

THE **WITCHER** THE RISE OF



The Rise of The Witcher: A New RPG King

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Translated from French by Maxim Misirlizade, ITC Traductions

This educational work is Third Éditions’ tribute to
to the popular video game series *The Witcher*.

In this one-of-a-kind volume, the author retraces the story of *The Witcher* video games,
interpreting the inspiration, context and content of the series
through original commentary and analysis.

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ISBN 978-2-37784-248-3

Legal submission: December 2019

Printed in the European Union by Grafo.



BENOIT "EXSERV" REINIER

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To my lucky star



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PREFACE

ODD THOUGH IT MAY SEEM, I wrote this preface a short while after completing the manuscript. I have not really had the chance to compare notes, so maybe this is what writers usually do. Although I may now have written three books, I still do not think of myself as an author. Only a few corrections remain before adding the final touches to this publication, entirely dedicated to *The Witcher*. My feelings are a mixture of relief and pride, as well as curiosity as to the next adventure and where it might take me. Writing this preface seems like a good opportunity to take stock of these long months spent researching the subject matter, traveling to Warsaw to meet the developers at CD Projekt RED and, of course, writing the manuscript. Barely a year has passed since I finished my first book on *Diablo*. I had agreed to write about *The Witcher* in the wake of that original project. Over the summer, however, I finally dedicated the time to *Dead Cells*, while working on my second book, *The Heart of Dead Cells*. After turning down the *Dark Souls* project, I was thinking I had missed my opportunity to write a book! Thankfully, my second chance with Third Éditions allowed me to be more productive than ever. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the team at this publishing house. Having the trust and support of these dreamers behind me, every single day, is something I simply could not do without.

People often ask me to outline the process behind my writing and explain how I manage to focus on just a single project. Never would I have thought I could thrive so much in a job. Quite simply, I find the whole thing fascinating; from the research phase, which leaves me feeling like a detective, to piecing my ideas together to weave a common thread. Having said that, it took a while before I truly appreciated *The Witcher*. The first game took me by surprise, as did its somewhat disorienting player experience, but still, I had a great time with it. For several years after the release of FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* in 2011, I found myself stricken with a condition that prevented me from appreciating any other game—this was no joke, many other cases were reported! Unfortunately, *The Witcher 2* came out the year after *Dark Souls*, so I failed to get into it in those days. It took years—and this book—for me to go back and give it another try. I am so grateful that I did. While I still have a close connection with FromSoftware's games—a source of great pride—I am delighted to report that I have since rediscovered my sense of wonder at games that

place storytelling front and center. In truth, I knew I had long been cured, even reconciling with *The Witcher* a few years ago.

In January 2015, during my first media trip as a journalist for the website *Gamekult*, I had traveled to Warsaw to play *The Witcher 3* a few months before its release, to form my own impressions about the game. Those three hours with the game blew me away. There was no doubt in my mind, the studio had pulled off a stunning feat of evolution, which is saying a lot. The writing had grown in maturity and insight, as had the dialog, and I was also pleasantly surprised by the combat. It is hard to believe I am writing this, seeing as it took me years to appreciate games lacking the trademark intensity of the *Souls* series. Aside from my glowing review for *Gamekult*, for whole days and nights I sat glued in front of *The Witcher 3* and, later, its expansions. It had been my very first preview event, and I could never have predicted that, three years down the line, I would not only revisit the studio, but enjoy hours upon hours discussing the series with its creators, some of whom have been a part of the furniture at CD Projekt RED since day one.

In addition to writing about them, I ended up getting involved in creating video games. I have been fortunate enough to consult on projects in development, leading me to announce the end of the “media” chapter in my unlikely video game career in October 2018. My childhood dream was to become a games tester; I imagine the same goes for a lot of people. The reality was not quite so romantic, but I learned a lot from the experience. Despite the opportunities to meet people, the unforgettable moments and the spirit that comes with working in the gaming media, I always felt a nagging sense of frustration in the back of my mind. By the time I had finished my first book, I had gotten to bottom of it. What I had been missing was that freedom to dive into a single topic, so as to better understand it, analyze it and ultimately find the words to explain to what extent Blizzard North, Motion Twin and, now, CD Projekt RED have stamped their mark on the history of video games. Stepping behind the scenes, going back to the beginnings of these unbelievable projects, then attempting to frame the whole thing logically was an enormous challenge, but the growing exhaustion and weekends cut short were well worth it.

I have an annoying tendency to develop tunnel vision for months on end, yet I still find myself looking up from my desk, to reflect on just how lucky I am to be here. Almost nine years ago now, I was recording a guide on how to play *Demon's Souls*—my cellphone aimed at my TV from a lump of sticky tack. Since then, I have traveled to many different countries and met with dozens of developers, among them the creator of the *Souls* series. I even managed to help some of them enough to find myself featured in the credits of their games. On top of that, of course, I have written three books. It is difficult to describe the pleasure of unwrapping a box full of your own freshly printed books. I am not sure I will ever get used to it, and, in a way, that is probably a good thing. Although mine might be the only name on the cover, these projects have never been a solo effort. There may be room in the acknowledgments, but the support of Damien, who supervised the project, and Laurelyne, my partner,

warrant a special mention here. They have held me up—literally at times—in periods of doubt, despair and fear that I would not see this through to the end.

I have kept you long enough. If we never cross paths in real life, know that I do not have words to thank you for having confidence in me. It is a real honor to relate to you the story of these Polish developers who, back in high school, believed that nothing would ever stop them from scaling the summit of the world. Today, they know their games are far from perfect, yet they have always been willing to question themselves and take feedback on board, a quality shared only by the greatest studios. In any case, their passion for storytelling burns as bright as ever. *The Witcher* universe is exceptionally rich, so I cannot help but recommend that you read the novels, if one day you get the chance. My wish for this book, which you hold in your hands, was to explain how and why the team at CD Projekt RED—as much as the author of *The Witcher* novels and short stories, Andrzej Sapkowski—deserve to be considered Geralt’s true parents. Indeed, this grew into something of an obsession over the months leading up to the project’s conclusion. All that remains now is to say I hope you enjoy reading this book and that we meet again one day in the pages of a fourth preface.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since launching his YouTube channel in 2011, Benoît “ExServ” Reinier has worn many hats and juggled various jobs. He worked as a journalist on the editorial team at *Gamekult* between 2014 and 2018, as well as signing with *Next INpact* and *PlayStation Magazine*. Today, his time is divided between his work as an author, streamer and game designer. As of 2018, he has entered the world of video game development, in particular, working at Redlock on *Shattered: Tale of the Forgotten King*. His expertise has also landed him consulting roles on several independent projects in development. He also wrote *Diablo : Genèse et rédemption d’un titan* (Diablo: Genesis and Redemption of a Titan) and *The Heart of Dead Cells*, published by Third Éditions.



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CHAPTER I: CREATION
WE ARE REBELS





IT WAS IN JANUARY 2015, four months prior to the release of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, that CD Projekt RED¹ opened its doors in Warsaw to a flood of journalists from all around the world. On the agenda was a tour of the Polish studio, an interview with a few key members of the team and, above all, a hands-on preview session with one of the most hotly anticipated games of the year. Standing among these lucky reporters, I was particularly impressed by all the organization that goes into this type of event, designed to build up to the treat that was to come. After only two installments in the series, CD Projekt RED had opted to make an open world game, considered by the developers to be “the Holy Grail of role-playing games.” For what’s better than granting players true freedom to act, travel and explore a whole other universe, filled with all manner of adventures, quests and mysteries? Such a goal would mean overcoming numerous obstacles on the technical side, of course, but also from a narrative and artistic perspective. Even though, in the early days, the project seemed a stretch too far for the Polish studio, the third installment would go on to achieve unprecedented critical and commercial success, thrusting the team to the top of the world. Upon release in May 2015, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* set a new benchmark for open world role-playing games.

I certainly never imagined this level of success on my very first visit to the studio, despite having gauged, during those few hours with the game and spent interviewing the team, that the ambitions of CD Projekt RED were limitless. In no way do they attempt to hide it; in fact, quite the opposite is true. Right in the very lobby, surrounded by dozens of awards and magazine covers featuring its trilogy, the studio’s motto is boldly emblazoned in English: *We Are Rebels*. Since then, it has been my good fortune to revisit the studio on several occasions, speaking with numerous core members of the team as part of my research for this book. I still remember how much their motto struck me, a moment which now stands out as a crucial step toward better understanding this group of developers, who never back down from a challenge. In spite of its humble beginnings, this trilogy has enabled CD Projekt

1. CD Projekt RED is pronounced “seedee proyekt red,” rolling the *r* in “Projekt” and in “RED.”