

Nationalism in an abstract game

How the Tetris soundtrack determines its cultural markedness

Raul Paiva de Oliveira

Faculdade de Tecnologia de Americana (FATEC-AM)
Americana, Brazil
raulpaiva@gmail.com

Rafael Augusto Bonin Bisoffi

Universidade de Campinas (UNICAMP)
Campinas, Brazil
rafael_bisoffi@hotmail.com

Abstract—The usual function of soundtrack, from the Romantic ballets and operas to the modern film and videogame industries, is to create a background and evoke an environment. In this paper, we intend to explore that concept in a specific example from the videogame field: *Tetris*. This game may seem, at first sight, a generic cultureless puzzle game. However, it has been strongly associated to the Russian culture. We intend to show how the soundtrack plays a major role in that association, as the main (if not only) objective element of ‘Russianness’ in the game, and the consequences that it poses.

Keywords—*Tetris*, game soundtrack, Russian music, nationality, cultural markedness, music aesthetics

I. INTRODUCTION

Music associated to other art forms is not new at all. Old cultures such as the Greeks would dance and declaim poetry while playing music. In more recent traditions, we have the operas, the ballets, and even theater plays making use of music as a part of a bigger whole, to a point in which they cannot be separated. With the creation of films and videogames, and the technological possibility of recording and reproducing sound along with the image, the questions rose by the association of music with other art forms become again central.

Games, in a broader sense, can be regarded as old as human culture, perhaps even older. As Huizinga points out, their presence can be perceived in the way puppies play with one another: using specific gestures sounds and attitudes, their activities have basic rules concerning no excessive violence or biting sensitive areas [1]. Also, the definition of this activity is very plastic, as many cultures over millennia had different notions for what exactly is a game. Languages with Arabic or Germanic roots, including English, have just one word or expression, like “play”, that could mean “play a game”, “play an instrument” or even “play a role”. This fact points to a primordial relationship between music, drama and games. It is precisely that ambiguity we are interested in; the one that makes the soundtrack an element so intimately wrapped to the later two.

Games and films can be thought to be related, since they are both audiovisual forms, so it is natural to conclude that both their soundtracks share a spectrum of analogue functions. Other relevant aspect is that they are both relatively new forms of expression, being the only two new art forms created in several centuries. Films and videogames studies are still not

vastly explored as traditional music, theatre or visual arts, for instance, so they seem to draw inspiration from other more mature or traditional forms and try to apply already proven successful approaches¹.

The concept of soundtrack, however, is very broad, as Carrasco points out [2]. It is often used to refer only to the music, but it compasses speech and sound effects as well. However, in the earliest forms of videogames, speech was still a difficult aspect to manage, since it was not a viable option to include actual voice records in the arcades circuits or console cartridges. Sound effects were present since almost the beginning of videogames, in the shape of beeps and specific noises, but they were used more often to signalize good or bad elements of gameplay, rather than to communicate a more deep emotional or cultural feeling. As such, music in a game’s soundtrack was supposed to help create an environment; it should be part of the landscape or the background, helping to shape meaning and communicating with the player in a subtle way.

In this paper, we intend to explore the role that the soundtrack plays in *Tetris* (especially in the Game Boy version, probably the most famous one) as a determining element of its cultural markedness, that is, as the main element of Russianness in an abstract game that has been, nevertheless, marketed from the very beginning as an exotic Soviet product.

II. *TETRIS*’ PAINFUL BIRTH INTO WEST

Tetris is one of the oldest videogames. Some of the earlier forms of pinball machines and penny operated arcades date back to 1930, but only in 1958 videogame machines would start to take a shape more similar to what we know today as home consoles. William Higinbotham developed *Tennis for Two*, a device similar to an oscilloscope, containing a rudimentary controller with one button and a potentiometer for each player. As its name suggests, it was loosely inspired in real tennis, and each player would move a rectangle on each side of the screen, trying to prevent the ball from reaching its “goal”. That same idea would prove a success in Atari’s *Pong*, this time developed for arcade. Another remarkable game was *Spacewar!*, developed in 1962 at MIT (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), consisting on a spaceship exploring and battling in outer space [3]. Its main purpose was to

¹ As Prendergast says: “[...] the Wagnerian device of the *Leitmotiff* fell naturally into use in the composition of scores for Hollywood Films.” [4].

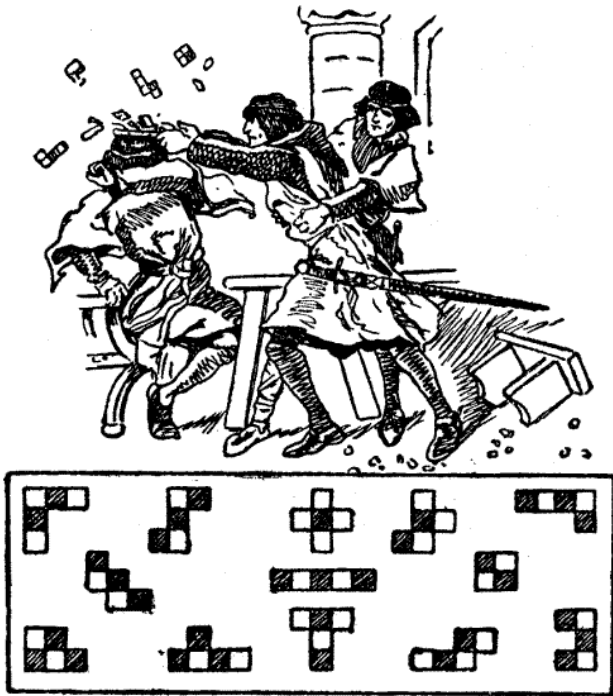


Fig. 2. Dudeney's Broken Chessboard



Fig. 1. A Pentomino wooden board.

1930), which published a *pentomino* problem in 1907 (Fig. 1) in his book *The Canterbury Puzzles*³. However, the invention of this puzzle is usually credited to Solomon W. Golomb, which coined the name *pentomino* (Fig. 2). Actually, he also created the name *polyomino* that refers to a whole family of puzzles with different number of pieces, formed by a different number of squares.

And, inspired by the works of Golomb, Alexey Pajitnov, a Russian computer scientist, created *Tetris* during the years of 1984 to 1986⁴. Before creating *Tetris*, he had already developed a game named *Genetic Engineering*, based on the same *tetromino* shapes, but the idea was dropped as dull. *Tetris* was different; having the shapes falling down to the bottom of the screen, so the player would have to rearrange them quickly to fill horizontal lines, without gaps. The filled lines would disappear, generating points, and the player would lose if the structure reached the top of the screen.

At first, a two-player version of *Tetris* was developed, in which players would compete for space inside the screen. It was even used in psychological tests by Vladimir Pokhiko, a friend of Pajitnov. Pajitnov and his colleagues distributed the game for computer, which spread around Moscow, and later to other countries of the Soviet Bloc. This version, the one with colored pieces, caught the attention of Robert Stein, owner of *Andromeda Software*, a company that commercialized software from Hungary to other countries⁵. As he had contacts within a large communications group in England, the *Maxwell Communications Corporation*, he thought he could sell the rights of Pajitnov's game to *Mirrorsoft*, one of the entertainment branches of Maxwell. Stein informally negotiated with Pajitnov the rights of *Tetris* (at first, it was not clear whether it was only for PC or for other platforms as well), who agreed to grant him the rights.

³ It is the 74th puzzle in the book, named *The Broken Chessboard* [6].

⁴ As Pajitnov himself stated in BBC's documentary, chess and board games were the main source of amusement during his childhood in Russia. In addition, he was very fond of *Pentomino* [7].

⁵ Hungary had a good production and successful exportation of software and puzzle games to Western countries. The following paragraphs on *Tetris*' history are largely based on the BBC's documentary [7].

demonstrate the capabilities of the first minicomputer, having its source code distributed for anyone to use it in their own machine.

Those early forms of electronic games may seem very different from the one of Nintendo's *Tetris*, or even other games from the 80s and the 90s. They did not have music, and in most cases not even any sound. However, this was rather a technological constraint, not a deliberate aesthetical decision from the game designers. In the later generations of videogame devices, faced with the opportunity of using separate channels for sound effects and music [3], developers had to start using creative strategies to deal with the representation of quality music, despite the consoles little audio resources. We will discuss in more details the soundtrack choice for *Tetris*. However, it is important to take into account the context of little technological development, especially in sound, in which it was conceived; as well as the fact that most composers were also programmers for videogames, due to the kind of knowledge necessary for hardwiring the sound into the game's cartridges.

Since puzzle games are as old as games in general, soon we would start to see this reflected in electronic games as well. The inspiration for *Tetris*' form traces back to Ancient Orient, specially China and India, where the board games *Go* and *Chess* were developed². In late 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century, these games inspired the works of an English mathematician, Henry Ernest Dudeney (1857 –

²As observed by Solomon Golomb in the introduction to his book about *polyominoes*: "[...] the observation that there are twelve distinctive patterns (the pentominoes) that can be formed by five connected stones on a Go board ... is attributed to an ancient master of that game" [5].

With the rights “secured”, *Mirrorsoft* started producing the game in England, and *Spectrum Holobyte*, an American branch of Maxwell in the US, selling several units of *Tetris*⁶ with a successful marketing campaign, portraying the game as an exotic piece “from behind the Iron Curtain” [7]. This caught the attention of Soviet Government, which contacted Stein through ELORG, the government department responsible for handling software exportation. It summoned Stein to Moscow, claiming that the informal negotiation was not valid, since in Soviet Union the *Tetris*’ intellectual property belonged to the government, not to Pajitnov. However, Stein managed to convince ELORG and closed an official deal, retaining the rights for the distribution of Tetris.

With the success for PC, *Mirrorsoft* decided to expand the distribution of *Tetris* to videogames, of home consoles, and contacted Atari Tengen, which began to develop its own version of the game (it had 3D-like shapes, as well as improvements in the soundtrack). In an American Tradeshow, Henk Rogers, founder of *Bullet Proof Software* (now *Blue Planet Software* [8]) saw the Atari NES version, and decided to take it to Japan, one of the biggest markets for videogames. He discussed it with Browleit from Atari, who authorized him to start producing a version of Tetris for PC and NES, the first ones to have a Russian inspired soundtrack (already including *Korobeiniki*), that sold over two million copies [8].

Nintendo was preparing to launch *Game Boy*, and thought that Tetris could be part of the product’s package. Then, Rogers contacted Stein directly to negotiate the rights for *Game Boy*. Meanwhile, Nikolai Belikov was assigned by ELORG to analyze *Tetris*’ original contract, and found out that the agreement was not being honored by Stein, who was in debt. Stein tried to stall the negotiation with Rogers, because he knew he could not secure the rights for handheld devices until he could solve his problem with ELORG. After three months, tired of waiting and becoming suspicious of Stein’s intentions, Rogers decided to travel to Moscow himself. At the same time, Stein took the same decision, and so did Kevin Maxwell, Robert Maxwell’s son (owner of Maxwell Communications Corporation), each of them separately.

Rogers met Pajitnov in Moscow, and soon they became friends. Contacted by the three foreigners, Belikov decided to meet them separately. He first met Rogers, who proudly showed him the games his company had been developing in Japan, surprising Belikov, which informed him that ELORG had never granted any videogame console rights for Tetris, and that the only rights granted were to Andromeda for PC games: the videogame cartridges were being sold illegally. Belikov then noticed an opportunity to grant separate rights, for PC, video game consoles and handheld consoles, one for each company, maximizing the potential for profit, as Stein was not honoring his contract and Nintendo, on the other hand, was a powerful company in the videogame market.

The same day, Belikov met with Maxwell, and confronted him with the information provided by Rogers. Maxwell admitted that the videogame cartridges had been produced as “pirate”. This cast mistrust over Maxwell’s intentions, taking a

huge toll on his company’s reputation later. The last meeting was with Stein, who was questioned about his original contract. Hoping to keep his rights over *Tetris*, he rushed to sign the reformulated contract with ELORG, not noticing that Belikov had introduced a new clause, specifying that his rights were only for PC games. This allowed the Russian to sell the handheld and videogame rights for Rogers and Nintendo.

Disappointed over his son’s failure in negotiating *Tetris*’s rights, Maxwell sent a telex to Belikov, threatening to approach Gorbachev himself with the matter if he did not change his decision. This made Rogers rush his return to Moscow with Nintendo’s American division directors to ensure the deal.

Rogers secured the rights of the game and sold them to *Nintendo*. In America, *Atari*, which had already produced five hundred thousand copies of their version of *Tetris*, sued *Nintendo* in advance, trying to keep the rights it thought to possess. However, the American court ruled summarily in favor of *Nintendo*, which launched the *Game Boy* version in the year of 1989, selling over 35 million copies worldwide [10]. Tetris continues to generate revenue to different companies, and creating, as a result, an infinite number of clashes over legal issues. Nevertheless, it remains a great success, being ported to almost every platform until today, both in its classical form, and as a new genre of *Tetris*-like games⁷.

III. NATION DEPICTED IN MUSIC

Modern nations themselves rose from a divided feudal Europe with scarce central power during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As time passed, they crystalized through several internal conflicts for unification (Philip II and the unification of France; the Catholic Kings and the unification of Spain under Castile; etc.) and external conflicts with the other rising nations, in the several European wars during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries (and arrangements such as Westphalia and the question of the national sovereignty, etc.).

However, it was not until Romanticism, in the 19th century, that the idea of nation was central to art in general, especially to music and literature. This was linked to the Romantic ideal of Nature: the people were the product of the natural environment, thus, the popular spontaneous art would be the truest manifestation of that natural character. That is related, for example, to the concept of ‘local color’ defended by the French Romantic poet Victor Hugo in his *Preface to Cromwell*: the idea that the natural spontaneous manifestations of the local people should overcome all ‘classical tradition’ in order to produce true art, instead of fake and pale imitations of frozen models that had nothing to say to the contemporary [11].

This concept goes through the whole period with different connotations. In music, it meant especially that popular manifestations, considered vulgar and inferior during Classicism, began to occupy a place of prominence. It meant a revision of the Classical harmony and composition techniques, and the incorporation of traditional popular instruments. It meant, above all, the extensive use of popular melodies and

⁶ It was considered “*certainly worthwhile*” by the Computer Gaming World magazine review, in May 1988 [9].

⁷ The basic concept of *Tetris* is so culturally unmarked that it even became an independent form and reproduced itself apart from *Tetris*: *Doctor Mario*, *Metris*, *Pokemon Puzzle League*, *Bejeweled*, etc.

popular genres of music, such as the polkas, the romances, the ballads and popular dances. This may seem a very long trip away from our theme, but it is not: the emulation of a national character is essentially a Romantic obsession and myth – and it is not a coincidence that the original music for *Tetris* Theme B comes straight from the period abovementioned.

Russia was not an exception to the nationalism issue; this becomes evident, once it was during romanticism that arose the need for every nation to have its own *Weber* (Carl Maria von Weber, 1786-1826). As Otto Carpeaux says: “*Weber had given the example. Each nation intends, so, to possess its own Weber [...] The Russian Weber is Mikhael Ivanovich Glinka (1804 – 1857); it was specifically Weber’s music that opened his eyes, freeing him, at least in part, from the Italianism of his beginning.*”⁸ [12].

Romanticism was also the first movement in a global sense, and the first to name itself, identifying itself as Romantic. Bach did not know he was Baroque; Haydn did not know he was Classic; but Wagner knew he was Romantic⁹.

The time of Romanticism was a great period of opening of Russia to the great Western European culture. Russia has always been an ambiguous country, specifically in geographical terms: it is a giant multicultural territory that lies half in Europe half in Asia. Thus, the Russians had to deal with their own cultural difference, their own exoticism. In Romanticism, this was polarized into two contradictory points of view: slavophiles, which believed that Russia should stay faithful to its cultural roots, and the progressists, which thought that Russia should be radically modernized and embrace the Western European influence. The conflicts between those two positions are more than recurrently represented in the works of a writer like Dostoyevsky¹⁰.

Certainly, musicians were sensible to those issues as well. Thus, Romanticism in Russia is an attempt to conciliate the great European tradition and the folk Russian spirit. Most of the greatest names of Russian music come from that period. The first of them is Mikhail Glinka, which was the great influence for the following generation of Russian composers¹¹.

Glinka is known for his cherubic hymns, which are directly inspired in the tradition of the orthodox chants (the orthodox religion was extremely important for the slavophiles), the *troparia*. That kind of music has its own harmonic system, which is completely different from that of the Western tradition¹². It makes the chants sound not only exotic, but also archaic and mysterious to a Western ear. Glinka adapted them

for chorus, taking them apart from the religious cult, to which it was restricted, and exposing it to secular appreciation. He also composed *Kamarinskaya*, a group of Russian dances inspired in two Russian folk melodies¹³.

Exoticism in general was recurrent in Russian Romanticism. We have Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* (explicitly inspired on the *One Thousand and One Nights*), Ippolitov-Ivanov’s *Turkish march* and the *Caucasian sketches* and Borodin’s *Polovetsian dances*, the most popular excerpt from *Prince Igor*. But, certainly, the greatest name from Russian Romanticism is Tchaikovsky. He is best known for his conventional ballets and waltzes. However, we can find, even in them, the Romantic exoticism: the *Arabian dance* is one of the ballets in *The Nutcracker*. Russian culture was very important for him. He composed the *Marche slave*, that is, a march with ‘Slavic spirit’.

Nevertheless, the most symptomatic piece of an attempt of fusion between Western and Russian music is the famous *1812 Overture*. 1812 was the year Napoleonic forces were cast out of Moscow by the Russian army that conquered back their capital, which had fallen under control of the French during the Napoleonic wars. That *Overture* was composed to celebrate the date. Thus, Tchaikovsky conceived it as a parody of the *Marseillaise*, which is explicitly quoted in the composition. However, he chose to begin it with a *troparion* executed by a chorus, as a prayer. Even further, he repeats the *troparion*’s theme before the most famous finale (the one with the canon shots – an extremely modern resource). Tchaikovsky was highly influential, being an inspiration for late Romantics such as Rachmaninov and for Modernists such as Prokofiev.

⁸ All the translations of Portuguese texts to English in this paper are ours.

⁹ Wagner was not just an important composer, but also an important theorist of his own art. He wrote a lot about his concepts; his ideal of an absolute form of art is almost a prevision of cinema; and his concept of *leitmotiv* is essential for the understanding of modern soundtracks.

¹⁰ See the translator’s introduction to *The Idiot* [13].

¹¹ As noted in Zahar’s *Guide to Classical Music*: “*Glinka is considered the father of Russian music*” [14].

¹² Carpeaux also says that it was not “[...] a superficial ‘Russification’”. *Glinka did not limit himself to employing Russian themes and rhythms; instead, at least some times, he stopped thinking musically in terms of the tonal system, that of Bach and Rameau, turning himself to the modes of old Slavic sacred music.*” [12].

¹³ Tchaikovsky said that the whole Russian symphonic school is in *Kamarinskaya* [14].

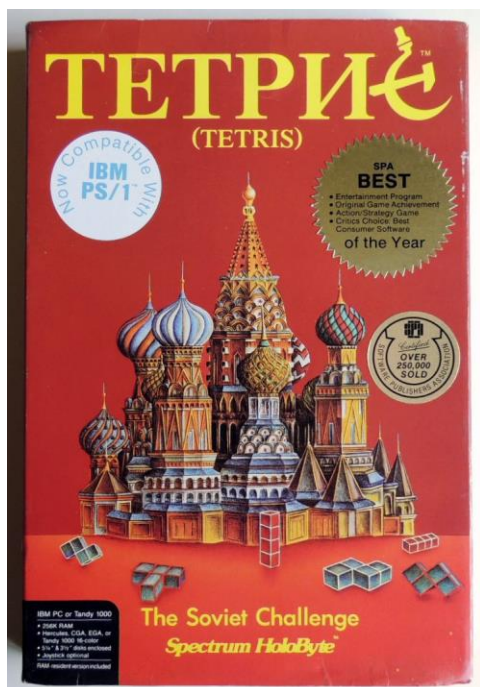


Fig. 3. Spectrum Holobyte's cover for Tetris.

IV. TETRIS' RUSSIANESS

The main object of this paper is the 1989 Nintendo version of Tetris, for its fame¹⁴ and for its soundtrack choice¹⁵ by Hirokazu Tanaka. However, it is important to note that the abovementioned versions by *Bullet Proof Software* already contained Russian folk songs, especially *Korobeiniki*¹⁶. In addition, Spectrum Holobyte's marketing division had already been thinking about the best way of selling the game: their conclusion was to associate it with Russian culture (Fig. 3.), marketing it as an exotic product *from behind the Iron Curtain*¹⁷. The cover of both Game Boy and NES versions had written in it 'From Russia with fun' (Fig. 4), in a clear reference to the 1963 James Bond blockbuster *From Russia with love*. When Hirokazu Tanaka was assigned to this work, he was already an experienced videogame soundtrack composer, being credited for important videogame music, mainly in *Nintendo*, like *Donkey Kong*, *Wrecking Crew* and *Metroid*¹⁸ [15].

At first glance, music in Tetris has an environmental function, a heritage from arcade games. This has roots on the old approach of covering distracting noises from the projector,

¹⁴ As Gibbons notes: "*The Gameboy (version 1.1) features the Russian folk tune 'Korobeiniki', a tune that has become increasingly associated with Tetris in all its incarnations*" [16].

¹⁵ As Gibbons notes: "*The choice of a particular piece of classical music for a video game sound track indicates something about both the piece in question and the game in which it appears: what musical qualities or perceptions about a work make it a good selection for a game, and what does the choice of classical music say about that game?*" [16].

¹⁶ They also included *Troika* and *Kalinka*.

¹⁷ As said in BBC's documentary: "*For inspiration on how to sell this game, they returned to its roots*" [7].

¹⁸ Karen Collins writes a very positive review on his work with *Metroid*'s soundtrack [17].

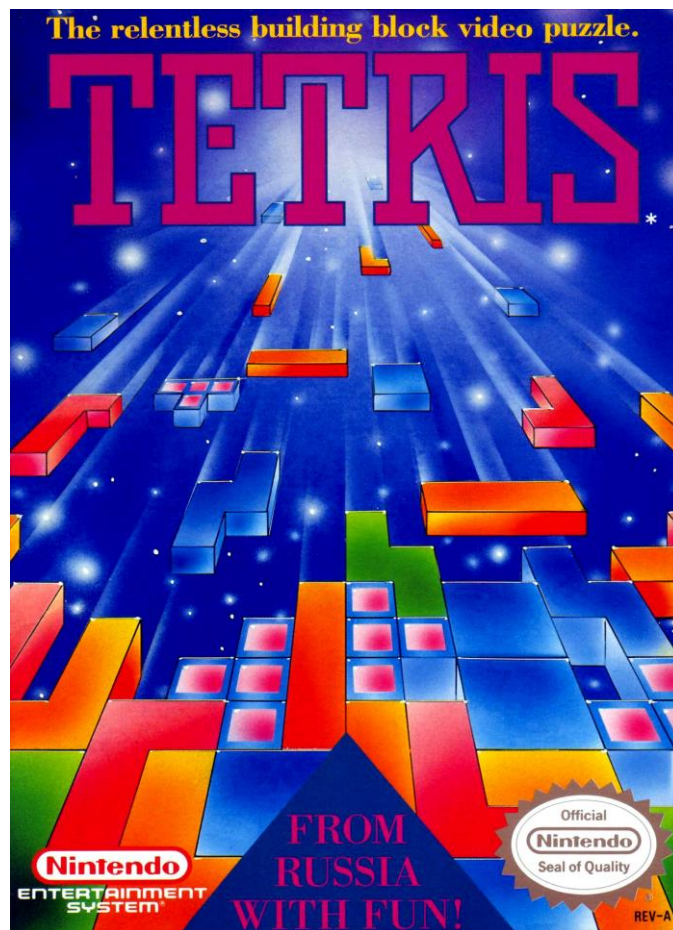


Fig. 4. Nintendo's cover for Tetris.

in the silent movies era [18]. The need for having constant background music was quite obvious, since there was no desire from the filmmakers to let disrupting sounds break the immersion of the audience. We could extrapolate that to arcades and pinball games in the 30s and the 50s, which were noisy machines sharing the same room with dozens of other similar ones.

Prendergast agrees with the utilitarian explanation for the need of music as a counterpoint for image in films, but he also remarks that music in silent movies had more than one single explanation [4]. One of them was that silent images might have a "ghostly" effect on the viewers, similar to shadow plays, which would evoke a haunting feeling, leaving the audience uneasy; the negative emotion provoked by the silent simulacra of the living could be made void by the sound, having the same effect as a child scared of dark, singing to calm itself down. Another one would be that the films, like other dramatic arts, have an individual rhythm, and we are accustomed to associate movement with audible sounds, making the music necessary to reinforce this connection. That could explain the usual practice that took place in the early 90s, which would later become a form on itself.

While thinking about the soundtrack choice, one must also consider the technical limitations of the media at the time. The

game developers used music in a looped fashion to conform to the environmental tradition of movies, since it had limited amount of memory to store a soundtrack spanning hours of gameplay, and no one could accurately predict how much time one would spend playing a particular game. The synthesizers were not so advanced by the time Tetris was released. Folk music offers a catchy melody, instantly recognizable. Thus, the composer, obliged to deal with minimalist conditions, can produce great result with few resources ('less is more'). Even with a single channel (the 1989 version had two) he is able to represent that 'national feeling' discussed above, mixing the Romantic aesthetic with the digital minimalism. Another point to consider is a specifically legal one: folk music is not copyrighted¹⁹.

Tetris' soundtrack consisted in three different tracks, named as 'themes' A, B and C. Theme A, the most famous and iconic, was inspired in the Russian folk dance and song named *Korobeiniki*, also known as *Korobushka*. Theme B remains uncredited, and was probably composed by Hirokazu Tanaka, but clearly inspired in Russian folk music. Theme C is an arrangement for the minuet from Bach's 3rd French suite.

Korobeiniki, the great inspiration for Tetris theme A, comes straight from the Romantic period, and is completely immersed in those questions discussed above. The original name refers to a poem by Nekrasov, the history of a peddler, published exactly in the 19th century (the century of Glinka and Tchaikovsky). Then, it became a song, and later a dance that "dates from late 19th century Russia, where it was invented by one of the many ballroom dancing masters who catered to the social dancing needs of the often newly urbanized middle classes and aristocracy" [1]. Thus, *Korobeiniki* was born itself in a Romantic context. Later, "the dance caught on and spread into smaller towns and villages throughout Russia, where it often changed considerably in the process of transmission, appearing sometimes under the names *Korobochka* or *Korobeyniki*" [19]. That means that not only the procedure here of choosing a 'folk' song as a soundtrack is romantic, but also the choice itself is so.

The *Sugar plum fairy* from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* was used as a first theme in the NES version. This piece is certainly one of the most famous pieces from the Russian Romanticism. However, it does not sound as Russian²⁰ as *Korobeiniki* - at least not 'folk' Russian - but sounds rather as a generic melody with a 'magical touch'.

Theme B remains uncredited. It does resemble a Russian dance²¹. Both Theme A and B have same tempo and similar harmony. This theme was rearranged for *Tetris World* and called *Mino Uet* (*mino* is probably a reference to *tetronimo*, but inverted). Minuet was a baroque dance; the title, however, must

be only a funny reference to the music world, since minuets had slow tempo and were divided in a tertiary meter, which is not the case of Theme B.

Theme C is not a trivial choice. Bach was the great musician responsible for organizing the Western tonal system from medieval music. Otto Maria Carpeaux wrote about him: "*The Kantor from Leipzig can already write like that because the last phase of the baroque period removed the greater obstacle to the harmonic writing: the permanent detuning between human voices and the string and wind instruments, on one hand, and on the other, the key instruments that had to follow those as a thoroughbass. This source of chaotic disorder in baroque music was eliminated by the mathematically exact, although acoustically inaccurate, division of the intervals in the key instruments. The clavier, now 'well-tempered', became the owner of music, imposing its intervals to the others. It was a real coup d'état in music. It allowed, for the first time, to make what Alessandro Scarlatti had done only instinctively. Finally, the empire of the law of rigorous separation between the major and minor scales, the purity of each scale, and the faculty of using, in composition, all the 24 possible scales.*" [12]

This theme, unlike the other, is a slow minuet, taken from the 3rd French Suite. Gibbons says: "A fair amount of classical music, particularly contrapuntal baroque music, could be more or less faithfully reproduced using this texture. In addition, much classical music was easily made into musical loops, which were a necessity for providing music with a minimum use of memory." [16].

Thought as whole, the soundtrack is like a baroque concerto²². It has three movements, with comparable melody and harmony, but with a radical change in tempo. In a Baroque concerto, the three typical movements are thought to sound intimately alike. Let us think about Vivaldi's *Seasons*: in the *Winter* concerto, the three movements sound "wintry"; in the *Summer* one, "summerly"; in the *Autumn* one, "autumnal"; in the *Spring* one, "vernal". Thus, Hirokazu Tanaka, when approximating *Korobeiniki* to Bach, deals with the Romantic operation of attempting a fusion of the Western tradition with the folk tradition, to make them sound like a whole *Russian concerto*.

Even though analyzing the NES Soundtrack, Gibbons states: "[...] the music for *Tetris* serves a more subtle function. It appears innocuous enough at first glance, and the game itself does not seem a likely candidate for any expression of nationalistic content, since there is no plot of which to speak. [...] [However,] the music points players towards an overall impression of 'Russianness.'" [16].

V. LITTLE GAME, HIGH POLITICS

How did a Russian game become famous in America during the Cold War? The cultural relations between Capitalist America and Communism during the 20th Century were always dubious, even at Cold War times²³. At first, one may think both

¹⁹ As Gibbons says in his article, when considering the use of classical music in videogames. The observation is also relevant here [16].

²⁰ "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" is not the most overtly "Russian" of Tchaikovsky's works" [16]. However, Gibbons argues that it is an element of Russianness, although not 'direct', for its familiarity, portraying the Russian culture as positive with the international contribution to music.

²¹ As Gibbons notes: "The origin of music B unfortunately is a mystery to me, but its complexity suggests precomposition, and it contains musical elements suggesting Russian (or Russian influenced) origins, perhaps as a folk song" [16].

²² As Bonner notes: "The various types of concerto are most generally represented by three separate movements in a fast - slow - fast arrangement." [20].

²³ We do not intend to deter ourselves in this very interesting subject, which would easily occupy hundreds of pages. We would like to suggest that, against

cultures were too opposite to be permeable. Off the top of the head, some examples of Communist influence on American culture could be noted, though.

One of the great antecessors of modern Hollywood obsession with megalomaniac visual effects was Sergey Eisenstein, the Russian director²⁴. Eisenstein produced his films in the very beginning of the 20th Century, but his visual effects were already astonishing. He would sink a whole army in a frozen river and make invaders burn babies alive right in front of the camera (*Alexander Nievsky*) or make millions of people march through a snowstorm in a full panoramic sequence (*Ivan the Terrible*) or show a whole battleship armada with thousands of ships (*Battleship Potemkin*). Those visual effects would often aggrandize the Communist regime, or the Russian history that led to it. It is very ironic that the resources now used to entertain the American audience were once used for Communist propaganda²⁵.

This little switch of ours to the field of Cinema is not trivial. Composing a soundtrack for movies includes most of the problems that composing a soundtrack for videogames includes. One of the greatest collaborators of Eisenstein was the Russian composer Prokofiev²⁶, which continued the great romantic Russian tradition (Tchaikovsky, The Five, etc.) into the film industry, becoming one of the most influential soundtrack composers.

During the 60's, Russia was depicted more than once in Hollywood. *From Russia with love*, the 1963 Bond sequel that is mentioned in the *Game Boy* version of *Tetris*, is a good example. Even though most of the film took part in Istanbul, it had a scheme planned by SPECTRE to manipulate both British and Soviet spies, taking advantage of the Cold War conflict. The 'bondgirl' was the beautiful Russian decoder Tatyana Romanova, which had herself some exotic charm with the strong Russian accent and stereotype.

Another great Russian-themed blockbuster was *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), based on the Nobel-winning novel by Boris Pasternak. It depicted the misfortunes of the title character in Russia after the Soviet revolution in 1917. The film won five Oscars in 1966, including for soundtrack [21], which included the famous *Lara's theme*, Zhivago's wife *leitmotif* played on the balalaika. This film was so successful that it is still

a superficial thought, there is a certain tradition in the Capitalist world of absorbing Soviet influences.

²⁴ Eisenstein traveled to Hollywood and even worked there before the Second World War. "[...] he was welcomed by leading Hollywood figures, including Fairbanks, von Sternberg, Disney and especially Chaplin, who became his close friend [...]" [22].

²⁵ Actually, Hollywood itself pays homage to Eisenstein: we can see, for example, references to the famous scene of the *Odessa stairs* from *Battleship Potemkin* in films such as Coppola's *Godfather* and De Palma's *The Untouchables*. It is very interesting that during the Cold War, this film was banned in many Capitalist countries for its Communist revolutionary content.

²⁶ He was responsible for the soundtrack in *Alexander Nievsky*. Tchaikovsky chorus introduction to the *1812 Overture* (an explicitly Russian nationalist music) is the background for the snow march scene abovementioned in *Ivan the Terrible*. We cannot forget that Romanticism is the great matrix when it comes to modern movies soundtrack; above all, the Wagnerian tradition.

considered one of the most profitable films in the history of Hollywood²⁷.

Thus, Tetris was not an exception, but a sort of heir of a tradition of fascination caused by the Soviet Union and Communism in the Capitalist world. We have mentioned above that the version of *Tetris* by *HoloByte* was deliberately marketed as an exotic product *from behind the Iron Curtain*. The strategy proved successful then, and even more when followed by Nintendo later, with the inclusion of the typically Russian soundtrack that was already being thought by Rogers and his team from *Bullet Proof*.

By the time *Tetris* was published, the Cold War was taking its last breath²⁸. The Berlin Wall would finally fall in that same year of 1989 (The Soviet Union would follow it two years later, being dismantled in 1991). *Tetris*' 'birth' into West is itself a symptom of the decadence of Cold War and the beginning of the opening of the Iron Curtain. ELORG, the Soviet department responsible for the international commerce of software, is a good example of that. It was a commerce that was very interesting for Gorbachev (which was himself, very curiously, almost dragged into the negotiations of *Tetris* by Maxwell). As Belikov, ELORG's staff responsible for the negotiation with Rogers and Nintendo, said, he would have had major problems with the Soviet bureaucracy if everything had taken place a year earlier. But the communists were slowly "learning how to play the capitalists game" [7].

The game may also have been seen as a challenge. Something like "that's the game the Russians are playing, don't you wanna be better than them in their own game?" Let us not forget the rivalry between the United States and Russia in sports during the Cold War. Every *Olympics*²⁹, was like a 'peaceful conflict' between Soviet and American athletes. "*The Spectrum HoloByte PC version of the game (1986) featured a red box with the Cyrillic title of the game at the top and the familiar hammer-and-sickle icon as the final letter. Underneath was the English title in parentheses and, at the bottom of the box, the phrase "The Soviet Challenge!" appeared prominently.*" [16].

VI. CONCLUSION

We have shown, thus, that *Tetris* soundtrack makes use of an old and now traditional romantic resource, that of the national or folk art to portray the work in question as belonging to a specific culture, in order to insert into the game itself that Russianness with which it was being marketed as an exotic product - let us not forget that exoticism itself is a very Romantic taste.

²⁷ The 8th All-time domestic gross with adjusted inflation [23].

²⁸ As Gibbons observes: "Just a few years earlier, the popular game *Rush 'n Attack* (Konami, 1987) depicted the scenario of a Russian attack on the United States, playing into the residual cold-war paranoia of the 1980s.³² By 1989, though, things were changing. After the tense atmosphere of the early 1980s, the changing social and economic policies of the USSR and the revolutions of 1989 were slowing altering American perceptions of Russia and its culture. *Tetris* plays into this alteration; rather than presenting Russian culture as universally negative, the game's music, in-game visuals, and marketing all play into presenting Soviet culture as exotic yet positive." [16].

²⁹ One of the inspirations for *Tetris*' name came from sports: 'tetris' is a portmanteau (fusion of two words) of 'tetra' (four, in Greek) and 'tennis' [24].

They could have sold *Tetris* as a generic puzzle game³⁰, and, in that case, they could have given it a generic soundtrack; perhaps some modern electronic music, which was quite sophisticated at the time. They could have made something like Kraftwerk's *Pocket Calculator*, which was very suitable for the sound system available for the game. They did not.

But what exactly makes it a Russian game? Is it the picture of the Red Square in the cover? Is it the fact that it was created by a Russian? Well, it certainly was, thus, it is obviously Russian from birth. However, 'obvious' can be tricky sometimes. Actually, *Tetris* was inspired in the works of an English mathematician, which was himself inspired in an Ancient game. Wouldn't it be more precise to say that it is multicultural from birth?

It is said³¹ that in the *Blue Planet* (Roger's former *Bullet Proof Software*, which hold the exclusive rights for the game) guidelines for *Tetris*, they state that the presence of *Kobeiniki* is mandatory for any version developed. It means that this song has been indissolubly attached to the game, making it unquestionably Russian.

A recent study mentioned by Daniel King, Paul Delfabbro, and Mark Griffiths questioned people what they thought about the *Tetris* soundtrack. A considerable number said they found the music in *Tetris* annoying. However, in the same study, they conducted tests with players: the conclusion was that, while playing with the soundtrack on, their heartbeat frequency was faster³². This shows how powerful a song can be in a game.

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³⁰ As said in one of the earlier reviews yet of the *Mirrorsoft* version : "It's Russian origins [...] are entirely irrelevant" [25].

³¹ The mysterious Tetris' guidelines are not available for the public. Henk Rogers mentioned it in an interview [26]. We found some information from it in the Tetris Wikia, a project like Wikipedia - so, not completely trustworthy - entirely about the game.

³² As noted in their paper: "For instance, (unpublished) pilot research carried out on Tetris by one of the authors (MG) found that in a self-report questionnaire, players said they found the Tetris music annoying when they played the game. However, in an experiment measuring heart rate (as a measure of excitement and arousal) while playing Tetris found significantly higher heart rates playing Tetris with the music on compared to playing the game in silent mode with the music." [27].

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