

University of Stockholm
Department of History
Bachelor thesis, autumn of 2016
Name: Christer Lidén
Supervisor: Professor Kurt Villads Jensen
Examiner: Associate Professor Mattias Tydén

The quest for medievalism in ‘The Witcher 3’.

A study of the *vita gravis*: the apposition between the medieval and the fantastical.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
1.1 Prelude & background	2
1.2 Theoretical framework	3
Medievalism and the liminoid	3
An approach to identify history in games.....	6
1.3 Method.....	11
1.4 Earlier research	12
1.5 Purpose	14
1.6 Research questions	14
1.7 Material.....	14
1.8 Outline	15
2. Analysis & final discussions	16
2.1 The apposition of the medieval and the fantastical	16
2.2 The holy, heretical and the dichotomy of choice	21
3. Summary & conclusion.....	26
4. Bibliography.....	30
Primary sources	30
Internet sources.....	30
Literature.....	30

1. Introduction

1.1 Prelude & background

In the fictive landscape of the Northern Kingdoms, the character Geralt of Rivia rides on his chestnut mare clad in chainmail armour whilst sporting two-handed swords comparable to a *zweihander* or longsword of the late 15th century. As I encounter my second village through the third-person view of my protagonist, a short observation leaves me with the impression of a plausible society taken from the Middle Ages. Such a historically detailed environment within a fantasy game of the 21st century should be no surprise to the avid gamer, however, it raised the question of the representation of history within computer games. In recent years, a tendency towards historical themes within popular media and literature has increased greatly, exploring ancient Rome, World War II and above all: the Middle Ages. Works of literature, movies and computer games all teem with newfound energy within the historical time period, and elements of fantasy and interpretations of our understanding of medieval times follow in its wake. This study seeks to investigate the medieval thematic in computer gaming and pursue what historical elements that persist through this relatively new medium. More distinctly, the many missions and *quests* experienced in the ‘The Witcher 3’ is the main object of study as they work in concert, providing both enhanced purpose for the player as well as constricting the freedom given in the open world of the Northern Kingdoms. Quests – a task or mission given by non-playable characters (NPCs) or during certain interaction with objects in the game – present a variety of impressions through participatory segments that the player encounters in the game. It is the potent meaning of said quests that this study seek to delve into in order to find, not only the historical features, but also the fascination that seems to propagate itself in games.

1.2 Theoretical framework

“Thus we are at present witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination.”¹

Medievalism and the liminoid

As Eco observed during the late 1980s, a growing interest in the Middle Ages can be seen in a number of areas, both academic and within popular culture.² It begs the question of why this not only emerges, but reemerges as one of the more popular historical periods of our day. Eco mentions that some of us believe “we are dreaming of the Middle Ages”, meaning that we yearn for a return of a past in which things seem simple and tangible in a post-modernistic and post-industrial world.³ He ascribes this desire for a simple past as a gateway to our own infancy; that we may understand or relive something of our early lives, while at the same time searching for our roots.⁴ This attraction towards the Middle Ages are very much alive today, an attraction that Pugh & Weisl term as “magic”⁵ in that it continues to captivate contemporary society past and present in a proliferating manner. It seems that the alluring promise of uncomplicated purposes in life, mortal strife and the absence of a digital era call out to people as a respite from daily life. However, it is not the historical accuracy of the Middle Ages that is sought after, or rather, this longing is towards a misunderstood notion of what the period was actually like. Certainly, the absolute truth and disclosure of what anything in history entails is beyond our recognition, but, this does not mean that the Middle Ages can be everything that modern interpretation wants it to be. Pugh & Weisl discuss at length the problematic use of the Middle Ages as the era often fulfils the purpose of a stage to carry modern discussions via old narratives through a misconceptualization of the period⁶, a sentiment echoed by Harris & Grigsby.⁷ In fact, one of the main misconceptions that modern society attributes to the historical period, is the removal of complexity found within the Middle Ages. This leads to the bastardization of the time period – an anachronistic practice

¹ Eco, Umberto. *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*. (London: Vintage, 1986). pp. 62.

² Pugh, Tison & Weisl, Angela Jane. *MEDIEVALISMS*. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

³ Eco. *Faith in Fakes*. pp. 63-66.

⁴ Eco. *Faith in Fakes*. pp. 65.

⁵ Pugh & Weisl. *MEDIEVALISMS*. pp. 1.

⁶ Pugh & Weisl. *MEDIEVALISMS*. pp. 3.

⁷ Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L. *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. (New York: Routledge, 2009). pp. 3.

not exclusive to the Middle Ages – and an ever expanding misconception of the historical period.⁸ Eco agrees to this notion as he believes that people look for the “real” Middle Ages and not “romance or fantasy”, but that this wish is misunderstood and that realness escapes notice beneath aforementioned romantic fantasy.⁹ In essence, society craves the idea of a simpler time, and thus, creates it whether it aligns with historical accuracy or not. But in spite of the disregard for what the time period encompassed, a plethora of works strives towards that very goal, and fall into the trap of wanting to be historically accurate whilst still intermingling the past and the present. This hunger for a tailored view of the Middle Ages is interesting to this study as it highlights the reason for medieval themes being present in a vast multitude of different mediums.

By virtue of this paper’s interest in the medieval thematic within games, the discourse of *medievalism* lends itself as a vital component in order to establish historical parameters to game contexts. As a branching part of medieval studies, medievalism encompasses a myriad of subjects where the presence of the medieval in our society – in recent or historical times – lies at its heart.¹⁰ One of the distinct characteristics of medievalism studies is the fluidity of temporality as it works with a sort of “dual sense of time, [both] medieval and modern.”¹¹ The search for the medieval in modern society, whether it is present at political, cultural or societal levels, is one of the main objectives for medievalism studies. However, the field itself contains diversities where medievalism represents many different ideas within its discourse. It is in some cases as earlier mentioned engrossed in the medieval present of our society, while in other cases its focal point lies within the persistence of the Middle Ages as present in other time periods.¹² Davis and Altschul want to widen our understanding of medievalism, expressing that the field must be seen as plural rather than singular in its constellation as of recent years of expanding work.¹³ Others claim that the differences of medievalism and medieval studies are non-existent and that the continued separation is merely a heritage of distinctions dividing “good” from “bad” interpretations of the period.¹⁴ Separating its views even more, it is seen by some scholars as the rejections of medieval studies accumulating into its own field over time.¹⁵ These differences have led to the

⁸ Pugh & Weisl. *MEDIEVALISMS*. pp. 8-10.

⁹ Eco. *Faith in Fakes*. pp. 65.

¹⁰ Berns, Ute & Johnston, Andrew James. *Medievalism: A Very Short Introduction*. *European Journal of English Studies*. Vol. 15, Issue 2. (2011). pp. 97-99.

¹¹ Mathews, David. *Medievalism: A Critical History*. (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2015). pp. 165.

¹² Mathews. *Medievalism: A Critical History*. pp. 170.

¹³ Davis, Kathleen & Altschul, Nadia in: Pugh & Weisl. *MEDIEVALISMS*.

¹⁴ Mathews. *Medievalism: A Critical History*. pp. 172-173.

¹⁵ Mathews. *Medievalism: A Critical History*. pp. 176.

formation of new fields of study such as the post-modern medievalism, and as relevant to this paper, *neomedievalism*. As medievalism either works in the space of presentation of the Middle Ages or through the examination of reproduction between creator and audience, neomedievalism is similarly influenced by the accepted medieval norm, affirming to the familiar period.¹⁶ However, its purpose is often to juxtapose this accepted view of the given time period in a playful manner; as Coote extrapolates on the subject: “neomedievalism brings understandings gained from the theory and use of new technologies to bear on our understanding of the medieval, and of medievalist representations.”¹⁷ In many ways, it is the process of syncretization of contemporary culture and a past that to our perception reappears and recreates itself in different forms.¹⁸

Agreeing with Ute & Johnston, and consecutively Coote, I believe that medievalism constitutes the study of the Middle Ages being presented and re-presented in later periods of time, whilst neomedievalism makes use of the same parameters, only to tailor it for its own needs. In this study, the material reflects a fluctuation between medievalism and neomedievalism, alternating medially from presentation and intermingled historicity. Neither part is dominant over the other, presenting an intersperse relation that cooperates in the discussions.

In ‘The Witcher 3’ a major part of the game takes place while performing quests or for various purposes due to different character interactions. Many of these can be defined as participatory outside of the obvious gaming standards, leaning towards the characteristics of a rite or ritual. Bell discusses Geertz thoughts on the ritual as something that stems from a convergence of activity and thought, and that these reflect something of representation or of symbolic value.¹⁹ The ritual is something that works in relationship to the norm, as “ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other [...] activities.”²⁰ In a sense, the quest works as a tool to differentiate itself from the game’s free-roaming style of open-world setting, pulling the player into segments of occasionally open, other times intermittently self-contained to the freedom of the in-game world. The manner of the questing, where the player is intersected by

¹⁶ Lesley, Coote. “A Short Essay on Neomedievalism.” *I Studies in Medievalism, Vol. 19: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, Karl Fugelso (red.), 25-32. (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010). pp. 25.

¹⁷ Coote. *A Short Essay on Neomedievalism*. pp. 29; 32.

¹⁸ Mayer, Lauren S. “Dark Matters and Slippery Words: Grappling with Neomedievalism(s).” *I Studies in Medievalism, Vol. 19: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, Karl Fugelso (red.), 68-75. (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010). pp. 72.

¹⁹ Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). pp. 32.

²⁰ Bell. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, pp. 74.

or seeks out the challenge, is routine-based, something that Bell would determine as a simplification of the ritual.²¹ However, in this instance the familiarity of presentation to the different quests are a part of the game's structure, thus affirming to the otherwise exaggerated form of ritual and transforming it into a rite of passage that players engage in.

Defining the ritual with more emphasis on the symbolic, Turner discusses at length how the liminal – ritualistic practices in older societies – can be seen in contemporary society in the form of liminoids, effectively finding correlations of leisure and play in modern activities.²² He states that modern society has more time for ludic endeavours, or leisure time, and identifies several instances of rituals practiced in modern times.²³ In similarity to Hong, who uses the term to define his liminoid games²⁴, the liminoid is an applicable concept for the defining of quests in 'The Witcher 3' as rites and rituals. I affirm my definition of the ritual with Geertz, it being the action conciliatory with thought in proximity and defined against societal norm. In this case, the societal norm is the open-world context of the game in which the player saunters around.

An approach to identify history in games

To identify aspects of history in games, a number of cross-disciplinary theoretical approaches are needed in order to handle the innate problems with computer games as an object of study. This introductory segment serves as an orientation of the many subjects I will touch upon in the discussion section later, since earlier research and the variety of terms used need ample presentation beforehand. As games separate themselves from other materials due to their interactive nature, a narrowing of focus must be defined. As this paper aims to probe the environment of play within the game, or *ludic space*, it falls into indirect contact with the area of critical discourse within games. In his paper on critical views of video games, Keogh explains the need for acceptance that game studies fall into a category of texts where the researcher must accept the role of the player as part of the observed material.²⁵ This does not mean that the person playing must be part of said study, rather, that each study must acknowledge the presence of a player altering the game through actions and above all,

²¹ Bell. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, pp. 19.

²² Turner, Victor. *LIMINAL TO LIMINOID, IN PLAY, FLOW, AND RITUAL: AN ESSAY IN COMPARATIVE SYMBOLOGY*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.). pp. 55; 64; 68-69.

²³ Turner. *LIMINAL TO LIMINOID*. pp. 71.

²⁴ Hong. When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games'. pp. 38-40.

²⁵ Keogh, Brendan. Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games. *Journal of Games Criticism, Vol. 1, Issue 1*. (2014). pp. 17.

propelling it forward. Thus, in studying games the researcher must work with the possibilities that each game offers and account for players having varying degrees of impact on the content. Keogh's notion is furthered by Hong, where the aspects of involvement is taken into consideration as part of a relationship between "games, developers [and] players"²⁶ which hold a central role in the interpretation in his own study.

This involvement of an external force that alters or conforms to the studied material is a problematic aspect when researching games, and consequently, leads into the subject of *immersion*. The term immersion is widely used within the discourse of game studies and is multifaceted in its demeanour, as it refers to the player's state of existence, or state of 'being', in the game's relationship to the 'real' world.²⁷ As Calleja extrapolates in his discussion on the subject, immersion works in affiliation with *absorption* and *transportation* and that this can be problematic as different studies use the same term synonymously.²⁸ In contrast to each other, by absorption immersion takes on the quality of complete incorporation of the subject where the player achieves different levels of engagement, thus, absorbed in the action presented.²⁹ This is to be seen as a form of immersion as can be seen in other activities where the person is caught up in the activity. By transportation, immersion refers to a state of travel to another place; the player is involved at a level where the game feels and plays as if the player were present inside of said game.³⁰ Being in regard to games, these notions of immersion do not lend themselves toward games only and it would be entirely plausible to suggest similar types of experiences when, for example, reading books. However, immersion in games does separate itself, as other mediums are interchangeable regardless of the recipient's actions. In Calleja's own words: "book readers might imagine themselves within the space world by a literary work, but that world does not recognize them."³¹

Also, games present players with the option to act within said world, allowing influence to the game externally.³² As a consequence, when attempting to derive any kind of malleable representation of anything within a game, the presence of the player must be recognized. In addition, when investigating the notion of what players experience and immerse themselves in, mentioning the ongoing research on the relationship between fiction

²⁶ Hong, Sun-ha. When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games' Reappropriation of History, Myth and Ritual. *Games and Culture, Vol. 10(1)*. (2014). pp. 37.

²⁷ Calleja, Gordon. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011). pp. 25.

²⁸ Calleja. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. pp. 27-28.

²⁹ Calleja. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. pp. 26.

³⁰ Calleja. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. pp. 26-27.

³¹ Calleja. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. pp. 29.

³² Ibid.

and reality is required. In this, earlier research has dividing opinions on the concept of player understanding and perception of reality, both inside and outside the game. The distinct differences arise during discussions of the player's involvement and in what ways the experience of playing games can affect how things are perceived inside and outside the game. Further, this relation between real and fiction sometimes expresses itself in hybridity, where the game incorporates "overlapping" qualities and redirects attention to things outside the game or through a break in the 4th wall.³³

On this topic, some have focused on the perceived 'real' within games, leaning upon the works of Zizêk and Baudrillard to understand how players might experience gameplay as representation of the 'real'³⁴, or rather, if they are part of a perceived state of hyperreality.³⁵³⁶ Other works tackle the subject of immersion in different ways, focusing instead on the various ways a player could experience the game environment. For instance, Schoppmeier's research on player movement in simulated urban spaces, positions itself in the belief that players have a good understanding on the differences between the fictional and the real.³⁷ Borrowing heavily on the works of Atkinson and Willis³⁸³⁹, Schoppmeier comes to the conclusion that modern games have given birth to a sort of investigatory in-game movement referred to as the *flâneur électronique*.⁴⁰ The game environment – being urban city landscape in his study – and player movement are essential in his search for player experience inside the game, which conforms to the notion of focusing on the player's perception. As can be observed, the field of game studies that focal their attention on the aspect of player perception are predominant. However, this study aspires to investigate certain aspects of the game without including the hypothetical player influence, aside from the basic notion that there is a player present. As Schut remarks in his research on computer games representation of history, that as long as we are mindful of the fact that the player is present, studying a certain

³³ Keogh, Across worlds and bodies. pp. 13.

³⁴ Stevens, Richard & Raybould, Dave. The reality paradox: Authenticity, fidelity and the real in Battlefield 4. The Soundtrack, Vol. 8, No. 1 &2. (2015).

³⁵ Being in a state of the hyperreal means that it is impossible to discern what is real and what is replicated in modern times, as a consequence of the industrial revolution and the proliferation of symbols. See: Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

³⁶ Kingssepp, Fighting Hyperreality With Hyperreality History and Death in World War II Digital Games. Games and Culture, Vol. 2, Issue 4. (2007).

³⁷ Schoppmeier, Sören. Digital Empires, Ludic Neoliberalism, and the "Flâneur Électronique": Urban Visions in Open-World Video Games. pp. 4.

³⁸ See: Atkinson, Rowland & Paul Willis. Transparent cities: Re-shaping the urban experience through interactive video game simulation. *City*, Vol. 13, Issue 4. (2009).

³⁹ See: Atkinson, Rowland & Paul Willis. CHARTING THE LUDODROME, The mediation of urban and simulated space and rise of the flâneur électronique. *City*, Vol. 10, Issue 10. (2007).

⁴⁰ Schoppmeier, Digital Empires. pp. 5.

aspect of a game is not without its benefits.⁴¹ In fact, the study of players' involvement in the games ecology will hamper the work towards a narrower focus on representations that exist within the game, regardless of external agencies. This tendency towards player involvement is to be expected, as games more evidently than other mediums highlight the possibilities of audience interpretation. Consequently, it is important for this study to clarify that the material chosen will be investigated as a representation of something that exists in the game, and that this cannot be circumvented other than outright refusal from the player to experience the content.

In contrast to other works, this study aims not to involve itself with the subject of immersion, nor the multifaceted discussions on hyperreality and authenticity, but rather the inhabited space which carry meaning in itself. Admittedly, the interactive component of games make such a study seem hard to perform, and a valid point raised would be this aspect of non-inclusion of player perspective. Nevertheless, I would still argue that similar to other mediums such as books and movies, games purvey a multitude of impressions that will be experienced regardless of the recipient. How these will be received fully is not only impossible, but seem fruitless as it would limit the indications to the few studied players. By focusing on what the game indwells in itself and what information these performative segments have been infused with, a greater understanding of games can be achieved.

In his research on open-world games, Hong argues that games "make use of history, myth and ritual" as they appeal to the recipient a sense of "when life mattered."⁴² Defining the experience of the player through his term *interface*, the game is thus presented as a relationship between makers, recipients, authors and industry. His claim is that the leisure of play, described with the use of Turner's ascribed *liminoid* – rites in modern society – creates an area for playful experimentation and room for action without societal consequences present to intervene.⁴³ Consequently, what is real or historically borrowed into gameplay and narrative is of insubstantial significance as the player simply accepts the situation. Hence, the act of partaking in the liminoid game is not a question of the player being convinced of a certain agenda or truth perpetrated by the game.⁴⁴ Instead, the player accepts this and simply enjoys the experience; it is, in Hong's words: "*real enough*."⁴⁵

⁴¹ Schut, Kevin. Strategic Simulation and Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History. *Games and Culture*, Vol. 2, Issue 3. (2007). pp. 217-218.

⁴² Hong. When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games'. pp. 36.

⁴³ Hong. When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games'. pp. 41.

⁴⁴ Hong. When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games'. pp. 40.

⁴⁵ Hong. When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games'. pp. 48.

In my view, Hong's idea regarding the game content's influence on its audience is neglecting the representational aspects that games reflect from contemporary society and its view on history. The argument that each player approaches the game differently – effectively turning study of said game content's influence on players impossibly difficult – is sound⁴⁶, but, this does not mean that a game's content is without its representation and meaning. To me, the inherent meaning within the game content is relevant because regardless of intent towards an experience, be it a book, movie or game, its material will still carry some meaning to its audience. Truly, discerning how each and every person reacts and interprets this meaning is an obvious impossibility, however, investigating the inherent meaning of the segments foundationally carrying the game can provide us with an estimation of what the audience will be exposed to. Certainly, just as the established canon of certain texts and the provided meaning of cultural works present itself with the estimation or guiding thoughts regarding its meaning, similarly, inherent meaning can be found and analysed from games.

Hong's presentation of liminoid games disregards the fact that although open-world games present greater freedom to the player, certain elements force them back under control. For instance, quests – an appointed task given by characters in the game – in 'The Witcher 3' provide their own message: in one part to the overarching plot, in another to their own inherent meaning. It is not the bewilderment of a page within a book nor is it part of a scene within a movie, both of which we often need to relate towards the rest of the work in order to fully comprehend. Rather, it is the participation of a rite or ritual in the gestalt of a quest or mission within the game parameters. Thus, regardless of the player's intent or meandering within the game, these segments will temporarily constrict the player to certain actions and force their participation. Therefore, the notion of liminoid games as something that can only be dissected as a whole is problematic, and I would argue that parts of a game can be examined to identify, in this case, the medieval. Even though these are in conjunction with the full game experience, they signify meaning in themselves as small rites, lending the player a view of the historical through participation and the game environment.

⁴⁶ Hong. *When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games*. pp. 41.

1.3 Method

The method applied is an attempt to incorporate the constituents of each theoretical approach earlier outlined in order to discern a suitable terminology for historical elements in computer games. Significantly, the term must involve a combination of our longing for the Middle Ages, while at the same time feel relevant for the participatory environment of the interactive medium. Expanding upon Hong's term *when life mattered*, I propose the phrase: *vita gravis*. *Vita* as in life because of its relation to the feeling of one's own life, and *gravis*, as in heavy, worthy and precious, functioning as the mark of importance, whilst still connoting the feeling of strife and difficulty. In essence, the phrase is supposed to incorporate a feeling for purposefulness; the simultaneous urge for importance to one's life and a sense of belonging to a historical past. Admittedly, it is an attempt to consolidate Eco's idea of our contemporary dreaming of the Middle Ages, into a tangible phrase by which to identify it.

In an attempt to clarify the method in practice, the game 'The Witcher 3' will be examined through its quests to identify the medieval thematic and other historical elements which attribute to a feeling of *vita gravis*. The identification of the medieval is achieved through the use of earlier research, as segments of the game are compared to established notions of the Middle Ages with the help of Dendle⁴⁷, van Lerie⁴⁸, Obermeier⁴⁹, and Drout.⁵⁰ The selection of quests which have been deemed sufficient for this purpose all contain a facet of the medieval in combination with a section of constricting gameplay. By constricting gameplay, I refer to a finite period of time whereas the player is engulfed in the participation of a mission that needs to be completed in order to progress. Some of these quests can be bypassed and others have periods where the player could theoretically ignore the rest to explore other parts of the game. Despite of this, I premise my interpretation of the quest parameters in that I presume the player wishes to finish it from the very start, without indulging in other activities. Moreover, within the quests the speech, environment and participatory pieces such as combat and conduction of appointed tasks are discussed in order to distinguish the faculty of *vita gravis*. The term is defined in the juxtaposition between the medievalism and neomedievalism that can be identified within the game. This appositional

⁴⁷ Dendle, Peter. "The Middle Ages Were a Superstitious Time." In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Stephen J. Harris & Bryon L. Grigsby (red.). (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁴⁸ Van Lerie, Frans. "Was the Medieval Church Corrupt?". In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁴⁹ Obermeier, Anita. "Witches and the Myth of the Medieval *Burning Times*." In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁵⁰ Drout, Michael D. C. "Everyone Was an Orthodox, Educated Roman Catholic." In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). (New York: Routledge, 2009).

relationship is found in the many decisions that exist during quests, where the medieval and fantastical merge into the *vita gravis*. It is the identification of this relation, in correlation with the determining of medieval aspects that correlate to the idea of the medieval that formulate the basis of analysis.

1.4 Earlier research

Considering that ‘The Witcher 3’ is a relatively new game, it is not surprising that no in-depth study aside from gaming journalism has been done. However, this is also due to the fact that case studies of games is unusual even within the field of ludology (game studies) and often tie in with the institutional practice from where the study adheres from. Yet, as this study works within multiple academic discourses, a range of earlier research become relevant to explore further.

Studying the explicit use of the Middle Ages in video games, Alcázar finds that history in gaming could change our perception of how we feel or sense a gaming experience.⁵¹ He highlights that the very participatory elements of games could influence us similarly to the effect of other cultural phenomena in that it intimately communicates meaning towards the player.⁵² The idea of ludic spaces that carry congenital meaning is shared by Schwartz, who believes that players not only experience what is presented, but also what is “underlying the representation.”⁵³ Albeit that her work involves itself with the subject of realism and simulation in games and not specifically history, her results interestingly conclude that realistic environments, misconceived as realistic or not, work towards the player’s acceptance of his or her surroundings. Also, through the participation from the player in the interaction of the game, she muses that the player has very real feelings towards their experience within the game.⁵⁴ This suggests that the participation in the interaction between player and content carries a weight of meaning and that this might be even more prominent in games that make use of historical constituents.

The use of history in gaming is a relationship that encompasses not only the historical, but also the fantastical. Indeed, this is especially true when one considers delving into any

⁵¹ Alcázar J., Juan F. The Other Possible Past: Simulation of the Middle Ages in Video Games. *Historia y Videojuegos. El impacto de los nuevos medios de ocio sobre el conocimiento del pasado medieval*. Research project, University of Murcia. 2010. pp. 328.

⁵² Alcázar. The Other Possible Past. pp. 329.

⁵³ Schwartz, Leigh. Fantasy, Realism, and the Other in Recent Video Games. *Space and Culture, Vol. 9(3)*. 2006. pp. 315.

⁵⁴ Schwartz. Fantasy, Realism, and the Other in Recent Video Games. pp. 321-322.

material indwelling the Middle Ages, as it is often the playground for the genre of fantasy. Young intuitively that fantasy is the carrier for the medieval setting for a modern audience, where the setting and historical annotations create a blur of content for the player to interpret.⁵⁵ In accordance, Alcázar identifies games with historical elements as a staple in the industry, and emphasizes that players who ingrain themselves will absorb a varying degree of historical knowledge from these settings.⁵⁶ This is further emphasized by E. H. Buzay & E. Buzay where they see the historical as something to purport other underlying meanings, in their case even veiling substratal dimensions of the creator's intent.⁵⁷ While all being reserved on the specific level of influence the historical has on their respective content, they all agree that it carries a pivotal role in convincing players to accept the presented in-game world.

This agreement meets opposition when looking at the narrative elements of the game, as some scholars believe that the historical has less impact. Brown asserts that it serves as meaning being interwoven, making it more of a carrier of the fictional in that the historical becomes too entangled with its fictive counterpart.⁵⁸ Her study on Arthurian texts show that the immense web of content makes it impossible to discern what is historical and what is fictional, thus, indirectly arguing against earlier authors' claims. However, within literature studies there are other opinions on how the historical influence the written material. Elliott sees a trend within the post-Tolkien fantasy literature where the historical create the foundation upon both tropes of the medieval, and the known reality of the time-period.⁵⁹ Selling also recognizes this and discerns that the Middle Ages is exceptionally useful for fantasy settings as it provides a recognisable milieu, while at the same time targeting our urge for escapism and familiarity in the unfamiliar.⁶⁰ Furthering this, Drout evinces that the

⁵⁵ Young, Helen. Approaches to Medievalism: A Consideration of Taxonomy and Methodology through fantasy fiction. *Parergon*, Vol. 27(1). 2010. pp. 164.

⁵⁶ F. J. Alcázar, Juan. Video Games and the Middle Ages. *Imago Temporis, Medium Aevum*, III. 2009. pp. 364.

⁵⁷ Buzay, H., Elisabeth & Buzay, Emmanuel. "Neomedievalism and the Epic in Assassin's Creed. The Hero's quest". In *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*, Helen Young (red.), 113-131. (New York: Cambria Press, 2015). pp. 126.

⁵⁸ Brown, Molly. "King Arthur and the Knights of the Postmodern Fable. Folding the Dead". In *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*, Helen Young (red.), 179-197. (New York: Cambria Press, 2015). pp. 182.

⁵⁹ Elliott, Geoffrey B. "Moving Beyond Tolkien's Medievalism. Robbin Hobb's Farseer and Tawny Man Trilogies". In *Fantasy and Science Fiction Medievalisms: From Isaac Asimov to 'A Game of Thrones'*, Helen Young (red.), 183-198. (New York: Cambria Press, 2015). pp. 193-194.

⁶⁰ Selling, Kim. "'Fantastic Neomedievalism': The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy". In *Flashes of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the War of the Worlds Centennial, Nineteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, David Ketterer (red.), 211-218. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001). pp. 212-213.

historical in fantasy fiction in part presents itself as enjoyable due to the fact that one can often discern the historical from the fantastical.⁶¹

In summary, it signals that the trend for fantasy literature and gaming alike tends to use the historical, and in particular the medieval, as an internuncio or vessel to both convince and enhance their world in concert. As is indicated through both ludology and literature studies, this phenomena steps beyond the idea of a sort of *au courant* writing, and reveals itself to be a recurring theme that eludes a definitive answer. The historical aspects of games as such stand between the battlement of the known and the unknown, being both discussed but never determined as it often lies in peripheral to other objects of study. In this paper, I will seek to investigate that middle ground and venture to provide an example on why we strive for the Middle Ages.

1.5 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and determine in what ways a delimited ludic space within the fantasy computer game ‘The Witcher 3’ inhabits historical representations of the Middle Ages. Also, it is the objective to examine the relationship between the theoretical longing for the medieval and the appropriation of the time period within the game, which is represented in the concept of the *vita gravis*.

1.6 Research questions

- In what ways does the ludic space within ‘The Witcher 3’ represent a historical depiction of the Middle Ages?
- In what manner does the game conduct rituals that facilitate the *vita gravis* within the ludic space?
- How do the participatory environments proliferate a sense of the *vita gravis* through the use of historical context?

1.7 Material

‘The Witcher 3’ is the third installation of the trilogy based on the works of Andrzej Sapkowski and his novels on the adventures of Geralt, the witcher for hire. The witchers are a

⁶¹ Drouot, Michael D.C. The Problem of Transformation: The Use of Medieval Sources in Fantasy Literature. *Literature Compass* 1(22). 2004. pp. 15-16.

guild made up of humans who transformed their bodies at an early age in order to possess the means to battle monsters and the supernatural. Drawing upon Polish folklore and the fantasy genre, the witcher series provide the narrative of a protagonist who finds himself in the midst of power struggles, racial segregation and open warfare. In the third game, 'The Wild Hunt', Geralt seeks his former pupil and foster child which takes him from the land of Velen's pseudo-English lowlands all the way to the frozen north of the Viking inspired Skellige. The game is an open-world roleplaying game (RPG) with a fantasy setting of medieval Europe, borrowing loosely from different years of the time period. As in other games of this nature, 'The Witcher 3' drives its content mainly via series of quests or missions where initially, the main character is either prompted through conversation or objects in order for it to start. Although most quests are optional in a sense that one could refuse to do them, this study presumes that it is the player's intention to experience its contents. Also, the main quest story line that the character follows is not of utmost importance. Surely, some segments will be discussed in this work, however, the main focus lies within the games presentation of the *vita gravis* that can be identified within the game. Thus, the analysis will focus less on the narratological aspects of the story, and more on the continual appearance of the sense of *vita gravis* that can be seen through several parts of the game.

1.8 Outline

Initially, the analysis will process the apposition of medievalism and neomedievalism, exemplifying via quests the many layers of this relation. Following this, a discussion on the connection between religious aspects and the *vita gravis* will ensue, with emphasis on the dichotomization of choice as a basis for analysis. Finally, the concluding chapter will discuss the merits of the term and how it interacts with the game and the audience. There will also feature a disclosure on the topic of the Middle Ages in our modern society.

2. Analysis & final discussions

2.1 The apposition of the medieval and the fantastical

“[H]ave we laid this burden on others? On so-called witchers... Stray children taught the ways of foul sorcery, their bodies mutated through blasphemous ritual. Sent to fight monsters though they could not distinguish good from evil. The flicker of humanity long extinguished within them [...] To this day, they shame us with their very existence!”⁶²

In the aftermath of an introductory segment, the game leaves the player with the freedom to explore the countryside with the main quest as the only guide forward. Here in the small county of the White Orchard, the player learns through the notice board that a man named Odolan needs help with a ghost that apparently haunts a nearby well.⁶³ The first impression of the White Orchard is that of medieval England in late summer. Being the land occupied by a foreign force, the surroundings show hints of earlier struggles and military actions, but otherwise the countryside seem to be unaffected. The main village near Woesong Bridge sports a tavern, a rundown smithy and some houses with thatch roofs and timbered lodgings. Following the road west from the village, the player finds Odolan in his relatively well furnished housing next to farmlands and a woodland pasture.



The landscape of the White Orchard. Source: <http://thewitcher.com/en/witcher3>.

⁶² Opening credits. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red, 2013.

⁶³ White Orchard, Quest: Devil By The Well. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

In this traverse of the White Orchard, the surroundings provide a reasonable picture of the medieval – aside from a fantasy dwarf working the bellows – which paired with the peasants’ accents make it reminiscent of southern England. The break in character for this environment is actually the presence of the main protagonist, as Geralt wanders within the world as an outsider, being a contrast in appearance whilst also being reminded by observers that he does not belong there. Comments such as “I don’t like you white one⁶⁴” and other derogatory terms mark Geralt, and indirectly the player, as an outsider come to disturb the setting around them.

The task given by Odolan refers to a well in a nearby village that has been abandoned due to a raid from soldiers long ago, and there seems to be a wraith haunting the now important water source. The player then travels to the abandoned village, finds the wraith and proceeds to inquire how best to banish it from the well. The game-play aspect of ‘The Witcher 3’ is interesting as it makes use of Geralt’s inhuman senses in order to investigate places for clues. The method is implicative of a Sherlock Holmes-esque monologue where Geralt mumbles the findings for himself and the player as he meanders from footprints, bloodstains and items alike. Once again the otherness of the character emerges, as Geralt works as a vessel for the player to interpret their surroundings. The perspective of Geralt is one of cunning and knowledge that encompasses the supernatural, hence, the player identifies with him as the carrier of modern perspective on the medieval environment. The participation of investigating the site using a modern application of crime scene methodology involves the player in the ritual of banishing what does not belong in the historical setting: the wraith. Throughout the game, this juxtapositioning of Geralt banishing what should be absent from the player’s perception of the Middle Ages is a thematic present in most quests that the character undertakes. The accounts of the quest-givers – such as Odolan at Woesong Bridge – bear the mark of superstition made real, as the explanation of the occult and magical is explained with the help of myths and folktales, reinforcing the notion of the Middle Ages as filled with superstitious masses.

As Dendle recognizes, this is partly true as common folk in the Middle Ages were prone to explain things via traditions and tales of mystique in preference compared to the scientific.⁶⁵ Thus, the sense of the *vita gravis* is identified not only in the environment of the player, but also in the expectations of the characters the player encounters via Geralt. When

⁶⁴ White Orchard, one of the peasants at Woesong Bridge. In *The Witcher 3*. CD Project Red.

⁶⁵ Dendle. The Middle Ages Were a Superstitious Time. In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Stephen J. Harris & Bryon L. Grigsby (red.). pp. 117.

interacting with people of this world the player is handed the expectation that the majority of them is acting as if they belonged in the Middle Ages that is depicted, which encompasses not only the visual but also the behavioural aspects of the characters' lives through speech and actions. Odolan describe the apparition he saw as a ghost; Symko, a boy who lost his father to a cockatrice, calls the perpetrator a "shrieker"⁶⁶; and the leader for a village called Ealdorman, tells of an "ancient power"⁶⁷ and continues with a tale of strange things happening in correlation with a haunted hill. These are a few examples of the accounts that carry the sense of tradition, superstition and dark magic rather than the near scientific explanation of Geralt's expertise. They plead and beg Geralt to wipe away the stain of the supernatural from their lives and cleanse their perception of the intruding nightmares that infringe upon their medieval norm.

In order for the player to experience this glorification of their character as the knowledgeable being come to rescue the ignorant masses, the world must seem plausible enough for such an endeavour. The longing for the medieval in 'The Witcher 3' appears, as the quests steers the player towards mending the historical setting. It is the playground for the power-fantasy of the player to play a demi-god amongst men within a recognizable historical setting. The impact of the Middle Ages as instantly recognisable and the historical carrier of simpler times, makes it essential for the player in order to feel the significance of the decisions that are being made. The sum of these parts construes one aspect of the feeling of the *vita gravis* within the game. At the end of the quest, Geralt receives a sum of gold for his troubles and rides away, leaving the farmer and his family to continue their lives blissfully ignorant of what they could not understand nor wanted to be a part of. The complication is rendered void, and the player has seen to that the normal life of a medieval farmer can ensue.

A mentionable occurrence is also that the other outsiders to the medieval elements of the story, present themselves in similar manner as Geralt in the form of other witchers and sorceresses. These characters traverse a thin line between the fantasy realm that they partly inhabit, and the medieval sphere of influence in which they also reside. Their contribution to the player in the perception of the surrounding world is split, as they sometimes serve as a reasonable character within the medieval time – such as Triss during her flight from the witch hunters⁶⁸ – and in others clearly differentiate themselves, such as the many discussion with

⁶⁶ Velen, Quest: Contract Shrieker. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁶⁷ Velen, Quest: The Whispering Hillock. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁶⁸ Velen, City of Novigrad, Quest: Pyres in Novigrad, Ratcatcher. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. 2015. CD Project Red.

Jennefer's on the metaphysical aspects of the Great Hunt⁶⁹⁷⁰. The latter part is also true for the many discussions and quests done with Avallac'h – an elven mage – who introduces the pseudo-scientific magic of portals and parallel worlds⁷¹. Together, they serve the purpose of another aspect of the *vita gravis*, which is to propel the importance of the main character's role in the story. This is only achieved via the clear distancing that these characters make towards their medieval surroundings, propelling a sense of otherness to both themselves and the player alike.

As discussed earlier in this paper, quests within the game can be seen as rites or rituals of a participatory nature, where the player is engulfed in certain tasks that enhance the importance of the game's setting. Even if these vary in various shapes and forms, having the player do things from searching and killing monsters to retrieving a frying pan, they all demand the player to participate in some task. Engaging the player in varying degrees of content, this participation further strengthens the sense of the *vita gravis* in a manner comparable to the effect achieved with Geralt. As already outlined, many quests present the player with the task of restoring the medieval life for the inhabitants of the game. Aside from the earlier examples, the dispatch of "Jenny of the Woods"⁷² is another case where the game juxtaposes the norm of the medieval against the abnormal of the supernatural. While also exemplifying the superstitious behaviour of the common people, the interaction with them puts the player in a situation of involving oneself in their ordinary lives. For instance, in another mission a hunter of a village in Velen seeks aid in tracking and removing a beast that ravage their surrounding forest⁷³. The contract is especially important for them as it threatens one of the main sources of food through hunting, hence, the player is presented with the life of a small village in the outskirts of a small commune. The peasants working garden plants, the men and women tanning animal furs, and the image of their small society provide a good picture of medieval life in the countryside. As the goal is to help the villagers and earn their reward, the game once again presents the dichotomy of the natural against the supernatural; the medieval against the fantastical.

Yet another example can be found in the very early interaction with Emperor Emhyr, as the player is forced to engage in the pleasantries of medieval court-life⁷⁴. Being portrayed

⁶⁹ Skellige, Quest: The King is Dead, The Funeral. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁷⁰ Kaer Morhen, Quest: The final Trial. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁷¹ Velen, City of Novigrad, Quest: Through Time and Space. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁷² Velen, Quest: Contract Jenny of the Woods. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁷³ Velen, Quest: Mysterious Tracks. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁷⁴ Royal Palace in Vizima, Quest: Bar fight & Royalty. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

as a mixture of the Byzantium Empire and a 16th century early European state, the imperials demand that Geralt change his clothing and manner in the wake of his audience with the emperor. This participation of shaving, clothing and learning the proper manners all point towards the ritual and its enhancing qualities. In similar view towards the ritual, Bell would categorize this enactment closer to performance theory as the player is integrated within the act itself, thus, losing the element of outside observance.⁷⁵ However, the interactive nature of games assigns itself anent a playful nature of the liminoid, acting as the performative aspect which trajects another depth of the *vita gravis*.⁷⁶ While Turner might not have directly discussed the effect of the liminoid within games, this ritual of medieval court performance fall within the category and furthers the sense of the environment that the player experience. Consequently, the liminoid is not only represented in the quests themselves, but in this unique case carries the sense of the *vita gravis* within the very actions of the liminoid. Where other quests merely exist as notions of the player's chosen action towards experiencing a ritualistic element within the game, the meeting with Emperor Emhyr makes an interesting exception as it marks out the liminoid in the quest itself. The intrusion upon the player's freedom within the open-world game and the medieval environment cater to the feeling of the *vita gravis*.

Via the completion of quests, the player experiences and progresses through the game while mending the medieval surrounding. The interminable play with the notion of simplistic life – simple as in without much variety, rather than easy – and the display of hardships, heighten the tension for the game and provide excitement for the missions as they break the stalemate within the world. It is indicative of the character of the *vita gravis* that these constituents of the Middle Ages work towards the intensification of the story, providing an ample foundation upon which the fantastical can thrive. Matthews expounds on the 17th century fear of the Middle Ages as a concept that could return, making it a “state of being” rather than a chronological epoch.⁷⁷ Expanding on that thought, I believe that the continual use of the medieval as a staging point for the enhancement of story and gameplay signifies a longing for the period. This strive is paradoxical, as it is not the time period that is sought after, nor the applicable lives of the people that inhabited them. Rather, it is setting of the fundamentally flawed perception of simplicity of an era that entailed less complexity compared to contemporary society, making it a perfect staging area for fantastical endeavours. To reiterate an earlier point, ‘The Witcher 3’ provides the relationship between a

⁷⁵ Bell. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, pp. 38-39.

⁷⁶ Turner. *LIMINAL TO LIMINOID*. pp. 64.

⁷⁷ Matthews. *Medievalism: A Critical History*. pp. 46.

recreation of the Middle Ages in medievalistic fashion, only to intervene with a neomedievalistic fantasy in apposition. The identification and involvement of Geralt as the, at times, anachronistic protagonist combined with the quests provide an undercurrent of the *vita gravis* throughout the player's experience of the game.

2.2 The holy, heretical and the dichotomy of choice

“Men of the north, you stand at the precipice! Your kings have failed you, so now you turn to the gods! And yet you do not plead? You do not kneel to dust your heads with ash? Instead you wail, ‘Why have the gods forsaken us?’”⁷⁸

As the words of the nameless doomsday prophet suggest, deities and worship are commonplace in the world of the Northern realms. Their occurrence differs in shape and form, presenting a varied flora of the occult, mythical and religious depending on the situation. Much like the apposition between the medieval and the fantastical, the game similarly bifurcates the holy or orthodox against the heretical or unorthodox. This is often expressed via choices that occur within quests where the player is offered the alternatives of conforming in favour of the customary or heretical. Moreover, the decisions often include a distinction of good and evil, putting the player in situations where the choice is between the ideas of humane or pragmatic behaviour, separating the two. This estrangement creates a subtle but forceful dichotomization of complex options.

For instance, during the search for Triss in the city of Novigrad – a sorceress of importance to the main quest – the player encounters the Church of the Eternal Fire.⁷⁹ In the Hierarch Square the commander for the Temple Guard, Caleb Menge, proclaims among other things the heresy of magic and proceeds to burn a woman at the stake.⁸⁰ Furthermore, Menge is also the leader for the Witch Hunters who resemble the inquisition responsible for the prosecution of heretical beliefs in the 13th century. Building upon the trope of a corrupt medieval church that did all manner of horrors in the name of purity, the game instils yet another aspect of the *vita gravis* in the player. As van Liere states, the idea of a corrupt

⁷⁸ Opening credits. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁷⁹ First appearance in Novigrad, Hierarch Square. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁸⁰ Velen, City of Novigrad, Quest: Pyres in Novigrad, Find Triss. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

church is a “gross generalization”⁸¹, but holds sway as the concept of this misconception has proliferated itself over time.⁸²



The City of Novigrad. Source: <http://thewitcher.com/en/witcher3>

The very aspect of burning witches is a false notion that has stuck in the public perception of the Middle Ages, a point which Obermeier concludes in her assessment on the subject. The phenomena of persecution and burning of heretics stems more appropriately from the 16th century and forwards, existing well into the 1800s⁸³. This demonstrates that the feeling for the *vita gravis*, rather than the historically accurate perception of the medieval prevails in the game. The player is greeted by the expected world surrounding the perception of the Middle Ages: the burning of witches and the rejection of thaumaturgy finding solace in the player’s assumptions.

In both resemblance and contrast, other encounters with the celestial and supernatural provide the element of choice as an additional layer, forcing the player to take a stand within the world he or she observes. In the ruins of a small brick outpost, Geralt happens upon two villagers who currently pays homage to a God presumably dwelling within a wooden figurine in the ruins.⁸⁴ After some investigation, Geralt discovers the God to be a Sylvan – one of the many types of monsters inhabiting the game – and the game offers the player to choose

⁸¹ Van Lerie. “Was the Medieval Church Corrupt?”. In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). pp. 31.

⁸² Van Lerie. “Was the Medieval Church Corrupt?”. In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). pp. 31-32.

⁸³ Obermeier. “Witches and the Myth of the Medieval *Burning Times*.” In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). pp. 222; 226.

⁸⁴ Velen, Quest: A Greedy God. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

between different paths. With a varied amount of investment in the different directions, the main directions the player can approach can be divided into two categories: either force the demon to leave them alone or demand that the demon be more lenient towards his worshipers, easing their suffering. The choice is riddled with associations, as it problematizes the player's conviction towards the villagers' future, whilst also making the player question their in-game character's identity of disposing monsters from the world. What at first seem the easy choice of killing/ceasing the demons operations or making him more amicable, is also the indirect choice of involvement in the world's status quo. The villagers, wanting only to please their deity with offerings, could be enlightened by the player, hence freeing them from the ignorance of slaving under a gluttonous demon. However, the act could remove a source of hope for them, awareness that might not be appreciated in the simple life of the peasants. As earlier, the game uses the player's apprehension of the Middle Ages as a way to shape the protagonist into the enlightened thinker, weighing the simpleminded villagers' lives in the shape of Geralt's hand. The sense of the *vita gravis* is prominent as the player applies the modern mind on what action to take in the medieval environment. The preconceived understanding of simplistic faith in false deities represented in the poor villagers, combined with the discovered truth of the demon, play into the feeling of the *vita gravis*. Deriving the choice of the aspects of perceived medieval simplicity, all importance and meaningful weight to the judgement disappear. This encapsulation of the notion of what the medieval is to the modern society is vital in order to achieve meaningful decisions within the game.

In similar fashion, the ritual in which Geralt partakes during the forefathers' eve also provides a choice riddled with circumambient aspects in relation to the *vita gravis*. Agreeing to help the Pellar with a ritual to put wandering souls out of the world of the living, Geralt disembarks into a mass of worshipping commoners.⁸⁵ Standing in the middle in front of a fire pit, Geralt protects the congregation against monsters as the ritual summons ghosts and concedes to the Pellar's will. However, before the ritual is complete several witch hunters arrive to break up the ceremony. Like the decision regarding the Godlike sylvan, the player is forced to choose between supporting the gathering, and in doing so, slaying the witch hunters who escalate the discussion into violence, or taking a step back. The secondary alternative is to accept that Geralt's role is limited to the act of pursuing monsters and not extended to the defence of a cult, let alone the killing of humans. Again, what may seem to be a choice between the defence of innocents and the cold-hearted calculation of a professional on the

⁸⁵ Velen, Fyke Isles, Quest: Forefathers' Eve. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

surface, has hidden depths to the judgement. The presence of the *vita gravis* in the shape of the ritual – an act rifled with medieval annotations towards the superstitious – and the relationship that Geralt has to the Pellar, all reverberate in the perception of the medieval. The Pellar has spoken in riddles, used blood magic⁸⁶ and rambled in what could be likened to the act of glossolalia⁸⁷ which all present his character as the extreme end of religious fanaticism.

Despite the results his thaumaturgy achieves, the presentation of it is as the naïve, superstitious and simplistic to the point of being stupefying. Once more the player is put in the position of a modern intellectual that presides judgement over the simple masses. The surrounding factors provide the player with the importance of the choice and the weight of the *vita gravis*, as the repercussions of the decision create ripples to the enclosing environment. Truly, regardless of which alternative the player sticks with, the feeling for the *vita gravis* remain ever vigilant, fundamentally making it evenly impactful. If the player steps back from the witch hunters, it leads into the encounter with an embittered Pellar who accuses the witcher of betrayal to their cause. Geralt then reminds him that he was helping the Pellar against monsters, not humans, emphasizing the superiority of his calling as if it is the rational one. The simple and passionate religious practices cannot triumph against enlightened reason, as the game continues the false dichotomy of the two. Even when Geralt helps complete the ritual, it goes awry because of the bloodshed and the ritual is broken. From the failure, it is revealed that the Pellar actually had a personal agenda towards the banishment, as he wanted the ghost of his tormenting father removed. This task is then performed by the player, securely fermenting the ascendancy of the reasonable over the unreasonable. Ultimately, this is possible because of the *vita gravis* being present in the process. The historical connection provides what is needed in order for the choices to have impact, without further explanation or emphasis aside from the plot itself.

As a final example of the relationship between the devotional and the fiscal, Geralt's encounter with the Church of the Eternal Fire in the field provides yet another aspect of this discussion. Standing next to an old battlefield, a priest of the order holds sermon at a makeshift altar beside the road.⁸⁸ Promptly in their first exchange of words, the priest exudes the overconfident tone of a righteous holy man, insulting the witcher for his very existence. The priest wants Geralt to burn the corpses on the battlefield with holy oil and spare their fate

⁸⁶ Velen, Quest: A Princess in Distress. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁸⁷ To speak in tongues.

⁸⁸ Velen, Quest: Funeral Pyres. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

from the devouring beasts that prowl and feast on their carcasses. When performing the task, Geralt encounters a survivor among the dead bodies and discover that the priest had tried to acquire fisstech – a sort of drug similar to opium – and that the witcher had merely been hired to cover the tracks of their deceit. When confronting the priest with this fact, he immediately tries to bribe Geralt and the choice is put between coin and honour. First, the initial contact with the priest produce the notion of the church as corrupt, having its roots from the description of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. Van Lerie tracks this to the historical writings of Protestants in centuries after the schism of Luther, which still holds sway over popular opinion to this day.⁸⁹ Also, Droust stresses that the reasoning for the churches behaviour in acting in a dominant fashion was in part to cull those who questioned, or openly denied their creed.⁹⁰ However, the presentation of the priest is conveniently made in the image of what modern society misconceives as the corrupt priests, working their own agenda in order to enrich themselves. Admittedly, the medieval church practice was at times questionable, but this does not mean that the priesthood was filled with ranks of the corrupt as is presented here.

The misconception of the church is yet another aspect of the *vita gravis* because it plays once again to the expectation of the audience. The stereotypical corruption of the medieval church is a well-known entity, and it controls the surrounding factors of the choice in the end of the quest. Instead of being a choice between a witcher's honour and money, it is the decision between justice and being an accomplice. The player is put in the situation where the corruption is identified and could be stopped or ignored. As the church is a notorious villain often falling victim to these interpretations of its actions in the eyes of the modern person, it delivers more decisiveness to the player. The surrounding circumstances of the mission are complicated by the presence of the *vita gravis*, the historical consanguinity conditioning the situation to a deeper level.

⁸⁹ Van Lerie. "Was the Medieval Church Corrupt?". In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). pp. 32.

⁹⁰ Droust. "Everyone Was an Orthodox, Educated Roman Catholic". In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). pp. 58.

3. Summary & conclusion

“The Redanian Eagle spread its wings, taking all the North, including Novigrad, beneath them. With victory in the war against Nilfgaard secure, Radovid proceeded to complete his witch hunt. As they had in Novigrad, pyres burned in Temeria and Aedirn, lands now ‘liberated’, by the Redanian monarch. In the drive for moral renewal, simple herbalists, pellars and healers and nonhumans – all supposed heretics – were murdered in droves. For many, freedom under Radovid’s sceptre proved more tragic than servitude to another.”⁹¹

As can be surmised from the analysis, ‘The Witcher 3’ reveals that the concept of the *vita gravis* is present in multiple ways to enhance, not only the story, but above all the impact of the player’s decisions. Through the juxtapositioning of the medieval environment against the fantastical, the *vita gravis* delivers meaning and gravitas to a world bereft of otherwise recognisable depth for the player it delivers its content. Surely, the stemming of open-world gameplay via interaction of quests – the liminoid in effect – strengthens the apposition that is revealed in the many choices that are made. The *vita gravis* notably distances itself from Hong’s terminology, working with the appositional interplay of medievalism and neomedievalism.

The main divergence between the *vita gravis* and Hong’s term of *when life mattered* becomes visible. As Hong recognizes, the historical functions as the enhancer – much like the *vita gravis* – to instil importance to the surroundings of the liminoid. However, for him the feeling is artificial and he claims that we “play along”⁹² even if we understand the difference of the real and perceived history within the game parameters. Here lies the limit to his terminology, as it merely functions within the idea of how real a game can be felt and in what way this impacts the player’s attitude towards reappropriation of history in liminoid games. I would argue that the *vita gravis* steps beyond notions of recreation of history in games, and points to the fundamental undercurrents of the game world where the medieval exists in this given example. The question of what is real or not is irrelevant, as the heart of the matter is that the very ambiance provides the circumstances where this choice can exist. Indeed, the setting of the quests that mesh with the medieval, transfuse importance to the game beyond a mere enhancement: it creates the very opportunity for such situations to exist. Without the

⁹¹ Epilogue, Helping Radovid. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. CD Project Red.

⁹² Hong. *When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games*. pp. 40.

vita gravis present in the game, such volition loses its edge and the innate interest as all ventures would need to be motivated.

Hong also correctly identifies that the study of content is problematic as it assumes the role of interpretation of the many different ways one could approach the game⁹³. What Hong disregards is the alternative, where a game without the support of the historical need to motivate the player to invest time and effort in order to create immersion and importance towards the game environment. Consequently, the historical innately exalts in this regard, as it readily lends itself to the player as the provider of the importance, the *vita gravis*, which carries narratives and game elements further. What each and every person individually experience is inconsequential as the existence of the historical, the *vita gravis*, in games appear to provide the foundation for the in-game world without further need to motivate the player towards immersion. A choice made in the world of people inhabiting the environment filled with the familiarity of presupposed notions of the Middle Ages, need not motivate why that appraisal carries weight in the same way as the completely fictional. The *vita gravis* works in this way because the historical is part of our identity, and what seems to be indicative of contemporary times, especially for the medieval.

Alcázar speculates on the reason why the Middle Ages have such prominence in video games, arriving at the conclusion that it could be the presence of “the worst of human feelings and responses and the highest spiritual aims of our species”⁹⁴ that coalesce into a tangible time period. In addition, Schwartz contemplates the fact that people in modern day society feel the need to express themselves via technical means, thus, indicating that games have more impact on our own self-image or identity as a tool for introspection.⁹⁵ Consequently, I believe that the importance of the Middle Ages in video games is one of many reasons that lead to the conclusion that there is a longing for the time period.

The historical speaks to our sense of self, our part in history and our self-identification: as we are part of history, but not necessarily historical ourselves we yearn for the life of importance and thus seek solace in history. This is undoubtedly true with the medieval in ‘The Witcher 3’ as it correlates with the appositional effect of the medievalism and neomedievalism; the historical and fantastical; the post-modern society and the Middle Ages. Perhaps this is why Umberto Eco saw it as us dreaming of the Middle Ages. That each of us strives for the chance to be important but that the contemporary society surrounding us

⁹³ Hong. When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games’. pp. 41-42.

⁹⁴ Alcázar. The Other Possible Past. pp. 339.

⁹⁵ Schwartz. Fantasy, Realism, and the Other in Recent Video Games. pp. 323.

seem to provide the answers to everything, and every aspect of creativity that flower to the surface is instantly recognized for everyone to see. There may have been a loss of self-importance, of impact, that each of us can provide to our own lives. This is found in the medieval, where a moment of minimal yet astounding impact can be seen clearly in the perceived simplicity of the time period. It is not that modern society is bereft of all decisions that carry weight and importance to our lives, quite the contrary. However, the medieval time period provides a setting where the impactful decisions are more readily identifiable, hence, why it is of importance to use it in games.

Certainly, Young's theory that fantasy is a provider of the medieval to a modern audience is at the very least partly true⁹⁶, seeing that in this case the Middle Ages is infused – misconceptualized or not – on several levels of the gameplay in 'The Witcher 3'. As a consequence carrying with it, the many misconceptions or falsities of the period is translated with them. In contrast to Hong's belief that players only need what is "real enough"⁹⁷, I agree with Drouot that it is important to understand how this "transformation"⁹⁸ is conceived and what people may experience. Just as Mathews explains on the Victorian novel which manifests the medieval in an intimate way⁹⁹, that in both story and environment the fantasy game carries similarities that span even into the undertone of decision-making. Where the neomedievalism of Assassin's Creed work within "alternate realities of the Middle Ages"¹⁰⁰, the *vita gravis* is the very relation between the apposition of the medievalism and the neomedievalism. Furthermore it does so in resemblance to the young-adult fiction that Brown highlights, more specifically, in its presentation of the medieval in a fragmentary fashion which can also be identified in the game.¹⁰¹ The juxtapositional character of the *vita gravis* travels back and forth between the different spheres, fragmenting the medieval in the wilderness of the fantastical. Certainly, the works of greater significance within the game industry that presents a fantasy world also carry the heritage of Tolkien's "middle-age corpus"¹⁰², which arguably influences games additionally. However, this does not reduce the

⁹⁶ Young. *Approaches to Medievalism*. pp. 164.

⁹⁷ Hong. *When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games*. pp. 48.

⁹⁸ Drouot. *The Problem of Transformation*. pp. 17.

⁹⁹ Mathews. *Medievalism: A Critical History*. pp. 141-142.

¹⁰⁰ Buzay, H., & Buzay. "Neomedievalism and the Epic in Assassin's Creed". In *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*, Helen Young (red.), 113-131. pp. 114.

¹⁰¹ Brown. "King Arthur and the Knights of the Postmodern Fable". In *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*, Helen Young (red.), 179-197. pp. 194-195.

¹⁰² Elliott. "Moving Beyond Tolkien's Medievalism". In *Fantasy and Science Fiction Medievalisms: From Isaac Asimov to 'A Game of Thrones'*, Helen Young (red.), 183-198. pp. 192.

effect of the *vita gravis*, as such an involvement would only strengthen the relation between the medieval and fantastical.

In conclusion, the *vita gravis* provides 'The Witcher 3' with the necessary annotations towards the Middle Ages to intensify the importance of the game world. It operates in the shape of apposition between the medievalism and neomedievalism of history and fantasy, balancing the two in order to make the game feel impactful for the player. Moreover, through the participation in the quests of the game, the ritual of the liminoid propel this aspect further, convincingly selling the environs to levels beyond the mere explorative nature of the open-world game. Finally, the balance of the medieval and the neomedieval can be seen in interrelation to what Selling speculates on regarding fantasy literature, which could stand as a reciprocation of the rational.¹⁰³ Agreeing with this, I would argue that the sense of the *vita gravis* – which is present in the game – exemplifies and correlates with the notion that our contemporary society strongly affiliates with the Middle Ages. Undoubtedly, it bespeaks of Eco's speculative argument of the medieval as something we look back upon, especially in fiction. Quintessentially, the translation of the fantasy genre and historical depictions in other mediums has fully integrated itself in this relatively new era of video games, and with it the epoch of the Middle Ages persists in staying relevant to our times. This work has provided the inception of a term which may be used in the search of games with similar character. Expectantly, it can provide better understanding for the abstract and elusive nature of the medievalism prominent in contemporary society, being ever present as an apposition to our own lives.

¹⁰³ Selling. "“Fantastic Neomedievalism”" In *Flashes of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the War of the Worlds Centennial, Nineteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, David Ketterer (red.), 211-218. pp. 216.

4. Bibliography

Primary sources

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt. CD Project Red, 2013.

Internet sources

<http://thewitcher.com/en/witcher3>

Literature

Adams, Ernest W. From: *The Construction of Ludic Space*. *Digital Games Research Conference*, 2003, University of Utrecht.

Alcázar F., Juan J. The Other Possible Past: Simulation of the Middle Ages in Video Games. *Historia y Videojuegos. El impacto de los nuevos medios de ocio sobre el conocimiento del pasado medieval*. Research project, University of Murcia. 2010.

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.)

Berns, Ute & Johnston, Andrew James. Medievalism: A Very Short Introduction. *European Journal of English Studies*. Vol. 15, Issue 2. (2011).

Brown, Molly. "King Arthur and the Knights of the Postmodern Fable. Folding the Dead." In *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*, Helen Young (red.), 179-197. (New York: Cambria Press, 2015).

Calleja, Gordon. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).

Buzay, H., Elisabeth & Buzay, Emmanuel. "Neomedievalism and the Epic in Assassin's Creed. The Hero's quest." In *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*, Helen Young (red.), 113-131. (New York: Cambria Press, 2015). pp. 126.

Deibert, Ronald J. 'Exorcismus Theoriae' Pragmatism, Metaphors and the Return of the Medieval in IR Theory. *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3(2). 1997.

Drout, Michael D.C. The Problem of Transformation: The Use of Medieval Sources in Fantasy Literature. *Literature Compass* 1(22). 2004.

Drout, Michael D. C. "Everyone Was an Orthodox, Educated Roman Catholic." In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). (New York: Routledge, 2009).

- Eco, Umberto. *Faith in Fakes*. (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Limited, 1986.)
- Elliott, Geoffrey B. Moving Beyond Tolkien's Medievalism. "Robbin Hobb's Farseer and Tawny Man Trilogies." In *Fantasy and Science Fiction Medievalisms: From Isaac Asimov to 'A Game of Thrones'*, Helen Young (red.), 183-198. (New York: Cambria Press, 2015).
- Francisco, Juan & Alcázar, Jiménez. Video Games and the Middle Ages. *Imago Temporis, Medium Aevum, III*. 2009
- Fugelso, Karl (red.). *Studies in Medievalism, Vol. 19: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*. (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010.)
- Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L. *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. (New York: Routledge, 2009.)
- Holsinger, Bruce. *Premodern Condition' medievalism and the Making of Theory*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.)
- Hong, Sun-ha. When Life Mattered: The Politics of the Real in Video Games' Reappropriation of History, Myth and Ritual. *Games and Culture, Vol. 10(1)*. (2014).
- Keogh, Brendan. Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games. *Journal of Games Criticism, Vol. 1, Issue 1*. (2014).
- Lesley, Coote. "A Short Essay on Neomedievalism." I *Studies in Medievalism, Vol. 19: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, Karl Fugelso (red.), 25-32. (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010).
- Mathews, David. *Medievalism: A Critical History*. (Cambridge: D.S Brewer, 2015.)
- Mayer, Lauren S. "Dark Matters and Slippery Words: Grappling with Neomedievalism(s)." I *Studies in Medievalism, Vol. 19: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, Karl Fugelso (red.), 68-75. (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010).
- Obermeier, Anita. "Witches and the Myth of the Medieval *Burning Times*." In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- Pugh, Tison & Weisl, Angela Jane. *MEDIEVALISMS*. (New York: Routledge, 2013.)
- Ramsey, Debra. Brutal Games: Call of Duty and the Culture Narrative of World War II. *Cinema Journal. Vol. 54(2)*. (2015).
- Romera, César San Nicolás, Ojeda, Miguel Ángel Nicolás & Velasco, Josefa Ros. Video Games Set in the Middle Ages: Time Span, Plots, and Genres. *Games and Culture, Vol. 1(22), Feb.* (2016).

- Schut, Kevin. Strategic Simulation and Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History. *Games and Culture*, Vol. 2(3). (2007).
- Schoppmeier, Sören. Digital Empires, Ludic Neoliberalism, and the “*Flâneur Electronique*”: Urban Visions in Open-World Video Games.
http://www.academia.edu/24804805/Digital_Empires_Ludic_Neoliberalism_and_the_Fl%C3%A2neur_Electronique_Urban_Visions_in_Open-World_Video_Games.
 Retrieved: 2016-09-14.
- Schwartz, Leigh. Fantasy, Realism, and the Other in Recent Video Games. *Space and Culture*, Vol. 9(3). 2006.
- Selling, Kim. “‘Fantastic Neomedievalism’: The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy.” In *Flashes of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the War of the Worlds Centennial, Nineteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, David Ketterer (red.), 211-218. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001).
- Stern, Eddo. A Touch of Medieval: Narrative, Magic and Computer Technology in Massive Multiplayer Computer Role-Playing Games. From: *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*, ed. Mäyrä, Franz. 2002, Tampere.
- Stevens, Richard & Raybould, Dave. The reality paradox: Authenticity, fidelity and the real in *Battlefield 4. The Soundtrack*, Vol. 8(1,2). 2015.
- Trigg, Stephanie. Medievalism and Convergence Culture: Researching the Middle Ages for Fiction and Film. *Parergon*, Vol. 25(2). 2008.
- Turner, Victor. *LIMINAL TO LIMINOID, IN PLAY, FLOW, AND RITUAL: AN ESSAY IN COMPARATIVE SYMBOLOLOGY*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.)
- Young, Helen. Approaches to Medievalism: A Consideration of Taxonomy and Methodology through fantasy fiction. *Parergon*, Vol. 27(1). 2010.
- Young, Helen. *Fantasy and Science Fiction Medievalisms: From Isaac Asimov to 'A Game of Thrones'*. (New York: Cambria Press, 2015.)
- Young, Helen. *The Middle Ages in Popular Culture: Medievalism and Genre*. (New York: Cambria Press, 2015.)
- Van Lerie, Frans. “Was the Medieval Church Corrupt?” In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*. Harris, Stephen J. & Grigsby, Bryon L (red.). (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- Waskul, Dennis & Lust, Matt. Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing. *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 27 (3). 2004.