

# By Svarog! Slavic Game Renaissance and the Ideology of the Extreme Right

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The global normalization of political extremism influences the gaming culture in various ways, from the rise of militant conservatives harassing women since the #GamerGate event (Chess and Shaw 2015; Mortensen 2018), to heated debates on racial representations in neo-medievalist and colonial fantasies (Majkowski 2018; Martin 2018), to government-sanctioned plans to promote national cultures through video games (Webber 2018). In Poland, all those tendencies are easy to observe, and, in fact, Polish fans often contribute to the online culture of nationalistic and racist bigotry. But there is yet another facet of the contemporary Polish gaming culture, associated with the right-wing movement: the influx of Slavdom games. In this talk I will analyze that seemingly innocent phenomenon with regard to the most bizarre political movement in contemporary Poland – the Great Lechinia Empire conspiracy theory. Using the already established ways to relate games and national topoi (Martin 2018; Nie 2013; Sterczewski 2016a, 2016b; Webber 2018) and the concept of invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012), I will present the way extremism can inform gaming culture and contribute to the normalization of fabricated and dangerous concepts as a part of national heritage.

On the surface, the recent interest in games perpetuating the so-called “Slavic folklore” can be tied to the international success of *The Witcher* franchise, quite commonly described as based upon “Slavic aesthetics” (see: Majkowski 2018). Its global recognition has resulted in an outbreak of Polish games based upon similar aesthetics, such as real-time strategy *Thea: The Awakening* or *Eventide: Slavic Fable*, a HOPA game for casual players. More titles are under development, including EU-funded *Slavic Monsters*, a *Pokemon GO* clone for Android devices; *Wyrzaj*, browser-based city-builder with RPG elements; or VR-based FPS *Hussarion*, a sci-fi game about fighting Slavic daemons while wearing power armor shaped after a winged hussar’s armor – an iconic armament of Polish 17-century heavy cavalry, romanticized as symbol of Polish greatness in contemporary nationalistic discourse.

Outside of the digital, there is a brand-new tabletop RPG entitled *Słowianie*, and several board games. In *Slavika*, and its new version called *Slawia*, players struggle over the fate of a fantasy kingdom. *Żercy* employs a less militant theme, casting players as Slavic shamans predicting the future, and *Stworze* makes players compete for fame and glory by accomplishing quests in a Slavic fairyland. All those games,

with the exception of *Slawia*, have been created for the domestic market, and testify to the local interest in such themes.

Such “Slavic Revival” is in stark contrast with the tradition of Polish gaming culture, traditionally wary of “Slavicness,” the aesthetics for a long time perceived as backward and embarrassing. For almost 30 years before the rise of *The Witcher 3*, there had been just three attempts at creating games based on what was considered local folklore: two tabletop RPGs, widely considered the worst locally-created gaming products of all time, and *Polanie* – a *WarCraft* inspired RTS with the sequel, internationally known as *KnightShift*. Moreover, early attempts at creating Slavdom version of fantasy literature was ridiculed to its demise by *The Witcher* books author, Andrzej Sapkowski, who championed for a more international approach to the genre (see Majkowski 2013 for details).

To understand the cause of the shift toward Slavic folklore in Polish gaming culture, and its domestic appeal, it is important to recognize common elements shared by almost all games mentioned above, *The Witcher* series included. Firstly, the local folklore is closely tied to beasts, daemons and gods – but lacks references to actual cultural practices, beliefs or customs. Secondly, the world of Slavic monsters and deities is a destroyed one, shattered and fragmented, to be reclaimed and rebuilt. Both motifs link analyzed games with the larger Polono-Slavic myth originating from the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century and tying Polish identity to pagan “Slavdom,” violently destroyed by Germanic Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy. The moral obligation of contemporary Poles would be to pick up the pieces of the demolished culture and re-forge it as a basis for the rebirth Polish nation (Janion 2006).

The Polono-Slavic ideology survived to 21<sup>st</sup> Century and has recently produced two important cultural phenomena. One of them is a longing for paganism and rejection of Catholicism, traditionally associated with Polish national identity. Pagan ideas are commonly disseminated through so-called “Slavic Bestiaries” – a practice was initiated by *Stworze i zdusze*, a groundbreaking (and completely fabricated) book on Slavic beliefs (Białczyński 1993). Therefore, it is a monster, not a god or a hero, that serves as a synecdoche of the forgotten Slavic past. The other phenomenon is a Grand Lechinia Empire conspiracy theory claiming that ethnic Poles are direct descendants of a class ruling over an ancient empire that was destroyed and erased from history by triumphant Christians. That belief results in a mixture of apocalyptic and providential images and beliefs distributed by the advocates of the theory, and combining the mourning over the lost empire with obsessive pride in such heritage (see: Hańderek et al. 2016; Kośnik 2018 for the analysis).

In the presentation I will focus in the employment of both themes in Slavic-inspired Polish games, from the apocalyptic landscapes of *Thea: The Awakening*, and the heroine’s efforts to reclaim the forgotten past in *Eventide*, to boardgames directly mentioning Polono-Slavic ideologists’ fabrications, such as *Żercy* and *Stworze*. Analyzing them on the narrative, aesthetical and gameplay level. I will argue that they contribute to the normalization of the nationalistic myth as a part of invented tradition, reinforcing such a topic through the in-game practices (Bogost 2007). By appealing to fabricated ethnic traditions through both aesthetics and gameplay, they help to establish the sense of a strong national identity and uniqueness, and to disseminate it through popular culture (Smith 1999, 2009). And as the nexus of nationalism, imagined pagan traditions and conspiracy theories described above are hardly unique to Poland – for example, the outrageous myth of Lechinia Empire echoes German Romanticism (Williamson 2004). Therefore, the analysis of Polono-Slavic themes in recently published games can serve as a case in a larger inquiry on relations between gaming cultures and the extreme right.

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