

Polish History up to 1795 in Polish Games and Game Studies

Michał Mochocki, Department of Anglophone Literatures,
Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland, michal.mochocki@gmail.com

Stanisław Krawczyk, Institute of Sociology, University of Wrocław, Poland

Aleksandra Mochocka Department of Anglophone Literatures,
Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland

Abstract

Situated within historical and regional (CEE) game studies, this article is an overview of games made in Poland after 1989 about Polish history up to the eighteenth century. It also outlines research made on those games, and it comments on changing cultural and political factors shaping the development of Polish history/heritage-themed games over the last three decades. We group the games in thematic-chronological categories: early medieval Slavic settings up to 1000, medieval to Renaissance Poland, and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth 1569–1795. Main findings: (a) Slavic fantasy became very popular with game developers after *Witcher 3*, but it has received little scholarly attention beside the *witcher* series. (b) Medieval Polish monarchies have barely caught the eye of game developers, which translates to the absence of related research. (c) The PLC period is well-represented in digital and nondigital games, and well-researched in historical games studies by Polish scholars in Polish and English.

Keywords

role-playing, board games, video games, card games, historical, heritage, Poland, CEE

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Introduction

In line with the newly developing trend of writing national game histories within the Central and Eastern European region, we present an overview of post-1989 Polish-made games about Polish pre-1800 history, as well as research made on these games (predominantly by Polish scholars, but often in English). This paper is positioned in historical game studies, as it focuses on the presence of Polish history and quasi-historical fantasy in games representing mediaeval or early modern settings (up to the 18th century). It also belongs to regional game studies, as it explores a thematic group of games and related game studies produced in Poland after it began its transition from a socialist to capitalist country.

This transition was a part of much larger regional developments, that is, the collapse of the Soviet Bloc. The games made before 1989, such as *Smok Wawelski* (Kucharski & Piwowarczyk, 1987), were produced in diametrically different circumstances, politically and economically, than the significantly larger amount of titles put on the market after this historic turning point. However, our description of games and trends from the 1990s to 2010s may also be classified as a “history of games”, but is not all history: we trace the developments of historical games up to the present moment (mid-2023), including some still in development.

There are two reasons, methodological and pragmatic, to limit the timeline of the historical settings to the 18th century. Methodology-wise, the study of games set in the 19th and 20th centuries would need to include their (often direct) involvement with the current politics of memory and heritage. This is to say that Polish participation in both World Wars and the subsequent anti-communist opposition have become the foundation for the right-wing collective identity project promoted by the United Right coalition ruling in Poland since 2015. Therefore,

games about 20th-century history made in Poland (especially after 2015) are much more politically charged than those set in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance and studying them would be a totally different project. Pragmatically speaking, covering the entire timeline all the way across the 19th and 20th centuries would be impossible within a single paper; what is more, systematic research on games set in the 20th century has been conducted in Poland by Klara Sterczewska (2016a, 2016b, 2019), and Sterczewska's forthcoming PhD dissertation (2023) covers Polish 20th-century game settings in much more depth than we could attempt.

More specifically, we limit the scope of the 18th century to the year 1795, when the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was partitioned between its neighbours and ceased to exist. We roughly divide the pre-Partition history of Poland in three periods, which correspond with respective sections in this paper: Slavic, mediaeval, and PLC:

- Slavic: The early mediaeval Poland up to the year 1000, which includes pagan Slavic tribes and the early united Duchy of Poland under the rule of Mieszko, who converted to Christianity in 966. His son Bolesław superseded Mieszko in 992, thus establishing the Piast dynasty.
- Medieval: High and late mediaeval Poland to early Renaissance in the 11th to 16th centuries, upgraded to the rank of a kingdom in 1025, ruled by the Piast dynasty to 1370, then briefly by the Hungarian line of the d'Anjou family, and by the Jagiellons 1386 to 1572.
- The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, formed under the last of the Jagiellons in 1569, and ruled by elected kings from 1573 to its demise in 1795.

The year 1000 is an absolutely arbitrary waypoint in the evolution from a congregation of loose tribes to a mediaeval dynastic monarchy. It sits between the milestones of 966 as the year of the official baptism of the duke's court and the recognition of Poland as one of the Christian monarchies, and 1025 as the first royal coronation. By contrast, the year 1569 brought a major transformation with a single political act: the Union of Lublin, which united the Kingdom of Poland and Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a single Commonwealth that encompassed most of today's Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine.

The decision to examine games *and* related game studies breaks into two parallel outlines. Three following sections include brief chronological characteristics of respective games, digital and nondigital, as well as identification of factors that influenced the development of games in Poland. We forego a close inspection of individual titles in favour of a broader look at selected motifs or themes. Our perspective on game content is similar to distant reading in literary studies (Moretti, 2013). Research review for all the three sections is collected in the subsequent one. We place this literature review near the end, as we see it as the second stage in the outline of "games plus game studies": the readers should first be introduced to the games and only then should they delve into the research. The paper ends with Conclusions: our main findings about the games, the studies, and their mutual relationship.

From Slavic Tribes to Polish Monarchy (9th–10th Centuries)

The early Slavic period was featured in two relatively influential games made in Poland in the 1990s. The *Kajko i Kokosz* series, started in 1995 by Seven Stars, included point'n'click, platform, and adventure games based on the *Kajko i Kokosz* comic series by Janusz Christa, highly popular at that time, personally involved in the creation of the games. By the end of 1996

the sales figures of the first *Kajko i Kokosz* reached 10,000: a then-outstanding result on the Polish market (Kosman, 2015, pp. 137–139). The single-player RTS *Polanie* (MDF, 1996), nicknamed “Polish Warcraft”, was also a commercial success and is still fondly remembered (Kosman, 2015, p. 144). It was eventually followed by the single- and multiplayer RTS with RPG elements titled *Polanie II* (Reality Pump Studio, 2003) in Poland, and *Knightshift* or *Once Upon a Knight* abroad (Kosman, 2015, p. 325). Slavic nondigital tabletop RPGs (TRPGs) have a similar timeline, with *Zły Cień: Kruki Urojenia* [*Evil Shadow: Crows of Delusion*] (Greczyszyn, 1995) published in the same year as *Kajko i Kokosz*, and *Arkona* (S. Print, 2003) in the same year as *Polanie II*.

None of the Slavic TRPGs won the hearts of the Polish players. Lambasted for the low quality of their design or editing, they also failed to attract a fan community with their theme. Majkowski (2019, p. 2) recalls them as “widely considered the worst locally-created gaming products of all time”. The two Slavic-themed video games were much more successful with their audiences. Nonetheless, the common view in the 1990s held that Polish history and culture was not a commercially viable theme.

Poland had only left the Soviet Bloc in 1989, opening its borders and market to Western capitalism, which resulted in a massive flood of American and Western European popular culture. Not only games, but also fiction and filmmaking were reoriented to imports from the West. There were cases of Polish fiction writers complaining that it was difficult to get published under a Polish name, with some novelists considering Anglophone nicknames (Mochocki, 2012b). If this was the situation on the local market, few would believe that Polish history and heritage would be of any interest to the global audience. This view held firmly well into the 2000s, when even the popular brand *Polanie* dropped its Slavic name, transforming the initially

planned sequel *Polanie 3* to a new label *Two Worlds* (Reality Pump Studio, 2007) (Kosman, 2015, p. 325).

And then – *from the North, from Ropers Gate* – came the witcher.

Whereas the first Witcher game (CD Projekt RED, 2007) was a moderate success, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (CD Projekt RED, 2011) became the greatest Polish achievement on the international videogame market (Kosman, 2015, pp. 375–376), only to be surpassed by *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015). The Witcher games dispelled the self-defeating belief in the unattractiveness of Polish culture to the global audiences, even though the degree of the Slavicness or Polishness of the Witcher universe was intensely debated (see Majkowski, 2018). While we do not engage with this debate here, many players did perceive the game as inspired by Slavic/Polish folklore and geographical setting (this was also the case with the first *Witcher*, as noted by Kosman, 2015, p. 351). Moreover, the games were praised as a vehicle for the worldwide promotion of that cultural heritage.

Claiming a cause-and-effect relationship is a tricky endeavour, but two breakthroughs correlated with *The Witcher 3*'s success story. Firstly, the Slavic setting proudly entered Polish game development (Majkowski, 2019). If we found only two Slavic-themed video game titles from 1990 to 2014, the years 2015–2023 brought:

- *Eventide: Slavic Fable* (The House of Fables, 2015), a HOPA game putting Slavic myths in the modern world;
- *Thea: The Awakening* (MuHa Games, 2015), a turn-based strategy Slavic fantasy (the authors openly cite *Witcher 3* as the trendsetter);

- *Thea II: The Shattering* (MuHa Games, 2019), as above;
- *Ancestors Legacy* (Destructive Creations, 2018), a historical RTS set across the 8th to 13th centuries, with Slavs as one of the four factions;
- *Blacktail* (The Parasight, 2022), a first-person action-adventure witchcraft fantasy based on the Slavic story about Baba Yaga; the game’s website describes it as a “blend of intense archery combat and dark storytelling set in a vibrant fairy tale world”;
- *Gord* (Covenant.dev, 2023), a single-player adventure strategy in a fantasy world inspired by Slavic folklore;
- *Dungeons of the Amber Griffin* (Frozensgem Studio, 2023), an FPP dungeon crawler inspired by legends from the Kashubia region (on the Polish coast of the Baltic Sea);
- *The End of the Sun* (2023), described on its website as “a first-person exploration and adventure story-based *game*, set in the world of Slavic rites, beliefs, and legends”.

Then again, the “Slavic revival” extended to nondigital games:

- *Słowianie* (Hengal, 2018), a tabletop RPG in a fantasy world based on Slavic themes;
- *Stolemě* (Underworld Kingdom, 2018), a humorous board game about battling families of the stolemě, legendary giants from the Kashubia region;
- *Stworze* (Underworld Kingdom, 2018), a board game with multiple expansions about mythical Slavic creatures living among humans;
- *Żercy* (A. Jagodziński, 2018), a card game about pagan priests serving their tribal chiefs;

- *Monster Slayers of Slawia* (Into the Unknown, 2019), a card game about witcher-like monster hunters (a revised version of *Slavica* from Hobby World, 2012);
- *R.P.G.* (Topory, 2019), a pack of historical TRPG scenarios set in the 10th-century Poland;
- *Slowianie* (Alexander, 2021), a board game village builder for children aged 8+.

The second breakthrough after 2015 was the launch of support programmes for local gamedev by the Polish government. A notable appreciation of Polish video games as a matter of international politics happened as early as 2011, when the game *Witcher 2* became a welcome gift from the Polish prime minister Donald Tusk to the American president Barack Obama, a fact recalled by Obama in his speech during his next visit to Poland in 2014 (Kosman, 2015, p. 376). Back then, *Witcher 2* was valued in economic terms: as a poster case of a global commercial success of a Polish product. Since 2015 the new government has enhanced this narrative as a justification for the creation of systemic public support for Polish games. On the one hand, the ruling officials continue to appreciate video games as a commercially powerful creative industry that builds the Polish brand in the global economy. On the other hand, they explicitly cite the soft power of video games as an attractive means to promote national culture abroad, and to teach history, heritage, and patriotism domestically. On the side of the game industry, the same belief is expressed by Jakub Wójcik, the chairman of Indie Games Poland Foundation: “The growing interest in Polish games translates into an increasing interest in our country, culture, history, and values” (in Marszałkowski, Biedermann & Rutkowski, 2023, p. 7).

Except the GameINN grant programme, created in 2015 and launched in 2016 by the National Centre for Research and Development, large-scale support programmes for the game

industry were short-lived and generally unsuccessful, like the long-delayed 2018 governmental project of tax deductions for producers of “cultural games” (Mileszko, 2018). A new agency named the Centre for the Development of Creative Industries, founded in May 2022, might bring a positive change, but it is yet to be seen. Nonetheless, for all their faults, the “post-witcher” governmental funding schemes have supported a number of history/heritage-themed games, some of which have been completed and released. Other state and local institutions and NGOs have followed suit, if not for international outreach, then for historical and civic education addressed to the Polish youth. By no means has this been limited to the early mediaeval Slavic period – but that period is certainly included. Of the above-mentioned titles, *Dungeons of the Amber Griffin* was supported by the Ministry of Culture and a local museum in the city of Wejherowo. *The End of the Sun* carefully recreates Slavic-built infrastructure, using photogrammetry of actual buildings in open-air museums. *Stworze* was supported by the Patrimonium Europae foundation. The *R.P.G.* scenarios, “putting players on the side of the ruling Piast dynasty and working for the nation-building project in the union of the crown and the Catholic church” (Mochocki, 2021a, p. 232), were published with a grant from the funding scheme named The Patriotism of Tomorrow, managed by the Polish History Museum.

These new “Slavic” games can hardly be called historical. Except for the *R.P.G.* scenario pack, which does refer to actual past events and settings, all the other games are either historical fantasy or are set in entirely fictional worlds, only “based on” or “inspired by” Slavic folklore. We include them in the study of history/heritage-themed games in line with Chapman’s (2016, p. 10) assumption that “fantastical settings and narratives (such as fantasy and science fiction) could still be used metaphorically to argue about the past, offering particular notions of causality

or exploring key ideas or concerns by mixing fantastical elements with those that are more conventionally historical”.

Generally speaking, Old Polish Slavicness appears only in the form of folklore and mythology because there are hardly any written sources about the pre-Christian period, and the available ones are not entirely reliable, as they were written by foreigners who had superficial (if not second-hand) knowledge coupled with an anti-pagan bias. Elements of material culture – architecture, weapons, tools – can be reconstructed thanks to archaeology, while social life, spiritual culture, and pre-Christian history are only known as approximations and informed guesses. Recorded history substantial enough for an attempt to construct a historically viable representation begins with the baptism of Duke Mieszko in 966, and it is the choice of *Ancestors Legacy* (2018).

Most of the above-mentioned video games create quasi-medievalistic worlds loosely informed by Slavic folklore and beliefs, with no connection to recognisable historical places, characters, or events. The TRPG *Arkona* (2003) is set in the generally-historical geography and cultures of Polans, Czechs, Germans, and Danes, but starts with the assumption that Mieszko did not accept Christianity. This turns *Arkona* into a counterfactual, alternate history (plus magic, deities, and monsters) developed up to 1100 A.D., but keeping the territorial expansion of Christianity close to as it was before 966. Another TRPG, *Słowianie*, is set on a fictional continent named Slawia with fictional geographical regions, magic, and monsters, but nonetheless declares the world to be very close to the real 9th–11th centuries – and even keeps the name “Germans” for its hostile neighbours.

3. Mediaeval to Early Modern Poland (from the 11th Century to 1569)

The high and late mediaeval period is surprisingly underrepresented. We have found only one directly relevant Polish commercial video game: *Knights of the Cross* (in Polish: *Krzyżacy*) (Cenega, 2002), not to be confused with the Chinese *Krzyżacy –Knights of the Cross* (Olive Panda Studio, 2023). It is a turn-based strategy about the war Poland and Lithuania waged against the Teutonic chivalric order in the early 15th century. There is also *Polskie Imperium: od Krzyżaków do Potopu* [*Polish Empire: from the Teutons to the Deluge*] (Cenega, 2010), whose title is entirely misleading. This is a Polish version of the Russian-made *Reign: Conflict of Nations*, featuring 26 warring factions in the 14th–17th centuries, with no preference for either Poland or the Teutons that would have justified the Polonocentric title of the Polish release.

This does not mean there are no medievalist video games made in Poland after 2015.

Indeed, there are:

- *Ancestors Legacy* (Destructive Creations, 2018), a historical RTS already mentioned in the previous section (as it spans six centuries, cutting across the somewhat artificial division between early and high Middle Ages);
- *Medieval Dynasty* (Render Cube, 2020), a life sim with survival and strategy;
- *Rustler (Grand Theft Horse)* (Jutsu Games, 2021), an open-world action game about a mediaeval thug;
- *Manor Lords* (Slavic Magic, 2023), a strategy RTS aiming to accurately represent the historical... Franconia.

However, none of them attempts to represent mediaeval Poland except for *Ancestors Legacy* (Destructive Creations, 2018), which places mediaeval Poland and the hostile Teutonic order next to the Vikings, Anglo-Saxons, and Saracens. The Slavic/Polish history is there but occupies relatively little space.

Regarding institutional support for historical video games, we wish to mention *Waterworks!* (Armor Games, 2020), a free-to-play management sim of mediaeval waterworks in the town of Grudziądz, based on Waław Kulczykowski's research at the University of Gdańsk. The game was funded by a grant from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, and developed with support from the Grudziądz municipality, a local museum, and the local waterworks. Then again, in late 2022, BTC Studio received a grant from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage for a strategy video game about the reign of Bolesław Chrobry, titled *Chrobry: A Story From 1000 Years Ago* (Wawrzyniak, 2022). This could potentially become an example of a Polish-made game focused entirely on Polish mediaeval history, but so far there have been no news about its further development.

There is a similar scarcity of mediaeval Poland's representations in Polish nondigital games. We can only mention small wargames, mostly hex-and-counter tactics about the prolonged struggle of Poland and Lithuania with the Teutonic knights in the 14th and 15th centuries, including simplistic centennial merchandise for the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Tannenberg (Grunwald) celebrated in 2010. The few outstanding cases are:

- *Na Grunwald! Rycerze króla Jagielly* [*To Grunwald! The Knights of King Jagiello*] (Egmont, 2010), a eurogame for children aged 8+, which does not portray the actual battle but consists in rallying knights for it; the winner is whoever brings the largest force to the king;
- *Magnum Sal* (2010, Leonardo Games), a eurogame about the exploration, mining and trade management of the famous salt mine in Wieliczka in the 14th century;
- *Korona Piastów* (*The Crown of the Piasts*), a unique board game project set not in the reunited kingdom of the 14th–16th centuries but in the 13th century, the time of the fragmentation of the said kingdom into small principalities. The game featured a fairly complex system of warfare, economy, and politics for small and weak lands ruled by minor dukes and lords descending from the once-royal dynasty. The project was developed throughout the late 2010s as a print-and-play prototype (still available for download), but never released commercially. The websites are no longer online, and Facebook updates stopped in September 2020.
- *Sigismundus Augustus. Dei Gratia Rex Poloniae* (2012, Fabryka Gier Historycznych), set during the 1548–1572 reign of Sigismund II August. It is an economic-political-military strategy, pitting 3–5 players against one another as leaders of powerful aristocratic families. The game was released locally and internationally. Its timeline extends into the PLC period, so it could also be mentioned in the next section.

4. Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795)

The PLC period is comparatively well represented in video games, commercial and noncommercial alike. Three of them are Polish versions of the tactical RPG *Mount & Blade* series. *Mount & Blade: Ogniem i Mieczem* is the Polish edition (2009, CD Projekt) of the Ukrainian *Mount & Blade: With Fire & Sword* (Studio Sich, 2009). Originally, the PLC was just one of five playable nations, and the international release marketed the game as set in Central and Eastern Europe. The Polish edition emphasised the PLC setting, so did two non-commercial mods created by the (mostly?) Polish modder community: *The Deluge* (2015) is a mod to *Mount & Blade: Warband* (see Majewski, 2017), and *The Deluge II* (in development) is a mod to *Mount & Blade: Bannerlord*.

Two independent free-to-play games were commissioned by a cluster of local counties on the Polish-Ukrainian border, the aim being to promote local history and attract tourism. *Szlak Sobieskiego* [*Sobieski's Trail*] (2012, Calaris Studio) was a free browser MMORPG, followed by *Skarb Sobieskiego* [*Sobieski's Treasure*] (2014, Calaris Studio), a free action-adventure game. The third stand-alone free-to-play game, titled *Korona Rzeczypospolitej* [*The Crown of the Commonwealth*] (2020, Frost3D Games), is a browser-based MMORPG funded by The Princes Lubomirsky Foundation (Fundacja Książąt Lubomirskich). All these three projects were non-commercial, dependent on institutional funding, and none of them lived long. More information on these and other PLC-themed Polish-made video games can be found in Mochocki, Schreiber, & Majewski (forthcoming-a).

As of July 2023, the newest PLC-themed game is *Crimen – Mercenary Tales*, a VR title promoted as an “action-packed, gory arcade slasher that distinguishes us from conventional physics-driven VR games”, which features “eight swashbucklin’ tales of grandeur, riches, and legendary feats” (Carbon Studio, 2023). It is set in various locations of 17th-century Europe, including the Caribbean pirate theme, but it emphasises PLC settings, character types, and weapons. Another relatively recent PLC-themed project is *Hellish Quart* (2021, Kubold): a historical fencing game with a forthcoming story mode.

Two other titles deserve a mention. Firstly, the *Hearts of Stone* (2015, CD Projekt Red), a DLC to *Witcher 3*, which infused the witcher’s fantasy world with a culture, imagery and motifs clearly modelled on the PLC (Majkowski, 2018; Mochocka, forthcoming). Secondly, the yet-unreleased game *BEAST* (False Prophet), a turn-based tactical RPG set in a grimdark version of the 1590s Carpathian borderland between Transylvania and the PLC. None of these games is directly set in the PLC (*BEAST* only in a small bit, *Hearts of Stone* not at all), yet the elements of the PLC heritage can be recognised in both.

Nondigital PLC-themed games – if we rule out numerous hex-and-counter tactical wargames – begin with the TRPG *Dzikie Pola* (1997, MAG; second edition in 2005, Max Pro), with players taking on the roles of landless adventuring PLC nobility. It was followed by the collectible card game *VETO!* (2004+, Krakowska Grupa Kreacyjna; second edition in 2007, Imperium), which featured hundreds of motifs from PLC history, art, cultural heritage, and PLC-set fiction. Based on it was *VETO: The Boardgame* (2013, Kuźnia Gier), also putting players against one another as leaders of factions campaigning for their candidates in the royal election. Another board game spin-off of the original *VETO!* was *Liberum Veto* (VETO, 2016). The next important title is *By Fire and Sword* (2012, Wargamer), a miniature wargame with 17th-century

armies of many nations, primarily the PLC and its neighbours. A Kickstarter campaign for its second edition in June 2023 collected \$91.000 (against the pledged \$15.000).

The best known designer board game in the PLC setting is the UK-made *God's Playground* (Treefrog Games, 2009), published in Poland as *Boże Igrzysko* (2010, Phalanx Games). The Polish publisher also released a “spin-off” title *Boże Igrzysko: MAGNACI* (2014, Phalanx Games), in English as *The MAGNATES: A Game of Power*. Both are negotiation-heavy strategies, with players controlling powerful aristocratic families competing for hegemony. *Unia Lubelska* (Trach, 2019) is a card game about political struggles around the formation of the Polish-Lithuanian union, and the most recent game with the PLC as one of several playable nations, is the military strategy *Coalitions: Raison d'Etat* (2023, Phalanx Games), a 17th-century-themed adaptation of the originally 18th-century-themed wargame *Coalitions* (2023).

There have also been various small, low-budget educational and promotional board and card games released by institutions or local administrations to promote their local heritage. One example is *Łazienki Królewskie [Royal Baths Park]* (2013, Egmont Polska), commissioned by the Łazienki museum, which represents the eponymous park as a meeting place for King Poniatowski and a few historical artists from his court. Another is *Proch i Stal [Gunpowder and Steel]* (Polskie Gry Planszowe, 2011), a cooperative defense game putting the player team in command of a small rebel force of Polish confederates, outnumbered and besieged by the Russians in the monastery in Tyniec in 1771–1772.

A unique case is the cooperative educational board game *Chłopska Szkoła Biznesu [Peasant Business School]* (2010, Małopolski Instytut Kultury), for 12–30 players. It is neither political nor military nor about the aristocracy. It utilises the history of an 18th-century town

centre of textile (weaving) production and trade to teach players selected elements of business and economy. The game is the central output of a long-term project funded by the Małopolska Institute of Culture, which included multiple educational activities and publications around the game. The project website is archived at <http://csb.mik.krakow.pl/files>, with a few papers and the game manual available in English.

Dzikie Pola and *VETO!* players were involved in various PLC heritage practices. The *Dzikie Pola* community made a strong presence at role-playing conventions around 2001–2006 and had its own small larp scene until around 2010 (Mochocki, 2012a). Moreover, PLC hobby role-playing seamlessly evolved into educational role-playing, historical reenactment, heritage events, and creation of other PLC-themed games. While the *Dzikie Pola* role-playing community seems to have died sometime in the mid-2010s, many of its former leaders remain active in other PLC heritage practices: as reenactors, educators, writers, game designers, event organisers, researchers (Mochocki, 2012a, 2017, 2021a).

The most notable example is Pospolite Ruszenie: a Kraków-based NGO specialising in grant-funded historical and civic education. Moving from *Dzikie Pola* TRPG to larp to reenactment to educational and heritage activities, they have a strong track record of grant-funded projects. Examples include *Project DEMOcracy* (2012), funded by the Swiss-Polish Cooperation Programme, engaging 1100+ junior high school students in about 50 larps about 17th-century parliamentarianism (Mochocki & Wrona, 2013), or *MyRazem [UsTogether]* (2022), a project uniting Polish and Ukrainian youth around their shared history in the PLC (<https://myrazem.net>). Pospolite Ruszenie's Facebook post from the 29 June 2023 says they are working on a new educational multiplayer board game *Złoty Wiek [The Golden Age]* set in 16th-century Poland, designed for 36 players in 12 teams of three.

5. Literature Review

Let us start with a summary of research on games presented so far. Academic research on Polish Slavic-themed games is notably scarce, unless we count publications on the Witcher games, particularly *The Witcher 3*. However, these game themselves do not purport to represent Poland's history, but they do refer to related cultural formations, such as Slavic folklore, debated in multiple papers (those in English by Polish scholars include Gawroński & Bajorek, 2020; Jański, 2019; Jaworowicz-Zimny, 2020; Majkowski, 2018; Mochocka, 2018). The Witcher games are also a popular topic of Bachelor's and Master's theses at Polish universities. Beside the "Witcherology", we have found only one English text on Slavic themes in Polish games: a long conference abstract (Majkowski, 2019). Even Polish-language publications are few and far between. Apart from Duszyński's (2012) paper on Slavic bestiary in TRPGs, which features both *Arkona* and *Zły Cień*, we can only locate brief accounts of Slavic TRPGs in general overviews of Polish RPG systems. The TRPG *Słowianie* (2018) has not attracted any scholarly attention yet, and the *Polanie* games, alongside *Kajko i Kokosz*, only receive brief mentions in histories of video gaming in Poland (e.g. Kosman, 2015).

Regarding the high and late Middle Ages, a lack of research corresponds with the shortage of games. We did not find any publications researching Polish games about Polish mediaeval history except one UK-made Master's thesis (Wright, 2020) that studies *Ancestors Legacy* as one of three cases of mediaeval representations in games. As for foreign-made games that feature Poland among other mediaeval countries, such as *Age of Empires* or *Medieval II: Total War* or *Crusader Kings II*, neither games nor studies focus on Polish history or heritage. This contrasts with the Czech case of the medievalist *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, which has become a global success and has generated a visible research interest (Neumann, 2019; Pfister, 2019; Zagalo,

2022; Majewski, 2022). A flagship of the Czech game industry, *Kingdom Come* has a somewhat similar position to *The Witcher* in Poland: commercially successful on the global market, valued locally as a means to promote national history and culture abroad, and getting a lot of academic attention in the local language and in English.

Research on PLC-themed games started in the late 1990s, shortly after the release of the *Dzikie Pola* TRPG (1997). It was pioneered by Jerzy Szeja, who introduced RPGs as extracurricular activities for his high-school students. (The mid-1990s also marked the beginning of video game studies in Poland; see Garda & Krawczyk, 2017.) Szeja first published short articles on the educational benefits of TRPG in the teacher's magazine *Polonistyka*, and then defended a PhD thesis on TRPGs' cultural, literary, and educational aspects (Szeja, 2004). Although not limited to historical themes, his multiple Polish publications referred to *Dzikie Pola* in its tabletop and live-action formats. English-language works on PLC role-playing started in the 2010s. Michał Mochocki wrote specifically about *Dzikie Pola*, about PLC-themed larps (2012a) and other games (2017) as cultural phenomena, and on PLC-themed larps in education (Mochocki, 2014; Mochocki & Wrona, 2013); PLC games also appear in his monograph on role-plays as heritage practices (Mochocki, 2021a), and he researches PLC-themed video games as well (Mochocki, 2017; Mochocki & Nowicki, forthcoming; Mochocki, Schreiber & Majewski, forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b). Tomasz Majkowski explores the cultural, national and political contexts of PLC themes in the *Witcher* fantasy (Majkowski, 2018) and in historical video games (Majkowski, Prokopek, & Kozyra, forthcoming). Mochocki and Majkowski have also been involved in two studies of *Hellish Quart*, one focused on the authenticity and immersion of digitally represented fencing (Mochocki & Nowicki, forthcoming) and the other on the discursive construct of historical realism in relation to "neosarmatian" ideology (Majkowski,

Prokopek & Kozyra, forthcoming). Jakub Majewski studies PLC among other historical settings in video games and TRPG (2014), and in video game modding (2017). There are also Polish-language papers on the *Dzikie Pola* TRPG (e.g. Mochocki, 2011; Łopatecki, 2015), most of them focused on its use for education in Polish history, culture, literature, or civics. The board game *Peasant Business School* boasts several dedicated publications on its design and educational application – mostly in Polish, two in English (e.g. Wacięga, 2015). Moreover, local research on PLC-themed games has been supported by two OPUS grants from the National Science Centre in Poland, both awarded in 2020. Mochocki’s team at Kazimierz Wielki University studies the PLC and the American Old West settings as two historical transmedia universes across historical fiction and games, and Majkowski’s team at the Jagiellonian University explores the PLC within a larger study on Polish national themes in video games.

Why are most of these publications recent? Firstly, as the field of game studies grows, a significant number of works are being produced on an expanding variety of subjects, with more and more Central and Eastern European game scholars publishing in English. Then again, geopolitical events in the last several years have made the issues of national identity more salient, across the world as well as in this region in particular. Politics of memory and heritage within individual countries have contributed to an increasing interest in national history. Last but not least, researchers have more publication and funding opportunities available for the study of national topics, the uses of national history included. These patterns are global or regional rather than country-specific, although the relatively large size of Polish game studies and the importance of history in Poland’s public sphere play a role, too.

Similar reasons may be fuelling the growth of studies of game cultures in the region, whether these studies focus on the socialist period (Garda, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2015; Švelch, 2019; Wasiak, 2010, 2014, 2016) or on the following decades (Garda & Grabarczyk, 2021; Ozimek, 2021a, 2021b; Policov et al., 2009; Šisler et al., 2017; Švelch, 2021). However, the studies in question are not focused on the uses of national history in games. The same is true of historical overviews of video game industries in various countries (Wolf, 2015, 2021).

Existing publications usually concentrate on individual titles or small groups of titles. We have not found a bird's eye view of the uses of any Central and Eastern European country's national history, or the history of the whole region. The closest to this is a special issue of *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* (Kristensen, 2023), which contains a few papers covering the representations of Belarusian, Czech, Polish, and Romanian history (Fousek Krobová et al., 2023; Réti, 2023; Serada, 2023; Šisler et al., 2023). Yet Central and Eastern European game studies as a whole is consolidating, as can be seen in two regional conferences (CEEGS annually in multiple countries, CEEHGW in 2022 in Czechia). Now this consolidation is extending to the study of historical-themed games, as evidenced by a forthcoming Routledge collection *Central and Eastern European Histories and Heritages in Video Games* (edited by Mochocki, Schreiber, Majewski, & Kot). Our paper contributes to this newly developing trend.

6. Conclusions

The early, pagan Slavic Poland up to about 1000 AD was relatively unpopular in games before 2015. The mid-to-late 2010s and early 2020s have brought a sudden increase in Slavic video games and board games, which we may attribute to the success of *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*. These games do not attempt to depict a historical version of early mediaeval Poland.

Instead, they extensively draw from Slavic mythology, folklore, and magic. These “Slavic fantasy” titles are deeply under researched in Poland so far, with the exception of *The Witcher 3*.

The mediaeval and early modern period (from the 11th century to 1569) features in a limited number of games set specifically in Poland. Polish video game studios prefer to make games about general mediaeval Europe, with Poland as one of several factions, or with no Poland at all. Nondigital games about mediaeval Poland are few and far between, too: we have found but a few cases other than hex-and-counter battles. The Polish struggle with the Teutonic Order in the 14th and 15th centuries is the dominant theme, with the 16th-century Golden Age and the fragmentation of the 12th and 13th centuries only marginally represented. It comes as little surprise that we found no dedicated research on medieval Poland in Polish-made games.

The 1569–1795 Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth is featured in quite a few video games: three free-to-play non-profit productions, three versions of *Mount & Blade*, a fencing simulator, and a VR game, not to mention the PLC-inspired *Hearts of Stone* DLC for *The Witcher 3*. The PLC used to have a vibrant fan community of the TRPG *Dzikie Pola* and CCG *VETO!*, and still has the wargaming scene of *By Fire and Sword*. Three PLC themes are strongly featured: warfare, the political system of royal elections and noblemen’s parliamentarism, and the cultural heritage of the multinational and multireligious union. Both digital and nondigital PLC-themed games are relatively well-studied.

In the previous section, we have discussed the factors that shape the popularity of history-/heritage-themed games with game scholars in Central and Eastern Europe. It is also worth examining two factors that influence the selection of individual games to be studied. First of all, a global commercial success brings international scholarly attention, which will include studies

of local historical, political, and cultural inspirations. Such is the case of *The Witcher 3* in Poland, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* in Czechia, or *Disco Elysium* in Estonia (which has an entire issue of *Baltic Screen Media Review* for itself: Apperley & Ozimek, 2021). Even though *The Witcher 3* and *Disco Elysium* are set in fictional worlds, links to the pagan Slavic heritage in the former (and to the PLC in its *Hearts of Stone* expansion), and to Central and Eastern European communism and nationalism in the latter, are evident enough. Secondly, some games receive an unproportionately large research coverage when they are researched by people involved in their creation. This is the case of the *Dzikie Pola* TRPG and larp, researched by their co-author Michał Mochocki, and *Peasant Business School*, researched by people involved either in its creation or in the larger educational project the game came from. Similar examples are Czech historical games covered in English-language research by Czech academics involved in their development. The games are: *Československo 38–89: Atentát* (Charles University & the Czech Academy of Sciences, 2015), *Attentat 1942* (Charles Games, 2017), *Svoboda 1945: Liberation* (Charles Games, 2021) and *Train to Sachsenhausen* (Charles Games, 2022). Related research works were mostly authored or co-authored by one of the designers, Vít Šisler (e.g. Pöttsch & Šisler, 2019; Šisler, 2016; Šisler et al., 2022).

The different popularity of different historical periods with Polish game developers is harder to explain than the degree of research coverage. Yes, the post-2015 Slavic fantasy trend evidently correlates with the success of *Witcher 3*. Moreover, Slavic revival in games is linked by Majkowski (2019) to the 21st-century far-right fringe movement of believers in Great Lechia, a huge Slavic empire allegedly existing before Christianisation, whose all records and evidence are thought to have been erased by a Christian conspiracy. But why do we have so many digital and nondigital games set in the PLC and so few in high/late mediaeval Christian Poland?

Focusing here on games and related game studies, we cannot explore fully the role of the mediaeval and PLC heritage in Polish culture and society outside games (for more on this role, see other papers, e.g. Mochocki, 2012a, 2012b, 2021a, and non-game culture and heritage studies). Our answer will be a brief speculation.

We believe there are two main reasons why mediaeval Poland is less inspiring than the PLC to contemporary Polish creatives, both related to the search for an appropriate heritage for the post-1989 Poland. In 1989 Poland abandoned the USSR-dominated Soviet Bloc to embrace Western democracy and capitalism, so it was in need of a new heritage to replace the (post-)Soviet legacy – but it also searched for some degree of its own national identity defined against the universalising pan-European narrative. The Catholic feudalism of mediaeval Poland could not help much, built as it was under German and Czech influence within an analogical pan-European universalism. The (arguably) exceptional Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth provides an alternative point of reference, distinguishing Poland from both Eastern and Western neighbours. In the discursive construction of heritage and memory, the PLC heritage was a working solution for nationalist EU-sceptics and multiculturalist EU-enthusiasts alike: the former variant interprets the PLC as an imperial Polish conservative Catholic project, the latter as a joint Polish–Lithuanian–Belarusian–Ukrainian project of an EU-like commonwealth of many cultures and faiths (more about it in Mochocki, Schreiber & Majewski, forthcoming-b). The second reason why the PLC is a more “productive” heritage than mediaeval Poland is its political system: the republican character of its parliamentarism, elective monarchy, and civil liberties is much more relatable for the 20-/21st-century parliamentary democracy than mediaeval dynastic monarchies.

An interesting matter is the development of systemic financial support for history-/heritage-/culture-themed games. The Polish government as well as local administration, public institutions, and NGOs are increasingly interested in funding games to promote their agendas. One governmental motivation is more economic than political: to stimulate the development of video games as a globally competitive industry. The Polish game industry is closely watching the situation in Germany, which has recently introduced “the largest industry support program in history, reaching up to 70 million euros annually”, which coincides with a 350% increase in the German position in the global ranking of the most anticipated games on Steam between 2021 and 2023 (Marszałkowski, Biedermann, & Rutkowski 2023, p. 39). In previous years, funding programmes for games were launched and abandoned with little to no inter-institutional coordination by various ministries (of culture and national heritage; of science and education; of regional development) and state agencies, none of which were particularly familiar with games. The year 2022 opened a new chapter: the Centre for the Development of Creative Industries was established as a dedicated agency for constant collaboration with the game industry, and it started to shape its programmes in close cooperation with the game industry association Indie Games Poland Foundation.

This Centre reports to the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, so we may expect that it will follow the governmental priorities regarding the politics of memory and heritage. This is the next aspect of governmental support programmes: the strictly political agenda to promote national patriotism through historical games. Far-reaching with regard to the history of the 20th century, which takes centre stage in the current governmental politics of memory, it appears to be driven by anti-German sentiments based on the memory of Nazi occupation and by anti-communist sentiments related to Soviet invasions and post-war dependency (as extensively

discussed by Sterczewska, 2023). Naturally, this narrative will directly and indirectly affect games about 20th-century history, but not games about distant history, when no communists or Nazis were around. Nevertheless, no historical period is entirely free from entanglements in present-day memory and heritage practices. While mediaeval and early modern settings cannot tell stories about communism and Nazism, they can feed into other components of the now-hegemonic narrative of Polishness (see Sterczewska, 2023), that is, into Roman Catholicism and ethnolinguistic nationalism (not to mention the fact that the anti-Russian sentiment can easily replace the Soviet Union with the earlier Russian Empire, and an analogous process is possible with anti-German rhetorics).

In any case, knowing history and having pride in the nation's former glory is generally desired in nationalistic patriotism, even if it is about victories from six hundred years ago. Historical or historical-themed games, just like film or print fiction, will always be caught between various discursive positions on history, heritage, memory, and identity (Mochocki, 2021a; Mochocki, Schreiber, & Majewski, forthcoming-b). It remains to be seen how the ever-increasing involvement of the Polish government in promoting patriotic themes and narratives in games will play out alongside grassroots socio-cultural phenomena such as the "Slavic revival" (Majkowski, 2019) or the "Sarmatian turn" (Mochocki, 2012b).

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