

Cat Goodfellow in conversation with Ninel (Amiko_chan) Nuretdinova Voices (Towards Other Institutions), Chapter II, #28

*What is your first memory of gaming? Where were you?
What virtual world did you explore?*

Amiko_chan

My very first game was *Tetris*, which was hardly worth exploring as a virtual world. The real thing started with *Tomb Raider*, an action adventure, then a series of city-building games along the lines of *Tycoon City: New York*, and economic strategy games such as *Faraon*. These genres are still among my favourites. In the latter two cases, the player gets a realistic experience, while the first one is an immersion into an amazing lost world.

Cat Goodfellow

I have that same memory of exploration and discovery. When I was very small, me and my brother would play *Midnight Rescue!* and *Treasure Mountain!*, side-scrolling adventures where you had to solve mystery riddles and collect treasure. I remember how excited we got when we realised there was a secret cave in *Treasure Mountain*. It didn't give you any extra points, but we felt like we'd discovered something important. We played *Duke Nukem 3D* when we were a little older – with the adult graphics turned off until we learned where the menu option was to enable them. I remember we had to load the game from the C prompt, which made us feel really grown-up... but now it just makes me feel old.

Have you seen your town or city represented in a game, or been to a real world location that you've played in a game? How did it feel to navigate it?

Accurate or inaccurate? Strange or normal?

Amiko_chan

Yes, I have. Both getting to a location that I've played and playing in a location that I've been to gives me a fantastic feeling. Navigating was mostly easy. Confronting the two realities, pinpointing

differences and similarities is a fascinating experience. I loved Tom Clancy's *The Division* and *Spider-Man*. Both are located in New York, and I had fun thinking back to my own travels while I was playing. Now I'd like to visit the real game locations that settled in my heart. It is clearly impossible to recreate an entire city in virtual reality, but it's not even necessary. In most cases, certain iconic buildings, streets and junctions are enough.

Cat Goodfellow

I've never lived anywhere exciting enough to end up in a video game. I think that's my problem. For me it was always about books: when I moved to St Petersburg, I wanted to go everywhere I'd read about in books.

Actually, the UK doesn't seem to show up in a lot in games. London does, but always the bits everyone goes to as a tourist. So it's not really representative of the experience of visiting the city, for me. I think those are the parts that appeal to an American audience and a more global audience, so that's what makes the cut.

Do you experience Russian and non-Russian games differently? How does it feel when non-Russians depict Russian places, culture or characters in their games?

Amiko_chan

The number of games produced in Russia is not that big. But it's always nice to play with one's own culture. My advice is to check out the developers that work with authentic folklore narratives: <http://www.mooseman.ru/blackbook.html>, for instance. Non-Russian games mostly feature stereotypes and cliches about Russia. The *Call of Duty* series is one such example. However, visiting the Soviet Moscow of *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* was fun. It is always nice to study the details to find out whether their rendition is good enough.

Cat Goodfellow

Back in 2010, when I was first working on my research on gaming in Russia, I remember reading an article by a developer from Vladivostok. He said that making games in Russia wasn't that hard in itself but getting to all the events and conventions in Moscow and St Petersburg proved to be next to impossible. Even in his own country, he didn't feel like the games that made it were

representative of the stories he wanted to tell. That really shaped my understanding of accessing games, especially over ten years ago.

I wonder how things have changed for him, and for other game developers like him, with more access to high-speed internet and a huge shift towards purchasing games online. How can anyone create new narratives about Russian culture and society in games if developers in remote parts of the country can't even access a domestic market?

Ninel Nuretdinova

I believe many things have changed today, primarily through access to high-speed internet. A short while ago, I talked to an online game developer from Novosibirsk in Siberia who had taken part in an indie game tournament and won an award. For him, it is a solution for finding sponsors, publishers and, most importantly, players. Moreover, during the pandemic, we learned to do everything online, so the issue of the far-flung areas of our country has in a way been solved.

In the S.T.A.L.K.E.R and Metro 2033 game series, spaces that we know are catastrophically changed by the effects of nuclear fallout. The protagonists are forced to survive in these environments, as well as interacting with strange new beings or entities. I see a lot of influence from Russian science fiction in these works (Solaris, Per Aspera ad Astra, the Strugatsky Brothers, Pelevin...). Why do we want to go into these spaces? What do these games tell us about Russian culture today? Why do they keep making sequels to them – are they still relevant?

Amiko_chan

People must be tired of the rules and norms of their daily lives. They need a different experience. On the other hand, this explanation might go for any video game. Perhaps what matters is getting into a realistic world where you are successful, for a change.

What will gaming in Russia look like in the future?

Amiko_chan

Game dev in Russia is taking quantum leaps. There is a whole

range of interesting indie games.

However, access to international releases may become problematic for the average Russian as the leading studios such as Sony Interactive or Nintendo keep raising prices for their products. Hardware isn't easily purchased either. In all likelihood, for the near future people will have to make do with existing games. Luckily, there are plenty of those.

The situation with VR games is noteworthy. Practically every shopping mall has a virtual reality arcade. They used to be the only way to experience VR, but now VR headsets are increasingly popular, at least among the people I know. The reasons are twofold: the gear is relatively inexpensive, and it offered a substitute for exercise during the pandemic

Cat Goodfellow

I saw the same challenges with access to new games between 2007 and 2013, when I was living in Russia and working on my research. Back then, I predicted that foreign games being so expensive would leave space for Russian indie game developers to step in and create more accessible choices. In my research, I found a lot of gamers I interviewed and surveyed didn't really care either way: they wanted to play interesting games, and at that time they felt the most interesting games were coming from the US and Europe.

I would never have predicted how popular VR is becoming. In 2007-2008 I didn't even have Internet access at home – I remember back then only about 25% of households had Internet. Now basically everyone is online.

Ninel Nuretdinova

Internet connection is paramount nowadays, to the point where you can't even launch an offline game without internet access. Just wondering what happens to the gaming world in case of internet problems.

Does being a woman make a difference to your gaming interaction and activities? Has that changed over the years you've been gaming? How does it feel to navigate a video game space as a

player character?

Amiko_chan

In Russia, just like everywhere else in the gaming world, it used to be a huge problem when the other players discovered you were a woman. There were two possible consequences: you were either snubbed or offered (unnecessary) help at every step. As the popularity of video games increased, any girl who admitted she was a gamer had to brave a barrage of excited comments, including suggestions that she was playing to keep up with a popular trend. Over the years the situation has improved, although there are still some negative comments, just like in every other industry.

As for the manner of interaction, I have not noticed any gender-specific styles. Anyone is entitled to make any gaming choices they want. I used to know girls who excelled in cyber sports, winning every shooter session, and guys who preferred sweet games.

Video game space perception is an interesting question, a subject for heated discussion among gamer friends. Some people like to imagine themselves as omnipotent; some like getting experience that is totally different from their real lives, while for me it is more like an adventure arising from my normal self. There are lots of books about time travellers having to deal with otherworldly problems and quests, in line with today's morals and notions about good, bad and nice manners. This is what my case is about. It is extremely difficult for me to go against my own nature and do something that I would not have done in normal life.

Cat Goodfellow

I remember when I lived in Yaroslavl' in 2007, there was only one internet cafe near me in town. The first time I went there after class, I walked in and I was the only woman. That hadn't happened to me in a space in a long time. All the guys were gaming: games that I knew and some that I liked, but I never gamed while I lived there. Then in St Petersburg the following year, I used to go to this big, two-floor internet cafe near Sadovaya station and it was totally different. A much more social space for guys and girls. I recall the guys still gamed more than the girls, but everyone was hanging out

together.

Like you, I find it difficult to act against my nature in a game. If there's an option to play as a woman, I want to take it: I want to exist in that game space as I am in real life. I grew up in a time when gaming wasn't so much of a gendered activity, and saw it shift towards being a hobby for guys with all the titles and advertising aimed at them. It was crazy to discover the boys at school weren't interested in talking about games with me. I'd always played games, you know? Now we seem to be moving back in the other direction.

Ninel Nuretdinova

All my female friends prefer male avatars. They say it's nicer to watch them play. I've heard things along the same lines from men as well: they like having female avatars to enjoy looking at them. As for me, I'm all for relating to my character.