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Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies

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POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN GAME STUDIES

Geralt of Poland: *The Witcher 3* Between Epistemic Disobedience and Imperial Nostalgia

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This article is a reading of *The Witcher 3* in relation to postcolonial approaches to Polish culture. It departs from an analysis of an online debate on racial representation in the game as a possible act of epistemic disobedience, and moves on to a consideration of three narrative aspects of the game itself: its representation of political struggle, the ideological stance of the protagonist, and ethnic inspirations in worldbuilding. By referring those three issues to postcolonial analyses of Polish culture, as well as Walter D. Mignolo's concept of decolonization through epistemic disobedience, this article aims to demonstrate paradoxical qualities of the game, which tries to simultaneously distance itself from the established, West-oriented ways of knowledge production and gain recognition as an artifact of modern Western pop culture. Moreover, it employs the tradition of Polish Romanticism to establish itself as a bridge between Slavdom and Western culture, and strengthen the colonial idea of Poland being the proper ruler over Slavs.

Little nations do have little minds.

The circle of thick skulls expands around us.

Reprehensible customs. Backward laws.

Reprehensible gods, my dear Titus Vilius.

– Wisława Szymborska, *Voices* (1997)

The aim of this article is to examine *The Witcher 3*, a blockbuster game which has become the most successful product of contemporary Polish popular culture, as a regional creation negotiating its place in the global (i.e. English-speaking) gaming culture. Starting with an insight into an online debate on the game's handling of racial diversity, I will employ Walter D. Mignolo's concepts of epistemic disobedience and oppressive modernity, as well as some of the existent postcolonial approaches to Polish culture, in order to explore the phenomenon of an internationally recognized game set during the Second World. In this way, I will address the issues of a Central European country's right to tell its own stories, and the problematic relation between the concepts of 'Polishness' and 'Slavicness' within Polish national discourse as a source of ideology in *Witcher 3*.

My analysis consists of four parts. Firstly, I address the two competing stands taken by participants of an online debate over the racial representation within the game, one group claiming that *Witcher* lacks diversity and and that this is a problem; and the other arguing that Slavic people have a right to create an exclusively white digital world. Next, I analyze three aspects of the game itself: 1) connections of the political tension in the gameworld with Polish historical experience; 2) the game's use of 'Slavic aesthetics': a conglomerate of images and motifs that players, especially those engaged in the online debate, associate with Slavic mythology and folklore; 3) relations between the protagonist, Geralt the Witcher, and epistemic tools of modernity. In the analysis, I employ relevant concepts already analyzed in the scope of Polish literary and cultural studies. Thus, I aim to grasp the character of both the importance of *The Witcher 3* for the contemporary Polish culture and its relation to dominant Western discourse.

Rather than address the issues of gameplay, player-avatar relationships, and game production realities, I focus on the game's narrative and visual aesthetics. Apart from the limited length of this article, there are three reasons for such a restriction. Firstly, it is consistent with the theoretical apparatus of Polish postcolonial studies that predominantly deal with literature and are, therefore, well-suited for a narrative analysis. Secondly, the gameplay of *The Witcher 3* closely follows the convention introduced into the genre most notably by BioWare RPGs and the *Gothic* series (Piranha Bytes, 2001). Thus, the gameplay adapts itself to design patterns developed in the West and leaves no room for the expressions of 'Polishness' that are the focal points of this article. Thirdly, the theoretical framework I employ to analyze the game itself is unfit for proper production-oriented research. Therefore, any attempt on my part to include such a perspective would be anecdotal at best.

Another area that my discussion leaves mostly unexplored are the relations between the game and its immediate source material—Andrzej Sapkowski's novels—as well as Polish products of the fantasy genre in general. Although the game is based on a series of novels sometimes dubbed 'Slavic fantasy', *The Witcher Saga* is, in fact, noticeably critical of the idea of Slavicness as a basis for a fantasy narrative. Sapkowski's novels employ an occasional folklore-based monster or a reference to regional superstitions, but the overall background of his work is rather cosmopolitan and not consistent in embracing Slavic inspirations. His short stories are based on well-known fairy tales, from *The Beauty and the Beast* to *The Little Mermaid*. The six-volume Witcher saga, in turn, creates a world of Tolkienesque elves and dwarves whose native languages are based on, respectively, Welsh and Norse, while the dominant race of humans—ignorant, cruel and mean peasants, as well as petty and short-sighted gentry—speak Polish. Furthermore, the author himself ridiculed the very idea of 'Slavic fantasy' on several occasions, especially in his manifesto entitled 'Piróg, or No Gold in Grey Mountains' (Sapkowski, 1995). Thus, the strong and complicated connection between the Witcher and the Polono-Slavic cultures that constitutes the context of my analysis is created mostly by the video game itself, and will be regarded as such.

Online Struggle Over The White Wolf

The debate over racial representation in *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt RED, 2015) was sparked by a single paragraph in Arthur Gies' long and rather generous review published by Polygon. Having argued for an ambivalence in the way some aspects of the game's narrative problematize misogyny while others reinforce it, the author makes an apparently casual remark that during the 50+ hours with the game he did not encounter any non-white character (Gies, 2015). While certainly true, this brief comment provoked a series of reactions, explanations, and refutations from critics and fans all over the world. From a Polish game developer's blog (Chmielarz, 2015) to a Forbes game column (Kain, 2015; Tassi, 2015), the lack of racial diversity was debated and commented upon from two strong positions. Some, such as Tauriq Moosa from Polygon, identified the issue as a symptom of a larger tendency in the game industry (Moosa, 2015). Others, like Dave Beja in his private blog entry reposted on Gamasutra, defended the exclusion of non-whites as an expression of Polish historical and contemporary experience, the country being predominantly white (Beja, 2015). The debate seemed consistent with the overall political climate affecting today's gaming community divided over the necessity of racial and gender diversity in mainstream games (Ong, 2016). The employed arguments were rather generic, mostly tied to the larger dispute over the use of the so-called 'non-human races' in the fantasy genre as a metaphor for real-life racial issues (Poor, 2012). Still, one of the questions explored by the debaters seems unique to that particular discussion, namely, whether the lack of racial diversity is connected to Slavic sensibilities and the national culture of Poland. As Patryk Kowalik puts it in his *Love Letter to Person Who Demands Racial Quotas in Witcher 3*:

> To people from multiracial countries, demanding racial diversity in video games might seem like something good, a progressive thing. However the game is not just any game, it's Witcher. Game made in country which battled through history to maintain it's own heritage and language, game which builds upon slavic mythology and promotes it internationally. You're trying to shoehorn foreign elements into their culture, enforce your own standards

onto theirs. In case I haven't hammered my point down strongly enough: you have people of a minority culture that were persecuted and discriminated against in last 250 years, who made this awesome work of art that represents them, and you're telling them to change it because it's not American enough.[1] (Kowalik, 2015: n. pag.)

And, by extension, another issue arises: are Poles just another group of privileged whites, or do they somehow depart from the dominant model of a Western subject, and are therefore entitled to produce their own narrative on their own terms?

It is not my aim to judge the validity of the dispute recapitulated above, nor to take a stance on the racial representation issue, though the problem is doubtless significant. What I find to be much more important for this analysis are the rhetorical strategies of both camps. Defenders of the game's whiteness employed three main arguments. Firstly, they argued that the game was made in a predominantly white environment of Poland, and therefore it mirrors Polish everyday experience—that claim was supported by statistics. Their second point was that the game is based on a book series and has to respect ethnicities of the world created by Andrzej Sapkowski, which is supposedly based on Slavic mythology and the history of Central Europe. Thirdly, they positioned the accusation of racism as coming from a privileged position of American middle class, forcing the people all around the world to share its sensibilities (Arean, 2015; Cosmo811, 2015; Kowalik, 2015).

The opponents developed a line of reasoning consisting of four main points. Firstly, they reasoned that a game made for international markets should stand up to international standards, especially as the lack of racial diversity in the commercially successful *The Witcher 3* contributes to a larger problem with racial representation in cRPG games. Secondly, they argued that there is much more to both the book series and the game than Slavic inspirations, as confirmed by Scandinavia-inspired locations, or the presence of harpies and sirens from the Greek tradition. Thirdly, they challenged the game's supposed historicity by highlighting the gameworld's

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[1] Original punctuation, spelling and grammar.

fantastic motifs such as magic and monsters that, according to the debaters, invalidate any claim to realism. Finally, they accused Poles of whitewashing their own history and background, as not only was Central Europe influenced by Byzantium, the gateway to Asia and Africa, but the very word 'Slav' comes from an extensive slave trade in the area (Boudreau, 2015; Fussell, 2015; Mueller, 2016; Murff, 2015).

Therefore, the camp defending the game's ethnic uniformity tried to employ rational, scientific argumentation relying on the authority of historical research and the mathematical poetics of percentage in the depiction of society. Thus, they attempted to construct a framework of knowledge that would allow the game to be accepted as neutral, and its aesthetic choices as justified. To that aim, sociological data regarding the racial composition of Polish society was often quoted in attempts to bolster the argument with what can be perceived as scientific neutrality. It was also an effort to depoliticize the issue of racial representation and separate it from the struggle taking place in another part of the world. The scientific poetics were there to enforce a premise of fundamental difference between the region that produced the game and those suffering from racial tensions. As a consequence, all three arguments suggested that Polish culture is not only unique and entitled to engage with its own problems, but also permitted to present those problems to the global audience without submission to what the aforementioned debaters perceived as 'American sensibility'.

As shown above, those arguments were dismissed by the opposition as a flight of fancy. The scientific frame was dismantled as either simply untrue or misguidedly based on the contemporary composition of Polish society, while *The Witcher 3* recreates a historical, supposedly more diverse region. The idea of historical veracity was either laughed at as incompatible with the very idea of fantasy fiction, or corrected with a reminder of the millennia-long interaction between the Slavic region, Byzantine, and Asian steppe cultures, without referencing numeric data to support the claim. The overall conclusion was clear: the knowledge produced in the area of Central Europe and employed by both local and Western debaters to defend the game's controversial racial choices is invalid, as it is ideologically distorted to

serve particular interests. When approached from a neutral, outsider (i.e. Western) perspective, it can be corrected: the historical framework used by the defenders of the game is incomplete, and the so-called 'Slavic aesthetics' turns out to be a conglomerate of various mythological motifs, from Greek to Norse.

Disobedient Poles?

Despite its emotional tone, the debate pushed the defenders of the game to form knowledge-based arguments that would counter the preliminary accusations of *The Witcher 3* critics. Those critics, in turn, enjoyed an ability to dismiss or accept their opponents' claims, denying the same privilege to the other side. Therefore, Kowalik's argument about the discriminatory appeal of the game's accusers to criteria imposed by the American perspective, though expressed in a frenetic tone, is not without merit. Not only did the critics of the game find themselves in a position to decide whether they found the other party's arguments convincing or not, they were also socially privileged, employing established platforms of knowledge distribution (from Polygon to Forbes); while the defenders used almost exclusively private blogs and social media, with just a handful of articles being published or reprinted by established platforms. What, however, was an even more significant cause of inequity was the choice of language: the debate was held in English, which forced the mostly Polish-speaking advocates of the game to use their second language. As a consequence, provisionally translated concepts considered common knowledge in Polish culture faced the judgement of people possessing what Walter Mignolo calls 'epistemic privilege' (Mignolo, 2002): the knowledge considered to be impartial and neutral. Still, the problem, spectacularly manifested in the above-mentioned Internet debate, expands onto the game itself, as it not only adapts literature, but also translates it from what Frederic Jameson calls 'the small-power language' (Jameson, 2006: 436) into English.

Such translation is not without its consequences. As extensively argued in both postcolonial studies and poststructuralist philosophy, all knowledge is situated in and tied to ideological, linguistic, and economic conditions. Yet, outside humanities, the premise affirming the existence of one universal and impartial knowledge properly

describing the state of the world is still persistent. Such knowledge, rendered in the neutral language of science, is related to European epistemology and has, since the Enlightenment, been produced in German, French, and English—the latter language being the most important, as the epistemological center of the West was relocated to the United States after the World War II (Mignolo, 2007; 2009). Thoughts formulated in those languages are weighed with a 'hubris of the zero point' (Castro-Gómez, 2007)—assumed to be detached and neutral, they are perceived as a measure of truth; the prime way to understand and judge the world and its people. Any statement produced outside the epistemic privilege is considered abnormal in one way or another (exotic, barbaric, trivial, wrong, and so on.) Therefore, as Mignolo claims, there are two possible solutions for non-Western speakers: they can either accept the authority of the English-based perception of the world, or engage in epistemic disobedience and refuse to acknowledge the superiority of the knowledge produced from the privileged perspective. The latter solution is a necessary precondition to any political and social disobedience leading to decolonization (Mignolo, 2009).

It is, therefore, very tempting to perceive both the debate about *The Witcher 3* and the game's aesthetic choices as an act of epistemic disobedience, and with a very high stake, indeed. Under the guise of historical and statistic data, there is a resistance to the concept that a non-diverse society is incomplete. The logic of such resistance can be verbalized as follows: 'Yes, Poland is a white country, but there is a historical reason for that, precisely as there is one for the more visible diversity of Western societies. Including people of color would not be a gesture toward those countrymen who lack proper representation, but an intrusion of an alien worldview, produced by different cultural circumstances. In line with this reasoning, the streets of Novigrad are as white as the streets of Kraków. But those white faces are not equal to New Yorkers or Parisians, as Poles (dubbed Slavs in the online debate) are whites of a different sort: neglected, forsaken people, depicted constantly as dim-witted plumbers and gangsters in Anglophone pop culture, for example, in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008). Simultaneously, as they are visually similar to representatives of the dominant imperial culture, they do not experience empathy reserved for

communities identified as minorities in American discourse'. Such rhetoric, based on a strong preconception of being unjustly oppressed, forms the ideological base underlying the debate: the conviction that ethnic and national differences are at least as important as racial ones, and should get proper recognition.

Yet, the very idea of epistemic disobedience is closely connected with racial issues, as it describes relations between the First World and the Third World. The main concept rejected in Mignolo's works is the assumption of intellectual and moral inferiority of people of color, and the postulate to educate them in the proper, Western way of thinking as a cornerstone of modernization (Mignolo, 2002; 2007; 2009; see also Anderson, 2006; Bhabha, 2012). As such, the application of epistemic disobedience to Slavic people might be a misuse. But the issue is even more complicated, as the debate centered around racial representation in *The Witcher 3* draws an interesting loop. Certain white people, feeling subjugated, resisted the concept of racial diversity, and thus contributed to the predominantly white culture of video games. It is an indefensible stance, if perceived from the standpoint of racial sensitivity. But such an interpretation relies on the excessively essentializing claim that there are no differences within European culture, and the continent is a homogenous hotbed of imperialism. Therefore, it is only prudent to ask whether it is possible to read *The Witcher 3* as a product of Second World culture, with its unique baggage, and whether, as such, it can be analyzed from a postcolonial perspective.

The postcolonial approach to Polish culture is hardly a new idea, as it was introduced by Clare Cavanagh almost fifteen years ago (Cavanagh, 2004). Cavanagh not only points out the obvious blind spot of postcolonial studies—the analysis of the Soviet empire's legacy—but also presents convincing evidence for the presence of postcolonial sensitivity in 20th-century Polish literature, from Tadeusz Borowski's Auschwitz stories, to Czesław Miłosz's essays, to Wisława Szymboska's poetry; not to mention the hotly debated legacy of the Polish expat, Joseph Conrad. Cavanagh's observations opened Polish culture up for both postcolonial and post-dependent analysis. Within academic discourse, the postcolonial project aimed to reevaluate Polish literary and cultural legacy from a new perspective. Focusing in particular

on Poland's internal divisions, its position in the region, and its relation to other European cultures (Delaperrière, 2008; Nycz, 2010), the project bears similarities to the employments of postcolonial studies in other Central European countries (Deltcheva, 1998). As far as literary studies is concerned, postcolonial studies provided an innovative tool to critically engage the Western perspective on the region, and especially its relation to the former Soviet empire (Thompson, 1999; Todorova, 2009), as well as deconstructing the historical narratives that had become normative in the official Polish discourse (Sowa, 2011; Zajas, 2008). Simultaneously, postcolonial discourse has become highly politicized and visible within the public debate, serving as a handy explanation for all shortcomings of Polish economy and democracy. It is liberally used by journalists associated with the extreme right for essentializing Polish identity and justifying isolationism and nationalism as decolonizing projects (Lisicki, 2013; Ziemkiewicz, 2011). On the other hand, there are also claims that applications of postcolonial research to Central Europe are simply a misuse of a toolset created for analyzing relations between European empires and their non-European colonies (Borkowska, 2010; Bill, 2014).

Still, the overall academic skepticism notwithstanding, and despite the right-wing appropriations of the postcolonial analysis of Polish and Central European culture, it has uncovered too many important issues within the local cultural canon to be easily dismissed.

Nilfgaardian Sun and Redanian Eagle

The usual basis for postcolonial readings of Polish culture is either the country's communist period, perceived as a time of subjugation to the Soviet Union (Cavanagh, 2004; Domańska, 2008; Thompson, 2005), or the so-called 'Partitions of Poland': the loss of independence at the end of the 18th-century (Janion, 2006; Sowa, 2011). As Jan Sowa claims, since the Enlightenment, the region was subject to modernizing efforts on the part of the imperial powers: Prussia, Russia, and Habsburg kingdoms (consolidated in 1804 as Austria, and later Austro-Hungary). Those three modern states expanded their territories onto the formerly independent Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Crimean Khanate, both perceived to have been anachronistic

and inefficient as independent entities. For the French Encyclopédistes, the Commonwealth served as a handy example of a poor, backward country immersed in perpetual chaos, and Voltaire himself highly praised the architects of its partition: the modern, enlightened monarchs of Russia and Prussia (Tazbir, 2010). Poland's premodern model of republican government—the 'noble democracy'—was replaced with the efficient, centralized imperial bureaucracy providing the feudal country with the achievements of rational modernity in what Sowa calls a 'triumph of the modern form' (Sowa, 2011: 421–30). The justification of the Commonwealth's annihilation is, therefore, very similar to the defense of British or French colonial projects as described by Mignolo: having been more mature (in the Kantian sense), the societies of the West were morally obliged to take over the area to free, educate, and uplift savages, turning them into civilized people (Mignolo, 2009). That said, it is important to remember that, in the Polish case, such an attempt was not groundless: the Polono-Lithuanian government model resulted in anarchy, the country was poor, the general population exploited and uneducated. Even Norman Davies, a historian famously sympathetic toward Poland, was forced to admit that 'Poland's label as "Republic of Anarchy" did not entirely lack foundation' (Davies, 1981: 386).

The gameworld of *The Witcher 3* is in a political position similar to the one sketched above. Within the game narrative, there is a pervasive motif of the older, inefficient but local governments colliding with a modern, yet foreign political system, as described below. The Northern Kingdoms—a quarrelsome, anarchistic conglomerate of countries without a single strong leader—are threatened by a modernizing attempt on the part of Nilfgaard: an efficient, centralized state with a regular army; already an empire with several provinces. The ambiguous character of the invasion is stressed in the opening chapter of the game, when Geralt is visiting an area freshly conquered by Nilfgaard. He discovers that the local society is in two minds about the Nilfgaardian presence: there are loyalists of the old regime, demanding the Temerian crest to be displayed on the wall of an inn or trying to undermine the enemy's war effort with rotten horse fodder. Simultaneously, however, some of the NPCs are changing their names to make them sound more Nilfgaardian. A Dwarven blacksmith, persecuted for his race, can finally count on the occupying soldiers to

take his side and punish the human who has wronged him. Prior to the invasion, he was denied justice by the Temerian lord.

Nilfgaard is, therefore, depicted as a formidable force and a dangerous enemy, but it is hardly an evil empire, especially when compared to the locally-brewed regime of the cruel king Radovid, a madman creating, with an unmatched ruthlessness, his own version of an absolutist state. Champions of the traditional world order are morally flawed. The local figures of authority—the Bloody Baron, or Olgierd von Everec, the central figure of *Hearts of Stone* expansion—are selfish, misguided characters with noble intentions and gross misdeeds born out of hubris. They both bring suffering to their families and subjects.

To meet efficient, noble, and admirable power figures, Geralt has to leave the area inspired by Slavic topoi and visit places that the game presents as foreign, and models after medieval Scandinavia or Provence. The latter location, in particular, assuming the form of the charming Toussaint, is a model state, with a strong yet empathic queen, deeply loved by her subjects; the gentry serving as protectors of the common people; and a content general population. The contrast between the perfect land introduced in the *Blood and Wine* DLC and the struggling realm from the main game is not limited by the fact that only the latter is affected by war. Toussaint remains a merry kingdom because it has been able to shelter itself completely from the intervention of modernity and preserve a feudal social structure, thus conserving its national character. A similar kind of local identity is also the source of strength for the Skellige Islands, the Norse-inspired area from the main game. Its population fiercely upholds their ancient customs and laws, and is able to distinguish itself from the Nilfgaardian Empire by sticking to the well-developed local culture—an advantage that Temeria and Redania, the fantasy kingdoms with a Slavic twist, seem to lack.

There are seemingly two kinds of political interactions within *The Witcher 3* world. A community can either develop a clearly distinct national identity serving as a strong basis for opposing the unifying attempts of Nilfgaard or Redania, or subjugate to them. Imperialism itself is also divided. Although both regimes are brutal, Nilfgaardians are a pragmatic lot, willing to keep the local community intact after establishing their authority over the region. Yet such benevolence is insidious, as the

main ability of the empire is to dissolve local uniqueness and unify all subjugated cultures. That aspect is stressed by such motifs as the background NPCs bragging about their voluntarily Nilfgaardized names; the uniform outfits of the Emperor's servants; or the blurring of traditional social and racial divisions when commoners and non-humans are emancipated under the new regime. Nilfgaard comes to the north to civilize and educate ignorant barbarians, interlacing the brutal reality of military conquest with the imperial rhetoric of generosity and prosperity.

The Redanian empire-in-the-making is Nilfgaard's parody: a ruthless country governed by a brutal warlord reimagined as a modern ruler. After eliminating the whole opposition in *The Witcher 2*, Radovid tries to establish a centralized state, relying mostly on oppression. He lacks the Emperor's magnanimity, finding joy in petty vendettas and cruel punishments. He employs religious fanatics, organized crime networks, and secret police as foundations of his power. In his unifying project, he does not stop at dissolving local identities but, rather, actively hunts down those perceived as different, and oppresses freethinkers. He shuts down the only university in the game, and his troops block the passage of war refugees into the Redanian territory. Like Nilfgaard, he aims at unification, but in a much more uncivilized way. Yet, he fancies himself to be a rational player on the geopolitical scene, receiving Geralt over a chessboard and musing about realpolitik. Ironically, he uses the Polish national coat of arms, a white eagle on a red shield, as his crest. Although the blazon itself is a joke taken from the original novels, Radovid and his imperial ambition is not. In the books, he is just an heir to the throne, nurturing pretty murderous thoughts, but without large-scale ambitions.

Velen, the area visually similar to Central Europe, is therefore trapped between two regimes. Unable to express any political form of its own, it has to choose between the Western version of enlightened modernity based on cultural superiority and 'civilizing' attempts on the part of the conqueror, and the homemade parody thereof. On the surface, they seem similar—but the local version is just a tyrannical autocracy without any redeeming qualities of more civilized conquerors: there is no rule of the law or respect for individual life within the Redanian empire, only naked violence.

Thus, Velen's situation brings to mind the historical complexity of Poland's relationship with colonizing powers. During the partitions, Poland was colonized by three countries representing two cultures: German, identified as Western, and Russian, perceived by Poles as Eastern, and therefore barbaric—superior in strength only. Simultaneously, Russians governed the largest part of the former commonwealth, and their power over Poland was reinstalled as the Soviet regime after World War II. It is the former Russian Partition that hosts the capital of Poland and has successfully managed to install its version of history as the official one (Nycz, 2010; Sowa, 2011). As a result, there is a tendency in Polish culture to perceive Western, and especially Austrian, colonizers as more benevolent, and to willingly accept the Western model of modernity as valid and desirable; the one Poland should aspire to (Janion, 2006; Sowa, 2011). The 18th-century Russian Empire is, in turn, regarded as a country faking its own modernization, a cruel and oppressive dominion of autocratic, 'Mongolian' Tzars creating a façade of the proper European state Voltaire was enamored with. In such a narrative, Poles are the only ones able to see through Russia's clever tricks (Thompson, 1999; Janion, 2006; Sowa, 2011)—just the way Geralt is able to realize that the king over the chessboard is actually a madman, not a tactician. A further colonial conviction, namely, that Slavs are unable to produce a modernity of their own and can only mock Western accomplishments (Thompson, 2007) can also be traced in the construction of the game's protagonist.

Love and War Intertwined

The player enters the highly politicized environment described above from the perspective of a very private subject. Geralt the witcher lacks political aspirations attributed to his female love interests, two sorceresses involved in politics[2], and if he engages in the public sphere, he does so to meet certain private ends. Operating out of the political scope, he deals with a private aspect of human existence. Even as an agent to monarchs, he interacts with their passions, not political plans: he searches

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[2] As tempting as it is, the analysis of attributing the political agency to female characters is beyond the scope of this article.

for the emperor's missing daughter whom the ruler seems to love; seeks for the sorceress Radovid has sworn his private vendetta against; or tries to reconcile the; Duchess of Toussaint with her estranged sister. It is no different from the tasks he gathers from other NPCs, being forced by the so-called Blood Baron to search for his absent family, or uncovering stories of broken hearts behind each noonwright and werewolf he is hired to kill.

Still, the protagonist's private perspective does not invalidate the political impact of his quests: even if Geralt helps Triss Merigold because of their friendship (or love), by doing so he still helps an underground resistance movement. It is impossible for him to fulfill the emperor's wishes and bring his daughter back to him without political repercussions, and the only way to let her keep away from imperial politics is to conceal her from her biological father. Therefore, it is merely Geralt's perspective that remains private, while the overall nature of the game's main plot is closely tied to the public sphere of life.

The same is true for episodes involving noonwrights and werewolves, usually framed as heartbreaking stories of passion. Behind doomed love, there are mésalliances, forced unions, and class divisions: the noonwright of White Orchard had been murdered by the local lord who went unpunished, and the White Lady of Novigrad committed suicide after being sold to a rich suitor due to her family's financial needs. Such politicization of the private sphere becomes most spectacular in the pervasive, and critically acclaimed (Gault, 2015; Ditum, 2016; Lane, 2017) background depiction of the war waged in Velen. Through the better part of the game, Geralt deals with professional soldiers, war survivors, and peasants struggling to survive in the war-torn land, or praising Gods for keeping the war away from the nearby area. Simultaneously, there is no overt depiction of an open armed conflict, and usually the war-related quests make the witcher search for missing loved ones or try to protect innocent civilians from soldiers' brutality or side effects of recent battles, for example ghouls feeding on the fallen combatants. Even though the military action commonly associated with the depiction of war in video games is almost completely absent from the game, *The Witcher 3* still makes a statement about the

nature of state-regulated violence by emphasizing the consequence of war violence (see Pötzsch, 2015) and stressing the way politics influences private lives.

Passions of the kings, though private, tend to have spectacular public consequences: while Geralt helps Crach and Craite's children on behalf of his friendship with their father, he becomes a kingmaker in the process. He is also able to make Ciri the empress of Nilfgaard and bring down the brutal Radovid by playing on the Redanian king's revenge drive. Simultaneously, the private lives of the said King's subjects are never free from political pressure, especially when love is involved. *The Witcher 3* does not draw a line between the private and the public, between romance subplots and the main political plot: passion is always entangled in political and economic conditions. That strategy poses the game in a striking opposition to, for instance, BioWare games, from *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) to *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2015). Those games, renowned for allowing the player to romance different party members, create a perfectly secluded private environment for pursuing love interests, and completely erase political consequences of the player's passions. Thus, another colonial aspect of the game is brought to light: as Frederic Jameson claims, for subaltern cultures, it is not possible to find shelter from politics in a perfectly secluded idyll of private life (Jameson, 2006).

Between Slavs and Slaves

It is hardly a challenge to recognize aesthetic inspirations behind the three parts of *The Witcher 3*'s open world. Skellige, an archipelago of fjords and conifer forests, inhabited by tough warriors and shieldmaidens sailing Viking longships, is as Nordic as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011). Toussaint's vineyards, cypresses, olive groves, and rolling hills are clearly inspired by Mediterranean culture, especially Provence and Tuscany. The third map, featuring the marches of Velen, the grand city of Novigrad and its countryside, is unmistakably familiar to a Polish eye. There are painted flowers on cottage walls, similar to Zalipie style; ruined castles and fortifications made of red brick; endless swampy flatlands of the Polish-Belarusian border; and the iconic harbor crane from Gdańsk, rising above the Novigrad cityscape. Even ever-present mallow flowers and grain fields bring to mind what is

considered to be a typical Polish landscape. Such is the country Geralt treats as his homeland: he is familiar with the customs and lay of the land. Skellige and Toussaint are, in turn, presented as exotic for the protagonist, though their aesthetics can be regarded as more typical of video games in general—the Viking-inspired visual style in particular is a trope of its own within the medium, employed by dozens of games.

To claim that the game refers to Polish topoi as familiar because it is a product of the Polish culture would be extremely simplifying and essentializing: CDProjekt Red's production was designed within an international game-developing culture that Mia Consalvo describes as a conglomerate of American and Japanese corporate practices (Consalvo, 2006). Therefore, the obvious exposition of the local visual aesthetics seems to be a rather intentional expansion of what the critics pointed out as the most successful moment of the franchise (Buford, 2014; Hero, 2017): Act IV of the first game, which is loosely based on a Polish Romantic play by Juliusz Słowacki. To build upon *Witcher 1*'s Act IV atmosphere, the game includes a huge selection of direct and indirect quotations from Polish Romantic literature in *The Witcher 3* (Schreiber, 2016), though direct references to Polish culture were mostly absent from *The Witcher 2*—a game targeted at an international audience. Thus, the return of locality in the third installment of the series can be perceived as a bold act of disobedience in which the Polish developers refused to replicate the familiar, West-generated patterns, and created a world based, as stressed by the lead designer Marcin Blacha, on their own cultural background (Blacha and Kubiński, 2016). Such a choice resulted in the game's praised 'Slavic character' (McCasker, 2014: n. pag.), though its major constituents derive from what could be described as the canon of Polish national culture rather than a broader Slavic one.

According to Blacha, the introduction of Slavic motifs naturalized as Polish by Romantic literature is a deliberate move, as there is no direct link between the hypothetical Slavic past and the contemporary Polish culture the game was drawing from (Blacha and Kubiński, 2016). Still, such a selection of cultural material is far from innocent. The most important source of the motifs used in the game is a list of mandatory school readings: Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady (Forefathers Eve)* or

Józef Kraszewski's *Stara Baśń (An Ancient Tale)* represent the national literary canon, heavily connected with the patriotic education in Polish schools. Although both writers—associated, by birth or by choice, with Lithuania—can be approached from a postcolonial perspective (Janion, 2006; Zajas, 2008), such readings are almost non-existent in the Polish curriculum, which favors interpretations focused on the issues of Polish independence. The Slavic culture invented by the aforementioned Romantics, among others, is therefore closely associated with nationalism and serves as a tool for establishing an imagined community of Poles (Anderson, 2006)—no wonder it is also employed by a game showcasing Polish culture to the West.

The juxtaposition of Polishness and Slavicness not only serves as a medium for the modern Polish national identity, but also signals two further issues related to Polish culture and tradition that influence the game, as I will analyze below. Firstly, the reintroduction of Slavic roots into the Polish Romantic culture reinforced the Polono-Russian conflict over the heritage of Slavdom. Secondly, the said reintroduction was necessary, as the Polish pre-modern culture distanced itself from its Slavic heritage, inventing a political myth of the gentry's Sarmatian origin. The said myth, in turn, served as a justification of lower class servitude in the 17th-century Polono-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As both problems are presented in the game, and can be unpacked with postcolonial tools, I analyze them in the order presented below.

In *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna (The Uncanny Slavdom)*, her seminal book on the Romantic reintroduction of Slavicness into the Polish national culture, Maria Janion claims that Poland is scarred by the violent introduction of Latin Christianity in the 10th-century and the simultaneous destruction of both the earlier, more benign influences of Slavic Christianity and the pagan tradition itself. The arrival of Roman Catholicism is, therefore, the first act of colonization depriving Poles of any genuine mythological background, as it became viciously destroyed for political reasons. As a result, the pre-modern Polish culture became cracked, the gentry inventing a myth of their own Middle Eastern origin to cut off from the Slavic peasantry. Great Polish romantic poets, especially Adam Mickiewicz, aimed to fill that gap by creating their own version of the Slavic tradition, James-Macpherson style—but their

decolonizing efforts coincided with the subsequent/second colonization of Poland during the Partitions. For this reason, Slavic culture became a battleground between the independence-oriented writers of Poland and the Russian pan-Slavic movement, an effort to create a universal Slavic culture united under the guidance of Tzar and the Russian Orthodox Church (Janion, 2006).

By engaging with the imagined pagan past, Polish Romantics were not only searching for the roots of their national culture, but also looking for a way to distinguish themselves from Russians, whom they perceived as Asian barbarians. The latter, in turn, believed Poles to be traitors of Slavic culture who were selling themselves out to the West (Janion, 2006: 191–3). Among various tools employed by Poles to claim uniqueness was a postulated bond between Slavic culture and a 'hidden', long-lost culture that was to be reconstructed from folk rituals, forgotten cemeteries, and footnotes in chronicles.

The Witcher 3 employs a very similar strategy, setting a hidden world of ethnic beliefs and relics in a stark contrast with the modernizing rationalities behind the Nilfgaardian and Redanian empires. Deep in the Velen marshland, there are children-eating crones revered as deities, and the common folk still celebrate the Forefathers Eve—a ritual taken straight from Adam Mickiewicz's romantic play, with direct quotations. Old shrines are desecrated by Nietzsche-quoting philosophy students; forgotten ghosts haunt ancient trees; and stillborn children turn into botchlings, undead monsters tormenting the living. This unofficial, secret world is something Geralt has to immerse in, understand—and, in many cases, conquer. But the very fact that it remains hidden makes it unfit to serve as a basis for a local political identity that would enable people of Velen to resist colonization attempts the way Skellige and Toussaint do. Meanwhile, the country is cynically exploited by Radovid's regime that appeals to the common identity of the local folk when warmongering or calling for pogroms, but in fact replaces local beliefs with a violent state religion.

Moreover, despite all their vibrancy and attractiveness, most Slavic references described above are either pathetic or horrifying. Common people of White Orchard, Velen and Novigrad are a curious bunch: clueless about the monsters preying on

them; often cruel, ignorant, superstitious, and alcoholic. The only ruler with folk roots, the self-proclaimed Bloody Baron, is an inept, deluded drunkard and a wife-beater. The pellar is, in turn, wise, but also quirky and oblivious to the results of a ritual he performs: Geralt has to defend the population from the ghosts he conjures. The Velen peasants tend to be sneaky, xenophobic, and untrustworthy, always ready to cheat on the witcher, or to murder inconvenient people. They secretly worship the Crones, the most hideous creatures imaginable, and frequently put themselves in trouble out of stupidity or greed. Such a portrait is hardly flattering to the community, and it is no wonder that Geralt looks down on all those Slavic types, preferring the company of people with distinctly non-Slavic names.

Thus, the other abovementioned issue is introduced. If the link between folk culture and Slavic paganism clearly refers to a Romantic motif, the connection between folk community and stupidity is a reminder of an older and more persistent aspect of Polish culture. Until the 18th-century, when it was colonized, Poland had itself been a colonial power in the region, dominant over the Baltic states and Rus (the contemporary Belarus and Ukraine) since the 16th-century. As Jan Sowa claims, the ideological basis of the Polish expansion was, predictably, a sense of superiority—Poland was considered a civilised state with the noble class fashioning itself after the other empire of the era, The Ottoman Sultanate (Sowa, 2011). With the destruction of the city-based middle class, the Polono-Lithuanian Commonwealth became an agrarian empire, increasingly oppressive toward serfs. In Eastern parts of the country, the caste of all-powerful Polish Catholic land owners governed over the Russian Orthodox population, while systematically weakening the realm's political integrity. After the Partitions, the landed elite were gradually deprived of their privileges, but their sensibilities produced a nostalgic, colonial myth of Kresy, the lost Eastern borderlands where various ethnicities coexisted under Poland's wise and benevolent rule—an image strikingly different from the historical reality, shaped by the oppressive impact of Polish landowners (Beauvois, 2005). The construct of Kresy is also a Polish equivalent of the American Frontier myth: a realm where a nobleman can truly be free and show his value (Janion, 2006: 165–90).

The mixture of nostalgia and contempt toward common folk, fueled by both class-based and ethnic divisions, is clearly seen in the game. As stated above, Velen commoners are a pitiful and somehow repulsive bunch. But to further understand the difference between folk and noble culture as presented in the game, it is helpful to compare two tragic figures of the game: The Bloody Baron and Olgierd von Everec, introduced in the *Hearts of Stone* expansion. The former character is a commoner usurping the title, and his tragic vices listed a few paragraphs above are all too familiar. He is an ugly, elderly, fat man with an unkempt beard, stained clothes, and poor manners. Tragic and repulsive at the same time, he is doomed to hang himself or to embark on an impossible quest.

Von Everec, a proper nobleman, embodies everything the Baron is not. Handsome, impressively dressed, an excellent swordsman and crafty sorcerer, he constitutes an amalgam of various tragic aristocrats created by classic Polish authors such as Mickiewicz and Sienkiewicz, including the protagonist of the legend of Pan Twardowski, a noble-born alchemist crafty enough to cheat on the devil himself (precisely as Olgierd does in the game). While dispossessed and gone astray, Everec remains a brooding intellectual, charismatic leader, and probably the most demanding opponent in the entire game. He can be saved, and is important enough to be depicted on a Gwent card: the honor Bloody Baron never receives. His far more sophisticated, tragic vices include consuming pride; unstoppable, destructive love—very different from the Baron's attitude toward his abused wife—and an appetite for dark arts. Moreover, the Baron's subjects are struggling and rebelling against his rule, while the common folk living near von Everec's mansion are prosperous enough to throw an elaborate wedding feast.

The ambivalent depiction of folk culture, discussed above, reveals yet another paradox. On the one hand, the game introduces a vibrant, interesting, and mysterious world of folk beliefs, containing plenty of peasant characters for Geralt to interact with. On the political level, the gameworld subscribes to the vision of Polish Romantics by pointing to Slavic beliefs as an alternative to colonialization and modernization, and a tool to oppose tyranny of the local version of an empire. On the

other hand, though, the native ways are ineffective, as the common folk cannot produce proper leaders. Thus, the game perpetuates an elitist aspect of Polish culture: the idea that Slavs should be governed by an elevated, Western-educated elite, without whom they are lost.

Geralt the Modernizer

As far as the distinction between peasantry and nobility is concerned, Geralt himself belongs to neither group, operating as an everlasting outsider capable of interaction with people of any social standing. On the one hand, he frequently takes the side of the oppressed, on the other—he constantly debunks primitive superstitions, and opposes plain ignorance of the common folk with his scientific mindset. Armed with those two attitudes, Geralt can be described as an agent of modernity, an individual and private alternative to the modernizing imperial regimes. While conducting a modernizing project of his own and trying to reshape the primitive land of Velen into a more empathetic, rational, and safer place, he engages with a colonial strategy Mary Louis Pratt dubbed 'anti-conquest': he is presented as a selfless agent of a higher moral order, helping the native population at his own expense (Pratt, 1992). His modernizing effort is based on two crucial elements of the myth of modernity as analyzed by Mignolo: emancipation and rationality. The former is understood as abandonment of a traditional social structure in favor of the European one, based on the concept of individuality; the latter relies on the idea of 'neutral', i.e. a Euro-centric, totalizing system of the world (Mignolo, 2007).

The emancipatory quality is based on the witcher's paradoxical ability to connect with people. Although in the game lore (and Sapkowski's novels) Geralt is described as an outsider, both persecuted and feared as a mutant and misanthrope, the gameplay has demands of its own. To meet the dialogue standards of the genre, Geralt constantly engages in lengthy conversations with sentient creatures of various social standings. In such exchanges, the witcher usually shows a unique amount of empathy, trying to appreciate his interlocutors. By uncovering their stories, he is able to understand their unique ways of life and confirm or deny the validity of their choices. Sometimes, his considerate attitude is presented as a dilemma for the player, when it

is up to her to decide whether Geralt will take pity on a monster and let it go, or slay it: such are the cases of the godling in Novigrad, both succubi; and a bunch of trolls, among others. On other occasions, the game decides for the player: there is no way to slay Johnny the godling, or spare the gryphon from White Orchard.

An occasional hesitation notwithstanding, Geralt comes to recognize various sentient creatures, humans and beasts alike, as equal and entitled to exist in their own unique ways. Such disregard for social status, or even adherence to the society, combined with an esteem for any way of life as long as it does not clash with the lives of others, has been the central ethical stance of Western modernity since John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau—a direct opposition to the communitarian ethics of premodern and non-European societies (Mignolo, 2007; Taylor, 1989). By recognizing non-normative life projects (Johnny, Mislav) and rejecting those that are normative yet cruel and destructive (Radovid, Dijkstra), Geralt becomes a representative of modern sensibility, empathetic toward the oppressed and sinister to the oppressor, forcing the finest aspect of Western modernity upon the savage land of Velen. Simultaneously, Geralt's tolerance is only possible because the gameworld's social order is depicted as oppressive and backward. Thus, the game reinforces the split between modernity and tradition, crucial to the idea of a colonizer's cultural superiority (Mignolo, 2002; 2007). Geralt's position as an outsider contributes to the very same concept, as he arrives from somewhere else to establish a new, more just and rational order.

But with the ability to recognize the validity of certain life choices comes another, more vicious power: Geralt is, in fact, a touchstone for the very concept of humanity. For every monster he decides to save, there are dozens he kills without a second thought; for every misunderstood outcast brought back to the society—a bushel of bandits and enemy soldiers the witcher does not try to reason with. It is a result of the employed mechanics, distinguishing between important NPCs with dialogue affordance and opponents attacking on sight. Simultaneously, however, the capability of having a conversation becomes established as the basic criterion for the witcher to recognize the given creature as his peer. Such capability is not necessarily

tied to the NPC's more general ability to speak. Multiple enemies encountered in the game shout offensive remarks toward the protagonist during the fight, but the game does not permit a dialogue with them. Apparently, they are not polite enough to properly exchange words.

Of course, such a distinction is completely beyond the player's control, and the game presents it as the natural order of things. Yet it thus becomes all the more similar to the colonial reasoning behind Western imperial projects that, according to Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha, used manners—understood as an ability to act according to the imperial etiquette—as a measure of humanity (Anderson, 2006: 90–94; Bhabha, 2012: 85–92). In his civilizing project, Geralt not only gives voice to oppressed minorities, but also eliminates groups that refuse to act as an oppressed minority should[3], trying to live a life outside the ethical frame the game approves of. Therefore, trolls are worth sparing if they are able to have a conversation in the course of which their child-like minds are properly ridiculed. But when the same trolls try to defend their territory from the intruder without any attempt at parley, they are excluded from humanity and can be butchered without any remorse. The ultimate example of a monster worth sparing is therefore Regis—the well-mannered, benignant vampire from the *Blood and Wine* DLC.

In several cases, Geralt's act of eliminating someone excluded from the humanity enables the emergence of civilization. 'Abandoned place' is a special location overrun by monsters the witcher has to kill. Once the deed is done, a touching animation is displayed: from a distance, Geralt observes humans resettling the spot. Thus, the game stresses that the only way civilization can prosper is through the removal of those who oppose the march of progress and colonization of their land. Still, it is worth noting that Geralt himself does not take part in the colonizing effort, observing the community of settlers from afar after he has made their endeavor possible.

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[3] Interestingly, that motif seems strikingly similar to the already discussed disobedience of some among the game players toward what they perceived as the pressure coming from the dominant American sensibilities. A detailed analysis of the possible parallel between those two situations would, however, demand a separate article.

Being an outsider is partially justified by the narrative presenting Geralt as a despised and feared freak. Still, his solitary tendencies seem to be rooted in the other modernizing quality of the witcher: his rational mind. During his adventures, he constantly debunks local superstitions with a precise knowledge of biology and keen sense of observation. The latter is also a part of the game mechanics: the so-called 'witcher senses' expose details otherwise too small to be seen on the screen, and allow him/the player to conduct evidence-based investigations. Data collected during such examinations, combined with his prior knowledge, serves as counter-points for folklore. During his witcher contract missions, Geralt is given untrue or incomplete information about the nature of the tasks, and the player has to establish which monster is terrorizing the local community. Sometimes the results are hilarious, for example when the witcher uncovers a crafty faun posing as the local god to be served food by peasants, or is hired to solve the case of a cow falling from the sky. At other times, outcomes can be grim, for instance when the investigation exposes dark secrets of the community: human sacrifices to the old deities, or gruesome murders. In both cases, such discoveries are associated with the prejudice and cruelty of uneducated commoners, and serve as an excuse for moral or scientific lectures.

Such practice locates Geralt in a zero-point of knowledge production, a neutral space occupied by truth. By debunking superstitions, he establishes a regime of total, evidence-based truth that cannot stand any competition—the concept the game is well aware of, constantly discrediting any form of religion-based reasoning as either backward or fanatical. Geralt is, therefore, put in a position directly opposing epistemic disobedience as discussed in the first section of this article. By undermining or ridiculing folklore, and approaching uneducated commoners with a certain superiority, *The Witcher 3* rejects the idea of an alternative perspective on knowledge production, or on modernity, thus adopting an unmistakably colonial stance (Mignolo, 2009). The game associates Geralt and several other characters, mostly sorceresses, with science and reason—the rest of the world is either outright stupid and in need of education; or associated with spirituality and superstition, as the pellar in Velen who is capable of summoning spirits, but knows nothing about proper medicine.

Thus, yet another paradox is revealed. On the level of outright political representation, *The Witcher 3* seems to be somehow critical of the colonial ideals, though such criticism comes with a fatalistic outlook on history and pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of decolonization. Yet the central character is provided with a dangerous combination of the colonial idea of neutral knowledge and an ability to distinguish human from non-human. Therefore, the game forces the player to participate in the project of modernizing the untamed land of Velen and barbaric Skellige in a Western mode—and, ironically, that is the political program of Nilfgaard. The main difference between Geralt and the Empire lies in the scope and moral evaluation of the intentions behind their actions. Speaking plainly, the witcher is a good guy, but he pays a price for his unique position: as a lonely champion of reason and decency in the savage and chaotic world, he has to be put outside the society.

The uniqueness of Geralt's position is reinforced by his capabilities as the player's avatar, and can be attributed to the patterns of game mechanics, as on the gameplay level he is a rather conventional cRPG protagonist with adequate affordances. It can, therefore, be argued that the employment the West-produced game mechanics enforces a position of the protagonist as an agent of modernity/colonial ideology (Mignolo, 2002; 2007; 2009), though any further investigation of the intersection between gameplay and colonial ideology (Mukherjee, 2016) is beyond the scope of this article. Still, even without such an analysis, two conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, by introducing a modernizing protagonist, *The Witcher 3* puts a player unfamiliar with Polish culture in a comfortable position of epistemic privilege, as Geralt shares post-Enlightenment sensibilities. Secondly, for native players, it mimics the position of contemporary Polish intellectuals, simultaneously appreciating aesthetic qualities of the local culture and modelling themselves after their Western counterparts to preserve their sense of superiority (Thompson, 2007; Nycz, 2010; Sowa, 2011). In both cases, such positions enable criticism of political and military colonization within the game narrative, and simultaneously remain in line with Western epistemic premises.

Conclusion

Introducing different perspectives into the discourse is an act of justice, and games rightfully aim for diversity—not only by catering to US identity politics, but also by trying to give voice to marginalized cultures. However, in the case of *The Witcher 3*, such a claim is more complicated than it might initially appear. Despite its accomplishments, Polish culture is, indeed, a minor one, perceived as insignificant and uninteresting on the one hand, and too peculiar and self-absorbed on the other (Jameson, 2006: 436). The international success of the series can, therefore, be framed as a reminder of the internal division within Europe, and the existence of 'the other white man's culture': the one that has not benefited from the rise of modernity the way the West did. It was certainly perceived that way by the group of people claiming for *The Witcher 3*'s cultural background to justify the lack of racial diversity. Their disagreement with English-language-based pop cultural diversity standards was an act of epistemic disobedience, creating an alternative to a worldview produced by ex-colonial empires preoccupied with racial distinctions.

Such a claim is supported by the visual aesthetic of the game, employing Polish topoi to create a realm the protagonist feels at home in, with Nordic and Mediterranean-inspired areas depicted as foreign in a way that problematizes what is considered familiar and exotic in cRPGs. The narrative is heavily influenced by Polish Romanticism, especially the idea of a pagan, Slavic past lost to the Western colonizers. The game's narrative is experienced from the perspective of a very private subject, yet remains strongly politicized, explicitly criticizing imperialism and oppressive Western modernity. Such a gameworld and story are, however, presented with gameplay tools of a Western cRPG, and the player engages in a civilizing effort, introducing modern values to backward areas of the so-called Slavic culture. Thus, the game acknowledges the tension between two attitudes toward Western Europe in the contemporary Polish culture: disobedience on one hand, and mimicry on the other. It also negotiates its own position within the global gaming culture by introducing Polish culture-inspired elements from the position of a subject occupying an epistemic zero-point, and therefore approaching them through Western sensibilities on the gameplay level.

Still, it should also be noted that at the same time, *The Witcher 3* is reminiscent of old Polish colonial dreams, recently revived by the rise of nationalism in Poland. By replicating the unflattering depiction of folk culture associated with Slavicness, and the myth of Polish nobility rightfully governing over the masses, it echoes the nostalgia for the inland empire lost to Russia. The usage of Slavic topoi is connected to the way they are employed within the national secondary education, intensifying political divisions and favoring the national over regional culture. The game is also internally divided over the evaluation of colonial legacy. On the one hand, imperialism is condemned as a political tool, and resisted by a country depicted as just—Temeria—even though it is simultaneously being conquered by Nilfgaard. The contrast between two Slavic-inspired countries, Temeria and Redania, is rooted in the distinction between oppressive Russian colonialism and benevolent yet doomed Polish rule, a basis for the nostalgic Kresy myth. On the other hand, Geralt himself is hardly a postcolonial subject, being an intellectual employing epistemic tools of the Western culture to civilize the world around him.

Therefore, both the game and its online defense seem to be products of a mindset described by Ryszard Nycz as 'xenophobic and turned inwards to reinforce its own sense of grandeur and uniqueness, but with one eye turned constantly toward the news in the wide world' (Nycz, 2010: 182). From this perspective, *The Witcher 3* is, first and foremost, perceived as a grand success of Polish culture and a proof of its worth—after all, it has been recognized abroad. Moreover, it is simultaneously praised worldwide for its unique 'Slavic' character, which, in turn, serves as evidence that Poles can create a cultural artifact meeting Western standards. Such a sentiment resonates simultaneously with two needs generated by the attitude defined above. On the one hand, the notion of uniqueness serves as a proof that Poles are considered different from both the West and Russia. On the other, it satisfies the Polish need for Western approval: as *The Witcher 3* is a global commercial success, Poles sharing the said mindset can finally find peace, recognized as a part of the Western culture and not as a barbaric, uncivilized Eastern country.

The simultaneous need for approval and recognition of exceptionality is rooted in Polish culture's tendency to describe itself as a part of Western Europe (Janion, 2006), and yet exploits the idea of Slavic culture while distancing itself from it (Sowa, 2011). As a result, 'Slavicness' is equated with 'Polishness' on the visual level, but within the game, the division between primitive Slavic peasantry and educated nobility is well-preserved. Thus, the game does not manifest any desire for decolonization. It is rather a part of the dream about the Polish return to a warm embrace of the former colonial empires, finally recognizing Poland, a proper ruler over Slavic cultures, as their peer.

Acknowledgements

Competing Interests

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