Eques Polonus sum.
Intentional and accidental tropes of Polish heritage in Sienkiewicz-themed digital games

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is to employ trifold intentionality theory proposed by Umberto Eco (Eco 1992) combined with Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model (Hall 1973, see also Shaw 2017) to scrutinize methods of embedding Polish national culture tropes in digital game material, and ways players with Polish valence (Kłoskowska 1996, see below) identify them and explain their meaning to non-Polish players. Confronting explicit developers' statements (as expressions of *intentio auctoris*), with players' interpretations available online (trope of *intentio lectoris*) and in-depth analyses of games in question conducted in good faith (to uncover *intentio operis*), we aim to answer three questions:

1. Which parts of national heritage are intentionally implemented by developers?

2. Which elements of national heritage identified in the game are considered in need of explaining to international community, by players with valid national valence (ie. players who adopted the national culture in question as their own)?

3. What national heritage tropes present in games are omitted from both discourses, considered transparent by developers and players, and how do they relate to intentionally highlighted motifs?

We propose to address the ways of decoding and encoding Polish cultural tropes through the discourse and game content analyses. First, we will study developers' statements, focusing on deliberate decisions of embedding the national heritage elements into the design and describing methods of encoding Polish culture for an international audience. Secondly, we will analyse players' interpretations of given elements, with special attention given to tropes players publicly declaring Polish valence considered intentionally highlighted in the game, and the way they are presented and explained to non-Polish users on popular internet platforms, such as Reddit, Facebook and YouTube. Finally, we will interpret the games themselves, highlighting the presence of Polish national heritage tropes, both already identified by either producers or player community, and overlooked or considered too obvious to be explained.

The analysis will be based on four games based on books by Henryk Sienkiewicz, Polish novelist and 1095 Nobel Prize in Literature winner. His so-called *Trilogy,* written in 1884-88 and set in the 17th Century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, are central to the formation of Polish national identity (Czapliński 2015, see also Majkowski et al. 2023). Sometimes criticized as xenophobic and catering to Polish megalomania, Sienkiewicz's books heavily influenced Polish popular history, forming what Michał Mochocki recently called "historical storyworld" (Mochocki 2021) of Polish 17th Century: narrative of Polish heroism at the zenith of Rzeczpospolita's power, embellished with action, especially sabre-fighting. The storyworld goes beyond Sienkiewicz himself, and multiple movie adaptations, with novels, TV series, reconstruction events, and a vibrant fan community celebrating so-called Sarmatian culture of Polish nobility.

The four games selected allow to highlight different attitudes towards Sarmatian heritage. In *The Witcher 3*: *Hearts of Stone* (CD Project Red 2015), Sienkiewicz's tropes are adapted to fit the fantasy world of the Continent, with clear references to the movie adaptations, and without any attempts at historicity. Contrary, *Hellish Quart* (Kubold 2022), a sabre-fighting simulator, is a serious project highlighting its historical veracity and combat realism. *Mount & Blade: With Fire & Sword* (TaleWorld Entertainment 2011) is a stand-alone expansion of the original *Mount & Blade*, designed by Turkish developers, adapted for Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth setting by Ukrainian studio and released by Swedish company - ie., created by three nations depicted as enemies in various parts of Sienkiewicz's *Trilogy*. Finally, *With Fire And Sword: Spiders* is an ironic mini-game inside *Observer* (Bloober Team 2017), parodying 8-bit aesthetics. Together, they present very different attitudes towards the same source material, providing us with the opportunity to compare common and divergent intentions towards presenting Polish heritage via digital game.

Given games will be analysed according to the game-language research method, based on the Bakhtinian theoretical framework adapted to study digital games (Majkowski 2019). The method allows to single out ideological threads underlying game design and tie it to pre-existing discursive formations: it will serve here to identify threads of national Polish culture and relate them to pre-existing concepts and cultural works. Confronted with developers' and players' discourses, the analysis

will uncover parts of national heritage not highlighted by either group, to catalogue unintentional national tropes (or intended by the works themselves).

Focusing on three aspects of intentionality, and four games differently approaching the same source material, we wish to present aspects of Polish heritage commonly considered important and worth of exposition, tropes unintentionally bleeding into a game set in historical storyworld, and differences in the attitude towards ideology of Polishness. We also aim at testing and presenting the analytical tool developed to scrutinize the complex relationship between digital games and national cultures, contributing to the growing field of research on games, nationalities and cultural heritage.

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