

Article

Virtual Worlds and Imagined Communities: Digital Folklore and Globalgothic in *The Witcher 3*

Yongyu Quan

Department of English, University of Macau, Macao, China; yc27734@um.edu.mo

Abstract

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015), a role-playing game developed by CD Projekt RED, exhibits enduring appeal even ten years after its release. The game features European folkloric and Gothic aesthetics that highlight its uniqueness and gained good reception among global players. Yet, the mechanism of this transnational and transcultural appeal is still insufficiently researched. This article challenges debates about the ephemeral nature of internet trends as digital folklore, analysing how regional folk traditions converge into cultural globalisation through interactive media such as video games. The main approach of this study is literary and cultural, adopting digital folklore theory, Globalgothic theory, and Benedict Anderson's imagined communities. This article also examines in-game quests and landscape aesthetics as part of gameplay through close reading. This study finds that the game interprets regional folk traditions into universal Gothic themes through players' participatory performance, decontextualised narrative design, and virtual world construction. A new form of digital folklore emerges in the Witcher Universe as an imagined community forms in the virtualised reality. At the same time, longstanding folkloric and literary traditions function as an anchor for this rejuvenated digital folklore and community.

Keywords: Benedict Anderson; digital folklore; Globalgothic; interactive media; virtual world

1. Introduction

The 2015 release of the role-playing game (RPG) *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, developed by CD Projekt RED (hereafter CDPR), is a milestone in digital game artwork. As the latest instalment of the trilogy, *The Witcher 3* attained great commercial success as of May 2026 with over 65 million copies sold worldwide (CD Projekt 2026). Based on Polish novelist Andrzej Sapkowski's creative writings, the game is characterised by its mysterious, subtle, and alluring cultural background. The franchise originated as an eponymous Polish story of the 'Witcher'—a monster slayer who hunts supernatural beings and villains, and becomes involved in wars. *The Witcher 3* is deeply shaped by the producers' creative synthesis of Slavic, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon myths and folklore (Jański 2018). While its sensibility is predominantly European and medievaesque, *The Witcher 3* has been so far translated into 15 languages, including Arabic, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese, and has been well received and successful in varied cultures (Noclip 2018). In a documentary about the game, the localisation producer of CDPR explains that all the localisation tasks are carried out concurrently and the game has 'no original language' (Noclip 2018). It thus

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becomes a convincing example of how a regional representation can integrate into the global popular culture, although there is an unavoidable necessity for the representation itself to be localised and let go of many European characteristics in Sapkowski's original writings (Gawronski and Bajorek 2020).

A key aesthetic feature of *The Witcher 3* is that it draws extensively on the 'dark side' of the historical myths, folk cults, and folklore, making the appreciation of this game a relatively novel and uncanny experience for global players. The vermin, the gore, the cult ritual, the monsters, the supernatural beings, the creepy atmosphere, and the sense of unease have made it possible for us to discuss how far the historical Gothic traditions have influenced it. Beyond its novel hybridity, achieved through its fusion of diverse historical European folk traditions, *The Witcher 3* focuses on societal margins, taboos and concerns: racial otherness, deformity, heresy, psychosis, disease, and the homicide. It unfolds its charming narratives by allowing the players to interactively observe and participate in the events that provoke their anxiety. It is perhaps the fascinating 'dark side' of the culture that helps the players worldwide actively overcome the cultural barriers in the storytelling and even actively take in what the CDPR wants them to learn.

As a result, the franchise's fans spontaneously form groups and communities on various social networks such as Fandom.com and IGN.com. As of June 2026, the Witcher Wiki on Fandom has a collection of over 12,308 pages and 644,575 edits; fans have also contributed to the creation of interactive game world maps and the compilation of an encyclopaedia covering all in-game information including weapons, monster bestiary, characters, magic, and so forth (Witcher Wiki 2026). The topics surrounding *The Witcher 3* on various social networks encompass reviews, guides, documentaries, full game walkthroughs, memes, semiotic decoding, game design, real-world costume play of the characters, interpretation of the plot, introduction to the mythological background, and so forth. These discussions and activities are often serious and detailed with examples and first-hand experience. At the same time, fans' participation from diverse countries and cultural backgrounds makes this Polish story series a part of cultural globalisation. These fan-made elements have the potential to become the core paratexts of the game that connect players, designers, and games (Genette 1997).

Scholarly work on *The Witcher 3* focuses on its queer culture, map, morality, sounds, language, and folklorism. Vanderschueren (2026) analyses the game from a queer uncanny and ecocritic perspective, assuming the fictional world of the game as an 'hyperobject' in which the avatar's 'queer' identity forms a sharp contrast with the collapsed climate of the game world. The contrast produces an uncanny effect on players and translates the intangible climate collapse into players' tangible lived experience. Johansson and Rübsamen (2024) frame the Witcher as a marginalised 'stranger' in the game world, arguing that the game encourages players to embrace the game's grey moral narrative and ponder the game's moral decisions. Pizzati and Tito (2025) and Stevens (2021) analyse the Slavic folk music features and sound exoticism of the game. Al-Batineh (2023) analyses the Arabic localisation across linguistic accuracy, technical implementation, and cultural appropriateness. Stein (2023) approaches the game's linguistic features through analyses of English varieties of game characters, arguing that English varieties such as Irish English, Cockney, and American English help stereotype fictional ethnic groups and races. Swallow (2025) focuses on the game's high medieval feature and explains how the game's graphics and texts integrate and provoke medieval sensibility in service to players' immersion. Özgü's (2026) comment centres on the game's adaptation of Polish folktales and its reference to those folktales' pantheism, arguing that this element breaks away from the binary opposition between good and evil in Christian folk narratives and sparks discussions of 'desire' as a theme with players' participation and decision. Majkowski et al. (2025) pay their attention to 'Leshy'—a game monster originating from Russian folktale, discov-

ering that its Polish reinterpretation in the game makes it popular worldwide as a part of Polish Slavic cultural heritage, which marks digital games' agency in cultural reinterpretation and ethnicity construction (also in Eklund et al. 2025; Mochocki et al. 2025). Bunting (2026) considers the open-world maps in the game as a negative factor in gameplay, contending that the game's numerous quest marks and places of interest will alienate players' immersive experience as pure labour.

Despite scholarly analyses through diverse lenses, the mechanism of this transnational and transcultural appeal is still insufficiently researched. Digital games as such can function as a virtual discursive universe that enables creators to construct a brand new global community; on such a basis, new collective imagination emerges regardless of individuals' original cultural background. Players are not merely audiences, but participants in folkloric transmission and reinterpretation. Their shared play experience and communication on the internet are the essentials of the digital folklore of the Witcher Universe. The continuous circulation and reception consolidate the basis of this digital folklore.

Rather than conducting an empirical analysis of fan community and the design of the game, this article approaches the Witcher Universe from a literary and cultural studies perspective. The later sections will focus on how the game's folkloric and Globalgothic elements build a cultural ground for global audience to form new group imagination and community. This article studies whether players' participatory gameplay contributes to the formation of the Witcher Universe as a form of digital folklore, and how the deterritorialised virtual world might strengthen or complicate this folkloric foundation. This article will organise the analysis into three interconnected sections. Section 2 builds a theoretical basis by incorporating digital folklore theory, Globalgothic theory, and Benedict Anderson's imagined communities. Section 3 explains how the Witcher's virtual world creates new digital folklore and provides a cultural space for an imagined community. Section 4 conducts a textual analysis of game quests and landscapes to analyse the Globalgothic elements in the game and how these elements contribute to the creation of the digital folklore and virtual community in Sections 2 and 3.

2. Theoretical Framework: Digital Folklore, Globalgothic, and Imagined Communities

However, the status of this subculture as a new form of folklore remains open to scholarly debate. Digital folklore theorists Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Ross (2016) consider cyberspace an 'infinite' base of the global postmodern culture. Regarding the enormous social impact of constructs such as cyberspace and virtual reality, the new digital culture is becoming an essential part of the continuing globalisation (Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Ross 2016). In the process of globalisation, Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Ross regard the internet as 'an encyclopaedia of a global folk', with the latter overlapping with the global cyberspace society or the 'netizens' (Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Ross 2016). Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Ross underline folklore's 'continuously evolving and organic nature', and argue that social media, information exchange technology and digital games have developed the 'digital way of integrating storytelling and role-playing, and of creating identities' (Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Ross 2016). Although they recognise online social media as 'the biggest backgrounds for e-folklore's creativity and circulation', they remain cautious about the 'ephemera' of such new culture (Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Ross 2016).

However, the case of *The Witcher 3* offers an opportunity to test this 'ephemera': does the game's anchor in longstanding folkloric and Gothic traditions make its culture more durable? Over the centuries, these traditions have already exhibited great vitality and dynamism, which facilitates the sustainability of *The Witcher 3*'s digital folklore reconstruc-

tion. The fans of *The Witcher 3*, for example, can be collectively regarded as a digital group which is analogous to the traditional folk group. In some way, this case can be significantly different from the ‘ephemera’ judgement of Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Ross, because the digital folk group of *The Witcher*, including the producers, the designers, the artists, and the players, are basing their construction of new folklore creation and communication on the traditional folklore that Sapkowski alludes to extensively in his original writings. By sustaining connections with these traditions, both the game’s production design and fan participation are passing on old and creating new folklore.

To support the claim above, this article starts with a discussion of the nature of folklore. Arguing for the social significance of folklore, Bronner (2019) thoroughly discusses how folklore must pass on to sustain social connections. He believes traditions are representations of ‘social control and expressions’ in contrast to a standardised, commercialised and artificial modern mode (Bronner 2019). The essential function of folklore, sociability, makes it indispensable for practical communicative behaviours. The authorship concerning its collective creation is anonymous and endows folklore with communicative attributes. Likewise, in Dan Ben-Amos’ definition, folklore and myths are defined as ‘artistic communication’ within a ‘small group’ (Ben-Amos 2020). In his theories, the community should be considered the critical factor in the formation of folklore, while the actual author of a story is gradually forgotten and erased from the community’s consciousness. Such a tradition accommodates people within a community, encourages shared understandings of unexpected events, natural phenomena, social norms, subjective experiences and questions of individual existence. These shared understandings simultaneously signify the necessity and reason for passing on to this tradition. Notably, Ben-Amos’s focus on ‘small groups’ does not preclude *The Witcher 3*’s global community, which is precisely composed of thousands of small groups: local cosplay groups, group chats, and wiki editors. The global community emerges in the interconnection of these small groups, not in opposition to them.

This kind of online folkloric communication scatters all over the world across small groups, and these communities’ creative contents become the transmedia paratextual materials that sustain their existence. Building on Genette’s (1997) theory that paratexts are thresholds to textual meaning, Hills and Garde-Hansen (2017) propose that it is the ‘paratextual memory’ sustaining the identity of the community and fans’ affective ties to the work. Similarly, Vollans (2021) argues that games and player experience exist in a ‘macro-textual network’: wikis, game analyses, discussions, and fan-made contents should be considered as essential parts of players’ gaming experience. This aligns with Švelch’s (2016) idea that game paratexts are integral components of the ‘lore’—a transmedia ecosystem deriving from the game.

Literary traditions of folklore can be regarded as another significant component of this digital folklore for their variability, historicity and philosophical attribute. Interactive media such as video games, which integrate texts, visuals, music, graphics and interactive mechanics, create an ‘enhanced’ form of digital literature. Despite Sapkowski and specific game designers’ authoritative status over the *Witcher* Universe, this authority gradually becomes decentralised as fans engage with the game world and start their own fan-creation. Fans become participants of the lore instead of mere audience. The players’ experience, opinions, and personal stories become public after they post them online, and the *Witcher* becomes their communal identity and tradition, which echoes Ben-Amos’ observation.

The global popularity of *The Witcher 3*, with its adaptations of dark European folklore, marks a plausible rejuvenation of literary traditions with interactive media and its potential to nurture new ‘small groups’ and their common recognition. Moreover, in this case, this rejuvenation not only benefits traditional European folklore but also Gothicism.

The most concrete examples are monstrosity, haunting, and depiction of the uncanny throughout the gameplay. By assimilating literary Gothic tropes and motifs, CD Projekt RED also intended to make this game a mysterious adventure in the unknown that provokes tension and curiosity. As Bronner (2019) puts it, the core function of folklore lies in its communicative attributes. The Gothic, which centres on universal human fears, coexists with *The Witcher 3*'s dense supernatural and uncanny atmosphere through its portrayal of European folklore.

While traditional folklore requires common linguistic and cultural recognition bounded by territory, digital folklore requires more far-reaching and universal transculturality that appeals to a global audience. In this sense, the Gothic serves as a versatile vehicle of cultural dissemination. Punter (1980) recognises the core of the Gothic—fear: fear and the taboo are the things that directly trigger readers' curiosity about the imaginable unknown. Bloom argues that the Gothic is not only 'a playground for the imaginative' but also 'the very foundation of a new sense of the imagination' (Bloom 2010). Such a new sense of imagination signifies the reactions of the human mind concerning 'the supernatural, the universal and the divine' (Bloom 2010). While some critics accuse the traditional Gothic genre of 'bad taste' for its formulaic tropes, as Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz (2020) put it, such criticism usually targets the label of 'Gothic' instead of what it denotes. The core of Gothic horror—fear and anxiety—makes it widely accepted worldwide. This account also reminds readers of 'folk horror'. Similar to the Gothic, folk horror also deals with regional folklore, mysteries, and popular memory (Scovell 2017). Scovell (2017) also argues that folk horror is 'a prism of term' that can interconnect with various cultural works, and 'horror' should be considered 'a mutation of its affect' when it is discussed in a cross-form context. In this sense, folk horror and the Gothic can overlap due to their common interest in folklore, mystery, and tension. Section 4 will see a textual analysis of how folk horror narrative is adapted and integrated into a globalised Gothic context, whereas specific folk horror is not the main focus of this article, because it is more concerned with the reconstruction of Gothic folklore for a global audience.

This is where 'Globalgothic' intervenes in the formation of the digital folklore of Witcher Universe. As Botting and Edwards (2015) theorise, the global fashion of witchcraft, zombification and other 'bizarre' modes implicates an international communal interest in the representations pertaining to horror, tension, and mystery. The term 'Globalgothic' usually refers to transcultural Gothic references, especially targeting the ubiquitous, local folkloric traditions and new tropes worldwide (Botting and Edwards 2015). The transcultural Globalgothic appeal allows *The Witcher 3*'s European folklore to resonate with global audiences. Though *The Witcher 3* is not a horror game, it offers players experience of the imaginable unknown, weird stories, and engagement with tension. Its material from European folklore naturally merges with the game's Gothic aesthetics, creating an artistic language that transcends language and identity. In this context, the circulation of folklore and literary traditions is recontextualised. As Bauman and Briggs (1990) put it, recontextualisation marks the reposition of narratives, symbols and oral traditions from their original contexts to new contexts for new communities. On this basis, Mould (2005) defines traditionalisation as a subtype of recontextualisation when a group attempts to 'provide authority to their narrative performance and interpretation'.

In this sense, this reconstructed Gothic conversely contributes to its popularity worldwide and makes folklore more than cultural ties of regional groups. Dark, uncanny European folklore along, with popular Gothic tropes, can make the game a cultural bond that connects people around the world and their shared traditional past (of play). In this way, how better to explain and analyse the above-mentioned constructed fictional environment becomes a problem for the creation of *The Witcher 3*. This article draws on the theory of Benedict Anderson. Anderson argues that nationalism came into being within a

complex religious and political context, in which, he supposes, the erosion of religion produced a need for ‘secular transformation’, thus creating the possible origin of nationalism (Anderson 1991). The rebellious movement against religious certainty accelerated people’s need to be ‘meaningful’ (Anderson 1991). While religion is based upon religious imagining, which digs into humans’ imaginative consideration of suffering, a nation is thus considered a suitable replacement for religion when a society moves towards secularisation. In this sense, the fictional universe in *The Witcher 3* can be likely deemed a replacement for the nation in similar ways, although it remains unknown what the particular meaning of virtual reality and mental travelling in fictional worlds can have for us.

The Witcher 3’s imagined community befits the term’s literal meaning, as the Witcher Universe is fictitious and imagined. Unlike nations, *The Witcher 3* community is by no means coercive, territorialised, or political—a distinction that challenges the analogy. This fan community is voluntary, deterritorialised, and ludic. However, when millions of fans worldwide unify in the Witcher’s worldview and bind themselves together as a community regardless of their diverse backgrounds, the spirit of this community partly agrees with Anderson’s insight. The rules, mechanism, and the Witcher’s protocols become this community’s shared codes and principles; the community’s websites, wikis, and forums become fans’ deterritorialised or virtualised public sphere; the uniqueness of *The Witcher*’s worldview separates it from other fictional worlds and makes this virtual world a cultural sovereignty—the collective and community-recognised construct to define the Witcher Universe, though it is not coercive and nationalistic. Based on Anderson’s theory, the state’s national narrative can be transformed into a collective consensus within the fan community—a process demonstrated through the collaborative creation of the Witcher encyclopaedia. This collective labour undertaken by the author, the game designers, game producers, game artists, game musicians, and fans echoes Anderson’s ‘print capitalism’ that gives rise to national imagination. In this sense, the virtual world experience in *The Witcher 3* can be deemed a virtualised and non-political alternative to nationalist engagement. On the contrary, the game’s virtual world is aesthetic and emotion-oriented based on players’ experience and joy. This global solidarity dispenses with ethnic or political identity.

Even though this ‘territory’ is virtualised and the ‘subjects’ in it are purely ludic, players still have their subjective experience in the virtual world and must respond to its reality. Scholars of virtual worlds have discussed how this immersive environment fosters this presence. Thimm (2012) demonstrates an example of a typical virtual world—‘Second Life’, in which the players simulate real-world communications and other activities. He then concludes that ‘the constants of human communities exist even in virtual contexts, and computer games extend into virtual worlds and vice versa’ (Thimm 2012). The virtual world can become a viable platform as the continuation of real-world experiences. Dovey and Kennedy argue that ‘Technology has become our environment, and environmental factors play a major role in producing consciousness and identity’ (Dovey and Kennedy 2007). He also elaborates on how such integration becomes possible in Digital Game Play by augmenting ‘experience’ and ‘immersion’ (Dovey and Kennedy 2007). The improvement of ‘experience’ and ‘immersion’ comes after a complicated combination of platform, control system, rules, and so forth. The key feature is to ‘participate’ (Dovey and Kennedy 2007). Participation and immersion in the virtual world, in this way, become our keys to studying the ideology and methodology *The Witcher 3* adopts to enhance its renovation of the literary traditions.

Taken together, a short conclusion can be drawn. First, this analysis responds to Krawczyk-Wasilewska and Ross’s (2016) argument that digital folklore usually demonstrates ephemeral qualities. The Witcher Universe assimilates the continuity of traditional folklore and literary Gothic traditions and builds an anchor for digital production and

internet culture. Second, it exhibits the power of Globalgothic regarding its contribution to transcultural bridging and popularisation of traditions. Third, it expands Anderson's theory of imagined communities to the virtual world by explicating a ludic, deterritorialised, and non-political form of community where shared identity, memory, and imagination emerge amidst affective game engagement. In the next section, this article will discuss how the virtual world of the Witcher Universe functions as a cultural vehicle for the digital folklore of the game, the community thus born, and the Globalgothic storytelling in a transcultural context.

3. The Virtual World and the 'Witchers' from the Real World

Before initiating a discussion of how the virtual world in the Witcher Universe effectively promotes the construction of new global group imagination, this article discusses the necessity and function of this virtual world. In its narrow technological definition, a virtual world is a computer-generated digital environment that simulates real-world phenomena or creates a world that diverges from the existing universe (Nevelsteen 2017). Such a virtual world is technically based on the collaboration of computer graphics, physics engines, HIDs (human interface devices) and so forth. The virtual world environment is indeed the very basis of contemporary interactive media, but such a definition is not the entirety. As is mentioned before, the connections that players and fans have established in the Witcher Universe are not simply shown by their identity as players, readers, and audiences of The Witcher franchise, but are also revealed by their 'co-creation' of the franchise, the discussions, the costume plays, and studies of the semiotics of the game on social media. The virtual world functions even outside its specific environment. The virtual world obtains its broader and ideal sense. It is an imaginative realm of the individuals drawn by its settings or discourse, a set of norms practised by a community, and an open narrative that invites participation and adaptation—a living fandom.

The Witcher Universe is thus similar to traditional folklore. Historically, the latter is, to some extent, the very emotional and spiritual tie that sustains the identity and familiarity in small groups of people. Folklore not only promotes the group's communication but also helps model the traits and properties of the culture that this group of people might create. The common imagination of people within such a circle nurtures the birth of ethnic groups and even nations. As Anderson argues, the loss of religious attachment since industrialisation deprived the industrial population of their religious group imagining, and nationalism became a new illusion for them (Anderson 1991).

However, after two world wars, the cold war and the scientific revolution, the twenty-first-century people now live in a world where nationalism is too often related to irrational fervour, conflicts, chauvinism, extreme populism and unilateralism. The intricate history of the twentieth century made collective imagination less homogeneous even within certain groups of people. The idealised nation exists only in mind and collapses when reality unravels. Traditional myths and folklore, at the same time, rapidly lose their credibility due to the popularisation of scientific knowledge and people's increasing familiarity with technology. The real world, in some way, has lost most of its possibilities of being imaginable, at least for adults. It is still easier to convince a child of the existence of the elves in the forest, home spirits under the bed, and Santa Claus in the North Pole than to persuade an adult that there are vampires and aliens among humans. Contemporary globalisation and the formation of a global market further threaten the imaginative potential of the real world. The growing interdependence of major economies and the international standards of goods and services have greatly influenced how the global urban population perceives the world as homogeneous business patterns, goods, services, and ways of city planning being popularised worldwide.

First, such interdependence and homogeneity have realistically formed the common ground for a global common culture to develop—a culture that could become new urban folklore, while the basis of nationalism and regional folklore is being radically deconstructed. Second, luckily, a virtual world, in this sense, can be deemed a revolutionary platform that accommodates illusions to replace the conventional folklorist or nationalistic imagination. Schmidt (2015) argues that the desire of ‘seeing can partly explain early modern Europeans’ desire for geography and exoticism’ and ‘discovery’, which entails ‘revealing the unseen’—an act that satisfies curiosity, and fulfilled curiosity brings pleasure. Such exoticism is the very sensational experience that a homogenous real world lacks and needs and can possibly be rediscovered in the virtual world.

The deconstruction of real-world imagination and the availability of virtual world imagination can be tangible. Schmidt (2015) elaborates how the Dutch impresarios of print in the seventeenth century monopolised the authorship, editorship, printing, engraving and selling of books related to exotic geography. These booksellers’ sources of exotic impressions generally came from sailors’ and adventurers’ journals, which contain first-hand descriptions of the east (Schmidt 2015). However, such first-hand information was usually modified, blended, grafted and exaggerated intentionally to cater to the wild curiosity of local readers (Schmidt 2015). The titular authors of exotic geography books were no longer authentic. Such practice made the texts concerning exotic geography obtain folkloristic properties.

In this way, the fantasies about the exotic lands became entertainment for the early modern Europeans, and the realistically existing exotic nations became a kind of ‘imaginative space’ for imaginative entities. Consequently, to some extent, the unseen reality is partly virtualised to accommodate the provoked group imagination. The curiosity about the ‘other’ shifts from ‘a desire of learning’ to ‘a desire of fantasising’, and the realistically existing lands become places of interest for exploitation and novel adventures.

Unlike the early modern exotic, the modern exotic is much safer and entertaining, and unlike the early modern population, a modern individual can easily get accurate, descriptive texts, pictures, videos and sounds of the geographically ‘exotic’ places, destroying the ‘virtualised reality’. The modern population’s need for learning geographic knowledge can be easily satisfied at school. Huggan (2020) comments on the ‘postcolonial exotic’, arguing that the ‘exotic’ has become a ‘default mode for speaking about colonial/postcolonial otherness’, and that the notion of ‘auto-exoticism’ is about the ‘indigenous self-fashioning’ and creating ‘pseudo-identities’.

The users together form a community in which each member of it, piece by piece, offers first-hand personal experience and opinions, building up a communal representational system that brings down the monopolised exotic representations. Such a community shifts the focus of exoticism from fantasising about the ‘exotic’ to learning and understanding other cultures. Learning deepens, and the room for romanticising other cultures shrinks. A modern individual’s wild imagination of exoticism can be significantly reduced as long as he or she lives in a well-informed environment. When learning substitutes fantasising, becoming the key to the reformed exotic aesthetics, the exoticism, which signifies the group imagination of the uncharted world in the context of global urban culture, is thus decontextualised.

At the same time, such decontextualised status of exotic sensibility makes a perfect match with the cyberculture that innately rejects centralised discourses and representational systems, fuses numerous cultures in the real world and constructs virtual worlds that include all. The function of the virtual world of *The Witcher*, in this aspect, is to provide an ‘extraterritorial’ space for group imagining where the norms and codes of the real world are still valid. The cyberculture formed in this cultural integration and reinterpretation thus conforms to the communicative nature of digital folklore in Bronner’s sense.

International communication via the Witcher Universe nurtures the birth of the franchise's fan community, where individuals associate with each other using the Witcher's language, knowledge, and identity. As Gualeni and Vella (2020) argue, an individual's way of being in a digital environment is analogous to what it is in the real world. At the same time, its virtual property helps such norms and codes get rid of their controversial elements.

In the virtual world of *The Witcher*, for example, the players' gathering on the online social networks proves to be a natural and spontaneous phenomenon that underlines their real attachment to the settings of such a virtual world, while this attachment is physically away from all existing social entities and connections. As is discussed in Section 2, folklore relies on anonymous group creation. The fans and players of the game, in this sense, become those anonymous storytellers each time they play the game and make different decisions, which can generate different storylines because of the flexibility of video games. This anonymous creation will be elaborated in Section 4 when discussing specific quests and player decisions.

Unlike the process of the secularisation of Europe, in which politically motivated nationalism replaced religious belief by conceptualising the nation-based communities, the conceptualisation of the virtual world of *The Witcher* is experiential and pleasure-motivated. Likewise, the adaptation and renovation of historical or urban folklore in the Witcher Universe are of pure ludic nature. The Witcher Universe uses Gothic tropes, art, and transcultural folklore to create a fictitious cultural 'other' as opposed to a real-world, geographical 'other'. The recipients of such concepts are fully aware of the virtuality and fictionality of the mechanism, setting, law and history of *The Witcher*, and this is the very new world they are looking for—an empty and barren universe that avoids trouble, a completely unreasonable illusion that resides far beyond the reach of reality, and an exotic realm where the curiosity for the unknown cultures can be satisfied. The exotic imagery of the Witcher Universe is rooted in Globalgothic and transculturally adapted European folklore, excluding colonial stereotypes in real-world cultures. Fans enter this shared imaginative space to experience the universal affective power of Gothic and folklore, instead of speculating on a foreign place. The foundation of traditional folklore and the Gothic makes this universe an inclusive and firm cultural ground, as opposed to an ordinary internet trend.

Yet it remains an open question whether it is completely 'safe' when scholars scrutinise the game's adaptation of Slavic culture. As mentioned in Section 1, Majkowski et al. (2025) focus on how the in-game monster 'Leshy' is appropriated from Russian folklore and becomes a part of Polish folkloric legacy. This may make people alert to the phenomenon of cultural appropriation, but at least in their study, Majkowski et al. (2025) seek to develop their argument from the perspective of transculturation and 'invented tradition'.

Here, a relatively harmless metaphor can be used: the Witcher Universe is an enlarged, modernised and virtualised Strawberry Hill House, and we thereby become the successors of Horace Walpole—the first Gothic writer who turned his house into his favourite Gothic 'castle'. Reeve (2020) argues that Strawberry Hill exists as an 'architectural self' underlying not only Walpole's capricious ego but also his constant longing for fantasies. Like Horace Walpole, fans of *The Witcher 3* find their own fantasies across the game world and the internet: a fictitious but much larger and eclectic world.

Similarly, Nakamura's (2002) criticism of 'identity tourism' reminds readers to pay attention to the potential risks of playing as an avatar: white players' liberty to play as other races is potentially another form of racial exoticism as 'races' are considered as a carrier for entertainment. Nakamura (2002) also warns that cyberpunk texts such as *Blade Runner* (1982) have the risk of techno-orientalism for their appropriation of East Asian

cultural symbols as futuristic décor. Therefore, the question of whether the Witcher as the avatar anticipates these risks is worth discussing.

As the player's avatar, the Witcher in the virtual world is designed to be an impartial participant in the fictional politics of the world; he is a wanderer, an observer, or even a victim. As Gawronski and Bajorek (2020) describe, the Witcher is 'a warrior, a loner, a mysterious figure, with a specific code of honour derived from belonging to a brotherhood.' The Witcher is not affiliated with any political entity and is not interested in doing so. He and his brotherhood live in the deep mountainous area of Kaer Morhen, maintaining a life of training, learning, hunting, and labouring. More importantly, they are not even considered as human beings by other races in the game and are often despised due to their body mutations. The witchers are the most indifferent beings in the Witcher Universe—the hermits who only care about their own deeds. A folk song in the gameworld sings:

'For your dolly polly sleep has flown
Don't dare let her tremble alone
For the Witcher
Heartless cold
Paid in coin of gold
He comes, he'll go, leave naught behind
But heartache and woe.'
(Przybyłowicz 2015)

The Witcher's neutral stance thus aligns with the extraterritorial status of the virtual world of the Witcher Universe; this constitutes one source of immersive experiences in the world, as it frees players from preconceptions and biases. More importantly, it endows the players with the power to participate in the branching storylines and become the collective anonymous author of the new folklore within their communities. In the next section, this article will explain how the game's transcultural Globalgothic approach integrates into and contributes to creating new digital folklore in the Witcher's exotic virtual world.

4. Old Folklore, New Gothic Gameplay

The mythological and Gothic features in its storytelling are the key factors that appeal to the people who seek novel and enchanting experiences. In the Gothic imagination, the pursuit of illusory pleasure is often enhanced by a sense of insecurity and unease. In that, such pursuit of pleasure indicates not only curiosity about an unknown culture or the emotional necessity of having a collective imagination, but also reveals a subconscious need for the adventurous, mysterious, bizarre, and even uncanny exploration of unknown danger. The thrills and unease in the process of playing the game—hence the term 'gameplay' that specifies the players' actions, strategies and motives (Aarseth 2003, as cited in Walther 2007)—create another form of curiosity that signifies not only the charm and terror of the unknown but also the triggering of an innate defensive mentality that mirrors subconscious worry and vigilance. As Kawin (2012) argues, the appreciation of horror is more than a need for thrill and excitement; it is an act that reflects subconscious nerves and tension. Such defensive imagination is the very response that The Witcher's design is supposed to elicit.

Moreover, the fictional political, cultural, ethnic, and existential issues displayed in the gameplay are helpful in terms of renovating and recreating these traditional tropes and stock features. Langdon (2020) argues that the Gothic tropes and landscapes are not eternal, but their manifestation remains. Specifically, it is the up-to-date 'marginal' concerns and taboos of society such as 'criminality, sexuality, monstrosity, and the supernat-

ural' which he concludes as the 'subject matter' that formulates the internal logic of the Gothic (Langdon 2020).

Although in game studies, the Gothic and horror are often studied together (as seen in Stobart 2019), Gothic games do not necessarily have to contain horror elements or frighten players. In Krzywinska's (2014) terms, the Gothic finds 'its way into every gaming genre': in video games, the Gothic functions as a 'game grammar' that adapts Gothic traditions into playable 'procedural, ludic, and the semiotic/representational' system. The key theme of Gothic games, as Krzywinska (2014) argues, is 'the return of the repressed'. Commenting on horror games, Perron (2018) considers the Gothic as one of survival horror's origins, arguing that survival horror is the mixture of many different genres including the Gothic, which confirms Krzywinska's ideas. Kirkland (2021) further defines the Gothic as a 'spectrum' in the context of video games, with the defining theme of 'the past haunting the present'. Both Krzywinska (2014) and Kirkland (2021) consider the detective narrative mode of uncovering fragmented environmental clues as a characteristic of Gothic games. *The Witcher 3* is not a horror game, though, it is rich in mythical and Gothic elements that are integrated into gameplay.

The mythical and Gothic elements in *The Witcher* can be considered the result of a highly eclectic and miscellaneous creative work. Many of the quests in the game draw their allusions to historical literary traditions in European, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon folktales. The quest 'A Towerful of Mice', for example, elaborates a tragic story in the Fyke Isle Tower (see Figure 1) where the Witcher runs into swarms of rats, a couple of dead peasants' corpses, and the ghost of the former lord's daughter, Anabelle, who still haunts the tower. The Witcher's role in this quest is precisely that of a Gothic detective who is bound to uncover the dark secrets of the haunted place. He soon discovers that the peasants came here to murder Anabelle's stingy and obstinate father, the lord who refuses to offer food. The peasants were then killed by the mutated laboratory mice of the mage Alexander. In the mayhem, Anabelle drank the potion Alexander had given her to feign suicide and tricked the mob. Upon witnessing the scene, her lover Graham thought she was dead and left in misery. She was paralysed when she woke up, and the rats ate her alive. She begs the Witcher to take her bones to Graham for a proper burial. As the player's avatar, the Witcher can choose whether he will help. If yes, Anabelle will become a plague maiden (see Figure 2) once her bones are handed to Graham and take her revenge, as she does not know why Graham left. If not, the Witcher will have to confront her like the plague maiden and later help Graham lift the curse around her. The plague maiden and the player's decision-making are worth discussing.



Figure 1. The Fyke Isle Tower. Source: © CD Projekt RED (2015b). Used for academic criticism under fair use.

First, the creature plague maiden is originally called ‘pesta’ or ‘pesta’ in the game’s bestiary (CD Projekt RED 2015b). ‘Pesta’ can specifically mean pandemic in Norwegian, but it is also the name of a pale-faced woman in black, the Black Death’s personification (CD Projekt RED 2015a). In Norway, Pesta is described as the demon of diseases that causes the deaths in the pandemic. Pesta is usually depicted wearing a red skirt and black robe, carrying a rake or a broomstick. People can see her wandering in the fields away in the distance; in the place swept by Pesta, everyone dies (Reichborn-Kjennerud 1940). The link between the plague maiden and the Black Death is plainly implicated in the quest title, as the Black Death often refers to the bubonic plague. In Varlık’s (2021) terms, the Black Death itself can have a solid Gothic implication. He argues that the widespread use of the name ‘Black Death’ since the nineteenth century is a nostalgic reconsideration of the historical catastrophe and is greatly influenced by nineteenth-century Romanticism, which imposes emotions and individualism on historical narratives (Varlık 2021).

The case of *The Witcher*’s pesta—the in-game deformed and rotten female monster—is also a creative type of folk horror, though not completely typical. Scovell (2017) proposes that folk horror should contain any of the three formal ideas: the use of folklore ‘for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes’; presentation of a clash between ‘arcania’ and ‘some form of modernity’; creation of new folklore through ‘popular conscious memory’. Based on Scovell’s ideas, Bacon (2023) proposes a more universal ‘chain’ of folk horror:

‘To begin with, there is always a protagonist... The landscape that they go to is then the first link on our “chain.” ... The next link is then the tension that is inherent between that first world... and the second world... The tension produced then leads into the third link, which is anxiety over a loss of identity—which replaces isolation. ... Finally, the last link is someone dies... the tensions created in the previous links... need to be released or counterbalanced by a death so that some kind of order can be restored.’ (Bacon 2023)

The biggest difference between *The Witcher* and this account is that the powerful Witcher as the protagonist has an adverse impact on the formation of a horror atmosphere, while protagonists in Scovell and Bacon’s folk horror would have to face the pain of the rift between their cognition and the weird situation. The Witcher comes to these weird places to hunt, slaughter, and work as a professional huntsman rather than as a lost traveller. The Fyke Isle, as a folk horror landscape, is indeed isolated from the rest of Velen (a region in the game), but this isolation is not temporal or cognitive—the whole Witcher world is already haunted by monstrosity and chaos.



Figure 2. The plague maiden Anabelle and Graham. Source: © CD Projekt RED (2015b). Used for academic criticism under fair use.

In this sense, the adaptation in *The Witcher 3* does not portray the pesta and the Black Death as alien, strange European/European folk disasters. Instead, they translate their cul-

tural characteristics into universal themes of patriarchy, tribulation, sorrow, revenge, violence, and trauma—an example of how regional folk and folk horror can be put in a Globalgothic framework. This also reflects and raises questions about what needs to be adjusted when folk narratives are decontextualised for a global audience. The description of plague maidens in the Witcher's bestiary writes: 'When plague ravages a region, a spirit will sometimes walk its lands, a ghost resembling an ill woman whose flesh rots off her bones and in whose wake crawls a cavalcade of rats.' (CD Projekt RED 2015b). It is notable that the connection between the plague maiden and the unfortunate Anabelle in this quest brings back the stereotyped Gothic female body implication. As Mulvey-Roberts (2016) argues, the prevalent pattern of threatening the female body is epitomised in Gothic fiction by 'female powerlessness' that makes the female body easy to control and distort, and the female in the castle is a representation of 'the containment of women within patriarchal social and legal structures.' Commenting on Ann Radcliffe's sentimentally traumatised heroines, she considers 'the inert unconscious female body is an expression of passivity, whose ultimate expression is that of the corpse' (Mulvey-Roberts 2016). Thus, this reframing allows players from all cultural backgrounds to understand and resonate with Anabelle's suffering; the quest is no longer a folktale but common digital memory of all players.

This article also borrows Mulvey-Roberts' method and compares the story of 'A Towerful of Mice' with the Bluebeard legend, which she believes is the urtext of *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). The defining factors of the Bluebeard legend are the disobedient wife and the dangerous confinement of the heroine as punishment (Mulvey-Roberts 2016). In *Mysteries of Udolpho*, the danger that haunts the heroine appears gradually as her unfortunate fate unravels, such as the loss of her parents, imprisonment and the secret body under a black veil. Losing all possible protection makes the heroine vulnerable and passive, a source of uncanny terror. Back to the story of Anabelle, she is essentially a victim of her father's patriarchal authority; her longing for freedom and romantic love unfortunately leads her to a chaotic status without protection, finally causing her miserable death in the hidden attic. The creation of the story 'A Towerful of Mice' is, beyond doubt, a renovation of the traditional tropes and stock features.

As a ruin, the tower itself takes on the role of a haunted castle in historical Gothic fiction and embodies the patriarchal control inflicted on the vulnerable lady in distress. The exploration of the isle can be a hasty task; as the Witcher enters the domain of the isle, the player has to be vigilant against the unknown and suspicious environment; in the next second, the Witcher might be attacked by malicious monsters.

The murder of the family of the lord, on the other hand, is unravelled in a more supernatural way; the Witcher's investigation proceeds step by step, using his magical power to gather the fragmented visions that display what has happened in the murder. The players are given hints as these fragmented pieces of information indicate that there has been a horrific murder, but they are not given the complete picture. The distressed maiden's haunting ghost who shows up in the midst amplifies the tension and anxiety that trouble us; her overwrought, depressing, and fierce grief roars into tides of words accusing betrayal, abandonment, and fear, making it a sharp contrast with the cold-hearted Witcher who calmly stands beside and listens. This scene resembles Dracula's whining after he knows his lover is married to her husband in Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992). As he shouts hoarse with tears to summon storms and winds, the visual narration reaches its sentimental climax of the whole film.

Likewise, players' troubled emotions come to their maximum, witnessing Anabelle's tragic and distressing fate. The death of Anabelle dramatically reinforces the powerless stereotype of Gothic females at one point wherein, after being powerlessly and consciously eaten by rats, her accumulated misery explodes and transforms her into the clas-

sical *femme fatale*. Such a transformation is quite similar to the transformation of vampires, which is also depicted in *Dracula*. The three female vampires and Lucy, the heroine, become deadly monsters thirsty for blood and killing and more powerful than men. The plague maiden, likewise, represents a threatening form of a distorted woman and her ultimate counter-attack and revenge on the patriarchal rule. As depicted in the quest's bad ending, Anabelle's evil form intends to take revenge on Graham. In the good ending, on the other hand, with the Witcher's help, Graham returns to the tower and explains everything to Anabelle. When Anabelle, in her disgusting, creepy, and deformed plague maiden form, asks for a kiss as proof of his love, he kisses her without hesitation. The curse is thus lifted, but the price is the young man's life—a catharsis of the repressed and unresolved anxiety.

Second, the player's decision-making. Consalvo et al. (2019) argue, '[g]ames cater to contemporary desires for individual agency ... offering players the privilege of shaping the narrative in a variety of ways.' The choices offered by the game are not completely random as these are the results of the game's procedural rhetoric that 'pushes...rewards or punishes players' (Bogost 2007). However, Consalvo et al. (2019) discover that players can rely on in-game choices, avatars, and story lines to confirm and strengthen their own personal ethos. This aligns with Sicart's (2009) argument that a virtuous player 'uses the practical wisdom acquired by playing that game, and all those games that form her repertoire, in order to make the most ethically informed choice'. Players are not totally blind facing the programmatic game rhetoric, as Consalvo et al. (2019) discover, 'even when players are decisive about their actions, they are also aware of the paths not chosen, the decision that could have gone another way'. Therefore, even though players' agency is confined by the game itself, the limited options still drive players to weigh and select the options that they align with or make them curious—player agency emerges in the tension between the game's procedural rhetoric and players' own will. They could still choose to be 'bad' out of curiosity (Weaver and Lewis 2012), or to be good to strengthen their own ethos. In this sense, what is special about the adapted plot in this quest is that the good ending actually indicates a reconciliation between the threatening and enigmatic stereotype of Gothic women and the underlying misogynistic patriarchal sentiments. The kiss, symbolising a man's courage and love for a deformed female body that still bears the will of his old lover, serves to show acceptance of the rebellious role of a Gothic woman at the cost of one's life. At this point, the narrative focus shifts from the Gothic woman to what Williams' (2016) terms 'patriarchy's dark, dangerous "other"'. On the contrary, it impresses us by glorifying the young couple who die for love together and bid farewell to the overwhelming and depressing patriarchal control.

This branching structure ingeniously incorporates the variability of oral folk tradition into the interactivity of gameplay. In oral folk tradition, storytellers are often responsible for the retelling and adapting of the story. In *The Witcher 3*, this responsibility is shifted to the players. One can either accept a more stereotypical image of a Gothic *femme fatale* and reinforce this Gothic trope or accept her as a victim of patriarchal violence. However, the players are not responsible for the authority of the story. In similar ways, no folktale is absolutely authentic. Without the need to engage in further fan creation, the players are already part of this digital folkloric tradition: every time they start a new playthrough, the diversity of their interactions marks the sustainability and modification of the folklore.

The landscapes also take a significant position in the renovated Gothic narrative, apart from the storytelling structure. The beautiful and impressive landscapes, in concrete ways, serve to elicit the sensation of sublimity in the virtual environment. Vella (2015) argues that the aesthetic regime in video games takes on the form of 'game-as-cosmos.' The cosmos, in this context, refers to 'a complete, integrated system of phenomena governed by some coherent scheme of rules' (Nash 1987, as cited in Vella 2015). Thus, game-

as-cosmos can partly coincide with the virtual world in this dissertation. Controlling the *Witcher* to explore the digital open world, the players, to some extent, have virtualised individualism in the gameplay. Such a virtualised individual may actively relate to the phenomenal interactions in the game world (Vella 2015). Upon this very basis, players' experiential and sensational activities can be significantly affected by the fluid form of the virtual landscapes, as the properties of interactivity and immersion endow the appreciation of such landscapes with more chances of subliminal perception. Such perception of sublimity, fundamentally, relies on video games' presentational mechanism. Vella considers that the entirety of a video game, the cosmos, bears the quality of 'fundamental unknowability'; the algorithms and structures that underpins the game's operation are essentially made invisible to the players, which differentiates gameplay from reading a book or watching a film that allows us to perceive the artwork directly, thoroughly and in detail (Vella 2015). Instead of direct perception, players' engagement with the game is quite indirect and intuitive.

One reason is that the presentation itself is fluid and dynamic, meaning players only need to pay attention to the point of interest and take the instantaneous background for granted. Unlike a book or painting, players are not allowed to relocate and review the full picture of specific interactive information. Such indirect perception causes an incomplete understanding of the totality of the object of interest. While at the same time, these dynamics can make room for the imagination of an ambiguous shape of the entirety of such an object, namely, the game-as-cosmos (Vella 2015). The presentable content of the game thus obtains the quality of sublime, in Kant's term, 'boundlessness' (Vella 2015). In effect, the landscapes in *The Witcher 3* take on the task of practising this affective narrative. The vastness of the map, the enormity of the geographical landmarks, and the scale of the spectacles blend with the tint of the obscure, creating numerous complicated, visceral, and sensational images of Gothic irrationality. The depiction of the Bald Mountain (see Figure 3), for instance, ingeniously utilises the in-game real-time rendering to show the gradual change in light, the fluidity of the cloud and mist above the ruggedness of the mountains, and the barrenness of the Bald Mountain right in front, displaying a highlighted bold peak with a gnarled, giant and monstrous tree in contrast to the lush forest lying indistinctly under the veil of the mist.



Figure 3. The Bald Mountain (CD Projekt RED 2015b) Source: © CD Projekt RED (2015b). Used for academic criticism under fair use.

Such an image is an invocation of the sublime and echoes *The Abbey in the Oakwood* (Friedrich 1809, see Figure 4). The setting sun, the mist, the skeletal trees, and the funeral together convey a romantic sense of awe and terror, rendering a macabre landscape of sublimity (Singer 2020). The monks and the coffin they carry, the ruins of a Gothic abbey, and the funeral in the scene arouse the senses of Romantic terror and melancholy. The

ruins serve as the defining Gothic motif: the pointed arch and its remains stand solemnly amidst the decaying oak trees, symbolising the fall of civilisation and the irresistible might of nature. In Armitt and Brewster's (2023) review of *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) and *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), Gothic ruins in a landscape usually hold symbolic meanings pointing to the fragility of civilisation, passage of time, and affective resonance of terror. At the same time, the decaying oak trees can symbolise death and the fragility of life, echoing the on-going funeral in front of the Gothic abbey. Similarly, the Bald Mountain implicates its message of death and decay through the skeletal tree's symbolism and its connection to a Gothic plot. This place is where the Crones' (Ladies of the Woods, vile and powerful sisters of three) Sabbath takes place once a year. During the Sabbath, local villagers loyal to the Crones would be sacrificed, dismembered and boiled in the cauldron to satisfy the cannibalism of the Crones. Although there are no Gothic pointed arches on the mountain, the Bald Mountain quest takes place primarily in a ruined dungeon on the mountain. The symbolism of the tree on the Bald Mountain and the mysterious and dangerous atmosphere in the dungeon blend into the vastness of Velen's wilderness, conjuring affective resonance of terror in players as they venture through barbarism and sublimity.



Figure 4. *The Abbey in the Oakwood* (Friedrich 1809). Source: Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Public domain.

The depiction of scale and grandeur and the ambiguous atmospheric rendering contribute to enabling the sentimental irrationality that triggers the artistic association of the Gothic imagination. The tales and quests in the game, which have become part of the players' subjective experience, manage to attach their narrative sentiment to these virtual spaces, strengthening the imagination and simulation of 'spatial' perception in the game. In such ways, these landscapes, along with the interactive narrations, become spaces of imaginative inhabitation for the players. A new kind of folklore is thereby created.

5. Conclusions

Synthesising digital folklore studies, Globalgothic theory, and Benedict Anderson's imagined communities, this article offers a unique perspective to explain the global popularity and cultural appeal of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. This article establishes three main arguments. First, the game's assimilation of traditional European folklore and Gothic legacies endows digital culture with time-tested vitality, laying the foundation for its good reputation. Second, the game's transcultural feature is marked by its Globalgothic stance; by interpreting the essence of regional culture to universal Gothic themes such as trauma, the uncanny, and the supernatural, the game breaks through cultural barrier and gains global recognition. Third, the game's virtual world serves as a digitalised imagined community in Benedict Anderson's terms. This virtual world's ludic, deterritorialised, and

non-political nature makes it an ideal space for real-world players who seek exotic or novel experiences from the virtual ‘other’. This article also analyses the game’s narrative and gameplay: the plague maiden, the Gothic trope of femme fatale, the flexibility of oral folk tradition, and sublimity of Gothic landscape are transformed into characters, interactive quests, players’ decision-making, and tangible virtual space. In sum, this case demonstrates the rejuvenating potential of interactive media for folkloric and Gothic traditions and the facilitating role of virtual worlds in the formation of communities. Although this article does not involve any empirical research regarding audience studies, it welcomes future ethnographic or other empirical studies on *The Witcher*’s digital folkloric communities.

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