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KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE AND THE PROBLEMATIC CLAIM OF AUTHENTICITY IN DIGITAL GAMES

In 1402, Sigismund of Luxembourg captured his brother, Wenceslaus IV, king of Bohemia and former king of the Romans, to seize the throne. Known as “the Idle”, Wenceslaus had never been able to secure the nobles’ loyalty, in the Empire or in Bohemia. A year later, Sigismund invaded Bohemia with a Hungarian army to strike against Wenceslaus’s supporters and to raise funds for his army by looting and plundering the royal treasury. This invasion and the attack on the small town of Skalitz are the beginning of the plot of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*,¹ an open world, first-person role-playing game² created by the Czech developers Warhorse Studios, who emphatically declared that they had created a historically accurate game. In this setting, the player takes the role of Henry, the blacksmith’s son, who tries to escape the ravaging Cuman mercenaries and eventually avenge the murder of the people he believes were his parents.

The release of the game in February 2018 created a stir in public and academic discourse. A tense debate about the authenticity and accuracy of depictions of the past in digital games emerged around historical fiction, the projection of popular perceptions of race and gender onto historical backgrounds, and nationalist recreations of the past.³

In March 2019, the game was nominated in the category “Beste Internationale Spielewelt” (best international game world) by the jury of the Deutscher Computerspielpreis, which again led to debates about the game and the political dimensions of history in games.⁴ These debates are a vivid example of the dynamics of commemorative culture and the significance of digital games for current understand-

¹ *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. Warhorse Studios. PC/PlayStation4/XboxOne/Nintendo Switch, 2018.

² Aside from cutscenes, the player sees the game world through the player-character’s eyes, instead of over his shoulders or from above, and can move freely to any place in the game world, which appears as a contiguous landscape of countryside, settlements, and towns. In a role-playing game in which the player impacts (parts of) the story by interacting with non-player-characters in various ways, this approach invokes a special kind of agency.

³ For an outline of the German and English contributions to the debate, see: *Heinemann*, Jan: Hope of deliverance... In: *Let’s Play History*, 27.01.2018/20.03.2018. URL: <https://lepetitcapo.wordpress.com/2018/01/27/hope-of-deliverance/> (last accessed 15.05.2020); see also footnote 11 below.

⁴ *Zimmermann*, Felix: „Vom rechten Bild des Mittelalters“ – Stimmen aus dem AKGWDS zur Nominierung von „Kingdom Come: Deliverance“ für den Deutschen Computerspielpreis 2019. In: *gespielt*. Blog des Arbeitskreises Geschichtswissenschaft und Digitale Spiele, 11.03.2019. URL: <https://gespielt.hypotheses.org/3071> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

dings of the past and how history is shaped by popular media. The aim of this article is to examine the debate's central concepts, namely authenticity and the impact of digital games in the context of commemorative culture, rather than to provide a detailed analysis of the game as such.

From product testing to journalistic criticism – how the debate started

The debate on *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*'s authenticity reignited one month before the game was published as the result of a polemical blogpost in which I took its lead designer, Daniel Vávra, and the journalistic reports about the game as an example in order to criticize German mainstream game journalism.⁵ That critique targeted game journalism for its predominantly limited view of digital games, for ignoring the contexts in which games are being produced, and developers' stances on history when reporting on games referencing to the past, and for fueling hype about the authenticity of digital depictions of the past by wholeheartedly adapting advertising phrases about the historical accuracy of games, for example, a statement that *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is even "so historically accurate [that] historians are consulting the dev[elopment] team".⁶

Vávra's pro-GamerGate⁷ and alt-right statements,⁸ the sight of him wearing a

⁵ Heinemann, Jan: Das „authentischste“ Historienspiel aller Zeiten?! Die gewaltige Schräglage von „Kingdom Come: Deliverance“. In: Let's Play History, 13.01.2018. URL: <https://lepetitcapo.wordpress.com/2018/01/13/das-authentischste-historienspiel-aller-zeiten-die-gewaltige-schraeglage-von-kingdom-come-deliverance/> (last accessed 15.05.2020). Meanwhile, another vivid example is the debate on the game "War Mongrels", designed by far-right studio Destructive Creations from Poland and published in 2021. A dossier by the initiative "Keinen Pixel den Faschisten!" shows that only little has changed when it comes to critical games journalism in Germany. See: *Keinen Pixel den Faschisten!*: Destructive Creations: Zwischen Neo-Faschismus, Neuheidentum, Antisemitismus und antimuslimischem Rassismus. In: Keinen Pixel den Faschisten!, 29.09.2021. URL: <https://keinenpixel-denfaschisten.de/2021/09/29/destructive-creations-zwischen-neo-faschismus-neuheidentum-antisemitismus-und-antimuslimischem-rassismus-download/> (last accessed 13.05.2022), and *ibid.* Destructive Creations: Dossier im Pressespiegel, 13.10.2021. URL: <https://keinenpixeldenfaschisten.de/2021/10/13/destructive-creations-dossier-im-pressespiegel/> (last accessed 13.05.2022).

⁶ Peppiatt, Dom: Kingdom Come: Deliverance Is So Historically Accurate Historians Are Consulting The Dev Team. In: XBOX Achievements, 01.12.2016. URL: <https://www.xboxachievements.com/news/news-25767-Kingdom-Come-Deliverance-Is-So-Historically-Accurate-Historians-Are-Consulting-The-Dev-Team.html> (last accessed 15.05.2020); Warhorse Studios: Realism. In: Kingdom Come: Deliverance. URL: <https://www.kingdomcomerpg.com/en/game-features/realism> (last accessed 15.05.2020); Färberböck, Peter: Interview mit Warhorse Studios zu Kingdom Come: Deliverance. In: Adventure Corner, 18.10.2016. URL: <https://www.adventurecorner.de/articles/8334/interview-mit-warhorse-studios-zu-kingdom-come-deliverance-englische-version> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

⁷ GamerGate was an anti-feminist and far-right movement that began in 2014, engulfing large parts of the digital gaming and developing communities, as well as adjacent areas of pop culture, with far-reaching political consequences. For an overview of the events and aftermath, see: *Keinen Pixel den Faschisten!*: GamerGate. Eine Retrospektive. In: Keinen Pixel den Faschisten!, 16.11.2020. URL: <https://keinenpixeldenfaschisten.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GamerGate-eine-Retrospektive.pdf> (last accessed 31.01.2022); Mortensen, Torill

band shirt of the openly Neo-Nazi murderer known as Varg Vikernes during Gamescom in 2017,⁹ and his resolute denial that people of color played any role whatsoever in medieval European history¹⁰ were the starting points for my critique, which was aimed at the “product testing” approach of established German game journalism, which usually ignores the real-world context of game development and the political implications of in-game representations. Its goal was not to condemn a specific game, which had not yet been published and therefore could not have been profoundly analyzed, but to raise awareness of the impact designers and developers have on shaping worldviews by transforming their sentiments and ways of imagining the past into something that claims to inherit the authority of the historical. Although the indicators put together were well known – especially in US online journals and blogs – a debate erupted about how authentic a digital game depicting the past – especially *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* – could actually be, whether games as pieces of art can be discussed hermeneutically without considering their authors, and finally, how accurately *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* stages medieval rural Bohemia – and if that could be any kind of a legitimate standard for evaluation.¹¹

Elvira: Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate. In: Games and Culture 13 (2018) 8, 787-806.

⁸ Otton, Andrew: An interview with Daniel Vavra: GamerGate and the gaming industry. In: TechRaptor.net, 12.09.2014. URL: <https://techraptor.net/gaming/interview/interview-daniel-vavra-gamergate-and-gaming-industry> (last accessed 15.05.2020), original URL no longer available, instead: <https://archive.ph/dnoeP> (last accessed 12.06.2022); N.N.: Daniel Vavra GamerGate Interview. In: the escapist, 10.10.2014. URL: <https://v1.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/gamergate-interviews/12400-Daniel-Vavra-GamerGate-Interview> (last accessed 11.01.2018); original URL no longer available, instead: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180219173621/http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/gamergate-interviews/12400-Daniel-Vavra-GamerGate-Interview> (last accessed 15.05.2020); Shimshock, Rob: Developer Speaks Out over Claim ‘Historical Accuracy’ Pushes White Supremacy in Games. In: Breitbart, 28.07.2015. URL: <https://www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2015/07/28/developer-speaks-out-over-claim-historical-accuracy-pushes-white-supremacy-in-games/> (last accessed 15.05.2020); Totilo, Stephen: My E3 Meeting With A Pro-GamerGate Developer. In: Kotaku, 07.02.2015. URL: <https://kotaku.com/my-e3-meeting-with-a-pro-gamergate-developer-1715511964> (last accessed 15.05.2020); Agnew: Kingdom Come: Thy Bullshit We’re Done. In: Agnew, 20.02.2018. URL: <https://alwaysagnew.wordpress.com/2018/02/20/kingdom-come-thy-bullshit-were-done/> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

⁹ *Game Two*: Game Two #35 | gamescom 2017 – Die Highlights der Messe. In: YouTube, 26.08.2017. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ePCqQgcKoE&feature=youtu.be&t=5m19s> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

¹⁰ Vavra, Daniel: “Yes I am because they weren’t”. In: Twitter, 14.05.2015. URL: <https://twitter.com/DanielVavra/status/598885090580635649> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

¹¹ My blogpost was accessed 28,699 times in January 2018, it counts 105 comments, reblogs, and pingbacks. Most of the comments focus on the question of whether or not *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* actually is authentic or accurate. I deleted the most insulting ones, but you can find lots of highly political comments in the comment sections and forums of games magazines, on reddit, and others. Following the pingbacks, automatic notifications that the blog has been linked in other blogs or homepages show that there is significant awareness of the concept of authenticity among bloggers who write about cultural topics and history in popular media. Although there are also dedicated defenders of a separation

Historical authenticity in digital games – how “realistic” can a game be?

The debate about the authenticity of depictions of the past in popular media forms is nothing new. Engaging in such a debate is a fool’s errand for a couple of reasons.¹²

First, the definition of authenticity is hard to pin down.¹³ The concept has a history of its own which reaches back to antiquity and has gone through many shifts

of author and work as regards cultural products, when it comes to the reaction of games journalism to my initial reproach, things get ambivalent. You can find some of them by following the link in footnote 3. Most articles published as feuilletons take the form of critical readings of historicizing interpretations of the past in digital games that claim to be accurate or authentic (Sigl, Rainer: “Kingdom Come: Deliverance”: Rechte Ideologie durch die Hintertür? In: Der Standard, 19.01.2018. URL: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000072551592/berufsspieler-kingdom-come-deliverance-rechte-ideologie-durch-die-hintertuer?ref=rss> (last accessed 15.05.2020); Kreienbrink, Matthias: Der ganze Muff des Mittelalters. In: ZeitOnline, 19.02.2018. URL: <https://www.zeit.de/digital/games/2018-02/kingdom-come-deliverance-mittelalter-spiel-realismus/komplettansicht> (last accessed 15.05.2020); Purchase, Robert: Kingdom Come: Deliverance review - history is a double-edged sword. In: eurogamer, 20.02.2018. URL: <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-02-20-kingdom-come-deliverance-review> (last accessed 15.05.2020)); Schott, Dom: Kingdom Come: Deliverance ist ein kitschiger Mittelalterjahrmarkt. In: Wired [now GQ], 20.02.2018. URL: <https://www.gq-magazin.de/auto-technik/articles/kingdom-come-deliverance-ist-ein-kitschiger-mittelalterjahrmarkt> (last accessed 15.05.2020)). However, the big games journals pulled back and took defensive stances. 4players published a video in which Eike Cramer and Jörg Luibl, the then editor-in-chief and studied historian, talk about Burzum, the history of dark metal music, and history in games. Luibl finally stated that taking the political stances of developers into account would be comparable to how National Socialist discriminated against non-heterosexual authors (Luibl, Jörg/Cramer, Eike: 4Players-Talk: Die Kontroverse um Kingdom Come: Deliverance. In: 4players, 16.01.2018. URL: http://www.4players.de/4players.php/tvplayer/4PlayersTV/Alle/35355/129311/4Players-Talk/Die_Kontroverse_um_Kingdom_Come_Deliverance.html (last accessed 15.05.2020)). In a dedicated video, GameStar’s editor-in-chief, Heiko Klinge, underlined the political responsibility of journalism as such. At the same time, GameStar published statements made by Daniel Vávra and Martin Klíma, notably without any critical classification, in which Vávra apologized for a “lack of care and my thoughtlessness in my personal communication, which has led to misunderstandings in the past” (translation by J. H.). GameStar Redaktion: Kingdom Come: Deliverance - Die Reaktion auf die Rassismus-Vorwürfe. In: GameStar, 17.01.2018. URL: <https://www.gamestar.de/artikel/kingdom-come-deliverance-die-reaktion-auf-die-rassismus-vorwuefe,3324854.html#top> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

¹² Inderwildi, Andreas: Kingdom Come Deliverance’s quest for historical accuracy is a fool’s errand. In: Rock.Paper.Shotgun, 05.03.2018. URL: <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2018/03/05/kingdom-come-deliverance-historical-accuracy/> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

¹³ There has been extensive research and debate since the 1990s in the context of historicizing films and other popular media, among others: Fischer, Thomas/Wirtz, Rainer (eds.): Alles authentisch? Popularisierung der Geschichte im Fernsehen. Konstanz 2008; Wirtz, Rainer: „Gefühlte Geschichte“. Die Dehnbarkeit des Begriffs Authentizität. In: epd medien 26 (2008) 21–27; Pirker, Ulrike et al. (eds.): Echte Geschichte. Authentizitätsfiktionen in populären Geschichtskulturen. Bielefeld 2010 (Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen 3); Sabrow, Martin/Saube, Achim (eds.): Historische Authentizität. Göttingen 2016; Knaller, Susanne: Ein Wort aus der Fremde. Geschichte und Theorie des Begriffs Authentizität. Heidelberg 2007 (Beiträge zur neueren Literaturgeschichte 246).

and changes. Today there seem to be two opposing ideas that often merge into one understanding of the concept. First, there is the idea coming from the classical understanding of authenticity as something of provable provenance, e.g., created by an identifiable person, author, or authority, or by tradition from the past. Second, it is understood as the sense or feeling that something (e.g., a representation of the past) or someone is “real”, showing itself or being shown genuinely.

Both understandings refer to some kind of originality. That is why even historians struggle with the concept of authenticity, because their work is based on historical sources that need to be reliable in one way or another. On the other hand, historians nowadays agree that there is no way to accurately reconstruct the past “as it really was”, because every source is based on individual perception and perspectives, and thus is categorically biased. History, as the word itself indicates, is a narrative or even multiple interwoven narratives that can be analyzed to get an understanding of how the author of a source, or the society of that time, perceived certain events and thought about the world.

The staging of the past in popular media (even in modern museums) is a totally different thing from academic history: these popular representations are designed to evoke emotional responses from their audiences, to tap into the public imagination. The concept of atmospheres of the past which Felix Zimmermann developed based on Gernot Böhme’s and Cornelius Holtorf’s works might be a good approach in order to avoid the weaknesses inherent in the concept of authenticity and to help give a better understanding of why and how specific representations of the past are experienced as authentic.¹⁴ The concept of atmospheres points to the affectivity of the perception of specific arrangements shaped by factors such as light, sounds, space, objects, and so on, that evoke a certain feeling before the recipient consciously begins processing what they perceive. Pastness, on the other hand, points to the feeling of the presence of the past—at any given moment recipients might imagine that they are in the past—or the feeling of the past evoked by such atmospheres, i.e., the recipient might feel that the past has manifested itself in the present day, the current moment.¹⁵ It is no longer of interest whether an arrangement is accurate or not, but how and why it evokes the feeling of authenticity.

That said, it becomes clear that there is no such thing as objective authenticity. Neither is there such a thing as a realistic representation of the past or even a historically accurate game. Instead, with this point in mind, the focus changes from what is represented and how accurate it might be to which implications and visions (of the world and/or the past) are staged in the specific media and how they relate to commemorative culture and political discourse.¹⁶

¹⁴ Zimmermann, Felix: Digitale Spiele als historische Erlebnisräume. Ein Zugang zu Vergangenheitsatmosphären im Explorative Game. Masterarbeit, Universität zu Köln 2018. URL: <http://kups.ub.uni-koeln.de/id/eprint/8286> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

¹⁵ Holtorf, Cornelius: The Presence of Pastness. Themed Environments and Beyond. In: Schlehe, Judith et al. (eds.): Staging the Past. Themed Environments in Transcultural Perspectives. Bielefeld 2010 (Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen 2) 23–40.

¹⁶ Pfister, Eugen: „Wie es wirklich war.“ – Wider die Authentizitätsdebatte im digitalen Spiel.

What about Kingdom Come: Deliverance? A short case study

So, how authentic is *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*? It depends on what you mean. If it comes to architecture, landscape, and creating an image of medieval rural Bohemia, the game does a good job of presenting a recognizably historical image of the past. Houses and castles are reconstructed based on historical depictions, reconstructions from museums, research articles, and the ruins still to be found in the area (which is depicted in the game), although major parts of this image are just the designers' interpretations.¹⁷ While more compressed, the landscape is based on the terrain around the town of Rattay (Rataje nad Sázavou), with large forests and farmlands. The game has thus been called a "stroll through the woods simulator" by a colleague.

In several ways, the game world is more historically plausible than many of its role-playing contemporaries. The game was advertised with the motto "dungeons and no dragons", and excludes magical elements, dragons, and fantasy humanoid races that are a central feature of the fantasy genre's medieval-ish worlds. It is set very firmly in a recognizably "real" world in a notable deviation from the fantasy worlds of games like *Dragon Age*, *Skyrim*, or *The Witcher*. All in all, it comes across as a vibrant, romantic, historical reenactment.¹⁸

But if we move beyond these impressive visuals and the worldbuilding, the game's authenticity becomes more questionable. Instead of offering a depiction of cultural exchange, social and spatial mobility, race, and gender which is multi-perspectival and grounded in critical reflection, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* conforms to tropes about the Middle Ages which are common in popular media. The game's depiction of many elements of society is based on stereotypes and myths about the past.

History is selective: the story historians tell about the past changes, depending on the sources they select and the way they put them together to construct explanations. Likewise, the story *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* tells is selective: the designers have constructed a particular image of the past. They, like historians, have constructed this image through their understanding of the period, but also from their perspective on the modern world.¹⁹

In: gespielt, 12.06.2017. URL: <https://gespielt.hypotheses.org/1334> (last accessed 15.05.2020); Sigl, Rainer: Der Mythos vom unpolitischen Spiel. In: Grimme Game, 03.02.2019. URL: <https://www.grimme-game.de/2019/01/17/der-mythos-vom-unpolitischen-spiel/> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

¹⁷ Vávra, David: Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Tour Guide. In: Foursquare, 28.02.2018. URL: <https://de.foursquare.com/vavradav/list/kingdom-come-deliverance—tour-guide> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

¹⁸ Bostal, Martin: Medieval video games as reenactment of the past: a look at Kingdom Come: Deliverance and its historical claim. In: *Sirvet*, Rafael Fernández/Gutiérrez Lloret, Rosa Ana (eds.): Del siglo XIX al XXI. Tendencias y debates: XIV Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea. Universidad de Alicante 20-22 de septiembre de 2018 [From the 19th to the 21st century. Trends and debates: XIV Congress of the Contemporary History Association]. Alicante 2019, 380-394. URL: <https://dhcon.ua.es/es/congresoahc2018/documentos/xix-congreso-ahc-actas.pdf> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

¹⁹ In general: Heinze, Robert: Learn to stop worrying and love authenticity. In: gespielt, 27.10.2017. URL: <https://gespielt.hypotheses.org/1715> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

This connection of the game to the modern world has influenced its representation of the Middle Ages in two key ways. First, the game follows a nationalist narrative. Vávra's stated goal was to make a game about the history of "his country".²⁰ Therefore, all foreign protagonists and powers are depicted as stereotypes who want to maliciously hurt Bohemia, which needs to be defended by "real Czechs".²¹

There's no effort to explain that Cuman mercenaries would likely have been fighting in Bohemia for the same reason as any other soldier: material gain or political obligation. There's no attempt made to show the common links between the Czechs and Germans, Hungarians or Cumans, which would both humanize these characters and show the sometimes overlapping cultural and political destiny of their homelands. Like the scared, confused medieval Czech characters they encounter, the player isn't allowed to benefit from the kind of historical foresight that makes foreigners more than cartoon villains.²²

The game presents the Cumans as orientalized scoundrels who appear as Timurid horse lords rather than as settled and integrated into Hungarian society as they were at the time when the story takes place.²³ Although Jan Hus is mentioned in the game, the looming Hussite Wars and the tensions arising from religious conflict and its many ramifications which one would expect to encounter in the game are neglected in favor of a peasant idyll that supports the vision of a peaceful nation under attack.

Second, the depiction of non-heteronormative characters is homophobic. The only two presumably gay characters are, following a trope in popular culture, portrayed as devious. Although nothing is openly said about their sexual orientation, Istvan Toth and his right-hand man, Sir Erik, who torture Henry at some point and capture the town and castle of Talmberg, are portrayed as having a close sentimental relationship, which "you would not understand". This depiction follows a current imagination of homosexuality in the Middle Ages, implying that because it was officially considered a deadly sin there could have been no non-heterosexual relationships. Although the church tried to persecute homosexuality, gender equivalent relationships were common.

²⁰ *Shimshock*: Developer Speaks Out over Claim 'Historical Accuracy' Pushes White Supremacy in Games (cf. fn. 8).

²¹ On Vávra's impact on characters in the game, compare the questions section of an interview with Warhorse Studio's art historian, Joanna Nowak: Warhorse Studios: Weekly Torch 22, 05.01.2017. URL: <https://forum.kingdomcomerpg.com/t/warhorse-studios-weekly-torch/29593/52#> (last accessed 15.05.2020): "I have tried to provide some details regarding historical figures, but I am not sure, if they have influenced Dan's image, already painted in his head. However, I admit, that often we have discussed the script, the way somebody acts, how he looks. Just not always the historical accuracy was interesting and easy enough to be used in Kingdom Come Deliverance. So, like with everything in our game, we made some compromises. Sometimes my advices [sic] were taken, sometimes not, other time [sic] they were modified [...] I think, in some cases it is great, that designers made things all up. I can even bet, that you will not be able to find out all their manipulations – they are so fancy."

²² *McCarter*, Reid: Kingdom Come: Deliverance – Myth-making and Historical Accuracy. In: Unwinnable, 02.03.2018. URL: <https://unwinnable.com/2018/03/02/deliverance-myth-making-and-historical-accuracy/> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

²³ *Bártfai*, Imre: Cumans in Kingdom Come: Deliverance. In: Medievalists.net, 02.2018. URL: <https://www.medievalists.net/2018/02/cumans-kingdom-come-deliverance/> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

Third, the game's representation of women is misogynist.²⁴ There are two storylines in which the main male protagonist dates women, namely Theresa, who fled from Skalitz, and Lady Stephanie, the wife of the lord who gives refuge to Henry after Skalitz has been pillaged. After meeting the women on several occasions, each of these storylines leads up to a final sexual act that marks the end of any possible interaction with the female non-player characters the protagonist slept with immediately before this. This fact sheds light on the only purpose for Theresa and Stephanie, which is to be love interests at Henry's disposal, who seems to be interested in winning them over but nothing else. The "Alpha Male" stat boost rewards the player for visiting brothels by temporarily improving the avatar's skill points and abilities. In fact, every bathhouse in the game is a brothel. These depictions are legitimized by referrals to a popular imagination of medieval gender roles in which women are always pictured as hearth-bound passive beings without any agency.²⁵ A picture that has little to do with the past but is based on patriarchal concepts originating in the nineteenth century, when philosophers of the late Enlightenment discussed what a human being may and may not be and what their role in the world should be.

Context is Key

This representation of medieval Bohemia must be considered in the context of the present political situation in the Czech Republic²⁶ and the lead designer's political stance. The way the game portrays medieval Bohemia is rooted in the post-communist commemorative discourse in the Czech Republic, for which the picture of a country suppressed by German and Soviet imperialism is significant.

This circumstance explains the goal the Warhorse Studios proclaimed: to tell a history of the Czech nation that had been long buried. In Vávra's words: "Since the Czech historians were kind of cut off from the world, there was no one to tell our history. So basically, we are using pop culture to spread the word",²⁷ "we are showing it with all the dirt as it really was".²⁸ But this statement falls apart when one takes

²⁴ Disclaimer: I haven't played the expansion "A woman's lot", published 28 May 2019, in which the player plays as "Theresa". "A woman's lot", *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (downloadable content). Warhorse Studios. PC/PlayStation4/XboxOne/Nintendo Switch, 2019.

²⁵ Kaufman, Amy S.: Gender, Sexism, and the Middle Ages: No More Fairy Tales. In: The Public Medievalist, 11.10.2018. URL: <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/no-more-fairy-tales/> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

²⁶ Pebe, Jiří: Czech Republic and Slovakia 25 Years after the Velvet Revolution: Democracies without Democrats. In: Heinrich Böll Stiftung Brussels, 15.09.2014. URL: <https://eu.boell.org/en/2014/09/15/democracies-without-democrats> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

²⁷ Arte: History's Creed, Episode 4 „Truth“, 09.02.2018, min. 02:22. URL: <https://www.arte.tv/fr/videos/074699-004-A/history-s-creed-4-10> (last accessed 15.05.2020), [https://www.facebook.com/notabenemovies/videos/1731761900209048/?__cft__\[0\]=AZW23Fo9z5qEVc6ErPIWgCl3yyOQ6cTuXNnFyK6xlOeDrw0rpqMCYt0U6haTTiV1X39hBFowkkTOoKh_sGl85riBnaK1a-2ycOcvX1JvrkGUKfcq8pMx3jmFcOOzMdTkZAWCiOuYI6Y7xQFDJ3WpVBAV&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/notabenemovies/videos/1731761900209048/?__cft__[0]=AZW23Fo9z5qEVc6ErPIWgCl3yyOQ6cTuXNnFyK6xlOeDrw0rpqMCYt0U6haTTiV1X39hBFowkkTOoKh_sGl85riBnaK1a-2ycOcvX1JvrkGUKfcq8pMx3jmFcOOzMdTkZAWCiOuYI6Y7xQFDJ3WpVBAV&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-R) (last accessed 31.01.2022).

²⁸ *Shimsbuck*: Developer Speaks Out over Claim 'Historical Accuracy' Pushes White Supremacy in Games (cf. fn. 8).

the international publications on Bohemian history into account. There are in fact many publications about Bohemian history by Czech and international scholars and cooperation between them and international scholars in this area of research.

These influences also explain why the game offers a regressive vision of the past and why – by creating a national epos that shapes Czech identity by contrasting it to a globalizing, multicultural world – it is so popular in large parts of the conservative gamer scene.²⁹

Can a Designer or Developer Be Held Responsible for Their Game?

This question has no simple answer. Beyond widespread online discussion about the use of popular memories of the past to perpetuate and naturalize an exclusionary image of the world as a place which was, is and should be ruled by white male supremacy, there has been a huge debate about authorship in the humanities for the last fifty years and it is still going on.

A game or a debate that follows political myths does not necessarily have to be doing so willfully or by being conscious about the fact that it does.³⁰ It might just follow a vague imagination or even a specific commemorative culture that is still reproduced in all kinds of popular media without recognizing it is patriarchic, chauvinistic, and racist. It could also follow these popular tropes for economic reasons: that is, producing images of the past which the audience can recognize to ensure the

²⁹ Grayson, Nathan: Kingdom Come Owes Its Popularity To 'Realism' And Conservative Politics. In: KOTAKU, 02.03.2018. URL: <https://kotaku.com/kingdom-come-owes-its-popularity-to-realism-and-conserv-1823420208> (last accessed 15.05.2020). One of the comments on my blog by an anonymous Czech user offers a vivid example: "We czech fans of the game insisted that color of carrots in game be changed to medieval one (more green, less red, as their crossbreeding to produce more karoten die was not yet done) Vavra was scolded for using modern horse models and they were reverted to look like the medieval ones. A female character at time playing a given story – would likely get laughed at, raped killed – probably burned as witch or something... which – well would be quite historically accurate – I am fully for anyone attempting to do so... I would add a 30 minute game-play as such attempting the story line. And well – any person of colour – assuming its not some 'mongol' genotype – (which would likely get killed as being more or less 'hungarian' at a time) would likely receive same treatment – probably rather than burning would enjoy stoning and getting killed – again I would fully offer such option for anyone to enjoy it. Except few 'roma' or gypsies (proper name at the time) there were virtually no 'people of color' in Bohemia. And speaking of which – just about century before the game setting – Prague was actually biggest slave trading city in Europe... and actually word 'slave' is derived from the word 'slav' which represent general ethnicity of eastern Europe. so – just add 2 and 2 together and realize who was sold as slaves there. We really don't share western guilt about anything. So please leave us out of it. We feel neither NEED nor any obligation to include anyone in our culture or history who simply was not there. This game is actually telling our struggle against western imposed ideas – and it's a (fictious) story from start of Hussian wars where we chose to resist ideas imposed by 'Holy Roman Empire' and Western church." Heinemann: Hope of deliverance (cf. fn. 3); <https://lepetitcapo.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/kommentarkcd.png> (last accessed 31.01.2022).

³⁰ Pfister, Eugen: On Political Communication in Digital Games. In: Spiel-Kultur-Wissenschaft, 08.03.2018. URL: <https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/1614> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

sale of games. Of course, in the worst case, the designers may actively use the authority embedded in claims of historical authenticity to present their image of an ideal, politically regressive world.

A combination of these factors seems to have driven the design of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. The conservative and right-wing commemorative culture in the post-communist Czech Republic is shaped by chauvinistic nationalism focusing on an exclusionary “own” history and identity, imagining the Czech Nation as having been under constant external suppression by the Holy Roman Empire, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union, and now finally being able to tell the ‘true’ story of their nation.³¹ The lead designer and other members of Warhorse are known for their political stances, which are, at the minimum, conservative.

What does that mean when it comes to a review of a game and the role of its designers or developers? There are two ways of looking at the authorship of games: on the one hand, because an author creates their work intentionally, they are the only person who is able to interpret and give meaning to it; on the other hand, the work is always interpreted and given meaning in every single player’s act of reception, no matter what the author wanted to say at the very moment of creation. Looking for historical and political implications in media, we need to stay within both accounts.

Digital Games and Commemorative Culture

As Adam Chapman has pointed out, the developer of a historical game has an understanding of the past which is shaped by commemorative culture and they interpret the past and create history on this basis in their games. At the same time, the person playing historical games interprets the game and makes sense of its representation of history through their own understanding of the past.³² It is the commemorative cul-

³¹ The right-wing and extremist populism connects the narrative of foreign threats in its modern anti-European Union, anti-immigration and anti-refugee nativist rhetoric. For an overview of the impact of memory culture on these discourses see: *Novotný, Lukas/Thieme, Tom*: Jenseits des vereinten Europas: rechtsextreme Parteien in Tschechien und der Slowakei. In: *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* 7 (2010) 1, 105-121; *Sláčálek, Ondřej*: Czech Republic: Populism Without Culture Wars? In: *Barša, Pavel/Hesová, Zora/Sláčálek, Ondřej* (eds.): *Central European Culture Wars: Beyond Post-Communism and Populism*. Prague 2021 (Humanitas 15) 158-202; *Törnquist-Plewa, Barbara*: Populist Memory Discourses in Contemporary East Central and Southeastern Europe – Their Roots and Main Features. In: *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 6 (2021) 53-63.

³² *Chapman, Adam*: *Digital Games as History. How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. New York, London 2016 (Routledge Advances in Game Studies 7); *Kapell, Matthew W./Elliot, Andrew B. R.*: Conclusion(s). Playing at True Myths, Engaging with Authentic Histories. In: *Kapell, Matthew W./Elliot, Andrew B. R.* (eds.): *Playing with the Past. Digital games and the simulation of history*. New York 2013, 357-369; *Salvati, Andrew J./Bullinger, Jonathan M.*: Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past. In: *Kapell/Elliot* (eds.): *Playing with the Past* 153-168 (cf. fn. 32). Empirical studies point in the same direction regarding the impact of historicizing games on less historically informed players: *Giere, Daniel*: *Computerspiele – Medienbildung – historisches Lernen. Zu Repräsentation und Rezeption von Geschichte in digitalen Spielen*. Frankfurt am Main 2019.

ture, the way society remembers certain things and keeps silent about others, and the designers' vision of the past that need to be analyzed and these might be criticized for whatever reasons.³³ Players of these historical games should ask questions about how and why specific interpretations of the past can be found in all kinds of popular media.

However, creating or claiming authenticity plays a critical role "in the assertion of memorial interpretive power as well as in the imagination of (new) communities and identities".³⁴ Despite being a fluid concept, authenticity inherits a persuasive power,³⁵ it transforms "the relict into a relic" until "all ethical, aesthetical and functional concerns melt away".³⁶

History cannot be objectively proven. It is an arrangement of stories about the past shaped by personal viewpoints, perspectives, imaginations, and interests – a cultural product. The (fictional) recreation of the past contradicts the assumption that authenticity is true to its subject. There is no absolute historical truth that can be represented. Instead, the past was, just as everybody's present life is, a complex contingent space of possibilities shaped by the environment, the society, and the agency of the subject itself. Games are part of cultural heritage and commemorative culture, and thus require a continuous informed and thoughtful debate. Like any other media, games take part in the formation of collective memory which results from the needs of the present.³⁷

By taking both sides of the medal into account, such approach does not ignore the intentional aspect of authorship nor its creative freedom nor the possible implications of specific selective depictions of the past, but at the same time, it doesn't ignore the collective and constructional dimension of history. Game criticism is not about prohibiting games or specific depictions, but about understanding society and games (and, in our case, history). Debates about authenticity are an expression of

³³ Huss, Nicolas: Ist das Mittelalter oder kann das weg? Zur Debatte um Authentizität in Kingdom Come: Deliverance. In: Paidia, 30.06.2018. URL: <http://www.paidia.de/ist-das-mittelalter-oder-kann-das-weg-zur-debatte-um-authentizitaet-in-kingdome-come-deliverance/> (last accessed 15.05.2020); Heinemann, Jan: Authentizität again: Der Tag des Zombie-Elefanten. In: gespielt, 17.10.2017. URL: <https://gespielt.hypotheses.org/1697> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

³⁴ Sabrow, Martin/Saupe, Achim: Historische Authentizität. Zur Kartierung eines Forschungsfeldes. In: Sabrow/Saupe (eds.): Historische Authentizität 7-28, here 24 (cf. fn. 13). (Translation by J.H.).

³⁵ Seidenspinner, Wolfgang: Authentizität. Kulturanthropologisch-erinnerungskundliche Annäherungen an ein zentrales Wissenschaftskonzept im Blick auf das Weltkulturerbe. In: kunsttexte.de 4 (2007). URL: <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/handle/18452/7734> (last accessed 15.05.2020).

³⁶ Sabrow, Martin: Die Aura des Authentischen in historischer Perspektive. In: Sabrow/Saupe (eds.): Historische Authentizität 29-43, here 30 (cf. fn. 13). (Translation by J.H.).

³⁷ Both, Assmann's theory of cultural memory and Rüsen's theory of history culture, agree on medial fixation as a central aspect of collective memory. Assmann, Jan: Kulturelles Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen. München 1997; Rüsen, Jörn: Die fünf Dimensionen der Geschichtskultur. In: Nießer, Jacqueline/Tomann, Juliane (eds.): Angewandte Geschichte. Neue Perspektiven auf Geschichte in der Öffentlichkeit. Paderborn 2014, 46-57.

commemorative culture debates about the significance of the past for the present and they help to foster an understanding of the importance of aspects of historicizing retrocession for today's society and its political struggles.