

FROM MARKO KRALE TO ARTHAS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE HEROES FROM CLASSICAL TRADITION TO DIGITAL VIDEOGAME FOLKLORE

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Abstract The paper examines the transformation of heroic ethos through a comparative analysis between traditional, canonical folklore heroes and their contemporary digital counterparts or transformations. From the key figure of Balkan and South Slavic epic songs, Marko Krale, through the local hero Turundžula Karavlaški, the paper traces their structural and symbolic equivalents in the virtual world of *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*.

By utilizing Richard Bartle's theory of virtual worlds, the paper tries to show how the static paradigms of oral tradition transition through contemporary children's folklore and adapt into the realm of digital folklore in videogames, and it argues that the archetype of epic hero does not disappear but undergoes a complex transformation in the interactive media of videogames. Even if the digital discourse provides more narrative nuance, the basic function, ethical message, and heroic idiosyncrasy remain consistent with the folk epic within the videogame itself.

The paper concludes that videogames serve as a contemporary basis for this narrative flow, proving that the epic tradition remains dynamic but has been given a different context and a different code of understanding.

Keywords: epic hero, digital hero/videogame hero, classical children's folklore/contemporary digital children's folklore, Marko Krale, Turundžula Karavlaški, Illidan Stormrage, Malfurion, Arthas Menethil, Richard Bartle, theory of "virtual worlds" (2007), *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* (PC videogame; Blizzard Entertainment, 2002)

Introduction

The epic hero of folk songs is the central driving force of the epic narrative. At the center of every epic and epic song stands the epic hero – a figure who is almost godlike, hyperbolic, grandiose, and nearly perfect despite his imperfections, giving form to the enduring ideal of the superhuman. Without him, the epic tradition would lose much of its power and appeal. The epic heroes, such as Marko Krale and Turundžula Karavlaški from Macedonian epic songs – of which the first is a common figure of memory in both Balkan and South Slavic epic tradition – are not only the agents or figures of the epics and folklore but also figures around which an

entire epic tradition has been established. They have a special status in the memory of Balkan and South-Slavic culture and, as a consequence of their superiority which is to the level of them being treated as ideas, principles, or even archetypes, they are paradigms and unexampled figures of heroism. Due to epics and epic songs, the epic hero is a sign of a particular historical time and space, of a particular “archaic” chronotope that is distant, incomprehensible, alien, and unusual to the people of today.

Folkloric matrices can only survive the challenges of the passing time if they are transformed into new, contemporary, and “more practical” models of what was once considered the highest heroic ethos. Within this context, contemporary children’s folklore serves as a vital bridge, showing how traditional paradigms transition into new mediums. It appears that, despite the fact that the “new” interpretations or new readings (“original”, creative, audio-visual representations) of epic heroes seem to be something new and never before seen, especially in the context of videogames – and especially in videogames with their own “digital folklore”, such as the games of the *Warcraft* series (specifically *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*, which is the subject of research here) – they are not as authentic as they seem but rather a kind of implicit revision or “modernization” of already previously established stereotypes. The heroic duel, the battle against a monster of immense strength and incomprehensible size, and even the hero’s determination to remain true to his beliefs in the face of countless temptations and challenges are not new ideas, but rather transformations of traditional heroic patterns within the virtual world. For the contemporary individual, the heroic ethos once embodied by figures such as Marko Krale, Turundžula Karavlaški, and the protagonists of great epics such as Beowulf, Hrothgar, and Siegfried – or even Grettir and Njáll from the Icelandic sagas – has been reimagined through their modernized counterparts, including Illidan Stormrage, his brother Malfurion, and Arthas Menethil. Such a transformation or adaptation into a new form of media does not merely mean an aesthetic transformation but also a structural transformation in that it moves the epic struggle from the oral tradition, and subsequently the written tradition, into the interactive form of the videogame, permitting the listener/reader of the epic poetry to not just be a passive recipient but an active participant in the struggles and decisions made by the hero of the videogame.

The need for such contemporary interpretations of the relationship between epic songs and videogames is a consequence of the notion that epic songs should not be viewed as static texts that are old-fashioned or even outdated but that they are fluid, dynamic structures that are transformed or have evolved in ways that are closer (more comprehensible, easier to understand) to contemporary individuals. The analytical method in the definition of key terms such as “epic hero”, or even “heroic ethos” or “valor” is required to describe why Marko Krale and Turundžula Karavlaški, although slightly archaic to most contemporary readers today, are still, at the same time,

distinctly contemporary. The definition of these terms will be useful in order to identify and recognize the possible projection of this “microworld” (the epic hero) into the macroworld of the videogame as a text that is no less complex than epic songs themselves. By contrasting the traditional and the virtual/digital, it becomes possible to observe how traditional narratives evolve through contemporary children’s folklore and shift into digital folklore, illustrating the “flow” of the epic into the digital – that is, how the *epic* in epic songs adjusts to the new medium in order to become less unfamiliar, less estranged, or more “homely” within videogames.

The definition of the epic hero as a key term in this paper can be derived from the definitions of epics and epic songs. The definition of the term *epic* can be traced back to the Ancient Greek words ἐπικός (*epikos*) and ἔπος (*epos*), which mean “word”, “story”, or “poem”. According to Martin, traditional definitions of the epic usually focus on grand themes and sublime topics but contemporary critics argue that these features do not define what epic as a genre truly is. The old classification of oral (primary) versus written (secondary) epics is now outdated, and scholars believe that written epics were created following examples of how oral epics were first formed (Martin 2005: 10). Citing Bakhtin, Turner believes that “while the novel was, like clay, adaptable and suitable to a world of change and evolution, the epic was marble – fixed, hierarchical, sacred, fit only for a static society, with a hero who is perfect and exists only in his external actions” (Turner 2012: 2). Therefore, in this case, the word *epic* signifies a complex story told in verse form that revolves around a hero who possesses extraordinary powers and is often depicted as a protector and the voice of his people. Although the traditional epic form demands patience and prolonged engagement for reading that may be difficult to sustain today, the contemporary individual remains closely connected to the ideal of heroism. This transition from traditional narratives is seamlessly mirrored in contemporary children’s folklore, where classical archetypes are reshaped and integrated into the broader realm of digital folklore. Rather than being detached from heroic ideals, they continue to engage with them through more accessible contemporary media, such as videogames, which offer dynamic forms of characterization that are more relatable than the antiquated narrative systems of the past.

In this respect, digital media, and videogames in particular, have become increasingly appealing. The epic hero is redefined not as a figure limited to medieval literature and epic poetry, but as a type of character which is transformed to correspond to the evolving tastes of contemporary audiences, including children as active participants in videogames. Marko Krale and Turundžula Karavlaški face mythical or superhuman figures that the contemporary mind can hardly even conceive of, while digital media and virtual reality give them concrete, visual shapes. In this respect, “digital folklore” can be defined as the complex lore that is intrinsic to a particular

game, such as the vast universe of *Warcraft*, which is not only the basic mythology that underlies the game itself but also a common cultural paradigm that binds the players of the game. It is a body of knowledge that is inherent to a community that is deeply entrenched in the stories that revolve around the particular world in which the events take place. *Heroic ethos* can be defined as a rigid, strict, and concise code of honor and valor that demands strict adherence. Failure to respect and adhere to the code is fatal to the status of the epic hero.

In the traditional epics, the tragic transformation of the hero is a very rare occurrence but in the narrative structures of videogames, this kind of transformation is much more apparent. A good example is the Lich King, a chthonic character of death – or, better said, a zombified, “undead” king – and the sword Frostmourne, whose name itself spells the disastrous fate of the one that wields it. The epic hero, in the traditional, as well as in the contemporary understanding, is always a fundamental character who has extraordinary physical strength but, at the same time, when it is needed, or when this strength fails him, he has to use his “trickster” type of cunningness in order to gain the victory. On the other hand, the hero is not resistant to the lure of temptation, and in many cases, his strategic wisdom is not enough to prevent his tragic outcome.

In a way, the “diffuseness” of the epic poem makes it possible to consider videogames like *Warcraft* III not only as technological accomplishments but as contemporary reworkings, or “audio-visual updates”, of familiar folkloric themes. In this new form, the hero is no longer the object of oral narration, but the story itself is dynamic in the sense that the player assumes an active role in shaping it. Nevertheless, there are certain structural rules involved, and it is not the case that the player has the full freedom of creating the hero *ex nihilo*. The story and the hero in the virtual world are modifiable and alterable to the degree that the game permits, and some games will permit more freedom than others. Just as Marko Krale and Turundžula Karavlaški embody the somewhat static, canonical paradigms of folk tradition, Illidan Stormrage, his brother Malfurion and Arthas Menethil function as their contemporary equivalents and they translate those same mythic-historical patterns but in a highly fictionalized form into the digital time-space of videogames. This process highlights how traditional narratives transition through contemporary children’s folklore and seamlessly integrates into digital folklore. However, unlike the heroes of the Macedonian and broader South Slavic tradition, characters such as Illidan, Malfurion, and Arthas are closer to the heroes of Anglo-Saxon and medieval Western European epics, such as Beowulf and Siegfried, as both traditions similarly foreground figures who are at once epic and tragic. The epic song, compared to the composite epics, in its structure is too limited in verses, too limited in “space” to provide a deeper narration and to portray a multidimensional hero,

so it is difficult to make a strict and linear parallel between these heroes and the heroes of videogames.

The heroic ethos, as an inherent part of the biography of the epic hero, represents a specific category through which the cultural and moral values of the community that produced the epic songs are shaped. This ethos becomes evident not only through the actions of the protagonist and supporting characters with similar attributes but also through the interventions of the narrator. The narrator has an omnipresent position, oriented towards the preservation of collective interests, meaning that in some heroic epics, such as *Beowulf*, “the traditional narrator is recast to become something more like the omniscient narrator” (Magennis 2011: 129). The core of epics is the so-called *heroic code* or a strict system of values such as a sense and responsibility towards honor, personal glory and loyalty to a superior figure (usually a king, like in the *chansons de geste*). As it will be witnessed with the figure of Arthas, who factually breaks the rules of honor and loyalty, this code would not allow any moral “gray areas”. The struggle between staying loyal to one’s people, or the king, vis-à-vis chasing selfish goals reflects a natural human tendency towards double values and hypocrisy. This can be perfectly seen in Arthas as a paladin, and later in his corrupted version after he conquers the sword Froustmourne. His fall into disgrace is the result of the pressure between trying to follow the code to perfection, and the inevitable flaws of being human.

The new guise of the epic hero: *Warcraft III* as a contemporary revision of the epic and its central characters

The shaping of Marko Krale as a sort of “messiah” or deliverer of enslaved people during the historical periods of collective powerlessness is closely linked to the mythological and archetypal representation of the “hero on horse”. This figure which has roots in ancient Thracian and Illyrian beliefs was modified through the contact between Slavic settlers and the local autochthonic population (Стојановиќ-Лафазановска 2009). These matrices shaped the character of Marko Krale into a figure of memory that combined ideas of various heroic victories over conquerors. He is not just a fictional, epic character but a mixture of myth, history, tradition, stereotype and cliché, and a result of centuries of shaping through epic singing. The South Slavic epic poems that have him as a central figure show “a century-old experience of the challenges for national survival” (Хајчески 1993: 5). While Marko Krale is a famous epic figure among many Balkan and South Slavic people, the character of Turundžula Karavlaški is a lesser-known, less frequent, less celebrated local epic hero that was present exclusively in the city of Strumica and in the Strumica Region in Macedonia.

The lack of historical context regarding the existence of Turundžula Karavlaški allows for an initial etymological interpretation of his name. At

first, the hero's name evokes associations with a potential Vlach origin; however, he remains an unknown figure in Vlach folklore

(Витанова-Рингачева 2024: 485).

According to Ivan Kotev who documented the songs featuring this character, the presence of Vlachs in the Strumica region was once undeniable but “starting from the mid-19th century, they migrated, mostly to neighboring Greece. A number of toponyms still testify to this significant Vlach presence in the Strumica region” (Котев 2018: 17). Both Vitanova-Ringačeva and Kotev conclude that the character's true origins are unknown and that his name is highly linked to Vlach culture only by association.

Unlike the multilayered nature of Marko Krale as an epic hero, Turundžula Karavlaški is thematically simpler; the epic poems that have him as a driving force of the narrative are centered around two motifs – the abduction of a bride and the duel with Arap Ali-beg. Just as medieval epics which have historical figures as central *spiritus movens* of the text cannot be viewed through strictly factual lens, the songs of Marko Krale also contain anachronisms and variations of motifs, side characters and storylines. Thus, the epic hero should be observed as a creative construct that reflects the spiritual landscape of the collective thought of a certain time and place and it represents an elevation of a once known historical figure that retained only few traces of its original inspiration.

Warcraft III: Reign of chaos is far more than a simple strategy game about warring races. It functions as a complex “digital epic” that highlights the hubris and hamartia of the characters of Illidan, Malfurion and Arthas. The narrative is structured in four interconnected campaigns that trace the escalation of a conflict through the perspectives of the Humans (represented by Arthas), the Undead, the Orcs and the Night Elves, offering a mosaic vision of a world that is on the brink of a collapse. Central to the shifting landscape of Azeroth, the dominant chronotope of this installment, is the transformation of Arthas Menethil. He evolves from a righteous paladin to its complete opposite after his obsessive drive to save his kingdom which leads him to claim the cursed Froustmourne, inevitably costing him his soul. Alongside him, Illidan is introduced as an antithesis to traditionally understood and accepted heroism, because he is a prisoner who is willing to resort to extreme measures to defeat his enemies (“Illidan”, *Wowpedia* 2026). The game is intertwined with topics of betrayal, sacrifice and the erosion of the heroic code. Both Illidan and Arthas are defined by their personal trajectories of rise and fall, a depth rarely explored in the inner worldview of canonical epic heroes. In this sense, they bear a closer resemblance to previously mentioned figures of broader epics rather than to heroes of epic song cycles, because the broader format provides a more profound insight into the hero's psychological profile. Epic poems, by contrast, have largely retained a condensed and restricted structure which prevents them from achieving the same narrative

voluminosity, and this extended “expansiveness” enables a more nuanced characterization of the protagonist, providing a deeper perspective and idea into their inherent qualities and the inevitable flaws that accompany them. This also usually allows for a richer flow of character data, their background and biography. Unlike the “static” nature of Marko Krale and especially Turundžula Karavlaški (for which there are only twenty-two songs recorded by Kotev), Illidan, Malfurion and Arthas are dynamic figures susceptible to changes that are actually *visible* for the player. The reader of the epic, who, now is the player of videogames, witnesses their development in real-time and in a more direct, immersive manner. This immersive interaction underscores how contemporary children’s folklore adapts to technological shifts, continuously feeding into the survival of digital folklore. Though they are as fictional as their folk counterparts, they appear as more authentic because unlike oral epic poems that are now fading from field research, a videogame can be played repeatedly, offering a sense of endless continuation.

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Richard Bartle’s theory of virtual worlds (2007), understood as both “place” and “experience”, is significant because it offers a framework for understanding the relationship between these canonical figures and their virtual counterparts. Bartle argues that the status of the virtual world is as authentic as the “real world” is for the player. For the players that inhabit the realms of Azeroth through their digital selves, these chronotopes are not mere simulations but, rather, genuine places where identity is reimagined through the immersion in the gameplay. To deny these virtual geographical points the status of “place” is akin to the claim that metropolises are non-existent. For a player, the virtual space is as real as the immediate, material world.

Bartle distinguishes between the terms *world* and *place* by defining the first as an abstract space of interaction, a self-contained entity whose quality of wholeness stems not from its physical coordinates but from its ability to be a sublimation of all knowledge and meaning within it. In contrast, the second term is a specific instance, manifestation or representation of that world. In the case with *Warcraft III*, Warcraft is the world and Azeroth is the place.

Bartle also points out that

Virtual worlds can thus be described in terms of how they are implemented (worlds) or how they are experienced by the players (places). The two go hand-in-hand, of course, in that the one leads to the other: change the implementation and you change the player experience. Sometimes, the word environment is used to bridge place and world: formally, it is a set of related implementation parameters which can be used as a generator (or recogniser) of bounded player experiences

(Bartle 2007: 2).

The concepts of *presence* and *flow* are perhaps even more vital. Simply put, *presence* is a perceptual illusion or a “trap” where the player, due to the game’s persuasiveness, the enjoyment it creates, or the sheer lapse of consciousness for the physical world, forgets that his or her experience is mediated by a screen, a keyboard, a mouse and whatever other tools are used to navigate in the virtual world. *Flow*, a term introduced by Csikszentmihalyi, is defined as

the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it

(Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 4),

“Flow” is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake

(Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 6).

In the virtual world, *flow* is the optimal mental state of total immersion in the game system. Within contemporary children’s folklore, where the child is positioned as an active player of the game, the digital hero becomes more relatable to him/her, as both the child as the player and the hero are able to successfully immerse themselves in the game world as place and experience. It becomes more natural to empathize with the “all too human” nature of Arthas Menethil, particularly in the context of a child playing *Warcraft III*, where the character is visually and continuously experienced within the game world, making him far more tangible and emotionally accessible to the child’s worldview than epic heroes from oral poetry, who are mediated through narration and therefore less immediate and less visually concrete. Even despite his noble intentions at the beginning of his campaign, immortalized by his vow: “I stand for the Light”, he succumbs to temptation and allows Froustmourne to corrupt his soul, ultimately leading to him killing his father. The tragic course of Arthas reaches its climax in the chilling dialogue with his father, King Terenas Menethil II. As the King asks in shock, “What is this? What are you doing, my son?”, Arthas strikes the final blow with a reply that marks the complete reversal of lineage: “Succeeding you, father”. Arthas, in a desperate, if misguided, bid to save his kingdom, had finally fallen under the corrupting power of Frostmourne. The sword did not only claim his soul but also served as a trigger for his fall into madness, kindling a megalomaniac desire for limitless power. The transformation is cemented in his chilling declaration that the kingdom, *his father’s kingdom*, will fall in order to give way to “a new order which will shake the very foundations of the world” (*Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*, Wowpedia 2026). In abandoning his former self with the bitter acknowledgment “I was a fool to trust in the Light”, Arthas completes his transformation, and he, now, is no longer a Paladin of the Light

but a powerful warrior of darkness, becoming the very evil he once sought to destroy.

In a similar manner, Illidan Stormrage is a tragic character whose fate is fueled by his unrelenting ambition and addiction to magic. Disregarding the warnings of his brother about the spiritual decay that magic brings, Illidan's defiance undermines his noble character, leading to his downfall within the realms of chaos. It is easier for the child as a gamer to feel immersion and flow when he or she is interacting with a tragic character. The "fall from grace" is a very human story that listeners and readers seldom get to see in its entirety in folk epic poems. Epic poems are necessarily fragmentary; the interest is still in the victory of the duel (*megdan*) over the enemy, and the tale ends there. The heroes of the epic are, in a way, one-dimensional and linear. But the transition of heroic figures into the world of virtual reality enables a complexity that cannot be fully achieved within the rigid formal and narrative constraints of the epic poem. However, the continuities between the two remain striking. Game designers often draw, consciously or unconsciously, on inherited heroic qualities, narrative structures, and mythic frameworks shaped by centuries of cultural and historical transmission. Figures such as the "tragic outsider", the "brotherly conflict", "condemnation to darkness", and "corruption over virtue" are thematic constellations that have long been explored within traditional epic forms. This thematic continuity shows how contemporary children's folklore, seen through theoretical videogame analysis, acts as a bridge that carries and transforms these archetypes into digital folklore. In videogames, these motifs are expanded and reshaped, becoming more psychologically complex, more vivid in narrative, and more immediate in experience.

At the same time, an important difference remains. The traditional epic hero seeks the "good" and is helped by supernatural forces, while the videogame hero is often more complex and ambiguous, and in a constant state of change, searching for identity. However, he is not strictly defined as either good or evil, since videogames often do not celebrate only the triumph of good, but allow moral ambiguity, where even "evil" can function as a catalyst for achieving a greater good or for triggering transformation and narrative development. In this respect, when children engage with such videogames, they do not merely consume narrative content but actively participate in the construction of meaning (Stojanović, Dimovska 2026). Through gameplay, they significantly deepen their understanding of contemporary ethical categories and value systems, as the multidimensional nature of the digital epic hero allows for the exploration of moral ambiguity, conflict, and transformation. Unlike the epic song, which offers a relatively fixed and pre-structured model of heroic behavior, the videogame environment tests and expands the imagination and interpretative capabilities of the child as a player of videogames. It encourages negotiation with shifting notions of "good" and "evil", "acceptable" and "transgressive", thereby contributing to the

formation of identity through contrast and reflection. In this process, the child positions themselves in relation to what is desirable and what is not, actively constructing a sense of self within a dynamic ethical and narrative space. Ultimately, while the epic poem presents a finished heroic model to be mimicked, the videogame transforms heroism into an open-ended process of exploration, interpretation, and identity formation.

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ОД МАРКО КРАЛЕ ДО АРТАС: ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЈАТА НА ЕПСКИОТ ЈУНАК ОД КЛАСИЧНИОТ ДЕТСКИ ФОЛКЛОР ВО ДИГИТАЛНИОТ ФОЛКЛОР НА ВИДЕОИГРИТЕ

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Резиме

Современото истражување на јуначкиот етос или идиосинкразијата на епскиот јунак во традиционалниот, фолклорен, народен еп може да биде релевантно, или корисно, само доколку се доведе во спрега со современите феномени и трендови кои се од поголем интерес за современиот човек. Централната фигура на епскиот јунак Марко Крале и маргинализираната, повеќе локална, а помалку прифатена за споделена фигура на меморија и заеднички (балкански, јужнословенски) епски јунак – Турунцула Каравлашки, се одличен темел за споредба со трансформацијата на оваа фигура во дигиталниот медиум. Ликовите на Илидан Стормрејд, неговиот брат Малфурион и Артас Менетил од франшизата *Warcraft* преку третото продолжение *Reign of Chaos* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2002) се земени како дигитални трансформации на епскиот јунак во сферата на видеоигрите.

Во трудот се искористи и теоријата на Ричард Бартл (2007) за „виртуелните светови“ како начин да се објасни трансформацијата на класичниот епски јунак во јунак на видеоиграта како парадигма која децата ја следат како идеал. Првиот е статичен, а вториот е динамичен, а голем удел во динамичното преобликување на јунакот, игра и трансформацијата на класичниот детски фолклор, кој сега се преобликува во современ детски фолклор и се проширува во сферата на дигиталниот фолклор, кој ги опфаќа и видеоигрите. Во трудот се укажува на тоа дека многу фолклорни обрасци не изумираат и дека тие се трансформираат во ново руво и во поинаков контекст. Нивната функција, смисла и порака што ја пренесуваат е речиси идентична, иако дискурсот, манирот и медиумот во кој се претставени е различен.