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Chinese-Speaking Steam Communities in the Face of Russian Aggression: The Case of the *Ukraine War Stories* Game

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[Abstract]: On February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a full-scale, massive military attack on Ukraine, resulting in an enduring war that persists to the present. The attack drew enormous attention from the global community, which provoked a feeling that the invasion threatened the entire world's stability and should be condemned. The ongoing war has encouraged the creation of numerous thematic games, many accessible through the Steam platform. Players often express their reflections on both the game itself and the topic it addresses in the comments section, which is available to all platform users. This paper presents conclusions derived from the qualitative analysis of approximately 250 comments made by Chinese language speakers on the game *Ukraine War Stories* in terms of language, content, and narrative. We indicate the dominant discourse within the gaming community, taking into account Chinese-language comments concerning their use of traditional or simplified characters, and discuss the emotions conveyed by players' feedback. We believe that understanding these aspects contributes to a more comprehensive view of how the community of gamers engages and interacts with complex global issues.

[Keywords]: Chinese language, discourse analysis, Russia-Ukraine war, Steam gaming community, video games

1. Serious games and political discourse

Games, whose main purpose is not entertainment (so-called serious games), have emerged as a medium to raise awareness about social, ethical, and cultural issues (Pereira et al. 2012, 53). Additionally, they provide specific information about various phenomena and events occurring worldwide. Thus, they can serve as an information tool, drawing attention to issues that should be disseminated to a broad audience (Khoury et al. 2018, 1885), as well as developing beliefs related to specific topics through experimentation, thereby eliminating the need for experience in reality (Mota et al. 2016, 2398; Raessens 2015, 246). Serious games have the potential to foster the development of empathy among players because of their immersive nature, which makes them a tool that is well-suited in this educational context (Belman and Flanagan 2009, 5) helping individuals to grasp the human impact of real-world issues like war and holding “the vast potential [...] for the work of peace education and conflict resolution” (Darvasi 2016, 19). However, it is essential to consider whether players’ pre-existing biases and deeply ingrained beliefs can be effectively altered by a game or whether these entrenched perspectives will ultimately prevail. It could be argued that a successful serious game should have the ability to alter a player’s worldview or, at the very least, compel players to engage in critical thinking.

Successful serious games should also meet the criterion of enabling the collection of data on player behavior (Samčović 2018, 598), as they assist, among other things, in changing attitudes (Mota et al. 2016, 2398; Gee 2003, 44). This capability can give insight into the effectiveness of the game, facilitate its development, and contribute to academic research through the analysis of data acquired during gameplay or data in the form of feedback. This data can be extracted from game reviews on popular digital distribution platforms, which make possible the collection of a wide range of gamers’ perspectives (Lin et al. 2019, 1), diverse backgrounds, cultures, and regions where media transmission follows a specific path. This diversity of user backgrounds and experiences helps to understand how perceptions of gaming can vary, influenced by local narratives that may be more or less objective, often filtered through various cultural, political, or ideological

lenses. However, games exist in a virtual dimension, a transnational environment, and they cross national borders, with platforms such as Steam being used by players located all over the world. Hence, comments can express opinions about the game and its content, but they also play a role in shaping other players' knowledge, much like the game itself (Jung 2020, 3).

In the context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, launched on a nationwide scale in 2022, this issue is particularly significant from the perspective of global stability and security; it also fosters a broad dialog among gamers about the war. Games such as *Ukraine War Stories*, hosted on Steam, have become forums where the gaming community can engage in discussions about the conflict, express views, and share reflections.

Viewed through the lens of the Chinese language and the Chinese-speaking community on the Steam platform, this matter takes on unique significance and interest, as Chinese can be written in two distinct writing systems: traditional and simplified. The latter is primarily used by citizens of the People's Republic of China, as well as in Malaysia¹ and Singapore,² whereas the traditional script is utilized by Taiwanese and Hong Kongers (Liu and Hsiao 2012, 689). This is of great importance given the political narrative of the war adopted by the media in these territories. According to the Chinese official position, China maintains a neutral stance (Song 2023, 21). However, this neutrality can be viewed as a strategic calculation to protect Chinese economic and political interests. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China has published a twelve-point statement outlining its approach to the Russian-Ukrainian situation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [China] 2023). Among other issues, the statement addresses the sovereignty of all countries, the abandonment of a Cold War mentality, the resumption of peace talks, and the cessation of hostilities, as well as the cessation of unilateral sanctions. Notably, the first two issues can be taken as directed toward the US and NATO, suggesting that they should not interfere in the politics of other countries. This may be particularly relevant in the

¹ It is worth noting that in Malaysia, the Chinese language is not recognized as an official native language; however, the "Chinese language education system is relatively superior" (Yan 2022, 134).

² One of Singapore's official languages is Singapore Mandarin Chinese, which differs from Standard Mandarin Chinese.

context of support for Taiwan. Mainland China views Taiwan as a rebellious province that should reunite with the People's Republic of China (Tworkowski 2023, 37). In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukraine's situation is sometimes compared to the Taiwan issue, which, however, differs in geopolitical and legal contexts (Zreik 2023, 13). Nonetheless, China's stance on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict may have far-reaching consequences for future international relations, especially concerning the tensions surrounding Taiwan.

By contrast, the official position of the Government of the Republic of China (Taiwan) toward Russia's decision to attack Ukraine is one of firm condemnation. According to a statement by the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian invasion is a threat to regional and global peace and stability. Taiwan has pledged to continue cooperating with the United States and other countries to help end the war in Ukraine, including by joining international sanctions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [Taiwan] 2022). The war in Ukraine has significantly affected Taiwanese perceptions of defense issues, highlighting an increased need to prepare for national defense (Hsiao 2022, 4).

Yichi Chen's (2024) research found that Chinese and Taiwanese media, despite similarities in agenda-setting, reflect different political goals. In the Chinese media, the war is described as a result of US actions (as opposed to China's promotion of peace and cooperation), with key terms such as "hegemony" and "cold war" frequently appearing in reports. Additionally, the media prominently feature the official statement's emphasis on peaceful solutions (Chen 2024, 3–4). In contrast, the prevailing narrative in Taiwanese media portrays Russia as a dictatorial and brutal state that has attacked Ukraine and violated human rights and describes Ukrainians as heroes fighting for freedom and democracy (Chen 2024, 3–4). The Taiwanese narrative also emphasizes globalization, diplomacy, and cooperation with the US, including criticism of the Chinese Communist Party (Chen 2024, 6).

Remarkably, a study by Deniz Aksoy et al. (2024) suggests that media reports regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine have increased Chinese support for the use of military force, with many expressing pessimism regarding peaceful solutions. This implies that the public is not convinced of the effectiveness of the Chinese government's official stance of neutral peace.

Consequently, it can be deduced that, following the outbreak of war, the issue of defense has become more significant for both Taiwanese and Chinese communities, indicating a heightened sense of insecurity. This development, in turn, shapes and fuels social debates on both security and sovereignty.

2. About the game

As stated by Tetiana Zinovieva, “video games serve as a powerful deep media tool of Ukrainian society to resist Russian aggression” (Zinovieva 2023, 226). *Ukraine War Stories* is one such game. It is a documentary, paragraph-based visual novel released for Windows computers and available for free on Steam. The game was published on October 18, 2022, by Starni Games, a Ukrainian studio founded in 2013 (Starni Games 2022), whose games are thematically centered on the issue of armed conflicts. *Ukraine War Stories* meets the assumptions of the genre: the gameplay is designed for a single player, there is a progression through decisions made, and the entire narrative experienced by the player is conveyed through descriptions, passages of dialog, overview graphics, and music. The game also features a system of consequences for the player’s choices, showing how the morale and resources of the group change after a particular option is chosen. It includes three scenarios based on true stories from the first months of the war in 2022, depicting events in the Russian-occupied territories of Gostomel, Bucha, and Mariupol (Kovpak and Lebid 2022, 107).

As regards the graphic development of the game, authentic war photographs are used in the background (Zinovieva 2023, 220), which have been digitally processed by applying a drawing-style filter. The interface consists of a panel displaying a portrait of the interlocutor, text provided by the game, a preview of statistics and resources, and a board with various options. The game’s music can be described as relatively dark, industrial, and tension-building, resembling film scores used in dramas or thrillers. It is not mechanically correlated with the gameplay.

The creators declare that they do not and will not profit from the game; their goal is to share the experiences of people suffering from the war in

Ukraine with the largest possible audience (Steam 2024; StarniGames 2022). Additionally, it is worth noting that the project was created by a small team from Kyiv, working during the war from their office in Ukraine. One of the creators survived the tragedy in Bucha: “[one of the guys from our team] had to hide with his family in the basement of the garage for a week until they were able to evacuate. His house was ransacked by the Russians along with many other houses in the village” (Steam 2024; my translation). This indicates the developers’ strong commitment to authentically portraying the war experience in a game meant to move players on an emotional level. The game’s content, based on a true and dramatic story, may significantly influence the nature of players’ comments, who may focus more on the message, themes, political background, and references to reality, and less on the gameplay and technical aspects of *Ukraine War Stories* as an interactive medium.

According to data recovered from Gamalytic, the game recorded approximately 37,700 downloads (Gamalytic 2024), while VG Insights reports a total of 30,870 downloads (Video Game Insights 2024b). This can be considered a significant success, given that it is an indie game and that these numbers were achieved through organic reach, as the game did not have any marketing investment. For comparison, the commercial game “Death from Above” (developed by Rockodile and published by Lesser Evil on February 22, 2024), an action-oriented drone simulator, set during the Russian invasion of Ukraine and priced at \$9.99, has sold approximately 9,200 copies on Steam (Video Game Insights 2024a).

In the context of our article, it is also worth mentioning that the game is available in eleven languages, including Chinese (in both traditional and simplified writing systems), significantly increasing its accessibility to a wide audience. However, the game does not have a Spanish version, despite Spanish being one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. This may be due to localization priorities, as well as limited resources and budget. It is important to bear in mind that the game is a pro-bono project.

We chose to discuss *Ukraine War Stories* for several reasons:

- > game genre – it focuses on narrative, making it a representative medium for studying players’ reactions to the depiction of real-world events in games;

- > availability – it is available for free;
- > education and emotions – it has an educational value and emotional aspect;
- > contextual relevance – because of its political and social implications, the game can generate comments that reflect broader political and social narratives concerning the Russian-Ukrainian war.

3. Methodology

In this article, we assume that language is fundamental in the construction of social reality and identity (Gee 2014); thus, we employed a methodology of digital discourse analysis, focusing on the content of players' comments posted on the *Ukraine War Stories* game page on the Steam platform. As noted by James Paul Gee (2014, 61), all meaning is local. This approach allows us to understand how localized utterances and their meanings influence society, shape perceptions of reality, and affect further communication and discourse. The main point of discourse analysis is to discern "how individuals use language in specific social contexts" (Dick 2004, 201). In this understanding of critical discourse analysis, language is viewed as a tool that actively shapes reality, with the manner of expression reflecting the speakers, their relationships with others, and their perception of reality. This, in turn, influences social behaviors and reinforces certain ideologies. Discourse analysis further examines the intricate relationship between language and identity, particularly how language is employed to construct both individual and collective identities (Gee 2014, 28). In this article, we focus on Chinese-speaking gamers.

This research was conducted to understand the dominant discourse within the Chinese language communities of gamers on the game and its context and to discover how individuals use the Chinese language in their reviews to construct and communicate their beliefs, emotions, and evaluations, as well as why they use it in these specific ways. Here we adopt the perspective of José P. Zagal et al. that "game reviews are one of the primary forms of video game journalism and are also one of the prevalent forms

of discourse about games” (Zagal et al. 2009, 215), but at the same time, we acknowledge that these reviews can also reflect broader player opinions on various issues associated with the game, with the game itself catalyzing the expression of such views.

In the analysis, we considered 262 reviews written in Standard Mandarin Chinese, the official language of both the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China. Based on the assumptions made earlier (geographical distribution, cultural and political context), it can be concluded that most comments written in simplified Chinese characters are likely to come from Chinese citizens, while comments in the traditional Chinese script are likely to come from Taiwanese citizens.³

All comments analyzed below have been extracted from the “reviews” section of the Steam platform. In the initial stage of the research, we extracted the data using a screen-based approach (Androutsopoulos 2013, quoted in Kreis 2022, 78), followed by a close reading of the comments to identify patterns and categorize our observations (as in Tovaes 2022, 28). The comments were analyzed for convergence in Chinese and Taiwanese narrative, cognitive statements, content (including semantics and keywords), valuation and tone (positive, neutral, negative), and the affective statements involved in their content (including emotional reactions expressed through language), based on the assumptions of a three-dimensional analytic framework that includes text, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough 1992, quoted in Dick 2004, 205). The discourse identified in the comments is specific to the context of the game, the cultural background of the players, and the global issue under discussion. By analyzing reviews it can be demonstrated how certain linguistic choices are tied to specific identities and viewpoints.

³ However, it is important to note that this information is not confirmed and cannot be directly obtained from the platform.

4. Quantitative data

At the outset, it should be noted that, according to the statistics of the Steam platform, the overwhelming majority of comments made in various languages are positive (874 out of 998). This trend may reflect the general reception of the game as a piece of art, but it may also indicate an anti-Russian perspective regarding the conflict. Consequently, the comments may reveal users' attitudes toward the war more than they reflect an objective assessment of the game's quality by Steam users. The majority of comments was posted during the initial post-release period, with the largest number appearing on the release day, October 18, 2022 (239 positive comments and 35 negative comments).

A total of 261 comments were posted in Chinese, accounting for over 26% of all reviews, which is an interesting result. However, the quantitative distribution of reviews seems to be logical, as the Chinese community accounts for as much as 12.3% of Steam users (Carless 2023), placing it second in the platform's overall community.

In simplified writing, 208 comments were posted, of which 34 (16%) were marked as negative. In traditional writing, 53 comments were posted, none of which was negative. This data provides preliminary insight into the differences in the Chinese-speaking community's attitude toward the game and/or the armed conflict.

5. Qualitative analysis

5.1. Convergences in content, narratives, and emotions within the Chinese language

Regardless of the writing system in which the comments are constructed, the Chinese-speaking community predominantly comments on the real conflict rather than on the game itself. They exhibit a unified sentiment of sympathy toward ordinary people, whom they consider the real victims of this war. The players are particularly moved by the fate of civilians, expressing

sadness and incomprehension as regards armed conflict, while simultaneously showing pessimism, noting the repetitiveness of history and the fact that people fail to learn from past mistakes. The community condemns war in general, wishes for its end, and frequently expresses a desire for world peace in its comments.

A common keyword for the Chinese-speaking community can be identified as 平民 *píngmín* “civilian, ordinary person” and its synonyms, including 人民 *rénmín* “people, nation, citizens” and 民众 (民衆) *mínzhòng* “masses, population, general public.” These terms are consistently used in comments to describe the main victims of the conflict: individuals who are not involved in warfare yet suffer as a result. These expressions, therefore, appear in contexts of compassion, concern, and solidarity, as well as the desire for others to live without fear and violence. An example of such a comment is as follows:

不管是什么战争，受苦的永远都是人民。

Bùguǎn shì shénme zhànzhēng, shòukǔ de yǒngyuǎn dōu shì rénmin.

No matter what kind of war it is, ordinary people always suffer.

In contrast, comments openly supporting Ukraine⁴ (comprising 13% of those in simplified characters and 34% of those in the traditional writing system) are dominated by the slogan 荣耀属于乌克兰 (榮耀歸於烏克蘭) *róngyào guī yú Wūkèlán*. This phrase is a direct translation of the Ukrainian national greeting Слава Україні (*Slava Ukraini*) “Glory to Ukraine,” which is used globally to protest against Russia’s aggression and to express support for Ukraine.

In both the comments written in simplified and traditional Chinese scripts, *Ukraine War Stories* is frequently compared to the title *This War of Mine* (released in 2014 by 11 bit studios, a Polish developer). These games are regarded as mediums that effectively describe the impact of war on ordinary individuals.

⁴ We considered comments openly supportive of Ukraine if they contained explicit expressions of support, characterized by emotional and encouraging slogans expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people in the face of the conflict.

5.2. Divergences in narrative - comments in simplified Chinese characters

The comments written in simplified Chinese characters are generally cautious and subdued, with relatively fewer emotional overtones, reflecting a sense of calmness and a striving for balance. Most users maintain a neutral tone, which aligns with the official approach of the People's Republic of China to the conflict. In their comments, they express the view that it is impossible to verify the truth and authenticity of the events presented, despite a great desire to do so. For these users, the reality of the Russian-Ukrainian war is not straightforward. To express this balanced approach they often use the reference to the colors 黑白 *hēibái* "black and white," stressing the difficulty in making clear assessments and drawing simple conclusions that distinguish between good and evil.

While maintaining neutrality, the players refer to the shared heritage and roots of Russians and Ukrainians, urging others to avoid unilateral perspectives and to promote the values of peace and love. Thus, they lament that despite advances in technology and humanity, the world remains governed by the law of the jungle, through which patterns of violence (such as rape, as referred to in the game's plot) are reproduced. In this aspect, it is emphasized that smart people should not ingratiate themselves with and support either side of the conflict, especially considering that China is not a direct party to it. Thus, they aim to protect China's overall interests:

我身为中国人，不想在这场战争中站队哪一方，我仅仅并不希望这场战争
导向一个不利于中国的结局。

*Wǒ shēnwéi Zhōngguó rén, bù xiǎng zài zhè chǎng zhànzhēng zhōng zhànduì nǎ yī
fāng, wǒ jǐnjǐn bìng bù xīwàng zhè chǎng zhànzhēng dǎoxiàng yīgè bù lìyú Zhōng-
guó de jiéjú.*

As Chinese person, I don't want to take sides in this war, I just want this war not
to lead to an outcome unfavorable to China.

首先，台湾是我国的一部分，其次，我希望世界和平。

Shǒuxiān, Táiwān shì wǒ guó de yībùfèn, qícì, wǒ xīwàng shìjiè hépíng.

First of all, Taiwan is part of my country, and secondly, I hope there will be peace in the world.

This desire for world peace frequently appears in comments, particularly through expressions such as 愿世界和平 *yuàn shìjiè hépíng* “may there be peace in the world” or 愿战争早日结束 *yuàn zhànzhēng zǎorì jiéshù* “may the war end quickly.” These phrases can be seen as key expressions within the Chinese narrative.

Some comments criticize both parties, indicating that each has ulterior motives and inflames emotions, leading to feelings of contempt toward both nations. This contempt is expressed through the use of pejorative and insulting terms for Russia and Ukraine, such as 俄狗乌贼 *égǒu wūzéi* “Russian dog, Ukrainian squid.” The comments highlight the ineptitude of the Ukrainian government and President Zelensky, often referred to as a provocateur, with the remark that despite these issues, “sinister” Russia should not interfere. Steam users also describe the Russian-Ukrainian war as a propaganda war or a conflict between “white thugs.”

It is worth noting again that comments openly supporting Ukraine constitute only 13%, while those openly supporting Putin’s actions are even fewer, at 2.9%. Additionally, there are comments expressing anger at Russian actions, but these too are in the minority (only 4.8%, with the comparison of Putin to Hitler occurring only once). All of these comments, however, are decidedly more emotionally charged, featuring expressions of rage or a desire for death. These emotions are underscored, among others, by the use of acronyms such as TMD (他妈的 *tāmā de* “fucked”), other curse words in Chinese slang, and pejorative euphemistic terms based on homophony. These are directed at both Russians (鹅匪 *éfěi* literally “goose thug” referring to ‘Russian thug’; 蛾子 *ézi* literally “moth” referring negatively to the term “Russian;” and 俄罗斯食人机器 *Éluósī shí rén jīqì* “Russian man-eating machines”) and Ukrainians, as well as Chinese who mindlessly support one-side (黄俄滚孝 *huáng’é gǔnxiào* “yellow Russian fanatic,” 鹅友 *éyǒu* literally “friend of the goose” referring to “friend of Russia,” 精俄 *jīng’é* “pro-Russian,” and 精乌 *jīngwū* “pro-Ukrainian”). Chinese individuals are particularly criticized by the players for their support of Russia, with ironic comments suggesting they change their citizenship to Russian and pointing

out their failure to remember Russian crimes against the Chinese people. Examples are:

众黄鹅孝子必将下地狱。

Zhòng huáng é xiàozǐ bì jiāng xià dìyù.

All blindly devoted Chinese supporters of Russia will go to hell.

去TM的战争 · 去TM的纳粹主义 · 去TM的俄罗斯联邦。

Qù tānmā de zhànzhēng, qù tānmā de nàcuì zhǔyì, qù tānmā de Éluósī liánbāng.

Down with the fucking war, down with the fucking Nazism, down with the fucking Russian Federation.

Players criticize not only the unreflective adoption of propaganda but also the moralizing tone of the game's developers. This is particularly evident in comments emphasizing that the game is biased, propagandistic, and brainwashing, with a narrative that whitewashes Ukraine and demonizes Russians. Therefore, players advise caution against potential manipulation. Some accuse the developers of attempting to manipulate players' thinking and believe that games should not serve as political tools, suggesting that *Ukraine War Stories* was created to solicit donations for Ukraine. Some players argue that the political manifesto embedded in the game is overly strong and cannot be regarded as a source of reliable information. Thus, as a result of frustration, some comments exhibit a stronger tone (for example, "game for idiots," "game for clowns," and "junk game"), also employing vulgar language (for example, 傻逼遊戲 *shǎbī yóuxì* literally "fucked up game").

看评论我真的服了 玩了个洗脑游戏就去反俄长点脑子吧。

kàn pínglùn wǒ zhēn de fú le wán le gè xǐnǎo yóuxì jiù qù fǎn É zhǎng diǎn nǎozi ba

Reading the comments, I really can't believe it. They played a brainwashing game and now they are against Russia. Use some brains.

可惜steam没有中间值评价 · 作为一款免费的宣传和和平小游戏我觉得还可以 · 但是政治色彩太严重了 · 甚至会提到俄做的事情比纳粹更严重啊 [...] 作为打发时间的小游戏可以 · 不建议太用政治眼光去看这个游戏 (我一开始就是被12种语言竟然有中文和绘画插画吸引了) 。

*Kěxī Steam méiyǒu zhōngjiān zhí píngjià, zuòwéi yī kuǎn miǎnfèi de xuānchuán hépíng xiǎo yóuxì wǒ juéde hái kěyǐ, dànshì zhèngzhì sècǎi tài yánzhòng le, shèn-zhì huì tídao É zuò de shìqíng bǐ Nà*cùì gèng yánzhòng a [...] Zuòwéi dǎfā shíjiān de xiǎo yóuxì kěyǐ, bù jiànyì tài yòng zhèngzhì yǎnguāng qù kàn zhège yóuxì (wǒ yī kāishǐ jiùshì bèi 12 zhǒng yǔyán jìngrán yǒu Zhōngwén hé huìhuà chāhuà xīyǐn le).*

It's a shame that it doesn't have a neutral rating on Steam, as a free game to promote world peace it's fine, but it has too clear a political tone, and it's even mentioned that what Russia did is worse than Nazism. [...] As a game to kill time, it's fine, but I wouldn't recommend looking at it too politically (I was initially attracted by the choice of up to twelve languages, including Chinese, and the illustrations).

Interestingly, some comments appear to indicate subtle support for Ukraine, hidden between the lines. This may suggest a fear of contradicting China's official stance, but also a clear desire to break away from its narrative. In this context, there are comments expressing opposition to all forms of aggression and criticizing the tacit acceptance of inhumane actions, cruelty, and impunity for the perpetrators, referred to as fascists (without explicitly naming the aggressor).

我不知道哪一方是对的，我只知道侵略者必亡。

Wǒ bù zhīdào nǎ yī fāng shì duì de, wǒ zhǐ zhīdào qīnlüè zhě bì wáng.

I don't know which side is right, I only know that the aggressors must fall.

Comments directly labeling Russia as the aggressor are present, but they are in the minority. More frequently, Chinese commenters view the West, NATO, and the United States as the true enemy, blaming them for the outbreak of war and positioning them as opponents in the conflict with Russia. These comments exhibit cynicism and criticism toward U.S. war policy, often referring to the United States as "Western war merchants." Zelensky is accused of provoking the Russians with his efforts to join NATO. This is perceived by users as a threat to Russia's security. Commenters mention the "fascist U.S. regime," U.S. "genocide" against its own citizens, and the West's double standards regarding wars. The game's narrative is sometimes described as Western capitalist propaganda that demonizes the Russian military, and there is criticism of the extreme nationalism depicted in the

game. These comments are interspersed with communist propaganda slogans and support for the Chinese government.

全世界的无产者应该联合起来，而不是给资本家卖命，充当统治阶级的屠刀砍向追求解放的民众。

Quán shìjiè de wúchǎnzhě yīnggāi liánhé qǐlái, ér bùshì gěi zīběnjiā màimìng, chōngdāng tǒngzhì jiējí de túdāo kǎn xiàng zhuīqiú jiěfàng de mínzhòng.

The proletarians of the whole world should unite, not serve the capitalists by becoming a tool of the ruling class to suppress people who want liberation.

究竟是谁造成的乌克兰战争？是北约，或者再说明白点，是美国！美国才是全世界最大最恶心的战争贩子！

Jiūjìng shì shuí zàochéng de Wūkèlán zhànzhēng? Shì Běiyuē, huòzhě zài shuō míngbái diǎn, shì Měiguó! Měiguó cái shì quán shìjiè zuì dà zuì ěxīn de zhànzhēng fànzi!

Who really caused the war in Ukraine? It's NATO, or to be more precise, it's the United States! The United States is the largest and most repugnant/warmonger in the world!

愿乌克兰人民抗击俄帝国主义侵略、北约集团、本土寡头政府的战争胜利。

Yuàn Wūkèlán rénmin kàngjī É dìguó zhǔyì qīnlüè, Běiyuē jítuán, běntǔ guǎtóu zhèngfǔ de zhànzhēng shènglì.

May the Ukrainian people prevail against the imperialist aggression of Russia, the NATO group, and the local government of oligarchs.

Numerous reviews mention a variety of political situations and refer to world history, including events such as the aggression of the USSR and Nazi Germany during World War II, Stalin's crimes, the Sino-Japanese War, the coup in Guatemala, the American mission in Afghanistan, the Iraq War, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the history of Sino-Russian relations. These events are also often linked to criticism of the United States. One of the most intriguing commentaries includes a poem titled "Report from the Besieged City" (in Polish, "Raport z oblężonego miasta") by Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, written in 1982 and translated into Chinese. This poem is used by the review's author to criticize China's official position, arguing that opposing the United States does not necessitate supporting another oppressive

aggressor attacking a sovereign state, and *vice versa*: opposing a Russian attack does not equate with supporting the United States. This critical stance is also reflected in another user's comment, who claims to have experienced harassment from Chinese state institutions and fellow citizens for publicly supporting Ukraine.

An interesting phenomenon is the masked self-irony of the Chinese people in some of the comments. Below is an example of one such review, which has been marked as "useful" by 333 users and "funny" by 181 users, indicating that it resonated with a significant number of the audience:

想到在战争中死去的每一个乌克兰人都有1/6的几率投胎中国,我的眼泪就止不住地往下掉。

Yī xiǎng dào zài zhànzhēng zhōng sǐ qù de měi yī gè Wūkèlán rén dōu yǒu 1/6 de jīlǜ tóu tāi Zhōngguó, wǒ de yǎnlèi jiù zhǐ bù zhù de wǎng xià diào.

Tears come to my eyes at the thought that every Ukrainian who died in the war has 1/6 of a chance of being reincarnated in China.

On the one hand, this may appear to be an attitude of criticism and dislike toward Ukrainians. However, after careful analysis and consultation with a native speaker, it becomes clear that it reflects compassion and concern for the future of Ukrainians. The comment suggests that Ukrainians, in their next phase of life, may have to face life in China, which is expected to mean bringing further difficulties and challenges for them.

There is little apparent commentary on the game design itself in the reviews. Some isolated comments point to a well-constructed plot, which is mostly considered an asset. However, there are also criticisms regarding poor playability, inadequate mechanics of choices, and dialog inappropriate for characters' ages, rendering them stereotypical and one-dimensional. Despite its classification as an *eroge* (adult visual novel), players indicate that, in this category, the game can be considered a failure.

In the comments written in the simplified system, there are no hashtags or emoji's. Instead, users who explicitly oppose one side use international slogans emphasizing solidarity with Ukraine (for example, *Slava Ukraini*, "I stand with Ukraine," and "The victory belongs to Ukraine"), opposition to armed conflict and dictatorship (for example, "fuck all wars & dictatorships," "fuck war," and "PEACE AND LOVE"), and their political views ("fuck

putin,” “down with XJP,” “Stand with Russia,” and “destroy the nazi”).⁵ These additions and slogans in English are meant to draw the attention of a wider, non-Chinese-speaking audience to the views of the comment authors.

5.3. Divergences in narrative - comments in traditional Chinese characters

Comments written in the traditional Chinese character system are notably more emotionally charged in terms of reactions experienced to the atrocities depicted in *Ukraine War Stories*. The game’s narratives are regarded as depressing and disturbing, but they also shift players’ perspectives on war, encouraging a more nuanced understanding that considers the deeper problems of armed conflict, particularly the suffering of civilians and helplessness experienced in the face of losing loved ones. The game is recognized by the community as immersive and captures the atmosphere of war, inducing strong emotions, including sadness, pain, powerlessness, or dread.

這是個由好幾個悲劇組成的遊戲，如果要玩，那請做好一個晚上都睡不著的準備。我是個國二的普通的男孩，我不否認我之前把戰爭想得很簡單，因為我壓根就沒想過失去親人的痛苦，我也沒想過面對敵人的入侵，我該有多無助，但在這遊戲中，我那些沒想過也不想想的事情都發生了，連幾分鐘的人物故事刻畫都可以讓我身歷其境，非常好的遊戲，也希望世界再也沒有戰爭，也希望台灣可以和平，不要發生戰爭。

Zhè shì gè yóu hǎo jǐ gè bēijù zǔchéng de yóuxì, rúguǒ yào wán, nà qǐng zuò hǎo yī gè wǎnshàng dōu shuì bù zháo de zhǔnbèi. Wǒ shì gè guó èr de pǔtōng de nánhái, wǒ bù fǎurèn wǒ zhīqián bǎ zhànzhēng xiǎng de hěn jiǎndān, yīnwèi wǒ yāgēn jiù méi xiǎngguò shīqù qīnrén de tòngkǔ, wǒ yě méi xiǎngguò miàn duì dírén de rùqīn, wǒ gāi yǒu duō wúzhù, dàn zài zhè yóuxì zhōng wǒ nàxiē méi xiǎngguò yě bù xiǎng xiǎng de shìqíng dōu fāshēng le. Lián jǐ fēnzhōng de rénwù gùshì kèhuà dōu kěyǐ ràng wǒ shēnlǐ qǐjīng, fēicháng hǎo de yóuxì. Yě xīwàng shìjiè zài yě méiyǒu zhànzhēng, yě xīwàng Táiwān kěyǐ héping, bùyào fāshēng zhànzhēng.

⁵ When transcribing the slogans written by users in English, I retained the original notation as written on the site.

This is a game built on many tragedies. If you are going to play it, be prepared for a sleepless night. I'm an ordinary middle school sophomore, I won't deny it – before that I thought about war in a very simple way, I never thought about the pain of losing loved ones, and I never imagined how helpless I would feel in the face of an enemy invasion. However, in this game, all those unimaginable and unwanted thoughts came to fruition. Even a few minutes of reading the description of the characters allowed me to empathize with their situation. A very good game. I hope there will be no more wars in the world, and that Taiwan can live in peace, without war.

As illustrated by the commentary above, the issue of Taiwan's security and the tensions caused by its situation with China are being raised alongside the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Players are critical of the government of the People's Republic of China and the Chinese regime. Figures of Marx and Lenin are commented on ironically as the “ancestors” of the Chinese. Additionally, the term 小粉紅 *xiǎo fěnhóng* (literally “little pink” or “little red fan”), which Taiwanese use to describe young cyber-nationalists, is invoked in the context of criticism of the Chinese. Users reproach them for their lack of access to free media and suggest that they should return to watching propaganda content on Chinese state television, rather than engaging in meaningful discourse. These strong negative emotions toward the Chinese are expressed through sarcasm directed at Chinese nationalists, as well as through insensitive and direct comments; some users even wish death upon the chairman and the Chinese Communist Party. This condemnation is evident in reviews opposing both China and Russia.

普丁会死 · chinazi也会死 · 世界最终会回到它本来应该是的样子。

Pǔdīng huì sǐ, chinazi yě huì sǐ, shìjiè zuìzhōng huì huídào tā běnlái yīnggāi shì de yàngzi.

Putin will die, the Chinazis [a pejorative term combining the words “China” and “Nazi”] will also die, and the world will eventually return to the way it should have been from the beginning.

The content of the comments often pays tribute to Ukrainian soldiers, including those defending the Hostomel Airport and encircled Kyiv, the 93rd Brigade, and the AZOV fighters on the frontline in Bakhmut, as well as the victims of the Bucha massacre. The comments include slogans such as “free

Ukraine,” “long live Zelensky,” and “glory to Ukraine,” as well as more uncensored slogans such as “fuck Russia” and 黃俄傻 *huáng’é shǎ*, literally “yellow Russian fucker,” a vulgar term for a Chinese citizen supporting Russia. Additionally, some comments describe the situation with statements like “Russia is murdering Ukrainian civilians.”

One commentary recalls the figure of Ceng Sheng-Guang, the first Taiwanese volunteer to join the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine and die in combat against Russia, thus becoming the first East Asian soldier killed in that war. Another review mentions the Taiwanese government’s assistance in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Similar to the comments written in simplified characters, users cite quotes from writers, both Chinese and foreign, including George Orwell and Guo Lanying, regarding the betrayals or atrocities of armed conflict. They also make references to world history and the current geopolitical situation, mentioning the USSR’s help in repelling the Japanese invasion while stressing that present-day support should be directed toward Ukraine, the victim of a fascist attack.

Users praise the developers for basing the story on true events, considering it the most important aspect from a game design perspective. However, on technical issues, criticism is directed at the low playability, monotonous music, and underdeveloped sound design. Players confess that because of the limitations in playability, *Ukraine War Stories* can hardly be classified as a game.

說不上是遊戲，不過很有那個氛圍，讓你設身處地感受到那種平民陷入戰爭的無奈與可憐，也讓你感受到戰爭的殘酷和可怕

Shuō bu shàng shì yóuxì, búguò hěn yǒu nàge fēnwéi, ràng nǐ shèshēn chǔdì gǎn-shòu dào nà zhǒng píngmín xiànrù zhànzhēng de wúnnài yǔ kělián, yě ràng nǐ gǎn-shòu dào zhànzhēng de cánkù hé kěpà.

You can’t call it a game, but it has the right atmosphere and lets you feel the helplessness and misery of civilians caught up in the war, as well as the brutality and fear that come with it.

Users making comments using traditional writing often include the Ukrainian slogan Слава Україні *Slava Ukraini!* “Glory to Ukraine” in their reviews. Another recurring slogan is 天佑烏克蘭 *tiān yòu Wūkèlán* “may

God protect Ukraine,” while a common hashtag is #RussiansATerroristState, frequently used globally in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

6. Discussion

Serious games based on true war stories enable the gaming community to better understand the course and consequences of war. They provoke reflection on complex social, political, and moral issues, which are subjected to extreme tests under conditions of war. The ability to comment on such games on publicly accessible platforms like Steam allows gamers from diverse backgrounds to engage in discussions, share perspectives, and debate complex issues, thereby providing developers with valuable feedback on their projects. Additionally, these platforms amplify voices marginalized in traditional media and include the perspectives of those directly or indirectly affected by the war, facilitating a multidimensional analysis of the geopolitical and social discourse among gamers.

The analysis of Chinese-language comments on the game *Ukraine War Stories* on the Steam platform leads to the conclusion that the game itself is of secondary concern. Users primarily focus on the political context of the real conflict, as the review section becomes a platform for expressing personal attitudes toward the involved parties, as well as a broader discussion on wars and their consequences. The platform allows comments to be made anonymously, which enables users to express their beliefs relatively freely, even those that diverge from government policies. In authoritarian states, such expressions, if made openly, could be subject to punishment. Unfortunately, this is also a breeding ground for increasing conflicts and divisions among players from different backgrounds.

Chinese-speaking users of Steam predominantly show empathy and compassion for innocent victims of war. Their deep understanding of the realities of war enables them to perceive the perspective of civilians and identify with them. This empathy can lead to a greater commitment to humanitarian and peace-related issues.

The lexeme 平民 *píngmín* can be seen as a symbol of the shared gaming experience within the Chinese-speaking community, which, regardless of individuals' country of origin, is united in compassion for the innocent victims of the conflict. These comments indicate the importance of considering the real consequences of war for ordinary people. They testify to the significant impact of the game in evoking emotions among players.

However, because of the geopolitical diversity of Chinese-speaking players, particularly between those from China and Taiwan, the analysis revealed two distinct attitudes, both probably guided by the same goal of defending respective national interests. The first is the quasi-neutral and balanced attitude of the Chinese, which aligns with the official stance of the People's Republic of China. Chinese players often refrain from taking sides directly (or criticize both of them) and express skepticism regarding the veracity of events as presented by non-Chinese media. The skepticism may stem from censorship and a tradition of restricting access to alternative sources of information by strong Chinese propaganda and a state narrative that often undermines the credibility of foreign media. In contrast, the second attitude is an emotional one from Taiwanese players, who unequivocally oppose the invasion of Ukraine and the use of weapons. Taiwanese players view the Ukrainian resistance as a reflection of their struggle for independence in the face of potential aggression by the People's Republic of China. The data provide evidence of differences in the interpretation of historical narratives and their impact on contemporary attitudes, as well as differences in the policies promoted in China and Taiwan. This offers insight into the dynamics of conflict and differing attitudes toward war.

The game generates significant controversy, especially in the context of the perception of games as a medium used to spread propaganda and the subjectivity of its narrative. The perception of the game and its content is certainly influenced by local discourse, which shapes the content of reviews even before players engage with the game. Each player approaches *Ukraine War Stories* with a specific cultural background and his/her own beliefs, which heavily influence their interpretation of the content presented in the game. Comments from the Chinese-speaking community, however, not only reflect personal beliefs but also broader social narratives. For instance, an anti-Western narrative is evident in comments written in simplified Chinese,

while a discourse centered on the struggle for sovereignty is prominent in comments written in traditional Chinese.

The findings demonstrate the potential of using the Steam platform and gamer comments as a tool for collecting data on attitudes, behavior, emotions, and language, which can serve as a valuable resource for analyzing the social and psychological aspects of armed conflict. The content of the comments reveals the controversial nature of the topic and the complexity of social divisions related to political issues. In sensitive topics such as war, the gaming community and Internet users, in general, seem to be the most outspoken and candid, partly because of the relative anonymity afforded by digital interactions and the use of avatars. Evidence of this fact can be observed in some of the more bold comments from Chinese users, whose non-mainstream voice is often silenced on a daily basis. Consequently, one can conclude that the comments are genuine and the analyzed data reflects authentic emotions and opinions, allowing one to gain insight into the true sentiments of language users. This also confirms that qualitative digital discourse analysis in the context of comments on game distribution and sales platforms can be a meaningful approach, providing valuable insights into the attitudes and dynamics of a specific social group.

The research presented here holds value not only in a historical or psycho-social context but also from the perspective of linguistic studies. Narrative is constructed through language, and the values and attitudes toward war are encoded in the words used by players. Semantic analysis thus becomes a valuable source of information about players' reactions and emotions, as well as the intensity and diversity of those reactions and emotions. Identifying keywords and repetitive phrases, decoding slang and vulgarities, and recognizing irony and sarcasm, among other forms of expressions, help understand how individuals cope with difficult topics. Pragmatic differences within the same language reveal how local contexts influence narratives, particularly evident in the study of Chinese, the official language in two geopolitically and socially divergent countries.

There may be possible limitations in this study. The author of this study is the sole interpreter of the data, and as such, the interpretation may be influenced by personal biases, cultural understanding, and subjective perspectives. Despite rigorous efforts and consultations with native Chinese

speakers, there may have been selective attention to certain themes and lexemes, potentially shaped by the author's linguistic and cultural background. This highlights the possible need for triangulation, in which multiple researchers could independently analyze the same dataset and compare their perspectives. Additionally, the reliance on the Steam platform as the primary source of data represents another limitation. The platform caters to a specific gamer culture that may not be representative of broader national populations. Thus, it should be considered that the conclusions drawn pertain only to the community gathered around the platform. Furthermore, because of the anonymity of the comments, there is a lack of detailed information regarding the demographic profile of the participants, such as their age, personal background, and education levels. The nationality of the commenters can only be inferred based on the writing system used in their comments.

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