

Rendering Romania. A Corpus-Based Analysis of Othering in Video Games

Vlad Pojoga

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu
5-7 Victoriei Boulevard
Sibiu, Romania
vlad.pojoga@ulbsibiu.ro

Maria Chiorean

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu
5-7 Victoriei Boulevard
Sibiu, Romania
maria.chiorean@ulbsibiu.ro

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“Romania. 2000. Objective status updated.” This is how *Hitman: Contracts* (Eidos Interactive 2004) opens up, with an abrupt mission briefing that turns an entire country into a target zone. Naturally, it is what one expected when starting a stealth video game from the POV of a highly skilled assassin. What you don’t expect, though, is how before any context can settle, Romania appears as a shorthand for an “other” space: dark, peripheral, where random characters depicted as mentally ill people ramble in Moldavian accents (“No, I’m not mad, these guys have all sorts of twins downstairs in the cellar, they are manufacturing them like cars, believe me”) and where medical staff talk about people as if they were cars (“This one has a broken carburetor, I’ll fix him and I’ll change the oil as well”). The Romanian language, heard here mostly by real-life players who do not understand it, is gritty, fragmented, and serves not as cultural specificity, but as atmosphere: a soundscape of chaos and pathology. In these first scenes, Romania becomes less a place and more an aesthetic of otherness as routine strangeness, where the player learns to see Eastern Europe through a filter of fear, decay, and narrative disposability. All this while, ironically, passing through the hallways and rooms of a state-of-the-art medical institution that for anyone living in Romania in the early 2000s would seem more science fiction than reality.

Hitman: Contracts is far from alone in this strategy. Over the last few decades, the action of several video games has been set in Romania or, more specifically,

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Transylvania. While some are the work of Romanian companies (*Black the Fall*, Square Enix 2017) and others have been created by foreign developers (*Resident Evil Village*, Capcom 2021, *Castlevania*, Konami 1984-2004, the upcoming *Age of Zalmoxis*, or *Hitman: Contracts* itself), the common denominator is their reliance on a limited number of tropes or aesthetic choices they associate with Romanian history. They range from medieval rulers who inspired the myth of Dracula to the more recent communist experience and from eerie folk to Eastern European hardmen, seemingly in a restrictive typology loop. In game studies, these narratives are already being investigated from the viewpoint of cultural representation, cultural geography (Ash & Gallacher 2011), and cultural heritage (Balela & Mundy 2011), with a focus on issues like cultural appropriation, exoticization, or Westernization: for example, Šisler (2008) and El-Nasr et al. (2008) have discussed the depiction of the Middle East and Muslim identity; Bembeneck (2013) has written about the homogenization of “barbarian” peoples in narratives set in ancient Rome; and Fung (2014) has problematized the tension between national identity and cultural hybridization in game development. Video games referencing Romania or Romanianness constitute a prime candidate for this kind of analysis, since so many of them use the space and the associated cultural identity as a narrative device. Multiple scholars have addressed this very phenomenon, writing about the problematic combination of “Romanian cultural markers” and American architecture in *Resident Evil Village* (Martin 2021), about “Balkanist villages” and their ahistorical domestication (Nae 2025), or about dystopified and commodified communism (Réti 2023).

These approaches highlight the world-building mechanisms that contribute to the hegemonic image of Romanianness in video games, allowing us to extract and compare them. However, most studies resort to “close reading” (the detailed analysis of a single game) and borrow from cultural studies and anthropology to formulate their critique. What remains underexplored is the larger pattern, i.e. the array of tropes and ideological dominants shared across seemingly unrelated titles. In other words, not just how one game constructs Romania as other, but to what cumulative effect is this construction reproduced. To address this, we propose a quantitative and typological analysis of an extended corpus: video games (1) set at least partially in Romania or featuring Romanian characters, (2) developed by foreign studios, which provide “hetero-images” of Romanianness – “those images which characterize the Other” (Beller & Leerssen 2007). Since no comprehensive database indexes narrative location in videogames, our list will combine Wikipedia lists of games set in Romania with those set in Transylvania. Our goal is to establish a dataset substantial enough to reveal recurrent narrative and aesthetic patterns beyond anecdotal evidence.

We plan to examine how Romanian intersectional identity and spatiality are narratively and visually constructed: whether locations are historically situated or instead collapse periods into a timeless collage; whether Romanian characters are individualized or reduced to anonymous groups of NPCs; whether language appears as meaningful communication, as fragmented atmospheric noise, or replaced altogether by accented English; and whether specific cultural references are deployed in ways that would be legible to Romanian players but opaque to international audiences. Ultimately, this study aims to trace how representational habits emerge and circulate, and approaches Romania and Romanianness as a dynamic case study for the sometimes predictable, otherwise surprising overlap of geopolitical imagination, commercial genre expectations, and local culture.

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