

Square, Marketplace, Tavern

Contested Spaces in Single-Player Neomedieval Role-Playing Game Cities

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Abstract This chapter explores urban spaces in single-player fantasy role-playing games in terms of their nostalgically neomedieval representation, focusing upon the significance of three recurring landmarks—the square, the marketplace, and the tavern—as potentially contested sites. The games chosen for close analysis are *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware 1998), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red 2015). We identify three interrelated paths along which we can read the significance of these games' neomedieval urban spaces. The first is the nostalgic element—manifested, for example, in the evocation of a world structured on a binary rural-urban divide lost in the present-day urban metropolis. The second is their critical capacity to act as interrogations of contemporary power structures. The third point is that containment of these power structures within a neomedieval domain may result in a complacent comfort in our distance from the 'medieval' domains in question.

Keywords Neomedieval, fantasy, role-playing games, cities, nostalgia, law, history

Introduction

This chapter pursues the exploration of urban spaces in single-player fantasy role-playing games (RPGs) in terms of their nostalgically pseudo-historical representation, focusing upon the significance of three recurring landmarks: the square, the marketplace, and the tavern. The games chosen for close analysis in this paper are *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware 1998), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011), and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red 2015). These games have been chosen for their typicality; to

a considerable extent, the observations we make are generalisable across a genre that works on familiarity with the tropes of its setting.

This exploration is founded upon recognition that these are games produced and consumed within a contemporary Western neoliberal context (Möring and Leino 2016). Within this context, these games' fantastical domains—not least their representation of urban spaces that recall the general atmosphere, if not the historical specifics, of the European Middle Ages—can be considered as works of “fantastic neomedievalism.” As Umberto Eco suggests, this evokes a postmodern nostalgia for an imagined past while offering critical potential resulting from the recognition that “all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages” (1986, 64). Neomedievalism therefore suggests an imagined Middle Ages that is a composite of “medieval fragments (themselves also fabricated)” (Lukes 2014, 3), rather than a historically accurate representation, and—as will become apparent during our analysis—tends to draw in elements that are more typical of the early modern than of the medieval, reflecting what is already, historically, a blurred boundary.

Building on our observations regarding typical spatial organisations of the neomedieval RPG city (Vella and Bonello Rutter Giappone 2018), this chapter explores locations that characterise these cities in terms of the instability and political negotiability suggested by Eco's description of neomedievalism.

Nostalgia and the Fantasy RPG City

As a starting point, it is useful to ask: in the context of contemporary capitalist society, what purpose is fulfilled by the neomedieval imaginary? For J.R.R. Tolkien, the “escape of archaism”—of which we can consider neomedievalism a particularly prevalent example—is a nostalgia related to the rejection of an industrialised modern context with its rapidly changing technology: “the condemnation, implicit at least in the mere silence of ‘escapist’ literature, of progressive things like factories, or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say ‘inexorable,’ products” (Tolkien 2006, 150). Of course, the ‘fairy story’ is as much the “product” of modern life as the “factories” and “machine-guns”—“it is part of the essential malady of such days” (*ibid.*, 151). Implicit in the ‘fairy story’ according to Tolkien is not merely an escapism that renders the present more tolerable but also a critique of the status quo.

Needless to say, the conventional RPG fantasy setting is not an escape into a free-floating fantasy with no grounding in the contemporary moment. There is a certain typicality to the vision of life being presented in the various cities encountered in the titles discussed here, proceeding from assumptions about our own pre-industrial

past and our own lived experience of cities, inflected through the genericity of fantasy, re-structured in accordance with a fictional world. Yet, some nostalgic desire lingers, suggesting a possibility for some alignment between ‘past’ and ‘fantasy.’ We understand nostalgia, with Linda Hutcheon (2000, 195), as rarely invoking “the past as actually experienced [but rather] the past as imagined”.¹

We identify three interrelated paths along which we can read the significance of these games’ neomedieval urban spaces. The first is the longing, inherent in an imagined vision of the past, for a putative lost ideal—what Svetlana Boym terms “restorative nostalgia” (2001, xviii)—manifested, for example, in the evocation of a world structured on a binary rural-urban divide that is lost in the contemporary urban metropolis (Lefebvre 2003, 11), and resulting in the games’ rural spaces becoming sites for nostalgia of the pastoral variety (Martin 2011). The operation of this form of nostalgia can be identified in the—actual or assumed—desire on the part of the player to experience a sense of inhabiting the games’ fantastical domains, of ‘being there’ through a cognitive process of incorporation (Calleja 2011, 169).

The second is the critical capacity of these imagined neomedieval spaces to act as interrogations of power structures of legal, political, religious, and financial authority. Here, we draw upon Boym’s description of “reflective nostalgia”, which—unlike restorative nostalgia—does not seek an actual return: instead, it “thrives in [...] the longing itself” (2001, xviii). As such, it is inherently relational rather than absolute, linking the now to the then, the here to the there—‘then’ in this case as imagined (and longed-for) now, and ‘now’ as seen through the lens of then. For Boym, then, reflective nostalgia reveals that “longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another”. One inhabits multiple places and times simultaneously, such that each context playfully reflects and comments upon the other(s) (*ibid.*, 50). In this way, the phenomenology of digital gameplay arguably renders the form an ideal vehicle for the experience of Boym’s reflective nostalgia. Thanks to the “double perspectival structure of ludic engagement” (Vella 2015, 55), the player, in the moment of playing, occupies a standpoint both within and outside the game world—just as nostalgia provides a “double exposure” (Boym 2001, xiv). The player is therefore always both incorporated in the game world and distanced from it. The experience of playing a video game foregrounds the relation between multiple time-places, and the critical potential inherent in the distance that structures this relation.

To qualify this critical potential, however, the third path to consider is that containment of these power structures within a neomedieval domain may result not in a critique of the contemporary moment but in complacent comfort in our distance

1 On the concepts of ‘authenticity’ and ‘accuracy’ in the context of a staged past in computer games, see Felix Zimmermann’s chapter in this book.

from, and assumed superiority to these domains—while allowing us to enjoy our visit as a ‘tourist’ in that world (Murray 1997, 106–12).

Square

Within the neomedieval cities we encounter, the square literally has a central function: it is the heart and focal point of the city. As such, it holds forth the promise of a communal space, the kind David Harvey observes a nostalgic hankering for:

The traditional centrality of the city has been destroyed. But there is an impulse towards and longing for its restoration which arises again and again to produce far-reaching political effects [...]. How else and where else can we come together to articulate our collective cries and demands? (Harvey 2012, xvii).

The square—where streets as paths of traversal converge—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). As such, nostalgia for the square, on one level, represents nostalgia for a clearer organising principle, one to rally around or against, allowing for resistance.

Frequently, however, it is simultaneously the site where law and centralised authority asserts itself and spectacularly displays its power—squares are usually defined by “one or more dominant public buildings” that cement their status as centre (Norberg-Schulz 1985, 59–60).² In the neomedieval cityscape, they often feature a scaffold or other platform for public punishment in prominent position—suggesting a more brutal exercise of authority (» *Fig. 1*). It is telling that, as soon as the *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*’s main quest leads the player to the game’s biggest city, Novigrad, she is immediately guided towards Hierarch Square, its most important plaza. The city’s hegemonic dominant order is in full display: the player-character Geralt witnesses Witch Hunters conducting public burnings of magic users, representing religious and, due to their close association with King Radovid, political power. Power is inscribed not only in the surrounding architecture but also directly on the body of the condemned (see Foucault

2 What Derrida calls the “theologico-political” foundation of criminal law (2014, 4) has its counterpart in the city dynamics - the “despotic and [...] divine” aspects (Mumford 1961, 60), that Lewis Mumford sees as a balance of freedom and control, settling into a distribution of power between castle, temple, local community, and marketplace, as organising centres.



Fig. 1 Pyre for forbidden books on display, calling for a communal effort (“surrender unorthodox books!”) to reinforce established religious (and political) authority in Hierarch Square, in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.

1977, 3–31), in the power-instating “ceremony of the gallows” (Lawson 1988, 148). This function of the square can also be seen in figure 1, where “unorthodox books” are gathered and burned in Hierarch Square.

The square is also, however, the place where Geralt is introduced to the thieves of the shadow society presided over by the King of Beggars, representing underground spaces of resistance. This is hardly surprising: the foot of the scaffold—as Michel Foucault points out (1977, 53–62)—is also a site for the vocalisation and display of public dissent, even while it provides the stage for a display of official power.³

3 V.A.C. Gatrell, writing about the later history of punishment in England (eighteenth to nineteenth centuries—another period of transition, ostensibly towards ‘reform’) identifies this unsettled and irrepressible complexity of the crowd’s reactions as the main reason for removing executions from the public gaze/arena, and relocating them “behind prison walls” (1994, viii, 608–10). The physically real Place de Grève in Paris was both the site of highly spectacular executions, such as that of Damiens (with which Foucault opens *Discipline and Punish* (1977)) and a place of protest and demonstration (hence ‘grève’ becoming the French word for ‘strike’ as collective action). Execution spaces were typically sites where crowds congregated, as well as those who made their living off crowds—including, ironically, pickpockets and cutpurses (Cockburn 1977, 64).

Interestingly, executions may also function as notable border markers, a kind of initiation into the ‘laws’ of cities as the centres of civilisation.⁴ Just as Geralt is led to Hierarch Square to witness the burnings, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*’s opening sees the player-character being led to the block in the town of Helgen.⁵ Later, entering Solitude, the capital city of the game world’s Haafingar Hold region, will trigger the execution of a rebel. *Quest for Infamy* (Infamous Quests 2014)—an affectionate parody of *Quest for Glory* (Sierra On-Line 1989)—involves an invitation to witness an execution in Volksville Square as soon as one enters the city (» Fig. 2). Events will not progress until the player has gone to the appointed place. In such a manner, she is forced to participate in the “spectacle of the scaffold,” in Foucault’s words (1977, 32–72).

By levering one into the position of obligatory witness, as in figure 2, it seems to wring out a tacit recognition and acceptance or confirmation of the boundaries of the social order. Jacques Derrida points out: “The spectacle and the spectator are required. The state, the polis, the whole of politics, the co-citizenry [...] must attend and attest, it must testify publicly that death was dealt or inflicted, it must *see die* the condemned one” (2014, 2). Violence is authorised by those who bear witness; at the same time, the machinery of power asserts itself excessively and makes itself most visible—and as a result, most contestable. It is hard to overstate the significance of this interpellated act of witnessing—it both invites and circumscribes the possibility of dissent. The execution scene in Solitude in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* testifies to the presence of murmuring undercurrents of dissatisfaction and dissent—not simply in the person of the condemned but also in overheard NPC reactions to the punishment. Even the NPC Captain Aldis, the very representative of official authority, expresses regret. Since ‘cutscenes’ do not generally hijack the player’s agency in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the player can intervene to halt this execution, freeing the condemned man Roggvir. However, surrounding dialogue and events will proceed just as if it had gone ahead. Roggvir,

4 The walls and the square converge as sites of visible contestations of power—displays of summary ‘justice’ are located upon entry points to Novigrad, as well as in its main square. This finds its counterpart in history—in early modern Malta, for example, the mutilated bodies of the condemned would be displayed along the walls of the cities after execution (Zammit 2016, 107). Gates, bridges, and other boundary-markers were likewise places of display in England (see Laurence 1960, 35).

5 Indeed, it is an established trope for the player-character(s) in a computer RPG to start off as prisoners or facing punishment. Games that take this approach include: *Gothic* (Piranha Bytes 2001), *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios 2006), *Two Worlds II* (Reality Pump 2010), *Dark Souls* (From Software 2011), *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (CD Projekt Red 2011), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Legend of Grimrock* (Almost Human 2012), and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014). This generates a scenario where the player has to contend with an immediately hostile environment before reaching safety, picking up starting equipment and basic skills along the way. Thus, the player is also initiated into the rules of the game, paradoxically through the very process that sees her cast off the shackles of imprisonment.



Fig. 2 Interpellating witnesses, in *Quest for Infamy*.

moreover, is programmed to die, and will do so regardless, even dying for no apparent reason despite the guards and executioners having been dispatched. One could thus ‘divert’ the course of justice, but without real effect—just as skirmishes around the scaffold could provide a display of resistance to authority, but also be contained. It could be suggested that, as the game’s system does not sustain the consequences of this intervention, this highlights the rigidity of the game’s own power structures and the limits they place upon the player.⁶

In this and other situations, the player-character is generally positioned as not being in complete alignment with the law—at least, possessing some (implied) autonomy. In order to move around in the city, however, even the player-character must be subject to the law. For example, being observed stealing turns guards hostile in all three games. The suggestion that one may be subject to law, forced to accept its authority, but not identifying with it, is contemplated in both *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. In the latter, one could eventually choose to side with the rebels, overthrowing Imperial authority. In *Baldur’s Gate* too, one can join the Thieves’ Guild and evade the Flaming Fist on Thieves’ Guild Quests, as well as being ‘wanted’ for a

⁶ Mateusz Felczak discusses the two sources of law and the contest for a “monopoly on violence” in *Baldur’s Gate*, in Benjaminian terms; the game’s law thus checks a player-character’s law-making autonomy (2016).

brief part of the main quest (having too low a reputation will also result in one's party being 'wanted' by the law).

Despite the suggestion of the possibility of resistance inherent in the nostalgic communality of the square, then, the brutality on display suggests a time when "the logic of exemplary punishment" (Hindle 2002, 121) was a cornerstone of law enforcement. These instances deliver consolation for the irreconcilable difference that still separates us from the neomedieval vision.⁷ Where both Derrida and Foucault would seek to question this idea of 'progress,' these games might offer a compensatory prize—through a reminder of a seemingly more brutal time—for not living in the idyllic vision of a neomedieval world: a comfortable coming-to-terms with distance.

This suggests another strand of 'neomedievalism,' which invokes an abject and brutal 'Other' in contrast to which "contemporary Western hegemony" seems to emerge as justified, "always in the right" (Lukes 2014, 4). The games negotiate between the two neomedievalisms identified by Daniel Lukes that partially correspond to two contrasting neomedieval perceptions of the historical medieval as an "age of multiple renaissances and renewal" on the one hand, and as a "dark and chaotic past" on the other (Çetiner-Öktem 2009, 52).

Marketplace

The neomedieval marketplace is reminiscent of a Bakhtinian vision of democratising vibrancy, associated with the marketplace as a centre for collective participation and mingling in the social life of the city (1984). Indeed, the marketplace is often not clearly distinct from the square, though the location(s) may be differentiated in terms of function. Like the tavern, the marketplace tends to be a site for entertainment and performance. Waukeen's Promenade in *Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn* (BioWare 2000) includes a circus tent. In the DLC chapter *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt—Blood and Wine* (CD Projekt Red 2016), once Geralt completes the Of Shears and a Witcher side quest, the quest-giving poet Le Papillon is to be found in Beauclair's marketplace, declaiming Geralt's feats to the crowd. Again, the outcome of the side quest A Portrait of the Witcher as an Old Man is the player-character's portrait being displayed to the throng in the marketplace.⁸ The "marketplace feast," Bakhtin

7 Gatrell writes ironically about such comfortable distancing: "Our times bear little relationship to those, it implies; progress in this as in other realms is achieved. [...] How could those people have done that to each other? How we have advanced since then!" (1994, 11).

8 In early modern London, the older urban space for communal life and participation co-existed for a while with a "prototypical culture industry," where traditional participatory social life faced a "significant challenge" from the emergence of the "cultural consumer"

suggests, “opposed the [...] unchanging established order and ideology, and stressed the element of change and renewal” (ibid., 81). This again testifies to a nostalgia for a time that is opposed to the univocal homogeneity of the late capitalist supermarket (Alexander et al. 1977, 247).

Yet, despite their celebrated room for diversity, marketplaces nonetheless display more reliable similarity than differences across these games—both visually and in the way they function. The player-character is likely to seek out and regularly return to the marketplace, to trade loot for new equipment. In a city marketplace, one might find a greater concentration of specialised merchants than in more provincial villages.

The marketplace offers a peculiarly capitalist challenge to stability. The marketplace, in these games, fulfils a double function. It is a nexus that connects the player-character within the system of currency and exchange that characterises commerce, and, as such, it invokes the exchanges of the capitalist market wherein the game itself is a product. We can recall Lukes’ description of the neomedieval as “that total world in which all is shockingly other yet also uncannily familiar” (2014, 5). The player already knows the rules governing such exchanges, and applies the same logic in both contexts. At the same time, one might also find ‘underground’ means to circumvent this capitalist system. The Thieves’ Guilds in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Baldur’s Gate*, for example, offer an alternative network—an opting-out of the accepted rules of exchange, through their own network of fences, and pickpocketing or stealing.

Arguably, what we get in these games is a vision of the city on the cusp of development from feudal to capitalist—an approximately ‘early modern’ arrangement where political and economic power no longer fully coincide, and where trade, small businesses, and a budding market are emerging as competing centres of authority and economic power alongside the traditional institutions of a more monolithic structure (see Higgins 1997, 81). The latter find visual representation in the grandeur of certain buildings, seeming to betoken stability, while shops and market stalls proliferate around them—where the state emerges “not as a static totality [...] but as diverse and changing, the site of profound contradictions” (Sinfield 1985, 265).

Though the marketplace, and its carnivalesque potential for subversion, are frequently contained within a defined space—Waukeen’s Promenade in *Baldur’s Gate 2* is clearly walled about, and the market of the city Riften in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is ringed by the surrounding architecture—in some games this demarcation is less clear. The market’s logic is sometimes seen to have infiltrated other domains. Trade is

(Bristol 1997, 244). *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* again recalls a time of transition and intersecting traditions—where performance occurs before a paying audience (sometimes vocal in response) in taverns, marketplace, but also in a dedicated space apart. Geralt, at various points, both sits in the audience and participates in the performance (e.g. in the main quest The Play’s the Thing).

a crucial determining factor in organising power relations in *Baldur's Gate*—not just within the main city (where the market is relatively dispersed in the form of scattered shops) but also in the network of relations between towns and cities in the world—in a main quest line that centres on the nefarious power-grabbing trade operations of the Iron Throne under Sarevok.

Historically, economic power was interwoven with other kinds of power, such as shows of military or legal force: “City walls obviously had a military function. [...] But the wall had other functions as well, for the system of fortifications had come into being largely to give city officials some control over the flow of goods and people in and out of their community” (Friedrichs 1995, 22). In England, a town’s right to hold a market was dependent on its having a pillory in the marketplace (Andrews 1896, 202).⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche foregrounds a close relation between penal law and commerce—suggesting that commercial law sets the model (2012; see also Derrida 2014, 153–54). We see a reflection of this idea in *Baldur's Gate*, where the Flaming Fist Headquarters—essentially a privatised police force, composed of mercenaries—is located in the same city quarter (South West) as the Merchants’ League Estate.

Tavern

The third urban site we discuss here—the tavern—is a space where the competing powers of hierarchised traditional authority and the market meet in joint conviviality or the occasional brawl. Indeed, while the square sometimes stages conflict between the different centres of power, these seem to ‘get on’ with less friction in the tavern. Power relations seem generally more negotiable—even horizontalised—in the tavern. In effect, taverns are pockets governed by an alternative order—where criminals and law-abiding citizens are equally received: “the alehouse offered a virtually institutionalized challenge to governmental ambitions for a well-ordered society” (Sharpe 1977, 102). For example, in *Baldur's Gate*, the Flaming Fist under NPC Officer Vai takes up home at the Jovial Juggler tavern in Beregost, paying bounties for bandit scalps. At the same time, a relaxation of the rules of social conduct extends, in the games in question, to the range of permissible behaviour the player can engage in. While fighting within the city bounds in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* will generally incur a reprimand from the city guards, brawling is permitted in some taverns. *Baldur's Gate 2* even goes as far as having ‘fighting pits.’

It is typically a place of respite and recovery, where the player retires when they are low on health—allowing a momentary pause in the progress of the quest. For example,

9 Executions in England tended to coincide with market-day (Gatrell 1994, 58).

resting in *Baldur's Gate* is one of the primary means of regaining lost health, while, in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, resting at an inn confers the “Well Rested” status, providing an experience boost. Writing about that most famous of dramatic examples of the tavern in William Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, plays otherwise filled with war and violence, Marjorie Garber notes the tavern’s association with “timelessness”, “pleasure” and “disorder”—implying a sense of inconsequentiality, and contrasting with history’s relentless drive in terms of “consciousness of time” (2004, 325). The tavern is a space where the pace might be different—it is also a space where one can often recruit new companions, listen to bards, play mini-games (like *Gwent* in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*), receive gossip, pick up quests, and engage in brawling challenges. This suggests a free space of play that accommodates fluidity: “There was also a ludic element within early modern popular culture, expressed in various forms of transgression, social inversion, and excess” (Bristol 1997, 234). However, just as in the marketplace, this freedom is also enabled and supported by a commercial system of transaction—gossip, for example, is not freely volunteered by the innkeepers and publicans in *Baldur's Gate* but exchanged in a bartering system—where one can buy more expensive drinks to increase the chance of information that opens onto a side quest.

The tavern is often more localised and closely linked to district, which makes it seem a neighbourhood haven, binding a community, as well as welcoming travellers passing through—the kind of place capable of evoking a warmly nostalgic sense of belonging. However, this localised aspect also underscores social distinctions, such as socio-economic ones. In Novigrad in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, for example, the contrast between the upper-class western district of Gildorf and the slum in the eastern part of the city known as The Bits, which Gildorf literally overshadows, is embodied in the contrast between the ostentatious luxury of the Passiflora tavern and brothel and the rundown, shady Nowhere Inn.¹⁰ In the same way, the unsavoury Copper Coronet in Athkatla’s Docks district is sharply distinct from Waukeen Promenade’s Mithrest Inn in *Baldur's Gate 2*. These examples also suggest that the flattening of the social order we considered earlier as characteristic of the tavern has its limits.

10 In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, the variety and distinctive character of different taverns has even led to one tongue-in-cheek travelogue-style list of recommendations (MacLeod 2018).

Conclusion

The three locations we have considered—the square, the marketplace and the tavern—are typical of the fantasy RPG city. Although we have not focused upon it here, the design of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s capital city of the Orlesian Empire, Val Royeaux, demonstrates this typicality in a distilled way (» Fig. 3). It is pared down to the elements selected as essential—the marketplace-square is central, and symbols of official authority are integrated into it; its political and commercial importance in the world



Fig. 3 Val Royeaux marketplace-square, in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

are marked by, for example, plaques on monuments targeting tourists and visitors—diegetically suggesting its status as a place of exchange and cultural tourism, and serving to fill in lore for the player. The gallows stands in the marketplace-square, and is the central feature in a later companion quest, where the player-character's jurisdiction (literally acting as judge in the Inquisition) overtly competes with the official jurisdiction. The marketplace extends its tendrils to dominate other areas of the city. The cafés/tavern are visually foregrounded.¹¹

11 The player's ability to explore Val Royeaux in this game is, however, mostly limited to the more affluent areas.

The three locations represent different, competing configurations of the power relations determining the social sphere of the neomedieval imagination. By tracing these power relations, we can identify competing arrangements of the centralised, feudal power structures of the Middle Ages on the one hand, and the emerging forces of capital and the market on the other.

The player-character is very much a participant within these power relations—positioned as a witness to the executions in Hierarch Square in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, engaging in market transactions, competing in the tavern brawls in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, and so on. At the same time, though these spaces might represent a nostalgia for communal spaces and life, the player-character is almost inevitably an outsider (Vella and Bonello Rutter Giappone 2018). This reflects the player's own position as a visitor—participating in the game world but not belonging to it. It is this double existence which aligns with the inherent duality Boym identifies in reflective nostalgia: the player is incorporated as a participant in the games' neomedieval domains, but is also able to reflect upon them from the outside.

The spaces considered here, precisely because they are so contested and therefore already predisposed to accommodating heterogeneity within a collective meeting place, are also where the player-character as a 'stranger' may appear to be most at home—the hospitality of the tavern, the cultural and commodity exchange of the marketplace, and gatherings in the square. The 'tourist' player thereby shares in the nostalgically longed-for participatory dimension of city-living.

This also points to a paradox that frames the inter-contextual relation: this nostalgic imaginary, cast as an antidote (offering both escapism and the possibility of critique or dissent) to modernity (and we could add, post-modernity) by Tolkien, is itself mediated and enabled by advances in technology, and, of course, by the system of capital, industrial production, and labour practices that is intertwined with, and makes possible, the technologies and production practices of commercial game development. The nostalgic distance generated may work to make us good consumers of a commodified dream of the past (a dream that re-stages the 'historical' transition into the social and economic conditions of capitalism), and (often at the same time) provoke us to critique the present by reflecting on what appears to have been lost—ironically, through the consumption of the products, and the participation in the cultural and technological practices of, the contemporary neoliberal moment within which we are situated.

Figures

Fig. 1: Screenshot by the authors (CD Projekt Red 2015).

Fig. 2: Screenshot by the authors (Phoenix Online Publishing 2014).

Fig. 3: Screenshot by the authors (Electronic Arts 2014).

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