

What Is a National Video Game?

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INTRODUCTION

In 2020 a project to study the Polishness of video games received funding from the National Science Center, and a number of commenters decried this as a waste of public money (Majkowski and Hekman 2020). Indeed, it may seem self-explanatory that *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015) is a Polish game, or that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios 2018) is a Czech game. However, it probably does not seem so obvious that *Baldur's Gate III* (Larian Studios 2023) is a Belgian game, as claimed by Belgium's news media service (*The Brussels Times* 2023) and foreign affairs ministry (*Focus on Belgium* 2023). All this begs the question: on what grounds does one decide on the national status of video games?

Many researchers are now associating video games with nation-states (Kristensen 2023; Navarro-Remesal and Pérez-Latorre 2022; Penix-Tadsen 2019; Swalwell 2021; Švelch 2019; Wolf 2021). Their work highlights underrecognized titles and undermines the view that video games are essentially global. At the same time, it is important to challenge the assumption that national status is inherently built into video games and that it can be objectively observed. This has been done with regard to countries such as the United Kingdom (Webber, 2020), Japan (Fiadotau 2021), South Africa (van der Merwe 2021), and China (Li & Li 2023). This paper contributes to that scholarship by focusing on the concept of the national video game itself, rather than on the games tied to a particular country. It proposes a way to organize the academic study of the relationship between video games and nation-states, but it also proposes a solution to practical classification problems that appear in preparing national game databases.

The paper presents the results of a team study. My colleagues and I began by consulting a working list of about twenty database categories prepared by another research team (see acknowledgments). That list had itself been based on an overview of existing video game databases and contained such categories as title, release date, developer, director, platform, or engine. After comparing the list with the outcomes of our own review of the available academic literature, we decided to distinguish just five general categories. Their tentative names are as follows: 1. developer, 2. game world (including 2.1. location and 2.2. cultural references), 3. language, 4. gameplay, 5. target audience and marketing. (These categories are types rather than classes, and so they are not all mutually exclusive.)

In the next step we applied our categories more systematically to the academic literature. We purposively selected ten publications – eight journal articles and two

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book chapters – representing several different countries, mostly in Central and Eastern Europe. For every publication, we noted whether each category was represented or not, that is, whether the publication discussed game developers, game worlds, etc. Whenever a category was represented, we took notes of how this was done. The procedure allowed us to analyze the representations of our categories across different publications. Basing on that analysis and internal discussions, we compiled a written description of the definitional issues related to each category. Finally, we read several additional publications to supplement our descriptions with further information.

A typical publication in our corpus describes games related to a particular country but does not examine this relation. Instead, the choice of games is based on an implicit understanding of what makes them Polish, Czech, etc. The most frequent marker of national status is that the game's developer is based in a certain country, but it is rarely clarified what this specifically means: the location of the legal entity (and the country that receives the taxes), the funding sources, the location of the (main) studio, or the ethnic and cultural background of the company's owners and workforce. These issues may be less problematic in older games, which were often created by individuals, but they come to the fore in many contemporary games produced by transnational companies and international teams, with widespread outsourcing. For instance, when the multinational team of Donkey Crew left Northern Ireland to set up a company in Wrocław, Poland, did Donkey Crew abruptly become a Polish developer?

The second most frequent marker is that the game deals with national history, geography, or culture. This may be salient in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* or *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, or in *Crossbow Warrior – The Legend of William Tell* (MobyDick Games 2015), where the player controls the most famous Swiss hero. But the world of *Baldur's Gate III* does not have any marked relationship with Belgium; it can be connected much more easily to the USA's culture via *Dungeons & Dragons*. And while *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* (Eidos Montréal 2016) is set in the alternative Czech Republic, its developer is based in Canada and is part of a company operating from Sweden. Therefore, the two main national markers can sometimes lead us in opposite directions. Another issue is illustrated by *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019): with all its references to fascism and communism, is it an Estonian game in the game-world sense, or rather an Eastern European one?

The remaining three categories are much less represented in our corpus but they still bear a certain weight. For example, the use of original game engines in Central and Eastern Europe could be considered a sign of local specificity (Vanderhoef 2021), and some titles developed in Poland have been shaped by a tension between dominant heroic gameplay conventions and the local tragic modes of cultural memory (Sterczewska 2016).

Overall, the paper puts an emphasis on examples from Central and Eastern Europe, in line with the recent attempts to increase the visibility of games associated with that region (Mochocki, Schreiber, Majewski, & Kot, forthcoming). It also proposes a more general conceptualization of national video games, drawing from game studies publications that represent various geographical and theoretical standpoints. At the same time, this is not an attempt to provide one binding definition of a national video game – game scholars need different definitions for different purposes, and they need to keep updating their definitions to match the changes in culture if not in games

themselves (Arjoranta 2019). Rather, it is an attempt to demonstrate the diversity of what we may include when conducting academic studies or creating game databases. The presented categories focus on the design and production side of games, not on the reception side; the goal here is to propose a list of game elements that can be important to different people, who can imbue the same elements with different interpretations. Finally, the paper assumes that video games should not be studied in exactly the same way as novels or films, but there is likely some overlap in certain areas – this is a matter for further study.

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