

Beyond the Wall: The Boundaries of the Neomedieval Town in Singleplayer Roleplaying Games

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ABSTRACT

The cities of the ever prevalent neomedieval fantasy roleplaying game are integral to their gameworlds. They act as quest hubs, goals, centres for action and places of safety. Much of the loop of the game revolves around leaving the city to complete quests, then returning to the city again, and repeat. In this paper, I take a closer look at the boundaries of the city. I begin by proposing a model to help define what a city's boundary is and how it is expressed to the player. Then, I look at how and why players cross those borders back and forth. Through this, I hope to facilitate a better understanding of how the city functions in roleplaying games, and how the ways in which it produces boundaries alters and affects how players interact with the gameworld.

Keywords

cities, neomedieval, roleplaying games, walls, boundaries, borders, space, quests

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to think of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios 2006) without picturing the Imperial City, *Divinity: Original Sin II* (Larian Studios 2017) without recalling Arx, *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011) without recalling the breathtaking reveal of Anor Londo. They serve as communities for the games' characters, hubs for quests, marketplaces for gear, safe havens and much more. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the cities that are at the heart of many digital games. Most recently with papers by Daniel Vella and Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone (Vella and Giappone 2018; Giappone and Vella 2018), but also with works by Bobby Schweizer (2014) and Marc Bonner (2018), which I will summarise in a brief literature review. Building on these insightful analyses, in this paper I will consider the boundaries of the city.

First, I will analyse how cities are demarcated and delimited. That is, what properties of the game and the gameworld signal that the player is in a town or city? What differentiates the city from the not-city, or cities which serve as hubs for the player from those which do not? To do this, I will propose three axes along which these distinctions are made and examine in what ways each of these categories affect the player's experience of the city. For continuity, I will mostly illustrate this model with reference to *Diablo II* (Blizzard North 2000), but will compare it with other relevant examples along the way, such as towns in *Original Sin II*.

Then, I will consider what happens in crossing those boundaries back and forth. This is because to understand a city or town and its borders, it is important to understand

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what the city is *not*, and how the city builds itself in opposition to the not-city. Only by examining the border and crossing it back and forth can we understand this relationship more fully. This will help to situate the usefulness and relevance of my proposed model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vella and Giappone have explored ‘The City in Singleplayer Fantasy Role Playing Games’, identifying the “recurring spatial organizations that define the genre’s representations of urban spaces in relation to the surrounding world” and how those spatial organizations shape the player’s experience in the gameworld (2018, 1). They expand upon this analysis in their later conference paper, ‘Square, Marketplace, Tavern: Contested Spaces in Single-player Fantasy Roleplaying Game Cities’. In the latter paper, Giappone and Vella focus on the three specific spaces in the title. Broadly, they consider the marketplace as a social space that connects the player with familiar capitalist structures, the square as the site where authority asserts itself, and the tavern as the location where the two previous structures clash (2018).

Vella and Giappone identify two dominant types of videogame cities: the “contemporary metropolises” of games like *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design 1997, 1999, 2001; Rockstar North 2002, 2004, 2008, 2013), *Saints Row* (Volition 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013) and *Sleeping Dogs* (United Front Games and Square Enix London Studios 2012), and the neomedieval fantasy city (2018, 3). Their object of study, and mine, is the latter, but scholars like Schweizer have focused the former. However, Schweizer too stresses the socially inscribed, transient and performative nature of the city:

The city as the subject of videogame design bears functional and representational similarities to real world cities but possesses its own set of requirements. Though designed for play, the videogame city is not unlike the real city millions pass through each day. We attempt to get from point A to point B with as little resistance as possible, pass by buildings whose interiors we know nothing of, are subject to rules and regulations that determine our actions, and experience a network around us that animates the world with people, pipes, and potholes. (2014, 1)

This means that it is important not to consider cities solely as physical entities—a collection of brick-and-mortar structures—nor solely as a community of people, but rather the two in conversation, mediated by social structures of power and culture. To account for this, Schweizer draws on Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja and Douglas Allen. He builds on Allen’s two-part structure of cities, comprised of a “constitutional order [which] establishes the physical requirements of an urban space” and a “representational order [which] refers to the systems that bring that space to life” (Schweizer 2014, 2). However, for Schweizer, this excludes “the interpretation of space by its active participants” and so he introduces “an experimental order that addresses how real and imagined spaces coexist” (2014, 2). In my examination of the borders of game cities, I will first be addressing how those borders are built, which will primarily remain in Allen’s static domain, but will then, in my discussion of how those borders are transgressed, engage more with Schweizer’s active aspect.

Marc Bonner’s exploration of the wilderness in rural open world games will also be useful in defining the city by what it is not. Gaston Bachelard observes the dialectics involved in architectural discussion, observing through the metaphor of a house that “the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter” ([1958] 1994, 5). For every inside there is an outside. Bonner sees this dialectic in the “man-nature dichotomy” (2018, 2), observing also that the notion of the ‘frontier’ “marks the dualism between the untamed and pristine environment and the pre-stage of orderly and civilized infrastructure” (2018, 3). Although I am not directly concerned with the frontier, it is a

useful concept in so far as the frontier is linked to the city. Furthermore, Bonner’s examination of how the “frontier in open world games seems to shift with the players’ agency” (2018, 3) is useful in considering how the city’s boundaries are transgressed.

HOW BORDERS ARE MADE

In this model, I propose that the boundaries of the city are made on three levels: the aesthetic level, the user interface level, and the system level:

Aesthetic Level	UI Level	System Level
Walls, building, roads, etc.	City name title card appears	Restriction of the use of abilities, spells, mechanics, etc.
Character stance	City name in UI	Loading screen
	Map changes (e.g. to a detailed city map)	NPCs’ behaviour changes

Table 1: The city boundary model. The column headers represent the three primary axes, while the cells in the rows below contain some common examples of how these categories manifest in digital games.

The Aesthetic Level

The aesthetic level comprises essentially of the diegetic sensory feedback communicated to the player by the game. Most often this is in what players can see or hear that communicates something about the environment to the player. For instance, using visuals as an example, the player might be able to recognise a city as distinct from the not-city because the city has roads and buildings and is enclosed by a wall, while the not-city is a wilderness mostly devoid of organised human construction. Likewise, the player’s avatar might also come across differently. For instance, when inside the hub-city, instead of standing primed and ready for battle, they might adopt a more relaxed pose, perhaps sheathing their weapons. This is the case in *Diablo II*: Figure 1 shows the difference in the idle stance of an Amazon class avatar in town (left) and not in town (right). When out in the wilderness, the Amazon raises her javelin in readiness and bends her legs ready to move, whereas in town she is relaxed with her weapon to the side.



Figure 1: Idle stance of an Amazon class avatar in *Diablo II* when in the Rogue Encampment (left) and when in the Bloor Moor (right).

The UI Level

The UI level consists of what is conveyed to the player but is not diegetic. In *Diablo II*, for instance, when entering a location (including towns), a ‘title card’ appears, as in Figure 2: “Entering the Rogue Encampment”. Also shown in Figure 2 is the red highlighting of the right and left mouse button combat abilities, signalling that they cannot be used. This level is also present when there is, for example, persistent information in a corner of the screen that tells the player where they currently are. When they enter a city, this changes to that city’s name. Also present in some games is a more detailed city map that becomes available when inside—such as in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), and *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* (Troika Games 2001)—possibly containing extra information such as shop vendors or important nonplayer characters (NPCs). Typically, the UI level conveys to the player some information about what has changed at system level. For instance, the UI displaying that the player is now in this city means that the player can anticipate or come to learn what system-level changes that entails. This differs from the aesthetic level in which changes can communicate a system level change, but does not always.



Figure 2: The player’s screen just after entering the Rogue Encampment in *Diablo II* showing the temporary “Entering the Rogue Encampment” UI message.

The aesthetic level and the UI level can blur together a little, particularly in games that aim to make much of their UI diegetic, such as *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory 2017). This is a point that Kristine Jørgensen examines in great detail in *Gameworld Interfaces* (2013). Jørgensen makes a two-part distinction, in contrast to my three-part distinction, between the gameworld and the game system, which she argues “are intimately connected and must be seen in context with each other [...] I see the gameworld as an interface to the formal game system” (2013, 3). This is because, for her, the gameworld is “an informational space that mediates between the player and the game system” (2013, 143). Crucially, she understands these gameworlds as “governed by the logics of game mechanics, which means that a sense of naturalism or fictional coherence is secondary” (2013, 3). It is on this point that I add my nuance regarding the distinctions made between the city-hub and the not-city. While Jørgensen contends that “all game informational features are part of the gameworld, regardless of how they are integrated” (2013, 144), I believe that, for my purposes here, a useful distinction can be made between these informational features. The difference between

the aesthetic level and the UI level is that the UI level will always communicate information that relates to the system level (defined in the following paragraph). The aesthetic level can communicate information that relates to the system level but does not have to. Instead, it relates more to the secondary “sense of naturalism or fictional coherence” that Jørgensen refers to (2013, 3). In other words, the UI level *informs* the player directly of what has changed in the game system, while the aesthetic level *naturalises and frames* that change within the diegetic fictional world of the game.

The System Level

The system level refers to demarcations whose effects are mechanical rather than sensory (visual or aural, for example). Understanding game mechanics along the lines of Miguel Sicart’s definition of “methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state” (2008), the system level refers to the game state and the ways in which the player is given agency to act upon it. For instance, in *Skyrim*, entering a town prompts a loading screen, marking a more rigid distinction between city and country—the two can never technically exist in the same gamespace at the same time. Entering a city prompts a change in the game state in terms of where the player may go. It can also refer to changes in the abilities of the player’s avatar. For example, in *Diablo II* when a player is in town and tries to attack or use an ability or spell, the avatar will say out loud “not in town” to indicate to the player that they will not commit their acts of violence within the boundaries of the town. A player cannot even aim a spell out of the front gate towards an enemy—while they stand inside the town, they simply will not attack. The inability to attack is the system-level change, while the avatar stating “not in town” is the UI-level indication to the player of that change.

Interestingly, this aspect can manifest more indirectly in some games. In a town like Driftwood in *Original Sin II*, for instance, there is no system-level rule that prohibits players from attacking or using abilities within the town. However, if the player does use Source spells or attacks anyone within the town, the town’s guard contingent will immediately come to arrest the avatar(s) responsible (in *Original Sin II*, the player can control up to four avatars which do not all have to be in the same location), making for an almost impossible fight until the player’s avatars are much more powerful. In this case, the game’s system instead uses mechanisms that indirectly enforce a similar rule to that in *Diablo II* while making the player feel as though they have greater choice. These affordances—the existence, positioning, behaviour and abilities of the NPC guards within the town—are still on the system level.

Model Discussion

It might at first seem strange that this model does not include a spatial element. However, I would argue that while spatiality is a property of the border and, of course, of the city—the border is somewhere and in some spatial configuration, as is the city—it is not a condition of its creation or definition. It has spatiality in that you must be either inside or outside of the space encompassed by the border, but what defines the conditions and positioning of the border are non-spatial conditions. The central point of my model is that these non-spatial conditions are system-level changes, indicated to the player directly by the UI level (and perhaps indirectly by aesthetic level changes), and then naturalised into the gameworld by the aesthetic level.

Here are two examples. The first shows the *Diablo II* boundaries for the Rogue Encampment, the game’s first hub-town, while the second shows the *Original Sin II* boundaries for Driftwood, expressed in this model:

Aesthetic Level	UI Level	System Level
Wooden walls mark the boundary	“Entering the Rogue Encampment” title card appears	Attacks, abilities and spells cannot be used inside the boundary
Semi-permanent dwellings inside the boundary, versus few outside	Persistent name of the town in top right corner	Vendors, quest-givers and other NPCs are positioned inside the boundary
Character stance is relaxed when inside the boundary	The avatar says “not in town” when the player attempts to use an ability or spell	
	Abilities and spells are tinted red	

Table 2: The city boundary model applied to the Rogue Encampment in *Diablo II*.

Aesthetic Level	UI Level	System Level
Walls	“Driftwood” title card appears	Using Source spells or attacking anyone within the walls will cause the guards within the town to turn hostile and attack the player’s present avatars
Buildings and roads inside the walls, versus few outside	In-game map shows city outline and structures	The guards and NPCs with the above behaviour are positioned in particular points within the city
Uniformed guards man the battlements and patrol inside the walls		

Table 3: The city boundary model applied to Driftwood in *Divinity: Original Sin II*.

Through this structure, the city is not only a spatial construction or a collection of buildings and vendors. It is a socio-cultural space that is differentiated from the not-city, or the hostile outside gameworld. And this is achieved through a combined representation of spatial, visual and ludic elements. The player has multiple reference points for what makes a city, with each game establishing its own conventions.

To continue with the example of *Diablo II*, this means that the player has a functionally different experience in a hub-town like the Rogue Encampment or Lut Gholein to a

non-hub-town like Tristram. Tristram is a standard Diablo-style hub-town in *Diablo* (Blizzard North 1996), but in *Diablo II* and *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment 2012) (as The Old Ruins or Old Tristram) it is a ruin filled with monsters. The distinction between the function of these otherwise similar spaces is made primarily by the system level. Rather than being a safe hub in which the player cannot attack and can instead talk to friendly vendors and quest-givers, it is treated as any other location in the wilderness in which the player can be attacked by monsters and may fight back. This change is communicated to the player on the UI level by simply not displaying the information that tells the player they are in a city (the title card appearing, the red highlighting over abilities, and so on) and on the aesthetic level by the town's appearance as a ruin rather than as a functioning city.

The same goes for *Diablo II* non-hub cities like Travincal and the Lost City. As Vella and Giappone note, “[t]he city’s ideology, and the way of life it sets in stone, is conveyed through intrinsically ludic modes of expression [...] if a city in a gameworld does not establish the conditions for such practices, it will not be experienced as a city” (2018, 4). Tristram has the appearance of a ruined city, and so already lacks much of the urbanity of the city. But Travincal does not. It has the appearance of a well-organised city within the conventions of the gameworld. It features large, intact buildings arranged in a grid of functioning roads. But because the way that the player is allowed to engage with it is different—it is full of monsters, the player may engage in combat, it has no vendors, no stash, no healer, and so on—it is not considered a hub-town within the conventions that the game has established. It does not function in the same manner. Instead, it is treated as another area of the extra-hub, hostile gameworld in which monsters are fought and quests are progressed.

From this example, and following Vella and Giappone’s argument, the aesthetic and UI elements can be seen as supporting levels for the system level. That is, the primary definition of the in-game city is in its function, in how the player is permitted to engage with it and the NPCs within. The additional levels are there to either reinforce that aspect (a city that also looks like a city) or to subvert it in some interesting way (a hostile area that looks like a city, for example). It is for that reason that the Rogue Encampment—a small gathering of tents, caravans, merchants and refugees—is a hub-town in *Diablo II*, while the large, holy city of Travincal is not. That is, of course, not to say that the aesthetic and UI levels are less significant. Indeed, it is in how the city is represented spatially, visually, aurally and so on that much of the semiotic discourse enters in. To illustrate this, I will compare two *Diablo II* towns.

The Rogue Encampment and Harrogath, the final hub-town in Act V of *Diablo II*'s expansion, *Lord of Destruction* (Blizzard North 2001), are exactly the same on both the UI and system levels, but their aesthetic levels give these towns and their boundaries a totally different relationship with the fictional gameworld. The Rogue Encampment is a makeshift town built by survivors of a battle at the nearby monastery. This manifests aesthetically in ramshackle structures, tents, caravans, wooden walls, rough dirt paths and NPCs whose belongings are packed up nearby, ready to go at a moment's notice. As can be gleaned from Figure 2, there is a continuity in the look of the town and the look of the demon-infested Bloor Moor just outside. The two seem to blend together seamlessly, interrupted only by the wooden walls. The dirt path continues, the grass and foliage remain wild, and similar decrepit stone houses and structures to the ones in the Rogue Encampment are found in the Bloor Moor. As such, it is a town that feels transient and impermanent, with shaky, ill-defined and fragile boundaries. It is also one that lacks a situated history and established social hierarchies. The first NPC the player typically talks to is Warriv (as he stands next to where the player begins the game with an exclamation mark above his head), who concludes the first interaction by saying that “you should talk to Akara, too. She seems to be the leader of this camp”

(Blizzard North 2000). There is no clear sense of who is even the leader of this town, only an indication. In this case, while functionally no different from any other hub-town in *Diablo II*, the Rogue Encampment aesthetically blurs this boundary between inside and outside, making the player feel at once less safe in the town and also less of an ‘outsider’, as the town has little to no established communities or social structures to be outside of.

Compare this with Harrogath in Act V (Figure 3), a Barbarian stronghold at the base of Mount Arreat, a site of religious significance for the Barbarians. When Malah welcomes the player, she normally says simply, “I, Malah, welcome you to Harrogath, the last stronghold of Order on Mount Arreat” (Blizzard North 2001). But when the player arrives at the town as a Barbarian avatar, Malah instead says: “You’ve travelled far, only to return home to us, Barbarian. Ohh... Much has happened in Harrogath since you left. Our homeland is hardly recognizable with so much evil about” (Blizzard North 2001). The difference in these two introductions immediately establishes Harrogath as a place with history and a long-established community. This sense is then reinforced in the architectural space and its aesthetic presentation. The city has large stone walls, sturdy, established, multi-storey stone buildings, cobbled roads and NPCs with permanent homes. The Bloody Foothills just outside the front gate have none of those, which creates a much stronger aesthetic division between city and wilderness. As the player ventures out from Harrogath, they experience a sense of the frontier as Bonner describes it: “the dynamic edge of conquered territory” (2018, 3). As the player pushes onwards through the foothills, they encounter small encampments and outposts, and Barbarian outriders fighting demons. The player then also comes across Waypoints which, once activated at-location, can be used to teleport back to town or to other Waypoints, dynamically increasing the range of the player’s quick traversal into the depths of the wilderness and thus pushing the ‘frontier’ of their unexplored limits back.



Figure 3: A location in Harrogath in *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction* near the front gate with the map overlay on.

While the same sense of frontier-pushing is present in Act I—for which the Rogue Encampment is the hub-town—in the Waypoint system, the aesthetic representation of the Rogue Encampment is of this frontier outpost in a way that Harrogath is not. Bonner continues his description of the frontier: “Settlements, out- and trading posts string together along the trails. It marks the dualism between the untamed and pristine

environment and the pre-stage of orderly and civilized infrastructure” (2018, 3). The Rogue Encampment has the appearance of one such settlement, showing only the most subtle and nascent distinction between an infrastructure and civilisation, and the untamed wilderness outside. In spite of this, the Rogue Encampment and Harrogath are both hub-towns in exactly the same way within the *Diablo II* game system: they both host an array of vendors and craftspeople, the player’s stash for storing items, a Waypoint, and act as a hub for the six quests each act hosts. Changes along the aesthetic axis create significant representational differences that inform the player’s understanding of the fictional world, but the functional city border is still defined in exactly the same way for both towns on a system level and communicated in the same way on the UI level.

HOW THE BORDERS ARE TRANSGRESSED

With a better idea of how city borders are generated, what should now be explored is how the player interacts with those borders and how my proposed model might help with these analyses. To this end, I will consider the function of cities within their gameworld—what purpose they serve for the player and what they facilitate the player to do—in order to see how, why and to what effect the borders are crossed back and forth. Vella and Giappone discuss the extent to which RPG cities serve as centres for their respective gameworlds. They observe that “most of the RPG worlds surveyed feature one ‘main’ city that constitutes the implicit ‘centre’ of the represented domain” (2018, 6), drawing on similar observations by real-world spatial theorists like Christian Norberg-Schulz, who states that the role of the settlement within an environment is that it “acts as a *center*” and that, as such, it is also a “goal” in itself (1985, 31). Vella and Giappone stress the spatial importance of this centre, as well as the significance of these cities acting as economic and political centres for the game that “establishes an absolute centre in the gameworld that [...] can leave the player feeling in a peripheral position” (2018, 7). But another related aspect of the city in RPGs is to act as a quest hub.

Quests have been proposed as a central organising structure for digital games, most prominently by Espen Aarseth, who claims that “the purpose of adventure games is to enable players to fulfil quests. This, not storytelling, is their dominant structure” (2004, 368). This, for Aarseth, reflects the observation made by Ragnhild Tronstad that a quest is performative, in-the-moment, while a story is constative, after-the-fact (Tronstad 2001, 81), and so quests more accurately account for the performativity of play. Quest games have three primary structures: serial (a unicursal corridor), nested (a central hub with multiple branching corridors), and concurrent (a rhizome of quests) (Aarseth 2005, 497). Through the lens of quests, the cities of quest games take on new significance.

The most obvious is the city as quest hub, manifested most clearly in the nested or hub structure. The hub in Aarseth’s thinking of nested quest structures is almost always some sort of city, town or settlement: an established congregation of NPCs who have a reason for being in that settlement and an attachment to and position in the world that enables them to send the player on meaningful quests. The role of the city and its boundaries is important in this dynamic. Writing on the narrative structure of Arthurian literature, A. C. Spearing observes that:

the landscape of medieval romance is structured by an opposition between the enclosed and the open: on the one hand, the cities, courts and castles from which knights set out to have adventures and to which they usually return when the story ends; on the other hand, the wilderness, often a forest, in which adventures themselves take place. Enclosed settings symbolize the world of human civilization, a realm of safety which is also one of constraint (for, as Freud tells us, civilization is based on repression). (1994, 138)

Setting up this binary between the enclosed and the open, the city and the wilderness, Spearing observes that the most important aspect of this dichotomy within the stories is in the transgression of that boundary: “the hero’s task is to survive a passage from one setting to the other [...] only through transgression, only in encountering the wilderness, can civilized values be defined and their limits understood” (1994, 139). This goes some way to understanding how the boundaries of the city are shaped and reshaped, and what the impetus is for transgressing and renegotiating that boundary. The structure Spearing outlines is essentially the same as in the nested quest structure: the player begins within the enclosed, civilised space, ventures out into the dangerous unknown, gains experience, power and a new or better understanding of the world and its value systems, and returns again to the city, their understanding of the gameworld transformed. With this process, the borders of the city often change, sometimes spatially or mechanically, but sometimes just in the player’s perception.

One example is in the constant pushing of the frontier boundary—the outriding boundary from the city—discussed earlier. In many neomedieval singleplayer roleplaying games, players must venture out into the wilderness in order to unlock the use of fast-travel nodes. This happens in the *Diablo*, *Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Softworks 1994, 1996; Bethesda Game Studios 2002, 2006, 2011), *Baldur’s Gate* (BioWare and Black Isle Studios 1998; BioWare 2000), *Dragon Age* (BioWare 2009, 2011, 2014) and *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011, 2014, 2016) game series, to name only a few examples. With fast-travel systems that work in this way, the player expands their frontier boundary through this rhythm of leaving the city, pushing outwards, returning to the city, then pushing further outwards. This frontier boundary is embodied by a fast-travel network that works on a system level, often centred within the hub-city.

The city border can often perform a different role in serial quest games, however. Vella and Giappone observe that “in many RPGs, the player is initially excluded from the city, and must earn the right of access” (2018, 9). As well as implicating the player within “the system of power relations structured by the inside/outside distinction”, this earned right-of-entry also “serves the evident function of structuring the player’s geographic progression and tying it into the progress of the game’s main storyline” (2018, 9). Rather than a hub, the city in serial quest games can often be seen more as a reward, a marker of progression, and possibly a checkpoint.

This can be seen in *Dark Souls*, which interestingly detaches its townships and cities from its checkpoints and main hub. Firelink Shrine, the game’s main hub, has a serene (if melancholic) atmosphere. One of the few places in the game outside boss battles that employs a musical score, soft, melancholic strings play in the background. It hosts a bonfire and various non-hostile NPCs and vendors. It feels like a place of safety for these aesthetic-level reasons. But its borders are also porous. There is no system-level change that distinguishes Firelink from the rest of the outside world, beyond the lack of monster spawns very nearby. This is hinted at in the aesthetic level in a similar way to the Rogue Encampment in *Diablo II*: while calm and peaceful, it is also a ruin with no walls and very little distinguishing it from the outside. Just like a fire that provides warmth can also go out, the borders of this hub can too fade. Even while in Firelink, the player can be invaded by other players, entering their world to slay them, they can be attacked by an NPC in retaliation, and enemies can also simply follow the player to the Shrine if they are not dealt with during a retreat. Instead, the system-level changes are used less to demark hubs as cities and as areas of safety and more to mark the player’s progression.

When the player finally reaches Anor Londo, the city of the gods, they are greeted with a spectacular vista (Figure 4), a reward in itself for a game that cultivates a bleak, ruinous aesthetic. Anor Londo, while clearly aesthetically a city, does not serve as a

safe space or a quest hub, but rather as an urban wilderness, filled with monsters and challenges. Anor Londo can only be entered at first by being carried by gargoyle-like Batwing Demons after conquering Sen's Fortress and the Iron Golem boss. Once the city's challenges are conquered, it can only be left or re-entered by bonfire warping; one does not simply walk into Anor Londo. The city is therefore strongly bordered by system-level restrictions, in contrast to the more porous borders everywhere else. First access to the city—the player's first crossing of this border—marks a milestone, the end of the first half of the game, and rewards the player with access to this sublime city. Upon leaving the city, the player thenceforth has access to the bonfire warping system as well as a new quest (to acquire the four Lord Souls), marking the second half of the game. In this way, the boundaries of the city can be seen as rewards and markers of progression through the game, rather than as borders that are to be crossed back and forth from the safety within to the wilderness without.



Figure 4: Screenshot from the cutscene in *Dark Souls* in which Anor Londo first comes into view.

In the concurrent structure, game cities seem to act as multiple interlocking quest hubs. Aarseth notes that one of the main purposes of the quest is to give “direction, action, and resolution, a sense of ourselves as participants in the game world [...] Quests force players to experience the game world, to go where they have not gone before, and barely can” (2005, 503). Within such concurrent quest games—like *The Elder Scrolls* series or *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios 2018)—the cities of the gameworld often act in both capacities of the city that I have discussed. They are hubs for branches of quests within the town, the surrounding area, and further beyond, as well as quests which relate to other towns. In this structure, gaining access to a particular hub can also be a reward in itself and a marker of progress as in the serial structure. This is the case, for example, in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009).

The quest structure approach to game spaces is, of course, only one approach out of many. But, combined with the model presented in the first section, it helps us to better understand the nature, purpose and effects of city boundaries. The nature of boundaries and how they are demarcated helps to establish the impetus for questing. Is the player leaving a well-established city to venture into the wilderness, for example? Or are they lost in a bleak landscape, searching for civilisation? Of the cities that are often used as quest hubs we can also ask, based on how their borders are constructed, what their

relationship to the gameworld is in a fictional sense. Is it, like *Diablo II*'s Rogue Encampment, a shaky settlement, hastily established in the wake of a disaster but that is at least safe, mechanically? Or is it, like Firelink Shrine, a brief respite, but one which is never wholly safe from danger?

CONCLUSIONS

Analyses by scholars like Vella, Giappone, Schweizer and Bonner establish the importance of towns and cities within gameworlds. Vella, Giappone and Schweizer through their detailed explorations of how those cities function, and Bonner in his examination of gameworlds that, unusually, lack cities and focus instead on the wilderness, on the decisively not-city in the “man-nature dichotomy” (2018, 2). What these analyses have also shown is that the boundary between the city and the not-city can also be porous, volatile and malleable. Bonner’s discussion of the frontier is a good example of this—liminal spaces that mark “the dualism between the untamed and pristine environment and the pre-stage of orderly and civilized infrastructure” (2018, 3). And this is even more the case in virtual cities than in real cities, as virtual cities can be seen as “genuinely placeless” because they “are not localized topographically” (Feireiss 2007, 220). They are not subject to predetermining physical factors, but rather are built from the ground up for the experience of the player. As such, the issue of how and why the boundaries between city and not-city are constructed and what that distinction means becomes all the more crucial to understanding the role of cities in digital games. This study is by no means exhaustive even of the small selection neomedieval fantasy roleplaying games I have looked at. But it does, I hope, provide some useful tools for better understanding how cities in games work.

My model in the first section offers a means by which the borders of cities or towns in games can be categorised and compared. Using this we could, for instance, begin to ask why a game like *Diablo II* imposes system-level, mechanical restrictions on the player while a game like *Original Sin II* uses more indirect methods, and what the effects of that difference are. We can also more easily consider the differences and similarities between locations such as Travincal in *Diablo II* and Anor Londo in *Dark Souls*, which are architecturally and spatially presented as cities, but which work functionally like any other area of hostile wilderness, and hubs like the Rogue Encampment and Firelink Shrine, which look much less like towns, but which do function as safe zones and/or hubs. Such attributes have significant effects on the position of the player-character and the town within the fictional world and can be better understood by analysing the individual components of their borders.

But borders are not only made to distinguish between in and out, they are also made to be crossed. In the second section, I looked at how and why players cross the city threshold, and how that crossing can be better understood using the model in the first section. Within this, we are asking what the unique properties of the in and out areas are—what motivates the player to travel out of the city, back in, and back out again. Quest theory goes some way to explaining the ludic structure of this impetus, and I have argued that the city very often acts as a nexus for questing. When it is not, the city is then usually an important quest *destination*. The difference here between whether a city is a quest hub or quest location is usually defined and made clear to the player through conventions in the game that manifest in my model. Typically, the difference is primarily established by system-level conventions, communicated directly by the UI, and then presented and framed on the aesthetic level, based on what that location means within the gameworld. This means that the borders can be defined mechanically in terms of what they allow the player to *do*. Much like with real-world definitions of borders, this might then say more about the player and their position within the gameworld than it does about the city itself.

As for the effect that this back-and-forth ludic rhythm has on the gameworld and on the play experience, the answers are unsurprisingly diverse. From *Sparring* we can find echoes of Arthurian romance in the questing knight who must cross the boundary of the court to quest and return more experienced, in order to better understand the court's own principles, the constitution of the boundary, and their relationship with the world outside. Through *Bonner* we begin to understand how the wilderness—the anti-city—operates in relation to the player, as well as the notion of the frontier in games. And through *Vella* and *Giappone*, we can read the cities themselves and situate them within the narrative and progression structure of the game. The town in fantasy roleplaying games is vital to a fuller understanding of the gameworlds they are situated in. But I believe that the most fruitful insights come when we look at the boundaries and borders in the world and ask why and how they are there, and what they do to the player's experience of the world. The relationship between man-made settlements and untamed nature is one that defines much of our understanding of space more broadly, and so it pays to go beyond the wall and back again.

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