The Extension of "Camp" and the Play-Element in *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*

The courtyard in the center of Novigrad bustles with people. The midday sun beams down, illuminating each little story taking place. The merchants selling their wares, the cloaked thieves lurking behind unsuspecting citizens, the city guards patrolling the area, and the large, smoking pyres in the center, spiking up towards the sky, visible from anywhere in the courtyard. Each moment only partially registers the existence of the others.

At the corner of the square, next to the signpost, a tall, bearded man with sheer white hair fazes into the world. His muscles bulge, pressing against the two decidedly massive swords on his back, and his scowl threatens anyone who might deign to look in his cold, cat-like eyes. Just as soon as the man appears, he bolts towards the center of the courtyard, apparently not noticing the hoards of people standing mere meters in front of him as he peels into the crowd with the speed of a horse. As he approaches the people, seemingly without buildup, warning, or provocation, the man leaps into the air, his head raising well above the people around him, as his feet plunge straight through the neck of a poor bystander who lurches to the side with a passionate "Aaarrrgghh!". Just as suddenly as he appeared in the world, the man appeared in the world of each person in the courtyard, making himself the most important thing happening to each of them at that moment. He keeps on running.

The man? Geralt of Rivia. The leap? A clean five-foot vertical. The bystander? Continues on with his day like nothing happened. Occurrences like these pepper the entirety of 2015's *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*, which features a broad open world the player can explore at their own leisure, as Geralt of Rivia, a famous witcher, a professional monster hunter. The city of Novigrad sits in the center of the game's world and it, alongside the rest of the world, demonstrates some of the best design video game worlds have to offer. The massive city teems with detail in every

corner, each person, boat, building, and puddle of mud intentionally placed to create a world that feels as though it exists beyond the scope of the player's interactions with it. The detail the developers put into the game makes it all the more shocking when the game gives the player control over the protagonist and lets them obliterate the ambiance they created.

The world of *The Witcher 3* has a deep feeling of grime and grit, with no surface totally clean, unless owned by a member of the upper class. Even the people wear tattered clothes and work diligently, just scraping by. Conversations with them reveal even more the hard life led by the people in the world, with Geralt encountering both poor peasants, terrorized by monsters, and the poor leaders who ignore the problems of their people. When the player takes control of Geralt though, the game tells a different story. Geralt has superhuman movement speed (as he is superhuman), but also an absurdly high jump, and an even more absurd proclivity for taking falling damage from short heights. In the interest of efficiency, the player rarely has a reason to not sprint at full speed everywhere they go, and the lack of consequences give them even less reason to avoid the thousands of civilians they literally pass through on their adventures. When Geralt gets on his inscrutable horse, Roach, the problems only worsen, as Roach tends to take the player's controls more as suggestions, moving on her own time. The way the player's actions break the game's hard aesthetic and grit can hardly be described as anything but utterly ridiculous. One honestly struggles to even understand why the developers allowed for such tomfoolery in the first place. Why spend tens of millions of dollars meticulously crafting arguably the most detailed and expansive world in any game only to give the player complete control over how they mess it up? Most interestingly though, one might ask why the player's ability to obliterate the game's immersion and ambiance actually makes the game far funnier and more enjoyable than it ever could have been otherwise.

The Witcher 3 and the way its audience engages with it comes from a long and complicated history. To better understand the cultural effects of *The Witcher* franchise, an essay by Michael Westfall called "Who are these people and why are they laughing?" can help contextualize the importance of the franchise. In his essay about the paintings of Ilya Repin, Westfall wrote about the function of historical paintings, saying, "They are expressions of a collective metaphysics — *abstract* qualities of identity and being that define some celebrated aspect of a nation's character" (Westfall). Westfall's essay responds to critics of Repin, who try to label his paintings as "kitsch", a term popularized by Clement Greenberg to describe art of a lower status, generally made more for profit than for artistic integrity (Greenberg). Westfall asserts that Repin's paintings, despite the claims of his detractors, create a powerful cultural identity for Repin's audience, the slavic people. He writes about an estate in Russia called "Abramtsevo", where slavic artists would congregate, "exchanging ideas and providing cultural continuity as new generations of artists emerged" (Westfall). He counters the classification of Repin as "kitsch", because he believes that Repin created his paintings not to please the artistic community of Western Europe, but to inspire the slavic people in Russia, a cause more relevant and pressing to Repin than the shifting tastes of other parts of Europe.

Other artists have created art for reasons similar to Repin's cause, including Andrzej Sapkowski, the author of *The Witcher*, Polish book series. *The Witcher* began as a series of short stories in the mid-1980s, and eventually turned into a full-fledged narrative book series in the 1990s, and now has three video game adaptations as well as an ongoing Netflix series. People often consider *The Witcher* Poland's *Lord of the Rings*, as both feature a medieval fantasy setting based off of the cultural lore of their home countries, but a heavy sense of cynicism and sarcasm colors the entirety of Sapkowski's series. Geralt, the main character, adventures his way through

places, meeting people, all based off of stories from Polish folklore, but unlike the fairytales from his origin, Geralt never gets his happy endings and moral lessons. The books relish in disappointment, constantly turning their source material on its head, denying both their characters and readers pleasant worlds and lessons learned, trapping them in a dark, morally bankrupt world where bad people rule. This cynicism makes sense when one considers that Sapkowski wrote these stories in Cold War-era Poland, for a Cold War-era Polish audience. Sapkowski and his audience didn't have the luxury of happy endings. They went straight from Nazi occupation to Soviet occupation, and over the 20th century their cultural identity had dwindled and fizzled away, drowned out by the monotonous, mechanical pulse of totalitarianism. Sapkowski, much like Repin, tried to give the Polish people a new cultural lore that could tie the Polish people together, and for what it's worth, he succeeded. *The Witcher* has thrived in Poland for decades since its release, and in 2011, President Obama even received *The Witcher 2* video game in a care package while on a trip to Poland (Business Insider), showing the series' ubiquity and importance.

The games present a strange shift for the franchise however, because as the games grew more popular, the harsh cynicism and reliance on Polish folklore lost its powerful effect on the games' increasingly global audience. By the time *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* released in 2015, the games had established themselves as one of the most popular modern game franchises, and Geralt's nearly nihilistic attitude towards the world around him simply stopped playing as well. Polish game company, CD Projekt RED, the games' developer, addressed this issue by replacing Geralt's downtrodden demeanor with a more upbeat, sarcastic Geralt. Yeah, sure, Geralt still doesn't like most of the people he meets, or places he goes, but now he's a family man, working alongside the love of his life to find his adopted daughter, and, most importantly, now he's funny.

In a lot of ways, *The Witcher 3* feels like a celebration, and in a lot of ways, it is. It was the first game in the franchise where CD Projekt RED had the funds to meet their ambition (after two of the most ambitious yet underfunded games imaginable), a large audience had grown excited to see the next installment in the franchise, and, as the last game in the *Witcher* saga, the developers wanted to give these now globally iconic characters a worthy send-off. These details made for a happier, more fun game, as both the franchise and its audience have finally pulled themselves out of the dark, fascistic hole they grew up in.

This celebration demonstrates a shift in how both the developers of the *Witcher* games and the players of the games see the tone and story. With the release of *The Witcher 3*, people began to look at *The Witcher* more playfully, identifying with Geralt and the world no longer in a direct sense, but in a more ironic, detached sense. People liked Geralt for simply being Geralt, not for representing the attitude of the audience. In a sense, *The Witcher* elevated above the culture it served and became a culture of its own. The way people started to look at the franchise very closely resembled the way Susan Sontage describes the concept of "camp" in her essay, "Notes on 'Camp'". Sontag describes the idea of "camp" by saying things like, "Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much'" (Sontag), and, "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious" (Sontag). Describing the attitude people have towards *The Witcher* nowadays as anything besides "anti-serious" would feel wrong. People love *The Witcher*, but precisely because it is "too much". Geralt's aggressive level of cynicism, Dandelion's absurd level of flamboyance, and the game's "save the world" story is all too much. From a modern perspective, it is altogether "too much" to read, definitely "too much" to see, and, notably, even more excessively "too much" to play. The interactive element of *The Witcher 3* contributes to the

game's camp in a couple of ways. Yes, it engages the audience more, highlighting the absurdity of the world and characters, but more interestingly, the openness of the game creates systems that, in their imperfections, create more camp, and, most importantly, give the players opportunities to create camp of their own, revealing how camp comes from the way that we play with our consumption of art.

Sontag describes camp as a "playful, antiserious" (Sontag) mindset one approaches art from, but her essay doesn't necessarily drill down to the core of where camp comes from. Luckily though, the 20th century historian Johan Huizinga can help fill in the gaps and reveal the base origins of camp. Huizinga, was a Dutch historian, but more specifically, a philologist, meaning he studied history through the lens of language and culture. His final, and perhaps most important, book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, explores the concept of play, and how it drove culture, ultimately coming to the conclusion that 20th century totalitarianism rose to power as a result of society abandoning play. Huizinga, in explaining the play-element, takes a rather long and cheeky side exploration into the trend of periwigs in the 17th and 18th centuries, however. Huizinga, put simply, loves wigs. He sees the periwig as the ultimate example of play in culture, writing, "How ironical is it that the highly serious age of Descartes, Pascal and Spinoza...of blossoming science and the great moralists, should also have been the age of that comical object, the wig!" (Huizinga, 184).

Much in the same way the Sontag explains that camp objects often begin with the most serious intentions, Huizigna sees wigs as an absurd trend used in the most serious senses. People in high society, people of importance wore wigs, yet Huizinga can hardly see anything more ridiculous in all of history. Huizinga's attitude towards periwigs very closely resembles the camp attitude Sontag describes in her essay, and pairing Huizinga's exploration with Sontag's one can

come to that conclusion that camp ultimately comes from the play-element in culture. Yes Huizinga believes the wig came from society playing with men's fashion further and further, but his unapologetic love for the trend comes from his own playfulness, revealing that, in the Huizingan sense, "camp" is merely another form of cultural play: the way in which we collectively play with artistic objects.

Returning to *The Witcher*, we can see how the entire series has buried itself in layers of something resembling camp, from the inception of the books to the consumption of the games. In the books, Sapkowski plays with traditional Polish folklore, contorting the stories into comical, sarcastic versions of themselves, but let us not forget that he wrote them from the context of Cold-War Poland. Huizinga believed that totalitarianism rose to power in Europe because society grew more obsessed with practicality and abandoned the play-element in culture, so by playing with folklore in his books, Sapkowski inherently revealed the dormant play-element, hiding in the subconscious of the Polish people, suppressed by an anti-play, totalitarian Soviet Union. While, from our definition, the way that Sapkowski plays with Polish folklore, may appear to create a decidedly "camp" series of books, the novels come from a slightly more complex perspective than that. Yes the *Witcher* books come from a sense of cultural playfulness, but they have a certain pessimism towards their source material that might disqualify the books from the "camp" classification. The books push Polish folklore into the mainstream in ways that hadn't happened for decades, or even centuries, but they pair the stories with a harsh critique. The books represent the source material, but seek to put the stories into what it sees as the "real world", and show how the stories' optimism and happy endings do not hold up against the depressingness of reality. A camp attitude towards these stories would revel in their simplicity

and enjoy the world they create, but the books do not do that. They play with the books, yes, but not in a campy way.

Having set all of this up, we can finally return to our introduction and consider the question we asked: "Why does the absurdity in *The Witcher 3* make it more fun?" We could, simply, say that the game is camp and accept that people will inherently find enjoyment out of it, but that would ignore the sublime beauty in how engages with the game. Yes, many aspects of the game demonstrate camp in the traditional sense. When you call Roach, she typically appears out of thin air, in the middle of a bush and takes approximately far too long finding a path to you, Geralt is, to use internet slang, a pure and simple himbo, evidenced best by a *Guardian* review of the Netflix show which begins a sentence with "But Geralt is woke as well as large" (The Guardian), and the out-of-place seriousness of the main plot can make it hard to take any aspect of the game seriously, but the true camp, the true, incredible, fascinating camp comes from the player's own interactions with the game.

If, as we said, camp comes from the way that we play with our consumption of art, games have a curious way of systemizing camp, because the player inherently needs to literally "play the game". Games come with varying degrees of player freedom, but *The Witcher 3* has more than most, and that level of player latitude has some interesting effects. Take, for example, the scene from Novigrad described at the beginning of the essay. In a vacuum, the square in Novigrad has some of the most in-depth, "serious" design in any game. The designers placed every detail carefully to ensure the city felt real and lived in. When the player enters, though, they have no obligation to observe the seriousness the developers laid out. The player can, and almost certainly will, act in a way that most efficiently accomplishes their goal. If the player spawns at the signpost and needs to get to the armorer on the other side of the square, they will

sprint from one end straight to the other, violently pushing everyone that crosses their path out of way, each person delivering their own Wilhelm Scream-esque cry.

This destruction of the game's ambiance comes as a result of the player's actions, so it clearly qualifies as camp in the sense that we've laid out, because they find humor in a "serious" work of art, but it also curiously changes the game itself, revealing two levels of camp from one action. The player's actions make the game camp for the player because of the way they play with their consumption of a game, but it also fully changes the ambience of the game in an irreparable way. The serious, carefully laid out game becomes a wholly unserious, absurd replication of a serious world, so much so that anyone watching would also see the game as camp. Imagine, for a moment, a person watching the game played without any connection to the player, as though watching the game streamed to a different room like a movie, much in the same way I introduced the game at the start of this essay. The observer would still find the game camp, because the game they would watch would clearly have camp elements. It would appear initially serious, with clear passion put into it, but the execution of the actions would feel so at odds with the initial theming that they could almost certainly not observe the game in a serious manner. The watcher would have to appreciate the strange juxtaposition and enjoy the game for its failures as well as its successes.

Because games are both played and watched, they create camp in powerful ways we don't particularly see in other mediums. Sontag claims that examples of "[pure camp] are unintentional; they are dead serious" (Sontag), a requirement that no one in this equation breaks. The camp here does not come from the developers, so they could not have meant for it. The player simply does what is most efficient and fun for them, they do not think about camp at all, and the observer has no control over the game itself here, so aside from their own playful

enjoyment of the game, they cannot modify the camp elements of the game itself, revealing how this, one, simple action creates camp in two different ways.

While Sontag's essay on camp describes well what camp looks like in art, it doesn't necessarily drill down to the core of where camp comes from. It hovers tightly around camp objects themselves and explores camp from the perspective of the artist or consumer, with a passing curiosity in the idea of "so-bad-it's-good" art, but doesn't explore the deeper, more ingrained origin of the experience. Huizinga's book attempts to identify the idea of "play" as not only one of the most important phenomena in culture, but also as one of the most core elements of living beings, with explorations of how play occurs in animals as well. A person can play with their dog and both of them will understand the game played, revealing just how ingrained play is in all living creatures, and connecting camp to that play-element shows how camp is similarly ingrained in us.

I think that nuance exists in the camp that comes from the ways we engage with games. Notice for a moment that I brought up the ways in which *The Witcher 3* is camp itself, and then moved into the ways that the player creates their own camp. If these are both examples of camp, why describe the player-created camp separately? Well, the player-created camp demonstrates a very special form of camp, because it's not necessarily an attitude that finds camp in the game, so much as it is a process that re-characterizes the game, its story, and its characters. When the player makes Geralt sprint through hoards of people, it establishes that Geralt, as a character, does that. The developers didn't write that detail down in any of their documentation, but the player still understands it as a part of Geralt's character, so long as the player does that. While the way the player changes the game does resemble camp, the fact that the camp only appears if the player decides to put it there points to the more powerful way in which the player has control

over the games story just as much as the developers do even in more story driven games like *The Witcher 3*.

Some games, like say *Skyrim* for example, lean into this element heavily and give the player total control over their character, their abilities, and what they choose to do, but other games, like *The Witcher 3*, present a more cohesive, designed world, and give it to the player with a wink and a nudge, acknowledging that the player has the ability to change elements of the game as they please. Beyond that, other games may choose to limit the player's ability to change the world and the story in an attempt to make the player experience the story as they intended. Of course, it seems obvious to say that in a game the player controls the story, because that is, after all, kind of the point of a game, but the player's control comes from a high level of complexity among the game's components, and modifying these components even slightly can heavily change the player's ability to engage with the game at all, making it important for game developers to understand the nuance in how the player interacts with their game.

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