Pushing in from the Margins: Player Efforts to Insert Polish-Lithuanian Cultural Heritage into Games

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines player efforts to modify commercial games to create a space for themselves to play with cultural content based on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, especially the mod *The Deluge* (2015). Modding can be seen as a case of marginal groups pushing towards the centre by imposing their personal agenda onto commercial titles developed with far larger resources. The other vital context is the relationship between the Polish-Lithuanian cultural heritage and the present-day culture of Poland and other inheritor nations of the Commonwalth. This heritage, so-called Sarmatian culture, has largely been set aside in favour of new national cultures. Even the highly successful Polish game industry mostly rejects Sarmatian culture as a source of inspiration. However, *The Deluge* and its sequel show that for a small part of the Polish public, Sarmatian heritage remains important enough to justify a decade-long effort from an unfinanced group of volunteer modders.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines two player efforts to modify commercial games to create a space for themselves to play with cultural content based on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Over more than a decade, primarily Polish players developed *The Deluge* (2015), a large and detailed mod for the first two games from TaleWorlds Entertainment's *Mount & Blade* series. Subsequently, with the release of *Mount & Blade 2: Bannerlord* (TaleWorlds Entertainment, 2022) a different though overlapping group of players have launched a yet-unreleased *The Deluge 2* mod for this newer title. It is argued that these player-driven efforts constitute not one, but two overlapping instances of groups at the margins of power pushing to bring their perspective into the centre of attention.

Firstly, then, the memory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a historical state and culture is today largely marginalised, not only in global terms, but even locally in

the area it once governed. Thus, any efforts to bring attention to this heritage are done from a position of institutional weakness, and in many cases, against active resistance – as shall be discussed, the heritage of this state is far from uncontroversial. Secondly, any time players engage in game modification and attempt to bring the results of their work to the wider public, this necessarily involves the less powerful group – the game players – engaging in an unequal interplay with the more powerful institutional actors of the game industry. While these industry actors are only rarely openly hostile to game mods, and quite the contrary, in many cases support and encourage modding, they nonetheless retain the power to impose their terms and limitations on players, and, as will be seen also in this particular case, are willing to do so sharply and suddenly when it is considered necessary from a business perspective.

To explore these issues, the present paper will firstly contextualise its topic by briefly examining the pertinent facts concerning the historical Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (PLC), as well as summarising its depictions in commercial games. Subsequently, the theoretical context for modding will be introduced, highlighting the co-existence of two partially conflicting perspectives on modding. The first perspective considers modding as exploitation, where modders are understood as serving primarily the interests of commercial game developers by contributing to the longevity and sales of their games. The second, and undoubtedly more dominant perspective, highlights the agency of the modders, and the way they use commercial titles to express themselves, sometimes against the wishes of the commercial game developers. Once the double context of the PLC and modding has been established, the history and outcomes of the PLC-related game mods, *The Deluge* and *The Deluge 2* will be examined.

THE HISTORICAL POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth was formed in 1569 under the so-called Union of Lublin, which formalised the personal monarchic union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania into a permanent dynastic union – a situation quite analogous to the gradual merging of the Kingdoms of Scotland and England into Great Britain. Although it is easy to locate both Poland and Lithuania on the map of present-day Europe, a reader unfamiliar with the history of this region might be surprised when comparing the borders of these modern states with their historical antecedents (Figure 1). At the time of the Union of Lublin, Poland, apart from holding parts of its present-day territory, extended far into modern Ukraine. Lithuania in turn encompassed its present-day territory as well as parts of today's Poland, Ukraine, and Russia, and all of Belarus. Finally, Poland and Lithuania also co-governed parts of today's Baltic republics. Thus, the union of these two states resulted in the formation of one of the largest political units in Europe. While this is not a historical paper, in order to explain why exploring the heritage of the PLC in games today can be understood as a push from the margins into the centre, we must explain how the memory of the PLC and its culture came to be marginalised in the first place. A brief summary of the history of this de-facto empire from its establishment to its demise at the end of the XVIII century and as the subsequent evolution of nation states in this part of Europe is therefore needed. Nonetheless, the caveat must be made: such summaries are necessarily gross simplifications. Readers interested in understanding this history in its full complexity could refer to Snyder (2003), Davies (2005a; 2005b), Kiaupa (2005), Frost (2015), and Butterwick-Pawlikowski (2020); for explorations specifically of culture, Polish language readers may additionally refer to Ulewicz (2005), Piskozub (2016) or Tazbir (2013) among others.

Figure 1: Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its constituents at its maximum extent in 1618, superimposed on modern states (Source: Wikipedia).

When the PLC was formalised in 1569, the state was a key European power, and would remain so until the middle of the XVII century. However, from 1648 begins a series of protracted internal and external wars referred to as the Deluge. The devastation of this period, combined with complex organisational problems of the state, set into motion a death spiral of decline (Davies 2005a). By the end of the XVIII, the state had weakened to the point where the neighbouring powers – Prussia, Russia, and Austria – were able to partition the territory among themselves, wiping the PLC off the map entirely (Davies 2005a, Butterwick-Pawlikowski 2020).

It would not be until more than a century later that Poland and Lithuania would recover their independence in the aftermath of the First World War. By this point, however, the cultural and national tectonic plates of Europe had shifted tremendously. The earlier Polish and Lithuanian monarchies had existed at a time when the notion of the nation-state had not been crystalised: both states were multicultural, multinational, and even multifaith entities. By 1918, most politically conscious inhabitants of the former PLC would reject such a polity, instead favouring separate states for separate nations. While Poland did try to reimpose its control over parts of the former PLC beyond the convoluted borders of the ethnically Polish area, the state in this form ceased to exist in 1939 (Snyder 2003; Davies 2005b); by 1945, the combined ethnic cleansing of the Germans and the Russians wiped away the complex cultural and ethnic overlaps that had remained of the PLC as a unitary entity, resulting in the Central Europe of almost exclusively monolithic ethnic states of today (Snyder 2003, Davies 2005b). Consequently, historical understanding of the PLC is contested. One contest lies between Lithuania and Poland, where historians differ strongly in their assessment of the long-term benefits of the union (e.g., Snyder 2003; Kiaupa 2005). A second line of contestation exists between Poland and Ukraine, with the latter state building its identity partially upon the Cossacks, whose complex relationship with the PLC ultimately ended in strife (Snyder 2003; Davies 2005a, Podhorodecki 2011. Even in Poland, however, which without a doubt was the dominant member of the former state,

and which has subsumed recollections of the PLC to the point where the dual Polish-Lithuanian state is frequently informally referred to simply as Poland, the PLC is a bitter-sweet memory. While the former state is praised as a cultural powerhouse, Polish historical discourse also frequently blames the culture and political organisation of the state for its downfall. Furthermore, nostalgic desires to re-establish a larger political union were almost forcibly quelled in the post-war era, with the gradual triumph of the so-called Promethean concept, by which Poland must set aside any pretensions to former territories and aid the Lithuanian, Belarussian, and Ukrainian states to full independence in order to secure a strong alliance against any potential Russian resurgence. In this context, the memory of the PLC is almost a source of embarrassment. In Poland, to highlight its achievements, and especially to take pride in them, is seen as potentially going against Polish political interests; conversely, especially Lithuania and Ukraine have shaped their modern identity to some extent on an explicit rejection of the PLC (Snyder 2003).

It must be added that the unique culture of the PLC is today largely marginalised and has indeed to some extent been under criticism since before the fall of the PLC (Waśko 1997). In the old Commonwealth, being Polish had gradually come to mean citizenship more than ethnic or cultural belonging. A Ruthenian or Lithuanian noble – but only a noble – would consider him or herself Polish in this sense of citizenship, while also remaining aware of their ethnic separateness (Snyder 2003). In time, most of the nobility had come to speak Polish and effectively embrace Polish culture. However, this process of Polonisation was bi-directional: Polish culture changed to accommodate its new adherents as well. The ultimate result of this cross-fertilisation was what is today called Sarmatism or Sarmatian culture (Ulewicz 2005). This culture was built around a myth connecting the nobility of the PLC – regardless of its ethnicity – with the ancient Sarmatian tribes known to have earlier inhabited this area (c.f. Sulimirski 1970). The truth of the matter was irrelevant: what was significant is that the culture of the PLC, while largely derived from Polish culture, was not literally Polish, and furthermore, was explicitly non-European in outer form, with the adoption of oriental clothes and weaponry (Waśko 1997; Tazbir 2013). By the final days of the PLC, a significant political fraction came to blame this culture for the state's weakness – *Sarmatism* first emerged as a derogatory term (Waśko 1997), with political modernisation being equated with a rejection or at least westernisation of Sarmatian culture. The demise of the PLC and later history strengthened these sentiments in Poland. It also goes without saying that a cultural concept that separated the nobility from the other social classes became highly problematic in modernity: if only the nobility saw themselves as Sarmatian, then most Poles were not Sarmatian. Among other PLC-descendant states, where modern national cultures sought to separate themselves from the PLC, the rejection of Sarmatism went even further. Only in Ukraine is the modern national identity connected to the history of the PLC – but while the Cossacks, who underpin modern Ukrainian identity certainly emerged within the PLC (Podhorodecki 2011), the brutal conflict between them and the PLC ultimately led to the separation of Ukraine from this state and its annexation into Russia (c.f. Snyder 2003, Davies 2005a), making the relationship between modern Ukraine and the cultural heritage of the PLC even more complicated.

THE COMMONWEALTH IN MODERN CULTURE

Thus, while relics and memories of Sarmatian culture constitute a significant portion of the cultural heritage of all countries in the Central European area, they are not significant as modern cultural discourse. This is not to say the Sarmatian culture of the Commonwealth has been entirely rejected. The Polish-Lithuanian period has, over the two intervening centuries, served as important subject matter throughout the area, but especially for Polish creatives, from writers such as Henryk Rzewuski, Henryk Sienkiewicz, and Józef Hen, through to filmmakers like Jerzy Hoffman, and, on rare

occasions, also for modern game developers. Nonetheless, the "Sarmatian turn in Polish culture" that Mochocki (2012b) had argued a decade ago, had never fully realised, and perhaps was mostly an illusion (cf. Kliszcz 2012). While some Sarmatian-themed games across various genres and platforms have emerged (cf. Mochocki 2011; 2012a; 2017; Majewski 2014), these titles were characterised by low budgets and low success rates. While in earlier decades, this could have been attributed to the general weakness of the fledgling Polish game industry (c.f. Budziszewski 2015), by the 2010s the growth of this industry meant this was no longer sufficient explanation. A paradoxical situation thus can be observed, where the highly successful Polish games industry rejects the Polish-Lithuanian historical period as a source of inspiration for anything more than the small cultural "easter eggs" observable in *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015) (cf. Majkowski 2018; Flamma 2020). The once-dominant Sarmatian culture that emerged from Poland and left an indelible mark in Central Europe, has itself become marginalised, relegated to the museum in favour of newer cultural trends and experiences that better suit the now largely monoethnic Polish state.

At the margins, however, interesting things happen. Where large corporations fear to tread, smaller firms, indie developers and modders step in – and not only from Poland. Thus, one game that explicitly referenced the cultural heritage of the PLC, *Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword* (Snowberry Connection/SiCh Studio, 2009), was almost ironically international in its origins. Its subtitle, *With Fire and Sword*, as well as various motifs and characters in the game, referenced to the first novel in Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz's famous historical trilogy, although the emphasis on combat, limited narrative and simple depiction of cultural landscapes makes it difficult to consider this an actual adaptation of the novel (Majewski 2014). Rather, the game is an example of Mochocki's (2021) argument that historical settings can constitute a sort of transmedia storyworld not unlike the franchise-based transmedia worlds described by Wolf (2012), where references to other works or iconic elements serve to connect one product to a broader whole.

The connections of *With Fire and Sword* (*WFaS*) to the PLC are almost ironic. The game was developed as part of the *Mount & Blade* series, a franchise developed in Turkey, one of the PLC's historical enemies in that exact timeframe – and published by a company from Sweden, another historical enmity of the period. Furthermore, *WFaS* was financed by a Russian company – with Russia being another frequent nemesis for the PLC – and the the game's actual development was farmed out to a Ukrainian company, whose name, SiCh Studio, references the historical capital of the Zaporizhian Cossacks, whose revolt against the PLC formed the core of *With Fire and Sword* – both the novel, and the game. To compound the irony, *WFaS* included five state-based factions in its narrative setting, with the PLC, Muscovy (Russia) and the Cossacks (as antecedants of Ukraine) serving as three primary choices for the player, while Sweden and the Crimean Khanate (a vassal of Ottoman Turkey) appeared in secondary roles. Thus, the storyworld included representations of all the modern states involved in development, as well as the PLC: but neither Poland nor Lithuania were directly involved in development.

Thus, geographically and culturally, *Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword* could be described as a successful effort by the once-marginalised Ukrainian part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to assert itself vis-à-vis the Polish centre, with the assistance of the PLC's erstwhile rivals. This reassertion was visible not only in the game's narrative, but also the metanarrative of the conflict with Polish modders that emerged during development: *The Deluge*, which we will explore in depth later, in fact started under the name of *With Fire and Sword* – an unsurprising choice given the fame of Sienkiewicz's works. However, when TaleWorlds Entertainment signed an agreement with Snowberry Connections allowing them to publish their game as *WFaS*,

the modding team was effectively put in a position where either they would change the name of their mod or would be running afoul of a trademark, running the risk of being forcibly shut down, or at the least, cast out of the official TaleWorlds forums that formed the central meeting point of the modding community. The change to *The Deluge* – incidentally, the title of the second book in Sienkiewicz's trilogy – allowed them to continue their efforts, but also highlighted the precariousness of modding.

MODDING: LIBERATION OR EXPLOITATION?

Game modding – the process of modifying a game to suit one's own purposes – should be framed as part of the broader story of what Henry Jenkins has described as participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). In particular, modding can be connected specifically to the "textual poaching" paradigm (Jenkins 1992; 2006), where the audience repurposes a mass media product to suit their own needs. While mods can be created by individuals, such efforts are just as frequently team based, and even individual modders typically function within loose-knit communities of practice, what Gee (2013) calls passionate affinity spaces (PAS), that develop around the common interest in a particular game; such mutual assistance and exchange of knowledge is certainly necessary for modding, because the activity typically does not involve any financial benefits (Squire 2011; Gee 2013; Majewski 2018).

When perceived as bottom-up efforts, modders are interpreted as reclaiming power from corporate publishers. However, this idealistic vision does not conform to the complexities of reality. In fact, game developers and publishers often facilitate mods by releasing development tools to the players (Imlach 2002), and they do so for the express purpose of extending the longevity and sales of their titles: a game that has many mods extending its gameplay will naturally be of greater interest to players (Imlach 2002; Chistiansen 2012). This has even led some scholars to criticise modding as a way for corporations to effectively exploit the unpaid "playbour" of their fans for profit (Kücklich, 2005). This negative vision in turn also does not conform to the complexities of reality: research has shown repeatedly that the modders themselves exhibit active agency, engaging in modding not because they must, but because they have their own varied purposes in doing so (Squire 2011; Gee 2013, Majewski 2017), in the same way that Jenkins' "textual poachers" of an earlier generation cared little if their fan art helped a corporation popularise its franchise. Indeed, when modders are asked directly about their motivations, it becomes impossible to regard modders as an exploited underclass: most strikingly, when asked if they would like an opportunity to earn an income from their mods, modders and other fans all too often declare that mods should remain free (Majewski 2018).

Nonetheless, modding is certainly precarious. Earlier participatory audience products – fan art, fan films, fan fiction – have often been restricted or even actively fought against by copyright owners for varied reasons (Jenkins 1992; 2006). Modding, while often enabled by game developers and beneficial to their games, likewise is policed by these same developers; whether because of concerns about controversial content or because of copyright violations, it is not uncommon for modders to have their efforts terminated by legal cease-and-desist letters (e.g., Cox 2012; Good 2020). In short, the relationship between modders and game developers is multifaceted. Sometimes friendly, at other times antagonistic, the relationship is arguably mutually exploitative. Game publishers want mods for their games to extend the longevity of their titles, but only if those mods are not harmful to the franchise. Game modders in turn want to mod games to suit their own purposes, even if those purposes are not aligned with the copyright holders. All of these complexities were visible in the development of *The Deluge*.

THE DELUGE

Even with the use of web archives, it is difficult to determine when Polish modders first set out to create the mod *With Fire and Sword* for *Mount & Blade* (TaleWorlds Entertainment 2008). What is known is that an early version of the mod was first made available in 2006 (The Deluge Devs 2012a), dating its development to at least three years before the release of the official game under that same title, and indeed two years before the final release of the original game – a fact made possible by TaleWorlds pioneering an early access-based sales model. Thus, it would appear the mod, whose final version would be released in 2015, had a development life cycle of almost a decade. During that time, apart from the change of title, the mod also transitioned to the second game in the franchise, *Mount & Blade: Warband* (TaleWorlds Entertainment 2011). As is typical for unpaid modding efforts developed through informal PAS communities, so that by 2010, the originally initiators of the project were no longer active, many new team members had joined, including a historical consultant. Some new members had also subsequently left, and in some cases, work developed for the mod had been replaced by output from other team members – in short, the development was highly dynamic, passion-driven, and thus unpredictable (c.f. Daedalus 2010).

The original *Mount & Blade* was a single player game built around purely procedural gameplay: the player would begin as a lone character in a quasi-medieval world of warring states, and, through combat, trade, and recruitment mechanics, would gradually build up a powerful warband – from fighting small groups of poorly armed robbers at the start, all the way to fighting large-scale battles against armies led by monarchs. As the game's title indicates, battles were the core of the game. There was no storyline, and the unfolding of the game was determined entirely by the world's procedural behaviour and reactions to the player. No official modding tools were ever made available by the developers, so the player community developed its own tools – albeit these were notoriously limited and difficult to use. Numerous mods came into existence, ranging from simple replacements of some graphical objects, the addition of specific historical or fantasy weapons, clothes or characters, all the way to total conversions like *Star Wars Conquest* (Star Wars Conquest Dev Team 2010) that completely replaced the medieval backdrop with sci-fi content from the *Star Wars* franchise.

Presumably in its early years, *The Deluge* was also intended to be a gradual, step-by-step replacement of the *Mount & Blade* setting with militaria appropriate to the PLC storyworld, culminating in a total conversion like *Star Wars Conquest*. These plans must have been strongly affected by the release of *WFaS*, which effectively fulfilled this same purpose, and being developed on a commercial budget with the full cooperation of TaleWorlds Entertainment, was made at a speed impossible to attain for modders, and with features that would likewise be impossible for them to accomplish. In particular, the game, unlike the original *Mount & Blade*, included a narrative quest-driven campaign, a feature impossible to add without access to original source code. We may imagine – though this is now difficult to trace due to gaps in archival materials from the mod forum – that the modders experienced a period of disorientation, and possibly this was when the mod's original founders left. Clearly, the team found a new objective with the 2011 release of *Warband*. The changes brought by this title were almost cosmetic, except for the introduction of a multiplayer mode. When *The Deluge* was released in 2012 (The Deluge Devs 2012b), it no longer featured a single player mode and made no attempt to replace the gameworld map. Instead, the multiplayer-oriented mod provided a range of battlefields crafted around landscapes and historic locations in the PLC, and a range of factions with numerous military unit types. Players would choose a battlefield, choose a faction and select their troops, then fight against one or more other players.

The martial orientation of *The Deluge* belies the efforts devoted to showcasing PLC cultural heritage; in fact, this was a key objective for the developers (Majewski, 2017), who relied on historical consultation to ensure the locations and equipment shown in the game was historically authentic (Figure 2). Without a doubt, there could be much discussion about how this term was understood by the modders, and the degree to which gameplay concerns affected this desire (for examination of broader game developer attitudes to authenticity, see Copplestone 2017). In any case, the focus on martial equipment and battlegrounds meant that the authenticity aimed at here was selective (Salvati and Bullinger 2013), but undeniable. A comparison might be made here with painters of military art, whose paintings certainly may aim to be authentic in their depictions of military equipment but whose focus can be much narrower than for painters of more broadly understood historical scenes, and whose paintings also need not comment on the ideological or moral dimensions of the depicted conflict.

Figure 2: Two aspects of *The Deluge*'s selective authenticity: landscapes and military arms. (Source: Steam Workshop).

Though there is no evidence this was ever a concern for the modders, focusing on martial aspects did allow them to sidestep any controversies related to present day reception and interpretation of the Commonwealth's history. This is not unusual: to take a far more extreme example, WWII FPS games typically avoid allowing the player to be a German soldier in a story-driven single player mode, but when players play Germans in multiplayer, this seems to be safe from controversy. The pure martial contest of the multiplayer battlefield seems to sanitise historical issues, and it seems

rare for players to ponder whether the German soldier whose shoes they are stepping into may have been an adherent to the Nazi ideology, or a participant in war crimes. In the case of the PLC, then, the multiplayer-only mod does not have to address difficult issues around historical relations between its chief warring factions, focusing instead on the "coolness" of their military prowess, and especially a key visual icon element of the PLC's military heritage, the winged hussars – incidentally, also a recurring theme of Polish military art (e.g., Figure 3).

Figure 3: The Battle of Kirholm by Wojciech Kossak, one of many paintings depicting the winged hussars in action (source: Raczunas n.d.).

The winged hussars were likely the Commonwealth's most visually striking – for once, the word "iconic" does not seem hyperbolic – military formation. It would be difficult to say that this formation is popular among Poles, as this would presuppose the popularity of the PLC as heritage, which we have indicated is somewhat doubtful; what is clear, however, is that for the minority that constitutes the Sarmatian cultural turn described by Mochocki (2012b), the hussars occupy a special place within this heritage. For example, the historian Radosław Sikora has written several books about the hussars aimed expressly at popular audiences (e.g., Sikora 2012; 2013). While the hussars – historically prohibitive to equip (Sikora 2013) – are today equally expansive for historical re-enactors to produce costumes for, they appear to nonetheless be popular as a topic of re-enactment, for example in the annual re-enactment of the battle of Gniew (Vivat Vasa! 2023). There is also a small but vocal contingent of passionate Polish internet users, (e.g., POLWingedHussar 2022), as well as official Polish cultural institutions (e.g., Kępa 2017), publishing online texts to promote the memory of the hussars and their international standing as "ultimate badasses" (POLWingedHussar 2022). Internationally, the hussars' characteristic image is attractive enough to warrant usage, but not necessarily recognition – for example, the hussars were re-interpreted as the winged lancers of Kislev in the tabletop wargame Warhammer Fantasy Battles 4th Edition (Games Workshop 1992) (c.f. Gallagher, 1996), but Kislev and its lancers were not explicitly connected to the PLC, being rather an amalgamation of the PLC, Russia, and pure fantasy elements.

When on occasion the hussars do reach the awareness of an international audience, this is promptly amplified by Polish users online; for instance, when the Swedish metal band Sabaton published the song "Winged Hussars" on their 2016 album "The Last

Stand", commemorating the hussars' perhaps most historically significant charge during the 1683 Ottoman siege of Vienna, an online meme "Then the Winged Hussars Arrived" emerged, which appears to have been propagated to some extent by Polish users, including its addition to the KnowYourMeme database (TheWingedHussarsArrived 2017). Also in 2016, apart from Sabaton's song, the hussars showed up internationally in the introduction video to *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* (Firaxis Games, 2016) – a fact again promptly noted and propagated by Polish media online, the headlines replete with excited exclamation marks (e.g. Zaremba 2016). Finally, it is worth highlighting a years-long low-key media campaign calling for the military honour guard standing in front of the Polish presidential palace to be dressed and armed in hussar equipment (c.f. Lande 2012). Against this backdrop, it is clear that *The Deluge*, whose title image includes a winged hussar (Figure 4), can be seen both as part of this broader, bottom-up minority movement to promote the hussars as a symbol of Poland (not necessarily the PLC) in international awareness, and also as a beneficiary of this movement, in later years probably gaining attention of the recipients of the various actions and initiatives described above.

Figure 4: Both *The Deluge* and *WFaS* centred their title art around their iconic "star" – the winged hussars.

However, although the movement described above seems broad, it must be stressed that its support remains generally shallow. While the hussars did stand before the presidential palace on one occasion in the form of historical re-enactors (Andruszkiewicz 2013), the office of the President never saw any reason to even comment on the proposal for the official guard from the armed forces to be permanently dressed as hussars. The "Winged Hussar Arrived" meme on the KnowYourMemes page has been marked as "rejected due to incompleteness or lack of notability" (TheWingedHussarsArrived 2017). *The Deluge* has certainly achieved a notable success as a mod, being currently ranked on Steam Workshop as the 39th most popular *Warband* mod – but its 175K unique visitors is a small number in the global context, especially since it is impossible to know a) how many visitors actually went on to download the mod, and b) what percentage comes from Poland and the broader PLC area, and what percentage from the rest of the world. By contrast, the portal SteamDB

estimates 500K-1.25M owners (SteamDB 2023) for *Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword* – which, of course, benefitted from the same trends, also used the winged hussar in its marketing (Figure 2), but was developed not on the margins by resource-starved modders, but through funded game development. Conversely, *WFaS*, though clearly attempting to leverage PLC cultural heritage for its purposes, struggled to achieve authenticity (Majewski 2014, 2017), even the sort of selective authenticity visible in *The Deluge*.

There remains the question of *The Deluge 2*, the mod currently being developed for *Mount & Blade 2: Bannerlord*. This mod is in early stages of development, and it would be impossible to even guess about its possible outcomes. What can be examined is firstly who the developers are, and secondly, what their declared intentions are, as explained by the modders in so far their only interview, with the YouTube channel Skrzydlata Kompanija (Skrzydlata Kompanija 2021). Firstly, the (thus far, exclusively Polish) group of modders aiming to develop *The Deluge 2* is not in any way continuous from the development team of the original mod, other than noting that they have had contacts with the earlier modders. Once again, the fluidity of the passionate affinity space is visible, with the implication that the new team is starting from scratch in every way, without carrying over any experience from the earlier efforts. Due to its non-commercial nature, the original *The Deluge* mod did not generate any kind of stable income that could provide a head start for new efforts – the work must begin from the margins again. Secondly, the intentions of the new team can be seen as more ambitious than the final published version of *The Deluge*, but perhaps matching the original vision of the mod before its shift to multiplayer-only: there is an intention to develop a total conversion with a large map populated by many historical landscapes, characters, peoples and troops, but no main narrative.

What, if anything, will remain of the team's ambitions remains to be seen – the last of their two development diaries released thus far had been in August 2021 (The Deluge 2021). A visit to their Discord server indicates the team continues to persevere, but with minimal progress. Such pauses are not unusual for modders, who work in their spare time, but it is also not unusual for mods to ultimately be abandoned after an extended pause. A pertinent example here would be the *Warband* mod *Sclavinia*, exploring early medieval Poland (Sclavinia Team 2014). After three years of updates on their ModDB page the modders ceased to report progress around 2016. Ironically – but probably not unusually – the mod's demise was explained by its lead developer as caused by a lack of time after he commenced full-time work in the game industry, combined with a sense of overwhelming by project scope (Leinnan 2017). Unlike successful mods, the demise of unfinished mods seems to be a poorly documented area in need of further research. Based purely on informal observations, we would suggest that especially for more ambitious projects, mod cancellations are likely to be more frequent than successes. To this, we would add also, that if the causes of these cancellations were to be explored, lack of time caused by a transition to full-time employment (even, perhaps especially, in the game industry) would be a key factor. Whatever the truth behind these speculative observations, the history of *The Deluge* and its sequel bear it out insofar as large team turnovers and occasional lengthy pauses in development can be observed, any of which could have – and still could in the future – result in premature cancellation.

CONCLUSION

Both *The Deluge* and *The Deluge 2* can be seen as an attempt by a financially and professionally marginal group to impose their personal agenda onto the product of more powerful commercial game developers. This imposition is highlighted not in the sense of the modders being somehow in opposition to the desires of commercial game developers, although *The Deluge* had indeed at one point been disrupted by such a conflict. Rather, the modders struggle to impose their agenda because they are working

for free in their spare time and often lacking any game development experience. Especially total conversions, the most content-heavy type of mod, are always an uphill struggle. Given the academic optimism of the possibilities existing within passionate affinity spaces (e.g., Squire 2011; Gee 2013; Majewski 2018), perhaps the struggles of mods like *The Deluge* are worth documenting to somewhat curb this optimism. Even more so, this optimism might be cooled by an attempt to document the struggles of the many mods that are never completed, with the team failing or simply disbanding along the way. While no such study has been conducted so far, it seems probable based on casual observation, that a statistical analysis of mods aggregated on a website such as ModDB would reveal premature cancellation is a more frequent conclusion than success. Such research would be complicated by the difficulty of understanding motivations – while it is easy enough to poll a modding community about why they mod, it clearly becomes much harder to understand the motivations for withdrawal from modding, when the modder in question will often simply disappear from the community. Overall, for scholars exploring mods, inevitably the success stories are both more interesting and more visible, leading to a sort of confirmation bias about the possibilities of modding. But ultimately, we should have no illusions: modding is indeed a challenge, and even if the modders themselves are not likely to be in any way disadvantaged or socioeconomically marginalised compared to non-modding players, they most definitely are marginal, lacking in power and resources, when compared to professional commercial game development. While, to their credit, *The Deluge* team displayed a far greater dedication to authentically presenting their subject matter than the developers of *Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword*, the fact remains that the former took almost a decade to achieve less than the latter accomplished in the space of a year or two simply by virtue of working as a professional, funded game development studio.

Nonetheless, *The Deluge* and its sequel show that to some small part of the Polish public, Sarmatian culture remains an important element of cultural heritage, an element indeed so important that it justifies a decade-long effort from an unfinanced group of volunteer modders. *The Deluge* certainly treated cultural heritage as a core aspect of their product – as, incidentally, did the commercial developers of *WFaS*, though somewhat less successfully. Within the range of developer attitudes towards heritage described by Copplestone (2017) and elsewhere by Majewski (2017), these development teams positioned their efforts at the more authenticity-centric end of the continuum, even if this authenticity was selective.

This desire for authenticity fact highlights the other aspect in which this case exemplifies the margins pushing into, and against, the centre. Polish-Lithuanian cultural heritage, the Sarmatian culture, has without a doubt been marginalised in the present day. All the states of the former PLC area, including Poland, exhibit a somewhat critical view of the Commonwealth era, often emphasising the mistakes, rather than the accomplishments of the period. While the revival of Sarmatian culture, described as a Sarmatian cultural turn by Mochocki (2012b) is real, the counterargument by Kliszcz (2012) concerning the tiny scale of this turn is also valid. Polish-Lithuanian cultural heritage is perhaps pushing in from the margins toward the centre, but the operative word here is indeed *margins*. Cultural mods attempt to engage in Jenkins-esque textual poaching to bring their object of interest to the attention of the centre, but their successes are small and slow. In this case, one of the limits was the emphasis on combat. While focusing on decontextualised combat allowed developers of *The Deluge* to sidestep potential controversies around the internal and external conflicts of the PLC, it also meant the depth of cultural engagement was at all times limited. This in turn means that key aspects of this complex historical and cultural storyworld topic remain firmly in the margins. Given *The Deluge 2* team does not appear interested in pursuing a deeper narrative world, this fact seems unlikely to be changed – at least not by modders.

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