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THE WITCHER'S INTERNET MAPS: FAN CARTOGRAPHY, ONLINE COMMUNITIES, AND SPATIAL STORYTELLING

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Maps are more than just navigational tools; they are powerful communication instruments: they shape spatial perceptions and reflect underlying power structures (Harley, 1989; Monmonier, 1991). The transmedia franchise *The Witcher* (Drewniak, 2020), shows how geographical representations function as "action spaces" (Abend & Harvey, 2015) challenging time, space, and storyline consistency. Despite Sapkowski's omission of a canonical map, fan communities, game developers, and media adaptations spread cartographic depictions of *The Witcher* universe. These fan-maps contribute to the spatial imagination of the franchise, revealing discrepancies and offering an entry point to transmedia and internet discussion.

Without an official map that establishes a "spatial truth" (Dodge, 2014) with the authority of the author (or the owner) (Crampton & Elden, 2008), the *Witcher* novels fans have created their own, using textual references and narrative cues. Fan-made maps, game maps, and maps in the Netflix adaptation reveal divergent interpretations of the story-world's geography. These disparities show the performative aspect of mapping (Gerlach, 2018) and how fan-created maps become spaces of discourse, where spatial realities are actively constructed and debated in participatory processes that produce crowd-sourced knowledge (Jenkins, 2006). Online communities, fandom spaces, play a central role contesting these cartographic interpretations, offering debates over spatial logic and continuity; while also offering debate about accuracy, authenticity, and ownership (Jenkins, 2006; Schiller, 2018); but the absence of an author that establishes a canonical space, fans and communities challenge each other in what Massey (Massey, 1999) calls power geometries, in which different agents have unequal chances

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to set up the story-spaces: while some establish those territories (ie. game-designers), others are just drawn to act and move or passively act within it (ie. gamers).

Reading *The Witcher* means making mental maps based on Sapkowski's descriptions, similarly to cognitive mapping theories (Downs & Stea, 1977, 2011). The absent spatial markers invite interpretative engagement and detective work at inferring distances and locations through narrative cues. This reading as active world-building enhances immersion, a key feature of fiction (Eco, 1989) but particular to epic genres (Arnott, 2016) and performative cartography (Turnbull, 2007). Online fandom discussions, particularly on platforms such as Reddit, Discord, and dedicated wiki and fan forums, further contribute to this interpretative process, as users collaboratively construct, debate, and refine the fictional geography: the Netflix adaptation uses cinematic landscapes and visual maps to guide viewers' perceptions of space, while video games incorporate interactive maps as tools for navigation, strategic planning, and immersive engagement (Calleja, 2011).

Research Question

How do fan-created, game-based, and adaptation-driven cartographic representations of *The Witcher* universe function as 'action spaces' in which the negotiating of spatial, temporal, and narrative consistency in the transmedia universe become expressions of power geometry (Massey, 1999) and reach debates about authority involving authorship, and ownership?

Methodology

This project collects data from the original novels and tracks the journey and movement of the main characters (Geralt, Yennefer, and Ciri) as described. On top of these tracks, we collected the territories of the three videogames, and of the Netflix series. Using that as the main frame, we revisited the fandom forums -the wiki, and communities on Discord and on Reddit- to capture debates on the spatial design, and any fan-works. All these performative practices that shape the transmedia world spatialities activated by the movement of the three tracked characters help us combine the static broad-space with the linear and narrative movement and to visualise their intersections and point at the significant locations of the narrated world.

The overlap of cartographies and movements leads to an analysis dedicated to comparing the cartographic dispersion available in the *Witcher* fandoms, and in the industry created products (video games, 1, 2, and 3) and the Netflix adaptation. This analysis is complemented by a qualitative content analysis of the fandom discussions about spatial design.

The work involves mixing methods combining computational and digital humanities approaches with qualitative content analysis of the community conversations: The data collection digitally tracks the discussions and the fandom communities and adds human interpretive approaches to reading and game-exploration. The analysis then uses digital tools (python libraries) to draw the spatial mapping and the character trajectories and overlapping the several maps to identify key geographical inconsistencies across representations and produces a map of maps with the paths of the characters and the tensions across the creations. The analysis of activity in online fan communities

identifies how audiences engage with, challenge, and validate every cartographic interpretation. These discussions are thematically coded, and particular attention is paid to debates about spatial logic, continuity, and the authority of different cartographic sources. This analytical approach enables us to comprehend the mapping of the Witcher universe not only as a topographical process, but also as a dynamic, participatory and discursive practice that circulates between different fan worlds (books, Netflix series, computer game) that influence each other; and how they become spaces of action and of negotiation that bring power geometries at play and reach the edges of regulation on intellectual property and authorship in co-creative transmedia worlds (Authors).

Contribution

Fan-made maps are not static representations but performative actions, and exploring the discrepancies emerging in the diverse circles of fans and creators helps understand the role of maps as dynamic cultural artefacts in which there is no 'right' or 'wrong', but rather a universe in which spatial realities are actively constructed and negotiated enacting power geometries of uneven capacity for map-making and space-definition.

This study on The Witcher helps to critically question the role of mapping in transmedia storytelling, copyright and fan participation within fictional geographies. Cartographic representations of fictional worlds challenge intellectual property and authorship (Schiller, 2018), as much as transmedia worlds do (Rodriguez-Amat & Sarikakis, 2012). And in the case of The Witcher cartographies epitomise the intersection of spatial representation, transmedia storytelling, and fan agency; and maps -reliant on collective interpretations rather than on authorial intent- are particularly rich for power geometry discussion, in which several agents have different capacities to set spaces. Wikipedia, fan Wikis, and game modding communities are key arenas where these debates on authorship and ownership unfold. This analytical work uses the principles of complex, standardized classification systems to provide a useful framework for examining how such systems influence perceptions of authenticity and authority within fictional geographies. This approach contributes to and updates the classic debates on the tensions between authorship, ownership, and fandom, and brings them to the next level by applying them to modern forms like crowd-mapping, fiction-cartographies, and transmedia-storytelling.

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