

From Newbie to Leader: Social Development Trajectories of Players in The Online Role-Playing Game Malinovka

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ABSTRACT

The study is designed as an analytical examination of the mechanisms of social mobility and the formation of leadership competencies within the virtual space of the Russian massively multiplayer role-playing game "Malinovka." The primary objective is to identify and characterize participants' developmental trajectories: from the initial stage of mastering norms and role expectations to subsequent advancement and the attainment of senior managerial positions inside the factional structure. The methodological foundation is established through a systematic review of relevant academic publications, a comparative analysis of pertinent market indicators, and a content analysis of the regulatory and normative documents produced by the gaming community. The findings indicate that a hierarchically organized in-game architecture creates conditions for the accumulation of social capital and the stepwise development of competencies associated with strategic planning, conflict management, and team communication. The resulting conclusions are consistent with the hypothesis that game-based experience has a high probability of being productively converted into professional managerial skills. The presented propositions retain practical relevance for developers of online projects, researchers of digital social spaces, and human resource specialists who employ elements of gamification in corporate training programs.

1. Introduction

Over recent years, the video game industry has demonstrated a qualitative shift away from a predominantly recreational model toward multi-layered digital ecosystems in which social interaction, cooperation, competition, and elements of professional testing of managerial practices unfold in a stable and repeatable manner. Market analytics confirms the significance of this segment: the global MMORPG market in 2025 is estimated at USD 28.06 billion, with expected growth to USD 46.76 billion by 2030 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10.75% [1, 2].

Within this broader structure, projects in the Role-Play (RP) genre occupy a distinct place, including "Malinovka" (malinovka.org). Unlike conventional MMORPGs, where the logic of progression is often reduced to the accumulation of in-game resources and artifacts, RP servers reproduce a more complex model of social organization, one that entails the simulation of public institutions—from law enforcement agencies and military units to criminal associations and elements of an administrative apparatus. Such an architecture defines not only action scripts but also normative and role-based expectations, ensuring regular participant involvement in procedures of regulation, allocation of authority, and the sanctioning of

behavior. An additional factor of significance is the audience's age structure: according to statistical data, 59% of active players in Russia fall within the 18–23 age group, which strengthens the role of virtual worlds as spaces of primary and secondary socialization and of consolidating communicative and organizational patterns [3].

Despite the noticeable spread of RP practices, the scholarly field remains characterized by a shortage of works in which the long-term dynamics of a player are examined as the evolution of a social subject inside strictly normed communities. The presence of studies focusing primarily on the psychological aspects of gaming addiction [4], as well as approaches that interpret leadership without anchoring it to specific game mechanisms [5, 6], does not provide a holistic explanation of how regulation, hierarchy, and institutional simulation generate stable models of social advancement. In this context, the present study is aimed at addressing the stated gap by analyzing participation in “Malinovka” as a process of sequential accumulation of social capital, consolidation of status, and expansion of managerial influence.

The purpose of the study is to identify the mechanisms and stages of transformation from an ordinary participant (a newcomer) into a high-ranking manager (a leader) under the conditions of the digital simulation implemented in the “Malinovka” project.

Scientific novelty is defined by the establishment of correlational links between the strictly regulated mechanics of RP servers and patterns of decentralized leadership formation, thereby refining the understanding of virtual worlds as environments of accelerated socialization.

The author's hypothesis is that the structured hierarchical organization of “Malinovka,” relying on a reporting system and in-game legal norms, promotes the formation of a stable set of managerial competencies that are potentially applicable to subsequent transfer into professional activity outside the game environment.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of social development trajectories, an integrated methodological toolkit was applied, combining quantitative and qualitative research procedures. The conceptual basis of the study is built on the principles of a systems approach, within which the “Malinovka” project is interpreted as a dynamic social system characterized by internal normativity, the reproduction of roles, and mechanisms of institutional control.

A series of analytical procedures is employed in the research logic. First, a systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted in accordance with PRISMA methodology: relevant sources from recent years were examined, including publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, as well as materials produced by leading consulting organizations (PwC, Deloitte, Gartner) [1]. Second, a comparison of market indicators was carried out on the basis of data from Mordor Intelligence, Newzoo, and TAdviser, which made it possible to align global MMORPG development trends with Russia's sector-specific features [2]. Third, a content analysis of the normative and regulatory corpus was performed: the official regulations of the “Malinovka” project, faction rules, internal forums, and reporting systems of the leadership cadre were examined [11]. Fourth, a case-based analysis of game mechanics was conducted, aimed at identifying managerial functions and procedures through which hierarchies are reproduced; empirical examples included the /transfer command as an instrument of personnel rotation and the hierarchical configuration of the Faction Management Team (FMT) [12, 13].

The source base is structured according to functional purpose. The academic segment is represented by studies devoted to social capital, A. Bandura's social cognitive theory, and the problem field of leadership in virtual teams [14]. The analytical segment is formed by reports from Gartner and McKinsey that reflect processes of AI implementation, spatial computing, and new forms of human–machine interaction, which define the technological context of “Malinovka's” existence in 2025 [17]. The practical segment includes materials from the malinovka.org project: internal documentation, attendance indicators, rules of conduct, and technical descriptions of updates [11].

As a theoretical lens, Ray Oldenburg’s “third place” concept is applied in an adaptation to digital environments: MMORPGs are interpreted as spaces of informal communication and social leveling in which interactions and status positions are formed primarily on the basis of in-game norms and recognition rather than participants’ initial position outside the virtual context [20].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis conducted indicates that social formation within “Malinovka” cannot be reduced to a straightforward accumulation of status or resources; rather, it unfolds through a sequence of qualitative transitions. These transitions are determined, on the one hand, by the logic of game mechanics and the distribution of roles, and, on the other hand, by an individual’s internal motivational demands associated with self-actualization and an expansion of the zone of responsibility. By 2025, the MMORPG segment exhibits markers of maturity: projects of this type consolidate for participants not only recreational practices, but also a stable “second-life” model in which obligations, behavioral norms, and sanctioned forms of participation become institutionalized.

For a correct interpretation of individual trajectories, it is necessary to account for parameters of the external environment shaped by economic and social trends in the industry. In 2025, MMORPGs will accumulate 34% of the total online games market, which makes it possible to treat this genre as one of the leading ones in terms of extracted profit and the depth of audience engagement [21].

Within Table 1, presented below, a description of gaming market statistics and demographics is provided.

Table 1. Comparative statistics of gaming markets and demographics (compiled by the author based on [1, 2, 3, 10, 21]).

Parameter	Global market (MMORPG)	Russian market (Total/MMO)
2025 volume	\$28.06 billion	~200 billion rubles
Projected CAGR	10.75% (through 2030)	5.0–7.0% (through 2030)
Primary age group	20–34 years (49%)	18–23 years (59%)
Dominant platform	Mobile devices (43.2%)	PC (56%) / Mobile (61%)
Average spending on donations	\$16.02 billion (total MMO)	204 billion rubles (2024)

Against the background of these macro-indicators, the “Malinovka” project demonstrates pronounced stability, largely due to its orientation toward the PC segment, which in Russia retains relatively strong positions compared with the global consumption configuration. The increase in spending on in-game purchases (donations) in the Russian Federation to 204 billion rubles is interpreted as an empirical marker of the audience’s readiness to invest in symbolic capital and the maintenance of virtual status [2].

The initial stage of participation, conventionally designated as “Newbie,” is characterized by elevated cognitive load: it requires the assimilation of RP terminology, the mastery of server regulations, and basic methods of generating in-game income. Empirical findings in studies of the educational and developmental effects of gaming activity indicate that approximately 70% of the relevant outcomes are formed precisely at the stage of overcoming primary entry barriers [22, 23]. In “Malinovka,” this phase is partially structured by a quest system; however, the key component of socialization is realized through interaction practices with other participants within labor activities (for example, the mine or the sawmill), where norms of cooperation, role distribution, and situational trust are reproduced.

Within this stage, a primary contour of social capital is established—specifically, bridging social capital—focused on “building bridges” between participants with different social and gaming backgrounds and enabling relatively egalitarian interaction within shared contexts of activity [20]. The growth dynamics of the global MMORPG market are conceptually aligned with an expanding inflow of new users, which, under conditions of genre maturity, increases the intensity of audience renewal and creates additional pressure on adaptation and retention mechanisms in projects, including “Malinovka.”

The second trajectory of social advancement is associated with the stage of group integration and subsequent specialization, when entry into a faction takes place. This moment functions as a structural threshold: individual activity ceases to be predominantly atomized and becomes embedded in a stable system of role expectations, sanctions, and delegated authority. Within “Malinovka,” the factional contour is organized according to the principle of institutional simulation, implying a division between legal structures (LSPD, the Army, the Mayor’s Office) and illegal associations (organized criminal groups, mafias). Each of these organizational forms establishes a specific regime of obligations, determining permissible behavioral scripts, the regulation of activity, and criteria of in-group assessment.

A key mechanism at this stage is hierarchical subordination. Factions typically include ten or more ranks, forming a multi-level system of statuses and access rights. Advancement along the rank ladder is tied to the achievement of planned indicators expressed through measurable performance results—for example, the number of arrests or the volume of delivered ammunition—which is enshrined through internal regulations and reporting practices [9, 11]. In this way, a managerial logic of goal setting and execution control is reproduced, where formal metrics become an instrument for legitimizing status.

An additional role is played by a professionalizing component implemented through in-group training. The practice of lectures and drills conducted by senior members for junior ones functionally corresponds to mentorship models characteristic of organizational environments outside the game, because it ensures the transmission of norms, procedures, and behavioral standards while also forming a mechanism for the reproduction of competencies within the collective [5, 15].

Finally, team coordination is crucial for this stage. The completion of complex tasks—including raids on dens or events aimed at capturing territories—requires synchronization of actions and the rapid distribution of roles, which is typically supported by voice communication and regulated interaction protocols. As a result, the development of competencies in critical listening, precise communication, and the coordination of decisions under conditions of time scarcity and heightened uncertainty becomes more intensive [5].

Figure 1 presents an authorial model demonstrating the redistribution of a player’s activity types as advancement within a faction occurs, making it possible to register a transition from predominantly individual practices to cooperative managerial and administrative functions.

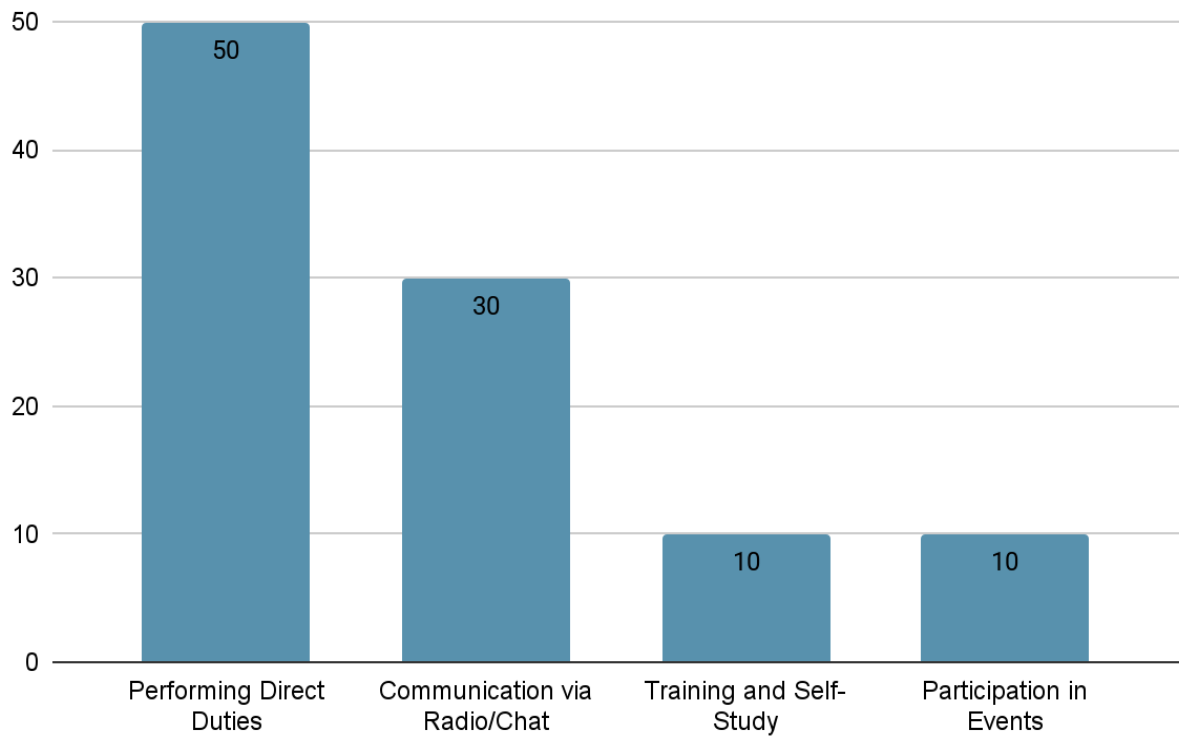


Figure 1. Structure of the operational activity of a mid-level player (compiled by the author based on [5, 11]).

The highest stage of social formation within the game environment is associated with occupying the position of faction leader or deputy leader. In “Malinovka,” leadership is constituted not as a simple consequence of accumulated experience or in-game tenure, but as a formalized status that requires institutional approval from the administration through the Faction Management Team (FMT). Within this configuration, the leader functions as an officially legitimized managerial subject who is held responsible for the functioning of the faction as a whole: the disciplinary condition of the roster, the level of participant activity, and compliance with the server’s normative requirements [11, 16].

The leader’s managerial workload reproduces a set of challenges that are structurally comparable to corporate practice. A substantial element is the monitoring of performance and activity, framed in KPI logic. In “Malinovka,” the requirement to maintain a specific Activity Level—1.0 ABAS—is stipulated; deviation from the normative value is treated as a violation of a managerial standard and entails formalized sanctions in the form of demerits (reprimands), with a potential outcome in the form of removal from office [11]. In this way, a mechanism of regular reporting and external oversight is institutionalized, constraining arbitrariness in managerial decisions and stimulating the maintenance of stable participation dynamics.

No less significant is the contour of conflict-management competence. The leadership role includes the necessity of resolving disputes both within the roster and at the inter-faction level. The absence of timely de-escalation can transform local contradictions into “faction wars” or provoke direct administrative intervention, which increases the importance of mediation procedures, negotiation-based management, and the maintenance of decision legitimacy in the eyes of participants [12].

A third key direction is personnel policy. The operation of the transfer system (/transfer) presupposes continuous evaluation of candidates and decision-making regarding acceptance, refusal, or reinstatement into the roster, which requires selection skills, analysis of reputational signals, alignment of individual characteristics with unit needs, and risk forecasting for organizational stability [13].

Within Table 2, a description of the managerial skills matrix of a faction leader in the “Malinovka” project is presented.

Table 2. Managerial skills matrix of a faction leader in the “Malinovka” project (compiled by the author based on [11]).

Game process	Required skill	Real-world equivalent (Soft Skills)
Completing forum forms and reports	Records management	Administrative management
Conducting interviews	Personnel assessment	HR management and recruiting
Planning operations (GRP)	Strategic thinking	Project Management
Discipline control (reprimands)	Ethical leadership	Corporate ethics and compliance
Interaction with FMT	Working with a regulator	Government Relations (GR)

Notably, the technological dynamics of recent years—specifically, solutions in the class of “Agentic AI” and “Spatial Computing,” recorded in Gartner’s reporting materials for 2025—are beginning to integrate into similar digital simulations as well, gradually redistributing managerial workload. The automation of routine procedures, including the verification of reporting through bots and other control instruments, reduces the share of operational actions in the leadership role and thereby expands the opportunity to concentrate on strategic planning and maintaining the quality of human interactions within the roster [7, 8].

At the same time, the advancement trajectory “from newcomer to leader,” for all its productivity in terms of competency formation, is associated with a risk contour that needs to be documented in the analytical description. The most vulnerable area is a potential shift of life priorities toward virtual achievements, which may be accompanied by a weakening of social ties outside the digital environment. Empirical data indicate a positive correlation between excessive gaming activity and social isolation in adolescence ($r = 0.42$), which allows hyper-intensive engagement to be treated as a factor of probabilistic growth in social-behavioral constraints in real-world contexts [4].

An additional limitation is connected to the resource cost of leadership positions within “Malinovka” itself: managing a large roster presupposes substantial time expenditures and stable operation under heightened responsibility. The necessity of constant discipline control, action coordination, and incident response while working with dozens or hundreds of subordinates generates chronic stress load and increases the likelihood of emotional burnout. In 2024–2025, the project’s developers indicate the introduction of supportive mechanisms, including reduction of term lengths and the expansion of deputy functionality; this is aimed at redistributing duties and reducing cognitive overload of the managerial tier [11]. Figure 2 schematizes a “social capital cycle,” reflecting how in-game achievements are transformed into authority and then returned in the form of resources that support further advancement and the strengthening of status.

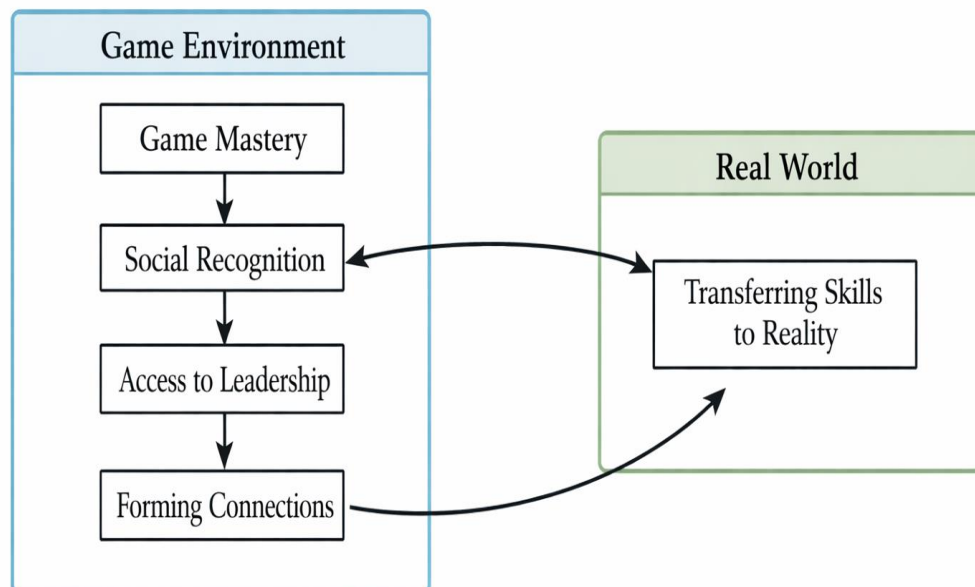


Figure 2. Model of conversion of game-based social capital (compiled by the author based on [4, 8, 11]).

The question of the transferability of competencies formed in MMORPGs becomes fundamentally important when assessing the applied value of game-based experience. Empirical studies conducted on the material of projects such as World of Warcraft and Mobile Legends show that participants who held leadership positions are statistically more often characterized by higher indicators in decision-making, subjective confidence, and the coordination of team actions in out-of-game contexts [5]. In the case of “Malinovka,” the potential for transfer may be expressed more intensively due to its realistic setting and institutional imitation: managerial procedures associated, for example, with administering a police department are, in the logic of their algorithms and in their disciplinary-organizational requirements, closer to the functional profile of a unit head within a law enforcement structure than to the management of episodic cooperation in a fantasy environment.

Theoretically, this effect is productively interpreted through the social-cognitive paradigm, according to which observing the actions of successful leaders and subsequently reproducing analogous functions independently within a controlled and relatively safe environment contributes to the formation of stable behavioral patterns [19, 24]. In this context, “Malinovka” can be treated as a kind of managerial “sandbox” in which mistakes are sanctioned within virtual regulations and symbolic disciplinary measures (for example, a reprimand), without producing direct consequences at the level of dismissal or material losses in the real economy. Such a configuration lowers the barrier to experimenting with managerial decisions and accelerates the consolidation of skills through repeatable practice.

Figure 3 presents a hierarchical scheme of faction governance in “Malinovka,” reflecting the multi-level nature of the project’s social organization and the degree of formalization of authority, reporting procedures, and decision-making channels.

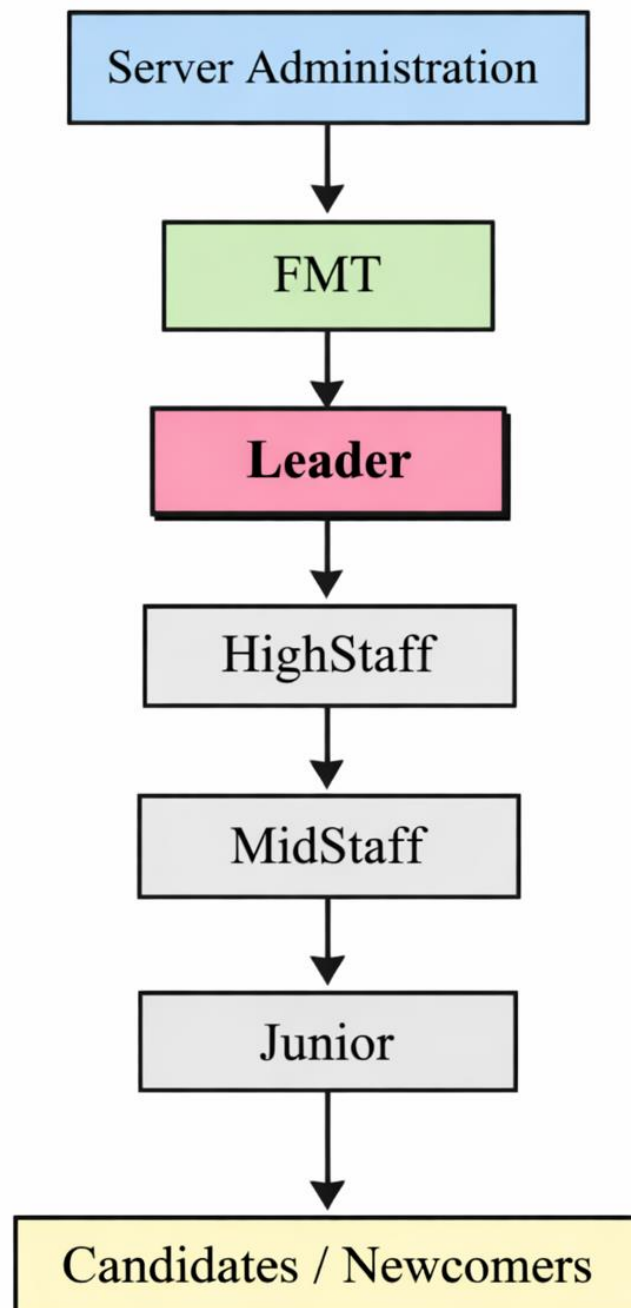


Figure 3. Hierarchical pyramid of governance in the “Malinovka” project (compiled by the author based on [5, 18, 24]).

Within the 2025–2027 horizon, a further strengthening of the role of artificial intelligence in the governance contour of gaming communities appears likely, primarily due to a shift from auxiliary automation toward decision-support at the level of managerial roles. In McKinsey’s analytical materials, “Agentic AI” is considered a technological foundation for the creation of virtual assistants for leadership tiers, capable of processing large arrays of game logs and detecting violations of regulations in a mode close to real time [25]. Projected onto “Malinovka,” this logic implies a potential shift toward more complex models of social organization, in which a share of administrative and control functions will be institutionally delegated to algorithmic tools, while leadership positions can redistribute attention toward strategizing, diplomatic interaction, and the production of unique role-play content that sustains engagement and the legitimacy of in-game institutions.

In parallel, the technology trend of “Spatial Computing” becomes more salient, expanding the possibilities of immersive participation through augmented- and virtual-reality devices [8]. A deepening of presence in the role-play environment entails a complication of the communicative requirements placed on managerial

cadres: the significance of nonverbal signals, attention management, and the construction of persuasive interaction scripts in three-dimensional space increases, where the distribution of audience focus and the coordination of actions begin to depend not only on text and voice channels, but also on the spatial organization of joint activity.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study of participants' social trajectories in the online project "Malinovka" confirmed the hypothesis that RP environments possess a pronounced developmental significance in the context of leadership formation. It was established that advancement from newcomer status to managerial-level positions represents an integrated cycle of socialization in which adaptive practices, elements of professional specialization, and experience in assuming responsibility for collective outcomes are consolidated in a sequential manner. The dynamics of this cycle are driven not only by individual motivation, but also by the project's institutional architecture, which sets normative boundaries, performance criteria, and sanctioned models of behavior.

The work recorded the market and technological conditions of MMORPG development in 2024–2025, indicating the economic and social maturity of the segment and its capacity to function as a stable space of social organization. Within "Malinovka" itself, mechanisms of social mobility were identified that are formalized through a rank system, reporting procedures, and personnel-rotation tools, ensuring the reproduction of a managerial vertical and the selection of participants based on performance. The analysis of leadership competencies demonstrated their high congruence with contemporary requirements of corporate management, primarily in the domains of coordinating team activity, making decisions under uncertainty, and maintaining normative discipline. At the same time, risks associated with increased psycho-emotional load on the managerial tier were identified, and directions for their mitigation were outlined through redistribution of authority, regulation of terms, and the introduction of supportive procedures.

The practical significance of the results is determined by the possibility of employing "Malinovka" and analogous projects as instrumentally rich platforms for the assessment and training of prospective managers. The configuration of game mechanics, requiring constant balancing between the interests of the roster, the requirements of administrative regulation, and external threats, functions as an effective simulator of systems thinking and organizational resilience. The conclusions obtained may be used in applied HR practices, in the design of educational game-based solutions, and in sociological research devoted to the transformation of interaction forms under conditions of total digitalization. Promising directions for further work are connected with analyzing the gender specificity of leadership in RP environments and evaluating the influence of decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) on the reconfiguration of faction structures and the distribution of power within gaming communities.

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