

Folklore-driven representations of femininity in Slavic-coded video games: the figure of Baba Yaga

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cultural gerontology, ageism, femininity, Slavic folklore, representation, video games, Baba Yaga, paratextuality, agency

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The aim of my paper is to present the analysis of a selection of the Slavic-themed video games published or produced after 2015 that utilise traditional Central and East European folklore as the main worldbuilding inspiration and include – either in the gameplay material and/or in the paratextual materials available before the publication of the game – the depiction of Baba Yaga.

I approach the figure of Baba Yaga as a representation of femininity that could be deconstructed in the framework of cultural and social gerontology (Chi 2011, Holzberg 2021, Luborsky and Sankar 1993, Marshall 2022, Samanta 2017, Shrauf 2009, Twigg 2015, Twigg and Martin 2015). While there are numerous studies on the elderly as players (eg. Dogruel et al. 2013) and the games for the elderly (eg. Li and Ren 2018), there seem to be significantly less literature focused solely on the representation of this demographic in video games, specifically when it comes to the representation of geriatric femininity (eg. Dill et al. 2005, Williams et al. 2009, Rughiniş and Toma 2011, Rughiniş, Rughiniş, and Elisabeta 2016) which should be studied independently, given the double standard of ageing (Sontag 1972), and with the use of specific critical tools (Rughiniş, Rughiniş, and Elisabeta 2016). I find the topic of the representation of elderly or aging women important and worth studying; even more so in the light of the recent *Witcher 4* announcement controversy with the vocal disappointment expressed on social platforms at the main character being a grown up female that fails to present as a teenage girl.

Published between 2015 and 2024, the games discussed are, as follows: *Eventide* (The House of Fables, 2015), *Yaga* (Breadcrumbs Interactive, 2019), *Black Book* (Morteshka, 2021), *Night is Coming* (Night Forest Studio, 2025), *Scarlett Deer Inn* (Attu Games, 2024), *Blacktail* (Parasight, 2022), *Reka* (Emberstorm Entertainment, 2024), and *The End of the Sun* (The End of the Sun Team, 2025) (as some of the games are currently

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still in the production phase, in their case I have analysed available paratextual materials or demo versions).

Originally a folklore character of ambiguous nature, Baba Yaga has been widely recognised as a uniquely Slavic entity, which may contribute to her implementation in the games that are coded as Slavic, even though in some of the analysed titles her function is highly limited, which could perhaps suggest only the perfunctory, allegatory intertextuality (Mochocka 2022) employed for the sake of marketing visibility. Some of the titles mentioned, however, use Baba Yaga as a crucial existent of the gameworld or the playable character. In all of the above instances, my interest is first and foremost in the relationships between: 1. the traditional folklore depictions of Baba Yaga as discernible in folk tales and the scholarly (literary studies, folklore studies etc.) discussion and codification of the same, 2. the contemporary popcultural depictions, and 3. the Baba Yaga characters in the above mentioned games and their position in the framework of the mythos and ethos of the games' worlds, specifically when it comes to the question of agency (Bódi 2023, Cole and Gillies 2021, Cole 2018, Domsch 2013, Frasca 2001, Muriel and Crawford 2020). The analysis concerns semiotic aspects of the characters such as their visual design as well as their gameplay functions, while the discussion of the findings relies on cultural gerontology.

Throughout the ages, Baba Yaga has been ambiguous in that she either acts as an evil enemy of humankind, or as a helper that takes care of her people. What does not change, however, is that Baba Yaga is an elderly woman – and her depictions always highlight what a given interpretive community thinks of women past their reproductive stage. Her exaggerated, symbolic image may serve as a litmus test for what is, and what is not, accepted in an elderly woman (as it has always been). The preliminary findings show different strategies adopted by design studios in question, from fairly conventional repetition of well-grounded folk tropes to their creative re-appropriation. While re-appropriation and re-telling of the folk or fairy tales material (Eladhari 2018, Joosen 2011) is nothing new in culture (e.g. Angela Carter, Andrzej Sapkowski) and video games design (e.g. *The Path*, *Tale of Tales*, 2009), my special interest here is in the possible relationship between playability (aka adaptation into a medium that allows interaction) and changing – or upkeeping – traditional Slavic folklore tropes. Therefore, other than the above mentioned features of the Baba Yagas themselves, I also analyse their relationships with other elements of the gameworld, including – first and foremost – the player controlled character, to find out what range of agency the Baba Yagas have and how it correlates with other parameters such as their visual design. My preliminary findings show that old age seems to be a feature that – even in the games that situate Baba Yaga as a helper – should not be salient, as her character is often made look significantly young (Reka) or is young (Blacktail), or her age-related features are coded as comical (Yaga) or evoking sympathy by recalling weakness (Eventide). The characters with the most agency are invariably young-coded. As Twing and Martin (2015, 355) say, “cultural fields thus become central territory for the changing negotiation of age”, yet as it seems, deeply rooted assumptions concerning elderly women appear to be stable.

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