



GAMES, GAMERS, & GAMING

The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt

By M. Brandon Robbins

The highly anticipated final entry in one of the most critically acclaimed and popular modern video game franchises is finally here, making its way to consoles—which means it's easy for you to circulate! Is *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* worth the wait? This game was, after all, first announced in 2013, and it's been a long two years for the most dedicated fans—two years of hype, anticipation, and, at times, skepticism.

Thankfully, *The Wild Hunt* is one of the richest narrative experiences gamers will ever experience, capped off with challenging, rewarding combat and nearly endless game-play freedom. An optional card game called *Gwent* is included; it is tied to one of the secondary quests and is as addictive and deep as the main play.

The world of *Witcher*

As with the two previous installments, *The Witcher 3* takes place in the same fictional universe and features the same characters as eponymous series of short stories and novels by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski. Neither a deep familiarity with the books nor with the previous games are necessary to hop into game three, though those who are already familiar with at least Geralt of Rivia's previous outings will have greater appreciation for the sprawling story and diverse personae.

Geralt, a professional monster slayer, or “witcher,” is searching for his long-lost lover Yennefer, who has sent him a cryptic letter arranging a meeting. Soon, Geralt is dragged into a story ripe with politics, mystery, adventure, and horror; there aren't too many narrative itches that this game does not scratch, especially when the multitude of secondary quests are taken into account.

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Like most modern role-playing games, *The Wild Hunt* has a complex setup. It is similar in tone to the popular *Game of Thrones* TV series (and the books that inspired it) but with more gritty, brutal combat and less courtly politics. Here, the

main characters are observers and behind-the-scenes operators instead of active participants in the white-collar brutality of medieval government.

A world of one's own

For gamers who wish to craft their own narratives, there are numerous options for doing so; even if the overarching story is somewhat fixed and linear, decisions the player makes (such as whether to free or retain a prisoner, or whether to spare a character's life) affect the story in ways that can be as minor as a dialog exchange or as extreme as the slaughter of an entire village.

The game's designers did an excellent job of allowing players to own their decisions; none of the narrative branches feel like the “right” or “wrong” path. For those wishing for deeper storytelling, there are a staggering number of side quests to complete throughout. Most role-playing games boast this particular content inclusion, but *The Witcher 3* is different in that each side quest plays like its own fully realized story—sometimes even weaving in and out of the main story. Even the “witcher contracts” quests—side quests dedicated solely to killing monsters for profit—have been structured as narrative experiences. There are no minor quests in this game;

each one has its own emotional weight and narrative purpose.

Playing the game

Though the game is heavy on story, it's still rich in visceral and strategic game play. The world of “The Witcher” series is dark, brutal, and unforgiving. There's a disastrous war raging, magic users are being hunted down and burned at the stake, nonhumans face constant and burdensome

racism, and organized crime almost overshadows legitimate business.

The difficulty of the game reflects the harsh nature of the setting; enemies attack heavy and fast, with Geralt having limited resources for protecting and preserving his health. In combat, gamers will spend most of their time on defense, unleashing precise attacks with flawless timing if they hope to survive. Geralt can create and use potions that bolster his attacks and fortify his constitution, but if he overuses them they become toxic and can damage—even kill—him.

In addition to swordplay, Geralt can use simple spells that let him conjure a magical shield, blast fire at his enemies, or force them to drop their defenses. Players will need all of these tools if they hope to stand a chance. With practice and strategic thinking, combat soon becomes a welcome challenge, but at first it is rather frustrating; novice players should definitely scale back the difficulty.

As with any good role-playing game, combat is not the only interaction Geralt has with other characters. Dialog plays a large part in this game, with some encounters avoidable if the gamer chooses the right words.

The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt is a beautiful production, with rich outdoor and indoor environments. While the tone is dark (though there is humor to be found), the graphics are alive with color, texture, and detail. All in all, it's a solid gaming experience and an early contender for game of the year. Patrons who admire dark fantasy, anything sword-and-sorcery, or deeply political stories will find much to love in this modern masterpiece.

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