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**Slow Violence in Crookback Bog: Dark Ecology and
Environmental Memory in *The Witcher 3***

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Abstract: As powerful sites of environmental storytelling, video games offer interactive narratives that shape ecological consciousness. Existing studies tend to neglect how narrative-driven games construct irreparable environmental damage. Timothy Morton's dark ecology and Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence, which have garnered significant popularity in literary and environmental humanities, remain underexplored in studies of gaming narratives and the ethical/political dimensions of player choices. This paper contends that *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* employs its interactive narrative structure and ethically complex characters to enact a form of dark ecology, teaching players that irrevocably broken systems cannot be perfectly restored. This research draws on Lawrence Buell's concept of environmental memory, Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, and Timothy Morton's concept of dark ecology to examine two significant narrative arcs—the Crookback Bog sequence and the Whispering Hillock quest—in a no-commentary walkthrough video. It emphasises how the game's user interaction distinguishes interactive gaming tales from passive ecological texts. This study seeks to (1) show how choice-driven quest structures in gaming narratives embed ecological ambiguity; (2) illustrate the refusal of environmental restoration as an interactive pedagogy of climate grief; and (3) broaden ecocriticism to encompass the procedural and participatory nature of digital storytelling.

Keywords: *Dark Ecology, Slow Violence, The Witcher 3, Gaming Narratives, Interactivity*

1. Introduction

During the early decades of the twenty-first century, video games went through a significant cultural shift. They have become significant sites for the construction of social identities and the negotiation of ideological values. The global video game industry has grown to surpass the film and music industries in popularity (“Video Games”). This cultural ubiquity has catalysed a corresponding expansion of scholarly attention. Game Studies is now an interdisciplinary field. It brings together literary theory, media studies, environmental humanities, and critical theory. Yet there is a significant scholarly gap. More studies are required on how interactive narratives construct irreparable environmental harm.

This paper aims to fill that gap. It examines three interlocking sites within the game: the toxic, war-scarred region of Velen; the Crookback Bog sequence and its associated Whispering Hillock quest; and the game's broader landscape of ruins, hauntings, and memory. For this, Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, Lawrence Buell's account of environmental memory, and Gunther Kress's multimodal social semiotics have been employed. *The Witcher 3* is played and re-narrated as much through walkthrough videos as through direct play. Hence, this paper treats such footage as primary evidence, showing how ordinary players process the game's ecological ambiguity.

In many role-playing games, players expect that completing a quest will correct or improve the systems it engages with. However, in *The Witcher 3*, poisoned marshes remain poisoned after the quests end, and burned villages are not rebuilt. The game persistently denies ecological resolution. It mobilises player agency not to empower restoration, but to instil an ethics suited to irremediable loss. The marred environments of *The Witcher 3* do not follow the popular narrative of heroic reparation. Instead, they show us that certain categories of damage resist erasure by even the most well-intentioned action.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glottfelty and Fromm xviii). The definition reflects its interdisciplinarity. The first wave of ecocriticism was dominated by nature writing, wilderness, and pastoral traditions. Environmental justice, toxicity, and the uneven distribution of ecological harm across different intersections belonged to the second wave. This paper follows the second wave. The distinction between first and second waves “should not, however, be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession. Most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong, and most forms of second-wave revisionism involve building on as well as quarreling with precursors. In this sense, “palimpsest” would be a better metaphor than “wave”” (Buell, *The Future* 17).

Popular environmental storytelling in film, television, and games still follows a restorative logic, in which a protagonist intervenes to repair environmental damage. Second wave ecocritics have long been sceptical of this logic. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) is among the most influential works of the second wave. According to Nixon, the most substantial forms of environmental harm are often invisible to conventional storytelling. They are slow-moving, incremental, and dispersed across time in ways that resist the spectacular, event-based structure that popular narrative typically demands (Nixon 2). Slow violence occurs gradually and out of sight. It is a delayed destruction scattered across time and space and is not typically viewed as violence at all (Nixon 2–3). Nixon also deals with the difficulty of representing slow violence that lacks a single dramatic moment. It poses a representational bind for anyone trying to tell its story within narrative forms built around climactic action (Nixon 3).

This challenge is especially important for video games, which depend on player choices. Slow violence is hard to capture in a story because it does not have a clear beginning or end. Most games use quests that start and finish to shape gameplay. *The Witcher 3* also follows a quest structure but does not connect finishing a quest with solving environmental problems. When tasks like the Whispering Hillock or clearing a monster nest are completed, players can enjoy a sense of achievement. Still, they do not get clear rewards for completing these tasks. The quest may be marked as finished but the effects of slow violence remain in the environment.

In *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), Morton argues that mainstream environmentalist discourse has treated Nature as a transcendental principle to be admired from a distance rather than engaged with directly, and he calls this "a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration" (4). It paradoxically obstructs genuine ecological thinking, since holding nature at arm's length keeps it as an object of reverence rather than a site of entangled, embodied relation (Morton 4–5). Dark ecology offers an ecological awareness that is uncomfortable, intimate, and often repulsive, refusing the sentimentalized images of nature that mainstream environmentalism relies on, and instead preserving what Morton calls its "dark, depressive quality" in the face of ecological catastrophe (186–87). Morton does not believe in the idea of a pure nature to be protected from human contamination. Nature is already mixed, damaged, and strange.

This framework is well suited to *The Witcher 3*, a game concentrated on monstrosity, decay, and moral compromise rather than picturesque wilderness. Many open-world games stage their most beautiful vistas as untouched wilderness available for the player's aesthetic consumption. *The Witcher 3* locations include bogs, swamps, and blighted farmland. All these are spaces coded, in most fantasy media, as background obstacles rather than sites of ethical weight. The game's monsters resist the

moral binary of a monster-slaying genre. Many of them are explicitly ecological beings. They are tied to specific sites, historical wrongs, or forms of neglect. Nature will not be protected by eliminating them. Instead, the act of slaying monsters forecloses one of several possible relationships with it. This paper treats such design choices as evidence that *The Witcher 3* is working within, and extending, the dark ecological tradition Morton describes.

Lawrence Buell observes that human narratives are naturally tied to place. A well-known landscape carries "a landscape of much richer personal and social memory" (256). Its landmarks are layered over and magnified in memory across generations. This idea has clear connections with landscape studies. Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (1996) makes a cognate argument on a broader historical canvas, contending that "landscape is the work of the mind," its scenery "built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock" (7). Buell is primarily interested in how literary texts register this environmental memory. On the other hand, Schama is interested in how physical places themselves come to bear cultural meaning independent of any single text.

The game's burned villages, unidentified graves, and desolate roads function as a distinctly ludic form of environmental memory. Unlike in a novel, the player can walk through a ruined village in a game. Environmental memory is encountered corporeally, through movement and exploration, not only through description. A game's environmental storytelling operates on two registers simultaneously: the fictional register of a ruined village's implied exposition, and the ludic register of the actual mechanical affordances the player is given, since to play a video game "is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world" (Juul 1). *The Witcher 3*'s haunted and ruined spaces exploit both registers, using mechanical design to reinforce, not distract from the historical weight the space is meant to carry.

Alenda Chang's *Playing Nature* (2019) analyses how games represent ecological systems. According to Chang, the rule systems inherent in games can emulate different relationships in the environment. Chang's work emphasises procedural and simulation-heavy games built around explicit ecological systems such as weather, food chains, or resource cycles. In *The Witcher 3*, the ecological content is delivered less through simulated systems than through narrative, level design, and quest writing.

Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen's multimodal frameworks offer a complementary analytical lens. According to Kress, meaning is never made through language alone but through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes – visual, auditory, spatial, gestural – that operate together (79). Van Leeuwen extends this idea. He observes that even apparently minor formal choices have ideological and interpretive weight (Van Leeuwen 3–5). For the purposes of this paper, these

frameworks provide the analytical tools to read walkthrough videos not as transparent records of gameplay but as multimodal texts.

3. Methodology

This paper directly analyses the game's narrative design and publicly available walkthrough footage of specific sequences, drawing on a full no-commentary playthrough of the Crookback Bog and Whispering Hillock sequences by the YouTube creator Lacry (2021). The Crookback Bog sequence appears from approximately 7:10:00 to 8:20:00, and the Whispering Hillock quest appears from approximately 11:00:12 to 11:07:10. Walkthrough footage is used here as primary evidence, rather than as secondary material. Usually, walkthroughs are regarded as paratextual or epiphenomenal to the game itself.

This paper uses the walkthrough footage for two reasons. *The Witcher 3* is a lengthy, branching, choice-driven game. There is no single playthrough that can be treated as exhaustive evidence of what the game "does" ecologically. The game's ecological argument only becomes visible through many different players' choices, routes, and responses. Walkthrough footage involves a large and varied population of players rather than a single player, strengthening claims about how the game's ecological ambiguity is actually received by its audience. Walkthroughs are themselves acts of interpretation, in which a player narrates, justifies, and sometimes visibly frets over decisions the game presents as irreducibly vague. Meaning is never made through language alone but through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes—visual, auditory, spatial, gestural—operating together (Kress 79). Even apparently minor formal choices carry ideological and interpretive weight (Van Leeuwen 3–5). Here, such choices include the pacing of a shot or the presence or absence of sound. Thus, a walkthrough does not merely record an ecological argument; it is itself a site where that argument gets worked out, contested, and communicated to a public audience.

Walkthrough videos are informal, customised texts that are created for varied audiences and platforms. The walkthrough examined here is treated as an illustrative case study. It is chosen because it makes visible interpretive patterns, such as moral hesitation, retrospective justification, and emotional responses to ruined landscapes.

4. Toxic Discourse and Slow Violence in Velen

In *The Witcher 3*, Velen is a land affected by wars. Walkthrough footage shows dead trees, poisoned marshes, abandoned villages, and fields through which armies have passed (Lacry 3:25:39–12:06:54). This recurring imagery signifies what Rob Nixon calls slow violence (2). Velen's devastation is not a

single spectacular event the player witnesses and resolves. It is the collective remnants of the Northern Wars still present in the environment even after the fighting has ended.

No individual burned farmhouse or poisoned well in Velen is, on its own, a remarkable element of environmental storytelling since big-budget games routinely use them as visual flavour to represent a world of ruins. What distinguishes Velen is the fact that such scenes are not rare. A player embarking on different quests in Velen cannot avoid passing all these areas. The game does not offer the player the option to get in or out of this landscape. This structural inescapability is itself a formal analogue to Nixon's central claim about slow violence. Slow violence lacks a single, explosive, cinematic event; conventional modes of narrative make it very easy for audiences to forget it almost immediately. But *The Witcher 3* has an open-world structure that scatters pieces of evidence in every scene. The player will thus be unable to compartmentalise or dismiss it. The game forces the player to tolerate the accumulated weight of the devastation. This mimics the inescapable, harsh reality of environmental decay.

Velen can also be productively read through the ecocritical category of toxic discourse, a term used to describe narratives organised around contamination, pollution, and environmental damage (Buell 31–52). The game's swamps are not merely aesthetic elements. They are populated by drowners, will-o'-the-wisps, and decomposing corpses. The landscape bears scars of human strife. They are more intense than usual battlefield wounds. Lush thickets cover mass graves, and pollution has affected water sources. For the inhabitants, war becomes a reality that never ends. War never becomes a part of history. Thus, it becomes slow violence because its effects are scattered across time.

The non-player characters do not merely offer background information. They also reinforce Velen's toxic discourse. Most of them convey their situations through the language of contamination and illness rather than abstract danger. When villagers speak of withered crops, poisoned livestock, and infants born misshapen, they articulate a concrete and material experience. Witch hunters guard the streets but they do not pursue monsters in the abstract. Their patrolling is a response to localised, corporeal anxieties about corrupted bodies and polluted terrain. The environment's sickness has generated fears about human bodies getting contaminated. This response has a vital narratological function. It connects the region's physical toxicity to its social toxicity. The conditions that degrade the soil also corrupt communal trust. They lead to witch hunts, plunder, and persecution that are more than the war's original havoc. According to Nixon, environmental harm of this kind cannot be separated from the social and economic deprivation it inflicts upon communities compelled to endure it (4). Velen directly performs this inseparability. The destruction of Velen's environment and the destruction of Velen's society are not two separate things. They are two different expressions of a single, deeper

condition of ruin. Both of them cannot be fixed in isolation. In Velen, the ruined landscape functions as evidence of environmental suffering. Toppled carts, burned-out chapels, and salt-poisoned fields act as a kind of physical archive of harm. In this way, *The Witcher 3* depicts slow violence. The player can easily understand that Velen has been wounded without any dialogue. It is because the wound is built into the level design itself, as an unavoidable condition.

5. Dark Ecology in Crookback Bog and the Whispering Hillock

Nature is not presented as pastoral haven nor conquerable wilderness. It is depicted as something weird. It becomes a space where the boundary between human and nonhuman gets erased. Monsters in *The Witcher* are never antagonists. Many of them are ecological beings, connected to specific sites of trauma or neglect. So, killing them does not protect nature. Instead, it rules out one of several possible relationships with it.

Crookback Bog is disturbing but it does not appear evil. There are no rough, dark trees reaching up like claws. No fortress with sinister barbs is shadowed against a blood-red sky. Instead, the bog is presented in pale greens and muddy browns. They are bland colours that convey neglect not danger. The threats hide under still water and twisted roots (Lacry 7:10:00–8:20:00). This is a clever ecological choice. The game does not offer a simple binary narrative of good nature versus bad nature. As Timothy Morton argues in his work on dark ecology, we cannot separate corrupted nature from healthy nature — they bleed into each other in ways that make easy moral categories useless (Morton 186–87).

The quest named the Whispering Hillock is the best example. In this quest, a spirit asks the witcher Geralt to liberate it from a tree. The player has two options — either free the spirit or destroy it (Lacry 11:00:12–11:07:10). However, both options never offer a clear solution. Freeing it leads to violence, while killing it reinforces an unjust order. The tree has nonhuman agency. It represents nature that needs recognition, not control. There is no simple moral solution here. This reflects Morton's ecological philosophy, which rejects neat divisions between a virtuous nature and a corrupting civilisation (Morton 186–87). Ecology is not a balanced system affected by human error. No player choice can extract a purely good outcome from it.

The structure of the Whispering Hillock quest is different from the typical role-playing quest design. Many games point out the "correct" or "good" choice through subtle cues. Some of these cues include musical transitions, camera angles, and character reactions. The player gets rewards when they choose the good option. The Whispering Hillock deviates from this style. Both outcomes are presented as morally serious ones. There is no right answer and no wrong one. Freeing the spirit badly impacts the villagers. But the player can know the consequences only after the decision is made. This

retroactive disclosure of consequence reflects Nixon's theory of slow violence. The harm caused by the player's decision is not immediately visible. Still, it evolves thereafter just like environmental damage.

In walkthrough videos, players routinely illustrate their decisions as they make them. Viewers can observe not just the mechanical effect of a choice. They also get chances to understand the moral reasoning behind it. A player who chooses not to kill a creature will display it as an act of ecological empathy. That player respects the value of non-human life in the ecosystem. A player who kills the creature instrumentally believes in the logic of extraction and exploitation. Walkthroughs function as secondary texts that shape ecological awareness beyond the boundaries of the game.

6. Environmental Memory and Haunted Spaces

The Witcher 3 constructs a relationship between memory and landscape. Burned villages, ruined castles, unmarked graves, and abandoned roads in the game function as archives of human history. The game does not tell the player about past violence through dialogue or cutscenes. Instead, it physically records that violence within its structure.

Some of the most emotionally powerful sites of environmental memory in Velen are not tied to any quest. They exist merely as environmental storytelling. They do not offer any incentive. They include a burned homestead with no map marker, a child's grave beside a road, and a collapsed bridge with wagon wreckage. At these sites, the player must infer a history from physical evidence alone. The player must read the landscape as a historian might read a material record. The environment becomes an archive of past violence. It generates meaning only through active engagement.

This dynamic intensifies in the game's haunted spaces, which articulate what might be termed a *haunted ecology*—environmental zones replete with unresolved human histories. These sites deploy haunting as a narrative device to render underlying historical wrongs legible, yet without implying that legibility constitutes correction or resolution. In doing so, the game extends its ecological argument beyond nonhuman nature into the built and social environment, effectively collapsing the nature/culture distinction upon which much conventional environmental storytelling continues to depend.

7. Multimodal Rhetoric in Walkthrough Videos

Kress's multimodal framework reveals that walkthroughs actively construct ecological meaning through visual, auditory, and editorial choices (Kress 79). Theo Van Leeuwen's account of social semiotics offers a complementary principle. Formal choices that appear neutral or incidental are in fact meaningful and ideologically loaded (Van Leeuwen 3–5). In walkthrough video, such choices include the length of a shot, the decision to speak or remain silent, or the choice of camera angle.

In the no-commentary walkthrough of the Whispering Hillock quest, the player stops near the spirit's tree and orbits it slowly. There is no speech. Viewers will listen to background sounds of wind, creaking branches, and distant howls. These sounds invite reflection, creating an ecological uncertainty (Lacry 11:00:12–11:07:10).

In Velen, the player, travelling on horseback, often slows down when passing through burned villages, mass graves, abandoned battlefields, and other areas of visual ruin (Lacry 3:25:39–12:06:54). This voluntary slowing denotes a sense of solemnity, unease, and curiosity. The pacing of a walkthrough also determines the narrative of slow violence in the game. These multimodal patterns suggest that walkthrough video amplifies *The Witcher 3*'s ecological argument.

8. Discussion

The game's dark-ecological design choices raise broader questions for game studies. Is the refusal of ecological restoration modelled here an idiosyncrasy of this particular game? Does it point toward a wider tendency within contemporary open-world design? A brief comparative analysis is useful here, without claiming to resolve the question. Many open-world games released in the years surrounding *The Witcher 3* continue to rely on explicitly restorative ecological logics. In these games, the player action visibly rejuvenates blighted land, repopulates ruined settlements, or otherwise offers a legible before-and-after of ecological repair. Alenda Chang argues that games "can offer a compelling way to reconcile a deep connection to nature and the non-human world with an equally important connection to technology and the virtual" (5). She suggests one reason for this tendency. Games can simulate systems, and players generally expect their actions to produce visible, positive systemic change. Hence, it is easier to design a restorative ecological logic. The restorative logic gratifies players. But *Witcher 3* is different.

When *The Witcher 3* is analysed from this setting, some points are clear. The game deliberately chose to deny restoration. The absence of repair is a conscious design decision. By the time *The Witcher 3* was released, restorative ecological logic had become the expected norm in open-world games. The game deliberately deviates from this logic. *The Witcher 3* aligns more with Buell's scepticism than with Chang's systems-oriented approach. The game is not interested in simulating ecological restoration. It lets the player confront irreparable damage. In simulation games, the structure is designed based on system feedback and player agency. Simulation is used, and players are rewarded. Narrative-driven games like *The Witcher 3* make the players witness irreparable environmental damage that arose out of their choices in quests. The question of whether this approach is becoming more common or remains rare is left open for future research. But *The Witcher 3* proves that such a design is possible, playable, and interpretable by a broad audience.

9. Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The analysis of environmental memory and haunted spaces is brief, and the Discussion section does not engage directly with two potential counter-arguments. The first is that the refusal of restoration may reflect technical or budgetary design constraints rather than an intentional ecological argument. The second is that other games in the genre may already employ similar mechanics. Additionally, the walkthrough analysis is based on a single video. It limits the generalisability of the interpretive patterns identified. Future research could address these limitations through comparative analysis of other open-world games, developer interviews, reception studies, and analysis of a larger sample of walkthroughs.

10. Conclusion

When the poisoned wetlands of Velen, the ethically challenging decisions at Crookback Bog and the Whispering Hillock, and the memory-filled ruins scattered throughout the region are considered as a whole, they are not just a collection of grim fragments. They form a consistent statement about environmental harm and its persistence. *The Witcher 3* denies players the comfortable assurance that right action can undo the damage wrought by war and neglect. The fens remain contaminated, while the restless dead find no peace. The marks left by conflict last forever. The player experiences, and not merely observes, a world where injury unfolds slowly, distributes itself across the landscape, and becomes inseparable from the ground on which it occurred. It is never presented as a dramatic crisis awaiting resolution. It is depicted as a permanent condition. The game also reminds us that places remember what happened to them, regardless of whether there is any witness to narrate it.

The mushrooming of walkthrough videos surrounding *The Witcher 3* extends the paper's ecological argument beyond the game itself. Individual playthroughs are transformed into a public, ongoing negotiation of environmental ethics. Drawing on Kress and Van Leeuwen's multimodal frameworks, this negotiation is conducted not only through spoken dialogue. Silence, pacing, camera movement, and the affective texture of a player's recorded hesitation contribute in negotiating environmental ethics. In the game's design, the ecological argument is only partially conveyed. Walkthrough creators complete the articulation of the argument. It leads to the generation of a text that is part game and part paratext, whose ecological meaning cannot be fully located in the software alone but must be traced across the wider ecosystem of play, commentary, and circulation that surrounds any widely played title of this kind.

Future research might extend this analysis in at least three directions. A systematic comparison of *The Witcher 3*'s dark-ecological design could be conducted against the restorative logic common

elsewhere in the genre. A quantitative or reception-based study of walkthrough commentary across a larger sample is possible. The framework developed in this study could be used to analyse other CD Projekt Red games and narrative-driven games more broadly. *The Witcher 3* offers a rich and underexamined case for ecocritical game studies. In this game, slow violence, dark ecology, and environmental memory are not just themes represented within the game's design. They are structural principles built into the game's design, quest structure, and the culture of interpretation based on it.

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