The Witcher: Blood Origin isn’t witcher-y enough to stand out

There’s one very important thing missing from *The Witcher: Blood Origin*: Geralt of Rivia. Of course, it makes sense that the iconic character isn’t in the new four-episode prequel series, given that it takes place more than 1,000 years before he was born, at a time when witchers (and the monsters they love to hunt) don’t even exist. But that doesn’t make his absence felt any less. Because without the lovably gruff Geralt, or at least an equivalent character to keep the story grounded, there isn’t all that much to differentiate *The Witcher* from all of the other epic fantasy series out there, of which there is no shortage this year in particular. *Blood Origin* does explain some pivotal moments in the franchise’s history, outlining the key moments that shaped the Continent, as it’s known. The problem is that it’s just not that much fun to watch.

The show takes place 1,200 years before the events of the original *Witcher* series, at a time when elves are the dominant force in the world. They don’t have much competition. While dwarves share the land, neither humans nor monsters do, and so elves — who are scarce in Geralt’s time — are spread across multiple kingdoms and clans, each with their own customs and beliefs and many of whom war amongst each other. That is until a few ambitious elves set a plan in place to unite everyone (by force) under a supreme leader. This sets off a chain reaction that leads to all kinds of pivotal events in *Witcher* lore, including the creation of the monster hunters and an event called the “conjunction of the spheres,” in which the worlds of elves, humans, and monsters are forced together, creating the Continent as we know it.

The story is told primarily through a loose group of adventurers who, for various individual reasons, band together to kill the leader of this new oppressive force for elf-kind. The first two episodes are a bit like the sequence in a role-playing game where you choose your party members. There's Eile (Sophia Brown), a warrior-turned-bard trying to atone for her violent past; Fjall (Laurence O'Fuarain), a disgraced royal guard now living in exile; Scian (Michelle Yeoh), an elven swordmaster and the last of her clan; Meldof (Francesca Mills) a dwarf with a big hammer and a quest for revenge; a mysterious warrior named Brother Death (Huw Novelli); and the mages Syndril (Zach Wyatt) and Zacare (Lizzie Annis).



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It's an interesting group – at least, I *think* they're

interesting, but *Blood Origin* never really gave me enough time to get to know them. With such a big cast, a short four-episode-long run time feels far too little. And that’s not even counting the characters outside of the adventuring party who help shape the story, like the powerful druid Balor (Lenny Henry, who *also* appears in *Rings of Power*, as if these shows didn’t blend together enough as is), an elusive elf storyteller played by Minnie Driver, and other guest appearances.





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A few still manage to stand out. It’s hard not to be drawn to a legendary swordmaster played by Yeoh, and Mills is hilarious as a heartbroken warrior with a delightfully foul mouth. But the rest often muddle together. Making matters worse, there’s a whole lot of politicking going on here — something that’s usually background fodder for the series — that obscures the more human (or, rather, elven) drama. The result is a show that feels more like a history lesson than an entertaining miniseries. It’s cool to learn these historical details about where witchers and monsters came from, but I could also get that from a wiki entry. Somehow the show even makes the now-requisite bath scene dull.

There is no shortage of fantasy shows about politics and prophecies and world-changing events. Those are a key part of *The Witcher*, naturally, but what helps give the series its own distinct voice is the witchers themselves, who keep the focus on the ground level. At its best, *The Witcher* is like a supernatural detective series, with Geralt and his ilk traveling from town to town, solving regular peoples’ problems by slaying beasts. The kings and queens and spheres aren’t their most pressing concerns when a basilisk is running loose in the garden.

It’s not impossible to make an interesting *Witcher* story without Geralt; we’ve already seen it happen with *Nightmare of the Wolf*. But that animated prequel was still centered primarily on witchers and had a character in Vesemir who had much of the same appeal as Geralt. *Blood Origin*, on the other hand, feels too far removed from the stuff that actually makes the franchise interesting and too crowded for any one character to carry it.

Franchise is the key word here. Given the strong start *The Witcher* had, Netflix seems determined to turn it into a sprawling franchise, so there will likely be more prequels and sequels on the way. Hell, they already have a replacement lined up for when Henry Cavill leaves in season 4. But *Blood Origin* shows the dangers of that approach: the further away you get from the source, the easier it is to lose what makes it special.

The Witcher: Blood Origin *starts streaming on Netflix on December 25th.*

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