

The Name of Janosik Will Never Perish: Góral's Tradition in Game Culture

Tomasz Z. Majkowski

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Ul. Gołębia 24

31-007 Kraków, Poland

tomasz.majkowski@uj.edu.pl

Magdalena Kozyra

SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities

mkozyra@swps.edu.pl

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The aim of this talk is to examine a corpus of independent video games that directly or indirectly feature Janosik, a folk hero associated with the Polish–Slovak borderlands and emblematic of a broader trend of employing and commodifying the culture of the Góral's – Highlanders of the northern Carpathians – for aesthetic and political purposes. I investigate how these games mobilize the Janosik legend in its various iterations, which elements of Góral cultural tradition they select or omit, and how such representational strategies can be situated within the longstanding political instrumentalization of both the character and Góral culture by the nation-states surrounding the Beskid and Tatra mountain ranges.

“Janosik” is the Polonized form of the name of Juraj Jánošík, an early eighteenth-century brigand and folk hero of the Tatra Mountains. A Slovak by ethnicity and a subject of the Habsburg Monarchy, the historical Jánošík was at once a freedom fighter and a highwayman, remembered primarily for his gruesome execution: according to popular ballads, he was hanged on a steel hook driven beneath his left rib. Jánošík's life and death first gave rise to an extensive oral tradition (Krekovičová 2014, Votruba 2016, see also Hobsbawm 2000) and subsequently inspired visual art, literature and film on both sides of the Tatra Mountains, culminating in the influential Polish television series *Janosik* (Passendorfer 1973), which enjoyed tremendous popularity in both Poland and then-Czechoslovakia (Imre 2012).

Despite their cultural prominence, neither Jánošík nor Góral culture more broadly feature prominently in mainstream digital games from the region, overshadowed by post-Communist nostalgia and the dominance of Slavic fantasy tropes. Several low-budget independent titles, however – predominantly developed in Poland – place the

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highwayman at their centre. Three of these titles belong to the same genre tradition. The earliest *Janosik* game by Mirage was released for the Atari in 1994, followed by an enhanced Amiga port in the same year. This side-scrolling platformer with rudimentary adventure elements sends the eponymous robber on a quest to rescue Maryna from a villainous nobleman, combining narrative motifs from the 1973 TV series with conventions reminiscent of *Super Mario Bros*. The 2020 free-to-play platformer *Janosik* (Retrovibe) reworks this premise: here the noble Highlander rescues his captured companions. Employing pixel-art aesthetics and incorporating metroidvania mechanics, the game spawned a commercially released sequel (Retrovibe 2024). The Slovak title *Juro Janosik* (Peter Jurkovsky 2021) represents a form of cultural reclamation: a low-poly action-adventure focused on the hero's dual identity as robber and freedom fighter.

Hellish Quart (Kubold 2021), an acclaimed Polish sabre-fighting simulator, does not include Janosik directly; the developers emphasize historical precision, and the presence of the Slovak hero would constitute a chronological incongruity. Instead, the game introduces Yendrek, a clear analogue of the legendary outlaw, a resemblance underscored by the fact that his leitmotif is a folk ballad depicting Janosik's death. Although the independent tabletop role-playing game *Corny Groń* (Skurzyński 2022) and its sequel *Beyond Corny Groń* (Skurzyński 2024) do not explicitly reference Janosik, the highwayman appears on the cover, and the setting draws extensively on the Polish variant of the legend.

Janosik also emerges as a secondary figure in two mainstream titles: *Eventide 2* (The House of Fables 2016) published by the Polish studio Artifex Mundi, and *Persona 5: The Phantom X* (Sega 2025), a free-to-play spin-off of well-known Japanese series.

The analysis considers which components of the Janosik legend are activated within these games, how they interact with mechanical design, and how the games deploy broader Góral cultural frameworks, including characters' attire, combat styles, linguistic markers, backstories, interface elements, and soundscapes. By doing so, the study aims to demonstrate the continued impact of nearly two centuries of aesthetic and political exploitation of Góral culture – particularly in Poland – while also highlighting efforts by independent creators to reappropriate or reinterpret the figure of Janosik, following the method to analyze game-languages outlined by Tomasz Majkowski (2019).

This research is situated within the broader problem of the appropriation and reconfiguration of Góral culture (Bagin 2014). Góral, an ethnic group tied to Wallachian pastoral migrations, inhabit the Carpathians along the borders of modern-day Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia. Since the late nineteenth century, their distinct culture has been a source of artistic fascination and folkloristic curation across the region, while also being strategically instrumentalized by political actors, including, for a period, the Third Reich. Within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Góral culture – including the Janosik legend – furnished symbolic resources for Slovak independence movements (Krekovičová 2014). Conversely, Polish intellectuals from Kraków idealized Góral as “uncorrupted” indigenous people, a European counterpart to romanticized depictions of Native Americans. Góral aesthetics – attire, ornament, musical forms – became a wellspring of modernist creativity, profoundly shaping local cultural production. The Zakopane architectural style, for instance, was formulated by lowland Polish artists yet subsequently became canonized as emblematic of “authentic” Góral culture (Dziadowiec and Wiącek 2015, Gunkel 2012).

Following the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, disputes over the ethnic classification of Góral – as either Polish or Slovak – assumed political importance, even influencing border demarcations between Poland and Czechoslovakia (Jesensky 2012). These tensions were later exploited by the Third Reich, which briefly posited Góral as a Germanic enclave between Slavic nations. Such shifting discourses facilitated the sustained appropriation of Góral traditions by national cultures, curated to embody primordial national values – an exemplary instance of what Hobsbawm and Ranger term “invented tradition” (Ranger and Hobsbawm 1984)

The figure of Janosik was well suited to this purpose. For much of the twentieth century he circulated either as a Polish nineteenth-century freedom fighter or as a folkloric hero embedded in a timeless, magical highland setting – his Slovak origins deliberately muted (Kroh 1971, Czarnowus 2018). These appropriations continue to shape perceptions of Janosik and Góral on both sides of the border. By analysing Janosik-themed independent games, this study seeks to trace how such entangled and persistent forms of cultural exploitation still inform the work of contemporary creators, and how independent game production may offer a venue for articulating cultural autonomy for Góral communities.

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