

Visual Enchantment in *Baldur's Gate 3*: Building an Immersive Fantasy World

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VISUAL ENCHANTMENT IN BALDUR'S GATE 3: BUILDING AN IMMERSIVE FANTASY WORLD

ABSTRACT

Fantasy, with its boundless imagination and limitless possibilities, has long captivated audiences worldwide through literature, film, and most recently, video games. Fantasy video games exist at a dynamic intersection of imagination, storytelling, and interactive gameplay, taking the immersive qualities of the fantasy genre to new and exciting heights. These video games act as gateways to alternate realities, allowing players to embark on heroic adventures within imaginary worlds. In the realm of game design, creating these immersive fantasy worlds is a pivotal aspect of ensuring an engaging gaming experience. J.R.R. Tolkien, the “father of modern fantasy”, emphasises “secondary worlds” that are rich in detail and internally consistent for the full immersion of its audience. Amongst the myriad of factors that contribute to the immersion of such fantasy game worlds, the role of visual elements in particular stands out prominently. These elements not only shape the aesthetic appeal of the game but also play a crucial role in crafting the atmosphere, narrative, and overall immersive experience of the player. This is evident in games like *Baldur's Gate 3*, an open-world game, where the vast environment serves as a meticulously crafted and cohesive world that draws players into its detailed lore, rich history, and vibrant cultures. This research delves into the intricate visual landscape of *Baldur's Gate 3*, seeking to unravel the significance of specific visual elements in the construction of a cohesive and immersive fantasy game world. By examining the visual design using three game elements—objects/mechanisms, characters, and items—this study aims to elucidate their contribution to the feeling of immersion experienced by players in the game world. This thesis aims to answer the question: *What is the role of specific visual elements in contributing to the creation of a cohesive and immersive fantasy game world in Baldur's Gate 3?*

A qualitative research method in the form of an iconological analysis was conducted for this research. By analysing “Baldur's Gate”, the titular city in the game, the player-researcher delved into the concepts of fantasy elements, world-building, and game design respectively. Results showed that by liberally implementing epic high fantasy tropes and clichés, the game

developers establish a foundation for consistent and immersive world-building through environmental storytelling, reflecting their ideologies. By creating a world with intricate detail and aesthetic consistency, the developers use environmental storytelling to immerse players, deepening their emotional connection and investment in the game world by mirroring real-world issues such as political power imbalances, socio-economic segregation, and personal struggles of the characters. Hence, this research highlights how fantasy game design can create a cohesive and immersive fantasy world through the intentional arrangement and implementation of visual elements.

KEYWORDS: Fantasy, World-building, Game design, Baldur's Gate 3

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	7
1.1. Societal and scientific relevance.....	9
1.2. Thesis structure.....	9
2. Theoretical Framework.....	10
2.1. Fantasy.....	10
2.1.1. Enchantment and escapism.....	12
2.1.2. Fantasy in video games.....	12
2.1.3. Categories of fantasy.....	14
2.1.4. Subgenres of fantasy.....	17
2.2. World-building.....	19
2.2.1. Critical world-building.....	20
2.2.2. World-building in video game design.....	21
3. Methodology.....	23
3.1. Research Design.....	23
3.2. Research Approach.....	24
3.3. Selection of Baldur's Gate 3.....	25
3.4. Sample.....	25
3.5. Data collection.....	26
3.6. Analysis of data.....	27
3.7. Validity and Reliability.....	29
3.8. Constraints.....	30
4. Results.....	30
4.1. Fantasy Elements.....	31
4.1.1. Objects & Mechanisms.....	31
4.1.1.1. Non-interactable visual elements.....	31
4.1.1.1.1. Buildings and structures.....	31
4.1.1.1.2. Outer city wall.....	34
4.1.1.1.3. Natural elements.....	35
4.1.1.2. Interactable visual elements.....	35
4.1.2. Characters.....	36
4.1.2.1. Non-playable characters.....	36
4.1.2.2. Party members.....	37
4.1.2.3. Enemies/Hostile characters.....	37
4.1.2.4. Animals.....	39
4.1.3. Items.....	40
4.2. World-building.....	41
4.2.1. Setting.....	41
4.2.2. Non-interactable visual elements.....	41
4.2.2.1. Buildings and structures.....	41

4.2.2.2. Natural elements.....	44
4.2.3. Interactable visual elements.....	45
4.2.4. Characters.....	45
4.2.5. Items.....	47
4.2.6. Critical world-building.....	47
4.3. Game Design.....	48
4.3.1. Eurocentrism and Western fantasy.....	48
4.3.2. Environmental storytelling.....	50
4.3.3. Transmediality.....	51
5. Discussion and conclusion.....	52
5.1. Limitations and future research.....	55
6. References.....	56
7. Appendices.....	64
7.1. Appendix 1.....	64
7.1.2. Tables.....	64
7.2. Appendix 2.....	65
7.2.1. Screenshots of Game Elements in Baldur's Gate.....	65

1. Introduction

Fantasy, with its boundless imagination and limitless possibilities, has long captivated audiences worldwide, transporting them to worlds where the extraordinary becomes reality and the impossible seems possible. Defined by its departure from the constraints of reality, fantasy encompasses elements of magic, heroic quests, and imaginative worlds that defy the laws of nature and physics (Weinreich, 2011, p. 7). As a subgenre of the fantastic, fantasy's fictional aspect often leads to escapism and enchantment, allowing readers, viewers, and players to lose themselves in captivating stories where anything can happen (Weinreich, 2011, p. 4; Murray & Maher, 2011, p. 47). Apart from its magical elements, these stories often reflect timeless themes of deep-seated human desires, fears, and moral questions through its narratives. From the captivating characters of C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950) to the genre-defining story of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), fantasy has long been a cornerstone of popular culture.

One of the most crucial elements of fantasy is the world in which these stories take place. Tolkien, known as the "father of modern fantasy", refers to these fantasy worlds as "secondary worlds" which stand opposite the "primary world" that the author and reader live in (Ekman & Taylor, 2011, p. 246). In a fictional context, the term "world" refers to not only a physical space, but everything contained within, such as fauna and flora, history and weather, and characters and cultures (Ekman & Taylor, 2011, p. 246). According to Tolkien, these secondary worlds are essential for the believability and immersion of the fantasy experience. These worlds must be internally consistent and rich in detail to fully engage the audience, thus allowing them to become fully immersed. With his most famous secondary world, Middle-earth, Tolkien was able to build a cohesive world with immense complexity that is both credible and appealing due to its detailed fictional history, culture, and vast array of characters (Weinreich, 2011, p. 14). The influence of Middle-earth permeates the rest of the contemporary fantasy genre, inspiring numerous works of fantasy literature and inspiring other media, from films and television series to video games, many of which draw from Tolkien's detailed and immersive world-building. Therefore, fantasy has established a rich tradition of world-building that continues to influence contemporary media.

More recently, video games have emerged as a groundbreaking medium, taking the immersive qualities of the fantasy genre to new and exciting heights. These interactive experiences allow players to fully step into various secondary worlds, with series such as *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986) and *The Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Softworks, 1994)

showcasing the genre's potential. Fantasy often takes a central role in the popular genre of role-playing games (RPGs). This is not merely coincidental; it testifies to the appeal of these immersive games and the escapist nature of fantasy stories (Rouse, 2005, p. 7). One such exemplary title is *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023), a fantasy role-playing video game inspired by the iconic table-top game *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast, 1997). Commercially and critically successful, *Baldur's Gate 3* is an open-world game based in the fictional setting of the Sword Coast in the Forbidden Realms. The game offers players a vast and detailed world which culminates in its titular city "Baldur's Gate". As 2023's Game of the Year winner, *Baldur's Gate 3* has gained a large amount of prominence and its influence on the gaming industry is already being discussed (Rodriguez, 2024, para. 2). In-depth research on its immersive world-building features, however, is still relatively scarce.

In the world of video game design, creating these immersive fantasy worlds is a pivotal aspect of ensuring an engaging gaming experience. Amongst the myriad of factors that contribute to the success of such fantasy worlds, the role of visual elements in particular stands out prominently. Visual elements not only shape the aesthetic appeal of the game but also play a crucial role in crafting the atmosphere, narrative, and overall immersive experience of the player through "environmental storytelling". Defined by Fernández-Vara (2011, p. 2) as "how spaces can evoke and construct a narrative experience", environmental storytelling can encourage emotional connections with the environment through the design of the setting, making it a critical factor in a game designer's arsenal. Therefore, the importance of cohesive world-building and environmental storytelling through visual elements, specifically in fantasy video games, is profound and not to be underestimated.

This research delves into the intricate visual landscape of *Baldur's Gate 3*, seeking to unravel the significance of specific visual elements in the construction of a cohesive and immersive fantasy game world. By examining the visual design using Rouse's (2005, p. 369) three game elements—objects/mechanisms, characters, and items—this study aims to elucidate their contribution to the feeling of enchantment experienced by players in the game world, leading to higher immersion. Therefore, this thesis aims to answer the question: *What is the role of specific visual elements in contributing to the creation of a cohesive and immersive fantasy game world in Baldur's Gate 3?*

A qualitative research method in the form of an iconological analysis was used for this research. By analysing "Baldur's Gate", the titular city in the game, using the three stages of Panofsky's (1972, p. 3) iconological method—pre-iconographic, iconographic, and iconological—the player-researcher delved into the concepts of fantasy elements,

world-building, and game design respectively. By taxonomising the various visual fantasy elements used in the city, followed by cultural and ideological influences, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these elements contribute to the creation of a cohesive and immersive fantasy game world.

1.1. Societal and scientific relevance

This research has scientific relevance as it contributes to the growing field of game studies and digital humanities by exploring the visual design in fantasy video games. By conducting an iconological analysis of *Baldur's Gate 3*, this study can provide insights into how visual elements contribute to the immersive experience of video games. This, in turn, can enhance our understanding of environmental storytelling in fantasy video games, a concept relevant to game design and broader media studies. Additionally, this research bridges the gap between traditional literary studies of fantasy literature and contemporary interactive media, offering a comprehensive view on how the concept of world-building is adapted and evolved in contemporary digital formats.

From a societal perspective, understanding how visual elements contribute to the creation of an immersive fantasy world can enhance the appreciation of video games as a form of true artistic expression. As video games continue to grow in popularity and influence, insights from this research can inform the development of more engaging and meaningful game experiences, which can foster emotional engagement amongst players. Furthermore, by analysing the game's visual elements and their role in world-building, this research can highlight how fantasy games can address contemporary issues in their fictional worlds, such as political dynamics and social inequalities. This study can thus inform discussions on the potential of video games as tools for education and social commentary.

1.2. Thesis structure

In order to analyse the role of visual elements in the world-building of *Baldur's Gate 3*, the thesis is structured in the following way. Firstly, the theoretical framework defines the core concepts, as well as the categories and subgenres, of fantasy, followed by the concept of world-building, and its importance in game design. Secondly, the methodological section explains the chosen research design and details the data collection techniques and data analysis methods used. Finally, the results of the analysis are discussed and a conclusion is made with recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Fantasy

In popular culture, no other genre has captured the imagination and transported audiences as much as fantasy. From the imaginative worlds created by J.R.R. Tolkien, to the intricate plotlines of George R.R. Martin, fantasy literature has captivated readers worldwide through its mythical creatures, heroic quests, and fantastical landscapes. Referred to as the 'genre of limitless possibilities', fantasy has become an essential creative powerhouse of modern entertainment. In addition to its literary reign over the past sixty years, fantasy has also permeated into other forms of media, including film, television, and video games, further solidifying its influence in contemporary entertainment (Weinreich, 2011, p. 1). Through its ability to transport its audience to fictional worlds, whilst simultaneously exploring timeless themes of morality, friendship and power, fantasy continues to enchant and inspire fans across the world.

A fantasy tale is defined by Long (2011) as "a tale that tells a story or depicts events and adventures, involving magic, alternate world, or both, so that the story could not take place in the "real world" (p. 2). *The Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (Summers, 2005, p. 492) also defines fantasy as "stories about imaginary worlds which often involve magic. The characters are often searching for good, and they usually fight with swords rather than modern weapons". Whilst fantasy in these descriptions is seen as 'transcending reality', 'escaping' the human condition, and the incorporation of alternate 'secondary worlds', it is also used as a way to invert elements of the real world, re-combining its existing features to create something 'new', strange and unfamiliar (Maukar, 2009, p. 812).

Considered the progeny of myths, the roots of fantasy date back to the Greek philosopher Plato, who used fantastical stories to explain his system of ethics (Weinreich, 2011, p. 13). After the withdrawal of myths due to the onslaught of Enlightenment thought, fantastical stories became the closest stories to myths (Sandor, 1991, p. 339). Many creatures and phenomena depicted in myths and tales from the real world can still be found in modern fantasy stories. Within myths, the ancient gods held abilities and governed not only natural occurrences but human fate. This "power" eventually migrated into the fantasy genre under the guise of the "magical effect" (Ryzhchenko, 2018, p. 3). This magic in modern fantasy literature is the result of the joint parentage of ancient myths and fairy tales (Bottigheimer, 2018, pp. 261–274).

It is the Victorian era however, that showcases the immediate roots of the modern fantasy genre. The nineteenth century was a period of flourishing for all manner of literature. Children's literature, adventure fiction (originally a subgenre of children's literature but

subsequently adapted for adults), and the almost stereotypically popular Victorian ghost stories, all lay the groundwork for fantasy literature in the 1900s (Jackson, 1980, p. 141). The success of these stories all provided a stage for the emergence of one of the most influential writers in literature history, J.R.R. Tolkien. In twentieth century fantasy, and fantasy as a whole, no other name stands out more than Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings* books, released between 1954-1955, are widely considered to be the epitome of fantasy literature and many experts have gone so far as to say that after their release, fantasy authors could either write like Tolkien or intentionally not like Tolkien (Weinreich, 2011, p. 14). With his detailed fantasy world of Middle-Earth and his plethora of lovable characters, Tolkien influenced many fantasy authors that came after him and is considered by many as “the father of modern fantasy”.

Fantasy has thus experienced influences from several eras and remains as dynamic as its varying inhabitants. However, despite its many variances, there are two distinct features commonly associated with the fantasy genre that provide a means for stories to be considered ‘fantasy’ in popular culture. Firstly, fantasy stories contain supernatural elements. Dragons, wizards, and scintillating vampires are supernatural creatures, and battles occurring in heaven and hell are supernatural events, many of which occur frequently in fantasy novels. Weinreich (2011, p. 4) states that these supernatural elements pervade fantasy to such an extent that they are the distinguishing feature of the genre. Magic, fantastic entities, time changes, and imaginative worlds are all supernatural tropes seen in modern fantasy (Kurkijan et al., 2006, p. 492). Secondly, in its early stages, fantasy refrained from playing with reality, instead inventing brand new story worlds of magic and oddity that clearly indicated they crossed the boundaries of reality. This separation from reality is what sets fantasy apart from its fellow genre within the fantastic, science-fiction (Weinreich, 2011, p. 9). Therefore, one of the key features of fantasy is that it does not claim its stories are factual. Fantasy stories are, by definition, fictional (Weinreich, 2011, p. 7; Laetz & Johnston, 2008, p. 162). Good fantasy makes a claim of complete sincerity and delivers logical stories that take their mythopoeic ambitions seriously. There is truth in fantasy, but it is contained inside the narrative. In terms of the real world, the contents are fiction.

Therefore, a two-part definition of fantasy by Weinreich (2011, p. 4) is described as:

1. “A story, movie, game or piece of art, which incorporates supernatural phenomena as an important part of its content, which can assume different roles, but without which it would not function.
2. Fantasy is fiction.”

2.1.1. Enchantment and escapism

Due to its fictional component, fantasy is often seen as an escape tactic from the demands of reality (Murray & Maher, 2011, p. 47). Perhaps the most appealing element of escapism through fantasy is that it offers stories about beautiful and magical worlds, enchanting its audience for the duration of their time in the books, films, or video games. This is often referred to as “the power of enchantment” (Weinreich, 2011, p. 10). Enchantment refers to “the unexpectedness, novelty, and surprise encounters with enchanting phenomena, leading to a feeling of exhilaration and acute sensory activity” (Lovell & Griffin, 2022, p. 2). This phenomenon allows fantasy stories to evoke a sense of wonder, awe, and fascination in the audience or reader, inviting them to immerse themselves in the fantasy world within the stories and temporarily escaping from the real world. Tolkien described enchantment as fantasy’s most vital and noble purpose. Both (2018, p. 60) supports this notion by stating that enchantment and a full acceptance of the secondary world, forms a prerequisite for fantasy to reach its full impact. In the realm of modern fantasy, the power of enchantment takes on new dimensions through the use of video games, as players are invited to step directly into these captivating worlds, becoming active participants in the enchanting narratives and landscapes created by game developers. Fantasy video games, then, have the potential to be an even more immersive form of escapism through fantasy (Rouse, 2005, p. 7).

2.1.2. Fantasy in video games

In the last few decades, the fantasy genre's megatext has developed dramatically and has permeated into various aspects of popular culture. In terms of popularity, the dominating texts of fantasy, apart from literature, have become films and video games (Stroud, 2018, p. 100). Whilst films depicting fantasy stories have often been at the forefront of popular culture conversations (once again, *The Lord of The Rings* comes to mind), it is video games that have become a more subtle titan of the fantasy genre. Fantasy video games represent a dynamic intersection of imagination, storytelling and interactive gameplay. These games serve as portals to alternate realities, where players can temporarily escape the restraints of everyday life and embark on heroic adventures by exploring the depths of these imaginary worlds. As interactive narratives, fantasy video games empower players to become active participants in the story, thus influencing the outcome through their choices and actions in the game (Murray & Maher, 2011, pp. 45-57). From iconic franchises such as *The Elder Scrolls* and *The Legend of Zelda*, to modern classics like *The Witcher* series (CD Projekt, 2007), fantasy video games are able to captivate audiences with their rich storytelling and the possibility of exploration and adventure.

The impact of the fantasy genre on the gaming industry is immense and not to be underestimated (Mukherjee, 2015, p. 191; Murray & Maher, 2011, p. 45). Morie and Pearce (2008, p. 3) state that J.R.R. Tolkien has “arguably more influence on cultures of gaming than any other single author”. *The Lord of the Rings* series, as well as any other fantasy literature it inspired, was a key influence on the role-playing phenomenon *Dungeons & Dragons*, which lay the foundation for modern massively multiplayer online games (Morie & Pearce, 2008, p. 3). These online games often take direct inspiration from Tolkien’s world—such as orcs in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)—forming the narrative of these games that are played by millions of people worldwide. Similarly, *The Legend of Zelda*, which is credited with popularising the action-adventure game genre in the 1980s, was heavily inspired by Tolkien’s writings amongst other fantasy books (Cirilla & Rone, 2020, p. 2).

Fantasy often adapts a central role in the popular genre of role-playing games (RPGs). This is not merely coincidental; it speaks to the appeal of these immersive games and the escapist nature of fantasy stories (Rouse, 2005, p. 7). If physical games are exempt from the avoidant negative connotation of escapism due to the physical activity they entail or the financial benefits they can provide, digital games are rarely granted this luxury. In fact, it could be argued that digital games represent the pinnacle of modern escapism. The obvious link of digital games with the superficial, if not outright negative connotation of escapism demonstrates a lack of educated awareness about both the various aspects of digital games and the philosophical groundwork of escapism (Calleja, 2010, p. 336). Video games are typically perceived as channels of escapism for two primary reasons. Firstly, the “magic circle” posits a boundary between games and the “real world”, imbuing games with a sense of artificiality that is generally considered as one of their distinguishing aspects (Calleja, 2010, p. 336). Games represent the epitome of advanced virtuality, encapsulating the illusion of existing within an alternate reality on the other side of the screen. Secondly, there is a prevailing notion that video games and play are the opposite of seriousness and work and are somehow set apart from ordinary, everyday life (Calleja, 2010, p. 335).

According to Larche et al. (2021, p. 155), role-playing games (RPGs) in particular can facilitate more profound levels of immersion, thus evoking a larger sense of escapism in players. Johnson et al. (2012, p. 120) similarly found that role-playing/strategy games are more associated with enhanced immersion than sport and fighting games. These so-called ‘escape’ players may be more common in RPGs due to the immersive features these games provide. RPGs often include significant world-building, including narratives and storylines, that allow players to feel completely immersed and disconnected from reality. *Dungeons & Dragons*

(*D&D*), arguably the most famous table-top RPG in gaming history, has been widely discussed for these immersive qualities (White, 2014, pp. 82-92; O'Brien, 2017, pp. 607-613). In recent years, digital games have further expanded the immersive potential of RPGs, including the latest addition to *D&D*-inspired projects; *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023). Drawing inspiration from the rich lore and mechanics of *D&D*, *Baldur's Gate 3* offers players a deeply immersive experience where they embark on epic adventures. This level of immersion not only captivates players but also fosters a sense of enchantment, as they become fully engrossed in the fantastical narratives and landscapes of the game.

2.1.3. Categories of fantasy

Defining fantasy categories and subgenres is essential for contextualising the discussion within the broader landscape of the fantasy genre and immersive gaming. By categorising and delineating the various types of fantasy, we can better understand the diverse range of narratives, themes and tropes that contribute to the genre's immersive qualities. This categorisation serves as an initial framework for analysing specific elements within fantasy works, such as world-building, character development, and narrative structure. Additionally, by analysing different subgenres, we can identify tropes that shed light on the genre's evolution and cultural significance. In the context of discussing immersive experiences in fantasy video games like *Baldur's Gate 3*, understanding the nuances of fantasy categories and subgenres provides valuable insights into the game's design, storytelling techniques, and player engagement.

Farah Mendlesohn, a scholar of fantastic literature, proposed four categories of fantasy in her book "Rhetorics of Fantasy" (2008). These categories—portal-quest fantasy, immersive fantasy, intrusion fantasy, and liminal fantasy—are descriptors of the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of fantasy stories that lay a foundation for possible further analysis. Mendlesohn (2008, p. xiii) argues that an enclosed fantasy world requires more sophisticated narrative techniques in order to elicit complex emotional responses from its audience. She refers to these techniques as frames, which are "narrative devices that establish a relationship between a fantasy world and our own whilst at the same time separating the two" (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. xiv). Thus, the emphasis lies on the relationship of the reader and the world described within these stories. "The key to the fantastic is how its universes work, which is sometimes where they are, but is always why and how they are" (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. xiv). Therefore, these four categories allow us to distinguish between how audiences perceive the fantasy worlds that draw them in

and allow them to escape. Mendlesohn's (2008, p. xiv) four categories of fantasy are summarised in Table 1.

In the first category, portal-quest fantasy, characters from the 'real' world are transported to a fantastical realm through a portal or gateway. The protagonists then embark on a 'heroes' quest or journey within this new world, encountering magical creatures, challenging antagonists, and ultimately fulfilling a quest or destiny (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. xix). Famous literary examples include *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950) by C.S. Lewis and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll. Sandor (1991, p. 341) further distinguishes five types of fantasy: the realistic, the romantic, the fantastic, the nonsensical, and the parabolic. In his own categorisation of the fantasy genre, Sandor's (1991, p. 341) romantic fantasy similarly focuses on themes of heroism and adventure. This overlaps with Mendlesohn's (2008, p. xix) portal-quest categorisation through its portrayal of a protagonist journeying to a fantastic realm to embark on a quest.

In immersive fantasy, the protagonists are natives or long-term residents of the main fantastical world (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. xx). Within these stories, the narrative focuses on their interactions with the world and its other inhabitants as they navigate its complexities and confront its challenges. Immersive fantasy therefore often emphasises the richness of the world-building and the characters' deep connection to their environment. The most well-known examples of immersive fantasy include *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) by J.R.R. Tolkien and *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996) by George R.R. Martin. Immersive fantasy is most associated with fantasy video games, including *Baldur's Gate 3* and *The Elder Scrolls*.

Intrusion fantasy involves the intrusion of the fantastical into the 'real' world. Ordinary individuals or communities are confronted with supernatural or magical elements that disrupt their everyday lives (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. xxi). The narrative typically explores the consequences of this intrusion and the characters' reaction to the fantastical elements. The most famous examples in this category include *Harry Potter* (1997) and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2001) by J.K. Rowling. Sandor's (1991, p. 341) fantastic fantasy is similarly characterised by elements of wonder and the supernatural, thus corresponding with Mendlesohn's (2008, p. xxi) depiction of fantastical elements protruding into an ordinary world.

The final category, liminal fantasy, touches upon the boundary or threshold between the real and the fantastical (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. xxiii). Within these stories, characters navigate transitional spaces where the rules of reality are suspended, thereby leading to encounters with the supernatural. Liminal fantasy often explores themes of transformation, ambiguity, and liminality. This category can be found in Hayao Miyazaki's *Studio Ghibli* film *Spirited Away*

(2001), as well as the universally acclaimed video game *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Nintendo, 2000) (Skott & Bengtson, 2021, p. 608). Sandor's (1991, p. 341) parabolic fantasy, which conveys moral or philosophical allegories, could align with Mendlesohn's (2008, p. xxiii) liminal category, where the narrative often explores boundaries through symbolism and metaphors.

Table 1

Categories and Types of Fantasy

Mendlesohn's (2008, p. xiv) fantasy categories	Characteristics	Examples	Link with Sandor's (1991, p. 341) five types of fantasy
Portal-Quest Fantasy	Fantastic world is accessed through a portal, the hero's quest is the main narrative	<i>The Chronicles of Narnia, Alice in Wonderland</i>	Romantic Fantasy
Immersive Fantasy	Confronting challenges as a long-term native of a fantasy world, critical importance of world-building and character interactions	<i>The Lord of the Rings, A Song of Ice and Fire, Baldur's Gate 3</i>	No clear correspondence
Intrusion Fantasy	'Intrusion' of the fantastical into the 'real' world. Narrative typically explores the consequences of this intrusion	<i>Harry Potter, Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them</i>	Fantastic Fantasy
Liminal Fantasy	Characters navigate transitional spaces where the rules of reality are suspended, the supernatural is a common element	<i>Spirited Away, The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask</i>	Parabolic Fantasy

Two of Sandor's (1991, p. 341) types do not directly correspond with Mendlesohn's categories: the realistic and the nonsensical. Sandor's (1991, p. 341) realistic fantasy type refers to stories that specifically focus on incorporating elements in fantasy stories that mirror the real world. An example of this is the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series by Rick Riordan (2005), which combines Greek mythological elements with modern-day settings. Nonsensical fantasy, on the other hand, refers to stories that defy traditional storytelling conventions and lean into the absurdity of the story, such as *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (2016), the sequel to *Alice in Wonderland* (2010).

Whilst there may not be a perfect one-to-one correspondence between Mendlesohn's (2008, p. xiv) categories and Sandor's (1991, p. 341) types, the overlap between both frameworks offers valuable insights into the diverse manifestations and thematic dimensions of fantasy works. In practice, *Ni no Kuni - Wrath of the White Witch*, a *Studio Ghibli* inspired video game originally released in 2011 by Namco Bandai Games, provides an excellent example of the dynamisms of these categories and types (Elvery, 2022, p. 3). *Ni no Kuni - Wrath of the White Witch* exhibits characteristics of portal quest fantasy, immersive fantasy, intrusive fantasy and liminal fantasy through its narrative, environment, and characters. It therefore exemplifies the fluidity of these categories and showcases how elements of Mendlesohn's (2008, p. xiv) categories can coexist to create a more immersive fantasy world.

2.1.4. Subgenres of fantasy

Beyond Mendlesohn's (2008, p. xiv) categories and Sandor's (1991, p. 341) types, fantasy also consists of several subgenres, the most prominent being epic fantasy, high fantasy, and low fantasy (Long, 2011, pp. 1-14).

Epic fantasy stories consist of grand sagas that depict the challenging struggles of heroes against formidable enemies. Epic fantasy serves as a 'meta-subgenre' of fantasy, thereby accommodating stories that span the spectrum from high fantasy to low fantasy (Long, 2011, p. 4). At the heart of every epic fantasy tale lies a hero's quest: a relentless pursuit of a goal. This quest often involves a physical journey across the vast expanse of the fantasy world, leading the protagonists to various locations and artefacts. Along this journey, the protagonist forms alliances and battles enemies of various forms. In certain epic fantasy tales, the quest ends up transcending its literal interpretation, instead reflecting a deeply personal and often spiritual journey for the protagonist (Long, 2011, p. 5). These characters often undergo transformative experiences, emerging as better versions of themselves. According to Long (2011, pp. 5-7), several defining epic fantasy elements are high stakes, powerful enemies, the natural world, and a richly-developed, well-ordered world with a large scope. One of the quintessential titles of the epic fantasy genre is Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), which remains highly influential in epic fantasy literature due to its foundational framework of the hero's journey.

High fantasy, as a subgenre, is characterised primarily by the presence of magical creatures and elements. Unlike low fantasy, where magic and spellcasters are rare, high fantasy settings are rich with beings capable of wielding spells and magical artefacts. In some instances, magic in high fantasy worlds supplants technology, thereby permeating every aspect

of daily life—from enchanted goods in marketplaces to strange illuminations in city streets. Furthermore, magic in high fantasy settings is typically reliable, with spellcasters possessing clear knowledge of their abilities and minimal risk of failure when casting spells. This reliability allows for the introduction of fantastical elements known as “wonders”, such as knights riding dragons and castles suspended among the clouds (Long, 2011, p. 8). For many gamers, the conventions of high fantasy are shaped less by fantasy literature than by the mechanics of the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing game. High fantasy games therefore, tend to take on aspects and elements of *D&D* campaigns. Consequently, high fantasy provides a space for the creation of grand tales of adventure and enchantment. According to Long (2011, pp. 8-9), several elements tend to define worlds within high fantasy stories, including: dungeons, monsters and fantastic creatures, and a large number of races such as dwarves, elves, gnomes and centaurs. Apart from his influence on epic fantasy, Tolkien is also widely considered to be the pioneer of high fantasy stories, having also served as a main inspiration for *D&D* (Laetz & Johnston, 2008, p. 161).

Low fantasy stands in stark contrast to high fantasy, diverging from the typical abundance of magic. Instead, low fantasy narratives and settings are characterised by a scarcity of magic, with some stories featuring none at all. When magic does make an appearance, it is often difficult to wield, requiring significant effort or expertise, and remains relatively low in power. Protagonists in low fantasy stories are typically warriors, with rare exceptions of characters capable of using magic. Conversely, their enemies tend to be more mundane figures such as soldiers or political rivals rather than fantastic monsters (Long, 2011, p. 10). Common low fantasy elements include patriotism, politics, romance, and a typical grim and gritty feel compared to high fantasy.

The dynamic nature of fantasy categories and subgenres allows for unique combinations that shape the essence of any fantasy narrative. In the case of *Baldur's Gate 3*, the game embodies elements of immersion, epic, and high fantasy, seamlessly blending these types to create a rich and immersive fantasy world. The immersive qualities of the game draw players into the world, where they become active participants in shaping the unfolding story and exploring the intricacies of the game's setting. Herein lies the significance of the game's world—it serves as a vital pathway for player immersion, enabling them to enchant themselves through the world of *Baldur's Gate 3*.

2.2. World-building

Fictional or imaginary worlds are creative works that are considered as if they exist outside of the medium in which they are made. In a fictional context, the term “world” refers to not only a physical space, but everything contained within, such as fauna and flora, history and weather, and characters and cultures (Ekman & Taylor, 2011, p. 246). Imaginary worlds differ from other typical media entities in that they are often trans narrative and transmedial in forms, including books, films, video games, and more (Wolf, 2012, p. 3). This makes these fictional worlds critical to the creation and immersion of a story. World-building then refers to the process of constructing these fictional worlds or universes.

Whilst J.R.R. Tolkien’s shadow hangs over the fantasy genre like an ancient, towering (and talking) tree; his works, specifically *The Lord of The Rings* (1954) and *The Hobbit* (1937), are viewed by many as the blueprint for world-building (Stroud, 2018, p. 96). In *The Lord of The Rings*, Tolkien built a so-called “secondary world” with immense complexity that is both credible and appealing (Weinreich, 2011, p. 14). The term “secondary world” refers to Tolkien expressing world-building in terms of “sub-creation”, where the author creates a “secondary world” opposite the “primary world” that the author and reader live in (Ekman & Taylor, 2011, p. 246). This secondary world designed by Tolkien is also an example of a “paraxial area”. A paraxial area is referred to by Maukar (2009, p. 812) as “the spectral region of fantasy, whose imaginary world is neither entirely ‘real’ (object, nor entirely ‘unreal’ (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two”.

Audiences mainly experience a fictional world through the telling of a story. Thus, world-building is frequently done in the background, enabling storytelling to take centre stage (Wolf, 2012, p. 30). World-building, however, frequently results in data, descriptions, and deviations that provide information about a world, slowing down or even bringing the story to a temporary halt. Despite this, excess detail and rich descriptions can be an integral part of the audience’s experience. World information that does not actively drive the story may nonetheless create mood and ambiance, or further shape the reader’s perception of people, locations, and events (Wolf, 2012, p. 29). In a 2009 study, Weinreich found that 34% of *The Lord of the Rings* books consist of mere descriptions, which serve no purpose to drive the plot.

What makes *The Lord of The Rings* a prime example of world-building is its optimal balance between familiarity and enchantment. The world that Tolkien constructed is relatively similar to our own, yet it still has significant fantasy elements in it to pique the reader’s interest and to entice them to go as far as they can within the book. The more a fictional world differs from the real world we live in, the more work is necessary to bring the world to life through

world-building (Ekman & Taylor, 2021, p. 244). For fantasy worlds in particular, the irony is that, despite its fancy characters, unusual fictional worlds, and strange scenarios, it may help us better grasp reality (Kurkijan et al., 2006, p. 492). For example, the incorporation of certain timeless elements such as the importance of the “ordinary” person and the value of friendship and collaboration, resonates with readers and appeals to our contemporary knowledge of individuality and society. This thus facilitates identification and sympathy with individuals and events (Weinreich, 2011, p. 14).

But world-building can also have pitfalls in terms of its sheer size. If the world is too small, the audience may believe they have learned all there is to know and that the world is spent, with nothing more to gain from it. A fictional world with an overflow of details beyond saturation, however, can never be stored in the audience’s mind completely; there will always be something that is left out (Wolf, 2017, p. 208). For example, someone can read a fantasy book at one point in time, and with each reread, the reader will notice new things, discover new connections and reimagine characters as their level of maturity and experience changes (Wolf, 2017, p. 208).

2.2.1. Critical world-building

In order to critically study a fictional world, whether it be portrayed in a novel or a video game, researchers must first piece together the world’s numerous aspects. This is referred to by Ekman and Taylor (2021, p. 246) as “critical world-building”. In critical world-building, the construction of fictional worlds takes on a multifaceted approach, where textual and visual elements are interwoven to create a comprehensive and nuanced description. This process transcends mere sequential presentation, rather embracing a holistic perspective that considers genre conventions and existing theoretical discourses (Ekman & Taylor, 2011, p. 247). Within this framework, the building blocks or “elements” of a world interact in a dynamic way, constantly evolving and reshaping their relationships. Therefore, each detail that is analysed or reinterpreted in light of genre tropes or different theoretical insights can spark new understanding of the world’s narrative and themes. Thus, the term “world-building” in this context encompasses “critical world-building”, emphasising its dynamic and transformative nature (Ekman & Taylor, 2011, p. 247).

2.2.2. World-building in video game design

In the realm of video games, world-building is an essential part of any player's journey throughout the game. Due to the immersive nature of video games, players are transported to these virtual worlds where every detail contributes to shaping their interactive experience and sense of engagement. Video game developers create imaginary worlds in which players can feel immersed and wish to return to on multiple different occasions (Rish, 2014, p. 35). As a result, game designers liberally employ genre tropes and clichés in their world-building (Nikolaidou, 2018, p. 219).

Game design, like the game industry, is a fast-evolving subject of discussion within academic research, particularly by media anthropologists researching the sociological implications of video games as a medium. However, little effort has been made to offer resources to designers themselves (Owen, 2011, p. 4). Defined by Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p. 2) as “the process by which a designer creates a context to be encountered by a participant, from which meaning emerges”, a game's design determines the form and shape of gameplay, which distinguishes the medium of video games from all others (Rouse, 2005, p. 21). Heskett employs a more traditional definition of game design, stating that design is “the conception of visual form”, thus emphasising the visual and artistic appearance of a product (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 2). The ideological values of game developers significantly impact game design, influencing the visual elements to align with their perspectives and intentions (Bulut, 2020, p. 329). In the fantasy genre, which remains largely male dominated, this can sometimes lead to negative effects, such as the objectification of female characters through overly sexualised designs and limited character roles (Grimes, 2003, p. 8). Understanding these influences is essential to grasp the broader context of world-building in fantasy game design.

Konzack (2006) argues that Tolkien's notion of sub-creation, which adheres to a multileveled experiential consistency, is at the heart of game design, as every game begins by describing the world in which it takes place (Konzack, 2006, as mentioned in Morie & Pearce, 2008, p. 3). In game design, fictional worlds are artistic works that in many ways are considered to have a life outside the medium through which they are formed (Ekman & Taylor, 2021, p. 246). Through environmental storytelling, defined by Fernández-Vara (2011, p. 2) as “how spaces can evoke and construct a narrative experience”, game design can encourage emotional connections with the environment through the design of the setting. Therefore, the implications of cohesive world-building and environmental storytelling, specifically in a fantasy video game, on game design is profound and not to be underestimated. By creating a seamless

and believable game world, game designers can enhance player immersion by allowing players to feel more connected and invested in the fictional world. This sense of connection can foster an emotional connection and extend the impact of the game's narrative facilitated by environmental storytelling (Bevensee et al., 2012, p. 97; Jenkins, 2004, p. 128). According to Carson (2001, para. 6) incorporating the narrative of a story into the environment is critical when designing a space. This author states that in many ways, the environment performs most of the job in delivering messages to the audience. Aspects such as colour, lighting, and even the texture of a setting have the capability to elicit either excitement or terror within an audience. Therefore, environmental storytelling is an imperative aspect within a game designer's arsenal. Moreover, Murray and Maher (2011, p. 46) encourage game designers to adopt a *Poetics of fantasy*, referred to as a "critical practice which will help to endow their [game developers] creations with greater depth and richness". Whether it's a history world or a fantasy world, players respond to the level of detail and consistency in a game (Rouse, 2005, p. 358). When the game world ensures aesthetic consistency and gives attention to detail to its visual elements, designers can create a distinct and memorable visual identity that resonates with players and leads to higher immersion. This aesthetic consistency is perhaps most recognisable in cities in fantasy games, where architectural style and historical elements can provide a distinct visual identity by applying recognisable features of real-world cultures (Vella & Giappone, 2018, p. 2).

According to Walton (1991, p. 161), engaging with an imagined world requires the audience to embrace certain principles, leading to specific outcomes governed by established rules. By adopting this approach to objects within the narrative, the audience assigns them significance within the fictional world. Thus, fiction encompasses scenarios where objects are imbued with this treatment. Walton (1991, p. 161) highlights the critical role of audience involvement, asserting that active participation is essential for the fictional world to come alive. This active engagement clarifies why individuals often develop deep connections and emotional responses to elements of fiction, despite their awareness of their fictitious nature. This is known as the paradox of fiction. Within the fantasy genre, this dynamic is intensified, as it goes beyond mere make-believe to create immersive and enchanting experiences (Both, 2018, p. 27).

Understanding the elements of game design is crucial for creating immersive experiences for players. Rouse (2005, p. 369) identified three classifications of game elements in game design: characters, items, and objects/mechanisms. These elements play integral roles in shaping the player's interaction within the game world, contributing to the overall immersion and enchantment. Characters encompass a diverse array of entities within the game worlds,

ranging from enemies that players engage in combat with to potential allies that players converse with. Items refer to entities that players can interact with or utilise during gameplay. This category includes weapons, health potions, as well as any possible inventory items, such as notes and keys. Objects and mechanisms constitute a distinct group within a game's framework, encompassing elements that appear in a game that players can not pick up but operate in some way. This includes buildings, doors, switches or other objects that serve to enrich the gameplay experience through their interactive nature (Rouse, 2005, p. 369).

By combining these game elements with a narrative, a world is built. In fantasy games, a prominent aspect of game design lies in its ability to create and harmonise visual elements and orchestrate environmental storytelling, thus establishing a cohesive world that immerses and captivates its players. Creating a taxonomy of these fantasy game elements within *Baldur's Gate 3* will assist in researching enchantment through world-building by providing tangible "pieces" that can be assembled to create a cohesive fantasy world.

3. Methodology

The methodology aims to bridge the above theoretical framework with the empirical results of the research. Firstly, the chosen research design and approach are explained. Next, the selection of *Baldur's Gate 3* and the chosen map area within the research are established. Furthermore, data collection techniques and the data analysis procedure are explained. Finally, the validity, reliability, and constraints within the methodology are discussed.

3.1. Research Design

This research aimed to analyse the visual elements used within the fictional fantasy world of *Baldur's Gate 3*. Accordingly, the nature of the research lends itself to interpretivism (Saunders et al., p. 137). Interpretivism, which focuses on understanding the subjective meanings and social constructs created by individuals, aligns closely with qualitative research methodologies. This paradigm emphasises the importance of context and the complexity of human experiences, making it suitable for studying the intricate visual design and world-building elements in a fantasy game. The research design applied a qualitative approach as such an approach is linked to interpretive theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, pp. 1-32). A phenomenological approach was integrated within the interpretivist framework. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals, seeking to understand how they interpret and find meaning in their interactions with the world (Saunders et al., p. 137). In this research, a

phenomenological approach allowed for an exploration of how the researcher experienced and engaged with the visual elements of the game.

Visual analysis provided a systematic method of examining the presence and significance of specific elements within the video game (Kozłowski et al., 2020, p. 538). In the context of *Baldur's Gate 3*, this approach enabled the researcher to delve into the game's content in order to identify and categorise the selected visual elements as part of an iconological analysis. Iconological analysis involves interpreting visual elements to uncover their underlying cultural, social, and historical meanings. This method goes beyond description to explore the deeper symbolism and ideological implication embedded in the visual design. By employing iconological analysis, the research aimed to reveal how visual elements in *Baldur's Gate 3* reflect and reinforce the game's broader narrative and thematic constructs.

By integrating phenomenological insights with iconological analysis, the researcher was able to comprehensively analyse how the visual elements in the world-building of *Baldur's Gate 3* contribute to player enchantment. This combined approach offered insights into how the game's visual design not only shapes the player's immersive experience but also reflects broader cultural and ideological themes.

3.2. Research Approach

A combined deductive/inductive approach was used for this research. Induction is frequently used in qualitative research to understand social processes from the perspectives of participants, in this case the player-researcher (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 146). Deduction involves starting with an existing theory or hypothesis and testing it with empirical data (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 145). In this research, a deductive approach was applied by using existing theories and frameworks related to fantasy world-building and game design as a basis for analysing the visual elements in *Baldur's Gate 3*. This approach allowed the researcher to apply established concepts to the analysis and test their applicability in the specific context of the game. Induction, on the other hand, is the act of gathering and analysing generalisable observations to produce new theories (Bryman, 2012, p. 26). By identifying and analysing patterns and trends within the data set, researchers can develop generalisations based on their findings. Inductive research is distinguished by its adaptability and receptivity of new ideas (Bryman, 2012, p. 27). This adaptability is beneficial in game studies, which compared to other research branches, is still relatively limited in its quantity. In this research, an inductive approach was used to explore the visual elements of *BG3* even further, allowing possible patterns to emerge from the data itself. This approach enabled the researcher to uncover new insights and

perspectives that may not have been detailed by existing theory beforehand. By combining deductive and inductive approaches, the research benefited from the strengths of both methods. The deductive approach provided a structured framework for the analysis, whilst the inductive approach allowed for exploration within the specific context of the game. This comprehensive approach enhanced the research findings, leading to a more detailed understanding of how visual elements contribute to the creation of an immersive game world in *BG3*.

3.3. Selection of Baldur's Gate 3

Baldur's Gate 3 presents a compelling case study for examining the relevance and interplay of visual elements in world-building within the fantasy game genre. As a high-profile release in the gaming industry, *Baldur's Gate 3* stands out due to its sheer amount of elements in its fictional world, which is deeply rooted in the rich lore of *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*. Fantasy games, particularly those based on *D&D*, have consistently captured the imagination of players by offering expansive, immersive worlds that allow the space for narrative exploration and player agency. *Baldur's Gate 3* exemplifies these qualities, providing a complex and engaging environment that is ideal for analysis. Additionally, *D&D* holds a prominent place in contemporary culture, not only as a cornerstone of tabletop gaming but also as a major influence on modern video game design. The game's mechanics, storytelling techniques, and world-building elements draw heavily from *D&D* and Tolkien's Middle-earth, making it a relevant subject for analysing how these traditional elements are adapted and evolved in digital formats. Therefore, by examining *Baldur's Gate 3*, this research can shed light on the intersection of classical fantasy tropes and modern game design, offering valuable insight into the ongoing evolution of the fantasy genre within the video game industry.

3.4. Sample

One of the earliest decisions to be made in game analysis is determining how much one needs to play a game in order to obtain the relevant information for the research (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 25). This analysis was based on physical areas within the game rather than total hours played. *Baldur's Gate 3* has one of the largest maps of recent gaming releases. The game itself is divided into three acts, each with designated locations relevant to the main storyline. The three acts consist of: Act 1 in the Wilderness, Act 2 in the Underdark and Moonrise Towers, and Act 3 in the city of Baldur's Gate. A full playthrough of the game can take on average 60-200 hours depending on how many side quests the player completes during

gameplay. To ensure a focused and manageable approach, this study specifically targeted one designated map area within the game due to the extensive gameplay duration. The selected area was Baldur's Gate, the bustling city and titular location of the game. The choice of limiting the study to one specific map area was grounded in the game's expansive nature and the desire for a focused analysis (Reddad & Verbrugge, 2012, p. 1). Baldur's Gate was strategically chosen due to its encompassing of diverse aspects of the game, including character interactions, and environmental elements. This selection ensured a representative sample whilst allowing for an in-depth analysis within the given time constraints.

3.5. Data collection

Fernández-Vara's (2019, p. 131) detailed process of collecting gameplay data was used as the main blueprint for this research. This author identifies the first stage in conducting a video game analysis as playing the game extensively. The data collection procedure thus involved systematically playing through the chosen map area of Baldur's Gate through close readings (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, p. 262). By conducting close reading of the game, this research was able to identify the representation of formal aspects described in the game analysis method by Fernández-Vara (2019, p. 131). According to this author's indications, the formal aspects of games study how the text was constructed and the pieces that it consists of, including visual elements. Thus, to capture the game as a text, the data collection process focused on the formal aspects of *BG3*. A combination of watching gameplay sessions on YouTube and conducting gameplay sessions were used in the first steps of data collection in order to speed up the process. Watching gameplay sessions took place until the end of March. From the first week of April onwards, the researcher reached the city in-game and conducted gameplay sessions themselves. The initial sample during gameplay sessions included taking screen grabs to monitor the identified visual elements, which were then stored in a file folder on a local computer disc. At the end of data collection, a total of 155 screenshots were taken throughout the collection process. Of these 155, 24 were ultimately selected throughout the initial and focused coding phases based on their relevance and clarity of shown elements (Saunders et al., p. 572) These screenshots can be found in Appendix 2. Furthermore, throughout the data collection procedure, a digital research notebook with interim summaries was kept in an orderly fashion to keep track of all findings (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 93). These summaries were handwritten notes with an Apple Pencil taken on the researcher's iPad using the digital note-taking app "GoodNotes".

The researcher was already familiar with the game, having completed Act 1 and Act 2, but was not yet familiar with the selected map area for analysis in Act 3, thus leading to naivety throughout the close reading analysis (Pippin, 2010, para. 18). This led to a more beneficial approach for data collection as the researcher was able to proceed towards the game without prior expectations, therefore maintaining “critical distance” which aided critical analysis and is considered ideal for analysing the visual design of a game exclusively (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 30).

3.6. Analysis of data

This research employed an iconological visual analysis (Müller, 2011, pp. 283–297) to delve into the visual elements of *Baldur’s Gate 3*, specifically focusing on their role in shaping the game’s intricate world-building. At the heart of this approach was an exploration of the symbolic content within the game’s visuals, unravelling the layers of meaning embedded into the characters, artefacts, and landscapes (Van Straten, 1986, p. 165). By identifying these visual elements, this study sought to uncover the design elements that underpin the fantasy world of the game.

In order to analyse the game’s visual data through an iconological approach, the ‘four levels of visual analysis’ model was used. This model, adapted from art historian Erwin Panofsky, allows researchers to systematically analyse visual elements at different layers, providing a structured approach to understanding *BG3*’s visual design (Müller, 2011, pp. 283–297). For the sake of this research, only the first three levels (pre-iconographic, iconographic, and iconological) were applied, with the fourth level (post-iconological) being a possible area for future research (Van Straten, 1986, p. 165). This fourth level would look into how the game is received from an audience’s point of view, thus not aligning with the scope and focus of this research.

The first level of the model is the pre-iconographic analysis, which involves identifying and categorising visual elements based on their surface appearance and immediate recognition. This analysis focuses on identifying observable features, such as characters, objects, settings, and other visual elements, without delving into their deeper meanings or symbolic significance (Müller, 2011, pp. 283–297). This initial exploration helped identify the foundational aesthetic components that contribute to the visual appeal of the game. Therefore, by identifying the relevant fantasy elements, we could lay the groundwork for understanding the importance of visual design in the fantasy city of Baldur’s Gate. The researcher employed descriptive and categorisation techniques to document the visual elements present in the context under study.

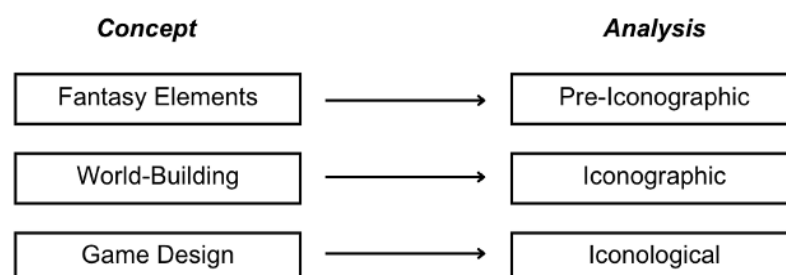
This involved creating inventories, lists, and visual diagrams to organise and categorise the identified elements.

The second step is referred to as the iconographic analysis, which builds upon the findings of the pre-iconological analysis by examining the symbolic meanings and cultural associations embedded within the identified visual elements. This analysis delves into the recognisable symbols and motifs present in the game, aiming to uncover the deeper layers of significance and interpretation within the game's imagery (Müller, 2011, pp. 283–297). This stage of analysis is crucial for uncovering the symbolic content within the visual elements and how these symbols contribute to the establishment of the game's world. By identifying and interpreting these symbols, this research was able to shed light on the cultural, historical, or narrative references that enhance the fantasy setting, thereby emphasising the importance of visual elements in providing a cohesive and immersive fantasy world. Therefore, implementing world-building involves understanding how these identified elements are intentionally integrated into the game design by serving as building blocks that construct a world with depth and meaning.

Finally, the iconological analysis places the visual elements within their cultural or narrative contexts through an ideological lens (Müller, 2011, pp. 283–297). This allows for the researcher to explore how visual elements contribute to the broader world-building aspects of game design, operationalising game design as the intentional arrangement and implementation of visual elements within the fantasy world to construct a cohesive and immersive gaming experience.

Figure 1

Operationalisation of Concepts using Iconological Analysis



3.7. Validity and Reliability

In order to ensure the credibility of scientific research, the researcher must ensure two central concepts: reliability and validity (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). Reliability refers to the replicability of the researcher, whether future researchers could come up with the same results and claims when conducting the same research (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). According to Moisander and Valtonen (2006, p. 23), there are two ways to satisfy reliability criteria in qualitative work. Firstly, by ensuring full transparency in the description of research methods and data analysis procedure. Secondly, by highlighting the explicit theoretical stance from which the research takes place, in the case of this research, iconological analysis. The researcher further ensures reliability by keeping comprehensive notes throughout the data collection procedure. Moreover, making sure that the categories fit the analytical model which is used, is critical for reliability in qualitative research (Silverman, 2011, p. 364).

Validity, on the other hand, refers to the accuracy with which the results reflect the researched phenomena (Silverman, 2011, p. 367). To ensure the validity of this research, several strategies were employed. Firstly, a triangulation method was used, combining data from multiple sources such as personal gameplay analysis, watching gameplay, and secondary literature on game design and world-building. This approach helps corroborate findings and minimises the influence of potential individual bias. Secondly, maintaining a detailed notebook trail throughout the research process helped to enhance transparency. This involved documenting each step of the data collection and analysis processes, including the methodological choice and the interpretation of findings. Moreover, reflexivity was maintained throughout the entire study. The researcher continuously reflected on their positionality, acknowledging how personal experiences and biases might influence the research.

To ensure the generalisability of this research, a comprehensive analysis of a wide range of visual elements within *Baldur's Gate 3* was conducted (Tracy, 2010, p. 837). This approach provides a holistic view of the game's design, demonstrating that the findings are not limited to isolated aspects but are representative of the game's overall structure by focusing on Rouse's (2005, p. 369) three game elements. Furthermore, grounding the analysis in a well-established theoretical framework in visual analysis and game studies further supports the generalisability of the findings within a wider academic context. The study also considers the game's alignment with current industry trends, such as the resurgence of RPGs and the emphasis on detailed world-building, indicating that the conclusions drawn are relevant to ongoing development in the gaming industry (MacCallum-Stewart et al., 2018).

The usage of an iconological method of analysis is relevant in this research due to its capacity to delve deeply into the symbolic and cultural meanings embedded within the visual elements. Iconology, pioneered by art historian Aby Warburg and later popularised by Erwin Panofsky in 1972, goes beyond mere description to uncover the underlying ideologies, societal values, and historical contexts that visual artefacts represent (Panofsky, 1972, p. 3). In the context of *Baldur's Gate 3*, this method allows for a comprehensive examination of how visual elements contribute to the game's world-building. Previous research has demonstrated the efficacy of iconological analysis in various fields (Müller, 2011, pp. 283–297). By applying this method to *Baldur's Gate 3*, the research can uncover the intricate layers of meaning within the game's visual elements, from character designs to architectural styles, and their role in creating a cohesive and immersive fantasy world. This approach not only enhances our understanding of the game's artistic and narrative strategies but also situates *Baldur's Gate 3* within the broader genre of fantasy storytelling.

3.8. Constraints

Considering the use of personal gameplay in the data collection method, the ethical concerns within this research are limited. However, conducting research involving personal gameplay analysis necessitates an understanding of the researcher's positionality. Recognising the researcher's potential biases and personal history with *Baldur's Gate 3* is crucial to acknowledge their possible impact on the results. As the researcher delves into the intricacies of the game's setting, their prior experiences and familiarity with similar fantasy environments could inadvertently influence their interpretations and analysis. Therefore, a high level of self-awareness is essential for the credibility of the results (Elo et al., 2014, p. 4). To address these constraints, it is essential for the researcher to strive for transparency in documenting their preconceptions and experiences, ensuring that the final analysis remains credible and can be presented as authentic.

4. Results

This chapter aims to provide an answer to the research question: what is the role of specific visual elements in contributing to the creation of a cohesive and immersive fantasy game world in *Baldur's Gate 3*? An iconological visual analysis took place in order to answer this question. Firstly, the identification of fantasy elements is made in the pre-iconographic analysis through descriptive visual analysis. Secondly, the iconographic analysis touches upon the relation of the fantasy elements to cultural influences in regards to world-building. Finally, the

iconological analysis section discusses the broader implications for the ideological aspect of game design.

4.1. Fantasy Elements

The pre-iconographic analysis of the city of Baldur's Gate provided an opportunity to explore the city on a purely visual level, allowing for the identification and categorization of formal elements present in the game's map area, as appealed by Fernández-Vara's game analysis method (2019, p. 131). This step in the analysis takes on a descriptive stance, allowing the researcher to conduct a taxonomic classification of fantasy elements before connecting the elements to cultural and ideological influences. The grand expanse of the city covers numerous and various locations, each with a multitude of plotlines and character interactions. Each individual area within the map was individually explored in line with the game's storyline, thus allowing for the discovery of each area in turn. Rouse's (2005, p. 369) three classifications of game elements were used to taxonomise the different visual elements. Firstly, objects and mechanisms are discussed and inventorised through their respective non-interactable and interactable qualities. Secondly, the different characters and races within the map area are identified and classified. Finally, items in the city, such as books and potions, are noted and categorised. A full table of the taxonomised game elements can be found in Appendix 1. Additional pictures of visual elements can be found in Appendix 2.

4.1.1. Objects & Mechanisms

Rouse (2005, p. 369) highlights objects and mechanisms as elements within a game that can not be picked up by characters. Objects such as buildings, structures, and natural features serve as non-interactable elements of the game world, shaping the player's experience and providing context for their actions by providing a setting for the player to play through. Mechanisms, on the other hand, serve as interactable elements such as magic portals, doors, and levers that the player can manipulate to progress through the game or trigger specific events within the game's story.

4.1.1.1. Non-interactable visual elements

4.1.1.1.1. Buildings and structures

As soon as the player enters the bustling city of Baldur's Gate, they are immediately greeted with a vibrant cityscape brimming with life. Yet, amidst the hustle and bustle of its citizens, players can discern the architecture of the city's buildings as mostly constructed out of

sand-coloured stone, with wood constructions occasionally offering structural support (Fig. 2). Houses, inns, shops, and taverns constitute the majority of buildings within the city, all spread throughout the city's districts. Baldur's Gate also plays host to multiple religious temples and cemeteries, such as the House of Grief, each with a distinct purpose and religious factor it plays host to. Within the centre, players can discern a recurring motif of circular patterns adorning buildings and intricate mosaics gracing stone floors. The streets, almost labyrinthine in their layout, are paved with different and distinct stones or tiles, making each path unique. Additionally, the streets rise and fall, featuring numerous height differences that add to the city's dynamic topography. As the player moves away from the city centre towards the docks, there is a noticeable decline in the architectural aesthetics and stability of buildings. Buildings near the docks tend to be less appealing and appear less durable in terms of construction. In contrast, when one approaches the heart of the city, the structures become increasingly robust and sophisticated, showcasing sturdier and more elegant designs.

Figure 2

Architecture in Baldur's Gate



One of the most eye-catching buildings within the lower centre of the city is a massive dome, embroidered in gold and coloured glass that plays home to the “Sorcerous Sundries”, a large magical shop for magic-wielders containing a vault of ancient magical texts (Fig. 3). The

exterior of Sorcerous Sundries stands out amongst the surrounding houses and taverns due to its vivid colours and ornate design. The shop is housed in a structure that appears older and more arcane than its neighbours, with intricate carvings and arcane symbols etched into its stone walls, whilst its entrance is adorned with glowing runes or sigils. A prominent feature of its interior design is a central display area, which showcases the most powerful and rare magical items available for purchase. The shop's arcane design, combined with its plethora of magical knowledge and rare magical items for sale, makes Sorcerous Sundries a pinnacle location in Baldur's Gate and a quintessential example of the tropes and stereotypes from the high fantasy genre. This aligns with literature by Long (2011, p. 8).

Figure 3

Sorcerous Sundries in Baldur's Gate



In contrast to the fine design of the Sorcerous Sundries, Baldur's Gate also plays host to the headquarters of the Flaming Fist, the city's most powerful mercenary company. These headquarters, located in the southwest area of the city, resemble a mediaeval fortress, with high, thick stone walls that seem almost impossible to breach. These walls are built from large, grey stones, giving the building a rugged and durable appearance. The main entrance is a large iron gate, constantly guarded by heavily armed soldiers wearing the distinctive uniforms of the Flaming Fist. Along with the walls and towers of the fortress, the banners and insignias of the Flaming Fist can be seen hanging throughout the entire city, easily recognisable due to its

design of a clenched fist engulfed in flames amongst a deep crimson background with gold embroidery. The contrast between Sorcerous Sundries and the Flaming Fist headquarters showcases the diversity of structures often found in epic fantasy stories, aligning with Long (2011, p. 6).

On the city's coastline, the harbour of Baldur's Gate is a lively area, brimming with activity and the constant hum of maritime life, with sailors, traders, and dockworkers busily moving about. As the player approaches the docks, the sight of large wooden ships moored along the piers immediately catches the eye. These ships range from sturdy cargo ships to sleeker merchant boats, each displaying different flags of various trading companies from other lands. The piers themselves are constructed from weathered wood, their surfaces worn and smooth. Surrounding the docks are numerous warehouses and storage buildings with stone walls and heavy wooden doors. These buildings are interspersed with small shops and stalls, where merchants attempt to sell their goods to passers-by. The harbour also features several taverns and inns, serving as a leisure place for sailors and travellers. Beneath this busy surface of the city lies a network of sewers and undercity ruins, remnants of an older city that has been built over time. The narrow passageways are often cluttered with debris and signs of past inhabitants, including rusted weapons, rotting wooden furniture, and remnants of ancient texts scattered across floors. Occasionally, the player can see a faint glimmer of hidden treasures, able to be picked up and stashed in a character's inventory.

The presence of buildings and structures such as Sorcerous Sundries, the Flaming Fist headquarters, the harbour, and the undercity ruins collectively exemplify the scope of an epic fantasy world, reflecting literature by Long (2011, p. 6).

4.1.1.1.2. Outer city wall

Encircling the city is a massive outer wall, serving as a barrier to the city. This outer wall is constructed from solid stone blocks with tall watchtowers, which are heavily guarded by armoured knights keeping an eye on the surrounding lands. The wall itself is several stories high, with a broad walkway running along the top, allowing guards to patrol its length. The Basilisk Gate, a prominent feature of the outer city wall, serves as a major entry and exit point to and from Baldur's Gate. The gate is flanked by imposing stone towers, each lined with statues of prominent deceased betrayers of the city. The gate itself is a heavy wooden structure, banded with iron and adorned with large rivets, forming a division between the inner city and the 'slums' outside the city wall. The slums—characterised by makeshift shelters and muddy paths—house a burgeoning population of refugees. The refugee camp consists of makeshift wooden frames

propping up sagging roofs, with clotheslines strung between poles filled with laundry and scraps of fabric.

The outer city wall and the Basilisk Gate can be seen as the “portal” to the city, providing an initial and critical barrier to the player upon entering Baldur’s Gate, thus resonating with Mendlesohn’s (2008, p. 7) portal-quest fantasy category.

4.1.1.1.3. Natural elements

Apart from the buildings and structures adorning the city’s streets, Baldur’s Gate is brimming with nature. Set in a bay alongside the Chianthon river, the city is surrounded by mountains, visible from the harbour near the city’s edge. Within the city itself, vines and overgrowth stick out from buildings, creating a sense of an ancient city reclaimed by nature (Appendix 2). Multiple parks are scattered throughout, providing green spaces amidst the city’s urban landscape. Large trees line many of the streets, and miniature flower gardens may be easy to miss if the player is not looking for them. The Chianthon River runs through the centre of the city, adding to its natural charm. Overgrown trees and patches of mud are common sights, showcasing the natural elements that persist despite the development of the city. Periodic earthquakes also leave their mark on the city throughout the player’s exploration, causing significant damage and inspiring fear and worry in the city’s inhabitants. The setting of mountains, flora, and the Chiathon river are prime examples of the natural world, one of the central elements of many epic fantasy stories, resonating with literature by Long (2011, p. 6).

4.1.1.2. Interactable visual elements

Baldur’s Gate plays host to numerous mechanisms that players can interact with. One of the most prominent mechanisms throughout the city is the magical “waypoints” serving as a means to teleport through Baldur’s Gate with ease. These magical waypoints, marked with brightly coloured glyphs and arcane symbols, stand tall and proud through their intricate designs, easily noticeable in the surrounding cityscape. These waypoints are examples of “planar travel” which is frequently found in high fantasy stories (Long, 2011, p. 9). A similar such mechanism appears in the House of Grief, arguably the most notable religious temple in the city. This temple is the site of the Mirror of Loss, an artefact possessing magical abilities, allowing players to interact with it in ways that reveal hidden truths about the character’s backstories. Framed by ornate carvings and adorned with shimmering crystals, it catches the eye of the

player instantly and illustrates the trope of powerful magical “wonders” from the high fantasy genre, reflecting literature by Long (2011, p. 8).

Apart from these magical mechanisms, the player also witnesses several more rudimentary mechanisms throughout the city, such as the various crates and barrels in the streets and buildings, interactable to players by often containing hidden items to be stored in the player’s inventory. Furthermore, the city is adorned with levers and hidden traps. These traps are invisible to the player unless they succeed on a “perception” check, after which the traps become visible due to a thin white line surrounding their invisible locations. The player is then able to interact with the traps in order to disarm them to continue onwards.

The addition of these mechanisms, such as the magical portals and the traps illuminated from their hiding places, reinforces the common arcane and adventurous tropes found in high and epic fantasy (Long, 2011, pp. 5-9).

4.1.2. Characters

4.1.2.1. Non-playable characters

One of the most noticeable elements when walking through the gates in the city is the sheer amount of non-playable characters (NPC’s) populating the streets (Appendix 2). As players explore the city, they’ll notice a bustling atmosphere filled with a diverse array of characters. From humans laughing to half-elves chatting with dwarves, the streets of Baldur’s Gate are alive with activity. Virtually every single location in the city plays host to a group of characters going about their daily lives. Varied in appearance, the humans in Baldur’s Gate display a range of skin tones, hair colours, and facial features. They typically wear practical clothing suited to their daily activities in the city. The elves are slender and graceful, with pointed ears and almond shaped eyes. These elves typically wear elegant attire and have intricate tattoos or jewellery. Dwarves, on the other hand, are stout and muscular, with sturdy builds and often rugged features. They commonly sport beards and favour sturdy clothing and armour such as axes and thick shields. The halflings are small and nimble with round faces, typically dressed in comfortable-looking clothing with colourful accessories. The city also plays host to several dragonborn, a visually striking and formidable race of creatures. Dragonborn are covered in tough, metallic scales that vary in colour, often reflecting the type of dragon they are descended from. Their heads are dragon-like, with pronounced snouts, sharp teeth, and a pair of forward-curving horns or frills. They often wear robust armour that accommodates their unique anatomy, including their tails and wide frames, which occasionally references dragon motifs or symbols of their heritage. The plethoric presence of all these formidable races, together with

their interactions across the various locations throughout the city, is a central trope of high fantasy, as illustrated by literature from Long (2011, p. 9).

4.1.2.2. Party members

Apart from NPC's, the player travels around the city with three other characters, known as 'party members'. Party members are characters that accompany the player throughout their journey in the game. They often have their own unique personalities, looks, abilities, and backstories, and regularly assist the player in battles by providing additional firepower, healing, or support through their skills and abilities. In *Baldur's Gate 3*, the choice of party members consists of the wizard, Gale, the warlock, Wyll, the barbarian, Karlach, the cleric, Shadowheart, the rogue, Astarion, and the fierce fighter, Laezel. The player-researcher chose the characters Karlach, Astarion, and Shadowheart as party members, due to their diverse range of races, backgrounds, and skills. Karlach, a tiefling, stands out with her fiery red skin with horns and a tail. Astarion, a vampiric high elf with a hidden agenda, has sharp and elegant features, with curly white hair, bright red eyes and sleek leather armour. Lastly, Shadowheart, a half-elf serving Shar, the goddess of darkness and loss, has long jet-black hair and dark make-up. Her intricately designed armour is predominantly black, with silver and purple accents, adorned with symbols and motifs that link her to her goddess. She uses a staff or mace, which she uses both in combat and to channel her divine powers. All three party members are powerful and visually stand out as prominent characters in the game due to their designs (Appendix 2). These characters reflect high and epic fantasy tropes through their distinct appearances, races, and magical qualities, aligning with Long (2011, pp. 5-9).

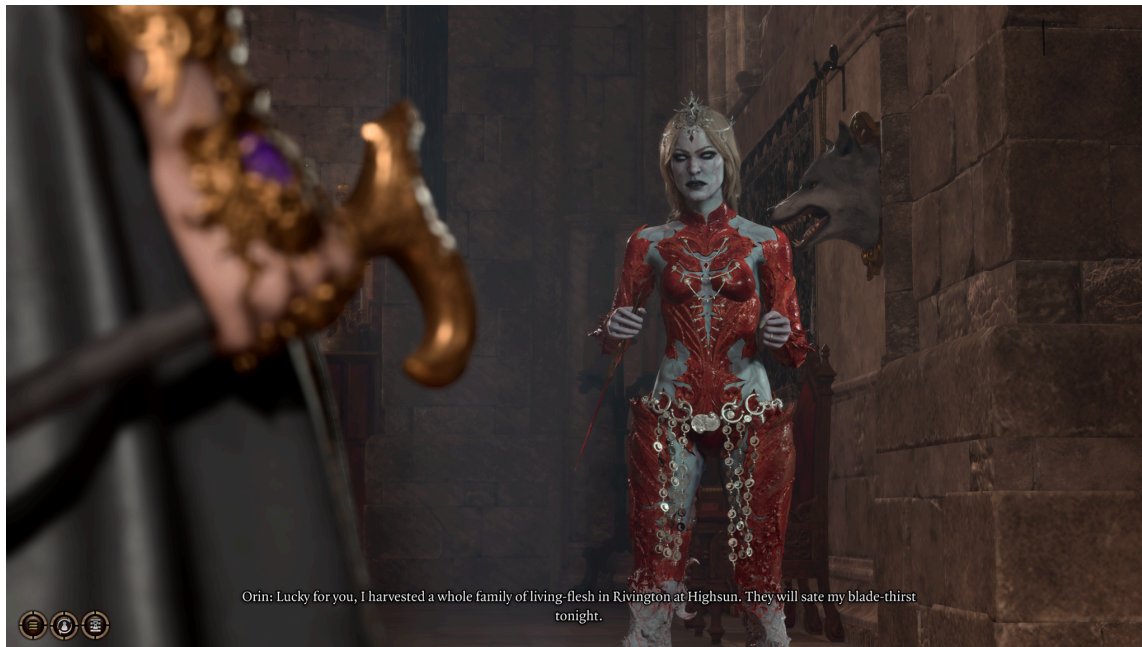
4.1.2.3. Enemies/Hostile characters

As the final destination within the game, *Baldur's Gate* plays host to several antagonists. These enemies range from regular villains to monsters, creating numerous battle moments in the game. Two of the main antagonists within the game, Enver Gortash and Orin the Red stand out as the city's main villains, driving the player's main questline throughout their journey in *Baldur's Gate*. Gortash, a seasoned male adventurer, is a wealthy lord seeking control of the city. His facial features are covered with creases and scars from past battles, whilst his attire is extravagant, his wide open collar adorned with golden dragons and ornate patterns. Orin the Red, on the other hand, takes on a more sinister appearance with her bluish skin and grey eyes, contoured with dark eyeliner. Her attire is distinctively revealing, consisting of blood-red armour with cutouts on her shoulder blades, hip bones, and legs (Fig. 4). Her head is adorned with an

ornate silver tiara with a crimson-coloured gem. Both Enver Gortash and Orin the Red are closely associated with powerful deities and act as vessels to the influence of their respective gods, Bane and Bhaal. The god-like presence of these villains, as well as their powerful nature, aligns with Long's (2011, pp. 5-9) central elements of high and epic fantasy stories.

Figure 4

Orin the Red's attire



Additionally, there are several secondary antagonists to be found within the city, including mind flayers and the Steel Watchers. Mind flayers are tall, slender humanoid creatures with long bodies and pale, sickly purple skin. Their heads have an enormous bulb on the cranium and their eyes often glow with an eerie blue light. One of their hallmark features is the tentacles dangling from their mouths, squirming as they use them to manipulate objects and creatures around them. The Steel Watchers, on the other hand, form a more passive and constant threat in Baldur's Gate. These Watchers, a group responsible for maintaining order, are large soldiers that uphold the law in Baldur's Gate according to Enver Gortash. The Watchers stand at least several feet taller than a human and are adorned with solid golden armour, intricately detailed and embellished with ornate patterns (Fig. 5). Their helmets, designed with sharp angular lines, include visors that conceal their eyes and keep their faces hidden from the city's inhabitants. Finally, some more traditional supernatural dangers also make up a significant

part of encountered villains, including poltergeists that haunt abandoned buildings and werewolves that emerge under the cover of night. Another fascinating moment took place when the player-researcher was faced with a very hostile group of supernatural rats in an inn's basement. The presence of these extraordinarily powerful antagonists from different races and supernatural realms is a central element found in high and epic fantasy, thus reflecting literature by Long (2011, pp. 5-9).

Figure 5

The Steel Watcher



4.1.2.4. Animals

Apart from supernatural rats, players also encounter a wide variety of animals in Baldur's Gate. The city is home to a multitude of dogs, often seen accompanying their masters or guarding certain areas (Appendix 2). They vary in size and breed, some being large and muscular whilst others are smaller and more agile. Horses traverse the cobblestone paths, ridden by knights and merchants alike, whilst pigeons can be seen eating bread crumbs at multiple squares. Cats are also a common occurrence, providing opportunities for interaction by demanding scratches from both players and party members. Some of these animals, particularly the more mystical or enchanted ones, serve as magic vendors, offering rare and arcane items

for players to acquire and store in their personal inventories, aligning with the high fantasy genre (Long, 2011, p. 9).

4.1.3. Items

As opposed to objects and mechanisms, items are elements in game design that players can pick up and use (Rouse, 2005, p. 369). In Baldur's Gate, the player encounters a wide variety of such items, including weapons, potions, and rations that players can store in their inventory for immediate or future use (Appendix 2). There are several notable loot items in the city. Weaponry of various types, such as daggers, swords, and bows, as well as armour such as leather vests and chain mail, are scattered throughout the city and can be discovered in chests, looted from enemies, or purchased from market vendors, aligning with literature by Summers (2002, p. 492). Magical artefacts, such as amulets, rings, and even wands, can be discovered in treasure hoards, on the bodies of powerful enemies, or hidden in secret locations. Food and drink, otherwise known as rations, can be found in crates and barrels, as well as on other characters and market places. These rations can vary from simple fruit and vegetables, to diverse meats and carafes of wine. Furthermore, books make up a significant part of the lootable items, appearing in numerous colours and sizes. The content of these books varies from journals, song books and poem books, to biographies and old recipe books. Scrolls containing powerful spells or enchantments are also found throughout the city, waiting to be discovered by the player and fellow party members. Similarly, the player can find magical potions and elixirs, including the highly coveted potions of invisibility as well as healing potions. Moreover, lockpicks and other quest items, such as keys, can often be found in crates and barrels scattered throughout Baldur's Gate. These various items, whether magical or ordinary in nature, are often found in epic fantasy narratives, aligning with literature by Long (2011, p. 8).

Another key item found within the city is "Baldur's Mouth", the city's newspaper, commonly referred to as "The Gazette". This publication serves as the primary source of news and information for the city's residents, and can be bought by the player from vendors across the city streets. Its design is visually striking through its distinct mediaeval aesthetic. Its front page typically features bold headlines printed in large ornate fonts. The layout is often adorned with intricate borders or some decorative flourishes which adds to its visual appeal. As for its common content, "Baldur's Mouth" covers a wide range of topics relevant to the player and the city's inhabitants. This includes reports on local politics, updates on civic projects or initiatives, coverage of cultural events, as well as death announcements and advertisements for local

businesses. This range of content mirrors the comprehensive scope of information typical in epic fantasy settings, reflecting literature by Long's (2011, p. 6)

4.2. World-building

The second phase of analysis, namely the iconographic analysis, took place in order to analyse the cultural references in *Baldur's Gate 3* based on the findings in the pre-iconographic analysis. These cultural references play a crucial role in shaping the world of Baldur's Gate. In this section, world-building is viewed through the lens of Ekman and Taylor (2021, p. 246), who stated that world-building encompasses not just the physical space but everything contained within, including fauna, flora, and history. Furthermore, the authors' perspective of critical world-building is taken into account.

4.2.1. Setting

According to Ekman and Taylor (2021, p. 246), a fictional world's history is an essential part in world-building. The city of Baldur's Gate lies on the Sword Coast within the Forbidden Realms in the world of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Its fictional roots extend back through millennia, with several transmedial projects taking place in its setting, including an animated series, several movies (one as recent as 2023), and the immensely popular web series *Critical Role* (2015). Located to the South of the great city state of Waterdeep, Baldur's Gate lies nestled within a bay on the Northern side of the Chionthar river as it flows from the sea inland. From its humble beginnings as a small trading outpost, Baldur's Gate grew into a thriving metropolis, its prosperity fueled by the wealth flowing in from distant lands and exotic goods brought by various adventurers. Situated strategically along the coast, the city became a beacon for merchants and travellers alike, enticed by the promises of opportunities and wealth. The city's busy markets and harbours serve as a testament to its economic position in the world, with goods from across the ocean making their way to the market stands spread throughout the city centre. Its coastal position thus underscores the city's political and cultural significance in the Forbidden Realms (Morie & Pearce, 2008, p. 3).

4.2.2. Non-interactable visual elements

4.2.2.1. Buildings and structures

The city of Baldur's Gate is characterised by a rich variety of buildings that reflect its diverse cultural and social landscape. As one traverses the lively streets, they encounter

unmistakable traces of Mediterranean influence within the city's architecture. From the picturesque coastlines to the distinctive red-stoned rooftops, and down to the meticulously crafted miniature gardens adorning sand-coloured buildings, Baldur's Gate pays homage to Portugal's neo-Gothic architectural style, which emulates the styles and principles of mediaeval Gothic architecture (Santos & Neto, 2020, pp. 43-82). The pointed arches, stained glass windows, and ornate decorations scattered throughout the city are reminiscent of the grandeur and intricate craftsmanship of historic European cities. The cityscape of Baldur's Gate bears clear similarities to that of the Portuguese capital, Lisbon, characterised by its labyrinthine network of winding stairs and varying elevations throughout the city. Even Baldur's Gate's heraldry bears a striking resemblance to the coat of arms of Lisbon (Fig. 6, Fig. 7). The prominent use of mosaics on the stone floors of city streets and important buildings further aligns with the Mediterranean style seen in the game.

Figure 6

Coat of arms of Baldur's Gate



Figure 7

Coat of arms of Lisbon



The Portuguese architectural influence in Baldur's Gate exemplifies Vella and Giaponne's (2018, p. 2) concept of pseudo-historical cities, where game cities bear representational traces of real-world counterparts. This influence is strikingly visible in the city's design, featuring a mix of grandiose, neo-Gothic structures like the Sorcerous Sundries and more traditional mediaeval-style houses such as the Flaming Fist headquarters. This

architectural diversity contributes to the city's multifaceted identity, showcasing both its rich history and evolving culture. Additionally, the widespread use of large sand-coloured stones in construction imparts a sense of uniformity and coherence to the city's aesthetic, enhancing its overall believability and immersion. Furthermore, the presence of religious temples in Baldur's Gate serves as significant landmarks that enhance the city's world-building. Each temple showcases unique architectural styles that mirror the beliefs and practices of the worshipped deities. These places not only cater to spiritual needs but also function as social hubs, fostering the communal spirit of the city's inhabitants. In contrast, the marketplace is another focal point, bustling with activity and lined with shops and stalls where merchants showcase their exotic goods, emphasising Baldur's Gate's role as a mercantile stronghold in the fantasy world. Additionally, the harbour plays a pivotal role as the city's lifeline, facilitating trade and travel. Despite its vital role in the city's prosperity, the docks are visibly less well off than the affluent inner city. The noticeable decline in architectural splendour from the city centre to the docks reflects the working-class nature of the harbour. This architectural disparity highlights the socio-economic contrasts within Baldur's Gate, reminiscent of modern cities (Weinreich (2011, p. 14).

The architectural design of the city reflects a neomedievalist impulse, representing a way of engaging in themes and ideas that remain current, including classism and refugee crises. This resonates with literature by Vella and Giaponne's (2018, p. 2). These socio-economic disparities can be seen throughout the entirety of Baldur's Gate. Within the city walls, the 'Sorcerous Sundries' stands out as a symbol of high and epic fantasy, its gigantic dome adorned with mystical symbols and encrusted with precious metals, symbolising the building as the pinnacle of magical power and opulence. The stark contrast between the dome and the other buildings within the city is striking. Whilst the dome gleams with gold and vibrant stained glass, symbolising an elite and almost "untouchable" power, the citizens in the streets reside in fragile houses, made only more unstable by the frequent appearance of earthquakes. The city's social structure reflects historical class systems and societal norms, evident in the distinct contrasts between the prosperous inner city and the impoverished outer city. This distinction mirrors the class divisions found in mediaeval cities, further affirming Vella and Giaponne's (2018, p. 2) pseudo-historical city claim. This division is physically emphasised by landmarks such as the outer wall and the Basilisk Gate, reminiscent of historical city walls that divided social classes.

The outer wall makes clear the distinction between outside and inside the city, leading to a narrative of "us and them", resonating with literature by Vella and Giapponne (2018, p. 8). The wall serves as a visual depiction of the social divide in terms of the ongoing refugee crisis from

the neighbouring city, El Torrel, one of the main storylines within the game. Outside the wall, amidst the open air and less than elegant living situations, the resilience of refugees is clear, a testament to the hope and desire for sanctuary within Baldur's Gate amidst the ongoing war. This creates a contrast with the wall's role in ensuring the safety and security of the city's inhabitants from perceived external threats. From one of the wall's watchtowers, the player can glimpse the natural landscape beyond, highlighting the contrast between the well-fortified city and the wilderness from previous adventures in the game. This portrayal further emphasises the thematic exploration of the "us and them" divide rampant in Baldur's Gate, aligning with literature by Vella and Giappone (2018, p. 8).

4.2.2.2. Natural elements

The mountains surrounding Baldur's Gate, visible from the harbour, symbolise the city's isolation and protection, akin to the strategic and defensive realities of mediaeval cities, closely aligning with Vella and Giappone's (2018, p. 2) concept of pseudo-historical cities. This natural barrier, coupled with the city's defensive walls, enhances Baldur's Gate's security and strategic importance, reminiscent of its role in *Dungeons & Dragons* lore. However, this sense of security is periodically disrupted by earthquakes, introducing an element of uncertainty and danger. These earthquakes serve as a reminder that whilst Baldur's Gate appears unbreachable and safe for those living within its walls, there still remains a sense of fragility which causes fear and worry among the inhabitants. Furthermore, the presence of vines and overgrowth on the city's buildings suggest a cityscape that is ancient, with nature seemingly reclaiming certain parts of its territory. This imagery evokes a sense of decay, hinting at Baldur's Gate's long history and its current fearful climate. The scattered parks and green spaces within the city offer more than just aesthetic value, they provide a sense of sanctuary amongst the city's busy streets and markets.

The river Chionthar, flowing through the centre of the city not only adds to the picturesque charm but also serves as a crucial element of the city's infrastructure and history. The river is a critical strategic point within the city, allowing the control of trade from the ocean to the other cities inland. Its central location and historical significance not only underscore the city's development into a powerhouse, but also exemplify the pseudo-historical elements that are integral to its design, drawing direct inspiration from the game's cultural predecessor, *Dungeons & Dragons*. This highlights Baldur's Gate's legacy and relevance within the fantasy world, as well as the influence of *D&D*, resonating with literature by Morie and Pearce (2008, p. 3).

4.2.3. Interactable visual elements

The various mechanisms in Baldur's Gate serve crucial roles in the city's world-building. The magical waypoints and The Mirror of Loss are depicted as ornate, ancient artefacts, often with a dark and reflective surface that hints at their otherworldly powers. These elements not only serve as functional devices within the game but also contribute to the city's fantasy atmosphere. The magical waypoints offer immediate teleportation, allowing the player to explore the vastness of the city. Similarly, The Mirror of Loss allows the player to glimpse into past events, thus shaping the player's understanding of the city's history and lore. The presence of these mechanisms in the game enriches the fantasy experience, aligning with literature on immersive world-building (Nikolaidou, 2018, p. 219). Furthermore, levers and traps enhance the sense of danger and adventure, encouraging the player to be cautious and observant. The presence of crates and barrels adds to the lived-in, functional aspect of the city, providing tangible rewards for the exploration of the city, in the form of items. The addition of these mechanisms is reminiscent of Mendlesohn's (2008, p. 8) immersive fantasy category, where these mundane yet functional elements help ground and immerse the player in the story, thus contributing to the world-building of the game.

4.2.4. Characters

When analysing the bustling streets of Baldur's Gate, the diverse array of characters become a crucial element of world-building. The influence of J.R.R. Tolkien's work is evident in the variety of races and their interactions within the city, thus reflecting a complex social structure and a high level of cultural diversity, aligning with literature by Stroud (2018, p. 96) and Long (2011, p. 9). The many races seen within the city are reflective of Vella and Giappone's (2018, p. 18) *polyphony*, meaning the multiplicity of voices and centres, which create a polyphonic encounter of various cultures, ideologies and forces. When applied to world-building, polyphony enhances the depth and complexity of a fictional world by incorporating diverse cultures, characters, and narratives. Including characters from various backgrounds and races, therefore, introduces a diversity that makes the world feel more real and multifaceted. The interactions of humans, half-elves, and dwarves, each engaged in their ordinary, daily activities, creates a lively and dynamic environment. This representation of a multicultural society not only enriches the game's setting but also enforces themes of unity and coexistence amidst the challenges of the city. Certain subraces seen in Baldur's Gate, such as the dragonborn, are directly influenced by *Dungeons & Dragons*, aligning with literature by Morie and Pearce (2008, p. 3). The inclusion of dragonborn characters, with their distinct physical features and cultural

backgrounds derived from *D&D* lore, echoes the genre conventions established by Tolkien and further developed in contemporary fantasy works. Additionally, the characters' mediaeval-style attire, frequently characterised by long tunics and tight-like trousers, further grounds the fantasy world in a recognisable historical aesthetic, resonating with literature by Vella and Giaponne (2018, p. 2).

Furthermore, Baldur's Gate is fraught with danger and conflict, as evidenced by the variety of antagonists encountered within the city. Analysing these elements iconographically reveals how the game succeeds at creating a sense of danger as well as urgency. Orin the Red exemplifies this danger with her intimidating character design, signifying the threat that she poses to players throughout their journey, reinforcing themes of danger and the supernatural within the city. Other supernatural threats, such as poltergeists and werewolves, as well as the tentacled mind flayers, introduce elements of horror and the uncanny, adding layers of complexity to the city's atmosphere. These enemies contribute to the narrative that the city is under siege both from within and from the outside. Additionally, the city's Steel Watchers represent the lawful opposition, maintaining order and presenting obstacles to the player's progress. These Watchers stand in stark contrast to the city's general public, their armour symbolising the power imbalance in Baldur's Gate's political environment. Adorned in solid golden plates, their imposing presence emphasises the deep-rooted inequality within the city. Whilst the citizens of Baldur's Gate are often seen in shabby workwear, indicative of their struggles and modest financial means, the Steel Watchers are the picture of opulence in their golden armour, embodying the steel hand of control and authority. This disparity in attire not only highlights the socio-economic divide but also reinforces the Watchers' roles as enforcers of the city's strict rules and regulations. The Watchers thus serve as a visual reminder of the power dynamics within the city, emphasising the theme of inequality and the dichotomy between the rulers and the ruled within Baldur's Gate. This aligns with literature by Vella and Giaponne (2018, p. 8).

Additionally, the constant patrolling of the Flaming Fist adds to the immersive experience, making the player feel the continued presence of law and order within the city. This omnipresent force not only ensures the safety of the citizens but also instills a sense of controlled fear, further highlighting the power dynamics between them and the city's inhabitants. The visual contrast between the Flaming Fist's organised and uniform attire and the more varied clothing of the citizens spotlights the division between the law enforces and the general public, emphasising the historical themes of authority and the societal structure in a city, resonating closely with literature by Vella and Giaponne (2018, p. 3).

Together, these enemies contribute to the dangerous environment in Baldur's Gate, challenging players at every turn. By incorporating these antagonists of various difficulties, races, and backgrounds, the world not only challenges players but creates an environment where danger is ever-present and multifaceted.

4.2.5. Items

In Baldur's Gate, the various items scattered throughout the city contribute significantly to the immersive fantasy environment. Mediaeval weapons and armour of various types, including daggers, swords, and bows, create a sense of historical depth through their detailed design and realism, falling into place amongst the neo-gothic, mediaeval pseudo-historical architecture in the rest of the city (Vella & Giappone, 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, the integration of various items such as books, magical potions, food and drinks, and lockpicks significantly enhances the world-building of Baldur's Gate. Books and scrolls provide rich lore and historical context, whilst magical potions and elixirs highlight the importance of alchemy and strategy. The existence of healing potions in the city emphasises not only the presence of magic but its importance in the game world, providing crucial means for players to sustain themselves during dangerous encounters with enemies. The presence of food and drinks illustrates daily life and realism, and lockpicks and quest items encourage exploration and problem-solving, thereby fostering player engagement with the environment. Together, these elements enrich the city of Baldur's Gate by offering purposeful features into a well-crafted world to immerse its players.

4.2.6. Critical world-building

The concept of critical world-building by Ekman and Taylor (2021, p. 247) is perhaps at its most evident within the world of Baldur's Gate. By utilising Rouse's (2005, p. 369) three game elements—objects/mechanisms, characters, and items—*Baldur's Gate 3*'s designers were able to create a secondary world that is credible and appealing, reflecting literature from Weinreich (2011, p. 14). The intersection and dynamism of these elements play a crucial role in this process. These game elements are intricately designed to interact with one another, providing players with a tangible sense of engagement that is vital to immersive gameplay. For example, interactive mechanisms such as crates and barrels not only contain essential items such as rations or health potions, they also prompt players to consider strategic choices for survival, especially when facing powerful enemies such as Enver Gortash or Orin the Red.

Moreover, the player's decisions influence the other game elements, impacting subsequent narrative developments and shaping the player's relationship with the world. For

instance, interacting with a specific character can lead to the discovery of an item, such as a scroll or magical potion the character may have in hand. Furthermore, items, whether mundane or magical, serve as tangible links to the lore and history of Baldur's Gate, informing the player on the city's past and a character's role in it. This interactive approach not only enhances player agency but also deepens immersion by making in-game decisions have consequences. This careful integration of Rouse's (2005, p. 369) game elements exemplifies the critical world-building approach, transforming Baldur's Gate into more than just a setting, but a living, responsive world that is shaped by players' actions and decisions.

4.3. Game Design

The final stage of analysis entails the iconological analysis. In this step, the researcher investigated the ideological context of the visual elements in *Baldur's Gate 3*. This involves examining how the game's design choices are influenced by the developers' values, beliefs, and experiences. The researcher considers broader historical and cultural influences on the game's developers, such as the predominance of stereotypical European fantasy tropes and the impact of classic literature by Tolkien. Additionally, the analysis explores how visual design choices reflect themes such as political and social inequalities, and refugee crises, which are intertwined with Western ideologies. Furthermore, the usage of environmental storytelling to convey messages is an essential aspect utilised by Baldur's Gate's designers, and enhances a player's emotional connection to the setting. By delving into this ideological perspective, the iconological analysis thus aims to discover the deeper meanings and societal implications embedded in the visual elements.

4.3.1. Eurocentrism and Western fantasy

The city of Baldur's Gate is a quintessential example of European fantasy, heavily influenced by the Western, particularly Belgian, roots of its developers. This more European-centric fantasy setting contains many stereotypical elements including neo-gothic and classic mediaeval European architecture, Tolkien's character races, and the presence of magical artefacts often featured in European folklore and mythology. The inclusion of these stereotypes reflects the ideologies and experiences of the game designers by illustrating a broader cultural bias towards European history and mythology in fantasy. This, in turn, reinforces a Eurocentric worldview and aligns with literature by Bulut (2020, p. 329), who stated that white masculinity informs game workers' ludic desires and imaginations, thus influencing

the production of video games. Other prominent examples of games drawing heavily on stereotypical European fantasy elements are *The Witcher* series (CD Projekt, 2007), inspired by Slavic mythology, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011), which is heavily inspired by Norse mythology and Viking culture.

The Portuguese-style architecture reflects the Western stereotype of a singular city holding significant trading power and functioning as a powerful port city. The intricate design of the city mirrors the historical prominence of Portuguese cities such as Lisbon during the Age of Exploration (Santos & Neto, 2020, pp. 43-82). The parallels with Western dominance can be seen in the city's strategic coastal location and bustling harbour, which serve as a gateway for trade and influence. This is reminiscent of how Portuguese ports, along with other key European ports, once facilitated global commerce and colonial expansion, reflecting broader European historical themes of exploration and domination. Furthermore, the city layout is reminiscent of the classic European mediaeval societal structure, where the less affluent population inhabit the outskirts of the city. Through the spatial segregation of social classes, the game developers highlight economic disparities and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few, mirroring the systemic inequalities of European history. Additionally, the city's important and isolated nature, ideal for game design, allows for a multitude of events and narratives to unfold without the immediate threat of interruption by neighbouring cities, thus enhancing player agency and immersion. Its position also means it is significantly difficult to launch an attack on, unless an aerial attack takes place. This isolation, combined with its critical position in trade amongst the Sword Coast can be seen as a metaphor for the Western fantasy of unchallenged control, further resonating with a Eurocentric worldview as mentioned by Bulut (2020, p. 329).

Moreover, The Flaming Fist and the Steel Watchers appear as a representation of authoritarianism, reflecting the pervasive control and militaristic dominance often found in authoritarian regimes. These powerful soldiers, tasked with maintaining order and enforcing the will of the city's ruler, Enver Gortash, operate with a heavy-handed approach, suppressing dissent and exerting control over the inhabitants. Their presence throughout Baldur's Gate symbolises a state where power is centralised and individual freedom is curtailed. This depiction aligns with European fantasy stereotypes, where powerful, authoritarian forces often dominate the social and political landscape, such as the armies in Tolkien's Middle-earth or the strict rule of the Empire of Tamriel from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. By drawing on these established stereotypes, the developers not only enrich the game's depth but also provide a stage for the critique of the real-world implications of authoritarianism by highlighting themes of power, control, and resistance that resonate with contemporary audiences.

Furthermore, in Baldur's Gate, the portrayal of female characters through their default attire exemplifies Western fantasy video game stereotypes. Female characters in the game often don revealing and more provocative default clothing, emphasising their physical attributes over practicality or combat readiness. This stereotype reflects a long-standing tradition in Western fantasy literature and gaming where female characters are frequently depicted in sexualised or impractical outfits, catering to the presumed male gaze, aligning with literature by Grimes (2003, p. 8). Orin the Red, for example, showcases the typical female attire in this genre, wearing a scant and form-fitting outfit that accentuates her figure whilst downplaying functional aspects such as protection or utility. This visual design choice not only perpetuates the objectification of female characters but also underscores a broader pattern within the genre where aesthetic appeal often takes precedence over realistic portrayals of women in combat roles. This alignment with Western fantasy stereotypes highlights the game developers' reliance on established, albeit problematic, tropes to craft the character designs, thus reinforcing the genre's traditional gender dynamics.

The recognition of elements from Western fantasy, European history, as well as inspiration from Tolkien's world, contribute to the player's sense of familiarity, resonating with literature by Morie and Pearce (2008, p. 3). By incorporating these genre clichés and tropes, the city becomes more recognisable and immersive to the player, aligning with literature by Nikolaidou (2018, p. 219). The developers, therefore, use the game's visual design as a tool to facilitate connection to cultural references, thereby creating a sense of continuity and immersion.

4.3.2. Environmental storytelling

The game developers substantially use environmental storytelling to elicit an emotional connection by embedding narrative elements into the game world itself. By placing visual clues, interactive elements, and subtle narrative details throughout Baldur's Gate, such as the socio-economic disparities mirrored by the pseudo-historical European architecture, the game developers create a dynamic and engaging environment, allowing the player to uncover the game's story organically as they explore the visual landscape of the city. This aligns with literature by Fernández-Vara (2011, p. 2) and Carson (2001, para. 6). This method of storytelling empowers players with agency, enabling them to explore, discover, and interpret the narrative in a personal and collaborative manner, thus creating a deeper connection with the environment, resonating with literature by Jenkins (2004, p. 128). This sense of player agency is heightened by the role-playing aspect of the game, allowing players to make meaningful choices that shape

their narrative and their relationships within the game world. In doing this, the developers created an imaginary world that players want to return to thus providing the motivation for multiple playthroughs of the game and creating high levels of player retention, affirming literature by Rish (2014, p. 35) and Bevensee et al. (2012, p. 97). These multiple playthroughs can consist of various characters each time, each with their own distinct storyline, allowing for hours of playing whilst continuing to discover the world more and more with each playthrough. The world of *Baldur's Gate 3* is so vast and expansive that even with multiple playthroughs, there will always be something left out, aligning with literature by Wolf (2017, p. 208). Despite this author's negative perspective on how the too-large size of a world can affect the player, *Baldur's Gate 3* seems to thrive on its size, continuously offering new discoveries and experiences. By combining this vast size with the incorporation of narrative into the environment through intentional visual elements, the developers created a world which delivers messages to its audience, continuously inviting exploration and reinforcing the player's emotional connection to the setting.

This connection is further strengthened through the intentional emotional engagement with the game's party members. With complex backstories, personalities, and interactions, the game developers provide an opportunity for players to become invested in the party members' stories, thus creating an even deeper connection with the world by allowing players to emotionally resonate with its inhabitants. For instance, Asterion's struggle with trauma and recovery, and Shadowheart's journey of identity and acceptance are all examples of struggles that the party members grapple with. In this way, players are faced with a way to grasp realistic themes and issues, even from the desk from where they enter this fictional world. This is reflective of literature by Kurkijan et al. (2006, p. 492), who stated that paradoxically, fantasy stories can allow us to better grasp our own reality. This also resonates with literature by Weinreich (2011, p. 14), who stated that the incorporation of current and recognisable events facilitates a higher level of identification and sympathy from the audience. The developers of *Baldur's Gate 3* thus heavily rely on the critical role of audience engagement and connection, as mentioned in Walton (1991, p. 161).

4.3.3. Transmediality

This high level of audience connection has also opened the door for the world of *Baldur's Gate 3* to enter even more transmedial pathways, from fanart to a possible animated television series (De Wit, 2023, para. 1). Therefore, the city of Baldur's Gate has a life outside of its traditional medium, maintaining loyalty to its existing community. These transmedial

properties of fantasy world-building align with literature from Ekman & Taylor (2021, p. 246) and Wolf (2012, p. 3), who discuss how expanding a world across multiple media forms can enhance audience engagement and investment. The familiarity and enchantment experienced by players, rooted in the city's *Dungeons & Dragons* influence and traditional fantasy elements, deepen this connection. Matthew Mercer, the dungeon master in the *D&D* inspired web series *Critical Role* (2015), voices the character of Minsc in *Baldur's Gate 3*, illustrating the strong connections between different fantasy media. The familiarity of seeing iconic *D&D* elements and hearing familiar voices like Matt Mercer's enhances familiar players' immersion in the game world. The game's developers incorporate these transmedial elements to integrate iconic *D&D* lore, such as the mind flayers, into *BG3*'s original narrative. Consequently, the city of Baldur's Gate transcends its origins and immerses its audience, becoming a dynamic and expansive part of the existing fantasy genre.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer the question: *what is the role of specific visual elements in contributing to the creation of a cohesive and immersive fantasy game world in Baldur's Gate 3?* In order to analyse this question, an iconological visual analysis took place of the titular city of Baldur's Gate within the game. This analysis method allowed for an in-depth examination of the interplay between visual fantasy elements and world-building in game design. Firstly, the pre-iconographic analysis allowed the researcher to identify and categorise the fantasy elements present within the city through a descriptive discussion. Secondly, the iconographic analysis allowed the researcher to delve into the cultural influences on world-building in Baldur's Gate. Finally, the iconological analysis delved into the ideological values and preferences of the game's designers and their role in shaping the fantasy world of *Baldur's Gate 3*.

The pre-iconographic analysis of Baldur's Gate exemplified many traditional tropes and common elements from within the fantasy genre. By utilising Rouse's (2005, p. 369) three game elements, namely objects/mechanisms, characters, and items, the player-researcher was able to relate these elements to traditional fantasy tropes. Following Long's (2011, pp. 5-9) classification of subgenres, Baldur's Gate is a quintessential example of an epic high fantasy world. Consisting of familiar high fantasy elements, such as magical portals, supernatural enemies, and a plethora of character races, within the meta-subgenre of epic fantasy, characterised by its vast scope and well-ordered world containing natural elements, the game designers liberally employ genre tropes and clichés, creating a world in which players feel

immersed and want to return to (Nikolaidou, 2018, p. 219; Rish, 2014, p. 35). The sheer amount and detail of these epic high fantasy elements not only captivates its audience but lays the foundation for the narrative to flourish through environmental storytelling in its world-building.

Wolf (2012, p. 30) argues that world-building often takes a backseat so that the storytelling in a game can take centre stage. In the case of *Baldur's Gate*, the world-building does not overshadow the narrative but rather enhances it. World information is ever-present in the city's visual design, where it is so carefully intertwined with its narrative that the environment in itself becomes the main narrator of the story. The game's design masterfully ties lore into Rouse's (2005, p. 369) game elements, creating a cohesive and engaging world that invites multiple playthroughs, as supported by (Rish, 2014, p. 35). The pseudo-historical architectural style and European historical elements, influenced by Portuguese architecture and mediaeval city layouts, contribute to the city's cohesive visual identity by applying recognisable features of real-world cultures through issues of political power imbalances and socio-economic segregation. Through the deliberate use of environmental storytelling, *Baldur's Gate* effectively immerses players by making itself a character in the unfolding narrative, deepening their emotional connection and investment in the game world. This detailed and immersive world-building through environmental storytelling aligns with Tolkien's notion of secondary worlds by ensuring that every element, from magic items inspired by *Dungeons & Dragons*, to minor NPC and animal interactions, feels deliberate and meaningful. Players can spend countless hours engaging with minor characters or reading letters and journals found throughout the city. Everything from the world's magic systems to the fictional histories ties into the player's main questline. Consequently, there is not a single location in the city that feels like a filler. Therefore, the world-building is evocative, where everything feels deliberate and stylistic, in turn evoking a sense of wonder and awe through enchantment. As a result, the aesthetic consistency and level of detail in the city's visual elements lead to the creation of a distinct and memorable visual identity that resonates with its players, thus successfully creating a secondary world that is accepted by its audience and fulfils fantasy's most noble purpose. (Rouse, 2005, p. 358).

Furthermore, Rouse's (2005, p. 369) game elements work in tandem, resonating with the concept of critical world-building by Ekman and Taylor (2021, p. 247). Players become active participants in the world due to their consequential actions and decisions, enhanced by the role-playing nature of *Baldur's Gate 3*. This player agency creates a high level of immersion that captivates players and fosters a sense of enchantment as they become fully engrossed in the secondary world. This immersion is further heightened through emotional engagement with

the game's characters by delving into party members' personal struggles such as loss of autonomy, identity crises, and self-destructive behaviour. This facilitates identification and sympathy from the audience, thus reflecting the paradox of fantasy in helping us grasp our own reality (Kurkijan et al., 2006, p. 492). By combining realistic themes, such as the refugee crisis outside the city and the trauma found in character's backstories, with fantasy tropes, such as magical waypoints and potions of healing, *Baldur's Gate* takes on the role of a paraxial area, aligning with literature by Maukar (2009, p. 812). This paraxial space allows for a seamless integration of familiar, real-world elements and fantasy elements, facilitating players' connection to the world and leading to higher immersion (Ekman and Taylor, 2016, p. 11; Maukar, 2009, p. 812).

The game developers thus utilise game design as a tool to build a fantasy world that captivates and retains players' engagement. By intentionally arranging and implementing visual elements to tell a story within the fantasy world in line with their own values and experiences, the game developers of *Baldur's Gate 3* were able to construct a cohesive and immersive gaming experience that exemplifies the rich tradition of detailed world-building pioneered by J.R.R. Tolkien in the fantasy genre. The developers' approach showcases a broader trend in gaming where audience engagement and rich world-building through environmental storytelling have become increasingly valued, reflective of Mendlesohn's (2008, p. xx) category of immersive fantasy. As players seek more meaningful and immersive experiences, games like *Baldur's Gate 3* serve as a prime example of what can be achieved through the creation and harmonisation of visual elements and the orchestration of environmental storytelling.

The results of this research have theoretical implications. Firstly, this research contributes to the theoretical framework of game studies by providing a nuanced understanding of how visual elements in video games contribute to immersive world-building, as well as extending existing theories on environmental storytelling in game design. Secondly, insights from this research can be used to enhance player engagement and enjoyment in fantasy video games. Understanding what visual elements contribute to the creation of a cohesive and immersive fantasy world can help developers create more compelling gaming experiences, possibly leading to higher retention levels amongst players.

This research can contribute to the academic field of game design by providing a detailed taxonomy and analysis of the visual elements that create cohesive and immersive fantasy game worlds. Furthermore, the study of visual elements can enrich media studies by offering insights into how games as a medium utilise visual and environmental storytelling. Additionally, by examining the use of stereotypical European fantasy elements, this research

can contribute to cultural studies by highlighting how contemporary media challenges historical narratives. Furthermore, the utilisation of an iconological analysis, typical to the art world, within game studies provides an interesting possibility for future research to refine the methodology for different game genres and styles, both visually as well as narratively.

5.1. Limitations and future research

Given the grand expanse of *Baldur's Gate 3*, not every single game element was found or listed during the analysis. However, the selection of the titular city as the chosen area for analysis provided the most comprehensive overview given the time restraints. Future research could extend the timeframe to other minor map areas to create a more comprehensive analysis. Furthermore, the implementation of a semiotic research approach to *Baldur's Gate* could provide a more nuanced understanding of *Baldur's Gate's* symbolic and cultural references. Additionally, incorporating the fourth step of iconological analysis from the audience's perspective could offer valuable insights into how players interpret and interact with the game's ideological constructs. Moreover, considering video games are a multisensory experience, future research could also benefit from delving into other sensory aspects contributing to player enchantment, such as the game's sound design and other gameplay mechanics.

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7. Appendices

7.1. Appendix 1.

7.1.2. Tables.

Table 2

Inventory of Rouse's (2005, p. 369) game elements in player-researcher's playthrough of Baldur's Gate.

Non-interactable visual elements	Interactable visual elements	Characters	Items
Houses	Magical waypoints	Humans	Weaponry (swords, daggers, bows, armour, etc.)
Taverns	Mirror of Loss	Elves	Magical artefacts (amulets, rings, wands, etc.)
Inns	Crates	Dwarves	Rations (food and drink)
Warehouses	Barrels	Halflings	Potions and elixirs
Sorcerous Sundries	Bags	Dragonborn	Books
Flaming Fist Headquarters	Hidden traps	Goblins	Scrolls
Winding roads	Levers	Astarion	Keys
Mountains		Karlach	
Flora		Shadowheart	
River 'Chionthar'		Enver Gortash	
Outer wall		Orin the Red	
Basilisk Gate		The Steel Watchers	
Refugee tents		The Flaming Fist	
Undercity ruins			

7.2. Appendix 2

7.2.1. Screenshots of Game Elements in Baldur's Gate

Figure 8

City of Baldur's Gate



Figure 9

City of Baldur's Gate



Figure 10

Architecture of Baldur's Gate



Figure 11

Religious temple in Baldur's Gate

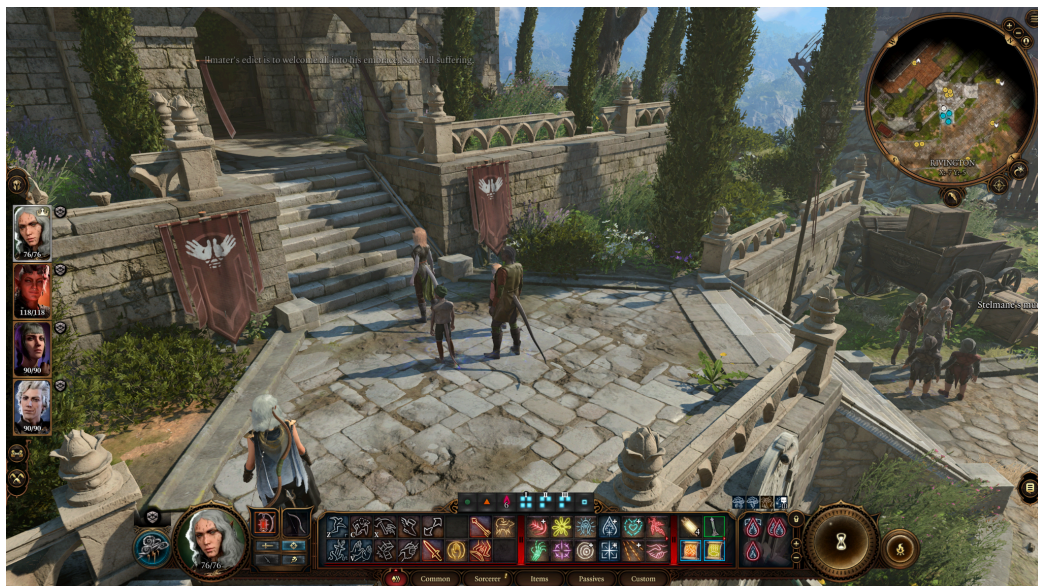


Figure 12

Refugee camp in the outer city of Baldur's Gate



Figure 13

Entry gate in the outer city wall of Baldur's Gate



Figure 14

Natural elements surrounding Baldur's Gate



Figure 15

Flora in Baldur's Gate



Figure 16

External view of architecture of Baldur's Gate



Figure 17

External view of architecture of Baldur's Gate

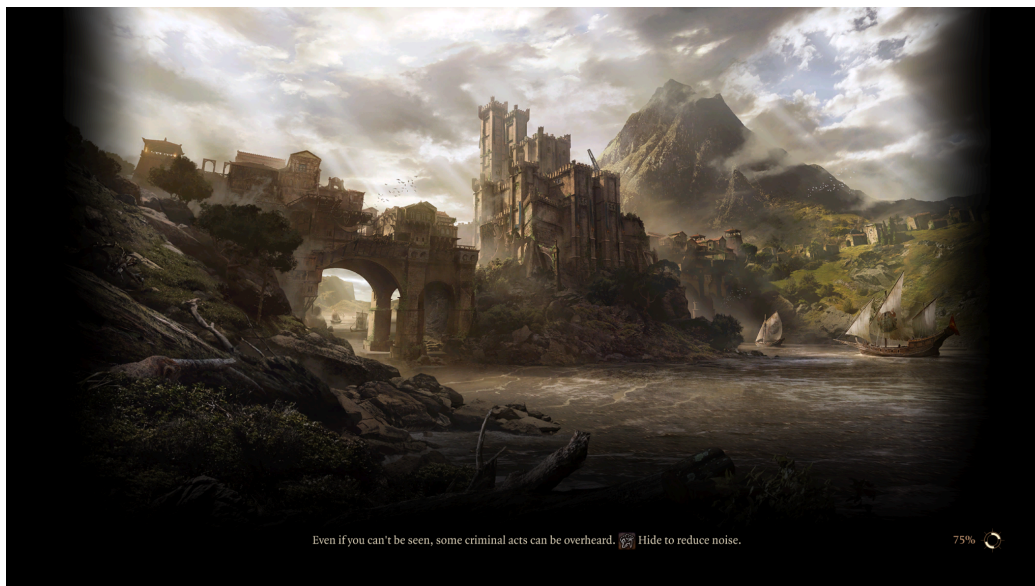


Figure 18

Part member, Karlach, in Baldur's Gate 3



Figure 19

Part member, Astarion, in Baldur's Gate 3



Figure 20

Part member, Shadowheart, in Baldur's Gate 3



Figure 21

Non-playable character in Baldur's Gate



Figure 22

Animal (Cat) in Baldur's Gate



Figure 23

Inventory of items



Figure 24

Item (recipe book) in Baldur's Gate

