Vernacular Geopolitics through Grand Strategy Video Games: Online Content on Ukraine in *Europa Universalis IV* as a Response to the Russo-Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT   Europa Universalis IV, (better known as EUIV), is a popular grand strategy
                                PC game. Players choose a country to play as and start in the year 1444 with
                                the option to plot new courses in history such as allowing players to form
                                Ruthenia, the game's version of Ukraine. In this article, I investigate how both
                                Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian online content creators have been making
                                content related to Ruthenia and Ukraine as a response to Russia's February
                                2022 invasion of Ukraine. I highlight how this content allows creators and
                                viewers to voice their opinions on the war, build a sense of solidarity with
                                the Ukrainian military, debate issues related to the war, and raise money for
                                Ukrainians in need. Through close readings of this content, I offer an analysis
                                of how this community uses the game to build a "vernacular geopolitics" in
                                which information about and understandings of international relations and
                                conflicts develop in non-elite settings.

INTRODUCTION

Europa Universalis IV (EUIV) is a computer game made by the Stockholm-based developer Paradox Interactive (fig. 1). Paradox specializes in grand strategy games that place players in control of countries or dynasties during different periods in history. Some of its games focus more on domestic policies, some are centered on the lives of individual characters, and others, of which *EUIV* is the best example, are concerned with foreign conquest and expansion. Often, the desires to create different historical narratives through the game are motivated in response to current geopolitical events such as the ongoing genocide of Uyghurs in China (MASTEROFROFLNESS 2021). In the past developers have responded to these tendencies and have added playable and formable nations such as Taiwan (called Tungning in the game) and Israel to the games. Users also use these games and such nations in them to create counter-historical narratives and comment on geopolitical conflicts (PARADOX WIKIS N.D.A, N.D.D).

FIGURE 1: SPLASH PAGE FROM PARADOX INTERACTIVE ADVERTISING FOR *EUROPA UNIVERSALIS IV*
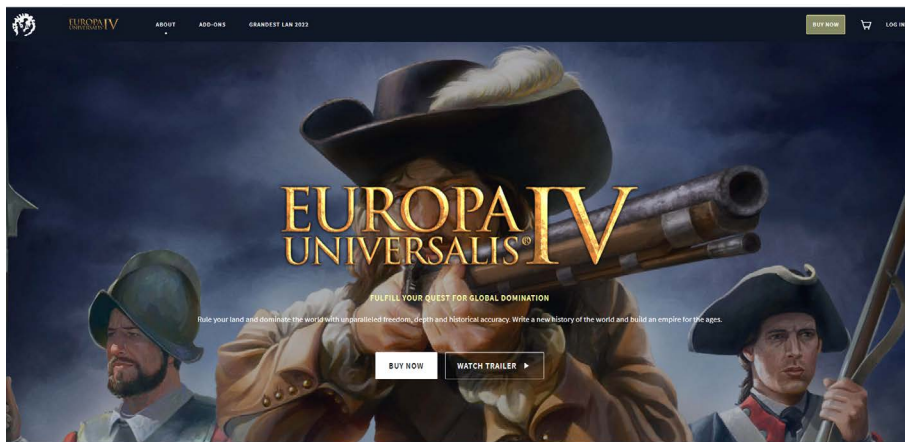
Source: <https://www.paradoxinteractive.com/games/europa-universalis-iv/about>.

In this article, I explore how the online community of *EUIV* players use the game to learn about and respond to a particular conflict, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, from both etic and emic perspectives. I find that the *EUIV* community's content, responses, and discussions concerning Ukraine constitute examples of vernacular geopolitical knowledge, and ways of understanding international relations, conflicts, geography, and politics in non-elite settings.

To make this argument, I draw from several different sources, including YouTube videos of players playing the game, the dedicated wiki and online forum for the game, information from the game itself, and journalistic reporting related to *EUIV*. Playing the game, watching videos of others playing it, and participating in the ancillary activities related to the game such as reading the wiki, provide avenues for individual players to form their own understandings of geopolitical issues and conflicts. I demonstrate in my investigation of the *EUIV* community's content surrounding Ukraine how this vernacular knowledge, awareness, and participation are developed. Through this study, I intend to illustrate the necessity of looking to areas such as games as valid and productive sites through which we can better understand how geopolitical events are understood, internalized, and reacted to among non-elites. Moreover, due to the fact that *EUIV* players are a rare example of a community of non-elites who are deeply interested in global politics, history, and warfare, I find that it permits a particularly rich area for understanding the emergence of vernacular geopolitical knowledge. Throughout this essay, I am guided by a number of questions. How do content creators use *EUIV* to comment on and inform audiences about Ukraine's history and its current geopolitical status? How do Anglophone and Ukrainophone content differ in their presentation of the situation and the types of commentary they solicit? What can the example of *EUIV* during the Russo-Ukrainian war tell us more generally about the use of video games among non-elites to understand geopolitical events and allow for them to participate in these events? To begin this investigation, I will offer some background information on *EUIV*.

BACKGROUND OF EUIV

EUIV was released in 2013 and has been supplemented over the years with a variety of expansion packs, downloadable content, and patches that have added new countries, game mechanics, and other elements to create a more immersive and engaging experience. *EUIV* has an estimated 4 million copies sold on Steam, the world's largest computer game retailer, and has been reviewed over 115,000 times by players (STEAMDB N.D.). The game is highly complex and comes with a steep learning curve to play proficiently. A common, half-joking refrain heard from the fan community is that it takes 1,000 hours of gameplay to finish the game's tutorial.

The standard starting date within *EUIV* is November 11, 1444, the day after the conclusion of the Ottoman victory at the Battle of Varna (fig. 2), and if it is played normally, the game automatically ends on 3 January 1821. The fact that *EUIV* ends in the time of the Napoleonic Wars (this section of the game is referred to as the Age of Revolutions) provides enough chronological distance to mitigate some of the more visceral reactions that people could have regarding more sensitive moments of global history. Even with this distance though, there are plenty of moments within the game that allow players to take part in issues such as the forced destruction and assimilation of Indigenous communities and profiting from the transatlantic slave trade, albeit in a sanitized and abstracted format (LOSITO 2023). This historical distance when playing as Ukraine allows players to avoid delicate issues such as the Soviet rule over Ukraine or examples of Ukrainian nationalist collaboration with the Nazis that could lead to more confrontational encounters.

FIGURE 2: THE *EUROPA UNIVERSALIS IV* MAP OF EUROPE AT THE GAME'S 1444 START DATE

Source: <https://www.quora.com/How-accurate-are-the-borders-of-countries-and-world-situations-in-the-starting-date-which-is-1444-of-the-video-game-called-Europa-Universalis-4>.

In the simplest terms, an individual game of *EUIV* (often known in the community as a campaign in keeping with the militaristic nature of the game) involves a player choosing a country and attempting to expand it territorially, economically, and technologically. Depending on the country selected, it is possible to form larger countries once certain requirements are met within the game. These usually entail possessing certain territories

or certain levels of technology that unlock as a player progresses. For example, Muscovy can eventually form Russia, any of the Japanese daimyos that start the game can work to form Japan, and, as I will demonstrate in the following section, it is possible for some countries to form *EUIV*'s early modern version of Ukraine: Ruthenia. Before addressing the Ukraine-specific content made by the *EUIV* community, I will discuss the theoretical bases and methodologies I use to understand how *EUIV* can help develop vernacular geopolitical knowledge and its implications for non-elite understandings of conflicts and international relations.

THEORY AND METHOD

There is a growing body of literature developing the concepts of folk geopolitics, vernacular security, vernacular international relations, and vernacular geopolitics, drawing scholarly attention to an important and understudied element of how global conflicts are interpreted, discussed, and integrated in non-elite contexts (BUBANDT 2005; HAYWARD 2009; JARVIS – LISTER 2013; STEVENS –VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2016; CROFT – VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2017; JARVIS 2019). In addition, this work is informed by research into popular geopolitics, which centers popular culture in its approach to understanding how geopolitical events and issues are understood in everyday life (DITTMER – DODDS 2008; DITTMER – GRAY 2010; SAUNDERS – STRUKOV 2018). While these terms may differ in their specific foci, I view them as a constellation of related and interlocking topics that can be viewed together to help increase our understanding how geopolitical events filter into quotidian contexts, informing and (re)producing knowledge. Throughout this article, I offer thick descriptive work that provides a sampling of the different ways that the game is used to understand the war in Ukraine from both Ukrainian and international perspectives as a way of providing a deep and comprehensive investigation into the quotidian responses to the war (LÖFFLMANN – VAUGHN-WILLIAMS 2018: 383). The most important sources for this are YouTube videos of people playing the game and comments on various fora dedicated to the game because of their communal aspects and the wider reach of the formats. All of these sources are from after Russia's invasion in February 2022. This research also adds to the literature that shows how popular culture plays a major role in developing social imaginaries related to international relations (WELDES – ROWLEY 2012).

In addition, this work adds to scholarship that investigates the ties between video games and the promotion of militarization (DER DERIAN 2001; STAHL 2006; POWER 2007; DYER-WITHEFORD – DE PEUTER 2009; GAGNON 2010; HITCHENS – PATRICKSON – YOUNG 2014). As I will show in the examples below, this trend continues among the *EUIV* community. Previous research elucidates how video games acculturate players to military life, ideas, and tactics as well as normalizing the uses of violence. Moreover, this past research speaks to how video games are useful in blunting criticism of military actions and decisions to use military force. Other scholars note how games can foster greater critical reflection with regard to war and violence (BOS 2023). I investigate how these theoretical ideas play out in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, finding that video games in this situation are largely adding to the militarization of everyday life for Ukrainians. This article also adds to this literature by providing accounts from a lesser-considered region. Much of the previous work on these topics focuses on the experiences and histories of Western Europe, the West, the Middle East, and East Asia. There is less attention to Central and Eastern Europe, and thus my work here helps make the literature more comprehensive in its scope.

This article also identifies how *"culturally dominant views on social conflicts and ethical dilemmas' are formed and communicated"* in games through an analysis of the assumptions that game developers build into the games and the responses to them from various constituencies (BOURGONJON ET AL. 2011: 93). My exploration of the structures and definitions of the game that work to guide players toward particular outcomes discusses this tendency in greater detail. Moreover, this work presents an investigation of so-called "'second order' representations" and analyzes how these representations offer new venues through which to better understand the broad impacts of geopolitical events that are often not included in the larger discourses surrounding international conflicts (NEXON – NEUMANN 2006).

Grand strategy games operate within a system whereby there is a *"negotiation between the game designers' understanding of a profitable interpretation of the past and the player's own interaction with and reading of the history presented"* (GISH 2010: 177). Within the context of examining *EUIV*, Greg Koebel notes that the game's hardcoded trade system reinforces certain assumptions about the history and growth of certain countries, presenting an example of how this negotiation works and how it persuades players

to make certain decisions, reinforcing the game's claims about and interpretations of history $\overline{(2018:\ 63)}$. *EUIV*, like other grand strategy video games, *"reaffirms the general idea that expansionism and capitalistic endeavors are necessary if society is to thrive"* $\overline{(\text{CASSAR 2013: 339})}$. The goals and structure of the game, however, encourage players to actualize the developers' historical arguments. In this article, I will show how players conform to or oppose these historical arguments through their gameplay and in their comments within the community and to the game developers.

To explore these issues and questions with regard to how the *EUIV* community uses the game to discuss the Russo-Ukrainian war, I employ a number of methodological approaches. I offer an investigation into how the developers create a specific historical narrative regarding Eastern Europe. I interpret and analyze the game's mechanics to offer an understanding of how certain historical assumptions are embedded in the game. In addition to looking at the developers' side of the story, I perform close readings of videos from content creators to understand how players use the game to construct their own narratives and understandings of geopolitical events. I also examine how modders (people who make new software that modifies aspects of the base game) choose to go against or add to the game mechanics and allow for different types of content and reactions from the game's community. Finally, I consider the ways that *EUIV* has sparked some controversies both in its own community and beyond, including areas directly related to the Russo-Ukrainian war.

In the remainder of this article, I will analyze content related to Ruthenia and Ukraine within the *EUIV* community, comparing how international and Ukrainian audiences use the game to discuss the war and develop vernacular geopolitical knowledge. To accurately reflect how vernacular geopolitics varies among linguistic communities, I examine online content in English intended for an international audience and Ukrainian-language content intended for a Ukrainian audience separately. Readers will note that I do not address Russian-language content in this article. This reflects the reality of *EUIV* content. While there is Russian-language content in the game, I have not found any Russian-language content of the game that involves forming Ruthenia or Ukraine. Even when I investigated Russian-language content dedicated to Russia in the game, there has been little concern with or interest in invading and conquering Ukraine

or how Ukraine is depicted and treated within the game. Instead, this content about Russia is more concerned with game mechanics or historical roleplaying than any sort of commentary on contemporary events within the confines of the game. This silence could be seen as its own example of how the formation of vernacular geopolitical knowledge in the game works, and the lack of content on Ukraine from Russian-language creators could perhaps indicate a lack of interest in or concern with the issues from that sector of the community. In the next section, I offer some further explanation on how Ukraine is played and depicted within EUIV.
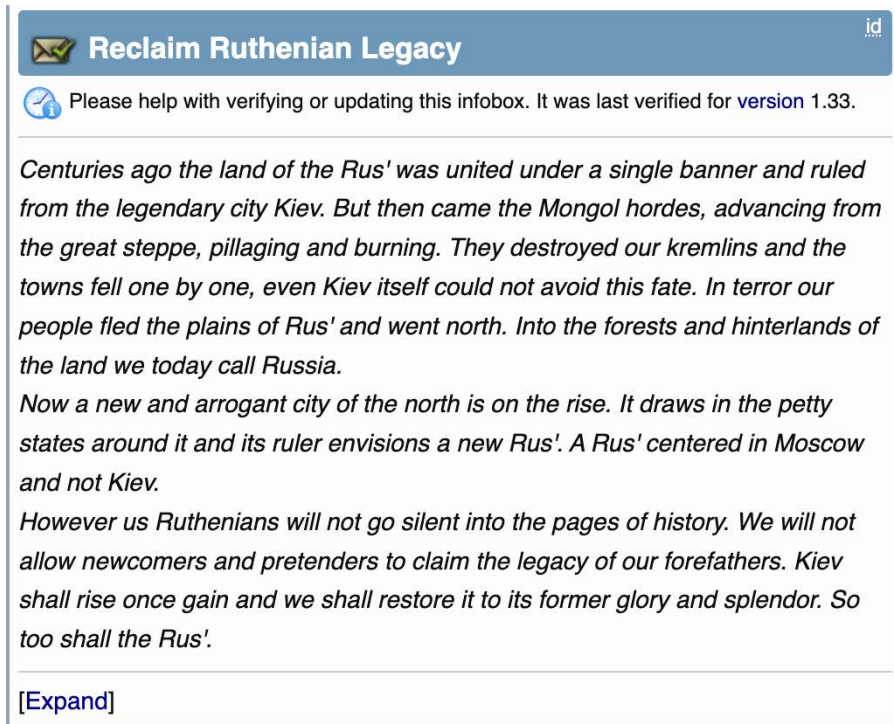
HOW TO FORM UKRAINE IN A FEW EASY CLICKS

To form Ruthenia, the player's nation must have either Byelorussian or Ruthenian culture (this is how they are referred to in the game) as its primary culture. Ruthenia is clearly meant to be seen as a forerunner to the modern Ukrainian state, as it sports a blue flag with a yellow *tryzub* symbol, one that is identical to Ukraine's current coat of arms. Players often think of and refer to Ruthenia and Ukraine synonymously in the context of the game so throughout this article, I will use both terms. I will use the term Ruthenia when a player is using playing a standard version of the game and I will use the term Ukraine specifically when referring to players who are playing as custom nations or using modified versions of the game that specifically allow them to play as Ukraine.

As for territory, to form Ruthenia, the player must control the provinces of Kiev and Zaporizhie (these are the names for the provinces are used in the game and thus they are the names for them I will use throughout the article) as well as controlling either the province of Volhynia or that of Halicz. While this does not seem like a lot of territory, these provinces are not adjacent to one another and thus the player must typically also control the territory between them as well. In addition, these territories are located between some of the most powerful nations at the start of the game, which makes them difficult to attain and hold. Finally, the player must also have reached an administrative technology level of ten to attain them. Players develop levels in administrative, diplomatic, and military technologies by spending "monarch points" which accrue as the game goes on. This requirement ensures that the player cannot form Ruthenia until about 100 years of in-game time has elapsed.

The territorial requirements for Ruthenia present a subtle, but telling definition of what the game's designers see as the core of Ukraine and Ukrainian culture. Kiev's centrality to this question is unsurprising, as it constitutes the center of not just the Ruthenian ethnic group, but all of the East Slavic ethnic groups in the game. The game's flavor text – the historical narrative elements that aim to immerse the player within the time period of the game – for the decision to form Ruthenia offers some powerful commentary on Ukraine's role in the East Slavic world with interesting parallels to the contemporary war in Ukraine. The text speaks of Ruthenia's opposition to Moscow and the Muscovite state (fig. 3).

FIGURE 3: SCREENSHOT OF THE MESSAGE THAT APPEARS WHEN PLAYERS FORM RUTHENIA

> ✉ **Reclaim Ruthenian Legacy**   id
>
> 🔄 Please help with verifying or updating this infobox. It was last verified for **version** 1.33.
>
> *Centuries ago the land of the Rus' was united under a single banner and ruled from the legendary city Kiev. But then came the Mongol hordes, advancing from the great steppe, pillaging and burning. They destroyed our kremlins and the towns fell one by one, even Kiev itself could not avoid this fate. In terror our people fled the plains of Rus' and went north. Into the forests and hinterlands of the land we today call Russia.*
> *Now a new and arrogant city of the north is on the rise. It draws in the petty states around it and its ruler envisions a new Rus'. A Rus' centered in Moscow and not Kiev.*
> *However us Ruthenians will not go silent into the pages of history. We will not allow newcomers and pretenders to claim the legacy of our forefathers. Kiev shall rise once gain and we shall restore it to its former glory and splendor. So too shall the Rus'.*
>
> [Expand]
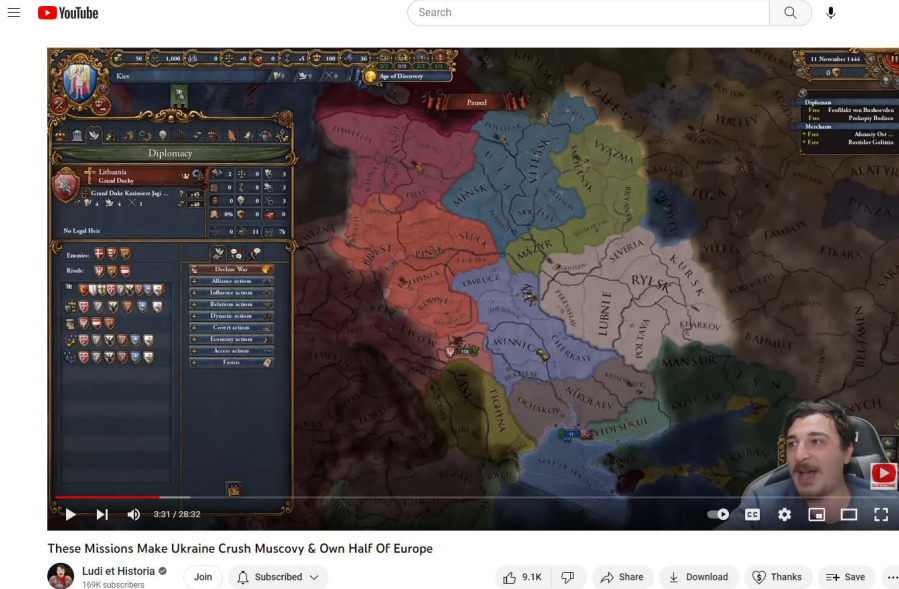
Source: <https://eu4.paradoxwikis.com/Ruthenia>.

The message of this text presents a proud Ukraine and offers an interpretation of history that confirms its place as the source of Rus' culture. At the same time, the history of Russian control over these regions still affects how the game refers to the territories. All of the names of these provinces are derived from transliterations from Russian (or in some cases the Polish versions of the names) rather than Ukrainian; hence, for example,

the game uses the spelling "Kiev" rather than "Kyiv". These decisions in nomenclature indicate that even when creating a text that is meant to offer opportunities for roleplaying and alternative histories, certain narratives and categorizations remain dominant and *de facto* normative.

In addition, the decision to mark Zaporozhie as a core part of Ruthenia, signifies the centrality of the Cossacks within *EUIV*'s conception of Ukraine. The Cossacks are such an integral part of the game's depiction of Ruthenia and Ukraine because Cossacks are well-known internationally as a symbol for the country, thus helping to attract players unfamiliar with the region, and also because the designers included content related to Cossacks into the game. Finally, the requirement to have either Halicz or Volynhia and yet nothing in the Donbas region, reinforces an early modern definition of Ruthenia or Ukraine as rather a part of Central Europe than the Russian heartland (PLOKHY 2009).

The most common, and most "historically accurate," way for a player to form Ruthenia is to begin as Lithuania, which has the option of releasing a number of Orthodox, Ruthenian vassal states, including Kiev, Galicia-Volhynia, Chernigov, and Zaporozhie (fig. 4). When releasing a vassal state, the player can then choose to play as the released subject. In this scenario, the player's first goal is to win their independence from Lithuania and then they are able to conquer the lands necessary to form Ruthenia.

FIGURE 4: SCREENSHOT OF LUDI ET HISTORIA'S RUTHENIA CAMPAIGN SHOWING
THE RELEASED VASSAL STATES; KIEV IS THE LOWER BLUE COUNTRY

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1oP2827NZ4>.

USING RUTHENIA TO HELP AN INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE UNDERSTAND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

I will begin this investigation into the use of *EUIV* as part of a development of vernacular international relations for an international audience through an analysis of one of the most prominent content creators in the *EUIV* community, Ludi et Historia (often shortened to just Ludi). Ludi's reach within the community is enhanced by the fact that he produces content in English, making it more accessible. He was one of the first *EUIV* content creators to directly comment on the war in Ukraine. Ludi's videos, and many of the others that I comment on in this article are what are known as "Let's Plays." As the name implies, these are recordings or live streams of a player just playing through a given game. Often, these series are rather long, spanning a number of different playing sessions. Another core feature of a Let's Play is that it shows as much of the game play as possible and allows viewers who are not actually playing the game to still have an immersive experience (GLAS 2015).

A video that Ludi posted on March 4, 2022 offers an interesting explanation of the way that the war was received within the *EUIV* community and how he translated contemporary geopolitical realities into the context of the game (LUDI ET HISTORIA 2022). The video itself has 145 thousand views as of July 2023, which is about the average for his other videos that he posted in the same time period (IBID.). Ludi uses humor as a way of making the geopolitical content more accessible to his audience. For example, in this video, he makes a joke about the fact that his name Ludi is the same as the Ukrainian word for people (*liudi*) and uses clips from a speech by Volodymyr Zelenskyy where he makes the plea that "Ludi" (people) will suffer in the war. He also jokes that Putin began the war because he saw Ludi's previous video of him successfully playing as Russia and wanted to recreate the borders Ludi created in the game. He continues to use humor by commenting that he spoke to Zelenskyy and they agreed that the best thing he could do in this situation is make a video of him forming Ruthenia (IBID.). In addition to trying to break some of the tension surrounding such a serious topic with humor, Ludi also engages in concrete actions to support Ukrainians. In the video, he asks his viewers to consider donating to the Red Cross and other charities as a way of helping refugees and those whose lives are being affected by the war, placing links to these organizations in the description of the video. This is a clear example of the ways that the community surrounding the game is able to use *EUIV* to organize material actions toward contemporary geopolitical events, independent of elite structures.

In Ludi's campaign to create Ruthenia, he chooses to play as Kiev. Ludi provides historical information throughout the video. He notes, for instance, that the reason why the Ruthenian lands are under Lithuania at all in the time-frame of the game is the Lithuanian victory in the Battle of Blue Waters (1326). This offers viewers some context to better understand the historical and political factors that have influenced borders to the present day. Moreover, through the game's structure, Ludi makes explicit connections to contemporary geopolitics. *EUIV* does not include an independent Byelorussian state. But, as Ludi tells his audience, the country Polotsk, which is also releasable from Lithuania, is the closest approximation to a forerunner of Belarus that exists in the game. Through these comments, he is able to inform the audience of how to better understand the historical map in the context of twenty-first century borders. Moreover,

in his game, Polotsk allies with Muscovy, which leads Ludi to sarcastically ask his audience where they have seen Belarus supporting Russia in the past (IBID.). Such a comment is clearly an attempt to have his audience connect his Ruthenia campaign to the ongoing war.

Ludi goes on to make more explicit connections between his own game and the current war in Ukraine. He notes that just like Ukraine, he too must fight to carve out a space between a number of larger powers to ensure independence and sovereignty. Through playing this campaign, Ludi expresses his admiration for the Ukrainians in the war and once again exhorting his audience to donate to Ukraine and placing links for making such donations in the description of the video. In sum, Ludi's video presents a way for his international, Anglophone audience to gain information about the history of Ukraine and better understand the factors behind the war.

EUIV AS A MEME GENERATOR

Much of the focus in this article has been on how members of the *EUIV* community use the game to create alternative versions of history or to right what they see as wrongs in the historical record. As demonstrated above, this usually entails staying within the normal confines of *EUIV* as a game and using its early modern setting as a place through which the player can create a strong and influential Ruthenia/Ukraine as a response to Russia's military aggression in the current moment. However, this is not the only way that *EUIV* is leveraged to discuss the war. One video, titled "Russian/Ukrainian War in EU4," uses a modded version of the game (that is, one that has been modified to have different features) to present a condensed version of the war (JABREAD 2022).

The modifications to this game bring the time-frame into the twenty-first century, update the countries' flags and borders to their current iterations, and change the names of the leaders to reflect the present reality. The video does not have any voice over from the creator. The soundtrack at the beginning of the video consists of a song from the video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, which plays over the gameplay while pictures of Putin looking excited are interspersed in the video. Eventually, a clip of Putin announcing the "special military operation," is presented and Russia begins its war against Ukraine. The beginning part of this war involves the

Russian army occupying a great deal of Ukraine and destroying many of its armies. However, about midway through the video, the soundtrack suddenly changes to the song "Yankee Doodle," while a clip of US President Joe Biden plays. The video then moves to showing a player playing as the US sending a great deal of money to Ukraine. Finally, the soundtrack switches one more time to the patriotic Ukrainian military song, "The March of the New Army" (*Marsh novoi armii*). The depicted gameplay moves to showing the player playing as Ukraine using the newly gifted money to build up his army and swiftly using it to drive Russia out of Ukraine, retake the occupied land, and eventually even take Moscow itself.

Only four minutes long, the video uses the familiar structures of *EUIV* to tell a part of the story of the war via the use of memes, jokes, and other elements. The video's creator, Jabread, also offers some subtle but interesting commentary in the description of the video, where he writes the simple phrase "*US aid go brrrrrr!*" (IBID.). This language derives from a meme that originated in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic with one character telling the US government to not *"artificially inflate the economy by creating money to fight an economic downturn"* while the other character in the meme, representing the United States Federal Reserve, responds with *"haha money printer go brrrrr"* (fig. 5). Within the meme's context, "go brrrrrr" is supposed to approximate the sound of a machine, like the money printing machine in the image above, working very quickly. What Jabread is implying with this comment is that the US government's large financial support is the major difference that has allowed for Ukrainian gains in the war. This four-word description offers a telling example of the ways that vernacular geopolitics knowledge is developed through the use of *EUIV*. Jabread's description here is, on one level, the repetition of a meme for a new context, and is meant to elicit laughter. On another level, though, it is his own modest commentary on the recent events.

FIGURE 5: THE ORIGINAL MEME USING THE PHRASE
"*GO BRRRRR*," FROM WHICH JABREAD'S JOKE DERIVES

Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/money-printer-go-brrr>.

The comments to the video show how vernacular geopolitical knowledge is spread and develops. One commenter, anonymooseplays3905, praises Jabread in a partially ironic tone, saying the video was *"greatly informative and helpful, I now have a complete understanding of geopolitics. Thank you[,] kind sir."* Clearly this commenter does not actually believe that he has full expertise in the subject just by watching this video, but it does show that some genuine information and knowledge was communicated even in a humorous format. Jabread's response to this comment also makes a clear statement about where they gained their own understanding of the conflict: *"all that [sic] hours of mine reading reddit threads should amount to something."* His admission that he gained this knowledge from Reddit demonstrates that traditional news media are not the only places where people are gaining information about contemporary geopolitical events. Jabread's comment shows how they take the vernacular knowledge learned in one non-elite, online context and is able to apply it and disseminate it in another format for a different audience. This entrepreneurial approach presents new ways of understanding how information about international relations circulates in non-elite contexts.

The comments section also shows the power of response and conversation that is a hallmark of social media. In the same video, another commenter, Raleyg, notes that Jabread *"forgot to include the sunken flagship event"*, referring to the Ukrainian navy's sinking of the Russian ship Moskva (IBID.). This comment shows that the audience is looking to improve

the knowledge presented in this context to make sure that it is more comprehensive so that future viewers would get a fuller picture of the war. Jabread responds to this comment by stating, *"man, I really wanna [sic] redo the video, there's too many events I could have included"*, which demonstrates the collaborative nature of this knowledge production as well as the desire for accuracy among content creators (IBID.).

Comments on the internet, of course, are not always productive. Often, they include criticism of the original content and can devolve into arguments over that content or ideas expressed in it. This video is no different, with one commenter writing, in Russian, *"oh those Ukrainian fantasies…" (okh uzh eti ukrainskie fantazii…)* (IBID.). In response, a commenter with a Ukrainian flag in their profile name responds, again in Russian, by asking the original commenter why he made such a comment when the video creator is not Ukrainian and wants him to explain what he meant in the original comment. I highlight these comments for a number of reasons. First, the fact that they are posted in Russian on the channel of a creator who exclusively makes English-language content shows how this type of vernacular geopolitical knowledge can transcend international boundaries and bring together very different groups into a single conversation. Second, the back and forth between these commenters underscores the rather ambiguous nature of the video. Is Jabread in favor of or opposed to US aid to Ukraine? Does Jabread think the West should be involved in the war? Does Jabread think Russia's actions are right or wrong? None of these questions are answered explicitly in his content and thus are up to interpretation from the audience. This lack of hierarchical and institutional knowledge is a quintessential element of vernacular geopolitics, but can also lead to ever more muddled and confused understandings of events. This small disagreement in Jabread's comments section is just one example of how *EUIV* content can lead to larger existential debates about the merits and motivations of geopolitical actions. I continue this investigation into internet comments as a site of vernacular geopolitical knowledge formation by directing my attention to how the often-controversial topic of Ukrainian and Russian ethnic origins is discussed in them.

ARGUING NATIONALITY IN THE COMMENTS

The question of the relationship between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples has been a key feature in the conflict. The Russian government and many Russian elites have been adamant in their assertions that Ukrainians and Russians are two parts of the same people. Vladimir Putin, in his article discussing the relationship between Russians and Ukrainians, refers to them as *"one people, a single whole"* (PUTIN 2021). The Russian government has used these arguments to assert their nation's descent from Kyivan Rus' and to make claims over Ukrainian territory (WEISS-WENDT 2020; KHISLAVSKII 2022; SHLAPENTOKH 2022). At the same time, Ukrainians have worked to assert distinctions in their history, language, and culture and there has been a strengthening of Ukrainian civic identity within the country from the post-Soviet period and especially since Russia's initial military action in Ukraine in 2014 (STEBELSKY 2009; AREL 2018; KULYK 2018; BARRINGTON 2022). These debates are not only the purview of state actors, but have become commonplace in everyday life.

YouTube comments for *EUIV* content are no exception. The comments to a video from another of the most prominent *EUIV* content creators, The Red Hawk, highlight how these debates influence non-elite spaces and are constitutive parts of forming vernacular geopolitical knowledge. A user named Dutch Skeptic starts the conversation by commenting on the fact that The Red Hawk was able to secure an alliance with Muscovy in his game writing: *"Ruthenia (Ukraine) being created with the help of Muscovy (Russia) is very ironic today"* (THE RED HAWK 2022). This comment is an obvious reference to the war and Russia's aggression toward Ukraine. While seemingly minor, the comment sparks a range of responses. First, a commenter named Joseph Williams remarks on the closeness of the Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian national identities. After receiving pushback on these comments, he follows up on them by stating, in part, *"Ukrainian identity developed very gradually between around 1300 and 1800… The Russian identity gradually emerged during the same timeframe."* In response, a user by the name of Vasyl Konstantinov writes, *"[t]his is a myth. Russians weren't even slavs. In Moscow slavic language replaced finno-ugric languages with the introduction of orthodox religion. And that's a proven fact using the geographic names around Moscow. The first Muscovite claim for Ruthenan legacy was made in 1721 by taking name of russia. It had nothing to do with ruthenia before [sic]"* (IBID.).

Vasyl Konstantinov's comment repeats some strident and extreme Ukrainian nationalist positions that aim to deny any possible connection between the Medieval Rus' state and contemporary Russian identity and culture (SHLAPENTOKH 2013). Such an extreme comment demonstrates how particular historical narratives and interpretations concerning topics such as the origin of a nation are integrated into and then reformulated in a variety of quotidian settings. The facticity of Vasyl Konstantinov's comments is, of course, not very high. But that is not what is most important here; rather, it is the way that he deploys these arguments in the comments to a video about a game as a means of defining the nation and policing its boundaries that offers an illustration of how vernacular international relations knowledge is communicated and used in online discussions. Vasyl Konstantinov is attempting to reset the common narrative and offering a rebuttal to notions of kinship between Russians and Ukrainians that have been weaponized by the Russian state.

Joseph Williams then responds once more, writing, *"Dont know what wacky alternate history they're teaching in Transnistria or whatever, but its [sic] so hilarious [sic] divorced from reality that I see no use continuing [sic] the conversation."* Here too, Joseph Williams also offers an example of vernacular geopolitical knowledge (THE RED HAWK 2022). Making the claim that his opponent is from Transnistria is meant to paint him as uneducated and dismiss his point as he is seen as someone who is biased based on common stereotypes about that region. But, despite its being based on stereotypes, it does at least display some knowledge of the region as Transnistria itself is not well-known around the world. At the same time, it also demonstrates some of the limitations of vernacular geopolitical knowledge. Transnistria is well-known to have a rather pro-Russian government and its continued existence is guaranteed by the Russian state. Therefore, it would be rather unlikely for someone from Transnistria to argue that Russians are not Slavs. These examples offer a moment to reflect on how the lack of institutionalization when it comes to vernacular geopolitical knowledge can lead to false information and wrong assumptions proliferating. In an era rife with worries over "fake news" and misinformation that is spread all the more easily via social media, these platforms can become generators of misinformation in the creation of vernacular geopolitical knowledge. It appears that as vernacular geopolitical knowledge develops, it is often informed by biases which impact how events are interpreted and can help to

spread these biases. The relationship between misinformation and vernacular international relations is one that demands greater attention moving forward. These previous examples have all been from Anglophone content creators. In the following section, I will address how vernacular geopolitics develops in Ukrainian-language content meant for Ukrainian audiences.

LET'S PLAYS FOR THE UKRAINIAN-LANGUAGE COMMUNITY

Let's Plays show the audience every moment of the game and the decisions that the given player made in the given scenarios. Because of their longer time commitment, Let's Plays are rarer than shorter, condensed, and edited videos like the ones mentioned above. For example, one of the series I will be discussing below spans over thirty videos, each about a half hour in length or longer. Thus, such series demand not just a deep time commitment from the video creators but also from the audience, if it is to watch through a whole series.

When looking at Ruthenia- or Ukraine-specific Let's Plays for *EUIV* it is unsurprising that this space is dominated by Ukrainian-language accounts. Especially given the geopolitical circumstances, it makes sense that a Ukrainian-speaking audience would be the most likely and most enthusiastic audience for a campaign where Ukraine becomes a great power in the world, with all of it narrated in Ukrainian. Moreover, the decision to play the game as Ukraine and in Ukrainian is also a way to broaden the appeal of the game to this community. Ukrainian is not one of the languages for the game that Paradox Interactive, *EUIV*'s developer, supports. As a result, players wishing to play in Ukrainian must download a localization that translates the game for them. Throughout the series, one sees many different commenters asking the user Shkiper how he managed to play the game in Ukrainian and he shares this localization mod with them. From the comments, it is evident that there is clear excitement about the fact that he is narrating the game in Ukrainian and playing a Ukrainian version of the game, with many commenters thanking him for creating Ukrainian-language content. This desire for Ukrainian-language content can be understood within the context of the push to decolonize Ukrainian culture from the influences of the Russian language and culture (BETLII 2022; EPPINGER 2022).

Changing the language in the game is an example of modding (modifying the base game to add more or different content and features). Paradox encourages adding modding to its games, offering a dedicated section on each games website to showcasing mods to its games and providing tools to allow for individual users to begin modding its games to increase interest in and brand loyalty to their games (Paradox Mods). Modding allows ordinary players to change the historical narratives that the developers include in the game.

There are a number of mods relating to Ukraine and the region that are available for download through Paradox's website. One that relates directly to Ukraine is called "Ukraine in EU4" and has a sister mod called "Belarus in EU4"; when a game is played using these two mods, players have the option of choosing between a number of new independent nations such as Carpatho-Ukraine and the Minsk State, neither of which is present in the base game (KIKI 2017A, 2017B). These mods are designed to offer opportunities to create alternative histories and not to be forced into the narrative that the developers have placed into the base game. These mods also represent useful sites of vernacular geopolitical knowledge. Kiki, the creator of both mods, makes clear in his description that he knows that the use of the term Ukraine is anachronistic for the time period. However, he uses it because it is the term for the area that is the most legible and identifiable for a broad audience and fits with the overall goals of the mod – to allow players to create alternative historical narratives where Ukraine and Belarus are major regional players in *EUIV's* time period. As I will show below, the modified aspects of the game are common features in these Ukrainian-language Let's Plays due to the greater flexibility they afford players who are looking to create specific alternative historical narratives within the game. These alternative historical narratives are key tools that players can use to advance their own vernacular geopolitical knowledge about the current war in Ukraine.

In this section, I will analyze the Let's Play series of two Ukrainian-language users, ShkiperUA (generally known as Shkiper) and Entrix, as they play through campaigns as Ukraine. The reach of these videos is much smaller than that of the English-language ones discussed above. Shkiper's first video in his series received 27 thousand views, but later the corresponding figure tapered off to a few thousand on average for

subsequent ones (SHKIPERUA 2022). Entrix, meanwhile, only had a few hundred views per video in his series. These two Let's Play series and the associated comments demonstrate how *EUIV* presents a productive site around which communal development of vernacular international relations knowledge coheres and moves.

Shkiper's game is a bit different than the other Ruthenia and Ukraine games that I have discussed. Rather than starting as one of the Ruthenian-culture vassal states of Lithuania, he uses a game feature that allows him to create a custom nation of Ukraine, much like the mod that I mention above. His Ukraine starts out as slightly bigger than the nation of Kiev in the game and most importantly, it does not start out as a vassal state, but rather as an independent country, making it much easier for him to expand it in the earlier parts of the campaign (fig. 6).

FIGURE 6: SCREENSHOT OF THE MAP OF UKRAINE AT THE BEGINNING OF SHKIPERUA'S CAMPAIGN

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8b2Vdx6-Qk>.

During a replay, Shkiper actually has to restart the game because in his previous game, he ended up in a difficult position. He does not show the audience every detail of the gameplay, but instead offers some highlights up until about the point where his original campaign began to decline. This ability to simply restart the game and hope for a better RNG (random number generation; this determines what events will occur during

the game) in the game is a unique feature of a video game, as opposed to other forms of media, not to mention actual history.

The decision to restart the game demonstrates that achieving something akin to realism or historical recreation is not the main goal in creating *EUIV* content for platforms like YouTube. Rather, there is still an imperative to entertain and show a sort of "best case scenario" that would demonstrate the full abilities of the given nation (in this case, the Ukrainian nation) in the game. Given the context of Shkiper creating this series in the wake of Russia's invasion and for a Ukrainian audience, it is clear that an important part of this series is its aim to boost the morale and raise the spirits of Ukrainians. This ability to show Ukraine in all its glory is one of the things that make a game like *EUIV* attractive and interesting to an audience. Through watching Shkiper's gameplay, the audience can have its anxieties assuaged and its desires fulfilled. The modded games provide an opportunity to witness a re-formation of the world where – in the minds of this Ukrainian audience – more just outcomes are produced and historical subjugation is eliminated.

Shkiper's foray into alternative history works to offer a diversion that can buoy fellow Ukrainians in this period of great uncertainty and stress, offering a parallel experience that is rooted in military actions, and it can give viewers a feeling of active participation in something that is similar to the ongoing geopolitical conflict. This interpretation is supported by the comments that Shkiper received for this video series. There, viewers offer their own suggestions about what to do to make for better gameplay. In addition, some users also offer their encouragement to Shkiper. These comments illustrate how communities can form through engagement with the game and the desires of parts of those communities to see certain outcomes.

Comments on these videos also demonstrate the connection between the viewers' interest in the content and their desires to see a Ukrainian military victory. For instance, the first comment to Shkiper's third video in the series specifically praises the SBU, the state security service of Ukraine, demonstrating a connection between the game activities and the ongoing war even though there is no explicit connection between them in the game itself. Moreover, at the end of each video he often makes comments about

ongoing events in the war and offers the well-known Ukrainian slogans *"Glory to Ukraine"* and *"Glory to the Defenders of Ukraine"* (SHKIPERUA 2022). This praise for the nation and the armed forces as a reflexive act for both Shkiper and many of the commenters in these videos appears to be a manifestation of what Roger Stahl calls the identity of the "virtual citizen-soldier," whose ability to be critical and political has largely been curtailed due to the realities of war and the actions of the military being depicted as more important and vital (STAHL 2006: 125–126).

Within the context of Ukraine, Greta Uehling provides a useful counterexample of critical militarization developing in the country through her study of a military themed café run by demobilized soldiers. Rather than a glorification of warfare and violence, she found a place where the related questions were interrogated (UEHLING 2019). She contends that the nuances of such interrogations are essential for recognizing and ensuring that we can better understand the *"conscious and deliberate practices that ordinary non-state actors use to mold others' thoughts and feelings about war"* (IBID.: 345). However, unlike Uehling, I do not see much self-reflection happening within Ukrainophone *EUIV* content. I hypothesize that this might be due to the different types of social interactions that we are researching. Uehling's work took place in the physical space of a café where patrons would come face-to-face with veterans and the instruments of war. In contrast, my research addresses an entirely virtual space, and thus the realities of warfighting in this case are abstracted and remote, allowing for the emergence of a more typical militarization.

Within the alternative narratives that the online content creators make, the names of provinces take on an important significance. If a country gains control of a province, its name changes to better reflect what this owning country would call it. Not every province in the game has varied names, but it is a common occurrence when provinces trade hands from one country to another. After Shkiper takes the province of Voronezh from the Great Horde, the user roma_nik8991 comments that it should be renamed to something like Bavovno or Khlopok, the Ukrainian and Russian words for cotton, respectively. This is a sly reference to Ukrainian slang, where words for cotton are used to mean an explosion (PEREBENESIUK 2022). This euphemistic use of *khlopok*, the Russian word for cotton, can also mean the sound of a clap or a pop; it has been used to replace the

word for an explosion in Russian media as a way of mollifying any worries about explosions (KOVALEV 2020). The user suggests this name change as a bit of dark humor due to the fact that there had been multiple explosions near Russian military installations in the Voronezh region. Shkiper takes his commenter's advice and renames the province to Bavovna, thus adding an element of the present-day conflict to the game. He also does this with other provinces, renaming Novorossiysk to Bayraktarivsk, after the Turkish-made drones that have been such an integral part of Ukraine's defense, and Tsaritsyn to Shkiperohrad, in a rethinking of history in which he names things after himself rather than after the tsar.

A climax of sorts for the series comes when Shkiper finally declares war on Russia. The episode is titled *"War with the Muscovites,"* again underscoring his desire to differentiate his Rus' from Muscovy. In the comments section for this video, the sense of excitement is palpable. One commenter using the name Lipetsk-tse Ukraina (Lipetsk is Ukraine) writes, *"I have waited for this for a long time."* Another commenter, offers their own interpretation by writing, *"Finally! The fight with evil"* (SHKIPERUA 2022). From these comments, one sees the ways that the simulated game acts as a proxy for the ongoing war in Ukraine. In the following video, the same user writes a long comment where he offers his belief that *"the main thing is that the Muscovite culture should be Ukrainianized to its core"* in Shkiper's campaign, and says that he wants the *"de-muscovization of Muscovy."* This powerful comment acts as a response to the Russian state's insistence that there is no separation between the Russian and Ukrainian nations. This comment pushes back and responds to the historical Russification with a hope for seeing a flourishing of Ukrainian culture. Interestingly, such rhetoric, when decontextualized, could sound like what the Russian government has accused the Ukrainian government of doing in Donetsk and Luhansk, namely discriminating against Russians and denigrating Russian culture, what Uilleam Blacker refers to as the *"much-hyped threat of forced Ukrainianization"* that is often invoked as a justification for the war (2022: 23). However, it is important to remember that the videos primarily deal with a video game and even if people are airing their thoughts and emotions about a current geopolitical situation in the comments, it is a very different situation than the actual war. Perhaps most tellingly a viewer sees this sort of de-Muscovization when Shkiper finally captures the province of Moskva later in the campaign and renames it Boloto, the Russian and

Ukrainian word for a swamp or backwater, which is also a reference to Moscow's terrain and an older name for a specific area of the city (LEONT'EVA – MOKIENKO 2021). The act of renaming Moskva to Boloto enables Shkiper to reset the historical narrative, at least in the context of the game. Rather than having Muscovy and Moscow be the center, the focus moves to Kiev and Ukraine. By changing the name of the province to such a dismissive and derogatory name, he makes a statement that moves it to the periphery both geographically and conceptually, offering an alternative narrative of both history and contemporary geopolitics.

Aside from the gameplay offering new ways to reconceptualize Ukrainian history, these videos also offer insight into how people in Ukraine are dealing with the realities of the current war. Entrix places certain disclaimers before his videos in his Ruthenia Let's Play series that mention the difficulties he faces in producing these videos. In addition, he explains in the descriptions for the videos that the realities of the war have meant that electricity is limited in his location, making it difficult for him to render longer and larger video files. As a result, starting with the sixth video in the series, he notes that he may have to break episodes up into smaller parts (ENTRIX 2022). These small elements forge a stronger connection between the realities of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and playing the game. The fact that Russian military actions are impeding the creation and uploading of these videos offers a small illustration of how even the acts of playing this game and creating content for the wider *EUIV* community are also linked to the wider struggles of Ukraine in the war against Russia. In the final section of this article, I will explore one other area where the war has directly impacted on the game and its community.

CONTROVERSIES OVER HISTORY IN THE EUIV COMMUNITY

On February 7, 2023, nearly a year after Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, Paradox released a developer diary, an update on how they would be adding to the game in the coming weeks (OGELE 2023). This update involved some of the specific updates that Muscovy/Russia would be receiving in the new expansion of the game. Due to the timing of the announcement, many members of the *EUIV* community took to the comments section of the post and other online fora to air their displeasure at Paradox's decisions.

Paradox told the press that it was *"not mindful of the timing"* of the release (PHILLIPS 2023).

In addition to the timing, a number of comments on the developer diary expressed the users' unease with calling one of Russia's missions "Liberate Ruthenia." A user named vaLor- responded to these comments by asking, *"Are you really trying to retroactively cancel the Russian Empire? Are you going to have this same fervor against the fact that China has a mission to conquer Taiwan, Ottomans to conquer Syria, and everything else that goes on in EU4 that happens in the world [sic]? Get over yourselves."* Here, the user is expressing their frustration at players attempting to project contemporary geopolitical issues onto the game. Using the language of "canceling" the Russian Empire here is also akin to the rhetoric that has been used against Ukrainian de-Russification and de-Sovietization efforts, and links discussions of *EUIV* to larger issues regarding historical revisionism.

Adrianople, one of the users who raised the issue of changing the name of the mission, responded to vaLor- by stating, *"Nope, and your reaction is rather telling, as I was proposing that 'liberate', which especially in Ukrainian and Belarusian history has a problematic connotation whenever Moscow comes into the picture (except for 1944, and even then that was a process of being juggled between Soviet and Nazi Totalitarianism) [sic]."* Adrianople, whose profile picture in the forum is a depiction of a Cossack warrior, offers historic grounding and context as to why they oppose the use of the verb "liberate," as they connect the issue not only with the current Russo-Ukrainian war, but also with conflicts from the past, a moment that evidences vernacular geopolitical knowledge. These criticisms and subsequent rebukes demonstrate how players are bringing their own views concerning geopolitics to the fora and desiring for them to be reflected in the game.

The developers of *EUIV* have demonstrated awareness and sensitivity when their decisions caused controversy among the player base. On February 15, in a different thread, a user named fr-rein asked that Russia's mission "Liberate Ruthenia" be changed to *"to the more neutral 'Seize Ruthenia.'"* That same day Johan Andersson, the lead designer on *EUIV*, responded by saying that it would be changed.

These debates over the concept of "liberation" boil over into the historical questions of cultural and linguistic repression and forced assimilation. One user, Romanix90, questioned why there should be separate Ruthenian and Russian cultures in the game as he believes they are one and the same, writing that in *"Russian Imperial times people there [in what is now Ukraine] were called Little Russians and [the] language itself Russian or [a] dialect of Russian."* A user called Testeria pushes back on this assumption, advocating for a distinctiveness of the Ruthenian culture in the region, and stating, *"Ruthenian – yes, Russian – no. The russification [sic] of Kyiv by Muscovy was fierce and brutal with burning books and language suppression."* Finally, one additional user known as FishieFan, who has since been banned from the forum, adds their own thoughts about the history of Russification, writing, *"[The] Russoficiation of Kyiv didn't see book burning or language suppression, just the dialect of the literarti being taught over common vernacular [sic]."* This exchange shows how culture, language, and ethnicity are negotiated and debated within the context of a vernacular community centered on a video game. The types of evidence used are not rigorous or sourced, but users wield them to provide grounding and support for their positions. References to the historical record are presented as self-evident justifications for why certain elements of the game should or should not be included in it and the "proper" way to interpret them. The desire to hew as closely to historical "truth" and "reality" as possible appears to be of paramount importance to *EUIV* players, no matter how they view the history.

Paradox's public relations blunder in announcing the updates that would be given to Muscovy/Russia offered a prime opportunity for members of the community to discuss and debate how Ukraine's history ought to be depicted and interpreted in the game. The highly contentious question of how Russia's historic annexation of this territory should be framed presented a clear moment where the production and dissemination of folk geopolitical knowledge could be seen in full force. For these commenters, the forum is not just a place for discussing what a mission in a video game is called, but an area in which they can voice opinions about how Ukrainian and Russian history ought to be understood in the contemporary moment and how the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war should be considered in that interpretation. Moreover, the media coverage of the issue brought much wider attention to *EUIV* and its community and likely helped in getting Paradox to apologize and make changes as well as bringing the issue of

commemorating the one-year anniversary of the start of Russia's invasion to wider audiences. This incident offers an example of how vernacular geopolitical knowledge developed through *EUIV* has "real world" implications that can go beyond just those of playing the game.

CONCLUSION

The *EUIV* community's creation and responses to content related to Ukraine and the 2022 war offer a clear example of how vernacular geopolitical knowledge is developed and spreads in non-elite communities. Understanding how information about the history and politics of Ukraine and Russia is absorbed and then replicated through the use of a video game demonstrates the necessity to consider less traditional informational venues. Greater investigation of such venues ensure that researchers gain a more holistic view of how the related events are understood by different populations. This article also helps to broaden the views of scholars of video games and geopolitical events through its use of examples from a region that is not well-represented in the literature. Offering these examples will provide and form more complex and nuanced understandings of how culture, history, and game design all impact the ways that games can be sites of geopolitical knowledge production in a variety of global contexts.

EUIV offers an especially interesting case due to the fact that the game is centered on warfare, geopolitics, and history. From my analysis, I find that in the content for non-Ukrainian audiences, the tendency is to create shorter forms of content that are able to draw in viewers with memes and exciting new elements of gameplay but also provide them with some information about Ukraine, the war, and even potential ways to support Ukrainians. Ukraine-centric content is seen by this linguistic community as more of a novelty and a way for content creators to offer their own assessments of the situation and capitalize on the heightened attention that the war has brought to Ukraine from audiences around the globe.

Meanwhile, for Ukrainian audiences, longer-form content is much more prevalent. I contend that this is due to their greater identification with the subject matter. The desire to see Ruthenia or Ukraine formed and become a strong world power presents an example of a desired counterfactual that can be quite comforting, especially in a time of great anxiety and

potential danger. Moreover, these longer videos take a great deal of time and effort to create. As a result, they can be seen as a player's own contribution to the Ukrainian war effort. Ultimately, this research illustrates the need to look to areas such as video games to more fully understand the ways that knowledge and ideas about international relations develop in non-elite settings and their potential impacts on how populations will respond to foreign policy.

Online comments concerning *EUIV* content and Paradox's further developments of the game demonstrate that they are lively sites where the abstractions of history, culture, and geopolitical events are made real. Debates over seemingly miniscule issues such as the particular wording of a video game event become referenda on the proper interpretations of the past, conflicts over representation and identification, and exhortations over how a corporation and individuals should think and talk about an ongoing war. This research shows that these disputes are from being overreactions to trivial aspects of a popular culture product; instead, they represent a tangible moment where non-elite individuals can have real impact on how others think about geopolitical events.

Further research is needed to see how these dynamics play out both in different games' communities and with regard to different geopolitical events. Comparative work that would analyze various games, linguistic communities, and geopolitical conflicts is necessary. The preceding research also raises a number of questions that require further research to answer. Do the game mechanics, design, and affordances present in *EUIV* make the sort of content and vernacular geopolitical knowledge produced by it differ from those of other games? How do different cultural norms and expectations within both different game communities and different linguistic communities affect the ways that games are used to develop vernacular geopolitical knowledge? In addition, since this research only considers content made in the first year of the war, it will be fruitful to see how the content related to the war develops over time. How will interpretations of the narratives produced in this content differ over longer periods and how will a greater distance from the beginning of the war change what is produced? Research into how online communities react to current geopolitical events is useful for scholars from a wide range of fields, since it allows them to better understand the ways that people use media to learn

about, interpret, and react to issues occurring around the world. The virtual battles and campaigns can have an immense impact on how history and current events are interpreted offline.

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