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**Historical figures in “Fate/Grand Order”:  
adapting Anastasia Romanova**

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**Abstract.** Historical events and figures tend to escape people’s memory as time goes by. In some cases, they are replaced by popular culture adaptations, e.g., video games, fiction, films, etc. Such adaptations may be beneficial to historical memory, preserving their historical models for posterity. Sometimes, adaptation become part of fictional history. “Fate/Grand Order” is a game released by Type-Moon in 2015 (Japan). Its fictional universe makes an active use of various characters of folklore and history, e.g., Joan of Arc, King Arthur, etc. The aim of the study is to examine the adaptation of Anastasia Romanova in the game “Fate/Grand Order”. The adaptation analysis scheme proposed by Linda Hutcheon, as well as the comparative method to cross-reference dialogs, illustrations, skills, craft essence in the game with photographs and biography of the real Anastasia Romanova were used. It is proved that Anastasia the Duchess of the Permafrost Empire from “Fate/Grand Order” is indeed an adaptation of the real Anastasia Romanova, the fourth daughter of the last Russian Emperor Nicolas II, although somewhat modified to match the traditional imagery of the Japanese popular culture.

**Keywords:** game, image, Russia, history, adaptation, character

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## Историческая личность в игре Fate/Grand Order: адаптация образа Анастасии Романовой

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**Аннотация.** С течением времени людям свойственно забывать о событиях и героях прошлого. Художественная литература, кинематограф и видеоигры часто адаптируют образы реальных исторических персонажей. Адаптация – хороший способ сохранить историю для будущих поколений, но иногда она становится частью художественной истории. Одним из примеров успешной адаптации исторического персонажа является игра Fate/Grand Order, выпущенная японской компанией Type-Moon в 2015 г. Ее сюжет опирается на оригинальную историю и часто включает в себя исторические или фольклорные персонажи (Жанна д’Арк, Король Артур и др.). Одним из таких персонажей является Анастасия Романова, младшая дочь последнего российского императора. Цель исследования – изучение адаптации образа Анастасии Романовой в игре Fate/Grand Order. Использовались теория адаптации Линды Хатчеон и сравнительно-сопоставительный метод, в соответствии с которым иллюстрации, «скиллы» и визуальный крафт Fate/Grand Order сопоставлялись с подлинными фотографиями и фактами биографии настоящей Анастасии Романовой. Показано, что образ Анастасии Романовой в Fate/Grand Order действительно является адаптацией реального персонажа русской истории, однако внешность персонажа этой игры подвергается некоторой модификации в связи с традициями японской популярной культуры.

**Ключевые слова:** игра, образ, Россия, история, адаптация, характер

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### Introduction

Adapting a character from history is not uncommon: such adaptations can be found in various media, e.g., television shows, movies, music, drama, the Internet, novels, comic books, and video games (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 2). Some historical adaptations are well-executed while others fail; some are historically accurate while others not so much. The list of the most popular historical adaptations includes King Arthur, Joan of Arc, Cleopatra, etc.

Games are soft media that are not immune to historical adaptations. Game developers quite often take inspiration from prominent historical characters and events: again, some stick to historical sources while others produce historical fiction.

Historical fiction uses history as a source of reference but does not keep close to the original historical accounts about important events and people (Chapman, 2016, p. 10). *Fate/Grand Order* is a Japanese mobile game released by the Type-Moon video game company in July 2015. Originally, it started as a *Fate/Stay Night* franchise product. *Fate/Grand Order* has 27 million downloads in Japanese and 19 million downloads in English.

*Fate/Grand Order* uses history a selling point. Many of its storylines have roots in historical events. For instance, the first story in Section II is entitled *Orléans*. It unfolds during the Hundred Years' War between France and England, namely during the Siege of Orléans. Section II is called *Camelot* and tells the story of The Third Crusade led by Richard the Lionheart. Russia is a game setting to be found in the very first chapter of the storyline called *Fate Grand Order: Cosmos in the Lostbelt*. According to the description on the game's official US website, Lostbelt No. 1, or the Russian Lostbelt, is a parallel world of the Permafrost Empire ruled by Anastasia, Grand Duchess of the Beast Nation.

In the game, the Anastasia character is a servant to one Kadoc Zemlupus, who plans to replace the Proper Human History with its Lostbelt version. Although Anastasia takes center stage in Lostbelt No. 1, she first appears in the prologue where she commands the *Oprichniki* troops in the attack on Chaldea, a cross-platform tool for *Fate/Grand Order*. In a later episode, Anastasia the daughter of the last Russian Tsar poses as the wife to Ivan IV the Terrible under the name of Anastasia Romanovna Zakharyina-Yurieva.

Historically, Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova was the fourth and the youngest daughter of Tsar Nikolas II. As a historical figure, she distinguished herself in popular culture due to the mystery surrounding her tragic death. Being a Grand Duchess, or a Princess, of the Russian Empire, Anastasia is, nevertheless, said to have been wild, flamboyant, extroverted, and entertaining (Rappaport, 2018; Lincoln, 1981; Riasanovsky, 2000).

**Adaptation theory.** This research utilizes Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation (2006, p. XI), which is an attempt to investigate both the popularity and the ongoing critique of the adaptation phenomenon in all its uses in various media. In video games or musicals, adaptations are likely to be perceived as flaws and substitutes that are certainly *nowhere near as good as the original*. However, L. Hutcheon also interprets adaptation as *a repetition, not a replication* (2006, p. XVI).

As a product, adaptation is a result of transposing one work (medium) to another. As a creative process, adaptation is a re-interpretation that becomes a new work. As a process of reception, adaptation is a text that enters our memory not from the original source but from a separate work, i.e., the product of adaptation.

Linda Hutcheon explains the relationship between the medium (adaptation) and the audience (viewer/reader/gamer). She derives three adaptation storytelling models: the one that tells a story (novels, short stories, etc.), the one that shows it (performance media), and the one that interacts with it (video games, amusement parks, etc.) (2006, p. XIV). She also introduces a 5W1H analysis structure that relies on five special questions: what, who, why, when, where, and how. What was adapted and what kind of adaptation pattern was used? Who did the adaptation? What was their background? What was their intention? Why did the adapter choose to make an adaptation rather than create something new? What were their causes:

economic, educational, political, etc.? How does the adaptation interact with the audience? How does it affect them? How is it received by them? When was the adaptation created? Did the historical period within which the adaptation was created affect it in any way? Where did the adaptation appear? Did the environment affect the adaptation? In this research, we focus mostly on the two first questions, i.e., the what and the why of the adaptation.

## Methods and materials

Methodologically speaking, this study relied on the method of comparative literature research. Comparative literature is a branch of literary history that features de facto international intellectual relations, e.g., those that existed between poets George Byron and Alexander Pushkin. It also studies the intercultural connections between different works of art, inspirations, and biographies. According to Shunqing Cao's *Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* (2013), this branch of literary studies has three foundations. The first one he calls *doxology* and defines as an empirical study of literary relationships with empiricism as its characteristic and literary relationships with its object, i.e., from the sender, via the transmitter, to the receiver (Cao, 2013, p. 12). The second is *crenology*, which means the study of origins or sources, i.e., from the destination back to the starting point. This study traced sources of influence across borders, based on positivism studies with an emphasis on collecting, identifying, and analyzing various visual and verbal data (Cao, 2013, p. 17). The third foundation is *mesology*, i.e., the process of circulation: it examines how the methods, approaches, and media from foreign works penetrate into some other cultural space and influence the underlying causal laws (Cao, 2013, p. 20).

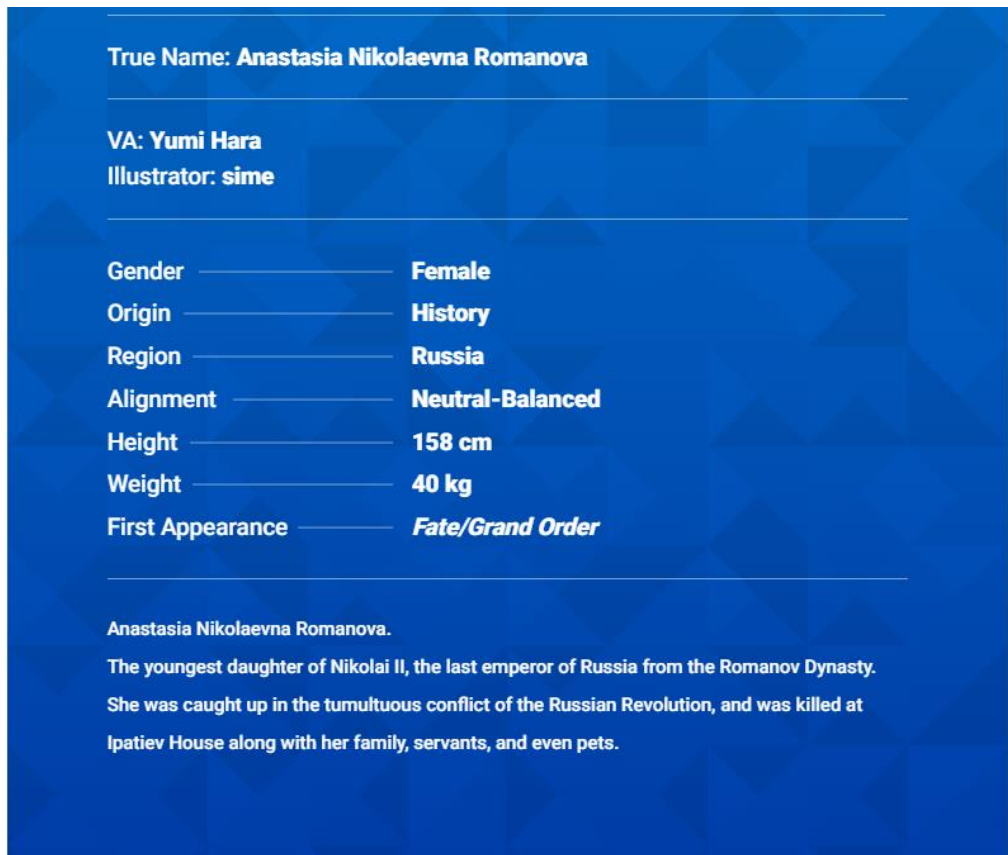
## Results and discussion

### ***Adaptation vs. its source: differences and similarities***

Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova is a character in the game universe of *Fate/Grand Order*. She is the Grand Duchess of the Beast Nation in the alternative world of Lostbelt No. 1. The timeline loosely coincides with the year of 1570 of the Proper Human History, and the Permafrost Empire is an adaptation of Tsarist Russia. The character of Anastasia was developed by an illustrator who calls themselves SIME.

Figure 1 illustrates the character profile published on the official US game website. The Anastasia of the *Fate/Grand Order* is an adaptation of Anastasia Romanova (1901–1918), the youngest daughter of Nikolai II, the last Emperor of Russia from the Romanov Dynasty. According to her profile on the game website, the real Anastasia *was caught up in the tumultuous conflict of the Russian Revolution, and was killed at Ipatiev House along with her family, servants, and even pets*. The description emphasizes the ordeal the real Anastasia experienced at the end of her life.

According to the character's card, her special skill is called *Schwipsig*. The Anastasia of the game shares this skill with another character, Viy: *Schwipsig* allows Anastasia to produce *little impossibilities* and small acts of mischief, e.g., creating small cracks for someone to trip over, snatching objects out of people's hands, etc. The skill has little effect and cannot inflict serious harm.



**Figure 1.** Anastasia's profile on the fate-go.us website

Source: Fate/Grand Order. (2018). Retrieved from <https://fate-go.us/>

In fact, *Schwipsig/Švibzik* (colloquial Russian: *naughty cutie*) is believed to have been a pet name of the real Anastasia derived from her unruly personality in childhood. Historical accounts indeed describe Anastasia as a cheerful and mischievous child<sup>1</sup>. Her mischievous nature was evidenced by I. Vorres (1965, p. 103) in a book about the last Russian Grand Duchess, Olga Alexandrovna. According to the latter, Anastasia was “*a Shvipsik indeed*”: *As she grew older, she developed a gift for mimicry. Ladies who came to see my sister-in-law never knew that somewhere unseen in the background, their Empress's youngest daughter was watching every movement of theirs, every peculiarity, and later it would all come out when we were by ourselves. That art of Anastasia's was not really encouraged, but oh the fun we had when we heard duplicated the fat Countess Kutuzova, one of my mother's ladies-in-waiting, complaining of a heart attack brought on by the appearance of a mouse. Very naughty of Anastasia, but she was certainly brilliant at it!*

In connection with Anastasia's nickname, H. Brewster (1999, p. 23) also quotes from the memoirs of Petr Vasilyevich Petrov, Anastasia's French teacher: *She was the imp of the whole house and the glummiest faces would always brighten in her presence, for it was impossible to resist her jokes and nonsense.*

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<sup>1</sup> Anastasia Romanova: The Mystery of the Grand Duchess. (2008, June 7). *RIA Novosti*. Retrieved April 7, 2023, from <https://ria.ru/20060618/49669714>

### Illustration

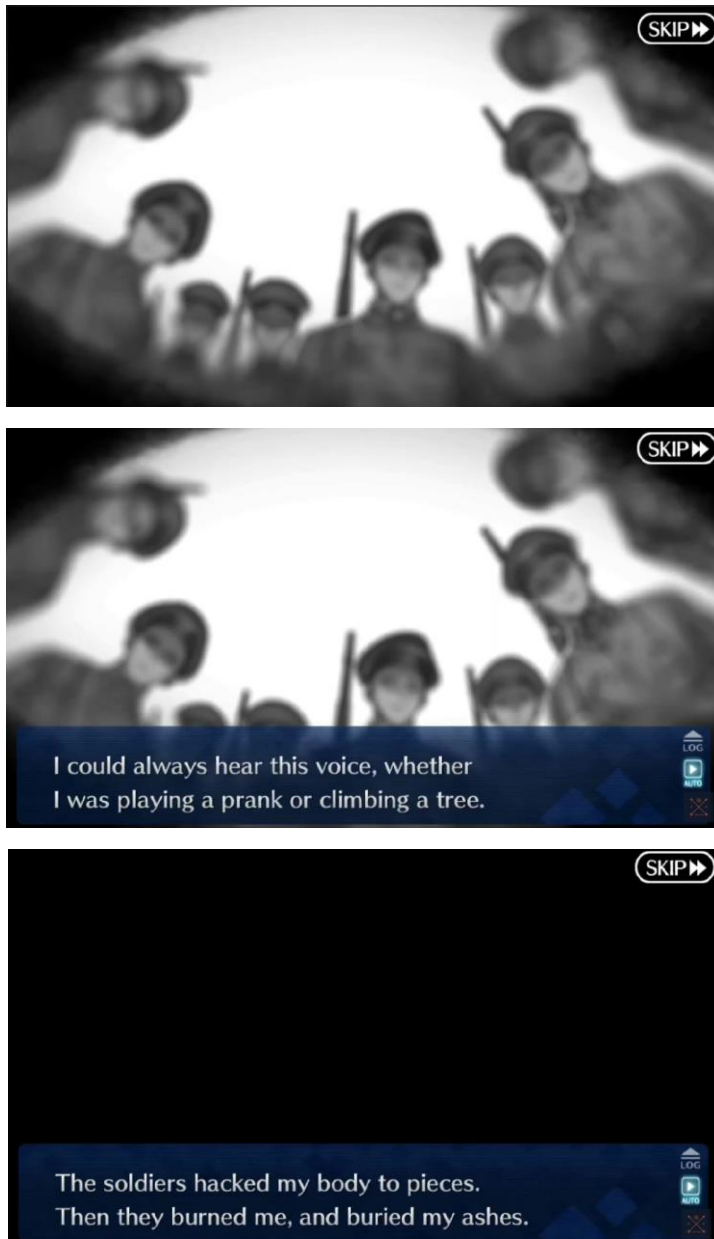
*Fate/Grand Order* gives three illustrations of the Anastasia personage with some additions and changes to her clothing and appearance. The images bear some resemblance with the real Anastasia: indeed, the dresses are similar to those in some photos of the real Anastasia as a child. For instance, we see a red ribbon which in fact is part of the Order of St. Catherine medal given to all princesses of the Romanov dynasty. The Anastasia of the game is also wearing a hat similar to that which was part of formal attire preferred by Russian novel ladies in the early XX century.

However, the adaptation has a different hair color. The real Anastasia had brown hair while the Anastasia of the game has white hair. It is not a coincidence: Japanese games and animations traditionally mark Russians with white hair. Also, the Japanese culture associates white with priests and brides: it symbolizes the spiritual and physical purity of the gods. The white hair might also be connected with the cold Russian climate: melanin deficiency may presumably result in hair bleaching.

The addition, the Anastasia of *Fate/Grand Order* is accompanied by a shadow hand which represents a mythical creature called Viy, first introduced by Nikolai Gogol in his short story of the same name (1835). In the original short story, the author described the Viy character as the king of dwarves. In *Fate/Grand Order*, Viy is introduced as a spirit-companion of the Romanovs and the source of Anastasia's magic.

Section X of the storyline opens with an illustration of eight soldiers looking at the player (Figure 2). The eight soldiers are an adaptation of the executioners who shot Anastasia and her family. In Dialog 1, Anastasia reminisces: *I could always hear this voice, whether I was playing a prank or climbing tree.* (This is how she first encountered Viy.) The line corresponds to the nature of the real Anastasia, who often climbed trees and refused to come down, tripped up servants, teased her teachers, etc. Dialog 2 continues as follows: *The soldiers hacked my body to pieces. Then they burned me, and buried my ashes.* Obviously, this line is an adaptation of the events that took place after Jakov Jurovskij and his men shot the Tsar family: they burned and buried the bodies of the Romanovs in a nearby forest. The victims were brought into a forest where their bodies were stripped naked and their clothes were burnt. When Jakov Jurovskij wanted to bury the corpses, he realized that the mine he intended to dump them in was too shallow. He took the last resort in destroying the corpses with rifle butts, dousing them with sulfuric acid, and burning them with gasoline. Although this adaptation of the Ipatiev House incident is quite faithful, it involves the Viy character, the Romanov guardian creature: *Gunshots rang out, after which there were only soldiers surrounding Anastasia. The pain in her body soon became pleasure, and Anastasia vowed to kill them. Suddenly she heard a voice that she had heard many times as a child. This is where Anastasia met Viy.*

In Figure 3, the Sherlock Holmes character explains that *in the year before her death, famine plagued all of Russia as a result of the ongoing first world war.* The events in the game are true to the fall of the Romanov dynasty in the Proper Human History due to the Great War, which led to food shortages in 1917. All resources, production, and transportation were diverted to the needs of the war, resulting in an inadequate supply for the civilian economy. As a result, many people from consuming regions migrated to producing regions, i.e., from large cities to the countryside within one region or from one region to another.

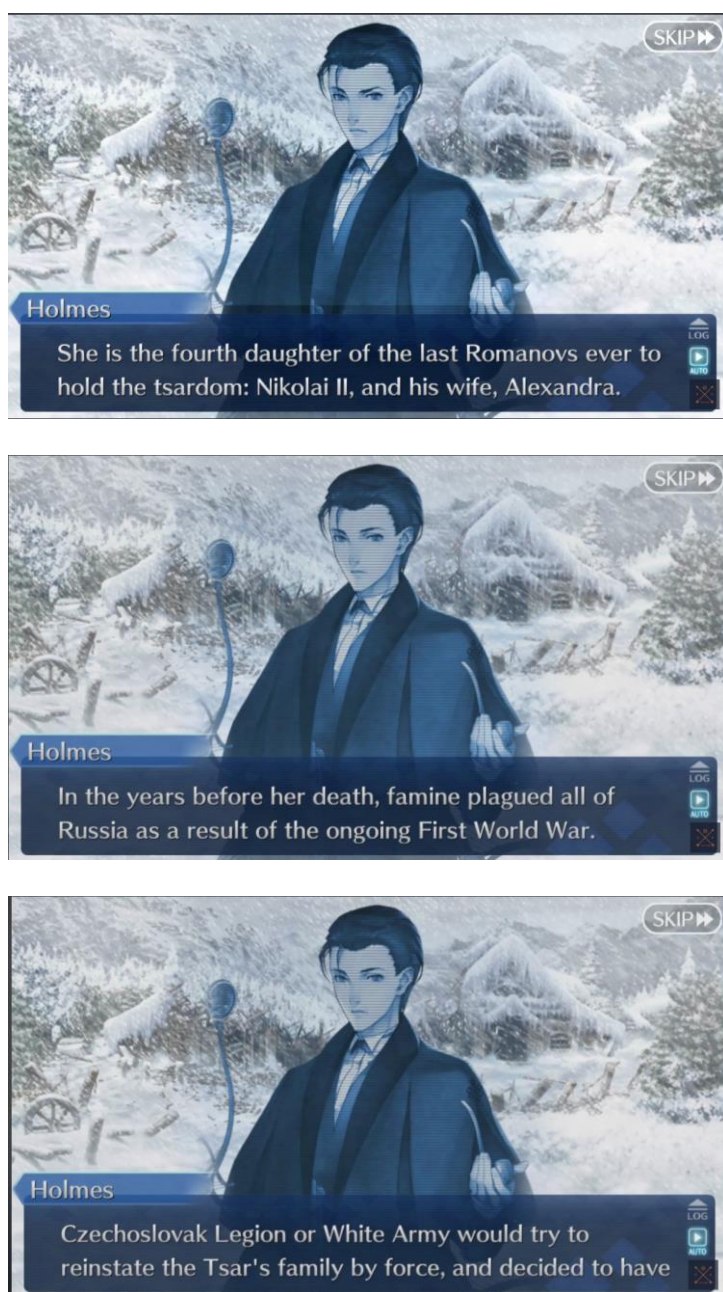


**Figure 2.** Section X of Grand Duchess Anastasia

Source: Fate/Grand Order. (2018). Retrieved from <https://fate-go.us/>

Sherlock Holmes says that *the new Leninist administration feared that the Czechoslovak Legion or the White Army would try to reinstate the Tsar family by force, and decide to have them execute*. This explains the murder of the Romanov family and who ordered it. The Bolsheviks indeed feared that the White Army or the Czechoslovak Legion would restore the monarchy on behalf of Tsar's loyalists. However, Lenin's administration did not give the order to execute the Romanovs. In fact, it came from the Ural Soviet, i.e., the Ural regional council, which was controlled by the Party of Social Revolutioners. They reasoned that, as long as the Romanovs were alive, there would always be a risk of counterrevolution from

the royalists. The assassination of the Romanov family symbolically destroyed the old Russian power, thus putting an end to the imperial era and commencing a new one<sup>2</sup>.



**Figure 3.** Section XV of Grand Duchess Anastasia, pictures 17–19

Source: Fate/Grand Order. (2018). Retrieved from <https://fate-go.us/>

<sup>2</sup> From the archive, 22 July 1918: Ex-tsar Nicholas II executed. (2015, July 22). *The Guardian*. Retrieved March 18, 2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/22/tsar-nicholas-executed-1918>





**Figure 4.** Section XXII of Grand Duchess Anastasia

Source: Fate/Grand Order. (2018). Retrieved from <https://fate-go.us/>

Section XXII tells an important story that reveals the role of Anastasia in *Fate/Grand Order* master plan (Figure 4). In this section, the characters of Beowulf, Atalanta, and Anastasia defeat Ivan the Terrible. The deposed Tsar asks for the names of the people who overthrew him, and Anastasia introduces herself as *Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova*. Ivan the Terrible defines her as *a servant from proper human history... and one who bears the same name as my beloved empress*. Although Anastasia shares the same name with Ivan's wife, she is a descendant of the Romanov dynasty that came to power after the Rurik dynasty: *I am a descendant of the Romanov dynasty, who reigned over Russia after you*. In our reality, the Romanovs succeeded the Rurik dynasty when Mihail Romanov came the Tsar of All Russia in 1613.

### OTMA craft essence

Craft essence is an important part of *Fate/Grand Order* game. It is available at Bond Level 10: it is a card that can be used to give extra power to the servant characters. Craft essence can be obtained through summoning or events. For the Anastasia character, the craft essence is encoded as OTMA, after the initials of the four Great Dutchesses: Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia. It is a collection of photos of Anastasia and her family.



Figure 5. OTMA craft essence vs. historical image, illustration 1

Source: *Fate/Grand Order*. (2018). Retrieved from <https://fate-go.us/>; OTMA's Camera. (n.d.). *Tumblr*. Retrieved May 10, 2023, from <https://otmacamera.tumblr.com/tagged/Maria%20Nikolaevna%20Romanova>

The OTMA adaptation in Figure 5 is similar to the original photograph of Anastasia taken while on vacation in the Livadia Palace in March 18 – May 25, 1912. Both pictures show a young girl proudly displaying a painting she has made. The Livadia estate was one of Emperess Aleksandra's favorites because of its beautiful scenery. According to *The Romanovs: Autocrats of All the Russias*, the imperial family left their residence in the Tsarskoye Selo near St. Peterburg for the Livadia Palace in the late March of 1909. H. Brewster (1999, p. 28) also

quotes a letter that the real Anastasia Romanova wrote to her French teacher Peter Petrov from the Levadia Palace: *Marie and I spend every evening with Aunt Olga and we paint a lot... Aunt Olga is so dear, kind, and cheerful, you must be envying me. There are a lot of roses here and other flowers too. I painted with oils and it came out very nicely.*



**Figure 6.** OTMA craft essence vs. historical image, illustration 2

Source: Fate/Grand Order. (2018). Retrieved from <https://fate-go.us/>; Romanova, 2017.

Figure 6 demonstrates another OTMA adaptation of a historical photo. The source picture is, in fact, Anastasia's selfie photo she took when she was 13 years old. The Princess used her new Kodak Brownie and a mirror, the fact she reported in a letter to her friend: *I took a picture of myself looking at the mirror. It wasn't easy because my hands were trembling*<sup>3</sup>. This photo is considered the first selfie in the Russian Empire, and also among the first selfies in the world taken by a teenager.

## Conclusion

The visuals and texts from *Fate/Grand Order* prove that the game adaptation of Tsar Nicolas's youngest daughter deviated from its historical model. However, the character of Anastasia was to a great extent inspired by the original story of Anastasia Romanova, which is clear from the illustrations, dialogs, skills, and craft essence pictures.

The 5W1H adaptation analysis confirmed that the real Anastasia Nikolaevna Romanova was the source of the Anastasia character in *Fate/Grand Order*. The visual images of Anastasia the Grand Duchess of the Beast Nation were definitely inspired by particular photographs from the imperial family collection. Although the numerous historical references make the Anastasia of the game an obvious adaptation of

<sup>3</sup> In Borjomi, the selfie of Grand Duchess Anastasia Romanova was "revived". (2017, February 14). *Sputnik Georgia*. Retrieved February 14, 2023, from <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20170127/V-Borzhom-i-ozhivili-selfi-velikoj-knjazhny-Anastasii-Romanovoj-234669999.html>

the real Russian Princess, the game character was formatted in line with the stereotypical depiction of Russian characters in Japanese popular culture. The adaptors chose to use an adaptation rather than create an authentic character because the Anastasia of the game continues the long list of other character adaptations in *Fate/Grand Order*, e.g., Ivan the Terrible.

The choice also could be explained by purely economic reasons: Anastasia's adaptation based on the mischievous and tragic historical model is attractive enough to encourage players to spend their money to get this character. Also, the character is an effective story support: Anastasia's storyline serves as a plot filler for the Lostbelt No. 1 plot, which unfolds against the background of Ivan IV's rule. Finally, in spite of Japan being home to 10,000 Russians, Russia has always remained an enigma in Japanese games and anime. As a result, Russian historical figures have become commonplace in Japanese popular culture.

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