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PART V

Intersections and Futures

Chapter 18

"Nigh Is the Time of Madness and Disdain"

Folk Horror in The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt

Stephen Butler

The globally renowned video game, *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015), by Polish gaming studio CD Projekt Red, might not seem an obvious choice for a study on folk horror, but this essay will argue that it is perfectly suited for it. The game is primarily a fantasy RPG set in the fantastic world of the novels of Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski. It shares many of the obvious traits of the genre: a medieval setting, a predominant quest structure both in its main quest and its various (obligatory by modern day gaming standards) side missions, magical abilities (with requisite opportunities at levelling them up), luscious scenery that draws attention to the landscape and detailed interactions with minor and non-playable characters. Yet, as will be shown, some of these features are themselves key criteria of the folk horror genre as much as they are staples of the fantasy genre, virtual or otherwise. Various theorists and commentators, such as Mark Fisher, have drawn attention to the porous boundaries that exist when trying to define either the horror or fantasy genres: "The fantastic is a rather capacious category, which can include much of science fiction and horror" (Fisher 2016, 161).

In describing the prominent role of monsters in the horror genre Noel Carroll describes the figure as possessing a similarly "porous" nature that Fisher applied to the genre overall. For Caroll, the nature of monstrosity is to expose or "violate our categorical norms" as to what constitutes normalcy and monstrosity (Carroll 1990, 5). As will be discussed later in this chapter,

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Geralt's role as a Witcher (or monster hunter), may seem to preclude this violation but his own process of being othered will complicate this. Another aspect of the game that may seem to preclude its inclusion in the horror category is its open-world nature. In an open-world fantasy game, there are two main drives to the gaming experience: completing quests and exploring the open world. The player in this game is prompted to explore by having a large world map with unsurveyed areas signaled with a question mark sign. Part of the experience of the game is to go to such places and reveal the mystery or question as to what is there, thus removing the question mark and arguably removing the mystery element necessary for horror to flourish. I would argue, though, that the game environment is set up in such a way as to foster some of the basics of the horror genre, and folk horror in particular. We are advised during loading screens in the game that is better to stick to the beaten paths as the landscape is dangerous and full of monsters. Once you stray from the path and plunge into the wild landscape that is literally marked as unknown territory it can very much feel as eerie as any horror scenario that involves a lone figure isolated against a backdrop that seems to threaten their very existence (Scovell 2017, 17–18). Landscape is a key element in folk horror whether as a rebuke to pastoral platitudes or as a suggestion that the land itself is a "home" to horrors as are the people who serve whatever entity resides within it. The latter is memorably the case with several game areas of the Wild Hunt; the "unholy trinity" of the Crones of Crookback Bog as the exemplar: they are referred to as "old as the forest itself [and] they care for this land and its folk in their own way." But they also happen to weave hair and twist lives" as they gain their strength by ingesting "a broth of human flesh" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015). We are told by the Whispering Hillock, a literal spirit of the place, that the Crones have invaded and usurped the land and are responsible for its monstrosity.

While the Crones are horrors strongly associated with the land, the titular antagonists of the Wild Hunt are almost Lovecraftian in their cosmic dimension. We discover in the last book of Sapkowski's series that the Wild Hunt, titular antagonists of the game, are interdimensional beings (or "space elves") who plan to teleport to the Northern Kingdoms of this fantasy world for colonization purposes. This can come as a shock to the reader who finds themselves suddenly in the realm of science fiction after many books of arguably standard medieval fantasy fare. Part of that fare is discovering what is so special about the blood of main character Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon, other than the political ramifications of its royal lineage which is a main plot of the books (and an optional ending in the game if you choose to pursue it) in a manner similar to George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-present). While it leads to the obvious trope of royal blood containing magical abilities, the abilities themselves are more science-fiction based—we

learn that Ciri is the Lady of Space and Time and can teleport herself to any time, place, or dimension of her choosing. Yennefer, one of the main characters describes her in the game thus: "She travels between places. Here and other worlds. Space is no obstacle for her" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015). This ability becomes the main plot point of the game as the Hunt are, tracking Cirilla across many worlds so they can harness her abilities for themselves to use in their bid for intergalactic and interdimensional subjugation and domination.

Both book and game leave this revelation of the nature of the Wild Hunt until late in their respective narratives. The Hunt only features sporadically throughout the books, which for this slightly pusillanimous reader was a relief as the passages are always horror-infused and literally nightmare-inducing for many of the main characters, as this memorable passage from *The Tower of the Swallow* can attest to:

> The nightjars sang their death knell in clamorous voices while the horizon became shrouded in clouds, quenching the remains of the moonlight. At that moment sounded the howl of the fell beann'shie, the harbinger of imminent and violent death, and across the black sky galloped the Wild Hunt—a procession of fiery-eyed phantoms on skeleton horses, their tattered cloaks and standards fluttering behind them. So it was every few years. (Sapkowski 2014, 6)

The horrific atmosphere of this spectral aerial procession is heightened by the ghastly chorus of "goatsucker nightjars," birds that "according to folk tales," (Ibid.) gather to sing around dying people. Here we have a narrative situation that perfectly conforms to one of the tenets of folk horror as observed by Adam Scovell as being, "a work that uses folklore, either aesthetically or thematically, to imbue itself with a sense of the arcane for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes" (2017, 7). By choosing to make this spectral version of the Wild Hunt the main antagonist, the game had already signaled its intent to lean more heavily into the horror elements of its source material. Subsequently, the game not only embraces the folklore-instilled terrors of folk horror, but it also entertains a strong sense, through its main quest and antagonists, of the arcane, the eerie, and at times, the downright terrifying. Arguably, nothing in the game reaches the sheer horror of fellow gaming titles such as the *Silent Hill* (1999–2014), or *Resident Evil* (1996–present) series, and your abilities as a Witcher ensures that slasher horror such as *Until Dawn* (2015) is nigh on impossible as a game mechanic, but while all these examples are stronger on the horror element, the *Wild Hunt* is more in keeping with the weird or the eerie, as defined by Mark Fisher.

It is noticeable in the above passage concerning the Wild Hunt and their avian accomplices that they are accompanied by another spectral figure, the "beann'shie," described technically as "A female wraith of Irish and Scottish

Gaelic tradition thought to be able to foretell but not necessarily cause death in a household" (MacKillop 1998, 30). This highlights an important feature of the folk horror within *The Witcher*, which unlike Scovell's reading that centers it on the UK, is its transcultural nature. And so, although the books seem uniquely Polish and/or Slavic with references to monsters and folk traditions as well as real-life history, they also contained many "ancestral voices" from Gaelic, Celtic, and Norse folklore. This saturation in the books of these different folk tales and myths is carried over successfully to the *Wild Hunt* game. As it should, for as MacFarlane explains, the titular myth is a "North European" one but also an "ur-myth" that is both a reaction to the global migratory patterns of wild geese (rather than nightjars) as well as a reflection on the "wider webs of wild places" that show up in cultural stories the world over (MacFarlane 2017, 291–92).

Such comparative mythologies and folk tales are standard features of the fantasy genre (Sullivan 2001, 1), but they also example Scovell's idea of "global ruralities" and more so the "folkoresque," as described by Michael Dylan Foster where a narrative creates its own, seemingly authentic, folklore (Foster and Tolbert 2016, 5). While, as we will see, discussion on the concept of "folk" will entail engaging with the currently thorny issue of national identity, and the global success of the *Wild Hunt* has certainly been promoted by the Polish government as an example of national pride, the game itself both looks to its own folk traditions but also to similar ones "on a wider global scale" (Scovell 2017, 101). The Wild Hunt legend is particularly prevalent in Norse mythology, as MacFarlane elucidates when referring to the leader of the Hunt often being Woden, the Norse All-Father (Ibid.). While Odin is replaced by main antagonist Eredin in the game, himself based on the Slavic folk figure of Koschie the Deathless, this does not mean that the Norse elements of the tale are forgotten. The final battle in the game takes place on Skellige, which is a game area heavily influenced by Celtic and Norse iconography, culture, and storytelling, and so it is fitting that when the Wild Hunt land here they do so aboard the Naglfar—a ship forged from the hair and fingernails of the dead, which is from Norse mythology as the vessel that carries monsters to do battle with the gods during Ragnarök. It is introduced via a cinematic cut-scene in a glacial deluge of ice and fog that is a particular highlight of the game and fully horrific in atmosphere.

The ship's arrival leads to one character's fearful rumination that the end of days has come: "Ragh nar Roog . . . the world's end." The reference to Ragnarök, the Norse apocalypse, confirms the source of inspiration for the Wild Hunt as antagonist, but it is also a foreshadowing of the game's end when Ciri uses her abilities to stop an apocalyptic cataclysm known in both books and game as the "White Frost," which we are informed is the fate of not just the world in the game but all worlds across space and time. The game

in a sense ties up a loose thread on this prophecy that is left dangling in the book series, which it is bound to do due to the quest structure of the game that demands a resolution one way or the other. Books can leave room for ambiguity or interpretations of events in the narrative, it can leave certain plot elements unresolved if it so chooses, but the quest or mission structure precludes this happening in RPG games. So, Ciri proves she's the main protagonist of the game rather than the titular Witcher, Geralt, when she informs him that "The White Frost is inevitable, it will come to freeze the worlds one after the other, eradicating all life. Only I can stop the destruction" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015). This conversation is part of the final cut scene, so there is no gaming element involved, but at certain times you get to play as Ciri rather than Geralt to confirm that she is actually the more important character in the game. Having said that, the majority of the gaming experience is with the player assuming the role of Geralt, a Witcher, aka "monster hunter." As such the most common side quest structure in the game is "find out who or what the monster is, where it lives, find it and (usually) kill it, get paid, indulge in bread and vodka." It is in the bestiary of monsters you hunt in the game that the horror elements of the game shine the brightest and while the bestiary is also of a global nature it is also very specifically tied to its Polish and Slavic roots.

L'ÂME SLAVE (THE "SLAVIC SOUL")

One of the more horrific side quests in the game is entitled "Tower of Mice" and is heavily inspired by a ninth-century Polish folk tale that is itself informed by a historical event. You are told by a group of local village people that there is a cursed local lord's tower, and they want you to lift the curse and kill whatever monsters it created. Your sorceress companion, Keira Metz gives you a magic lamp that allows you to see the ghosts that haunt the tower to help lift the curse. You eventually meet the source of the curse who is a young woman confined as a wraith to the tower's location. We discover she was given a potion to make it look like she was dead to avoid the angry mob justice of the local starving populace who have discovered that the local lord is hoarding food at their expense. While said lord meets his arguably justified end, the woman is the only survivor of this retribution due to a potion her mage lover gives her that makes it seem as if she is dead. She awakes as the only survivor but is paralyzed due to the effects of the potion, so she has to lie, conscious but immobile, while she is slowly eaten to death by the rats that now inhabit the abandoned tower. The horror in the scene is in the dead victim's narration, and it is a chilling adaptation of a Polish folk tale concerning a real-life Mysia Wieża (Mice Tower) in Kruszwica, Poland, and its

ninth-century ruler, Prince Popiel. A more direct allusion to the tale is given by another character who is a key one for a discussion of folk horror elements in the game, a local shaman known as the Pellar: "a great hunger descended on us all. While the lord in abundance wallowed, there in the Tower of Mice. But the old gods in their ire upon him visited a punishment. A plague of rodents swarmed the isle. At first, they ate all from the feast tables. Then, the lord and all his court they devoured" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015).

The Pellar is also involved in the side quest that draws the heavily on both Polish folk traditions but also the literature around it. After successfully completing the "Tower of Mice" quest, the player is invited by the Pellar to help him with a related matter at a site adjacent to the tower. This quest, "Forefather's Eve," involves attending a local stone circle complex and summoning the spirits of the dead in an annual ritual that Geralt thought had died out. The Pellar though, as we've seen, is a staunch follower of the "old gods" who are the ones to be placated during this ritual, that is essentially the Slavic version of Halloween. In Poland, it is known as "Dziady," and was immortalized in a poem by the same name by Poland's national poet, Adam Miczkiewicz; it is commonly translated into English as the title of the quest, "Forefather's Eve." This is an example of a theme that appears throughout The Witcher, games and books, where, following one of Scovell's dictates for a narrative to be classed as folk horror, pagan or older beliefs are pitted against an official or contemporary religion. What is interesting within the world of The Witcher is that it creates an environment that is full of such clashes, containing multiple references to both real folklore from various cultures and others from recent pop culture so that they constantly oppose contemporary "beliefs" that are predominantly manifested in Geralt's view of the world. This creates a "folkloresque" landscape that is a patchwork of "folk horror" motifs. An instance of this is seen in the case of "noonwraiths," who are the daytime twins of the "nightwraiths." They are taken from the Slavic figure of the "południca," who has a commendable managerial work ethic: "Although she was a patron deity of agriculture, the poludnitsa was also a mischievous spirit who would punish those who worked in the fields at midday, an hour sacred to her, for she had decreed it a time of rest" (Dixon-Kennedy 1998, 217). The noon wraith, though, is both deeply local but also global in character, as Russian author Eketerina Sedia explains of Slavic myths and tales: "I hadn't realized Russian fairytales were related to other religions . . . Most of Russia's pagan gods were borrowed from elsewhere—Scandinavia, Phoenicia, Greece, Egypt, you name it" (Sedia 2007, loc. 2335).

This borrowing from Scandinavian sources can also be seen in the creature of the leshy, who had first appeared in the Scandinavian fantasy game *Skyrim* before returning a few years later in the *Wild Hunt*. In both games it can be found in forests, usually protecting the woods and creatures who live there.

There are a few quest-related interactions with the leshy in the latter game with one entitled "The Woodland Spirit" which is exactly what the creature is in the stories of both countries: "the spirit of the forest from which it takes its name" (Dixon-Kennedy 1998, 166). In order to summon the creature, it is required to burn its totem effigy, and what is striking about the game is that once you see one totem you start to see them interspersed throughout the game's entire visual environment. There are countless wayside shrines and village totem poles that dot the landscape in the game in the same way they still do in Poland. This points to another aspect of the transcultural folk horror aspect of the game in its use of structures that are simultaneously real and imaginary, place specific but part of a larger cultural imaginary.

The village totems, just mentioned, while appearing in the game have nothing to do with the game's narrative but are very much a part of the visual texture of the game that draws heavily on Polish physical geography, ethnography, and cultural iconography. A Polish travel blog identified some of these specifics in relation to the designs of some of the buildings in the game. One of the first inns you visit in the White Orchard game area (and by far the last if you're fond of vodka and card games) is interiorly decorated with pająki, paper ornaments as unique to rural settings in Poland as the various statues of the old gods. This is mirrored by the exterior floral patterns on buildings in the game village of Lindenvale that correspond to those found at the Zalipie museum in southern Poland (Widomska 2021). What is so interesting about these buildings is that while they clearly have specific local roots in Polish geography and architecture, they are also part of a larger visual iconography of the folk horror genre. For example, Robert Eggers' *The Witch* was released in the same year as the *Wild Hunt*, and the cottage in that film could easily be situated in the game, and in both the game and film such buildings tend to be framed by or situated in dark and ominous woods that always seem to threaten the security of the human dwellings. The brief reveal of the witch in that film as a beautiful woman with goat feet is a shock in the film, but in a fantasy game, it's a very common trope.

WITCHERFINDER GERALT

The fantasy world of Sapkowski, both in the books and games, is one in which magic is common enough that, as discovered early when meeting both Keira Metz and the Pellar, people turn to it and its practitioners when they need help. Yet, there is a short story of Sapkowski's set in this universe, "Eternal Fire," in which he introduces a religion known as the "Church of Eternal Fire" established in the city of Novigrad. They are fond of burning people at the stake, and their criteria for selection is primarily magic users

and nonhuman species such as halflings, elves, and dwarves. Novigrad is a main gaming area in the Wild Hunt (and based visually on the Polish city of Gdańsk), and when you first arrive, there is a particularly gruesome cut scene in which we see three people being burned in a public execution in the main square, all for the crime of having used magic. Every time you enter the city, subsequently, there are corpses hanging at the various gates to remind you of how magic users and other species are treated in the city. This is not just for scenery purposes—numerous side quests in the game involve Geralt thwarting the machinations of the church and helping various mages and witches flee the city. The main antagonist in these missions is their primary enforcer, Caleb Menge, who is as sadistic and misogynistic as Matthew Hopkins, the *Witchfinder General* (Reeve 1968) of the classic folk horror trilogy of films along with *Blood on Satan's Claw* (Haggard 1971), and *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973). In the case of both Britain and Poland, this supplanting of pagan religions by Christianity is itself a theme in their folk horror traditions with the "religious tensions" of Michael Reeve's film also on full display in the Wild Hunt (Janisse 2021). While neither film nor game explicitly state it, it can easily be read in both narratives that of the two worldviews one is much more appealing than the other. There is no gameplay choice, for example, that allows you to side with Menge or his church. You either help eliminate him or you opt out of the quest entirely.

FEARS OF THE FOLK AND FEAR OF THE FOLK

Depending on your game choices you can take a definitive side and help eliminate the witch hunters for good from the Northern Kingdoms and dispel one of the more horrific aspects of the game. The various choices you make throughout the game are reflected in the end cut-scenes, which differ depending on said choices (these can range from the death of Ciri to her crowning as empress of the Northern Kingdoms). If you rid the world of the stain of the religious witch hunters, an interesting piece of reflection by Geralt occurs, which reintroduces the horror element thought banished with the elimination of the hunters: "Hatred and prejudice will never be eradicated. And witch hunts will never be about witches. To have a scapegoat—that's the key. Humans always fear the alien, the odd. Once the mages had left Novigrad, folk turned their anger against the other races . . . and, as they had for ages, branded their neighbors their greatest foes" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015). This is very much in keeping with the themes of both books and games and shows how they carry the spirit of folk horror at their respective cores. The vilification and abhorrent treatment of nonhuman species is a direct correlation to racism in the narrative world and is a staple of every iteration of The

Witcher story—in the books these racial tensions often ignite into massacres and genocides, or "pogroms," as Sapkowski describes them, referring to the historical persecution of Jewish people in the Poland/Lithuania region, and indeed across Europe. The totems of the old gods that are so frequent in the *Wild Hunt* involve a side quest, "Defender of the Faith," that entails restoring damaged totems that have been vandalized by the proponents of the Church of Eternal Fire. In 2020, a commune in northern Poland attempted to erect similar totems designed by a local folk artist in their area and met active resistance from the Catholic church and Polish government. It is no coincidence, however, that the group being discriminated against are Kashubians, an ethnic minority group in Poland who have historically faced such persecutions (Wilczek 2020). Sapkowski is from Łódź, a city that infamously had a Jewish ghetto during the second world war, and whose awful history is part of its psychogeography and informs the racial and ethnic politics of the entire Witcher series.

The discrimination at work in The Witcher universe is most noticeable regarding its main POV game character—Geralt. When the company announced the first game and that it would take place after the book series had ended, it caused a stir, not least because to all intents and purposes both Geralt and Yennefer had been killed in a pogrom of their own. The ending is ambiguous, though, as Ciri arrives with her newfound spatiotemporal powers and whisks the two dying protagonists off to a mystical place called Avalon. Geralt's ignominious end at the prongs of a pitchfork by an enraged peasant during a mass riot points to a final revealing of the folk horror that runs below the surface in The Witcher and exposing the horrors of the "monstrous communities" as its gruesome coda (Scovell 2017, 30). The game does not ret-con this; rather it takes advantage of the ambiguous ending to bring both Geralt and Yennefer back, but the lingering wound of how Geralt met his end informs the atmosphere of the game throughout. There is a prologue that sets the scene for the game where the player is introduced to the world and the nature of its main character, The Witcher. They are, however, described in heavily loaded language: "Stray children taught the ways of foul sorcery, their bodies mutated through blasphemous ritual. Sent to fight monsters though they could not distinguish good from evil. The flicker of humanity long extinguished within them" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015). Here, there is a clear dichotomy made between monster and human, but the immense appeal of The Witcher universe, in whatever medium, is that it involves a critical deconstruction of this dichotomy. Geralt is constantly treated with fear and hatred in his interactions with people due to this monstrous "othering." A common contention throughout this chapter has been that having a monster hunter as the main character and a quest structure that often revolves around identifying a monster and killing it often reduces the horror impact of the game. But this

is an open world game that involves resolving the quests in several different ways depending on the choices of the player. If you don't feel like heading into the wilds and hunting giant spiders or griffins or wraiths, then you can strategically avoid them. And there are numerous quests in which having determined the nature of the monster you decide the best course of action. This could involve handing people over to the monsters as deserving victims or freeing the monster from their situation in a non-violent manner. The "Woodland Spirit" quest is such an example. You can either burn the spirit's totem and then kill the spirit in combat or you can listen to the local shaman in Skellige who offers you an expiatory ritual that will placate the spirit. If you pay attention to the "old ways" of the shaman, both Woodland Spirit and Mutated Monster Hunter get to live in a world that is as openly hostile to them as they are to it. If you so choose, you can play the entire game in a manner that would make Lord Summerisle, from *The Wicker Man*, proud.

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