

TRANSMITTING AND PRESERVING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH OPEN-WORLD ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

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Summary

This paper maps out the theories informing my PhD research into open-world role-playing games (OW-RPGs) as tools for individual learning and transmission of cultural knowledge. Three hypotheses and the methods used to explore them are outlined. 1. OW-RPGs are particularly well suited for cultural learning due to their complexity. 2. OW-RPGs foster deep player engagement outside of play. 3. An OW-RPG would be effective in transmitting Australian Aboriginal culture. To better illustrate this in a European context, the paper also examines the use of RPGs for Polish-Lithuanian cultural heritage.

Keywords: role-playing games, education, cultural heritage, Australian Aborigines, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Sarmatism.

Introduction

The first objective of this paper is to map out the methodologies and theories informing my recently commenced PhD research into the application of Open-World Role-Playing Games (OW-RPGs) for individual learning and cultural transmission. For the purpose of this study, OW-RPGs are defined as a subdivision of the video game role-playing genre, distinguishable by virtue of the emphasis on the player's freedom to explore the game world and engage in a multiplicity of narratives to the point where the main story of the game can in fact be ignored without substantially diminishing the overall experience. The role-playing game (RPG) genre itself is defined here as any game where the player is allowed to develop the characteristics of his or her character over the course of the game, for instance by gaining new skills or obtaining and learning to use new items, and where this character development aspect is not incidental but central to the gameplay experience. The RPGs under examination in this research are all digital computer games – however, it is worth noting that not all RPGs are computer games, and in fact the genre has its roots in offline games, a fact that will become significant in the second part of this paper.

This research explores three hypotheses. The first hypothesis is: "OW-RPGs are especially suited for cultural learning tools by virtue of the breadth and depth of their game worlds and the variety of experiences offered within."

The second hypothesis is: "OW-RPG texts display strong hyperdiegetic properties which foster a deep engagement of the audience not only with the game, but also outside of the game and resulting in a set of complex knowledge dissemination/analysis practices that essentially drive a segment of the OW-RPG audience to continue learning about the subject of the game even when not playing."

Finally, the third hypothesis is: "there is a strong value in creating popular, commercial video games that will transmit cultural knowledge and history to wider audiences. In the Australian context there is a special need for such dissemination of knowledge specifically about Aboriginal culture, and an OW-RPG will be particularly appropriate for this purpose, to be demonstrated by creating a design blueprint of such a game." This final hypothesis does not imply a rejection of other approaches to the dissemination of cultural knowledge, particularly serious games – it is instead argued there are limits to the application of educational and serious games, which can be overcome through the use of popular commercial games.

These three hypotheses build upon each other: put another way, the first part of the thesis seeks to demonstrate that OW-RPGs are complex enough to depict societies and societal issues at a complex enough level that the audience can learn about culture from the game, the second part goes a step further by demonstrating that not only can audiences learn, but they do in fact go to great lengths to learn from and analyse the cultural material therein – and finally, the third part seeks to find a convincing way to put this approach into practice in the Australian context to prepare a blueprint for a game dealing with Australian Aboriginal culture.

In order to achieve these objectives, a wide range of methodologies will be used, with each of the three components of the thesis bringing in methodologies from different fields. The first part of this paper therefore briefly makes the case for the different methodologies used and the objectives to be accomplished.

One aspect of my research is an examination of similar efforts conducted with RPG games for other cultures, elsewhere in the world. In order to make this work more relevant to its Lithuanian and other European recipients, I have chosen to devote the second half of this paper to a review of the usage of RPG games for the transmission and preservation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This heritage, the so-called Sarmatian culture was strongly and irrevocably tied with the multinational Commonwealth and particularly its nobility, serving to bind their disparate cultures together (Wasko 1997). As a consequence, the

demise of the Commonwealth, its subsequent occupation by neighbouring powers, and finally the advent of the present-day nation-states so radically different in their dominant ideologies to the multinational Commonwealth, have resulted firstly in a radical change of culture and the near obliteration of Sarmatian culture, and secondly, in an internecine tug-of-war over what remains of this heritage. Here in Lithuania where this paper is being presented, there can surely be no stronger reminder of this than the 20th century Polish-Lithuanian conflict over Vilnius, a city that occupies a pre-eminent place in on the cultural map of both nations (Briedis 2009). It is hard to see any genuine rapprochement between the two sides unless both nations become more aware and more accepting of their historical ties and their common heritage of the Sarmatian culture. I hope that in the future, my research, though situated primarily in the Australian context, will ultimately be of use in encouraging the creation of OW-RPGs that transmit and preserve the cultural heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – an effort that, being Polish and a game developer, I hope to be a part of – and for the present, these games serve as a useful point of comparison, identifying potential strengths and weaknesses of their particular approaches.

We will begin, however, by exploring the three hypotheses central to my research.

Examining the depth and scope of the OW-RPG

Since the first research question argues in favour of using OW-RPGs for cultural learning specifically because of their breadth and depth, it is precisely these two characteristics of the OW-RPG that will first be explored. There are three stages to this.

Initially, a historical examination of the RPG genre and the OW-RPG subgenre are needed in order to identify the distinguishing generic traits, as well as the directions of evolution within the genre. The context for this is genre theory, as it applies to game studies. Altman (1999) notes that generic labels in film are not static, that works are often classified into a given genre only retrospectively. For this reason, there is a need to lock down a more detailed definition of the OW-RPG. Special attention is devoted to the history of the *Elder Scrolls* series, which serves to provide the key texts of study for this research, namely the three most recent single-player games in the series: *Morrowind*(2002), *Oblivion* (2006), and *Skyrim* (2011).

In the next stage, the three *Elder Scrolls* games identified above will be subjected to a quantitative and qualitative examination. The quantitative examination will be a survey of the game worlds presented by these three games – a census that catalogues the numbers and types of characters, cultures, locations and affordances. This census will help to determine the breadth of the games, by charting the diversity to be found within the game worlds, both in terms of people, objects and places to be encountered, and in terms of possible player activities.

Finally, the qualitative examination will help to demonstrate the depth of the games. The examination will essentially be a critical reading of the games' subject matter, narrative themes and issues broached, as well as an examination of core gameplay mechanics, and their evolution in consecutive games. Additionally, for each game, one particular theme will be singled out for deeper analysis, bringing in additional theoretical frameworks from other fields. An interesting example of this is Huntington's (2003) "Clash of Civilizations" paradigm from the field of international relations. This paradigm, which argues that in the present international order, nations will band together, compete, and be torn apart or brought together along the dividing lines between civilizations, turns out to be an extremely useful lens to explore the political themes in *Skyrim*, where precisely these civilizational dividing lines, defined by both culture and religion, can explain the complex political backdrop and events of the game.

OW-RPG audience engagement

The second hypothesis makes the claim that OW-RPGs display strong hyperdiegetic properties, and these in turn lead the audience to engage deeply with the game both while playing it, and outside of it. This question needs to be examined within the framework of cultural studies. Cultural studies provides us with the concept of cult media, and identifies a key characteristic of such media – the notion of hyperdiegesis (Hills, 2002), that a cult text creates a world, and thus fosters attachment by rewarding re-reading and further exploration. This concept, notably, seems to fit very well with Wolf's (2012) theory of world subcreation, which again makes the statement that many works of fiction draw in and fascinate their audience by giving the impression of containing a complete, furnished and consistent world – which in turn leads to the notion of worldliness discussed by Champion (2007). Worldliness, which Champion discusses specifically in regards to *Oblivion*, is the notion that a virtual reality must contain certain characteristics in terms of social, cultural and environmental presence, in order to feel like a place – a world – rather than simply a space. The properties of OW-RPGs therefore need to be compared against the notions of cult media, while simultaneously bringing in concepts from game scholars like Wolf, and cultural heritage scholars like Champion.

The specific practices of OW-RPG fans will then be examined through an ethnographic survey of individual *Elder Scrolls* fans, as well as basic quantitative survey of the body of work produced by the *Elder Scrolls* community, in order to demonstrate that the fans do indeed retain a strong engagement with the game when not playing. Recently, a cursory ethnographic study of *Skyrim* players was conducted by

Johnson (2013). Johnson was primarily interested in identifying history-related motivations of *Skyrim* players – whether or not an interest in real-world Nordic culture had any influence on their decision to engage in the Nordic-influenced fantasy world of *Skyrim*. The fact that her response to this question is largely affirmative is already significant for the idea of using OW-RPGs for cultural learning; even more notable, however, are Johnson's descriptions of player activities. Johnson provides clear evidence that *Skyrim* players engage in scholarly behaviour – collecting, critically analysing, and disseminating knowledge about the world. This, apparently, the players do so well that the creators of the *Elder Scrolls* series testify to using fan websites during development (Johnson 2013). All this gives us hints of a strongly engaged audience that actively seeks to learn from the game, and whose engagement can even be quantified to a certain degree by examining the community's output. There is, however, a need for even deeper research in this area, and answering the second hypothesis will address this need.

Aboriginal Australian culture examined through game design

The third hypothesis of my research is intended to produce a practical outcome: the creation of a design blueprint for an OW-RPG capable of imparting cultural knowledge about the Australian Aborigines to a wider audience. Doing this will involve applying the findings of the earlier chapters to build a strong OW-RPG concept. Furthermore, game design theories from recognised authors in the field such as Fullerton (2008), along with the author's personal games industry experience, will be used to further strengthen the game design.

Additional concepts from game scholars are then brought in to further strengthen the game design, particularly on the afore-mentioned topics of subcreation and worldliness, the latter composed of the three characteristics of environmental, cultural and social presence. In order to accomplish a game that feels like a convincing world, the three kinds of presence need to be maximised by critically reviewing previous OW-RPGs, identifying flaws, and acting to fix them. Two other game studies concepts used to inform the design process are adaptivity and believability, both coming from Tanenbaum & Bizzocchi (2009). These two notions can help to further strengthen the game design by highlighting the need to make the game internally consistent – believable, by virtue of meeting the player's expectations, and more player-centric by finding ways to make the game adapt and react to the player.

A final aspect which cannot be ignored is Aboriginal culture itself, which will heavily impact the game design. To give just one example of the impact Aboriginal culture will have, consider that one of the near-constant traits of OW-RPGs is the visual map, used to aid the player in navigating the world. Within Aboriginal culture, where writing did not exist, visual maps were a foreign concept – what took their place was the spoken, or more precisely, sung word. The so-called songlines were at their heart a religious concept (Flood, 2006), but also served for navigation, as a mnemonic device to help memorise the landscape. But how to communicate this in a game? These are issues that will need to be solved.

We have laid out the three hypotheses of this research, and the methodologies that will be used to examine them. It is worthwhile to make a side-step now, and review how already existing games fare as tools of cultural transmission for the Polish-Lithuanian heritage.

Cultural Heritage in the Polish-Lithuanian Context

When reviewing RPG games that deal with the Polish-Lithuanian cultural heritage, the first thing that needs to be pointed out is the near-total absence of academic works dealing with the subject. There appears to only be one academic author that discusses any of these games in significant detail. This raises the question of the divergence of views on the Sarmatian heritage. It is perhaps natural, given that the term "Sarmatism" was first coined as a pejorative (Wasko, 1997), that there is disagreement as to the very value of exploring Sarmatian heritage – and to whom does it belong. There is especially a strong sense of ambivalence amongst Lithuanian scholars, with some arguing that Sarmatism was in fact primarily Polish, and thus foreign to Lithuania's own heritage (Vasiliauskas, 2001). At the same time, there is a strong case to be made for Sarmatism being a common construct of the two nations working together (Wasko, 1997). This is not the place to explore this debate, but the existence of the issue must nonetheless be noted – there remains disagreement on the value of Sarmatian culture, its exact relation to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the corollary question of whether it was truly a culture of the Commonwealth, or an outgrowth of Polish culture imposed upon or adapted by other nations. Still, regardless of these historical debates, examining the portrayal of Sarmatian culture in role-playing games will help us to see more clearly how the research presented in this paper applies in a European context.

Games dealing with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's cultural heritage are a relatively new phenomenon that has really only been examined by a single academic author, Michał Mochocki. The phenomenon, however, is a fast-growing one: Mochocki (2012a) points to a number of games, digital and non-digital, in a number of different genres that were developed from 1997 onwards, including both local productions and imports from other countries. However, as the focus of this research is the OW-RPG genre, most of these other titles must be laid aside. In this paper, we will only examine three titles. Two of these, both from the *Mount & Blade* (2008-2011) series, can be described as OW-RPGs. The third, however, is not

an OW-RPG, and indeed is not a video game at all, but a pen-and-paper game. While technically beyond the scope of this research, I have chosen to discuss it nonetheless, because as a different form of RPG, it provides a useful comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of two approaches to the same topic. In addition, the game in question, *Dzikie Pola* (1997) – *The Wild Fields* – is also historically noteworthy as the first RPG dealing with Sarmatian themes.

The Wild Fields

Developed and published locally in Poland, *Dzikie Pola*, as stated previously, is a pen-and-paper game. Games of this kind are essentially nothing more than a very sizeable manual, defining the rules by which the players interact with each other and the game master with the aid of dice, while tracking the progress of their characters by making notes on specially provided character sheets. During the course of the game, the game master conceives and narrates the current situation, as well as determining the actions of any non-player characters encountered; the players, in turn, respond by informing the game master of their own actions, frequently using dice to determine the results of the actions in accordance with the game rules. The game thus comes down to a combination of three aspects – the rules, the players' imagination, and their abilities in terms of theatrical performance.

Contrasted with OW-RPGs, pen-and-paper RPGs like *Dzikie Pola* have the advantage of adaptivity – each time, the story is made up on the spot by the game master depending on the player actions – and a greater emphasis on performance. For instance, *Dzikie Pola* encourages players to speak to each using archaic expressions, and generally to get into character by presenting them in detail with the characteristics, views and ideals, both real and stereotypical, of the Sarmatian noble. The game's adaptivity also means that *Dzikie Pola* can engage in exceedingly complex social reconstruction, and the game's manual indeed claims to provide the basic knowledge for a "realistic" reconstruction of the 17th century Commonwealth, as well as encouraging the players to further research the subject in order to enhance their gaming experience (Mochocki 2011). From this, however, we can surmise the analogous drawback – a poor game master, will drastically affect the game's believability and result in a poor gaming experience that teaches the players little. The OW-RPG, by virtue of its pre-generated, scripted nature, cannot reach the heights of adaptivity of the pen-and-paper RPG, nor can it offer players the same wide scope for performance, but it is able to compensate by providing a consistent, reasonably believable experience. Most importantly, however, the OW-RPG provides an interactive visual simulation component that vastly enhances the feeling of worldliness: a player in *Dzikie Pola* can imagine, with help from the game master, that he is visiting a specific location, a great city, a fortress, a village – but the *Skyrim* player simply visits these places, seeing them with his own eyes. A video game is of course still narrated through mimetic narration, in the same way that cinema is narrated (Majewski 2003) – but given the emphasis on freedom of movement in an OW-RPG, this form of narration is far less obtrusive than relying on the game master's oral descriptions. For this reason, pen-and-paper RPGs, while not without their own unique benefits, cannot fill the same role that OW-RPGs do. Let us therefore examine the only, so far, attempt to depict the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its culture in an OW-RPG: the *Mount & Blade* series. The initial game in the series, *Mount & Blade* (2008), created by the Turkish developer Taleworlds, took place in a fantasy world. However, the creators soon decided to launch a spin-off game set in the reality of 17th century Central & Eastern Europe – this game, developed using Taleworlds' technology but by an external studio, Ukrainian developer Studio Slich in collaboration with the Polish publisher CD Projekt, was *Mount & Blade: Ogniem i Mieczem* (2011) – *With Fire and Sword*. This first iteration was only available in Poland – however, a refined sequel/upgrade was then developed, published in Poland as *Mount & Blade: Ogniem i Mieczem. Dzikie Pola* (2011) – *The Wild Fields* – and internationally under the English translation of the original title: *Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword* (2011). While the latter game refines the formula in many ways, the cultural content of the two games is not significantly different, and for this reason this paper will refer to them jointly, under the acronym *WFaS*.

With Fire and Sword

Set against the stormy backdrop of the 17th century, when the Commonwealth found itself embroiled in decades-long struggles against Muscovy, the Ukrainian Cossacks, the Crimean Tartars, and Sweden, *WFaS* places a strong emphasis on tactical group combat. As such, it is not a typical OW-RPG where the player would most of the time be alone, or joined by one or two companions at the most. The player character here must assemble a fighting force, and it is the group combat that forms the core mechanic of the game. Initially, the player will skirmish against small groups of brigands, but over the course of the game, in order to progress, he will ultimately need to raise a force of 200-300 men, infantry and cavalry. In order to keep this force fed and well paid, inevitably bigger forces and targets must be engaged, forcing the player in turn to engage in political strife – offering up allegiance to one of the five states mentioned above. When creating his character, the player may choose to be a Sarmatian noble, though he can just as easily choose to be a Tartar or Swede, a Russian or a Cossack – and in any case, choosing one particular origin does not prevent the player from changing sides, even repeatedly, in mid-game. He may also choose to travel anywhere within the map limits that span from northern Russia south to Crimea, and

from the easternmost steppes of present-day Ukraine to roughly the line of the Vistula river in central Poland – however, unlike the *Elder Scrolls* games, the entire world is not represented as an interactive 3d environment. Instead, the player's party is represented by an icon-like figure on a map. The only time the player may directly experience 3d landscapes is during battles, and when visiting any kind of settlements – villages, strongholds, or cities. Similarly, the player may talk to any character encountered in a settlement, and interact with them in various ways, from politics and romance, through business and trade, all the way to duels or tavern brawls, but once travelling on the map outside of any settlement, he cannot encounter any locals, only other parties or warbands that are also visible on the map. Even when encountering another party, he will only be able to converse with the party's leader – the only other interaction he may have with the rest of the party is at the tip of the sword, should the two parties end up engaging in combat.

Considering these limitations, it is difficult to say if *WFaS* is even truly an OW-RPG in accordance with the definition given at the outset of this paper. The game certainly is some form of RPG, as the player develops his character's stats, skills, social rank and wealth. It also certainly is open in its play structure. Because, however, the interaction with the world is so limited, it cannot truly be considered an open world. Nonetheless, its gameplay is similar enough to the OW-RPG, that at the very least, the game carries a number of the same advantages that OW-RPGs were said above to have in comparison with non-digital RPGs – it constructs a virtual world for the player to navigate, see, and interact with. It is worth therefore examining this virtual world in the context of worldliness and the three kinds of presence – cultural, environmental, and social.

In dealing with cultural presence, the game relies on visual representations rather than written or spoken description that one would encounter in a pen-and-paper RPG. When the player enters a city, his character does actually walk through its streets, finding them populated with people dressed in historically appropriate attire, and sporting historically appropriate hair styles – a significant factor, since it is the attire and hairstyles that served as the most vivid markers of the Commonwealth's cultural distinctness (Mochocki 2011). Similarly, the dialogues are full of expressions appropriate to the period. Where the game does fail in cultural worldliness is the lack of any significant hermeneutic richness: the game's cultural content is shallow. There are no cultural artefacts of communication, such as books, or spoken tales that would have been common in this period. The player's only source of information about the world are fairly short dialogues presented as text, with no vocal recordings. This deprives the player of experiencing the differences in accent he should be able to encounter when interacting with the game's diverse cultures and nationalities. Both of these flaws are absent in recent OW-RPG titles such as *Skyrim*, where numerous books exist for the player to read, and all dialogues are spoken. An even greater problem are the major cultural artefacts – the cities themselves. These lack any sense of realism or historical accuracy – Vilnius, in reality filled with narrow, twisting streets and numerous Gothic or Baroque buildings, is presented as orderly rows of freestanding buildings. There is also not a single building that would be recognisable from real Vilnius. Ironically, it is the small villages that best convey a sense of cultural place, perhaps because their small size allowed the creators to polish them further, or perhaps because there is no jarring sense of “this should look unique” that the great cities like Vilnius, Warsaw or Krakow convey. All this means that while the cultural world of *WFaS* does have some value, it ultimately fails to be a convincing and believable one. Unlike OW-RPGs like *Skyrim*, in *WFaS* the player quickly concludes that cities in the game have no intrinsic cultural value, but merely serve as repositories of useful services – shops, stables, inns, and so on.

The environmental aspects fare little better. The landscapes, seen during battles, certainly convey a sense of Eastern Europe, and are reasonably varied. There is also some variation in the weather, but it is precisely in weather that the environmental world is the weakest: there are no seasons. In a part of the world where the difference between summer and winter is the difference between sweltering heat and half a metre of snow, this is a glaring omission. Further, the inability to move through the entire landscape, means that this game has more in common with pen-and-paper RPGs relying on imagination, than with OW-RPGs that recreate a contiguous landscape. The disjointed nature of the world thus further weakens the sense of worldliness and believability.

Social presence, however, is a relative strong point. While the player is constrained by the game mechanics that do not allow him a full range of social interactions he would potentially have in a pen-and-paper RPG, there is a very strong sense of the player's actions having real meaning and impact on the social fabric of the world. A reputation system exists, whereby attacking the troops of one state will result in other factions adjusting their view of the player accordingly. Further to this, most of the characters the player interacts with also have their individual opinion of the player independent of the faction opinion. Even amongst the characters the player recruits to join his own force, there is a sense of independent purpose, and occasionally the player finds himself negotiating with his own men and women, trying to keep in line two characters who, as it turns out, have utterly incompatible world views. On other occasions, the player will be accosted by one of his subordinates for taking a particular action – while another character praises him for it. Thus, within the admittedly narrow constraints of the game's core mechanics, there is at first glance a relatively strong sense of social presence. Paradoxically, however, this sense is undermined when the player knows more about the culture being presented: one of the standard ways of raising funds in the game is to engage in trade. This, however, would have been anathema to the Sarmatian noble (Mochocki, 2011), so if

the player is a noble, he would be ostracised by his peers. Analogously, if he is not a noble, he would not be able to pledge allegiance to the King, or command armies in the field. Clearly, more attention is needed towards integrating social presence with the traits of the particular culture; additionally, when imported into a convincing OW-RPG, these aspects of social presence could be further strengthened by fostering a greater range of social possibilities.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the basic methodologies of my research into the applicability of OW-RPGs for the transmission and preservation of cultural heritage. This research has only recently commenced, and there is little in terms of findings to report. What can be achieved at this stage, however, is to present an argument justifying this project and this particular multi-disciplinary approach to the subject. The strengths of OW-RPGs – their ability to transport the player into another world, filled with a variety of cultures, people, places and artefacts to interact with in complex ways, as well as the way in which OW-RPGs foster continuing engagement with the subject outside of the game, not only make OW-RPGs potentially one of the strongest tools available for the purposes of cultural heritage, but also make them a complex subject to engage with in research, demanding the use of multiple methodologies from disparate fields of research.

While the stated outcome of my current research is the creation of a blueprint for an OW-RPG that explores Australian Aboriginal culture, there is great value in reviewing efforts that have been made in other parts of the world to do the same thing for other cultures. For the purpose of this paper, I chose to spend a significant amount of space exploring the present use of RPGs, digital and non-digital, for the transmission of cultural heritage in the part of the world of most interest to the Lithuanian readers of this publication – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The games explored here were shown to have some promise, but, they do not fulfil the potential that I have argued digital OW-RPGs to have – above all, because the games in question are not in fact true OW-RPGs, and one of them is indeed a non-digital game. There is clearly much room for further exploration of Sarmatia and Sarmatism in new games. The paper has, however, also accidentally revealed another issue – I myself am a Polish scholar, and the only other research in this area that I could locate was by another Polish scholar. But the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a bi-national state, and its cultural heritage is the heritage of Lithuania and Poland alike – indeed, belonging in parts also to Belarus, Latvia, and the Ukraine. There is a strong need for scholars from the non-Polish parts of the former Commonwealth to offer their points of view. It is possible that Lithuanian research already exists, and simply remained invisible to me due to the language barrier; analogously, with most of Mochocki's work being available only in Polish, he may not be known to Lithuanians. It is my hope that the publication of this paper will, in some small way, contribute to internationalising within the former Commonwealth, the discussion on the value of applying OW-RPGs to educate about our common cultural heritage.

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Santrauka

KULTŪRINIŲ ŽINIŲ PERDAVIMAS IR SAUGOJIMAS TAIKANT ATVIRO PASAULIO VAIDMENŲ ŽAIDIMUS (OW-RPGS)

Šis straipsnis apžvelgia teoriją, panaudotą mano daktaro disertacijoje tiriant atviro pasaulio vaidmenų žaidimus (OW-RPG) kaip individualaus mokymosi ir kultūrinių žinių sklaidimo priemones. Pateikiamos trys hipotezės ir jų tyrimo metodai. 1. OW-RPG žaidimai ypač tinka kaip kultūrinio pažinimo priemonės, nes sukuria gilią ir plačią žaidybinio pasaulio erdvę bei siūlo įvairiapusišką veiklą. 2. OW-RPG tekstai turi stiprias hyperdiegetines savybes, įtraukiančias auditoriją ne tik į žaidimą, bet ir už žaidimo ribų, kas suteikia žaidėjams kompleksinių praktinių žinių, moko analizuoti ir skatina tam tikrą OW-RPG žaidėjų dalį toliau studijuoti to žaidimo temą netgi nustojus žaisti. 3. Populiarių komercinių žaidimų kūrimas yra reikšmingas tuo, kad sklaidžia žinias apie atskirų šalių kultūrą ir istoriją plačiajam dalyvių ratui. Australijoje pastebimas didelis tokios kultūrinių žinių sklaidos poreikis, ypač apie aborigenų kultūrą, todėl OW-RPG ypač tinka šiam tikslui. Tai parodo, kad šiam žaidimui buvo sukurtas ir popierinis variantas. Toliau straipsnyje kalbama apie tyrimo metodus, pateikiami teoriniai samprotavimai, nagrinėjantys visas tris hipotezes atskirai. Pabaigoje, norint priartinti tyrimą Europos skaitytojui, autorius nagrinėja RPG naudojimo pavyzdį Lenkijos-Lietuvos kultūros paveldo sklaidimui, pateikia trumpą kritinę popierinio RPG *Dzikie Pola* (1997) ir OW-RPG *Mount & Blade: With Fire and Sword* (2011) analizę naudodamas Championo (2007) kultūrinės, socialinės ir aplinkos buvimo koncepciją, taip pat Tanenbaumo ir Bizzocchio (2009) prisitaikymo ir įtikinamumo koncepciją.