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“Video Games in Transmedia Storyworlds: *The Witcher* and the Mothership Problem”

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### **Abstract**

This article looks at the impact of video games on transmedia fantasy worlds using *The Witcher* as a primary example. While Hollywood-centered franchises tend to follow a “mothership” model of transmedia, with one dominant platform surrounded by ancillary texts, *The Witcher* demonstrates an alternate model in which the video game series plays just as central a role as the TV adaptation. The article introduces the concept of “dual industrial core” transmedia to describe this type of franchise and explains its implications for fantastic storyworlds. Whereas mothership transmedia attempts to offer high levels of completeness and consistency, particularly in relation to the storyworld’s mythos and topos, dual industrial core transmedia favors greater flexibility. The key platforms for the storyworld maintain distinct differences between each other, often deliberately choosing to diverge in terms of character and storyworld representation, with the video game praised for its Slavic character while the TV series aims for a more generic fantasy environment reminiscent of *Game of Thrones* or *The Lord of the Rings*. What holds the fantasy world together is less a coherent mythos and topos than foundational characters displaying a particular kind of ethos, allowing creators in different media to expand the storyworld by creating “*Witcher*-esque” situations that are accepted as authentic if they remain true to the storyworld’s bleak, morally ambiguous worldview. As dual industrial core franchises become more common, we may also expect to see more fantastic storyworlds bound primarily by ethos with significantly less emphasis on a consistent mythos and topos.

**Keywords:** transmedia, worldbuilding, *The Witcher*, fantasy, adaptation, narrative core, industrial core.

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Stephen Joyce

# Video Games in Transmedia Storyworlds

*The Witcher and the Mothership Problem*

**T**HE RISE OF THE FANTASTIC across the 21<sup>st</sup> century mediascape is inextricably linked with the growth of transmedia storyworlds. While transmedia fantastic universes such as *The Wizard of Oz* have long existed, fundamental changes in our media ecosystem have given them much greater prominence. Increased competition for our attention encourages producers to invest in media franchises with a proven audience. Digital technologies allow audiences to move easily across platforms and encourage narrative extensions in other media. Networked fan communities allow audiences to build storyworld knowledge secondhand through fan wikis and fan forums, as well as construct their own extensions through fan fictions. These shifts in industry incentives, technology, and audience participation have turbocharged the creation of immersive transmedia storyworlds. However, one structural factor that deserves more attention is the impact videogames have had on the overall media ecosystem. It does not seem a coincidence that fantasy worldbuilding has become so prominent just as a major new entertainment medium is reshaping the mediascape, yet the systemic and aesthetic implications of video games for fantasy worlds require more fine-grained elaboration. What are the structural consequences of video games now challenging Hollywood in terms of production budgets and revenue? What are the aesthetic consequences for transmedia storyworlds given the rise of a new medium in which linear narratives are often downplayed in favor of worldbuilding?

This article examines these questions in relation to *The Witcher* franchise. What makes *The Witcher* unusual is the atypical direction of adaptations and expansions across media. Generally speaking, fantasy storyworlds originating in literature are first adapted into film or

television series, which wins them a larger audience that can then be used to finance expansions in other media, such as video games. *The Witcher*, however, follows an uneven path of development. It began as a series of short stories and then novels by the Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski that attracted a cult following in Eastern Europe. This success led to the creation of related comics co-authored by Sapkowski, a tabletop RPG system, and a critically panned film, *The Hexer*, in 2001. However, while the film and its subsequent one-season TV series flopped, the franchise rose to international prominence through CD Projekt Red's videogame franchise, culminating in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* in 2015, one of the most successful and critically acclaimed video games of all time. This success lifted Sapkowski's first collection of *Witcher* stories, *The Last Wish*, into the *New York Times* bestseller list, twenty-seven years after it was first published. The growing interest inspired Netflix to produce a TV series in 2019 that broke Netflix records with over 76 million member households watching the first season. Although Gawronski and Bajorek (2020, 105) argue, "[u]ndoubtedly, the most important event related to the popularization of the story about the Witcher was the premiere of the American–Polish series created by Lauren S. Hissrich," it is clear that the primary engine of *The Witcher's* international popularity has been the game series.

This type of development is becoming increasingly common. Although there are film versions of *Assassin's Creed* and *World of Warcraft*, the engine of these popular fantasy worlds continues to be the video games. However, does it make any difference to a transmedia storyworld if it is rooted in a video game rather than a traditional narrative medium? This paper argues that we need to refine the idea of the "motherhip" in transmedia worldbuilding to better understand the roles that different media play and how that affects the aesthetics of transmedia fantasy worlds.

## Narrative and Industrial Cores

A major challenge for transmedia worldbuilding is establishing storyworld coherence across different adaptations and expansions. Jason Mittell (2015, 294) defines a spectrum between "*balanced transmedia*, with no one text or medium serving a primary role over others, with a more commonplace model of *unbalanced transmedia*, with

a clearly identifiable core text and a number of peripheral transmedia expansions that might be more or less integrated into the narrative whole.” In terms of industry economics, not all extensions are equal; some generate far more revenue than others and the goal of producers is to attract audiences to the platforms that offer the greatest return. Typically, this is the film or television series, with other media functioning as paratexts. Dedicated fans may seek out the tie-in novels and board games, but most casual fans are content to consume only the core text. As Henry Jenkins (2014, 247) explains, “[t]he mothership must be perceived as self-contained, even if other media add new layers.”

The most straightforward model of transmedia thus belongs to fantasy worlds that have one main platform with everything else being ancillary. An archetypal example is *Star Wars*, in which the film series is the canonical mothership around which everything else orbits. The mothership model offers a high level of internal coherence because storyworld material outside the mothership can always be defined as non-canonical, thus allowing creators to gloss over inconsistencies between media by insisting that only the mothership texts are canon. This approach works best for transmedia worlds rooted in film or television, because audio-visual media are the most expensive to produce and attract the biggest audiences. Hence, film and TV often finance transmedia extensions less as an extra revenue source than as a form of advertising, offering fans free webisodes or online material, for example, in order to keep audiences hooked and offer more gateways for new fans to discover the franchise. The problem is that, if the mothership fails, it can bring the entire franchise down with it, a process I call *franchise entropy* (Joyce 2018, 102). Entropy describes the gradual dissipation of energy and enthusiasm for a storyworld, with new expansions causing audience dissatisfaction and a loss of engagement. This has repeatedly been a problem with, for example, *The Terminator* franchise, with the failing film series unable to support transmedia extensions. Arguably, the same process afflicted *The Matrix* as well, with the franchise unable to sustain its early transmedia momentum after the disappointing reception of the film sequels.

We can see a more complicated transmedia model when we look at fantasy worlds such as *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings*. Here, we have blockbuster film series that finances a huge range of transmedia extensions, but no amount of Hollywood money is ever going to

displace the books as the true canon. Let us now split the mothership into two terms, the *narrative core* and the *industrial core*. The narrative core describes the medium that fans consider the most authoritative text on that storyworld. The industrial core describes the medium that primarily finances the transmedia universe, driving demand for the various extensions. Hence, we get the new *Fantastic Beasts* series of films in *Harry Potter* or the *Lord of the Rings* TV series by Amazon, which continually expand the fantasy world but will never displace the canonical books. Franchises split between narrative and industrial cores are more likely to suffer from storyworld coherence difficulties, but what they lose in coherence is often compensated by the strength the franchise accrues from possessing a dense network of texts across platforms. This creates a web of storyworld material that cannot simply be destroyed by a failing film series. Instead, as with the gap between the Tim Burton/Joel Schumacher *Batman* movies and the Christopher Nolan reboot, the industrial core will go dormant while other texts continue developing on different platforms, testing new ideas and keeping the storyworld active before a new industrial core powers it back to prominence.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century mediascape, the industrial core of a transmedia franchise could only really be a film or TV series. No other industry could compare financially with Hollywood. Tying in with a major Hollywood production was a pathway to riches for creators in other media and very few people turned down lucrative opportunities for adaptation. What has changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that the videogame industry has grown to a size comparable with Hollywood. Triple-A console games rival cinematic blockbusters in terms of budgets and revenue. This also means that game producers are not willing to play a subordinate role in some Hollywood franchise. Game producers are reluctant to invest resources in tie-in games that are then wholly dependent on a movie's success, while also being wary of bad film adaptations damaging their biggest franchises. Transmedia fantasy worlds with a major videogame component thus form what we may call *dual industrial core* franchises, which encourage games and the film or TV series to share the overall fantasy world but stay at a significant distance from each other, with both sides policing the boundary to maintain a distinct identity. Franchise entropy is less common when a franchise can rely on two industrial cores, as the failure of one core is not the end of the fantasy world. Yet it does

create an even more significant challenge for issues of storyworld coherence.

Using this terminology, we can describe *The Witcher* as having not a singular mothership but three distinct cores: a narrative core in Sapkowski's books and the dual industrial cores of the video games and the TV series. From an aesthetic perspective, this leads to a problem: How does a fantasy storyworld with three distinct cores maintain a sense of coherence when the creators in all three may be pulling in different directions? Using the dual industrial model, I will first examine some of the distinctive features of the narrative core, then how it has been adapted by the different industrial cores.

## Narrative Core

Every transmedia storyworld needs a narrative core that is in some way amenable to adaptation. This straightforward statement poses immediate questions once you start applying it to the relationship between literature and games. Fantasy novels have been bestsellers with dedicated audiences for decades. Fantasy RPGs are one of the biggest digital game genres. So how come hardly any of the major fantasy RPGs are based on a successful series of novels? Why don't game creators simply acquire the rights to Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* or Terry Brooks' *Shannara* series if they want to make an expansive fantasy RPG in a richly detailed world? Film and television have always been willing to pay for the rights to successful literature in order to tap into a large existing fan base and there is no reason why this logic should not apply equally to games. Yet among digital fantasy RPGs today, *The Witcher* is somewhat of an outlier in being directly adapted from fiction with no prominent intermediate adaptation in film or television. The first question, then, is whether something about the narrative core makes it different from other fantasy novels and, if so, how that makes it amenable to video game adaptation.

One of the first things a fantasy reader notices when opening a *Witcher* novel is the absence of a map. Since Tolkien, it has been *de rigeur* for high fantasy novels to provide detailed maps of an internally consistent world. These maps serve a variety of purposes, such as facilitating the author's desire for consistency in world details or assisting the reader's understanding of narrative events. As Stefan Ekman (2013, 15) writes in his detailed study of fantasy

maps, “[w]hether provided for authentication, understanding, inner consistency, or world expansion, maps are expected to be supplied in high fantasy novels today.” These world maps are often so extensive and detailed that one novel is usually insufficient to explore them; the high fantasy genre is full of trilogies, tetralogies, and pentalogies devoted to exploring fantasy worlds whose extent has been mapped from the first page. Moreover, the locations marked by maps are not simply geographical but historical, often featuring places where major events within the lore of the fantasy world took place. Two salient features of high fantasy, then, are what Klastrup and Tosca (2004, 412) define as a detailed *mythos*, “the central knowledge one needs to have in order to interact with or interpret events in the world successfully,” and extensive *topos*, “what is to be expected from the physics of and navigation in the world,” both of which are represented by the initial map. One would think that the existence of a detailed mythos and topos to explore would make fantasy novels ideal for video game adaptation, yet the absence of direct adaptations shows that this is not true, and the primary example of such adaptations, *The Witcher*, does not conform to high fantasy conventions.

Unlike other high fantasy series, *The Witcher* did not begin as a series of novels but as a cycle of short stories based around the character of Geralt of Rivia, which were then gathered in two collections, *The Last Wish* and *Sword of Destiny*. There is a loose chronology, and some rather vague hints of geography, but it is difficult for a reader to piece it together into a coherent whole. These beginnings had an effect on the storyworld because, as Sapkowski explained:

You don’t create universes in short stories, there is—literally and metaphorically—no place for them. Later, when my stories started evolving into full novels, the necessity of some coherent background became imminent. And slowly, step by step, something resembling a universe started to emerge. But it’s only in the background, so it plays a secondary role in the story. (Interview by Handel 2020)

Unlike other fantasy series, *The Witcher* is not particularly interested in establishing an intricate, coherent sense of history and geography. Sapkowski’s writing is less descriptive than we might expect of high fantasy and more focused on dialogue, which affects how we incorporate storyworld information. Rather than an omniscient narrator



highlighting salient aspects of the world, we get lines such as, “I stayed in Pont Vanis for a long time, in Esterad Thyssen’s court. And then at Niedamir’s in Hengfors” (Sapkowski 2008, 33). Should readers be mentally constructing a map with Pont Vanis and Hengfors, and, if so, where are they supposed to be in relation to each other? Sapkowski drops many such names into the dialogue without explanation and there are few cardinal points to anchor our understanding of the world’s geography. Moreover, readers are consistently reminded that stories, histories, and reports are unreliable. For example, the opening chapter of *Blood of Elves* features dozens of characters arguing about the truth behind one of Dandilion’s ballads; by the end, the reader is left with an unclear sense of what really happened and whose version of events can be trusted. Where other fantasies often present authoritative histories by an omniscient narrator, Sapkowski likes to give readers conflicting points of view on a contentious or unknowable past.

Another strategy for worldbuilding could be to use elements of the primary world to map the secondary world, such as using Viking names to represent the north or Slavic names to represent the east, but Sapkowski’s fantasy world is a *mélange* of cultures and traditions. Sapkowski gives a sample list of mythologies he has drawn on, including “the Germanic Wild Hunt. The Portuguese bruxa. The Arabic ghul. The Scottish kilmoulis [...] dryads from Greek myths. Paracelsian gnomes. The Japanese kitsune” (*Literary Hub* 2020). This eclectic foundation is fascinating, but it does not help readers draw on their knowledge of the primary world to construct a clear image of the different factions and races. Most readers will rapidly conclude that the world’s topos is of minor importance for the author. As Gawronski and Bajorek (2020, 7) remark, “Sapkowski – the writer – is not particularly interested in the geography of stories, the characters” languages, or maintaining realism. It is a kind of patchwork in which social relations become key factors.

*The Witcher* employs some of the trappings of high fantasy with its medievalist setting, but in its narrative form draws more on the sword-and-sorcery tradition of the wandering adventurer in a more primitive world, as in Robert E. Howard’s *Conan the Barbarian* or Karl Edward Wagner’s *Kane, the Mystic Swordsman*. This form depends primarily on an iconic central character confronting a variety of challenges, rather than the detailed worldbuilding of high fantasy. Instead of

mythos and topos, it is *ethos*, the “knowledge required in order to know how to behave in the world” (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 412), that characterizes the form. Sapkowski’s use of high fantasy trappings provides a backdrop against which to juxtapose a cynical, morally ambiguous ethos. There is political intrigue but no deserving ruler; there are oppressed people, but they are as likely to betray their own kind as fight tyranny. The common folk are superstitious, usually ignorant, often cruel, particularly when it comes to persecuting other races, such as dwarves and elves.

A typical example is the chapter in *Blood of Elves* when Geralt, Ciri, and a severely ill Triss ride with a convoy of dwarves and humans delivering some secret cargo through countryside plagued by elven rebels, the Scoia’tael. Throughout the chapter, different characters argue about whether the elves are freedom fighters or bandits and which side the equally persecuted dwarves should be on. Geralt tries not to get involved, saying “I want to remain neutral” (Sapkowski 2008, 134), while his friend Yarpem Zigrin, the leader of the convoy’s dwarves, tells him it is impossible. When the elves finally attack, Geralt does intervene in order to save Triss, but it is then revealed that the convoy contains no secret cargo; it was simply a trap designed to test Yarpem Zigrin’s loyalty to a distant human king and so the slain on both sides died for nothing. In contrast to the Tolkien-derived traditions of high fantasy, there is no clear division between good and evil. No noble quest or magical object will be able to transform a world so defined by suspicion, treachery, and violence.

In such a world, the hero, Geralt, has less in common with the heroes of fantasy than with those of hardboiled detective fiction; down those mean highways must ride a man who is not himself mean, who can maintain a certain ethical code even in a world defined by moral turpitude. Sapkowski has acknowledged a debt to Raymond Chandler, saying, “I like to imagine the Witcher as some kind of incarnation of Philip Marlowe, or any other private investigator who lives in a big, bleak urban jungle, trying to fight against evil and who in the end cannot win” (*SamaGame* 2011). Like a classic film noir, *The Witcher*’s world is a moral grey zone with no good outcomes. Geralt will attempt to mitigate its harshness, but there will be no ultimate triumph of good over evil.

Rather than mythos or topos, then, what defines the world of *The Witcher* is its ethos and how the foundational characters, and

in particular Geralt, navigate these moral challenges. Whereas most high fantasy novels vary in mythos and topos but share a common ethos about good and evil, *The Witcher* borrows the trappings of the typical high fantasy world in order to question the ethos that unites the genre. Several scholars have elucidated the connections between this worldview and Polish culture. Paulina Drewniak (2019, 214) argues, “[b]eneath the transmedia framework lies a world whose worldness is distinctly Central European,” while Tomasz Majkowski (2018, 11) sees a “pervasive motif of the older, inefficient but local governments colliding with a modern, yet foreign political system,” with the encroaching Nilfgaardian empire confronting smaller, often tyrannical feudal kingdoms. For many, *The Witcher*’s bleak moral worldview reflects Poland’s complex history, trapped between competing empires and ever aware that heroic epics tend to be written by invaders rather than the invaded. This mistrust of the heroic mode of high fantasy and a preference for murky ethical and political situations with no satisfactory outcome is perhaps the defining aspect of *The Witcher*’s storyworld.

## From Narrative to Industrial Core

Despite how popular *The Witcher* was in Eastern Europe, there is a big jump between being popular in Poland and being internationally successful. The traditional route is through a film adaptation; however, the Polish film *The Hexer* (Marek Brodzki, 2001) was poorly received by fans and critics. When asked about his opinion, Sapkowski said, “I can only answer with a single word, an obscene, albeit a short one” (McKee 2021). Instead, the franchise’s industrial core came from a completely different quarter. A young Polish company called CD Projekt Red bought the video game adaptation rights from Sapkowski for a total of 35,000 PLN, about \$9,500 in today’s money. According to Sapkowski, “they offered me a percentage of their profits. I said, ‘No, there will be no profit at all – give me all my money right now! The whole amount.’ It was stupid” (Purchase 2017). After the success of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, Sapkowski sued CD Projekt Red for \$16.11 million in royalties, showing exactly how much he appreciated his early mistake. Nevertheless, Sapkowski’s lack of interest in video games may well have been a blessing for the storyworld. Some adaptations suffer from an overly strict fidelity to the source material, enforced by a watchful

author, but CD Projekt Red were given total creative freedom to play with the world of *The Witcher* because Sapkowski had little interest or belief in what they were doing. This allowed them, over time, to mold it into one of the finest fantasy RPGs in video game history. The first two games adopted more linear storytelling strategies, but the third game shifted to an open-world design and its phenomenal success perhaps best illustrates the storyworld's distinctive qualities. Hence, I will focus on *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* as the most prominent and influential video game adaptation.

Intuitively, one might think that videogames, with their emphasis on spatial storytelling, would appreciate worlds with an elaborate and consistent mythos and topos, but the example of *The Witcher* suggests that other qualities are actually more useful for adaptation. Three aspects of *The Witcher's* narrative core stand out in this regard. The first is the importance of foundational characters defined primarily by their ethical relationship to the world and each other, rather than by physical characteristics or their role in a complex mythology. Marc Steinberg (2012, 194), in his study of anime media, states that transmedia “character is a material–immaterial composite” that has material incarnations but cannot be reduced to them, a distinction developed by Klastrup and Tosca (2019, 37) into an understanding of “‘embodied character’, with very pronounced individual character traits, manners, and looks, and ‘ideal-type’ characters.” Whereas *The Terminator* franchise, for example, struggles to escape the shadow of how Arnold Schwarzenegger embodied the title role, *The Witcher* follows the model of Sherlock Holmes, in that the main character is defined by his actions in recurring types of situations, as well as his relationships to key supporting characters, rather than more material characteristics. In the books, Geralt is characterized primarily by his ethical stance towards a corrupt world, and the absence of a significant on-screen embodiment prior to the games means he is defined more by his immaterial than his material qualities. The advantage for video games is that overly embodied avatars can act as obstacles for entering the game world. As Jessica Aldred (2012, 101) argues, “[s]ince, in live-action cinema, a star’s image is always, to some extent, carried into the role they play, game characters forced to be ‘digital doubles’ of their filmic incarnations are similarly bound to the expectations and constraints of that image.” By moving from book to video game without a major film or TV adaptation, *The Witcher*

was able to preserve the predominantly immaterial aspects of the main characters. This facilitated their adaptation and allowed Geralt to function successfully as an avatar; as players, we are able to look through Geralt rather than at him as his embodiment is less important than how he engages with the world, or how players engage with the world through him.

The second aspect is that having a well-defined mythos and topos in another medium may not be an advantage for games as these remove the player's opportunities for exploration. Worldbuilding and spatial storytelling emerged as key elements of video games because narration had to adapt to the primacy of player interactivity, but the drive to explore virtual worlds for narrative information depends on there being a gap in the player's knowledge. If that knowledge is readily available in some other canonical medium, it may restrict the player's opportunity for meaningful exploration. In *The Witcher*, however, the mythos and topos emerge piecemeal out of a series of short stories, followed by novels, none of which provide maps or other typical cues of coherence. By having only a sketch of the overall mythos and topos in the books, *The Witcher* left ample scope for the games to build on the narrative core in a meaningful way; it is notable that, aside from fan creations, the first maps of *The Witcher* universe accompanied the games rather than any of the novels.

The third aspect is that the focus on ethos dovetails well with the interactive aspect of games. The problem with adapting linear narratives into video games is that players familiar with the source narrative will feel that the outcome is determined in advance; in *The Witcher*, the absence of a pre-determined narrative means that the game designers can focus on creating "*Witcher*-esque" situations, those which display the storyworld's signature bleak worldview and moral ambiguity. A brief example is the minor quest "Wild at Heart" in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. Geralt arrives in a village to find a hunter, Niellen, searching for his missing wife. While searching the woods, Geralt is approached by the wife's sister, Margrit, who offers him a bribe to lie to Niellen and go on his way. The player may accept the money and thus end the quest, but if the player continues, they discover that Niellen is actually a werewolf, a fact known only to Margrit, who secretly loves him. She tried to expose what Niellen is to her sister in the hope that she would leave him, but the werewolf Niellen ended up unwittingly killing his own wife. Once Niellen discovers the truth,

he asks Geralt permission to take revenge on Margrit. There are two ways for this branch of the quest to end: the player can allow Niellen to kill Margrit and then Niellen begs the Witcher to kill him, or the player can defend Margrit and kill Niellen. Such narrative dilemmas offer players the feeling of meaningful choice, which they cannot get if they simply play through a well-defined narrative from another medium. What is typical of *The Witcher's* ethos, though, is that no ending is satisfactory. Either everyone dies or only the guiltiest party lives.

This bleak moral ethos defines *The Witcher* for most gamers. It does not particularly matter if characters, places, or narratives in the game are grounded in canonical events from the books; what matters is that the game stays true to *The Witcher's* moral universe. This allows a lot of freedom for game designers. For a typical fantasy series with a well-defined mythos and topos, game designers would have to pay close attention to the narrative core for canonical references that could be expanded in the game. Because *The Witcher's* narrative core is already a fragmented, piecemeal construction, it is easy to populate the game world with new locations and characters, as long as they conform to *The Witcher's* moral vision. According to Marcin Blacha, Story Director at CD Projekt Red, “none of the *Witcher* games are an adaptation in the sense that they replay a well-known story in computer game language. They’re based on the world created in the original, plus some of the characters, but all the stories are made up by us” (2016). When the series shifted to an open-world game design, it was still possible to maintain this sense of the world because, even if players do not visit every single location, the quests they discover repeat the same fundamental ethos in different variations.

The game mechanics also help to reinforce the importance of ethos, something that Blacha traces back to the Polish tabletop game tradition that most of CD Projekt Red’s designers came from. “In Poland, a different style of RPG was popular – where a story is told and throwing dice is less important. What’s important is the psychology of the characters, the way of telling the story and simulating the world. This way of thinking is also visible in *The Witcher*” (2016). Unlike most RPGs, in *The Witcher 3* players cannot gain experience points by killing random monsters in the game world. Although there are plenty of creatures to fight, the game places no value on doing so. Random acts of violence accomplish nothing. The only way to gain xp

is to complete quests, which usually involves making difficult ethical decisions that can have far-reaching consequences.

After some experimentation, the game series found an audio-visual aesthetic that complemented this moral universe. While *The Witcher 2* featured a rather generic fantasy environment, the game designers created a world modeled more openly on Eastern Europe in *The Witcher 3*. As Majkowski explains, the game's largest map, the Velen/Novigrad region, "is unmistakably familiar to a Polish eye. There are painted flowers on cottage walls, similar to Zalipie style; ruined castles and fortifications made of red brick; endless swampy flatlands of the Polish–Belarussian border; and the iconic harbor crane from Gdansk, rising above the Novigrad cityscape" (2018, 16). This atmosphere is enhanced by the distinctive soundtrack. According to Joshua Stevens (2021, 552), "the game's 'Slavic folklorism' emerges from the poetic incorporation of extant Eastern European folksongs and also through its use of musicians who perform in a style somewhat representative of the entire Eastern European region." Instead of erasing local color in order to appeal to international audiences, as they did in *The Witcher 2*, the game designers leaned into the storyworld's implicit use of a contrast with genre expectations. If the moral world of *The Witcher* does not look like the typical fantasy, then neither should its visual world, leading to the much-praised Slavic character of *The Witcher 3*.

The popularity of *The Witcher* games launched the series to international prominence. As Drewniak (2019, 217) notes, "the translations after 2005 are clearly motivated by the games; indeed, many feature the game logo, a stylized wolf's head, on the cover." While Sapkowski may have regretted not asking for a percentage instead of a flat fee for the rights, there is no doubt that his *Witcher* stories would not have reached the bestseller lists without the industrial core powering them into international consciousness. The massive growth in the storyworld's fanbase naturally attracted the attention of Hollywood, which led to the next significant step in the franchise's development.

## A Dual Industrial Core Franchise

Two years after the launch of *The Witcher 3*, writer-producer Lauren S. Hissrich was in Netflix HQ to pitch a TV series based on the novels (Romano 2021). By 2017, HBO's *Game of Thrones* was the biggest

show on the planet and other streaming services were eager for their own blockbuster fantasy series. In November 2017, Amazon paid \$250 million for the rights to *The Lord of the Rings*, intending to create a range of spinoff series; Netflix wanted its own fantasy series and *The Witcher* was a logical choice. However, this triggered an argument about who owned the rights, a struggle that was finally resolved in December 2019. On the day the first episode of the new TV series was broadcast, CD Projekt Red announced an agreement with Sapkowski that affirmed “its existing title to *The Witcher* intellectual property in developing video games, graphic novels, board games and merchandise” (CD Projekt 2019). Thus, the emergence of a new industrial core led all sides to redraw and police the boundaries within the franchise.

The ownership conflicts of dual industrial core franchises thus impede attempts to create internally consistent transmedia storyworlds. Whereas this is an important normative goal for franchises with unified IP rights, it is an obstacle to the development of franchises with divided IP rights. Yet all sides need to share the overall storyworld because franchise entropy benefits no one. The challenge of sharing the storyworld with the narrative core and the game industrial core while establishing a distinct identity has defined the struggles of the TV adaptation.

These internal divisions are not just legal issues but are also reflected in the aesthetic paths chosen by different parts of the franchise. The TV series was not simply adapting Sapkowski’s novels but also implicitly adapting the video games – it is a reasonable assumption that the target audience largely consisted of the game’s worldwide fanbase. However, not only would CD Projekt Red have been quick to object to any infringement of its intellectual property, the creators of the TV series were eager to establish *The Witcher* on its own terms rather than as a video game adaptation. Geralt’s iconic wolf medallion was redesigned for the TV series, signaling the producers’ intention to develop an original visual aesthetic. Instead of *The Witcher 3*’s conscious invocation of Eastern Europe, the series creates a more generic fantasy world reminiscent of *Game of Thrones*, with a similar color palette to the HBO series and a greater emphasis on what visual effects supervisor Julian Parry calls “grounded horror” (Russell and Mottram 2019). In interviews, production staff seemed keener to point out differences rather than similarities. For example, costume designer



Tim Aslan revealed that he was instructed not to draw on the game for inspiration, to which he replied that he had no intention of doing so because the game's costumes look "a bit tacky" (Bedewi 2020).

However, these efforts to draw distinct boundaries between parts of the franchise may have an advantage when it comes to game-to-film adaptations. Joleen Blom (2019, 2) has argued that games have a problematic role in transmedia franchises because the players' actions may result in multiple possible outcomes or avatar identities, but one choice needs to be made canonical if other media are to build on the game's story. "Dynamic game characters cause additional friction because they accelerate the multiple identities of that character within a single work over which the player has a certain amount of creative agency, while commonly the proliferation of characters and their multiple identities spreads over a body of works." *The Witcher 3* offers multiple possible endings, but there is no reason for other parts of the franchise to maintain coherence with any of these outcomes. Sapkowski has been quite clear that the games have no influence on his books, while the TV adaptation is deliberately keeping itself separate from the game world. Because fans are made aware of this from the outset, there is little expectation of continuity or consistency across platforms.

This also has the advantage of allowing different media to distance themselves from problems in other cores. When *The Witcher 3* was released, Arthur Gies (2015) commented in his review, "I don't recall a single non-white humanoid anywhere." This sparked a firestorm of controversy online regarding the game's depiction of racial and ethnic diversity, with some arguing that the game is an accurate representation of Polish historical experience (Beja 2015) and that American critics were simply imposing dominant American discourses on a nation whose culture has been historically marginalized (Kowalik 2015). This debate has been perceptively analyzed by Tomasz Majkowski (2018), but what is significant here is how the series sidestepped any similar controversy by employing a multi-racial cast, often creating a completely different look for major characters. Some franchises can experience pushback when they attempt to change the race of particular characters, such as the controversy around a "Black Hermione" in the *Harry Potter* franchise, but the clear distinctions drawn between game and TV series meant that accusations of inconsistency would have been ridiculous. Hence, dual

industrial core franchises may be more resistant to franchise entropy because problems encountered by one part do not necessarily spread across the franchise.

However, the qualities that made *The Witcher* so amenable to video game adaptation also impeded its adaptation into a *Game of Thrones*-style TV series. Reviews of the show were often terrible. *Time* declared it “the latest disaster in a year of terrible post-*Game of Thrones* fantasy TV” (Berman 2019), with many critics singling out the “bloated storytelling and bloated exposition” (Abed-Santos 2020) as weaknesses and that “piecing together what’s going on at any given time in *The Witcher* is both impossible and insignificant” (Travers 2019). Whereas the piecemeal structure of the original stories was an asset for the games, the absence of a clear mythos and topos created problems for the TV series. The first season ran three storylines on the foundational characters of Geralt, Ciri, and Yennefer over decades across the continent, but it takes viewers most of the season to work out that many events are happening not just out of order but often decades apart. This led to a lot of confusion, particularly among those who were unfamiliar with the source material. Netflix did supply an interactive timeline on its website to help fans navigate the series, but the fact that this was needed at all suggests producers were aware of the challenges posed by the non-linear, episodic narrative.

While the fragmented literary source proved challenging, the series also struggled with the legacy of the game’s focus on ethos and unsatisfactory choices in morally ambiguous situations. In the first episode, Geralt must choose to help either the princess-turned-bandit Renfri or the manipulative wizard, Stregobor; after killing Renfri, he is chased from town by a mob led by Stregobor, who tells Geralt: “You made a choice, and you’ll never know if it was the right one.” In the games, such choices feel meaningful because the decision rests with the player; in the TV series, where the audience is more passive, such comments do not have the same impact. All we can do is watch Geralt choose, but it is difficult to evaluate his choices when we are struggling to make sense of the overall context. Whereas the game benefits from the storyworld’s primary emphasis on ethos, the TV series struggled to recreate the same ethical engagement without the benefit of a coherent mythos.

The first season thus struggled to balance the twin legacy of the narrative core and the game industrial core. These problems were not

inevitable, but it is noteworthy that the show suffered from problems indicating chronology and context, aspects associated with mythos and topos, which also hampered its ability to render meaningful the storyworld's distinctive ethos. Nevertheless, its success showed the importance of being part of a major franchise because the pre-existing audience for *The Witcher* could fill in narrative gaps using their knowledge from the novels and games or from the fan community. According to Netflix, the show reached a staggering 76 million households, and the corporation moved rapidly to take advantage of its new hit, commissioning not just a second season but also multiple animated films and a spinoff series. Showrunner Lauren Hissrich declared that it all came back to the main TV show as “the mothership” and “without that being the core of this franchise, I don’t know that all the other pieces work” (Romano 2021). From a broader perspective, we may argue that it all comes back to being part of a dual industrial core franchise, which created the massive audience the first season was able to tap into to fuel its own success in bringing the storyworld to a wider audience.

## Conclusion

The example of *The Witcher*'s development into a transmedia fantasy world shows that as games become more central to our mediascape, certain aesthetic elements may become more pronounced. Despite the fact that game narratives are built on spatial storytelling, a clearly established mythos and topos in other media may be an obstacle to player exploration of the storyworld in videogames. Instead, foundational characters defined more by immaterial than embodied qualities and a distinctive ethos for framing player choice may be more important. The emphasis on foundational characters over plot would bring transmedia franchises closer to the Japanese anime media mix, a form that has always relied more heavily on game components, such as the successful *Pokemon* franchise. As Marc Steinberg (2012, 187) explains, “in the transmedia worlds of anime, the function of the brand is more often than not assumed by the character, which guarantees a degree of compossibility or communication between series.” No one expects the *Pokemon* universe to have an internally consistent plot, but fans do expect Pikachu to be consistent across platforms, just as Geralt will always strive to protect Ciri, have a complicated relationship with

Yennefer of Vengerberg, and find himself having to choose the lesser evil.

What is downplayed in such storyworlds is plot continuity and consistency. Although this has been a normative goal of transmedia storytelling rooted in narrative media, video games allow for multiple outcomes based on player decisions and it is hard to make one of these choices canonical. This multiplicity is reinforced by the industrial organization of franchises with a major video game component. The concept of a dual industrial core franchise helps draw attention to how different media police the boundary between themselves even within the same fictional universe. Instead of a single coherent storyworld, the dual industrial core structure encourages all platforms to emphasize how they diverge from each other. Thus, *The Witcher* TV series sought to establish an identity distinct from the games, while Sapkowski insists that only his novels and short stories are canon and the other, more popular media have struggled to adapt their literary essence because “the process of transforming words into pictures cannot be done without some losses” (Elderkin 2020). Studies of worldbuilding often emphasize the importance of consistency and completeness in the mythos and topos, but as video games become ever more central to our media eco-system, perhaps storyworlds founded on core characters and a distinctive ethos, but with a rather fragmentary mythos and topos, will begin to appear more by design than by fortuitous accident.

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