

Syrko emphasizes that her models struggle not only with the physical pain and the difficulties of newly disabled life, but also with the private grief of facing the changes to their once conventionally attractive bodies. The artist ultimately aims to sculpt them into new forms of beauty, and to help us—viewers, witnesses, and recipients—habituate our eyes when we may want to avert.

Mere documentation of war wounds would be a perfunctory interpretation of Syrko's "sculptures." I propose that we consider them within the wider phenomena of *war bodies* in today's Ukraine, with multifarious signifiers pertaining to the physical suffering of people and their invaded land, to emotional distress, and to the body that has lost legal and political rights, a body raided. Syrko tells us too about the estrangement and alienation of normative guidelines for humanness. "Sculptures" are traces of the bodies that will now be present in Ukraine: we should consider them carefully not only in how we look at them but in the future struggle to rebuild cities and villages viable for all the sorts of bodies that will inhabit them.

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**Atomic Heart.** Mundfish, developer. Focus Entertainment and 4Divinity, 2023. Video game. <https://atomic.mundfish.com/en.html>. doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.185

*Atomic Heart* by Mundfish, a Cypress-based Russian game studio, represents a rare attempt at a big-budget video game by an east European developer. *Atomic Heart* was released in February 2023 to controversy around ties between the game's financiers and Putin's regime, and the developer's anemic statement on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, calling themselves a "pro-peace organization" that does not comment on "religion or politics." The subject, however, is unquestionably political: a robotic rebellion in an alternate history USSR, where labor has been abolished but the GULAG has not.

*Atomic Heart's* stated influence is Ken Levine's *BioShock* trilogy (2007, 2010, 2013), extensively discussed in scholarship as a critique of Ayn Rand's libertarianism and American exceptionalism. *Atomic Heart* plays just like *BioShock*, with a gruff protagonist exploring an elaborate environment destroyed by political metaphors, gun in one hand and magi-tech powers in the other. It is a pastiche of *BioShock*, replacing a landscape lampooning American politics with a Soviet context. Yet many western reviewers felt *Atomic Heart* to be almost uncritical in comparison. James Archer writes for *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*: "Atomic Heart is. . . USSR fanfiction. For all of *BioShock's* bluntness, there was never any doubt that [it represented] dystopias, their ruin brought about by the same extremist thought that birthed them. *Atomic Heart*, by contrast, paints [the USSR] a largely earnest hotbed of wonder science, its collapse the fault of just a few bad apples."

Such readings overlook AH's political allusions, especially to Ilya Khrzhanovsky's *DAU* films (2019), on the Soviet theoretical physicist Lev Landau and his Research Institute (previously, a sharashka). *DAU* was filmed in a simulacrum built to facilitate the actors roleplaying as Soviet citizens, and in this regard was already ludic. *Atomic Heart* responds to *DAU* by offering a sharashka as a playground for the protagonist's

dilemmas and atrocities. The protagonists of *Atomic Heart* are the troubled veteran Nechaev and his glove, containing an AI called “CHAR.” After an introductory spectacle of a utopian post-labor Soviet city set in 1955, *Atomic Heart* also entirely takes place inside a sharashka, where technologies are developed and tested by imprisoned intellectuals. Another direct allusion appears early in the tutorial when Nechaev finds the game’s first weapon: an axe. It will be minutes before an opponent appears, but if the player wants to use the new weapon, only one target is available: an innocent pig. This references Khrzhanovsky’s *Degeneration*, probably the most famous of the *DAU* films, where several real-life Russian Nazis brutally slaughter a pig on camera. Here, the player avatar is the slaughterer. A crude intruder to the utopian scientific prison, Nechaev is composed of action hero machismo clichés: gruff one-liners and prison argot. CHAR, conversely, speaks with the vocabulary and subtle irony of the intelligentsia. This is key: we learn that CHAR is not an AI at all, but the game’s alter-history version of Lev Landau, the scientist responsible for the technology, but enslaved to it by game’s apparent villain and Nechaev’s boss Sechenov (a reference to the legendary Russian physiologist).

Nechaev learns all this as his sanity falters: at key moments, he loses consciousness, transported (along with the player) into a hallucinatory vaguely pan-Slavic village space where his objectives change from fighting robots to picking apples. Each time Nechaev exits such a state, he finds himself surrounded by dead people, typically those just about to reveal something crucial to him. CHAR tells Nechaev that Sechenov is activating a killing mode built into him and the “rebellious” (but actually obediently murderous) robots he’s fighting. Only at the very end of the game do we learn that this is a lie: CHAR has been triggering Nechaev’s kill switch all along, ultimately stranding the protagonist within the pan-Slavic hallucination at the end of the game.

Nechaev first appears as an action protagonist only to discover that he has less agency than his magic glove. This is the heart of the game’s political critique, with multiple scenes directly lampshading Nechaev’s crippling conformism. Leaving the utopian Soviet city, Nechaev turns on the radio, quickly shutting off a political broadcast and muttering “No politics!” while Alla Pugacheva’s “A Million Red Roses” plays instead. “No politics” here is an ironic declaration of castrated agency. CHAR, the talking glove, conversely, is all about politics and agency, ruling the person wearing it (and the player) with information and vision.

CHAR and Sechenov are the game’s villains, but also markedly “progressors,” following the characterization in Mark Lipovetsky’s 2015 essay on the Strugatsky brothers’ science fiction. Lipovetsky characterized “progressors” as a problematic ideological myth through which the Soviet scientific intelligentsia imagined themselves as visionary heroes not only somehow outside their oppressive regime, but also above the masses. This allowed the scientific intelligentsia to both bolster the regime and also see themselves as the enlightened opposition. *Atomic Heart*’s utopian USSR, where robots work, cities fly, and communism is handily defeating capitalism, is sabotaged by such progressors with neither the ethical compass nor the empathy to resist their own affinity for authoritarianism. For all its flaws, *Atomic Heart* should not be accused of being apolitical: the contemporary Russian scientific intelligentsia plays video games, and *Atomic Heart* is implicitly calling their ideology of detachment from the Putin regime into question.

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