

From Soviet Symbols to Digital Realities: Exploring Russian Cultural Hegemony in 35 MM

Mehmet Arif Arık / Dr. 

Akdeniz University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Journalism, PhD
m.arif.arik@gmail.com

Tuba Livberber / Assoc. Prof. Dr. 

Akdeniz University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Journalism
tubalivberber@akdeniz.edu.tr

Ayşen Yalman* / Asst. Prof. Dr. 

Akdeniz University, Serik Gülsün-Süleyman Süral Vocational School, Department of Marketing and Advertising
aysenyalman@akdeniz.edu.tr

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

With globalization, countries have begun to prioritize economic and soft power alongside military strength in their security strategies. Following the global shift in power after 1990, the Russian Federation, facing a historical turning point, required reorganization and a new approach to secure its role in the emerging international system. Digital games, a significant aspect of popular culture, play a role in ideological and political meaning-making, reflecting real-life dynamics. Games with narratives can construct ideological worlds, embedding and communicating myths and representations to players. In this context, analyzing the Russian-developed game 35 MM provides insight into Russia's strategy of using soft power to extend its cultural influence while maintaining regional interests. This study aims to unco-

ver the cultural codes that reflect Russia's effort to promote its global presence through digital games without abandoning regionalism. By interpreting 35 MM through a post-Soviet lens, the study explores the underlying symbols and boundaries of this new hegemonic and ideological strategy. The findings reveal that video games have the potential to be powerful tools for countries to disseminate cultural hegemony. Russia is actively leveraging this potential by collaborating with game developers to extend its cultural influence to younger generations.

Keywords: Post-Soviet Russia, Hegemony, Globalization, Soft Power.

JEL Codes: Z1, Z10

Citation: Arık, M. A., Livberber, T., & Yalman, A. (2025). From Soviet Symbols to Digital Realities: Exploring Russian Cultural Hegemony in 35 MM, *Researches on Multidisciplinary Approaches (Romaya Journal)*, 5(1): 9-20.

Introduction

Digital games not only drive a larger economy, but also have a more active cultural production and distribution potential thanks to their power of cultural hegemony. This power also plays an important role in shaping popular culture and increasing its global influence. Newzoo's Global Games Market Report found that by 2020, one in three people worldwide will play digital games. Similarly, the digital games industry has become a fast-growing global economy. In 2020, the global games market will generate \$159.3 billion. About \$78.4 billion of this revenue, or almost half of the global games market, was generated in the Asia-Pacific region. Eastern Europe, including the Russian Federation, accounted for \$4.2 billion, or 2% of the market. According to this data, Russia has the most promising games market both regionally and globally (Newzoo, 2014). The main reason for this is the Russian Federation's investment and support of digital technologies after the Soviet Union. In fact, the Russian Federation is the first country to recognise eSports as an official sport and to establish the official eSports federation (Russian eSports Federation [RESF]). In this context, it is crucial for our research to examine the support and investment provided by the Russian Federation to participate in the global gaming market and its impact on shaping culture.

The aim of this study is to investigate how Russia, which, especially after the Soviet Union, has preferred to use capitalism by redefining it within its own structure rather than being anti-capitalist, and which aims to increase its influence on the global society through cultural hegemonic tools, while not abandoning the use of military force, aims to achieve this goal through digital games, which have a new and high potential compared to other sources of cultural hegemony. This research aims to reveal the details of this choice by focusing on Russia's cultural hegemony strategies in the axis of digital games and examining their impact on culture. In this context, the study employs a case study approach to reveal the processes of Russia's ideological dissemination and cultural persuasion by analysing the games produced by independent Russian developers and large companies. Through the case analysis of the game 35 MM, developed by an independent game developer directly supported by Russia, this research also delves into the background of Russia's cultural hegemony in the post-Soviet era.

Post-Soviet Hegemony as a Different Integration Model

States, which have a new understanding of security with globalization, regulate their international security plans not only in political and military fields but also in other fields such as economy, technology, culture, climate and society. As a result of this

transformation, in addition to the concept of military power, the concepts of economic and cultural hegemony also come to the fore. Likewise, although Russia has been using hard power instruments due to its vast geographical location since Tsarist Russia and the USSR, it has now started to use cultural hegemony instruments as well. As Hall stated: "What hegemony implies is that the dominance of particular entities is achieved not by ideological coercion but by cultural leadership" (1999).

Academics and politicians who call for Russia to use its own cultural hegemonic power to defend its national interests against the hegemony of the Western world (Kosachev, 2012; Medvedev, 2012) argue that Russia's goal is highly motivated to protect its national interests, including its cultural hegemonic power. The current international crisis over Ukraine is consistent with this approach: Ukraine is seen as a 'battlefield' where Russian and Western hegemony clash (Kosachev, 2012). Therefore, the discourse of cultural hegemony has become increasingly important in Russia (Lavrov, 2014).

Therefore, the transition from a socialist system based on central planning to a market economy accelerated during the Putin era (Kiseleva, 2015). The Russian economy gained momentum thanks to the reforms implemented by Putin, who came to power after the newly established Russia experienced serious economic crises and became increasingly poor (Putin, 2012; Kosachev, 2012). Putin steered the economy through reforms in many sectors and took steps on a global scale. All these initiatives by Moscow are seen by the international community as important steps towards Russia's re-emergence as a world superpower, as it was during the Soviet Union. In line with this goal, Russia's announced foreign policy objectives include spreading the Russian language and culture, strengthening the Russian diaspora around the world and preventing discrimination against Russian goods, services and investments (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013).

Digital Games, Global Games Market and the Russian Federation

The employment of cultural hegemony in the framework of Russia's globalization plan can help explain why societies, accustomed to hegemonic American-style communication in the digital games industry, which is the leading platform among others, have swiftly adopted Russian games. Digital games, which are a considerable part of popular culture, bear the traces of real life due to their role in the production of ideological and political meaning (Valeriano & Habel, 2016; Goodfellow, 2015). For example, Höglund concludes that the games he analyses in his article turn the Middle East into a perpetual battlefield and, through both marketing

strategies and game semiotics, enroll the player as a soldier willing to fight in virtual warfare and even support the ideology that functions as the political justification for the games. Lemke (2020) has argued that the ability of many transmedia narratives, such as digital games, to continue to present themselves to us in many guises, on many sites and over long periods of time may make them a more powerful tool than previous media for shaping people's views of what is natural in the social world. On the other hand, Abrudan and Prundaru (2009) focus in their article on the relationship between social representations in games, society and reality and the way they are interconnected. In this context, it can be suggested that digital games with a story are capable of building a meaning within the framework of their own ideology by constructing and repeating various representations along with myths and by communicating them to the player.

Computer games offer products in various categories to popular culture by creating icons (Mario, Pacman, etc.), (Montoro, 2021). Furthermore, a role-playing culture is formed by producing various movies, animations, and cartoons based on the stories of computer games (e.g., *Mortal Kombat* and *Lara Croft*), (Rahman, Wing-Sun and Cheung, 2012). In addition, it is possible to spread cultural hegemony through digital games with controlled content (Kukkola, 2020). In particular, reaching the younger generation, which is the most effective audience for spreading ideologies, can be achieved by using the potential of digital games (Valeriano & Habel, 2016; Kaya, 2019). The influential role of computer games in cultural production paves the way for their use as a means of cultural hegemony.

For these reasons, there are many Russian and foreign companies operating in the field of game development in Russia. Wargaming, Gaijin, and Mail.ru are some of the giant Russian companies. Especially the game "World of Tanks", developed by Wargaming, is considered as the most successful game made in the territory of the former Soviet Union. As of 2021, the game has more than 160 million registered users (World of Tanks Player Statistics, 2021). Unlike equivalent digital games that propagandise for American hegemony, neither of the two games downplayed the presence of the Soviet Union in the Second World War (Valeriano & Habel, 2016; Tyushka, 2019). On the contrary, these games positioned the Allied and Axis Powers as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany from the beginning. With such contents, the Russian Federation attempts to overcome the world's perception about the Western military superiority (led by the US) in terms of structure (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008). In this period, especially when the world has begun to overcome the Western hegemony regarding politics, economics as well as culture and entered the post-American stage (Zakaria, 2008; Tilly, 2017), Russia aims to fill the place

of the US and the West by keeping the ideologies about the Soviet Union alive. While Russia actively seeks to expand its presence in global markets and participate in global institutions, it also tries to transform these institutions in its favor (Sancaktar, 2011). Russia has endeavoured to promote 'appropriate' messages in games that directly recognise the gaming industry as a valuable domestic industry from an economic and technological point of view, without stifling it (Peterson, 2005). This was not reflected in the roundtable report in 2010 (Roundtable in State Duma, 2010) or the meeting in 2014 (Newzoo, 2014; Galyonkin, 2015), but in the wider public opinion on games. At this point, while politicians recognise the importance of digital games as new media (Gavra & Bykova, 2020) for technological progress and the spread of innovation, they are reluctant to allow the uncontrolled production and distribution of video games because of their ability to spread ideological messages that are incompatible with the messages the government wants young people to receive (Goodfellow, 2015). The recommendations presented here are broadly in line with the Putin administration's efforts to fund and improve access to technology (Goodfellow, 2015; Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015).

Methodology

In this study, criterion sampling was employed as the primary sampling method, in conjunction with a case study approach to methodologically frame the analysis. Criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling techniques, involves the selection of all cases that meet predefined criteria, which is particularly useful when paired with case study analysis to focus on a specific instance that exemplifies certain significant characteristics. This method allows for an in-depth examination of the selected case—in this instance, the game 35 MM—to explore its unique features in alignment with the research objectives (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Unlike random sampling, criterion sampling is more targeted, making it a suitable approach for qualitative research and case study methodologies, which aim to derive detailed insights from a carefully selected case that reflects the study's conceptual framework.

The criteria used in criterion sampling can be established by the researcher based on the aims of the study or can be derived from a pre-existing set of standards or frameworks. This flexibility allows the researcher to tailor the sampling process to suit the research context, ensuring that only cases relevant to the phenomenon under investigation are included (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). For instance, a researcher might choose to focus on individuals or organizations that have achieved a certain level of expertise or experience in a field, or on specific instances of a phenomenon that exhibit key character-

istics important for analysis.

In this context, the game 35 MM serves as the sample for the study. This game was selected because it fulfills several criteria central to the research objectives. Specifically, 35 MM was developed by an independent game developer, which is relevant for examining the unique production and narrative characteristics of independently produced games. Additionally, the game was originally marketed in two languages—English and Russian—demonstrating its intent for international reach and cross-cultural communication. Despite being a product of the independent gaming sector, its considerable global impact provides a rich case for analyzing its ability to resonate with diverse audiences.

The selection of this game also reveals certain limitations. While 35 MM offers unique insights, its status as an indie game may limit the generalizability of the findings to larger, commercially-driven game productions. Furthermore, its bilingual marketing strategy may introduce nuances related to language, culture, and reception that may not be present in other indie games with more localized or limited distribution. Nevertheless, the deliberate selection of this game allows for a focused and detailed exploration of how indie games can shape narratives and player experiences on a global scale.

To frame the study within a broader context, we apply the production of culture framework (Deuze & Allen, 2007), which examines the role of professionals in cultural industries across five key domains: (I) technology, (II) laws and regulations, (III) industry structure, (IV) occupational careers, and (V) markets. (Deuze & Allen, 2007; Martin & Deuze, 2009; Peterson, 1990; Peterson & Anand, 2004). Through this lens, we seek to understand how indie games like 35 MM contribute to and reflect broader cultural narratives and hegemonic strategies, particularly in the context of Russian cultural codes

This study attempted to make an interpretation through the game 35 MM, supported directly by Russia, in order to take a closer look at how the high potential of digital games is used in hegemonic strategies. Russian cultural codes can be found in the game when considering concepts such as gameplay perception, gameplay behavior, ideological meaning production, and cultural signs. As the game 35 MM was developed as a persuasive game, it was addressed as a myth in this study, which attempts to reveal which signifiers about Russia are brought to the fore in the context of reconstruction of memory. Barthes (2014) defines the myth as a "second-order semiological system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain, which existed before it". He focuses on the meaning of the sign, which is explicit, is known to all, and has been agreed upon. Connotation, which is the second-order of signification, refers to the meaning of the sign emerging within

the framework of the individual's own emotions, socio-cultural environments, and perceptions (Fiske, 2017). Denotation indicates "what" is shown in the photographs. However, connotation emphasizes "how to make sense" of them (Barthes, 2014). Considering these concepts, this research grounds the question "What is seen in visuals?" for denotation and "What is represented? / How is it represented?" for connotation.

In line with this, the research questions are as follows:

1. What is seen in the visuals of the game 35 MM?
2. What is represented in the visuals of the game 35 MM, and how is it represented?

These questions guide our analysis of how 35 MM communicates Russian cultural codes and ideological messages. The data were collected through first-hand gameplay experiences by the researchers in 2020, with attention to visual and narrative elements that align with the study's aims. This approach allows for a focused examination of the game's role in shaping global narratives and player experiences.

Results

Technology

Technology is naturally tied to the nature of video games, both in terms of the innovative use of computer tackle and software in games and in the way technological parameters continually plump near-future game development. This tension is reflected in the work of inventors by an extensively felt need to maintain pace with the rearmost technological innovations, whilst also being challenged to mandate and innovate the uses of those very same technologies in a manner that threatens to make 'old' skills obsolete (Deuze & Allen, 2007). In this context, 35 MM, which emerged as a result of technological developments, is a game that can be played with technologically simple and ordinary hardware. In this context, in order for the game to be played by the player, there is no need for low-medium class system hardware, a small memory space such as 2.86 GB, and no other tools other than hardware such as mouse and keyboard, which are considered necessary for the use of a computer.

35 MM is about events that take place in an unspecified geography of Russia at an unspecified date after a global pandemic emerged in 2014. The game's story is entirely based on the "hero's journey", the survival of the two companions in a post-apocalyptic environment, and the events they experience during their journey from the countryside to the city. When the main story of the 35 MM game is handled through the common narrative scheme of Laurel, the material and colour palettes have been chosen to reflect a post-apocalyptic environment. The colours

are grey and dark, and the game atmosphere is foggy and dirty. In the game, although the number of interacted characters is limited, there are detailed narratives about the background of non-player characters, such as the story of the character we stayed at in the chapter "Overnight". The game, which consists of 17 chapters in total, proceeds linearly, without a time limit and narrator's direction. The player progresses the story through the monologues and dialogues of the characters or by means of the surrounding tools such as letters, postcards, and pictures. Surprise elements (plot twists) have been included in the story that can turn the player into a wrong corner. For example, it is a traumatic surprise for the player to learn that the character who guides us throughout the journey is actually the drunk driver who killed our family. This explains the lonely, defeated, and regretful appearance of the characters throughout the game and provides the harmony between the plot and the character. In the last sequence of the play, the main character fulfills his purpose and manages to find peace by returning to his home.

In terms of gameplay mechanics, the game is based on solving small puzzles and overcoming obstacles. The entire game is based on exploring and collecting items, highlighting the visual and auditory elements in the game. There are also strong messages in the game about the roots of Russia in the post-Soviet Period, the destructiveness of human nature in a crisis environment, and the importance of the past for people.

Law and Regulations

In the digital interactive entertainment industry, the publishers of a game product, who mandate the terms of power over IP, control the maturity of the value of a game product. When an inventor works for a company and creates means for a game, the development company fairly inherits the product of the work under work-for-hire agreements. When an inventor is contracted for freelance work, educated development companies regularly include clauses that transfer control of the IP to the constricting development company (Martin & Deuze, 2009). Microsoft released free software (XNA Game Studio Express 6) in August 2006 that enables players to produce their own games for the Xbox 360 from scrape. A crucial consideration in this significant aspect of game work is the publishers' control of intellectual property rights in this co-creative process – as end-user license agreements (EULA) tend to claim exclusive power over whatever gamers or game workers contribute to the evolving game product. In some cases, similar as Counter-Strike (where a gamer-created mod for Valve's Half Life went on to come a hugely successful separate marketable product), the publishing company legitimizes the mod work by hiring the modders, using authority over the

original game as an intellectual property to secure the rights to consumer-created content (Castronova, 2005).

The touchstone for the first official views on video games was the round table on 'The role of education and the computer game industry in the formation of values and patriotic education of young people' held in February 2010 (Goodfellow, 2015). In the report of the meeting, the Chairman of the Youth Committee stated that 'the task of the state should be to ensure the development of computer games by young people and at the same time protect the moral and ethical standards of our society, strengthen and promote traditional values' (Roundtable in State Duma, 2010). Furthermore, Russia was the first country to recognize esports as an official sport and to establish the official esports federation (Russian eSports Federation [RESF]). However, Russia-based major game companies are moving their headquarters to different countries to benefit from the facilities in tax reduction, marketing, and consolidation, which poses a danger to Russia's digital game development activities. For instance, the Warthunder developer, headquartered in Russia, moved Gaijin's development centers outside the country. The Russian Federation has introduced regulations and incentives related to the gaming industry to prevent such situations. The roundtable (Roundtable in State Duma, 2010) discussed various topics such as "vision and innovation" in both the international and Russian gaming markets, "local use of innovative technologies to create patriotic-themed computer games", "the influence of computer games on the philosophical views that young people can develop", and the possibility of providing tax incentives to the Russian software industry (Goodfellow, 2015). Other examples of these incentives include the 'resource support package', which includes incentives for crowdsourcing, and the grants awarded by the Russian Presidential Executive Office in March 2014 (Newzoo, 2014). However, RADIT, which was established in 2010, has not carried out any activities. In addition to the regulations and financial benefits to encourage the growth of the domestic game industry, The Russian Federation steered the developers in the preparation of game content. The roundtable (Roundtable in State Duma, 2010) participants recommended that the interactive technology industry should be rolled into the 'Electronic Russia' program, in order to better support the production and distribution of games that promote patriotism and a healthy life (Goodfellow, 2015). After that duma, the conference, organized by the Ministry of Communications and Mass Media of the Russian Federation in 2014 and attended by major game developers such as Mail.ru Group, 1C-SoftClub, and Wargaming, is of an essential example of these directions. It was decided during this conference that game creators should develop "patriotic"

games (Newzoo Games Market Research, 2020). It is noteworthy that, after this date, Wargaming launched war simulations - with a patriotic subtext - such as World of Warplanes in the first half of 2014 and World of Warship in 2015. On November 10, 2016, the "Expert Council of Game Industry (ECGI)" was announced. The Council was established by Russian video game developers and companies to support the games and eSports markets in the CIS countries and attract new investors. Moreover, it also aims to conduct analytical research, establish activities related to the recognition of the national game industry by the international game industry and regulate issues regarding video game developers' cooperation with government agencies. The council's experts include representatives of well-known companies such as Wargaming, Nekki, Gaijin Entertainment, Nival, Riot Games CIS, and Mail.ru Group (E-Sport Conferace Website). Considering that national and patriotic symbols are used as cultural hegemony established by soft power (Bolin & Miazhevich, 2018), Russia's policy in this direction is revealed.

Russia's regulations for independent game developers and the digital game industry have been shaped by cultural hegemony and national interests. Indie games such as 35MM are evaluated within these regulations and legal frameworks. Russia sees the digital gaming industry not only as an economic opportunity, but also as a means of instilling national and ideological values in younger generations. In this context, game developers may face both incentives and content restrictions.

Industry and Organizational Structure

The greater games industry is structured in a manner that to some extent strictly prohibits independent game development. The titles that draw the most profit, similar as certified sports games (Madden NFL) and big budget first- person shooters (Halo), bear a position of specialized development that makes the independent backing and development of similar ambitious titles grounded off on an original idea virtually insolvable (Martin & Deuze, 2009). The organizational structure naturally depends on this. But for indie games and game developers this is not the case. By using the possibilities of digital technologies, indie game developers try to get involved in the industry with a small number of single organization schemes.

Soviet Russia, which adopted the pro-Western attitude of Boris Yeltsin following the Cold War, followed a more selective approach to globalization after the 1990s by considering different priorities and strategies and trying to integrate Russia with Western institutions (Tsygankov, 2013). There are soft power

elements with various strategies in this independent game of Russia, which is progressing within the scope of becoming a global power. Sub-events in the game follow each other chronologically in line with the causality principle. The storyline proceeds in a discontinuous linear line. The game starts in a wooden shelter reminiscent of old Russian houses in the countryside and continues towards the city streets where there are large and spacious buildings.



Figure 1. Storyline of 35 MM Game
References: (Software, 2016)

It can be argued that the journey which includes the literal meaning and can be interpreted as a transition from traditional to modern, contains a connotation referring to post-Soviet Russia's being innovative and technology-oriented. In the game, specific symbols are used as products to create hegemony and ideology aiming at symbolic constructions of societies and boundaries. Commercial and cultural elements such as Russian vodka, Matryoshka, sickle and hammer, the ballet Swan Lake, Soviet-era metro stations, Lada-branded car are carefully and comprehensively modelled as replicas of their real-life representations.

Nevertheless, some visuals stand out in the game as an indication of the struggle of the working-class, which are one of the important symbols of the struggle for socialism. The subtext of the photograph of a worker working in the field, posing with a sickle, conveys the message that communism is still an area of struggle, and, even if integrated into the capitalist system, the contributions of the workers in the historical process are not forgotten.

Symbols are considered as products to create hegemony and ideology aiming at symbolic constructions of societies and borders. The coercive geographical structure and military power of the Soviet regime creates a new symbolic universe.

From Soviet Symbols to Digital Realities: Exploring Russian Cultural Hegemony in 35 MM



Figure 2. Matryoshka, Wall Carpet, Lada and The Ballet Toy Which Plays Swan Lake
References: (Software, 2016)

One can maintain that the culturally dominant symbolic relations such as solidarity that exist in the understanding of communism are similarly reconstructed today through semiotic practices and image production using the photographs of a building with stars and a worker.

Due to the permeable nature of symbols, the stages of transition from an orthodox Tsarist regime to a communist society and later adoption of a capitalist structure are expected to be interpreted and adopted by individuals in their own meaning universe through the game. The game's progression is much more designed from the countryside to the city. The linear progression of the game, from the countryside to the city, and the rail-based journey contain messages about the Trans-Siberian railway line built in the Soviet era and the Siberian countryside, which was the lifeblood of the Soviet aristocracy and economy.

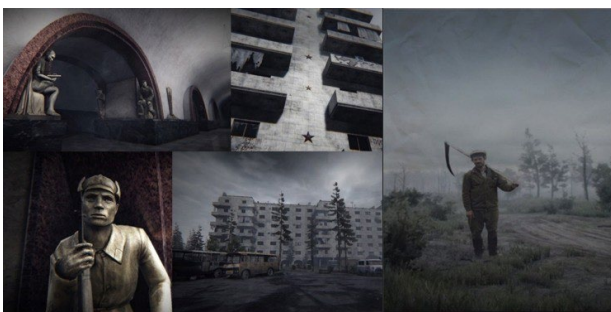


Figure 3. Soviet Era Symbols at The 35 MM Game
References: (Software, 2016)

For instance, during the game, when the character travels from the countryside to the city by train, there are still farmers working in the Russian countryside, although it is post-apocalyptic. The communication language developed via symbols through architec-

tural structures is affected by culture, social formations, beliefs, and lifestyles (Erarlan, 2014).

One of the most vital messages in the game is in the form of graffiti. The English word "Revolution" is converted into "Evolution" by removing the letter "R" by Putin. Considering that this graffiti, featuring Russian President Vladimir Putin, is located in a communist party building modelled in the game. This clever manipulation of the word reflects Putin's political narrative of evolving Russia from its Soviet past while maintaining its ideological foundations. The subtle shift from 'Revolution' to 'Evolution' implies that the ideals of the Bolshevik revolution are not just a part of history, but a natural progression ingrained in Russian identity and governance under Putin's leadership.



Figure 4. Vladimir Putin at the 35 MM Games
References: (Software, 2016)

The message that the Bolshevik revolution has become a natural feature of the Russian people passed down from generation to generation. And this message is conveyed through the relationship between the gameplay, space, and meaning. Indeed, evolution is literally defined as the transmission of genetic traits to the offspring, the selection and reproduction of these offspring by positive or negative natural selection processes, and their becoming dominant in certain living populations. In this context, the player receives the message that the Soviet Union is not only seen as an ideology or culture but also as a natural feature that has been disseminated by Putin and become dominant throughout the society. This message can be interpreted as a "reference to the nostalgia for the Soviet Union and the return policies" that the Russian Federation implicitly applies in domestic politics, despite the impression in foreign policy that the Russian Federation is moving away from the Soviet Union. Russia, which attaches great importance to the game 35 MM and has achieved great success in the world gaming market, prefers soft power sources with its desire to be a global power and goes beyond its boundaries by devising a new strategy that includes its traditional local cul-

ture. As Sancaktar (2011) emphasized Russia, while trying to expand its presence in global markets and join international institutions, it has also tried to transform these institutions in its favor.

Occupational Careers

Industry produces culture and culture produces industry. For example, development studios make games which, like Doom or Mario Bros., become a recognized part of global popular culture (Negus, 1998). According to Deuze and Allen (2007) careers in post-industrial cultural fields such as gamework tend not to follow a neatly structured, seniority-based and long-term route. Gamework is much more random, sporadic and messy – a type of work and a kind of career that favors the young, the unattached and the male. De Peuter and Dyer- Witheford signal three particular types at work on the “dark side” of gamework passionate pay slaves, precarious global inventors (as game-workers are decreasingly employed through worldwide outsourcing practices) and free networked labor (handed by modding and fan communities).

Independent game developers can develop games that are famous worldwide and have reached very large sales figures without the support of large companies. Minecraft, developed by Marcus “Notch” Persson and selling 238 million copies in April 2021 (Sirani, 2023), is an example of a successful independent game. Minecraft was initially developed by Marcus Persson alone, until he had enough money to hire more people to help him develop the game (Rodriguez, 2022). Persson later founded a company called Mojang. The success of Minecraft was so good that Notch sold Mojang to Microsoft for \$2.5 billion in cash. This makes him the richest independent game developer (Rodriguez, 2022). On the other hand, since part of the subject of the article is Russia, it is necessary to mention the most successful Russian independent game developer in history, Alexey Leonidovich Pajitnov and his video game Tetris that brought this success. Pajitnov developed the world-famous video game Tetris in 1984 while working as a computer engineer at the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union (Schell, 2017). Tetris is a game that has appeared on many platforms and has sold more than 520 million copies (Sirani, 2023). Tetris is perhaps one of the most unforgettable games in the history of gaming.

Sergey Noskov is the developer of the 35 MM game selected as the sample in this study. An independent Russian game developer, Noskov has developed nearly ten independent games since 2012, such as the 35 MM, The Light, 7th Sector, Train, and has played a role in the development of many games such as ‘Paws and Soul’ and ‘The Uncertain Part:1’. Noskov mostly uses linear and atmospheric gameplay elements in his games. Although most of the games

he has designed and published are for PC, his 2021 game In The Rays of the Light was released with Playstation 4 and 5 console support. Noskov also runs a community called “INDIE GAME | 35MM, The Light, 7th Sector, Train” with 3100 members.

Markets

According to Deuze and Allen (2007) “digital games are played by just about anyone – particularly by today’s youth who practically grew up with a Gameboy in their hands, a multimedia PC at home and at school, and a PlayStation in their bedroom. One particular effect this may have is on the characteristics, attitudes and beliefs of young professionals, newcomers, and recent graduates who are entering the media workforce from the start of the 21st century”.

In this context, Russia, which is one of the countries that is inevitable to improve its position in the global gaming market (Table.1), increased its investments and technological support after the Soviet Union (Newzoo Analytics Report, 2020; Allcorrectgames Russian Games Market Report, 2020). The economic success of internationally recognised domestic companies such as Wargaming, 1C-Softclub, Gaijin and Mail.ru clearly attracts the financial interest of the Russian authorities (Goodfellow, 2015). But at the same time, these companies also represent a strong potential counter to the huge influence of global gaming companies in Russia. The reach and popularity of large domestic companies is seen as a ready access point to the young population that Russian political figures seek to control (Brandist, 2015; Romashko, 2018).

Today, with the development, production, and sales of digital games, the gaming industry has become a rapidly growing global economy. As of 2019, there were more than 2.5 billion players all over the world. It is estimated that this number will exceed 3 billion by 2023 (Newzoo, 2020). It can be noted that such a large mass forms the center of a robust economic system. This ecosystem comprises players, game developers and publishers, communication, private finance and advertising tools, platforms for digital games (Twitch, YouTube, and platforms for new generation cyber tournaments), institutions providing advanced training in the field of game development, electronics manufacturers (e.g. Intel, Nvidia, etc.), and internet companies that have all the resources to find promising solutions to the digital games market (Mail.ru, Google etc.). As of 2020, the global games market grew by 9.3% compared to the previous year and generated \$159.3 billion. Analysts predict that, in 2021, the global games market volume will increase by 18%, approximately \$170-180 billion. “Computer gaming industry 2020” prepared by Higher School of Economics (HSE-Russia). Report provides some really important data like: In 2019, the Russian gaming market grew to \$2 billion (RUB 129.5

From Soviet Symbols to Digital Realities: Exploring Russian Cultural Hegemony in 35 MM

billion). The growth rate of the value of the e-sports market in Russia is one of the highest in the world - 20% per year compared to the global 18%. The value of the Russian e-sports market in 2019 amounted to 2.6 - 3.9 billion rubles (\$40-60 million). As of 2023,

the Russian video game market, which includes both mainstream and indie games, is estimated to reach a value of approximately 167 billion rubles by the end of the year (Allcorrectgames Russian Games Market Report, 2020).

Table 1. Global Games Market

GLOBAL GAMES MARKET 2020 Total: \$159.3 Billion					
Personal Computer 36.9 Billion USD		Game Console 45.2 Billion USD		Smartphone and Tablet 77.3 Billion USD	
Downloaded/ Boxed PC Games	33.9 Billion USD	45.2 Billion USD		Smartphone Games	63.6 Billion USD
Browser PC Games	3.0 Billion USD			Tablet Games	13.7 Billion USD

References: (Newzoo Global Games Market Report, 2020)

Discussion and Conclusion

Cultural effects in 2000 and public diplomacy in 2008 stand out in the texts that determine the principles and priorities of Russia's foreign policy. Therefore, it is true to argue that Russia, which is not willing to stay out of the system in global competition, considers that being a regional power is a prerequisite for gaining power in the global market. In this new integration model, although it maintains hard elements and hot conflict, Russia's desire to impose its hegemony on the global community by using cultural hegemony elements has pushed Russia to establish warm relations with the former Soviet states. Thus, Russia prefers to use the concepts of anti-capitalist and capitalist together and by redefining them within its own structure.

Discovering the contribution of the western-centered global consumer culture to the economy, the spread of ideological trends and its ability to obtain the consent of individuals to rule societies, Russia has begun to employ digital games. Accordingly, considering that the number of companies developing domestic video games should be increased, it has provided these kinds of companies with support such as tax reductions to enable them to compete in the global market. In this way, Russia has reached an increase of 25% each year in the world digital games market, has developed 10% more than other countries in the global market, and has managed to rank 6th in the world in terms of investments made in this field (Russian Federation Analytical Center). SuperData and Wargaming (SuperData Website) released a detailed report on the current state of the gaming market in the Commonwealth of the Independent States and its development prospects, showing that mobile gaming segment in the digital games mar-

ket grew from \$372 million in 2017 to \$561 million in 2018, with an increase of 51%. Stating that Russian is the third most common language on Steam, the world's largest online game platform, the research also points out that Russia has grown rapidly in this segment. On the other hand, it would not be wrong to say that the most critical example showing that Russia focuses on digital development in competing in the global market and in disseminating its local culture is the Ministry of Digital Development, Communication and Mass Communication, which was established in 2012. Therefore, it can be argued that Russia, which wants to spread its mindset of post-Soviet hegemony as a regional power across the world, as Gramsci puts it, "without establishing a political administration on it, with its cultural and moral management" (Fiori, 2014) has put the strategy of disseminating Russian culture into action by getting players' consent. Thus, the appeal of values is socially constructed and is said to be the result of the 'power politics of identity' and the struggle over ideas that form part of social relations (Kiseleva, 2015: Mattern, 2005; Zahran and Ramos, 2010).

The game 35 MM frequently uses the working class, one of the most important symbols of socialism and revolution, military vehicles belonging to the period when Russia was defined as the most brilliant military power, and symbols such as the red star, which is the symbol of communism. Moreover, symbols like Matryoshka dolls, Soviet-era metro stations, and Lada-branded cars emphasize the connection to Soviet heritage. These symbols are carefully integrated into the game's environment, functioning as tools for constructing cultural hegemony and reinforcing a sense of nostalgia for the Soviet era. Through these semiotic elements, the game not only reconstructs a Soviet past but also communicates contem-

porary ideological struggles between communism and capitalism. When the game is viewed through concepts such as gameplay perception, gameplay behavior, ideological meaning production, cultural and ideological signs, a post-apocalyptic Russia simulation created to reconstruct memory with Soviet codes emerge. While simulation blurs the distinction between the real and the virtual, in line with the uncertainty principle of the postmodern era where it is active (Baudrillard, 2005a), hyper-reality produced with digital games also creates fictional agendas in terms of politics, economics and religion, as well as artificial wars and artificial lives, which gradually replace the real ones. An unreal Russia, which is close to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics created in the game 35 MM, will be perceived by players as more real than real Russia. As Baudrillard (2005b) puts it: "Simulation reproduced the unoriginal in an unoriginal way!."

Russia can reach out to the masses on which it can continuously impose its ideologies continuously and uninterruptedly with the massively multiplayer games of every genre, which have an enormous number of users. Furthermore, it can also reach regular gamers, who follow the gaming industry as well as accessible and original productions by independent producers. In this context, Russia has transitioned from the period when hegemony was actually established in factories and infrastructure was the determinant (Gramsci, 2014) to a conjuncture where hegemony is established in games and players play a decisive role. In such a period, it is possible to say that Russia aims to expand the hegemony and is willing to spread with simple but strategic steps by using one of the largest industries in the world. However, the structure of the big game industry often makes it difficult for independent developers to compete with big studios producing high-budget games. Despite these structural challenges, indie games such as 35 MM have entered the market with unique production plans utilizing digital technologies. These indie games offer a different approach to storytelling and ideological messaging that contrasts with mainstream commercial games.

When we look at the literature on the use of cultural hegemony in video games, similar results draw attention. (Cohoon, 2021; Lale, 2020). For example, Lale (2020), in his study on South Korea's cultural influence, argues that since the 1997 economic crisis, the Korean government has invested millions of dollars to develop popular culture media, especially television series, music groups and video games. In this context, in order to promote the cultural and content sectors, Korea Culture and Content Agency and Korea Game Industry Agency were founded. The Korean Wave also provided South Korea with significant financial resources in different categories such as animation, publishing, cartoons, characters, games, movies, music and TV series. Economic suc-

cess in one sector has led to improvements in others. For example, the success of the gaming industry has benefited creative industries such as animation, character and graphic design. This study, which deals with cultural hegemony and its impact on video games within the scope of the 'Digital Iran' project, emphasizes the concepts of culture and identity. The project shows how games are grounds for conflict that imprint, counter imprint, and deconstruct hierarchies of power as well as grounds for fostering subjectivity and debate (Cohoon, 2021).

In this study, in which Russia's cultural hegemony is evaluated through digital games, it is seen that the elements in the 35 MM game, which are discussed through 5 themes, serve as tools of cultural production. The journey in 35 MM can be interpreted as both a literal and metaphorical transition from traditional to modern Russia, illustrating post-Soviet Russia's embrace of innovation and technology. The game's environments and symbols, particularly the abandoned industrial landscapes, reflect a society grappling with its Soviet past while navigating a capitalist future. These visual elements highlight the duality of contemporary Russia, blending socialist ideals with modern capitalist realities. In this context, specific symbols within the game, such as the worker wielding a sickle, directly connect to Russia's historical struggle for socialism. This imagery serves as a reminder that, despite the integration into a capitalist system, the contributions of the working class remain significant in the historical narrative. By incorporating such symbols, 35 MM reflects the ongoing ideological tension between communism and capitalism in post-Soviet society. Thus, 35 MM serves not only as a reflection of Russia's technological evolution but also as a medium through which ideological conflicts are symbolically reconstructed. The game highlights both the struggles and advancements of Russian society, allowing for a deeper analysis of how indie games like 35 MM contribute to the symbolic construction of societal boundaries, ideologies, and hegemonies. The research was evaluated through the categories of technology, laws and regulation, industrial and organizational structure, occupational careers, and markets. In this context, it was determined that innovative technologies were used in the game and the content and form of the game were developed in accordance with laws and regulations.

In the industrial and organizational structure theme, it is seen that Russia acts in line with its cultural hegemony to become a global power. Russian vodka, Matryoshka, sickle and hammer, Swan Lake ballet, Soviet-era subway stations, Lada branded cars, workers working in the fields and starred buildings symbolising communism are included as symbols of the elements of hegemony built through cultural production. Looking at the symbols on these cultural products and architectural structures, it is possible

From Soviet Symbols to Digital Realities: Exploring Russian Cultural Hegemony in 35 MM

to see that the elements of cultural hegemony are effectively used in the game. On the other hand, it is known that Russia uses digital games to spread its cultural hegemony to the younger generation and takes concrete steps together with game developers. In this framework, symbols of cultural hegemony spread information about lifestyles, social, cultural, political structure and belief system in the international arena.

In terms of occupational career, this game was developed and designed by an independent developer, who is also involved in the development of other games similar to this game and manages a community that includes many of these games. Considering that the game industry has become a global economy, it is clear that the development, production and sale of this game contributes to both financial and cultural marketing. In conclusion, it is possible to say that video games have the potential to be an effective tool for countries to spread their cultural hegemony.

Future studies can examine cultural hegemony strategies in a broader framework by analysing mainstream games produced by major game developers instead of only independent games. In addition, studies comparing cultural hegemony practices in the digital game industry of different countries can be conducted. The ideological effects of games on players can also be investigated through user experience analysis and ethnographic methods. Finally, in addition to digital games, cultural hegemony strategies can be analysed through different media tools such as social media and other digital platforms. Additionally, future research can explore the structural challenges faced by independent developers within the larger gaming industry. By comparing the narrative and ideological strategies of indie games like 35 MM with those of mainstream, big-budget games, researchers can gain a better understanding of how cultural hegemony operates across different segments of the gaming industry.

References

Abrudan, E., & Prundaru, G. (2009). Social representations and ideologies in digital games. *Journal of Media Research*, (5), 30-41.

Analytical Centre of The Russian Government (2020). Russia leads in commercial video game production. <https://ac.gov.ru/en/news/page/russia-leads-in-commercial-video-game-production-26703>.

Ankara Development Agency (2017). Digital Games Report. Retrieved April 2023, <https://www.ankaraka.org.tr/archive/files/yayinlar/ankaraka-dijital-oyun-sektoru.pdf>.

Barthes, R. (2014). *Mythologies*. (4th Ed.). (T. Yücel Trans.). Istanbul: Metis Publications.

Baudrillard, J. (2005a). *Simulacra and Simulation*. (O. Adanir Trans.). Ankara: Doğu Batı Publications.

Baudrillard, J. (2005b). *Le complot de l'art [The conspiracy of art]*. (E. Cengiz, H. Gür, A. Nur Trans.). Ankara: İmge Publishing House

Brooks, S. G. & W. C. Wohlforth. (2008). *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Castronova, E. (2005). *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cohoon, M. (2021). Digital Iran: Soft Power and Affect in Video Games. IDEA. Retrieved November. 2022. <https://ideah.pubpub.org/pub/3dnhzmywx/release/2> <https://doi.org/10.21428/f1f23564.3d7610e0>.

Desai, P. (2005). Russian Retrospectives on Reforms from Yeltsin to Putin. *Journal of Economic Perspective*, 19 (1), 87-106.

Deuze, M. & Allen, C. (2007). 'The professional identity of gameworkers', *Convergence*, 13, 335-353. DOI: 10.1177/1354856507081947.

Erarslan, A. (2014). Meaning in Architecture; An Evaluation on "Symbolic Language" in Structure. *Design Theory*, 10(18): 18-35. DOI: 10.23835/tasarimkuram.239593.

E-Sport Conference Website (2018). E-Sport Conference. Retrieved April, 2021. <https://esportconf.ru/en/post/dlya-razvitiya-kompyuternogo-sporta-sozdan-ekspertniy-sovet-igrovoy-industrii-59583>.

Fiori, G. (2014). Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary. (2nd Ed.). (K. Emiroğlu Trans). Ankara: İletişim Yayınları (Communication Publications).

Fiske, J. (2017). *Introduction to Communication Studies*. (S. İrvan Trans). (5th Ed.). Ankara: Bilim ve Sanat Yayınları (Science and Art Publications).

Gramsci, A. (2014). *Prison Notebooks*. (J. A. Buttigieg Ed.). (E. Kici Trans.). Istanbul: Kalkedon Publications.

Hall, S. (1999). "Culture, Media and Ideological Impact". In *Media, Power, Ideology*. (2nd Ed.). (M. Küçük Trans.). Ankara: Ark Publications, 199-243.

Helleiner, E. & Andeas P. (2005). *Economic Nationalism in a Globalizing World*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Higher School of Economics (HSE), (2020). "Computer gaming industry report-2020" Moscow: ICT Moscow, retrieved at January. 2021. <https://ict.moscow/en/research/computer-gaming-industry-in-russia-2020/>

Höglund, J. (2008). Electronic empire: Orientalism revisited in the military shooter. *Game Studies*, 8(1), 10.

Konseptsiya Povişeniya Prodovolstvennoy Bezopastnosti Gosudarstv – Uçastnikov SNG". (2010). Reşenia Soveta Glav Pravitelstva SNG.

Koraboev, I. (2010). "Ot Regionalnoy İntegratsiyi Tsentralnoy Azii k Evraziyskomu İntegratsionnomu Prostranstvu? Menyayushaya Dinamika Postsovetskogo Regionalizma", *Evraziyskaya Ekonomicheskaya İntegratsiyi*, 3 (8) 5-30.

Lale, A. (2020). 'The Soft Power of South Korea', *Academic Social Studies*, 4 (13), 63-74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31455/asya.615427>

Lemke, J. (2004). Critical analysis across media: Games, franchises, and the new cultural order. In *First International Conference on Critical Discourse Analysis*, Valencia, published by "Jay Lemke's Personal Webpage" Retrieved May 2022. <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jaylemke/papers/Franchises/Valencia-CDA-Franchises.htm>.

Levgold, R. (2002). "All the Way, Crafting a U.S.-Russian Alliance" *Russia in The National Interest*, 70. 21-31. DOI:10.4324/9781315128870.

Lo, B. (2003). *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*. London, UK: Macmillan.

Mansfield, E. D. & H. V. Milner. (1997). (Ed.), *The Political Economy of Regionalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Martin, C. B. & Deuze, M. (2009). 'The Independent Production of Culture: A Digital Games Case Study', *Games and Culture*, 4(3), 276-295. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009339732>

Montoro, J. M. (2021). From Japan to the World: Super Mario's World-building Across Two Continents. *Western Japaneseness: Intercultural Translations of Japan in Western Media*, 129.

Muriel, D., and Crawford, Garry. (2018). *Video games as culture: Considering the role and importance of video games in contemporary society*. Routledge.

- Negus, K. (1998). 'Cultural Production and the Corporation: Musical Genres and the Strategic Management of Creativity in the US Recording Industry', *Media, Culture & Society* 20 (3), 359-79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344398020003002>.
- Newzoo Analytics, (2020). *Global Gaming Reports*. Retrieved March, 2021. <https://newzoo.com/insights/trend-reports/newzoo-global-games-market-report-2020-light-version/>
- Newzoo Games Market Research, (2014-2015). "Introduction to the Russian Games Market, Opportunities in this submerged market: A Broader Perspective", Retrieved February, 2021. http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/700740/Russian_Games_Maret_Report.pdf?t=1455181625601.
- Peterson, R. A. (1990). 'Why 1955? Explaining the Advent of Rock Music', *Popular Music*, 9(1), 97-116. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143000003767>.
- Peterson, R. A. & Anand, N. (2004). 'The Production of Culture Perspective', *Annual Review of Sociology*, (30), 311-34. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110557>.
- Purtaş, F. (2008). "Orta Asya'nın Bütünlüğü Sorunsalı ve Orta Asya'da Bölgesel Entegrasyon Girişimleri", In *Orta Asya ve Kafkasya'da Güç Politikası* ["The Problem of the Integrity of Central Asia and Regional Integration Attempts in Central Asia", *Power Policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus*] (T. Demirtepe Ed.). Ankara: Usak Publications.
- Putin, V.V. (2012). Statya Predsedatelya Pravitelstva Rossii V.V.Putina v gazete «Moskovskiyevost» [The Representative of Russian Government V. V. Putin in Newspaper Acticle "Moskovskiyevost"], Retrieved March, 2021 <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/18252/>,
- Rahman, O., Wing-Sun, L., & Cheung, B. H. (2012). "Cosplay": Imaginative self and performing identity. *Fashion Theory*, 16(3), 317-341. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174112X13340749707204>
- Rodriguez, E. (2022). 10 Most Successful Indie Games, DualShockers Website, Retrieved March, 2023. <https://www.dualshockers.com/most-successful-indie-games/#bastion>
- Ruffino, P. (2013). Narratives of independent production in video game culture. *Loading...*, 7(11).
- Sakwa, R. (2004). *Putin: Russia's Choice*. London, UK: Routledge Publications.
- Sancaktar, C. (2011). "Sovyetler Birliği'nin Yıkılışı: Politik Değişim, Kapitalizme Geçiş ve Parçalanma", In *Dünya Jeopolitiğinde Türkiye* [The Collapse of the Soviet Union: Political Change, Transition to Capitalism and Fragmentation", *Turkey in World Geopolitics*], (H. Çomak Ed.), İstanbul: Hiperlink, 523-570.
- Schell, J. (2017). "Soviet blocks." *American Scientist*. 105(1). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A477991436/AONE?u=anon~bad-0b818&sid=googleScholar&xid=7dcdad18>.
- Sirani, J. (2023). The 10 Best-Selling Video Games of All Time, IGN Website, Retrieved March, 2023. <https://www.ign.com/articles/best-selling-video-games-of-all-time-grand-theft-auto-minecraft-tetris>
- Stallings, B. (1995). (Ed.), *Global Change, Regional Response: The New International Context of Development*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Superdata Website. (N.d.) Russia to become the third biggest European market for video games, Retrieved March, 2020. <https://www.superdataresearch.com/blog/russia-to-become-the-third-biggest-european-market-for-video-games>
- Tilly, C. (2017). *From mobilization to revolution*. In *Collective violence, contentious politics, and social change*. Routledge.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Russian Federation, (2013). "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation" [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Russian Federation Website], Published February,18. Retrieved March 2021. Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation - Fundamental documents - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (mid.ru).
- Trenin, D. (2001). "Vladimir Putin's Autumn Marathon: Toward the Birth of a Russian Foreign Policy Strategy," Briefing Paper Volume 3, Number 11, Security and Foreign Policy Program, Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center.
- Tsygankov, A. P. (2013). *Globalization: a Russian perspective*. In *Thinking International Relations Differently*. Routledge.
- Vasechko, V. (2007). "Staroe i Novoe Evraziystva: Kontseptsiya Religii i Politiki", In *Vestnik Rostovskogo Gosudarstvennogo Ekonomicheskogo Universiteta* ["Old and New Eurasianism: The Concept of Religion and Politics", *Bulletin of the Rostov State Economy University*]. 'RiNX', Vol: 1: pp. 141-146.
- Warframe Player Statistics (2022). Warframe player count. Retrieved April, 2023. <https://mmo-population.com/r/warframe>
- Warthunder Player Statistics (2023). Warthunder Player Count. Retrieved April, 2023 <https://techbeastz.com/war-thunder-player-count/>
- Yengin, D. (2012). *Dijital Oyunlarda Şiddet*, İstanbul: Beta Publications.
- Yıldırım, A. ve Şimşek, H. (2013). *Sosyal bilimlerde nitel araştırma yöntemleri*, Ankara: Seçkin Publications.
- Zakaria, F. (2008). *The Post-American World*. New York: Norton Publications.
- Zahrn, G., & Ramos, L. (2010). From hegemony to soft power: implications of a conceptual change. In *Soft power and US foreign policy* (24-43). Routledge.