

Between Authenticity and Fantasy

The Medievalist Music of the Videogame

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015)

Naam: Susanne Dirksen

Studentnummer: 3997448

BA Muziekwetenschap

BA Eindwerkstuk, MU3V14004

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Begeleider: dr. Ruxandra Marinescu

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Universiteit Utrecht

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¹ I notated the music examples as shown in figures 2.1, 2.3, 2.5 and 2.7 by using the music notation program MuseScore. All music examples are short melody transcripts of tracks of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), composed by Marcin Przybyłowicz, Mikołaj Stroinski and the Polish folk group *Percival*.

² A list of sources for the images of figures 2.2, 2.4 and 2.6 is available in the *Images* section of the Bibliography (page 24).

Abstract

The influence of nineteenth-century Romanticism on popular perceptions of the Middle Ages resonates widely through contemporary media. Medieval-themed videogames are extremely popular now, but scholarly studies of medievalism in videogame music are scarce.

Between Authenticity and Fantasy seeks to bridge this gap by discussing the medievalist music of a case study, the highly acclaimed fantasy videogame *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015). The thesis also explains why Romantic-style orchestral music, folk music and period instruments are used, even though they are anachronistic in this imagined historical setting. As Romantic-style music has been used to depict the Middle Ages in many visual media, it is not strange that the composers have turned to this musical tradition. Furthermore, the adaptation of folk music and period instruments in this soundtrack suggest a sense of desired authenticity and historicity to a broad audience, as they emphasize a certain rural or urban location. *The Witcher 3* employs a variety of musical styles that play an important part in the creation of an immersive and engaging experience, as they have the capacity to suggest a historical setting through music. The case study illustrates these suggestive qualities of medievalist music by using four music examples.

Introduction

Elements of the Middle Ages have manifested themselves in art and literature for centuries. This manifestation and interpretation of medieval elements in times after the Middle Ages is called medievalism.³ The immense success of medieval-themed television shows and films such as *Game of Thrones* (2011) and *The Lord of the Rings* (2001) illustrate the presence of medievalism in contemporary media. As is demonstrated by their widespread fanbases, medieval-themed stories continue to appeal to a broad audience.

Although a number of recent scholarly works look into the medievalism of music in visual media, the videogame genre is often left out.⁴ Recent initiatives, such as the *Society for the Study of Sound and Music in Games*⁵, indicate the growth of the study of videogame music, but most publications are primarily concerned with technological aspects of videogame music. The study of medievalism in videogame music still comprises but a small part of videogame music studies, but this has its advantages, too, as it provides the opportunity to explore medievalism in a relatively young, but prominent, medium. By considering medievalism in videogame music, we gain a better understanding of the uses of the Middle Ages in contemporary media.

When investigating medievalism in videogame music, one particular videogame genre stands out: the role-playing game (RPG). This genre was popularized by the analogous table top game *Dungeons and Dragons* in the 1970s. The success of fantasy RPGs like *The Witcher 3* (TW3) illustrates the ongoing popularity of this genre, as it has received multiple ‘Game of the Year 2015’ awards. One of the main reasons why RPGs enjoy such popularity is because they have the capacity to capture a player’s attention and imagination by presenting a constructed glimpse of an imagined past. However, a videogame has to maintain familiarity as not to completely alienate a player. One way to bring about this familiarity is through the use of associative music, which is often rooted in the music traditions of other screen media. Medieval-themed films, for example, are often accompanied by Romantic-style orchestral

³ Louise D’Arcens et. al, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2.

⁴ Examples of scholarly works on medievalism in the music of visual media are: John Haines, *Music in Films on the Middle Ages: Authenticity Vs. Fantasy*. (New York: Routledge, 2013) and James Cook, Alexander Kolassa, and Adam Whittaker, eds. *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁵ The *Society for the Study of Sound and Music in Games* regularly updates a bibliography of selected works on music and audio in videogames. <http://www.sssmg.org/wp/bibliography/>.

music, as this became the standard idiom in Hollywood film in the twentieth century.⁶ In this thesis I define Romantic-style music by referring to this Hollywood tradition and its nineteenth-century origin.

The influence of the nineteenth century and Romanticism also comes to the fore in the soundtrack of TW3, in which Romantic-style music is frequently heard. But the adaptations of folk music and Celtic music in this soundtrack are more subtly connected to the Romantic era, when folk revivals occurred.

We might expect that the music in TW3 should suggest authenticity, as its story begins in the year 1272, but to represent historical accuracy is not the aim of music in such videogames.⁷ The purpose of the anachronistic music in TW3 lies in its ability to create more believability and immersion: it is an essential aspect of a player's experience. Historical accuracy will thus not be discussed in this thesis, rather, its focus will be on suggested authenticity.

The main question of this thesis is as follows: in which ways are the Middle Ages represented in the music of the role-playing game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*? The following three sub-questions are meant to help answer the main question: how does a romanticized perception of the Middle Ages manifest itself in the musical styles of TW3? What are the relations between the music and the locations in TW3? Which associative medievalist elements are employed in TW3? Both chapters in this thesis discuss the elements of these sub-questions.

The first chapter of this thesis provides the theoretical background for chapter two by discussing the recent scholarly debate on medievalism and its Romantic roots. It also explains how Celtic and folk music and Romantic-style music constitute the medievalist sound of TW3. For this discussion, I turn to chapters by Louise D'Arcens and Clara Simmons.⁸ John Haines' perspective on pastoralism in medievalist film music is particularly relevant, because it helps understanding the link of pastoralism with the medievalist elements in the case study.⁹ Another important work to which I turn to is a collection of essays edited by James Cook,

⁶ Kathryn Kalinak, "Chapter 5: A history of film music II: 1927-1960," in *Film music: A very short introduction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 62-63.

⁷ Bettina Bildhauer, "Medievalism and cinema," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D'Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 49.

⁸ Clara A. Simmons "Romantic medievalism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* ed. Louise D'Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁹ John Haines, "The Making of the Middle Ages," in *Music in Films on the Middle Ages: Authenticity Vs. Fantasy* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 7.

which provides approaches to medievalism and anachronism in popular media.¹⁰

The second chapter discusses the case study of this thesis and provides interpretations of the medievalist music of TW3, using four music examples from the soundtrack: a grand battle track, a diegetic minstrel song, a combat track, and a Celtic song. I have chosen this case study specifically, because the part folk music plays in the soundtrack of this videogame is remarkable; I argue that it has defined the overall sound of the videogame. Adaptations of folk music prevail in the combat music of TW3, which will be exemplified by the combat track and the Celtic song, but the composers employed Romantic-style music in the most tense battle scenes, which attests to the persistent influence of the Romantic music tradition in other media. The Celtic song and the diegetic minstrel song emphasize a particular historical location and a medieval signifier.

This thesis highlights the relevance of the study of medievalism in videogame music, especially given the current interest in the imagined Middle Ages in contemporary media and the scarcity of studies in this particular field.

¹⁰ The following two essays were consulted to gain insights into the use of Celtic music and the use of the lute as a denominator of a medieval setting in TW3:
Simon Nugent, “Celtic music and Hollywood cinema: Representation, stereotype, and affect,” in *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2018).
Daniela Fountain, “3 ‘Frame not my lute’: the musical Tudor Court on the big screen,” in *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen*, James Cook et. al, eds., (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2018).

CHAPTER I

The Long Arm of the Nineteenth Century

1.1 Reviving the past

Medievalism is a concept that embodies the perception and recreation of a medieval Europe in post-medieval times.¹¹ The term ‘medievalist’ refers to a nineteenth-century construction of an ideal past. By contrast, I use the term ‘medieval’ to refer to elements identified by modern scholars as dating from before 1500. Medievalism thus refers to the conceptualization of the Middle Ages, instead of stressing historical accuracy.

Following the ‘Medieval Revival’ near the end of the eighteenth century, themes from the Middle Ages became a popular subject among the Romantics. According to R.R. Agrawal, the Middle Ages sparked the interest of writers at the beginning of the Romantic Movement.¹² I argue that the Medieval Revival lay at the core of the Early Romantic Movement, as it paved the way for medievalism in the nineteenth century and its subsequent influence on contemporary perceptions of the Middle Ages. The Medieval Revival thus indicates that medievalism was already bound up with Romanticism in its earliest stages.

If a nostalgia for a lost medieval past is one way to define medievalism, one could argue that medievalism had a great impact on the Romantic sentiment as well, as this movement took great inspirations from medieval narratives.¹³ Many RPGs, too, use literary elements derived from the Middle Ages. Typical themes include chivalry, opportunities for adventure, and romance. These elements have attracted both contemporary gamers and the nineteenth-century Romantics, as they have the power to spark the imagination of a broad audience. The fascination with medievalist stories is thus not a novelty, as they continue to inspire many through their immersive, imaginative and nostalgic qualities.

The quest for retrieving a lost past also gave rise to another revival. The ‘Celtic Revival’, which was established by scholars in the nineteenth century¹⁴, shows similarities with the Medieval Revival in its yearning for a lost past. According to James Porter, this revival

¹¹ Richard Utz, “Coming to Terms with Medievalism,” *European Journal of English Studies* Vol. 15, No. 2, (August 2011): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1325577.2011.566691>.

¹² R. R. Agrawal, “The Medieval Revival at the Initial Stage,” in *The medieval revival and its influence on the romantic movement* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1990), 1-2.

¹³ Clara A. Simmons, “Romantic medievalism,” in *The Cambridge companion to medievalism* ed. Louise D’Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 103.

¹⁴ James Porter, “Introduction: Locating Celtic Music (and Song),” *Western Folklore* 57, no. 4 (1998): 206, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1500260.

combined both historical elements and inventions.¹⁵ The inventive nature of these movements can be found in current manifestations of Celtic music as well, as this genre contains a mixture of cultural stereotypes influenced by popular notions of what Celtic music is. Especially near the end of the twentieth century, Celtic music became more present in mainstream media.¹⁶ The Hollywood blockbuster *Braveheart* (1995), for example, exaggerates its historical Scottish setting through the clichéd use of bagpipes.¹⁷

In this thesis I refer to Celtic music by defining it through its geographical, musical and linguistic characteristics: the Celtic regions and languages of Ireland and Scotland, and the popular use of stereotypical instruments, such as the Celtic harp and the fiddle.¹⁸ According to Simon Nugent, these instruments are frequently used as Celtic signifiers in medieval-themed popular media, as a general audience associates them with an authentic European past that is old enough to be identified with the European Middle Ages.¹⁹ I argue that composers of medieval-themed media, too, employ Celtic music because it sounds ‘old’ enough to the majority of its listeners. Celtic music has the capacity to evoke a mystical Europe of the past, but it remains familiar through its stereotypical styles and sounds. These stereotypical features also come to the fore in, for example, the theme song of the recent animated film *Brave* (2012), wherein a historical setting of Scotland is suggested.²⁰ In *TW3*, too, Celtic music is adapted to suggest a historical and peripheral setting. Here Celtic music serves not only to deepen the emotional engagement with a story, but also to provide a means of orientation, as recognising certain types of music helps a player to navigate. I argue that through music, the cultural and historical context of a videogame is underlined. As music in videogames has the capacity to enhance the immersion a player experiences, it is a vital ingredient in the quality of a videogame.²¹

¹⁵ Porter, “Introduction: Locating Celtic Music (and Song),” 207.

¹⁶ Simon Nugent, “Celtic music and Hollywood cinema: representation, stereotype and affect,” in *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen* eds. James Cook, Alexander Kolassa, Adam Whittaker (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2018), 15f/61.

¹⁷ ClassicAdden, “James Horner – Braveheart Theme Song,” Youtube Video, 2:37, August 26, 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AN04imFDK8>.

¹⁸ Porter, “Introduction: Locating Celtic Music (and Song),” 215.

¹⁹ Nugent, “Celtic music and Hollywood cinema: representation, stereotype and affect,” 15d/61.

²⁰ MrFrancoisLeScore, “Brave [Soundtrack] - Touch The Sky - (Julie Fowlis) [HD],” YouTube Video, 2:31, July 27, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAD_E1kaYuY.

²¹ Tim Summers, “Music and Virtual Game Worlds,” in *Understanding Video Game Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 92.

1.2 The pastoral ideal

Celtic music not only signifies an imagined historical setting in medieval-themed media. Here I argue that Celtic music is also employed to underline a rural and peripheral environment, as it is associated with peripherality. The nineteenth-century concept of pastoralism indicates this rural and urban distinction, and idealizes the former.²² I argue that the idealization of a rural and ‘traditional’ way of life is present in medievalism as well, as both pastoralism and medievalism attempt to retrieve a ‘simple’ and premodern way of life. Following John Haines’ concept of a ‘pastoral’ mood, I argue that the adoration of nature is also a prominent feature in an RPG like TW3, as it contributes to immersion.²³

In this thesis I refer to the pastoralism in TW3 not only through visual aspects, but also through its sonic aspects. Whereas John Haines refers to the sound of a horn as a signifier of a pastoral medieval setting, I argue that in TW3, folk music and, more specifically, Celtic music are signifiers of the pastoral mood and its rural character.²⁴ Composer Marcin Przybyłowicz, who, together with Mikolai Stroinski composed the soundtrack for TW3, noted that the rural regions of TW3 are emphasized by the use of Slavic inspired folk music, but I argue that the pastoralism of TW3 is primarily reflected through the use of Celtic music, as this type of music idealizes the location where it is heard.²⁵

1.3 The medievalist sound

The use of folk music to suggest an authentic historical setting seems a logical choice as, according to Haines, folk music is associated with medieval music, noting that both medieval music and folk music evoke a sense of authenticity.²⁶ The idea that folk songs hold genuine authenticity was, according to Haines, already mentioned by writers of the sixteenth century.²⁷

Although Celtic music and folk music play a major part in the suggestion of authenticity in the music of TW3, the influence of the Romantic-style tradition is evident, especially in the most dramatically tense scenes. Apparently, when it comes to accompanying drama, ‘epic’

²² Terry Gifford, “1 Three kinds of pastoral,” in *Pastoral, The New Critical Idiom*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

²³ John Haines, “The Making of the Middle Ages,” in *Music in Films on the Middle Ages: Authenticity Vs. Fantasy* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 7.

²⁴ Haines, “The Horn Call and The Trumpet Fanfare,” 47.

²⁵ A short part of the interview with composer Marcin Przybyłowicz is embedded in the following online article: James Cook, “Playing with the Past in the Imagined Middle Ages: Music and Soundscape in Video Game,” in *Sounding Out! Theme: Medieval Soundscapes*, eds. Dorothy Kim and Christopher Roman, soundstudiesblog, last modified October 3, 2016 by acajc3. <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2016/10/03/playing-with-the-past-in-the-imagined-middle-ages-music-and-soundscape-in-video-game/>.

²⁶ Haines, “Court and Dance Music,” 69.

²⁷ Haines, “The Making of the Middle Ages,” 7.

and medieval-themed stories in films and videogames still rely on this Romantic tradition. As Kathryn Kalinak noted, the strength of this musical tradition lies in its communicative qualities: it became a vehicle in Hollywood films for communicating emotion and as a guide in the narrative.²⁸ Haines noted the dominance of this Romantic sound as well, noting that it became a persistent musical idiom for the scoring of medieval-themed films in the twentieth century.²⁹ I argue that the use of Romantic sound in TW3 is equally part of the medievalist sound of this medium, as it has been used to portray medieval-themed narratives since the beginning of the Hollywood tradition.³⁰ It makes sense for composers of medieval-themed RPGs, too, to use this type of music, as the associative nature of the genre was established long before videogames were around.³¹

Typical features of this Romantic tradition, such as grand symphonic orchestras, resonate in the soundtrack of TW3. Although the leitmotiv is not an invention of the Romantic era, I argue that its use in contemporary media was heavily influenced by Romantic-style Hollywood music, in which the leitmotiv became a prominent ingredient for making the story more coherent.³² Kalinak noted that especially the melodic leitmotiv became the dominant type of leitmotiv employed by Hollywood composers.³³ In TW3, too, these recognisable melodies narrate clues to the listener, as the main characters' leitmotifs resonate in different versions throughout the story in order to signal their presence. Furthermore, I argue that these melodic leitmotifs, in addition to the Romantic-style music, are employed in TW3 to strengthen the emotional engagement

The main function of folk music and period instruments in this videogame, however, is to suggest a certain historical setting, and to make the contrast between rural and urban locations clear. In the rural locations, folk music is the dominant type of music, whereas period instruments that are associated with civilisation, such as the lute, are used in the urban locations.

Medievalist music is thus rooted in the heritage of nineteenth-century Romanticism, as folk music and Celtic music, too, experienced a renewed interest in the nineteenth century.

²⁸ Kalinak, "Chapter 5: A history of film music II: 1927-1960," 62-63.

²⁹ Haines, "Court and Dance Music," 77.

³⁰ Two noteworthy examples of the use of Romantic-style music in medieval-themed media are the soundtracks of *Floris* (1969) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938); Geert de Wit, "Floris Tune Floris Theme Song," Youtube Video, 0:52, June 25, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaZndSnQQos>.

Soundtrack Fred, "The Adventures of Robin Hood | Soundtrack Suite (Erich Wolfgang Korngold)," YouTube Video, 14:40, June 24, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uT6dLPfSCL8>.

³¹ Haines, "The Making of the Middle Ages," 19.

³² Kalinak, "Chapter 2: How does film music work?," 11-12.

³³ Id., 12.

CHAPTER II

The Medievalist Sound of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015)

Grand orchestral melodies, expressive folk songs and period instruments all contribute to the medievalist sound of TW3. But as the story begins in the year 1272, the use of these types of music are anachronistic, as they derive from other musical eras. The four music examples in this chapter illustrate this functional anachronism.

In this chapter, I argue that the anachronistic styles of music in TW3 are appropriate for their purposes as they suggest different geographical and historical environments.

2.1 The sound of battle

In the story of TW3, the player assumes the role of Geralt, who is a witcher with supernatural senses: he wields swords and is able to cast magical spells. His primary job is that of a monster-slayer, but in TW3 his main purpose is to find and save Ciri, a noble girl who is like a daughter to him. The main antagonists in the story of TW3 are a group of powerful elves, who go under the name of the Wild Hunt. This group of huntsmen pursue Ciri, who is both the last child of the 'Elder Blood' (a rare and powerful gene) and a princess.

When facing the Wild Hunt, the music of TW3 shifts to a sound that is more dramatic than the general combat music. In this thesis, I use the term 'boss battle music' to indicate the music that is heard during encounters with powerful enemies. As combat constitutes a major part in this gameplay and story, the implementation of ear-catching music during such encounters is of crucial importance, as it reminds a player to be cautious and quick to respond.³⁴

Although the general folk sound of combat music communicates 'awareness' to the player through its striking and fast-paced cues, I argue that, in order to communicate an increased level of danger, the composers have turned to Romantic-style music. Considering that this type of music became the dominant musical idiom in medieval-themed films in the twentieth century, this is not an odd choice.³⁵ The dramatic and narrative qualities of Romantic-style music especially match the aural and communicative needs of boss battle scenes, as these are of great significance to the player's ability to progress the videogame.³⁶

As is mentioned in chapter 1, one of the key communicative components of Romantic-style

³⁴ Summers, "Communication for Play," 126.

³⁵ Haines, "Court and Dance Music," 77.

³⁶ Summers, "Communication for Play," 116.

music in TW3 comes to the fore in the form of leitmotifs. These unite the narrative and aid the player in understanding the situation, as they return in a variety of cues and scenes.³⁷ The presence of key characters and locations is communicated through these themes, which I will demonstrate by the following example.



Figure 2.1 The leitmotif of the Wild Hunt.

The leitmotif of figure 2.1 signifies the presence of the Wild Hunt. It is heard in the track *Eredin, King of the Hunt*³⁸ and other crucial cinematic scenes in which the Wild Hunt is present. Its haunting sound is achieved through the use of the melodic tritone: the melodic diminished fifth and augmented fourth are present in bar 4, bar 7 and the connection between bar 2-3 (see figure 2.1). The tension this interval creates is emphasized by its insistent use within eight bars.

In Romantic music, too, the tritone was used to portray the fearsome ‘Wild Hunt’, as this was a popular subject derived from medieval folklore.³⁹ In Franz Liszt’s eighth *Transcendental Étude*, for example, this *Wilde Jagd* is portrayed by frequently using the tritone in a thunderous and fast-paced work for solo piano.⁴⁰ I argue that the tritone was established in music of the Romantic era as a signifier of the devil and danger, which, according to Scott Murphy, subsequently influenced the use of the tritone in the Hollywood film music tradition.⁴¹ The associative use of the tritone in the leitmotif of the Wild Hunt

³⁷ Kalinak, “How does film music work?,” 20.

³⁸ Video Game Entertainment, “The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt - Official Soundtrack #3 – Eredin, King of the Hunt,” YouTube Video, 2:27, May 12, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTKOcx679BA>. (the leitmotif of figure 2.1 is heard from 1:43)

³⁹ Paul Merrick, “Le Chasseur Maudit. Key and Content in Liszt’s Music in C Minor,” in *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, vol. 44, no. 3/4, (2003), 321.

⁴⁰ The *Wilde Jagd* as performed by Evgeny Kissin:

Ashish Xiangyi Kumar, “Liszt: Transcendental Etude No.8, Wilde Jagd (Kissin),” YouTube Video, 4:43, June 1, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crprL4skrY4>.

⁴¹ Scott Murphy, “The Major Tritone Progression in Recent Hollywood Science Fiction Films,” *A Journal for the Society of Music Theory* 12, no. 2 (May 2006): 2, <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.06.12.2/mto.06.12.2.murphy.html>.

attests to the persistent influence of Romantic-style music on contemporary media.

2.2 Priscilla's song

Like boss battle music, most cinematic cutscenes of TW3 employ an orchestral and nondiegetic soundtrack. But one of the most pivotal cutscenes of TW3 highlights a diegetic song, sung by the minstrel Priscilla, who captures both the attention of the audience of the story world and the gamer alike. In this particular scene (see figure 2.2), I recognise three signifiers of the Middle Ages: the minstrel (1) singing about romance (2) and the display and sound of a lute (3). I argue that these signifiers contribute to the medievalist setting and that they suggest a civilised location in the following ways.



Figure 2.2 Stills from Priscilla's performance in Novigrad.

In a tavern in the city of Novigrad, we hear and see the performance of a song, *The Wolven Storm*, by Priscilla, a minstrel.⁴² According to Haines, the minstrel is a popular medievalist subject.⁴³ I argue that *The Wolven Storm* might also reflect the simplicity of the way the minstrel and the Middle Ages have been portrayed in film.⁴⁴ The melody of this song is not very striking: it is mainly based on the diatonic scale, it does not include any poignant dissonant intervals and its rhythm, too, does not include a lot of variation (see figure 2.3 below).

Even though the use of the minstrel to depict the Middle Ages is stereotypical and simplistic, I argue that Priscilla's song supports the narrative, as she sings about the romance between Geralt and the sorceress Yennefer. Here the song has a clear function, as it might influence the player's decision to either leave or stay with Yennefer. In its simplicity may lie

⁴² Shirrako, "The Witcher 3 Soundtrack OST - Priscilla's Song," YouTube Video, 4:09, May 21, 2015. <https://youtu.be/2bSk-8C76dc>.

⁴³ Haines, "The Singing Minstrel," 109-110.

⁴⁴ Id., 89.

its charm, as the player, just like Geralt, has been given a moment of silent contemplation.



Figure 2.3 *The Woven Storm*, first verse.

The lute in this scene is, just like the minstrel, associated with the court and the elite. Priscilla's richly decorated lute radiates a golden light in a tavern that is unnaturally bright and colourful (see figure 2.2). I argue that this was very likely deliberate as a reminder of the association of shining gold with a noble character performing on a beautifully decorated instrument, but it may also refer to the late medieval de-luxe illuminated manuscripts with golden initials.

Daniela Kleinman argues that the lute is typically used in film to represent the Renaissance.⁴⁵ I argue that the lute in this scene, however, not only suggests a historical setting, but also underlines the distinction between the rural and the urban, as this 'elite' instrument indicates a more civilised region of TW3, namely the city of Novigrad. The contrasting 'rural' sound of the non-urban locations will be illustrated in the following section.

2.3 Reflecting the outskirts

Romantic-style music plays a major part in the soundtrack of TW3, but a substantial part of the soundtrack was based on folk music. The use of folk music in medieval-themed videogames is not a novelty either, but the part it plays in the soundtrack of TW3 is striking. Here folk music is not only heard in its typical space, the tavern, but also in rural areas, where a major part of the story and combat takes place.

The prominence of folk music in TW3 is exceptional when compared to the prevailing

⁴⁵ Daniela Fountain, "'3: 'Frame not my lute': the musical Tudor Court on the big screen,'" in *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen*, James Cook et. al, eds., (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2018), 10d/61.

idiom heard in fantasy RPGs, which I have referred to in this thesis as Romantic-style music. According to Isabella van Elferen, the other and less recurring musical styles in fantasy videogames take their inspiration from Asian and Arabic elements, which she referred to as ‘exotic’ styles.⁴⁶ If one considers folk music to be exotic, however, I argue that the exotic sound of TW3 is more closely connected to its imagined fantasy Europe, as the majority of folk music heard in this videogame was based on European folk songs. The Slavic-inspired songs provided by the Polish folk group Percival, for example, feature prominently in TW3.⁴⁷

The use of instruments that may be labelled ‘exotic’ or ‘uncommon’ from a Western perspective were used to portray the fictional European setting of TW3. Although the place names in TW3 do not directly refer to actual European locations, many of its sites are inspired by Europe. The countryside of the rural and war-torn region of Velen (see figure 2.4 below), for example, was based on a region in Poland.⁴⁸ The following section illustrates how the rurality of a region such as Velen is reflected through the use of folk music.



Figure 2.4 Stills of the rural region of Velen.

First of all, I argue that folk music aids in emphasizing a rural, or ‘pastoral’, environment by contrasting it with the ‘civilised’ and more polished sound of the music in urban districts in

⁴⁶ Isabella van Elferen, “Fantasy Music: Epic Soundtracks, Magical Instruments, Musical Metaphysics,” in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 24.1 (2013): 9, https://www.academia.edu/7527306/Fantasy_Music_Epic_Soundtracks_Magical_Instruments_Musical_Metaphysics_in_Journal_for_the_Fantastic_in_the_Arts_24_2_4-24_2013_.

⁴⁷ One notable example of a Slavic-inspired song in a combat track is *Steel for Humans*, which is an adaptation of Percival’s *Lazare* (a song based on the Bulgarian wedding song *Oy Lazare, lazare*): Video Game Entertainment, “The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Official Soundtrack #19 - ...Steel for Humans,” YouTube Video, 1:27, May 11, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qck-tdJFe6o>.

⁴⁸ Michał Stec of CD Projekt Red noted that Velen in *The Witcher 3* was based on the northern Polish region of Mazury. This statement was added to the following article: Justyna Dzik, “Polish Culture and Real Places in The Witcher 3 Wild Hunt,” *realplacesinthewitcher*, planpoland, last modified October 21, 2017, <https://planpoland.com/realplacesinthewitcher/>. Velen, also called ‘No Man’s Land’, is an explorable and scarcely populated area in TW3.

the videogame. This difference is also stated by the composer Marcin Przybyłowicz, who noted that the instruments used in urban regions are more of the ‘elite’ type, compared to the folk instruments heard in rural environments of TW3.⁴⁹

Another reason why folk music is employed in TW3 is because it has the capacity to suggest an authentic historical setting. According to Simon Nugent, folk music is meant to create a link with an ‘authentic’ medieval past, as it suggests a history and a tradition.⁵⁰ I argue that the imagined historical setting of TW3 is reinforced through the use of songs and instruments that may sound traditional and old to the general audience of this videogame. The following music example illustrates these points.



Figure 2.5 Part of the vocal melody of *Silver for Monsters*.⁵¹

The combat track *Silver for Monsters* exemplifies the rurality of the region of Velen in the following ways. Firstly, the exotic colour of the melody comes to the fore as D-minor now includes a lowered second degree and a raised third degree (see figure 2.5). This colour may sound particularly exotic to Western ears, who represent the primary target audience for this videogame. The rhythm is heavily syncopated and the eccentric vocals are doubled by a bouzouki, a Greek folk instrument that, like the Persian bowed kemenche in this track, is heard throughout many of the combat tracks of TW3.

Furthermore, to the general Western audience, the kemenche recalls associations with the East just as the bouzouki recalls associations with the South East. Whereas exoticism in music often refers to the differences between the listener and the ‘Other’⁵², I argue that these instruments are not employed to suggest a Non-Western place, as the story world of TW3 is largely based on Europe. I argue that, within the narrative world of TW3, these instruments

⁴⁹ A short part of the interview with composer Marcin Przybyłowicz is embedded in the following online article: James Cook, “Playing with the Past in the Imagined Middle Ages: Music and Soundscape in Video Game,” in *Sounding Out! Theme: Medieval Soundscapes*, eds. Dorothy Kim and Christopher Roman, soundstudiesblog, last modified October 3, 2016 by acajc3. <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2016/10/03/playing-with-the-past-in-the-imagined-middle-ages-music-and-soundscape-in-video-game/>.

⁵⁰ Simon Nugent, “Celtic music and Hollywood cinema: representation, stereotype and affect,” in *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen* eds. James Cook, Alexander Kolassa, Adam Whittaker (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2018), 15d/61.

⁵¹ MrSarto, “OST The Witcher 3 – Silver for Monsters,” YouTube Video, 2:23, May 12, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQS4o_bYA_M (the melody of fig. 2.5 starts at 1:27).

⁵² Ralph P Locke, “A broader view of musical exoticism,” in *The Journal of Musicology* 24.4 (2007), 479.

are used to suggest a time that is ‘exotic’ or ‘other’ to us: the imagined Middle Ages.

The music of the rural area of Velen thus reflects the ‘uncivilised’ and ‘primitive’ nature of this environment through its use of folk music, which opposes the music in the more civilised cities of Novigrad and Oxenfurt present in the videogame.

2.4 Echoes of Celticism

Like the combat music, the exploration tracks of TW3 include elements of folk music, too. In many instances the exploration tracks make use of an orchestral sound in combination with folk instruments. This type of music, which I refer to as ‘exploration music’, plays a significant role in the world-building of the videogame, as it has the capacity to reinforce a setting by communicating a certain mood. The mystical and rural setting of Skellige (see figure 2.6 below), for example, is musically underlined by the emphasis on colour and timbre, wherein rhythmical structures are less pronounced.⁵³

The exploration music in the area of Skellige is also deeply influenced by Celtic music, where it functions to underline its northern and pastoral setting. As is mentioned in chapter 1, I argue that Celtic music is specifically used here to indicate a remote and peripheral location, as a general audience associates this type of music with the outlying regions of Europe. The composers have turned to Celtic music to evoke an imagined cultural history, as it complements the Celtic and Nordic-inspired styles found on Skellige.⁵⁴ But I argue that the Celtic music heard in this region, next to portraying a fictive historical place, illustrates a pastoral ideal.

Just like the Slavic-inspired folk song as mentioned in section 2.3, the adaptation of the Scottish Gaelic song *Fhir a’ bhàta* heard in the area of Skellige reflects the rurality of the location. Unlike the folk songs of the mainland area, this song reflects an ideal place. Its vocals are soothing and sophisticated, which reflects the tranquillity that is to be found in this area. Although enemies are still to be found in this place, it is also a region that is less influenced by the political intrigues and wars that ravage the mainland in TW3.

⁵³ An example of an exploration track wherein atmosphere is emphasized is: Aranáro, “Fyke Isle – Velen Exploration 6,” YouTube Video, 7:15, May 2, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMC-mIJxgo>.

⁵⁴ The region of Skellige contains a mixture of Celtic and Nordic styles ranging from Celtic ornaments in architectural designs to Viking-style ships. Pagan beliefs are suggested here as well, as the beliefs of the Islanders are inspired by Norse mythology.



Figure 2.6 Panorama of Skellige.

The *Fields of Ard Skellig*⁵⁵ was based on the eighteenth century folk song *Fhir a' bhàta*, or *the Boatman* (see figure 2.7 below).⁵⁶ The use of this Celtic song resonates with the audience's perception of what is medieval and old. Although the song itself originates from a time that is much later than the portrayed space the use of the Celtic language of Scottish Gaelic, too, evokes a feeling of history.



Figure 2.7 Part of the vocal melody of *The Fields of Ard Skellig*.

Besides the use of a Celtic language, the sound of the Celtic harp and the fiddle evoke associations with Celtic music, as these stereotypical instruments relate to general notions of what could be defined as Celtic music.⁵⁷ The melancholic fiddle melody smoothly blends with the vocals, which seem to echo in the pastoral and mountainous countryside by the use of reverberation.

In its suggestion of a certain tranquil and ancient place, *The Fields of Ard Skellig* reflects the use of Celtic music in TW3, and how it conveys the pastoral ideal of Romanticism.

As the four music examples of this chapter have shown, medievalism has manifested itself

⁵⁵ VGameOSTs, “The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt OST - The Fields of Ard Skellig,” YouTube Video, 3:10, June 5, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gokhBJWSjeM>. (the melody of figure 2.7 starts at 1:03).

⁵⁶ Lucy E. Broadwood, Frank Howes, A. G. Gilchrist and A. Martin Freeman “Twenty Gaelic Songs,” in *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 8, no. 35 (1931): 295-296, JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4434236.

⁵⁷ Simon Nugent, “Celtic music and Hollywood cinema: representation, stereotype and affect,” in *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen* eds. James Cook, Alexander Kolassa, Adam Whittaker (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2018), 15f/61.

in the various musical choices of the soundtrack of TW3. I conclude that the world-building qualities of both Romantic-style music and folk music may have contributed greatly to the immense success of this videogame, as the various musical styles contribute to suggesting a vibrant space. As I have demonstrated, the reason why these different and anachronistic musical choices work, is because they have been established long before this videogame was released. The influence of the nineteenth century is demonstrated not only by the use of grand Romantic-style sound derived from this era via the Hollywood tradition, but also in the portrayal of an ideal pastoral setting on the one hand, and a 'rough' and uncivilised mainland on the other hand, which both contrast the urban regions present in the videogame. The music examples in this chapter have shown that both the music and its subsequent influence on the perception of an imagined historical time are rooted in medievalism and Romantic thought.

Conclusion

In this thesis I argued that the music of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) reflects contemporary and romanticized perceptions of the Middle Ages. Although the soundtrack of TW3 is anachronistic, the musical choices work well in representing historicity to a general audience, as these choices are largely based on the established musical idiom of medieval-themed films and videogames. In *Between Authenticity and Fantasy*, I argued that the Romantic-style music of contemporary medieval-themed media and the Medieval and Celtic Revivals rooted in the Romantic Movement have greatly influenced the medievalist sound of TW3. The impact of the Romantic era is visible not only through the use of Romantic-style music, but also in the way it emphasizes a pastoral ideal by employing folk music and Celtic music in rural milieus. The urban areas, and its contrast with the rural, are further underlined by the use of ‘elite’ instruments and the character of a minstrel, which are associated with civilisation.

As a wide variety of RPGs such as *The Witcher 3* enjoy huge popularity, it would be interesting to further examine how music, and more specifically music that is associated with historical periods or places, contributes to creating a quality videogame. To study the music of medieval-themed videogames from a medievalist perspective might further explain where these musical choices come from, and why they work well in conveying a historical setting to a broad audience. Further research on music and medievalism in recent medieval-themed RPGs, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (2018), might examine whether there is a common ‘medievalist’ music idiom in these videogames. However, new studies might also argue that the music of medieval-themed videogames do not necessarily relate to medievalism or medievalist ideas. Such studies might also give an indication of whether or not the musical styles used in medieval-themed videogames will change in the future. A clarification of musical styles used in medieval-themed videogames could also, for example, show whether the music in these videogames is all require the influential Romantic-style music. One could even argue if ‘medievalist’ music is even a viable concept, let alone a type of music.

I expect that, by studying medievalism in videogame music, we may either see the continuous complexity of a broad concept like medievalism, but we may also further refine it through new studies of medievalism in contemporary media.

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