Counter-Balkanism in The Witcher & Gwent: A Historical Reinvention Beyond the Balkan Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

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The rediscovery and classification of the Balkans has been the subject of literary fiction and philosophical writing since the late 18th century. Though the Balkan states, and their myriad cultural groups, had occupied that geographic locale since the 5th century BCE. The theoretical body of work produced by the global West and its perception of the Balkans then was, and is, mired in stereotypes drawn from sociopolitical events of the 18th century and beyond, rather than the complex history of those peoples. In fact, the reality of the Balkans and how those peoples conceived of themselves is diametrically opposed to the body of work produced by Western scholars and artists. That Western body of work is referred to as Balkanism, a term coined by Maria Todorova in *Imagining the Balkans* (1997). This concept is a local application and modulation of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). In this, the Western games industry has conformed to accepted standards of discussing the Balkans explained in Balkanism. What I argue is that *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and its spin-off card game, *Gwent*, reimagine a Europe beyond Balkanism, which subverts, and critiques stereotypes attached to Balkan countries. I discuss the theoretical body of work focused on cultural theory and game studies to explore the intersection between these two fields. This theory is then applied to analyze *Gwent* as an introduction to the more complex world of the *Witcher 3*, and how both games read together posit a different conception of the Balkans.

DEDICATION

To Mia, a wholehearted thank you for helping me find a voice for ideas I've had for many years, and for always keeping my tendency to digress in check. I wouldn't be here without your guidance. To my other readers, Fenwick and Martin, thank you for taking the time to consider my work from outside, without your contributions my ideas would've been mired in even more technical jargon and obscure references. To my friends and colleagues, Marc, Ryan, Marilyn and Sarah, thank you for spending altogether too much time listening to my rants. Discussing this thesis with all of you and fielding your questions led me down the most unexplored paths, which incidentally were also the most fruitful. Finally, and most of all, thank you to Adrian and Ioana, my parents. Everything I've accomplished is because of your love, support and understanding. This work is a celebration of everything you've taught me about myself and where we came from. From the bottom of my heart, thank you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

GLOSSARY

Characters

Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon a.k.a. Ciri

> Biological daughter of Emhyr and adoptive daughter of Geralt. Member of the School of the Wolf, although she has not undergone the trials required of other members. Possesses magical abilities drawn from the Elder Blood. She becomes a full-fledged witcheress or the empress of Nilfgaard based on player choices.

Emhyr Var Emreis

> Imperator/Emperor (*ker'zaer*) of the Nilfgaardian Empire as of the events of *The Witcher 3* (1257-1290). Publicly favorable to the elder races and those with magical abilities. Known for his expansionist policies.

Geralt of Rivia

> The eponymous *Witcher* and the player characters in all three main *Witcher* games. A master swordsman and survivor of the *Trial of the Grasses*, a rite of initiation required to create witchers. Rider of the Wild Hunt, the series antagonists prior to the games themselves. Adoptive father of Ciri. Adoptive son of Vesemir. Adoptive brother of Eskel and Lambert.

Henry Var Attre

> Nilfgaardian ambassador to Novigrad for a decade at the start of *The Witcher 3*. He is concerned about the omnipresence of war in the realm and the pogroms targeting ethnic minorities in the Northern Kingdoms.

John Calveit

> Imperator of the Nilfgaardian Empire following Morvran Voorhis (1301- ?). Interested in the scientific and medical development of the Empire rather than expanding its territory.

Morvran Voorhis

> Canonical Imperator of the Nilfgaardian Empire following Emhyr Var Emreis (1290-1301). Member of the Guild of Merchants and commander of the Alba Division. Encountered in the events of *Witcher 3* during his time as commander. Strikes up a friendship with Geralt through

their shared love of horse breeding and riding. Known for dealing with financial subterfuge and espionage.

Philippa Eilhart

Member of the Redanian court, de facto leader of the Lodge of Sorceresses and advisor to Radovid's father. Tortured and Blinded by Radovid after leading an attempted coup. Later allied with Redanian resistance to assassinate Radovid and make peace with Nilfgaard.

Phillip Strenger a.k.a. The Bloody Baron

De facto ruler of Velen following the Nilfgaardian conquest of the land. Found searching for his disappeared wife and daughter. Possesses knowledge of Ciri's whereabouts and is willing to trade the information for Geralt's help. Suffers from psychological trauma from his years at war and alcoholism.

Radovid V the Stern

King of Redania following the death of his father. Bears a great grudge against the Elder Races and magical folk following his abuse at the hands of Philippa throughout his childhood. De facto ruler of Novigrad through his control of the Church of the Eternal Fire. Assassinated by his own spymaster, Philippa Eilhart and other resistance elements from Redania and Temeria.

Triss Merigold of Maribor

Founding member of the Lodge of Sorceresses. Known as a skilled healer and alchemist. One of the two primary partners to Geralt in *The Witcher 3* and the main partner in the previous two installments. She has a sister-like relationship with Ciri. Encountered in *The Witcher 3* as she is attempting to evacuate the local magical community amid pogroms.

Vesemir of Kaer Morhen

Eldest witcher in the School of the Wolf. Mostly found in Kaer Morhen, where he plays the role of a dispatcher. He is the adoptive father figure of Geralt, Eskel, Lambert and the adoptive grandfather of Ciri. He has also raised and commanded numerous witchers not encountered, but still active by the time of *The Witcher 3*.

Yennefer of Vengerberg

Member of the Lodge of Sorceresses and later agent of Emperor Emhyr. Primary partner of Geralt in the books prior to the games and potential partner in *The Witcher 3*. She is the adoptive mother of Ciri, whom she is searching for during the events of the game.

Locations

Alba

Name of the River that flows through the city of Nilfgaard and is also the name of the adjacent river valley. Known for its pastoral beauty and its vineyard. Homeland of Morvran Voorhis and many other Nilfgaardian nobles.

Kaedwen

One of the Northern Kingdoms, located to the north of Nilfgaard and the East of Redania. Usurped and annexed by Radovid in the time between *The Witcher 2* and *The Witcher 3*.

Nilfgaard

Name of the capital city of the Nilfgaardian Empire and used colloquially to refer to the empire as a whole.

Northern Kingdoms

The kingdoms that lie to the north of the Nilfgaardian Empire and to the east of the Skellige Isles. The region contains the kingdoms of Redania, Kaedwen and Temeria (prior to the events of *The Witcher 3*).

Novigrad

A free and self-governing city within the Kingdom of Redania. The city is officially ruled by the Church of the Eternal Fire, although the merchant guilds and criminal underworld exert a great deal of influence. It lies at the southeastern edge of Redania on the border with Velen.

Redania

Northern Kingdom ruled by Radovid V. Currently at war with the Nilfgaardian Empire. Has annexed the former kingdom of Kaedwen and dismantled its local administration.

Temeria

Northern Kingdom conquered by the Nilfgaardian Empire between the events of *The Witcher 2* and *The Witcher 3*. Now exists as province of the empire with full citizenship rights.

Velen

Region on the northwestern edge of Temeria. Although official under the banner of Nilfgaard, the extended presence of Redanian soldiers has impeded any administration forming. The region is colloquially called *No Man's Land*.

Vizima

The former capital of the Kingdom of Temeria, currently the administrative seat of the Nilfgaardian Empire. Restored by the occupants following years of disuse.

White Orchard

Southeastern region in Temeria. Inhabited by farming communities and overseen by a Nilfgaardian outpost located in nearby castle ruins.

Technical Terms

CD Projekt

The video game publisher and distributor that oversees the CD Projekt Red division. Also distribute games through the GOG engine. Currently the larger traded video game company in Poland, worth approximately 2.3 billion USD.

CD Projekt Red

The game development studio founded in Łódź in 2002. It is a division of the larger CD Projekt game publishing company.

Deck

The cards selected by players to form a cohesive strategy during card games. Subject to restrictions that dictate the minimum or maximum number of characters players are allowed, as well as other various restrictions pertaining to unique or special cards.

Gwent

Card game existing within the *Witcher* universe. Many characters throughout *The Witcher 3* play this card game and challenge Geralt. The cards in *Gwent* reproduce generic units from each cultural group, as well as notable story characters. *Gwent* is currently available to play in a spin-off title from the main *Witcher* series.

Ladder

A system available within the *Gwent* standalone game that displays the rankings of all players by region. Prizes are awarded to the top 1000 players in the world at the end of each season.

Witcher

The title granted to those who have survived the *Trial of the Grasses*, trained in the various witcher combat styles and gained membership within a school. The main school shown in the games is the *School of the Wolf*. The schools of *The Griffon*, *The Bear* and *The Cat* are shown to be in other Northern Realms. The *School of the Viper* is known to be in Nilfgaard.

INTRODUCTION: A *WITCHER* TRIBUTE

During a European tour in 2011, then-President Obama stopped in Poland to meet with then-Prime Minister Donald Tusk. The visit was a conventional state diplomacy exercise. What was unusual was that the state gift given to President Obama contained a copy of *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*.[1] The full gift bag contained a *Best of the Witcher 2: Video Trailers for President Barack Obama*, a *Witcher 2* gift box with golden in-game currency, two *Witcher* novels by Sapkowski, *Witcher 2* stickers and a bust of Geralt (the eponymous Witcher).[2] The gift was unusual for many reasons, chief among which was that a videogame had never been given as a diplomatic gift. Then there is the fact that Tusk's government didn't just include the *Witcher 2* videogame as part of a larger gift, rather the entire gift was magnum opus of *Witcher* media. When Obama returned to Poland three years later in 2014, he gave a speech that addressed the gift directly: "I confess, I'm not very good at video games, but I've been told that it is a great example of Poland's place in the new global economy. And it's a tribute to the talents and work ethic of the Polish people as well as the wise stewardship of Polish leaders like Prime Minister Tusk."[3] Suddenly, *The Witcher 2* became a stand-in for Polish technological innovation, a celebration of good governance and the culmination of Polish artistic endeavors decades in the making. In response to the speech given in 2014, Adam Badowski (the game director for that installment) remarked that "This is an extraordinary acknowledgement of our hard work here at CD Projekt Red. The *Witcher 2* is a game we created for players around the world by drawing from various sources including our national heritage. We are truly pleased to promote our culture in this manner."[4] At the time, there was a definite sense that videogames in general had not received recognition as serious art in Europe, and more so that they would become the icon to represent Polish culture from an insider perspective.

The importance of that cultural moment brings up several questions in itself: Why is this game so important in particular? What traditional paradigms of representation does it reinforce or challenge? What new opportunities does the series' high profile open? To answer this last question, after sweeping 50 different videogame awards from many games media outlets, *The Witcher 2* set up that entire universe, and the CD Projekt Red studio, as the premier vehicle to represent Poland to the world at

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[1] Owen Good, "Poland Gives President Obama *The Witcher 2's Collector's Edition*," Kotaku, May 28, 2011, https://kotaku.com/5806531/poland-gives-president-obama-the-witcher-2s-collectors-edition.
[2] Philip Bump, "All 274 gifts given to Barack Obama between 2009 and 2012, ranked," The Washington Post, August 4, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/08/04/every-gift-given-to-barack-obama-between-2009-and-2012-ranked/?utm_term=.2dd88f2db8cc.
[3] Rachel Weber, "Remember When Obama Said He Was Bad at 'The Witcher'?," Rolling Stone, January 20, 2017, https://www.rollingstone.com/glixel/news/remember-when-obama-said-he-was-bad-at-the-witcher-w462185.
[4] Ibidem

large.[5] Answering questions about the game's importance and its place within the larger cultural context of Europe, and the Global West, requires at least a general explanation of what that context looks like.

The Southeast and the West: Paradigms of Representation

Depictions of cultures alien to the West writ large have followed norms of representation dating at least as far back as ancient Greece. For ancient Greeks, the term βάρβἄρος (barbaros) referred to non-Greek peoples wholesale, as their languages were understood as *bar-bar* sounds, i.e. incomprehensible barking. However, it was also an antonym for πολῖτης (politēs), which meant citizen (a term which had embedded within it notions about civilization and cultural development).[6] Therefore the classification of all non-Greeks as both animalistic and uncivilized meant every mention of those peoples, whether an acquiescence or a challenge of this paradigm, had to operate within that frame. The very idea of being European, or Occidental, as a unique marker of civilization implies that other peoples do not share in this same marker.

This was the subject of discussion in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), when he excavated the paradigm of representing the Middle-East within the Western academic and artistic traditions. I'll discuss this more at length in the following chapters, but I believe it is important to remark that Orientalism opened the door for considering the role of the Global West in producing narratives about other locales that had more to say about the West's gaze, than about the actual region being discussed. A few years after Said published his work on paradigms about the Middle-East, another scholar named Maria Todorova iterated and further developed Said's framework to discuss the Balkans. In *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), Todorova went into detail about the Balkans' very existence as an ambiguous region where many cultures overlapped and conflicted, resulting in the emergence of a territory alien to Western Europe, yet distinct from the land that Said had studied. She also coined her own term, *Balkanism*, as theory to explain how the geo-political zone was discussed and viewed by the Western world. Shortly, Balkanism referred to an entire tradition that produced that entire area as a lesser and barbarized version of Western Europe, which had been suffused into art, literature, film, political

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[5] "The Witcher 2 received 50 awards," CD Projekt Red, January 5, 2012, http://en.cdprojektred.com/news/the-witcher-2-received-50-awards/.

[6] Henry George Liddell & John Urry, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1940. Accessed at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%2319347&redirect=true

discourse, philosophy and more.[7] I discuss this concept in full in the next chapter, but for now, I'd like to think shortly on one example of Balkanism as a reference point: The Gothic vampire genre.

Although the choice to discuss the vampire genre seems bizarre, its development and popularization has much to do with Balkanism as well. Europe has vampiric folk tales in many countries, and even saw the publication of vampire poetry in Goethe's *The Bride of Corinth* (1797), but it wasn't until the 19th century that the genre transformed into what modern readers are familiar with. Beginning with Lord Byron's poem, *The Giaour* (1813), and John William Polidori's short story, *The Vampyre*, the genre began to inhabit the salon world of the West. Then, in 1893 with Jules Verne's *Le Chateau des Carpathes* (The Carpathian Castle), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the vampire became synonymous with Transylvania, a large province of modern Romania. The vampire became at that time a symbol of moral decay, but also a symbol for fears relating to disease (and specifically the spread of sexually transmitted diseases) in Victorian England.[8] These fears were paired with anxieties around immigration from Southeastern Europe, and the supposed rise in criminality and disease within ghettoised communities from Balkan countries.[9] As the barbarian stood as an antonym to the Greek citizen, so the vampire stood as an antonym to the civilized Londoner or Parisian.

That paradigm in storytelling stood untouched for at least a century and even grew in popularity. In 1913, the silent film *The Vampire* made its way to early film theatres, courtesy of director Robert G Vignola who rose to great fame in Hollywood during the 1920s. In 1922, the now infamous *Nosferatu* adapted Stoker's book, with the added detail that Dracula became Count Orlok, a more hideous and beast-like monster. The film was the subject of a legal dispute which sought to destroy all copies of the film as they were deemed copyright infringement.[10] The entire affair showed a burgeoning interest in the norms that structured representations of these decidedly Balkan characters. There have since been numerous adaptations of the source material, where the similar pattern of representation is observed. It should come as no surprise that the vampire figure also appears throughout the *Witcher* universe, sometimes as a monster and sometimes as highly refined nobles, but always as separate

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[7] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 194.

[8] Greg Buzwell, "Dracula: vampires, perversity and Victorian anxieties," British Library, May 15, 2014, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/dracula.

[9] Ibidem.

[10] Domagoj Valjak, "All copies of the classic 'Nosferatu' were ordered to be destroyed after Bram Stoker's widow had sued the makers of the film for copyright infringement," The Vintage News, April 5, 2017, https://www.thevintagenews.com/2017/04/05/all-copies-of-the-cult-classic-nosferatu-were-ordered-to-be-destroyed-after-bram-stokers-widow-had-sued-the-makers-of-the-film-for-copyright-infringement/.

entities. However, this is one example where the West came to confound a genre with the Balkans, and to produce its rulers as monsters. Surely, this cannot be the case for modern representations.

I consider representation of the Balkans in videogames, as they are my primary medium. What games feature Balkan countries?[11] Well, if I look at games set in Serbia, audiences may select between a few military games; either flight simulators, strategy games or *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Essentials*. The lack of variety in these games, or rather the strong stereotyping, is indicative of other Balkan countries and their place within the games industry.[12] If players want to play a game set in Kosovo, there is *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear*. In Albania? *Tom Clancy's EndWar*. In Croatia? *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield* or *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. Romania falls within this same purview, although with a strong showing in the *Command & Conquer* and the *Hitman* series. It should be noted that Bulgaria features in *Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup*, which all things considered is the most distinct game in terms of genre I have found thus far. When Southeast Europe appears in Western produced games, it only does so in military re-enactment of the Second World War, or the Cold War or some doomsday scenario where local governments collapse back into a Cold War configuration. Videogames, although a younger medium than literature or film, are already embedded in pre-existing paradigms of representation, which orient what Western viewers would even be interested in consuming as media, i.e. the Balkans as a geopolitical powder keg or as the home of transient monster men. Now, the importance of *The Witcher* opus is more understandable.

We Need a (Local) Hero

While beginning to research the history of *The Witcher*, from paper to game, I came to understand just how monumental the books were in the Polish cultural world. Since 1984, Poland has had its own literary prize, the *Janusz A. Zajdel Award*, named after the first winner died the same year as winning the prize.*[1314]* Notably, no prizes were awarded in 1986, 87 or 89. Andrzej Sapkowski has taken the prize home in 1990, 1992 and 1993, for his *Witcher* short stories and again in 1994 for his first *Witcher* novel. He won yet again in 2002 for his novel *Narrentum*, which is set in a different fantasy world. In the span of five years, Sapkowski swept the Polish literary fantasy scene and gained

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[11] I use the term Balkans here lightly, but I will take care to explain it in the next chapter, as it is a highly ambiguous and shifting term.

[12] I am discussing larger studio releases principally, as indie games tend towards better representation of Balkan cultures (e.g. *Papers Please*).

[13] "Historia Nagrody Fandomu Polskiego im. Janusza A. Zajdla," JA Zajdel, accessed November 11, 2017. http://zajdel.fandom.art.pl/aktualnosci.html.

[14] Usually shortened to the *Zajdel.*

recognition abroad when he won a similar award in Spain, the *Ignotus*, in 2003 for both his collected *Witcher* anthology and short story, *The Musicians*.[15] Sapkowski came to represent Polish literary excellence and a distinctly local take on the fantasy genre. There was also a short run television series television series in 2001, *The Hexer*, that went unnoticed internationally. Here, there is a unique scenario where a celebrated Polish author's work struggled to resonate with the larger European and Western world, but where the local artistic community wanted the work to have greater reach.

Cue the 2001 release of *The Witcher* on PC. Since the 2001 release, two installments followed suit in 2011, with *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, and in 2015, with *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. By the start of 2017, the entire videogame series had sold over 25 million copies of the series combined, far outstripping the reach that the literary works originally had.[16] The games also moved beyond the novels almost entirely, as the games chronologically follow the books and are entirely new stories set within Sapkowski's works. The decision to gift the second installment of the games to President Obama was certainly not accidental, but rather a celebration of Polish success. The *Witcher* series came to represent excellence, both in literature and game development, at a time when virtually no videogames were being produced in Poland or the neighboring countries. The videogames are underpinned by a very strong sentiment that CD Projekt Red has created a world marked by the local cultural sensibility and cultural context of Poland. I have attempted to showcase quickly how the Southeast of Europe has generally been presented in gothic literature, genre film and videogames. This is a very selective overview of popular literary and visual media, but it is nevertheless representative of the general representative paradigm where the Balkans are concerned. I've also focused on how important *The Witcher* series is in the local sphere. So, the preliminary questions I move to are: What is the *Witcher?* Who is the character? What makes the character and the world distinctly non-Western?

Wild Hunt as a New Balkan Narrative

The specificity of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, both as a game made in Poland, and as a premier work of Polish literary fiction, provides me with a unique avenue to analyze a distinctly Balkan narrative. The primary research question I ask in this thesis is: How does *The Witcher 3* reinforce, challenge or nuance the established paradigm of representing the Balkans, i.e. Balkanism? Obviously, this larger problematic brings up a number on concomitant questions. What are the Balkans proper, as a

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[15] "Ignotus Awards 2003," Science Fiction Awards Database, accessed January 5, 2018. http://www.sfadb.com/Ignotus_Awards_2003.

[16] Andy Chalk, "The Witcher series has now sold more than 25 million copies," PC Gamer, March 30, 2017, https://www.pcgamer.com/the-witcher-series-has-now-sold-more-than-25-million-copies/.

geographic or cultural area? What is Balkanism (and what are its implications for this subject)? These questions are tied to the rhetorical dimension of the game, viz. what it communicates to the player. There are also several methodological questions that I use to structure my analysis. For instance, what design elements are most important in this game, as it pertains to the representation of culture?

A *Witcher* & *Gwent* Primer

The questions about who or what Witchers are runs throughout this analysis, but it's useful to give a short primer of who the primary Witcher character is. Throughout all three games, players assume the role of Geralt of Rivia, the eponymous Witcher. Witcher is both his title, and his profession.[17] Witchers are monster hunters, trained by local *schools* in combat, alchemy and rudimentary magic.[18] Children, usually orphans, are brought to the Witcher schools where their aptitude is tested. These tests are grueling experiments with mutagens and combat against monsters, which leave the children changed if they survive, and otherwise end in their death. The few that survive are changed by the mutations, gaining enhanced strength, endurance and speed. They are however visibly nonhuman. In the case of Geralt, his mutation left him with cat irises and yellow eyes, in addition to being sterile (which is the case for all Witchers). Geralt was so brilliant at Witcher training, that he and a few other students underwent further mutations. Those mutations killed all but Geralt, whose hair became snow white as a result. Geralt is thus the apex Witcher. The games follow his adventures after being mysteriously resurrected following his death at the hands of a lynch mob and highlight his cynicism towards the base nature of people in contrast to his noble nature when it concerns those closest to him. The first two games largely revolved around political plots and the recovery of his memories, while the third game followed him on his search for his adoptive daughter Ciri amid an impending war and potential apocalypse. By this point, Geralt himself is nearing the end of his adventuring years and struggles with the nature of his profession, in a world where people seem to perpetrate more evil than the monsters he hunts.

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[17] By title I mean the way that people refer to him, not a noble title in the European sense.

[18] There multiple Witcher schools, such as the schools of the Viper, Cat, Griffon and Bear. The one that features heavily in the games however is the school of the Wolf, for which Geralt stands as the poster boy, nicknamed White Wolf. The other school of the Wolf members operate as Geralt's family. They are Vesemir, his teacher and adoptive father, and his adoptive brothers, Eskel and Lambert. The school is implied to be in decline, as the horrible experiments that the children were subjected to have been outlawed by Vesemir and no new Witchers have been created. Geralt's adoptive daughter Ciri is also a member of the school and has been trained in all their ways, although she has her own distinct magical powers.

The third installment, *Wild Hunt*, is the game I discuss in this work as it had the widest global reach and was also substantially larger in scope. The game takes place in an open world that players may explore at their leisure. They play as Geralt and may specialize as they level up to become proficient weapon masters, alchemists or wizards, or some jack-of-all trades combination in between. The bulk of their time is spent doing detective work, determining which monsters are roaming and hurting locals, all within the scope of the epic story that sees Geralt looking for Ciri and warring with the mysterious Wild Hunt, a group of dimension-hopping elves. The game also provides mini-activities, including but not limited to: Horse racing, treasure hunts, underground pit fighting and most importantly, a collectible card game called Gwent. I say most importantly because the card game has ballooned far beyond its original scope in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt.*

Gwent is a card minigame that began as part of *The Witcher 3* but has since gone on to become a free-to-play game available by itself. It is a war game, where two players win by pitting their armies against each other and the player with the highest total score wins the match by taking the best two of three rounds. A more detailed explanation of the game is that players each bring their own personalized digital card decks[19] to table. Each player draws 10 cards, with the first move decided by coin flip. Afterwards, each player may play one card in alternating turns until one player decides to pass. When both players have passed, the one with the highest point total takes the round. This format is repeated for a second round, and if needed a third round.[20] The game is meant to illustrate the clash of two armies within the *Witcher* universe, and the armies themselves also belong to nations or ethnicities within the world. *Gwent* is also an oddity, because characters within the *Witcher 3* game also play with these cards amongst each other, implying that the card game exists both as a metagame representing the characters from that universe, and as a game internal to that universe. The interactions between *The Witcher 3* and *Gwent* as games also factors into my analysis and so I'll explain how I parse them in the following chapters.

Breakdown: How to Make Sense of the *Witcher* universe

I intend to break down both *The Witcher 3*'s design elements using traditional textual analysis but doing that requires two things: a body of work pertaining to cultural theory against which to compare *The Witcher 3*'s cultural portrayals and the tools to allow for the analysis of game elements.

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[19] Deck: The card pack that each player puts together, and which represents their army.
[20] If a player wins two rounds straight, the game ends. If players are tied one-to-one, then the third round is played. The game can also end in a draw if players end with two-to-two score.

The literature review chapter which follows is devoted to that task. The discussion on cultural theory comes first through Arjun Appadurai's work on global cultural flows, as this provides an avenue to consider videogames as a part of larger intellectual and cultural climate. Then, I turn to Edward Said's conception of Orientalism, and the formation of Orientalist art as the baseline for West/East prejudices. Third, I move to Maria Todorova's development of Balkanism, due to its specific importance for the *Witcher* series, both in terms of the world it depicts and its production. I also make short use of Hungarian historian, Zoltan Hajdu's discussion of the geographic Balkans to provide a solid geographical understanding of the region. Moving on from the discussion of cultural theory proper, I switch gears to media studies authors.

The first portion of the media studies literature review will focus on authors that discuss the interplay between design, play and cultural theory. First, I use a general understanding of media as situated and rhetorically charged formation, which issues from media archaeology writer Jussi Parrika. Second, I look to games theorist Ian Bogost's concept of *procedural rhetoric* to understand how complex attitudes and rhetorical arguments can be built into computational systems, and more specifically games. Third, I turn to Adam Chapman's discussion about the act of playing videogames as historical re-enactment and re-imagining. These three authors provide a media and game studies perspective on how cultural paradigms can be packaged into games. My understanding of what the cultural narrative is, and how the games as a whole can communicate those narratives, also require a more refined toolset with which to register which design elements fulfill specific functions.

This second aspect of games studies literature will focus more on the methodological aspect of doing the analysis. Conducting textual analysis on a game means I need a proper lexicon for what constitutes a readable element. For this, I turn mainly to Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton's toolkit for analysing games, wherein specific elements are explained as it concerns their communicative aspect. I also bring in other games scholars that focus on the spatial construction of the game universe, like Henry Jenkins, and with more specific discussion about cartography, like Stephan Gunzel. These three approaches, cultural theory, media studies and game studies (more pointedly) will provide the method to triangulate what messages are being embedded into the game, in what way and which elements can be analyzed to trace back this narrative.

The second chapter will focus on *Gwent*, the standalone videogame currently in development and how it scaffolds the identities of nations, ethnicities and individual characters found in the *Witcher* universe. Here, I go into technical analysis of the game's structure, it's teaching mechanisms and the

way players are meant to play the game. Following that, I look at the way two specific factions are designed, one representing Western Europe, and the other representing the Balkans. In this section, I analyze the game mechanics as representative of cultural identity. Lastly, the chapter features specific characters that are important in the *Witcher 3* and discusses how those cards are designed to communicate information about those characters.

The third chapter, which comprises the bulk of the analysis, relies on the *Gwent* chapter's lexicon and further develops discussion about cultural representation. Here, I analyze the maps and spatial design of the areas that the players traverse, the item inventory available throughout the game and the distribution of in-game wealth as additional relevant elements in the cultural narratives of the *Witcher 3*. Then, I move onto discussing how those elements intersect with the game's plot, through specific quests, which feature ethnic groups and characters discussed previously. All these perspectives are meant to articulate a holistic paradigm of intercultural contact, stereotyping and representation. Once considered in a unified manner, I argue that this holistic narrative stakes out a different understanding of the Balkans, one that is both a challenge to and a move beyond Balkanism.

The analysis of *Gwent* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is followed by a discussion of the overall results of this analysis, its limitations and avenues for further research. In this conclusion, I specifically explain which the parts of the *Witcher 3* were not included in this project, why they weren't and what new types of analysis they could open. Further, I discuss the methodological limitations with the research method I employ and the theoretical body of work that underpins my reading. Lastly, these limitations and alternative research routes are reoriented as new avenues for research, relating either to *Witcher* media writ whole, or to other Balkanist media that can provide insights as to how the horizon of representations about this locale is shifting. This paradigm of representation, i.e. Balkanism, is where I turn to now, as all analysis that follows requires an understanding of how the Balkans are portrayed (and how those representations rely on a deeper body of cultural theory). More precisely, understanding Balkanism is absolutely necessary to the main question I ask: *How does the Witcher 3, with the support of Gwent, challenge, reinforce or reposit the Balkanist paradigm that has shaped the Western world's cultural and political understanding of the Balkans.*

CHAPTER 1: CULTURAL THEORY OVERVIEW AND GAME STUDIES FOUNDATION

The examination of the critique of Balkanist motifs in the *Witcher* and *Gwent* requires a multipronged approach. What are the cultural discourses that shape game production? How can the technology function as a delivery tool for those discourses? What are the objects that should be examined for this encoding to become apparent? These questions also shape a general movement from theory to praxis, through the existing literature. More specifically, the discussion about cultural discourse is not unique to videogames. Cultural discourse has already been written about at length by Appadurai, Said and Todorova, among others. Since all elements of media as process and product express these discourses, it would behoove us to set down what the discourses that we track actually are and how they come to shape the media object. The movement between these three authors also progresses from the general to the specific, as a way to allow us to grasp how discourses form.

Global Cultural Flows, Orientalism[21] and Balkanism

Arjun Appadurai's *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* is for this analysis a foundational text because it foregrounds the manner in which media production is entwined with so many other aspects of the world.[22] The general idea of this text is rather facile to grasp as a whole, viz. that media production is one layer among many of a global cultural flow which impact each other at all points.[23] These five layers, or scapes as Appadurai names them, are respectively: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes.[24] By ethnoscape, Appadurai refers to the "landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live", which includes every denomination of ethnic group and every civil status (tourist, migrant, refugee, etc.).[25] In effect, the ethnoscape doesn't designate just people, but also their constant contact and friction as groups are displaced. The technoscape refers to the "global configuration" of technology, viz. the movement of mechanical technologies across national boundaries, as well as the ever-accelerating movement of informational technologies.[26] Notably, Appadurai gestures to the existence of multinational technology enterprises as emblematic of the movement along economic axes, as well as political or ethnical lines.

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[21] The words Orientalism, Orient and Oriental will appear throughout this section to keep the discourse between Said and Todorova unbroken. By these terms I mean to draw attention to the area we now call the Near East. I acknowledge the term as a problematic category, rife with colonial overtones.

[22] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory Culture & Society* 7 (1990): 295.

[23] Ibid, 296.

[24] Ibidem.

[25] Ibid, 297.

[26] Ibidem.

By extension, the "disposition of global capital" is in effect the finanscape that has become more nebulous due to the complexity of the technoscape. Further, the relationship between the ethno, techno and finanscapes is "deeply disjunctive and profoundly unpredictable", given that each scape has its considerations, objectives and constraints.[27] These three scapes form the basis of the latter two. The mediascape which refers to media themselves (television, film, photography, radio, etc.), but also to the infrastructures that disseminate media (studios, radio stations and magazines for instance.[28] The ideoscape is co-constituted with the mediascape and is the total amalgam of ideological messages produced by all the scapes, which can have contradictory inclinations between themselves.

The principal idea then is that each layer determines and is determined by the others, much in the way that tectonic plates surf and collide with each other. The difficulty lies in figuring out how the scapes present themselves in each context. Appadurai explains that the term "scape" was selected because it provides a horizon, a perspective in which these relations may be examined, rather than a deterministic causality.[29] What may appear as an objective relation between say culture and media is in fact a highly specific historical and regional occurrence. Furthermore, the author explains that these scapes underlie and form what Benedict Anderson had termed "imagined worlds" or rather imagined communities.[30] For Anderson and Appadurai, cultures and nations are imagined constructs produced by the specific intersection of flows that are contrived. This idea will become increasingly apparent as we move towards the writings of Maria Todorova.

We should also pay attention to the specific scapes and what they connote, especially in regard to media production. Mediascapes are readily accessible for us because of their objective nature. I mean this in the sense of media as an object of study. They are "narrative-based accounts of strips of reality" and always informed by private or collective interests.[31] The formal qualities of the media object, viz. if it literary or visual, if it is static or moving, if it is didactic or participatory, are the manner by which metaphors are encoded and by extension the path analysis must take to excavate meaning. The media commodity is then a hyper-complex aggregate formed by the other scapes, to an extent, yet possessing its own logic and convention.

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[27] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory Culture & Society* 7 (1990): 298.
[28] Ibid, 299.
[29] Ibidem.
[30] Ibid, 297.
[31] Ibid, 399.

The media product is produced on the basis of an economic agenda (which is often obfuscated from the media producer and the consumer) which possesses its own goals.[32] The product is also a real, tangible object that exists within the actual boundaries of reality, of the technical constraints and the affordances of technology. The media product expresses sophisticated political and philosophical conceptions that are proper to the culture being depicted. Visually schematizing the scapes would position them in a rigid manner, which I wish to avoid, but we can nevertheless admit that the technoscape and finanscape are tightly bound, given the fact that technology operates as a product and extension of financial logic, as are the ethnoscape and the ideoscape due to the emergence of ideologies as national signifiers, e.g. warlike expansionism as inherently Balkan.[33] However, these associations are relative to how we conventionally think of media production as an intermediate category. The geopolitical situations that authors like Said and Todorova describe is one where the finanscape, or we could say the economic situation, is not just entwined with the ethnoscape, but rather they appear as one and the same. What if prosperity or lack thereof, the finanscape, begins to appear inherently as culture? This implies that in the practice of perceiving cultural otherness, there is a fundamental misrecognition of what is proper to the culture, and what is a manifestation of circumstance. It is here that moving towards Said becomes crucial.

Orientalism, Edward Said's oeuvre, remains a highly contested account of the manner in which the West has produced, viz. Orientalized, the Oriental.[34] For Said, the Oriental as a category is imagined, yet not arbitrary. The term carries within it a number of related concepts about institutions, doctrines, language, and imagery. More importantly however, the term encodes a specific *material* civilization and culture, and by extension "bureaucracies and colonial styles".[35] What Said critiques is the academic tradition of conducting Orientalist studies that has become effaced, or rather has receded and become a layer which underlies all studies that discuss the *Orient* and the *Oriental* as categories.[36] Said explains that Orientalism in its academic form claims to be "a veridic discourse about the Orient."[37] Subsequent "investment [has made] Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness."[38] Orientalism then can be understood as a

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[32] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory Culture & Society* 7 (1990): 298.

[33] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128.

[34] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 2.

[35] Ibidem.

[36] Ibidem.

[37] Ibid, 6.

[38] Ibidem.

constructed ideoscape that is imposed in all evaluations of that locale. Perhaps, what interests me the most is that this category is not self-generated, but rather external and specific to Europe. The *Oriental* is a category imposed along with colonial bureaucracy as a way to make cultural difference legible.

Figure 1: *The Snake Charmer by Jean-Leon Gerome (1870)*

For a moment, let us consider how an artwork like Jean-Leon Gerome's *The Snake Charmer* functions in this ideological space. I mention this piece of artwork because it was selected as the cover to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, but also because Gerome achieved great success on the basis of his Orientalist artworks. In his prime, he was reputed as "one of the most studious and conscientiously accurate painters of our time."[39] The painting which depicts a sensualized an androgynous youth facing away from the audience and holding a coiled python, as a flautist on the right serenades the snake, all for a crowd of men decked in varying attire. The painting however holds within it a number of elements that predispose the audience to certain judgments. In her 1983 essay, *The Imaginary Orient*, renowned art historian Linda Nochlin remarked that the painting should have been called "*The Snake Charmer and*

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[39] Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989)*,* 37.

his Audience", referring to the critics evaluating the artwork.[40] The piece is laden with a sense of sexual mystery and otherness represented in the elements disclosed to the eye (tiling, murals, carpet and clothing for instance).[41] As the audience observes the painting more closely, details come into focus, namely the filthy tiling on the floor, the bundle of discarded clothing in the background, and the mural falling into disrepair. As Nochlin remarks, Orientalist works are always bereft of scenes of work and industry, but rife with representations of "idleness and neglect."[42] Gerome's gaze is taken as a totalizing and veridic representation of an Oriental slave market, where "the strategies of the 'realist' (or perhaps 'pseudo-realist,' 'authenticist,' or 'naturalist' are better terms) mystification go hand in hand with those of Orientalist mystification."[43] The selection of which elements to present and which to occlude, how the gendered relations are presented, the wealth of the locale and the dress of the subjects are very specific and conscious choices.

The media product thereby follows the way Appadurai describes scapes intersecting each other, as the French salon scene was a great economic driver of the 1800s and paintings displayed there were the premier visual media of the time. In this painting, the ideoscape of the indolent Oriental underpins this product of Orientalist media, itself spurred by economic class relations. Said's imperative is to remember one fact above all: Gerome is French. He is not displaying the locale, but rather the French aristocrat's assemblage of it. The culture he depicts is not his own. The painting was produced in "Constantinople sometime in the late 1860s"[44][45], but with a politically constructed understanding of the Istanbul of that time, as though Gerome were saying: "Don't think that I or any other right-thinking Frenchman would ever be involved in this sort of thing. I am merely taking careful note of the fact that less enlightened races indulge in the trade in naked women-But isn't it arousing!"[46] The technological and economic considerations of the media commodity shape the representation of this culture and cultural life that is alien to the producer, while simultaneously charging that context with a number of judgments made from a vantage of power. As Todorova remarks, "Orientalism […] is a discourse about an imputed opposition."

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[40] Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989)*,* 35.
[41] Ibidem.
[42] Ibid, 39.
[43] Ibidem.
[44] Ibid, 36.
[45] I would like to draw attention to the fact that even Nochlin makes the mistake of using the Byzantine name for the city, whereas its name is Istanbul and has been since the Ottoman conquest in 1453.
[46] Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989)*,* 45.

Gerome's work manifests the problem that lies at the heart of Orientalism, cultural bias. Can there even be a truthful statement made by a cultural outsider in that instance? I don't wish to make a claim as it concerns all locales, but in the case of the Balkans, Todorova seems to think so. As she explains:

> Biases and preconceived ideas even among those who attempt to shed them, are almost unavoidable, and this applies to outsiders as well as to insiders. Indeed, the outsider's view is not necessarily inferior to the insider's, and the insider is not anointed with truth because of existential intimacy with the object of study. What counts in the last resort is the very process of the conscious effort to shed biases and look for ways to express the reality of otherness, even in the face of paralyzing epistemological skepticism.[47]

What Said focuses on is not that Orientalism is a category per se, but rather that it is an imposed category with a specific agenda, or as he puts it "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[48] The author avows his use of the Foucauldian idea of discourse as a formative power.[49] In short, the amalgam of media produced through Orientalism is opened towards producing the horizon of the Oriental world, for lack of a better term. Appadurai's global flows model is therefore expanded here into a larger configuration where the Western ideoscape is in opposition to the ideoscape of the East, and in effect is impressed upon it forcefully.

Said's contention is that the study of Orientalism as a discourse about the Orient necessitates three qualification that are essential. The first is the acknowledgement that the Orient as an idea has a real basis, but that basis is artificial, not natural.[50] By this we mean that the category is not an idea about the real Orient, but rather one about the conception of the Orient by the West. The second qualification is that "ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studies without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studies."[51] Here, Said prefigures Appadurai, essentially stating that the analysis of the ideoscape (Orientalism) requires the study of everything that feeds into it. I touched on the third qualification earlier, viz. that Orientalism is not some ephemeral fantasy, but a deeply rooted and reinforced system of knowledge, "an accepted grid for filtering through

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[47] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ix.
[48] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3.
[49] Ibidem.
[50] Ibid, 5.
[51] Ibidem.

the Orient into Western consciousness."[52] Therefore, Orientalism is a system, and as it concerns me, can be understood as a hyper complex code that produces the culture of the Near East for consumption and domination by the global West. This is a theory specific to the Orient and thereby begs the question: What is Orientalism's bearing on media specific to the Balkans and Eastern Europe? For this we turn to Maria Todorova's work.

Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* is perhaps the single most important text for this project.[53] She presents the work as a treatment, an adaptation of Said's work, attempting to utilize the tools pioneered by Said to excavate the circumstances and qualifications proper to the Balkans.[54] She specifies that where the Orient is subject to the discourse of "imputed opposition", the Balkans are subject to "imputed ambiguity."[55] As she describes, the "discourse on the Balkans as a geographical/cultural entity is overwhelmed by a discourse utilizing the construct as a powerful symbol conveniently located outside of historical time."[56] What Todorova draws attention to is that the Balkan concept has a valence produced by the West/East tension, one that is tied to historical legacy. She also gestures to Said's work as a critique of the "crisis of representation", viz. the notion that anthropology as a discipline reveals not the object of study, but the norms and conventions of the study.[57] I would add that game studies as a much younger discipline has taken up the torch from cultural studies and communication studies, thereby inheriting these same crises. Games are crystalized instances of the global flows that produce them, therefore a game about and from the Balkans stands as an artefact of all its complexities.

We should pause for a moment and conceptualize what the Balkans are more exactly, as the name and the location are a source of confusion. There are numerous maps that depict what the Balkans are, assigning countries to the category on the basis of geographic position. There is even a conception of inner and outer Balkans. So where do we draw the line? Commonly, the Balkans are geographically represented in one of three ways: Framed by rivers, framed by seas and along the span of the Balkan mountain chain.

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[52] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 6.

[53] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[54] Ibid, ix.

[55] Ibid, 17.

[56] Ibid, 7.

[57] Ibid, 10.

Figure 1.

Delimitations of the Balkans Peninsula

Legend: 1: Sava – Danube line; 2: Trieste – Odessa line; 3: Carpathian and Balkans line

Fig. 2: Multimodal map of the Balkans

The map displayed above aptly displays fundamental issues with determining what the Balkans are. Drawn up by Hungarian historian Zoltan Hajdu, the map displays the conflicting geographical accounts.[58] If the Sava-Danube line is used (Legend 1), then Romania is excluded from the Balkans, as is Hungary and large swaths of Slovenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia & Montenegro. The straight line called the Trieste-Odessa line is the generally accepted norm, even endorsed by the CIA.[59] If that is the standard, then we encounter the problem that the actual mountain chain extends even further north (Legend 3).

It would seem that the Balkan nomen (as well as Southeastern Europe as an analogue) had very little to do with cartographic geography.[60] Rather, the question – what are the Balkans - is answered by discussing what Balkanism is. For Todorova, "'balkanism' expresses the idea that explanatory approaches to phenomena in the Balkans often rest upon a discourse or a stable system of stereotypes

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[58] Zoltán Hajdu, Iván Illés and Zoltán Raffay, "Introduction," in *Southeast-Europe: State Borders, Cross-Border Relations, Spatial Structures*, (Pécs: Centre for Regional Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2007), 4.

[59] "Balkan Peninsula Line," Wikimedia Commons, accessed January 6, 2018. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balkan_peninsula_line.jpg.

[60] Zoltán Hajdu, "Hungarian researches on the Southeastern-European space (the Balkans): continuity, interruption or permanent re-start," in *Southeast-Europe: State Borders, Cross-Border Relations, Spatial Structures*, (Pécs: Centre for Regional Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2007), 25.

that place the Balkans in a cognitive straightjacket."[61] So, it is a restrictive and imposed discourse, but what are the primary characteristics of the discourse? Todorova explains further that although "Balkan" is the Ottoman name for the mountain range, it effectively "became a pejorative, triggered by the events accompanying the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of small, weak, economically backward and dependent nation-states, striving to modernize."[62] Materially speaking, the Balkans serve a symbol of inferiority within the larger European context, but the process of modernization that the Balkans undertook collectively also led them to "serve as a symbol for the aggressive, intolerant, barbarian, semi-developed, semi-civilized and semi-oriental."[63] If the Gerome painting discussed earlier imputed a mystery worthy of conquest for the Orient, the Balkan is denied even that much.

According to Todorova, the Balkans have two specific qualifiers that differentiate them from Said's object of study. The first is their "concrete historical existence" and the second is the "self-perception of being colonial or not."[64][65] In the first instance, the Orient appeared as an inaccessible or mysterious entity to Western scholars, in great part due to its geographic remoteness and, its perceived opulence and its exotic mores. On the other hand, as it concerns the southeast European peninsula there is a tangible historicity that can be mined.

> Two legacies can be singled out […] One is the millennium of Byzantium with
> its profound political, institutional, legal, religious, and cultural impact. The
> other is the half millennium of Ottoman rule that gave the peninsula its name
> and established the longest period of political unity it had experienced. Not
> only did part of southeastern Europe acquire a new name – Balkans – during
> the Ottoman period, it has been chiefly the Ottoman elements or the ones
> perceived as such that have mostly invoked the current stereotype.[66]

It would then seem that the nomen corresponds loosely to Southeastern Europe where the Byzantine and Ottoman presence left its mark. This notion ties directly to Todorova's second consideration about what is *Balkan* or not. As succinctly as possible, what Todorova considers to be *Balkan,* are the cultures that were part of the Byzantine sphere of influence and then the Ottoman sphere of influence, which she explains is concomitant.[67] The byzantine legacy gave the area its cultural unity with "the spread of

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[61] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 193.
[62] Ibid, 194.
[63] Ibidem.
[64] Ibid, 13.
[65] Ibid, 17.
[66] Ibid, 12.
[67] Ibid, 162.

Christianity in its Greek Orthodox version from Constantinople, the adaptation of Roman law among the Slavs […] in a word, the emulation of Byzantine cultural and political models."[68] The Ottoman legacy which follows is more complex because the empire was not colonial in the sense commonly applied in postcolonial theory.[69] Rather, the "Ottoman legacy [appears] as the complex symbiosis of the Turkish, Islamic, and Byzantine/Balkan traditions."[70] As the Balkan nations were absorbed into the Ottoman empire, they were largely permitted their own religious, cultural and administrative structures and afforded citizenship in the empire. Therefore, instead of the habitual colonial/colonized paradigm, here we are speaking about "centuries of coexistence that cannot but have produced a common legacy [where] the history of the Ottoman state is the history of all its constituent populations."[71] As it is understood here, the Balkans are marked by the "issue of [their] semicolonial, quasi-colonial, but clearly not purely colonial status."[72] The mark of the Orient on provincial Europe has produced the area as a zone where there is always consciousness of a certain political and cultural autonomy, not present in purely colonial states.[73] As Todorova explains, "even the nominal presence of political sovereignty has been important for the ones who have felt subordinate, dominated, or marginalized."[74]

This double bind produces the Balkans as a demarcated political zone within Europe, and more significantly, one dominated by the Orient which the West in turn sought to dominate. The Balkans are set aside with all "their unimaginative concreteness, and almost total lack of wealth, [which] induced a straightforward attitude, usually negative, but rarely nuanced."[75] In fact, Balkanism always presents relative to Orientalism, or rather "Lux Balcanica est umbra Orientalis", meaning that which shines on the Balkans is the shadow of the Orient.[76] Todorova explains further that "Balkan self-identity, or rather of several Balkan self-identities, constitute a significant distinction: they were inevitably erected against an "oriental" other. This self-definition has to do with the drive to modernize after the collapse of the Ottoman empire and amounts to a declaration by Balkan countries that they too could be European, rather than Ottoman.[77] As seen in the map earlier, there is still much debate about states are Balkan or not, but throughout the book Todorova singles out directly: Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova Macedonia,

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[68] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 162.
[69] Ibid, 194.
[70] Ibid, 164.
[71] Ibidem.
[72] Ibid, 16.
[73] Ibid, 17.
[74] Ibidem.
[75] Ibid, 14.
[76] Ibid, 15.
[77] Ibid, 192.

Turkey, Greece, Albania, Croatia, Serbia & Montenegro, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Slovenia.[78] She also grants that some contact zones have a certain Balkan affinity, without being Balkanized entirely, namely Austria and Poland.[79] Furthermore, this discourse seems to have only crystalized in the wake of World War I and intensified around the time of the Cold War and Yugoslav War.[80] The kickoff of this period came with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, and then grew in intensity as the Western and Eastern bloc formed.[81] Yugoslavia for instance was rarely associated with the Balkans during the Cold War, when it began to fracture in the 90s, it suddenly became Balkan to the eyes of Western scholar and journalists.[82] This is because Balkan countries were regarded as "the last primitives" in Europe and that the "taste for devastation, for internal clutter, for a universe like a brothel on fire" was their province.[83] This is due in part to the Balkans existence as a liminal space between the Occident and Orient, which never drew interest from disciplines like postcolonial critique and cultural criticism.[84] There is much more to be said on the Balkans proper, but for now, it should suffice to posit the locale as the European territories possessing foreign, viz. Turkish and Islamic qualities with respect to the European singularity; an *ambiguous* Europe if you will.[85]

The global flows that structure cultural identity are inherent politicized, as the presence of wealth or lack thereof is a key characteristic of Balkan identification. The ideoscape, ethnoscape and finanscape appear as one entwined category that shifts and morphs depending on which area of the Balkans is open to examination. Where then, do the mediascape and technoscape come into play? If Balkanism, as a complex and holistic discourse, is articulated through technological and media affordances, how is that representation achieved?

Media Archaeology & The Conceptual Apparatus of Videogames

To be sure, part of the answer lies in the examination of how media communicates at large, but in this instance, I wish to understand the specific interplay of culture and media. Precisely, I want to examine how a videogame can express ideas in line with or in opposition to the Balkanist discourse explored hereto. That implies understanding how the affordances that exist in the technoscape articulate the videogame product that traverses both the ideoscape and the mediascape. The field of

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[78] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 161.
[79] Ibidem.
[80] Ibid, 19.
[81] Ibid, 192.
[82] Ibidem.
[83] Ibid, 48.
[84] Ibidem.
[85] Ibid, 17.

media archaeology provides the tools to interrogate the construction of media. I turn to renowned media archaeology thinker Jussi Parikka and his book, *What is Media Archaeology?*.[86] For Parikka, media archaeology "sees media cultures as sedimented and layered, a fold of time and materiality where the past might be suddenly discovered anew."[87] The idea then is that Balkanism does not spring into existence when Todorova, or even Said conceived of these models. As Todorova explained, it has been formed by layers of artistic tradition, policy, cultural friction and military conflict.

However, videogames allow us a new technological avenue in which to analyze Balkanist discourse and the way it is currently put into practice or dismantled. As Parikka describes, media archaeology through the intermediary of "Huhtamo's work has centered mostly on the idea of *topoi* (plural of topos): topics of media culture that are recurring, cyclical phenomena and discourse that circulate."[88] In this respect, the subject matter that videogames frame is not unique to their artistic form; rather it is the specific manner in which they do so that interests me. More importantly, it is not simply that the phenomena presented already exist, it's that their presentation is iterative, which is the distinguishing feature of the media product. As it pertains to this analysis of Balkanist motifs, the motifs themselves are recurring and have presented through oral discourse, literature, film and now videogames. What then is the videogame topos notable for? It must have its own technological characteristics that set it apart from previous communicative modes, otherwise the creators of these games would never had felt the need to move the discussion into this new medium.

Ian Bogost follows this tradition, dissecting what technology, and more particularly videogames, does at a discursive level. Bogost's *Unit Operations* and *Persuasive Games* both devote the bulk of their time to conceptualizing the technological structures that underlie games (among other media technologies). The reason why I've elected to call on Bogost in this section, as opposed to the following section on game studies proper, is because Bogost focuses on media as process, rather than object. The aspect to his work that I'd like to discuss is the concept of procedural rhetoric and its valence to videogames. Bogost explains that "procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes. Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion – to change opinion or action."[89] For Bogost, process has a persuasive orientation and rhetoric has objective, viz. formal components that can be disclosed. These processes are in fact *code*. They are a written,

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[86] Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology* (Cambridge: Policy Press, 2012).
[87] Ibid, 3.
[88] Ibid, 12.
[89] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*: *The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 28-29.

intelligible and deliberate syntax. In the context of Balkanism I have been discussing, the use of the videogame format allows the creators to encode arguments for or against Balkanism as complex processes. This takes the form of quest branches, morale, deck building options, etc.

Videogames are the procedural rhetoric form *par excellence*. According to Bogost, this is because "videogames are among the most procedural of computation artifacts. All software runs code, but videogames tend to run more code, and also to do more with code."[90] On the one hand, there is an argument of magnitude. Games are among the highest order procedural rhetoric because of the *quantity of code*. It is their ability to apply that code more flexibly that allows them to cement ideological arguments as process however. Games appear as a more "expressive subgenre of computational media" and privilege interactivity as their communicative mode.[91] This means that every single choice coded into a game is a deliberate rhetorical argument, which is communicated through interaction. If this holds true, then every element, conspicuous or not, has relevance to the analysis of the game.

I include Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter's *Games of Empire* in this part of the analysis as well. Their discussion of *Banal War* brings into consideration the production economy of the *Witcher* games as well.[92] By banal war they mean an interminable, but also diffuse cultural, economic and political conflict between two parties.[93] They in fact mention the Yugoslav Wars, "savage, but by historical standards, minor conflicts", as a manifestation of banal war.[94] As it concerns this analysis however, the production of any media product that passes judgment on a culture is also part of this conflict, and therefore works of Balkanist or Anti-Balkanist art have political import. In fact, the authors use the expression "endemic hostility to generate a 'state of exception'."[95]As I mentioned in the introduction, the third *Witcher* game had enough socio-political capital that it was given as a present to the president of the United States while visiting Poland, as if to say "This is the universe that we know." The game is not just a game to the people who made it, but a crystallization of their distaste for a norm of

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[90] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*: *The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 44.
[91] Ibid, 45.
[92] Nick Dyer-Witherford & Greig De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 99.
[93] Ibid, 100.
[94] Ibid, 99.
[95] Ibid, 100.

representing the Balkans which denies their perspectives and paints them as the "Hornet's nest" within Europe.[96]

Even further though, the section of their book titled *Imperial City: Grand Theft Auto* explores how in-game cities and micro cultures located within those cities represent complex economic and political systems.[97] "The city is a key site of Empire" they write, and that is certainly the case in the two cities presented in the *Witcher 3* game, one associated with the global West and another associated with the Near East.[98] In fact the representation of these cities delineates which elements are celebrated and which are repressed in each culture.[99] Further, the distribution of wealth among characters, neighborhoods and classes constitutes a socio-economic critique in itself and provides another element to analyze within the gameplay structures of the *Witcher 3*.[100] If Bogost's procedural rhetoric provides the framework to understand *how* videogames communicate content, then Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter's analysis provides the *what* that is communicated. What I want to highlight next is the *where* these meanings are encoded, i.e. the object of study and how it can be read.

Game Studies and the Object

Critical and cultural theories help us understand the message being transmitted by deconstructing the message and its cultural connotations. Media archaeology helps us deconstruct the mode in which the message is transmitted as a historical and iterative process. What I turn to now is the concrete objects open to analysis, i.e. the package in which the message is couched. It is perhaps here that I find the most difficulty with delineating a field of study. Holding the arguments listed above as true means that all visible and invisible assets in a videogame are deliberate and open to analysis. The only way in which this analysis can remain intelligible within the scope of this process is to pick a line of inquiry.

The first useful perspective is found in Adam Chapman's *Digital Games as History*. Chapman's idea is that all games function as procedurally mediated histories.[101] Histories of *what* is a question

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[96] Zoltán Hajdu, Iván Illés and Zoltán Raffay, "Introduction," in *Southeast-Europe: State Borders, Cross-Border Relations, Spatial Structures*, (Pécs: Centre for Regional Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2007), 4.
[97] Nick Dyer-Witherford & Greig De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 153.
[98] Ibidem.
[99] Ibid, 157.
[100] Ibid, 158.
[101] Adam Chapman, "Interacting with Digital Games as History," in *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 30.

worth asking and the answer is unsurprisingly any history which the writer wishes to convey. Like Bogost, Chapman list interactivity as one of the key aspects of videogames, in this instance with respect to historical enactment.[102] Where Chapman deviates however is in his discussion about subjectivity and agency. For him, "what historical narrative will be produced is uncertain until play takes place."[103] Each player and each play session produces a different narrative configuration, a different rhetoric, within a given horizon of possibilities. One can easily imagine that the field of possibilities therefore determines what historical narrative is conveyed.

Chapman also proposes the notion of *resonance*. Resonance here means the level of attunement between the player's context and the game's context.[104] More specifically however, "*historical resonance* is the establishment of a link between a game's historical representation and the larger historical discourse, as the player understands it."[105] Therefore every choice the player can make is made intelligible by tensions or harmonies between the player's context and the one represented in the game. In this light, the historical context, cultural representations, and everything else that we might deem contextual or historical is important in how each element is communicated and what is selected as important enough to be communicated by the game. I'll discuss this more in the sections specific to each game, but for now, I assume the Balkanist discourse as the default cultural discourse that the audience assumes as their *de facto* perspective, before facing the dissonance produced by the games.

Historical context is tied to another aspect of videogames, and cultural discourses in general, viz. space. Todorova's account of what the Balkans as a concept is tied to historical legacy and is not only geographical, but temporal. There is a sense that the Balkans are an accumulation of historical events and periods. In *Space Time Play*, Henry Jenkins' essay *Narrative Spaces* explains why the two, space and time, always appear in tandem.[106] For him, the magnitude of interactivity has to do with *immersion*.[107] The more immersive a space is the more engrossing and powerful an affective experience becomes.[108] Spaces appear as constructed vistas that communicate as much about the game world, as the story that they underpin. What Jenkins proposes is that game worlds possess an embedded narrative, which is constituted by elements selected *a priori* by developers. These elements correspond to the world itself,

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[102] Adam Chapman, "Interacting with Digital Games as History," in *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 31.
[103] Ibid, 34.
[104] Ibid, 36.
[105] Ibidem.
[106] Henry Jenkins, "Narrative Spaces," in *Space Time Play* (Boston: Birkhauser, 2007), 56.
[107] Ibidem.
[108] Ibid, 57.

the locales, the puzzles, etc.[109] However, they also possess emergent narratives. Each choice "has created a world ripe with narrative possibilities […] with an eye towards increasing the prospects of interpersonal romance or conflict."[110] Much like Chapman, Jenkins contends that these tensions are productive, didactic and meaningful. However instead of focusing on the historical context, he examines the game world itself as a meaningful object. In this light, background visual objects become meaningful selections. If a locale is presented as a barren waste, while another is showed as a pastoral paradise; there is intent to those choices. This kind of representational dichotomy lies at the center of the *Witcher* universe and has bearing on the overall argument that will follow.

Hereto, I've discussed space in the more concrete sense. In that mode space appears as the landscape to be explored by the player in an interactive sense. There is however a more abstract understanding of spatial organization that I wish to bring up: maps. I've mentioned Todorova's penchant for cartography, as well as the place afforded in cultural techniques to maps as media. Another text which focuses on maps and their place in videogames is Stephan Gunzel's essay *Eastern Europe, 2008,* also part of *Space Time Play*. For Gunzel, maps orient the player within the game space, either in the sense of the entire world, or relative to proximate objects (as is the case for minimaps).[111] However maps have an iconic quality to them as well. Gunzel explains that there are in fact two large categories of maps: Rational and Symbolic.[112] A rational map conveys orientation that is immutable and is mathematically accurate. A symbolic map however distorts actual measurements to convey iconic features, such as portraying a city as oversized to illustrate its importance relative to other cities on a map. Generally speaking, minimaps tend to fall into the former category, while world maps fall into the latter (at least in videogames). This is because rational maps display information gleaned through precise measures and avoid "figurative representation."[113]

Symbolic maps issue from the Medieval world and attempt to convey transcendent orientation through icons in the actual world, a model that is largely taken up by videogame world maps[114] By transcendent, Gunzel means to say that these maps convey more than just geographic location, they

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[109] Ibidem.

[110] Ibidem.

[111] Stefan Gunzel, "Eastern Europe, 2008: Maps and Geopolitics in Video Games," in *Space Time Play* (Boston: Birkhauser, 2007),444.

[112] Ibid, 445.

[113] Ibidem.

[114] Ibidem.

present geography in allegorical ways that are rhetorical in and of themselves.

Fig. 3: *Witcher 3* World Map

If we look at the *Witcher* 3 world map, the locales that are important are disclosed immediately. They each have an icon and are therefore equally important as objects of exploration, regardless of the population that inhabits them or how much time the player will spend in each area. Keeping the use of the world map in a game Gunzel gestures to the Baudrillardian mode in which maps precede the territory.[115] The idea is that the mode in which maps are presented to the audience prefigures how locales and locals are apprehended by audiences, by manipulating dimensions, adding text or simply hiding elements. Maps can also split territory between factions and disclose geopolitical information about the cultures present on each territory and indeed do so more often than not. Gunzel discusses *Ghost Recon* as an example of this use of maps, but for the purpose of this project, I will return to the map shown above, in conjunction with images from the game world to explore how those elements articulate the identity of in-game cultures.

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[115] Stefan Gunzel, "Eastern Europe, 2008: Maps and Geopolitics in Video Games," in *Space Time Play* (Boston: Birkhauser, 2007), 446.

These are all space/time signifiers that order the interactive universe for players to experience, but surely the elements of play also figure into this analysis. As discussed earlier, any conspicuous element of play is fair game for deconstruction. I turn to Consalvo and Dutton's text concerning the analysis of in game objects.[116] One element that becomes open to analysis is the player's object inventory. Each item contained therein possess a use (what do they do), a temporal status (do they change over time), a cost and a description.[117] Each item can be read on its own, but they can also be read as part of a continuum. We can, for example, articulate a critique of the socio-economic reality present in a game if we take into account the cost of food items relative to the potential income that players have access to. In the case of a card game, one can imagine that tags on each card can also be read in terms of how they code use and organization into archetypes.

Consalvo and Dutton also touch on the interface present in various games, or what we commonly call a User Interface or UI.[118] The game's presentation of a player's inventory is an example of a UI, albeit a very specific one. We can imagine every screen as a UI with rhetorical elements aimed at teaching users how to navigate each context in a game. UI structures how a player relates to other characters, the horizon of choices open in the narrative, how weapons affect the world, how travel is structured and so on.[119] I choose these examples, because they are salient for the *Witcher* game, but the structure of UI in *Gwent* is much more visible and inflexible, as card tags non-negotiably structure play. UI in card games tends to display the assets organizationally like an archive. This organizational tagging is salient because it codes archetypes as essential cultural groups (as each faction is in fact an in-game culture). Which cards may be selected, how do they interact with other cards, what is the velocity of an action, which cultural signifier is attached to which mechanic and so on. For instance, a card like *Emissary* displays which faction it belongs to in the banner at the top left, that it is a spy with the *red eye* symbol below and how many of each card may be used in one card deck by the color of the card contour (in this case three as it is bronze).

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[116] Mia Consalvo & Nathan Dutton, "Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games," *Game Studies* 6, issue 1 (2006), accessed July 5, 2017. http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo_dutton.
[117] Ibidem.
[118] Ibidem.
[119] Ibidem.

EMISSARY

But... but there's no justice in it! One does not kill the messenger!

2 STRENGTH

   ANY ROW / DISLOYAL

Deploy: Draw the top 2 Bronze Units (not including Emissaries) from your Deck. Play 1 and shuffle the other back.

ILLUSTRATION BY: **BRUNO BIAZOTTO**

Fig. 3: The Emissary, a common Nilfgaard unit.

Perhaps the most abstract consideration that can emerge from UI analysis is what Consalvo and Dutton term "Interaction Mapping."[120] Here we refer not to the cartographic map, but the conceptual mapping of the horizon of actions present in a game. The options available frame the freedom allowed to a player in the choices he may make. If for instance, the game defaults to combat in a keystone moment of the narration, the players are not allowed to make a diplomatic choice.[121] If, as is sometimes the case in the *Witcher* universe, players are allowed to transcend a racist standpoint given as a default in favor of a progressive attitude, then the games afford culturally salient choices. Interaction mapping is the highest order asset analysis because it takes into account all other elements of a game's construction and discloses them as the underlying elements that together form the horizon of interaction.

I've laid out my general trajectory through the material, from theory to praxis. Very generally, the field of cultural theory that I look at concerns the cultural content of the game. The disciplines of cultural techniques and media archaeology then structure how I conceptualize the videogame both a media process and a media artifact, which in turn allows me to examine how the game codes cultural

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[120] Mia Consalvo & Nathan Dutton, "Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games," *Game Studies* 6, issue 1 (2006), accessed July 5, 2017, http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo_dutton.
[121] Ibidem.

signifiers. Finally, I discussed the formal analysis of temporal structure, spatial structure and asset analysis, which corresponds to the formal analysis of the games themselves. If we wanted to combine all that into a sentence it would roughly translate into the *what*, the *how*, and the *where*. With these perspectives, I now have the appropriate avenue into discussing the *Witcher 3* and *Gwent*.

Methodology

Prior to writing this thesis, I conducted data collection by way of playing both games. In the case of *Gwent*, the collection phase took an approximate 100 hours. The process required that I catalogue game menus, game modes, teaching tools and individual cards. It was also necessary to play the game in every mode to understand how the game mechanics imprint value judgements on players, regarding which cards are meant to be paired together and how one should construct game strategies. As for *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, the data collection ran for roughly 180 hours. This was limited to the main game, without the expansions that players may play afterwards. This collection included data about game menus, in-game encyclopedias, currencies, items, visual design cues and most importantly, quests that players undertake to propel the story forward. It was often necessary to examine branching choices for quests, meaning one quest might become multiple ones in the scope of this analysis. Additional paratextual material was collected from media journalists, political speeches, developer interviews at public events and promotional video aimed at marketing the game. These materials required approximately 10 hours to sift through.

So far, I've explored how media products are built up through a layering of discourse, technological affordances and design elements. The analysis of Gwent and *The Witcher 3* will work by peeling away each layer, looking at the media product, then what affordances are present, and then how they support or contradict Balkanist discourse. This of course necessitates more specialized tools relative to each game. However, there is a legitimate question to be asked: Why both games? Why not one or the other? I've chosen to do this because Gwent offers easily legible associations between cultures and archetypes that inform general attitudes in the *Witcher* universe. *Gwent*'s visible coding of game assets allows the reading of those cultural signifiers into the *Witcher* game, specifically when characters from different cultures interact or when a new culture is introduced. Conversely, the *Witcher* operationalizes narrative and spatial construction that discloses characters as significant for analysis.

I've elected to begin with Gwent because it will allow me to apply insights from each card's design as an index for events *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.[122] I will examine the cards themselves, the overarching separation of culture into essential mechanics, the menus and the choices in construction of decks as conspicuous formations that articulate an attitude towards the respective culture. Then I will examine how each of these elements is underpinned by the structure of the *videogame*'s conventions in terms of construction as a card game, and as a *Witcher* game. Finally, I will look at how all these elements serve to communicate a cultural discourse about the *Witcher* universe, which is itself a pseudo-European construct with its own cultural affordances and arguments.

The following chapter will be dedicated to the *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* game.[123] Using the information gleaned from the essentialized and distilled cultural universe found in *Gwent*, I will look at inventory organization, specific quests, intercultural contact, spatial construction, historical information and player choices that articulate the game. Similarly to the previous section, all these elements will be considered with respect to how they produce a complex discourse. Finally, I will position the *Witcher* in general as it stands in relation to the cultural canon of Balkanist ideology and its myriad iterations.

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[122] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt,* CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[123] Ibidem.

CHAPTER 2: GWENT AS A FRAME OF REFERENCE

Introduction: Gwent as a roadmap within a roadmap

Before we begin looking at Gwent as such, I want to discuss where Gwent fits into the scheme of this analysis. As of July 2017, the game is in open beta, and so not yet out of development, although its earlier iteration existed in the *Witcher 3* game in full.[124] We can therefore think of Gwent as an offshoot of the *Witcher 3*, but one that is connected to the game itself. As such, we should always keep in mind that Gwent is part of a continuum where it is articulated by the cultural boundaries of the *Witcher* series. Adam Chapman's understanding of ludic re-enactment is important here, as what the games engage the player in, is a pseudo-historical re-enactment of a fictional Europe.[125][126] This is inflected by artistic choices relating to characters, voice lines, heraldry and cultural nomenclature that will come up through this chapter.

Additionally, although there are five factions present in the *Witcher* universe, which I will discuss somewhat in this chapter, I focus almost exclusively on the Northern Realms and Nilfgaard factions, as they represent the Balkanist point of contact most directly. The Skellige Isles, Scoia'tael elder races and

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[124] All reference images were collected from the July 5th, 2017 patch.
[125] *The Witcher 2*, map menu

[126] This map, taken from the second *Witcher* installment displays clearly the boundaries between nations in the game universe. By the time when the third *Witcher* game takes place, Vizima is the war capital of Nilfgaard, with the entire country taken over. The central tension of the early acts has to do with the foreign queerness and threating expansion of Nilfgaard.

Monsters hordes play more of a narrative role in the *Witcher 3* section, although they are not as strongly essentialized and presented as the main factions I discuss here.

It is useful here to remember what the key characteristics of Balkanism are as a discourse and to foreground what each of these two factions, Northern Realms and Nilfgaard, privilege as their core cultural elements. Balkanism is a "pejorative [discourse], triggered by the events accompanying the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of small, weak, economically backward and depending nation-states, striving to modernize."[127] I want to stress that this discourse occurs between the West and the Balkans. It is always rooted in a cultural perception, where the West imputes poverty, political weakness and fragmentation to the Balkan states. By extension, the global West sees itself as modern, wealthy and united in a common polity. The second element that is important is that the Balkan characteristics are tied to *Ottoman-ness*, or the legacy of Ottoman imperial policies, culture, science, language, etc. The cards seen in *Gwent* paint an altogether different situation. The Nilfgaardian Empire, often referred to simply as Nilfgaard, appears as a strong military power, with a unified population through a concept of citizenship rooted in law, rather than ethnicity. These characteristics are taken from the Byzantine period of the Balkans (circa. 285 CE to 1453 CE), rather than the Ottoman elements that Balkanist discourses privilege.[128] Conversely, the Northern Realms cards are themselves shown as technologically backward and impoverished, which are cultural elements that Balkanism imputes to the East rather than the West.

Formal Qualities of Multiplayer & Singleplayer

The elements discussed above are consolidated through more general design elements. Those elements, by which I mean general menus, game modes and teaching tools provide players with the tools necessary to understand in-game factions as holistic groups defined by overarching themes. They also iteratively lead players to form judgements about each faction through the design elements of cards, but also by comparing cards in-between factions. Reading the formal qualities of Gwent functions similarly to reading an instruction manual for a card game. Much of the organizational information (menus, card effects, collections) is displayed overtly, rather than being inaccessible code. It is these systems I look at first because they structure the player experience heavily and convey intuitive information about the proper way they should be used.

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[127] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 194.
[128] Ibid, 162-163.
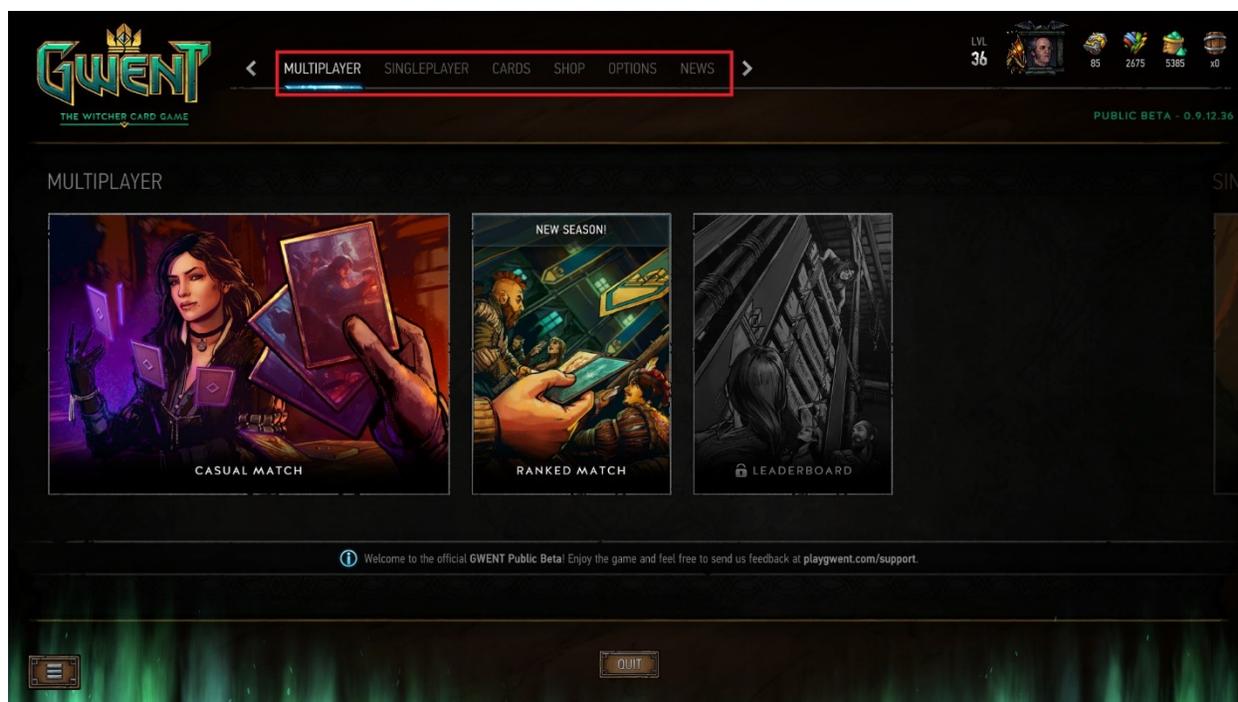
When a player logs into the Gwent game client, they are greeted by this menu system. The multiplayer and singleplayer tabs constitute the totality of Gwent gameplay accessible through the client.[129] The multiplayer version offers the option to play a casual match, wherein the time it takes to find a match is the primary matchmaking mechanic. It also offers the Ranked Match option that prioritizes MMR (Match Making Ranking) over other factors when generating matches.[130] I'll return shortly to the importance of ranks in the discussion about deck[131] building and card management.

The Singleplayer tab offers a Practice mode and a Challenges mode. The practice mode is simply a match against a computer-generated deck/playstyle with which to make sure your own deck works properly. The challenge mode however is a much more interesting subcategory. The list on the left in Fig. 2 is an index for multiple challenge pages. The first two are general challenges that engage the players in the core gameplay mechanics and the card management systems. Where things get complicated is with the latter five challenge categories.

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[129] Gwent gameplay can be observed in CDPR sponsored tournaments on their Twitch channel, as well as YouTube videos and other recorded content.

[130] Ranked matches function by Seasons lasting a few months each, meaning every season a player's MMR is reset to 25% of its previous value and a new season begins. Each season also features its own leader boards that are separated by geographic areas (North America, Europe, Asia, Oceania) with an overarching World ranking.

[131] *Deck* is a common card game term for the collection of cards that a player puts together to form a play strategy. Deck building has specific constraints that we will
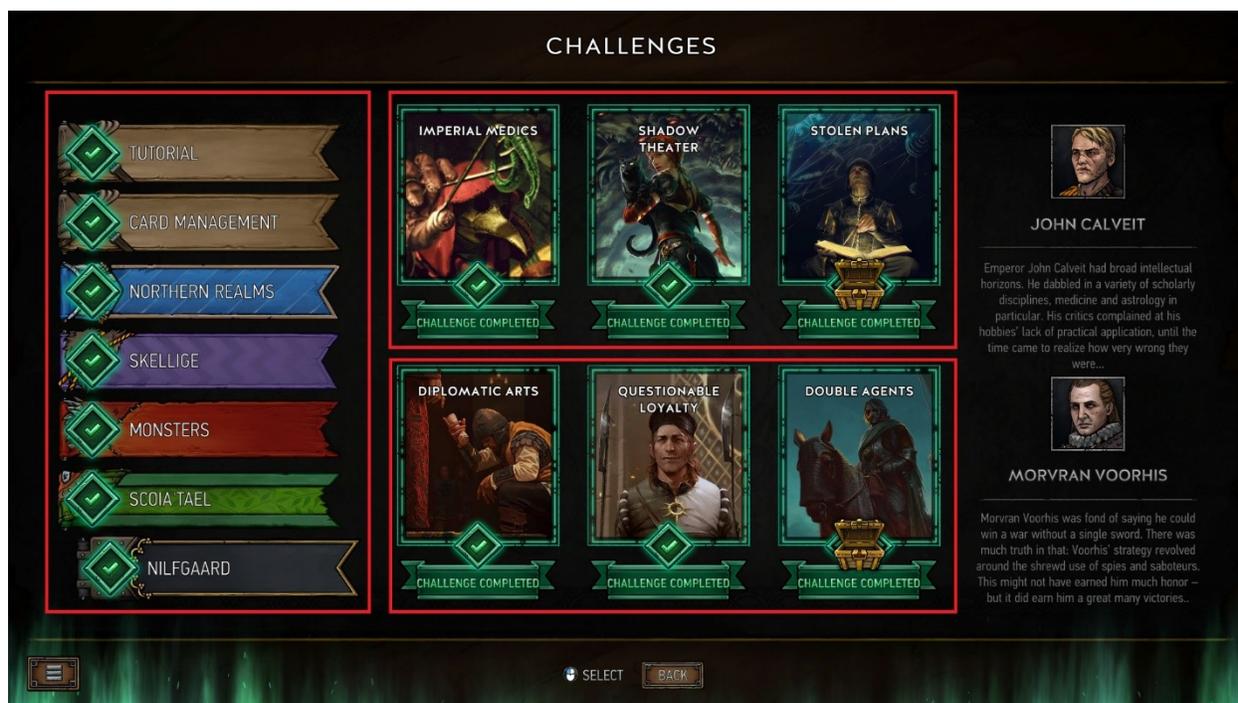
Fig 2. Challenges Menu

Each challenge page offers six challenges, separated into the factions available for play: Northern Realms, Skellige, Monsters, Scoia'tael and Nilfgaard.[132] The six challenges are separated into two rows, the purpose of which is to teach the player about a specific faction leader through three progressively more difficult challenges and to allow the player to unlock that faction leader. For instance, to unlock Morvran Voorhis, the player must complete in order the *Diplomatic Arts*, *Questionable Loyalty* and *Double Agents* challenges. Of the 15 faction leaders available to construct decks around, 10 are unlocked in this fashion. I want to stress that each of these challenge chains is highly didactic and emphasizes the intended flavor of each faction leader, which is outlined in the flavor text beneath the leader portrait.

Adam Chapman writes about games as "historying" practices, explaining that "digital-ludic re-enactment does seem to bear some similarities to traditional re-enactment in terms of both practice and discourse" and that "digital-ludic re-enactment is generally restricted to *exploratory challenges.*"[133] These challenges are meant to show the player how to build decks with the goal of playing online and climbing the ranked system, more so however, they involve the player in these re-enactments that are

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[132] For the purpose of this example, I've selected the Nilfgaard challenge section, but any other faction would've worked just as well.

[133] Adam Chapman, "Interacting with Digital Games as History," in *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 222-223

laden with discourses about each in-game culture. The challenges are iterative in a Bogostian way, as each refines notions about how a faction is meant to be played and built up. The further each player advances within the challenges of each faction, the more they are habituated to that faction's identity by the progressive layering of mechanics. Therefore, uncovering the discourses allows us to understand *what* is being communicated about each culture and what their first order characteristics are purported to be. Discovery about these discourses, in my opinion, is most accessible in the card management options: Collection & Deck Building.

Card Management, Collection & Deck Building

Before a player can play a match, they must construct a deck, which is subject to manifold constraints designed to orient player choice. The *Cards* menu mentioned earlier has three subsections: *Deck Builder*, *Collection* & *Trinkets,* as seen in *Fig. 3*.
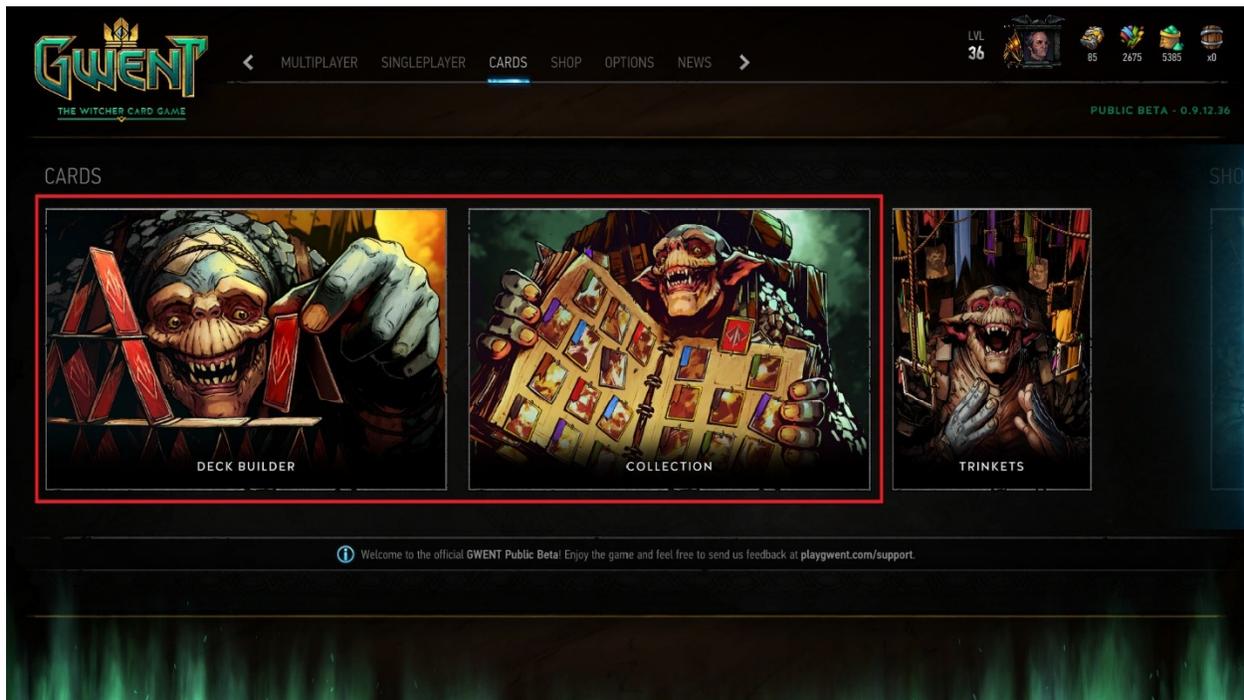
Fig. 3 Deck Builder & Collection

The third submenu, Trinkets, is devoted to cosmetic choices of the player avatar picture, the picture outline and the player title; all of which have no bearing on the game mechanics but enhance the flavor

of deck identity. Player avatars are chosen from a roster of primary characters in the series, which I'll discuss in the faction identity section. For now, I wish to focus on *Deck Builder* and *Collection*.[134]

These two sections function as a continuum in that deck builder allows player to construct their deck with cards taken from and crafted in the collection menu. When a player wishes to build a new deck, they must first select one of the five factions, then one of the three faction leaders available for that faction. Let's take a closer look at the constraints of deck building.
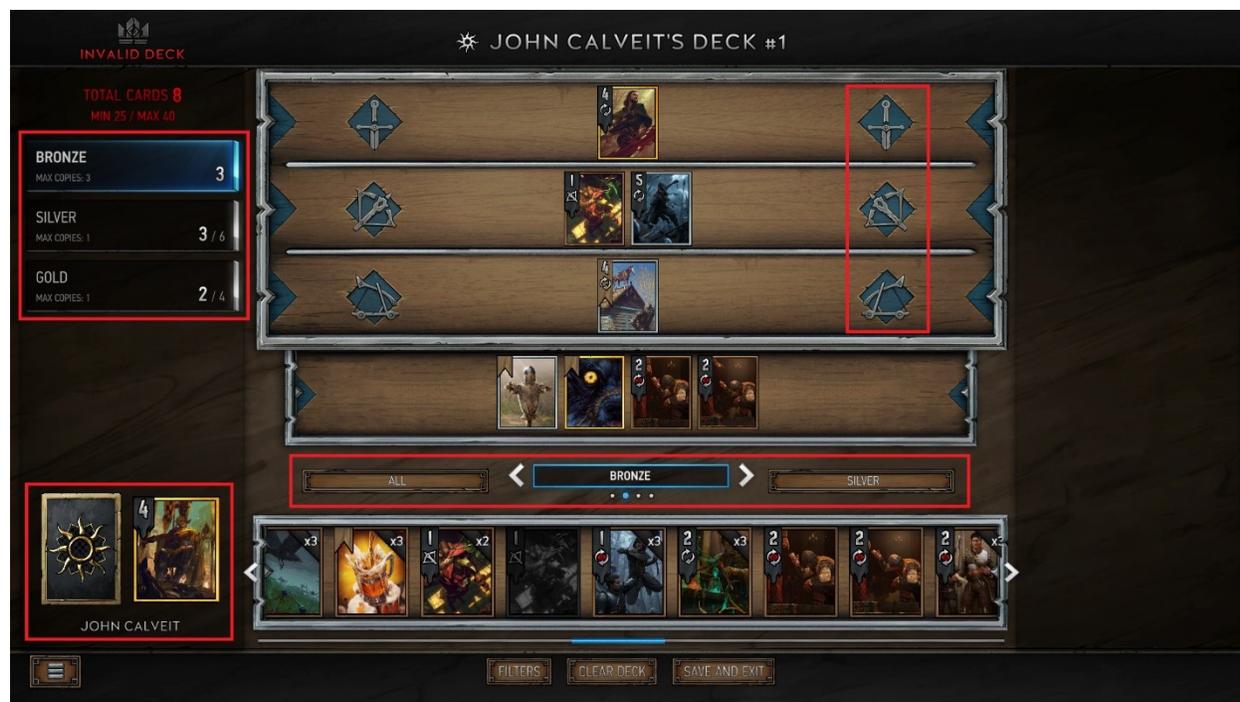
Fig. 4: Deck Builder

Beginning with the general format rules, each deck must contain between 25 and 40 cards. Those cards must be in large part *Bronze* cards, with a maximum of six *Silver* cards and four *Gold* cards.[135] The cards that can be selected *must* be part of the specific faction or be listed as neutral, allowing for a degree of freedom in card selection. In the center of the image in Figure 4, the card organization tool allows

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[134] By player avatar I mean the icon located at the top right of Fig.3, which is a custom portrait that players can select. Each portrait is a known character from the *Witcher* series and has famous voice lines that can be used to emote during matches.

[135] The card grades correspond to the importance and role of faction specific characters. Bronze cards correspond to nameless characters like *Emissary* and *Assassin*. Silver cards represent named characters with secondary importance to the *Witcher* story, such as *Roach*, the eponymous Witcher's horse. Gold cards are highly impactful faction characters that play an important part in the story, like *Cahir* shown at the top. Faction leaders can be considered to be the most important Gold cards, as they underpin the entire deck build.

players to sort cards by grade. In the lower left corner, the faction of the deck and the leader are displayed.

For card mechanics, the faction leader functions like a *Gold* card, save that it is always visible to both players. Selected cards are placed on the row appropriate to them (Melee, Ranged, Siege) or if they are agile, signified by the double arrow icon, they can be placed on any row. The fourth row at the bottom corresponds to *Special* cards that encompass expendable effect cards or spy cards that are placed on the enemy side of the board. Additionally, players can add filters to search for specific card effects or keywords on cards to facilitate deck building.

The *Collection* menu's primary purpose is to provide a sortable archive of all cards in game with detailed explanations for each card. By default, the collection lists every card in one menu, but it can be sorted by factions at the top of the page, and by card grades on the left. The same filters available in the *Deck Builder* appear here, albeit with the possibility to lists cards that are not owned by the player.[136] More importantly, when a player selects a specific card, a popup menu appears on the right side of the screen with descriptions of the card effects and the keywords.
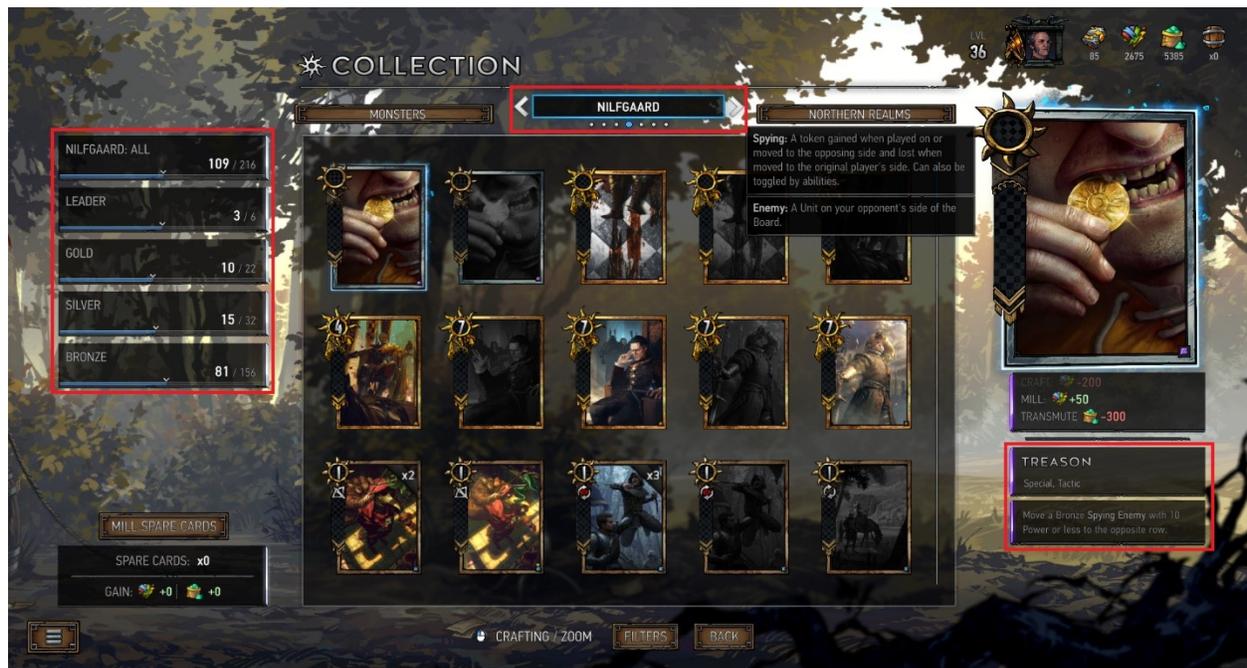
Fig. 5: Card Collection

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[136] Cards are acquired through "kegs" which are purchased either with ore gained in game or with out of game currency. The player is rewarded one keg each day for the first 6 rounds won, then the next 12, then next 24. The model rewards engagement in the game, as even when a player loses a match, they may have won a round. Cards may also be dismantled for scraps that can be used to craft other cards without restriction.

In the example card provided here, *Treason*, the effect targets *Spying* creatures. The collection therefore provides information that this card is meant to be played in conjunction with cards that have compatible card effects of their own. The collection gives players concrete information on how cards fit together as a puzzle by foregrounding their design constraints. When taken together, the *Deck Builder*, the *Collection* and the *Challenges* are the canon of how decks are built as strategies, but also how players experience the *flavor* of each faction.

Mechanics and Faction Identity

At Pax East 2016, Rafal Jaki and Damien Monnier, the lead developers for *Gwent* at the time, gave a presentation about the game.[137] In it, both developers discussed the flavor and mechanics that influenced the development of Gwent, which at that point was still part of the core *Witcher game*. Jaki made the point that *Gwent* is a game about the *Witcher 3*, which also exists within that game. This fact is important because narratively Gwent as a representational form is about how the in-game cultures see each other, while also distilling information about the *Witcher* characters and cultures into card mechanics. Thinking back to Bogost's understanding of procedural rhetoric, we can trace *Gwent* expressive mechanics as elements of rhetoric that are persuasive as well.[138] In effect, certain unique terms displayed on cards, as well as more complex mechanics that cannot be condensed into one term, articulate a *correct* way to build decks and to play them. Players are exposed to these values iteratively every time they access the collection, the deck builder, the challenges or when they witness highly synergistic decks in multiplayer.[139] Therefore, the leaders of each faction and the faction mechanics also essentialize the cultures portrayed in the game. I will next discuss what distinguishes each faction from the others.[140]

Northern Realms Mechanics

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[137] Rafal Jaki & Damien Monnier, "Gwent-ception: Does a game within a game, make a better game?" (presentation, Pax East 2016, Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, Boston, MA, April 22-24, 2016). https://www.twitch.tv/videos/62397383.

[138] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*: *The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 46.

[139] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games*: *The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 28.

[140] Before beginning to talk about card mechanics, it is important to understand how their effects can be written on the cards themselves. Some card effects will be condensed into a simplified term, and in that case, players are expected to learn those terms (sometimes referred to as tags). This can lead to confusion if a game has an abundance of such terms. For more complex card effects, it may impossible to condense the effects into one word. Those effects will be explained verbally and may themselves have syntax issues or bizarre interactions. Card effects are often a source of confusion because of their nomenclature. I propose the following: for this section, when discussing the cultural descriptors of a card, I will use the term "ethnicity", when discussing the utility of card character, such as being a soldier, I will use the term "role". As for the action that occurs when a specific card is played, I will use the term "card effect". These terms should help keep descriptions straight for readers.

Beginning with Northern Realms makes most sense, as the faction's homeland is the narrative backdrop for the *Witcher* games overall. For starters, there are no nonhuman units, and the ethnic descriptors[141] presented below in *Fig. 6* correspond to specific kingdoms encountered in the *Witcher* universe. Culturally speaking, Northern Realms is regionally diverse, but ethnically homogenous. By this, I mean that the Northern Realms war with each other and each has its King, but they still understand each other as Northern in the face of foreign invaders, like Nilfgaard. How can we grasp what that identity is? The answer lies in the flavor text on cards. Flavor text denotes a piece of text that has nothing to do with the mechanics of a card, but primarily articulates the card's identity or function within the cultural unit of a faction.

Fig.6: The Blue Stripes, a division of patriotic militiamen

For Instance, *Blue Stripes Commando* is a bronze grade card that appears three times in the collection and its flavor text, "I'd do anything for Temeria. Mostly though, I kill for her", is indicative of the primary trait associated with Northern Realms: militarism.[142] Numerous other units have similarly conquest-

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[141] By ethnic descriptor, I mean words like "Temeria" which correspond to the unit's home country and communicate to the player which other units are compatible, i.e. from the same ethnic group
[142] *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game*, CD Projekt Red (2017; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

oriented quotes like "Temeria! Temeria! Gods shed all grace on thee! And smite thy foes with horrid woes, for all eternity!"[143] or "I'll die for Redania, I'll kill for Redania…I'll even eat worms for Redania!"[144]

In terms of roles, most cards are classified as soldier, officer or machine. This reinforces the notion that Northern Realms is a military first faction. The cards relegated to the support role are often battlefield medic or nurse. In terms of *who* they are, Northern Realms is very straightforward. What their card effects do is more complex however. Most of this faction's units tend to be weak but can *muster* each other. Mustering is card game parlance for units that allow you to play other units for free. The mechanic functions in a way whereby units mimic traditional European militia. The *Blue Stripes Commando* card displayed above is a perfect example of this mechanic, in that the effects cannot be distilled into one word printed on the card, but its mechanic recurs throughout the faction overall. Other card effects that appear heavily on these cards are *crewmen* and *fresh crew*. *Fresh crew* appears on siege weaponry like *Ballista*, *Trebuchet* and *Reinforced Siege Tower*, where the term indicates that the card effect is modified by the number of *Crewmen* next to the unit.

TREBUCHET
Machine

Castle won't batter itself down, now will it? Get them trebuchets rollin'!

7 POWER

⟳ ANY ROW / LOYAL

Deploy: Damage 3 adjacent Enemies by 1.
Fresh Crew: Increase the Damage dealt by 1.

ILLUSTRATION BY: ANNA PODEDWORNA

Fig. 7: The Trebuchet, a typical Northern Realms example of engineering

If we take the *Trebuchet* card shown in Figure 7 as an example, its effect states that it deals damage to multiple adjacent enemies, and the *fresh crew* mechanic indicates that *if there are crewmen* adjacent to this unit that it will deal more damage. The more *crewmen* are adjacent to this card on the

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[143] Ibidem.
[144] Ibidem.

game board, the stronger it becomes. Mechanically, Northern Realms isn't just a military faction, it is a *mass* military faction. The game's rhetorical elements reinforce its predilection for playing as many units as possible next to each other and to support them with medics and artillery. This highly complexified faction identity is nowhere more apparent than in the three leader cards.

Northern Realms Leaders

I've talked about card effects and terms as they appear on bronze units, which compose the bulk of a deck, but we should pay attention to leader cards as well. Leader cards are the only mandatory cards when building a deck and they allow players a certain degree of agency as to which of three they pick, but their flavor and mechanics limit the overall possible choices when building decks, i.e. Leader cards constrain deck building by specifying which cards will give players the best results. The three leaders for the Northern Realms faction are *Henselt*, *Foltest* and *Radovid*. We should deconstruct these archetypal cards in the same way we've done up to now, by foregrounding flavor text and mechanics.

In terms of mechanics, all three leaders have the *crewmen* card effect. I argue that the presence of that mechanic is meant to convey that artillery and mass military formations are the *core* of how the faction is designed. All three leaders are kings of specific realms, respectively Kaedwen, Temeria and Redania, again implying that Northern Realms share a common cultural identity, but with subtle differences between each kingdom. In terms of specific articulations of this identity, all three leaders are very distinct. Henselt for instance, is the epitome of the *muster* mechanic - his effect allows a player to muster all copies of a bronze grade support, machine or Kaedweni ally.[145] His flavor text is also indicative of how this entire side of the Northern Realms faction is meant to be conceptualized: "King Henselt did not look like a thief, but, with all due respect, that's really what he was." Henselt's association with banditry and militias sets up this part of the faction, the realm of Kaedwen, as thieving bands of soldiers, who are poor, but industrious and roam en masse. The second leader, Foltest, corresponds to a more traditional understanding of the faction. His mechanic reads "*Boost* all other Units in your Hand, Deck and on your side of the Board (except Agents and Double Agents) by 1."[146] This ability, combined with the *crewmen* aspect pushes the side of Northern Realms that has to do with patriotism, morale and mass organized armies. His flavor text, which reads "Don't need advisors or their schemes. I place my trust in my soldiers' blades.", also supports this reading of this leader as a patriotic

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[145] *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game*, CD Projekt Red (2017; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[146] Ibidem

and honorable leader.

Fig. 8: King Radovid blinding Philippa Eilhart during his pogrom against the Lodge of Sorceresses

The third leader, *Radovid*, is potentially the most important as *The Witcher 3* takes place in his realm, Redania. His ability is meant to convey the xenophobic inquisition against heretics, non-humans and magic users that is central to the Northern Realms. It allows him to lock[147] two units and damage them. His flavor text, "A king should be merciless towards his enemies and generous to his friends"[148] is a reference to the event in his card art, where he gouges out a sorceress' eyes between the events of the second and third *Witcher* games and marks the start of his inquisition.[149] Radovid is shown smiling, as the abject humiliation of the sorceress brings him great pleasure. The image also shows him accompanied by two witch hunters on the left and right sides, solidifying his tie to that aspect of the faction.

The representation of the Northern Realms cultural faction is heterogenous, but still discernable. Generally low power levels among these cards imply that individual soldiers are weak or poorly equipped. The strong focus on soldiers banding together and mustering each other is meant to

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[147] Locking a unit causes chains to appear on that card and blocks all their abilities. It is a reference to a special type of ore (dimeritium) used to make restraints that prevent the use of magic.

[148] *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game*, CD Projekt Red (2017; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

[149] *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

convey their aptitude for banding together. Likewise, the theme of machines that grow stronger the more soldiers are nearby illustrates fledgling technology that requires constant upkeep. Most units fall under three banners: ragtag militias that muster each other, organized armies that grow stronger the more are mustered and lynch mobs that are strongest when attacking wizards and nonhumans. The faction leaders stress these archetypes both in their mechanics and in their lore, and thereby separate the faction into very distinct cultural groupings. The third group, Redania, which is front and centre during *The Witcher 3* is most prevalent since it has the greatest number of cards within the faction, but all three contribute to what the faction is meant to embody. I can extend this form of analysis to the other faction that interests me most: Nilfgaard.

Nilfgaard Mechanics

Nilfgaard is our primary point of contact to a model that inverts Todorova's description of Balkanism, because the faction appears as an opposite of the Northern Realms in almost every way. If we begin with ethnicities, we find that Nilfgaard has none that are discernable, aside from Witcher which is very limited in scope. The implication is that Nilfgaard appears as one unified culture in the game even though it spans an enormous swath of lands and has conquered numerous countries under its banner. However, many cards are named after the smaller nations where their units are stationed, such as *Vicovaro* or *Alba*. What interests us is not each nation and their qualities, but rather the fact that the lack of any mechanics related to country completely efface the existence of the individual nations, which was the primary organizing element in Northern Realms. The intent can be read as an inflection that the Nilfgaardian identity is about the empire, not about the specific units and this is a feature that will be apparent in the leader cards as well.

Conversely, if we wish to understand how this faction is distinct from the Northern Realms, we turn to the role tags. Many are shared here as well, such as soldier, machine and support, however, Nilfgaard possesses an abundance of *agent* tagged cards. Agent cards, barring a few notable exceptions, are exclusive to Nilfgaard. They are cards that are played on the opponent's side of the game board and act as spies, assassins and diplomats. Where Northern realms is focused on straightforward militarism, Nilfgaard's faction modus operandi is to either disrupt the enemy with this type of subterfuge or to play with the flow of information. Other spy cards allow you to look at your deck and draw selectively or to arrange the top of your deck or that of your opponent's deck.[150][151] Nilfgaard is focused on diplomatic

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[150] *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game*, CD Projekt Red (2017; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[151] Ibidem

subterfuge and military intelligence.

Fig. 9: Ambassador, an example of espionage and statecraft in Nilfgaard

Many units can also synergize with spying units to deal damage to the enemy or to boost themselves as well.[152] Themes of subterfuge and assassination are not at all like the Balkans which Todorova earlier explained were portrayed as: barbarian and semi-developed.[153]

Moving on to the mechanics is most salient because it allows us to look at Nilfgaard's other primary tag: *Reveal*. The reveal mechanic has to do with revealing cards in the opponent's hand to gain information, or to reveal cards in your own hand for beneficial effects. The number of interactions with the *reveal* tag are too many to expound, but they have to do with making units stronger or to play units that are revealed while drawing a new unit. Conceptually, revealing is all about military intelligence, either providing misleading intelligence to your opponent or discovering key information about him and is deeply tied into the core of how Nilfgaard presents itself.[154]

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[152] Ibidem
[153] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 194.
[154] *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game*, CD Projekt Red (2017; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

Fig. 10: The Fire Scorpion as an example of an "exquisitely engineered weapon"

Controlling that flow of information is where the faction mechanics shine and convey a sense of Nilfgaard as highly sophisticated war machine. *Reveal* as a mechanic is often tied into cavalry and siege weapons. The siege engine that Nilfgaard possesses has to do with surgical strikes executed related to intelligence. As for cavalry, the mechanic functions by revealing your own units in exchange for high power units, painting the image of a cavalry charge where the enemy is alerted by the flashy maneuver.[155] So, if we understand Nilfgaard as faction especially tied to military intelligence, diplomacy and espionage, that is also very culturally homogenous, where do the leaders fit in?

Nilfgaard Leaders

The Nilfgaard leader cards, if we work from the earlier example provided by the North Realms leaders, provide an altogether opposite design style. The three cards, *Emhyr var Emreis*, *Morvran Voorhis* and *Calveit* are chronologically successive emperors, rather than competing kings. In fact, the third emperor's voice line when the card is played is "I will not repeat Emhyr's mistakes."[156] Mechanically, the leaders have common themes, but no keywords in common. *Emhyr*'s card allows players to play a card and return a card to hand, representing diplomatic missions, high level military

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[155] *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game*, CD Projekt Red (2017; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[156] Ibidem

maneuvers and tactical deployments.[157] The second emperor, *Morvran*, allows players to reveal up to four cards, reinforcing the *reveal* archetype discussed earlier. The last leader, *Calveit*, allows players to look at three cards from their deck and decide which of the three they draw, which was a mechanic discussed in relation to agents and spies. Thematically, all three leaders reinforce all the cultural types that their bronze cards portray, but rather than being prime organizing cards, they are supporting parts of the overall faction identity.

In terms of cultural themes, we should pay special attention to John Calveit. This is because his art direction has many interesting elements to break down. First, his name in the Sapkowski novels is Jan, not John, which is the Slavic rendering of the name. His title is canonically *Ker'zaer*, which is a Nilfgaardian spin on the German word *Kaizer*, meaning emperor.[158] It should also be noted that *Kaiser* as a term is a direct derivation of *Caesar,* as it refers to the Roman title of emperor. These are elements proper to the lore of the novels, but there are design elements in the card itself we should take note of. Aside from the voice line mentioned earlier, *Calveit* also says "All roads lead to Nilfgaard", a modification of the proverb, *all roads lead to Rome*.

JOHN CALVEIT

Leader, Officer

A sword is but one of many tools at a ruler's disposal.

Doomed, Stubborn.
Deploy: Look at the top 3 cards from your Deck and play 1.

ILLUSTRATION BY: LORENZO MASTROIANNI

Fig. 11: Emperor Calveit, Morvran's successor

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[157] Ibidem.
[158] Andrzej Sapkowski, *Time of Contempt* (Warsaw: superNOWA, 1995).

The proverb is reputed by Phillip Schaff, a classical historian, to have originated from the *Millarium Aureum*, a monument erected in Augustus Caesar's honor.[159] Aside from the text, the image itself is a to-scale reproduction of the *Statue of Emperor Constantine* erected in Minster at York, where the emperor was crowned originally. This reproduction by Mastroianni also adds the flowers and horse parade elements associated with the traditional *triumphus*, the Roman Triumph. Emperor Constantine is also known to have been born in Naisus (modern Nis in Serbia). During his reign he also relocated his seat of power to Byzantium, renamed the city Constantinople, thereby setting the foundation for the entire Byzantine Empire. He died in Nicomedia, an ancient Greek city located in the territory of modern Turkey and later interred in Constantinople, rather than Rome. Emperor Constantine is also sainted in Eastern Orthodoxy and recognized as the first Emperor to convert to the Christian faith.[160] At every level, this character is infused with elements of Roman culture, as are most units he is associated with mechanically in the game. More so, he is tied to Byzantine Christianity and Byzantine Rome. The choice to feature these characters and this version of Roman culture is a concerted effort to foreground the Byzantine elements of Nilfgaard.

Overall, Nilfgaard is portrayed as a cultural juggernaut that is seemingly very homogenous, despite the wide berth of land it occupies. Compared to the Northern Realms faction it is shown to be wealthy, opulent, scientifically advanced, militarily sophisticated and practiced in diplomacy and statecraft. It is also presented as a long-lasting dynasty, rather than a collection of competing monarchs. At every turn where the Northern Realms were presented as shabby, Nilfgaard is shown to be developed and storied. Furthermore, Nilfgaard is at its core deeply tied to a very model of the Balkans, one that predates Ottoman rule, and where the elements stressed are the Roman legacy, and all of its political and governmental traditions are foregrounded.

Notable Northern Realms Cards

Up to here I've focused on faction identity as a general cultural formation and its links to the leader cards as manifestation of those larger archetypes, but each faction has many unique cards that are thematically important. Some are important because their mechanics are necessary to build a functional deck, however I am concerned with cards that represent characters from *The Witcher 3* specifically, as those are the cards that codify quest interactions into card mechanics.

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[159] Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The apostolic fathers, Justin Martyr, Ireneaus,* (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 1886).

[160] Raymond Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 30.

Much of the first act in *Witcher 3* takes place in Velen, also called No Man's Land, a Northern Realms territory on the cusp of Nilfgaardian invasion. The land there is ruled in absentia of kings by the Bloody Baron, Philip Strenger.[161] In *Gwent*, the Bloody Baron card is one of the more important gold cards and is used as the cornerstone of a very specific strategy. The card's flavor text reads "I've not been a good father, I know, but…perhaps it's not too late", a direct reference to a central quest in the *Witcher* game that has to do with his troubled family and which is the most in depth contact the player has with Northern Realms culture.

Fig. 12: Phillip Strenger, aka the Bloody Baron of No Man's Land

Mechanically, the card's effects are twofold. First, if the Bloody Baron has not been drawn, he is always placed on top of your deck before your next draw. Effectively, this means the Baron is an unavoidable character if he is part of a deck, which I take as a manifestation of his centrality within the Witcher 3 narrative. Second, the Baron is strengthened for every unit that you destroy throughout the game. This effect is an adaptation of his *Witcher 3* reputation, as he "was known for his violent temper and three-mile-long cruel streak, hence his moniker."[162]

Another card that is important to the cultural identity of the Northern Realms is Philippa Eilhart, a revolutionary witch hunted by King Radovid. In the leader card for Radovid, the art displayed the king gleefully blinding the witch whom he considered a traitor. Both cards work as two halves of the same

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[161] *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game*, CD Projekt Red (2017; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[162] *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

narrative: The systemic persecution of mages and witches in the Northern Realms. Philippa's flavor text reads "Soon the power of kings will wither, and the Lodge shall seize its rightful place", a reference to the sect of revolutionary and egalitarian witches that she leads.

Fig. 13: Philippa Eilhart, de facto leader of the Lodge of Sorceresses

The Lodge will be part of a larger discussion in the next chapter as it concerns the position of women in the *Witcher 3*, but here it highlights the political tension between a sickly monarchy and brazen revolutionary factions. Philippa's mechanic is rather simple as it deals lessening damage to one random unit and then to another so long as there are other units to attack. It is a direct representation of a fantasy game staple, a chained lightening bolt. However, discursively, the lack of control over power in this card has to do with the rage felt by oppressed witches which is present in other Northern Realms cards.

In fact, an immediate example is Margarita Laux-Antille's card. Margarita is a tertiary character in *The Witcher 3*, who is also part of the Lodge. Her status as a less important character is again conveyed by the card's silver border. Margarita's card art depicts the pogrom against witches, which is not witnessed onscreen, but which occurs during *The Witcher 3*'s first act, again at the hands of Radovid

and volunteer witch-hunters.[163] The flavor text, "I care only about what is good for Aretuza and my pupils" is a reference to both Margarita's work and her fate. In the *Witcher* universe, Margarita is the academy rector at Aretuza, a college of science, alchemy and magic.[164]

Fig. 14: Margarita, Rector of Aretuza

The plot elements displayed by the card further reinforce the themes of persecution and cruelty against magic folk in Radovid's kingdom, but also bring in the added dimension that magic is not only supernatural, it is intellectual. The persecution of witches is also the persecution of academies and learnedness. Her card mechanic also reinforces this theme by negating damage on another unit and removing its lock, which I mentioned in the Radovid section as a reference to imprisoning magical beings.

Many of the thematically important cards in the Northern Realms that have to do with *The Witcher 3* directly deal with themes of persecution, violence, dictatorship, gendered violence and ableism. The faction identity that these cards articulate is therefore one where the Northern realms are culturally regressive and, ironically, undergoing a crisis of modernization.

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[163] "The Great Escape," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame., The Great Escape

[164] *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

Notable Nilfgaard Cards

Nilfgaard cards also have their share of story characters from the third *Witcher* title that are good examples of the larger Nilfgaardian culture and how it is portrayed in the games. The Nilfgaardian leader I haven't spoken too much about, Morvran Voorhis can be found here. Out of all the leader card characters in Nilfgaard, he has the lion's share of mundane moments with the eponymous *Witcher*. In many ways, Morvran is a point of contact with Nilfgaardian nobility, their concerns, their hopes and their prejudices. Morvran's flavor text, "The summer sun reflected in the quiet waters of the Alba – that's Nilfgaard to me", is a remarkably affectionate quote about his homeland. The character is positioned as a patriotic and generally peaceful ruler, hailing from the Nilfgaardian capital which is located on the Alba River.

Fig. 15: Emperor Morvran Voorhis, successor to Emhyr.

Mechanically, Morvran allows the player to reveal up to four cards from either player's hands. I read this as a great versatility between statecraft, espionage and warfare. Notably, although Morvran's flavor text is about his peaceful homeland, his card art shows him at the forefront of his army. Furthermore, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Artbook* also has an entry for Morvran where is described as "proud, aware of his high rank and what it entails, and equally comfortable on the battlefield or in courtly salons."[165] Morvran

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[165] "Voorhis," in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Artbook* (Warsaw: CD Projekt Red, 2015), 129.

as a character shows the wide range of cultural affairs that Nilfgaardians are involved in, as well as their military flexibility. I've selected Morvran because he mirrors the Bloody Baron, as they are both regional commanders. However, one of the running themes in the Northern Realms cards shown above was the treatment of magical folk.

Another Nilfgaard card I turn is Fringilla Vigo, another tertiary character that appears in *The Witcher 3*. Fringilla is another member of the Lodge, along with Philippa and Margarita, but is affiliated with the Nilfgaardian empire. The card's flavor text, "Magic is the highest good. It transcends all borders and divisions", sets up the situation of magical folk within the Empire very differently than we've seen so far. Nilfgaard as a culture prizes excellence or talent. Morvran as seen above is an exceptional statesman and commander. Fringilla is an exceptional witch. In the context of this faction, being magical does not equate with an ethnic status, but a profession. This is also displayed in the card, where Frigilla has an Imperial writ allowing her to operate affixed to her dress.

Fig. 16: Fringilla, one of the Emperor's court sorceresses

Additionally, her mechanics follow the general Nilfgaardian theme of flexibility. If she is played on the opposing side, she can weaken a unit by copying another adjacent unit. If she is played on the allied side, she can strengthen units in the same manner. Fringilla does not damage units, but rather manipulates values, stressing the non-violent function that most mages employ, save Philippa. The

Lodge sorceresses appear in multiple factions and have their own place in the Witcher world and I'll turn to discussing their place in the later chapter.

Mechanics that manipulate points are very flexible didactically. In this instance, the card shown in *Fig. 17* increases your strength or decreases your enemy's strength based on the armies each player has. However, there are other ways in which point manipulation can convey different messages. The last card I want to discuss is a Nilfgaardian garrison commander named Peter Saar Gwynleve. Peter is the first quest giver that gives a bounty to the player in *The Witcher 3* and he rules over an occupied Northern territory. All these considerations make him an important point of contact for the player. Peter's flavor text is a spoken line from a quest, where he speaks to a peasant saying: "These are not the hands of an "Excellency," but of a farmer. So we speak peasant to peasant."[166]

Fig. 17: Peter Saar, Garrison Commander

Peter is the first and perhaps only character we meet in *The Witcher* 3 whose entire character is built up around class divides, ethnic divides and the difficulty of intercultural contact. Peter oversees taxation and his wish is to conduct his duty fairly among all the citizens he rules. His card effect, either weakening a stronger unit or healing a damaged unit, codifies this attempt at *keeping things fair*. His

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[166] "Peter Saar Gwynleve," in *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game*, CD Projekt Red (2017; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

secondary effect also entails that when players heal weakened allied units, or weaken opposed strong units, Peter helps the weak and hinders the strong.

Nilfgaardian characters, in addition to the themes coded into the faction altogether, have identities and mechanics related to governance, equality, social mobility and statecraft. I would even say that at every point they appear as opposites to the Northern Realms cards and the characteristics those characters embody, further highlighting the divide between both cultures. The purpose of including these cards is to look at the skeleton for each character that Gwent developers deemed indispensable, i.e. the mechanics and the flavor text. Further, the selection of these six specific cards has to do with specific moments within the *Witcher 3* narrative that constitute cultural friction.

Conclusion: From Gwent to the Witcher 3 Story

If we return to the Gunzel text about representations of Balkans as unstable, culturally regressive, radical and filled with opportunistic banditry, we find that Gwent has formed an opposite image where the Nilfgaardian Empire subverts tropes about Balkan countries.[167] The map set up by the faction archetypes and articulated in the flavor text and voice lines of specific cards presents the Northern Realms as a faction of highly militaristic, if mostly rapacious and xenophobic countries that are only bound by their geographic location. Nilfgaard on the other hand, and the lands it conquers, is portrayed as a scion of meritocratic and mostly fair administration, with equal regards to citizens of all creeds and ethnicities. As I will discuss in the chapter on the *Witcher 3*, Nilfgaardians are presented as exotic and feminized, but in the context of Gwent, they are set up as incredibly adept political leaders, with a common tradition that they partake in and steward for future generations. They are also artistically linked with art depicting the Roman empire and infused with the prestige and storied traditions of that culture.

When Todorova discusses the real-world Balkans, what the West writ large stresses is their status as partially Orientalized backward nations.[168] However, in this representation of these pseudo-historicized Balkans, Nilfgaard, what is stressed is their scientific development, their multiculturality and their sophisticated statecraft. More so, these elements of sophistication are intimately tied to the Byzantine legacy within the Balkans, and its particular brand of *Roman-ness.* I reiterate here that Todorova discusses Byzantinism as a component of Balkanism, where the Byzantine characteristics of

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[167] Stefan Gunzel, "Eastern Europe, 2008: Maps and Geopolitics in Video Games," in *Space Time Play* (Boston: Birkhauser, 2007), 444.
[168] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17.

the Balkans are occluded by the Ottoman ones, with the intent to mischaracterize the Balkans. The locales that make up Nilfgaard and the Northern-Realms are pseudo-historical re-enactments in the way that Chapman contends, as the primary faction within Nilfgaard is from along the Alba river, a location drawn from actual Romanian geography, while Redania's flag replicates the Polish coat of arms. If the discourse of Balkanism, viz. that the East is poor and primitive, while the West is wealthy and modern, is inverted here, then there it produces a re-enactment where this fictitious Poland, Redania, is ambiguously positioned as a weak nation, relative to the fictitious Balkans. When players begin playing Gwent, either as part of the *Witcher 3* game, or the more refined standalone variant, they are embroiled in a didactic network that teaches players about these factions, who they are, what they do and how they are different from each other. What *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* accomplishes however, is to actualize these stereotypes through the game's narrative. This is where I turn next.

CHAPTER 3: THE WITCHER 3 AS A VERITABLE NO MAN'S LAND

Looking at the *Witcher* universe through the lens provided by Gwent is a valuable key to understanding how cultures, and their representatives, are archetypes. However, the *Witcher 3* is an entire ecosystem of game mechanics, narratives and other design elements that articulate with much greater sophistication what Gwent renders crudely. We can consider the Gwent cards as a sort of flash card for how each character is written, but when those characters interact with each other, or better yet, with the player, those card elements are put into play. Further, the presence of the player character, Geralt of Rivia, the eponymous Witcher, has its own implications.

In this chapter, I will look at the ubiquitous narrative elements that are present in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt and explore how those elements impact the general cultural judgements that were already present in Gwent. Those elements include: the landscape of the primary playable area, the player inventory and wallet, the game difficulty, specific story quests (both primary and secondary), the place of Gwent within the game narrative, and discourse around women in the game. I use the knowledge base built up in the previous chapter to cement my reading of important non-player characters, and all the socio-cultural elements relating to the Northern Realms or the Nilfgaardian Empire. I will once again eschew discussion about the Skellige Isles and the Elder races here, as those cultures have their own discourses and cannot simply be grandfathered into this text.

My aim in the *Gwent* chapter was to show how the cards come to represent archetypes about specific ethnicities, namely Nilfgaard as the Byzantine Balkans, and Northern Realms as a comparatively impoverished Western Europe. As Todorova discusses, the stereotypes of the Balkans are based on the political and historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire, while downplaying the Byzantine Empire's influence on Balkan cultures. *Gwent* serves as a skeleton for reading *The Witcher 3*. The archetypes built up for each faction in the previous chapter are put into action in multiple ways. As players traverse the landscape of *The Witcher 3*, they meet different countries, cultures and administrations. Furthermore, the characters that populate this world, and the quests they dole out, articulate the concepts discussed more generally in the previous chapter. More specifically, the general Northern Realms storylines focus on the exacerbation of poverty, warfare and the persecution of minorities, while the Nilfgaard storylines have to do with combatting those problems by using governance models and ideology specific to Nilfgaardian culture.

More specifically, I begin this chapter by analyzing the design of the four locales that the player encounters in the first act of the game: White Orchard, Vizima, Velen and Novigrad. These areas have elements that are rooted in cartography discussed in the literature review, but also visible architecture, wealth indicators, and atmosphere that highlight the characteristics of either the Northern Realms or Nilfgaard. Then, I consider how the player character, Geralt, navigates through this world. I refer specifically to the item inventory, the availability of food and items necessary for survival, the access to wealth or lack thereof, and even the different types of currency. In conjunction with these elements I consider the difficult settings available, as markers of the authenticity of the experience, i.e. is the game more representative if it is more difficult? Past that, I will proceed to examine certain quest lines that pit this positioned player character in relation to those characters discussed in the previous chapter, such as Peter Saar Gwynleve. The final part will be a discussion about the treatment of female characters, largely represented by the Lodge of Sorceresses and Geralt's adoptive daughter, Ciri. This is because their narrative runs throughout many optional and main quests and form a second story within the main narrative.

Maps, Landscape and Locale: The Map Before the Characters

The Witcher 3 leads in through an opening cinematic with Geralt dreaming about past golden days with his adoptive daughter, Ciri, and lover, Yennefer, before the dream turns into a nightmare.[169] As Geralt wakes up besides his mentor, Vesemir, the game prompts the player "Temeria, Road to Vizima. May, 1272."[170] The game immediately provides the player with a sense of time and space. It doesn't matter that the player has no idea where Temeria or Vizima are, or what the year means. What we know so far, is that two locations are important enough to be a marker. From here, the player moves mostly west throughout the game. It would be no stretch to say that the game progressively brings to bear the extensive misery of West as a contrast to the idyllic East where the player starts. To better understand that journey, we should refresh our memory concerning the game's world map.

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[169] "Prologue," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[170] Ibidem

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Fig 1.: World Map of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

On the map displayed in *Fig. 1*, the player begins in the prologue area, the provincial town of White Orchard and moves west, through the occupied capital of Vizima, into the province of Velen and up to the city Novigrad, throughout the game. This swath of land takes up around two thirds of the actual game in terms of quest density. What the map does, according to Gunzel's essay on the importance of cartography, is that it skews the player's perception of the relative importance of each area. In terms of game time, Velen takes up the lion's share of quests and is also geographically massive.[173] Whereas,

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[171] *"World Map,"* in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

[172] This map of the *Witcher 3* has two elements I want to highlight. First, each area has heraldry and is shown as an equally important quest area. Second, big parts of the map are not highlighted implying that they are not important to the scope of this game.

[173] Stefan Gunzel, "Eastern Europe, 2008: Maps and Geopolitics in Video Games," in *Space Time Play* (Boston: Birkhauser, 2007), 443.

Vizima is just one castle that the player visits twice in the game.[174] However, according to this map, they seem to occupy similar geographic spans, they both warrant heraldry and appear as important locales.

The area that the player began in, White Orchard, is part of the Kingdom of Temeria, a Northern Realm that has fallen to Nilfgaard's advance. This is where the first few hours of quests take place and where the player gets his first taste of the cultural friction between the two cultures. White Orchard is somewhat of an oddity because it displays elements associated with both cultures, which should come as no surprise given it is an occupied land. The area is described as "a small Temerian village, in surroundings which at first glance seem almost idyllic. Clear skies abound, and the orchards' trees are bursting with white flowers."[175] Further, the game's art description articulates that "The juxtaposition of a warm, sunny spring and a landscape rife with destruction and conflict lends color and credence to the game's atmosphere. In this land, as is often the case in reality, war continues to upend human lives no matter the weather or time of year."[176]

Fig. 2: White Orchard: The Pastoral Countryside

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[174] Vizima is the former capital of the Temerian kingdom, now under Nilfgaardian occupation.
[175] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Artbook* (Warsaw: CD Projekt Red, 2015), 9.
[176] Ibidem

The game simultaneously conveys two pieces of information to the player: First that White Orchard is naturally beautiful, second that it is in disrepair because of perpetual war and conflict. The adjoining area is also home to old ruins made out of red brick, where the Nilfgaardian garrison has taken up residence.

Fig. 3: White Orchard Village

Overall, the landscape, structures and atmosphere convey a sense of hope mixed in with bitterness regarding a long history of conflict. The small village that the townsfolk occupy is shoddy and only beginning to rebuild as the player arrives, with many of the shops destroyed.[177] The visual cues convey that ordinary people are attempting to return to their mundane daily lives amidst war. This is the backdrop to much Nilfgaard/Northern Realms contact. However, for now, I'd like to look at the next area the player traverses: The Imperial Palace at Vizima.

As I mentioned above, Vizima is not a Nilfgaardian locale proper, rather an occupied territory that is undergoing transformation. However, it is the only contact that the player has with Nilfgaardian culture, such as the Empire's royal court, its decoration and social relations. Overall the castle displays ornate stonework on the interior and luscious gardens outside.[178] Given that it is meant only as a temporary war camp, the palace dwarfs the degree of care and embellishment that is apparent subsequent locales in the game.

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[177] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Artbook* (Warsaw: CD Projekt Red, 2015), 10.
[178] *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

The exterior's beauty is also complemented by the interior. Stained glass windows play with light and create an atmosphere of almost religious reverence as the player walks up to the Emperor's throne. Flanked by statuesque Nilfgaardian knights, the player enters what seems an almost different world from the one explored in White Orchard. This single location serves as the primary touchstone to an entire culture, as most of the game is spent within the neighboring kingdoms of the Northern Realm [?]. It's discursive purpose, I gather, is then to shape the ethnic identity of Nilfgaard in the eyes of the player.

The third, and largest game area that the player arrives at is Velen of the Northern Realm, also known as No Man's Land. This part of the world takes up a considerable part of game time, if not most of the game. The description given for the zone reads "Velen [...] is currently a no man's land ravaged by the ongoing movement of soldiers across its terrain. [...] Many inhabitants of Velen have been killed or forced to flee into the woods, while those that remain eke out a meager existence under the constant threat of attacks."[179] Where White Orchard displayed a Northern Realms locale under Nilfgaardian administration, Velen shows the near collapse of Northern Realms governance and the abandonment of the general populace to fend for themselves.

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[179] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Artbook* (Warsaw: CD Projekt Red, 2015)*, 16.

Fig. 5: Near-Abandoned Hamlet in Velen

Velen's identity as a land is integral to the experience of the game and was also the first area shown to players in the *Witcher 3* cinematic trailer.[180] In that cinematic it showed Geralt delivering a monster trophy to some local militiamen indentured to Nilfgaard, as those men were preparing to sexually assault and then execute a woman. The situation is unique to this area, as players are shown areas that are administered fairly prior to arriving here. As Geralt prepares to stop the execution, he tells the bewildered soldiers that he is "killing monsters."[181] The lawlessness of the land, its barren visual representation and the conduct of opportunistic mercenaries forms a horizon in which the Northern Realms appear as barbaric and violent. However, this province appears this way because of the power struggle between the Northern and Nilfgaardian powers, not because the people are innately evil, and this notion will come up when discussing quests as well.

The main hub in Velen is Crow's Perch, a castle town ruled by the Bloody Baron mentioned earlier. The small town is meant to serve as the administrative hub for the area and is ruled through force. Yet it seems almost as ruined as the adjacent countryside. As the developers explain, "We were at pains to ensure that Crow's Perch melded well with Velen's overall atmosphere. The castle is a tough

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[180] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Killing Monsters Cinematic Trailer*, CD Projekt Red (2013; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Short Video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0i88t0Kacs.
[181] Ibidem.

place inhabited by equally tough and dangerous men."[182] One of the primary elements that runs through all of Velen is the sense of danger or imminent threat. Whether it is from monsters, roadside brigands or power-hungry mercenaries, the player is meant to feel ill at ease, as opposed to the pastoral beginning of the game.

Fig. 6: Crow's Perch Courtyard[183]

Velen's location goes beyond conveying a sense of danger or abandonment however. It seeks to convey an atmosphere where "mess and sloth rule the day […] lending the place an overall feeling of disorder."[184] As players enter the town, they can see shanties that have been beaten down by the weather surrounded by filth. There are no roads, except for a mud trail left by foot traffic and as one moves up towards the castle, the fort falling in disrepair is also visible. Mercenaries patrol the town and order people to disperse. There is a concerted attempt with the town itself to produce an overall conception of the Northern Realms as semi-developed, economically backward and striving to modernize.[185] The fourth area the player enters again offers interesting information about the Northern Realms: Novigrad.

Novigrad is a thematic departure from the vistas players will have grown accustomed to by this point. This is of course by design, as "the character of this location and its surroundings were meant to

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[182] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Artbook* (Warsaw: CD Projekt Red, 2015), 23.
[183] Ibid, 22.
[184] Ibid, 23.
[185] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 194.

be diametrically opposed to the doom and gloom and ramshackle wooden buildings of Velen."[186] This brings up a key distinction, as Novigrad is part of the Velen province geographically. However, Novigrad is presented as a free city within the country of Redania, which itself exists as a self-governing conclave within the province of Velen. As such Novigrad has many hybrid qualities. In an interview given at E3 2013, environment designer Jonas Mattsson spoke about infusing the city with influences taken from South and East Italy, as well as medieval Amsterdam. For instance, the high-roofed houses are emblematic of Amsterdam architecture. Another element I discuss in depth later is the presence of Roman-style public baths adorned with traditional Roman columns and marble-work, which are found throughout the former Roman territories.[187]

Fig. 7: Geralt entering Novigrad from the Port district.[188]

The city of Novigrad appears as another counterpoint against Northern Realms monarchy because it is self-governing and independent from the larger nation. It is ruled by a religious leader called the Hierarch and at first appears as an industrious locale. Unsurprisingly, the primary place of worship, the Temple of Fire sits at the heart of the city and orients districts around it[189]. However, the city is also governed in secret by a group of crime lords, displaying the ebb and flow of power between the

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[186] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Artbook* (Warsaw: CD Projekt Red, 2015), 36.
[187] Debbie Timmins, "The Witcher 3 Preview and Interview," The Average Gamer, June 28, 2013, http://www.theaveragegamer.com/2013/06/28/the-witcher-3-preview-and-interview/.
[188] Ibidem
[189] *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Artbook* (Warsaw: CD Projekt Red, 2015), 41.

merchant and religious classes that inhabit the city.[190] Much of game's later plot will have to do with these groups having different sensibilities to magical folk within the city, but there is also a definite conflict between the rich and the poor. One important place where the city's merchants converge is the Novigrad baths.
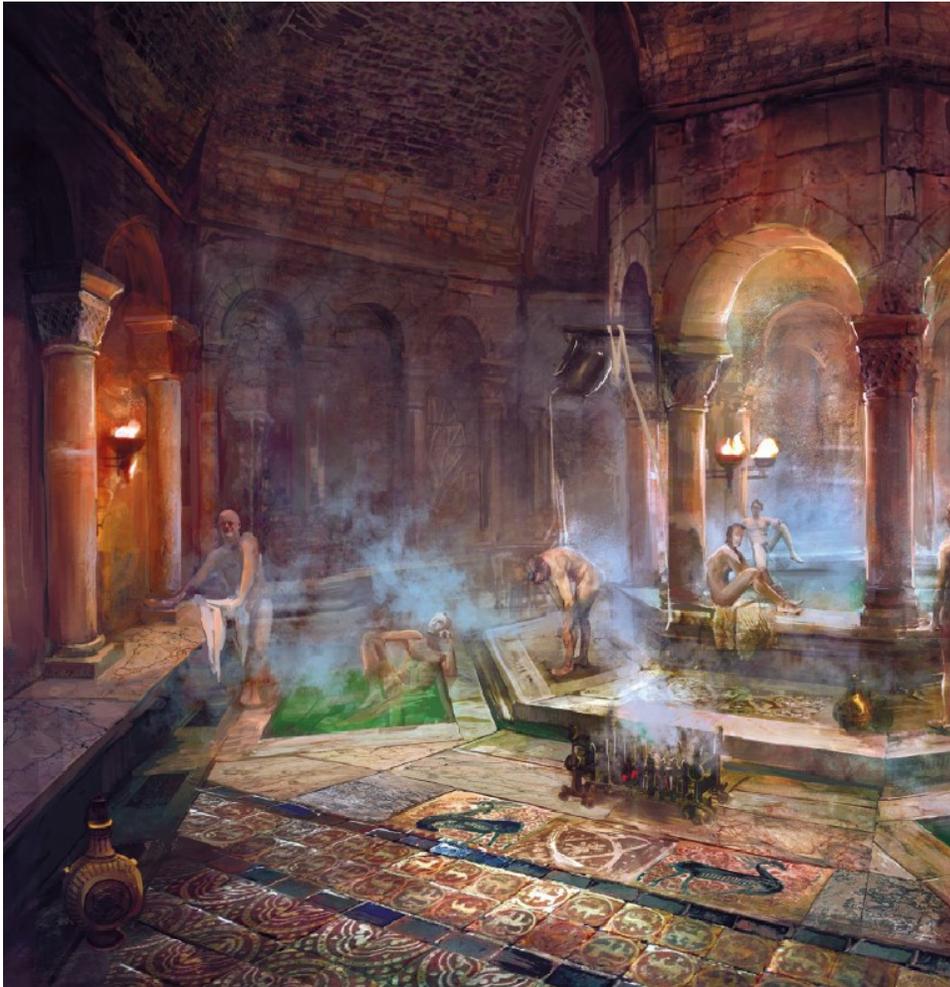
Fig. 8: A different kind of snake charming

The baths appear as a space where the non-religious men of the city congregate to discuss commercial and administrative matters, including espionage. As players enter the baths, it becomes apparent that different ethnic groups congregate here and that there is contact between these groups, and also romantic encounters between individuals of all genders and creeds.[191] I want to gesture to the fact that this underground space is *Orientalized* similarly to the way that *The Snake Charmer* also sexualized all-

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[190] "Pyres of Novigrad," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[191] *"*Get Junior," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

male intimate spaces, yet the game inverts the judgement it poses on this space. Rather than discussing sexuality as tied to slavery, as the earlier painting did, this part of the game's design focuses on socially and culturally progressive discourses taking place between the decision makers of Novigrad. And this kind of intimate contact is a recurring motif that will pop back up in the discussion about Nilfgaardian fashion.

Thinking through Comparative Regional Differences as Discourses

All four of these locales articulate a different cultural atmosphere. From the pastoral, yet besieged White Orchard, to the luxurious Vizima, to the desolate Velen, to the bustling yet conflicted Novigrad, the player is exposed to different regions where entire cultures are configured differently. At the center of the differences between each zone are the different governments that structure, organize and steward local life. White Orchard was a naturally peaceful township recovering from centuries of neglect and conflict and doing so under the management of the Nilfgaardian military garrison. The model is temporary and, in many ways, rudimentary as it seems to function through martial law and tax levies. Vizima is an old castle, once in disrepair and now made vibrant by Nilfgaardian rule, as the entire royal court now lives there. Here, the central Nilfgaardian authority has taken residence, along with its legislative authority. Velen is a waste where people scrounge for food and deal with criminality and famine at every turn and the de facto leader cannot ensure the safety of any but those within his main fort, at the price of heavy handed tyranny. Finally, Novigrad is a city stuck on the cusp of modernity, fighting to free itself from a theocratic government in favor of a more progressive model. In *Orientalism*, Said discusses the importance of recognizing that "rule", as in dominating a zone, was sanctioned and rationalized under the general orientalist paradigm.[192] So far, *The Witcher 3* seems to propose the exact opposite. The warlike conduct of the Northern Realms has in fact worsened chaos and anarchy, where the Nilfgaardian system seems to, at the very least, stabilize the political uncertainty of each location. The role of proper governance, or lack thereof, will be the primary topic when I discuss the Viziman audience as well. Then the question we can ask is what elements of each culture, Northern Realms and Nilfgaard, lend themselves respectively to the devastation or the embellishment of their countries. I argue that the player inventory and the general flow of currency within the game serves to highlight some of those elements.

Player Inventory and Wealth: The Sense of All Encompassing Poverty

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[192] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 39.

Consalvo and Dutton single out player inventory, viz. the space where players accumulate and organize items, as a key design characteristic to be scrutinized. What is the inventory within the game world? What are its limitations? How does it shape player experience regarding the management of items and wealth? These are questions that I ask about the inventory in *The Witcher 3*, but I want to go further. There are pieces that are part of the inventory to an extent, but not entirely, such as currency and food which merit analysis as well. In addition, there is the consideration of other inventories, such as the stash, shopkeepers and the bank that also have a certain impact on player experience. This section deals with these topics.[193]
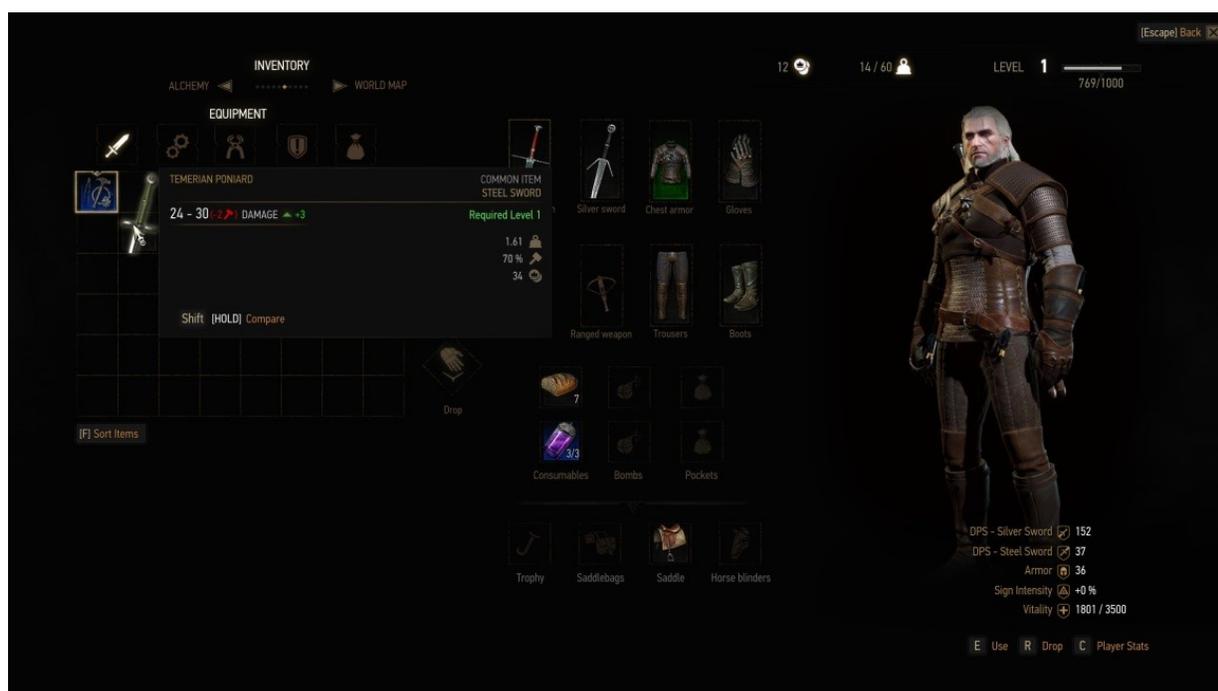
Fig. 9: Player inventory screen, with crowns and weight capacity at the top right

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[193] Before I begin discussing these elements properly, I'd like to draw attention to another design element that underlies the entire substrate of item management, viz. game difficulty. In the *Witcher 3*, there are four difficulty levels: "Just the Story! (Easy), Story and Sword! (Normal), Blood and Broken Bones (Hard) and Death March! (Very Hard)."[193] These difficulty levels determine how many rewards players receive from completing quests, both in terms of money and experience. They also scale monster difficulty and force players to utilize more food, potions and money to buy curatives. This in turn means that each difficulty strains player resources exponentially, as it gives less rewards and requires more investment. This begs the question: If I want to analyze player income and money systems as part of the game's overall message, which difficulty is the appropriate one? There is no definite answer and there is no *proper* way to play the game. The only consideration is that the game can be made more grueling by increasing the difficult, which will increase the feeling of poverty that pervades the game world. However, the game achieves this by default, especially with players unfamiliar with the game's difficulty.

As the player moves through the game areas I've described above, the accumulation of wealth plays an important role. How much money does the player have access to, where can they accumulate it and how can they spend it in the best way. These are all questions that players have to grapple with as they move from the opening area into the later game areas. Needed resources can cost varying amounts of money. For instance, crafting potions can require anywhere from 15 to 450 crowns, and they work for limited amounts of time ranging from 2 to 30 minutes in game. And obtaining those crowns is likewise very tough work, and subject to the caprice of a system that is deliberately obscured to the player. For example, when a player slays a monster, they can take the monster's head as a trophy which can be sold for 50 crowns but only at one shop, which is located in Novigrad. Every other store that buys trophies, will only pay players half that value, 25 crowns. This shop in Novigrad is never singled out or indicated to players as a shop where they can sell the trophy for full price and therefore can only be found by chance. This is compounded by the fact that most shopkeepers will only purchase items relevant to their profession. For instance, herbalists will not buy monster trophies or weapons of any variety, while smiths will never buy plants, and so on. Players face significant contrivances in any attempt to find a venue to hawk their wares, and often have to sell items for suboptimal amounts of crowns. So far, I've been talking about the availability of money as a resource, but there's another layer of complexity that players have to deal with, namely inventory size.

Inventory size is a generic concept that is found in many games. It can appear in one of two ways usually: Either inventories are limited by space, i.e. they only have so many slots that players may occupy, or they are limited by weight. Thankfully, *The Witcher 3* eschews the space model, thereby freeing players from the need of relentlessly organizing their items by types and in efficient ways. However, the game has a very stringent weight calculation. Many items are very heavy relatively speaking. This is most often the case where weapons are disproportionately heavy, and often the item most easily found. For instance, axes of any variety tend to cost between 200-500 gold to buy, weigh 2.5 lbs and can be sold for around 25 gold each.[194] The player's starting inventory sits at a capacity of 60 lbs total and must hold all items including curatives, herbs, quest items, monster trophies, horse saddles and so on. Realistically this means that even four axes will require the player to either throw them away or sell them. Buying weapons will also deplete your funds severely. The resulting situation is that players often find themselves overencumbered, low on funds and desperately in need of making money, while also having very few vendors with any reasonable amount of money to actually buy the player's *vendor*

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[194] *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

trash. Thinking about this in real life terms, Geralt's inventory is cluttered by junk that he must keep and barter away in a world where everyone else is even poorer than he. If there's a joke about *being rich in a currency that no one accepts* in this whole situation, the state of currency in the game is certainly the punchline.

When discussing areas earlier in the chapter, I mentioned that there are occupied lands, Northern Realms lands and Nilfgaard lands. One of the myriad ways that the game conveys this to the player is the currency itself. Instead of using generic units, like gold or silver, the *Witcher* world uses crowns. Crowns are actually "Novigrad Crowns" meaning they are the specific currency of the city of Novigrad which has spread far beyond its borders. However, players may come across two other types of currency in the game: The Oren and the Floren. The Oren, although specifically a currency, appears as an item similar to copper ore, or food in the player inventory. It is unusable to players, save if they find a location to convert the money into crowns. Crowns are usually found on corpses or inside chests throughout the game, however some peasants also have Orens on their person. This happens in Velen and White Orchard, lands that were part of Temeria, the fallen Northern Kingdom. Realistically it means that there are folk who, although they have money, are virtually destitute because they never get to exchange their currency. I also draw attention to the fact that Orens can be converted into crowns at a one to one ratio. The implication being that Temerian Orens and Novigrad crowns are equal in value, that the countries that produced them are equally wealthy and powerful.

The Nilfgaardian Floren is another story altogether. Florens appear as inventory items that can be moved and stored, like the Oren. However, they are given as rewards when completing missions for Nilfgaardian quest givers, as well as found in treasure chests or on deceased soldier's corpses. Meaning that the Floren is not a *dead* currency, but rather a rare and foreign one. The other factor to consider is that Florens can be converted into Novigrad crowns at a one to three ratio. They are sometimes a symbol of notoriety within the Northern Realms, styled as "Nilfgaardian gold", as it carries the social stigma where the holder is associated with Nilfgaard, a foreign invader. Nevertheless, there is an absolute relation economically speaking where Nilfgaard's money is stronger than both Northern Realms currencies present in the game. I will circle back to the political importance of Nilfgaardian coin shortly.

I wish to wrap up this section by discussing banks in the *Witcher* world. As discussed above, the only way to make currency usable is to convert it into crowns, from either orens or florens. There is only

one main place this can be accomplished: at the Vivaldi Bank in Novigrad.[195] Strictly speaking, banks are not very accessible within the game world. For players, the first bank might be encountered about 20 hours into the game, because the city is surrounded by high level monsters and bandits which will easily kill even Geralt if he is not leveled up and properly equipped.[196] For characters living in the Witcher world, this bank is ridiculously remote. Essentially, the entirety of the White Orchard and Velen cast of characters will likely never enter that bank. The story implication is that most of the Northern Realms cast is virtually destitute simply due to their location and the shifting political entities that administer those lands. There's a point to be made that people probably barter between themselves in the game world, but the shop restrictions would make it difficult. Herbalists only want to trade in herbs, and smiths only want to trade in weapons and armor. Presumably, the herbalist has no interest in trading curatives for weaponry, as it has no use for him. If we consider the separation of wealth within the game universe, it seems there is an almost absolute power relation where Nilfgaard is considerably wealthier than the Northern Realms as whole. However, the extensive poverty gap between characters in those Realms has more to do with incidental factors than some inherent quality that makes them inferior. This brings back my earlier discussion about the difference between West and East having to do more with the rulers, and models of rule, than it does with the people that populate the land. Up to here, I've gone over the visual design of locales, the models of government that steward those cultures and the economic relations which underpin all intercultural contact. Within the game, I would classify those systems as a technoscape (the land and its resources), ethnoscape (models of government) and finanscape (wealth and economic differences). Moving on to discussing the actual story quests and the rapports that they form between the cast of characters is, I believe, part of the Ideoscape formed by all these considerations.

White Orchard Quests: These are not the hands of an "Excellency"

All the factors discussed in the previous chapter and the earlier part of this one serve as a scaffold to ensure that I do not mischaracterize the essential qualities of the vast cast of characters the player encounters in the world of *The Witcher 3*. This next section will deal with specific story examples where one ethnic group, Northern or Nilfgaardian, is either the object of exposition along cultural lines or where judgement is passed on the antagonist group. Like the section on environmental design, I will

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[195] If players move into the expansion *Blood & Wine*, the Cianfanelli Bank affiliated with Nilfgaard becomes available as well, albeit that location is also remote.

[196] This is of course an approximation based on my own experience of the game and might be even longer for someone not acquainted with the Witcher universe.

go through quests in the order that the player is intended to come upon them, from White Orchard into the later acts in Novigrad. Some of these quests are unavoidable primary quests, but many are also secondary quests that are picked up on the various notice boards posted in the townships that populate Velen, or the districts within Novigrad.

When the player first arrives in White Orchard, one quest is readily available as a de facto contact with the lay of the land, culturally speaking. This quest is titled *Twisted Firestarter*. Its premise, a common staple in roleplaying games is that the local smith's forge has been burned to the ground. Willis is a successful smith whose wares attract many customers from abroad, but he suffers from racism due to being one of the few non-humans, a dwarf, that lives in the community. As the player investigates what happened to the forge, it becomes clear that a local malcontent, Napp, has taken issue with Willis because of his booming business, as he sells weapons to the "Black ones", e.g. Nilfgaardian occupiers.[197] This villager calls Willis a "filthy non-human" and says that all of them are money hungry traitors.[198] Investigating the event, Geralt quickly discovers that Napp got blackout drunk one night and burned down Willis' forge. This quest presents an interesting first contact, principally because it deals with racism and xenophobia towards a town's occupiers as a source of misery, when most of the interactions that players can have with those characters indicate the exact opposite, viz. that Nilfgaard seems to be ruling well here. Yet in this instance Napp is shown to be the local drunk who does not work at all and is envious of Willis' success. At the conclusion of the quest, Geralt may choose to either turn in the villager to the smith, or to accept a bribe in order to deceive the smith and to tell him that the arsonist could not be found. The first choice leads to the smith alerting the authorities who have strict laws and take the villager away for punishment. The second leads to the disappointment and disillusionment of the smith with the status quo where hardworking folk are persecuted because of their ethnicity. As is often the case with these quests, the question players ask themselves is: Which choice is the correct one? If the player chooses to turn the arsonist in, they will receive 20 crowns, 70 experience points and a discount on items that Willis sells in perpetuity. If they elect to accept the bribe, they receive 20 crowns only. In real Bogostian fashion, the game is saying turning the criminal in is the right choice, no matter the sympathy one feels for the character. Notably, the player does not have all the information about quest outcomes, they know how much money they will make, but nothing about the experience or the discount. However, the game can be reloaded at the last save point to see both outcomes. So, the first contact the player has with the world of the *Witcher*, culturally speaking, is one of "imputed

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[197] "Twisted Firestarter," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[198] Ibidem

ambivalence", where criminals are so because they have been shaped by a culture of racism and clientelism, rather than because these bandits are ideologically convinced of their righteousness. Clientelism here refers to a social model where people give and receive contracts or money based on favoritism, not unlike nepotism. However, the administration that seeks to correct these crimes is convinced of its moral imperative to protect law-abiding citizens and minorities.

As the White Orchard zone is a tight package of quests meant to habituate the player to the *Witcher* world, the next quest I want to focus on, the *Beast of White Orchard*, follows the previous quest closely. This quest has to do with the garrison commander overseeing White Orchard hiring the player to find a marauding monster and to put it down. The commander is a character I discussed in the last chapter, Peter Saar Gwynleve. As the player-as-Geralt walks up to the commander to trigger their first cutscene, the game requires movement through the entirety of the ruins, marked by the repurposed red brick ruins that the Nilfgaardians have turned into their headquarters. The zone is tidy, if somewhat Spartan, and serves as a backdrop for the soldiers that occupy the area. When the cutscene begins, the player walks up as a farmer is trying to negotiate taxes with Peter. The peasant explains that the taxes are high and that with the war raging on and a bad crop, his family will either starve or be punished by the occupiers. To this heartfelt plea, Peter Saar removes his steel gauntlets to show the peasant calloused hands and to tell the peasant, as discussed in the previous chapter, "These are not the hands of an "Excellency", but of a farmer. So we speak peasant to peasant."[199] This seemingly earnest contact between an occupied farmer with everything to lose and a commander who could exert near-dictatorial power offers a counterpoint to the earlier quest in which a villager took out his malcontent on an innocent bystander. In fact, if the player just walks around the area and listens to the ambient dialogue, Peter can be overheard saying to another legionnaire: "The Nordlings' hatred for us will never wane."[200] When the player speaks to Peter, he agrees to provide information about the player's main quest if they take the time to hunt down a wyvern that has been attacking villagers. In addition to providing this information, he offers to pay the player a fair sum for *Witcher*'s work, an issue that comes up often when people are unable or unwilling to compensate Geralt. These two examples of cultural contact during the *Twisted Firestarter* and *Beast of White* Orchard quests illustrate how "Nordlings" perceive and interact with Nilfgaardians, while also showing the players how Nilfgaardians react to those

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[199] *"The Beast of White Orchard,"* in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[200] Ibidem.

prejudices.[201] I mean that the Northerners in White Orchard short change each other, and Geralt, the way through the zone, while Peter is fair to Geralt and to the local people who despise him on principle

Vizima as a window into Nilfgaard: "The Gentleman will be seated on the bergere"

As the White Orchard section of the game comes to a close, players are spirited to Vizima, the occupied capital, where the Witcher is to have an audience with the Nilfgaardian emperor. This main quest titled *Imperial Audience* is very dense in terms of content for this analysis. It can be roughly broken down into three sections: The interrogation, the social preparation and the military brief. The first two sections intermingle, as the interrogation occurs in the middle of a slightly farcical fish-out-of-water scene where Geralt must be prepared for his audience with the Emperor. The latter is a matter of fact discussion about the political climate of the *Witcher* world.
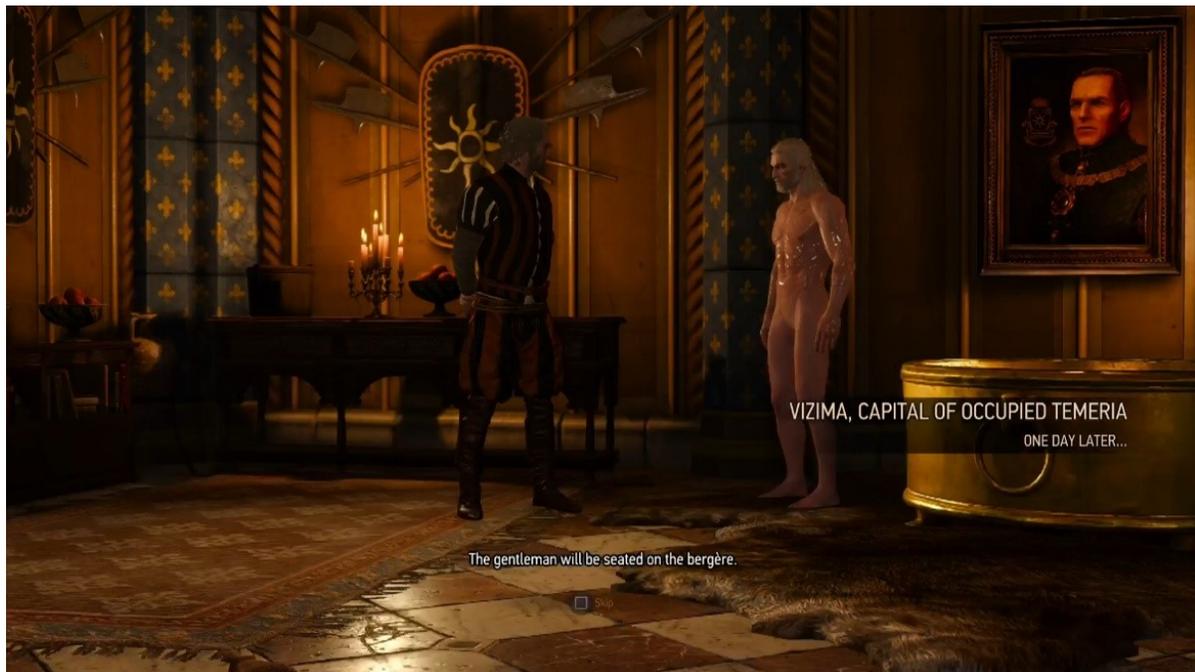
Fig. 10: The Nilfgaardian chamberlain attempting to civilize Geralt

The scene opens as Geralt is being washed, while he gruffly comments "Think Emhyr cares if I'm clean." Clearly, the answer is yes, as this scene revolves around cleaning, clothing and altogether civilizing the player. The chamberlain attempts to seat Geralt in the bergere, a term he is exasperated to explain refers to a chair. Geralt is then shaved as he states that he thought his beard "added to [his] dignity."

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[201] It's difficult to say whether the term *nordling* is a pejorative, but given that only Nilfgaardians use, it can be read that way as well.

The chamberlain agrees but explains that "it also detracts from your elegance." The exchange may seem superfluous but is emblematic of the cultural difference that the player-as-Geralt is going through, from Northern dignity to Nilfgaardian elegance.[202] Yet the exercise is more than just fashionable. As the attendant begins his work, General Morvran (one of the Nilfgaard leaders mentioned in the previous chapter) makes his entrance and begins to question the player. This is a mechanical contrivance where players who have not played previous games can fill in character choices they might have made. These choices do have an impact on how story characters will react to the player once they reach Novigrad. Morvran's theme of backroom politics, or rather interrogations that seem like pleasantries, is important here. As he states, "Men turn honest when they feel a blade at their throat." The line between military exercise, political meeting and party formality is nonexistent here, something that was stressed in Gwent's card design as well. As the interrogation begins, Morvran sets the facts in order: "Geralt of Rivia. Place of birth – unknown, parents – unknown, age – unknown. All insignificant detail."[203] This, like the scene with Peter, stresses again the lack of ethnic or national criteria when making judgements about folk. Morvran mentions their use of military intelligence, investigation and scouts as crucial parts of their reconnaissance apparatus. Morvran also comments on the Northern military commander as "a murderer of nonhumans. We know this gentleman well."[204] Seemingly, Nilfgaardians care more about the state of one's appearance than the species they belong to, a notion not shared by "Nordlings." Finally, the general comments on his stance on political subterfuge, stating that "national interest calls on one to forge difficult alliances at times. Alliances with witchers included." The concept of *national interest*, in the sense of a nation-state's interest in preserving civil society, seems almost alien here, in a world where kings and warmongers still rule with impunity. It also highlights how far ahead Nilfgaard is relative to other countries, in terms of statecraft and domestic affairs. The scene concludes with Morvran requiring Geralt sign the legal documents "affirming [he] stated the whole truth and nothing but the truth, on pain of imprisonment." Again, the presence of a legal document of this kind is unique in this installment, and the *Witcher* series overall. The chamberlain then intercedes, stating that the player must choose their attire for the upcoming imperial audience, a matter as important as the preceding interrogation.[205]

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[202] Notably, Geralt is from the very northeast end of the Northern Kingdoms, a place called Kaer Morhen. However, Witchers tend to travel the entire world and be more tied to their profession as an identity than to a nation.
[203] "Imperial Audience," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[204] Ibidem.
[205] Ibidem.

After the interrogation, the player must choose garments, recite the proper honorifics for political characters that they encounter, execute the proper bow and choose conversation options that are respectful, lest they be snubbed. This is the first and only instance in the game where courtly etiquette is invoked. The player here does not inhabit a neutral cultural position between Nordlings and Nilfgaardians as is the case throughout the game. Rather they simply take the place of a cultural outsider. As Geralt exits the bath area, he is given the choice between three outfits considered appropriate for an imperial audience. The chamberlain commenting haughtily, yet with admiration "And they say that clothes do not make the man."[206] Therefore, it is again driven home that aesthetic refinement is primordial within Nilfgaardian culture. Geralt ironically replies back "So what now? Powder my nose?"[207] Geralt's attitude has to do with a general Nordling perception where Nilfgaardians are perceived to be effete because they wear makeup. Although *Witchers* are ostracized and very worldly, they nevertheless inhabit the cultural space of the Northern Realms all their lives. After this, the chamberlain proceeds to educate the player on proper bowing. The player is prompted to repeat the sequence of actions, which, even if the correct action is selected, is executed clumsily. The chamberlain remarks that "[they] have learned to expect less of Nordlings."[208] The writers stress Nilfgaardians' fastidiousness and their obsession with propriety to an almost comical degree. Where White Orchard appears as a no-nonsense farm land, Vizima is presented as the pinnacle of hoity-toity courtly culture.

After the portion of this quest that deals with social manners, the player is then taken to meet the Emperor, introduced by his multitude of honorifics. The imperial audience is meant to telegraph the next chapter that players will embark on. The emperor explains that he will pay Geralt "More than you customarily receive for a contract. Considerably more."[209] I reiterate that the Witcher profession is abhorred throughout the Northern Realms, whereas in Nilfgaard the "motives do not interest [the Emperor]. Only Results."[210] Meritocracy is again present in this discussion, where the player's culture, ethnicity and even magical status are inconsequent, so long as they serve the Empire. As the player exits this audience, they are directed to speak to the Nilfgardian minister, Var Attre, who informs the player about the political and military goings-on of the *Witcher* world. Here the player is told how the Nilfgaardian high command perceives its neighbor states. The ambassador mentions that one of the

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[206]"Imperial Audience," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[207] Ibidem.
[208] Ibidem.
[209] Ibidem.
[210] Ibidem.

Northern Realms "was in such disarray that we encountered no resistance."[211][212] The ambassador mentions other realms that are weakened by infighting and more specifically "Radovid's Redania, which had ignored the rest of the North's pleas for help."[213] Furthermore, the ambassador states that they hoped that Radovid would "sue for peace, perhaps even submit to vassalization."[214] This is again an important distinction between how the Northern Realms usually operate in war, viz. total annihilation, and how Nilfgaard does, vassalization.[215]

I want to stress how Nilfgaard operates. Vassal states or kingdoms refer to administrative zones where the local ruler is pledged to offer allegiance and homage, usually financial, to a larger political power. However, the structure is a mutual obligation where the greater power protects and offers emergency aid of all kinds to the vassal. This goes back to the Ottoman style of rule that was present in the Balkans, where ruler and ruled become co-constituted. No cultures are erased or stigmatized, and the primary focus is placed on citizenship, rather than a sense of ethnic belonging.[216] The Nilfgaardian ambassador goes on to say that not only did Radovid, the Redanian king, not sue for peace, but rather began attacking his "rudderless and dejected" allies to increase the size of his kingdom. Although the result is a stronger kingdom for Radovid, the people of that kingdom are not valued subjects, but rather conquered peoples intended for military conscription.

The player can also enquire about Velen, the No Man's Land mentioned earlier, to which the ambassador explains that "This land never flowed with milk and honey, and now it flows with blood. Armies have swept through it several times, trampling fields, looting granaries, burning villages. Famine grips the populace."[217] Management of the area is mentioned to be near impossible because of the remoteness of villages, and the swampy terrain, with the Blood Baron ruling in absentia of enforceable law. There is a sense where it's not that Nilfgaard enjoys leaving a power vacuum in the area, but rather they are "stretched too thin", lacking resources and manpower because of the war dragging on. Clearly, the ambassador considers it the Empire's duty to help people who are living in miserable circumstances, again regardless of their nationality.

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[211] "Imperial Audience," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[212] I won't mention every Northern Realm, as there are a baker's dozen of them. But the two that readers should always remembers are Temeria, where Nilfgaard now rules, and Redania where most of the game takes place.
[213] "Imperial Audience," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[214] Ibidem.
[215] Ibidem.
[216] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 163.
[217] "Imperial Audience," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

One last area that the player can enquire about is the free city, Novigrad. Var Attre explains that the city's freedom is doomed, because of its considerable military worth. It is likely to be taken over by Radovid to bolster his armies further, a military move that Nilfgaard may have to thwart. The military tension and the ever-looming threat of war has plunged the city into an atmosphere of fear. As the ambassador explains: "How do men deal with fear? They seek reassurance…and scapegoats. The Church of the Eternal Fire understands this perfectly. And it promises to improve the lives of its flock by pointing out the guilty." The political understanding of its neighbour is highly astute and void any cultural stereotyping. Nilfgaard understands what the military treachery, chaos and tension leaves in its wake. Var Attre continues to explain how Novigrad leaders are manipulating the narrative around the poverty and conflict that has beset the city: "Who started the war? Who profits from it? Why, it's obvious – mages, elves, dwarves. In a word, any and all deviants."[218] This theme of non-humans and magical kind as deviant, or unnatural is at the heart of the xenophobia that is present in Gwent cards discussed in the earlier chapter and will appear again when I discuss Radovid and the Lodge of Sorceresses. This political climate is more strained than ever, but Var Attre recounts that he has personally spent thirteen years as ambassador in Novigrad, where "[he has] seen a great deal -cruelty, cynicism, greed."[219] This ends the section in Vizima proper and marks the bulk of the cultural contact that the player has with Nilfgaardian high command.

Thinking back on the characteristics of *Balkanism* as a hegemonic discourse is necessary to understand what's happening in this quest. Balkanism is primarily about the West's evaluation of the Balkans as barbaric, warlike, unsophisticated and tyrannical. Now, Nilfgaard is the *Witcher* stand-in for the Balkans as discussed in the *Gwent* chapter, and the Northern Realms are stand-ins for Western countries. However, Nilfgaardians present none of the characteristics that Balkanism attributes to their referent civilizations, rather the Northern Realms do. The subtle move that the *Witcher* games have undertaken is twofold. First, the body of stereotypes attached to the Balkans has been untethered and associated with an imperialistic Northern Realm. Second, that body of stereotypes is attached to the ruling class, rather than the entire culture. The message is that the Balkanist flaws are a by-product of the avarice and cruelty of the few, rather than a deeper truth about the many that compose a culture. This quest provides insight on how Nilfgaardian culture views itself relative to neighboring countries, but goes far beyond. It displays what role the Empire wishes to have relative to common folk, non-humans

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[218] "Imperial Audience," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[219] An important fact to note is that Geralt remains skeptical as to Nilfgaard's supposed altruism. It seems to the Witcher that for all the ambassador's moral posturing, Nilfgaard is also responsible for the conflict. Players are therefore encouraged to take characterization of both Nilfgaardians and Northerners with a grain of salt.

and magic folk. It also passes judgement on the futile warmongering of Radovid, which only causes further confusion and misery. This idea of a suicidal war, one that is driven solely by ego is also an attribute given specifically to "Balkanization" through war.[220] These wars are described as erratic, superlatively destructive and needless. This briefing also displays very astutely the atmosphere that *The Witcher 3* is suffused with: a pervasive fear that leads normal people to commit hateful acts upon their neighbors. The discussion between Geralt and Var Attre conveys the extent to which a law-abiding and progressive culture, relative to those in the game world, can better the lives of people. The explication of the geopolitical situation also definitely sets up Nilfgaard as the more advanced power politically, financially and militarily. The main underlying themes of these discussions is that Nilfgaard is a highly refined civilization that seeks to better the lives of the peoples it conquers, where the Northern Realms rulers are willing to destitute their own people to maintain their grip on power. At a higher discursive level, this scene also articulates fully what I discussed in the section on Gwent: Nilfgaard is a culture where courtly intrigue, military campaigns, espionage, fashion and discussions about government are equally important and often share the same space. This cultural and social arrangement is indeed very modern, while even the free city of Novigrad seems stuck in a xenophobic past.

Novigrad and its Witch Hunt: "So Who's it a Place For?"

I jump ahead to Novigrad here because I want to use it as a counterpoint to the information given to the player in Vizima. Nilfgaardians unequivocally condemned the persecution of nonhumans and magical folk as a backwards and ignorant attitude. Novigrad, mentioned earlier as a much more progressive part of the North, here seems almost as regressive relative to the Witcher's code of conduct and Nilfgaardian law from the eyes of our nonhuman protagonist, Geralt. This comes to a head in two Novigrad quests entitled "Pyres of Novigrad" and "The Great Escape." The first quest deals with Geralt arriving in the city and the second with a pogrom against magical beings, and I'll discuss them in that order. As the player enters the town, they pass a group of townsfolk being riled up by a roadside preacher. When the preacher notices the Witcher passing by, he says to the crowd: "Ah, here crawls a witcher! Look! The corpse-like visage! The beastly eyes! This is magic that's made a mongrel of a man!"[221] When confronted by an angry Geralt, he reiterates that "You are a mutant! A freak! A useless relic of a bygone age that should be burned like a withered branch!"[222] The player can reply in one of three ways to this racist barrage. In the first they can ignore the preacher, in the second they can

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[220] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)*,* 54.
[221] "Pyres of Novigrad," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[222] Ibidem.

threaten him and in the third they can ask him "how many people have you saved?"[223] In the third instance, the preacher is taken aback by the question, attempts to deflect it and then falls silent. The crowd at this point sees the preacher for a charlatan and leaves (and if the player has chosen this option they are also given 10 experience points, whereas the other two choices give none). Here, the player brings to bear information from the previous chapter - knowledge that the church is exploiting people's fear - and countering it with hard facts about the practical need for magic. The situation also shows that the racism prevalent in this Northern Realm is not innate, but cultivated by those in power.

Players barely have time to move into the next neighborhood, however, before being taken into another cutscene. This time, in the public square, the leader of the Novigrad witch hunters is staging a public burning of a sorceress and a wizard, while pontificating about religion.

No evil can survive the Holy Fire! The Holy Fire enlightens, burns and cleanses!

Fig. 11: Novigrad Pyres

The entire event is suffused with rage and pettiness, as the executioner threatens one of the victims: "You'll beg for mercy in all the voices known to you, like the others of your species."[224] In response, the victim pleads for life, saying that he's done no wrong and only wishes to live like the "kind folk" he is imploring to save him. The only individual to appear outraged at this scene is the player character, while

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[223]"Pyres of Novigrad," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[224] Ibidem.

people look on in frozen terror. Again, the game seems to stress that people are not enjoying the spectacle, but they are too afraid to intervene. The city is littered with these kinds of pyres, guarded by witch hunters and church guards.

The later half of this quest is centered on tracking down Triss, Geralt's paramour from previous games, and a sorceress of the Lodge. When the player reaches her supposed home, a shop that has been ransacked by thieves, they can fight the thieves who believe that their actions are justified. The thieves believe that looting her shop is not a criminal act because "Sorcerers, mages of all types are outlaws."[225]It seems as though these staged pogroms and public executions are considered by local administrators to be business as usual, whereas the Nilfgaardian ambassador saw these events as a tragedy inflicted on the people of Novigrad. Although Geralt is not outright attacked, he is nonetheless warned to leave town as "Novigrad's no place for your kind."[226] The player replies to the executioners that they "Heard Novigrad was no place for mages. Now you're telling me it's no place for Witchers. So, who's it a place for?" The answer given is that Novigrad is only for the faithful, but in reality it means those who bow to the powerful elite. Even then, game events have shown that anyone is vulnerable to institutional violence if they misstep, as the point of that violence is to be arbitrary and to stoke people's fear. As it relates to Balkanism, Todorova had made the point about Yugoslavia specifically became *Balkan* in the eyes of the West, once it began to collapse in on itself.[227] It wasn't that Yugoslavia was seen as historically Balkan, but that the atmosphere of fear, the threat of impending war, and the predatory conduct of the Yugoslavian splinter-states towards each other were all *Balkan* attitudes or characteristics. In that light, Novigrad is tied to Balkanist stereotypes, even though the city was discussed earlier as distinctly Western.

As the player advances to the heart of Novigrad, it turns out that one of the criminal underworld leaders, the King of Beggars, has offered to keep the mages protected, so long as they maintain a mutually helpful relationship. Immediately, the player is offered employment in the process of "reshaping this city." As this crime lord explains, "City Council is a puppet troupe with the hierarchy of the Church of the Eternal Fire as its puppeteer. Until recently, that is, when Radovid and his witch hunters took the reins."[228] The institutional racism exhibited and celebrated in Novigrad is therefore not incidental, but highly engineered by the Northern king to consolidate power. In contrast, what the

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[225] "Pyres of Novigrad," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[226] Ibidem.
[227] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 191.
[228] "Pyres of Novigrad," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.

merchant caste, represented by this crime lord, wants is a future where "One day the so-called free city of Novigrad will be truly free. But before that can happen, we gotta rid it of superstition."[229] If compared to the Nilfgaardian focus on justice, fairness and meritocracy, the game manifests *northern-ness* as a paradigm where the powerful weaponize fear and its antidote as tools to control the poor. As the King of Beggars states, "Any crowd of rabble'll cheer to the stench of burning flesh. But one day folk'll understand the Eternal Fire's naught but a leash around their necks."[230] And here the game does something beyond inverting the Balkanist paradigm. Nilfgaard is more civilized in many ways than the North, but that situation is not presented as a natural state, but a result of good stewardship. The King of Beggars calls the rest of Novigrad putrefied, saying that his underworld is the "last bastion of normality, sanity, reason." Here, the leaders of the criminal underworld come to represent freedom fighters dreaming of a Novigrad unfettered by religious zealotry and xenophobia. The implication is that, in the right hands, Novigrad could flourish and that those stewards could come from the locals themselves.

Any crowd of rabble'll cheer to the stench of burning flesh. But one day folk'll understand the Eternal Fire's naught but a leash around their necks.
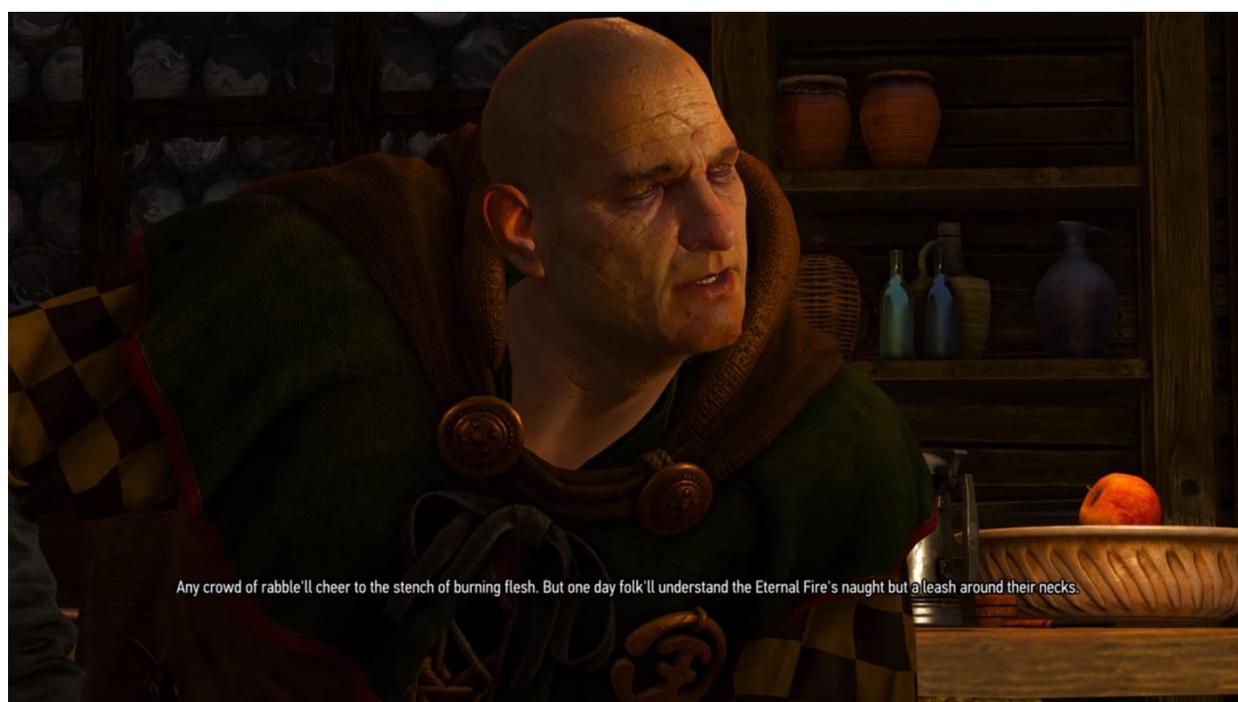
Fig. 12: The King of Beggars, part of a cabal of merchants and crime bosses

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[229] "Pyres of Novigrad," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[230] Ibidem.

As players spend more time in Novigrad they are embroiled in the fight between resistance elements in the city, and the increasingly violent persecution of minorities, chief among which are sorceresses. A later quest called "The Great Escape" requires that Geralt and Yennefer save two imprisoned sorceresses. One of those sorceresses is Margarita Laux-Antille, a character discussed in the Gwent chapter as the mechanical counter to Radovid. In this quest, Geralt comes upon both sorceresses and attempts to free them. As the player breaches the jail, they see both sorceresses abused, scarred and burned after weeks of imprisonment. Margarita can be talked to after escaping the jail and she will recount the circumstances of her capture. As she explains, it would have been easy for her to escape the pogrom, except she was trying to save her students. As punishment for trying to escape the purge, Radovid punished Margarita by killing her students, all sorceresses themselves: "Burned…alive…one after the other. The most talented girls in the North. Radovid was saving me for last."[231] The treatment of sorceresses and magical folk is bound up with racism, but at its core it is also about the systemic subordination of women in the North.[232] Triss and her fellow sorceresses are seen as deviant not only because they are magical, but because they are using their powers to disobey the King and his zealots. The treatment of women is a theme that recurs throughout the game, and in particular in the Bloody Baron's questline *Family Matters*.

Velen and the Bloody Baron: "What Would You Know of Pain"

I move to this quest line concerning Velen because the treatment of sorceresses in the Northern Realms is not only about envy toward magical folk, but also about the subjugation of women. This theme is certainly at the forefront of the Bloody Baron's questline in Velen. As discussed in the earlier chapter, the Baron, Philip Strenger, is a local warlord that has become the de facto ruler of Velen. He is allowed free reign by the Nilfgaardians because they see his presence, although violent and oppressive, as a better alternative to outright anarchy. The player arrives at the Baron's fort on his search for Ciri, his adoptive daughter. Geralt's efforts mirror those of the Baron, who wishes to find his wife and daughter. Strenger is forthcoming with information and even seems to relate to Geralt, saying that they

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[231] "The Great Escape," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[232] It should be noted that sorceresses represent most magic users that players encounter. The villainous Wild Hunt has an elvish sorcerer and in the Skellige Isles, not discussed here, sorcerers are called druid and occupy a position of political power. In the Northern Realms and Nilfgaard, male magic users are rare, and not important enough to be named in this installment.

are "Two helpless, empty-handed sods."[233] The quest is framed as an exchange between two concerned fathers, at least initially.

As Geralt investigates the Baron's home for clues about his family members, the unspoken details indicate a much more troubled home. The disheveled bedroom littered with broken furniture and spilled alcohol prompts the player to suspect that there may be violence at the heart of this supposed disappearance, a fact that is soon corroborated by a local apothecary who helped the Baron's wife and daughter escape. When the player returns to confront the Baron, he is found setting fire to his home and then tries to drunkenly fight the Witcher. After the Baron is subdued, there is a scene where the player learns the truth: The Baron regularly abused his wife, though he never harmed his daughter. In the latest episode of abuse, the violence caused his wife to have a miscarriage. After this event both women fled their home while the Baron was sleeping off his stupor.

Fig. 13: Strenger confesses the truth of his situation

Despite the violence that pervades the Baron's life, he attempts to convince Geralt that he does love his wife, recollecting that "Twenty years we've known each other. She's seen me drunk and sober, she was there to greet me when I returned the victor, she was there to patch me up in defeat."[234] Strenger also goes on to say that his wife would criticize him for his shortcomings and insinuates that he

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[233] "Family Matters," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[234] Ibidem.

would come back from the battlefield more broken every time. There is intimation of post-traumatic stress throughout the discussion. As it concerns his daughter, the Baron says she was the apple of his eye and that he doted on her; giving her the run of the entire fort. What the Baron attempts to do is to coerce the women in his life into roles that he considers proper: The loving and supportive wife, and the spoiled but pure daughter. What this scene brings up is that the war doesn't merely play out at a national or societal level, where groups of people are affected. It affects individuals, families and couples. Strenger appears as a flawed, reprehensible man, but one whose existence is the result of men like King Radovid and their callousness. The Baron seeks at his core to preserve an idyllic false image of his family life because he lives his life surrounded by never-ending violence, and when those attempts are challenged, he lashes out.

Fig. 14: The Baron preparing to bury his child[235]

The resolution of the quest also comes with great sacrifice and personal pain. Strenger must perform a ritual to release the spirit of the unborn child he killed while drunk. That scene is the one presented on the Gwent card discussed earlier. In regular Witcher fashion, the unborn child has become a monster. However, the point of this quest is to forsake violence, and for the Baron to accept responsibility for the child as payment for his crime.[236] If the child is accepted by the Baron wholeheartedly, given a proper name and then buried with dignity, its spirit is freed, and it will help the player find the Baron's missing wife and daughter. The quest line that commences to find both women is long and ends with a bittersweet denouement: The daughter has become emancipated, but she chooses

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[235] "Family Matters," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[236] The ritual requires that the Baron pick up the child and while cradling it, to give it a name and to accept that the monster is his child, and that it's fate is his fault entirely.

to be a witch hunter and to persecute nonhumans and magical folk, as a rebellion against her father's wishes. As for the Baron's wife, she has become indentured to three demonic witches and gone insane in the process. The story ends with the Baron either dying to free his wife or committing suicide to escape his shame. What I want to focus on however, is the nature of the family altogether. In this Northern Realm, perpetual war and chaos has forced the Baron into a life of brutality. He sought to escape this brutality by rigidly hanging onto his fantasy of the perfect family. This coercion, brought on by the same fear as the people of Novigrad, led to all three women in his life either dying, losing their sanity or becoming as hateful as the world he sought to protect them from.

Ciri and Geralt: A Different Relation to Gender & Fatherhood

The final quest that players complete as part of the game's main narrative is called *Something Ends, Something Begins*. It is an open-ended epilogue to the main game, where many of the choices players have made during gameplay influence the ending they receive. Three endings are possible here. The first ending sees Ciri survive the events of the game and set off on her own to become a Witcher, free from traditional duties. The second ending sees Ciri survive the events of the game, but due to her lack of confidence in her abilities, she returns to Nilfgaard as per her father's wishes to become Empress. The third ending sees Ciri die saving the world from the impending White Frost, an apocalyptic and multidimensional ice age.


Soon word of the ashen-haired witcheress had spread throughout the North, from the Yaruga to the mountains of Kovir...
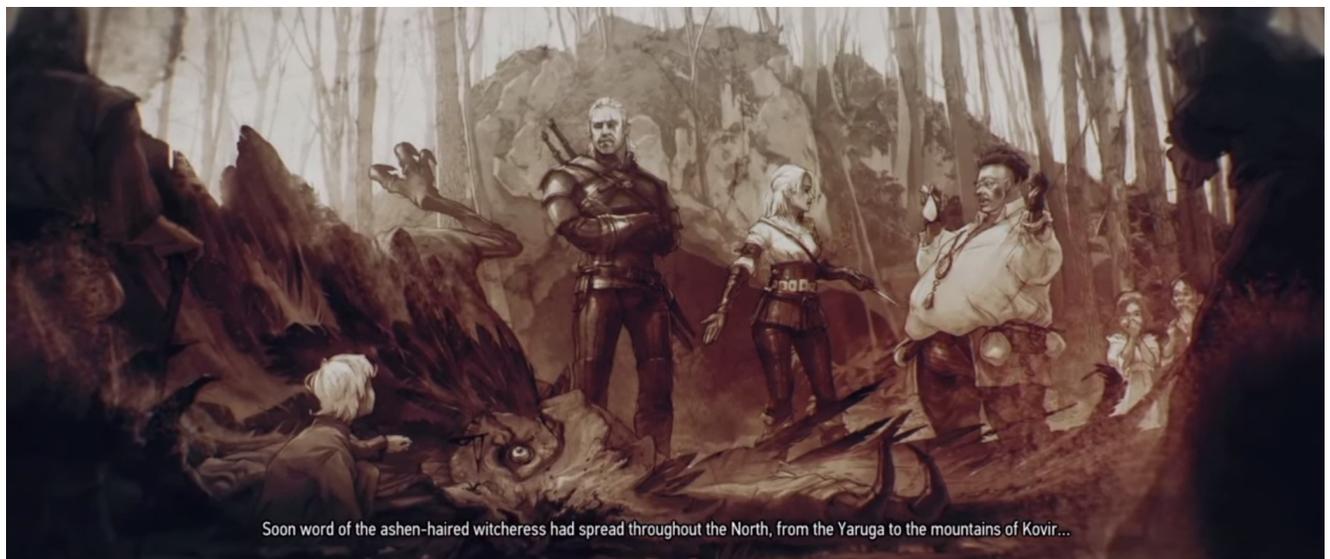
Fig. 15: The "positive" ending achieved by having more positive than negative choices

The conditions for triggering each ending are tied to specific moments throughout the entire game which concern Ciri. Those choices have to do with respecting Ciri's wish to not see her birth father, to pay respects at a friend's grave and by allowing her to speak to the Lodge of Sorceresses without Geralt's supervision.[237] The other deciding quest requires Geralt to encourage her to "Go for it", viz. to follow her dream of being free from her ancestral obligation to the throne, and then refusing to listening on her private conversations.[238] Each of these decisions gives either positive or negative points and if players accrue more positive points then they receive the positive ending: Ciri becoming a Witcher.[239] Where the Novigrad and Baron's questlines showed what happens when men control women's lives, the overall quest relating to Ciri rewards a type of fatherhood and masculinity that is progressive. If this ending is achieved, Geralt will commission a Witcher sword for his adoptive daughter as a token of his affection. The game then states that Geralt trained Ciri fully in the Witcher profession and that on her own she achieved great fame, as shown in *Fig. 15*.

My reading of the general quest trajectory is that attitudes towards nonhumans, attitudes towards women and attitudes towards those of different economic class are the root of Northern Realms problems, and are profoundly ingrained in its ruling class. Thinking back on Bogost's procedural rhetoric, players cannot negotiate with the game systems as to which choices give or subtract points. What the game teaches the players is that the "positive" ending can only be achieved by fighting racism, sexism, ableism and imperialism, which occurs if the player consistently makes choices attempting to empathize with others and their circumstances. These choices give points, while choices that allow players to exploit the weak for money or power always lead to subtracted points. These associations between quest choices, score and endings are non-negotiable outcomes that players have to accept at the end of their playthrough, but without the games giving any indication prior to the end as to the importance of specific choices.

Conclusion: From the Land to the People

The point of this chapter has been to discuss how the developers of the game articulate a vision that undoes Balkanist archetypes. This takes place through multiple layers of design and writing. I discussed Gwent as a general skeleton in the previous chapter, as a scaffold to read certain characters

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[237] "Blood on the Battlefield," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[238] "Child of the Elder Blood," in *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Projekt Red (2015; Warsaw: CD Projekt Red). Videogame.
[239] The ending is positive as the internal code for the game adds points for certain choices and subtracts them for others. This ending is achieved when the players accrue more positive than negative points, resulting in a positive score. In this sense, the ending is *mathematically* positive and commonly assumed as the good ending because it ends with an emancipated Ciri and fulfilled Geralt.

and the culture that they come from, and often represent. Here, the intent was to go beyond, to discuss other design elements that also articulate that vision, and then to examine how those characters interact with each other, and with the player character.

It is clear from the developers' own admission that the game's landscape and environment design was meant as a background to help players frame the cultures they met. From the pastoral but backwards White Orchard, to the lavish and refined Vizima, to the barren and ravaged Velen and finally to the industrious, yet xenophobic Novigrad, the player is exposed to various cultural formations. Each land either reinforces Nilfgaardian or Northern archetypes or subverts it by pairing it with incongruous elements. For instance, pairing Northern culture with Novigrad as a merchant city enhanced its cosmopolitan aspect, while also exploring the deep hatred and fear cultivated there that has led to outright witch hunts.

The Balkanist paradigm portrays Balkan countries as weak and economically dependent. Yet Nilfgaard's economic might, its enormous geographic span, unified government and multicultural nature is a point for point re-imagining of the Balkans as something else entirely. As for the Northern Realms, they are re-imagined with the characteristics usually attached to the Balkans. This reimagining, or as Chapman called it, the re-enactment of Western Europe and the Balkans has to do with the redistribution of stereotypes. By positing Nilfgaard as an older and more refined Byzantine version of the Balkans, the games achieve an ecosystem where being Balkan is not inherently negative. Further, the portrayal of the Northern Kingdoms undertaking witch hunts and pogroms, while living in poverty and perpetual conflict, relative to the eastern invaders, displaces Balkanist tropes onto the Northern Kingdoms, i.e. the reimagined West. The construction of the game world's cities and villages is meant to sign-post the relative wealth and development of each region. These notions drawn from the environment are further reinforced by a pervasive sense of poverty. This is rendered through the lack of food, curatives and supplies that the player contends with regularly, while in full knowledge that the people inhabiting the Witcher world are often even more destitute. More subtle details like the prices of military gear, the relative poverty of the shopkeepers, the exchange rates between currencies and the inaccessibility of the bank also convey an extreme lack of wealth that is felt everywhere, even in the Novigrad residential districts.[240]

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[240] Paired with the issue of game difficulty, the feeling of poverty can be enhanced further, while creating an even more inhospitable game world.

All these elements are brought to bear as the player navigates the world. In White Orchard, players are acquainted with Northern peasants living under the command of Nilfgaardian soldiers. Ruled with strict but ultimately fair methods, the land seems to flourish by the time the player leaves for the next area. Again, this point was one that Todorova stressed, when she discussed the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire as mutually constitutive of each other. The Byzantine and Ottoman Empires consolidated Balkan identity by shepherding those countries together, yet allowed them to self-govern and brought Balkan culture into a symbiotic relationship the Ottomans, to the point where the cultures of each individual country also constituted the Ottoman Empire overall. Byzantine Empire, Ottoman Empire and Balkans are for Todorova a historical continuum that has undergone transformations, while nevertheless retaining a unified identity deeply rooted in a refined concept of citizenship based on adherence to common laws, as opposed to citizenship rooted in the place of birth.[241] Balkan citizens were part of the Ottoman Empire because they contributed to the collective, as much as Nilfgaardian citizens are part of that empire for the same reasons.[242] In Vizima, the player is exposed to a cultural life rife with etiquette, intrigue, fashion and an extremely detailed look at the *Witcher* world, from the eyes of those who hope to make it better. From there, the player must trek through Velen, encountering destroyed villages, backwaters and a fort ruled by a broken warlord. The world as it is for the Northerner is contrasted with the world as it could be in the mind of a Nilfgaardian. Finally, the player arrives at the free city of Novigrad, a supposed haven, only to find mass pogroms, public executions and a mad king who relishes in the torture of those he rules.

A final twist in the game's positive ending is that after the events of the game, the kingdom of Temeria (the land where Vizima and White Orchard are located) is restored by the Emperor granting its people citizenship. It should be noted that the Kingdom had fallen after the assassination of its king by other Northern Realms actors. The Northern and Nilfgaardian fusion, where the former's culture is tempered by the latter's administrative institutions, proves to be a success undoing bloodshed stretching to the first Witcher game. The point is to understand that the cultural formations in the *Witcher* world are not natural or innate. Nilfgaardians prosper because of concrete actions taken to

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[241] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 164.

[242] Adherence to Ottoman government was so profound that early German anthropologist Johann Gottfried von Herder and philosophers like Immanuel Kant were researching the Balkan *Volksgeist* (Or Balkan Popular Spirit) and referred to that entire swath of Europe as European Turkey due to the strong fusion of linguistic elements and legislative traditions (Todorova, 128). In effect, Balkan countries were understood to be equal parts Ottoman and European.

better the lives of the ones they rule, while the North languishes because of a mad tyrant that abuses his power.

Fig. 46: The fate of Temeria under Nilfgaardian rule

At no point is a categorical judgement made where Northerners are all condemned as savages. This is perhaps the most damning charge that Todorova levies at Balkanism, i.e. that it has scapegoated *all* Balkan peoples for frustrations in the global West and that it has done so in a manner that escapes the general paradigm of colonialism, as the Balkans are mostly white and Christian.[243] Even in the case of the Bloody Baron, a man worthy of contempt, the player is often intended to feel sympathy and understanding for his pain, as something external that is impressed upon him. There is a real sense that the North and Nilfgaard are separated only by the judiciousness and the empathy, or lack thereof, from those in power towards those they preside over. This is where I turn last: A final discussion of what a Europe *sans Balkanism* would entail.

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[243] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 188.

CONCLUSION: A MOVE BEYOND BALKANISM

I began my analysis inquiring as to how *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* contributes to, challenges or modifies the Balkanist model of representation. This question was accompanied by several subset questions asking what the Balkans were and what Balkanism was. I argue that the Balkans are a region of Southeast Europe that occupy a cultural and political space, loosely tied to but much larger than the geographic region the term refers to. The term Balkan refers in this context to the nations that bear a significant cultural, political and historical legacy issuing from the Byzantine and Ottoman empires. Todorova singled out Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Macedonia, Turkey, Slovenia and even included Austria and Poland as Balkan contact areas, meaning countries that were not Balkan per se, but still had familiarity with the Balkan identity. As for Balkanism, it referred to a complex discourse articulated by centuries of conflict between the Christian West and the Ottomanized Balkans. That discourse rests upon holistic attitude that views the Balkans as a barbarian, semi-oriental, intolerant and warlike group of nations. Balkanism informs the production of art and media that depicts the Balkans in that light and even which hinders the production of representation that challenges this paradigm.

CD Projekt Red and their *Witcher* series, set squarely in fictionalized Balkans territories, challenge and move beyond the Balkanist paradigm in several ways. First, the opposition of the Northern Realms, as a stand in for Western European states, and Nilfgaard, as a stand in for the unified and Byzantine Balkans, flip the script. In their re-imagining and reference to pre-Ottoman state, the *Balkan* appears as sophisticated, fashionable, educated, magnanimous and progressive. In contrast, the Northern Realms appears as warlike, xenophobic, impoverished, conniving and superstitious. At every turn the factions stand in clear opposition on issues that have to do with the persecution of ethnic groups, the differently abled, women and those of lower social status. Second, this flip is not unilateral, which further nuances this challenge to traditional Balkanism. Nilfgaard and the Northern Realms occupy their relative positions because of the models of governance and citizenship that they employ. The Northerners are not made out to be hateful by nature, but rather by the historical legacy that has shaped their nations, while Nilfgaardians have built a vibrant empire through the meritocratic institutions that comprise it. Third, this inverted Balkanism is not portrayed as an incontrovertible truth, but as a fluid and flexible paradigm in which progress or regress is equally possible based on what choices the player makes and how the important story characters respond. Given that the events leading to Nilfgaard's ascension as a superpower, and the decline of the Northern Kingdoms, all occur

throughout the *Witcher* videogames, which feature original scripts, this new conception of the Balkans and the West is original, even if unintentional, to the game developers. If, as Todorova maintains, Balkanism is a discourse about an imputed ambiguity, i.e. the anxiety that Western Europe exhibits in the face of the proximate Balkans, then this anti-Balkanism destroys any pretense to absolute truth by altering it. *The Witcher 3* and *Gwent* time and again reinforce that corruption, misery, war, inequality and racism are climates built and sustained by the elites in power, rather than the masses that populate any countries in this world. So, the answer lies in governance models that steward a better a future, rather than an isolationist xenophobia which seems to characterize the North at the onset of the game.

Contributions to Videogame Studies and Cultural Theory

As I discussed earlier, videogame narratives have largely confined Balkan countries to the genre of military first-person shooter games, or real-time strategy games. Most often these games have portrayed stories centered on the Yugoslavian collapse, or post-Communist anxieties, but in doing so have reproduced the obsession with Balkan political instability found in Balkanism. The intent of this analysis was, in part, to highlight that the *Witcher* series represented different themes about the Balkans. While it is true that the *Witcher* universe is marked by war and instability, it also displays exhaustive detail about the intercultural relations, the models of governance, local folklore and aesthetics that permeate the real-world Balkans. In every sense, these games are about the Balkans, made for Balkan eyes (as well as Western ones) and made by artists who are themselves familiar with the Balkans.

At a theoretical level, this analysis sought to understand how and if works can challenge a dominant cultural discourse. Reading Todorova and Said, i.e. the source texts about Balkanism and Orientalism in conjunction with Appadurai was meant to highlight that these discourses are part of a larger, Western-centric hegemony on knowledge production. Balkanism as a discourse often supersedes local voices in the discussion about what the Balkans are. The success of the *Witcher*, its circulation and its role as a political gift are not incidental, but part of its core message: "This is our world as we see it." Understanding what *The Witcher 3* achieves, with the added support of *Gwent*, when it modulates this anti-Balkanist narrative, and how it does so, is important because it attempts to break hegemonic paradigms. It would be facile for these game creators to write a narrative in which Nilfgaardians are beyond reproach, and Northern Realms citizens are naturally barbaric. What comes through is a thoughtful cultural paradigm in which everyone involved could build a flourishing world, if historical

circumstance allows. At this level, *The Witcher 3* is not merely an anti-Balkanist work of art, but an counter-hegemonic one altogether.

At a more methodological level, I intended to discuss a card game as a particularly schematized model for communicating deeper truths about the game. In a Bogostian sense, the rhetoric of card games is more front and centre than the rhetoric of other game genres. When it is read in conjunction with design elements that can be more occluded, like plot quests or lore, then it becomes a roadmap of sorts. Card games work with very limited space to communicate essential qualities about the characters and world they relate back to. Therefore, the elements that can be found on each card are the most important. Further, reading cards together, like those in a faction or archetype, allows analysis to move from individual instances into more macro forms, viz. understanding a cultural group's essential characteristics for instance. However, my analysis is not infallible or all-encompassing.

Analysis Limitations & Flaws

The scope of *The Witcher* games, even of the third installment alone, is much too broad for this thesis to fully analyze. I mentioned earlier that there were other avenues to explore and I want to discuss those for a moment. If we take only *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, there are groups which could constitute an entirely different thesis. Those groups, namely the Skellige clans and the Elder races are just as important as the ones I discussed, but emblematic of different cultures. Skellige clans are island clans focused on glory and heroic achievement, with their own laws, cultural forms and mythological folklore. As for the Elder races, the term refers to elves and dwarves that have come from a different dimension. Those groups represent the minority diasporas that traverse European nations, with their own distinct languages, struggles and narratives. Talking about those groups would have diluted my analysis from the Western/Balkan contact to include other hegemonic paradigms of representation. The inclusion of those cultures makes for a richer discussion but would have required a much larger format than what this thesis is meant to be.

Even considering the limited scope I chose to analyze, I covered a minimal and very curated swath of game quests. It is very possible that including a larger body of quests or looking at specific villages throughout the game would have made for a different analysis. I am confident that I have not mischaracterized or twisted the primary trajectory of quests and characters. However, it is entirely possible that a small description in a quest item or a branching quest path I did not take could have revealed a sympathetic or tragic aspect of a characters otherwise seen as cruel. It is an occupational

hazard when dealing with a game this enormous and with multiple branching paths, that players will never see the full extent of the product.

This also brings up another limitation of my overall method. I am always positioned relative to the subject matter. As Todorova put it earlier, there is always a bias I must uncover and keep in mind when I deal with any material, but especially material that celebrates and opens discussion about my own cultural background. Textual analysis is vulnerable because it is subjective, and so another critic might "read" the same game and come to an entirely different conclusion. This was in fact the case when the game originally released in Northern America, where the discussion focused on the inclusion, or lack thereof, of ethnic groups present in North America. This criticism is valid, but was not the primary focus of my analysis, leading to a significant divergence in opinion.

One last limitation I'd like to address is the limitation of language. This entire analysis was undertaken in English. I played the games in English, read my theoretical baseline texts in English and wrote this entire paper in English as well. There are many overlapping language barriers to consider and all the interpretive missteps they can cause. The games in the original Polish script used in pre-production, which is translated during production may have vastly different dialogues and terms. Given how heavily I focused on the dialogue, a misunderstanding here can shift an entire character's representation. This applies from the other side of the analysis as well, since I read Todorova's work in translation as well. As for this text, I've written it in English, as it is the language I am most proficient with, but it is meant for those living and working in the Balkans as well. For all the limitations I face with this work, I also see many future directions for this work, and those like it.

A Post-Witcher Analysis

The limitations listed earlier also constitute avenues for future analysis. For instance, Balkanism is a discourse that exists side-by-side with other types of hegemonic attitudes. It would behoove us to consider how the treatment of other ethnic groups in the *Witcher* series intersects with the cultural stereotyping I discussed earlier. This would amount to increasing the scope of the analysis laterally. However, the analysis could also be extending in terms of historicity. Looking at the previous *Witcher* games would help understand how specific factions have changed over the course of the games being produced. There are ethnicities in the game world that also only appear in the previous games which would allow for a different perspective. The scope could also be increased by adding more material that is not part of the games, such as the short television series or even the original literary works by

Sapkowski. Those materials would contrast the narrative produced by CD Projekt Red and could highlight what the studio specifically altered. That reading could also bring up endemic issues that are part of Balkan literary traditions, such as the exclusion of non-European ethnicities or the treatment of women. These directions for future research all have to do with expanding this analysis of the *Witcher*, but there are also other avenues to explore, such as different theoretical foundations.

My analysis proceeded from the field of cultural theory, specifically focusing on global flows and media archaeology. However, it would have been possible to run a more schematized and mathematical breakdown of dialogue trees, decisions and story branches with methodology issuing from the digital humanities. Another perspective would see this analysis as a Marxian analysis of the production economy behind the games. In that vein, the analysis would focus on what nationalities were included in the writing of the game, where the wealth generated by the game's distribution eventually wound up and how its international distribution affected the studio's development. After all, the game's production context is important for understanding what CD Projekt Red's rise to fame means for the games industry in Europe. Another theoretical field that could orient this analysis would be that of gender studies. Although I touched on the role of gender somewhat, I did so within the scope of my focus on Balkanism, but the situation could be reversed to produce an analysis where cultural stereotypes are read through a larger paradigm where gender is the orienting principle.

These avenues are rich alcoves for exploring the *Witcher* series more in depth, but there's no reason to stop there. This thesis was intended as a template to conduct similar analysis for other games. For instance, the *Tom Clancy* war games listed at the beginning of this text could provide another field to work with entirely. I mentioned the strong focus on Yugoslavian disintegration and the military conflicts that ensued. That focus is also part of the Balkanist paradigm and could provide a richer understanding of representation of the Balkan in videogames has focused on until now. For that matter, I have focused on the Balkans more holistically, but there is analysis to be conducted on specific nations and ethnicities as well, or even diasporic communities from Balkan countries in other parts of the world.

Lastly, my work deals with videogames specifically and utilises methodology appropriate to that field. There is no reason why tools from film studies, television studies or art criticism could not be substituted to analyse any work of cultural representation. I encourage the endeavor especially as it pertains to the Balkans, where the current Western interest on postcolonial studies finds little to do. There is still a great deal of artistic work to parse and doing so is an imperative as many Balkan countries struggle with their cultural legacy and the move to create a pan-national European identity. When Maria

Todorova reached the conclusion of her book in 1997, she wrote: "If Europe has produced not only racism but also antiracism, not only misogyny but also feminism, not only antisemitism, but also its repudiation, then what can be termed Balkanism has not yet been coupled with its complementing and ennobling antiprinciple."[244] This antiprinciple, although nascent, can be found here in CD Projekt Red's rendition of the *Witcher* universe. More so, it is found without settling for an easy answer that would displace Balkanism to a new locale.

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[244] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 189.

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