

Representation of Medieval Realia in PC game: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*

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The study describes the Czech computer game Kingdom Come: Deliverance and the scale of its historical depiction of medieval realia. The well-known title is set in the medieval Czech Kingdom in 1403 and the player is presented with a complex world where he has to survive, acquire the game mechanics and complete historically inspired quests within and besides the main storyline. In this study, we will present various historical aspects of the game, such as political background, geographical setting, social depiction of the part of medieval Bohemia, late medieval armour and weapons in comparison with reality. Kingdom Come: Deliverance is sometimes referred to as a medieval simulator or a learning tool, based on its effort to realistically demonstrate history.

Key words: *Kingdom Come; Deliverance; computer game; middle-ages; simulation; historical aspects*

This computer game gained fans worldwide long before its completion. The development studio Warhorse launched a kickstarter campaign so people could support their effort or show interest in their PC game. After a short time, more than 35 000¹ backers financially supported this project which aimed to create the most realistic depiction of the middle-ages in e-games. After its release in February 2018, the game was ranked² mostly positively and it achieved multiple awards (Gamescom 2017 – Best PC Game, Central and Eastern European Game Awards 2018 – Narrative, International Festival of Film Music and Multimedia Soundtrack Poděbrady 2018 – Special Achievement in Multimedia Award)³. Masaryk University in Brno even created a series of lectures⁴ focused on this PC

¹ <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1294225970/kingdom-come-deliverance>

² <https://www.vg247.com/2018/02/13/kingdom-come-deliverance-reviews-round-up-all-the-scores/>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_Come:_Deliverance

⁴ <https://www.online.muni.cz/vite/11080-video-kingdom-come-aneb-jak-zkonstruovat-stredovek>

game, in which the historians demonstrate the similarities to the real medieval world as well as the differences.⁵

To understand the reason why a huge player supporting wave has been created, we must present multiple gaming aspects which are implemented to reach the highest level of joining gameplay and historical realism. It is imperative to understand that a perfect simulation of a historic era cannot be made. The balancing of historicity and gameplay is necessary, since the main aim of the game is entertainment. The story is set in the medieval kingdom of Bohemia in 1403. Reigning king is Wenceslaus IV of the Luxembourg dynasty. Among other historical characters mentioned in the game, we can find his brother Sigismund of Luxembourg- the king of Hungary, their father Charles IV and Moravian margrave Jobst, who is the only one that can be met in person. It is clear to a player from many dialogues, that some people (in the game) support the king while others stand behind his brother. Wenceslaus IV was imprisoned (1402–1403) by his brother Sigismund, whom many Czechs wished to be the king of Bohemia.

Wenceslaus IV is mostly spoken about negatively: *“Maybe he was intelligent and able, maybe in his core he was just, but these virtues were drowned in wine, where the truth has not been hidden. On the contrary, other vices emerged from these depths: laziness, anger seizures, daintiness and more issues appeared which would be solved diplomatically by his father.”*⁶ In the game, he is being presented as a useless leader. Sigismund is by some characters described as a more welcomed king and by others as an aggressor, since he invaded Bohemia with an army. At the beginning of 1403 he seized Kutná Hora (Kuttenberg), where he confiscated great amount of precious metals and coins, gaining the means to continue the war effort in Hungary.⁷ After a few hours of gameplay the village of the protagonist (Henry) is attacked by the soldiers of Sigismund and they manage to slaughter many villagers including his mother and father (later it is found out that he was not the real father). That is why Henry embarks on a journey of revenge. Among well-known historical characters we can also mention Master Jan Hus, whose ideas about church reformation are clarified to player by a local priest (while drinking beer). All additional information about realia, characters, professions, areas can be found in the codex- a part of in-game menu with extended historical explanations. Medieval society is here too formed by peasants, nobles and clergy. The protagonist meets many individuals from various social background (nobles, knights, vassals, monks, traders, etc.).

⁵ <https://www.online.muni.cz/vite/10352-stredovek-v-kingdom-come-co-je-skutecnost-a-co-fikce>

The whole lecture cycle available at:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPugk9D9MuezYIdCEJvOwNA_CcETPcz3

⁶ Hrych, E. (2015). *Velká kniha evropských panovníků*. Praha, REGIA s.r.o. , p. 562.

⁷ Bartl, J. (1996). *Žigmund Luxemburský*. Budmerice: Rak, p. 43.

Geographically, the game is situated approximately 44 km southeast of Prague around Ratava nad Sázavou (Ratay) and its overall size is 16 km².⁸ Many of the locations, that the player can visit, can still be found there e.g.: Užice (Uzhitz), Mehojedy (Merhojed), Leděčko (Ledetchko), Samopše (Samopesh), Strříbrná Skalice (Silver Skalitz) or Sázava (Sasau). There are also some fortifications. In Rataje nad Sázavou two castles used to stand there, which were separated by only a few hundred meters.⁹ They are Pirkštejn (Pirkstein), that was later changed to nobleman manor and Talmberk (Talmberg). Talmberk was founded at the turn of the 14th century and by the beginning of the 16th century it has been abandoned.¹⁰ The player has the opportunity not only to see, how Czech medieval villages, towns or castles might have looked like, but he is also a witness to its real function (e.g. there is a lot of work going on in the villages, the fields are being ploughed, traders pass by, castles serve as a sanctuary for refugees and we also join a castle siege).

Gothic architecture is present in many churches but especially at Sasau monastery which is being built at the time of the plot. The protagonist even joins the monastic order of Benedictines so the player can admire the three-nave basilica from the inside, while he must follow the rules of this order (common prayers, meals, helping with work, transcription of Holy Scriptures, obedience, etc.)¹¹. If he commits an aberrance, he is punished. An interesting fact is, that the creators decorated the interiors of churches with the depiction of “saints” – these are named after the most generous contributors to the kickstarter campaign.

The player is tasked with various quests, which present many aspects of medieval life. Besides typical “fetch” or “kill” RPG quests we can stumble upon a heretic Waldensian¹² cult that has to be dealt with, alchemical recipes of lonely healers, we initiate construction of devastated village according to preferences, help with a castle siege, we have to find out whether or not a blacksmith is using charms to improve his steel or not, identify the mysterious disease that had spread in one village, etc. The protagonist is illiterate as was the majority of population of this era so he has to find a way to gain the useful skill of reading. He has to eat, sleep and maintain hygiene as well or suffer the penalties in charisma (although there is a perk which increases the speech skill with an opposite sex if the player is dirty due to the “manly odour” but the effectiveness of sneaking is significantly decreased because of the stench). Food is an important part of immersion. From

⁸ <https://www.shacknews.com/article/103324/how-big-is-kingdom-come-deliverances-map>

⁹ David, P. – Soukup, V. (2017). Dějiny hradů a tvrzí v Čechách, na Moravě a ve Slezsku. Praha: Euromedia group, p. 188.

¹⁰ Idem, p. 193.

¹¹ http://www.solesmes.com/sites/default/files/upload/pdf/rule_of_st_benedict.pdf

¹² An ascetic Christian movement, declared as heretical

the vast amount of nutrition, we can mention fruit, vegetables, bread, cheese, pea or lentil soup. Since rations can quickly spoil, dried or smoked variants such as sausages, salami, dried fruit, mushrooms, or any smoked meat come in handy. After drinking a strong spirit, the game can be saved, otherwise it saves automatically when the player goes to sleep or during longer quests. Other popular alcoholic beverages are beer, wine and mead. A special category is made by potions (enhancing, soporific, poisonous, etc.). Those can be crafted with alchemy skill or bought. The “people” in the game wear colourful clothes that can get visibly dirty as well as armour. Even the map in the game is filled with colours, inspired by medieval illumination.

Cattle grazing the pastures, the crop is being grown in the fields. Forests are intentionally appearing dark and mysterious. Players are presented trees and bushes that grow densely and many times, they create an impassable section of the woods so they need to find an alternative route. Also, if you hurry through a forest on a horse, a branch can knock you off it. Narrow forest pathways only enrich the illusion of secrecy and it is not difficult to get lost. Besides caves, ruins, various bandit camps, animals inhabit these areas as well. However, this aspect has a double edge. Game meat is more expensive and many tasks require it, however if you are randomly checked at the town entrance or in the woods while you are carrying poached meat, you get into trouble. For gameplay mechanics the punishment is naturally lower as in real life – you spend some time in prison. The penalty for poaching specific animal e.g. a stag was cruel such as disfiguration and skinning alive.¹³ During one of the tasks, you help a young noble to hunt. Although hunt enriched medieval nutrition, this aspect was minor for knights, the major aim was a sport.¹⁴ During this quest, the player is able to learn how to hunt down hares, deers or wild boars.

One of the most important parts of the game is fighting. Here we meet with a well-thought mechanics created with a help from real fencers.¹⁵ The player has a five-pointed star in front of him which symbolizes five stances from where it is possible to cut or stab, plus a middle point- body centre. Attacks can be led from various ways according to the opponent’s stance. Continual strikes can exhaust the protagonist (as well as the opponent). Then, neither the offensive, nor the defensive is effective. The player has an instance to manage to block an incoming strike while the time is slightly slowed. The combinations of attacks are available as well. These can be purchased for “skill points” and they need to be taught, since all require a fluency of specific consecutive attacks. For instance, the skills with a longsword were inspired by European fencing manuscripts (as Hans

¹³ Barnes, I. (2008). *Historický atlas rytířů a hradů*. Praha: Vydavatelství Mladá fronta, p. 137.

¹⁴ Idem, p. 137.

¹⁵ ARGO, *Dům rytířských ctností*

Lichtenauer- German fencing master of 14th century, the founder of “secret art of fencing with a longsword”¹⁶. Terms like Zorn ort, Duplieren, Durchlauffen, Fehler, taken from medieval fencing books describe a specific combination of strikes that form fluent consecutive hits aimed at various body parts of an enemy.

Players have a variety of melee weapons (swords, axes, maces, daggers, polearms, fists) and one ranged weapon (bow). Swords are divided into long swords, short swords, hunting swords and sabres. An iconic medieval weapon is realistically presented as an effective and relatively fast way of dealing with multiple unarmoured opponents, however this arm is not so useful against armour. It is positive, that the game creators implemented multiple sword categories in their game, since there were many variants. For instance, a specific type of a one-handed sword was designed against full-plate armour. The blade was around 100 cm long, quite wide near the handguard.¹⁷ A stab with this weapon to loin, neck, visor or under the shoulder was deadly. Axes and maces in this game are weapons of shorter reach but very effective against a well-gearred enemy. Why try to cut or stab through the armour when you can smash it and crush the bones beneath? The effectivity of these arms is significantly visible during gameplay because an opponent can be dazed, and therefore unable to fight, by a good hit in the head (even while wearing a helmet). The dagger is here used in a different way compared to other RPG titles where it serves as an ordinary weapon. It did not belong among the best weapons for melee combat but it was excellent for finishing off knights knocked to the ground.¹⁸ In the game, it serves for silent killing of sleeping or unaware enemies if the player is able to sneak up on them. Polearms were very popular in late middle-ages. They consisted of a long pole and a metal head of many shapes and sizes. There were many variants of these weapons with a huge range of different types of points, blades, hooks, hammers, axeblades including spikes to penetrate armour.¹⁹ A hook could be used for pulling down riders or for immobilizing an armoured infantryman, that could be then killed by other companions.²⁰ In the game, polearms are present but not as widely as they should have been. If a player takes such a weapon, his movement is limited and he is able to attack only in one way which does not imitate the versatility of this arm at all.

The bow is a very useful ranged weapon for the protagonist. Those were present at the beginning of the 15th century in many variants, same as they are

¹⁶ Kovařík, J. – Křížek, L. (2013). *Historie evropských duelů a šermu (Svazek I). Od starověku k branám renesance*. Praha: Mladá fronta, p. 105.

¹⁷ Synek, Jaroslav et al. (2013). *Vojenské dějiny od pravěku do roku 1648*. Praha: Ottovo nakladatelství, p. 185.

¹⁸ Dougherty, J. M. (2012). *Zbraně a bojové techniky středověkých válečníků*. Praha: Naše vojsko, p. 116.

¹⁹ Idem, p. 120.

²⁰ Idem, p. 120.

here. In Central Europe was mostly used a straight European bow long approximately between 1,5–1,9 m.²¹ A nomad composite bow is present as well, since one type of enemies are Cuman²² mercenaries. It provided a longer range and higher arrow penetration with its double bending and construction.²³ Medieval archers had to train for a long time so they could shoot arrows precisely but at the same time quickly (the pace of shooting depends on a bow type). The most important aspect of shooting with a bow was to be able to draw the heaviest longbows (aka warbows). The power of a loosened arrow depends on the draw weight and that is why a good longbowman had strong muscles on his arms and back. In many RPG series (*The Elder Scrolls*, *Dragon Age*, *Gothic*) we encounter a game mechanics, where the effectivity of the archers is dependent on his specific attributes- dexterity or agility. In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, the bow mechanics are realistically depicted to be dependent on strength. If a player wants to use a stronger bow, he needs to train his strength more than agility. While shooting, the emphasis is put especially on the gamer. Here again we witness a simulation. In order to successfully hit a target, one must guess where the arrow will fly, since there is no helping crosshair. The bow cannot be drawn for a longer period of time because it drains stamina and the character's hands start shaking. Real archers were shooting in a similar way. A draw is followed almost immediately by a release. Modern archery uses a different kind of bows and shooting technique. Arrows are categorized according to their usage, not historically, according to their arrowhead type. For instance, a "better piercing arrow" contains a bodkin arrowhead. This type was used against armoured targets because it consisted of sharpened polyhedron. The point is supported against turning over by the curve and angle of the sturdy ridges that are created by the four faces of the head.²⁴ The player therefore does not have to learn the arrowhead nomenclature. Last but not least, it is important to address the incredible power of the bows in this game. Enemies in full-plated armour, who were to a large extent protected from arrows drop dead after a few shots, which does not simulate the historical reality of late medieval warfare.

Compared to the longbow which has been used in England (in Hungary, a shorter, composite variant) a crossbow (Lat. *balista*, Ger. *armbrust*) was spread in all other parts of Europe already in the 14th century.²⁵ This popular and easy to handle ranged weapon is sadly missing in this game. It is not clear why the creators

²¹ Synek, J. et al.: op. cit., p. 191.

²² Nomadic ethnic, settled in Hungary in 13th century
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cuman>

²³ Synek, J. et al.: op. cit., p. 191.

²⁴ Loades, M. (2013). *The Longbow*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, p. 24.

²⁵ Matuška, M. – Syka, J. (2016). *Husitský válečník*. Praha: Grada Publishing, p. 103.

prefer much less used bow compared to crossbow, which was much more common in late medieval Europe. We cannot omit a wonder weapon of the 13th century on European battlefields – gunpowder. Around the year 1403 (in which the game is set), first firearms should be appearing, not speaking of artillery using gunpowder. In Bohemia, it has been produced since 1380s.²⁶

Another essential aspect of medieval RPG is armour. *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* once again surprised the players by one of the most elaborate systems of protective gear in the world of computer games. It consists of layering, which is historically supported.

The lower layer consisted of aketon (aka gambeson). They were made of two layers of cloth or hide and in between them was the stuffing of horsehair, wool or oakum.²⁷ They were then quilted in many ways. This affordable and simple piece of armour provided a reasonable level of protection even on its own. Of course, a heavy hit with a longsword or a mighty strike with a mace could hurt the wearer but to cut through such a thick layer was almost impossible. Aketon served also as a pad for other, metal parts of gear. A mail shirt was the next layer. It has been used on European battlefields for more than two thousand years. It was quite favoured among warriors and knights alike. It consisted of a huge number of interlocked metal rings (usually one ring was linked with four others). This dense mesh was able to protect the wearer mainly against cuts. A stab with a sword tip or a spear managed to get through, so another layer was introduced in late middle-ages – plate armour. It was evolving by continual addition of bigger and smaller metal parts. Iron lames in plate vests began to increase their size and in the second half of the 14th century we can encounter large metal plates, covering the chest and back – cuirasses.²⁸ Those can be found in the game in many variants and colours. By the end of the 13th century a city in Northern Italy – Milan was considered to be a centre for crafting armours.²⁹ In the game, there is also gear from historically confirmed concurrence besides Milanese armour set. We can find Saxon, Magdeburg, Augsburg or Nurnberg sets. Important parts of a knight's protection were also pauldrons, chausses, gloves, neck and head protection. Helmets underwent dynamic development in the middle-ages as well. From early medieval conical types, through iron hats to great helms. In late middle-ages a specialisation of headgear emerges (as bascinet, sallet, etc.). There are many kinds of helms present in the game, even with movable visors (which is automatically lowered when the character enters combat) that provides additional protection but limits the field of view as is historically correct. A surcoat (Ger. waffenkuttel) could be

²⁶ Synek, J. et al.: op. cit., p. 199.

²⁷ Idem, p. 188.

²⁸ Klučina, P. – Pevný, P. (2012). *Ottova Encyklopedie Zbroj*. Ottovo nakladatelství, p. 109.

²⁹ Idem, p. 111.

worn on the armour for representation and cover from the elements.³⁰ These are available too and the player can wear a coat of arms of his landlord or of a specific town. Audially, the armour is depicted in a very believable way. You hear clinks and clatter, when struck a blunt metal sound can be heard. This increases the level of immersion. Unrealistic attributes of plate armour can be experienced while fighting an unarmed peasant during some quests, who is able to defeat you (barehanded), even if you wear a full protective set.

From the military sphere, we can also mention horses that are very difficult to control and fight on. If you want to kill an enemy by riding over him you will not succeed. The horse itself does not cause any damage. During a castle siege, you need to construct a trebuchet. Another historical character appears here – the author of an illustrated book about warfare. The most well-known example of this book is the famous *Bellifortis* of Konrad Keyser, which was created in the 15th century in Bohemia.³¹

Besides various bandits, the player also encounters Cuman mercenaries in the service of Sigismund of Luxemburg. They represent almost “barbaric” danger, wearing nomadic-styled gear, using composite bows and sabres. Furthermore, they cannot be understood, since in the game, they speak Hungarian. This depiction is not entirely correct according to historian *Imre Bártfai* who claims, that it is improbable that this ethnic would speak Hungarian or wear outdated equipment.³²

The computer game *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* presents a unique connection of history and modern entertainment. The players can stumble upon many historical realia that are not always 100% reflection of historical reality, but for the creation of a story, areas and game possibilities, they are absolutely sufficient. The difference between this game and any other RPG dwells in the well-thought combat system that is the closest way of experiencing real fight (except VR), the simulation of the world through quests, dialogues, combat or by the survival itself. Last but not least, it has been proven that the public wants a game like *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*. People want to be drawn into medieval era that can provide as much immersion as possible. The success of this Czech game is worldwide and for many players, it has provided enough stimuli, visual tools, researched information to motivate them to learn and to demonstrate the medieval life and society.

³⁰ Idem, p. 113.

³¹ Kovařík, J. – Křížek, L. c. d., p. 100.

³² <http://www.medievalists.net/2018/02/cumans-kingdom-come-deliverance/>