Czech appeal: Use of local themes and settings by a national game industry

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As the costs of game development were rising in the 1990s, most game developers from peripheral regions, including Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), shifted from writing games for the local market towards writing primarily for an international audience. Given the cultural dominance of English-speaking countries, this usually meant tailoring games to the preferences of the generically "Western" or "American" players, erasing most traces of local culture – a phenomenon that Vanderhoef has called "indie games of no nation." (Vanderhoef, 2021) In the last decade or so, however, there has been an observable trend in CEE countries to produce games using local themes or settings, possibly thanks to the massive success of *Witcher 3* (2015), a Polish game with overt references to Polish folklore and culture. Locally-themed production includes games as diverse as the Polish horror adventure *The Medium* (2021), taking place in the ruins of a socialist-era holiday resort near Krakow, or the Russian deck-building adventure game *Black Book* (2020), inspired by the folklore from the Perm region in the Urals. Although this trend is now well-known and literature on it is emerging (Fousek Krobová et al., 2022; Majkowski, 2018), very little work has focused on the production side of such games.

This paper will focus on recent Czech games that use local themes and settings, based on developer interviews and game analysis. This research occupies a previously unexplored intersection of two strands of literature. On the one hand, it follows the work on contemporary local game development scenes (Keogh, 2021; Kerr & Cawley, 2012; Young, 2018). On the other hand, it follows the discussion of games and national culture, and the associated question of what makes a game "French", "Polish", or "British" (Jankowski, 2021; Majkowski, 2018; Webber, 2020). This is not a purely academic discussion, as both EU and national institutions enact or plan policies to support game production as a part of national cultural production (Jørgensen, 2017; Kerr, 2013). From this perspective, such games can be seen as a means of building both national and European cultural identities, similarly to so-called *small nation cinemas*

(Hjort & Petrie, 2007). At the same time, local content has been used for its novelty value or even exoticism, because it helps distinguish local titles from other games within the same genre – with *The Medium* (2021), for example, being a *Silent Hill*-style game, but taking place in post-communist Poland (Fousek Krobová et al., 2022).

In terms of material, this paper will focus on a selection of recent and upcoming Czech titles with local themes and/or settings; we currently plan to use *1428: Shadows over Silesia* (2022), *Hobo: Tough Life* (2021), *Hrot* (early access, 2021), *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), *Last Holiday* (in production), *Scarlet Deer Inn* (in production) and *Someday You'll Return* (2020). We will work with three types of material: (1) interviews with the designers (in case of larger teams, designers responsible for local content, such as writers or level designers), (2) the games themselves (if released), which will be analyzed following the guidelines for game close reading and game analysis (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011; Fernández-Vara, 2015), (3) press interviews and promotional materials for those games. The research will investigate the representation of local themes within the games' content, the developers' motivations for including it, and the process of researching and implementing it in the games. It will also explore the developers' relationship to the local and international gaming communities.

So far, we have conducted two interviews and analyzed a portion of the press material. We will conduct the remaining interviews in Q1-2 2023. According to our preliminary findings, in some cases the inclusion of local themes has been inspired by the success of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), a successful Czech RPG title that takes place in medieval Bohemia. Using local themes is generally seen as practical, as it gives developers easier access to reference material; from the creative point of view, it also allows them to tell more personal stories. However, a significant challenge in using local settings – especially in the case of indie designers using asset stores – is the unavailability of specific local assets (such as Hussite battle wagons in *1428: Shadows over Silesia*) in asset stores. Although all the selected games (with the exception of *Last Holiday*) are aimed at an international market, much of the initial encouragement, support, or crowdfunding comes from the local Czech community, which drives developers to create games that will resonate locally before they might sell abroad. In summary, the preliminary observations show that despite game distribution being primarily global, game production is significantly shaped by local support networks, local tastes, and the local game culture's opinion leaders.

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