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Special Issue

Gamevironments of the Past.

by

Derek Fewster and Ylva Grufstedt

Issue 05 (2016)

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History and Human Agency in Videogames

Vinicius Marino Carvalho

Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the way historicized videogames model human agency. It is argued that the perceived biases in historical representations attributed to an excess or lack of agency are not exclusively caused by limitations of the medium or pervading values in the game design, but also by the inherent complexity of the concept of human agency and its contended status in historical theory. The first part of the paper will offer an overview on the many ways agency has been discussed in both game scholarship and historical and political theory. The second part will mobilize this theoretical apparatus in a case study of history and human agency in *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015) I contend that the game's handling of the two topics supports an unconstrained vision of society focused on the micro-level of social interaction, setting it apart from most of the strategy and roleplaying games. I conclude by pointing to guidelines by means of which *The Witcher 3* can serve as a counterpoint to the prevailing simulations of agency in games, and how its achievements can inspire future titles interested in modeling fundamentals of historical theory in novel ways.

Keywords: history, game studies, videogame, historical theory, agency, *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*, micro-macro problem, covering law problem

To cite this article: Carvalho, V. M., 2016. Ghost in the Cartridge: History and Human Agency in Videogames. *gamevironments* 5, 104-131. Available at <http://www.gameenvironments.uni-bremen.de>.

Introduction

"Man by nature chooseth the lesser evil." – Thomas Hobbes (1998, 93)

"I don't believe in a lesser evil." (Sapowski 2010b, 102) "If I have to choose between one evil and another, I'd rather not choose at all." (CD Project RED 2013) – Geralt of Rivia

Agency, understood as the general capacity to make meaningful decisions, is a key

concept in game design and a popular notion in promotional material for videogames with a focus on historicity. The *Making History* franchise (2007-2015) nods to it in its very title. *Civilization V* (2010) invites the player to “become the Ruler of the World by establishing and leading a civilization from the dawn of man into the space age” (Take-Two 2010). Crusades-era inspired *Assassin’s Creed* (2008) declares that “your actions can throw your immediate environment into chaos, and your existence will shape events during this pivotal moment in history” (Ubisoft 2007). Medievalist fantasies which attempt to simulate fictional historical cultures often display similar aspirations. In *Fable* (2004-2011), “[e]ach person you aid, each flower you crush, and each creature you slay will change this world forever” (Lionhead Studios 2015). In *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited* (2014), “the choices you will make will shape your destiny” (Zenimax Media Inc. 2014). *Divinity: Original Sin* (2014), in turn, boasts “a plot that will rattle the very fabric of time” (Larian Studios 2014).

At first sight, these marketing statements seem to indicate not only the existence of a demand for meaningful choice-making in games, but a desire for agency over one’s own experience as well as over the virtual environments in which these games take place. However, whether or not this makes videogames more or less promising as historiography is a different question. Historians who show faith in the transformative power of individual action – or in its potential as resistance against societal oppression – would be right to feel enthusiastic about gaming’s possibilities. Historians concerned with structural constraints, contingencies, and impersonal processes, on the other hand, would find the blithe empowerment of videogames troubling. At best, they would be oversimplifications of complex phenomena. At worst, they would be naïve and ultimately anti-historical flights of fancy.

Are videogames, as ludic designed systems, capable of simulating human agency in a way accordant to historical theory? Would inaccuracies in historical games be caused by an excess or absence of some form of agency, conditioned by their reliance on fantastical, presentist or otherwise ahistorical tropes?

In game scholarship, some have associated the modeling of agency with the inherent limitations of the medium or with the influence of political assumptions from the part of the developers (Galloway 2006, 85-106, MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007, Shaw 2015). Some have considered the very notion of “player agency” problematic, as it ultimately tricks players into an illusory autonomy while making them compliant with a set of declared or implicit rules (Charles 2009, Frasca 2001, Wilson 2009). In the following paper, I contend that the perceived mishandlings of the notion of agency can be traced to the very complexity of the concept and its contended status in historical explanation. Furthermore, I argue that these biases are not entirely dependent on games’ faithfulness to the past on a representational level.

In order to articulate the point, I will approach this question with a case study of CD Projekt RED’s *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*. While not a historical game *per se*, it nevertheless presents several compelling elements to an analysis of the subject. As a dark fantasy game with no explicit commitment to a factual past, it takes an unhindered approach to historical continuity compared to most historical simulation games. At the same time, as a medievalist cultural artifact, it features references to themes and visions of civilizational development that are common to works concerned with historical authenticity. Moreover, as an RPG with a strong emphasis on player choice, it features an intricate web of causal chains and unpredictable outcomes that make it an invaluable benchmark for the modeling of agency.

In the first part of this paper, I will present some key definitions of agency in videogames and historical theory, as well as highlighting the challenges in translating these notions into measures of gamic agency. In the second part, I will mobilize this theoretical apparatus in a case study of the role of agency in CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*. I will start with a general presentation of the game and its lore and proceed to a ludological analysis of its decision-making mechanics and outcomes. Subsequently, I will interpret the representational aspects of the game in light of these considerations and evaluate what they tell us about the game's conception of human agency.

The Concept of Agency in Videogames and in History

The concept of human agency has sparked lengthy discussions in both game design and the humanities, and it will be useful to comment on them before proceeding to the case study.

In the scholarship about interactive media, agency has become a key principle, in no small part due to the influence of Janet Murray's seminal treaty *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997). Murray defined the concept as the power to make meaningful actions with perceptible outcomes, a capacity intimately linked with the medium's potential of providing gratification (Murray 1997, 126). In the years following the book's publications, scholars have made both theoretical and practical strides to understanding the boundaries of agency in relation to player behavior, systems' constraints, gratification, and authorial intent.

Following Brenda Laurel (2014), Michael Mateas formulated a Neo-Aristotelian model to analyze the concept. According to the scheme, a game can be divided into six hierarchical categories (plot, character, thought, language, pattern, and spectacle)

organized according to two inverse logics of purpose and apprehension. The formal cause (plot to spectacle) represents authorial (i.e. plot-driven) constraints, whereas the material cause (spectacle to plot) represents computational affordances, “opportunities for action made available by an object or interface” (Mateas 2001, 144b). Player agency reaches its sweet-spot when these two causes are evenly balanced. An excess of formal constraints might lead to the feeling of being “railroaded” into the author’s plan. An excess of material affordances, on the other hand, makes players’ actions seem arbitrary, useless, or devoid of meaning.

Notwithstanding the model’s merits, the idea that agency can be defined as the mere responsiveness of a game to player input has been contested by some authors. On the one hand, Thue et al. (2010, 210) argue that the objective pliability of a system to an actor’s action – what they call theoretical agency – is not enough to induce feelings of meaningful decision-making. To evoke that, systems also need to provide perceived agency, an individual’s subjective perception of the degree of control he or she exerts on his or her experience. Drawing on the existing social psychology research, they propose that perceived agency is dependent on factors such as foreseeable outcomes, the capacity to reach desirable goals, and clear causal connections between actions and their subsequent effects.

On the other hand, Harrell and Zhu have balanced the focus on player agency with the idea of system agency, “the capacity of the computational system to modify the story world and provide affordances for users’ actions” (Harrell and Zhu, 2009, 47b). This competence can manifest itself either as a set of narrative allowances and constraints – what Mateas would call its formal cause – or as control over non-player characters (NPCs) and semi-autonomous characters. Player and system agency can be either independent or dependent (directly or inversely) on each other, in a dynamic Harrel and Zhu call agency play (2009, 43a).

These theoretical guidelines show that there is a huge variety of ways developers can draw upon to convey a sense of agency – or lack thereof. To analyze how these principles might serve the intricacies of historical theory, a brief examination of history’s attention to the concept is warranted. Given that societies, unlike designed systems, do not operate based on a man-made blueprint, these topics are still hotly contended in the discipline.

Categorizing agency is a challenge because its conceptions are not tied to any single cultural background or quadrant of the political spectrum. Opposing worldviews and ideologies might – and often do – converge into similar assessments of humankind’s potential. In order to solve this problem, Thomas Sowell (2007, 4) has suggested that notions of agency can be divided in two “visions” or pre-analytical theoretical foundations. The unconstrained vision, on the one hand, interprets human rational actors capable of promoting social change and edifying society according to their designs. (Sowell 2007, 93). The constrained vision, on the other hand, posits that humans are always restricted, either by their incapacity of acting rationally and/or altruistically, by uncontrollable contingencies or by the inherent complexity of social processes. From this, it follows that structures and systemic processes, more than individual action, ought to be relied upon (Sowell 2007, 100).

A gradient between two competing visions is a useful way to visualize agency, but it has its limitations. As Isaiah Berlin (1997) demonstrated, the extremes of both constrained and unconstrained thought – or, in his terms, “impersonal” and “personal” visions – converge to a denial of human freedom and responsibility. In the former, agency becomes illusory, as mankind is considered impotent to resist the dictates of contingency. In the latter, it becomes redundant, as the existence of an underlying “pattern” of society points to a single irresistible path to the future.

This ambivalence is partly because the problem of human agency over history comprises, in fact, two distinct issues. The first concerns explaining social phenomena “when all we observe is individual action,” a dilemma known as the micro-macro problem of sociology (Aya 2001, 143). The second, christened as the covering law problem, questions the possibility of establishing general laws to the study of history, and whether or not it is possible to arrive at a scientific knowledge of historical processes in the apparent absence of such laws.

The micro-macro problem can be seen in debates opposing actors *versus* structure, individual *versus* society, and action *versus* order, although it cannot be reduced to any single dichotomy (Hitlin and Elder Jr. 2007, 172). Alexander and Giesen (1987, 4) trace its origins to the disputes between the Anglo-Saxon Liberal tradition – primarily the thought of John Stuart Mills – and the continental holism represented in the German Idealism of Fichte, Herder, and Hegel and in the works of Rousseau. The covering law problem, on its turn, can be traced to the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1989), although its terms can be most clearly understood in the exchanges between Carl Hempel (1959) and William Dray (1960), arguing, respectively, for and against the pertinence of general laws for historical explanation).

More than a simple scholarly dispute, however, this quarrel relates an apprehension about the uses and abuses of history. As Murray Murphey (1986, 46) has pointed out, the problem casts doubts over the very ideas of human nature, agency, and freedom. To admit that human behavior in society might be conditioned by iron-clad laws is to suggest that free-will itself could be bounded. Karl Popper, for example, considers the “doctrine that history is controlled by specific historical or evolutionary laws whose discovery would enable us to prophesy the destiny of man” (Popper 1966, Ch.1 Para 4) the main threat to his project of an open society based on tolerance,

reasonableness, and the marketplace of ideas. Under the guise of a dogma of social progress, the vilest of actions could be construed as necessary evils towards a larger and inevitable good.

These fears and apprehensions suggest that the question of human agency goes well beyond political philosophy. Because freedom, progress and contingency are central themes in the portrayal of the human experience, the way in which a cultural product deals with agency might affect its choice of interpretive tropes, its reliance on anachronisms and the very way its message is presented. However, because these anxieties are also less explicit than cut-out theoretical principles, translating them in terms of gamic agency becomes a daunting task.

In the next section, I will attempt to engage this challenge with a case study of the game *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015). *The Witcher* features a fictional world with several parallels with our own, and a strong sense of historical continuity. Yet, the pertinence of the game is not due to its typicality, but rather its singularity. The third installment of *The Witcher* series presents a contrasting approach to historicity to the one offered by most plot-driven fictional RPGs. It engages very little with the processes commonly modeled in macro-oriented simulation games. It also offers a departure from the treatment of agency in some micro-oriented games without, most surprisingly, relinquishing the genre's promise of decision-making as "history-making." The game, as such, provides a useful parameter to reflect on structural choices present by historical and historicized games, especially those which could otherwise be taken for granted.

Human Agency and History in *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*

The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt (W3 henceforth) is the third installment in a franchise developed by Polish studio CD Projekt RED based on books by writer Andrzej Sapkowski. At the time of writing, it counts with three titles aside from expansions and spin-offs (*The Witcher* 2007, *The Witcher II: Assassins of Kings* 2011, W3 2015). Although the intellectual property enjoyed little fame in the American continent until very recently, Sapkowski's prose became an editorial success in Europe ever since the launch of the short tale *The Witcher* (*Wiedźmin*) in 1986. The eight books subsequently published, released between 1992 and 2013, were translated to over 15 languages and adapted to graphic novels, TV, and cinema.

CD Projekt RED's trilogy is a direct continuation of Sapkowski's book series, and remain true to its central motifs despite some liberties with continuity. All three games feature writer-led storytelling, with plots that are reactive to in-game choices, each in their own way. The responsiveness of its virtual environments to player agency has been heavily advertised by its producers, with its third installment in particular being described as a benchmark in "meaningful choices and impactful consequences" (CD Projekt RED 2015). As such, a brief exposition of its plot and lore is necessary to contextualize the logics of decision-making in the games.

Sapkowski's franchise is set in an unnamed world stormed by vicious monsters, in which humans coexist with an assortment of Tolkienesque fantastical races. To protect themselves against the creatures surrounding them, the sapient races created witchers, a caste of warriors mutated into deadly monster hunters. The transformation is at once a blessing and a curse, as it grants witchers supernatural abilities while sapping them of a measure of humanity, including the capacity to express emotions and have children. Throughout over 13 tales and 6 novels, Sapkowski's saga follows a witcher named Geralt of Rivia, his lover, the sorceress

Yennefer, and their adoptive child, Ciri, as they strive to survive in a world torn by a war between the southern Nilfgaardian Empire and a rag-tag coalition of rebel Northern kingdoms that struggle against its expansionist drive.

In *W3*, after years of intrigue, Nilfgaard embarks in a full-fledged invasion of the North, and the continent is torn in a war between emperor Emhyr and king Radovid of Redania, the last of the Northern monarchs to resist the Southern onslaught. Geralt of Rivia, recently recovered from an episode of amnesia, is reunited with his lover Yennefer, who had been hired by the emperor to rescue their ward – and Emhyr’s biological daughter – Ciri, from the pursuit of a mysterious cavalcade of ghostly warriors called the Wild Hunt, known to haunt the earth in times of strife. Geralt’s quest will lead him towards some of the land’s most important people, and his actions may or may not tip the balance of the war. In the end, Geralt finds Ciri, and together they defeat the Wild Hunt. Depending on a number of decisions taken throughout the game, Ciri might sacrifice herself following the final battle, become Emhyr’s heiress as future ruler of Nilfgaard or fake her own death and follow Geralt on the witcher’s path.

W3 requires players to make hard choices in a context of world-changing political struggles and imperatives of fate. It also presents these conflicts through a micro lens, focusing on its effects on people’s lives over the twists of fortune between kings, nations, and races. More so than other medievalist RPGs – including its two predecessors – *W3* emphasizes uncertainty and contingency. Throughout his journey to find his daughter, Geralt’s involvement will change the course of his world’s history, but in ways in which he could not anticipate. While the game employs the familiar formula of decision-making via dialogue, the quantity of decision points is so great and the flags that mark the crucial choices so well hidden that the player, at the game’s conclusion, remains in the dark about the causal connection that led to the

observable outcomes.

A breakdown of *W3*'s endgame outcomes might be warranted to illustrate the point. Its two main conflicts, the Wild Hunt's chase after Ciri and the Nilfgaardian invasion of the North, are obligatorily resolved at the end of the journey. In the first, the Wild Hunt is defeated and their true purpose is revealed: they are in fact a race of otherworldly elves who wish to use Ciri – bearer of the Elder Blood, a source of immense magical power – to escape from the White Frost, an apocalyptic ice age that sooner or later befalls all worlds, and is about to consume their plane of existence. Heeding the call of destiny, Ciri proceeds to make use of her gift and puts her life at risk in an attempt to dispel the White Frost so that it never threatens another world again. Whether she survives or not depends on her self-confidence, which she will progressively acquire throughout the game if Geralt acts like a supporting father. These variables, surprisingly intimistic in their nature, are given by five decision points along three quests (*Blood on the Battlefield*, *Final Preparations*, and *Battle Preparations*). One point (taking Ciri to her biological father Emhyr) can be skipped, although it opens up an ending option unachievable otherwise. Each decision is flagged as "positive" or "negative," and the sum of each attribute determines which ending variation will be arrived at. The "positiveness" of the decisions is not always clear from the outset, and some of the choice nodes are timed, forcing players to think quickly lest they risk the decisions being made for them.

By the endgame, if the player has made two or less positive decisions, Ciri dies dispelling the White Frost. If the player chose at least three positive decisions, Ciri survives the ordeal and follows her foster father's footsteps in the witcher's path. If the player numbered three positive decisions and took Ciri to see Emhyr, and if Nilfgaard wins the war, Ciri survives, moves to court, and succeeds her father as

empress.

Ensuring Nilfgaard's victory brings us to the second conflict, the invasion of the Northern Kingdoms. Unlike Ciri's fate, Geralt's involvement in the war depends entirely on side quests and can be completely skipped. Should the player avoid the content altogether, the Redanian king Radovid defeats Nilfgaard, but soon casts the mantle of repression over the North, burning sorcerers, non-humans (elves, dwarves, and halflings) and dissidents at the stake. At one point in the game, however, Geralt will be approached by Radovid's political rivals and invited to participate in the monarch's assassination. Accepting the offer will open a series of four quests, which, once completed, results in the king's death and its subsequent turmoil. In the last one, *Reason of State*, the victorious plotters will turn against themselves and Geralt will be urged to intervene. If he sides with Sigismund Dijkstra, Redania's former chief of Intelligence, Nilfgaard is defeated and Dijkstra himself takes Radovid's place. If he sides with Vernon Roche, leader of the resistance in one of the North's overrun states and Geralt's potential friend in *The Witcher's* second installment, *Assassin of Kings* (CD Projekt RED, 2011), Nilfgaard will win the war and Roche's kingdom of Temeria will be granted independence as a client state. Siding with one leader, however, results in the other being killed. In the case of a victorious Dijkstra, this means the death of Geralt's allies from the first two games, to whom the player could presumably have formed an emotional attachment. A breakdown of this causal chain is shown below in Figure 1.

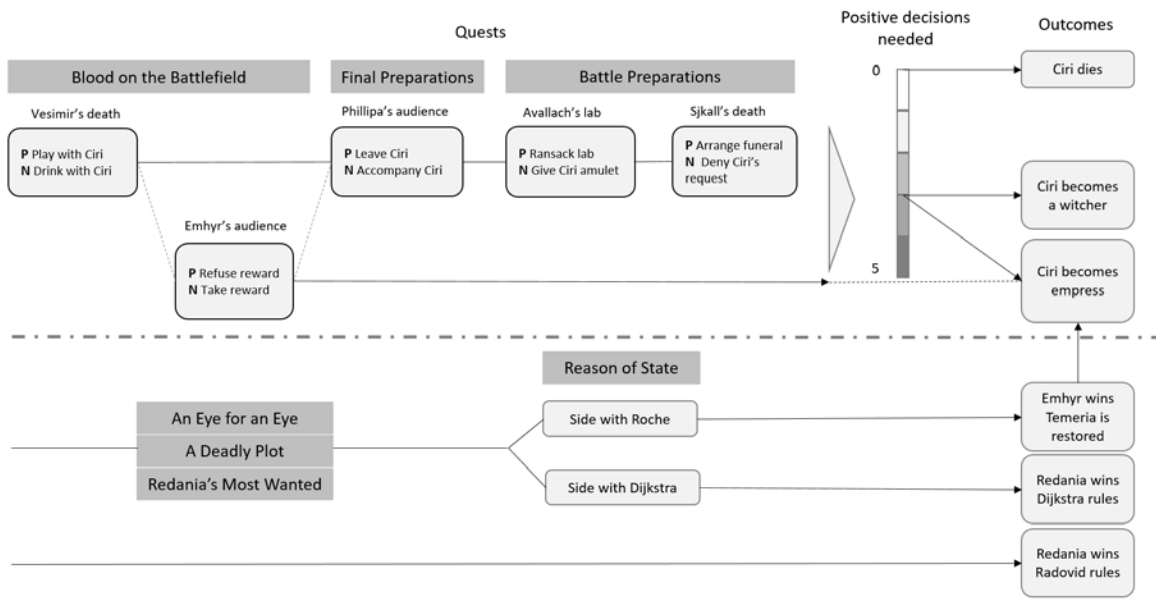


Figure 1. W3 endgame outcomes.

System's agency, expressed in a narrative framework that emulates the preferences of believably human NPCs, allows one to backward induce a connection between the decisions and the outcomes. Ciri will react (with joy or denouement) after each of Geralt's actions in her quest chain. Dijkstra is a consistent power monger and at one point talks about his desire to take reins and industrialize the land. Still, the outcomes are not directly foreseeable from the choice nodes. Even Geralt's involvement in Radovid's assassination plot, the most overly political of his actions, is motivated not by a desire to tip the scales in the war, but by the monarch's truculence against mages and non-humans, several of which are Geralt's close friends. The authorial plan is not perceivable by the player, not due to an excess of affordances, but, in the fashion of a detective novel, by merit of emotional and narrative misdirection. The player's decision to save Roche's life might end up costing a desired victory against Emhyr, whose actions are portrayed as ruthless and villainous. In even more ludic terms, a player might take Ciri to the emperor's audience out of a completionist desire to see everything the game has to offer, only to find out that his or her diligence led to an unwanted outcome in which Ciri abandons the witcher's life. In the case of the quest chain determining Ciri's fate, even awareness of the decisions

could be compromised. Among hundreds of choice nodes for the game’s dozens of quests, several of which have immediate perceivable outcomes, a player could understandably conclude that those subtle gestures of affection have little bearing in the endgame scenarios.

Given these conditions, it would be tempting, in an extreme reading of Thue et al., to state that *W3* allows for little sense of agency. However, the impact of uncertainty over its plot is counterbalanced by the frequent resort to misdirection and by the interplay with a highly responsive system agency. An abundance of small choices with short-term consequences sustains the impression that the game’s affordances are tied to an authorial plan. NPCs have their own preferences and will act accordingly, sometimes in detriment of Geralt’s best interests. In the quest chain *Brothers in Arms*, the protagonist must gather allies for a clash against the Wild Hunt. Whether they will lend their aid depends on Geralt’s past actions towards them. At the same time, the environment evolves with time, simulating long-term change. Radovid’s pyres will grow in number as he extends his persecution to non-humans. Depending on the outcome of the war, the player will come across either rotting battlefields or the fallout from Nilfgaard’s demobilization. True to the game’s focus on the micro-level of social interactions, some details – like a Nilfgaardian soldier consoling his Northern lover – are strikingly personal.

Altogether, these design choices converge to a constrained image of human society in which individuals are rational and influence the course of their history, but not always as they intended, nor to the fulfillment of their agendas. The bleak, uncertain world of *The Witcher* franchise has no place for the revolutionary will of *Mass Effect’s* Commander Shepard, who single-handedly changes the fate of the galaxy. In Geralt’s world, human agency is always limited by chance, destiny, and the conflicting actions of fellow individuals. Even Ciri, arguably the most unconstrained agent in the series,

given her powers to change the future, is bound by the dictates of prophecy. Gifted as she might be, she is just as subject to designs of fate as the people whose lives are transformed by her actions.

It is pertinent to point out how consonant these choices are with the game’s thematic and representational aspects; specifically, with its universe’s notion of morality. Geralt claims to adhere to an unwritten “witcher’s code.” Throughout the franchise, it is revealed that such a code does not exist, but is rather an excuse to refuse contracts which he feels offend his morals. The conditions include sparing sapient monsters and refraining from involvement in political disputes. Unlike the stoic apathy of Jedi in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003-2015), this “witcher neutrality” is not based on a sense of moral superiority, but rather on Geralt’s awareness of his own shortcomings and his unwillingness to rationalize tangible human suffering – in his own words, on his reluctance to choose a lesser evil (CD Projekt RED 2013, Sapkowski 2010b, 102). The very downfall of the witcher order is explained in-game as the result of righteous propaganda. Once a thriving guild, the witcher school was at one point stormed by peasants riled up by moralizing pamphlets distributed by mages who resented the hunters. Witchers may be monster slayers, but it is the certainty and ruthlessness of the series’ factions – the dogmatic Order of the Flaming Rose, the Scoia’tel guerrillas, the fanaticism of Radovid’s witch hunters, and the civilizational mission of the Nilfgaardian empire – who are its true villains. In a cut scene arrived at after witnessing the immolation of non-humans, Geralt expresses that what is at stake is not a lack of goodwill or civility, but unchangeable human nature:

“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 have left Novigrad, folk turned their anger against the other races... and, as they have for ages, branded their neighbors their greatest foes” (CD Projekt RED 2015).

For Geralt, the end never justifies the means. His skepticism towards a predictable future and in readymade solutions to the world’s problems translates in a suspicion towards higher causes. Being not a historical simulation, but the adaptation of a licensed fantasy franchise, the world of *The Witcher* predictably borrows these elements from Sapkowski’s own prose rather than any historical treatise. The hostility to totalizing views of human society and the ruthless cruelty they sow are recurring themes in the series’ books, and can be best illustrated by a quote from the works of fictional philosopher Vysogota of Corvo in the novel *The Tower of the Swallow*:

“There are in every State fanatics who wish to impose a certain conception of public order. Committed in body and soul to this idea, they are willing to do anything to defend it. That includes committing crimes, for the end, according to them, justifies the means and reverses the morals. They don’t assassinate, they preserve the public order. They don’t torture or blackmail: they protect the reason of State and fight for the peace. For these people, life is an entity that has no value and does not merit consideration when it becomes an obstacle to the established order. These people forget that the society that they serve is composed precisely of these entities. They have a so-called broad outlook... the surest way to becoming oblivious to the pieces of the puzzle.” (Sapkowski 2010a, Ch. 8 Para 86).

Throughout the novels – and into the games – this vision is opposed by an understanding of the world as an ordered, predictable whole. The position, generally heralded by characters related to the world of magic and by the elves of the Wild Hunt, confronts Geralt’s and Vysogota’s pessimism with the allegory of Ouroboros, the serpent of time that bites its own tail, to whom past, present, and future have no meaning, and in which everything that happened and everything that is to happen is connected by a single, inexorable purpose. This viewpoint is acted upon by faith in the unavoidability of destiny and in the boundless power of the Elder Blood that runs through Ciri’s veins.

Yet, although several twists in the series' plot are hinted to be the work of a higher force and Ciri can indeed bend space and time to her will, we are left without assurances concerning the existence of an overarching plan. Every confirmation of the words of prophecy is countered – often by Sapkowski's clever use of flash-forwards – by the implication that it could as well be the product of chance. The belief in contingency eventually wins as Philippa Eilhart, a mage who attempts to place the whole world under the rule of sorceresses using the power of the Elder Blood, eventually lets Ciri go her way instead of holding her captive. Even if history has a plan, Philippa realizes that its understanding lies beyond human grasp.

Concluding Remarks

As an RPG, *W3*'s invites a discussion on the theoretical underpinnings of history itself, in addition and independent to the topics of authenticity, historical culture, representation, and the "politics of play" on which most scholarly attention on the genre has fallen (e.g. Brown 2014, Dipietro 2014, Moberly and Moberly 2008, November 2013, Shaw and Sharp 2013, Traxel 2008, Voorhees 2009). Calling attention to the specificities of the historical theory underneath videogame representations does not preclude these other approaches. Rather, it enriches them, as the key axes of analytical thought (agency, structure, action theory, contingency, etc.) have been concurrently mobilized by different (and often competing) schools of thought and political discourses, and cannot adequately be restricted to any single interpretive system.

In the case of *W3*, the game presents complex causal chains by means of its choice and consequence mechanics, which highlight the role of uncertainty and the limits in human agency. While the game is not "historical" in theme, and not properly concerned with socio-political dynamics to be considered a "simulation" of a given

Game developers wishing to explore this potential would need to create a game lore that entices the concepts to be explored, or – if the game is to be based on an existing intellectual property – choose a source material in which these concerns are present. It is unlikely that *W3* would succeed in its modeling of constrained agency if uncertainty, contingency, and hostility to totalizing visions were not already focal points in the original book series. To game scholars, the systematic study of this disparity might help uncover common patterns of association between remediated past, morality, theory, and genre – for example, a non-compliance bias in medieval simulations, a prevalence of unconstrained visions in futuristic games, or an anachronistic ethic of public accountability in pre-modern city builders.

Concomitantly, *W3*'s focus on the micro-level of social interactions provides the means for counterpoint to theses presented in macro-oriented historical simulations, like grand strategy and city-building games. These genres have often been criticized for ignoring the human element, reducing soldiers to cannon fodder, slaves to currency, and small tribes to stepping stones to empire building. In many cases, this bias is intentional and unavoidable, as glimpsing into the plight of common people was not possible – or was purposely avoided – by the leaders, generals, or executive committees whose roles these games simulate. If at first it is tempting to treat *W3*'s point of view as preferable, keeping theories of human agency in mind allows us to see that these views are not antithetical. Rather, as proponents of the "micro-macro link" have argued, they represent parallel and often complementary approaches (Alexander et al. 1987).

Micro views tend to emphasize individual behavior, psychology, and personal aspirations, but may shun on construing topics in a broad outline. Indeed, *W3* is a shallow explanatory device for large-scale historical, social, or political processes, and Geralt's uncompromising cynicism would sound naïve in the context of complex

simulations of war economies, like the *Hearts of Iron* series (2002-2016). Macro views concern themselves with structures and decision-making patterns in a level in which individuals are accounted for mostly as data for overarching trends that in turn can have their influence felt back in the micro-level. A soldier can be both a loving father estranged from his family *and* a number in a casualties roll. A hamlet might be both the cherished abode of a family *and* a quotient of resources to be mined. Refusing to recognize one level may hamper understanding of the other – for example, by failing to explain *why* a given hamlet was attacked in the first place. Designing a micro-oriented game to engage a topic often approached on the macro level – and vice versa – can be a path to bringing new air into a well-worn genre without necessarily disparaging its established franchises. Alternatively, a sophisticated use of agency dynamics might allow a game to slide through the micro-macro scale, offering different points of view in the same play through. Historical theory is a rich toolset for game designers and critics to utilize. To implement it, games and game criticism need not relinquish their inventiveness. Rather, they will find in it a unique opportunity to expand.

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ⁱ Game composer Mikolai Stroinski stated using Slavic, Balkan, and British folk music as reference, as well as employing ancient instruments like the hurdy-gurdy, renaissance fiddle, and gheychak to contribute to an unique ambiance, see RPGfan Music Staff (2015). For visual and thematic references, see Fewster (2015).

ⁱⁱ The link between Geralt of Rivia and Liberal (or, as he wills it, Neo-Liberal) "anti-politics" in Post-Communist Poland has been further remarked by Poblöcki (2008).