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**Romantic Dissonance:  
(the Limits to) Wandering through Nature in Open World Role-  
Playing Videogames**

## Abstract

In the fields studying arts, Romanticism and the tendency of Romantics to escape everyday life into a perfect depiction of nature, often without leaving the house, is well-known with scholars. The fact that videogames seem to follow this trend has been neglected by many. Games allow for escapist tendencies as well as a new form of immersion, namely incorporation. Additionally, open world role-playing games offer players the means to wander through nature like flâneurs. Terms such as technoromanticism and electro-Romanticism have appeared, connecting Romanticism to technology and videogames, but these accounts remain theoretical. With the help of textual analysis as described by Fernández-Vara and instrumental/free play as provided by Glas & Van Vught, this thesis delves into the Romantic in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft*. For one, the aestheticisation of nature is noted, consisting of the visual style of nature as well as the fact that both games are built upon mostly pre-industrial worlds. When analysing the mechanics that allow or take away from the ability to enjoy the Romantic vistas, however, it is found that a certain type of dissonance arises, different from the ludonarrative dissonance that is usually discussed by academics. Although this is noted to happen between the ludic and narrative structures in games, with the MDA framework it is shown that dissonance can also take place between mechanics and dynamics, using the Romantic nature of these games and the available interactions with this as an example.

Keywords: Romanticism, videogames, ludonarrative dissonance, mechanics, dynamics, aesthetics

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	2
Introduction .....	4
Story versus simulation in ludonarrative dissonance .....	8
Romanticism: the traditional and the digital .....	11
Exploring open world role-playing games .....	14
Escapism, immersion and incorporation .....	14
Exploration .....	16
The Romantic Dissonance in Skyrim and World of Warcraft.....	18
Aestheticisation of nature .....	21
Exploring nature .....	24
Conclusion.....	31
Limitations and suggestions .....	33
Bibliography .....	35
Ludography .....	36
Figures .....	36

## Introduction

For a long time now, notions of Romanticism have perpetuated our society by making people wish to travel, to see different things, to be somewhere else. Videogames, a relatively modern medium, give their players the means to do just that. The Romantic longing for the past and for nature is also something that some games portray, in particular open world role-playing games that are lauded for their large virtual worlds filled with beautiful sceneries and the freedom they offer players. This freedom, however, also has its limits.

To give an example: imagine the sounds of water lapping at a shore, of birds whistling in their trees and the calming note of background music floating through the air. Standing at a lake in the middle of a forest, watching butterflies flutter by, one might almost forget that this is all ‘just a game’. To some it comes as no surprise that there is always someone’s avatar standing here, fishing on the pier at the Crystal Lake in Elwynn Forest. Except even in this virtual scenery, this Romantic setting filled with supposed calm and beauty in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), one cannot do this if one were a lower level character. The murlocs inhabiting the small isles in the lake are aggressive and will attack anyone with a level similar to their own on sight. Amidst all the peace, imagine a sudden gurgling war cry from behind as a meter-high, humanoid fish monster rushes to attack the avatar. This can ruin the sensation of peace and quiet that the previous description exuded.



Fig. 1: Crystal Lake in Elwynn Forest and its aggressive inhabitants.

This can be seen as an example of ludonarrative dissonance: “a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story” (Hocking 2007) but also described as a form of emersion – as opposed to immersion – or “the sensation of being pulled out of the play experience” (Seraphine 2016, 2). After all, the player’s sense of immersion and attempts at Romantic role-playing are disrupted by the game’s mechanics. At the level of the game itself, however, there is no problem: the rules of the game cause the murloc to attack you, which fits the narrative of the world, since murlocs are known as aggressive creatures. Dissonance would rather be created if the murloc did not attack the player. In this case, there is balance between the game’s ludic structure and its narrative structure; thus, in this moment, the ludonarrative state of the game is in harmony. Even so, a sense of dissonance remains in that the game offers its players freedom – freedom to explore and roam and enjoy the environment like a flâneur in nature – while at the same time taking this away from them by enforcing other mechanics. With the use of the Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics (MDA) framework, the ludic structure was divided into mechanics and dynamics in order to demonstrate how these can work against each other in terms of gameplay (Hunicke et al. 2004).

In this thesis, ludonarrative dissonance will be discussed in relation to the elements of Romanticism that are visible in two open world role-playing games, namely *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) and the aforementioned *World of Warcraft*. The ways in which these games allow players to enjoy themselves in seemingly Romantic settings, combined with how this freedom might get taken away by the games, can be seen as a dichotomy between the story of the world and the mechanics of the game in a way that has not been elaborated upon before.

Romanticism has not often been connected to videogames. During the Romantic period, people wanted to escape the effects of the Industrial Revolution, from Enlightenment, from scientific objectivity (Casey 2008). As industrialisation continues to spread out, the wish to become one with nature grows as well. This is already a heavily-discussed topic in literature and art studies, and theories of technoromanticism (Coyne 1999) and electro-Romanticism (Wills 2002) have appeared, connecting elements of the movement to more contemporary forms of media. Others, such as Littlejohn (2012), have also linked Romanticism to modern practices such as digital animating, showcasing that there is still an interest in continuing to connect the dated movement to the modern. In Wills’s case, he does so directly with videogames, stating for instance that, “[a]s technological advances guaranteed greater processor power, videogame worlds came to resemble the canvases of Romantic-era painters in their favoring of grand wilderness displays” (2002, 400).

Open world role-playing games often consist of large, mediaeval-esque worlds filled with nature. These games also offer users freedom in that they can play the game on their own terms: they can create their own characters, set their own pace, do only the quests they wish to do. They offer a form of escapism to some, which has a negative connotation in that many people see games as “an avoidance of the “real,” in its varied manifestations” (Calleja 2010, 335). Calleja contradicts this by noting that escapism is relative, since it can be interpreted in various ways depending on one’s cultural background, making this a problematic term to use (2010, 347). Immersing oneself in a game is part of the experience of playing the game, and one might be able to see escapism as one of the possible consequences of this, although this does not necessarily have to be the case (Calleja 2010, 344).

The interactivity, visual nature and possible escapism in games are elements that connect videogames with Romanticism: players can take their time to explore various forms of nature and lose themselves in their surroundings. Additionally, there is also the paradox these returning Romantic notions assume in that this artificial nature “offers an illusionary escape from artificial lifestyles, [...] an electronic voyage for new Romanticists, a welcome break from industrialism, but reached only by technological interfacing” (Wills 2002, 405). This might then also be linked to videogames as a form of escapism, an explanation as to why so many gamers enjoy such games, as posited by Calleja (2010, 345). Furthermore, this research can help us understand game design in that it relays what elements recur in successful AAA<sup>1</sup> open world role-playing games, which seem to resemble Romantic ideas in that the games focus on pre-industrial, natural worlds where players have the option or perhaps even are encouraged to enjoy the scenery.

The research question in this thesis is: how do notions of Romanticism appear in open world role-playing games and what do they reveal about the balance between the ludic and narrative structures in these games, in other words: the ludonarrative state? As seen above, a harmonious ludonarrative state does not necessarily exclude the possibility of dissonance. The Romantic elements in games highlight a new type of ludonarrative dissonance that can take place, namely that between mechanics and dynamics. In this case, and as already stated by some (Seraphine 2016), the scheme of ‘ludic’ versus ‘narrative’ would become more complex than it currently is, both aspects consisting of more than just ‘mechanics’ and ‘main story’.

To answer this, in the first chapter, the question of how open world role-playing games, that are lauded for both their stories and the freedom they offer players, problematise the

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<sup>1</sup> AAA, or ‘triple A’, games is a term used to denote games developed with high budgets, often by larger companies in the industry. A comparison has been made between AAA games and blockbusters (Steinberg 2007).

concept of ludonarrative dissonance will be discussed. To connect the Romantic notions that these videogames seem to portray to the affordances of the game and the possibilities or limitations that this provides or causes, the discussion concerning ludonarrative dissonance will be delved into, starting with Hocking's coining of the term ludonarrative dissonance (2007) and moving on to more recent debates around the concept (Seraphine 2016). The MDA framework of Hunicke et al. (2004) will be used in order to offer a plausible alternative to Seraphine's incentives and directives.

The second chapter concerns the notions of Romanticism that are most forthcoming in these games. This will be done with the help of a general overview of what the core aspects of Romanticism are, namely connecting with nature, escaping life and returning to the past (Faflak & Wright 2012; Kohlenbach 2010; Masson 2009; Schmidt 2010; Seyhan 2010). Contemporary researchers have already made interesting discoveries in this field when it comes to connecting Romanticism to digital media, such as how current technological developments point towards certain Romantic ideas ("the global village and the electronic cottage invoke a return to the ideal of preindustrial arts and crafts" (Coyne 1999, 10)) or how games are canvases for digital artists, in this case programmers, to paint upon (Wills 2002, 400). With this, the current discourse surrounding this theme will be portrayed so that this thesis may find its place within this discussion and broaden the research done on modern incarnations of Romantic notions. The elements of Romanticism that will be the focus in this thesis are the portrayal of nature and the past in videogames, since this is what Wills concentrates on most (2010, 409), as well as their tendency to allow escapism. Escapism will be discussed since, as Calleja notes, this is an element that is often used in relation to videogames (2010, 335). This is also one of the links between games and Romanticism, which was also used to escape everyday life (Schmidt 2010, 21; Kohlenbach 2010, 260).

The ways in which open world role-playing games promote Romantic aspects in their gameplay will be noted in the third chapter. This will be done, firstly, with a discussion of the escapist qualities of videogames, something that links them to Romanticism in a rather specific manner, and the concept of immersion. After all, these two are related to each other in that "engagement with virtual environments" is often seen as a form of escapism, "without considering the particular qualities of the specifically situated engagement" (Calleja 2010, 344). This engagement, then, is debated by Calleja, who believes that there are too many different terms surrounding the same element – or one term surrounding various elements – and offers a unique alternative to videogames, namely incorporation (2011, 169). Afterwards the worlds of open world role-playing games will be brought up, since these seem like the perfect places to

escape to, with their vastness and the different ways one can explore these games (Švelch 2010; Atkinson & Willis 2007; Wills 2002).

Finally, to connect ludonarrative dissonance and Romanticism in these videogames, the fourth chapter contains an analysis of various aspects that allow for Romantic behaviour. First of all, the in-game world was explored while focusing on certain elements of gameplay that can be connected to the Romantic notions within these games. These aspects consisted of the aestheticisation of nature and the possible ways of moving through and interacting with this nature, and were used to find out whether and to what extent the games in question truly offer their players the freedom to enjoy this in whatever way they wish. This was then connected to the concept of ludonarrative dissonance in that a different form of dissonance arises, namely between mechanics and dynamics. In order to find this dissonance, the games were analysed via close reading, where “a specific aspect of a game” was chosen and broken down “into its basic elements” which, in this case, are those mentioned before (Fernández-Vara 2015, 200). The games were played both in an instrumental way, which requires players to “do what the game’s formal components are encouraging [them] to do so that [they] may progress through the game and achieve its goals”, as well as a more ‘free’ manner, where “players are not playing along to any set challenges or game objectives but freely engage in the to-and-fro movement of play” (Glas & Van Vught 2017, 6). This was done to find out how far the freedom these seemingly Romantic games offer their players truly goes. These research methods will be discussed in more depth in the fourth chapter.

### **Story versus simulation in ludonarrative dissonance**

Since Romanticism in videogames reveals a new kind of ludonarrative dissonance, the debate surrounding this concept will be laid out first. Afterwards, in the next chapters, Romanticism and its connection to videogames will be delved into, in order to eventually show this new kind of possible dissonance.

Hocking first described the term ludonarrative dissonance in relation to *Bioshock* (2k Games 2007), stating that it is “a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story” (2007). In this case, he specifically discusses the choices players can make versus the choices the story forces them to make: players are offered the possibility to play in a selfish manner, doing that which is best for their character, but this is taken away by the story, which forces players to help others. Since then, many scholars have built upon it. Ballantyne, for instance, compares ludonarrative dissonance to cognitive dissonance, stating that, whereas cognitive dissonance concerns one’s own beliefs, ludonarrative dissonance deals



with the imposed beliefs of the game (2015). Seraphine, on the other hand, describes ludonarrative dissonance as “the sensation of being pulled out of the play experience” (2016, 2). Both the narrative and the ludic structure consist of incentives and directives, and although Seraphine fails to give a concrete definition of these, he seems to imply that they point to what players are encouraged to do by the game and what they absolutely must do. The dissonance here is created when an incentive becomes a directive and come into conflict with each other (2016, 2). Seraphine, however, criticises the term in that it supposes that the player must identify with the beliefs of the character they are controlling. “Before diagnosing ludonarrative dissonance in a game,” Seraphine states, “one should maybe ask if the ludonarrative dissonance would still be there when the alterity of the controlled character is accepted by the player” (2016, 4). In this case, one would not be witnessing ludonarrative dissonance, but cognitive dissonance as discussed by Ballantyne.

When it comes to the Romantic aspects of *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft*, it becomes apparent that these give rise to a unique kind of dissonance: players are “pulled out of the play experience” they wish to create for themselves due to certain elements (Seraphine 2016, 2). Seraphine’s directives and incentives play a role in this, though this distinction leaves behind the narrative of the game, which is very much of importance here. Narrative is more than just the story of the game, the main quest, the journey to defeat the end boss. In the context of open world role-playing games as large as *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft*, in which the story can be unique in that every player decides when and what they do, the narrative encapsulates more than just the story. The world itself, after all, can be seen as a narrative as well. Ryan seems to claim as much when she states that games, “which are generally not played for the sake of their plot but frequently rely on concrete narrative examples – characters, setting, action, to lure players into the game” can be read in a narrative manner, despite the fact that they are not “narratives in either a diegetic or a strict mimetic sense” (2004, 333).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, others have written about game design as narrative. Jenkins, for example, believes that game designers “don’t simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces” (2004, 121). As such, games include evocative spaces that “draw upon our previously existing narrative competencies” and embedded narratives where “viewers assemble and make hypotheses about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues” (Jenkins 2004,

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<sup>2</sup> In literature, the matter of diegesis and mimesis can be summed up with the phrase ‘show, don’t tell’, in which mimesis stands for ‘showing’ and diegesis stands for ‘telling’. Examples of mimesis in videogames is everything one can see in a natural manner, whereas diegesis would be the information of the character’s health points, for instance.

124-126). In these cases, it is the world of the game itself that tells the story. Thus, visuals and the way in-game spaces are shown are also part of the narrative, which is especially important when it comes to Romanticism. The aestheticisation of nature is a crucial aspect of the movement, after all, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

If the narrative can be more complex than it seems, then perhaps the mechanics can, as well. Seraphine himself concludes the same with his distinction between directives and incentives. Because he does not give proper definitions, it is not clear what the relation between these is. The ludic incentive in *Bioshock* seems to be the choice players are given between helping people or not doing so, whereas Seraphine describes the fact that the game eventually forces players to aid others as the “narrative structure’s incentive – or rather directive” (2016, 2). Another example is a moment in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013), where companion Ellie is emotionally distant and must be comforted by player character Joel. Seraphine believes that this starts with a moment of ludonarrative dissonance in that Joel calls for Ellie, but she does not come, forcing Joel to find her instead. This, according to Seraphine, highlights the fact that the game “was hiding the narrative structure’s directives, behind changes in the ludic structure’s incentives” (2016, 7). The narrative directive would be that the player must comfort Ellie, the ludic incentive being that the player is encouraged to find her in order to clear the obstacle. Except the game does not give the player a choice: without reaching out to Ellie, players cannot continue, making it seem less of an incentive and more a directive. Perhaps the ludonarrative dissonance would instead come from Ellie reacting as usual, despite the narrative development. Ellie’s ludic directive – ‘come when Joel calls’ – would clash against her narrative – ‘Ellie is traumatised’. Additionally, narrative incentives seem hard to come by: how does the story ‘encourage’ players to act in a certain way instead of simply forcing them?

An alternative would be to use the MDA framework to discuss the ludic structures of a game, since this provides a well-defined understanding of the various elements that are involved in gameplay. It is also meant to be a “formal approach to understanding games – one which attempts to bridge the gap between game design and development, game criticism, and technical game research”, giving it a more applicable edge (Hunicke et al. 2004, 1). With the MDA framework, gameplay consists of an “interaction between coded subsystems” which create “complex, dynamic (and often unpredictable) behavior” (Hunicke et al. 2004, 1). The distinct components of videogames that Hunicke et al. note are the rules, the system and the ‘fun’, which they translate to the design counterparts mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics. Mechanics “are the various actions, behaviors and control mechanisms afforded to the player within a game context”, whereas dynamics are “the run-time behavior of the mechanics acting on player inputs

and each others' outputs over time" (Hunicke et al. 2004, 2-3). Aesthetics concerns the emotional responses that designers wish to provoke in players, but since dissonance is usually an unwanted response, this section is not relevant for this thesis. Examples of dynamics are "the ability to earn or purchase powerful weapons and spy equipment, and to develop tactics and techniques for stealthy movement, deceptive behavior, evasion and escape", and mechanics include "expansive tech and skill trees, a variety of enemy unit types, and levels or areas with variable ranges of mobility, visibility and field of view" (Hunicke et al. 2004, 5). With the MDA framework, a different type of dissonance will be discussed in the fourth chapter, namely the dissonance between dynamics and mechanics.

### **Romanticism: the traditional and the digital**

In this chapter, the most important notions of Romanticism will be reviewed so that they can be connected to videogames. Traditional scholars who discuss Romanticism as the movement it originally was, will be linked to those who use the term in a more modern and digital context. When Romanticism took root at the end of the eighteenth century, it was "simultaneously a cultural, political and socio-economic movement of revolutionary vision and ambition" (Seyhan 2010, 7). It was a reaction to the Enlightenment, the Classical, the French Revolution and Christianity. It criticised the world and pushed European life towards the modernised state it now finds itself in, reinforcing "the modern disintegration and privatisation of religion" and "[radicalising] and [extending] Enlightenment individualism" through "the Romantic emphasis on the subject and its experiences and feelings" (Kohlenbach 2010, 260). The Romantic's obsession with "the aestheticisation of nature, the engagement with dreams and the imaginary, and the poetic constructions of a peaceful medieval life – traditionally regarded as evidence of a Romantic 'escapism' from modern reality" are seen as having allowed modernity to take its first steps to begin with (Kohlenbach 2010, 260). These are the core values of Romantic art: nature as something to be treasured, dreams, the imaginary, medieval life and escapism. According to Masson, an important characteristic of Romanticism is its "affinity for the simplicity of peasant life and the closeness to nature" (2009, 120).

Concerning escapism, Masson believes that Romanticism was not exactly escapist in that it allowed one to flee to the past, but that it let one "escape to a place or a state assumed to be prior to *any* defined order" (Masson 2009, 121; emphasis in original). Still, the escapist tendency is quoted by many a scholar. There seems to be a "traditional interest of Romantic studies in the individual's experience of and escape inward from external phenomena, particularly through aesthetics" (Faflak & Wright 2012, 8). Schmidt adds that Romanticism is

“regarded as escapist or realist, reactionary or progressive in many variations” (2010, 21). This latter can be linked to Kohlenbach’s claims concerning the role of Romanticism in the development of modernism, that it “is a complex historical configuration with strong anti-modern and escapist as well as critical and enlightened potentials” (2010, 275). Whatever the case, it remains a fact that many people, mostly outside of the academic tradition, believe escapism to be a Romantic tendency, and therefore it will be treated as such in this thesis. After all, it is not Romantic scholars developing games, but developers and programmers who have certain ideas about what Romanticism entails for them.

An example of this dichotomy between scholars and laymen can be seen in Littlejohn’s analysis of Romantic artworks with the intention of using his examination for 3D rendering. Most importantly, Littlejohn remains at the level of Romantic art without delving into the deeper philosophy behind it, such as Romanticism’s connections to modernity. He claims that the “subject matter and themes [of Romantic art] transported the audience to an exciting and often fantastical setting” (2012, 1). Furthermore, Romanticism “was meant to give an escapist experience never achievable in normal life, with stories of terrible tragedy and terrific acts of courage depicted in literature and art” (Littlejohn 2012, 1). Emotion and imagination were the focus of the artworks which belonged to this tradition, broadening the types of stories that art could tell. Fitting with Littlejohn’s description of Romantic artworks, the games in this thesis also “transport the viewer to another world they could not normally experience” (2012, 1-2). This ability to transport players can be seen as a form of immersion.

The fact that we can “be immersed in virtual landscapes and virtual architecture” is due to Romantics, Coyne claims (1999, 3). Whereas rationalists and empiricists “debated the nature of reality and how we can know it,” Romantics, on the other hand, “elevated the intangible world of the imagination” (Coyne 1999, 5). When Coyne discusses the Romantic in digital narratives, he concentrates on the possibility to “transcend the constraints of the embodied worlds towards *unity* through the power of information technology” – or virtual reality – and the struggles that come with this concerning what is or is not real (1999, 7; emphasis in original). Although he does not specifically mention videogames, many of his comments concerning these Romantic narratives, especially those surrounding virtual reality, work in the light of games. Since Coyne’s work was published in 1999, back when both videogames and virtual reality were not at the stages they currently are, these can be applied interchangeably, especially with how the two territories overlap these days. When Coyne claims that the Romanticism in IT narratives lies in how “information technology implicates itself in people’s attempts to progress from one sphere of existence to another,” this can be seen in how videogames invite

players to step into a different world inside of their consoles and computers (1999, 9). Additionally, Coyne states that digital utopias are important to technoromanticism. He explains that the “global village and the electronic cottage<sup>3</sup> invoke a return to the ideal of preindustrial arts and crafts” and that Romantics “reinvented the aesthetic, guilds, crafts, and feudal harmony of the medieval age” (1999, 10). Here, Coyne even specifically mentions videogames and how these elements celebrate a certain sense of medievalism.

Whereas Coyne’s technoromanticism concentrates on IT and computers in general, Wills’s electro-Romanticism is linked explicitly to the Romantic in videogames in that he compares programmers to romantic artists, believing that they “cast nature as a visual spectacle” since “videogames [exalt] nature as strange and magnificent” due to the fact that “[c]omputer chips [generate] impressive collages of gushing waterfalls and mystical caves” (Wills 2002, 400). Comparing videogames to the Catskill Mountains paintings of Thomas Cole, who was known for his Romantic paintings of America, Wills states that “the scale of the digital scene reduced the player to a mere onlooker, a small, insignificant and solitary figure” (2002, 400). In short: programmers and developers adhere to ideas of Romanticism, which becomes electro-Romanticism. Wills builds upon this by explaining how nature in videogames, in other words artificial nature, “offers an illusionary escape” and that games pose as “electronic voyage[s] for new Romantics, a welcome break from industrialism” as it did in the past, except this can only be achieved through technological interfacing (2002, 405). Programmers, as the Romantics of our age, create untouched scenes of wilderness “on a new electronic frontier”, where virtual nature “becomes synonymous with romantic sentiment and primordial innocence, its creation a form of digital nostalgia for paradise lost” (Wills 2002, 409).

All of this remains on a theoretical level if not given explicit examples, which is why these Romantic notions and how they appear in *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft* are analysed in the fourth chapter of this thesis. Whereas Wills’s electro-romanticism concerns a more passive form of playing a videogame, perhaps looking at the game as a piece of art instead of a product for entertainment, Coyne’s technoromanticism seems more focussed on the interactive nature of technology. Both, however, are of importance, since they make up what the games are. For this reason, Wills’s points were examined with a focus on the aestheticisation of nature and the elements that initially seem to give videogames their Romanticism. Coyne’s insights, on the other hand, were incorporated with the possibilities of immersion and interaction that games offer.

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<sup>3</sup> The electronic cottage is another example of the combining of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’: the cottage with its Romantic values but with all the benefits of the electronic, digital age.

## **Exploring open world role-playing games**

Wills discusses the Romantic nature of videogames in terms of spectacle and amazement, positing the programmers and developers as artists and the players as viewers. Still, it remains a fact that the ‘viewers’ in videogames have more agency than those of paintings do in that they control characters who inhabit the in-game worlds. These worlds, no matter how Romantic they seem, are not meant to be watched, but to be interacted with, immersed in and, finally, explored. That is exactly what this chapter delves into by first explaining Calleja’s use of the terms escapism, immersion and incorporation and afterwards discussing the exploration of in-game worlds.

### **Escapism, immersion and incorporation**

Escapism is one of the explicit links between videogames and Romantic traditions. Whether this escapism itself is positive or negative is beside the point. Although Calleja is rather sceptical of the concept and its use, he still offers helpful insights as to how it is conjured by games and how it is connected to aesthetics and interactions. For one, he argues that one must look beyond the visual aspects of a game, to its mechanics. After all, an important element of games is how they “involve all forms of goal-directed decision-making going from making planetary invasion plans involving hundreds of remotely located players to deciding which player on the transfer list in a football game will work best as a right winger” (Calleja 2010, 345). It is these feedback loops, as Calleja calls them, that capture “the player’s attention for extended periods of time” and which are “made up of these affordances for pattern seeking, problem solving, and decision making” (2010, 345). This, combined with the graphical qualities of some games, can offer players an exciting change from real life, even when many aspects from real-life jobs appear in these games. In this way, games can give players challenges needed for their mental well-being that are lacking in real life. It is the combination of in-game worlds and the engagement of gamers with these worlds that “can lead to a sensation of inhabiting them, not necessarily because the [player] enters another realm but because that realm becomes part of their immediate surroundings, infusing the immediate environment with the qualities of the represented environment” (Calleja 2010, 347). This is also why one must look further than simple visualisation when it comes to the Romantic in videogames, since these games are more than mere aesthetics. Therefore, the analysis in this thesis goes beyond visuals, but also delves into the mechanics, eventually resulting in the discovery a different type of ludonarrative dissonance.

Connecting escapism to immersion, Calleja warns readers of “normative assumptions that misrepresent our engagement with virtual environments as being necessarily escapist, without considering the particular qualities of the specifically situated engagement” (2010, 344). After all, escapism is “intimately related to the uniquely human faculty of imagination” and “allows for the possibility of mentally detaching ourselves temporarily from the present moment, which is a defining element of escapism” (Calleja 2011, 137). The power of games lies in the fact that they can “[transport] our imaginations to the places represented on screen” as well as “[offer] a structure for competitive play” (Calleja 2011, 2). Calleja thus claims that immersion, or some form of it, is what “makes digital games so involving” and that “this relationship between player and game yields a novel form of engagement” since it shortens the “subjective distance between player and game environment, often yielding a sensation of inhabiting the space represented on-screen” (2011, 2). Due to this, players can project their Romantic desires onto the games they play and that facilitate these desires with representation and possibly also interactivity.

When discussing the concept of immersion, Calleja criticises the various synonyms used interchangeably for different purposes. Distinctions between the various used terms such as ‘immersion’ or ‘presence’ are not made when discussing different media: immersing oneself in a game is completely different from immersing oneself in a book, after all (Calleja 2011, 33). Connected to this is a sense of technological determinism. No matter how important “the specifics of the medium are for our understanding of the experiences they afford,” we must refrain from recognising these experiences as though they are completely dependent on the technology behind the medium (Calleja 2011, 33). Calleja therefore wishes to “propose a more precise conceptualization of the phenomenon that is specific to game environments” (2011, 3). In this, he looks at immersion not as a phenomenon that takes place on its own, but which is part of the experience of gaming and therefore involves gameplay as well.

Instead he proposes to use incorporation, which points to the incorporation of the in-game world into the mind of players “as part of [their] immediate surroundings, within which [they] can navigate and interact” (Calleja 2011, 169). Furthermore, it deals with the incorporation of the player into a single location within an in-game world with the help of an avatar, thus giving the player the feeling of actually being in said world. With this, Calleja provides a more diverse definition of this concept, including both experiences concerning the game outside of the game itself and those within (2011, 169). It also solves the aforementioned problems concerning immersion, since it is meant specifically for media that are aware of the presence of the player and the agency they are given (Calleja 2011, 173).

Calleja's emphasis on the uniqueness of videogames as a media shines light on the new ways it is possible for the medium to portray Romantic ideas, and his mention of specific instances of gameplay shows that players are indeed capable of enjoying these portrayals. Additionally, his discussing of the in-game world as something in which players can navigate (explore) and interact was taken into account with the analysis, which focusses on these two factors alongside aestheticisation. The next section of this chapter will delve deeper into the exploration aspects of open world role-playing games.

### **Exploration**

In order to escape real life and enter other worlds, one first needs worlds that one can escape to, and open world role-playing videogames seem to be the perfect alternative to everyday life. These games incorporate stories in which players often have to save the world or something similar, allowing them a break from what they might consider their boring realities. Rollings and Adams claim that there are two types of players when it comes to role-playing games, namely story-chasers, who are "primarily interested in progressing the story" whereas character-advancement fanatics are not "so much interested in the story, except where it is applicable to developing the player's avatar" (2003, 348). Adventuring and exploring are as big a part of the games as combat is, according to Rollings and Adams, in that they are "a means to an end: in order for the story to progress and characters to develop, they have to have something to do" (2003, 349).

This, however, assumes that one is playing the game as it was meant to be played. Exploration sometimes can be seen as a form of meta-gaming in that players find their "own goals in the game, which the designers did not originally intend" (Švelch 2010, 63). Although exploration is often a part of open world role-playing games – which, as will be discussed in the analysis of this thesis, include designs that appear Romantic, whether or not the designers did this consciously – taking the time to enjoy the scenery is a form of meta-gaming in that these Romantic elements and the natural environment are not the main focus of the games. One steps "out of the avatar [...] while still controlling it" (Švelch 2010, 64). When it comes to Romantic behaviour in open world role-playing games, players perform a combination of meta-gaming and honest play, which takes place when they project their "moral code into a fictional world" (Švelch 2010, 64). This means playing the game with everyday morals instead of those of the character, whereas role-players "take on a moral profile different from [their] own" (Švelch 2010, 64). The Romantic desires of players wandering through nature can be part of role-play depending on the personalities of their characters, but wandering and exploration are



usually considered normal parts of the characters' lives. Therefore, it is often players who project their Romantic ideas onto their gameplay.

An example of such behaviour is that of the *flâneur*, a term first coined by Baudelaire (1964) but popularised by Benjamin (1990). As *flâneurs*, players acquire a “connection between self, community and the physicality and magic of the urban experience” (Atkinson & Willis 2007, 819). Atkinson and Willis link this term to videogames to form the concept of *flâneurs électroniques*, stating that the “ability of the game environment to be intrinsically interesting also twists the notion of gameplay since gamers remarked that wandering around, taking in certain vistas and urban viewpoints was sometimes a release and of interest in its own right” (2007, 828). Although this is in relation to cities, the notions of wandering and witnessing parts of the game's environments can also be found in experiences concerning nature. When Atkinson and Willis stress the fact that “the common excitement at the pure spectacle of the city generates a sense of wandering in simulated environments that, to some extent, parallels that of urban *flâneurs*,” one can see the links between this and the awe that natural sections of games can evoke in players (2007, 828). Additionally, the fact that players “appear as *flâneurs électroniques* in the sense that they take time to wander, explore and find excitement in spaces that are not ‘real’ and yet have reality components built into them” is another aspect that is featured heavily in Romantic exploration-based behaviours in videogames (Atkinson & Willis 2007, 842; emphasis in original).

This goes to show that players view games as more than just stories to be played and worlds to be rushed through, that they take advantage of the Romantic vistas that videogames offer them. As Wills states, only “by exploring the virtual landscape can the secrets of nature be fathomed” (2002, 402). The encountering of plants and animals “lurking in virtual wildernesses” is another way games allow players “to engage with eponymous digital creatures in their “natural environment”” (Wills 2002, 402). In this way, games encourage players to see the world as something that must be explored, but also respected. This, connected to the fact that “multiple titles recreate past states of nature and society, providing digital eulogies to distant times”, despite the possibilities that technology offers for those who create games, points to the fact that videogames use Romantic ideas as sources of inspiration (Wills 2002, 409). After all, programmers “envision unexplored wildernesses on a new electronic frontier” and their works promote “nature as an idyllic, bucolic realm” (Wills 2002, 409). In turn, virtual nature, according to Wills, “becomes synonymous with romantic sentiment and primordial innocence, its creation a form of digital nostalgia for paradise lost” (2002, 409). Because of

this, exploration and the different ways that *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft* do or do not encourage exploration will explicitly be looked at in the next chapter.

What makes games so special, however, is the fact that players can interact with the virtual world. “While granting their spectators engrossing views,” Wills states when it comes to two-dimensional representations of nature, “such fine-crafted landscapes only partially simulated the nature experience” (2002, 400). He even claims that digital nature “needed to mimic material *life* in order to gain stature among players” (2002, 400; emphasis in original). Thus, in order for digital nature to seem real, players had to be able to interact with it. Using *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo EAD 1996) and *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD 1998) as examples, Wills notes that their three-dimension nature and their “unrivalled richness of landscape” helped with their success, citing the fact that Mario “traveled across slippery snow, swam against water currents, and shot up into the air when burnt by hot lava beds” and Hyrule’s “distinct weather patterns, night and day [...] and [...] diverse array of domestic and wild animals” as proof of their authenticity (2002, 400-401). This interactivity, however, comes with a downside. After all, videogames offer their players fixed and programmed ways of interacting with the virtual world, making them “more like playgrounds and city parks than wild-spaces” (Jenkins 1998, 272). It is these ways of interacting that limit the freedom in videogames and “remind players of the constructed world they enter” (Wills 2002, 412). Therefore, interactivity in a Romantic context causes a certain kind of dissonance in the gameplay, which will also be explored in the next chapter.

### **The Romantic Dissonance in *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft***

This chapter concerns the analysis of the Romantic elements in videogames and the connection of this to ludonarrative dissonance. In order to do so, certain aspects were examined and placed into categories for separated discussion, namely the aestheticisation of nature and the possibility to explore in *World of Warcraft* and *Skyrim*. These aesthetics are built upon the literature surrounding Romanticism itself, the aestheticisation as described by Kohlenbach (2010) and the medieval life mentioned by Masson (2009) as well as the virtual landscapes and architecture players can immerse themselves in (Coyne 1999) and the Romantic vistas that “cast nature as a visual spectacle” (Wills 2002, 400). Thus, this concerns what the world looks like and how it is designed. The exploration of in-game nature deals with the mechanics that make this dynamic possible – the shape of the world, the different ways of moving through it, the various perspectives one can choose from and the interactions with the world – as well as those that go against it – interactions creatures instigate with avatars, the fixedness of tutorials, the level

distribution in the world and borders of the map. This has to do with the freedom players are given when it comes to taking advantage of the Romantic settings. The main focus of this section is: can players truly act like flâneurs in these virtual wildernesses?

The method chosen for this thesis was a textual analysis as discussed by Fernández-Vara, which she describes as “the in-depth study of a text [...] using the text as a sample or case study to understand a specific issue or topic” (2015, 9). More specifically, this thesis makes use of a close reading of the games in question, where one chooses “a specific aspect of a game and [breaks] it down into its basic elements” (Fernández-Vara 2015, 200). The ‘specific aspect’ in this case was the Romantic nature of videogames, the ‘basic elements’ being how Romanticism occurs in the visual aspects of the games, as well as how they are promoted or hindered by the implemented mechanics of the game, focussing on the movement through the in-game world and the possible interactions with it.

While examining these mechanics, the focus was on how much or how little freedom players received in order to fully enjoy the apparent Romantic vistas in *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft*. To do this, both games were first played in an instrumental manner, in order to ascertain the various mechanics that make up the dynamic that allows for the freedom of players in the first place. In other words, “do what the game’s formal components are encouraging us to do so that we may progress through the game and achieve its goals” (Glas & Van Vught 2017, 6). When examining which mechanics went against this dynamic, however, free play was used, where “players are not playing along to any set challenges or game objectives but freely engage in the to-and-fro movement of play” (Glas & Van Vught 2017, 6). Whereas the former approach sees games as objects, the latter sees them as processes. Although the two are distinct, both were used in this thesis. With instrumental play, the possible ways of moving through and interacting with the in-game spaces were examined in order see how the games afford or limit free play, and free play was used to ascertain the limits to this freedom. Free play might show “that games are not stable objects but under constant negotiation by its players”, but these negotiations always rely on a certain lenience from the game: if the game offers no room for negotiation, there is little that players can do against this (Glas & Van Vught 2017, 9). No type of play was necessary for discussing the aestheticisation of nature, since this is a matter of representation and therefore does not involve gameplay.

The focus during the analysis was on traversing through the in-game worlds, noting the environment and how it reacts to the player character’s presence as well as the actions that can be performed and the freedom in the player’s movements. Since “just looking at play styles and practices might miss the meaning game designers knowingly or unknowingly instilled in a

game, or other aesthetic dimensions of a game's design", both mechanics and representation were taken into account in this thesis (Glas & Van Vught 2017, 4). Since the writer was already quite familiar with both videogames, possible sources for dissonance were noted before delving into the games themselves, such as the invisible borders and the level system in *World of Warcraft*. Because of this, a maximum of five hours per game was needed for this analysis. These were then sought out with an avatar in-game to see how these functioned in 'reality' and whether they were as distracting as they theoretically seemed. Gameplay was not recorded; instead, observations were jotted down during gameplay and written out afterwards. The results were then connected to the concept of ludonarrative dissonance in that a different form of dissonance arises than previously discussed in academics.

As mentioned before, the analysed games are *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft*. *Skyrim* is an open world action role-playing game in which players can create their own characters. It is set within a mediaeval-esque universe where industrialisation has not yet taken place. Much of the land consists of forests, mountains and lakes, and there are towns, cities, fortresses and dungeons spread about the map. *World of Warcraft*, on the other hand, is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. However, since it also consists of an ever-expanding large open world and is also an action game in that it features real-time battles instead of being turn-based, it is similar to *Skyrim* in terms of gameplay. Much like in *Skyrim*, it is possible to create one's own character. The main difference is the fact that it is an online game which is played with millions of other gamers who share the same world.

These games were chosen because they share many similarities, such as the large, mediaeval-esque open fantasy worlds and the fact that they are role-playing games. Additionally, both are considered successful games, having received various awards. *Skyrim*, for instance, received critical acclaim and has received various additional editions. It has been sold almost ten million times in 2016 and was named Game of the Year in 2011. *World of Warcraft*, on the other hand, has regularly been called one of the best games developed. In both 2005 and 2006 it was the best-selling pc game and at its peak it had twelve million monthly subscribers, six years after its release. Both games received praise for their aesthetics and design, the environment, which fits with Romantic notions as seen in the next section of this chapter, often being cited as one of their winning points. Although it is too much to presume that this is what attracted players, the fact that it may have had a helping hand in their reception might be an indication as to the importance of inclusions of seemingly Romantic elements in modern videogames. These Romantic elements will be displayed and discussed in the next section.

### **Aestheticisation of nature**

In this section, the aestheticisation of nature in *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft* was analysed. As stated before, besides escapism, the aestheticisation of nature is an important aspect of Romanticism and forms one of its core beliefs. It is not difficult to find examples of such in both *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft*, which for large parts consist of nothing but vast stretches of fields with varying flora and fauna. In *World of Warcraft*, Thunder Falls is a waterfall by Mirror Lake in Elwynn Forest, and it offers whoever makes it to the top of the hill a view of the mountains and trees in the distance, although players have to fight their way through bandits to do so. Standing at the top of the waterfall, players can hear the sounds of rushing water and whistling birds. A few bushes and small trees grow beside the river that flows into the waterfall. If one were to follow this river away from the waterfall, one would reach the top of a different waterfall that overlooks not only Elwynn Forest, but also the neighbouring region Westfall and the border between the two. From here, one can even see the Great Sea that lies between the two main continents of the planet: Eastern Kingdoms and Kalimdor.



Fig. 2: the woods of Elwynn Forest from the top of the Thunder Falls, with small gardens and houses scattered here and there.

Likewise, in the south of *Skyrim* is Lake Ilinalta, which offers an aesthetic treat on its own. Exploring its edges uncovers various other sights, such as the hunter who pitched his tent by the shore and spends his days fishing, or the Bleak Falls Barrow built on the slope of the mountain next to the water. Down here, players can hear sparrows and crickets, as well as the wind. After climbing the mountain, one can see the vast landscape of Whiterun Hold and the

various hills and castles that adorn it. Up here, the wind sounds harsher than on the ground. Especially with the setting sun, this makes for a rather stunning view. On the other hand, a small tower called Stendarr's Beacon can be found on a high hill in a southeastern corner of the map, from which the player is given a view of the high, snowy mountains rising up from all sides. Up there, the absence of many sounds that can be found in other places showcases the desolation these places, far away from civilisation, bring with them.



Fig. 3: Whiterun Hold as seen from the mountain between North and South Brittlechin Pass above Lake Ilinalta. One can see trees and small lakes down below, and more mountains surrounding the plane. In the distance are what look like a castle, or the ruins of one.

The visual nature of the world in *Skyrim* greatly resembles our own. *Skyrim* is a single country with logical rules when it comes to geography, climate and ecosystem. Since it is one of the northern countries on the continent of Tamriel, much of the region is covered in snow, with a few areas that sport lush forests instead. The game's lead environment artist, Noah Berry, states that they wanted to give players "dramatic, sheer visuals and vistas to walk and travel through" (2011) that remind us of the "exciting and often fantastical setting[s]" of which Littlejohn speaks (2012, 1). Some creatures and plants only appear in certain locations – frost trolls, for instance, can only be encountered in colder regions. This, together with a day and night cycle and changes in the weather, give players the idea of being inside a world that is alive, that it is something that allows players an "escape from external phenomena, particularly through aesthetics (Faflak & Wright 2012, 8). Some days are spent wandering through thick fog, whereas on others the sky is clear. The nature in *Skyrim* is given a realistic look, though it

does not react to the presence of the player's character, only to its programmed environment, like grass and leaves swaying in the wind.

The aesthetics of nature are somewhat different in *World of Warcraft*, which sometimes includes more supernatural environments. Different planets are given different kinds of looks, ranging from futuristic to rustic. The Hellfire Peninsula in Outland, for instance, is a barren region with little to no nature. Here, players can even see outer space with its stars and planets. Nagrand, on the other hand, is another part of Outland, but this is a green savannah that has a sky akin to that of our own. The environment is therefore less logical than it is in *Skyrim*. Another example is Dun Morogh in the Eastern Kingdoms in Azeroth, a country with a cold climate and therefore covered in ice and snow, despite the fact that nearby countries do not share this at all. Contrary to *Skyrim*, the style in *World of Warcraft* is brighter and more cartoony. The textures are simpler and this makes the environment more flexible: the grass and the flowers sprouting from the ground, for instance, react to the presence of the characters and sway out of the way when moved by.

Besides being full of nature, the world in *Skyrim* is also a pre-industrial one, a “digital [eulogy] to distant times,” although certain civilisations were technologically advanced before disappearing (Wills 2002, 409). If there even are any roads, these are of stone and connect the various towns, which often make use of mediaeval-esque defences like large walls and are filled with small, old fashioned houses as well as imposing castles. Horses are the main use of transport for the citizens of *Skyrim* and trade takes place through small-scale, privately owned establishments. Guilds like the Thieves Guild or the College of Winterhold, a mage association, are also part of the world's society, reminiscent of Coyne's claims that Romantics “reinvented the aesthetic, guilds, crafts, and feudal harmony of the medieval age” (1999, 10). Nature is mostly untouched by the inhabitants of the country and there is little to no signs of them meddling with the natural way of life. They defend themselves from aggressive animals and they chop wood, but this is never seen as having an effect on the environment. However, in contrast to the cited “affinity for the simplicity of peasant life”, life in *Skyrim* is not peaceful, and war rages across the country and between various groups of people (Masson 2009, 120). Strife is a part of life in *Skyrim* and is what the storyline is built around.

Although mainly given a pre-industrial setting, *World of Warcraft* is a combination of modern and pre-modern aspects. Most of the world is built upon mediaeval-esque elements, the lack of technology being one of these, but certain civilisations are more developed than others. Dwarves mostly use guns, for instance, and gnomes are known for tinkering and creating engine-like apparatuses. Additionally, though there are many parts in the world of *World of*



*Warcraft* that portray the idyllic, untouched forms of nature that one might expect in Romanticism, the signs of damage are visible in other places. War has scarred much of the worlds, though the lesson here remains that humans – or their equivalent – will always bring harm upon their surroundings, as can be seen in Felwood in Kalimdor, a corrupted forest inhabited by all sorts of nasty creatures. Thus, while *World of Warcraft* might include the picturesque nature settings, it also offers those showing the disastrous results of battle. Though this world might not always be “a form of digital nostalgia for paradise lost” as it is in Elwynn Forest (Wills 2002, 409), it does give players spaces they can “wander, explore and find excitement in” (Atkinson & Willis 2007, 842). However, as quoted before, Willis states that “the scale of the digital scene reduced the player to a mere onlooker, a small, insignificant and solitary figure” (2002, 400). Since games are more than just paintings to be looked at, the mechanics that allow players to interact with the world must also be looked at, as pointed out by Calleja.

In this section, it was made clear that there is a connection between the ways in which the nature in them is portrayed and the Romantic tendencies as discussed in a previous chapter. As such, the Romantic notions in these games have become clear, as well as the fact that these are environments that can offer players refuge from reality in that they seem to be self-contained worlds filled with breathtaking vistas, different from our own, while also resembling them in certain ways. Although both games approach this in slightly different manners, similarities such as their focus on natural and pre-industrial areas remain, even if the visual styles differ. The next section of this chapter concerns the mechanics that promote or go against the various uses of the Romantic nature of these videogames, and what effects this has concerning the ludic structure and ludonarrative dissonance in games.

### **Exploring nature: mechanics, dynamics and dissonance**

Now that it has been established with the aestheticisation of nature that takes place in these games that they indeed do offer Romantic worlds, this section will delve into the mechanics that make the exploration and wandering through these worlds possible – the shape of the environment, how players can move through and interact with it, the possibility to play in either third or first person perspective – as well as some mechanics that go against this dynamic – interactions between hostile enemies and characters, the tutorials, the level of certain areas and borders of the maps. Finally, the implications this has when it comes to ludonarrative dissonance will be discussed.



The Romantic in videogames is special in that the games in question are not just for viewing purposes, but are also meant to be navigated through and interacted with. The fact that both *World of Warcraft* and *Skyrim* consist of relatively large, open worlds that offer players many possibilities when it comes to sightseeing and wandering around like *flâneur électroniques* in nature is testimony to this. Both worlds are 3D and players take control of avatars in them, allowing for actual movement through the different environments and thus making players feel as though they were “part of [the player’s] immediate surroundings” (Calleja 2011, 169). Players can also change their movement speed from walking to jogging, and characters in *Skyrim* and rogues in *World of Warcraft* can sprint temporarily. In both games players can choose whether they wish to play in a first-person perspective and see the world through their character’s eyes, or a third-person perspective in which they can see their character from behind. In the first case in *Skyrim*, the player’s mouse takes control of the character’s head, turning with the movement of the mouse. With this, players can decide to take a stroll through a forest while looking at the sky, or they can take in the scenery instead. When riding a horse, however, the viewpoint is fixed in a third person perspective. In *World of Warcraft*, one must first right-click to look around, since the mouse is also used to select spells. Instead, the camera slowly bobs up and down, as if it truly were the character’s head. The aforementioned aesthetics as well as the sounds in the game – background music and environmental noise like the woodpeckers, crickets and the wind in *Skyrim* – add to the feeling of being outside in nature, although neither game includes such animals to begin with. With this, they mimic reality, which, as previously mentioned by Wills, is necessary for them “to gain stature among players” (2002, 400).

Additionally, the interactions that are possible within and with nature are also of importance. After all, they make the experience feel more real, helping with the notions of escapism and immersion and in turn allowing players to take advantage of the Romantic settings. Calleja’s incorporation also consists of interactions in that it is part of what makes videogames so unique, since players can “navigate and interact” in these incorporated worlds (2011, 169). An example of this that Wills himself names, is the collecting of plants. In *Skyrim*, interactions with creatures are limited mostly to looting and killing them. Looting often coincides with skinning: looting wolves or bears awards players with their pelts. Another example of interacting with animals is riding (or stealing) horses, and player characters can adopt several dogs, although they can only be told to stay, follow or go home. Players can also capture butterflies and the like, although they might find that, much to their horror, they tore out their wings instead of capturing them. Thus, although there is a “diverse array of domestic

and wild animals” the amount of interactions with them has its limits, reminding players of the constructed nature of the world (Wills 2002, 400-401).

The possible actions characters can perform on creatures is larger in *World of Warcraft*, depending on the class of the character. Hunters, for instance, can tame a variety of animals and keep them as pets. Critters are also available as pets, although, unlike the hunters’ companions, these do not fight, except in the mini-game called ‘pet battles’ in which pets fight other pets and can gain levels. Otherwise, interactions are narrowed down to killing and looting creatures, as in *Skyrim*, though the amount of possible attacks characters can use or cast on them is larger.

When interacting with the world itself, *Skyrim* offers various possibilities. One can eat and drink a variety of foods and drinks, all of which can affect the character (drinking ale, for instance, restores stamina points but damages stamina regeneration, and it blurs the screen and makes it impossible to walk in a straight line to emulate being drunk). Furthermore, many items can be stolen or moved, and books can be read. Wills’s example of collecting plants is also a part of the gameplay: players can pick up herbs and other plants to make potions. Characters can chop wood and mine ore, for which special tools are required. If these types of interactions all reward the player with physical objects, one can perhaps also see exploration itself as an interaction with the world where the reward is the discovering of new parts of the map. Although Gazzard defines rewards of exploration as “rewards that allow players to move along paths that have now been unlocked in the gameworld” mostly in relation to the clearing of obstacles, one could claim that finding hidden parts of the virtual world is also an example of a reward of exploration, since these sceneries might not be discovered if one did not leave the path in the first place (2011).

Interactions between players and the world of *World of Warcraft* resemble those in *Skyrim*. Herbs and plants can be collected, ores can be mined, but an addition is that animals can actually be skinned. Whereas in *Skyrim* animals are skinned automatically while looting, in *World of Warcraft* one must learn a skill for this. These are called gathering skills and remind us of how, according to Coyne, technoromanticism includes “a return to the ideal of preindustrial arts and crafts” and the reinvention of guilds and crafts (1999, 10). One of the game’s designers claims that these skills “make the world much more dynamic” and that they allow “the world to feel much more interesting” since it is “not just this world that has a bunch of creatures and pretty scenery” but that there are also “objects throughout the world that people can gather up and use” (2004). When it comes to the previously made claims about exploration itself as a reward, this is even more visible in *World of Warcraft*, where parts of the map are only revealed after having ‘discovered’ them. Additionally, characters gain experience points

and even achievements for filling their maps, which in turn encourages players to explore the world.

All that was described in this section, is part of the games at the most basic levels. The ways in which players can interact with the in-game world are programmed and were intended to work in these ways by the developers themselves. The fact that the player's character can pluck the wings off a butterfly but not capture it alive is a choice Bethesda made, as was the fact that Blizzard decided to give hunters the possibility to tame animals. These are the mechanics of the games, which "are the various actions, behaviors and control mechanisms afforded to the player within a game context" (Hunicke et al. 2004, 3). In the grand scheme of ludonarrative dissonance, mechanics can then be seen as the ludic structures of these games, since they concern the gameplay. These mechanics combined create a certain kind of dynamic. In the MDA framework, dynamics describe "the run-time behavior of the mechanics acting on player inputs and each others' outputs over time" (Hunicke et al. 2004, 2). "Together with the game's content (levels, assets and so on)", the mechanics that were discussed – the shape of the world, the different manners of moving through and interacting with nature, and the possible perspectives – create the dynamic of 'exploration' (Hunicke et al. 2004, 4). As Seraphine already noted, the narrative and the ludic structures are made up of both incentives and directives, although he does not explain the differences and relations between these. Using the MDA framework instead, the ludic structure would consist of both mechanics and dynamics. Much like 'incentives' and 'directives', this offers a difference between what players can do and what they must do, except in worlds as large as those in *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft*, the amount of freedom players are given makes it possible for many mechanics and dynamics to never be used. Both mechanics like the collecting of herbs and dynamics such as exploration might be ignored by players who do nothing but follow the storyline or pursue other in-game professions.

With this, however, it is possible for mechanics and dynamics to go against each other. The interactions that creatures can initiate with players are an example of this. In *Skyrim*, creatures are often hostile and will attack characters on sight, forcing them to fight or flee. One might be taking a stroll past the giant camp near Whiterun when a humongous mammoth comes rushing by. Not acting is impossible here, since this ultimately results in the character's death, in which case the player is forced to reload to a previous savepoint. The system of enemies attacking characters in *World of Warcraft* is slightly more complex: the larger the difference in level between characters and enemies, the more or less likely they are to attack. A level 5-character might be standing at the edge of Crystal Lake, taking in the calming scenery, when

the aggravating noise of a level 9-murloc pulls them out of their thoughts. While this takes place, the level 110-character fishing at the docks remains ignored by the beast. This is a matter of ‘aggro’, as it is called in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). The fact remains that in both games, characters are prone to being harassed by antagonistic enemies. Although Wills comments that “games routinely encouraged players to [...] catalogue [...] animal species lurking in the virtual wildernesses”, note how he explicitly mentions cataloguing animals, not fighting them (2002, 169).

When players start playing *Skyrim*, they are at once thrown into the main story without any introductions and must finish the first quest before they are given the reigns of their path. With this, the game wishes to give the player a starting point and a mission, a story that anchors their character and makes them want to play the main quest. The first few minutes of the game restrict what players can or cannot do – the only movement allowed is that of the character’s head; walking is temporarily taken over by the game itself – before the player is presented with a choice: the Imperial Guards or the Stormcloaks? Both groups stand for different ideas and are at war with each other, and the player must choose which member to follow, although both result in the character successfully fleeing from both their execution and the dragon that is attacking the village. After finishing this quest, players are given almost complete freedom over where they can go and what they can do. They might decide to do what their companion tells them to do – to find other members of whichever group the player has decided to join – or they can wander off and accept any quests they come across. In this way, it seems that exploration is indeed nothing more than “a means to an end: in order for the story to progress and characters to develop, they have to have something to do” (Rollings and Adams 2003, 349). As already noted by Švelch, however, some players decide to meta-game, following their own goals instead of those the designers tried to encourage (2010, 63).

*World of Warcraft*, on the other hand, starts with a cinematic cutscene explaining the current situation and the character’s place in the story. This cutscene takes a few minutes and can be skipped. Afterwards, players are given full control over their characters, although the game tries to encourage a certain behaviour. The first thing a player gets to see is their character standing in front of a non-player character (NPC) with a golden exclamation mark above their head. If the tutorial of the game is active, this will tell the player to “right-click [icon of mouse] on the [golden exclamation mark] to get your first quest.” This will then set the player on a journey throughout the continent, guiding them from one place to the next and making sure their character progresses enough in level to safely enter the next area. Much like in *Skyrim*,

random NPCs can be quest-givers, except these are marked visibly on the mini-map as well as in person.

When considering the freedom that games give their players to explore, the distribution of difficulty, levels and the information pertaining to this is an important aspect, since this either encourages or discourages going to certain areas. In *Skyrim*, for instance, this is less clear than in other games. All enemies level with the player's character, meaning there is never a too large gap between the character and the enemy they are fighting. There are certain exceptions to this, such as dungeons, which are locked between certain levels, and special enemies such as giants. What level enemies have, however, remains unknown to the player until they have tried their hand at defeating them. Levels in *Skyrim* pertain mostly to the amount of skills the player's character has, so even the level of friendly NPCs is not visible. Players are thus left to their own devices when it comes to figuring out the best path for them and the game allows them to do so. After all, there are few areas that characters cannot reach due to a too low level, which means they have access to the entire map from the very moment they leave the tutorial of the game.

Levels in *World of Warcraft* are used to divide the areas in a visible manner. Characters start at level 1 and can make their way up to level 110 by activities such as killing creatures, completing quests and clearing dungeons. Whereas in *Skyrim* only the player's character has an actual level, in *World of Warcraft* everything has one. Areas are therefore divided by the enemies' levels. The beginning area for the humans, for instance, is Elwynn Forest, and the main map tells players that this is for characters between levels 1 and 10. The second region, Westfall, is meant for characters who are level 10 to 15, and Redridge Mountains, the third, for those with levels between 15 and 20. Connected to this is the fact that all enemies within these places mostly adhere to the given levels. Walking through Redridge Mountains as a level 1 character can be dangerous, since the lower the level, the faster one will attract the attention of enemies, whose attacks deal more damage. The clear division between regions and the information about them discourages players from exploring the game on their own terms.

The borders of the maps are also critical when exploring the world. Besides reminding "players of the constructed world they enter", they also decide how far they can go before the game attempts to stop them and forces them to turn back (Wills 2002, 412). In *Skyrim*, this sometimes takes place in the form of invisible walls that do not allow characters to move beyond, as well as geographical restrictions such as mountains that cannot be crossed or seas that cannot be traversed. An instance of this in south *Skyrim* lies between the Cracked Tusk Keep and Halldir's Cairn, where a small stone arch is built in a narrow passage between

mountains. After venturing past it, the player's character runs into an invisible wall, and the line, "You cannot go that way," appears in the top left corner of the screen. The same happens in the east, northeast of Stendarr's Beacon, with a similar passage. Whereas geographical borders are less disruptive – they have a logical place within the world and offer visual clues as to the impossibility to cross them – the invisible walls can rupture the illusion of the game. After all, there is nothing visibly blocking the way. Furthermore, it shows a certain type of restriction in that players know they cannot go wherever they wish and are instead forced to remain in a certain space.



Fig. 4: the path out of the country between the Cracked Tusk Keep and Halldir's Cairn.

The world in *World of Warcraft*, on the other hand, is so vast that such borders are often unnecessary. Since the different places within the universe consists of whole worlds, many boundaries are part of the environment, whether this is because the player's character has reached the end of the planet or a large body of water, in which case 'fatigue' will set in and eventually kill characters. Still, there are many limits to where players can go and stand that have nothing to do with geographical boundaries. For one, 'closed zones' exist and are inaccessible for players, of which Northern Lordaeron is one example, which cannot be entered in any way. Additionally, with the supposed manoeuvrability accompanying the flying mounts in the game, it becomes clear that there are many more places that one cannot go. Players cannot go as high as they want, eventually coming across an invisible roof, and certain regions, such as Quel'Thalas in the Eastern Kingdoms of Azeroth, are impossible to enter by flying mount

and cannot be flown in at all, for reasons that have to do with the servers on which the game was built. With this, the limitations of where one can go become painfully clear.

As stated at the beginning of this section, all these are examples of mechanics that either make a dynamic possible, or take away from it. The dynamic in this case is the exploration of these Romantic settings that seem to invite players to do just that, given shape by the mechanics concerning the possible ways of moving through and interacting with the world. On the other hand, different mechanics work against this very dynamic by restricting the freedom of players through the use of invisible barriers or explicit level systems. This causes dissonance in that it can affect the experience within the game, pulling players out of the simulation and thus resulting in emersion as described by Seraphine. Except the current state of ludonarrative dissonance is that the dissonance takes place between the game's story and its rules, though both categories fall short when it comes to the game's ability to facilitate the ways of playing it encourages. It has already been mentioned that a game's story is more than just its main quest, that the worlds themselves can be considered part of the narrative as well. If we were to complicate the ludic structures of games as well, we could consider both mechanics and dynamics to be part of the ludic structure of games. When these work against each other in certain areas, temporarily affecting the gameplay of the player, it would be a conflict within the ludic structure of the game causing a dissonance, not between the ludic and narrative structures. The interactions with hostile enemies are an intriguing example in this case. After all, the fact that the murloc attacks nearby characters fits within the story of the world, where they are known for their aggressive nature, just like how the wolves in Skyrim make the forests a dangerous place for travellers. If they did not attack the player's character, this would in fact cause a certain kind of dissonance in that creatures that should be hostile towards them, are not. Though this supports harmony between ludic and narrative structures, the dissonance between mechanics and dynamics on the ludic level becomes clearer with this example. The dynamic is namely the enjoying of nature and wandering through it like a flâneur, which is then hindered by the mechanic of interactions between animals and characters, the attacking murloc that pulls the player from their Romantic experience.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, the videogames in question seem to give off the impression that they allow their users more freedom than, for instance, a painting does. Especially when concentrating on the Romantic aspects of both forms of media, at first glance videogames seem to be the perfect solution to the Romantic's wish. Especially with the rise of virtual reality, the urge to escape to

the past and to nature may be fulfilled sooner rather than later. Exactly because of its limited nature, however, the painting gives its viewers more room to imagine whatever they want; they are not constricted by anything other than the format of the painting itself and can continue their exploration inside the minds. Videogames, on the other hand, are seemingly all-encompassing and immersive spaces that fully incorporate their players into spaces that consist of fixed rules and mechanics and therefore restrict the path and the actions that players can take. After all, in the confines of one's own mind, one has total control. In a digital world, there are lines of code that make whatever one sees possible, but since they are definite and made by someone else, they can limit (the extent of) one's actions and experience. These limitations can then give rise to related practices outside of the games themselves, such as the creating of mods as well as the writing and reading of fan fiction, in which players take full control over the games in question outside of the developers' influence.

This struggle between the player's free will and the mechanics of a game seems unique in that there is no dissonance between the ludic and the narrative structures that is usually discussed by scholars. However, when trying to take advantage of the Romantic vistas in games by simply wandering through the environment but finding that other aspects of the game, such as violent murlocs, the effect of dissonance – the emersion, the being pulled out of a game even if simply in the form of slight irritation – is still there, pointing to the existence of something more than only the rules and stories built into the game. With the help of a close reading of an instrumental and free playthrough, the connection between the Romantic elements and the possibility to free play in *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft*, combined with the MDA framework that divides gameplay into both mechanics and dynamics, it was found that the ludic structures in videogames consists of these two instances as well. With this, it is possible for dissonance to take place within the ludic structure even while the ludic and narrative structures are in harmony at that certain point. The murloc at Crystal Lake attacks because it is a vicious creature and it is known as such in the lore, the story of the world, and it would not do for it to ignore a juicy target in the form of a lower levelled character. The player behind said lower levelled character, however, might be trying to enjoy the calming atmosphere of the lake, and does not take kindly to the interruption. As shown, the mechanics and the dynamics of the game work against each other, resulting in dissonance even though the mechanics and story fall into place.

As such, it has become clear that, despite the Romantic aesthetics, videogames provide limited room to truly take advantage of these. This does not mean that videogames have failed as a Romantic medium. "Like paintings, static computer backgrounds failed to deliver a more rounded experience of nature's meanings by their focus on aesthetics" is what Wills states in



relation to two-dimensional games (2002, 400). As stated before, three-dimensional games were a step forward from these “superficial embodiments of the natural world” (Wills 2002, 400). Perhaps virtual reality will offer more improvements when it comes to the Romantic nature of digital media, but even then, mechanics and rules will still be in place. Whatever the case, the fact that one can, in fact, enjoy such Romantic environments at least to a certain degree speaks volumes about their Romantic nature. If a developer were to concentrate on this aspect of the game, then who knows what the result might be.

The importance of the implementation of Romantic aspects in these games for the success of them, however, remains unclear. Although in both cases, the vibrant worlds and the freedom players receive in them was cited by critics as being part of what made them so great, the fact that this Romanticism brought a certain kind of dissonance along with it did not seem to do anything to hinder this success. Linked to the supposed escapist tendencies that players have towards these games, this simply depends on the player themselves and which aspects of the game they wish to lose themselves in. Whereas for some this might be the professional raiding world in *World of Warcraft*, for others this can indeed be strolling through the forests. The latter group might then use the game to facilitate their own desires in the form of, for instance, mods in *Skyrim*, but would therefore officially still be playing the game. As such, the fanbase of these games remains too varied to comment on the relevance of Romantic aspects in these AAA videogames for their success. Disregarding the success of the games, however, it remains important to note the effects that developers’ choices can have on their games. With this, they can be more conscious of the way their decisions affect gameplay as a whole.

### **Limitations and suggestions**

Due to the scope of this thesis, only open world role-playing games with a focus on fantasy were analysed. Other games within this genre, such as *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios 2015), which resembles *Skyrim* except for the fact that it takes place in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, could have been interesting to examine in a Romantic light. On the other hand, it might also be helpful to seek the same elements in games that are not considered to be open world or role-playing games, in order to find out what effects this might have. Another possibility that was overlooked in this thesis was the fact that both *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft* allow players to download mods and addons. *Skyrim* especially is known for this, and the fact that some players use mods that increase the amount of realism in the game might be helpful when finding out how they themselves look at the Romantic nature in these worlds. After all, how do mods that allow characters to die of hunger or cold affect the overall gaming experience?

Of course, the research methods also bring certain limits with them. Close reading, for one, is a rather subjective and possibly descriptive method, and thus it becomes difficult to stay openminded as well as analytical when examining certain features in videogames. Since little to no outside sources concerning the source material was used, all results come from the researcher's reasoning. Additionally, only the games themselves were analysed, with no attention paid to other factors, such as the players themselves. An example for further research based on this would be a study surrounding ecogames. Unlike these, *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft* are popular games, played by thousands of people all over the world. Does the nature in these games and the ways in which some players interact with it perhaps influence the way they view the real world? Does this affect their relationship to nature outside of the virtual world as well? When it comes specifically to the Romantic that was analysed in games, it must be noted that academic views of what does or does not pertain to the movement were not strictly followed, since it became clear that scholars versed in Romanticism view it different than those who look at it from the outside. As such, many cliché Romantic trends have been contested by academics, but since others, such as Littlejohn and Wills, continued to describe the movement in terms of nature and escapism, this was used when analysing *Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft*.

Concerning the additions to the debate surrounding ludonarrative dissonance, there are the considerations around how this model might be implemented in relation to other types of videogames. For now, it has been extrapolated from open world role-playing games, though it remains unknown if and how this would work when used in the context of other types of games. Furthermore, this theory surrounding mechanics should also be compared to others that do not explicitly mention any kind of dissonance. An example of this is Juul and his use of fiction that is implemented in rules, fiction that is not implemented in rules and rules that are not explained by fiction, which discusses the various relationships between rules and narrative as well (2005).

In short, although this thesis adds to the concept of ludonarrative dissonance and the types of dissonance that are possible between more elements than mere narrative and ludic structures, more research is needed to make any definite statements concerning the ludonarrative state of videogames. In the meantime, players can enjoy the Romantic vistas in videogames to their hearts' content – or at least, to the extent that these games allow them to.

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