The Witcher: Crafting a Franchise

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Andrzej Sapkowski's fantasy series of novels and short stories about the witcher Geralt of Rivia (1986–2013) is the foundation of the most popular Polish transmedia franchise. From many adaptations and dramatizations of Sapkowski's work, one clearly stands out as it started an internationally recognized brand of its own – *The Witcher* videogames. This presentation analyzes *The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED, 2007) and its sequels from the perspective of culture-specific reception in order to shed light on the challenges that relate to franchise-based game development in a global context.

CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher* functions as an exceptional case where the creation of a globally directed licensed product was governed by a lack of international pre-awareness. In extreme contrast to many other impactful Western franchises like the *Lord of the Rings* (Thompson 2007), at the time of the videogame's release the Witcher books, comics, tabletop role-playing game, film, and TV adaptations were familiar to the Polish audience yet consumers in most other countries had no or very limited knowledge of them. This was due to the overdue translation schedule; for instance, the English volume of the first book in the series was published in the US not before May 2008, a year after the videogame's release.

In the first part of the presentation we analyze the first Witcher videogame itself, focusing on selected design choices that coincide with the above-described situation (see Iversen 2010). The cRPG is a sequel to the novels as it starts directly after the events described in the last book of the series. The designers decided that the avatar-protagonist will suffer from a severe memory loss, thus being unable to remember his past or any of his witcher skills (but having "muscle memory" that enables recreating basic attacks). This rather well-worn plot twist serves ludonarrative consistency: it justifies the tutorial and improves player agency in character development. However, this solution makes optimal identification with Geralt's subjective perception of the gaming situation impossible for fans familiar with Sapkowski's work. Playing the videogame with knowledge of other texts in the franchise is actually in contrast with the "ideal" play experience, the latter being reserved for the international audience lacking the pre-awareness of the Witcher universe.

In the second part of the presentation we analyze the process of the videogame franchise's development, grounded on a number of personal interviews with the developer company CD Projekt RED's designers and localization producers. The interviews uncover how the design and localization decisions were strongly driven by the problem of the target audience's level of literal illiteracy in the later installations – *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* – but not so much in the first one (cf. Mullen 2010). For instance, the issue of terminology used in different videogame localizations and its consistency with the local translations of Sapkowski's novels: in Italy the original stories were translated after the release of the *The Witcher*, introducing some conflicting terms and creating a dilemma for the localization team of the second videogame (cf. Garda 2016).

In conclusion, the presentation evidences and exposes the dynamic requirements set by the rapid shifts in the global cultural industry (Kerr 2017). Even though franchising offers clear advantages – such as reduced investment risk (Aarseth 2006) and the use of pre-existing fictional universes (Thompson 2006) – it also brings along particular franchise-specific problems. *The Witcher* case study provides a unique perspective on this process, as the engagement of international audiences is not based on their pre-awareness of the marketed product.

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