A Plague in Montiel:
Plague, Quarantine, and Social Space in Role-Playing Games

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Abstract
Analyses of virtual spaces have frequently cited cinema as the primary influence on the configuration and perception of game worlds. This essay takes a different approach, examining the influence of historical ideologies of space on current game design. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault defines the modern social space as a configuration of private domiciles and public precincts ordered to facilitate surveillance, indexing of social data, and population control. The reordering of pre-modern social space was directly motivated by the bubonic plague. Stopping the spread of disease meant exercising strict control over social interaction and over the spaces in which that interaction occurred. Once the emergency had passed, the new configuration remained in place, gradually evolving from an ad hoc defensive system to a permanent disciplinary system. The rules of Foucaultian disciplinary space extend to the simulated spaces of role-playing games, in which the player’s encounters with disease are determined by the maintenance or violation of spatial boundaries within the game world. Quarantine boundaries separate qualitatively distinct game spaces, marked by differences in graphic environments, non-player character types found within them, and the rules governing game play; the player incurs penalties for violating these boundaries. At the same time, the game Morrowind represents a more utopian vision. With disease banished, the game depicts an instantaneous reintegration of quarantined space with social space. Foucault sees no such reintegration; the spatial divisions designed to contain the infection remain even when the threat of infection does not.
The Lord said to Moses: “Order the Israelites to expel from camp every leper, and everyone suffering from a discharge, and everyone who has become unclean by contact with a corpse. Male and female alike, you shall compel them to go out of the camp; they are not to defile the camp in which I dwell.” The Israelites obeyed the command that the Lord had given Moses; they expelled them from the camp.

Numbers 5: 1-3 (NAB)

**On the Plain of Montiel**

Occasionally, I have felt vaguely displaced after quitting a game, as if I could not find my way all the way home. On certain gray mornings, after hours of playing Neverwinter Nights or Morrowind, my misty, Midwestern front lawn has seemed more like the shrouded landscape of Faerûn or the Ashlands of Vvardenfell. Like travelers returning from a strange country, we often return from virtual space with a subtly altered perception of more familiar surroundings. Images, patterns of thinking, stay with us, if only as fleeting impressions, passing disorientation, or a mild but persistent sense of unreality or wonder, as if we have migrated from one dream world to another, only believing that we have awoken.

Edward Soja (1996) finds a similar blurring of the real and imagined in the “Exopolis,” a “copy of a city that has never existed” (19). Kansas, Soja suggests, is not in Kansas anymore. Digital games present a simulacrum even more enchanting than Soja’s Exopolis, one that takes root in the mind and reproduces itself in our view of the world. In a February 2004 *Esquire* article, Tom Chiarella profiles “Suicide Bob,” an addicted gamer who works nights as a FedEx loader, so that he can spend his days playing *Grand Theft Auto III*. Each night, leaving his Playstation 2 behind, he follows a familiar path from the airport parking lot, through a tunnel, over a bridge to a waiting area, where a truck carries him to the tarmac. For Suicide Bob, though, this dull trek to work does not seem so much an exile from his game world as an extension of it. “I just try to get from point A to point B,” he says. “Everyone has a bunch of doors to get through. It’s not unlike a game, really” (Chiarella 2004, 91).

Controversialists routinely cite the more destructive consequences of confusing the virtual and actual worlds. In a March 2005 broadcast, *60 Minutes* reported the story of a teenage triple murderer who, when captured by police, told them, “Life is like a video game. Everybody has got to die sometime” (“Grand Theft Auto” 2005). Ed Bradley explains that Devin Moore, a neglected foster child, played *Grand Theft Auto III* “day and night for months” (“Grand Theft Auto” 2005). When Fayette, Alabama, police arrested him on suspicion of stealing a car and brought him to the station for questioning, Moore snapped, swiping a Glock from one of his captors, killing two officers and a police dispatcher, and fleeing in a stolen squad car. As he relates the details of the crime, Bradley walks through the rooms and corridors of the Fayette police station, tracing Moore’s path as he killed the three men. A scenario in *Grand Theft Auto III*, he explains,
likewise takes the player into a police station, where he frees a jailed convict, guns down cops, and escapes in a stolen squad car. This segment of game, juxtaposed by 60 Minutes editors to Bradley’s walk through the actual killing zone, demonstrates an uncanny similarity between the rooms and corridors in the game and those where Moore killed three men. Moore’s virtual and actual environments, like Suicide Bob’s, appear to have momentarily overlapped.

While Devin Moore’s actions are appalling, they do not defy explanation, according to those familiar with the dizzying charm of simulacra. In *The Production of Space*, for instance, Henri Lefebvre (1974) suggests that modern social space “ceases to be indistinguishable from mental space” (27). In Soja’s Exopolis, “representations of everyday reality…substitute for the reality itself” (Soja 1996, 19). Similarly, Michael Heim (1996) has described Alternate World Disorder (AWD), a condition, he writes, that causes “images and expectations from an alternate world…[to] distort our functioning in the current world… The virtual world obtrudes upon our activities in the primary world, and vice versa” (4). In the most extreme cases, the virtual world not only obtrudes on the primary world but replaces it entirely. In *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) identifies the “loss of the capacity to distinguish textual worlds…from the actual world,” as the deepest level of immersion in a fictional world (99).

Ryan herself calls this condition “Don Quixote Syndrome,” tracing its ravages to Cervantes’ tale of a bored old man who develops a habit for chivalric romances, becoming so immersed in them “that he spent whole days and nights over his books; and thus with little sleeping and much reading, his brains dried up to such a degree that he lost the use of his reason” (Cervantes 1605, 58). As he rides a flea-bitten nag across the dull landscape of La Mancha, he narrates to himself the story of his first sally:

> Scarcely had the rubicund Apollo spread over the face of the vast and spacious earth the golden tresses of his hair, and scarcely had the little painted birds with their tuneful tongues saluted in sweet and melodious harmony the coming of rosy Aurora, who leaving the soft couch of her jealous husband, revealed herself to mortals through the gates and balconies of the Manchegan horizon, when the famous knight Don Quixote of La Mancha, quitting his downy bed of ease, mounted his renowned steed, Rocinante, and began to ride over the ancient and memorable plain of Montiel. (Cervantes 1605, 62-63)

Quixote’s “syndrome” is a pleasant madness that transfigures his whole world. The once arid plain now glows in the golden dawn, and birdsongs welcome the gods themselves to this “ancient and memorable” place—formerly a forgettable corner of Spain where nothing much ever happened. Even the shabby inn where he spends the night “assumed in his eyes the semblance of a castle with four turrets, the pinnacles of which were of glittering silver” (Cervantes 1605, 64).
Digital games have become our own plain of Montiel, a place of confusion and transformation where the imaginary overflows into the mundane, wondrously or pathetically. As the inn becomes a glittering castle and the plain “ancient and memorable,” our own landscapes become charged, animated, and thrilling, “like a game,” as both Suicide Bob and Devin Moore tell us. Most of us, however, even those who play games regularly, identify more closely with Sancho Panza than with Don Quixote. Most of us think that we have enough common sense to recognize the difference between the dream and the reality. We tend to regard the confusion of virtual and actual spaces as an individual pathology, the pitiable condition of a rudderless night loader, a lonely foster child turned cop killer, or a deluded old man who jousts with windmills. Heim and Ryan speak of a “disorder” and a “syndrome.” A psychologist on 60 Minutes speaks of “risk factors,” like abuse, anger, and emotional stress, which can contribute to a teen’s break with reality (“Grand Theft Auto” 2005). Speaking of this condition as a disorder and isolating its more visible sufferers from the rest of us who court unreality, however, obscures the fact that digital games have the potential to influence perception not only individually but socially. Don Quixote does not represent an individual pathology but rather a general condition that has emerged as games have grown in complexity and become a more integral part of mass culture. As we play games, games play us.

**Plague and the Transformation of Social Space**

I became interested in the more specific ways games can influence our perception of social space when I noticed that three of the most complex and critically celebrated role-playing games released in the last several years—Bioware’s *Neverwinter Nights* (2002) and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), and Bethesda Softworks’ *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002)—simulate plague and quarantine. Why does plague emerge as a consistent theme in these games? If they propose to simulate reality, then what devices do they use to simulate a world seized by plague? In turn, what potential do they have to influence our view of actual disease and quarantine? In 1974, Lefebvre presciently described his proposed “science of space” as “a sort of computer simulation of the future, or of the possible, within the framework of the real” (9). Games now serve as these simulations, and we might consider them analytical tools of Lefebvre’s science of space, models to help us answer these questions. *Neverwinter Nights*, *Knights of the Old Republic*, and *Morrowind* allow us to experience movement within quarantined space and, in some cases, to experience the isolation and ostracism of the infected. Patterns emerge, but to discover the meaning of these patterns, we must momentarily turn away from the games, back to the world the games recreate.

In considering the profound social repercussions of bubonic plague in the late medieval and early modern periods, historians have emphasized a fundamental shift in the philosophy of government that occurred in response to the crisis. In order to preserve society against annihilation, governments took unprecedented measures to control
the movement and social interaction of the populace. Eventually, these interventionist policies provided for a complete reorganization of social space. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) describes this new social space as a configuration of private domiciles and public precincts organized to enable surveillance, enforce discipline, and facilitate the indexing of social data:

> First, a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death, the killing of all stray animals; the division of the town into distinct quarters, each governed by an intendant. Each street is place under the authority of a syndic, who keeps it under surveillance; if he leaves the street, he will be condemned to death. The syndic himself comes to lock the door of the house from the outside; he takes the key with him and hands it over to the intendant of the quarter. ...Only the inendants, syndics, and guards will move about the streets and also, between the infected houses, from one corpse to another, the "crows," who can be left to die: these are the "people of little substance who carry the sick, bury the dead, clean and do many vile and abject offices." It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion, or punishment. (195)

This transformation of social space, as Foucault suggests, operated on the principle of isolation. Historian J. N. Hays (1998) writes, “Within the affected town, families of plague victims would be confined to their houses, with the doors locked and barred from the outside. ...Objects used by the sick and the deceased were seized and burnt” (54). In addition, Hays explains, cities might establish a cordon sanitaire, or sanitary corridor, “stopping traffic on roads and demanding health passes travelers, or perhaps halting all people and goods at their border entirely” (1998, 54). With the appearance of the Black Death at the Italian seaports of Pisa and Lucca in the summer of 1348, for example, Pistoia closed its gates to all travelers, forbidding even its own citizens to return home, and in Milan the despotic Archbishop Giovanni Visconti not only closed the city gates but entombed the diseased within their own homes. Under the draconian policies imposed by Visconti, Milan remained virtually unstricken by the plague (Tuchman 1978, 108).

Other cities gradually adopted such quarantines as those that saved Pistoia and Milan, and successive waves of infection found Europe more prepared. Ragusa instituted the first official quarantine in 1377. By the fifteenth century, the Italian city states developed these directives into systematic quarantine protocols, establishing lazarettos, or pesthouses, and severely restricting movement between and within cities, sometimes under pain of torture or death. While earlier quarantine practices derived from Mosaic laws prescribing the removal of lepers from the community, Girolamo Fracastoro proffered the first modern theory of contagious disease in 1546. Rejecting astrology, herbal remedies, and even prayer, Fracastoro recommended simply that in
order to stem the plague, the healthy should avoid contact with the sick. As Fracastoro’s ideas became more widely known, authorities assumed that social interaction fostered contagion and acted decisively to limit such interaction.

The pesthouses represented the most visible demonstration of these policies of isolation. First established in Venice in 1423, they became a prominent feature of many European cities by the eighteenth century. Usually situated beyond the city walls, on an outlying island or peninsula, the location of the lazaretto isolated the infected from the larger communities. Within their walls, they contained distinct subsections for the seriously ill, for travelers arriving from infected cities, and for those simply suspected of carrying the plague. In the Genoa pesthouse, for example, those subject to the _quarantena brutta_, or ugly quarantine, manifested unmistakable symptoms of plague and lingered in complete isolation for forty days or until their deaths. Those under the _purga di sospetto_, or quarantine of suspicion, who showed no sign of infection but had come from places where plague had been reported, also found themselves in the lazaretto (Cipolla 1981, 39). John Howard, an eighteenth-century British prison reformer who toured Mediterranean pesthouses, found them generally “very dirty, and no less offensive than the sick wards of the worst hospitals. …The walls…not having been cleaned probably for half a century, were saturated with infection” (Hirst 1953, 379). Hays concludes that “forcible removal to the pesthouse was a horror that…was often perceived—with reason—as a death sentence” (1998, 55).

The plague further divided the rich from the poor, igniting riots, driving the rich to protected country estates, and leaving the poor to die in the close quarters of the city. In _The Decameron_, the most famous literary account of the Black Death, Boccaccio (1353) follows a group of patricians to one such refuge:

> They gathered in small groups and lived entirely apart from everyone else. They shut themselves up in those houses where there were no sick people and where one could live well by eating the most delicate of foods and drinking the finest of wines. …They believed that drinking excessively, enjoying life, going about singing and celebrating, satisfying in every way the appetites as best one could, laughing and making light of everything was the best medicine for such a disease…and they would often make merry in private homes, doing everything that pleased or amused them the most. This they were able to do easily, for everyone felt he was doomed to die. (8)

Within these retreats, Boccaccio imagines a grim orgy, the young protected from the plague by their distance from cities and roads, but nevertheless marking the days until the pest found them. The poor, on the other hand, more commonly died in the lazaretto. Surveying the meticulous records of the 1630 outbreak in Pistoia, Carlo Cipolla (1981) finds that all of those admitted to the lazaretto belonged to laboring class; seven of every ten people taken to the lazaretto died there. (77, 79)
By the seventeenth century, quarantine protocols became more integrated into the social fabric, as local bureaucracies arose throughout Europe with the purpose of maintaining the separation between the healthy and the sick. Sheldon Watts (1998) describes an emergent “ideology of order” that “justified intervention into the lives of ordinary people” (16). Such intervention primarily manifested itself in the reorganization of social space, the restriction of movement between and within infected cities, as well as the creation of isolated zones like the pesthouse where the disease could be safely contained. Defeating the plague, governments realized, meant exercising strict control over social interaction and the spaces in which that interaction occurred. In many cases, these measures worked, but once the emergency had passed, the new bureaucracies and social configurations remained, gradually evolving from an ad hoc defensive reaction into a permanent disciplinary system. This new, “segmented, immobile, frozen space,” segregating the sick from the healthy and the rich from the poor, engendered the new social ecology simulated by role-playing games.

**Plague and Virtual Ecology**

Marie-Laure Ryan describes an ideal of total immersion, the experience of moving and acting within a virtual space indistinguishable from actual space. The most sophisticated virtual spaces, she argues, do not simply render photorealistic detail but replicate environmental responses to individual action. Ryan (2001) writes:

> The difference between “being in space,” like things, and “inhabiting” or “haunting space,” like the embodied consciousness, is a matter of both mobility and virtuality. …The ultimate test of the material existence of things is the ability to perceive them under many angles, to manipulate them and feel their resistance. …Whether actual of virtual, objects are thus present to me because my actual or virtual body can interact with them. …The ideal vr system is conceived here as an ecology, in which every object is a tool that extends the user’s body and enables her to participate in the ongoing creation of the virtual world. (71)

Games attempt to create this sense of “inhabiting space,” not only by enabling the player to project his consciousness into an avatar who may respond to the environment, but also by simulating an environment that responds to the player. The more closely these simulated responses mimic causality as experienced in the actual world, the more convincing the sense of inhabiting the virtual world.

The most complex responses simulate a complete interrelationship between the virtual environment and the player: an ecology. While Ryan speaks of spatial, temporal, and emotional immersion—states that correspond to setting, plot, and character, the three basic elements of narrative—*Neverwinter Nights, Knights of the Old Republic,* and *Morrowind* invite phenomenological immersion, a sense of being and acting in the game world, by simulating the quarantine practices that have fundamentally determined the way we think about social space and subjectivity.
In *Segmented Worlds and Self*, Yi-Fu Tuan (1982) argues that the segmentation of social and domestic space bears a direct “relation to developing consciousness and the idea of the self” (3). Like Foucault, Tuan traces this systematic spatial partitioning and the consequent shift in the “idea of the self” to the late Middle Ages, but he finds its cause in a broad “trend toward increasing privacy and intimacy,” not in the acute historical circumstance of the plague (68). Tuan argues that the division of social space had a profound effect on subjective consciousness, creating discrete private spheres in which families could withdraw from the larger community, and individuals could withdraw from the family. Domestic roles became more clearly defined, leading to more enlightened social relations: “The status of women improved. Parents showed an increasing concern for the proper way to raise and formally educate children. ... Individuality was recognized as an attribute not only of men, but of women and even of children” (Tuan 1982, 68).

Foucault recognizes the division of social space as an exercise in control and the plague as “the trial in the course of which one may define ideally the exercise of disciplinary power” (198). For Foucault, the effects of this exercise were not, as Tuan claims, more enlightened attitudes toward women and children but rather the internalization of disciplinary structures and the subjection of consciousness. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler (1997) further explores this relation between subjection and subjectivity, arguing that “power is not simply what we oppose, but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are. ...‘Subjection’ signifies the process of becoming subordinated to power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (2). In the model developed by Foucault and Butler, the exercise of power, specifically the partitioning of social space, determines the way we think about ourselves and our relations with others; it creates both an ecology and a individual consciousness.

These segmented spaces and the subjectivities they form underlie the virtual phenomenology in *Neverwinter Nights*, *Knights of the Old Republic*, and *Morrowind*. The virtual worlds respond to our actions and give us a sense of presence, as Ryan claims, but they also give us a sense of psychic familiarity; they feel more real in the way they erect quarantine boundaries and the way they give us pause when they compel us to cross them. Our actions and reactions in the virtual world are shaped by the ways we have internalized the disciplinary structures of the real world.

**Neverwinter Nights**
Generally game narratives involve three disease scenarios: the player must destroy the infected agents; the player must search for a cure; the player becomes infected and subject to the effects of the disease. In all three scenarios, encounters with disease are determined by the maintenance or violation of spatial boundaries within the virtual world, a pattern that reflects the disciplinary logic of quarantined space. In many games, these quarantine
boundaries separate qualitatively distinct game spaces, marked not only by differences in graphic environments and non-player character and creature types, but also in the rules governing game play. Although many games feature combinations of the three scenarios, genre most often determines the degree of environmental responsiveness. First-person shooters like *Half-Life* (1998), *Deus Ex* (2000), and *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2000) only require that the player use massive firepower to splatter infected critters all over the walls. The player may not spread the disease, work to stop it, or contract it and experience its effects. In such games disease functions mainly as narrative ornament, not as an environmental response. In more plot-driven action games such as *The Suffering* (2004) and *Resident Evil: Outbreak* (2004), the player combats infected agents in an effort to contain the disease and may also play as an infected character, gaining enhanced abilities in combat. Both of these games feature dark and claustrophobic game spaces, the former a derelict prison; and the latter a hospital, research facility, and hotel, all abandoned, dim, and zombie-infested. While these haunted spaces emphasize the separation from safer, sunlit social spaces, and the player may indeed transform into the object his own loathing, the games do not script the possibility of true contagion; that is, the spread of the disease beyond its quarantined world to a larger social space.

Role-playing games develop more interactively complex disease scenarios and locate infection within the context of social space, in the sense that Foucault describes it. In *Neverwinter Nights*, the player begins in the quarantined city of Neverwinter with a mandate to discover the origin of the Wailing Death, a pestilence that ravages the population. Lady Aribeth and Lord Nasher, the rulers of the city, have established a *cordon sanitaire*, barring the city gates. They have converted the Hall of Justice, a government center, into a pesthouse, where nurses tend to moaning victims. In squares throughout the city, guards torch piles of diseased corpses; the player may gain twenty-five experience points for helping to torch the corpses. Like the traders in Pistoia forbidden to leave the city, travelers in Neverwinter, unable to return to their homes, wander the streets in desperation, begging the player for help.

The city itself has been segregated into five sections, a City Core with four gates barring passage to four separate districts: the Peninsula, the Docks, the Beggar’s Nest, and Blacklake. In the City Core, dialogue with non-player characters reveals that the Wailing Death, like historical epidemics, has fueled class conflict throughout the city. The Neverwinter nobility claim that the plague originated in the slums of the Beggar’s Nest, while commoners accuse the Blacklake aristocrats of guarding a cure while the rest of the city suffers. The player learns that the reagents necessary for the serum are scattered throughout the city, one in each of the four districts. As the player searches for the reagents, becoming familiar with Neverwinter’s quarantine zones, he finds that measures taken to ensure security have only fostered chaos in each of the districts. In the Peninsula, a prison break has filled the streets with vicious thugs. Pirate gangs have taken control of the Docks, and in the Beggar’s Nest, the undead and disease-crazed
goons, embodiments of the plague, infest the wrecked streets. In Blacklake, however, life seems more peaceful. There is no mayhem in the streets, no undead in the sewers, and no outlaw gangs in the taverns. Of the four districts outside the City Core, only Blacklake offers the player refuge from random encounters with enemies. Even the soundtrack, a pleasant, pseudo-Baroque melody, signals a contrast with the tense and foreboding musical themes in the Peninsula, the Docks, and the Beggar’s Nest.

This apparent oasis of order within a diseased, chaotic city most strikingly simulates Foucault’s segmented spaces, in which “the plague is met by order” (1977, 197). The disciplinary power exercised in these spaces function to “sort out every possible confusion. …It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease, and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way” (Foucault 1977, 197). This “omnipresent” power manifests itself most immediately in the guards who man the gates and the streets maintaining the quarantine boundaries: “Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere” (Foucault 1977, 195-96). The Blacklake nobles have, in fact, sealed themselves from the rest of the city, creating a cordon sanitaire within Neverwinter by abandoning a part of the district to diseased bandits and sealing themselves from this no man’s land behind a second gate. In addition to the city guards manning the primary gate, Blacklake’s own militia hold the secondary gate and patrol the district itself. Within this wealthy, privately policed sanctuary, Meldanen, a powerful, reclusive mage, has erected still another barricade, closing himself within his estate above Blacklake, like the blithe patricians in The Decameron. Fermosa, a wealthy but socially conscious young woman, represents the only voice of disorder in the district. A crowd of listeners gather around her in a small amphitheatre as she incites them against Meldanen. When the player engages her, she says that the wizard has horded food in a private vault and enlists the player to kill Meldanen, take the key to his vault, and distribute the food to the people. Because one of the reagents is protected within Meldanen’s estate, the player is compelled to accept Fermosa’s offer and becomes embroiled in the class conflict simmering below Blacklake’s serene surface.

**Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic**

While the districts of Neverwinter, with their enclosures within enclosures within enclosures, simulate Foucault’s “segmented, immobile, frozen space” in the quarantined city, they do not vividly illustrate the effects of the Wailing Death on non-player characters, nor do they threaten the player himself with contagion. *Knights of the Old Republic* demonstrates the effects of contagion more graphically and presents the player with the ethical dilemmas inherent in quarantine policy. Shortly after the prelude, when the player escapes an embattled Republic warship to the surface of the ultra-urbanized planet Taris, he learns of a horrible disease that transforms people into subhuman, cannibalistic creatures called rakghouls. The Sith garrison on Taris has quarantined the
disease within the Undercity, a barren subterranean slum like Neverwinter’s Beggar’s Nest, populated by the urban poor and strictly isolated from the Upper City by guard posts at the lifts providing access to the Undercity.

As in Neverwinter, class tensions seethe in Taris. In the Upper City, haughty citizens complain of the offensive alien immigrants that have contaminated their city from above and the diseased “outcasts” that rot their foundations below. When the player infiltrates the quarantine boundary by impersonating a Sith guard and accesses the Undercity, he discovers the outcast camp, a motley community of grifters, dreamers, and unlucky souls led by Gendar, who steadfastly holds the frontier against the rakghouls. Like the Blacklake nobles, the outcasts, themselves isolated by the quarantine, have erected a secondary barricade, a fortress wall protecting them from the rakghouls that have infested the Undercity. Within this fortress, the outcasts have established a makeshift lazaretto, a small pen containing those known to be infected by the rakghouls. Here, the player may watch the gruesome spectacle of transformation.

In the morally consequential universe of *Knights of the Old Republic*, where certain actions gain “light side” and “dark side” points, the player faces a number of choices that simulate the ethical and administrative difficulties of quarantine policy. In this sense, the game draws the player into a deeper level of immersion than *Neverwinter Nights* does, positioning him to exercise disciplinary power in the manner of Foucault’s syndics, intendants, and guards. When the player first arrives in the Undercity, for example, he encounters Hendar, an outcast desperately fleeing a pack of rakghouls in the no man’s land beyond the fortress wall. The guards, though horrified at the fate of their comrade, resolve not to open the gates, lest the rakghouls slip through the breech and infect the entire camp. The player may force the guards to open the gate and rush to Hendar’s rescue, thus jeopardizing the entire group, or he may maintain their safety and watch Hendar die. The welfare of the one weighs against the welfare of the many. Later, when the player has discovered the rakghoul serum on the corpse of a Sith soldier, he faces a number of choices. He may cure the outcasts in the lazaretto; aid an infected Republic soldier lost in the Undercity; give the serum to Zelka Forn, a doctor maintaining a hospital in the Upper City; or sell it to Zax, a crime boss, for a profit. Unlike *Neverwinter Nights*, *Knights of the Old Republic* conveys the responsibilities and dilemmas of the health officials who maintained the “ideology of order” deemed necessary to overcome the plague.

**The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind**

While the player must infiltrate the diseased Undercity of Taris to find the rakghoul serum and advance the narrative, the violation of the quarantine boundary in *Knights of the Old Republic* does not result of the spread of the disease to the upper levels of the city, and the player, when infected, suffers only a steady loss of hit points, not qualitative changes in graphical representation or abilities, though non-player characters change into
rakghouls. *Morrowind* features a more complex disease scenario, a more widely responsive virtual environment, in that game narrative depends on the player’s infection, isolation, and eventual cure. In fact, the player may contract a variety of diseases as he travels the land of Vvardenfell, including Porphyric Hemophilia (vampirism), lycanthropy, and a leprosy-like disease called Corprus. Initially, each disease is contained within specific game space: a vampire enclave, a remote forest village, and a “Corprusarium.” When the player enters these spaces, however, the diseases, as well as the virtual environment, become more fully interactive than those in *Neverwinter Nights* and *Knights of the Old Republic*. The player may experience the effects of infection through diminished or enhanced movement or abilities, as well as graphical metamorphoses. Most significantly, players can carry these infections into the larger social space of the game world, eliciting disease-specific reactions from non-player characters. If a player has Corprus, for example, he cannot engage others in conversation. If he has Porphyric Hemophilia, he cannot travel by daylight but gains dramatic physical and magical enhancements. If he has lycanthropy, he likewise gains superhuman combat abilities, but if imperial guards discover that he is a werewolf, they will try to kill him.

The messianic narrative in *Morrowind* requires the player to gain immunity to Corprus in order to prove himself the long-prophesied savior, Nerevar. After contracting the disease from a minion of the evil overlord Dagoth Ur, the player is shunned by non-player characters until his mentor advises that he visit the physician-mage Divath Fyr in the Corprusarium, a pesthouse on the remote island of Tel Fyr. In the Corprusarium, Divath Fyr tells the player that he has created an experimental cure. Before he surrenders it, however, the player must secure a magical artifact in the Corprusarium’s dungeon, where bestial and horribly deformed victims of the disease are confined by a *quarantena brutta*. One of the most memorable characters in the game, Yagrum Bagarn, a morbidly obese dwarf whose diseased legs have been replaced by mechanical spider legs, presides over the dungeon and provides the player with the magical artifact he needs to get the cure from Divath Fyr. The cure inoculates the player against Corprus, removing the effects of the disease and immunizing him against all further infection, including common diseases and vampirism.

The inoculation prepares the player to venture into the Ashlands, a barren, blighted wasteland of volcanic hills and magma fissures in the center of Vvardenfell. In the heart of the region, beneath the Red Mountain, Dagoth Ur lurks, spreading disease-laden dust storms throughout the region and marshalling hordes of infected creatures. In order to contain the blight, the Elven kingdoms of Vvardenfell have erected the Ghostfence, a massive, magical *cordon sanitaire* around the Red Mountain, maintained by a garrison of warriors at the Ghostgate. If the player enters the Ashlands prior to gaining disease immunity at the Corprusarium, he risks falling victim to Dagoth Ur’s germ warfare, contracting “common disease” or “blight disease.”
Like *Neverwinter Nights* and *Knights of the Old Republic*, the diseased ecology of *Morrowind* recreates Foucault’s “immobile, frozen, space,” where the player moves “at the risk of life, contagion, or punishment.” But the player’s sense, as Ryan says, of “inhabiting” Vvardenfell, of being and acting in the virtual world, becomes more intense as we feel the effects of pestilence not only in the divisions of virtual space but also in the programmed reactions of non-player characters. In *Morrowind*, plague is a spatial and a social phenomenon, and the disciplinary power exercised on the player character simulates Butler’s model of the way “Power not only acts on a subject but…enacts the subject into being” (13). Being sick in Vvardenfell compels the player to think of his character in a new way, to act and move differently from one who is well. Cities that previously welcomed him now become hostile, and quests that seemed important now become less important than finding a cure—or, in the case of vampirism, finding another victim to sate his thirst for blood. Plague not only creates a spatial and social ecology but also, in Butler’s words, “enacts” the player character into being.

**World of Warcraft and Genre**

The continuity between historical plagues, the consequent reordering of social spaces according to the disciplinary model, and the design of virtual spaces reveals that game design has been influenced in part by events beginning in the fourteenth century. The same historical conditions that have shaped the spaces we inhabit every day have also shaped our virtual spaces, contributing to the lingering sense, as Michael Heim observes, that “the virtual world obtrudes upon our activities in the primary world.” In Suicide Bob’s more direct words, life is “not unlike a game.” This spatial correspondence between the virtual and the real worlds invites us to apply Foucault’s spatial analysis to both, as the lazaretto, the *cordon sanitaire*, and patterns of partitioning in urban spaces are replicated in the simulated worlds of role-playing games.

In September 2005, the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (2004) presented an opportunity to test this method of analysis with a different genre. Blizzard Interactive, the game’s developers, added a high-level quest scenario in which players entered a dungeon, Zul’Gurub, to confront a powerful demon, Hakkar, the “God of Blood.” In his death throes, Hakkar spews a deadly pestilence, Corrupted Blood, which infects all players in the vicinity and inflicts damage so large that only characters at the highest levels can contract the disease without dying instantly. Blizzard intended to confine Corrupted Blood to Zul’Gurub, but when players contrived to carry the plague outside the dungeon into the larger game world of Azeroth, Corrupted Blood spread, killing hundreds of avatars.

The event received attention beyond the gaming community, as some viewed it as a reliable simulation of the spread of real epidemics. Brian Martin, a security consultant, cites the *World of Warcraft* plague as a lesson about our vulnerability to actual computer viruses: “Giving it the ability to propagate at all beyond a limited environment definitely
reminds us that self-propagating code is likely to bite us...without careful consideration and planning” (Lemos 2005). Jeremy Reimer (2005), a writer for the online magazine *Ars Technica*, speculates that epidemiologists might find “that this event was worth studying as a kind of controlled experiment in disease propagation.” Like the Wailing Death, rakghoul disease, and Corprus, Corrupted Blood mimics the pathology and social effects of actual diseases—and like historical plagues, it emerges through the violation of a *cordon sanitaire*, as players carry the plague beyond the lazaretto of Zul’Gurub into the wider social world of Azeroth.

At the same time, there are qualitative differences between the *World of Warcraft* plague and the plagues simulated by *Neverwinter Nights*, *Knights of the Old Republic*, and *Morrowind*. These differences arise mostly from the generic disparity between the closed systems of single-player role-playing games and the more expansive and social mmorpgs. While *Morrowind*, like *World of Warcraft*, simulates the social effects of disease, Corprus spreads as a function of the game program. Corrupted Blood, on the other hand, spreads in an unprogrammed way, through the interactions between multiple players rather than the interaction between a single player and the game program. In a virtual world populated by many thousands of player characters rather than just one, the effects of Corrupted Blood are purely social, manifested in its means its propagation rather than in the construction of Azeroth’s cities.

Within a few weeks after the first appearance of the virtual pestilence in Azeroth, Blizzard eradicated it from the game programming, banishing Corrupted Blood from Azeroth with much greater ease than the perplexed nobles, clergy, and physicians banished the Black Death. Unlike Azerothians, Europeans could not rely on a benevolent programmer-god to write their horror out of existence. As Foucault explains, they had to accommodate the pest, isolate it through the division of their world, and make a home for it the lazaretto: the plague, “called for multiple separations...and organization in depth of surveillance and control. ...Those sick of the plague were caught up in a meticulous and tactical partitioning in which individual differentiations were the constricting effects of a power that multiplied, articulated, and subdivided itself” (198). Likewise, plague in *Neverwinter Nights*, *Knights of the Old Republic*, and *Morrowind*, does not merely kill, it defines the construction of the world and our movement and consciousness within it. In these games, as in the real world, plague is not a short-term anomaly to be corrected by programmers but rather a fundamental condition of life and a design principle.

**Discipline, Reintegration, and Utopia**

Marie-Laure Ryan emphasizes a crucial break of Renaissance artists from their medieval predecessors, when they discovered the laws of perspective and created the illusion of three dimensions in painting. Looking at these art works, Ryan explains, “the spectator experiences the depicted objects as virtually present, though the flat surface of the
painting erects an invisible wall that prevents physical interaction” (3). While perspective painting only entices the viewer to enter its sumptuous world with the illusion of three-dimensional space that stretches beyond the canvas, digital games dissolve the “invisible wall,” allowing the viewer to “enter” a simulated three-dimensional space. The “trick of the eye” of the trompe l’oeil technique becomes a trick of the mind. Like Baroque frescoes, they simulate the existence of a world beyond view, but as interactive environments, they also simulate an ecology, a world that is responsive to the movement and action of the player. They employ the same visual cues as perspective painting, creating the illusion of three dimensions, but they also conceive a phenomenological perspective, the illusion that our action as well as our vision extends into their world. Like the Renaissance artists who experimented with novel visual effects, creators of these digital games have developed scripts to sustain the illusion of “inhabiting” the simulated world, where real and imaginary spaces converge. Although we remember Devin Moore, that unfortunate, latter-day Don Quixote, we cannot forget “those moments of sheer delight,” as Ryan describes them, when “the reader develops an intimate relation to the setting as well as a sense of being present on the scene of represented events” (122).

In these role-playing games, however, a plague has come to Montiel, as if Quixote, in his contemplation of Apollo and Aurora, has happened upon a worm-eaten corpse. Simulated diseases have infected these dream spaces, segmenting and restricting them, but also convincing us more surely of their reality and subtly influencing the way we perceive actual disease and social space. By associating disease with social isolation and the underclass, with criminality and physical deformity; and by banishing it to the slums, sewers, and dungeons of the Beggar’s Nest, the Taris Undercity, and Tel Fyr; Neverwinter Nights, Knights of the Old Republic, and Morrowind condition us to dissociate ourselves from the afflicted. On the other hand, by simulating the biological and social effects of disease on player characters, as well as the ethical problems of quarantine, they also foster empathy with the afflicted. Most consistently, though, these games reinforce our consciousness of our world as that “segmented, immobile, frozen space” that Foucault describes. Neverwinter, Taris, and Vvardenfell seem real because their infected precincts are configured and governed much like the world we occupy everyday.

The conclusion of Morrowind, however, represents a significant difference between actual and virtual environments. When the player destroys Dagoth Ur in the heart of Red Mountain, the blight and dust storms abate, the Ghostfence disappears, and the perpetual gray penumbra over the Ashlands turns to blue sky. While most games follow the logic of disciplinary space to their conclusion, enforcing quarantine boundaries and scripting dramatic consequences of violating these boundaries, Morrowind represents a vision different from Foucault’s. With disease banished from Vvardenfell, the game depicts a happy and instantaneous reintegration of quarantined space with social space. In his survey of the reorganization of social space since the late Middle Ages, Tuan notes an analogous countermovement in utopian communes in the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries that works to de-segment public and private spaces in order to foster a more collective consciousness. These “utopias,” Tuan writes, “are conscious attempts at reconstituting social wholes,” countering the “forces of withdrawal” and segmentation with “those of reintegration” (177, 182). Game design, in this sense, is a kind of utopian planning. As Morrowind imagines the instantaneous reintegration of social space by the magical dissolution of the quarantine boundary, the game actualizes within the virtual world the utopian fantasy of communal reintegration. The Ashlands, the great lazaretto of Vvardenfell, becomes a part of the happy island commune.

Foucault sees no such possibility of reintegration. Nevertheless, the city—segmented, systematized, and subjugated in the wake of the plague—also represents a kind of “political dream,” the “utopia of the perfectly governed city” (Foucault 1977, 198). The reintegrated commune and the perfectly governed city, taken in opposition, represent two distinct visions of utopia: Tuan’s vision of the reintegration of social spaces and the renewal of pre-modern communal consciousness; and Foucault’s vision of perfect order achieved through segmentation and surveillance. The disappearance of the Ghostfence, the final departure from Foucault’s spatial model in Morrowind, marks a significant impasse between virtual worlds and our own. In the former, the sick can be made well, and society made whole. In the latter, the boundaries designed to contain the sickness remain even when the sickness does not, and the well go on living as if they were sick.

References


