NORTHERN PLAINS ETHICS JOURNAL

Mission

The *NPEJ's* mission is to create a high-quality dedicated publication platform to promote democratic participation in social and ethical issues affecting the Northern Plains and beyond, including, of course, the entire state of North Dakota.

To succeed, the *NPEJ* hopes to become a marketplace for the accumulation, dissemination, discussion, and recognition of scholarly work, ideas, and other work related to ethics affecting communities in North Dakota.

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Scholar Section

Truth and Reality, Lost in Translation: Russia and the Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies in the Information Environment

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Abstract

Revolutionary changes in the information environment have altered the way humans learn about the world and share their lives in community. The information environment is characterized by global, highspeed connections; abundant, easily accessible information; and emerging technology that can produce and manipulate data. This paper argues that emerging technology in the information environment impedes people's capacity to distinguish truth and reality. At the same time, philosophical trends that dismiss objective truth and prioritize subjective experience amplify the disorientation and hinder ethical action. This paper explores how information and communication affect human thinking and shared communities in the context of advances in the information environment. It then explores the philosophical trends animating contemporary culture before using Russia as a case study to demonstrate ethical implications.

Introduction

The forged document "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" was first published in Russia in 1903, likely the work of the tsarist secret police in Paris. The Protocols purported to be the meeting minutes of a group of Jewish elders conspiring to topple Christendom and rule the world. The Protocols eventually spread from Russia and were translated into dozens of languages. They were printed in the United States in 1920 by Henry Ford to warn of the Jewish "peril."

Lauren Perlaza

Adolf Hitler mentioned them in *Mein Kampf*, and in the 1930s, three decades after their first appearance in tsarist Russia, he used them in schools in Nazi Germany.[1]

In 1983 the Soviets fabricated a story that the United States had created the virus causing AIDS. They planted the story in an Indian news publication to mask its origins. Soviet agents pushed it for several years, reprinting it in Soviet-friendly publications and building its legitimacy over time. Four years after it first appeared, Dan Rather reported it to the American public on the CBS evening news in 1987.[2] Today the timeline from production to the widespread consumption of information has been radically compressed. Those same stories can be produced, disseminated, and make global headlines in less than four hours.

The modern information space has amassed millennia of the world's collective knowledge and connected the globe in ways unimaginable in the past. At the same time, in today's hyper-connected information space, troll factories, automated bots, and state-controlled media in multiple languages can spew lies that corrode social trust 24 hours a day. Bad actors can target entire populations with false narratives and disinformation at low cost and little effort. Emerging technology, utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, can now produce deepfakes that convincingly show known personalities saying and doing things they never have in reality said or done. AI can write stories around key phrases with no human intervention. The metaverse will soon allow humans to interact in an entirely simulated world. The information environment, already shambolic and polarizing, has the potential to become exponentially worse. The complexity and speed of the information environment challenge human understanding of reality and truth.

What are the ethical implications of the evolving information environment? The two converging trends have significant repercussions on ethical behavior. First, emerging technology in the information environment makes it harder for people to distinguish truth and make sense of their world. Second, philosophical trends that dismiss objective truth and prioritize subjective experience and emotion amplify the problem. The implications for ethics, or right

[1] "A Hoax of Hate: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" Anti-Defamation League. Last modified Jan. 5, 2013. https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/hoax-hate-protocols-learned-elders-zion

[2] Ben Popken, "Factory of Lies: Russia's Disinformation Playbook Exploded." *NBC News*. Nov. 5, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/factory-lies-russia-s-disinformation-playbook-exposed-n910316.

action in the world, are profound: people are both less convinced of the existence of objective truth and at the same time less able to orient their judgments based on reliable information.

Russia is used here as a case study to demonstrate the ethical implications inherent in the emerging information space and philosophical milieu. Russia is at the forefront of a holistic, state approach to the information space, combining propaganda, disinformation, cyber capabilities, and emerging technologies to influence perceptions and behavior. The philosophical basis for Russia's approach to information blends a potent mixture of political realism built on a foundation of postmodernism that actively rejects objective truth and reality. These same trends are evident in many countries, but as thinker Peter Pomerantsev observes, "the future arrived first in Russia,"[3] and thus, it provides a unique window into this brave new world.

The first section explores how information and communication affect human thinking and shared communities. It then considers the effects of emerging information and communication technologies on these vital human experiences. The second section traces the philosophical concepts that animate contemporary culture, focusing on the elevation of the subjective self as the arbiter of truth. The third probes how Russia uses the modern information space to challenge truth and reality, the philosophical ideas that inform Russia's approach to the information space, and how emerging technologies support Russia's practices. Throughout the paper, ethical concepts will be considered in light of the context of the tech-empowered information environment. These concepts shed light on the importance of the human ability to discover truth and orient themselves in reality to behave ethically.

Scope

This work does not focus on one specific emerging technology like AI or deepfakes. Instead, it takes the entirety of the modern information environment, characterized by global, highspeed connections, troves of easily accessible information, and the emerging automated systems that can produce and manipulate data. It understands all aspects of the information environment to be a novel technology that fundamentally shifts the way humans learn about their world and share their lives in community.

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[3] Peter Pomerantsev, "Why did the Future Arrive First in Russia?" Interview by Demetri Kofinas, *Hidden Forces*, Episode 229, Jan. 14, 2022, https://hiddenforces.io/podcasts/peter-pomerantsev-future-arrived-first-in-russia/.

While many philosophical concepts are discussed here, this work does not intend to be a robust reflection of the latest academic dialog around philosophical questions. Instead, the focus is on general manifestations of significant philosophical ideas in popular culture and politics. Readings from Hannah Arendt, in particular her discussion of the fragility of facts in her essay "Truth and Politics,"[4] as well as Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of emotivism in *After Virtue* were foundational texts to the author's thinking.[5]

Information and Communication: The Basis of Truth and Shared Reality

> "*As some psychiatrist once put it, we all build castles in the air. The problems come when we try to live in them.*"
>
> *-Neil Postman[6]*

When the digital age first dawned, many predicted it would usher in an era of fact-based shared understanding. Whereas in the past, humans had been limited by ignorance and superstition, now they would be able to quickly find the facts and adjust their beliefs accordingly. Computers would cull gigabytes of data and serve up truthful information at the speed of a Google search. Citizens armed with smartphones and video evidence would be a bulwark against the lies of dictators. The ability to share information and organize online would spread democracy throughout the world. The predictions were predicated on the fallacy of technological determinism, which is the idea that technology drives social, political, and economic outcomes with humans subordinate to it. However, as is often the case with emerging technologies, its initial promise has given way to a darker side.

In recent years, technological advances have resulted in an explosion of information and a flattening of the information space. Today, the average person is exposed to more information in one day than they would have been in a lifetime

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[4] Arendt, Hannah. "Truth and Politics." *The New Yorker.* Feb. 17, 1967, pg. 49. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics.

[5] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 3rd edition, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) Chapters 2 and 3.

[6] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business,* Read by Jeff Riggenbach, (Audible Audiobooks, Jan. 16, 2007) 4 hrs. 49 min.

in the 15th century.[7] The internet and now social media give an equal platform to all voices. While this means that anyone anywhere can access the vast troves of human information accumulated over thousands of years, it has also led to what many are calling information disorder or information pollution.[8] There is so much information available that it is nearly impossible to assess its origins, truthfulness, and importance in day-to-day life. Falsity appears alongside truth. Unwarranted attention is paid to inconsequential stories while significant events may be given short shrift. Bad actors can easily disguise themselves behind false identities.

Individuals' and societies' response to the chaotic information space has demonstrated the complex ways humans process information, make sense of the world, and participate in community. Researchers have yet to crack the code on how humans use information to understand and interact in their environment, but it is clear they do not form judgments and beliefs on a purely rational basis. It turns out that human cognition and perception, and its resulting belief systems, are much more complex and enigmatic than once thought. In addition, humans orient themselves in the world and in community by building "representations" of reality through complex systems for understanding and imparting information.[9] Most accepted ethical systems are rooted in either rational judgment, as in Kantian deontological ethics and utilitarianism, or in observable reality, as in natural law theory or virtue ethics as put forward by Thomas Aquinas or Aristotle. However, the complexity of the information space combined with the way people process information makes ethical foundations based on objective truth and reality more tenuous.

Information: Human Cognition and Perception

Retaking the opening examples of the fabricated Protocols document and the Soviet disinformation campaign around the origin of HIV, both stories have been thoroughly debunked, and their deceptive origins unmasked. Yet, a study in 2005 revealed that of a randomly sampled group of African Americans, 30 percent of men and 24 percent of women persist in the belief that "AIDS was produced in

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[7] Gaia Vince, "Cities: How Crowded Life is Changing Us." *BBC Future*, May 16, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20130516-how-city-life-is-changing-us.

[8] Council of Europe. *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking,* by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *(*Sept. 27, 2017) 7, https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-november-2017/1680764666.

[9] Will Starr, "How, Exactly, Do Our Brains Construct Reality," *Literary Hub,* Mar. 11, 2020, https://lithub.com/how-exactly-do-our-brains-construct-reality/.

a government laboratory."[10] In the case of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," the document is still actively in circulation despite being exposed as a fraud an entire century ago by *The London Times*. *The Times* showed in 1921 that The Protocols had been plagiarized from the 1864 French satire *Dialogues in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*, which never even mentioned Jews. According to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Protocols are still taught in many Arab and Muslim countries as fact, and as recently as 2002, Egypt aired a miniseries based on the fabricated document.[11]

Why these stories persist can be explained by the complex way humans take in and accept information. Humans do not study information and form opinions disinterestedly; they use heuristics and tribal thinking to make sense of their world. Tribal thinking is the result of tribalism, which is understood as "groupness" or "group affiliation," whereby people take on the opinions and ideas of their group affiliation.[12] These tendencies provide people mental shortcuts to simplify and manage incoming information. By simplifying information, humans can think quickly through a high volume of new informational inputs, but these mental shortcuts can also serve as impediments to nuanced understanding.

Confirmation bias, for instance, is the phenomenon by which humans accept information that agrees with their preconceived ideas and reject information that contradicts their opinions and beliefs. Thus, if a portion of the African American community has developed a distrust for the government for a variety of valid reasons, and the story they hear validates that distrust, they are more likely to believe it and reject evidence to the contrary. Studies have shown this clear tendency. In one famous study, pro- and anti-capital punishment individuals received two invented studies, one giving evidence supporting capital punishment and the other in opposition to capital punishment. The study participants were asked which study was more credible in their view, and unsurprisingly the majority chose the study that favored their initial position. Not only that, but at the end of

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[10] Michael W Ross et al., "Conspiracy beliefs about the origin of HIV/AIDS in four racial/ethnic groups," *Journal of acquired immune deficiency syndromes (1999)* vol. 41,3 (2006): 342-4. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1405237/.

[11] U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, *"Protocols of the Elders of Zion,"* Holocaust Encyclopedia, Accessed May 31, 2022, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/protocols-of-the-elders-of-zion.

[12] Carolina Kitchener, "The Trouble with Tribalism," *The Atlantic,* Oct. 17, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/membership/archive/2018/10/trouble-tribalism/573307/.

the experiment, their opinions on the subject were even stronger.[13] They selected the information that confirmed their existing belief, and by doing so, the belief became even further entrenched.

       In addition to confirmation bias, recent studies show that humans delegate much of their thinking to their "tribe." In *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*, cognitive scientists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach explain "the illusion of explanatory depth," whereby people think they know much more than they do.[14] They suggest this is because humans think in community. Thus, humans unconsciously outsource much of their thinking to friends, experts, and authorities and take on their views without realizing how little they understand the issue at hand. The tendency to think in groups can become a self-sustaining ecosystem, in which false information and shared narratives may continue unexamined.

       Humans also generally process information uncritically. Much research has demonstrated that people approach information with a truth bias; that is, they assume information they encounter is true rather than false.[15] In addition, the more familiar a particular piece of information "feels," the more likely a person is to accept it as true. Thus, if a person is exposed to a message multiple times, even if it is false, they are more likely to consider it accurate because it "feels" familiar.[16] This effect was found with even one exposure to a particular statement or claim, and the effect grew with additional exposures. Even when people were told the information was false, they persisted in believing it to be true.[17] At the same time, humans tend to judge easier-to-process statements as more likely to be true than harder-to-process statements.[18] This effect can be elicited in studies, for instance, by repeating the information to make it seem more familiar and easier to understand. If a piece of information seems to fit one's mental narrative, it is easier to understand and accept. Lastly, according to Elizabeth Marsh and Matthew

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[13] Elizabeth Kolbert, "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds," *The New Yorker,* Feb. 19, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds.

[14] Steven Sloman and Philip Fernach. *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017) pg. 23.

[15] R. Greifeneder, M.E. Jaffé, E.J. Newman, and N. Schwarz, (Eds.), *The Psychology of Fake News: Accepting, Sharing, and Correcting Misinformation*, 1st ed., (Routledge, 2020): 116, https://doi.org/10.4324/978042929537.

[16] Greifeneder, Jaffe, Newmann, and Schwarz, Psychology of Fake News, 78.

[17] Greifeneder, Jaffe, Newmann, and Schwarz, Psychology of Fake News, 135.

[18] Greifeneder, Jaffe, Newmann, and Schwarz, Psychology of Fake News, 134.

Stanley, the human cognitive "system accepts inputs that are 'close enough' even when we know better."[19] Consequently, people frequently accept information based on false presuppositions, like answering the question: "Water contains two atoms of helium and how many atoms of oxygen?" Of course, water does not contain helium, but few people recognize the error in the information set. This means that false premises can proliferate unchallenged in the information space.

The modern information space makes it more challenging to wade through oceans of data and understand their significance, intensifying human reliance on heuristics and tribal thinking. If, in the past, one false story like the Protocols or the HIV conspiracy could affect communities for decades, today a torrent of false or misleading information can misinform at a global scale. At the same time, compressing complex stories into pithy tweets on Twitter or short scrolling headlines on Facebook encourages users to do what already comes naturally – think quickly, uncritically, and in groups. Whereas these traits have arguably helped humans navigate their environment for thousands of years, in the information environment they can lead to the proliferation and entrenchment of unexamined ideas and narratives.

Information: Maps of Reality and Shared Experience

Complicating the picture, people take their bearings in the world through information and communication. Traditionally, theorists saw communication in a simple information transmission paradigm. Transmission conveys the means by which entities transmit messages: there is a sender, a message, a means of transmission, and a receiver. It focuses on connectivity rather than the cognitive effects. But of course, the picture is much more complex. According to communications theorist James Carey, people use information to assess the nature of reality. They use information they receive to first "produce the world by symbolic work" (i.e., they represent a space with a mental map) "and then take up residence in the world we have produced" (they use the mental map they drew to get from point a to b).[20] Writer Will Starr, based on the work of neuroscientist David Eagleman, describes the process as the brain constructing a hallucinated

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[19] Greifeneder, Jaffe, Newmann, and Schwarz, Psychology of Fake News, 138.

[20] Carey, James W. *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. (Rev. ed.: Routledge, 2008), 30.

"model" of the world.[21] The brain takes in innumerable data points through complex sensory processes that allow it to construct a working representation of the external environment in the mind's eye. In the case of the physical environment, the mental map has to reasonably correspond to reality for people to safely and accurately navigate their surroundings. Humans must constantly test their mental maps against physical reality. However, in the case of the information environment, which is characterized by belief systems, that same principle does not necessarily hold.

Let's take an example to illustrate the point: In 2016, a conspiracy theory, charging that Democratic Party officials were operating a child sex trafficking ring out of the basement of a Washington DC pizza restaurant, circulated on social media. It included real information like the restaurant's address and photographs, but the accompanying story was fabricated.[22] So powerful was its resonance that a North Carolina man went to the restaurant to investigate. His visit ended in a four-year prison sentence after pointing a gun at an employee and firing shots in the restaurant, where no children and no basement were found.[23] This story is a powerful portrait of how information impacts humans' understanding of reality. In this case, the man's actions in physical reality put the lie to rest; however, in most cases, people cannot test their beliefs against reality. Thus, they go on ordering their mental worlds around a distorted map of reality.

Communication becomes even more complex when considered within its role in the community. James Carey contends that communication should be seen both in terms of transmission and ritual. Whereas the transmission view focuses on conveying information, the ritual view of communication, according to Carey, is "linked to terms such as 'sharing,' 'participation,' 'association,' 'fellowship' and 'the possession of a common faith.' In this view, communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared

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[21] Will Starr, "How, Exactly, Do Our Brains Construct Reality." *Literary Hub,* Mar. 11, 2020, https://lithub.com/how-exactly-do-our-brains-construct-reality/.

[22] Mike Wendling, "The saga of 'Pizzagate': The fake story that shows how conspiracy theories spread," *BBC News*, Dec. 2, 2016. https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-38156985.

[23] Kennedy Merrit, "'Pizzagate' Gunman Sentenced to 4 Years in Prison," *NPR,* June 22, 2017, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/06/22/533941689/pizzagate-gunman-sentenced-to-4-years-in-prison.

beliefs."[24] A news story then not only imparts the new happenings of the day, but "it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it."[25] People project themselves and their beliefs into the stories they read and hear about. A Council of Europe report on Information Disorder suggests, "we must recognize that communication plays a fundamental role in representing shared beliefs. It is not just information but drama — 'a portrayal of the contending forces in the world.'"[26] The ritual view of communication brings additional light to how the fake stories around the origin of HIV or a Jewish conspiracy can resonate in communities despite their falsity. People share stories and information in community that correspond to their commonly held values.

Again, an example will help illustrate how the ritual response plays out in the modern information space. In 2018, a story about a group of high school students from Covington, Kentucky, who allegedly blocked a Native American protest in Washington, DC, went viral. The initial, erroneous headlines described President Trump-supporting teenagers obstructing a peaceful Native American protest from proceeding up the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial. Accompanying the story was a photo of what appeared to be a smug teenager smirking at a Native American. The image seemed to tell the entire story. Within hours, individuals, celebrities, and politicians from across the country called for the kids' expulsion from their school. Many shared the school's phone number, and some even attempted to identify and share the students' personal information online. Many couched the image and the story in terms of their broader beliefs and ideals, which the news story seemed to confirm and validate. It took several days and hours of additional video for journalists to correct the story's false narrative, but its initial power was not so much in its content but rather in the "portrayal of contending forces" it seemed to confirm.[27] The social media outpouring was more akin to a ritual act of shared belief.

The ritual view of communication opens up an interesting possibility about how humans perceive "reality." It asserts that information can be communicated based on observable reality, but powerfully, the inverse can also be true: in the

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[24] Carey, *Communication as Culture,* 18.

[25] Carey, *Communication as Culture,* 7.

[26] Council of Europe. *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking,* by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, (Sept. 27, 2017) 7, https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-november-2017/1680764666.

[27] Caitlin Flanagan, "The Media Botched the Covington Catholic Story," *The Atlantic,* Jan. 23, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/media-must-learn-covington-catholic-story/581035/.

ritual view of communication, "reality," or the map humans choose to inhabit, can be *created* via information and communication. According to Carey: "We create, express, and convey our knowledge of and attitudes toward reality through the construction of a variety of symbol systems: art, science, journalism, religion, common sense, mythology."[28] Thus, people can create and inhabit a constructed shared reality in some real sense. Later, we will see how Russia has used information to construct a shared reality for its citizens. Another example involves the QAnon conspiracies.

In the United States, the QAnon conspiracies demonstrate how people can construct a shared reality. The anonymous leader Q posts conspiracy theories in forums like 4chan and 8chan, where community members can actively participate in their propagation. According to an investigative piece in *The Atlantic* in 2020, "the QAnon belief system looks something like this: Q is an intelligence or military insider with proof that corrupt world leaders are secretly torturing children all over the world; the malefactors are embedded in the deep state; Donald Trump is working tirelessly to thwart them… The eventual destruction of the global cabal is imminent."[29] In most cases (Pizzagate notwithstanding), the truth of the claims cannot be verified, but the belief in them has led thousands, if not millions, to make common cause in their shared reality. In the virtual reality of the modern information space, unlike in physical reality, people can easily create and propagate "a reality" of their own making. However, as Neil Postman pointed out in the opening quote to this chapter, while "we all build castles in the air. The problem comes when we try to live in them."[30] If the "reality" people construct is based on faulty information, they will inhabit and base their actions and beliefs on a distorted version of the world. This phenomenon is prevalent in the information-saturated digital space.

Information Disorder: Maps to Nowhere

Revolutionary changes in the information environment mean a deluge of information and conspiracy theories can achieve instantaneous global reach. In

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[28] Carey, *Communication as Culture,* 13.

[29] Adrienne LaFrance, "The Prophecies of Q: American Conspiracy Theories are Entering a Dangerous New Phase," *The Atlantic*, June 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/.

[30] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business,* Read by Jeff Riggenbach, (Audible Audiobooks, Jan. 16, 2007) 4 hrs. 49 min.

fact, two teams of forensic linguists tracked down Q of QAnon fame to a South African software developer as the likely, but still unconfirmed, source.[31] In a 2017 report for the Council of Europe on "information disorder," the authors argue that "contemporary social technology means that we are witnessing something new: information pollution at a global scale." Information pollution refers to irrelevant, inconsistent, or incomplete information that clutters the information space and hinders humans' ability to filter and make sense of it.[32] Writer and Professor Michael P. Lynch aptly conveys the effect of information pollution, noting "Googling is like being in a room with a million shouting voices." One cannot hope to understand and order all the information available. Thus, according to Lynch, "the most disturbing power of information pollution is that its repeated use can dull our sensitivity to the value of truth itself."[33] People give up on pursuing truth altogether as undiscoverable.

The Council of Europe conceptualizes information pollution as leading to "information disorder," which they outline as misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information and define based on their falseness and intent to harm. Misinformation is false information shared with no intent to harm others. The sharer generally does not know the information is wrong – depending on whether Q believes the information he shares, he and his followers would fall into this category. Mal-information is truthful information shared to cause harm. Leaked phone conversations or emails, for example, would fall into the category of mal-information. Disinformation, on the other hand, "is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm."[34] Bad actors and unwitting citizens contribute to the disorder that characterizes the digital information space.

In recent years, disinformation has been weaponized at a scale the authors of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" or the HIV deception could have only dreamed. Islamic State fighters used staged photos and the promise of viral social

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[31] David D. Kirkpatrick, "Who is Behind QAnon: Linguistic Detectives Find Footprints," *The New York Times,* Feb. 24, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/technology/qanon-messages-authors.html.

[32] Levent Orman, "Fighting Information Pollution with Decision Support Systems." *Journal of Management Information Systems* 1, no. 2 (1984): 64, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40397792.

[33] Michael P. Lynch, "The Disturbing Power of Information Pollution," *The MIT Press Reader,* June 6, 2019, https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/disturbing-power-of-information-pollution/.

[34] Council of Europe. *Information Disorder,* 5.

media exposure to accuse U.S. soldiers of atrocities in 2015.[35] Russian trolls created personas and social media groups to inject disinformation into the U.S. public square in 2016. For instance, the Russians created Facebook groups like: Blacktivist, United Muslims of America, Army of Jesus, and Being Patriotic to push narratives that resonated with targeted audiences.[36] Blacktivist had more followers in 2016 than the authentic Black Lives Matter group. The images, stories, and memes shared in these groups did not resonate because they were true but because they seemed to confirm a particular group's larger truth or shared account of the world.

Ethical action in a digital world unmoored from physical reality and observable facts is difficult because the truth of any event or action is often distorted. Thus, people's mental maps of the world are warped, and they are unable to rely on reason to properly navigate the world. No doubt, the perpetrator in the Pizzagate incident believed it was his ethical duty to act on behalf of vulnerable children. Indeed, had there been trafficked children at the pizza restaurant, his actions would have been considered courageous acts in pursuit of justice. Yet, his actions were ultimately and rightly punishable because his information was wrong, and thus his resulting beliefs and actions were wrong. As in a computer program, when the information inputs are inaccurate, the program does not work as intended. Likewise, when humans build their operating system on corrupted code, their resulting behaviors are also perverted. Unlike a computer code, which can be easily corrected, the human system, is far more complex and challenging to repair.

This chapter explored how the digital age created a novel environment, detached from physical reality, in which people process information and build their understanding of the world. It showed how humans process data through a complex system that relies on unconscious phenomena like heuristics and outsourcing to make sense of incoming information. At the same time, human communication is not only the transmission of messages from sender to receiver but a ritual act that expresses shared beliefs and value systems, frequently decoupled from the

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[35] Emerson T. Brooking and P.W. Singer, "War Goes Viral: How Social Media is Being Weaponized Around the World," *The Atlantic,* November 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/11/war-goes-viral/501125/.

[36] Nicholas Confessore and Daisuke Wakabayashi, "How Russia Harvested American Rage to Remake U.S. Politics," *The New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/technology/russia-election-facebook-ads-rage.html.

traditional understanding of truth as verifiable facts corresponding to reality. The modern information environment encourages these tendencies. The implications for ethics are profound in that people cannot easily orient their actions in the world without a correct understanding of truth and reality. In light of this, it would seem logical that people would hold more fervently to factual truth and observable reality. Interestingly, the opposite is true; emerging trends in the information environment coincide with a philosophical movement that decries truth and reality. Next, this paper explores how cultural trends in worldview compound the ethical problems brought on by emerging technology in the information space.

Whose Truth? What Reality? Who Decides?

> *"My contention that morality is not what it once was is just to say that to a large degree people now think, talk and act as if emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be. Emotivism has become embodied in our culture."*
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> *-Alasdair MacIntyre*[37]

The postmodern age arose in the mid-twentieth century as a repudiation of the modern age that had only recently emerged from decades of war and strife. Whereas belief in objective truth characterized the modern age, postmodernism is characterized by its rejection of objective truth in favor of subjective experience and uncertainty. Informed by emerging science like quantum physics, reality likewise became contingent and subject to the perspectives of the observer.[38] The metanarratives and conventions that had informed the modern age gave way to deconstruction and skepticism.[39]   Deconstruction in literature, for example,

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[37] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 3rd edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 22.

[38] Benjamin Carlson, "Did Quantum Physics Lead to Postmodernism?" The Atlantic, May 27, 2010, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/05/did-quantum-physics-lead-to-postmodernism/340795/.

[39] University of Minnesota, "Cultural Periods," Libraries, Accessed May 31, 2022, https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/1-6-cultural-

focuses on the complex underlying subjective assumptions or constructs of the author, which make a definitive understanding of any text ultimately unknowable. While few people are familiar with the nuances of postmodern thinking in philosophy, many of its ideas pervade popular culture and public discourse.

In a 2020 survey of American worldviews by the Cultural Research Center of Arizona Christian University, no holistic worldview predominated across respondents. Rather the beliefs of most participants fell into the category of "syncretism," which the Center described as "the name for a disparate, irreconcilable collection of beliefs and behaviors that define people's lives. It's a cut-and-paste approach to making sense of and responding to life. Rather than developing an internally consistent and philosophically coherent perspective on life, Americans embrace points of view or actions that feel comfortable or seem most convenient."[40] Thus, Americans' beliefs and practices often reflect elements of multiple worldviews. For instance, they may hold that all moral systems are socially constructed and dependent on the cultural beliefs of the society in which they occur rather than independently existing. At the same time, they may condemn certain practices, like child marriage, as universally wrong. The views are often internally inconsistent and mutually exclusive, but in a cultural milieu of subjective experience and feeling, the inconsistency is unsurprising.

In the same survey, 54 percent of Americans do not believe in objective truth. Survey director George Barna explained, "Most people would say all truth is subjective, and there's no kind of objective truth based on an external standard. They would say they're the standard that determines what truth is."[41] Like in the 2019 Disney hit *Frozen 2*, Elsa, the protagonist, discovers that she herself is the source of the knowledge and understanding she has been searching for, singing:

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periods/#:~:text=The%20Modern%20Age,%2C%20scientific%20discoveries%2C%20an d%20globalization.

[40] Arizona Christian University, Cultural Research Center. "American Worldview Inventory: America's Dominant Worldview Syncretism," Press Release, Apr. 13, 2021, https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CRC_AWVI2021_Release01_Digital_01_20210413.pdf.

[41] Sean Salai, "Poll: Most Americans Say Truth is 'Subjective,' No Absolute Right or Wrong," *The Washington Times*, Oct. 20, 2021, https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/oct/20/most-americans-say-truth-subjective-no-absolute-ri/.

Show yourself
Step into the power
Grow yourself
Into something new
You are the one you've been waiting for
All of my life
All of your life[42]

When Elsa sings, "You are the one you've been waiting for…all of your life," the implication is that she is the source of knowledge. The subjective self is the final arbiter of truth.

With the subjective experience rising to a new level of prominence, emotions are likewise predominant in public discourse. In 2016, the Oxford dictionary declared "post-truth" the word of the year, defining it "as an adjective relating to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals." The word seemed to aptly describe a period in which interaction was mainly online and characterized by emojis. These little digital faces expressed emotion at the click of a button. Information was passed along the interwebs using algorithms that weighted its emotional resonance more than its detached newsworthiness.[43] Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre identified emotivism, which contends that moral language and judgment is an expression of emotions and attitudes, to be a grave danger to moral discourse back in 1981. MacIntyre explains that "emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling..."[44] He argued compellingly that emotivism results in interminable debates because they are based on rival premises that cannot be reconciled. For instance, debates about socialism place the principles of equality and liberty at loggerheads, and the deciding factor is each person's subjective feelings about which principle to prioritize. MacIntyre states, "From our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we

[42] Idina Menzel and Evan Rachel Wood, "Show Yourself" (from Frozen II), Walt Disney, Wonderland Music Company, 2019.
[43] Bobby Allyn, "Here are Four Key Points from the Facebook Whistleblower's Testimony on Capit0l Hill," *NPR,* Oct. 5, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/10/05/1043377310/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-congress.
[44] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 3rd edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 11-12.

do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion."[45] It becomes a test of wills or emotional persuasion rather than a logical argument. At the time, he did not imagine the debate would eventually extend to the factual world and limited his argument to the world of moral discourse.

However, in contemporary society, his arguments can be taken an additional step to the factual realm. Today, what would have been considered fact in the past now has a subjective element. The cultural debate over microaggressions is illustrative. The impact of words or facial expressions is prioritized over their intent. For instance, the question "Where are you from?" could be considered a microaggression because one could experience this question as an assumption of otherness and thus inferiority.[46] The "fact" of aggression is determined by subjective experience. In his book *Homo Deus*, Yuval Harari labels this approach to ethical knowledge as humanism and describes it through the equation: Knowledge = Experience x Sensitivity. He explains that in this view to "answer [] any ethical question, we need to connect to our inner experiences and observe them with the utmost sensitivity."[47] Connecting to emotion in this view is a critical aspect of knowing and by extension behaving ethically.

The idea that there are many possible truths is also deeply embedded in contemporary culture. The refrain that one should "speak their truth" and "live their truth" captures this idea.
Prominent postmodern thinker Jean-Francois Lyotard "theorized, [the world] was one of micronarratives instead of grand narratives—that is, a multiplicity of small, localized understandings of the world, none of which can claim an ultimate or absolute truth."[48]   One's truth would depend on one's perspective, which is contingent upon a multitude of cultural inputs and constructions.

At the same time, reality has become a fungible concept in contemporary culture. It, like truth, is a function of perspective and can be remade subjectively.

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[45] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 8.

[46] Wing, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice." *American Psychologist*, 2007, 62, 4, 271-286. https://sph.umn.edu/site/docs/hewg/microaggressions.pdf.

[47] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 2017), 239.

[48] University of Minnesota. "Cultural Periods." Libraries. Accessed May 31, 2022. https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/1-6-cultural-periods/#:~:text=The%20Modern%20Age,%2C%20scientific%20discoveries%2C%20and%20globalization.

Kurt Andersen of *The Atlantic* notes in a 2017 article, "Today, each of us is freer than ever to custom-make reality, to believe whatever and pretend to be whoever we wish. Which makes all the lines between actual and fictional blur and disappear more easily. Truth in general becomes flexible, personal, subjective."[49] Andersen argues that the rejection of objective reality originated with thinkers in the 1960s who contended, "The rulers of any tribe or society do not just dictate customs and laws; they are the masters of everyone's perceptions, defining reality itself." Thus "reality is simply the result of rules written by the powers that be." In this telling, reality itself is constructed, changeable, and determined by the dominant power structure rather than a reflection of an existing reality external to all subjective experience.

The ethical considerations here are complex because the subjective experiences of individuals or collectives can lead to conflicting judgments regarding the basis for ethical action. Traditionally, most ethical systems, at least Western ones, forbade lying for instance. However, in the modern context of subjective experience and personal truths, the idea of lying is no longer a simple concept. The very notion of lying assumes a corresponding notion of an objective truth in contradistinction to subjective truth. If there is no objective truth and only subjective truths, there are no lies. There are only different perspectives. At the same time, if "reality" is the result of structures put in place by the dominant group, then it is reasonable to deconstruct and reconstruct it subjectively. However, this concept undermines the foundations of the liberal world order and makes shared ethical values difficult to attain.

The implications of these ideas quickly migrate from the ethical and philosophical realm to real-world implications in the political and social sphere. Before moving into the case study, which will explore how Russia as a nation-state manifests the two converging trends illuminated in this paper, it is worth pausing to distinguish how postmodern cultural trends manifest at the nation-state level in the United States. The United States is fundamentally different from Russia in that it is in word and deed a pluralistic democracy. At the nation-state level, that means its ideas and policies, like the people it represents, can be syncretic; that is, they may represent conflicting worldviews. For example, U.S. politicians may profess there is no truth, while at the same time vigorously advocating for universal truths like human rights. Competing ideas play out in the culture and affect the political

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[49] Kurt Andersen, "How America Lost its Mind," *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/how-america-lost-its-mind/534231/.

direction of the United States over time. Thus, cultural debates over abortion, gun rights, or transgenderism may lead to eclectic policies for many decades. Individual subjective truths abound in the United States, making truth seem evanescent and difficult to pin down at the national level.

While the cultural debates play out among individuals and groups, at the level of the nation the U.S. government generally still holds to an order based on truth and objectivity, especially in the realm of foreign policy where the liberal order is based on truth and objectivity. For instance, the liberal order consists of rules-based institutions, like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Criminal Court among others, which assume shared facts and reality. These institutions are meant to investigate the truth of a matter and adjudicate between conflicting parties. Their existence and functioning are fundamentally undermined if objective truth and reality are no longer seen as valid universal frameworks. In a democracy though, cultural trends may not show up consistently in government institutions and policies for many years. Interestingly, the apparent inconsistency between America's cultural debates and government action is a point of criticism for numerous countries.

Several nations have pointed out the incoherence of America's syncretic beliefs and visible elevation of subjective experience in recent years. For example, in 2019 the Hungarian State Opera in Budapest staged George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess. The Gershwin estate requires black performers be cast in the piece as part of the license. The United States considers it paramount to abide by licensing agreements. At the same time, many in the United States profess the importance of subjective experience. Thus, the Hungarian State Opera, to get around the requirement to cast black performers, had the performers sign letters claiming they identified as black. The letters stated, "African-American origin and consciousness are an integral part of my identity."[50] The director said they were simply playing by the "absurd rules" the United States had created, alluding to discussions around gender identity in the United States. Likewise, Russia has used similar lines of reasoning to undercut the United States and the truth-based principles the U.S.-led liberal order represent. While ethical issues are not synonymous with political and social issues, they frequently overlap and influence one another. The concepts of truth and reality have undergirded the social, political, and ethical systems of the

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[50] Palko Karasz, "Hungarian Opera Asks White Cast of 'Porgy and Bess' to Say They are African-American," *New York Times*, Apr. 10, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/10/arts/hungary-opera-porgy-and-bess.html.

West for hundreds of years, and their marginalization has profound implications in all spheres.

Russia provides an excellent window into the implications of the two converging trends explored thus far. At the state level, Russia has utilized the information environment as a primary tool of both domestic and international policy. At the same time, this author argues that Russia, unlike the United States, has systematically and faithfully taken up and acted out postmodernist philosophy on a grand scale. Russia has unabashedly enacted postmodern thought systems in its rhetoric and actions in the information environment. Thus, the recent experience of the Russian system can offer important insights into the ethical consequences of a worldview unbound by truth and reality and an information space that facilitates it.

Case Study: Russia's Information War on Reality

> *"But where Soviet propaganda was anchored in ideological truth claims, the contemporary Russian variant can be compared to a kaleidoscope: a light piercing through it is instantly transformed into multiple versions of reality."[51]*

According to an April 30, 2022, statement of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, one million Ukrainian citizens had been "evacuated" to Russia following Russia's invasion of the country in February. He suggested they were refugees, but those who have escaped from Russia tell a tale of torture and killings, as Russian forces claim they are eliminating supposed "Ukrainian Nazis."[52] At the time of this writing, Russia is bombarding eastern Ukrainian cities after having been pushed back by Ukrainian forces around Kyiv. In their wake, human rights organizations have received reports of rape and torture and have uncovered

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[51] Katri Pynnöniemi and András Rácz (eds.), *Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine*, 2016, 14, https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/fog-of-falsehood.

[52] "Why is Russia Setting up Detention Centres in Ukraine?" *The Economist*, Apr. 30, 2022, https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/04/30/why-is-russia-setting-up-detention-centres-in-ukraine.

evidence of mass killings of Ukrainian civilians by Russian forces.[53] One Ukrainian woman said incredulously of the Russian forces, "These are our 'brothers.' We have similar languages. I never thought they would behave like that."[54] However, since 2014 Russian media and leadership have been portraying Ukraine as a country infested with neo-Nazis led by an illegitimate puppet regime of a NATO-expanding United States. President Putin justified Russia's 2022 invasion based on these specious narratives, which had been carefully groomed in the information environment for many years. Russia fabricated narratives and constructed a shared reality around them that eventually led to the horrifying actions the world is now witnessing in Ukraine.

Russia has been at the center of foreign policy discussions regarding state actions in the information environment over the last decade. It has orchestrated all aspects of information disorder – disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information – to create cognitive and behavioral impacts that are advantageous to its strategic goals. Russia frequently uses information to sow confusion and chaos or undermine and discredit. However, more interestingly, Russia also uses information to ostensibly construct new realities, a possibility that has become more potent as the cyber realm removes humans further from physical reality. While Russia's tactics in the information environment are not new, the mediums and thereby the reach and impact have changed. In addition, Russia's modern information war is not in service to a particular ideology or truth claim, but rather it is in service to the rejection of all truth claims.

The Soviet Union was well-known for its nefarious use of information to undermine the West during the Cold War. The Soviets referred to this technique as "active measures." Active measures were deliberate programs to manipulate adversaries, often based on lies, forgeries, and front organizations. For instance, in 1960, on the eve of the Olympics, Russian KGB agents forged a letter purportedly from the Ku Klux Klan and sent it to UN delegates from several African countries with the heading, "The Olympics – for the Whites Only!" and the text: "A foul

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[53] Yousur Al Hlou, Masha Froliak, Evan Hill, Malachy Browne and David Botti, "New Evidence Shows How Russian Soldiers Executed Men in Bucha," The New York Times, May 21, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/world/europe/russia-bucha-ukraine-executions.html.

[54] Anelise Borges, "Ukraine war: Bucha resident Olga, 94, says Russia's invasion is worse than Nazi's WWII occupation," *Euronew,*. May 4, 2022, https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/05/ukraine-war-bucha-resident-olga-94-says-russia-s-invasion-is-worse-than-nazi-s-wwii-occupa.

stench spreads out from the East River and hangs over New York like a pall – the greasy sweat of the Black Races of Africa and Yellow Races of Asia which have pervaded the United Nations. It is enough to make every white Protestant American vomit." The letter included the image of a monkey being lynched.[55] The letter's goal was to discredit the United States and sow division at the UN by exploiting and exacerbating racial tensions in the United States. Around the same time, a race-related tract was distributed in Congo purportedly from fellow black people in America to warn the Congolese of American racism and claimed: "special units of racist killers" were to be sent to Congo.[56] Similar "active measures" operations accused the United States of imperialism. Others exploited and created "peace movement" front groups to oppose U.S. weapons systems and hamstring NATO defenses.[57] The goal was to undermine the capitalist U.S. to pave the way for the spread of communism.

Similarly, today's active measures have many goals, and one is to sow doubt and create confusion to keep the adversary from effectively responding. The difference today, however, is that Russia offers no competing ideal. In *This Is Not Propaganda*, Peter Pomerantsev describes Russia's disinformation tactics, saying that stories "are just thrown online or spewed out on TV shows, more to confuse than to convince, or to buttress the phobias of audiences predisposed to seeing plots all around them."[58] For instance, on July 17, 2014, a Russian missile fired from Ukrainian territory by Russians from the 53rd Air Defense Brigade shot down the civilian airliner, Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, killing all 298 civilians aboard. The Russians had consistently denied their direct involvement in Ukraine for months, framing the conflict as an organic uprising of Ukrainian separatists against an oppressive regime in Kyiv. In the wake of the incident, Russia introduced multiple conflicting storylines into the information space to obfuscate reality. They claimed Ukraine had accidentally shot down the plane in a failed attempt against the Russian president. The Russian commander in charge of the 53rd Air Defense Brigade claimed the CIA had filled the plane with corpses and provoked the Russians to shoot it down. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov peddled a version in which Ukrainian air traffic controllers had ordered the flight to lower its

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[55] Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, (New York: Picador, 2020), 136.

[56] Rid, *Active Measures*, 138.

[57] Rid, *Active Measures*, 266.

[58] Peter Pomerantsev, *This is Not Propaganda*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), Audiobook.

altitude while Ukrainian fighter jets were in the area, suggesting that they were at fault.[59] While the stories were implausible and even contradictory, they were enough to convince the Russian population and confuse many in the West as to what had really happened. In September 2014, 85 percent of Russians believed Ukraine was to blame; that number remained consistent a year later, even after a full investigation showed unequivocally that a Russian missile fired by Russian miliary members had brought down the airliner.[60]

Russia has also used information to undermine and discredit adversaries. In 2014, mass protests erupted in Ukraine in response to then-President Yanukovych's reneging on his promise to sign a political association and free trade agreement with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia. Ukrainians considered Yanukovych's deal with Putin to be corrupt personal enrichment at the expense of the Ukrainian people. As the protests on Kyiv's central square, the Maidan, grew the Russian information campaign to discredit them sprang into action. Russian officials and state media accused the protestors of being right-wing fascists, labeling them "Banderites" after a World War II-era Ukrainian nationalist, who the Russians accused of collaborating with the Nazis. The participants of the peaceful Maidan protests represented a diverse group of Ukrainians without a controlling ideology, language, or ethnicity.[61] The first person to call for the protests was Mustafa Nayyem, a student from a Muslim refugee family.[62] Among those protesters killed by government snipers in February 2014 were an ethnic Armenian, a Belarussian, and three Ukrainian Jews among others.[63] Yet Russia's mere framing of the event as a right-wing, fascist manifestation prompted discussion and headlines. Many Western outlets published stories about the extent of right-wing nationalist influence on the Maidan. Even if the reports concluded that far-right groups had minimal influence at the protests, the very fact of the stories and headlines helped Moscow create the illusion that neo-Nazis led the uprising. It undermined the Ukrainian protesters, who were then forced to justify their intentions and convince the world their fight was for dignity against corruption rather than a dangerous, nationalistic manifestation.

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[59] Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. (United States: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 178-182.

[60] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 182.

[61] Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom, 153

[62] Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Kremlin's War on the Internet*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 275.

[63] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 153.

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Russia also used the information space to shape the physical reality in its takeover of Crimea and its invasion of the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk in February and March 2014. Russia undertook its invasion in direct response to the success of the Maidan protests and the subsequent ouster of President Yanukovych. In Crimea and eastern Ukraine, Russia created the illusion of an organic movement against invented Ukrainian oppression to justify its invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea. "Little green men" first appeared in Crimea and later in Donetsk and Luhansk. They bore no insignia but methodically took over government buildings and helped install new pro-Russian leadership.[64] They claimed to be "volunteers," and Russian authorities and television framed the takeovers as part of a grassroots response of oppressed Russian-speaking Ukrainians against what they portrayed as an "illegal coup" in Kyiv and its purported "Banderite" and fascists propagators.[65] From the outset, it was abundantly clear that the "little green men" were Russian special forces; observers noted their Russian accents and use of Russia-specific slang. Some of the soldiers themselves admitted their affiliation. However, by simply removing insignia and lying, the Russian state created enough confusion in Ukraine and Western nations that they could not respond appropriately to what constituted a military invasion of a sovereign state by another.[66] So successful was this tactic at creating another reality that when peace talks were finally conducted, Russia was able to portray its participation as a "facilitator" rather than the belligerent and aggressor it was.[67] The peace negotiations were framed as being between the Russian-created, -directed, and -supported Ukrainian "separatists" and the Ukrainians, normalizing the fiction that it was a Ukrainian civil war rather than a Russian invasion.

[64] Vitaly Shevchenko, "'Little Green Men' or 'Russian Invaders'?" *BBC News,* Mar. 11, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26532154.
[65] Maria Snegovaya, "Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine," *Institute for the Study of War,* Russia Report 1. September 2015, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20Putin's%20Information%20Warfare%20in%20Ukraine-%20Soviet%20Origins%20of%20Russias%20Hybrid%20Warfare.pdf.
[66] Steven Rosenberg, "Ukraine Crisis: Meeting the Little Green Men," *BBC News*, Apr. 30, 2014.,https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27231649 .
[67] Kurt Volker, "Don't Let Russia Fool You About the Minsk Agreements," *Center for European Policy Analysis,* Dec. 16, 2021, https://cepa.org/dont-let-russia-fool-you-about-the-minsk-agreements/.

Indeed, Russia has continued the specious narratives it began in 2014 and has made them the basis for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In announcing his "special military operation" against Ukraine, President Putin claimed it was necessary to "de-nazify" the country.[68] What began as a fabricated story to undermine the Maidan protestors in 2014 had blossomed into a full-blown invented reality and basis for war. Likewise, three days before the invasion, Russia livestreamed its national security council meeting where it pretended to deliberate its response to the request for formal recognition by its installed leaders in Donetsk and Luhansk.[69] The charade Russia began in 2014 remained its faux reality in 2022. Sadly, what began in the virtual reality of the information environment has led to thousands of deaths and millions of displaced people in the real world.

Ethically speaking, the Russian population appears to believe Russia's "special operation" is a just act based on the "constructed reality" that Ukrainian leadership is an oppressive neo-Nazi force. This "reality" has been generated, amplified, and confirmed in the information space since 2014. There is significant anecdotal evidence that even when speaking with Ukrainian family members who are witnessing Russian atrocities in their towns, many Russian citizens refuse to accept the factual reality of the situation.[70]

As this paper laid out in the first chapter, people take in information and orient themselves in the world and in their communities through complex cognitive processes. People's natural tendencies to filter information through a set of mental shortcuts makes the need for truthful interactions paramount. Otherwise, the representations of reality that people construct in their minds are distorted and ineffective to guide ethical action. At the same time, if people believe there is no truth and even reality is subjective, the ethical implications are even more profound. In the Soviet Union, people could test the truth of communism against their lived reality and understand its failures. Modern Russia professes no truth,

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[68] Miriam Berger, "Putin Says He Will 'Denazify' Ukraine. Here's the History Behind That Claim," *The Washington Post*, Feb. 24, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/24/putin-denazify-ukraine/.

[69] Patrice Taddonio, "What an 'Unhinged' Meeting Reveals About Vladimir Putin's War on Ukraine," *PBS*, Mar. 15, 2022, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/video-putin-war-ukraine-documentary/.

[70] Michael Wasiura, "Russians With Ukrainian Relatives Trust Their TVs More than Their Family," *Newsweek*, May 12, 2022, https://www.newsweek.com/russians-ukrainian-relatives-trust-their-tvs-more-their-family-1705942.

and as one interviewer put it wants "to make truthfulness an irrelevant category."[71] In that way, there is no external standard by which to assess reality. At the same time, without objective truth, there is no ethical yardstick by which to judge Russia's actions.

Postmodern Weapons for a Totalitarian Future?

> *The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.*
>
> *-Hannah Arendt[72]*

"We've lived through a communism we never believed in, democracy and defaults and mafia state and oligarchy, and we've realized they are illusions, that everything is PR,"[73] a producer at a Russian television studio told British journalist Peter Pomerantsev in the early 2000s. The momentary optimism that prevailed at the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 faded as quickly as it appeared in Russia. The chaos of Russia's attempted transition to democracy and a market economy in the 1990s, combined with the loss of its empire left many rudderless and disillusioned. According to Pomerantsev a "triumphant cynicism" became the working milieu of Russia's elite, if not much of its population.[74] Whereas many citizens behind the Iron Curtain looked to Western freedom and democracy for hope during the Cold War, by the 2000s, many Russians were convinced that all politics and all claims to higher ideals were simply a charade and "PR" – the

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[71] Peter Pomerantsev, "The Russian Roots of Our Misinformation Problem," Interview by Sean Illing, *Vox*, Oct. 26, 2020,
https://www.vox.com/world/2019/10/24/20908223/trump-russia-fake-news-propaganda-peter-pomerantsev.

[72] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," *The New Yorker,* Feb. 17, 1967,
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics.

[73] Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 73.

[74] Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True*, 176.

acronym for public relations borrowed directly from English into the Russian language.

Just as postmodern philosophers arose in the West in response to the destruction wrought by the world wars and the perceived failures of modernity, in Russia their ideas -- skepticism of metanarratives; denial of objective reality; and a rejection of logic, reason, and truth – found a receptive audience. For instance, in the 1990s French postmodernist philosopher Francois Lyotard's critique of cultural metanarratives and Jacque Derrida's deconstruction of language were fresh and fashionable ideas.[75] The Kremlin's chief image-maker, Vladislav Surkov, according to Pomerantsev, in the 2000s was quick "to invoke new postmodern texts just translated into Russian, the breakdown of grand narratives, the impossibility of truth, how everything is only 'simulacrum' and 'simulacra.'"[76] The disillusionment of the transition era created fertile ground for an anti-ideology to take root, characterized not by a set of ideas or principles but by its lack of commitment to any particular idea and a rejection of truth, consistency, and even objective reality.

Emory professor Mikhail Epstein noted the trend as early as 1995 and argued it was a pattern in Russian history. He notes, "Communist teachings arrived in Russia from Western Europe and seemed at first completely alien to this backward, semi-Asiatic country; however, Russia turned out to be the first nation to attempt an enactment of these teachings on a worldwide scale."[77] In his view, "the same paradox pertains to the problem of Russian postmodernism," whereby a Western concept is enacted on a grand scale by the Russian state.[78] For Epstein, the key aspects of Russia's postmodernism are "the production of reality as a series of plausible copies, or what the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls "simulation' …Models of reality replace reality itself, which then becomes irrecoverable."[79] Indeed, Russia has adopted many international democratic conventions, but they approach them as actors in a play, standing on their marks and reading from a script.

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[75] Peter Pomerantsev, "Putin's Rasputin," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 33. No. 20. Oct. 20, 2011, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n20/peter-pomerantsev/putin-s-rasputin.

[76] Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True*, 74.

[77] Michael Epstein, "The Origins and the Meaning of Russia's Postmodernism," (The National Council for Soviet and East European Research, Jul. 16, 1993), 2, https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/1993-807-21-2-Epstein.pdf.

[78] Epstein, "Origins of Russia's Postmodernism," 2.

[79] Epstein, Origins of Russia's Postmodernism, 2.

Unlike the Soviet Union, which worked hard to maintain a veneer of truth, today's Russia fundamentally rejects the idea of truth. "This new propaganda is different. Putin isn't selling a wonderful communist future. He's saying, we live in a dark world, the truth is unknowable, the truth is always subjective, you never know what it is," Pomerantsev explains. Surkov describes Russia's approach as more "honest" than the West's. In his cynical view, everyone is participating in the same truthless charade; only Russia dares to admit it. Writing in 2019, Surkov argued the ideals of the West were fiction and that the "illusion of choice… is the main stunt behind the Western way of life in general and the Western style of democracy in particular, and it has more to do with P. T. Barnum than with Cleisthenes." He snidely remarks that "The United States still invokes the virtues and values of its semi-fictional founding fathers." He describes Western democracy as an "imported chimera" not suitable to Russia's historical heritage. The Russians, in his words, rejected "the illusion" of democracy "in favor of pre-determined reality." However, Russia acts out many Western constructs for "appearance sake," but "These institutions are like a dress uniform to greet strangers; everyone knows that you don't wear that at home."[80] Thus, unlike the Soviet Union, which eagerly held to its narrative of world communism and forced its citizens to participate in the lie, the new Russia assumes everyone knows they are participating in lies and that is simply the way the world is.

Interestingly, simulation is an idea with deep roots in the Russian psyche. The term Potemkin villages originated in Russia in the 1700s to describe impressive facades supposedly constructed along the Dnipro River to hide the true state of Russia's countryside from its empress Catherine the Great. Political technologist and former Kremlin insider Gleb Pavlovsky explained in a 2017 *PBS* interview that Vladimir Putin was himself a kind of Potemkin village. In his telling, former Russian president Boris Yeltsin's administration carefully chose his successor based on sociological research about the type of leader the Russian people favored.[81] Pavlovsky explained that the character and the story were created first, and Putin was made to fit the line: "I knew the plot. I needed an actor. The plot was ready six months [before Putin was chosen]." Television made Vladimir

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[80] Herman Pirchner, Jr., "'Putin's Brain' an Echo of Absolute Tyrants," *The Hill,* Mar. 8, 2019, https://www.afpc.org/publications/articles/Putins-brain-an-echo-of-absolute-tyrants#translated%20article.

[81] Gleb Pavlovsky, "Putin's Road to War, The Putin Files," Interview by Michael Kirk, *PBS Frontline*, July 13, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/gleb-pavlovsky/.

Putin, who went from a virtual unknown to legitimately winning a Russian election in a matter of months in 1999 and early 2000. Pavlovsky, who has since fallen out of favor with Putin, has described the creation of the modern Russian media as entirely scripted from the Kremlin. He noted that factuality had no bearing on the news; rather, "You can just say anything. Create realities."[82] In this view, one can never know whether the chicken or the egg comes first. Pavlovsky asks: "Is there more interest in conspiracy theories because far-right parties are growing or are far-right parties growing because more conspiracy thinking is being pumped into the information space?"[83] It is hard to discern whether information created reality or simply described reality. In the modern information space, both options can be true.

Pomerantsev observes that for the Russian state, "information … precedes essence."[84] Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre coined the original term, "existence precedes essence," which Pomerantsev paraphrases, to describe the philosophy that humans exist first and then create their own values and meaning. This idea contradicted the traditional notion that humans are born with an innate identity and value (i.e. essence). In the world of information, this means that a story or narrative can be created first and reality shaped to fit it. It turns on its head the idea that facts and objects exist first, and then humans discover and describe them, as in Western science and journalism. Thus, when Russia's main TV channel presented a woman pretending to be a Ukrainian refugee and telling a gruesome, fabricated tale of a three-year-old Russian-speaking boy crucified by Ukrainian soldiers in a square in Ukraine, it did not matter that the story was false. The point was the meaning it created and conveyed to its audience. When asked about the story after Western journalists found it to be false, the deputy director of Russia's state TV replied that the Russian audience liked the content they produced.[85]

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[82] Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom, 161.

[83] Peter Pomerantsev, "Russia and the Menace of Unreality: How Vladimir Putin is Revolutionizing Information Warfare," *The Atlantic,* Sept. 9, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/russia-putin-revolutionizing-information-warfare/379880/.

[84] Peter Pomerantsev, *This is Not Propaganda, (*London: Faber & Faber, 2019), 82.

[85] Peter Pomerantsev, "Russia and the Menace of Unreality: How Vladimir Putin is Revolutionizing Information Warfare," *The Atlanti,*. Sept. 9, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/russia-putin-revolutionizing-information-warfare/379880/.

The idea that information precedes and forms reality permeates Russia's official thinking. Mason Clark, a researcher with the Institute for the Study of War, notes that Russia's war machine is secondary to the information campaign. The reality is created and shaped prior to the application of force: "The Russian military defines a "hybrid war" as a strategic-level effort to shape the governance and geostrategic orientation of a target state in which all actions, up to and including the use of conventional military forces in regional conflicts, are subordinate to an information campaign."[86] Thus, the influence of information and narrative has primacy over actions in the real world.

Notable Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, who has been described as a key influence on the Kremlin's geopolitical ideology, rejects the idea of universal truths and values and uses postmodern thinkers to support his claims. In an interview with the BBC in 2016, when asked by a BBC journalist whether he believed demonstrably false stories on Russian television, Dugin answered, "Absolutely!" He explained that postmodernism and modern sociology led by its founder Emile Durkheim supports the idea that "total facts" are a question of what society accepts as true. He goes on: "Postmodernity shows that every so-called truth is a matter of believing, so we believe in what we do. We believe in what we say, and that is the only way to define the truth. The truth is [a] question of belief."[87] In this telling, there can be no appeal to common facts. Belief is the only required element of truth.

Dugin also invokes Ludwig Wittgenstein Theory of Language to justify the idea that language is always an interpretation of so-called facts. Wittgenstein proposed that the meaning of words was defined by their use rather than by a rule or definition. Following from this idea, in Orwellian fashion, Surkov coined the term "sovereign democracy" as Russia turned toward authoritarianism. It, of course, did not mean democracy or sovereignty but rather an inversion of both concepts, the Russian state's complete control over "democracy."[88] Likewise, the coerced and orchestrated uprisings in Donetsk and Luhansk were described as the

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[86] Mason Clark, "Russian Hybrid War," *Institute for the Study of War, (*Military Learning and the Future of War Series, Sept. 2020), 8, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf.

[87] Aleksandr Dugin. "We Have Our Special Russian Truth." Interview by Gabriel Gatehouse. *BBC Newsnight,* BBC, Oct. 28, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGunRKWtWBs.

[88] Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom,* 46.

"Russian Spring," playing off Western descriptions of the Arab Spring. Once again, they used a term meant to convey a powerful, grassroots effort to describe the exact opposite event in Ukraine. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was deemed a "special military operation," and Russian citizens and journalists who called it a "war" were arrested.[89] The word "war" did not convey the reality the Kremlin wished to project.

This same phenomenon can be seen at the level of ideas, where whataboutism is used prolifically to assert moral equivalency to actions without any fidelity to distinguishing characteristics. Thus, when the West condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine, they say "What about Libya? What about Iraq!" President Putin repeatedly turned to this tactic in an interview with NBC in June 2021. When the interviewer asked him about the imprisonment of Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption activist, Alexei Navalny, as a foreign agent Putin turned the conversation to the United States. "The law on foreign agents wasn't something we created! You created that back in the 1930s, and your law is much harsher than ours."[90] When the interviewer asked him about protesters being arrested in Russia, Putin shot back that the police would have shot them if it had happened in America. A distorted mirror is purposefully reflected back at the West at every turn. As far back as 2007, Kremlin officials were using the example of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's four terms in office to encourage President Putin to run for a third term despite Russian laws.[91] In this way, Russia sets up a false equivalency between its actions and those of the West, understanding that most people will accept the underlying presuppositions uncritically.

Russia's modern anti-ideology has differed from preceding authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. It has not propagated a competing system as the Soviets did through communism and its worldview centered around class or the Nazis did through a worldview based on race. Despite this difference, much of what Hannah Arendt wrote in her monumental investigation of the subject in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is identifiable in modern Russia. In fact, Arendt's words about

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[89] Pashaeva, Yana. "How the Russians Arrested for Protesting the 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine Are Being Treated." *Slate.* Mar. 11, 2022. https://slate.com/technology/2022/03/russia-protesters-arrests.html.

[90] Putin, Vladimir. "Exclusive: Full Interview With Russian President Vladimir Putin." Interview by Keir Simmons. *NBC News.* June 14, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6pJd6O_NT0.

[91] Erika Niedowski, "Putin as Russia's Franklin Roosevelt?" *Baltimore Sun*, Mar. 4, 2007, https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2007-03-04-0703020014-story.html.

Nazi Germany written in 1951 bear a remarkable resemblance to Russia's current state of affairs.

> In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and that nothing was true. ... Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow. The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism.[92]

That psychological assumption is the foundation for Russia's global actions in the information environment. It need not convince others of its correctness. It only needs to create doubt that there is any correctness to be found.

In an illuminating example of how modern Russia systematically distorts facts once considered undisputable, in a discussion May 21, 2022, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova even twisted the notion of totalitarianism itself. She was asked how Russians should respond to accusations that Russia had become an Orwellian totalitarian state. She responded: "For many years we thought Orwell had been describing totalitarianism. That's one of the world's fakes. Orwell was writing about how liberalism would drive humanity into a dead end. He wasn't writing about the USSR. He was writing about the society in which he was living, about the collapse of the idea of liberalism. But the notion has been imposed on you that he was writing about you. So, tell them that he wasn't writing about us, but about them. Tell them, it's you abroad living in a fantasy world, where people can get canceled."[93] In modern Russia, even Orwell's masterpiece can be distorted and given a "new perspective" from which to view reality.

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[92] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism, (*New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
1973), 382.
[93] Francis Scarr, Twitter Post, May 21, 2022, 2:37 pm.
https://mobile.twitter.com/francis_scarr/status/1528082681673678848.

Thus, not only is it impossible for one to orient their moral compass for right action, but ultimately, in this view, there is no knowable right action to undertake. Russia has used postmodern philosophical ideas to critique and cast doubt on accepted narratives and norms. They have justified their own actions by inverting language and appealing to subjective belief systems. At every turn, they filter facts as through a kaleidoscope, fracturing truth into multiple perspectives on reality. Pomerantsev describes this phenomenon as "a strategy of power based on keeping any opposition there may be constantly confused, a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it's indefinable."[94] When people cannot orient themselves based on a truthful reality, it is debilitating to ethical behavior. The tech-empowered information space further cultivates a sense of truthlessness and unreality.

'Question More' – Emerging Technology Takes Russia's Anti-Reality West

Technologies created to connect the world proved to be the entrée for Russia's corrosive methods against what Russian theorists term the global "psychosphere."[95] At the same time as Putin consolidated his power in the 2000s, new social networking platforms exploded around the globe. Today, Facebook is approaching 3 billion users worldwide. In 2012, when the platform had only 721 million, research concluded that any two people on the globe were within four degrees of separation from each other on Facebook, a striking indicator.[96] News often breaks on X, formerly Twitter, where opinion makers convene to share pithy news, comments, and analysis. Powerful algorithms decide which content is served to which user with virality trumping veracity as the key factor for further dissemination. Into this new "public square," Russia gleefully injected its cynicism and theater.

Russian media, with the multimillion-dollar backing of the Kremlin, extended its reach beyond Russia's borders to offer the world a new "perspective." By 2014 Russian platforms like RT and Sputnik were broadcasting in multiple

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[94] Pomerantsev, "Putin's Rasputin," https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n20/peter-pomerantsev/putin-s-rasputin.

[95] Peter Pomerantsev, "Inside the Kremlin's Hall of Mirrors," *The Guardian*, Apr. 9, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/apr/09/kremlin-hall-of-mirrors-military-information-psychology.

[96] Lars Backstrom, Paolo Boldi, Marco Rosa, Johan Ugander, Sebastiano Vigna. "Four Degrees of Separation." WebSci 2012. June 22, 2012. https://research.facebook.com/publications/four-degrees-of-separation/.

languages in more than 100 countries and ran highly successful social media platforms. Complementing the broadcast media complex, Russia used the modern information environment to employ thousands of trolls, bots, and cyborgs to blanket the information environment with new "truths" and "realities."

Russia's international media platforms aim not to inform audiences but rather to create doubt in accepted narratives, to deconstruct them. The tagline of RT is "Question More," inviting its audience to doubt what it thinks it knows. At the RT launch in Argentina in 2014, President Putin stated explicitly that RT's purpose was to challenge the international mainstream media's monopoly on the "truth" and provide a different "perspective."[97] The perspective of RT in practice is to erode faith in Western ideals and institutions. Thus, most of its stories are a negative framing of whatever the United States and Western institutions do or say. On one afternoon in March 2022, a survey of RT in Spanish's Facebook page included a report claiming the EU's ban of Russian flights in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine would have a negative global impact on prices, routes, and the climate.[98] Another story blamed Western restrictions on Russian gas for Latin America's rising gas prices, and another post focused on a Chinese government official parroting Russian accusations of U.S. biological laboratories in Ukraine.[99] None of the stories tell the story of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Instead, they seek to undermine the West's response to it.

While RT and Sputnik operate openly as state-sponsored media organizations, an ecosystem of human trolls and machine bots work alongside the official media to create content, astroturf the information environment, and amplify narratives. Several former employees have described their work at the Internet Research Agency, later labeled the "troll factory" in St. Petersburg, Russia. Their job was to create the perception of organic engagement favorable to the Kremlin on social media. According to insiders, they were given the storylines to promote throughout the day and had a quota of comments and original postings they were required to complete. The IRA had departments for each major social media platform, like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter (now X), and

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[97] "Cristina Kirchner Y Vladimir Putin Firman Acuerdo De TV Para Dar a 'Conocer La Verdadera Rusia Y La Verdadera Argentina,'" *La Nación,* October 9, 2014. https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/cristina-kirchner-tendra-una-videoconferencia-con-vladimir-putin-nid1734179/.

[98] Facebook, RT en Espanol, March 15, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/ActualidadRT.

[99] "China Urges Pentagon to Open Up about 'Biolabs' in Ukraine." *RT*. Mar. 8, 2022. https://www.rt.com/russia/551468-china-details-pentagon-biolabs/.

domestically popular ones in Russia like VKontakte. Social media allowed the Russian trolls to interact directly with Americans and other target audiences outside Russia's borders. The work included impersonating Americans to create and pump false stories into the American information space to exploit divisions and provoke outrage.[100] To amplify the human content, automated Twitter accounts, or bots, were programmed to tweet, retweet, and comment to achieve virality and get stories to trend online. In fact, in 2016 the top two stories on social media, both heavily promoted by the IRA, were that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump for president and that Wikileaks had confirmed Hillary Clinton had sold weapons to the Islamic State (ISIS).[101] Russia used a potent mix of human ingenuity, social media-enabled connectedness, and AI-powered automation to simulate the appearance of genuine interaction.

Russia has also used hacking and cyber-attacks to push its information narratives. Where in the past spies had to infiltrate organizations, today hackers can burrow into networks from thousands of miles away and steal and release information. This technique is considered mal-information in that the information is true but used with the intention to cause harm. In 2016, for instance, Russia hacked the Democratic National Convention and released troves of emails that damaged the image of then-candidate Hillary Clinton.[102] In 2014, a phone call between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, discussing how to help Ukrainian leaders move forward as the Yanukovych regime fell, was recorded and released to promote the narrative that Ukraine was a client state of the U.S. State Department.[103]

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[100] Adrienne Chen, "The Agency," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html.

[101] Tim Weiner, *The Folly and the Glory: America, Russia, and Political Warfare 1945-2000*, First edition, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020), 250.

[102] Nakashima, Ellen and Shane Harris. "How the Russians Hacked the DNC and Passed its Emails to Wikileaks." *Washington Post.* July 13, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-the-russians-hacked-the-dnc-and-passed-its-emails-to-wikileaks/2018/07/13/af19a828-86c3-11e8-8553-a3ce89036c78_story.html.

[103] Krishnadev Calamur, "U.S. Diplomat's Leaked Phone Call Gets Poor Reception," *NPR*. Feb. 7, 2014. https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/02/07/273020508/u-s-diplomats-leaked-phone-call-gets-poor-reception.

it possible to produce convincing fabrications that make reality harder and harder to discern.

Vladislav Surkov gloated in a 2019 essay for Russian publication Nezavisimaya Gazeta, "Foreign politicians allege Russian interference with elections and referenda across the globe. In fact, the matter is even more serious -- Russia interferes with their brain, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness."[107] Considering Surkov's penchant for performance, the claim may be inflated, but the problem it elucidates is genuine. For Russia, their actions in the information environment are not only a matter of snarky comments by trolls or hacking for an advantage, they seek to shift people's very perception of reality -- to redraw the maps from which they direct their individual and national course. As the technology grows more sophisticated, the lines between truth and falsehood, reality and illusion will be harder to distinguish.

This chapter has shown how Russia uses modern technology and the information space to both transmit messages and to shape reality and perception. In Ukraine, the "reality" they created through actions in the information environment shaped the events on the ground. Not only that, Russia's fabricated narrative about Ukrainian neo-Nazis and Western aggression became the basis for a full invasion in 2022. At the core of the Russian state's actions is a worldview that hinges on the idea that reality and truth are constructed and not independently existing. Rather than trying to persuade people of the truth, they work to undermine the very idea that truth exists. The information environment is increasingly conducive to Russia's philosophical approach, as sophisticated technology like AI can increasingly create experiences that "feel" real.

Conclusion

> *The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever.*
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> *-Hannah Arendt*[108]

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[107] Vladislav Surkov, "Putin's Persistent Nation-State," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta,* Feb. 11, 2019,
https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html?print=Y.

[108] Arendt, "Truth and Politics," https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics.

Ethically speaking, the converging philosophical and technological trends are deeply problematic. If there is no objective reality, then it is acceptable to create it. If there is no truth, there can be, by definition, no lies. If "truth" is only a matter of a society's or an individual's belief in it, with no need for corresponding evidence or logical coherence or even pragmatic sensibility, then there is no space for debate or common ground. Each community's or individual's beliefs based on their subjective experiences and perspectives are sovereign.

Taking this idea to its logical conclusion means there is no basis for shared understanding. Power, in this view, is the primary animating force and the only arbiter between competing interests or "truths." As Dugin said in the BBC interview, "only war could decide [sic] who is the boss."[109] This is the clear implication of Russia's war in Ukraine. Two irreconcilable "truths" collided, and Russia has made clear its "truth" is not bound by facts. Hannah Arendt warned in her 1967 essay "Truth and Politics" that facts were the most vulnerable type of truth. She observed that:

> Facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories ... Perhaps the chances that Euclidean mathematics or Einstein's theory of relativity – let alone Plato's philosophy – would have been reproduced in time if their authors had been prevented from handing them down to posterity are not very good either, yet they are infinitely better than the chances that a fact of importance, forgotten or, more likely, lied away, will one day be rediscovered.[110]

It is paradoxical that in a world of abundant information, truth can be lost, but it is a distinct possibility.

While Russia provides a stark example of the dangers of embracing a society detached from factual reality, many other countries have manifested similar tendencies. Pomerantsev noted in a 2020 interview that "The same sort of politics I saw in Russia years ago is the same kind of politics I'm seeing now in the UK and Brazil and the Philippines and the US. And the internet and digital media

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[109] Dugin, BBC Interview, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGunRKWtWBs.
[110] Arendt, "Truth and Politics," https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/02/25/truth-and-politics.

technologies have been the essential tools behind all of it."[111] Importantly, technological advances now allow humankind to convincingly create truth and a competing reality for the first time in history.

The world's population already exists increasingly in digital reality, and digital reality's sophistication continues to grow explosively. A recent study estimated that the average adult would spend approximately 44 years of their life on screens.[112] More and more time will be spent gathering information and communicating online. Information will become more ubiquitous and fast-moving between entities. Orienting oneself in a factual world will be increasingly difficult and thus ethical decisions will become more fraught. As the global village careens into the digital universe, it is worth considering how truth and reality may become its unwitting casualties. Russia provides a stark warning that the world would be wise to heed.

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Lauren Perlaza's "Truth and Reality, Lost in Translation: Russia and the Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies and the Information Environment": A review essay

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Abstract

Advances in technology are often accompanied both by optimistic and pessimistic responses to what people imagine the technology will do to human beings and their societies. At all times, when thinking about any technological innovation's acceptability, it is essential to understand what the technology is, as well as how humans can control it. In this review essay, I examine the main points of Lauren Perlaza's "Truth and Reality, Lost in Translation: Russia and the Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies and the Information Environment", and then present a more optimistic view of its social impact.

Keywords: Civic discourse, democracy, emerging technologies, information environment, totalitarianism

Lauren Perlaza's work in this issue has provided an important contribution to information theory now made more urgent by early 2023's potentially break-through Artificial Intelligence algorithms. Perlaza provides an overarching theory that two converging trends will destabilize democracies and civic discourse across the world. The two trends are emerging technology in the information environment that will make it harder for humans to discern truth and make sense of their world. The second trend will aggravate the first, which is philosophical theories that dismiss objective truth and prioritize subjective experience and emotion. The author then provides concrete evidence (as much as that it possible in our post-modern world) in the form of a case study of Putin's Russia and his concerted efforts to confuse friendly populations and foes alike.

This important essay is divided into three parts: "Information: Maps of Reality and Shared Experience" which provides the theoretical basis for engaging the questions of fake news and every society's need for truth

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seeking; part 2, "Whose Truth? What Reality? Who Decides", which examines the theory of post modernism and the preparatory role such a multi-generational assault on objective truth plays when combined with internet technology; part 3, "Case Study: Russia's War on Reality", which provides well researched and exhaustively footnoted examples of the outright assault on the citizenry's efforts to understand their own country, Russia, as well as form a more accurate understanding of the West (the US and NATO nations).

The theoretical section provides an up-to-date review of current information theory, which is a leading-edge field of inquiry in business, government, and the military. Even if the reader stops at the first chapter, they will be better informed for it, understanding that "information pollution" has always been around, but now is super-charged by internet and digital technology. There has been well-informed citizenry, to be sure, but often powerful forces have adopted one or more tactics of "mis-information", "dis-information", or "mal-information". Perlaza calls attention to the fact that Czarist Russia was the source of some of the most damaging dis-information campaigns, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" which eventually contributed to the Nazi Holocaust by energizing antisemitism across Germany, helping smooth the way for Hitler's concentration camps. The author explains that each and every society must seek truth and help to create from the best available information "Maps of Reality and Shared Experience." But when now confronted with malevolent uses of digital technology, what can result is "Information Disorder and Maps to Nowhere." Yet, digital technology and the internet alone are not responsible for the epic challenge now emerging. To truly destabilize societies, there must be a second factor, which came in the form of a new philosophy, Post Modernism.

In "Whose Truth? What Reality? Who Decides", Perlaza examines ethics in the age of Post Modernism and argues that the dismissal of objective truth and the prioritization of subjective experience and emotion amplifies the problems around malleable digital technology. And the author further recognizes that relative truth in the United States causes fundamental problems even without concerted efforts by Putin's Russia to create confusion. The United States, for example, is among one of the most welcoming to the concepts of relative truth purveyed through Hollywood films and giant American social media companies. Yet, the US Government

actively supports the United Nations and organizations like the International Criminal Court, both of which rely on accepted rule following and concepts of universal justice. How can a country as powerful and influential as the United State reconcile such competing philosophies? The author does not venture to say, but then leads us to the next section, a case study of how an aggressive, murderous regime as is Putin's Russia can take advantage of such unresolved tension.

So, what has Russia done to give us a glimpse of totalitarian information tactics of the future? Much. As Perlaza explains in "Case Study: Russia's War on Reality", shockingly much. But malevolent information strategies (combining misinformation, dis-information, mal-information) have a long history in Russia. The author recalls the use of Potemkin Villages, the creation of fake peasant homes dotted along the rail lines between Moscow and St Petersburg. This disinformation strategy sought to mislead Russian Royalty and visiting foreign dignitaries as to the true living conditions of Russian peasantry, offering up fake imagery of prosperous villages, and thus obscuring the decaying rural hovels as was more representative of rural Russia at that time. The author explains how today Russian authorities use the "Cyber Realm" to move the citizenry's perceptions further from reality. The most important of these examples is the decade- long attack on a peaceful neighbor, Ukraine, which regained its independence as a sovereign nation in the early 1990s. The author describes in detail, supported by numerous references to eyewitnesses and detailed military reports, the disinformation campaigns that followed the shoot down of civilian air liners; suppression of popular movements in Kiev's "Maidan" square resulting in the death of many by sniper fire; the use of "little green men" (actually Russian troops) in the liberation of Crimea by Ukrainians from neo-Nazis; and most recently, in the all-out invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In all these cases, mis-information, dis-information, and mal-information tactics were used, combining talented human trolls, amplified by botnets to push this corrupted information to viral levels. But worse yet in the struggle to seek truth, the author notes that Russia now uses powerful A.I. to create "Deep Fakes" of the Ukraine President Zelensky, in a further effort to confuse the Ukrainian people and their soldiers.

So, where does this lead? The author argues that the future is one of information chaos, and the destruction of *any* society's ability to create a shared reality beyond the control of authoritarian regimes. When a society

cannot understand their world, they are incapable of taking action, and thus power flows upward to the top. Perlaza believes the Russian approach to governing in the digital age will be adopted by authoritarian regimes across the globe, and evidence of such an approach is already emerging in China. The author also implies that such a challenge of information chaos may confront western democratic societies as well, even if delayed by a few years.

The essay is compelling by providing a synthesis of information theory with a factual case study of contemporary Russia. But I believe the author's conclusions may be too pessimistic about the future. In the United States authors such as Yuval Harari have predicted digital challenges to stable community posed by digitization and artificial intelligence. Michael Lind has lamented digital confusion combined with postmodern theory has also undermined democratic processes in the federal government of the United States. But Lind suggests solutions to the digital chaos now engulfing or emanating from the national ruling classes. He argues that if governance can be pushed down to more of the state and local level, the chaos will be reduced. More specifically, if the stakeholders outside Washington D.C., in particular the state governments, churches, farm groups, and labor unions, will insist upon and help generate more truthful information, and thus improve the quality of debate and decision making.

If Lind is right, it is quite possible similar counter-vailing forces may eventually emerge in Russia, perhaps after this latest dictator retires. Various Russian groups, representing their stake holders, will need to come together to address real issues of environmental degradation, falling birth rates, and the limits of an extraction economy that cannot rely on Siberian oil forever. It is important to recall the Russian people have an incredible capacity to endure and persevere. The Russian people endured the Potemkin illusions and Czarist police for centuries. The same Russian people survived Communism and Stalinist Soviet repression and endured total war to stop Nazi Germany. These are the same Russian people who gave the world Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Solzhenitsyn, some of the most reflective and critical thinkers in the history of the world. It seems equally possible that Russian leaders of the next generation will eventually permit or fail to suppress the Russian peoples' quest to build a shared experience and a more honest quest for truth, even in the age of Post Modernism. The Russian

people may eventually help teach repressed peoples across the world how to seek truth in the Age of Information Chaos.

Prior to his move back home to North Dakota, **Dr. Mark Hagerott** *served on the faculty and held numerous academic leadership roles at the United States Naval Academy. He also served as a planning and strategy director in one of the largest U.S. Army educational organizations, NATO Training Mission, which included army, air force, and medical school programs. Hagerott served as distinguished professor and deputy director of the Center for Cyber Security Studies at the Naval Academy and served on the Defense Science Board summer study of unmanned systems 2014-2015. He is a commissioner on the Midwestern Higher Education Compact, and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.*

Chancellor Hagerott's research and writing are focused on the evolution of technology, education, and changes in technical career paths, and he is the author of multiple articles and book chapters, with a recent emphasis on unmanned systems. He served as a non-resident cyber Fellow of the New America Foundation, 2015-2017. He was among the first military professors from the United States to brief the Geneva Convention on the challenge of lethal robotic machines and argue the merits of early arms control measures in 2014. In addition, his proposals for national education reform of the Land Grant universities have been published in The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and have been presented on Capitol Hill and the White House.*

The Call of the Unicorn: Supporting Native American Students & Why It Matters

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Abstract

Native American students comprise less than 1% of the undergraduate and graduate student population in the United States. Post-secondary data often leaves Native students out of the research—noting a small sample size. These statistics, or lack thereof, arguably make the case for an education system that is more responsive to the specific needs of Native American students. So where do we start? This article will use storytelling and culturally responsive andragogy as a conceptual framework. The presenter will share personal experiences as a multi-ethnic Indigenous student and educator. Additionally, the author will discuss how allowing for multi-ethnic educational approaches to support Indigenous students promotes a sense of belonging and community for all students.

Keywords: Culturally responsive andragogy, education, Native American students, storytelling

Preface

There were seven prophets that came to the Anishinaabe, which are referred to as the Seven Fire Prophecy. The prophets came at a time when the people were living a full and peaceful life on the Northeastern coast of North America, and they left the people with seven predictions of what the future would have in store for them. The prophecies were referred to as the Seven Fires and each fire's prediction discussed points in time that would come in the future of the Anishinaabe/Ojibway people.

The first prophet said to the people of the Great Migration. A time when they were to leave their homes by the sea to search for the land in the shape of the great turtle. This turtle island would bring forth both the beginning and the end of their journey. The second prophet said that while the people will be camped by a body of water, the direction of the Sacred Shell will be lost, and the birth of a girl will point them back to their traditional ways. The third prophet said that the people will find their right

path to the land where "food grows upon the waters." This is the land where they must move their families. The Fourth Fire was originally given to the people by two prophets, and they both came as one. They told of the coming of the New People or the light skinned race. The first prophet said that if they come wearing the face of brotherhood, it will bring wondrous change that will unite them as a mighty nation. The second prophet warned that if they come wearing the face of death, it will bring forth suffering, poisoned waters, and fish that were unfit to eat.

The fifth prophet said that in the time of the Fifth Fire, there will come a time of great struggle that will affect the lives of all Native people. One would come forth bearing the promise of great joy and salvation. If the people accept this false promise and abandon their teachings, they will cause the near destruction of the people. The prophet of the Sixth Fire said that during the time of the Sixth Fire, it will be apparent that the promise from the Fifth Fire would be a false promise. Those who were deceived by this promise will take their children away from the teachings of the Elders. Grandsons and granddaughters will turn their backs away from their elders. Our Elders will lose their reason for living and their purpose in life. A new sickness will come among the people and our balance will be disrupted.

The seventh prophet, said to look different from the other prophets, was young and had a strange light in his eyes. He said that during the time of the Seventh Fire, the New People would emerge. They will need to retrace their steps that were left behind and rediscover the teachings. This will guide them back to their Elders who will guide them along their journey, but many of the Elders will have fallen asleep. They will awaken with nothing to offer. Other Elders will remain silent, as no one asks anything of them. The New People will have to be careful in how they approach the Elders, as the task the New People asks of them will not be easy. If the New People will remain strong in their quest for the teachings, there will be a rebirth of the Anishinaabe Nation. The Sacred Fire will be lit again. This is the time that the light skinned race is given a choice between two roads and if they choose the right road, it will light the Eighth and final fire. This final fire will bring us eternal peace, love, brotherhood, and sisterhood. If they make the wrong choice of the roads, then the destruction which they brought with them in coming to this country will return, which will cause much suffering and death to all

people. It is believed that the first six fires from the prophecy have come to pass, and we are now in the time of the Seventh Fire.
-adapted from tribal elder interview participant

Introduction

What comes to your mind when you hear the word "unicorn" and what would you say if you were ever referred to one? According to Merriam Webster (2023), a unicorn refers to "a mythical, usually white animal generally depicted with the body and head of a horse with long flowing mane and tail and a single often spiraled horn in the middle of the forehead." This is the version of the word that I always thought of in passing. I never wanted to be referred to as one, but then—I was. It was right before graduation of my doctorate. I was presented with the common question of what my plans were post-grad. Then, I was asked, "so how does it feel to be a unicorn?" Being referred to one felt almost dehumanizing in the moment—a mythical creature often referred to in literature and movies. How did it feel? Well, it felt uncomfortable to say the least.

I didn't always feel comfortable in higher education. I felt like I was always in the minority because I was in fact in the minority. A Native American woman who was also single parenting a child on the autism spectrum—I was the minority. I often disagreed with my peers, while some would turn to me and ask about culture. I wasn't representative of a whole demographic—I was just one person. A person that often struggled to feel heard in the classroom.

Answering the Call: The Unicorn Theory

When referring to research in higher education, we often look at the statistics. What if statistics do not exist? Do we simply just brush it off and dismiss an entire group due to lack of sample size? The lack of sample size and the equity gap for Native American students in higher education is exactly the problem. Why not recognize the needs for Native American students in higher education in order to close the gap? The response of "we do not have enough native students in higher education to get accurate statistics" is a copout—an excuse.

It was graduation day, and I still didn't know what to make of the question—how does it feel to be a unicorn? I asked my advisor, "What does

being referred to as a unicorn even mean?" She responded, "To put it simply, you're a rarity. You're a Native American woman with a doctorate." Then, she asked me, "Did you even realize how wonderful and rare you actually are to have done this?" Thus, the unicorn theory emerges: the acceptance of a scholar in academia as a rarity with little to no regard as to why statistically there is a gap.

Being Native in Academia

In terms of statistics, Native American students comprise less than 1% of the undergraduate and graduate student population in the United States. Post-secondary data often leaves Native students out of the research—noting a small sample size (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). These statistics, or lack thereof, arguably make the case for an education system that is more responsive to the specific needs of Native American students.

I was raised with both Metis and Anishinaabe traditions, (my father's family were Master Metis Fiddlers, I learned how to jig, I learned how to jingle dress dance, and my mother made sure I participated in Anishinaabe ceremony), so I grew up walking the two planes of Metis and Anishinaabe identity. Metis or Michif is described as "mixed blood."

During my dissertation study, I was reminded of my own experiences speaking what little Michif/Metis language I could—a native French speaker told me that I was speaking "broken French." I was not speaking French, I was speaking Michif/Metis. My culture (including the language) is so unique that many people not associated with the tribe may not know it even exists, because it is so rare. This shows how the culturally sustaining andragogy can come into play in higher education—coming together to make something unique that shows a connection between two originally different cultures.

The research of Pewerady (1993) and Godinho et al. (2014) both support the idea that culturally relevant teaching is an effective teaching strategy for teaching Indigenous students. As I look back to my educational experience, I often think of the teacher who tried to be culturally sensitive giving us a lecture about Indian boarding schools. I became extremely emotional listening to the testimonies given by my elders in a short film she had shown to us. I did not know why—it was not until I got older that I even heard the term "historical trauma." I appreciate that a teacher tried to teach

me about an aspect of my background, but I felt for me to truly connect with the material, she needed to be aware of the trauma that she would be opening for me. I had experienced emotions that I was not prepared for at the time. For these reasons, culturally relevant teaching strategies should be informed by taking the historical traumas of all students in mind.

Trauma Informed Practice

In the higher education classroom, cultural awareness doesn't go far enough in supporting indigenous students. The term *cultural safety* is more appropriate. Cultural awareness is simply just acknowledging that a student has a cultural identity other than your own. Cultural sensitivity is when we take steps to consider our own cultural identity and experiences to determine how they can impact others. When we use the term cultural safety, it refers to when students perceive us as "safe" and "not a threat" to their own cultural identity being accepted in the classroom (Tujague et al, 2021). Additionally, "trauma-informed education is intimately connected with equity and justice" (Imad, 2022). This approach to education is often connected with cognitive brain theory, as when we experience social rejection (both real and perceived), it can put an additional stressor on our brains (Imad, 2022). When we have negative stressors on our brains, it can affect our ability to learn and process information, which is why we are led to believe the notion of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to hold merit.

When we are making sure our classrooms are culturally safe with trauma informed practices, we are making sure that we are providing a place for healing to happen—which starts by getting to know our students' individual stories. Healing begins when we share our stories and experiences, which helps us to understand the trauma we have suffered from in the past and present. As practitioners, understanding the trauma of indigenous students has led to social, emotional, and economic disadvantage helps us to move past racist assumptions (Tujague et al, 2021). In turn, this helps us to move forward to become agents of change in higher education to create a learning environment that reduces stress on the student, promotes a safe space for openness, and advances racial equity.

When we think about student development and how historical and contemporary trauma can play a role in student learning, we must make trauma-informed choices in our practice. Using the tenants of what current

research on trauma informed practice looks like for working with indigenous students, it creates a framework of what a *culturally safe* classroom climate would look like in higher education. They are as follows:

- **Individual Reflection** - It is important for an educator to reflect on their own roles and culture in order to practice cultural humility and enhance growth. "It is rare for practitioners to reflect on intergenerational privilege and white privilege that contribute to the equity gap" ((Tujague et al, 2021). When we are reflecting on ourselves, we are more likely to focus more on how we can enhance the student-teacher relationship.
- **Building trusting relationships with our students** - For indigenous students to be comfortable enough to share openly and honestly with their instructors and advisors, they need to be approached with great care. Chilisa (2012) argues that "[Indigenous] ways of seeing reality, ways of knowing, and value systems are informed by their indigenous knowledge systems and shaped by the struggle to resist and survive the assault on their culture" (p. 13). When we keep this in mind, we can be culturally conscious of their value system and needs.
- **Building a classroom community** -Encouraging peer support and collaboration in the classroom can promote a sense of belonging both socially and academically.
- **Empowering our students** - Offering choice in assignments or in the assessment process can be beneficial in student growth and allows students to take accountability for their own learning. It can also encourage students to self-advocate for themselves.
- **Understanding that traumatic experiences are just in the past** - While historical trauma is a factor to consider, it's not the only factor to consider. Trauma can be compounded with different experiences (including those of experiencing microaggressions in the educational setting). We must acknowledge that both historical and contemporary traumas can affect student learning.
- **Knowing that trauma informed approaches aren't simply "going easy" on our students** - educators can still challenge

their students while being supportive of their needs (i.e., allowing for extra time to complete an assignment after the death of a loved one).

Once we understand our students' stories, we can reduce the risk of re-traumatization when we are sensitive to student needs. This practice starts with relationship building and maintaining those relationships throughout the learning process.

As I reflect on trauma-informed practices, I think back to a time in higher education where I was faced with the decision to keep going with my studies or to drop out of school. It was at the beginning of a new semester and my father had passed away suddenly. I had reached out for additional support from my instructor explaining the situation and asking for a few days' extension, as I had an obligation to my family and to my father to help with the funeral (and to grieve). I was dismissed and it had a tremendous impact on my semester and my relationship with my instructor. In order to make this experience a positive one, I noted it as what not to do. It's why I advocate now for trauma informed practices, because it's experiences such as the one that I had that help to contribute to the unicorn theory.

Supporting Multicultural Indigenous Students

For multicultural Indigenous educators, the use of culturally relevant teaching can support Indigenous populations in surviving the assault on our culture. Education can serve as a tool for decolonization with Indigenous populations. As some studies have demonstrated, the Indigenous communities affected by culturally sustaining teaching strategies expressed their appreciation for the educational systems using their culture as the basis for enhancing student learning and promoting student engagement. Meaning—we learn more about ourselves and the role education has in our culture. Pewewardy's (1992) argument for "inserting education into the culture" can be a tool for decolonization as a method of passing down important cultural lessons and practices. Culture is the first consideration when approaching education with Indigenous students as an attempt to connect with something that often matters most to us—our identity. Therefore, it creates a more meaningful educational experience by connecting home with school (Gay, 2000).

Despite being an effective teaching method for diverse students, culturally relevant pedagogy does not go far enough for Indigenous students. This approach does not guarantee the support for multicultural students, which many Indigenous students would identify with as "mixed bloods." In the next section, I will discuss the teaching methodology of culturally sustaining pedagogy and how it uses culturally responsive pedagogy as its foundation. This is an extension of CRP and serves is a more effective method to teach Indigenous students who identify as multicultural or multitribal.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is a term that was created in the educational research of Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014). Ladson-Billings has the experience working in urban areas that consist of high numbers of African American students. She inquired about what was going well with these students, as well as studied the classrooms of teachers that had pedagogical success working with these populations. Culturally relevant pedagogy was an attempt for her to teach newer generations of teaching education students to approach education who would bring an "appreciation to their students' assets" populated with culturally diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 74). According to Ladson-Billings, many educational researchers have expanded on her work. Ladson-Billings expressed that her term has "taken on a life of its own…totally unrecognizable to me" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 82). She comments on the extensions that others make on her work on culturally relevant pedagogy— as something that is foundational but needs to be pushed further (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Ladson-Billings agrees with these people. One of those extensions is that of Paris (2012)—which Ladson Billings cites in her article "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. The Remix."

According to Paris (2012), culturally sustaining pedagogy is a term that supports the ever-changing ideas of heritage and community, which thereby aims to also support the value of multi-ethnic and multilingual students in the present and future. In addition to this statement, Paris (2012), also points out that the cultural practices of Indigenous people have "historically been and continue to be the target of deficit approaches; contemporary linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural research has pushed against the tendency of researchers and practitioners to assume unidirectional correspondence between race, ethnicity, language, and cultural ways of being" (p. 94).

However, Paris (2012) argues that to maintain our increasingly multi-ethnic and multilingual society, we must call upon culturally sustaining pedagogy. Paris' (2012) argument states that neither the term culturally responsive or culturally relevant go far enough. This is in relation to the idea that both terms are in fact unidirectional and do not guarantee support for a multiculturalism and multilingualism among students. Paris' (2012) essay springboards off these two terms to offer the alternative term of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which requires our pedagogies to go beyond responsive and relevant cultural experiences of students, but also requires teachers to support students in sustaining their cultural and linguistic competence, and also offers access to dominant cultural competence (Paris, 2012).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to foster and sustain cultural pluralism. Paris (2012) states that "a pluralistic society need both the many and the one to be vibrant" (p. 95). Paris (2012) states that teachers must be open to the idea of sustaining students in both their traditional ways, but also in the evolving ways they are living in the current dominant culture (which promotes cultural hybridity). Kraidy (2002) states that "Politically, a critical hybridity theory considers hybridity as a space where intercultural and international communication practices are continuously negotiated in interactions of differential power," therefore cultural mixture (hybridity) serves as a tool for resistance to dominant culture (p. 317). In addition, monocultural approaches to education have had and continue to have devastating effects on educational access and achievements particularly to students of color (Paris, 2012).

Young, Herring, & Morrison (2017) build from the framework of culturally sustaining pedagogy that Paris lays out in his essay. Young et al. (2017) create the foundation of what a classroom climate using culturally sustaining pedagogy would look like in academia. They move forward by providing suggestions for teachers who wish to use this pedagogical approach in their teaching. Young et al. (2017) suggest the following seven conceptual strategies to use:

- **Practice cultural humility** - develop a sense of self awareness of your own culture and attitudes. This is a framework that allows the practitioner to reflect on their own preconceived ideas and biases they may have, which allows

educators to reflect on how their own experiences and perceptions impact relationships with others.

- **Cultivate inclusive relationships** - Inclusive teachers are thought to welcome all students and realize that their classrooms have students with a variety of different abilities, interests, and motivations. They also understand their colleagues as a way to collaborate to extend the learning for every student. "When teachers feel responsible for that relationship, it changes how they teach" (Young et al., 2017, p. 177).

- **Plan lessons for everyone** - There is no "one size fits all" approach to education. Lessons should move away from this idea to teaching and learning. Inquiry based, project-based, and problem-based learning strategies are all examples of ways that you can plan lessons and instruction for everyone.

- **Build teacher capacity** - an essential component of inclusive learning environments is built on the idea that all teachers are skilled in teaching all of the students. Specialists and classroom teachers must work together to share instructional resources and methods—in turn, developing stronger skills within the practitioner.

- **Use strength-based language** - in educational environments, words that are commonly used to describe students that struggle are disorder, deficit, and dysfunction. An alter Indigenous to this common practice is using words to describe a students' strengths and gifts. Teachers that participate in this practice allow their students' strengths to learn new material and develop a better relationship with the individual student, as well as their families.

- **Develop a growth mindset** - This is a decision theory from Carol Dweck (2015) that states that rather than thinking of teaching and learning as "fixed," educators must adopt the idea that everyone can get better at learning through practice and developing more experiences with learning. People who have a growth mindset, believe that everyone can learn through practice.

- **Understand that learning is not linear** - educators must recognize that not all students learn in a linear way. Students do not have to master the basics in order to participate in higher-order thinking. Different topics, skills, and knowledge

> should be revisited over several years to allow students to develop a deep understanding of the content being taught to them. As a student grows and matures, so do their interpretations of complex topics (Young et al., 2017).

In the conclusion of this essay, Young et al. (2017) state that "culturally sustaining reflective education is the framework for a quality education that honors our students' diverse backgrounds and educational needs" (p. 178).

As a multicultural educator, I find the expansion of Ladson-Billings' (2014) work with culturally relevant pedagogy from Paris (2012) and Young et al. (2017) to be insightful and to truly honor multiple parts of a student's identity. I identify as Metis or Michif. I grew up with multiple parts of my cultural identity, and my family honored traditions from the multiple cultures that my Metis background represent—which include foods, dance, music, etc. Unfortunately, I can recall a specific instance when a non-Native male professor asked me to discuss my culture with the class, when I shared my Metis culture (sharing about the Michif language, bush dances, and the importance of family in our culture), he told me "No, I thought you said you were Native American." It felt like I was treated as being "less than" for being proud of my Metis/Michif heritage—like I wasn't a REAL native. I'm referred to as a unicorn in some instances, but treated as less than for pushing back against what Indigenous scholars are stereotyped to do in higher education. These types of experiences make it ever more important of the work of Paris (2012) and Young et al. (2017), which help to support students like me—those who identify with more than one culture.

Multicultural education must first recognize that we are still learning new strategies to merge cultures together. LeClair (2008) states that we must first resist the genocidal gestures of appropriation. She goes on to say that we must not be afraid of cross-cultural work. Mistakes are inevitable. There is the idea that we can be both academics and Indigenous women— we can identify as being part of more than one culture. LeClair (2008) refers to Vizenor's (1997) writing as a tool "to teach a new way of thinking, a way that deliberately violates conventional codes and obvious categories, as a tool of liberation" (p. 66). She also quotes Vizenor (1997), stating that it is not possible to translate Indigenous traditions and culture into the English language without giving privilege to that culture over the other (LeClair,

2008). This practice gives the dominant culture a master template by comparison, but we still, in fact, use the English language to do our work. How can we not? The remembered tradition of our Indigenous ancestors can grant us survival. By allowing ourselves to be visible—but not necessarily understood as we would generally prefer—is a beginning. A beginning to reimagine ourselves into an urban landscape that has attempted to eradicate us as Indigenous people (LeClair, 2008). It is this reimagination that helps us to decolonize education—in order to liberate ourselves from a dominance that has taken over us for generations.

Learning new ways to break away from the dominant culture helps us to survive—this includes finding new ways to teach younger generations. "Profound educational innovation requires reforms where 'the recognition and intellectual activation of Indigenous knowledge today is an act of empowerment by Indigenous people'" (Battiste, 2002, p. 4). It is through this reformation that Indigenous knowledge systems act as a tool for resilience against the current neocolonial education systems that continue to oppress the Indigenous populations. The mainstream education system throughout the United States and parts of Canada continue to play a "significant role in assimilatory processes subjugating Indigenous knowledge while celebrating and promoting the dominant settler culture" (Arellano, Friis, & Stuart, 2019, p. 394). In order to reimagine ourselves in this landscape, we must first acknowledge that to be resilient, we must act as agents of change in order to accomplish an education system that empowers Indigenous populations. The effects of colonization are still present today, for us to decolonize education systems, we must first go back to our "roots." What this means for Indigenous populations is to learn how our tribes lived prior to being colonized. This is essential in the breaking away from the dominant culture—to learn how to live using the methods that we used before to promote resilience.

Decolonizing education through culturally sustaining pedagogy refers to an approach that recovers tribal practices that were present and in use prior to different periods of colonization through a reimagination of our current urban landscape. Tuck (2011) states that colonialism is not something historical, as Indigenous populations continue to see the effects of colonialism in the present. Tuck's ideas of post-colonialism and decolonization are terms to be contested—as we are continuing to restore what we lost from colonialism. She goes on to say that curriculum for

Indigenous populations needs to 'repatriate' or 'restore our homeland' when approaching education. Tuck (2011) refers to repatriating curriculum as "reclaiming our sovereignty, land, subsistence rights, cultural knowledge and artifacts, theories, epistemologies, and axiologies" (p. 35). Hatala et al. (2016) state that "resilience among [Indigenous] populations also involves moving beyond processes of returning to a previous state…toward embracing new ideas of transformation and adaption into something new" (p. 1914). This transformation is necessary to take ownership for the knowledge systems for Indigenous populations in order to be resilient within an education system. Reimagining ourselves in the urban landscapes begins in the restoration of the knowledge systems that taught us prior to mainstream education—prior to Indian Boarding Schools.

It is important to recognize the need for decolonizing education for Indigenous students. For Indigenous populations to build resiliency in an educational system, they must first take control of that system. This ownership and cultural connections placed in the educational system will help to heal these populations from the cultural trauma that Indigenous people have today. Thus, making the role of the unicorn ever more important in academia. It is necessary to reimagine how an educational system could look like as Indigenous people take ownership of these systems. The cultural values of the Indigenous population will reflect in this shift of the educational system. One way that we can take back ownership of our knowledge systems is to examine the different ways that Indigenous people were taught prior to education and reimagine it for the present day (i.e., oral storytelling/history, intergenerational teachers, and land-based education would be examples of prior teaching strategies among Indigenous populations that are deemed to still be effective today).

Conclusions

In my own experiences growing up, identifying as Metis, I sometimes felt like I was "othered" in the classroom and that Metis was a dirty word. It was still how I identified, but I did not always feel welcome. According to Fiola (2015), "…most Metis are unaware that we are included in the *Oshkibimaadiziig* (New People) spoken in the Seven Fires Prophecy and that we are welcome…" (p. 2). Many multi-ethnic educators often stress the importance of respecting others' cultural identities in addition to your

own. The views of multi-ethnic Indigenous educators reinforce the idea that educators must consider all possible cultural identities present in the classroom (including those on Indigenous reservations).

Now, I ask you again, what comes to mind when you hear the word "unicorn" and what would you say if you were ever referred to as one? An alternative definition for the word unicorn from Merriam-Webster (2023), "something unusual, rare, or unique." After some reflection, I had to revisit the question posed by my former doctoral professor: What does it feel like to be a unicorn? Well, if I'm being honest, it feels like I'm still in the minority. Imposture syndrome is real. But—I also now have a position of power where I can do something about it and a title where I'm no longer being dismissed. Addressing the equity gap for Native American students will take time, but it's a necessary component in order to support an underserved and underrepresented group in higher education. So, we unicorns, must answer the call. How can we start closing the equity gap? It starts with recognizing the issue for what it is—I shouldn't be a unicorn.

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The Wicked Problems of THIS WAR OF MINE*: Exploring Ethical Dilemmas Through Boardgaming*[1]

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Abstract:

Games are a unique form of popular culture media artefacts which afford players with an interactive and engaging opportunity to explore ethical and moral issues. Their ability to do this is too often overlooked by those who traditionally see games as frivolous activities detached from the so-called 'real world'. However, the field of ludology – derived from the Latin ludus, meaning 'play' or 'game' – has shown that sophisticated games can produce complex and substantive narratives. The boardgame This War of Mine is one such example as it has players assume the role of civilians trying to survive in a besieged, war-torn city. In it, players are intentionally confronted with a series of wicked problems -- ethically and morally ambiguous dilemmas in which determining the 'right' choice is difficult and one often needs to decide between a series of limited, bad options with uncertain and possibly unsettling consequences.

This article seeks to contribute to the literature on ludic ethics by critically examining the ethical and moral content of This War of Mine by observing and surveying the gameplay and player experiences of two groups of players. In doing so, it explores how they engaged with and responded to the wicked problems the game presents. This article also aims to make a broader argument that the field of ethics should pay greater attention to games of this type in order to better understand how ethical issues are produced, interacted with, and consumed within popular culture.

Keywords: Ethics, wicked problems, ludology, boardgames, moral game design, war, player-centered research

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A gravely wounded woman staggers down the war-torn street of a city under siege and asks a group of civilians for refuge. She has some food with her. But, over the long term, she will likely prove to be another mouth to feed. Those in the relative safety of their shelter have to decide whether to let her in or send her on her way. They debate what to do.

The above scene was not an account from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War or the Bosnia War of the 1990s. Instead, it occurred around a table while playing the boardgame *This War of Mine* (*TWoM*). This does not mean that this event was without substance, however. Games are too often reflexively dismissed as frivolous activities detached from the 'real world' and consigned to the realm of children, hobbies, social gatherings, or time-wasters on one's phone or computer. This view is too narrow. There is a long-standing and growing literature on *ludology* -- derived from the Latin *ludus*, meaning 'play' or 'game' -- on how games represent important and pervasive[2] popular culture media artefacts which can have substantive narrative content and meaning, as well as impact on players. A particular focus of ludology is how certain games can intentionally or even unintentionally afford meaningful opportunities for players to engage with ethical and moral issues through gameplay, and to prompt players to use their in-game experiences to reflect upon the real-world circumstances upon which they are based.

TWoM, in both its digital (videogame) and analog (boardgame) formats, is an award-winning game which was purposefully designed to invert the tropes found in most wargames. Traditional wargames often have players assume the role of soldiers or military commanders who use force to overcome obstacles. Consequently, they tend to produce narratives which glorify violence and downplay the consequences of war, especially for civilians, placing the player in the position of having a substantive effect on

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[2] The importance of videogames and boardgames in popular culture is significant. The videogame industry's revenue is at least equal to or substantial higher than that of films, even when mobile games (the highest revenue stream) are excluded (Sayal 2023). Boardgames are substantially lower, but the decade-plus boardgame renaissance is still ongoing with approximately five thousand games and expansions released in 2022 alone, according to boardgamegeek.com, the premier boardgame website.

the conflict's outcome. By contrast, *TWoM* has players vicariously experience and reenact the very real human costs of armed conflict by simulating the difficult choices civilians are forced to make just to survive in a warzone over which they have very little control. Gameplay requires players to confront a series of *wicked problems* -- ethically and morally ambiguous dilemmas in which determining the 'right' choice is difficult and one often needs to decide between a series of limited, bad options with uncertain and possibly unsettling consequences. As such, it is a prominent example of what Sicart (2009, 4) called an "ethical" game[3] and Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014, 3) referred to as "a compelling arena" for players to "play out their beliefs and ideas." Games like *TWoM* provide a valuable opportunity to examine how players interact with and respond to ethical and moral dilemmas through gameplay.

This article seeks to contribute to the literature on ludic ethics by critically examining *TWoM*'s ethical and moral content by observing and surveying the gameplay and player experiences of college students in ethics courses at North Dakota State University. In doing so, it explores how the players engaged with and responded to the *wicked problems* the game presents. This article also aims to make a broader argument that the field of ethics should pay greater attention to games of this type in order to better understand how ethical issues are produced, interacted with, and consumed within popular culture. Ludologists are already doing this to some extent, but more work from the ethics discipline will better bridge these two research agendas.

This article proceeds as follows. Section one presents an overview of the literature on games as ethical objects. Section two more fully explains *TWoM*, including its content and gameplay, as well as briefly reviewing previous studies of the game. Section three describes this study's methodology. The following section presents the results from the gameplay sessions, focusing on player experiences and their engagement of the ethical decisions they faced. The conclusion summarizes the findings of this study

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[3] Zagal (2009) used a similar term.

and discusses how the fields of ludology and ethics can, and should, continue to contribute to each other.

The Ethics of Games

The central premise of ludology is that games are a unique form of media and studying them requires that researchers "account for the distinguishing properties of the medium" (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2016, xii). Games do not exist merely on their own, but rather are unfinished artefacts which rely upon the active participation of players in order to give them meaning. For example, while a chessboard is a physical object, certainly, its true function and significance are fully realized only in the context of playing chess. To paraphrase Sicart (2014, 73), it is in the play, not in the games, where meaning resides. Players are therefore instrumental in determining the course of a game and are effectively co-creators of both the gameplay experience itself and ultimate end-product – they derive, but more importantly, give meaning to these artefacts. This, in turn, creates a degree of individual and collective responsibility for what transpires in-game. As Stenros and Waern (2011, 15) put it: "What we experience is not 'the game' but a play session, and that session does not exist unless we actively create it." We can contrast this with more "passive" forms of media -- such as films, television shows, novels, comics, art, etc. – which are effectively finished products by which their creator has total control of what is being consumed, even if individuals can interpret it differently (Harby 2019, 44).

Nonetheless, players cannot simply do what they wish since their actions take place within the bounded conditions determined by the designer's predetermined rules. Returning to the example of chess, pieces move only in certain ways. These rules allow the game designer to manipulate the gameplay experience through the options available to players, in-game incentives, and victory conditions, as well as by defining how players interact with each other, nonplayer characters (NPCs), and the in-game environment. In this way, games can intentionally promote particular narratives and ideas for their players. Bogost (2007, ix) referred to this as *procedural rhetoric* -- "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing,

images, or moving pictures." Galloway (2006, 90-91) described something similar as the "algorithm" by which designers "control" players and their engagement with the game's intended narratives.[4] For example, the boardgame *Twilight Struggle* quite successfully pushes players to perform, and even internalize, the zero-sum, hyper-competitive nature of the Cold War (Ambrosio and Ross 2023).

Obviously, not all games have narrative content. For example, *Tetris* merely consists of placing shapes into optimal locations. Others do, however, even if unintentional. Many first-person-shooter videogames reward players for killing designated enemies, thus promoting a narrative which privileges violence over other means of achieving goals (Schulzke 2013). Given the increased popularity of these games after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, many of them also contained rather narrow and stereotypical representations of terrorism, Muslims, and the Middle East (Höglund 2008). Even that which is absent can advance certain narratives. Berents and Keogh (2014) and Pötzsch (2017) highlighted how most videogames sanitize warfare and therefore make it seem more legitimate through the purposeful absence from gameplay of civilians and the long-term consequences of war. Pötzsch (2017) referred to this as the *selective realism* found in most wargames.

There are those who wish to draw a sharp line between in-game narratives and actions, on the one hand, and those which have out-of-game effects upon players, on the other. Huizinga (2016), for example, proposed that games represent a *magic circle* within which the broader rules of society do not apply.[5] This is a realm disconnected from societal norms and temporarily exists by mutual consent between players, containing its own, separate ethical and moral code. Under this formulation, "we are explicitly divesting ourselves of the need to consider the moral consequences of our actions" when playing games "because the normal rules regarding what is and is not appropriate do not pertain" (Heron and Belford 2014a, 10). One can legitimately use physical violence in a boxing ring, but not in normal

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[4] Also see de la Hera, et al (2021).
[5] Zimmerman (2012) argued that Huizinga was not nearly as strident about this in-game and out-of-game separation as is commonly believed.

life, for example. If we extend this line of reasoning further, then there is little we can learn from players and the games they play, even ones which include ethical issues, because player choices and experiences have no substantive out-of-game relevance. Anything gleaned from them would only apply to actions within "similarly morally discontinuous spaces" (Heron and Belford 2014a, 10).

This perspective has some merit. We tend not to judge players choosing to act consistent with the confines of a game's mechanics and incentive structures.[6] Betraying someone in a game premised upon duplicity is considered fundamentally different from betraying them out-of-game. For example, the boardgame *Diplomacy* is notorious for temporarily ruining friendships until the game ends. Furthermore, certain games aim to have players interact with taboo subjects which are permitted only within the bounded gamespace, thus allowing them to participate in 'dark' or 'transgressive' play without out-of-game consequences (Mortensen, Linderoth, and Brown 2015; Jørgensen and Karlsen 2018).

The degree to which there truly is a moral or ethical magic circle remains debated, however. Some argue that the entire concept is misguided and that the line between the 'real' and 'game' worlds is quite permeable (Zimmerman 2012). Videogames, in particular, have come under significant criticism for their depictions of violence and sexual content, as well as their purported out-of-game impacts on players. Controversies over *Grand Theft Auto*, a videogame series premised on having players commit crimes and general mayhem, were found not only within the gaming community itself, but also in wider political and cultural arenas. How games represent children is particularly divisive and playing games in which they can be harmed is a line which many players feel compelled not to cross, despite its virtual nature (Sjöblom 2015). Sicart (2009, 44-45) went further in arguing that, while it is true we can distinguish between in-game and out-of-game actions, we should not be so quick to dismiss the former as without ethical substance: the choices that players make are still "real" in the sense

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[6] Cheating or intentionally breaking game rules is different in that it violates the temporary social contract which exists amongst players – that is, the magic circle is also a circle of trust that everyone is playing by the rules.

that they do in fact "take place and have consequences in a virtual environment and on their users." Bjørkelo (2018, 185) came to a similar conclusion by arguing that if a game evokes real emotions in its players, then the simulated reality which it seeks to create is likewise real. To the degree to which these choices have ethical or moral implications, players effectively become "ethical agents" partaking in "a complex network of responsibilities and moral duties" presented by the game (Sicart 2009, 4). Granted, sometimes this will go unnoticed by players or simply brushed off as being just 'part of the game' – the latter is what Mortensen (2015, 158) referred to as the "contextual awareness" which many players adopt. This is more likely to be the case when the ethical issues presented are merely strategic or instrumental; that is, there is clearly a correct choice if one wishes to proceed in the game or to achieve victory. In many games, for example, engaging in rampant colonialism and conquest is required if one wishes to remain competitive and, therefore, many players will not give such activities a second thought since having fun and winning are their primary goals. In fact, there is a quite popular genre called '4X' games, which stands for eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate. In other cases, a game's moral system may be what Heron and Belford (2014, 1) called "shallow" because the supposed ethical choices are just flavoring and have no real impact on either the game or its player-characters -- choosing one path or another becomes merely an alternative means to playing ultimately the same game.

By contrast, there are games which seek to break through the compartmentalized gamespace and in order to have players "externalise the moral message of the game" (Heron and Belford 2014a, 11; Heron and Belford 2014b; Björk 2015). Bos (2021, 4) classified these as belonging to a subgenre of games which "subvert, challenge, and disrupt" hegemonic ideas in order to "encourage new ways of thinking, experiencing, and understanding" them. Some of these are not really games meant to be played, as we would commonly understand them, but rather should more accurately be described as advocacy in game form. For example, the game *September 12th* promotes a message of the futility of using drone strikes to combat terrorism, but players do not actually make meaningful choices in

the game and the outcome is predetermined.[7] In *Train*, players are meant to feel complicit in the Holocaust by unknowingly transporting Jews to a concentration camp – something which only becomes apparent at game's end. Other games are subtler and are a game first, with the message second, even if the designer's goal was to advance a particular narrative. An often-cited example is the videogame *Spec Ops: The Line* which, at first, appears to be just a normal first-person-shooter, but subtlety morphs into game quite critical of the genre's consequence-free militarism. It even goes as far as to directly confront players with the ethics of not only their in-game actions, but also their choice to play such games in the first place (Heron and Belford 2014; Björk 2015; Pötzsch 2017). In this case, the powerful message is balanced with genuine gameplay.

A primary way in which designers can include meaningful ethical content in games is by forcing players to confront a series of *wicked problems*: "a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision-makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing" (Sicart 2013, 32; Bosman 2019).[8] This is a design choice intended to simulate how difficult some choices are in reality, not for the sake of making the game itself harder, but rather to provoke and challenge player sensibilities. In order to be truly successful at being not just a game, but also a normative environment within which players can engage with substantive ethical issues, such games must include several elements. First, players should have actual choices and not be railroaded into a particular outcome. Without having meaningful choices, players are fundamentally not responsible for the consequences of their actions and there is little that players can learn from their individual decisions. No matter what players do in *September 12th*, counterterrorism always fails, for example. Instead, they are being preached to by the game,

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[7] This can be contrasted to *Labyrinth*, an asymmetrical game that seeks to simulate the War on Terror, that also contains a procedural rhetoric which argues that force-based counterterrorism can be counterproductive (Ambrosio and Ross, 2022). However, *Labyrinth* is a deep game with complex and open-ended gameplay.

[8] Zagal (2009) did not use this specific phrase, but he analyzed three videogames which do something similar.

rather than serving as co-creators of their gameplay experience and the narratives produced by it. Second, there cannot be an obvious and effective choice if one wishes to proceed in or win the game. The choices which confront players need to be complex and ambiguous, containing uncertain outcomes and without an easy answer. This is especially powerful if multiple choices can be morally justifiable. Third, while there will always be an element of manipulation present in any exercise of procedural rhetoric – since a game's rules influence players to take or avoid certain actions consistent with its message -- the game cannot be blatantly so. There is no reason for those playing *Train* to suspect that they are playing anything other than a simple train-loading game. The game's final message, even if provocative, is somewhat ham-fisted as players are effectively tricked into making immoral choices which become only apparent in hindsight and without the knowing participation of the players. Thus, in *Train*, players have little responsibility for their actions since they were actually not confronted with an ethical dilemma in the first place. Finally, the choices players make cannot be shallow, as Heron and Belford (2014) described them, but rather must have substantive ethical content. In other words, player decisions must have consequences not just for the outcome of the game, but also as a normative reflection of how we see the values of the in-game characters – and, by extension, the players themselves.

If done right, building a game around wicked problems can increase the chances that players are personally affected by a game's content and may engage in post-game critical reflection about the choices they made or, more precisely, the decisions they made within the confines of the game's mechanics (Mortensen 2015). In some cases, players may come away from a game with a positive experience and an understanding that they made ethical decisions. *Mass Effect*, a science fiction videogame, ultimately rewards players for taking a more cooperative and collective approach to achieving security for the game's protagonist factions (Hayden 2017). In others cases, however, our traditional association of play as 'fun' is subverted and replaced by *parapathic play*, an experience which deliberately provokes negative emotions within players by having them make difficult in-game choices or to engage with problematic subject matter

(Stenros 2018, 19). This can be done with the purpose of safely experiencing such emotions within the confines of a gamespace or of helping players gain different perspectives and connect in-game outcomes to out-of-game realities. Just enduring a dark gameplay experience can be rewarding in its own right. One example of parapathic play is this author's experience playing the excellent, but heart-wrenching, boardgame *Freedom: the Underground Railroad*, in which players work cooperatively to help escaped slaves transit to Canada and change popular perceptions of slavery in favor of abolitionism. After repeated plays, it became apparent that our desire to always do the right thing and protect every escapee had to be replaced with a more utilitarian mindset in which some non-player characters had to be sacrificed to the autonomous slavecatcher for the greater good. My friends and I eventually won and were satisfied in our victory, but we did not feel good about it. Nonetheless, we found this experience both stimulating and rewarding because of the respectful way in which the designers handled the material and, more importantly, the way in which it caused us to deeply consider the ethics of idealism versus utilitarianism.

The degree to which we can or should consider games "ethical objects," rather than just a form of escapism, will ultimately be determined by the experiences of players (Sicart 2009, 4). As seen in the next section, *TWoM* is an excellent example of parapathic play based upon the wicked problems it presents.

This War of Mine

TWoM was originally produced in 2014 by the Polish videogame company 11 bit studios. Three years later, they jointly released a cooperative boardgame version with Galakta, also a Polish gaming company.[9] The designers intentionally sought to create an emotional experience in order to shine a spotlight on the devastating impact of war for civilians and to encourage players to develop empathy for the in-game

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[9] The videogame and boardgame versions of *TWoM* are very similar, but differ in some key ways. For purposes of this article, however, these differences are not substantial. In addition, there have also been multiple expansions for each version, but only those expansions relevant to this article will be covered.

player and nonplayer characters (Kwiatkowski 2016; de Smale, Kors, and Sandovar 2019). They conducted extensive research on the subject, supplemented by their personal memories of watching television reports about the 1992-1995 siege of Sarajevo, as well as their cultural, and even familial, memory of the struggles of Polish civilians during World War II. Despite these historical influences, *TWoM* is set in a fictious location in order to disconnect it from any specific conflict and to show that civilian suffering in war is universal.

Contrary to almost all boardgames, in which nearly everything players need to play the game is presented in advance, *TWoM*'s rulebook is notably sparse. Instead, after board is initially set up, players uncover the game mechanics as they go along. Although criticized by some reviewers and players (Thurot 2017), this was seen by the designers as an essential part of the game: "Part of creating emotional realism is matching the disorientation that occurs during war. In war, no one is prepared. There is no guide book, no instructions on how to navigate the everyday" (de Smale, Kors, and Sandovar 2019, 401).

In *TWoM*, players assume the role of a group of ordinary civilians who occupy a safe house and attempt to survive in a besieged city until a ceasefire is declared. They have no ability to affect the end of the war, nor do they know when it will happen.[10] Along the way, players will need to make difficult choices between often bad options with uncertain consequences for themselves and outsiders. Players must collectively guide this group through a series of challenges such as leaving the relative safety of their building and venturing deeper into the city to gather necessary materials such as food and medicine; sustaining each member's psychological wellbeing to ensure that they do not fall into despair; reacting to random events which can endanger or benefit the group; interacting with their fellow civilians; and, overcoming threats from soldiers, violent scavengers, and desperate civilians. It pulls few punches and, rather than feeding into society's desensitization of war found in most other media, and particularly games, *TWoM* actively confronts players with its horrors.

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[10] The endgame is determined randomly by drawing a certain card from the Event deck.

Players have to balance their selfish interests with the needs of others they encounter, such as stealing from the vulnerable in order to feed their group. One of *TWoM*'s prominent features is that selfish actions can impose a heavy, in-game emotional toll on the survivors, proxied by each survivor's Empathy level. It is very likely that the players will collectively lose the game rather than survive.

While *TWoM* can be described solely in terms of its mechanics as a cooperative resource management game, this would be utterly incomplete as it is fundamentally a storytelling game. It is very nonlinear and few games will unfold in the same manner. In-game incidents and player choices require players to consult either the Book of Scripts, which collects textual accounts of what the survivors (and, therefore, the players) experience, or cards, such as Events, Visitors, and Memories of the Past. Some of these will then direct players to make further choices, leading to additional story prompts. One example from the 1,947 available scripts describes the survivors finding a group of thirty frightened children and their caretaker who says to them: "This is a children's home. Their parents either died or abandoned them. We stayed here to take care of them. What else could we do? Please just leave, don't hurt us. They didn't do anything." The players then need to collectively decide to leave them alone and go, try to help, or rob them of their supplies. If they choose the third option, they will be directed to read another passage at the end of the game (assuming they get there) in which their postwar guilt is weighed against their satisfaction of having survived. The resolution is left ambiguous as the players are not told whether they made the right or wrong choice – it is left to the players to decide for themselves. Another particularly harrowing choice involves whether to assist a woman who is about to be sexually assaulted by a group of soldiers. Players must decide whether they will leave the woman to be victimized in order to safely bring supplies back to the house or to help and risk their group. There is nothing, even working for one's own survival, that is depicted as cost-free.

Even the title is evocative: while players are not playing themselves, they are playing this war of *mine* – it is meant to be personal both for themselves as players and for the survivors they are playing. To this end, the members of the group are not nameless, faceless avatars, but rather have

been given unique backstories and descriptions of prewar memories triggered by certain in-game events, both good and bad. These are found in a separate booklet and are unique to each character. For example, Emira is a homeless woman used to a rough life filled with suffering, loneliness, and rejection, but, as the game progresses, players are able to see how the character finds moments of shared humanity and even hope. Player empathy with the survivors is reinforced aesthetically by having a photo of a real person on the character's card. Players will need to track each survivor's levels of fatigue, hunger, illness, wounds, and misery. Hitting certain thresholds reduces the number of actions they can undertake per round. More importantly, reaching the highest levels will result in the character's removal from the game. This is not just as simple as taking a piece from the board, it is described narratively, including how they died from illness or wounds, or even committed suicide. And even this has an in-game and narrative effect on those left behind. In short, *TWoM* is not 'fun' in the traditional sense of playful activities. Nonetheless, it is a rewarding, even if emotionally difficult, experience.

In addition to receiving numerous awards and critical accolades, several scholars have examined the videogame version of *TWoM*, indicative of its distinctiveness amongst wargames. Roy (2016) discussed how *TWoM* explored the ethics of both group and individual survival by balancing 'care-taking' with 'hunting-providing'. Pötzsch's (2020) chapter emphasized *TWoM*'s paratexts and the videogame expansion *The Little Ones*, which introduced children into the game as additional survivors who must be protected. De Smale (2020) explored the inadvertent production of historical memory of the Bosnian War by video content producers who streamed their gameplays. Pötzsch and Hammar (2020) focused on how *TWoM* raised the question of whether everyone, even the most good-intentioned civilian, is "a (potential) perpetrator" during war. House (2019) and Kampe (2019) explored *TWoM* through the lens of feminist theories. De Smale, Kors, and Sandovar (2019) provided an in-depth study of the 'gamework' behind *TWoM* by focusing on the designers, their intentions, and the process of its production. Others were more directly focused on player experiences, though they went about this in different ways. Both

Toma (2015) and Bos (2021) gathered their data indirectly by examining unsolicited reviews and posts on various online forums, rather than directly through questionnaires or focus groups of players. By contrast, Jørgensen (2020) assembled four volunteers to keep a gameplay log and conducted individual interviews of player reactions to their experiences. Bjørkelo (2018) took an ethnographic approach, reporting how playing *TWoM* made him feel both during and after gameplay. The exception to the exclusive focus on the videogame version is Booth's (2021) analysis of the boardgame in which he applied Bogost's procedural rhetoric concept to how *TWoM* promoted narratives about the tensions between control and randomness during wartime, the often-utilitarian decisions one must make just to survive, and what 'winning' even means under these conditions.

From these studies, three conclusions can be reached. First, it is possible to analyze a game solely as a text and for scholars to do a critical reading of the rules, components, and paratextual elements surrounding it, and, from this, to draw conclusions about how it produces certain narratives. However, a truly complete understanding of any game comes only from the experiences of actual players. This is especially true of a game like *TWoM*, which reveals the full impact of its narrative over time during gameplay. Although Bjørkelo's responses to *TWoM* were both interesting and heartfelt, even a scholar's autoethnographic conclusion has its limits, as Jørgensen (2020, 75) explained, since scholars are approaching gameplay with their research agenda in mind and often with the intention of publishing their findings, rather than primarily as players. Therefore, it is essential for scholars to step back and derive their conclusions from how others encounter and respond to a game's narratives and content.

Second, there were several reasons why some players did not like the game. Some responded that they were more used to traditional, fun games and therefore the subject matter did not appeal to them; they felt the game's message was too heavy-handed; or, they did not like the game mechanics and how it translated the intended narrative. Nevertheless, all of these studies, as well as most players, found that the ethical issues in *TWoM* were not just surface-level or shallow, but rather permeated its game mechanics and were intrinsically linked to the gameplay experience. There

should be little question that *TWoM* is an 'ethical object', as Sicart used the phrase, and therefore is ripe for ethical analysis.

Finally, for many, *TWoM* resonated beyond the time in front of the monitor. Bjørkelo's account of how the game made him feel complicit in reprehensible behavior and the effect it had on him afterward was seconded by some of Jørgensen's volunteers. Moreover, both Toma and Bos found that some players were prompted to engage in ethical debates about their in-game choices with fellow players on internet forums. Thus, each of these studies found that *TWoM* was successful in breaking through Huizinga's magic circle and having out-of-game consequences.

Despite the insights which these player-focused studies provide, there are two primary limitations which provide an opportunity for further research. First, other than Jørgensen's interview of four subjects, none of these studies directly interacted with other players nor, with one exception,[11] did they directly observe actual gameplay. Second, with the exception of Booth, each examined the videogame version of *TWoM*. Although many of the narratives are the same in both versions, the videogame is a solo experience in which one plays alone against computer-generated challenges. By contrast, the boardgame requires multiple players to work cooperatively to ensure that the group survives. It therefore creates a far more social experience which allows players to discuss and debate a common course of action, something which Booth highlighted when he played the game with friends. Observing how players interacted with each other can provide important insights into how players responded to the ethical issues with which they were confronted in *TWoM*.

Methodology

Games are a unique form of media and therefore the methodology used to examine them must take this into account (Lankosi and Björk 2015). Since the interaction between the player and game is critical for unlocking their full meaning, this study followed the increasingly common

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[11] De Smale (2020) observed videos of gameplay posted online. However, her focus was quite limited to the unintentional reproduction of historical memory, rather than engagement with ethical issues.

methodology of focusing specifically on the player experiences of others, rather than adopting an autoethographic or formal analysis approach, the latter of which relies on one's own interpretation of the game primarily as a text. To this end, undergraduate students in ethics classes at North Dakota State University were recruited to play a session of TWoM.[12] The purpose behind this recruitment strategy was due to the fact that this study is specifically interested in exploring the ethical issues embedded in *TWoM*. It was expected that these students, by virtue of their class participation, had already been exposed to some of the field's concepts. Two separate groups of four students were selected and each group played one game each. This article also followed Jørgensen's (2020, 77) advice to collect information about player experiences in various ways – that is, by "triangulating sources [and] interpretations." This was done through taking notes while they played *TWoM* (participant observation), a post-game discussion (focus group), and a follow up, online questionnaire taken some days afterward (survey). The second and third of these included predetermined questions which asked students to comment on the ethical issues they experienced in the game.

Because of time constraints, the students played a modified, streamlined version of *TWoM* intended to facilitate gameplay. This was done for three reasons. First, since only one of the participants was an active boardgame player, there was concern that the players would get bogged down in game mechanics and feel overwhelmed just by playing the game, rather than engaging with its themes. Second, since not every player action requires a recourse to the Book of Scripts or contains a narrative aspect, some additional narrative and decision-making prompts were introduced throughout the game in order to make these more frequent. These were selected randomly based upon cards which the players drew and therefore were thematically linked to their situation at the time.[13] Finally, the author was aware that *TWoM* can be lengthy, depending on prior experience with boardgaming in general, the nature of this game in particular, and how long

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[12] Students were compensated with extra credit and a $25 gift card.

[13] Many cards contain numbered references to the Book of Scripts which are only activated at certain times. For purposes of this study, they were utilized more liberally than would be called for if playing a normal game without modification.

the characters survive. Rather than attempting to rush through to a conclusion, the playthrough was ended after several rounds. While the players were not able to get a complete gameplay experience, they were exposed to enough of *TWoM*'s main themes and narratives, and were forced to make enough difficult collective decisions, that they were able to engage in and reflect on its subject matter, and to give meaningful feedback.

Results

   This extended section discusses the feedback and observations from the gameplay sessions. It begins with the players' general impressions of the game and the ethical issues embedded within it, and then explores their engagement with four specific scenarios that they faced.

General Impressions

   The players' overall impressions of *TWoM* were consistent with parapathic gameplay in that "it didn't seem to stray away from the serious (and often hard-to-swallow) aspects of war," with players remarking that "this game is just misery," "depressive," and "REALLY grim."[14] One player recounted that whenever the Event cards or the Book of Scripts were consulted, they actually got nervous, a sentiment shared by another who stated that the game "raised my anxiety level." Nonetheless, there was broad consensus that *TWoM* was highly engaging. It was unlike anything they had played before and therefore provided a unique and insightful gaming experience: "Even in the fictional scenario, it was easy to become miserable through the experience, but at times also rewarding to succeed, to thrive, and to have small victories."

   There were several aspects that the players highlighted. One player asked: "Did this really happen?" A prevalent feature of the feedback was how *TWoM* provided them a deeper understanding of the plight of civilians during warfare which, as they indicated, is too often overlooked in history and broader media coverage. As one player put it: "Honestly, I did not understand how much civilians were affected during the war, and that lawlessness would bring out the true villain in us." Those who previously

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[14] Emphasis in original.

played first-person-shooter videogames reported that *TWoM* provided a very different view of war and survival from what they were used to. It was fortuitous, then, that one of the groups randomly drew script #360m which purposefully seeks to connect the game with real-world events by giving players an in-game reward if they commit to spending some time "on checking or recalling where the line runs between gameplay and reality," in particular regarding the Srebrenica Massacre or Bosnian War. It drove home the notion that situations similar to those in the game continue to occur, and it provided an opportunity for this author to briefly talk about the Yugoslavian conflict and how it related to *TWoM*.

Several players expressed their appreciation that the game did not "hold back" and that it "did not stray from the more sensitive aspects [of war]." Even though they understood that the game "will never compare to what it's like" to be a person in this situation, all players expressed that *TWoM* effectively conveyed the general chaos of warfare, the helplessness felt by civilians, and the "brutal" nature of surviving under these conditions for both themselves and the NPCs they came across. There was also some rapport built with the NPCs who "were in the same hellish boat as us" as civilians. However, this created a series of ethical dilemmas for the players as they realized there was very little that they could do to help others without jeopardizing themselves. And even though they were clearly fictitious, the players found sympathy for the NPCs as they "seemed closer to real people than I expected." In short, the designers' narrative message clearly emerged through gameplay.

Each player was randomly given a specific character with a unique backstory they read to their fellow players before playing.[15] Most players identified with their characters and were strongly invested in their survival.

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[15] This was another departure from the rules-as-written in which the player whose 'turn' it is chooses what the group as a whole does during a particular phase, after discussing it with their fellow players. The design purpose behind this appears to be that if one member of the group dies (which is often the case) then no player is left without a character. While there is a logic to this, as it creates a sense of investment in the group rather than individual self-interest, it has the effect of lessening players' personal stake in the game. Assigning players an individual character is what this author did in their personal games with friends. Replicating it here appeared successful as well.

One remarked that they took the game more seriously because the characters they were playing were "more relatable." In fact, one player expressed that they wanted *more* backstory. Since we did not get to finish the game, some players also wanted to know what would have happened to their characters if they survived or failed to do so, and skipped to those sections of the Book of Scripts before ending the session. However, one player thought that if they would have had a closer connection with their avatar if they could have chosen or created one which was more like them.

The social aspect of the game was also very important to their gameplay experience. As one player put it: "I think it was fun interacting with people and figuring out the game and how we would have to handle scary situations." With very little prompting from this author, the players were quite willing to discuss and even debate their choices in terms of both their game-effect consequences of their actions and the broader ethical considerations. Certainly, players were primed to consider the latter because they were aware of the purpose of the study. Nonetheless, this did not seem artificial as having three other players around the table with differing viewpoints and values meant that each participant had to engage with others' perspectives and defend their own. For example, one player was far more willing to act out of selfish interests, whereas others were more amenable to considering the interests of others. This created some tension in the group, which one player commented about on their post-game survey. Coming to a consensus was not always easy: one player who was being too dominant in discussions was asked "Who made you the leader?" While there are some important advantages to playing the videogame version of *TWoM* – most relevant is the fact that the program will handle all of the rules, so none are forgotten or misapplied -- a key takeaway of both playthroughs was the player interaction. This demonstrates not only that the boardgame better conveys the sense of collective survival than the solo videogame, but also that our understanding of *TWoM* is more fully realized by taking both versions into account.

The players vocalized that the ethical issues embedded within *TWoM* were neither shallow nor tacked-on. Rather, they were central to its narrative and their gameplay experience. As they explained in the surveys:

> ...the hardest [decisions were] when it involved others and
> there was no easy choice....They made me feel bad, but also
> I understood in the situation you should prioritize yourself in
> a lot of cases.
> The most challenging decisions were most definitely the
> "morally gray" ones.
> ...there are ethical decisions that are truly difficult to make
> during a time of severe distress. It could mean taking from
> someone and that potentially ending their life.
> ...more often than not, our decision, even if morally right,
> could not prevent negative outcomes, and that was
> something that made every decision, regardless of whether
> we felt good about it or not, one of anxiety and fear. Even
> the most noble actions could get our group killed, which
> made it challenging to make any decision.

By forcing players to confront a series of wicked problems, in which the
ethically correct thing to do was unclear and the consequences often
unsettling, *TWoM* successfully afforded them a substantive opportunity to
engage with the morality of their decisions. In many cases, even if their
decisions were relatively successful in advancing their collective survival,
they explained that they still did not know whether they were truly the right
thing to do. More importantly, these lessons were not just restricted to their
in-game consequences, but also sparked out-of-game reflection: "I think the
game demonstrated that, regardless of how we choose to act, good things
happen to bad people, and horrible things happen to good people, especially
in times of conflict."

Directly observing the gameplay was also useful for understanding
the process by which the players came to their decisions. Certainly, there
were some game-oriented, minmax considerations, such as distributing their
limited food and water amongst the group. This was easy in the beginning
when there were enough supplies to go around, but became harder over time
as supplies dwindled. In most cases, the group's decision was based upon
how much going without would negatively affect a particular character's

ability to perform actions in upcoming rounds, with those characters closest to losing their effectiveness prioritized over those who would still be able to maintain their full complement of actions. But even these decisions were tinged with ethical considerations. As one player remarked during the focus group, it "sucks" when you don't have enough for everyone and have to make choices based upon "who can help us the most." Another asked, "how do you place a value on human life? People are not just the sum of their utility."

Utility was not the only consideration, however. One of the groups played with *The Little Ones* expansion in which they had to care for an NPC orphaned child who requires food, but does not really help the group survive except, possibly, by boosting morale under certain circumstances. During this game, it was interesting that the players automatically fed the child first before discussing how to distribute the rest because the child was vulnerable and all alone. Listening to their discussions, it was also evident that players actively balanced their group's selfish needs with an affirmative desire to help others, or at least to not harm them. Players wanted their characters to survive, certainty, but they did take into consideration the interests of others. This is a testament to the fact that *TWoM* makes even the nonplayer characters feel 'real'. Sometimes, the imperatives of survival overrode their more altruistic intentions. In some of these cases, they justified their actions after the fact based upon the ethics of consequentialism. As one player said: "When a decision was made which resulted in more food, resources, and positive outcomes, it was validating to have made the choice we did." However, these situations were balanced by others in which they players took some pride in the fact that they made what they felt was the morally-correct decision, even if it did not result in an in-game benefit to their characters. This moral ambiguity is seen in the following selection of four specific decisions that the players had to work through.

Four Decisions[16]

Stealing from Children

One of the first situations that one group found themselves in occurred as they sought out supplies in the city. The players encountered a group of children who were sifting through a box of emergency supplies. The children scattered immediately, but the players had to make a decision: either take the box's contents or, as described in the Book of Scripts, "...leave the stuff there. We won't steal from kids." The players debated what they should do, with the discussion centering around the balance between their own and the children's survival needs. Since it dealt with a vulnerable group, one player commented that it was "the hardest" to make. They eventually settled on taking the box's contents, defending their decision on the basis that the children most like already took what they needed, even though there was no indication of this in the text and this seemed to be a post hoc justification. In the immediate postgame focus group, one player commented that they "really wished we didn't take the stuff from the kids." Nonetheless, the tension between altruism and self-interest was succinctly expressed by one player who said that they "did feel bad about my decision, but I would make it again."

Discovering a Wounded, Enemy Soldier

For one group, the scenario that consumed the most time to come to resolve involved the discovery of a wounded, enemy soldier their characters found at the bottom of a rubble pit next to a fallen tenement. The solider was clearly not a threat and pleaded for assistance. The players had two options according to the Book of Scripts: "try to help" or "leave him in the hole and leave, but not before spitting on him."[17] On the surface, this seemed like an easy choice because there did not appear to be any in-game advantages

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[16] These represent two from each group.

[17] Players were not given the option to kill him.

to helping him since he was injured, an enemy, and not a fellow civilian. Nonetheless, the group thoroughly debated the issue with in-game considerations being secondary to the ethics of their decision. On the one hand, some players advocated to save the soldier. As one player said, "Even an enemy soldier is a person." On the other side was an argument rooted in reciprocity: "he would not have the same mercy for me if I was in his situation." In the end, and despite disagreement amongst the group, they initially tried to help him despite that the fact that "we had things we could lose, such as food, time, water, and other things." Once they made this decision, the Book of Scripts described the severity of his wounds. Upon hearing this and surmising that it would take too time to extricate him – time which they felt they did not have[18] -- they choose to leave. Upon reflection, one participant called the group's decision "challenging" and "felt gross regardless of the decision made."

Gravely Wounded Stranger

When one group directed their characters to venture outside their safehouse, they came across a "gravely wounded stranger" who asked for shelter. This was the scenario which began this paper. The players had two choices: either take the person in as an additional character or trade with them and send them on their way. Many points were brought up against letting them in. Unlike the situation with the wounded soldier, there seemed to be a clearer cost associated with helping the stranger: even though they came with some food, they were already wounded and therefore would likely not be of much help to the group, despite costing the group food and water for the rest of the game. This was relatively early on, but already the group discussion centered around their short-term versus long-term survival and between self-interest and altruism. As one player put it in the post-game survey, the stranger was "another

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[18] According to the rules, players have a limited number of actions they can undertake during the scavenging portion of the game. The longer they take to do things, the fewer opportunities they have to gather much-needed supplies.

mouth to feed, another burden." "I'm selfish," declared another, who argued that the group should worry only about themselves. To complicate things, this group was playing with *The Little Ones* expansion and therefore had "a child to feed." The "cost-benefit analysis" of their decision and "whether or not it was worth it," therefore, seemed to dominate their discussion. Observing this, it seemed that the group was going to send them on their way, even without trading. It was surprising, then, that the group ultimately decided to give refuge to the stranger, who wound up being Zlata, a music student, after the random character card was drawn. It was apparent that the players identified with another civilian who was in an even worse situation than they were and, despite the additional burden she would represent, decided that they would try to bear it.

Hopeless

While scavenging for supplies, one group came upon a particularly sad scene: an old man in a uniform sitting in his apartment with a photograph of a child in his hand and a gun next to him on a table. The deaths of his children and grandson in the war had caused him to give up hope and he asked the group to put him out of his misery. The implication is that he wanted to commit suicide, but could not go through with it. The group had three choices: try to give him hope, kill him as he asked, or just leave. After some discussion, the players expressed their sympathy for the man's plight and the cost-benefit analysis seen in other discussions was replaced with a decision to take positive action by giving him hope. One player called this decision "more simple" than the others they had to make, since it seemingly came at little cost to themselves. However, it should be noted that whereas the middle option provided the possible benefit of acquiring a much-needed weapon afterward, the first (which they choose) and third options could leave them with nothing – a fact that informed their discussion. A true cost-benefit analysis would suggest ignoring the moral implications and doing

what was best for the group. Instead, they chose the path of empathy and compassion.[19]

Conclusions

TWoM purposefully goes beyond being merely a game and becomes an opportunity for players to engage with difficult ethical issues by confronting a series of wicked problems. This study organized playthroughs for students from ethics courses at North Dakota State University and collected data through direct observation, as well as postgame focus groups and surveys, with the purpose of exploring the nature of this engagement and how players responded to the game's wicked problems. Its broader goal is to argue that ethics scholars should pay more attention to games of this type as a means by which normative issues are produced in popular culture -- a notion which might be lost upon many who think of games as merely entertainment. The potential impact of games on players is strong as they can invite critical discussion and reflection through their inherently interactive nature where players actively take part in the game's unfolding narrative.

This study demonstrates that these engagements can be meaningful, especially if done in a manner that avoids shallowness and purposefully seeks to engender ethical dilemmas for players. While certainly none of the students who participated in this study would call *TWoM* 'fun' in the traditional sense, they found its narrative compelling and thought-provoking, and the normative issues which it raised challenging. Purely minmax, game-centric decisions were not absent from the players' discussions, of course. However, they openly acknowledged the difficulty they had in making some decisions because the situations they faced were morally complex – it was not just the *characters* which faced these dilemmas, but the *players* as well. By having players experience the tensions between imperatives of self-interest and altruism, *TWoM* helped

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[19] They did not know it when they made their decision, but the group wound up being rewarded by the man who handed over his gun for them to take. Thus, the almost-unrelentingly bleak nature of *TWoM* sometimes rewards its players for making the right choice.

them better understand that in circumstances of high stress, when personal survival is at stake, these two may diverge and difficult, and sometimes regrettable, choices must be made. Several players expressed how they later reflected upon their in-game choices and, in some cases, actually felt bad about them afterward. This provides further evidence that well-crafted games can foster an erosion of Huizinga's magic circle and have substantive out-of-game effects. This is particularly true for games which are firmly grounded in real-world circumstances, even if they are portrayed in a fictional setting. In the present case, the costs of war for civilian populations is not something that many students think about within the relatively safe confines of peaceful, stable societies. However, rather than watching a film, listening to a podcast, or reading about these situations in an article or book -- through which consumers are more passive recipients of the creator's narrative -- games are unique in affording players the opportunity to actively work through complex and ambiguous ethical choices. This can be an eye-opening experience for some individuals and playing such games can build empathy for their real-world counterparts struggling against adversity. These lessons are especially true in regard to boardgames. Contrary to videogames, which are often solo experiences, the social aspect of boardgames allows players not only to engage with the game itself, but also with each other. What one loses in efficiency by having the computer take care of all of the rules and facilitating gameplay, one gains in being exposed to others' beliefs and decision-making processes, in defending one's own reasoning, and in engaging in debate. Thus, if we take seriously McLuhan's (2005, 7) observation that "the medium is the message," then games can be invaluable as a means for players to explore the content and process of ethical decision-making, and for scholars to uncover how this is produced and reproduced in popular culture.

More broadly, the fields of both ludic and ethics studies would benefit from more research like this, especially coming from the latter field. Roy's (2016) piece cited above illustrates how this can be done: beginning with a firm foundation in ethical theories and then examining how these are portrayed in ludic form. Obviously, this need not be limited to *TWoM*, as there are many videogames and boardgames which intersect with ethical issues, with topics ranging from environmental and corporate ethics, to

economics and capitalism, and warfare and human rights. Beyond these specific topics, many games deal with broader themes of selfishness versus cooperation, the treatment of others, interpersonal conflict, and power dynamics – all of which can be utilized to uncover how players 'play' ethics. For example, Murphy and Zagal (2011) examined three videogames which offered players an opportunity to engage with the ethics of care. Furthermore, Exmeyer and Boden (2020) asked what games like *Papers, Please* – which seeks to simulate the sometimes capricious and oppressive nature of immigration -- can teach players about administrative ethics. There is also growing attention being given to the ethics of producing games on certain topics in the first place. Some current discussions along these lines include representations of colonialism (Winkie 2021; Flanagan and Jakobsson 2023; Homo Ludens 2023), slavery (Kerri 2017), civilian victims of warfare (Homo Ludens 2022), and non-Western peoples and cultures (Shlomo 2023), as well as whether allowing players to play brutal regimes, such as Nazi Germany (Alonge 2019; Hodson 2021), is ethical. In short, this study reinforces the notion that there is much that the fields of ludology and ethics can contribute to each other.

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NORTHERN PLAINS ETHICS JOURNAL

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Community Section

Educational Justice: A Vision for Ethical Leadership in Schools

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Abstract

The transition from a focus on educational equity to the pursuit of educational justice marks a critical shift in the discourse of educational leadership. This article articulates a leader's role in spearheading this change within the educational landscape, with Fargo Public Schools exemplifying the integration of ethical frameworks into actionable policies that serve as a catalyst for equitable societal transformation.

Keywords: Education, leadership, educational justice, ethics

At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, Fargo Public Schools introduced a newly created Department of Equity and Inclusion. The Fargo Public Schools Department of Equity and Inclusion advised and served as a resource to the Fargo Public Schools' equity and inclusion efforts and furthered the district's commitment to addressing educational gaps in Fargo Public Schools. The work of the Equity and Inclusion department was profound and appreciated.

It also became a target resulting from the politicization as organizational efforts focused on the celebration of diversity, equity, and inclusion were being misrepresented and attacked for political purposes.

While Fargo Public Schools is committed to combatting the misinformation and will continue this necessary focus on removing barriers that don't allow all students to succeed, our organization also recognized that time spent constantly defending our practices can undermine teaching and learning by pulling time and resources away that are better spent on refining and improving our practices (Cuevas, 2022). Therefore, starting the 2023-2024 school year, Fargo Public Schools changed the name of this department from being the Department of Equity and Inclusion to the Department of Educational Justice. The term *Educational Justice* more

clearly describes the work of Fargo Public Schools and our previous Equity and Inclusion Department.

Educational justice, as defined in the *Handbook of Research on Educator Continuum and Development of Teachers*, is "adjusting the system so that access to resources and guarantees for educational success are provided for all" (Zugelder & L'Esperance, 2022, p. 1). Educational justice embodies a shift in paradigm from educational equity, demanding not just equality in resources but an empowerment of all students to reach their full potential. As the Superintendent of Fargo Public Schools, I have championed this shift, embedding a commitment to justice in every policy initiative, ensuring educational experiences are designed to be transformative rather than merely transactional.

In ethical decision-making, the utilitarian imperative for the greatest good, the deontological commitment to duty, and the cultivation of virtue outlined by virtue ethics are not merely academic exercises. They are practical imperatives embedded in the leadership model at Fargo Public Schools. These ethical perspectives inform our philosophies, policies and practices, ensuring decisions that affect our students are made with a clear focus on their collective future (Strike, Haller, and Soltis, 1998).

Educational justice involves a reimagining of the educational system, one that not only addresses but actively corrects for historical and persistent disparities. At Fargo Public Schools, the shift from equity to educational justice is tangible in our efforts to upend traditional barriers and create a more just educational environment. This transformation is rooted in the understanding that educational justice is the foundation upon which we will measure our success (Rawls, 1971).

Our philosophies at Fargo Public Schools are developed to recognize the cultural narratives and identities of our students, blending the objectivity of quality education standards with the subjective realities of our students' lives. This balanced approach is critical in fostering an environment that is both ethically principled and culturally responsive (Banks and McGee Banks, 2009).

The role of educational leaders is instrumental in shaping an educational landscape that is just and equitable. Through targeted initiatives at Fargo Public Schools, we address socio-economic disparities, providing a network of support that translates ethical leadership into educational justice for all students.

Educational Justice: A Vision for Ethical Leadership in Schools

Educational justice is the new benchmark for educational leadership. It challenges us to redefine our roles and the very structure of educational systems to align with the values of a just society. Fargo Public Schools is committed to this redefinition, as we advance toward a future where justice is not an abstract ideal but a lived reality for every student.

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Rupak Gandhi, Ph.D. *has served as the Fargo Public Schools superintendent of schools since July 2018. He serves on the AASA Governance Committee, North Dakota K-12 Education Coordination Council, North Dakota School Study Council, and North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders legislative focus group. He is also a mentor for the AASA National Superintendent Certification Program.*

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In October 2022, Dr. Gandhi was named the 2022-23 North Dakota Superintendent of the Year by the North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders.

The Parable of the Commons

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> *"What is common to many is taken least care of, for all men have greater regard for what is their own than for what they possess in common with others." – Aristotle –*

Parables address both our human-ness and the choices we confront. Simple stories, usually, they hold a mirror to us, speak truth, and confront. They are intended to inspire thought, to provoke introspection. Here's one, spoken through three verses—one idyllic, one ominous, one catastrophic—that addresses Aristotle's point about competition between individual and common interests:

> ***The idyllic.*** *Each spring as the snow left, a vast and verdant mountain meadow was revealed. And there was the grass— free, succulent grass—as far as the eye could see. Into it, shepherds from nearby villages released their small flocks of sheep. They used only what they needed. Their sheep thrived, they thrived, and so did the meadow.*
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> ***The ominous.*** *But a few of the shepherds saw opportunity in the meadow. They could increase the size of their flocks, exploit the asset, and grow their personal wealth. In time, as they prospered, others were pushed out. The meadow seemed smaller now, some noticed. And the grass thinned.*
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> ***The catastrophic.*** *In the fullness of time, the meadow became the province of a monopolistic few. There was no room in it for shepherds of small flocks and, even if there were, the grass was gone. Flocks were sold off; shepherds and their families left their villages. As a resource, the meadow was destroyed, neither useful, much less exploitable, for or by anyone.*

This parable re-shapes a story British economist, William Forster Lloyd developed in 1833 that many refer to as "The Commons." Within his economist's universe, Lloyd's story countered a rosy "invisible hand" perspective that human nature, unregulated, will produce societal benefits and healthy market equilibrium. He employed his story less as a moral exercise and more as an academic vehicle to explain and illustrate an economic perspective.

Lloyd's story took a hard turn in the 1960's when co-opted by controversial ecologist, Garrett Hardin, who turned his useful learning tool into a frightening doctrine known since as "*The Tragedy* of the Commons." Hardin theorized an individual will always—always—prioritize self-interest ahead of common interest, even unto self-destruction. We will compete with one another for resources until they run out. Per Hardin, "[r]uin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest."

Self-interest, after all, is woven into us. Untaught, many-a child's early lexicon includes a demanding, "mine!" Our own interest is stronger than iron. Exceeding our concern for others, it can also blind us to consequences. Thus, mankind has repeatedly proven Hardin's claim.
Look! The mighty Colorado River is in crisis and no longer reaches the sea. Seven states use more water than naturally flows, draining both flow and reservoirs. In the 1990's, Northern Cod populations fell to but 1% of historic levels. Why? New technologies allowed fishing companies, with giant trawlers, to scoop the fisheries clean.

How many examples can one conjure of natural habitat lost to human profiteering? It's happening far away, beyond our consciousness, in Brazil, Paraguay, and Southeast Asia. The world's rain forests have been consumed or degraded for the sake of timber, ranching, and farming.
It happens at home, too, where natural prairies are now corporate mega-farms. Where are the small farms? And what of the butterflies, the birds, the bees? Before that was another prairie story, one of the epic destruction of a resource that sustained man for eons, the near extinction of the American bison.

But self and common interests compete over less obvious "resources," too. If we're aware, we see the tale unfold in sundry contexts.

There's traffic, for example, where drivers of personal vehicles congest and jam common lanes. There's noise and light pollution, where individual activities, collectivized, prevent us from seeing and hearing our natural world; they disrupt our sleep, our joy, our health. There are our oceans, so vast they could absorb all of our garbage—we once thought. And there's outer space, man's newest dumping grounds.

But political scientist, Elinor Ostrom, had a different perspective; she disagreed with Garrett Hardin's fatalistic view that man's self-interest would inevitably, inexorably, lead to resource destruction, if not existential ruin. Countering it, she identified compelling examples of successfully preserved shared resources. There were groups who effectively shared pasture land in Japan and Switzerland. Canal systems in Spain and the Philippines successfully allocated water to the benefit of many. There were forests in Nepal and India that communities used, protected, and preserved. Ostrom dug deeper and identified certain design principles that differentiated examples where resources were successfully preserved and shared, not exploited to the point of destruction. She posited that:

1. Commons need clear boundaries. Who is entitled to what?
2. Rules must be adapted to the local context.
3. Participatory decision-making is crucial.
4. Commons need to be monitored.
5. Sanctions should be graduated for those who abuse the commons.
6. Conflict resolution should be easily accessible.
7. Commons need legal status and the right to organize.
8. Commons work best when embedded within larger networks.

Ostrom's eight design principles translate into a variety of both private and public approaches to regulate inevitable tension between self and common interest. The usual examples include:

*   *Cultivating norms and traditions by which all abide.* This approach may have worked in a simpler time, when individuals were more socially dependent. Are they as

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effective when allegiances are less to social networks and harmony than to shareholder interests and personal gain?

- *Privatization.* Where private interest or business owners control resources, avoiding destruction depends on benevolence. Can we reliably bank on the generosity of others?
- *Finding and creating alternative, replenishable, or sustainable resources or products.* Is this option workable in all environments? Fast enough?
- *Employing rational incentives or disincentives to reduce over-use or consumption.* Think of discounts for re-useable grocery bags or, on a larger scale, peak pricing. Are these options a fit for all contexts?
- *Regulation, such as quotas, fees, tolls, taxes, permits, and fines.* When the "private" over-reaches, should the "public" protect?

For the efforts she devoted to disproving the ruinous inevitability of self-interest, Ostrom received a Nobel Prize.
How wasted those efforts would be if deemed mere counterpoint to Hardin's dark narrative. So viewed, the dialogue is reduced to an academic skirmish about human nature.

Instead, how ennobled her efforts may be if deemed to have transformed "the commons." Because of Ostrom, perhaps what began as an economist's clever teaching tool, later co-opted as "tragedy" to support a sky-is-falling perspective, may now serve us as parable.

Parables, after all, are more than mere mirrors through which we see ourselves. They do more than teach a bloodless academic perspective. Instead, they also contain a moral and ethical component. They invite us, *once* we examine ourselves, to make right choices, then *to act*.
The parable perspective matters because the story isn't over. Consequential resource competitions will play out again and again. And, as they do, so too there will be opportunity for ethical choice, common stewardship, or profligate, unrepentant, and ultimately destructive self-interest.
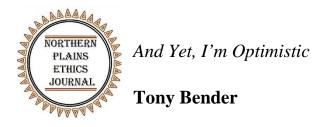
The old story plays out, for example, when we consider antibiotic effectiveness. When antibiotics are over-prescribed for the sake of individual benefit, bacteria become more resilient, and meds less effective. Individuals feel better, while mankind is less well. Should we passively observe the phenomenon? Or should we employ a modulating strategy for the common good.

Likewise, the age-old competition may also be involved in how we manage our digital data. There is an idyllic universe actually known as "the digital commons," where resources are collectively owned and managed. Open source lives there in a democracy of shared data bases and an inclusive AI landscape. But it competes with a universe of "enclosure" of both data and algorithms. Tech giants collect and protect vast expanses of data for gain, to improve their bottom lines, to sell. They develop technologies and algorithms to barricade stores of data within legal and proprietary moats. The competition wages with intensity.

Problems have always been easier to identify than right solutions, haven't they? Thus, perhaps a thought construct such as "the commons," conceived as parable, can help us see those problems sooner and with more clarity. Perhaps it can help identify more ethical and moral outcomes and, then, inspire our instinct to act.

But the first step is to actually *employ* the construct. If we do, we may be quicker to identify a resource as one of common benefit—as ours, not mine; the more we may be inclined to perceive a relationship between our behavior and the consequences to the greater community; the more we may be inclined to replace selfishness with selflessness.

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And Yet, I'm Optimistic

Tony Bender

I remain optimistic. I also have a buttload of gummies if anyone needs any.

For the record, buttload is unit of measurement equaling 48 bushels, half of which would be a hogshead. I think it's part of the metric system. This has been the educational portion of our column.

Sure, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are galloping full-tilt toward us, one of the riders is the Fat Lady, and she's singing "It's the End of the World As We know It," yet, I feel fine.

Did I mention I have gummies?

I'm an unabashed optimist and patriot. I find the Constitution is visionary although cracks in the system have been exposed in the way a mouse finds its way inside in November. I fly a flag in my yard and I stand for the national anthem but mostly because if I kneel I might not be able to get up. I'm not convinced my right hip was American made.

Funny, isn't it, psychologically I feel the need to validate myself because even though I consider myself a moderate, in North Dakota, that makes me Che Guevara. Plus, I'm a journalist. That's three strikes. According to the Derek Zoolander Center for Kids That Can't Do Math Good.

Some Republicans have convinced themselves that they're the only true patriots while Democrats are a bunch of gummy-eating welfare-queen woke gun-haters intent on destroying America. Well, your message only has to be as smart as your audience. Anyway, I'd call loving your country enough to want to make it better the highest order of patriotism. Everyone's got ideas. Compromising is called democracy.

I'm a fiscal conservative, a social liberal—but fiscally conservative in that I believe in investment in infrastructure and education because it pays off economically and with a more civil society. Of course, educated Americans are not in the best interest of some.

This lengthy preface is a reflection of the success and lack thereof of messaging between the two major parties. There is no obvious policy under Trump but they're great at messaging it. Unless internment camps, martial law, a theocracy, actual weaponization of DOJ, and retribution are a platform. Please throw in a massive tax cut for billionaires, Republicans, just so we know it's really you.

Democrats remain pitiful with their narrative. Biden hasn't completely gotten the car out of the economic ditch but unemployment is low, inflation is slowing, retail spending is up, and the first major infrastructure bill since Eisenhower was passed with bipartisan support. You don't hear about Democratic success stories much. Most benefits to working families—Social Security, Medicare, the ACA, social safety nets—have come from Democrats. Try taking them away.

One might argue that Biden's shown wisdom and patience with foreign policy; no showboating with China or in the past two months, with Israel and Hamas. He's building relationships. Laying out plans. Competence in this climate is a big deal. So where's the messaging?

Tearing down 250 years of political evolution and norms ("The Deep State"), filling positions with unblinking sycophants, eliminating judicial and congressional checks and balances while echoing violent Hitlerisms... I dunno, based on civics classes, history, and current events, it doesn't feel like it would pencil out well. I wonder if this election will be America's much needed wakeup call or if we'll keep hitting the snooze button.

Do we teach civics anymore or are we still too panicked over CRT? On the extreme edges of political beliefs, we've become fact-averse. Statistics are helpful in problem-solving. For instance, with regard to CRT, generational riches and continuing prejudices are glaring when you examine the wealth and imprisonment rates of minorities. For the Land of the Free, we sure lock up a lot of people, increasingly into private prisons, and we all know what private vendors need—customers.

I'd like to see journalism and news consumer classes in the curriculum. Teach students the intended goals of journalism, the difference between opinion and news, and an ability to critically think through current events coverage. Instead, there's been a steady attack on public education. I guess vouchers and Jesus will fix what ails us.

Every four years, I play a little game. I look at the potential GOP presidential candidates and try to find one I could live with. I generally support Democratic policies more than Republican ones, but yes, I have voted for Republicans. This year, it's Chris Christie because he's the only one willing to support the rule of law as it applies to Donald Trump. Nikki Haley is trying to lean right enough to get the nomination but I don't think she'd govern as an extremist.

I'd mostly trust Doug Burgum's policy judgements but not his resolve. How do you run against someone yet refuse to criticize him? Whether it's fear or political calculation, it's a bad look and a bad strategy. You don't dip your toe into a political run. Either you're in or you're out. Address the criminal in the room. Now, you've got everyone's attention. Now, you can start talking about policies and competent governance.

The law. That's where it all lies for me. Let the judicial system work. There are abundant checks and balances. If a Democrat is corrupt, let there be consequences. Bob Menendez oozes slime, and his case should move forward quickly and publicly. Credit to Republicans for moving decisively to excommunicate Congressman and former Super Bowl MVP George Santos.

Republicans have typically supported law enforcement and the American military, two institutions undermined and attacked by Trump because lawbreakers don't appreciate law enforcement.

Republicans miscalculated, and created a monster, thinking they could control him. They could if they united behind the rule of law. A long list of former members of the Trump Administration have warned about him, exposed corruption and ineptitude, but only after leaving their positions. They're right, but with less to lose, less credible.

Yet, I remain optimistic. Probably because I have gummies. But I have other reasons, too.

First of all, there's no guarantee that Trump will run the gauntlet of court cases without a conviction before election day. Even if he does, the disclosures about an organized coup attempt and an unlawful retention of national secrets for unknown purposes will peel off all but the most ardent supporters.

Trump's Supreme Court appointments and the decimation of Roe v. Wade, will only cost him women's votes. Women have been demonized, slut-shamed, and now are subjected to even more government control to the

point of endangering their lives. They've lost personal freedom and have been more entrenched as second class citizens. There's a reason he's trying to walk it back.

Then, there's Trump's obvious cognitive decline, his criminal psychosis, and his violent intentions to defy the Constitution and become a dictator. It's not speculation. He's saying it. There's no way a majority of American voters will support that.

Every fever breaks. Or it kills you.

Ultimately, it will come down to debates if Trump gets that far. He's been hiding from Chris Christie, but he can't run from a presidential debate. Yes, Biden has suffered from some gaffes and looks frail, gleefully exaggerated and unfairly edited by Fox News, but Trump is energetically projecting insanity.

That's not partisanship. It's a cogent observation.

On the other hand, it's impossible not to wonder if Biden is doing a Ginsburg. The ego it takes to hold these lifetime achievement positions makes one vulnerable to inner hubris. That ship has sailed, however, unless he falls off his bike again, and there's no way of knowing whether another Democrat would fare better in this political atmosphere. We can all acknowledge that we'd like to see more vibrant leadership. A better bench in both parties. But there's something to be said for experience. Still, miles of fingernails will be chewed in 2024.

Biden's taking a slow and steady approach amidst Democratic handwringing. He's played to his strengths—one-on-one politics LBJ-style. He's refused to take the bait on a myriad of issues, so Republican extremists, mostly in the U.S. House, come off looking like a provocative rabble. It plays well to their districts, but beyond that, maybe not so much. Optically, the Democrats at least look like a party able to govern. If and when people see that a Biden-Trump race is a decision between democracy and despotism, I believe those now distracted will come home.

It's human nature, I suppose, for some Trump supporters to think he's not serious about his threats, but the Heritage Foundation is and has constructed an authoritarian, checks and balances-averse framework for a Trump administration. They're serious about one party forever rule.

Biden has much to overcome. He's got to find bipartisan forward motion on the border. The bet here is that it will come to a head with a

proposal that will make Republicans look bad if they reject it. Progress requires Congressional funding.

Here's where history comes in. The big picture. American meddling in governments in some cases has upset the social order. We've created refugees that we demonize when they arrive at our borders hoping to improve the lot of their families. A deeper understanding of our crises will lead to less volatile debate. History and humanity go hand in hand.

The moment cries out for inspirational leadership. But we've got what we've got.

There will be a whisper campaign that will acknowledge that while steady and experienced, Biden will continue to delegate. President Yoda. So, you'll see administration members pointed to the forefront to project the message that this is a team. Anthony Blinken comes to mind. And they'll look to make Kamala Harris more likable and competent. Initially, she was relegated to the background as VP's often are, viewed as a drag on policy, certainly an abysmal failure on border messaging, but the reality is voters need to be confident that she's ready for the Oval Office. The rehabilitation campaign is underway.

Messaging. On that count, Biden Spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre, the first Black LGBTQ person to hold that position, has been average—certainly compared to Jen Psaki's quick-thinking humor. Some of the most effective messaging is seeping out from conservatives. The Koch Network has $70 million to spend opposing Trump. That choir of opposition will continue to swell. To date, traditional conservatives have lost the narrative to a strongman who has no political beliefs beyond the politics of expediency in his own selfish interests. I trust traditional Republicans to uphold constitutional law.

What we don't know is what we don't know. World events have a way of throwing curveballs at elections. Domestically, third parties could make things closer in key states. That was part of the perfect storm that sank the Hillary. While third-parties could ironically derail democracy in 2024, the best thing that could happen to this country in the near future is the emergence of such parties. The stranglehold Democrats and Republicans have on American politics chokes everyone. A third party needn't be a huge majority to be effective, just enough to force compromise and end gridlock—the swing vote in democracy. Coalitions as needed.

Tony Bender

Ronald Reagan warned that the loss of democracy was always a generation away. Well, here we are. We're approaching a pivotal moment. It could end us. But it could also rouse us from our complacency, reinvigorate civic involvement, and ultimately strengthen our democracy. A close call often inspires us to take stock. The state of the nation ultimately comes down to us. It will be a harrowing ride. But I have faith in the majority of American voters.

Tony Bender *is a longtime state and national award-winning columnist and journalist. He's the owner and publisher of the Ashley Tribune and Wishek Star. He's published two novels, three collections of columns, and collaborated with Ed Schultz and Sen. Byron Dorgan on five books, including Dorgan's NY Times Bestseller, "Take This Job and Ship It."*

NORTHERN PLAINS ETHICS JOURNAL

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Student Section

Military Ethics in the Causing of Disability: The American Soldier's Right to Autonomy

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Abstract

The powerhouse of the United States military is undeniable, as is its impact on American citizens who inevitably feel its influence. This country's voluntary conscription is called into question as its society has traditionally pushed for military service, even prepping the youth for war through sports and expectations of masculinity. In addition to this, many individuals enter the military enticed by its financial benefits and educational assistance. Is this conscription truly voluntary if there has remained a tradition and expectation of service? Even while in the military, informed consent is not likely to be given, as not all possible situations can be considered when deciding to serve.

The military is a unique employer in this regard, as it has the potential and ability to leave its employees mentally unhealthy, disabled, or killed. This paternalistic institution has acted as a parent to a child, making decisions to ensure the best outcome for themselves, leaving the soldier's autonomy behind. Utilizing narrative ethics, military ethics, and service-connected disability analysis, this piece examines the role that the military plays in the United States through its causing of disability. Throughout the history of this institution, soldiers have been given vaccines without the full information provided, subjected to experimental medicine, manipulated for experiments, and exposed to toxins that have deteriorated their minds and bodies. Soldiers deserve full bodily autonomy and informed consent when entering this line of work. Wartime is no excuse for this exploitative treatment of citizens. Loss of life is not worth the pursuit of total obedience and efficiency.

Keywords: Military ethics, disability, bodily autonomy, paternalistic institution, chemical warfare, veterans

Introduction

The United States military has been a symbol of the country's strength and power for centuries. Its prevalence has been an indicator of American pride, as service in it represents heroism and bravery. In North Dakota alone, as of 2017, there are 51,677 veterans living in the state. 9.25% of the North Dakota's adult population are veterans ("North Dakota - Veterans Affairs."). 12,784 of North Dakota veterans were receiving

disability compensation in 2017, roughly a quarter of the total number of veterans (Ibid.).

My own family holds a line of military tradition that began soon after my family immigrated to the states. Both my grandfathers served, one as a photographer traveling throughout Europe and the other serving in the National Guard. They talk fondly of their experiences. Their satisfaction stemming from military service is evident. For them, military service was a rite of passage, it was an honor.

My father followed his father's footsteps, entering the military out of both desperation for financial security and societal expectations. He grew up playing with G.I. Joes and reenacting intense gunfights with childhood friends. My father was deployed to Saudi Arabia in 1990 for Desert Storm in the 131st Quartermaster in the water purification unit, acting as mechanized support for the 'Big Red One'. Months of constant warfare nearby in the desert heat coupled with the nearby oil fires, depleted uranium, and experimental drugs (forcibly given) made for a unique combination of poison. Nearly twenty-five years later my dad was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia, a blood cancer that was brought about by the toxins of wartime, with burn pits and depleted uranium orchestrated by the United States government being the major factors in his disease.

Chemical usage in wartime is nothing new to the United States military. Dating back to World War I, chemicals such as mustard gas, chlorine, and phosgene were used on soldiers during combat (Everts). In World War I alone, 1.3 million casualties were reportedly caused by chemical weapons. Again, during the Vietnam War, the United States utilized chemicals, in this case, an herbicide called Agent Orange, and napalm (Everts). These chemical weapons can cause a range of disabilities, some temporary and some permanent, and have been proven fatal. Many cause throat and eye irritation, others fill the lungs with fluid, some cause temporary blindness and blisters (Everts).

While the United States military works to protect its citizens, it is simultaneously causing them harm, in many cases, disability. This is a matter of ethics, one that engages an urgent issue of public concern. This matter ought to be discussed and philosophers ought to work collaboratively within communities to address it.

The military's usage of these chemical weapons draws into question the soldier's autonomy and military ethics, as they are undeniably linked, with disability intertwined throughout. In 2018, there were a documented 4.7 million veterans with a service-connected disability ("Statistical Trends: Veterans with a Service-Connected Disability, 1990 to 2018."). In consideration of the disability rights movement and the push for accessibility and education, the widespread causing of disability by the military must be addressed. The field of philosophy of disability is expanding rapidly and philosophers must analyze its impact.

Clive Baldwin, Canada Research Chair in Narrative Studies at St. Thomas University argues that we can "view storytelling itself as an ethical framework" (Baldwin). Narrative ethics seeks to develop a basis of personal identity which ethical learning can then build upon. Narrative ethics can be thought of as a way to contextualize topics through storytelling; it understands a situation not as it is currently but what it was and what it may become (Baldwin). Through stories in narrative ethics, multiple perspectives can emerge that shed light on the complexity of an issue. Humans tell stories and connect through shared words; these shared words inform and guide our culture. The military is an integral part of this country's cultural fabric, and illuminating personal experiences and integrating them contextualizes the issue and avoids an ahistorical perspective.

I will analyze the military ethics that cause disability and how a soldier's autonomy and responsibility factors in. The soldier is still entitled to bodily autonomy and their human rights while in time of war, and the violation of autonomy to cause disability (or knowingly increasing a person's risk of future disability dramatically) is unethical and must be examined.

Analysis

Military service is voluntary, although conscription is still mandatory for men of age. Service members are not physically forced into service, and therefore consent to their military service, but it is important to examine if military service is truly voluntary. The military has dictated American culture for decades, remaining a beacon of masculinity and honor. It is not surprising that society has historically prepared its youth

for wartime service, as they shoot each other down with toy guns and compete in rigorous sporting events that mirror athleticism required in war. Young boys watch as their fathers talk of country pride while they themselves are prepped for battle and impeding danger. This structure mimics Immanuel Kant's philosophy on childhood education, where "young children require a discipline that consists of obeying rules imposed by external authorities" (Frierson, 1099). This discipline had a further reach than simply gym class etiquette or parental choice. The societal system that places great importance on military service instructs how the children are raised and what they value, like serving their country.

While this societal expectation may seem outdated, the narrative shifted to financial benefits, promising little risk. Many soldiers enlist because college is financially unattainable, and they are running out of options. If society and finances drive decisions to join the military, surely it cannot be categorized as 'voluntary'. Enlistment may be the sole way to obtain higher education for individuals, making their participation passive, not active. If it is not voluntary, then soldiers do not consent to their military service, which undermines the military's actions and beliefs. The military advertises the sacrifices its members make to secure the freedom of all citizens, implying its members includes those passionate about their country, not seeking stability in a rough financial climate. In "Paternalism, Consent, and the Use of Experimental Drugs in the Military," Jessica Wolfendale and Steve Clarke conclude that soldiers give implied consent to military service, and all it encompasses, because the dangers of service are well known.

Implicit consent is not possible however, as not all possibilities of wartime are known. These possibilities, even if known, are not even communicated. Soldiers in the Gulf War did not know their bodies were being contaminated by burn pits and depleted uranium. Wartime provides a unique situation where consent may not be possible for every activity that service members are involved in. Situations become dangerous quickly, there is not time to handout a consent form as an attack is occurring. But if military service generally causes or drastically increases the likelihood of disability, then under this line of reasoning, service members essentially 'hand over' some of their rights when enlisting. This situation creates a new sector of work, one that legally infringes on the rights of its employees.

The military is also unique in its characteristics as an employer.

While military service is a job and career for many, the military is not held to the same standards of other employers. Ned Dobos lays out this reality in his article "Punishing Non-Conscientious Disobedience: Is The Military a Rogue Employer". Dobos uses a metaphor of a construction worker, detailing how if a construction worker believed an order they were given could result in injury or great danger, they would not seemingly be required to follow through (Ibid., 106). The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970 gave workers the right to disobey instruction if they believed it would result in "imminent danger" (Ibid.). Soldiers do not seem to be granted this right, as doing so would be defying orders and could result in legal action or dishonorable discharge. Military employees do not have the right to self-preservation. The military is in its own category separate to traditional jobs, as perhaps it is seen as a "higher calling to serve a higher good" (Ibid., 109) that other jobs are not. But going back to the issue of consent, if participation isn't truly voluntary, then service members are not seeing it as a 'higher calling', but just another job, except this is one that requires an agreement to sacrifice their life for the good of the whole.

Joining the military does not allow for causing disability or death. Soldiers do not hand over their autonomy for their uniform. Enlisting shouldn't be equated to allowing great physical harm, just as driving a car does not mean an individual consents to a car crash.

The military can also be seen as a paternalistic institution, one that mimics a father and son relationship. The higher-ranking officers, or fathers, interfere with the rights and decisions of the lower ranking service member, or the naïve child. This paternalism is seen as favoring the whole group over the individual, while the care of the individual has a direct correlation to the good of the group: peak physical fitness, access to weapons, suitable clothing, etc. (Wolfendale, 338). The emphasis on the good of the group means the diminishing of the individual, as individual rights are violated, and lives are taken. It is exactly this paternalism that allows the violation of rights. Soldiers, however, are not children following a father's orders and are not unable to consciously make decisions and uphold autonomy.

During the First Gulf War in 1990, the Department of Defense (DoD) sought approval from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to waive informed consent from the soldiers in order to administer them the experimental drugs of pyridostigmine bromide and the antibotulism

vaccine (Wolfendale, 343). Most soldiers received the drugs (two thirds) and while the vaccination was deemed optional, this fact was not revealed to the soldiers (Wolfendale, 343). The DoD justified their request to the FDA by stating that the military "sometimes must supersede normal rights and procedures" that civilians enjoy (qtd in Wolfendale, 344). While the military is a paternalistic institution, it is not acceptable or ethical to administer experimental drugs with unknown side effects for "therapeutic intent" against possible chemical weapons used by Iraq (Wolfendale, 343).

While the administering of pyridostigmine bromide and the antibotulism vaccine were both for therapeutic use, the military has also utilized experimental drugs for experiments on soldiers. From 1922 to 1975, the United States military researched medically induced fear, hysteria, and hallucinations in over 70,000 troops, many times for money, preying on those who needed cash (Dickerson).

Through these examples, the military has utilized experimental drugs for the betterment of the soldiers themselves but also for their own scientific end and research conclusions. Soldiers simply become a means to an end for the 'to-do' list of the United States military.

Military service can cause disability such as amputations, spinal injuries, mental illness, cancer, generational illness (Agent Orange), breathing problems, blindness, deafness, genitourinary trauma, and many more. Genitourinary Trauma regards wounds that can interfere with "urinary, sexual, hormonal, aesthetic, and … reproductive" functions (Caplan, 10). Twenty-five percent of total injuries in wars from the Civil War to the first Gulf War were genitourinary traumas (Parent, 10). The importance of disabled service members and their ability to bear children is often understated but can aid in recovery and increase quality of life (Parent, 11). The loss of reproductive capabilities is something that is not often discussed with veterans and remains a great risk of military service. While this issue has been partly addressed by the government through sperm bank storage, the issue is multifaceted, and the bare minimum is not enough to make up for the great trauma the injuries bring upon service members. This issue is extensive, it is not just the physical injuries that impact veterans, but a wide array of disabilities that are caused by human intervention.

The government has recognized some fault in its actions towards service members and provides medical care through Veterans Affairs in

conjunction with disability benefits. These benefits are difficult to obtain and require the spending of money in order to reach the possibility of acquisition. The disability percentage is done by 10s, with the percentages rounding down. This then corresponds to a dollar amount given to the individual. The percentage of disability is very important to the individual and their ability to live "comfortably" financially with their disability. A startling comparison can be seen in the difference in compensation for a 90% rating and a 100% rating. The compensation for the 100% rating is $1,190.18 more than the compensation for the 90% rating (Hill). There is also a deep tie societally and linguistically between wartime and disability. In the example of cancer, an "individual will "lose her battle" and we will praise her for having "fought the good fight," long, hard, and courageously" (Malm, para 2), and deem her a survivor if the treatment is successful. This correlation further defends the idea of soldier's lives on the line, an idea where service members fight to either live or die and are subjected to immense dangers and threat to life. The military is an institution that is so heavily engrained into American life that even linguistically, soldiers are seen an inch away from death, and normalized for being there.

Service member's rights should not be violated under the guise of wartime necessity in the name of military excellence. This is important in the future of military ethics and disability studies. Service members cannot be seen as a mere means to the American machine's victorious end. Service members deserve respect and recognition of rights beyond what is being presently seen. If consent realistically cannot be fully obtained, the institution must be rebuilt in a manner that respects bodily autonomy. Drastic measures must be taken to avoid repeats of forgotten disservices to veterans. The military values discipline, efficiency, and obedience, all values deeply rooted in an authoritative and paternalistic hierarchy. It must be determined which values the military should emphasize, and if efficiency over the protection of human life is worth it. If the paternalistic military can take free reign under the justification of it being in the 'best interest' for military efficiency, then where does the line get drawn? Under this assumption, the government can continue to violate rights to reach whatever end their see fit.

Conclusion

Some have claimed that service members "sign a blank check, co-signed by their families, payable to the Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines, up to and including their lives" (Major General Joseph Caravalho quoted in Parent, 10). The military is an institution of tradition, even if that tradition disables and kills.

This tradition is un-American, it hurts Americans. Service members are not cogs in the violent machine of warfare. Service members' lives are not to be played with in pursuit of efficiency and obedience. Service members are engaged citizens, family members, autonomous beings, and are intensely human. Autonomy is not a luxury that only a select few get to enjoy. A paternalistic military is not sustainable in its current trajectory. Veterans are dying as the military stands by. Wartime is not a valid excuse for the stripping of veteran's bodily autonomy. The violation of this autonomy that causes disability or consciously increases the likelihood of future disability is unethical. To deny service members a right to self-preservation and consent would be to threaten the autonomous lives of humans everywhere.

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