

Hussars of Might and Magic: The Influence of Gaming Media on Polish Gaming Canons

Krzysztof Olszamowski

AGH University of Krakow
ul. Czarnowiejska 36/C7
30-054 Krakow

kolszamow@agh.edu.pl

Anna Kożuch, Krzysztof Mroczek

AGH University of Krakow
ul. Czarnowiejska 36/C7
30-054 Krakow

akożuch@student.agh.edu.pl, kmroczek@student.agh.edu.pl

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to consider the specificity of nostalgic narratives in Polish gaming journalism through a critical analysis of new Polish-language publications about *Heroes of Might & Magic III* (3DO, 1999) against the background of original press reviews. Much of the existing research on nostalgia for retro games will also be relevant to Polish gaming culture (Becker & Trigg, 2024; Whalen & Taylor, 2008; Wulf et al., 2018). It should be noted, however, that as a result of political transformation, the Polish market opened to video games during the extremely dynamic development of the industry in the 1990s, focusing on the PC gaming segment due to the lack or limited official distribution of consoles (Ciszek 2024). Most of the games that shaped Polish gamers at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries belonged to the following genres: cRPG, real-time strategy and turn-based strategy (Krawczyk, 2015). Press reviews play an important role in shaping awareness of games (Zagal et al., 2009). For Polish gamers at the turn of the century, the extensive range of specialist press publications was particularly significant (Staszenko-Chojnacka, 2021), as it was both a source of knowledge about games and a relatively cheap way to access full versions of older games and demos of new releases.

Researchers have already studied the popularity of certain games in specific countries or regions, due to their local culture, economic factors, state media policy and the institutional organization of e-sports. Such cases include the phenomenon of the *FIFA* series and similar football-themed games throughout Africa (GeoPoll, 2024), *StarCraft II* in South Korea (Rea, 2018), and *CS: GO* in Brazil (Menasce, 2017). For this reason, we believe that when writing about nostalgia for games in Poland, it will be valuable

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to take into account local objects of nostalgia (Makai, 2018) and the romanticization of cult titles (Bosman, 2023), limiting the influence of global discourses.

We want to examine changes in the Polish video game criticism community through qualitative content analysis and discursive analysis of critical texts devoted to *HoMM 3*, a title that has left an indelible mark on Polish culture and gaming history. The number of guides and fan content, including memes, created over the past 25 years proves that the game enjoys cult status among Polish gamers. What is more, the local character of this discourse is specific to it – although the game is recognized worldwide, only in Eastern Europe does its fandom continue to be active in tournaments and modding (e.g. h3.gg). Therefore, we want to draw conclusions about the media success of *HoMM3* on Polish soil. We are interested in the role that the original reviews published on the Polish video game market in the early 2000s may have played in sustaining canonical memory (Assmann, 1999), both as a tool for intergenerational transmission and as a carrier of that memory.

We intend to compare critical texts published in the year of the game's release (1999) with contemporary reviews (20 years after release, 2019-2025), e.g. (kkk, 1999; Czarny Iwan, 1999; Woźniak, 1999). We want to extract from the existing texts (in the case of contemporary reviews, also video materials) what sentiment they convey towards the game, what language they use, and what function they try to fulfil for the audience. We acknowledge that due to very limited internet access at the turn of the century, print media was the primary source of information about new games for players, which is why the descriptive role of text was much more important. We will also consider the popularization of game journalism, which will probably be manifested in the linguistic layer of contemporary reviews in the form of a developed sociolect.

Despite the clear professionalization of Polish gaming journalism, evident in the shift of its target audience from young people (Staschenko-Chojnacka, 2021) to a general audience, a surprisingly large proportion of contemporary material seems to fall victim to its authors' nostalgia for *HoMM 3*, ultimately characterized by a similar lack of criticism of the game as the reviews published in 1999. Contemporary material about the game can be divided into two categories:

- nostalgic reminiscences that repeat the virtually uncritical narrative of the 1999 reviews (tvgry, 2019)
- news articles about recent updates to some of the popular mods (eg. Jackowski, 2025; Gąsior, 2025)

This work will demonstrate the special cultural status of *HOMM 3* as a foreign game adopted by Eastern European players. In Poland, this status was influenced by economic, technological and social conditions, as well as the strong opinion-forming role of the gaming press at the turn of the century. In the case of cult games, magazine narratives remain so enduring that even today's more critical authors remain influenced by constructed canons. Contemporary content does not question the position of *HOMM 3*, adopting a nostalgic perspective. To deepen the analysis and conclusions, we plan to conduct broader research using content related to games created in the CEE region that are valued by Polish players but are not recognized worldwide.

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