Portrayals of gender and identity in the soundtrack of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*

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ABSTRACT

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (CD Projekt Red, 2019) is an award-winning role-playing video game (RPG); the third instalment of *The Witcher* game series inspired by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski's fantasy novels. Centring upon the protagonist Geralt of Rivia, *The Witcher 3* has been praised for developing a complex, authentic and immersive game environment that combines magic and fantasy elements within a broadly medieval setting. A central aspect of the game's success is its soundtrack – the fusion of music, sound and voice – which further contributes to building the game's overall narrative and the complex construction of its central characters.

This paper explores how *The Witcher 3*'s soundtrack constructs identity, focusing in particular on its use of neo-medievalist signifiers and its contrasting representations of masculinity and femininity. Neo-medievalist sounds are a central concept in building the game's identity; these sounds draw on folkloristic elements surrounding the choice of instrumentation and the recurrence of folk music throughout the game's narrative, thus increasing the player's immersion within *The Witcher 3*'s world. Regarding gender, female vocalisations are used within the soundtrack to add depth and emotion to male characters – particularly Geralt of Rivia, who due to his mutations lacks conventional emotional capabilities. Despite the inclusion and emphasis of female voices on the soundtrack, the placement of women in influential roles is limited through other musical scoring techniques, which effectively reduces the agency of these characters, thus suggesting an imbalanced treatment of gender. Through exploring these aspects, I argue that the soundtrack is a crucial part of how gender and identity are constructed throughout *The Witcher 3*, further exploring how these elements affect the player's overall in-game immersion.

The Witcher multiverse: Exploring its origins and contexts

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2019; originally released on other gaming platforms in 2015) is the third instalment in *The Witcher* game series, following *The Witcher* (2007) and *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (2011), all developed and produced by Polish video game developer CD Projekt Red. *The Witcher 3* is a Slavonic medieval RPG (role-playing game) based on the fantasy novel series *The Witcher* by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski. *The Witcher 3* offers a plot development of Sapkowski's literary universe, enabling potential resolutions of

previously unanswered storylines, as Wallace (2015) notes: 'Sapkowski laid the groundwork for all the characters in the Witcher universe, something that CD Projekt [Red] respects and tries not to wander too far from'. Therefore, the game is an example of a transmedia text: it both dramatises and extends Sapkowski's stories, appealing to existing fans of *The Witcher* series while also attracting RPG players more broadly. *The Witcher 3* has been hailed as an incredibly successful game, having won over 250 Game of the Year awards and gaining a devoted cult following (CD Projekt Red, 2019). This dual success has been intensified by the recent TV adaptation of *The Witcher* (Schmidt, 2019) on Netflix, further reinforcing transmedia connections and building a tri-force fandom base.

The Witcher 3 presents a large, complex open-world map – known as 'The Continent' – where humans and monsters coexist in chaotic unity under the lore of the 'Conjunction of Spheres'. The gameplay is predominantly from the third-person perspective of the game's protagonist, Geralt of Rivia. Geralt is a Witcher: a mutant monster hunter from the School of the Wolf. Witchers are produced through the 'Trial of the Grasses', undergoing alchemical alterations to adopt 'superhuman reflexes and strength' (The Witcher – Wild Hunt, n.d.). Due to their high mortality rates and the controversies surrounding subjecting young, apprentice witchers to such traumatic tests, these experiments were eventually abandoned. Geralt, whose white hair, cat-like eyes and emotionally stunted reactions are negative side-effects of his mutations, is therefore one of a dwindling band of witchers (Trial of the Grasses, 2021). *The Witcher 3* implies that these remaining witchers are now principally hired as mercenaries, tasked with hunting and killing monsters for money, often at the expense of ethics and morality.

Due to the nature of *The Witcher 3*'s open-world gameplay, players can complete the game in a huge number of personalised ways. The game contains a variety of Main and Side quests which can total over 100 hours of gameplay (Mozuch, 2021). Each game play-through is unique to the player, as different dialogue options influence numerous potential outcomes in the game's main storyline, including Geralt's romantic subplots with the sorceresses Yennefer of Vengerberg and Triss Merigold. *The Witcher 3*'s central plot follows Geralt and Yennefer's search for Geralt's 'Child Surprise' Cirilla (Ciri), a princess of Cintra who is effectively his adopted daughter. Ciri is on the run from the Wild Hunt; an Elven Cult who want to exploit the unique qualities of her Elder blood, which grants her special, magical powers. As Geller (2017) summarises, the Wild Hunt is based on a European folklore motif:

> Of a ghostly leader and his group of hunters and hounds flying through the cold night sky, accompanied by the sounds of the howling wind. The supernatural hunters are recounted as either the dead, elves, or in some instances, fairies. In the Northern tradition, the Wild Hunt was synonymous with great winter storms and changes of season.

The Wild Hunt are therefore a violent, magical and environmental threat to both Ciri and Geralt, providing a challenging central set of Main questlines that are supported and extended by Side quests used for levelling up Geralt's character and equipment, exploring The Continent, and interacting with a wide range of non-player characters (NPCs). Alongside Geralt, Ciri is the only other playable character in the game, which expands the game's narrative and adds depth to her character. However, these periods of controlling Ciri are generally brief, and her character abilities and customisation are significantly reduced when compared to Geralt, lacking further skills such as alchemy, and the ability to upgrade and develop various weapons and armour.

In addition to *The Witcher 3*'s complex characters, intricate lore and huge, visually detailed universe, the game's soundtrack is significant in immersing players within The Continent and dramatising the narrative. The soundtrack is a coalition of music, sound and voice within the game, all of which are used in complex ways that are particularly significant in understanding the game's constructions of identity. This article explores

aspects of masculinity and femininity in the sonic portrayal of Geralt, Ciri and other characters, and how signifiers of gender and socio-cultural location – in particular the use of neo-medievalism – are used to add depth and 'authenticity' to *The Witcher*'s world.

Gender, identity and ludomusicology

Ludomusicology is the field of research surrounding video game music. Unlike in film music, where the music is anecdotal and composed to reflect what is happening onscreen at a given time, video game music is cued depending on the events taking place in the game – 'the music is dynamic; that is, responsive to game events and player actions' (Collins, 2018). In other words, the player shapes the game's sonic environment through active, rather than passive involvement. Player immersion is very important for game developers and 'music plays a significant part in creating a sense of immersion in the game, specifically through making the player feel involved in or engaged with stimuli from the virtual environment' (Summers, 2016, p. 59). As Gibbons (2020) notes, video games could be regarded as 'unstable', as play-throughs are unique to each player: 'This instability may emerge because of the interactive nature of the medium, in which each user's experience may differ' (Gibbons, 2020). This requires a contrasting approach to musical composition when compared to film music, where the final text is fixed: each viewer sees (and hears) the same thing.

The Witcher 3 presents 'an … example of transmedia worldbuilding. CD Projekt Red had to establish the aesthetics of the books, alongside the extensive lore, people, and stories of the literature, whilst establishing their own narrative of Geralt and associated characters' (Smith, 2020, p. 148). The game seeks to 'seamlessly [blend] gameplay with the surrounding environment' (The Witcher, 2015) which envelops the player in the game's soundscape.

Research into the construction of identity in video game soundtracks has often focused on RPGs, perhaps because of the importance of characterisation and setting to the genre's narratives of exploration and adventure.

Ludomusicology also draws heavily on research into film and television music, which although not dynamic in the same way that game audio often is, has often provided a template for game composers in how it engages with and contributes to the construction of identity in multimedia texts. For example, Smith (2020, p. 10) states that 'regardless of player priority, creating a coherent and reactive soundscape amplifies the worldbuilding process for the player of an RPG'. Smith's (2020) research on the role of voice and vocality in video game soundscapes enabled the exploration of how the soundtrack – particularly the female voice – is used to represent Geralt's masculinity and add emotional depth to his character; 'voices as worldbuilding tools can aid the construction of a coherent virtual world, providing audio signifiers of people and culture alongside characterisations which may lead to increased identification by the player' (Smith, 2020, p. 147).

In addition to the use of voice, musical semiotics more broadly are significant in *The Witcher 3*'s sonic portrayal of gendered identity. These have often been noted as problematic, from the so-called 'silent' film era which began in the 1890s and where live accompaniment was used to help interpret and illustrate the action on screen (Marks, 1997, p. 26). Beginning in this period, film music has continued to rely heavily upon broadly understood semiotic associations between sound and musical 'meaning': for example, musical signifiers or signs were used to represent various character identities, genders and ethnicities onscreen. Film music often engages with musical stereotypes and clichés. Musical stereotypes developed within the classical Hollywood film era – the term used to refer to the period of cinema from the 1910s to the 1960s (Wierzbicki, 2008, p. 131) – and controversy has often surrounded their use. For example, one notable stereotype was labelled by Kalinak (1982, p. 77) as 'the virtuous wife and mother', which identified as very musically conventional. It 'was characterized by musical practices with strong positive associations. Her instrumentation was orchestral, with the violins usually carrying the melody; the harmonies were lush, based on late nineteenth-century models; the rhythms were even

and lyrical; and the melodies often had an upward movement, or included upward leaps in the melodic pattern' (Kalinak, 1982, p. 77). Although these musical features are not unique to music associated with the 'virtuous wife', their repeated use within classical film to accompany this character type means that they function as a musical shorthand. Music emphasises 'virtue' and sexual morality as the primary features of these women, and consequently also situates them as desirable for male characters: therefore, even music supposedly about female characters often serves primarily to emphasise the desires and control of men within the narrative (Haworth, 2014). As analysis of *The Witcher 3* reveals, many of the semiotics of gender associated with film music are also found in video game scores. However, specific treatment towards gender and identity in video game soundscapes is 'relatively underexplored as yet, although case studies of individual game worlds are beginning to appear' (Haworth, 2012, p. 125).

Neo-medievalism in *The Witcher 3*

The Witcher 3's soundscape makes significant use of neo-medievalism, a cultural concept 'which tends to embed traditional and folk music influences … indicative of a European Middle Ages epoch' (Lamb & Smith, 2018, p. 79). The soundtrack, composed by Marcin Przybyłowicz and co-composed by Mikolai Stroinski, contains many medievalist semiotics, these can be heard through the choice of instrumentation (Lamb & Smith, 2018, p. 92) and the recurring theme of folk music (p. 94), which plays a significant role in the game's narrative. These aspects aid greatly in worldbuilding and create a game identity for players to engage with, as Smith (2020, p. 149) notes, 'The series establishes a northern European medieval fantasy aesthetic, combined with Polish folklore, that grew in popularity in the early 2000s.' The soundscape does not replicate, but instead evokes medievalist concepts; some factors are not precisely correct but do give the player a sense of location and identity (Lamb & Smith, 2018, p. 91). For *The Witcher 3* soundtrack, Przybyłowicz worked with Polish folk musicians from the band Percival (GameSpot, 2016) to create the sound required to epitomise 'authentic'

folkloristic semiotics. In addition to folk instruments like the lute and wooden flute, 'Percival added … traditional instruments such as bouzouki, recorder, acoustic guitar, Renaissance violin, and dulcimer' (Lamb & Smith, 2018, p. 93). This instrumentation is reflective of 'the importance of traditional real instruments' (p. 93) in evoking neo-medievalist soundscapes. Moreover, Przybyłowicz's soundscape is not typical of 'Western cinema and television. The soundscape of the game builds an alien lore through coherent audio and visuals, symbolising a dangerous world filled with monsters and the unknown' (Smith, 2020, p. 150).

Further contributing to *The Witcher 3*'s medievalist identity is the aspect of diegetic folk music performances, mostly undertaken by NPC bards throughout the main cities of The Continent (see Figure 1). These are 'central to reinforcing the sense of place in the *Witcher 3* soundtrack [through] the setting of the tavern and outdoor performing areas within the cities and towns' (Lamb & Smith, 2018, p. 94). This selection of pieces are improvisations by Percival in the key of D minor with Aeolian modal influences (Lamb & Smith, 2018, p. 94). Modal tonality reinforces medievalist semiotics as opposed to using more modernised Western tonality: effectively, this kind of tonality sounds 'historical' to contemporary audiences, and is frequently used in film, television and game scores with settings in the distant past – perhaps further evoking a feeling of nostalgia. Furthermore, 'Percival's self-taught approach [was applied], which further reinforced the score's folk aesthetic because self-teaching was a genuine attribute common to folk musicians from many cultures' (p. 94). Here, Przybyłowicz wanted to create 'a unique sound' (p. 94) that was authentic to the atmosphere created in the game. This also creates an intersection between diegetic and non-diegetic music within the game's environment: diegetic sound (which belongs realistically within the game world) is blended seamlessly with cues intended solely for the player (non-diegetic), creating a rich and multi-layered sonic environment.

Medievalist semiotics are further reinforced through the side-quest player-controlled card game

GWENT, which often takes place in tavern settings throughout the game (and is another example of *The Witcher*'s transmedia success, spawning a successful standalone digital card game released on multiple platforms). The cue 'A Story You Won't Believe' (see Figure 2) is predominantly heard throughout these GWENT games, and is characterised by a simple, repetitive and modal melody played on traditional folk instruments. This, used in association with the bards, street entertainers and tavern settings, greatly contributes to *The Witcher*'s worldbuilding. If the music can be heard, the player knows they are only mere seconds from a drink and a game of GWENT.
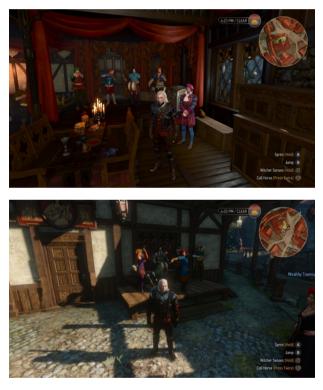

Figure 1: Examples of Geralt watching the NPC Bard performances in the city of Novigrad (CD Projekt Red, 2019). Screengrab by author

Figure 2: 'A Story You Won't Believe' cue from *The*

***Witcher 3*. Example of the Bard music showing Aeolian mode influence (Lamb & Smith, 2018, p. 96).**

Representations of Geralt's masculinity: Emotion, combat, and prejudice

The Witcher 3's game world presents a multitude of complex characters, where the soundtrack is used to add a depth of identity and aid in character building. This is particularly important in the portrayal of Geralt of Rivia, who is the game's most central character but also one whose emotional and ethical characteristics are perhaps initially quite veiled or ambiguous because of his witcher mutations. This means that 'Geralt is furnished with a personality, backstories, relationships, scars, and other non-customisable features that identify Geralt as a character with his own agency and goals' (Smith, 2020, p. 149). As previously mentioned, Geralt of Rivia is the primary playable character in *The Witcher 3*, alongside Ciri who appears in a handful of scenes. As a result, the player can accumulate hundreds of hours playing as his character (Gach, 2018).

As the player ventures further into the game, female vocals within the soundtrack are used to add depth to Geralt's character. Smith (2020, p. 158) states that 'Geralt's musical signifiers are located within the female voices of non-diegetic combat music; these vocal signifiers of Geralt portray him as a complex being which goes against the "aggressive" monster hunter identifiers that the game world's inhabitants believe him to be, the developers critiquing the views of Geralt as a "combat machine"'. This is important because the musical signifiers within the aural environment give Geralt's character greater psychological and emotional depth, thus aiding the player in developing a deeper virtual connection to Geralt.

As an open-world game, *The Witcher 3* presents a vast landscape for the player to explore. A large part of the map is barren, uninhabited land, which is home to a variety of vicious monsters and creatures. Geralt can ride his horse, Roach, or traverse via foot through these desolate areas. Due to the lack of NPCs in these regions, Geralt emits little-to-no

dialogue. As a result, non-diegetic music accompanies Geralt's journeys through these areas; this aids in worldbuilding and thus increases the player's immersion in the game. Furthermore, the soundtrack in these areas includes female vocals. This acts as a guide for the player, to differentiate the different areas of gameplay that the player will experience. If there was no soundtrack here, the player would not know if they were about to step into any potentially dangerous situations: changes in musical cue and texture therefore not only contribute to atmosphere and depth, but also serve important practical purposes.

The female vocal timbres change to reflect what is happening in-game. For instance, the cue 'Silver for Monsters…' triggers when the player fights monster enemies (referring to the silver sword Geralt uses to slay non-human foes). Language is not used in this cue, instead 'the female singers of Percival use vocalisations to mimic unpleasant sounds of a monster attack. Nonsensical hisses, screams, and barks continue the boundary blurring of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds to unbalance the player and intensify the combat' (Smith, 2020, p. 158). Furthermore, metallic timbres are used to emulate Geralt's sword fighting. Due to the mutations that Geralt's character has undergone, he lacks typical emotional qualities, or at least the ability to communicate these conventionally. Therefore, the added female vocals in the soundtrack represent Geralt's emotions, even if the character does not show any visible change in facial expression. These qualities are used to expand our understanding of Geralt's identity, perhaps showing the player when he may be afraid in conflict, for example. They are significant in encouraging player identification with a taciturn character and in developing Geralt's personality beyond that of a 'combat machine' (Smith, 2020, p. 158).

The Witcher 3 highlights many social issues, such as racism and prejudice. As an outsider – a witcher who travels the world hunting monsters for monetary gain – Geralt is not always accepted in the various societies on the map. This is perhaps further intensified by his unusual American accent, which clashes greatly with the heavy Northern English accents of most NPCs, and the Irish accents heard in the Skellige Isles. In tavern settings particularly, it appears that Geralt experiences abuse due to the nature of his profession. In one of the first playable areas of the map – White Orchard – the player experiences this prejudice in the White Orchard Inn (Rubén, 2016). Here, Geralt becomes involved in a violent fight with a few racist drunkards; it is perhaps one of the first instances where the player encounters non-diegetic combat music. Although the music used in this cue is an unreleased album track (u/PericlesCarvalho, 2019), it follows similar conventions to the GWENT music. The combat music is characterised by a driving rhythm and lack of female vocals (Lamb & Smith, 2018, p. 95), similar but more volatile than the GWENT music. Furthermore, the 'raw sound of string and folk instruments lend themselves well to the brutality of the witcher's world' (p. 93). The soundtrack used here heightens combat events for the player and increases engagement. Furthermore, the lack of female vocals boosts tension. If we consider this particular cue, the combat music starts in the dialogue preceding the fight. This may indicate that Geralt's adrenaline is increasing and that the player should sense the danger and brace themselves for the upcoming fight: again, a combination of atmosphere-development and practical signals for the player.

A clear example of where the female vocals are used to distinguish contrasting game environments is the bridge running towards the city of Novigrad (see Figure 3). Novigrad is notorious for racism and as the game progresses more images (sorcerers/sorceresses) are staked along this bridge, due to an extreme witch-hunt taking place within the game's narrative. Here, the Fast Travel marker acts as a waypoint where the music changes rather abruptly; the player appears to trigger a contrast in aural environment which is characterised by a very prominent lack of female vocals within the soundtrack. Perhaps this signifies Geralt's angst upon approaching Novigrad, reflecting his emotions through the accompanying soundtrack.

Figure 3: The 'Gate of the Hierarch' in Novigrad, showing the Fast Travel waypoint (behind Geralt) where the soundtrack vocals change (CD Projekt Red, 2019). Screengrab by author

Geralt carries two swords, one silver, for monsters, and the other steel, for humans/humanoids. Two particular cues create contrast for the different combat styles: 'Silver for Monsters' and 'Steel for Humans…' (Przybyłowicz & Stroinski, 2015). These 'are heard in the provinces and kingdoms of the mainland and signify enemies through conflicting uses of the voice' (Smith, 2020, p. 158). As mentioned earlier, 'Silver for Monsters…' uses the voice to emulate monster attacks. On the other hand, 'Steel for Humans' 'uses the voice, instead of mostly vocalisations, to signify combat with humans … the voice includes Bulgarian lyrics that portray the sentience of humans and their ability to discriminately attack Geralt' (Smith, 2020, p. 160). These different uses of the voice aid greatly in distinguishing different combat styles in the game. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how the various timbres of the voice can be used to represent a multitude of in-game events. The player, as they progress through the game, can perhaps rely on these locutions to predict in-game events – thus increasing their engagement. *The Witcher 3* shows how versatile the female voice is as an element of RPG soundtracks: it is used to signify different types and styles of combat, to highlight environmental changes, and to highlight emotional depth within the construction of Geralt's masculinity.

Representations of femininity: Musical characterisations of Ciri and Yennefer

At initial glance, *The Witcher 3*'s portrayal of women can perhaps be considered as positively disparate. Ciri and Yennefer of Vengerberg can be regarded as the two most significant female characters in the game and, alongside Geralt of Rivia, form the tritagonists of *The Witcher* series. The female protagonists are modelled with great psychological depth, and the player is aware of each woman's passions, conflicts and traumas throughout the game's narrative. As a result, *The Witcher 3* 'received attention when it [was released] because it features women in major narrative roles' (Ballou, 2018). Furthermore, women are presented through this game 'as fully-realized characters with their own motives, idiosyncrasies, and flaws' (Ballou, 2018). This perhaps juxtaposes with the cultural and historical contexts in which these female characters reside; 'the game draws on an established universe, as well as European medieval culture and history, which poses as an explanation for the treatment of female characters' (Womenofthewildhunt, 2018). Research shows that '74% of the people who play Western RPG-style games, like *The Witcher 3*, are men' (Ballou, 2018). This suggests that by presenting a lot of strong female characters in important roles, CD Projekt Red hoped to appeal to a more diverse audience. These developments are not only confined to the protagonists but also the various NPCs that Geralt encounters along his quest across The Continent – whereby these 'characters are not portrayed as mere love interests for Geralt or shallow NPCs, but have compelling character arcs and personalities' (Womenofthewildhunt, 2018). This contrasts greatly with the prior games in *The Witcher* series, which were criticised due to their severe objectification of women within the narrative (Feministing, 2009). For instance, in *The Witcher* (2007), 'sex cards' were assigned to the player as a virtual trophy, potentially objectifying female roles with the notion of viewing them as something to be captured and collected. Nevertheless, the concept of feminism in *The Witcher 3* is a tricky one to address. Ballou (2018) states that '*The Witcher 3* is uneven in its treatment of women. It shows how carelessness, ignorance and subtle, yet pervasive sexism can undermine the narrative potential of female

characters in video games. Sometimes, *The Witcher 3* sends the message that women aren't in charge of themselves and their bodies, even if these women explicitly say they are.' Music and sound are significant in understanding the ways in which both Ciri and Yennefer are constructed in the game.

The 'Damsel in Distress' trope 'is a plot device in which a female character is placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character, usually providing a core incentive or motivation for the protagonist's quest … traditionally the woman in distress is a family member or a love interest of the hero' (Sarkeesian, 2013). 'One study found that, in 21 percent of … games, women were portrayed as a victim or damsel in distress' (Summers & Miller, 2014, p. 1030). The 'Damsel in Distress' trope is widely used in various media to develop and add tension to the narrative, however, 'video games are an important form of media that have the potential to impact gender role attitudes' (p. 1028). Despite her powerful magic powers, Ciri could fit this character role. *The Witcher 3*'s main questline focuses on locating Ciri and ensuring her escape from the clutches of the perilous Wild Hunt. Throughout the game, the player explores most areas of The Continent's map with the primary incentive of finding information on Ciri's whereabouts; the various Side quests are mostly optional for the player, allowing them to develop individual character narratives and explore the various subplots within *The Witcher 3*'s game world.

CD Projekt Red's character development of Ciri complicates 'the game's gender dynamics … as you try to decide whether Ciri is a well-developed female character or not … people have argued the point back and forth for years' (Ballou, 2018). The player first encounters Ciri within the opening combat tutorial section of the game. At this point in the game's narrative, she appears to be a teenager. The player could regard her as particularly impulsive – she has ditched her theory books to practise her combat skills independently while her elder witcher trainer, Vesemir, has fallen asleep. Upon waking, Vesemir regards Ciri as a 'young damsel' (Gamers Paradise, 2015), and the player has the option to

dissuade Vesemir from lecturing Ciri on her unguided training. Here, Ciri has been verbalised as a 'Damsel in Distress' and therefore will emulate this trope throughout the game, due to her being the central quest of the narrative. Geralt believes that Ciri needs his utmost support and protection. However, this greatly juxtaposes with Ciri's character presence, which – right from the start – is portrayed as confident and independent. Her identity is full of contrasts, as is Geralt's (and Yennefer's) attitude towards her: she is both a young girl in need of guidance and protection, and an independent woman with agency and power.

As mentioned previously, Ciri is the only other playable character in *The Witcher 3* aside from Geralt. Although her agency is somewhat reduced, each playable moment sees a development in her character; she hones her craft and by the concluding battle of the game is incredibly powerful, perhaps more so than Geralt. Due to the special qualities of her Elder Blood, Ciri is a 'Source', meaning that she is a natural producer of magical energy which both Triss [Merigold, sorceress] and Yennefer [of Vengerberg, sorceress] have tried to help her train over the years' (Natividad, 2020). Nevertheless, a common feature of Ciri's storyline is that the playable moments often entail her running away from a problem. Perhaps one of the first instances of this is in Crookback Bog in Velen, where Ciri is escaping from the Wild Hunt; the player can fight if they wish, however, the objective of the quest is to 'Escape from Crookback Bog' (Video Games Source, 2015). Interestingly, Ciri's combat music here is 'Steel for Humans' (Przybyłowicz & Stroinski, 2015), which is also used in Geralt's combat cues. As previously mentioned, 'Steel for Humans' has many female vocalisations which are used to signify combat with humans and/or humanoid creatures. By using the same soundtrack, this suggests that Geralt and Ciri are represented equally and are equitable in the game's hierarchical structure of gender.

Ciri, unlike Geralt, carries only one silver sword, named Zirael. Nevertheless, this contrasts with Ciri's depiction in Sapkowski's novels, whereby she carries a steel sword (Natividad, 2020). Perhaps *The*

Witcher 3's soundtrack alludes to Sapkowski's representation of Ciri by choosing 'Steel for Humans' as the accompanying combat music; thus, aiding in developing her identity within the game. Although Ciri's hierarchical power can be viewed as equal to Geralt's some factors disturb this balance, such as the underlying 'Damsel in Distress' trope that is attached to her character. Therefore, perhaps the soundtrack clouds Ciri's true character authority. By using the same combat music as Geralt, this perhaps suggests to the player that there is equal treatment towards men and women in terms of *The Witcher 3*'s combat scenes – or it might suggest that Ciri is a 'shadow' of Geralt, who isn't important enough to be given her own, unique combat cue. *The Witcher 3*'s narrative also undermines Ciri's prowess. Ciri's mortality rate is far higher than Geralt's, and her fate is decided by the player's individual choices throughout the game. Moreover, there are three different endings to *The Witcher 3* game centring around Ciri's outcome. As the player has virtual control over Ciri's future, this lessens her power against the male protagonist, Geralt. This further shows how complex the treatment of gender is in the game and how the soundtrack perhaps highlights these differing qualities in Ciri's character identity.

In Sapkowski's *The Witcher* novel series, Yennefer of Vengerberg is portrayed as Geralt's primary love interest. Yennefer is a sorceress (see Figure 4) and, as a result, is infertile (like witchers). Throughout Sapkowski's novels, Yennefer yearns for a cure for her infertility and the ability to conceive, which she later abandoned to be genetically modified to harness her magical powers and gain a beautiful appearance. In the novels, Yennefer's emotional identity is full of contrasts. This is potentially due to her upbringing, which was 'rough … from the moment having been born a hunchback' (Yennefer of Vengerberg, 2021). Her family relationship was very abusive; however, she escaped their clutches to train at the Aretuza school for sorceresses (Yennefer of Vengerberg, 2021). Therefore, Yennefer can be regarded as very emotionally conflicted.

In terms of *The Witcher* game saga, Yennefer's first in-game appearance was in *The Witcher 3*, due to complexities surrounding the development of her character. CD Projekt Red's senior writer Jakub Szamałek stated that 'we avoided introducing [Yennefer] in the first two games partly because she was such an important character that we were afraid of bringing her to the picture' (Wallace, 2015). In the previous games, Geralt's love interests could be regarded as non-committal and informal. However, CD Projekt Red's approach to Geralt's relationships has intensified through *The Witcher* game series. If we compare *The Witcher 3* to the earlier *Witcher* games, in-game relationships are more meaningful for the player; the concept of 'sex cards' has been removed entirely and Yennefer of Vengerberg's character has been introduced to the game series. More so, the player has flexibility over which female protagonist to romance: a choice between Yennefer of Vengerberg or Triss Merigold, who was first introduced as Geralt's love interest in *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (2011). This encourages immersion as players are granted the power to make decisions that are unique to their individual play-through: their actions can result in long-term romance for Geralt with Yennefer or Triss, or neither of them if they make 'poor' decisions. *The Witcher 3* initially presents Yennefer as rather condescending and cold-hearted, although as the game's narrative evolves the player sees significant positive development of her character if they choose for Geralt to romance her.

As discussed previously, the musical portrayal of female characters in many RPGs often draws heavily on cinematic musical conventions. Many similarities can be drawn between 'the virtuous wife and mother' musical stereotypes identified by Kalinak (1982, p. 77) and Yennefer's theme, which the player first hears after Geralt's brawl in the White Orchard Inn. Here, the music is initially in a minor tonality, however, when the shot cuts to Yennefer, the music modulates to a major modal key to accompany her theme. Yennefer's theme is characterised by an initial rising motif that has continuous upward movement (see Figure 5). However, the motif falls twice, which perhaps signifies underlying trauma. Nevertheless, these

musical features are very typical of 'the virtuous wife and mother' musical stereotype. Considering the instrumentation, Yennefer's theme appears to be played on a viola which is accompanied by a lush, romanticised Dorian mode harmony on strings, lute and percussion (Golden Phoenix, 2015). This further reinforces the concept of neo-medievalist settings, by creating a stabilised game environment through the consistent use of modal tonality.

Figure 4: Yennefer's theme from *The Witcher 3*. Transcription by author

Yennefer works alongside Geralt at the request of Ciri's biological father, the Nilfgaardian Emhyr var Emreis, to support him in finding his daughter. In *The Witcher 3*, Yennefer can be regarded as a mother figure to Ciri, as Kallelinski (2015) argues: 'There are several instances [in the game] that show how emotionally Yennefer cares about Ciri, even to the point in doing a crime [performing necromancy] to find, save and rescue her'. In Sapkowski's (2015) *Sword of Destiny* (*The Witcher* Book 2), Yennefer must accept her fate of never being able to conceive and thus, 'Yennefer, whose most [desired] wish was to have a child, got it in the form of Ciri. It was her child, she called her daughter and Ciri called her mother … Something Ciri never said to Geralt, father. It was always Geralt, but Yennefer was a mother for her' (Kallelinski, 2015). Yennefer's musical theme is used to add psychological depth to her character, to show the player that there are more emotional qualities to her than what may initially be perceived. If the player is not familiar with *The Witcher* novel series, Yennefer's theme perhaps foreshadows her motherly instinct for Ciri. Nevertheless, by using stereotypical music scoring techniques from the Hollywood cinema era, this perhaps undermines the value of Yennefer's character: highlighting her as a typically 'feminine' maternal caregiver and love interest, rather than a powerful and independent sorceress.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored how gender and identity are portrayed through the soundtrack to *The Witcher 3* video game. The concept of neo-medievalism is central to creating the game's identity. By exploring folkloristic components regarding instrumentation and folk music, Przybyłowicz and CD Projekt Red have created an effective and immersive game world that is authentic to *The Witcher*'s origins. Furthermore, the soundtrack aids greatly in character building. Considering the character of Geralt of Rivia, the soundtrack is used to add emotional depth to Geralt's identity, to show that he is more than just a terse fighting-machine. Due to the possibility of the player experiencing long periods of no dialogue from Geralt as he explores the open-world map, female vocals are added to the soundtrack to reflect his emotions through various in-game events, such as in the combat cues. The character of Yennefer shows how CD Projekt Red adopted stereotypical Hollywood film scoring techniques to present her gender and identity to the player. Furthermore, Ciri's representation through the soundtrack presents her identity in conflicting ways that perhaps highlights an unequal treatment of femininity and masculinity by CD Projekt Red. Although *The Witcher 3* has been praised for its treatment of women by placing them in leading, powerful roles, there is perhaps an insistent form of sexism that permeates the game's soundtrack. Nevertheless, the aspects that I have discussed in this essay show that the soundtrack is incredibly effective in conveying a variety of identities and associations throughout the game. Alongside the complex construction of gender and identity, these factors contribute to player immersion and involvement, thus aiding greatly in *The Witcher 3*'s overall success.

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