
Viewer or Player? Questioning Spectatorship in
Videogames: A Reflexive Analysis of *The Witcher III: Wild
Hunt* (2016)



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██████████ – Dissertation

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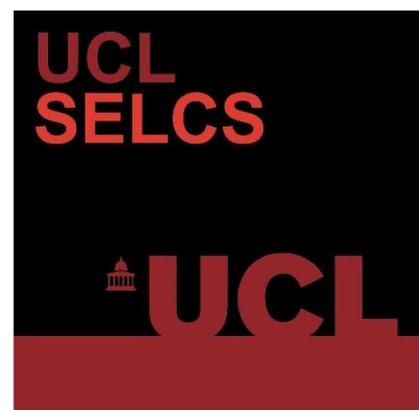


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Abstract

This essay interrogates how the videogame medium creates an engrossing and complex spectatorial experience that consistently challenges the user's sense of activity. Are you playing, are you watching, or both? The method consists of a playthrough of *the Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2016), then analysed and deconstructed to address how play, spectatorship and engagement all merged into one. The paper looks at aesthetics first, to see how borrowing from film studies affects the experience of watching a narrative unfold despite the overwhelming presence of ludology. Then, it focuses on how immersion is used, urged, and upset by the attempted reconciliation of appeals to modalities that interrogate a user's experience of the text. Finally, the last chapter ties experience altogether by questioning how choice in videogames can be constructed as a manipulation of the will of the player, effectively brought on by the engagement of their watching. Semiotics, narratology, cinematography, ludology, and focalization theory are all present in the essay and fortify a conclusion that seeks to integrate how a user experiences the complex experience of videogame spectatorship via playing, watching and being.

Introduction — Framing the Player-Viewer

“Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you.”

-Dziga Vertov, Soviet Film Director, ed. John Berger. ¹

Videogame walkthroughs have always been a source of comfort for me. Whether it was because I lacked access to the newest console, game, or contented myself with watching rather than playing; walkthroughs are one of my preferred ways to consume video game content.

During a long and isolating Covid-19-plagued winter break, I set myself to watching gameplay of the recently released triple-A videogame, *CyberPunk 2077* (2020). ² Premonitions that walkthrough watching is a niche sport are tarnished upon acknowledging that this video alone—one among many YouTube walkthrough channels—was viewed 8.2 million times. Rather than enumerate various proofs of the videogame industry’s colossal and expanding value (approximately 138.4 \$bn in 2021), what inspires my curiosity is the question of videogame spectatorship. ³ What processes occur when watching play? And, to what extent, if any, does such a practice appeal closer to filmic viewership rather than distanced engagement with play?

Formulating questions and methods for a reflexive investigation can be helped by reviewing former game studies literature on the relationship between game and narrative. In 2002, Krzywinska and King regarded narrative as partial to gameplay, offering only a ‘general context within which gameplay is conducted’. ⁴ Here, narrative plays a subordinate role against ‘more active or frenetic gameplay’. ⁵ Re-evaluation offers two important insights: Firstly, that modern videogames contest

¹ Dziga Vertov, “Ways of Seeing” ed. John Berger, (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p.17; Dziga Vertov, ‘Kinoks: A revolution’, in *Kino- Eye* ed. by Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien, (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984), p. 17-18.

² TheRadBrad, *CYBERPUNK 2077 Walkthrough Gameplay Part 1 - INTRO (FULL GAME)*, online video recording, YouTube, 9 December 2020; CDPROJEKT RED, *CYBERPUNK 2077* (2020), Xbox, PlayStation, Microsoft Windows and OSX.

³ J. Clement, “Value of the global video game market 2012-2021” (2021), *Statista*.

⁴ Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, ‘Computer Games/Cinema/Interfaces’, *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference* (2002), p.147, PDF.

⁵ *Ibid.*

such assertions via the immense leap of technological developments produced in the last two decades. More recent publications such as Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games* or Weimin Toh's *a Multimodal Approach to Video Games and the Player Experience* contain readings deeply concerned in the analysing videogame narrative, and the vast ways it can support and define certain games. Via a combination of alternative industry models, audience tastes and, crucially, superior technology, developers pay an inordinate amount of attention to narrative as they do gameplay— if not more.

Writings of a mere 19 years later demonstrate how substantially game studies literature is subject to the period of its origin and the products of its study. Uniquely so, the videogame medium is one where incessant growth and innovation suggests an urgency to reevaluate academic observations. Consider, for instance, Sacha Howell's argument below:

If anything, narrative videogames adhere even more rigidly to the classical formula [forging motivation and causal connection] than film; more than just giving characters believable motivation for their subsequent actions, as in film, cut-scenes often directly give the player/spectator his or her objectives: shoot X, steal Y, jump to Z.⁶

Howell's view that indiscrete instructions and one-dimensional character motivation are one of videogame's sole narrative engines would have resonated then more than it does now. The observed fad giving players more degrees of freedom has welcomed narrative variation and champions individual player identity through choice.

Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (2012-2014) is one which excelled at the visual novel, incessantly proving that storytelling had the ability to outshine traditional action gameplay, or at the very least do without it. *Fahrenheit* (2005), *Heavy Rain* (2010), *Life is Strange* (2015), and more, spearheaded a contemporary wave of choice-based narrative videogames.

On-screen text and feedback are one of the mechanisms that support the visual novel: rewarding, acknowledging, or reproaching a player's choice and its effects on the storyline and its

⁶ Sacha A. Howells, 'Watching A Game, Playing A Movie: When Media Collide' in *cinema/videogames/interfaces*, ed. by Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), p.113; David, Bordwell, 'Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures' in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. by Philip Rosen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 17-34.

characters. These intra-game messages recall Salen and Zimmerman's elements integral to the achievement of 'meaningful play' as the feedback function imbues weight to a player's decision.⁷



Fig 1: "Clementine will remember that." (left)

Fig 2: "Rocket is furious that you let Drax throw him." (right)

The screenshots above compare *The Walking Dead's* use of the function (top left) with a contemporary imitation featured in a trailer for the upcoming *Guardians of the Galaxy* videogame (top right).⁸ Such is one of the many examples discussed in the essay that shows how design mechanics may support a game's narrative, reflecting the trend that honours both disciplines equally and in tandem.

The association between narrative and ludology is productive here because it draws back to the essay's initial question, particularly if it succeeds at isolating how all elements of a videogame, both asynchronous and interactive, combine to create a complex and dynamic spectatorial experience. I aim to resolve this quarrel via a reflexive analysis of my own playing experience that honours both filmic and ludic qualities; actively engaging with the dichotomy that appears to rouse a certain tension or friction across both these disciplines.

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt (2016) is my key reference.⁹ *The Witcher* is a third-person action-adventure game set in a fictional, medieval fantasy world ripe with monsters, magic, and war. *The Witcher's* context is immensely relevant as it provides a fuller understanding viewed as an adaptation

⁷ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, 'Unit 1: Core Concepts: Interactivity', in *Rules of Play*, ed. by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), p. 65-66.

⁸ Telltale Games, *The Walking Dead* (2012), Xbox, PlayStation, Microsoft Windows, OSX and subsequently other platforms; Eidos-Montréal, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, (2021), Microsoft Windows, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation, and Xbox.

⁹ CDPROJEKT RED, *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2016), Xbox, PlayStation, Microsoft Windows and OSX.

from its original literary companion. It is a game that excels at translating these rich themes, providing a base for an equally engaging game that triumphantly weaves game and narrative seamlessly. In order to condense over 200 hours of gameplay, supporting literature and adaptations, three chapters will encompass the plural dimensions of *The Witcher*.

Defining who or what player-viewer is means to appreciate how they are both divergent and overlapping at once. Where play typically appeals to one's sensory, physical, and mental engagement with ludic mechanics, narrative pulls the watcher into its story, recalling a relationship akin to the filmic spectator. This dichotomy draws back to game studies' age-old debate between narratologists and ludologists, which Jenkins' quotation summarizes quite succinctly: "... a blood feud threatened to erupt between the self-proclaimed Ludologists, who wanted to see the focus shift onto the mechanics of game play, and the Narratologists, who were interested in studying games alongside other storytelling media."¹⁰ This investigation recalls the essence of this dispute in that it attempts to—perhaps sanguinely—reconcile the disciplinary tension between the intersective activity of watching and playing. A thorough breakdown of elements, with clear labelling and dissection should aid in minimizing overlapping terminology, theories, and methodologies between the two medias.

This essay seeks to escort the reader across *the Witcher's* layers by locating its most visceral feature, aesthetics, as an opening chapter. The game's cinematographic dimension via an immensity of cut-scenes results in an integration that produces a unique narrato-ludic space that may situate the spectator's vacillating position.

Chapter II peels beyond the visuo-aesthetic layer to assess how immersion is nurtured throughout the game's environments, levels, and world. Immersion forms an essential part of understanding how a game's mechanics, narrative and aesthetic features work together to place the player-viewer in a lived-in and rich fantasy world. In turn, it happens to complicate the dichotomy between viewing and playing as immersion happens behaves as both a bridging and isolating tool.

¹⁰ Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. by Pat Harrigan and Michael Crumpton, (Boston: MIT Press, 2004), p.118.

Chapter III takes on immersion in a similar vein via the tension between choice and rules. The freedom to choose one's actions, reactions, and dialogue prompts in the allow the player to reflect their individuality upon the game and its feedback. The freedom to choose, however present it may be, is bound by rules and mechanics that nudge the player into choosing certain paths over others. Persuading a player to feel freer and yet manipulating them into certain choices is yet another juxtaposition that emerges as a result of the complex relationship between player and viewer. Evidence shows how a videogame's ludic laws substantiate the friction that segregates the player-viewer in a spectatorial position where the game hegemonically overwhelms the player to contest or succumb to its principles.

Interrogations of spectatorship are weaved throughout, posing the world of player and viewer, narratology and ludology, film, and game against one another with the intention of producing an examination through a confrontation of these dialectical building blocks.

Via the *Witcher*, I intend on exposing the methods in which narrative is integrated, furthered, and defined by gameplay. Lending equal weight to these two disciplines is the sole manner upon which such a game can be analysed to the depth that it demands. Such discourse therefore harks back to the original spark of this discussion: how can videogames be consumed solely via watching. Videogame spectatorship—via the advent of newer technologies—has evolved in such a way that it urgently merits academic re-evaluation. With any luck, a reflexive examination of *the Witcher* may succeed in modernizing analytical models that embrace the dual-perceiver, shaking the foundations upon which game studies is partly constructed.

Chapter I — Aesthetics: Cut-Scene Cinema

Brock Rough's chapter, "Videogames as Neither Video nor Games: A Negative Ontology", concludes— after advocating for a deconstruction the videogame category—that 'there is very little that videogames *must* be intrinsically.' He therefore suggests that game studies scholars looking forward should traverse past a set of essential properties, and, rather, challenge 'how far we can stretch the boundaries of what videogames can be.'¹¹ The fundamental idea that videogames contain plural dimensions of engagement captures my personal view and embodies this investigation's central assertion.

A videogame's categorical breadth and experiential variety may grant a user mobility to shift along the player-viewer spectrum. Former and future references to the player-viewer spectrum confront the question of identity. By appreciating the generically challenging and multi-dimensional properties of the videogame, the player-viewer spectrum breaks down and addresses the multi-dimensional relationship between user and text. Is an experience more visceral if a videogame features more cinematic cutscenes, dramatic camera angles, or explicit artistic direction? Or, will the essence of videogames nevertheless gravitate toward a ludic dimension, where mechanics, level design, and controls dominate? Showcasing this dichotomy upon a spectrum proves I strongly believe—although some videogames present a significant contest—that user identity is fluid. Nevertheless, transfers or adjustments upon the spectrum typically arise as videogames progress, particularly when alongside a player's personal perceptions of the videogame.

In order to best put theory and model to the test, *The Witcher* became intentionally became my main object of study. *The Witcher* is a noteworthy subject for a number of reasons. Firstly, the *Witcher* saga has its origins in a six-novel strong book series by Andrzej Sapkowski, released between 1990-2003 in Poland.¹² Having undergone numerous adaptations from what already was a narratively fertile soil, developers worked with a wealth of contextual and literary material. Even so, the product

¹¹ Brock, Rough, 'Videogames as Neither Video nor Games: A Negative Ontology' in *The Aesthetics of Videogames* ed. by Jon, Robson, and Grant Tavinor, (New York: Routledge, 2018), p.38-39, PDF.

¹² Rob Dwiar, "The Witcher Books: reading order and where to start", *PC GAMER*, (2021), available online.

had to contend with the expectations and needs of original *Witcher* audiences and external videogame consumers alike, and thus respecting the narrato-ludic balance is vital. Moreover, the game is notoriously large in scope: in number of quests, map size and breadth of RPG-style customization mechanics. This facilitates the integration of vast materials upon a large platform, capable of populating the in-game world with complex supporting characters, lively NPCs (non-playable characters) and lived-in environments. A fantasy setting that ‘nobly upholds its rules’, features a compelling plot, well-crafted combat and strategic RPG mechanics have earned *the Witcher* one of the highest counts of awards to date.¹³ It was only surpassed in 2021 by the latest *Last of Us* instalment, which beat the game’s count of awards, 260, by only one.¹⁴

This chapter looks on to break down how the cut-scene and its numerous aesthetic and formal properties contribute to a user’s malleable position on the player-viewer spectrum. In 2002, Sacha Howell mused on what may have then been the future of in-game cutscenes. Such in-game cutscenes— scattered within various points of a videogame to aid its narrative—typically feature a photorealistic art style with an omniscient, cinematic camera developed outside the in-game engine. She therefore interrogates: “Does the future of cut-scenes lie in this kind of removal of disruption?”¹⁵ Howell considers Valve’s *Half-Life* as a departure from the antiquated trope via the inclusion of two cut-scenes that incorporate narrative whilst allowing the player to remain in control. Although she terms it a revolutionary innovation, she laments how *Half-Life*, although armed with a responsive plot, could still not reach the narrative heights of *Deus Ex* or *Final Fantasy VIII*.¹⁶

The integration and balance of narrative, cut-scene and ludic mechanics is exemplary in *the Witcher*. The game offers an expansion to the cut-scene definition and mechanic. Viewing cut-scenes roughly as a narrative interjection of a videogame’s ludic elements, *the Witcher* offers approximately eleven different dimensions of cut-scenes. What sets them apart is how intimately the player’s control is incorporated. Below is a chart charting these levels as most and least interactive.

¹³ Simon, Parkin, “The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt review – a rich adventure born in literature”, *The Guardian*, (2015), <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/may/13/witcher-3-wild-hunt-review-xbox-ps4-pc>>.

¹⁴ Alex, Calvin, “The Last of Us Part 2 has more game of the year awards than The Witcher 3, the previous record holder” *VG247*, (2021), <<https://www.vg247.com/last-us-part-2-witcher-3-awards>>, [accessed 21 August 2021].

¹⁵ Sacha A. Howells, “Watching A Game, Playing a Movie: When Media Collide”, in *Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), p.120.

¹⁶ Ibid.

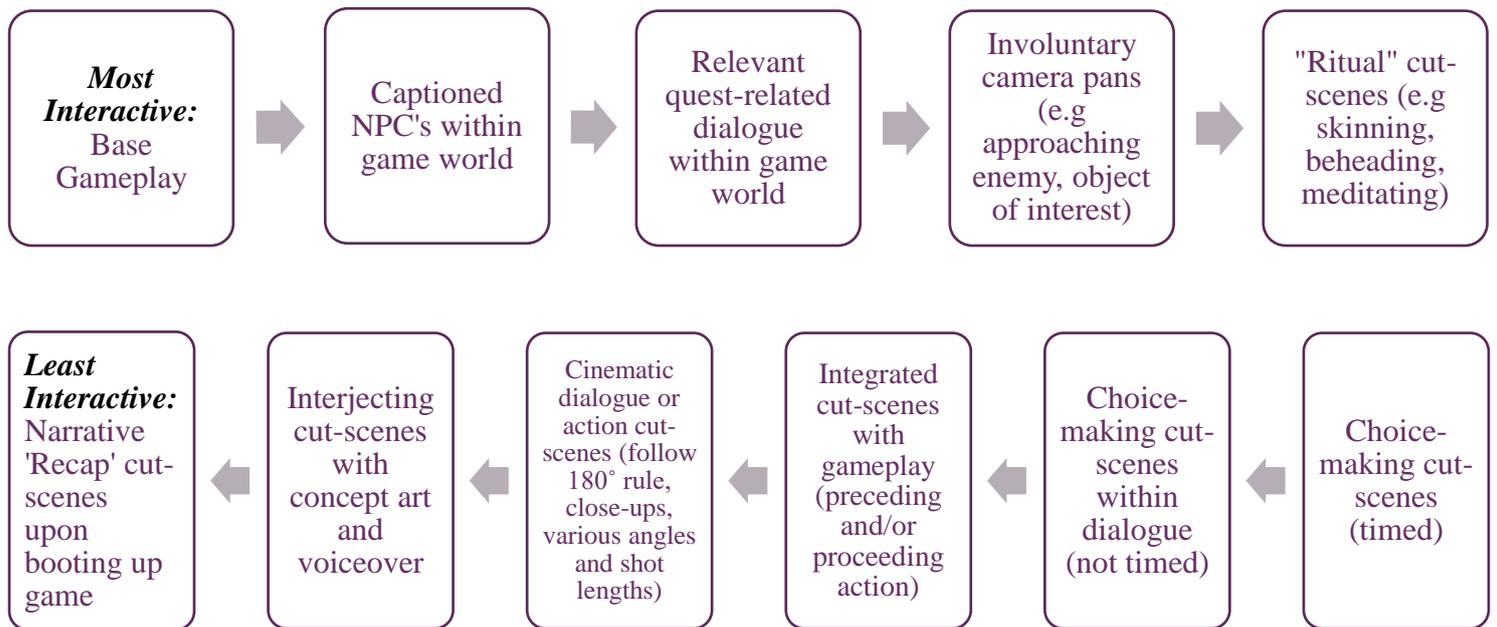


Fig 3: Cut-Scene Chart

The various layers highlight the number of ways in which the idea of a cut-scene can be malleated to provide narrative substance at many more points in the game. For instance, the second most interactive way—titled NPCs within game world—regards NPC dialogue lines as a narrative interjection. By simply walking around a village to talk, listen and eavesdrop on inhabitants exemplifies one of the most subdued ways to gain narrative context. Some information may be ornamental, only providing additional colour to game’s NPCs and related characters. Characters with something to say—although every NPC has *something* to say—will interact with Geralt, supporting captions appearing above their avatars that relay their speech, allowing words to be perceptible even if you simply happen to ride by them. Whilst ludically it may not amount to much, a player too focused on the game’s main quests may lose out on certain opportunities to further immerse themselves in the literary world of the *Witcher* as a consequence of doing that which most videogames typically do not ask for: distraction. Diversion from main quests encourage the player to experience the colossal depth to which control, content and customization have been prioritized by *The Witcher’s* developers. These cut-scenes can be analysed to consider how different cut-scenes dispense narrative content and context.

White Orchard's Intolerant NPCs

As Geralt's mentor Vesemir walks you through the opening of the game, you approach village of White Orchard. The village is frankly composed of NPCs comfortable with directing hostile slurs your way, extending a hearty welcome to players anticipating a world where its hero is neither welcome nor tolerated. As they ride, Vesemir, warns Geralt that they "should watch themselves and leave as soon as they know anything." Within seconds, however, I was glaringly reprimanded by a female villager to stay away from her family as I neared her. Some strolling later, and a child exalted that his mother won't let him talk to strangers. Such interjections embed the series' political commentary with narrative: wherever they go, Witchers suffer prejudice emerging from their choice to endure the self-inflicted alchemical mutations needed to become a monster hunter. Consider how Sapkowski addresses this in the novel:

They roam the land, importunate and insolent, nominating themselves the stalkers of evil, vanquishers of werewolves and exterminators of spectres, extorting payment from the gullible and, on receipt of their ignoble earnings, moving on to dispense the same deceit in the near vicinity.

-Anonymous, Monstrum, or *Description of the Witcher*¹⁷

Although tolerance for the Witcher folk is generally lacklustre throughout the whole Continent, the feeling of prejudice runs particularly deep in White Orchard. A main quest there leads you to assist a solitary hunter with pariah status on account of an unearthed homosexual relationship with the emperor's son. Another results to an engrossment with an arsonist crime targeting the resident blacksmith who charges the citizens of discrimination on the basis of a dwarfist hate crime. Patterns of dialogue like this can be found in other villages with respect to their relevant lore. That White Orchard is both the first and one of the most hostile experiences Geralt faces with NPCs emphasizes the prioritization of context alongside plot. Introducing the player to Geralt's subdued political position immediately is not coincidence because it initiates a context upon which the player may later act in other correspondences. Below is a screenshot exhibiting an example in which intolerance towards Geralt is expressed via a dramatic cut-scene in the game's opening hour.

¹⁷ Andrzej Sapkowski, *The Last Wish*, trans. by Danusia Stok, (London: Gollancz, 2008), p.165.



Fig 4: "Hrrk-poo. Don't want your kind here".

Insinuating that there is more to the protagonist's actions and choices through a prior context substantially affects the user's place on the player-viewer spectrum. Two theoretical processes occur here: the first recalls a reworking of Genette's lens of focalization that incorporates what's known as internal focalization which concerns 'what the character *knows...*' and 'includes the character's *thoughts* or perceptions.'¹⁸ This example of prior knowledge is remarkably important and its incorporation into the narrative works to great effect to amplify the narrator's identification with Geralt's encounters with intolerance.

This vested concentration to the novel's politics and its integration of this aesthetic coding recalls Julian Kücklich's iteration that information embraces 'the hermeneutic process of reading a literary text, by challenging the player to make predictions about what is to come, or to reconstruct the events that led up to the present situation.'¹⁹ Working with an issue as globally-recognized as racial prejudice and trans-mediating it to what can typically be a simultaneously apolitical and violence-glorifying medium proves a double-edged sword that makes Sapkowski's commentary on hierarchal prejudices relatable, accessible, and captivating.

¹⁸ Gerard Genette ed. by Manfred Jahn in 'Windows of Focalization: Deconstructing and Reconstructing a Narratological Concept', *Style*, 30.2, (1996), p. 244.

¹⁹ Geoff, King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders & Space Invaders: Videogame Forms & Context*, (New York: I.B Tauris, 2006), p. 45; Julian R Kücklich, "The Road Less Traveled - The Case for Computer Game Philology", 2002, The Challenge of Computer Games Conference, University of Lodz.

Despite the central themes, circumstances and context do fluctuate across the Continent. In Novigrad, a more developed and populated urban setting, night-time NPCs range from “strumpets” to “sketchy strangers” and victims of fisstech addiction, an illegal narcotic. Shadowing Novigrad’s dingiest alleys may even lead you to a side quest that morally implicates Geralt in a streetside conflict between a fisstech dealer and three elves who lament their fisstech was laced with poison and resulted in the death of their children. The ability to encounter distinct regions with their own individual anecdotes, themes, and characters allows *the Witcher* to take advantage of the player’s exploration of the world as a way to learn more of Sapkowski’s.

NPC captions are just one of a multitude of ways in which such narration takes form. The display of one of 63,871 voice clips offers an enormous range: from annoyed grunts to endangered pleadings, NPC prompts frequently draw Geralt into side quests.²⁰ Interactions with NPCs may be deliberately arranged to advance the main quest, trigger a side quest, or supplement relevant narrative material. For instance, if your character returns to Crow’s Perch, a small village housing the Bloody Baron’s estate, you may come across a woman sharing to other NPCs how her husband stole one of the Baron’s pigs to produce a feast of it. One lady is horror-struck enquiring how their fellows could undertake such a risk. Although these few lines of dialogue do not provoke a quest, they are referential to the Baron’s sinful gluttony and Geralt’s prior encounter with it during a main quest.

This minor yet poignant interaction dials into the feudal politics and oppressive class division between the villagers that slave at the hands of their occupying authorities, some of which have personal relationships with Geralt. Given that Geralt may not directly correspond with every last NPC, observations like these may lead the player to change their behaviour towards others. For instance, when I encountered contractors who were respectful to Geralt, I was inclined to do the work for free and respond sympathetically. In this case, a side quest awaits me that involves returning to assist the Bloody Baron who seeks an estranged daughter, but my testimony to his villagers’ misfortune may urge me to be crueller to him by potentially seeking to preserve the daughter’s seclusion.

²⁰ Mechtank, “The Witcher 3 All Voice Clips”, *Nexus Mods*, (2018), <<https://www.nexusmods.com/witcher3/mods/3058/>>



Fig 5: “Maybe he [the Baron] got angry, killed her [the Baron’s wife], buried her in the woods?”

The screenshot above shows said villagers living within the Bloody Baron’s township spreading rumours about what may have happened to the Baron’s missing wife. In a later quest, Geralt discovers that gossip was not elusive: the Baron’s wife leaves him due to repeated incidents of domestic abuse. The uncovering of slices of information depends on a player’s attention and personal perceptions, which could affect play. Cut-scenes that indulge in these peripheral points of context therefore further conform to the intricate dynamic brought on by situating the user as both watcher and player.

As such, captioned characters make up one of the many dimensions which complicate the user’s relationship to the text. The literal reading of on-screen dialogue may itself point to the game’s narrative nature, but when combined with the relevance of the context provided by NPC dialogue lines, one can appreciate how *the Witcher* champions narrative as an assertive factor of a user’s overall engagement with *the Witcher’s* world.

“Care For a Drink?”: Making Choices on Geralt’s Behalf

Amongst the *Witcher’s* impressive and immersive array of gameplay mechanics is choice-making. All relevant dialogues allow Geralt to choose select 2-4 separate responses. These range from asking questions that may lead to further quest-related information, the creation of personal and varied relationships with the characters of the world and even hostile engagements. This interjection of gameplay in place of a narrative node is listed in the cut-scene chart as second to least interactive. Slightly more interactive is a form of cut-scene that urges the player to make a rapid decision, which typically incorporates ludic sequences like combat or the loss of a character. These decisions feature a timer, which enables the threatening lapsation of time to pressure the user. Furthermore, these cut-scenes supplemented by the occurrence of a single or multiple rapid cuts of close-ups of relevant characters or Geralt’s face, awaiting the user’s decision and expecting its possible outcomes. The addition of a timer has the characteristic of both a ludic and narrative mechanic because it reflexively forces the player to make a choice under a delineating constraint. The timer is an implicating rule, acting as an attestation to how important Geralt’s decisions are in his world. Moreover, the timer rouses you to believe that an egregious amount of time to make an in-game choice is a fictional and idealistic luxury that such an immersive game will not support.

Such a cut-scene occurs at a local inn in Heatherton village. Geralt, pursuing man named Hendrik who is indispensable to the main story, asks the innkeeper for leads. Soon after, brash thugs enter the inn and are thereupon offended by Geralt’s presence, terrorizing him to answer to their hostility: “Gonna say who you are, or do I need to loosen your tongue with me knife?”. A timer emerges, and the player-viewer is faced with three dialogue options: “Back off or die”; “I’m a Witcher” and “Care for a drink?”. All options lead to separate consequences. The first launches Geralt into an immediate, player-controlled combat sequence. The second effectively defuses the situation, allowing Geralt to continue interrogating the innkeeper. The final option, however, proves the most fruitful. The offer branches out to a further two more, the first of which resumes its original hostility

and escalates in a brawl, and the latter leading to a friendly exchange and, crucially, additional information Geralt can later use in a main quest to access the aforementioned Bloody Baron's fort.



Fig 6: Timed Choice Cut-Scene

The inclusion of weighted decision-making urges the player to make greater use of their sensory skills with regards to listening, looking, attentiveness and speed in order to make the most calculated decisions which may reap the highest reward. A player's knowledge that interacting with the game's narrative and Geralt's character so closely will once again affect how one sees themselves as a user. Knowing that identification is a crucial part of my experience of immersion means that players know to look towards narrative and beyond ludic interaction to participate in absorbing play.

Although previous examples regard cut-scenes with varied levels of user interaction, all are meaningfully anchored with relevant, interesting, or necessary ludic consequences, rousing most players to engage with its elements. In isolation some narrative additions may seem more decorative rather than essential to progression. The demand for this proximal quality of engagement therefore pushes the player further into that ambivalent space where playing and viewing are so tightly bound they appear to converge. The feature of the cinematographic cut-scene therefore shows how mechanics serve to benefit absorption in both ludology and narratology as it signposts to the player

that ludic rewards are available if they immerse themselves within the politics, lore and narrative of *the Witcher* more intensely than traditional videogames tend to endorse.

Chapter II— Immersion: Realism, Modality and Representation

Carl Therrien’s notion of immersion is our starting point in the pursuit of comprehending the dichotomous and complex spectatorial interplay between narrative and ludology. Therrien offers two kinds of immersion found among videogames. The first regards that the more stimulated input points during play, the more immersive a game is.²¹ 1997, for instance, marked a critical transition in the potential for immersive play via Sony’s introduction of a motor-equipped apparatus, permitting the player to experience rumble feedback respective to gameplay.²² The enhanced sensation of touch and its visceral association with the user’s audio-visual experience of the game adds an additional level of sensorial interaction, thereby expanding its potential for immersion. A more abstract proposal views immersion as a ‘particularly engrossing state of mind, a concentration of mental resources in the course of a specific activity’.²³ Immersion is an essential concept for this essay’s investigation because both ludic and narrative features indulge in it. Both categories are capable of furthering or deterring engrossment in play and situating these occurrences will offer an insight into how immersivity is practiced. Isolating how immersion plays out may locate the spectator more truthfully along the player-viewer spectrum.

Working from the idea that immersion is one of many tools used in the subjective measure of quality, we may observe how *the Witcher*’s pursuit of immersion categorizes, foments, and produces the identity and intrinsic qualities of its user.

A fruitful approach to a coherent measurement of immersion considers how lenses of modality are impressed upon a user. Modality, with roots in semiotics, draws upon a text’s ability or

²¹ Carl Therrien, “Immersion” in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 451-452.

²² Sheila C. Murphy, “Controllers”, in *Video Game Studies*, ed. by Wolf & Perron, p. 22.

²³ Therrien, *Video Game Studies*, p. 452.

quality to make claims conducive to its credibility, even within fictional dimensions. This is best explained by refashioning Peirce’s original intention:

...we have to trust some of the information we receive [from texts or images], and do so, to quite some extent, on the basis of modality markers in the message itself, on the basis of textual cues for what can be regarded as credible and what should be treated with circumspection.²⁴

A preoccupation with videogame modality is considered in Andrew Burn’s work, who claims that certain categories are valuable markers of videogame modality. A reworking of media modalities is necessary because videogames offer more pluralist sensations than a written text and also undergo technical manipulations that a film does not. Modality can also be perceived as a spectrum, with a high level of modality indicative of a confident or assured claim to a certain truth. Modalism states that such claims to truth depend on the lens by which an image or text is understood or concerned with rather than the image itself. Burn highlights these four faculties: *sensorial* provides a wholly perceptible and literal image, hardly affected; a *naturalist* image is still realistic but adapted for human sensibility in its appeal to perceptible cultural or social markers; an *abstract* image implies deep or “hidden” meaning in truth that lies as far from a literal representation as possible; whilst the *scientific/technological* category requires the explicit detailing and elaboration of truth to communicate information.²⁵

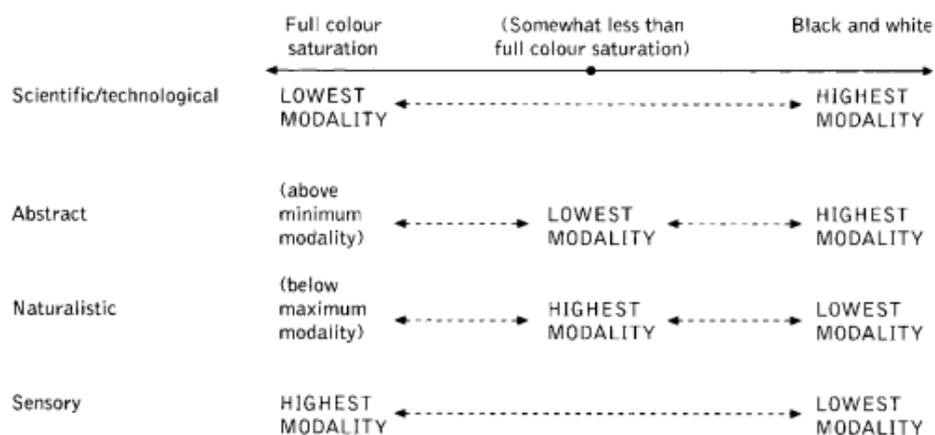


Fig 7: Modality values of colour saturation in four coding orientations.

²⁴ Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, “Modality: designing models of reality” in *Reading Images*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.154; Albert Atkin, “Peirce’s Theory of Signs”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2013), ed. by Edward N. Zalta; Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, p. 166.

²⁵ Andrew Burn, “Returning to Hogwarts: The Modality of Computer Games” in *Analysing Media Texts*, ed. by Andrew Burn and David Parker, (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 48-49.

A reflexive analysis of *the Witcher's* immersive mechanics will therefore be conducted upon these four modalities. Before I begin, a disclaimer: entering this discourse merits a degree of acknowledgement concerning the subjectivity of my analysis.

Unlike film or literature, where text is more stable than videogame, the large variety of paths that *the Witcher's* scope endeavours makes the findings of one's primary research more variable because there are more factors to differentiate its outcomes.

This is because the player can approach its linear plot in any way they like, immersing themselves in a colossal number of secondary quests and various dialogue branches. These not only affect a player's experience, and therefore an analyst's findings, but also the outcome of the game itself. Carr's ontological breakdown regarding the recognition of subjectivity and the requirement of researcher as player reflect why a subjective approach is both unavoidable and ideal:

As a method, then, this process of play, fragmentation, and "reading off" has proved effective in the sense that it has the potential to generate unexpected findings... It offers an analyst a chance to move beyond [what Dyer calls] positive or negative "images of" work and toward recognition of "the complexity and elusiveness, the real political difficulty, of representations."²⁶

It's crucial for my investigation to succeed in deconstructing and segregating—as much as possible—the player and viewer. The very reason why this proves to be challenging is also why it may well prove fruitful. It is not completely possible to cleanly carve the borders of a game's narrative and ludic categories because of their tendency to overlap. The analyst is subject to volatility themselves as they attempt to dissect a text that intends to flow, connect, and communicate among its networks seamlessly. I have therefore looked to see how certain features of the game made me feel more immersed within it and recorded its attempts. I then distributed them along the modal categories of naturalist, sensorial, abstract, and technological, analysing the yielded findings.

²⁶ Diane Carr, "Methodology, Representation, and Games", *Games and Culture*, 14. 7-8, (2019), p.712; Richard Dyer, 'Introduction' in *The Matter of Images: Essays on representations*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 1-2.

Naturalistic Ideation

Naturalism in its technical sense suggests the replication of elements modelled against how they appear in our natural world. Although *the Witcher's* environment has considerable discrepancies to a modern time and place, there is still a method to measuring how convincing such designs or recreations appear.

As videogames have grown more technically accomplished, it is paired with a commitment of photorealistic replications of texture, shadow, lighting, and space: 'The history of videogames is one that has been dominated, on one level, by investments in increasing realism, at the level of graphical representation and allied effects.'²⁷ This does not reflect some which have their own distinctive animated style that departs from this pursuit of replication, like the blocky, pixelated *Minecraft* (2011).²⁸ Photorealism draws on descriptive and rich textures of landscapes, differentiating gravel, stone, grass, or swamp. Shadows stretching over a dirt road cut through thick and animated trees or foliage that evokes a visceral feeling of space and place. Pairing this with persuasive ambient sound allows a swaying tree to not only to look real but also *sound* real, and therefore, more immersive.

Beyond this, naturalism is applied to how convincingly characters sound, move, speak, and interact. Voice acting is of a high grade and motion capture technology allows for a recreation of organic human movements and mannerisms.

Up to now, the given examples plainly appeal to the game's replication of the real world. There are other elements however, that force the player to pretend as though they themselves are present in the game's world. For instance, many sections of the game occur in buildings, caves, or ancient exploration sites. Roofed spaces make for remarkably low-lit environments, some of which leave the player completely blind were it not for a flame-casting torch that can be equipped when

²⁷ Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, "Realism, Spectacle, Sensation" in *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders*, (London: I.B Tauris, 2006), p.125.

²⁸ Mojang Studios, *Minecraft*, (2011), Windows, Mac OS, Linux, and subsequently other platforms.

walking, riding or even in combat. The figure below illustrates the power and relevance of the in-game torch.



Fig 8: In-game darkness frequently demands the use of torchlight.

Encouraging the player to engage with accessories by drawing on their ability to analyse real-life scenarios to further immerse the player, as well as generating a certain naturalistic sensitivity that is already present throughout the game.

Like other games, food and drink items can be consumed allowing the player to regenerate or recover any health lost due to combat. Even so, the game includes unconventional items like alcohol and other consumables like potions that can have adverse effects on your character by making them stronger, faster, or unfavourably, inebriated to the point of tipsiness.

A player is also able to pick up a variety of herbs and plants around the world that can be used for alchemy or crafting. Some of these can only be found in certain places, giving an authentic topographic awareness to the geographic world of the *Witcher*.

The challenge of deconstruction is complicated precisely because some immersive features have multiple, subjective effects, which appeal to narration and ludology at once. For instance, the game time clock is sometimes as a narrative element, when only a specific time of day will enable a

quest to progress. Once, I had to meditate (allowing the rapid passage of time) at a werewolf's lair until midnight in order for the werewolf to appear and be slain. In another instance, I waited until dawn to verify that I had successfully facilitated the passing on of a disturbed foetal spirit. Otherwise, the presence of the game time clock is primarily decorative, recording the passage of time and dynamic light changes so as to ornament the open world. Even so, the replication of elements encountered in our world, including the dangers of nightfall and landscape variety that sunlight reveals reflects a high naturalist modality.

Both of these elements contribute to the sensation of immersion, but it is noteworthy that a high naturalist modality would not automatically mimic the sort found in film or text. Gameplay elements tend to persuade and engage more evidently than film and text do due to the manufacturing of elements that are otherwise mechanic and artificial. Moreover, game immersion gives its user a unique agency that other mediums cannot grant, due to an ability to allow a player to choose where and how they look, move, and speak. In *the Witcher's* case, numerous customizable elements emphasize a convincing ludic immersion because it is supportive of, rather than conceived by the game's narrative elements, decorative features, or technical descriptors and mechanics.

Sensorial Engagement

The extent of *the Witcher's* sensorial engagement depends on the medium upon which it is played. Technological variables and platform choice can foster discrepancies of gameplay experience. Playing with a controller, for instance, welcomes vibrations produced by the controller's rumble engine, enhancing immersivity by appealing to the sensation of touch. Such vibration may be experienced during a combat scene, or when struck by an enemy, or even during an important choice-making decision, like the ones described above. Once again, this is both a ludic and narrative feature because it seeks to draw the player further into *the Witcher's* narrative as well as Geralt's shoes. It also makes the game more fun to play plainly because it engages more of the player's senses. This modal category is elusive, however, because it endeavours to replicate Geralt's physical perceptions despite the safe distance between player and text. One is never truly in danger, and yet, sensorial modality

provokes a level of stress within the player which highlights a successful immersion in the game, as if the player were facing the threat in real life.

Beyond these in-game elements, another sensorial function that immerses a player further is music. Music during gameplay is constantly fluid, with different tracks dedicated to specific scenes and dialogues, distinct settings or even combat scenes. The tracks reflect the emotion of such moments: combat scenes provide fast-paced rhythms with dominantly percussive instruments. Non-diegetic tracks are characterized by the environment: a dark cave will provide a more ominous timbre with a slower, trembling, creeping simple melody. A default theme features folkish instruments, a pan-flute, lutes, and grand percussion. Tracks in Novigrad during rainfall feature high-pitched feminine harmonies with soft but *staccato* piano and harpsichord melodies. Music design is often as important as everything else in any game, but in *the Witcher*, the vastness of the open world allows for the further characterization and personification of setting, atmosphere, and situations via the advent of varied musical tracks that fit *the Witcher's* folk-gothic aesthetic.

Music sensorially situates the player more profoundly within idiosyncratic settings, situations and as reflections of Geralt's feelings. Consider how the numerous moments of passionate love-making are heralded by a slow, orchestral, yet oft-reproduced track. Are we to think that Geralt undermines such engagements due to their plurality, and that Geralt views copulation with these women as shallow? Such questions, answers and feelings plunge deep into the literary matrix of *the Witcher*, and music modally contributes as it adjoins narrative moments to a stimulating audio-ludical experience.

Abstraction in Fantasy

The case of the abstract modality is more intricate when applied to games because it is subject to one's personal reading rather than a visual or physical description of elements. What it points to, however, is an abstraction of *the Witcher's* themes, elements, and contexts down to their essence, separate to meaning derived from their icons. This requires a more subtle reading of textual elements

as the abstract focuses less on what *the Witcher* shows, but rather what it tells or stands for, without explicitly saying so.

One of *the Witcher's* most abstract attributes depended on its genre and setting: a fictional, gothic, and medieval world, rooted deeply in the fantasy genre. As for many other products of the fantasy genre—think *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings*—mythical traits such as magic, and the extraordinary social circumstances they bring stand in for an abstracted social morality.

Abstraction is visceral precisely because it appeals to a low modality: the more general or less evocative an idea within the text, the less modal it is. Abstraction and fantasy have been subject to literary dissection for centuries, observing that often the genre's strength lies in its detachment: individuals and societies can assess their flaws more objectively in being removed by immediate cultural and social markers. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, 'detachment, abstraction and decontextualization (and against naturalism), results in an attitude which does not equate the appearance of things with reality but looks for a deeper truth "behind appearances".'²⁹

Friedman observes the power of abstraction and its relationship to magic, concluding that its power 'lies in the way the [fantasy] genre negotiates two intertwined preoccupations of our era: technology and nature'.³⁰ He suggests that although fantasy may urge readers to reel for a nostalgic, fictional, or simpler past, its intention is rooted in a desire to convince humans to alter their present for a better future. Players of *the Witcher* will not have directly come across monsters, magic, medievalism, feudalism, war or Geralt's heroic plight. Even so, an engagement with these themes recalls Friedman's vision. Monsters may point to an anxiety of humankind's never-ending and ever-present battle in its control and subduing of nature and its creatures. Magic suggests a discomfort with the pervasiveness and rising influence of technology, and perhaps how it is unsuitably distributed amongst the Earth's population.

Themes of medievalism, feudalism, war, and its consequence retort oppression against the plebian and serf classes. Speciesism against mutants, half-lings, other races, and the holier-than-thou

²⁹ Kress and Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, p. 165.

³⁰ Ted, Friedman, "The Politics of Magic: Fantasy Media, Technology and Nature in the 21st Century", *Scope*, 14, (2009), p.1, PDF.

attitudes of the higher class, recall the aforementioned theme of inequality. If *the Witcher* does indeed attempt to reconcile social anxieties via magic and fantasy, such as, but not limited to, human's relationship with technology, nature, and autocratic patriarchy, it succeeds in imbuing a real abstraction to *the Witcher's* themes, as well as a defined purpose. *The Witcher's* meaningful engagement with the abstract modality is testament to the fact that there is expressive material that exists beyond narrative and among the literary context where such concerns are more explicit. An abstract modality therefore allows the game to indulge in these stimulating and philosophical ideas without interrupting gameplay.

Technological Sophistication and Associated Risks

The modal category of technology is where the process of immersion falls apart. Granted that technology is that very thing that functionalizes the game to run in ways that are both fun and immersive, an excess of technological settings may work to hamper immersivity. Should this be seen as a limitation, however, or as an essential and, therefore, reconcilable feature of the videogame medium?

A simple way to pick out *the Witcher's* technological features is evident from its menu. *The Witcher* offers a standard menu with your usual "save game's" and options categories but also offers another menu that the player interacts with every other minute. This menu includes a glossary of characters and monsters, an alchemic brewing menu, an inventory, a world map, containing points of interests and objectives, a quest list, and an overview of your character and their gear, as well as a meditation menu that allows Geralt to jump forward in time and regenerate health.

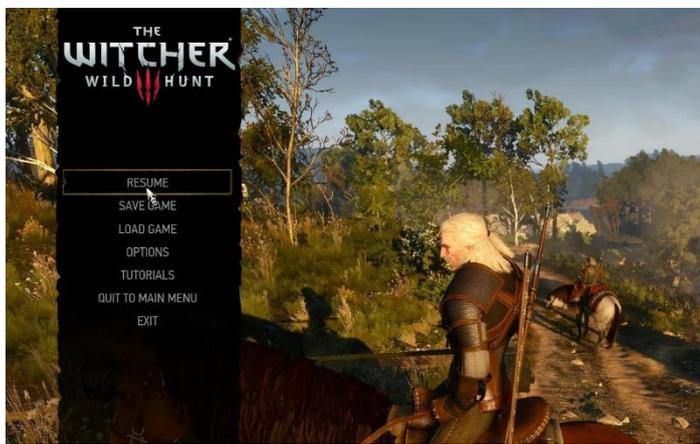


Fig 8: Main Menu

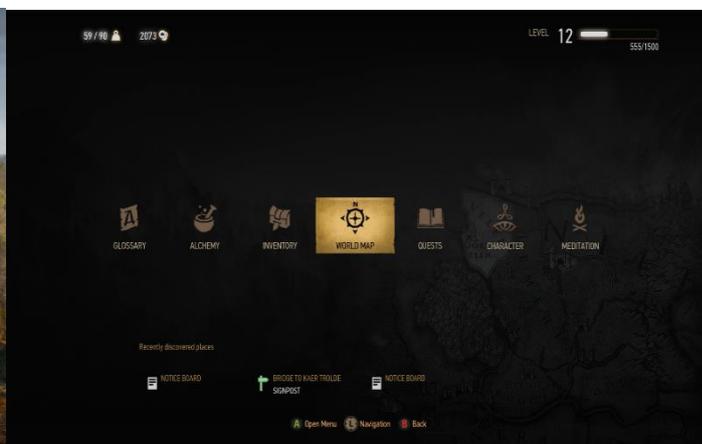


Fig 9: Pause Menu

Indulging in the category of the map yields certain findings. Given its large size and variety of environments, it allows for further immersion along the margins of *the Witcher's* vast world. Greater size and richer design warrant more time spent collecting gear and items, talking to different characters, and exploring other villages, all the while travelling on horseback and inhaling the world's spectacular diverse landscapes. A final set of naturalist elements include the advent of a detailed mini-map, a heads-up display, a game time clock and real-time weather. These absorb a player because it literally situates them inside a certain time and place in the world.

Moreover, the menu also displays how much weight Geralt is currently carrying and the remaining limit, as well as how much money he has, and an experience and level bar. By challenging the player with restrictions and combining personalization with strategy, the game is more immersive as it provides more control to the player. The constraint of weight entices the player to be more thoughtful about the gear they pick up, buy, and sell, embedding a required self-awareness, and thus a deeper involvement during play.

Even so, one can question whether this actually adds immersivity. Consider how the option to meditate, even in combat, allows you to regenerate health, or the option to pause a game in the middle of combat may interfere. Do these interventions risk reminding a player of their distance from the subjects of play? If the intention to achieve a high modality in the naturalist and sensorial senses seem to be a priority for videogames, does the achievement of a high technical modality cause an interruption that can be seamlessly implemented? Or does should this interruption be tolerated or ignored if there is no other way to reconcile such a dichotomy? These are subjective questions,

because they require as much discussion of game design as much as they do a study of user experience. An experienced RPG player is commonly aware of the vast array of fine-tuning that such games allow, but, a new player, perhaps more absorbed in *the Witcher's* story, may find themselves less about collecting experience points that grant Geralt a '5% increase of critical hit chances when wielding a crossbow'.³¹

It boils down to this: Does the integration of gameplay elements that lean on the ludic more than the narrative, which therefore have a high technological modality, affect immersion negatively? During a loading screen, the game cycles through various tips, one of them being: "Eavesdropping on conversations can sometimes provide important information about quests". I have previously acknowledged how relevant the function of NPC dialogue is to the user experience and serves as a testament to the variety and richness of *the Witcher's* narrative ability. But does the fact that a player may have discovered this via the advent of a loading screen get in the way of immersion? Would a player not feel more satisfied realizing this on their own? Such questions and more are better posed to the realm of debate similar to that which considers the identity of the cheater or the function of walkthrough guides, such as the one examined in Mia Consalvo's *Cheating*.³²

With regards to this investigation's relationship between immersion and spectatorship, I am convinced that *the Witcher* offers a paradox. Carr touches upon a similar conundrum when comparing various methods of videogame analysis. She reflects on a method that required an intimate and repetitious combing of a game, and realizes that no genuine player would play that way:

[Raymond] Bellour's doleful acknowledgement of unattainability resonated because I was attempting to capture something that emerges through play, through a process that had ceased to resemble play.³³

It is problematic to assume what can only be measured by the unique and singularly individual experience of gameplay. Whilst the analysis of my own gameplay has yielded useful conclusions regarding *the Witcher's* relationship with immersion, spectatorship, and modality, it is nevertheless impossible to reconcile my subjective experience of immersion with that of others who play *the*

³¹ *The Witcher*.

³² Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

³³ Carr, "Methodology, Representation, and Games", p.715; Raymond Bellour, "The unattainable text", *Screen*, 16, (1975), p.19-27, PDF.

Witcher. The most audacious claim I would feel confident in making when confronted with such an open-ended question would be to commend the categories of modality as a highly practical tool in doing their best to concretize the objective qualities of one of the most subjective experiences of play or viewership: that of immersion.

Chapter III— Is Freedom an Illusion? Choices, Rules & Signs

A game might fail in its aim to immerse its players, but the pursuit itself centres, or focalizes the spectator because it appeals to a productive process that engages the dichotomy of playing and watching. In games where making substantial choices is a central feature, dismantling how icons signal certain choices is part of the formulation of meaning: a player's interpretation of signs may well condition the spectatorial experience and foster a spectatorial identity. Tabulating the circular chronology that links the game's signs and the formation of player identity will allow us to locate and designate weight to the peripheral, yet significant, circumstances that occur during spectatorial engagement.

The absorption of information and its conditions provide another dimension of mobility to the user's position on the player-viewer spectrum. Retracing how it unfolds in *the Witcher* offers a model to reflect upon the ludic conception of how choice, rules and signs are integral to the artistic direction of engrossment with play. By looking at how the mechanism of *the Witcher's* social economy maintains both ludic and narrative dilemmas.

From Ideology to Meaning: Deconstructing the Process

Commencing at the rear end may grant a productive take-off. Games of narrative substance can be said to represent a certain set of values and beliefs, which can be concretized by the all-too contested notion of ideology.

In travelling along semiotic lines, we may conceive ideology as the product of one's profound engagement with play. Meaning is therefore its mediator, and language its measure. Signs are

therefore the icons which become interpreted by its user. If I see ideology as an embodiment of engagement, some, like Sicart, view ludic ideology as deterministic and, as a set of ‘rules that determine our relation to the representation of the world.’³⁴ I favour the idea that ideology is borne out of an engagement with play and can therefore be determined by circumstance and context over the substance of signs themselves. Giving weight to circumstance and peripheries, however, summons the great need to reflect upon the place and space which field meaning.

More concretely, we have evidence of developer’s appreciation of choice in game design. Working from the widely-adopted industry standard that consequential decisions equate to a respective quality of emotional substance, shows how contestable such thinking is. Although it has grounds within game design, it ignores how reception comes into play. Summoning semiotics means equating sign deconstruction with caution: meaning is an arbitrary—rather than deducible—production of the merge between signifier and signified.³⁵ The videogame medium renders the signifier and signified more relevant and layered, because its creators have more dimensions to manipulate meaning than with film or text.

Moreover, secondary factors such as pre-conceptions also interfere with reception. Consider for instance, how although choice is a major component in the production of meaning, a videogame’s ideology is no less defined by games with more freedom. This is because, even then, the set of choices provided, in and of themselves, offer an ideology via their contestation of antonymic and alternative counterparts. In fact, alternatives may situate meaning further, because they are intimately framed by ideological boundaries that permit glimpses into purpose, consequence, and intention.

Choices bound by a lack of freedom

Despite the medium’s vested engagement with diversifying experience through choice, videogames cannot pretend to grant freedom and be equally bound by a finite and calculated set of options. Luke Kelly, discussing the ambitions of the ideal game, coins “ideality” as an achievement of the

³⁴ Miguel Sicart, ‘Family Values: Ideology, Computer Games & *The Sims*’, *DiGRA- Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level Up*, 2, (2003), PDF.

³⁵ Ghsoon Reda, ‘Ferdinand de Saussure in the Era of Cognitive Linguistics’, *Language and Semiotic Studies*, 2.2 (2016), PDF.

prioritization of narrative choice: such games ‘often provide the most compelling experiences’ because they embrace the narrative of the videogame ‘as unstable and vulnerable’.³⁶ Although many games can be enjoyed without a thrilling storyline, a contagious trend spotlighting choice has undoubtedly surfaced. Consider the visual model below that attempts to breakdown and chronologize how choices stem from a desire to address the ideology at the heart of a videogame:

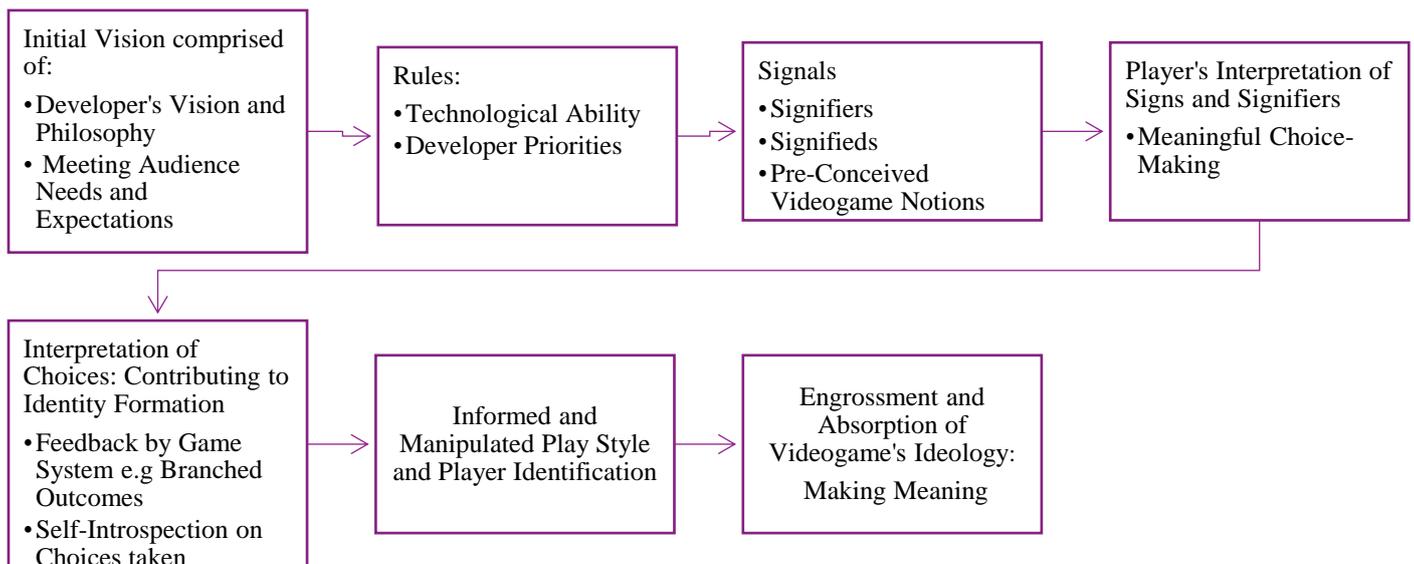


Fig. 11: Meaningful Choices Process Chart

The trickiest and yet most noteworthy aspect of this chart is what follows from players making choices: such play is informed and manipulated circularly by an amalgamation of the factors that surround gameplay. The affectation of play style that emerges from engagement will enable the player to assume a certain position or identity with respect to the narrative.

The consequences of individual choice, according to Salen and Zimmerman, ‘speak to the outcome of a player action, identifying how a single choice impacts larger events within the game world.’³⁷As we exemplify the process of meaning we can come to a stronger vision of the meaning of process. Looking at *the Witcher’s* economy is one of many sets of spaces where choice makes its narrative mark.

³⁶ Luke Kelly, ‘The Ideal Game’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, Birkbeck College, 2016), p. 189.

³⁷ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, p.64

Greedy Or Needy? Geralt's Urgency for Coin:

Money or currency is a common feature among RPG games, which allows the player to buy items. Buyable items may aid the player in combat, looting (gaining more powerful items) and as a way to personalise the standard avatar of Geralt.

Crucially, *the Witcher's* keenly positions money as a central concern via a balancing of certain mechanics. For instance, the purchasing power felt rather weak to me, and saving up for a certain item was necessary were I to want or need one. Moreover, when money stood as a reward for completing a quest, it was seldom a generous sum. Additionally, outside of quests and side missions, there were little to no opportunities for money-making, and the missions that would reward most handsomely would be both time-consuming and challenging. Finally, the abundance of slots that can enhance Geralt's primacy resulted in the fact there was always something to upgrade: two different swords, a crossbow, arrows, a whole set of armour, runestones and more. Some features, like skill points could not even be purchased with money. For all these reasons and more, *the Witcher's* currency felt to me a sparse yet powerful resource, and often a primary concern.

Beyond simple audio-visual cues, the game's inherent mechanics contributed to the overwhelming purpose of wealth and therefore represent part of the game's ideology. Attempting to resist the signals that made up Geralt's financial urgency convey how a discourse is produced by the relationship between the game's hegemonic mechanics and the player's reluctance to rebel against them.

I felt at odds with the force of money and how necessary it was for me to earn it. My reception of the game's signs and signifiers had coerced me into worshipping the economy's hegemonic structure. This is not the first a game has been accused of abusive or controlling mechanics. With regards to the industrial phenomenon of Pokémon, Buckingham and Sefton-Green consider the relationship between the consumer and producer in terms of structure and agency

engaged ‘in a deliberate—even cynical— form of manipulation.’³⁸ Moreover, they claimed that the provision of the Pokémon world aimed to resolve satisfaction through consumption, preventing other forms of children’s culture from ever existing.³⁹ The relationship between user and hegemonic mechanics is mirrored through choices promising freedom which were indeed more manipulative than they were liberating.

One of the ways such a boundary was drawn was in the avatar of Geralt. Geralt as the player’s vessel is significant because the repetitious and evocative narrative force of Geralt’s oppression permeated my play style. The stereotype that Witchers have an inherent and insatiable love of money which feeds into their public hatred is a recurring theme. Negotiations almost always arise when Geralt accepts quests from characters, even allowing the player to barter via a slider, which accommodates the NPCs “annoyance level”. NPCs were sensitive towards Geralt’s negotiations and did not hesitate to comment on the social significance of the transactions with tongue-in-cheek comments: “I know Witchers don’t work for free”. Other times, the player can choose to press or offer gratuitous services, a decision that is seemingly free and up to the player’s discretion. If engrossment is active, every previous encounter goes on to shape the next one. Times where I was treated crudely provoked aggression, whilst graceful encounters brought on more sympathy. But, its essential to record that although I can select between those options, the narrative ultimately dictates my choices. If one of my options is to barter, and the other is to scoff and exit aggressively, an underlying feeling is suggested: Geralt deserves to have that money. Here is where the freedom of choice becomes too transparent to have weight. Antonio Gramsci, whose revolutionary writings on cultural hegemony interpreted by T.J Jackson Lears, reflects on bounded thinking typical of hegemonic structures, asserts that

“...every language contains the elements of a conception of the world”. The available vocabulary helps mark the boundaries of permissible discourse, discourages the clarification of social alternatives, and makes it difficult for the dispossessed to locate the source of their unease, let alone remedy it.⁴⁰

³⁸ David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green, ‘Gotta catch ‘em all: structure, agency and pedagogy in children’s media culture’, *Media, Culture & Society*, 25.3, (2003), p. 380-384.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 384.

⁴⁰ T. J Jackson Lears, ‘The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities’, *The American Historical Review*, 90.3, (1985), p. 570, PDF; Antonio Gramsci, as quoted in Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci’s Political Thought*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.44.

Upon review, I realized that the limitation in choice and the way in which certain options were presented to me as a player, geared me towards an identity more dictated by the framing of language than the freedom of discourse. Freedom via choice is more deceiving than it is presented, because amongst other things, the absence of my own responses, forced me to think solely on the game's terms. Individualizing narrative through free choice—if truly the developer's goal— is hereby compromised. Although options are available to the player, they are bound to the hegemony of the game and emerge from the developer's design rather than from a player's true capability to pick outside of the prescribed set.

Appreciating the game's ability to affect me, however, may result in something I do not support, that I had no defence against the game's hegemonic design. The game leverages the fact that engrossed players feel responsible for the outcome of the narrative. Moreover, the choices that are available are finite, and pre-set by those in charge of the narrative itself, meaning I will inevitably fail to freely determine my own behaviour. Ultimately, I am trapped by these limits, and manipulated into picking certain choices over others. Choosing to contest the game's direction outright, recalls the position of the 'subaltern: a concept concerned with writing "history from below" and with being "part of a self-conscious effort to correct social history's bias for the perspective of the elite classes.'

⁴¹ This allows a perspective that focuses on the reception of the player, and an ability to behave in varied ways, rather than be under total domination.



Fig 12 (left): Geralt's responses to the man's plight: "Where should I search for your son?"; "Let's talk about my reward" (initiate negotiation); "Sorry, busy at the moment".

⁴¹ Souvik, Mukherjee, 'Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism', *Games and Culture*, 13.5 (2018), p. 505, PDF.

Fig 13 (right): The man's response to a high barter: "It's a lot... I'll need to borrow from kin. But you have it. Won't spare no coin for me boy."



Engaging with problem of money therefore pushed me to play the game in a number of different ways. What remained constant is the sensation that I am both responsible and affected by how Geralt behaves. I related to him and were I to err in a certain act, I sensed regret; the game had immersed me into its world, narrative, lore, and politics. Remarkably, this immersion ensued from the oft-attacked marriage of ludology and narrative. Once again, videogames are unique because the sustained tether of avatar and player results in an endless feedback loop. When it comes to choices, we always know their outcomes: whether they are as significant as attacking a village or as innocent as drawing a sword.

The accusations of corruption toward Geralt fortified identification by evoking sympathy. Such an observation shows how my identification, which determined my choices as I played, informed my experience, because it drew on my subjectivity rather than a strictly universal one. This is what separates a game driven by narrative like *the Witcher* from a game motivated principally by the completion of set goals, say, a first-person shooter like the *Call of Duty* franchise.⁴²

Even then, it is a useful insight because it opens the floor to the ontological question it teases: If manipulations are there to make choice harder and therefore more meaningful, does this make choice and rule autonomous; or antonymic? That is, is freedom in choice there to counter the rules it inhabits? To what extent then, is choice in videogame illusory or fallacious if the game's design can intentionally re-route your opinion so succinctly?

⁴² Infinity Ward, Treyarch, Sledgehammer Games, Raven Software, *Call of Duty*, (2003-present), Microsoft Windows, OS X, Play Station, Xbox, and Subsequently other platforms.

Such a hypocrisy has been observed in other games. In a review of first-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), the author laments the duplicity in promoting choice and simultaneously removing one's ability to act upon it. He writes: 'being presented with no choice is more "emotionally real," because while it guarantees the player can only make the singular choice, it is also more manipulative.'⁴³ Players are initially given the ability to reject violent acts that preserve the user's moral integrity. Eventually, the game revokes the privilege of choice in its most provocative moments, igniting the moralistic player's frustration. This shows how even though choice may be an implementable feature it will always be in the hands of those who dictate what those choices are. We may say that those in control of the paper may be in a better position to influence the pen.

Manipulation is present in both valences as deceit and encouragement. Videogames have a long-standing requirement of signalling or prompting players to act more generally. Most games with linear storylines typically suggest clear tasks and goals by providing guides that track mission progress such as the one in *the Witcher's* HUD. On the other hand, videogames that deliver an immersive experience tend to have the ability to highlight a multitude of interactive options available to the player. Videogames which urge the player to select between many possible avenues of narrative or ludic interactivity have a high naturalistic modality because they allow the player to think as they might do if their relationship with the videogame world and avatar were unified with their own self.

A study published in 2018 witnessing how two 14-year-old boys set about designing a videogame, observed how the subjects intended on priming players into interacting with certain objects they felt a player would otherwise ignore: 'By giving rewards on the kind of places you'd have to click' ... 'We made it so you're supposed to click a barrel, but no person will click a barrel at random'.⁴⁴ It was noted that the boys aimed at 'creating a coherent experience', and that even though

⁴³ Matthew Seiji Burns, "A Sea of Endless Bullets: Spec Ops, No Russian and Interactive Atrocity", (2012), *Matthew Seiji Burns*, available online; Yager Development, *Spec Ops: The Line*, (2012), Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 and subsequently other platforms.

⁴⁴ Bruno Henrique de Paula and others, "Playing Beowulf: Bridging computational thinking, arts and literature through game-making", *International Journal of Child-Computer Interaction*, 16, (2018), p.43.

they viewed the barrel interaction as an obscure novelty, it served a purpose both as ‘proxy for a computational conception’ and ‘in conjunction with narrative events.’⁴⁵ This is a relevant insight because the inexperienced subjects of the study emulated what they assumed to be a professional design process based on their own engagement with videogaming. The urge to implement this into their game proves that the interaction between ludology and narrative is as perceptible to developer as it is for players.

We may consider that a high naturalistic modality is linked to a wide range of interactions and choices available. They simultaneously entice the player to comport themselves as naturally as they might in the game world as in real life, whilst allowing them to act based on their individuality, despite following the rules of a fictional world in a digital medium. It may increase the player’s sensation of presence because they interact more with ludic elements that draw on a user’s individualities. Consider how *the Witcher* forces one to reassess how a player orients themselves against the frequent moral impasse of rejecting and accepting monetary compensation. It’s both a relevant and impactful imperative because it coaxes the user to dually reconcile narrative and ludology.

These thoughts are enriched by Frederic Seraphine’s coinage of the ludophrase concept: a rebellion to the alleged simplistic view of videogame mechanics. Seraphine sees the ludophrase as a richer treatment of choice in videogames because it considers a process more complex than sole causation: ‘we can create ludophrases that don’t necessarily occur according to rules and may occur just once. It becomes then possible to create gameplay interactions that may change or even disappear during play, creating infinite possibilities of meaning through contrast’.⁴⁶ This promotes meaningful choices not only due to a consideration of more factors but also because appeals to individuality and confrontations with atypical scenarios have an ability to influence judgement too.

A high naturalistic modality is therefore achieved because the appeals made to videogame users and their lives outside of the videogame world lean on both foreign and relatable concepts. Although

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Frederic Seraphine, ‘Ludophrases: Ludics Before Mechanics’, (2016), p.8, PDF.

not all users are faced with Geralt's moralistic dilemma of attaining wealth, most players relate to a financial anxiety brought on by existing within a capitalistic and hierarchical society. Even then, the degree of distance which we do have, if exercised, can allow a third perspective: the hegemony of the game can be countered if we rebel against the rules, laws, and design of the game. This other view appeals to the initial strength of the idealization of choice in game. It reflects our society and the anxieties that are borne from it because it is based in the familiar ideal—and fallacy—of meritocracy: any goal, aim or position in life is within reach if the right choices are made to attain it.

This is the key to fostering a player's identity. Immersing oneself in such a context requires both the faculties exercised when watching and playing, because they are the very same ones employed in choice-making.

Although interactivity isn't nearly as participatory in film as it is in videogame, most appeals are housed in narrative and require active viewership. Again, this points to the illusion of freedom despite having choice, because it still depends on the unique subjectivity of the player.

In an attempt to convey the achievement of a high naturalistic modality, an overstimulation of governing factors may make one's experience of action, control, and embodiment richer. Perhaps this enveloping, complementary notion of spectatorship thrives because the modality of choice articulates the impression that decisions made in the fictional, digital world feel more consequential than they are. As both player and viewer, I have come to conclude that it is within the developer's power to construct convincing modalities that are able to override the sensation that I am always in control. It intentionally and triumphantly draws upon the familiar experience of living in a meritocratic, capitalistic society, and the complexity of judgment that still, infallibly, inhabits it.

Concluding Reflections— Why Splinter the Spectatorial Experience?

I chose the Dziga Vertov quote to open my dissertation because I firmly believe that the videogame medium may revolutionize how we may come to think of spectatorship as a whole.

What was once a field constructed using the concepts of narratology and cinematography now merits its own ontology. Videogames are a challenging and multi-faceted discipline because they commit their users to an inordinate amount of time, content, aesthetics, and ludic stimulation. No medium as of yet has found a way to be as concentrated and still as largely encompassing as videogames are.

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt, although a phenomenal and impressive piece of work in its own right, is only one of many that triumphantly binds narratology and ludology together so harmoniously that it resolves, at least for me, what was once thought to be irreconcilable.

The essay you just read addressed the player-viewer spectrum in three ways. The first chapter, which analysed how aesthetics borrowed from film through cut-scenes targeted how a game, even when making the most dramatic use of camera angles and shots, ultimately still serves a ludic purpose despite the immense appeal to the activity of looking, watching and observing.

The second chapter took the idea of immersion as a neutral ground that challenged how ludic mechanics entailed subduing and meshing in order to not hamper a visual and narrative absorption. Its findings proved that appeals to multiple modalities were forced to reconcile with the narrative and the ludic in order to not get in the way of one another. Its other conclusion was that no matter how broken down the aspects and characteristics of a game are it is impossible to ascertain an immersive quality as doing so takes away from its most inherent quality, that of subjectivity. Immersion cannot be a guarantee of any text as immersion relies upon the established and distinctive commitment and identification of player-viewer with text.

The final chapter sought to collapse the mirage by which the concept of ludic choice stands behind. Most often, freedom of choice is employed in videogames as a way to diversify experience and therefore foster a unique and special spectatorial identity between product and consumer. Locating this

discussion in semiotic terms, and consequently, through those of agency and hegemony, found that games cannot possibly offer the choice they seem to promote when their construction so transparently lies in the hands of those who govern the rules and laws of the game world. It's suffocating because although we are tempted to fall into the 'willing suspension of disbelief' we know, thanks to the comfort of our leather-lined chair, that we are not in the game.⁴⁷ And yet, choices are appealing, visceral, and meaningful because they draw upon a participatory spectatorial experience that only the interactivity of videogames can offer.

Somehow, the spectator is tricked into thinking that because choices I make draw on how I would naturally—or modally—feel in real life, that choices really do matter in the digital world. Choosing to immerse myself in a feeling that facilitates my escapist desires, makes me prey to the manipulations possible in the realm of the game.

The real crux of the videogame's spectatorial experience is therefore the odd sensation that although I am holding a controller, I am not really in control; that although I am myself, I am really Geralt; and that although I am a tourist in the digital world, that world recalls my world.

I cannot help but plunge into the magical transportation of a different world that operates on the most contrasting and converging identifiable experience, which is that of feeling like I am playing, watching and wholeheartedly present in the game all at once.

⁴⁷ Samuel Taylor, Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*. (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Company, 1834), p. 175.

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Appendix

Title Page Figure: Screenshot of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2016) on Xbox Series X.

Figure 1: Screenshot of *The Walking Dead* (2011), accessible at: <<https://www.denofgeek.com/games/the-walking-dead-false-promises-telltale/>>, [accessed 29 June 2021].

Figure 2: Screenshot of: IGN, *Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy – Official Gameplay Demo (4K) | E3 2021*, online video recording, YouTube, June 13, 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9-C6whF4Mc&t=345s>>, [accessed 20 July 2021].

Figure 3: Cut-Scene Chart

Figure 4: Screenshot of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2016) on Xbox Series X.

Figure 5: Screenshot of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2016) on Xbox Series X.

Figure 6: Screenshot of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2016) on Xbox Series X.

Figure 7: Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, “Modality: designing models of reality” in *Reading Images*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.166.

Figure 8: Screenshot of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2016), accessible at: <https://www.reddit.com/r/witcher/comments/5g2cah/is_there_a_more_powerful_torch_somewhere_mine_is/>, [accessed 22 September 2021].

Figure 9: Screenshot of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2016), accessible at: <https://www.reddit.com/r/Gamingcirclejerk/comments/4ztogj/super_original_feature_only_witcher_3_does_st_art/>, [accessed 22 September 2021].

Figure 10: Screenshot of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2016).

Figure 11: Meaningful Choices Process Chart

Figure 12: Screenshot of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2016) on Xbox Series X.

Figure 13: Screenshot of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2016) on Xbox Series X.