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The Witcher 3:

A Wild and Modern Hunt to Medievalise Eastern and Northern Europe

Derek Fewster

Abstract

Review of the video game The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt.

Keywords: review, The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

Review

To comment or review on a game already so praised and awarded by the gaming society and magazines does not come easily. This will thus not be a classic review. My intention is more to discuss certain interesting issues than to present another full commentary of something that has already, and somewhat prematurely, been flagged as "The Game of the Year 2015". Nevertheless, The *Witcher 3 (TW3)* can already be considered a classic worth even further study.

The Witcher games are based on a set of novels by the Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski, all set around the adventures and world of a professional hunter of monsters, a Wiedźmin, named Geralt of Rivia. The origins of the series date back to 1992 when the first of the novels was published. Success has followed steadily and by now the Witcher has inspired a Polish movie and TV series (both internationally known as "The Hexer"), comic books, various board games, several video games, metal bands, songs and even a rock opera. Needless to say, most of the cult status Wiedźmin enjoys in Central and Eastern Europe is unknown to the English-speaking West. So far only five of the eight

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books have been translated to English, but as the computer games have emerged the popularity of the phenomenon has amplified. Two weeks after release, the game had sold over 4 million copies. The previous games, *The Witcher* (2007) and *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (2011) have sold something like 8 million copies altogether; all have earned a set of awards.



Figure 1: Scenic view of No Man's Land with Geralt riding on, after the armies have passed by. War, war never changes.

Narrative core

The present game, *TW3*, certainly merits its content rating for an adult audience. But, I would add, what makes this special is that it does not really merit this from the presence of semi-realistic violence, some foul language or a few scenes with limited nudity, but from the obvious emotional experiences it offers. The protagonist Geralt will certainly cleave or behead his enemies at times and, if the player chooses to do so, be involved in some short digital joys of the flesh, but the game does not overdo it. What the game



offers is a well researched, designed and narrated one hundred hour journey through a medieval fantasy landscape, its tales and mythology, and a journey through the minds and values of some millions of players.

The narrative of *TW3* brakes into territories seldom entered in games; it twists and turns and surprises, more than Baldur's Gate, Thief or The Elder Scrolls ever have managed to. The quests often grow into short stories of hard moral choices and the consequences of them. The game often forces the player to attempt to choose the lesser of evils, probably even to reload previous saves just to try to find a bearable outcome. Other quests are outright hilarious, like catching an escaped goat, escorting a flock of cursed pigs, or writing, producing and performing a three act play. *TW3* includes a riotous and warm story of friends doing some heavy drinking and its consequences. One of the vampire hunting quests also requires Geralt to get rolling drunk as the monster only targets drunkards. Dry adult humour permeates the narrative as does a welcome and often quite innovative medievalised cursing and swearing: I have never seen a corpse collector show the middle finger in a game before, as the protagonist questioned his integrity.

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Figure 2: Luring out someone in the public. Will you remember your chosen lines in the play?



Figure 3: The game trope of "Escorting Grandma" revisited. Will you get these pigs transformed back to humans or let them become a snack for some abomination?

Default interaction is not necessarily to kill, not even regarding the monsters Geralt has a contract on. The player can most apparently choose to talk and spare any sentient beings he encounters, at least those which show little or no aggression to start with. One quest even gives him the choice of either performing a sacrifice to a fiend to save the fortunes of a village or to kill the demon, thus ending the ancient agreement providing prosperity for the settlement.

Psychology matters. NPCs respond like real adult people might and act likewise. TW3 is a rare gem in that the player is rewarded for acting like a Mensch, an empathetic human not trying to metagame the game or second-guessing what ought to be the right according to acquired models from other gameplays. Rushing through dialogues will fail quests and the gaming experience will suffer. In fact the whole outcome and end of the game depends on the player's ability to be supportive of his young ward and his capacity to stay faithful to only one of his two possible love interest. The game has several, very different endings, with oodles of game play only available along the specific paths taken. Decisions simply matter. TW3 does not fail its endgame like Mass Effect 3 nearly did, and it goes further than the stories of, for instance, Telltale Games. Literary references and jokes abound, like in Sapkowski's original novels. Little Red [Riding Hood] is the adequately dressed girl leader of a band of forest bandits, Cinderella lost her shoe because a monster ate the rest of her, and Geralt has to attempt to save seven dwarves – including a clumsy one and another one with narcolepsy called Sleepy - in the main quest line. Meeting the halfling poster painter Henri Rautlec or reading a note about a certain Leif [Eriksson] who aims to sail far far west brings out a smile as well. Easter eggs – like finding an apparent Tyrion Lannister dead in a "sky cell", interviewing a recently escaped Abbé Faria or reading notes relating to the Cthulhu



mythos – are certainly present, as in any modern computer game.



Figure 4: Little Red Riding Hood, the realistic version. Will you let her take the life of a traitor to save the whole village, or will you object and have to kill her and all her bandits?

History versus Fantasy?

The design and ambience is simply quite impressive. The hamlets and towns have a real feel to them, maybe even better than in the *Assassin's Creed* games. Dwellings are fundamentally realistic and functional. The walls, interiors, orchards, fences, storage spaces, carnage of war, grazing domestic animals, fields of sizes actually able to support whole families, children playing, women gossiping, and dockhands working all have very little with mere fantasy to do. *TW3* provides possibly the best 3D reconstructions of medieval rural living so far: the costumes and details might well be more of modern design than history, yet the ambience and feel is convincing.

The chronological frame of the world of TW3 is a mixture of several periods. The

designed medievalisation is largely a version of the central and northern European High and Late Middle Ages, without guns but with certain features and innovations only possible from the nineteenth century onward, like lingerie, wall posters and large shop windows. A public bathhouse in Novigrad is in Roman or Romanesque style, while a masquerade follows renaissance and later Venetian fashions. The eclectic world of *TW3* includes a full Norse-Irish region named Skellige, populated by early medieval Celtic and Scandinavian societies, with clans, Jarls, shield maidens, long ships and wall hangings in the style of the Bayeux tapestry. The game designers have also stated that this realm has been inspired by areas like Ireland, Shetland, Orkney, Scotland and the Scandinavian fjords.

Despite the wide array of sources and artistic influences the world remains quite consistent in its localities. An interesting choice made by the designers is that the invading Nilfgaardians are dressed in clothes resembling western sixteenth century fashion, favouring austere black in an evidently (counter-)reformatory way. The language the invaders speak is a fascinating adaptation of apparently some Welsh and Germanic dialects, possibly even some High Middle German, with a touch of Dutch accent. Considering the Polish origins of the whole Witcher set, the ruthless Nilfgaardian Empire clearly mirrors the Teutonic knights, the Holy Roman Empire, the Third Reich as well as the general German Drang nach Osten. Both Sapkowski's novels and the games mirror and make subtle references to centuries of the traumatic history of Poland and the Polish people. In *TW3* the free town of Novigrad even resembles the concept of multicultural medieval Danzig (Gdansk), being contested once again by several political powers. In the game the player has the power to change the allegiance of Novigrad once more.ii

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The common speak of the game is of course originally Polish, translated and voiced in full audio also in English, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian. Keeping to the Slavic tradition of the entity one brilliant concept remains: the main language of *TW3* is written using the medieval Glagolitic alphabet of Eastern Christianity. In this way road signs, maps, graffiti and posters are in a readable yet totally historical code, albeit many writings remain in Polish when decoded. Following more standard conventions of fantasy and Sapkowskis original novels, the Elven language is based on Welsh, Irish, French and English.



Figure 5: A map displaying Glagolitic letters. The dialogue here presents some of the current historical context in *TW3*.

Designers of any fantasy game have a plethora of ready monsters to choose from. The vast bestiaries of mythological collections, like the Dungeons & Dragons games use, provide hundreds of alternatives. While using some "western" classics, like the Harpy or the Cockatrice (Kuroliszek), the Witcher bestiary is nevertheless anchored in the

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internationally rather unknown and so far unused Slavic folklore and mythology. Using this treasury of ideas is a great innovation in itself. Adding Fiends (the horned Biesy or Chort) of pagan Slavic beliefs and folk tales, Plague Maidens (the Morowa Dziewica), Noonwraiths (aka "Lady Midday", the Południca), Nightwraiths (the Północnica), Leshens (the Leszy, a forest troll), Drowners (the Topielec or Utopiec, an evil water spirit), and even the fundamental Wild Hunt (the mythical Dziki Gon) and the Crones (the three sisters Baba Jaga) gives a whole new dimension to gaming. These monsters are more than just inventions for a game, they were once embedded into the mind and memories of real people.



Figure 6: The Crones of the Baba Jaga, here as an adaptation of old folk tales. Will you risk the lives of the children they have stolen for achieving your other goals?

The fantasy element of the monsters and ghosts does in fact add to the sense of realism. For a medieval peasant, or actually anyone living in pre-modern times, these creatures were real, be they explained as spawned by hell or venerated remnants of old

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pagan times. Instead of superimposing a modern historical and rational explanation to why these elements of folk tales never were and that they are only fun fantasy, the game instead pays homage to an irrational superstitious world and comes much closer to how any medieval person looked upon his or her reality. *TW3* captures the elements of fear, war and general uncertainty better than most history books or game narratives do.



Figure 7: Meeting a Plague Maiden. Will you have him kiss the monster or let it loose on the land?

The folkloristic element even shines through when Geralt tries to figure out what kind of a monster, if any, he is under contract to find and kill. The descriptions of what the witnesses have seen or heard are loaded with misinformation, lies, prejudice, beliefs and assumptions. Geralt has to investigate each case before any identity or level of truth is revealed. Only when he finds the possible monster does the game turn into true fantasy, or actually into a medieval ballad or tale of knighthood. By shifting the gear and making the monsters physically real the story becomes as real as Beowulf or any Norse or

medieval tale of griffins, dragons and other monsters. *TW3* catches the spirit of an age by making the folklore true. It provides a commendable way to try to understand the medieval mindset of the mostly unlettered, without the inherent condemnation given by modern rational historiography. The presence and use of Slavic mythology and folklore in the design of monsters, beliefs and magic objects is one of the most invigorating features of the game.

In *TW3* people have their beliefs and uncertainties, but the player/Geralt is the only totally rational and learned solver of the problems arising. Geralt being a true outsider, a witcher, makes it possible to present the protagonist as an plausible extension of the modern player in a skilfully medievalised world. Even so, not investigating the relevant sites, clues and corpses thoroughly will sometimes subtly lead the Geralt astray and the player into incomplete solutions, possibly without the gamer ever realising it, just like in real life.

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Figure 8: Talking to a farmer who believes in a brand new deity. Will you believe him?

Adding to a relative sense of realism is that there are no divine interventions, no avatars of gods, ever. Beside of mostly northern and eastern pagan beliefs and folk lore, without any classical pantheon, there is only one organized religion present, the fanatic Order of the Holy Flame, This creed provides clear references to Christianity, especially to the inquisition and elements of dogmatic intolerance. However, interestingly enough, there is no analogue of Christ in the religion of the Order of the Holy Flame. The rigorous hierarchical organization is purging the main town in the game, Novigrad, by burning books and undesired people, as well as hunting "witches", i.e. anyone associated with magic, herbs, paganism and wisdoms of the old. "We must forge a new morality – or rid ourselves from morality altogether", a preacher of the Order claims. Certain dialogues show that this new morality has a rather strong relation to Marxism as well. "Religion is the opiate of the masses! The gods are dead! Thus speaks Master Friedrich of Oxenfurt!", the same preacher states.

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Figure 9: Meeting a Marxist iconoclast in the countryside. Will you protect the old statue he threatens to destroy by beating some sense into him and his followers?

The old and lingering beliefs of the common people centre around a few female divinities, mostly associated with nature, prosperity, peace and fertility: for the continentals there are shrines for Melitele, who has three natures as a girl, a mother and a crone. For the islanders of Skellige there is the fertility goddess of Freya, loaned straight from old Norse tales, as well as a well established institution of [Celtic] druidism. Norse myths are embedded into the story: The Wild Hunt rides a ship named Naglfar and the day of doom they signal is called Ragh nar Roogh. A light spoiler: *TW3* is one of the first games to design this fearful event into a dramatic virtual struggle, for the protagonist to undo it.

Geralt is himself closely associated with the followers of Melitele and the druids, even if he does not himself discuss religious issues often. In the books Geralt finds it hard to believe in any fate or any divine interventions. Yet fate and his choices drive him and the story onwards, regardless. In the game the protagonist will for example be offered a quest to re-erect fallen statues of Melitele, which will result in a deadly fight with the some fanatics of the Holy Flame, if the quest is followed through. The player is, following the novels, definitely made part of the ancient customs and values of the pagan world, more than being a harbinger of new times and values.

Gender and race

The gender approach of *TW3* is also interesting and would really merit some further studies. The game has both been accused of blatant sexism and hailed as one of the most feminist games ever created. The aftermath has stirred quite a set of arguments on the net, some well-founded and many without any first hand playing experience, as well as a few rather unnecessary threads telling more about the prejudices of the authors than about the game.iii After playing the game for some 130 hours, I am not all that convinced that the game promotes any real misogyny or male sexism, quite the contrary. Beside of the designers' teenage fascination for unhistorical cleavages, *TW3* has developed immensely from the memento cards of sexual conquests presented in the first part in 2007.

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Figure 10: Triss Merrigold, sorceress and a possible girlfriend and future partner. Will you stay true to her and break Yennefer's heart?

The saga is about a heavily scarred, bearded male - who has been quite a womanizer in the previous games - and three exceedingly beautiful women, all of them rather sexualized and showing off their revealing beauty, as the skilful designers have wished to display them. Yet of these three, Geralt's two possible love interests, Triss and Yennefer, are subjects and personalities with major goals of their own, and the third and youngest, Ciri, is like a loved daughter to the aging and infertile Geralt. Triss and Yennefer are both sterile sorceresses with the power to alter their looks into anything; Yennefer is infact a 100 years old hunchback, who never shows her real self, so who could really blame her, or the designers, for making her so "Inhumanly beautiful", as she states herself being? Yennefer and Triss are both depicted as powerful and rather vain, and both have been using a sometimes rather simpleminded Geralt as their lover, in both the novels and the games.

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Figure 11: Yennefer, another possible partner and here about to resurrect a corpse for some interrogation, despite your objections.

All the appearances are part of the tale, and all the relations carry a weight of past actions and failures revealed in the novels and the previous games. The Witcher games all take place after the events in the novels, but remain quite faithful to the canon of the original stories. Thus Geralt remains heterosexual, cynical, sarcastic and often quite emotionally detached. If the general plotline would be stated in a few sentences, *TW3* is a tale of a rough but decent man trying to find and save his troubled ward, Ciri, and several others from dying in the middle of raging wars and persecutions. It also remains a narrative of a woman growing up and finding her future and of her mental father's ability to support this and finally let her go. If the player, Geralt, in the game makes the wrong choices at a five easily unnoticed points Ciri will perish, for one of the saddest endings in gaming history. Likewise, if Geralt fools around with both of his former love interests he will also be humiliated and left alone.

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Figure 12: The final moments of Ciri, if you chose to be selfish and unsupportive. Did you start a snowball fight or just get drunk when she needed you?

Ciri is luckily also a playable character for telling her own story, and I am glad to say, she kicks ass with both personality and sword. The game passes the Bechdel test with flying colours; among the many narrative gems is a calm scene where Ciri enjoys a conversation with some other women in a Sauna, swimming and relaxing and adding to her health bar before the enemy reappears. Women in the game are in general of all ages and professions; they are not intended as decorations or victims, but as parts of a complex world. They are as much victims as men are in the presented medievalised and violent settings. In one quest Geralt learns that the master armourer of the whole game is actually the female partner of the smith; she has been covering up for the inadequate and useless stereotypical dwarf for years, until Geralt enables her emancipation and takes over of the business. In another long quest line he can chose to help Skellige to elect its first queen ever, a much sounder choice than letting her competing but reckless brother take over. These events are not just patches over some latent sexist agenda, but



a few examples of a multitude of designed circumstances and possibilities during game play.

To mention other details, the brothels do have a few male prostitutes as well, and Geralt will show as much skin and shape as his possible sex and love partners. If Geralt chooses to pay for a "strumpets" attention, the player will notice that they may take a drug before, which adds a proper sinking feeling to what is transpiring. Visiting a brothel thus becomes a combination of displaying an obvious historical practice and some modern questioning of the institution. The game also introduces probably the first crossdressing elf tailor in gaming history for some quite good dialogue. As the elf eloquently and irrefutably states: "I am a Redanian countess one day, a dockside thug the next. That is true freedom!"

All the story take place in a medievalised, basically Celtic, Scandinavian and Polish Europe, which has an interesting result on the concept of race in the novels and games. Unlike the mixed fantasy of the Elder Scrolls games there are no representatives of African or Asiatic cultures - or their fantasy analogues – in the Witcher world. The designers have not forced some racial quota of alterity into the game, but have instead let the "races" of elves, dwarves and Halflings take the place of the mistrusted, the despised and the persecuted.

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Figure 13: Meeting a basic human racist. Will you participate in a plot intending to kill his mad king or let him win the war?

The racism and pogroms of the fantasy world paint a dark picture of it; Geralt is often confronted with racial issues, some of them rather nasty or mind-bending. For instance, should the player tell the constable that the perpetrator of a crime is the innocent but detestable racist or the actually guilty dwarf, further inflaming the racial problem?

There are seldom choices between black and white. The choices are more like trying to select the lesser harm, forcing a selection between grey and dark grey. The spirit of the world has quite aptly been called Noir: mythological monsters, bandits and deserters populate the countryside, hanged civilians dangle from branches everywhere in the noman's-land, while books, mages and non-humans are burned by witch hunters of a religious order in the town squares. By exposing a credible yet brutal world *TW3* forces players to think a bit further on the real world and our present values. Through this, I would say that *TW3*, approaches and promotes a modern sense of plausible morality

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and desirable equality, like games as Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* or the *Fallout* series have done before.



Figure 14: The remains of a sorceress and a doppelganger after the witch hunters of the Order of the Holy Flame found them. Will you save the others still persecuted?

All in all, Geralt's sense of justice is rather modern, not medieval. The inevitable doomsday he is fighting to stave off, on a grander scale, is also inspired by modern concepts. His world is threatened by inevitable climatic change as well, all life living on borrowed time. Brief glimpses of parallel universes Geralt travels through display how other failed worlds have ended up, as arid deserts or equally dead landscapes of ice. In a certain dialogue with Ciri it is even suggested that she has visited a world like ours, outside of the playable game.

Conclusion

Despite a lot of enforced cut-scenes, some treacherous quick-time choices crucial for

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the endgame, a somewhat difficult keyboard adaptation for PC players, and some problems with moving and the camera view, *TW3* is simply a treat. It is definitely more than a "fantasy" game and more than a semi-medieval reconstruction. I can recommend it to anyone who enjoys a fascinating narrative, a large sandbox, tough decisions and a fresh plot. The dialogue is also brilliant, not to mention the obvious general visual design. Any game designer, medievalist or student of medievalism, ethics or popular beliefs will also find loads of material here for classes and research.

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ⁱ All screenshots from the gameplay were taken by the author.

ⁱⁱ I disagree here with a statement made by Jonas Mattson, Environmental designer at CD Projekt Red, who claimed inspiration came from medieval Amsterdam. Neither the character, topography nor outlook seems Dutch. See http://www.theaveragegamer.com/2013/06/28/the-witcher-3-preview-and-interview/.

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