

Chapter 2

The Witcher 3 And The Digital Bloodlands

*Only what is human can truly be alien.
The rest is mixed forest, undermining moles [krecia robota], and wind.
– Wislawa Szymborska, Psalm (1978)¹*

Witcher 3 embodies an extraordinary narrative paradox. On the one hand, the stories and characters of its open world teem with motifs from Polish folklore and Slavic mythology.² On the other hand, there is almost nothing exclusively Polish about *Witcher 3*'s storyline. Only two out of *Witcher 3*'s hundreds of quests, and two brief moments in the “Hearts of Stone” downloadable expansion for the original game, have specifically Polish national cultural referents – and even these have been significantly altered from their original contexts.³ If *Witcher 3* appears to be one of the most Polish videogames ever made, this is only because it is one of the least Polish of all videogames.

The paradox can be explained by the fact that the *Witcher* franchise has always been deeply critical of mainstream Polish nationalism, namely the self-serving notion that a wholly benevolent Polish nation suffered from the machinations of utterly malevolent Austrian, German, Russian, and Soviet empires. Like all other nationalisms, Polish nationalism is deeply ambivalent, and its popular manifestation has been marked by everything from cosmopolitan anti-colonial solidarity to authoritarian xenophobia.⁴

In the first two *Witcher* games, CD Projekt critiqued Polish nationalism via the character of King Foltest and the kingdom of Temeria, fairly transparent allegories of Józef Piłsudski and the Second Polish Republic, respectively.⁵ One of the single greatest achievements of *Witcher 3* was to move beyond the framework of national allegory, by weaving multiple national histories from the Eastern European and Eurasian region into a single framework.

This framework, or what we will call *Witcher 3*'s transnational regionalism, was especially productive because the overwhelming majority of American, Japanese and Western European fantasy role-playing videogames cite the legends, folklore and national allegories of their respective maritime or feudal empires. Prior to the *Witcher* series, the only symbol of Eastern European culture familiar to transnational audiences would have been Bram Stoker's Dracula.

Yet CD Projekt did more than simply introduce audiences to the richness and diversity of Polish folklore and Slavic mythology. Every single locality, institution and polity in *Witcher 3* references the factual polities and historical epochs of the Eastern European and Eurasian regions, without being limited by these polities or histories.⁶ For example, the empire of Nilfgaard bears certain aspects of the Ottoman and Russian dynastic empires. Conversely, the empire of Redania displays aspects of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Prussian empire. Skellige is a composite of the loose confederations of the Ukrainian Cossacks and the Viking raiders of Denmark-Norway. Finally, the bustling port city of Novigrad features the sophisticated financial services of Hanseatic-era Hamburg and the intellectual dynamism of

Immanuel Kant's Königsberg (Prussia).

This transnationalization of open world form is the flip side of an equally striking transformation of player agency. One of the lessons CD Projekt learned during the production of the first two *Witcher* videogames was that the expansion of player freedom in post-2008 open worlds came with a narrative price tag. This price tag was increasing pressure on the credibility of player choices. If the choices players make are powerful enough to overturn the underlying rules of the open world, then those rules became uninteresting, and the open world lapsed into a mere simulation. Conversely, if player choices do not significantly affect the open world, there is no incentive for players to progress further in the main story.

The studio concluded that the only way to make interactive choices truly meaningful was to balance increased player freedom with its opposite – that is to say, with the interactive experience of unfreedom. This latter is not to be confused with non-interactive cut-scenes, crafting requirements, or game difficulty settings. Rather, its key category is the interactive experience of collective choicelessness, a.k.a. geopolitical closure.

To portray this closure, CD Projekt made the decision to build its open world on the basis of two transnational archives, both of which explicitly critique Eastern Europe's official or mainstream national histories as forms of geopolitical closure. The first archive is comprised of the work of the leading Eastern European dissident artists of the 1970s and 1980s. The four artists who most directly influenced on *Witcher 3* were Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska, Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, Czech animator and film director Jan Svankmajer, and German dramatist Heiner Müller.

What united these otherwise very different artists was their incisive critique of the despotic one-party states of post-1945 Eastern Europe, and a political commitment to a pan-European process of democratic transformation which culminated in the construction of the European Union. The history-drenched landscapes of dissidence in Szymborska's *Psalm* (1978) anticipate *Witcher 3*'s history-filled open world, precisely where the sparkling script and soundtrack of Kieslowski's *The Decalogue* (1987) foreshadow *Witcher 3*'s interactive dialogues and superb ambient music.⁷ In the realm of visual design, Svankmajer's alternately whimsical and terrifying stop-motion animated creatures are the analog predecessors of *Witcher 3*'s finely-crafted digital monsters. Last but not least, the character of Ophelia in Müller's *Hamlet-machine* (1977) is very much the forerunner of Ciri in *Witcher 3*.

The second archive which provided a model for *Witcher 3*'s open world was not aesthetic in nature, but historical. It is the archive of what Timothy Snyder named, in one of the most suggestive historical syntheses of the early 21st century, the Bloodlands. This was a zone of apocalyptic violence generated by the twin imperial expansionisms and eventual war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany between 1931 and 1945, a zone comprised of the territories of present-day Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, the western edge of Russia, and Ukraine.⁸

This time period and region of the world have been largely overlooked by most postcolonial scholars, who have focused on the struggles of the post-1945 African and Asian nations for self-determination against Western European colonialism and US neocolonialism.⁹ One of the lessons of Snyder's work is that there is an urgent need to rethink the histories of the Austrian, Ottoman, Russian and Qing Chinese empires, and to grasp the ways in which Tito's Yugoslavia, Kemal's Turkey, Stalin's Soviet Union, and Mao's China were simultaneously

neocolonial as well as postcolonial polities.

The current consensus of historians is that in the course of fourteen years, approximately 38.7 million to 40.3 million human beings perished from war, state-engineered famine, the Nazi Holocaust, and Soviet political repression in the Bloodlands and in the Soviet republic of Kazakhstan. Approximately one in three Kazakhs, one in four Belarusians, one in five Ukrainians, one in six Lithuanians and Poles, one in seven Russians and Lithuanians, and one in ten Latvians perished. Between 8.3 million to 10 million of these deaths were caused by Soviet neocolonial famines, mass imprisonment and mass shootings,¹⁰ while approximately 30.3 million of these deaths were caused by Nazi Germany's invasion and the extermination campaigns of the Holocaust.¹¹

Historical memorializations of the Bloodlands are legion in the nations of Eastern Europe and Eurasia. They run the gamut from WW II war memorials to the stained glass installations of Marc Chagall,¹² and from films such as Polish director Andrej Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds* (1954) to Heiner Müller's play *Germania Death in Berlin* (1971). However, CD Projekt deserves credit for being the first studio to successfully memorialize the Bloodlands in an open world videogame.

Where Snyder synthesized multiple national histories into one of the first transnational histories of the Bloodlands, *The Witcher 3* transformed the multiple national archives of the Bloodlands into the first interactive experience of transnational geopolitical closure. Put bluntly, *Witcher 3*'s open world does not draw exclusively on the Polish experience of the Bloodlands, but accesses in equal measure the Belarusian, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Moldavan, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian experiences of the Bloodlands.

One of the first examples of this transnational strategy is the game's prologue, a sequence of three successive tutorials designed to teach the basic rules of the open world to a diverse audience with a wide range of player skills.¹³ The first of these tutorials is set in Kaer Morhen, an abandoned castle partly rebuilt into a witchers' hideout. A series of interactive dialogues introduces Geralt, the main playable character; Yennefer, a powerful sorceress and one of Geralt's past romantic interests; Ciri, a spirited young girl with superhuman combat skills who is also Geralt's adoptive daughter; and finally Vesemir, a grizzled old witcher who is Geralt's former mentor.

None of the dialogue choices or player actions of this first tutorial have significant long-term consequences. That said, the tutorial concludes with an extraordinary cut-scene which introduces the theme of geopolitical closure. A mysterious frost suddenly appears around Kaer Morhen, transforming a sunny day into a raging snowstorm. This signals the appearance of the main villains of *Witcher 3*, a mysterious group called the Wild Hunt. The goal of this group is to kill or capture Ciri, and they ride in on a magical ship whose black sails and hull float in mid-air on a foreboding white mist.

This sequence rewrites one of the most powerful narrative innovations of the late 20th and early 21st century neo-slave narrative, namely the ghostly specter of the slave ship, in an Eastern European context.¹⁴ Where novelists employed the symbol of the slave ship to write the largely unwritten histories of the twelve million human beings incarcerated by Atlantic chattel slavery, CD Projekt employs the ghost-ship of the Wild Hunt to interactively narrate the largely unwritten histories of the millions of human beings incarcerated by Eastern European and Eurasian serfdom.¹⁵

At this point the screen fades to black and we learn that the entire prologue up to this point was one of Geralt's nightmares. A subsequent conversation with Vesemir reveals that Yennefer has never actually visited Kaer Morhen, and that Ciri is no longer a child, but is a full-grown young woman on the run from the afore-mentioned Wild Hunt.

Players are now granted access to the second tutorial of the game, consisting of a small village called White Orchard and its immediate environs. Whereas the first tutorial is a single linear path, White Orchard is a miniaturized open world designed to teach players the basic techniques of open world travel, riding, swimming and navigation. It also introduces players to the crafting, combat and quest systems of the open world.

The White Orchard tutorial contains a total of fourteen quests. Only two of these are required to advance the overall storyline, while the other twelve are optional. This preponderance of side quests, the single most striking feature of *Witcher 3*'s open world, is not an accident. CD Projekt explicitly encourages players to wander off the beaten path and explore the open world at their own pace and in a manner of their own choosing. These side quests include activities as varied as witcher contracts, treasure hunts, side quests, and even a fully-functional and well-designed collectible card game within the game called Gwent.¹⁶ Gwent proved so popular among players, that CD Projekt upgraded it and released it as an independent digital card game in May 2017.¹⁷

In the previous chapter, we described how CD Projekt abolished the fetch quest by making each quest a memorable and unique interactive experience, and by designing the open world's in-game economy to reward player exploration. The White Orchard tutorial builds on this achievement, by balancing increased player freedom with increased geopolitical closure. What this means in practical terms is that player decisions now begin to have serious consequences on the fate of other characters.

These decisions and consequences are narrated primarily by means of interactive dialogues, which blend top-notch facial animation, sound design, voice-acting and camera position into a seamless whole. These dialogues are constructed to encourage players to probe more deeply into the past history and motivations of the non-player characters, by separating player dialogue choices into responses which have consequences (printed onscreen in a yellow font) and responses which are merely informative inquiries (printed in onscreen a white font). Many of these dialogues are marvels of narrative concision, and regularly manage to compress the content of novellas into a few lines of dialogue while sacrificing nothing of the humanity of the characters involved.¹⁸

For example, after meeting Tomira, White Orchard's resident herbalist, players can complete a side quest called "On Death's Bed."¹⁹ This involves collecting the ingredients for a potion necessary to save the life of Lena, a villager mortally wounded by the griffin. Players must decide whether to save Lena by brewing a special witcher potion, or allow her to die in peace. Players will not discover the true consequences of their decision until much later in the storyline, when players visit the Nilfgaardian military encampment located at the southeastern edge of the open world map.²⁰

One of the most striking expressions of geopolitical closure in the White Orchard tutorial is the interactive depiction of the horrors of imperial war. The region has been ravaged by the rampaging armies of Nilfgaard and Redania, two mighty empires locked in a life-and-death struggle against each other. Players explore burnt-out huts, hear peasants wailing in front of the

wreckage of their homes, and search former battlefields littered with rusted armor and rotting corpses. Predictably, most survivors are hostile towards outsiders or anyone perceived as different. Since Geralt is a witcher, a mutated human being, he is subject to relentless contempt and occasional open violence from the villagers, the first instance of CD Projekt's unrelenting critique of xenophobia and chauvinism in the full open world.²¹

After completing the two main quests of the White Orchard region, players must complete a third and final tutorial before accessing the full open world. This tutorial consists of a single main quest, entitled “Imperial Audience”, wherein Geralt is dressed up in formal court attire, banters with the chamberlain, Mererid, and pays a visit to the leader of the Nilfgaardian empire, emperor Emhyr var Emreis (superbly voiced by Charles Dance).

These interactive dialogues banish any notion that Nilfgaard is a cardboard evil empire. Keen-eyed players will note Nilfgaard's cultural cosmopolitanism as well as the Emperor's political acumen, and comprehend that the empire is a flawed but by no means wholly malevolent polity. That said, the main function of these dialogues is to teach players that their choices now have serious consequences on the open world.²² The player learns that Ciri is not just a sorceress of remarkable power, she is also the Emhyr's daughter. As a potential successor to the imperial throne, Ciri's survival is of the utmost priority, and the Emperor duly orders Geralt to locate her and bring her to the imperial court.

What makes this tale of geopolitical destiny so riveting is its interactive framing by means of the seemingly least important character in the scene, namely Mererid, the chamberlain. When first meeting the Emhyr, the player must make a time-limited decision to either bow or refuse to bow to the emperor. There are no positive or negative consequences for Geralt for either decision, but there are significant consequences for the chamberlain. If the player chooses not to bow, the following conversation occurs in the hallway:

Mererid: *in an agonized whisper*: “Did the gentleman not understand? Did I not emphasize adequately that one must bow to the emperor?”

Geralt: *surprised*: “Relax. Nothing happened.”

Mererid: *hisses*: “To the gentleman. But I shall be punished.”

This revelation will elicit an involuntary pang of guilt in many players, precisely because Mererid's behavior is in such startling contrast to his previous demeanor of supercilious hauteur. Even minor player choices may turn out to have major consequences for other characters, to the point that some players will feel obliged to replay the sequence in order to spare Mererid from harm.

It is only after completion of “Imperial Audience” that players are permitted to travel freely through the full open world.²³ This is the moment CD Projekt unveils one of its most intriguing narrative innovations, best described as the transformation of the writing of history into a core game-play mechanic. We noted previously that players utilize Geralt's superhuman witcher senses in order to investigate clues and reconstruct past events. Once players are permitted to explore the full open world, these detective skills are utilized in what we will call open world history-writing. This latter reworks the large-scale history of the Bloodlands into the small-scale experiences of what E.P. Thompson famously termed “history from below.”²⁴

One of the first moments of this history-writing takes place during the “The Nilfgaardian Connection” main quest, which takes place immediately after “Imperial Audience.” In a village tavern, Geralt encounters the hirelings of the Bloody Baron, a former Temerian soldier turned vassal of Nilfgaard. When these hirelings threaten Geralt with violence, players can choose either violent or nonviolent responses. Neither choice is necessarily wrong or right, but both have significant consequences for the local population.²⁵

What makes this history-writing so compelling is that it is seamlessly integrated with all other aspects of *Witcher 3*'s open world. Just as each player quest is a unique story, each settlement, each region, and each polity has a unique set of histories, transmitted via a carefully balanced admixture of interactive dialogues, non-interactive commentary from non-player characters, and incidental historical materials. In order to distinguish these historical materials from those which relate to player quests, we will call them discoverables.

These discoverables run the gamut from personal letters to lyric ballads, and from homemade medical remedies to abstruse metaphysical discussions. None of this material is necessary for quest completion, nor does it necessarily serve to advance the main story. Yet the consistent narrative excellence of these discoverables sustains the credibility of *Witcher 3*'s depiction of geopolitical closure, in much the same way that the narrative excellence of the side quests underwrite the credibility of the main quests.

To appreciate the power of discoverables, consider the cut-scene which precedes “The Nilfgaardian Connection” quest. Players watch Geralt riding past a giant tree festooned with the bodies of executed prisoners. This is a stark visual reminder of the price tag of imperial war, as well as a game-play hint. If players search the base of the tree, they discover a half-finished manuscript written by someone named Aldert Geert. Geert was the traveling scholar who taught Geralt how to play Gwent at the White Orchard tavern, who has now become one of the countless victims of the war.

This discoverable transmits the horror of war far more effectively than any voiceover or character dialogue, by emphasizing the vulnerability of historians and the fragility of historical archives. The sequence also testifies to the function of replayability in *Witcher 3*'s open world. Since players are not required to speak to Geert in the White Orchard tavern, not all players will grasp the full import of the manuscript during their initial play-through.

To be sure, the vast size of the open world and the extensive amount of additional narrative content available through discoverables presented an enormous design challenge to CD Projekt's game designers. Discoverables had to meld seamlessly with the content of player quests, while remaining congruent with the overall atmosphere and narrative tone of the open world. To meet both goals, CD Projekt balanced the larger histories of the open world with the smaller histories of the discoverables by means of a series of critical frames.

These frames ensure that the seemingly disparate events of the main story quests, the discontinuous narratives of the side quests, and the local histories of the discoverables all function as a cohesive whole. Three of the most important of these frames are the identity-politics, the dynastic expansionisms, and the gender norms endemic to the empires which ruled the territory of the Bloodlands between 1648 and 1945.

The frame of identity-politics critiques the confessional, caste-based, racial, ethnic and communal conflicts raging in the open world. We previously noted that players interactively experience the caste discrimination directed against witchers while role-playing as Geralt. This

experience is reinforced by numerous cut-scenes depicting the ultimate consequence of repressive identity-politics, e.g. the beginning of the main quest “Pyres of Novigrad” shows witch hunters executing a doppler, a humanoid shapeshifter able to mimic the appearance of others. In addition, a range of discoverables highlight the disastrous effects of past forms of caste discrimination, religious intolerance and xenophobia.

The frame of dynastic expansionism denounces the catastrophic effects of the ongoing war between Redania and Nilfgaard. Just as importantly, it documents the painful legacies of past imperial wars. Many of the explorable ruins of the open world are the remains of ancient elven kingdoms, whose populations were exterminated during a series of genocidal wars with human kingdoms. In the context of the Bloodlands, the grim fate of the elven peoples has self-evident parallels to the late 18th century partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by the Austrian, Prussian and Russian empires.

The frame of gender provides a similar double periodization, by critiquing the institutions of gender characteristic of the pre-1914 Austrian, Prussian and Russian dynastic empires, as well as those of the 20th century Nazi German and Soviet empires. While this gender frame had its origins in Sapkowski's *Witcher* novels, which feature a number of strong and nuanced female characters, CD Projekt deserves credit for listening to the fan critique of the female characters in its first two games.²⁶ In fact, *Witcher 3* is one of the few role-playing videogames to feature true gender balance across its full roster of playable and non-playable characters.

One of the best examples of this gender frame is the side quest “Master Armorers”, unlocked by visiting the smithy in the town of Crow's Nest, apparently run by a dwarf named Fergus with the assistance a woman from Skellige named Yoana. During the quest, however, players discover Fergus has no armorsmithing talent at all (a satirical jab at the cliché of the metalworking dwarf, a mass-cultural fantasy trope as old as Richard Wagner's *Rhine Gold* (1854)), while Yoana turns out to be a talented craftworker held back by gender prejudice. After a smithing competition held by the Nilfgaardian authorities to choose the best armorer, Yoana utterly crushes Fergus -- in fact, she turns out to be the most powerful armorsmith in the game. He accepts his defeat, and the duo continue to work together, only this time he is the assistant and Yoana is the acknowledged lead.²⁷

What makes the critical frames of identity-politics, dynastic expansionism and gender so powerful is their narrative synthesis. No identity-politics is ever presented without its dynastic or gendered context, no dynastic struggle is devoid of identity-politics or gender, nor does any expression of gender exist without identity-politics or dynastic politics. Just as importantly, these critical frames link the game-play mechanic of player choice and its in-game consequences to the archive of past player choices and their corresponding consequences. The more history players uncover, the greater the likelihood they will make historically informed and thus more astute decisions. Conversely, the less history players uncover, the greater the chance they will unwittingly replicate the disasters of the past.

In fact, the challenge of balancing player-encountered discoverables with player-initiated history-writing led CD Projekt to one its most remarkable innovations. This is a mode of interactive storytelling which successfully synthesizes the elements of player choice and geopolitical closure as no other videogame has done before. We will call this mode the interactive path.²⁸

Witcher 3 contains eight main story paths and fourteen side quest paths. Each path is a

subcycle of quests which develop a specific character or set of characters, and a specific location or set of locations. While all of the main story quests are organized into paths, only a subsection of all of the side quests are given paths. The function of these paths is to maximize the principle of player freedom, while preserving the thematic and narrative continuity of the open world. Although certain quests in each path must be completed in a specific order, the player can have most of the main story and nearly all of the side quest paths open at any given time. This allows players to explore the open world at their own pace, and to construct their own unique timeline of interactive dialogue choices and in-game actions.

Since each path contains several key moments when players must make decisions vis-a-vis the character or characters who are at the center of each path, the result is a complex web of choices and consequences. While some of these consequences are revealed at the end of the path, others are not revealed until the very end of the game.

To understand how these paths operate and why they are so effective, consider one of the first side quest paths in the game, the Keira path, unlocked at the conclusion of the main quest “Hunting a Witch.” During this path, players discover that the alleged witch is none other than Keira Metz, a powerful female mage who was the former advisor of Temeria's slain former leader, King Foltest. In the wake of Nilfgaard's occupation of Temeria, Keira has been hiding incognito in Velen's countryside to avoid execution at the hands of roving witch hunters. Ironically, despite being a powerful sorceress in her own right, Keira was troubled by nightmares projected by the Crones, three powerful magical beings who rule over the trackless swamps of Velen:

Player action: choose “Did you know these witches?” during “Wandering in the Dark” quest.

Geralt: “You know these witches?”

Keira: “I've never met them, but I've read of them. In an old manuscript I found in one of the huts in the village. It mentions the village witches venturing into Crookback Bog at times – to liaise between the villagers in the Crones, the Ladies of the Wood. The Crones appear to be intolerant of outsiders, but they help the local folk. Apparently, they stopped the spread of the plague in Velen.”

Geralt: “Hm. What's your take on all this?”

Keira: “I'd love to shrug it off as the nattering of so many old women, yet... Throughout my first fortnight in Velen, I had horrible nightmares. Something was calling me out into the swamps. One night I decided to enter the dream consciously, render it lucid. I confronted the... thing directly. It broke contact at once. Peaceful nights ever since.”

Keira's path is comprised of one main quest and five subsequent side quests. During the main quest “Wandering in the Dark”, Keira accompanies Geralt during the player's first open battle against one of the warriors of the Wild Hunt. Subsequently, Keira provides Geralt with five successive side quests, each of which must be completed to unlock the next (“Magic Lamp”, “An Invitation from Keira Metz”, “A Towerful of Mice”, “A Favor for a Friend” and “For the Advancement of Learning”).

While none of these side quests are mandatory in terms of advancing the main storyline, all are superbly narrated, all generate useful items for the player, and all have significant

consequences on the fate of Keira herself. Completion of “An Invitation from Keira Metz” grants Geralt ownership of Keira's magic lamp, an item which dispels magical illusions and can also reveal brief scenes of past events. This lamp is necessary to complete a number of subsequent side quests. Similarly, completion of the side quest “A Towerful of Mice” is necessary to unlock a side quest involving the Pellar, a herbalist who lives near Crow's Nest. The fourth side quest, “A Favor for a Friend”, establishes Geralt's credentials as a medieval foodie, and also unlocks an optional romance sequence with Keira. While the choice of accepting or declining this romance has no positive or negative consequences on the storyline or on any of Geralt's subsequent relationships, the sequence is skillfully narrated and respectful of Keira's ability and intelligence.

What makes these side quests so compelling is that each is a compelling narrative in its own right. For example, in “A Towerful of Mice” Geralt discovers that a mage constructed a secret laboratory in the tower on Fyke Island in order to expose unwilling human subjects to a rat-borne plague, a reference to the horrific human experiments of the Nazi German invasion of the Bloodlands. Geralt also discovers that a ghost haunts the tower, a spirit named Annabelle. During an interactive dialogue with Annabelle, she claims to have been the daughter of the lord of the tower, and that she perished during a peasant insurrection against the lord.

However, the ghost's story also contains a number of logical inconsistencies. If players fail to notice these latter, they will inadvertently release a malevolent spirit into the countryside and wreak additional havoc on the long-suffering villagers of Velen. If players remain skeptical about the ghost's claims and press the latter for answers, they will discover the spirit is really a plague maiden, a disease-bearing specter cursed to seek vengeance on its former human lover. Armed with this information, the player will be able to lift the curse and permanently dispel the ghost, although there is a price tag for this ending as well.²⁹

The fifth and final side quest of the path, “For the Advancement of Learning”, raises the stakes yet again by determining Keira's fate. If players do not complete this final side quest, Keira will be caught by the witch hunters and burned at the stake (to hammer the point home, players are compelled to watch her execution in a cut-scene). If players do complete this quest, there is a chance she will survive until the end of the game. For this to occur, players must avoid picking a fight with her when they meet once more on Fyke Island (the result will be a battle to the death), and advise her to seek refuge with Geralt's fellow witchers at Kaer Morhen.

The Keira path is not necessary to complete the main story of *Witcher 3*, and has comparatively few long-term consequences. Yet the path features extraordinary scriptwriting and voice-acting, delivers compelling character development, and deftly mixes narrative subgenres as diverse as comedy and action-adventure to horror and romance. One of the reasons *Witcher 3* creates such a compelling open world is that every single path features credible character development, balances a unique set of discoverables with the player's history-writing, and is constructed with the same care and attention to detail as all other paths.³⁰

The complete list of side quest paths in *Witcher 3* is described below, in approximate order of their availability in the main storyline:

Table 1. Side quest paths of *Witcher 3*.

Path	Requirements	Side Quest or Chain of Quests	Consequences
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1	Completion of first tutorial	Treasure hunts for Feline, Griffin, Manticore, Serpentine, Ursine, Wolven and Viper witcher gear	No long-term consequences
2	Completion of main quest “Wandering in the Dark”	Successive side quests “Magic Lamp”, “An Invitation from Keira Metz”, “A Towerful of Mice”, “A Favor for a Friend” and “For the Advancement of Learning”	Keira romance option, determine Keira's fate
3	Completion of side quest “Towerful of Mice”	Side quest “Forefathers' Eve”	Determine fate of Pellar
4	Completion of main quests “Bloody Baron”, “Family Matters”, “Ladies of the Wood” and “The Whispering Hillock”	Side quest “Return to Crookback Bog”	Determine fate of Philip Strenggar and Anna Strenggar
5	Completion of “Count Reuven's Treasure”	Completion of side quest “A Matter of Life and Death” and choose to kiss Triss during fireworks, completion of “Now or Never” and choose to romance Triss	Co-determine fate of Triss and Geralt
6	Begin main quest “The King is Dead – Long Live the King”	Choose to kiss Yennefer after springing laboratory trap and choose subsequent romance option, romance Yennefer during main quest “No Place Like Home”, completion of main quest “Nameless”, completion of side quest “The Last Wish” and choose romance option	Co-determine fate of Yennefer and Geralt
7	Completion of main quest “A Poet Under Pressure”	Successive side quests “A Matter of Life and Death” and “Now or Never”, successive side quests “Cabaret” and “Carnal Sins”	Determine fate of Novigrad mages and Triss romance (path 5), determine fate of Priscilla
8	Completion of main quest “Get Junior”	Concurrent side quests “Redania's Most Wanted”, “Eye for an Eye” and “The Gangs of Novigrad”	Determine fate of captured Nilfgaardian soldier and Rico
9	Completion of main quest “Nameless”	Concurrent side quests “In Wolf's Clothing” and “The Last Wish”	Determine Yennefer romance

10	Completion of main quest “The King is Dead – Long Live the King”	Concurrent side quests “Possession” and “Lord of Undvik”, completion of both unlocks the side quest “King’s Gambit”	Determine next ruler of Skellige
11	Completion of side quest “Stranger in a Strange Land”	Side quest “The Cave of Dreams”	No consequences
12	Completion of main quest “The Play’s The Thing”	Side quest “A Dangerous Game”, which contains a collectible necessary to begin the side quest “The Soldier Statuette”	No consequences
13	Completion of main quest “Broken Flowers”	Side quest “Fencing Lessons”	No consequences
14	Completion of side quests “Now or Never”, “An Eye for an Eye”, “A Deadly Plot”, and “Redania’s Most Wanted”, and one player choice in main quest “Blindingly Obvious” (be diplomatic towards Dijkstra)	Side quest “Reason of State”, choose to either defend Vernon Roche or refuse to become involved	If player defends Vernon, Nilfgaard defeats Redania. If player refuses to become involved, Redania under Dijkstra defeats Nilfgaard

Only one of the side quest paths, namely the fourteenth and final one, has significant consequences for the end state of the open world. By contrast, the final four main story paths all have significant consequences for this end state. Of the eight main story paths, the first six are concurrent in nature, i.e. their respective subquests can be initiated and then completed in any order the player wishes.³¹ All six main story paths begin with Geralt as the playable protagonist, and conclude with a quest or set of quests featuring Ciri as the playable protagonist. The final two main story paths are linear in nature, and are accessible only when the first six main story paths are completed.³² To compensate for this linearity, the final two main story paths merge Geralt and Ciri’s perspectives, allowing players to alternately play as Geralt and then as Ciri at key points in the story. The eight main story paths are listed below:

Table 2. Main story paths of *Witcher 3*.

Path	Requirements	Geralt’s Quests	Ciri’s Quest(s)	Characters Developed
1	Completion of “Imperial Audience”	“The Nilfgaardian Connection”, “Bloody Baron”	“Ciri’s Story: The King of the Wolves”	Baron Philip Strengger (Bloody Baron), Gretka and Ciri

2	Completion of “The Nilfgaardian Connection”	“Hunting a Witch”, “Wandering in the Dark”, “Ladies of the Wood”, “The Whispering Hillock”	“Ciri's Story: Fleeing the Bog”	Keira Metz, the members of the Wild Hunt, the Cronos
3	Completion of “Bloody Baron”	“Family Matters”, “Princess in Distress”	“Ciri's Story: The Race”, “Ciri's Story: Out of the Shadows”	The Pellar, Phillip Strengger, Tamara Strengger, Anna Strengger
4	Completion of “Imperial Audience”	“Pyres of Novigrad”, “Novigrad Dreaming”, “Broken Flowers”, “Get Junior”, “A Favor for Radovid”	“Ciri's Story: Visiting Junior”	Dandelion, Priscilla, Triss, Radovid
5	Completion of “Imperial Audience”, payment of 1000 crowns to Atropos	“Destination: Skellige”, “The King is Dead – Long Live the King”, “Echoes of the Past”, “Missing Persons”, “Nameless”	“The Calm Before the Storm”	Yennefer, Crach an Craite, Cerys an Craite, Hjalmar an Craite, Ermion
6	Begin “Get Junior” quest, complete bathhouse sequence	“Count Reuven’s Treasure”, “The Play’s The Thing”, “A Poet Under Pressure”	“Ciri's Story: Breakneck Speed”	Dijkstra (Sigi Reuven), Cleaver, Francis Bedlam
7	Completion of Paths 1-5	Required quests, in order of completion: “Ugly Baby”, “Disturbance”, “The Final Trial”, “To Bait a Forktail...”, “No Place Like Home”, “Va Fail, Elaine”. Optional quests: “Brothers in Arms: Velen”, “Brothers in Arms: Novigrad”, “Brothers in Arms: Skellige”. Required quests, in order of completion: “The Isle of Mists”, “The Battle of Kaer Morhen”, “Blood on the Battlefield”		Avellach, Lambert, Vesemir, Emhyr var Emreis
8	Completion of Paths 1-6	Required quests, in order of completion: “Bald Mountain”, “Final Preparations”, “Blindingly Obvious”, “The Great Escape”, “Payback”, “Through Time and Space”, “Battle Preparations”, “Veni Vidi Vigo”, “The Sunstone”, “The Child of the Elder Blood”. Optional quest: “Skjall’s Grave”.		Imlerith, Skjall, Geels, Eredin

		Required quests, in order of completion: “On Thin Ice”, and “Tedd Deireadh, The Final Age”	
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Both the fourteen side paths as well as the eight main story paths gradually increase the consequentiality of player decisions as well as the scale and scope of the geopolitical closure, i.e. the first side quest path determines Keira's personal fate, whereas the fourteenth co-determines the end state of the open world. In like fashion, the first main story path focuses primarily on the region of Velen and has relatively few long-term consequences, whereas the final main path has decisive consequences on the entire open world.

On closer examination, the first three main paths incorporate one or two of the three critical frames mentioned previously, i.e. identity-politics, dynastic expansionism and gender, whereas the fourth through the eighth main paths incorporate all three. One of the best examples of a two-frame strategy is the second main story path, whose primary critical frames are identity-politics and gender. The main character of the path, Baron Phillip Strenger (superlatively voiced by James Clyde), is a former Temerian soldier who now rules the countryside of Velen as a vassal of Nilfgaard. Strenger tasks Geralt with investigating the disappearance of Strenger's wife and daughter, Anna and Tamara, in exchange for information about Ciri.

What makes Strenger so compelling is CD Projekt's extraordinary skill at weaving the gradual revelations of his past into the critical frame of gender. For example, at the conclusion of the “Bloody Baron” quest, Strenger recounts to Geralt how he first met Ciri. Instead of telling the story in a cut-scene, players step into the shoes of Ciri as a playable character in the main quest “Ciri's Story: King of the Wolves”. This is the interactive equivalent of a cinematic flashback, or what can be termed a retrospective playthrough. While playing as Ciri, players must rescue Gretka, a young girl, from prowling wolves. A series of interactive dialogues reveal that Gretka's family had too many mouths to feed and consigned her to the Trail of Treats, a place where unwanted children are banished, never to return.

These interactive dialogues and a subsequent battle against a werewolf do more than just showcase Ciri's empathy for others and her astonishing combat skills. They illustrate the structural violence of the family as an economic unit. This critique of the family, which hearkens back to Engels' ground-breaking critique of the family as a pitiless structure of economic accumulation,³³ is reconfirmed by the second half of “Family Matters”, wherein Geralt discovers the real motivation for Anna and Tamara's disappearance was domestic violence. Strenger savagely beat his wife in one of his drunken rages, causing her to miscarry and precipitating Anna and Tamara's flight from the Baron's home.

Geralt's subsequent confrontation with Strenger is one of the most moving interactive experiences ever crafted in a videogame. Far from being a cardboard villain, Strenger is both utterly despicable and yet wholly pitiable, a violent domestic abuser and yet a genuinely affectionate husband, a hopeless alcoholic and yet a doting father, a brutal functionary of Nilfgaardian rule and yet a secret Temerian sympathizer haunted by the guilt of being a collaborator.

It is only after this interactive sequence that players are allowed to determine Strenger's final destiny. The first step is tracking down the grave of the Baron's stillborn child, which

harbors a vengeful ghost called a botchling. Players must either destroy the botchling, or else appease its anger and thereby transform it into a benevolent guardian spirit called a lubberkin. Both choices elicit a series of realistic and priceless reactions from Strenger.

The ultimate fate of the Baron hinges on the decisions the player makes during the main quests “Ladies of the Wood” and “The Whispering Hillock”. Geralt discovers the Trail of Treats described by Gretka is not a legend, but is a magical lane carved through the swamp by the Crones. The trail leads to the village of Crookback Bog, inhabited by an elderly caretaker and a group of abandoned children. This caretaker is none other than Anna, the Baron's estranged wife, who in a moment of utter desperation agreed to become the magical servant of the Crones.

In yet another bravura moment of interactive story-telling, players must earn the trust of the orphaned children by playing a game of hide-and-seek. This sequence is a clever nod to one of the most celebrated videogame franchises of all time, Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear* series (1987-2015), which helped to popularize stealth-based game-play in videogame culture. Eventually the player will discover the location of Johnny, an impish and harmless magical creature who has information on Ciri's whereabouts.

This unlocks the main quest “The Whispering Hillock”, wherein players must choose whether to following the Crones' wishes and slay a magical spirit trapped inside an ancient tree, or to disobey the Crones and free the spirit from its prison. The conclusion of this path marks the first significant milestone in the category of geopolitical closure, in the sense that the player's actions now have consequences for entire groups as opposed to just one or two individuals.³⁴

Conversely, later paths and side quests begin to integrate the critical frame of gender with the frames of identity-politics and dynastic expansionism. This is most evident in the various quests involving the witch hunters of Novigrad and Redania. At first glance, the theme of witch hunting might seem to be historically anachronistic, given that witch hunts were one of the most egregious forms of state-chartered violence perpetrated against Western and Central Europe in the period during and immediately after the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), but were comparatively rare in early modern Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Yet what makes CD Projekt's depiction of the witch hunters narratively credible is the fact they are based not on the sectarian persecutions of the 17th century religious wars, but on the Nazi and Stalinist persecutions of the 20th century Bloodlands.

This lesson is hammered home everywhere from the main quest “The Great Escape”, which denounces the bureaucratic juggernaut of mass persecution, incarceration and execution, to the side quest “A Favor for Radovid”, which reveals that the witch hunters are Radovid's roving death squads. Similarly, “Forefather's Eve” shows a band of witch hunters persecuting local peasant religious believers, while “Now or Never” shows Radovid's extermination campaign against mages. This theme is echoed by a number of other side quests, e.g. “Little Red” illustrates the nightmarish effects of the partisan warfare which raged throughout the Bloodlands between 1940 and 1945, showing how the spiral of violence and counter-violence blurs the line between perpetrators and victims.³⁵

What prevents this nightmarish history from disrupting the open world's careful balance between player-controlled history-writing, exploration-based discoverables and plot-driven geopolitical closure is the emergence of a new kind of transnational solidarity. It should not be surprising to learn that the three main forms of this solidarity -- civic tolerance, egalitarian citizenship, and gender equality -- are the utopian negations of the critical frames of identity-

politics, dynastic expansionism, and gender inequality mentioned previously. What is surprising, however, is the fact that these forms of solidarity are spatially concentrated in the neutral polity of Novigrad, the largest and wealthiest city in the open world.

The reason is that Novigrad is more than just the main prize of the war between Redania and Nilfgaard. It is the narrative fulcrum where CD Projekt connects the urban histories of the largest cities of the Bloodlands with those of the transnational present.³⁶ Put bluntly, nearly all of the main and side quests located in Novigrad and its immediate environs set the past histories of the Bloodlands in motion towards the post-1991 histories of Eastern European and Eurasian global economic integration.³⁷

One of the best examples of this interweaving of the past and present is the beginning of the main quest “Get Junior”, in the middle of the fourth main story path. Geralt meets with three gangsters, each the head of a powerful faction of the Novigrad underworld, in the seemingly incongruous setting of a bathhouse: Dijkstra, the former head of Redanian intelligence who has reinvented himself as a powerful gangster under the pseudonym of Sigi Reuven; Cleaver, a.k.a. Carlo Varese, a dwarf who controls the prostitution rings in the city; and Francis Bedlam, King of the Beggars, head of the thieves' guild of Novigrad.

This meeting is a sociologically accurate snapshot of the “grey bourgeoisie” which took power in nearly all Eastern European and Eurasian nations in 1990-1991 imaginable.³⁸ This stratum was an unruly admixture of genuine entrepreneurs (Geralt himself), privatized national security employees turned entrepreneurs of coercion (Dijkstra), criminal syndicates rooted in minority ethnic groups (Cleaver), and prisoner subcultures (Bedlam).³⁹ In this context, the bathhouse setting is not accidental, but suggests the Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian folk tradition of the sauna.

That said, CD Projekt made the wise decision to limit these allusions to post-1991 Eastern Europe to a significant subtext rather than a major theme of the story, in order to preserve the thematic unity of the open world.⁴⁰ What Novigrad does provide, on the other hand, is the cosmopolitan setting wherein the critical frames of identity-politics, dynastic expansionism and gender can be seamlessly integrated into a new type of character development: the birth, in short, of market-driven individuation. This latter is not to be confused with individualism or self-interest per se, but refers to the new types of urban-based subjectivities capable of practicing the new forms of solidarity mentioned previously. These subjectivities would be distinctly out of place in the war-ravaged villages of Velen or the clan-based society of Skellige, which is why characters such as Keira and Yoana remain distinct outliers vis-a-vis their social locations. By contrast, Novigrad's urban spaces teem with properly urbane sophisticates.⁴¹

During the Novigrad main quest “Broken Flowers”, for example, Geralt meets Elihal, a tailor elf who happens to be an unashamed and talented cross-dresser. This is both a reference to the democratization of gender norms typical of urbanization, as well as a nod to the participatory cosplay (costume play) culture popularized by digital fan communities and comic conventions.⁴²

Just as importantly, Novigrad's urbanity allowed CD Projekt's quest designers to parody, satirize and pastiche a broad range of transnational media forms and genres, without disrupting the continuity of the open world. The main quest “Novigrad Dreaming” not only pokes fun at the city's greedy bankers in the best tradition of citizen journalists such as Bill Moyers and Nomi Prins, it also rewrites the Hollywood haunted house thriller into the comic fable of a mildly supernatural urban squatter.

Conversely, the Novigrad side quest “Of Swords and Dumplings” parodies the Hollywood heist caper, the rags-to-riches story, and the gangster thriller in order to critique Novigrad’s urbanized racism and xenophobia. The main character of the quest, Hattori, is a talented elven swordsmith who has been reduced to selling dumplings due to racial discrimination and a local extortion racket.⁴³ To complete the quest, the player must defeat the local extortion racket, help reconcile Hattori with an estranged former worker, and repair the strained relationship between two merchant brothers. It is only by rebuilding three forms of solidarity -- Hattori’s right to live and work in the city like any other citizen, Hattori’s trust in his assistant, and the trust between the merchant brothers -- that players are granted access to Hattori’s smithy, the most powerful in the open world.

This dialectic of greater individuation and expanded solidarity need not take the form of earth-shaking battles or epic confrontations. One of the single most moving quests of *Witcher 3*, titled “Empty Coop”, is also one of the simplest.⁴⁴ In this quest, a peasant woman asks Geralt to track down a monster which has allegedly been stealing her chickens. On further investigation, players discover a trail of small human footprints, alongside some oddly-shaped wolf tracks, leading into the forest. The perpetrators of the chicken theft turn out to be three small children, ages seven to ten, whose parents were abducted by soldiers during the war. They explain to Geralt that the wolf prints were caused by a family heirloom, a pair of wolf moccasins created by their father, which masked their footprints. Players must make a choice:

Player action: choose “Give 'em a home. Likely to stop stealing, then” instead of “Watch out... They'll be back.”

Geralt: “Take them in, give 'em a home. Won't steal from you, then.”

Old Woman: “Sure, but it'll mean feedin' the whelps. I gain nothin' from it.” *Pause.* “But... suppose I'll give it some thought.”

If players choose “Watch out”, the children vanish. Given the parlous state of the open world, one must assume the worst. However, if players encourage the woman to take in the children, nothing seems to happen at first. After sufficient time has passed, however, and if players return to the old woman's home, they will discover the three children are now playing merrily in the yard.

What makes this positive ending sublime is that there is no monetary reward for nor any other overt commemoration of the player's good deed. The simple visual confirmation that the player's actions saved three children from perdition -- a confirmation only possible thanks to the handcrafted nature of *Witcher 3*'s open world, which renders each location memorable and distinct from all others -- will trigger a profound wave of empathy in most players. The social meaning of this empathy is the recognition that by stepping into the shoes of the child protective services staffer, Geralt is defending the welfare state services which were systematically pulverized by the post-1991 wave of privatization and deregulation across Europe.⁴⁵

More remarkable still, this particular ending was co-produced by CD Projekt's fan community. The original version of this quest was timed, i.e. if players did not investigate the childrens' tracks within a certain time period, the quest automatically failed and the children disappeared. Players argued, with some justification, that timed quests are incompatible with the

overall principle of maximum player freedom typical of the game as a whole.⁴⁶ CD Projekt listened to its fan base, and removed the timer from the quest in a subsequent update.⁴⁷

Perhaps the most striking examples of the forms of solidarity which germinate in Novigrad are those of the cultural sphere. The key agent of this sphere is Priscilla, one of the most interesting characters in the game and the co-star of some of its most finest quests. While *Witcher 3* leaves the aesthetic merits of Dandelion's poetry open to debate, Priscilla is portrayed as a singer, writer and lyricist of the highest caliber. Her performance of the song "The Wolven Storm" in the side quest "Cabaret" is not just one of the highlights of the game, it is also one of the most sublime cut-scenes in videogame history.⁴⁸

In addition to her artistic talents, Priscilla also has a pragmatic understanding of Novigrad's cultural politics. In the main quest "The Play's The Thing," Geralt must find and talk to a doppelganger, harmless creatures with the capacity to precisely mimic the appearance of other humanoid creatures. This is seemingly impossible, given that doppelgangers are being relentlessly hunted down by roving witch hunters and have every reason to remain in hiding. After some thought, Priscilla comes up with the properly Brechtian solution of writing a play which preaches tolerance, in order to convince the doppelganger to appear (suitably disguised, of course) in the audience.

The player must subsequently co-write the main theme and script with Priscilla, recruit and compensate the actors, ushers and performers, and arrange for publicity. Above all, the player must perform as one of the main characters: legendary witcher Geralt plays the onstage role of -- what else -- a legendary witcher. The resulting play-within-a-videogame delivers an astonishingly open plea for humanity and tolerance in a city ravaged by xenophobia.⁴⁹ It also ingeniously simulates the experience of stage fright by compelling players to deliver lines of onstage dialogue in time-limited interactive dialogues: suddenly, the pressure of fighting occult monsters in underground caverns pales next to the demands of the acting profession. While there is no serious penalty for choosing the wrong line, the experience of making a mistake is as comically mortifying as it should be.

This quest is not just a tour de force of interactive story-telling, it is a rewriting of Act II of Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*, the legendary 1977 drama which accurately forecast both the democratic uprisings of 1990-1991 as well as the subsequent eurozone-induced austerity and neo-national political revanchism of the European Union, a.k.a. transnational capitalism with European regional characteristics.⁵⁰ In contrast to the tragedy portrayed in *Hamletmachine*, where the characters cannot break free of their historical moment, "The Play's The Thing" depicts a subtle but unmistakably positive transformation. This is the moment Geralt recognizes the doppelganger in the audience and uses the opportunity to peacefully and safely draw the latter out -- all while staying in his on-stage character as the witcher playing a witcher.⁵¹

This transformation of Geralt from mercenary-minded professional into an agent of social solidarity is also apparent in the Novigrad side quest "Carnal Sins". This latter is an ingenious reworking of the detective story, the forensic procedural, and the vampire thriller into a searing critique of the increasingly widespread politics of 21st century political revanchism -- a.k.a. economic policies which enrich local plutocrats, legitimated with xenophobic violence towards perceived outsiders. After a vicious attack on Priscilla aimed at destroying her voice, Geralt must sift the physical evidence, cross-examine witnesses, and follow the due process of law (e.g. presume innocence before assigning guilt) in order to discover the true culprit. In essence, the

player must think and act like a civil investigator, rather than a hired assassin.

Given the concurrent structure of the first six main story paths and nearly all of the side quest paths, one might ask why *Witcher 3*'s final side quest path and two main story paths are primarily linear in nature. The reason is that the finale had to satisfy three narrative challenges. Two of these latter are unique to the form of the interactive open world, while the third was unique to the *Witcher* franchise.

The first challenge was the necessity to integrate the parallel stories of Geralt and Ciri into a single narrative frame, and thereby showcase how the player's choices influenced the development of both characters. Put bluntly, an open world premised on character development would not be credible if its two main characters did not develop in some significant way. The second challenge, the logical corollary of the first, was the requirement to make the theme of geopolitical closure credible by showing how the player's choices in the game concretely affect the end state of the open world. The third challenge was to fulfill CD Projekt's public commitment to the fan community as early as February 2013, two years and three months before its official release, that *Witcher 3* would be the epic conclusion of the *Witcher* trilogy.⁵² This meant that the ending had to tie up as many loose narrative ends from *The Witcher* and *The Witcher 2* as possible.

The final main story and side quest paths succeed brilliantly in answering all three challenges, in large part by adopting one of the most important innovations of *Witcher 3*'s illustrious predecessor, Square Enix' *Final Fantasy 12* (2006). This latter's greatest innovation was its last-minute switching of narrative gears from the framework of fantasy fiction to that of science fiction. The conclusion of *Final Fantasy 12* depicts the victory of an anti-colonial united front against a revanchist energy-rent imperialism, only not through sheer firepower, but through a collective solidarity which defeats the plutocratic elites driving the open world towards an apocalyptic war.⁵³

The finale of *Witcher 3* adopts a similar strategy, by rewriting the registers of fantasy into those of science fiction. In retrospect, CD Projekt carefully prepared the ground for this move by liberally salting its open world with themes drawn from science fiction. These latter include everything from magical constructs which invariably turn against their creators in the best tradition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1819), to the Skellige side quest "The Tower Outta Nowheres", an uproarious satire of some of the most exploitative and anti-consumer business strategies of the videogame industry, namely digital rights management (so-called DRM).⁵⁴

This long-running science fiction subtext finally comes into its own in the main story quest "The Isle of Mists". The isle in question is a magical portal which is everywhere and nowhere, i.e. it coexists with all times and spaces, but is also irreducible to these latter. At first glance, this quest might seem to be a straightforward rewriting of the classic European fairy-tale and subsequent Disney franchise "Sleeping Beauty", given the presence of the stranded dwarves Geralt meets on the Isle and Ciri's magical slumber. What does not fit into the fairy-tale framework, however, is the magic lantern Geralt employs to steer through the isle's harbor, the fully mechanized worlds the newly reawakened Ciri describes having visited, or the interdimensional surveillance technologies of the Wild Hunt which quickly detect Ciri's presence, forcing her and Geralt to teleport elsewhere.

There is a similar transformation of fantasy into science fiction in "The Battle of Kaer Morhen", wherein Ciri's power to drive back the soldiers of the Wild Hunt is not primarily

military in nature, but rests on her capacity to disrupt the very fabric of the space-time continuum (they hastily retreat, but Ciri's mentor has to restrain her at the last second, to avoid permanent damage to the cosmos).⁵⁵ The deeper lesson here is that Ciri's limitless power to travel through time and space will always be constrained by the limitless military resources of the Wild Hunt, and continued conflict between the two will result in nothing but an endless spiral of mutual destruction.

The nature of this conflict is revealed by the main story quest "Through Time and Space". Far from being inexplicably evil, the members of the Wild Hunt turn out to be seeking Ciri's power for the wholly rational purpose of warding off an impending cosmic apocalypse. The Wild Hunt are the elite warriors of an elven kingdom called the Aen Elle, an ethnic group distantly related to the elves of Geralt's world, but which long ago discovered a means of interdimensional travel and conquered a number of other worlds. However, their inter-world empire is being engulfed by the White Frost, a monstrous blight spreading across the cosmos which is freezing and destroying every world in its path. In response, a warrior named Eredin has usurped control of the Aen Elle and driven them to wage unremitting interstellar war, in hopes of finding a source of magical power strong enough to stop the Frost.

This shattering series of scientific and sociological revelations is given its corresponding geopolitical context in the main story quest "Tedd Deireadh: The Final Age", wherein the forces of Skellige, Nilfgaard, Geralt's allies, Ciri and a group of sorceresses must unite to defeat Eredin and halt the suicidal war of the worlds. When the player finally dispatches Eredin, however, they are confronted with an apparent betrayal. Ciri's mentor, Avellach, an elven mage of extraordinary power who is an exile from the Aen Elle, has unleashed what appears to be a Conjunction of the Spheres. This is the long-prophesied opening of the magic portals connecting all worlds at once, which threatens to disintegrate the very fabric of the universe in much the same way as Ciri's outburst during "The Battle of Kaer Morhen".

Yet when Geralt finally corners Avellach and challenges him to a duel, on the plausible assumption that the latter is the ultimate villain of the story, no battle takes place. Instead, Avellach reveals that Ciri has decided to fight the root cause of the conflict between Aen Elle and the rest of the universe, by directly attacking the White Frost on its own interstellar grounds. When Geralt takes issue with Ciri's decision, like any parent or guardian agonizing over a mortal danger threatening their adopted or natural offspring, this astonishing exchange takes place:

Geralt: *stubbornly*: "There's gotta be another way..."

Ciri: *gently*: "What can you know about saving the world, silly? You're but a witcher. This is my story, not yours. You must let me finish telling it."

This is the moment the open world's simulation of the geopolitical past suddenly becomes the science fiction laboratory of the future: Geralt's player-initiated history-writing accedes to Ciri's mandate to change the course of history.⁵⁶ What is crucial here is that none of the interactive dialogue choices during this quest have any effect on the final outcome of the game -- indeed, all the determining choices have already been made.

CD Projekt's goal was not to deceive players but to shed light on one of the deepest contradictions of the open world as a form. This is the fact that the more pervasive the digital

media has become, the greater the integration of its practices and institutions into everyday life, the greater the potential collective power of transnational audiences vis-a-vis any given open world. *Witcher 3* acknowledges this power through its multiple endings, which transform the themes of player freedom and geopolitical enclosure into something new.

These endings are divided into two main categories, namely the outcome of the war between Redania and Nilfgaard, and Ciri's personal fate after battling the White Frost. A series of quests and interactive dialogue choices generate three possible end states for the former, namely the victory of Nilfgaard, the victory of Redania under Radovid, or the victory of Redania under Dijkstra. A separate series of player choices located in six interactive dialogue sequences generate three possible destinies for Ciri -- her demise due to the White Frost, her survival and crowning as empress of a victorious Nilfgaard, or her survival and decision to become a witcher.

The three end states of the war are determined not by the main story, but by the player's completion or non-completion of side quest path 14. If this side path is not completed, Redania led by Radovid will automatically defeat Nilfgaard. The price tag of this victory is that Radovid will rule over his expanded empire with a reign of terror against mages and non-humans. Conversely, if side path 14 is completed, the player's decisions will tip the balance towards either the victory of Nilfgaard, or else the victory of Redania under Dijkstra. The former option results in less overall bloodshed, albeit at the price of autocratic stagnation, whereas Dijkstra's rule ushers in an epoch of authoritarian industrialization.

One possible hypothesis is that these three end states correspond to the three hegemonic forms of dynastic geopolitical closure on the territory of the Bloodlands between 1775 and 1914. These destinies were annexation by the Austrian, Prussian (after 1871, German) and Russian dynastic empires. Nilfgaard's victory most resembles the dominion of Romanov-era Russia, something confirmed by a sub-variation of this scenario wherein Ciri becomes empress of Nilfgaard.⁵⁷ This latter triggers a playable epilogue wherein Ciri and Geralt spend one last day together in an icy, snowbound White Orchard and must drive off an inoffensive bear from a fishing hole at a frozen lake, a nod towards the rule of Catherine the Great. Conversely, Redania's victory under the brooding cloud of Radovid's madness suggests the elite senescence of the Austrian empire, while Dijkstra's authoritarian industrialization recalls to mind Prussia's expansion into the German empire.⁵⁸

This raises the question as to why none of the three empire endings -- nor any of the three Ciri endings -- overtly refer to the two major post-dynastic empires of the Bloodlands between 1914 until 1945, namely Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. This strategy may seem especially counterintuitive given the myriad references to the apocalyptic violence unleashed by these empires in *Witcher 3*'s open world.

We can begin to unravel the mystery with the assistance of one of Timothy Snyder's most insightful comments, namely that the construction of the European Union was not the final settlement of the conflicts of World War II, something more accurately ascribed to the inauguration of the US to the status of world hegemon in 1945. Rather, the European Union is the final settlement of World War I.⁵⁹

Witcher 3's empire endings stop in 1914 for a similar reason: its open world is not about 1945, but about 2008. This is why Ciri cannot be reduced to a national allegory of Poland, Ukraine, or any other specific nation or ethnic group in the Bloodlands. It is not that she has nothing to do with the post-1914 anticolonial resistances or the post-1945 anti-neocolonial

resistance movements of the region, but precisely because she represents what they all have in common today. Ciri is, in short, the first great interactive avatar of the European-wide social movements fighting against the EU's own version of transnational capitalism, and for a new kind of transnational political, economic and cultural solidarity.

It is here that CD Projekt pulls off one of the greatest feats of interactive story-telling of all time. Ciri's survival or demise depends on whether or not the player has properly grasped *Witcher 3's* critique of identity-politics, dynastic expansionism and gender, by choosing dialogue options which treat Ciri with the values of cosmopolitan solidarity, democratic autonomy and egalitarianism. In practice, players must correctly choose either two out of four or three out of five interactive dialogue choices. Put bluntly, each choice is a test of the player's understanding of the importance of social solidarity.

The first of these five dialogue choices occurs at the end of the main story quest "Blood on the Battlefield", when players must advise Ciri on how best to mourn the passing of Vesemir. One of the dialogue choices triggers an uproarious interactive snowball fight, one of the truly sublime moments in *Witcher 3*, while the other triggers a lugubrious drinking session. The snowball fight adds to Ciri's chances of survival, while the drinking session subtracts from such. The first lesson is that our sorrows are bearable only when we grasp the joy of laughter and play with others.

The second dialogue choice occurs in the final moments of "Blood on the Battlefield" and is triggered by Ciri's optional visit to Emperor Emrys (note that if the player encourages Ciri to visit the Emperor, there is a possibility she will become empress of Nilfgaard in the epilogue, whereas if the player encourages her to go to Velen instead, the empress ending is automatically excluded and her fate will depend on four dialogue choices instead of five). During the conversation with the emperor, the player must make an additional interactive dialogue choice to accept or reject the Emyr's payment to Geralt for fulfilling the Emperor's order to bring Ciri to the court. If Geralt refuses to accept the money, this adds to Ciri's chances of survival, whereas if he accepts it, this reduces her chances. The second lesson is that solidarity always comes before money.

The main story quest "Child of the Elder Blood" contains the third dialogue choice, triggered by Geralt and Ciri's fruitless search through Avellach's laboratory. If Geralt encourages Ciri to run amok in the laboratory to express her feelings, this counts towards her survival. If Geralt encourages her to bottle up her feelings, this detracts from her survival. The lesson here is that we must be honest with ourselves if we are to be honest with others.

The fourth dialogue choice occurs prior to Ciri's meeting with the Lodge of Sorceresses in the main story quest "Final Preparations". Geralt must decide whether to allow Ciri to go to the meeting by herself, or to accompany her. The former choice adds to her chances to survive, the latter detracts from her survival. The lesson is that everyone must fight their own battles.

The fifth choice is whether to visit Skjall's grave or not in the side quest "Skjall's Grave". Skjall is a minor character who sacrificed himself to protect Ciri during one of her escapes from the Wild Hunt. Completing this side quest adds to Ciri's chance of survival, while failing to do so subtracts from her chances. The lesson here is the necessity to acknowledge even the smallest acts of solidarity which sustained us in our lives.

Equipped with this understanding of the dialogue choices, we are finally in a position to understand the connection between the three empire endings and the three Ciri endings. These

six endings boil down, in practice, to three geopolitically meaningful endings. The first ending occurs if the player's choices trigger Ciri's demise. This results in a playable epilogue wherein Geralt hunts down the last surviving Crone, as vengeance for Ciri's death. After completing this quest, a cut-scene suggests that the interdimensional portals between the worlds is becoming active again, and that humanity is unlikely to survive the next Conjunction of the Spheres. This is the dismal fate of national polities without any hope of transnational democracy, which relapse into plutocratic and kleptocratic despotisms.

If the player's choices trigger Ciri's crowning as empress, stagnation replaces catastrophe. This is the bleak future of eurozone austerity, wherein neo-mercantilist policies benefit Europe's export surplus nations at the expense of Europe's import surplus nations. Yanis Varoufakis has provided the single best account of why this neo-mercantilism is unsustainable in Greece, Portugal and Spain, and will eventually be unsustainable in Italy and France.⁶⁰

It is Ciri's survival as a witcher, by contrast, which offers the most interesting avenue of resistance. The secret of this third ending is contained in the brief cut-scene showing Ciri crouching on a frozen plain, shielding her eyes from the blinding core of the White Frost before beginning her assault. We never see what powers she summons against the Frost, precisely because *this struggle is still going on*. The Ciri witcher ending asks the player to reflect on the basic contradiction between player choice and geopolitical closure -- to think through *Witcher 3's* open world as a model of our own world.

By linking the early modern history of Eastern Europe and Eurasia to the geopolitics of contemporary European integration, *Witcher 3* honors the possibility of a future emancipated from the categories of geopolitical closure altogether. This closure must end, for true freedom to begin: the choice between human need versus plutocratic greed is ultimately the choice between a human future versus planetary extinction. If the price tag of digital citizenship is universal complicity with the injustices and horrors of a networked world, then the crushing weight of this complicity can only be borne by means of a democratically chosen and transnational solidarity. Against the White Frost of the two thousand billionaires, only the solidarity of the 7.5 billion digital witchers will do.

1. Szymborska's original line: "Tylko co ludzkie potrafi być prawdziwie obce./ Reszta to lasy mieszane, krecia robota i wiatr." Wislawa Szymborska, *Psalm* (1978), translated by Joanna Trzeciak in: *Over the Wall/After the Fall: Post-Communist Cultures through an East-West Gaze*. Edited by Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska and Elena Gapova. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. (xiv).
2. For further details, see: Steven Messner. "The Myth Behind The Monsters of The Witcher 3." *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*. October 15, 2015. <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2015/10/15/the-witcher-3-folklore/>.
3. The *Witcher 3* side quest "Forefather's Eve" refers to Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* (1822-1834), while the side quest "A Towerful of Mice" is loosely based on the Polish folk tale of Prince Popiel. However, the narrative content of both quests has nothing to do with the originals. "Forefather's Eve" is not an ode to Polish nationalism, but denounces both the imperial-era and Soviet-era repression of peasant religious practices. Conversely, "A Towerful of Mice" denounces Nazi-era human experimentation and the brutality of the Polish nobility vis-a-vis their Polish and Ukrainian peasants. The wedding sequence of "Hearts of Stone" is based on Stanisław Wyspiański's 1901 play, *The Wedding*, while the crypt sequence features the non-player character of Witold quoting a line from Adam Asnyk's "No, Nothing Happened There". The full roster of *Witcher 3*'s limited references to Polish culture is here: https://www.reddit.com/r/witcher/comments/3zkaxv/spoilers_all_the_references_to_polish_culture_in/?
4. For a comprehensive analysis of Polish nationalism, see: Brian Porter. *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
5. Piłsudski was one of the key instigators of Poland's post-1918 independence from the Russian and German empires, as well as its dictatorial leader from 1926 until 1935. The Second Polish Republic lasted from 1918 until the combined Nazi and Soviet invasion of 1939.
6. CD Projekt built on the achievement of Andrej Sapkowski's *Witcher* novels, which critique the institutional violence of 19th and 20th century imperialism, colonialism and militarism along with the identity-politics of racism, sexism and chauvinism.
7. For a fuller analysis of the specific achievements of *The Decalogue* and its relationship to Poland's post-WW II media culture, see chapters 4 and 5 in my own text: Dennis Redmond. *The World is Watching*. Carbondale: Southern University of Illinois Press, 2003.
8. Timothy Snyder. *The Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
9. The contradiction here is that both Stalinist and post-Stalinist Soviet Union and Maoist China supported genuinely popular anti-imperial mass movements and Third World national revolutions in Cambodia, Cuba, Laos, Vietnam and elsewhere. At the same time, the Soviet state crushed anti-imperial revolutions in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Poland (1981), while the various Soviet republics were ruled by neocolonial nomenklaturas. These national nomenklaturas were ambiguous social formations, halfway between the British, French and Portuguese colonial despotisms and the Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone comprador elites which ruled many postcolonial American states during the late 19th century, and many African and Asian states during the late 20th

century.

10. This number includes the 5.6 million Soviet victims of the 1931-1934 famine-genocide, the 800,000 mass shootings of Soviet citizens during the Great Purges, and the 2 to 3.6 million excess deaths due to the lethal conditions of the Soviet gulag.

11. Timothy Snyder's *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and as Warning* (2015) argues that social geography explains one of the most puzzling features of the Holocaust, namely its regional nature. Approximately half of all European Jews living outside of the Bloodlands in 1939 lived to survive the Holocaust, but only about 5% of all Jews living in the zone of the Bloodlands escaped the Nazi killing machine. Snyder makes a convincing argument that this special lethality was due to the fact that the existing state structures of the Bloodlands were destroyed twice over, first by Soviet neocolonialism (the Soviet mass killings and state-engineered famines in Soviet Ukraine between 1931 and 1938, and the 1940 invasions of the Baltic states and eastern Poland) and then by Nazi colonialism. See: Timothy Snyder. *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and as Warning*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2015.

12. Chagall was born to a Lithuanian Jewish family in Vitebsk, in what later became the country of Belarus. Today Vitebsk is the site of an annual arts festival and a Chagall museum.

13. These basic rules include how to use the camera system to look around, how the player-character walks and runs, how to examine and acquire objects, how to use the player's special witcher senses, how to interact with non-player characters, and how to access the combat and inventory systems.

14. Neo-slave narratives explicitly memorialize the stories of the enslaved populations of the Atlantic triangular trade which were either excluded from the historical archives, or never recorded in the first place. As such, they are profound meditations on the writing of history, as well as on the politics of aesthetic representation. Three of the most influential neo-slave novels are US writer Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Haitian writer Evelyne Trouillot's *The Notorious Rosalie* (2004), and Indian writer Amitabh Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008). The three most prominent interactive media works which borrow heavily from the literary neo-slave narratives are Cory Barlog's *God of War 2* (2007), Dana Jan and Ru Weerasuriya's *God of War: Ghost of Sparta* (2010), and Stig Asmussen's *God of War 3* (2010), all of which rewrote the materials of the Greek mythology epic into an interactive slave insurrection. For additional context on the importance of slavery as a key foundational structure of the early capitalist world-system as well as a critical element of present-day history, see: Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993. Also see: Marcus Rediker. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Penguin, 2007.

15. It is no accident that the systems of Atlantic maritime slavery and land-based Eastern European and Eurasian serfdom emerged during the same time-period -- the late 16th and early 17th centuries -- and were abolished at roughly the same time, i.e. the mid-19th century. Both modes of wageless labor served comparable functions in the histories of their respective empires, i.e. whereas slavery was a crucial engine of wealth for the Atlantic maritime empires, serfdom was an equally indispensable engine of wealth for the Austrian and Russian empires. As late as 1860, 3.95 million US citizens (12.6% of the population) were chattel slaves and 10.5 million citizens of the Russian empire (14% of the empire's population) were serfs.

16. The quest which introduces players to Gwent features this witty exchange:

Geert: "What a waste of time! The earth shall revolve around the sun before you comprehend these rules!"

Geralt: "Got a minute?"

Aldert: "Why not. Aldert Geert, assistant professor in contemporary history at Oxenfurt Academy."

Geralt: "Geralt of Rivia. Witcher with tenure."

17. CD Projekt Red. *Gwent*. <https://www.playgwent.com/en>.

18. During one of the main quests, Geralt finds the body of a villager who was killed by a griffin (a magical flying lizard) and strikes up a conversation with Mislav, a local hunter. If the player chooses to show empathy with Mislav, the following dialogue occurs:

Geralt: "You know him?"

Mislav: "We served at the lord's manor together, where the black army's encamped now. He was a stable hand, I was the lord's hunter. But that was before... Well, a long time ago."

Player action: choose "Before what?" instead of "The Nilfgaardians – where'd you find them?"

Geralt: "Before what?"

Mislav: "Before they drove me from the village."

Geralt: "What'd you do?"

Mislav: "Nothin'. I'm a freak. Sorry, I'd rather not talk about it."

Player action: choose "I'm a freak, too." instead of "Won't press you."

Geralt: "I'm a freak, too."

Mislav: "Aye, but of another kind."

Geralt: "If it's lycanthropy, I can help."

Mislav: "What?"

Geralt: "Lycanthropy. Werewolves? Handled a few cases in the past. It's usually a simple curse that..."

Mislav: "The lord's son, Florian, and I... We loved each other. Dieter walked in on us in the stables. They drove me away... Florian hanged himself. Lord started drinkin', and the estate fell into ruin. That's the long and short of it."

Geralt: "I'm sorry."

Mislav: "Ah, ancient history now. I was to show you where I found the Nilfgaardians. Come."

This sequence exemplifies the brilliance of *Witcher 3*'s storytelling. Players are free to ignore Mislav and concentrate on the quest, but they are rewarded for their curiosity and empathy with a riveting tale of same-sex lost love – the ingenious queering of the heteronormative fantasy romance melodrama.

19. Tomira's hut is located just to the west of White Orchard village.

20. If the player visits this area, one of the soldiers will recognize Geralt and the following dialogue will take place:

Soldier: "Geralt of Rivia, correct? You were in White Orchard recently? Near Vizima?"

Geralt: *assents*: "Mh-hmh. Charming village if you don't mind rotting corpses."

Soldier: "There'd have been one more if not for you. Lena... she survived, thanks to your potion."

Geralt: "Nice to see a Nilfgaardian soldier concerned about the fate of some simple Nordling. But kind of surprising, too."

Soldier: "That night, when the griffin attacked her... she was on her way to meet me, in the woods near the garrison."

Player choice: select "1. Lousy spot for a rendezvous" or "2. Love knows no bounds, I guess".
If player selects 1:

Geralt: "Mmh. Love knows no bounds."

Soldier: *agreeing*: "Not so."

If player selects 2:

Geralt: ""

In both cases, soldier continues:

Soldier: "Her parents told her that if they saw her with a Nilfgaardian, they would shave her head, cut out her tongue and banish her from their home. Listen. Lena... she has not fully recovered. I took her with me when I was transferred, thought she might get better. But no. She says nothing, recognizes noone, sleeps most of the day."

Geralt: *sadly*: "I warned Tomira. Witcher potions have powerful, usually permanent side-effects. Can't do anything to help now. Maybe a mage could."

Soldier: "I don't know whether to thank you, or curse you for not letting her die with dignity."

Geralt: *unmoved*: "Trust me, the choice I had to make was harder."

21. The final interactive scene in White Orchard shows an angry female villager beating the female tavern owner close to death, accusing the latter of being a collaborator with the invading Nilfgaardians. However, when Geralt and Vesemir intervene to stop the tavern keeper from being murdered, they only make things worse, because three male villagers use this opportunity to ambush the witchers. There is no option to choose a non-lethal path: the player (as Geralt) and Vesemir must kill the three or be killed. Real life variations of this tragedy occurred in tens of thousands of cities, towns and villages all across the Bloodlands, where invading Nazi or Stalinist armies inflicted massive violence on local populations, nationalist or Soviet partisans committed counter-violence, etc.

22. The theme of player responsibility is also conveyed by means of several optional conversations with Morvran, one of Emhyr's top military commanders, which allow players to simulate the effects of past decisions they had made during play-throughs of *TW2*. During the third tutorial, Morvran will ask Geralt about whether or not the latter killed Aryan, and chose the Yorveth or Roche path (if the player chose Yorveth, Morvran will ask if Geralt saved Triss or broke Saskia's curse, and if the player chose Roche, Morvran will ask whether Geralt saved Triss or saved Anais). Finally, Morvran will ask whether Geralt helped Sile in the Megascopie or not, and whether Geralt killed Letho or let him go. If the player chose to let Letho go, Letho will appear in the optional *Witcher 3* side quest "Ghosts of the Past". If Letho survives this quest, he can be recruited to fight against the Wild Hunt at Geralt's side during the main quest "The Battle of Kaer Morhen".

23. It is true that a significant part of the full open world, the island archipelago of Skellige, requires the completion of a main quest. This was done to ensure that players witness and experience the devastation unleashed by the warring empires on the communities of the open world.

24. E. P. Thompson. "History from Below." *Times Literary Supplement*. April 7, 1966 (279-280).

25. Many of these consequences take the form of incidental or ambient story-telling. The first time the player visits the village, they will overhear a peasant couple located in a hut directly opposite the inn arguing over whether to slaughter their pig before the local authorities take it from them. If the player chooses to fight the Baron's thugs, the peasant couple will not be harmed, but the whole village will suffer collective retribution from the Baron as punishment. If the player chooses not to fight the Baron's thugs, Geralt will observe two of the Baron's thugs force their way into the peasants' hut and slam the door shut (there is no way to stop the thugs in time, or to open the door thereafter). Whichever course of action the player chooses, they must bear the burden of complicity.

26. Most notoriously, the first *Witcher* videogame rewarded players for seducing women with in-game trading cards. A representative fan critique is available here: http://feministing.com/2008/12/10/subtle_sexism_analyzing_the_wi/. By contrast, every single one of the character romances and romance-related interactions in *Witcher 3* are handled with great care and respect for all the parties involved.

27. This is a subtle allusion to the significant transformation of gender during the epoch of the Bloodlands, namely the mass entrance of Eastern European and Eurasian women into arms factories and industrial plants due to Stalinist industrialization in the 1930s and WW II in the 1940s.

28. This term originated in Sapkowski's *Witcher* novels and is often cited in CD Projekt's videogames. The witcher's path is the unique destiny which each witcher is said to pursue, independently of the other members of their caste.

29. To exorcise the ghost, the player must either bring Annabelle's remains to Graham, her former lover, or bring Graham to her remains on Fyke Island. In both cases, the meeting is fatal for Graham, who is reconciled to his lover at the price of a properly Wagnerian *Liebestod* (i.e. the couple are reunited forever in death). The first ending releases the plague maiden to prey on the villagers of Velen, while the second exorcises the ghost forever.

30.

31. It is worth pointing out that where *The Witcher 3* employs character-driven paths, *Fallout 4* employs companion friendship and romance paths. These latter require the player to garner companion approval through multiple quests and successive player actions vis-a-vis friendly allies. The main difference is that players can pursue multiple paths simultaneously in *The Witcher 3*, whereas *Fallout 4* limits players to one companion at a time. We will describe the structure and consequences *Fallout 4*'s companion-based narrative strategy more closely in the next chapter.

32. The first six paths correspond to Act I of *Witcher 3*'s main storyline, while the seventh and eighth correspond to Act II and Act III.

33. Friedrich Engels. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Hottingen-Zurich, 1884. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/>.

34. If the player disobeys the Crones and frees the Tree Spirit, the orphaned children of Crookback Bog will remain alive. However, the Tree Spirit will slaughter all of the inhabitants of Dunwood village as vengeance for its imprisonment, while the Crones will punish Anna by transforming her into a water

hag. She can be returned to human form, but the undoing of the curse will be fatal for Anna. Her death subsequently drives Strengger to suicide, causing Strengger's second in command, a brutal thug with none of the Baron's redeeming qualities, to take charge of Velen. Alternately, players can attack the Tree Spirit directly or kill it through covert sabotage. This choice will permit the Dunharrow villagers, Strengger and Anna to survive. However, the orphaned children in Crookbag Bog vanish, most likely becoming the hapless prey of the Crones. There is no happy end to either choice, just a pair of grim alternatives.

35. If the player does not complete the “Now or Never” side quest, mages will continue to be persecuted and slaughtered by Radovid. If Radovid is allowed to remain on the throne, the witch hunters will begin to persecute non-human residents of Novigrad (primarily dwarves, elves and dopplers). Alternately, if Radovid is replaced by Dijkstra or if Nilgaard wins the war with Redania, the witch hunts cease, at the price tag of perpetuating other forms of dynastic violence.

36. While the demography of the Bloodlands remained primarily rural until the post-1945 period, the largest cities in the region at the end of the 19th century included Chişinău, Dnieper, Gdansk, Kaliningrad, Kharkiv, Krakow, Kyiv, Łódź, Lviv, Odessa, Riga, Vilnius and Warsaw.

37. These urban quests are especially interesting because they provide important hints as to how CD Projekt's will create credible characters and quests for its next game, *Cyberpunk 2077*, an open world science fiction role-playing videogame set primarily in a futuristic city.

38. The newly independent polities of the former Soviet bloc experienced three geopolitical outcomes in the period between 1991 and 2015. The first was the dismantling of the rule of the grey bourgeoisie and the development of full electoral democracy. This occurred in the thirteen polities of post-2004 Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, and post-2014 Ukraine. The second outcome was the rise of oligarchic collectivism, where nascent democratic institutions, traditions of indigenous anti-colonial nationalism, and a lack of energy-rents constrained the political power of the grey bourgeoisie. This occurred in the twelve polities of Abkhazia, Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Tajikistan (Ukraine was ruled by oligarchic collectivism from 1991 to 2013, until the democratic revolution of 2014). The third outcome was the transformation of grey bourgeoisies into autocratic kleptocracies in the four polities of Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. These kleptocracies took the political form of presidential monarchies and the economic form of energy-rent patrimonial states. These latter were structurally most comparable to the Middle Eastern and Eurasian presidential monarchies and energy-rent autocracies.

39. In the nations of the former Soviet Union, the prison subcultures took the form of the “thief in law” convict culture which emerged in the Soviet prison system. For further details on the contemporary trajectory of the grey bourgeoisies, see: Karen Dawisha. *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014. For information about the coevolution of Russian organized crime and the Russian state since 1991, see: Mark Galeotti. *Russian Security and Paramilitary Forces since 1991*. London: Osprey Publishing, 2013. Also see Galeotti's blog, “In Moscow's Shadows”: <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com>. For additional details of the thief-in-law subculture of the Soviet prisons, see: *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia, Volumes I, II and III*. Edited by Damon Murray and Stephen Sorrell. London: Fuel Design, 2009. <http://fuel-design.com/russian-criminal-tattoo-archive/>.

40. This is why the three gangsters do not develop significantly as characters, but remain representatives of their respective class fractions. It also explains why the gangsters' plan to seize political control of Novigrad, a plan briefly discussed by Bedlam, remains unrealized.

41. The one apparent exception to the maxim that Novigrad is the space of greatest individuation, namely the Skellige side path which determines who will succeed King Bran as the ruler of Skellige, only reconfirms the rule. During the side path, a series of player choices determine whether Skelligens unite around the intelligent Cerys an Craite, the headstrong Hjalmar an Craite, or the authoritarian Svanrige Tuirseach. However, none of these three choices are integrated into the development of the three characters. If players explore the Skellige islands, they will discover a decentralized, lineage-based society with a tradition of strong-willed female warriors. They will also encounter examples of the justice as well as injustice meted out by these lineages, everywhere from traditions of family honor and druidic nature worship, to clan feuds and slaving expeditions. What the various quests suggest, but never explicitly state, is that Skellige can either evolve towards a trade-based society more or less at peace with its neighbors (the Cerys option), or become a haven of ruthless maritime expansionism comparable to the land-based expansionism of Redania (the Hjalmar option) or Nilfgaard (the Svanrige option). All three choices remain sociological possibilities, rather than sites of character development.

42. While one of the oldest of today's transnational fan conventions, the San Diego Comic Con, first met in 1971, attendance did not cross the 10,000 mark until 1989.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Diego_Comic-Con.

43. The name and the theme of dumplings are not accidental, but refer to the legendary 16th century Japanese swordsman Hanzo Hattori, the subject of innumerable Japanese films, television series and manga (comic strips). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hattori_Hanzō. Unlike his historical namesake, Hattori shrinks from combat and flees physical confrontations of any kind.

44. This quest is located just east of Honeyfill Meadworks, in the settled region to the east of Novigrad.

45. This subtle but unmistakable defense of social solidarity is echoed by a number of minor side quests which are not part of the main story or side quest paths. These involve defeating packs of roving monsters which have occupied small villages. After defeating all of the monsters, a cut-scene shows the residents returning to their village to rebuild, as Geralt watches with evident satisfaction. Restoring these villages generates small amounts of experience points, but does not generate significant economic returns or other rewards, i.e. the decision to restore them is primarily a moral and not an economic decision.

46. On September 29, 2015 CD Projekt Red forum member REDKatja informed the fan community of the change: "It [i.e. the timer] was design[ed] at first, but we decided to adjust it. If quest failed for you, after patch arrives, you will be able to start it again and complete it. Sorry for inconvenience."
<https://forums.cdprojektred.com/forum/en/the-witcher-series/the-witcher-3-wild-hunt/tech-support/43787-quest-bug-empty-coop/page3>.

47. Other examples of CD Projekt's capacity to deliver game-play which respected the wishes of the fan community include the quest "The Taxman Cometh", located in the *Hearts of Stone* downloadable expansion, which subjects Geralt's excess income to taxation. This was an elegant way of quashing an

in-game exploit which allowed the player to accumulate excessive wealth (the name of the tax collector is Walthenor Mitty, homage to James Thurber's Walter Mitty) without unduly upsetting fans. Another example includes Patch 1.05, a free update of the game released online by CD Projekt in May 2015. This patch created the Bovine Defense Force Initiative, a tongue-in-cheek monster designed to prevent players from killing a herd of local cows in White Orchard and selling their hides. Since the herd automatically respawns, players could generate significant amounts of money early in the game, disrupting overall game balance. The Bovine Defense Force is a powerful upper-level monster with zero experience points which constantly reappears whenever players attack the respawned herd.

48. The song was written by Marcin Przybyłowicz. CD Projekt deserves special commendation for the sophisticated facial animation employed to depict Priscilla's performance, as well as the onscreen reactions of the audience members. While all the vocal renditions of the song in the *Witcher 3*'s seven spoken languages are excellent, the Polish version sung by Anna Terpiłowska is especially resonant. This latter is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvQNZZCdjeI>.

49. The sequence is one of the most direct allusions to Eastern Europe's world-class theater culture, from its foundation by Bertolt Brecht to its later efflorescence under Heiner Müller.

50. Act 2 of Müller's play highlights Hamlet's incapacity to show his solidarity with the gender politics of Ophelia's rebellion, anticipating his later betrayal of the revolution at the end of the play. The conclusion of *Hamletmachine* depicts Hamlet and Ophelia as allegories of the intellectuals affiliated with the one-party state and the independent social movements: the former betrays the revolutionary cause and finds accommodation within the ruling order, while the latter are crushed. My own original English-language translation of Müller's play is available online: <http://monkeybear.info/Hamletmachine.pdf>.

51. Specifically, Geralt detects a familiar face in the audience -- a notoriously brutal Temple guard who was... [**specify this sequence of reading the non-identity within the repressive mask.**]

52. CD Projekt Red. "The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Announced." February 5, 2013. <http://en.cdprojektred.com/news/the-witcher-3-wild-hunt-announced/>.

53. Two rival empires in *Final Fantasy 12* are waging an imperial war to control supplies of magacite, a crystal which stores vast quantities of magical energy called "Mist". This crystalline Mist powers the vehicles and industries of the open world, just as hydrocarbons power those of the real world, i.e. the storyline is a critique of 20th century and early 21st century energy wars.

54. In this particular quest, Geralt is trapped in a mage's laboratory and must escape by finding a book called Gottfried's Omni-opening Grimoire. The initials G.O.G. are a reference to Gog.com, CD Projekt's real world digital distribution service. As a company, CD Projekt has abolished all forms of DRM for all of its videogames and digital services, including Gog.com. To escape the tower, Geralt must disable the Defensive Regulatory Magicon (i.e. DRM). The name of the mage, Gottfried, is a reference to Gottfrid Svartholm, one of the founders of The Pirate Bay, a file-sharing site legendary for its age and durability. Adding to the mirth, the final battle inside the tower is structured as a miniature tower defense game.

55. Players can recruit as many as seven other non-play characters to serve as allies in this quest,

provided they have completed the various main story and side quests involving these characters. This is an ingenious game-play incentive to complete as many quests as possible, since players are rewarded with increased experience points, additional cut-scenes, and assistance in one of the more challenging sequences of the game.

56. From a literary standpoint, this moment is also the negation of one of the oldest tropes of the literature of colonialism, namely Prospero's self-serving renunciation at the end of *The Tempest* (1610). Shakespeare's play signaled the moment that Dutch and French market despotism began to replace Hapsburg dynastic expansionism as the hegemonic authority of the capitalist world-system, a.k.a. the prelude to the tectonic conflict of the Thirty Years War. By contrast, *Witcher 3* marks the moment that the transnational artists of the early 21st century have begun to renounce their commercial monopoly over the work of interactive media, by opening the door to the vast digital fan communities which are beginning to create, share and consume their own forms of non-commercial media.

57. This ending requires players to choose to complete side quest path 14, to defend Roche against Dijkstra the end of this path, to convince Ciri to meet with Emyr during the denouement of "Blood on the Battlefield", and to guarantee Ciri's personal survival of the battle with the White Frost. Note that it is possible for Nilfgaard to win the war while Ciri perishes against the White Frost or becomes a witcher.

58. Scholars of the Austrian-Hungarian empire may object to this reading on the grounds that Radovid's blood-thirstiness does not match the historical track record of the Austrian empire, a significantly less repressive and violent polity than the Soviet and Nazi empires which replaced it. This is true, but not relevant to the argument. None of *Witcher 3*'s polities are exact replicas of actual empires or historical events. Rather, CD Projekt's goal was a transnational retelling of the history of the Bloodlands which is critical of all xenophobic nationalisms and repressive sectarianisms. Radovid's descent into madness is meant to suggest the elite malfeasance which doomed the Austrian Hapsburgs, much as Dijkstra's rule suggests Bismarck's reign as Minister President of Prussia (1860-1890) and Chancellor of the German empire (1871-1890).

59. "...the European Union is a settlement of empire for the former [maritime] empires, and also for the former subjects of Communist empire. That is, by the way, in my opinion the most interesting thing about the European Union. It's not a settlement of the Second World War so much as it is a settlement of the First World War." Timothy Snyder. "1917 Centennial Series: Origins of Unfreedom." November 15, 2017. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6glynCBQtgk>. Clip runs from 17:20 until 17:30.

60. Yanis Varoufakis. *The Global Minotaur: America, Europe and the Future of the Global Economy*. New York: Zed Books, 2011. Also see: Yanis Varoufakis. *Adults in the Room: My Struggle With Europe's Deep Establishment*. London: The Bodley Head, 2017.