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Beyond the Initial Choice: Spatial Exploration and the Recognition of Narrative Consequences in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

Melampaui Pilihan Awal: Eksplorasi Spasial dan Pengenalan Konsekuensi Naratif dalam The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

Agung Wijianto, agungwijianto@uho.ac.id
Fakultas Ilmu Budaya
Universitas Halu Oleo

Abstract

This study examines how The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt organizes the relationship between player action, narrative consequence, and the recognition of outcomes through spatial exploration. While existing approaches to digital game narrative have examined procedurality, environmental storytelling, and player agency, this study directs attention to the distinction between a consequence being established within the game world and its subsequent recognition by the player. Drawing on Janet Murray's concept of cyberdrama, particularly procedurality, spatiality, and participation, the study analyzes three cases: the Whispering Hillock quest and the subsequent discovery of information about the orphans in Novigrad, the Missing in Action quest and Rhosyn's later appearance at Dune's farm, and the encounter with John Verdun following his rescue from drowners. Through close textual analysis of these cases, the study examines how subsequent encounters can confirm an outcome, disclose changed circumstances, or complicate the interpretation of an earlier decision. The analysis suggests that the narrative significance of an action may extend beyond its immediate presentation, as evidence of its consequences becomes accessible through encounters spatially separated from the original event and not necessarily encountered during every course of play. On this basis, the study proposes deferred consequence recognition through spatial distribution and optional exploration as a preliminary analytical perspective for investigating how games organize the recognition of narrative consequences. Rather than establishing a generalizable concept, the study offers a basis for further comparative and empirical research into the relationship between consequential action, spatial organization, and narrative understanding in digital games.

Keywords: digital game narrative; The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt; cyberdrama; spatial exploration; narrative consequences

Introduction

Narrative meaning emerges not only from the events represented in a story but also from the relationships between actions and their consequences. In interactive narrative, this relationship acquires particular significance because audiences do not merely encounter a sequence of events; they also participate in the unfolding of the narrative through their actions and decisions (Ryan, 2009). What happens as a result of an action can shape how subsequent events are understood, how characters are perceived, and how the significance of earlier decisions is retrospectively interpreted. Consequently, the relationship between action and consequence is not simply a matter of causality within a story but also a question of how narrative meaning becomes available to its audience. Examining this relationship is therefore essential to understanding how interactive narratives organize participation and construct meaning through the unfolding of events.

Digital games provide a particularly significant context for examining the relationship between action and consequence because they combine computational processes with navigable narrative environments. As Henry Jenkins (2004) argues, game designers do not merely tell stories but construct spaces that enable different forms of narrative experience, including the discovery of narrative information embedded within the game environment. Similarly, the discussion of environmental storytelling emphasizes how players navigate digital worlds to discover and interpret narrative information rather than simply receive it through explicit exposition (Lowe, 2019). These approaches suggest that narrative information in games need not be confined to a predetermined sequence of events but may instead be distributed across explorable spaces. Consequently, the relationship between an action and its narrative significance warrants consideration beyond the immediate encounter in which the action occurs, particularly when the consequences of that action become recognizable only through subsequent exploration.

Although digital games can distribute narrative information across explorable environments, the presence of such information does not guarantee that it will be encountered during a particular course of play. In open-world games, players can pursue different routes and activities, making their encounters with narrative events contingent on how they navigate and engage with the game world. Hutchinson (2021) highlights this variability by observing that players may encounter scripted scenarios or story events only intermittently, while Škrdla (2025) approaches game environments as spatial structures through which narrative meaning can be encountered and interpreted. These perspectives suggest that the relationship between a game's narrative content and its realization in play is not necessarily straightforward: information embedded in the game world may remain outside a player's experience because of the paths taken through that

world. This possibility raises a further question about narrative consequences: when an action alters the represented world, must its significance become recognizable at the moment of action, or can recognition depend on encountering its effects through subsequent exploration?

Released in 2015, CD Projekt Red's *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* offers a productive object for examining the relationship between spatial exploration and the recognition of narrative consequences. Its open-world design integrates quest-based storytelling with an extensive fictional environment in which locations, characters, and events contribute to the construction of the game world (Jański, 2019). Scholarship on the game has examined its narrative choices and the limits of player agency (Kleinerman, 2022), as well as the moral implications of choices that affect characters and their world (Johansson & Rübsamen, 2024). These features make the game particularly relevant to an investigation of how narrative consequences are represented beyond the immediate circumstances of a decision. Rather than treating consequential choices solely in terms of their branching outcomes, the game also invites attention to how the consequences of Geralt's actions become perceptible through subsequent encounters with the world he inhabits.

In The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, the relationship between Geralt's actions and the recognition of their consequences can extend beyond the encounters in which those actions occur. The game's spatial design provides a productive context for examining this relationship, as its locations function not merely as settings for gameplay but also as meaningful structures through which narrative information can be encountered and interpreted (Jański, 2019; Škrdla, 2025). When Geralt frees the spirit beneath the Whispering Hillock, the orphans can later be found in the care of Miss Marabella in Novigrad. Similarly, if Geralt persuades Dune to shelter the Nilfgaardian deserter Rhosyn in Missing in Action, Rhosyn can subsequently be encountered at Dune's farm in White Orchard. A more morally troubling development occurs in the unmarked encounter At the Mercy of Strangers, when Geralt later encounters John Verdun, a man he previously saved from drowners, among bandits who have killed and looted a group of refugees. Although these cases differ in their narrative implications, each connects an earlier intervention to a later manifestation elsewhere in the game world. The significance of Geralt's initial action thus becomes recognizable not solely through the immediate encounter but also through subsequent encounters that the player may discover while exploring. Exploration does not produce these consequences; rather, it provides access to evidence of outcomes that have already unfolded within the game world, potentially reshaping the player's interpretation of the earlier action.

The significance of this narrative configuration lies in the possibility that consequences may remain unrecognized throughout a player's experience of the game. Although the outcomes of Geralt's actions may be established within the

game world, their subsequent manifestations are not necessarily encountered during the player's progression. Because the game does not always direct the player toward the locations where these outcomes become perceptible, discovering them may depend on the player's decision to explore beyond the immediate demands of a quest. The freedom to traverse the game world thus creates a tension between the existence of a consequence and its recognition: an outcome may have unfolded within the fictional world without becoming part of the player's understanding of the narrative. This distinction matters because players may interpret Geralt's earlier actions on the basis of the information available to them at the time, while an optional encounter elsewhere may subsequently complicate or transform that interpretation. Examining this relationship therefore offers a way to understand how free-roam exploration shapes not only access to narrative information but also the conditions under which the consequences of earlier actions acquire meaning for the player.

Research on The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt has approached the relationship between narrative and gameplay from several complementary perspectives. Vickery et al. (2018), for example, examine how players interact with the game's narrative through different forms of engagement, including passive interaction, active interaction, and dialogue choices. Horn (2021) develops a model for interpreting narrative games through quests, emphasizing elements such as event space, accessibility, and time. More recently, Evren (2024) examines player-driven storytelling in open-world games through The Witcher 3, focusing on the relationship between open-world design, narrative structure, and player agency. Meanwhile, Škrdla (2025) examines how spatial elements in open-world games carry narrative potential that players actualize and interpret during gameplay. Taken together, these studies establish that narrative interpretation in open-world games is shaped by the interaction of spatial design, quest structures, and player activity. However, the specific relationship between the spatial distribution of consequences and their contingent recognition through optional exploration remains a productive area for further investigation. In particular, the question of how a consequence can be established within a game world without necessarily becoming part of the player's experience calls for closer attention to the distinction between an outcome's existence in the fictional world and the conditions under which the player encounters evidence of it. Addressing this issue, the present study examines how subsequent encounters in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt make the consequences of earlier actions recognizable through exploration that is not always required by the game's immediate quest objectives.

To investigate this relationship between spatial exploration and the recognition of narrative consequences, this study draws on Janet Murray's concept of cyberdrama, particularly her account of the expressive properties of digital environments and the aesthetic experience of agency in Hamlet on the Holodeck (Murray, 2017). Murray identifies procedurality, participation, spatiality, and

encyclopedic capacity as properties through which digital environments support distinctive forms of narrative experience, while agency describes the satisfaction of taking meaningful action and perceiving its results. These concepts provide a useful framework for examining how the game organizes actions and their consequences, how its spatial environment makes narrative information accessible, and how players' decisions to explore shape their encounters with that information. In particular, spatiality and agency offer complementary perspectives on the phenomenon investigated here: the former directs attention to the organization of the game world, while the latter foregrounds the player's active engagement with it. Rather than assuming that Murray directly theorizes deferred consequence recognition, this study extends the application of her framework by examining how the spatial distribution of consequences and the optional nature of subsequent encounters condition the player's opportunity to recognize and reinterpret the outcomes of earlier actions.

This study argues that The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt complicates the relationship between narrative consequence and player recognition by distributing the manifestations of Geralt's actions across an explorable game world. Through subsequent encounters that are not always required by the immediate progression of a quest, the game makes the recognition of certain consequences contingent on the player's exploration beyond the locations and objectives that initially frame an action. Drawing on Murray's concept of cyberdrama, this study examines how spatial organization and player agency shape the conditions under which these consequences become perceptible and acquire narrative significance. By distinguishing the existence of a consequence within the fictional world from the conditions under which it becomes recognizable to the player, the study highlights how optional exploration can extend, complicate, or retrospectively transform the interpretation of earlier actions in interactive narrative.

Based on this argument, this study asks: How does The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt organize the recognition of narrative consequences through spatially distributed encounters and optional exploration? To address this question, the study examines three encounters: the later appearance of the orphans following Geralt's decision in the Whispering Hillock quest, Rhosyn's subsequent presence at Dune's farm after the events of Missing in Action, and Geralt's later encounter with John Verdun in At the Mercy of Strangers. Using Janet Murray's concept of cyberdrama as its theoretical framework, the analysis investigates how the spatial organization of the game world and the player's freedom to explore condition the recognition of consequences and potentially reshape the interpretation of earlier actions. Through these cases, the study contributes to discussions of interactive narrative by examining how the relationship between an action and its consequences may extend beyond the immediate quest and depend on subsequent encounters that are not necessarily required for progression.

Method

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach to examine how The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt organizes the recognition of narrative consequences through spatially distributed encounters and optional exploration. The primary data source is the PC version of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, developed by CD Projekt Red and originally released in 2015, running on patch 5.00. The analysis focuses on the game's playable content, particularly quest sequences, character encounters, dialogue, and narrative information situated within its fictional environment. The game is treated as the primary object of analysis rather than as an illustration of player experiences reported through interviews, surveys, or other empirical methods. Accordingly, the study examines the narrative structures and opportunities for recognition afforded by the game itself, without assuming that all players encounter or interpret its content in the same way.

Three encounters were selected purposively because they illustrate the relationship between an earlier action and a subsequent manifestation of its outcome in a different location. The first case concerns the orphans associated with the Whispering Hillock quest, whose subsequent presence in Novigrad follows Geralt's decision to free the spirit. The second concerns Rhosyn in Missing in Action, whose later presence at Dune's farm follows Geralt's intervention on his behalf. The third concerns John Verdun in At the Mercy of Strangers, whose later appearance at a former refugee camp complicates the interpretation of Geralt's earlier decision to rescue him. The cases were selected according to three analytical criteria: an identifiable initial action by Geralt; a subsequent outcome associated with that action; and a later encounter through which the outcome becomes recognizable beyond the immediate context of the initial decision. Together, the cases provide different narrative implications through which to examine the same underlying relationship without treating their outcomes as equivalent in moral significance.

The primary material consists of the game's quests, relevant dialogue, character encounters, and spatially situated narrative information associated with the three selected cases. The analysis traces each case from the initial decision through the subsequent manifestation of its outcome, attending to the conditions under which that manifestation becomes accessible to the player. Particular attention is given to whether the later encounter is required for immediate quest progression, how it is situated in relation to the initial action, and how the information it provides may alter the interpretation of that action. The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, it identifies the initial action and establishes the corresponding outcome within the game's narrative structure. Second, it examines the spatial relationship between the initial event and the later encounter, including whether the game directs the player toward the latter or leaves its discovery contingent on further exploration. Third, it interprets how the later encounter confirms, extends, or complicates the understanding of the earlier action. This procedure distinguishes the occurrence of an outcome within the fictional world from the player's opportunity to discover and interpret evidence of that outcome.

Murray's framework informs the analysis through the four affordances of digital environments she identifies: procedurality, participation, spatiality, and encyclopedic capacity (Murray, 2017). Procedurality directs attention to how the game's rules and conditional narrative structures connect player actions to possible outcomes. Participation concerns the player's ability to interact with and navigate the game environment, while spatiality foregrounds how the organization of the game world shapes movement and access to narrative events. Encyclopedic capacity, in turn, draws attention to the game's ability to accommodate extensive information and detail through which its fictional world and narrative histories can be elaborated. Alongside these four affordances, Murray's concept of agency provides a perspective on the player's experience of taking meaningful action and perceiving its results. Applied to The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, these concepts guide the examination of how the game establishes conditional outcomes, distributes information about those outcomes across its world, and makes further knowledge accessible through exploration. The analysis does not assume that Murray explicitly theorizes the delayed recognition of consequences; rather, it applies her framework to investigate how the interaction of these affordances and agency shapes the conditions under which players can encounter and interpret the outcomes of earlier actions.

Discussion and Result

The Whispering Hillock: Procedurality, Spatiality, and Optional Narrative Discovery

The Whispering Hillock quest in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt illustrates how the game's procedural structure connects a player-directed decision to outcomes that extend beyond the immediate quest. When Geralt encounters the ancient spirit beneath the tree, he must decide whether to free or kill it. This decision establishes different narrative outcomes, including different fates for the orphans held by the Crones. In the main quest sequence, freeing the spirit after consulting the ealdorman of Downwarren saves the children, who are subsequently placed in the care of Miss Marabella in Novigrad. Killing the spirit, by contrast, leaves the children in the Crones' custody. The distinction is significant because the player's decision does not merely determine an immediate event; it conditions subsequent developments in the fictional world. Through Murray's (2017) concept of procedurality, this relationship can be understood in terms of how the game organizes conditional outcomes in response to player action. The quest's narrative structure establishes a connection between the decision performed through Geralt and the subsequent state of the game world. The consequences, however, are not all necessarily encountered at the moment the decision is made.

Figure 1

New Admissions to Miss Marabella's Shelter



Note. In-game ledger from The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, documenting the admission of five children to the shelter in Novigrad. Screenshot by author.

The relationship between procedurality and narrative information becomes particularly evident in the later discovery of New Admissions to Miss Marabella's Shelter. Located at Marabella's school in Novigrad, this in-game book lists the names of the children admitted to the shelter and provides confirmation of their fate following the decision to free the spirit. The book thus offers information about an outcome established through the earlier quest, but it does so in a different narrative and spatial context. Murray's (2017) concept of spatiality helps explain the significance of this separation. The initial decision occurs in Velen, whereas the additional information about the orphans becomes available in Novigrad. The game world therefore distributes the decision and the later evidence of its consequences across distinct locations. Space functions here not merely as the setting for narrative events but as a condition of access to information about those events. The player must move beyond the immediate location of the quest to encounter the book that confirms the outcome.

The discovery of the book also brings participation into the analysis. In Murray's (2017) framework, participation concerns the player's ability to interact with a digital environment rather than simply receive a predetermined sequence of information. In this case, the player can explore Novigrad and discover supplementary information about the orphans, but the game does not require the player to find the book to complete the original quest. This optionality is crucial to the narrative configuration. Although the game establishes an outcome through its conditional quest structure, it does not guarantee that every player will encounter the information that confirms it. If the player does not visit Marabella's school and discover the book, this additional knowledge may remain outside their experience. The distinction is therefore between the outcome established by the game and the player's opportunity to discover further information about that outcome. Participation enables the discovery, while the optional nature of the encounter means that discovery is not guaranteed.

The book may also be considered in relation to Murray's concept of encyclopedic capacity, which concerns the ability of digital environments to accommodate extensive information and detail. The significance of the book in this case is not simply that it adds another piece of text to the game. Rather, it supplies supplementary information about events beyond the immediate encounter in which Geralt made his decision. The game can thus elaborate on the consequences of a quest through an item situated elsewhere in its environment. Nevertheless, encyclopedic capacity should not be treated as a complete explanation for the phenomenon: the book's informational content matters because it is spatially situated and must be discovered through the player's engagement with the world. Its relevance to the analysis lies in the way supplementary narrative information is made available beyond the immediate quest, while its optional discovery determines whether that information enters the player's experience.

Taken together, these features demonstrate how the Whispering Hillock quest organizes the relationship between action, consequence, and recognition. Procedurality connects Geralt's decision to a conditional narrative outcome; spatiality separates the original decision from a later source of information about that outcome; participation enables the player to discover that information; and encyclopedic capacity helps explain how the game accommodates supplementary narrative detail. The optional nature of the discovery cuts across these features: the game establishes the outcome without requiring the player to seek out the book that confirms it. Consequently, two players who make the same decision may have different levels of knowledge about the orphans' fate, depending on whether they encounter the relevant information. This case demonstrates that the recognition of a consequence is not necessarily simultaneous with its establishment

in the game world. The later discovery does not produce the orphans' fate; it makes that fate more fully knowable to the player.

Missing in Action: Spatiality, Participation, and the Recognition of Survival

The quest Missing in Action provides a second example of how The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt connects a player's actions to subsequent outcomes through conditional narrative structures. The quest's outcome depends not only on Geralt's decision but also on the order in which the relevant encounters occur. For Rhosyn to survive and later appear at Dune's farm, Geralt must discover Missing in Action before finding the two brothers and subsequently persuade Dune to shelter the Nilfgaardian deserter. When these conditions are met, Rhosyn can later be encountered at the farm in White Orchard. His subsequent presence therefore reflects a particular sequence of gameplay events rather than an outcome guaranteed by completing the quest under any circumstances.

This conditional structure is significant in relation to Murray's (2017) concept of procedurality, which directs attention to how a digital environment organizes actions and their possible outcomes through its rules and processes. In this case, the game establishes a relationship between the order of encounters, Geralt's decision concerning Rhosyn, and the character's subsequent circumstances. The outcome is therefore shaped by more than an isolated choice: the sequence in which the player encounters quest events also matters. Procedurality helps explain how the game makes Rhosyn's later appearance dependent on a particular configuration of actions and events, while the later encounter provides evidence of the outcome established through that configuration.

The later encounter also foregrounds spatiality. Geralt's intervention takes place in the context of the search for Bastien, whereas Rhosyn's subsequent appearance occurs at Dune's farm in White Orchard. The change in location marks a change in the narrative circumstances through which Rhosyn is encountered. During the initial quest, Rhosyn appears as a deserter whose survival is precarious; at the farm, his presence indicates that he has found shelter and a place within Dune's household. The farm thus becomes a location where the outcome of the earlier intervention is made perceptible. The spatial separation between the two encounters allows the game to represent Rhosyn's changed circumstances through his subsequent presence in the world rather than through an extended account delivered at the moment of Geralt's decision.

Participation is relevant because the player must engage with the game world to encounter this later manifestation. Rhosyn's subsequent presence does not necessarily become part of the player's experience simply because Geralt persuaded Dune to shelter him. The player must encounter the character again at the farm to obtain this additional evidence of the outcome. The game does not

require the player to seek out this later encounter as part of the immediate progression of Missing in Action. Consequently, the player may complete the original quest without discovering how Rhosyn's circumstances develop afterward. This optionality is not a separate affordance in Murray's framework; rather, it describes how the game organizes the conditions under which participation can lead to further narrative knowledge. The player's freedom to traverse the environment makes the encounter possible without guaranteeing that it will occur during a particular playthrough.

The distinction between the establishment of an outcome and its recognition is especially clear in this case because the later encounter presents Rhosyn himself rather than relying on a supplementary written record. His presence at the farm functions as direct in-world evidence that the earlier intervention has had consequences beyond the immediate quest. Yet the significance of this evidence depends on whether the player encounters it. A player who never returns to or passes through the relevant location may retain knowledge of the decision to shelter Rhosyn without acquiring this additional information about his subsequent circumstances. The game can therefore establish a conditional outcome while leaving the player's knowledge of its manifestation contingent on further exploration.

The Missing in Action case demonstrates how procedurality and spatiality work together with participation to shape the recognition of narrative consequences. Procedurality connects Geralt's decision to Rhosyn's subsequent circumstances; spatiality locates the manifestation of those circumstances at Dune's farm; and participation makes the later encounter available through the player's continued engagement with the game world. The optional nature of the encounter means that the outcome may remain unrecognized by players who do not discover it. Unlike the Whispering Hillock case, in which a book supplies supplementary information about the orphans, Rhosyn's later appearance provides direct visual and narrative evidence of survival and relocation. The case thus illustrates how a game can represent the consequences of an earlier action through a character's changed circumstances, while making the player's recognition of those consequences dependent on an encounter beyond the immediate demands of the original quest.

At the Mercy of Strangers: Optional Intervention and the Retrospective Recognition of Consequences

The unmarked encounter At the Mercy of Strangers presents a distinctive relationship between player choice, narrative consequence, and subsequent recognition. When Geralt encounters John Verdun, a former Temerian soldier tied up near a riverbank and threatened by drowners, the player can choose either to rescue him or to leave him to his fate. If Geralt refuses to help, John dies and the

later encounter does not occur. If Geralt rescues him, however, John can subsequently be encountered at a former refugee camp, where he and a group of bandits have killed and looted the refugees who previously abandoned him.

The encounter therefore involves two distinct moments of optionality: the initial decision determines whether John survives and the later sequence becomes possible, while subsequent exploration determines whether the player discovers what John has done. This distinction makes the encounter particularly useful for examining how the game's organization of choices and spaces shapes both the occurrence of narrative events and the player's knowledge of them.

Murray's (2017) concept of procedurality helps explain the relationship between the initial decision and the possible subsequent outcome. The game establishes different narrative states according to whether Geralt rescues John or leaves him to die. If John is rescued, the game permits a later encounter in which his subsequent actions become apparent; if he is abandoned, that sequence is foreclosed by his death. The procedural dimension thus concerns not only the immediate result of Geralt's intervention but also the way the game organizes the subsequent availability of a character and his associated narrative events. Importantly, however, the game does not make Geralt's rescue responsible for John's later violence. The rescue establishes the condition under which John can survive and reappear, but John and his companions remain responsible for their actions against the refugees. Procedurality helps explain the conditional relationship between the two encounters without collapsing the distinction between Geralt's decision and John's subsequent conduct.

Participation is particularly important because it operates at both stages of the encounter. First, the player participates in determining whether John survives by choosing whether Geralt unties him. Second, if John is rescued, the player can continue exploring the game world without necessarily discovering the later encounter. The game does not require the player to visit the former refugee camp to progress through the main narrative, and the encounter is not recorded as a conventional quest with mandatory objectives.

Consequently, the player may establish the conditions for John's later appearance without ever learning about the violence that follows. Participation therefore shapes both the narrative branch that becomes possible and the player's opportunity to acquire further knowledge about that branch. The optional nature of the later encounter is not itself a separate affordance in Murray's framework; rather, it describes how the game structures the conditions under which participation can lead to additional narrative information.

The case also illustrates the significance of spatiality. The initial rescue takes place on a riverbank west of Mulbrydale, whereas John's subsequent appearance

occurs at a former refugee camp near the Border Post, northwest of the initial location. These locations situate John within markedly different circumstances. At the riverbank, he appears as a vulnerable individual in immediate danger; at the later camp, he appears among bandits implicated in violence against the refugees. The spatial separation allows the game to disclose information about John's subsequent actions in a different context from the one in which Geralt initially encountered him. The player must encounter John again to discover this development. Spatiality thus contributes to the retrospective effect of the encounter: information presented elsewhere in the game world can complicate the interpretation of an earlier decision without altering the event itself.

The significance of the later encounter lies in how it can transform the player's interpretation of the initial rescue. When Geralt first encounters John, the immediate situation presents a choice between helping a person in danger and leaving him to die. The subsequent discovery introduces information that was unavailable at the moment of that decision: John has retaliated against the refugees who abandoned him. This does not invalidate the original rescue or establish that Geralt should have anticipated John's later conduct. Instead, it exposes a difference between interpreting an action on the basis of the circumstances initially presented and reassessing it after encountering further information. The game makes such retrospective interpretation possible, but it does not guarantee that every player will experience it. A player who leaves John to die will never encounter this outcome, while a player who rescues him but does not discover the later camp may never learn of his subsequent violence.

Through Murray's framework, At the Mercy of Strangers demonstrates how procedurality, participation, and spatiality intersect in the organization of narrative experience. Procedurality establishes the conditional relationship between the rescue and the possible later encounter; participation allows the player to determine whether John survives and whether to pursue further exploration; and spatiality distributes the later evidence across a different location. The two forms of optionality are crucial to this configuration: the player can refuse the initial intervention, thereby preventing the later sequence, or make the intervention but never encounter the subsequent evidence. The case therefore illustrates how the game can make a later development possible without guaranteeing that it becomes part of the player's experience. More significantly, when the later encounter is discovered, it can retrospectively complicate the interpretation of the earlier rescue, demonstrating how optional exploration shapes not only access to narrative information but also the conditions under which earlier actions acquire meaning.

Procedurality and the Distinction Between Consequence and Recognition

The three cases examined in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt demonstrate that the relationship between player action and narrative consequence involves more than the establishment of a conditional outcome. The game also organizes how evidence of that outcome becomes available to the player. This distinction is particularly relevant to Murray's (2017) account of procedurality, which emphasizes the expressive potential of digital environments through processes and rules. In the Whispering Hillock quest, Geralt's decision establishes a particular narrative outcome, while supplementary information about the orphans' fate is available through a book in Novigrad. In Missing in Action, the sequence of encounters and Geralt's decision to persuade Dune to shelter Rhosyn condition the character's subsequent circumstances. In At the Mercy of Strangers, rescuing John Verdun makes a later encounter possible, although the player is not guaranteed to discover it. These cases illustrate different ways in which the game connects actions to outcomes, but they also expose a distinction between the outcomes established by its procedures and the player's subsequent awareness of them.

This distinction requires a careful application of procedurality. The concept helps explain how a game's rules and conditional structures organize possible narrative states, but it does not, by itself, explain why a player might remain unaware of an outcome. The conditions governing an outcome and the conditions governing its recognition are related but analytically different. In the Rhosyn case, for example, the outcome depends on both encounter order and Geralt's decision. The player's subsequent recognition of that outcome, however, depends on encountering Rhosyn again at Dune's farm. Similarly, in the John Verdun case, the decision to rescue John determines whether the later sequence becomes possible, whereas the player's discovery of the bandit camp determines whether the additional information enters their experience. Procedurality therefore helps explain how the game establishes conditional outcomes, while spatiality and participation help explain how the player may subsequently encounter evidence of those outcomes.

The distinction is also important for understanding agency. Murray (2017) associates agency with the experience of taking meaningful action and perceiving its results. In the three cases examined here, the player can participate in decisions that affect the fictional world, but the full significance of those decisions is not necessarily apparent when they are made. The game may establish an outcome without immediately presenting all the information through which its implications become intelligible. This does not mean that the player's agency is illusory or that the consequences themselves are absent. Rather, it suggests that the experience of agency and the recognition of consequences do not always coincide temporally or spatially. A player can make a consequential decision without acquiring complete knowledge of the resulting state of the world.

The John Verdun encounter makes this distinction especially apparent because the later information can complicate the interpretation of the initial rescue. The rescue remains an action that saves John from immediate danger, but the subsequent encounter reveals that John has participated in violence against refugees. The new information does not change the earlier event or make Geralt responsible for John's later actions. Instead, it gives the player grounds to reassess the earlier decision in light of information that was not available during the original encounter. Narrative recognition here is not simply the confirmation of a consequence; it can also involve a retrospective reconsideration of an action's meaning.

Taken together, these cases suggest that procedurality and agency should be considered alongside the conditions through which players encounter narrative information. The game establishes outcomes through conditional structures, but players do not necessarily encounter every subsequent manifestation of those outcomes. The analytical distinction is therefore between a consequence being established within the fictional world and its becoming recognizable through play. This distinction provides a way to examine how narrative meaning in interactive games may develop beyond the immediate presentation of a choice and its apparent result.

Optional Exploration, Spatially Distributed Narrative, and Other Games

The relationship between spatial exploration and narrative recognition in The Witcher 3 connects with a broader discussion in game studies concerning how game environments convey stories. Jenkins (2004) argues that game spaces can function as narrative architecture, supporting the enactment of events and the embedding of narrative information within environments. Fernández-Vara (2019) develops a related perspective through the concept of indexical storytelling, examining how players interpret spatial traces that point toward events occurring within a game world. Both perspectives help establish why space should not be treated merely as the setting in which a narrative unfolds. Game environments can preserve and communicate information about events, while players' movement through those environments affects what they encounter and how they reconstruct narrative relationships.

The present study extends this concern from the presence of narrative information in game spaces to the relationship between optional discovery and the recognition of consequences. In the Whispering Hillock case, information about the orphans' fate is available through a book in a location separate from the original quest. In the Rhosyn case, the later appearance of the character provides evidence of the outcome of Geralt's earlier intervention. In the John Verdun case, the spatially separated encounter discloses information that can retrospectively complicate the meaning of the initial rescue. These examples differ in the form of

information provided, but each demonstrates that the player's understanding of an earlier event can depend on encountering material or characters situated elsewhere in the game world. The relevant issue is not simply that games contain environmental storytelling; it is that the availability of further information does not guarantee that every player will encounter it.

Research on other games offers useful points of comparison. Spokes (2018) , in his discussion of Fallout 4, examines explicit and implicit encounters with death and the role of environmental storytelling in shaping how players engage with representations of mortality. His analysis demonstrates how details encountered in a game world can become occasions for interpretation beyond the most explicit forms of narrative presentation. Similarly, Fernández-Vara's (2019) account of indexical storytelling emphasizes the interpretive work involved in reading spatial evidence. These approaches share with the present study an interest in how narrative meaning can emerge through engagement with the game environment rather than exclusively through predetermined sequences of dialogue or cutscenes. The Witcher 3 cases, however, place particular emphasis on how the discovery of such information relates to a consequence associated with a prior action.

Research into environmental storytelling has also begun to examine more directly how players interpret what they encounter. Smith Nicholls & Cook (2025) for example, investigates how players construct interpretations of environmental storytelling through an empirical study involving a game environment designed as a ruined village. This research is relevant because it treats the player's interpretation of environmental evidence as an active process rather than assuming that narrative information is understood uniformly. The present study addresses a related but distinct question through textual analysis: rather than investigating empirically how different players interpret environmental cues, it examines how The Witcher 3 makes certain information available or unavailable through its conditional events and spatial organization. The distinction matters because the argument here concerns the game's narrative structure and the conditions it creates for recognition, not a claim that all players respond to the same encounter in the same way.

The comparison also clarifies why optionality should not be treated as a separate affordance within Murray's framework. Optionality describes a design condition: the game makes some information or encounters available without requiring them for immediate progression. Spatiality helps explain where that information is located; participation concerns the player's engagement with the environment; procedurality explains how prior actions condition subsequent events; and agency concerns the experience of meaningful action. These concepts illuminate different aspects of the same configuration, but none should be treated

as a synonym for optionality. The contribution of this analysis is to show how these aspects interact when the recognition of a consequence depends on an encounter that may not occur during a particular playthrough.

This relationship is particularly relevant to open-world games, in which players can pursue different routes and activities. Hutchinson's (2021) discussion of The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild observes that players may encounter scripted scenarios or story events only intermittently. That observation supports the broader premise that the narrative information encountered during play can vary according to how players navigate a game world. However, the present study focuses more narrowly on the consequences of earlier actions: not only whether players encounter narrative events, but whether subsequent encounters make outcomes associated with earlier decisions recognizable. The distinction offers a specific point of comparison between variable narrative encounters and the recognition of consequences that are distributed across space.

Reconsidering Narrative Choice and Moral Consequence in The Witcher 3

Existing scholarship on The Witcher 3 has examined the relationship between player choice, narrative structure, and moral interpretation from several perspectives. Vickery et al. (2018), through a diary study of players engaging with the game, identify different forms of interaction with narrative, including passive interaction, active interaction, and dialogue choices. Their work highlights the coexistence of linear and branching narrative structures and shows that players engage with story elements even while performing other gameplay activities. Kleinerman (2022), meanwhile, examines choice and agency in the game, questioning how narrative direction and the conditions of spectatorship shape the player's experience of decision-making. Johansson and Rübsamen (2024) analyze the game's moral framework, examining how its encounters and choices establish and negotiate moral boundaries. Together, these studies establish that narrative interaction, player agency, and moral consequence are important dimensions of The Witcher 3.

The present analysis approaches these issues from a different angle. Rather than asking primarily whether the player's choices provide meaningful agency, or how the game constructs moral dilemmas, it examines how the consequences associated with particular actions become recognizable through subsequent encounters. This shifts attention from the structure of the choice alone to the relationship between a choice, its outcome, and the player's opportunity to encounter further evidence of that outcome. The distinction is especially clear in the three cases. The Whispering Hillock quest associates Geralt's decision with the orphans' fate, but the book in Novigrad provides a separate source of information about that outcome. Missing in Action makes Rhosyn's later circumstances conditional on encounter order and Geralt's intervention, while his subsequent

appearance provides evidence that the player may or may not discover. At the Mercy of Strangers makes the later encounter with John possible only if he is rescued, but discovering that encounter requires further exploration. These cases therefore draw attention to a dimension of narrative consequence that cannot be captured by examining the initial decision in isolation.

The John Verdun case also brings the analysis into dialogue with scholarship on morality in The Witcher 3. Johansson & Rübsamen (2024) discuss the game's presentation of moral issues and the relationship between its represented moral order and the player's experience. The present analysis complements this line of inquiry by highlighting how moral interpretation can depend on when the player acquires additional information. The initial rescue presents John as someone in immediate danger, whereas the later encounter reveals his involvement in violence against refugees. The later information may prompt a reassessment of the rescue, but the player's interpretation is not necessarily determined by the game. It remains possible to understand the initial intervention as justified by the circumstances visible at the time while condemning John's later actions. The importance of the later encounter lies in its capacity to complicate moral interpretation, not in establishing a single correct judgment of Geralt's decision.

The analysis also complicates an understanding of narrative consequences as merely branching outcomes. Branching structures are important in The Witcher 3, but the three cases show that the consequences of a decision can extend beyond the immediate branch and become recognizable through a later encounter. In this respect, narrative consequence involves both the game's conditional organization of events and the player's subsequent access to information about them. A consequence can be established without its significance being fully apparent at the moment of the initial choice, and a later encounter can add information that confirms, extends, or complicates the player's understanding. The John Verdun case illustrates retrospective reinterpretation most clearly, while the orphans and Rhosyn cases emphasize the later recognition of survival and changed circumstances.

This argument should not be taken to mean that all players will miss these encounters, that every optional outcome is hidden, or that The Witcher 3 uniquely employs this structure. The analysis identifies a configuration in three selected cases rather than establishing a general rule about open-world games. Its contribution is instead to foreground a distinction that can inform the interpretation of interactive narrative: the existence of a consequence in the game world does not guarantee that the player will encounter the evidence through which it becomes recognizable. By bringing this distinction into conversation with scholarship on narrative architecture, environmental storytelling, player

interaction, and moral choice, the study offers a focused way of interpreting how The Witcher 3 organizes the relationship between action, consequence, spatial exploration, and narrative understanding.

Conclusion

This study has examined how The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt organizes the relationship between player action, narrative consequence, and the recognition of outcomes through spatial exploration. Drawing on Janet Murray's concept of cyberdrama, particularly procedurality, spatiality, and participation, the analysis has focused on three cases: the Whispering Hillock quest and the subsequent discovery of information about the orphans in Novigrad, Missing in Action and Rhosyn's later appearance at Dune's farm, and At the Mercy of Strangers and the subsequent encounter with John Verdun. Across these cases, the game establishes relationships between earlier actions and later narrative developments, while the recognition of those developments depends on whether the player encounters additional information or characters through further exploration.

The central finding is that narrative consequence and its recognition are analytically distinct. The game's procedural structures establish conditional outcomes, but these outcomes do not necessarily become fully intelligible at the moment of the initial action. Instead, subsequent encounters can confirm an outcome, disclose changed circumstances, or complicate the interpretation of an earlier decision. This distinction is particularly evident in the John Verdun case, in which the later encounter reveals information that can prompt the player to reassess the earlier rescue without making Geralt responsible for John's subsequent actions. The three cases therefore demonstrate that the narrative significance of an action may extend beyond its immediate presentation and become recognizable through encounters distributed across the game world.

This study proposes deferred consequence recognition through spatial distribution and optional exploration as an analytical perspective for examining how digital games organize the relationship between player action, narrative consequence, and the recognition of outcomes. Its contribution lies in distinguishing the establishment of a consequence within the game world from the conditions under which that consequence becomes recognizable to the player. This distinction extends the analytical scope of procedurality, environmental storytelling, and player agency by directing attention not only to the outcomes conditioned by player actions or the narrative information embedded in game environments, but also to how and where evidence of those outcomes becomes accessible during subsequent play. Through three cases from The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, the study illustrates how spatially separated encounters can confirm an earlier outcome, disclose a character's changed circumstances, or complicate the interpretation of a previous decision. These variations suggest that the narrative significance of an action may depend not only on the outcome it establishes but

also on the subsequent encounters through which that outcome becomes intelligible. The proposed formulation therefore offers a way to investigate the relationship between consequential action and the spatial organization of narrative information without assuming that all consequences are discovered or interpreted in the same way. As a preliminary analytical proposition derived from a limited corpus, it does not claim to establish a generalizable concept; rather, it provides a basis for further comparative and empirical research into how games make the consequences of player actions recognizable across time and space.

The findings also have implications for the study of The Witcher 3. Scholarship on the game has examined narrative choice, agency, and moral interpretation; this analysis adds a complementary perspective by considering how the recognition of consequences can extend beyond the initial decision. From this perspective, narrative meaning is shaped not only by which outcome a decision establishes but also by how the game makes information about that outcome available through subsequent play. This approach provides a basis for examining how the temporal and spatial organization of narrative information can contribute to the experience of consequence in open-world games.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on a close reading of three selected cases from a single game. The findings therefore establish an interpretive pattern within this corpus rather than a general rule applicable to digital games as a whole. Second, the analysis examines the game's narrative structures and the opportunities they provide for recognition; it does not include empirical research into how different players actually navigate the game, whether they discover these encounters, or how they interpret them. The argument concerns the conditions under which recognition is possible, not the uniformity of players' experiences. Third, although Murray's framework provides a productive basis for examining procedurality, spatiality, and participation, the specific distinction between consequence and its recognition is an analytical formulation developed through this study. It should not be treated as a concept that Murray explicitly theorizes in these terms.

Future research could extend this approach through comparative analyses of other open-world and narrative-driven games, examining whether and how the recognition of consequences depends on optional encounters, spatially distributed information, or revisiting previously encountered locations. Empirical studies could also investigate how players discover and interpret such outcomes, including whether delayed recognition changes their retrospective judgments of earlier decisions. Such research would help distinguish the structures that games make available from the experiences players actually have. By separating the establishment of consequences from their recognition, this study offers a focused analytical perspective for further investigating how digital games organize narrative meaning through procedural structures, spatial exploration, and participation.

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