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Special Issue

Nation(alism), Identity and Video Gaming

edited by
Lisa Kienzl and Kathrin Trattner



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Kingdom Come: Deliverance. A Bohemian Forest Simulator

Eugen Pfister

Abstract

Review of the video game Kingdom Come: Deliverance.

Keywords: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, Review, Czech History, Authenticity, gamevironments

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Riding and hiking alone through the lush forests between Sázava and Rataje (now part of the region Středočeský kraj), I felt strangely at peace with myself. Most of the time I had no definite destination, no explicit goal. I mean, sure, if I would have taken the time to check my quest log, I would have found a handful of pending tasks. But I didn't care. I wanted to stay a little longer in the glade, check out this little creek in the valley, explore that hidden trail. These were for me most definitely the best moments of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), moments of sincere serenity in the midst of a virtual 15th century Bohemian forest. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is sold as a historically authentic RPG set in medieval central Bohemia. Its development was funded by the he Czech billionaire Zdeněk Bakala and an additional Kickstarter-crowdfunding campaign where it gained much attention through its proclaimed aim to "to make the experience as authentic as possible" (Warhorse Studios 2019a).

The aspiration of the developers to simulate "accurate melee combat" (Warhorse Studios 2019a) means, that, if I accidentally met some brigands, I had no intention to fight them and tried to keep out of their way. I wouldn't have survived the encounter.



The game always worked best for me, when my avatar was left alone. Even a brief attempt at hunting ended rather frustrating, when the hunted hare, surrounded by fifteen of my arrows, that most apparently have missed him, stared back at me with an unnerving calm. The same can be said for all my attempts at socializing with the locals. They did not have much to say and I did not know what to ask. We were never meant to exchange pleasantries or to get to know each other. My short-lived friendship with the son of the baron was therefore ill fated. This does not mean that I constantly avoided all other human NPCs. I was still curious. I wanted to visit their settlements, their castles and of course the affectionately reconstructed Sázava Monastery. I liked to watch them working in the fields, gossiping at the taverns or working in their shops. They had their daily routines, their life seemed to me full of purpose and peace, at least for those who were not slaughtered by barbaric invaders. But the closer I looked the more they began to resemble hollow automatons. A moment exemplified by the mother of the protagonist dusting the earth floor in front of their house. And what is worse, almost all women look the same, and almost all of them had nothing of purpose to say (Brandenburg 2018).

That is precisely my problem with this game, it has a beautiful backdrop and some intricately costumes, but no actors/agents to fill the gameworld with life. Of course, the same can be said about almost all open-world games. It is extremely difficult to program lifelike NPCs.





Figure 1: Women's roles are extremely limited in Kingdom Come: Deliverance © Warhorse Studios.

The trouble is, that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* was sold by its Czech developer Warhorse Studios (2019b) as the most historically accurate RPG:

"KC:D is an open-world, realistic RPG set in the late Middle Ages. The game's focus is threefold: lavish visuals, realistic first-person melee combat and an immersive, credible story played out in an authentic setting that provides a refreshing alternative to corny, save-the-world scenarios".

So, where do we find this historical accuracy, maybe in the story? Not so much. The story is the umpteenth rerun of the ever-same story of a young boy, who secretly is a prince and rescues the world.

You are playing young Henry, son of the local blacksmith who loses both his parents, when Cuman soldiers under the control of Sigismund, king of Hungary and Croatia attack the small village of Skalitz. You then get a chance to avenge your parents when Sir Radzig Koblya accepts you as his *envoy*. It is later revealed that you are in fact an illegitimate son of Radzig. Sounds familiar? A little bit like the story of the young

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William Thatcher in *A Knight's Tale* (2001), or like the young blacksmith Balian in Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), or – truth to be told – the story of Luke Skywalker in George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977). The story works because it successfully taps to the fantasy of so many teenage boys in the whole world, who dream of secretly being a prince that rescues the world. And there is nothing wrong with that. It sometimes works for me, too. But as a historian, I most definitely have a problem with the claim of the developers, that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is more historically accurate than any other RPG. Because it is not.



Figure 2: Henry, the game's protagonist © Warhorse Studios

Let me explain: Sure, there are no orcs, no dragons, no demons, no warlocks, no elves and all of the mentioned historical personalities have really existed. It is also true, that the developers have spent many working hours to painstakingly recreate the architectural façade of a medieval Bohemia. The beautiful Sázava Monastery is the most remarkable example for this. But as I said, it is first and foremost façade, a historicizing background for a timeless young boy fantasy. The problem is the idea of historical accuracy transported here. For Warhorse Studios, this means the



reconstruction of medieval architecture and costumes and the landscape. But we learn almost nothing about the true everyday life of Bohemian peasants or craftsmen in the 15th century, we learn almost nothing about their way of thinking – an intricate and intelligently woven side quest about Hussites being the noteworthy exemption.



Figure 3: Sázava Monastery in Kingdom Come: Deliverance © Warhorse Studios.

This is why I have a problem with creator Daniel Vávra's declaration: "Since the Czech historians were kind of cut off from the world, there was no one to tell our history. So basically, we are using pop culture to spread the word" (Brillaud 2017). If asked, any medievalist will tell you, that the history of Bohemia in the Middle Ages is very well researched, especially the military history. There have been hundreds of conferences, anthologies, monographies. In fact, the Czech colleagues that were credited as historical consultants of the game in the credits are very well connected internationally. Vávra's claim should therefore be read solely as a marketing tool. Trouble is, it is more because his claim is fueling national sentiments of a neglected Czech nation:

"For the purposes of Deliverance, it's enough to say that setting a game during the struggle of for power between Sigismund and Wenceslas IV is loaded with historical significance relevant to the modern day. By turning them into easy symbols for good/Czech versus evil/foreign, they foreshadow a nation's century long fight for sovereignty, recalling a more recent past in which the Czech lands have had to contend with Soviet, Nazi and Austro-Hungarian domination" (McCarter 2018).

And in the end, the game teaches us nothing new about Czech history, it dresses an almost ancient fantasy in a historical costume, a beautiful historical costume, but only a costume.

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