

(Semi-)Peripheral Gameplay in Video Games

Stanisław Krawczyk

University of Wrocław

Poland

stanislaw.krawczyk@uwor.edu.pl

Keywords

centers and peripheries, game industries, memory culture, regional game studies

Since about the mid-2010s (Wolf 2015), many scholars have been associating video games with countries or regions other than the traditional centers. Instead of the USA and Japan, these scholars have been interested in Europe (Navarro-Remesal and Pérez-Latorre 2022), Asia (Kang et al. 2024), or Latin America (Penix-Tadsen 2016). That trend has focused on game production and game worlds much more than on gameplay. Perhaps this is fully justified; perhaps in (semi-)peripheral game industries, that is to say in most places in the world, gameplay conventions are a rigid external form, which can hardly be modified locally but which can be filled with partly local content. In that sense the development of video games with national or regional references in smaller game industries would mirror the origins of the modern novel in the peripheries of the global literary system (Moretti 2000).

Or perhaps gameplay in (semi-)peripherally developed video games can also be affected by local circumstances. This is my main thesis, which I will support with examples related largely to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), one of the regions that are increasingly visible in game studies (Kristensen 2023; Mochocki et al. 2024). I will refer to existing research by focusing on three areas: platforms, fighting mechanics, and the relationship with national memory culture. I will also conduct my own analysis of a free short game *Art Parable* (Team Epic-C 2024).

From the perspective of platform studies, it is interesting that many CEE game developers used to develop their own game engines, producing visuals or physics different to those of the mainstream engines like Unity and Unreal (Vanderhoef 2021). In a similar vein, the use of personal computers rather than consoles seems to have encouraged a number of Czech game developers to produce titles containing complex, stat-based gameplay or aspiring to a high degree of realism (Šisler, Švelch, and Šlerka 2017).

Fighting mechanics may be particularly reflective of the aspirations to realism and authenticity. These aspirations have been expressed directly by the developers of the cRPG *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios 2018); set in 15th-century Bohemia, the game has been advertised as an accurate simulation of melee combat (Pfister 2019). Furthermore, *Hellish Quart* (Kubold 2021), whose development is led by a Pole, is a fighting game and thus puts an even stronger stress on melee combat.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Drawing some of its popularity from the importance of Sarmatism and saber-fighting in Polish culture, the game is also enmeshed with a version of Sarmatian ideology (Majkowski, Kozyra, and Prokopek 2023).

Ideological entanglements of gameplay have been well examined in game studies – one example is the concept of procedural rhetoric. In the context of (semi-)peripheral game industries, one important entanglement is that between gameplay and a memory culture which emphasizes historical failures. Polish game scholars have noted that the focus of video games on winning is in keeping with the globalized culture of the United States, which celebrates victories much more than Poland's culture does. In the latter, locally produced games about national history often reference tragic losses (particularly in the Second World War and the Warsaw Uprising) but they still strive to offer their players the conventional experience of success – for instance, by omitting the broader context and focusing on small victories. And yet exceptions can be found, such as *This War of Mine* (11bit studios 2014), where the survival-oriented gameplay is in line with a less pronounced part of Polish memory culture, which commemorates civilian casualties of war (Schweiger 2015; Sterczewska 2016b). Notably, analogous issues seem to occur in boardgames (Sterczewska 2016a).

As my own analytical example, I will discuss a small game *Art Parable*, created during a cultural game jam in the AROs Aarhus Art Museum in Denmark (the game jam has been part of the EPIC-WE project, which is funded by Horizon Europe). The narrator of the game encourages the player to complete an idyllic painting by clicking on a few thematically relevant elements, like a farmhouse or a sheep. If the player chooses to go against the narrator's wishes and rip the painting apart in selected places, unsettling events happen and finally a war breaks out in the background. *Art Parable* may be seen as a comment on game interactivity itself – like the internationally recognizable title *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013), from which it derives its name – but also as a locally relevant satirical comment on the romanticization of history in 19th-century Danish landscape paintings (and in their present-day exhibitions).

Two limitations of this study are that the examples above are all confined to Europe (mostly Central and Eastern Europe) and that there is no analysis of gameplay experiences. To present some of the ways in which these limitations might be addressed in future studies, I will conclude with a reference to Emil Lundedal Hammar's examination of counter-hegemonic commemorative play in *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Quebec 2014), a game set in the historical French colony of Saint-Domingue – today's Haiti (Hammar 2017).

REFERENCES

- Hammar, Emil L. 2017. "Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play: Marginalized Past and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*." *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*. 21 (3): 372-395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256622>
- Galactic Café. 2013. *The Stanley Parable*.
- Kang, Yowei, Kenneth C. C. Yang, Michał Mochocki, Jakub Majewski, and Paweł Schreiber, eds. 2024. *Asian Histories and Heritages in Video Games*. London: Routledge.

- Kristensen, Lars. 2023. "Gaming Eastern Europe: Production, Distribution and Consumption." *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*. 14 (1): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2023.2149122>
- Kubold. 2021. *Hellish Quart*.
- Majkowski, Tomasz Z., Magdalena Kozyra, and Aleksandra Prokopek. 2023. "Finish – Spare the Shame: Realism of Hellish Quart and Alt-Sarmatian Ideology." *Games and Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231210599>
- Mochocki, Michał, Paweł Schreiber, Jakub Majewski, and Yaraslau I. Kot, eds. 2024. *Central and Eastern European Histories and Heritages in Video Games*. London: Routledge.
- Moretti, Franco. 2000. "Conjectures on World Literature." *New Left Review* 1 (1): 54–68. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii1/articles/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature>
- Navarro-Remesal, Víctor, and Óliver Pérez-Latorre, eds. 2022. *Perspectives on the European Videogame*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Penix-Tadsen, Phillip, 2016. *Cultural Code: Video Games and Latin America*. Cambridge, MA – London: The MIT Press.
- Pfister, Eugen. 2019. "Kingdom Come: Deliverance: A Bohemian Forest Simulator." *Gamevironments*. 11: 142–148.
- Schweiger, Bartłomiej. 2015. "Relacje władzy w polu wytwórstwa gier komputerowych." *Czas Kultury*. 31 (2): 104–110.
- Šisler, Vít, Jaroslav Švelch, and Josef Šlerka. 2017. "Video Games and the Asymmetry of Global Cultural Flows: The Game Industry and Game Culture in Iran and the Czech Republic." *International Journal of Communication*. 11 (1): 3857–3879. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6200>
- Sterczewska, Klara. (Writing as Sterczewski, Piotr.) 2016a. "Replaying the Lost Battles: the Experience of Failure in Polish History-Themed Board Games." *Kinephanos*, no. April, 71–89. <https://www.kinephanos.ca/2016/replaying-the-lost-battles/>
- . 2016b. "This Uprising of Mine: Game Conventions, Cultural Memory and Civilian Experience of War in Polish Games." *Game Studies*. 16 (2). <https://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/sterczewski>
- Team Epic-C. 2024. *Art Parable*.
- Ubisoft Quebec. 2014. *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*.
- Vanderhoef, John. 2021. "Indie Games of No Nation: The Transnational Indie Imaginary and the Occlusion of National Markers." In *Game History and the Local*, edited by Melanie Swalwell, 159–176. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Warhorse Studios. 2018. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.
- Wolf, Mark J. P., ed., 2015. *Video Games around the World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 11bit studios. 2014. *This War of Mine*.