Exploring Spatial Design Features of *Final Fantasy XIV*: An Investigation into the
Affordances and Incentives of Role-play in MMORPGs

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This thesis explores the spatial design features of several locations in the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV* (FFXIV) that incentivize and/or afford role-play amongst its players. Drawing on theories of worldbuilding, and role-play, this study examines the ways in which locations allow for players to appropriate them for their role-play experiences. Using a combination of a qualitative textual analysis and a virtual ethnography, this thesis identifies three factors, lore, functionality, and aesthetics, that contribute to the affordance and/or incentive for role-play in different game locations. These factors are further analyzed through the lens of a spectrum of role-play spaces, which ranges from designed and themed role-play spaces to more natural and organic open areas. The study finds that the spatial affordances of *Final Fantasy XIV* enable players to create immersive, personal, and socially-driven role-play experiences. The aim is to create a framework for other researchers to use during their work.

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INTRODUCTION

In the world of *Final Fantasy XIV*, the beach of Costa del Sol sparkles with the warm sun, surrounded by a bright blue ocean. The sand is a soft golden colour, the perfect place for adventurers to relax and soak up the sun after a long adventure. The tiki bar invites all to take a drink and adds a touch of tropical charm to the place. The gentle sound of lapping waves against the shore creates a peaceful ambience, making it the perfect escape from the hustle and bustle of Eorzea. Visitors lounge on their sunchairs, chatting with friends or taking a nap in the shade. Others are swimming in the inviting water or playing games on the beach. Costa del Sol, a popular gathering spot, is the epitome of a tropical paradise, inviting all to come and experience its joys.

Contrarily to this beach, in the heart of Coerthas, beyond the snow-capped peaks of Ishgard, the Coerthas Central Highlands stand as a wild and untamed frozen land, where the howling of the wind and the crunch of snow underfoot are the only sounds to be heard. Snowy peaks rise majestically in the distance, while the vast wilderness sprawls out in all directions, promising adventure and mystery to those brave enough to venture through. Players who journey through this rugged land find themselves in a remote location, a place where the stresses of the civilized world seem far away. They can explore jagged cliffs and hidden valleys, searching for rare treasures and hidden secrets. The solitude of the wilderness creates a sense of awe and wonder, inviting players to explore and discover the natural beauty that surrounds them. Even in these harsh conditions, some players find solace in the peace and serenity of the snow-covered landscape, using it as a place to meditate and reflect on their adventures. The Coerthas Central Highlands offer a prime example of how even the most desolate and isolated locations can also be used for role-play, as players immerse themselves in the rich and imaginative world of *Final Fantasy XIV*.

Final Fantasy XIV (also known as FFXIV amongst players) is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) developed and published by Square Enix in late 2010. In the MMO, players can create their own customizable characters and are able to explore the vast online fantasy world of Eorzea. The game features a rich storyline, a variety of quests, and an immersive environment that encourages players to team up and form communities. Virtual worlds such as FFXIV offer players unique opportunities for social interaction and play. Players can explore a variety of imaginative and immersive virtual environments, from idyllic beaches to rugged snow-covered landscapes. These locations provide a rich opportunity for social interaction, role-playing, and creative expression. FFXIV offers a wide range of activities for players to take part in, including crafting, gathering, and battling against fierce monsters and bosses. Its player community is vibrant and dedicated, perhaps due to this game being the fourteenth instalment of the *Final Fantasy* series. The series stories are not necessarily connected but do feature similar elements, themes and some recurring characters.

Before continuing this thesis, it is important to note that I have been a player of *Final Fantasy XIV* for several years and consider myself a big fan of the game and its franchise. Therefore, it is possible that this may have influenced the way in which I conducted my study or the outcome of the research. However, I also draw upon my knowledge and experience as a player throughout the study to provide more context where I believe it would be beneficial. Having this personal experience as a player allows me to have a deeper understanding of how the game works, how players interact with it, who to ask questions to if I have them, and I am familiar with the lore of the game, etc. This knowledge helped me recognize patterns and trends that could be missed by someone without this experience. At the same time, I was aware of the need to maintain a "critical distance" and not to let my personal biases or

different types of spatial design within games can facilitate or actually hinder role-playing activities and what factors influence player behaviour in these environments.

Both the pleasant beach of Costa del Sol and the icy backdrop of Coerthas in FFXIV showcase the power of spatial design in virtual environments that foster social interaction and play. With spatial design, I mean the deliberate arrangement of these digital spaces in MMOs, such as taverns, towns, landscapes, dungeons, etc. The concept of "worldness" is important in understanding the impact of this spatial design in MMOs, as it influences the players' sense of immersion and engagement in the game world (Klastrup, 2009). Spatial design, as a part of world-building, aims to create an immersive virtual environment that feels believable and coherent to the players. By intentionally arranging the digital spaces, game designers can create a sense of place and space that enhances the player's sense of presence in the game world (Klastrup, 2009). The inclusion of NPCs, objects, structures, and ambient sounds, as well as the deliberate placement of these elements, can influence the player's perception of the game world and its narrative. Therefore, the concept of worldness highlights the importance of creating spatial design that enhances the player's engagement and enjoyment of the game. The idea of using spatial design to foster social interaction and play is supported by several scholars, even when their work isn't necessarily touching the topic of location design. For instance, Marinka Copier and Jesper Juul, two researchers whose work I will be using in my theoretical framework, don't seem like they might fit this notion (2007; 2011). Yet, they do emphasize it after closer consideration. Juul's work isn't specifically speaking about MMOs. However, in his book *Half-real* he argues that, in general, game worlds are a unique blend of the game's mechanics and the player's imagination (2011, pp. 171-172). Copier's work, on the other hand, does go into MMOs as she highlights the role of location design in facilitating creativity and collaboration in digital culture (Copier, 2007, p. 103). These two works are important to mention together to show that even in widely different and

seemingly unrelated works in the field of game studies there is a broader underlying consensus that spatial design is an important factor in digital games and the way players engage with spaces and with each other. Therefore, it can be argued that location design plays a pivotal role in shaping the virtual worlds of video games as it enables players to experiment with different identities and engage in meaningful social experiences. This process facilitated by location design is enabled by the exceptional affordances of the game world, which permit players to interact and play in ways that surpass what is feasible in the physical world.

In the world of FFXIV, there are many locations which players make their own through role-play, something that is described in works by, for example, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor (2011; 2009). Pearce's work explores the social dynamics and cultural practices that emerge in virtual environments and highlights the creative potential of these environments as the online worlds create "new creative playgrounds" for role-players to shape their player identity in (Pearce, 2011, p. 6). Taylor agrees with that idea as she says that the game worlds of MMOs are tightly interlaced with the "social and the co-constructive work of players" (Taylor, 2009, p. 155). Players are not only interacting with the game world but also with each other.

A sizable part of the existing literature on role-play primarily focuses on *World of Warcraft* (WoW). As a fervent player of the game myself I decided to focus my research on FFXIV. Choosing this MMORPG over the more popular choice of WoW could offer a different and comprehensive insight into role-play in different in-game environments. The literature on role-playing in MMORPGs covers a range of topics, from player motivations (Snodgrass et al, 2011), social dynamics (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Yao, 2010), character creation, and game design (Suter, 2018) to constructing virtual identities and worlds (Copier, 2007, pp. 199-200; Hine, 2003; Juul, 2011). However, specifically, location design and its impact on the role-playing experience have often been overlooked or a little neglected. As

mentioned before, while the importance of location design for role-playing in MMORPGs has not been extensively studied by these authors, some have acknowledged its relevance. To explore this topic more, this thesis aims to analyze the utilization of in-game locations for role-playing in FFXIV, highlighting the connection between virtual spaces and the experiences of players during various versions of role-play. In doing so, this thesis aims to fill the gap in research of spatial design in MMORPGs. By investigating the role-playing aspect of FFXIV and examining how players use in-game locations, this thesis provides a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of social play in virtual worlds. For my research, I will be posing the question "**How does the spatial design of the MMORPG FFXIV afford and/or incentivise role-play**". I pose this question as an "and/or" question to allow the possibility that spatial design may both afford and incentivize role-play or that it could do one or the other separately. By using "and/or", the question is more flexible and acknowledges that the relationship between spatial design and role-play in MMOs is not a clear-cut either/or connection. The problem this research question addresses is the relationship between the spatial design of the MMORPG FFXIV and the player behaviour of role-play. Specifically, this research investigates how the game's spatial design elements facilitate or motivate role-playing in the game. This study's objective is to identify the spatial design features of FFXIV that support and encourage certain types of role-playing among players, categorize these game locations based on their level of design for role-play, and analyze the environmental and social factors that influence role-play in MMORPGs. The research method employed in this thesis will be expanded on in the methodology chapter later on. Answering the main question of this thesis provides new insights into the impact of game/level design on player experience and behaviour in an MMORPG setting. It could help understand how different types of spatial design within games can facilitate or actually hinder role-playing activities and what factors influence player behaviour in these environments. This could also

lead to a better understanding for researchers of how players engage with these virtual worlds and how to categorize different locations during their research. In order to answer this main question, I will answer the following sub-questions:

1. **How could one categorize role-play locations in-game?**

2. **What role does player creativity play in shaping the role-playing experience in FFXIV?**

By exploring different types of in-game locations to see what type of role-play occurs there and the unique characteristics of each location, I aim to enhance our understanding of the factors that support or hinder the role-playing experience in MMORPGs. For my analysis, I employed a textual analysis of several case studies of different locations within *Final Fantasy XIV.* To complement this analysis, I engaged in a virtual ethnography of role-play activities within these locations through in-game observations. Based on these analyses, I plotted each location on a spectrum with two axes where I compared the type of role-play this location mostly has, individual- or group-play, on one axis and whether they are designed with role-play in mind or not on the other. I based this on three focal points: relevance to lore, functionality, and aesthetics. I will be discussing these focus elements further in the theoretical framework and the methodology section. This provides a visual representation of the distribution of role-play activities across the game world and allows for a comparison of the effects of spatial design elements in facilitating role-play in different locations. I will be building on e.g. Richard Bartle's, Henry Jenkins', and Nick Yee's work on the topic in my theoretical framework (2006; 2004; 2015). Since the literature on spatial design is so limited I aim for the categorisartion system to be able to be used by other researchers on various preferences influence the analysis too much (Van Vught and Glas, 2017, p. 13). I only added my experience where I thought it would benefit the analysis and I will try to make clear where I do so during this thesis. Furthermore, answering the second sub-question will

contribute to answering the main research question as I examine the dynamic relationship between spatial design, player agency, and social practices that emerge within the game world. By analyzing how players creatively interact with the game's design and world-building, one can gain insights into how the game can incentivize and facilitate role-play activities. Additionally, understanding the role of player creativity in shaping the role-playing experience in FFXIV allows us to have a better understanding of how players navigate and negotiate the constraints and opportunities presented by the MMO genre. It builds upon previous work by researchers such as Louise Grann, Mia Consalvo, Richard Bartle, but also T.L. Taylor and N. Ducheneaut et al (2021; 2007; 2006; 2009; 2006b).

This study aims to explore how the spatial design of MMORPGs can afford and/or incentivize role-play. Specifically, I investigate the relationship between the spatial design of locations in FFXIV and the different types of role-play present and how they are facilitated by the game's lore, functionality, and aesthetics. I also aim to create a spectrum that can be used on different MMOs as a foundation to aid other researchers in their work. The next chapter provides an in-depth review of the theoretical background that guides this study. By shedding light on how the spatial design of FFXIV incentivizes and affords role-play, this study hopes to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on MMORPG design, as well as providing a spectrum that can be used on other MMORPGs other researchers can use this work as a foundation for their research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This theoretical framework will provide an understanding and interpretation of concepts, definitions, and assumptions that will be used to interpret the findings of the following analyses. This framework will guide the method, analyses and the interpretation of the results. I will discuss various concepts relating to role-playing in MMORPGs, including the relationship between in-game locations and player experience, player creativity in shaping the role-playing experience, and the design of in-game role-play locations.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IN-GAME LOCATIONS AND PLAYER EXPERIENCE IN MMORPGS

In this section, I will explore some of the literature on the relationship between in-game locations and player experiences in MMORPGs. While a substantial amount of the existing literature on this topic has been focused on the game *World of Warcraft* (WoW), such as Ducheneaut et al, and Bonnie Nardi, Michele Dickey, William Bainbridge, and Richard Bartle (2006a; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2010), extending this research to FFXIV could provide a deeper understanding of how spatial design can incentivize role-play within these types of online game worlds.

Role-playing in MMORPGs is a complex phenomenon that has attracted attention from various scholars across a myriad of disciplines. As mentioned before, literature on this topic highlights the social, psychological, and cultural dimensions of role-playing, as well as the design elements that facilitate or hinder role-play experiences. Copier's work suggests that the study of MMORPG role-play requires a multifaceted approach that considers both individual and collective dimensions of play, as well as the interplay between these dimensions and the game world itself (Copier, 2007, p. 39, 46). Which is why I undertook a

multifaceted approach to my analysis. Additionally, other literature on the topic by, for example, Nick Yee, Ducheneaut et al, and Richard Bartle has been applied to understand the motivations and behaviours of MMORPG players (2007; 2006b; 2006). Bartle's taxonomy of player types categorizes players into four main groups: Achievers, Explorers, Socializers, and Killers (2006, p. 3). Achievers are motivated by obtaining in-game rewards and completing objectives, while Explorers seek to uncover hidden areas and discover new elements of the game world (Bartle 2006, pp. 3-4). Socializers prioritize social interactions with other players, and Killers derive satisfaction from engaging in player-vs-player combat (Bartle 2006, pp. 3-4). Bartle's player types shed light on players' motivations and preferences while playing. (2006). Copier's work also emphasizes the importance of player agency and creativity in shaping the experiences of players in game worlds, which can be influenced by the different player types identified by Bartle (2007). This means that the way players interact with different in-game locations is crucial, as, for example, an Explorer type may have a better experience in a location that is oriented towards achieving specific goals.

Yee's work, which is inspired by Bartle, on player motivations in MMORPGs explains how social boundaries and expectations are established in role-play communities (2007). Yee's study finds that players' motivations for playing MMORPGs are tied to their desire for social interaction, achievement, and immersion in a virtual world (2007, pp. 773-774). This means that players in role-play communities may establish social boundaries and expectations based on their shared motivations and desires. Yee says that researchers often "ignore the important fact that different people choose to play games for very different reasons" and that not everyone falls into a simple archetype (2007, p. 774). He feels as though Bartle's taxonomy is limited, but he does acknowledge its importance and usefulness in understanding player types in MMORPGs (Yee, 2007, p. 772-773). I argue he is right about this usefulness in a certain sense. Using these archetypes and categories does help us

examine social interactions and how players form social bonds and connections within the game world. So, I wouldn't want to write off using archetypes or categories, such as the ones I will create in this thesis, completely as they provide a foundation for others to work on. Additionally to Yee, Ducheneaut et al highlight the complexity of social interactions in these MMO games and the importance of understanding players' preferences and motivations (2006a).

Ducheneaut et al explain that social interactions in MMORPGs are complex and multifaceted, like Copier, and that understanding the different motivations and preferences of players can provide valuable insight into the types of social interactions that players seek out and enjoy (2006a, p. 314; 2007). This study makes clear that MMOs are finely tuned to what excites players and how to keep these players' favour (Ducheneaut, 2006a, p. 314).

The understanding of players' motivations and experience can be further enhanced by considering Klastrup's concept of worldness (2009). As mentioned before, Lisbeth Klastrup's concept of worldness refers to the player's sense of immersion and engagement with the game world (Klastrup, 2009). Klastrup's concept of worldness emphasizes players' sense of immersion and engagement with these virtual worlds. Klastrup argues that players experience a sense of worldness when they are able to connect with and feel a sense of belonging to the game world and that this feeling can be facilitated by various design elements, such as the game's narrative, atmosphere, and visual aesthetics (Klastrup, 2009). This concept provides insight into how players engage with game worlds. In addition to Klastrup's concepts of worldness, the concept of affordances also plays a role in determining the feel of a game. Affordances refer to the actions or interactions a player can perform in-game, which can shape the player's perception of the game world and their engagement with it (Cardona-Rivera & Young, 2013, p. 8). While affordances determine player creativity and

control, added fiction, such as setting, story, and characters, can create a more immersive experience for players, adding depth and richness to the game world. In MMORPGs, this interplay between rules and fiction can have a significant impact on the design of in-game locations and the role-playing experiences they afford. For example, the rules of FFXIV dictate the abilities and limitations of what a player's character can do, while the game's fiction establishes the setting and lore of the world. The design of in-game locations must take into account both these rules and fictions to create a coherent and immersive environment for role-playing. Being aware of how the interplay between rules and fiction can impact the design of in-game locations and the role-play experiences they afford is something researchers should be aware of as this can contribute to how players engage with the game world in these MMORPGs.

PLAYER CREATIVITY AND ROLE-PLAYING EXPERIENCE IN MMORPGS

During my research I found two types of role-play to stand out in MMORPGs. There is ludic role-play, which refers to the role-play activities that take place within the game mechanics and system that is established by the developers. This includes using emotes, chat, and party systems to create a character and interact with other players in the game world. Playing an RPG doesn't necessarily mean you have to be a role-player. Ludic role-players adhere to the minimum requirements of the game's mechanics and systems to establish and maintain their character. They focus on tactical gameplay surrounding their character's class, resource management, and content generated by the game developers. On the other hand, there is creative role-play, which refers to the role-play activities that take place outside of these game mechanics and systems and are initiated by the players themselves. René Glas speaks on this when he notes that players seek ways to expand on the game's content (Glas, 2010, p.

169-170). This can include activities such as creating backstories for their characters, creating pictures using third-party software, and organizing events or activities that are not explicitly supported by the game, such as player-owned establishments or parties. Creative role-play allows players to expand on the game's world and express their own creativity and imagination. Players of MMORPGs, including FFXIV, often use their creativity to enhance their role-playing experience within the game, despite (or maybe due to) the limitations and affordances of the medium. MMORPGs offer a unique environment for player creativity during role-play due to their interactive nature. One of the key affordances of these games is for players to configure a new character within the constraints of the game world. The players have a variety of choices in how they want to represent their character in race, facial features, voice pitch, etc. These options are limited and so it is up to the player to establish their virtual identity further both within and outside of the boundaries of the game. Additionally, players can use game mechanics and systems to facilitate and enhance their role-play experiences, such as through emotes, chat channels, and guild systems. However, there are also limitations to player creativity in MMORPGs. While the digital environment offers a range of tools and resources for role-play, it is still limited by the constraints of the game world and the mechanics created by the developers. Players must work within the confines of the game's boundaries, rules and lore, which can limit the scope of their creativity. Some studies, such as the one by Grann, look at the specific features and mechanics of games that facilitate player creativity, such as character customization options and user-generated content tools (2021). She argues that the customization options available in character creation tools provide players with the opportunity for self-expression and self-discovery (Grann, 2021, p. 1-3). Moreover, scholars have examined how player creativity is shaped by the broader context of game culture, including social norms, community practices, and cultural values (Consalvo, 2007). Additionally, in some video games, the way the game mechanics and systems are designed

may not always support or allow for a certain type of role-playing, and players may need to work around these limitations to achieve their desired outcomes. Role-play exists everywhere in these games, not just in designated role-play locations. From my experience as a player, I see that it's not that people role-play everywhere, but that the players use whatever the game world provides them to create scenarios to play out. This is why there is still role-play in locations that are not necessarily designed for role-play. They are still designed for play and players use whatever the game world offers to use in the way they play the game.

THE DESIGN OF IN-GAME ROLE-PLAY LOCATIONS IN MMORPGS

I argue that design elements play a critical role in creating an in-game role-play location. Liesbeth Klastrup's emphasis on creating a sense of worldness in MMORPGs, which she talks about in her article "The Worldness of *EverQuest*", aligns with this notion (2009). She mentions how popular role-play locations often have a strong connection to the game world's lore, history, and culture, which can help players feel more connected to the game world and enhance their role-playing experience (Klastrup, 2009). An example of such a location in FFXIV is the Gold Saucer, an amusement park laden with arcade-type games (Appendix D, p. 55). This location is popular in the role-playing community because of its connection to other games in the *Final Fantasy* franchise and its unique cultural significance within the game world of FFXIV. Klastrup explains in her article that worldness includes

> both the experiences of being in-the-world (immersion and presence), but also the experience of the malfunctions of the world; and the shared experience of juggling both the reality and un-reality of the world, as well as the experience of the world as it is presented in all the many websites on and stories about the world.
>
> (Klastrup, 2009)

Her idea of worldness relates to the idea that video games are unique in their ability to create immersive virtual worlds that players can interact with. Klastrup says that a game's worldness is the sum of all the design and narrative elements that work together to create a sense of place and space in the game world (Klastrup, 2009). This includes not just the game environment itself, but also the characters, story, and other features that give players a sense of the game's setting and context. Klastrup argues that worldness is an important aspect of game design because it allows players to feel a sense of presence in the game world, which can enhance their engagement and enjoyment of the game (Klastrup, 2009). David Weibel and Bartolomäus Wissmath supplement this notion when they talk about the importance of spatial presence and flow in a game world (2011, p. 2). They suggest that flow, which is the mental state of operation when a player is immersed in the game they are playing and how they move through and interact with the space, is most important (David Weibel and Bartholomäus Wissmath, 2011, p. 2, 11). By creating a rich and immersive virtual world, game designers can give players a sense of influence over the game environment, allowing them to explore, interact with other players, and create their own unique experiences within the game world (Klastrup, 2009). As she notes, "The conglomeration of all these elements is what characterises the "worldness" of a specific online world, and what makes us engage in and believe in it" (Klastrup, 2009). The idea of worldness remains a relevant and useful concept in studying games, as it highlights the importance of creating immersive and engaging virtual worlds that allow players to explore and interact in new and creative ways. Overall, effective design elements for in-game role-play locations in MMORPGs include well-defined boundaries and rules, connections to the game world's lore and culture, and catering to players' preferences. Best practices and examples of successful role-play locations can be found in FFXIV, but also in other MMORPGs, such as the infamous "Lion's Pride Inn" in WoW, which is a popular location for role-play.

Different types of in-game locations can facilitate role-play, such as housing lots, market spaces, and open-world areas. Various factors influence how popular these locations are for role-play, such as level design, lore consistency, and accessibility. Design elements such as aesthetics, layout, and functionality also play a significant role in creating immersive and engaging in-game role-play locations. According to Ricardo Álvarez and Fábio Duarte, the qualities of these locations also play a crucial role in triggering players' responses (2017, p. 209). To enhance the overall role-playing experience and prevent players from disrupting the immersion of the game world, developers create boundaries that limit players from breaking character and detracting from the overall role-playing experience or from being in the way of other non-role-players. For example, certain actions or language may be prohibited in designated role-play areas to prevent players from disrupting the immersion. In addition to the other sources mentioned before, literature such as Stenros's "In Defence of a Magic Circle" can be useful in understanding the role of boundaries and rules in facilitating role-play in these different locations (2014). Effective role-play locations often have well-defined boundaries, boundaries which could be social or coded, and rules that allow players to suspend disbelief and immerse themselves in the game world (Stenros 2014, pp. 147-148). For instance, housing lots in FFXIV often have strict social rules regarding behaviour, dress code, and language, which contribute to a sense of authenticity and immersion.

All in all, this theoretical framework has explored various aspects of role-play in MMORPGs, including the social, cultural, and design elements that contribute to the player experience. In the following chapter, I will outline our methodology for conducting a qualitative study of role-play in MMORPGs, drawing on the insights gained from this theoretical framework to guide my research approach.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research design, data collection and analysis methods of this study.

For my study, I conducted a textual analysis of seventeen role-play locations in *Final Fantasy*

XIV[1] and developed a system that can be used to categorize and evaluate locations based on

their aesthetics, functionality, and connection to the game's lore. I based the choice of these

locations on my experience as a player of FFXIV[2]. I chose locations that I know are hotspots

or that are generally very popular. I also chose a few locations which I knew would help

explore the limits on whether or not this spectrum would work in classifying them, such as

the Ruby Sea, since this one would be difficult to classify as either a role-play designated

location or one more apt for free solo exploring (Appendix D, p. 54). These different

locations represent a diverse range of role-play possibilities, allowing for a clear

demonstration of how the spectrum could be used in research on a myriad of locations in

other MMOs. This analysis involved examining the functionality, aesthetics, and lore

elements of each location. Functionality will encompass the rules, goals, and mechanics

present in each location. I chose to focus on this element due to the literature of, for example,

Ducheneaut who discusses the concept of affordances as well as Taylor's examination of the

social and cultural aspects of MMOs and how players interact with these game worlds

(2006a; 2009). The analysis of aesthetics will focus on the atmosphere, music, (usable) props,

and environmental sounds. This element is chosen because I found that a lot of the immersion

of these MMOs can be linked to the aesthetics of the surrounding areas. Some literature from

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[1] It is worth noting that some of these locations may have different levels of role-play activity depending on the server or community using the location. For example, while the Lavender Beds in Gridania may be a bustling role-play location where I play, it may be a less (or even more) active role-play spot on other servers than the one I play on. I play on the Phoenix server in the European Light Data Center. Phoenix is classified by the Square Enix Final Fantasy website as a congested world. This means that the world is a "crowded, highly populated world", and so I do believe that my research is not hindered by too little activity (Square Enix). However, it still has to be noted.

[2] It's also worth noting that the categorization of locations based on their design and functionality for role-playing is not a definitive ranking. Different players and researchers may have different preferences and priorities when it comes to role-playing in *Final Fantasy XIV*. And researchers should be mindful of this when using a similar categorisation system in their own work.

my research that links to this element is, for example, Klastrup who talks about the engagement and immersion of game worlds, or Juul and Yee who discuss how aesthetics contribute to the engagement or interaction of players with the game world (2009; 2011; 2015). The Lore elements will include factors such as the presence of NPCs, the relevance of the location to the main story, and the presence of dungeons in the area. This element stems from the research by, for example, Jenkins, as he discusses how fans engage with the narratives, posed through the game's design and how that can be integrated into the game world (2004). To supplement my analysis, I will also observe the type of role-play that occurs in each location and if one is more prevalent than the other. Using the gathered data, I will create a spectrum via a graph that plots the locations based on two axes (see Fig 1).

Fig. 1 The spectrum where all locations will be plotted on
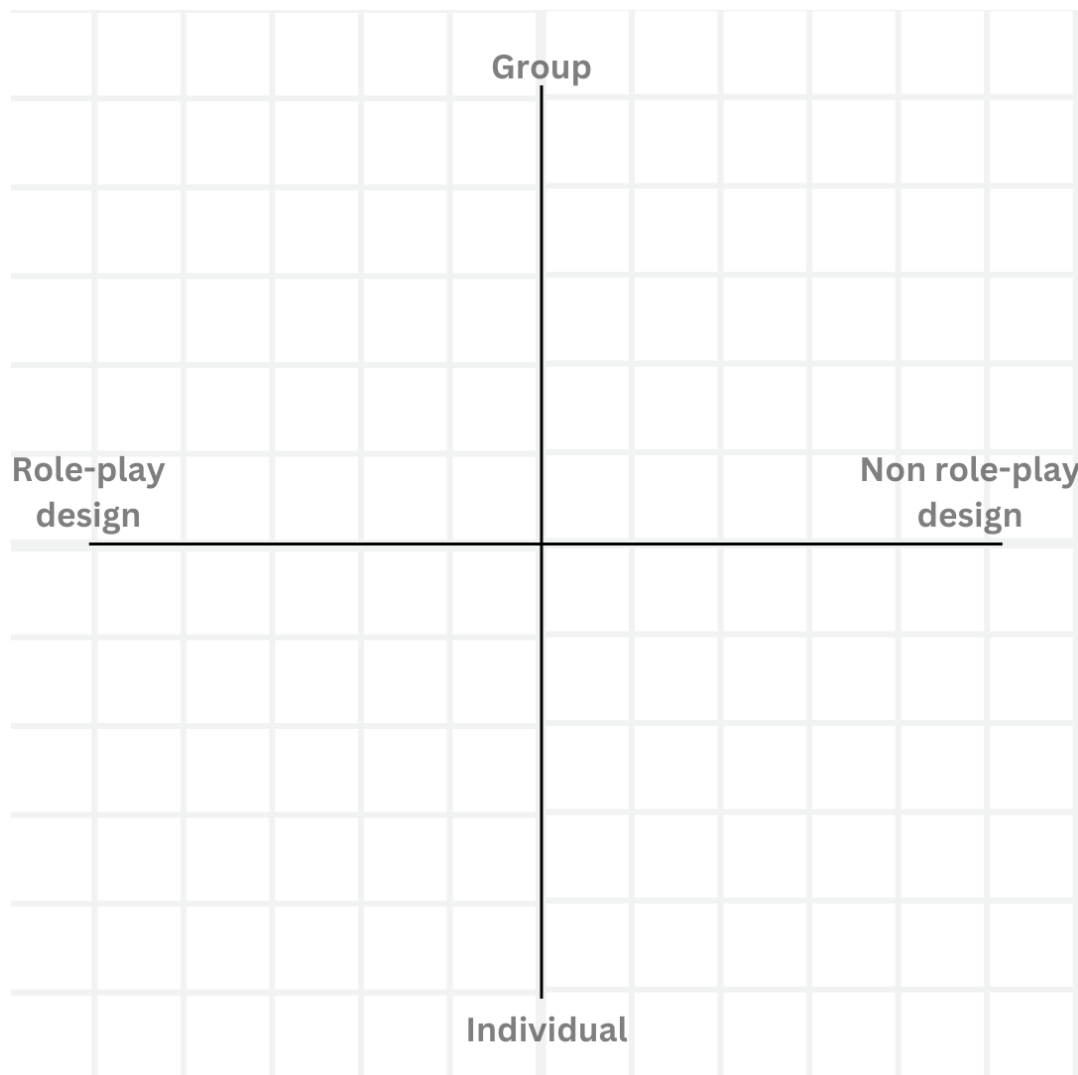
The x-axis will be dedicated to spatial design and will range from role-play design to

non-role-play design. This axis is based on the discussions of aesthetics, lore, and

functionality that I mentioned before. The y-axis will reflect the observations made during the

study and will range from group to individual role-play. The idea of group role-play and

individual role-play is based on René Glas' work where he discusses three forms of play,

individual play, individualised group play, and dedicated group play. (2010, pp. 107-108). By

using this method, I aim to gain a better understanding of the factors that contribute to

popular in-game role-play locations and how they impact the type of role-play that takes

place.

The focus of this research is on the functional, aesthetic, and lore elements of these locations, rather than the social aspect. These will be mentioned, but are not the main focus of the study. Instead, the aim is to understand how the design of these locations influences the role-play activities that take place within them, and how these activities are influenced by game mechanics and environmental storytelling. The research seeks to contribute to the understanding of how MMORPGs can create immersive and engaging role-play experiences through effective location design.

For this study, a qualitative case study approach has been used. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the interactions between players, game rules, and the in-game environment, while also providing a contextual understanding of the phenomena being studied. By using a case study approach, this study was able to capture the complexities of role-playing practices in MMORPGs. To gain insights into the social structures and cultural practices of the role-playing community, this study has also been conducted using a virtual ethnographic approach as a second analysis. Virtual ethnography emphasizes the importance of in-depth exploration, participant observation, and reflexivity to gain insights into the practices and experiences of the role-playing community (Hine, 2003, p. 10). Hine says that in her virtual ethnography, "the emphasis is on connection rather than location", which is where our approaches differ (2003, p. 84). I would rather say that, yes, the social flow is important, but the location design and spatial flow have a definite impact on how this social flow is steered, which I will demonstrate in my analysis. Using virtual ethnography, even though social interactions weren't my focus, allowed me to gain a contextual understanding of the basic role-playing practices in MMORPGs, and how these practices are influenced by location design.

I used René Glas' PhD thesis, *Games of Stake: Control, Agency and Ownership in World of Warcraft*, which also makes use of Hine's virtual ethnographic approach as a guide (2010). It provided a framework for exploring the role-playing practices in MMORPGs through participant observation, in-depth exploration, and reflexivity. His research also helped me gain insight into how my positionality and reflexivity can shape the research process and findings.

As mentioned previously, multiple methods have been used to collect data for this study, including a textual analysis and online observations. During my analysis, I will be conducting research on seventeen locations ranging from beaches, city hubs, forests, markets, deserts, etc. Online observations will include participating in role-playing activities through solo wandering, free role-playing with strangers, and joining an FC during events, such as art parties (Appendix A, p. 42). Screenshots will be used to capture the virtual environment and some interactions for analysis and these can be viewed in Appendix D starting from page 52. To analyze the data collected during the research, Fernandez-Vara's book on the analysis of video games will be utilized (2022). Categories mentioned throughout the book, such as boundaries (social, legal, and physical) of a location, environmental aesthetics, social dynamics, and the context of the game, will be the basis used to analyze the design elements of the role-play locations, the role-play behaviours and interactions within those locations, and the cultural context in which those behaviours and interactions occur. The findings of the textual analysis and online observations will be used to categorize the locations and their placement on the created spectrum. This spectrum was developed as a result of these two analyses. It consists of four quadrants similarly to Bartle's taxonomy (Bartle 2006, p. 3). Each quadrant represents a different level of role-play (RP) focus and social interaction potential.
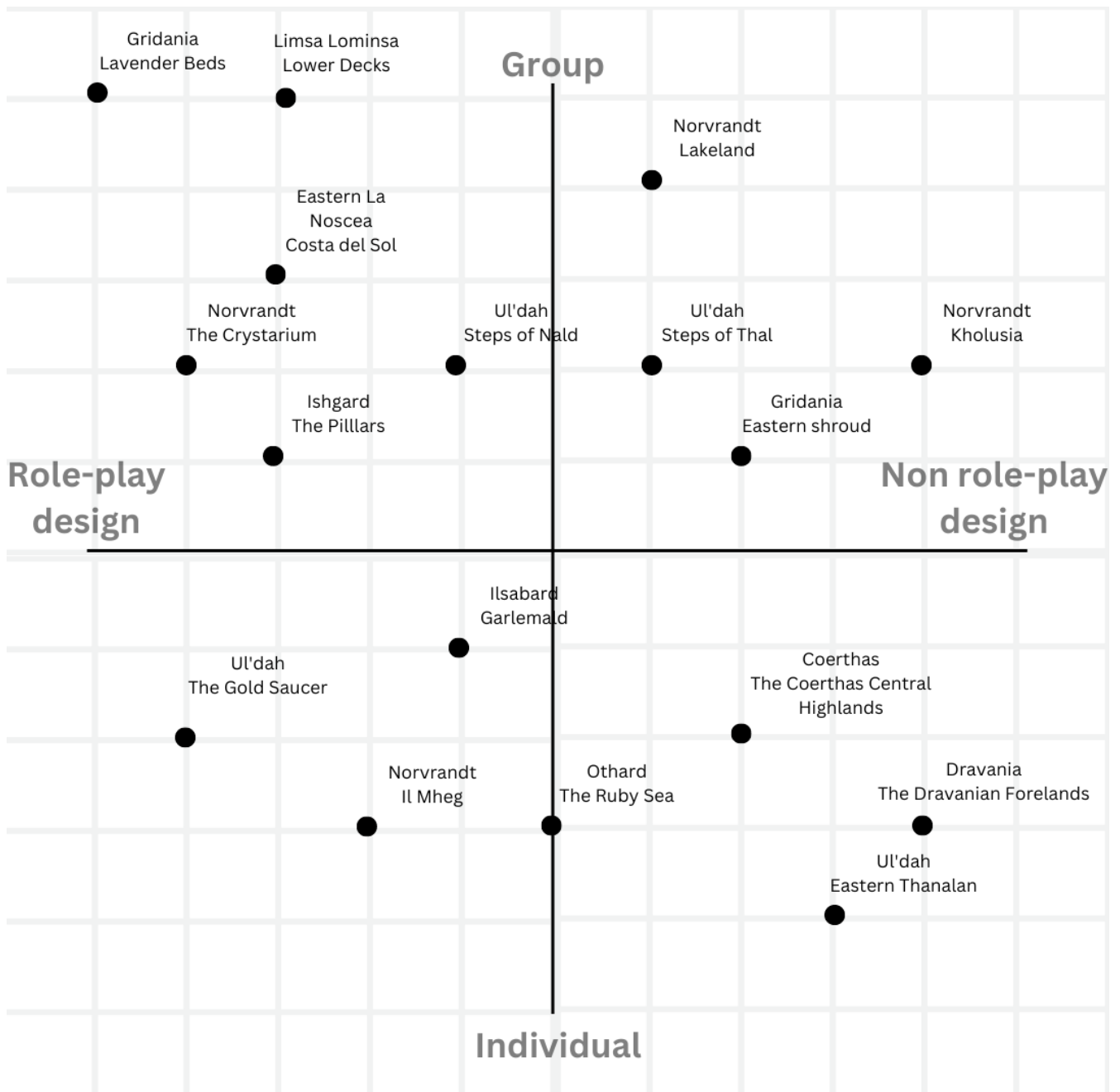
ANALYSIS

The outcome of the textual analysis supplemented by the virtual ethnography created a basis

for the spectrum where I tried to explore whether or not it was possible to categorize

locations on their level of role-play focus and social interaction potential (see Fig. 2). I tried

this with seventeen locations in FFXIV. Some of the notes I made on each location can be

found in Appendix B starting on page 43 of this thesis. The textual analysis focused on the

descriptions of each location, which could be found on this wiki[3], as well as what I knew of

them already as a player of the game. The lore elements surrounding the locations, as well as

their visual design and overall aesthetic were also part of this analysis. I examined the

functionality of each locations, including their layout and the features players could interact

with, such as props or NPCs, and how they were integrated into the game's story. For

example, The Crystarium in Norvrandt is a very important location story-wise (Appendix B,

p. 49). It is the main hub for players to come to when they arrive in this new world in the

Shadowbringers expansion and a lot of the main scenario quests take place here. For the

textual analysis part, I read up on what the wiki says about this location. I made notes on

what stood out to me such as important story elements, musical themes, landmarks, concept

art, what in-game characters might have said about it, and general background information.

This allowed me to gain an understanding of the background and lore of the location, as well

as its intended functionality and aesthetics of it. I then took a stroll in-game throughout the

area and paid particular attention to the different factors that I based my spectrum on; lore,

aesthetics, and functionality. I made notes on what stood out to me such as the music, the

look of the surrounding area, the types of NPCs I found, and what players were able to

actually do with their characters in this location. In The Crystarium I noticed, for example,

that the city is constructed around a massive crystal tower and that it has a modern industrial

---

[3] The descriptions of each location in FFXIV can be read here:
https://finalfantasy.fandom.com/wiki/Final_Fantasy_locations

aesthetic to it with red and brown bricks being complemented by a dark iron component. I noticed the music was bright and hopeful, and fit the theme of this city. Players could buy and sell items, use chairs and benches, talk to NPCs, and make use of lodgings, as well as pick up a few side quests. During my ethnographic observations, I noticed players came together in the cafe area to chat about their day, or they went shopping together to create new outfits for their characters. I also noticed a few groups take pictures together in these areas (Appendix B, 49). By combining these different analytical approaches, I was able to gain an understanding of the spatial design of these locations as well as the role-play in them. I did this for all seventeen locations. Based on my analysis of these locations I rated them on a scale of -5 to 5 to see where they would fall on the spectrum. This evaluation can be viewed in Appendix B on page 43.

Fig. 2 The spectrum with each of the seventeen locations plotted

Through my analysis, in general, I saw first-hand how players appropriate these locations for their role-play activities. As Hitchens and Drachen say, players are free to use the areas as they see fit, even though some of the pre-created locations can be somewhat restrictive (2009, p. 14). I observed that solo-RP tended to take place in more secluded areas, such as in The Coerthas Central Highlands and other more open areas in the game world (Appendix B, p. 47-48). In contrast to the more social role-play that occurred in more public spaces, such as in

Limsa Lominsa, The Costa del Sol, and The Steps of the Nald, which are a city-hub, a beach,
and part of another city-hub, respectively (Appendix B, pp. 45-47). I observed how players
use their player housing areas, such as The Lavender Beds, to create unique and personalized
spaces that reflect their character's backstory or interest (Appendix B, 44). Owning a housing
lot in FFXIV is quite an achievement as buying one of these lots is a very expensive
endeavour which, besides the initial monetary cost also requires a set time investment to
keep. Owning one of these lots is usually left to FCs that bundle together enough money to
buy one together. This is why most houses are usually bustling with role-players that hang out
in the lot's garden area. I joined a few of the events of my FC, such as a sleepover-themed art
party (Appendix A, p. 42). Some players decorate their housing areas as homes with
elaborate furnishings and decorations, while others build actual functioning spaces such as
nightclubs or casinos. Areas that are this level of customizable and functional for players are
the ones that fall into the quadrant I will discuss first.

Fig. 3 The spectrum with the names of each quadrant
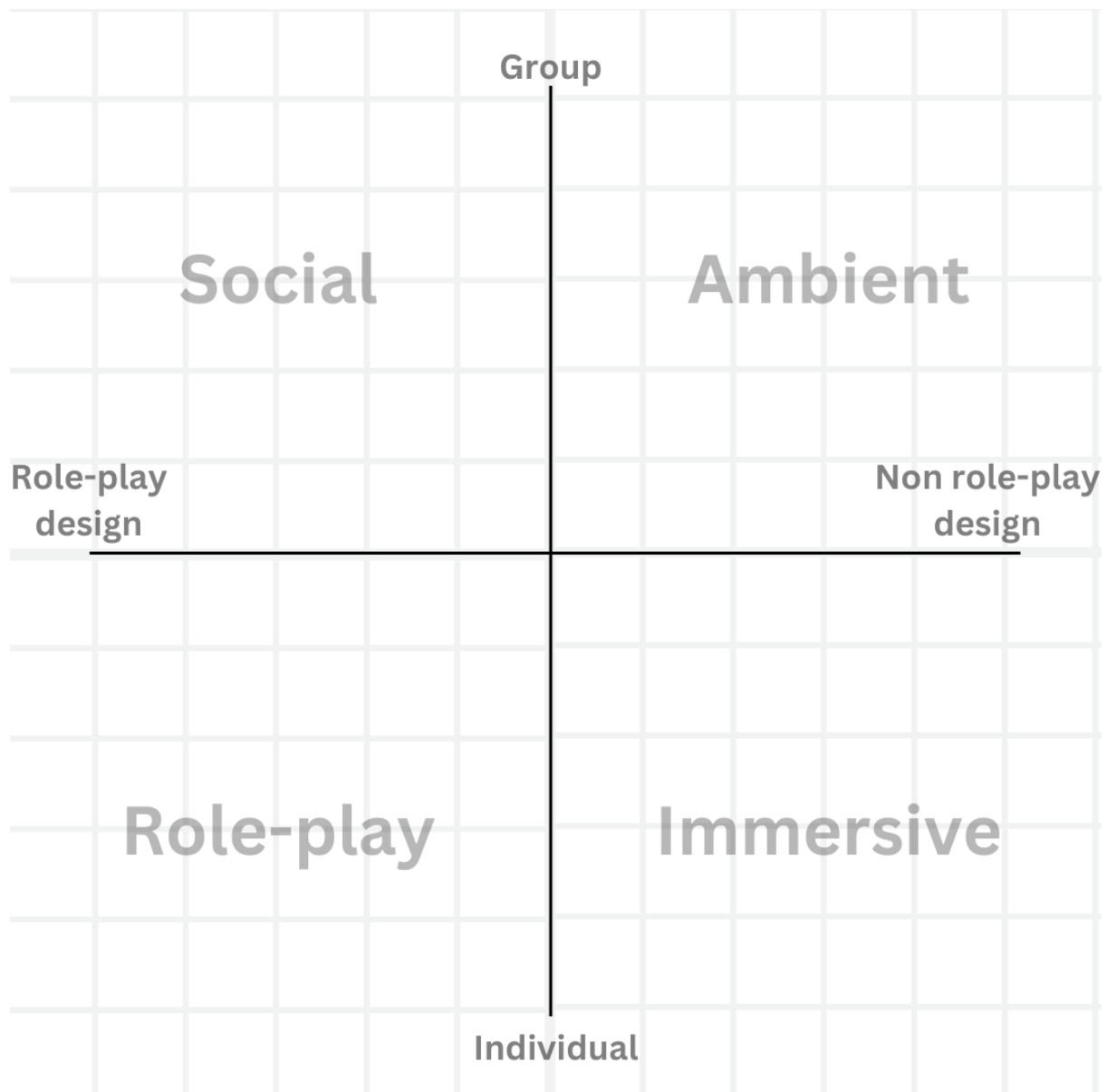
The top left quadrant, which I called the Social Quadrant, includes locations that are specifically designed for social interaction and role-play (see Fig. 3). I chose this name for the quadrant due to their high degree of interactivity, with plenty of NPCs and props for players to interact with. Players are seen in groups where they pose for group photos, hang out, watch player bards performing, advertise a player-created nightclub, etc. A notable feature of these locations (at least in FFXIV) is that a lot of seasonal quests are organized in these areas. For example, during summer there will be a summer festival on the beaches of

the Costa del Sol and during Easter, Limsa Lominsa is decorated with egg-themed garlands (Appendix C, p. 52). The locations are designed by the developers to be used for role-play and they make that clear by putting so much emphasis on them by dressing them up like this.

The top right quadrant of the spectrum, called the Ambient Quadrant, includes locations that are still used for social interaction and role-play, but the focus here is more on the environment and atmosphere. I named this one the Ambient Quadrant because the focus in these locations is on the environment and atmosphere. There are still lots of players role-playing in groups or working on their character gear together, but the focus of the location is mostly on it being an interesting environment. Players who engage in role-play activities tend to be more focused on the overall immersive experience and exploring rather than on the social interactions outside of their group. The term "ambient" here refers to the background environment, which plays a significant role in shaping the overall tone and atmosphere of that location. The aesthetics combined with the ambient sounds and the environmental storytelling make it so that these locations look meticulously crafted, but they are not specifically crafted for role-playing. An example of one of the locations that fits in this quadrant is Norvrand's Lakeland (Appendix B, 50). This location is a vast, open landscape with a serene and peaceful fantasy atmosphere. The environment is richly detailed with rolling hills, towering mountains, and sprawling fields dotted with purple trees. There are many hidden nooks and crannies for players to explore and the focus is less on the functionality of the settlements that you can find throughout the area, and instead more on creating a rich and immersive environment for players. These social locations are often populated with NPCs to still make it seem like the areas are bustling even when there aren't a lot of player characters around (Álvarez and Duarte, 2017, p. 214). These locations seem to aim to provide a sense of community and belonging for players who share common interests

and goals. Locations in this quadrant are, for example, marketplaces, camps, or strongholds that offer opportunities for players to engage in trade with one another.

The bottom right quadrant, which I named the Immersive Quadrant, includes locations that are not designed specifically for role-play but are still visited by solo-RP'ers. The Immersive Quadrant refers to locations that were not intentionally designed for role-playing, but that are still used by solo-RPers. These locations are seemingly focused on creating an immersive environment, similar to the Ambient Quadrant, except these locations have a certain, in my experience, rugged quality to them that makes them ideal for solo-play. The flow in the spatial design of these locations will be highest in locations on the right side of the spectrum (Weibel and Wissmath, 2011, p. 12). Flow in this context refers to how players move through a space and how they interact with it (Weibel and Wissmath, 2011, p. 12). These locations tend to be focused on natural environments, such as forests, mountains, and deserts and are frequently used, regarding role-playing, for exploration and journaling. It differs from the Social Quadrant in, for example, that these locations aren't as populated. There are fewer NPCs to fill these spaces as they are often associated with travel routes or dangerous places for non-adventurers. The few NPCs one can find usually have been placed there for the reason of providing side quests. In The Coerthas Central Highlands (Appendix B, p. 47), for example, there are settlements and in these settlements, you can find guards who might have a side quest where you go help out other guardsmen fight off monsters or go on a rescue mission to find a knight who hasn't returned from his last mission in the snow. This part of the spectrum focuses a lot on the atmosphere of a location, as well as the degree of interactivity and story significance. As a player of the game, I have noticed that a lot of these locations also have a special moment in the story of the game where the location is changed slightly, be that through a special sort of weather value or an actual change in landscape. This focus on atmosphere and environment contributes to the sense of immersion

for players, which when one is solo-RP'ing is important since it offers them a stronger sense of presence in the game world (Klastrup, 2009).

The bottom left quadrant, the Role-play Quadrant, includes locations that are designed specifically for solo RP'ers, such as the Gold Saucer (Appendix B, pp. 46-47). While these locations offer a lesser degree of affordances for social interaction these locations do tend to have a specific aesthetic or theme, with plenty of props and NPCs to facilitate solo-RP. In the case of the Gold Saucer, for example, there are mini-games specifically created where solo play is important or where you can't play in a team (Appendix B, pp. 46-47; Appendix D, p. 55). While these locations are primarily meant for solo players, they can, of course, also be used for social interaction if desired.

Through my analysis, I found that there is a way to categorize locations based on their role-play activity and type as well as on their design for role-play or non-role-play. The level of social design for role-play seems to affect the intensity of the role-play activity, as locations specifically designed for role-play tend to be more functional and players are able to interact with it more, which attracts more players. This is somewhat expected. That being said, role-play is still possible in the locations that are less so designed for role-play, though players may have to deal with the other types of players roaming the virtual world. The most popular locations for social role-play, during my analysis, tended to be city hubs. In general, the type of role-play that happens on the left side of the spectrum is often more casual than those of the right side. These locations, such as Limsa Lominsa, often seemed smaller or were designed with more narrow paths and specific grouping areas than the locations on the right side of the spectrum (see Fig. 2; Appendix B, p. 45). These less role-play-focused areas are often quite open for players to wander through. Even though I focused my observations on players taking part in role-play, it has to be said that I noticed similar observations for

non-RP'ing players in these locations. Most players were active in these city hubs while fewer were seen throughout the locations on the right side of the spectrum. This means that they often blend in quite nicely with the role-players in the location on the left side. On the other hand, these non-RP'ers stand out in the locations on the right side of the spectrum, which means that role-players sometimes will have to be mindful of non-role-players and how they may affect the atmosphere and immersion of a role-playing location. Some role-players try to get these non-RP'ers to join them, but that doesn't always succeed. When that happens they usually just ignore one another and continue to play the game in the way they prefer.

The observations I made show that there are differences between solo role-play and social role-play in the different quadrants of the spectrum. In the Ambient Quadrant, for example, social role-play tends to be more common than solo role-play (see Fig. 2). Players use the engaging locations to collectively create a shared experience with other players. In contrast, in the Immersive Quadrant, solo role-play is more prevalent. One such location is, for example, Eastern Thanalan, where there are more players travelling by themselves, even walking instead of running to enjoy the landscape (Appendix B, p. 46). Players use these locations to complete quests and missions or to explore, often without much interaction with other players. This also causes the type of role-play that happens on the right side of the spectrum to often be more related to the person (back)story of a player's character, which could correlate to the main story of the game. For example, after the main quest of FFXIV in version 6.1 a lot of players started to pretend to explore the game world as their character who was, according to the game's story, taking a break from saving the world. This is the type of role-play that would happen on the right side of the spectrum, whereas the role-play that happens on the left side of the spectrum is often designed for role-play and, from what another player has told me, what-if scenarios. For example, a player might wonder what it

would be like if their character went on a vacation to the beach, and then they could visit the Costa del Sol map to enact that role-play scenario (Appendix B, p. 47). These spaces have a particular theme to them that could be revisited for players to interact with.

Player control in MMOs is somewhat limited by the game's design (Hitchens and Drachen, 2009, p. 14). This means that players can only interact with the game world within the boundaries set by the game's developers. On the open Ruby Sea, it looks as if players can travel endlessly on the open waters (Appendix B, p. 48). However, at one point they will hit a wall that stops them from going any further. Players are also limited by the movements allowed for by the developers. Copier's work provides insight into how players can navigate these limitations through role-play, which allows them to creatively shape their own experiences within the game world (2007). Players do this, for example, by using player housing to create their own little space in the game. Therefore, I will be discussing things like player housing sections and other features as an example of how players use the spatial affordances of the game to, from a worldbuilding perspective, make the game world personal.

Players use the spatial affordances of the game, such as player housing to make the game world more personal and to create their own sense of worldness (Klastrup 2009). One way players appropriate game locations is through the customization options available for their player-owned housing. These customization options allow players to create their own personal and unique spaces that reflect their characters' personalities through function or aesthetics. This customization option enables players to have more agency over their experiences in the game, as they can shape the world around them to fit their vision to create their own sense of worldness; "immersion into a world and the feeling of presence within it" (Klastrup 2009).

But the game isn't solely there for role-players and so the RP'ers also need to work with the limitation that they are playing "alone together" as called by Ducheneaut et al (2006b, p. 410). While they may physically be RP'ing alone or in a small group, they are still part of a much larger community of players. The chance to play in this world and with these people online provides players with a sense of agency and creativity as they can use this connection to shape their own experience in the game world. For example, you have many players who decide to start a band together in-game, buy a house together, or even get married in-game. One example I found during my observation is how I encountered two players in the Eastern Shroud who role-played as a couple of young travellers trying to follow the game's storyline (Appendix B, pp. 44-45). Instead of using the usual, faster, transportation devices, these two were strolling side by side, traversing through the Shroud. Despite the game's limitations, players have found ways to work within them to create immersive and engaging role-playing experiences. During my observations, I saw that the virtual locations provided to them allowed them a high degree of immersion through the environmental design choices. The music, ambient sounds, interactive props, interactive NPCs, etc all contribute to this immersive environment.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have explored the spatial design features of *Final Fantasy XIV*, an MMORPG, that incentivize and/or afford role-play among its players. What I realized was that the relationship between spatial design and role-play in MMOs is not straightforward, as it may both afford and incentivize role-play separately or even together. To address this complexity, I conducted this study, not only as a researcher but also as a player and fan of the game, which has influenced some of my methods and findings. However, as Van Vught and Glas say, I tried to keep a "critical distance" and only used my experiences where I thought they would be beneficial (Van Vught and Glas, 2017, p. 13). This thesis aimed to fill a gap. I noticed that much of the literature on the topic was specifically on *World of Warcraft* and by investigating FFXIV I provided a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic of social play in these virtual worlds from a different perspective. I hoped to provide a framework, or specifically, a spectrum, that other researchers would be able to use in their own research.

To come to this spectrum I discussed a myriad of concepts relating to role-play in MMORPGs. Copier's work showed that player agency and creativity are important factors in players' experiences in these virtual worlds (2007). During my analysis I found that she was correct as locations that had more freedom for players to exercise their agency in shaping their experiences, such as in player housing areas or in areas that had a lot of functional props, there seemed to be a lot of social group-role-play, compared to environments that focused more on an aesthetic or lore based principle (see Fig. 2). While there are certain limitations set that confine player's creativity to the boundaries set in place by the game, these boundaries are also there to help the player from breaking their own immersion (Stenros 2014, pp. 147-148). Klastrup's idea of worldness and the immersion and engagement of players also helped highlight the importance of spatial design (2009). Her idea that video

games create an immersive virtual world through the conglomeration of their narrative and design elements has been helpful in the discussion on how these three elements, the location's aesthetic, the functionalities of the location, and connections to the overarching story of the game-world, are crucial in determining player's experiences within game locations (Klastrup 2009). As seen in the analysis, these elements do have a connection to the type of role-play found in these locations. Role-play can take place anywhere in an MMORPG, not just in places designated for role-play. While different locations may be better suited for different types of role-play, some locations are specifically designed for role-play while others may be more incidental.

Ducheneaut et al explained that understanding the motivation behind why these players behave as they do, and thus role-play where they do, requires a multifaceted research approach, which is one of the reasons why I used a combination of different methods during this thesis (2006a, p. 314). I used a combination of a textual analysis as well as a virtual ethnography on seventeen locations in FFXIV. During the textual analysis, I examined the functionality of the locations, the connection to the overarching lore of the world, as well as the general aesthetic of the location. Furthermore, I assessed each location's potential for social interaction by seeing if a location is more visited or used by group role-players or solo-RPers. From the data gathered I created a spectrum that is loosely based on Bartle's taxonomy of player types. Like his taxonomy, this spectrum is divided into four quadrants: Social, Ambient, Immersive, and Role-play (see Fig. 3). I then plotted each location on the spectrum (see Fig. 2). The results revealed that the players in FFXIV appropriate locations for their role-play activities, but that due to the types of locations, different types of role-players would be present. As Yee stated "different people choose to play games for very different reasons" and these locations seem to afford and/or incentivize different types of play (2007, p. 774). It is difficult to make a general statement and say which key elements facilitate or

hinder role-play as it depends on the type of role-play. Casual group play benefits from having a lot of functional props for players to interact with and is happening mostly in city-hubs where a lot of people will congregate. Examples can be seen in Limsa Lominsa's Lower Deck, as well as in The Costa del Sol (Appendix B, p. 45, 47). On the other hand, serious solo-RP benefits from having wide stretching landscapes, such as in Eastern Thanalan (Appendix B, p. 46).

While this study aimed to provide insights into the role-playing practices in MMORPGs and the influence of location design on these practices, several limitations must be considered. Firstly, the study's findings may not be representative enough of the various types of locations in FFXIV or other MMOs. While the selected locations cover a wide range of design elements and role-playing activities, there may be other locations that were not included in this study, which could have different design elements and player behaviours. This could limit the generalizability of the findings. However, this study's goal was to create a framework that other researchers could build on and explore whether it would be possible to create and use this spectrum, which has turned out fruitful. Secondly, my study focuses solely on FFXIV, and the findings may not apply to other MMOs with different game mechanics, lore, and player communities. The social and cultural norms in FFXIV may differ from other games, which could result in different role-playing practices and preferences. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying the study's findings to other MMORPGs. Lastly, this study only examines the locations' functional, aesthetic, and lore elements, rather than the social aspect. While social dynamics play an important role in sustaining role-playing communities, due to the scope of this study it does not delve deeply into the social interactions and relationships that develop in these locations. Future studies could explore these social aspects of role-playing in MMORPGs in a similar context to better understand the phenomenon.

Overall, this study's findings can contribute to the growing body of knowledge on MMORPG design and provides a spectrum that can be used by other researchers on other MMORPGs. This study can serve as a foundation for future research on the relationship between in-game locations and player experience in MMORPGs.

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Appendix A: FC Role-play Event Invitation

Image of the invitation spread to the FC members for the sleepover art party

Appendix B: Analysis Notes

Location Names	Scale of -5 to 5	Individual-Group		Role-play design - Non-role-play design
Gridania - The Lavender Beds		5		5
Gridania -The Eastern Shroud		1		-2
Limsa Lominsa - The Lower Decks		5		3
Ul'dah - The Steps of Nald		2		1
Ul'dah - The Steps of Thal		2		-1
Ul'dah - Eastern Thanalan		-4		-3
Ul'dah - The Gold Saucer		-2		4
Ishgard - The Pillars		1		3
Eastern La Noscea - Costa del Sol		3		3
Coerthas - The Coerthas Central Highlands		-2		-2
Dravania - The Dravanian Forelands		-3		-4
Othard - The Ruby Sea		-3		0
Ilsabard - Garlemald		-1		1
Norvrandt - Il Mheg		-3		2
Norvrandt - The Crystarium		2		4
Norvrandt - Lakeland		4		-1
Norvrandt - Kholusia		2		-4

The values I have given each location to plot them on the spectrum

Appendix B (continued)

These are some of the notes I made on the locations that I observed

Gridania - The Lavender Beds
- It is a lush, forested area with many natural elements such as streams, hills, and flowers
- The player houses are all big and different to one another. They all have personal touches to them and players decide if they allow people entry to their house or not. Players can hang around in all of the gardens and use all the props put there by the owners of the lots. These houses aren't a necessary thing to own, but it does give extra storage space. Players can leave items here instead of taking them with them. Since players have a limited storage capacity this is a handy feature, but there's no push for players to try and own a housing lot. These are not really tied to the story, for example.
- During weekends I see many players standing in line for nightclubs. The bouncer (who is another player) tells people to put away their weapons, remove their armour, and put away pets.
- The boundaries of the location are water, invisible walls, as well as trees and unscalable mountains. Mounts that the player can use to normally fly with can't fly in this area.
- Some of the houses have a guestbook or a person saying what the social rules are. Some houses don't allow pets, weapons, or armour to be out in the open, for example.
- During most days I see players hanging out and talking in their gardens. They use emotes and chat to talk and greet each other. Some show off their new mounts or new outfits or their latest win from a dungeon raid.
- The streets of the Lavender Beds aren't as busy, but a lot of the lots are busy with groups of players. Most are role-playing (casually or creatively), but there are also players using training dummies to perfect their rotations.
- Some NPC can be found walking around as guards or tending to the gardens outside of the lots

Gridania - The Eastern Shroud
- Since Gridania is themed after the general High Fantasy tropes of big forested areas, this part of the Shroud is also covered in natural elements. The wooded area is sectioned off by natural barriers like rivers, gigantic trees, thick underbrush, etc.
- In the Eastern Shroud, one can find a fairy-type species of NPC called Sylphs. The part they live in, The Sylphlands, together with The Hawthorne Hut where a lot of players appear due to the teleportation stone (Aetheryte crystal) there, are the most popular areas as far as I can see after going to observe on different occasions.
- This area is a bit of a travel-through area. There are a few side quests for players throughout the area, but if players solely follow the main scenario quests then they are in and out of this area relatively quickly.

- A lot of role-play goes on around the Sanctum of the Twelve since players can get married in-game here. It is a giant church that can be found near the Bramble Patch. This means that low-level players would have a harder time coming here since the monsters in this area are generally stronger than in the rest of the Eastern Shroud. I found a lot of players taking group pictures either here or near the Sweetbloom Pier.
- The focus of the developers seems to mostly have gone on the surrounding environment. In certain locations on the map, one can feel a clear eerie feel due to the types of monsters, the dead trees and grass, the music and sound effects, etc.

Limsa Lominsa - The Lower Decks
- Limsa Lominsa is known in the FFXIV community as *the* role-play place to be. And especially on The Lower Decks. This bustling, lively area has a lot of activity and a rush of people moving through it. A tip given to me by another player was to turn off the names of other players so I would actually be able to see what was happening around me.
- In the concept art of Limsa Lominsa, the city is always pictured from far away. This allows one to see the white buildings with dark blue accents. It is a little reminiscincent of the Greek architecture of Santorini but with a fantasy twist.
- On The Lower Decks, one can find many shops and other commercial elements. A lot of players are here to do their shopping or to craft items in bulk to sell them on the market board here.
- A lot of NPCs can be found in this area. Shop owners, guards, residents, dancers, pirates, rogues, etc. They are all "busy" leading their life and it does give a sense of lived-in feeling to the area. In one place during my explorations, I saw a fight happen with some onlookers. At first, I thought these were players, but on closer inspection, they were a group of NPCs. I think that having these sorts of scenarios happen through NPCs also gives a certain precedent for the role-players in the area.
- The music in this area is epic and grand in character. The moment you step into the area you are welcomed by a symphony of brass instruments and bagpipes. It is loud and exciting and sets a happy tone. Some players told me that the moment they hear this city's soundtrack they feel at home as if the city is welcoming back its adventurers.
- The streets are narrow due to everything being built on suspension bridges over rocks that stick out of the ocean. This seems to make the environment seem more filled without making it feel cramped. Compared to the more open layout of, for example, Gridania (the city-state, which I haven't included in my list of observed locations), one could feel like The Lower Decks are visited by more players whereas I think it is mostly looking like this due to the design of the location.

Ul'dah - The Steps of Nald
- The Steps of Nald is a grand ornate area, which seems to be inspired by the old Ottoman Empire. The locations boundaries are impressive buildings and architecture.

- NPCs here in this location are doing similar things as can be seen in Limsa Lominsa. They are there to give life to the location. There are NPCs dancing, residents, shopkeeps, guards, etc.
- Wealth and authority are the themes that are important here. Ul'dah is the city-state that is known for its commercial significance
- The music here, just as in Limsa Lominsa, is there to provide a certain mood to the environment. There are also other ambient noises such as the sounds of people talking as if there is a market.
- Even though it's still busy on the general streets of The Steps of Nald, a lot of players (both RP and casual) can be found in The Quicksand, which is a cafe that can be found here.
- It is definitely less busy here, but I notice more people being in groups than alone. The ones that are alone, are usually just normal players, not role-players.

Ul'dah - The Steps of Thal
- Due to this location being so close to The Steps of Nald and part of the same city-state, it looks quite similar.
- In this location, there is more of a focus on politics, wealth, and craftsmanship. In The Steps of Thal, a lot of commerce and craftsmanship is happening. Here, one can find the actual market, whereas, in The Steps of Nald, it's more of a city street to the market. The players present here are more working on their skills than role-playing, but the ones that are role-playing are there often in groups.
- This location, again, feels like a sort of mid-way point on the road to something. Even though this is where a lot of the commerce is, which might seem like it would get a lot of people here, this location is less popular than The Steps of Nald. I think this is because this location is more designed to fit a certain theme, but isn't as designed to be fun to be in for people. In the Steps of Nald, you have the cafe and, in general, it feels a little more lively there.

Ul'dah - Eastern Thanalan
- This location is a sprawling desert area full of sand, rocks, and the occasional lone tree. The sky is open and the map looks beautiful at night. I spent a lot of time just pointing my camera up or sitting next to a pond to enjoy the environment.
- There are players here, but the environment mostly begs for solo role-play.
- There are some camps and settlements to be found throughout the map. This adds a sense of survival and resourcefulness to the area. The aesthetic of it feels like the typical wild west.
- The atmospheric sounds of the wind and the animals (which are just big monsters) around really add to the feeling of journeying through a desolate desert.

Ul'dah - The Gold Saucer
- I know, due to being a fan of the franchise, that The Gold Saucer has connections to previous games in the Final Fantasy world. The music in this area is an element that

keeps coming back throughout the franchise so I can imagine that it could evoke a sense of nostalgia
- This place is a lively, colourful, and loud area with a lot of activity and movement. Excitement is all around. The colours are vibrant and the theme is that of a theme park or a casino.
- The music is a happy sort that would fit a fair or carnival. It ties well with the whole theme park aesthetic. There are also sounds of other people laughing and talking and the sounds of slot machines and other attractions are all around.
- The NPCs in this area are all dressed as croupiers or women dressed in the typical "sexy bunny girl" outfit (think Bridget Jones' bunny costume). These NPCs don't give out (sides) quests, but players can buy lotto tickets, exchange won tickets from the mini-games for items, or start mini-games by talking to them.
- There are mini-games and gambling games all around the location. These games range from testing the players' reflexes with the mouse or their agility with the keyboard (or controller) to playing card games or mahjong.
- This location is often busy, no matter what time of the day or what season we are in. I've noticed that some locations could be less busy at certain times of day or during certain parts of the year. Here, there are a lot of people around at all times, but most of the people are here to play by themselves. These people are having fun together, but are there to play alone.

Ishgard - The Pillars
- Ishgard is generally themed after Germanic, medieval-style villages and castles. The Pillars is the area where the rich nobility lives. The centrepiece of the map is a gigantic church with impressive Gothic architecture. The other buildings are grand stone pieces of architecture too.
- The NPCs present are knights, nobles, or part of the clergy. This adds to a sense of chivalry, authority, and spirituality in the entire area.
- The sounds of bells and crowds add to the atmosphere of the area.
- This place is one that is beautifully crafted with a lot of benches and spots that are good for pictures or playing out scenarios.

Eastern La Noscea - Costa del Sol
- This area is a tropical beach with a lot of sand, water, and tiki-themed props.
- There are beds with parasols for players to sunbath, and they can swim in the ocean or play closer to the shore in the water, there are bars all around where they can relax and buy food items, and during the summer there will be a special event on the beach for all players to take part in. The location has a great sense of relaxation and leisure to it.
- The music, and ambient noises, such as the sound of the waves and seagulls, add to the atmosphere of the area too.
- This location is usually very popular with players and mostly with role-players.

Coerthas - The Coerthas Central Highlands

- This area is a snowy mountainous range with a lot of cold and rugged terrain. Snowy and frozen rivers wind through the landscape.
- There are some camps and fortresses sprawled throughout the area, which adds to the survival theme of the area.
- The music is orchestral and classic with themes that fit an epic battle.
- NPCs in the area are often guards, knights, and the occasional merchant that all fit with the medieval theme.
- This area borders Ishgard, which is why the medieval European theme is so prominent here as well.
- The story elements of this location, which is the constant battle between Ishgard and the Dravaninan Horde are prominent here in the environmental design of camps, NPCs, etc. (Mostly during and after the Heavensward expansion)

Dravania - The Dravanian Forelands
- The Dravanian Forelands are characterised by forested areas located in Dravania. The tree's roots lift the entire trunk of the tree high off the ground allowing the player to walk underneath them. As well as the rolling hills and rocky cliffs.
- The area has an organic and natural aesthetic to it with an emphasis on natural colours and materials such as wood, stone, plants, etc.
- The music in this area is a little melancholic, but also hopeful due to the violins and flutes. It fits the theme of the area as well as the plot nicely. The ambient noises focus on natural sounds such as the flapping of wings and the flowing of water.
- NPCs in the area include dragons (or dragonkin) as well as some humanoid tribes scattered throughout the map. There are quests here to keep the players in the area, which makes for good content on the solo-role-play part, but there is little to do for groups, and the location is more focused on fitting the theme than being pretty for pictures.

Othard - The Ruby Sea
- The Ruby Sea is an expansive body of water located in the Far East of the world of FFXIV. If the player goes too far out the game will stop them and show that there is an invisible wall. This happens in every location, but it's something to note here since the boundaries of the area aren't as clearly marked by towering cliffs or giant trees blocking the way. The area features both above and below-water areas to explore. This is the first time where this is possible.
- The landscape is dominated by the sea, but there are island groups to explore as well as underwater caves and grottos to be found.
- The island has a Far Eastern aesthetic, with Japanese-inspired architecture. The music of the area also sounds inspired by the Far East due to the flute sounds and what sounds like a shamisen.
- NPCs that can be found here are pirates, merchants, and fishermen, alongside the few underwater races that have their own underwater villages.
- There is some stuff here for players to role-play, mostly in the underwater villages or surrounding the pirate bases on some of the islands.

- This location has a lot of tie-ins to the story so it is logical that there's some stuff for players to do and for it to be aesthetically pleasing, but it also feels expansive and open. It's hard to say where I would place this on my scale since a lot can be said for both sides. I think I would therefore place this one in the middle.

Ilsabard - Garlemald

- Garlemald is a massive industrialized empire that dominates Ilsabard, the most northern continent of the FFXIV.
- The landscape is characterized by massive factories, crushed urban environments, smokestacks, and a lot of ice and snow.
- The area has a militaristic aesthetic, with a heavy emphasis on industrial metal and architecture.
- The music in the area is also mechanical, ticking like a clock, but there is also something innocent in there. There is a small section where the music ticks away as a music box version of the former melody.
- The story of FFXIV has been building up to Garlemald from the beginning. The big enemies that the player is fighting against for four expansions have been from Garlemald. They have been *the* force to be reckoned with, and when you get to the main city it is in rubble and you have to save its people. There are not a lot of NPCs to be found unless they are there for story purposes, and none are happy to see the player. Role-play in this area happens, but I'd say it's mostly personal role-play.

Norvrandt - Il Mheg

- Il Mheg is a fantastical and whimsical area located in Norvrandt, the new world introduces in the Shadowbringers expansion pack.
- The landscape is colourful, with giant flowers, mushroom fields, and sparkling streams.
- The area has a distinct fairy tale aesthetic, with a giant whimsical fairy castle and quaint fantastic architecture that uses bright, flashy, and playful colours.
- The music in the area is lighthearted and playful too, making use of string instruments for that light sound.
- NPCs here are fairies, pixies, mushroom people, and other fantastic creatures. There is a lot to do and the location is beautiful, but I would still call this location more suited for solo-play due to story significance (you're supposed to be stranded on this new world alone), but also because it's something I have observed. More people have been wandering the place alone as individual travellers.

Norvrandt - The Crystarium

- The Crystarium is the main city-hub of Norvrandt. It is a city built around a massive crystal tower.
- The landscape is dominated by the tower as well as by the surrounding buildings and architecture. Its city is catagorised by its futuristic and fantastical architecture.
- The city is filled with NPCs, including merchants, vendors, quest-givers, residents, etc.

- The music in The Crystarium is atmospheric and fits the futuristic and magical setting of the city.
- Due to the city being so important for the story, given its central location in the Shadowbringers' main scenario quest, there is a lot to do and there are specific places like a cafe, gardens, and a lodging station for players.

Norvrandt - Lakeland
- The Lakeland is a lush and vibrant forest location just north of The Crystarium. There are large bodies of water, purple fantasy trees that form a forest, and lookouts spread around the map.
- Lakeland has some role-play element, but is more focused on a certain fantastical perspective. It is a setting with a lot of nature-themed for adventure-based role-play. This location seems better suited for group role-play as I see groups more often together in this location.
- The music here is peaceful and adds to the serene atmosphere of the area.
- Throughout the Shadowbringers expansion, a lot of story moments happen in this location, but they are often quick and travel themed, which I think adds to the feeling of this location having a similar feeling as a lot of locations that I think will fit in the top right quadrant of the spectrum.

Norvrandt - Kholusia
- This location is a rugged, mountainous region to the east of The Crystarium. There are steep cliffs, several small settlements, and a path of slums that lead towards the giant, lavish city-hub of Eulmore.
- This location, just like the Lakeland location is a bit of a travel-through location. A lot happens here throughout the main scenario quests, however, it is mostly going from area A to area B
- Kholusia seems to be an area where poverty is affecting all the settlement in this area. The region features a number of NPCs that show the hardships these people go through to show the dichotomy between this area and the city of Eulmore.
- The music is sombre and atmospheric. It fits the rugged nature themes.
- The area isn't necessarily made for role-play, but there are still groups going about through the location because it has a lot to do in the small settlements. Or even exploring the rugged nature of the area and taking photos.

Appendix C: Seasonal Decorations in a Location

Limsa Lominsa Lower Deck is decorated with eggs during Easter
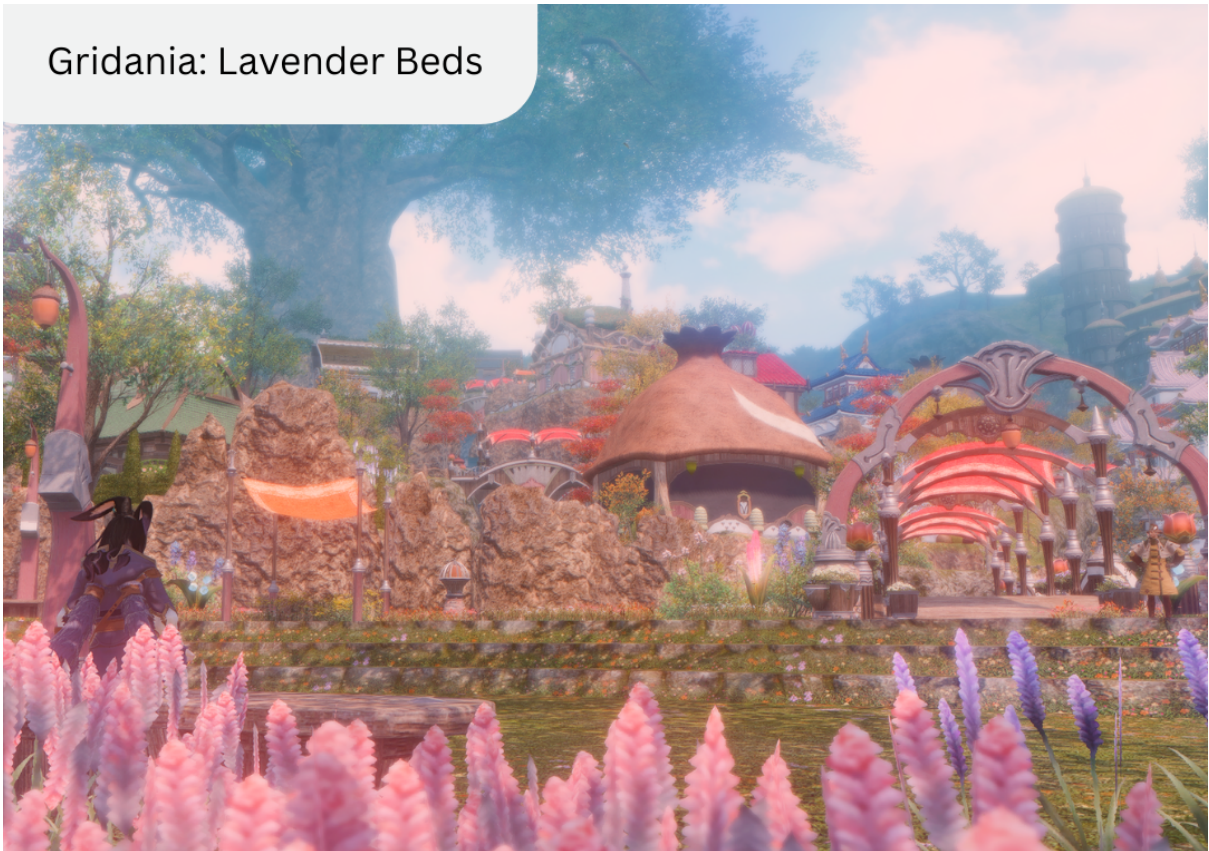
Appendix D: Location Pictures

Gridania: Eastern Shroud

Gridania: Lavender Beds

Limsa Lominsa: Lower Decks

Ul'dah: Steps of Thal
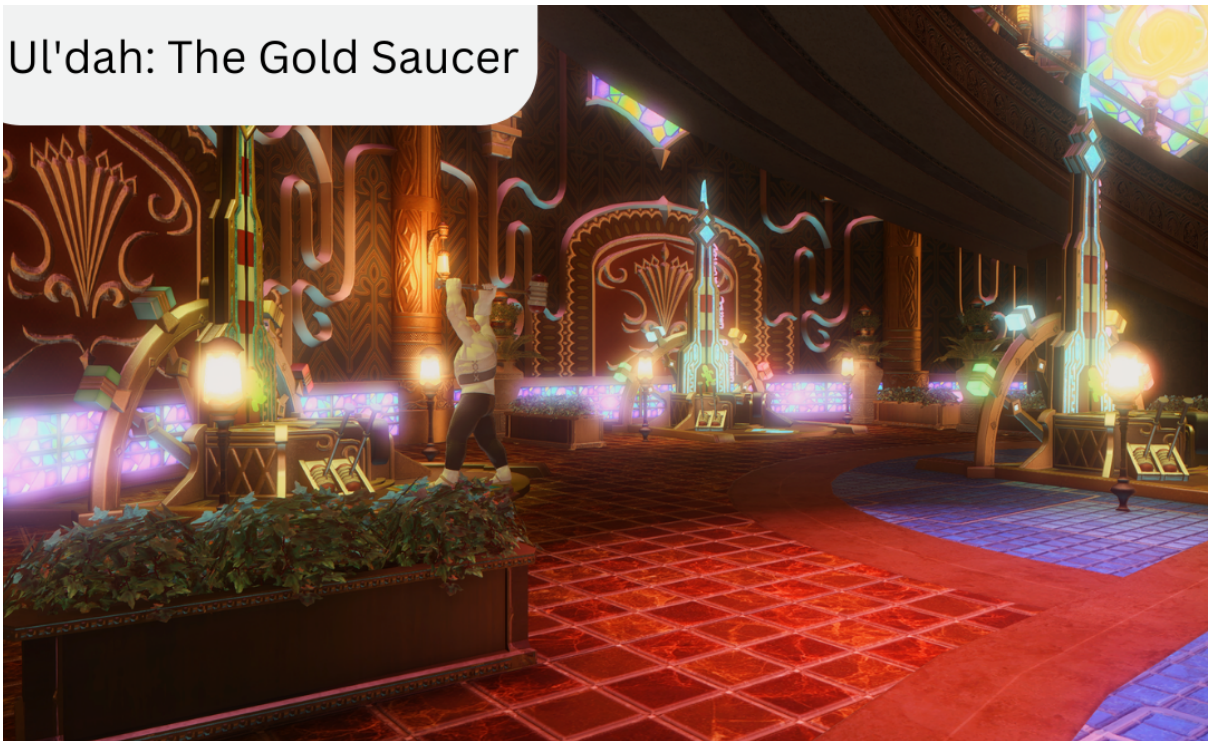
Norvrandt: Il Mheg

Othard: The Ruby Sea

Ul'dah: Steps of Nald

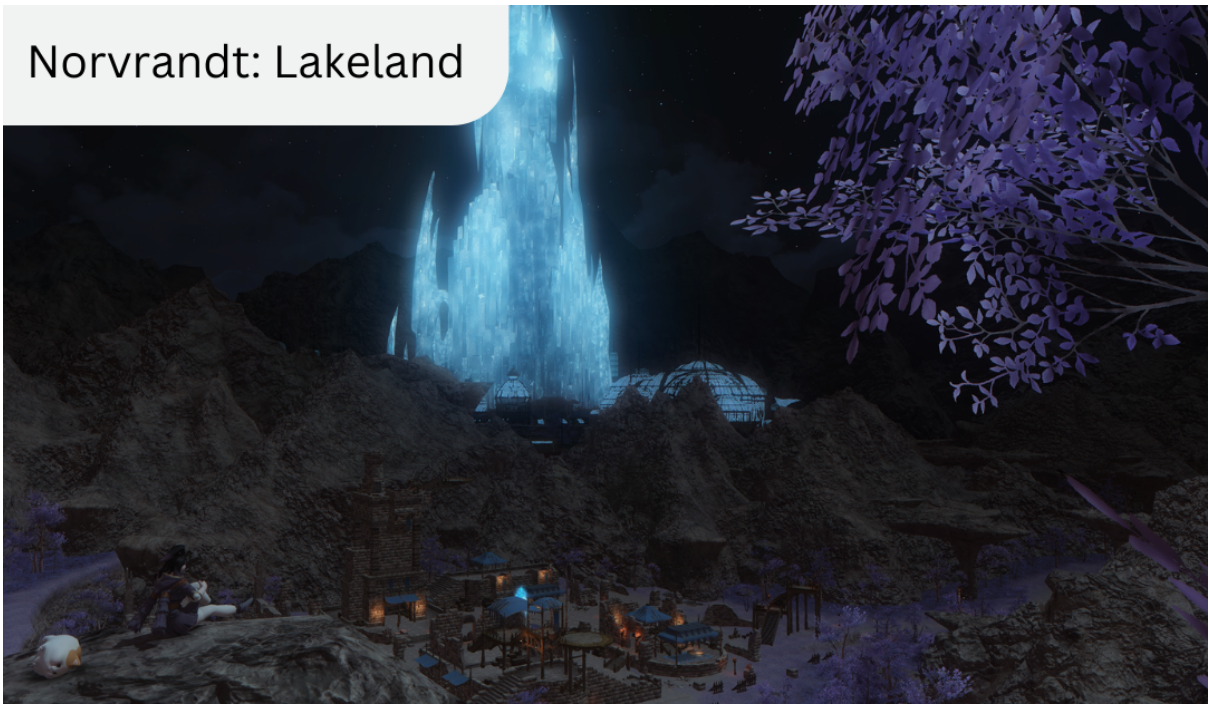Ul'dah: The Gold Saucer
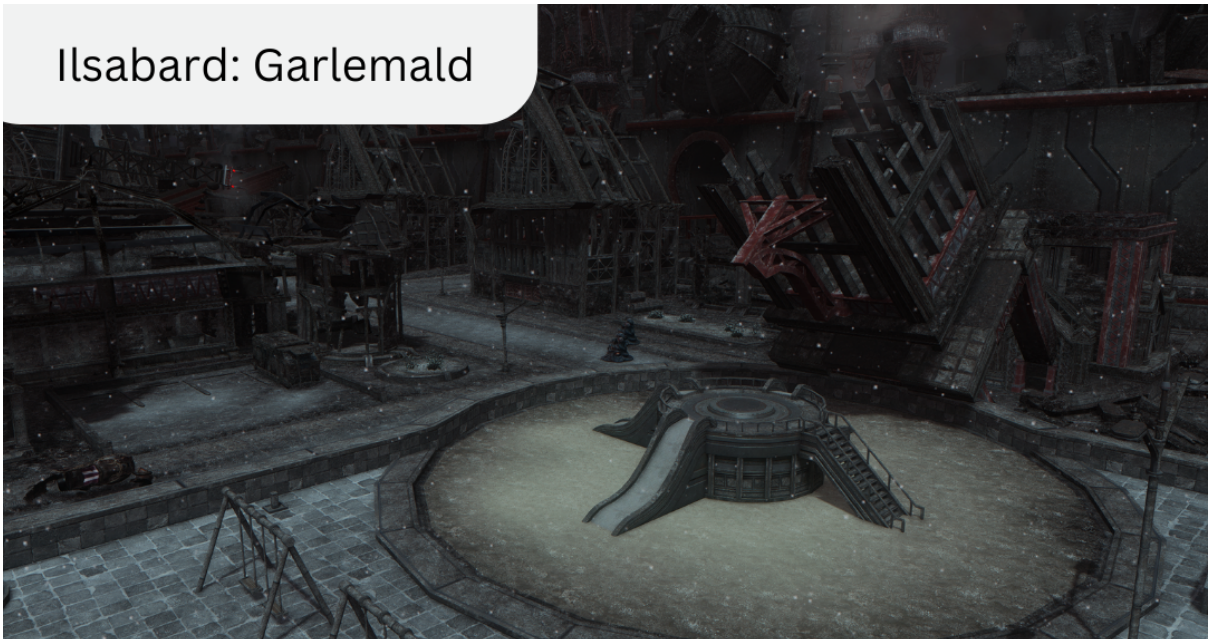
Norvrandt: Kholusia

Norvrandt: Lakeland

Norvrandt: The Crystarium

Ilsabard: Garlemald

Dravania: The Dravanian Forelands

Coerthas: The Coerthas Central Highlands

Ul'dah: Eastern Thanalan

Estern La Noscea: Costa del Sol

Ishgard: The Pillars