January 2018

Video Game Review: Kingdom Come Deliverance

Eric Lowe
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol11/iss1/20

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.
Video Game Review: Kingdom Come Deliverance

By Eric Lowe

Since the early 1970s, video games have presented a unique form of entertainment by allowing people to step out of their daily lives and into the worlds of the games they play. The Magnavox Odyssey, which was the first home gaming console, brought such activities as playing table tennis to the television screens of families across America. It became so popular that the developer Atari blatantly stole the game’s idea and rebranded it as the coin-operated arcade game Pong.\(^1\) Admittedly, the rudimentary black and white interface that comprised the game hardly stood a chance of emulating the excitement of an authentic game of ping-pong, but it was a major feat of entertainment considering the technology available in 1972.

Forty-six years later, the video game industry can proudly boast that the entertainment value of its products has grown in tandem with the technology they employ. The comparatively primitive gameplay of Pong has today been succeeded by that of games featuring vast and meticulously designed worlds spanning areas as large as fifty square miles.\(^2\) Sports games like the popular FIFA soccer and Madden football series, which used to feature only a small handful of real-life players, teams, and stadiums, are now capable of photo-realistic reproduction of nearly every aspect of the sport which they mimic. Furthermore, games are no longer confined to the imitation of just one real-life activity, as was once the norm dictated by early technology. For instance, developer Rockstar’s 2013 release Grand Theft Auto: V included full-fledged simulations of street racing, golfing, and tennis, all of which were merely additions to the game’s central third-person shooter mechanics. More than ever before, video games today have the ability to deliver an experience that transcends basic amusement or distraction.

One potential aspect of that transcendent experience is the ability of games to educate their audiences, either as the expressed purpose of a game or as an incidental effect. In terms of education as a primary purpose within video games, there is emerging research that examines the ways in which they can supplement the developmental progress of children. Experts at Stanford University have discussed the possibility of utilizing familiar gaming conventions, such as earning points, badges, rewards, etc., as a tool for educators to gauge a student’s motivations, as well as their need for interaction and self-expression in the classroom. However, the widespread implementation of video games as a primary instructional apparatus has yet to come to fruition.

More commonly, educational contributions from games often occur as an inadvertent byproduct of the entertainment experience. Many games feature settings and plots that are derived from the real world, often relying on specific periods of history as a basis. As a result, players are immersed in historical context throughout the process of completing the game. Notable examples of this phenomenon include the *Call of Duty* and *Assassin’s Creed* franchises. The former is a series known for its gritty depictions of World War II infantry combat, with players storming the beaches of Normandy or capturing the island of Iwo Jima. The latter franchise features open-world sandbox-style adventures in which the player assumes the role of a master assassin, murdering their way through such locales as Ancient Egypt, Renaissance Italy, or Victorian London—to name a few. Despite the informative potential of these enticing settings, however, any historical accounts included typically remain secondary to gameplay mechanics centered on exploration, survival, hack-n-slash action, or shooting.

What would happen, then, if history was a primary focus within a video game? What if every aspect of the game—the

---


4 This variety of game design drops the player’s character within a large, unrestricted game world and allows the player to explore that world in whatever fashion they desire. This has been an increasingly common design through which developers have been able to generate more engaging settings and compelling storylines.
gameplay, plot, characters, and setting—were created with historical accuracy in mind? Is it possible for a video game to serve as both a form of entertainment and as a secondary historical source? Czech developer Warhorse Studios has provided perhaps the most compelling example of such a game: 2018’s *Kingdom Come: Deliverance (KCD)*. This game is a first-person, action/adventure role-playing (RPG) experience set in fifteenth-century Bohemia, what is known today as the Czech Republic. Warhorse has taken extensive measures to ensure that the medieval Bohemian setting is more than a mere engine to propel the game’s plot. They have emphasized historical accuracy as the main feature of *Kingdom Come*, offering players a thoroughly immersive game that is careful not to leave out even the most mundane details of life in 1403. It took a 120-person team over seven years to create the final product, compared to the industry average of a two or three-year development cycle. The primary question surrounding the project is whether or not the game will be worth the rather substantial time and effort that went into making it. Moreover, will players enjoy a game that has been designed with such care for history, perhaps at the cost of entertainment? If so, how effectively can a video game explain history? These are the questions that I had in mind as I began playing *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*.

The game wastes no time in introducing the player to the history of Bohemia in the year 1403. As the opening menu loads, an illustrated narrative explains that Wenceslas IV, son of Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, had taken the crown following the death of his revered father. Unfortunately, Wenceslas did not share his father’s passion for ruling. Instead he spends his time and vast wealth on more frivolous pursuits. The king’s half-brother, Sigismund of Luxembourg, took advantage of his sibling’s lack of attention to matters of state by abducting Wenceslas and seizing power for himself. Sigismund’s armies ravaged Bohemia, attacking any lord who remained loyal to the deposed Wenceslas. This moment in

---

5 First-person games feature a “camera” designed to mimic the character’s field of vision, as opposed to a third-person perspective where the camera is floating behind the character.

Czech/Bohemian history, as *KCD*’s introduction concludes, is where the protagonist’s story begins.

The player’s assumes the role of Henry, a son of a blacksmith, who lives in the small town of Skalitz. The game’s prologue follows Henry as he goes about his day-to-day business, and on this particular day he is assisting his father in forging and presenting a sword to the local Lord Radzig of Kobyla. However, this endeavor is interrupted when a massive army attacks the town, slaughtering anyone who does not flee. Sigismund’s army, which is comprised of both Bohemian soldiers and Turkic mercenaries known as Cumans, razes Skalitz to the ground and kills Henry’s parents before his very eyes. Left with the option of either dying with his family or fleeing for his life, Henry takes flight and escapes to the neighboring fiefdom of Talmberg, carrying only Radzig’s sword and the clothes on his back. A few days later, he attempts to return to Skalitz in order to give his parents a proper Catholic burial. When the player reaches the abandoned village, they are set upon by bandits, who effortlessly defeat Henry in combat and steal Lord Radzig’s sword. Left for dead, Henry is saved by a young woman who brings him back to a local city and nurses him back to health. This is the backdrop against which the game’s prologue ends and the story begins in earnest.

In terms of immersion into the world of 1403 Bohemia, *KCD*’s introduction serves to illustrate a few notable characteristics of medieval society. First of all, the size of Henry’s world is incredibly small when compared to modern standards. The village surrounding the castle of Skalitz is all that Henry truly knows, only having heard of cities such as Prague, Kuttenberg, or Rattay (which are all located within 20 miles of his hometown) through the stories of his father and other villagers. In the late medieval period, travelling long distances was made difficult by a multitude of factors, including the availability of livestock (a horse or a mule to carry heavy loads), the lack of preserved food, and economic inability to devote time to travel. Henry’s geographical naivety is compounded by the fact that he cannot read; the son of a village blacksmith would not have needed such an education, nor would he have had time to learn. An average citizen living in the

---

7 When describing the narrative of a role-playing video game, the player and the character they control become one entity. In this paper, I use both “Henry” and “the player” when discussing the main character’s actions/objectives.
Middle Ages would have remained mostly within the confines of their fiefdom—typically no larger than a three square-mile plot of land—serving their community in whatever capacity their occupation allowed for. The only notable exceptions to this trend are situations in which violence forced people to move (as in Henry’s case), or in the case of religious pilgrimages.\footnote{Paul B. Newman, \textit{Daily Life in the Middle Ages}, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2001), 186.} Subsistence farmers would simply work the land that they lived on, while a town blacksmith (as opposed to a member of an urban trade guild) would attend to the basic metallurgical needs of the manor and its lords.

The manor system was the dominant economic institution within the medieval social order, and many of \textit{KCD}’s plotlines and mechanics were designed around it. Historically, the relationship between noble and serf was based in both economic practicality and social construction, as Henry comes to learn during his experiences. The nobility was the educated warrior class of medieval European society, and ordinary serfs comprised the producer class. Clergymen, who were often non-firstborn men of noble birth, held the separate role of maintaining the spiritual and social welfare of society through the operation of the Catholic church. This tripartite social order—consisting of those who fight, those who work, and those who pray—allowed for efficiency within all three groups; high-born children could receive an education and complete seminary or military training only because they did not need to learn how to grow crops, tend cattle, or smith horseshoes. Likewise, the working class of serfs could not be held responsible for the military or religious preservation of their society, as this would necessarily prevent them from producing the consumer goods needed to maintain their survival.\footnote{Clifford R. Backman, \textit{The Worlds of Medieval Europe} (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 2003), 333-336.} Henry’s mother sternly chastises him when she discovers that he has been “learning swordplay,” an activity that she clearly considers unbefitting of a blacksmith’s son. Henry’s father similarly warns him that he has plenty to do in a day without trying to learn the art of warfare, reflecting the overarching sentimentality within the feudal manor system: the division of labor between nobles, the
clergy, and serfs was necessary for the effective economic operation of medieval society.10

While the game’s prologue is fairly restrictive in terms of what sorts of activities the player can engage in, those restrictions are removed once Henry wakes up in the town of Rattay. Having recovered from his near-fatal encounter with the bandits who stole Sir Radzig’s sword, Henry sets out to fulfill his duty to his lord and avenge the death of his family. This broadly serves as the game’s overarching storyline, prompting the player to find and return the stolen sword, then kill the man responsible for the attack on Skalitz. The player is free to roam the Bohemian countryside as they see fit, but given Henry’s status as a penniless refugee, he must rely on the assistance of those who have the power to help him. The fastest way to attain the weapons, armor, and (most importantly) experience necessary to avenge the deaths of his parents is to formally enter the service of Lord Radzig and the other nobles of the region, transitioning from one who works to one who fights. Attempting to carry out his mission alone would almost certainly result in death, either by sword or starvation.

This is where Kingdom Come’s historical fixation truly comes into its own—when its realism and accuracy challenge the norms of the genre. In many popular fantasy RPGs, particularly the most recent entries in the Elder Scrolls or Witcher series, the player is encouraged to approach the game in whatever fashion they see fit. Those who wish to fight their way through the game are given the necessary equipment and skill from the start, with greatly overpowered abilities granted through rapid leveling; those who prefer the economic route to the top can immediately begin selling items that can be found throughout the game world, amassing enormous wealth within just a few hours of gameplay. Game mechanics are typically weighted in the player’s favor, allowing them to comfortably and quickly complete quests and progress through the game—at the cost of realism. KCD’s design philosophy is quite the opposite, and it is made clear from the outset that Henry is not yet readily equipped to accomplish his mission. In fifteenth-century Europe, an orphaned peasant-turned-warrior would need training, assistance, and experience in order to succeed, and the game adheres to this reality as often as possible.

Combat is simultaneously the most rewarding and frustrating aspect of *KCD*, as it demands from the player a nuanced balance of technique, preparation, and practice to master. During the first few hours of gameplay I was itching to try my hand at swordplay, having finally found a weapon to call my own. I ventured into the nearby forest in search of bandits to cut down, only to be minced to pieces by a duo of moderately-equipped ne'er-do-wells whose lunch I had apparently interrupted. Upon restarting at my last save point, I was issued a word of advice from the developers at Warhorse, in the form of a notification in the top right-hand corner of the screen. This reminder indicated that I did not possess the requisite Strength (one of the main character’s skill attributes, which can be enhanced via gameplay) to properly wield the rusty short sword I was using, which explained my ill-fated raid on the bandit camp. I could almost hear the satisfied sigh of Joanna Nowak, the full-time research historian responsible for ensuring *KCD*’s authenticity, as the game politely reminded me that I was playing as a rather scrawny blacksmith’s apprentice, not an accomplished martial artist.\(^{11}\) In order to stand a chance in combat, the player must understand the subtleties of medieval warfare and how to apply that knowledge to each encounter. Knowing which weapons are most effective against each type of armor\(^ {12}\) or learning a special technique to counter an opponent’s attack become the difference between life and death, and the only way to master these elements is through training and experience. Towards the end of my sixty-or-so hours of gameplay, I had developed the necessary skill—both in game (through statistical attribute increases) and as a player—to dominate my opponents in single combat, which was extremely rewarding.

As I progressed through the game, reminders pertaining to history and realism were omnipresent whenever I would encounter new places, persons, or failures. The game features a massive codex of historical information about the game’s locations, famous characters, and social structure, containing at least one or two

---

\(^{11}\) Webster, “Kingdom Come: Deliverance.”

\(^{12}\) The developers included a range of period-accurate weapon types, including swords, axes, maces, bows, and halberds. They also included a robust clothing and armor system, allowing the player sixteen different armor “slots” for headwear, footwear, and everything in between. For a detailed study of medieval arms and armor; See also chapter six of Paul B. Newman’s *Daily Life in the Middle Ages*. 


pages per entry. I found this codex to be more important in *KCD* than in other games that feature similar indices (the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise comes to mind), mostly on account of how much the game design relies on historical medieval conventions and sensibilities. Combat was not the only mechanic that was made more complicated as a result of the game’s historical focus; alchemy in *Kingdom Come* is another notable example of how the game brings the medieval world to life, for better or for worse.

The art of brewing potions and decoctions is a staple of RPG fare, and players are usually only required to know which ingredients go together to create a certain elixir. Not content with such an abstract representation of fifteenth-century medicinal practices, *KCD* tasks the player with manually completing all of the steps of the potion brewing process, from picking wild herbs to boiling pot for three turns of a sand-glass. Henry must also first be able to read the recipe for a given decoction in order to brew it, one of many instances in which Henry’s state of illiteracy must be addressed by the player before progressing. The available remedies themselves are period-accurate for the most part, with most concoctions having only minor effects such as treating a wound, loosening stiff joints, or poisoning an enemy. No mixture goes so far as to give Henry any sort of super-human strength or ability, once again straying away from the conventions of the genre. For the historian-gamer, this is an intriguing diversion into medieval medicine and its employment. However, the tediously accurate gameplay mechanic may alienate some players who are more concerned with other elements of gameplay.

To the question at hand, then: does the attention to historical detail make *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* a better role-playing experience, or does it convolute a tried-and-true formula? I would argue that *KCD*’s complexities represent its strengths, and its thorough integration of history into the entire design of the game marks an accomplishment within the genre. The developers at Warhorse Studios took each individual component of a typical RPG and tested it against the realities of medieval life. This is

---

13 Newman, *Daily Life in the Middle Ages*, 261. Notable diversions from medicinal history include the “Amor Potion” and the “Lazarus Decoction.” While love potions were certainly made and sold, they were of course only placebo and largely ineffective. Rejuvenating mixtures to grant strength to a wounded soldier would also have existed, but again would most likely have been a basic opioid stimulant, not capable of healing.
apparent not just in the major mechanics of the game, such as combat, trading or alchemy, but also in the smaller details as well. For instance, Henry’s carrying capacity is limited to just over one hundred pounds, and his horse can carry only a hundred pounds more (without purchasing larger saddlebags). Given the kill-loot-sell\textsuperscript{14} economics central to most RPGs, enforcing a more realistic weight limit on what the player can carry enhances the immersion into the game world. Other small considerations like food perishability and an attention to cleanliness further drive home that sense immersion.

Immersion is \textit{KCD}’s strongest suit, and it serves the historical aspirations of the game well. While some concessions were made in order to maintain the entertainment value of the game (usually related to time: armor repairs are instantaneous, learning to read occurs over a few in-game hours instead of weeks or months), Warhorse has gone to great lengths in order to make the player feel like they are living in a real time and place. Henry is a believable character and in order to fulfil his mission the player must adapt to the conditions of 1403 Bohemia. \textit{Kingdom Come: Deliverance} provides a gameplay experience capable not only of conveying history, but encouraging players to learn more. By crafting a simple-but-compelling narrative around enjoyable characters, \textit{KCD} draws players into the historical lore of its game world. While Henry’s accomplishments may seem to pale in comparison to becoming Arch-mage in \textit{Skyrim} or saving the galaxy as \textit{Mass Effect}’s Commander Shepard, they leave the player with the same satisfaction—proof that a game created with history in mind can deliver both facts and fun.

\textsuperscript{14} In many RPGs, the player earns most of their money by defeating enemies, looting their armor, weapons and valuable possessions, and then selling those items at a vendor for outright profits. When a player’s carrying capacity is unrealistically high, they can accrue vast amounts of loot without having to return to a city to sell it first.
Bibliography


Author Bio

Eric Lowe is a graduate student in the Social Science and Globalization M.A. Program at CSUSB, having earned his B.A. in History in 2017. His research interests include race, ethnicity and immigration within U.S. history. His thesis work examines the internal and external creation of identity and community among racial minorities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as legal treatment of these groups during that period. After completing his M.A. in 2019, Eric intends to move directly into a Ph.D. program and continue his scholarship on race in America. He hopes to begin lecturing at the community college level, with the goal of earning a professorship at a four-year University upon the completion of his doctorate.