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Operation Barbarossa 2021: Practices (Re)Rendering the Myth of the ‘clean’ Wehrmacht in Contemporary Grand Strategy Computer Gaming

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Visitors in military attire watching a war game on a video wall at gamescom, the world’s largest trade fair for video and computer games in Cologne, Germany, 21 8 2019

> Public imagination of history is increasingly expanding beyond those sites of sanctioned memory present in parks, monuments, libraries, and theaters. Historians should therefore be wary of overlooking the budding potency of digital spaces as sites of public history production.

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ScienceCampus doctoral researcher Jon-Wyatt Matlack explores the significance of computer games in shaping imaginations of the past. Focusing on *Hearts of Iron IV*, he considers how the format can encourage revision of the Nazi past, going against the grain of efforts towards critical *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or working through the past. The article explores how gamers can take up positions perpetuating the myth of a clean Wehrmacht while perpetuating narratives of a barbarian Eastern Europe where the USSR poses the greatest threat to humanity. He shows how reconstructions of historical narratives in digital spaces deserve more critical interrogation as a medium for the production of counterfactual history, especially given how popular and successful they are as depictions of the past, albeit a counterfactual one that draws on players’ affective urges and distorts historical reality.

Bogged down and bludgeoned bloody, the Wehrmacht stares down defeat as the Red Army doggedly advances westward. “In this titanic struggle of national survival, we must use every asset and every advantage” in the fight “against the threat of global bolshevism”, arrives the message, as you opt to recruit the freshly minted *SS Division Charlemagne* from the occupied French territories.[1] In this desperate hour, threats from within displace the drama of those from without. Scrambling to respond, there is another message: “Senior officers within the Wehrmacht have launched a coup […] intent on liquidating Hitler!”[2] With time dwindling, “SS troops and loyal army units” salvage the situation, with “Hitler himself leading the clean-up effort with his trusty Luger”.[3]

How is it possible to find yourself in such a quandary? Such quixotic episodes as this may elude broader attention precisely because they transpire in the imaginative (a)historical space of the grand strategy computer game *Hearts of Iron IV.* Developed by Paradox Interactive in 2016, it boasts more than one million copies sold as of 2018. The game is the fourth iteration in a series that allows players the opportunity to take the reins of power in any country during the period of the Second World War.[4] As ‘grand strategy’ suggests, the player takes on the role of an omnipotent leader of a given state, honing in, however, on waging a military conflagration, with military forces at the players’ disposal.

This essay investigates an under-examined entertainment medium that purveys counterfactual history regarding the Second World War. Scholars such as Rhett Loban and Tom Apperley have recently engaged with grand strategy gaming as emerging spaces of re-negotiated historical narratives.[5] Gaming not only for entertainment, but also for meaningful education in history is also a surfacing debate, with some scholars suggesting that academic work could take the form of video games.[6]

Beyond that, some U.S. military academies have informally utilized grand strategy games to educate their students on base-level understandings of war and strategy.[7] Practices of historical and memory culture will indeed increasingly be shaped by computer games into the future. Historian Wulf Kansteiner even claims that narratives espoused in video games will come to “displace traditional linear narrative media”, as “historical culture can and will be radically rewritten and reinvented every time we turn on our computers”.[8]

With this contribution, I contend that grand strategy games such as *Hearts of Iron IV*, while entertaining, disseminate counterfactual reproductions of the myth of the ‘clean’ Wehrmacht.[9] Crucially, the dynamics dictating this unsettling propagation are unique to this genre and arise via a complex interaction between game developers, gamers, and historical narratives of the Second World War. Beginning with a discussion on the mediality of grand strategy games as such, I then examine the textual and visual elements depicting the Wehrmacht, before reflecting on how these interplay with historiography. Lastly, I draw comparisons between *Hearts of Iron IV* and its hard copy predecessors in board gaming in the U.S.

By focusing more pointedly on the game’s depiction of the Wehrmacht on the Soviet-German front, I identify the key deviations and omissions that the game’s narrative purveys to the player. Principally, the game’s narratives sharply contradict historiographical precedent. This, as I show, occurs not only through the storytelling as written by the game studio, but also arises through the demands of a player base actively participating in the re-shaping of these historical narratives. Fundamentally, this essay intervenes in a specific case study of how the Wehrmacht’s explicit glorification accompanies an implicit sanitation of its legacy. Beyond effacing the victims of historical crimes, as well as their contemporary descendants, reconstructions of historical narratives in digital spaces deserve more critical interrogation as a medium for the production of counterfactual history.

Grand Strategy Gaming as a Medium

Image 1: Cover Art of Hearts of Iron IV's initial release in 2016. / Paradox Interactive – used in accordance with fair use in an educational setting (Zitatrecht)

To start off, grand strategy games are not so-called FPS games, or first-person-shooters. Though grand strategy games enjoyed an explosive market growth of near 100% from 2010-2013 compared to the previous decade,[10] with *HoI4*'s publisher netting a 40% increase in revenue during the Covid-19 epidemic,[11] first-person-shooters by far outpace this format both in sales and cultural impact. Second World War focused games such as *Call of Duty 2, Battlefield V,* and *Call of Duty WWII* promote a far different historical interaction for players. By adopting the first-person perspective, the "narrowing of scope celebrates the citizen soldiers, allowing for the 'apolitical' stance of honoring those in service".[12] Embodying a single soldier in the setting of World War II, the player thus reflects "contemporary fantasies of the war as evidence for the assured triumph of the West, and particularly the United States", as the repetition of "the victory of the Allied powers is literally played over and over again".[13] Alongside this triumphant practice, developers of FPS games are also motivated to exclude problematic elements, as they "aim to let the player have a pleasurable gameplay experience, while avoiding moral ambiguity".[14] Moreover, this genre almost exclusively adopts the Allied perspective, and does not challenge the player to embed themselves in the ranks of the Wehrmacht.

This is less often the case with grand strategy games, including *HoI4.* Far from following the linear plot of typical first-person-shooters, which is shaped more like a mouse maze than an open field, strategy games adopt a "bird's eye view from above".[15] Prosecuting war from an exclusively strategic perspective can be traced back to the nineteenth century Prussian game *Kriegsspiel* — a precursor to more modern board gaming — that "eliminated… many of the contingencies to actual war, reducing battle to a Malthusian calculus of cost-benefit computation".[16] This in turn leads to adopting an

Archimedean "view-from-nowhere" perspective that disabuses the player from the notion of moral responsibility towards the object on which one inflicts the actions of war. This can cause the opposing faction to be seen in terms of "radical otherness".[17] Since grand strategy games do not oblige the player to adopt the perspective of an individual, taking the bird's eye view is inherently dehumanizing and promotes detached apathy. This position perhaps primes players to opt against re-enacting the jubilant and well-known victory of the Allies, and instead adopt the perspective of the Hitler and his Wehrmacht. One reviewer of *HoI4* succinctly illustrates how this view is implicitly suggested to the player at first glance: "I'm sat at a desk, looking at abstractions of my country, something that I imagine is akin to the role of a real leader [...] a taste for being the Führer".[18]

To answer the question of how strategy games promote a counterfactual view of history it is necessary to consider not only the removed perspective, but the impact of the interactive forms. In contrast to films, texts and other static media through which Second World War-focused entertainment is consumed, gaming requires a "*non-trivial effort* via concrete player input and decisions"[19] that amount to an original (re)enactment of history, unrestrained by well-researched reference. Since *HoI4* encourages the player to play as Nazi Germany, and therefore the instigators of the war and perpetrators of countless crimes, this interaction is not a frivolous act. Whereas film is certainly not immune to becoming an object of imaginative fascination, the fixed narratives presented through this medium do not allow for direct intervention by the audience. This component of interactivity with the narratives of history, rendering them suddenly pliable and mutable, is crucial to the logic produced by grand strategy gaming. The terminology itself demonstrates the difference: contemporary gamers are not audience members, but consumers, whose "imaginations of World War II in digital games don't represent an officially sanctioned memory but emerge out of traditions intrinsic to popular culture", with game studios trying "to meet (and fuel) the expectations of a paying public".[20] This marketplace dynamic therefore disentangles players from structures of cultural memory produced in other entertainment media. Because of the associated paywall constraining access to computer games (the standard price of *HoI4* being 180€), combined with its more limited market presence, the narratives purported within such games are often overlooked by the public and scholars alike. Player taste then becomes the principal driver of the historical memory presented in strategy games.

Thus, as Tobias Winnerling argues, a cycle of "audience-imposed expectations" is endemic to serialized games in the same genre:[21]

> The representations of factual historical events and circumstances that these games employ are not effective denotations: either it is impossible to correlate them with any verifiable events/processes, or they are just so thoroughly informed by the games' own needs and presuppositions that they cannot be considered factually adequate. Their functions are to evoke a

> feeling of historicity and to exploit the reminiscences they may trigger in players—reminiscences based not only on factual knowledge or the emotions associated with historicized objects, but also memories of earlier and similar games within the same field.[22]

Very much complimentary to Stephen Colbert's lauded term *Truthiness* – an assertion that invokes the feeling of truth, without being itself constrained by fact – Winnerling plays with the notion that feelings trump established facts when the game requires it.

Another review of *Hearts of Iron IV* from the massively popular platform *Gamespot*, remarks on the rugged historical realism ostensibly embraced by the game: "It's a callous perspective" but "this is the essence of what it means to dedicate a nation" to conquest; concluding, "*Hearts of Iron IV* embodies the hard truths about all-consuming war".[23] The transfixing detail and well-crafted style of this modern strategy game impresses its audience with a feeling of authenticity, especially as it employs newer game mechanics that differentiate it from its previous installments.

Moreover, the player base is not solely constrained by the narrative tethers written by game developers. A vast array of so-called *Mods* have been created (player engineered modifications edited directly into the game, akin to 'house rules' added to a board game's rulebook), which can be seen as evidence of interpretations of history negotiated by the player community themselves. Generally, the 'mods' tend towards radicalization. One notable example, the mod *Red Dawn* for the *Hearts of Iron IV*, allows players to establish a white ethnostate in the United States led by President Richard Spencer, the modern day alt-right radical.[24] "These counterfactual communities illustrate that the alignment with, negotiation of and resistance to dominant paradigms of history" are not ultimately singularly arbitrated by the developers of grand strategy games alone, but rather by "the communities of practice they [the players -JM] establish".[25] As of 2021, there are over 30,000 player-created 'mods' to *HoI4* available on Steam, the largest digital distribution software of computer games in the world.

Investigating *Hearts of Iron IV*

Having outlined the theoretical and contextual components of my study, I turn now to the empirical aspects, focusing on the depiction of the Wehrmacht and, more specifically, the Eastern Front. The game casts this arena as the ultimate showdown from which the player must emerge victorious. In light of the astronomical battlefield death toll, along with the well-documented German atrocities in the USSR, the game's attempts to reimagine this central conflict are striking. It is also rendered an unavoidable part of the narrative as the game forces the player's hand: failure to take the eastward warpath will see the Soviet Union declare war on the player.

In essence, the principal in-game Wehrmacht personalities, as well as the units themselves, are

fundamentally de-Nazified and desensitized both in act and appearance. The cover art of the game on release, for example, depicts Field Marshal Erwin Rommel alongside British General Bernard Montgomery, U.S. Army General Douglas MacArthur, and Red Army Field Marshal Georgi Zhukov, casting Rommel as a character among equals in this seemingly canonical assembly. Notably, the swastika normally emblazoned on Rommel's service cap and on the breast of his dress uniform (Image 1) is replaced by a blank adornment, stripping away any connection to the Wehrmacht's ultimate allegiance to National Socialism.[26] This pattern will remain virulent throughout the game. The Wehrmacht is depicted as being 'loyal', serving the nation, while the SS elements that players can recruit are embodied as the true bastion of rapacious savagery of Nazism.

Image 2: Germany's Focus Tree. Paradox Interactive / Screenshot used in accordance with fair use in an academic setting (Zitatrecht)

Starting with some of the Wehrmacht Generals, several of these men are bestowed with short texts affixed to their profiles. The player must hand select their preferred General for each post within the General Staff from a wide array of persons. Wilhelm Keitel, available to be recruited as Chief of the Army, who in actual history was executed following the Nuremberg Trials in 1946, is described as "a general of the Old Guard", adding that "what he lacks in skill he makes up for in loyalty".[27] Albert Speer is denoted singularly for masterminding the "armaments miracle", with Heinrich Himmler granting the player the 'bonus' of making *SS*-legions recruitable under his title of "Prince of Terror".[28] Similarly, what characterizes Hermann Göring, is that "he is devotedly loyal" albeit "not the best at his job" as Chief of Air Force.[29] In stark contrast, selecting the portrait of Red Army Field Marshal Ivan Konev states that "Konev has wicked little eyes, a shaved head that looks like a pumpkin and expression of self-conceit",[30] representing the inverse of the capabilities of the Nazi appointees, as well as invoking the overtly fascist characterization of Russians as "Asiatic hordes".[31] On the other hand, General Heinz Guderian's theories on *Schwerpunkt* and *Blitzkrieg* tactics are denoted as "daring new doctrines" that aim to rely more on machinery rather than manpower, stipulating that "giving them free reins might help avoid the meat grinder horrors of the Great War".[32] Innovation, devout loyalty, competence, and even mercy (for German soldiers), therefore constitute the character of Wehrmacht generals espoused by the in-game texts.

To grant structure to the game's flow and to allow the player to dictate their preferred order of events, a 'focus tree' with policy goals set for the next 30-70 days forges the path ahead, ultimately culminating with the real events of World War II, such as the invasion of France, Operation Barbarossa, and so on (Image: 2). Within the text of many of the focus tree pathways, a motivational narrative of the rectitude of Nazi Germany's missions emerges. The player is encouraged by any and all attempts to wage ideological and strategic warfare against the Soviets, with this struggle against the other Allies all but absent. The player encounters the slogan "Danzig was German, Danzig has remained German, and Danzig shall be German" in the push to invade Poland, adding that the "Poles stand in the way of our plans for Lebensraum."[33]

As the game loads, classic quotes from Second World War figures give the player ostensibly prudent advice, such as Adolf Hitler's truism that one needs "only to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down" in reference to the Soviet Union (Image: 3). Focus tree events concerning the countries that Germany should seek to influence are consistently cloaked in noble terms. "The source of communist influence must be destroyed", for "a life lived in fear is no life at all", when concerning a military build-up to invade the east.[34] By keeping "the red menace in check"[35], the texts inform the player that "our nation stands as a shield against Bolshevism, protecting the West from communism's influence",[36] concluding that this would be a "righteous war".[37] This rather overt revisionist assertion that Nazism served more broadly as a bastion shielding the West echoes postwar insistence by *SS*-General Felix Steiner, who "claimed that it had in fact been a European army" that "invaded the Soviet Union to defend the Christian Occident".[38] This instance exemplifies how *HoI4* engages not only in careless reproduction of fascist rhetoric, but also actively contributes to the retroactive positionality of Nazism as inherently defensive against Communism.

Image 3: Hitler's quote concerning the Soviet Union on the loading screen. Paradox Interactive / Screenshot used in accordance with fair use in an academic setting (Zitatrecht)

Another crucial constant in the narratives promoted is the centrality of the person when describing Germans, with the concomitant denial of Soviets' personhood. Be they "German brethren" in Poland,[39] or "oppressed German inhabitants" in the Sudetenland,[40] the humanity of German people's perspective remains evident while the Soviet people are consistently reduced to mere nodes

of their ideology. They are rarely described as being Russians, Ukrainians, or of any other national origin. Purging Soviet generals is illustrated as "breaking some eggs",[41] while the Yugoslav identity is designated as simply "an artificial construct".[42] Such characterizations radically other the opponents of the Wehrmacht and present a perverse dichotomy to the player, with the essentialist, uncontested nature of German nationhood standing in opposition to the alleged frailty of Eastern European identities.

Thus the game's text implicitly endorses Hitler's own rhetoric of his war as a "Kampf zweier Weltanschauungen" (war of two worldviews) with the ultimate goal being "die Vernichtung der bolschewisten Intelligenz" (the extermination of the Soviet intelligentsia).[43] Chris Lempshall maintains that this "hierarchy of nations" in war games is not solely the domain of game developers, but is heavily influenced by the popular imagery and stereotypes believed by the game's audience.[44] Whether accidentally or explicitly, the implied inevitability and the dogmatic righteousness of the Nazi invasion espoused by the game's texts disturbingly echoes Nazi rhetoric from this period. A publication by the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* in 1941, for example, portrays its invasion of the USSR as "inevitable" in light of an eventual "planned Soviet betrayal" of the German Reich, whose war goal has always been "the freedom and independence of the people".[45] *HoI4* therefore echoes the Wehrmacht's actual rhetorical justification and tacitly accepts the Wehrmacht's defensive characterization of its invasion against the duplicity of the Soviets. As these slogans and claims are based in historical reality, it is not their mere presence that is at issue. Rather, it is the lack of contextualizing distance between the player and National Socialist ideological discourse that remains troubling. Seemingly authentic historical counter-narratives outlined in Nazi rhetoric are the starting point to challenging actual historical memory for players. It is the in-game enactment of the *Vernichtungskrieg* that invites the player to accept the assumptions prophesied by these narratives.

Image 4: The decision "Proclaim Greater German Reich" requires the preconditions of controlling Stalingrad and Leningrad. Paradox Interactive / used in accordance with fair use in a research setting (Zitatrecht)

As the player progresses through the focus trees towards war on the Eastern Front, competition for power between the *SS* and the Wehrmacht arises. At the player's discretion, the Wehrmacht can exploit

this conflict to rid Germany of Hitler, reminiscent of the July 1944 plot, reverting Germany to its imperial past, with the Nazi party utterly removed. It is even possible to reinstate the ailing Kaiser Wilhelm II at the behest of Wehrmacht leadership, should the player feel so inclined. Along this path, the Wehrmacht's purported Prussian identity is presented as indispensable in de-Nazifying the country, allowing "Prussian militarism" to become "now more popular than ever".[46] Such events leverage the player with the historic myth that the Wehrmacht was at once inherently resistant to Nazism, while maintaining their honor in the face of genocide by invoking the rigid loyalty compelled by the legacy of Prussia. Historian Christopher Clark remarks on this misguided judgement, arguing that "precisely because it had become so abstract, so etiolated, 'Prussiandom' was up for grabs. It was not an identity, nor even a memory".[47] As presented in *HoI4*, there is a sharp linear divide between the fascist *SS* and the Prussian Wehrmacht, but only in regards to narrative, never in substance. 'Final' victory against the USSR by Wehrmacht forces is, in the game, the sole prerequisite to proclaiming the new "Greater German Reich" after capturing both Stalingrad and Leningrad (Image: 4). "The names of Stalin and Lenin disgrace two major cities in the new German *Lebensraum*, mocking the soldiers who gave their lives", prompting the player to codify their culminated victory by renaming these cities to "Hindenburg" and "Ludendorff", with Berlin becoming Germania.[48] This act available to the player is crucial. Securing *Lebensraum* is re-cast not as a fascist genocide, but as a valid invocation of the famed legacy of Prussian military history. In this distorted view, the player is therefore invited to re-imagine this murderous action as a natural conclusion of the Second World War, as well as edifying the player with a broader sense of belonging to the longer historical continuum of Prussia.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, Soviet frailty foretold in the game and their inability to resist the Wehrmacht harken an erasure of Soviet peoples and place through the enactment of *Lebensraum*. This attempt to laud the player with glory at once trivializes actual historical war crimes while also casually instigating the player to commit a genocide of the western Soviet Union that was itself never fully realized in history.

Reflection in Historiography

This narrative distancing of the Wehrmacht from war crimes on the Eastern Front has been "comprehensively exploded" by historians of the period.[49] In the numerous trials of war criminals post-1945, Wehrmacht generals charged with atrocities sought absolution by shifting blame to 'Führer Orders' or so-called 'catastrophe orders'. This, according to Alaric Searle, subverts the stipulation that Wehrmacht officers maintained any meaningful distance from National-Socialist ideology.[50] Moreover, "it was the *lack* of victory in the Soviet Union", writes Timothy Snyder in *Bloodlands*, "that made the Wehrmacht inseparable from the Nazi Regime [...] as the army high command and the officers in the field implemented illegal and murderous policies, they found no justification except the sort that Hitler provided".[51] The game's haphazard use of Nazi pontifications, unconvincingly justified as necessary historical immersion, recklessly intertwines with the myth of a 'clean' Wehrmacht,

obscuring from the player's view the actual crimes committed whilst maintaining the *feeling* of roleplaying clad in a Stahlhelm. The game's characterization of certain prominent Wehrmacht generals as subversive of National Socialism is especially negligent. While the game suggests that the Wehrmacht would gladly murder the Führer at the player's behest, in reality Heinz Guderian issued an emphatic appeal to his soldiers in August of 1944 in the aftermath of the July plot:

> Laß Dich von niemandem übertreffen in Deiner Treue zum Führer. Niemand darf fanatischer an den Sieg glauben und mehr Glauben ausstrahlen als Du [...] es gibt keine Zukunft des Reiches ohne den Nationalsozialismus.[52]
> (Let no one surpass you in your loyalty to the Führer. No one may more fanatically believe in victory and radiate more faith than you... there is no future of the Reich without National Socialism.)

Furthermore, in his definitive work on the culture and history of the German warrior, military historian Sönke Neitzel establishes that the Wehrmacht "as an institution did not constitute a counterweight, and proved rather to be a willing servant of the Nazi state" as they unflinchingly implemented the tenants of the *Vernichtungskrieg* so ordered by the Nazis.[53]

The myth of the clean Wehrmacht perpetuated in *HoI4* intertwines with a longer history of primarily US-based board gaming. Early 1970s war games, such as Avalon Hill's *PanzerBlitz,* that found a wide audience in the US, were the earliest iterations wherein gaming and myth-making entangled to portray the Eastern Front in a strict, desensitized manner, stripped of the moral complexities of war crimes.[54] The Cold War environment fueled anti-Soviet resentment in the US and opened the market for historic myth-making, including, notably, former Chief of Staff of the Wehrmacht General Franz Halder's book *Hitler als Feldherr* [Hitler as a Strategist], as well as a litany of studies published by the former Wehrmacht generals translated into English by the U.S. Army's Historical Division. Board gaming became another conduit for such myth-making.[55] Whereas just after the war's end in 1945, 71% of returning American GI's rejected the notion that the Soviet Union presented a clear and present danger to global peace,[56] the proliferation of pro-Wehrmacht publications into the American market partially supplanted this consensus in military-enthusiasts' circles. Writing on this precise problem, Ester-Julia Howell postulates that an Atlantic-spanning German-American "militärische Erinnerungskultur" (military culture of remembrance) resulted from a shared interest in re-evaluating the Wehrmacht's eastern campaigns as perhaps the first movement of a larger 'Western' struggle against Soviet Communism.[57] Franz Halder's circulation of military history studies – for which he would earn him the Meritorious Civilian Service Award from the US – accused Hitler of being the source for the Wehrmacht's blunders on the Eastern front. As these myths gained in popularity, they found expression in the board game *War in the East: The Russo-German Conflict*, where event cards replicate debilitatingly illogical orders from Adolf Hitler and force the player to adopt the perspective of a Wehrmacht general. As historians Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies argue: "for romancers who see

Hitler as the source of many of the defeats of the war", this gaming concept "appropriately matched their [the players' – JM] own understandings of the conflict".[58]

Conclusion

This essay does not advocate for adding war crime elements to grand strategy gaming for a mass audience, even if the explicit lack of contextualization instills a morally simplified version of the Wehrmacht, and the *SS* to some extent, that players may accept as reflective of historic truth. While *Hearts of Iron IV* is not the first gaming experience that reproduces and propagates a sanitized narrative of the German-Soviet war to a mass audience, it certainly is among the most egregious and unequivocal offenders. The lack of critical reflection on the moral implications of this title appears intentional, as the developers unevenly apply standards to their other games. In a separate game title focusing on the Middle Ages, *Crusader Kings III*, the developers reacted to perceived public outrage by refraining from using the phrase *Deus Vult*, citing sensitivity to problematic suggestions of holy war waged by Europeans in a post-colonial space.[59]

As engagement with popular media, such as computer games, continues to drastically increase, so too should the study of narratives, perspectives, and myth-making disseminated by these mediums be critically investigated. Many historians remained involved in lively debate on the question of *whose* history is being expressed in a given narrative, working towards means of embracing subaltern perspectives and rectifying the imbalances of past research. Concurrent with effort should be intensified study of *how* history is being consumed, as well. Wulf Kansteiner highlights the radical departure for lived historical consciousness that the invented communities of historical video game spaces portend. This essay endeavors to expand upon this postulation as I support similar calls to more intensely contest the relatively reckless fact-checking processes of historical narrative production purveyed by gaming platforms. Public imagination of history is increasingly expanding beyond those sites of sanctioned memory present in parks, monuments, libraries, and theaters. Historians should therefore be wary of overlooking the budding potency of digital spaces as sites of public history production.

Notes

[1] Recruitment Campaign in France: (Event ID 5), *Hearts of Iron IV*

[2] The Oster Conspiracy: (Event ID 70), *Hearts of Iron IV*

[3] The Conspiracy Fails: (Event ID 72), *Hearts of Iron IV*

[4] The first version of *HoI4* was published in 2002.

[5] See Tom Apperly, *Counterfactual Communities*, and Rhett Loban and Thomas Apperley, *Eurocentric Values at Play*

[6] See Dawn Spring, *Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship*

[7] Rhett Loban, *Digitising Diplomacy,* 4

[8] Wulf Kansteiner, "Alternate Worlds and Invented Communities", 132

[9] The literature on this subject is vast. See: Manfred Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat* (1969), Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941–1945, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (1986), Wolfram Wette, *Die Wehrmacht. Feindbilder, Vernichtungskrieg, Legenden* (2002), and Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Hitler's Wehrmacht, 1935–1945* (2016)

[10] Yannick Rochat, *A quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981–2015)*

[11] Year-end Report 2020, Paradox Interactive.com, Feb. 23, 2021

[12] Tanine Allison, *The World War II Video Game, Adaptation, and Postmodern History,* 9

[13] *ibid*

[14] Pieter Van den Heede, *Wolfenstein, Call of Duty and the limits of historical play?*

[15] Nicolas de Zamaroczy, *Are we What we Play? Global Politics in Historical Strategy Games,* 163

[16] Robertson Allen, *The Unreal Enemy of America's Army,* 41

[17] Nicolas de Zamaroczy, *Are we What we Play? Global Politics in Historical Strategy Games,* 164

[18] Paul Dean, *What it's like playing as Hitler in Hearts of Iron IV*, eurogamer.net

[19] Holger Pötzsch and Emil Hammer, *Playing Perpetrators*, 2

[20] Eugen Pfister, *Man Spielt nicht mit Hakenkreuzen!*, 2

[21] Tobias Winnerling, *The Eternal Recurrence of all Bits*, 151

[22] Tobias Winnerling, *The Eternal Recurrence of all Bits*, 154

[23] Daniel Starkey, *Blood, toil, tears, and sweat*, gamespot.com

[24] Luke Winkie, *The Struggle Over Games who use Mods to create racist Alternate Histories*, kotaku.com

[25] Tom Apperly, *Counterfactual Communities,* 3

[26] See Eugen Pfister, as the swastika is also banned in video game material in Germany pursuant articles 86 and 86a of the German Strafgesetzbuch.

[27] Military Staff Selection, Wilhelm Keitel, *Hearts of Iron IV*

[28] Political Advisors Selection, *Hearts of Iron IV*

[29] Military Staff Selection, Chief of the Air Force, Herman Göring, *Hearts of Iron IV*

[30] Military High Command options, Ivan Konev

[31] See Smelser and Davies, *The Myth of the Eastern Front*, 70, on the racial rhetoric of Soviet soldiers in the Nazi view.

[32] Army Innovations, Germany Focus Tree, *Hearts of Iron IV*

[33] Danzig or War, Germany Focus Tree, *Hearts of Iron IV*

[34] Striking at the Source, Germany Focus Tree, *Hearts of Iron IV*

[35] Anti-Comintern Pact, Germany Focus Tree, *Hearts of Iron IV*

[36] Bulwark against Bolshevism, Germany Focus Tree, *Hearts of Iron IV*

[37] War with the USSR, Germany Focus Tree, *Hearts of Iron IV*

[38] Quoted in Jan Tattenberg, *The Fatherland perished in the frozen wastes of Russia*, 196

[39] The Polish Question: (Event ID: 58), *Hearts of Iron IV*

[40] The Munich Conference: (Event ID: 49), *Hearts of Iron IV*

[41] The Great Purge, Sovet Focus Tree, *Hearts of Iron IV*

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[44] Chris Lempshall, *National Memory and the First World War*, 137

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