



Exploring Kantian Ethics in Ethical Dilemmas of *The Witcher* Video Game Series and Its Literary Origin

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Abstract: This article explores the ethical and moral choices in *The Witcher* video game series, drawing comparisons with Andrzej Sapkowski's original literary works through Kantian ethics. Immanuel Kant's deontological framework, emphasizing duty, universal moral laws, and the categorical imperative, provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing the decisions Geralt of Rivia, the series' protagonist, is forced to make. The *Witcher* video games present players with morally complex dilemmas where they must often choose between two lesser evils, reinforcing Kant's claim that moral action should be based, not on emotional responses or consequences, but on duty. This article analyzes the critical moments of the game's narrative where moral ambiguity occurs. It investigates if choices made by Geralt because the player decides them are upheld according to Kant's conception of morality, particularly to the centrality of universal principles like justice, truth, and respect for human dignity. It also discusses the representation of such ethical situations in Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski's literary work of the same name. In the novels, a decision regarding the story emerges from the author's singular voice. At the same time, in the game, it can be made potentially forever by the player or, perhaps more intriguingly, by the character Geralt of Rivia. The article argues that the ability of the player's agency in the game ultimately yields more ethical consequences than the author's instantaneous narrative consequence in the novels.

Keywords: ethical choices, the witcher, Kantian ethics, moral dilemmas, player agency, Andrzej Sapkowski.

Introduction

In contrast to Andrzej Sapkowski's original literary works. The player agency of *The Witcher* video game series brings depth to ethical complexity and encourages higher engagement in philosophical reflection. This article presents how the ethical and morally charged situations in the video game series *The Witcher* exist on the premises of deontology by Immanuel Kant. The successful novels and television programs with their video-game counterparts are works based on the Polish novelist Andrzej Sapkowski. In both the television programs and the video game series, Geralt of Rivia always makes some seriously harsh ethical decisions. However, the games have a special interactive element that lets

players affect Geralt's choices. An appropriate theoretical framework for examining these choices is Kantian ethics, which places a higher value on moral behavior based on obligation, general ethical principles, and the categorical imperative than feelings or outcomes. Only some studies have examined the application of Kantian deontological ethics in contrasting player-driven options in video games with pre-defined narrative choices in novels, even though many focus on *The Witcher* series's narrative intricacy and moral quandaries. The knowledge gap is in how player activity affects the ethical experience of the story and its outcomes in video games. This essay bridges the gap by applying Kant's ethical framework to compare and contrast the moral judgments made in video games and books. This study emphasizes the ethical depth of players' agency and its philosophical ramifications by looking at crucial game moments where players must make moral decisions and comparing them with Sapkowski's author-driven story. This fresh viewpoint sheds light on how interactive media might promote ethical participation outside the confines of conventional literature.

The article explores the ethical and moral choices presented in *The Witcher* video game series. Further, it compares these choices with the ethical framework in the original literary works of Andrzej Sapkowski through the use of Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics as the theoretical lens. It would investigate whether the decisions taken by the protagonist, Geralt of Rivia as controlled by the player, align with the concepts in Kant of duty, universal moral laws, and the categorical imperative. By comparing and contrasting these two different forms of media, the paper argues that through a player's agency within the game, more significant consequences come about ethically, and this is backed by an analysis of two kinds of narrative media: video games as in the case of the *Witcher* series of video games, and a more static form of media which includes novels by Sapkowski under the theoretical lens of deontological theory by Immanuel Kant.

What is Deontology?

Deontology is an ethical theory that uses rules to distinguish right from wrong (Alexander and Moore). The article uses Kant's deontological framework to analyze pivotal moments in *The Witcher* video game series where players face morally ambiguous dilemmas, focusing on how these decisions are made within Kantian ethics. The decisions of Geralt of Rivia are ethical choices within the games and books, considering the definition of duty and moral laws as conceived by Kant. The consequences of player agency in shaping the game narrative, contrast this with the more fixed outcomes in the novels that Sapkowski authored. The theoretical foundation for analyzing the ethical dilemmas presented in *The Witcher* video game series and its literary counterpart lies in Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics. This Kantian philosophical doctrine posits that the foundation of ethicality lies not in consequences, but rather is an elemental part of intent and further commitment to duty and morality (Johnson, Robert, and Cureton). At the core of Kant's moral system lies the concepts of duty, categorical imperative, and universal moral law, which form a framework for the judgment of acts as in themselves morally good or evil. (Johnson, Robert, and Cureton)

Kantian Ethics: Duty and the Categorical Imperative

Kant's ethical theory is based on the argument that moral behavior should be grounded in a sense of duty and not by feeling or interest in consequences. For him, something is morally correct if and only if it is because there is a sense of duty to the moral law, not for self-interest or from effect by a feeling of a situation. This deontological approach therefore differs from consequentialistic theories like utilitarianism where the actions are based on the consequences of that action. Kant's moral philosophy makes categorical imperative posit a universalization to which any individual ought to adhere as they execute an action; that is: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant). This suggests the action based on propositions that would be used as universal laws of all individuals, at all times.

Analysis of Three Pivotal Dilemmas

The paper focuses on three specific ethical dilemmas, each representing a distinct facet of Geralt's moral decision-making, which helps streamline the research. These examples were selected for their ability to illustrate various aspects of Kantian ethics.

The Striga Dilemma:

In the novel *The Last Wish*, the protagonist Geralt of Rivia is hired to lift the curse cast upon Princess Adda which had turned her into a Striga. A Striga can be defined as an unnatural creature of violence, where Geralt is bound by his duty to protect this kingdom either by killing it or breaking the curse to save her life from death. Despite the immediate threat she poses, Geralt chooses to risk his life and tries to lift the curse rather than take the simpler route of killing the monster. His choice to lift the curse is based on the information that Adda happens to be a blameless casualty of the curse and not a creature of malevolence (Sapkowski 1993).

Geralt's decision was very much the Kantian definition of the categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." (Kant 23). Geralt's choice to rather spare Adda than slaughter her reflects Kant's deontological principles, mainly the belief in respecting the inherent dignity of all human beings, whatever the situation maybe. Kant's ethics emphasize that individuals should be treated as ends, not as means to an end. Adda, though dangerous in her Striga form, is still innocent, cursed into monstrosity through no fault of her own. Geralt recognizes this, and his decision to save her rather than kill her reflects the Kantian moral law to protect life and respect the intrinsic value of an individual, even at the risk of personal danger (Gregor 1998).

Thus, Geralt's decision-making reflects an adherence to moral duty rather than outcome-based reasoning. While killing the Striga might seem like a utilitarian solution to protect the kingdom from harm, Geralt chooses the more ethically demanding path. This is in line with the view of Kant that moral actions should be performed for duty and principle, not for convenience or consequence (Sullivan 1994).

In the 2007 video game, *The Witcher*, the player, encounters a similar dilemma involving Princess Adda's transformation into a Striga. The choice to either lift the curse or kill the creature is presented again, but this time it is the player who must decide the outcome. The game offers two key choices: Attempt to break the curse and save Adda, similar to Geralt's decision in *The Last Wish* (CD Projekt Red 2007) or kill the Striga to eliminate the immediate threat she poses to the people. (CD Projekt Red 2007).

The decision in the game is left entirely in the player's hands, adding a layer of moral complexity through player agency. The player must weigh the risk of attempting to break the curse (which may result in failure and death) against the certainty of eliminating the threat through violence. The moral choice is no longer just a part of Geralt's internal struggle, but a responsibility placed directly on the player.

In the game, the player is allowed to make a Kantian ethical decision—can they universalize the maxim of killing Adda, an innocent cursed girl, to protect the kingdom? Or will they uphold the principle that every life has intrinsic worth and attempt to save her?

If the player chooses to lift the curse, they align with Kantian deontology. This choice reflects the belief that Adda is an innocent victim who must be treated as an end in herself, deserving of dignity and moral consideration. The player, like Geralt in the novel, acts out of duty to preserve life and break the curse. This decision embodies Kant's moral law: it is not permissible to kill an innocent person just because it might prevent further harm. If the player chooses to kill the Striga, the decision reflects a more outcome-oriented approach, potentially violating the Kantian imperative. The Killing of Adda would appear to be the choice best for ensuring safety in the kingdom, but this will reduce Adda to just a means to an end, the end being the protection of others. This according to Kant would be morally wrong since it

considers life as inherently valuable in this case, Adda. The video game provides more agency where the novel cannot; it is left to the player to act or not act based on his or her ethical framework. The effects of the player's choice rock the entire game world, and the decisions become more personal. This emphasis on moral agency highlights the contrast between the fixed narrative of Sapkowski's novel, where Geralt's Kantian decision is predetermined, and the flexible narrative of the video game, where the player's moral reasoning determines the outcome.

In the novel, Geralt's choice is guided by the strictest adherence to Kantian ethics. The author-controlled narrative portrays Geralt as a character who values his moral duty over personal gain or convenience. His decision to save Adda is grounded on the idea of treating others as ends in themselves of Kant. Sapkowski has made sure that his writings portray Geralt as a protector of the innocent even though the innocent have turned into danger. In the game, however, the moral dilemma is shifted to the player. While the player may make the same Kantian choice to save Adda, he is also able to go beyond that choice and introduce a more pragmatic, consequentialist approach. The player's agency in the game allows further discussion of ethical frameworks because his decision may not necessarily be guided by the idea of Kantian duty but is based on the outcome or personal preference. This flexibility creates more significant ethical consequences in the game world, as the player's choices directly affect the fates of characters and the larger narrative. Ultimately, the fixed ethical structure of the novel contrasts with the more dynamic, interactive moral landscape of the video game, showcasing how player agency can introduce complexity and ambiguity to Kantian decision-making.

The Renfri Dilemma:

In the book "The Last Wish," Geralt gets himself into a situation: Renfri, a bandit leader seeking revenge against a mage, Stregobor who thinks that Renfri is cursed and has to be eliminated. In her words, Renfri is fighting for justice with violent retribution for the way Stregobor left her to die after a series of experiments. Conversely, Stregobor is adamant that Renfri is irremediable and needs to be killed to stop her from doing the same evil in the future. Renfri, on the other hand, decides to give Geralt the option of killing Stregobor, or else she will unleash her wrath on Blaviken's people. Despite his reluctance to interfere, Geralt realizes that Renfri intends to massacre innocents to achieve her revenge. Geralt eventually decides to stop her and kills Renfri and her gang in self-defense, knowing that it's the only way to prevent the bloodshed of innocent townsfolk (Sapkowski 1993).

In Kantian ethics, Geralt's choice appears as a choice to hold fast to some universal moral law: the protection of innocent life. Geralt does not kill Renfri out of personal gain or because he believes she is inherently evil. Instead, he acts out of duty to prevent harm to the townspeople, treating their safety as an end in itself. Kant's categorical imperative would ask whether Geralt could universalize the principle of killing one person to prevent harm to others. In this case, Geralt is driven by the duty to protect others from violence, which aligns with Kant's deontological framework. The author-controlled narrative, under Sapkowski's hand, reinforces Geralt's commitment to a code of ethics rooted in protecting the innocent, even when the consequences are tragic. Geralt tries to avoid taking sides, but when pushed to make a decision, his choice is to minimize harm, driven by a moral duty to uphold justice and prevent greater evil (Sullivan 1994).

In *The Witcher 3*, the player, controlling Geralt, is faced with several dilemmas that echo the same moral conflict as the one with Renfri. For instance, when Geralt encounters various morally ambiguous characters—bandits, rogue sorcerers, or oppressed nonhumans—the player must choose whether to kill or spare them (CD Projekt Red 2015). In some quests, players can negotiate peace between warring factions or take a hard-line approach by eliminating threats to avoid future conflict. These moral choices in the game are left to the player's interpretation. For example, sparing the bandit leader might lead to peace but could also result in future harm. Alternatively, killing the bandit could prevent potential violence but may not align with Kantian ideals if the person can be redeemed. Introducing player agency in the video game allows for a broader interpretation of Kantian ethics. Unlike the novel, where Geralt's actions are controlled by the author and rooted in duty, the player's decisions can either follow the deontological path or diverge into more pragmatic, outcome-driven choices. If the player, acting as Geralt, chooses to spare an enemy who can be redeemed, this reflects Kantian duty and the categorical imperative. However, suppose the player opts to kill for

practical reasons, such as to prevent future violence. In that case, the decision can shift toward a consequentialist framework, where the outcomes matter more than the principles. This divergence from strict deontology highlights the tension between ethical duty and player freedom. It shows that while the game offers Kantian choices, it also allows for moral flexibility that the novel does not.

The novel's narrative keeps Geralt bound to a Kantian ethical framework where his decisions reflect a strong sense of duty and the protection of innocents. However, in the game, the player's moral reasoning may shift between deontological and consequentialist ethics. This introduces a level of moral ambiguity and responsibility that is absent in the novel, emphasizing the greater ethical consequences created by player agency in the video game.

The Dilemma of Neutrality:

The dilemma of neutrality arises in both *The Witcher* novels and games regarding Geralt's choice to interfere or remain neutral in political conflicts which is a decision that tests Kant's duty-based morality and his categorical imperative in nuanced ways. This dilemma is illustrated in Sapkowski's *Baptism of Fire* and mirrored in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, where Geralt faces a choice to intervene in political matters, such as wars between kingdoms and the Nilfgaardian Empire, or to avoid entanglement altogether.

In the novel, *The Witcher Baptism of Fire*, Geralt initially resists involving himself in the broader political conflicts around him. Despite his neutrality as a Witcher, he finds himself drawn into the ongoing war due to his sense of duty to protect his adoptive daughter, Ciri. This situation reveals Geralt's internal conflict between remaining neutral—as his Witcher code traditionally dictates—and acting out of moral duty to those he cares about (Sapkowski). From a Kantian perspective, Geralt's choice to intervene reflects the categorical imperative to act in ways that protect, and respect others as ends in themselves. His actions underscore Kant's principle of moral duty, as he chooses to protect Ciri and her autonomy despite the personal and political risk it entails.

In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, players, as Geralt, face similar decisions with wide-reaching consequences in the Nilfgaardian war. The player can support one side, remain neutral, or make decisions that impact factions within the war, each affecting relationships, alliances, and the game's ending (CD Projekt Red). By giving players this agency, the game brings Kant's concept of universal moral laws to the forefront, encouraging players to ask if their choices could be consistently willed as a universal maxim. Geralt's (and the player's) choice of action thus reflects the importance of Kantian duty, particularly the notion that one's moral obligations to protect others, like Ciri, may outweigh personal or societal rules of neutrality.

Both *Baptism of Fire* and *The Witcher 3* illustrate the complex nature of Geralt's moral responsibilities when navigating political landscapes. In the novels, Sapkowski uses Geralt's reluctant involvement in the war to emphasize the clash between his duty to individuals he cares for and his professional neutrality. In contrast, the video game grants this ethical agency to the player, allowing them to directly face the repercussions of involvement or neutrality, adding layers of ethical complexity. This shift highlights the significance of the categorical imperative in Kantian ethics, as players are encouraged to think through whether their decisions in a politically fraught world are universally justifiable. By exploring this dilemma, both the novels and game series underscore the complexity of applying universal moral principles to real-world scenarios. Through the player's ability to interact with these choices, the video game format transforms Sapkowski's narrative-driven ethics into an interactive Kantian test of duty and moral law.

Conclusion:

This article has sought to explore how the moral decisions made by Geralt of Rivia whether controlled by the author in Andrzej Sapkowski's novels or by the player in *The Witcher* video game series align with Kantian ethics, particularly with the principles of duty, universal moral laws, and the categorical imperative. Through a comparative analysis of

pivotal moments from both narrative mediums namely the Novels and Video games, the research highlights how the author-controlled narrative of the novels reflects a strict adherence to Kantian deontology, whereas the player-controlled narrative in the video games introduces more fluidity, giving players moral agency that can lead to either Kantian or non-Kantian outcomes. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the growing field of video game studies and ethics, where the interplay between narrative control, player agency, and philosophical principles is increasingly relevant. Video games, as an interactive medium, offer a unique platform for ethical engagement that static media like literature cannot. By transferring the weight of moral decisions to the player, games like *The Witcher* push individuals to confront ethical dilemmas firsthand, potentially altering their understanding of moral responsibility. Moreover, this research underscores the broader relevance of philosophical frameworks like Kantian deontology in analyzing modern storytelling mediums. As video games start evolving into complex narrative forms, they present new opportunities to study how ethics are represented, enacted, and internalized by players. By examining these shifts through the lens of a time-honored ethical theory, this research opens the door to further interdisciplinary exploration between philosophy, literature, and interactive media. In a world where moral ambiguity is increasingly part of both real and virtual experiences, this study emphasizes the importance of analyzing how different narrative forms influence our ethical perspectives. The comparison between Sapkowski's literary work and the video game adaptation not only highlights the richness of storytelling across mediums but also invites a deeper reflection on the ethical consequences of player agency in shaping virtual worlds. Ultimately, this research contributes to our understanding of how we make moral choices, both in fiction and in the interactive landscapes of modern gaming.

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