

World and Place – Map and Territory

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Computer games often operate with the term »world«. Some games, from Super Mario World (Nintendo 1990) to World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), use the term »world« in their title, others like The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion (Bethesda Softworks 2006) include at least a world-map. As Aarseth (2008) has shown, these worlds are not comparable in size or content to our »real« world but to theme parks. For reasons of playability they offer a compression of space and experiences. While films and novels compress time by omitting unimportant or boring events, games compress the space. »World« only seems to be the term to connote wholeness. Other games, for example the GTA-series, do not use the term »world« in their title but consider certain cities like Vice City, San Andreas or Liberty City, as the whole gameworld, for which they deliver city maps. The maps represent the whole (game)world.

In my paper I will explore how these world- or city maps relate to the places and territories in which the avatar moves. The aim is to describe the interaction between the maps and their territory and the world and the places in this world, respectively. Computer games as well as other digital media combine both manifestations of space. They constantly mediate between world and place. While the avatar moves and acts in the places, the player gains an overview over the world on the map.

As a basic difference I will draw upon the distinction between the »lived space« and the rational space of the map that Ryan (2001) proposes. According to Ryan the lived space in fiction (including computer games) is marked by a thick description and the impression that this space is habitable by a body located in that space. The space of the map on the contrary, is placeless and marked by relational descriptions (Ryan 2001, 121-130). Her description of the lived space resembles Relph's (1976) phenomenological approach to places as sites that are established by (social) (inter)actions and can be differentiated by the potential they offer for (social) (inter)actions. Both approaches will be used as theoretical background to describe the establishment of places in computer games.

Since the use of maps and territory varies in different genres, I will conduct a close reading of The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion combined with a short prospect on strategy games (example: Civilization IV). In strategy games the player can use the world as a map that has to be manipulated. Thus, lived space or places – if they exist at all in the game – have to be established differently.

The analysis will also include the questions, if the spatial organisation of games can be related to the distance a player has to the game, if maps in computer games can be considered as the record of the avatars movements (see de Certeau 1988) and if the territory in which the avatar moves is not only a simple territory but also a symbolic representation of fictive landscape (thus: fictional) which in itself is a map.

References

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