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# Medieval video games as reenactment of the past: A look at Kingdom Come: Deliverance and its historical claim

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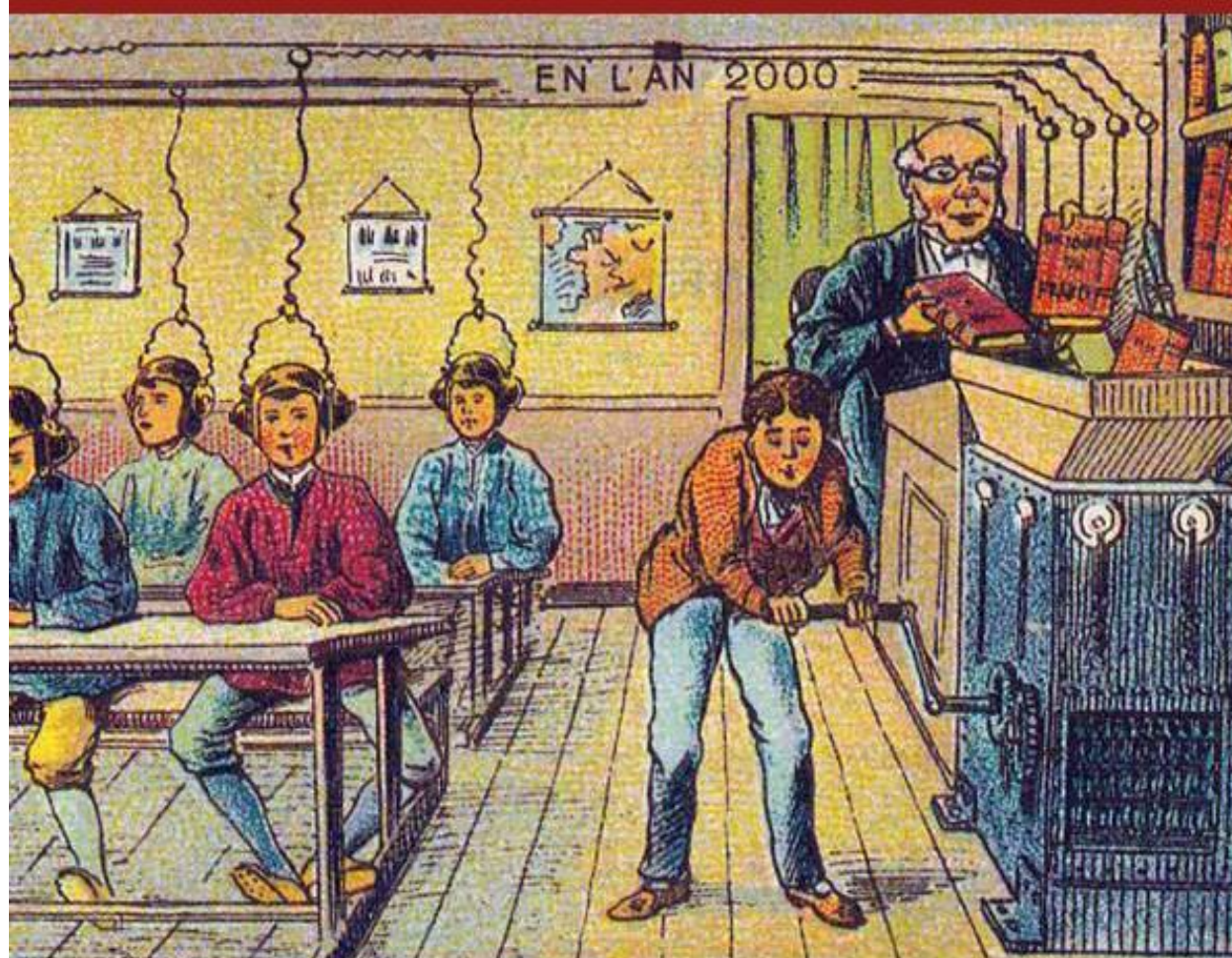
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# MEDIEVAL VIDEO GAMES AS REENACTMENT OF THE PAST: A LOOK AT KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE AND ITS HISTORICAL CLAIM

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## Introduction

In 1979 was released on Atari 2600 the first game relying on the Middle Ages. Simply titled *Adventure*, this game took place on an open medieval-fantasy environment where the hero, a single pixel square, had to find a magical chalice and return it to a golden castle. From the classic *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986) to most recent triple A games, such as *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) or *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt, 2015), fantastic Middle Ages keep inspiring the video game industry, drawing a dynamic close to the Medieval Revival at work since the 1980s. Concurrently with this vision of medieval-inspired worlds, very few games came up with a historical approach of this period. As a matter of fact, most of the games offering an experience based on historical facts turn out to be strategy games: from *Defender of the Crown* (Cinemaware, 1986) which places the player in the role of a XII<sup>th</sup> century Saxon wrestling for the control of England to *Age of Empire II: the Age of Kings* (Microsoft, 1999) which follows different war campaigns from Attila to Joan of Arc. So far, the only ambitious game to combine strategy approach and third-person RPG action in a historical based environment is *Mount and Blade* (Taleworlds, 2008). This example relies on the absence of noticeable fantasy elements and doesn't take place on a particular set of events, or even on an identified time. Thus, on the last 40 years of video game development, which have witnessed an unprecedented growth of this medium, medieval history has been an important background inspiration, but has hardly been the principal matter of interest on which games focused.

In February 2014, the Czech video game developer Warhorse Studios launched a crowdfunding campaign for the development of a «realistic single-player RPG set in the medieval Europe», based on an «open-world sandbox with period accurate melee combat»<sup>1026</sup>. Released in February 2018, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* attempts to provide a first-person gaming experience relying on historical accuracy. To make the experience «as authentic as possible»<sup>1027</sup>, the developers intended to propose a historically accurate environment, based on «real-world locations [...], period-accurate armors and costumes, combat and fencing systems designed in collaboration with the most knowledgeable, skillful swordsmen around, and a story based on actual, historic events». To this end, the game is based on a specific date -the year 1403- and a specific location: the Kingdom of Bohemia. The player control a fictive character, Henry, into a context of civil war between the heirs of the late Emperor Charles IV, struggling to survive and looking for revenge after the murder of its parents.

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<sup>1026</sup> *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* project's page on Kickstarter, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1294225970/kingdom-come-deliverance>, consulted on April 10, 2018.

<sup>1027</sup> *Ibid.*

While video games based on historical events, such as the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ubisoft, 2007-2017) were repeatedly questioned by historical game studies about their vision of History<sup>1028</sup> and the capacity given to the player to have a determining part on these happenings<sup>1029</sup>, the proper re-creation of the material culture and the simulation of more intangible elements of the past weren't properly broached by academics. The particular claim of historical accuracy of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* allows us to start a reflection about video games as a simulation of material and immaterial aspects of the past. In order to do so, we propose to draw a parallel with another non-academic activity commonly called «historical reenactment». This hobby consists in the embodiment of real or fictitious historical characters from a specific date and places and relies on a reconstruction of historical material. It appears that historical reenactment and historical video games are reaching each other in their struggling with sources and interpretations, in their search for material re-creation and simulation of intangible elements. As Warhorse Studios is inspired by this particular practice -which is widely-developed in Eastern European countries and particularly in Czech Republic-, it seems logical to ask ourselves, through the example of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, if medieval video games can be seen as a genuine reenactment of the past. In order to do so, we intend to combine both interdisciplinary *game studies* approaches that are narratology and ludology, as defined by Gonzalo Frasca<sup>1030</sup>. The narratological approach which studies the narrative structure of the game cannot be overlooked in an analysis of historical content in video games and the ludological approach is a key to bring an analysis on historical material culture and gesture through gameplay issues. First, we will question historical accuracy as a new potential development priority for video game through the choice of a simulated environment based on real characters and events. Then we will approach the pros and cons of virtual materiality between infinite possibilities of a re-creation of the past, and limitation of non-physical re-creation based on archaeological knowledge. Finally, we will focus on the simulation of intangible historical contents, as a tool which may allow historical video games to open a specific reading of the past.

### **Historical accuracy: A development priority?**

Since the beginning of the *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* project, Warhorse Studios highlighted their will to give players the most «realistic» medieval game ever conceived. Before studying the game itself, we have to question this emphasis on historical accuracy. Regarding video games as a research subject, academics bring to mind the difficulty for *game studies* to broach both conditions of creation and use of what is at the same time a program, a medium, a work of art and

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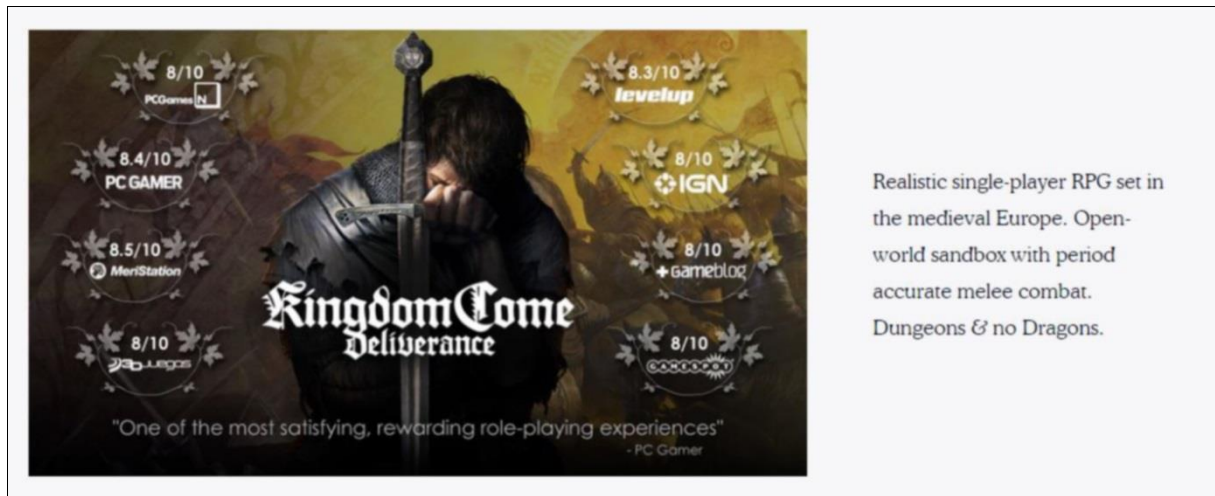
<sup>1028</sup> Jean-Clément MARTIN: «L'Historien et le Jeu, ou l'inquiétude du garde-chasse», *Écrire l'histoire*, 16 (2016), pp. 225-227.

<sup>1029</sup> Vincent BOUTONNET: «Jeux vidéos et interprétations historiques: étude d'*Assassin's Creed*», in Marc-André ÉTHIER, David LEFRANÇOIS and François AUDIGIER (eds.): *Pensée critique, enseignement de l'histoire et de la citoyenneté*, Louvain-la-Neuve, De Boeck supérieur, 2018, pp. 131-141.

<sup>1030</sup> Gonzalo FRASCA: «Ludology Meets Narratology. Similitude and Differences between (Video)games and Narrative», *Parnasso*, 3 (1999), pp. 365-371.

an industrial process<sup>1031</sup>. In this particular case, we can rely on the *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*'s kickstarter page which describes the initial project.

Picture 1: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*'s kickstarter page



(Source: Kickstarter)

«Dungeons & no Dragons» was the first headline of the project. This parodic distortion of one of the most famous fantasy tabletop role playing game's name is currently symbolic of a conception of historical accuracy mainly built on what it's not supposed to be, that is to say fantasy. Without describing criterions of «accuracy», the arguments stand on the wedge the developers intended to drive between their intention and the expression of neo-medievalism<sup>1032</sup>.

This position is ceaselessly repeated, guaranteeing that gamers won't find «any dragons, half-naked Elven warriors, or wizards in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*»<sup>1033</sup>. This conception of historical accuracy reaches other non-academics practices such as historical reenactment. Audrey Tuaille-Demésy highlighted that this activity which aim for a strict representation of the past defines itself by the foursquare refusal of an approximate approach<sup>1034</sup>. Therefore, it struggles with spectacular and fantastic visions of medieval period, as a sign of the binary opposition of memory's

<sup>1031</sup> Samuel RUFAT and Hovig TER MINASSIAN (eds.): *Les jeux vidéo comme objet de recherche*, Paris, Questions théoriques, 2011, pp. 6-7.

<sup>1032</sup> This neologism popularized by Umberto Eco in his 1986 essay *Dreaming of the Middle Ages* is commonly used to describe the intersection between popular fantasy and medieval history, as can be seen in cinematic and television productions, literature and more recently video games. In French it is equivalent to the concept of «*médiévalisme*» which refers to the projection into present time of an idealized Middle Ages. See: Vincent FERRÉ: «*Médiévalisme et théorie: pourquoi maintenant?*», *Itinéraires*, 3 (2010), pp. 7-25. / Tommaso DI CARPEGNA FALCONIERI: *Médiéval et militant, penser le contemporain à travers le Moyen Âge*, Paris, Publication de la Sorbonne, 2015.

<sup>1033</sup> «You will not find any dragons, half-naked Elven warriors, or wizards in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. At no point will you have to collect seven pieces of a legendary magic staff to defeat an ancient evil bent on destroying the world with an army of demons. We think there are enough such games out there». *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* project's page on Kickstarter.

<sup>1034</sup> Audrey TUAILLON-DEMÉSY: *La re-création du passé: enjeux identitaires et mémoriels. Approche socio-anthropologique de l'histoire vivante médiévale*, Besançon, Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2013, p. 23.

approach between historian and public -a widening gap yet foreshadowed by Maurice Halbwachs in 1950<sup>1035</sup>.

We also have to focus on indicators of historical accuracy on the *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* project as it has been written. On its first description, the aim of historical actuality is set under the concept of «realism»<sup>1036</sup> which is opposed to neo-medievalistic elements early described. Strangely enough, the original project never mentions the participation of historians as an endorsement to the project, although the assistance of Joanna Nowak, a qualified art historian, was required during the development. As developers announced themselves, the aim of the crowdfunding campaign wasn't to raise funds to finance their game's development but to prove the existence of an interest towards a game that focuses on magicless Middle Ages. They argued that players' response for historical video games has always been great, as demonstrated by the success of *Total War* (Creative Assembly, 2000-2017), *Mount and Blade*, *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010) and *Assassin's Creed* -although the quote of this last license seems kind of contradictory owing to esoteric elements at the source of its storyline. In order to illustrate their will of «realism», developers invited the potential players to think about their project as «*Braveheart: The Game*»<sup>1037</sup>. This particular choice seems awkward as the 1995 Mel Gibson's multiple awarded movie is not known for being an extremely historically accurate film<sup>1038</sup>. We may relate this reference to a general refusal of latest cinematic productions such as *The Lords of the Rings* or *Game of Thrones*, which certainly contributed to fix neo-medievalism imaginary into popular vision of Middle Ages. But *Braveheart* also focuses on an emphasis of mostly-unknown local history in which the developers of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* may have found an inspiration to highlight the Czech Republic's past.

In order to stand out, the claim of historical accuracy of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* also takes place on a general reaction against the evolution of video games. We can notice a reaction against the classic mechanics of role playing games, with a criticism of low-interest tasks such as «killing rats in the basement» -which can refer to *Skyrim* just as well as other RPGs- or an aversion of what gamers refer to as «FedEx quests», which simply consist to delivering an item to some non-playable character from point A to point B<sup>1039</sup>. A second critic takes place against the actuality of gaming, particularly against the development of massively-multiplayer online (MMO) games on mobile<sup>1040</sup>. Even if this reaction is branded with humour, it places the developers' project in a position of crusader against the general turn of gaming. Once again we can draw a parallel with the historical reenactment actors' will, as reenactors generally think their practice as a way to battle against stereotyped images of the Middle Ages, which forms a reaction against popular culture and mainly against public uses of History.

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<sup>1035</sup> Maurice HALBWACHS: *La mémoire collective*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1950.

<sup>1036</sup> «A first-person, open world, realistic RPG that will take you to Medieval Europe in a time of great upheaval and strife». *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* project's page on Kickstarter.

<sup>1037</sup> «So what is *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*? Think of it as *Braveheart: The Game*. Majestic castles, armored knights, large, open field battles, and political intrigue set in a vast, emergent world». *Ibid*.

<sup>1038</sup> Elizabeth Ewan describes it as a movie that «almost totally sacrifices historical accuracy for epic adventure». Elizabeth EWAN: «*Braveheart*», *American Historical review*, 100-4 (October 1995), pp. 1219-1221.

<sup>1039</sup> «Sick of killing rats in the basement? Or being treated like a messenger, transporting stuff from point A to point B? So are we! That's why our quests are different». *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* project's page on Kickstarter.

<sup>1040</sup> «Should our Kickstarter campaign fail, it will mean that we were wrong, that there is no interest to play a game with the atmosphere of *Braveheart*, and that we will have to start considering working on some mobile MMO, because that's where the money is these days (or so everybody tells us)». *Ibid*.

Beyond this historical «realism» aim, the medieval world pointed out by Warhorse Studios appears stripped of its fantastic elements but not its romantic ones. Thus, the different announcements give prominence to medieval times as a period of adventures and threats, violence and romance<sup>1041</sup>. The nonlinear story depicted as «epic» must allow players to wander an open-world as solve conflict in several stereotypical ways: «fighting as a knight, lurking in the shadows as a rogue, or using the bard's charm to persuade people». As a project, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* certainly trades fantasy for a more historical world but as a product it remains fitted out with romantic representations of Middle Ages destined to embrace a large audience.

Four years after the launch of project, this large audience was definitely reached. The crowdfunding campaign collected more than 1,2 million of Euros among 35 384 contributors. In the first week after its release on February 13<sup>th</sup> 2018, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* sold more than a million copies. On the second week, it was no.1 selling games in several European countries including Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and United Kingdom. This aim of Warhorse Studios turned out to be a successful wager. But did the claim of historical accuracy take a crucial part on this success or was it just an added-value on another role playing game among many? Regarding the historical-based content on *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft, 2012) and *Unity* (Ubisoft, 2014), Vincent Boutonnet noticed this diversification about the reception, as a part of players are simply not interested in historical content<sup>1042</sup>. On these issues, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* can likely provide some elements. Due to gameplay and graphics concerns, the game was criticized as an unfinished product released too soon to provide a quality gaming experience. Active players' community on discussion groups then clearly divided itself. Supporters of the historical aim of the game overlooked these technical matters while others described an unplayable game, with little consideration for the historical-accuracy effort. This schematic division between supporters of gameplay and supporters of background does remind the duality about academics' approaches: ludology and narratology.

As a result, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* remains an extremely classical first-person role-playing game. It doesn't revolutionize video games mechanics but it stands out by taking place in a medieval open-world riddled of fantastic elements. In a second part, we have to question the pros and cons of this virtual recreation of material aspect of a specific time.

### **The pros and cons virtual materiality**

*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* aims to offer players a chance to «take a trip through the Middle Ages»<sup>1043</sup>. This ambition relies on the creation of a playing environment made as historical as possible. Its consistency allows the player to assume a new identity, different from the one outside the game. This virtual space can be linked to the «magic circle» defined by Johan Huizinga to describe the play-ground of games, in which its rules can be applied<sup>1044</sup>. Through virtual

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<sup>1041</sup> «Play as a medieval investigator searching for a mass murderer, lay siege to a bandit fort with an army at your back, experience epic battles between armored knights, interrogate, bribe, threaten, love, help, fight...». *Ibid.*

<sup>1042</sup> Vincent BOUTONNET: «Jeux vidéos et interprétations historiques...», p. 140.

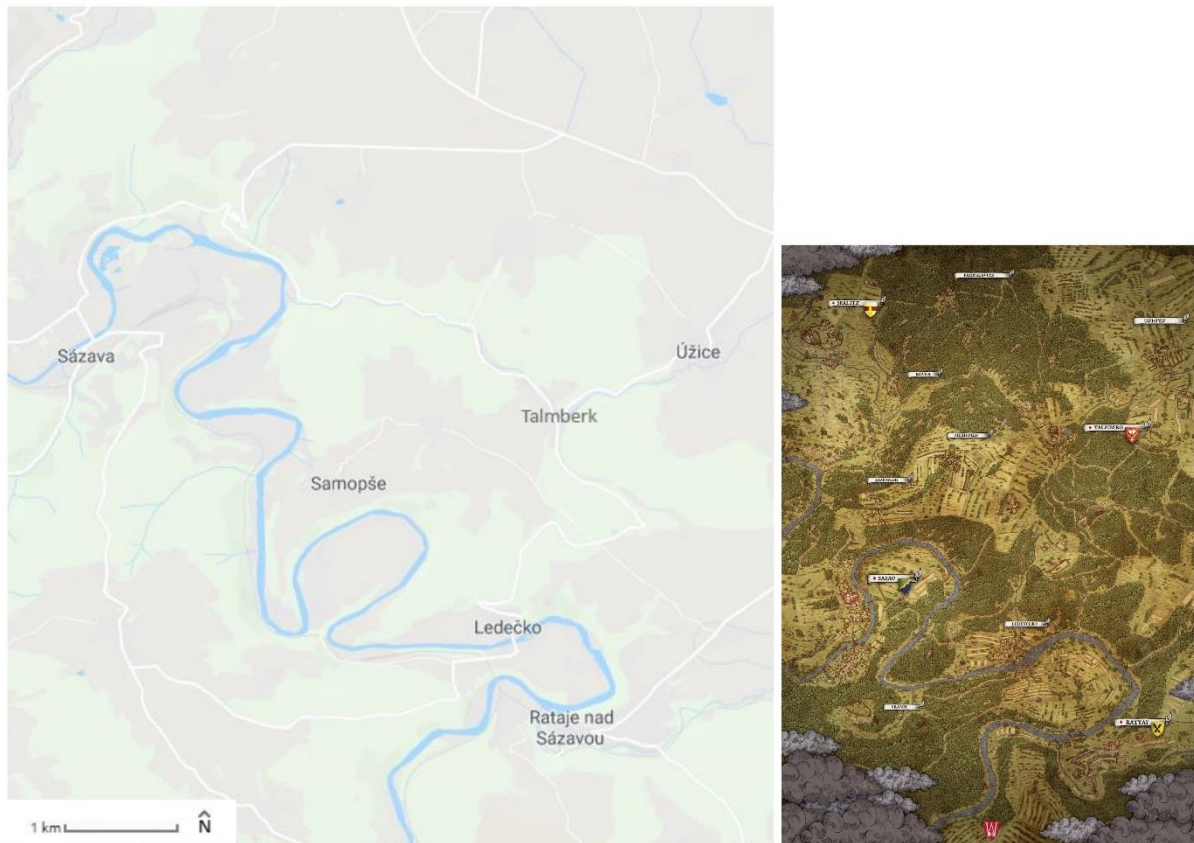
<sup>1043</sup> *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* project's page on Kickstarter.

<sup>1044</sup> Johan HUIZINGA: *Homo Ludens*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949, p. 10.



materiality, we intend to take a look at this «simulated environment»<sup>1045</sup> and its representations of historical space and material.

**Picture 2: Surroundings of Rataje nad Sázavou, Central Bohemia and their representations in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*'s playable environment**



(Source: Google Maps/Warhorse Studios)

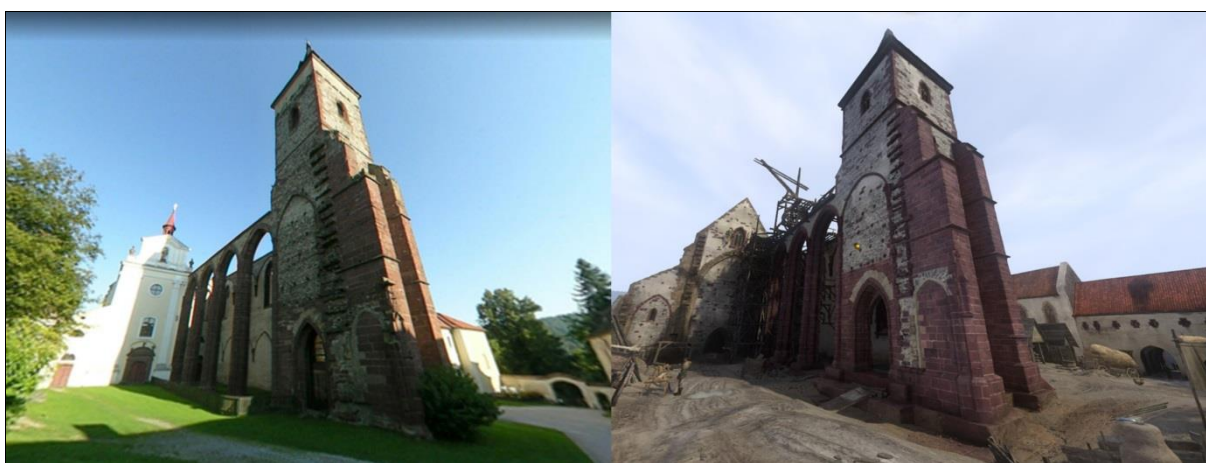
As Vincent Boutonnet noticed about the worlds of *Assassin's Creed* series, recent technologic developments allow previously unseen realistic virtual environments<sup>1046</sup>. It appears crucial to distinguish this incontestable illusion of realism from a historical accuracy of space's representation. The map of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is covering 16 square-kilometers, including forests, fields, villages and castles. Following their aim to create a historical experience, developers have been solicitous over the representation of real locations. Thus, the main place of the game, designated by its German name «Rattay», appears to be the fortified town of Rataje nad Sázavou, a marketplace situated in Central Bohemian region. Developers reproduced the actual elevation of this town along with its general organization around the main street and the particularity of its two castles. In a quite impressive way, the entire map of the game covers the

<sup>1045</sup> Samuel RUFAT and Hovig TER MINASSIAN: «Espace et jeu vidéo», in Samuel RUFAT and Hovig TER MINASSIAN (eds.): *Les jeux vidéo comme objet de recherche...*, pp. 77-103, esp. p. 97.

<sup>1046</sup> Vincent BOUTONNET: «Jeux vidéos et interprétations historiques...», p. 139.

surrounding region, not only by the representation of other settlements such as Talmberg (Talmberk), Uzice (Úžice), Ledetchko (Ledečko), Samopesh (Samopše) but on a general representation of height, wooded spaces and waterways. However, compromises have been necessary to adapt the environment to the gaming experience. As Esper Aarseth noticed, as realistic as it seems, video game portray space in a «deviation from reality in order to make the illusion playable»<sup>1047</sup>. For example, meanders of the Sázava river have been shortened, probably in order to get the town of Sasau (Sásava) closer. Furthermore, the northwest area of the map which contains the village of Skalitz (Stříbrná Skalice) is actually situated farther to the west. However, this virtual environment doesn't intend to represent an entire world, as often with video games based on historical background which provide allegories of an entire kingdom, with different landscapes and atmospheres restricted on several square-kilometers. Instead, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* depicts a very local narrative space with accurate distances based on real locations.

**Picture 3: The left tower of the Sasau Monastery and its representation in the game**



(Source: Google Maps/Warhorse Studios)

Beyond landscapes and general organization of space, the real environment issue concerns the «reconstruction» of buildings. It turns out to be difficult to know the exact process followed by the developers and which elements they may have used to create the virtual reconstruction of XV<sup>th</sup> century buildings. As game's developers admitted, this task appealed «interpretations from various sources», using «data from preserved document, *pictures of the exact era and consultation with historians and experts who work in museums*»<sup>1048</sup>. For example, the two castles situated in Rattay were entirely virtually reconstructed. As some remains of the southern one, the Pirkštejn castle, does show the fidelity of the developers work to the global building, the northern one was since totally reworked through Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque movements. In this case its «reconstruction» is a general interpretation of a medieval castle from the Kingdom of Bohemia.

<sup>1047</sup> Esper AARSTEH: «Allegories of Space: the question of spatiality in computer games», in Markku ESKELINEN and Raine KOSKIMAA (eds.): *Cybertext Yearbook 2000*, Jyväskylä, University of Jyväskylä, 2001, pp. 152-169, esp. p. 163.

<sup>1048</sup> «Warhorse Studios Weekly Torch» on *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* official forum, posted on January 12, 2016, <https://forum.kingdomcomerpg.com/t/warhorse-studios-weekly-torch/29593/26>, consulted on April 12, 2018.

The tower of the Sasau monastery is another interesting example. This Benedictine abbey founded on the site of hermitage of Saint Procopius in 1032 is one of the most important and iconic place of the game. During the XIV<sup>th</sup> century, the Romanesque basilica was transformed into a Gothic building, intended as a monumental three-nave structure. As Sasau was sacked by Hussite troops in 1421, the building activity was interrupted and the monastery fell into decay over the following two centuries. Today, the most notable remain from this period is the left tower of the projected three-nave structure. As *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* takes place in 1403, developers have chosen to represent the monastery under construction. Thus only the iconic still-existent left tower is represented while the rest of the abbey is being built. In a general way, developers intended to use at maximum the iconic remains and information at their disposal, before building an interpretation in an esthetic scheme from late XIV<sup>th</sup> century. Beyond those iconic places, the virtual environment has to be filled with more modest settlements.

Of course, it was impossible then to produce an entire 16 kilometers-square world based on archaeological evidences. In a large part, it seems that developers filled their world by «turning medieval» the present organization of buildings. Once again it appears more of an esthetic inspiration of known buildings and techniques from this period. Thus this systematic «medievalization» of space is based on a lot of serial houses and barns. Despite of minor variations and mirror effect, those buildings look actually the same on each places of the virtual world. Due to the lack of information on a large-scale and the limitation of time and means of such a game project, every house couldn't be designed as a different and specific building. Regarding the references of ancient period on videogames environment, André Laury-Nuria and Sophie Lécole-Solnychkine highlighted that the first impression of «junk-mythology» and general historical confusion remains in a gathering of different references to antic world<sup>1049</sup>. To draw a parallel, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance's* world cannot be considered as a «junk-medieval» environment. Despite of the previous elements, it doesn't gather general medieval references at any cost and remains consistent on a Late Middle Ages' esthetic and on logical hierarchy between landscapes and settlements, with references to local and iconic buildings.

Without precisely knowing the sources of developers' information, it does appear difficult to go further on this primary analysis. Such a task would require an extremely precise knowledge on Eastern Europe buildings' archaeology and an open access to Warhorse Studios process of creation. Nevertheless, the possibilities of the virtual world of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* invites once again to draw a parallel with historical reenactment. Indeed, its material representation most often interferes with contemporary environment. When it takes place on the inside of actual medieval buildings -castles and abbeys mostly- these places were largely reworked over time and form more iconic indicators of medieval times than real places to reenact. Alternatives do exist with reconstruction of medieval environment such as the *Middlealdercenter* in Nykøbing Falster (Denmark) but it remains confined spaces isolated from their global surroundings. Then both reenactors and visitors are confined in spaces without a «historic horizon» to look at to stimulate their immersion. Even though it is flawed, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance's* environment allows players to consider a global medieval environment, without contemporary elements limiting this immersion. As Axel Stockburger noticed it in an adaptation of Roger Caillois theorization of

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<sup>1049</sup> Laury-Nuria ANDRE and Sophie LECOLE-SOLNYCHKINE: «La référence à l'antique dans les jeux vidéo: paysages et structures mythologiques», in Samuel RUFAT and Hovig TER MINASSIAN (eds.): *Les jeux vidéo comme objet de recherche...*, pp. 104-122, esp. p. 117.

games<sup>1050</sup>, video games' environment allows the player to act «as if» this second fictional reality were a constructed and logic simulation of a real world<sup>1051</sup>. On the opposite of real life's historical reenactment's possibilities, we may wonder if video games may be able to reach Jules Michelet's dream of a «total resurrection of the past».

The aim of simulation of a historically accurate narrative environment goes further than landscapes and buildings. In the perspective of material culture, a genuine reenactment has to represent both the objects of the everyday life back in 1403 and their uses in accordance with social levels. In a general way, the material reconstruction follows the problematic of the global environment reconstruction. Playable items such as costumes, armors and weapons point out a meticulous work, based on museum artifacts and iconographic representations. However, all reconstructed objects don't exactly match with the specifics date and location of the game. Interviewed before the release of the game, the Warhorse Studios' in-house historical consultant Joanna Nowak admitted that the developers aims wasn't to portray exactly the year 1403 but rather «to focus on making an accurate feeling of medieval times»<sup>1052</sup>. Thus, the material context of the *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* widely fits in with Eastern-European archeological context on an approximate 40 years range around year 1400. However the game's attention to detail is still remarkable, especially when we step back and compare it to other recent Middle Ages based games such as *For Honor* (Ubisoft, 2017) which provided a totally fantasist vision of medieval period based on European chivalry, «Vikings» and Japanese warriors. To go further, we can regret that the game only represents three levels of material wealth based on schematics social levels: nobility, town's bourgeoisie and lower-class peasants. In a procedural way, these three different levels match with different generic material environments. Then we can express the same remarks as we already did regarding the multiplication of serial houses. As other activities which aim to represent a historical environment, video game has to «fill in the blanks» of History. As historical reenactment, the «resurrection of the past» remains an interpretation process and choices have to be made in a most accurate way possible, based on evidence at disposal.

We may question the specificity of virtual materiality into the aim of historical accuracy. Compared to real life's reenactment, video gaming reconstructions benefit from infinite possibilities of representation. Especially, the entire project depends only of a handful of developers able to control the content, in this case the material representation. It can avoid one of the main issues of historical reenactment: the wide extent of the practice which goes with different degrees of qualities and acceptation of relative material accuracy. Historical reenactment appears as a «plural practice»<sup>1053</sup>: some groups restrain their activities to a strict range of time and localization while others represent a period based on entire European archeological context. On the one hand, Warhorse Studios has been able to control the global coherence of its game environment, which seems impossible into reenactors' scale. On the other hand, the reconstruction

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<sup>1050</sup> Roger CAILLOIS: *Man, Play and Games*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1961, p. 10.

<sup>1051</sup> Axel STOCKBURGER: *The Rendered Arena. Modalities of space in video and computer games*, Thesis Phd, University of the Arts of London, 2006, p. 34.

<sup>1052</sup> «The idea of the designers is not to give you *exactly* what was in 1403. Rather, we focus on making an accurate feeling of medieval times. You can find a weapon [in the game] that was maybe a little too old or too new, but it gives you the feeling that it's the Middle Ages». Joanna Nowak interviewed by Andrey Webster for *The Verge*: «*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is an RPG that trades fantasy for historical accuracy», published online on February 2, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/2/16964080/kingdom-come-deliverance-history-rpg-ps4-xbox-pc>, consulted on April 14, 2018.

<sup>1053</sup> Audrey TUAILLON-DEMÉSY: *La re-création du passé...*, p. 57.

of the historical material is obviously limited by its inherent virtuality. Objects represented in *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* are restricted to a visual representation as they are untied from the physical characteristics of original artifacts. For example, weapons and armors -main items in a game focusing on a «wannabe» knight- are transcribed into statistics elements that Kara Lynn Andersen defines as «a chunk of code that gives [them] characteristics that control how [they] behaves in the game»<sup>1054</sup>. To sum up, virtual materiality cannot bring a physical and feeling perception of objects as real life reenactment is able to by allowing both reenactors and visitors to feel and test reconstructed artifacts. This acknowledgment and the aims of historical accuracy of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* must be linked to the limits of virtual materiality into the museum world, known as Virtual Heritage. Yet summarized by Alonzo Addison<sup>1055</sup> in 2000, these issues were recently adapted to interactive learning games based on History by Erik Champion<sup>1056</sup>.

However Warhorse Studios has attempted to simulate this perception through the gameplay, especially regarding swordplay. Depending on the type and number of enemies faced by the player, he has to choose an adapted weapon. Then a sword appears as a deadly weapon against common underequipped opponents but it turns out to be quite inefficient in front of a full-plate armored enemy. On the opposite, using a war hammer seems a good way to counter armored opponent but leaves the player quite vulnerable to quick attacks. These pre-defined characteristics come with a system of combat based on movements and skills. This first-person melee combat system, which developers described as the «most challenging feature of the game»<sup>1057</sup> intend to mix intuitive control of the weapon with sufficient variety of moves. Thus, a well executed sword «combo» is able to break through enemy's defense and reach the weak spot of plate armor, as the helmet's visor or the defenseless armpit. This entire system shows an interesting relation with skills. Depending on the abilities of his character such as strength or rapidity and his general habit of the different weapon, the player can learn new movements with different instructors. On the player's side, the search for a better protection reduces the potential weak spots but makes movement slower or more limited. For example, wearing a face-protecting helmet increases the defense of the head but reduces the field of vision by adding a simulated vision filter on the player's screen.

**Picture 4: Wearing a face-protecting helmet reduces the player's vision**



(Source: Warhorse Studios)

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<sup>1054</sup> Kara Lynn ANDERSEN: *Immaterial Materiality: Collecting in Live-Action Film, Animation, and Digital Games*, Thesis Phd, University of Pittsburgh, 2009, p. 153.

<sup>1055</sup> Alonzo ADDISON: «Emerging Trends in Virtual Heritage», *IEEE Multimedia*, 7 (2000), pp. 22-25.

<sup>1056</sup> Erik CHAMPION: «Game-based History and Historical Simulations», in Erik CHAMPION: *Critical Gaming: Interactive History And Virtual Heritage*, London, Ashgate Publishing, 2015, pp. 75-92.

<sup>1057</sup> *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* project's page on Kickstarter.

With an interesting degree of real-time physics and inverse kinematics, this system intends to demonstrate the pros and cons of the different weapons featured in the game and aims to be as authentic as possible. As medieval combat specialist Daniel Jaquet granted it on an interview after the game's release, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance's* developers show a real understanding on combat techniques based on the thrust even if they have made concessions regarding the close combat movement and the extend of combat techniques<sup>1058</sup>. As a matter of fact, developers based the different gestures on actual fencing techniques written on Late Middle Ages, such as the works of the German Johannes Liechtenauer, and actually interpreted through HEMA (Historical European martial arts). Both physical and cultural practice, HEMA focuses on traditional forms of combat based on surviving documentation and their interpretation. Promotional making-of videos intended to demonstrate the connection Warhorse Studios forged with «martial art experts», showing that the development of this game is once again closely tied to historical reenactment, as Audrey Tuaille-Demésy refers at these two practices as «two sides of the same coin»<sup>1059</sup>. In the case of constraining conditions which could push reenactors beyond their body limits, Vanessa Agnew pointed out the theory of a «state of complete absorption in the reenacted event»<sup>1060</sup>. This «period rush», as Agnew referred to, can be applied to reenactment of large scale battles where reenactors' skills overtake the real life situation. Regarding virtual combat system, philosopher Pascal Garandel asserted that player substitutes real skills with technical skills (applied into game controller) which appeal to the same aggressive drives in the reception/action process<sup>1061</sup>. To draw a parallel, we may ask ourselves if the virtual combat system of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* could provide a similar sensation of immersion.

This combats system relying on historical sources is an interesting example of crossover between virtual materiality and real-life experimentation of gesture. However, the rest of the game doesn't feature such an advanced attempt. Even if the original project described a crafting system based on medieval techniques, such as blacksmithing, the final craft system only happens in game's menus, without trying to represent accurate crafting procedures. Once again *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* remains a game and its gameplay focuses on medieval romantic representations such as combat. This positioning may also be revealed regarding to the opposite of virtual materiality, that is the reconstruction of intangible elements essentials to simulate a living and immersive accurate medieval open-world.

### Reading the past: The simulation of intangible

As Marc-André Ethier and David Lefrançois noticed regarding the criticism of historical movies, historians produce interpretation of the past based on «investigations and doubts»<sup>1062</sup>. If

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<sup>1058</sup> Daniel Jaquet interviewed by Patxi Berhouet for *La Croix*: «Kingdom Come: Deliverance: le jeu est-il fidèle à la Bohême du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle?», published online on February 19, 2018, <https://www.la-croix.com/Culture/Kingdom-Come-Deliverance-jeu-est-fidele-Boheme-XVe-siecle-2018-02-19-1200914905>, consulted on April 14, 2018.

<sup>1059</sup> Audrey TUAILLON-DEMÉSY: *La re-création du passé...*, p. 13.

<sup>1060</sup> Vanessa AGNEW: «What is Reenactment?», *Criticism*, 46 (2004), pp. 327-339, esp. p. 330.

<sup>1061</sup> Pascal GARANDEL: «Malaise dans Civilization. Jeux vidéo, psychanalyse et sublimation», in Samuel RUFAT and Hovig TER MINASSIAN (eds.): *Les jeux vidéo comme objet de recherche...*, pp. 149-175, esp. p. 158.

<sup>1062</sup> Marc-André ÉTHIER and David LEFRANÇOIS: «État de la recherche sur la pensée historique et la critique historique des films de fiction» in Marc-André ÉTHIER, David LEFRANÇOIS and François AUDIGIER (eds.): *Pensée critique, enseignement de l'histoire...*, pp. 109-116, esp. p. 112.

cinematographic productions aims to represent past times «as they were», they have to read into academics works and mostly fill the blanks to produce a narrative environment. In the best case scenario, this interpretation is supported by academics themselves. However, as Alan S. Marcus highlighted, the processes involves a «creative leaps necessary to tell any historical narrative in which documentation is sketchy» making that «films based in history are inevitably a blend of historical record fiction, and a filmmaker's perspective»<sup>1063</sup>. As movies only represent a windowed view in which the spectators are passive, video games have to build an entire world in which players can take an interactive part. In our case, we previously saw that this «blanks' filling» applies to material reconstruction with limitation due to the virtual materiality's issues. It also applies to the simulation of intangible necessary to make *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*'s world coming alive. More than ever, the will to simulate intangible matters draws a parallel with historical reenactment and its questioning, especially regarding spoken language, religion or even human groups representations.

Language appears as a crucial point of immersion but it does experience many difficulties. First, past languages are only accessible by written sources, mostly produced by elites regarding Middle Ages. It turns out to be difficult, even impossible, to simulate orality through literacy of what some refer as «a Silent Age»<sup>1064</sup>. Second, while printing wasn't even close to start standardization of spoken language, those ones on year 1403 into the East of the Holy Roman Empire must been a blend of old Czech, Germans and West Slavic languages. Finally, a Role-Playing Game such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* involves lots of conversations between different historical characters. This includes interactions between the hero -Henry- and higher or lower social-level characters, which should respect social codes and propriety hard to access. If we take a look into historical reenactment practices, there is a divergence between reenactors who consider that reenactment is strictly limited to material issue and those who try to embody characters from the past through language. However, these attempts are often limited. By considering the differences between written sources and oral forms of languages, it appears unlikely possible to unthinkingly speak as a character from the XV<sup>th</sup> century. In front of these difficulties, Warhorse Studios' developers avoided neo-medievalist language and choose to modernize the dialogues. These ones were then entirely recorded in modern English, with a few Czech implements, notably regarding swear words such as «kurva», equivalent to the «F word» in several East European languages. This choice has to be considered as one of the major concessions to historical accuracy. However, developers couldn't avoid the issues of interactions between different social level characters. In an interesting way, they turn it to a sort of challenge for players. Those ones have sometimes to choose the right dialogue between Henry and another character according to their social relation. In a more interesting link to material representation, the outfit of the hero can have an effect on the result by increasing or decreasing its charisma abilities. If Henry speaks to a peasant, the player can choose a more direct way to obtain information, especially if he is armed or stand in plate-armor. Interactions with noblemen have to be more respectful and a dirty outfit may decrease Henry's charisma. An aggressive approach even may even conduct the player to spend several nights in prison. As all conversations are already written, this system is limited and sometimes very

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<sup>1063</sup> Alan S. MARCUS: «It is as it was», *The Social Studies*, 96-2 (2005), pp. 61-67, esp. p. 61.

<sup>1064</sup> Alaric HALL: «The Orality of a Silent Age: the place of orality in Medieval Studies», in Marko LAMBERG *et al.* (coords): *Methods and the Medievalist: Current Approaches in Medieval Studies*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 270-290.

stereotypical. However, it does show an interesting will to represent social indicators and interactions by turning it to an element of the gameplay.

**Picture 5: Depending on its abilities, the player may choose several dialogue approaches**



(Source: Warhorse Studios)

As we said, religion representations also prove to be a particular issue in order to simulate a consistent medieval environment. Regarding historical reenactment, religion -and especially Christianity- is under-represented. Although spiritual issues can't be avoided to evoke everyday life during medieval times, living history merely approach religion belief and practices. For that matter, Audrey Tuaille-Demésy noticed that clergy is rarely embodied by reenactors<sup>1065</sup>. When this happens, we can add that men of the cloth are rarely depicted beyond a satirical depiction. In an interesting way, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* follows the same pattern. While developers aim to provide an everyday life simulation on year 1403, we can only notice that religion doesn't take an important part into the game mechanics. Henry doesn't have to prey daily or even to cross himself when entering a church. Although the «physical needs» of the character (hunger, tiredness...) have to be considered by the player, spiritual ones are absent. The clergy is also relatively absent into Henry's journey. When men of the cloth are depicted, the game shows them as deviant or concupiscent. For example, one of the first quests of the game -entitled «*mysterious ways*»- leads Henry to meet the father Godwin, the parish priest of Uzice. In order to get information from the priest, the player has to join him into the tavern in the evening and inciting him to drink again and again. A certain choice of dialogue and actions conduces to a binge night with father Godwin, ending in an explicit debauchery including Henry, the priest and two waitresses. Due to its unexpected ending, this quest was particularly popular on the few weeks following the game's release. Later into the game, the player can learn more about the past of Godwin, suggesting this one was born as an aristocrat before its entry to God's service. There is no doubt that such deviant characters did exist, but it seems unfortunate that this meeting is the first contact of the player with religion in the game.

<sup>1065</sup> Audrey TUAILLON-DEMÉSY: *La re-création du passé...*, p. 96.



Another quest must be notified. During this one titled «*A needle in a haystack*» Henry tracks a fugitive hidden in the Sasau Monastery. In order to kill him or to bring him to justice, the player has to infiltrate the community of Benedictine monks and live their everyday life. If he doesn't want to be uncovered, the player has then to participate to the morning and evening prayers, to work in the alchemist workshop or the scriptorium, and to share common meals. At the same time, he must investigate to find his target without getting caught if he venture to forbidden places or doesn't respect the brothers' schedule. Of course allowances of monk's everyday life have been made in order to increase the accessibility of the game and make it more playable. Plus number of monks will reveal themselves as corruptible or deviant. Nevertheless, this particular section of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* shows the will of developers to depict a medieval world beyond commonplaces, even if religion matters seem biased.

This particular representation of religion content must finally lead us to an extended analysis about the writing of History through video games. As cultural products, video games are reflections of our modern societies. As Yvan Hochet noticed, they demonstrate ideological views and the priority accorded to the gameplay mustn't hide these first representations<sup>1066</sup>. As historical reenactment which may be guided by political views<sup>1067</sup>, historical video games must feed an epistemological consideration about the representation of the past. Two years before it was released, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* was subject to critics and accused of racism by different media. As a matter of fact, the game only features white population while there is some evidence of Moors in that region at the beginning of the XV<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, the game itself is only covering 16 square-kilometers and their absence seems historically logical. However, the controversial statements of game director Daniel Vávra appear problematic, as he was affiliated to the *Gamergate* controversy, a movement which criticized cultural diversification in video games and media censorship back in 2014. Whereas this allegations are well-founded or not, the game does frequently depict foreigners as negative characters. The most obvious example is the depiction of Cumans, a Turkic nomadic group from Cumania, as murderers and savages in King Sigismund's pay. Other foreign peoples like Hungarians and Germans don't fare much better. On the other hand, the game may be considered as showing an uncompromising view of racism during Middle Ages, which is an interesting but dangerous historical topic to feature in a cultural product.

## Conclusion

*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* turns out to be an interesting project for historians. Its aim of historical accuracy makes it an oddity among mainstream video gaming productions and allowed us to draw a parallel with historical reenactment as another public use of History aiming for accuracy. As this activity, the game built its identity on opposition of general public image of medieval period carried by neo-medievalism phenomenon. Still, it does remain a very romantic incursion into Middle Ages focusing on knight's bravery and war's horror. The parallel doesn't

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<sup>1066</sup> Yvan HOCHET: «Jeux vidéo et enseignement de l'histoire et de la géographie», in Samuel RUFAT and Hovig TER MINASSIAN (eds.): *Les jeux vidéo comme objet de recherche...*, pp. 123-134, esp. pp. 123-124.

<sup>1067</sup> Martin BOSTAL: «Évoquer le passé pour contester le présent: discours politiques et identitaires à travers la reconstitution historique du Moyen Âge», in *Événements contestataires et mobilisations collectives en Normandie, du Moyen Âge au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, Actes du 51<sup>e</sup> Congrès des Sociétés Historiques et Archéologiques de Normandie*, Louviers, FSHAN, 2017, pp. 251-260.

stop at this aim. The construction of a consistent simulated medieval environment shows interesting decisions, including the representation of iconic places into a space based on real surroundings. Even if this project appeals to interpretation and features a lot of generic buildings, it is likely to offer an immersion impossible to implement by real life reenactment. As concrete reconstructed environments, the virtual environment regards representation of materiality with an admitted wide range of the archeological context and resorting to generic objects in order to «fill the blanks» of History. Nevertheless, the combat system proves to be an interesting way to demonstrate historical characteristics of weapons, based on interpretation of written evidences. Developers also had to make compromises regarding intangible matters essential to provide immersion. Although it remains stereotyped, interactions between characters sometimes show an approach of relation based on an interpretation of social convention. However other depicted elements such as religion or foreigners depend on developer's options. It certainly demonstrates the subjectivity to provide a total interpretation of a past time and reaches once again the problematic of historical reenactment -and widely of historical studies by confronting its uncertainty.

Is *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* a «History lesson pounded with sword swipes»<sup>1068</sup> as some media described it? At the end of the day, it is above all a game about Czech history. Beyond its medieval background, the events depicted bring to light a mostly unknown national history, a very «personal» project according to different Warhorse Studios' developers. But *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* does remain a game. This involves compromises to its gameplay and a certain interpretation of History. However, considering its success, it is assured that it will preserve its identity of the most accurate game based on medieval period. Historians can be pleased that aiming for historical accuracy, even with flaws, does emerge into mass-consumption industry such as video gaming. They don't have to dub such a production, neither are they bound to criticize it at any cost. But as historical reenactment, they have to take it into account as a public use of History and as a new way to summon and interrogate past times, events, artifacts and men.

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<sup>1068</sup> «Une leçon d'histoire assénée à coups d'épées». Jean-François Morisse for *20Minutes*: «Kingdom Come Deliverance: Le Moyen Âge cruel et hyper-réaliste, comme si vous y étiez», published online on February 13, 2018, <https://www.20minutes.fr/culture/2219435-20180213-video-kingdom-come-delivrance-moyen-age-cruel-hyper-realiste-comme-si>, consulted on April 10, 2018.