

## **Perceptions of the russia-Ukraine war by representatives of the AltspaceVR community**

**Abstract:** This essay will answer the following essential question: how does the AltspaceVR community perceive the russia-Ukraine war? The paper will briefly outline the historical and political context of the present situation, a full-scale war in the center of Europe. The essay also offers key findings from a brief exploratory study. In particular, the text identifies three main political narratives in the AltspaceVR community and suggests how and where they emerge. It also provides questions for further research on this topic.

### **Introduction**

In this essay, I will answer the following essential question: How does the AltspaceVR community perceive the russia-Ukraine war? As the material is relatively short, it has a rather concise structure. I will first explain why I chose this topic for research, provide historical context and explain why I believe it is crucial for the global community. Then, I will briefly review the literature on the topic, followed by the methods and limitations of this study in more detail. I will finally describe the key findings worth sharing and several conclusions.

First, I want to start with a brief historical excursion into the events of a year ago. On February 24, 2022, the russian federation launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, bombing and sending its troops along the russian-Ukrainian border. They did so under the guise of a “special military operation” that was supposedly aimed at “denazify” Ukraine (BBC 2022). The war is being waged brutally, disregarding the Geneva and Hague Conventions. russia has been targeting civilians, torturing, and raping Ukrainian citizens, shooting up green corridors, and torturing and brutally killing prisoners of war (Mahala 2022).

Many countries have supported Ukraine in its fight against the aggressor. However, russian propaganda is spreading at an incredible rate, as russia has vast experience in this area. Therefore, this paper explores what kind of attitudes toward the russia-Ukraine war are widespread in the international and intercultural AltspaceVR community. To answer this key question, this will determine the main facts that AltspaceVR users know about the situation in Ukraine. Furthermore, it is crucial to identify the leading narratives in this community regarding the russian invasion of Ukraine.

In general, the topic of narratives is quite common among researchers and ordinary users of virtual environments. For example, there is a conference called “VR Narratives: A Workshop in VR, about VR,” during which numerous speakers and researchers from European and American universities presented their work on narrative studies in VR (Rettberg et al. 2020). Nevertheless, more work must be done on political narratives in VR environments related to Ukraine. These studies have not been conducted in Ukraine because VR research is not very well developed in the country due to the lack of educational programs in digital anthropology and other disciplines that might be interested in this kind of knowledge. Moreover, the international scientific community is likely busy with its own research questions, apart from Ukraine. That is why now, on the eve of the anniversary of the tragic invasion, it is more relevant than ever to study the attitude of the virtual community to russia’s actions.

### **Theoretical background**

To understand the topic more thoroughly, I propose understanding the theoretical framework we will use in this study. First, the research is conducted within the framework of such a scientific field as digital anthropology. Since digital anthropology is relatively new, it is undoubtedly multidisciplinary, “focused on the Internet-related transformations that make possible a whole range of new social phenomena” (Boellstorff 2013,1). In today’s world, especially during the coronavirus, society has become accustomed to working, communicating, and relaxing online. However, digital anthropologists have studied online communities within these communities using the ethnographic method since the beginning of the 21st century (ibid), with broad implications for the scientific world.

The second theoretical element of this section is narrative. A narrative is a story in French. However, when we use this word in the context of social or political sciences, it takes on a slightly different meaning. In the political sense, it is a “complex frame, a cognitive structure that organizes the human perception of the world and events in it” (Pocheptsov 1970, 476). This implies that one can control the perception of certain events, actors, or even the world by controlling narratives. That is why political actors try to promote their narratives on all possible social networks, offline and online.

Exactly how narratives about the Russia-Ukraine war are spread in the virtual world is not the scope of this study. However, we do assume that both sides of the war spread narratives in other ways, such as through the media, speeches by public figures, and opinion leaders. Instead, it is interesting to study AltspaceVR users on an ethnographic scale because it is an international community where individual users can instantaneously share information with people from different continents. Furthermore, with the connectivity of Altspace VR, researchers can relatively quickly collect the political narratives of various users across geographic boundaries.

## **Methods**

This small exploratory study does not claim to be methodologically valid and reliable across contexts. However, I will briefly describe the logic behind the methodology. The research was conducted within what the “first ethnographic scale” of research on virtual environments, exploring the views of a digital community about the “real” offline world (Boellstorf 2010, 129). The study explores this ethnographic scale using qualitative methodologies, namely participant observation.

Along with participant observation and navigating this virtual fieldsite with an avatar, I conducted unstructured interviews (or conversations) with representatives of the AltspaceVR community. I used the Convenience sample type: “get any cases in any manner that is convenient” (Neuman 2014, 273). The study includes the narratives of five people from different countries and ages.

Using structured field notes, I will share my experience as a researcher. In practice, it happened the following way: I entered the AltspaceVR program and chose a Destination with some people. At first, I tried to explore different meetups, but people come to different events with a specific purpose. So, I ended up in the meetup where the person was praying, and I was uncomfortable interacting with him or her.



Picture 1. Photo of the researcher trying to explore different meetups. A quiet place to pray.

So, I chose to observe a Campfire. While people do specific things at other events, at Campfire, they socialize. So, I looked for bored people or not to talk to anyone else and start a conversation.



Picture 2. Photo of a researcher in the Campfire before conducting the participant observation.

During this process, I faced various problems. At first, I approached groups of people and joined their conversations. However, it could have been more comfortable because they were already speaking about a particular topic, and it was inappropriate to change it. I also *felt I needed to be more confident in a large company*. So, I approached people alone or in a group of two.

It was emotionally difficult and unpleasant for me when the other person *ended the conversation without warning*, turned around and walked away, or did not even start the conversation and left immediately. However, such situations also occur in the real world, and as social scientists, we are used to them.



Moreover, it was challenging to communicate with people *with different English accents*. As a result, it was difficult for me to understand the interlocutor and continue the dialogue. This was also exacerbated by the voice effect provided by the AltspaceVR program.

Another observation I have made is that in this community, people are looking for relaxation and are *only sometimes ready to talk about political topics*. Thus, many people I tried to talk to end the conversation quite quickly. At least I was not banned.

Since this kind of observation is emotionally draining, I could only conduct up to two daily conversations. Naturally, therefore, the research took me longer than I had planned.

Another ethical point I would like to highlight is the aspect of *my nationality*. Usually, the first question people ask in the AltspaceVR is, “Where are you from?” So, I could not hide the fact that I was from Ukraine. On the one hand, it could affect what people were willing to tell me. On the other hand, however, it logically explained why I was interested in this topic, so some people were willing to give me time. It is also important to note that my nationality affects data collection and analysis.

## Data

In this section, I will focus on describing the data I received and analyzing it. I could talk to people from as many different contexts as possible, which helped me get exciting results. My respondents include two men from India (South Asia), one man from Peru (South America), one man from Spain living in Germany (Southwest and Central Europe), and one man from Canada (North America). Now I would like to introduce my informants.



Picture 3. Photo of a member of the AltspaceVR community. A man from India. We were playing basketball during the conversation.



*Picture 4. Photo of members of the AltSpaceVR community. The second man from India is on the right. The face of the first man from India is on the left. In the background is a person who does not want to continue the conversation.*



*Picture 5. Photo of members of the AltSpaceVR community. The man from Peru is on the right. A woman from Poland on the left did not continue the conversation.*





*Picture 6. Photo of a member of the AltspaceVR community. A man from Spain who lives and works in Germany. The man with whom I talked the longest.*



*Picture 7. A lousy photo of a member of the AltspaceVR community. A man from Canada. He had a beard, glasses, and a red cap. There was a woman behind me who did not want to talk.*

I spoke with two categories of people. The first one is relatively close to Ukraine and feels the war's impact: Ukrainian internally displaced persons and protests in their country. The second category is people very far from Ukraine, and most likely (before the war) did not even know where it was situated.

Listening to people's conversations and observing the AltspaceVR community, I realized that *talking about politics is not typical for this virtual community*. They are more likely to get to know each other, discuss work, and relax online. Therefore, my presence and questions about political topics could slightly change their daily AltspaceVR routine.

The first result I would like to share is what *people know about the war regardless of how far away they live*. Usually, after I said I was from Ukraine, they would answer: “Oh, that is where the war is going on.” Alternatively, they would say nothing, and then I would ask: “What do you know about this country?” I got the same answer about the war. *People who empathize with Ukraine* and believe russia is to blame for the situation, even though they know specific facts about the situation, are more likely to ask questions than to speak up. However, *people who do not empathize with Ukraine* speak freely and confidently.

Returning to the introduction’s central questions, I ask about facts and narratives. The main facts that members of the community know about the war are that **it is with russia** (known by all) and that **russia has more weapons** than Ukraine (mentioned by 3 out of 5). Another fact is that the **EU and other allied countries are helping Ukraine** (a resident of the EU and Canada). It was easier to collect value judgments than facts. However, this is quite logical, given the distant cultural context of the informants.

I also identified three main narratives that community members were broadcasting. One narrative came from the participants from India, another from a man from Peru, and the third from the EU. A man promoted the first narrative I wanted to discuss from Peru. His narrative was that **Ukraine had no chance of winning because russia is a powerful country with a powerful army**. He did not specify whom he was supporting in this war, but I believe russia is likely spread to this narrative most broadly. We are used to the idea that russia spreads that they are “the second most powerful army in the world” and so on. It is also interesting that this person claims he is not interested in politics but that this topic is “on the minds of everyone,” even thousands of kilometers away from the war.

The second narrative is men from India and a man from Canada. Although they claimed to know nothing about the war, the logic of their speech was based on the idea: **putin is bad, russians are wrong, and Ukrainians and the Ukrainian President are good** (they did not remember his name). This narrative came to India from Ukraine.

And the last narrative I can highlight is from a man from Spain who lives in Germany. The third narrative is similar to the second, as it also includes **condemnation of russia and support for Ukraine**. The respondent believes that it is necessary to help and support Ukraine. However, it has a significant “European” tinge. Since the European Union is geographically close to Ukraine, some Europeans are concerned about the **possibility of the war becoming global**. So, the narrative also includes a warning to be careful not to provoke World War 3.

Nevertheless, even among those who support Ukraine, there is a narrative **that half of Ukraine is pro-russian and wants to live in russia**. A respondent from Canada voiced this opinion. Such messages are also russia’s way of justifying its invasion and are a russian narrative.

## Conclusion

To summarize, I emphasize the following points. The virtual community of AltspaceVR is more of a recreational community, so discussing political topics is optional for its members. Therefore, some members collectively did not want to discuss our topic and did not develop the conversation. However, these situations could be caused by other factors, like bad sound quality or the interlocutor being busy. However, those AltspaceVR community members who spoke openly had a confident, well-formed attitude toward the war based on specific facts and narratives. Among the narratives, this article traces narratives spread and favored by the russian and Ukrainian sides, as well as specific European narratives considering the European geopolitical context.

Out of the five people we interviewed, four tend to support Ukraine and approve of the actions of the Ukrainian authorities. While one respondent did not positively assess either the actions of russia or the actions of Ukraine, he treated it remotely, exclusively as events taking place far away. Various russian narratives justify the invasion through false claims about Ukrainian citizens’ support for russia. The narratives traced here blame russia for what happened and support Ukraine. However, in some cases, they fear the consequences of support. Another narrative was more pro-russian, implying a belief in

Russia's victory and the absence of empathy for Ukraine.

Given its potential for political engagement, this study shows that there are few opportunities to engage community members in the topics of the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, across various virtual environments, there is potential to host events, talk shows, or performances about the war. Furthermore, this study could be expanded further to include more participants across different contexts, given the limited size of this exploratory research.

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