Sacred Places and Spatial Design in Fantasy-themed Isometric cRPGs

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The aim of this analysis is to assess the spatial narratives evoked by sacred architecture in digital games. The scope of the research is limited to those computer Role Playing Games (shortened, cRPGs) which implement isometric, top-down perspective. The focus on non-(full)3D environments is motivated by some specific narrative and level design solutions implemented in such games, that affect the orientational agency (Carr 2003) of the players' characters while taking advantage of various forms of environmental storytelling (Fernández-Vara 2011). In the analysis, I will concentrate on the issues of space, verticality, map layouts in relation to sacred objects and buildings, and other means of connecting games' mechanics with interactive and non-interactive elements of sacred architecture. This research treats the definition of architecture quite broadly, including sacred structures of various types and origins (Wescoat/Ousterhout: xxi), incorporating human(oid) and environmental agency alike.

The main sections of this analysis concern two distinct modes of facilitating meaningful narratives and interactions through the introduction of sacred architecture and spatial design. First one focuses on temples, shrines and other places that are situated in a clearly defined space within the (graphic representation of the) game world. Second one refers to places which quasi-religious provenience is suggested rather than directly communicated through labelling performed on the level of graphical interface, which makes their in-game representation more open to themes of ruination, non-human agency and references to the (oftentimes ancient) history of a particular region. While clearly signalled sacred spaces encompass fully functional – from both narrative and mechanical standpoints – religious facilities, the implied and non-obvious sacred grounds are communicated through environmental storytelling and non-direct references to the in-game lore.

In the following section, I will present the reasoning behind the selection of titles for this study, key concepts of sacred spaces used in the research as well as a general overview of the theoretical underpinnings.

Introducing the Spiritual Spatiality

I focus predominantly on the fantasy-themed titles, with a few examples taken from post-apocalyptic games for the sake of comparison. The research material encompasses games based on the *Dungeons&Dragons* license: Infinity Engine titles such as the *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare since 1998) and *Icewind Dale* (BioWare since 2000) series, as well as their indirect continuations featured in the *Pillars of Eternity* (Obsidian Entertainment since 2015) series. Staying true to the cRPG genealogy, several examples are referring other games in the genre, especially *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* (Troika Games 2001) and *Tyranny* (Obsidian Entertainment 2016). The rationale behind this selection follows the crucial differences in conceptualizing religion and spirituality when it comes to fantasy-themed and science-fiction/post-apocalyptic titles, the two categories that comprise the majority of isometric cRPGs. Lars de Wildt puts forward that "science fiction-based religions indicate a radical and unacknowledged ontological shift in the perspective on religion: religious, spiritual or occult phenomena are no longer located in nature (as in history- or fantasy-based religion), but in a man-made technological world" (Wildt 2020: 141). Although there have been some interesting instances of fantasy-themed cRPGs where on the narrative level metaphysics got intertwined with the very material cultural output of past civilizations (as in the *Pillars of Eternity* series), searching for the ghost in the machine has indeed been reserved for the settings closer to the modern-day level of technological advancement.

Following the seminal work of Clara Fernández-Vara, this analysis is based on the premise that "spaces are one of the obvious bridges between narrative and games" (2011: 2) and that they "can evoke and construct a narrative experience while navigating a space". Building on the work of Henry Jenkins, Fernández-Vara argues that space can be conceptualized through its "basic qualities" which are "movement, contests, and exploration" (Fernández-Vara 2015: 101). Many of the religious themes explored in this paper stem from the Jenkins' notion of environmental storytelling in game design, where "organizing the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution" (Jenkins 2007: 58). These in-game spaces are "rule-based" (Fernández-Vara 2015: 101), and signalling religious undertones through the cohesive application of particular architectural or environmental traits is a common strategy in designing challenges within digital games. Spatial narratives are arguably in the centre of meaning-making associated with digital games, although the idea of a 'sacred space' is not as easily transferred into the realms of digital worlds. Given the divergent definitions of religious objects, understanding the in-game sacred spaces poses similar problems to describing the 'sacredness' of space in contemporary world; Douglas Hoffman claims that "a definition of sacred space is tantamount to expressing the ineffable, presenting the unpresentable, or describing the divine, which in many cultures and faiths is taboo" (2010: 2). This research aims to disentangle the meanings – and functions – of sacred spaces in a very specific, now largely derelict type of digital games, and as such tries to contribute to the ongoing discussions on the modes of translating the religious themes, expressions and spatial design into the medium which imposes significant technological and discursive constraints on the ways in which such process can materialize in a

finished, interactive product. The overarching premise of the rationale followed here is that "the game's topographical arrangement – and the shape into which it moulds the player's path – can become the narrative's chief organising principle" (Vella 2011: 1).

There is a special perspective through which players explore sacred architecture in isometric-style cRPGs. As many of these titles have a fixed and non-adjustable camera view, oftentimes only two out of four walls in a given room or building interior are on full display. This results in the rest of the space – often unexplorable or even altogether obscured from the view – being transformed into an implied space, a space which by default should 'inherit' the properties of the elements which are normally visible to the players. The older Infinity Engine titles use this constraint in creative ways, introducing multi-faced rooms with numerous walls, interactive panels and non-standard cubature. However, the cRPG sacred places are rather tame and conservative in their spatial design, with more architectural leeway being given in locations where the narrative extravaganza is amplified by some form of a non-obvious environmental design, such as in the Spellhold Asylum in *Baldur's Gate II*.

There is a connection between the projected verticality to establish hierarchical, architectural order, and the rationale behind placing temples and other graphically distinct sacred spaces on the maps of particular locations. Temple of Yondalla, dedicated to the Halfling's Goddess, in *Baldur's Gate I*, is placed within a short travel distance to the game's biggest and most intricate dungeon crawl, the Durlag's Tower, which allows players to access its crucial services (e.g. identifying items and resurrecting fallen party members) with relative ease during the time-consuming exploration of its four underground levels. However, other spatial dynamics are often employed with relation to sacred places: from the division of the sacred area itself into different sections to delineating sacred space through religious artifacts, various design strategies were employed to convey the meaning associated with religious architecture.

Possible strategies to explore sacred places are afforded to the players by the in-game architecture: growth in strength of an individual adventuring party member is inextricably tied to the progress made in the understanding of spatial design. The logic of gradually acquiring special insights and unveiling what remained hidden at the beginning of the journey is a recurring theme in isometric RPGs. In *The Temple of Elemental Evil* (Troika Games 2003), the first major location inside the titular temple is The Throne Room which contains a secret passage revealed at the end of the game, allowing the party to face the final confrontation. Similar logic is employed in the way in which Temple of Tempus is implemented within the *Icewind Dale*'s narrative arc. This time, the sacred place is available to be partially explored at the beginning of the journey, but it hides a mystery reveled in the very last chapter of the game. As argued by Jonathan Z. Smith, the sacredness of a particular space is inextricably connected with the potential to perform rituals within its borders (1988: 18). The common feature of the titles analyzed in this chapter is that they connect in-game actions with religious rituals that unlock new spatial dimensions of the in-game world.

In the subsequent parts of my analysis, I would refer to the works of Jeanne H. Kilde who writes about a specific "power dynamics" in Christian architecture (2008: 4). According to her studies, church buildings are considered "dynamic agents" in the process of cultivation and preservation of formalized manifestations of faith. She enumerates three

types of power associated with sacred spaces: divine, social, and personal The first one is a direct consequence of such space being a home of a supernatural force, often personified and possessing a fixed set of properties and characteristics. Social power is tied with hierarchies and division between the clergy and lay persons inhibiting a given area, and personal power comes from a personal experience of visiting a shrine or a temple. I would argue that such agonistic take on the sacred spaces fits well with their contextualization in cRPGs, and this tripartite framework will inform the rationale presented in the following sections.

Sacred spaces can also be considered places of transcendence, where architectural elements prompt a re-framing of our senses towards the un-earthly beings and ideas. This notion can be explored through the idea of 'nondirected attention' that is evoked when one contemplates or slowly immerses in the natural surroundings while subsuming to their calming and healing powers, which Rebecca Krinke associates with the set of architectural inspirations observed in Christian and Shinto buildings (2015: 48). The architectonics of sacred spaces in videogames can be – and oftentimes is – embedded in the digital representations of nature, and comparison between the urban-themed sacred space and sacred outdoor areas can help to bring forward their distinctive teleologies: how they serve both a mechanical and narrative role in proving players with explanations regarding the purpose of the gameplay and even underscoring the whole worldbuilding aspect of a fictional, digital universe.

Sacred City, Sacred Architecture

The overarching idea that informs the particular conceptualization and interpretation of sacred architecture in this paper refers to the notions of modularity and interactivity. For the sake of this analysis, sacred spaces are treated as objects built from the components that constitute integral building blocks of the gameplay. This approach allows to assess the temples, chapels and sacred natural areas according to their **explorability**, interactivity and general purpose defined by both the narrative and mechanics of a particular title. The somehow formulaic architecture of sacred objects in games lies partially in their asset-driven modularity: once the design framework defining the features of a given object has been established, it could be easily modified to fit diverse range of environmental design purposes.

In Athkatla, the main city hub of *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, at least one temple is present in six out of eight map areas. Although most of them are somehow connected with minor or major quests, their architectonic structure mainly allows for a convenient placement of key NPCs (non-player characters) who are usually permanently allocated to their designed spots. Top-down perspective favours more open spaces, and separate rooms or hidden areas are scarce. Interestingly, active temples in cities rarely suggest a division between the prayer-and service space and 'sacred' space reserved for the presence of high clergy. Conversely, if the temple interiors are more extensive and contain any points of interest for players to discover, their architecture makes a clear distinction between the part which blends with the surrounding architecture of the city and the part which must be accessed (in most cases – descended into) separately. Examples of this

spatial trope can be witnessed in the first iteration of *Pillars of Eternity*, where both Temple of Eothas in Gilded Vale and Woedica Temple in Defiance Bay look like small and inconspicuous ruins on the area map. Additionally, the underground temple trope in cRPGs is closely tied to dungeon-esque spatial design stemming from the classic *D&D*-based role-playing games, where the interconnected corridors and a mixture of confined and commodious rooms provide a playground maze for players' parties to explore.

Commenting on the neomedieval architecture of computer RPGs, Daniel Vella and Krista Giappone observe that "power relations seem generally more negotiable –even horizontalized –in the tavern" (Bonello Rutter Giappone/Vella 2021: 108). Similar conclusion can be drawn with regards to the temples where NPCs representing very different social strata share the same space. Especially in *Dungeons&Dragons*-based games, clergy and official religious figures to be found in temples and sacred objects usually perform a set of functions regardless of their denomination. Some items offered for sale may differ according to the assigned alignment of the deity worshipped in a particular area, but the services remain consistent across clergy associated with 'evil', 'neutral' or 'good' deities.

Conveying religious meaning in the fantasy-themed games rarely happens without the evocation of the myth and mythic-esque narrative structures so persuasively introduced in the popular writings of Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell that have been hugely influential in shaping the key texts of contemporary popular culture. Eliade's interpretation of the rationale behind the spatiality of sacred places reveals the desire of evoking a special realm that is not bound by the earthly constraints of the everyday life. As he writes in *The Sacred and the Profane,*

> The intention that can be read in the experience of sacred space and sacred time reveals a desire to reintegrate a primordial situation – that in which the gods and the mythical ancestors were present, that is, were engaged in creating the world, or in organizing it, or in revealing the foundations of civilizations to man. (Eliade 1959: 91–92)

Sacred space in digital games oftentimes mirrors this desire of unmediated agency – the temples and sacred sites quite literally amplify the divine presence and its tangible manifestations. The idea of an understated, albeit always present and extremely pervasive notion unifying the multitude of religions, cultural customs and formative narratives at their ideological and cultural core has been utilized also as one of the foundations of computer role-playing games from the isometric era. Interestingly, this can be seen not only in games repeating the framework of the Campbell's **hero's journey** (Campbell 1973) or relying on essentialist understanding of religious needs to facilitate hierarchical social structure underpinning their fantasy settings, but also in the level- and environmental design of these titles. The aforementioned religion historian and phenomenologist Mircea Eliade has been criticized on the basis of his essentialist approach to the practices of spirituality:

> The romanticism that influences theories of religion like Eliade's ignores modern linguistics, and "impeaches the status of language in order to preserve ontology from

> anthropology and maintain the privilege of unmediated, direct experience". (Apple 2013: 49)

It can be argued that the spatial and symbolic unity which Eliade tries to establish between the common dwellings, everyday artifacts of domestic culture and sacred spaces is represented more accurately in the digital worlds of cRPGs rather than in the actual historic data. This "unmediated" experience of religion in cRPGs manifests in several ways. First, the presence of religious artifacts of a very tangible – and, to some extent, commodified – power is tied to the temple shops, where players can obtain items imbued with certain divine magic. Second, and this pertains more to the post-apocalyptic titles, sacred spaces are where players can meet 'religious' people; not just priests, but also lay persons who can usually be interrogated about their beliefs. Third, the de-contextualized presence of religion devoid of anthropological ambiguities and individual practices permeates games as systems, as the cohesive and clear-cut features of the key religious actors are crucial in conveying a narrative that would be at the same time immersive and relatively unconvoluted. Players' clear understanding of fictional spiritual practices is secondary to their grasp on religion as a system – which is a crucial worldbuilding component in many narratives.

If the architecture of sacred places is multi-layered and requires active engagement from the players, it usually means that a quest-driven narrative structure takes over the worldbuilding and lore-heavy exposition, the traditional two surface elements of temples in cRPGs. Such locations **de facto** serve as dungeons in more combat-oriented tabletop systems, where each room is filled with enemies to vanquish and puzzles to solve. The religious, lore-driven spatial narrative is substituted with exploratory desire motivated by a very tangible outcome: a material reward for players' expenses in the shape of rare artifacts and other lootable goods. However, the openness to pillage and murder in most cases connects with the fact that a given dungeon has been previously defiled and forcefully taken over by some evil creatures, and now the players' agenda is to somehow purify its desacralised whereabouts. The lingering aura of mystery in the gaming representations of religious architecture remains largely disconnected from the social and communal dimensions characterizing their real-life counterparts. It can be argued that "the architecture of virtual worlds […] suggests cathedrals or mosques or pagodas without being identical to physical religious buildings" (Shut 2014: 270), albeit such mimetic resemblances in fantasy-themed cRPGs first and foremost signal their narrative functions rather than reference any concrete religious system. In addition to spatial properties, players may also get audial clues as to what to expect from a newly discovered sacred area; in *Baldur's Gate II*, temples devoted to Talos and Lathander each have very distinct sound sets.

Even though it is quite clear that "religion […] serves as a source of magic, quests and items in fantasy games like *Skyrim* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*" (de Wildt/Aupers 2020: 1444), the role of in-game artifacts in establishing and delineating the borders of sacred spaces remained largely unexplored by the game studies scholars. To investigate the relevance of cult objects and artifacts in cRPGs, it may be useful to assess the instances in which the conventional spatial narratives associated with sacred spaces are modified and designed to transgress their utilitarian role. Prominent examples can be experienced in

Baldur's Gate II and include two major quest lines (*The Cult of the Unseeing* and *The Deaths in the Umar Hills*) located in areas related to Amaunator, the god of order, sun, law, and time[1].

In the canonical *Forgotten realms* timeline, after the fall of the Netheril empire, Amaunator essentially became a dead deity, and as a result the sacred places devoted to him do not offer any services. Quests linked to the former cult areas of the Yellow God employ spatial narratives connected with verticality: players' party must descend into the underground to fight off evil forces and restore the order. The common denominator for both of the questlines are items that need to be retrieved and assembled to successfully accomplish the tasks. The Rift Device Rod and the Symbol of Amaunator motivate the exploration of the underground areas, but their key role is to indicate the borders of the sacred spaces. Once used, Rift Device must be brought back to the underground temple, and any attempts to leave the dungeon with the item in the inventory result in the main protagonist being turned into dust. Conversely, the Symbol of Amaunator allows to enter the inner sanctum of the Temple Ruins, giving players access to resolve the quest and battle the main antagonist who corrupted the now-defunct temple. In both of these quests, the items marked with special religious importance are employed to signify the vertical delineation of the sacred and the profane, which would otherwise be very hard to achieve in an isometric cRPG. Here, the divine power gets intertwined with the personal power associated with religious space, and the idea of sacralisation of space through the human activity (Kilde 2008: 8) prevails against the sacredness understood as being established through hierophany which "reveals an absolute fixed point", an ontologically undisputable centre of religious presence (Eliade 1959: 21). Whereas *The Cult of Unseeing* makes players descend into the sewers of the Temple District in the city of Athkatla, the exploration of the Temple Ruins requires venturing into the wilderness first. The next step in my analysis of the spatial design of sacred spaces in cRPGs moves beyond the confined and organized areas marked by the presence of civilization, venturing instead into the realm where the discourses of primordiality, nature and sacredness are interlaced in conveying religion-related narratives.

Sacred Nature, Sacred Landscape

Referring back to Campbell's and Eliade's persuasive usage of the myth, it can be noted that it could be implemented to link the environmental 'sacredness' with the understanding of religion as a culturally significant system of beliefs. Elizabeth Parker comments that myth "carries a sense of both antiquity and yet fluid contemporaneity. This delineation makes sense when we think of the forest environment: it is a setting in which we imagine a multitude of myths to have occurred in the past, and yet imagine, now, that we may yet encounter them" (2020: 38). Wild lands in classic cRPGs are the realm of systemic religious pliability. Contrary to the cityscapes, there is no hierarchical verticality that would impose an order of exploration (and exploitation) of sacred spaces,

1 https://forgottenrealms.fandom.com/wiki/Amaunator. Accessed 27 August 2023.

and signs of ruination blend in with the quasi-romantic aesthetic flavour of picturesque landscapes.

Parker aptly notes that "the forest […] has been widely construed as an *antichristian space*", and "religion in the woods is usually presented as skewered and […] the epitome of this is to be found in the significantly persistent image of the forest as a perverted Eden" (2020: 272). This is symptomatic in the instances when clergy or religious figures are spotted outside the sacred spaces; *Baldur's Gate*'s Bassilus, a mad cleric of Cyric who takes the undead around him for his family, dwells in one of the game's numerous wilderness areas (also known as Red Canyons) among the stony ruins, which is an architectural sign of both his moral and functional deterioration. It is important to note that abandoned temples, churches and other religious buildings in cRPGs actively use ruination as an aesthetic strategy to evoke **Ruinensehnsucht**, a specific longing for deteriorated remnants of architecture (cf. Fuchs 2016), calling for both exploration and contemplation. A 'sacred' space analogous to Red Canyons stony ruins in *Baldur's Gate* can be found in Larswood map, where two characters approach players' party with a rather malicious intent. In the official wiki, this location is curiously considered a "construction site of a druidic shrine"[2], which links to the other, rarely explored, albeit interesting trope connected with visual and narrative signs of desacralisation: positioning and labelling religious locations as 'excavation sites' of archeological importance. We can witness the prevalence of this trope whenever there is a narrative need to justify the excursion to remote places in the corners of a particular game world map. There is no coincidence that the temple ruins oftentimes remain outside the scope of the in-game civilization; one can hardly find examples of abandoned (and haunted, or taken over) buildings and sacred sites within the city space, as if the architectural and metaphysical signifiers of religion gradually lose their meaning along with their proximity to the in-game cultural hubs. The only obvious exceptions to this are locations beneath the city, but their very presence is often a threat to the aboveground 'civilized' religions. Here, another prevalent trope is confirmed: only the monsters are truly at home in the open nature – this statement resonated even in the very heart of nature-admiring romantic movement (Heringman 2004: 80), where the aesthetical roots of classic Western fantasy imagery arguably stem from.

Temples and sacred places are oftentimes also teleological in their design. The Temple of Trials in *Fallout 2* (Black Isle Studios 1998) is perhaps the most striking example of the utilitarian approach to supposedly sacred architecture devoid of nearly any spiritual, narratively embedded meaning, although fantasy-themed titles also have their share in using dungeon-esque spatial design under the guise of religious architecture. Some digital games include visual and narrative clues that link the journey of the hero through the in-game spaces with the advancement towards the godhood. For example, Jared Hansen explored the resemblance of "patterns of progression" from the profane to the sacred in traditional Shinto, Buddhist and Christian architecture in relation to the spatial representation of character's gradual empowerment in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD 1998) (Hansen 2021). However, most fantasy-themed isometric cRPGs assert the hero's journey through dialogues and encounters rather than spatial signs, and religious coding of isometric dungeons plays a secondary role to testing the players' combat

2 https://baldursgate.fandom.com/wiki/Osmadi. Accessed 27 August 2023.

and negotiation skills. The Temple of the Forgotten God *in Icewind Dale* makes for another example of a sacred space which is in fact a linear dungeon devoid of any side quests, with only tangential evidence hinting at lore referring to Forgotten Realms pantheon[3]. The Temple is remote and requires rather long journey from the nearest hub of civilization, which signifies the presence of yet another recurring cRPGs trope: those sacred spaces which necessitate travelling through natural habitats are coded as explorable, albeit more or less inherently evil. Serpent's Lair Temple in *Icewind Dale II*, hidden among the Jungle of Chult, also follows the theme of Nature being a hiding place of rich and complex, yet perilous religious cults.

Among the most interesting instances of religious architecture strongly tied to the environment are locations where organic and non-organic nature is directly associated with a deity or someone possessing godlike powers. In *Tyranny*, there are at least two distinct maps built on such narrative premise: Howling Rock and Jagged Maw Shrine. Both are connected with Cairn, a powerful figure who has the ability to command the elements of the earth. Archon Cairn is literally buried among the rocks which make for the vast majority of the landscape, and the slow agony of the remnants of his living force is responsible for periodical earthquakes. Jagged Maw Shrine and the Archon himself are revered among the Beastmen, one of the local tribes. *Tyranny* unusually portrays the conflicting interests over the aforementioned areas: while some factions wish to conduct scientific experiments on the Cairn's petrified but still living body, others wish to end his suffering and stop the detrimental earthquakes. The complicated nature of this conflict, further amplified by the game's original take on including moral decisions into its narrative mechanics, highlights the multiple layers that can be considered in the assessment of a sacred space: its origins, history, present socio-political impact and even its possible deleterious environmental effect. This example underlines the social power contained within the sacred space – the power to facilitate group identity (in this case manifested in the Earthshakers faction residing in the area), but also the power to generate antagonisms between those arguing for a distinct form of divine presence and those denying its spiritual dimension altogether. In a sense, the sacredness of the aforementioned spaces is negotiable, and features an interesting clash between the scientific and spiritual approaches to religious dilemmas (cf. Pisarey 2020).

There are very few cRPG titles that connect religious tropes of mythical and science-fiction provenance, and *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*, a unique mixture of fantasy and steampunk, certainly counts among them. This title introduces a multi-staged quest that prompts players to visit the game's sacred locations in a particular order. *Arcanum* features twelve distinct altars located in different regions, each dedicated to one god or goddess and providing bonuses to the players' party when a suitable offering is made. Some of these places are just statues, sometimes linked to a mini-quest that needs to be completed to secure a reward. Here, the interesting element of spatial design refers to the specific idea of pilgrimage – travelling between sacred places to achieve a spiritual prize. The *Ancient Gods* quest requires a map that illustrates the connections and hierarchical order of shrines, and some lore-related proficiency is needed to avoid curses

3 One of the randomly generated treasures in the first level of the Temple are *Boots of Moander*, an artifact named after a long-forgotten (and considered dead as well as powerless) deity.

being imposed instead of blessings. Such digital pilgrimages can be considered just one of **allomytic**, that is "exploring nonexistent traditions" (Anthony 2014: 39), elements of interactive design. However, the spatial allocation of the interconnected altars and shrines reveals their role in environmental storytelling that supports the game's encounter design philosophy: both pacifist and extremely agonistic approach to gameplay are equally viable. An example of this is *Falcon's Ache*, a location of the Elven God of Wisdom altar, where each violent action by any character is immediately punished by death from the hand of gods for disturbing a sacred ground. Even given this condition, players' party can still verbally provoke a group of NPCs residing in the area, which – if played correctly – results in their demise after violating the laws of this place.

Conclusion

In the analysed titles, a certain structural cohesion and functionalization of sacred space is very noticeable. Allocating a teleological rationale behind the spirituality, religion and especially the design of sacred objects and locations underscores a bigger narrative frame through which these titles convey information about the lore, game world and even basic mechanics governing the gameplay. As insightfully observed by Leonid Moyzhes, in the *Baldur's Gate* series players must confront the fact of the god's absence – the death of the protagonist's father, who also happens to be the god of murder, strikes a peculiar postsecular note (2020: 75). The dialectics of presence and absence are extremely important in the construction of digital sacred spaces in cRPGs. The divine, social and personal power dynamics that constitute the meaning conveyed through spatial narratives are all employed in the cRPGs, and due to the unique aesthetics and design of these titles, the isometric cRPGs can be used to transgress the conventional spatial boundaries of sacred spaces, as demonstrated in the selected case studies.

The more defunct, ruined and abandoned the temple, shrine or monastery, the more agency it affords to the players. While exploration of sacred spaces does follow the general rules and key mechanics of the given game – in combat-oriented cRPGs the design of sacred architecture would be more focused on encounter design – city temples and aboveground structures of religious provenience are very different from the exploitable underground dungeons, even if both categories are narratively labelled as 'temples'.

The approach presented in this study has its limitations. As Jeanne Kilde observes, "although church spaces foster certain relationships and encourage certain behaviors, they do not necessarily require or determine those relationships and behaviors" (2008: 200), and similar conclusions pertain the digital game spaces. Isometric role-playing games historically asserted more agency to the players in terms of agonistic behaviour; plundering even functionally and mechanically uninteresting sacred places is usually possible without breaking the critical narrative path to successfully complete the game. Second limitation is tied to the historical accuracy and relevance of the in-game architecture from the perspective of heritage studies, which has not been assessed in this study. This issue would require a separate inquiry, as the topic at hand calls for a thorough mapping of sacred spaces against the architectural traits specific to a particular historical period.

In general, graphical conventions afforded by top-down view and party-based mechanics result in the architecture of sacred places being subsumed to the requirements of pathfinding and encounter design. Isometric cRPGs have to accommodate for the impact of interior design on both combat and non-combat encounters, where party placement and formation are crucial factors in achieving tactical advantage or initiating a dialog by a character developed to match such tasks. In the 3D, modern-day cRPGs – such as the third instalment of the *Baldur's Gate* series – the verticality and spatial design would arguably be employed to different ends than it has been the case in their isometric counterparts. Given the recent resurgence of the *Dungeons&Dragons* franchise (Sidhu/Carter 2020), future assessments of sacred digital spatiality in the upcoming fantasy-themed computer role-playing games have to take into account the evolving stance of this immensely influential system on religion and play. Inclusivity, diversity and the overhaul of traditionally combat-centred design approach could all play a pivotal role in the implementation of religious spatial tropes in digital RPGs.

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