

Travel and Exploration in *Elden Ring* and *Genshin Impact* as an Essential Game Experience

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INTRODUCTION

In their efforts to portray vast game spaces, open-world video games allow for players to appropriate land- and cityscapes through various means of exploration, such as in-game photography or numerous modes of movement and travel. This is achieved through the creation of various “nonverbal guidance systems” (Rotzetter 2018) placed in game worlds or embodied in game mechanics, such as pathfinding strategies through “architectural weenies,” (Totten 2019, 178) i.e., points of interests leading to “prospect pacing,” the “continuous navigation from horizon to horizon, from hill to mountain top to valley sides, from ledges to watchtowers [...]” (Bonner 2018, 5). Open-world games seem to be the ultimate form of narrative environments, the design of (game) spaces capable of novel ways of storytelling through their space alone, a design imperative that goes back to the creation of theme parks such as Disneyland (Pearce 2007).

With AAA video games pushing the margins of seemingly infinite freedom and exploration of ever-grander spaces, FromSoftware’s *Elden Ring* (2022) is one such case where in-game travel and exploration is key for its gameplay. The game has obtained an artistic status, with reviewers describing it as a “masterpiece” and the “finest video game yet made” (Parkin 2022). *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo 2020), then, might be a controversial game to pit against *Elden Ring*. As a free-to-play *gacha* game, the game encourages players to spend money for in-game items and rewards and thus is usually connected to practices encouraging gambling as part of a monetization strategy in gaming (Alha et al. 2018; Drummond et al. 2020). By comparing it to *Elden Ring* however, this case study seeks to highlight the parallel strategies in its world design and exploration. Further, *Genshin Impact*’s monetization model implicates the game in an “economy of time”, i.e., playing to obtain the game’s currency as “an opportunity cost that is calculated and rationalised in relation to the monetary value of ones’ time” (Woods 2022, 1080). As exploration is one of the most accessible ways to obtain the game’s currency through in-game means, players are therefore confronted with choosing between time-consuming exploration or a purchasable shortcut. By ascertaining underlying principles of open-world games generally, the comparison of these two games serves to illustrate how similar spatial design strategies can be used for different game experiences and purposes. This case study is part of an on-going research project exploring concepts of travel and tourism in video games.

TRAVEL AND EXPLORATION

In their endeavours to create appealing game worlds, both *Elden Ring* and *Genshin Impact* create vast seamless spaces with the player occupying the role of a player-character as an outsider. This appeals to two out of three characteristics Celia Pearce identifies in narrative environments, agency and identity (Pearce 2007, 201). Conceptualising a player's identity as travellers of a game world speaks to the particular agency they have within it, where the player-character "gazes at the landscape, eager to find exploitable resources, and the landscape is constructed as a space eager to be exploited by the player" (Kagen 2022, 90). Furthermore, the traveller identity also applies to player-characters. In *Elden Ring*, the player-character is an unnamed character called "the Tarnished", whilst *Genshin Impact* refers to the protagonist as "the Traveller", a stand in title for the player's chosen name. Both characters have been displaced from their places of origin, and thus are strangers or alienated in the worlds they explore. Although the games' difficulty, combat systems, and other encounters are designed differently respectively, thereby influencing degrees of rewards and exploration, the principle of players seeking rewards in these spaces remains unchanged. This case study will then primarily focus on the resource akin to currencies, namely runes and primogems.

Runes and primogems can be found in the game world through exploration and the resulting encounters or challenges. As the currencies are necessary to obtain items and skills, or in *Genshin Impact*'s case, (rare) characters as well, these rewards are meant to incentivise in-game behaviour, entice exploration, and create a sense of curiosity (Totten 2019, 300). The open world makes use of "rewarding vistas", i.e., impressive sceneries that may act as a reward themselves, marked by, for instance, large structures visible from a far distance to bring attention to them, leading players from one place to another in the sense of prospect pacing. In *Elden Ring*, players are dependent on runes to level up their character, purchase items from vendors, upgrade their weapons, and to learn new skills.

TIME AS CURRENCY

Genshin Impact's primogems on the other hand cannot be directly used as a currency for items but are used to obtain so-called wishes, with each having a minor chance of giving players a (rare) character or weapon. Primogems, however, are also purchasable with money, and thus the game is explicitly linked to an economy of time. Orlando Woods contents, in contrary to the associations typically made with gambling, that players are encouraged to "forge more 'rational' types of playing behaviour" (2022, 1080). In other words, players are confronted with the question of spending money or obtaining the currency through in-game means, such as exploration where player must use their own time as a resource. Potentially, time is an even more important currency than primogems themselves, as *Genshin Impact*'s in-game rewards are structured around time-limited events, time-limited characters, weekly and daily quests, and dungeons available only on certain days of the week. Purchasing primogems, then, is not a solution to entirely circumvent these limitations, rather than being able to lift time constraints on the player ever so slightly. This, however, provokes the question as to whether play itself is not already implicated in an economy of time. As Wood argues, play has "become more integrated within the rhythms, logics and decisions of everyday life," (Woods 2022, 1078) thus *Elden Ring* and *Genshin Impact* pose varying degrees of this involvement where players may feel compelled to make time-pressured decisions.

CONCLUSION

By focusing on the explorative aspects of *Elden Ring* and *Genshin Impact*, this case study allows an analysis of underlying principles of open-world games generally, their spatial structure, and reward experience. As currencies act as rewards, they structure

this exploration as another dimension of play, where the player's time is another resource to consider. *Genshin Impact* brings this forward most obviously as currencies can be purchased. As one game is regarded as an artistic endeavour on the one hand and potentially unethical monetization business model on the other, this case study also encourages how both games can benefit from a game-focused analysis to question these conceptions and therefore discern matters of play.

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