

God's Playground: On Polish History, Games, and Discourses

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INTRODUCTION

In 1981 British historian Norman Davies published a book titled *God's Playground*, presenting a unique perspective on Polish history. The title, derived from the works of Polish 16th Century poet Jan Kochanowski, highlights the specific position of Poland as a “stage” or a “playground” – a country “where fate has frequently played mischievous tricks and where a lively sense of humor has always formed an essential item of equipment in the national survival kit” (Davies 1982, xvi). With the emergence of digital games, the idea of a history-as-a-playground comes to life, as historical events are routinely “played out” by contemporary players in history-themed games (see Schwarz 2020).

While number of titles based on historical events exists within the genre of historical games (Chapman 2016), not all of them are equally accepted by historians and the general public as a valid representation of the past. Multiple history-themed games are accused of historical inaccuracies and simplifications, and questioned in the broader context of the possibility of adapting historical events into the medium of games (Bomba 2007, Kansteiner 2017, Pötzsch and Šisler 2019), revealing ongoing tensions between the ludic paradigm and the seriousness of historical research (Chapman 2016), but also illuminating the ideological assumptions behind the way popular history and public memory are constructed and utilized (Hammar 2016, Pfister 2020).

The aim of the presentation is to analyze the Polish discourse regarding games about Polish history, as informed by an ongoing debate on historical games and tensions between “game conventions and dominant discourses of Polish cultural memory”

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(Sterczewski 2016), and to unravel professional and popular assumptions about the way historical discourse should be constructed, distributed, and consumed. The goal of this meta-study is to map which aspects of the historical discourse implemented into discussed games, are considered historically truthful and correct, and which elements are regarded as false and inaccurate. This, in turn, will allow us to analyze how historical myth and ideological perspectives are either strengthened or weakened by the discourses on digital games.

As the preliminary research indicates, most Polish arguments regarding historical accuracy focus on games set in two historical periods: either 17th Century, or Second World War, with particular focus on the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, pointing out the importance of those two periods in Polish public memory.

Regarding 17th Century, the focus of the criticism is the portrayal of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, in games such as *Medieval II: Total War* (Creative Assembly 2006), *Mount and Blade: With Fire and Sword* (TaleWorld Entertainment 2011) or *Hellish Quart* (Kubold 2022). According to numerous popular authors, the aforementioned games help to deepen the knowledge about Polish history through the accurate depiction of events, correctly constructed maps featuring actual Polish cities, or detailed and realistic historical atmosphere, all well-suited to the medium of digital games (see Łaskiewicz 2021). What is however, omitted, is that the presented vision of 17th century is informed by popular literature, especially Henryk Sienkiewicz's books written to "warm up Polish hearts" during the times of Partitions, and, presenting romanticized and retrotopic perspective of the past (Niedźwiedź 2015). Considering those games as historically accurate, critics often accept the representation based on nostalgic re-collection of the period as true (see Jameson 1991), strengthening the myths and glamourizing the bygone epoch (Majkowski et al. 2023).

The second popular topic is more controversial. As highlighted by critics, it is difficult to present the tragic events of the Second World War (especially the Warsaw Uprising), through the medium of games, due to the inevitable clash between the possibility of winning, and the tragic conclusion of actual events (the Uprising was violently crushed). Therefore, while the Uprising is often considered an event easily adapted on the game narrative (as a story of the honorable few fighting against the great evil) or visual level (utilizing easily recognizable visual symbols like Fighting Poland Anchor, see Napiórkowski 2016), it is considered difficult to justly represent the event through game rules. Analyzed authors criticize tabletop game *Mali Powstańcy* (Little Insurgents, Miłunski 2009), for turning "the story about Warsaw's tragedy into an optimistic tale about a bunch of smart scouts tricking the sluggish Nazi German war machine" (Schreiber 2017); or digital game *Enemy Front* (CI Games 2014) for choosing the convention of a first-person shooter to represent the tragic battle (Schreiber 2017). Therefore, almost paradoxically, the sole game praised by the critics, is *Warsaw Rising: City of Heroes* (Pixelated Milk 2019), a turn-based strategy game that cannot be won.

Through the universal rejection of the alternate histories in which the Uprising emerges triumphant, the critics strengthen established discourse surrounding the Uprising as honorable defeat, embracing the tragedy and inevitability of failure, considering them as far more important than the gaming conventions. Instead, they follow institutionalized memory of the event, supporting the *Gloria Victis* (Glory to the

vanquished) motto, and the ideology of honorable death (see Janion 1998, Kobielska 2016), deeply anchored in Polish culture.

The presented study allows to pinpoint the aspects of historical discourse considered pivotal by the general audience and map out the attitude towards the past presented by professional and amateur game critics. As such, it highlights the importance of historical games and the game-related discourse to the public memory in semi-peripheral country, as well as the durability of national myths, renewed by the idea of playing out historical events.

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