George Spencer Terry*

Downstream Influence in the Russo-Ukrainian War: Grand Strategy War Gaming as a Novel Approach to Influence Operations

Abstract: This article delves into an examination of video game streaming and its impact on shaping perceptions of the Russo-Ukrainian War as an influence operation. Specifically, it investigates the case of a 16-year-old boy known as GrishaPutin who streamed a multiplayer game of Hearts of Iron IV from the *ChVK Wagner Centre*. Drawing upon the framework of popular geopolitics and considering the narrative, ludic, and representational dimensions of these streams, this article situates the event within the broader social context in which the influence operation unfolds. Ultimately, this paper concludes that this event represents a novel and yet to be fully established practice in the realm of influence operations. It highlights how such information operations can evolve and adapt, with non-state actors occasionally driving innovation in ways that may not have been anticipated or planned by established state entities.

---

* **Corresponding author:** George Spencer Terry, e-mail: george.terry@baltdefcol.org. Lecturer in War and Conflict Studies, Baltic Defence College; Doctoral Candidate in Political Science, Johann Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu.

Introduction

On 4 February 2023 in Saint Petersburg, a 16-year-old boy by the *nom de jeux* of GrishaPutin streamed a multiplayer game of Hearts of Iron IV from the *ChVK Wagner Centre*, donning a full Russian military kit, adorned with a ribbon of Saint George – the *georgiyevskaya lentochka* – on each flank of his helmet (*ЧВК ВАГНЕР ЦЕНТР - РОССИЯ VS НАТО (МП)*, 2023). He did so on VKontakte, the most popular Russia social media site, likely to avoid any bans from the platform by moderators on Twitch, the most popular site for video game streaming. In this stream, the war begins when Ukraine attacks the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR); it culminates in full-blown global thermonuclear war between Russia and NATO forces. The stream ends when GrishaPutin and an interlocutor representing the United States agree upon the delineation of the post-World War Three borders.

In normal circumstances, a 16-year-old streaming a playthrough of a videogame would not warrant academic analysis. However, the circumstances surrounding this event are anything but normal. This is a 16-year-old that has had his picture taken with Yevgeniy Prigozhin (GrishaPutin, 2023), and nearly one year after having published a guide on "How To Conquer UKRAINE As RUSSIA In Hoi4" on his YouTube channel (*How To Conquer UKRAINE As RUSSIA In Hoi4* (GUIDE), 2022) only 16 hours before the invasion itself, he was broadcasting from Wagner Headquarters. The young streamer was gifted a full Russian   combat kit for his spectacular live performance. Although this stream represented the first of a chain of isolated incidents localised around *ChVK Wagner* and is by no means demonstrative of a wider trend in Russian doctrine toward information operations, this now deleted stream of a simulated war between Russia and NATO forces that begins due to Russia defending its client states in the Donbas' unveils not only assumptions about the nature of this conflict but also implications regarding its eventual denouement, at least in an idealised form.

Since the first stream of 4 February 2023, GrishaPutin has streamed from *ChVK Wagner Centre* two more times. The second stream of 18 February 2023 repeated the same scenario of the first stream, although the outcomes were drastically different and highly fantastical: the war ended with Russia's annexation of most of Europe, a Belarusian annexation of Poland, and a Russian naval invasion of the continental United States (*ЧВК Вагнер центр - РОССИЯ VS НАТО #2 МП*, 2023). The third stream of 18 March 2023, in comparison with the first two, solely acted as a 'Simulator of the Special Military Operation', which in each simulation led to complete victory on the Russian side (*ЧВК Вагнер центр - СИМУЛЯТОР СВО - ШТУРМУЕМ БАХМУТ В HOI4 - ВСЕ ДОНАТЫ ИДУТ НА ВИНТОВКИ ЛОБАЕВА И ПАТРОНЫ К НИМ,* 2023)[1].

Through a comparative analysis of these streams, this article seeks to apply the narrative, ludic, and simulative dimensions of this event to explain them as an effort at an influence operation aimed at shaping perceptions of the Russo-Ukrainian War for a section of the Russian domestic population, primarily young men. This analysis is framed through a conceptualisation of popular geopolitics vis-à-vis the aforementioned narrative, ludic, and simulative dimensions, placed against the social context in which this influence operation unfolds. In order to argue these premises, the article will first provide an overview of the stage of this information operation, the grand strategy video game *Hearts of Iron* IV. Then, working conceptualisations of narratology, ludology, and simulation will be presented. Following these conceptualisations, the mechanism of the influence operation, that is, popular geopolitics, will be delineated, alongside its intersections with the narrative, ludic, and simulative dimensions of the streams. The penultimate sections will present focused analyses of each of these dimensions in relation to each of the individual streams. This article concludes that such an event represents a novel yet still unestablished practice in influence operations that seems to have taken root within *ChVK Wagner*, providing a mould for future projects.

---

[1] EN: 'PMC Wagner Center - Simulator SMO - STORMING BAKHUT IN HOI4 - ALL DONATIONS GO TO LOBAYEV ROCKETS AND PARTS FOR THEM, 2023'.

Gaming Grand Strategy: Hearts of Iron IV

The specific game that GrishaPutin is playing during the stream is Hearts of Iron IV, a grand strategy game (GSG) that allows the player to take political and military leadership over any country over the course of the Second World War as an "authentic real-time war simulation" (Hearts of Iron IV - Paradox Interactive, no date). It is incredibly popular amongst GSGs, with an average of a little over 30,000 players in May 2023, which reflects stable trends over the last year and a half (Hearts of Iron IV - Steam Charts, no date). The game begins in 1936 or 1939, wherein the player may choose to play as any sovereign nation state in the world at the starting date. In this way, the original version of the game is meant to simulate the Second World War from 1936 until its conclusion. Additionally, the player must navigate issues of provisioning and logistics for their armies and develop military doctrine and capabilities in concert. However, the military dimension is not the sole part of national action simulated, as Hearts of Iron IV has an explicitly ideological and political dimension as well. Each country has a guiding state ideology – democratic, fascist, communist, or non-aligned – that situates the country's positioning and closeness to other states within the game – and it is often only due to shared ideological affinities that states are able to enter into military alliances. These ideological guidance points can be changed through the hiring of political advisors using political power, certain events, or choices in focus trees.

While the base game simulates alternative histories of the Second World War and all its possible permutations, modifications to this game (mods), created by players, allow for a wider range of scenarios within which the player can forge an alternative history based upon a variety of different factors. For example, two of the most popular mods for *Hearts of Iron IV* are *Kaiserreich* and *The New Order*, which outline alternative histories that show either a German victory in the First World War or an Axis victory in the Second World War, respectively (Steam Workshop: Kaiserreich, no date; Steam Workshop: The New Order: Last Days of Europe, no date). Both take points of departure

from the normal timeline, but nonetheless aim to simulate these alternative histories within the guardrails of deterministic narratives.

The version of the game in the stream is a further modified version of the *Hearts of Iron IV* mod called *Millennium Dawn*. In comparison with the base game, this mod simulates the post-Cold War world from 2000 to 2035. Like the base game, *Millennium Dawn* not only simulates military conflict, but it additionally provides a holistic simulation of international relations, albeit with a marked focus on conflict. Nonetheless, in comparison to the *Hearts of Iron IV* base game, *Millenium Dawn* touts a "new and unique economic system, a new political system, national taxation and debt, custom internal political factions, [and] international influence mechanics," giving the mod a deeper and more credible level of simulation (Steam Workshop: Millennium Dawn: A Modern Day Mod, no date). Additionally, and in order to maintain a certain level of military realism, the mod uses "highly detailed and accurate armies, navy, aircraft, and equipment based on real world statistics collected by the IISS's The Military Balance 2016, SIPRI's Trends in International Arms Transfers 2016, and FlightGlobal's World Air Forces 2015" (ibid.). In this manner, *Millenium Dawn* endeavours to faithfully replicate contemporary geopolitical dynamics to a greater extent than alternative customised iterations of the game, substantiating its approach through explicit allusion to the theoretical operational capacities ascribed to each nation.

Narratology, Ludology, and Simulation

This article complements other theoretical and methodological approaches toward studying the intersection between new media, international relations, and political science. Past approaches of the study of video games have centred on the 'narratology vs. ludology debate' (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca, 2020) that pits narrative against gameplay as the analytical focus. Stemming initially from literary criticism and the French structuralist tradition of the 1960s, the narrative approach centres on the presupposition that "structuring elements and relationships that bind semantic units together form a superstructure of meaning," understanding that video games represent a specific format of storytelling, one that allows the player to shape and

participate in that narrative (Arsenault, 2014, p. 475). Conversely, the ludic approach, in its radical form (Klevjer, 2002), instead emphasises solely the game design, game mechanisms, and the technical aspects of gameplay, treating any narrative elements as superfluous or inconsequential to the study of games as being "alien" to their aesthetic form.

As the narrative approach has privileged those video games with either fixed or reasonably flexible narratives (i.e., *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor*, *Battlefield*, etc.), there has been little consideration to those games wherein the player or players are the source of all narrative generation, beginning their game *in media res*, as is the case with GSGs. Conversely, the ludic approach is perhaps more applicable in this case, as "through this combination of possibility and process – reflected in the actual experience of the player – games attain their persuasive power and become instrumental to social critique and reflective learning" (Robinson, 2015, p. 97). However, GSGs still complicate this consideration, as the generation of narrative on the part of the player is an intrinsic part of the gameplay; in a way, the player is the storyteller. In such a situation, the narrative is generated by the player in a GSG under the ludic constraints provisioned by the gameplay mechanisms; the ludic topography is the location whence narrative is derived, i.e., the possibility of a narrative can only originate from the mechanisms provided by a game itself.

Still, those debates range from viewing the two approaches as complementary and not dichotomous (Murray, 2005) to seeking a strict separation between the two under the assertion that games cannot tell stories. The essence of the debate, nonetheless, can be simplified to a singular distinction, the game as a story or the game as a game. Aarseth argues that this debate is mischaracterised in presenting the two in opposition, mainly from a distortion of this incompatibility by the narrativist camp   by demanding that the elements of game be considered mutually exclusive from those of stories, and that instead the common elements of games, i.e., world, objects, agents, and events, act as a hybridised ludo-narrative space at different levels of contingency (Aarseth, 2012). In Aarseth's typology of games, this modified version of Hearts of Iron

IV would come closest to a 'pure game' in that the world is open, the objects (e.g., military units, rockets, factories for the provision of materiel, etc.) fully creatable and malleable, and there are no kernels or necessarily scripted events (ibid., p. 4). The only problematic element in this case is gauging the modularity of the agents, which range from players to 'bots' with no individual identity. The narrative – while not provided for in scripted events or kernels – is nonetheless reproduced in the extra-ludic space with the player as interlocutor.

However, by focusing on the game in itself in both the ludic and extra-ludic spaces, the narrativist and ludic approaches do not necessarily have to be diametrically opposed or treated as two ideal poles of a spectrum. As an analytically corollary to the dimensions of and debates between narratology and ludology in the study of gaming, an engagement with the concept of simulation provides a space for the two to come to a synthesis rather than to clash in antithetical confrontation, which has been recognised as "yet unexplored field in gaming studies" (Frasca, 2013, p. 233). As mentioned previously, the developers of Hearts of Iron IV intended it to be a real-time war simulation, and fixing the definition of simulation for this study in order to operationalise it so as to provide an analytical approach to the analysis of GrishaPutin's stream akin to those approaches is already well situated in the ludic and narrativist disciplines.

A working, composite, and exploratory definition of simulation, therefore, is necessary for analytical purposes . Strictly speaking from a practical perspective, a simulation then would be the meta-system of a model that "abstracts from the real system by way of conceptualisation, selection and simplification" and it is endowed with "symbolic meaning through the mapping of the simplification of these features and relations (Crookall, Oxford and Saunders, 1987, p. 151) that is to refer back to a hypothetical reality that would result from the processes of simulation. In the paradigm of a GSG as a simulation, the ludic mechanisms furnish those simplified features and relations while the narrativist dimension consequently allows for the space of symbolic meaning to represent the basis of that model, which is interstate war and international relations. However, more theoretically, "simulation threatens

the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary'" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 5), as the simulation itself stems from a reference to a reference, drawn from a citation of data that itself cites official governmental figures and estimations.

This engagement with the Baudrillardian semiology of simulation and the subsequent simulacra that they produce helps to elucidate the ligatures between the ludic and the narrative. As holistic models of a supposed reality, GSGs take this simulation and mediation of a real-world phenomenon even further, as a GSG such as Hearts of Iron IV not only acts as an information system providing second or third level simulations of a singular phenomenon but a simulation of the real of the world itself, providing mechanisms to simulate global processes from diplomacy to internal politics, to economy, to warfare. Rather than depicting a single event, these games attempt to depict the real world as a phenomenon, including simulations of political life, economic dimensions, and spatialised representations of the entire world – there is no "extra-ludic space" that the player would be unable to affect, only a ludic levelling, wherein non-salient aspects would be made more abstract.

For example, populations, military production, research and development, and diplomatic ties are all quantified, thereby imbued with representative meaning for each of the relevant international actors. The information system allows for the player, through the constraints provided by the gameplay mechanisms, to generate narratives simulative of real world phenomena, in line with the semiotic "text vs. practice" approach to the narratology-ludology debate as highlighted by Kokonis (Kokonis, 2014). In this way, both the narrative and ludic dimensions of the GSGs are encapsulated in the simulative as a symbolic signifier of the real, despite the any relation to referenced real word phenomena. The simulative unveils a reality that could or should come to pass, and the resultant simulacrum of such a situation, therefore, would be that which is produced both during and after the stream and that which the player inscribes through play and the audience, which will be covered in the following section, consumes.

Below, *Table 1.* summarises the nature of each approach, as well as their operationalisation and some general examples.

Approach	Nature of Approach	Operationalisation	Examples
Narrative	Tells a story, similar to a novel or a film	Tracing the sequence of meaningful events	Player-generated account of a war, from its *casus belli* to the conditions of armistice
Ludic	Focus on game design, as well as the space in which the game takes place	Marking the possibilities and processes afforded by the gameplay mechanics	Quantification of morale as an offensive multiplier; role-dependent modes of autonomous actorship
Simulative	Holistically represents a real-world phenomenon through a model	Comparing the effects of ludic possibilities and processes on narrative outcomes	Ludo-narrative space equalised with the real world; i.e., taking Kyiv in three days in-game represents its real-world feasibility

Table 1. Summary of the Narrative, Ludic and Simulative Approaches to Analysing GSGs

Influence and Audience

Streaming has been one of the most successful vectors of popularising new media. There are over 1.2 billion content viewers for video game streams globally, the number of which exponentially after the outbreak of COVID-19 (Clement, 2022). Nonetheless, this single event is by no means a normal stream. It required institutional consent from ChVK Wagner and was directed at a specific audience. In light of his own stated ideological proclivities, GrishaPutin was allowed to enter the Wagner Centre to stream this game, so it can be assumed that the messaging within the stream was approved by the same person or persons who approved his streaming from the inner sanctum of ChVK Wagner itself. In this way, he would not necessarily have the same free hands that he would have had should he have streamed in his own personal capacity. Therefore, this stream, resulting in a pre-approved messaging regarding the course of the war, should be viewed as an information operation, as "it aim[s] to affect cognitive, psychological, motivational, ideational, ideological, and moral characteristics of a target audience" (Larson et al., 2009, p. 3); in this case, the primary target audience would be Russophone young men.

The previous theoretical and contextual engagement with narratology, ludology, and simulation nonetheless rely on a particularly player-centric essentialism of conceptualisation. While a player-centric approach does serve an important role in analysing this event, an equally important element is the audience. The simulation of this hypothetical war, after all, played out on a stream. As part of a stream, the consumption of this activity by viewers, as well as a profile of the typical viewer, i.e., those aforementioned Russophone young men, should also be considered. According to TwitchTracker, Russian-language streams accumulate an average of over approximately 160,000 individual views over a one week period, second only to the English language viewership (TWITCH RUSSIAN STATISTICS, no date). Before his self-

imposed exile to VKontakte, GrishaPutin additionally had over 31 thousand subscriptions on Twitch (Twitch, 2023).

At the same time, streaming, as such, blurs the line between participation and consumption. In the case of Twitch, the streaming platform on which GrishaPutin was the second ranked streamer for *Hearts of Iron IV* globally, his viewership extends far beyond the bounds of the Russophone informational space. At the same time, gaming – and especially war games – appeal to highly masculine audience and appeal to masculinities, which is affirmed by other analyses of gaming culture (Kontour, 2011; DiSalvo, 2017; Taylor and Voorhees, 2018). As mobilisation orders call upon men from the ages of 18-60, it is exactly this young, masculine audience that would make up the most physically fit pool of manpower for the upcoming, covert waves of recruitment to replace the waning numbers of demoralised *mobiki* or to fill the ranks of ChVK Wagner.

Popular Geopolitics and GSGs

At this point, the structure and forms of analysis and the target audience and its social context have been outlined. The narrative, ludic, and simulative approaches provide complementary frameworks for analysing the stream while the social context and audience provide the point of reference for the motivational, ideational, and ideological effects intended by an influence operation, as well as the means by which they would be communicated. This leaves, then, the theoretical mechanism of the transmission of these effects on a target population.

It is in such a context that popular geopolitics is germane to further conceptualisation of such a mechanism. Forwarded as an approach to geopolitics by Gearóid Ó Tuathail, popular geopolitics is an approach that seeks to uncover the processes behind the intersubjective construction of understandings of spaces and peoples (Tuathail, 1999), standing in opposition to but sometimes informing formal, practical, and structural geopolitical thinking. Instead of a focus on theorisations or frameworks of international relations and geopolitics as they are strictly understood by scholarship or practiced by politicians, popular geopolitics instead looks at how these

understandings are constructed and perpetuated through mass media, popular culture, and situated geopolitical knowledge resulting from those processes (*ibid.*). Attitudinal variations of acceptance of certain geopolitical knowledge is additionally dependent on its source of production (Szostek, 2017), whether that is from state news, social media, conversations with colleagues, or in the case of this analysis, online streams of video games. Finally, popular geopolitics should be understood as contingently dependent on the directionality of its production and dissemination; the question is primarily whether a geopolitical discourse is for the populace, that is, for popular consumption, or of the populace, that is, a geopolitics that is vernacularly and organically produced (Ciută and Klinke, 2010). The current article utilises the pro popolo understanding of popular geopolitics, as it is most in line with the intentions of an influence operation.

Video games, as a part of this mass media, therefore, act as a prime conduit for affecting the geopolitical attitudes of a population – with GSGs having a more marked potential as their subject matter is geopolitics in its most essential form. At their base level, "Strategy games regularly define policy as both a conflict and a spatial pattern. Armies and other units have to be trained or built and positioned in space, knowledge must be acquired, and space must first be explored and then acquired" (Nohr, 2010). Each of these preconditions for successful policy and in-game survival condition both player and audience to accept certain assumptions regarding the nature of interstate conflict, a precept for the formation of a vernacular geopolitical conscious and acceptance of geopolitical imaginaries. Therefore, the impact of a GSG such as *Hearts of Iron IV* in shaping the cognitive, psychological, motivational, ideational, ideological, and moral characteristics of an audience is rooted in exactly how it can define such policy in relation to its object of simulation. How this definition materialised in GrishaPutin's streams at the ChVK Wagner Centre will be now charted in the subsequent sections.

Grand Russian Narratives

In the first stream of 4 February, GrishPutin constructs the narrative of a fictional war between Russia and NATO. The conflict starts when Ukraine declares war against the DNR and the LNR, which necessitates a Russian intervention to protect its "allies". The course of the narrative is already outlined in the title of the stream, "Russia vs. NATO (MP)", which sets the stage for the events to unfold. Initially, Russian forces effortlessly take control of eastern Ukraine and Kyiv, while also capturing the Baltic Defence Federation with ease. However, the Nordic-Baltic region sees some resistance from NATO forces when Kadyrovtsy face pushback in the Troms og Finnmark region of Norway and the Kola Peninsula, which leads to a slight incursion into non-essential Russian territory.

As the war progresses, the situation spirals out of control, with Ukraine being erased from the map, and Poland facing utter destruction through dozens of waves of nuclear missiles. The devastation of the war extends to Paris, Budapest, and other NATO capitals not directly on the war's frontlines, which are destroyed by nuclear strikes as well. On the operational level, conflict stalls in Poland, and Russia eventually also faces nuclear retribution. The stream ends with the player representing the United States asking GrishaPutin for an armistice, stating that further escalation of the nuclear weapons' use would lead to mutually assured destruction. The two players come to an agreement to, leaving only Lviv Oblast as a part of a rump Ukraine.

The second stream of 18 February neatly follows the narrative of the first, although it deviates in a more fantastical direction, namely as nuclear bombs are not used as they are used in the first stream. Unlike the first stream, Serbia joins the Russian side as the conflict progresses, and as Russia advances, Serbia gains control over Bosnia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. Novorossiya, formerly the DNR, becomes an independent state, consisting of southern Ukraine (that is, Zaporizhye, Kherson, and Donetsk Oblasts), while Belarus occupies and annexes Poland and Slovakia. Additionally, Russia invades all NATO countries in Europe, which is paired with a successful amphibious invasion of

the United Kingdom. The Duginist and later Putinist slogan of "from Lisbon to Vladivostok" is made concrete. The narrative culminates in a Russian naval invasion of the United States, resulting in the occupation of the entire east coast. Unlike in the case of the first stream, no armistice agreement is reached between the players, and the strategic goal of Russia, namely global dominance, and the destruction of the US-led international system, is achieved through military means.

The stream of 18 March 2023, although limited in its scope to the so-called 'Special Military Operation', begins with the same defensive casus belli – Russia must protect its allies in the Donbas' from Ukrainian aggression. However, unlike in the case of the other streams, there is not just one player-generated campaign, but there are several. On the same premise, the operation recursively plays out with the same results, albeit with slight variations in each iteration. Russian armour advances the line and VDV troops parachute in and hold key points throughout the country until they can be reached by the Russian armed forces, and Russian regulars and ChVK Wagner mercenaries defend the front from any counterattacks.

Each story that is produced in these streams develops in the same sequential structural form: Russia reacts to Ukraine, Russia dominates both the operational and strategic domains, and due to this dominance Russia is able to extract concessions, in the form of annexations, occupations, and the like, in order to codify geopolitical interests. These geopolitical interests are explicitly visualised as the telos of each narrative, as its purpose and end state, and to this point, nationalist geopolitical imaginaries are made manifest through the narratives of the two streams that focus on global rather than regional conflict. The armistice between GrishaPutin and the US player of the 4 February 2023 stream results in a general reproduction of the map of "Russia for Russians" as created by the alt right nationalist blog *Sputnik i Pogrom*[2] (*Как выглядит*

---

[2] EN: Sputnik and Pogrom. The name is reference to both the Soviet satellite and the Tsarist era antisemitic ethnic cleansing campaigns, representative of the syntheses within hardline Russian nationalist thought.

«Россия для русских»?, 2022), while the stream of 18 February creates an imaginary akin to Dugin's conceptualisation of Greater Eurasia in the Foundations of Geopolitics, barring some aberrations (Dugin, 1997). One case is ideal, the other fantastical, and both represents objects of Russian subjective desire should these narratives play out in the realm of the real rather than that of the digital.

Ludic Mechanisms and Dimensions

The ludic gameplay mechanics, viewed in their pure orientation, also uncover implicit assumptions regarding actorship in how each country is represented. The relationality of different actors, the potential actions that these actors can take, and the limits of this actorship are all directly outlined through how the gameplay is coded or modified.

The version of Millenium Dawn that is played during the first and second stream are slightly   modified in comparison with the base version of the mod. Instead of having the entire world populated with nations, only NATO member states, countries in continental Europe, and countries bordering Russia in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus are represented in the first stream. Markedly, the CSTO, the post-Soviet, Russia-led analogue to NATO, is removed from the map and not given any representation through the in-game mechanics. NATO in its entirety is represented in-game as a faction (that is, a group of countries that can call on each other for mutual defence or offence). Even then, not all countries are afforded their own agency. For example, the Baltic states are not afforded individual state actorship by this modified version of Millenium Dawn. They are clustered together as a single Baltic Defence Federation, without their own separate armed forces or political systems, and they are not even animated by a human player, instead following the calculations of the game's AI.

Both the DNR and the LNR are shown to be independent states, albeit protectorates of Russia. In such a protectorate status, the game mechanics allow either a graduation from this status to full independence or a degradation to vassal status. This vassal status, consequently, can also be shifted to full annexation. As protectorates, they are part of Russia's faction, which grants

them the coded ability to call on Russia as an ally in a mutual defense pact should they be attacked by another in-game actor. In the same way, Chechnya is granted a level of actorship and decisional sovereignty beyond that which it is legally afforded within the current Russian Federation by the game mechanics. It is a vassal, which means it is visually separated from the rest of Russia and has its own units.

In the case of the second stream, the ludic mechanisms of the game reproduce the same sort of flattening and focus that the first stream presented. For example, instead of the conglomeration of the Baltic states into a Baltic Defence Federation, they are all lumped together in a pan-Baltic Latvia – once again, with its decisions being made by an AI rather than a human player. The same situation of provided an enhanced international actorship to Chechnya and the DNR and LNR as a Novorossiya that will come to annex southern Ukraine by the end of the stream. Again, similarly to the first stream, Wagner units are represented as a special type of infantry unit, and once again, they are leading a successful charge. Differently from the first stream, however, the second stream does not block out non-participating parties to the conflict from the world map. However, similarly to the first stream, there is no faction system for the Russia-adjacent actors, and neither the CSTO nor the SCO as references for Russian allies are present – the Russian in-game actor cannot call upon allies that it legally could call upon within the realm of 'real world' international politics should such a war – supposedly defensive – erupt to a global scale.

For the third stream, the operational map limits the scope of Russian activities to Ukraine as its direct reference. The entire war plays out within the bounds of this map, not spilling over into an in-game conflict with other represented actors. In fact, flattening of actorship through ludic mechanisms is even more stark within this steam, as every single NATO member state that borders the operational space, that is, the territory of Ukraine, is lumped together as a single "NATO" in-game actor. Additionally, the Baltic states, most of Poland, and the majority of Russia are not included on the in-game map. Due to this

omission, the in-game mechanism that creates a system to represent something akin to a lend-lease system (i.e., one actor's quantified military-industrial outputs can be sent to another actor based on an in-game offer) would not be present. Therefore, support from Western states would not be present even through the provided ludic channels, but in the case of this third stream, such support would likely not even arrive within the simulated temporal endpoint of the several runs, each of which ending with complete Russian victory over Ukraine.

The Simulative Synthesis of Narrative and Ludic Elements

In relation with the other sections, which were more comparative in nature, the current section will take the three streams together in order to trace what these streaming events simulated as a whole. To this point, this section will focus on how Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States, and NATO are compositely represented and simulated across the three streams and what sort of reality and system to which they refer, ignoring the factuality of such simulative representations as irrelevant to the intent of the influence operation *per se*.

In each of the three streams, Russia is represented as a peer actor to NATO, and in each hypothetical situation, its achieves both its operational and strategic goals. With correct operational planning, Russia is easily able to route either Ukrainian or NATO forces with acceptable losses on its own side. The Russian military-industrial output is able to quickly replenish any miniscule losses that it suffers, and replenishing manpower is never an issue in the full manning of any of their deployed formations. In short, even in a situation when Russia would be facing the full might of NATO, it would not face any materiel, manpower, or morale issues, and in the best of circumstances, it would even be able to project its military power to the other side of the world – to the point of capturing Washington, DC – without risking the defence of Russian territory.

Ukraine itself is practically represented as a non-actor. In each simulation of the war, its military is quickly neutralised, leading to the victorious completion of the SMO, the annexation of its territory to Russia or a Novorossiya, or it coming to act as a new staging ground for the next stage of the war against

NATO in its entirety. Similarly, by comparing both the narrative and ludic representations of the Baltic states, their peripheral role to the conflict is established in that in both approaches, any agency or importance is minimised, whether that be through treating them as a minor operational obstacle – taking less than a day to overcome and occupy – on the way to moving into the wider European theatre of war or as the area delineating the new border between Russia and the West.

In the same frame, all NATO countries other than the United States and Poland are represented in the same fashion as the Baltic states, albeit to varying degrees. They are passive actors in the conflict even when infused with a human logic due to the multiplayer nature of the game, as targets to be razed with Russia Kinzhals or nuclear warheads rather than having any sort of agency of their own. Poland, in both of the global cases, represents the staging ground and finally stand of the West before either a completely successful Russian onslaught or the unleashing of nuclear destruction. The United States provides collective agency to the West by being the only ludic actor that GrishaPutin – the individual animating the simulated Russia in this case – will engage with to come to any sort of conclusion to the conflict.

Each of these streams additionally also simulates diverse end states for the war, representative of ideal Russian goals, which range from affirmations of initial predictions for the SMO (i.e., Kyiv is truly taken within three days), to the more fantastical and desired (i.e., total war with NATO, the United States being forced to the table of negotiation, or direct occupation of Washington, London, Berlin, and Paris by Russian forces). In this way, the ludo-narrative results of the streams of 4 February and 18 February only simulate and shift the scope of Russian victory from one more believable yet still ideal to the completely phantasmatic. To this point, however, any of the departures from the realities of the war tend to become minimised, and the overall Russian understanding of the nature the conflict itself is unveiled for the audience to consume and internalise.

The war is not a war between Russia and Ukraine. The simulations in their diverse ways further clarify this already crystal-clear point – the war is to be understood only as a civilizational conflict between Russia and the West, the West concisely represented by a NATO but with its agency completely contingent upon the decisions of the United States. Each conclusion of the conflict simulates the successful implication of the December 2021 draft treaty – i.e., ultimatum – to the United States, NATO, and the OSCE ('Соглашение о мерах обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации и государств-членов Организации Североатлантического договора', 2021) at least in its most minimalistic terms. Treated as a simulacrum of the conflict, these conclusions of the conflict reinforce its cognitive framing as an existential war between the West and Russia, and Russia will necessarily emerge from this conflict with a full triumph. It is not necessarily implied, however, that Vladimir Putin will be the one donning the *toga picta*.

Concluding Thoughts

While Hearts of Iron IV is not a traditional tabletop wargame in the style of the original Kriegsspiel of von Reisswitz, it is a wargame, nonetheless. Instead of the tile and card, there is pixel and code in their place, but they nonetheless serve the same essential purpose. They both are tools to simulate war and conflict. However, as tools, their efficacy is entirely dependent to its relation to their telos, with the end state to simulate a tactical battle on the ground in one case and to do the same for the full spectrum of global conflict – with all the relevant military, political, and economic dimensions – in the other case. However, if the simulation of a specific end state is more important that the veracity or probability of such an outcome, it is exactly that which is simulated – the ludo-narrative message – that becomes the centre of gravity within an influence operation.

Therefore, grand strategy war gaming – and not solely games about war – no longer act as a pure simulation but also finds its use as a tool of domestic influence and as a propaganda tool, representing new trend that has yet to be fully exploited. In its general terms, such an engagement fits within the Russian wide-scope understanding of influence operations, specifically the

often used and often abused Gerasimov Doctrine, which can be narrowly understood as war conducted in all spheres of human activity, wherein the "role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals" is paramount (Gerasimov, 2013), from physical space, to the informational space, to the psychological space, and so on. In such a paradigm, the ludo-narrative space is no exception as another non-material realm in which war car be waged. In the same way that social media has already been overtaken by state and non-state actors with vested interests, gaming and streaming should be recognised to constitute a new theatre for possible influence operations in their own right. While this influence operation was most probably targeted at the domestic Russian young male population, the consequences of these streams are yet to be discerned, although the repetition of these streams hints that GrishaPutin's benefactor sees an added value for continued patronage and provision of the platform.

Though not the argument of this article, hypothesising on the intent of this influence operation is germane to understanding the logic behind the approval and mis en scene of the stream that prefigures its intended message and target of influence. It is first relevant to guess who would have consented to the streaming. In this case, it would have been Yevgeniy Prigozhin, a lower-level decision maker within Wagner, or some actor from the Kremlin officialdom supplying and shaping the narrative to be produced. The source of approval, however, changes the contingencies behind the messaging and such resultant telic properties. Only afterward would it serve to speculate on the rationale and intent of such an operation in a wider context.

For example, if this approval came at its root from with ChVK Wagner, there are two possibilities. In the first case, the message is nothing more than a lightly veiled criticism of the decision-makers of the Russian Ministry of Defence, of Minister Shoigu, of General Gerasimov. If a 16-year-old could easily rout the United States and the forces of NATO, the fact that the highest level of strategic decision making within Russia could not do the same given the same structural conditions heavily implies that this leadership must be

changed. This is the most likely circumstance, as the stream was broadcast at the initial phase of the Prigozhin-Shoigu struggle for power, a prelude and informational shaping operation to frame Prigozhin's direct video addresses complaining about an endemic lack of artillery support (Пригожин вновь пожаловался на «снарядный голод» и обвинил в этом Шойгу и Герасимова, 2023), direct comments bluntly challenging Shoigu and Gerasimov's martial competence (Погорилов, 2023), or the Ministry of Defence forcing the Wagnerites to sign contracts that would dissolve the PMC in practice, placing the former mercenaries under its aegis. Whether Prigozhin had acted independently or under direct orders from Putin is inconsequential to the overall logic of the situation, yet Prighozhin's interview regarding the ineptitude of the Ministry of Defence during the beginning of the war, the impossibility of victory under the current circumstances, and the direct challenge to state narratives regarding the war itself tends to hint that any fetters that tie him to the Kremlin are loose at best (Пресс-служба Пригожина, 2023).

However, the other possibility is that it instead was meant to act as a catalyst for mobilising patriotic sentiments amongst the viewership, but considering all the other contingencies, this is the less likely of the options. If the approval stemmed from the Kremlin-adjacent Wagnerites, the representation of reality within the stream is more reliant then on its presentation as a war as one between Russia and NATO rather than Russia and Ukraine, mirroring statements from both the Kremlin and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, than on the operational decision-making of the combat on the virtual ground. In either case, this leaves space for future research into the cause rather than effect of this approval. At the same time, neither of these situations is necessarily exclusive of another.

In all cases, this phenomenon relates to the nexus of popular geopolitics as it relates to influences operations in their pro popolo orientation. If a domestic orientation of these influence operations toward the propagandistic building of morale was the intent, then the inverse is possible as well, with its goal of demoralising the adversary. If not already a consideration in Western capitals, video game streaming as a vector of transmitting discouraging narratives

regarding the war to the exact demographic of mobilisation-age males would circumvent the typical challenges of similar operations in the sphere of traditional social media. Without the typical account or keyword-level bans, these streams would necessitate constant vigilance of a dedicated staff in order to censor them, requiring an additional investment of resources that the Russian state may not necessarily be able to afford. Even if the viewership and impact would be half of GrishaPutin's number of subscribers, this would still be a number of individuals comparable to the equivalent of an average Russian BTG (Grau and Bartles, 2022).

If ostensibly private actors such as ChVK Wagner are willing and able to engage in such innovative approaches to bolster their recruitment numbers and justify political actions outside of the realm of the purely military-technical, this demonstrates that the actors involved view such actions as having a beneficial impact – with minimal investment, little risk, and potential reward. As clearly stated, this article by no means argues that the actions undertaken by ChVK Wagner and GrishaPutin represent any sort of strongly established trend, but it shows how such information operations can permutate and how non-state actors can at times spur innovation in ways ossified state organs may not have considered or planned or, conversely, to allow the state to conduct novel types of influence operations in a more covert fashion. As imaginaries and the process of cognitive shaping such imaginaries becomes all the more important for the conduct and study of influence operations in the future, GrishaPutin's early 2023 streams at the ChVK Wagner Centre can act as relevant and elucidating case to both explain and determine how such an innovative operation would unfold in actuality.

Bibliography

Aarseth, E. (2012) 'A Narrative Theory of Games', Foundations of Digital Games Conference Proceedings, pp. 129–133.
Arsenault, D. (2014) 'Narratology', in Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies. Routledge companion to video game studies, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, pp.

475–483. Available at: https://papyrus.bib.umontreal.ca/xmlui/handle/1866/18996 (Accessed: 21 June 2023).

Baudrillard, J. (1983) Simulations. New York City, N.Y., U.S.A: Semiotext(e), Inc (Foreign agents series).

Ciută, F. and Klinke, I. (2010) 'Lost in conceptualization: Reading the "new Cold War" with critical geopolitics', Political Geography, 29(6), pp. 323–332.

Clement, J. (2022) Topic: Gaming video content worldwide, Statista. Available at: https://www.statista.com/topics/3147/gaming-video-content-market/.

Crookall, D., Oxford, R. and Saunders, D. (1987) 'Towards a Reconceptualization of Simulation: From Representation to Reality', Simulation/Games for Learning, 17(4), pp. 147–171.

DiSalvo, B. (2017) 'Gaming masculinity', Diversifying barbie and mortal Kombat: Intersectional perspectives and inclusive designs in gaming, pp. 105–117.

Dugin, A. (1997) Основы геополитики (геополитическое будущее России). Moscow: Arktogeja.

Egenfeldt-Nielsen, S., Smith, J.H. and Tosca, S.P. (2020) Understanding video games: the essential introduction. Fourth edition. New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Frasca, G. (2013) 'Simulation versus narrative: Introduction to ludology', in The video game theory reader. Routledge, pp. 221–235.

Gerasimov, V. (2013) 'The Value of Science in Foresight: New Challenges Require Rethinking on the Forms and Methods of Warfare', in. Voroshilov General Staff Academy Conference.

Grau, L.W. and Bartles, C.K. (2022) Getting to Know the Russian Battalion Tactical Group, RUSI. Available at: https://www.rusi.orghttps://www.rusi.org (Accessed: 4 June 2023).

GrishaPutin   (2023)   [Photograph].   Available   at: https://images.vkplay.live/image/14a81758-5b75-4813-9dce-a5d0a657aa8a?change_time=1680639477&mw=640 (Accessed: 5 April 2023).

Hearts of Iron IV - Paradox Interactive (no date). Available at: https://paradoxinteractive.com/games/hearts-of-iron-iv/about (Accessed: 20 March 2023).

Hearts of Iron IV - Steam Charts (no date). Available at: https://steamcharts.com/app/394360#All.

How To Conquer UKRAINE As RUSSIA In Hoi4 (GUIDE) (2022). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxdN8q99PsM (Accessed: 5 April 2023).

Klevjer, R. (2002) 'In Defense of Cutscenes.', in CGDC Conf. Citeseer.

Kokonis, M. (2014) 'Intermediality between Games and Fiction: The "Ludology vs. Narratology" Debate in Computer Game Studies: A Response to Gonzalo Frasca', Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies, 9(1), pp. 171–188. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1515/ausfm-2015-0009.

Kontour, K. (2011) War, masculinity, and gaming in the military entertainment complex: A case study of "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare". University of Colorado at Boulder.

Murray, J.H. (2005) 'The last word on ludology v narratology in game studies', in International DiGRA Conference, pp. 1–5.

Nohr, R.F. (2010) 'Strategy Computer Games and Discourses of Geopolitical Order', Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture, 4(2), pp. 181–195. Available at: https://doi.org/10.7557/23.6043.

Robinson, N. (2015) 'Videogames and IR: Playing at Method', in F. Caso and C. Hamilton (eds) Popular culture and world politics: theories, methods, pedagogies. Bristol, UK: E-International Relations Publishing.

Steam   Workshop: Kaiserreich   (no   date).   Available   at: https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=1521695605 (Accessed: 20 March 2023).

Steam Workshop: Millennium Dawn: A Modern Day Mod (no date). Available at: https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=2777392649 (Accessed: 20 March 2023).

Steam Workshop: The New Order: Last Days of Europe (no date). Available at: https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=2438003901 (Accessed: 20 March 2023).

Szostek, J. (2017) Popular Geopolitics in Russia and Post-Soviet Eastern Europe, Europe-Asia Studies. Taylor & Francis, pp. 195–201.

Taylor, N. and Voorhees, G. (2018) 'Introduction: Masculinity and gaming: Mediated masculinities in play', Masculinities in play, pp. 1–19.

Tuathail, G.Ó. (1999) 'Understanding critical geopolitics: Geopolitics and risk society', Journal of Strategic Studies, 22(2–3), pp. 107–124. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437756.

Twitch (2023) Twitch. Available at: https://www.twitch.tv/grishaputin (Accessed: 6 April 2023).

TWITCH RUSSIAN STATISTICS (no date) TwitchTracker. Available at: https://twitchtracker.com/languages/Russian (Accessed: 4 March 2023).

Как выглядит «Россия для русских»? (2022) Спутник и Погром. Available at: https://sputnikipogrom.com/russia/41868/this-is-russia/#.ZDZSjXZByUk (Accessed: 12 April 2023).

Погорилов, С. (2023) Ищут крайнего из-за страха поражения: в ГУР объяснили конфликт между Пригожиным и Шойгу, Украинская правда. Available at: https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2023/05/12/7401902/ (Accessed: 4 June 2023).

Пресс-служба Пригожина (2023) 1829 Публикуем первую часть большого интервью Евгения Пригожина., Telegram. Available at: https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1279.

Пригожин вновь пожаловался на «снарядный голод» и обвинил в этом Шойгу и **Герасимова (2023)** TV Rain. Available at: https://tvrain.tv/news/prigozhin_vnov_pozhalovalsja_na_snarjadnyj_golod_i_obvinil_v_etom_shojgu_i_gerasimova-550092/ (Accessed: 4 June 2023).

'Соглашение о мерах обеспечения безопасности Российской Федерации и государств-членов Организации Североатлантического договора' (2021). Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Available at: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=ru.

ЧВК Вагнер центр - РОССИЯ VS НАТО #2 МП (2023). Saint Petersburg: ChVK Wagner Centre. Available at: https://vkplay.live/grishaputin/record/2d4e1438-6586-4d03-b7f2-1765ac3ef18c (Accessed: 6 April 2023).

ЧВК ВАГНЕР ЦЕНТР - РОССИЯ VS НАТО (МП) (2023). Saint Petersburg: ChVK Wagner Centre. Available at: https://vkplay.live/grishaputin/record/7605ccad-fe67-4090-96df-6e88ad314ca5 (Accessed: 20 March 2023).

ЧВК Вагнер центр - СИМУЛЯТОР СВО - ШТУМРУЕМ БАХМУТ В HOI4 - ВСЕ ДОНАТЫ ИДУТ НА ВИНТОВКИ ЛОБАЕВА И ПАТРОНЫ К НИМ (2023). Saint Petersburg: ChVK Wagner Centre. Available at: https://vkplay.live/grishaputin/record/1fb8cd53-852f-49c4-8156-ec1b53146f53 (Accessed: 5 April 2023).