Sarmatian Gamified: Sarmatism in Contemporary Polish Gaming Culture

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ABSTRACT

Sarmatism – the dominant cultural formation of Polish (and, to some extent, Lithuanian) nobility from 16th to 18th century – has played a particularly important role in the process of shaping modern national identities of the region. Its ideological revival in the last three decades is, in a particular way, visible in Polish gaming culture. The aim of this paper (and presentation) is to outline the focal points of popular narratives concerning sarmatism in selected Polish historical analog games and to confront them with foreign historical productions (mainly digital) referencing the same region and era, namely Central and Eastern Europe in early modern period. I am particularly interested in the response of Polish gaming communities to these depictions, which manifests itself in specific interpretative practices, accentuating "historical accuracy".

Probably the most influential Polish game of the analyzed genre is a tabletop RPG "Dzikie Pola" ("Wild Plains"), firstly published in 1997. My research also includes a card game "VETO!" (1st ed. 2004, 2nd ed. 2007) and a wargame "Ogniem i Mieczem" ("By Fire and Sword", 2009/2010) along with expansions. Examination of these cases allows to extract a coherent general image of sarmatism developed by modern Polish culture. However, said image often clashes with corresponding depictions included in video games produced outside of Poland. Some of the most graphic examples of these tensions may be found in the third installment in "Europa Universalis" series by Paradox Entertainment (2007) and some other (significantly less popular) productions, such as "Reign: Conflict of Nations" (2009). The variety of responses from Polish fan communities (reviews, debates, even modifications) illustrates the significance of sarmatism in the popular national discourse; moreover, positive reception of "historical accuracy" (for example in case of "Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword" (2011)) highlights the most crucial parts of sarmatian mythos.

My approach is based on theoretical works from the field of cultural anthropology, particularly Thomas Hylland Eriksen's "Ethnicity and Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives." (2010) and Michael Billig's "Banal Nationalism" (1995). Depictions of early modern period in video games are analyzed in "Early Modernity and Video Games" (ed. T. Winnerling, F. Kerschbaumer, 2014) with some of the articles employing similar research background. One of the most important aspects of my analysis is the examination of Polish gaming communities, especially the ones organized around particular websites or forums (e. g. "Paradox Interactive Forums" or "Dzikie Pola"

forum) and producing typical fan content. I will, however, also consider single reviews and comments from various global and local gaming portals.

Keywords

sarmatism, historical games, poland

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