From *College of Wizardry* to *Witcher School*: A Comparative Study of Franchise Larp Design

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Abstract: A study of live action role plays as transmediations of a global franchise universe, this work analyses two cases: *College of Wizardry* (world of Harry Potter) and *Witcher School* (world of *The Witcher*), using Mark Wolf's (2012) framework of eight infrastructures: space, time, character, nature, culture, language, mythology and philosophy. The case studies lead to questions and predictions about franchise larps in general. For example, characters, culture, mythology, and philosophy are most useful as vehicles for direct imitation / adaptation of elements from the franchise media (books, films or video games) to larps; philosophy is most likely to be subject to ideology-based modifications; whereas space and nature will be heavily influenced by the physical features of the game site. The text ends with a look at possible relationships between larp creators and the copyrighted multimedia entertainment industry.

Keywords: larp, franchise, transmedia, witcher, Harry Potter

1. Introduction

This comparative analysis of the first editions of two high-profile larps, *College of Wizardry* (November 2014) and *Witcher School* (April 2015), focuses on adaptation/transmediation of globally recognised fantasy franchises. The former was set in the Harry Potter universe, the latter – in the world of the Witcher. Both settings had first been created as novel series and then transferred to other media, including the highly successful film adaptations of *Harry Potter* (Warner Bros) and *The Witcher* video game series (CD Project RED). Held at historical castles in Poland, both larps were designed as 3-day high-quality immersive events for 100+ participants. Both were framed as "schools" and cast the majority of players as students, while the author of this study experienced both games as a teacher. Both took care to provide extensive media coverage for international audiences. With the global attention received by *College of Wizardry*, they were part of an emerging (now: well-established) trend of franchise "castle larps" that reach beyond the larping communities towards mainstream culture.

Just like ARG, a larp:

> is experiential more than textual, making it impossible to re-create the narrative moment of participating in the game. Thus, as researchers, we must rely either on our own experiences or secondhand accounts of transmedia consumption rather than being able to revisit a story for analytical purposes (Mittel, 2014, p. 263).

Hence, this study (first presented at DiGRA 2015 conference) is based on analysis of written/recorded media, with primary importance given to game design documents, supplemented with participatory observation from the preparation and execution of the games. Making use of the theory of transmedia storytelling, participatory culture, and roleplaying studies, the paper will explore how the popular brand/franchise is used to attract the target group, and how the designed larps are related to the "canonical" narratives. The main focus is on the franchise larps as constructed worlds, their infrastructure analysed with Mark Wolf's framework from *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012). The case studies are also used to inform questions and predictions about the development of franchise larps in general.

2. On franchise, transmedia and adaptation

Academic analysis of trans-/crossmedia cultural production frequently focuses on content generated by copyright-owning companies to maximise profit (e.g. Aarseth, 2006, p. 1–2). *College of Wizardry* (CoW) and *Witcher School* (WS) do not fall in this category: both were initiated and organised by fan communities. Being a non-profit grassroots event, the first CoW did not ask Warner Bros for permission. Only later, in the face of immense media coverage, talks were initiated, and the company prohibited the use of Harry Potter intellectual property in later editions of CoW, yet gave approval for the first run and the sequel/rerun in April 2015 (Raasted, 2015, p. 30). WS organisers, in turn, had obtained permission from CD Project RED beforehand, both for a Polish-speaking edition in April and international (English) in August 2015 (as Dastin Wawrzyniak, owner of Agencja 5 Żywiołów, states [2015, personal communication]). In both cases, the larps brought no direct profit to the licence-holders, even though they openly used their brands.

Promoting the brand, the larp designers can be seen as "grassroots intermediaries", i.e. "unofficial parties who shape the flow of messages through their community and who may become strong advocates for brands or franchises […] challenging what 'grassroots' means, as such activities often coexist or even coincide with corporate agendas" (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013, p. 7). This is especially true about WS, which had the video trailer of *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* and company logo on the home page of its website (WitcherSchool.com, 2015).

In the case of Potter/Witcher fans, the larp would be experienced as an adaptation of the books/films/videogames: "haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 6). Hence, CoW design doc calls the playing style "Harry Potterish" (Rollespilsfabrikken & Liveform, 2014, p. 28), whereas WS wants to be "a simulation which tries to reflect faithfully the actual witcher training we know from The Witcher universe" (Agencja 5 Żywiołów, 2015, p. 18). What's more, the former says:

> In the Harry Potter novels and movies, there's an interesting blend of the ridiculous, the deadly serious problems of growing up and the fight of good vs. evil. Harry and his friends deal with teenage romance, deadly monsters, political intrigue and personal rivalries, all the while playing a major role in this epic conflict between good and evil.

And there's still room for some exploding magical beans, miscast spells that turn out silly and small touches of the absurd (like the crazy rules set in place under Dolores Umbridge, for instance).

We're aiming to have Czocha feel like that (Rollespilsfabrikken & Liveform, 2014, p. 28).

Whereas the latter notes:

During the game you will become an apprentice going through a rigorous witcher training: you will learn fencing, archery and alchemy; you will hunt monsters, unveil secrets and intrigues; and finally, you will face tough choices and discover the consequences the hard way (Agencja 5 Żywiołów, 2015, p. 4).

It is [...] a story about the most characteristic quality of The Witcher setting – about moral dilemmas and choices which are never purely good or bad (ibid., p. 7).

This will be an opportunity to immerse yourself in a well-known setting of The Witcher and live your own unforgettable adventure (ibid., p. 8).

With the declared intent of re-creating the franchise universe, it seems that the target audience were the Harry Potter / The Witcher fandomes who have developed a personal connection to the narratives. As Lemke says:

The Harry Potter franchise is a new kind of cross-media or meta-media object. The complete experience of its "discourse" involves participation with all these media: not just reading the books, but also viewing the films (which differ significantly from the books) and the DVDs (which include material not in the theatrical-release films), playing the videogames, wearing the clothing, buying the toys, visiting the websites which are linked to the books, films, and videogames, and even perhaps eating the candy (2004, p. 3).

On the other hand, neither CoW nor WS require an extensive knowledge of the "canonical" works. In both games, the castles (schools) are isolated microworlds with their local history written by game designers. There had been no Czocha College in the Harry Potter crossmedia universe, nor had there been a Moszna witcher school in the Witcher's. This should[1]

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[1]   This is declared authorial intention. However, there are reasons to doubt in the possibility of bringing the experience of a fan close to a non-fan: "One does not have to watch the film to play the game, nor does one have to play the game to understand the film. But the affective relationship between the game and the player alters the understanding of the film's meaning through the emotional dedication of the players / fans" (Booth, 2015, Kindle, Introduction, section "Board games as paratexts"). Referring to the eight world infrastructures (see below), Wolf (2012) insists: "It is through the completeness and consistency of these structures that world gestalten are able to occur. Without these structures, worlds would fall apart and become little more than a collection of data and information, and they

level the field for avid fans and non-fans, as both are approaching a new setting with a new history, which is only loosely connected to events and characters known from the canon. These concerns are not specific to larp, they reflect e.g. what Mittel says about television: "**transmedia extensions from a serial franchise must reward those who partake in them but cannot punish those who do not**" (2014, p. 262). WS design document states clearly that its content and pre-game workshops on site will be enough to fully participate in the larp (Agencja 5 Żywiołów, 2015, p. 4–5).

To what extent, then, is the franchise content present in the larps? Torner (2015) shows that a larp can be a strict adaptation of a film or book, but it is not the case with CoW and WS. Aarseth claims that "somewhat romantic notion of 'crossmedia content' should be replaced with the more accurate term 'crossmedia branding', which may include transfer of the content to a greater or lesser degree" (2006, p. 5). Thus, even if the amount of franchise content is small, the larps still can be analysed as "franchise" or "adaptation" of the Harry Potter / Witcher series. To agree with Hutcheon, "An adaptation's double nature does not mean […] that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment" (2006, p. 6). Moreover, Johnson states that "faithtful" replication of previous media is not even expected: "Franchises do not replicate themselves: they are produced in negotiated social and cultural contexts that demand exploration" (2013, p. 3). What complicates matters even more, neither CoW nor WS selected one medium (book, film or video game) as the "one single source or ur-text" (Jenkins, 2007) for adaptation / transmediation.

Terminology-wise, some scholars would insist on using the word "transmediation" instead of "adaptation", as adaptation assumes "retelling **existing** stories, whereas transmedia storytelling tends to be characterised as telling **new** stories in different media but set within a consistent diegetic world" (Harvey, 2015, p. 3). Booth distinguishes "transmediation (the expansion of a narrative across multiple media products), adaptation (the process of recasting a text into a new format), and franchising (the addition of multiple media products under one brand)" (2015, Kindle, Introduction, section "Board games in a digital culture"). Nonetheless,

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would cease to be worlds" (p. 154). Therefore, player's unfamiliarity with the source world is likely to severely hamper the level of immersion into the game world.

establishing definitions is not the purpose of this study. Whether it should be called a "transmediation" or an "adaptation of a heterocosm" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 14; see below), the subject of this analysis is the content franchised from the canon narratives to the larps.

3. World, not story

As Jenkins claims, "storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium" (2006, p. 114). In the first issue of *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, "storyworlds can be defined as the worlds evoked by narratives, and narratives can be defined in turn as blueprints for world-creation" (Herman, 2009b, p. vii). Wolf notices that "franchised entertainment, and entertainment in general, is moving more and more in the direction of subcreational world-building" (2012, p. 13); and "imaginary worlds invite audience participation in the form of speculation and fantasies, which depend more on the fullness and richness of the world itself than on any particular storyline or character within it; quite a shift from the traditional narrative film or novel" (ibid., p. 12–13). Herman not only popularises the term "storyworld" (2009a, p. 105–136) but also highlights the importance of narratively-created "**experience** of living through storyworlds-in-flux" (ibid., p. 137). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Jamison calls *Harry Potter* "An entire imaginative world for the generation of children that grew up reading and writing in it" (2013, p. 152), and Garda attributes the global success of *The Witcher* franchise by CD Projekt Red first and foremost to the eponymous character **and** the expansion of the universe far beyond the world of Sapkowski's novels (2010, p. 20–21).

In his discussion of video games as crossmedia productions, Aarseth recalls Cawelti's:

> two levels of popular fiction, 1) the level of cultural convention, where we find the stereotypes, characters, the clichés and the environment [...] and 2) the level of the underlying structure, which is a series of events (boy meets girls, boy loses girl etc.). Only the latter is where the story is actually told, but the [...] the games contain the first level without really affording the latter (2006, p. 7).

Also Hutcheon, talking about the easiness of translation of story elements (themes, characters, the *fabula*) between the telling-to-showing (book-to-film) engagement modes (2006, p. 10–11), sees a difference when it comes to the interaction mode (video game). She says:

> What gets adapted here is a heterocosm, literally an "other world" or cosmos, complete, of course, with the stuff of a story – settings, characters, events, and situations. [...] experienced through multisensorial interactivity (ibid., p. 14).

Ryan & Thon say that "the defining components of narrativity: character, events, setting, time, space, and causality" can be found in any medium, whereas interactivity applies to media such as "video games, improvisational theater, hypertext fiction, tabletop roleplaying games [...] but not to literary narratives, print-based comics, and film" (2014, p. 4). Wolf insists that in the process of "interactivation", i.e. adaptation of non-interactive media into interactive ones, a "model of the world [...] must be constructed which can be interacted with by the user" (2012, p. 260).

All these researchers focus on video games, and seem to be unaware of larp. Hutcheon, Wolf, Johnson, Jenkins, Ryan & Thon briefly discuss tabletop RPG (and Wolf does actually mention larp in one sentence [2012, p. 139]), but when they want to compare digital immersion to bodily immersion in a physical environment (where larp should definitely be referenced!), they reach for theatre or Disney theme parks and rides. Still, Jenkins' idea of "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" (2004), with the concepts of "spatial stories and environmental storytelling" (ibid., p. 121) and "evocative spaces" (ibid., p. 123) designed "to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players" (ibid., p. 129), seems perfectly transferable to larp. After all, as Mortensen states, live action role players strive to "create a special place and space for all: a game space" (2007, p. 303). Instead of having a **narrated** experience of "living through storyworlds-in-flux" (Herman, 2009b, p. 137), they will **actually** live through the experience. Therefore, this is where I will be tracing the **adaptation / transmediation of franchise elements: in the world, not story**. For this purpose, I use Wolf's (2012) framework for the description of "imaginary worlds", which includes eight interconnected aspects he calls infrastructures.

4. Franchise elements in CoW and WS in Wolf's framework

Wolf mentions "three basic elements needed for a world to exist: a space in which things can exist and events can occur; a duration or span of time in which events can occur; and a character or characters who can be said to be inhabiting the world" (2012, p. 154). As he discusses in Chapter 3, the **space** is defined by maps, **time** by timelines, and **characters** by genealogies and relationships. On top of that, he distinguishes five other infrastructures developed in the space + time + character continuum: **nature, culture, languages, mythology** and **philosophy**. Together, "These are the structures by which we make sense of a story or a world, whether in fiction or lived experience, and which place individual facts and details into the larger contexts needed for them to be fully understood" (ibid.).

4.1. Space, time and characters

Space: In both games (CoW and WS), the microworld, i.e. the interactive setting of the game (genuine **game space**), is a secluded school located in a large medieval-ish castle, plus the nearby outdoor area. It is physically present and accessible to the players, arranged and decorated by the organisers as close as possible to the ideal 360 degree illusion in which "roleplaying [...] becomes immediate, physical and social" (Koljonen, 2015, p. 177). Neither the castle, nor the institution (school) existed in the franchise: their socio-cultural histories were invented entirely by the larp-writers, and the "map" of the game space was shaped first and foremost by the existing physical space. Larp organisers can decide on the name and function of particular rooms and outdoor locations (including the selection of in- and off-game areas), but they must work on and within the real-world infrastructure. The real-world doors, walls and corridors have to remain doors, walls and corridors in the game diegesis. Also the functional aspect of the real-world spaces is frequently reflected in-game: the real-world library stuffed with bookshelves and desks is still called a library; the real-world dining hall is used to serve in-game meals; and the bedrooms with real-world beds are also bedrooms for the characters.

The macroworld, i.e. the geographical and cultural setting existing beyond the castle in the larp fiction, is assumed by default to be the

full universe of the franchise saga. There is limited in-game interaction between the school and the macroworld through non-player characters coming to school from the outside, and through narrated in-game events that supposedly happen in the big world and their consequences are felt in the school (e.g. pressure from Polish and German Ministries of Magic in CoW; from the royal house of Temeria in WS). In this way, even though the Czocha / Moszna castle does not come from the franchise universe, it is firmly set in it, connected via hundreds of microlinks in the plot, language (proper names) and character backstories, as will be presented below.

This arrangement of game space is likely to become the golden standard for franchised larping (not just larping; see Wolf, 2012, p. 260–262): a small interactive (playable) microworld supposedly surrounded by the full-blown cult universe, yet isolated from it by a visibly or verbally marked border of the game and off-game zones. Due to financial, legal and logistic constraints, the area of the larp will always be spatially limited, with no organiser's control over the space that surrounds it. No franchise-based interactions await beyond the game area, so interactions between the micro- and macroworld can only be facilitated by the organisers, without players leaving the game space. It is only in the game venue that the organisers can create the "feel" of the cult world by props, decorations, installations and interactors, and keep it safe from intrusions of random outsiders. It seems that all franchise larps must follow this model, unless their world is a variation of our Primary World which allows for ubiquitous pervasive play: travelling anywhere in the physical world and interacting with non-players without harm to the immersive illusion. Pervasive larping is by all means possible (Stenros, Montola, 2009, p. 35–37); the question is: which franchise worlds would facilitate it?

Similarly, all larpwriters will have to build their map of the microworld directly on the physical shape of the game venue, not vice versa. One of the consequences is that franchise larps will rarely be set in famous locations known from the cult narrative: if a building or city is described in detail in a book (even more so if depicted in the audiovisual media!), it will be impossible to replicate it believably in the available environment. Therefore, such larp is most likely to be set in a location which has **not** been described in the cult media. Exceptions to this rule can be big

investors whose budgets allow for large-scale construction works, such as global media companies building their own theme parks (e.g. Wizarding World of Harry Potter set up by Universal Studio in 2010 "recreates Hogsmeade and Hogwarts as portrayed in the later Harry Potter films" [Gilbert, 2015, Kindle, Introduction]).

Time: Analogically to the space, which breaks down into micro- (available for interaction) and macroworld (assumed to exist beyond the game), time can be described in microscale (events happening in the duration of the game) and macroscale (the timeline of events in the whole franchise universe). In both scales, timelines:

> can be used to chart the cause-and-effect relationships between events, explain and clarify their motivations and maintain consistency, and give local events a context within larger movements of historical events. Timelines tie backstory into a story's current events and help an audience to fill in gaps, such as characters' ages or travel times, or their participation in events described in broader scale (Wolf, 2012, p. 165).

In microscale, in CoW and WS alike, the game time is synchronous with the real time (1 hour of play time = 1 hour of in-game time), and amounts to 2 full days + the previous evening, not counting pre-game workshops. It starts at the beginning of a school year, with new students just accepted into the school. The larp opens with an official greeting at the doorstep, then all participants dine in a huge dining hall, have some free time before curfew, and go to sleep (or do some nightly player-generated business, with teachers trying to catch them and send them to beds). On the second and third day, the whole morning and a large part of the afternoon is spent on scheduled classes. The game ends around midnight on the third day, with a witcher examination in WS, or huge party after the ceremonial assignment of students to houses in CoW.

In macroscale, in both games the time is moved a long way from the main franchise plots. CoW took place in 2014 (also in-game), while the events described in the HP saga ended in 1998. For the characters, the story of Harry Potter and Voldemort was not-so-recent history, which has some long-term consequences still felt in the magical world, but was not witnessed by anyone under the age of 20. Still, some older characters had included participation in the "canonical" HP events in their backstories, and some player characters came as Hogwarts graduates.

Witcher School, in turn, is set 200 years before the action of *The Witcher* video game, long before Geralt was born, so no direct connections to the franchise plot are present, except for two non-player characters: sorceress Philippa Eilhart and witcher Vesemir (see below – the "Characters" section). Other elements of the franchise timeline are proper names of countries, cities and kings, together with few historical events such as the elven uprising led by Aelirenn the White Rose. In the *Witcher* book, the uprising was mentioned as distant history, commemorated only by long-living elves. In WS larp, the uprising is just being quenched, with some elf survivors found by players in the forest, and some players connected to the events in their character's stories (e.g. death of relatives).

Once more, it makes sense to generalise from the two cases: in any franchise larps, player characters are unlikely to live in the midst of major events depicted in canon-setting narratives. Part of the problem is that such events happened in specific places, whose physical reconstruction in game space faces the issues described above. Another is that the narrative events have defined outcome determined by specific characters and their actions. Re-staging the scenes exactly as they happened in the source medium would rob the players of agency, turning the experience from larp into theatre. Leaving agency to the players would result in different actions and outcomes, most likely with a different character cast, in which case it would not really be the same events. Also, if the larp authors want to limit the divide between fans and non-fans, they will move the timeline of the game away from the timeline of franchise plots to prevent the fans from constant references to the canon events that would be taking place simultaneously.

The synchronous one-to-one mapping of game time on real time will also be standard for the most part of larp's duration. It is possible to stop the game for a moment and move the time forward (e.g. to the next day) by a gamemaster's narration, but it would be difficult to change the speed of time while the game is running. Stopping the game and jumping from one scene to another is easy; changing the flow of time within a scene is not, especially if it must be coordinated for a number of groups in different locations. In embodied multiplayer role play which happens through live conversation and live physical movement, speaking, walking, eating and other activities will take as much time in-game as they do in real time.

Characters: In Wolf's framework, the infrastructure for characters are genealogies, which "relate characters to one another, giving them a context within larger frameworks which are familial, ancestral, social, institutional, and historical" (2012, p. 170). Wolf highlights the importance of legacy and family ties, but also mentor-student relationships and friendships, combining "the influence of ancestry, upbringing, and companionship" (ibid., p. 171).

In both games analysed herein, players are divided into school staff, senior students, and freshmen (in CoW, there are also sophomores), plus an array of other characters working in the school or coming from the outside. All students are player characters, some of them related (e.g. in-game siblings), others connected by friendships, romances or enmities, yet others in mentor-pupil or romantic affairs with teachers, adding to the social depth. In CoW, teachers also are full-time players, while in WS the teaching staff are hired NPCs. Out-of-school characters are always NPCs.

As far as franchise is concerned, in CoW the "canonical" characters are only mentioned in the background, as heroes of bygone events, and in the individual stories of characters (e.g. professor Crumplebottom had been a member of Dumbledore's Army). In WS, the players can meet the sorceress Philippa Eilhart and witcher Vesemir, secondary characters from the Witcher saga. They both were presented as ones who had lived extremely long thanks to magic potions or spells, so the continuity of the world is not broken by their presence in the Moszna witcher school 200 years before they met Geralt. However, this "200 years before" means that no information about their activities and role in the canon narratives can be part of the larp. Essentially, they are not the persons we know from the books.

All characters are supposed to represent the social classes, ethnicities, nationalities, worldviews, behaviours etc. of the HP / Witcher universe – in this way, tons of franchise elements enter the game. With the absence of the canon-featured storyline (long before / after the game's timeline) and very limited presence of canon-featured space (far away from the game's location), it is the crowd of characters that collectively recreate the canon-featured social world (bringing in languages, nature, culture, mythology and Philosophy; see below). They also strengthen the

performed belief in the existence of the canon-featured space beyond the game:

> each character's life history becomes another narrative thread in a world's narrative fabric. [...] Even when unrelated characters cross paths briefly, with a main character from one story becoming just an extra in the background of another, such a transmedial appearance can be a powerful way to evoke the world extending beyond the confines of a particular story; and one can imagine that every minor character and extra passing through the background has as complete and detailed life as the main character does (ibid., p. 171–172).

An interesting parallel may be drawn with "paratextual" (that is, based on cult media texts) board games researched by Booth. He says that "to exist in a transmediated relationship with the core text, paratextual board games do not transmediate plot, but rather must transmediate pathos" (2015, Kindle, chapter 3: "Transmedia Pathos and Plot in *The Walking Dead*"), which he defines as "the emotional appeal that a text can make to its reader. Pathos is generated by affective actions happening to a character in a media text, the feeling of connection between character and player" (ibid.). This works well also to explain the idea behind the analysed larps: they did not want to adapt the canonical narrative or locations for the players. Instead, they put the players in similar locations to face similar challenges and events in a similar social context, the idea being to create a very similar (canon-like) experience.

Generalising, a social microworld with characters adapted from the franchise is probably the most promising engine for the adaptation of a world to larp. Generic character types with costumes, props and behaviour patterns can create the "feel" of the given world even if the game space and game time do not. Also, the re-creation of specific characters known from the franchise narratives is relatively cheap and easy, when compared to re-creation of spaces, and their actions in the game do not harm the consistency of the world unless they clash with the canon narratives.

4.2. From nature to philosophy

In Wolf's framework, the basic three-partite (space + time + character) infrastructure of an imaginary world is interconnected with five other layers:

nature, which is not only the flora and fauna of a world, but also all of its materiality down to even its laws of physics, which may differ from those of the Primary World. **Culture** is built atop nature by a world's inhabitants, and is partly determined by what nature provides, as well as the culture's own history in the world. **Language** arises from culture and contains a culture's worldview embedded within it, since it regulates what can be expressed and how it can be expressed, and gives communicable form to the way in which the members of a culture collectively conceptualize their world. **Mythology** emerges from a combination of the previous layers and is how a culture understands, explains, and remembers its world. And finally, **philosophy** is the set of worldviews arising from the world itself, which includes not only the ideas and ideologies of the world's inhabitants, but also those which the author is expressing through the world's structure and events (2012, p. 155; emphas. M. M.).

Nature: The natural world, such as forests and lakes, is indexical in both larps: whatever there is around the castle is also in-game, allowing for 360 degree illusion. In Wolf's words, nature (and other four infrastructures discussed in this section) "are often more backgrounded than the structures of space, time, and character [...], and may rely heavily on Primary World defaults" (2012, p. 172). The real natural environment, as well as laws of physics, human physiology etc. will be assumed to work normally in the game world – unless specified otherwise. The obvious exception here is the presence of supernatural powers (magic / witcher signs), actively used by characters and contained in objects. Plus, NPC monster crew (ghosts, forest creatures, werewolves) and artifacts (props), such as bones, horns, fur of magical creatures, add elements of fauna and flora to "supernatural nature" typical of fantasy settings.

Generally, in line with the principle of minimal departure (Ryan, 1991, p. 51), all physics, biology etc. work like they do in the real world, but there is also magic that can affect that, and there are exemptions for creatures with supernatural powers. According to Wolf, when slight changes are applied to the default (Primary World's) natural laws, "they can subtly and cumulatively create that feelings of differentness that make imaginary worlds so fascinating and attractive" (2012, p. 172). Larps are likely to follow this pattern (i.e. keep the changes slight), as they are played in personal physical contact, which severely limits the possibilities of defying the laws of nature.

Culture links nature to history and is usually central to the unique situation that provides a story's conflict. [...] By providing a worldview that shapes the natural world's

resources into such things as agriculture, architecture, clothing, vehicles, and artifacts, which in turn inform customs, traditions, language, and mythologies, culture grounds and connects the various productions of a people into a (hopefully) coherent structure through which characters see the secondary world (p. 179–180).

Here, the influence of the franchise is the most direct: communities and conflicts, organisational and material culture, social hierarchies and customs can all be replicated in a larp through characters, objects, events and space.

In-game conflicts, both between players and between external powers, are taken from the saga: pureblood vs. muggleborn; non-werewolves vs. werewolves; school administration vs. the Ministry; everyone against death-eaters in CoW; or humans vs. nonhumans; witchers against sorcerers; political powers against one another in WS.

Many elements of material culture are also adapted from the canon, sometimes down to the minute detail. In WS, the process of production and application of anti-monster blade oils mimics the content of *The Witcher* video games, and so does the appearance of metal wolf's head medallions worn by trained witchers. Not to mention the hundreds of generic elements: magic wands, glass test tubes, swords, clothes, books, brooms, leather sacks etc., which reflect the franchise world's economy, technology and tradition.

Overall, the symbolic culture with social hierarchies, behaviour patterns, customs, and daily activities can be transported from a narrative to a larp. If the game location is an institution (here: school), the details of industrial/organisational culture will also borrow from the canon. This the larps did with the names of school subjects (and quidditch!) in CoW and the witcher skills/subjects in WS; the division into Houses and rivalry for the House Cup in CoW; the harsh physical training + Trial of the Grasses for elixir tolerance in WS; the strict hierarchy between masters and students etc. Some elements are replicated in minute detail, e.g. the names and powers of witcher signs and elixirs in WS are directly based on *The Witcher* video game. Interestingly, WS adapts one of the aesthetics/mechanics from the first *Witcher* game: romance cards given to players as a symbol of sexual interaction with a non-player character (The Witcher Official Wikia, 2015). Several NPCs in WS (male and female), designed as sexually active and open for affairs with players-students,

would give a printed card with their picture to the player they had sex with.

Summing up, the material, symbolic and social culture of the franchise world may be adapted to a larp setting through characters, space and timelined events. A significant part of in-game culture is created through timelines of events and the playable + assumed space of the game as pre-defined and decorated by larp organisers. However, the main "infrastructure" for in-game culture are characters, who will actively develop the timeline by interactions in/with the playable space and share "knowledge" of past events in the assumed space beyond.

Languages: In CoW international environment, the official language was English, but saturated with Harry Potter's terminology (muggles, quidditch), with the addition of Latin-like names of spells. Players were asked to use English at all times, even when they gathered in small national groups. In the all-Polish edition of WS, players were asked to stylise their language with elements of archaic Old Polish, in the manner of the Witcher books, including coarse humour and obscenities. In both games, the language included names of people, places, groups, monsters, organisations etc. known from the franchise. The "interconnectedness of the world's terminology", says Wolf, may be "enhancing the reader's immersion in the world" (2012, p. 188). In WS, language archaisation and proper names adapted from the saga additionally create a folkloristic Slavic flavour, considered by Garda a dominant element in *The Witcher* video game (2010, p. 23).

Neither of the larps featured constructed languages, such as discussed by Wolf in the respective chapter, nor a variety of languages, nor translators or translating devices (except for very few cases of minor Polish-speaking NPCs in CoW, and a translation spell used to communicate with a captured demon in WS). Wolf's observation: "besides organizing and connecting concepts and cultures in imaginary worlds, languages and words are also often a source of knowledge and power within their worlds" (2012, p. 184) has, therefore, limited application. As source of knowledge – extensively, if we count in-game lectures, books and conversations; as source of power – only in spellcasting.

Again, this does not seem to be specific to Witche/Potter universes but to larp as a medium: it relies primarily on communication between

players / characters, thus impediments to communication could jeopardize the very essence of the experience. Impossible to be quickly learned in pre-larp workshops, fictional languages are unlikely to be introduced in a larp. However, it would be a viable option for communities who have been learning such language for a long time, such as Klingon-speaking fans of *Star Trek* or Quenya-speaking fans of Middle-Earth.

Mythology: In Wolf's words:

> Mythologies structure secondary worlds by giving them a history and context for events, through legends and stories of origins that provide backstories for the current events and settings of a world. They often reveal how characters and ongoing problems came to be, so that story events seem more meaningful and perhaps even the completion of a long character arc or the resolution of an age-old conflict. Mythologies, then, provide historical depth, explanations, and purpose to the events of a world (2012, p. 189).

It seems, therefore, that mythology plays an important role in the interconnected infrastructures of an imaginary world. Nevertheless, neither CoW nor WS made noticeable use of a mythology. This should come as no surprise considering the marginal existence of mythologies in the original universes. In both settings, stories about monsters, spiritual beings, ancient heroes, magic and magical items are not myths – they are reality or history (except for some ridiculed folk tales). Even a cosmic magical cataclysm called the Conjunction of Spheres in the witcher's world does not belong to creation myths but to the realm of science, like the Big Bang theory in our world.

When it comes to religion, the pantheon of gods presented in Sapkowski's fiction is small and superficially sketched, with priesthood and organised religion frequently presented as insincere tricks to obtain money and power (exception: the cult of Melitele, goddess of health, fertility and agriculture). All protagonists and the majority of their friends are godless and suspicious of religion. In Rowling's books, even though they feature immortal souls and afterlife, there is no mention of heaven and hell, nor God or pantheon of gods. In both canonical narratives, the protagonists and the world's affairs do not seem to care about religion of any kind, and this attitude was transferred to the larps.

However, in the case of other franchises that take a different approach – one that heavily features religious or non-religious myths – it should be expected that derivative larps would follow suit.

Philosophy: On the one hand, philosophy is part of the widely understood culture of the franchise universe: it is the culture (people / characters) that develops philosophies. Wolf, however, pays more attention to the philosophical worldview of the authors that may be reflected in the design of the world. In that case, it goes beyond the fictional in-game cultures:

> A philosophical outlook can be embodied within a narrative in a number of ways: through an author's direct commentary on events; through characters' points of view; through statements made explicitly in dialogue or implicitly in characters' behavior and choices; through the way actions and consequences are connected, revealing a worldview concerning cause-and-effect relationships (for example, whether bad characters are punished for their crimes or get away with them); and through the author's overall attitude as to what is considered normal or unusual (which can be expressed by the norms within the diegetic world of the story itself) (2012, p. 192).

Wolf seems to be interested mostly in ethics and ideology, and larps seem to have huge potential in these areas. Roleplaying can be a platform for expressing values and worldviews, as well as a tool for a real change of perspective and identity in players. This theme is explored in detail by Bowman (2010) in *The Functions of Role-playing Games* and Simkins (2015) in *The Arts of larp*. Fuist calls it "agentic imagination" – "the active ability of social actors to shape their identities through immersive imagination" (2012, p. 114). Both CoW and WS have something to tell here.

Also, as will be seen in CoW (but not in WS), in a transmediation of the philosophy of the franchise world, a large larp is subject to the same ideological forces that Lemke sees in MMO games:

> divergences in ideology and value systems that may occur when fans and players appropriate the resources of a franchise world to express their own view of social reality. Large online communities of fans / players may develop their own cultural values, at variance with those of the creators of the original franchise world and its commercial extensions (2004, p. 7).

Hence, the ideological and ethical discourse in CoW focused on sexism, racism / classism against muggles, muggleborn wizards and werewolves – to a much larger extent than J.K. Rowling's books (which had been criticised on grounds of social justice, e.g. Dresang, 2002). Moreover, it highlighted full tolerance for non-heterosexual relationships and non-normative gender identities: "your character can be straight, bi, gay, lesbian, queer or

whatever you choose, and only a few people will care. Just as it should be in reality (but sadly isn't)" (Rollespilsfabrikken & Liveform, 2014, p. 40). The question of good and evil was discussed as "what is the definition of Dark Magic" and whether "good" wizards can learn and use Dark Magic to battle evil. However, the concepts of Good vs. Evil remained strongly polarised and black-and-white. It were social justice issues that got the spotlight.

In WS design doc, by contrast, the theme of racial struggle is much less relevant and gender issues almost non-existent. On the one hand, this could be seen as a deviation from Sapkowski's original vision which does feature the discussion of racial / gender inequalities. On the other hand, Sapkowski problematises these issues in **some** short stories and book chapters but **not** in others, so it might be argued that their marginalisation in WS is not a serious breach of fidelity. Nevertheless, it is the ethical question of good and evil that takes centre stage in WS. The ethical complexity of Sapkowski's books was already successfully transmediated to *The Witcher* video game, praised for:

> the behavioral realism of its synthetic agents, the maturity of its fantasy world full of social issues and conflicts, and in the freedom it allows players to make complex choices that enable the game to satisfy a wide range of psychological needs. Instead of making good vs. evil choices, players usually find themselves in situations that require choosing between the lesser of two evils. These choices directly affect the virtual environment and govern player interactions with the inhabitants of the fantasy world (Bostan, 2009, p. 13).

Similarly, the *Witcher School* design doc reads: "Wanting to keep the original tone of the Witcher world, dirty and morally unclear, we decided to create characters with complex personalities, possibly as far from simplicity or archetypes that we could" (Agencja 5 Żywiołów, 2015, p. 11). Another trick was to confront players with ethical questions and let them find answers on their own. As Simkins says, "A good larp writer will [...] force some good questions on the participants, but they want to experience the joy of seeing the players take ownership of the characters and lead the story in interesting directions of their own making" (2015, p. 67). This is exactly what the WS is doing, laying down these questions for players:

- How hard can I push myself to become the best?
- How much effort can I put into completing a given task?

- Am I able to take someone's life?
- Are the beasts roaming the surrounding forests the only creatures deserving to be called monsters? (Agencja 5 Żywiołów, p. 8)

Larp allows to "practice first person ethical perspective", in which the player can "negotiate the world's complex decisions from the character's point of view" (Simkins, 2015, p. 183). Detailed analysis of in-game ethics falls beyond the scope (and word limit) of this paper. For the comparative analysis of the larps as franchise / adaptation, suffice it to say that:

- WS tried to recreate the social world and ethics as they were depicted in the *Witcher* saga, emphasising moral dilemmas and problems in drawing a clear line between good and evil;
- CoW took effort to "correct" its franchise society in line with social justice ideals, and emphasised racial and class issues (in Wolf's framework, this means changes to the adapted infrastructures of culture, philosophy and characters).

5. Further outlook

College of Wizardry has received immense media coverage around the world, drawing the attention of the general public and of media companies (Axner, 2014). Tickets for the second edition sold out in two minutes (Dembiński, 2016, p. 148), and crowdfunding campaigns secured money for more. Two more CoWs, a sequel and a re-run, took place in April 2015, almost simultaneously with the *Witcher School*, and yet more followed. At this moment (June 2016), CoW #9 and #10 are scheduled for November 2016 (again, fully booked) and #11 for March 2017, with the first overseas edition *New World Magischola* recently completed in the USA, and the first German-speaking *College of Wizardry: Nibelungen* coming at the Kliczków castle in February 2017. *Witcher School* has had the total of six editions (one of them international) at the castles of Moszna or Grodziec, and another Polish plus other English-speaking ones are coming in September and October 2016. In November 2015, the ex-witcher Moszna castle became a British manor house in *Fairweather Manor*, a larp inspired by TV series *Downton Abbey*: a new project by the same team that stood behind CoW. Another one, *Convention of Thorns*, set in the White Wolf's franchise

World of Darkness, is coming in October 2016 at Książ castle. There also was *Inside Hamlet* in March 2015 in Denmark; not really a popular media franchise, but also a high-budget castle larp with cross-media outlets.

Each of these projects resonates through mainstream media, making more and more people interested in larp. In Poland, where larp was little known beyond the larping community, CoW was a true game-changer that paved way for WS and other games (Dembiński, 2016, p. 151–152). The majority of WS players were first-time larpers, and many say they want to continue to larp. In the first version written in 2015, I concluded this paragraph with "Future will show if it is a lasting change or a short-lived fad". In this mid-2016 revised edition I have no doubt the "blockbuster larp tourism" is here to stay.

Another new trend that seems to be currently unfolding is the incorporation of larp into licensed for-profit activities of the entertainment industry. Hundreds of larps based on popular franchises are created by fans for fans for fun at game conventions, and the copyright holders do not object. However, the impact of the castle larps of 2014 and 2015 (especially CoW) could not be ignored. Warner Bros prohibited further use of the Harry Potter brand after April 2015 (Raasted, 2015, p. 30), so the next CoWs are no longer set in the franchise. By contrast, CD Projekt RED gave their permission for the *Witcher School* in April and August 2015, even though the organiser intended to turn it into for-profit. Neither company has decided to use the larp for its own profit.

Nevertheless, to use Fiske's (1989) concepts of excorporation/incorporation, it is possible that the entertainment industry will reincorporate franchise larps as another branch of copyrighted cross-media production. The process has already begun. First, in early 2013 the larping community heard about Disney's patent claim for "Role-Play Simulation Engine" for theme parks, and expressed fears about potential legal action taken by Disney against larp organisers (Aaronlarp, 2013). In mid-2015, Disney officially announced plans for a new park Star Wars Land that will feature immersive roleplaying. There are reports about Disney staff studying franchise larps *Monitor Celestra* and *College of Wizardry* for this purpose, and Nordic larpwriters being directly involved in the Disney project (Bienia, 2015). Lately, Martin Eriksson, a globally recognised larpwriter (known e.g. for *Monitor Celestra*) has been hired by the new owner of the

White Wolf brand to redesign the whole franchise as a coherent trans-media universe, combining video games, RPGs, larps, films etc. under a single storyline (Olepeder, 2016). At the time of writing, Rollespilsaka-demiet has just released the website for *College of Extraordinary Experiences* (CollegeofEE.com, 2016): a highly expensive (4.900 euro per ticket) larp-like workshop conference for professional experience designers, with mentors from a variety of creative industries in which larp is found next to the American film and TV industry. The days of franchise larps being ignored by transmedia giants seem to be over.

 Corporate involvement may take the form of a) direct profit-making from ticket sales, or b) demanding licence fees from larp organisers, or perhaps c) supporting grassroots larp events as powerful engines for brand marketing. Option "a" is coming in Disney theme parks, whereas "c" is the case of *Witcher School*. When it comes to "b" White Wolf's attempt at introducing a pay-for-play policy in 2005 was quickly cancelled in face of community outrage (Doctorow, 2005). Since then, I have not heard about any company demanding licence fees for larps. Still, it does not mean that the idea cannot come back. It is too early to predict which form will prevail, but there is no doubt that reincorporation of larp is on the way.

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Od *College of Wizardry* do *Witcher School*. Studium porównawcze larpów franczyzowych

Abstrakt: Przedmiotem pracy jest transmediacja uniwersum z globalnej franczyzy do teatralnej gry fabularnej (larpu). Analizie poddaję dwa przypadki: *College of Wizardry* (świat Harry'ego Pottera) i *Witcher School* (świat wiedźmina), posługując się siatką ośmiu światotwórczych infrastruktur według Marka Wolfa (2012): przestrzeń, czas, postacie, natura, kultura, język, mitologia i filozofia. Studia przypadku prowadzą do pytań i przypuszczeń na temat franczyzowych larpów w ogólności. Przykładowo, postacie, kultura, mitologia i filozofia mają największy potencjał jako kanały bezpośredniej imitacji/adaptacji elementów z franczyzy (książek, filmów, gier wideo) w larpie; filozofia jest najbardziej podatna na zmiany motywowane ideologicznie; przestrzeń zaś i natura będą w dużym stopniu warunkowane fizycznym kształtem terenu gry. Tekst kończy się spojrzeniem na możliwe relacje między twórcami larpów a przemysłem rozrywki multimedialnej chronionej prawem autorskim.

Słowa kluczowe: larp, franczyza, transmedia, wiedźmin, Harry Potter

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