Of Damsels, Knights, and Identity Politics: Social Norms and Boundaries in Central and Eastern Europe's Role-Playing Video Games

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Abstract

The thesis argues for the study of video games as a branch of popular culture with an exceptional ability to communicate social norms and boundaries, which enter into dialogue with their audiences' political views and convictions. The thesis explores these themes through the analysis of two successful Central and Eastern European titles, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), both of which have become subjects of heated discussions about politics and representation in video games, yet they have not received extensive academic attention. Following a literature review and theoretical framework, the thesis offers a comparative close reading of these games, which finds that they use themes such as nationalism, religion, and historical allusions to communicate diverging sets of values. Subsequently, the thesis examines how *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* were received by journalists and audiences. In this part, the thesis offers a brief qualitative content analysis of three online discussion threads, which concludes that arguments about the games' controversial aspects served as proxies for audiences to comment on a larger debate about political correctness and self-representation in the video game industry. Through these analyses, the work reaffirms the need to study games as politically-charged entertainment on a textual as well as extra-textual level.

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Last but not least, I wish to extend a symbolic thank you to developers like CD Projekt Red and Warhorse Studios, who constantly keep pushing the boundaries of what video games can be both as entertainment and as works worthy of continuous debate in and outside academia.

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Introduction

For decades, video games were relegated to the fringes of popular culture and dismissed as entertainment that struggled to become an art form conveying emotional complexity. [1] Throughout the past two decades video games have, nonetheless, expanded their popularity further than ever, becoming a dominant force in the entertainment industry[2] as well as in the study of popular culture,[3] with a growing number[4] of scholars[5] and critics delving into their cultural significance.[6] Whereas a considerable portion of the early research into video games was fixated on the entertainment form's deterministic[7] connection[8] to violence,[9] newer works have expanded game studies scholarship to such topics as depictions of military[10] jingoism[11] and racism[12] in games,[13] or their potential to foster empathy.[14] Many of these studies have

[1] Aaron Smuts, "Are Video Games Art?," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3 (2005), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0003.006.

[2] "Investing in the Soaring Popularity of Gaming," *Reuters*, December 10, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/sponsored/article/popularity-of-gaming.

[3] Adrienne Shaw, "What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies," *Games and Culture* 5, no. 4 (October 2010): 403–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009360414.

[4] S. Deterding, "The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies: Assessing the Past, Present, and Future of Interdisciplinary Game Research," *Games and Culture*, September 1, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016665067.

[5] James Paul Gee, "Why Game Studies Now? Video Games: A New Art Form," *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 58–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412005281788.

[6] Keith Stuart, "Game Changers: How the Increasing Cultural Significance of Video Games Is Reflected in Our Coverage," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2017, sec. Membership, https://www.theguardian.com/membership/2017/jul/21/game-changers-how-the-increasing-cultural-significance-of-video-games-is-reflected-in-our-coverage.

[7] Craig A Anderson, "An Update on the Effects of Playing Violent Video Games," *Journal of Adolescence*, Video Games and Public Health, 27, no. 1 (February 1, 2004): 113–22, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2003.10.009.

[8] Tracy L Dietz, "An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior," n.d., 18.

[9] Marcus Schulzke, "Critical Essay—Models of Agency in Game Studies," *Technoculture*, accessed April 13, 2019, https://tcjournal.org/vol2/schulzke.

[10] Marcus Power, "Digitized Virtuosity: Video War Games and Post-9/11 Cyber-Deterrence," *Security Dialogue* 38 (June 1, 2007), https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010607078552.

[11] Nick Robinson, "Have You Won the War on Terror? Military Videogames and the State of American Exceptionalism," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 2 (January 2015): 450–70, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829814557557.

[12] David J. Leonard, "Not a Hater, Just Keepin' It Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies," *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 (January 2006): 83–88, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412005281910.

[13] Sam Srauy, "Professional Norms and Race in the North American Video Game Industry," *Games and Culture*, May 15, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017708936.

[14] The Deep-Play Research Group et al., "Rethinking Technology & Creativity in the 21st Century: Empathy through Gaming - Perspective Taking in a Complex World," *TechTrends* 59, no. 6 (November 2015): 3–8, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-015-0895-1.

underlined how video games are capable of projecting strong political messages and influence the cultural assumptions of their players, either entrenching or actively challenging different social norms.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the qualitative analyses of politically-salient video games through examining two titles from Central and Eastern Europe that are among the most successful entertainment products of the region, yet they have received relatively limited academic coverage: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) by the Polish studio CD Projekt Red[15] and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) by Czech developer Warhorse Studios.[16] I approach these titles primarily from the perspective of sociologist Dustin Kidd's theory, according to whom works of popular culture inadvertently communicate sets of social norms and stratify audiences based on their preferences.[17] The thesis also repeatedly draws from cultural studies scholar John Storey's description of popular culture as a site of struggle between various social groups vying for prominence.[18] The aforementioned titles are particularly fitting for exploring these themes, as in addition to containing politically charged content on a textual level, *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* have also been heavily politicized by video game critics as well as audiences in divisive debates that reached far beyond the scope of the titles themselves.

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[15] *The Witcher* series not only sold tens of millions of copies, the video game series became so famous in Poland and beyond that in 2011 Donald Tusk gifted the visiting U.S. president Barack Obama a copy of the franchise's second installment, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings.* "President Obama Gives Shout-Out to 'Witcher 2', Probably Didn't Play The Game," *Complex*, accessed May 28, 2019, https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2014/06/president-obama-gives-shout-out-to-witcher-2-probably-didnt-play-the-game.

[16] 2018, which saw the release of *Kingdom Come*, was the most successful year for the Czech video game industry so far, eclipsing the country's cinemas in terms of revenue. Jakub Zelenka, "Počítačové hry z Česka už přinášejí větší tržby než filmy v kinech. Velká studia posilují svou pozici" [Video Games from the Czech Republic are Bringing in More Revenue than Movie Theatres. Big Studios are Strengthening Their Position], *Deník N*, December 13, 2018, https://denikn.cz/35593/pocitacove-hry-z-ceska-uz-prinaseji-vetsi-trzby-nez-filmy-v-kinech-velka-studia-posiluji-svou-pozici/.

[17] Dustin Kidd, "Harry Potter and the Functions of Popular Culture," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 1 (February 2007): 69–89, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00354.x.

[18] John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2009): 10-13.

While a handful[19] of scholars[20] and critics[21] have covered these games individually,[22] no comprehensive comparative analysis has been conducted on *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come*, despite the many similarities they share in terms of their storytelling, mechanics, and regional themes.

The Witcher 3 and *Kingdom Come* have garnered acclaim for constructing original game worlds that rely heavily on Central and Eastern European history[23] and folklore for inspiration[24] and that do not shy away from addressing themes such as war,[25] conflict and politics.[26] Nonetheless, North American and Western European game outlets raised questions regarding the games' overwhelmingly Eurocentric and white virtual worlds,[27] claiming that they were contributing[28] to the long-running trend of marginalizing[29] minorities and colored characters in video gaming.[30] The debate that developed around *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* warrants an analysis of these titles as cultural artifacts that construct elaborate webs of social norms and boundaries with their virtual worlds – a comprehensive analysis, however, requires to expand

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[19] Tomasz Z. Majkowski, "Geralt of Poland: The Witcher 3 Between Epistemic Disobedience and Imperial Nostalgia," *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (January 30, 2018), https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.216.

[20] Dennis Redmond, "The Witcher 3 and Transnational Open Worlds," accessed March 28, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/30137555/Chapter_1_The_Witcher_3_and_Transnational_Open_Worlds.

[21] Reid McCarter, "Deliverance: Myth-Making and Historical Accuracy," *Unwinnable,* accessed April 15, 2019, https://unwinnable.com/2018/03/02/deliverance-myth-making-and-historical-accuracy/.

[22] Klara Hübnerová, "Stereotypy v Kingdom Come: Václav a Zikmund jako z Jiráska" [Stereotypes in Kingdom Come], *em.muni.cz*, accessed May 7, 2019, https://www.em.muni.cz/vite/10426-stereotypy-v-kingdom-come-vaclav-a-zikmund-jako-z-jiraska.

[23] Edwin Evans-Thirlwell, "Wot I Think: Kingdom Come – Deliverance," *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* (blog), February 13, 2018, https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2018/02/13/kingdom-come-deliverance-review/.

[24] "How The Witcher Plays with Polish Romanticism," *Culture.pl*, accessed May 28, 2019, https://culture.pl/en/article/how-the-witcher-plays-with-polish-romanticism.

[25] Matt Wales, "The Witcher 3 Is a Masterpiece of World-Building," *Eurogamer* (blog), May 12, 2015, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2015-05-12-the-witcher-3-is-a-masterpiece-of-world-building.

[26] Jeffrey Parkin, "How I Learned to Love Kingdom Come: Deliverance," *Polygon*, February 21, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/2018/2/21/17031138/deliverance-kingdom-come-warhorse-impressions.

[27] Tauriq Moosa, "Colorblind: On The Witcher 3, Rust, and Gaming's Race Problem," *Polygon*, June 3, 2015, https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem.

[28] Robert Purchese, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance Review - History Is a Double-Edged Sword," *Eurogamer* (blog), February 20, 2018, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-02-20-kingdom-come-deliverance-review.

[29] Paul Tassi, "Yes, I'm Colorblind About 'The Witcher 3,' And Yes, That's A Problem," *Forbes*, accessed March 29, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2015/06/04/yes-im-colorblind-about-the-witcher-3-and-yes-thats-a-problem/.

[30] Nathan Grayson, "Kingdom Come Owes Its Popularity To 'Realism' And Conservative Politics," *Kotaku*, accessed April 14, 2019, https://kotaku.com/kingdom-come-owes-its-popularity-to-realism-and-conserv-1823420208.

the framework beyond the games' handling of racial diversity and inclusion, necessitating taking into account both what social and political norms the games contain on a textual level, as well as how they were perceived by audiences.

The thesis opens with a theoretical framework and literature review in Chapters 1 and 2 that provide a definition for popular culture and locate video games within this umbrella term. These parts serve to demonstrate that game studies and theorists of popular culture have grappled with similar questions regarding the validity of commercial entertainment as art, its political implications, and its potential role in social change. In Chapter 3, I conduct a textual comparative analysis of *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* to analyze the varied ways in which these games construct a set of social norms and boundaries that have both conservative and progressive elements. Subsequently, Chapter 4 looks at the criticism that was labeled against the games and recounts how their developers attempted to fend off allegations of racism, as well as the players' reactions to these controversies. In this segment, I conduct a content analysis of three online discussion threads where audiences debated the lack of characters of color in *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come*. I claim that the predominant narrative among the contributors to these threads is a prime example of popular culture's stratifying effect, which produces a binary narrative of 'us' against 'them.' The concluding chapter summarizes the findings and stresses the need for a more robust research into the political salience of video games from a regional as well as international perspective.

1. The Many Faces of Popular Culture

The field of game studies has generated a formidable[31] body[32] of research[33] in the past decades,[34] mirroring the increasing influence of video games as an entertainment form.[35] Studies concerned with the significance of video games have analyzed them from a multitude of perspectives, routinely placing them into the larger framework of popular culture,[36] which has long been used to discuss a variety of entertainment forms, including movies, music, or comic books. Popular culture is, however, not a concept without its ambiguities and its definition can affect how media such as video games are perceived and critiqued, or whether they fit the umbrella term that popular culture has become at all.

While popular culture is not a clearly delineated concept, the majority of scholars grappling with its meaning agree that it is a product of industrialization and mass production. In his comprehensive work *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, John Storey states that the concept emerged as a result of the unprecedented urbanization and technological advancements of the 19th century, which fundamentally changed cultural relations in advanced economies, blurring the line between common cultures and that of the elites, producing a cultural space that dominant classes had less control over.[37] While there have been scholars who have gravitated towards interpreting popular culture as an 'authentic' culture originating directly from 'the people,' Storey warns that this approach is problematic, as it would restrict

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[31] Bjarke Liboriussen Martin Paul, "Regional Game Studies," *Game Studies* 16, no. 1 (October 2016), http://gamestudies.org/1601/articles/liboriussen.

[32] Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, *Queer Game Studies* (U of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[33] Marcus Schulzke, "The Virtual War on Terror: Counterterrorism Narratives in Video Games," *New Political Science* 35, no. 4 (December 2013): 586–603, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2013.848703.

[34] Markku Eskelinen, "Towards Computer Game Studies," *Digital Creativity* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2001): 175–83, https://doi.org/10.1076/digc.12.3.175.3232.

[35] Adrienne Shaw, "What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies," *Games and Culture* 5, no. 4 (October 2010): 403–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009360414.

[36] Mark J.P. Wolf, "Video Games as American Popular Culture," *Quaderns de Cine*, no. 12 (2017): 120-128. https://doi.org/10.14198/QdCINE.2017.12.10.

[37] John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2009): 12-13.

the term largely to folk culture, ignoring how central commodification is to widely-consumed cultural goods.[38]

Given the fact that major video games require tens of millions of dollars to develop and that they have an equally or even higher advertisement budget,[39] such an approach would effectively lock them out of the realm of popular culture. The same would, however, occur to major movies, which operate with even higher production costs and also heavily rely on international markets.[40] This suggests that the commercialization of culture needs to be an integral part of how popular culture is understood, if it is to cover the most widely consumed media forms, which places the concept firmly outside the boundaries of traditional folklore.[41] In the predominant majority of interpretations presented by Storey, this commercial aspect is inherent to popular culture and it is the phenomenon's ideological implications that form a ground for debate instead.

According to Storey, the immense reach of popular culture has made it inescapable to address its political implications, giving rise to a number of major theories interpreting popular culture as a force with detrimental or benevolent effects.[42] Critics such as the scholars of the Frankfurt School have approached popular culture with strong reservations, treating it as "inauthentic" and manipulative, while its audiences were perceived as largely passive recipients of its messages.[43] A similar perception of passive 'readers' was articulated by structuralists who

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[38] Storey, 9.

[39] "How Much Does It Cost To Make A Big Video Game?," accessed April 26, 2019, https://kotaku.com/how-much-does-it-cost-to-make-a-big-video-game-1501413649.

[40] "$200 Million and Rising: Hollywood Struggles With Soaring Marketing Costs | Hollywood Reporter," accessed April 26, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/200-million-rising-hollywood-struggles-721818.

[41] This does not imply that folk culture cannot be part of popular culture. On the contrary; folk culture itself has been highly commercialized throughout the 20th century. See Laura Carter, "Rethinking Folk Culture in Twentieth-Century Britain," *Twentieth Century British History* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 2017): 543–69, https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwx038.

[42] Storey, 5.

[43] Storey, 8.

claimed that popular culture was an effortless reproduction of dominant power structures – a view that was challenged by scholars who saw it as a terrain for negotiation between dominant and subordinate groups, as well as postmodernists who held that the very divide between high culture and popular culture has been erased by the latter one's ubiquity.[44] While there are significant differences between these interpretations, all of them share an underlying consensus that popular culture plays a pivotal role in shaping the values of those who consume it.

According to sociologist Dustin Kidd, the ability to mold its audience's values is a core characteristic of popular culture, which has become an intrinsic and necessary component of all advanced capitalist societies, as popular culture is the most effective way to entrench norms and social boundaries, while it simultaneously serves to renegotiate them.[45] Kidd considers the complex system of identity creation and separation a fundamental function of popular culture, concluding that consumption patterns "provide an easy reference system for identifying allies and adversaries."[46] Through a set of consumption rituals, popular culture fosters solidarity among those sharing similar preferences, creating a sense of community that is necessary for social cohesion.[47] The American sociologist also stresses the ability of popular culture to achieve this on an unprecedented level by referring to such phenomena as the worldwide fan base of the *Harry Potter* novel series.[48] Furthermore, he also credits popular culture with the

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[44] Storey 9-10.
[45] Dustin Kidd, "Harry Potter and the Functions of Popular Culture," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 1 (February 2007): 71, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00354.x.
[46] Kidd, 78.
[47] Kidd, 79.
[48] Kidd, 83-86.

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potential to be the driving force behind social change,[49] which is underlined by the impact of such popular literary works as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)[50] or *The Jungle* (1906).[51]

Popular culture's contribution to stratification along the lines of audience preferences and its potential to contribute to social change, nonetheless, do not automatically mean that its consumers are openly political. John Street et al. claim in their 2012 study on the relationship between popular culture and political engagement that especially younger audiences are skeptical of conventional politics, yet at the same time the popular culture they consume acts as an important source of political knowledge for them, shaping their feelings and opinions.[52] This process, however, mostly occurs through aesthetic and other judgments made by audiences about the 'authenticity' and 'realism' of the sources of their cultural pleasure, rather than through evaluating the television, music or video games they consume as openly political.[53]

The multi-layered relationship between consumption and political sentiments has also been researched by Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss in their study of everyday nationhood that seeks to identify to what extent mundane consumption patterns can be considered politically and ideologically driven. Echoing Kidd's view of popular culture as producing both social cohesion and stratification, Fox and Miller-Idriss state that consumption patterns reinforce and communicate social membership.[54] Although many products try to actively appeal to people

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[49] Kidd, 80.

[50] Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel has long been credited with giving an enormous boost to the support of abolitionism across the United States' northern region in the lead-up to the Civil War. BeeEllen J. Goldner, "Arguing With Pictures: Race, Class, and the Formation of Popular Abolitionism through Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, Vol. 24, Iss. 1/2 (2001): 71-84.

[51] Upton Sinclair's book published in 1906 caused an uproar over the working condition and hygienic practices in the United States' meatpacking plants, leading to the passage of federal meat inspection laws already in the same year. Roger Rootst, "A Muckraker's Aftermath: The Jungle of Meat-Packing Regulation after a Century," *William Mitchell Law Review:* Vol. 27, Iss. 4 (2001): 2413-2433.

[52] John Street, S. Inthorn, and M. Scott, "Playing at Politics? Popular Culture as Political Engagement," *Parliamentary Affairs* 65, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 338–58, https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsr037.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood," *Ethnicities* 8, no. 4 (December 2008): 550, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796808088925.

with various labels, such as being 'national products,' frequently it is the patterns of consumption rather than the products themselves that provide a political significance to them.[55] The status of 'national products' is further complicated by the fact that they may be enjoyed by international audiences and reinterpreted as cosmopolitan articles.[56]

The framework of consuming products nationally provided by Fox and Miller-Idriss has been expanded by Enric Castelló and Sabina Mihelj, who see national identity as having become "anchored" in global capitalism's cycles of promotion and consumption.[57] According to Castelló and Mihelj, consumption patterns allow for a multitude of ways in which they can be turned into political statements, including boycotts, 'buycotts,' or even by gestures as simple as wearing apparel with national symbols that are salient in a given environment.[58] The political implications of such consumption patterns can be easily observed on many facets of popular culture, such as the attempted boycotts of certain movies[59] for their perceived political messages.[60]

Similarly to Fox and Miller-Idriss, scholars of everyday nationhood recognize that products marketed as national frequently appeal to transnational consumers, or they even cater to these audiences. Castelló and Mihelj, however, do not view consumer cosmopolitanism and

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[55] Fox and Miller-Idriss, 552.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Enric Castelló and Sabina Mihelj, "Selling and Consuming the Nation: Understanding Consumer Nationalism," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 18, no. 4 (November 2018): 558, https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517690570.
[58] Castelló and Mihelj, 567-69.
[59] A good example of such merging of consumption and politics was the unsuccessful call by a groups of rabid Donald Trump and alt-right supporters to boycott the 2016 *Star Wars: Rogue One* blockbuster movie for its alleged "anti-white agenda" represented by its multicultural cast and strong female characters. "'Rogue One': White Supremacists to Boycott Latest Star Wars Film," IndieWire, accessed April 26, 2019, https://www.indiewire.com/2016/12/rogue-one-white-supremacists-boycott-star-wars-film-anti-white-agenda-1201753703/.
[60] A more successful attempt at such a boycott was arguably the mobilization of LGBTQ sympathizers against the 2013 film *Ender's Game*, due to the fact that the author of the book from which the movie was adapted was vocal about his opposition to gay marriage. Nonetheless, it is hard to judge whether the movie's low revenues were caused by the boycott or by a general disinterest in the film. "Ender's Game Box Office vs. Ender's Game Boycott: And the Winner Was...," *E! News*, accessed April 26, 2019, https://www.eonline.com/news/477160/ender-s-game-box-office-vs-ender-s-game-boycott-and-the-winner-was.

consumer nationalism as mutually exclusive, but rather consider them as working in tandem in "reproduc[ing] a form of belonging perfectly adjusted to the workings of global capitalism."[61] In the broader context of popular culture, one of the many examples of this process is the success of such movies as *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) or *The Lives of Others* (2006), which spoke to both domestic and international audiences while remaining firmly rooted in a Germany historical and cultural context.[62]

The political potential and moldable appeal of popular culture is further elaborated on by cultural geographer Tim Edensor's study of the relationship between nationalism and popular culture. Edensor claims that the very existence of national identity is in no small part sustained by the circulation of spectacular and mundane representations of cultural elements through such artifacts as books, music, films, and even adverts.[63] Echoing the postmodernist sentiment about popular culture, Edensor contends that the consensus around canon formation and about the excellence of individual works is increasingly eroding, which results in canonical texts being represented together with works that would have been previously labeled vernacular or 'low' culture.[64] This opens the possibility for popular works such as the Hollywood blockbuster *Braveheart* (1995) to recycle and reinterpret both old and new notions about national identity and history.[65] Edensor stresses that even though the movie is a Hollywood blockbuster that casts Scottish history into a more generic framework designed to appeal to international audiences, its formulaic nature ironically allowed the movie to be reinterpreted in the

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[61] Castelló and Mihelj, 572.

[62] Thomas Lindenberger, "Stasiploitation: Why Not? The Scriptwriter's Historical Creativity in "The Lives of Others"." *German Studies Review* 31, no. 3 (2008): 557-66. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27668592.

[63] Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford ; New York : Berg Publishers, 2002): 139.

[64] Edensor, 141.

[65] Edensor, 142.

framework of 1990s Scottish nationalism, regardless of its wildly inaccurate portrayal of history.[66]

Edensor's claims about the significance and political potential of contemporary popular entertainment can be seen reaffirmed in numerous studies dealing with various other branches of popular culture, including fostering nationalism through popular music,[67] or comic books.[68] In no small part because of its legacy and misappropriation for political goals, *Braveheart* can be considered an ideal embodiment of popular culture and all the aforementioned dilemmas and characteristics that the term implies. Being a Hollywood blockbuster, *Braveheart* is clearly a product of highly commercialized, global cultural production, yet its status as a quasi-national epic points to the eroding boundaries between high and low culture, and to the blurring of history and fiction. Moreover, the movie's utilization by the Scottish National Party as a rallying call for greater political independence also clearly indicates that it effectively communicated a set of values, social norms and boundaries that were successfully used for bolstering the support for a political cause.

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[66] The Scottish National Party managed to appropriate the movie and framed their calls for a greater independence from Westminster as a modern-day equivalent of William Wallace's fight against oppression that *Braveheart* chronicled in a highly inaccurate and idealized form. Edensor, 150-151.

[67] Margit Feischmidt and Gergő Pulay, "'Rocking the Nation': The Popular Culture of Neo-Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism* 23, no. 2 (2017): 309–26, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12264.

[68] Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (September 2005): 626–43, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.2005.00478.x.

2. Locating Video Games within Popular Culture

Save for the interpretation of popular culture that equates it with folklore, video games easily fit its framework as an entertainment form that is completely dependent on modern technologies, mass production, and communicates a set of social norms and power structures, which are frequently seamlessly integrated into the background or into the mechanics of individual games. The growing body of game studies has also touched on most of the dilemmas that scholars of popular culture have been facing, from debates about the status of the entertainment form as 'low' art to its potential to be a political mobilizing factor, be that for progressive or reactionary purposes. Moreover, video games have also motivated audiences to partake in the process of content creation, in addition to which they have also internalized the techniques of other popular media, such as movies or music.

Given the central role that commercialization plays in theory of such thinkers as Theodor Adorno, video games could be considered the perfect incarnation of the culture industry that the Frankfurt School dubbed a vacuous and inauthentic reproduction of art and feelings.[69] Video games became widespread due to the development of increasingly affordable computer technology from the 1970s onwards and soon afterwards, games themselves were used to drive the sales of serialized computer models, consoles, tablets, and mobile devices.[70] Their very existence being firmly rooted in mass production makes video games an example of the standardized culture industry that Adorno and his peers denounced as inherently false and deceptive.[71] While the Frankfurt School's condemnation of popular culture may be excessively

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[69] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (ed.), *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford University Press, 2002): 94-137.

[70] Mark J.P. Wolf, "Video Games as American Popular Culture," *Quaderns de Cine*, no. 12 (2017): 120-128. https://doi.org/10.14198/QdCINE.2017.12.10.

[71] Horkheimer and Adorno, 94-96.

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harsh, video games were repeatedly denied the status of an art form and relegated to the category of simplistic commercial entertainment even by proponents of popular entertainment. As late as in 2010, renowned film critic Roger Ebert remained "convinced that *in principle,* video games cannot be art,"[72] despite games using many techniques present in cinema as well as drawing thematic inspiration from iconic films and literature.[73]

The tension between commercial entertainment and art that is at the heart of the Frankfurt School's critique of popular culture has haunted video games long after firm scholarly disciplines have been established around popular film and music.[74] Game studies scholars tended to argue against the interpretation of video games as a "subcultural teenage phenomenon"[75] by pointing to titles that played out as interactive movies and theatre performances by including movie-like 'cut-scenes' that complemented their gameplay.[76] Video games have also been cited as the pioneering entertainment form of "convergence culture," as games frequently motivate audiences to be active participants in the creation and dissemination of content.[77]

During the past decade, more and more credence has been given to the artistic potential of video games, which was in no small part caused by the gradual emergence of 'artgames' that brought video games into established cultural spaces like museums[78] and the boom of the indie game industry since 2010. The latter phenomenon mirrors independent cinema in many ways,

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[72] Roger Ebert, "Video Games Can Never Be Art," Roger Ebert's Journal, accessed April 27, 2019, https://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-never-be-art.
[73] Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., "History" in *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, New York ; London : Routledge, 2016:, 71-72.
[74] Aaron Smuts, "Are Video Games Art?" *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3 (2005), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0003.006.
[75] Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 23.
[76] Smuts, Ibid.
[77] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2008): 8-10.
[78] While they are far from uniform, art games are usually much smaller in scope than big releases and they tend to play around with traditional game mechanics and adopt a more abstraction visual presentation. Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011): 9-17.

by fostering a culture and audience for smaller projects and laying emphasis on themes that are less likely to be explored in titles that are built around spectacle.[79] While the uneasy relationship between art and consumer culture has been at the forefront of game studies, the aforementioned developments indicate that there is little reason to believe that a self-sustaining alternative scene similar to independent movies could not develop around video games.

Running simultaneously with debates[80] about the artistic potential[81] of the entertainment form,[82] game studies scholars have also extensively analyzed the depiction of dominant power structures in video games. In his seminal text "The Rhetoric of Video Games," Ian Bogost outlined how games had the capability to communicate explicit as well as implicit messages through their setting and storytelling, as well as through gameplay procedures and limitations that individual titles have players observe.[83] Analyses of the political implications of individual games or trends in the industry reflect what John Storey categorizes as structuralist and Marxist approaches to popular culture, the former of which tends to see popular culture as an effortless reproduction of dominant power relations, while the latter interprets it as a terrain for exchange and negotiation between groups.[84]

The structuralist argument tends to be particularly strong in studies focusing on the rampant militarism of post-9/11 popular culture that captivated the video game industry in the wake of the United States' military engagement in the Middle East. Among a number of scholars

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[79] One of the most-discussed indie game titles of recent years has been *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016), in which the creators depicted their experience of struggling with the terminal illness of their child. Mata Haggis, "Creator's Discussion of the Growing Focus on, and Potential of, Storytelling in Video Game Design," *Persona Studies* 2, no. 1 (May 17, 2016): 20-26. https://doi.org/10.21153/ps2016vol2no1art532.

[80] Ebert, "Video Games Can Never Be Art."

[81] Gee, "Why Game Studies Now?"

[82] Smuts, "Are Video Games Art?"

[83] Bogost emphasizes that the gameplay and storytelling choices and limitations players face can in themselves be constructed in an ideologically biased way by video game developers, even if the presentation is seemingly neutral. Ian Bogost, "The Rhetoric of Video Games," in *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. 117–140.

[84] John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2009): 9-10.

dealing with this topic were Nick Robinson, who examined how dozens of successful shooter franchises adopted the ideologically charged 'war on terror' rhetoric and constructed narratives where the United States were viewed both as a victim of global terrorism as well as the only force capable to eradicate it,[85] while Marcus Schulzke examined how these games inflated the belief in the ubiquity and capacity of terrorist cells.[86] Extensive attention has been devoted also to the United States Army's successful use of its own video game *America's Army* as a communication and recruitment tool,[87] which prompted worries that the proliferation of war-themed games with little critical content could dampen the incentive in a generation of gamers to scrutinize politics and the deployment of state violence.[88]

Similar concerns have been voiced by scholars researching the significance of race and gender in video games, highlighting the long-running stereotypical images featured in the medium.[89] In his study "'Live in Your World, Play in Ours,'" David Leonard criticized the video gaming industry's tendency to associate African Americans with images of black athleticism, female sexuality and the decay of American inner cities.[90] According to Leonard, the presence of African Americans in video games primarily served as an attraction for white players, who were given the opportunity to act out stereotypical roles associates with blackness in what amounted to "High-Tech Blackface." [91] The argument about video games proliferating dominant negative stereotypes has been reaffirmed by quantitative research documenting the disproportionately high amount of male characters in video games, as well the

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[85] Robinson, "Have You Won the War on Terror?"

[86] Schulzke, "The Virtual War on Terror."

[87] Corey Mead, "America's Army: The Game," in *War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict,* Boston: Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.

[88] Roger Stahl, "Have You Played the War on Terror?," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 2 (June 2006): 112–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180600714489.

[89] David Leonard, "Not a Hater, Just Keepin' It Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies," *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 (January 2006): 83–88, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412005281910.

[90] David Leonard, "'Live in Your World, Play in Ours': Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other," *SIMILE: Studies In Media & Information Literacy Education* 3, no. 4 (November 1, 2003): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.3138/sim.3.4.002.

[91] Ibid.

overrepresentation of White and Asian characters in most titles.[92] The conclusion that the video game industry predominantly reproduces existing power relations is underpinned by studies pointing to the low number of female game developers and IT professionals in general.[93]

Despite ample evidence about video games' tendency to reflect existing power structures, there is a rich body of scholarship suggesting that these power relations are not necessarily presented as monolithical, which is in line with Kidd's interpretation of popular culture as not only a means to transmit dominant social norms but also a field for their negotiation.[94] In her analysis of the *Tomb Raider* series, Esther MacCallum-Stewart highlights how the character of Lara Croft has successfully survived as a video game icon and how her depictions have gradually shed her sexualized image for that of a more relatable and grounded heroine.[95] In 2016, Adrienne Shaw and Elizaveta Friesem have documented the history of queer characters in video games, showcasing the growing representation of LGBTQ characters across the gaming landscape.[96]

Responding to the view that the depiction of racial minorities in video games constituted a digital version of blackface, Rachael Hutchinson warned that even seemingly stereotypical images and roles may contain a critical reflection on racial conflict in America, when narrative context, gameplay choices, and player-character identification are taken into account.[97]

[92] Dmitri Williams et al., "The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games," *New Media & Society* 11, no. 5 (August 2009): 815–34, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809105354.

[93] Julie Prescott and Jan Bogg, "The Computer Games Industry: Women's Experiences of Work Role in a Male Dominated Environment," *Women in Engineering, Science and Technology: Education and Career Challenges*, 2010, 138–58, https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-61520-657-5.ch007.

[94] Dustin Kidd, "Harry Potter and the Functions of Popular Culture," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 1 (February 2007): 69–89, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00354.x.

[95] E. MacCallum-Stewart, "'Take That, Bitches!' Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives," *Game Studies: International Journal of Computer Games Research* 14 (December 14, 2014), http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/maccallumstewart.

[96] Adrienne Shaw and Elizaveta Friesem, "Where Is the Queerness in Games? Types of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Content in Digital Games," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 3877–89.

[97] Rachael Hutchinson, "Representing Race and Disability: Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas as a Whole Text," in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, 2017, 164–78, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005rgq.14.

Similarly, Schulzke cautioned against passing overly deterministic conclusions about how video game audiences consumed the games they played, arguing that players do not necessarily conform to playing games as the developers intended or agree with the ideological messages they encounter.[98] Ben DeVane and Kurt Squire have reached a similar conclusion in their participatory study, pointing out that particularly experienced gamers had a sophisticated understanding of video game tropes and displayed the ability to critique them despite enjoying a particular game.[99]

Reaffirming Kidd's argument that popular culture not only reflects dominant social norms but can also influence them,[100] video games have repeatedly become parts of larger debates on social and political issue. Games continue to be studied based on their perceived connection to violent behavior,[101] especially among minors,[102] and games have been the subjects of several moral panics, which involved anti-game activists, religious groups, as well as some scholars drawing questionable correlations between them and school shootings.[103] Recently, video games have also proven to be a potent force in the debate about identity politics, after the backlash against media critics and academics exploring gender and race relations in games revealed a deep polarization among the video gaming community.

Media critic Anita Sarkeesian has emerged as a particularly significant figure in this heated debate, having produced the 2013 video series *Tropes vs Women in Video Games* in which

[98] Marcus Schulzke (2013), "Critical Essay—Models of Agency in Game Studies," accessed April 13, 2019, https://tcjournal.org/vol2/schulzke.

[99] Ben DeVane and Kurt D. Squire, "The Meaning of Race and Violence in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," *Games and Culture* 3, no. 3–4 (July 2008): 264–85, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412008317308.

[100] Kidd, 80-81.

[101] Sarah M Coyne et al., "Violent Video Games, Externalizing Behavior, and Prosocial Behavior: A Five-Year Longitudinal Study during Adolescence," *Developmental Psychology* 54, no. 10 (October 2018): 1868–80, https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000574.

[102] Jeanne Funk Brockmyer, "Playing Violent Video Games and Desensitization to Violence," *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 65–77, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2014.08.001.

[103] Christopher J. Ferguson, "The School Shooting/Violent Video Game Link: Causal Relationship or Moral Panic?," *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling* 5, no. 1–2 (2008): 25–37, https://doi.org/10.1002/jip.76.

Sarkeesian analyzed such widespread clichés as the "damsel in distress," the use of women as "background decoration" in games, or their treatment as reward. [104] Sarkeesian garnered widespread attention after she became the target of waves of online harassment, including threats of rape and death, which she received as soon as she announced her series through a crowd-funding campaign.[105]

In the aftermath of the hostile reactions to Sarkeesian's work, video gaming has become even more permeated with politics, culminating in the 2014 #GamerGate movement. The series of backlashes and online hate campaigns known as #GamerGate revolved around attacks on a number of feminist video game developers, critics and academics, while also focusing on an alleged corruption among video game journalists.[106] Albeit far from a unified movement, supporters of #GamerGate saw calls for an increasing visibility of women, colored characters and sexual minorities in video games as part of an indoctrination campaign of "political correctness" that was actively undermining the authenticity and freedom of gaming culture.[107]

#GamerGate has not only made identity politics central to the discussion of video games, it has also irrevocably drawn attention to the political dimensions of gaming communities, [108] providing strong evidence that gamers should not be treated as a homogenous group, as their ideological differences were not unlike political divisions among different voter bases. [109]

[104] "Tropes vs Women in Video Games - Season 1," *YouTube*, accessed April 15, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLn4ob_5_ttEaA_vc8F3fjzE62esf9yP61.

[105] "The Attack on Anita Sarkeesian: From Media Analysis to Anti-Feminism and Online Harassment," *Sociology Lens* (blog), July 2, 2012, https://www.sociologylens.net/topics/communication-and-media/the-attack-on-anita-sarkeesian-from-media-analysis-to-anti-feminism-and-online-harassment/10036.

[106] Michael Salter, "From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse," *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 14, no. 2 (August 2018): 247–64, https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659017690893.

[107] Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 8 (December 2018): 787–806, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016640408.

[108] Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 208–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917.

[109] Kristin MS Bezio, "Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-Right," *Leadership* 14, no. 5 (October 2018): 556–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018793744.

#GamerGate is a reflection of what Dustin Kidd refers to as popular culture's complex system of identity creation and separation according to which allies and adversaries are identified.[110] In the case of the 2014 movement, this was achieved through a brand of identity politics,[111] which pitted a highly masculine perception of video gaming culture against the supposedly corrupting wave of "queering" and feminization of gaming spaces.[112] This resulted in repeated waves of criticism against games that were perceived as marred by a progressive agenda,[113] while developers and critics who were supportive of #GamerGate were hailed as pariahs in a hostile environment.[114]

The conservative backlash of #GamerGate has been well documented in academia, as it has provided a somewhat cathartic moment for the study of video games, explicitly showcasing the heterogeneity of the gaming public and highlighting that political and cultural question can play a central role among them just as much as among heated partisan supporters. In their detailed account of the movement, Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw systematically trace how #GamerGate proliferated through various online forums and how the movement gradually began to target game journalists, critics and academics who were seen as undermining the industry with their feminist agenda.[115] In her own take on the movement, Torill Elvira Mortensen concluded that #GamerGate was a prime example of how online platforms such as

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[110] Kidd, 76.
[111] Udith Dematagoda, "Revenge of the Nerds: Recidivist Masculinity, Identity Politics and the Online 'Culture Wars,'" *Journal of Extreme Anthropology* 1, no. 3 (October 3, 2017): 139-148, https://doi.org/10.5617/jea.5359.
[112] Sarah Beth Evans and Elyse Janish, "#INeedDiverseGames: How the Queer Backlash to GamerGate Enables Nonbinary Coalition," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, Volume 2, no. 2 (2015): 125-150.
[113] Jessica E. Tompkins and Teresa Lynch, "The Concerns Surrounding Sexist Content in Digital Games," in *Video Game Influences on Aggression, Cognition, and Attention*, ed. Christopher J. Ferguson (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 119–36, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95495-0_10.
[114] "How Gamergate Pioneered the Backlash Against Diversity," *The Walrus* (blog), September 11, 2017, https://thewalrus.ca/how-gamergate-pioneered-the-backlash-against-diversity-in-technology/.
[115] Chess and Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes."

Reddit, 4chan or Facebook, which in theory foster open dialogue, were utilized to create toxic echo chambers and to launch attacks on opposing voices.[116]

Taking the 2014 movement's implications even further, Kristin Bezio argues that GamerGate served as a precursor to the alt-right's rise and strong online presence in subsequent years. Bezio notes that #GamerGate popularized many expression later used disparagingly by the alt-right, such as "safe space," "snowflake," or "cry bullies," in addition to which both groups enjoyed the support of the same ideologically skewed outlets, such as Breitbart, and echoed a similar anti-progressive rhetoric fuelled by fear-mongering and moral panic.[117] In a more positive spin on #GamerGate, Udith Dematagoda concluded that the reactionary movement actually heralded change, as the emergence of such "destructive masculine impulses" historically tended to occur "when the totemic power of the institution of manhood was brought into question."[118]

Whether #GamerGate is understood as the forerunner of a growing conservative wing among video game audiences or as the backlash of a vocal minority against the industry's progressive trajectory, it indicates that as most branches of popular culture, video games also inherently separate their audiences into groups that may perceive each other as a threat. The recent surge of critical approaches in game studies as well as conflicts within the video gaming community such as #GamerGate have provided ample proof that video games are a politically salient branch of popular culture, warranting an examination of how select games and their audiences communicate and negotiate social norms and boundaries. While game studies scholars have analyzed #GamerGate extensively, little has been written about individual games that have been subject to praise or criticism among its followers.

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[116] Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games."
[117] Bezio, 563.
[118] Dematagoda, 5.

2.1. The Politics of *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come*

Studies of #GamerGate abound; however, game studies scholars have not devoted nearly the same amount of attention to individual video games that have been politicized in the past years, particularly in the case of Central and Eastern European titles. Rather than being analyzed in academia, games from the former Eastern Bloc have mostly attracted the attention of video game journalists and online outlets. Throughout the past years, these outlets have contributed to romanticizing Central and Eastern European titles as unique [119] and distinguishing themselves from Western European and North American productions by embracing certain regional characteristics, such as history and Slavic folklore.[120] At the same time, games such as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) have been criticized by leading video game outlets, most notably the North American *Kotaku*[121] and *Polygon*,[122] for their racially homogenous gaming worlds that feature little to no characters of color. This warrants a closer analysis of these games in the context of social norms and boundary formation in popular culture.

Most of the discussion surrounding the aforementioned titles has occurred online, with limited available academic research. One of the notable exceptions is Tomasz Majkowski's excellent study of the *The Witcher* 3, "Geralt of Poland: The Witcher 3 Between Epistemic Disobedience and Imperial Nostalgia," in which the author concludes that despite its extensive use of Slavic folklore, Polish historical references, and a seeming reproduction of a conservative hierarchical

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[119] Yoan Stanev, "Emerging Europe's dark and surreal computer games," Emerging Europe, December 15, 2018, https://emerging-europe.com/after-hours/emerging-europes-dark-and-surreal-computer-games/.
[120] "The Dark, Ironic, Surreal Games of Central and Eastern Europe," *GamesIndustry.biz*, accessed March 3, 2019, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-10-29-dark-ironic-surreal-game-aesthetics-of-the-post-ussr-block.
[121] Nathan Grayson, "Kingdom Come Owes Its Popularity To 'Realism' And Conservative Politics," *Kotaku*, accessed December 20, 2018, https://kotaku.com/kingdom-come-owes-its-popularity-to-realism-and-conserv-1823420208.
[122] Tauriq Moosa, "Colorblind: On The Witcher 3, Rust, and Gaming's Race Problem," *Polygon*, June 3, 2015, https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem.

order, *The Witcher 3* is deeply embedded in the culture of Western enlightenment thought.[123]

According to Majkowski, when the game invokes Polish history within its fantasy narrative, it does so to offer a scathing criticism of Polish historic nationalism and revisionism, presenting a story in which the ethos of patriotism and calls for the homeland's defense are coopted by local tyrants who are "unable to produce a modernity of their own" and instead terrorize their subjects. [124] In another study devoted to the game, "*The Witcher 3* And The Digital Bloodlands," Dennis Redmond explores how *The Witcher 3* attempts to merge a plethora of themes in its narrative, including the "critical frame of gender with the frames of identity-politics and dynastic expansionism."[125]

While *Kingdom Come* lacks literature of the same quality as Majkowski's analysis of *The Witcher 3*, it has been subject to a handful of insightful analyses[126] available online.[127] In his in-depth look at the game "Myth-Making and Historical Accuracy," Reid McCarter problematizes the game's treatment of foreign nations, its neglect of female characters, as well as the game's disparaging portrayal of gay characters.[128] Both Majkowski's and McCarter's writings underline that scrutinizing games such as *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* can reveal dynamics in which video games communicate complex ideas about social order and boundary setting.

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[123] Tomasz Z. Majkowski, "Geralt of Poland: The Witcher 3 Between Epistemic Disobedience and Imperial Nostalgia," *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (January 30, 2018): 16 https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.216.
[124] Majkowski, 14.
[125] Dennis Redmond, "Chapter 2. *The Witcher 3* And The Digital Bloodlands," in *Worlds To Win. The Politics of Transnational Audiences in The Witcher 3, Fallout 4 and Freeman's Mind* (MonkeyBear Press: Kolkata, 2018)
[126] Klara Hübnerová, "Stereotypy v Kingdom Come: Václav a Zikmund jako z Jiráska" [Stereotypes in Kingdom Come], *em.muni.cz*, accessed May 8, 2019, https://www.em.muni.cz/vite/10426-stereotypy-v-kingdom-come-vaclav-a-zikmund-jako-z-jiraska.
[127] Imre Bártfai, "Cumans in Kingdom Come: Deliverance," *Medievalists.Net* (blog), February 26, 2018, http://www.medievalists.net/2018/02/cumans-kingdom-come-deliverance/.
[128] Reid McCarter, "Kingdom Deliverance: Myth-Making and Historical Accuracy," *Unwinnable*, accessed April 15, 2019, https://unwinnable.com/2018/03/02/deliverance-myth-making-and-historical-accuracy/.

Despite the many similarities shared by the aforementioned games, they have not yet been subject to an in-depth comparative analysis that would have focused on contrasting the varied ways in which they utilize their Central and Eastern European setting and cultural influences for conveying progressive or conservative messages, nor has the debate surrounding the games' perceived racism been studied extensively. In an attempt to fill these gaps, the subsequent chapters provide a comparative analysis of *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* both on a textual as well as extra-textual level.

3. Close Reading and Comparative Analysis

This chapter examines two successful video game titles from Central and Eastern Europe that have become subject to wider debates about politics in games among journalists and audiences alike; *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) by the Polish studio CD Projekt Red and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) by Czech developer Warhorse Studios. The analysis follows the arguments of cultural theorists Dustin Kidd and John Storey, who suggest that cultural artifacts inevitably depict a set of social norms and power structures[129] that audiences either subscribe to or struggle to reconcile with their own views.[130] Following a description of the games' place in broader popular culture, their genres, and some key gameplay mechanics, I carry out a textual analysis of *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* in which I fragment the games by choosing key themes (world building, depiction of women, nationalism, and religion) and by analyzing the social and political implications of these segments.[131] Through this analysis and by referring to available secondary literature, I determine to what extent the social norms projected by the aforementioned titles can be considered progressive or conservative, and how their respective value systems compare to each other.

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[129] Dustin Kidd, "Harry Potter and the Functions of Popular Culture," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 1 (February 2007): 69–89, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00354.x.

[130] According to Storey, the likes and dislikes of different social groups are in themselves a form of struggle for greater dominance and popular culture provides a constant ground for negotiation based on whose views are being represented. John Storey (2009), "Introduction" in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman: 10, 79-82.

[131] Game studies employs this method commonly, but its origins can be found in literary criticism. Commonly, game studies scholars hold that critics ought to play the games themselves, as opposed to experiencing them in a more passive manner (watching gameplay videos, etc.) Diane Carr, "Methodology, Representation, and Games," *Games and Culture*, September 6, 2017, 155541201772864, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017728641.

Both *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* have enjoyed a positive reception[132] by video game critics and went on to become financial[133] successes,[134] contributing to the growing influence of Central and Eastern Europe within the video gaming industry.[135] Despite being celebrated as some of the most influential works of entertainment produced in Poland[136] and the Czech Republic in recent years,[137] a number of major Western European and North American video game outlets as well as players have raised questions regarding the overwhelmingly Eurocentric[138] and white game worlds that *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* depict.[139] While this criticism has been labeled a misunderstanding of the games' Central and Eastern European cultural[140] context,[141] the debates these games sparked about their perceived conservatism warrant their close-textual analysis and an examination of the social norms and boundaries that

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[132] The review aggregator site Metacritic points to "Generally favorable" review in the case of *Kingdom Come*, while *The Witcher 3* enjoys "Universal acclaim." www.metacritic.com

[133] Exact sales figures of *The Witcher 3* are not public, however, the entire series sold more than 33 million copies by 2018, out of which *The Witcher 3* accounts for roughly half of the sales. "Witcher Series Sells Over 33 Million Copies in 10 Years; Witcher 3 2017 PC Sales Equal PS4/XO Sales," *Wccftech* (blog), March 23, 2018, https://wccftech.com/witcher-33-million-witcher-3-2017-pc/.

[134] Within a year, *Kingdom Come* managed to sell more than two million copies, which is impressive for an original intellectual property that is neither a sequel, nor an adaptation of pre-existing works. "Kingdom Come: Deliverance Has Sold Two Million Copies," *PCGamesN*, accessed March 29, 2019, https://www.pcgamesn.com/kingdom-come-deliverance/kingdom-come-deliverance-sales-numbers.

[135] "The Dark, Ironic, Surreal Games of Central and Eastern Europe," *GamesIndustry.biz*, accessed March 3, 2019, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-10-29-dark-ironic-surreal-game-aesthetics-of-the-post-ussr-block.

[136] CD Projekt Red were the first breakout success of the Polish video game industry in the late-2000s due to the first installment of *The Witcher* video game franchise and the studio has since become the "hegemon" of the industry in the region, both financially and in terms of the recognition its work garnered. "The Future Looks Bright for the Polish Gaming Business," *Visegrad Plus* - Forum for Visegrad+ studies, accessed May 28, 2019, http://visegradplus.org/the-future-looks-bright-for-the-polish-gaming-business/.

[137] In 2018, video games became the most successful entertainment export of the Czech Republic, which was in no small part because of *Kingdom Come*. Jan Sedlák, "Vítězný rok českých her: Úspěch Kingdom Come a Beat Saber či vzkříšení Geewy" [The Triumphant Year of Czech Video Games: The Success of Kingdom Come, Beat Saber and the Resurrection of Greew], *Lupa.cz*, accessed May 28, 2019, https://www.lupa.cz/clanky/vitezny-rok-ceskych-her-uspech-kingdom-come-a-beat-saber-ci-vzkriseni-geewy/.

[138] Tauriq Moosa, "Colorblind: On The Witcher 3, Rust, and Gaming's Race Problem," *Polygon*, June 3, 2015, https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem.

[139] Nathan Grayson, "Kingdom Come Owes Its Popularity To 'Realism' And Conservative Politics," *Kotaku*, accessed April 14, 2019, https://kotaku.com/kingdom-come-owes-its-popularity-to-realism-and-conserv-1823420208.

[140] Steve Boxer, "Fan Backlash after Eurogamer's Kingdom Come: Deliverance Review," *Green Man Gaming Newsroom* (blog), February 21, 2018, https://www.greenmangaming.com/newsroom/2018/02/21/fan-backlash-eurogamers-kingdom-come-deliverance-review/.

[141] Katherine Cross, "Opinion: Cultural Influence Does Not Preclude Diversity," accessed April 14, 2019, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/245754/Opinion_Cultural_influence_does_not_preclude_diversity.php.

they present, as they provide a notable example of video games' ability to entrench or challenge existing hierarchies.

The Witcher 3 and *Kingdom Come* are rooted in popular culture's long-running trend of repeatedly reimagining and reinterpreting medieval culture for contemporary audiences and purposes.[142] Umberto Eco framed this enchantment with the period as European and North American culture's persistent return to the Middle Ages to look for the roots of its contemporary "hot" problems, which is akin to how a psychoanalyst seeks to understand present neurosis by "a careful investigation of the primal scene."[143] Video games' approach to medievalism is a particularly strong manifestation of what Eco saw as the contradictory impulse to rediscover one's roots through reliable and authentic representations and indulging in escapism akin to J.R.R Tolkien's writings,[144] as games tend to take a loose approach to depicting medieval-like worlds, freely combining historic material with contemporary adaptations, commentaries and paraphrases, creating a form of "fantastic neomedievalism."[145] According to medievalist Daniel Kline, game developers have utilized elements of the medieval past to lend credence to their plotlines, to exoticize their characters and to give a romantic aura to the setting of their games, which established the medieval period in gaming not as a distant past, "but a present reality, a treasure trove whose contents can be ceaselessly reconfigured for current needs."[146]

Along with building on the ongoing fascination of popular culture with the medieval period, *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* are bound by further similarities in terms of their game

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[142] Daniel T. Kline, *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 2013): 3.
[143] According to Eco, the medieval period is a constant focal point because "all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages," from the rise of modern languages and capitalist economies to the concept of nation states and our contemporary understanding of love as a "devastating unhappy happiness." Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays* (transl. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, London: Picador, 1987): 64-65.
[144] Eco, 65.
[145] Kline, 4.
[146] Kline, 5.

mechanics and storytelling. Both titles belong to the computer role-playing genre (cRPG or RPG),[147] and have the players assume the role of a pre-defined character, which allows creators to exercise near-complete control over the perspective that players experience during the game.[148] With these pre-defined avatars, players traverse a detailed game world populated by various characters and stories that can be discovered through exploration and interaction. As it is customary in most RPGs, in addition to pursuing a main storyline, players have the option to explore various side-quests, which usually consist of smaller stories that contribute to the greater immersion of players in the world and provide them with additional content and playtime. The challenges that players encounter in the games are predominantly solved through combat and killing enemies, although some situations may also have non-lethal solutions.[149] Although both titles take place in a quasi-medieval setting, *The Witcher 3* incorporates elements such as magic and mythical creatures into its world, while *Kingdom Come* veers closer to the genre of historical fiction, in the veins of movies like *Braveheart* or *Kingdom of Heaven*.[150] Both games, nonetheless, display a similarly strong affinity towards their region of origin, relying heavily on Central and Eastern European history, landscapes and folklore, which form the backbone of their virtual worlds and serve as inspiration for their storytelling.

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[147] The role-playing genre of video games has its roots in pen and paper games such as Dungeons & Dragons, which involve players partaking in a game narrative with elaborate rules, set in a fictional world with a detailed backstory and mythology. Players seek to fulfill various quests and encounter enemies and other challenges through their play that they have to overcome, usually as a team. "What Is Role-Playing Game (RPG)? - Definition from Techopedia," accessed April 22, 2019, https://www.techopedia.com/definition/27052/role-playing-game-rpg.

[148] RPGs tend to either give players the option to 'create' their own character, which frequently involves choosing their race, sex, gender, etc. or alternatively, they have players assume pre-defined avatars. The benefit of the former approach is greater variety, while the latter one allows developers to tell a more focused story closely connected to the pre-defined protagonist's history and personality. "Pre-Made vs. Custom Characters in RPGs," *Numantian Games*, accessed April 22, 2019, http://www.numantiangames.com/2013/03/05/premade-vs-custom-characters/.

[149] *The Witcher 3* is more combat-reliant than *Kingdom Come*. The latter game offers more options of avoiding combat via choosing the right dialogue options or through resorting to the game's stealth mechanics and avoiding enemies. In fact, *Kingdom Come* offers the option to complete the game without directly killing any enemy outside of one character, whom the main protagonist inevitably kills in one of the non-interactive cut-scenes.

[150] Despite having been advertised with the catchphrase "Dungeons & no dragons," Warhorse Studios has explicitly cited *The Witcher* series as an inspiration for their storytelling. "Kingdom Come: Deliverance Aims to Separate Fact from Fantasy Fiction," *Digital Trends*, January 22, 2014, https://www.digitaltrends.com/gaming/kingdom-come-deliverance/.

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I argue that *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* ought to be read as works that communicate value systems on two levels. Both games construct meticulously detailed medieval-like societies, which are marked by feudal and patriarchal relations, as well as the dominant position of organized religion in society. These motifs coalesce into a web of values and norms, creating an enclosed ecosystem that subsequently the games' narratives and gameplay prompt players either to accept or oppose.[151] *The Witcher 3* uses the aforementioned power structures to depict a world ravaged by conflict between nations, social groups, as well as animosity towards the racial 'other,' against which the game's main protagonist frequently rebels, acting as a transformative force. *Kingdom Come*, on the other hand, conceives an 'authentic' medieval world in which feudal and patriarchal relations, as well as the dominance of the church are presented as inseparable features of the status quo that ensures social cohesion. I detail that while *The Witcher 3* explicitly critiques the foundations on which the society it depicts is built, *Kingdom Come* ultimately offers only a limited criticism of religious zealotry and blind nationalism, tasking players to pursue restoring the Bohemian Kingdom's nostalgic golden age instead.

3.1. *The Witcher 3*: Championing Progress

The Witcher 3 is the third and most successful installment of the Polish CD Projekt Red studio's video game series based on the prose of Andrzej Sapkowski, whose writing has been praised for its subversive and ironic take on the fantasy genre[152] that was popularized most notably by J.R.R. Tolkien.[153] Similarly to Sapkowski's novels, *The Witcher* video games follow the

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[151] It can be argued that some games go as far as creating coherent worldviews and cultural identities of their own through the many norms and boundaries they set up, which could be a virtual version of the "webs of significance" that cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz identified as the governing force of human conduct. Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973): 5.

[152] Krzysztof Jański, "Creation of the Fictional World in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*," *Homo Ludens* 1(11)/2018: 119.

[153] George Clark, *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-Earth* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000): 1-10.

adventures of Geralt of Rivia, a member of an itinerant group of professional monster slayers known as 'witchers,' who travels a warn-torn country in search of his long-lost adoptive daughter, while encountering various colorful characters, monsters, supernatural forces and political intrigues on his way.[154] The majority of the gameplay involves Geralt fighting various mythical creatures as well as human enemies, in addition to which it features a large number of quests involving searching for clues and engaging in dialogues of various length with NPCs (non-player characters).

The expansive world that Geralt of Rivia traverses includes locations inspired by Scandinavia and France; however, the game's core regions are based on Poland.[155] Similarly, the fantasy lore of *The Witcher 3* is deeply influenced by Polish mythology, while its political factions reference dynasties and states that have been involved in Polish history for centuries, such as the Ottoman and Russian empires or the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Prussia,[156] which makes the game a perfect example of fantastic neomedievalism that freely blends elements of presumed authenticity with fiction.[157] Through Geralt's adventures, CD Projekt Red enables players to inhabit a world permeated with references to Polish and Eastern European high as well as low culture; however, the game is far from uncritical in its use of these themes. From peasants to nobles, many of the world's inhabitants that Geralt encounters are portrayed as superstitious, prejudiced or downright cruel, and the main character is routinely placed into situations where he has to fight them or confront them with their flaws.

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[154] For a good summary of the game's narrative and gameplay feel, see CD Projekt Red's official promotional video of the game. "The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt - Official Gameplay Trailer," *YouTube*, accessed April 22, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYwe_WHARdc&list=PLf-QZNCg8OAY9-uVPt-RGEmlryyg-pnpD&index=23.

[155] For a well-presented account of the Polish inspiration in the game, see "Polish Culture and Real Places in The Witcher 3 Wild Hunt," *Plan Poland* (blog), October 21, 2017, https://planpoland.com/realplacesinthewitcher/.

[156] Dennis Redmond, "Chapter 2: The Witcher 3 And The Digital Bloodlands," *Worlds To Win: The Politics of Transnational Audiences in The Witcher 3, Fallout 4 and Freeman's Mind* (Kolkata: MonkeyBear Press, 2018). http://monkeybear.info/DennisRedmond_WorldsToWin_2018.pdf

[157] Kline, 4.
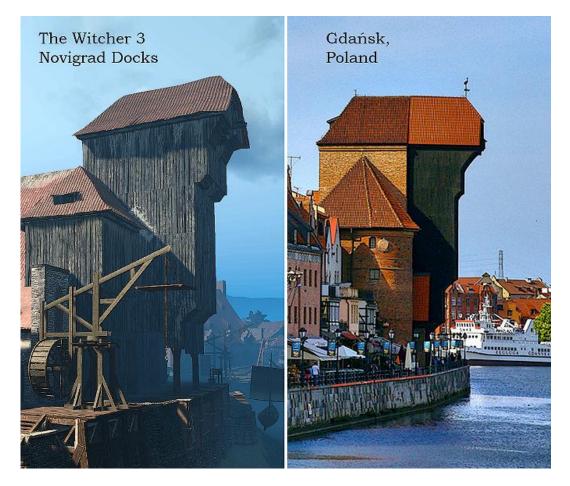
3.1.1. Building a World of Conflict

The Witcher 3 has been praised for its meticulous world building[158] and the amount of detail that developer CD Projekt Red put into creating the game's "a vast, immersive virtual topography that supports a plenitude of events, characters and supplementary lore."[159] The core region of this expansive game world is Velen, a territory inspired by the landscapes of northern and central Poland;[160] however, it is presented as far from an ideal or nostalgic place. During Geralt's search for his daughter, Velen and its neighboring regions and kingdoms are under siege by the mighty southern Nilfgaardian Empire, which is carrying out a systematic invasion of the territory.

A series of indecisive battles that have taken place between the last remaining independent local kingdom, Redania, and Nilfgaard have completely devastated Velen, and Geralt learns that many refer to it as No Man's Land due to the collapse of the rule of law in the region. Left at their own devices, the inhabitants of Velen are seen resorting to worshipping ancient gods in hopes of survival and adhering to local warlords of questionable character. Geralt eventually leaves No Man's Land and does encounter a more coherent and functioning society within the walls of the neutral port city of Novigrad (**Figure 1**), which is untouched by war and resembles an amalgamation of Amsterdam and Gdansk.[161] The city, however, soon reveals its own flaws, which include widespread corruption, the reign of religious fanatics and the persecution of non-human races.

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[158] Matt Wales, "The Witcher 3 Is a Masterpiece of World-Building," *Eurogamer* (blog), May 12, 2015, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2015-05-12-the-witcher-3-is-a-masterpiece-of-world-building.
[159] Jański, 120.
[160] "Polish Culture and Real Places in The Witcher 3 Wild Hunt."
[161] Tomasz Z. Majkowski, "Geralt of Poland: The Witcher 3 Between Epistemic Disobedience and Imperial Nostalgia," *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (January 30, 2018): 16 https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.216.

Figure 1: Many landscapes and locations in the game are inspired by Poland and Eastern Europe, including the port city of Novigrad.[162]

Through visual design, characters, and dialogues, the game builds an elaborate web of social customs, norms and boundaries that govern the various regions present in its world, but it actively encourages players to be critical of them. While Velen and Novigrad serve as the primary locations of the game to showcase the Polish influence on *The Witcher 3*'s narrative and world design, it is hard to read these locations as a flattering fantasy renderings of medieval Poland and Eastern Europe. *The Witcher 3* offers players an opportunity to travel beyond the confines of its fictional version of Poland and Eastern Europe; however, nowhere is it as critical of the local customs, people and politics as in these locations. The structure of the society seen

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[162] Image taken from "R/Witcher - One of the Buildings in the Novigrad Docks Is (in Terms of Looks) Based on Brama Żuraw (Polish for Gate Crane). It's a City Gate of Wolne Miasto Gdańsk (Polish for the Free City of Danzig) Built in 1363.," reddit, accessed May 5, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/witcher/comments/4zn7ni/one_of_the_buildings_in_the_novigrad_docks_is_in/.

in Velen and Novigrad is deeply hierarchical, as the ultimate authorities in these regions are aristocrats or religious dignitaries who face little to no accountability for their actions, even if they actively terrorize their own subjects. This hierarchical world is also deeply patriarchal and it frequently casts women into subservient roles, leaving them open to violence and abuse. Furthermore, Velen and Novigrad are also marked by strong racial prejudice and segregation, as the mythical races of dwarves and elves are forced to live in ghettos separate from human inhabitants, being subject to exploitation and marginalization on a daily basis.

3.1.2. Morality and the Role of Women

According to Storey, popular culture is capable not only of reproducing existing power structures, but can also serve as "a site of struggle" between subordinate groups and the dominant groups that seek to validate their position.[163] The entire region of Velen and Novigrad can be read as a virtual version of such sites, where different layers of the game's virtual society clash. Consequently, through the systematic critique of the norms and boundaries that govern these areas, developer CD Projekt Red offer their own critique of zealotry, chauvinism and nationalism in the game. The narrative depicts many of the inhabitants of Velen and Novigrad as petty, superstitious and deeply chauvinistic, which repeatedly clashes with the main protagonist's stoic yet righteous character. In one of the game's notable early story lines involving a local warlord in Velen, Geralt finds out that the self-proclaimed ruler has chased away his wife and daughter with his alcohol-fueled outbursts that culminated in domestic abuse and the miscarriage of his wife. The witcher confronts the warlord with the impossibility of washing away his sins despite his remorse and attempts to find his family, underlining the game's tendency to make Geralt into the story's moral anchor and authority (**Figure 2**).[164]

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[163] Storey, 10.
[164] While the game offers the player different dialogue options and even different outcomes based on them, Geralt's character and personality are very much pre-determined by the literature the developers draw from and

Figure 2: *Geralt of Rivia, while presented as a stoic and cynical main protagonist, is a source of superior moral judgment and a voice of reason in The Witcher 3.*[165]

Stories dealing with the vulnerable position of women abound in the game; however, *The Witcher 3* challenges the idea of a male-dominant, hierarchical society in more proactive ways than simply condemning the victimization of women. The game introduces an extensive cast of female characters with varying degrees of agency, ranging from powerful figures to damsels in distress. The patriarchal and chauvinistic world finds a particularly strong contrast in the game's various sorceress figures, who are presented as extremely knowledgeable and powerful characters driven by different motivations, yet most of them ultimately end up helping Geralt on his quest, displaying a level-headedness that many of the male leader figures of the game lack. While these characters occupy a strong role in the narrative, they still maintain

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from CD Projekt Red's own attempts to give him a recognizable and strong character. This means that the player is never fully identified with the character, as Geralt has a mind and personality of his own that players cannot mold beyond choosing from a number of limited choices – most of which are equally fitting to Geralt's cynical but righteous personality. For one of the longer analyses of the character of Geralt of Rivia, see Alex Wiltshire, "The Witcher 3's Geralt Is One of the Best RPG Heroes (Because He's Really No Great Hero at All)," *gamesradar*, accessed May 4, 2019, https://www.gamesradar.com/the-witcher-3s-geralt-is-one-of-the-best-rpg-heroes-because-hes-really-no-great-hero-at-all/.

[165] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), CD Projekt Red.

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problematic features, such as the choice of the developers to present some of them as scantily clad and sexually revealing (**Figure 3**) regardless of the context they appear in,[166] suggesting that CD Projekt Red has not shied away from the gratuitous sexualization of women despite the effort that went into writing their dialogues and stories.[167]

Figure 3: Although generally well-written, many of the game's female characters are scantily-clad and their presentation appears gratuitous.[168]

3.1.3. Nationalism and Superstition

While *The Witcher 3* treads on thin ice with its sexualized portrayal of women, the game is able to articulate a more focused message on other issues, including its scathing criticism of religious fanaticism, bigotry and nationalism. Besides battling monsters and bandits, Geralt

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[166] For a good analysis of the game's female characters, see Nathan Grayson, "The Complicated Women Of The Witcher 3," *Kotaku*, accessed March 29, 2019, https://kotaku.com/the-complicated-women-of-the-witcher-3-1711003491.

[167] Prior to the games' release, the developers have stated that they would like sex to be strongly tied to characters and character development in the game. Simon Parkin, "Why Sex Matters in Witcher 3, the Grand Theft Auto of Fantasy Games," *The Guardian*, January 28, 2015, sec. Games, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jan/28/sex-witcher-3-grand-theft-auto-of-fantasy-games.

[168] *The Witcher 3*.

frequently finds himself fighting witch hunters and other religious fanatics, who persecute elves, dwarves and various other fantasy beings that represent the racial 'other' in the game's universe. Similarly, Geralt finds himself at odds numerous times with the despotic political regime of Redania that rules over the country he traverses. While Redania posits itself as the last defender of the region, its ruler Radovid (**Figure 4**) is promoting his own, local brand of terror, openly allying himself with the witch hunters and encouraging their cleansing of the population in the name of maintaining order.[169]

Through making Redania's ruler into one of the game's most despicable figures, *The Witcher 3* offers a criticism of patriotism and nationalism as the means to whitewash homegrown tyranny, which cultural scholars Tomasz Majkowski and Dennis Redmond interpret as the game's a direct criticism of Polish historic nationalism and revisionism. According to Majkowski, Redania represents a mere parody of the efficient, disciplined, and modernizing Nilfgaardian invader, and it unsuccessfully attempts to refashion its brutal warlord into a modern ruler, without the ability "to produce a modernity of their own."[170] Meanwhile, the Nilfgaardian empire represents an amalgamation of the various dynasties and empires that have ruled over Poland throughout the centuries, leading Redmond to connect the game's negative portrayal of the local ruler to *The Witcher* series' long-running criticism of mainstream Polish nationalism and its "self-serving notion that a wholly benevolent Polish nation suffered from the machinations of utterly malevolent Austrian, German, Russian, and Soviet empires."[171]

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[169] In one of the game's major side quests titled "Reason of State," Geralt can actually choose to aid an assassination plot against the cruel local ruler, Radovid, directly contributing to his downfall.
[170] Majkowski, 13.
[171] Redmond, 1.

Figure 4: Redania's cruel ruler Radovid wearing attire with a coat of arms resembling the Polish eagle and its national colors.[172]

Although the countryside represented by Velen and its inhabitants revering old deities could potentially serve as an alternative to the Redanian ruler's ruthless vision of local culture, *The Witcher 3* makes it clear that the world of old beliefs and folk superstition is not a viable path to the future either. During the main storyline, Geralt encounters the old deities protecting parts of war-torn Velen, who are revealed to be three old Crones (**Figure 5**), inspired by the Eastern European legends of Baba Yaga, a morally ambiguous witch-like creature.[173] Geralt discovers that some inhabitants of Velen are able to survive and sometimes even thrive due to their obedience to the Crones, which involves offers of human sacrifice to the creatures. With the aid of his adoptive daughter, Geralt eventually destroys the Crones in the game's final act, breaking their hold over Velen and ending their malevolent protection. When the peasants who worshiped the Crones ask the main hero what they are to do without them, Geralt simply replies

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[172] *The Witcher 3.*

[173] "Tracing the Fairy Tales and Myths behind The Witcher 3's Unsettling Crones," *PCGamesN*, accessed May 4, 2019, https://www.pcgamesn.com/the-witcher-3-wild-hunt/the-witcher-3-crones-of-crookback-bog.

"Manage, on your own."[174] Geralt frequently finds sympathy for monsters and supernatural beings and he does not destroy all creatures he encounters, nonetheless, he systematically purifies Velen of both dangerous monsters and bandits throughout the game, which casts the main hero as a colonizing and modernizing force himself. Ultimately, Geralt can be viewed as "an individual and private alternative to the modernizing imperial regimes" in the game; a force that protects the oppressed, but also debunks superstitions, old beliefs, and opposes ignorance with a scientific approach.[175]

3.1.4. Challenging Values

As Majkowski concludes in his analysis of the game, Geralt the witcher is ultimately an embodiment of progress who displays superior moral judgment to commoners as well as aristocrats, rebels against social status and norms, and he cultivates an "accommodating esteem" for any way of life that does not jeopardize the freedom of others, which makes the witcher a perfect champion of Western modernity and enlightenment.[176] The value systems and norms constructed to govern *The Witcher 3*'s world are actively being challenged by the character of Geralt and his companions, which serves to reveal another set of social norms and boundaries that the developers impart through the game's narrative and gameplay.

This multi-layered approach is an illustration of what academic and video game designer Ian Bogost identifies as the medium's rhetorical power and versatility, "as video games are not just stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented—for critique, satire, education, or commentary."[177] *The Witcher 3* presents an example where the game's intended message is woven into a larger

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[174] *The Witcher 3*.
[175] Majkowski, 22.
[176] Majkowski, 23.
[177] Ian Bogost, "The Rhetoric of Video Games," " *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008): 119.

framework rather than presented to players directly, which avoids the potential alienation of players by appearing overwhelmingly didactic when communicating its set of values.

Figure 5: *The three Crones, whose death in the last act of the game can be seen as an end to the rule of superstition and the old gods in Velen – a successful project of colonization in its own right.*[178]

Despite seeking to escape overt moralization, *The Witcher 3*'s criticism of the oppressive and highly hierarchical world that it depicts ultimately results in a call for the rejection of chauvinist, superstitious, as well as nationalist thinking. These implied values are what Kidd calls popular culture's "source of norm production," which audiences either reject or subscribe to,[179] depending on the degree of criticism with which they approach the culture they consume.[180] The game's rebellion against bigotry and nationalism through criticizing its own world also echoes cultural studies scholar Rachael Hutchinson's research claiming that the portrayal of stereotypical structures and themes in games does not necessarily mean that the

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[178] *The Witcher 3*.
[179] Kidd, 73-75.
[180] Storey, 10.

very same titles cannot actively critique the norms they present.[181] While *The Witcher 3* does not always live up to the progressive message its narrative and main hero seek to convey, the game offers a remarkably critical take on its fantastic rendition of Poland and Eastern Europe, which the main hero seeks to reform and enlighten rather than to conserve in its imperfection.

3.2. *Kingdom Come*: Championing Nostalgia

Czech developer Warhorse Studios has been partially inspired by *The Witcher*[182] series in producing its own role-playing epic *Kingdom Come: Deliverance.*[183] Unlike CD Projekt Red, however, the Czech studio eschewed any fantastic elements from its medieval game world and conceived their title in the genre of historical fiction instead, with the goal to "make the experience as authentic as possible."[184] Warhorse Studios' efforts to make the game believable included painstakingly recreating parts of 15th century Bohemia's Sázava region based on historical sources[185] as well as the creation of a vast text-based codex that players can browse at any time while playing the game to learn details about medieval society and historic events.[186]

[181] Rachael Hutchinson, "Representing Race and Disability: Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas as a Whole Text," *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, 2017: 164–78, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005rgq.14.

[182] Eddie Makuch, "Xbox One, PS4 Medieval RPG Promises to Blend Skyrim, Witcher, and Red Dead," *GameSpot* (blog), 13:30:29 UTC, https://www.gamespot.com/articles/xbox-one-ps4-medieval-rpg-promises-to-blend-skyrim-witcher-and-red-dead/1100-6417265/.

[183] The following trailer illustrates the game's story and feel particularly well. "Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Rex, Familia et Ultio [US]," *YouTube*, accessed May 12, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARm3QgC_Ysk.

[184] "Kingdom Come: Deliverance," *Kickstarter*, accessed May 7, 2019, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1294225970/kingdom-come-deliverance.

[185] "The Obsessive Historical Accuracy of Kingdom Come: Deliverance, and How It Makes for a Better RPG," *PCGamesN*, accessed March 29, 2019, https://www.pcgamesn.com/kingdom-come-deliverance/kingdom-come-deliverance-historical-accuracy.

[186] The codex is also available online, directly taken from the game. "Codex," *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*, accessed May 7, 2019, https://kingdomcomedeliverance.gamepedia.com/Codex.

Despite its meticulous attention to details,[187] and featuring "dungeons & no dragons,"[188] *Kingdom Come* still represents a brand of fantastic neomedievalism blending motifs of authenticity and pure fiction. The developers have aptly described their work as "Braveheart: The Game,"[189] since its main narrative and characters are largely fictional and provide a highly dramatized and movie-like take on the conflicts that engulfed 15th century Bohemia.[190] The game takes the historic events of the year 1403 as its backdrop, which involved King Sigismund of Hungary imprisoning Wenceslas IV, the frivolous heir to the Bohemian throne, and conducting raids across the lands against the settlements of nobles who did not support Sigismund's competing claim to the throne. The game stars Henry (**Figure 6**), a blacksmith's son, who sees his entire hometown burned to the ground by the king's plundering Cuman mercenary forces.[191] Escaping the massacre, Henry starts working for Bohemian nobles still loyal to the imprisoned Wenceslas and embarks on a number of adventures at their behest with the ultimate goal of repelling the invading forces.

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[187] The creators have made their pursuit of authenticity central to *Kingdom Come*'s image, which they have fostered also with material released to promote the game, such as a documentary series exploring how *Kingdom Come*'s combat system was modeled after medieval sword-fighting techniques. "Fechtbuch: The Real Swordfighting behind Kingdom Come Trailer," accessed May 7, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=no2tg49Oz0g.

[188] "Kingdom Come," *Kickstarter*.

[189] Ibid.

[190] Despite its fictional nature, the game fascinated scholars of medieval history and it was even used as a basis for a lecture series at one of the Czech Republic's largest universities, Masaryk University, that ran a class on "Constructing the Medieval Ages." "Video: Kingdom Come aneb Jak zkonstruovat středověk" [Video: Kingdom Come, or How to Construct the Medieval Ages], *em.muni.cz*, accessed May 7, 2019, https://www.em.muni.cz/vite/11080-video-kingdom-come-aneb-jak-zkonstruovat-stredovek.

[191] "Kingdom Come: Deliverance," *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, accessed March 29, 2019, http://www.kingdomcomerpg.com/.

Figure 6: The game's main character, Henry, gradually ascends from a simple blacksmith's son to a skilled warrior pursuing the invaders.[192]

3.2.1. Building a World of Stereotypes

Much like *The Witcher 3,* the game has players assume a character with a pre-defined history and past, with whom they can traverse a detailed game world, interact with various NPCs (non-player characters) via dialogue or combat, while fulfilling quests that are connected either to the game's main storyline or one of its many side-stories. As it is the case with CD Projekt Red's game, *Kingdom Come* also meticulously constructs a self-enclosed world that is governed by a set of social norms and beliefs that the player has to navigate; nevertheless, the game does not invite its audiences to scrutinize its world as extensively as *The Witcher 3* does. One of the game's most consistent motifs is that of underdogs opposing a foreign aggressor, which places the main character Henry firmly at the side of Bohemian loyalists, who systematically fight Sigismund's forces and allies.

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[192] *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), Warhorse Studios.

The game's antagonists, most notably the Hungarian king's Cuman mercenaries (**Figure 7**), however, do not receive much attention beyond being cast as cardboard and "savage" villains whom Henry has to outsmart or defeat.[193] Similarly, the two most notable German characters appearing in the game are a local drunk and a duplicitous knight with whom Henry can form an uneasy alliance at one point in the story.[194] These limited depictions sit somewhat uneasily with *Kingdom Come*'s ambitions to depict a morally complex tale ripe with political intrigues, which is somewhat perplexing, given the fact that the game does contain moments questioning blind nationalism. Notably, the Czech nobility loyal to Wenceslas repeatedly confess to Henry that the rightful successor to the throne has the makings of a poor king and that they oppose Sigismund for fear of losing their influence as much as out of loyalty or patriotism.[195]

Figure 7: *A Cuman mercenary readies to strike the main hero's mother. Cumans are depicted as generic antagonists in the game; a plundering and murdering force unleashed on idyllic Bohemia by the foreign invader, King Sigismund of Hungary.*[196]

[193] Imre Bártfai, "Cumans in Kingdom Come: Deliverance," *Medievalists.Net* (blog), February 26, 2018, http://www.medievalists.net/2018/02/cumans-kingdom-come-deliverance/.

[194] Reid McCarter, "Deliverance: Myth-Making and Historical Accuracy," *Unwinnable*, accessed April 15, 2019, https://unwinnable.com/2018/03/02/deliverance-myth-making-and-historical-accuracy/.

[195] The in-game Codex that serves as an encyclopedia for the game's backdrop describes Wenceslas in a critical light, as "a weak, idle and moody ruler who was afflicted with many ailments, as well as difficulties meeting his royal obligations, despite the fact that he had been groomed for rule since early childhood." See "Wenceslas IV of Bohemia," Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki, accessed March 29, 2019, https://kingdom-come-deliverance.fandom.com/wiki/Wenceslas_IV_of_Bohemia.

[196] *Kingdom Come.*

In her brief analysis of *Kingdom Come*, Czech historian Klara Hübnerová points out that although *Kingdom Come* offers a breathtaking visual reconstruction of medieval Bohemia, the game largely subscribes to historical stereotypes, even in its depictions of King Wenceslas IV and King Sigismund of Hungary.[197] Hübnerová explains that Wenceslas' image as a drunk and weak ruler, as well as Sigismund's portrayal as a machinating tyrant, have been aggrandized by a line of popular historians and religious-political movements throughout the centuries and that the game accepts these interpretations with little criticism.[198] Sigismund is in particular a one-dimensional villain who appears for mere seconds in the game and has his allies carry out his plan, acting as a puppet master. In combination with the cardboard Cuman villains, he acts as a destabilizing force in the otherwise tranquil and idyllic Bohemian lands that had previously lived their golden age under Czech history's most famed king, Charles IV.[199] While the game presents its main characters as struggling primarily against Sigismund's forces out of fear of immediate oppression, the political backdrop is constructed in a manner that makes the prospect of defeating Sigismund and his allies a partial reclamation of Bohemia's bygone glory and reestablishing its desired status quo.

3.2.2. Religion and the Role of Women

Kingdom Come also differs markedly from *The Witcher 3* in its treatment of religion as well as women when it comes to the game's "norm production" that audiences are invited to accept.[200] Organized religion is presented as a benevolent force necessary for social cohesion in the game, rather than an oppressive institution. Warhorse Studios went to great length to emphasize the importance and omnipresence of Christianity in the medieval ages, having NPCs (non-player

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[197] Klara Hübnerová, "Stereotypy v Kingdom Come: Václav a Zikmund jako z Jiráska [Stereotypes in Kingdom Come]," *em.muni.cz*, accessed May 7, 2019, https://www.em.muni.cz/vite/10426-stereotypy-v-kingdom-come-vaclav-a-zikmund-jako-z-jiraska.
[198] Ibid.
[199] "The Golden Age of Charles IV," *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*, accessed May 8, 2019, https://kingdom-come-deliverance.fandom.com/wiki/The_Golden_Age_of_Charles_IV.
[200] Kidd, 73-75.

characters) greet the game's main hero with religious references, such as "Jesus Christ be praised" and reference Christianity in conversations.[201] In general, churches, monasteries and religious dignitaries play a central role in *Kingdom Come*'s story (**Figure 8**) and they are presented as institutions and individuals holding great moral as well as political power.

The game does contains some criticism when it comes to religious dogma, one notable example being the character of Father Godwin, a small-town priest who regularly gets drunk with the locals, has a lover, yet he emerges as one of the game's most sympathetic figures. Similarly, one of the game's side-quests entitled "Waldensians" involves the main hero following the orders of a bloodthirsty vicar, who is looking for local heretics.[202] During the quest, Henry has the option to side with the persecutor or help his targets escape, leaving the ultimate choice up to the player. While *Kingdom Come* does suggest that religious zealotry and blind obedience are misguided, the Catholic Church ultimately appears to be a benevolent rather than a repressive institution in the game; one that is flawed but nonetheless creates a sense of cohesion and peace across Bohemia.

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[201] *Kingdom Come.*
[202] Ibid.

Figure 8: *The Catholic Church and religion play a central role in the world of* Kingdom Come. *At one point in the narrative, the main hero Henry even has to live at a monastery, pretending to be a novice, in order to solve a mystery.*[203]

Kindom Come does show some ambition for nuance when it comes to nationalism and religion; however, this approach does not extended to other motifs of the game, such as its depiction of women. Unlike *The Witcher 3*, whose cast of strong female characters in a highly patriarchal world amounts to a virtual version of what Storey labels a "site of struggle" between social groups,[204] *Kingdom Come* relegates its female characters into marginal roles and even the more prominent women featured in the game's main quest line are afforded very limited space. The more notable female characters serve mostly as romance options for the main character Henry, who can pursue the affections of several women throughout the game by fulfilling various side-quests. While this allows the female characters some extra dialogue, the end goal of Henry's interaction with them is merely successfully sleeping with the characters, after which they fade into obscurity, without much additional interaction with the main protagonist.[205]

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[203] Ibid.

[204] Storey, 10.

[205] The game's somewhat juvenile emphasis on sex is underlined by the fact that after successfully sleeping with a woman, Henry gets a buff (a temporary bonus that increases some of the character's abilities, such as skills in battle or dialogue) entitled "Alpha Male," whose description reads "Your needs have been satisfied and it shows. You're feeling self-confident." "Alpha Male," *Kingdom Come: Deliverance Wiki*, accessed May 9, 2019, https://kingdom-come-deliverance.fandom.com/wiki/Alpha_Male.

Developer Warhorse Studios announced that the game would receive additional downloadable content[206] in May 2019 that would allow players to see some of the events of *Kingdom Come* from a female character's perspective and add a new storyline into the game that addresses the religious persecution of women, which makes it likely that the developers will improve on its overall representation of women in the game.[207] Compared to its handling of female characters, however, *Kingdom Come* shows even more questionable judgment when it comes to the depiction of homosexuality. The only notable gay characters featured in *Kingdom Come* are the invading Hungarian king's ally, Istvan Toth, and his mercenary lover, the latter of whom is captured by the main character at one point in the story, after which Henry scornfully informs his allies about the man's relationship with Toth.[208] These features are hard to attribute to the developers' desire to forge an 'authentic' game world of medieval Bohemia rather than to values and norms that *Kingdom Come* expects its audiences to subscribe to.

3.2.3. Reaffirming Values

Although Warhorse Studios has cultivated an image of *Kingdom Come* as a game with nuanced storytelling and a subtle approach to conflict, it frequently falls short of this promise, only rarely challenging the norms and beliefs dominating the 'authentic' medieval world the game depicts. 15th century Bohemia is presented as an idyllic land governed by its own just lords, whose 'golden age' and tranquility are dismantled only by foreign forces. Outside of this alien threat, however, the game mostly suggests that the player ought to conform to the norms governing its idealized medieval world rather than scrutinize its shortcomings. In light of this, the developers' comparison of their game to *Braveheart* is more than apt, as *Kingdom Come*

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[206] Downloadable contents, or DLCs, are usually sold after a game's release for various sums and they may add anything from a few extra items that the player can use to hours of new story content to the game.
[207] *Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Royal Edition*, accessed May 29, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axjwsK1fJlQ.
[208] Reid McCarter, "Deliverance: Myth-Making and Historical Accuracy."

echoes the 1995 Hollywood epic's romanticization of Scotland's landscapes and medieval society.[209]

The game's antagonists are not fleshed out beyond representing disruptive and conniving forces, while *Kingdom Come* also takes the dominance of religion and religious structures as a given, without overly scrutinizing the possibilities of religious persecution. Similarly, the self-interests of religious dignitaries and the Bohemian loyalists who comprise Henry's circle of allies also remain largely unaddressed. Rather, *Kingdom Come* provides a beautifully-rendered game world in which players are asked to accept the norms and values that Warhorse Studios presents as 'authentic' and inseparable from the period, without conceding that they are also a testament to the developers' own priorities and views.[210]

3.3. Two Tales of Medieval Europe

Both *Kingdom Come* and *The Witcher 3* provide rich examples of popular culture's and video games' ability to present audiences with a complex sets of norms and values that may shape their views, depending on the degree of criticism with which these audiences approach individual works. Both titles offer a romanticized and fictional rendering of their countries of origin and draw heavily from their respective histories and cultures. *The Witcher 3* ultimately uses these elements to denounce superstition and blind nationalism, showcasing that infusing a game with Central and Eastern European history and folklore does not preclude being critical towards them. *Kingdom Come*, on the other hand, asks its players to accept and even idealize the rules and norms governing its conservative game world, having players partake in what is presented as a benevolent tale of nationalism. Given the many similarities that these games share in terms of their genre, storytelling, and gameplay mechanics, *Kingdom Come* and *The*

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[209] Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford ; New York : Berg Publishers, c2002, n.d.): 148

[210] Reid McCarter, "Deliverance: Myth-Making and Historical Accuracy."

Witcher 3 are notable examples of the varied ways in which individual video games can comment on the larger cultural frameworks that influence them, giving space to rebellion as well as conformity.

The story, motifs and political implications present on the textual level are, nonetheless, hardly the only aspects that determine how individual works are perceived and discussed in public discourse. As Edensor's and Kidd's research on popular culture suggest, the extra-textual life of individual works is frequently more central to their legacy than any messages that their authors may want to convey. Works may be appropriated and reinterpreted in new frameworks that imbue them with social and political significance,[211] as well as serve as catalysts for identity creation and separation, according to which audiences begin to identify in-groups and out-groups.[212] This necessitates an analysis of the reception and debates that developed around *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come,* which were driven less by the progressive and conservative elements that these games contained on a textual level, and more by what they omitted.

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[211] Edensor, 150-151.
[212] Kidd, 76.

4. Debates about Absence

This chapter explores the extra-textual significance of *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come*, focusing on the controversy that developed around the games' racial homogeneity and the political salience that this controversy implied. The chapter's first part describes how journalists framed the lack of nonwhite characters in *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* as indirect racism, as well as the game developers' response to these allegations. The second part focuses on the audience reactions to this controversy, through the analysis of three online threads that were created on the popular Reddit discussion platform in direct response to the aforementioned criticism.

To determine the overarching sentiment and opinions prevailing among audiences who contributed to the aforementioned discussions on Reddit, I employ qualitative content analysis, which is commonly used for studying mass media communication[213] and relies on such criteria as the distribution and frequency of words to evaluate various types of communications.[214] My analysis also draws partially from critical discourse analysis, which studies "how language as a cultural tool mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions,"[215] inasmuch as it attempts to infer the social function and ideological underpinning of the evaluated text.[216] In my analysis of the discussions about *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come*, I focus on the recurrence of politically-charged vocabulary and the arguments they are used to

[213] Uwe Flick et al., *A Companion to Qualitative Research* (SAGE, 2004): 266.
[214] Mehmet F. Dicle and Betul Dicle, "Content Analysis: Frequency Distribution of Words," *SSRN Scholarly Paper* (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, July 31, 2018), https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2997101.
[215] Rebecca Rogers et al., "Critical Discourse Analysis in Education: A Review of the Literature," *Review of Educational Research* 75, no. 3 (September 1, 2005): 367, https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543075003365.
[216] Linda A. Wood and Dr Rolf O. Kroger, "Language, Discourse, and Discourse Analysis" in *Doing Discourse Analysis: Methods for Studying Action in Talk and Text* (SAGE, 2000): 3-17.

support, as well as the connection of this rhetoric to broader political debates that have been occurring within the video gaming community.

Judging any work of popular culture purely based on its textual reading would yields only a partial interpretation. As the studies of Tim Edensor, as well as Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss have shown, audiences may reinterpret the works and products they consume, engendering them with political significance reflecting their own political sentiments. [217] Works such as the Hollywood blockbuster *Braveheart* have been ascribed political substance by being reframed as immediate commentaries on current issues, even when the work itself was not conceived for this purpose.[218] *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* have, to an extent, also been subject to such political reinterpretation through debates on whether the games' omission of racial minorities could be considered[219] a conservative political statement by the developers[220] and whether the games were to be held accountable for contributing to the underrepresentation of nonwhite characters in the gaming industry and popular culture in general.[221]

The criticisms of the games' Eurocentric game worlds were met with varied reactions by developers and industry insiders, ranging from diplomatic answers pointing to Central and Eastern Europe's cultural specificity[222] to combative statements that echoed the arguments of

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[217] Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood," *Ethnicities* 8, no. 4 (December 2008): 549-53, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796808088925.

[218] Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford ; New York : Berg Publishers, c2002): 139-46.

[219] Robert Purchese, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance Review - History Is a Double-Edged Sword," *Eurogamer* (blog), February 20, 2018, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-02-20-kingdom-come-deliverance-review.

[220] Tauriq Moosa, "Colorblind: On The Witcher 3, Rust, and Gaming's Race Problem," *Polygon*, June 3, 2015, https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem.

[221] Paul Tassi, "Yes, I'm Colorblind About 'The Witcher 3,' And Yes, That's A Problem," *Forbes*, accessed March 29, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2015/06/04/yes-im-colorblind-about-the-witcher-3-and-yes-thats-a-problem/.

[222] "'Fifty Shades of White': Witcher 3 Devs Talk Race and Adapting Literature," *PC Gamer*, accessed March 3, 2019, https://www.pcgamer.com/fifty-shades-of-white-witcher-3-devs-talk-race-and-adapting-literature/.

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the reactionary #GamerGate movement,[223] which rose to infamy in 2014 after a wave of online harassment campaigns against feminist and progressive developers and video game journalists.[224] Among audiences, those who subscribed to the notion that the criticism of *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* amounted to political correctness being force-fed to video gamers were particularly vocal on online platforms such as Reddit. The debates led on this platform provide an outstanding illustration of popular culture's role in social stratification,[225] as the contributors relied on a binary narrative of "true" gamers standing against malicious "social justice warriors."[226] These debates not only underline the inherent political potential of video games, they also link the politically-charged rhetoric of gamers and developers to a broader discourse.

4.1. Colorblindness or Unique Cultural Context?

The debate around the lack of racial representation in *The Witcher 3* has been sparked by the U.S. online outlet *Polygon*, whose contributor Tauriq Moosa has taken issue with the game's exclusively white game world, claiming that excluding people of color from a fantasy game that included creatures such as elves and dwarves was dehumanizing and contributing to the ongoing marginalization of nonwhite perspectives in video gaming.[227] Moosa claims that the "lack of persons of color, and the lack of questions about our absence, comes from ignorance rather than animosity," however, he rejects pointing to the game's Eastern European roots and the source material as a satisfying explanation for this omission.[228] Moosa was subsequently

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[223] "An Interview with Daniel Vavra: GamerGate and the Gaming Industry," *Gaming News, Reviews, and Articles - TechRaptor.Net* (blog), September 12, 2014, https://techraptor.net/content/interview-daniel-vavra.
[224] Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 8 (December 2018): 787–806, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016640408.
[225] Dustin Kidd, "Harry Potter and the Functions of Popular Culture," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 1 (February 2007): 77-78, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00354.x.
[226] The expressions themselves are politically loaded, as they have been highly popular among reactionary gamers in the past years. "Trolls, Hackers, Anons. Conspiracy Theories in the Peripheries of the Web," *Lexia. Rivista Di Semiotica*, no. 12 (June 23, 2016): 387–408, https://doi.org/10.4399/978885489931523.
[227] Moosa, "Colorblind."
[228] Ibid.

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joined by other critics from major online outlets, such as *Forbes*' Paul Tassi, who concluded that reviewers such as himself bore responsibility for not giving enough attention to the game's racial homogeneity, which stemmed from the fact that most game journalists, as well as developers in the industry, were white males.[229]

The argument against deflecting the issue of race and racism to nonhuman fantasy creatures ties into a broader debate in game studies about the history of disproportionate racial representation in the video game industry. In his 2017 study of the North American video game market, Sam Srauy identified the industry's avoidance of financial risk as the main reason behind racial underrepresentation in video games.[230] According to him, publishers and developers want to make sure that their stories are instantly relatable to players, which makes them use narrative themes from past well-known texts, such as J.R.R. Tolkien's work.[231] These "outdated" texts, however, erase race and feature only white human characters alongside the archetypal figures of dwarves, elves, and other fictional beings.[232]

Given the fact that *The Witcher 3*'s source material is a postmodern response to Tolkien, the argument that the game's world ignores nonwhite races due to relying on genre tropes does hold some ground. Crucially, however, Moosa also highlights in his criticism that the lore of *The Witcher* and its literary source material does include lands where people of color live.[233] Although these areas are mentioned only in passing throughout the game and they represent distant exotic lands, the first entry of *The Witcher* series even featured a nonwhite villain, which supports the possibility of greater racial inclusivity in the series.[234]

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[229] Tassi, "Yes, I'm Colorblind..."
[230] Sam Srauy, "Professional Norms and Race in the North American Video Game Industry," *Games and Culture*, May 15, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017708936.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Ibid.
[233] Moosa, "Colorblind."
[234] "Azar Javed," *Witcher Wiki*, accessed May 14, 2019, https://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Azar_Javed.

While critics of *The Witcher 3* have framed the game's overwhelmingly white spaces as a misstep and an insensitive gesture on the side CD Projekt Red, developers reacted by claiming that viewing *The Witcher 3*'s world as homogenous purely based on race was erroneous. Reacting to the criticism, one of the game's senior writers Jakub Szamałek argued that the lack of visible racial diversity in *The Witcher 3* does not mean that the game lacks diversity. Szamałek emphasized that many of the game's conflicts were inspired by tensions that have existed for centuries between the various cultures coexisting in Poland, despite the fact that these differences may appear to be shrouded in "fifty shades of white" to audiences from racially more diverse countries.[235]

Similar sentiments were raised by other supporters of the game from the industry, such as Australian game developer Dave Bleja, who claimed that targeting *The Witcher 3* was in itself culturally insensitive, as Central and Eastern European countries had long been ignored by the gaming industry until CD Projekt Red's famous series took off.[236] According to Bleja, critics such as Moosa "fail to grasp the cultural content of the game, and instead look through it through [their] own cultural lens," while ignoring that many Polish gamers saw *The Witcher 3* as a rare case of the successful representation of their culture on the global gaming market.[237]

Despite standing by *The Witcher 3*'s content, CD Projekt Red did eventually introduce a nonwhite group of characters into the game with its first expansion pack *Hearts of Stone*.[238] These NPCs (non-player characters) are portrayed as distant exotic travelers from a land called Ofier, who possess somewhat Orientalized characteristics, including their look and accent (**Figure 9**), which potentially opens them to another brand of criticism for being token diversity

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[235] "'Fifty Shades of White': Witcher 3 Devs Talk Race and Adapting Literature."
[236] Dave Bleja, "The Melting Pot and the Salad Bowl: Why the Witcher 3 Is a Step Forward for Ethnic Diversity in Games," *Volnaiskra*, accessed March 29, 2019, http://www.sprykegame.com/1/post/2015/06/the-melting-pot-and-the-salad-bowl-why-the-witcher-3-is-a-step-forward-for-ethnic-diversity-in-games.html.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Expansion packs introduce substantial new content to the game and are usually purchasable separately, after the game's launch, for a more moderate fee.

characters.[239] Nonetheless, critics of the game such as Moosa saw the inclusion of the Ofieri as a step in the right direction, claiming that they loved the characters' "eloquence & strange syntax" and the fact that they dispelled the notion that a player's immersion in a "monster-slaying, magic game" can be ruined by greater racial diversity.[240]

Figure 9: Geralt encounters various Ofieri in The Witcher 3*'s first expansion,* Hearts of Stone. *While some of them are hostile to the main character, the most prominent character from the region is a scholar and traveler, with whom Geralt can have a conversation about his distant homeland.[241]*

4.2. A Fight against Political Correctness

Kingdom Come was subject to a similar debate about the lack of racial diversity as *The Witcher 3*, which has started even before the game's release. Unlike CD Projekt Red, Warhorse Studios has not been as diplomatic when engaging with the criticism, as the game's lead writer,

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[239] Whether developers who themselves have not experienced living as a minority can create authentic characters representing them has been a long-running question. For one of the brief discussions on the matter, see Brandon Sheffield, "Token Video Game Characters Distract from Real Stories - Anna Anthropy," accessed May 14, 2019, /view/news/178977/Token_video_game_characters_distract_from_real_stories__Anna_Anthropy.php.

[240] Tauriq Moosa, "So There Are People of Colour in Witcher 3 Now #HeartsOfStonepic.Twitter.Com/T7FiUpzSkF," Tweet, @*tauriqmoosa* (blog), October 13, 2015, https://twitter.com/tauriqmoosa/status/654028328920289280.

[241] *The Witcher 3: Hearts of Stone* (2015), CD Projekt Red.

designer and Warhorse Studios co-founder Daniel Vávra has openly confronted users and journalists critiquing *Kingdom Come*, calling them ignorant and pointing to the meticulous historical research behind the game.[242] Being the main marketing face of Warhorse Studios, Vávra's combative response was further complicated by the fact that the game designer has been an outspoken supporter of #GamerGate (**Figure 10**), an online movement that materialized in 2014 as an aggressive response to the video game industry's increasingly progressive trajectory.[243] Vávra's defense of *Kingdom Come*'s racial homogeneity echoed #GamerGate's narrative of progressive critics and video gamers condemning[244] those not conforming to their worldview of "forced diversity."[245] When speaking to the major video gaming outlet *Kotaku*, Vávra claimed that such criticism was deeply biased:

> "It doesn't matter that we are writing [a] story dealing with very touchy and controversial topics as hatred between Czechs and Germans, about anti-semitism or religious fanaticism. It doesn't matter, that we are the first game about Czech culture and history. That's not enough! We need to cover all the problems of all the people in the world in that one game, otherwise we are very bad people."[246]

The developer's outspoken message resonated well with select groups of gamers and news portals, receiving support from such outlets as *Breitbart*, who have portrayed Vávra as a victim of outrage culture and mainstream media.[247] Warhrose Studios co-founder Martin Klíma did

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[242] A handful of Vávra's notable reactions from his Twitter page have been saved on the following website, including him arguing with an American user claiming that Medieval Europe did have people of color: "Oh please Mr. American teach me about our history! I was only born on the borders of Bohemia, Germany and Poland so I dont know shit." Imgur, "Video Game Designer Daniel Vávra Is Called Racist by an SJW for Not Putting Black People in a Videogame about Medieval Czech Kingdom. Explains That This Is Because There Were None.," Imgur, accessed May 14, 2019, https://imgur.com/gallery/omnobVt.

[243] Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games."

[244] Notably, one video gaming outlet refused to review *Kingdom Come* altogether, due to the views of Vávra. Patrick Klepek and Austin Walker, "We Haven't Covered 'Kingdom Come: Deliverance.' Let's Talk About Why.," *Waypoint* (blog), February 16, 2018, https://waypoint.vice.com/en_us/article/9kzqxd/kingdom-come-deliverance-waypoint-radio.

[245] "Kingdom Come, Wolfenstein 2 and the Myth of 'Keeping Politics Out of Games,'" *GameRevolution*, February 22, 2018, https://www.gamerevolution.com/features/370591-kingdom-come-wolfenstein-2-myth-keeping-politics-games.

[246] Stephen Totilo, "My E3 Meeting With A Pro-GamerGate Developer," *Kotaku*, accessed March 29, 2019, https://kotaku.com/my-e3-meeting-with-a-pro-gamergate-developer-1715511964.

[247] Robert Shimshock, "Daniel Vávra on Historical Accuracy and Race in Games," *Breitbart*, July 28, 2015, https://www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2015/07/28/developer-speaks-out-over-claim-historical-accuracy-pushes-white-supremacy-in-games/.

release a statement suggesting that Vávra's views were not representative of the entire team,[248] and has voiced a more reserved stance on the debate about race in *Kingdom Come*, claiming it represented a cultural misunderstanding between Czechs and Americans, as these nations had a very different experience with cultural homogeneity and multiculturalism that both of them took for granted.[249] Klíma's more nuanced take, however, received little exposure compared to Vávra's strong presence on social media. Ultimately, this made it hard to dissociate Warhorse Studios from Vávra's views and public image, as he remained the main face of a team with over 100 members.[250]

The line of argumentation about representing one's culture on their own terms is complicated by the fact that neither CD Projekt Red nor Warhorse Studios developed their games for a local market,[251] inviting the question whether or not video games and popular culture produced primarily for international audiences should be inherently open to greater scrutiny of its range of representations, regardless of their developers' efforts to ensure a degree of historical accuracy[252] or to stay true to their source material.[253] While different in tone, the developers of *The Witcher 3* as well as *Kingdom Come* have both held that they have the right to produce

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[248] "Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Die Reaktion auf die Rassismus-Vorwüfe" [Kindom Come: Reaction to the Allegations of Racism], January 17, 2018, https://www.gamestar.de/artikel/kingdom-come-deliverance-die-reaktion-auf-die-rassismus-vorwuefe,3324854.html.

[249] Klíma explained his stance on the issue at length at one of his presentations in the Czech Republic, during the Q&A session, at 1:50:00. *"*Martin Klíma | Kingdom Come: Deliverance Aneb Jak Se Dělá Počítačová Hra" [Martin Klíma | Kingdom Come: Deliverance Or How to Make a Computer Game], accessed May 15, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAtgZudbVJE&t=19s.

[250] "Kingdom Come: Deliverance Is Beautiful, but Boring," *Polygon*, February 16, 2018, http://archive.fo/bbIpM.

[251] In the case of Warhorse Studios, the Czech market was so small that it was not even financially viable for the studio to create a Czech voiceover for the game. "Konec nadějím. Kingdom Come: Deliverance český dabing mít nebude" [End of Hopes. Kingdom Come: Deliverance Will Not Have Czech Voice-over], *Zing* (blog), January 3, 2019, https://www.zing.cz/novinky/96050854/konec-nadejim-kingdom-come-deliverance-cesky-dabing-mit-nebude/.

[252] Colin Campbell, "Giving Life to 15th-Century Bohemia in Kingdom Come: Deliverance," *Polygon*, April 24, 2015, https://www.polygon.com/features/2015/4/24/8445617/kingdom-come-deliverance-interview-preview.

[253] "Video Games without People of Color Are Not 'Neutral'," *Offworld*, accessed March 29, 2019, https://boingboing.net/2015/06/26/race-video-games-witcher-3.html.

narratives on their own terms and subsequently present them to global audiences without submitting to any prescribed sensibilities.[254]

The rationale behind this claim can be reinforced by a broader sentiment existing in political theory that is skeptical of applying Western standards and understandings of multiculturalism to other regions, such as Will Kymlicka's warnings against judging the relationship between national and minority groups in Central and Eastern Europe outside of their local context.[255] Demands to adhere to a certain brand of diversity and multicultural thought may also be interpreted as a form of neocolonialism that solidifies the notion that North America and Western Europe possess a superior understanding of multiculturalism, while Central and Eastern Europe are peripheral regions that ought to adapt their standards.[256]

While the argument that forcing predefined standards of diversity runs the risk of denying individual works their cultural uniqueness has a strong theoretical basis, it is important to note that *Kingdom Come* and *The Witcher 3* can be criticized for their limited range of representation even without resorting to this dynamic. As commentators from Central and Eastern Europe have stated, *Kingdom Come* notably ignores the possible presence of the Romani in medieval Bohemia, whose inclusion would have provided a way of introducing racial diversity into the game that would have been relevant to its regional context, without 'submitting' to North American or Western European cosmopolitanism.[257] Ultimately, both the *Witcher 3* and

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[254] Tomasz Z. Majkowski, "Geralt of Poland: The Witcher 3 Between Epistemic Disobedience and Imperial Nostalgia," *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (January 30, 2018): 5-6 https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.216.
[255] Will Kymlicka, "Multiculturalism and Minority Rights: West and East," *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 2002, http://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/2002/nr4/Focus4-2002_Kymlicka.pdf.
[256] Maja Muhić, "Multiculturalism in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenge or Threat?," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 22, no. 2 (2004): 37–44.
[257] "Kingdom Come, Representation, And Layers Of Privilege," *The Fandomentals* (blog), February 20, 2018, https://www.thefandomentals.com/kingdom-come-representation/.

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Kingdom Come possess possible venues of diversity that the developers glossed over and did not exploit.

Figure 10: *Warhorse Studios co-founder Daniel Vávra's strong presence on social media and his vocal support of #GamerGate since 2014 have made him and the team behind* Kingdom Come *suspect in the eyes of many gaming journalists.*[258]

[258] Daniel Vávra ⚔, "My Wife Is Sexist :)Pic.Twitter.Com/1gQViMSnpw," Tweet, @*danielvavra* (blog), September 12, 2014, https://twitter.com/danielvavra/status/510551990246445058.

Justifications of 'historical accuracy' and an adherence to the source material ultimately merely support the fact that diversity was not among the priorities of developers rather than prove its inherent incompatibility with the games' concepts. In extreme cases, arguments referring to cultural uniqueness and the complete rejection of criticism labeled at self-representations can be (mis)interpreted as a pretense for resisting cultural openness and a way of downplaying the existence of racism in Central and Eastern Europe.[259] Ultimately, however, arguing about *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* in the context of clashing ideas about multiculturalism between North American and Western and Eastern Europe is in itself flawed, as these games can be critiqued in a way that neither denies their unique cultural characteristics, nor does it blindly subscribe to claims that they should be shielded from criticism by their regional character.

4.3. Audience Debate and Echoes of #GamerGate

Unlike some of the discussions between video game outlets and developers that tried to provide a nuanced take on the lack of racial diversity in *Kingdom Come* and *The Witcher 3*, many gamers have interpreted the debate in the veins of Daniel Vávra's framing, as a cultural battle between politically-biased progressives and 'true' gamers, which strongly echoed the sentiments raised by the 2014 #GamerGate movement. The debate led on the online platform Reddit is a prime example of what Dustin Kidd identifies as popular culture's tendency to encourage social stratification and "provide an easy reference system for identifying our allies and adversaries."[260] Furthermore, it can also be seen as a notable instance of popular culture providing grounds for social groups to assert their power.[261] To illustrate the narrative that dominated among the staunchest defenders of the games' almost-exclusively white worlds, I

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[259] Julie Mostov, "The Use and Abuse of History in Eastern Europe: A Challenge for the 90s," *Constellations* 4, no. 3 (1998): 376–86, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00062.
[260] Kidd, 77-78.
[261] Storey, 9-10.

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provide a brief qualitative content analysis of three feeds from the Reddit platform,[262] which were created in direct reaction to the allegations of racism in *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come*.

Focusing on the most popular comments and replies in these threads, I examine the narrative that players constructed about the critique of racial homogeneity in *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come*, which is based on analyzing the repeated use of politically-charged vocabulary and their function in the contributors' arguments. Two of the selected feeds represent an immediate reaction to video game journalists' criticism of *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come*, as both threads were created within a week after the publishing of the articles critical of the respective games. The third feed is added due to the fact that *Kingdom Come*'s ethnic homogeneity came to be broadly discussed already prior to the game's launch, and it covers a portion of the discussions leading up to the game's release.

4.3.1. Main Arguments in *The Witcher 3* Thread

In the thread opened to discuss allegations of racism in *The Witcher 3*,[263] the baseline argument in defense of the game[264] was its reliance on Slavic folklore and the source material of Andrzej Sapkowski's books, which were written during Poland's communist era of closed borders and relatively little international movement in the country. The country's current relative homogeneity and the fact that "Black people are rare [in Poland] even now" also served as a

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[262] Reddit is one of the most popular online forums in the world, where users can discuss a broad range of topics. Reddit's video game section alone has more than 20 million registered users. "The 30 Most Active Gaming Forums (Round-Up List)," accessed May 15, 2019, https://www.gamedesigning.org/gaming/forums/.

[263] The analysis of the thread is based on the most popular comments as well as the most popular replies to these comments. Popularity was determined based on the received 'upvotes ' by users. To identify key conversations that drove the debate and to eliminate a significant number of comments that did not receive substantial attention, I took into account only entries that received at least 100 points by users 'upvoting' them and replies to these comments that either had over 90 upvotes or matched at least 50% of the respective comments' popularity. Overall, the thread on the criticism of *The Witcher 3* includes 750 comments, out of which this method narrowed my focus to 11 key entries around which the entire discussion was structured. The original thread is available at "Seeing How Witcher 3 Is Being Accused of Being Racist : Pcmasterrace," accessed May 15, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/pcmasterrace/comments/39g468/seeing_how_witcher_3_is_being_accused_of_being/?sort=top.

[264] A full transcript of these key comments can be found in **Thread 1** in the Appendix.

repeated argument in defense of the game's Eurocentric perspective, with most labeling the games' critics ignorant of Eastern European culture and referring to them as "SJWs" (social justice warriors).[265] Notably, this term that was popularized in its derogatory connotation by the 2014 #GamerGate movement and has remained one of its lasting legacies.[266] The more heated comments suggested that critics of the game wanted to deny Polish players the possibility to "take pride in their own folklore" and that demands for greater racial diversity were a form of malicious cultural pressure driven by standards alien to Central and Eastern Europe. There was one user among the top contributors who mentioned that the source material and series did acknowledge the existence of regions where people of color lived; however, none of the other popular entries in the thread expressed the view that the developers ought to have explored this possibility to diversify the range of representation in their game.

4.3.2. Main Arguments in the *Kingdom Come* Threads

Discussions around *Kingdom Come* have flamed up even before the game's release, in no small part because of Warhorse Studios co-founder Daniel Vávra's vocal support of #GamerGate and his frequent heated exchanges with various users and video game journalists on Twitter, whom he accused of spreading forced political correctness. The most popular Reddit thread[267] on the politics *Kingdom Come* prior to the game's launch was devoted to Vávra and his

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[265] Out of the 11 comments, 4 included the phrase "SJW," all of them in a disparaging context. 4 additional comments made fun of demands for greater diversity without mentioning the phrase itself.

[266] #GamerGate connected the term to people with self-righteous rhetoric about social issues, who are prone to engage in aggressive arguments. Abigail Herbst, "How the Term 'Social Justice Warrior' Became an Insult," August 13, 2018, https://fee.org/articles/how-the-term-social-justice-warrior-became-an-insult/.

[267] It is worth noting that while the thread reacting to *The Witcher 3* was opened in one of the main video gaming subgroups (subreddit) of Reddit, the discussion about Vávra's views was already started under the most popular conservative political subreddit, The_Donald. "R/The_Donald - Kingdom Come Developer Is Called Racist by an SJW for Not Putting Black People in a Video Game about Medieval Czech Kingdom. Explains That This Is Because There Were None.," reddit, accessed March 29, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/7v19cm/kingdom_come_developer_is_called_racist_by_an_sj w/.

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aforementioned online feuds, [268] in which users have hailed him as a voice of reason against ideologues of political correctness. [269] Similarly to the Reddit contributors defending *The Witcher 3*, commenters have repeatedly expressed a sentiment that attacks on the game stemmed from a malicious, anti-white sentiment, which was forcing a form of revisionism on game developers for the sake of diversity.[270] Vávra was hailed as one of the few courageous developers "not [to] be intimidated by the insufferable killjoy SJWs."[271]

Following the launch of *Kingdom Come*, users expressed similar sentiments[272] in reaction to the criticism of video game outlet *Eurogamer*, which claimed that Warhorse Studios were perpetuating racism by exclusion. [273] Commenters repeatedly drew [274] parallels with the criticism raised against *The Witcher 3* in the wake of its launch; however, without using the expression 'social justice warrior' in this case. [275] Instead, the most popular contributions highlighted a perceived hypocrisy in the arguments of *Eurogamer*, whose team was pointed out to be comprised almost exclusively of white men.[276] The outlet's critique was decried as "white saviour bullshit" that stemmed from being "offended on the behalf of others," which was accompanied by claims that art should not be driven by forced standards of

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[268] Despite only 181 comments, which is a significantly lower number of replies than in the case of *The Witcher 3*'s thread that contained 750 comments, the high number of upvotes allowed me to maintain the same pattern for choosing the most popular comments. This narrowed the analysis to 7 key entries that drove the conversation.

[269] The transcript of the key comments can be viewed in **Thread 2** of the Appendix.

[270] 3 out of the 7 key comments argued explicitly that critics of the game were disadvantaging white people/cultures.

[271] The expression "SJW" was used in 4 out of the 7 key entries, while 2 additional comments criticized the notion of advocating diversity without using the term.

[272] While expressing similar views to the previously mentioned group of commenters, this thread was opened in Reddit's general gaming subreddit. It also had a significantly lower popularity than the previously mentioned conversations, despite receiving 151 comments. To narrow the conversation to 6 key contributions, I took into account entries that had at least 20 upvotes. "Kingdom Come Deliverance Accused of Racism in Eurogamer Review : Gaming," accessed May 15, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/7z4swq/kingdom_come_deliverance_accused_of_racism_in/?sort=top.

[273] Purchese, "Kingdom Come: Deliverance Review."

[274] A transcript of the key comments is available under **Thread 3** in the Appendix.

[275] 3 of the 6 key comments referred to *The Witcher 3* controversy.

[276] "The Eurogamer Staff," *Eurogamer.Net*, accessed May 16, 2019, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/the-eurogamer-staff.

representation.[277] Contributors also appear to have shared the sentiment raised by the previous debates that the criticism labeled at the two games' racial bias was blown out of proportion. Similarly to the discussion on *The Witcher 3*, none of the contributors mentioned that Warhorse Studios should have utilized the game's own cultural context to expand its scope of representation, by including such ethnic minorities as the Romani in the game world.

4.4. Us v. Them Narratives

The aforementioned discussions offer only a snippet of the debate around *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come*, however, the similarities between them point to a pattern of arguments present among gamers who vocally protest demands of greater diversity in video games. These discussions are in general less popular than debates about the game's story, characters and technical aspects and they are likely to represent the opinions of a vocal minority. [278] Nonetheless, the views expressed by this segment of the audience are influential enough to create a feedback loop and an ongoing discussion with major video game outlets that expose broader audiences to the debate.

These discussions proliferate a narrative in which *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come,* including their developers and fans, are embroiled in a form of cultural battle between political correctness and authentic gaming culture. Under these circumstances, the norms and boundaries presented by the games are accepted as a given and instead of scrutinizing the games' contents, the narrative becomes about audiences resisting cultural pressure from outsiders. This dynamic illustrates what Kidd labels popular culture's power to produce a form

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[277] 4 of the 6 top contributions explicitly voiced their opposition against forcing particular brands of representation on popular media.

[278] Some of the most popular threads on *The Witcher 3* on Reddit, such as the one detailing the success of its sales, had as many as 4 thousand comments. "The Witcher 3 Sells 4 Million Copies in 2 Weeks - This Is What You Get as Developer If You Don't Try to Rip off Gamers and Release a Complete Product Where People Get Their Moneys Worth! : Gaming," accessed May 17, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/395ppn/the_witcher_3_sells_4_million_copies_in_2_weeks/.

of social cohesion as well as stratification, in which members sharing the same preferences in popular culture are bonded together "in relationships of trust and shared purpose," while outsiders are frequently identified as adversaries.[279]

The narrative of reasonable gamers and developers standing up to 'social justice warriors' who are promoting a repressive form of political correctness and mandatory diversity follows a similar binary logic as the arguments raised by #GamerGate supporters, which pitted "true gamer[s] (male, masculine)" against "the queering of game spaces by nonmasculine identities," who were criticized as inauthentic and destructive to the gaming industry. [280] The aforementioned interpretation also ties into the understanding of popular culture as a "terrain of ideological struggle between dominant and subordinate classes," [281] since there is a degree of victimhood and underdog attitude on the side of those who positioned themselves as resisting the cultural pressure of political correctness.

The aforementioned victimhood also suggests that the games' defenders were drawn into a political debate only due to the misdirected critique against *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* and that they otherwise oppose the politicization of video games. Nevertheless, accusing video game outlets of needless politicization is far from an apolitical statement in itself, especially since this was framed with the vocabulary and arguments popularized by #GamerGate. This dichotomy underlines that even audiences who profess a degree of skepticism towards the political use of popular culture are likely to draw political knowledge from the titles they consume and not relate to them with a neutral mindset.[282]

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[279] Kidd, 76-78.
[280] Sarah Beth Evans and Elyse Janish, "#INeedDiverseGames: How the Queer Backlash to GamerGate Enables Nonbinary Coalition," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, Volume 2, no. 2 (2015): 125.
[281] Storey, 9-10.
[282] John Street, S. Inthorn, and M. Scott, "Playing at Politics? Popular Culture as Political Engagement," *Parliamentary Affairs* 65, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 338–58, https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsr037.

Pitting reasonable gamers and alleged zealous proponents of political correctness against each other not only echoes #GamerGate's binary logic, it can also be seen as part of a broader cultural backlash against progressivism across Europe and North America,[283] which the 2014 movement itself has been a precursor to.[284] The fact that much of the aforementioned discussion was divorced from the games' contents and the debate around *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* was framed more as a proxy for the critique of the industry's pivot towards diversity also hints at the potential of appropriating works of popular culture for making political statements, as described by cultural critic Tim Edensor in his take on *Braveheart*'s (mis)use as a rallying call for Scottish nationalism in the 1990s.[285]

As it was stressed in Chapter 2, *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* do not necessarily project conservative messages; however, this may become irrelevant for the games' extra-textual legacy if their significance is successfully reinterpreted by consumers and they are engendered with a new meaning. In the most extreme cases, this can make even the act of purchasing and supporting these games acts of "political consumption"[286] and while the debates on racial diversity were hardly the reason for the financial success of *Kingdom Come* and *The Witcher 3*, the amount of press coverage that the games' perceived political messages received suggest that the legacy of individual works can be easily influenced even by groups of vocal minorities.

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[283] "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," *Harvard Kennedy School*, accessed May 17, 2019, https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/trump-brexit-and-rise-populism-economic-have-nots-and-cultural-backlash.

[284] Kristin MS Bezio, "Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-Right," *Leadership* 14, no. 5 (October 2018): 556–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018793744.

[285] Edensor, 150-151.

[286] Enric Castelló and Sabina Mihelj, "Selling and Consuming the Nation: Understanding Consumer Nationalism," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 18, no. 4 (November 2018): 564, https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517690570.

Conclusion

It has become increasingly apparent in recent years that video games are as politically salient as any other branch of popular culture. The thesis demonstrated on the examples of *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* that pursuing the textual as well as extra-textual analysis of individual titles reveals an entangled web of social norms and values that video games communicate to their audiences, or values that audiences themselves attach to these games. Through close textual and comparative analysis, I showcased how *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* differ in their construction of fictional medieval Europe and how the former title projects a progressive message, while the latter engages players in a more straightforward tale of nationalism and chivalry. Drawing on these findings, I stressed that the two games offer considerably different approaches to the adaptation of 'regional' historical and cultural themes, which *The Witcher 3* uses for critique, while *Kingdom Come* utilizes them predominantly for nostalgia.

In my analysis of the extra-textual significance of the games, I focused on the controversies that developed around *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* due to their lack of racial diversity. After recounting the reaction of some of the games' developers, I carried out a qualitative content analysis of a series of player reactions to the same issue. My findings suggest that audiences who defended the lack of racial diversity in *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* most vehemently showed little interest in scrutinizing and debating the games' contents and instead framed the discussion as a clash between 'true' gamers and the malevolent advocates of political correctness. Drawing from existing literature, I related this finding to popular culture's tendency to divide audiences into groups of allies and adversaries, contributing to social stratification. Furthermore, I stressed the connection of this narrative to politically heated

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debates within the video game industry about the issue of diversity, which have become particularly frequent since the 2014 #GamerGate movement.

The rich political content that surfaced during the textual as well as extra-textual analysis of *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* reaffirms the need to study video games as a politically-salient medium with a growing reach, capable of communicating messages of tolerance, acceptance, but also of nationalism and chauvinism. Given the fact that *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* may have been the most influential cultural exports of Poland and the Czech Republic in recent years, scrutinizing video games as titles that engage with the political opinions of their domestic as well as international audiences is more pertinent than ever. The varying interpretations of the lack of diversity in these games also suggest that game studies would benefit from an increased capacity to judge titles both in their regional and global contexts. Instead of casting them inherently flawed or faultless, such in-depth analyses could help convey that games like *The Witcher 3* and *Kingdom Come* have a lot to learn from, as well as a lot to offer to the global video gaming community.

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Appendices

A. List of Key Comments from Thread 1[i]

1. I'd like to remind people that witcher is based on books, written during communist occupation in poland. Country that unlike politically correct united states didn't import black slaves.

   Expecting witcher to have black people is like expecting black vikings or white ninjas. Black people are rare here even now. Unlike other countries color diversity ain't a common thing and not something we actually think about, just like most of you don't think about african kids starving when you play your games, or some country being occupied by an dictator. It's simply an exotic concept and issue we don't have because once again we did not import slaves ;P

   That's why there are no black people in the game and assumption game is racist only because there are white people in the world is quite ignorant and racist by itself.

   edit: This article actually does a better explaination why this sjw bs is wrong and in a way it's no more than racism and denial of polish culture. Thanks /u/Verius

   edit2: wikipedia article about polish ethnicity Well as one tweet said, it's more likely to spot an elf or dwarf in poland than a black person. and In regards of sexism This guy makes a good explaination. thanks /u/ak474000

   And few nice tweets:

   Creative Director of Kingdom Come: Deliverance from /u/NoZephy

   Total Biscuits comment about the issue from /u/cf0ed2aa-bdf5-4ef6-a

   edit 3: the source of it all from /u/Futbolmaster

   edit 4: If anyone still feels poles should be blamed for white racial supremacy and blacks slaves i'd recommend looking up origins of the word slave.

   edit5: seeing how some people point out websites like this shouldn't be read i'd recommend them to point it out in their web of trust rating

2. A bunch of privileged SJW attacking a polish studio for making a polish game based on polish and nord folklore for not being racially diverse.

   Talk about cultural imperialism. How dare polish people take pride in their own folklore. Geralt should have been a black monsterkin transexual black jewish vegan with his hair dyed blue, else game is racist prejudiced pillar of the patriarchy.

   Edit: Thanks for the gold kind stranger. I thought I was going to have to write a 500 word essay citing 10 sources to get gold at the very least.

3. you forgot about muslims.

4. And now I'm triggered.

5. You see polish people are surprisingly white, which means they aren't allowed to be proud. So saith the SJW horde.

6. Not to mention the game takes place in a region known as "The Northern Kingdoms". There's actually a country in the Witcher universe that has black, or at least darker people - Zerrikania - but geographically it's a long way from the places we visit in the games.

7. Overall world of witcher takes a lot from slavic folklore mixind more modern problems, when it was written it was during communist occupation. Not many blacks then, heck even on tv they'd paint someone if they wanted a black character. Right now 20 years after communism was abolished black people are still rare here, i've seen only one in my entire lifetime, he was visiting his family with his wife, it happened when i was a kid. I mean do you really think that in this setting someone would think 'we need more blacks cause the world looks racist?' No black people is simply more natural for us. Anyway i'd suggest for cdp to make a patch with optional no racism option that'd change skin tones for characters in the game so those people could be happy. Never would turn it on, but if some mcdonalds raised american sjw will fill better and stop whining it might be a good idea.

8. As a black person (so you know the demographic that should be upset if anybody is) fuck that shit. The only people who seem to give a shit about this are people whose skin color are already represented in the fucking game. MOST of us don't give a shit about not being represented in a game that would make no sense for us being there in the first place. It's not America. If the game took place in a culturally diverse area but was white washed to be completely white then sure I'd understand, but it's taking place in East Europe like op said ethnic races are like unicorns there so why the fuck should I see some black guy in the middle of town for no reason other than diversity.

9. The Witcher 3 is racist. Against elves and dwarfs and mages and mutants. Which may I remind you, do **not** actually exist.

10. *people within the game are racist The concept and the game itself are not racist.

11. Expecting witcher to have black people is like expecting black vikings or white ninjas
http://i.imgur.com/1Lgk53j.jpg   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7kf-nV_E5Y
Your move, Poland.

B. List of Key Comments from Thread 2[ii]

1. Kingdom Come developer is called racist by an SJW for not putting black people in a video game about medieval Czech kingdom. Explains that this is because there were none

2. LIES! European media tells us ALL important historical figures were black people!

3. Just google "American inventors". I kid you not.

4. More game developers should be courageous and not be intimidated by the insufferable killjoy SJWs. If they're not happy, they can choose to not buy the game.

5. That's the thing gamergate taught us, SJWs don't buy games. They come in and bully people to follow SJW dogma. They have no interest in the products produced, just adherence to their beliefs. It would be best to ignore them. Games have done well before, except games that pander to SJWs.

6. Does anyone else think it's creepy how sjws want every accomplishment to be by black people or Muslims?

7. Diversity is codeword for anti-white

C. List of Key Comments from Thread 3[iii]

1. [...]This isn't to say Kingdom Come: Deliverance is a hotbed of racism, because it isn't. The Turkic Cumans speak a different language and are a hostile enemy, which seems like a limited portrayal but no less so than any other war game I can think of. Then again, I'm white, so maybe I've missed things. And racism can take many forms, one of them being exclusion.[...] http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-02-20-kingdom-come-deliverance-review In simple words? Kingdom Come: Deliverance does not contain black heroes because there is NO proof that at that time in Prague you could meet black people, the creators did their homework, but ... It's racism anyway. It's quite funny/odd because when we look at Eurogamer staff, they seem as if they could be accused of the same thing, i.e. lack of racial diversity - http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/the-eurogamer-staff

2. Yeah this is ridiculous. Witcher 3 got the same shit from some outlets, saying it was a fantasy world without people of color. It may be fantasy but it was based off Medieval Poland. Putting any group of people be it Men, women, Homosexuals, people of color etc. where they historically weren't just doesn't make sense. If a game like Kingdom Come prides itself on being extremely accurate to history, and and ton of historians are saying people of color weren't in the area, why would you throw historic integrity out

of the window just to appease people. A comparison i saw somewhere sums it up for me, its like playing Dynasty Warriors, and then being upset when a white person, or colored person doesn't appear. It just doesnt make sense for the most part for them to do so.

3. I'm black... witcher 3 is one of my all time favorite games of all times (started gaming at 9, I'm 37 now)... and if it wasn't for this post I never noticed the lack of black people. You know some people are offended by the silliest shit. They simply don't have to buy the game... same argument I have with people bothered by black panther... don't watch the movie and go kick a bag of rocks.

4. The Turkic Cumans speak a different language and are a hostile enemy, which seems like a limited portrayal but no less so than any other war game I can think of. Then again, I'm white, so maybe I've missed things. And racism can take many forms, one of them being exclusion.[...] Then again, I'm white, so maybe I've missed things. Classic white guilt and white saviour bullshit (which in by itself, is racist btw). "i'm going to be offended on the behalf of others because they might somehow find it insensitive that they are not represented in the game about medieval europe". For the love of the space noodle, this stupidity needs to end, honestly. We don't do this for Asian media, only this odd form of self-masochism and punishment for no reason. Even if it was exclusionary, who cares? a creator of content gets the final say on their content, if you do not like it, look for other content, do not attempt to force people to do things they do not want to (or cannot do). Japanese manga was majorly male dominated in writers and was geared towards men, what did japanese women do? complain about it, while try to force men to write more female-oriented manga? no, they made their own damn manga and everyone's happier and manga is better for it.

5. Historical games will die because of stupid accusations like this.

6. A similar story happened in the case of the Witcher 3. It seems to me that the media publish such materials in order to attract attention.

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i Source:
https://www.reddit.com/r/pcmasterrace/comments/39g468/seeing_how_witcher_3_is_being_accused_of_being/?sort=top
ii Source:
https://www.reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/7v19cm/kingdom_come_developer_is_called_racist_by_an_sjw/
iii Source:
https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/7z4swq/kingdom_come_deliverance_accused_of_racism_in/?sort=top