The City in Singleplayer Fantasy Role Playing Games

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ABSTRACT
This paper considers cities in single-player fantasy role-playing games, identifying recurring tropes in terms of the spatial functions by which they shape the player's lived experience of the gameworld. The functions of centring, demarcation of inside and outside, movement and encounter will be considered, both in terms of the spatial organizations determining them, and in terms of the spatial practices they give rise to. The analysis shall be anchored in a close engagement with a number of representative titles, including *Baldur's Gate, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Dragon Age: Origins, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *The Witcher III: The Wild Hunt.*

Keywords
Cities, phenomenology, space, architecture, RPGs, urban space

INTRODUCTION
In this paper, we shall consider the city in single-player fantasy role-playing games (RPGs), attempting to identify the recurring spatial organizations that define the genre's representations of urban spaces in relation to the surrounding world, and, inseparably, the spatial practices these organizations shape for the player's embodied existence in the gameworld in the form of the avatar (Klevjer 2006; 2012).

Existing theorizations of game space (Nitsche 2008; Calleja 2011, 73-92), as well as, more specifically, work on in-game cities in genres like the massively multiplayer online RPG (Oliver 2002; Huber 2005; Hayot and Wesp 2009) and the open-world action-adventure game (Schweizer 2013), will be drawn into conversation with theories of urban space and architecture (Lynch 1960; Alexander et al 1977; Soja 1989; Lefebvre 2004), and, in particular, with Christian Norberg-Schulz's phenomenological approach to the built environment (1985).

In order to establish the foundations for our approach to the RPG city space, we shall begin by laying out our assumptions about the legibility of city spaces, outlining the specificity of genre representations of imagined pseudo-'historical' cities, outlining a perspective according to which a city is comprehensible in terms of the functions it affords the city dweller, and highlighting the player's embodiment in the form of the avatar as the means by which the player is allowed to experience these functions in the game city as a lived space. These will furnish the framework for a discussion of

the central spatial tropes we identify here as structuring the player's experience of the RPG city space: *centring, inside/outside boundaries, movement,* and *encounter*. These observations lead us to conclude that these recurrent tropes shape the player's spatial and phenomenological positioning in the city, and reflect a particular cultural understanding of the lived city space – one that exhibits a nostalgia for an imagined pre-industrial organisation of human dwelling at the same time as it engages with the way we live in the contemporary city.

The games that will furnish our key reference points are *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare 1998)*, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios 2006), *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), and *The Witcher III: The Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red 2015), with other games occasionally featuring to further illustrate certain points and as demonstrating their tendency to recur. These games are selected as being in some sense 'representative' of their kind, exemplifying the genre's dominant traits, and a certain consistency in recurrent tropes, across a historical spread covering the genre's development over the past two decades.

THE MEANING OF THE FANTASY RPG CITY

In this section, we will outline a set of assumptions that underlie our approach to understanding the fantasy RPG city space. These build upon the relationship between the 'real' and 'imagined' city, and the legibility of the city space as a carrier of social, economic and political significance. From this, we move to consider the possible specificity of genre, and how a fantasy RPG city may be read along these lines. The section concludes with a view of the functions of the city, and how meaning emerges in the lived embodied experience of the city space.

The legibility of the city

A semiotic approach to architecture, in which the built environment is read as a text onto which cultural, social, historical and ideological codes are inscribed, is well-established. Charles Jencks, for example, articulates a theory of architecture as a semiotic practice, in which "formal signifiers" such as "forms, spaces, surfaces, volumes" come to stand for signifieds as diverse as "space concepts and ideologies" and "social customs and anthropological data" (1980, 72-74). Moreover, as urban geographer Edward Soja notes, "relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, [and] human geographies become filled with politics and ideology" (Soja 1989, 6). This suggests a certain readability, which is arguably just as much the case in fictional cities, which, to some extent, reflect an inevitably ideologically-tinged understanding of their actual counterparts. As Bobby Schweizer (2013) points out, in a reading of the urban space of *Saints Row: The Third* (Volition 2013), the imagined city and the real city share certain structural similarities which enable comparison.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, existing work on fantasy cities in digital games has tended to operate upon such an assumption. William Huber notes that the fantasy MMORPG genre can be perceived "as one by which questions of race, nation and ethnos are worked out in fictional geographies" - nowhere more so than in the cities that populate their imagined landscapes, standing as manifestations of diverse socio-cultural organizations (2005, 2). Huber uses the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XI* (Square 2002) as an example, analysing each of the game's three main cities as bearing the representational traces of real-world cultures. For instance, the human city of Bastok features elements of architecture that "suggests Chicago in its early years," and exhibits a relation between the dominant Humes and the enslaved Galka, who are used for physical labour, that "strongly suggests the American experience of race,

particularly in the era of industrial growth in the early 20th century" (ibid., 3). It stands in a relation of open hostility to the Quadav Beastmen, who are native to the surrounding landscape. As such, it is easy to conclude that Bastok functions as an analogue to the American West at the turn of the twentieth century - at least as this historio-geographic milieu has been constructed in popular culture to represent the dawn of the era of Western civilization's domination of the American landscape and its indigenous populations, at the end of the process of subjugation that marked the era of the 'Wild' West.

Fantasy, neomedievalism and the city

The specificity of fantasy RPG cities can perhaps best be made apparent through a contrast with what is arguably the other dominant genre of digital game cities – namely, the contemporary metropolises of such crime-themed open-world action-adventure games as the *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar North 1997-2013)*, Saints Row* (Volition 2006-2013)*, Crackdown* (Realtime Worlds 2007; Ruffian Games 2010)*, Yakuza* (Sega 2005-2017) and *Mafia* (2K Czech/Hangar 13 1998-2016) series, *The Getaway* (Team Soho 2002) and *Sleeping Dogs* (United Front Games 2012). Whether they represent actual cities, such as the Hong Kong of *Sleeping Dogs* or the Shinjuku of *Yakuza,* or entirely fictional ones, such as the Liberty City of *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001)*,* and whether they strive for realism or satire, we intuitively recognize and read the city spaces in these games – in their architectural styles, their spatial topologies, and the spatial practices they afford – as representations of the contemporary, often post-industrial, urbanized world of late capitalism. Conversely, the RPGs we consider here are situated within the fantasy genre, presenting "neocosmic" domains (Nash 1987, 55-77) that are intrinsically coded as being 'other' to the world we recognize as ours.

Yet this 'otherness,' as Huber's analysis of the city of Bastok shows, is not absolute separability. While 'fantasy' suggests "the impulse to depart from consensus reality" (Hume 1984, 30), and is most consistently contrasted with realism, the deeper relation between mimesis and fantasy, as Hume also suggests (ibid., 20), is more complex than one of simple contrast. Fantasy often adopts, reworks and recontextualizes recognizable representations of real-world elements. These include similarities on a structural level - indeed, Ekman and Taylor (2016, 12) suggest that an imaginary world shares certain "structural, functional, and aesthetic" features with a building, as implied in the term 'world-building.' On this basis, they propose that the critic approaching imaginary worlds is engaged in analysing what they term 'world-architecture'.

What recognizable elements, then, do we encounter in the RPG city? In very broad terms, most – with some notable exceptions – invoke Europe in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern era. The places most frequently encountered in the RPG city include a marketplace, a tavern/inn, a town hall (or other location of authority), shops, and houses, perhaps a prison or temple. There is a certain typicality to this, proceeding from the genericity of fantasy, as well as – inflected through fantasy, and re-structured in accordance with the neocosmic logic of a fictional world – from assumptions about our own historical, pre-industrial past. As Eddo Stern points out (2002), the milieux of many fantasy games fall firmly under the umbrella of what Umberto Eco termed "fantastic neomedievalism" (1986, 63), referring to pop-cultural imaginative revisitations of ideas, tropes and elements associated with the Middle Ages.

Not explicitly matching any actual, specific historical referent, medieval or otherwise, neomedievalism yet invokes "the past as imagined, as idealised through memory and

desire," and thus, arguably, presents a nostalgic situation in which "the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past" (Hutcheon 2000, 195). At the same time, Eco argues, the neomedievalist impulse also represents a way of engaging with themes and ideas that remain current. If it is even partially true that "all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages" – since it is in this historical period that we find the roots of "modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy" and also "the rise of modern armies" and "the modern concept of the national state" (1986, 64) – then this complex period of transition offers a promise of apparently near-limitless potentiality for imaginative reworking, in its emergent and burgeoning development(s): a source of conflicting, interrelating elements.

The functions of the city

So far, we have considered the city as a legible 'text,' inscribed with meaning that can be interpreted independently of the lived experience of its spaces. However, any 'reading' of the city cannot ignore the crucial 'representational' dimension of 'lived' space, to borrow Henri Lefebvre's (1991) terms. In fact, Eco writes that the architectural work is first and foremost "a *possibility of function*" (1980, 12), setting in stone a certain set of affordances and facilitating certain practices. It is the functions of an architectural work – the practices it affords - not simply its formal qualities, that carry denotative and connotative meaning (ibid., 25).

To say what a city *means,* then, it is to its functions – the practices and ways of life it shapes and is shaped by – that one must look. The same is true of cities in gameworlds – Michael Nitsche, accordingly, argues that, since "architectural space comes to life through the way it is used," it is in terms of their "functionality" that we should make sense of "architectural game spaces" (2008, 160). Huber is aware of this: his analysis of the city of Bastok, for example, does not stop at considering its recognizable visual references. The city's ideology, and the way of life it sets in stone, is conveyed through intrinsically ludic modes of expression, involving the player's playing of the game in the generation of meaning: "the relationship between the player, the terrain, and the fiction of the nation becomes playable as procedure" (2005, 2). Through "mechanisms of complicity" (ibid., 5) – such as the Conquest mechanic by which a city's race gains control of a given territory and its natural resources – the player is made to participate in the imperialist practices that define the city's ideology.

In fact, if a city in a gameworld does not establish the conditions for such practices, it will not be experienced *as* a city. Speaking of the MMO *Everquest* (989 Studios, 1999), Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp argue that "each city reflects an attempt to illustrate a cultural backstory for each of the races" (2013). At the same time, Hayot and Wesp noted a lack of fit between the game's representation, in its virtual world architecture, of functioning cities, and players' lived experience of these cities as game spaces:

> ... for all their success in evoking the representational *look* of a living city, the cities in *EverQuest* have been desolate places, by and large. Real-world sites of public activity such as schools and venues for entertainment were represented in the gameworld's initial design, but they were never used. [...] these gaps between representation and use prevented the cities from evoking the experiences players could recognize as living in a city.

It is the experienced functionality of the in-game city space, then, that carries semiotic significance - and, as such, a 'reading' of these spaces acquires a phenomenological dimension.

Embodiment and the city

In order for a city in a gameworld to be experienced as a city, then, it must afford the spatial practices we understand as pertaining to a city. These practices are inherently embodied ones: phenomenologists of space emphasize the fact that the process of place-making depends on the encounter between the landscape and the body (Casey 1993, 30). Accordingly, Juhani Pallasmaa writes, "'I confront the city with my body" (2005, 40). On this basis, Norberg-Schulz (1985) - drawing on Martin Heidegger's phenomenology of building and dwelling (2004[1951]) - develops a phenomenological approach to the embodied experience of the built environment, which he understands as enshrining the fundamental structures of experience that shape our being-in-the-world as embodied beings.

The player, then, can only participate in these practices – and thus experience the functions of the city as structuring possibilities of being – if s/he is granted an "embodied ludic subject-position" (Vella 2016, 3), that is, a subjective existence in the gameworld founded upon an embodiment in the figure of the avatar (cf. Taylor 2002; Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2006; 2012; Bayliss 2007; Gregersen and Grodal 2009; Gee 2008). Gordon Calleja's notion of incorporation formalizes this relation between the player's embodiment in the form of the avatar and the experience of the digital environment as a lived space, being defined as "*the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar*" (2011, 169). Of course, the player's "sense of habitation" is complicated by an unavoidable ontological separation from the gameworld – s/he is always a visitor in a world s/he is foreign to (Murray 1997, 106-112). As such, at the same time as the player participates in the practices of the in-game city, s/he stands at a remove from them. It is hardly surprising, then, that the player is often cast in the role of the stranger or outsider, in relation to the city as the zone of habitation *par excellence*.

THE SPATIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE RPG CITY

If the city is meaningful in terms of the possibilities of function it establishes, and, hence, the embodied spatial practices it allows, then, in order to understand the RPG city, we should take a closer look at the specific elements and tropes that most strongly determine the player's experience within it.

In order to specify the most relevant structures of experience, we will draw in particular on Norberg-Schulz's phenomenology of the built space. On that basis, we shall identify the following structures as being crucial in the shaping of the player's experience: *centring, the demarcation of inside and outside, movement* and *encounter.* These will be considered both as functions of the built environment in its relation to its environs, and of the player-avatar's engagement with the space.

In this section, we will identify and explore certain features which are both functions of the built environment in its relation to its environs, and of the avatar's engagement with the space. These dimensions are constitutive of the co-dependent relationship between the player's embodied being and the virtual city space.

Before doing so, an important caveat should be made. In positing these spatial functions as being characteristic of the player's experience of city space, we do not mean to suggest that these functions - and the experiences and ways of being in space they give rise to - are exclusively a feature of cities as one part of the larger worlds presented for the player to inhabit in these RPGs. In the games we are analyzing, it would certainly be possible to find examples of these spatial functions at work in other, non-city places in the gameworld. What we are proposing, however, is that

cities exhibit concentrations of these spatial functions within their respective gameworlds, revealing, on some level, a more sustained association between these spatial functions and the idea of the city - as such, they may also more clearly illustrate certain aspects of our practices of engagement with a gameworld.

Centring

Norberg-Schulz writes that "the settlement acts as a *center*" (1985, 31), gathering the surrounding landscape into an organization around itself. This appears to be true of many fantasy RPG worlds – even when a city is not as strikingly central to the topology of the world map as the Imperial City in *Oblivion,* most of the RPG worlds surveyed feature one 'main' city that constitutes the implicit 'centre' of the represented domain. Novigrad in *The Witcher III,* Denerim in *Dragon Age: Origins* and the titular city in *Baldur's Gate* all serve as examples of this.

In order for a city to serve this centralising function in relation to the landscape, Norberg-Schulz argues, it "has to possess *figural* quality in relation to the surrounding landscape" (ibid.) – that is, it has to form a clearly delimited, visible form that serves to visually gather its environs around it.

It is striking the extent to which this is the case in RPGs with an open-world game space topology, which thereby situates the city as an element within the landscape rather than as a discrete space. A city such as Solitude in *Skyrim,* perched upon a monumental stone arch, is a striking visual figure first and a functionally thought-through city second. In the same game, the city of Whiterun, dominated by Dragonsreach hall standing on a rocky crag that rises above the surrounding plain, seems primarily intended to figurally recall the city of Edoras as visualized in Peter Jackson's filmic adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002).

Such a figural quality depends upon a clear boundedness to the settlement – the sprawl of the contemporary metropolitan area robs the city of its definite shape and, hence, of its figural quality, making it unclear where the city begins and ends. A telling comparison could here be drawn between the contemporary milieux of the open-world action-adventure games listed above – where the urban sprawl is practically coterminous with the playable space, and, to all intents and purposes, the city is the world – and the situatedness of RPG cities as bounded elements within a wider landscape. In fact, fantasy tends to extend its world beyond the city (more than implicitly) - looking at maps in fantasy novels, Ekman (2013, 24) observes that only "2 to 12 per cent" of fantasy maps are city maps (rather than world or world-area maps). As such, an emphasis on the figural quality of the settlement implies a privileging of pre-industrial urban arrangements, and of the rigid distinction between the urban space and the (implicitly rural) surrounding landscape - a distinction that is increasingly eroded in an urbanised-industrialised world (Lefebvre 2003, 11). It is telling that the examples Norberg-Schulz himself uses to illustrate this point are the medieval hill-towns of central Italy (1985, 31). In this regard, RPGs' figural representations of their cities as defined forms can be read as a key element of their nostalgic presentation of pre-industrial (or industrialising) worlds and spatial arrangements.

For Norberg-Schulz, the primary architectural form of this centralising, figural function of the settlement is the tower. Seen from afar, the tower "gathers the surroundings" by "defining a man-made center," defining the city itself as a centre within the landscape. The high places of a settlement, its vertically prominent landmarks, "give people a place which they can see from far away and orient

themselves toward" (Alexander et al 1977, 316) – it "forms a focus to the built habitat" (Norberg-Schulz 1985, 35).

Moreover, the tower stands "always *as something*" (ibid.) – as a symbol of political, religious or cultural authority, values or identity, defining the centrality of the settlement accordingly. Again, we can find no shortage of examples to illustrate this. The main cities in *Oblivion, The Witcher III* and its expansion *Blood and Wine* (CD Projekt Red 2016)*,* for example – respectively, the Imperial City, Novigrad and Beauclair – with all their differences, all feature vertically prominent central monuments that stand as testaments to religious or political power: the White-Gold Tower of the Imperial Palace, the Great Temple of the Eternal Fire, and the main tower of Beauclair Palace. Glimpsed from afar while on a quest to the outer reaches of the map, they serve to give the player a sense of her proximity to, or distance from, the centre, of how far s/he has come or how far s/he still has to go.

In all these ways, then, the city establishes an absolute centre in the gameworld that – contrary to the oft-emphasized 'here' of the player's in-game embodiment as the spatial centre of her experience (Leirfall 2013; Vella 2015, 267-268) – can leave the player feeling in a peripheral position.

The city's centrality shapes the spatial practices that pertain to it. Norberg-Schulz writes that this centrality makes the settlement "a point of *arrival*" (1985, 31): it is the goal towards which we orient our journey. It is hardly surprising, then, that in many RPGs, the player reaches the main city only towards the end of their quest, usually after having performed a set of tasks that are a prerequisite for being granted access to the city. In *Baldur's Gate, Dragon Age: Origins* and *The Witcher III,* for example, the city occupies a prominent position at the top of the map, with the player starting the game towards the bottom of the map and working out a meandering but gradually ascending path towards the city. This is particularly evident in *The Witcher III,* where Novigrad stands at the apex of the roughly triangular expanse of the land of Velen, at the confluence of the map's two main waterways and at the terminus of all its paths.

Once the player has arrived at the city, of course, its centralizing function does not disappear. Rather than the centre to be striven for, it is adopted as the centre of the player's world. Speaking of MMO worlds, Oliver (2002, 175) writes that the player's exploratory forays fan out from the city as a "starting-point," and, throughout the player's adventures, it serves as a "safety net," drawing the player back whenever she needs to recover health, stock up on necessary items, and so on. As a result, "the player always returns to the city" (ibid.).

Conversely, when the city does not establish itself as such a centre, it might fail as a city entirely. One of the chief failings Hayot and Wesp (2009) identified in *Everquest*'s cities, for example, was that they were located in "dead ends" with no "through traffic" and "only limited proximity to the rest of the world."

The centrality of the city can also be understood in less explicitly spatial terms – though even these dimensions of centrality serve to reinforce its centralizing spatial function. The city is also the centre in the sense of being 'the centre of things' - the seat of political power, law, and economic networks. Thus, economic and trade networks in *Baldur's Gate* lead back to the Merchants' League, and the devious Iron Throne, in the city of Baldur's Gate - which is also the religious centre of the world, with temples dedicated to different gods (where worship tended to be devoted to one particular deity in the smaller villages), and the central base of authority for the Flaming Fist, mercenary-law enforcers whose reach extends beyond the city.

Likewise, in *Oblivion,* the Imperial City is not only, as its name directly states, the seat of imperial power, but is also the location of the headquarters of a number of organizations: the imposing and impressive Arcane University, for example, houses the upper echelons of the Mages' Guild, while the Gray Fox, the leader of the Thieves' Guild, is also to be found in the city. Most skill-trainers in *Oblivion* and *Skyrim* are also to be found in cities and towns.

In addition, the city is often where merchants have the biggest reserves of cash to purchase the more expensive loot the player might wish to sell, where the best equipment is available for purchase, and where certain exclusive services are available - it is only at the bank in Novigrad, for example, that the player is able to exchange currencies in *The Witcher III*. All of this, of course, serves to bolster the draw of the city, the sense in which "the big city is a magnet" (Alexander et al 1977, 34) with an inexorable centrifugal pull.

The demarcation of inside and outside
For Gaston Bachelard, the division of space into 'inside' and 'outside' represents the basic architectural gesture, encapsulating the fundamental meaning of building (1994, 5). The same is true for Yi-Fu Tuan, who writes that "the sense of an 'inside' and an 'outside,' of intimacy and exposure" gets to the core of what built space means (1977, 107). The dialectic of inside and outside structures an entire sequence of highly loaded binary oppositions: safety and danger, 'here' and 'there,' us and them, the civilized and the 'savage,' and so on. Of course, the demarcation of the border between inside and outside – and, hence, the determination of these oppositions – represents a political exercise of power, and constitutes a mechanism of exclusion geared towards keeping certain people 'out'.

Many fantasy gameworlds rest upon this fundamental opposition. In terms of the topology of the gameworld as virtual space, this is already apparent in the fact that the main city in most of the RPGs in our analysis is modeled as a discrete virtual space, separate from the rest of the gameworld. In *Dragon Age: Origins,* where the game world is constituted of a rhizomatic arrangement of smaller, discrete spaces (Nitsche 2008, 177; Calleja 2011, 81-82) laid out upon a world map, the city of Denerim is presented as a separate map, distinct from the rest of the world. Even *Oblivion* and *Skyrim,* which model their domain as a single, continuous open world across which the player is free to wander, structure each city as a discrete map that is loaded when the player ventures through the city gate.

This already implies the sense of a separation, and, hence, a binary opposition, between the city and the external landscape - an observation which appears true of RPGs more generally. Speaking of MMO worlds, both Oliver (2002) and Huber (2005) identify a clear distinction between 'city' and 'wild' spaces, with the former representing safety and civilization, in the form of shops, inns and all the other services the player-character requires, and the latter containing all the threats needs to be dominated and resources that need to be conquered or gathered. Furthermore, the consignment of the city to a discrete virtual space separate from the overworld means that it is treated in much the same way as other interior spaces, of which the dungeon is the prime RPG example.

This separation between the city as inside and the surrounding world as 'outside' also finds architectural expression. Almost invariably, fantasy RPG cities - even in the case of *The Witcher III,* where the city is a connected part of the world in terms of its construction as a virtual space, and where its inhabitants spill outside the physical boundaries, in poverty-stricken and deprived suburbs - are walled cities, displaying

the most clear and foregrounded architectural structuration of the opposition of inside to outside.

Of course, the border is far from an impermeable one, and the player will often be able to move with some degree of freedom between the inside and the outside. Escort quests in *Gothic 3* (Piranha Bytes. 2006) and *Fable* (Lionhead, 2004) underline both the distinction between the cities and the dangerous world outside, and the player-character's particular freedom to traverse the boundary between the two.

Yet, this ease of access is not usually a given from the start. In many RPGs, the player is initially excluded from the city, and must earn the right of access: the operation of the inside/outside distinction as a mechanism of exclusion is very much present. Most often, this serves the evident function of structuring the player's geographic progression and tying it to the progress of the game's main storyline. However, these enforced exclusions also serve to locate the player within the system of power relations structured by the inside/outside distinction. In *Gothic 3*, for example, Ishtar, the largest and most important city in the area of Varant, is difficult to access – it can be accessed as a functional city (short of invading and 'liberating' the city) only at the very end of a trust-building apprenticeship (quests, reputation) with the Hashishim against the Nomads; one can complete the game without ever entering Ishtar.

The trope of having to 'earn' access to the city is a common one. If the player attempts to access the titular city in *Baldur's Gate* before the fifth of the game's seven chapters, s/he will get no further than Wyrm's Crossing, the only bridge that provides access into the city. Finding it raised, the player is informed by the guards that the city has isolated itself as a precautionary response to the disturbances further south along the Sword Coast – disturbances that, of course, the player-character is directly involved in. The player, in a sense, is associated with the threats to the city's order, part of the 'outside' that threatens the 'inside'.

Likewise, in *The Witcher III,* Novigrad is a closed city, locked down in response to the destabilisation caused by the Nilfgaardian Empire's military expansion into the Northern Realms. Lines of refugees wait at the gates, trying to obtain access to the city. As an outsider and a foreigner to the city, Geralt is also excluded – he must obtain official papers before the guards posted at the gates will allow him to enter the city. Once he obtains the papers and is able to enter and exit the city as he wishes, his newly-obtained privilege is remarked upon as such by the refugees who have still not been granted that right: the mechanism of exclusion remains in practice.

Even in cities that the player-character is able to access without impediment, certain limitations are often imposed upon her/him to mark her/his status as an outsider. In *Skyrim,* to give just one example, there is the option of purchasing a house in many of the major cities – only, however, once one has been acclimatised and accepted as a kind of citizen. In most cases, one earns the right to reside in a city only by first earning favour through the completion of a series of quests for the city, its citizens or its Jarl.

This is exceptional in terms of the player's engagement with the games more generally, where the world enables the player's action – here, the player-avatar is manifestly temporarily excluded from the presumed hub of action within the world.

Movement
Kevin Lynch identified *paths* as the "predominant city elements" in city dweller's cognitive maps of the city (1960, 49). Likewise, for Norberg-Schulz, one of the

primary spatial forms of the city is the *street* (1985, 55). The street is here understood as the manifestation, in the urban domain, of the *path* as one of the primordial spatial forms of human being-in-the world. It implied traversal and forward progress.

In the RPG city, streets generally constitute, in topological terms, an example of a multicursal maze structure (Nitsche 2008, 177; Calleja 2011, 80-81), giving the player multiple possibilities of traversal along more or less predetermined paths. The streets, therefore, are channels for movement.

Often, the player will be traversing the city space in pursuit of a given quest or task. Streets are thus seen as paths of traversal that need to be followed in order for the player to reach a particular destination: the house of a quest-giver NPC, a shop where they can sell unwanted treasure or purchase weapons unavailable anywhere else, and so on. In *The Witcher III,* for example, the minimap highlights the shortest route to the currently active quest location marker, superimposing a single unicursal path upon the multicursal complexity of the city space. For a player focused on achieving the quest, this represents an extreme example of Lynch's observations on the cognitive mapping of city space, by which the city dweller, "in the light of his own purposes," arrives at a particular environmental image that "limits and emphasizes what is seen," bringing a particular image to the foreground while relegating everything that is not relevant to the individual's purposes to the background (1960, 6). The individual thus invested in city space will see nothing but their goal, relegating all the irrelevant aspects and elements of the cityscape to the background.

Of course, the player's movement through the city space is not always so purposeful. In fact, the spatial organisation of the city itself tends to direct movement and the gaze, as the situationists suggest, with "the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not", having an effect "on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (Debord 1955). Wandering the streets of Novigrad in *The Witcher III,* Geralt will on occasion – even if the player is intent on following a particular quest – be diverted from his purpose by tantalizing suggestions. A barber's shop-sign might tempt the player to pause on her quest and venture in to try out a new look for Geralt, while the arched mouth of a shady alley or the steps leading up to another district might entice the player's non-purposive exploratory instinct.

This is very much in keeping with Norberg-Schulz's phenomenology of the street, which, he argues, is first and foremost "a manifestation of the process of discovery" (1985, 56), defined by a "horizontal rhythm which expresses the process of meeting and discovery" (ibid., 59) – a point we shall take up in the next section. Moreover, for the player-character in the games discussed here, every door is an invitation. The multicursality of the streetscape asserts itself here as a multiplicity of suggested possibilities.

Alternative routes may be provided which offer an evasion of these conventional navigational routes – such as the underground network in *Baldur's Gate*, useful when one needs to remain out of sight or evade encounters and interactions with NPCs. In effect, however, although the interactions with NPCs like guards are replaced with random and scripted encounters with mostly-hostile sewer dwellers, these networks connect with the city streets and form what is effectively an 'under-city'. Much the same function is performed by the sewers in Novigrad in *The Witcher III,* which function as illicit paths of traversal through the city when the city authorities need to be evaded - such as when Geralt helps the witch Triss Merigold lead the city's magic users out of the city's boundaries to escape the persecution of the Order of the

Flaming Rose. Here, however, the underground ways are not generally accessible outside the context of specific quests, and, as such, cannot be incorporated into the player's general practices of movement through the city.

Whether it is purposive or digressive, whether it follows the prescribed paths of the streets or forges alternative routes, the player's movement is measured in the avatar's paces, and, as such, the player's experience of mobility in the city space remains, in most cases, an embodied one. Transportation is not typically available within the fantasy RPG city space, and the town/city is pedestrianised, limiting speed and imposing a regular rhythm. There are fewer means of transportation available than in the case of games where an industrial or post-industrial metropolis constitutes the game world, with ease of mobility, transport and speedy traversal being a primary dynamic (see Schweizer 2013, 8-11). In fact, different kinds of obstacles may be encountered, rather than the promise of continuous uninterrupted flow, such as Schweizer observes in *Saints Row: The Third*, where (despite busy streets) there are as few impediments to the player's movement as possible: "the city is organized such that traversing it should never be a barrier to the structuring of activities" (ibid., 8).

While the organisational layout of the city in these games is usually clear and readable, occasionally we get a more restricted or obscured viewpoint. Unusually for fantasy RPGs, Sierra's *Quest for Glory 2* (1990) featured an infamous and obligatory disorientating navigation of the city streets, which are presented as being indistinct, featureless in terms of sights and sounds, but aptly overwhelming – a bewildering maze of narrow streets and towering walls. Exceptional rather than the default mode of traversal, this was designed originally as a DRM device (a map was provided in the manual – only slightly mitigating the frustration), yet it is narratively accounted for as the hero's experience as a newcomer to the city – which is a labyrinthine and bewildering space, before currency is exchanged and a map can be bought. The buying of the map dispenses entirely with the experience of the streets and takes one directly to the key locations in the city; after receiving this 'key' to the city, it is impossible to recover that experience of being lost or trapped – familiarisation has occurred, irrevocably. We might say that amidst the frustration, something else was glimpsed – the possibility of simply being a flâneur, of drift, of losing one's way, of not knowing what might be around the corner. In this case, movement itself constitutes a diversion from purpose.

This possibility of digression, distraction and detour is limited or enabled to varying degrees in the RPGs in our analysis. Where a city is organised in a centralised fashion, as in *Skyrim*'s Solitude and Whiterun, the avatar's steps might be guided towards the centre; where the city is segmented into districts – as in *Baldur's Gate* or *Dragon Age: Origins* – the centre may be displaced as an immediate goal, even visually, as once in the city one is re-positioned in relation to one particular district or another. The player can only re-orient her/himself according to the main ostensible city centre upon viewing the map, which functions to give a broader view of one's position in relation to the surroundings, and in relation to the city or the city-centre. This experience is the most dislocating, in terms of the player's sense of the centrality of the avatar-embodied position, and, simultaneously, the moment where the embodiment of the player and the avatar seem to converge most seamlessly in the sharing of a gaze upon their own position which, on the map, appears as a distanced object – this is particularly the case where the avatar has a physical map in their inventory or its equivalent.

As previously noted, where exclusion comes to the fore and the player-character's outsider status limits access to the city, this becomes at the same time a limitation on

movement. However, such physical exclusion is an exceptional (and usually temporary) state of affairs. Alongside this, player-characters generally reflect the player's already commented-upon foreignness to the lands in question – as prisoners (*Oblivion; Skyrim*), exiles (*Baldur's Gate*) or members of secretive, isolated orders (*Dragon Age: Origins, The Witcher III*).

As such, the player-character does not fully belong anywhere, a lack of roots which might motivate an initial exclusion, but which, in other respects, paradoxically enables greater freedom of movement, freeing the player-character from the rigid system of social roles and related spatial practices pertaining to the locality - hence the player-character's ability to move between zones and casually intrude into interior spaces, which we have observed in the previous section. NPC citizens, on the other hand, are locked into their predetermined patterns of familiarity and belonging, without the capacity for exploration or survival outside the city walls (hence, escort quests).

A final note to make on the matter of movement is that, in the RPG city, it can refer not only to the player-character's own movements, but to those of the city's NPC inhabitants going about their daily life. The player's subjectivity, which, thanks to the "double perspectival structure of ludic engagement," (Vella 2015, 55), is situated both *inside* the gameworld and *outside* it, at a remove, seems perfectly positioned on Lefebvre's balcony-over-Paris: "in order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely […] to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside. A balcony does the job admirably, in relation to the street" (Lefebvre 2004, 27-8). It is fitting, then, that, in cutscenes and dialogue sequences, *The Witcher III* and *Blood and Wine* often position Geralt on balconies, verandahs or similar vantage points, looking down upon the life of the city as he contemplates his next move.

Encounter

As the player wanders the streets of Novigrad in *The Witcher III*, it is not only the architectural features of the streetscape that might lead her/him to wander from the intended path. The call of a passer-by asking for a moment of Geralt's time, for instance, might signal the opportunity for a new side-quest. A soapbox preacher might single Geralt out for admonition, provoking an altercation that might have consequences. In *Baldur's Gate*, too, the player might be tempted to pause to listen to the town criers, who may fill in some information about the world, give out a quest, or even comment on the party's exploits and alert the city to their activities - the latter,in particular, in the town of Beregost.

These examples highlight another of the fundamental spatial practices defining city space: that of meeting and encounter. Alexander et al write that "a city becomes good for life only when it contains a great density of interactions among people and work, and different ways of life" (1977, 22). Norberg-Schulz posits *variety* – the presence of diverse cultures, professions, ways of life and so on, and *density* – the proximity of these diverse elements to each other, as the necessary qualities of the urban space which allow for the function of meeting (1985, 53-55).

The city space as the space for the polyphonic encounter ('polyphony' as the multiplicity of voices and centres, see Bakhtin 1984) of different cultures, ideologies and forces becomes the city as contested and co-habited space, in which these forces may vie for dominance and control of the city in overt or covert conflict, or in which differences may co-exist. Polyphonic variety is certainly a hallmark of many RPG cities. Often they bring together different races and classes – sometimes mingling and

rubbing shoulders, other times segregated or demarcated along clearer lines of exclusion and hierarchy. As an oppressed race, the elves in *Dragon Age: Origins* are relegated to the ghetto of the Alienage within Denerim, while those in *The Witcher III* live in slums outside Novigrad's walls.

Just as the function of movement has the street as its associated spatial form, so too does the function of meeting. In addition to the street, the second primary spatial form Norberg-Schulz identifies as being core to the city is the square. The square is the final point of arrival, the goal at the end of the street experienced as a path of traversal, and the heart of the city's organisation. If the street manifests the fundamental spatial form of the path, the square represents the fundamental form of the centre.

Essentially, the square, as the meeting of streets, and, therefore, the coming-together of paths of traversal, brings together the disparate voices, social classes, ethnicities and interests making up the urban fabric: "the square fulfills the gathering function of the settlement. It represents the meaning of coming together" (Norberg-Schulz 1985, 61). The square is the centre of the centre, gathering together a diversified social collective. It tends to exert a gravitational pull or centring effect on movement, directing the rhythms or direction of traversal. There may be an implicit nostalgia here for a vision of a centralised city with a communal space, one that has been lost with post-industrial development (see Harvey 2013, xvii).

In this regard, it is telling that, as soon as the game's main quest leads the player to Novigrad in *The Witcher III,* the player is immediately guided towards Hierarch Square, the city's most important plaza. Here, Geralt is introduced to the forces at play in the city - the Witch Hunters conducting public burnings of magic-users, representing hegemonic religious and, due to their close association with King Radovid, political power - and the thieves belonging to the shadow society presided over to the King of Beggars, representing underground spaces of resistance and opposition. Despite his ostensible neutrality, Geralt very quickly finds himself buffeted by these competing forces and forced to navigate his situatedness in relation to them. The possibility of encounter requires the condition of heterogeneous alterity (see Derrida 2000), highlighted particularly where such encounters are unforeseen.

This is by no means exceptional: the player-character's interactions with the city space are rarely without constraint. Limitations might be imposed, or spring from the surrounding circumstances. NPC reactions in *Divinity: Original Sin II* (Larian Studios 2017) will vary from open hostility to friendly welcome according to the avatar's race. In *Two Worlds II* (Reality Pump 2010), it is an offence to jostle, bump into or brush against NPC citizens, suggesting personal boundaries within public space and in physical encounters. The space occupied by the avatar's body is very clearly demarcated, and NPCs are, to some extent, given 'equal' rights to occupy the space.

CONCLUSION

With this survey of cities in single-player fantasy RPGs, we have sought to provide an overview of the structures of experiences relating to the player's engagement with city locales in single-player RPGs. We have made the case that these city spaces are, to a considerable extent, defined by a recurring set of spatial structures, each of which shapes, and is shaped by, a related range of spatial practices making up the player's being in the gameworld.

The spatial categories we have focused on – centring, the demarcation of inside and outside, movement and points of encounter – are adapted from the phenomenological

structures of the individual's experience of urban space as articulated by Norberg-Schulz, Tuan, Bachelard and others. Through the establishment of an absolute 'centre' to the landscape, set in stone in the figure of the tower, the in-game city counterpoints the structure of subjectivity that seems to guarantee the player-character's centrality, and thus comes to function as a goal or destination that imposes its own demands upon the player's movement in the world. Emphasized by the structure of the city walls, the manifestation of the boundary between inside and outside has a direct impact on the player's understanding of the game world, and of the place her/his own embodiment is granted within it. Within the walls, the multicursality of the streetscape establishes diverse possibilities for movement – both the linear path of traversal towards a goal or quest location, and less purposive practices of diversion, wandering and exploration. Finally, the city also establishes points of encounter for the various elements at play within its spaces, positioning the player-character as only one of the myriad forces and interests at work in the city, with the square as the architectural figure of the possibility and practice of encounter.

As such, it is easy to conclude that the representations of city space – in itself, and in relation to a wider world – that we find in these games reflects an understanding of the city that bears an affinity to the one that holds sway in the phenomenological tradition. Of course, this understanding is itself tied to a particular historical and cultural moment and bears the mark of its own ideological assumptions. By this observation, we do not mean to suggest that fantasy RPG cities explicitly respond to, or are consciously modelled on, the understanding of city space expressed in the phenomenological tradition. Instead, it is arguably more appropriate to suggest that both representations of the city share roots in a nostalgia for an imagined pre-industrial organization of the built environment, and for the kind of dwelling in the world it represented – even as many of the games we have considered extend beyond simple nostalgia, using their fantastical, neomedievalist milieux to represent the social, cultural and economic relations and power struggles, the institutional structures and political forces that, as Eco argues, emerged in the Middle Ages and continue to shape the contemporary city.

While fully exploring these political dimensions of the represented city space is not something we have the 'space' for in the current paper, we have already alluded to this crucial and inescapable dimension of the city space through references to the work of Lefebvre, Soja and Harvey, among others, highlighting the fact that the in-game city space, and the player's engagement with it, always bears the mark of ideology (and especially, given the socio-cultural context of the majority of videogame production, and the specificity of the fantasy reimaginings of quasi-'historical' cities in these games, capitalist ideology). Future critical work on RPG cities could potentially further explore the socioeconomic implications of the spatial functions and practices we have investigated in this paper, in light of their relation to our contemporary positioning.

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