UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Faculty of Humanities, Social Studies, and Education

The Paths of a Witcher

Moral foundations, Narrative Distance and Choice in *The Witcher 3*

David Christoffersen

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1   Introduction

Videogames present unique opportunities to tell engaging stories, as well as to explore moral questions. The player being an active participant in the storytelling experience brings them closer to the character they are controlling. This can mean that they feel mastery when they complete a difficult challenge, or culpability if their choices result in a negative outcome. Incorporating failure and perseverance into the storytelling is made possible through direct interaction, which is part of what makes videogames such interesting subjects for academic analysis. Overcoming a challenge or facing difficult choices and consequences can be woven into the narrative—demanding investment, development, and consideration in order to progress. Interactivity, in other words creates myriad possibilities for involving and compelling storytelling unique to videogames as a medium. Exploring this alongside traditional analysis of literature and film can add nuance and variety to the analysis of different varieties of storytelling media.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015) is a fantasy role-playing game where players take on the role of a Witcher, most easily understood as a monster slayer, by the name of Geralt. Like many narratively focused games it includes branching storylines that change depending on the player's choices. I argue that this makes them uniquely suited for exploring moral questions and what drives different players to have differing opinions on possible outcomes. *The Witcher 3* is particularly well suited for such exploration as it provides players with a compelling and unflinching exploration of human nature. This is driven by the combination of fantastical and naturalistic elements in the game's setting. The absence of morality meters or other objective measures of right and wrong means that the impact and challenge of the game's moral questions is left up to the player. This also means that what is perceived as a good act or outcome is left up to the interplay between the boundaries set by a morally ambiguous protagonist and the player controlling him. Throughout the game the player will be interacting with complex characters, often with both good and bad qualities. Players will be faced with incredible cruelty and asked to decide who lives or dies, often with unforeseeable consequences further down the line. The harshness of the game's setting combines with its magical elements in creating ample opportunities for moral dilemmas, as well as unique challenges. How the player perceives the game's difficulty can play into their interaction with characters in the game. More competent players might forego material rewards or face greater challenges in order to achieve better narrative outcomes. This would be a result of lessened dependency on resources in order to make progress. The presence of

magic, monsters and humanoid fantasy creatures like elves and dwarves is accounted for within the naturalistic setting, which preserves the grounded feeling of the game. Bigotry toward groups or individuals, as well as toward Geralt also contribute to the story and can increase or lessen the emotional distance between the player and different characters. Playing through the game and making different decisions creates a unique iteration of Geralt as a character, as many possibilities can be realised within the game's narrative. The availability of different choices is dependent on Geralt, as he sets the boundaries and the player acts within those lines.

For the purpose of creating a solid theoretical framework I will be using established research on videogames (Grodal, 2000), (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020) and cinematography (Brown, 2021). This research aligns well with traditional literary analysis due to audiovisual storytelling having established practices and approaches meant to communicate specific messages. For the purpose of analysing moral questions and understanding different player responses I will be making use of Booth's theory of Narrative Distance (Booth, 1961) as well as Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2012). Booth's account of how readers become aligned with, or distanced from characters works well in conjunction with Haidt's theories on the foundations of moral thinking. People are more likely to condemn those they dislike, while excusing the flaws of those who they feel close to. What makes us respond positively or negatively to specific actions—driving us to like or dislike someone, depends on our intuitions. Together these theories create a comprehensive framework for explaining different responses to the same scenes. Gaining an understanding of this can provide insight into what drives humans to think and act in the way that we do, while also explaining why people's intuitions drive them toward different conclusions. Awareness of this could contribute to more compelling and interesting narratives as well as fostering greater understanding for differing perspectives. In a world rife with conflict and polarisation, such understanding could help build bridges between opposing groups.

This thesis starts off by introducing videogames as a concept in order to familiarise the reader with concepts, mechanics, and other aspects unique to the medium. This is followed by a specific introduction to *The Witcher 3*. Then I begin presenting the theoretical framework, starting off with audiovisual storytelling. This establishes common practice and ways of communicating information through the use of sound or imagery. The final pieces of the theoretical framework are Narrative Distance and Moral Foundations Theory. These will be used to explore the player's relationship with their avatar and other characters, and to explain why players intuit different things from the same situation. Finally, I will use the theoretical

framework to analyse *The Witcher 3*. Initially this analysis will explore how the game teaches the player to play and interact with the world and its characters. Following that is one of the key character conflicts of the game, between the main character and a powerful ruler. Then I explore one of the game's most memorable questlines in order to highlight the game's storytelling and character writing. The final subchapter explores the game's three possible endings and what they represent tying back to character dynamics. The possibility of failure is emphasised and argued to enhance the emotional impact of the game's other endings.

2 A brief introduction to Videogames

A guide for the unfamiliar academic

There is incredibly diversity within the field of videogames. Just as books can do everything from providing culinary recipes to telling of epic adventures, videogames can range from strategy games where the player commands armies[1], to frantic multiplayer games about restaurant management[2], to role-playing games with intricate and dynamic stories[3]. Different genres require different skillsets, as well as differing greatly in presentation, complexity, and purpose. A competitive shooter like *Call of Duty* where you play against other people can be easily compared to traditional sports, as the goal is to outplay your opponent(s) and accumulate more points than the other team/player in order to win. The appeal of competitive sports also applies to videogames and can be seen in the growing popularity of E-sports.

Meanwhile a story-based, single-player game like *The Witcher 3*, which will be the subject of this thesis—is more focused on telling interesting stories. The game has the player engage with different characters and progress through a dynamic story that changes in accordance with the player's actions. The purpose of these kinds of games is to draw the player into the game world—making them feel like they are actively participating in a story taking place in a completely different world.

Videogames are an audiovisual medium similar in many ways to movies. The similarities between the two make established techniques for building atmosphere and audiovisual storytelling applicable to both forms of media. What separates videogames from other forms of media, however, is their interactivity. This allows players to dynamically shape and alter a game's narrative (Grodal, 2000, p. 197). Direct input from the player is required to progress and overcome whatever challenge they are presented with. This input will in the vast majority of cases come from the player pushing buttons on a controller or by utilising a keyboard and mouse setup.

Players being actively engaged with what happens within the game requires them to stay alert in order to respond appropriately to new information and stimuli (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006, p. 133). As sequences of action-reaction loops between the player and the game emerge and become automatized their cognitive load is lessened, allowing them to plan their next moves while staying alive long enough to put the plan into action (Klimmt &

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[1] *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment)
[2] *PlateUp!* (It's Happening Studios)
[3] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Project Red)

Hartmann, 2006, p. 138). Acting appropriately when faced with a challenge inside a game requires that your input causes your avatar to move in an expected way. This is what I will call the "feel" of a game: the responsiveness and predictability of the game's controls. A game with a good feel will react in a foreseeable and responsive manner to your input, allowing you to remain immersed in the gameplay experience without interference. Controls that feel clunky or unresponsive might result in unintended in-game deaths, unpredictable movement or other behaviour that causes the player to no longer be immersed in the gameplay experience. These remind the player that they are playing a game in their living-room rather than battling monsters or exploring alien planets. A goal for videogame designers then becomes to preserve immersion through minimising interference and maintaining player engagement.

When done well, the audio-visual message combines with the feel of your input through gameplay in a way that enhances the storytelling through interactivity. The story you experience can contain anything from desperation and helplessness to spectacular power fantasies, each with their own "carrots" and "sticks" to encourage and discourage certain ways of acting. An almost instant "retry" after dying combined with great strength, speed and capability on the part of your avatar, for instance, encourages a direct approach—even if opponents appear fearsome on an audio-visual level (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020, pp. 235-236). Operating within this kind of framework primes the player toward a certain approach. Both fight and flight are available to the player, but '**FIGHT**' is emphasised to such a degree that flight would not only be unintuitive, but also embarrassing within the game's context.

A game where you lack the capacity to fight back against frightening monsters on the other hand takes fight out of the equation, leaving flight as the only viable option. This would emphasise feelings of fear and panic rather than excitement and agency. Such different game scenarios allow us to observe that a player's emotional reaction to a given situation depends on how they assess their own coping potential (Grodal, 2000, p. 202). When a game encourages you to feel powerful and capable, you are more likely to react with excitement to a new challenge. Similarly, discouragement and helplessness alter emotional reaction whether these come from lack of skill or confidence on the player's part or are constructed through gameplay and audiovisual presentation. This means that helplessness or discouragement can be an intended part of the experience. Forcing the player into a position where they feel small or vulnerable puts them into a distinct frame of mind where feelings of terror or dread can be more effectively conveyed and experienced.

The fact that no progress will be made without direct input from the player immediately creates a connection between the player and the character they are controlling. The player is made to experience events *with* their in-game avatar, making them both an observer of and a participant in unfolding events. In a narratively-focused game this can make players feel empathy for their character and ones they interact with, while also sharing in their victories and defeats as they influence both the character and player (Perron, 2005, p. 2). In the process of playing through a narratively focused game, the player controls their avatar and discovers relevant clues and details relating to the ongoing plot. However, they may also wander about and explore the world on their own accord—creating an unstructured narrative of dynamic exploration that may or may not have an impact on the controlled narrative. While this can lead to hidden treasure that can help on their journey direct interaction with the narrative is still required in order to progress through and eventually finish the game (Perron, 2005, p. 6). A key difference between videogames and a storytelling medium like a book or movie, is that important details about characters or the world may be hidden and only discovered through searching through the environment or dialogue with side-characters that can be missed. Accomplishing this in a book would be akin to tearing out a few pages and not revealing their content to the reader until they discover them hidden under the kitchen-sink.

The connection between the player and their avatar creates an interesting dynamic. It is incredibly common for a player to say something like "*Fiddlesticks[4]*, I died!" as a response to their character meeting an untimely end at the hands of a trap or enemy. Rather than passively observing events as you would with a book or movie, you are instead directly responsible for what happens on the screen. Some games tell linear stories that will remain the same regardless of what you do, while others tell dynamic stories that change depending on the player's actions.

Some have interpreted the use of first person pronouns commonly used by players in reference to their avatar's actions as players inserting themselves directly into the story, effectively projecting themselves onto their in-game avatar (Robson & Meskin, 2016, pp. 167-169). I would argue that this is a misinterpretation that fails to take several factors into account. Firstly, videogame avatars are often characters with their own fictional histories and lives. A player operating within the confines set by the character they are controlling does not change this, nor does it give the player access to or understanding of the character's internal processes. The added immersion of a story that you directly contribute to, combined with this

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[4] Quote altered for the benefit of readers who may object to profanity.

lack of insight can be used to craft wholly unique narratives in which the player can feel culpable for the actions of their avatar within the game (Suduiko, 2018, p. 9).

The player's ability to control some decisions does not equate to them having full access to, or understanding of, the character's thoughts, mental state, or motivations. This divide between the player and their avatar can be used in conjunction with the cooperative nature of the player-avatar relationship in order to evoke specific reactions from the player. Having a character's mental state deteriorate as they commit increasingly more gruesome or vile acts, all while the player controls them can be uniquely suited to creating a visceral feeling of horror or disgust from the player (Suduiko, 2018, pp. 9-10). The following quote from Suduiko is a wonderful example of the interplay between the player's real-world knowledge or experience and the effect this has on the game's narrative:

> "There are often conditions for "failure" in a video game in the following sense: it is possible for an avatar to die in the course of a video game's narrative, e.g. by failing to kill some particular enemy, at which point the player will have to return to some particular earlier position in the playthrough (often the last point at which the game was saved) and try to find a way to proceed beyond that point without the avatar being killed. Failing-and-repeating is essentially a process of the player learning the various possible outcomes of the game, iterating various commands to the avatar until they find success conditions for proceeding through the narrative. This means that players often use information from their failed attempts in order to ultimately succeed: perhaps the player learns-by-death-of-the-avatar in Skyrim that a large, disproportionately powerful monster lurks behind a hidden but avoidable corner; subsequently, she proceeds by directing her avatar to avoid that corner. Suppose the player named her avatar "Icarus": we would surely be licensed to ask, as we would when making sense of a character's actions in any such narrative, "Why did Icarus avoid that corner as he progressed through the area?" The obvious answer seems to require that we cite the monster that previously killed Icarus, but surely Icarus, as he (fictionally) lives and breathes, does not know about that monster. One might instead try to construct some story about how Icarus "had a bad feeling" about the corner, or how he simply avoided it by dumb luck, but these ad hoc explanations wilfully avoid the apparent, actual reason why Icarus did not go explore the corner: the player knew about the monster waiting for Icarus" (Suduiko, 2018, p. 6).

A game's dynamic narrative, manifesting in this example through gameplay and without explicit narration within the game, underlines what I would describe as a cooperative experience between the player and the character that they are controlling. You may as a player intuitively lean towards creating an in-game justification for why you chose a certain course of action, but the fate of your character ultimately relies on your ability to choose and act appropriately in a given situation. Failing this will generally result in having your progress reset and trying again from an earlier point in the game.

Having "saves" or "checkpoints" that you can be returned to either by force or choice also adds a dimension to decision-making in videogames. If you are placed in a situation where your character has to choose between killing or sparing an enemy commander, you may first decide to kill him, only to grow curious about what would happen if you spared him instead. In this situation you can return to the point before you made the decision and choose differently this time. This leaves the player free to explore the possibility structure of the game (Suduiko, 2018, p. 8). The ability to alter events creates myriad possible realities within the narrative. While the ability to selectively reset your progress may seem like a handy feature that effectively removes any stakes from the narrative. This can be countered by adding more long-term consequences of your choice later on, or by having any decision come with pros and cons that will have to be weighed against each other by the player. Both methods are used to great effect in *TW3* and have played a big part in my choosing to write about that game in particular.

The interactive nature of videogames combined with a purpose of entertaining and keeping the player immersed requires challenge or an activity in order to keep the player engaged. The most common way to do this is through combat, putting the player up against opponents who will have to be dispatched or overcome in some way in order to make progress. This adds a layer of challenge to the experience as progressing requires the player to improve through acquiring and polishing a required skillset.

A good combat experience will tend to have enemy attacks being signalled through specific animations, and generally with successive attacks playing out in set patterns and rhythms. Going up against an incredibly challenging boss can lead to frustration in the short term, but repeated attempts and steady improvement lead to progress, which in turn leads to perseverance against the odds. Finally accomplishing a task that has required the player to improve through repeated failures creates a feeling of mastery and excitement unique to videogames as a storytelling medium. In this, videogames are distinguished from other types of media, as the challenge of a fight can be incorporated into the storytelling. You are not

only taking in descriptions of a difficult battle or an oppressive atmosphere with the odds stacked against you—you are experiencing it first-hand. The feeling of personal involvement is enhanced by other entities within the game acting independently, as well as in relation to your actions. Your control of events is not absolute and will depend on how skilled you are at handling them (Grodal, 2000, p. 203).

Unlike non-interactive media, videogames are wholly reliant on player engagement for the story to progress. When done well, this immerses the player in the game's setting. A player having to overcome challenges whether they be puzzles, boss fights or difficult platforming-sections in order to progress through a narrative adds a degree of personal development different from what could be experienced as a passive observer in a story.

The consequences of your actions rest on the shoulders of you and your avatar as your actions impact the course of the narrative in tangible ways. The joy and relief of vanquishing a powerful foe, or the sadness and guilt of your choices leading to the death of a beloved character depend on effort and investment. Caring about characters requires that there are actual characters to care about. Videogames will often be populated mostly with nameless entities like "town guard" or "farmer", who elicit little emotional investment. However, even minor characters can be made relatable to players through well-written dialogue and discoverable details. Populating the world with narratives separate from the ones the player is taking part in makes the world feel like it is inhabited by actual people, even if you don't interact with all of them.

Great stories that strike a chord with those who experience them can be found in many different forms. But as a medium, videogames have been met with a degree of dismissal or even vilification that overlooks the wonderful stories and experiences to be found within them (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019). By analysing them in the context of literary scholarship, using a combination of concepts from narratology and video game studies, and discussing how one of my favourite games tells a compelling story that would be impossible in any other format, I hope to shed some light on the many storytelling opportunities to be found in interactive media.

2.1 The Witcher 3: What is it?

A guide within a guide to confuse the unfamiliar academic

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt is a fantasy role-playing game. Role-playing games are—as the name suggests—built around the player taking on a role within the game world that allows for meaningful interaction and choice within the confines of the game-world. These games tend to be greatly influenced by their setting as those will alter the courses of action and character development available to you, as well as the hazards you will encounter along the way. Quite a few role-playing games allow for creating one's own character[5] or inhabiting the role of a blank slate with minimal characterisation outside of what is decided by the player[6]. These games leave the limits of what the character would do completely in the player's hands, provided the attempted action is allowed for in the game. If you decide to create an evil, borderline genocidal character in Fable, you are free to do so. If you want to create a smooth-talking scientific genius in Fallout, nothing is stopping you—aside from the myriad hazards and monstrosities populating the nuclear wasteland you're exploring.

    The Witcher 3, on the other hand, has the player taking control of an already established character. This comes with certain limitations in terms of what actions are available to the player, but also allows for deeper storytelling as there is a solid basis for character-building already present. The boundaries for what Geralt of Rivia, the main character of the game, is willing to do are decided by his established sense of morality.

    Geralt is a Witcher, a mutated monster slayer trained from childhood, travelling the world, killing monsters in exchange for payment. He is unwilling to be needlessly cruel to innocents or betray those close to him, but he can be quite mercenary—or willing to allow injustice to happen in order to not get involved in a conflict. As such, the player is often given the decision—either explicitly or implicitly—to simply not get involved, even in situations where walking away is certain to cost someone their life. While this is an option, you may also choose to take a more active part in events and intervene where you deem it fit to do so. This creates a sense of cooperation between Geralt and the player in terms of making moral decisions, as Geralt sets the boundaries, and the player moves within them.

    TW3 operates within a medieval fantasy setting with an emphasis on naturalism and moral grey areas. Poverty and suffering are commonplace, and combat reflects the setting

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[5] Examples include the *Mass Effect* (Electronic Arts) and *Fallout* (Obsidian and Bethesda) series.
[6] Like the *Fable* series (Lionhead Studios)

through its gruesomeness. Frightening monstrosities shriek and groan as they lunge toward Geralt, who in turn swings his silver blade—sending their heads flying in a spray of blood. Experience with the game makes the danger you're facing clear while also making you an active participant in the brutality of the game's world. Geralt is used to the harsh realities of his world, but the player is likely to be struck by the similarities between the cruelty of humans and that of monsters. Quite often these intertwine or exist in light of, or even directly because of one another. Someone dying in a traumatic manner, or a curse uttered in a moment of strong emotion can result in a place being haunted until the curse is dealt with. Sometimes these haunting spirits can be convinced to depart peacefully from this world, whereas other cases can only be solved the witchers' way, e.g., through violence.

This creates a learning process for the player as they gain proficiency not only in combat, but also in navigating a world where difficult decisions must be made, and their consequences accepted.

The horror aspects of *TW3* are exemplified by the presence of monsters, oppression, graphic violence, and a common feeling that you are faced with powers much greater than yourself. If a player decides to play the game on its higher difficulties the added challenge can contribute to deeper immersion in the game's atmosphere through making perils and challenges of the world tangible through fiercer opponents and scarcity of resources. Frustration in response to repeatedly losing to a stronger opponent or trepidation at the prospect of making your way through a scary or perilous environment are not only natural responses, but the conveyance of these to the player in a safe setting may contribute to better handling of such feelings in real life. If you have managed to conquer your fear in a videogame, that still means that you have experienced fear, perhaps even to the point of wanting to quit—yet you pressed on and achieved something substantive as a result. Practice makes perfect, so it makes sense that those who have practiced facing adversity would be more adept at doing so again, even if the adversity was simulated (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, & Johnson, 2020).

TW3 is played from a third-person perspective and set in a medieval fantasy setting featuring monsters primarily from Slavic mythology. These will be frequently encountered as Geralt is a Witcher, more easily understood as a monster-slayer. He is uniquely qualified to battle fierce opponents and brave the dangers of lands ravaged by war and prowling monstrosities—as the process of becoming a Witcher includes undergoing mutations that dramatically increase one's strength and abilities. Every Witcher is equipped with two swords: one steel and intended for humans, another made from silver, meant for killing

monsters. In combat the player must rely on recognising enemy attack patterns, dodging, counterattacking, and using magic or specific equipment in order to vanquish foes that are often superior both in numbers and strength.

The challenge of enemies can be lessened by choosing to play on a low difficulty setting which makes combat far less punishing by decreasing how much damage is done to you whenever enemy attacks land. However, this may also lessen the impact of many story elements. For instance, the player may be forced to choose between taking a bribe or going up against a group of well-armed thugs. On a lower difficulty, this would be an easy decision between doing the right thing or taking money you don't need. On a higher difficulty on the other hand, the decision is between a difficult fight which is likely to cost you precious healing items even if you win and getting easy money you sorely need for new equipment or healing items—but at the cost of allowing injustice to prevail. I would argue that playing the game on a higher difficulty enhances the game's storytelling as the player is made to feel the harshness of the game's environment to an extent that would be missed without experiencing scarcity of resources or facing difficult choices between self-preservation and protecting others.

3 Audiovisual Storytelling

The following section will contain observations on what information is being conveyed to the player on an audiovisual level. Music, voice acting, and sound design, as well as visual details like colour scheme, composition, animation, and camera angles all work to convey specific information to the audience. These will be referenced accordingly so that readers can see for themselves what is being discussed in order to ensure that the analysis stays grounded and consistent. Utilising terms that apply to the audiovisual storytelling of both movies and videogames allows for clear communication of intended information. This in turn makes it easier to accurately analyse specific scenes as well as point out creative decisions along with their implications for the game's story and overall feel.

The fact that we are dealing with a medium where interactivity is at the core of the experience calls for a brief look into how this combines with audiovisual storytelling in order to create a feel for the world that the player is moving through. The feel of a game will vary as different genres emphasise different aspects of their world. For example, in TW3 freedom to move about in an open environment makes for greater and more dynamic views and vistas. This can come at the cost of being able to convey specific moods with precise timing. However, this problem has a commonly used workaround. At certain points control will be taken away from the player in what is known as cutscenes.

Cutscenes are similar to traditional movie segments but may contain a degree of interactivity where the player decides between different dialogue options as the conversation progresses. They are most commonly set within the game's engine—preserving the look and feel of the game in general, but with more deliberate camera placement, colouring, and texture. Within *TW3* cutscenes often connect to the game's dialogue system—with the player being allowed to pick between different statements or responses, but with camera control and character movement being controlled by the game itself. These cutscenes and dialogue sections will be the main focus of my analysis as they are most commonly where the player engages with the moral choice system of the game, as well as the part that lends itself most easily to a traditional analysis along the lines of literary studies.

The centrality of interactivity requires designers who wish to immerse the player in their world to teach the player how to become immersed in the game. Proper camera movement plays a big part in this and can be intuitively taught to the player by placing objects or set pieces designed to draw attention close to the player. These serve as cues for them to look where the creators intended with appropriate timing. Noticing sinister details as you

progress through a seemingly abandoned house contributes to immersing you in the game's world, which in turn leads you to pay more attention to such details. When done well, leaving control to the player allows them to dynamically explore while discovering details and items. A player might gain gratification from engaging in this process, even at times when they are effectively being led around by the nose.

Proper camera control can also be an essential part of surviving tough combat encounters. Enemies circle around you and must be kept track of if you are to react to their attacks in time. As this becomes an automatic process with experience it also contributes to immersion as the player *cooperates* with the character they are controlling, shifting their focus from enemy to enemy while dodging, striking, and countering fierce attacks from vicious opponents. The character's abilities provide a range of tools to the player, but these must be used appropriately if they are to prevail.
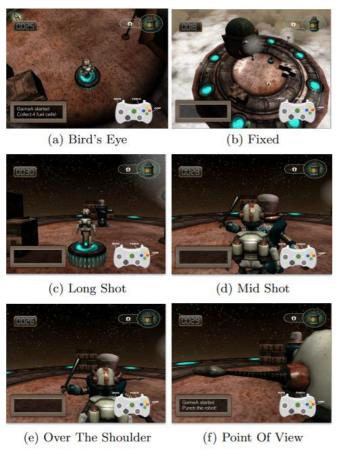
As videogames are a visual medium much like movies, drawing on cinematography can help lay academic grounding for claims made during analysis of specific scenes. The limited degree of interactivity within cutscenes makes cinematography a useful theoretical foundation for pointing out what we, as players are being told through the sound and visuals of a game.

Videogames and movies make use of many of the same tools in order to convey intended moods or messages. However, videogames are unique in that their camera systems bear the burden of not only mediating this flow of information to the player, but also of supporting the player's ability to play the game (Burelli, 2013, p. 1). As the task you are engaged in in-game changes the camera will tend to be programmed to automatically adjust along with it.

Another difference between film and videogame cinematography is to be found in the camera itself. Whereas films make use of a physical camera existing in the real world, videogames use what is referred to as a virtual camera. The virtual camera simulates the behaviour of a real one and can even produce images indistinguishable from real-world footage, provided there is sufficient processing power available. The key difference is that the virtual camera does not physically exist. This allows it to change its properties over time in order to adapt to ongoing events, as well as to move around rapidly in response to player-input (Burelli, 2016, p. 182). The feel and utility of different camera-angles and distances cause them to be more or less effective depending on the task at hand (Burelli, 2013, p. 8).

A long shot, placing the camera further away from the player allows for better overview and awareness of their surroundings, but might lessen the impact of combat or

similar intense situations as the player is placed further away from the action. On the other hand, a POV-shot places you right at the centre of ongoing events but limits your visual scope to being very close to that of your avatar. Examples of different variants of third-person perspectives common to videogames are shown in the following pictures:

(a) Bird's Eye   (b) Fixed

(c) Long Shot   (d) Mid Shot

(e) Over The Shoulder   (f) Point Of View

(Burelli, 2013, p. 4).

While aspects like camera-angle and distance are often automated, the player will normally control the camera within the parameters set by the game itself. The process of the camera adapting to the player's actions and input requires that it be aware of the player's state both in and outside of the game. The interplay between the programming of the camera and how the player controls it creates an indirect relationship between the two (Burelli, 2016, p. 183). When done well the camera can enhance the gameplay experience as it highlights necessary information or aids the player in exploration or combat through intuitive movement or simply through functioning in an immersive and predictable manner. A player's immersion in the game can be easily sabotaged if the camera becomes a hindrance or even a nuisance. Dying to an enemy or falling off a ledge because the camera stubbornly decided to focus on a nearby collection of pebbles rather than where you wanted it to, is likely to cause frustration, taking the player out of the game world in the process. Technical malfunction or interference,

whether it be in the form of a misbehaving camera, graphical bugs or the game's physics engine deciding that horses can and *should* fly are to immersion what obvious mistakes in grammar or spelling are to an otherwise well written story.

Allowing the player to control camera movement by extension gives them control of what they are seeing. This must be considered if you, as a creator want players' attention to be drawn toward specific details, vistas, or occurrences within the game. This includes teaching proper camera usage, which can be taught intuitively to the player through gameplay. If you want the player to carefully manoeuvre through a claustrophobic environment, you can do this by instilling the proper mood or placing dangerous traps or hidden enemies within the game world. After dying to said traps or enemies a few times the player will be more inclined to proceed carefully, scanning their surroundings for signs of danger. This applies to different genres and needs to be reinforced in specific ways depending on what gameplay experience is intended.

To put it simply, proper camera usage on the part of the player is a matter of carrots and sticks, with carrots representing greater feelings of mastery or eased progression through the game and sticks representing hindrances, loss of progress and frustration. How far these incentives go in punishing or rewarding the player depends on the game as well as in-game difficulty, which in most cases is adjustable. Audiovisual storytelling and gameplay exist in a kind of symbiosis as they must rely on one another to provide a compelling experience to the player.

In adding a theoretical grounding to my analysis of *TW3's* storytelling, it becomes relevant to make use of cinematographic theory in order to explain what information is being conveyed to the player within specific scenes: What goes into crafting a specific mood, how a situation is made to feel real or impactful, and how this comes together in order to create a coherent and compelling experience. For this purpose, I will rely on Blain Brown's *Cinematography: Theory and Practice*, (Brown, 2021) as it provides a good overview of cinematic practice and how this connects to audience engagement and reactions, without becoming too complicated or overwhelming. Specific terms and concepts of visual storytelling will be explained in the following section in order to maximise coherence and brevity.

3.1 Light, colour and texture

Light and colour are essential components of visual storytelling. They convey crucial information about a scene's mood and emotional affect, contain information about character's

moods or relationships and alter the viewers experience in ways that are felt on a gut level. Lighting and colour add visual texture to the story being told in ways that can be felt even if the viewer is not conscious of this.

It is unusual today to shoot something "straight"—as in simply recording reality as-is. Images are changed through a multitude of methods like the manipulation of colours or contrast, adding filters, smoke, fog or weather effects, among many others (Brown, 2021, pp. 4,7,11).

An immense amount of information is being conveyed to the player as they enter a new area in *TW3*. What the setting is like—the emotional mood of the area, if the setting is naturalistic or exaggerated—alters our expectations. Vivid, saturated colours combined with bright sunlight make for a livelier, almost fairy-tale-like atmosphere, whereas muted and seemingly lifeless colours—possibly with the addition of rain or fog—craft a much more oppressive atmosphere, effectively pulling the player "into the dirt" with everyone else inhabiting the setting. Combinations and contrasts between the lively and the oppressive allow players to experience a whole spectrum of emotion—from wonder to horror, with contrasting imagery also making their opposites clearer.

3.2 Framing

Framing serves many purposes, one of the most important of which is to direct the attention of the viewer toward important visuals and away from the irrelevant. Thus, it is also a matter of composition, rhythm, and perspective. Using these features well can help the viewer receive key information at the right moments, as well as immersing them in the story (Brown, 2021, pp. 4-5).

In videogames, audio-cues, scene composition and framing play a big part in directing player attention. Through framing, players can be carefully guided through the story, all the while feeling like they are progressing through it completely of their own accord. The contribution of framing then becomes greater within an interactive environment, as the player must have their attention drawn toward the right things at the right moments in order for them to progress through the narrative in a way that maintains immersion and emotional investment.

Competent use of framing can create suspense, a sense of depth or distance, as well as underlining a storytelling point or emotion. Sometimes the purpose served can be as simple as making things visually interesting for the player, especially within cutscenes where interactivity is limited.

3.3 Camera Angles

Camera angle refers to where the camera is placed in relation to the scene. A high angle places the camera above events or characters, whereas a low angle looks up from below. However, the most common placement is around eye-level.

Angles are a key ingredient in scene-composition and have a significant effect on a viewer's emotional reaction as angles and placement can convey information about a character or setting, making them appear vulnerable or powerful, distant or intimate (Brown, 2021, p. 8).

Studying cutscenes in *TW3* with camera angles in mind will help show that every cutscene is deliberately composed in a specific manner, quite similarly to how a movie set would be. Thus, any visual information conveyed through specific camera angles ought to be considered as intentional on the part of the game's creators. This being the case makes such details valid points of analysis as they are not mere accidents, but meticulously placed points of visual information provided to the player.

3.4 Point of view

Point-of-view most commonly refers to having the camera see something much in the way that a specific character would, effectively placing the viewer in their shoes and giving a closer look at what a situation looks like to that character. Letting a viewer get this close to a character strengthens the bond between a viewer and the character as both are perceiving the same thing at the same time. This can be used to create suspense or to underline differences between a character and what they are dealing with (Brown, 2021, p. 10).

However, the players point of view will often differ from that of their avatar. *TW3*, for instance is played in a third-person perspective with a virtual camera following Geralt, with both being controlled by the player. *TW3*'s third-person perspective allows for a great degree of possible camera movement in cutscenes- at times moving away from, closer to, or around Geralt depending on the situation.

3.5 Score and sound design

The musical score of a piece of cinema is central to creating a desired mood or ambience for any given scene. The emotional weight of an important speech is amplified by the addition of grandiose orchestral music, rising tension and terror is enhanced through the use of sustained high tones, deep droning sounds or discordant and erratic plucking. This conveys to the audience a sense of unease, letting them know that danger is close. Building suspense in such

a way often reaches its peak with musical stinger intended to make the audience leap out of their seats in fright, often accompanying a visual jump-scare on screen (Heimerdinger, 2012, p. 6).

Games, like cinema, have widely adopted musical scores to amplify and create emotional or ironic commentary on unfolding narratives. However, a game's musical score is unique in that it can be dynamic and adapt to specific situations as you encounter them. Tracks can be layered in such a way that they reflect an immediate threat, with a weak enemy backed up by only the first layer of the combat music, while a powerful enemy becomes striking not only in its design, but also through the full splendour and intensity of the musical backing (Lamb & Smith, 2018, pp. 80,83).

Similarly, sound effects can be emphasised or even combined with the musical score in order to reward specific actions or encourage a desired behaviour. An example of this in practice can be found in *DOOM* (id Software 2016) where the gameplay is tailored in a way that emphasises the player's power while encouraging an intended approach with a furious lack of restraint in mowing down scores of demons. The soundtrack intensifies during combat and becomes less intense in between encounters as the music turns into transitional harmonies (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020, p. 244). Like in *TW3*, combat music shifts as you face greater dangers, making the soundscape uniquely suited to your current situation and actions. Particular boss-fights will often have musical pieces designed with only that particular fight in mind, underlining the importance and magnitude of facing a specific foe.

However, while both *DOOM* and *TW3* have combat backed by intense soundtracks, they still differ greatly in the mood and emotion conveyed to the player. *TW3*'s folk-inspired fantasy soundtrack morphs into a primal and intense one as combat ensues. Energetic vocalisations, yells, stringed instruments played with great intensity and heavy, yet limited percussion lets the player know that while Geralt is powerful, he is still up against vicious opponents. The player is meant to feel energised, but not invincible. *DOOM*'s combat music on the other hand, with its industrial and unrelenting torrent of distorted guitars and unceasing percussion tries to put the player more into the mindset of a self-aware industrial-grade meat-grinder sent to teach the hordes of hell the true meaning of suffering. *DOOM*'s music and sound design convey a sense of overwhelming power and agency to the player; you are the doom slayer and this is your playground, even to the level of having the slayer's knuckle-cracking deliberately synchronised with the violent shaking of the structure he is in, as if the building itself quakes in the face of the slayer's overwhelming rage (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020, p. 245).

A game's soundscape is, when done well, closely tied into what the game is trying to make the player feel and experience. Battling a massive, fire breathing dragon quickly becomes a let-down without proper musical backing, or a parody if the beast purrs like a kitten. If you base your gameplay around sword fighting or facing horrifying monsters, you benefit greatly from making the clanging of swords louder and the monsters sound as scary as they look. Music combines with the overall sound-design and contributes to immersion by making you feel the right things at the right moments. Proper use of audio ought to be considered an essential part of audiovisual storytelling, rather than something that is considered after the fact.

4   Narrative Distance and Moral Foundations Theory

> *"In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator,*
> *the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to*
> *each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value*
> *or judgment; moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical"*
> *(Booth, 1961, p. 69).*

Different factors contribute to our emotional proximity or distancing from fictional characters; these can include the obvious distance in time and space as well as social class and conventions of speech and dress. A less tangible but vital component of this dynamic is the personal beliefs and qualities of all those involved in the process, the reader being only one among these. The other participants include the author, narrator and characters of the creative product (Booth, 1961, p. 69). Each of these can be more or less distanced from every other participant depending on their characteristics and values—a character may differ greatly from the author producing the work but be closely aligned with the values and priorities of the narrator and reader. This can manifest as clear differences in, for example, morals, intellectual capacity, and relative maturity. An author can produce a narrator who is emotionally distanced from a given situation, while personally experiencing and expecting a greater degree of emotional involvement from the reader (Booth, 1961, p. 70). The distance between us as readers and a given narrator or character can be increased or lessened over the course of a story. A character may go from relatable with values proximal to our own to a twisted shell of their former self. Such cases of moral degeneration contribute to increased distance, while also being a potent literary tool as the reader goes from closely relating to a character to witnessing a shift that renders the character unrecognisable. Initially sympathising with and relating to a character adds potency to such degeneration as a storytelling tool. The reader might start off justifying immoral actions or moral failings, only for the distance to gradually increase, resulting in relatability and sympathy being replaced with condemnation. Such an experience might elicit shock, disappointment, or frustration on the part of the reader, as well as the narrator or other contributing characters. Meanwhile a case of moral redemption or positive development can bring forth feelings of joy, relief, and pride. Whichever direction it goes, a gradual increase or decrease in our ability to relate to a character is widely used in

modern fiction and has a noticeable effect on those partaking in these fictional experiences (Booth, 1961, pp. 70-71).

The interactive nature of videogames can highlight this process as we are not merely witnessing a transformation or journey—we are active participants, without which the story cannot progress. This can add a real sense of culpability if the player's avatar commits immoral deeds, while also elevating positive responses when a character changes for the better. Awareness of this as an important aspect of our experience with fictional products can provide a solid foundation for exploration as well as discussion of creative works. It might also, in conjunction with Moral Foundations Theory, explain why we as players are drawn toward or pushed away from the different characters, situations and solutions encountered in *The Witcher 3*.

A story-based videogame having compelling outcomes that vary greatly from each other requires a degree of understanding for different moral perspectives and values. I argue that *TW3* doing this well plays a big part in it being a good gameplay experience that engages players as well as maintaining interest in the game's world, story, and characters many years after its release. The interplay between the player and the game's main character adds interesting considerations as Geralt becomes a combination of his established character traits and how the player projects values onto him. If a player is sufficiently invested in the game, then they are likely to make choices that they perceive as good or morally correct. Geralt sets the limits for the actions available to the player, and the player's moral foundations make them lean toward the decisions that appeal the most to them.

Part of the appeal of *The Witcher 3* for a project such as this is its moral ambiguity. Geralt, the main character, is an antihero who is perfectly willing and capable of violence or mercenary behaviour should it be necessary[7]. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen argues for the unique appeal of antiheroes:

> "Such characters' inner conflicts are best understood as tensions between the moral commitments that motivate and structure human social agency. In struggling to reconcile conflicting self- and other-regarding motivations, morally ambiguous protagonists activate the same basic tensions in the minds of audiences. They invite readers, viewers, and players to grapple vicariously with the payoff structure of human sociality" (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2017, p. 103).

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[7] Or just beneficial, depending on what approach a player decides on.

Vicarious engagement with dilemmas relating to prioritising one's self-interest or the good of others is a perfect arena in which to explore moral questions. Doing so within videogames where you are an active participant adds another layer, as your moral judgement is likely to come into play during the course of the story. The interplay between the player and their avatar sets the scene for uniquely interesting experiences where moral questions, values and priorities can be explored.

Dealing with moral and immoral motives, actions and characters is part of the larger scope of human imagination. Empathy and condemnation go hand in hand as our heroes need opponents. Heroes tend to embody pro-social ideals while villains are self-interested and malicious, embodying antisociality. This is known as an agonistic structure and appears to be universal to human beings, implying a grounding in our cognitive architecture (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2017, p. 106). Engagement with fictional worlds appears to be adaptive, which might explain why humans enjoy it to such an extent (Clasen et al., 2020, p. 228). A morally ambiguous protagonist can inspire imaginative engagement with the complexities and challenges of human life and sociality. Navigating through moral conflicts relating to the self, one's family, group and the abstract rules of culture allows audiences to familiarise themselves with real moral problems through simulation (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2017, p. 106). Such interaction mapping onto real experience adds potency to storytelling as it can guide us through experiences that we might never have otherwise—even though we have the capacity to process them built into our cognition.

Due to the grey morality of *TW3*, most of the game's choices will not have an objectively good outcome. It is left up to the player to decide on what they themselves deem the right course of action and to live with the consequences of their decisions. Different choices will change the story to a greater or lesser extent, with some even altering the ending of the game and others being minor encounters with more immediate solutions. Quite often the consequences of your actions will only be revealed to you at a later point, often in unforeseeable ways.

The variety and availability of choices to the player make the world feel real, simply because not every choice is a massive, life-changing event. Some choices will allow you to take your time and consider your options, while others will operate on a timer and require you to choose quickly. In this way, both the player's intuition and their reasoning can play parts of varying significance depending on the situation. Whichever option the player picks, they will

have to live with the consequences of their actions. Having this kind of effect on a story can cause players to feel responsible both in relation to positive and negative outcomes.

While Geralt, and by extension the player, is a powerful character in a dark and oppressive setting, he is still forced to go up against forces significantly greater than himself. Difficult choices are forced upon the player and good intentions alone are not enough to ensure a good outcome. Matters of gameplay and self-interest intertwine with the greyness of the game's morality by incentivising the player to take material goods like gold or weapons in exchange for looking the other way when someone is being cruel to others.

The gold you earn could mean you can afford new equipment that could greatly help you in other quests. Alternatively, the opponents you might have to face could be so great in number, or so strong that battling them proves so dangerous or costly in terms of resources that you are forced to avoid the conflict. These concerns can be exacerbated or alleviated by choosing higher or lower difficulties. Facing harder enemies will make them a greater threat and require more skill and resources than fighting foes who are easier to dispatch. Some players will be drawn toward a more intense experience as it makes for more of a challenge by adding greater stakes to combat as well as to moral choices.

Because MFT focuses on individual variations in morality, it is particularly suitable for explaining moral choices in a morally ambiguous setting. It also becomes more suited for an exploratory approach into what leads players toward moral judgement or approval in meeting with different moral questions. Individual differences in moral foundations could explain why players are drawn toward certain characters or courses of action and repelled by others.

4.1   Introduction to Moral Foundations

As this thesis will be focusing on interactivity and moral choices in *The Witcher 3*, it becomes necessary to explore morality through a theoretical framework. Such a framework allows for clearly defined terms and boundaries for academic discussion and allows arguments to be more clearly understood while also providing theoretical backing for any claims made. Some perspectives, like the utilitarian or universalist theories are commonly referred to in academia when morality is brought up. Students in Norway are familiarised with these in their first years in universities through an intro to philosophy course included in most study programs. As a result, these theories become obvious candidates for analysing systems of morality or choices therein. However, instead of exploring the game's approach to morality through a

utilitarian or universalist lens, I have instead decided to make use of Moral Foundations Theory, or MFT for short.

MFT seeks to explain rather than to make judgements, which creates opportunities for studying motivations and moral thinking from the ground up. This approach avoids the pitfall of moral judgement through in-built conclusions, as the goal is not to arbitrate on what is right or wrong, but rather to understand what drives people to make such judgements in the first place. An approach emphasising individual differences in motivations and moral reasoning is well suited to exploring the moral questions raised in *TW3*, as the game avoids clearly signalling that decisions are morally right or wrong. That moral ambiguity puts the emphasis on individual values, motivations, intuitions, and reasoning processes in order to decide on what decision is right in a given situation, as well as what constitutes a desirable outcome.

Moral Foundations Theory is a theoretical framework designed to explain personal, political, and ideological disagreements between individuals and groups. It builds on research in the field of moral psychology as well as on the social intuitionist model which traces its roots back to philosopher David Hume, who argued that "reason is and ought only to be a slave of the passions" (Haidt, 2013, p. 287). The social intuitionist model argues that our moral thinking begins with a pang of emotion otherwise referred to as an intuition—a feeling that something is or works in a certain way. This intuition is then supported after the fact by our capacity for rational thought as we construct arguments and reasons for why our intuition is not only right but should also be accepted as such by other people. What we intuit from different kinds of input will depend on our moral foundations—our basic values, variable between individuals but explicable through human social psychology—which in turn will have an effect on our intuitions. According to MFT, people vary at the level of personality (as well as culture and individual experience) on traits like wishing to prevent harm or ensuring a fair outcome in a given situation, as well as dealing with matters of group loyalty and the sanctity of specific items, actions, or ideas. MFT has also found support in modern empirical research utilising different methods of measurement (Graham et al., 2013, pp. 72-74). The six moral foundations in MFT are defined as follows:

Care/Harm refers to the desire to prevent harm and caring for those who are suffering. Harm can refer to both its physical and mental forms, meaning that this would apply to those struggling with mental health issues or difficult emotions as well as those who are starving, sick or injured. People scoring high in Care would prioritize protecting and providing for such people.

Fairness/Cheating has to do with wishing to ensure that the outcome of a given situation is fair and just. What constitutes a fair outcome is differentiated to a great extent depending on political ideology, with the left emphasising equality and the right preferring proportionality.

Loyalty/Betrayal refers to the desire to maintain loyalty within a group. The group can be anything from a family to a religious or national grouping. This foundation can contribute positively to group cohesion through rewarding loyalty, which benefits the group- and punishing betrayal, which would negatively impact it.

Authority/Subversion deals with respect for hierarchies and social structures. This can refer to authority figures, political or religious authorities or senior members of a family. Subverting or challenging such authorities is condemned, as they hold real importance to those scoring highly on this foundation.

Sanctity/Degradation refers to people attributing value beyond the physical to objects, concepts, or ideas. Attributing value to something comes with a desire to prevent it from being degraded and reacting negatively when such a thing occurs.

Liberty/Oppression has to do with the desire to ensure autonomy and freedom for individuals, as well as groups. This leads to moral condemnation of perceived oppression or excessive intervention.

People's scores on the different foundations are shown to vary reliably depending on different political, religious, and societal factors. This also means that political affiliations can be explained in part by how one weighs the importance of the different foundations, as well as how these are conceived of and emphasised in the personal and wider social landscape one inhabits (Graham et al., 2013, pp. 76,84). What these foundations can provide is insight into what leads people to become who they are—their values, ideals, and convictions. Understanding this and applying it to the moral questions encountered in TW3 can shed some light on what could motivate people to decide on specific courses of action, as well as what would lead them to prefer one outcome over another.

The Witcher 3 is set in a world where it is often difficult to decide what is the "correct" or "moral" decision. As a result of this ambiguity, different people will have different ideas of what constitutes a correct choice as well as different reasons for deeming it so. Deciding between saving a group of innocent people or a single character that the character has developed a closer relationship with can be based on different moral foundations, or even different conceptualisations of the same foundation. A person with high scores in the Care foundation might be moved toward saving a group of people over a

character who the player has gotten to know, but who nevertheless is responsible for causing harm to others. The innocents in this scenario are not responsible for any wrongdoing, and thus not subject to moral condemnation, whereas the more familiar character might have pushed the player so far away from them through their actions that the player is no longer able to relate to them.

Moral Foundations also help with explaining why people prioritise and attribute value in different ways. Encountering a character working hard to provide aid to the poor or remaining loyal to their allies despite torture and oppression can bring players closer to their point of view, making them more relatable as a result as their actions are in line with the player's values. Applying this theory to *TW3*'s choice-based storytelling can shine a light on why different choices and outcomes are appealing to different players.

Moral Foundations Theory is divided into three main parts: (1) "Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second," (2) "There is more to morality than harm and fairness," and (3) "Morality binds and blinds." (Haidt, 2013). The first refers to the social intuitionist model, the second makes observations on how we conceptualise morality and how this can be lacking, and the third focuses on the causes and consequences of moral and emotional reasoning. These different sections explain distinct aspects of the theoretical framework in ways that help with understanding what MFT is. The sections will be more closely explored further on through the subheadings of this chapter.

MFT argues that our moral thinking develops from a combination of innateness and social learning rather than relying exclusively on either biology or reasoning (Haidt, 2012, p. 26). The reason for referring to moral foundations is that the theory explores the fundament of our sense of morality rather than the "peaks"—the idealistic refinements—of moral development. MFT is less concerned with what ought to be in the realms of morality than with why moral thinking functions the way it does. It approaches morality like a skyscraper, investigating what groundwork went into making the construction possible instead of looking up at the very top of the already finished building. Foundations mark the very beginning of something, and thus, moral foundations theory seeks to understand the "groundwork" that makes our moral thinking possible, as well as to explain the diversity of our individual senses of morality.

The foundations make themselves apparent "in a small set of affectively laden responses produced by the 'emotive centres' of the brain, which themselves should be studied as biological adaptations crafted by natural selection working on intensely social species such as ourselves and other primates" (Haidt, 2013, p. 282). Grounding a theoretical framework in

something tangible adds a clear frame of reference with checks and balances in the form of behavioural patterns, adaptability, and social structures both in nature and human societies. This makes MFT useful as a lens for analysis, as it does not contain the moral judgement aspect that might occur with more "peak-centric" frameworks, as well as having something tangible to base their evidence on. Understanding the interplay between biological and social factors on our moral thinking makes for a greater degree of insight into what shapes and motivates human beings and how we interact with and experience stories and media. This is particularly interesting when it comes to videogames, as the opportunities for meaningful decision-making within the game can provide moral dilemmas that challenge and immerse the player deeper into the story through a sense of investment and contribution to the experience.

The intuitionist aspect of MFT assumes that impulses are crucial for moral thinking to function properly, an idea that finds support in Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (1994). The book exemplifies this with research on patients who had suffered damage to the ventromedial pre-frontal cortex. This damage caused the patients to no longer include emotional intuition or "affect" into their decision-making leaving only the rational part of the brain to deal with decision-making. While their sense of right and wrong remained intact, they were no longer privy to affective flashes that help in structuring, constraining, and guiding one's reasoning. Instead of exhibiting the hyper-rational behaviour that might have been previously expected when emotional thinking is removed, the patients' capacity for decision-making was markedly impaired. They were having severe difficulties in choosing or even narrowing down choices due to the lack of intuitions to guide them in the right direction (Haidt, 2013, p. 284). This is a good indication that affective flashes of emotion or intuition play an important role in guiding our reason. Rather than emotional affect and reason being separate and independent processes they instead seem to exist in a symbiotic relationship with one another.

Moral considerations can be guided by many different concerns, which has led to different principles being put forward to explain human behaviour. The best known of these is the Hedonistic Principle. Simply put, it states that humans want to maximise pleasure and minimise pain to the best of our ability. Later evolution of this idea takes different kinds of pleasure into account, including the pleasure of having purpose in one's life and contributing to what one considers a greater good or experiencing some hardship in order to ensure that some future goal is achieved. In this way the idea of pleasure and suffering become multifaceted. Religious groups may participate in rituals, abstain from drugs or alcohol as well as certain foods in order to secure their place in a good afterlife, or perhaps specific

efforts will be undertaken in order to bring grace or honour to family-members both living and dead, as well as increasing the odds of material rewards in this life or spiritual rewards in the next (Haidt, 2013, p. 285). While there are differences in how care and harm are conceptualised, it does still tend toward logical coherence.

MFT aims in part to highlight the statistical peculiarity of contemporary Western value systems, using the psychological concept of WEIRD cultures (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). WEIRD cultures, which are statistical outliers in many respects, tend to base their understanding of morality almost exclusively on the moral foundations of Care/Harm and Fairness/Cheating. These largely being the only foundations to be considered valid causes other foundations that contribute to our moral thinking to be overlooked. MFT aims to explain why matters of Care and Fairness are not the only concerns that drive moral thinking globally and historically. For the purpose of testing this claim, Haidt created short stories that were designed to be emotionally disturbing while also being harmless. Examples include a family eating their dog after it has been killed by a car, and a woman using her country's flag to clean her toilet (Haidt, 2013, p. 285). If nobody is being harmed or wronged by the actions taken by characters within these stories, then surely there is nothing morally wrong about their actions, or is there? Just reading the examples mentioned here might have caused a pang of disgust in the reader—yet articulating what exactly is wrong and why it should be considered immoral would be difficult if we only consider Care and Fairness as valid foundations for morality.

Both adults and children belonging to upper classes within WEIRD cultures have an easier time distinguishing between moral and conventional boundaries. This means that they can hear a story where someone breaks with what is conventional without feeling a need to morally condemn the person doing so. Members of lower classes or those coming from non-WEIRD countries and cultures, on the other hand, tend to distinguish less between breaches of social norms and breaches of moral etiquette (Haidt, 2013, p. 285). This causes conformity to be a matter of morals rather than simply a matter of personal preference.

People's (un)willingness to judge the morality of different actions can come into play in how one interacts with the different moral choices of *TW3*. What constitutes a moral decision or good outcome will be put to the test as different moral concerns and foundations are weighed against each other. This allows players to become more familiar with their own moral thinking through exploration of a world that places them in difficult situations without obvious right answers. How a player interacts with a world where people are driven to

thieving, violence or even cannibalism will depend on their moral intuitions, as well as how willing they are to exact punishment and in what form.

4.2 "Intuition comes first, strategic reasoning second".

Moral foundations theory builds on Hume's idea that "reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions" (Haidt, 2013, p. 287). This is fundamentally different from thinking of emotion and reason as two separate and independent processes, while also placing reason in a kind of subservient position to the passions or intuition that points our reasoning toward specific judgements or conclusions (Haidt, 2013, p. 287). Haidt argues that humans do not, as is commonly thought, use reason purely as a means to pursue objective truth, but rather that it is something humans use in order to justify our positions to other people (Haidt, 2013, p. 287). This leads us to the core metaphor of the elephant and the rider, with the elephant symbolising our intuition and the rider representing our sense of reason.

Picturing this metaphor may start us off with an idea that the rider is in charge, but that is only true to the extent that the elephant agrees to being controlled. If an animal weighing several tons really wants to go somewhere, then the rider will simply have to come along for the ride. When the elephant goes in one direction, the role of the rider quickly becomes more like that of a PR-representative for the animal. The rider can provide arguments for why going in this particular direction was, in fact, not just intentional and well thought out, but also a decision that should be emulated by others.

Our reasoning is not so much used in order to search for truth, as it is a means to find arguments that support our initial emotional reactions (Haidt, 2012, p. 25). An example of this in action is when subjects who were presented with stories that triggered strong feelings about right and wrong ran out of arguments about why they thought something was morally wrong. A man having sexual intercourse with a dead chicken before he cooks and eats it alone in his own house with no witnesses is quite a disturbing image, but it is also one of the stories told to people who were "morally dumbfounded" as their moral foundations of Care and Fairness did not provide any justification for why somebody doing this is doing something immoral rather than only being guilty of a simple breach of social norms and etiquette.

When faced with a story like the one about the dead chicken, people's intuition might be that the story is disgusting and that what is disgusting is also likely to be considered wrong by many. However, because nobody is being harmed[8], this does not qualify the man in the

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[8] Not even the chicken, who has already been sufficiently harmed so as to now be considered an ex-chicken.

story for moral condemnation despite their initial desire to condemn him. The absence of moral justification is often not sufficient to change someone's judgement that something is wrong. The intuition is what has led us to a destination and the reasoning comes up with an explanation after the fact (Haidt, 2012, p. 25). However, someone who relies more heavily on the Sanctity foundation would not have the same difficulty in condemning this necrophiliac approach to cuisine. They might argue that the animal, the man, or sex itself is desecrated in him doing such a thing with a dead fowl rather than, say, his living and consenting partner. While sanctity is often connected to religion that does not mean that secular value systems are unconcerned with matters of sanctity or desecration. This can be exemplified by the disgust brought on when hearing about people desecrating corpses. No religion is required to recognise that the corpses used to be living beings, and to wish to see them treated with respect.

4.3 There is more to morality than Harm and Fairness.

WEIRD cultures tend to over-emphasise Care and Fairness and exclude other foundations from consideration when discussing moral questions. This way of conceptualising morality is, on a global level, quite abnormal. Many other cultures value Authority, Loyalty, and Sanctity to a much greater extent. This does not mean that WEIRD people are not also concerned with matters relating to those foundations, as many in those societies have moral values closely tied to those foundations as well, but rather that they do not provide acceptable grounding for moral argumentation.

The WEIRD approach can be argued to be detrimental to our understanding of moral thinking, as large parts of the process are excluded from consideration. However, the fact that all of the foundations play a part in shaping cultures, laws and moral systems ought to urge those seeking to understand moral thinking to not be so hasty in their dismissal.

It is important at this point to clarify what constitutes a moral foundation. The five criteria provided by Haidt may shed some light on this, they are as follows:

(1) It is a common concern in third-party judgments.

(2) It provokes automatic affective evaluations.

(3) It is culturally widespread.

(4) There is evidence of innate preparedness (e.g., the response is evident in other primates, or it emerges very early in infants).

(5) There is an existing evolutionary model demonstrating its adaptive advantage

(Haidt, 2013, p. 290).

It is important to note that the innateness of moral foundations does not mean that our moral thinking is hardwired from birth, as their formation is based on both biological and social factors. What we as humans are born with is closer to what a first draft is in relation to a finished story. The outline and major aspects of the story may be kept mostly intact through the formation, but all kinds of changes can be made based on outside influence. Similarly, experience can play a big part in suppressing, changing, or enhancing how much importance is placed on specific foundations. Differences in how important specific foundations are to different groups can help us understand political and ideological differences between groups, as well as the moral anger expressed when people are exposed to culture war issues (Haidt, 2013, p. 290). However some of the most heated cultural issues today, like abortion and patriotism are the result of fundamental disagreements about whether the loyalty, authority and sanctity foundations are even to be considered as valid when it comes to moral questions (Haidt, 2013, pp. 290-291). Understanding the different foundations and the impact they have on moral thinking then becomes an important tool for understanding the motivations and convictions of different people.

4.3.1 Care/Harm

The Care/Harm foundation evolved in response to the necessity of caring for vulnerable children. It involves sensitivity to signs of suffering and need, causing us to despise cruelty and make us wish to care for those who are suffering (Haidt, 2012, p. 153). That is not to say that we wish to care for all others universally. In fact we are more likely to mirror and empathise with others when they conform to our own moral matrix, as opposed to those who have violated it (Haidt, 2012, p. 236). The wish to care for others involves protecting them from both physical and mental harm. Seeing someone in distress and wanting them to feel better and taking steps to do so is the care foundation in practice.

Along with the Fairness/Cheating foundation, Care/Harm is one of the two "pillars" of WEIRD moral systems. In such systems, the most common questions raised in order to determine whether something is immoral are: "Is someone being hurt as a result?" and "Is it fair?" Lack of fairness in distribution of goods or legal proceedings may result in emotional or even physical harm, meaning that the care and fairness foundations often overlap.

The desire to care for individuals or groups who are suffering can motivate players to extend charity to the needy or go out of their way to keep others from harm. It is also likely to be grounds for morally condemning characters who have hurt or exploited others. This is

exacerbated if the harm befalls characters who the player has developed an emotional attachment to.

4.3.2 Fairness/cheating

The Fairness/Cheating foundation evolved in response to the increased productivity brought on by cooperation, as well as the challenge of not being exploited by others in a group. This can be influenced by how generous or considerate others act when it comes to distribution of goods or similar. This foundation makes us sensitive to indications that another person is a good or bad partner for collaboration. It also makes us want to expel or punish cheaters from our group (Haidt, 2012, p. 153). However, different people have different ideas of what is fair and what is not, particularly when it comes to distribution of goods. In a WEIRD political spectrum, a left-leaning person may be drawn more toward equal distribution so that everyone involved has what they need, while a right-leaning person is likely to put more stock in proportional rewards, where those who have contributed or produced more get rewards proportional to their contribution (Haidt, 2012, p. 185). Having individuals rewarded on the basis of proportionality will also result in those who have not contributed also not getting as much as those who have, or possibly not getting anything at all. Those who value proportionality may not want to support those who contribute less because it could encourage freeriders whereas those who value equality would prioritize everyone getting an equal share.

Equal distribution of goods may be conducive to reducing harm, as nobody has to go hungry even if they contributed less, or even nothing to the group effort. This means that people are provided for even if they are unable or possibly even unwilling to contribute. However, a more proportional distribution can provide incentive to work harder, possibly enriching the group in the long term by having each worker be personally invested in producing more goods. The proportional approach can result in those who are incapable of contributing being left with nothing, while the equal approach can take resources away from those who have contributed more. Each has flaws and benefits when judged against other moral foundations.

Different conceptualisations of fairness are likely to result in different perceptions of key events or locations, however it can also result in similar conclusions based on different justifications. Seeing hard working farmers forced to pay exorbitant taxes to invading armies could trigger a sense of unfairness in those who value equality as well as those who value proportionality. Either way, striving toward a just outcome is likely to be a core priority to players—especially those who have become emotionally invested in the game's world.

4.3.3 Loyalty/betrayal

The Loyalty/Betrayal foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of forming and maintaining coalitions. It makes us trust and reward "team players" and makes us want to punish those who betray us or our group. (Haidt, 2012, p. 154) The loyalty foundation ties people within a group together by ensuring that those who are trustworthy are acknowledged and that the disloyal are ostracized or possibly even killed depending on the severity of the betrayal. An emphasis on loyalty can help with bonding members of a group together and aiding in cooperation as a result of in-group trust and reliance but can also be restrictive or exclusionary to those outside of the group.

Loyalty applies to an "in-group" and can refer to individuals within a family, a country, a sports team, or anything of the kind. This foundation is dependent on how much value is placed on concepts like family or being part of a nation, as an emphasis on the groups we belong to helps to cement the boundaries between "us" and those on the outside of our group. Cheating on a spouse, taking advantage of a friend, or otherwise betraying someone who trusts or relies on you are all part of the "betrayal" subversion of loyalty.

In WEIRD political spectrums, this foundation plays a bigger part in the moral thinking of conservatives than that of liberals. Conservatives focus more on the specific groups we belong to, such as a particular religious group or nation, as well as emphasising personal responsibility. This can be a possible explanation for why conservatives also tend to prefer proportionality over equality, as it places responsibility on individuals to contribute in meaningful ways to their lives and communities. Failing to do so comes with an expectation that one faces the consequences and can be viewed as a betrayal of one's duties or responsibilities.

Players valuing loyalty would be more likely to prioritise the well-being of those they feel close to, even if it is at the expense of others. Loyalty to different groups can contribute to the player's condemnation of opposing factions and representatives of those. This is interesting in the case of *TW3*, as Geralt is a character torn between different worlds and loyalties. Throughout the game the player will be faced with options to aid different groups or causes. Who Geralt, and by extension the player, is drawn toward will depend on their moral foundations and relation to characters who represent the different factions involved.

4.3.4 Authority/Subversion

The authority/subversion foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of forging relationships that will benefit us within social hierarchies. It makes us sensitive to signs of

rank or status, and to signs that other people are (or are not) behaving properly, given their position (Haidt, 2012, p. 154). MFT argues that human psychology contains an innate predisposition toward social hierarchies with distinctive roles and responsibilities.

That is not to say that this only applies to a singular social system, but rather that people value organisations or individuals as authorities whose guidance ought to be heeded and respected. This can apply to religious or political leaders, royalty, parents, or scientists, with different authorities being valued or challenged depending on group affiliation. The authority foundation deals with how individuals value and weigh the importance of authority figures and their place within society.

This foundation contributes to stability within the social hierarchy and solidifies different roles in relation to one another. This is helpful in creating stability and providing people with clear roles and responsibilities within their society. On the other hand, unchecked authority may lead to incorrect ideas or unfair practices going unchallenged, as subversion may be harshly punished.

Subverting authority is allowed or disallowed depending on one's own affiliation as well as which authority is challenged. Subversion can take many different forms but will generally involve ridiculing, contradicting or otherwise challenging some established authority.

The repercussions of such subversion may be severe in a very socially stratified society but might meet with a more neutral response, or even celebration, in more egalitarian societies. The success of punk-rock music and comedy ridiculing authority figures in many WEIRD societies show a move away from emphasising the importance of authority. This can bring more familiarity and interaction between social groups but may also cause less stability and safety in one's role and place in relation to others.

However, this should not be interpreted as WEIRD cultures not having authorities that are seen as beyond challenge or criticism. Questioning the merits of democracy within a WEIRD society and arguing in favour of absolute monarchy is likely to be met with ridicule and scorn as the political institution of democracy is a valued authority. Similar repercussions can result from challenging scientific or social ideas that are widely believed to be factually and/or morally correct. Some religious figures are fair game for ridicule, while targeting others is taboo. Acknowledging that authority still plays an important part in how groups and individuals interact within WEIRD societies can provide a clearer image of social practices in the world around us.

TW3 offers many interactions with different authority figures, ideas, and social norms. How willing a player is to challenge or fall in line with these will depend on their views on authority, as well as which authorities are valued or disdained by the player in question. The proximity of authority, whether it be personal, societal, or emotional can lead players to abide by certain authorities, while distancing them from others.

4.3.5 Sanctity/degradation

The sanctity/degradation foundation first evolved as a way to handle the so-called omnivore's dilemma: figuring out what we can eat and what may prove to be poisonous, toxic, or infected with parasites. In a world full of pathogens and parasites it is essential to distinguish between the safe and the unsafe. The human response to this includes what Haidt calls "the behavioural immune system" which extends our human concerns regarding nourishment to the realm of ideas and symbolism. It opens the door for people to place irrational value on objects and ideas. These values can prove to be either positive or negative and help in binding groups together through shared regard or disgust toward specific actions, items, or ideas.

Sanctity is most commonly associated with religiosity, as in the reverence shown by religious people when they find themselves in holy places like churches or mosques or toward their respective holy texts. Ordinary objects are imbued with immense value by those within a group who share in the perception that they are part of something greater than themselves. This reverence can also imbue items and acts with an essence of corruption or wrongness, like the Islamic or Judaic ban on eating pork or the condemnation of homosexuality common within many religious movements.

However, the sanctity foundation is not exclusive to the religious. For instance, it can be clearly observed in modern environmentalist groups, whose rhetoric treats nature as something sacred—in the sense that it contains immense value and ought to be treated with reverence—while pollution caused by humans degrades this sacred thing in a way that is considered deeply immoral by those within the group. Finding an item or concept to be sacred or worthy of protection is a deeply human quality that continues to play an important role in how humans interact and view the world.

The perception of something being sacred can have a deep impact on how we interact with the world around us. Within *TW3* the player will be faced with religious fanaticism, fierce nationalism, unfamiliar traditions, and worldviews that differ significantly from their own. What is viewed as sacred, whether it be the bond between family members, religious

practices, or beliefs around one's responsibility toward others will alter the gameplay experience.

4.3.6 Liberty/oppression

The liberty/oppression foundation makes people notice and resent signs of domination. It makes people band together in order to resist bullies and tyrants. Viewing people as equal and wishing to avoid what is perceived as unnecessary intervention or interference is rooted within this foundation and accounts for the egalitarian and frequently anti-authoritarian movements on the left in WEIRD cultures, as well as the libertarian, government-critical movements on the right (Haidt, 2012, p. 185). What is perceived as oppression can differ from person to person and can be influenced greatly by how one conceptualises fairness. Intervention from the state enforcing a minimum wage can be viewed as a step away from oppression by many left-leaning individuals while libertarians view it as the government forcing ordinary business-owners out of business through tyrannical mandates. Who is responsible for the oppression: the business owners toward their employees or the state toward the citizens? The answer to such questions is core to understanding why these groups react in the way that they do.

The many, and at times outright despotic authorities encountered in *TW3* will provide plenty of opportunities for the Liberty foundation to come into play. The racially motivated oppression of non-humans or the religious persecution of mages and herbalists provide concrete examples of oppression. The addition of war and invading armies provides plenty of motivation for players wishing to combat oppression. However, no side is without flaw and the consequences of your actions may come back to haunt you later.

4.4 Morality binds and blinds.

Richard Dawkins famously coined the idea of the "selfish gene," suggesting that selfishness is more conducive to survival and thus also more likely to be passed down to the next generation. However, participants in society tend to view selfishness and cowardice as negative traits, leading in turn to people being shunned in favour of those displaying more prosocial traits like bravery and selflessness. Even though someone who places themselves in harm's way has a smaller chance of survival, they are disproportionally likely to succeed in passing on their genes as a result of social acclaim and recognition of their contribution. (Haidt, 2013, p. 292). Our moral thinking constricts our thinking and blinds us to specific points of view. This can be beneficial to groups who have a goal of cohesion within their

group, but terrible when the aim is pursuing truth. With that in mind, Haidt argues that it is essential to ensure a diversity of perspectives within fields that study morality, as lessening cohesion in this way also contributes to freedom of thought and inquiry through preventing ideas and concepts from becoming "sacred" or otherwise excepted from scrutiny (Haidt, 2013, p. 293). I believe videogames can contribute to diversity in moral thinking through effectively placing people within moral dilemmas that can help them better understand their own sense of morality while also having it challenged through different moral dilemmas that may or may not adhere to their established moral thinking.

4.5 Why is this relevant?

If humans were not held accountable for our actions, we would be less likely to act in accordance with moral rules or systems. The service provided by moral systems is to have rules and boundaries presented and adhered to within groups as well as between individuals. Videogames contribute to explorative thought around moral problems by making us aware that our actions will have consequences, either through letting us know explicitly or through experience. Narrative distance and proximity alter and shape our experiences of the story we encounter, as well as how willing we are to defend or condemn certain traits or actions. These factors, in conjunction with MFT, make for a clear and interesting framework for media and literature analysis. I argue that moral foundations can provide explanations for how different individuals experience stories—who they relate to, their praises and condemnations and what outcomes they consider good. The sheer variety of human beings can mean that within a group of players each one will have a unique experience and combination of choices and outcomes, while also being pleased with what they've achieved. Interactivity makes you a part of the story in a unique way. It means that you get an opportunity to directly contribute to the course of a story—that your values, intuition, and thinking will lead you toward different decisions while also holding you responsible for their results. Experiencing desired or unwanted consequences after making what they deemed right choices can lead players to reflect on their thinking, making the gameplay experience one that also contains grounds for self-development and personal improvement on many different levels. Combat against difficult foes can improve a player's pattern recognition, reflexes, and strategic thinking, meanwhile teaching them lessons about perseverance and facing challenges head-on. Internalising such messages and reflecting on one's own thinking could translate into personal betterment in real life.

5 The Witcher Analysis

Videogames are unique in that they require direct engagement with the story in order to progress. This can be in the form of combat, decision making or exploration. Each of these can enhance the player's experience of the other two as the intertwining aspects of gameplay, serve to heighten each other. Contextualising them in light of each other makes for an engaging gameplay experience where each aspect of gameplay contributes to the others. The personal involvement the player has with the story also creates opportunity for exploring moral questions. A harsh setting with magical elements like sorceresses, elves and monsters opens the door to all kinds of intriguing questions and situations for the player to interact with. Doing this while maintaining a sense of authenticity gives real impact to the game's moral choices. The cooperative nature between the player and their avatar creates an interesting dynamic where possible courses of action are decided by the main character while the player chooses between the available approaches. Conflict is both a necessity and common occurrence in the game, as Geralt has a penchant for getting involved in major conflicts and conspiracies. Furthermore he has previous entanglements with supernatural forces like the titular Wild Hunt and powerful political actors within the game's setting.

Who Geralt is in any one playthrough will depend on the player, yet certain traits remain constant. His general stoicism and issues with authority, as well as a stone-faced approach to humour are present regardless of player input. However, complexity is added to his character through which choices are made available in a given situation. Geralt sets the boundaries for which actions can be taken, yet the player decided between these as to which will be taken. An option being available signals that Geralt could conceivably make that decision, however, as his life is constantly at risk, consideration is not limited to morality alone.

The Witcher 3 is uniquely suited for exploration of moral questions as the game is ambiguous and raises interesting moral quandaries, often without objectively correct answers. Moral foundations and Narrative Distance can help explain why people make, and are comfortable with their choices.

5.1 Quick summary of events before the game

In order to equip readers with necessary information about the game before discussing it, the following section will contain some brief explanations of core aspects of the world and story of the game.

The Witcher 3 is set in a medieval fantasy setting. Societies are ruled by kings and lords and the contrasts between rich and poor can be staggering. The world was originally inhabited by elves and dwarves, but humans and monsters were introduced in an event referred to as the conjunction of the spheres. Humans multiplied quickly and conquered vast territories from the elves, which has resulted in a social stratification. Elves, dwarves and other members of the elder races are often looked down on and mistreated by humans. This has led some members of the elder races to join militant groups fighting against humans while others try to coexist and live normal lives.

The presence of magical beings also entails people with an aptitude for magic or alchemy. Mages, sorceresses and witchers all have varying degrees of proficiency with magic, with Witchers having the most rudimentary understanding of it. Meanwhile, Witchers are skilled at brewing potions that can greatly aid them in their work but could easily prove deadly to normal humans.

The fantastic, magical, and medieval elements of the game provide fertile ground for moral questions as it also includes a great deal of conflict. Monsters, mutants, and magicians are added to a feudal setting where kings and lords war and scheme in order to increase their power and influence. The game's naturalistic exploration of human depravity and cruelty is enhanced by having normal, flawed people face to face with creatures and phenomena far beyond their comprehension. The game world accounts for the presence of fantasy creatures and species like halflings and elves, while still maintaining an authentic and unflinching portrayal of human nature.

Geralt is the main character of the Witcher games. He was trained as a Witcher, or monster slayer from a young age—eventually undergoing mutations that dramatically improved his physical properties. Quite unusually the mutations turned his hair white, eventually earning him his nickname of "The White Wolf".

Core to the game's story is the search for, and interaction with Geralt's adoptive daughter, Ciri. The relationship between her and Geralt is the emotional core and driving force of *TW3*'s main story. The choices made throughout the course of the game directly impact the state of the world, while also deciding Ciri's fate and future. Ciri was born with

unusual powers that allow her to travel between different worlds seemingly at will. She is also the biological daughter of the current emperor of Nilfgaard, making her the rightful heir to the throne. She received training from Geralt and his mentor, Vesemir at Kaer Morhen, the base of the Witcher school of the wolf. As of *TW3*, Geralt has not seen Ciri for a long time, after she disappeared into another world. Now the main quest revolves around finding her and eventually defeating the wild hunt.

Witchers are humans who have undergone hard training as well as a set of mutations referred to as The Trial of the Grasses. The training and mutations are administered in childhood and when successful, greatly increase physical attributes and healing ability while also slowing the aging process. However, the mutations also render witchers sterile and make their eyes resemble those of cats. Witchers were created to be monster slayers and travel the world taking on contracts wherever they go. While they provide a useful and necessary service, they are still feared and reviled by many, rumoured to be cold blooded killers, greedy mercenaries and accused of stealing children.

For the purpose of adding urgency to the game's main story, there must also be a sense of threat. That comes with the game's antagonist faction, known as the Wild Hunt. The Wild Hunt are members of a species of elves from another world. They have a great deal of magical power and travel between worlds, although they are greatly limited in these endeavours. They are trying to capture Ciri and gain control of her powers, which would allow them to move vast armies between worlds conquering as they go. Urgency is added by the presence of the White Frost; an everlasting and overwhelming winter spreading between worlds, moving away from worlds lost to the White Frost and into new ones would ensure their survival, even if it comes at the cost of destroying all who they consider to be lesser beings.

The Witcher 2 ended with Geralt uncovering a conspiracy, deciding on the fate of an assassin, and regaining his memory. The game's final cutscene shows the beginning of the Nilfgaardian invasion of the Northern Realms. Since that time, six months have passed, we start *TW3* looking for Geralt's former lover, Yennefer, a sorceress whose fate Geralt is bound to by a djinn's magic.

5.2 Tutorial

Video link: (Christoffersen, 2023h).[9]

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[9]Tutorial and White Orchard: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fysP8fBCV1s

TW3's tutorial serves dual purposes. The first is the basic one of introducing the player to the game's controls and different aspects of gameplay: movement, dialogue, exploration, combat, and choice are briefly presented in explicit ways, swiftly followed by opportunities for the player to try them out, thereby making connections between explicitly stated information and its implementation. The second purpose is to introduce the world and characters to new players. This familiarises them with Geralt as well as his relationships to some of the core characters within the game. The most important ones for the moment are Yennefer, Vesemir and Ciri.

I argue that the close bond between the characters is important in order to create investment on the part of the player, as well as adding urgency to the main quest and elevating player engagement. Introducing and establishing the close relationship between Geralt and Ciri is used as a way to get players invested, which in turn motivates them to engage with the game's world and events. Meanwhile the worldbuilding begins to prepare us for interaction with a hostile and challenging world where a single mistake could prove fatal.

The process of familiarising the player with Geralt necessitates an introduction, as well as showing different sides of him. Who he is in a given scenario conveys information to the player, while also creating opportunities to develop narrative proximity between him and the player. *TW3* begins with Geralt relaxing in a bath. He appears to be dozing and has let his guard down. The music changes to underline the appearance of an insect-like creature crawling into the tub. Tension builds as we hear rapid high notes played in the background—Geralt reacts as if the creature has pinched something sensitive and the music returns to normal, revealing it as not a real threat after all.

The rise in tension is subverted in a humorous fashion which might serve to endear players to Geralt as a character. Taking the time to relax only to receive the pinch of existing plans and responsibilities is akin to a "five more minutes" moment familiar to many as they struggle to get out of bed in the morning. Relatability plays an important part in creating narrative proximity to a character. Additionally, the familiarity of his reaction informs us that this has likely happened before, hinting at a pattern of behaviour, and beginning to establish a character dynamic.

The method of prodding Geralt along might be viewed as unnecessarily harsh or funny and clever. How it is perceived is likely to inform the player's views on the on-again-off-again relationship between Geralt and Yennefer, further expanded on as the scene progresses. The creature is revealed to be a magical construct produced by Yennefer, who is currently lounging in a chair nearby. As Geralt rises from his bath the camera moves into a lower angle

and pans upward while pointed at his back, which is covered with myriad scars gathered from enemies both human and inhuman. His musculature and general build combined with his many scars paint a picture of a warrior who has been seriously injured many times before. Before Geralt leaves the room Yennefer grabs him and pulls him in for a passionate kiss, which goes on for a few seconds before she pushes his head away in a playful but decisive fashion. Their dynamic is briefly introduced in this simple manner: They are strongly attracted to each other, but there is a definite push and pull between the two which we become more familiar with throughout the story. This somewhat unstable dynamic is made clear and reinforced through cutscenes and dialogue as the two interact. The level of conflict in particular is noted by several other characters throughout the game, marking it as the rule rather than the exception.

The next important character to note for the introduction is Geralt's mentor and father figure, an old Witcher named Vesemir. While he might initially seem old and a little grouchy but has a soft side which moves him toward lovable grandpa rather than grumpy old man. He smiles as he watches Geralt training with Ciri in a familial kind of way, showing that he is more than just a trainer to them. An impression that is further reinforced by Ciri referring to him as "Uncle Vesemir". Establishing positive relationships between likeable characters lessens the narrative distance between the player and the characters involved, as pro-social traits and dynamics are likely to appeal to most players. Geralt in isolation has limited ability to emote, meaning that insight into his emotional state might not be perceivable through tone of voice or body language. These things are conveyed through what actions are made available or taken as well as in how he functions in relation to other characters. Making him a character that players like and sympathise with is important for the emotional highs and lows of the story to remain impactful, in turn relying on characterising Geralt in his relation to others.

The most important relationship in the game, and to Geralt, is his relationship to Ciri. Interactions with her tend to be the times when Geralt is most explicitly emotional and open. The effort he takes in preparing his daughter for the realities of a harsh and unforgiving reality combines with legitimate moments of vulnerability to show the relationship's importance for both characters. The necessity of preparation and care is made explicit through specific actions that alter how the story of *TW3* ends. However, those preparations lie somewhere in the future, and this is simply a depiction of how she started to prepare: through training at the Witcher school of the Wolf, much like Geralt himself did as a child. While effective, it might also injure or even kill those without the necessary skill or fortitude to make it through.

The training itself consists of Ciri balancing and striking with her blade while manoeuvring around a large pendulum, all this while blindfolded and standing on top of a narrow set of platforms with a sheer drop on one side. If she gets the timing wrong it could easily result in serious injury, revealing the harsh and often unforgiving nature of the Witchers' training. Despite the danger, this was the activity she wanted to engage in after Vesemir fell asleep during their reading. Ciri craves physical challenges, activity, and danger, while being significantly less fond of sitting still and reading up on monsters.

At one point in her training Ciri gets the timing wrong and her sword-arm is hit by the pendulum, knocking the wooden sword from her hand. However, she manages to catch the sword on her foot, balancing it and then launching it back up, catching it and then getting right back to her training.

Geralt tells her to get down—despite how impressive her skills appear, he states that her reflexes are still slow, underlining that monsters will not go easy on her. A Witcher's life is one filled with great peril. They are made to go up against formidable and deadly opponents, where one mistake could result in serious injury or death. Ensuring that Ciri is equipped to deal with the many threats and challenges she will be faced with also requires her to be formidable at a level far beyond that of ordinary humans, even exceedingly capable ones.

The following scene illustrates how moral foundations can play a part in a player's reactions, as well as providing an opportunity for highlighting the interplay between narrative distance and MFT. Ciri and Geralt go to meet Vesemir to do some more training. The old Witcher starts on a lecture about the importance of information when Ciri quotes a relevant passage from the text she was supposed to read. She did, in fact read what she was supposed to and merely waited for an opportunity to reveal it with maximum effect. When asked why she decided to do so, she quotes Vesemir on the importance of waiting for an optimal moment to pounce for maximal effect. Someone who puts great value in respecting authority, whether it be in the form of expertise, experience, or age, might be frustrated or annoyed, viewing her behaviour as disrespectful and in need of correction. Meanwhile, a player with less concern for this might find it both humorous and endearing to see authority challenged in such a harmless and thought-out way. According to WEIRD morality, her behaviour is significantly more likely to be viewed as endearing than insulting, which appears to be intentional as the authority figures involved lean towards endearment.

Whether the goal of lessening the emotional distance between the player and Ciri is accomplished depends on how important matters of respecting authority are to the player.

However, players primed to condemn Ciri for her subversive behaviour may find themselves calmed somewhat by the mild reactions of Geralt and Vesemir. Had Vesemir launched into a display of righteous fury, then one could align oneself with him, standing in solidarity against impudent youths. The situation as it is presented does not present this kind of opportunity, meaning that such condemnation could extend to the authority figures in question for not acting appropriately in the situation.

This short section of the game teaches us certain things about Ciri: She is rambunctious, brave, incredibly athletic, in possession of quick reflexes, adventurous and prone to boredom. She eagerly seeks out challenges and is more than willing to at least bend the rules if they are annoying or inconvenient to her wishes. She is also willing to openly question and challenge authority, revealing an independent and rather cunning mind already at such a young age. It is crucial that players get to know and develop a relationship to her character in order for the main quest to have an impact. How players respond to her at this early stage might also indicate which of the game's endings they would consider the most satisfying when the time comes. How attached players get to her and their investment in her relationship to Geralt, Vesemir and other character will add further emotional weight to the different endings—they might even drag players more toward preferring an outcome that would be enjoyed by her and Geralt than one where she could objectively contribute more to the world. Ciri is naturally inclined towards liberty and independence, but the world has placed enormous responsibility on her shoulders. She is an heir to an empire as well as a uniquely powerful entity, yet her wishes uttered throughout the game are those of freedom and normalcy. The game's two good endings reflect the duality of her character with freedom on one side and great responsibility on the other—Geralt contributes to the former and her father, the emperor of Nilfgaard to the latter.

The final aspect to be established during the tutorial is the looming threat of the game's primary antagonist faction: The Wild Hunt. This introduction ensures that the player understands why it is a matter of urgency to find Ciri before the Hunt does and aligns Geralt's motivations with what is felt by the player. The cooperation toward a common goal is an important factor in creating narrative proximity between players and their avatar. The game goes about this by suddenly transforming the pleasant atmosphere of Kaer Morhen into a nightmarish storm depicting Geralt's worst fear.

The tutorial concludes with Ciri knocking the helmet off a training dummy, after which it launches over the castle walls, and she goes to search for it. Geralt starts to worry as she's taking a while to come back and fails to respond when he calls her name. Then he

notices a tear in the training dummy, in fact it looks like the dummy is bleeding from where it was cut. Geralt approaches slowly, looking puzzled and slightly alarmed. A variation of the game's theme begins playing with high, drawn-out notes creating a sense of mystery and rising tension. There's clearly a rapid drop in temperature as snow begins to fall. Geralt reaches out and grabs the piece of fabric, pulling it reveals a human face, spattered with blood. The whole colour palette shifts into a greyer, more lifeless hue. The soundscape fills with roaring winds and whispering voices.

Geralt turns around to look for Vesemir and we see his expression twist into one of complete horror. The camera moves and we see what Geralt reacted to: A giant ship has appeared over the walls of Kaer Morhen. All his friends are frozen, and the parapet is occupied by armoured figures accompanied by large, armoured horses—The Wild Hunt has arrived at Kaer Morhen.

Having one's home, a place associated with safety and comfort, invaded is a concept that is unpleasant on a very basic level. Seeing such a fear realised humanises Geralt and places him emotionally closer to the player as a result. He is humanised through moments of vulnerability yet remains capable enough to effectively drive the plot forward. Seeing Ciri, a child who Geralt cares deeply for, being in mortal danger serves the purpose of making the player's intentions align with Geralt's leading toward a desire to protect her.
This plays on the Care and Loyalty foundations in that one naturally wishes to keep her safe and to do right toward the members of one's own group.

The tension, already at a high point escalates further as a blizzard rages toward Geralt. The camera shifts closer to the armoured figures. Their leader is facing away from the camera and speaks in a deep, distorted voice "I've long awaited this, and you, White Wolf". The camera moves to Ciri, who is frozen in the process of cowering. Some of the armoured figures move towards her, the camera moves briefly back to the leader who turns around, revealing a mask in the shape of a skull. The imagery on display has clear connotations of death. Eredin, the leader of the Wild Hunt's detachment? is depicted as a harbinger of death, a seemingly unstoppable force moving toward the person Geralt treasures most. We move back to Ciri as one of the figures raises his blade to strike. Geralt looks on in horror, shouting a protest as the blade falls. The screen goes black as we hear the sound of a blade cutting through flesh and bone, along with a distorted scream coming from Ciri.

5.3 White Orchard

The tutorial provided explicit if basic instructions to many of the game's systems. Yet the understanding gained from these is rudimentary and in need of development. White Orchard is effectively a continuation of the tutorial where the game's mechanics and systems can be explored. Layers of complexity are added gradually, introducing a new concept, and then giving the player an opportunity to try it out for themselves within a setting that feels real. Expanding on dialogue and introducing moral choices that have to be made and interacted with creates opportunity for meaningful interaction with the world of *TW3*. How players act or react to a given situation will depend on factors like their Moral Foundations, perceived difficulty or challenge, availability of resources and their narrative distance to what happens in the game. As the player begins to master the game they are also more closely aligned with Geralt. This comes as a result of the player's input deciding how well Geralt performs in and out of combat. Increasing one's proficiency with the game allows Geralt to perform at a higher level. In effect this creates a self-reinforcing cycle where investment I the game leads to engagement with the world and its systems, which in turn causes the player to improve little by little. New gameplay and story elements will be explored in the order they are encountered to provide insight into how a player might experience the gradual introduction of new elements to the game. Engagement is maintained through the game's use of cinematography, particularly in cutscenes where information can be conveyed to the player in creative and interesting ways. This combines with use of sound and music to enhance the gameplay experience and encourage continued interaction with the game's world and characters.

17:27

   While the tutorial and all its content existed within a dream, the implications of Ciri being in danger—as well as the Wild Hunt's appearance at Kaer Morhen do eventually come to pass. This adds foreshadowing to the mix, underlined by Geralt mentioning a history of dreams alluding to actual events. This scene also sets up the main quest through brief, in universe conversation. Following his awakening he has a short conversation with Vesemir, which establishes the purpose of their journey—providing necessary information to the player while fleshing out their relationship.

While the tutorial is revealed to all have been a nightmare, the area of White Orchard is in many ways a continuation of the tutorial as this is where you truly learn how to play the game. Matters of combat, resources, quests, and decision making are introduced and

expanded on throughout a section that is largely separate from the main quest, which will not be properly introduced until the end of the section. Before they leave the camp, they are attacked by ghouls and the player is treated to a real introduction to the game's combat. The sudden nature of the attack underlines that even peaceful moments can be broken up at a moment's notice as dangers lurk everywhere in the wild.

21:40

In a game like *TW3* combat is a core aspect of the gameplay. Geralt's occupation as a monster slayer requires that he is capable of killing the creatures he goes up against, which in turn relies on the player to provide appropriate input. Learning this is a gradual process based on pattern recognition, timing, and resources. The learning process gradually aligns the player's skills with Geralt's as their combined efforts result in perseverance through increasingly greater challenges. While the combat instructions given in the tutorial provided the fundaments of combat there is still much to learn. The best way to develop one's combat ability is simply through engaging in combat with various foes and utilising different approaches—gradually figuring out what approach feels right for the individual player. The written tutorial informs us about different kinds of enemies and the appropriate sword to use for each. Steel for humans and silver for monsters. The ghouls are monsters, which is indicated by their white health bars. This encounter is a prime example of learning by doing—while basic instructions were given in the tutorial this is where they have to be put into practice. As I am playing on the game's highest difficulty, the enemies do quite a lot of damage whenever they land a hit, which makes the Quen (shield) sign incredibly helpful in combat. My previous experience with the game makes the enemies and their attack patterns familiar, which in turn lets me know when to time my attacks and dodges. This means that the encounter is less perilous than it might have been to a player unfamiliar with the game playing on the same difficulty. The encounter is finished without sustaining any damage, thus avoiding a drain to my limited healing items, and preserving my funds for the acquisition of better equipment rather than refilling my healing reserves. If I were to rush in, swinging blindly at the enemies without dodging or using signs, then Geralt would have been swiftly killed by the ghouls, and my progress would be reset back to the last save point.

Gaining proficiency with the game's mechanics means that the distance between Geralt and the player is lessened, as his established level of skill is brought out by the player's input. This benefits immersion and engagement with the experience, while also meaning that a player could become more willing to face tougher enemies in order to progress toward a desired outcome. Mastery of the game's systems also lessens reliance on healing items or

similar resources, as their function is to allow continued progress despite making mistakes. This, in turn could make selfless behaviour a more desirable option as your survival and progress are not significantly impaired.

23:40

Having access to a large, open world means that quite a bit of time will be spent travelling. Game developers wishing to maintain interest and encourage exploration are tasked with making the travelling a compelling part of the game. Dialogue, environmental storytelling, and audiovisual aspects contribute to making the world feel alive and inhabited by real people. Geralt and Vesemir continue on their journey, their conversation as they ride through the war-torn countryside preventing tedium and making good use of the travelling time. Having the two Witchers talk about theories on ghouls, the ongoing war and loyalties therein breathes life into the world—they are moving in a world where events unfold regardless of their own involvement. Creating an interesting world that engages the player encourages exploration and involvement with ongoing events. If the seeds of wanting to explore are planted, then the next step is to reward such engagement in order to create a satisfying gameplay loop. These rewards can be in the form of better equipment, more resources, pieces of information about the world or satisfying narratives to take part in. A player who is immersed in the goings on of the game's world is also someone who is more invested in protecting it and its inhabitants.

24:35

While we have been introduced to minor enemies, there is still the matter of greater and more formidable ones. Instilling the player with a sense of the danger represented by such foes is important if they are to really get a sense of what Witchers are forced to deal with. Our first meeting in the game with such a beast is with a griffin. This sets up the boss and final barrier that must be overcome before proceeding with the main story.

The camera shows a cart, and we hear a man screaming for help. We pan up to see the Witchers arrive at the scene of the attack, then they dismount and approach. Turning around to show their perspective of the attack we see a man, presumably a merchant hiding under a cart with a large monster just behind it, apparently in the process of eating something. The camera moves back to the cart, closer to the ground and pans toward the monster. The ground is soaked with blood and a horse's legs can be seen just before the griffin is revealed. It shrieks as it bites off large chunks of flesh from the fallen animal. Its beak and claws and the damage they can do to a living creature are in focus—underlining the danger it represents.

The perception of the griffin as a threat grants an opportunity for the Witchers to do what they're trained to. Their immediate reaction concretises them as capable fighters, prepared for, and even used to dealing with this kind of monster. Geralt and Vesemir chase off their horses and attack the griffin, who takes to the air as soon as it notices them. Geralt manages to wound the creature, but clearly not enough to render it harmless. It lunges down at Vesemir, striking him and forcing Geralt to dodge the attack. It circles back around and picks up the merchant's horse before taking off. Geralt sheaths his blade, and we see Vesemir bleeding from his shoulder, however he appears relatively unharmed considering the size and lethality of the griffin. The merchant crawls out from under the cart, while he is clearly relieved to not have been killed, he still appears somewhat suspicious of his rescuers. "You'd…you'd like a reward, I suppose?" (26:10)

At this point the player is faced with a decision: do they ask for money or tell the man that he does not owe them anything? What you decide on at this point is likely going to depend on the level of difficulty you have faced thus far, which is limited to the previous encounter with the ghouls. If the fight proved difficult and cost you all of your healing items, possibly leaving the player with only a sliver of health left, then they are more likely to ask for a reward as combat has proved costly and difficult. However, someone who has enough for the moment and found the encounter to be manageable without sustaining much damage or loss of resources could be more inclined to help without pay. Vesemir's injury might move Care or Loyalty minded players further toward asking for a reward, as he is closely aligned with Geralt and was injured while protecting the merchant.

I decide on refusing payment which prompts the merchant to say "And they call Witchers heartless. Say they won't lift a finger without pay" (26:22). His scepticism makes more sense in this context: he was certain the help would prove costly even if it let him keep his life. Geralt compares the statement to another myth about mice being born from rotting straw Geralt's delivery tends to be rather flat, but his lines often contain humour or clever jabs that are often missed by those he speaks to. Humour and observations like this make him a more interesting character as it hints at richer emotional processes than what is outwardly expressed. The lack of explicit emotion in most of his dialogue or body language serves to emphasise outward displays of emotion when they do occur.

28:57

The arrival into White Orchard is marked by a mix of hostility and goodwill, showing different sides of the local populace. The witchers arrive at the inn and attract quite a bit of

attention from some of the clientele who make snide remarks as they pass. The innkeeper however appears to be a rather kind woman. She apologises for the thugs' behaviour and—at the news of Bram being saved from the griffin—gives them free food as a reward. Players who asked for money from Bram would not have received this reward, but they would also have no way of knowing this would happen. Gaining good will from people might result in beneficial outcomes as well as the satisfaction of doing what one believes to be right, but it does not guarantee rewards or even desirable outcomes. Approving reactions from NPCs provide positive reinforcement of Geralt's traits, lessening distance between him and others around him. This can include the player, as their contribution to the story leads to noticeable changes in the world. Creating player involvement is greatly aided by them feeling like they are an active participant in a world where their actions matter.

34:25

Interaction with specific locals can be a good way to gather information. Geralt asks the inn's guests about Yennefer. The first men are aggressive and refuse to speak to him, prompting the use of a sign to make one of them tell Geralt what he knows. His friend starts yelling "Oi, people! The freak's taken Micah's mind!" but is swiftly moved to silence by the threat of losing his tongue if he speaks any more. The open hostility of these men is likely to make the use of magic and subsequent method of silencing feel appropriate to many players. However, the negative reaction to using spells near superstitious and prejudiced peasants can be anticipated and avoided through simply asking or leaving the men alone. Leaving might intuitively feel like cowardice to some players, while others prefer to avoid conflict, even after receiving offensive remarks. Having seen the devastation wrought on the countryside could drive Care oriented players to sympathise with the peasants despite their hatred for Witchers. Meanwhile, the unfair and unfounded hostility to Geralt plays on the Fairness foundation, meaning that their actions are easy to condemn or feel justified in punishing regardless. This is particularly likely if players feel closely aligned with Geralt, as the offense could be perceived as being directed toward the player as well.

The next queried guest is a clueless academic frustrated with the local populace for their lacking understanding of Gwent, a popular card game within the game's world. His exclamation of "The earth shall revolve around the sun before you comprehend these rules!" (Christoffersen, 2023h, p. 35:30) plant the first seeds of doubt regarding his understanding of the world. His dismissal of "The Horsewoman of War", meaning Yennefer, as pure superstition further reinforces the impression that this man knows far less than he lets on. His

views and opinions are imbued with ironic distance as we are clearly not supposed to take him seriously as an authority figure.

He intends to document the Nilfgaardian invasion as it occurs, which Geralt advises against, stating that he will be killed by the first soldier he meets. This mortifies the scholar, who asks why a soldier would do such a thing to a neutral civilian, to which Geralt replies that he would be killed for his boots. The contrast between first-hand experience with human cruelty and an idealised view of war and conflict is stark and the scholar appears in disbelief that anything like that could occur. Sadly, Geralt is proved right as the player can discover the man hanged from a tree in Velen—noticeably missing his boots (Christoffersen, 2023a, p. 1:15). The scholar and his fate is a statement: those who cannot defend themselves will be victimised, no matter their view of themselves or how things are supposed to be.

After a bit of further conversation Geralt plays some cards with the man and moves on to another table where he talks to a mysterious merchant by the name of Gaunter O'Dimm, who appears to know everything about him and Yennefer already. O'Dimm guides him toward the local garrison commander, who might know where Yennefer went after White Orchard, which effectively puts us on the path of the main quest.

After leaving the inn, the player is given free reins to move about White Orchard, exploring, doing side quests, or progressing through the main story.

45:40 to 55:08

Incentive for exploration is provided through the presence of background dialogue pointing toward ongoing events, interesting details in the environment and through the different notices posted on noticeboards. These boards provide the primary source of quests as well as nifty details about the world.

One of the more noticeable features of the village is the smouldering ruin of a forge with a dwarf angrily hammering away at his anvil right beside it. An exclamation mark is displayed on the mini map, but the sound and visual cues ought to catch a player's attention on their own. Geralt is tasked by the smith to figure out who is responsible for setting fire to his forge, a task that is promptly accomplished. The quest does its part in establishing the rising racial tensions of the game's world as dwarves and other non-humans are ostracised and rumoured to be working with the enemy against the local populace. The smith is forced by the Nilfgaardians to produce weapons for their army without receiving anything, save for the necessary materials to make them. As the dwarf explains: he has been a part of the community for many decades and provided goods and services to the locals, often at a negligible cost. This plays on the Loyalty, Fairness, and Care foundations, as the blacksmith

faces this kind of treatment despite his participation and loyalty to the local community over such a long time. When the arsonist is caught, he is promptly sentenced to death, afterwards the smith expresses a newfound belief that the Nilfgaardians might finally civilise the country. The betrayal has effectively forced him out of his community and moved his loyalty toward the invader—a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. This kind of interaction, with differing loyalties, priorities and values is at the core of what makes playing *TW3* such a compelling experience. They make the world feel alive and populated with characters that feel authentic, complete with motivations and flaws. The player is forced to consider the consequences of their actions but is also given an opportunity to shape the world through their decisions.

5.4 The Nilfgaardian Garrison

1:01:40 to 1:06:35

TW3 encourages interaction with the game's optional content through intertwining it with the main story. This is crucial as the optional content plays a huge part in fleshing out the world while also teaching us more about Geralt as a character. Engaging with the side content elevates the main story through making players more invested in the fate of the world and its inhabitants. Progressing through the preparations for hunting the griffin also has us introduced to different side characters whose stories tie into the greater narrative of events in White Orchard. Sowing the seeds of interest in mandatory sections increase the likelihood of players engaging with the optional content in order to learn or experience more about the world. Further encouragement is provided by rewards in the form of money, equipment, resources, and experience points, which contribute to levelling up and increasing one's skills.

A key aspect of Geralt as a character is his open opposition to authorities he disapproves of. Placing him in situations where he has no choice but to deal with such authorities plays an important role in Geralt's characterisation as his personality shines through. The game will sometimes provide options to be more conciliatory, but a confrontational tone is sometimes unavoidable, as is the case with the Nilfgaardian captain in White Orchard. The captain's introduction has him speaking with a local farmer and appealing to his own experience when deciding how much to requisition from the village. After being offered forty bushels, the captain decreases the sum to thirty—a move that might seem both fair and compassionate considering the circumstances. Whether the player considers this a genuine act of kindness from a surprisingly benevolent officer, or a cynical ploy to win over the local populace is up to their respective intuitions. Geralt is not convinced, which becomes clear through sarcasm and verbal jabs during the conversation.

Geralt's penchant for challenging authority is a commonly displayed trait that occasionally has to be reined in. The degree to which he can indulge in openly challenging disliked authorities is partly up to the player, with the other party involved being his survival instinct.

5.5 Tomira and On Death's Bed

1:08:16 to 1:10:50

One of the most memorable quests in White Orchard starts when Geralt encounters an herbalist caring for a dying woman. The quest presents a difficult choice with unpredictable consequences, only revealing the outcome much later in the game. Establishing long-term ramifications of your actions creates an impression that the world keeps moving independently of Geralt and the player. Additionally, the quest serves as a splendid example of narrative distance shaping our intuitions and priorities. Moral thinking depending on intuitions also means that the initial pang of approval or condemnation is coloured by our like or dislike of specific characters. How we are made to feel in a given situation also plays a part in this as players could be moved to action or passivity through available input.

Our preparations for hunting the griffin requires a specific herb and information about the monster. Acquiring the herb is the first part of this process and introduces us to Tomira the herbalist. Our first meeting has her caring for a dying woman named Lena, who was attacked by the griffin—setting the stage for a moral dilemma.

Brewing a potion could save her life but might also kill her in an excruciatingly painful manner. Doing nothing, on the other hand will guarantee her death, but in a way where she is sedated and allowed to pass away in the company of pleasant dreams. Brewing the potion has utility for combat scenarios, as it is a potent and renewable source of healing—meaning that the player is incentivised to find the necessary resources whether they mean to give a dose to the dying lady or not.

The decision between certain, but pain-free death or an unlikely cure that might end up causing immense pain or permanent damage is not an easy one. Yet it nevertheless will be made by any player who encounters Tomira, as doing nothing is a decision in itself. However, the player can be moved toward helping if they like Tomira as a character. This is an instance where narrative distance contributes to our moral thinking. As humans we are more willing to side with those we like or relate to and condemn those we dislike. This also means that positive character traits that people find relatable or admirable lessen narrative distance between them and a character—in turn making players more considerate of the character's wishes and opinions. In light of the previously encountered hostility from some of the

villagers, Tomira's respectful and considerate approach to Geralt feels refreshing and genuine. It also makes her more likeable to players who feel close to Geralt, as they would enjoy seeing him treated well by others, perhaps even feel like they are enjoying the same treatment by proxy.

Deciding to give Lena the potion is met with a positive reception, as well as a reward from Tomira, who thanks Geralt "for giving a damn". Receiving thanks and approval from a character we've grown to like also makes the decision feel more correct. It implies that the opposite course of action could be viewed by Tomira as callous or uncaring. While the Care foundation would likely make people wish to help a dying girl the wish might be tamped down by the risk of further causing further suffering for only a small chance of saving her life.

What consequences come from making this decision is not revealed until quite a bit later in the game. While travelling through a Nilfgaardian encampment in Velen, Geralt is stopped by a Nilfgaardian soldier who knows his name and his earlier presence in White Orchard. The soldier reveals that Lena survived thanks to Geralt's potion, and that he was the one Lena went out of her way to meet. Love between an invader and a local is not looked kindly upon, and her parents would punish her harshly were they to find out. This led him to bring her along when the army left White Orchard. However, saving Lena's life did not come without a cost. She is left an empty husk of her former self. The soldier tells us that "She says nothing, recognises no one, sleeps most of the day". The consequence of saving her life was rendering her little more than a shell, only technically alive. The conversation ends with the soldier stating that he doesn't know where to thank Geralt or curse him for not letting her die with dignity (Christoffersen, 2023g).[10]

Despite good intentions and Tomira's approval the result is still one that could be seen as worse than the results of doing nothing. Yet in every playthrough I decide to give her the potion. In part because I like Tomira, in part because I believe Geralt would have made the decision and because I feel like trying to help is the right thing to do in the situation. The quest's ending shows how some situations do not have happy endings, merely two varieties of tragedy that the player will have to choose between.

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[10] On Death's Bed: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kq4tiHojNKg

5.6 Contract: Devil by the Well

1:11:11 to 1:13:32

A Witcher's primary source of income is through taking on monster contracts, missions to kill monsters in exchange for money. One of the notices on the noticeboard in White Orchard was for a contract on a spectre. Getting in touch with the contract giver, Odolan, reveals that the area around the local well has been haunted for about twenty years, but that the need for accessing it has only become an issue after the war—as rotting bodies now pollute the river. Odolan's daughter became severely ill after drinking noxious water from the river and needs clean water in order to recover, making the well the only viable solution. It is likely that players will feel sympathetic with Odolan, as he displays virtuous traits despite being in a difficult situation. He does everything in his power to save his daughter, yet also expresses pity for the wraith haunting the well. Admirable traits combine with moral intuitions of Care, Fairness and Loyalty to lessen the player's narrative distance to him. Negotiating for the reward reveals that the man has very little to give in return for Geralt's services. The sum of twenty-two crowns is not much to risk one's life for—and doing so would almost be considered an act of charity in itself. However, the game pushes players toward doing it regardless with the twin incentives of storytelling and experience points. Experience points, when accumulated allow Geralt to level up—acquiring new skills and growing stronger in the process. Progressing through the story necessitates growth, emphasising the value of experiences in developing oneself. The monetary reward then is not the only consideration and can be excused, particularly if one feels sympathy for the man.

1:14:19

Devil by the Well does a lot in establishing the area's history and connecting various events through discovering clues. This represents one of the unique ways videogames can tell stories as key information can be missed by players who do not engage with the world or its characters. Figuring out a mystery piece by piece creates incentive for exploration and a curious approach to dialogue, as doing so rewards attentive and invested players with stories and experiences that might have been completely overlooked. Exploring the village of Hovel does not initially result in a meeting with the ghost, as it only appears at certain times. However, a dead dog with signs of burns and scorched grass near the well indicates a spirit that makes use of fire and heat in its attacks, a Noonwraith. Consulting the bestiary provides valuable information on how to deal with this new threat, as well as establishing the value of

information in gaining an advantage over unfamiliar opponents. Before the wraith can be made to leave, Geralt will have to locate the object tying her to this world.

The last house to be searched contains some clues as to what led the village to become cursed. A diary tells of a small group opposed to the lord of the area and some of the different injustices inflicted on the people. They strike off on their own and build a new village, but the last entry tells us the lord is coming to visit the village, that he has grown calmer after the death of his son. Hovel holds the first piece of a puzzle, which can be pieced together or missed depending on the player's involvement and decisions.

The skeleton of a man lies near the diary, possibly the remains of Volker, the diary-owner's husband. There is a knife still jutting out between his ribs, even after animals have picked his bones clean. Geralt follows the tracks left behind after a struggle, he finds a woman's bloody palmprints near the door that indicates she was fighting for her life despite being injured. As the clues lead Geralt toward the well, he notices that the well's rope is taut, as if something heavy is hanging from it.

1:18:33

The camera moves down into the well, the sides of the structure narrowing our view and creating a frame within a frame. This focuses our attention on specific detail, while also creating a claustrophobic or closed in mood. As Geralt looks down, the camera pans to reveal the woman's skeleton, hanged from the bucket-rope and left there all this time. The camera moves to a higher position and looks down at the skeleton—hanging over the dark abyss of the well, suspended between life and death reflects how her spirit is bound to this place.

It is beyond doubt that the woman's spirit has been twisted into a wraith due to what she experienced in her final moments. Examining the body shows a missing left arm–likely having fallen off from the weight of a bracelet she was wearing; a treasured gift from her husband that be the item that binds her to this place.

Finding the bracelet reveals the woman's name: Claer.

1:22:32

Cremating the bracelet and Claer's remains summons the Noonwraith. Claer's skeleton burns with an unnatural green flame as the wraith rises up from the well that she had inhabited for so many years. Her spirit has been twisted into something monstrous—dried and decomposed skin, missing teeth, and a long, protruding tongue, yet she is wearing a crown of flowers on her head. The flower crown represents her innocence, and in conjunction with her twisted and decayed appearance, through visual storytelling we are told a story of a pure soul who has been corrupted. Dealing with the curse might grant her some peace as she's allowed

to finally move on from this world. A drawn-out scream fades away into nothing as the final blow is struck, the curse has been lifted. The gameplay becomes more impactful through having communicated so much about Claer through the game's cinematography beforehand. Rather than simply fighting an evil spirit for no reason, we are putting a tortured soul out of its misery. While sad, there is still relief knowing that she can be at peace, and that Odolan's daughter might grow up as a result of our actions.

1:24:33

When the time for receiving his reward comes, the player is given a choice to refuse payment from the poor man—instead asking him to keep the money for his daughter. I believe most players would be inclined to leave him the money as it builds on moral foundations that would apply to many different groups. The near universal Care and Fairness foundations kick in, as the goal of the contract is to provide clean water for a sick child who was poisoned as a direct result of the ongoing invasion of her home country. Odolan is doing all he can with limited means in order to cure his daughter, playing on the sanctity and loyalty foundations as he prioritises the well-being of his family despite a challenging economic situation. Expanding on this: Odolan displays values that would make most players sympathetic to him, thereby creating narrative proximity to the player. The interplay between Geralt and the player also comes into play, as the option to refuse payment is made available—this is a choice that Geralt is considering, maybe in part because he too would do anything to protect his own daughter. However, Geralt is also a professional who provided a service in exchange for an agreed-upon sum. Odolan remains very grateful if you accept the payment—after all, you did save his daughters life. The difference between the two outcomes lies in one highlighting the Witcher's capacity for kindness and selfless behaviour, and the other having him acting as expected.

Ultimately I would argue that the narrative payoff is significantly greater than the monetary one—Odolan's gratitude and the prospect of his daughter having a better life, with Geralt being remembered fondly at her wedding, ends the contract on a hopeful note. Just because the world of *TW3* can be cruel, that does not equate to a lack of warmth and kindness. Shining a light in the darkness is more significant than doing so in broad daylight.

1:26:17

Asking Tomira if she knew of a woman named Claer provides the second piece of the puzzle regarding what caused the massacre in Hovel. The lord rode out to the village with a retinue to convince the villagers to return. However, Claer said something about his dead son,

Florian, that made him fly into a rage. What would have brought her to speak ill of a man's departed son, as well as what was said remain a mystery until a final piece of the puzzle is found. Quests and characters being connected in this way allows the game to slowly reveal information to the player as they search for it. Discovering new information through actively looking for it feels more rewarding than simply reading a summary of events. Having seen what became of Claer and putting her spirit to rest has us starting at the end and leaves it to the player to figure out the *why* and *how*.

5.7 The Beast of White Orchard

1:27:23

The world of *TW3* is cruel in myriad ways, not least of which is its intolerance. Being set in a medieval setting rife with superstition and emotional reasoning contributes to this in having drastic action not being tempered by reason. Our meeting with the hunter, Mislav grants us further insight into what this entails—building up the extent of the world's cruelty before the player's eyes. After his relationship with the lord's son, Florian was discovered, Mislav was cast out and the ensuing chaos ended in Florian's suicide, the lord's alcoholism and eventually contributed to the massacre in Hovel.

The interconnected nature of events can be entirely missed or explored in detail depending on the player's actions. They are hidden pieces that are intriguing on their own, but together tell a larger story than their isolated parts. Piecing them together becomes a matter of personal investment as it requires effort and attention to detail in order for the picture to be made clear. Having the main quest nudge players toward finding these, yet still allowing you to miss them is part of what makes it a gratifying experience for so many. The player's effort is rewarded with story and worldbuilding that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. This strengthens investment in those already invested and incentivises interaction with the game's world beyond the main quest.

Tracking the beast has Geralt consulting a local hunter by the name of Mislav. However, the hunter has to deal with a group of wild dogs before he can help Geralt locate the Griffin's nest. Attentive players might notice some similarities between Geralt and Mislav— both kill beasts that threaten the local populace for coin yet are viewed with suspicion and disdain from the people they protect. The core difference between the two lies in the scale of their prey and the exact reason for the derision they are met with.

1:30:30

The dogs tore a man to shreds before they were killed by Geralt and the hunter. Mislav knows the man from the time he worked as the lord's huntsman, a long time ago. Inquiring about the issue reveals the final piece of the puzzle surrounding the massacre at Hovel.

Mislav was driven out of the village because he is, as he puts it, a freak. Leaving it there and moving on will result in never learning the full story, whereas asking further has Geralt assuming that Mislav must be a werewolf and offering to help. However, the explanation turns out to be more of a tragic one. Mislav and the lord's son, Florian loved each other and were eventually found out. This led to Mislav being cast out and Florian committing suicide, which in turn caused the lord to start drinking heavily, his estate falling into ruin. The extreme disgust in reaction to homosexuality reinforces the harsh nature of the game's setting, as it contains opinions on the issue reminiscent of those common to medieval societies around the world. It is likely that Claer's comment to the lord made mention of his son's homosexuality, suicide, or both—explaining the sudden rage and grizzly retribution. Claer having the capacity to say something like that to a grieving and troubled father might make players less sympathetic to her. However, the lord's mistreatment of the locals, as well as the gruesomeness of his retribution prevents much sympathy from going in his direction. The local populace view homosexuality with disgust and Claer might not have been an exception. Yet she is a product of her environment, and her kindness toward Tomira nevertheless make her stand out in a positive manner. Preventing characters from being entirely virtuous, allowing for flaws and prejudice even in likeable characters adds emotional weight to the setting and reinforces its moral ambiguity.

People being driven largely by intuitions also means that pangs of disgust can lead to dehumanising views or vilification. Including this in the game reinforces the naturalistic and difficult feel of the game's world as cruelty can manifest itself for any number of reasons. It also gives a sense of authenticity to the population of White Orchard, as their views are not tailored to reflect the views of the game's audience, but rather to be partly in opposition to many players. A WEIRD approach to morality will likely have players sympathising with Mislav, while feeling disgust at how cruelly he has been treated by the locals. Meanwhile other approaches to morality may lead players to be disgusted by or condemn him on the basis of homosexuality being viewed as sinful or unnatural. This serves as a vivid example of conflicting moral intuitions, with concerns of Care and Fairness coming up against those of Sanctity. WEIRD societies prioritising the former diminishes the impact of the latter. The Sanctity foundation would nevertheless have a significant impact on how a player with strongly negative intuitions regarding homosexuality would experience this part of the game.

1:40:08 to 1:46:35

   Before Geralt and the player can move on from White Orchard and into the game proper, they will have to face the griffin. Narrative progress is tied to this encounter, meaning that the player is stuck in White Orchard until the monster has been dealt with. The build-up to the encounter creates a sense of anticipation and investment as the player has been an active participant in the preparations. Slaying the griffin has the player making use of what they have learned so far and serves as a kind of challenge to round up the first chapter of the game. Blocking progress behind a challenge like this is one of the aspects differentiating games from other storytelling media. Your own skills and actions are directly linked to your ability to proceed and might have to be developed in order to reach your goals. After emerging triumphant from the encounter, Geralt takes the griffin's head to the Nilfgaardian captain as proof of a job well done.

1:47:30 to 1:49:30

   The final meeting with the Nilfgaardian captain is one that serves to further characterise this iteration of Geralt. The reason I specify this is that who Geralt is, and how we view him is shaped by our choices in conjunction with his established personality. When making a difficult decision the player might spend quite a bit of time figuring out what the best choice would be. Some choices take this possibility away and force the player to choose quickly before a choice is made for them. Seeing a timer count down adds to the sense of urgency and makes the player have to rely on their intuitions in the moment. Being forced to decide quickly will likely be followed by rationalising to oneself why the decision was the correct one. Thinking back to the metaphor of the elephant and the rider, the elephant has been given full control for a moment. Defending its actions and the consequences of these will eventually be left up to the rider. Making these choices a challenge to the player requires there to be pros and cons to each option—in this case material gains would come at the cost of personal dignity and vice versa.

   Arriving back at the garrison triggers a cutscene in which the captain deals harshly with a farmer for delivering rotten grain. He is visibly upset after having provided decent terms to the locals and views the delivery as an act of great disrespect. Military code dictates the punishment for delivering defective goods to be fifteen lashes with a knout.

   Geralt's issues with authority are on full display as he points out the discrepancy between the captain's previous behaviour and his current, more authoritarian approach. Despite the tense mood, we still receive the promised information: Yennefer is a day's ride

ahead, in Vizima. Geralt goes to leave, but is stopped by the captain, who offers him payment for fulfilling the contract.

This choice is the first timed decision of the game, and thus gives little time for thinking through one's options. This means that intuitions will have an even greater impact on the decision than usual, as rational thinking requires time and consideration. Refusing the reward will purely be an act of defiance and condemnation of the captain, whereas accepting it will require Geralt, and by extension the player to accept the man's authority. After having challenged the man's authority this would effectively be an admission of defeat on Geralt's part. It would be an admission that while Witchers may talk tough, they can always be bought. Sticking to his principles will leave him poorer, but richer in dignity.

A player scoring high on Authority could be more likely to understand the captain's indignation after placing himself in a position to relate to the locals. As he puts it himself "I extended a hand to these people, and they spat on it". This could distance them from Geralt, as his direct opposition to the captain may be viewed as overly idealistic or acts of petulant rebellion. On the other hand, players who view the captain's authority as illegitimate, as well as those who feel close to Geralt as a character will be more likely to refuse the offer. Furthermore, the Care foundation would drive opposition to the captain as he is responsible for sentencing the farmer to a harsh physical punishment. Yet even those who personally oppose the captain might feel compelled to accept the offer if they lack resources or struggle in combat scenarios. In a world as frequently hostile and merciless as this one, having principles and sticking to them while staying alive demands a great deal from people. A more capable Geralt could be willing to scrape by without extra resources, whereas one that is struggling might be forced to suffer indignities in order to ensure survival. Ultimately, I decide not to take the money. Geralt leaves the garrison accompanied by the sounds of lashes and the farmer screaming out in pain. This could induce a pang of guilt or shame in players who took the money, especially to those who wished to oppose the captain and his actions. Meanwhile those who refused the money might feel increasingly justified in having taken a stand against him.

1:50:20

Despite Witchers for the most part looking human, there is an underlying fear and distance between humans, non-humans, and the mutated monster slayers. Their capacity for violence, catlike eyes, and a history of taking children to be trained and mutated into new Witchers have led people to fear and hate them. This creates distance between Witchers and other humans and complicates our dealings with other people. Witchers are neither fully

human nor non-human, making them outcasts even among other outcasts. Poor treatment from many different sides could incline players toward more cynical or mercenary behaviour, responding to being dehumanised through dehumanizing others in turn. This scene has the two Witchers being forced to violence, the extent of which horrifies the barkeep who treated them kindly on their arrival. The sudden increase in distance, going from appreciated to feared and hated in the span of minutes launches us out of relative comfort. The juxtaposition of having been met with open arms and sent away with horrified shouts marks a definite end to the tutorial.

The Witchers go to the local tavern and get dragged into a fight after Vesemir intervenes when the innkeeper is attacked by a local woman. The other guests at the bar, a group of drunk patriots itching for a fight, draw their weapons and lunge at Geralt and Vesemir, who kill their attackers in brutal fashion. The display horrifies the locals, and even the innkeeper, Bram's cousin who had treated them so kindly earlier on now yells at them to leave and never return.

Seeing a group of their own people killed and dismembered despite greatly outnumbering the two Witchers solidifies the onlookers' view of the Witchers as monsters. A wedge is placed between the Witchers and the local humans—a reminder that despite good intentions and important work, they are still far from human in the eyes of many. Having Geralt be treated like a freak in itself has narrative impact, but seeing a possible explanation for why this might be creates an interesting mix of emotions. The scene contextualises the violence that defines a Witcher's way of life through the horrified looks of those who witness it.

1:53:40

White Orchard as a section of the story is not only finished because there is no more business, but also because the massacre means that the Witchers have to leave, and quickly. This draws a clear separation between the tutorial and the rest of the game, letting the player know that their time here is up and that they have to move on.

As they go outside, they are met by a group of Nilfgaardian soldiers, accompanied by Yennefer. She brings with her an invitation for Geralt from emperor Emhyr Var Emreis of Nilfgaard but refuses to elaborate until they arrive in Vizima. Her urgency in getting to safety behind the city's walls turns out to be well-founded, as riders from the Wild Hunt chase after them. The Nilfgaardian escort accompanying them is killed, seemingly without much effort. Seeing trained soldiers dispatched in such a manner, combined with Geralt and Yennefer only barely getting away underlines the threat of the game's antagonistic faction. The fact that

Geralt just went up against several armed men just minutes before yet is fleeing for his life now further emphasises them as a legitimate threat. Now the path leads to Vizima where the game's main quest is introduced by the emperor himself.

5.8 The Witcher and The Emperor

Opposing forces and influences

Geralt and Emperor Emhyr represent different moral foundations and aspects of Ciri. Each pulling her in a specific direction: Geralt toward liberty and Emhyr toward authority. This divide contributes to two of the game's endings in that each will have her aligned more with one than the other. The Witcher ending represents her embracing liberty and casting off the burden of her birthright—travelling the world as a Witcher and living freely. Meanwhile, the Empress ending has Ciri accepting responsibility and becoming the ruler of Nilfgaard with all the challenges and restrictions that entails.

The player will spend a large amount of time tracking down Ciri. During this part of the story Geralt follows available clues in order to figure out where she could have ended up. These sections familiarise us with Ciri through flashbacks as Geralt gathers the necessary information. It is important for players to get opportunities to relate to her as a character and figure out her personality and values, as the relationship between her and Geralt is the emotional core of the game. Making the player like Ciri as a character moves them emotionally closer to both Ciri and Geralt as our wish to see one succeed automatically aligns us with the intentions of the others.

Ciri is similar to Geralt in her values, with an appreciation for self-determination and personal freedom. She wishes to help others and fight injustice, yet she would be happier on a personal level if she were not born to greatness[11] (Christoffersen, 2023d, p. 1:42:20). Even defeating the Wild Hunt does not free her, as so many others have plans for her and would do anything in their power to make those plans a reality. While she is personally inclined toward liberty, Ciri is still expected to lead and do great things—either through fate or the wishes of others. Her being the only heir to the Nilfgaardian throne in a time where the emperor is pressured to abdicate makes her invaluable to his cause and ambitions. That is not to say that Emhyr does not care for his daughter, but rather that her well-being is prioritised below his ambitions for the Nilfgaardian empire.

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[11] Finale pt2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brG2D-m9uQQ

Ciri's wishes contrast greatly with her decisions in the Empress ending as she accepts to carry a burden for the benefit of others. Her selflessness is noble in intention and is likely to have a positive effect on the world. Players are likely to have mixed emotions regarding this decision as the greater good comes at a significant personal cost for Ciri and Geralt. Geralt and the player's attachment and narrative proximity is crucial for each of the endings to have the desired emotional impact, as all are built on the foundations of their relationship.

The tension and ill-will between her two father figures are added to by the player's own moral foundations and proximity to Geralt. [12] (Christoffersen, 2023f, p. 8:45). Geralt's opposition and dislike of the emperor can be more or less obvious depending on approaches to dialogue but is nevertheless felt and noticed through the availability of subversive dialogue choices. Refusing to bow to the emperor is the first of the available subversions. The oppositional tone Geralt takes with him leaves little room for doubt. However, courses of action that signal direct opposition are not mandatory. A more diplomatic approach is available, which would likely prove more palatable to players to whom subversion of royal authority, tradition or simple etiquette would not be a fitting approach. While Geralt's personality still contributes greatly to the tone of the conversation, player choices can nevertheless make the conversation cordial, if somewhat strained. Observing tradition and picking dialogue options that are less hostile is an option. However, obeying the Emperor's commands and taking Ciri to him might also result in Geralt and Ciri being separated in one of the game's endings.

Taking Ciri to see Emhyr opens the possibility of getting the Empress ending, as this is where she receives the offer to ascend to the throne. Accepting the Emperor's reward will result in Ciri feeling sold out by Geralt, as if finding her was just another job to be completed. Meanwhile denying the payment strengthens their bond and helps motivate her during her final confrontation with the world-threatening White Frost.

While the conclusion has vast implications for the fates of the game's main characters, the journey toward it is what ultimately makes it a compelling experience. Ciri and Geralt are not experiencing this in isolation, but rather in conjunction with all kinds of side-characters. Each contributes more or less to the overall experience, but nevertheless plays a part in shaping the course of the game.

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[12] First Visit to Vizima: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPoy-FwrZKo

5.9 The Bloody Baron

Redeeming the unredeemable?

Some of *TW3*'s most memorable moments come in a questline concerning the side character Phillip Strenger, otherwise known as the Bloody Baron. This questline contains deeply flawed characters and complex dynamics, which in turn allow for different interpretations playing on specific moral foundations. Geralt is tasked with tracking down the Baron's wife, Anna, and their daughter, Tamara, who have both gone missing. The land of Velen is full of swamps, marshes, and monsters—making it near impossible for normal humans to track them down. In exchange for Geralt completing this task, the Baron will help locate Ciri. The two are aligned in their search for missing family members, and each relies on the other in order to find their missing loved ones. There is a dark twist to the story: the Baron is gradually revealed to be a violent alcoholic—prone to rage and reckless behaviour. This extends to him beating his wife and traumatising his daughter, who would be forced to calm him when he would get angry. The primary question raised and explored within the questline is whether a man like him can be redeemed.

The Bloody Baron is a warlord aligned with the Nilfgaardian empire; he holds a significant amount of power in the marshland of Velen, an inhospitable and perilous land plagued by hunger and war. The state of the surrounding area bleeds over into the Baron's home at Crow's Perch. A large estate stands in disrepair, yet the conditions are still far better than in the rest of Velen. The mix of luxury and decay complements the story as it mirrors how the Baron's family—his home, is falling apart.

The initial impression of the Baron paints a picture of a jovial, yet surprisingly sharp individual[13] (Christoffersen, 2023a, pp. 22:03-25:15). the Baron is a large man, a combination of accumulated muscle and corpulence. While he might seem fat and jolly at first, his large frame also indicates great physical strength. It is doubtless that he would prove a real threat to others if he meant them harm. His greying beard covers most of his face, but the dark rings under his eyes look as though he has not slept properly for weeks.

We find out early on that the Baron helped Ciri and a little girl rescued by her, named Gretka. The Baron gave them food and shelter when they needed it (Christoffersen, 2023a, p. 38:42). This immediately creates a positive image of the man, as he treats Ciri and Gretka with kindness without getting anything in return. Selfless behaviour for the purpose of helping others, children in particular, is cause for narrative proximity and casting him in a

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[13] Bloody Baron pt.1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4zrTXhnck8

positive light. His continual hospitality to Ciri and Gretka ends with Ciri using her powers to save his life from a monster (Christoffersen, 2023c, pp. 1:10:20-11:13:11).[14] Ciri's emotional proximity to Geralt, and Geralt's proximity to the player in turn make this point weigh more heavily in his favour. Ciri would want to see the Baron doing well, which might lead the player toward wanting the same thing.

The Baron's many years of abuse directed at his wife drove her to hate and resent him. This resentment began after he had grown dependent on alcohol to deal with the hardship and loneliness of soldiering. While he was away, his wife cheated on him with a childhood friend of hers named Evan. This went on for three years as the Baron was away risking his life as a soldier, trying to provide for his family. Anna revealed all this to her husband in a letter, announcing that she no longer loved him and had run away with Evan, taking Tamara with her. This led the Baron to track them down and slaughter Evan and feeding his carcass to the dogs. Anna tried to kill him in retaliation, marking the first time he hit her. According to the Baron, he felt that to be the only way to calm her in the moment. When he returned home with his family it was with a daughter too young to understand and a wife who despised him. Eventually their lives devolved into a vortex of arguments, alcohol, and violence (Christoffersen, 2023c, p. 59:10).

The Baron's explanation might drive some to sympathise, while others will already have judged him and found him beyond saving. This might also make some players less inclined to listen to his explanation. Condemnation of his position on its own could be based on a host of different foundations. Loyalty, as he betrays his family through his abuse, Sanctity as his behaviour dishonours the inherent value of his relationships and marriage. Additionally, he causes direct and indirect harm to his family, both in physical and emotional ways, and the imbalance in strength makes the situation feel even more unfair. This plays on the Care and Fairness foundations, which tend to be important in the moral systems of most cultural and political groups. There are even grounds for condemnation based on the Liberty foundation, as he essentially becomes a tyrannical force within his own home. His family is trapped in an intolerable situation, which leads them to take drastic measures in order to escape his influence. However, the situation is complicated by how their family started to degrade. The Baron risked his life and saw horrible things as a soldier—being away from his family and trying to cope with the weight of it all leading to substance abuse. Anna having an affair for many years while he endured these hardships creates grounds for condemnation

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[14] Bloody Baron pt.3: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6rzh-wu47c

based on the Sanctity, Care, Fairness and Loyalty foundations. The pain and raw emotion in the Baron's voice when he talks about this shows how deeply this hurt him, leading those who still have a degree of sympathy for him to move closer to him in terms of narrative distance. This would be a case of the Care foundation being dependant on one's relationship to a character, as one could absolutely feel sufficiently cut off from The Baron so as to not empathise with his position. However, there is one preceding scene that would lessen the narrative distance between the player and the Baron, at least for those who see it.

The scene that does the most in terms of painting the Baron as a redeemable character relates to a creature called a Botchling: a miscarried child, buried without ceremony and filled with hatred toward an unwelcoming world and its parents in particular. the Baron, if he was unrepentant or not faced with the consequences of his actions would be a largely unsympathetic character. Seeing him take responsibility and fully accept what his actions have led to, as well as what impact this has on him makes him seem like a man that truly is doing his best to change. It all starts the night when Anna and Tamara flee (Christoffersen, 2023a, p. 1:14:28). During their attempt to escape, the pregnant Anna gets into a scuffle with The Baron and ends up having a miscarriage. While this is initially believed to be a direct result of the altercation, it turns out to be a result of a pact she made with The Crones of Crookback Bog: powerful monsters acting as local deities in Velen. Anna was so filled with resentment that she refused to carry another child from her husband. Making a wish to The Crones seemed the only option to her. However, the wish was corrupted into a deeply traumatic experience for all involved, while also forcing her into service to The Crones. The sincerity and genuine emotion in the Baron's voice as he describes the sight of the child who he wanted more than anything lying small and defenceless in a pool of blood is hard to ignore. It filled him with such dread that he wrapped it in a clean sheet and quickly buried it nearby, just wanting to forget everything about it. The Botchling from a narrative standpoint is a physical amalgamation of the Baron's sins. Sins he will now have to face if he is to find his family.

How much emotional impact this all has on the player depends on whether they choose to kill the Botchling or attempt the ritual of naming, which would give it peace and turn it into a friendly spirit. The choice is timed, meaning the player will need to quickly decide between the certain approach of gathering its blood or the more uncertain ritual of naming (Christoffersen, 2023a, p. 1:21:22). The latter results in what is arguably the most compelling point in favour of the redeemability of Phillip Strenger.

The Botchling is childlike in its demeanour, held by its father who looks down at what became of his child with a grim look on his face. The camera shifts and we get a closer look at the monstrous aspects of the creature. Large, red eyes and a mouth with rows upon rows of sharp teeth, sporadically letting out inhuman hisses and strangled gargles. Again, contrast is used to create mixed emotions in the player. The Botchling looking like a child at a distance, even acting like one, elicits sympathy and a desire to protect it. A closer look reveals a different side as it is made clear that while this thing might have been a child once it has been turned into something twisted, almost demonic. Would players feel fear or disgust upon seeing it? Or is its link to the Baron and his quest to put its spirit to rest enough that we, like the Baron, see traces of its humanity and what might have been? Narrative proximity to the Baron would make players experience events in ways closer to his point of view.

The music creates a solemn, almost otherworldly mood as the ritual begins. The Baron cradles his daughter and speaks the words of the ritual:

> By the powers of earth and sky.
> By the world that was to be your home.
> Forgive me, you who came, but who I did not embrace.
> I name thee Dea and embrace thee as my daughter.

As he utters her name, Dea's eyes open wide like she is truly seeing for the first time. Accompanied by the sound of thunder and her father's sobs, she stretches out her arm toward him for just a moment before she goes limp and quiet. Finally at peace, Dea is buried by the threshold to her father's home.

This scene follows the lowest point of Geralt's dealings with the Baron. After finding out about his abuse, Geralt and the player would both feel greatly distanced from him. Whether they get to this scene or end up killing the Botchling instead is something that I would argue plays a big part in whether or not they believe the Baron to be redeemable. The ritual seems an honest display of vulnerability as he is faced with the consequences of his actions. They show a man crushed by the weight of his sins—a father who mourns the loss of his child and blames himself for everything. Seeing him in this state brings a glimpse of the man he could be: someone who tries to make up for his past mistakes and lives a life helping those he wronged. It seems that the ordeal with Dea changed something in the Baron. Returning to Crow's Perch later on has him sitting in the garden—not having touched food or

drink, wondering about what might have been Dea's favourite flowers were she alive (Christoffersen, 2023b, pp. 7:05-09:18).[15] He appears pensive, reflecting on matters that he never fully acknowledged before.

Ultimately the Baron's only reason for continuing to live is his family. Joining him in rescuing Anna from Crookback Bog has Geralt and him facing down monsters before discovering Anna, who seems to have lost her mind (Christoffersen, 2023c, pp. 1:29:53-21:33:31). In this ending the Baron makes a promise to his daughter that he will not touch alcohol, and that he will take Anna to a healer in the Blue Mountains. It is the ending I chose, and the ending I choose playthrough after playthrough. Knowledge of available outcomes is an explorative process where the sequence of action and consequence is slowly made clear to the player. This, in turn allows veteran players to make informed decisions that move their iteration of the game's world in a specific direction. Effectively this means that the first, second and possibly the sixth playthrough could all be vastly different experiences—yet some choices are likely to be cemented as the right ones in the mind of different players. Having gone through the questline several times exploring the consequences of each decision, I also learned that outcomes that have him failing to rescue Anna result in the Baron committing suicide (Wiki).[16] Due to my narrative proximity to him, combined with a genuine belief in his redemption, such an outcome only seems tragic. Giving him a chance at redemption feels fair, if not for him alone, then for the sake of Anna and Tamara. Perhaps even Dea, now a spirit watching over their household, could get a chance to see them heal.

5.10 The Endings and Their Effects

Different courses of action will result in different outcomes that change the world to a greater or lesser degree. However, some specific decisions go so far as to decide how the game ends. (Wiki). [17] These are encountered later on in the game and relate directly to the relationship between Ciri and Geralt. Each provides her with lessons and motivation to fulfil her destiny and survive her battle with The White Frost. The commonality between all these choices is that they strengthen the bond between Geralt and Ciri, while also letting Ciri grow on a personal level. This prepares her for the greatest ordeal of her life, for which she needs peace of mind, security, and reminders of what she is fighting for. The bond between Ciri and Geralt ultimately decides her fate.

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[15] Bloody Baron pt.2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stHd1S16Y3g
[16] https://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Phillip_Strenger
[17] https://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Something_Ends,_Something_Begins_(quest)

Having separate endings is another unique aspect of videogame narratives, at least in terms of incorporating them in a way that feels intuitive and seamless. Each represents a possible outcome within one particular iteration of the world. The fact that things could have ended differently—even tragically—adds impact to the story through acknowledging the significance of the player's choices. The bad ending in particular elevates the two other endings through providing a distinctly negative outcome. In effect, the possibility of failure makes success feel more satisfying.

Players will have to consider what Ciri needs at specific times in order to get one of the game's two good endings. Ignoring her emotional state or focusing too much on acting stoic or proper will have her crushed by the pressure she has to deal with. Providing moments of relief, trust, and freedom result in a more desirable outcome in that Ciri's survival is ensured.

5.11 Bad Ending

The bad ending is an interesting one in that it is meant to disappoint, a narrative anti-climax. Ciri dies during her encounter with the White Frost and Geralt seemingly gives up on life after retrieving her Witcher's amulet (AFGuidesHD, 2015, p. 38:09). This is a definite let down for players who have gotten invested in the story. Getting to this point, especially on higher difficulties would take a lot of time and effort on the player's part. Depending on how much of the side content one decides to finish it could be upward of a hundred hours. During this time the player will have to acquire and hone a set of skills in order to progress through the game's many challenges. They will have interacted with a large cast of characters and played a part in deciding many of their fates. Players will have been struck down time and time again by foes much stronger than them, but each attempt has been a step on the path to perseverance. However, despite of all the effort and growth—this path has led us to tragedy. The actions that ultimately decide how the game ends will be encountered by all players as they progress through the game's final stages. The decisions that result in a good outcome where Ciri survives will have Geralt providing consolation, support, and trust—giving her peace of mind and a reminder of what she is fighting to protect. Knowing what to do in these situations requires the player to consider Ciri's emotional state and what she needs in the moment. When she blames herself for Vesemir's death, she needs a moment of joy to remind her of the good things in life. When she is faced with the betrayal of one of her most trusted allies, she needs an outlet for her rage. In other words, what Ciri needs from Geralt is for him to be a good father to her. He has to be the opposite of her biological father, whose strict and

demanding approach would crush and demoralise her. Granting her a sense of freedom and security, making her feel loved and trusted, prepares Ciri for the encounter she was always destined for. Failing to provide that will result in this ending.

The bad ending is not meant to be liked, but rather to stand as a testament to failure. Geralt, for all the good he might have done as a Witcher, still failed in his role as a father. The fact that losing Ciri crushes him to the point of giving up, cements their relationship as the most important aspect of his life. Thus, his role as a father is also core to his values and identity.

My first time playing through *TW3* ended in this way. Seeing Geralt so broken down made me feel hollow, like I was responsible for this outcome, likely because I was. By prioritising what I thought the game wanted me to do, I had neglected Ciri. Realising this spurred me to immediately restart the game and make different decisions this time. This is the purpose of having a bad ending: to allow for failure and motivate players to try again. Even as they get a more desirable ending the bad ending enhances the others through the knowledge that things could have ended in tragedy had they acted differently.

5.12 Empress Ending

One of the game's two good endings is the one where Ciri survives her encounter with The White Frost and ascends to the throne of Nilfgaard. This requires Geralt to have taken her to Vizima to meet the emperor, where Emhyr makes the offer that she should become empress. I would argue that this is the bittersweet ending, as while it contains its fair share of positivity it nevertheless concludes with Geralt and Ciri being separated. Ciri is reluctantly aligned with her biological father as she realises that once more, she will have to take on great responsibility in order to contribute meaningfully to the world. In doing so she distances herself from Geralt, as a Witcher's life is incompatible with that of royalty. Her life has been shaped by what is required of her often being the opposite of what she wants. Despite all this she will accept Emhyr's offer should he make it, showing that she values the well-being of others above her personal wishes. This is all dependent on Nilfgaard winning the war. Should they lose, Emhyr will be assassinated, and the line of succession will be broken. Redania's king Radovid will take control and hunt down mages, alchemists, and non-humans all across his territories. Nevertheless, this would leave Ciri free to live the life she wants, even as it throws the north under the reign of a maddened fanatic.

The ending scene starts off in high spirits, but becomes increasingly sombre over time, as Ciri is tormented by her decision and only wishes to spend a little more time with Geralt

(Christoffersen, 2023e, p. 1:27:48)[18]. Its conclusion has Ciri saying a tearful goodbye to Geralt, handing him her sword and with it, leaving behind one life to begin another. They embrace—possibly for the last time before Ciri approaches the imperial retinue. As she moves away from Geralt, the camera remains close to Geralt, underlining the growing distance between them. He can only watch as his daughter rides out of his life and into another (Christoffersen, 2023e, p. 1:48:13).

We are left with the melancholy of knowing that Ciri and Geralt will miss each other greatly, slightly tempered by the knowledge that she can accomplish great things in her time as Nilfgaard's ruler. However, our close proximity to both Geralt and Ciri gives their feelings more weight than the more abstract notion of an entire empire full of unknown people. The world might be better off, but at the cost of the small, unconventional family we have grown to know and appreciate.

This ending, while melancholy might still be preferred by some players due to its implications of greatness for Ciri and betterment for the world. Having Nilfgaard, a powerful force in every sense, ruled by someone inclined toward peace, tolerance, and liberty hints at a brighter tomorrow. Ciri's power as empress could result in a time of peace, where the suffering we encountered in White Orchard and Velen would be a thing of the past. Through giving up the life she wanted, Ciri can make the world a better place, a noble sacrifice for the greater good. Pure rationality void of emotion would mark this as the objectively superior ending; however, humans are far from entirely rational.

5.13 Witcher Ending

The game's final ending is known as the Witcher ending. This is the one a player will get if Ciri survives but was never brought to see the emperor, or if Nilfgaard lost the war. In contrast with the Empress ending, this one starts off with a sense of tragedy and gets more light-hearted as it goes on. Geralt tells Emhyr that Ciri died while fighting The White Frost, and that her body will likely never be found. This provides Ciri—who is very much alive, with an excuse for disappearing without a trace. As with the Empress ending, he goes back to where his quest began, White Orchard, where Ciri is waiting for him (AFGuidesHD, 2015, p. 0:03).

Before he goes to see her, however, he acquires a special silver sword, inscribed with her name. The role of swords in each of the good endings indicates it representing the

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[18] Finale pt3: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQdMwHA48uE

Witcher's way of life. The Empress ending had her leaving her sword behind, whereas the Witcher ending has her receiving a new one. One noticeable difference between this and the Empress ending lies in the mood of the ending scene. In this ending Ciri is filled with optimism and excitement for the future and Geralt gets to go on adventuring with his daughter.

This ending is much lighter in tone than the others. It preserves the happiness of two characters the player has grown close to. The narrative proximity to these characters is likely to make players prefer this ending over the other two on a purely intuitive basis. One could question whether it would not be better for Ciri to become Empress in terms of making the world a better place. By all means a valid point, especially when accounting for the degree of suffering and injustice in the world. Ciri has an opportunity to prevent harm and oppression for massive numbers of people, as well as to save the life of her biological father. Emhyr will be assassinated by members of his court if Ciri does not take the throne, meaning that this ending comes at the cost of his life, with the possible loss of many more resulting from later conflict in or around Nilfgaard. Ciri's freedom comes at a cost both to those we see and to the unknown masses we can only know through our amalgamated impression of life in this world. This point of view could be challenged by the point that Ciri already saved the world and has spent her entire life bearing the burden of greatness. All she wanted was to be free and this ending grants her wish. After a lifetime of hardship, Ciri is finally allowed to live the life she wanted. Could anyone blame her for that?

6 Conclusion

The Witcher 3 is a unique storytelling experience where the mood and setting provide ample grounds for exploration of morality. Magical elements fuse with an unflinching, naturalistic setting to form a cohesive and intriguing world for players to interact with. Throughout the experience the player will be faced with various challenges, involving them in the world and the fates of its inhabitants. The game's ambiguous morality leaves it up to the player to decide what is right or wrong in a given situation. These decisions are some of the primary challenges of the game and result in consequences that are often impossible to predict. Accepting this and weighing the good up against the bad means that the player's moral thinking and intuitions, as well as their narrative distance to specific characters.

These decisions feel significant because of their related consequences—both in the long and short-term. The fact that *your* decisions shape the world drive involvement and engagement as the player is an active participant in the world.

While *TW3* tends toward emphasising cruel actions and the misery they cause, that does not mean the game is solely focused on negativity. Experiencing failure or hardship both in terms of combat and narrative makes success feel earned. The satisfaction gained through increasing mastery encourages engagement with the game and its challenges. Moments of kindness, relief and joy are imbued with meaning through the hardships faced by the player and the characters they meet. This makes the game's lighter moments feel more significant, as they have been earned through struggle. The game's use of contrasts serves to enhance the overall experience through displaying a wide range of emotion and having the player move through these in order to progress.

How players react to a given situations, as well as their willingness to approve or condemn an action will differ from player to player. The reason for this is an interplay between their moral foundations and their narrative distance to specific characters. The two exist in a symbiosis where one has an effect on the other and vice versa. Our intuitions drive us toward liking or disliking characters, moving us closer or further away from their point of view. Narrative distance in turn can temper or heighten our intuitions toward approval or condemnation as we are less willing to condemn the actions of characters we like. This also means that disliked characters are easy to fault as we are primed to look for flaws and wrongdoing.

Differences in moral foundations and distance can help with explaining how different players approach different situations. These also explain differences in which outcomes they

like and dislike. This extends to the game's endings where the personal wishes of characters we've grown to care for are weighed against the safety and well-being of many others who are unknown to us. Whether players prefer one or the other depends on how much they expect individuals to sacrifice for the good of others.

Combining Moral Foundations Theory and Narrative distance makes for a clear and easily understood framework. This makes it well suited for media and literary analysis, particularly when it comes to videogames with moral choices woven into their narratives. Understanding what drives people to make different decisions, or value different outcomes provides meaningful insight regarding human nature. Further research utilising such a framework could help develop our understanding of what drives human beings to act and think in the ways we do. It might also help with the creation of new and compelling narrative experiences through better understanding of these processes.

In the end I think of *The Witcher 3* as a game about perseverance and the importance of our relationships to others. Geralt bears the scars of countless battles, yet his face rarely betrays any emotion outside of specific moments. His life gains meaning through his relationship to Ciri, with all the challenges and joys that entails. Through accepting responsibility for another person, he also opens himself up to being hurt, yet his life would be empty without it. Even though his path takes him through much danger and hardship, it is nevertheless one he decided to walk for the sake of his daughter. Through playing *The Witcher 3*, the player walks this path with him, fighting his battles and accompanying him through joys and sorrows. Geralt's victories are also our own, as the player will have improved over the course of the story. How the story ends after all, is up to us.

7 Reference List

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