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An Ecology of Care: Training in Dependence and Caretaking in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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with a concentration in Film Studies
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Abstract

This project investigates the popular open-world fantasy RPG, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015) and the ways in which the *Witcher 3* brings questions of care and dependence to a digital medium so often thought of in terms of violence and/or mastery. Much of the previous discourse on video games, particularly role-playing games, has tended to center on violence and what this might mean for players behavior or the potential real world effects of this violence. Departing from a focus on violence I argue that the *Witcher 3*, reveals the potentials of open world RPG video games to show how environments, subjects, and objects are all connected and interdependent. In revealing this interdependence, *The Witcher 3* brings questions of care to the forefront of narrative, gameplay, and player decision making.

Leaning on theories of care and new materialism I investigate three aspects the *Witcher 3*: the game world itself that depicts environments as dynamic spaces, the player's narrative role as supporting character rather than "chosen one", and the game's attention to objects both in maintaining inventory and their role in quests. Each of these aspects of the *Witcher 3* highlights the ways in which they are all dependent upon each other while displacing the player from the center and encouraging interpersonal interactions as a means of societal impact rather than the player's direct control of the world's fate. In fostering a relationship between the player and the game world based in care rather than violence, *The Witcher 3* opens up new ways of relating to environments and creates the possibility of cultivating this relationship outside the game perhaps inspiring care for environment, subjects and objects in our own world.

An Ecology of Care: Training in Dependence and Caretaking in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*

Introduction

“The being known as the Caretaker had been summoned to the von Everec estate from another realm, making ‘demon’ its most accurate designation. The Caretaker had been forced into servitude by magic. Its tasks – to care for the house and protect it from intruders. It performed these pedantically, tending the flowers, repairing the fences, tidying the yard ... and murdering all intruders who set foot on the grounds, then burying their corpses in neat rows on untended land just beyond the manor garden’s bounds.”

- Character Description, “The Caretaker,” *The Witcher 3*

Summoned from beyond the manor garden’s bounds yet limited to them, the “Caretaker” from *The Witcher 3’s* expansion “Hearts of Stone” epitomizes the extent to which the game invokes and represses care, revealing entangled relationships between characters, environments, and objects only to restrict them. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015), players must confront the Caretaker at the von Everec estate during the quest “Scenes from a Marriage.” The quest centers on Olgierd and Iris’s marriage and depicts what happens when one constricts care to the individual and so-called private sphere. Olgierd, obsessed with caring for Iris by himself, initially refuses any outside help, cutting himself and Iris off from the rest of the world. This independence proves unsustainable and eventually Olgierd summons the Caretaker to assist

in caring for and protecting Iris and the estate. This contraction and repression of care manifests in the Caretaker's aesthetic design, which takes the form of a faceless figure robotically attending to immediate tasks and acts of service deemed care by Olgierd. When the player first encounters the Caretaker, it is wearing a long black robe with its hood pulled up hiding its face. The Caretaker soon removes his hood, revealing that it has no face. Instead, it has a flap of skin sewn over where its face should be. The Caretaker once had a face, but it has been covered up, sewn over, rendering him faceless; a visual repression of care.

The Witcher 3 crystalizes neoliberal tendencies to repress care in figures like the Caretaker. The Caretaker's physical appearance embodies care's repression both in this quest and in the non-game world. In contextualizing and tracking this repression of care, my project teases out representations of care throughout *The Witcher 3* across three main areas, avatar, world design, and objects. During the game's quests, players make both trivial and significant choices that implicate them in an ecology of care and the complex relations it entails, while cautioning them against contracting care to immediate contingent relations. In doing so, *The Witcher 3* reveals anxieties concerning dependence and individual choice while highlighting the unavoidable extensions that care compels even amid efforts to contract or repress them.

The Witcher 3 foregrounds this ecology of care through its figuration of the player-avatar relationship. An ecology of care is defined here as an interdependent system of relations that foster collective and individual caretaking at-a-distance. Olgierd fails to see this ecology of care when he attempts to contract care to the individual. He alone can care for Iris, he claims, and the only help he accepts is an extension of himself manifested through his own magic as the Caretaker. In contracting care to the individual, Olgierd pushes care and collective dependence to the background giving rise to the nightmarish Caretaker. In contrast to this quest's portrayal of

the repression of care and its negative effects, *The Witcher 3*'s lack of avatar creation brings interdependence to the forefront. Unlike many recent role-playing games (RPGs), *The Witcher 3*'s players do not create an avatar from scratch, which would give them control over its physical features, gender, class, and background. Instead, players are thrown into the world of the game as Geralt of Rivia. Rather than deciding who they are and making their place in the game, players must function inside their role as a father to Ciri and navigate Geralt's pre-existing personal relationships and what it means in this society to be a witcher. Witchers practice a form of maintenance and caretaking by keeping citizens safe from monsters. In society, witchers' form of caretaking has been repressed and subjugated, resulting in caretaking that is not only treated violently by others but is also violent itself. People view witchers as monsters and treat them cruelly. As mutated monster hunters, witchers are similar to the Caretaker, pressed to the background, continuously performing twisted forms of violent caretaking. In *The Witcher 3*, players cannot decide who they are in the game world and instead must role-play as a thrown subject, highlighting interdependence rather than individual control. Therefore, I argue, *The Witcher 3* refuses players a relationship to the avatar, and as such the game world, forged in mastery and control in favor of one fostered in care and dependence.

As such, *The Witcher 3* subverts both RPG and fantasy genre tropes to highlight care in its narrative and gameplay. The fantasy genre is well known for its "chosen one" trope. Within this trope, a single person is the prophesied "chosen one," the only one who can save the world. Many video games follow this mold, featuring players as protagonists whose character arcs tend to revolve around rising to become the best from nothing. In these games, players start with vague backstories, or no backstory at all, with the goal of becoming heroes. In contrast, *The Witcher 3* displaces the player from the center of the narrative. The game's story is not Geralt

saving the world or training to become a hero. Instead, the player is thrown into a very different position as a supporting character, as a father to the “chosen one,” in the game’s larger narrative. This, in effect, pulls care to the forefront of the story all the while training players through gameplay to become aware of the interdependence of environments both in and outside the game world.

To further highlight this ecology, *The Witcher 3* foregrounds interdependence in its overall world design and attention to objects. *The Witcher 3*’s open-world design connects spaces contiguously as well as showing them to be interrelational. Nonplayable characters (NPCs) in different environments know of and talk about other places in *The Witcher* world and how other kingdoms or places affect them and their home city or village. Players can move between these different environments seamlessly, showing these places as interconnected spatially as well as through the ways they rely on one another. *The Witcher 3* also displays environments as dynamic processes rather than static representations. Environments have weather patterns and portray the passing of time from day to night. The world is more than mere backdrop scenery in which the game takes place; it directly affects the player’s gameplay. Areas of the map have varying climates and, therefore, different monsters and environmental perils. There are cliffs in places like Skellige, where you can fall off cliffs, and poisonous gas in the swamp of Velen, which the player must avoid to minimize health damage. The player’s progress in the game depends on them having an understanding of how these environments are interrelated. In its portrayal of environments as dynamically interconnected and interrelational, *The Witcher 3* avails players to the interconnected and interdependent nature of environments as such, not only within the ecologies of each environment but in a broader ecology of care. In doing so, it allows for the player to explore, experience, and forge new relationships to complex environments that act

upon the player just as much as they act upon it, allowing the player to see human and nonhuman worlds as connected and interdependent, as ecologies of care, both in and outside the game.

When it comes to inventory maintenance and quests, *The Witcher 3*'s attention to objects goes beyond simply gathering or using objects to progress in the game; they reveal how character, objects, and world are knotted together in a heterogeneous web. Objects such as weapons and armor are dependent on the player to keep them in good shape through repair kits, while the player is dependent on these objects to continue in the game. Objects also act as mediators within *The Witcher 3*, facilitating reversals between subject / object, self / other, and living / nonliving and revealing to players the way subjects and objects are entangled through this reversibility. With this realization that subjects and objects are entangled, players are trained to appreciate and care for things external to themselves. Objects also play a central role in quests and act as mediators of connectivity, revealing connections both near and far across time and space, unveiling an ecology of care that extends both in and outside the game world.

At the same time the game takes steps toward revealing an ecology of care, it also calls into question a broader impulse to contract care in our neoliberal present. *The Witcher 3* expresses anxieties about dependence and individual choice while offering alternative modes of being in the world. In doing so, *The Witcher 3* displays a desire for care that has largely been repressed in our current moment. Neoliberal values, such as freedom, autonomy, and individualism are often built into the very framework of conventional gameplay. Within most contemporary RPGs, players are given an abundance of choices that give them greater control over how they interact with and affect the game world and its inhabitants. Most games champion these values through avatar customization, "chosen one" narratives, and mastery over environments and objects. *The Witcher 3*, meanwhile, leans into neoliberal desires for freedom

and mastery to reveal alternative ways of being in the game world. This works like a salve for the player, easing them into new ways of relating and viewing environments despite their preconceived neoliberal notions. In doing this, *The Witcher 3* reveals the potentials of open-world RPG video games to show how subjects, environments, and objects are connected and interdependent. In revealing this interdependence, *The Witcher 3* brings care to the forefront of narrative, gameplay, and player decision-making, revealing a repressed ecology of care. To tease this out, I now turn to three aspects of *The Witcher 3*: player's role as a supporting character rather than the "chosen one," the game world's depiction of environments as dynamic spaces, and its attentiveness to objects as mediators of connectivity and sites of reversibility. Each of these aspects reveals different alternative relationships within the overarching ecology of care that depict first humans interdependent, then nonhumans as entangled, and finally how this extends to the whole environment.

Neoliberal Gaming in Fantasy Role-Playing Video Games

The Witcher 3 reveals how open-world RPG video games can show subjects, environments, and objects as connected and interdependent. In revealing this interdependence, *The Witcher 3* trains players in an ecology of care that stretches across the game world and into everyday life. Yet, despite the potential for training in interdependence that *The Witcher 3* affords, many video games fall into common narrative and gameplay tropes that express neoliberal values. Since their beginning in the early 1970s, video games have expressed interest in terms like freedom, choice, and individualism, all ideas that are closely associated with neoliberal values. Open-world RPGs, in particular, strive to give the player as much freedom and as many choices as they can manage, all the while placing the player at the center of

gameplay and narrative. In doing so, these games enshrine freedom as individual choice, which represses or negatively transvalues care's status as collective dependence and forges a relationship between player and environment based in mastery and control rather than care and dependence. In order to ease the player into this ecology of care, *The Witcher 3* uses these tropes as a salve, settling players into familiar gameplay mechanics and narrative structures only to subvert these tropes and train players in new ways of relating to and viewing environments. The bulk of this thesis endeavors to identify this training. For the moment, however, I am going to put the ecology of care that *The Witcher 3* affords on hold to trace care's repression and flesh out neoliberal gaming. To do so, I employ *Dragon Age Inquisition* (BioWare, 2013), an open-world fantasy RPG released two years prior to *The Witcher 3* and often compared to and contrasted with it.

From arcade games to Massively Multiplayer Online Games to single-player, open-world RPGs, nearly all video games, past and present, feature neoliberal values. Video games emerged in the early 1970s, around the same time as the rise of neoliberalism as the dominant cultural ideology. Since this beginning, games have linked the player's progress to leveling up and bettering their avatar, thereby incorporating neoliberal values of self-sufficiency and individualism into the very foundation of gameplay. RPGs exhibit three common gameplay and narrative features that offer players numerous choices: character creation / avatar customization; avatar betterment and leveling up; and inventory management and gathering of objects. Through these features, video games encourage players to create and develop the most effective and self-sufficient avatar possible or, put otherwise, the ideal neoliberal subject. This ideal subject is someone who is not dependent on the state or other citizens; it is a free and autonomous self (Burchell 29). Neoliberalism is, moreover, a theory of political and economic practice

characterized by the belief that the best way to advance human wellbeing is by “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework” (Harvey 2, 3).

Neoliberalism arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s, following the American New Deal and European post-war reconstruction and is marked by privatization, deregulation, and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision. It values freedom, choice, and individualism and asserts that people can make it on their own if they simply try hard enough; our successes and failures are our own to bear.

RPGs perpetuate freedom, choice, and individualism in their game mechanics and narrative arcs, ensuring freedom through individual choice instead of mutual care. In “Neoliberal Rationality and the Computer RPG,” Andrew Baerg explores how neoliberal rationalities are expressed in RPGs. He argues this genre of gaming has become popular due to its contemporary context within neoliberalism as the dominant political ideology. Throughout these games, players are constantly bettering their avatar through various means, working towards what Baerg terms the “optimal build” or the most efficient avatar possible within the game (63). Game mechanics involving avatar creation and inventory management foster an “entrepreneurial approach to gameplay” that takes “cost-benefit analysis to the extreme in embodying the neoliberal entrepreneurial self” (163). These game mechanics not only perpetuate neoliberal ideals of self-improvement and autonomy, but also allow players a large amount of control over their gaming experience. In doing so, they forge a relationship between player and environment grounded in individual control rather than collective dependence. Other scholars, such as Matt Barton and Daniel Mackay, have argued similarly, though neither incorporate game mechanics into their arguments, focusing instead on economic context and moral clarity. Merce Oliva, Oliver Latorre, and Reinald Besalu analyze video game covers and assert that these games

express values associated with neoliberalism, namely freedom and individual choice (612).

These games advertise interactive worlds that players can freely explore with a wide variety of choices so they can play their way. Within this genre of gaming, players have the freedom to explore the map however and whenever they choose. In many open-world RPGs, players can even choose what quests they wish to complete and in what order.

Many games also feature narratives with character arcs that align with the aforementioned values and place the player at the center of narrative and gameplay. Within these games, players determine what kind of person their avatar becomes and how they interact with the game world, other players, or NPCs. Oliva, Latorre, and Besalu argue that the ability of players to choose and customize their avatars ties in with the “neoliberal imperative of self-improvement” (613). Players often begin as a character who starts from nothing or just an average citizen before rising to become a hero or the ultimate version of themselves.

Customization of player avatars has been around in some form or another since video games’ early years. Much of this early customization of avatars had little to no effect on gameplay and only served the purpose of giving players more aesthetic choices for their avatars. In the mid- and late 2010s, however, avatar customization exploded. Players can now customize various aspects of their avatar’s gender, race, species, tattoos, scars, etc. *Dragon Age Inquisition* is one of these games.

The *Dragon Age* series has been championing individual choice since its beginnings in 2009 with *Dragon Age Origins*. The first installment of the series featured a striking amount of avatar customization for its time, allowing the player to choose from a multitude of physical attributes, including gender, eye color, and species. In making these choices, players take control of their backstories and how their avatars are perceived in the game world. This affords players a

tremendous authority in how they interact with the game world and its inhabitants. The player's choice of gender and species affected narrative possibilities for their avatar from enhancing their ability to romance a specific character to improve their chances of becoming ruler of Ferelden. By the time Bioware released *Dragon Age Inquisition* in 2013, graphics and game mechanics had improved enough to allow developers to design an extremely detailed character creator that expanded the freedom and choice granted to players in *Origins*. In this version, the player is in charge of every detail of their avatar's appearance, including being able to change specific aspects of their face and body structure to minute details like scars and tattoos. The avatar has no name or identity outside what the player gives it. Right from the start, *Inquisition* places the player at the center of the game, freely choosing who they are and how they engage with the game world.

Not only are players at the center of gameplay and able to choose their identity in *Inquisition*, but they are also the game's "chosen one" and are, therefore, the main focus of the game's narrative. In making players the protagonist of gameplay and narrative, *Inquisition* gives them immense control over the fate of game world and its inhabitants, forging a relationship between player and environment founded in mastery. Players are always the Inquisitor, the only one able to close the rifts that threaten the stability of the metaphysical barrier between the physical world of Thedas and the Fade. As the chosen one, players must not only seal all rifts, but also lead the Inquisition and unite the lands to stop Corypheus, the game's villain, from taking over the world. Beyond saving the world, players are able to affect other characters in the game, particularly those in their party. *Inquisition* features eight available party members from which players choose. At first, having a party would seem to support collective dependence rather than neoliberal self-sufficiency, but the party "remains under the control of a single

player” (Baerg 169), and, therefore, the party is an extension of the individual player. As proof, the player has control over each of the party members in combat and must develop each of their skills. Players must keep to neoliberalism’s management of the self and ensure the “collective nature of quest completion is subsumed under the banner of individualism” (Baerg, 169).

Though Baerg uses language like “collective” that would suggest dependence, it should be noted that he does not directly engage with the topic of interdependence as opposed to individualism as I do in this thesis. Leaning on Baerg’s assertion, I claim that the individual’s control over the party is a portrayal of freedom as individual control that transvalues care’s collective dependence to that of the individual.

Something similar occurs at the level of world design, as many open-world RPGs create environments that exist solely for the player’s use, allowing them to interact and explore the world to mine resources, gain experience points, and continue to better their avatars and progress in the game. This type of gameplay encourages the player to use the environment and its resources to attain neoliberal ideals of self-improvement, while also striving to gain control over environments in order to achieve freedom. *Inquisition* closes off and portrays spaces as nested boxes rather than connected and interdependent. In its world, Thedas, for instance, one finds a series of independent areas with stagnant climates full of resources that only exist to serve the player’s quest. In this, *Inquisition* cleaves the player from environment, encouraging mastery over these environments rather than dependence and care. In Alenda Chang’s article “Games as Environmental Texts,” she notes that game environments have a tendency to “lean heavily on cliched landscapes” with environments that are little more than “background scenery” (58). She asserts that these types of environments, coupled with video games’ common emphasis on players mining of these environments to build skills, all too often equate to “mastery of the

external environment” (60). None of *Inquisition*’s areas affect the player in any way nor do they depict the player’s effect on environment, instead portraying these areas as untamed places for the Inquisitor to explore with the purpose of gaining influence or mastering these regions. The environment has no effect on the enemies the player encounters, and changes in the environment do not aid or hinder the player. As a result, *Inquisition* fails to show player and environment as dependent upon each other. Each of the places the Inquisitor / player visits has its own separate stagnant climate. The Hinterlands are rolling fields with a few mountains lining the edges. It is always daytime and sunny. By contrast, Stormcoast is all rocky cliffs along the ocean with rain steadily falling in an endless drizzle. Occasionally, the sky lights up in a flash of lightning, but apart from this, the environment does not change; it functions as background scenery, largely separate from the gameplay. In failing to show these spaces as connected or interdependent, *Inquisition* can only conceive of the player’s relationship to environment as one of mastery and control.

This mastery of environments becomes more prevalent in the very nature of *Inquisition*’s gameplay. The main motivation for exploring the game’s world is to gain influence points by planting the Inquisition’s flag and building camps throughout the map. In turn, much of the player’s experience of their influence over Thedas is from afar and through one of mastery as they delegate their troops and other *Inquisition* members from the war table. This game mechanic does not forge a relationship of interdependence between players and environments across distances. Instead, players make decisions regarding the world of Thedas and send other out to do their bidding. They are not confronted with the consequences up close but rather receive messages through letters or one of their advisors. This is not a relationship of distance that shows dependence across regions but instead imagines dependence or interconnection

through an individual, in this case, the Inquisitor. This further severs player and environment while placing the player at the center of the game, forging a relationship between player and environment steeped in mastery rather than dependence.

The game's loading screens further iterate this relationship, offering bright and colorful depictions of either the various areas to which the player can travel or the player's home castle of Skyhold. These images rarely feature both human structures and natural environments together, and if they do, the manmade structures are usually smaller or in the distance. Instead of reminding the player of humanity's effect on the environment, these images separate humans from world. The frequent images of Skyhold as the player travels between areas seem to suggest that their structure is the glue. As with the war table mechanic, the Inquisition and, therefore, the player as the leader are depicted as what connect the regions of Thedas. Again, *Inquisition* envisions interdependence of environments through individualism. Instead of showing the world and its organic and inorganic inhabitants as already and always entangled, *Inquisition* suggests that these places are only connected through and dependent on the *Inquisition*. Therefore, *Inquisition* fails to show how people and environments are interconnected; instead, keeping them separate and stagnant.

Inquisition further expresses connection by way of individualism through objects and encourages optimization of the avatar through the optimization of objects and inventory management. In *Inquisition*, objects mainly aid the player in completing the game; they serve little to no narrative purpose. Similar to other games of its kind, *Inquisition*'s players acquire objects through exploration, as rewards for completing quests, or by crafting them from resources found in the environment. Most open-world RPGs feature an inventory that stores the items players acquire throughout the game. Typically, players gear their management of

inventory toward overall game progress. Players must select which objects are worth keeping to level up and build skills. Much like avatar creator, crafting in *Inquisition* grants players control over objects and, in turn, influence over gameplay. It allows them to customize and create their weapons and armor from scratch. To craft items, players bring their items to a crafting station, where they can choose from an abundance of options to combine different resources to create various types of weapons and armor. Different material combinations determine a weapon's or armor's specific attributes and / or magical abilities. Each weapon has five possible crafting slots: primary, utility, offense, defense, and masterwork. Different materials do different things, moreover, when placed in different slots. For example, leather, when placed in the utility slot, enhances cunning and dexterity, but when placed in the offense slot, gives weapons the ability to "sunder on hit" or exploit "critical chance," "critical damage," or "flanking damage." In this detailed abundance of choices, the player has, once again, a large amount of control over what kinds of weapons they wish to make. These choices give players further control over which abilities they heighten in combat. They highlight the neoliberal notion that one can construct the best version of themselves through mastering the optimal object. Once made, these weapons never break or show wear and tear. They require no maintenance or care from the player to remain in good shape, once again pushing care to the background. *Inquisition* continues to depict the player as the central connecting force in failing to recognize objects as a site where players and environment are knotted together. This again focuses the narrative and gameplay on the player, these objects, and the resources that constitute them are only present in the game to contribute to the player's progress. They do not reveal interdependence between humans and nonhumans.

Overall, *Inquisition*, just as many open-world RPGs, perpetuates neoliberal values in its gameplay and narrative through its focus on freedom as individual choice through the player's avatar, the overall world design, and objects. From the beginning, *Inquisition* places players at the center of narrative and gameplay. Players have control over who they are in the game world through extensive character creators. Beyond aesthetic choices, players can choose what gender, class, and species they are, giving them control over how they are perceived by and interact with the game world. These games separate players and environment in their stagnant and fragmented regions, further repressing interdependence and depicting players as a unifying force through control thinly disguised as "influence." All the while, players engage with objects as mere everlasting resources, creating them from scratch to suit strengthening their avatar and progressing through the game. *The Witcher 3*, however, displays hints of interdependence amidst its neoliberal gameplay, that unveil a repressed ecology of care that spans spatial and temporal distances.

The "Burden" of Caretaking: Repressed Care and Interdependence in The Witcher 3

The Witcher 3 retains some of the contemporary video game's symptomatic tropes. Yet, in embracing only to subvert these tropes, I argue *The Witcher 3* reveals a desire for care that has largely been repressed in our present moment. As I have suggested, contemporary open-world RPGs strive to give the player as many choices as possible, resulting in a relationship between players and environments based in mastery. Players make decisions that change the course of the narrative, affecting their own fates and the fate of others. Through extensive character creators and weapon and crafting mechanics, players have control over who they are and how they interact with a fragmented game world where players use objects to help them strengthen their

avatar and progress in the game. *The Witcher 3*, however, exhibits traces of interdependence among these neoliberal gaming tropes that resituate freedom within a collective world that players must mutually maintain. First, the game shows anxiety about dependence through conventional gameplay mechanics and a narrative that represses care and dependence in favor of violence and control. Yet, at each turn, the game internally contradicts itself, revealing a desire for the very care it represses. Throughout this section, I aim to uncover these traces through avatars, environments, and objects to suggest that *The Witcher 3* overtly engages players through a familiar, neoliberal logic only to covertly “train” them in a repressed and unfamiliar ecology of care.

Within our contemporary moment, care and dependence have largely been repressed. In Scott Ferguson’s book *Declarations of Dependence*, he explains how, in premodern thought, care was “understood to be an inescapable burden and the locus of cultivation and spiritual uplift” (68). With the rise of modern political theory, however, power was placed at the center while matters of caretaking were deemed impractical, unsophisticated, or naïve (68). Contemporary RPGs exhibit this move from care to power in their emphasis on freedom through control by way of individual choice. In perpetuating neoliberal values of freedom and self-sufficiency, they repress care and dependence under a mound of choices portrayed as freedom. Rather than the overt control and steady forward progress of most contemporary narratives and gameplay, the goal of *The Witcher 3* is to find Geralt’s adopted daughter, not to overcome Geralt’s role as a witcher. Instead, players must function inside this disparaged societal role, securing the safety of others as a subjugated maintenance worker. Nonetheless, it is through *The Witcher 3*’s avatar, as well as its dynamic world design and reversible subjects and objects that, I

argue, the game at once expresses neoliberal faith in control and reveals an alternative ecology of care.

The Witcher 3 embraces neoliberal desires in its promises of freedom and autonomy, yet it does so only to restrict players from the start in not allowing them to choose or change who they are in the game world. *The Witcher 3* at once represses care through the violent nature of Geralt's occupation as a monster hunter and the violent treatment he endures under the shameful "burden" of his position as caretaker only to then never allow players to escape from it, showing a desire for this repressed care and dependence. As mentioned in the previous section, role-playing a predetermined character is unusual for RPGs. Players either create an avatar from scratch, or if they must play as a premade character, then they often have no ties to the world. Instead, these characters have few to no prior interpersonal relationships, which allows the player to decide the identity they wish to roleplay without consideration. In *The Witcher 3*, however, players are Geralt, a character with an already established professional and personal life within which players must role-play. The opening sequence of *The Witcher 3* explains what witchers are, how they came to be, and what others think of them in the Witcher world. Throughout this scene, *The Witcher 3* engages players in the familiar neoliberal conception of care and maintenance as burden. The voiceover of this scene first explains how magic and monsters came to be in this world. He asks, "Did we raise our swords against them or have we laid this burden on others?" The man then explains that witchers are "stray children, ... their bodies mutated through blasphemous ritual." He describes them as inhuman, "sent to kill monsters, though they could not distinguish good from evil. The flicker of humanity long extinguished within them." Witchers are perceived as no better than the monsters they hunt, and care is thought of merely as a "burden" that has been placed upon witchers. Players are told that these witchers have no

humanity and they “shame us with their very existence.” This suggests that care and maintenance work are conceived as burdens and are in themselves shameful. Therefore, those who take on those jobs are shames to society. The camera fades to black and begins the next cutscene. The player is now Geralt, the very shame, the very inhuman thing, they were just told to despise. The player has seen how this world views witchers and now they are thrown into this world as one. The game immediately flips the player into the life of a monstrous maintenance worker thereby drawing degradation of maintenance work and workers to the forefront.

This opening sequence also depicts how *The Witcher 3* brings care and dependence to the forefront in ways that mirror Martin Heidegger’s notion of “18hrownness.” By “18hrownness,” Heidegger means we are always thrust into a world that we did not choose and dependent upon this world within which we must function. With 18hrownness, our subjectivity in the world, “being-there,” is one in which we are presented with a series of finitudes. These finitudes give us only a partial glimpse of the whole. This glimpse shows us the relations of the world within which we must act, in effect revealing the interdependence of these relations and therefore the whole. *The Witcher 3* ultimately subjects players to the experience of Heidegger’s conception of “being in the world” through “throwness,” revealing Geralt’s and the player’s dependence on each other, the world, and other people and things. In unveiling this dependence, *The Witcher 3* shows an unconscious desire to bring care forth from its repression. As a witcher, the player is subjected to the verbal and sometimes physical abuse of NPCs throughout the game. From being attacked and told to leave establishments to simple name-calling, *The Witcher 3* rarely lets the player forget what it means to be a witcher. In forcing players to roleplay as a monstrous maintenance worker, *The Witcher 3* builds the act of maintenance and the effects of its repression into the very fabric of gameplay.

Though *The Witcher 3*'s opening shows a society that conceives of maintenance as a shameful burden, the game presents an alternative relationship by never promising the player an escape from it. The goal of *The Witcher 3* is not to change Geralt's place as a witcher nor is this something to overcome. There is no chance to become something other than a witcher. Even after the game is over, and players have found Ciri and defeated the game's main enemy, Geralt does not become a legend or even a hero. Instead, if Geralt survives, the epilogue suggests he either continues his work or retires. In throwing players into the life of Geralt, the game obliges them to roleplay as a monstrous maintenance worker with no promise of typical RPGs' reward of becoming a hero. The game never seeks to escape the "burden" placed on witchers; players are subject to Geralt's existence rather than in control of their own destinies. *The Witcher 3* at first presents care as a shameful burden placed upon witchers only to then contradict this notion by having players act out this position of inescapable maintenance as Geralt. In the game players are also subjected to the abuse witchers often endure from others, in effect subjecting players to the destructive symptoms of repressed care. Thus initial conceptions of care and maintenance are drawn into question through the player's experience of the game world as a premade avatar, namely a witcher. In playing through these contradictions, *The Witcher 3* engages and trains players in an alternative relationship with the game world based in care rather than control.

The Witcher 3 also displaces players from the center of narrative and gameplay, placing them in a supporting position as father to the chosen one rather than one of control as the chosen one themselves. From this position, players interact with the game world and are covertly trained in an ecology of care. Unlike many other RPGs in which players are the chosen one and make decisions that directly determine the fate of the world, players in *The Witcher 3* indirectly affect the world. As Geralt, players determine much of the ending of the game through their

interactions with and support of Ciri. In her article “Live in Your World, Play in Ours: The Spaces of Video Game Identity,” Sheila Murphy asserts that gamer identification “fuses the gamer to the game” and forges a relationship that is fundamentally different from other media due to interactivity (13). Therefore, interacting with the game world as Geralt, rather than as a character of their own creation, fundamentally changes the players’ relationship to the game world. In interacting with the world as Geralt, players are encouraged to play out a supporting role in the narrative. Attempting to step outside Geralt’s role often proves to be the wrong choice, resulting in a gentle chastising from other characters or far worse consequences like death or injury of others, or even Geralt himself. At the end of the game, players are reminded of their role one last time just before Ciri enters the tower to fulfill her destiny as the chosen one. No matter what dialogue option players choose, Ciri says, “What do you know about saving the world, silly. You’re but a witcher. This is my story, not yours. You must let me finish telling it.” Players are not the chosen one; players are their support and attempting to tell Ciri’s story for her or to control her, results in her inability to defeat the White Frost and save this world and others. This serves to remind the player that their relationship to this game is not one of mastery but instead of care. The placement of this line of dialogue at such a critical moment, right before the endings diverge, stresses the game’s desire for this alternative relationship of support and care. It points to the type of interactions players need to have had throughout the game in order to succeed in defeating The White Frost with Ciri and Geralt both still alive. In interacting with the world as Geralt, a father and maintenance worker, players are displaced from the center of narrative and gameplay as the “chosen one” and are never promised a chance to become a hero. In moving players away from these typical fantasy and RPG tropes, *The Witcher 3* subverts

neoliberal values of self-improvement and individual freedom that creates a space where players are trained in an alternative relationship to environments based in care and dependence.

The Witcher 3's open-world design also perpetuates neoliberal ideals of freedom and individualism though through its promise that players can explore however they want. Yet, at the same time, the game portrays this world as connected and interdependent, while confronting players with the effects of progress narratives such as war. The game developer, CD Projekt RED, expresses the aforementioned neoliberal ideals in the advertisements for the game, which describe how “in the open-world of Wild Hunt, you chart your own path to adventure.” Players have access from the start of the game to any of *The Witcher 3's* regions. They can explore any and all corners of the map whenever they choose and pick which quests they wish to complete and when. Like most RPGs, *The Witcher 3* features neoliberal gameplay mechanics in its treatment of the environment and its resources. Players gather these everlasting resources as crafting components to further their own progress in the game. In doing so, the game fails, like most games, to show players and environments as connected and interdependent, therefore repressing care and dependence.

However, amidst these neoliberal game mechanics, *The Witcher 3* also shows a desire for this repressed care in its overall world design. At first, the game's attention to freedom and individualism seems to only further cultivate neoliberal ideals, yet, I argue, in allowing players access to all the game's regions from the start, *The Witcher 3* depicts its world as existing in its own right rather than directly tied to the player's individual progress and self-improvement. This preexisting world is represented in *The Witcher 3's* world map. The map in *The Witcher 3* functions differently than maps in other open-world RPGs. Many other open-world games start the player with a map that is largely blackened out. The map becomes visible as the player

explores, as though the map is being formed through the player's actions. It is as though players are creating the world as they progress in the game. *The Witcher 3*'s map is entirely visible from the start, however, thereby portraying the world as already existing rather than tied to individual agency or progress. In doing so, *The Witcher 3* presents an alternative relationship to environments as more than just regions that exist for players to mine resources from for their own gain.

The Witcher 3's open-world shows these places as interconnected spatially as well as interdependent rather than fragmented, self-contained areas. Players can move between environments seamlessly and NPCs from different areas know of and talk about other places and how they affect each other. As players explore, they can simply run or ride their horse from one region to the next instead of previous games' areas separated by loading screens. This shows these areas as interconnected and gives a greater sense of how these places are all part of a larger whole. NPCs' frequent references to other regions further depict this interconnection. As players traverse the game world, completing quests and chatting with NPCs, they become aware of the ways in which these places are affected by one another. Outside the game, players live in a world where their everyday lives are precarious. They live with the uncertainty of economic and environmental questions about the future. *The Witcher 3* expresses this economic and environmental uncertainty in depicting widespread poverty and devastated barren landscapes. Beyond simply depicting this economic and environmental ruin, the game nudges players to see what survives in its midst. In her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing argues that appreciating precarity as an earth-wide condition allows us to recognize it as the situation of our world. She advocates for what she calls "contamination as collaboration" as a potential answer to surviving among the uncertainty of our present moment. Tsing urges us to

work in and through the contamination of capitalism, which despite itself gives rise to interdependence. We are contaminated by everyday encounters with humans and nonhumans, that shape and make up who we are and make way for new directions and possibilities; “purity is not an option” (Tsing 31). I claim that *The Witcher 3*, however unconsciously, urges players to notice interdependent ecologies entangled within and among the ruins of neoliberalism, while also showing the ways these regions contaminate one another, disavowing purity and self-containment.

Within in *The Witcher 3*, players travel the game world and are confronted with the ruins of humans’ progress, particularly war, which draws attention to ecological relations across regions. In doing so, *The Witcher 3* covertly trains players to be aware of the interdependence of these areas and notice what lives amidst the devastation of human progress. The game’s first monster contract is an excellent example of this training in these ecological relations. Within the first hour of gameplay, during their search for Yennefer, the player / Geralt visits the Nilfgaardian captain stationed in White Orchard. While there, the captain asks Geralt if he will get rid of a griffin that has killed several soldiers and has been terrorizing the area. Later in this quest, the player discovers the body of another dead griffin. Through examining the body and surrounding area, they determine that the griffin was killed by Nilfgaardian soldiers while she slept. Therefore, as Geralt concludes, the reason the other griffin has abandoned its lair and has been behaving so aggressively is that the Nilfgaardians killed his mate. The reason the player / Geralt has to hunt down this griffin is because of violent human action in the name of progress through war. As the players’ first monster-hunting contract, future contracts are colored in this light, encouraging players to question why these “monsters” are a problem in the first place. As I have suggested previously, these monster-hunting contracts are about violence as care and vice

versa. Players are tasked with hunting monsters to care for and maintain the safety of areas and the people who inhabit them throughout the Witcher world. Yet, *The Witcher 3* reverses this seemingly anthropocentric care by depicting “monsters” as creatures whose habitats are impacted by human progress, leading to their change in behavior that results in the death of others and eventually the creature itself. In this way, *The Witcher 3* shows human progress, specifically war, as affecting both humans and nonhumans, further knotting them together in a heterogeneous web of interdependence across regions. All the while, through the aforementioned contradictory gameplay mechanics, the game, implicitly trains players to notice an interdependent ecology of care entangled among the ruins of neoliberalism rather than attempting to be outside of it.

The Witcher 3 at first represses care and dependence in its portrayal of objects as mere resources that shape the players’ avatar and gameplay, only to then force players to maintain and care for each of these items, offering an alternative relationship to them based in mutual dependence. In *The Witcher 3*, players have the freedom to explore the Witcher world however they please. Within this freedom of exploration players continuously gather objects and mine resources from the environment to better their avatar and progress in the game. A progress-oriented relationship to objects is common in RPG gameplay and perpetuates neoliberal ideals of self-improvement and progress. Players are free to gather whichever and however many objects they wish, choosing which objects will serve them best throughout the game. In doing so, players have control over which character abilities they wish to heighten, in short shaping combat gameplay to their liking. Players are also able to craft items or have items crafted by armorers or weaponsmiths. Upon finding or purchasing a schematic for armor or weapons, players can decide if they want to spend the time gathering the resources to craft the item. This freedom to

choose what objects players create or keep, or even if they wish to spend time gathering items, gives players control over how the gameplay takes shape in their playthrough. Therefore, *The Witcher 3* at first portrays objects as mere resources for the player, in effect conceiving of freedom as individual control.

However, I argue, that while *The Witcher 3* presents typical neoliberal gameplay when it comes to objects it also offers an alternative interdependent relationship by incorporating the continuous maintenance of these objects into gameplay. In order to be successful in *The Witcher 3*, players must pay close attention to their inventory. Unlike many other RPGs where objects cannot be damaged, weapons and armor in *The Witcher 3* show wear and tear as they are used. They must keep their weapons and armor in the best shape possible in order for them to function at their best in combat. *The Witcher 3* rewards players for taking extra time to make sure all their weapons and armor are properly cared for. Therefore, just as with Geralt's occupation as a witcher, *The Witcher 3*, makes maintenance a key component of gameplay, thereby drawing care and dependence forth from their repression.

Furthermore, objects in *The Witcher 3* are often instrumental in the narrative and act as mediators, facilitating reversals between not only subjects and objects but also living and nonliving and self and other, revealing interdependence between humans and nonhumans. In doing so, *The Witcher 3* reveals anxieties concerning the reversibility between subjects and objects, exemplifying fears that all humans and nonhumans could be treated as mere resources. Through three encounters in the "Mask of Uroboros" quest, *The Witcher 3* establishes two forms of relationality between subjects and objects. The first part of this quest points to the aforementioned anxieties about subject-object interrelationships and then reacts violently to them, while the second half trains players in an alternative relationality. In the quest "Mask of

Uroboros,” Geralt and Yen search for the Mask of Uroboros, a magical object that gives the wearer the power to see the past. In their search, the player / Geralt and Yen find themselves in a room filled with taxidermy animals. When players attempt to open a locked door, Geralt’s finger is pricked. Suddenly, all the stuffed animals in the room come to life and attack. At this moment, objects are suddenly and violently raised to near subjecthood, creating anxiety about where that leaves subjects. Therefore, this violent assault threatens not only Geralt’s life but also his place in the world as subject. Geralt shows his anxiety through a rather paranoid statement, “Monsters, can feel them coming closer; they’re everywhere.” The paranoia in the statement, with words like “monsters” and “they’re everywhere,” seems to stem from anxieties concerning dependence, that the other objects that fill this room may suddenly become monstrous subjects showing Geralt’s own subjective lived body, and through him, the players’ subjective selves, as hopelessly intertwined with the objective world.

The reversals in *The Witcher 3* function similarly to Vivian Sobchack’s subject/object reversals in “The Passion of the Material: Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity.” She focuses on reversals between subjects and objects in what she calls “interobjectivity.” For Sobchack, experiencing the reversibility between subjects and objects and knowing what it is to be an “objective subject” and a “subjective object” can inspire care for things external to ourselves (288). An objective subject is “open to being externally acted upon regardless of one’s volition” (288), or a subject that is open to being acted upon by external stimuli outside of their control. While a subjective object is a “material being that is nonetheless capable of feeling what it is to be treated only as an object” (288). It is this reversibility between subjects and objects that affords one the possibility of “recognizing and caring for things external to ourselves” (288). She further asserts that the “subjective lived body and the objective world do not oppose each other

but on the contrary are passionately intertwined” (287), portraying subjects and objects as entangled. *The Witcher 3* at first points to anxieties concerning these reversals, as they threaten Geralt/ the player’s subjecthood by blurring the lines between subjects and objects. With this line blurred, players are confronted with potentially being treated as a mere resource, as objects often are. Yet the game then shows a desire for a different relationship to objects by encouraging players to experience the game world, and perhaps the real world, as an objective subject and subjective object.

The second half of this quest fosters a more pleasurable relationality that focuses on connections between subjects and objects and draws subjects to subjects, both past, and present, together via objects. After stealing the mask, Geralt meets up with Yen out on the Cliffside, where they wish to use the mask. Yen passes the mask to the player / Geralt and tells them that she will cast a spell that allows her to see through their eyes, so they can all see through the mask together. Players have the option to assert their anxieties about this action, though, as with so much in *The Witcher 3*, it cannot be stopped. Players may have Geralt say begrudgingly, “Gonna read my mind again?” to which Yen responds, “You object?” She is now annoyed and questions the player’s own wariness at experiencing the world as a subjective object. Again, the player can choose to agree or push the issue by responding “yes” or “nope.” If the player clicks “yes,” then Geralt says, “You know I don’t like it,” essentially whining at the game for forcing players to participate in the mask’s collective gaze. Yen then replies, “Let it go,” and whether players want to or not, they have to let it go. Therefore, despite initial anxieties, *The Witcher 3* nonetheless reveals desires for this entanglement and encourages players to experience this reversibility and, therefore, the world as both objective subjects and subjective objects. In experiencing this reversibility, players come to see humans and nonhumans as always already entangled in an

interdependent web. These reversals need not be violent; instead, they can open doors to possibilities that bring players, characters, and objects into an ecology of care that inspires maintenance and responsibility for both subjects and objects inside and outside *The Witcher 3*.

In all these ways, *The Witcher 3* exemplifies the neoliberal gaming tropes of its predecessors only to internally contradict itself, revealing desires for the very care and dependence it represses. Players are then covertly trained in noticing a repressed ecology of care that conceives of freedom as interdependent collectivity rather than individual control. In playing Geralt, a witcher, players never escape the “burden” of maintenance, thereby working acts of care into the fabric of narrative and gameplay. *The Witcher 3*'s environments are depicted as connected and interdependent rather than fragmented and self-contained. Finally, objects, do not assure players autonomy or mastery over resources. Rather, they depict mutual dependence and facilitate reversals between subjects and objects that reveal them as hopelessly entangled, affording players the possibility of caring for both humans and nonhumans external to themselves. In these ways, *The Witcher 3* subverts neoliberal ideals of freedom and autonomy and presents an alternative relationship to environments based in care rather than mastery. Through these narrative and gameplay mechanics, *The Witcher 3* trains players to see the details of environments and their proximate—as well as distant—relationships, inspiring care both in and outside the game.

The Salve Turned Training

In *The Witcher 3*, players are covertly trained in interdependence, despite the game's overarching anxieties about interconnectivity. Throughout its gameplay and narrative, *The Witcher 3* presents neoliberal gaming tropes that repress care and dependence and imagine

freedom as control only to later contradict itself, revealing a desire for the very care it represses. Previously, I teased out these desires for repressed care across three registers: avatars, environments, and objects. As Geralt, players must continuously perform acts of maintenance; environments are depicted as interdependent rather than fragmented and self-contained; and objects are more than mere resources and facilitate reversals between subjects and objects. In these ways, *The Witcher 3* subverts neoliberal ideals of freedom and autonomy, offering an alternative relationship to environments that is based in care and dependence rather than mastery. In doing so, *The Witcher 3* supplies a space wherein players train, largely unconsciously, in caring for humans and nonhumans external to themselves. I further claim that *The Witcher 3* trains players in a particular quality of care across the three aforementioned registers both near and far. In role-playing Geralt, players are trained to be a “good enough” parent to Ciri, supporting her without neglecting her or being overbearing. As players traverse the massive world of *The Witcher 3*, they experience dynamic environments that set non-linearity against linear progress narratives. In their dealings with objects, meanwhile, players are covertly trained in recognizing the shared world of subjects and objects. In these ways, I argue, *The Witcher 3* covertly trains players in becoming conscious of and attentive to environments and the ways in which humans and nonhumans are linked and interdependent both in close proximity and through long distances in an ecology of care.

The training in this ecology of care that *The Witcher 3* affords springs from the interactivity of video games, which have frequently been recognized for their training capacities. Video games are interactive mediums through which players practice skills that can be utilized both in the game world and without. The way players engage with a video game is different from other forms of media such as films and novels. Michele Dickey’s article “Game Design

Narrative for Learning” focuses on video games as “interactive learning environments” through which “players can gain and practice skills which may then be applied to a real-world setting” (246, 254). In their role-playing adventure as Geralt, players interact with a dynamically connected world, experiencing possibilities beyond the forward momentum of progress narratives. Along the way, they interact with objects that avail players to the entanglement of subjects and objects, inspiring them to care for humans and nonhumans external to themselves.

In *The Witcher 3*, players must operate in their role as father to Ciri, a role in which they are unwittingly trained as a “good enough” parent. The “good enough” mother was coined by D.W. Winnicott and is a mother who strikes a balance between being neglectful and overbearing, allowing the child to develop a sense of self. The game puts a strong emphasis on the player’s parental role and their relationship with Ciri. Interactions with her are a significant part of triggering what fans have termed the “good,” “bad,” or “bittersweet” endings to the game. In the “bad” ending, players have failed to care for Ciri, resulting in the death of both Ciri and Geralt. Players cause this ending when they attempt to control Ciri or make decisions for her. Fans have deemed this the “bad” ending, because it is highly unsatisfying, since both Geralt and Ciri die and the White Frost is not destroyed. Players succeed in their initial main quest to find Ciri only to have her and themselves die in the end. They earn the “good” ending, meanwhile, by supporting Ciri and her choices rather than attempting to control her. Fans termed this ending “good” because interactions with Ciri result in her and Geralt both surviving and ensuring the defeat of the White Frost. Having secured the safety of this world and others, Geralt and Ciri then take off together on monster hunting adventures, just as they both wanted. Players ultimately found this ending highly satisfying, they were victorious in their battle against the White Frost and both Ciri and Geralt live and get to stay together. Finally, in the “bittersweet”

ending, players reunite Ciri with her biological father, the Emperor, and she returns to the palace to become empress. It earned its name because, like the “good” ending, both Geralt and Ciri survive and the White Frost is defeated, however, Geralt and Ciri are separated. Though the “bittersweet” ending is not definitively viewed as the best ending by fans, I claim this ending is actually best for the whole of the Witcher world. Unlike the other endings, the “bittersweet” ending reconnects the political sphere with repressed care in Ciri’s role as empress and results in Ciri’s stronger sense of self. Therefore, the epilogue is more hopeful than the other endings for social and economic improvements in the Witcher world. In doing so, the “bittersweet” ending reveals desires for repressed care and shows the potential large-scale positive results of players training in “good enough” parenting and an ecology of care.

In *The Witcher 3*, the player’s ability to act as the “good enough” parent to Ciri is what enables them to get the “bittersweet” ending. If they are the “good enough” parent, the game rewards players with not only a happy ending for Geralt and Ciri, but also with a possibly happier ending for the Witcher world. With Ciri as empress, there is the potential that the Nilfgaardian war might end potentially lessening the poverty and environmental destruction caused by the forward progress of war. The interactions that lead to this ending line up with D.W. Winnicott’s notion of the “good enough mother” (7). Players are expected to support Ciri without trying to control her; do everything for her; or blindly support her. It is Ciri’s development of a sense of self that leads to her accepting her role as future empress and which, therefore, brings the political sphere and repressed care together. The “bittersweet” ending also helps balance what seems like an erasure of motherhood in *The Witcher 3*. As a “good enough” father, Geralt permits an ecology of care that emerges from a meeting of masculine care and feminine governance. To get this ending, the player must choose to encourage Ciri to see her

biological father, Emperor Emhyr. Ciri makes it clear that she wants nothing to do with her father or her role as Empress. Players can choose to either support Ciri full-heartedly in this decision (resulting in the “good” ending) or persuade her to see her father, despite her desire not to. This decision leads to Ciri repairing her relationship with Emhyr and accepting her future role as empress. This is the only ending where Ciri has a relationship with both of her fathers, connecting both of her positions in the world, as a monstrous maintenance worker and leader. Within this ending only, the base game’s epilogue states that Ciri has the necessary qualities to become a good empress: “From her father, she’d inherited an empress’s political instincts. From Geralt, she had gained a sense of simple human decency. Few monarchs boast both traits—which is quite a shame.” Though sparse, these lines suggest that, with Ciri as empress, there is the potential for the state of the Northern Realms to change. These positive changes are only made possible through Ciri becoming empress because she embodies the reconnection of the political sphere to repressed care. In this way, *The Witcher 3* shows a desire for this repressed ecology of care and trains players in its potential positive effects.

Of course, *The Witcher 3* can only imagine this reconnection through a position of power, as Ciri’s role as empress suggests, this position of power is a mediated one. As an empress, Ciri sits in the middle of the spectrum of political power between total power and subject, therefore embodying both. Therefore, while Ciri’s position as empress in the “bittersweet” ending imagines the reconnection of the political sphere and care through a position of power it still does bring them together, and portrays this reconnection as beneficial to the whole. In this ending, *The Witcher 3* expresses a desire for a different relationship to environments and their inhabitants, one based in care rather than control, and covertly trains players in “good enough” care through their role as a parent. The game encourages players to demonstrate what they have

learned throughout the game and pass this awareness onto Ciri, allowing her, as Empress, to possibly inspire this sort of care across the provinces. If they have learned “good enough” care while role-playing as Geralt, then the game rewards them with an ending that provides more hope for a society that cares for all humans and nonhumans.

The Witcher 3 further trains players to be aware of interdependence in and across complex environments, displaying these environments as dynamic processes that affect gameplay rather than static representations. In interacting with this world, players are covertly trained in dynamism and non-linearity as opposed to static self-contained environments and linear progress narratives. As mentioned previously, Alenda Chang expresses that game environments have a propensity to lean on cliched landscapes with environments that function as mere background scenery (58). She asserts that these types of environments “merely equate to mastery of the external environment,” forging a player-environment relationship that is largely based on extraction and utilization of resources with little to no consequences on the natural world (60). The world of *The Witcher 3* is more than mere backdrop scenery in which the game takes place; instead, it directly affects the player's gameplay. The different climates across the Witcher world's regions determine what monsters are present and what resources are available. For example, if players come across a thick fog, they must be aware that a type of monster known as a foglet might materialize and attack them, or if they are sailing, then players will have to avoid the many sirens lurking in the sea depths. The time of day also affects certain monsters, particularly when it comes to wraiths or specters, some of which only appear at noon or midnight. Stronger monsters also usually appear at night, so players must decide if they are strong enough to risk traveling or wait until morning. The environments themselves frequently have their own perils. Players must navigate the steep cliffs of Skellige or fall to their death and

avoid the poisonous gas in the swamps of Velen to minimize health damage. Regions also have different resources depending on their climates. Players must be aware of where these resources are if they need to craft a certain item. In order to complete monster contracts or simply survive while traversing the world, players have to be aware of the Witcher world's dynamic environments. In this, *The Witcher 3* fosters what Chang calls "problem" or "possibility spaces," wherein "we come face to face with our knowledge of and impact on the environment" (63). Chang asserts that most games miss the potential of video games to create environments that would allow the player to learn about natural processes and / or how organic and inorganic matter are connected. In creating dynamic environments that affect gameplay and attempt to portray real-world ecological processes, *The Witcher 3* takes steps in setting up a world where mastery of the external environment is not central to gameplay. In effect, training players that mastery of external environments is not necessary for survival.

As a possibility space, *The Witcher 3* creates a space where players interact with a dynamic and connected world that depicts the impact of human progress-oriented actions, like war, on natural environments and their inhabitants. Through its depiction of war's negative effects on environments, *The Witcher 3* shows the destruction of linear progress narratives while covertly training players in the value of non-linearity. Progress narratives can be described as constant linear movement forward. Progress narratives in *The Witcher 3* mainly take shape as the Nilfgaardian war. Nilfgaard's march on the Northern realms is a good example of progress as continuous forward momentum in the name of expanding and bettering their nation. RPGs often present progress and war as necessary or exciting endeavors, wherein the player is usually a direct participant. These games tend to resort to these progress narratives in order to incorporate the exploration of worlds neatly into the games' narratives. Rather than participate in the forward

march of a progress narrative, *The Witcher 3* forces players to view its effects from the sidelines as a regular inhabitant of the world. The region of Velen's barren burned swamp depicts humans' effect on the environment built into the game's world design. Anna Tsing asserts in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* that neither progress narratives nor stories of utter ruin tell us how to think about "collaborative survival" (25). In our current moment, we struggle with the "problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination," yet among this ruin, entanglement persists (25). Tsing goes on to assert that progress narratives constant forward movement draws "other kinds of time into its rhythms," yet without this familiar rhythm, we might come to notice other patterns. (26). Within *The Witcher 3*, players come to see the value of non-linearity without the familiar presentation of linear progress narratives offered by most RPGs. In *The Witcher 3*, players do not directly participate in the war; they do not fight for either side nor can they themselves stop the war. Instead, players bear witness to the environmental devastation caused by the ongoing war as they travel throughout the regions. In exploring these regions and bearing witness to the destruction of progress narratives, players are encouraged to consider alternative nonlinear narratives.

Additionally, the motivation for players to explore these environments in *The Witcher 3* is not through a typical progress narrative like gaining land or expanding one's influence through nationhood. Instead, players explore environments for Geralt's work as a witcher, in their search for Ciri, or to simply discover what is out there. Therefore, I claim, *The Witcher 3*, as an interactive medium, covertly trains players to notice environments' complex webs of interdependent relations, both proximate and distant, as ecologies of care, while showing a desire to move beyond the destruction of progress narratives and towards a more non-linear relationship to environments. *The Witcher 3's* map is littered with question marks that serve to compel the

player to explore the world for the joy of seeing what they will stumble upon, be it a fantastic creature or a magical ancient relic. In doing so, *The Witcher 3* works to shift players away from strictly progress motivated exploration and instead towards curiosity “unencumbered by the simplifications of progress narratives” (Tsing 16). Narratives of progress and ruin do not open players up to the interdependence of the world; instead, it blinds them to it. *The Witcher 3* searches through and beyond these narratives, expressing a larger cultural desire for non-linearity. The game shows this desire rather overtly through its main quest as players search for Ciri, who is known as the Lady of Time and Space. In her ability to teleport across time and space, Ciri represents non-linearity. In their search for Ciri, players are on a wild hunt for non-linearity or life beyond linear progress narratives. In shifting players away from common progress motivated gameplay and narratives, *The Witcher 3* offers an alternative and unwittingly trains players in the value of non-linearity.

Objects in *The Witcher 3* also knot player, object, character, and world together across time and space, both near and far. People often strive to keep a clear distinction between subjects and objects, fearing that failure to do so will permit treating people as mere things. However, I argue that in blurring this distinction, one can gain a greater sense of the way humans and nonhumans are entangled in an ecology of care. In *The Witcher 3*, the mask of Uroboros mediates this ecology of care. In the “Echoes of the Past” quest, players help Yennefer steal the mask to look back in time and find clues for the whereabouts of Ciri. Yen casts a spell so she can see the past through Geralt’s eyes as he looks through the mask. Once the spell is cast, Yen is connected to Geralt who is, in turn, connected to the mask. The game manifests this connection visually in a glowing pale blue light stretching between the characters. Players are, meanwhile, connected to Geralt and therefore Yen and the mask through the video game console, creating a

heterogeneous web stretching between subjects and objects inside and outside the game. This highlights what I have termed as an ecology of care and what Jane Bennett calls “vibrant matter,” a heterogeneous compound of which we are each made up (12). In arguing that all matter is lively she asserts that the difference between subjects and objects is reduced, though not erased, while raising the “shared materiality” of all things and affording players the possibility of recognizing “the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other” (12, 4). This can reveal the entanglement of humans and nonhumans in an interdependent web of relations, as a world of vibrant matter. This entanglement between characters, players, and objects spans across the game world (characters through the mask) and the non-game world (players through the game console), training the latter in the possibility of recognizing this ecology of care as spanning across the game world and our own.

Furthermore, objects placed throughout the world of *The Witcher 3* extends this ecology of care outside the game world, across mediums, to the *Witcher* novels. These objects, I argue, can help players see connections as reaching beyond the game world, even if they only span within in the *Witcher* world. They might then also encourage players to think about how this entanglement appears outside the game world in other ways. Players happen upon these objects as they explore the game world. If they have not read the novels, these items may hold less significance, but they are still aware that they connect the game world to outside spaces. One such item is a book found in Yen’s room, titled *The Poisoned Source*. Players who read the novels probably know what this book is. *The Poisoned Source* was written by Tissaia de Vries and appears in the *Witcher* novels as an item of great personal importance to Yen. Tissaia was Yen’s mentor and mother figure who dies in the novels. Yen carries her book with her always.

Upon picking the book up, Geralt says, “Tissaia de Vries, *The Poisoned Source*- still turns to it for inspiration.” This line of dialogue makes this item stand out as important and ties the novels, and the past, to the present, showing these connections as spanning outside the game. Another such item is the apple juice that is always in Yen’s room. This item references Geralt and Yen’s first meeting in the *Witcher* short story, “The Last Wish,” wherein Geralt is tasked with bringing Yen apple juice. The significance of this item might be lost on players who have never read the novels. However, the game includes a shortened version of “The Last Wish” as another book that can be picked up in Yen’s room, allowing, if not encouraging, players to catch up on the story, directing their attention to fictional worlds outside the game through objects. These items also reward players for noticing and paying attention to their surroundings since the object can only be found by actually taking the time to look around Yen’s room. In doing so, I claim, *The Witcher 3* encourages players to notice details of in-game environments to perhaps see how connections between subjects and objects stretch beyond the game world, inspiring care in and out of the game.

In all, *The Witcher 3* reveals a repressed ecology of care through the player’s relationship to avatars, environments, and objects. Therefore, the game creates a space where players are covertly trained in becoming aware of and attentive to environments and the ways in which subjects and objects are connected and interdependent both in close proximity and across distances in an ecology of care. Through role-playing as Geralt, players train in “good enough” care for humans and nonhumans external to themselves. In working as a witcher and searching for Ciri, players explore a dynamic and connected world that affects their gameplay and mirrors real-world ecological processes that foster a relationship between player and environment based in care rather than mastery. Finally, objects in *The Witcher 3* act as mediators of connectivity,

training players to see the interdependent ecology of care as spanning both in and outside the game. Through each of these aspects, I argue, *The Witcher 3* trains players in interdependence despite its apparent repression, revealing potentials and possibilities of video games in the neoliberal era to inspire care and responsibility for subjects, environments, and objects, both within and outside *The Witcher* world.

Conclusion

The immense popularity of *The Witcher 3* likely stemmed from its embrace of common neoliberal gaming tropes that repress care, yet perhaps what made *The Witcher 3* stand out above the other games were the internal contradictions that I have teased out and argue suggest a desire for the very care it represses. In doing so, these neoliberal gaming tropes act as a salve that eases players into a covert training in care. Therefore, perhaps the game's popularity as the most awarded video game of all time points to a desire within our society for care and collective dependence that has largely been repressed in our current moment. Released in 2015 among a plethora of other fantasy RPGs, *The Witcher 3* stood among the rest, earning over 800 awards, 251 of which were Game of the Year awards. The game also snagged awards for Outstanding Achievement in Game Design, Best Story Telling, and Best RPG. As a result, it was credited as the benchmark for the genre going forward. What was it about *The Witcher 3* that stood out from previous RPGs? According to reviewers, *The Witcher 3* was superior in its overall world design as a "living breathing community that would go on living even if you stopped playing" (Anderson, 2018). This directly ties into my reading of *The Witcher 3* world as depicting interdependence across environments both near and far. The game was also praised for its engaging narrative with complex branched storytelling through which your choices have

consequences. In praising *The Witcher* for these aspects of gameplay and narrative, these reviews and awards perhaps show a broader desire for repressed care and dependence, calling for an alternative relationship to environments both in the game world and without.

The Witcher 3 embraces neoliberal desires for freedom and autonomy, creating a salve for the player that eases them into alternative ways of relating and viewing environments. The game brings players into the game world and narrative through familiar neoliberal gameplay, as they continuously strive to build their avatar's skills through gaining experience points. Within this familiar neoliberal context, players are covertly trained in becoming aware of and attentive to the interdependence of environments and their human and nonhuman inhabitants. Common open-world RPGs narrative and game mechanics perpetuate neoliberal ideals of freedom and autonomy that repress care and collective dependence. *The Witcher 3* subverts these RPG and fantasy tropes and instead portrays environments, subjects, and objects as interconnected, revealing a repressed ecology of care that conceives of freedom not as individual control but as interdependent collectivity. In doing so, *The Witcher 3* fosters a relationship between player and environment based in care rather than mastery.

In unveiling this ecology of care, *The Witcher 3* creates an interactive space where players are covertly trained in care and interdependence across three registers, avatars, environments, and, objects. As a witcher, players are at once told care is a "burden" but then never allowed to escape this burden, at once weaving acts of caring and the effects of its repression into gameplay. As a father to Ciri, *The Witcher 3* displaces players from the center as the "chosen one," moving them from a position of power and control to one of care and dependence. In their parental role, players train in "good enough" care by choosing interactions with Ciri that are at once supportive but not controlling. If players are successful in "good

enough” caring they ensure the survival of Geralt and Ciri and the defeat of the White Frost. Through exploration gameplay and overall world design, the game encourages players to notice interdependent ecologies and the impacts of humans and nonhumans on environments and, in turn, each other. In reading *The Witcher 3*’s depiction of war and its negative effects on environments as a portrayal of the destruction of linear progress narratives, I claim the game covertly trains players in the value of non-linearity through awareness of ecologies and exploration gameplay. Meanwhile, objects in *The Witcher 3* act as mediators of connectivity, facilitating reversals between subjects and objects and intertwining player, object, character, and world together across time and space in an ecology of care in and outside the game.

The Witcher 3’s immense popularity and success opens doors for future mainstream RPGs, proving that conventional RPG tropes need not be the only way for players to interact with a virtual world. Since *The Witcher 3*’s release, other RPG games have begun to show similar narrative and gameplay trends, suggesting a broad desire for this repressed care. Many, if not most, open-world RPGs following *The Witcher 3*’s release, feature vast detailed and spatially connected worlds. Games like *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017) and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) portray ecological processes that affect gameplay, continuing the trend of depicting environments as dynamic and interconnected. Future scholarship might question how games in other genres or other forms of interactive media reveal repressed care or offer relationships between players and environments alternative to power and control. *The Witcher 3* reveals that video games can give players a space to act out these anxieties, training to see the ecology of care they repress and perhaps inspire care and collective dependence both in and outside the game.

In general, due to both the success of *The Witcher 3* and critical investigations into the game's narrative and gameplay like my own, future video games might continue to move away from neoliberal ideals of freedom and autonomy that repress care's collective dependence AND instead foster relationships to environments and their human and nonhuman inhabitants based in care. If future games continue to move away from game mechanics and narrative arcs that naturalize neoliberal ideals towards ones that instead adapt an ecology of care, then this could become the dominant form of gameplay, in effect making this alternative relationship to environments more common. Therefore, video games as an interactive medium could train players to see the intrinsically interdependent knotted web of subjects, objects, and environments in and beyond the game world, inspiring care and collective dependence for humans and nonhumans alike.

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