

The Silver Fox of Video Games: Questions of Aging and Masculinity in CD Projekt's *The Witcher* Series

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Abstract

New media has become one of the lenses through which we perceive and consume our lived social realities. Video games, as part of the new media (r)evolution, offer perspectives on our socio-cultural realities by engaging us with their (at times fantastical) worlds, not far removed from our own. Herein, games are a valuable addition to further an understanding of how bodies are performed on screen and what this implies for socio-culturally informed imageries of peoples off-screen. This paper specifically looks at the depiction and performance of age and gender as societal categories in CD Projekt's *The Witcher* video game series (2007-2021), and discusses their implication for characters inside the games as well as players outside. While focusing on *The Witcher* series' protagonist Geralt of Rivia, interlacing issues of heteronormativity, able-bodiedness, (hyper)masculinity, and the progress of successful male aging will be analyzed. Here, the medium of video games plays a pivotal role in comprehending the series' presentation of heteronormative male aging as both a dynamic performative act between character and player, and an act of spectatorship with Geralt's aging male body as a body to be consumed. Moreover, as the games turn to present their hero as an ambiguous figure, fluctuating between rogue "silver fox" and socially empowered patriarch, this paper will also consider what happens to the (fictional, digital) aging male body if he is actualized as a successfully aging body. Finally, this paper draws upon discourses in aging studies, gender studies, as well as disability studies, and aims to broaden the discussion on aging male bodies in new media onto video games.

Aging (Men) in the Age of Games

“Why men throw their lives away attacking an armed Witcher, I’ll never know. Something wrong with my face?” (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*). This quote from Geralt of Rivia, protagonist of CD Projekt’s *The Witcher* video game series (2007-2021), takes us to the center of this paper’s discussion on age, gender, and able-bodiedness.¹ Geralt is a witcher, a monster hunter equipped with super-human physical and mental abilities, capable of magic, and trained by his witcher school to kill.² These skills are, in part, results of mutation experiments conducted by the school on a select group of young boys. If they survive the mutation procedures, these new witchers are granted bodies and minds that are trained and developed far beyond average: “Stray children taught the ways of foul sorcery, their bodies mutated through blasphemous ritual. [...] To this day they shame us with their very existence!” (*Wild Hunt*, Opening Scene). In the case of Geralt, the mutations have also caused his appearance to change: his hair is now white, his eyes are golden-yellow. As the game series progresses, Geralt’s overall looks harden as well: he develops deep wrinkles, his body becomes more muscular but also scarred, and he wears a constant frown on his face. These visual features of (un)natural aging, in addition to his physical and mental super-abilities as a witcher, mark Geralt as an outsider to his society.

Originating from Andrei Sapkowski’s novel saga *The Witcher* (Pol.: *Wiedźmin*, 1986-2013),³ the video game series specifically feeds into current discussions on age and gender in new media: “In our mass-mediated society, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops, conspiring to render the aging [...] body paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible” (Woodward 163). In the games, Geralt’s aging male body is made hypervisible through his visual design and aesthetics, while his looks and demeanor are designed to mirror Western notions of the “successfully” aging male body that are

¹ I mainly refer to the last three games in the series, namely *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015; from now *Wild Hunt*) as well as its second DLC *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Blood and Wine* (2016; from now *Blood and Wine*).

² Witcher schools are organizations by witchers who create and train new monster hunters in accordance with their respective creed. There are eight witcher schools in total, each focusing on different combat and magic specialities. Geralt of Rivia was created by and trained in the School of the Wolf.

³ Sapkowski’s novel saga has since been adapted into several different formats, most prominently CD Projekt’s video game series, and Netflix’s *The Witcher* TV-series (since 2019). The entire body of Sapkowski’s works is considered a multi-media franchise, and ranges from the novels to board games and graphic novels.

presumably familiar to players of the game.⁴ However, Geralt's aging body is also rendered invisible by means of his abilities. Although his visual features allude to his age, Geralt's mental and physical skills far transcend those of the average body. His super-ability contrasts, and at times significantly overshadows, his aging character design and, in turn, renders it invisible. Although his looks, demeanor, and his extraordinary abilities make Geralt an outsider to his society, his intimate heteronormative social relations mark him as father and husband to the games' female characters. The paradox, then, lies in Geralt, as a male connoted figure, simultaneously "acting his age," meaning that "age is not simply *shaped* by social forces; it is *constituted* in interactions and gains its meaning in interaction and in the context of larger social forces" (Laz 86; emphasis in the original), as well as resisting these "social forces" of normative male aging.

When thinking about video games in the contexts of gender and age, one might assume that most video games cater towards young white adult men and thus must feature content accordingly, with younger male heroes appealing to the age-appropriate heteronormative ideal. While the biggest demographic of video game players in the United States is indeed young/er (between 18 and 34 years old) and predominantly white (around 71%), some of the most popular role-playing video games (RPGs), such as the *Red Dead Redemption* series (2010-2018), the *God of War* series (2005-2018), or the *Uncharted* series (2007-2022), center their stories on middle-aged men instead (Entertainment Software Association 2022)⁵. Arguably, the deliberate age gap between young/er players and aging characters creates a specific dynamic. In *The Witcher* game series, for instance, this dynamic creates an ambiguous hierarchy: Geralt as an aging character is constructed as superior to the implied young/er player regarding both age and masculinity. At the same time, however, the young/er player is put into a position of power, controlling Geralt's digital aging body through space, time, and narrative.⁶

⁴ Robert L. Kahn and John Rowe (1998) define "successful aging" as "multidimensional, encompassing the avoidance of disease and disability, the maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities" (439).

⁵ The protagonists in these series, as is the case for most protagonists in popular video game franchises, are white as well. The lack of representation of people of color in video games, especially at the intersections of age and gender, is a long-standing issue addressed e.g., in Everett and Watkins, "The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games."

⁶ Empirical data on player demographics of *The Witcher* game series has, at least to my knowledge, not been made public. Nonetheless, in light of the average U.S. player (young/er, white, male), the role of the implied player needs to be analyzed in

In the games, Geralt appears as an aging man, yet players are led to explore him as an “ageless” man. As the player continuously engages with Geralt through heteronormative “youthful” activities (such as having heterosexual relationships with younger women or engaging in combat sequences), they seem to overcome his aging design with him. Coincidentally, players also undermine Geralt’s aging, yet ageless character performance: Geralt is, after all, an aging body, who requires the (assumably) younger player’s assistance—without the player’s active engagement with the game’s interface, Geralt would not move, and the game could not proceed. Although this is technically true for all video game avatars, Geralt, as a specifically gendered and age-coded character, is (per default) subjected to the player’s authority, marking Geralt as an aging male body in need of control.⁷ By enacting Geralt both mechanically and in the narrative, players not only navigate him to “become immersed into the game world and become a part of it,” but also contribute to the gendered performances of Geralt’s super-abled hypermasculine aging body as well as add to its control (Wenz 314).⁸ Examining the relationship between players and game character in the discussion on age and gender in video games thus highlights the policing of the body and its performances replicated on screen, while it also offers a crucial vantage point for deconstructing the patriarchal, heteronormative, ableist hegemony on and off-screen (cf. Nitsche 392).

conversation with the empirical player, especially when discussing issues of age and gender. This, of course, does not entail that other player groups are not equally engaged by *The Witcher* games.

⁷ The same cannot be said for video game avatars generally. For game characters like Nintendo’s Mario and Luigi, for instance, their age/aging are neither integral to the games’ narrative nor their mechanical gameplay. In their case, the enforced engagement between player and avatar remains non-intrusive to Mario’s and Luigi’s conception on and off-screen. In case of other RPG characters like Lara Croft, enforced mechanical gameplay also does not seem to influence Lara’s character design, meaning that no matter how many times a player is forced to move Lara during gameplay, her age is neither addressed, altered, nor seems to influence the way players engage with her. However, in the new installations of the *Tomb Raider* franchise (2013, 2015, 2018), Lara is designed noticeably younger than in previous versions of the game, while her aging becomes an important addition to the franchise’s reboot. Here, similarly to Geralt, Lara’s reliance on the player is ambiguously reinforced by her distinct aging, as the new games’ “emphasis on vulnerability [partly resulting from Lara’s “youthful” inexperience, lacking in previous *Tomb Raider* installations] may simultaneously simply re-invite male players to care for and protect the female character” (Engelbrecht n.pag.). Reading characters like the “new” Lara alongside discussions on age and gender thus requires a reevaluation of players’ default control over game avatars, in order to uncover the possible replication of underlying social structures.

⁸ Immersion “means that the player is caught up in the world of the game’s story [...], but also refers to the player’s love of the game and the strategy that goes into it” (McMahan 68).

Similar to the ways social media or television affect our perception of the world and our participation in it, so do video games:

The concept of 'culture' in relation to digital games, game development, and player practices appears both important and challenging. It directs our attention to the artistic and cultural values, and to the creative expression that games are able to embody and inspire [...] in their rich, real-world contexts. (Mäyrä 298)

Consequently, video games “do not exist in a vacuum, but are rather intertwined with other aspects of human life in all possible ways”, while new media, be it in form of television series or video games, is no longer a mere content to be spectated but to be interacted with as well (Siitonen 171). In this paper, I thus frame *The Witcher* series as one such example of new media being both performed and performative. In the following chapters, I discuss this dichotomy about how age and gender, as well as sexuality and dis/ability, situate themselves (collectively and distinctly) as socio-cultural and socio-political functions in video games. Here, I use approaches from gender studies, disability studies, and video game studies to analyze the specific role of Geralt of Rivia in *The Witcher* games with regard to his role as the series' hypermasculine super-ager. Throughout the paper, I consider both the series' contents and audience (the players) to showcase how performances of age and gender, dis/ability and sexuality, are framed in *The Witcher* games, while ending my discussion with a reflection on the possibilities and limits of video games as another “silvering screen” (Chivers 7).

Gaming Gender, Dis/ability, and Aging: A Literature Review

Media, and especially video games as new media, are increasingly delivered to us as personal and personalized, growing from given entertainment into an opportunity for individual(ized) expression: “With the development of social media the individual is placed on a pedestal. Every citizen, [...] can create a personal profile for multiple purposes” (Brems et al. 445). Though not necessarily tied to an in-game online presence, video games live on the interaction with the player.⁹ As players engage with both the game's mechanical interface and the narrative, “the meaning of the game comes in the game's reaction to player expression within the game” (Rouse III 88). Here, “[t]he player is an active performer because she is also an interactor; but she is also the audience of this performance, since she is the one who makes sense of the system and acts accordingly” (Fernández-Vara 6).

⁹ Arguably, the necessity of creating an online profile to access games in the first place, as is the case with PlayStation, Xbox, Steam, and other gaming platforms, already ties players to a personalized online space—even if the game itself is not played online.

In case of RPGs, the individual player is positioned at the game's center while (ideally) immersive engagement with narrative and mechanics emerges, which is crucial for successful gameplay (cf. Hanson 205). In this regard, "play becomes intensely personal", as

[players] emotionally and cognitively feel as if what we are subjected to in-game is also what our experiences would be in the flesh. There is no distinction between real and virtual. We react to the narratives, spaces, and characters based on our own subjectivities. (Luc 92)

By toying with categories of "real" and "virtual," video games aim to construct worlds as personally *and* performatively accessible and recognizable to their players. Hence, when analyzing social categories such as age and gender in video games, multiple layers are to be examined: social categories in games can function as immersive identification for players but can also break immersion; they are performed by the characters but are also performative for the players; they are informed by society but also feed back into it (cf. Therrien 457).

The terminology of "performative" is hereby derived from Judith Butler's critical reflection on normative society and gender:

[A]cts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that [...] [they] are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (136; emphasis in the original)

Gender only exists as a performed reality, meaning that it is shaped by societies' normative construction of the gendered body—which does not make our daily lives as gendered persons any less real but simply goes to say that gender has no inherent meaning or function but to categorize and control. Critically addressing normative societal regulations of both enactment (performance) and perception of bodies, in turn, becomes central to the analysis of gender (and other social categories) in social productions of the digital age, such as video games.

Although Butler conceptualizes performativity primarily in terms of gender, the humanities and social sciences have since applied their theory to other fields. Disability studies, for instance, uses language traditionally found in gender studies to further critical analyses of bodies in systems: "In the social system in which we live, the able body is privileged over the disabled body. [...] The able-bodied tradition has been influential in establishing the schema for normative reflection and in categorizing the terrain, the normal or the abnormal, the able-bodied or the disabled" (Inahara 47). This leads back to Butler, who states that "[w]hat constitutes through division the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds of the subject is a border and a boundary tenuously maintained for the purpose of social regulation and control" (133). The binary categories between

“inner” and “outer,” disabled and able-bodied, queer and straight, and female and male, hereby solely function to “stabiliz[e] and consolidat[e] the coherent subject” (134). Stabilizing the fluid subject through a controlled binary, in turn, constitutes and reconstitutes the normative (white, male, straight, able-bodied, young) versus an “Other” (diverse people) by means of hierarchical separation and social degradation— “[i]n effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit” (134).

Similar to how queer and/or disabled bodies threaten normative categories of gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability, the aging body equally poses a threat to the binary hegemony. Particularly the depiction of the aging body on screen “has been demeaning” (Chivers xviii) since the aging body is not coherent with the social construct of a normative body—even though “aging affects all of us” (xix). Instead, the aging body is pushed towards an imagery of youth, both regarding visual aesthetics and physical mobility, while “the pressure to remain young and vigorous [...] [becomes] an ironic form of successful aging” (10). Successful aging is inevitably tied to youth—the younger one appears, the more successful one ages. The depiction of successful aging in visual media is also a gendered issue: aging successfully in men often correlates with “continuing to achieve physical feats not common even for the average younger person,” whereas for women “facing the audience seems impossible without youth-enhancing technologies” (xii). The aesthetics of youth are thus closely tied to conceptions of masculinity and femininity. The stereotypes of “silver fox” and “cougar” attest to society’s attempt at controlling the aging body as youthful and as gendered.¹⁰ Here, the silver fox trope, for instance, alludes to the masculine ideal of the able-bodied, attractive and sexually active man, who, despite his age, fulfills all criteria of youthful appearance and demeanor but who, thanks to his age, is also knowledgeable and calculated (cf. Oró-Piqueras 1196; cf. Bañón and Zecchi 255).

However, the aging body is not only subjected to a strive for youthful gendered aesthetics: Ageist notions also include those of “the grumpy old man or the relationally-oriented nurturing woman” (Sandberg et al. 1), whereby, again, these stereotypes serve to control the aging gendered body by means of “othering”—the young/er, (still) able-bodied, (still) sexual person contrasts the old/er, potentially disabled, desexualized

¹⁰ The term “silver fox” refers to men of a certain age “who are considered to be attractive”, despite ageist notions of the aging male body. The term “cougar” refers to “older female characters who develop relationships with younger men” (Oró-Piqueras 1196).

person and declares them undesirable and thus unwelcome.¹¹ Having passed the stage (and age) of cougar and silver fox, aging bodies are gradually reinstated into their most fundamental socially gendered roles: men, especially “old” men, are unemotional and therefore only get grumpier with age, whereas women, especially “old” women, are kind and nurturing and therefore become mothers (grandmothers, great-grandmothers) once more.¹²

In turn, the aesthetics of youth are not only marked as increasingly irrelevant but also unattainable to the aging person beyond the silver fox or cougar (cf. Pickard n.pag.). Instead, the aging body now creeps towards its inevitable decay and is pushed even further to the edges of society, adding no value to societal preservation of youth. With regard to the performances of age in new media, and especially in video games, framing the aging body as “either decline or success” becomes particularly challenging (Bañón and Zecchi 254). Aging bodies unable to “socially perform either with the body or the mind [...] are depicted as zombies” (256), while aging bodies able to perform must do so in a youthful manner, thereby contributing to society’s notion of “successful aging.” In the case of video games specifically, questions of how aging is performed and performative for both characters and players, and how this dynamic affects the depiction and (ideally) immersive experience of the (gendered, dis/abled, sexualized) aging body for the player, become crucial for “deconstructing ageism” in video games as new media (251). In this paper, I use the example of Geralt in *The Witcher* games to showcase and exemplify how age and gender are linked, categorized, and refigured for both character and player. In the following chapter, I trace Geralt’s gendered journey of aging from his silver fox persona (section 3.1) to his development into the game series’ patriarch (section 3.2). Here, I discuss the implications Geralt’s transformation has for the performances of age and gender within the games and outside the games, while embedding these discussions in the broader context of age and gender in new media.

¹¹ In her article “The Othering of Old Age: Insights from Postcolonial Studies,” Silke van Dyk points out that there are “different processes of othering, with the young-old being valued as the other and the oldest old being disdained as the other” (109).

¹² Ruth Gehrman’s article for this special issue, “The Digital Granny: Staging Grandparents on Social Media” analyzes the role of grandparents in both the United Kingdom and the United States to discuss the gendered staging of grandparenthood on social media.

How Witchers Age: Geralt of Rivia in *The Witcher* Games

Geralt, the Silver Fox: On Questions of Masculinity, Able-Bodiedness, and the Other

Geralt's narrative conceptualization as an aging yet super-abled Other is complex and at times paradoxical: Geralt's super-abilities and altered looks are the result of magical, arguably medical, experiments rendering him non-human and thus an Other regardless of age. Age and the notion of able-bodiedness, at first, do not seem to function as controlling social categories to Geralt's fluid identity, instead his distinct non-humanness does—Geralt is an Other, because he is not a “real” human. This would entail that Geralt is beyond any (ableist) categories of age, as they do not apply to him—after all, he is not (entirely) human in the first place.

This reading, however, is an oversimplification of Geralt's character in *The Witcher* series. Geralt is othered because he is “unnaturally” super-able-bodied, yet his super-able-bodied “otherness” is also informed by the societal binary classification of bodies, “that is, ‘natural’ bodies that are non-modified [...] and ‘unnatural,’ modified bodies” (Steinhoff 224). In *The Witcher* series, the natural male body is conceptualized as heteronormatively gendered, gradually aging towards death, and generally depicted as average, whereas Geralt's unnatural (or supernatural) body is perceived of as an excessive version of these social classifications: Geralt is physically and mentally stronger, while his appearance reaffirms his hypermasculine super-abledness (e.g., his toned, muscular body).

At the same time, Geralt's aesthetics are also contradictory: Although Geralt is “super” in every sense—he is strong, smart, independent, sexy—his body displays signs of advancing age, to which his scars and wrinkles attest. Geralt's mutated non-humanness does not protect him of “natural” impacts on his body, as aging and combat have left visible marks. Geralt's idealized (and stylized) heteronormative aging male body is limited because it cannot transcend natural processes of age, physical and mental ailments. Therefore, Geralt's modified unnatural body and mind cannot evade social categories of age, gender, sexuality, and able-bodiedness either—instead, Geralt, like all of us, succumbs to their control despite his non-humanness.

Moreover, the game series actively connotes Geralt's behavior as “old/er.” For instance, Geralt is often characterized as cold and emotionless: “[Geralt] ‘Witcher mutations. They strip us of emotion. I'd be jumping for joy otherwise’” (*Wild Hunt*). Although the game series, again, attempts to explain Geralt's demeanor as tied to his non-humanness, Geralt's depiction is nonetheless infused with socially constructed gendered ageist stereotypes. Geralt's general demeanor resembles that

of the grumpy old man, who lacks empathy and youthful delight. In coding Geralt as mature and beyond impulsive youthful mannerisms, his words and actions are attributed with a sense of precision and practicality, adding to his otherness by means of his age rather than his non-humanness.

Simultaneously, Geralt's frequent use of sarcasm and dark humor distinguishes him as someone who is indeed capable of youthful wittiness (which, ironically, the quote above also alludes to: "I'd be jumping for joy otherwise."). One core narrative of *The Witcher* series focuses on deconstructing its own ageist framing of Geralt's lack of emotionality: "[Geralt] 'You don't owe us anything. You were in need, we helped.' [Villager] 'And they call Witchers heartless. Say they won't lift a finger without pay'. [Geralt] 'They also say mice are born from rotting straw'" (*Wild Hunt*). By portraying Geralt as an "hard on the outside, soft on the inside"-type hero, *The Witcher* series plays with societal constructions of gendered age and uses them to add depth to Geralt's character. Here, the "position of the old man as grumpy, [...] [points] to a position of the dutiful and responsible old[er] man as [...] someone who is needed in society" (Sandberg 4). The imagery of the "bigoted old man" is thus replaced with someone who is "helpful and caring" (7). This will be explored more extensively when analyzing Geralt's development into the series' patriarchal figure.

Beyond Geralt's characterization as the grumpy old man unmasked, he is also characterized as the games' figurative silver fox. Throughout the series, Geralt remains youthful due to his super-natural abilities as well as his specifically masculine coded sexuality, despite his (visual and behavioral) aging. In *The Witcher* series, aging (hyper)masculinity correlates with heteronormative ideals of superable-bodiedness and heterosexuality: "masculinity is constantly highlighted and celebrated by accentuating [...] sexual appeal and flirting abilities, and [...] sexual relationship[s]" (Bañón and Zecchi 255). In Geralt's case, his masculinity is highlighted in his relationships with younger women, ranging from his two main love interests to sex workers. Moreover, Geralt's super-able-bodiedness is directly linked to his masculinity, as not only his physicality (and mentality) in terms of combat skills is exaggerated, but also his characterization as a hypermasculine heteronormative figure—Geralt is capable of anything beyond an average scope, be it engaging in numerous pleasurable heterosexual encounters, holding his breath for prolonged periods of time, or using his extensive knowledge to kill monsters. Hence, Geralt's design as the heteronormative hypermasculine super-ager marks him as an example for the "preponderance of hegemonic discourses of male sexuality and masculinity, even in old age" (Bañón and Zecchi 255).

Players are led to both admire and desire Geralt's idealized (and stylized) character, as *The Witcher* series avoids problematizing Geralt's social exclusion as related to his exaggerated heteronormative and hypermasculine aging, instead presenting it as consequence to his unnaturalness. Without having to question Geralt's hegemonic socio-cultural framing, players navigate his triumphant transcendence from unnatural social outcast to attractive humane hero, making character and players become dependent on each other to succeed in the process (cf. Rouse III 87). The player is inclined to form an emotional bond with Geralt through narrative and mechanics, adding to the "dialogue between the journey of characters and the journey of players, a companionship [...] across the ontological divide" (Klevjer 308). Yet, positioning the player as Geralt's companion also creates a shift in their power dynamic, as the player is asked to perform Geralt's gendered, aging, able-bodied identity with him. On an intradiegetic level of *The Witcher* games, Geralt's identity remains (paradoxically) fluid: he ages but remains ageless; he is natural but also unnatural. The only mechanism capable of stabilizing Geralt is the player. As the games' sole external factor not coherently pre-set, the player can (and, in fact, must) navigate Geralt in such a way that it results in their joined success. Successful heteronormative male aging, in turn, can only happen in *The Witcher* series if the player is complicit with its performance: Geralt cannot perform his aging, gendered, able-bodied identity without the player guiding his performance, while performing Geralt's identity with him by means of narrative and mechanical interaction ultimately results in Geralt's (and the player's) success. Therefore, to ensure their successful gameplay navigating Geralt's fluidity, players must feed into the games' construction of Geralt as a successful super-ager.

Analogous to Geralt's aging body being dependent on the player, so is Geralt's male body made subject (or object) to the players: As they help and accompany Geralt in his (hyper)masculine endeavors—from fighting monsters to finding love—players are asked to constantly reinstate Geralt as the games' heteronormative hero. However, players' engagement in Geralt's gendered acts of violence for instance, also undermines Geralt's position as the hypermasculine skilled fighter:

[W]e might add that the battered and bruised body that can take it (like a man) is also imbricated in its straining [...] [T]he excess of the muscular male body necessarily illuminates the instability of the heteronormative masculinity through its very efforts to close over the ruptures, gaps and fissures in its formation. (Dolan 145)

What Dolan alludes to here, is that in the case of *The Witcher* games, by engaging in the performance of (literally) pushing Geralt's male body into violent danger as well as towards continued aging, players add to his

emasculatation and eradication of agency. After all, who would Geralt of Rivia be without his player leading him into battle or to the next brothel and having both ventures be successful?

Simultaneously, Geralt is enabled to progress from his position as his society's non-human outcast: The player allows Geralt to grow and possibly outgrow his fluid instability in their continued engagement, increasingly stabilizing Geralt. Though technically only a combination of pixels, *The Witcher* series secures Geralt's ability to "be" (aging, male, heterosexual, able-bodied) in relation to the player and the real worlds in which they play. Or, alternatively, "video games [...] offer the player the possibility to complexly and meaningfully interact with the game world" while "the task of an immersive video game is to grant the player the capacity to perform" (with) the character—both narratively and mechanically (cf. Nae n.pag.).

Geralt, the Patriarch: Of Fathers, Hegemonic Power, and Final Ends

With two of *The Witcher* series' last game installations, *Wild Hunt* and *Blood and Wine*, Geralt (and the player) are finally set to retire. Interestingly, retirement here does not entail negative sentiments often a with retirement in Western societies, framing it as "a range of risks [...], such as illness, disability, inactivity, and social isolation" (Rudman 12). On the contrary, Geralt's retirement is framed as stabilizing and thus preferable even, marking it as a rite of passage to his establishment as the game series' socially accepted patriarch.¹³ Having navigated and accompanied Geralt through his aging process, players are now offered an end to Geralt's fluidity—not only by means of the player's companionship but also through Geralt's intimate relationships with select other characters. Geralt moves past his silver fox persona and his (un)natural state of social unrest, and steadily evolves into the series' patriarchal figure by completing his arch from non-human (and inhumane) outsider to kind-hearted and settled hero over the course of the games.

In Geralt's development into the games' patriarch, his youthful super-ability fuses with his maturity, rendering him the absolute idealized figure of successful male aging: "In typical social gerontological terms, it becomes acceptable (a sign of success even) to be old, as long as you

¹³ Geralt's positive representation of retirement hereby also channels the flipside to retirement narratives, framing it as a personal, planned phase during (later) life dedicated to one's responsibility of maintaining and/or optimizing health and thus youthfulness (Rudman 2015). In Geralt's case, his retirement, then, not only entails his development into the series' patriarch, but also marks this development as a commitment to him remaining healthy and young, though now settled and matured. This again alludes to Geralt's portrayal as the hypermasculine heteronormative successful ager, even—or especially—in retirement.

don't also become disabled" (Chivers 21). Since Geralt remains super-abled until the end (while players are even urged to continuously expand his super-abled skill set), Geralt's success as the aging hero is completed, making him the forever able-bodied aging male figure in the games. Moreover, Geralt's still fluid *male* aging process is completed through his socio-romantic relationships, which gradually establish Geralt as husband and father to secure his patriarchal position of power, rather than remaining the series' bachelor silver fox.

Geralt's relationships with the young/er women in his life are central to his stabilization and to the completion of his aging process. Depending on the player's decisions during gameplay, either Ciri (Geralt's protegee daughter), Triss, or Yennefer (his two main love interests) accompany Geralt on his final missions towards retirement. In order to feedback this decision back to the player, only one of the three women is featured in Geralt's retirement storyline at the end of *Wild Hunt*, and analogously in its sequel *Blood and Wine*. It is important to note that regardless of who the player chooses in the end, all three women are deeply involved in Geralt's final development and significantly shape his ascension to the series' patriarch.

However, although Ciri, Triss, and Yennefer complement Geralt's rise to a patriarchal figure, it is after all the player who decides on Geralt's climax as the games' aging, soon to be retired, protagonist. Once again, Geralt is dependent on the player to complete his last stages of successful aging (becoming a father, becoming a husband) and to ascend into a social position of patriarchal power. At the same time, Geralt is also established as the series' patriarch despite the player's control: "Ageing masculinity is [...] explored through the frame of late fatherhood that functions like late-style in the transformation of youth into desirable maturity," while late partnership, after having aged past the silver fox, equally seems to add to Geralt's "transformation of youth into desirable maturity" (Dolan 157).

The women, with whom Geralt has intimate relationships, add to Geralt's position of maturity either through late fatherhood or late partnership, which, in return, stabilizes his identity and marks his gendered aging process as complete. Although all three women are portrayed as decisively independent and equipped with their own set of (supernatural) abilities, Geralt's prominent narrative of aging masculinity renders them as adornments to his success. Moreover, the women's distinct youthfulness adds to Geralt's depiction as a successful ager, as they not only reiterate his abilities as silver fox (attractive, sexually active, super-abled) but also affirm his position as their patriarch. Here, Geralt's new social role towards the end of *The Witcher* series stands in stark

contrast to his original position as non-human social outcast. Even though Geralt has, in his super-abledness, always been more powerful than others, his social power is significantly improved as the series comes to a close.¹⁴ In this process, his age and (hyper)masculinity are imperative to his advance as an aging male figure; his power lies not only in his aging male body presented as “a signifier of potent biological masculinity” (Dolan 242) but also in his authority over young/er women.

In turn, Geralt’s newly found stability as successfully aging patriarch prevents an “equation of old age with misery” (Chivers 21), as the following scene towards the end of *Blood and Wine* demonstrates:

[Geralt and his chosen partner Yennefer sit outside in Geralt’s vineyard, having finally decided to settle down after years of nomadism.]

[Geralt] “Ever thought this day would come? Me and you. . . Peace and quiet. . . bees buzzing, birds chirping. . .?”

[Yennefer] “I almost regret delaying so long before coming to you. . . I was quite the silly goose. . .”

[...] [Yennefer and Geralt banter playfully.]

[Yennefer] “Well said, Witcher. You’re not only handsome, but wise, too. I feel a bit like the cat that got the canary.”

[...]

[Geralt] “How’d that start, anyway? Our duels in wordplay?”

[Yennefer] “Forgotten? [...] You started it from going mad with boredom. I remember finding your sense of humor both groan-worthy. . . and somehow endearing. Never change, Geralt. I beg you.” (“Be It Ever So Humble. . .” Quest)

As this scene illustrates, Geralt has aged successfully both with regard to his silver fox persona and his patriarchal power status. Geralt has seemingly left behind his bachelor silver fox persona by settling down and engaging in a monogamous heteronormative relationship with Yennefer (“[Geralt] ‘Ever thought this day would come? Me and you...’”). However, Geralt’s youthful and “endearing” behavior still adds to his appeal, regardless of his matured aging (“[Yennefer] ‘You’re not only handsome but wise, too’”). In this sense, Geralt completes his circle of successful aging by attaining the social power of the patriarch; he remains desirable as the silver fox to his female companions and allows the player to admire him for his successful male aging—in this sense, he also remains a desirable choice for the player.

Although players have now completed Geralt’s story (of masculine aging) with him, they do not find his character much changed: Geralt is still humorous and sexy, able-bodied and hypermasculine, though now

¹⁴ Thus far, *Blood and Wine* is the official end to Geralt’s storyline in *The Witcher* game universe.

settled and matured. This development finalizes the players' departure from Geralt—there is nothing left to do, neither for Geralt nor for the players, as Geralt (and the players) eventually find “[p]eace and quiet” (*Blood and Wine*).

Finally, this is also where we might find Geralt's appeal as *The Witcher* games' protagonist. By completing Geralt's story, players have also completed Geralt as an aging male character to be played—“unstable categories of identity, presence, and subjectivity” (Rehak 107) are rebalanced in his success as a male ager, while players have also successfully completed the game series itself (107). At the same time, players can also rest assured that the character they have been made companion to never truly changes, because Geralt is, after all, a digital fictional character. Geralt's final appeal, then, lies in his challenging engagement of players in narratives and mechanics of change, whereas his core “being” remains the same until the very end: “[Yennefer] ‘Never change, Geralt. I beg you.’”

Concurrently, Geralt's inability to change also alludes to his inability to die: “No Witcher's ever died in his own bed”, Geralt tells Ciri as they bury their old Witcher mentor and father-figure Vesemir, after having fallen in battle (*Wild Hunt*, “The Battle of Kaer Morhen” Quest). As a super-able man Geralt can age, however, he will never die of old age. Instead, Geralt would die, if at all, because of his (un)natural inclination to violent combat, being both his trade as well as embedded into his super-able hypermasculine body (and mind). Here, Geralt is made immortal because players never get to know how Geralt will (eventually) die in the narrative, while Geralt's (eventual) death is rendered irrelevant due to his stabilization as heteronormative hypermasculine super-ager. In short, Geralt, cannot die because players have already finished his story as an aging male character. In this regard, Geralt's retirement narrative at the end of *The Witcher* series further insinuates Geralt's completion as an aging male character. Even though Geralt's story ends, he does not end being an ideal heteronormative figure of successful male aging: “[Geralt] ‘You know, feels kinda strange having a home.’ [Yennefer] ‘Mhm. I must say, I never pictured you owning real estate.’ [Geralt, chuckles] ‘Was something of an accident. . . but I'm not about to complain’” (*Blood and Wine*, “Be It Ever So Humble. . .” Quest).

Death, as the final disruptive aspect to Geralt's successful aging narrative, thus does not (and cannot) threaten Geralt's successful aging process—either by ending his development from silver fox to patriarch prematurely, or by marking Geralt as “old” in diminishing his achievements as an aging man through dying (of old age or otherwise). In the games, Geralt *cannot* actually die even in mechanical

engagements, since the games allow replays of failed sequences and only let Geralt die momentarily. Thus, “the player is still able to resurrect and continue playing” (Wenz 314). Finally, Geralt is rendered immortal simply by means of him existing (and being alive) in *The Witcher* games and, by extension, the entire franchise—after all, Geralt lives, and he lives forever.

Game Over, But Not Really: “Silvering” Video Games

Equivalent to how “silvering screen films” render the aging body as a body to be consumed (Chivers 7)—that is, by showing, discussing, altering, or removing aging bodies from film and television—video games cater their aging characters as bodies to be played with and to be entertained by. This consumer orientation creates a dichotomy between characters as representative anchors for their audience’s immersion, and characters designed primarily for product value:

In foregrounding age while trying to erase its visible appearance, silvering screen films transform representations of aging into an understandable and consumable product, fitting well into an era in which identity is tied to consumer practices and status. Film audiences can buy into positive and negative models of growing old, with little in between to contemplate. (7)

Analogous to Chivers’ analysis of the (market) models of silvering screens, games such as *The Witcher* series equally raise questions to the representation of aging (male) characters in new media. This becomes especially complicated considering that “[m]any video games are mass market productions that try to reach an audience as diverse as possible in order to maximise profitability” (Farca 7). With around 75 million copies sold worldwide (*Statista* May 2023), *The Witcher* games can hereby not only be considered a mass market product, but their popularity amongst audiences has also added to the phenomenon of *The Witcher* multi-media franchise as a whole.¹⁵ However, in the discussion on age and aging, the nature of the medium video game is to be considered distinctively, since game characters (as avatars) are always subordinate to their audiences’, namely the player’s control, which in the case of aging characters problematizes their agency.

The game character is herein marked as a helpless Other, not only due to them being an avatar, but because of their difference (in age, and other). This places the character into a position of subordination, as “it is the job of the player to create ‘life’ in the third person, and failure to do so

¹⁵ Season 2 of Netflix’s *The Witcher* series, for instance, “has joined streamer’s most-viewed TV shows of all time list, amassing 462.5 million hours of view-time” (Zorrilla n.pag.).

will create feelings of a mechanical lifelessness” (Grodal 155). The character on-screen thus can (at first) only gain meaning through the player’s engagement, marking the aging digital body as meaningless and “lifeless” if they are not being played (with). At the same time, the character as avatar is “limited and freed by difference from the player, they can accomplish more than the player alone; [...] avatars differ from us through their ability to *live*, *die*, and *live* again” (Rehak 106-07; emphasis in the original). Here, the immortality of the aging character on screen adds to their agency in ways which the player cannot overrule (quite literally, as the game code is pre-written). The aging body on screen, both creeping towards and running away from its demise, can in fact never die and therefore “permits meaningful experimentation with shifting and multiple identities” (Aldred 358). In terms of “realness” and representation, this then entails that, though age is universal and real to both our world and the worlds on screen, its lived realities for characters on screen and consumers off screen differ—both positively and negatively.

Ultimately, the aging male body on screen, both reliant on societal conventions and undermined by their real-world actors, becomes an object (or a subject) of desire. Players are confronted with a very distinct and narrow representation of the aging male body that is unattainable to them—players might toy with the aging male body’s performance, but they can never perform its successfully aged heteronormative patriarchal idealization as hypermasculine, socially empowered, and (super-)able-bodied themselves.¹⁶ Though *The Witcher* series frames Geralt’s “superiority” as originating from unnatural processes, his performative body is still bound to social frames, adding to the toxicity of (Western) hypermasculinity and able-bodiedness continued in advancing age and picturing social acquisitions of power as resulting from completed processes of successful aging.

Finally, discussing video games as new media installations can be useful to understanding the effect social conceptions of age, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, and more have on our media and media consumption. Video games showcase performances of societal norms more acutely than any other medium, both regarding characters and societies on screen, as well as off-screen: “Games are not trivially consumed. They require player participation to be completed, and this is

¹⁶ Interesting here is also how the player is positioned against Geralt as a heteronormative hypermasculine figure, and how the player’s gender and sexuality are in turn (re-)negotiated in processes of identification and relation during gameplay. Unfortunately, I was not able to address this train of thought in this paper, and refer to Mia Consalvo’s essay “Hot Dates and Fairy Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games.”

fundamental to what they are” (Rouse III 87). In conclusion, considering the ambivalent role of video games as new media in their potential for social discourse, adds to the richness of critical perspectives on our real world: “the video game, for all its chaotic cartoonishness, may constitute a small square of contemplative space” (Rehak 123). In line with this special issue’s focus on age and gender in new media, this paper aimed to show the intricate connections between age and gender as social denominators and their significant influence on both characters on and audiences off-screen. Here, video games stand exemplarily for the ways in which Western cultures, regardless of age, gender, can engage with (new) media, and how these performances shape and alter the way in which identity, social interactions, and normativity are (re-)produced and challenged. Ultimately, games have proven to be more than “mere play”: instead, they have found their way into modern socio-cultural and socio-political discourses—and *vice versa*.

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