



# How Does Interactive Media Preserve Folklore?

Multimedia adaptations of The Witcher

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## ABSTRACT

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Traditional folklore has evolved and refined as new elements are infused, and unnecessary details are discarded. In this thesis, the methods through which interactive media will preserve and benefit folklore, were addressed and assessed. The focus was the fearful witch Baba Yaga from the folktale Vasilisa the Beautiful, The Crones from The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt videogame, and Deathless Mother character from The Witcher Netflix series. The Witcher franchise is a “folkloresque” product that has an almost reciprocal relationship with folklore, which have provided a sense of authenticity to the former, in return for the preservation of the latter. The Witcher was used as an example of modifying the new and the old together and blending them together: how was it presented and replicated in various media and across numerous platforms.

Folk stories are constantly retold in new ways, and through various devices (both literary and media) that are relevant to their epoch. YouTube is one of the biggest discussion and video platforms where both consumers and creators share their experiences of popular media. While YouTubers have provided knowledge and experiences for the viewers, memes show what people have found important with a twist of humor.

Through a study of the characteristics of folklore and folkloresque products, and an analysis of the nature of interactive and social media, this thesis concludes that such products and media have helped to preserve folklore; albeit perhaps not in a style that is always immediately recognizable, to those more familiar with their (not quite original) traditional format. The stories and characters will be in different forms and better adapted to the current era.

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Keywords: folklore, folkloresque, digital culture, the witcher, baba yaga,

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**ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS**

Acculturations	assimilation to a different culture (typically the dominant one).
Folklore	the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth.
Folkloresque	a hybrid term from folklore and popular culture that explains folklore's influence to popular culture.
Metacommentary	used to describe a narrative that directs the reader's attention to the text's purpose and positioning.
Wonder tales	a generic description of speculative fiction stories based on classic or historical cultural narratives.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Folklore has always been an important technique to engage, inspire and gather people together. That is to say, like religion, it helps reenforce an ethnic identity through shared culture and the moral lessons depicted. Progress has developed modern methods to give traditional folklore a new value. The present adaptation of 'Voleth Meir', the Deathless Mother, from The Witcher Netflix show (season 2) is instantly identifiable as inspired by Baba Yaga the 'Boney Legs' various old Russian folk stories, but most famously that of Vasilisa the Beautiful. This thesis shows the interesting connection of The Witcher game and television series with the original Russian folk story Vasilisa the Beautiful.

The Witcher has been inspired by so many folklores and mythologies all around the world, yet provides a genuine Slavic feel, with the majority of characters and storylines drawn from Eastern European mythology. This dissertation's purpose is to show how interactive media such as YouTube and video games can preserve folklore: how we tell stories today through molding traditional tales to make them relevant. Modern digital methods of storytelling and creating identities have developed through the use of online social networking services. The challenge is to keep up with trends and find the right kind of notes to reach the audience. Combining something new into an old form of folklore is also interesting. Hence, the concept of 'folkloresque'; a product that has a relationship with folklore and thus is imbued with the sense of authenticity of real folklore.

This thesis briefly addresses what folklore means and how it differs from fairy tales. However, the focus is regarding how elements have inspired and combined between traditional Slavic witch character Baba Yaga, The Crones from video-game, and Deathless Mother character from The Witcher series. This dissertation explores the example from Vasilisa the Beautiful's fearful witch Baba Yaga and The Crones from The Witcher 3 videogame because folklore surrounding witches provides rich figures: complex, inscrutable creatures with striking appearance. The Slavic roots of Baba Yaga and Vasilisa the Beautiful are explored, because they show no signs of losing their status, regardless of new folklore developing.

The concept of a 'folkloresque product' which has a relationship with folklore that is soaked with a sense of authenticity of real folklore. It blurs the lines to define what is real or pure folklore. The Witcher is a great example how new and old are seamlessly merged together, and how it is shown all over interactive media creating our very own folklore world.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a number of interesting characters in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, but the most fascinating is Baba Yaga, the 'Boney Legs' witch that owns a conscious magical house that runs from danger on giant chicken legs. Folk stories have inspired many fantasy genre novels, games, and shows such as *The Witcher* franchise. The *Witcher* creator Andrzej Sapkowski himself have said in interviews that he simply uses retelling which consists classic fairy tales, legends, myths, and modifies them (Handel 2020).

The *Daily Telegraph* reporter Victoria Ward (2019) heavily criticises social media and smart electronics for their role in the destruction of traditional folklore. She asserts that our children will be deprived of their stories and lessons. However, Violetta Krawczyk-Wasilewska's 'Folklore in Digital Age' (2016) and Zack Zipes (2006 & 2013) find positive aspects of digital media providing folklore heritage not only in own cultural communities but worldwide. "It reflects genuine systems of informal, everyday knowledge, values, norms, traditions, and stereotypes accepted by a given social group or local milieu" (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2016, 30). Zack Zipes believes the Internet has enabled folklore to change as well as expand. In this regard, he has explored the notion of memes: replication, evolution, and dissemination of folk and fairy tales (Zipes 2012, 17).

Kinga Bajorek and Slawomir Gawronski (2020) present the fantasy writer Andrzej Sapkowski who created in 1980's *The Witcher* novel series and how it became more known worldwide through the videogames, and the current Netflix production brought even more international visibility. Bajorek and Gawronski in their essay 'A Real Witcher—Slavic or Universal; from a Book, a Game or a TV Series' discuss how the global masses' admiration would not be possible without all the different multimedia adaptations of *The Witcher* (2020,3).

Often it can be confusing where genuine folklore ends, and folkloresque popular culture begins. The roots of the original mythology behind *The Witcher* characters overlap between various cultures' folklore and fantasy; perhaps arrived at inde-

pendently, but probably inspired by older, forgotten stories. Through Youtube videos, I came across The Crones: repulsive creatures who are controlling with fear. They have not just been inspired by Baba Yaga but many other three sisters' stories from various cultures. Forrester, Skoro and Zipes (2013) and Peter Clark (2019) explain how The Witcher is borrowing heavily from European folklore. However, many of the repulsive creatures are inspired purely by Slavic culture.

Finally, the thesis will address the impact of social media and folkloresque. YouTubers like WitcherGeorge (2018), StoryDrive (2019), and FudgeMuppet (2020) on their channels provide information concerning The Witcher lore and the horrid witch sisters The Crones. Not only that they provide insightful background knowledge about the Ladies of the Wood from the videogame 'Wild Hunt' but they are also sharing for their viewers the origin folklore behind these specific creatures and many other monsters. Subscribers are able to share their own input in comment sections: opinions, feedback, cultural details from the folklore character.

Michael Foster and Jeffrey Tolbert (2019) have explained through the 'Spirited Away' (by Hayao Miyazaki, 2001) Japanese anime concepts of folklore and tradition how do we understand them in modern time: "The narrative structure felt resonant, and it did not directly reference any specific tales but seemed skilful cobbling together of many" (Foster & Tolbert 2016,6). Because of how they view folklore and its influences to a popular culture they created the term 'folkloresque' and cut it under segments integration, portrayal, and parody to keep it simpler. Folkloresque refers to a creative commercial product that is deliberately combined from several folkloric elements and mixed with new fantasy to give an impression that they are from existing traditional folklore (Foster & Tolbert 2016, 6). The Witcher is gathering the fans of the novels, videogames, and Netflix series and others who are interested in folklore from worldwide on the same platforms to share their common interest. This is all thanks to the 'Witcher' world that is so successfully created and that kind of authentic feel comes only from the connection from the traditional folk stories.



### 3 THE MEANING OF FOLKLORE

Storytelling is common in every culture. Folktale refers to a story that was traditionally passed down verbally from generation to generation. Even though fairy tales were not originally created or meant for children, they resonate with them: “children recall them as they grow to confront the injustices and contradictions of so-called real worlds”, explains Zipes (2012,20).

Today many of these stories can be found in written form, but typically the original author is unknown and there are various versions of the tale from different countries. Folktales can take the form of legends, myths, fairy tales, or fables. According to Musack (2018), some of the tales might have been based on partially true stories, and many folktales were used to explain things that were difficult to understand, to discipline and frighten children, or provide moral lessons.

#### 3.1 Differences between legend, myth, fairy tale, and fable

Folktales are stereotypical and “held true” stories from local folk. They are based on supernatural powers and fairy tale creatures existing or include truthful meaning from familiar settlements, war, or cultural history. Therefore, the difference between a folktale and a fairy tale is that a folktale is believed. The story types are built from motives and features as a prop that will be removed from one story to another. This improves the story to stick around through generations. The terms “folklore”, “myth”, “legend” and “fairy tales” are often used interchangeably for cultural stories, leading many to believe they mean the same thing, explains Musack (2018). While there is overlap among the forms, they each provide a unique reading experience.

Musack (2018) explains the differences between different tales despite their similarities: Legends are often based on real historical occurrences and can be narrowed down to a specific time in history, but they are not entirely verifiable. While legends are based on real historical events and people, myths are largely from a religion or belief system. Despite that some myths are born from something real,

a myth's purpose is to explain a natural phenomenon. That is why they often contain something supernatural, gods and demigods. Fairy tales are the least rooted in reality, and they usually involve imaginary creatures and elements of magic. The traditional versions of fairy tales originated in oral folklore and contain clear narratives that identify good and evil. A fable is a short tale passed down through the generations that is intended to teach a moral lesson. Fables generally feature talking animals, creatures, plants, non-living objects, or forces of nature that are given human qualities. (Musack 2018)

For something to be folklore, it needs to be "traditional ". This means that it needs to be passed on through time in some way: things we say, we do, make, and believe. In general, folklore is an overarching term that refers to the collection of traditional stories of a community or culture (Musack 2018). Folklore can include art, songs, dances, myths, legends, tales, stories, beliefs, superstitions, and practices, which all are part of our cultural heritage.

#### 4 VASILISA THE BEAUTIFUL AND BABA YAGA

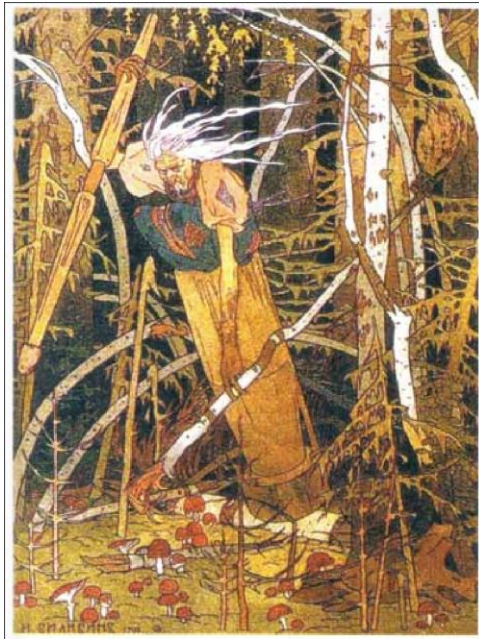
Folk tales were often ritual tales that brought the people of a community closer together and the folk was not just made up of the lower classes, but all social classes (Zipes 2006,55). For example, the Russian folktale 'Vasilisa the Beautiful' (Picture 1) has no longer any real historical significance, nevertheless, if you read carefully, you can still find some of the original Slavic mythology from the story. The story tells about young heroine Vasilisa and her journey to meet a scary witch Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga gives Vasilisa impossible tasks that she overcomes with the assistance of her magic doll. Stories of Vasilisa the Beautiful runs in Russian families from old folks to new generations and serves the purpose being "the tale of warning": besides being part of important traditional culture, the tale warns not to wonder off alone in a dark forest and misbehaved children will be eaten by the cannibal witch Baba Yaga (Eskelinen 2010).



PICTURE 1. Art by Lily Seika-Jones

"But looming above all these fantastic elements of Russian fairy tales and folklore is the terrifying Baba Yaga, a voracious swamp witch who wants only to gobble up fat children after forcing them to do chores for her", writes Cereno (2020). Her appearance in numerous stories has made her a modern icon: Baba Yaga 'boney legs', iron teeth witch with a long nose that can scratch ceiling while snoring, flying around a mortal and sweeping away her tracks from the night sky (Cereno 2020)

(Picture 2). Also, one of the reasons why Baba Yaga appears in many stories is her terrifying relationship to death. “Baba Yaga’s particular combination of traits and functions makes her unique among witches and witch-like characters in world folklore. Like the Indian goddess Kali, Baba Yaga is terrifying because of her relationship to death. She mediates the boundary of death so that living human beings may cross it and return, alive but in possession of new wisdom, or “reborn” into a new status” (Forrester, Skoro & Zipes 2013, 34).



PICTURE 2. Baba Yaga by Ivan Bilibin from 1902

#### 4.1 Pure folklore

Folklore has evolved out of an oral tradition, as stories are passed down in different ways over thousands of years. These oral folk stories preceded their literary narratives, and diverged both as contemporaries, and since the first books were written. Hence there are no definitive versions of national folktales or literary fairy tales. However, we can assume that writing different kinds of folk tales has reflected different cultures’ rituals, historical anecdotes, traditions, religions, and beliefs. Recording the various stories was extremely important for preserving oral traditions for future generations, and writers changed the tales depending on what was the tales’ purpose (Zipes 2006,43). There is no definitive version of a folktale, no original version. Folktales are evaluated through aesthetic,

folkloric, and pragmatic viewpoints by the environment in which the stories are collected and retold.

The works of the Brothers Grimm and the writers whom they inspired, such as Aleksandr Afanesyev in his *Russian Fairy Tales* (1855 - 1863), have given rise to a false impression concerning the nature of folk stories and fairy tales (Zipes 2006, 43). The fairy tales once were derived from myths that had been religious, but storytellers (such as The Brothers Grimm) had gradually discarded their religious connotations and the tales became just “wonder tales” (Zipes 2006,46). Zipes’s view of the less authentic folk stories corroborates Dorfles’s (1969) opinion about the institutionalisation of those stories. Myths have become kitsch as they have been developed and bastardised in order to maximise their commercial value, thanks to the energy and magical characteristics of the genuine myth, which the pseudo myth can reproduce (Dorfles 1969,46).

## 5 THE WITCHER

The Witcher, created by Polish fantasy writer Andrzej Sapkowski, consists of three series of short stories and a five volume novel that was created in the 1990s. The video games and the Netflix production has brought more international visibility outside of the Slavic countries. (Bajorek & Gawronski 2020, 3)

Sapkowski's The Witcher fantasy stories have been published in almost 30 countries around the world (2020, 3). Since its landing in "the mainstream global mass culture" the protagonist Geralt of Rivia has been in the main focus of debates about the Slavic origins by the fans of videogames and novel readers. According to Bajorek and Gawronski, this is possible only because of multimedia adaptations of The Witcher (2020,3).

### 5.1 The roots from Slavic mythology and folklore

Unlike some other popular fantasy media, The Witcher draws heavily from Slavic culture, mixed with Norse, Germanic, and other Western folklore: While Geralt of Rivia, the Witcher, is a modern fictional character, many of the monsters are drawn directly from authentic European and Slavic folklore (Clark 2019). "Delving into those stories sheds a light on the history of what has brought fear into human hearts for ages", writes Clark (2019). Sapkowski combines elements in the world of The Witcher where are mismatched combinations from the Middle Ages which are also very contemporary (Bajorek & Gawronski 2020, 7). The creator of The Witcher, Andrzej Sapkowski has openly said in many interviews how he uses and merges different cultures' mythology and folklore, and that he takes credit for creating the hero Geralt of Rivia, but not the whole world of The Witcher: "It would be easier to name the mythologies and cultures I didn't draw on," and describes his writing as an "eclectic cocktail" (Literary Hub 2020).

## 6 DIGITAL CULTURE

The National Trust, a British charity organization, has warned that advances in technology and social media are causing traditional mythology to die out, as it is no longer relevant (Ward 2019). “It said that in a world dominated by smartphones and the internet, superstitions that were once believed to save the lives of miners and tales of magical blacksmiths were no longer of interest to children who have never ridden a horse or put coal on the fire”, writes Ward (2019).

Barnett (2017) considers traditional folklore benefiting from modern culture and how stories are increasingly becoming an important technique to engage, inspire and gather online and offline. Interactive technologies provide the tools to empower audiences to participate in new interactive storytelling experiences. The Internet has enabled the fairy tale to change as well as expand in unusual ways.

Haase (2016, 77) decries the explosion of new media and how technologies have turned the wave of stories into an “un-manageable” and “un-imaginable” universe of stories. He calls it an “expansive universe” with no borders, no limits. He lists an endlessly unstable collection of fairy tales that the internet presents us in so many forms: in verbal narratives, videos, music, games, advertisements, art, photography, merchandise, memes, social media postings, etc. “This hyperproliferation of texts certainly gives us a wealth of materials, but their novelty and omnipresence threaten to complicate our selection and assessment in very practical ways” (Haase 2016, 78).

Digital culture creates new ways of communication between everyone and spontaneous reaction and response to news and information (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2016, 25). Not to mention all the benefits among creative people sharing their art and design creations. Zipes believes the Internet has enabled folklore to change

as well as expand. In this regard, he has explored the notion of memes: replication, evolution, and dissemination of folk and fairy tales (2012, 9).

## **6.1 Social media**

Influential social media platforms accessed from mobile devices are encouraging tens of millions of users to interact on a massive scale; sharing their lives, stories and media they find interesting. Despite Jessica Monaghan's depressing view of folklore being demolished, Ward (2019) writes how folklore still is a part of our daily lives, and claims that technology is a revitalising force, rather than killing off folklore.

Online activities are not only utilised for dry data exchange, but are increasingly the focal point for entertainment, socialising, and sharing personal opinions (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2016, 25). Although social media platforms can be tricky, because of their subjectivity: everyone likes to tell a good story, and there is an overload of vanity from a storytelling perspective. Modern digital methods of storytelling and creating identities have developed through the use of online social networking services (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2016, 30). The list can be quite long starting from a platform like YouTube, that is considered to be one of the biggest backgrounds for e-folklore's creativity (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2016, 30). Krawczyk-Wasilewska emphasizes how folklore is a cultural phenomenon: "It reflects genuine systems of informal, everyday knowledge, values, norms, traditions, and stereotypes accepted by a given social group or local milieu" (2016, 30). Folklore has always been a 'living' category and it means it is 'lived' in repeated and modified variants and versions from generation to generation (2016, 30).

### **6.1.1 YouTube**

The Witcher is presented by various YouTubers specifically because of the mythology and folklore origins. They inform their viewers about the inspirations for the beasts in The Witcher. From a preservation of folklore perspective, that could be exciting, because folklore consists of the elements a civilization finds valuable



enough to pass down through the generations. Though largely considered traditional, there is an adaptive aspect, as cultures discard that which they no longer value. Yes, the longest standing features of a story rarely shift, but there is an evolutionary pressure that empowers the storyteller to make small alterations (Ward 2019).

Under aliases such as WitcherGeorge, StoryDrive, and FudgeMuppet these YouTubers are explaining the Crones background from the mythology, and concerning from The Witcher games and novels. All these channels have hundreds of thousands of subscribers. FudgeMuppet (2020) serves his listeners by creating high-quality content presenting the mythological background of The Crones' by using Photoshopped artwork, using images, and the haunting music from the Wild Hunt game. He has 1.2 million subscribers, and over 116 thousand have viewed his video since January 2020. 'Witcher 3 - The Crones - Witcher Lore & Mythology' since January 2020.

These videos demonstrate how YouTube has become a nexus for distributing and preserving folklore in modern day. Not only do these creators produce educating and entertaining content, but they also inspire listeners to move on other interactive platforms to gain another level of experience of the folklore. The people are gathered sharing the comments of their own experiences of the videogames and how they found The Crones terrifying, yet, fascinating (Picture 3; Picture 4). The interactive nature of YouTube comment sections, lures their viewers into playing the videogame, reading the novels, and watching the Netflix series, thus immersing them more deeply into this folkloresque franchise, and its influences.

This indicates that the old stories are still relevant. However, times have changed, and some traditional popular genres go out of fashion (Tomkowiak, 2014, 175). We are not missing out on the classic stories; we get them, but just in different forms. By modernizing the tales, they reflect on what storytelling's purposes are and the crucial topics that they might consist of. Furthermore, they contain considerations about how the narrative is structured or under what circumstances it is being performed (Tomkowiak, 2014, 175).



PICTURE 3. A capture from comment section of FudgeeMuppet's Youtube site of Witcher 3 - The Crones - Witcher Lore & Mythology, 2022.



PICTURE 4. "We shall tell you, brave boy". The Crones from Wild Hunt

The Witcher videogames has been embraced by their visual look. Sapkowski himself have stated that "The publicity and sales results speak for themselves, if it were a weak game; it would not have had such achievements" (Bajorek & Gawronski 2020, 5). However, he admits also that the videogames have had a

negative effect on his novels because of the images from games are printed on the covers of his books: readers think that the books are written for the game (2020, 5). “Seeing a picture of a game on the cover of my book, many fans assumed that the game was created first “(Bajorek & Gawronski 2020, 5).

### 6.1.2 The Crones

The folklore of witches is classic, and they are fascinating characters in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt videogame. These creepy creatures are presented as the Ladies of the Woods, ‘The Crones’ (Picture 5), as the most ancient and powerful creatures of The Witcher universe (WitcherGeorge 2018, 1:47). “Most likely the most unsettling creatures in the history of games”, describes Inderwildi (2020). The Crones are formed from three witches Weavess, Brewess and Whispess and they use their dark magic to control and manipulate those who pass their path or enter their home (StoryDrive 2019, 6:54). “You know the Crones are mysterious when no one knows their true names nor what breed of monstrosity, in fact, are they “(FudgeMuppet 2020, 3:20).



PICTURE 5. “We’ll cut you up, boy. A fine broth you will make”- Brewess. The Crones are eating youths to stay strong.

The youngest witch Weavess weaves hair and twists lives (Inderwildi 2020). The middle ‘sister’ Brewess is a demonic potion maker and knows recipes for human soup (WitcherGeorge 2018, 8:00). The oldest one Whispess is the most ancient

and dangerous one (8:19). In *The Witcher 3*, she collects human ears which she hangs from trees. With magic, she can hear all that happens in the swamp.

The Crones are influenced by many sources of myths and folklore such as the three Norns from Norse mythology and the three Moraias from Greek mythology (StoryDrive 2019, 6:58). Inderwildi (2020) and Youtuber FudgeMuppet (2020, 1:45) compares the Crones to the three weird sisters from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (ca. 1606), cauldron-stirring witches who can foretell the future. "The "weird" in their name does not mean 'strange' but stems from the Old English word 'wyrd,' meaning fate" (Inderwildi 2020). The Crones have prophetic powers too.

Many cultures have a version of three sisters who can control mankind's destiny and faith. It is impossible to locate any specific story that has influenced the Crones, but certainly, they are not entirely devised by their author. Despite that these three sister witches are not technically presented as Baba Yaga, there is genuine inspiration behind the Crones. The old witch Baba Yaga lives in a deep forest in a house that stands on a chicken leg(s) surrounded by a fence made entirely of human skulls and bones (StoryDrive 201, 7:45). As well as this Slavic folklore character Baba Yaga, the Crones share this cannibalistic taste for children: they get their strength from the human flesh! In some tales, Baba Yaga has sisters, and all three are named Baba Yaga (2019, 8:40). Like the Crones, Baba Yaga is dark and dangerous, yet morally ambiguous.

Like Crones, Baba Yaga has a striking appearance: the witch is unusual tall, has a huge nose that stick up to the ceiling, and iron teeth that she sharpens with human snack (Forrester, Skoro & Zipes 2013, 35). Furthermore "In some tales the descriptions are demeaning or disgusting, in one example, her tits are slung up over a rail" (Forrester, Skoro & Zipes 2013, 35). Baba Yaga is described to be "inscrutable and so powerful that she does not owe allegiance to the Devil or God or even to her storytellers". Hence, she is deciding on whether she will help or kill whomever comes to her hut that stands on chicken legs (Forrester, Skoro & Zipes 2013, 8). The Crones' help is never altruistic, neither Baba Yaga's; they have always a price for their assistance.

## 7 FOLKLORESQUE AND MULTIMEDIA ADAPTIONS

Popular culture has a strong influence from folklore. Human cultures have always created all kinds of artwork in an attempt to make sense of and celebrate their world. However, how do we understand concepts such as folklore and tradition in modern times?

Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey Tolbert (2016) question how popular culture views folklore and how folklore influences popular culture. They created the term ‘folkloresque’ to be relevant with all cultural products that indicates a relationship between folklore and popular culture. Folkloresque is described as a popular culture’s own perception of folklore. It refers to creative commercial products (e.g., movies, graphic novels, video games) which are deliberately patched together from a various range of folkloric elements and mixed with newly created elements to give an impression that they are from existing traditional folklore: (Foster & Tolbert 2016, 6). Like a product such as *The Witcher* has an entirely “believable” world, and it is because the story has true motives (Foster & Tolbert 2016, 26). This authentic feel comes from a connection from traditional folktale.

### 7.1 Integration

Integration as described by Michael Foster and Jeffrey Tolbert (2016, 19) considers how popular culture merges elements of folklore into commercial products. Can value be added through this process of borrowing and merging? What does it reveal about the current cultural context and values?

Foster asked himself where was the folklore in ‘*Spirited Away*’ (2001) when he was planning a lecture about this Japanese anime. Clearly, the filmmakers were inspired by Japanese and European folklore, but the allusions were vague: “characters and actions on the screen pointed only vaguely, if at all, to actual referents outside the film. Similarly, although the narrative structure felt resonant, it too did not directly reference any specific tales but seemed a skilful cobbling together of

many” (Foster & Tolbert 2016, 3). The film was infused with a folklore-like familiarity and felt authentic because of folkloric roots. However, at the same time it was not beholden to any single tradition, claims Foster. Clearly, the movie itself is inspired by various myths, legends, folktales and beliefs, but is not a retelling of traditional narratives. Even if we may recognize an item as a commercial product, we might assume that the product is based on “real” folklore (2016, 20). However, David Emerson considers that some of the folklore elements in these animations are teaching about real mythology from own culture: each of them presents the real cultural beliefs, practices, and supernatural elements (2019, 265).

Andrew Higgins has studied J.R.R. Tolkien and the genesis of his mythology. His thesis argues that all aspects of Tolkien's creativity worked brought to life “an invented secondary world the complexity of which fantasy literature had not seen before” (Higgins 2015, 4). “The audience for genre fantasy may have existed already, but there can be no doubt that Tolkien widened it tremendously”, writes Gardner (1997, 16). Hence, *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy is regarded as an archetypical piece of high fantasy (Gardner 1997, 17). Tolkien borrowed from various cultures religions, myths, legends, and folklore (for example, his general use of the Finnish *Kalevala*) to attempt to create a new European mythology through his work (Higgins 2015, 16, 259). Thus, modern mythology and ancient religions are borrowing from even earlier religions and traditions. It demonstrates that folklore is preserved even if its original form is destroyed and forgotten.

Arguably, *The Witcher* could be an example of this in the modern day. The Crones, from *The Witcher 3*, are woven together from strands of folklore and mythology. “*The Witcher 3* carefully created something that feels both new and seamless, while also nodding towards its disparate, ancient influences”, describes Inderwildi (2020). Also, the creator Sapkowski has combined elements from different mythologies to create his very own “*Witcher*” world (Bajorek & Gawronski 2020, 7). “*The Witcher* tells a story very much not of this world. But it does so by employing ideas firmly rooted in millennia of human belief” (Clark 2019). *The Witcher* was originally recognizable only in Poland and other Slavic countries, but with the help of the different multimedia adaption it has become internationally known: “Different adaptations of the original “*The Witcher*”, known from literature, undoubtedly deformed the perception of readers and changed the

author's intention. Nevertheless, it was due to them that "The Witcher" ceased to be recognizable only in Poland and other Slavic countries. It is thanks to the adaptations that it has become an international product of mass culture" (Bajorek & Gawronski 2020, 8). "Media adaptations of original works begin to live their own lives, and with time, these adaptations seem to be the only unique, and semi-primary sources for the next generations of the recipients of cultural messages" (Bajorek & Gawronski 2020, 8).

## 7.2 Portrayal

Tolbert (Foster & Tolbert 2016, 22) studies how discipline characters are categorized in the popular culture, and calls this kind of portrayal a "commonsense" of the folklore image. Despite Geralt of Rivia (Picture 6), the Witcher, as a character does not have a historical archetype, he has a significant connection with various fantasy heroes (Bajorek & Gawronski 2020, 3). "The Witcher is a warrior, a loner, a mysterious figure, with a specific code of honour derived from belonging to a brotherhood" who is protecting the human world from dark monsters (Bajorek & Gawronski 2020,3). There are many inspirations to a concept that is literally thousands of years old. The lonely warrior who travels across the lands in search of his destiny; a hero who struggle and honour truth; wounded who want to be whole. Geralt is defined as a symbolic Polish popular culture's spirit of "neo-liberal anti-politics" from the 1990s (Apor 2008, 198). "He is a professional, carrying out his duties and unwilling to become involved in the "petty quarrels" of the contemporary politics", writes Apor (2008, 198).

The Witcher Geralt was ranked as the 6th best hero in video game history in 2018 (GameRadar 2018) and he was included in the top 25 best video game characters of all time (Tom's Guide Staff 2018). The Witcher is depicted as an adventure figure with a special knowledge into mysterious worlds, which is common narrative type: become the key to solve a mystery or a crime (Foster & Tolbert 2016, 22). "The folkloresque of the portrayal genre reminds us not of what folklore is but of the popular culture image of what folklore is", writes Tolbert (Foster & Tolbert 2015,22). Even though the games are popular the greatest publicity for The Witcher was brought the series by Netflix which premiered December 2019, and



it became even stronger element of popular culture, on a global scale (Bajorek & Gawronski 2020,5).



PICTURE 6. Geralt from the Netflix show Vs. Great from the game.

Netflix show has brought definitely even more international recognition to The Witcher franchise, but there has been controversy of adaptations: The latest Netflix production were accused by fans to use adaptations from the popular videogames instead of the original novels by Sapkowski (Bajorek & Gawronski 2020, 4). Sapkowski himself has expressed proudness of the Netflix show: "I congratulate Lauren and her team on their excellent work. Adapting my books is not an easy task. I watched with great joy, and I hope for an even more epic Season 3" (Mazanko 2021). In the end Netflix created a hybrid solution that has infused both the original novels and videogames. Yet, they managed to create it that way that it is significantly different from the original. "The series is sometimes more demanding on the part of the viewers than simple entertainment cinema. Events are not always presented in chronological order, and there is no clear indication of whether past or present events are represented. This, however, reflects the disturbing and intricate nature of Andrzej Sapkowski's prose", describes Bajorek and Gawronski (2020,5).



### 7.2.1 The Witcher: Voleth Meir and Baba Yaga

Sapkowski has named Baba Yaga one of his favourite monsters from Slavic mythology: “When I was a kid, the scariest was Baba Yaga, the child-eating witch” (Handel 2020). Interestingly season 2 of the Netflix produced series “The Witcher” presents a new antagonist ‘Voleth Meir’ (the Deathless Mother) (Picture 7). She does not actually appear in the games or the books. However, anyone who is familiar with Slavic folklore recognizes that The Deathless Mother obviously is inspired by a folklore character Baba Yaga.



PICTURE 7. Deathless Mother from The Witcher season 2 series, 2022.



PICTURE 8. Art work by Kari Christensen

Baba Yaga (Picture 8) has appeared in various folktale stories in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus since the 18th century (Forrester, Skoro & Zipes 2013, 7). What makes Baba Yaga an interesting character is that she is dualistic: no Baba Yaga depiction is exactly like another. In *The Witcher*, Deathless Mother displays a different form depending on the intruders' deepest wishes. Most of the time Baba Yaga is not just a monstrous cannibal but also a maternal benefactress (Forrester, Skoro & Zipes 2013, 7) who is guiding and offering wisdom for lost ones. However, there is often a high cost of the witch's help: she is testing whomever will come to her, by chance or by choice (Forrester, Skoro & Zipes 2013, 8). In *Vasilisa the Beautiful* for example the young heroine is given almost impossible tasks to finish. If she had not succeeded, she was in danger to get eaten alive by Baba Yaga (Venäläisiä kansansatuja, Aleksander Lindberg 2008). Similarly, the Deathless Mother feeds not on the flesh of those she bargains with, but on misery.



PICTURE 9. Resample of The Baba Yaga's chicken leg house and *The Witcher's* Deathless Mother's house.

However, the most visual comparisons are Deathless Mother's and Baba Yaga's huts: below you can see images where both of the witches' houses are depicted as moving on legs (Picture 9). Usually, the witches hut will only permit entry after

a certain secret incantation is said: "Hut, hut, turn your back to the forest and your front to me" (Cereon 2020). In the first appearing of the Deathless Mother's hut in *The Witcher* (season 2, episode 2) the intruders say: "Behold the mother of forests, the Deathless Mother nesting in dreams. Turn you back to the forest, hut, hut. Turn your front to me, hut, hut ", and suddenly the doorless building spins around to face the visitors and shows windows that look like its eyes.

In the series, though she is shown as a demon who feeds from misery rather than children, arguably though both are sustenance through the misery of others. In some tales where Baba Yaga kidnaps a child, she is teaching a lesson to a mother how to keep a child alive from a dangerous world: The fact is that infant mortality causes less pain for the actual infant, though more for the mother (Forrester, Skoro & Zipes 2013, 33). Baba Yaga and the Crones share a cannibalistic appetite for children. In some stories, Baba Yaga is shown as three sisters. The common factor between all of these witches (Baba Yaga, The Crones and Deathless Mother) are the typical witch elements: they are the most vicious creatures with prophetic powers who enjoy others' misery. Despite they might seem to have a soft spot for guiding the lost, they always attempt to extract a terrible price for their assistance.

"Though it is difficult to trace the historical evolution of this mysterious figure with exactitude, it is apparent that Baba Yaga was created by many voices and hands from the pre-Christian era in Russia up through the eighteenth century when she finally became "fleshed out," so to speak, in the abundant Russian and other Slavic tales collected in the nineteenth century", describes Zipes (Forrester, Skoro & Zipes 2013, 7). Whilst Baba Yaga is exclusively Slavic folk character, she has become an international "legendary" figure: illustrations, paintings, films, animations, and various other designs have flourished in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. "Yet, no matter how Baba Yaga is portrayed, it is her strange Russian otherness that paradoxically strikes a common chord in readers of her tales" (Forrester, Skoro & Zipes 2013, 8).

### 7.3 Parody and satire

Parody provides examples of a culture that is particularly self-conscious or self-referential: Whether it is mocking or celebratory, a common characteristic of folkloresque parody is its plain awareness of its own derivativeness (Foster & Tolbert 2016, 23). Tolbert does not think it is a coincidence that parody is often considered as a postmodern form and he thinks that parody is “the eye of the beholder” (Foster & Tolbert 2016, 24). Even if a producer is not always aware of the derivative nature of the product, it all depends on how well the audience knows the context. Any consumer can find parodic folkloresque through interpretation (2016, 23).

The pseudonym “seanzoz” publishes funny animated parodies on YouTube. The best-known parodies are from various videogames (such as Skyrim, Fallout 4, The Witcher 3) and he has hundreds of thousand subscribers. ‘The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Parody’- animation (2015) is based on the popular videogame series. In this parody, Geralt has a new ‘Zen Box Nine’ to keep contact instead of using ancient magic stone (Picture 10). This great Zen Box Nine device can open “communication to both ways”, plays ‘Wannabe’ by popular British girl group Spice Girls, freeze moments of time (takes an ugly picture of Kira) and after Siri mentions Sesame Streets’ Cookie Monster (which Geralt is not familiar of) it puts him in a hunting mode immediately. Obviously to understand the parody in this is to recognize current and late 90’s popular cultures elements. Without this inside knowledge, it is just another animation that only entertains visually.



PICTURE 10. Geralt showing to Kira his new Zen Box Nine from Wild Hunt Parody

Tolbert does not think it is a coincidence that parody has often been considered a postmodern form (Foster & Tolbert 2016, 23). For example, the entire Shrek franchise was created in a parodic folkloresque fashion. It provides sophisticated awareness of popular culture and has an addition of familiar folkloric elements invoked to the parody. Films such as Shrek might simply be considered “updated” versions of existing folklore (Foster & Tolbert 2016, 23). Below there is a still image from GIF by artist alias Danissimo (Picture 11).



PICTURE 11. Witcher Shrek GIF by Danissimo

The GIF is a combination of two huge franchises The Witcher and Shrek. Humorous value becomes by knowing these two characters: Geralt from The Witcher, who has come to kill Shrek, the horrible, green, stinky monster from the swamp. The folk parody is an artistic form of communication that is built upon a pre-existing aesthetic structure (Narvaez 1977, 33). The original creation is altered to the extent that the former sentiment is still identifiable to the creator and to the audience as well. So, how does parody preserve folklore? Folk parody imitates and exhibits crisp contrasts with original models which evoke laughter. It is quite clear that many of these parodies will keep existing in oral tradition as well in a part of digital media. Folklore takes the form of humorous parody by “maintaining an original structure with the addition of an element of comic surprise which functions as a critical comment on the initial folklore item” (Narvaez 1977, 33).



### 7.3.1 Memes

In our modern age of social media, storytelling has evolved to an entirely new and unprecedented form, generated by the general public, and largely free from the oversight of institutional publishers. Krawczyk-Wasilewska explains how the “PhotoShop-lore” and the digital animations of images together with modification of sounds are providing a further dimension (2016, 30). These make reference to products that popular culture has created, and they have “an endless cycle of parody and commentary that is often aware of its own cyclicity” (Foster& Tolbert 2016, 25). You could argue that a meme is a modern example of a piece of folklore: they are passed through online communities in the same way that old superstitions and tales were passed on in the past.

For example, dating platforms are known for ridiculously edited pictures. People have warned the danger of online dates: you never know who truly is behind a screen. It is not surprising that some witchy material from The Witcher has ended up in a dating-related meme (Picture 12). However, is this meme a joke about the images filters that people use so much or a warning about the danger behind a “potential” date?



PICTURE 12. Meme from Reddit that reflects the virtual dating scenes, and the ability of The Crones to disguise their appearance.

Sharing a meme can be enjoyable. On the other hand, it is also needed. Could memes be a modern folk warning story? Sometimes urban legends have been created as elaborations on humorous anecdotes like memes. Taylor-Blake (2016) considers that collecting and discovering urban legends reveals shared central beliefs and, thus, they are strengthening our communities. Folklore includes urban legends, and urban legends are folk narratives of life in modern society (Taylor- Blake 2016). Memes possesses a narrative structure that can have misconceptions or folk beliefs which might become urban legends (Taylor-Blake 2016). These legends are constructed usually from our pre-existing beliefs about modern times concerns and suspicions.

Dee Dee Chainey (author of *A Treasure of British Folklore* & Co-founder of #FolkloreThursday) in Victoria Wards interview (2019) thinks that new folklore is created constantly on the Internet. The culture of 'passing it along', or sharing memes, establishes them as a valuable indicator of what society values, because if the receiver does not find it significant, it just simply disappears. Everyone with a smartphone or computer is now a content producer and content consumer, and this way jokes, urban legends, and other folklore genres of fact and fiction can spread within seconds all over the world (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2016, 31). Some fairy tales are so well-known and spread worldwide that they have started to appear like universal memes. Zipes compare memes to viruses: When you plant a fertile meme in people's minds, you literally parasitise their brains. (2012,17) For example the song 'Toss a coin to your witcher' will not be just stuck inside of our heads but also in memes (Picture 13). "The show, based on a world created by the Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski, also has a sense of humor that often borders on the wacky, and it has even generated a pop-rock cult earworm, "Toss a Coin to Your Witcher." The series's stylistic range is as unpredictable as it is wide" (Vincentelli 2022).

Zipes expresses his worry about how the term and popularity can become dangerous for a person when memes are used for anything that becomes trendy: “it can cause the person or term become meaningless”, states Zipes (2012, 18). Yet, memes have been viewed as an elementary unit of cultural transmission. Memes are independent and they process cultural evolution. Also, they can help build traditions by creating pools of stories predicated on the human communication of shared experiences (Zipes 2012, 19). However, acculturations depend on a meme. It does not always function smoothly. The problem is that when someone creates a trend; in the wrong hand it turns out just a dreadful copy. However, the more a meme is reused, the more kitsch they become. Hence why they give us so much humorous value.



PICTURE 13. The old and new fans of The Witcher are gathered. Toss a coin to a witcher! 2020



## 8 DISCUSSION

Storytelling is a community builder: a group with nothing in common listens to the same story and suddenly they have a shared experience. YouTube shows this very well. Whether you are a fan of the novels, videogames or the Netflix show, *The Witcher* gathers them together under the discussions of the origins of the mythological inspired monsters. Youtube is a new way of passing down folklore in a current era.

The *Witcher* related Youtube content demonstrates how folktales are still around, but shared and relayed through new mediums. In our digital era, stories transmit more easily and we can still find old tales. We redefine many of the old folk stories suitable to modern times. The development of communication technologies can be viewed as a new avenue for spending leisure time and creativity, and video platforms, such as YouTube, give *The Crones* and hence *Baba Yaga* immense visibility. Whether one is a fan of *The Witcher* videogames, novels, or the recent Netflix television show, there is a parallel attraction to the same video content, as curiosity is satisfied through the information behind the *Ladies of the Wood*, and stories about witches. Perhaps there is a new digital folklore because media experts are developing the technical aspects to create more artistic possibilities of media folklore forms.

However, even as folklore works as an inspirational source of art for many, there might not be an understanding or knowledge of any meanings of the original versions. It would be interesting to extend this thesis question, to if there can be value added in folklore, through folkloresque's process when it keeps borrowing and merging folklore elements: whether they lose meaning in the process and turn into examples of Haase's "un-manageable" and "un-imaginable" universe of stories. Disney's *Snow White* suggests that elements of successful folkloresque adaptations, can become the de facto folklore in the public consciousness; such are the cultural memories and fondness for her *Seven Dwarves*. Whereas *Maleficent*, though popular, has yet to exercise a similar influence. One might speculate that folkloresque art that veers too far from the archetypes and deeper meanings

at the core of these stories, will eventually be forgotten, such is the evolutionary process of folklore, and perhaps all human culture.

Folkloresque leads to greater exposure to cultural traditions and shows how folklore is valuable. The term folkloresque might refer to a gaudy product that is planned to have popular appeal, but such products demonstrate how folklore and popular culture mutually influence each other. The Witcher franchise has borrowed from true myth, legend and folklore and created a believable fantasy world. Societal tastes constantly change and search for new ideas; without this kind of wasteful aspect of our economic system, there would be no folklore. Using outdated stories does not always appeal to everyone. The folkloresque's purpose of integration of the old folklore into modern digital ways is to carry the same morals and teach the same lessons. Yet, do it in a way that will resonate better with the audience. With inspirations from folklore and mythologies, good interesting stories and characters will remain updated and be retold through various interactive media sources.

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