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Table of Contents

Michał Mochocki, Yaraslau I. Kot Editorial: EHGS and Ukrainian Games of War	[5]
Aliaksandr Razhkou Features of the Use of Religious Symbols in Ukrainian Games of War	[9]
Jagoda Kościelniak The Semiotics of Wartime Kharkiv in Ukrainian Video Games	[29]
Emilia Mazur, Kacper Karwacki The Spectacle of the Absurd: Parody in Video Games as a Tool of Political Satire Relating to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine	[50]
Anna Sroka, Igor Kwasigroch Chinese-Speaking Steam Communities in the Face of Russian Aggression: The Case of the <i>Ukraine War Stories</i> Game	[84]
Michał Palmąka Preserving Wartime Video Games: Criteria and Methods in the Context of the War in Ukraine	[110]
Yaraslau I. Kot Ukrainian Games of War: Born in the Flames of Invasion	[128]

The Semiotics of Wartime Kharkiv in Ukrainian Video Games

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

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

2. Urban semiotics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Semiotics in video games

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Kharkiv

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Kharkiv in Ukrainian video games

5.1. *What's up in a Kharkiv Bomb Shelter?*¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.2. *Kharkiv, 23 of August*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Buildings:

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

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

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

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

Tree:

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

People:

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

Birds (probably pigeons):

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. Conclusions

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

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

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

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