

# Out of Bounds: Exploring Beyond the Map

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## EXPLORATION

While conducting research for my PhD thesis I stumbled across a small community of self-proclaimed “explorers” who spent their time traversing the bizarre and unusual places that exist outside of the pre-designed playable map in the massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Within video game maps there are numerous spatial borders that display the end of the virtual world. For instance, invisible walls, impassable terrain and sequences that lead to inevitable character death are frequently implemented. *World of Warcraft*, more specifically, is said to contain ‘slippery mountains’ amongst other ‘impenetrable barriers’ (McGregor, 2006: 72). However, through ethnographic observations with explorers, I watched as players shifted through these ‘impenetrable barriers’ and climbed seemingly unclimbable mountains. In doing so, they entered a host of unconventional spaces known by the exploration community and in games culture more broadly, as “out of bounds”.

For the most part, video game maps act as containers, both in that they literally keep players within their confines, but also, that they dictate the correct spatial movement to players. The virtual map creator produces ‘formal structures, arrangements of time and space which operate to control and constrain gameplay’ (Flynn, 2004: 59). Playing video games in this way comes from a deeply developed embodied literacy of video game spatiality. Ruberg (2019: 208) for instance, stresses that players typically ‘rush through...supposedly unimportant corners of the game map’. Their focus is on what is useful and important such as loot or the gameplay objective. I contend that this produces a hegemony of navigation that sees players become accustomed to certain movements and orientations within virtual space.

By contrast, places within *World of Warcraft’s* out of bounds areas are not like the conventional map. Gameplay within *World of Warcraft* is typically structured around ‘win/loss conditions, ranking procedures, and continuous feedback’ (Ask and Sørensen, 2019: 74). Indeed, for most players, time in Azeroth will be spent completing quests, defeating bosses, gathering resources to craft or fighting against each other in player versus player battlegrounds. However, when explorers go out of

bounds there are no quests to complete and nothing to win or lose nor any dungeons, items or other players. There is only a glitched and broken world to inhabit.

I see exploration as a practice of breaking and reimagining. A tactical movement that challenges the image/functioning of the virtual map. Not only do players unsettle the stability and verisimilitude of the game world by seeing its slippages and affordances, but they also reimagine the playful possibilities within virtual navigation. In my PhD thesis, I see this as an act of queer play as it unsettles many norms that operate in play, games and games culture more broadly (Chang, 2015; 2017; Ruberg, 2019). Queer play is defined as approaching games in the “‘wrong way’” (Ruberg, 2019: 18). Yet, going out of bounds not only plays with wrongness but also *embodies* it. Players break the game and redefine what they can and should do within the parameters set by game worlds. It also, looks beyond rigid structures which ‘gestures towards a wider potential break’ (Prevas, 2023: 135). To me, queer play in this instance is concerned with finding other ways of being in the world.

Exploration could also be described as an act of countergaming as intentionally breaking game space obscures ‘any conventional sense of gameplay’ (Galloway, 2006: 118). Not only is breaking through the boundaries of normative spatial confinement a political move that signals a resistance to conventional configurations of space, but the actions, playstyles, pleasures and encounters within this space are equally alternative. As such, playing *World of Warcraft* in this way provoked alternative gaming pleasures and spatial embodiment which unsettled the ‘normal flow’ of the game and in doing so ‘turned into a space that can convey new meanings’ (Fantacci, 2018: 1). This can be seen in other instances of in-game boundary transgression. For instance, the previous artistic work of Harun Farock’s (2012), in particular *Parallel III*, similarly delves ‘out the boundaries of the game world’s by taking viewers outside of map spaces. More recently, a group of artists (The Grannies) in Melbourne, Australia curated an exhibition focused on screenshots of out of bounds space in *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Akin to the objective of this chapter, these works also question the limits of games and playing. However, this paper’s primary contribution addresses exploration outside of artistic spaces (even when players saw exploration as a creative practice) and as such provides a description and analysis of the specific practices of explorers.

These specific practices will be broken down into two interrelated sections. The first addresses how players admire the brokenness of out of bounds space. One of the main differences between admiring scenery in the conventional map and this map was the appreciation of subversion. Their surrounds were full of graphical errors and aesthetic glitches. But these players did not cherish these spaces despite their flaws, but *because* of them.

The second practice addresses how they capture and distribute screenshots of these broken worlds as a creative performance. Participants understood that taking screenshots was a core pleasure of exploration. Not only did these pictures evoke admiration and praise within the online chatrooms but also served to preserve players’ discoveries and capture places of emotional significance. Across both points I stress that game worlds are not merely ‘a background setting’ but are a place where

power structures can be played out, challenged and reimagined (King and Krzywinska, 2005: 76).

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