

The Past and other Monsters: Construction and Consumption of History in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

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Abstract: History, as represented in video games, is a contested site of discourse. While it reduces real historical experiences to a playable role, it also forms the first impressions of history for young players. Therein arises, the question of historical accuracy – if it is a fictional world, does it need to be accurate in its depiction of history? But it is also impossible to completely do away with historical markers of belonging for the game as it is difficult to imagine anything beyond us. The same is evident from the fact that most fantasy video games take inspiration from established high-fantasy conventions, which in turn, are derived from folklores and mythological texts. This paper seeks to analyse the space of historicity created in the game, *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*, in such hyperreal context and explore the experience of medievalism made available through this game.

Video games, just like any other form of media, are not free from history and ideological baggage. More often than not, our perception of a given incident is shaped by pop media depiction of the same, essentially blurring the boundary between the real and the simulation. This framework of understanding becomes even more contested in the experience of a low – fantasy game like *Witcher 3*, which draws upon the popular conception of the medieval ages. In doing so, it problematises the spaces of historicity created in video games, simultaneously drawing material from commonplace reality while also presenting fantastical elements as the reality of that virtual space. As a result, the experience of the hyperreal gains further credence in the context of video games.

As Jean Baudrillard theorised, hyperreality refers to the condition in which the distinction between the real and the virtual is largely dissolved. His concept of hyperreality was closely linked with another concept, namely ‘simulacrum’, which in turn refers to the replacement of reality with its representations (Lane 86-87). This phenomenon of miscognition becomes even more interesting in the context of our consumption of fantasy media which derives its core concepts and world-building aspects from deliberate misrepresentation of history. During the 1980s, Umberto Eco observed a growing interest about the European medieval age in the popular culture. He mentions that “we are dreaming of the Middle Ages” (Eco 59) through which he refers to a desire of return to the past, which is imagined to be simpler in comparison to the contemporary times. In the essay, he enumerates ten different kinds of Middle Ages that are imagined in various works in the contemporary times. These medievalist imaginings give rise to a popular perception of the medieval Europe that entails an “oscillation between fantastic neo medievalism and responsible philological examination” (Eco 77). Regardless of the factual accuracy of the worlds constructed, what was crucial was the given work’s ability to produce a feeling of its firm belonging in historical reality.

This sense of authenticity was performed through various plot elements such as feudalistic social setup, knightly romances and gross misogyny, to name a few. As a result, it gives rise to a hyperreal experience of the medieval ages in the modern times and it is this very phenomenon that Eco calls ‘neomedievalism’. This mixture of the mythic and the real constitutes the core of the fantasy genre. While this commingling

was evident from early literatures such as *Beowulf*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and et cetera, the contemporary tendency of creating a fantasy world setting from real historical timelines was established by the works of J. R. R. Tolkien.

J. R. R. Tolkien and his high-fantasy works *The Lord of The Rings* and *The Silmarillion* contributed significantly to the establishment of fantasy as a genre that allows the intermingling of the real and the imaginary. His works were derivative of his various interests such as philology, religion and war, in particular his personal experience in World War I and his son's service in World War II. The central conflict of the trilogy closely mirrored the biblical battle between good and evil. His characterisation of Sauron was also influenced by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, especially the description of the fallen angel, Lucifer, in the epic poem (Mcgill Wikispeedia). His interest in languages led him to develop several make – believe languages, spanning across centuries-worth of imagined history. This fictional history was not just limited to human characters but also included various classes of fantastical beings such as elves and dwarves. The most important thing for Tolkien while creating these fictive languages was the tonality and the perceived 'sweetness' of the performed speech. As he himself claimed "Greek, Finnish, Welsh (to name at random languages which have a very characteristic and in their different ways beautiful wordform, readily seizable by the sensitive at first sight) are capable of producing this [phonic] pleasure" (Tolkien 207). It is hardly surprising that he modelled his Elvish languages following closely– but not mirroring entirely – the Welsh and Finnish phonetic system. Sindarin was created following the former while Qenya was modelled on the latter.

For him, "The making of language and mythology are related functions" (Tolkien 210) and as a result, the Lord of The Rings became to him "an essay in "linguistic aesthetic"" (Tolkien 183). Furthermore, his own experience as an officer in the First World War significantly shaped the narrative of the books, as is evident from the close resemblance that the Dead Marshes of *The Hobbit* had with the trenches dug during the wartime. Thus, his fantasy world was brought about by the intermingling of the fictional with real, historical elements of day-to-day life. Following the immense popularity of the series, there was an outpouring of various novels in the same vein. Hence, it is hardly surprising that Tolkien's works had a prominent impact in the development of the immensely popular tabletop RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*. As Gary Gygax, one of the co-creators of the game, notes:

How did it [Lord of The Rings] influence the D&D game? Whoa, plenty, of course. Just about all the players were huge JRRT fans, and so they insisted that I put as much Tolkien-influenced material into the game as possible. Anyone reading this that recalls the original D&D game will know that there were Balrogs, Ents, and Hobbits in it. Later those were removed, and new, non-JRRT things substituted—Balor demons, Treants, and Halflings. (qtd. in Tresca 35)

Dungeons & Dragons, in turn, was hugely influential in the development of the fantasy game genre.

However, a critical distinction must be made here between high and low fantasy works.

The term "high fantasy" was first used by Lloyd Alexander in his essay, titled "High Fantasy and Heroic Romance" (1971). Thereafter, it was used by Kenneth J. Zahorski and Robert H. Boyer to refer to works of fiction that take place in secondary worlds which exist beyond the human realm of existence (Stableford 198). In such worlds, fantastical things occur and extraordinary beings exist without much influence from the 'other' human world (if at it exists in that work's fictional universe). Concomitant to the earlier category, "low fantasy" refers to fictional works which take place in the primary world of humans, that is

invaded by events which are “nonrational happenings that are without causality or rationality because they occur in the rational world where such things are not supposed to occur” (Stableford 256). While high fantasy worlds have their own rules and physical laws, low fantasy works are based in realistic environments which are intruded by the fantastical. In context of such distinction, Tolkien’s works are all high fantasy whereas *Witcher 3* belongs to the low fantasy genre.

The reason this distinction becomes important is the fact that while Tolkien insisted on the fact that his mythopoeic works were based off of the real world, they still had the capacity of inducing a feeling of enchantment and wonder in its reader. However, *Witcher 3*, while firmly entrenched within a fantastical world, has a clearly recognisable setting – that is, the East European countryside. This game, like its previous two instalments, is based off of Andrzej Sapkowski's novels collectively called *The Witcher*. Interestingly enough, these games are not conceptualised as a continuation of the series and the Sapkowski’s direct involvement in the game was only to the extent of creating the maps of the game world.

The game revolves around Geralt of Rivia, a Witcher (i.e. a monster hunter, who is a magically enhanced individual, possessing supernatural abilities as a result of mutations). The main storyline revolves around his search for his foster-daughter, Ciri, who is the last descendent of the Elder Blood, an ancient and unique Elven bloodline which grants her the ability to manipulate space and time. As a result, she is being chased by the Wild Hunt, a horde of horse-riding spectres who are the harbinger of catastrophe, in the game. CD Projekt Red, the Polish game development company which created the game, received much critical appreciation. They were the recipient of several prestigious game-of-the-year awards, along with its recurrent appearance in ‘best games of all times’ lists from various reputed websites like IGN, PC Gamer and etc. It is especially appreciated for its innovative story-telling in an open-world setting wherein each side quest has its own complete narrative. As Kimberly Wallace notes in her 2015 review of the game, there is a significant amount of agency that is made available to the player as each dilemma can be solved in several ways (such as brute force, tricking or using the protagonists’ supernatural powers) and every decision made in the game is significant as it quite literally shapes how the story unfolds (Gameinformer). As a result of such connection, the world within the game feels alive – it is teeming with personalities and possibilities of different kinds. And this is where the experience of history, as provided by the game, becomes a point of contention. Arthur Gies’ famous review of the game in *Polygon* criticises the game for its lack of colored characters and its ambivalent (if not downright misogynistic) portrayals of female characters. The game involves White human characters only, be it peasant or royalty. Furthermore, Gies addresses the violence directed towards the female characters and their hypersexual presentation. There are several demons and monsters, that Geralt is asked to destroy, who arise out of female discontentment. One character in the main storyline of the game, Bloody Baron, is particularly known for his cruelty (hence his moniker). He admits to being violent towards his own wife, to the extent of making her suffer a miscarriage. He is given the space to explain his rationale and justification for the same, followed by the player’s option of offering a sympathetic reply.

Even the main female characters of the story – Yennefer, Triss and Ciri – are given an ambivalent subject position of being simultaneously powerful in their own right but having a two-dimensional relationship with Geralt. Yennefer of Vengerberg is a powerful sorceress and the main love interest of Geralt. She is described as a raven-haired beauty who smells of lilac and gooseberries. However, her appearance is an

enchantment as she is almost a hundred years old. Later, when Geralt notices her lopsided shoulders and thereafter realises that she is a hunchback, he is shown to not lose his love for her. Triss Marigold is another legendary Temerian sorceress and she, too, is described to be in love with Geralt. Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon (generally referred to as Ciri) is the princess of Cintra and the ward of the Witcher. She is often described as Geralt's 'destiny' and they share a strong familial bond. As is evident, all these female characters are defined in relation to Geralt, either in romantic terms or platonic, familial terms. While one can argue that they have been characterised so because the story itself is said from the point of view of the Witcher himself and they each have significant political identities outside of their relation to him (Yennefer being unofficial advisor of the King Demavend of Aedirn, Triss being a member of King Foltest's royal council and Ciri being a royal princess and possibly the ruler of Nilfgaard, depending on the player's discretion), the game still portrays much of their presence only through the quests that Geralt undertakes, without much external perspectives. In addition to this, their portrayals are constructed to cater to the male gaze. As Gies notes in his article:

I get that the setting of *The Witcher 3* is meant to be a dark, dirty fantasy. But in a world that so explicitly goes out of its way to build a believable, distinctive take on the genre, the inclusion of so much violence explicitly directed against women feels like a clear,

disconcerting choice. It's not just present, it's frequently a focus. When they're not being murdered, women in *The Witcher 3* are comically sexualized. Nudity is everywhere — think *Game of Thrones* on HBO — and even when they're dressed, female leads don't have it much better... Even Ciri, a daughter figure for Geralt and someone revealed to be incredibly powerful in her own right, walks around with her shirt unbuttoned in the middle, with a pretty clear view of a bra underneath. (Polygon)

Due to its critical stance, the article generated polarising opinions with people. On the one hand, there were some claiming that it is these elements that add to the historical accuracy of the game. On the other hand, others believed that the game, being a work of fantasy, could afford to avoid those very elements through its mode of twisting the real and commonplace. This debate brings back the aforementioned divide between the authentic and the accurate, as theorised by Eco. This attitude towards the past is a subjective response and is generated beyond historical truths, thereby evoking different responses from people when they encounter neomedievalist content through fantasy media. For instance, a user called "Spoonny_Bart" commented that the "the world portrayed in the books and games alike draws heavily from Medieval history" (qtd. in Brandenburg 210) as a means to justify the game's treatment of women. Another user called "Rhys4Peace" connects the game's history to European history to claim that the game take place at a time period that "is long before Europe had visited the exotic places of the planet, and as such, non-Caucasian people were practically unheard of" (qtd. in Brandenburg 210) as a way of justifying the lack of racial diversity in the game. Both such comments show how history itself is fictionalised and contextualised in the context of a given fantasy media. They also present how the Middle Ages – as an imagined spatio temporal category – blurs the divide between factual truth and perceived reality, as both users draw assumptions from their personal perception of the medieval.

In direct contrast to such claims of historical authenticity, the game itself draws inspiration from several disparate locales. The game is developed from the perspective of the central and northern European High

and Late Middle Ages (Fewster 165). In game, Geralt carries two swords – one made from forged steel and the other coated with silver. While the former has general attack purposes, the latter is exclusively for monsters which are vulnerable to silver. Such a stylistic choice made in the fighting mechanism is in line with the historical reality of the concerned age. However, the fantasy element is introduced through the sign-system, wherein the player-Geralt is able to employ supernatural abilities and directly attack or influence the opponent. The signs cast by the player are of four types – Aard, Axii, Quen and Yrden. The Aard spell is a telekinetic blast which can knock down enemies, remove toxic gas from an area and blow through broken doors and rubble. The Axii spell involves mind control, whereby he is able to control his enemies in combat (and even make one enemy attack another if it is fully upgraded). It is also useful outside combat situations as it helps the witcher control the conversations and make them proceed in a direction that is beneficial for him. The Igni sign is essentially the witcher's ability to produce fire – in combat it can be used to set the enemy on fire. In general, it comes in handy to light lamps, torches and etcetera. Thus, even the gameplay mechanic ensures an amalgam of both real and fantastical.

Now coming back to environments, they are mostly derivative of European geography and historical construction of the same. The map is littered with castles, unending wild fields and thatched huts of peasants. However, there are also modern elements that are possible only from the nineteenth century onwards such as lingerie, wall posters and large shop windows (Fewster 165). Touissant – with its vineyards, olive gardens and hills – is evidently inspired from Mediterranean landscapes, particularly Provence and Tuscany. Velen and Novigrad are familiar views for the Polish audience, with castle ruins and swampy marshlands. As Derek Fewster notes:

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 [The Witcher 3] 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. (Fewster 165)

He goes on to analyse the linguistic patterns in the common-speak of the game. The Glagolitic script, which is the oldest known Slavic script, is used in the game. While the content of the game is made available to the player in the desired language, the script remains in road signs, maps, graffiti and posters. In doing so, the geographical markers of the game remain readable but undecipherable to the player. Furthermore, following in Tolkien's convention and Sapkowski's novels, the Elven language is constructed upon Welsh, Irish, French and English. The invading Nilfgaardians speak an interesting mix of Welsh and Germanic dialects, along with a slight Dutch accent (Fewster 165). This is only one of the ways in which the game opens up the long, traumatic history of Poland wherein it was invaded multiple times.

The region was under constant modernising efforts by several imperial powers such as Prussia, Russia and Habsburg kingdoms from the Enlightenment period onwards. These three imperial powers, ascribing to the form of the modern state, expanded into the formerly independent Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. The colonial rhetoric of a western, modernised power seeking to uplift the underdeveloped Poles was employed to justify the destruction of the Commonwealth. The colonial rhetoric of a western, modernised power seeking to uplift the underdeveloped Poles was employed to justify the destruction of the Commonwealth. The general inefficiency and anarchy of the Polono-Lithuanian government, poverty and

the uneducated (and exploited) status of the masses were cited as the reasons for the colonial expansion (Majkowski 11). A similar politically ambivalent dynamic is noticed in the game as well. The Northern kingdoms constitute a chaotic, anarchic collective of countries which lacks a proper leader. It is under the colonial influence of Nilfgaard which is a centralised state with significant armed forces at its disposal.

The ambivalent nature of this expansion is especially evident when Geralt goes to an area, which had been recently occupied by Nilfgaard. The local society is divided in two – loyalists and Nilfgaard sympathisers. The former adheres to the rule of local authorities and demands that the Termerian crest are put up in inns. The latter is evident from the fact that several NPCs were changing their names to appear more Nilfgaardian. Furthermore, a Dwarven blacksmith supports the colonial expansion as the earlier regime had left him persecuted (on the basis of his race) and the Nilfgaardian occupation supports him. As a result, the Nilfgaardian presence is not portrayed as an evil empire – rather it appears more civil when viewed in comparison to the Bloody Baron mentioned earlier and Radovid. Radovid is a cruel ruler, originating locally, who aims to establish an absolutist state and is extremely ruthless in his actions. In contrast to this, the Nilfgaardian regime may appear more pragmatic which is willing to leave the nature of the local community undisturbed after occupation (Majkowski 12). However, its implicit epistemic violence and ideological construction of the ‘civilising mission’ is hard to ignore. The brutal military conquest of Nilfgaard is couched within the imperial logic of benevolence and generosity. The main story line quests that Geralt undertakes are largely motivated by personal allegiances, which are however closely tied with significant political implications. His search for Cirri is out of his love for his ward. However, in order to keep her safely away from the realm of politics, he would have to hide her. Similarly, when he helps Triss, he is not just aiding her because of their friendship (or love), he is also supporting a resistance movement. In a similar note, the monsters – especially noonwrights and werewolves – carry stories of personal tragedy but which are also perceived by the peasants as evil. While there are several taken from the bestiaries used in Dungeons & Dragons style games, such as Harpy or Cockatrice, the Witcher bestiary is largely derived from Slavic folklore and myths. Fewster explicates upon the same, stating:

Adding Fiends (the horned Biesy or Chort) of pagan Slavic beliefs and folk tales, Plague Maidens (the Morowa Dziewica), Noonwraiths (aka “Lady Middy”, 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 Dzikie 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. (Fewster 167)

As a result, the game draws from a range of Polish and Slavic cultural texts to present a superstitious pagan setting for the villages, which stands in stark contrast to the cold rationale followed by kingdoms and empires. It is in the former world that Geralt has to immerse himself in and try to solve the complexities generated by the same through quests or witcher contracts – which entails work that he is contracted to do for monetary returns. However, the game problematises this in two ways – by producing an ethical dimension in such quests and by presenting the peasants/ villagers as a negative presence.

In the context of the first method, the monsters are often presented in a sympathetic light. In the quest named “Wild at Heart”, Geralt comes across a notice of a man called Niellen who is searching for his

missing wife, Hanna. As he is investigating the case, he comes across Hanna's sister, Margrit, who tries to bribe him to lie to Niellen and drop the objective of investigation. If the player chooses to go ahead with the quest regardless, then it is revealed that Niellen is a werewolf. Margrit, who had been in love with him, had thought of telling Hanna the same and when she exposed her to the bestial state of her husband, Hanna was killed by him in his bloodlust. This enrages Niellen and he seeks to kill Margrit, where the player is again presented with the choice of letting the werewolf kill her or telling her to run away, while he slays the werewolf. If the first option is chosen, then after Margrit is killed, Niellen requests the Witcher to kill him. In a similar fashion the noonwraith, in the contract quest of "The White Lady", is revealed to have become that way after she committed suicide when she was sold by her parents to a rich man, in return for monetary remuneration.

Personally, and presumably for a lot of people, one of the most morally difficult situation was provided by the quest "Ladies of the Wood". Replicating the philosophical trolley problem, the player is made to choose between allowing the sacrifice of orphan children to the three Crones in the Crookback Bog or else save them at the cost of a whole village being decimated by the crones. Such a construction not only adds to the players experience for a work of fantasy but also helps in constructing the neo-medievalist space of the game wherein monsters feel like a real presence, similar to the world of Beowulf or any other medieval tale of dragons, griffins and et cetera. The game creates the space of perceived historical reality by "making the folklore true" (Fewster 169).

As for the second contextual understanding of the game, in several contract quests, Geralt is supplied with false information, prejudices and outright lies by the peasant. Furthermore, the general reception that he receives from villagers and peasants is negative, where he is treated like an outsider and whose presence must be tolerated in order for the evil presence to be removed. This is in compliance with the historical imagination of the lower classes being a superstitious and distrustful group, wary of alien presences. Such a neo- medievalist configuration is further bolstered by the existence of the Church of the Eternal Fire.

In the game, it is a fanatic religious order that rejects and seeks to remove all unnatural existences, such as witches, various kinds of nonhumans and monsters. In Novigrad, Geralt comes across people being burnt publicly, under the suspicion of practicing witchcraft. This religious presence immediately brings to mind the medieval conception of Christianity, particularly the Salem witch trials, Inquisition and the general intolerance that the Roman Catholic clergy is associated with in the popular imagination. Furthermore, the name itself has its origin in Orthodox Christian belief system. The fact that this religion had a complete hold over Novigrad and was slowly spreading its influence over the other Northern Kingdoms closely reflects the colonial influence of the Christian religion in Poland as well. As Tomas Z. Majkowski notes:

Poland is scarred by the violent introduction of Latin Christianity in the 10th-century and the simultaneous destruction of both the earlier, more benign influences of Slavic Christianity and the pagan tradition itself. The arrival of Roman Catholicism is, therefore, the first act of colonization depriving Poles of any genuine mythological background, as it became viciously destroyed for political reasons. (Majokowski 18)

In the midst of such a conflict-ridden world, Geralt emerges as the voice of modern reason and rationality. As a monster hunter, he is the eternal outsider. He belongs to neither the upper classes nor the lower classes. However, he maintains contact with both peasants and the nobility. He is empathetic with the

downtrodden and oppressed, frequently taking their side. Even in his fantastical capacity as a witcher, he displays a scientific set of mind. He often debunks superstitions and ignorance of the people. In the side quest, “A Greedy God”, the witcher comes across a village which worships a deity, Allgod, and gives him offerings in return for protection. However, due to recent wars, the supplies had been running low and the villagers were worried about the god’s wrath wreaking havoc on them. Upon investigation, Geralt finds that the Allgod is merely a centuries-old sylvan, who tricks the villagers.

Thus, the character of Geralt – in being firmly rooted in the game’s world but who also possesses modern sensibilities – is a convenient gateway for the player to fully immerse themselves in the neo medieval space of the game. Furthermore, the presence of a detached individual that upholds the principles of reason and scientific investigation, in a primarily feudalistic colonial world space is significant as it opens up a neutral space of objective truth, whereby the primacy of an individual’s rationality is upheld in society characterised by conflicting ideologies.

Consequently, the players are able to retain their own modernity and their individual value systems, while entering a space that is constructed from particularities of a bygone era. It aids the player’s immersion into the game narrative, without experiencing any cognitive disjuncture from a socio – political arena that is different from that of the contemporary times. Due to this affective distance, our own perception of the medieval ages is heavily influenced by modern standards of ethics and understanding. The neo – medievalist space we experience through games such as the Witcher 3 is not without its modern biases. As a result of this complex formulation of fantasy games, the players are made to inhabit an ambivalent space that doesn’t completely disavow itself from commonplace reality nor fully gives way to a pure suspension of scepticism.

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