

**«Forsaken Lore of Antiquity, the Game Mechanics edit»
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A Soulslike deconstruction of Russia

This is a tale of a tarnished country, whose light continues to dim as she digs her grave deeper and deeper into the fossil-rich ground. May this story shed light onto a forgotten and rewritten history, and illuminate those who are left in the darkest corners of unfamiliarity. If in a world so vast as our own control is illusionary the one power that can elevate a simple mortal to the rank of a warrior, — is knowledge.

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0. Introduction

It has come to my knowledge that at the time of finding the theme for this large body of text, there were two things on my mind; Russia (and its many implications) and the game Elden Ring. In making this connection I have come to realize that the two may just have more in common than one may first assume. My fascination with the game came through the model of storytelling that the game utilizes to build the lore of the world of Elden Ring. This is done through objects, allowing the player to then piece together their context in the bigger picture and greater story, which they are guided to decipher through the little descriptions of these objects, ranging from weapons, armor, talismans to such things as ashes of war and so on. This blew my mind, and has served as the main point of departure for this thesis. Coming back to the physical world which surrounds us, the first half of this essay is a deliberate analysis of Russia as a political body, cultural entity, and society, and additionally, it aims to explore the key elements of Russia's military strategy and centuries of its history. This is all done through the lens of Elden Ring's core structural elements. Based on this analysis carried through in the first part of this thesis the latter part of this essay will reflect upon these findings and attempt to contextualize them in the current political climate.

For my dear readers that are maybe not as familiar with the game Elden Ring, I would like to introduce you to it. This description is an attempt to capture what the game is about but it won't come close to delivering the feeling and depth one experiences when playing it.

Elden Ring is a 2022 action role-play game developed by FromSoftware. It was directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki (director of similar games in the fantasy genre such as the Dark Souls series, Sekiro and Bloodborne), the worldbuilding for Elden Ring however was provided by none other than the fantasy writer George R. R. Martin himself (Sawyer and Franey). This culmination of creative direction created an incredibly rich game dynamic, with all of the elements in the game being built around the deeper lore that tied the whole game together. The game takes place in a fantasy place known as the Lands Between; here you find yourself stranded on the Weeping Peninsula and as you look into the distance you see a massive Golden Tree that radiates a ghostly light over its surroundings. Instinctively you start moving towards the tree, and on your adventure, you learn that the Lands Between don't have a ruler, a new Elden lord has not yet been appointed. From this point you are faced with the decision of whether you want to become the next Elden lord or if you want to appoint someone else or destroy the order of this world as a whole. The vastness and depth of the lore is absolutely captivating - it would take another paper as long as this one to summarize all of its intricacies. To provide further understanding, I feel it valuable to highlight certain game mechanics that are not unique to Elden Ring but that further enhance the story. The crux of the story is based on the fact that the choices you make as a player have an impact on what ending you get in the game, beginning with the character select menu where you choose the class you want to be in, and throughout the game you continue to make more choices (quests, NPCs, stat upgrades etc.) that will impact the final outcome. This crux creates a parallel between this game world and the real world, even if it's on a smaller scale, actions inevitably have consequences.

Now you may wonder: why is it appropriate to analyze Russia through this lens? I want to emphasize that there is a certain urgency to this body of work - understanding history has always been important but now there are imposed obstacles that may prevent people from reading or understanding certain historical facts. Russia has been rewriting its history textbooks for children, shaping their ideas of the past to entertain an idea of the future that is

far from the reality of what is actually happening (McGlynn). This is dangerous in a lot of ways but the scariest form of this will manifest in the way that it will prevent people from acknowledging or understanding the horrors of Russian occupant and imperial history. In addition to that *rewriting history* and misinformation also very much leads to trust issues from russians towards their government and brings along an overall sense of powerlessness that gets in the way of being able to see potential change. When occupant wars become '*Defense of People's Democracies*', there is an inconsistency with reality that will lead to destructive and forever damaging delusion.

Thus, this considerably playful approach is used not to take away from either the importance of facts nor the trail of horrors Russia has left throughout history and continues to do to this day. This thesis offers a different way of structuring information providing a more complex overview of history and the implications, causes and outcomes of imperialism. The relevance of this is heightened as it becomes hard to understand what history books one can trust; if governments have the power to rewrite them at their will. Maybe a history textbook is not the only way to document history and perhaps there are more elements that can better help contextualize information and offer a more nuanced view of the issues at hand.

It is not the goal of this paper to summarize all of Russian occupant and imperial history in detail. Instead the goal is to bring to light information that can shape the way we view the world and offer a new perspective that can potentially help build a better understanding of the world we live in by taking a dark subject and mirroring it with a creation that represents light for many. A tangible representation of a history that can seem entirely the opposite. The structure of this essay allows us to see these elements as all part of the same 'game', how everything is a cog that will influence your playthrough.

It is evident that a lack of information or fragmentary parts of information can be used to create and spread propaganda and misinform the audience. This is why this essay works to touch upon and bring as many historical and contemporary facts of history, (geo)politics, culture and society to light, to offer a much more broad understanding of the situation. In the end I hope that the deeper comprehension of all of these elements will spark a new generation of ideas and in the best outcome, prevent history from repeating itself.

1. Character Stats

This chapter is dedicated to breaking down the key components of Russia's character build. The Hofstede Country comparison tool is used to evaluate some of the character statistics¹.

VIGOR - Attribute governing HP (Health Points).

This stat is aimed at describing Russia's population and health attributes.

The Russian population as of 2022 stands at 143,5 million ("Population Total - Russian Federation"). Seeing a general decline from 148 million since the 1990s. Russia's population is also unevenly distributed as for every 100 women there are only 86,39 men ("Russian Federation Male to Female Ratio, 1950-2022"). The life expectancy for women being 72 and 70 for men, both lower than the global average ("World Population Dashboard Russian Federation"). Factors such as low birth rates, high emigration, staggering health statistics and a deadly war in Ukraine all contribute to the aforementioned statistics (McFall). Along with that, Russia has certain health factors, such as alcoholism and dietary practices, that contribute to higher rates of death from heart disease (Eberstadt et al. p. 5).

MIND - Attribute governing FP (Focus Points).

Concerned with Individualism / Collectivism within Russian society.

Russians demonstrate notably higher manifestations of collectivism than individualism, with different forms of collectivism. It's not only important to differentiate from others, but also to dominate (to the point of coercion and violence) over the group members located lower in the group's hierarchy (Starodubskaya). Individualism in this society has limited manifestation – predominantly with those on the higher hierarchical levels, meaning that one has to 'deserve' and 'earn' the right to self-express and be able to have their own desires. In such a culture, sacrificing one's interests in favor of those of the group is the norm and is expected by default.

ENDURANCE - Attribute governing stamina.

Concerned with the masculinity/femininity of the culture.

Interestingly Russia scores low on this stat meaning it is more feminine. This is related to the high Power Distance. Russia being an authoritarian state and a former empire, with a legacy of punitive institutions and power distance, dominant behavior might be accepted when it comes from the boss, but is not appreciated among peers. At second glance however, one can see that Russians at the workplace as well as when meeting a stranger tend to understate their personal achievements, contributions or capacities.

STRENGTH - Attribute required to wield heavy armaments.

Describes the division of power within Russia.

Russia scores high on this attribute, a nation where power holders are very distant in society. This is underlined by the fact that the largest country in the world is extremely centralized: 2/3 of all foreign investments go into Moscow where also 80% of all financial potential is concentrated. The huge discrepancy between the less and the more powerful people leads to a great importance of status symbols. In 2020, the richest 1% of the Russian

¹ see Hofstede Insights Oy. Country Comparison Tool Russia.

population received more than one fifth of the national income (“Income and Wealth Inequalities in Russia Over Time”). Russia’s governing practices are more vertical due to the long legacy of authoritarianism, which is negatively correlated with adaptation and dissemination of any ‘horizontal’ practices (Starodubska), which would manifest in a more equal dispersion of wealth and decentralized government.

DEXTERITY - *Attribute required to wield advanced armaments. This dimension is defined as the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses, based on the way they were raised (Indulgence / Restraint).*

Scoring low on this stat Russia has a tendency for cynicism and pessimism. Restrained societies do not put much emphasis on leisure time and control the gratification of their desires. With attributes contributing to this stat being moral discipline, strictly prescribed gender roles, the neglect or utter disregard of freedom of speech all giving way to a much smaller percentage of happy people (Hofstede et al.).

INTELLIGENCE - *Attribute required to perform glintstone sorceries. This stat will aim at taking apart the affluence of formal education and intelligence in terms of culture of the Russian society.*

A large percentage of the Russian population has attained at least an upper secondary education so it scores high on this stat. However, due to Russia spending 4.9% of GDP on educational institutions in 2010, it is still below the OECD average of 6.3% (“Russian Federation - Country Note”). As of 2020 only 4% of the GDP goes into education (“Education in Russia - Statistics and Facts”).

FAITH - *Attribute required to perform sacred Incantations. Concerned with the religious culture of Russia.*

The majority of the Russian population is religious, specifically 41% of Russians identify with the Russian Orthodox Church and 43,5% identify as either atheist or spiritual. Further portion of the population identifies with minority religions: Islam (6.5%), other variations of Christianity including Protestant, Evangelist and other Orthodox sects (7.3%), native Slavic faiths, Paganism and/or Tengrism (1.2%) and Tibetan Buddhism (0.5%) (Evason). Throughout history Russia has used religion to unite its subordinates and maintain power; as the country grew, in order to keep its people (especially the lower classes) in line it used religion as source of control (Pena).

ARCANE - *Influences player holy defense and death resistance. This dimension describes how every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future.*

Russia is definitely a country with a pragmatic mindset. A country that willingly looks away from past mistakes and fails to create long term developmental goals. A high score in this stat can also symbolize the difficulty or inability to change and adapt to unforeseen circumstances, which in Russia’s case have led to stagnation and blind pursuit of political goals, one such example being the waging of a full scale invasion on Ukraine.

Graph of Potential Breakdown of the Stats for Russia:

Based on the classes that Elden Ring offers you as a default in the beginning, before you can customize your character, the sum of the base stats with no upgrades is 86. The highest base stat value is 16 and lowest is 7, average score being 12.

Vigor	8
Mind	13
Endurance	7
Strength	14
Dexterity	8
Intelligence	12
Faith	15
Arcane	8

The estimate of the starting class of Russia would be similar to that of a Confessor in Elden Ring. There they are described as “a church spy adept at covert operations. Equally adept with a sword as they are with incantations”. Which is reflective of the highest stat being Faith linked to sorceries and other notable stats being Strength, Mind and Intelligence.

2. Weapons (offence)

All weapon classes will refer to specific moments in Russian history. Russia has manifested itself as a really aggressive player, in the past and recent history Russia has continued its territorial expansion. Historically Russia has gained control over many lands that belong to other nation states and indigenous people. This territorial expansion aligns historically with colonial histories of many European countries. Unlike many European players at the time, Russia didn't look to the land overseas but rather to the land that was around it.

Colossal Weapons

Weapons that deal heavy damage but require a lot of strength to do so. Some of the biggest wars that Russia has started / been part of, that have ended in partial annexation, accession, affiliation, occupation of foreign territory. The wars and battles presented here are not representative of all the wars that Russia started / took part in between the years 1547 - 2023. The time frame and the wars mentioned in this section are relevant examples in understanding the behavioral pattern of Russia as an imperialist player.

Wooden Tsardom Mace - The Russian Tsardom (1547–1721)

- Siege of Kazan - *The annexation of Kazan into Russia*
- Russian conquest of Astrakhan - *Annexation of Astrakhan into Russia.*
- Russian conquest of Siberia - *The start of Russian annexation of Siberia*
- Kazakh-Russo Conflicts - *The annexation of Kazakhstan into Russia.*

Golden Empirical Scepter: Russian Empire dating from (1721–1917)

- Fourth Bashkir Rebellion - *The rebellion is crushed. Establishment of Orenburg*
- War of the Bar Confederation - *Treaty of Kuçuk Kainarji. First Partition of Poland*
- Catherine the Great's Polish war - *Second Partition of Poland*
- Kościuszko Uprising - *Third Partition of Poland*
- Caucasian War - *The annexation of North Caucasus into Russia*
- Russian conquest of Central Asia - *The annexation of Central Asia into Russia, including Kazakhstan, Bukhara, Khiva, Kokand, Turkmen tribes, Kyrgyz tribes and Afghanistan.*
- Russo-Turkish War - *De jure independence of Romania, Serbia and Montenegro from Turkey. The annexation of Kars and Batum into Russia.*
- Persian Constitutional Revolution - *Russian occupation of Northern Iran until 1917.*

Iron RSFSR Scythe: Russian RSFSR Starting in 1917 - 1921

- Russian civil war - *Victory for the Red Army in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, South Caucasus, Central Asia, Tuva, and Mongolia; incorporation of those territories into the Soviet Union.*
- Ukrainian-Soviet War (Ukrainian War of Independence) - *Formation of the Ukrainian SSR and its incorporation into the Soviet Union. Destruction of the Ukrainian People's Republic.*
- Kazakhstan campaign - *Overthrow of the Alash Autonomy; incorporation of Kazakhstan into the Soviet Union*
- Sochi Conflict - *Sochi and Tuapse transferred to the Russian SFSR. Gagra transferred to Georgia*

- Invasion of Azerbaijan - *Overthrow of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic government; incorporation of Azerbaijan into the Soviet Union*
- Invasion of Armenia - *Overthrow of the First Republic of Armenia; incorporation of Armenia into the Soviet Union*
- Invasion of Georgia - *Overthrow of the Democratic Republic of Georgia; incorporation of Georgia into the Soviet Union*
- Soviet intervention in Mongolia - *Provisional People's Republic of Mongolia established as a protectorate*

The Great Patriotic Warhammer: Soviet Union and its involvement in WW2 1939 - 1945

- Soviet invasion of Poland (Part of World War II) - *Partition of Polish territory (Fourth Partition of Poland) between Nazi Germany, Soviet Union and Slovakia.*
- Winter War (Part of World War II) - *Cession of the Gulf of Finland islands, Karelian Isthmus, Ladoga Karelia, Salla, and Rybachy Peninsula, and lease of Hanko to the Soviet Union.*
- Occupation and annexation of the Baltic states (Part of World War II) - *Occupation and annexation of the Baltic states Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania into the Soviet Union by the Red Army.*
- Soviet occupation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina (Part of World War II) - *Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and the Hertsa region unified into the Moldavian SSR and annexed into the Soviet Union*
- Soviet–Japanese War (Part of World War II) - *Karafuto Prefecture annexed into the Soviet Union and incorporated into the Sakhalin Oblast of the Russian SFSR. The Kuril Islands were annexed into the Soviet Union and incorporated into the Russian SFSR. The partition of the Korean Peninsula; the Soviet Union also occupied North Korea.*

Georgian Halberd: Georgian wars In between the years 1991-2008

- Georgian Civil War and South Ossetian War - *de jure independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. And establishment of a pro-russian government in both states.*
- Russo-Georgian War - *(Later in 2008) occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.*

Moldovan Transnistria Estoc: 1992

- Moldo-Russian war - *Transnistria gained de facto independence, allowing Russia to control the region, Transnistria became one of the "unrecognized republics" that appeared throughout the USSR, alongside Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. These self-proclaimed states maintained close ties with each other.*

Chechen Twin Blades: War in Chechnya 1994- 2009

- 1st and 2nd Chechen wars - *Between the years 1994 to 2009, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria gained de facto independence but de jure it remained a part of the Russian Federation until 1999. That year the Chechen Republic invaded Dagestan leading to the start of the 2nd Chechen war. The Second Chechen war ended in 2009 with Russia regaining control over Chechen region.*

Crimean Tatar Crozier: War with Ukraine 2014 - ongoing

- Russo-Ukrainian War- *Starting with the annexation of Crimea, when Russian troops entered the Crimean peninsula and joined it to Russia on the 27th of February 2014, seizing the building of the Supreme Council of Crimea and the building of the Council of Ministers in Simferopol (Higgins and Erlanger) and as symbol of this take over*

Russian flags were raised over these buildings (Gumuchian et al.). This heralded the start of the War with Ukraine (2014–present). At the moment of writing this essay Ukraine has undergone a formal annexation of an undefined area in and around Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts (so called Donbas region) by the Russian Federation (Dickinson and Morrow).

Swords and Hammers

These weapons are lighter and swifter than the aforementioned weapon class, they require less strength to be wielded and allow for faster attack speed. This weapon class is dedicated to listing the revolutions and uprisings in Russia. Apart from the October Revolution there are many examples of suppressions of indigenous groups and tribes of people who were 'Russified' and forcefully attached to Russia, these are anti-colonial/anti-imperial uprisings.

The Anti-Colonial Uprising Shotel: List of Successful Destructions / Dissolutions of Anti-colonial / anti-imperial uprisings in Tsarist and Imperial Russia. (1552-1905)

- Tatar Rebellion - *Tatars in Tatarstan crushed.*
- Bolotnikov Rebellion - *Rebels under Ivan Bolotnikov crushed.*
- Razin Rebellion - *Cossacks under Stepan Razin crushed.*
- Bulavin Rebellion - *Don Cossack rebels crushed.*
- Fourth Bashkir Rebellion - *Bashkir rebels crushed.*
- Koliivshchyna Rebellion - *On Ukrainian territory Haidamaky rebels crushed.*
- Pugachev's Rebellion - *Rebels under Yemelyan Pugachev supported by Turkey crushed.*
- Decembrist revolt - *Decembrist rebels in Saint Petersburg crushed.*
- November uprising - *Polish anti-imperial rebels crushed.*
- Gurian rebellion - *Georgian Gurian rebels crushed.*
- Shoorcha rebellion - *Tatar, Mari and Chuvash peasants rebellion in Tatarstan and Ulyanovsk crushed.*
- Mahtra Rebellion - *Estonian peasant rebellion crushed.*
- Bezdna Revolt - *Peasant rebels in Tatarstan crushed.*
- January Uprising - *In Poland Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian insurgents crushed.*
- Polish rebellion in Siberia - *Polish political exiles crushed.*
- Russian Revolution of 1905 - *Socialist revolutionaries crushed, Nicholas retains the throne.*

The Crimson Revolution Greatsword: Russian October Revolution (7 November 1917 — 16 June 1923).

- The overthrowing of the Monarchy - *Abdication of Tsar Nicholas gave rise to the first to the formation of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR) and later the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in most of its territory.*

The Socialist Rebel Crusher: List of uprising and rebellions crushed during and after the formation of the USSR. These are not limited to anti-colonial uprisings but also the uprisings with an anti-socialist and/or anti-russification mentality. (1917-1937)

- Ukrainian war for Independence - *Destruction of the Ukrainian People's republic.*
- East Karelian Uprising - *Near Finland, Forest Guerrillas Finnish volunteers crushed.*

- Central Asian Revolt - *Basmachi, Khiva, Bukhara and Afghanistan people's rebellion crushed.*
- August Uprising - *Damkom suppressed.*
- Chechen uprising of 1932 - *Chechen rebels suppressed.*
- Islamic Rebellion in Xinjiang - *Rebellion is suppressed, establishment of the rule of Sheng Shica's Soviet puppet regime over the whole territory of Xinjiang province.*

Anti-Communist Insurgency Curved Sword: Anti-communist insurgencies in Central and Eastern Europe. (1944 - 1960)

- Guerrilla war in Ukraine (Part of World War II from 1944 to 1945)
- Guerrilla war in the Baltic states
- Anti-communist resistance in Poland (1944–1953)
- Guerrilla war in the Baltic states - *Ukrainian, Polish, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian, Romanian, German and Hungarian insurgent independence movements are suppressed leading to hegemony in Eastern Europe being preserved.*
- East German Uprising - *East German demonstrators suppressed.*
- Hungarian Revolution - *Hungarian revolutionaries suppressed.*
- Invasion of Czechoslovakia - *Military presence until 1991 Prague Spring is suppressed.*

Silver Federative Clever: 1991 - present

- Georgian civil war - *Zviadist revolt crushed.*
- East Prigorodny Conflict - *Expulsion of ethnic Ingush from Prigorodny by Ossetian militia.*

Ranged Weapons

This weapon category describes the long distance conflict resulting in minor physical contact between Russia and its opponents. With implications on occupied territories.

Cold Proxy Bloc Crossbow: Cold War 1947–1991,

To summarize the complex history of the wars and annexations that Russia has started / been part of and to bring this to a conclusion that reflects the image and status of Russia today, the Cold War needs to be addressed. After the end of WW2 the USSR, the Allied forces (US, Britain and France) freed Europe in the West and The Red Army freed Europe in the east, simultaneously engulfing parts of it into the Soviet Union. First the partition of Poland between Nazi Germany and the USSR and at the end of WW2 the division of Germany into the Eastern and Western Blocs respectively (Bizonia) (Williamson). The USSR even went as far as to erect a (fire)wall that would divide Berlin into 2. The territory of GDR was not recognised by its western rivals.

The player party renowned as the Grand Alliance (US, Britain, France and USSR) broke apart in 1947 which became the pivotal point in their further gameplay (Williamson). The parties disagreed on 2 key game rules, disagreement on the formation of the United Nations and the control of the most OP (Over Powered) weapon in the game: Nuclear Power. As neither of the player wanted the opponent to be the only one to wield this OP weapon, under Stalin the USSR started rapidly developing their own Nuclear Weapon. This led to a period

of fear. The Cold War. At the height of its power the USSR had span the territory of 15 republics, held together by threads as time went on.

One reason for the collapse of the huge Soviet player party was that many of its constituent republics had become aspiring nation-states, or, as with most of the republics, sought to recover their independence. The single most important factor was Ukraine's December 1991 referendum, in which an overwhelming majority voted for their independence (Bildt). This together with the economic loss in the Cold War led to the dissolution of the USSR player party and thus loss of the acquired territory.

3. Armor (Defense)

In Elden Ring it is speculated that each piece of armor has different defense and resistance values, while equipping a piece along with its proper set provides the player with certain buffs that can aid in different combat situations (“Helms | Elden Ring Wiki”). Russia throughout history has not focused as much on its defense, but on showing an aggressive offense strategy in hopes that the time for it to defend itself wouldn’t come. Therefore the class of armor that Russia would opt for is a lightweight cloak / chainmail allowing for easy movement and speed but leaving the wearer vulnerable to one shot kills.

Helms

In the Elden Ring certain helms can aid in casting intelligence based incantations. A helm or rather a hood / hat / crown the Russia player would equip would be one that can partially camouflage the player or aid.. In this armor class some examples of economic defense strategies will be brought to light.

The Motherlands Gas Crown:

Some intelligence based incantations that this armor piece can assist in, include but are not limited to; implementing economic sanctions, imposing economic blockades, forming coalitions and unions, breaking off diplomatic relations, and conducting information warfare (Kofman et al., p 26). The support or feature of Russia that enables this game strategy, creating a boosted bargaining power, is the built in Gas and Crude Oil reservoirs. However, this is also almost the only economic power Russia has at the moment.

Chest

Each piece of chest armor provides different defense, resistance and poise values for different weights. Additionally, some armor pieces also provide unique bonuses, such as health regeneration (“Chest Armor | Elden Ring Wiki”). As for Russia’s case there are no key fortresses or blockades that protect the ‘vital organs’ (cities) of Russia, Russia’s main defense strategy was in extending the so called ‘buffer-zone’ (that at some point reached Berlin) (“The Creation of the Soviet Buffer Zone”), making the ‘playing fields’ (war ground) far from its key geoeconomic centers.

Military Garb:

This defense strategy hasn’t changed since the dawn of the Soviet buffer zone, after Russia’s loss in the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union the ‘buffer-zone’ respectively shrank to the known borders of Russia. And thus contemporary Russia’s main military strategy is counter defense which is aimed at preventing aggression and an inexhaustible desire to rebuild this buffer-zone. One way Russia attempts to pursue this is at the beginning of military action; the infliction on the adversary (the coalition) of damage, during which the opponent would give up the continuation (escalation) on conditions beneficial to Russia. The infliction of necessary damage to the adversary could be achieved through the damaging of key targets of military and military-economic potential of the adversary to a level, the achievement of which the adversary could discontinue (the escalation of) military actions. One such example is when Russia exploded the Kakhovka Dam on the 6th of June 2023 (Beaumont et al.). This led to the destruction of the Hydroelectric Power Plant, which is an environmental destruction that will have profound

humanitarian and ecological consequences (“The Destruction of Ukraine’s Kakhovka Dam and Hydroelectric Power Plant”).

Gauntlets

Gauntlets in Elden Ring is an armor piece that is worn to protect the player's hands from damage (“Gauntlets | Elden Ring Wiki”). The hands are used to hold and wield weapons; they are the part of the body that are also used to cast spells and incantations, the parallel that could be drawn here is the way power is used as a defense strategy in the manipulation of information and information warfare. (The phenomenon of propaganda is further explored in the chapter of Magic and Spells.)

The All-Russifying Gauntlets:

The all-dominating direct strategy of manipulating and forcing countries into the Russian Tsardom/Empire/Soviet Union and “federation” is through ‘Russification’. In itself, Russification is a set of policies and processes encouraging non-Russians to adopt the Russian language and culture and thus increasing Russian political domination, throughout history in Eastern European countries (Kravtsiv and Kubijovyč) and predominantly today in Ukraine. This is also often followed by oppression of native or indigenous languages and cultures and partial erasure of these cultures too.

Apart from Russification another way of manipulating power is granting de facto independence to certain ‘countries’ only recognised as such by Russia, and sometimes other pro-Russian states. Some examples of these ‘countries’ today include the annexed oblasts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia; the boundaries and their borders were not defined when annexed and to this day none of the oblasts were fully under Russian control. (“Conflict in Ukraine’s Donbas”). For the rest of the world these oblasts remain Ukrainian but temporarily under Russian military occupation; however with the use of propaganda some are led to believe in their autonomy as republics. And in recent history the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia annexed from Georgia also remain partially recognised.

Leg Armor

In Elden Ring greaves, leggings and boots is armor that protects the legs of the player, and thus the protection of the part of the body that propels the player to further discoveries in game. For Russia a parallel could be drawn with the execution and propulsion of its defense strategy.

Iron Instabilating Greaves:

The overall Russian objective in military strategy is to prevent an opponent from achieving a decisive outcome and forcing them into a conflict with high levels of attrition. The vision is to inflict damage to the opponent’s military and economic infrastructure so that adversaries will seek war termination on acceptable terms and become preoccupied by the ensuing internal instability (Kofman et al., p ii). This is manifested in pressuring the attacked country into a long durational period of war during which infrastructure is obliterated making certain parts of the country inhospitable (most recent example is the destruction of the city of Mariupol, Ukraine (Harding et al.).

Items granting Buffs and Debuffs

Certain items in the Elden Ring can bestow certain blessings or curses on the player. Buffs being something that can grant the player special damage types depending on the opponent and debuffs being special weaknesses of the player, based on the damage that is inflicted on them. These are bonus or extra items that can be equipped alongside the armor set of the player. Some items that are selected here are certain attributes that can be advantageous or disadvantageous to Russia's game strategy when they are 'equipped' / 'in use'.

Patriotism Talisman

When the Patriotism Talisman is equipped it boosts Strength and Vigor in the player. It also creates an extra memory slot where an extra spell or incantation can be placed, making the player more susceptible to propaganda. Feelings of pride and communist nostalgia fills the player with respect and glory for the forefathers that fought in WW2 (Zafesova) and boost Faith in their political leader. This in turn creates a buff where the players in the Russian party gain and show aggressive support for the regime and the country. It is almost always accompanied by a strong distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Which in turn becomes a debuff as the party becomes incredibly xenophobic to anyone that does not share their ideology and it leads to a severe distrust and disregard of other player parties. The xenophobia can often lead to another status effect known as racism where the difference between 'us' and 'them' is not only rooted in political views but also in the visual features of other players.

Motherland Wooden Cross

When equipped with this item, the player slows down under its load. It debuffs Dexterity but adds points to Faith. This item creates a feeling of false hope and trust for the player's country, deluding them into thinking that it will always welcome them back and that it is something worth fighting for. There is a sentiment that the player owes something to its party. This boosts the party's overall Faith attribute but does not grant the individual player anything other than the extra weight load. This is an item that is hard to unequip. In the 20th and 21st century 'the great wars [...] are extraordinary not so much in the unprecedented scale on which they permitted people to kill but also in the colossal numbers of those persuaded to lay down their lives (for their motherlands). [...] The idea of ultimate sacrifice comes only with an idea of purity, through fatality' (Anderson., p. 144).

4. Geopolitics and Map

Borders

In the Elden Ring and in the real world, maps are used to navigate and highlight important locations. What is crucial to state here is that Russian maps in the real world are inherently colonial. The importance of certain locations and borders are often dictated by the colonial / imperial powers (Worlds Unreal). What is particularly interesting to look at is the formation of borders, as in game the borders are created by the developers and the playing court is fixed from the start. This is on a much smaller scale is parallel to our world. There is a fixed amount of landmass that fluctuates ever so much as time goes by and the divisions and borders are created by the developers in our realm.

Russia is the biggest country in the world, covering 17.1 million km² ("Largest Countries in the World by Area"). Yet this has not discouraged it from expanding its borders all the way into the 21st century. Unlike many empires that have existed in the past, Russia never had an identity separate from one (Chafetz and Sipher). The rest of the world recognises Russia's borders as they were formed in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union (that is excluding Crimea and the Donbas Region), but as Catherine the Great famously said, "I have no way to defend my borders but to extend them" (Chafetz and Sipher). Which in turn reflects how Russia as a country formed - by forcefully connecting independent city states. When Kyiv was part of Russia there was no common language, no common administration, and no joint identity. During the Ivan III rule, his quest was to "reunite the lands of the ancient Rus," however the 'lands of the ancient Rus' is a bit of a misconception, as we have uncovered in the second chapter of this thesis. There were many different people and cultures, even nation states living in the territory of what we call Russia today.

Ancestral Lands

In the Elden Ring in the Eternal cities of Nokron and Nokstella, the player can discover the ancestral lands and the Ancestral Spirit. This is all that is left of the initial inhabitants of the Lands Between. In the Eternal cities the player can also get a glimpse into what the world looked like before the order of the Erd Tree; these cities were hidden away from the over world for many years and are cursed to not see the night sky.

Russia's territory occupies the land of at least 160 groups of people, 40 of which are officially recognised as indigenous ("Indigenous Peoples in Russia"). The 40 recognised groups account for less than 0.2% of the total Russian population. There is no such concept as "Free, Prior and Informed Consent" enshrined in legislation and thus, Indigenous Peoples are not recognised by Russian legislation as such, so these groups are largely unprotected and ostracized. Russia's export revenues are largely generated from the sale of fossil fuels and other minerals, often extracted from territories traditionally inhabited or used by Indigenous Peoples. Like many resource-rich countries, Russia is heavily affected by the "resource frenzy", fuelling authoritarianism, corruption and bad governance. Which, in many ways, negatively impacts the state of Indigenous Peoples' human rights and limits opportunities for their effective protection ("Indigenous Peoples in Russia") and often pushes them out of their ancestral lands. Moreover there is an expressed concern because of the fact that the draft "Subsoil Law" (bill № 187513-4), submitted by the Russian Federation Government to the State Duma does not regulate nor mention the issues related to the exploitation of georesources on the traditional residence and land use territories of the Northern indigenous people (Murashko, Olga, and Sergey N. Kharyuchi.). The life of the

Northern indigenous peoples, which is based on traditional land use, depends completely on the condition of their environment. This bill's ignorance of the specific problems of the indigenous environment and the traditional way of life contradicts the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the federal legislation, and international principles and rules concerning the protection of the rights of indigenous peoples (Murashko, Olga, and Sergey N. Kharyuchi.).

Map of Russia with highlighted ancestral/indigenous lands.

Коренные народы Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока Российской Федерации Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East of the Russian Federation



Figure 1

5. NPC's (Non Playable Characters)

NPC's or non-playable characters in the Elden Ring are the various inhabitants of the Lands Between that the player encounters throughout their journey. These NPC's often provide information that helps players piece together the Lore of the game, while some are quest givers or are related to each other in some manner, many are merchants with whom players can trade for Equipment, Magic, and Items. Given that the player cannot play as one of the NPC's and the fact that these characters have different world views, goals and quests to each other, a parallel can be drawn between them and those who inhabit Russia. This chapter is therefore looking at those who live in Russia, the vast differences between them, their diversity contrary to the political agenda of uniformity and their life under the the regime of oppression.

Like in the Elden ring there are many different kinds of NPC's, this is also the case in Russia. The majority of the people living in Russia (77,7%) identify as Russian, and the other 22.3% is made up of other ethnic groups that are indigenous to their respective regions, as well as those that have migrated and created diaspora communities over generations (Ter-Grigoryan). These nationalities include Tatars, Ukrainians, Bashkir, Chuvashs, Chechens, Armenians, Nenents along with at least 160 more ethnic groups, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Under President Vladimir Putin an emphasis has been placed – in official discourse, the education system and the media – on national unity and Russian patriotism. This has been reflected in the increasing attrition of a range of rights for minorities and indigenous peoples in the country, from language and land rights to freedom of expression and security (“Russian Federation”). This is against a broader backdrop of state repression that has seen many basic rights rolled back in recent years, particularly in areas where the state is actively engaged in conflict (e.g. Ukraine). The issue of identity is widely acknowledged in the post-Soviet environment; many policies of that time were aimed at the consolidation of an encompassing all-Russian national identity as a source of nation-building (Semenenko), which continues to be enacted to this day. What is evident from this is that the monopolization of the politics of identity by the state leads to a regime transformation towards authoritarianism (Semenenko).

The NPC's of Russia are more and more limited in the ways they are able to express themselves. Not only in terms of what people are allowed and not allowed to say but also in the expression of their sexual orientation and gender. This being through the changes in policies that is targeted directly at LGBTQIA+ community. One such example is evident in the ban of same-sex marriages (“Песков Словом «Нельзя» Ответил На Решение ЕСПЧ О Браках Геев В России”), as in the eyes of the Kremlin same-sex marriages threaten the traditional family values. This termination along with the ban on gender-affirming surgeries as of 14 of July 2023 (“Государственная Дума Запретила Смену Пола В России”), takes away the rights of these people, creating a larger inequality in society and seriously harming the wellbeing of a large part of Russian population. Furthermore the marriages of trans individuals are promised to be terminated and they will lose the right to adopt children. All of this is indirectly aimed at wiping away the existence of LGBTQIA+ people.

6. Magic and Spells

In the Elden Ring Magic Spells are cast by players in the form of Sorceries and Incantations. From conjuring glintstone pebbles to invoking the power of a dragon's breath, spells cover a wide variety of offensive, defensive, and utility functions ("Magic Spells | Elden Ring Wiki"). Such powerful techniques can be interpreted as many forms of propaganda that Russia uses internally (incantations) and externally (sorceries).

Sacred Seals

Are necessary items used to cast incantations. Associated with the Faith attribute.

The firehose of falsehood Incantation: Russian propaganda when casted as an incantation has two distinctive features: high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions. In the words of one observer, "[N]ew Russian propaganda entertains, confuses and overwhelms other players (Paul and Matthews)."

One such example is evident at the very moment, when Russia waged a full scale invasion on Ukraine on February 23 2022, it denied the fact that war had started, twisting the facts and feeding people the idea that it was a 'special operation' enacted in order to free Ukraine from nationalism. Many people in Russia to this day are under this spell. And this narrative with a few alterations over time continues to be fed to Russians.

Upgrading the Incantation +

In order for the incantations of propaganda to be effective Russia uses these techniques to boost the effects: it blasts the same fictive narratives into multiple sources (especially through television, audiovisually) this makes the incantation more persuasive than in a single source, sometimes the information is repackaged, and it works very effectively if those sources contain different arguments that point to the same conclusion (Paul and Matthews). Even if the information is false the repeated amplification of it engraves it deeper into people's minds.

Staves

Are necessary items used to cast sorceries. Associated with the Intelligence attribute.

The Unionification sorceries: These sorceries are cast on people both inside and outside of Russia in order to make other player parties join Russia. Quite literally in some aspects. This was done during the Soviet Union and has leaked in the 21st century too. The whole notion of *Russification* is a powerful sorcery that simultaneously enables cultural erasure (such as language and identity) and forceful indoctrination into 'Russian culture' by making the learning of Russian language mandatory.

This is also very evident in the ongoing war with Ukraine, as Russia fails to see Ukraine a sovereign nation state but rather as the 'Younger Brother' of Russia, that in turn needs someone 'wiser' and bigger to control it. It seems that Russia might not be entirely sure of its identity itself, and thus it is under the same spell it casts on its neighboring countries.

Side effects of the Sorcery -

This is yet another falsehood spell because as seen throughout history it is really hard to think of Russia as one single group of people. It is multicultural and multilingual, yet these

elements are under great pressure from the regime. On paper, the Soviet Union was a multinational federation of republics. In reality, Russians were solidly in command of a tightly controlled regime headed by the Communist Party. And this mentality doesn't seem to have changed since then. There is a lack of care created by the large distance between those in power and those on the other end of this social hierarchy. Which, as time goes by, becomes more detrimental to the wellbeing and livelihoods of the people that live in Russia and around it.

7. Evaluation

To evaluate the research method I think it is important to highlight some limitations of this research approach. There are probably some questions left in the evaluation of the position of Russia: Is Russia the player or the game? And the answer may not be explicit in the research as the parallels that are drawn are metaphorical and abstract at times. This is done with the intention to underline how abstract history can be and how politics, with many of their implications, are cruel games. If the governments choose to toy with people's lives so carelessly, and if many of their actions reflect negligence towards people's livelihoods, is it not just a game to them?

In the broader sense of our world, Russia is a player with its character stats, armor and weapons choices; and its own strategy to navigate the game. These are chosen, selected and waged based on the country's history. However what is important to highlight is that these are not arbitrary events and choices that Russia makes as an entity, these are conscious decisions made by people. People who can be held accountable. Since the aim of the paper was to create a more holistic system of knowledge surrounding Russia, and it focused more on geopolitics, there is not that much discussion on the people in power. The next step would be to look into the Playable Characters that can be held accountable for the state that Russia is in today on an individual and collective level.

So what kind of player is Russia? Russia has mixed character stats, scoring low on a lot of the stats and heavily prioritizing the Strength and Faith attributes. This has an impact on its game strategy, specifically its weapon choices and armor selection. Focusing more on its offense, its armor is light. Russia aims to pursue its political goals through violence and territorial expansion. It is not a country to fight from afar, it faces its adversaries head on, almost always placing the first hit. It switches weapons quite often, openly engaging in territorial wars and uses swifter weapons to suppress and crush civil uprisings, to maintain centralized control. The Faith attribute affects the circulation of information in the form of sorceries which affect Russia on a large scale. The Faith stat manifests strongly in the spread of propaganda and misinformation about Russia's history and current political entanglements. This is the attribute that arguably unites Russia and propels it forward in pursuit of its goals. Its defense is its faith in the "correctness" of its actions. It blindly runs forward ignoring what is around it, it has a large weapon in the right hand and a long sharp sword in the left hand, its chainmail chimes rhythmically as it keeps running. It runs until it can deal the first blow at its opponent, then it will continue to inflict damage onto the other over a prolonged period of time.

This all comes at the cost of the people living in Russia and its neighboring countries. As natural resources are of greatest importance, people do not matter as much and are often pushed out, suppressed, ostracized or plainly removed if they stand in the way. This is not a really sustainable way of playing, however the lack of consideration for the future clouds this strategy in a way that prevents Russia from thinking long term.

8. DLC (Downloadable Content) and Bug Fixes

After a thorough analysis of Russia, there are a couple of things that can be concluded: the reason for Russia's current political state and its full scale invasion of Ukraine is not unexpected, but a consequence of many such engagements in the past. It is a repetition of the inability to resolve the country's own issues, and in order to detract attention from internal problems of the country, a new war is waged that can be used to sway and manipulate people from what matters at hand. It is also a reflection of its political identity that has not changed from being imperial over centuries. Fueled by ignorance, villainization of the 'other' and the struggle to create an identity, creates a whirlpool that cannot recognise other countries as sovereign nation states, but can only see them as potential lucrative lands that can be swept under Russia in an attempt to make it stronger and regain control.

In the words of the philosopher Marshall McLuhan "All forms of violence are a quest for identity."

As I am concluding this thesis Russia is still at war with Ukraine. People are still being killed, injured and displaced as I am writing this. The context and the tone of this thesis therefore echoes the time of war. Although it is hard to imagine a happy ending, I wanted to write some suggestions for a potentially better outcome of this situation. Acknowledging the difficulty of extrapolating and envisioning the future, there are many things that Russia can do to improve. An example of a country committing heinous war crimes and crimes against humanity; is Germany. However after two world wars Germany has come to terms with its past and acknowledged its mistakes. Russia has not (yet). Until it does so, all of Europe, but especially Russia itself, will continue to suffer.

Another point of improvement would be to value people's lives as more than just cannon fodder, and caring about people more than natural resources. These people being Russia's own citizens and also the people of other countries. This could potentially prevent Russia from committing new invasions in the future and improve healthcare and education systems inside the country and consequently raise the standard of living.

In the best of outcomes I think Russia would greatly benefit from the decentralization of power (which has not been the case since imperial Russia). This would fiscally resolve the issue of poverty in many regions of Russia and potentially prevent the descent into authoritarianism in the future. This would create more money for many regions of Russia and instead of the taxpayer money going to the Kremlin it would actually stay in the region and be used to improve the lives of people in that area (an actual Federation).

Stop the War in Ukraine! and Stop Occupation!

Post Scriptum

*By morning's light, curses will cease,
Silenced echoes, weeping in peace.
As the ages pass, those who understand,
Will know whose festive burial graces the land.*

Excerpt of a poem by Vladimir Alexeev
Translated and reinterpreted by Vasilisa Ikryannikova

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Figure 1: Dallman, W K. "Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East of the Russian Federation." *Norwegian Polar Institute* , Norwegian Polar Institute , 2005.

In many ways there were sources that inspired the structure, tone of this paper and helped shape this thesis I want to highlight them here:

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