

Polish Romanticism Revisited in “Epopeja” From Literary Classics to Tabletop RPG

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“Epopeja” (2023) is a tabletop RPG set in a fantasy world inspired by the historical setting of the early 1800s somewhere in the Lithuanian/Belarusian territory of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, at that time incorporated into the Russian Empire. The game explicitly declares itself as non-historical and steers away from using the proper names of historical peoples and places. For instance, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania becomes “the Duchy”, the Kingdom of Poland is “the Crown”, Russia is just “the Empire” ruled by a nameless “TSAR”. Moreover, the storyworld is full of supernatural creatures and filled with supernatural powers, whose epic-scale conflict looms over the story. This clearly isn’t a historical setting - but it is the kind of fiction known to anyone familiar with 19th-century Polish literature. This is Polish Romanticism at its finest, mixing folklore, magic and superstition with microhistories of fictional but nationally/regionally-defined communities struggling with macro-scale geopolitical consequences of the Russian occupation.

The question I try to answer in this talk is how the game incorporates narrative conflicts from Polish 19th-century literary classics to construct the game’s storyworld. My basic analytical framework is the categorisation of storyworld components (Ryan 2014), expanded with ontological rules (Ryan 2018) and secondary world infrastructures (Wolf 2012). This allows me to isolate building blocks (such as characters, settings, events, mental events), their higher-level organisation (timelines, genealogies), and involvement in conflicts as they are presented in the game. In the second step, I demonstrate which of these interpersonal, political, and metaphysical conflicts are borrowed from 19th-century Romanticism (as discussed by Polish literary scholars: Janion 2007, 2014, 2020; Janion C Żmigrodzka 2001, 2004). In doing so, I point to: examples of micro-scale borrowings of single elements from a particular literary work, e.g. the character of Count, whose personality, a few biographical details, and a castle inherited after a court dispute are unmistakably modeled on the Count from the most celebrated Polish national epic *Pan Tadeusz* by A. Mickiewicz;

1. storyworld elements selected to be major driving forces of in-game conflicts, e.g. The King of Alders, a spiritual being named after the eponymous character of J.W. Goethe’s ballad *Der Erlkönig*;

2. patterns of social conflicts between groups that have a fictional and factual -historical status (mixed ontology: Wolf 2020), i.e. are fictionalised in Romantic literature but also have factual historical counterparts, e.g. the TSAR’s soldiers vs. local confederate insurgents.

L. Hutcheon, a leading theorist of adaptation, would probably object to using the word ‘adaptation’ for points 1. and 2., as she explicitly excludes “short intertextual allusions to other works” (p.170). Nor would she agree with point 3., which replaces specific works with a large

collection of works labeled as national classics of a literary period. In this last case, instead of a single literary work identifiable as the original source, it makes more sense to talk about recurrent narrative tropes of Polish Romanticism. Nevertheless, “Epopėja” RPG may be compared to Romanticism literary classics with regard to their strategies of adaptation of the actual historical setting. In approaching fictionalisations of historical settings as a form of adaptation of the past, I follow the path taken by Gerzic C Norrie in their edited volume, which includes a chapter on adaptations of a national past in role-playing games (Redder 2019). In this alternative approach, the source of adaptation is not a single narrative work but a historical period setting defined by geographical and temporal limits. Taking it one step further - from a historical period known from historiography to a historical period fictionalised in 19th-century literature - does not seem too far-fetched. In other words, I find it equally plausible to discuss “Epopėja” as a very loose adaptation of the historical setting of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania under Russian occupation in the early 1800s, and as an adaptation of the generic 19th-century Lithuanian setting of Polish Romantic literature.

Readers who do not accept this redefinition of the concept of adaptation may think of it in terms of adoption of literary tropes and genre conventions in the style of transmedial fan fiction (see e.g. Lindgren-Leavenworth 2014). Either way, this allows me to frame the adoption/adaptation of Polish Romanticism in “Epopėja” as an example of “role-play as a heritage practice” (as discussed by Mochocki 2021), which enables the (implied - Polish) player to engage in self-reflexivity over heritage-relevant themes present both in the game and in the source texts (as in Stobbart’s, 2018, discussion of self-reflexivity in video game adaptations).

References

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