

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

Platform: PC, Xbox One, PlayStation 4

Genre: Role-playing game

Release Date: 19 May 2015

Developer: CD Projekt Red

Publisher: CD Projekt

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Marcin Blacha

Borys Pugacz-Muraszkiewicz. Based on the works of Andrzej Sapkowski

Overview

"Evil is Evil. Lesser, greater, middling - it makes no difference. The degree is arbitrary; the definition's blurred. If I am to choose between one evil or another, I'd rather not choose at all " - Geralt of Rivia

Set in the dark fantasy world, envisioned by Andrzej Sapkowski, the Witcher game franchise strives to deconstruct and reconstruct popular fantasy and fairy tale tropes in inventive, unorthodox ways. While many other modern day franchises are termed 'mature' simply because of violent and sexual content, the Witcher franchise lives up to its label by utilizing its inherent sexual and violent content, not to gratify its players, but to ask questions which would otherwise be impossible to frame.

The third installment in the series follows Geralt of Rivia, professional monster hunter, as he tackles war crimes, social injustice, xenophobia and genocide on an epic quest to find his adopted daughter, Ciri, (and potentially save the world while he is at it).

Characters

- **Geralt of Rivia:** With a gruff exterior and a mostly gruff interior, Geralt of Rivia (ironically not from the kingdom of Rivia), is the anti-heroic protagonist of the Witcher franchise. Despite being armed with at least two magic swords and a crossbow, Geralt's most powerful weapon remains his dry wit. Coupled with his comically serious demeanor and under-reactions to most in-game events, this makes him very relatable to most

modern gamers who are just as likely as he is to roll their eyes at the next monster or bandit to pop up on screen. Finally cured of the plot-convenient amnesia that plagued him throughout the previous games, Geralt is ready to tap into his decades of experience as a Witcher to overcome whatever monsters oppose him, inhuman or otherwise. Though bards sing ballads about Geralt's legendary promiscuity, choosing to play him as such might lead to some surprisingly realistic consequences.

- **Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon:** Affectionately referred to as Ciri, the former princess of Cintra defies many negative female game character stereotypes by being complex, sensibly dressed, and significantly more powerful than the male protagonist, both story and gameplay-wise. Though not quite as prominent in-game as her foster father Geralt, Ciri is more important to the story, with much of the plot revolving around her and her personal struggles. Limiting the number of times the player gets to control Ciri actually positive affects the game overall, making each of those scenarios feel far more significant. This also has the effect of making Ciri's game-breaking abilities feel empowering rather than unbalanced.
- **Yennefer of Vengerberg:** Geralt's apparent true love from the book series and Ciri's adoptive mother finally makes her in-game appearance in the *Witcher 3* as a major character and romance option. Unlike most romance options in other games, Yennefer's importance to the plot is not dependent on whether or not the player decides to pursue her. Cold, calculating, utterly ruthless, and more than a little vain, it is made abundantly clear that Yenn's love for Ciri (and potentially Geralt) is the only thing stopping her from turning into the villainous, scheming sorceress archetype that the Witcher franchise loves so much.

- **Triss Merigold:** Though her plot prominence as Geralt's primary love interest has gone down from the previous games with the introduction of Yennefer, Triss Merigold is, in many ways, a more interesting character in the *Witcher 3*. With her romance subplot taking a backseat, Triss's character as the charismatic leader of the mage rebellion, plagued by guilt and self-doubt, gets to shine.
- **Emperor Emhyr Var Emries:** Any man with the epithet 'White Flames Dancing over the Barrows of his enemies' is one to be feared and the aging Emperor of Nilfgard is no exception. His desire to find his biological daughter, Ciri, is fueled just as much by paternal love as it is by political pragmatism. Only in the dark, gritty world of the *Witcher* would a genocidal expansionist like Emhyr be considered one of the more progressive rulers.
- **Julian Alfred Pankratz viscount de Lettenhove (aka Dandelion):** Narrator of the franchise and personification of the 'spooned bard' trope, Master Dandelion's frivolous, fun-loving disposition serves as a foil to Geralt's grim, dour nature. Dandelion's unreliability as a narrator is presumably used as the in-universe explanation for some of the more ridiculous feats the player can perform.
- **The Wild Hunt:** Take every common trope associated with Elves in modern fantasy and brutally mutilate them. The Wild Hunt is the anti-thesis to the concept of Elves popularized by JRR Tolkien, though not too far off from older depictions of the Fair Folk. Led by Eredin, the Horsemen of Tir Na Lia travel between worlds, kidnapping specimens to fuel their millennia long eugenics experiment to create the 'savior' of the multiverse. Since their most successful specimen happens to be Ciri, Geralt has little choice but to oppose them.

Breakdown

“Every decision you make will bring devastation. Each choice will lead to a greater evil.” – The King of the Wild Hunt

In many games with choices, there’s almost always a ‘good’ option – an optimal solution to the ostensibly declared ‘moral dilemma’ the protagonist is facing. *The Witcher* franchise does its best to do away with the ‘ostensibly’ bit.

From the starting zone itself, the *Witcher 3* establishes that the term ‘right choice’ does not exist in its world. The local dwarven blacksmith hires Geralt to track down the person responsible for burning down his smithy – an attack allegedly born from society’s inherent racism and xenophobia. The Witcher’s enhanced senses allow him to pick up the trail of the arsonist easily, leading Geralt to the doorsteps of the local drunkard. At this point, the player has two choices: hand over the arsonist to the dwarf as agreed to, or let the drunkard go after accepting a modest amount of gold as bribe.

To most gamers, the choice is obvious. **Operant conditioning** induced by most choice-based game narratives has taught us that settling for greater immediate reward at the cost of potential future rewards is always the ‘wrong’ choice. Options for the player to settle for a ‘compromise’ are unanimously depicted as both immoral and inefficient – a reinforcement of the ancient parable that crime does not pay.

Doing the apparent ‘right’ thing by turning in the drunk arsonist causes the dwarf to hand him over to the local occupied garrison – an act that not only sees a man dying for a drunken mistake but also amplifies the racial tension in White Orchard. The alternative of accepting the bribe isn’t much better either, damaging Geralt’s professional reputation and causing the dwarf to lose all hope of coexisting with humans. Replaying through that quest makes the players

realize that the game does not consider either of the two choices to be better than the other. The only judge of player action ends up being the players themselves.

The removal of any form of arbitrary morality system forms the first of the three steps adopted by CD Projekt Red to make in-game choices even more meaningful. The second step revolved around eliminating player foresight by subverting common game clichés. Modern gamers are exceedingly savvy and can spot plot-threads from miles away. Being able to predict the consequences of their actions makes major choices feel underwhelming. The arsonist quest provided a good example of the developers subverting player expectations regarding the outcome of their choices. And it is merely the first of many. Do you save a dying woman with a toxic healing potion at the risk of permanently damaging her mind? Do you let a convicted killer walk free for the sake of his newly acquired family? Do you trust an ancient, inscrutable entity as an ally simply because it opposes a different entity that you mistrust? The consequences of many of these choices do not become completely apparent until hours of gameplay later. As a result, loading an older save file to 'redo' the choice would result in a loss of significant progress. This ensures that the practice of 'save-scumming', making multiple copies of a saved game to undo undesired consequences, does not detract from the significance of each choice.

A major mistake many RPG developers make when designing side-quests is creating them in vacuum. Each of these side-quests feel like filler because of how little it had to do with both the main quest and other side-quests. Any decision taken in these side quests would feel hollow, simply because the player knows that the consequences are by the limitations of that particular quest. This is not the case in the Witcher 3. Most major side-quests frequently cross paths with main quests and even characters from the more minor side-quests can end up playing surprisingly big roles in the overarching narrative. When Geralt first enters White Orchard, he is

given only a vague introduction to the setting. Following the main quest reveals a bit more, but the central mystery of the ruined villages remains unsolved. If the player decides to complete seemingly random side-quests in the area though, he will find himself encountering a wide variety of characters, each of whom reveal just a bit more about White Orchard's central mystery. This pattern of questing continues beyond White Orchard and, ultimately, unites the overarching narrative under a single, cohesive, narrative capsule. Instead of using side-quests as a means to tell self-contained mini stories, CD Projekt Red used them as a way to explore the setting without delving into extended, unnatural exposition. Making an open world with a strong story was the goal, according to senior environmental artist Jonas Mattson, and it is obvious that they succeeded^[1].

Because the quests feel inter-connected, players would be more cautious with many of their choices. Players start looking at the potential consequences of their side-quest choices not just in terms of that particular side-quest, but also in terms of the broader narrative they are creating. In this way, inter-connected quest design forms the third and final building block for meaningful choices in the Witcher 3.

Strongest Element

"Hatred and prejudice will never be eradicated. And witch hunts will never be about witches. To have a scapegoat—that's the key." – Geralt of Rivia

The portrayal of Geralt in the Witcher 3 is undoubtedly the highlight of the game. His dry, curt dialogue, quick wit and fast paced, exciting combat style make him an extremely entertaining player avatar. The more personal nature of the story this time around really provides a perfect stage for the 'heartless' monster hunter's more humane side to shine. An emotionally stoic performance by voice actor Doug Clarke combined with subtle, precise facial animations

and a masterfully written script give us the most sympathetic portrayal of Geralt yet. Instead of as an outlet for a pure fantasy power trip, the aging Witcher is depicted sequentially as a man trying to earn an honest living in a dishonest world, a lover hoping to reconcile with his long lost paramour, and a father desperately attempting to keep his daughter safe from forces beyond his control. All of these are concepts players can relate to and in turn make Geralt more than just a tool with which players can indulge their monster slaying fantasies. The quality of the writing is so solid and Geralt's character so multi-faceted that even the more morally ambiguous choices seem in character for the White Wolf.

Unsuccessful Element

Although every single one of the optional marks in the game provide a challenge even on the easier difficulties, the final boss fight with, Eredin of the Wild Hunt, is both ridiculously easy and mechanically unimpressive. This is in stark contrast with the two compulsory boss fights immediately preceding this one, both of which are significantly harder and feature more complex attack patterns. The fact that Eredin had been built up as a major threat from the earliest moments of the game further add to the disappointment.

Highlight

"Life might be black and white to you Witchers, but to us common folk it's all just shades of grey." – Philip Strenger, the Bloody Baron

The quest chain involving the Bloody Baron of Velen and his family is definitely the highlight of the game. Swerving in and out of the main plotline, the massive side-quest chain involves Geralt helping the cruel, short-tempered 'baron' of Velen reunite with his estranged family. Along the way, the Witcher must deal with a very realistic take on domestic abuse,

exorcise a monster born of pure tragedy, outmaneuver entities older than the land they walk on and finally reflect on his own identity as a father. The complexity and development of the characters involved in the quest and combined with the quest chain's length and multiple possible outcomes make it feel like an entire game in itself.

Critical Reception

It is a testament to the quality of the Witcher 3 that it was able to win Game of the Year 2015 ahead of such amazing titles as Fallout 4, Bloodborne and Metal Gear Solid V ^[2].

Kevin VanOrd of Gamespot highly praised the Witcher 3's 'meaningful choices and impactful consequences', and gave it a 10/10 making it the 9th game to have a perfect score on Gamespot^[3]. While certain publications like GamesRadar did criticize the game's numerous bugs and instability in some cases, almost all of them agreed that the game's setting and themes more than made up for it^[4].

Lessons

- **Interconnected quests make for a better overarching narrative.** By creating a web of side-quests that link with the main story at different points, CD Projekt Red ensured that the entire narrative felt like a singular entity instead of a series of smaller, stand-alone stories.
- **Morality can be explored in-game without the use of an arbitrary morality meters.** The best judge of your own action often ends up being yourself. The Witcher 3 embraced this adage and consolidated with impactful writing that succinctly conveyed the consequences of player choice without expressing the

developer's own opinion on that choice.

- **‘Dark and gritty’ does not mean unfunny and pretentious.** The Witcher 3 touches up on many, many dark topics but it also does not shy away from occasionally laughing at itself. From black humor, to comic allegories to the occasional slapstick – the range of comedy delivered by a self-declared ‘emotionless’ monster hunter is surprisingly vast.
- **Subverting player expectations can lead to some truly memorable experiences.** As explained above, the fact that the Witcher 3 builds its quests around deliberately toying with player's expectations considerably improves the significance of each in-game choice. In the Witcher 3, the game plays the gamer almost as often as the gamer plays the game.

Summation

In an era where the ‘open world’ tagline is gratuitously applied to every new game under the sun, the Witcher 3 truly demonstrates how a massive game world can be utilized properly to deliver the intended core experience. It provides very good examples of how side quests should be handled in open world games – not as arbitrary filler to make the world feel less empty, but rather as tools with which players can explore the game's setting.

Works Cited

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