The Witcher world map. People need maps of imaginary places.

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Abstract:

A regular map represents what is already there; a fictional map is often primary – to create the map means to create the world of the map (Ekman, 2013). The maps from fictional literature-based worlds have been a long-standing subject of research (Sharp, 1904; Post, 1979). Among many types of fictional maps, the worlds described in literature consist of a major theme (Engberg-Pedersen, 2017). The literary cartography is continuously challenging the problem of adequately mapping a world that has been imagined and, often only partially, described (Piatti and Hurni, 2013). Creating a map requires a thorough understanding of the imaginary space and extensive knowledge of the fictional world which does not necessarily go along with cartographic skills. This results in the amateur fictional cartography and a vast majority of cartographically unprofessional source materials about the location of objects existing in books and/or movies (Richterich, 2013).

The aim of this project was to create and describe a method of designing a map of the Witcher world, created by Andrzej Sapkowski and described in six fantasy novels and 15 short stories. The main motivation was a lack of a detailed map of the Northern Kingdoms, corresponding not only to the Witcher book series but also to new sources such as TV series, films, games, and comic books. The major goal was to refer to reliable sources of information such as official or fan-generated descriptions and materials. Certain objects and names have been artificially added for credibility and cartographic accuracy. The editorial guidelines of the Polish overview maps, which can be found in educational atlases, were used for visualisation. The premise of the project was to juxtapose an imaginary, fantasy world with a contemporary, official editorial form.

The methodology can be divided into three stages. At first, the reliable sources and descriptions were collected from online fan and art communities sites, such as Facebook fanpages and DeviantArt. Lists of towns and sites, diagrams, maps and graphics depicting the Witcher world have been collected from a fan-made encyclopaedia Witcher Wiki which is a community site that aims to create the best resource for Witcher books by Andrzej Sapkowski (www.witcher.fandom.com). Their credibility was measured by direct comparison to the information from the books but additionally series, films and games. If a layout of objects was repeated in the different sources, it was considered more plausible. The quality of the source graphics was not considered, because the main focus was on data reliability. Stage two involved extracting data about topography, coastline, hydrography, settlement pattern and borders. The objects that were presented in the reliable sources (hereafter referred to as the primary objects and toponyms) were selected and included on the map. Topography and hydrography were completed using real landscapes as inspiration. The settlement network has been completed to maintain a population density and make the terrain situation of the Witcher world plausible. This was guided by the nature of the countries described in the book, which specified the terrain and the population levels. The addition of new towns was guided by a need to fill gaps on the map, not out of a desire to add our own creations. Supplementary toponyms were added for the newly invented topographical objects, e.g. rivers, mountain ranges, islands, and settlements. The wording of the supplementary names was adapted to the character of the nearest primary toponyms.
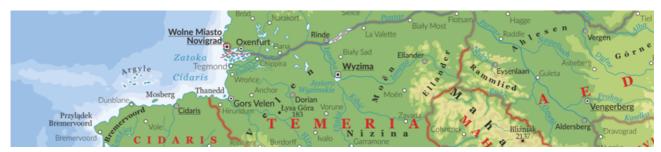
Figure 1. A section of the designed map of the Northern Kingdoms – general map, by Marcin Wereszczyński

The result of the work are three maps of the Witcher world, entitled 'the Northern Kingdoms - general map'. Two were designed in a contemporary editorial form. The first one contains only the primary settlements and the geographical names. The second one includes also supplementary settlements and toponyms, thereby, making it look more plausible. The third map is supplemented with the objects, but its graphic form has been stylised on the Polish maps of the mid-20th century. The aim of this treatment was visualising the age of a map and fitting it into the fantasy world, which it depicts, without losing the data presented on it. The inhabitants of this world call this depicted area the Northern Kingdoms, so possibly they would have named such map similarly. The resulting map was positively perceived by fans based on numerous comments and opinions posted on the internet, but also aroused a lot of interest among people previously uninterested in The Witcher, including the mass media. It became a starting point for a discussion on the geography of the Witcher world. Witcher enthusiasts submitted comments and suggestions for changes, referring to the sources. Taking them into account, the map has been and continues to be edited and improved. Some other creators are currently developing new thematic maps based on this map of the Northern Kingdoms. The use of the editorial guidelines significantly diverging in style from the medieval world of The Witcher aroused controversy, but at the same time was appreciated as making it easier to perceive and imagine it as the real world. Based on the map designed in the project, a stylised version of the map was hand-drawn with ink by the artist known as Impractical Cartographer.

We conclude that the mapping of non-existent worlds is important for the users because it facilitates understanding and imagining of a given space. This opens a discussion of differences in perception and imagination. Moreover, it allows us to follow the fictional characters and to locate the events from the books, series and games. One can argue that a graphic form that differs from the depicted world surprises the users and hinders their understanding. To solve this issue, a map presenting the same data in a stylised medieval manner was created. The popularity and great interest in the developed Witcher world map testify the usefulness of mapping fantasy worlds.