



Нарративная медиариторика видеоигры «Valiant Hearts: The Great War» при изучении истории: теория и практика имплементации в образовательном контексте

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Введение. Генеральный секретарь ООН А. Гутерриш призывает переосмыслить всю информационно-коммуникационную структуру организации образовательного процесса с учетом глобальной цифровизации. Среди множества медиаинструментов и платформ, осваиваемых образовательной средой, особое и весьма перспективное место принадлежит видеоиграм. В данном случае они определяются в качестве мультимодальных кибертекстов, обладающих уникальными риторическими возможностями. *Целью исследования* является определение образовательного ресурса видеоигры «Valiant Hearts: The Great War» в контексте изучения истории.

Материалы и методы. Методология теоретической части исследования основывается на процедурно-риторической (Я. Богост), медиальной (А. Энслин) и мультимодальной (Дж. Хавреляк и В. Тох) интерпретации видеоигр. Экспериментально-практическая часть работы опирается на методику Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) М. Пренски.

Результаты. Выявлено, что видеоигра «Valiant Hearts: The Great War» обладает значительным медиариторическим потенциалом по репрезентации информации в рамках топики «Первая Мировая война». Ее нарративная направленность предоставляет ряд новых возможностей по трансляции исторических сюжетов. Учебный эксперимент продемонстрировал высокую эффективность использования «Valiant Hearts: The Great War» в рамках изучения истории Первой Мировой войны. Данный кибертекст вызвал живой интерес у обучающихся, заметно усилив учебную мотивацию и интерес к образовательному процессу. Пользовательское изучение его сюжета позволило студентам открыть лично-экзистенциальное измерение в изучении темы Первой Мировой войны, а также заострить внимание на ее антигуманистическом характере и столкновении судеб людей и государственных интересов. Одновременно, данные DGBL-практики оказались сопряжены со значительными временными затратами по изучению видеоигровых кибертекстов. Также была отмечена их неполная фактологическая релевантность академическому курсу истории.

Заключение. Можно рекомендовать использование DGBL-методики при изучении истории, но в строго определенных форматах. В первую очередь, в рамках факультативных занятий, самостоятельной домашней работы и долговременной проектной деятельности. Также обязательным условием при работе с неспециализированными видеоиграми является методическое сопровождение, которое призвано акцентировать внимание обучающихся на учебных задачах. С учетом этих особенностей, считаем целесообразным интегрировать в образовательный процесс по истории отдельные видеоигровые кибертексты (например, «Valiant Hearts: The Great War»), способные актуализировать изучение истории и создать новые, мультимодально ориентированные семиотические режимы убеждения в практике учебного процесса.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

обучение на основе цифровых игр, исторические видеоигры, история, нарративные видеоигры, историческое образование, видеоигровая медиариторика

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The narrative media rhetoric of the video game 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' in studying history: the theory and practice of implementation in an educational context

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The UN Secretary General A. Guterres calls for rethinking the whole informational-communicative structure of the educational process, taking into account global digitisation. Among the numerous media tools and platforms being mastered by the educational environment today, video games occupy a special and very promising place. In this case, they are defined as multimodal cybertexts with unique rhetorical capabilities. *The research aims* at determining the educational potential of the video game 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' in the context of studying History.

Materials and Methods. The methodology of the theoretical part of the study is based on the procedural-rhetorical (J. Bogost), medial (A. Ensslin) and multimodal (J. Hawreliak and W. Toh) interpretation of video games. The experimental-practical part of the research is based on the Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) method by M. Prensky.

Results. It has been revealed that the video game 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' has significant media-rhetorical potential for representing information on the topic of World War I. Its narrative focus provides a number of new opportunities for relating historical subjects. An educational experiment demonstrated the high efficiency of using 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' in studying the history of World War I. This cybertext quickened the students' interest, considerably increasing their academic motivation and interest in the educational process. The user study of its plot enabled the students to discover a personal-existential dimension in studying the topic of World War I, as well as to focus on its anti-humanistic nature and the clash between people's destinies and state interests. At the same time, these DGBL practices turned out to be associated with a substantial amount of time necessary for studying video game cybertexts. Their incomplete factual relevance to the academic history course was also noted.

Conclusion. Using the DGBL method in studying history can be recommended, but only in particular formats – first of all, within the framework of extracurricular classes, homework and long-term project activities. Also, a mandatory condition for working with non-specialised video games is methodological support aimed at focusing the students' attention on learning tasks. Taking into account these features, we consider it appropriate to incorporate into the educational process of studying history certain videogame cybertexts (for example, 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War'), capable of optimising the study of history and creating new, multimodally oriented semiotic modes of persuasion in the practice of the academic process.

KEYWORDS

Digital Game-Based Learning, historical video games, history, narrative video games, history education, video game media rhetoric

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INTRODUCTION

Various information and communications technologies are increasingly spreading into the modern-day educational space, becoming an integral part of current pedagogical practices. Digitisation of education and the implementation of new computer technologies in the educational process is a topical issue that has been repeatedly raised at the international level. In particular, the UN Secretary General A. Guterres spoke about the need to rethink the whole informational-communicative structure of the organisation of the educational process [9]. These same ideas are consistently covered in the recommendations of the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education [10]. Our research lies in the context of this international intention to search for and practically test new technological formats and media collaborations in the educational environment.

Among the numerous media tools and platforms being mastered by the educational environment, video games occupy a special and very promising place. In this case, they are defined as multimodal cybertexts with unique rhetorical capabilities. In terms of curriculum subjects, video games are most often used in the context of studying history. This, first of all, is due to the original modes of video game transmission of information, allowing for the interactive study of the logic and dynamics of the historical process, and secondly, to the popularity of historical settings and plots in multi-genre video games.

Our article is part of a wide array of studies devoted to the consideration of the theory and practice of using video games in the educational process. Therefore, in previous articles we already discussed in detail the issue of analysing the Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) method and the body of the main research literature in this area. Thus, we will get straight down to considering the works that describe historical video games and their use in educational practice per se.

First of all, it is necessary to highlight a number of fundamental monographic studies within the framework of this subject area. The first one we would like to mention is a book by J. McCall, which was reprinted in 2022 [27]. It is a combined educational guide to the use of historical games for the development of critical thinking skills. The book focuses on practical information and specific examples of incorporating video games into the learning process. Its content covers the main aspects of planning and conducting classes based on historical video games. And as recently as 2024, another work by McCall, which deals with the famous grand strategy game 'Europa Universalis IV', was published [26]. It is a teaching guide to the effective organisation of study time in this game containing methodological tools for analysing the results of its use. A monograph by the practicing teacher K. Squire is generally devoted to considering the peculiarities of teaching in the digital age based on the example of incorporating video games into the educational process [38]. A large portion of the work deals with demonstrating examples of the use of historical games in the academic process. J. Gee's book, where various video games are considered as a cognitive tool in teaching [22], has a similar structure. A. Chapman's work presents a special method for analysing historical video games based on the categories of simulation and epistemology, time, space, narrative, and affordance [17]. Through the prism of these categories, the author reveals how video games create representations of the past and act as a special form of historical media text.

This subject area has also received extensive coverage in the research article format. A team of authors led by A. Chapman give an overview of a branch within the game studies research program which is dedicated to historical video games [19]. The theoretical basis of the discourse of history game studies was formed by the conceptual developments of the already mentioned A. Chapman [18] and J. McCall [28], as well as by the studies of D. Spring [37] and L. Traynor [40]. Of note is a work by K. Schut, which reveals the bias of video games in the presentation of historical narratives [35]. C. Fogu analyses the influence of digital technologies (including video games) on all aspects of historiographic activity [21]. He reconstructs the way video games participate in the process of the virtual representation of the historical semantics of the real and potential past. A. McMichael explores the strengths and weaknesses of video games in history teaching practices [29]. An article by K. Kee and S. Graham examines the positive practical experience of teaching history using the DGBL method in high school and university [25]. The use of video games (based on the example of 'Civilization IV') at the school level of historical education is also the subject of a study by a team of authors led by W. Watson [41]. An article by J. Pagnotti and W. Russell [30] focuses on solving the same problems in the context of practical classroom activities. A work by T. Apperley is devoted to developing the thesis that grand strategy games (using 'Europa Universalis II' as an example) offer original media tools for critical interaction with historical narratives [15]. Comparing video game media texts with traditional

methods of historical representation, the author emphasises how algorithmic gameplay can change the understanding of historical processes. In the context of the Spanish pedagogical practice of using the DGBL method, the experiment by M. Sánchez [34] is of interest. He used the 'Dominations' video game for a multimodal study of the course on the history of the Ancient World. L. Gilbert explores history as a human experience using the example of analysing students' sensory involvement in the narrative of 'Assassin's Creed' [23]. Finally, a fairly original approach to the study of historical video games is offered by E. Pfister, who considers them as an example of new mythological narratives [31].

In addition, the thematic collection of articles 'Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History' edited by M. Kapell and E. Elliott [32] is worth mentioning. The main theme of the collection is the reconstruction and analysis of ways of interacting with the past through video game texts.

In the Russian scientific discourse, there are a number of original and in-depth studies that analyse historical video games. Thus, an article by S. Yu. Cherny scrupulously reconstructs the features of the procedural representation of the historical narrative in grand strategy games (using the example of 'Europa Universalis IV') [14]. L. V. Moyzhes reveals the ideological significance of affordances in the media text of historical video games [11]. The issue of distorting history in video game narratives is studied comprehensively and in sufficient detail in articles by S. I. Belov. In particular, he specifically considers video games as a media tool for representing the topic of the Cold War [2; 3] and implementing the policy of memory [4]; the researcher also analyses historical symbolism as a factor in the formation of social memory [1]. S. N. Fedorchenko conducts his research in the same subject area, focusing on how the events of the Great Patriotic War are interpreted in video games [13].

Interestingly, there are only a few papers on the topic of using the DGBL method in historical education in the domestic scientific and pedagogical discourse. Thus, some works by U.P. Belyaeva are devoted to the direct integration of video games into the process of history teaching. In particular, she considers the possibilities of using the video game series 'Age of Empires' in history lessons [8].

Finally, over the past three years one of the authors of this study, D.A. Belyaev, has conducted a series of theoretical, experimental and practical studies on the possibilities of using video games both in the context of general historical education and specialised training. Among his most relevant works, one can point out a 2023 study that looks into the use of the DGBL method in direct educational activities for studying history [5].

Meanwhile, most studies that explore video games in the context of historical education examine projects of the strategic genre. However, we will focus on analysing the educational potential of the adventure-narrative historical video game 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' (2014), which, at first glance, has a very limited potential for transmitting historical information from the point of view of genre and dominant media modes.

Accordingly, the aim of our study is to define the educational potential of the video game 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' in the context of studying history. Its achievement is specified in two major tasks: firstly, in the conceptual and theoretical exposure of the modes of media-rhetorical transmission of historical information in the cybertext of the video game 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War'; secondly, in the experimental verification of the features, effectiveness and prospects of educational work with the media text of 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' within the framework of the direct practice of history teaching.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary media material of the study is the video game 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War', which received an award at The Game Awards ceremony in 2014 (the video games equivalent of the Oscars) in the nomination for the best narrative. In terms of genre, it can be defined as an arcade-adventure puzzle game put in the setting of the First World War. Apart from that, the computer programme 'Game Studies. Politics and History in Video Games: Software and Presentation Course' was used as informational, educational and methodological support [6].

The experimental part of the study was conducted at the level of higher education within the framework of a free elective history course, whose topic implied additional study of the First World War. Its participants were 67 second- and third-year students of various departments. The total duration of the experiment was intended to take 26 academic hours, which included 8 hours of classroom work and 18 hours of independent work.

The general collection and research interpretation of the experimental data was carried out in two major modalities:

- the 'subjective protocol' for data collection, which included surveys and in-depth interviews, was used. Its results were intended to demonstrate the students' subjective evaluation of the use of the DGBL method based on the video game 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' for studying the history of the First World War;
- an objectively oriented assessment of the amount of residual factual knowledge on the topic of the First World War and the acquisition of relevant competencies after working with the video game cybertext was carried out (through complex testing and thematic essays).

The methodology of the theoretical part of the study is based on the concept of A. Ensslin [20], which reveals the linguistic features of video games as a special medium, the theory of multimodal semiotic interpretation of video games by J. Hawreliak [24] and W. Toh [39], as well as the concept of procedural rhetoric by J. Bogost [16]. In the experimental-practical part of the research, we relied on the Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) method by M. Prensky [33]. Also, during the implementation of the theoretical and practical parts of the study, we used the methods of systemic and comparative analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In most cases, in studying history with the help of the DGBL method, video games belonging to the genre of grand (conceptual) strategies are used. Their software tools allow simulating several variants of the development of historical events taking into account multifactorial influences [7]. However, 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' is fundamentally different from cybertexts of strategic character in terms of genre, and therefore in terms of media rhetoric. It is a modally narrative game, where the main body of information (in our case, this is, in fact, a separate historical episode) is transmitted through the plot narrative. In addition, the unfolding of the software narrative is absolutely linear and devoid of significant narrative variations.

All that can be initially assessed as limitations (in comparison with strategy games) of using 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' as an interactive media text on history. At the same time, the narrative nature of the video game allows for the use of other multimodal means and rhetorical techniques that are inaccessible to classic strategies to influence the user.

The plot of 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' is told through personal stories of four main protagonists who took part in the war – soldiers from the French, German and American armies, and a Belgian nurse (Picture 1).

This narrative approach makes it possible to simulate and represent several different perspectives on the events of World War I, presented as a first-person narrative with maximum user involvement. At the same time, it creates intense emotional attachment to historical events which are taken seriously and personally. By focusing on individual experience, the game interactively speaks about the personal, human dimension of the war, emphasising the experiences, sacrifices and struggles of those who participated in it. As the plot unwinds, 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' raises moral and ethical questions and dilemmas, encouraging users to critically consider the decisions made during the war, as well as reflect on their consequences. This promotes the development of empathy and a deeper understanding of the meaning of war in the humanistic dimension and, ultimately, contributes to the 'humanisation of history'.

Apart from this emotional dimension, the video game has a certain historical authenticity regarding facts, the geography of events, and set design. For instance, it features real historical places and events, such as the Battle of the Somme and the Battle of the Marne. Despite the artistic

stylisation of the visual component of 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War', it actually has a high level of historical accuracy, providing a visually exact representation of the era, including uniforms, weapons, and environments. In addition, the game contains documentary insets with key historical facts and real photographs that provide a socio-historical and factual context for the events of World War I. Another gameplay element is the search for and collection of historical artifacts that provide insight into the daily life of soldiers and civilians during the war.



Picture 1 Image of the video game's protagonists «Valiant Hearts: The Great War»

It is important to note the interdisciplinary potential of 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War'; its use is not restricted to the study of history. Thus, the game can be easily integrated into Literature, Art and Music classes, since it contains numerous media references to cultural works of the early 20th century. Finally, the presence of original historical documents allows it to be used to support the study of foreign languages, primarily French and German.

All this creates great potential for productive educational work with 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' within the framework of historical consideration of World War I. Yet, the possibilities of its unlocking will become clear in the course of conducting an educational experiment based on the DGBL method, with the video game 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War' used as a basic cybertext for studying the historical events of World War I.

Classroom work included the following forms and types of educationally oriented activities:

- familiarising the students with the basic game mechanics and interface functions;
- setting in-game goals and objectives for the students;
- arranging two face-to-face classes on playing the game under the guidance of a teacher with a simultaneous discussion of historical events and characters;
- discussions about historical facts (with an emphasis on unreliable data) and the axiological modality of presenting information in 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War';
- holding public debates on the motivation of the protagonists of the game, as well as discussing their actions from a moral and state perspective;
- the students' presentations on the results of familiarising themselves with the video game cybertext;
- final tests, in-depth interviews and surveys.

Independent work included the students' playing sessions that involved a thorough study of the narrative of 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War'. Given the linear character of the game's software, the main task was to complete the game's story or reach the maximum level. In case of experiencing

difficulty in solving the game puzzles, the students could get advice in a group chat. During the game, the students were to make one or two saves which were eventually demonstrated (with the player's commentary) in classroom discussions. In addition, using the reflective writing method, the students were to write reflective essays or diary entries about their personal gaming experience and its introspection in the context of the First World War topic. By way of variations on the thematic focus of the essay, the students were asked to analyse the protagonists of the game, study their origins, their motives for participating in the war, and how the war influenced their fate and world view. Finally, the students were required to systematically search for and record all historical inconsistencies that are present in the video game cybertext.

Based on the results of the entire complex of educational experimental procedures, the following data were obtained.

Firstly, the students' attitudes towards using the DGBL method in studying history were assessed dynamically (with empirical fixation points at the beginning and end of the experiment). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Changing attitudes to the DGBL method

Questions	Before the start of the experiment		After the end of the experiment	
Attitude to the DGBL method in studying history	Positive	63%	Positive	86%
	Negative / Sceptical	17%	Negative / Sceptical	9%
	Neutral	20%	Neutral	5%

Despite the fact that already at the beginning of the experiment a fairly high percentage of respondents reacted positively to the use of the DGBL method, however, their number increased significantly upon completion of the educational experiment. This indicates subjectively positive impressions of the majority of the students from their acquaintance with the video game cybertext. The students appreciated the usefulness and effectiveness of this form of ICT training.

Secondly, checking the reflective essays, analysing the final presentations and in-depth interviews showed the students' deep emotional involvement in the game plot. This became the starting point for discussing the inhumane nature of war and reflections on the difference between personal and state views on the First World War, as well as reflections on the impact of the war on people's fates and existential experiences. Many students pointed out that the game's storytelling enabled them to rediscover both the First World War as a historical event and the phenomenon of war in general, in its humanistic dimension.

Thirdly, fact-based testing showed that 78% of the students had learned the core set of specific events and facts about World War I contained in the game cybertext.

Simultaneously, certain difficulties were noted in the students' independent familiarisation with the video game, which required frequent consulting support and working with a specialised computer programme that served as important methodological support. In addition, the factual material on the topic of The First World War, present in the video game cybertext, was rather disjointed and did not include a number of important facts necessary for the historical and factually holistic coverage of this topic.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting the results obtained, we can acknowledge their coherence (in terms of the development of critical thinking) with the conclusions from the monograph by J. McCall [27]. We were also able to confirm the effectiveness of A. Chapman's analytical method for decomposing a video game narrative into separate semantic blocks [17]. On a subjective-emotional level, the students perceived the video game positively. This kind of information delivery evoked additional interest in

history in general and the topic of the First World War, in particular. The latter began to be perceived by the students as a transmedia event, whose information can be transmitted through various media and at the same time be quite academically legitimate. Here, the results of our study are consistent with the data presented by L. Gilbert, who examined another narrative-oriented video game – ‘Assassin’s Creed’ [23].

At the same time, ‘Valiant Hearts: The Great War’ is not a specially designed educational software project, which underlies the vagueness of its educational component. The identification of this component and following the educational trajectory within the framework of reading the video game cybertext (i.e. finishing the game) requires special efforts from students and must necessarily be accompanied by methodological support. All this creates objective difficulties in integrating the video game into the regular process of studying history. Finally, educational work with the video game cybertext required serious material and technological resources created in an experimental format. However, we are aware of the fact that the technological context of organising everyday educational practices may not often meet the conditions for using video games in the classroom.

In general, based on our experience in organising and conducting several experiments on the use of the DGBL method, we can identify three generalised clusters of difficulties and constraints in educational work with video game cybertexts: educational-organisational and methodological, material and technical, and competence-related ones. The content of the first cluster is stipulated by the fundamental asynchrony, on the one hand, of the concentration of educational material in video games and the time limitations of working with it, and, on the other hand, the systemic nature of the academic process, which has a clear thematic structure and rhythmic chronological order. Accordingly, the practical integration of video games into the educational process turns out to be very problematic. One possible way out of this situation may be the initial (as early as the planning stage) inclusion in the course syllabus of a separate unit for using the DGBL method. The second cluster comprises the entire set of the necessary material and technical resources needed for the effective implementation of classroom and independent work with video game cybertexts. This difficulty can be partially resolved at the level of educational institutions by improving the required technological equipment. Yet, in this case, the issue of the technical organisation of students’ independent work remains relevant. Finally, the third cluster of difficulties and constraints is related to the level of essential special competencies of the teachers themselves. Qualified, educationally oriented work with video game cybertexts requires new digital knowledge, experience and skills from teachers. And this is especially important in connection with the need for intensive methodological support for students’ academic work. Meanwhile, a clear understanding of all these difficulties may enable us to work out effective strategies for organising educational work based on the DGBL method which will take into account and minimise their constraints.

In general, some of the identified positive effects and constraints of the use of these media resources in historical education are also recorded in the collection ‘Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History’ [32] and the monograph by P. Shah [36], which confirms the relevance of the data obtained and the adequacy of their interpretation.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the video game ‘Valiant Hearts: The Great War’ has significant media-rhetorical potential for representing information on the topic of World War I. At the same time, its narrative focus provides a number of new opportunities for relating historical subjects. The educational experiment demonstrated the high efficiency of using ‘Valiant Hearts: The Great War’ in studying the history of World War I. This cybertext quickened the students’ interest, considerably increasing their academic motivation and interest in the educational process. The user study of its plot enabled the students to discover a personal-existential dimension in studying the topic of World War I, as well as to focus on its anti-humanistic nature and the clash between people’s destinies and state interests.

However, despite the formal success of our experiment and the achievement of positive results, we could recommend the use of the DGBL method in studying history only in particular formats – first of all, within the framework of extracurricular classes, homework and long-term project activities. This is due to a substantial amount of time necessary for studying video game cybertexts

and their incomplete factual relevance to the academic history course. Also, a mandatory condition for working with non-specialised educational video games is maintaining information security [12] and methodological support aimed at focusing the students' attention on learning tasks. Taking into account these features, we consider it appropriate to incorporate into the learning process of studying history certain videogame cybertexts capable of optimising the study of history and creating new, multimodally oriented semiotic modes of persuasion in the practice of the academic process.

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