

Dr. Aleksandra Mochocka  
Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz

*The Witcher Adventure Game*: literary texts, video games, and board games in the convergence culture.

*The Witcher Adventure Game* is a non-digital board game remediating Andrzej Sapkowski's prose, strictly related to *The Witcher* video games series. As an introductory examination of this broad issue, the text highlights selected problems pertaining to the analysis of board games specifically designed as the equivalent/counterpart of literary texts and targeted at the contemporary, digitally literate audience, and is going to focus on the above mentioned case in the light of the references to the more general regularities, concerning other board games based on literary texts.

The first short story presenting Geralt of Rivia and his world was published in the 12/1986 issue of *Fantastyka* as the third winner of the literary competition organised by that science fiction and fantasy magazine the previous year. It initiated a plethora of different texts that have spread across various media over years. Although the *Witcher* narrative was not a transmedia project at the beginning, it could be connected with considerable intermediality and interactivity which Roszczyńska (2009) calls the interpretative codes typical of popular literature. At present, there are numerous editions of the short stories and novels differing in cover design (from original cover art to video game artwork), quality and medium (paperback and deluxe printed editions, ebooks, audiobooks), and language (translations to several languages), as well as comic books, a table-top role playing game, computer games, a card game, a board game, a feature film and a television series, jigsaw puzzles, Internet discussion boards and fan pages, a Wikia, fan fiction and fan art (including cosplay), some licensed *Witcher*-inspired fiction, popular music, larps (live action role playing events), and a recognisable amount of scholarly criticism.

Two critical works seem to be worthy of discussion here: namely, Kaczor's (2006) and Roszczyńska's (2009) publications. While Kaczor fails to appreciate Sapkowski's writing for its lack of originality (according to Kaczor, the pleasure that the texts bring consists in the recognisable and comforting patterns that it offers), Roszczyńska points at their (valuable) postmodern qualities. Some of the postmodern features of Sapkowski's fiction are already mentioned by Kaczor (2006), though. According to Kaczor, the eponymous character of the *Witcher* series is de-heroised or deprived of agency and could not be called a protagonist per se, thus breaking the modernist pattern. What is more, the author recognises what she calls *the game of know-unknow* in the

Sapkowski's texts: on the one hand, certain elements (such as, for example, the magic mirror or the evil stepmother and the seven gnomes) suggest a "canonical" version of a given story, but on the other the reader is offered a "demystified", twisted one. This is, however, a feature that Kaczor finds the proof of the "stain of repetitiveness" that destroys any higher literary value of the texts. Comparatively, Roszczyńska (2009) points at some "problem fields" that define Sapkowski as a postmodern fantasy writer, namely: game, history, ethical values, self-consciousness, and entertainment.

By that token Fulińska (1999) discusses Sapkowski's prose as a kind of palimpsest in which one cannot discern individual layers. What calls for attention here is definitely the theory of transtextuality and its derivative, the theory of paratextual relationships, by Gérard Genette (2001). A specific mode of writing that Genette calls the ludic mode of imitative text can result in playful parody or pastiche without any aggressive or mocking undertones; what is more, the phenomenon of the hipertext as a whole can be generally understood as being playful. Because of the strong and overwhelming influence of the ludic mode the boundaries between modes are blurred – there is some inherent playfulness in combining various texts and relating them to one another (Genette, 2001). Again, Genette's theories are reflected in Martuszevska's (2007) notion of literary *playing/gaming*. Such playing/gaming can take place on the level of a group of texts and involve literary conventions as well as different kinds of intertextuality. On the level of the text (as an entity) it can consist in playing/gaming with fiction and authenticity and misleading the reader. When it comes to Sapkowski, his use of the playing/gaming devices is definitely more postmodern than modern (to use Martuszevska's explanations), as he "fictionalises" the world he creates with the implementation of parody and excess. Sapkowski's use of mottoes in the Witcher series, as analysed by Roszczyńska (2009), can be recognised as an example of such deliberate fictionalising, and *the piled-up*, as the author has it, *intertextuality* discussed thereof can be another, as the story seems to bite its own tail the Ouroboros-style .

*The Witcher Adventure Game*, the board game that stays at the focus of this text, is one of the many manifestations of the Witcher narrative; neither is it exceptional, nor the first of the non-literary, other-media renditions of the Witcher world – as it is, it follows a well-established tradition of adapting (or appropriating) certain motifs and themes taken from Sapkowski's fiction. It should be also noted, however, that Sapkowski's short stories and novels are not the exclusive or even not the main source of the above mentioned references; it seems to stay in line with the assumption made by Jenkins (2007) about transmedia storytelling projects: "There is no one single source or ur-text where one can turn to gain all of the information" ("Transmedia..."). *The Witcher Adventure Game* can be said to be a part of the network of texts; their individual meaning cannot be considered

out of the context provided by the remaining ones. Whereas Sapkowski's texts seem to remain an important repository of references for the board game in question, other influences – as transferred through the video games – seem to play a crucial part, too. What follows is that all these texts (cultural or literary ones) may, but do not have to, constitute the interpretive baggage of the players who venture to play *The Witcher Adventure Game*.

In the light of the above presented points, it should be observed that *The Witcher Adventure Game* is a cultural text that can be ascribed with an enormous number of intertextual references. On the one hand there is Sapkowski's palimpsestic, postmodern prose, a gateway to the rich corpus of classical as well as modern verbal texts, visual and performative art (an enormous amount of intertextual references are made in the Witcher narrative, from allusions to myths, fairy tales, literary masterpieces, and philosophical treatises, to hints to memorable historic events as well as the half-forgotten fads of the contemporary political scene). The Witcher saga is already palimpsestic. On the other hand, the board game is related to other texts (cultural and literary) that use – and transform – the elements of Sapkowski's world. Under those circumstances, to analyse *The Witcher Adventure Game* various literature-oriented theories of intertextuality (Allen, 2000, et al.) should be taken into consideration along with the transmedia storytelling theory, such as proposed by Jenkins (2006, et al.).

As it was pointed out above, upon its creation thirty years ago the Witcher was not meant to be a transmedia project (there was nothing more to the verbal text than some black and white illustrations). However, the intrinsic features of the Witcher series, postmodern playfulness being decisively one of them, as well as the ongoing cultural changes led to the development of numerous remediated Witcher-related artefacts. As follows, the more general context in which *The Witcher Adventure Game* can be considered is the convergence/participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), while there are also more specific contexts, one of them being the phenomenon of board games revival and the influx of board games based on literary texts on the Polish market, specifically the ones that have been designed as the counterparts to some works of Polish popular literature (five such original games were published from 2010 to 2014, the sixth being currently in the design stage<sup>1</sup>). The games in question may be sub-categorised with respect to some features that may possibly influence upon their reception. One such criterion can be the time span between their release and the publication of the literary text they are based on. For example, *Erynie* had been commissioned to be released as a part of a box set including an unpublished novel by Krajewski, while the other

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<sup>1</sup> *Erynie* based on a noir crime fiction by Marek Krajewski entitled *Erynie; Gamedec* and the science fiction series by Marcin Przybyłek; *Enclave. Zakon Krańca Świata and Zakon Krańca Świata* by Maja Lidia Kossakowska; *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu* and *Pan Lodowego Ogrodu*, a series by Jarosław Grzędowicz; and *The Witcher Adventure Game*; the game in the design stage is one based on *Achaja* series by Andrzej Ziemiański.

board games were designed and published years after the launch of the literary texts. *The Witcher Adventure Game* supplements a wide array of other products, with the notable example of the video games (as its predecessors) and the digital board game (released alongside the non-digital version). As to the author's participation in the design process, in most cases (with the notable exception of *Gamedec*) the writer was not involved; however, Sapkowski's detachment – from both the video games and the board game – is perhaps the most visible. (The legal reasons behind such non-involvement as well as behind some forced differences between the *Witcher* series of short stories and novels and the games would require extensive discussion on their own.)

Given these points *The Witcher Adventure Game* can be analysed as a cultural text situated within a complicated framework of other texts that may influence upon its reading. As Hutcheon (2006) has it

adaptations are obviously "multilaminated"; they are directly and openly connected to recognizable other works, and that connection is part of their formal identity, but also of what we might call their hermeneutic identity. (p. 21)

The theory of the horizon of expectations (Jauss, 1999) seems to be specifically applicable here. Does the fact that a person playing the game has got the previous knowledge of the *Witcher* world change the reception of the game, and if so (which seems highly plausible), then to what degree? Is the knowledge of the *Witcher* world necessary to play *The Witcher Adventure Game* at all? The latter question may be answered in the negative. In line with the strategy adopted by other designers, Ignacy Trzewiczek created a game that can be played without any prior contact with either Sapkowski's fiction or other *Witcher* world artefacts. The first question, however, is open to discussion. "Rules Reference Guide" to the game contains some basic information about "The *Witcher* Lore" and the characters and the political factions featured. In order to play the game, or in other words, to initiate the gameplay, the participants do not have to know the intricacies of the *Witcher* world as created by Sapkowski on the basis of various myths, legends, and literary as well as cultural references. At the same time it would be illogical to neglect the possible influence of such an interpretative baggage on the players. Again, the same questions may be asked when it comes to the "expanded" *Witcher* world depicted in the comics, films, and video games, and with the same result: the board game can be theoretically played in isolation, but taking into account the widespread popularity of the video games (and the advertising strategy of CD Projekt RED) we may assume that it is not, at least when it comes to the video games references. As the American publisher's site boasts:

The *Witcher Adventure Game* takes players on a journey across the world of the critically acclaimed *Witcher* franchise. Based on the best selling novels and award-winning video games, the *Witcher* universe makes its way to your tabletop with *The Witcher Adventure Game*! ("The *Witcher*...")

It would be interesting to find out, however, what exactly the relationships between the board game and the video games are and, again, how they influence the board game reception. And last but not least there is yet another point of reference: namely, the interpretative baggage that relates to boardgaming (player experience) and the knowledge of the industry (for example, the fact that Trzewiczek is the lead designer has raised the expectations of some players decisively high, as it is reflected expressis verbis in the reviews that articulate disappointment with the game mechanics of *The Witcher Adventure Game*, deemed not demanding enough for advanced players).

As it has been pointed out, *The Witcher Adventure Game* can be analysed in terms of literary, cultural, and purely gaming references. Here comes the basic problem generated by all game systems: how they should be discussed – should they be considered as narratives, or as systems that are built upon some constitutive, mathematical rules, set in motion by the players' decisions which generate subsequent short- and long-distance results. In short, the narratology vs. ludology conflict can be reconciled if we build the argument around the theories of the more moderate scholars, such as Henry Jenkins (2003) or Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), but even the more extreme positions in the above mentioned debate are potentially useful, if properly contextualised.

The analysis of the constituents of the game as well as the gameplay can facilitate the analysis of its narrative aspects. Discussing *The Witcher Adventure Game* as first and foremost a board game does not interfere with looking into issues such as, for example, the questions of embedded and emergent narratives, even more so as the game producers themselves enforce the idea that there is some narrative to be sought:

You and up to three friends will take on the roles of beloved characters from the Witcher universe and travel across the dangerous wilds, battling monsters, completing quests, earning gold and victory points, and vying for ultimate triumph. Along the way, you'll craft an unforgettable narrative, unique to each and every game. ("The Witcher...")

As it mentions elements such as "battling monsters" and "earning victory points", this fragment is a perfect illustration of the observation Salen and Zimmerman (2004) make about games and narrative:

Everything we know so far about the experiential components of games – that they are complex sensual and psychological systems, that they create meaning through choice-making and metacommunication, that they sculpt and manipulate desire – are tools for crafting narrative experiences.

These experiences emerge from the design of events, actions, and characters. (p. 381)

The approach taken here is therefore to utilise narratological approach combined with some complementary ludological considerations.

The classification introduced by Andrzej Drózdź (2009) for the analysis of the codex book could be used to describe and analyse a board game, as both phenomena involve the use of verbal

code along with iconic code and are material objects, yet allow for the actualisation of an abstract text, which involves the active use of the receiver (reader). The *three-dimensional outer space* of the board game would consequently consist of all the material elements, that can be described in terms of their size, weight, and texture, such as the box containing the elements: the board, the cards, the tokens, the dice, the rules booklet, the miniatures etc.. The *two-dimensional outer space* of the board game would be the all the illustrations on the board, cards etc. as well as the typography. It could possibly be suggested that the *inner space* of the board game would be the operative, constitutive, and implicit rules (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p. 130-136) and the game space, and finally – the gameplay, set in motion with the help of the player's operations. The board game may be similar to a codex book in many aspects, yet it is also significantly different, the main difference being that the organising principle behind a board game is not semiosis, but ludosis (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 19). It could be observed, however, that board games are hybrid in nature, as a certain amount of semiosis is possible in their case, along with the possible ludosis generated by the gameplay. This seems to pertain specifically to the outer space of the game. Then again, the game elements that can be analysed narratologically rather than ludologically, such as the characters, may be, at least to a degree, analysed from a semiotic point of view.

The preceding considerations evoke the problem of the intersemiotic translation (Hopfinger, 1974): certain levels of the text cannot be translated, as they consist of the building blocks typical of a given medium; however, the meaning of the message as expressed in one semiotic system may be conveyed with the use of different signs (from a different semiotic system) arranged in such a way so as to achieve a similar result (p. 21).

While according to Hutcheon (2006) "the separate units of the story (or the *fabula*) can be transmediated" (p. 11), in a game "the interactive, physical nature of this kind of entertainment entails changes both in the story and even in the importance of the story itself" (p. 13). Utilising Grau's ideas, Hutcheon goes on to explain that

What gets adapted here [in the case of games in general] is a heterocosm, literally an "other world" or cosmos, complete, of course, with the stuff of a story – settings, characters, events, and situations. To be more precise, it is the "*res extensa*" – to use Descartes' terminology – of that world, its material, physical dimension, which is transported and then experienced through multisensorial interactivity. (p. 14)

Although "stories are not empty content that can be ported from one media to another" (Jenkins, 2003, p. 120), there are some intersemiotically translatable elements which "can obviously be transported from one text to another" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 11). Hutcheon (2006) recognises themes, such as "quests, magical tasks, disguise and revelation, and innocence versus evil" or "love, pain, and nature" as one of the elements most easily "adaptable across media and even genres or framing contexts" (p. 10). Other story elements that can be "transported from one text to another"

(Hutcheon, 2006, p. 11) are characters.

When it comes to the visual aspect, the four playable characters of *The Witcher Adventure Game* are nearly exact equivalents of their computer game (*The Witcher*, and *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* by CD Project RED) counterparts. They are "Geralt of Rivia – Monster Hunter", "Dandelion – Roguish Bard", "Yarpen Zigrin – Dwarven Warrior", and "Triss Merigold – Cunning Sorceress", as they are tagged in the "Rules reference Guide", where their three-paragraph descriptions are provided. The descriptions highlight the specific combat skills and point at the potential allies, as both are crucial for the gameplay.

The characterization employed in the board game serves as the example of the hybrid nature of this medium and the interplay of narrative and gameplay aspects. Geralt, Dandelion, Yarpen, and Triss are characterised explicitly on the cards (e.g. Development Cards) that are one of material components of the game; in this case, the verbal code is combined with iconic code (a system of icons that carry specific meaning in the game mechanics supports verbal messages). Even before the game instance (Björk and Holopainen, 2005) the meaning of such descriptions cannot be comprehended without some interpolation of the rules onto the game world. In other words, the characters are characterised by the texts and pictures on the development cards which specifies the weapons they possess, the allies they can collaborate with, the special powers (such as spells) they can use etc.. The information concerning the characters is spread across numerous game components; the ones contained in the box (and the illustrations and the text on the box itself) are supplemented with whatever is published in the epitextual materials, in print or online, such as the interviews with the designers, advertisements, reviews etc.. Taking advantage of the medium they appear in, those materials may offer characterisation closer to what can be found in, for example, narrative prose, yet still alluding to the "playability" of the characters presented. Whereas the characters' description in the "Rules Reference Guide" strive at some literariness despite being strongly focused on the presentation of the playable features, the description from the Fantasy Flight Games site is even more game-oriented:

Triss Merigold offers a play style different from any other hero's. Her skills as a sorceress grant her magical abilities far beyond mortal knowledge, and because of this, Triss is the only hero who draws quest cards from the blue, or magic, quest deck. Triss's skill with magic is also reflected by the fact that she can spend three blue leads to create a blue proof. Although Triss's magical prowess makes her deadly when forced to fight, she prefers to avoid combat as a solution to problems, and she must spend seven red leads to make a single red proof. ("Dwarven warrior...")

Compare this description with the following excerpt from "Rules Reference Guide":

Triss's power comes from knowledge, and whether it entails spying on others through her magical devices or using raw force to extract the information she needs, she always finds a way to get to the heart of the matter.

Most of her spells take time to prepare but, given the proper momentum, she's an unstoppable force that can break through any obstacle in her path. Using her intellect and magical prowess, Triss is able to bend the rules in her and her party's favor, which will frequently come in handy during the numerous adventures to come. (p. 13)

In both cases the descriptions attempt at some level of literariness. At the same time, in both cases to understand what the presentation implies, one has to activate the process of ludosis.

As it has been pointed at, a board game based on palimpsestic postmodern literary fiction and situated in the framework of an emerging transmedia storytelling project is an immensely complicated system to analyse. By no means do the considerations presented above exhaust all the possible topics that can be summoned up here. In conclusion, the research project concerning *The Witcher Adventure Game* should at least take into account the problems that has been tackled in this text, namely:

- when it comes to literary intertextuality, the question whether the original intertextual playfulness represented by Sapkowski's fiction is reflected in the board game, as well as the question of intertextual references possibly present there;
- the relationships between the game and other cultural texts, including games (board, video, and card games), and generally speaking, their influence on the reception of the game;
- when it comes to transmedia storytelling, the questions of the specific contribution of the game to the extended Witcher universe and the specific experience that the game offers, as well as the issues of marketing strategies, coordination, and authorship, as well as fan appropriation (among the others);
- when it comes to the horizon of expectations, the features situating the game in the framework of the already existing genre and the ones that relate it to the "recognizable other works", to recall Hutcheon's phrase quoted above, as well as the congruence or the lack of thereof between the expectations of the players and their experience (as, for example, reflected in reviews);
- when it comes to game design, the constituents of the outer and inner space of the game, game mechanics, and the resulting gameplay, as well as as the resulting game world;
- when it comes to narrative, emergent and embedded narratives, and characterisation.

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