

Reports and Commentaries

3.7.3. RUSSIAN GAMERS BECOME ACTION HEROES: PAVEL SANAEV'S *NA IGRE* [HOOKED] (2009) *by Stephen M. Norris*

N*a igre* is the first Russian film to explore the gaming culture that has flourished since communism's collapse. Based on Aleksandr Chubar'ian's 2003 novel *Games Into Life* [Igrы v zhizn'], Pavel Sanaev's film not only attempts to capture the world and worldviews of Russian gamers, it also provides a snapshot of the new Russia as seen through the eyes of the first post-socialist generation.

Figure 1. The DVD's menu: the keyboard as a gun.



Source: Film still from Pavel Sanaev's *Na igre* (2009).

The film is narrated from the point of view of six young gamers (five men, one woman) from Nizhnii Novgorod. They win a gaming tournament and, in addition to a cash prize, receive a mysterious new ‘anti-terror’ game. When they load the disc into their computers, they each receive powers that are similar to those of their virtual personas, avatars. They can fight like martial art specialists, shoot like the best marksmen, drive like the best Formula One racers, and plan like the best military tacticians. When one of the other winning gamers, Maks (Aleksei Bardukov), is confronted by a group of toughs at a restaurant, he easily defeats them. The six protagonists soon discover that they, too, possess remarkable abilities. When Maks is kidnapped, the six rescue him. In the process, they seemingly uncover a terrorist plot and take out the bad guys, bragging afterwards about the hits they each scored. Maks, however, is horrified by the real-life violence and he does not join their plans to use their new-found powers. The six decide to get rich, taking on the local crime syndicate and forcing them to pay tribute to them. Meanwhile, an oligarch (Viktor Verzhbitskii) who has designs on securing world supremacy by obtaining a rare metal from a Bolivian mine, convinces the heroes that they need to work for him to help defend Russia from terrorist groups and Special Forces alike. The oligarch, Boris Sergeevich, lives on a dirigible that travels throughout the country while he orders his main henchman, a Russian security forces agent named Lebedev (Boris Tenin), to do his dirty work. To reward them for their service, Boris Sergeevich allows the provincial gamers to get a taste for the good life during a hedonistic spree in Moscow. The gamers are also closely watched by the creator of the special game, Pokrovskii (Mikhail Gorevoi), who wants to use it to create an army of young gamers with special powers. The six agree to take out a supposed enemy of Russia at Boris’s behest. In the end, one of them—nicknamed ‘Vampire’ (Sergei Chirkov)—realizes that they have all been duped and have served as hired assassins. He attempts to call off the assassination but fails to do so. ‘Dlinnyi’ (Tikhon Zhiznevskii), one of the six, is killed in the ensuing battle with local Nizhnii Novgorod police. The gamers all realize they have been used; the adult world they sought to join and grow rich in has proven to be more cruel than they imagined.

Figure 2. The gamers (left to right): Yan, Vampire, Dlinnyi, Komar and Doctor.



Source: Film still from Pavel Sanaev's *Na igre* (2009).

The story does not end there. *Na igre 2: Novyi uroven'* [The Next Level] came out in February 2010 and had the gamers deal with the ramifications of their new-found powers and new-found awareness that they had been used. Sanaev wanted to create an action genre film that stretched across two films. His hope, as he told Susana Al'perina of *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, was that audiences would respond to his heroes, feel anger toward them, but also want to follow their fates. It is a story, as Sanaev argued, about how 'young people acquire super abilities and cross over the division between a game and life. They crossed over without a moment's hesitation' (quoted in Kiseleva). In another interview, Sanaev insisted the film is not about the harmful effects of computer games, telling a reporter that 'that is a subject for psychologists' (quoted in Khoroshilova). The director's statement, however, was an attempt to answer a major question about his film. Sanaev does not condemn the gamers and their games, but his film still foregrounds societal anxieties about the excesses of the digital age and the morality of young people in the new, post-communist consumer culture.

Figure 3. The gamers become action heroes.



Source: Film still from Pavel Sanaev's *Na igre* (2009).

Na igre contains all the signposts of what Will Brooker has identified as a ‘videogame film’: spectacular, showy effects, videogame-like memes such as a plot that involves progression through different levels, and a narrative style that functions like a videogame and is based on cycles of character-death and reset (2009: 123-24). Sanaev also employs videogame-like camera techniques to replicate the third-person and first-person shooter format of the games the protagonists play on their computers and in their lives. *Na igre* allows the viewer to experience the game-like experience of the protagonists as they shoot their opponents just as the audience gets the long, third-person shots of the heroes in action.

The result is that *Na igre* represents the most significant Russian example of what gaming scholars have termed ‘convergence’: the ‘double jump’ a text makes when it moves between media platforms. Sanaev’s film is one where videogames, mass media, cinema and audience converge. The convergence begins with the title. Sanaev initially called the film *Gamers* but held an online competition to come up with a new name. A young gamer from Ekaterinburg suggested *Na igre* and Sanaev liked it. The title came from Danny Boyle’s film adaptation of Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*, which was translated in Russian as *Na igle* [On the Needle, or Hooked] (Al’perina 2009). The film is also a synergistic convergence of media in the New Russia. As Judd Ethan Ruggill has defined it, synergistic convergence is ‘more than simply an industrial, economic, aesthetic, political, technological, and/or ideological concourse’ (2009: 110). ‘It is’, he concludes, ‘the magnification of forces, meanings, and ideas that happens as a result of this flowing together’ (Ruggill 2009: 110). *Na igre* magnifies the economic, social, cultural and political changes in Russia since the end of communism. The film particularly highlights the convergence between different ways of life, generations, groups, regions of Russia, and economies. It also highlights the interplay between films, television and computer games in the new Russia. It sells itself and the game culture it depicts—the

game they win at, to pick one example of the convergence in the film, is the popular online game, Point Blank (<http://pointblank.ru/>). After watching the film, any spectator can go online and play the game, too.

Figure 4. The computer games turns real: (pre-)Soviet architectural pieces in the background.



Source: Film still from Pavel Sanaev's *Na igre* (2009).

Sanaev's biography is also a tale of convergence. In the press *Na igre* received, Sanaev's biography occupies as much space as the film's plot. He is the grandson of the actor Vsevolod Sanaev and the son of the actress and documentary filmmaker Elena Sanaeva. His stepfather is Roland Bykov, the famous actor and director. Pavel first garnered attention as a writer for his 1995 autobiographical novella, *Bury Me Behind the Baseboard* [Pokhoronite menia za plintusom]. The book became an instant bestseller and has subsequently gone through several editions. Sergei Snezkin made a film adaptation of it in 2009 while Sanaev authored the script. Both the novella and film dissect the world of the Soviet intelligentsia through the eyes of a young boy. Sanaev's account, as Tatiana Moskvina-Yashchenko writes, exposes the vices and virtues of his family: 'the intelligentsia's virtues were honesty, sincerity, and talent, whereas its main vice was corruption of the soul' (Moskvina-Yashchenko 2009). Sanaev's narrator (a fictionalized self) experiences 'the Soviet land' and 'the land of advanced socialism' as a naïve, helpless child. What he sees is a land dominated by status, careerism, and desire for consumer goods. Both the novella and film present a Soviet society 'that created a new type of person who was spiritually weak, incapable of tolerance, forgiveness, and selfless love' (Moskvina-Yashchenko 2009). These values, Sanaev suggests, survived communism, when the parents passed on their ways of life to their children.

Na igre becomes therefore a continuation of this argument, a further convergence between virtual and real lives. The protagonists are all post-Soviet subjects: their lives, habits

and morals all developed after 1991. Their opponents are Soviet subjects: their lives have changed after 1991, but their development took place before. The gamers live in Nizhnii Novgorod, a symbol of pre-revolutionary Russian commerce and post-Soviet economic recovery that had been the closed city of Gorky for much of the Soviet era. They drive tricked-out foreign cars, speak in slang, play paintball, ride bicycles, hang out in new cafes, sport tattoos, wear the latest fashions and rollerblade. They are optimistic, naïve, and they believe they are using their powers for good. We first see Boris Sergeevich hatching his plans in Akademgorodok, the Soviet science city built in the Khrushchev era. Built to serve as a Soviet New Atlantis, by the 1980s, Akademgorodok with its grey, monotonous buildings, became a symbol of the crumbling system that built it. Boris Sergeevich launches his plan from the Soviet-era town and its Institute for Alternative Sources of Energy. The bad guys in the film tend to occupy old factories, wear fashions that are a mix of the 1980s Soviet apparat-chik with 1990s Russian gangster, speak in Soviet tongues, and exhibit a lack of morality. They do not believe they are doing anything for good. The game on screen, replicated by the shooter games they play on their computers, is a battle between good and evil, the new and the old. It is waged on several fronts. Sanaev has done much to draw these comparisons, declaring that his film differs from other recent Russian special-effects blockbusters because ‘we have [in our movie] a completely different story ... that deals with a sense of the stories of real, non-invented people, topical turning-points, and the atmosphere of a real, urban, but not fairy tale, life’ (quoted in Kiseleva).

Figure 5. Oligarchs and security agents: Boris Sergeevich and Lebedev.



Source: Film still from Pavel Sanaev's *Na igre* (2009).

Sanaev wanted his film to be one ‘that breaks preconceived ideas about what Russian cinema is’ (quoted in Khoroshilova). *Na igre*, therefore, fits with Sanaev's previous films,

both marketed for and about teenagers: 2005's *The Last Weekend* [Poslednii uik-end], a teen thriller, and 2007's *Kilometer Zero* [Nulevoi kilometr], which follows two young men from Murmansk who attempt to make it big in Moscow. Most critics have not been impressed by Sanaev's cinematic world. Stas Lobastov, writing in *Itogi*, laments Sanaev's directorial projects and his attempts 'to reproduce onscreen his ideas about contemporary young people's way of life' (Lobastov 2009). He calls Sanaev's cinema a 'children's world' and posits, based on Sanaev's autobiographical writings, that the director failed to have a normal childhood and therefore seems obsessed with recreating one on screen. Although Lobastov's criticism was negative, he had it right—*Na igre* is about young people, their culture, and their worldviews after communism. It is worth watching for what it reveals to us about new media and patterns of convergence between various media platforms in Russia.

Na igre

Russia, 2009, 90 min.

Director: Pavel Sanaev

Screenplay: Pavel Sanaev, Aleksandr Chubar'ian

Producers: Leonid Ogorodnikov, Oleg Andreev, Aleksei Riazantsev

Cinematographer: Vladislav Gurchin

Music: Ivan Burliaev

Cast: Sergei Chirkov, Marina Petrenko, Pavel Priluchnyi, Evgenii Kharlanov, Tikhon Zhiznevskii, Nodar Siradze, Aleksei Bardukov, Agniia Ditkovskite, Viktor Verzhbitskii, Boris Tenin, Mikhail Gorevoi

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