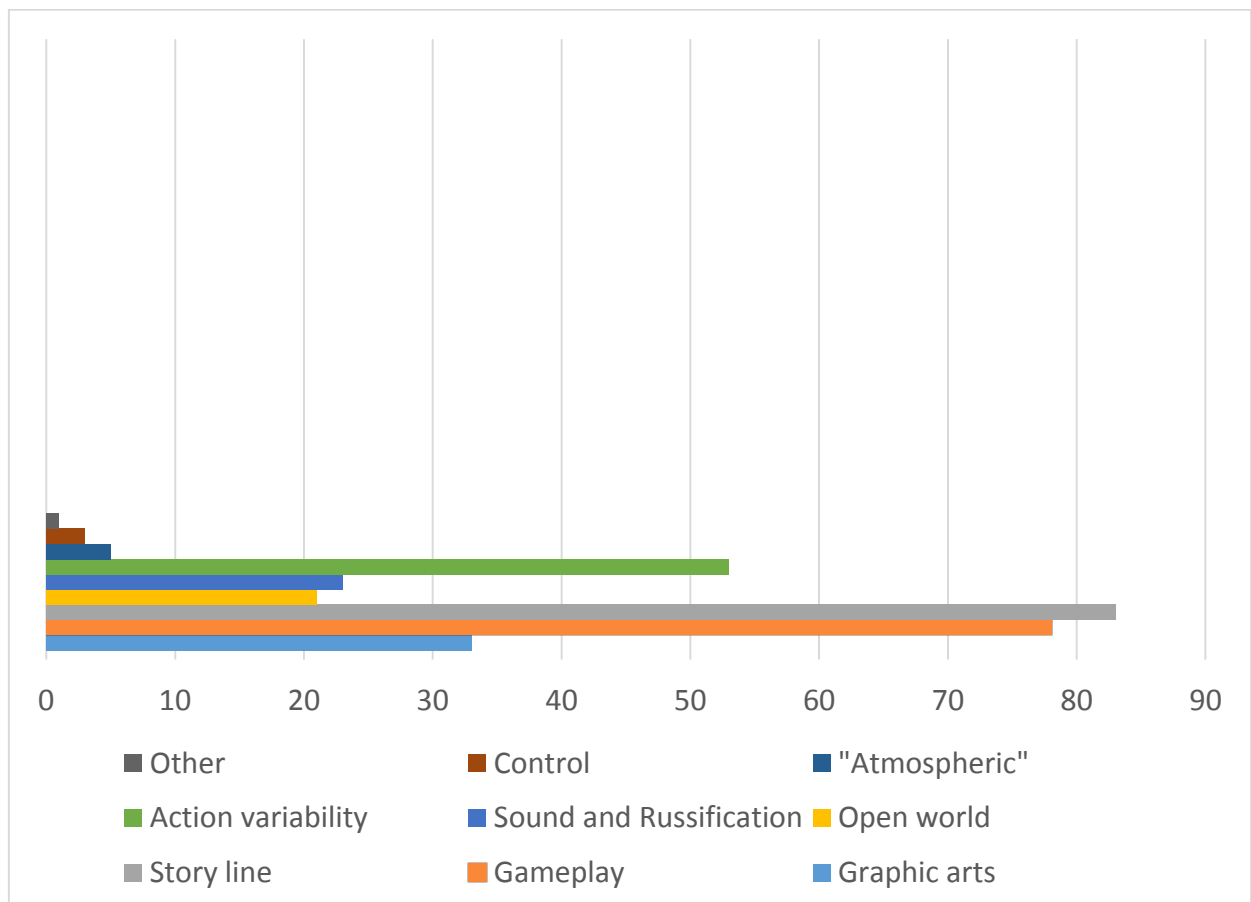
**Figure 5.** How much time per day (on average) do you spend playing computer games? (%)



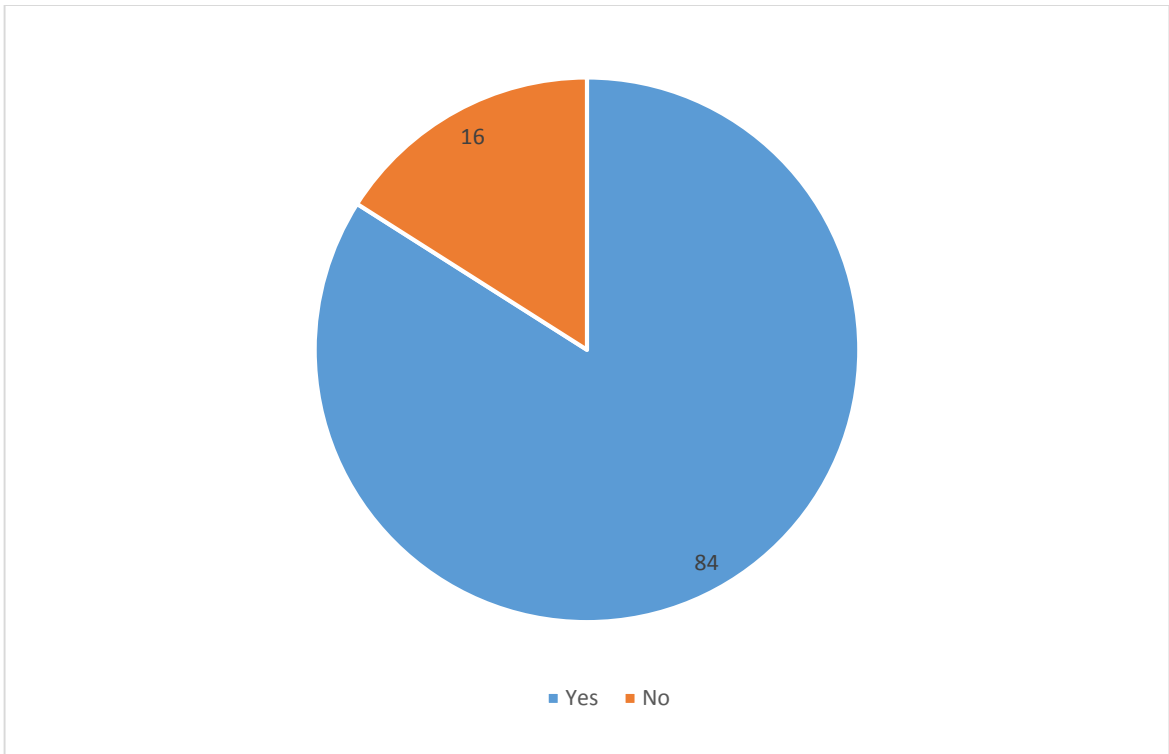
**Figure 6.** Popular game genres (% a multiple-choice question)



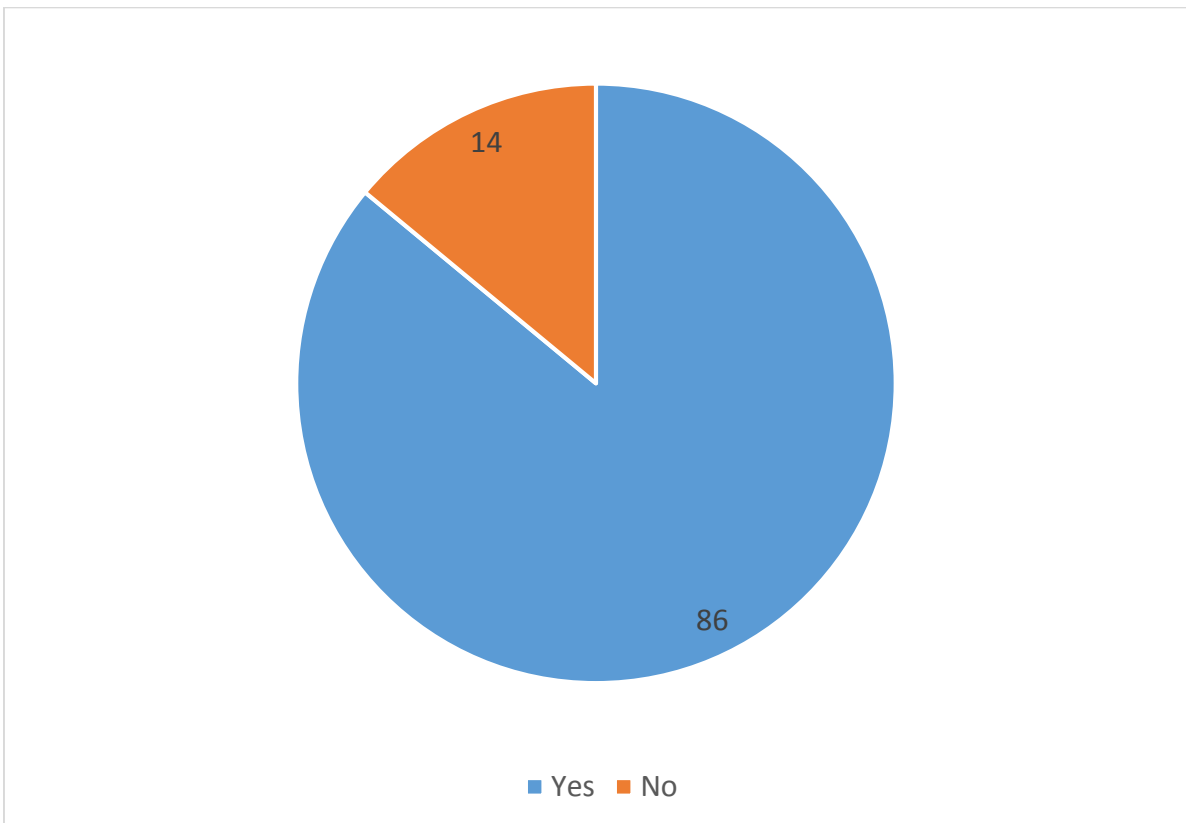
**Figure 7.** The most common game modes (% , a multiple-choice question)



**Figure 8.** What is it about games that appeals to you? (% , a multiple-choice question)

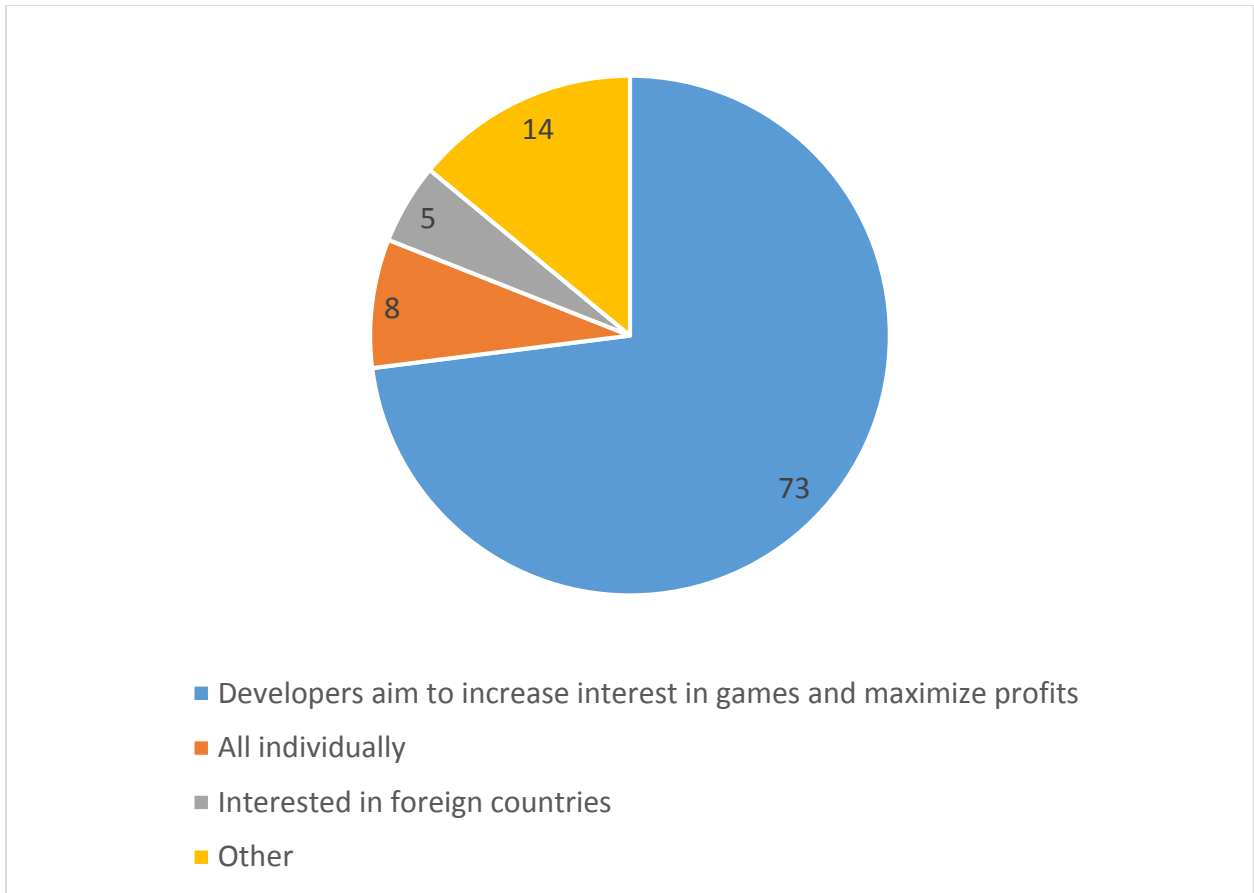


**Figure 9.** Have you ever played computer games with a historical plot? (%)

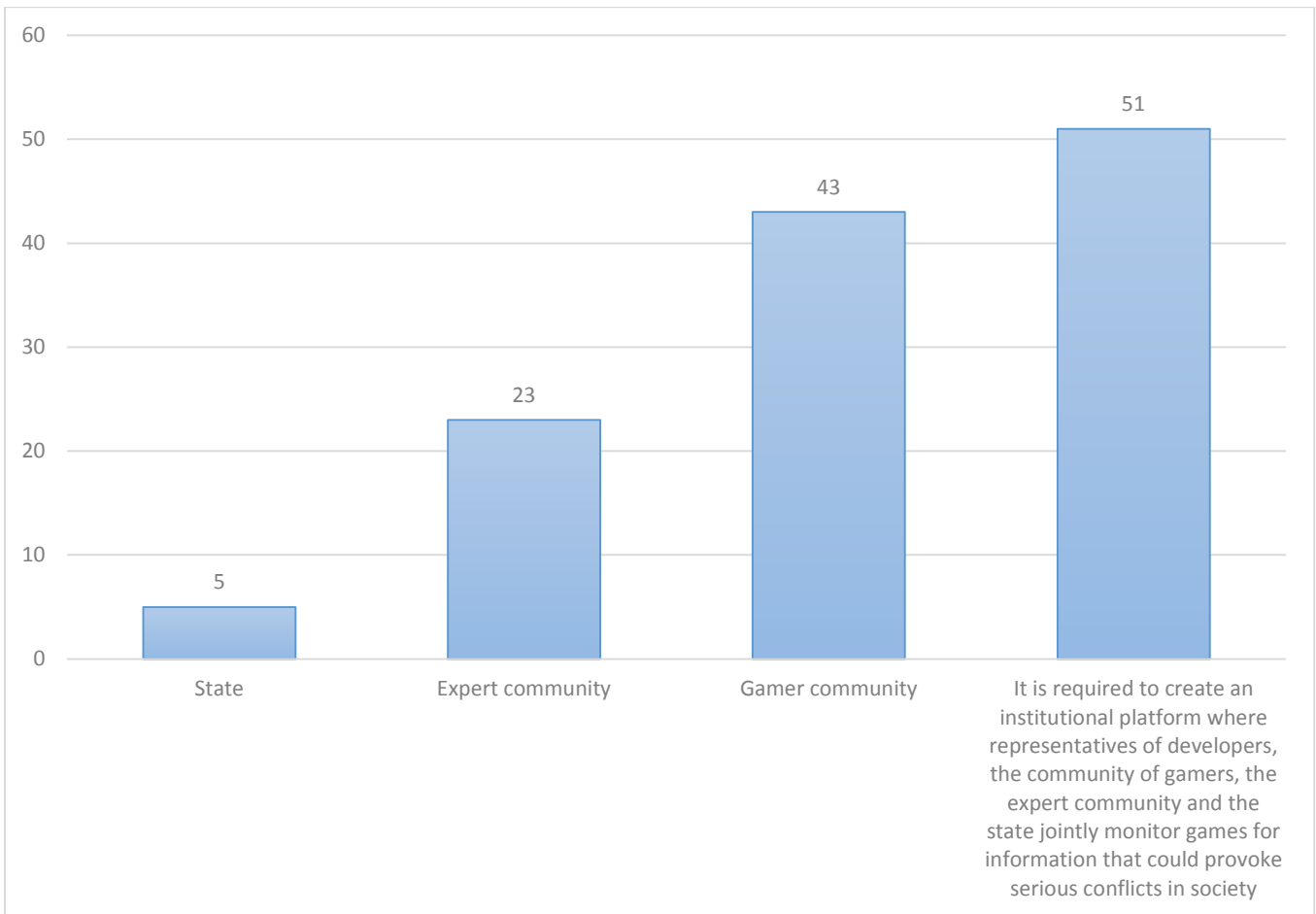


**Figure 10.** Do you think that history can be distorted in computer games? (%)

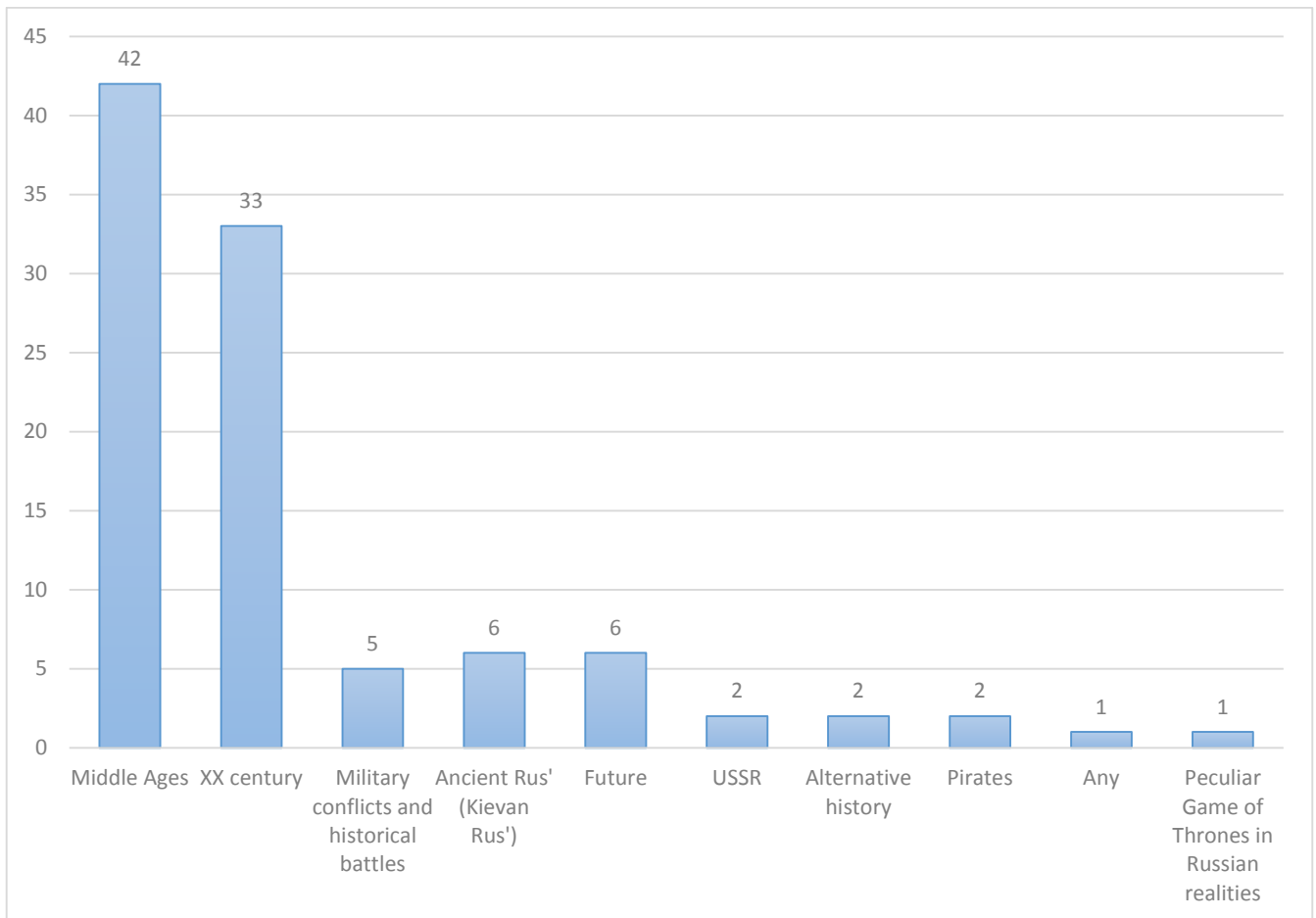




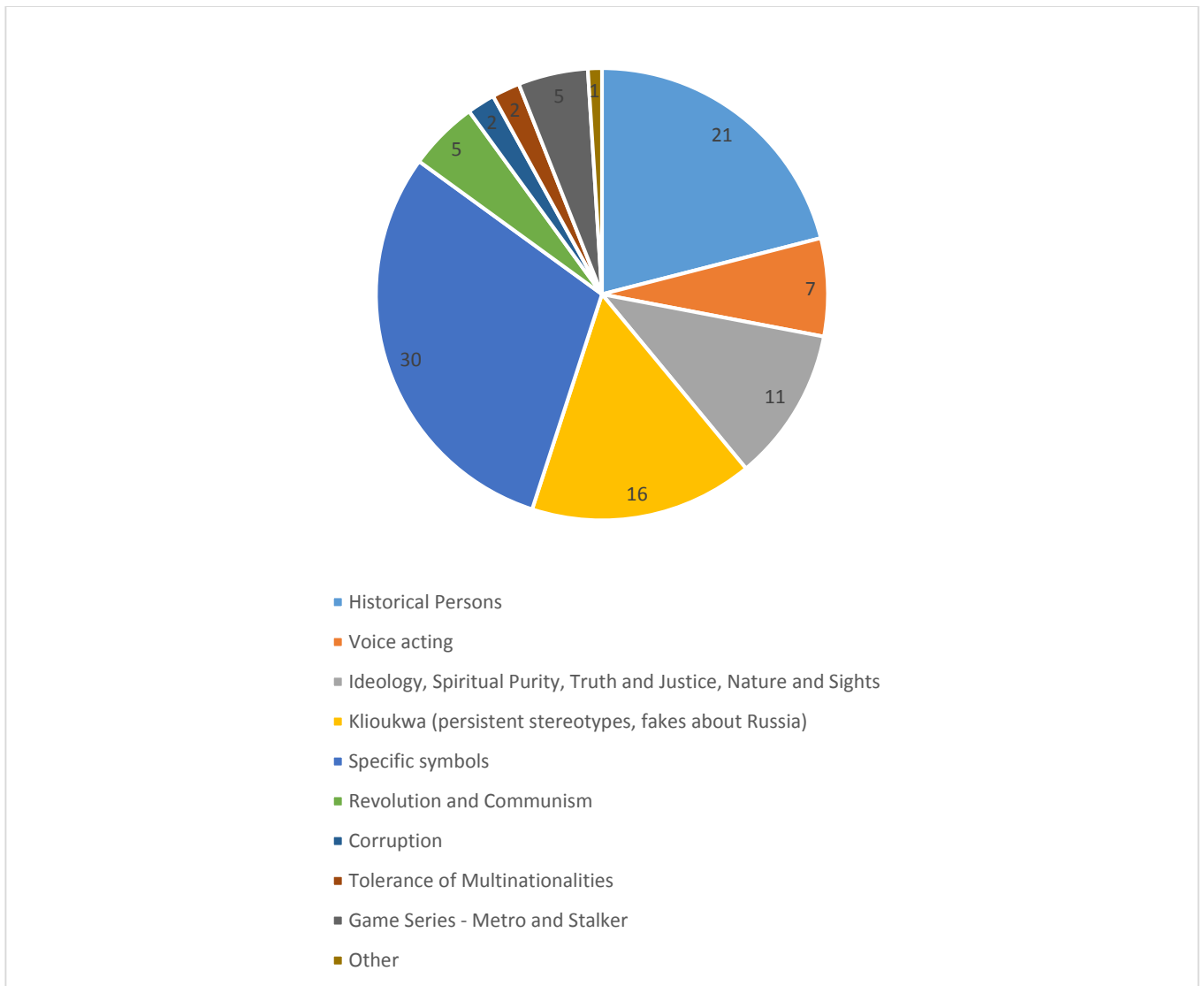
**Figure 11.** Why is history distorted in computer games? (%)



**Figure 12.** Who do you think should monitor fakes and stereotypes in computer games that distort history and can cause discord among people? (% , a multiple-choice question)



**Figure 13.** What historical plot in the games are you interested in? (indicate historical events or century) (%)



**Figure 14.** What do you think the image of Russia in computer games should be? (please write your own opinion)

### Interpretation, Discussion and Conclusions

Most of the Russian gamers consider themselves the middle class, 48% of the citizens have enough money for food. However, buying expensive items is difficult. However, 20% can get some expensive things and still cannot afford a car (figure 2). Earnings of 17% of gamers are slightly above the poverty level. A comparable number (15%) of gamers can afford to buy whatever they want. Given that computer games in the future can evolve and offer multiuser modes, the online nature of the gaming subculture creates the conditions for the formation of a new type of communication, including political communication. It can be assumed that those gamers who are most dissatisfied with their material (career, status, etc.) standing may turn to a political collaboration or create political party forms. This scenario is quite likely since a similar precedent has already been in Russia. Also, Barack Obama used computer games during his presidential campaign. Blumer's symbolic interactionism model [1] provides a good explanation to this aspect of computer games: any community, including the gaming one, can generate the so-called "functional groups" that are able to take on managerial functions in this communication process. Gamers mostly prefer desktop personal computers (PCs). Perhaps PCs are most suited to the technical and software requirements of modern computer games (figure 3).

As can be seen from the survey, the amount of time spent by gamers is very heterogeneous (figures 4–5). Although in terms of duration, small segments of time (game sessions) dominate. Currently, a large share of the market is moving to session-type computer games. If we take into account the possible politicization of those players who are most dissatisfied with their social status, then a short game session can also be used to create focus groups and a chat to solve completely conspiratorial tasks, including exchanging opinions using the gaming slang to discuss political issues and deploy their own network of active members. Modern

technology makes it possible to establish this kind of partisan-type political communication. Blockchain and artificial intelligence encryption technologies can take the conspiracy of such political communication to a new level. All that is lacking is the ideological component and the factor of having a political leader, "partisation," and the party identity of gamers. However, the potential of creating cybersimulacra with the functions of echo chambers and their own political worlds based on computer gaming universes may well construct a new type of political mythology. For example, the worlds of computer games devoted to history and historical periods directly addressing the subject of identity can become the basis for them. The risks of destabilizing the political process are also associated with the fact that law enforcement agencies practically do not have experts on gaming subcultures. Such issues are discussed very rarely and in a rather narrow circle of experts. Therefore, a more proactive government policy is needed in this regard, from monitoring existing and creating proprietary computer games to developing a patriotically oriented gaming subculture based on computer games with a historical plot. This is necessary to prevent the radicalization of the gaming community.

Gamers generally do not think that time is wasted on games. Thus, games are an important part of the gamers' lives, which means that games can be used by political actors. The concept of phygital world should also be taken into account as gamers are getting acquainted with a number of symbols, meanings, and interpretations from computer games that become so realistic that it becomes more and more difficult to draw a clear line between the real world and the virtual one.

Among the most popular game genres are RPGs, shooters, and action games (figure 6). It is likely that most gamers take the game seriously (RPGs) or prefer a fast-paced and emotionally entertaining gameplay that helps relax after a hard day (shooters and action games). This observation gives rise to a subsequent scholarly debate. The possible "partisation" of dissatisfied gamers entails certain risks. Some extremist forces can use shooters to train the combat wing of a radical political group. The government should consider these risks. Also, the polled gamers liked the SimCity simulator (the 20th question on the questionnaire with a choice of pictures).

About 80% of respondents choose single-player games. Consequently, the working hypothesis about the transition of players to the multiuser mode has not been confirmed, although it is not yet known how the market situation and the preferences of gamers will develop in the future. In other words, there is a topic for further discussion. Perhaps further research will be needed to clarify this issue. The preference for single-player mode (figure 7) so far indicates that gamers are not yet ready for mass politicization. Probably, some new impulse is needed from developers or political strategists (of course, it is better if political radicals are not involved in this process) to change this situation. However, slightly less than half of the gamers do agree to a cooperative mode (up to 10 users). Thus, it can be assumed that the politicization of communication based on computer games can start not with large (5,000+ users) and medium (up to 50 users) groups but with small ones (up to 10 users), which goes well with the political conspiracy and blockchain-based communication encryption technologies. On the other hand, the formation of many such microgroups may involve the deployment of a complex network of autonomous units that select their own leaders at the local level but share a common ideology within a common cybersimulacrum. The government should take these risks into account and at least monitor such processes until there is a developed domestic industry of games with a historical plot aimed at a clear strategy that implies patriotic education and the formation of a symbolically rich and understandable macropolitical identity of Russians who would be proud of their country's history and will be ready to protect national interests.

Russian gamers care about the plot, gameplay, and variability (figure 8). At the same time, gamers want to participate in the gameplay. An interesting plot is a request for the present-day "ideological character." The storytelling mode and the "historical games" format are able to offer necessary elements for creating such closed-loop cybersimulacra. But will it be a patriotic core of values or something else? The government shouldn't ignore this phenomenon.

Obviously, most gamers have played games with a historical plot (figure 9). The historical plot gives what is missing for the next step in the politicization of the world of computer games, including the values and ideology for creating closed-loop cybersimulacra. This observation is extremely important as the interest of gamers in the "historical games" will sooner or later be used by political actors. The question is what the nature of these actors will be.

Most of the respondents (86%) recognize the fact of distortion of historical events using computer games (figure 10). However, the gamers interpret this as an act of creativity rather than intentional political

manipulation. Meanwhile, Russian gamers (73%) are sure that the reason for the distortion of history in computer games is the developers' hunger for profit (figure 11). Gamers, as a special group of users, do not want to delegate the solution to the issue of monitoring fakes in games to anyone else. They are ready to do this themselves (figure 11). This observation is interesting in that it can testify to a nascent gaming identity that political stakeholders can use. By and large, gamers will gradually be able to move to a new level of communication through games. But the important question is what role the government will take in this communication process. This aspect can be interpreted using Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism model. The dual "transaction" process includes "interpretation" and "definition" [1]. Thanks to the "interpretation," a gamer receives symbolic instructions from other individuals (gamers and game developers) in the form of a ready-made assessment and interpretation of historical facts, and the "definition" implies the construction of ready-made meanings and models for interpreting the history imposed on an individual by collective opinion. It can be assumed that such a symbolic transaction may increase during the evolution of popular games toward the multithousand user format.

The answers to the question about the historical plot (figure 13) are also interesting. The outcome is of great political and symbolic significance. The gamers can be divided into two categories: those who are interested in the history of the 20th century (33%) and in the history of the Middle Ages (42%). These periods are extremely important for the formation of political identity since the medieval period is associated with the historical roots of the country, and the 20th century is associated with significant turning points for Russia, including the First World War, revolutions, the history of the Soviet Union, and the Second World War. These topics are of interest to Russian gamers and can be used by political actors and political strategists to construct ideologies, create political parties and a new type of identity. It is noteworthy that in the Czech Republic (Masaryk University in Brno) they have already set out to teach history using computer games since 2020, planning to analyze historical stereotypes and myths.

The most common answer to the last open question (figure 14) is "Specific symbols." The gamers mentioned the Eagle, the Kremlin, Buckwheat, AK-47 as well as the "sickle and hammer." Following the "Symbols" are "Historical persons," among whom the most popular are Vladimir Putin, Joseph Stalin, and Peter the Great. The answers also include "A strong and tough man" and the name Ivan. Gamers find a large amount of the so-called "klioukwa" (extremely implausible and grotesque information about Russia) in games. Interestingly, this answer is the third most popular. The respondents rather stated that this phenomenon exists. This is very important since the government can cooperate with gamers to identify fakes and prevent their appearance. This determines the potential of "historical" computer games from the point of view of shaping the politics of memory for the whole country. In addition, there is a significant request for heroism and a real Hero in the game. Perhaps, for this reason, the gamers called their existing cyber simulacrum—the METRO and STALKER game series where they feel comfortable—the symbol of Russia.

So, computer games are becoming an important communication channel that is open to politicization. First, the possibility for such politicization is determined by previous cases of distorting historical facts. Second, the survey showed that the gaming community in Russia is ready to contribute to the protection of historical truth. Third, the observation that Russian gamers need clear and recognizable symbols in computer games with a historical plot is fundamentally important.

### **Acknowledgements**

The research was supported by the Moscow Region State University as part of the 2019 intrauniversity grant "Online Computer Games as a Mechanism for Implementing the Politics of Memory: Technologies and Models".

### **Appendices**

This Appendix provides a sample questionnaire that was used during the sociological research:  
Questionnaire for the Computer Games and the Politics of Memory survey

- 1) Indicate your gender:
  - Male
  - Female
- 2) Indicate your age.

- 3) What is your occupation?
- Employee
  - Student
- 4) If a student, indicate the type of your educational institution:
- 5) If an employee, indicate in which area you work.
- 6) Indicate your education.
- 7) What category of population could you attribute yourself to?
- We do not have enough money even for food.
  - We have enough money for food but not enough to purchase fashionable clothes from well-known brands (to follow the trends of modern fashion).
  - We have enough money for food and clothing, but it is difficult to purchase expensive devices such as a plasma TV, AC, or an expensive smartphone.
  - We can purchase some expensive things, but we cannot afford a car for the whole family.
  - We can afford a car (a foreign brand), but there are still money constraints.
  - We can afford anything.
- 8) Indicate the type of your locality.
- Urban (cities, towns, urban-type settlements, and Moscow).
  - Rural (villages, settlements, farms, etc.).
- 9) What platform do you use to play computer games?
- PC
  - XBOX
  - PS
  - Other
- 10) How often do you play computer games?
- Rarely
  - Daily
  - Several times a week
- 11) How much time per day (on average) do you spend playing computer games?
- Less than 2 hours
  - 2–4 hours
  - 6–8 hours
  - 10+ hours
- 12) In your opinion, do you spend too much time playing games?
- Yes
  - No
  - Rather yes than no
  - Rather no than yes
- 13) What genre of games do you prefer? (choose several options)
- RPGs
  - Strategy games
  - Simulators
  - Action games
  - MMORPGs
  - Shooters
  - Racing games
  - Horror games
- 14) What mode of computer games do you prefer?
- Global (online, 5,000+ users)
  - Multiuser (30-50+ users)
  - Cooperative for several users (no more than 10)
  - Single-player mode
- 15) What is most important for you in games? (choose several options)
- Graphics
  - Gameplay

- Plot
- An open world
- Sound and Russian language support
- Variability of actions
- Other (please specify)

16) Have you ever played computer games with a historical plot?

- Yes
- No

17) Do you think that history can be distorted in computer games?

- Yes (please indicate why)
- No (please indicate why)
- Yes (please indicate why)
- No (please indicate why)

18) Why is history distorted in computer games?

- Foreign countries are interested in this.
- Extremist groups use this for recruitment.
- Developers seek to increase interest in games and maximize their profits.
- Other (please specify)

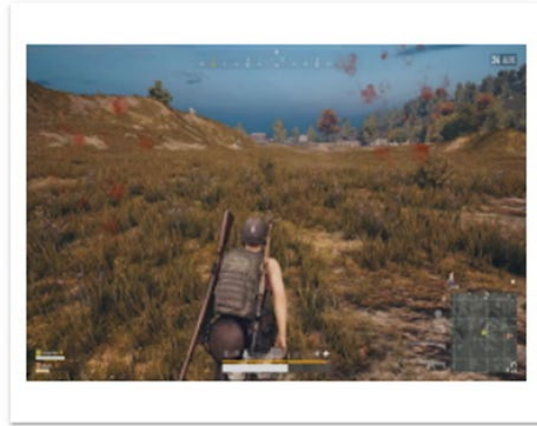
19) Who do you think should monitor fakes and stereotypes in computer games that distort history and can cause discord among people?

- The government
- The expert community
- The gaming community
- It is necessary to create an institutional platform for the representatives of the developers, the gaming community, the expert community, and the government to jointly monitor games to identify information that can provoke serious conflicts in society.

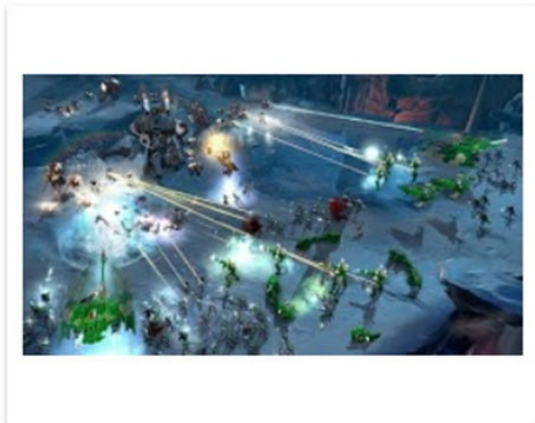
20) Select the game screenshots you like best:



1.



2.



3.



4.

- 21) What is the historical plot in the games you are interested in? (indicate historical events or century)  
 22) What do you think the image of Russia in computer games should be? (please write your own opinion).

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