The rogue needs a city: Role-Playing Game cities and their literary background

David Matencio Durán

PhD scholarship holder with Fundación Séneca
Department of Spanish Literature, Literature Theory and Comparative Literature,
Faculty of Humanities, University of Murcia
University of Murcia, Campus de La Merced, 30001 Murcia, Spain
david.matencio@um.es

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When designing cities for a character class like the rogue, early Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPG) developers strived to build environments that players using rogues would enjoy. This can be observed in TRPG multi-system supplements oriented toward a better understanding of the abilities and environment where these characters dwell, such as Gamelords' *Thieves' Guild* (1980) and *Haven* (1981) multiple installments, or Chaosium's *Thieves' World* (1981). To build realistic cities and roguish characters, these developers allied with literary authors that, inspired by five hundred years of Picaresque tradition, brought to the table narratives and traits contained within the literary figure of the rogue. The literary influence of fiction writers in the creation of the worldbuilding of a game as *Dungeons & Dragons* was pointed out by Gary Gygax himself in his famous appendix N (TSR, 1979). Furthermore, it has been also discussed by scholars such as Peterson (2012; 2020), Goldfond (2021) or Vossen (2020). This media-mixing approach in the early TRPG industry is fundamental to understand the cities we find nowadays in digital RPGs. This paper aims to discuss how the literary relationship between rogues and cities and its remediation (Bolter and Grussin, 2000) into TRPGs in the dawn of this industry's ecosystem had a massive impact in the way we understand the contemporary digital RPG city. Stories about politics, hunger, social-class warfare, and activities such as pickpocketing, shoplifting or killing in contemporary RPG virtual cities are in debt with this past.

From the early Spanish picaresque works written by Mateo Alemán or Cervantes towards High-Fantasy (e.g., Tolkien) and Sword and Sorcery's novels (e.g., Leiber, Vance) rogues have participated in the cities as the main actors of the marginal world, carrying with them multiple stories and characteristics transmitted by tradition. These novels and short novels required new ways of understanding and portraying the criminal parties involved in the city's politics as well as the intentions and desires of the lower classes. The solution was creating a type of character born and raised in that marginal world: the rogue. In the same fashion, detailed descriptions of the cities they dwelled in were necessary since the authors intention was to portrait an accurate city architecture and distribution when stealing, running away from the security forces, or following their victims. Because of that, we find detailed descriptions of 17th century's Madrid or London to build a mental map and to give context of the space were these characters lived. In addition, methods of thieving, scamming, and disguising were

explained and featured for centuries in picaresque literary works; offering many possibilities to every future rogue created. These characters were also portraited as agile, flexible, dexterous, witty, and charismatic in their endeavors; in the very exact way we know them nowadays and precisely how they were transferred from fiction into RPGs after centuries of evolution and adaptations.

Space and how it is used is also key to understand the way cities are built as a playground for rogues. They should be able to perform inside the city all sorts of activities historically associated to the literary character. As developers try to give access to such actions, new mechanics are added to the game trying to fit the mold given by tradition and, at the same time, these actions enable new narratives. Therefore, the creation of the stealing mechanic motivates the addition of a thieving quest or thieving narrative branches. However, it is important to note that this may happen the other way around; the narrative concept of the game might be the one that motivates the introduction of certain roguish actions for the player (Heussner et al, 2015).

Because of this, for example, percentage-based or skill-based thieving systems are born. Then, these systems need playable or non-playable characters that may act as victims of the playable rogue or protagonists of certain narratives; and with them, a fictional world where they can live. Shops, treasures, greedy merchants, cruel leaders…all of them are born to give a proper space for rogues to thrive and with them, the composition of the city is pushed towards a richer setting which allows to experience an immersive setting for the players enjoyment.

The relationship between players, their characters and space have been studied in Game Studies from the very beginning of the discipline. From the fan-oriented discussions in TRPG magazines such as *Dragon* (Stephens, 1983) or *White Dwarf* (Vernon, 1982) to Aarseth's (2001), Fernández-Vara's (2007; 2015) or Nitsche's (2008) reflections on spatial configurations in video games, and the cities inside them, space has taken the spotlight as one of the main contributors to the gaming experience. The value of the city as a space that is tied to certain narratives or mechanics has also been explored by academics such as Jenkins (2004), Juul (2005), or Wolf (2012).

Building on those studies, traditional RPG supplements as *Thieves' World*, and three digital RPG featuring rogues such as: *Baldur's Gate II* (BioWare, 2000), *Divinity: Original Sin* (Larian Studios, 2014) and *Pillars of Eternity* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2015). This paper will analyze how the cities contained in these games are partly created to host rogues and how this brings into the setting all sorts of elements of literary origin that have been transferred from Picaresque works to TRPGs and, finally, to digital RPGs. This approach will open a path to understand urban spaces in RPG worlds, especially if they contain rogues, based in urban settings inspired by Literature.

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