

The voice of authority? Lore management strategies in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*

Głos autorytetu? Strategie zarządzania wiedzą o świecie w Kingdom Come: Deliverance

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Abstract: This paper examines the strategies employed in the medieval role-playing game (RPG) *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018) to deliver and contextualise lore, or historical & background knowledge, to the player. These strategies are compared to the approach employed in other RPGs, in particular the faux-medieval fantasy *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). It is argued *Kingdom Come* actively seeks to highlight the historical status of its content, projecting an impression of historical clarity, only occasionally highlighting uncertainty. By contrast, *Skyrim* conveys its lore in a nuanced and playful way that seems to acknowledge the limitations of the historical process.

Keywords: lore, worldbuilding tools, historical authenticity, worldbuilding objectivity, worldbuilding subjectivity

1. Introduction

This paper explores lore, or knowledge, delivery in the historical open-world role-playing game (RPG) *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018; Warhorse Studios), examining the strategies employed for this purpose by the game's creators. The use of the term *lore* may be surprising here, given its conventional use in the context of world-building theory and the practice to denote knowledge about the background and history of a fantastic world (Wolf, 2012), when *Kingdom Come's* setting is a historical world. Nonetheless, there is a claim to be made that a historical setting in fiction, given its separation from actual history, can be functionally considered to be a separate world, manifested either as a single product, or, if present in multiple products, even a transmedia world (Mochocki, 2021). The concept of lore is thus apt for a historical setting and is understood here as the background and historical knowledge about the 15th-century Bohemian setting of *Kingdom Come*. However, when conceptualised as lore, this knowledge does not encompass the sum total of actual knowledge about the real history of 15th-century Bohemia, which would include many elements not included in the game. Instead, the lore of *Kingdom Come* is on the one hand limited to only those elements of its historical setting that exist in the game, while on the other hand, it also encompasses those fictional elements that were added in the process of creating a work of historical fiction.

The establishment and delivery of lore in *Kingdom Come* is thus a process involving curation, interpretation, and invention – all of which exist in a continuum between subjectivity and objectivity. It is this process that is under examination here. The marketing materials for *Kingdom Come* made a very strong promise of historical accuracy of the setting, and it is argued here the creators made a strong effort to employ lore delivery strategies that reinforce the idea of *Kingdom Come* as a historically accurate game. While the game does at times acknowledge some of the liberties it took with its setting, overall, *Kingdom Come* conveys lore in an authoritative manner. This manner is contrasted here with the more subjective and open approach employed by some fantasy games, especially *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011; Bethesda Game Studios).

Due to space limitations, this paper examines only lore delivery, and not the lore itself. While at times it is necessary to invoke specific historical issues, in general this paper does not attempt to assess whether or not *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* as a setting is historically faithful, nor does the paper explore the wider issue of historical accuracy/authenticity and the divergences in the understanding of these concepts (Copplesstone, 2017).

2. Communicating lore

As already mentioned, in discussions of fictional worlds, the term *lore* encompasses essentially all knowledge about the world in question. This may be information about the world's historical or, in the case of fantasy, mythological past, its geography, peoples, cultures, fauna and flora, as well as the world's current situation, individual inhabitants, and the connections between the present and the past. While in the broader picture, the lore of a given setting encompasses also the stories told by individual products exploring this setting, for the purpose of this paper, which examines only a single game, the term *lore* is narrowed down to denote only the backdrop, or the setting of the story, but not the story itself.

Lore is especially critical to the presentation of fantasy worlds. Scholars who explore world-building devote considerable attention to the “encyclopaedic” impulse that encourages fantasy writers to extend their novels with lengthy and detailed appendices (Maj, 2015, 2019), or to publish companion paratexts (Genette, 1997) that serve as reference guides to their world (Wolf, 2012; Maj, 2019). For audiences, these encyclopaedic extensions are a crucial element to allow them to mentally enter this otherwise alien, potentially difficult to comprehend imaginary setting.

Mochocki (2021) notes an overlap between fantastic storyworlds and historical settings. Effectively, historical settings are experienced like storyworlds, including the process of initial access. The first entry to any unfamiliar fantasy storyworld is demanding for the audience, which needs to orient itself in the new world (Wolf, 2012). Historical settings can be less problematic for audiences if they already have some vision of the setting, which is true to some extent for Western audiences experiencing

medieval settings (Eco, 1987; White, 2014). The caveat is that medieval settings exist in the popular imagination in a distorted form, described sometimes as medievalist (Eco, 1987). For *Kingdom Come*, access is further complicated by the relative lack of audience exposure to the specificities of medieval Bohemia. Thus, ironically, the closer *Kingdom Come* heaves to historical realism in its Bohemian settings, the more alien it becomes to its audience. This demands careful communication of lore.

The historical objectives of *Kingdom Come* are notable. The game originally struggled to find a publisher (Vavra, 2018; Bojo, Bigas & Princ, 2021) and needed a strong selling point. The creators made realism the feature setting the game apart from typical fantasy RPGs, as expressed in the crowdfunding slogan *dungeons and no dragons* (Kingdom Come..., 2019). Realism was then repeatedly communicated to the audience, via websites (Kingdom Come..., n.d.; Kingdom Come..., 2018), documentary films (Bojo, Bigas & Princ, 2021; Warhorse Studios, 2021), press articles (Webster, 2018), and the game's end credits by highlighting the use of professional historians as consultants.

Questions remain concerning *Kingdom Come*'s vision of history, whether the promise of historical authenticity was fulfilled, and whether the game does not in fact convey a nationalist interpretation of that history (e.g. Bártfai, 2018; Let's Play History, 2018; McCarter, 2018; Taylor, 2018; Webster, 2018; Pfister, 2019, Wright, 2020). It is not the purpose of this paper to explore these debates, more thoroughly examined by Wright (2020). Instead, what is explored here are the strategies and methods employed by *Kingdom Come* to expound lore to the player in a manner that communicates the intent, or at least the impression of historical veracity.

2.1. The lore toolbox

For the purposes of this paper, lore is limited to background knowledge about the storyworld, without encompassing the unfolding narrative. In terms of Henry Jenkins' (2004) conceptualisation of narrative architecture in games as divided into enacted, embedded, evoked, and emergent narrative, lore is told through all four forms of narrative, with different tools connecting to them. The two forms most relevant here are enacted and embedded narrative, but all four need to be briefly considered.

Evoked narrative builds the world by referring to world elements not present in the current narrative, but previously seen in another product. This form of narrative gains importance as a transmedia world grows through media expansion (Wolf, 2012). By its nature, evoked narrative has a strongly subjective, experiential aspect, depending as it does on the connections made in the minds of the audience, and this aspect evades analysis when examining the product rather than the audience. For this reason, evoked lore is set aside here.

Emergent narrative encompasses the events that develop through the game's dynamics. Thus, emergent narrative can contribute to communicating lore through game mechanics, which Ian Bogost has described as procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007). For example, the relative strengths of weaponry can be experienced through its use in combat, where it becomes readily visible that a peasant armed with a club is a poor match for an armoured, sword-wielding knight, while a fantasy setting might communicate differences between humans and playable fantasy races through their statistics (Ferrari, 2010). Dynamic events like random encounters with bandits can also be construed as lore, conveying to the audience the dangers of the world. However, emergent narrative elements are largely hidden behind the game mechanics, and as such do not constitute a part of the communication strategy. For this reason, they are also set aside in this analysis.

The core of the lore delivery toolbox in *Kingdom Come* are enacted narrative elements like dialogues, and embedded narrative elements like books and notes, like in other open-world RPGs such as *Skyrim* (for further discussion of narrative strategies in *Skyrim*, see Majewski, 2018). Information is delivered to the audience primarily through diegetic sources, complimented by an extradiegetic database.

Enacted forms of delivery include dialogues and enacted scenes. Enacted storytelling concentrates on the unfolding story, but necessarily also conveys background lore, e.g., when the player talks to Father Godwin, who explains the religious upheavals unfolding in Bohemia during the game's timeframe, but outside of the game's geographic scope. In an open-world RPG, dialogues can be used both to reveal and to conceal knowledge. For example, *Skyrim* breaks knowledge into chunks divided among different characters, forcing players to actively search the world

to gain lore (Majewski, 2018). This is an effective technique for player engagement, but since the basics of the world need to be available readily, it is not typically used to convey the fundamental lore about the story-world. Furthermore, even high-budget games like *Skyrim* recycle some background dialogues due to the high costs of recording voiceovers, and this problem is even more significant for a lower-budget production like *Kingdom Come*. A further issue is pacing. Regardless of medium, it is typically problematic to pause the story narrative to supply the audience with another chunk of lore. Books and films resolve this by delivering the bare minimum of lore in the flow of the narrative, relegating the rest to appendices and paratextual publications (Wolf, 2012; Maj, 2019); an open-world game, however, can relegate lore to other diegetic sources, accessed optionally by players. For these reasons, it is embedded narrative that constitutes the paramount method of lore delivery. Foremost among these are lore books – readable, diegetic objects that exist within the game world, adding a literary element to the game (Kochanowicz, 2014).

Lore books are a staple of RPG games, going back thirty years to *Ultima VI: The False Prophet* (1990; Origin Systems) (Majewski, 2018). Such books are typically brief; most *Skyrim* and *Kingdom Come* books, if printed in a size 12 font, would amount to less than a dozen pages. However, their brevity is offset by their vast quantity and the range of topics explored. For example, *Skyrim* has 301 books (Majewski, 2021), and explores topics ranging from theological treatises and works of history, to cookbooks, personal diaries, travelogues, volumes of poetry, and works of prose fiction (Kochanowicz, 2014; Majewski, 2021). Books in *The Elder Scrolls* series visibly imitate various stylistic features of medieval literature (DiPietro, 2014), often delivering lore in the form of subjective debates between scholars, with no guarantee given whether the content of this particular book is a true depiction of the game world, or a false depiction skewed by the author's prejudices.

However, the quantity of books seen in *The Elder Scrolls* could only function convincingly in medieval fantasy, not medieval reality. In medieval, pre-printing press Bohemia, where few people could read and books had to be copied out by hand, having dozens of books scattered throughout the world would undermine historical realism. Thus, *Kingdom Come* necessarily presents far fewer, and far less diverse diegetic books than

Skyrim, with just about 100 books overall, of which many contain only brief fragments of text. Lore books also have the problem of needing to be found in the game world – where *Skyrim* could place a bookshelf in any townhouse, in *Kingdom Come* books are rare.

Under these circumstances, the creators of *Kingdom Come* introduced an additional tool for lore presentation, more reminiscent of classical fantasy literature: an extradiegetic encyclopaedia (Maj, 2019). While it is rare for historical novels to employ encyclopaedic appendices, it is not unheard of in historical games, e.g., in *Echo: Secrets of the Lost Cavern* (2005; Kheops Studio) (Majewski & Bielińska-Majewska, 2018). In *Kingdom Come*, the encyclopaedia, called the Codex, includes a catalogue of entries including game tutorials as well as world information categorised into general info, locations, events, society and characters.

2.2. Examining the Codex

In *Kingdom Come*, the Codex is the richest source of lore for the player, setting the tone for the game. Its entries, unlocked for the player on a “just in time” basis, provide an overview of medieval Bohemia, the activities and lifestyles of its people, cultural and political issues, and much more additional information. Unlike most of the game’s worldbuilding apparatus, the Codex constitutes extradiegetic material in Wolf’s (2020) taxonomy of worldbuilding types. The language used is academic, actively striving for a sense of neutral objectivity. The unsigned authors only rarely indicate the presence of their own opinions and interpretations. Thus, the Codex is key to communicating to players the developers’ message about their intent: it is the voice of authority reminding the player that Warhorse Studios wants them to believe *Kingdom Come* depicts medieval Bohemia in a realist manner. Lore is presented as fact, even when the given issue is under dispute or otherwise questionable. In this aspect, the Codex is similar in its approach to many worldbuilding projects that present their lore as definite, in stark contrast to the uncertainty of real history (Johnson, 2020).

For example, the Codex entry concerning Markvart von Aulitz declares that the Bohemian nobility seeking to overthrow king Wenceslas IV in favour of his brother Sigismund were motivated more “with money and power”. Such a motivation may conceivably be the dominant opinion

among historians; nonetheless, it is striking that the motivations of individuals who lived 600 years ago are discussed in such definite terms. Other entries take similar risks. The entry on hygiene makes the claim the Catholic Church objected to cleansing the body and only allowed priests and monks to bathe twice a year. Given the diversity of opinions among Church authorities in this area, it is again striking to see such a claim declared matter-of-factly and in such broad terms, even if such opinions were held by some Bohemian clergy.

These examples show the ease with which neutral language can frame as incontrovertible claims that, even if backed by some evidence, are open to dispute. At the same time, in spite of its academic veneer, the Codex does not include referencing, making any deeper analysis of these issues in the context of other historical writings difficult.

The Codex, while at times overconfident in its assertions, does occasionally highlight unknowns, such as when discussing the historically unclear context of the demise of one of the game's historical characters, Racek Kobyla. More importantly, in various places the Codex acknowledges and highlights the extent to which *Kingdom Come* diverged from what its historian advisors considered fact. These acknowledgements also contribute to the Codex' implicit authority by communicating to the audience that the authors did not depart historicity by accident of ignorance, but rather by conscious design for the benefits of gameplay. For example, in the entry on the Inquisition, the authors state: "In KCD, we tried to stick as close as possible to an actual trial, but took artistic license, for example, with the principle of secrecy, since we allowed Henry to play an active role in the proceedings. We also sped up the entire process".

Elsewhere, however, the Codex is more circumspect in expressing its historical departures. The entry on alchemy discusses the historical aspects of alchemy as a proto-science but does not explore the implementation of alchemy in the game, barely acknowledging that history capitulates here to the gameplay demands of the open-world RPG, where players need to produce "magical" potions to use in combat. Ironically, the Codex thus explains some of the game's less important departures from historical sources, while ignoring more significant cases.

Overall, the Codex seems designed to serve a specific purpose: to inform the audience about the world, as well as to highlight the historical

knowledge of the game creators and the authority of the historians who advised on the production. The amount of lore presented in the Codex is considerable. Through this device, *Kingdom Come* rivals the amount of lore provided by the much bigger *Skyrim*. However, *Skyrim*'s reliance on exclusively diegetic, and therefore openly subjective, sources for presentation of lore ultimately seems more nuanced and playful than *Kingdom Come*'s neutral and academic non-diegetic entries. *Skyrim* presents the past as uncertain, subject to debate, accessible only through varied and often irreconcilable perspectives. *Kingdom Come* presents the past almost as if it were filled with clear facts with little room for uncertainty. This is ironic: as noted by Johnson (2020), it is usually fictional worlds that present their past with complete clarity, in contrast to historical works, even historical fiction.

3. Conclusion

Kingdom Come chose a strongly authoritative approach to lore. This was not a given. Certainly, the game world could have been presented with more uncertainty, perhaps by employing more diegetic lore, or simply acknowledging the limits of historical knowledge in the extradiegetic Codex. Had a more nuanced approach been desired, the Codex might have included the names of the entry authors, as well as referencing for their sources, to better acknowledge their subjective perspectives, and backing claims with evidence. Alternatively, the Codex could have been written from a diegetic perspective, an approach employed in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015; CD Projekt Red), where the player has access to a diegetic encyclopaedia of lore.

However, ultimately, suggestions for greater nuance would miss the point. If the Codex is at times too confident and authoritative about the history it describes, in all likelihood, this was precisely the intent: to instil in players a confidence about the game's historical veracity. *Kingdom Come* initially struggled to find a publisher willing to take a risk with a medieval RPG. It needed strong, clear selling points. Realism became one of these selling points, helping to distinguish the game from the far more common fantasy RPG titles, fuelling a successful crowdfunding campaign,

and leading to a publishing agreement. In order for this to happen, it was not enough to simply decide on realism – this intent for realism needed to be clearly communicated to the public, to convey at all times the developers’ authority on the storyworld of 15th-century Bohemia. If this was the purpose of the extradiegetic Codex, it was certainly a success.

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Ludography

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Głos autorytetu? Strategie zarządzania wiedzą o świecie w *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*

Abstrakt: Niniejszy tekst omawia strategie stosowane w średniowiecznej grze fabularnej (RPG) *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2019) w procesie przekazywania i kontekstualizacji wiedzy światotwórczej (ang. *lore*), czyli wiedzy na temat tła i kontekstu historycznego. Strategie te są porównywane ze strategiami stosowanymi w pseudośredniowiecznej grze fantasy *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). Artykuł przedstawia tezę, iż *Kingdom Come* aktywnie dąży do podkreślenia statusu historycznego swojej treści, budując wrażenie historycznej klarowności, a tylko w rzadkich przypadkach zwracając uwagę na niepewności historyczne. Tymczasem *Skyrim* prezentuje wiedzę w bardziej zniuansowanej formie, igrając z ideą historyczności i jak gdyby zaznaczając ograniczenia historycznych procesów poznawczych.

Słowa kluczowe: *lore*, narzędzia światotwórcze, autentyczność historyczna, światotwórczy obiektywizm, światotwórczy subiektywizm
