

"Demokratia": mocking Russian politics through a videogame

March 5 2014, by Marina Lapenkova

Buy voters, divert public funds, become an all-powerful tsar: it's all part of the fun in videogame "Demokratia", whose merciless take on Russian politics has made it a runaway success in the land of Vladimir Putin.

"Begin the ballot-stuffing!" and "Voter participation is 146%!" announce the characters in Demokratia, who bear more than a passing resemblance to well-known Russian politicians.

The game has already been downloaded by 1.5 million Russians, and is picking up around 100,000 new users every month according to its creator, NeskinSoft.

To build a Russian democracy, the player combines elements to create new objects—similar to the smash US puzzle game Triple Town.

Three currency notes secures a sheep, three sheep make a voter, three voters make an election office—and so on until you've reached the summit of power.

Players can also learn to ignore budgets, violate the constitution and pay off parliamentarians.

'A KGB colonel'

Some elements, like the "jailed lawyer"—an apparent reference to

opposition leader (and lawyer) Alexei Navalny—can be used to combat pro-regime bad guys like the "colonel of the KGB", which happens to be President Putin's former job.

Navalny, a fierce critic of Putin, became famous after publishing leaked documents on his blog exposing corruption in high places and ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Moscow last year.

The game's creator, Valentin Merzlikin, has openly supported Navalny.

The 37-year-old computer programmer, originally from Moscow, has made the strange decision to move to Belarus—hardly known as a bastion of democracy.

With so many anti-government activists being hounded by the authorities, he wanted to "give them something to amuse them", he joked in a phone interview with AFP.

"Demokratia" was released on December 10, 2011, the same day as allegations of rigging in parliamentary elections triggered a wave of protests that continued until Putin's re-election as president the following May.

"We got 100,000 downloads in the first week," recalled Merzlikin.

Pussy Riot

Since then, there have been around 20 new versions of the game, featuring new personalities each time, from female activist group Pussy Riot to US singer Madonna, who has publicly backed the group.

Gamers will find that the pinnacle of the game does not stop at Putin. They can keep going up to "Mahatma Gandhi", "Jesus", or Russian icons

such as poet Alexander Pushkin and cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin.

"Demokratia is very popular because it's a game that is both provocative and without propaganda," said analysis firm Hungry Shark.

In Russia, where nine out of 10 people regularly indulge in gaming, "videogames have become more important than cinema or literature," said blogger Dmitri Goblin Poutchkov.

Recognising the threat, the state has tried to fight back.

Two popular social media sites—Odnoklassniki and Mail.ru—have blocked Demokratia.

The government has also tried to create its own games with a more pro-regime slant.

One example, touted in state-backed media, is "Snowdev Run" where an ex-KGB agent saves Moscow from zombies. A gaming website described it as attempting to "glorify Vladimir Putin, but it ultimately fails".

Not everyone is enamoured of Demokratia's mocking tone, however.

"Regardless of what I think of Putin, this [game](#) is amoral and cynical," wrote one reviewer on the MacRadar website.

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