Externalizing the Horror of Polish Oppression in the Landscape of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*

Arguably the most famous and successful book-to-video game adaptations currently on the market, *The Witcher* (Polish: *Wiedźmin*) series has become a transmedia empire—the *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (TW3) is one of the most awarded games ever made. Its success directly influenced Netflix creating a TV series, multiple spin-off card games, a series of graphic novels, and rumours of a fourth game in the works (called Project Polaris). *The Witcher* series of books was written by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski, and given the great global success of this series, *The Witcher* franchise holds a very special place in Polish culture. Much of modern fantasy draws its myths, beliefs, and rituals from Anglo-Saxon folklore (Clark & Perkins 2010). When Slavic folklore is evoked in fantasy, it's often Russified by Western and Japanese developers, ignoring the nuances of the other 12 Slavic countries, as well as other Indigenous, divergent, Eastern Russian peoples. However, *The Witcher* remains unapologetically Polish—drawing from the Polish flavour of Slavic mythology, its version of tradition and folkloric tales, and even evoking local Polish botany and linguistics.

While the non-chronological collection of stories bound by the novels are character-driven, revolving around the eponymous witcher Geralt of Rivia and his struggles to maintain his humanity, very few clues are given about the environment and lore of the landscape. CD Projekt Red took advantage of this gap, remaining faithful to the narrative's main plot beats while imbuing the game world, environment, and landscapes with Polishisms—especially in TW3. The main regions the player has access to are: the Temeraian regions White Orchard and Velen; the free city of Novigrad and wealthy Oxenfurt belonging to Redania; and the Skellige Islands. There is much debate about the historical influence on these fictional nations, and which real countries they represent (Majkowski 2018). Most of these discussions stem from the original source material and are Germanocentric, revolving around Western nations, erasing Sapkowski's statements regarding his inspiration from multiple world mythologies, including of course Slavic—and even more specifically—Polish ideologies, literatures, and history (Literary Hub 2020, Szymborska & Czyż 2023). However, when it comes to the game world, the environment of Velen eerily evokes the Polish cultural memory of the country's three partitions, numerous suppressed uprisings, and occupation during WWII: all forms of extractive colonialism.

These painful, horrific histories are preserved in the Polish cultural collective, instantly recognizable to Polish audiences. What's interesting is how TW3's developers constructed these hauntings by referencing and alluding to literary works and ideologies generated by Polish Romanticism. Romanticism is a late 18th century literary, artistic,

and philosophical movement in Western society, chiefly characterized by individualism, nature, emotion, the Gothic, and the unknown (Seyhan 2010). However, while this revolutionary time was marked with freedom from oppression, Poland had been partitioned by Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Romanticism was more than something philosophical and artistic; it became political, instilled with longing for sovereignty while drawing from mystical and folkloric inspirations (Tornqvist-Plewa 2008).

This presentation focuses on the numerous salient elements of memory embedded in TW3's landscape. It will build upon my current research examining horror as a medium working within games to point toward "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber 1993, Schmidt & Heeg 2025) as well as Yi-Fu Tuan's titular geographic work on topophilia and the politics of space and memory. Topophilia, as coined by Tuan, is "the affective bond between people and place or setting," which can be felt by a specific group of people, but also a cultural collective (1974, 4-5). This will aid my analysis of why these allusions in the landscape are so specific, their silent rhetorical power, and the emotional response they evoke.

CITATIONS

Clark, David, and Nicholas Perkins, eds. *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination*. Vol. 1. Boydell & Brewer, 2010.

Literary Hub. "Andrzej Sapkowski on the Mythologies Behind *The Witcher.*" *Literary Hub,* 10 Dec. 2020. https://lithub.com/andrzej-sapkowski-on-the-mythologies-behind-the-witcher/

Majkowski, Tomasz Z. "Geralt of Poland:The Witcher 3 between epistemic disobedience and imperial nostalgia." *Open Library of Humanities* 4. 1 (2018): 1–35.

Schmidt, P, and S. Heeg. "Horror as Medium: An Examination of Environmental Horror in Video Games." *Epistemic Genres: New Formations in Digital Game Genres,* edited by Gerald Voorhees, Betsy Brey, Joshua Call, and Matt Wysocki, Bloomsbury, 2025 (forthcoming).

Seyhan, Azade. "What is Romanticism, and where did it come from?." *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism* (2009).

Szymborska, Dorota and Radoslaw Czyż. “Sapkowski: Co myślą o nas na Zachodzie? Zalecam wyzbycie się megalomanii. Nikogo nie interesują polskie podziały.” *Wyborcza,* 21, June. 2023. https://wyborcza.pl/7,75517,25646029,andrzej-sapkowski-wiedzmin-to-fantasy-i-basta.html

Tonrqvist-Plewa, Barbara. “Romanticism and Realism: A Dichotomy in Polish Culture and Politics.” *Scando-Slavica* 40.1 (1994): 63-74.

Tuan, Yi-fu, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. Prentice-Hall, 1974.

AUTHOR STATEMENT:

Pamela Maria Schmidt is a graduate of the University of Waterloo’s Experimental Digital Media program in the Department of English Language and Literature and is currently the Interdisciplinary Project and Communications Manager at the Games Institute. Her Master’s research focused on ambient and apocalyptic rhetoric, the use of dread by mass media, and climate change. Schmidt’s current research explores the use of horror as a communication tool in video games, adaptations, and monstrous representations. She has co-presented on the topic of horror in video games with Sid Heeg, including “Horror as Medium: Wicked Problems and Environmental ‘Non-Horror’ in *Resident Evil V, VII*, and *VIII*” at the 2023 International Conference on Games and Narrative; “Horror as Medium” at the 2024 Beyond Play Conference; and in “Horror As Medium: An Examination of Environmental Horror in Video Games” in the forthcoming edited collection *Epistemic Genres: New Formations in Digital Game Genres* (Bloomsbury).

Author's Statement

Taylanumut Doğan is a PhD student in Communication Studies at Concordia University, located in Montreal/Tiohtià:ke. He is interested in the literary functions of games and their interpretation, especially relating to how digital games represent and produce politics. His dissertation focuses on the relation of player agency and subjectivity and their potential for producing narratives about socioeconomic classes and their historical agency. He is involved with Technoculture, Arts and Games (TAG) Lab and mLab affiliated with Concordia University. This submission is currently under review as an article in the *Gothic Studies* journal.

Dead Labor and the Vampirism of Capital in *Vampire: the Masquerade – 5th Edition* and *Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines*

This work considers the political-economic implications of vampirism through the gothic tabletop role-playing game *Vampire: the Masquerade – Fifth Edition* (White Wolf Entertainment 2018) (abbreviated as *VtM*), and one of its video game adaptations, *Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines* (Troika Games 2004) (abbreviated as *Bloodlines*). Examining the vampire mythos from a Marxist perspective —partly through Marx's own metaphorical utilizations of these supernatural creatures and partly through their ideological implications—, this work argues for an examination of role-playing vampirism as a symbol for alienation from urban capitalist society, and seeks to examine this through different forms of gameplay oriented media and historical contexts. Discussions of vampirism has been ever-present in the fields of literature, cultural studies, and even politics, especially in relation to its adaptational qualities. This work takes into account the literary and folkloric origins of vampirism, as well as its resurgence in the late 20th century through popular cultural artifacts and the various adaptations of vampires into different settings. In addition to this, discussions of role-playing and its video game adaptations also informs this work quite strongly. Above all, perhaps, this work considers the political-economic implications of vampirism, in relation to the implications of role-playing as a predatory and explotative character in the context of tabletop role-playing and video games.

Tracing the lines between the cultural history of vampirism and its applications into modern settings and forms of storytelling, this work intends to provide new insights into the relation of social alienation and exploitation, as well as the predatory aspects of hierarchical relations in general. Examining vampires in the context of role-playing also provides insight into the fluidity of vampirism as a cultural phenomenon, ranging from a monstrous object of horror to realistic embodiments of exploitative and predatory aspects of contemporary society. This work seeks to weave the historical context and the contemporary role-playing implications together, providing insights into the functions of 'playing evil' in the contemporary urban capitalist society.

In order to achieve these aims, this work will begin with a discussion of the vampires becoming literary figures based in folklore (Wilson 1985; Rickels 1999), and their transformation from aristocratic figures to representations of the bourgeois (Marx 1982; Neocleus 2003; Moretti 1997). This will be followed by a discussion of *VtM* through its fifth edition corebook, examining the setting and the players' role in the world as vampires, informed by other discussions of tabletop role-playing and its potentials (Waskul & Lust 2004). Finally, a conclusion will be provided by a discussion of *Bloodlines*, mainly through its adaptation of gameplay mechanics from *VtM* and the

important narrative beats placed within the setting of Los Angeles (Slocombe 2008; Dillon & Lundberg 2017).

In essence, this work is a study of cultural and formal adaptation that seeks to reveal the potential of representing vampirism in role-playing and video games, especially in relation to the historical antecedents of such narratives and the underlying critiques of capitalist exploitation and alienation.

References

Dillon, R., Lundberg, A. (2017). "Vampires in Video Games: Mythic Tropes for Innovative Storytelling." *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics 16*(1), 46-67. DOI: 10.25120/etropic.16.1.2017.3578.

Marx, K. (1982). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. Trans. B. Fowkes. London: Penguin Books.

Moretti, F. (1997). *Signs Taken For Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. Trans. S. Fischer, D. Forgacs, and D. Miller. London and New York: Verso Books.

Neocleous, M. (2003). "The Political Economy of the Dead: Marx's Vampires." *History of Political Thought 24* (4), 668–684. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26220011.

Rickels, L. A. (1999). *The Vampire Lectures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Slocombe, W. (2008). "Beyond Good and Evil: The Inhuman Ethics of Redemption and Bloodlines." In *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Games Without Frontiers War Without Tears*, eds. A. Jahn-Sudmann and R. Stockmann, 119-128. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Troika Games. *Vampire: the Masquerade – Bloodlines*. Activision. [PC]. 2004.

Waskul, D., Lust, M. (2004). "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing." *Symbolic Interaction 27*(3), 333–356. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333.

White Wolf Entertainment. (2018). *Vampire: The Masquerade 5th Edition Roleplaying Game Corebook*. Stockholm: Paradox Interactive.

Wilson, K. M. (1985). "The History of the Word 'Vampire'." *Journal of the History of Ideas 46*(4), 577-583. https://doi.org/10.2307/2709546.

ICGaN 2025 Paper Submission Abstract

Games of Life and Death in the 21st Century: Battle Royales and the Gamification of the Roman Arena

Since the turn of the 21st century, a cultural fascination has emerged around the gamification of death. This manifests in a wide-ranging transmedia genre—the battle royale—which finds unity in a simple dystopian premise: dangerous contests where losing spells death (usually in gruesome fashion). As the historical and conceptual site for the gladiatorial games, the Roman arena finds itself entangled within this global media phenomenon. Across media of different forms, languages, and cultures, the arena has been creatively reimagined into dynamic venues for modern and technofuturistic bloodsport. Even transformed as they are, these new arenas continue to evoke their Roman prototype in visual, narrative, and technical terms. They maintain their multi-function as playing field, visual spectacle, and site of authorized brutality—both for the diegetic inhabitants of these worlds and for the contemporary audiences who interface with the violence from across the safety of a screen.

Scholars like Aldrete (2021) have examined the recycling of this trope across anglophone science fiction film and television, recognizing this media trend as "illuminating for what it reveals about classical reception in mass culture" (5) as well as the "concerns and trends in western society at the dawn of a new millennium" (18). This paper expands upon those observations by taking a cross-cultural approach to charting out the cultural zeitgeist in which battle royales emerged. In the East, we have the explosion of Japanese manga, anime, and film premised on violent games of life and death inspired by Koushun Takami's dystopian novel-turned-film *Battle Royale* (1999), including *Sword Art Online* (2012), *Alice in Borderland* (2020), and *Squid Game* (2021). In the West, we have a wave of sword-and-sandal film and television beginning with *Gladiator* (2000), to the popularity of *The Hunger Games* (2008–) novels and film adaptations. Striking up a dialogue between eastern and western media enables us to examine the implications of globalized cultural production on the continued reception of the Roman gladiatorial games.

Emerging from this fortuitous coincidence of eastern and western transmedia imaginaries is the massively popular genre of battle royale videogames, which includes titles like *Fortnite* (2017), *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* (2017), and *Apex Legends* (2019). Taking the battle royale genre

as a specifically multiplayer rendering of the gladiatorial games can produce conclusions distinct from analyses that focus on the arena's reception within single-player contexts. For instance, Clare (2021)'s survey of single-player gladiatorial video games centers itself around "the formulation of a Rome-specific continuum … set apart through its depiction of a power struggle between individual (and his society) and the ruling (mortal) body, and then, crucially, realizing that as a set of gameplay functions" (77). Multiplayer games, by nature of their social contexts of play, process the encoded ideologies of the arena differently. For instance, Kim (2021) has analyzed the battle royale genre's affective resonances within the East Asian context, and how, "[i]n it, the [capitalist] ideology of the zero-sum game, of twenty-first-century gamespace, is cast into the virtual world for the player to consider" (139). My reading sees the video game battle royale genre's conventions and commercial paratext as part of a sustained strategy of euphemism. In service of creative and commercial ends unique from their televisual and filmic counterparts, these games renegotiate the bleak specter of Roman imperialism harnessed by its precursors while formulating a renewed emphasis on spectatorship. Tapping into recent sociotechnical developments in gaming culture—esports, streaming, broadcasted competitions, and elaborate live events—they set the stage for a more playful, lighthearted, and commercialized mode of engagement with ancient bloodsport.

Bibliography

Aldrete, G. S. (2021). "Bread and Circuses": Ancient Rome, Modern Science Fiction, and the Art of Political Distraction. *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *51*(2), 4–20.

Clare, R. (2021). *Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames: Representation, Play, Transmedia*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Fagan, G. G. (2011). *The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games* (1st edition). Cambridge University Press.

Fernandez De Henestrosa, M., Billieux, J., & Melzer, A. (2023). Last Man Standing: Battle Royale Games Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory. *Games and Culture*, *18*(4), 427–448.

Greszes, S. (2019, May 26). Hunting down the true origins of the battle royale craze. *Polygon*. https://www.polygon.com/2019/5/26/18636556/battle-royale-games-movie-book-koushun-takami-inspiration

Grossman, L. (2013, November 20). “I Was Destined to Write a Gladiator Game”: A Conversation with Suzanne Collins and Francis Lawrence. *Time*. https://entertainment.time.com/2013/11/20/i-was-destined-to-write-a-gladiator-game-a-conversation-with-suzanne-collins-and-francis-lawrence/

Kim, S. Y. (2021). Surviving Digital Asia: PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds and the Affective Economy of the Battle Royale. *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, *7*(2), 128–150.

Meijer, F. (2005). *The Gladiators: History’s Most Deadly Sport* (First Edition). Thomas Dunne Books.

Sports Video Group (Director). (2022, July 14). *EA’s Joe Lynch Goes Inside the Apex Legends Global Series Championship Production* [Video recording]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjXtOGN758g

Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. The MIT Press.

Taylor, T. L. (2018). *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton University Press.

Author Statement

Kevin Wong is a graduate student at Harvard University working towards a PhD in Classical Philology with a secondary field in Science, Technology, and Society (STS). His research examines the afterlife of ancient Greece and Rome in videogames, entertainment technology, and media culture.

His dissertation work, still in its earliest stages, studies how the amorphous concept of ‘epic’ has developed into as a framing ideology for gaming entertainment. Recognizing culture and commerce as inextricably intertwined, he examines how these ideological continuities have become entrenched within the videogame industry’s creative, commercial, and sociotechnical path dependencies. He analyses in-game systems and narrative worldbuilding co-extensively with the entire gamut of sociotechnical phenomena that has emerged around gaming culture—from esports and streaming, to game engines and the design of physical gaming spaces.