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# ‘From Russia with Fun!’: *Tetris*, Korobeiniki and the Ludic Soviet

## ABSTRACT

2014 marks the 30th anniversary of Alexei Pajitnov’s puzzle game *Tetris*. The simple, addictive interface created an instant sensation upon its 1989 US release. The anniversary thus represents a convenient occasion to reexamine this 8-bit classic, now a vaunted member of the ludic canon.

Reflecting anxieties about what lay behind the Iron Curtain, video games of the 1980s tended to represent Soviets as vodka-addled adversaries. *Tetris* was the first to present Soviet elements in a more positive light, illuminating changing US attitudes at the end of the Cold War. Once western game developers obtained marketing licenses, they emphasized the game’s origins with red packaging, images of the Kremlin, and the hammer and sickle. Russian musical selections added geographical specificity and commercial interest. The Soviet elements drew gamers’ attention, and the game’s addictive nature created habitual – even compulsive – players. *Tetris* afforded gamers a metaphorical connection to previously forbidden, exotic territory. The construction of a new ludic Soviet sets *Tetris* apart from other games of this era. By exploring *Tetris*’s historical narrative in a context of more hostile representations, we craft a new understanding of the game’s role in constructing a new cultural discourse situated at an important moment in US history.

## KEYWORDS

Ludomusicology  
video game music  
Korobeiniki  
Russia in video games  
*Tetris*  
Cold War  
video game  
folk song

1. Indeed, 'Korobeiniki' is often popularly referred to as 'The Tetris song' in the United States even though the Game Boy release had two other music options available to the player.

In June 1984, Alexey Pajitnov was a 29-year-old computer programmer working for the Soviet Academy of Sciences, a government-funded research and development centre. In his spare time, Pajitnov was testing his self-professed computer hacker skills by developing a design for a video game on his Elektronika 60 terminal (*Tetris – From Russia With Love*, Temple, 2004). Programmed in Pascal with black and white graphics and no sound – save the whirring of the computer processor or the click of the keyboard under the players' fingers – Pajitnov's prototype consisted of managing falling blocks of varying shapes into orderly rows at the bottom of the screen. Today, that pet project – a puzzle game called *Tetris* – has reportedly sold more than 425 million copies on over 30 gaming platforms worldwide (*Tetris* official site, 2014).

Though *Tetris* was the first game to cross the Iron Curtain, the Soviets had made regular appearances in American video games throughout the 1980s; recurring themes of mind control and nuclear war in all facets of popular culture served to manipulate contemporary fear and fascination with these remote ideological adversaries. *Tetris* was an unprecedented cultural artefact: a brilliantly simple and compelling puzzle game that tapped into players' constructive energies, a refreshing alternative to the destructive impulses of many western titles. Because of the game's unique origins, it was explicitly and strategically coded as Soviet for the American audience through the use of music and visual iconography, greatly expanding the discursive space of what could have been presented as a neutral puzzle game.

Unlike many other games of this era, which construct an intentionally negative depiction of the Soviet Union largely through images and textual references, *Tetris* celebrates its origins visually *and* musically. Despite using both classical works and new compositions in several versions of the game, the franchise's most popular and enduring track is associated with the 1989 Game Boy release: an arrangement of the nineteenth-century Russian folk song 'Korobeiniki'. The song became inextricably intertwined with *Tetris*, a musical metonymy for the game itself and – because of the game's unique and direct association with Russia – one of the first positive musical depictions in video games of the land behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>1</sup> This song has become a theme of sorts for the Russian puzzle game itself; 'Korobeiniki', often labelled as 'the *Tetris* song' by fans, features prominently in every subsequent version of the game.

Despite the game's positive representations of Russian culture, newspaper articles jokingly heralded *Tetris* as a Soviet plot to derail American productivity and win the Cold War. Of course, there were likely few Americans in the late 1980s that would take this absurd conclusion at face value. These kinds of statements seem to represent an echo of earlier paranoid tropes of Soviet indoctrination and mind control, but the ironic stance indicates that America's icy disposition – at least in popular culture – was thawing by the early 1990s. The final flowering of paranoid language to describe a video game represents a vestige, an ultimate reversal of fears that were, just a few years earlier, no laughing matter.

This article examines the unique place of the 1989 *Tetris* in game music history, demonstrating how it rejected conventional approaches to Soviet representation in its positive and holistic embrace of its origins. First, the article will outline prior representations of the USSR in video games, in order to identify certain pervasive and paranoid Cold War tropes of the late 1980s revolving around nuclear brinkmanship, communist ideology and Soviet brainwashing techniques. After examining the extent of these negative

representations, it becomes clear that the depiction of the Soviet Union in the 1989 *Tetris* represents an unusual – and unusually prominent – shift in attitude as the Cold War drew to a close, facetious suggestions of Soviet treachery aside.

### BRUTES, BOOZE AND BRINKSMANSHIP: THE SOVIET UNION IN VIDEO GAMES OF THE 1980S

The Cold War era played host to a number of standard tropes that recurred in all facets of popular culture, from novels to films to video games. Though some recurring themes were somewhat benign – vodka, borscht, depictions of snowy Russian landscapes – others reflected deep-seated cultural anxieties about brainwashing and mind control, communist ideology as a threat to the American way of life, and the prospect of nuclear war. Educational filmstrips such as *Duck and cover* (Rizzo, 1951) instructed school children on what to do in the event of a nuclear attack. *Red Nightmare* (Waggner, 1962), a film sponsored by the US Department of Defense, imagines a Soviet-dominated United States and warns citizens not to neglect their ‘all-American’ duties. The plot of *Red Dawn* (Milius, 1984) concerns the possibility of strategic nuclear strikes on US soil. These concepts were so pervasive that parody was inevitable: Stanley Kubrick satirized the fever pitch of nuclear anxieties in *Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb* (Kubrick, 1964), a black comedy ending in a disturbing montage of nuclear detonations set to Vera Lynn’s ‘We’ll Meet Again’ from 1939. The quintessential and most-often cited example of Cold War paranoia, however, is *The Manchurian Candidate* (Frankenheimer, 1962), in which a young man from an influential family – brainwashed by Chinese and Soviet forces – nearly assassinates the president of the United States.

The same fears – of mind control, atomic bombs and communist threats to world peace – manifest in video games of the 1980s. *Communist Mutants From Space* (Atari, 1982) featured aliens from the planet Rooskie who attempt to destroy peaceful democratic planets and convert the people into communist mutants. According to the game’s instruction manual, the Mother Creature – who has gone insane due to irradiated vodka – leads the mutants’ attack. The tropes are over the top – cartoonishly exaggerated for a kids’ game – but they still serve as a manifestation of a particularly pervasive fear of brainwashing and the spread of Soviet ideology.<sup>2</sup> The actual game mechanics are a poor clone of the wildly successful *Space Invaders* (Midway, 1978), and the sound is relegated to laser effects and percussive hits. The game itself was derivative, and so this wild storyline may be the result of trying to differentiate the knock-off from the original. However, the text and image-based negative representation of the ‘Rooskies’ is typical for games of this era, as further examples will demonstrate.

Several games from the 1980s feature a stereotypical Soviet strongman character, vodka-fuelled and hardened by the brutal winters of his motherland. *Karnov* (Data East, 1987) was an arcade platformer in which the titular character (and former circus performer) uses his considerable strength and fire-breathing abilities to search for treasure. While at first it seems promising that the brute figure is cast as the hero, it was not to last. *Karnov* was not the Mario of Data East; in future games *Karnov* was reduced to a recurring role as a boss figure that the player must fight, changing his role from then on to that of the bad guy.<sup>3</sup>

2. This kind of excessive, blatant stereotyping is not unique to games. The short TV film *The Children’s Story* (1982), based on a short story of the same title, depicts a teacher indoctrinating elementary school children into the ways of the new regime in the wake of a totalitarian takeover of the American government. In one scene, she suggests that the American flag is superfluous, as one does not need a symbol to love one’s country. She then asks the students to help her cut the flag into small pieces so that every person in the room can have a small piece.
3. These games include *Bad Dudes vs. DragonNinja* (Data East, 1988), *Trio the Punch-Never Forget Me ...* (Data East, 1990) and *Tumblepop* (Data East, 1991).

4. The entrance music for the German boxer Von Kaiser, Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries', is inexplicably reused for the Indian boxer Great Tiger, and for the American boxer Super Macho Man. The reason for this reuse is unclear; interviews with individual members of the sound team (consisting of Yukio Kaneoka, Akito Nakatsuka and Kenji Yamamoto) tend to focus on later work for Nintendo, such as Yamamoto's work on the *Metroid* series.
5. The company seems to abandon these internal censorship policies with the advent of the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (which regulates game designers by assigning ratings in a manner similar to the film industry), but in 1987 they were still in effect.
6. Yoko Shimomura, the composer for *Street Fighter 2*, recalls that the game planners were more interested in creating a lighthearted general atmosphere for each country than with striving for accurate depictions of world music traditions:

So I got a list at first, and when we were discussing the type of songs I should make, there were different scenes from different countries, but I thought, 'The real India isn't like this.' It's the same way that Japan is geisha and kabuki from the eyes of foreigners. That kind of mysterious, distorted view of the world was funny to me. We discussed the idea of – rather

Nintendo's hit *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* (1987) was an adaptation of the arcade boxing game *Super Punch-Out!!* (1984), featuring a scrappy protagonist facing off against a series of international opponents. From the mysticism of the turban-clad Indian boxer Great Tiger to bullfighter Don Flamenco's entrance to a clip from the opera *Carmen*, the Nintendo developers portrayed opponents as caricatures of each nationality. Each foreign (i.e., non-American) opponent had distinctive entrance music that is clearly chosen to be a recognizable symbol of their country from a small snippet: Frenchman Glass Joe enters to 'La Marseillaise', Piston Honda of Japan enters to the Japanese folk song 'Sakura' and so on.<sup>4</sup> The music functions merely as a signpost, announcing each boxer's background for the player before the fight.

The Russian boxer for *Punch-Out!!* was named Vodka Drunkenski in the original arcade version, and the character is depicted with a reddish hue to his skin, a red costume, and an entrance to 'Song of the Volga Boatmen'. Nintendo changed Drunkenski's name for the NES release to Soda Popinski, because the company had strict content guidelines in effect in order to keep home console games family friendly. The ninth rule states that Nintendo will not approve any game that 'incorporates or encourages the use of illegal drugs, smoking materials, and/or alcohol (Nintendo does not allow a beer or cigarette ad to be placed on an arena, stadium or playing field wall, or fence in a sports game)' (Schwartz and Schwartz 1994: 23). In these rules, Nintendo banned nudity, sexuality and graphic violence, as well as profanity, blood, drugs, religious symbols and political messages.<sup>5</sup> As a result, Soda Popinski guzzled bottles of soda instead of vodka between bouts, but the stereotype of the hard-drinking brute remained.

The international theme in fighting games continued. *Street Fighter 2* (Capcom, 1991) also featured characters from around the world, from China's Chun-Li to India's Dhalsim. The Russian representative in *Street Fighter 2* is named Zangief, a large, muscle-bound wrestler from the Soviet Union whose fighting style is based on grappling. Though the racial stereotypes are slightly less overt in this later game, early character sketches reveal that Zangief's original name was Vodka Gobalski (Kohler, 2011).<sup>6</sup> The character of the Soviet fighter appears in cinema, as well: *Punch-Out!!* and *Street Fighter 2* both came out after *Rocky IV* (1985), in which the American champion Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) faces Ivan Drago (Dolph Lundgren), a powerful fighter from the USSR.

Soviet characters are a common 'bad-guy' trope in video games of the 1980s, but the Soviet Union appears as a setting in many other games of this era, as well. Several strategy games from the early part of the decade are concerned explicitly with brinkmanship, international relations and nuclear arms – a reflection of anxieties that the Cold War could turn into a hot one. Flight and submarine simulator games are the most simplistic of these representations, using Soviet territories less as a setting than as a target.<sup>7</sup> For example, U.S. Gold's *Raid over Moscow* (1985) features an American space pilot on a mission to stop three Soviet attacks and then infiltrate and disable a nuclear facility in Moscow. *Task Force Harrier EX* (Treco, 1991) focuses on penetrating a communist military force in Russian territory by piloting a Harrier fighter jet into the USSR. Simulators often have a very simple plot: players are given missions to drop bombs and fire missiles to destroy strategic outposts in a hypothetical war that has already escalated from cold to hot.<sup>8</sup>

Action-adventure titles such as *East vs. West* (Rainbow Arts, 1989), *The Fourth Protocol* (Hutchinson Computer Publishing, 1985) and *The Mafat*

*Conspiracy* (Vic Tokai, 1990) tend to focus on espionage and covert operations, counter-terrorism, and attempts to evade Soviet mind control. In the spy-thriller *Covert Action* (MicroProse, 1990), for example, the player must install wiretaps, infiltrate enemy hideouts, and intercept and decode secret messages in cryptography mini-games. However, some action games are based on a simpler 'run and gun' model in which the player, as a member of a special ops force, shoots her way into an enemy base to rescue captured soldiers (Konami's *Rush'n Attack* from 1985 and Ocean/Taito's *Rambo III* from 1988 are two such examples).

Strategy and war games resemble the board game *Risk*, in which the players manage geopolitical negotiations or combat scenarios on a large scale: either communicating with world leaders and striving for diplomacy or attacking and repelling enemy forces.<sup>9</sup> Atari's arcade game *Missile Command* (1980) is based on protecting six cities from destruction via ballistic missiles and smart bombs; unfortunately, there is no way to win (as is common in many arcade games); the artillery barrage simply accelerates and intensifies until the player is destroyed and forced to play another quarter. *Nuclear War* (U.S. Gold, 1989) is a *Dr. Strangelove*-ian satire, a cartoonish battle royale in which the player's ultimate goal is to have at least some of her country's population survive after everyone else on earth has perished in nuclear attacks. The game featured caricatures of real world leaders such as Ronnie Raygun, Mikhail Gorabachef, Mao the Pun, Ayatollah Kookamamie and Infidel Castro.

A few strategy games take place in the USSR: *KGB* (Virgin Entertainment, 1992) is set in the final days of the Soviet Union. The protagonist (Captain Maksim Mikahilovich Rukov) is sent to investigate possible corruption in the KGB and unravel a complex political plot.<sup>10</sup> *Crisis in the Kremlin* (MicroProse, 1991) was a strategy game in which the player assumes the role of a Soviet President from 1985 to 2017. Players must govern the USSR, allocate funds from the State's budget and respond to certain historical prompts such as the Chernobyl disaster. The player has the option to rewrite history, but the game had a notorious slant, driving the player towards establishing capitalism and dissolving the USSR.<sup>11</sup> Mindscape's *Balance Of Power* (1985) is a geopolitical strategy game in which the player must lead either the United States or the Soviet Union for eight years and maximize prestige while avoiding nuclear war. If the player fails to keep the peace, she is sharply rebuked: 'You have ignited a nuclear war. And no, there is no animated display of a mushroom cloud with parts of bodies flying through the air. We do not reward failure' (*Balance Of Power*, Mindscape, 1985). What is striking in the dozens of examples surveyed is that none seem to present the Soviet Union or its people in anything but a negative, adversarial role.

Taken together, all of the games mentioned thus far highlight certain Russian tropes again and again: vodka (irradiated or regular), militant communism, brute fighter characters, harsh, snowy landscapes, and Russian folk tunes or classical selections as nationalistic signposts. Certain tropes – the vodka, communist iconography and brute fighters – seem to carry a more negative valence as a representation of Russia, and are seemingly ubiquitous in games that represent Soviet Union from before 1988. Images of snowy landscapes or the use of Russian folk tunes or classical music seem to possess a more neutral tone – unless they are coupled with the more inflammatory stereotypes.

*Tetris* thus appears to be one of the first games (if not *the* first game) to represent the Soviet Union in a neutral – or perhaps even a positive – light.<sup>12</sup> *Tetris* represents an anomaly in the representation of the Soviet Union, at least

than character theme songs – maybe making background music with the feeling of each country instead. For example, for India I wouldn't make real Indian music, but I'd make what I imagined Indian music to be like. When I suggested that making some kind of world music with a comical taste might be funny, they said it was fine, and we went with it.

(Dwyer 2014)

7. Though some games, such as *M1 Tank Platoon* (MicroProse, 1989) and *Red Lightning* (Strategic Simulations, 1989), stage hypothetical campaigns against the Soviet Army in central Europe instead of the USSR.
8. Some additional examples of flight and submarine simulators include: *B-1 Nuclear Bomber* (Avalon Hill, 1980), *688 Attack Sub* (Electronic Arts, 1990), *F-117A Stealth Fighter* (MicroProse, 1992), *F-19 Stealth Fighter* (MicroProse, 1988), *F-22 Interceptor* (Electronic Arts, 1991), *The Hunt for Red October* (Argus Press, 1987), *M1 Tank Platoon* (1989) and *Red Storm Rising* (MicroProse, 1988).
9. Such as *S.D.I.* (Cinemaware, 1985), *WarGames* (Coleco, 1984), *War Room* (Coleco, 1983), and the four games in Strategic Simulations' 'When Superpowers Collide!' series: *RDF 1985* (1983), *Germany 1985* (1983), *Baltic 1985* (1984) and *Norway 1985* (1985). Several of these war games posit hypothetical armed

conflicts not only between the United States and the USSR, but between NATO and Warsaw Pact forces: *NATO Commander* (MicroProse, 1983), *North Atlantic '86* (Strategic Simulations, 1983) and *Theatre Europe* (PSS, 1985).

10. The game is maddeningly difficult: the clock runs in real time, and the player must make quick decisions to trigger certain events. The consequences of even minor choices can be catastrophic, but the player is often not made aware of these devastating consequences until hours into the game.

11. Chuck Moss wrote in *Computer Gaming World* in 1992 that the game 'drives the player toward establishing a free market, and both political and social liberation' (1992: 54).

12. The next game to do so was *Gorby's Pipeline* (Tokuma Shoten, 1991), a *Tetris*-like game where the player must connect falling blocks containing water pipeline to build up the Russian infrastructure. The game featured background music taken from Russian classical music – such as the 'Great Gate of Kiev' from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the Swan Theme from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, and Rimsky Korsakov's 'Flight of the Bumblebee' from *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* – as well as a friendly Mikhail Gorbachev's likeness in the game's instruction manual and title screen. This game seems to have had limited influence, however; it was released only in Japan, and it was

to the *American* games market – several of the games discussed above were released after Pajitnov's puzzle. Even after *Tetris* appeared, games continued to use negative depictions. So though *Tetris* did not enact sweeping changes in the way Soviet and post-Soviet Russia was represented in games, it remains one of the most immensely popular, enduring, and influential games of the 8-bit era, and so its refusal to pander to these standard tropes is all the more significant.

**TETRIS: FROM RUSSIA WITH FUN!**

A lifelong fan of puzzle and strategy games, Alexey Pajitnov drew inspiration for *Tetris* from a favourite childhood pastime: pentominoes (*Tetris* official site, 2014). The game of pentominoes consists of pieces made out of five congruent squares in a variety of permutations, which are then assembled like a jigsaw puzzle in a small box. Pajitnov created a version using blocks of four congruent squares, and coded a game where the blocks fall from the top of the screen and can be rotated and set into place to form complete lines. The result – despite its crude graphics and lack of sound effects – was instantly compelling: the creator recalls spending hours playing with his new creation before he began giving the game away to his programmer friends, who also became hooked. As Pajitnov remarks,

I did play a lot with this kind of strange prototype and I can't stop myself ... And then I let people play and I realized that it's not myself who is cuckoo and gets something wrong in the brain, because everybody who had this game could not stop playing it.

(*Tetris – From Russia With Love*, Temple, 2004)

The official history of the game (as relayed on the *Tetris* website) suggests a smooth transition from the Soviet Union to the United States, in which game designer Henk Rogers fell in love with *Tetris*, became close personal friends with Pajitnov, and won the rights to begin publishing versions for the US market.

In reality, *Tetris's* Cinderella story – its meteoric rise to the status of a cultural icon – is much more fraught than its creator suggests. The first game to emerge from the Soviet Union, *Tetris* was first distributed in an unofficial capacity: computer programmers enthusiastically gave copies of the program to friends on floppy disc. Soon, representatives of competing software companies were vying for distribution rights.<sup>13</sup> As a result, there was a glut of unsanctioned early versions of the game as certain publishers – unaware that they lacked exclusive rights through the proper channels – crafted a series of licensing deals with developers (Sheff 1994). The battle for *Tetris's* lucrative future in the United States culminated dramatically in a legal battle between video game giants Nintendo and Atari, which ended in a summary judgement granting sole console and handheld development rights to Nintendo (U.S. Dist. 2004).

While *Tetris's* path to the United States was tumultuous, several features had been added to Pajitnov's original along the way that would impact the reception of the game in the West. The first version of the game to promote a Russian aesthetic was the 1988 release from the California-based game company Spectrum HoloByte. This version, designed for the US games market, incorporates many distinctly Russian elements: red box art complete with

images of St. Basil’s Cathedral, a Soviet hammer and sickle, the tagline ‘The Soviet Challenge’, the Cyrillic letter Ya (Я) in place of every R, and Russian music such as Tchaikovsky’s ‘Trepak’ from *The Nutcracker* and *Marche Slave* in B-flat minor, op. 31, and Glière’s ‘Russian Sailors Dance’ from *The Red Poppy*.<sup>14</sup>

A *New York Times* article from the same year interviewing Spectrum Holobyte CEO Gilman Louie confirms the company’s intention to add Soviet elements for commercial interest: ‘Colorful graphics that evoke images of the Soviet Union, including an opening scene of a Cessna aircraft buzzing past Red Square, were added to the program in this country to make it more appealing to a sophisticated audience’ (Lewis 1988).<sup>15</sup> The 1988 Spectrum HoloByte/Sphere release for Apple II used a number of musical tracks taken from folk songs and the classical repertoire, including ‘Trepak’ from *The Nutcracker* and the ‘Song of the Volga Boatmen’.

These early releases of *Tetris* in the United States consistently included Soviet elements that were remarkably absent from British and Japanese versions of the game. Mirrorsoft’s 1986 version for the Commodore 64 saw no reason to play up the game’s national origins: the game contained a nondescript, atmospheric soundtrack and two crouched, ineffably mythical human figures surrounded by a field of stars and bolts of lightning. The Japanese arcade version released by Sega in 1988 also lacks the Russian elements, portraying a mountain scene behind the playing field and featuring a heavily synthesized, 1980s pop-influenced background track. Yet the American versions of the game all incorporate explicit Soviet references and Russian music.

The Nintendo version of *Tetris* for the NES (1989) incorporated Tchaikovsky’s ‘Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy’ from *The Nutcracker* as one of three musical choices. William Gibbons noted that this selection is hardly the most obvious choice stylistically, and yet, its familiarity instantly marks the game as Russian in the ears of the player (2009: 7).<sup>16</sup> Whether or not players equate the musical selections with a positive valuation of Russian musical contributions, the presence of the ‘Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy’ serves to reinforce the game’s origin to those familiar with the holiday classic.

The most famous example of Russian music in *Tetris* is the adaptation of the nineteenth-century folk song ‘Korobeiniki’ from the 1989 Nintendo release for the handheld Game Boy. The Russian word Korobeiniki means peddlers, and the text of the folk song tells an extended story of a young girl flirtatiously haggling as a form of courtship. The musical selections are not identified explicitly for the player; they are presented rather neutrally in the options menu as ‘Tetris A’, ‘Tetris B’ and ‘Tetris C’, allowing the player to choose between three different background tracks to add variety to gameplay. Tetris A is in quadruple metre in the key of A minor (with the seventh almost always sharpened), and is accompanied with lively offbeat percussion in the noise channel and a broken octave pattern in the bass voice triangle channel that give the track a great deal of motion and momentum (see Figure 1).

Tetris B appears to be an original composition by Nintendo’s Hirokazu ‘Hip’ Tanaka (see Figure 2). Tetris B relies on an obsessive rhythmic motive of an eighth followed by two sixteenths that occurs every single measure of the loop, often in unison across all four channels. This strict adherence to a single rhythmic figure unifies the overall sound and gives the track a metronomic rigidity. Like Tetris A, this selection is in a minor key (E minor) with the seventh frequently raised. This may have been a deliberate attempt by Tanaka to echo the sound and the style of Tetris A.

a bit derivative of *Tetris*’s style of gameplay. However, *Gorby’s Pipeline* is interesting precisely because it represents a second, rare instance of positive representation: the game utilizes Russian classical music with gusto, and seems to celebrate – rather than mock – Gorbachev’s likeness.

13. David Sheff explains the complicated history of the game in great detail, beginning with Mirrorsoft president Robert Stein’s initial enquiries to the Soviet government and ending with Nintendo’s play for the handheld rights to distribute *Tetris* with their handheld Game Boy system in the late 1980s. Sheff’s *Tetris* chapters – in his 1994 book, *Game Over: How Nintendo Conquered America* – remain one of the most meticulous sources tracing the game’s rocky path from the Soviet Union to the United States. Sheff documents each Telex, tentative meeting and tactical misstep by competing publishers in order to demonstrate why Henk Rogers’s deal with Pajitnov and ELORG (Elektronorgtechnica, the Soviet Ministry of Software and Hardware Export) for Nintendo of America represented such a triumph. This complicated story is also shared in the 2004 documentary film *Tetris – From Russia With Love*, directed by Magnus Temple.
14. Mirrorsoft and Spectrum Holobyte had seen great value in the fact that ‘Tetris’ was the first game to come from behind the Iron Curtain, which was still intact at the time. As Gilman

Louie had suggested, they slickly packaged 'Tetris' in a red box, emphasizing that it was from Russia with love ... Programmers at Spectrum Holobyte in the United States added battle scenes as background pictures and a simple animation that played at the start of the game: a Cessna flew across the screen and landed in Red Square. It was a homage to Matthias Rust, the young West German pilot who had flown his small plane from Helsinki to Moscow, past all the Soviet radar and air defenses, and landed in Red Square, embarrassing the Central Committee. Rust had been arrested, tried, and imprisoned. (Sheff 1994)

15. The Spectrum Holobyte version did not go unnoticed in the USSR. The animation that played at the beginning of the game - a small Cessna aircraft flying across the screen and landing in Red Square - made Elorg furious. The animation was a nod to West German pilot Matthias Rust, who evaded detection as he flew from Helsinki to Moscow, finally landing in Red Square to the embarrassment of the government. As Sheff suggests:

An article about 'Tetris' from a London computer magazine reached Elorg in Moscow. It described the version of 'Tetris' that was being sold in the West. It mentioned the graphics - the battle scenes and the image of Matthias Rust flying his plane across the Russian

Musical score for Tetris A, 'Korobeiniki'. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of four channels: Pulse Channel 1 (treble clef), Pulse Channel 2 (treble clef), Triangle Channel (bass clef), and Noise Channel (percussion clef). The music is a simple, rhythmic melody.

Figure 1: Tetris A, 'Korobeiniki'. Transcriptions are my own.

Tetris C is an arrangement of the Menuet from Bach's French Suite no. 3 in B minor, BWV 814. The encoded version lowers the key from B to F-sharp minor (perhaps to account for the already-resonant MIDI timbre) and makes some slight registral changes from the left hand in Pulse Channel 2, but the recreation is otherwise quite faithful to the original. The only major discrepancy arises at the end; the Game Boy version truncates and recomposes the original, starting with m. 28, collapsing eight measures into four. The reason for this emendation is unclear; it may have had to do with space limitations. Nevertheless, the recomposition is skillful; it does not sound truncated or otherwise incorrect to the listener as it progresses back to the tonic.

Musical score for Tetris B, an original composition by 'Hip' Tanaka. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of four channels: Pulse Channel 1 (treble clef), Pulse Channel 2 (treble clef), Triangle Channel (bass clef), and Noise Channel (percussion clef). The score is divided into three systems, with measures 3, 6, and 9 marked at the beginning of each system.

Figure 2: Tetris B, an original composition by 'Hip' Tanaka.



Figure 3: Tetris C ending vs the original (transposed to F# sharp minor for comparison).

However, the presence of Tetris C on the soundtrack begs the question: why Bach? It is a seemingly incongruous choice. It has a thinner texture than the other two tracks, using only two of the four channels of the Game Boy sound chip. Despite the difference in texture and metre (Tetris A and B are in 4/4, and C is in 3/4), the work is not entirely out of place with the other two: It is in a minor key with occasional sharped sevenths (though they are not as pervasive as in the other two examples). More importantly, the Menuet, like the other two, creates momentum through perpetual motion: the running eighth-note arpeggiations in the lead voice drive the music forward.

The main function of the music in *Tetris* is to provide a backdrop to repetitive processes of play. All three loops for the game are consistent with this goal: all three are tuneful and addictively catchy. All three tracks appear to be set to play at the same brisk, motivating tempo in the game: 140 beats per minute. The timbre of the game audio also contributes to a sense of unity within the score: because the same sound chip generates all three tracks, the bleeping timbre of the audio remains consistent.

It is clear that 'Korobeiniki' was chosen intentionally, to play up the game's Soviet origins, even to those unfamiliar with the original folk song. However, the tune loses its title and, perhaps, its explicit connection to its Russian folk tradition once it is renamed 'Tetris A'. What is the consequence of this

sky and into Red Square. Alexinko showed the article to Pajitnov, who was amused by the reference to Rust ... The bureaucrats in Moscow were far more concerned about the reference to Rust. The Central Committee viewed the young pilot as a terrorist and did not consider the invasion of its air space a practical joke. Broadcast around the world, Rust's 'raid' had been a great humiliation.

(1994: 5126-33)

16. Although 'Dance of the sugar plum fairy' is not the most overtly 'Russian' of Tchaikovsky's works (the 'Cossack dance' springs to mind), what it sacrifices in directness it makes up in familiarity ... Even listeners unable to recognize the musical elements that would indicate the Russian origins of another piece are likely to be familiar with Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*, one of the most popular pieces of Russian classical music in history. The presence of the song reinforces not only the Soviet beginnings of Tetris, but also reminds players of the artistic contributions of Russian culture.

(Gibbons 2009: 7)

17. Though I cannot speak for every player, I certainly took notice of the text at the bottom of the intro screen that gave credit for the original design to an 'Alexey Pazhitnov', even as a young player.

loss? Renaming the tracks with letters strips all three songs of their individual identities outside of the game, and all three are collapsed into a player's holistic conception of the 'game' as a coherent construct. The music, by losing its specificity outside of the game, is transformed inside it into a metonymy for *Tetris* itself. This association is cemented through sheer repetition: a player who spends hours playing to 'Tetris A' begins to think of the piece as 'The Tetris Song' even outside of the context of play.

Yet, in combination with the Russian names in the opening credits and images of St. Basil's Cathedral on the title screen, all the musical selections can easily become coded as 'Russian' to the listener.<sup>17</sup> As Ralph P. Locke suggests in *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*, the immediate assumptions about exotic settings and characters (given not just in music, but also in stereotypical images, costumes and visual symbols) can render even seemingly nondescript music into a representation of the same exotic locale: 'Were one to hear the music on its own, it might not convey any immediate geographic or ethnic overtones. In context, the audience accepts it as consistent with the exotic setting and with the exotic character's or group's apparent proclivities' (2009: 63). Players are likely to treat each element of the game as consistent within the overall Russian theme, even though the Bach example might otherwise be seen as an unusual addition. After all, the player is led from the beginning to treat *Tetris* as distinctly Russian: it came 'From Russia with fun!' according to the tagline on the Game Boy box.

If Tanaka had wanted an instantly recognizable Bach work, he would have chosen something like the Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565. Instead, he chose the middle movement from the third French suite: this Menuet is not particularly well known – at least, it lacks the status of a cultural icon – but it fits in well with the other selections by virtue of its rhythmic momentum, minor key and a compact form that was conducive to looping. The music seems cohesive beyond the visual contextual clues because of the uniformity of the synthesized sound through the PSG chips; any disparities of musical style that are apparent to a musicologist are largely collapsed for the player into the overarching 8-bit aesthetic.

The juxtaposition of Russian music and Soviet iconography with non-Russian pieces and the falling puzzle blocks is not jarring or inconsistent for the player. Instead, as Locke suggests above, the audience may embrace all elements holistically. This is particularly true in video games, which combine multiple media into a single experiential unit. As Nicholas Cook asserts in *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (1998), music is *not* alone (as Peter Kivy would have it); it is not autonomous. In video games, music is deeply and inextricably intertwined into the act of play.

## THE IMAGINED RUSSIA, LUCRATIVE EXOTICISM AND POSITIVE PORTRAYAL

Exoticism is a play on what is known about a real place and its people, even if that knowledge is fragmented or incomplete. Video game stereotypes of the Soviet Union serve to fill in gaps in knowledge of the real place and thus reinforce those stereotypes, reassuring the audience that their assumptions are based on some fundamental truths about the exoticized locale or social milieu. This point is a poignant one in the case of 1980s video games; the gulf between the real Russia and the game companies' imagined Russia under Soviet rule was likely wide, and Cold War tensions between the two superpowers only

added to this disparity between the real and imagined Soviet Union. Whereas most games in the 1980s relied on negative stereotypes and outdated, offensive tropes to portray the Soviets as the enemy, *Tetris* was the first game to cross the Iron Curtain, and it occupies a special place in gaming history as the only game originating under communist rule to experience immense popularity and commercial success in the United States.

This commodification of Soviet music and iconography serves one purpose: to set *Tetris* apart in the video game market. *Tetris*'s blocks are not Italian plumbers, elfin adventurers or spunky hedgehogs; there were no characters upon which to establish the game's brand in the late 1980s. Puzzle games are difficult to brand and market effectively in a sea of competitors for players' attention and allowances. This commodification of the Soviet Union in the video game is a rather lucrative form of exoticism; the main function of the Soviet elements is to add commercial interest and increase profits.

Alexey Pajitnov even acknowledges this possibility of a boost to sales in a 2010 interview on Gamasutra.com: 'The interest in Russia was really high, and the fact that they decorated it in kind of a Russian style really helped to the marketing of the game' (Nutt 2010). Whether or not *Tetris* found greater success due these marketing ploys or its gameplay, Spectrum HoloByte added the Soviet elements consciously and with an eye to improving sales. Phil Adams of Spectrum HoloByte made this intention clear in *Tetris – From Russia With Love*: 'The curiosity of having anything from, you know, behind the other side of the Iron Curtain was kind of like memorabilia or something, you know, people wanted to have [it]' (*Tetris – From Russia With Love*, Temple, 2004).

The exotic elements could only propel the game so far – adding just enough intrigue to convince some people to purchase the game. But it was the game's inherent qualities that led to its immense popularity, and media reports of the compelling Soviet puzzle game only added fuel to the fire. Though, before long, the attention-grabbing music and imagery would become adjunct to the lure of the puzzle itself, as *Tetris* became a household name and a recognizable brand.

## SOVIET BRAINWASHING: TETRIS ADDICTION AND COLD WAR ANXIETIES

National newspapers were soon flooded with articles proclaiming *Tetris* addiction. Some articles make tongue-in-cheek suggestions that the Russians could be using *Tetris* addiction to disable America and stage a takeover. Linda Berndt says as much in her article for *The Ottawa Citizen*: 'I also believe that, had the Russians really wanted to take over North America during the Cold War, this would have been their best secret weapon' (1994). Cairn MacGregor of the *Montreal Gazette* released an article in January of 1992 entitled 'Brain-twisting Tetris shows you can't trust those Russians', in which he states:

Those pesky Russians are at it again. Now that the Soviet Union has broken up and the Cold War is over, everyone in the West is experiencing a false sense of security, while ignoring the most insidious plot since Rubik's Cube to ruin the minds of the brave and the free and turn them all into slaving morons. Old-guard Russian computer programmers are still turning out brain-bending weapons that are cleverly disguised as addictive computer games.

(1992)

18. A *Wired* article by Jeffrey Goldsmith asked whether the game represents an electronic drug. Pajitnov responded to this charge with skepticism, but interestingly compared the impact of *Tetris* to music: 'Many people say that, but my feeling is it's more like music. Playing games is a very specific rhythmic and visual pleasure. For me, *Tetris* is some song which you sing and sing inside yourself and can't stop' (Goldsmith 2005).

The ongoing releases of various versions of *Tetris* – and the 1990 release of *Welltris*, a 3-D sequel – only intensified these sorts of glib remarks and comparisons. A 1989 *Chicago Tribune* article saw *Tetris's* incursion into the market not as Soviet attempts to distract Americans and create addicts, but instead as the first commercial volleys into the American games trade: 'It doesn't seem like a particularly sinister concept – certainly nothing that could be the basis of a Russian attempt to infiltrate the red-blooded American software industry. But it is' (Wood 1989).

Though the suggestions of Soviet infiltration are in jest, lighthearted comments about the compelling puzzle game often belied real anxieties about video game addiction and its impact on the brain. Particularly of interest to the media was the fact that *Tetris* became incredibly popular in an unusual demographic: parents. The *Tetris* effect was described as trancelike and akin to chemical substance abuse, and even the music was blamed for hypnotizing players: 'When accompanied – in the Game Boy version – by a computerized Russian tune, *Tetris* can put a player into a trance-like state that lasts for hours' (Carlton 1994). The game provides powerfully addictive positive feedback, isolating the player from the outside world and leading to long stretches of continuous gameplay.

Nintendo commissioned psychologists and sociologists to study the phenomenon and figure out the game's allure in order to capitalize on this untapped market and appeal to entire families instead of just the children (Carlton 1994). Several theories were circulated that attempted to explain *Tetris's* unmistakable appeal to the female gamers' sensibilities. Articles have suggested that *Tetris* taps into a human desire to tidy up messes, and that there are many other games that reflect this drive:

Many human games are basically ritualized tidying up. Snooker, or pool if you are non-British, is a good example. The first person makes a mess (the break) and then the players take turns in potting the balls into the pockets, in a very particular order.

(Stafford 2012)

Stafford links the game's appeal to the Zeigarnik effect, a phenomenon where people remember incomplete or interrupted tasks better than completed tasks (2012). *Tetris*, he argues, is perpetually incomplete, and thus psychologically satisfying and compelling.

Even in its first incarnation on the Elektronika 60, with flat black and white graphics and lack of sound, *Tetris* was instantly recognized as unique and compelling, engaging with one's sense of order and creative impulses. Yuri Yevtushenko, the director of the Computer Center at the Russian Academy of Sciences, explains how Pajitnov's project stood out from other games of its time: '*Tetris* differed from other games, mostly American, where you had murders, shootings, explosions, and chases. *Tetris* appeals to another side of the human psyche: one bent on construction, instead of destruction' (*Tetris: from Russia with love*, Temple, 2004).

Despite this constructive impulse, the game's all-encompassing absorption was seen as externally destructive to productivity or social interactions. Formerly, addicted gamers report having to quit all games cold turkey, using the language of addicts recovering from drug, alcohol or nicotine addictions (Goldsmith 2005).<sup>18</sup> The media almost universally celebrated the innovative Soviet puzzle game, but with the caveat that the game must be used in moderation and play must be monitored in order to avoid addiction.

The game’s impact is so powerful that it causes an unusual effect that can last hours after play: images of the tetrominoes seem to linger in players’ brains long after disengaging from the console, even appearing in dreams and superimposed on buildings, sidewalks, and other surfaces such as parquet floors, road signs and bathroom tiles (Carlton 1994). Some even report ‘playing’ the game in their head: ‘I play *Tetris* in my sleep ... I look at the clouds and try to put them together to form *Tetris* lines. I am beginning to spend long amounts of time staring at interlocking-brick patterns and mentally moving them around to form more complicated lines’ (Berndt 1994). This phenomenon is well documented, and occurs even in subjects with severe brain damage to the hippocampus and temporal lobe, who cannot form permanent memories of playing the game.<sup>19</sup>

Neurological research on *Tetris* is still ongoing. Recent studies suggest that *Tetris* may be able to serve as an early intervention in treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, due to the game’s ability to disrupt memory consolidation processes for traumatic images (Holmes et al. 2009). It seems very likely that video game therapy will eventually become a viable field in the future, and continuing research into *Tetris*’s impact on the brain provides interesting glimpses into the function and cooperation of neurological structures during periods of complex cognitive engagement.

A variety of elements – intense immersion, the excitement of speeding up, the obsessive need to replay – come together in the gamer’s experience of playing *Tetris*. While other puzzle games exist, few have attained the popularity and loyalty of addicted players for so long and across so many platforms. Players must experience a particularly compelling internal narrative that keeps all of them coming back to the same unusual game again and again. It is a story comprising several layers of personal experience: button-pushing actions, ocular strain, catchy music getting stuck in one’s head, affinity for the right shape of a block, the floating images in one’s head hours after gameplay, a sense of the exoticized Russian character adding an intriguing flavour, and a desperate will to succeed in the face of almost certain failure.

This last element is the most fascinating. For all the talk of the game’s positive Soviet representation, constructive impulses and creative appeals to one’s sense of order and cleanliness, the game relies heavily on negative motivation. The construction of a line causes it to disappear; the only blocks remaining on-screen are those that remain incomplete, or the buried evidence of mistakes from previous tetromino-placement embedded in layers of blocks waiting to be excavated and filled with the right piece again. As blogger Eric Roe (2011) suggests, the game can take on a particularly nihilistic tone for the player: ‘Just like life there is no way to “win” at Tetris, you can play well or you can play badly but the final product is always the same, the screen is filled and the game ends’. How can a game so infinitely frustrating and ultimately meaningless become so potent, so palpably addictive, so psychologically satisfying?

The player may feel they are staving off some kind of disaster. After all, most games have plots of heroic quests in one way or another: did the players in the early 1990s feel they were somehow symbolically rebuilding Russia in the wake of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union? Did they see the game’s falling blocks as a metaphor for socialism itself, a system that will collapse and fail no matter how hard one might try to build it up or save it? Perhaps, in some way, players can see these heroic elements running through all of the Russian-tinged games they play: between avoiding nuclear war through careful negotiation (*Balance of power*), saving the planet from communist mutant

19. For example, the subjects had no memory of the game (or the experimenter) from session to session ... But even though the subjects don’t remember the game, don’t get better at it, and have no idea why they’re being woken up in the middle of the night, they reported seeing what sound remarkably like Tetris pieces while they’re drifting off to sleep. For instance, one reported seeing ‘images that are turned on their side. I don’t know what they are from. I wish I could remember, but they are like blocks’ (Helmuth 2000: 291).

invasion (*Communist mutants from outer space*), or even building and rebuilding a wall that you are doomed never to complete (*Tetris*), the player serves as mediator, as saviour, or at least, as the last line of defense against inevitable doom.

These statements are fanciful, but not as outlandish as they may seem. Roe's post proves that there are those who have read a rather complex ideological framework into *Tetris*, equating the game to life itself, and particularly to life in the Soviet Union, cued by the game's representation of its Russian origins via graphics and music. Roe speculates:

While these harsh realities are true of any human existence, they were especially true of life in the Soviet Union. While critics of capitalism would argue that life in a capitalist society is just as cruel if not crueler than life in a communist society, subjects of capitalism are at least presented with the idea of social mobility. Even if in practice this social mobility is inaccessible for the vast majority of citizens, they are at least encouraged to dream about a different lifestyle. For Soviet citizens there was no such dream, just endless labor until the screen filled up.

(2011)

For a player to have such a powerful reaction, connecting the game to the political situation of the Soviet Union merely through a few aspects of the game's representational strategy, it becomes clear that *Tetris's* Soviet elements represent more than just decorative additions to the compiled code.

This historic change in video games from vodka-swilling enemies to a lovably addictive Soviet puzzle game gave the American audiences a new, more abstract take on Russia. The American player could feel in many ways that this game somehow embodied the Russian people, interpreting the Soviet elements to represent Russian logic or intelligence (or nihilism about the fate of the USSR, as shown in Roe). This shift in games from overt caricature and racial stereotype to more neutral Soviet imagery occurs exactly at a moment of American superiority in the wake of the Cold War: the game reached the height of its popularity as the Soviet Union was collapsing in the early 1990s.

*Tetris* is so much more than the sum of its blocks. The representation of Soviet Russia is a vital actor in this process of attaching complex ideas to a simple puzzle game. Had *Tetris* been devoid of the title screen graphics and Russian songs, few if any would have constructed this sort of connection of gameplay to real-world political ideologies. That this connection is possible reveals a great deal about the power of suggestion; a few exotic Soviet elements meant to lure customers to an otherwise unmarked puzzle game did much more than rack up sales for Nintendo. The Soviet elements gave the players a chance to experience a uniquely Russian product, to associate it with its origins and thus with a land that was undergoing a great deal of change in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

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