

By the Law of the Wolf. *Werewolf: The Apocalypse. Heart of the Forest* between global, national and fictional

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ABSTRACT

Released originally in 1992, *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (White Wolf 1992) is the most openly political installment of the *World of Darkness* tabletop RPG franchise, balancing the personal horror with the strong ecological message, rooted in late-20-century environmentalism, the New Age spirituality and second-wave feminism (Zarzycka 2009). While criticized for tokenization of non-Western cultures (Long 2016), the game nevertheless provided a narrative framework to explore themes of personal identity vis-a-vis political issues of systemic marginalization, climate crisis and personal agency (Bourgault du Coudray 2003, Cate 2018, Zarzycka 2009, 2019). While never quite as popular as *Vampire: The Masquerade* (White Wolf 1991), *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* inspired several tie-ins, including the collectible card game, series of comic books, and digital games.

In this study, we will analyze *WtA: Heart of the Forest*, a visual novel based on *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, produced by Polish studio Different Tales and released in

2020¹. We aim to focus on the ways the pre-existing tabletop RPG provides a platform to address contemporary political tensions, universalize national issues, and challenge the human vs. nature trope by setting the game in a contact zone (Pratt 2008, Haraway 2010, Sugiera 2023). Following postcolonial ecocriticism (Mukhejee 2024), the concept of playable cultural memory (Potsch and Sisler 2019, Caselli et al 2023) and the intertextual semiotics (Riffatere 1978, 1985, Katsaridou and Thibault 2016, Majkowski 2016, 2019) to track down how the original RPG and local cultural heritage interact, we will examine how the game explore hybrid identities, build around major political and cultural tensions from the Polish public discourse of the late 2010-ties, and blurs the lines between public and private, past and presence, local and global, and fictional and authentic.

The game combines two major sources: the mechanics and the rich lore of *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* and press releases reporting on the political protests taking place in Poland in 2017, mixing in the legacy of anti-communist guerrilla fighters, so called Cursed Soldiers, an important and highly divisive part of contemporary Polish public memory (Kobielska 2016, Kończal 2020). The narrative is set in a village in Eastern Poland surrounded by the last primeval forest of Europe: a contact zone of Polish and Belarussian cultures. The main character, Maia Boroditch, is a young Polish-American woman in the search of her roots and source of a dream, soon to discover she hails from the werewolf family serving as protectors of the forest, and that her grandfather was possibly guilty of war crimes against civilians. Upon arriving in the Forest, she also gets involved in an environmentalists' protest against the logging, framed as a part of her hereditary werewolf duties.

This way the game utilizes the tabletop RPG lore not only to address the real-life environmental crisis, but to highlight fundamental similarities of two seemingly unrelated political issues. The activists protesting the logging operation are also werewolves, and internally divided regarding the means of the protests: there is a confrontational, violence-prone group of local activists, and a more diplomatic, tech-savvy team from Berlin, seeking a peaceful resolution. By combining tribal affiliation introduced by *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* with national identities, the game manages to highlight the difference of means and goals between central and peripheral ecological movements (see Mukherjee 2024) without reducing it to nationalistic stereotypes.

Similar is the treatment of Cursed Soldiers: the divisive subject strongly associated with the right wing is tied to werewolf suprematism from *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* lore to introduce the ethnic dimension to environmentalism. While real-life Polish guerilla fighters are often accused of war crimes based on ethnicity and religion (namely, murdering people of Belarussian and Jewish descent, see Kończal 2020), in-game atrocities are presented as werewolves taking extreme measure to protect the forest from human settlers, reversing the historical colonizer-colonized dynamics and tying it to the present-day question of environmental protests.

Heart of the Forest navigates political complexity introduced by entangling fictional and real-life issues through the mechanics of character creation. The game does not

¹ In 2024 a sequel was released, centered around the refugee crisis in the same area. Fascinating and important as it is, it will be left out of this analysis due to different narrative focus.

follow rules of *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, eliminating skill-based checks in favour of resource management: the player is balancing Maia's Health, Willpower and Rage to unlock various narrative choices and accumulate points in several mental traits. At the end of the game, the player is selecting a werewolf tribe and is assigned a role based on final traits composition. This reverses the order of the tabletop RPG, where the entire process is part of pre-game character creation. To a degree, the game is therefore a prolonged character creation experience, replacing fixed and arbitrary choices with the fluidity and hybridity of "role-playing as a character".

Maia is an epitome of an unstable, contact zone subject from the very beginning. She self-describes as Polish, though the character sheet calls her "American". She confesses of having Jewish roots, and carries distinctly Belarussian surname, recorded on a family gravestone with Cyrillic alphabet. Inadvertently, she is also a werewolf: a liminal creature traditionally serving as vehicles for stories about transformation and hybridity (Chappell 2007, McMahon-Coleman & Weaver 2012). In the course of the game, her identity is challenged and reshaped, only to take a final form at the very end - and different narrative choices result in different outcomes. This way the game reduces personal agency in the identity development: as it happens through the series of narrative choices with uncertain outcomes, the player does not have full control over the creation process. This way *Heart of the Forest* utilizes one of the core RPG mechanics to contemplate the political aspects of personal identities.

Heart of the Forest differs from the original RPG in one additional regard: it does not use fantasy fiction as a metaphor for political issues. Instead, it combines game lore and mechanics with a direct treatment of contemporary politics, to highlight the way personal identities are shaped in the contact zone, at the crossroads of Western and Eastern Europe, where national and ethnic blurs. This way it addresses the local aspect of global climate catastrophe, and presents serious questions about the limits of environmental activism in the Global North.

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