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Without morals in a moral world—the expanding moral circle of The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt

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As video and computer games get increasingly more advanced, the immersive experience for the player of these games also follows this trajectory. In these games, one aspect that has been explored to the greatest extent is that of choice and player agency. Often, these choices and acts are of a moral character, whether it be choosing what to do on an ambiguously formulated questline with multiple branches or how to approach different creatures within the game world. The game *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* provides a case of a game that uses many mechanisms to explore issues related to moral and morality. Through a qualitative textual analysis of the game, this article explores how players are faced with the game's moral order. Utilizing Singer's idea of the expanding moral circle, this article explores the game world's establishing of moral issues, including who and what are included in the expanding circle and in what way this is conveyed within the game. Relying on the dual nature of the gameplay, where players are role-playing as the Witcher Geralt of Rivia as well as experiencing what unfolds in the game in front of a screen, this article discusses how these moral orders–the one in the game world and the one in "real" life—intertwine the moral underpinnings of a digital game. This article also discusses how encounters with non-human animals often leave the player with very few choices regarding which to act, which is not presented as moral issues at all. Furthermore, this article discusses further development of the theoretical framework as a possible vantage point from where to understand morality and how it emanates in different game worlds.

KEYWORDS

video games, morality, critical animal studies, popular culture, speciesism, fantastical racism

1 Introduction

Video games are not only a pastime but also an opportunity for players to explore different ways to interact with their worlds. When a player enters game worlds of monsters, witches, dwarves, and other entities that struggle to live and coexist in war-torn lands, the player's choices will impact them all more often than not. In true classical gaming fashion, a game will allow players to act as the role of equalizers who slay monsters and help farmers. Simultaneously, the player can go through the world as a villain, ignoring pleas for help and letting wild animals and monsters roam free in the game world, wreaking havoc. As the player makes choices to act or not to act, the actions or inactions will have a consequence for the in-game world. However, how are these choices made, and by whom?

As technology develops, inhabitants of the digital world become increasingly credible as actual thinking creatures. This is mainly because the artificial intelligence programmed into the NPCs is becoming increasingly sophisticated. Among these developments is the possibility

of the increasing complexity of behavioral aspects in non-humanoid creatures (for example, being perceived as more "real" or "natural"), such as animals or monsters (see section 5.2 At the fringes of the circle –animals as moral mirrors). Pearce (2011) discusses this habitual thinking of the digital world in including only human or human-like inhabitants of fantasy settings, while this article will focus on the part of speciesism, where relationships between humans, humanoid fantastic races, monsters, and animals are formed. Are the non-human species visible in these games given the same treatment of perceived complexity? Following Hawreliak and Lemieux (2020), we acknowledge that video games are interesting arenas to represent and analyze systemic oppression and privilege issues. The many modes of address by video games allow the player to experience and interact with systems of oppression and privilege in ways that other media cannot, at least to the degree of interaction presented by digital games.

Digital games have been central to moral debates since the 1970s (Lamers and Filipović, 2020). With the advent of violent video games such as *Mortal Kombat* (Midway) for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System in 1993, this became a governmental affair in the United States. *Mortal Kombat* is often cited as the case for initiating the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) in the United States, which rates digital games and accordingly assigns an age recommendation for playing the game. Violence in games is often seen as an ethical, moral, and, to some extent, practical societal problem, which is at the same time validated and disputed by both researchers and the public (Andersson and Milam, 2023; Lin, 2013). The industry, gaming culture, and games themselves have undergone a seemingly boundless evolution from the 1990s, with the advent of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), E-sports, virtual reality, and countless more forms and genres (too many to recount here), and it is constantly evolving (Consalvo, 2017). As Groen et al. (2020) note, "an increasing amount of time is spent on playing digital games in the everyday life of a likewise increasing number of people" (2020:1). Studies on games have been as diverse as the games themselves, ranging from ethnographical and anthropological understandings of gaming communities and players (Pearce, 2011; Nardi, 2010), how specific gaming technologies are imagined through play and advertising (Voida and Greenberg, 2012; Chambers, 2016), to understanding the economic structures of the gaming industry (Kerr, 2023).

This article explores the construction and the depiction of moral conflicts of speciesism and (fantastic) racism along with i mperatives and obligations toward the cohabitants of the world in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015, henceforth *The Witcher 3* or "the game"). The game was released for personal computer (PC) gaming and gaming consoles such as PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. The game is the third installment in a series of one of many iterations of a series of a medieval, low-fantasy setting based upon the books of Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski (Majkowski, 2018). Initially, a series of books (novels and short stories), it has been adapted into several forms of games (board games, collectible card games, and tabletop roleplaying games), animated and live–action films, as well as several live–action television shows, and is now a world-spanning franchise. This article will focus on the game while still recognizing the franchise's significant influence on many spheres of popular culture. Over the past 10 years, the game has reached massive audiences and has been praised in reviews and many game websites' top list of 2015. It has also been featured as number one often (Gamespot, 2015). By drawing on theories from critical animal studies and cosmopolitanism (as a normative call for a moral responsibility toward the other), we outline an analysis of the representation of the interactions between the humanoid and the other inhabitants of the fantastic world of the Continent. This article builds its discussion based upon a critical reading of the player interactions and available agency toward the digital cohabitants in the game world within *The Witcher 3*.

This article will investigate the following research questions:

- How does the game set up a series of conflicts between species and fantastic races within the game world of the Continent?
- How does the game morally construct the player avatar, the Witcher Geralt of Rivia, as the game's protagonist?
- How does the game offer moral agency for the player in navigating these conflicts?

2 Materials and methods

To capture the experience that sets video games apart from any other form of media, the study of video games requires a somewhat specific skillset: Games are essentially about understanding the experiences of an implied player. A study of ludic experiences requires an understanding of the game as form and content, as well as the implications of the choices and the activities of the player and their emotional state (Mortensen, 2018). For that reason, Aarseth (2003) suggests that there are simply three main approaches in analyzing the experience that emerges from video games: looking for the design, rules, and mechanics, studying the play of others, or studying the game by playing it oneself. Any kind of study about video games will be a good fusion of these approaches.

This article is based on a qualitative analysis of the game's content. The case study is built upon 150+ h spent within the game world of the Continent. Understanding a specific case such as *The Witcher 3* requires a method that is "highly *focused*" (Gerring, 2017: 29), paying particular attention to details, as well as the relational contexts which the game exists within. Thus, this method is based on the critical readings that emerge from intimate knowledge from within the game. However, a case study is often not open for judgment until after it has been completed since this is where the results can be discussed in further contexts (Tight, 2017). Therefore, it is equally important to adopt an exploratory and open form of qualitative critical reading in addition to an initially well-conceptualized and demarcated problem. Since games not only offer narratives or stories through individual playthroughs, it is also vital to keep in mind that the game facilitates emotional experiences based on the willingness to immerse oneself in the game worlds. Open-world games (or sandbox games) are well suited for these types of analysis, as they rely on an understanding of how it constructs what Klastrup (2009) calls "worldness"—the sense of the game world being lived in. This makes research on digital games, such as the one at hand, rely on intimate and experience-based readings.

Video games that focus on morality, choice, and open-ended gameplay are central to the gaming culture. They offer the player an experience where both the player's choices and agency will impact the game, their inhabitants, and their world (thereby enhancing the gaming experience). In *The Witcher 3*, many of the choices given to the player are moral. Throughout the game, the player's choice will affect how events in the game play out in the end. Pearce (2011) argues

that this is a fundamental aspect of building a credible game world that feels inhabited by actual thinking beings and not just static, one-dimensional non-playable characters (NPCs).

The choice to study the fantasy game *The Witcher 3* boils down to a series of key factors, in addition to the game being a (now) classic example of an open-world video game. First, its world is highly interactive; many different outcomes are depending on the player's actions. The ever-present theme of moral choices and the consequences of choices makes this an open-ended game, which invites the player to reflect upon their actions throughout the experience. Second, the game is constructed to be (imagined as) realistic in terms of presentation, soundscapes, and storytelling. This creates a low-fantasy world that emerges as a perceived lived-in world to the player. Its realistic character-to-character interaction and interaction with the game world have been highly praised (Ramsey, 2015). It is also a game that offers a rich platform for academic discussions on many different levels: the creation of the world through the use of folk culture themes (Majkowski, 2018), the architecture (Aroni, 2019), how folk culture is esthetically coded in the soundtrack (Stevens, 2021), and its portrayals of gender and identity (Eckersley, 2022) or how its soundscapes serve to enhance player experience (Woźniak et al., 2024).

3 Critical perspectives on morality, species, and digital games

Game studies have long been an established area of research, bringing in critical perspectives from across the academic spectrum. Ethical considerations have been very much a part of these studies, echoing that "all forms of entertainment throughout history have been suspected of exerting a bad influence on the character formation and virtuousness of their audience" (Lamers and Filipović, 2020: 31). Lamers and Filipović (2020) continue to assert that games are, in fact, entertainment, and for the most part, "morally speaking, positive human possibilities lie in the pleasurable use of digital games" (2020:33). However, when it comes to moral reasoning as a player within a digital game world, there is likely to be conflict, as the player does not enter the world "empty," but with preconceived notions of guilt, empathy, and sympathy (Krcmar and Cingel, 2016). Historically, the play has been separated from the mundane exercises of everyday non-virtual life (Huizinga, 1955; Sicart, 2020), however, Krcmar and Cingel (2016) mean that the playing of a game is not separable from real-life feelings of morality, making the magic circle within which the game is played, "porous" (2016:99).

Another field where the studies of video games (and fantasy video games in particular) are abundant is the issue of fantastic racism. It can generally be understood from two points of view as discussed in the following: On the one hand, the portrayal of fantastic races mirrors discourses from the real world. Young (2015) positions that fantasy as a genre is generally understood as an area of whiteness. From Robert E Howard's *Sword & Sorcery* serials, through the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, to the works of George RR Martin, fantasy is primarily rooted in a firm understanding of the medieval as a Western society with underlying Western values. The portrayal of fantastic races mirrors discourses from the real world, legitimizing a certain form of inherent racial hierarchy. For example, elves are often viewed as the highest of the fantastic races, showing attributes that link them to whiteness, control, and refined civilization. On the other hand, other races display other traits that mark them lower within a fantastic racial hierarchy. The lowest of the races are often connected with evil (such as orcs, trolls, goblins, and similar). These are often described as wild, chaotic, uncivilized, and linked to an inherent evil. Often, these races cannot help but can be evil because it is in their nature. In this way, the portrayal of races often mirrors racist discourses and stereotypical tropes. Carpenter (2024) shows how different optional races for the gamer also will influence how the character or race is expected to be played. Since its inception, race in, for example, *Dungeons and Dragons* has been a central determining factor of who a character is. These include race-bound evil or goodness, where some races are portrayed as more intelligent or charming than others while often also being described as inherently good. In contrast, the races that are portrayed as inherently evil often bear characteristics that make them dumb, crude, and violent.

When we talk about fantastic racism within the game *The Witcher 3*, we talk about the racism that occurs within the game world and the relationships that different species have with each other, that is, the relationship between humans and what Majkowski (2018) calls "non-normative life projects," such as other anthropoid humanoid races (such as elves, dwarfs, gnomes, etc.), other supernatural beings such different forms of ghosts, undead, godlings and other forms of spirit creatures, or monstrous beings, such as griffins, kikimoras, basilisks, and dragons. A substantial part of this article deals with how the player encounters non-human animals in the game and how these animals are part of the moral sphere in which the player is situated. While there is not an abundant body of research, specifically on morality and non-human animals in digital games, some very distinct perspectives have emerged. For example, a few attempts have been made to play morally toward non-human animals, resulting in, for instance, attempts to play as a vegan in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Westerlaken, 2017). Coghlan and Sparrow (2021) conclude their discussion on the killing of non-human animals in digital games by saying that there is a risk of this type of mundane violence to de-sensitize players to physical harm that is afflicted on animals. Van Ooijen (2018) argues for an explanation that centers around ideology to explain this, stating "that we live in a 'carnist' society encouraging violence against certain species of animals; and that games constitute procedural representations of such often implicit ideological systems" (2018:34). While these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, they show a range of understandings toward the treatment of non-human animals in digital games. As Hayse (2023) notes, however, morals and ethics are not interchangeable concepts, and morality is more often than not understood as "particular values and practices in one's personal, social, and cultural life" (2023:579). This is opposed to ethics, often understood as the underlying code of conduct. This article considers this separation between morality and ethics helpful going forward, as it primarily deals with morals in Hayse's understanding.

4 Theoretical framework—cosmopolitanism and morality toward cohabitants

The Witcher 3 has a fantasy setting, meaning it does not need to aspire to reflect any real-life counterparts. However, the game is close to tropes that have come before, not just in fantasy settings but also historical ones. For example, while aspects like architecture are amalgamations of recognizable elements, the design is unique to *The*

Witcher 3's game world (Aroni, 2019). In the same vein, the fantasy elements are more often than not based on recognizable tropes, with races such as dwarves, elves, and gnomes, but also include those distinct to the game world (and the compiled universe of *The Witcher*, including books, TV shows, etc.). Humans stand at the center of this world for the player, in the shape of Geralt. Through him, the player experiences the world and all its conflicts, the way it looks and feels, the creatures encountered, and the choices made throughout. While choices and moral acts, such as violence, are often directed toward humans, monsters, or humanoids, Chittaro and Sioni (2012) make a point that violence toward non-human animals falls by the wayside in much of the literature on digital games and violence. In this article, non-human animals are included in these moral discussions.

To understand the acts and issues the player faces in *The Witcher 3*, we turn to how Singer (2011) discusses how humans morally encompass others in our surroundings. According to Singer, the "moral circle" relates to how one imagines different moral responsibilities toward others and has historically been expanding in conjunction with developing more diverse ways of living. Starting with only the closest people, such as the family or neighbor in early history, the circle has come to amass inclusion of far-reaching others with the rise of the modern world, such as the creation of the nation–state, industrialization, and subsequently, modern life (Singer, 2011). Media has become a large part of this expanding circle. As Silverstone (2007) declared, media has become the primary way through which we encounter the other by reading, watching, and engaging in the multitude of mediated forms of communication. Silverstone dubs this the Mediapolis in reference to the fact that human expression and deliberation of morality, philosophy, and politics occur through the media (Silverstone, 2007). This comes close to how Singer describes the moral circle as expanding; modern digital life offers many connections to others through mediated forms (think social media as a telling example). Below is a theoretical figure of the framework used in the analytical work (Figure 1).

In its use in this article, the expanding moral circle is used to consider the moral choices and deliberations of the player in *The Witcher 3*, playing as the character Geralt of Rivia. By centralizing the player (Geralt) as the hub of the moral experiences in the game, the circle is utilized to show how close or distant specific moral acts and imagined moral questions appear to the player. Through this, special focus can be given to how the game presents the player with frames of morality to both deliberate and act within. However, the ways in which Singer (2011) considers the concept are rooted in a historical understanding of moral expansion, based on humans in real life, not digital worlds. This adaptation of Singer's concept is part of this article's analysis. Furthermore, Singer's arguments are not without criticism. First, Singer's perspectives are grounded in that he is a white male, which could raise questions about privileged perspectives and the implications these perspectives might have on his reasoning. Second, Singer's elaborations on speciesism are often used to equate discrimination and forms of abuse of humans to that of non-human animals (see, for example, Grey and Cleffie, 2015). While these criticisms are considered, the expanding moral circle lends itself well to conceptualizing a framework of morality (especially in the case of this article) where a mapping of moral obligation and imaginaries can be done with the individual player as a starting point. The expanding circle is, in essence, a moral imaginary, a way to consider how and why morality is understood in a specific sense. Dant (2012) uses the concept of the moral imaginary when examining how television depicts and establishes different conceptions of morality, creating tapestries of moral understandings. This is, in turn, conveyed to the viewer through TV shows, films, and so on (Dant, 2012). One of the key points in using the moral imaginary in theoretical application is that it makes possible the outlining, as well as the deep analysis, of a specific moral understanding. In the instance discussed in this article, it is then how *The Witcher 3* builds a moral world for the player to comprehend, act, and, in many cases, also influence. While the expanding moral circle can be seen as a moral imagination, the details in how Singer describes how the circle functions to encompass other species lays the groundwork for the coming analysis in this article, as the case deals with other races, nonhuman animals, and, finally, various kinds of monsters. Thus, one of Singer's (2011) main arguments is how he sees the moral circle expanding to include nonhuman animals. Kasperbauer (2017), while noting that the expanding circle's, seemingly most important, feature "is a quantitative claim about the number of different types of entities we show moral concern for" (2017:138), reflects on Singer's arguments and notes that there is a distinct qualitative side which deals with the concern of how "the change in treatment is morally important, or makes a moral difference" (Kasperbauer, 2017). While the notion of a moral imaginary may seem all-encompassing and diffuse, this distinction of who, what, and why provides tools in which to deconstruct and subsequently reconstruct (that is, to provide an understanding of the moral imaginary the player encounters in *The Witcher 3*) the moral world of the game.

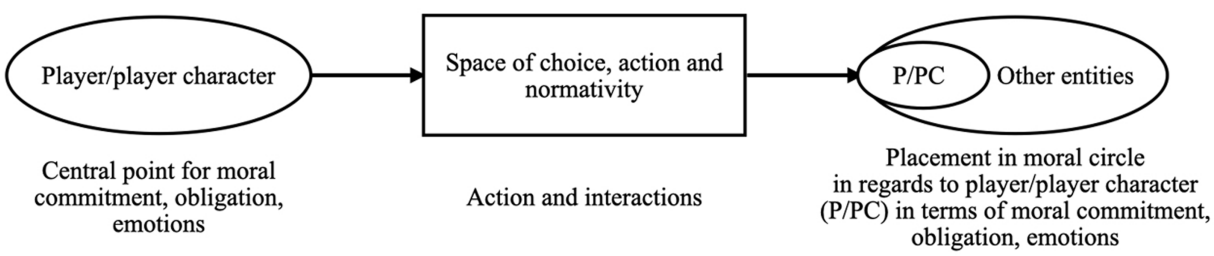

FIGURE 1
Theoretical model for analysis of player/player character and moral commitments.

Two notes need to be made on the theoretical framework. First, in playing the game, the player is engaging through the character Geralt; they are role-playing another human being. This leads to certain considerations regarding method and theory application. While Silverstone (2007) argument about Mediapolis is not as foundational as Singer (2011) expanding circle, it provides a cornerstone in its ability to put the mediated experience at the forefront of the discussion of morality. Second, the world of *The Witcher 3* is abundant with creatures more, less, or not familiar to the player. Some, as human and non-human animals with real-life counterparts, are distinctly recognizable, while others are imagined races and species. The framework discussed here will help in understanding how the game builds a moral imagination, which includes all these species, and how the player is allowed to interact with them. Here, we can see the details of the figurative borders of the expanding moral circle, detailed inclusions into the circle, the conditions in which this is done, and any (if any) ambivalences that occur as an outcome of this analysis.

5 The player avatar—Geralt, the Witcher

The game world is explored through the eyes of the main character, Geralt of Rivia—the titular Witcher. To explore how the player interacts, we will first explore the construction of the main character. In this section, we will unpack how the character is constructed and balanced and how his moral responsibilities toward his different cohabitants of the Continent are presented. As Dant (2012) notes, morality "is, by and large, not a rational or conscious process but one that for the individual members of society often seems to be 'natural'—a set of attitudes, values, ideas, and feelings that they take for granted, as if it were built in and a part of who they are" (2012:4). As a baseline for how moral issues are encountered, there is a "naturalized" and taken-for-granted moral circle in which the player, as Geralt of Rivia, is situated in as the epicenter. It means that the vantage point from which morality is viewed in the game is a duality, that of the fictional character Geralt and the player who plays the game. The moral issues faced in *The Witcher 3* are encountered on two levels. One is that of role-playing as Geralt, and the other is the "real" feelings and emotions the player might experience during gameplay. The analysis will first deal with the character of Geralt as the center of the expanding moral circle, and then discuss morality closer to how a player encounters the cohabitants of the game world. The game's focus on moral issues is primarily presented through the dilemmas the Witcher faces in his journeys through the Continent. The character Geralt of Rivia is a literary creation of Sapkowski, and the game follows a main story alongside a myriad of minor and major side stories. Through the eyes and actions of the main character, the player gets to explore, experience, and influence the world through its actions. Therefore, the game must strike a balance between storytelling that stays true to Sapkowski's creation and player choices to create a sense of agency, present a series of surprises, and control the story's potential outcomes. To facilitate maximum flexibility, the player must have a high level of freedom in controlling where to go and how to affect the world through their actions.

The game solves the problem of balancing action and inaction in two major ways: First, Geralt is a literary character with a strong personality and a strong sense of personal morals. It allows the player to adapt their playstyle to how they perceive the character to act. Second, Geralt often alludes to the Witcher's code as a guiding principle for his actions. In the short story collection "*The Last Wish*," Geralt admits that the Witcher's code is something he made up because "those who follow a code are often respected and held in high esteem. But no one's ever compiled a Witcher's code. I invented mine." (Sapkowski, 2008: 149). This allows the character to be morally flexible and be aware that every choice has moral implications and unforeseen consequences. A recurring key issue in the franchise is the notion of greater and lesser evils. When choices have repercussions that are not planned or foreseeable, it may be better not to choose at all. A great example can be found in a series of quests early in the game, related to the main quest, "*The Beast of White Orchard*": The Witcher is contracted by a garrison's commander to hunt down a griffin that is attacking peasants in a nearby village. The commander's soldiers have been unable to hunt the beast and ask the Witcher to fulfill the task in exchange for some vital information. On investigating the griffin's attacks, the Witcher concludes that the commander's soldiers have been attacking and killing the griffin's mate, which has enraged it, as griffins are known to mate for life. By accepting the mission, the player is forced to kill a morally wronged creature to progress. A subsequent voluntary quest asks the Witcher to find a swallow potion for one peasant girl who suffers from wounds inflicted by the griffin. If the Witcher declines or cannot conclude the quest in time, the girl will die from her wounds. Alternately, if the Witcher offers her the potion, he will later learn that though the wounds were healed, the potion had destroyed the girl's mind. Regardless of the player's intent, the outcome of the scenarios will be pain and suffering for the peasant girl.

Throughout the game, the Witcher is constructed as a deviant. Witchers are not merely humans but beings created of alchemical compounds designed to slay monsters on behalf of humans. As such, Geralt is a mutated creation disconnected, feared, and shied by humans of all countries, regions, and classes. Despite being an agent serving the Continent's denizens to save and protect them from supernatural and natural threats, the Witcher is an outcast. Often, Witchers are described as being as much of a monstrosity as the monsters they kill for coin. Their isolation is essential, as it puts Geralt outside the moral circle. While it exposes him to different forms of fantastic racism that are abundant within the world, it also detaches him from the moral systems that the farmers, soldiers, clerics, nobles, and kings of the Continent adhere to.

As such, he can be played in the style of an outsider, with a spectator's detached eye on the happenings around him as he stands as a stranger whose services are up for coin. Because he has equally detached relationships with kings, monsters, peasants, barons, nobility, and mothers who have lost sons in the wars, it allows the player a certain element of freedom as he serves as an agent as well as a non-committed stranger. More importantly, as Majkowski (2018) puts it, "He can serve as a wanderer that is disconnected from superstitions, prejudices, and old morals. His stance is built on a modern type of morality, which allows a connection with the player who can experience the different forms of moral layers that the game explores." For that reason, Geralt bears both cosmopolitan and voyeuristic characteristics. Like the stranger of Georg Simmel (1971), he roams through the world: Here today and leaves tomorrow. This

allows the player to play in many assorted styles, as according to the (alluded to and very flexible) code of the Witchers, they have no moral commitment toward anyone. Geralt's principles stipulate that he should accept his contracts, fulfill them, accept payment, and not get involved. As such, every time the player chooses to get slightly more involved the character Geralt acts against his principle. Whenever he allows himself to be or become involved in the world's affairs, he is transgressing the detached stance. As he continues to get involved, his moral circle is a little bit widened by the different actions he takes. The circle continuously widens as he decides he is responsible for his fellow cohabitants. Nonetheless, the world in which this takes place needs a stringent, and many times acceptable (by the player) "moral order," which is "the largely unwritten system of social mores and conventions through which the society is kept together as a coherent whole" (Dant, 2012: 45). While Geralt can accept or resist the ideals of this moral order, the moral order exists as a value-based point of reference.

During the duration of the game, the player has interactions with animals, monsters, sentient humanoids of different races, and other "non-normative life projects," as Majkowski (2018) calls them (ironically enough, that includes undead and ghosts). Through the large and small quests that often stem from someone hiring the Witcher to clear a problem (find someone lost, save someone kidnapped, or protect someone), he gets to experience the world as a consequence of finely balanced fantastic ecosystems (what happens when a griffin finds that domesticated sheep are good game?), or finding himself knee-deep in clearing out nests of fantastic animals so that a (human) village may blossom. His position to kill monsters for coin is both a bearer of civilization (as in clearing out wildlife and or helping farmers save their stock). However, the Witcher is also a ghost-hunter who may also help against the use of evil magic and curses. In the capacity to be a witch-hunter who lifts curses or exorcizes ghosts that appear because of wrongdoings, the Witcher appears as an entity who comforts, advises, and sometimes acts as a conscience. As a cosmopolitan and bearer of cosmopolitan norms, he walks through the world and listens before acting, if deciding to act at all. He talks, observes, participates, and, finally, acts. As such, he is neither biased nor committed but offers the player several options to act as well as not to act.

As a Witcher, Geralt of Rivia is an outcast: Being bred and mutated to be magical, fantastical, and set apart from most humans, he often becomes a victim of racism such as preconceptions about what the Witchers are. Geralt, the epicenter of the world's presentation of moral issues, then relies on the various kinds of moral interpretations that differ from different perspectives (in quests and interactions, for example). The image of the Stranger (Simmel, 1971) becomes even more prevalent in this case, shifting the focus from Geralt as a character toward the player's feelings and moral compass, even though the player is free to role-play in any way they choose. At work is the moral duality discussed at the beginning of the analysis, where experiencing the game world's expanding moral circle works on several dimensions and levels. In this way, "[m]oral consciousness is not learned from reasoned reflection on principles but evolves through rational and critical engagement with the ordinary, situated, activity of social life going on around us" (Dant, 2012: 46). In interacting with the game world as well as in learning about it through the eyes of Geralt, the moral order of the game slowly unfolds in front of the player.

5.1 The continent—a conflicted sandbox

Equally important as the character avatar is the world it is present in. This section will unpack and discuss the world of The Witcher 3. The world of the game is called the Continent. It is presented in a sandbox style, which means few or no limitations on what the player can do. Apart from the possibility to simply exploring the Continent by roaming the world freely and without constraints, the game world emerges primarily through the main quests, the side stories, and the different monster-hunting contracts that the Witcher Geralt accepts. Quite often, a story is set in motion through an encounter with a specific person who needs something accomplished. The entry point is often a simple need that uncovers dramatic tension, unforeseen mysteries, and other issues of often moral nature.

The Continent is where warring nations fight against each other. Still, it also serves as a ground for tensions between different forms of living projects, such as humans, dwarves, elves, and other fantastical humanoid creatures. One of the major conflicts stems from the continent serving as a backdrop for many types of different forms of fantastic racism, where the different races view each other with suspicion, hatred, and fear. *The Witcher 3* addresses this relationship through its different layers of interconnected moral issues, such as personal responsibility toward individuals, groups, and beliefs that are naturally connected with the world's construction.

The Continent is a place where many different races and beings have arrived from other planes. Thus, the Continent emerges as a world where all (and essentially none) have rightful claims to the world. In the game, the world is a contested place between the elder races (elves, dwarves, and gnomes), who claim to have lived on the continent for thousands of years, and humans, who have been slowly inhabiting the Continent. Over the past 1,500 years that passed since their first entry into the world, they have slowly and methodically pushed out the elder races. The specific details of these circumstances are kept vague within the game but describe how humans expanded their influence. At the same time, the elder races moved, fled, or retreated out of the way of the ever-expanding empire of humans.

The point in time where the world and its beings came to be is described as a cataclysmic cosmic event known as "The conjunction of the spheres," where dimensional planes collided and created the world as it was known. Different races, species and other living projects entered the world. In many aspects, the Continent may resemble many classical fantasy worlds, with its inspiration from medieval times and the inclusion of fantastic races. It is easy to fall into the lines of thinking that Young (2015) proposes, in that fantasy often relies upon an in-built hierarchy in-between the different fantastical races. Carpenter (2024) further builds upon this idea, showing how fantastic racism often relies on a combination of morals, biology, and religion to justify internal hierarchies. *The Witcher 3* cleverly neutralizes parts of this inherent assumption regarding different moral stances among the races as the world is created when all types of worlds invaded it—As such, the Continent becomes a place where different types of racism can be discussed and problematized because of human expansion and colonizing. Where other games may use the different races as ways to talk about diverse types of morality systems (for example, orcs or goblins are evil because it is inherent in their basic nature), the Continent is filled with cohabitants who have to face moral responsibility through their actions alone. Hence Geralt's stance that evil is evil, and that evil

emerges from the decision to take an action. Any type of external force cannot explain evil away—it is a consequence of action.

5.2 At the fringes of the circle—animals as moral mirrors

As established, Geralt is the epicenter of the expanding moral circle, although often constructed as deviant and without moral obligation. Nonetheless, Geralt is a character who is being played; he is controlled in movement and interaction; Geralt does not respond autonomously (contrasting, for example, in games such as The Sims). Having established the character and the context in which he acts (the game world), in this section, we turn to the fringes of the expanding circle and use non-human animals as a further case to explore how the game establishes a moral framework for the player to act in. While others inhabit these fringes as well, their motifs are often laid out for the player to easily understand and decide to act on (or not) and how this act is performed. For example, monsters are generally evil and are bound to be slain by the Witcher. The humans and humanoid fantastical races are understood as their moral actions and ethical modes of conduct mirror issues easily perceived as moral by the player. These issues extend to those of racism as well, and the world of *The Witcher 3* makes these themes clear for the player in the gaming experience. Nonetheless, the main difference between the presentation of racism and speciesism in the game is that the way wild animals are treated in the game does not directly translate to the mistreatment or exploitation of animals. Rather, this is a "hidden" moral issue, which depends on understanding it *as* a moral issue.

To begin to explore the way in which non-human animals fall under the moral framework of *The Witcher 3*, it is imperative first to understand how different animals appear to the player and what actions are available to the player when encountering animals in the game. While this subject has been elaborated in much greater detail elsewhere (upcoming by Johansson and Rübsamen, 2025), a brief overview will provide the player's moral choices in interaction with non-human animals. Naturally, these choices depend on the animal; for example, Geralt's trusty horse, Roach, is treated as transportation, mirroring how most of us are used to imagining horses traditionally. Other animals, such as bears, wolves, panthers, or wild boars, are hostile creatures that attack the player if they get too close. More domesticated and farm animals are docile and do not offer much interaction with the player. This means that non-human's complexity in the game is limited. However, as Singer (2011) suggests, the lines between human and non-human animals are not always as sharply drawn as one could imagine. A standing argument, Singer argues, is often "one that suggests that morality is exclusive to human thought and action, where animals do not have this capacity" (2011:27). Being largely sociobiological in nature, this argument holds the notion of "instincts" close to its core. These "instincts" are purely digital, a preprogrammed intelligence in the game. Molloy (2011) means that how animals are represented and subsequently are seen acting in popular culture is often taken at face value and understood as the animal's natural way of being. The way in which these digital instincts work within the game presents a potential entryway to understanding how the player understands the morality of the game when it comes to non-human animals.

Most prevalent in this regard are the species of animals with real-life counterparts in the game, such as cows, chickens, wolves, bears, horses, various kinds of birds, goats, etc., as discussed above. These fall within and outside of the expanding moral circle, depending on their imagined way of acting. Singer (2011) means that the basic biological argument is centered on a "need" as a definition of an instinct, like that of the fox "needing" to kill and eat a hen, thus creating strategies for going about this task. The seemingly violent animals in *The Witcher 3* (wolves, bears, panthers, and so on) have a digital instinct conveyed as a "need" to attack and kill the player. While this can be understood as simply a defense mechanism for the animals, it is nonetheless hostile, and the player is left with a binary of choice: to kill or not to kill. In most of the game, Geralt is built as a moral vessel that the player fills with their own moral choices. Singer explains that the source of ethics is "from our nature as social, reasoning beings" (Singer, 2011: 149), which is translatable to the actions undertaken by the player in the game. The animals, from the blood-thirsty wolf to the docile farm cow, are outside of more complex moral reasoning (like that about other, human, or more human-like characters). That does not mean that the moral imagination of the game is not complex when it comes to animals; the player is free to reason around the moral choices when encountering non-human animals (for example, the player is free to attack and slaughter farm animals); nonetheless, they are limited in their way of action. Reasoning becomes a naturalized and exclusive human trait for the player as Geralt, who is left with the choice of how to deal with interactions of the kind explained above. As Singer (2011) proposes, this echoes how we traditionally imagine different animals and how they act and feel. The game mirrors these traditional views and presents an imagined understanding of morality recognizable by most players. These understandings are, of course, based on, for example, cultural or religious beliefs and can vary wildly from player to player. However, it is in recognizing how the game presents the animals where the argument lies, unrelated to how the player chooses to act.

While the player's actions are at the center of the game, how the game is programmed, as has been discussed, presents a way for the player to imagine how morality functions within the game world. Certain non-human animals are included in the moral circle (at least as freedom of reasoning). They are not presented as any sort of obstacle for the player at first sight. Others, such as the bear or the wolf, are treated as hostile entities, conceptualized as "beasts" rather than animals. On the official Wiki of *The Witcher 3*, these animals, along with dogs and panthers, are listed as beasts (The Witcher 3 Beasts, 2024). Adams (2010) argues for what she calls an absent referent when it comes to separating animal (living, thinking creature) from meat (food source), in which consuming meat and arguing for this act is easier when the reference to a living animal is removed. In the same vein, naming a wolf "beast" removes it from a sphere in which a wolf is a complex being to a being conceived as a blood-thirsty enemy. This is not the only way animals perceived as dangerous are moved further from the player in the expanding moral circle. The game rewards players for killing animals in the form of different loot, such as pelts, meat, etc. Sturrock (2018), when discussing ethics and game design, means that these kinds of rewards are not always only a reward but "can act instead as feedback, which tells the player how well they are doing in the game" (Sturrock, 2018). Amassing pelts (by killing bears, for example) to craft clothing could be seen as playing "well." Rewards, loot, or feedback for doing well in a game are part of what often keeps the game progressing and the player feeling like they are evolving. Nonetheless, these aspects further situate the "beasts" as just that: beasts with digital instincts that focus on attacking the player.

This creates a special situation for this animal category in the moral imagination within *The Witcher 3*, in which the player is left with few ways to act despite their ethical and moral reasoning. As Singer (2011) posits, "ethics are not laws written up in heaven" (2011:149), but contextual and specific to certain types of social imaginaries, to use Taylor's (2004) term.

The discussion of digital instincts as a way of adding to the moral imagination of *The Witcher 3* is not without its caveats; in a video on the programming of the horse mechanics in *The Witcher 3*, the English translation director comments on the developers making the horse mechanics "too good" to be playable (The Witcher, 2016). The play testers and developers were getting motion sickness from the way the horse was ridden and acted, which led to a simplification of the horse mechanics for the in-game world. While, from a critical perspective, the animals in the game are bound to over-simplified digital instincts and ways of interaction, they are at the same time part of a game that is meant to be played. A user perspective is a fully understandable reason to simplify the gameplay elements; a game is supposed to be enjoyed on some level.

6 Discussion

This article has shown how the game allows the player to engage with and face issues regarding moral responsibility as a result of the player's actions. We have shown how the game allows the player to portray Geralt's flexible and often ambiguous morality in their style. As such, the game allows players to explore many different moral dilemmas where actions often end up with either bad or really bad consequences. By empathizing with the ambiguous origins of the many different types of inhabitants of the Continent, the game emphasizes how the different cohabitants have a mutual responsibility toward each other as sharing a co-living space. By this argument, the moral circle is supposed to cover a large expansion.

This article can hopefully offer valuable perspectives on how to analyze the world construction and player agency regarding the options and set-ups of acting morally within the game. Our discussion allows us to start asking similar questions about the genre of open sandbox games and other action/adventure role-playing games. There are shortcomings in taking a moral perspective on the content and the in-game world. Being a critical reading of a popular culture text, and without actually investigating the players themselves, we cannot determine how the player will play the game. Even though the analysis sheds light on how the game offers moral problems, we cannot assume (nor would we want to) that there is a direct transference of moral understanding from the medium onto the player. This approach would require an entirely different set of methodological applications. What the text does offer in terms of application is a way to initiate critical discussions on how moral agency is facilitated within gaming. As such, the approach in this article can be related and critically read in terms of representation, diversity, and conceptualizing the limitations of moral agency.

As might be apparent by the scope of this article, there are many, all equally fundamental, vantage points in understanding a digital game as a moral project. While it can be argued that the role of the Witcher is outside of the moral systems of the game world, Geralt and the player are very much at the epicenter of the expanding moral circle. This might seem like a dichotomous relationship between world-building and the player character; it is, however, in how the player imagines the moral circle, that emphasis is put in this article. This includes humans, fantastic races and organisms, familiar animals, and unfamiliar monsters. Exploring all these facets of morality in *The Witcher 3* is too large an undertaking for the work presented here. We have decided to instead show, through selected cases, how the notion of the expanding moral circle, as a moral imaginary, can help in understanding game worlds such as the one in *The Witcher 3*. Our attention has been directed toward gameplay elements of interaction, storytelling, and, to a lesser degree, game development. By adapting this viewpoint and aiming it toward certain elements, there can be a more detailed description of the moral construction of the game and its elements at hand. Racism and speciesism have been at the forefront of this analysis, and although they take different forms in their presentation to the player, these themes are based on how the game lays out its motifs to the player. Themes around racism might be easier for the player to relate to real-world connotations, even the fantastical races within or outside the moral circle. Other moral issues are so integrated into gameplay and tradition that they no longer are immediately apparent as moral issues, like killing a wild animal. However, the framework presented here can encapsulate both these moral issues and create knowledge around how they fit into the player's moral understanding of the game world. The moral circle, as explained by Singer, thus enables a *moral mapping* of the different species, be they humanoid, monstrous, or non-human animal. This moral mapping focuses on the relationship between the player and the game world in all dimensions in which the player engages with its inhabitants.

6.1 Conclusion

A game such as *The Witcher 3* might appear like a too comfortable fit for such an analytical framework, as it relies heavily on moral choices that the player makes in the shape of Geralt in his many interactions with townspeople, farmers, dukes, and duchesses and so on. While this might be true, this analysis shows how the framework can be applied to games (or possibly other media) that do not share this explicitness in morality and moral choice. Many other games include the player interacting with other species, animals, and fantastical races, and this framework could facilitate an understanding of the morality the player is presented within these interactions. For instance, a fantasy sandbox game such as *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* has the player help and commit to the causes of multiple fantastical races, but the moral obligation to these is not fully transparent to the player. On the other hand, in games such as the space opera-like *Mass Effect*, the player always has a renegade or paragon meter available to show if the player is affiliated with the "bad" or "good" side, respectively. While this is a transparent visualization of morality, the framework presented here could enable a deeper understanding of the players' further affiliations with other games' entities. Hunting mechanics is another aspect that does not necessarily appear as a moral issue but can be understood through this framework. While non-human animals become a natural choice as a case study, considering this is a substantial part of Singer's initial argument, this can be applied to more exceptional or fantastical cases.

Furthermore, conceptualizing Geralt, and subsequently the player, as an incarnation of Simmel's concept of "the stranger," one can gain insight into how the detached nature of the character lends

itself to an almost alien understanding of morality. The Witcher is not supposed to care about moral issues, the issues of the common and the not-so-common people and creatures of the world. That does not exclude the player from caring and feeling something about the issues presented in the game. It is often quite the opposite, since the game demands the player deliberate on moral gray areas and diffuse paths which certain choices can send them on. Utilizing the notion of the Stranger, at least in the case of *The Witcher 3*, lets the game construct a world in which the expanding moral circle can be understood inch by inch with each moral issue and, subsequently, the way the player engages with them. The Stranger, then, is also a duality, like how moral issues are faced in the game (through role-playing as Geralt and the player's "real" feelings). While not extensively explored in this article, this duality is an interesting way forward in analyzing morality and digital games in conjunction with the concept of the expanding moral circle.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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