The Role of a Northern Town in a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game – Bruma in *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited*

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1. Introduction

This thesis explores the function and imagery of a town called Bruma in the PC version of a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game called *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited (ESOTU)* by Zenimax Online Studios. The game was originally released in April 2014 under the name *The Elder Scrolls Online*, and the game is still being continually developed as of May 2016. This thesis is based on the current version of the game on the European Megaserver (April – May 2016).

The aim of the thesis is to study the role of Bruma in the game. This includes investigating what kinds of objectives and content Bruma offers to players and how the existence of the town contributes to the game overall. The thesis also explores how Bruma is portrayed in the game as a Northern town from the perspective of story content (i.e. how the game depicts Bruma through words and the game environment), and how the gameplay and the story content interact.

The aim here is to contribute to the fields of game studies and literary analysis by analysing the game as text, but also by taking into account its many features as a game, as both are relevant to Bruma’s role as a town which has been inserted into the fabric of the game. We take a look at what Bruma offers to players in order to provide them incentives to visit it. Bruma’s Northern location and identity as a Northern town is discussed in detail from both physical (architecture, location in relation to other places) and cultural perspectives.

**Structure of the thesis – ‘core’ and ‘shell’**. Game studies researcher Frans Mäyrä (2008) brings up two perspectives on how games can be looked at: “(1) core, or game as gameplay, and (2) shell, or game as representation and sign system” (p.17), which is how the sections of this thesis have also been organized to the extent it has been possible. Chapter 2 focuses on the gameplay, while Chapter 3 focuses mostly on the shell as Bruma is discussed more as a piece of literature (including the themes of Northness and danger which arise from the ‘text’).

Further, Mäyrä explains:

> [w]hile the core, or the gameplay layer concerns everything a player can do while playing the game, and also game rules that govern these actions, the shell includes all the semiotic richness modifying, containing and adding significance to that basic interaction. For example, game board or game world, game pieces or characters all
might be ‘extraneous’ to the core gameplay, but they belong to game as parts of the semiotic shell, where they modify the overall gameplay experience. (p.17)

Although the ‘core’ and the ‘shell’ points of view guide the structure of this thesis, these are human made categories, and as such, especially in the case of Section 3, the lines blur. The ‘shell’ affects the gameplay, and the gameplay influences the interpretation of the story content. Section 4, then, brings together what has been discussed in the thesis from the ‘core’ and ‘shell’ sides and provides a more general discussion of the topic of the thesis before the concluding section.

Main questions. Put in question form, the thesis addresses the following questions:

1) Gameplay (core): what types of incentives and opportunities does Bruma offer to players through gameplay and game mechanics in ESOTU?
2) Representation (shell): textually, what kind of a playing experience and image of northness does Bruma present to players in ESOTU?
3) What is the overall function and role of Bruma in ESOTU?

Additionally, the relationship between story content and game mechanics is addressed at many points in the thesis. The title of this study, ‘The Role of a Northern Town in a Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game – Bruma in The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited’, contains multiple concepts. ‘Role’ refers to the general role, function, impact of the in-game location studied. The thesis attempts to provide a view of the various layers of a specific location in the game regarding its function and meaning. ‘Northern’ is another key word in the title because northness is a key aspect of what makes the location in question unique, or different, from the other quest hubs in Cyrodiil. The theme of northness (and more specifically, Nords) is brought up in conversations with the Non-Player Characters (NPCs) in Bruma. The town architecture and objects themselves are also of a Northern style. The quality of the game being a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game is inseparable from the gameplay due to Player-versus-Player (PvP) fighting gameplay, and other social gameplay elements. The fact that Bruma exists in a PvP zone adds its own flavour to the general feeling of the place, and enables additional gameplay options in the area.

Imagology and the image of Bruma as part of the ‘role’ of the Northern town. Bruma’s unique identity is part of the reason why players may visit the place. The Northern image that arises from Bruma also adds to all the other images of the North that exist in general. It is thus interesting to look at exactly what kind of an image of northness Bruma, specifically, presents.
‘Image’ is here used to refer to the general image, or imageme, of Bruma which arises from the text, architecture and gameplay in Bruma. While the word ‘image’ here is used rather similarly to how it is used in imagology, its definition is slightly broader here than in imagology. Leerssen (2007) summarizes ‘image’ as

the mental or discursive representation or reputation of a person, group, ethnicity or ‘nation’. This imagological usage is not to be confused with the generally current meaning of “pictorial or ->visual depiction” (p.342)

and emphasizes that images relate to moral or characterological judgements:

factual report statements which are empirically testable [...] are not part of image-formations. Images specifically concern attributions of moral or characterological nature (e.g. “Spaniards are proud”); often they take the form of linking social facts and imputed collective psychologisms (e.g., “Paris is the capital of French elegance” [...]). To the extent that a discourse describing a given nationality, country or society relies on imputations of national character rather than on testable fact, it is called *imaginated*. (p.342) [emphasis in original]

Thus my use of the word ‘image’ is slightly broader because I extend the word to also refer to empirically testable things such as the fact that the buildings in Bruma are consistent with in-game Nord architecture, and that there is snow on the ground in Bruma. I then use these facts to make statements about the image Bruma presents to players – what it is *like* there. It is key to remember that whereas imagology more generally discusses depictions of real groups of people, here we are talking about fictional groups of people, such as the *Elder Scrolls* race of Nords. On the other hand, due to the apparent similarity of Nords to some stereotypical depictions of real Northern people and cultures, we can certainly ask whether the ingame depictions of Nords reinforce stereotypical ideas of real Northern (Scandinavian and Finnish) people of today and days past. *The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters : a Critical Survey*, edited by Beller and Leerssen (2007), is a great introduction to the field of imagology which deals with national stereotypes and related phenomena. This thesis makes use of some imagological research, which will be brought up where relevant.

**Previous research on The Elder Scrolls games.** *The Elder Scrolls* game series, which *ESOTU* is a part of, has been studied from many angles. Simpson (2015) has studied “Representations of Race and National Narratives in Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim and Fallout 3” in his Master’s Thesis. Sirangelo (2014) has written about the Child God archetype in *The Elder Scrolls* lore. Champion (2014) evaluates the potential for modding (modifying) *Skyrim* “for the visualization and exploration of literature.”
Martin (2011) has written an article called ‘The Pastoral and the Sublime in Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion’. Martin’s approach to writing about *Oblivion* is delightful as it focuses on the game as a text to be analyzed for its content, which is perhaps still a little rare when it comes to studies on games, and studies on *The Elder Scrolls* series. Pringle (2015) has studied self-esteem and self-presentation in *The Elder Scrolls Online*. While Pringle’s sample size was quite low (40 participants), Pringle’s findings seem to suggest there is correlation between gender and class choice, with female players more likely choosing the Templar or Sorcerer class, and male players choosing the DragonKnight or Nightblade class. If this finding also applies generally to the *ESOTU* population who have actually chosen to play the game out of their own initiative, it is interesting how a person’s physical sex, or, identity, can have an impact on the game world, and gameplay. Brown (2015) has mentioned *The Elder Scrolls Online* in relation to sexuality and the Mature rating the game received from the Entertainment Software Review Board (p. 135).

Fewster has presented a paper on *The Elder Scrolls Online* on ‘Fictional Worlds and Historiography’ at a conference in 2015. His abstract states,

> ESO – and Bethesda Softworks – present a historical consciousness and depth quite rare within the genre, possibly serving both adults and adolescents far more contemplative complexity than the average D&D clone, which might use some equally well-known elements of history and folkloristic memory (p.39)

and that

> [t]he paper argues that even a fantasy fighting game like ESO can utilize a complex relationship to historiography, collective memories and modern historical consciousness. (p.39)

The available text in *ESOTU* on the history of Tamriel is sizable indeed. It is also noteworthy that Fewster points out the ‘contemplative complexity’ in *The Elder Scrolls Online*.

These studies are but a few conducted on *The Elder Scrolls* series, or where an *Elder Scrolls* game has been one of the games studied. The series has clearly sparked quite a lot of academic interest in various fields. The series is very popular, the world and the gameplay lend themselves for many kinds of play. The introduction of modding tools to *Morrowind*, *Oblivion*, and *Skyrim* have inspired players and researchers alike. *ESOTU*, however, was published so recently (two years ago at the time of the writing of this thesis) that there is not much published research on it yet, but there is no reason why more studies on it could not emerge in the coming years, given the popularity of *The Elder Scrolls* series, its fantasy genre, deep lore, rich gameplay in both PvE (Player-versus-
Environment) and PvP (Player-versus-Player) contexts, and its role as a medium through which people interact with each other. However, that is one reason for me to study *ESOTU* – it was published very recently (and it is, in fact, still being developed), it is popular game, and it has not been studied much yet.

**Games as a topic for study.** Frans Mäyrä stated already in the year 2008 that games are

a significant cultural force, which has a prominent role in the lives particularly of those people who are living in industrialized countries. The commercial success of the games industry also cannot be ignored (p.4).

He also writes,

the two key factors were there for a new wave of game studies to emerge: an important and challenging, and largely yet under-researched phenomena [sic], plus a fair number of young researchers with the expertise and enthusiasm necessary for embarking upon study on this field. (p.5)

This is relevant to the significance of this study as well – *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited* is a cultural force that has touched the lives of many, both as a cultural text and as a platform for social interaction. People are in contact with the game for a number of hours, ranging from a few dozen hours to days, weeks, and even months. What people then experience during their playtime in the game merits investigation. *ESOTU* is an enormous and nuanced cultural ‘text’ which deserves to be studied as ‘literature’ in its own right. Another important factor in choosing to study a game such as *ESOTU* is that games have yet been under-researched, as Mäyrä has pointed out. Thus, this study will contribute to the growing amount of research in the field of game studies.

On what he provides in his textbook on game studies, Mäyrä writes:

[a] rather general overall framework will be developed during these discussions, but no single ‘master theory’ will be provided to contain all conceptual aspects, since the reality of games and play does not fit in any narrow model. Games, players and their interactions are too complex and interesting in their diversity to allow for all-powerful simplifications. (p.10)

Mäyrä’s statement brings up an interesting point about the diversity, or even uniqueness, of different games. Due to this diversity, it is good to study all types of games. Also, games and player populations differ even between games that can superficially belong to the same genre, such as massively multiplayer online roleplaying games. These games may share some general features, but differ in significant ways when it comes to the implementation of quests, gameplay, and player
interaction that is possible within the framework of the game. Due to this, it is important to study ESOTU as well – especially considering that the game has not yet been studied much at all. Discussing both the gameplay and the representational side of something in the game is a good starting point. The location of Bruma mixes PvE and PvP gameplay and The Elder Scrolls lore in an interesting manner.

The player base of ESOTU has seemed to me to be quite friendly and helpful in general, more than I would have expected. Perhaps this has to do with it being an Elder Scrolls game – the game may have attracted many players who would not typically play massively multiplayer online games. Naturally, wherever there are people, there is drama, and there are also occasional rage whispers, rude emotes (animations player characters can perform), and individuals who will often behave rudely, but generally speaking the atmosphere in ESOTU has been quite pleasant in my experience, which has surprised me in a positive way. The quests in ESOTU are, in my opinion, quite varied, extensive and well written, when taking into account their gameplay limitations, and the sheer amount of quests and content in the game is staggering. The Player-versus-Player gameplay and the social situations and ways of organizing guilds and group play in ESOTU would certainly merit several different studies.

Mark Griffiths, Director of the International Gaming Research Unit and Professor of Gambling Studies at Nottingham Trent University, wrote in 2014 how his “papers on video game receive far more publicity than my research into the social benefits of, for example, playing online role-playing games”. There may be a bias in media reporting, and perhaps even in funding, studies which will explore the negative side of gaming. Games have been, and are being, studied by researchers from various fields. A lot of research has, indeed, focused on their positive and negative effects on people. In their abstract, Cole and Griffiths (2007) conclude that “MMORPGs were found to be highly socially interactive environments providing the opportunity to create strong friendships and emotional relationships.” They also write, “MMORPGs also offer a place where teamwork, encouragement, and fun can be experienced.” This highlights the social dimension of games and their potential meaning for players.

It is, however, important to also study games as text – beyond whether they are good, bad, or addictive in general, or whether they incite people into using violence in their every day lives. Television series and books are not only studied from those points of view – they are also studied as texts for the way they present people, places, relationships, and so on. There is so much to study
about various games as texts which present ideas and tell stories that we would be missing a lot if we only focused on studying them as a phenomenon.

**On the complexity of studying games and ESOTU.** As mentioned earlier, this thesis is not purely about gameplay nor purely about storytelling. Mäyrä (2008) writes about how the distinction between gameplay and narrative is blurry:

> [n]o one actually seems to be willing to reduce games either into stories, or claim that they are only interaction, or gameplay, pure and simple, without any potential for storytelling. But the different emphases and foci for the study of games remain, and that is the single most valuable contribution of this debate for game studies: games can be several different things, depending on how one approaches them. Looking for narratives, one can find (or construct) them, and it is equally possible to search and find the essence of games in their interactive character – in their gameplay. (p.10)

Mäyrä’s emphasis on games being “several different things” (ibid.) echoes the approach taken in this thesis – the role of Bruma is discussed from various points of view.

This study explores also the interaction of gameplay and representational content. Mäyrä observes,

> [i]n the context of game studies, it is just as important to think about meaning that is related to actions, or images, as it is to find meanings in words. The linguistic theories of meaning have often focused on the role of convention in sounds or symbols. (p.13)

In ESOTU PvP, architecture has an impact on how it is possible to play. It would also be impossible to write about Bruma without commenting on what it looks like and what there simply is (the enemy NPCs who do not talk, for example).

Mäyrä also makes an interesting point about the interactive nature of playing games when he writes,

> [w]e can decode messages that carry information in unconventional forms by simple trial-and-error behaviours, as the feedback we derive from our interaction tells us whether we have understood each other or not. And in many cases it is even not so crucial that we are receiving and decoding messages exactly as they were originally intended; playing is fundamentally a form of contact by interaction, and while playing, it is most important that we keep the interplay going, and derive its predictable or surprising outcomes. A concept of games culture can help to bring into light the mostly unspoken backdrop against which games make sense for their players. (p.14)

This draws attention to the variety of experiences players can have in the game. It is also important to remember that players may indeed not decode meanings – especially non-text content – exactly
'as intended’. In the context of the Elder Scrolls games, decoding meanings as intended would require extreme dedication to the Elder Scrolls lore in order to be able to notice and understand all the references and allusions to events, people and places in the vast lore that spans many games. Mäyrä addresses the inherent complexity of studying games, which is also evident in this study, as he writes,

[i]n this book, games are approached as many-dimensional objects of study, additionally complicated by the fact that the full range of significance of games as objects are available only through the activities of various players. Thus, the multiple subjects and contexts of playful interaction further add to the complexity of signification, which therefore needs to be recognized as an irreducible and essential part of games and their study. (p.17)

Mäyrä states that

[t]he identity of a game in this narrow sense is based on its rules. However, [...] the identity of a digital game is inseparably tangled with many other factors, including the audiovisual design of its game world and its objects and inhabitants. [...] Player attitudes and competences also affect how the game will be realized during gameplay. (p.17)

Player interactions and player skill are an important, inseparable part of the gameplay, the gameplay experience and the player decisions in Bruma as well – the general state of the PvP map, player skill and the number of allies and enemies at the quest hub all have an impact on what it is like to play in Bruma at any given moment.

There are many ways to play a game such as ESOTU since it offers so much content and gameplay in a way where players can choose relatively freely where they will go. Mäyrä draws attention to the diversity of player preferences when he states,

[w]hile playing, some gamers concentrate more on the rule system and play the game to win or finish it, without much regard for the game world or its backstory, for example; but it is likely that all players are to some degree influenced also by the representational parts of the game, such as the quality of graphics or audio. (p.18)

We should not, of course, forget that the very same players who at one point decide to concentrate mostly on the rule system, may also focus on the representational side of the game at other times. The same player may rush through Bruma on one character in order to simply grab the skyshard, which will enhance her or his character, but may, at another time, choose to take the time to admire
the architecture of the place and embrace the act of interacting with the NPCs, paying attention to what they are saying.

**Writer’s experience with the game.** I have been playing *ESOTU* extensively for two years – since the launch of the game – which has given me a lot of insight into the worlds of both hardcore and casual players, having started as a casual player myself. My focus has mainly been on the PvP side of gameplay, but I have also completed a lot of PvE content (including all of the veteran dungeons and some Trials) – some of it for fun and social reasons, some of it more due to having had to farm for powerful items (such as Blood Spawn, Valkyn Skoria and Molag Kena items) and developing my characters. To give an idea about the extent of the hours I have spent in the game, my second most played character has been logged on in the game for over 80 days (over 1920 hours). Some of that time has been spent on things such as jumping from one rock to another, chatting with people, and reading the guild and zone chats. That is, however, one of the main reasons why I do have extensive insight into the game, especially considering that during this time I have belonged to guilds where there have been many other people who have spent similar numbers of hours in *ESOTU*. I have also frequented the official *ESOTU* forums – the Alliance War, PvP Combat & Skills, General Discussion, and Public Test Server subforums in particular. This has provided additional insight into player experiences in the game.

My approach in this thesis may, in part, be considered to be autoethnographic. Many of the ideas presented in this thesis are based on my vast experience in playing the game and the interactions I have had with people. For a very easily understandable introduction to autoethnographic research, Jenni Virtaluoto provides a very clear and concise discussion (2015) (pp.29-31) in her doctoral dissertation of her own approach to writing a doctoral dissertation about technical communication as a technical communicator herself. Her thoughts however echo mine as she states, “[t]he aim of this study is to provide a theoretical analysis of the issues discussed, rather than a subjective, purely narrative account” (p. 31). Many of the statements in this thesis will be easily verifiable facts while confirming some of them might require asking other players questions.

**Qualitative versus quantitative approach.** This study is qualitative, not quantitative. Speculative fiction is often about that which ‘could be’. In the same vein, this study about a literary work, of a virtual space for thousands of people in an imaginary world that is not completely separate from ours, is about that which ‘is’, and that which ‘could be’. While some of the statements made here about the game are so factual, concrete, in nature that they are easily verifiable – achievements
exist in the game, the skyshard in Bruma is collected by many players, and so on – others cannot be verified quite as easily without specifically engaging players themselves (instead of simply observing the game itself and player behavior in the game) as motifs are not always clearly visible simply through observation. However, we can still make arguments that make sense and are logically valid. Literary analysis often proposes ideas about texts that are far beyond the realm of what casual readers may even realize about a particular text in question. Part of the richness of certain texts is the multitude of possible interpretations about them, yet they all must be based on what there is for all to see. For example, one of the statements made in this thesis is the suggestion that the name Domitia Catullus and the character itself may be a subtle, but intended, joke. Some players may realize the potential for the joke, others may not. However, the logical argument for the joke is still valid, whether or not the joke is observed by any player. There is inherent value to such a potential joke, and the observation of its existence.

From here, we can arrive at the next point about qualitative versus quantitative approach: a quantitative approach in which one would interview players is limited by the pool of respondents, the questions asked, and other elements such as the time available for the interview or for the filling out of the questionnaire. I particularly did not wish to take the interview/questionnaire approach for three reasons: answers are limited based on the questions asked, on what players themselves think on a conscious level, and on how much time they allocated for answering the questions – how profound they are willing to render their thinking for the moment of answering a questionnaire. There is undoubtedly value to questionnaires and interviews, but this thesis simply takes another approach to explore the topic. However, this thesis may then be used as a basis for questions to be asked in a future study on actual player experiences and how common certain experiences are to the game population.

On choosing Bruma to study. One might then wonder why the town of Bruma, in particular, was chosen as the location to study in ESOTU instead of some other town. The reason is complex – one reason for it is that it is a town which contains PvE (narrative) content but that it also exists in a Player-versus-Player area at the same time – which affects gameplay and the ‘shell’ in an interesting way. My personal interest in northness and my earlier plan to study Bruma in The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion affected the choice as well. In the end, I chose to study Bruma in The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited because there was so much to study about Bruma in ESOTU regarding gameplay, but the extent of the ‘shell’, representational, type of content was still manageable for a study of
this size. There is certainly a lot of content in the *Elder Scrolls* games that could be studied in relation to northness. *Skyrim* is the home of the Nords and a whole single-player game (*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*) in the series takes place there. Bruma and the Northern parts of Cyrodiil in *Oblivion* would make for an interesting study as well – as would the Northern locations to the North of Cyrodiil in *ESOTU*.

**Significance of ESOTU.** *ESOTU* is by no means a marginal game. In fact, the number of people who have played the game is large, and thus its cultural impact is far from nonsignificant among those who play PC and console games. The game is available for the PC, PlayStation 4, XBOX One and OS X (Mac). *The Elder Scrolls Online* (the original release) has the Metascore (a review score ranging from 0 to 100 on the well-known review site called Metacritic) of 71 for the PC, and the Metascore of 80 for *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited*. The game has won the title for Best MMO of 2015 on MMORPG.com, beating *WildStar, Guild Wars 2, Star Wars the Old Republic* and *Final Fantasy XIV*. While it is not possible to have accurate sales numbers of the game, the website VGChartz.com estimates sales of *ESOTU* as being 1.6 million for PlayStation 4, 1.2 million for Xbox One, and 0.84 million for PC. The game is also available for OS X operating system, but its sales numbers are probably included in the PC sales numbers. In total, VGChartz estimates global sales of the game to be 3.64 million. Thus, the game is by no means tiny or insignificant. It has touched the lives of many. For some, the game can be a casual diversion for a few hours per week – a time for picking flowers, crafting low level gear, and walking everywhere slowly. Some like to roleplay their character as far as it is possible. Others compete fiercely against the non-player characters in dungeons, or against other players in Cyrodiil. For some, it may have even become ‘that other life’, where one may live free of the bounds of one’s repressive society for a moment. Some players spend considerable hours in the game with their friends per day. *ESOTU* is something different for everyone, yet it provides common ground for shared experiences with people – friends, allies, and enemies alike.

**General information about ESOTU gameplay.** Set in a fantasy world established in earlier games in the series, *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited* is a multiplayer roleplaying game with an immense number of options for character development. Technology-wise, the world of *The Elder Scrolls* is mostly comparable to the technology level of the Middle Ages, but magic enables people to have instant travel and many other forms of ‘technology’ that were not available to people in the Middle Ages. The player character explores dungeons, forests, and towns. Because of the number
of choices the player can make in the game and the nearly limitless areas where the player character is able to roam, ESOTU can be considered to be a sandbox game. Players gather plants in order to create potions, they research and craft armor, help non-player characters, and kill monsters and humanoid enemies.

Players are able to form guilds and temporary groups in order to play together. On the PC, various text chat channels are available – each guild has a regular chat and an officer chat channel. Group chat is available for groups. Zone chat, say chat and yell chat are area based chats available to all members of the same faction who are within the area in the same instance of the location. The say chat has a small radius, yell chat has a larger radius, and zone chat covers the whole current zone. Players can also whisper to each other. Setting oneself offline means that one can whisper to someone else, but one cannot receive whispers. It is also possible to block communications from up to one hundred players. On consoles, text chat has not yet been implemented, but the developers are working on it. Instead, the console versions use an integrated voice chat. Some PC players also use voice communications for more difficult content and for social reasons. The most popular voice communications software for ESOTU’s European population may be Teamspeak 3. Player guilds in the game have different functions, and one player account can be part of five guilds at the same time. Guild sizes range from one to 500 people. Usually, guilds are defined by whether they are for casual players or hardcore players, and whether they focus on Player-versus-Environment (PvE) or Player-versus-Player (PvP), or both. There are also trading guilds which focus on acquiring great guild traders at which the players can sell their goods through the guild store functionality, which is available to any guild with fifty members or more.

There are four main classes in the game – DragonKnight, Nightblade, Templar, and Sorcerer. The character can be a female or a male. The “races” (the game calls them races) available for player characters are Argonian (a reptilian race), Breton, Dark Elf (Dunmer), High Elf (Altmer), Imperial, Khajiit (catlike beings), Nord, Orc, Redguard, and Wood Elf (Bosmer). Of these races, Breton, Imperial, Nord and Redguard seem to be human – at least in appearance. Each race receives different racial passives which affect the character’s ‘stats’ (the numbers that determine how much health a character has, how strongly the character hits, etc.) to an extent. All of the races mentioned above are humanoid and intelligent, but there are also a number of different animals, monsters, ghosts and other beings in the game. In Bruma, demon-like beings called Dremora have taken over the city. They serve a godlike entity called Molag Bal, the main antagonist in the game.
Molag Bal seeks to enslave every mortal in Tamriel (the mortal world in *The Elder Scrolls* lore). In Bruma, Molag Bal has sent down a Dark Anchor (Dolmen) which forms a connection between his realm and Tamriel. These Dark Anchors exist all over Tamriel, but they can be destroyed by heroic people of Tamriel (players) by defeating the servants of Molag Bal at the Dolmen and closing the anchor pinions. The anchor activates regularly and must be closed. In reality, this is an endless cycle in the game – the Dolmen cannot be closed permanently. Molag Bal’s servants have taken over Bruma, many people have been hurt, and the people in Bruma are faced with a tough decision – whether they will try to fight, stay, or try to escape the town.

Bruma is located in the Province of Cyrodiil, on the continent of Tamriel. This area has been featured also in a previous game in the series, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, but the events of *Oblivion* take place later than the events in *ESOTU*. A war is being waged in Cyrodiil between three factions, and thus it is not uncommon for heroes of the alliances to be spotted in Bruma. The residents of Bruma (NPCs) are not hostile to any members of the three factions (the players), nor can the players attack the Bruma residents.

The PvP area in *ESOTU* is designed for three factions to wage war on an endless basis, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The map of Cyrodiil is like a triangle that stands upside down, on its head. An image search on an internet search engine with keywords such as ‘Cyrodiil’, ‘map’, and ‘ESO’ bring up images of the layout. The Ebonheart Pact (EP) is an alliance between Nords, Dunmer (Dark Elves), and Argonians. They are represented by the red colour and their base is located on the North-Eastern corner of the map. The Daggerfall Covenant (DC) brings together the Bretons, the Orcs, and the Redguards. They are represented by a blue colour, and their base is located in the North-West. Represented by a yellow colour, the Aldmeri Dominion’s (AD) base can be found on the Southern tip of the Cyrodiil map. The AD faction consists of Khajiit, Altmer (High Elves), and Bosmer. There is a tenth playable race, the Imperials, whose home is Cyrodiil. They do not officially belong to any of the factions as a race. Some editions of the game enable players to play any (playable) race in any faction (this can also be achieved by buying the relevant upgrades in the Crown Store). A character will always belong to one faction, and one faction only. Although the factions are lorewise mainly supposed to consist of the races described above, the fact that many players have the chance to create a character of any playable race in any alliance means that some AD player characters are

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1 Other games in the *Elder Scrolls* series have taken place in Hammerfell and Highrock (*Daggerfall*), Vvardenfell which is located in the Province of Morrowind (*Morrowind*), and Skyrim (*Skyrim*).
Dunmer, some EP player characters are Altmer, and so on. Section 2 explains more about the details of the game mechanics in Cyrodiil, such as how traveling works there and what happens when the player character dies.

There are many towns sprinkled around the province, with the Imperial City located in the middle of the Province in the middle of a huge lake. Access to the Imperial City in *ESOTU* is only possible through three sewer entrances on the shores of the lake (one sewer entrance per faction). The terrain slowly rises, the farther the PC travels from the Imperial City. There are various different types of environments in Cyrodiil – there is rugged terrain and snow in the North, while the Aldmeri Dominion in the South are generally lusher.

**What next?** The thesis will first focus on the gameplay side of Bruma in Section 2 – the way game achievements and opportunities to develop one’s character invite players to come play in Bruma. The section following the gameplay oriented one will then focus on the representational side of Bruma – the quest content, non-player character interaction, Bruma’s appearance, and the image of northness that arises from these. The fourth section discusses the role Bruma plays in the game more generally. The fifth section concludes the thesis. There is a small glossary at the end of the thesis for some gaming and *ESOTU* terms used in this thesis.
2. Core: Game mechanics and reasons to visit Bruma

This chapter focuses on the role game mechanics and game goals have in attracting players to come visit Bruma. In other words, this section explores the variety of goals Bruma can help players achieve. Bruma offers opportunities for character advancement: the player can complete certain Achievements by meeting certain predefined criteria which are explained in the Achievements section of the game, the character may gain more experience points, or make progress towards unlocking a new skill point. These opportunities are explained in more detail below. The player may also like to complete quests due to their entertaining narrative content and to explore Bruma as a new, yet unexplored location. Another important role for Bruma is in the way it draws small numbers of players to it, which in turn provides opportunities for small scale Player-versus-Player action. This section begins with a more general explanation of the game mechanics available in the game for understanding the background that affects the gameplay in Bruma.

Skill system and Champion Points. There are four classes in *ESOTU* for players to choose from: DragonKnight, Templar, Sorcerer, and Nightblade. Each of the classes can be played in a multitude of ways. Each class has 15 basic skills, each of which has two ‘morphs’ (the skill is slightly different based on the player’s choice of the morph). Each character that is level 15 or above has access to two skill bars. Each skill bar can contain five skills that can be activated, and one ultimate skill. A player can switch between these two skill bars by activating weapon swap. Players can choose abilities for the skill bars from class skill lines, weapon skill lines, guild skill lines, world skill lines, and the Alliance War skill line. Not every character will have every skill available for slotting them on their skill bar, however, because many skills have additional requirements for using them. One cannot, for instance, use a high level weapon ability unless one has leveled said weapon skill line first by gaining experience for it. To use a weapon skill, one also needs to have slotted the appropriate weapon for the skill bar on which the weapon skill is placed. Each class also has three powerful Ultimate abilities, which can only be activated once in a while in a fight. Weapon skills and ultimates also provide two morphs for the player to choose from when the character has advanced the relevant skill far enough. Players need skill points in order to be able to unlock and use skills. Skill points are also used for unlocking ‘passives’ – that is, passive abilities which do not need to be activated, but which still affect how the character works in combat. Most of the successful endgame characters have nearly everything ‘minmaxed’, which includes having the skill lines maxed out,
having at least epic level gear with legendary quality weapons (this requires a lot of ingame gold, or patience to farm for items), and having item sets which synergize well with their character concept. The number of possible combinations for how a character can be ‘built’ through the use of particular item sets, skills, and Champion Points is huge. For content where Champion Points matter, the most effective builds are the ones that are backed up by the maximum amount of Champion Points that characters are allowed to have. In the Thieves Guild update (which is the current version of the game at the time of the writing of this thesis), the number of Champion Points allowed to affect the character’s ‘stats’ was 501. Champion Points (CP) can be assigned in different ways, and they only grant passives to the character, such as 20% more magicka regeneration, or 25% more damage for magic and elemental damage done by the character. As such, these passives are incredibly powerful, and in PvP, in a fight with equally skilled players with similar builds, the one with 501 CP would win relatively easily over someone with 0 CP. It takes a long time to gain 501 CP, usually months. Most people who have been playing from the start of the game did not have 501 CP at the start of the Thieves Guild patch. The number of Champion Points a player has depends on how much experience (experience points, ‘xp’) the player has earned while playing on a Veteran rank character.

**Death and resurrection in Cyrodiil.** *ESOTU* is a game where both the player’s skill and the way the character has been ‘built’ matters. The player needs to read the fight correctly and to activate the right skills at the right time, while managing the character’s resource pools effectively. If the character’s health goes below zero, the character dies. There are different ways for the character to come back to life. In Cyrodiil, the following rules apply generally. If the character has only fought PvP NPCs, such as wolves, the character can be resurrected by the player who is playing the character by expending a Grand Soul Gem which contains a captured soul. The character can also, in this case, spawn at one of the two Wayshrines at the faction’s base camp. If, however, the player character, while in combat, has been hit, or has hit, a player character of an opposing faction or an NPC guard of an opposing faction, the player cannot resurrect his or her own character by using a soul gem. In that case, the player must either

- spawn at a Forward Camp which has been placed by a player of his or her own faction close enough to the player
- be resurrected by another player who channels a resurrection animation which takes a few seconds – if the player being resurrected accepts the resurrection within one minute of the completion of the animation, the player character will become alive and stand up
in the location where the character died, and the soul gem is consumed (the resurrecting player can be interrupted while channeling the resurrection animation by enemy players, and even by some NPCs)

- spawn at the faction’s base camp, at one of the two Transitus Shrines (explanation below) which are located there
- spawn at a keep which belongs to the player’s faction and which has not been flagged as being under attack.

The player’s character thus does not suffer a permanent death. The only way a player’s character would stop existing is if the player deleted the character from the character selection menu. However, there are many reasons why players do not like to see their characters to die. The player loses the ability to fight on the battlefield, and may be required to return to the fight by running or riding a long distance on a mount. Riding back can be boring and the time lost that way can result in the loss of a keep to the enemy, for example. Dying while outnumbering the enemy can be generally considered to be a failure, as can a loss in an equal fight, such as a duel – no one likes to lose.

**Traveling in Cyrodiil.** Traveling in Cyrodiil takes place by running, on a mount which gives a speed boost between 0% and 60% depending on the character’s horse riding skill, and by using the Transitus Shrine network. Transitus Shrines are small shrines available at the faction homebases, keeps, and outposts. Outposts only serve as end points for travel – one cannot travel from an outpost to a keep. For a Transitus Shrine to be active at a keep for one to travel to, the keep needs to be owned by one’s own faction, the keep must not be flagged as being under siege, and one of the three resources surrounding the keep needs to be held by one’s own faction. One can travel between Transitus Shrines as long as a continuous link for travel exists between keeps – one cannot, for example, travel from one keep to another if the keep in between them is flagged as being under siege. Another method for traveling is to die to an enemy or an enemy guard, and then to respawn at a keep held by one’s own faction that is not flagged as being under siege. The latter method of traveling is called *blood porting.* Cyrodiil is a huge area – traveling from one’s home base to close to an enemy base would take many minutes even on a 60% speed mount while using an Alliance War skill that gives an additional 30% speed boost – and that is, if one is not killed on the way by enemy players.
A simple search on a search engine brings up several maps of Cyrodiil in ESOTU. Abstractly, Cyrodiil is shaped like an upside down triangle. There are two Transitus Shrine locations at each base, and two gates from where one can start to ride to other locations in Cyrodiil, if one’s own faction does not own any keeps on the map. For Ebonheart Pact, the closest keep on the map to the base in the North is Kingscrest Keep. It can generally take approximately a minute and a half to travel to the keep from the Northern Ebonheart Pact base – depending on whether one uses the speed buff and the character’s riding skill. It takes 2 minutes and 50 seconds from the nearest Kingscrest Keep door to travel to Bruma with a constantly upkept speed buff while riding on a mount with maxed riding skill. In other words, if one’s own faction does not own anything on the map and one is not a skilled PvP player, or if one’s horse riding speed is slow, it can take a very long time to reach Bruma. This system rewards map control for factions very clearly. There are a few different PvP campaigns, “servers”, on which one can play. If the map on one’s home campaign does not look favorable, a player can seek to find another campaign where one’s own faction is controlling more of the locations on the map. Experienced and well-connected players (who have many friends in the game) have an easier time changing from one campaign to another in search of a good campaign than beginners due to the way campaign porting has been limited per character.

Bruma in Cyrodiil. Bruma is located nearly exactly in the center between the Ebonheart Pact (EP) and Daggerfall Covenant (DC) bases. Due to the way Bruma is located very near the top of the map, the Aldmeri Dominion (AD) base is located approximately twice as far from Bruma compared to the EP and DC bases. The closest keep to Bruma is Fort Dragonclaw, which is located right in between the Northern bases of DC and EP. It takes very little time to ride from Fort Dragonclaw to Bruma, so it is very advantageous to questers if their faction owns Fort Dragonclaw. Another keep that is relatively close by is Fort Aleswell, which is located in the DC section of the map, South-West from Bruma. It is, however, perfectly common for other factions to own the keep. The Bleakers Outpost is also close to Bruma, to the South of Bruma. In some cases – especially when either EP or AD owns Chalman Keep and Bleakers, Bruma can be right on the path for people riding from Bleakers to Dragonclaw as they are taking part in the Alliance War and fighting for map objectives. Bruma can also be in the way when carrying an Elder Scroll from EP territory to DC territory, and vice versa. It is easy to pass Bruma, but it takes additional time to do so, which is not something people are always willing to do when they are in a hurry.
Each player creates her or his own goals. There are very many reasons for people to play in Cyrodiil. *ESOTU* is a sandbox game where players can set their own goals depending on their preferences. There are many activities available to players who enter Cyrodiil on their characters. Some people play *ESOTU* in order to immerse themselves in a fantasy world. Others like to play competitively, finetuning their character builds and playstyles so that they are very effective at accomplishing the goals they set. For many, one of the main reasons to play the game is to be able to play the game with others. There are many ways to PvP, and players create their own objectives when it comes to PvP. Some may wish to gain Alliance Points (a type of currency and something that can advance a character on the leaderboard towards Emperorship, which gives gameplay advantages and fame), others may like to help their faction advance on the map as far as possible, others may prefer to seek challenging fights without a lot of concern for the map itself.

Some of the motivations people have for playing in Cyrodiil are listed below in order to illustrate the range of functions Cyrodiil itself has, and how Bruma relates to people’s goals.

- **Exploration.** Exploration is fun in itself – discovering new places, new NPCs, new content.
- **Gaining experience.** Gaining experience points as a veteran level character contributes to the Champion Points (CP) gained. Champion Points can be spent to make a character’s passive stats stronger. Currently, there is a cap to how many Champion Points one can allocate to a character. In the future, the cap will be raised now and then, and thus gaining Champion Points even beyond the cap (currently at 501 CP) is advantageous even if one has more than 501 CP currently. Gaining experience also advances the levels of skills and skill lines if they have not been fully developed yet, and takes the character towards the maximum character level, if the character has not already reached it. Experience is gained mainly by killing NPCs and enemy players, completing quests, and discovering new locations.
- **Achievements.** Some people like to collect achievements in *ESOTU*. *ESOTU* provides a range of predetermined conditions, which players can meet and thus unlock achievements, which give achievement points. Some achievements unlock new dyes for dyeing one’s armor, some give titles that players can display under their character name. None of the achievements are requirements for playing the game itself. In endgame PvE content, people will sometimes ask a potential group member whom they do not know
from earlier experience to link a specific achievement to demonstrate that they have completed a specific dungeon, since this gives some indication of their capability to complete the content ahead. PvP achievements in *ESOTU* exist more for a sense of accomplishment, and in some cases, for bragging rights. For a completionist type of player, any achievement is naturally valuable. Perhaps the most important PvP achievement is becoming an Emperor or Empress, which unlocks an achievement, a title, and a gorgeous bright red dye which is special since it can be used to dye a piece of armor intensely red. Many PvPers want the achievement because it usually takes a lot of effort and skill. However, some guilds ‘farm emperor’ in campaigns where it is easier to play in a certain way for many people in a guild to receive the title one after another. This may involve vastly outnumbering the other factions, or working together with another faction guild to take turns in crowning new emperors. This practice is widely disapproved of by many players due to the way it devalues the prestige of the Emperor title and due to the way such practices wreck campaigns, preventing more legitimate type of PvP from taking place there.

- **Alliance War (PvP) ranks and Alliance Points.** This partially relates to achievements – new PvP Alliance War ranks unlock new skill points, Alliance War skills, dyes and achievements. Alliance War ranks are directly connected to Alliance Points (AP) gained. Alliance Points are gained by killing enemy player characters, healing allies, and by attacking and defending strategic structures such as keeps, outposts and resources (mines, farms, and lumber mills) in Cyrodiil. Having a high Alliance War rank on a character is prestigious as the rank is related to the overall Alliance Points gained on that character, and is generally taken to be indicative of the player’s experience, and to some extent, skill. After the game had been out for two years, there were extremely few players who had reached the maximum Alliance Rank (to give a sense of the scale, in my own estimation, the number was lower than 30 on the EU Megaserver – possibly lower than 15). Alliance Points are also a type of currency that can be used to purchase siege engines, camps, and PvP gear. Some people like to focus their PvP efforts on simply gaining as many Alliance Points as possible.

- **Finding lorebooks and Skyshards.** Finding these items scattered in the world contributes to character advancement and achievements.
• **Supporting one’s alliance.** Activities related to this include attacking and defending keeps, outposts, resources, and capturing Elder Scrolls for one’s own alliance. Each PvP campaign lasts a set number of days, at the end of which the alliance with the most points wins. Points are granted at set intervals based on how many objectives on the map the alliance currently controls. The scoring varies from campaign to campaign, but the basic idea is the same. Some players play in order to advance their faction’s control of the map for its own sake. Some players also care about the campaign points. Others prefer to do other things to support their faction, including scouting and killing enemy players traveling from one keep to another.

• **Finding specific kinds of PvP fights one particularly likes.** Some players simply look for the types of fights they enjoy, without caring much about their own faction in particular as long as they are able to fight good fights themselves. These players may still very well choose to help members of their faction when they see someone is in trouble – the main point is that the players may not place great emphasis on how many keeps their alliance controls, and so on, as long as good fights are still to be had. Some players have characters in multiple factions and may, for example, first play on a campaign on one character, and then relog to a character of a different alliance and go play on the same campaign again.

• **Supporting one’s guild or friends.** Essentially, this may take any form.

• **Trolling / spying.** This type of gameplay is not engaged in by very many people. However, examples of this type of play include writing taunts or demoralizing text in ‘enemy’ zone chat by logging onto a low-level character of the enemy faction and porting to Cyrodiil in order to be able to write in the zone chat. One may also relay information about enemy Forward Camps this way to one’s own guild or faction. Generally, this type of behaviour is frowned upon. Writing accusatory or insulting messages to enemy players is something that also takes place in Cyrodiil for a variety of reasons ranging from simple trolling to believing that the other player cheated (which, in many cases, they actually have not done despite the belief to the contrary). Rare individuals take pleasure in doing offensive animations on top of enemy corpses in order to flaunt their ‘superiority’ or to show someone ‘their place’. Opinions vary on what the actual level of offensiveness of these actions is. Offensive animations are also sometimes performed by some players as a show of disrespect to the enemy for a variety of reasons.
• **Dueling.** Some people like to duel by engaging in mutually agreed upon fights. This usually takes place at an area specifically agreed upon. When players are ready to fight, they signal this to the opponent. The duel usually starts when both players have blocked and jumped in the air. Multifaction guilds dedicated specifically to dueling exist (on the EU Megaserver, Arena, Colosseum and Mythical Playground have been the most well known ones).

• **Roleplaying.** Roleplaying can take place anywhere, at any time.

• **Chatting.** Taking the time to simply chat or otherwise interact with other players in the game.

• **Farming and goals relevant to the Imperial City DLC.** The Imperial City is located in the middle of Cyrodiil, but access to it is granted only to subscribers and those who have purchased the DLC. The Imperial City is technically a different zone, even though it is situated in Cyrodiil storywise. The Imperial City mixes PvE and PvP, and players farm there for gold, materials, item sets, and crafting motifs. PvPing there comes with additional risks and rewards as players accumulate a different type of currency, Tel Var stones, in the Imperial City, which are automatically looted from dead enemy player characters. A dead player can only keep a portion of the Tel Var stones that she or he had on the character at the time of death.

From the list above, it is easy to see that players can, and usually do, have more than one reason for playing in Cyrodiil. One may be social, roleplay, support one’s guild, support one’s own faction, play to gain more experience for Champion Points, and farm for Alliance Points at the same time.

**Gameplay goals and Bruma.** Let us now see how these different gameplay goals can be met by playing in Bruma. Bruma does not support some of these gameplay goals as much as it does others, but Bruma is very inviting to players looking to fulfil some specific gameplay goals.

**Exploration and Bruma.** Bruma is a small town, but it does offer ten quests which can be completed each day (they are always the same ones, but in random order). There are also NPCs that do not offer gameplay content, but rather, are there to contribute to the general atmosphere and to tell a story. This in itself is probably enough to attract questers and explorers to Bruma.

**Gaining experience and Bruma.** Bruma does not offer a significant number of experience points if one is looking to level a character fast, but completing the quests does give some experience points.
Achievements related to Bruma. The following achievements are relevant to Bruma. Some of them are requirements for larger compilation achievements, as is the case with “Bruma Adventurer” and “Cyrodiil Champion”. There are six achievements that require the player to have visited Bruma, totalling 190 Achievement Points, which is a significant number to players who focus on gathering Achievement Points on their characters. These achievements can be found on the achievements section of the character.

- “Bruma Adventurer” – 10 points. “Complete all quests in Bruma.”
- “Cyrodiil Champion” – 50 points. “Complete all quest achievements in Cyrodiil.” Unlocks a dye called Cyrodiilic Steel.
- “Imperial Anchor Shatterer” – 15 points. “Destroy every Dark Anchor in the contested lands of Cyrodiil”. Bruma Dolmen is one of the ten Dark Anchors to be destroyed for the achievement.
- “Anchors Away” – 50 points. Gained when every Dark Anchor has been destroyed by the character in Tamriel.
- “Cyrodiil Covenant Skyshards” – 15 points. The tip for finding the Skyshard is “Decorating a Nord’s manor grounds.”
- “Tamriel Skyshard Hunter” – 50 points. “Find all the Skyshards located throughout Tamriel.” The achievement unlocks a dye called Aetherial Blue.
- “[Race] Slayer” – 10 points each. “Kill 100 [race] enemies in the Alliance War” There is one achievement for each race. Getting the finishing blow on a player character advances the counter.
- Various other Cyrodiil achievements, including “Tremendous Healer” which is unlocked by healing in Cyrodiil, and Alliance War rank achievements that are unlocked by gaining ranks in the Alliance War by accumulating Alliance Points

There is, however, no pond in Bruma where one could fish in order to try to catch a rare fish for the “Cyrodiil Angler” achievement which unlocks a dye.

Alliance War (PvP) ranks, Alliance Points, and Bruma. Due to the small numbers of players who visit Bruma and due to the way it is never guaranteed that there will be players at a quest hub,
Bruma is not a good source of Alliance Points for people who would like to gain AP or Alliance War ranks.

Finding lorebooks and Skyshards in Bruma. My understanding is that there is no lorebook to be found in Bruma itself that would contribute towards gaining experience in the Mages Guild skill line. There is one Skyshard in Bruma, which, when gathered, advances the skill point meter by one third towards getting one skill point. This is the main attraction for visiting Bruma for characters that are being leveled quickly in order to be able to play endgame content on them.

Supporting one’s alliance in Bruma. Due to the way quest hubs do not currently provide any buffs to players or points to the overall faction, nor any other advantages for the Alliance War, any players who play in Bruma are actually ones who are not contributing to the Alliance War. These players may of course help other players of their own faction who are questing in Bruma, but that is still not contributing to the Alliance War. If these players would not be contributing to the Alliance War otherwise, this does not have an effect on the Alliance War unless the campaign population is so high for their faction that the campaign is locked for the faction, in which case other players of their faction are being prevented from porting to the campaign. In that case, the ‘questers’ may very well be hindering the Alliance War efforts of their faction.

Finding specific kinds of PvP fights one particularly likes in Bruma. Bruma may very well provide opportunities for players to find the type of PvP they like. Questers and those who are not used to PvP fighting are much easier to fight than seasoned PvP players. The way questers are required to return to the same NPC after having filled the requirements of a particular quest provides good opportunities for other players to gank them (waiting in stealth, attacking from stealth and killing the enemy fast because they do not have time to react properly, or they start the fight from a significantly weaker position due to the element of surprise). Talking to an NPC means that the player character’s weapon is sheathed and the camera goes into first-person mode, which significantly limits the player’s ability to observe what is going on. A seasoned PvP player may find interesting outnumbered fights at quest hubs by fighting three questers at the same time, for example.

Supporting one’s guild or friends in Bruma. This can take many forms, such as providing additional damage or healing in potential fights, and providing a sense of security.
Trolling / spying in Bruma. Spying in Bruma is not useful for the Alliance War unless one happens to spot a large number of players riding towards a keep. This, however, is very rare. Trolling players who are not good at PvP is relatively easy at quest hubs if one is a good player. One may, for example, prevent them from completing the quests by killing their characters more than once (should they keep returning to the place).

Dueling and Bruma. Dueling is not really applicable specifically to Bruma. One may, however, find 1 versus 1 fights in Bruma – the difference is in the way the fight is started and whether the other player actually wishes to fight. Additionally, there are NPCs in Bruma that can interfere with duels, should they be organized there.

Roleplaying and chatting in Bruma. These activities can take place anywhere.

Farming for gold and items in Bruma. The town of Bruma itself is not a good place to make gold. Although killing NPCs gives some gold, there are much more effective ways to farm gold in the game, even in a PvP zone. The Imperial City offers a chance to loot motifs, materials, and Tel Var stones which can be used to purchase more crafting materials or pieces of armor, most notably the Shield Breaker set. The gold received from completing a quest at Bruma also completely pales in comparison to the gold gained by farming in the DC Sewers in the Imperial City. The Bruma Dolmen has a rare chance to drop a very good item, but this chance is the same at any of the Cyrodiil Dolmens. Dolmens also have a good chance to drop powerful siege engines, and this may be one reason someone might make a quick stop at Bruma on their way somewhere else, or as a part of their Dolmen farming route.

On gameplay and Bruma in general. Unlike the Alliance War objectives, Bruma most likely does not hold longlasting interest for most players per one character. However, players can have up to eight characters on their account, and thus they may need to return to Bruma again and again, if for nothing else, then at least to collect the Skyshard located within its walls, as it is an easy way to advance one’s character’s access to active skills and useful passives (a character gains one skill point to spend on a skill or a passive for every three Skyshards the character has collected).

Skyshards are probably the main draw for many PvErs to run around in Cyrodiil because skill points are very valuable to new characters. Some naturally do wish to simply experience the story content Cyrodiil has to offer in itself, while others wish to complete some of the achievements Cyrodiil

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2 Which includes selling any Arcane Willpower Rings which one indirectly has a chance to obtain by farming there.
offers. Bruma can be part of an exotic and exciting adventure to some people who do not have a desire to PvP in general. Once players have visited Cyrodiil, some may decide to start to PvP for the sake of PvPing, after having been exposed to the PvP environment nearly out of necessity. It is, however, also possible to completely avoid entering Cyrodiil on one’s character, but one will then miss some opportunities to advance one’s character. Stamina based characters probably have the strongest need to PvP a little because one of their main healing skills, Vigor, is a skill that can only be unlocked by gaining a sufficient amount of Alliance Points. Vigor is relatively easy to unlock these days, however, as the Alliance Point requirements for it have been lowered considerably from how it used to be when the skill was first introduced to the Alliance War skill trees.

‘Surprising’ out-of-game player choices. Bruma offers a number of attractive features for all players. However, with so many PvP campaigns in existence (they are different, permanent instances of Cyrodiil), the players who wish to complete the PvE objectives available in Bruma are scattered on the various campaigns. Some PvP campaigns are more focused on the Alliance War gameplay in which objectives on the map are conquered and points are gained for the factions, while other campaigns tend to be of a different type, in which one faction may rule the map most of the time. These are called buff campaigns. Those players who wish to avoid encountering players may choose to play on a buff campaign where their own faction controls most of the territory. Players may also play during a certain time of day (late at night or early in the morning, for example) in order to reduce the odds of encountering people. Thus players themselves can control their own Cyrodiil experience, and thus, their Bruma experience, to some extent, using game elements that fall outside the realm of the lore. In the end, nothing is certain, however, and one may encounter enemy players anywhere in Cyrodiil, at any time. Some players may also enter such buff campaigns in order to fight these players who try to avoid enemy player encounters. However, after the introduction of the Imperial City and the economic gain one may be able to achieve by hunting and killing enemies there, Bruma may be of less interest now for PvPers who seek to fight less experienced players (and, possibly, to punish them for thinking that they are safe in a buff campaign). Players can control some aspects of their game experience even when it comes to the

3 Characters are often classified based on whether their primary damage dealing attribute is stamina or magicka. There are, however, other types of builds as well. Characters that tank (who take damage so that other characters do not have to take as much damage), for instance, may be hybrids, or otherwise difficult to define.

4 The reason for this can be that the PvP players resent buff campaigns because the zergs who hold power in such campaigns destroy ‘legitimate’ good control-the-map type of PvP with their sheer numbers in order to provide safer access to PvErs to explore Cyrodiil.
opposition that they face, including controlling the odds of encountering members of another faction in Bruma.

It is not always the case that when members of different factions meet that a fight will take place. Sometimes people simply decide to indicate to each other by not attacking or by playing emotes (animations that the character performs) that they are not hostile. Experienced PvPers may consider it a matter of honor not to attack considerably lower level characters. On the other hand, they may also choose to toy with them a little by rooting the character in place or attacking until the character’s health is very low, and then stopping. Another way to play with considerably less experienced players is to fight fully until one could finish the enemy off, but instead of doing that, the experienced player may simply stop and move on.

**Bruma as a place to be avoided.** Bruma also repels. Bruma does not offer incentives for playing there in order to achieve campaign victory or to rule the map. If passing Bruma on the way from one keep fight to another, it is often wiser to avoid going through it because there is a chance that one will be dismounted from one’s horse by attacks from NPCs – or even by a random quester, if one is unlucky – which will delay one’s arrival at one’s destination. One cannot mount while one’s status is set as ‘in combat’. If an NPC dismounts a player character, the player has two options to get back on the mount – either by killing the NPC or escaping from it, mainly by running far enough from its original location. By its very presence offering objectives to players and the prevalence of hostile NPCs, Bruma poses a challenge. For those who it does not directly affect, it poses an obstacle – something to be avoided. It can be a hindrance in the way of other goals.

**A different way to categorize approaches to playing.** Bartle identified in 1996 “[f]our approaches to playing MUDs” (multi-user dungeon games) in an article which became a classic in the field of game studies. Bartle stated that “the four things that people typically enjoyed personally about MUDs were” “[a]chievement within the game context”, “[e]xploration of the game”, “[s]ocialising with others” and “[i]mposition upon others”. Bartle described “killers” as “only in the knowledge that a real person, somewhere, is very upset by what you’ve just done, yet can themselves do nothing about it, is there any true adrenalin-shooting, juicy fun”.

In *ESOTU*, such behavior would mostly manifest as ‘teabagging’ where the person who has killed another player character presses CTRL (the default key for sneaking and unsneaking) repeatedly on top of another player character’s body – the animation thus simulates invasion of another’s personal
space in an offensive manner\textsuperscript{5}. Another way players grief is by sending a taunting or otherwise unpleasant whisper to a player, or posting such a message in a guild chat both players are part of. Although this sort of behaviour probably has happened nearly anywhere in Cyrodiil, I do not think that it is very common at the quest hubs in general, although the Cyrodiil quest hubs in \textit{ESOTU} certainly provide opportunities to grief players for the fun of it, especially since the skill required for beating questers who, most likely, are not used to PvPing is not necessarily very high. By being in control of the environment by patiently waiting for one’s prey to approach a quest giver and then talk to the quest giver, thereby rendering themselves open to attacks for some time is ideal for individuals who do not have a lot of experience themselves, but who are seeking the rush of beating another player. Still, teabagging is perhaps more common where PvP gameplay between people who actually choose to primarily PvP takes place (as opposed to the, generally speaking, less challenging PvP that takes place quest hubs due to the PvP inexperience of the questers) at keeps, outposts, and resources and in fights that take between keeps. The reasons and circumstances leading to teabagging in \textit{ESOTU} would certainly make for an interesting study. Nevertheless, a different type of trolling, which was mentioned earlier as well, in which a player prevents others from completing quests at the quest hub, probably does take place quite often. However, the style of play in which the player only prevents the other person from completing the quest, but does not actually send hateful messages or teabag the enemy, is, in my view, completely acceptable and should not in itself be considered grieving as it is legitimate gameplay and does not involve actively trying to offend the enemy.

Exploration of the game and socializing are rather self-evident categories. Exploring Bruma does not take very long – perhaps an hour or two at most, if one takes the time to do the quests slowly and to talk to the NPCs. Thus Bruma attracts people who like to explore, but after Bruma has been explored, explorers move onwards. Socializing can basically take place anywhere, including Bruma. \textit{Guild} chats, \textit{group} chat, \textit{whisper} chat and \textit{zone} chat are easy to use in Bruma. The limiting factor in Bruma is that there are only a few people – or none – there at any given time in general, and thus one is not exposed to stimuli in the form of other players in the near vicinity. Thus other places can be more conducive to socializing, especially some of the most popular PvE areas like Wayrest, Mournhold, and Elden Root.

\textsuperscript{5} This may be somewhat more common on the North American PC Megaserver than on the European PC Megaserver, but I have not tried to verify this.
Bartle (1996) defined “[a]chievement within the game context” primarily as “[p]layers give themselves game-related goals, and vigorously set out to achieve them”. Such achievements could be the ingame achievements defined by the game itself, but on the other hand, players who prefer to focus on endgame PvE and PvP content could possibly also be counted as belonging to this group. In the end, these are merely arbitrary categories, but there is a point to be made about endgame content players in *ESOTU* regarding Bruma: there are, generally speaking, much more attractive places for endgame PvE players and PvP players to be spending their time at – which partly also explains the relative scarcity of players in Bruma and at the other quest hubs. The NPC enemies at Bruma are very easy to kill even by soloing, and thus they do not provide any type of challenge for an endgame PvE oriented person. However, the number of players per hour at Bruma at any given campaign does vary widely due to campaign situation, time of day, day of the week, and other factors.

**Summary.** As we have seen in this section, Bruma in *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited* provides many types of opportunities for different gameplay goals, but it certainly does not support all types of gameplay as well as it does some other types of gameplay. It does not provide endgame content, but rather, the type of content it does offer is mostly related to exploration, leveling and achievement hunting. Some may drop by Bruma as they are farming Dolmens in Cyrodiil for good pieces of gear or powerful siege engines. Bruma also offers some small-scale PvP, but people who focus on PvP would rarely spend a lot of time in Bruma because there are more interesting opportunities for PvP elsewhere. Bruma can, however, be a good introduction to PvP for people who are not yet experienced with PvP in general. In addition to attracting players to visit, Bruma also repels people from riding through it because they can be dismounted by the NPCs, and on the other hand, there is a risk that one might bump into an enemy player there, which is something a player may want to avoid at a particular moment.
3. Dynamic shell: Images of northness and the interconnectedness of story content and gameplay

This section focuses on the ‘shell’ aspect of Bruma – that is, what Bruma looks and feels like, and its image and themes storywise (northness, danger, intelligence). However, the ‘shell’ is dynamic and interacts with the gameplay and the function of Bruma in the game overall. The danger that looms in Bruma is not only there due to the story and the shell, the nature of the area as a PvP zone adds to the sense of danger and the reality of it.

Nomen est omen. Bruma. Just another exotic name to plenty of non-native speakers of English, possibly even to some native ones. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited* have been experienced by millions of people in total, but not everyone is aware that Bruma’s very name implies something essential about the town: winter. American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines ‘brumal’ as an adjective “[o]f, relating to, or occurring in winter”. Collins English Dictionary defines it similarly as “of, characteristic of, or relating to winter; wintry”. As we will discover later as the text progresses, one of Bruma’s defining features is its Northern location, as a town situated in the North of Cyrodiil, as it brings something new, even exotic, to the palate of a traveler thirsting for new adventures and places to see.

**Bruma in ESOTU and in Oblivion.** *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited* is a highly intertextual game. The history of Bruma for many begins with an earlier game in *The Elder Scrolls* series: *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. *Oblivion* was published years before *ESOTU*, but *ESOTU*’s events take place earlier in the timeline than those in *Oblivion*. Thus *ESOTU* could be described as being a prequel since *Oblivion* was published years before *The Elder Scrolls Online* launched. Essentially, both *Oblivion* and the huge PvP zone in *ESOTU* cover the same area where ingame lore is concerned – both take place in Cyrodiil, the central area of Tamriel, which is the the realm of mortals the *Elder Scrolls* games are situated in (aside from various other non-mortal realms). The events in the games take place hundreds of years apart in the lore, in the year 582 of the Second Era, and in the year 433 of the Third Era. The maps are not exactly the same, however, most likely due to a multitude of reasons ranging from technical differences between the game engines to differences in artistic

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6 *ESOTU* was not always called *The Elder Scrolls: Tamriel Unlimited*. The game changed its payment method from subscription to Buy-To-Play on March 17, 2015, which is also when the game received the second part to its name. Previously, the game was simply called *The Elder Scrolls Online*.

7 The Third Era begins after the year 2E 896. Mentioned in ‘Brief History of the Empire, Part 1’ (in-game book in *Oblivion*).
visions, ingame eras, and the requirements for the three-faction PvP system. Bruma and other towns exist in both games, as does the Imperial City, the center of all of Tamriel.

One cannot completely ignore the impact of Bruma in *Oblivion* on *ESOTU*’s Bruma, as the two cities need to fit together lorewise, or at the very least, not contradict each other in a manner that would break immersion and the illusion of continuity. The location of the town is similar enough in both games in relation to other recognizable locations such as Cloud Ruler Temple and the Imperial City. One of the requirements for the design of Bruma in *Oblivion* was to be consistent with the established *Elder Scrolls* lore, and the same applies to the design of Bruma in *ESOTU*, with the added requirement that it now needs to be congruent with a location already shown in a previous game, where many of *ESOTU*’s players have likely spent hours exploring the area already. A convenient explanation for any differences comes from the difference of the eras the games take place – thus Bruma in *ESOTU* does not need to be an exact replica of *Oblivion*’s Bruma, as many known and unknown events have taken place between the events in *ESOTU* and the events in *Oblivion*. In fact, the state of Bruma as a broken place ravaged by the Dremora (*The Elder Scrolls* version of demonic beings) is one explanation for any differences in architecture and city plan.

**North is relative.** Bruma is not the most Northern region in *ESOTU* or in the *Elder Scrolls* lore. However, within the context of the previous game, *Oblivion*, Bruma represented the North and the Northern identity brought variety to the game. In *ESOTU*, Nords (the Nord race) are brought up as a theme in Bruma in the conversations the player character can have with the NPCs. Thus Bruma seems to be a vehicle for exploring the Nord culture and the differences between it and other cultures in *The Elder Scrolls* lore. Additionally, Cyrodiil as a PvP zone is relatively separated from the rest of the map surrounding it due to the way one can usually (apart from some possible bugs in the Imperial City) only leave Cyrodiil by first traveling to the home base of one’s own faction and by porting to a PvE zone from there via a Wayshrine. Within its context – Cyrodiil – Bruma is very near the edge of the map in the North, and it is part of the Northern area where snow is beginning to cover the ground. Bruma is presented as a Northern town. Peter Davidson (2005) writes, “[n]orth is always a shifting idea, always relative, always going away from us” and that “[e]veryone carries their own idea of north within them” (p.8). Bruma is in the North. Yet there is North to the North of Bruma.

**General description of Bruma.** Approaching Bruma from the North, the sky darkens. Gigantic chains reach down from a huge round portal in the sky. Bodies are being transported up. Worm Cult
Battlemage, Worm Cult Nightblade, and Worm Cult Dreadmage, among others, are performing a rite of some kind at the root of this Dark Anchor which connects Tamriel and Coldharbour, the realm of the evil Molag Bal – the one who also has stolen the player character’s soul at the beginning of the game. Signs of destruction everywhere. A section of Bruma’s huge Northern wall made out of lumber and stones has been shattered to pieces. Bruma Ranger and Halfara Black-Bear look at the devastation ahead. “There’s no end to these creatures!” Halfara says. I comment, “Good to see you still out here.” To this heavy armor wearing Nord, there is no question about it, this is where she needs to be: “Where else would I be? As I said earlier, Bruma will be won or lost out here, not inside the church or manor. Let the wounded stay inside; the warriors are out here.”

I have made my way to the East side of Bruma. Houses have been burned. Dremora patrol the area. The ground is partially snowy – the town must have been attacked some time ago. It is snowing slightly. There are some conifers. Some grass and ground vegetation are visible. They move with the wind. Bruma Guards protect the manor from attacking Dremora. I can attack the Dremora, there is no option to attack the guards. Three guards stand outside of Bruma Chapel with their weapons drawn. Aside from a basket or two, there seems to be nothing left in the burned and collapsed buildings.

I make my way to what looks to be a Wayshrine, but I cannot port from it. Perhaps it is just a regular firepit surrounded by pillars, some panels and a roof. I do not know the function of this structure and the meaning of the fire blazing under its protection. I continue onwards and reach the backside of the Manor. A Skyshard has been placed here in the middle of a round structure which may have been a water fountain. I am startled as I suddenly notice an enemy player very close to me. The player does not attack me, however, so I choose not to attack either. I look at the walls surrounding the manor. As I look at the size of the very large doorways in the tall, thick walls, I wonder what these walls were designed to protect against. To me, it would seem the walls might as well not exist at all due to the size of their doorways, but who knows? The fact that there is no wall to be seen on the East side of Bruma adds to my confusion. On the South side of Bruma, there is another wall, but this time there seems to be a clear function to it – it seems to support the landmass from sliding away. Perhaps the walls surrounding Bruma Manor have also been used as a form of housing or storage space. Aside from some walls, the only structures that are still left of Bruma are the Bruma Manor and Bruma Chapel.
This general description brings up important aspects of the town. The gigantic portal to the sky and the bodies which are being transported towards it, the Dremora patrolling the streets, and the destroyed buildings and sections of walls are clear signs of danger and destruction. The enemy fighter poses no danger this time for some reason. The Nord warrior appears to have some kind of warrior code about being brave and a true warrior who faces danger. Yet she is not unreasonable – she thinks that the wounded should stay inside, where it is safer. The fact that she is a woman breaks the traditional warrior stereotype about only men being fighters. The weather is cold – it is snowing and the ground is partially snowy, and the conifers fit the idea of what nature is like in the North.

Bruma’s general atmosphere is affected by the presence of a Dolmen more than one would first realize. Whenever the Dolmen is active\(^8\), the music around Bruma changes to more dramatic, battle type of music. This music will play even when the player character’s status is not ‘in-combat’. Thus the music conveys ‘danger’ even when the player character is not necessarily directly in danger, which can influence the general feeling of playing. The dramatic music ends when the Dolmen is defeated, but the Dolmen respawn timer is relatively short – it would seem that new Dolmen NPCs will spawn approximately ten minutes after the Dolmen has been deactivated.

**Manor Hall.** Manor Hall in Bruma is a moderately sized Nord style manor mostly made of wood. Its main hall features a prominent staircase and three huge sculptures made of stone. The rooms are symmetrical in design – upon entering the building through the main door, the left and right sides of the manor mirror each other structurally. The ground floor is mostly made of stone, unlike the upper floor which is made of wood. There are a few carpets of circular design on the floor, and a few quadrangle ones. All except one of the round carpets feature a central three-pronged design. This is the same carpet that can be seen in Mournhold, the Ebonheart Pact capital, which is home to the Tribunal worshipped by many Dunmer. The three prongs of the design likely represent the three gods that form the Tribunal – Almalexia, Sotha Sil, and Vivec. A similar design appears on the character creation screen in *ESOTU*, representing the Dunmer race. This is not, then, a purely Nord style manor as it features a strong Dunmer cultural and religious element which has been included in the interior design of the manor on purpose.

An elaborate, round, ornamental carpet has been placed at the main entrance in the main hall. Given that people entering the manor may carry snow in with their shoes and may wish to wipe

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\(^8\) I am not certain about the exact conditions for the music, but it definitely does seem to be related to the Dolmen’s activity and the distance of the player character from the Dolmen.
their shoes on the carpet, the choice to place this elaborate carpet right at the entrance is an interesting choice that may accentuate the wealth of the owner of the manor. Note, however, that characters do not leave snowy footprints visually when they enter the manor. Two bear rugs have been laid on the floor on the upper floor – a Northern element – the rug is good for insulation, and the bear is associated with North more than a lion, for example, would be. Due to the fact that the rugs still have the bear head attached to them conjure up images of hunting, wilderness and danger which has been conquered. Detailed wall rugs featuring a sailing ship have been placed on the walls. The ship theme is consistent with the image of stereotypical Northeners – the Vikings.

There are many bookshelves in the manor, which suggests some access to information and knowledge, and literacy. There are also two desks on the upper floor, with writing supplies stored on them. A Redguard NPC is writing at the desk. This is an interesting detail regarding literacy and a subversion of racial stereotypes. Redguards have darker skin tones than any other race in Tamriel – they can be interpreted as being ‘black’ or African. This works against the old real world stereotype of Africans being savages. The presence of so many books also goes against the way Nords are being presented in Bruma in NPC conversations as being dumb (by some NPCs). Due to the way racial features and different groups are being brought up in conversations in Bruma, it is easier to see various people here (especially in Bruma Manor) as being representatives of their races.

**Game mechanics, danger, and fighting inside a building.** Manor Hall is one of the two intact buildings that a player can enter. When players enter these locations from outside, they receive a short loading screen, and their characters enter the location inside with their weapons not drawn. The same mechanic applies when the player leaves the building. Entering buildings always poses certain risk in Cyrodiil due to the loading screen during which a player may be attacked by someone already in the location where the player is going. The fact that their weapon will be in the sheathed state also means that they cannot activate a skill as fast as they could otherwise do (this is not, however, a hugely significant factor, but simply, a minor disadvantage). On the other hand, it is dangerous to enter any location which one cannot view, or, scout, beforehand, because then one does not know how many enemies there are, what classes they are, what level they are, what their Alliance Ranks are, and what their names are (i.e. whether they are some of the more competitive and skilled players).

Interestingly, both of Bruma’s two quest givers are located inside a building which cannot be scouted from the outside. Bruma is the only quest hub in Cyrodiil where both of the quest givers for
the hub are located inside. One is located in Manor Hall, and the other in Bruma Chapel. Although Manor Hall features windows, the outside world is not viewable through them, nor can players peek in from the outside. Players can, at any time, sneak, use short-term invisibility potions (which have a cooldown) to render themselves invisible. They can be revealed in different ways, however. Nightblades can also use a Nightblade class ability to cloak, which renders the player invisible for a brief amount of time per each cast of the spell – some Nightblades can often cloak as long as they wish without running out of resources. However, game mechanics guarantee that a player character is never invisible when they talk to an NPC. Talking to quest giver NPCs is a required step of completing quests – players need to talk to an NPC first to receive a quest, and then to talk to the NPC again in order to return the quest and to receive the reward for it. Staying in such closed spaces as the ones featured in Bruma is dangerous game mechanically because it is often difficult to activate a door while in combat with a player or players. In fact, the player needs to not have been attacked for several seconds before they can open the door at Bruma Manor or Bruma Chapel in order to activate the area transition mechanic, transporting the player character from inside the building to the outside world. Keeping the alliance war skill Caltrops (which spreads sharp pieces of metal on the ground on a wide area for a relative long period of time and hurts enemies in the area once per second) active at the door effectively prevents anyone from leaving the building. Thus, entering and staying in such interior locations is dangerous for anyone who is not well equipped and skilled for fighting in PvP. The danger to die also increases the fewer allies there are in the area. Players can also place high damaging traps at the door as they are waiting for someone to enter the building. When the player character materializes inside, if their character touches the trap area, they receive the damage and possibly an additional effect, such as a root or a stun. An example of such a skill is Volcanic Rune (morph of Fire Rune) from the Mages Guild skill tree, which damages the enemy, knocks them in the air and stuns them for a few seconds (this effect can be broken free from, however, by using the standard Crowd Control break free mechanism if one has a sufficient amount of stamina left to do so). This kind of a trap gives the advantage at the start of a fight to the player who is already on the side of the door where the new player materializes, whether that is inside or outside of the building.

Some players might feel safer when talking to an NPC inside a building that one can only enter through a loading screen because the enemy cannot see them from afar, and they can first investigate the room for any stealthers before talking to an NPC. However, the fact remains that the
interior spaces in Bruma are very small and make escaping a fight difficult because there are not many places to hide. Both buildings provide a choke point – the Manor’s chokepoint is at the only door which players can use to go outside. At the chapel, there are three doors which players can use to go outside, but there is a chokepoint between the doors and the questgiver further in.

Inside, whoever is the strongest, wins when the options for retreating are not available. Kiting (moving away fast trying to avoid being damaged\(^9\)) can be more difficult when the space and structures available are limited. However, that is not to say that a kiting ‘spec’ – especially one that a highly skilled nightblade uses, could not work at Manor House. Manor House consists of four separate rooms on the ground floor and a lobby, which shares the same space with the upper floor. A nightblade with great gear at the hands of an experienced PvP player could use Shadow Image to outmaneuver even three average enemies in Manor House with the help of the nightblade Shadow Image skill. The nightblade would, for example, place the Shadow Image, which visually looks like a shadow person, on the top floor, and then enter one of the side rooms on the lower floor. The other players would then chase the nightblade into that room, where the nightblade would try to inflict some damage on one of the enemies fast. Failing that, the player would then activate the Shadow Image skill again, which would port the player onto the top floor where the player had placed the shadow. The nightblade could then cloak (go invisible) and heal, waiting for another opportunity to strike – or at least try to do so. The enemies would then need to maneuver back to try to locate the player. If the nightblade did not activate cloak, the enemy players would still need to obtain line of sight on the player, and in the case of melee fighters, they would have to find a way to reach the nightblade in order to be able to damage the nightblade. Line of sight in outnumbered fights is a huge advantage because in most cases, the player simply cannot be hit by the enemies until they achieve line of sight. Some exceptions to this exist, however. Any remaining AoE (Area of Effect) skills still active on the ground onto which the player moves will still damage the character (and render the character visible in case the character was cloaked when entering the AoE). The nightblade in question would likely also rely on knowing the game mechanics very well and use animation canceling to be as efficient as possible. At the end of the day, even this example comes to one thing: skill. The nightblade in question here is someone experienced. The Shadow Image skill is not used by most casual nightblades, and using it requires some advanced thinking on the part of

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\(^9\) Sorcerers use the Streak skill for this. Dodge rolling is helpful as well. (See Glossary)
the player in order to use it at the correct time, at the correct place, and then for the nightblade to move to a location which maximizes the advantage afforded by the Shadow Image port.

The previous example highlighted the way design decisions about architecture and the placing of the NPCs do affect gameplay. Skill also matters, and will end up affecting how safe a player feels at a given location – at least in theory. After all, people who are not skilled at something also cannot judge their own skill level well since they do not know what they do not know. They may not also recognize when they are in more danger. However, one can still estimate that an inexperienced player will feel hesitant about entering the PvP zone in general, for instance.

**Bruma Chapel** is a relatively small church in Bruma, unprotected by walls. Despite its little floor space, the building is extremely tall. Its slanting rooftops are decorated by a dragon figure. Icicles hang from the roof. The building is made of stone and wood. It is difficult to judge how many floors there are in the chapel – perhaps four – but only two of them are accessible to the player inside. There is a high tower, but no church bell. There is a very similar structure to Bruma Chapel in Riften in *ESOTU*. The basic structure is exactly the same, with the exception that the building, Mages Guild, has a terrace surrounding in Riften. Riften is a Nord town in the Province of Skyrim. The building style of Bruma in general is very similar to buildings found in Riften as well – the doors, windows, supporting wooden pillars and stonework are identical.

From a PvP perspective, Bruma Chapel is not very different from Bruma Manor – both offer two levels on which to fight, though Bruma Chapel does not provide side rooms in which one could try to hide the same way as Bruma Manor does. Both spaces are relatively small for PvP combat in relation to the size of AoE attacks – especially to the radius of the Caltrops skill mentioned earlier. It is possible to prevent someone from going outside by placing Caltrops strategically. Technically, it may be slightly easier to escape from Bruma Chapel because there are three doors leading outside. However, all the doors are located within the same small room, so the difference probably is not significant in that regard. Chokepoints, such as doors, are also good for detecting stealthed players by forcing them to take damage from an AOE attack, which then reveals them as a result.

The central piece in Bruma Chapel is the giant statue at the center of its main room. The statue depicts a male wearing Nord heavy armor, including a double-horned helmet. The figure is resting his hands on a two-handed battle axe. There are a few urns on the backside of the statue. A Bruma Guard regularly goes to pray at it, kneeling. Temporary beds and bedrolls have been spread in the room. There are some bookshelves, benches and writing desks on the upper floor, where one NPC
is taking a break from the suffering below. Another NPC is patrolling there. The NPCs at Bruma Chapel accentuate the suffering and danger that has fallen upon Bruma. Hjorik is a mender who tends to the wounded. Many NPCs are sitting or lying down, trying to recover from the wounds they have received.

Lassen Dorvayn is one of the people resting there. He is a Dunmer who thinks that “no one is going to help” them and that they are “all going to die” there. He also tells the player character that the cultists and Dremora attacked at night. He had managed to help a wounded woman get into the safety of the chapel before his leg was hurt. Lassen seems to be shocked as he says, “I couldn’t help anyone, just listened to them scream”. Another NPC, Faldar Snow-Hair, is very concerned about a man she is tending to. She says that they do not know how to treat him and that he is dying. She is sad and concerned because she does not think that the wounds are something Hjorik, the “village healer” can really heal: “Magicka-inflicted wounds, infected bites from the undead, Dremora-cursed lesions – who can heal these?” The text describing the injuries, spoken aloud by the NPC, perhaps makes a stronger impact than simply seeing the enemy NPCs patrolling the town, as it is easy to reduce them to mechanical gameplay – enemies to be slain in the same way as one might play an action game.

Interestingly, there is a Redguard woman called Hafza in the chapel as well. She does not speak of Kyne (which is the god the chapel healer makes a reference to), but of “the gods” instead: “This day, I face my death. If the gods will that I survive, I will face tomorrow’s ordeals when they arrive.” The Bruma residents are not all just Nords – or even people whose races belong to the Ebonheart Pact. In addition to the two Redguard women and the Imperials in Bruma, Igarri at the chapel is a Khajiit. Igarri also demonstrates considerable fighting spirit even though she is wounded:

> It is right that Hjorik tends to the seriously wounded first. A Khajiit learns to bear wounds with courage, until the insult can be returned a thousandfold upon one’s enemies.

She then continues,

> This one will survive. Soon, our foes will discover that not all in Bruma have been declawed!

Such fighting spirit thus is not only a trait found in Nords and Dunmer in Bruma. Interestingly, the Alliance War in Cyrodiil does not seem to concern the NPCs much – presumably because they are too busy with the threat from Molag Bal. Player characters of any faction, who storywise are members of their respective faction armies, are not generally treated in a hostile way by any civilian or guard in Bruma (apart from Trelon Valen, but even he only does so in words, not
in actions). The player character’s help is welcomed by two separate quest givers in Bruma. Essentially, gameplay reasons probably affect this aspect of storytelling in Bruma – if the NPCs were scared of player characters or hostile to them, it would not be possible for the quests and NPC dialogue to exist as they are now. Bruma is, in fact, quite special in comparison to some other quest hubs because there is no patrolling Alliance War guard there that would attack the player if the player is of the wrong faction. In the other quest hubs, there is usually a wandering Alliance War guard who belongs to the faction to whom a certain keep nearby belongs to.

**Lore and intertextuality.** *The Elder Scrolls* lore is rich, and not all content is readily and easily comprehensible. Examples of it are, for instance, the decorative elements in Bruma Chapel. Wall cloths depicting two different symbols are not readily readable for all. These symbols remain a mystery to me personally – I was not able to find a god or an organization whom the symbols might represent even by searching for clues on the internet. They may have actual meaning, however, even if that meaning is not easily discoverable. Their very presence, in any case, suggests that they have importance to the people who are associated with Bruma Chapel. Another example of how appreciating the richness and complexity of the lore and references to them may take some work are Bruma Chapel’s healer Hjorik’s mentions of Kyne and Shor’s Bridge. Kyne is probably a familiar name to *Elder Scrolls* fans, but they may not know or remember the exact details about Kyne. However, there is a lorebook in the game called “Varieties of Faith: The Nords”. Lorebooks are short texts presented in the game in the form of a book written by someone in the *Elder Scrolls* world. The book explains Kyne in the following way:

   Kyne (Kiss at the End):

   Nord Goddess of the Storm. Widow of Shor and favored god of warriors, she is often called the Mother of Men. Her daughters taught the first Nords the use of the Thu’um or “Storm Voice.”

Thus, a piece for unlocking meaning is present somewhere else in the vast game. While this may not be considered a proper example of intertextuality, there is another example which makes a reference to another *Elder Scrolls* game – *Skyrim*. In *Skyrim*, at the very end of the main quest, the player character comes across a bridge which the player character must cross. From the dialogue available from an NPC at the bridge in *Skyrim* to whom the player character must talk in order to be able to cross, the player may be able to deduce that Shor’s Bridge is in fact the bridge shown in *Skyrim*.10 What this information about Kyne and Shor’s Bridge reveal to a knowledgeable player of

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10 I am grateful to Elder Scrolls Wikia’s Sovngarde Quest page for providing information on the quest in an easily accessible manner.
the game is that Hjorik’s faith is Nord-based, which in turn suggests that Bruma is culturally a Nord town. There are, of course, many other examples which support this idea – the architecture, the relative number of Nords and the ‘screen time’ given to them (both questgivers are Nords) compared to the other NPCs, and the prevalence of discussion about the mentality of specific Nords and Nords in general. Interestingly, Argonian influences are missing from Bruma despite Argonians being part of the Ebonheart Pact faction. The game rewards those who are well versed in the lore, within ESOTU and across the Elder Scrolls games. Hidden meanings reward players who like to explore and to find out more about the lore. Architecture, interior design, and NPC talk can function as puzzles to be solved.

**Representation and intelligence, barbarism, loyalty and bravery.** The themes of barbarism, facing danger, and intelligence are prevalent topics when one talks to people (NPCs) in Bruma Manor. Different people have different takes on the situation in Bruma. A male Dunmer called Trelon Valen stands in a corner upstairs, facing the door downstairs. He is wearing medium armor with a dagger in his right hand. His elaborate beard brings to mind Seneca Crane’s beard in the film adaptation of The Hunger Games. Dark and swirly, the beard must take some time to upkeep. He is sporting a small ponytail, not that different from rogue’s knot hairstyle. The beard, ponytail, medium armor and dagger suggest he falls into the general roleplaying game category of rogues, thieves, bandits, and in the case of ESOTU, nightblades. The following is a conversation one can have with Trelon Valen in Bruma Manor:

Trelon Valen: Just keep moving. Around here, folks are as likely to knife you as talk to you.
Me: What’s happening here?
Trelon: What, your eyes aren’t working? Bruma’s being torn apart, that’s what’s happening. [paragraph change] The smart folks are getting out of town. The dumb ones will stay here and die. I won’t be staying, in case you’re wondering.
Me: How can I help?
Trelon: Well, when I’m ready to leave, why don’t you run out ahead of me and let the Dremora rip you to shreds? Then I can get away.

Trelon’s speech is full of rudeness and hostility which the player character has not provoked in any way, other than by merely being present and speaking to him. The player character’s questions seek information and offer help, but those questions are not received well by Trelon. Trelon opens the conversation with a veiled threat, disguised as friendly advice, given that he himself is the only one with a knife in hand in the manor. There are guards at the door with their weapons drawn, but they have a legitimate reason to have their weapons unsheathed as they are guarding the door, and it is their job to do so. It is unclear how long Trelon has been staying in Bruma. The fact that he does not
mention anyone or speak of loyalty to any group suggests he is an outsider. He talks rudely to the player character, insulting the player character’s perceptiveness with the line about eyes working. Later he talks even more rudely when he suggests the player character run ahead of him so that the player character would be killed instead of him, enabling Trelon to get away. He also defends his decision to leave by calling those who stay in town dumb, and self-promotes himself by equating himself as being part of the ‘smart folks’ group who are getting out. As a whole, the character sounds hostile, self-centered and selfish. From his lack of stated relationships to other people in town, he seems to be quite disconnected from them.

Perenius Caudinus is an Imperial who is sitting at a table in Bruma Manor. The dialogue between him and the player character begins as follows:

Perenius: Is it too much to ask, that I have a few moments of peace?
Me: Why aren’t you fighting?
Perenius: Life can’t be all fighting and death and pain. There must be some pleasure, even for a moment, or life isn’t worth living. So I sit and read, in the brief leisure allotted to me.
Me: No one else is sitting around reading.
Perenius: That’s because they’re all illiterate peasants in this backwater village. I was raised in the Imperial City, where love of the arts thrived. Around here, the “arts” consist of scrawling dirty sayings on walls. And misspelling most of the words.

After this it is found out that Perenius is not originally from Bruma, but is a refugee from the Imperial City and has “been stuck here” after his companions died after they had just arrived at Bruma. Perenius claims that “all” are “illiterate peasants” in Bruma, which he describes as a “backwater village”. Perenius is not in a good mood, which may possibly be why he is criticizing the locals as much as he does. The comparison between the Imperial City (the center of everything, the Imperial City is literally in the center of Tamriel on the map) as a place “where love of the arts throve” and the illiterate periphery is interesting.

There seems to be a connection between bravery and intelligence in the way the people in Bruma Manor talk about staying or leaving Bruma. Trelon Valen equates those who are leaving the town as being ‘smart folks’ and the ones who stay there and die as ‘dumb’. Willingness to fight and its relation to intelligence is also brought up by Domitia Catullus. Her situation is, however, quite different from Trelon and her motivations for speaking about intelligence stem from caring, and much less from outright selfishness. The following is what Domitia Catullus in Bruma Manor says when the player interacts with her (Domitia is tending to Kjakur Gray-Fists, who has sustained an injury by fighting):
Domitia: I keep telling him to lie still and be quiet, but like all Nords, he’s too thick-headed to listen to reason.

Me: Can I help?

Domitia: Do you have a magical hammer that can beat sense into a Nord’s thick skull? If not, then there’s little you can do to help. [paragraph change] Kjakur needs to lie still long enough for his hip to heal. Then we can leave this place far behind.

Me: You’re leaving?

Domitia: Yes, and so should you. And anyone else with a speck of sense. Bruma is doomed. Anyone who stays is going to die. I don’t know why Kjakur and the rest don’t see this. If we all left together, we’d all be much safer. But we’re leaving regardless.

From the way Domitia and the person she is tending to talk about each other, it is quite clear that they care a great deal about each other. The way Domitia berates Kjakur by calling him thick-headed while obviously caring for him by saying how he needs to rest in order to heal, juxtaposes what she says in a manner that implies closeness. By using the word “we” in “we can leave this place far behind”, she lets her interlocutor know that she and Kjakur will stay or leave together. It is interesting how Domitia, too, connects “sense” with leaving. In her view, Bruma is “doomed” and she points out that everyone who will stay will die. If indeed that is the case, leaving would be a sensible option. She, however, acknowledges that not everyone agrees with her view when she talks about how she does not know why Kjakur and the rest do not see that anyone who stays will die.

Domitia’s concern is for all the people in Bruma, but especially for Kjakur, over whom, it would seem, she seems to think she has some power: “But we’re leaving regardless”. Unlike Trelon, Domitia seems to wish to work together with others, whereas Trelon does not seem to even pretend to work with others when he suggests that he could escape at the cost of another person’s life.

Kjakur Gray-Fists, who is sitting on the floor and leaning to a wall, refers to Domitia by the nickname “Dommy”11 and tells the player character not to be very concerned about what Domitia says:

Kjakur: Don’t mind Dommy, she just likes to fuss over me. I’ll be up on my feet and hacking cultists to bits in no time.

Me: You’re going back out there?

Kjakur: You’re new here, you don’t understand. This is my home, those are my friends out there – the ones who’re still alive anyway. I can’t leave them to fight and die alone, not while there’s hope of taking back Bruma.

Me: You think there’s still hope?

Kjakur: Of course I do. I wouldn’t keep Domitia here if I thought we couldn’t beat them. Grigerda’s sending out runners all the time. Some are bound to get through and bring back help. Then we’ll wipe out the evil that’s taken over Bruma.

11 Given their banter and certain tug of power about whether Kjakur should lie still and be quiet, Domitia’s nickname “Dommy” (dom-, dominate, domineer, dominatrix) might be a subtle joke about the nature of their relationship and about Dommy’s personality or sexual tendencies. Her last name, Catullus, may refer to the Roman poet Catullus.
**Images, representation, Nords and northness.** Domitia Catullus, judging by her Latin-sounding name, fair skin, and human look, is Imperial. The conversation between the player character and Domitia refers to the Nord race and stereotypes about it. Kjakur is set up as a representative of his race by Domitia, and thus what Kjakur says can be interpreted as representing Nord culture (whether one actually chooses to embrace this interpretation naturally depends on the player). In the following quote, Ann Rigney (2007) seems to be referring to representations of real world groups of people, but what she states is nevertheless relevant here:

> Writers choose certain individuals or groups to represent their nation or people as a whole, and the way they portray those individuals is a way of implicitly or explicitly projecting certain characteristics onto the group as a whole. In this way, ‘representing the group’ through language is not only a (more or less) accurate reflection of existing states of affairs, but also a way of calling that group’s identity into being. [the arrow denotes the existence of another article in the book] (p.416)

The Nord identity and culture in the *Elder Scrolls* is being created and recreated the way the NPCs talk about Nords, but also simply by the way ‘representatives’ of the races speak and act in general.

Leerssen (2007) describes two useful terms related to images and perspective as thus:

> a fundamental distinction is the one between auto-image (or ‘self-image’) and hetero-image: the [former] referring to a characterological reputation current within and shared by a group, the latter to the opinion that others have about a group’s purported character. (pp.342-343)

Domitia serves as someone who presents a hetero-image about Nords, which then interacts in the minds of players with the way Nords themselves actually talk about themselves and their motivations, and what they do. In addition to this, the environment itself “speaks” as well – the prevalence of bookshelves and writing desks at both Bruma Manor and Bruma Chapel silently suggest that Nords may not be as “dumb” and “illiterate” as other sources on Nords would claim.

As we can see, the storytelling here is quite complex. What is more, Leerssen (2007) summarizes ‘image’ as “the mental or discursive representation or reputation of a person, group, ethnicity or ‘nation’” (p.342) and emphasizes that

> factual report statements which are empirically testable [...] are not part of image-formations. Images specifically concern attributions of moral or characterological nature (e.g. “Spaniards are proud”); often they take the form of linking social facts and imputed collective psychologisms (e.g., “Paris is the capital of French elegance” [...]). (p.342)
This is exactly what Domitia is doing when she says, “but like all Nords, he’s too thick-headed to listen to reason”. She is making a characterological statement about Nords. Kjakur on the other hand says that what Domitia says should not be taken seriously and tries to explain his motives. Kjakur appears to be brave and very loyal to his friends and home (“I can’t leave them to fight and die alone”). He is also hopeful about the chances of the runners bringing back more help to Bruma. If that condition is met, Bruma’s fate may not be as “doomed” as Domitia thinks, and Kjakur may not be as foolish or “dumb” as the others would think.

There are other examples of NPC dialogue which brings up the theme of bravery or cowardice. During the quest “Timely Intervention” the Nord Halfara Black-Bear says,

[ti]ell Grigerda I’m fine. But I’m not going to hide in the manor or church while these monsters roam our streets. I’m staying out here until they’re gone . . . or I am.

On the other hand, Nords are not the only brave ones. The Dunmer Methas Andavel tells the player character when the player comes looking for him the following:

The others can hide in the manor and church. I’m staying here. This is the most fun I’ve had in a long time.

In the end, the Nord quest giver in Bruma Manor comments on Halfara Black-Bear and Methas Andavel:

I knew it. They’re both too stubborn and proud to take orders from anyone. Well, at least they’re alive, for now. [paragraph change] Thank you for letting me know.

As part of another quest, “Know Thy Enemy”, Grigerda the Nord quest giver suggest the player character go and find out about the enemies the people in Bruma are facing. Once the player character has done this, she comments,

[s]o now you know. Our foes are deadly and numerous. It is wisdom, not cowardice, that keeps us inside the shelters left to us.

In this case it is, interestingly, a Nord who thinks that it is wise to stay inside, and comments that it is not cowardly to stay inside. The Dunmer Methas Andavel on the other hand serves as the counterbalance to the self-centered and rude Dunmer Trelon Valen when it comes to bravery.

**Northness, Bruma and depictions of the North.** There are various ideas about what is Northern, and what Nordic people are like. One common idea is the thought of Northern people as Vikings. Simpson (2015) argues rather straight-forwardly in his thesis that
The human races in *Skyrim*, with the exception of the Redguards, represent races that correspond to historical European people groups. The Imperials represent the Roman Empires, the Bretons are the British/Celts, and the Nords represent Norse peoples. (p.24)

The outward appearance of pale-skinned Nords and their somewhat Scandinavian names (mixed with English) certainly do not contradict this\(^{12}\). However, strictly on the basis of what is presented in Bruma, it would not perhaps be as easy to state a direct correlation between Nords and Norse peoples as the dialogue and other content in Bruma is quite limited in size. However, Bruma is, of course, merely a fraction of all the content in *ESOTU*, which in turn is only one game in a series of *Elder Scrolls* games.

The classic idea of Northern people as barbarians who wore horned helmets, drank a lot, used mushrooms and sailed the seas and conquered land is echoed in the description of Nords on the official *ESOTU* website\(^{13}\):

> Most of Tamriel once stood under Nord rule. The proud race broke the ancient Alyeids\(\text{sic}\), nearly drove the Elves from High Rock, and conquered most of Morrowind. The hard- drinking\(\text{sic}\), straight-talking warriors fight with an ecstatic ferocity that terrifies foes.

The Nords in Bruma could be described as being proud indeed, but they do not particularly seem to fit this image that well. However, and bravery and loyalty seems to be an important part of their culture. It should also be mentioned that there seem to be quite a few brave female NPCs in Bruma.

The ships depicted on the wall clothes in Bruma do conjure up an association to the Vikings. The warrior statue in Bruma Chapel does wear a helmet with horns. Interestingly, Bruma is not homogenous when it comes to race – there are at least Dunmer, Nords, Redguards, Imperials and Khajiit there.

Peter Davidson, in his book *The Idea of North* (2005), writes:

> Everyone carries their own idea of north within them. To say 'we leave for the north tonight' brings immediate thoughts of a harder place, a place of death: uplands, adverse weather, remoteness from cities. A voluntary northward journey implies a willingness to encounter the intractable elements of climate, topography and humanity. (p.9)

This view of North, however, is not the only way of imagining North, as we shall see from the

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\(^{12}\) One can of course pose the question, “How much correlation is needed to be able to claim a strong correlation between a fictional race and historical group of people?”

\(^{13}\) It would seem that this text can no longer be found on the official website after some changes to the official site were made.
following quotation (also from *The Idea of North*):

Two opposing ideas of north repeat (and contradict each other) from European antiquity to the time of the nineteenth-century Arctic explorers: that the north is a place of darkness and dearth, the seat of evil. Or, conversely, that it is a place of austere felicity where virtuous peoples live behind the north wind and are happy. (p. 21)

The weather is somewhat adverse in Bruma – there is snow there. The Imperial, Perenius, refers to Bruma as a backwater village (remoteness from cities). The bear pelts in Bruma Manor remind of the wilderness out there, and “bear” also features in the name of one of the NPCs who are featured in the quests. The terrain also rises the farther North one travels from the Imperial City. Nords are not particularly depicted as virtuous in Bruma, unless one counts the bravery and loyalty aspects. Perenius does mention the “dirty sayings” on the walls.

The idea about Northern people lacking in intellect is not new at all. Davidson (p.23) quotes Aristotle (translation by Sinclair (1962, p.410)) as:

The nations that live in cold regions and those of Europe are full of spirit, but somewhat lacking in skill and intellect; for this reason, while remaining relatively free, they lack political cohesion and the ability to rule over their neighbours.

However, the image presented in Bruma about Nords regarding their intellect is contradictory – Domitia Catullus says that Nords are thick-headed, and Perenius refers to all the people in Bruma as “illiterate peasants”, yet when one talks to the Nords oneself, they do not appear to be lacking in intellect. One Redguard woman is even seen writing at a desk. Additionally, the presence of the bookshelves would seem to contradict the heteroimage on Nords offered by Domitia and Perenius.

**Campaign situation, gameplay, and the feeling of danger in Bruma.** Storywise, as we have seen, Bruma is a very dangerous place. The NPCs talk about the danger posed by the Dremora and the cultists a lot. The theme for Bruma Chapel NPCs and its quests is the ‘human’ suffering the attack on Bruma has brought on the town, and how people could handle it. However, for player characters, Bruma is even more dangerous as they also need to worry about encountering any members of the opposite faction Alliance War armies. The danger posed to player characters is both predictable (computer-controlled) and unpredictable (other players from opposing factions).

The dangerous sounding music which plays while the Dolmen is active in Bruma may add its own sense of danger, influencing player mood subtly but significantly. The possible increased state of agitation – especially for inexperienced players who are in Cyrodiil for the first time – may influence
their likelihood of simply attacking a player first who otherwise would not even attack them. The more experienced and skilled a player is, the more they can relax and wait for the other player to attack since they know how to handle the situation.

The extent of how much danger one may feel one is in can depend on a multitude of things, ranging from a simple desire to not be killed by a player, to player skill, to how punishing a death will concretely be regarding time investment. As described earlier, a player has many options to resurrect, but these options depend on the state of the PvP map and the availability of fellow alliance members in the area (including their combat skills and their willingness to resurrect the player character in question). When the map is disfavorable, a person who cannot be resurrected with a soul gem may have to ride for a long time. It is probably quite rare that a PvE type of player would place a camp in case they are attacked in Bruma these days (Thieves Guild version of the game) because while Forward Camps have been restored to being sold at siege merchants at this point, they cost a lot of Alliance Points for PvE type of players who do not generally do PvP gameplay and thus have not accumulated Alliance Points. The camps now also have a very short range within which the player can use them, and they last for a very short time now\textsuperscript{14}, which means that placing a camp would not be a good investment in most cases as the time spent at a particular quest hub and its surrounding areas may be much longer than the duration of the camp.

Bruma’s location means that relatively speaking, members of the Aldmeri Dominion are statistically – all other factors considered – at largest disadvantage when it comes to Bruma. Since Bruma is located in the North, approximately just between the bases of the Daggerfall Covenant and the Ebonheart Pact, Aldmeri Dominion (AD) characters have the longest distance to travel to Bruma, which raises the stakes for them due to the penalty a PvP death entails. Due to this, Bruma can feel more dangerous to AD players in general when their faction does not control keeps nearby. Even when the map is more balanced in terms of keeps, AD players still have the longest distance to travel to Bruma, which may then contribute to a feeling that Bruma is a Northern town where hostile enemies are likely to roam – the very fact that keeps nearby are of a certain color can affect the likelihood of encountering players of a certain faction, as people, and especially PvE type of players (in other words, people who do not have much experience with PvP), like to perform actions which are convenient. It is convenient not to have to ride for a long time over terrain where one may be

\textsuperscript{14} Previously, Forward Camps lasted for approximately an hour and did not have a limited radius.
attacked, and it is convenient to play close to a keep at which one can respawn if one’s character is killed by an enemy player.

The game mechanics themselves and the ‘shell’ – the very location of Bruma in the North and its identity as a Northern (Nord – Ebonheart Pact) town – support each other. It is dangerous there, far in the North. The Northern town of Bruma is theoretically the most dangerous to members of the Aldmeri Dominion, the Southern faction.

However, no location is completely safe in Cyrodiil apart from the faction bases, which are very safe15. Cyrodiil is unpredictable by its very nature of players creating some – most – of its fighting content. PvP players who seek PvP encounters may specifically go to campaigns which are of one particular color, or to quest hubs far from their own keeps in order to find enemy player characters to fight (and kill). For these players, the quest hub’s primary function in that moment is to lure enemy player characters into the area for them to kill.

**Possibly unintended interpretations.** Due to how players can be expected to immerse themselves in the game, there are some possible areas where the immersion either breaks or leads to strange conclusions. Despite the snow on the ground in Bruma and the possibility for snow to be falling from the sky, the game does not fully immerse the player to the extent game mechanics could do so. There is no punishment for sitting on snow for an hour wearing nothing but one’s underwear. The character’s stats remain the same whether one sits on a hot sunny beach somewhere or plays dead on snow without moving. The characters at Bruma Manor could be interpreted as being strangely preoccupied with the idea of who is “dumb” or illiterate, and what other people think of them. However, perhaps it is not so strange to expect people to have to try to justify their decisions to stay inside instead of fighting as other members of the community are risking their lives outside. A mostly unspoken code of honor, on the other hand, motivates those who are fighting to stay out there. One could also wonder about why people in Bruma have built such huge walls in the town that they could be the major source of housing or storage. The walls are simply massive in size. On the other hand, they do not seem to be able to protect the town due to the lack of proper defensible choke points. The possibility for speculation about the wall-like structures could be never-ending.

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15 Players have been known to get past the protections designed to keep enemy players out from the faction bases – this is outside of intended gameplay and has resulted in temporary bans for players who have gained access to the enemy base and proceeded to attack players there.
However, what can be truly immersion breaking is the way player characters can be so powerful compared to the Dremora and cultists in Bruma that it is entirely possible that a player with a proper and powerful endgame build could take on relatively easily all the enemy NPCs in the whole town at the same time, especially on the campaigns where Champion Points are enabled. This would certainly raise questions about the weakness of the so called warriors and guards in Bruma, and on the other hand, the powers of the player character and members of the Alliance War armies. For instance, the NPCs in Bruma are nothing more than a nuisance for my character even when I wander around Bruma on my character with a PvP focused build – in other words, the build is not even optimised for fighting NPCs. The Dolmen is easy to beat by oneself as well. Since one can complete the daily quests every day, one could wonder why nothing seems to change in Bruma – it is as though the place is stuck in some kind of a warped time loop where nothing one does is permanent.

As we have seen in this chapter, the interpretation and general feeling of the area does not only depend on the ‘shell’ – the dialogue, physical structures, and the NPCs in Bruma. The ‘shell’ interacts dynamically with gameplay. Unintended interpretations about the danger, strength of the Bruma residents, possibly even their sanity are possible, resulting from gameplay that is contradictory to the NPC dialogue. The unpredictable nature of PvP guarantees that one can never be truly safe in Bruma – the danger that looms there does not only consist of the Dremora and the cultists – one could be attacked by members of the other factions at any given time. The feeling of safety or danger a player can feel in Bruma depends on various things, including player skill, the general status of the campaign, music, and whether one needs to interact with the quest NPCs, both of which have been placed in interior locations. The residents of Bruma have diverse views about how they should react to the catastrophe that has fallen upon Bruma. Some wish to leave, others wish to stay and fight as long as there is some hope left. The residents of Bruma consist not only of Nords and Dunmer, there are also Redguards and a Khajiit there. The Imperial perspective on Nords seems to be that of certain condescension – the heteroimage imposed on Nords in Bruma is that of thick-headedness and illiteracy. This image is counterbalanced by the way Nords present their views themselves and the environment itself with the high number of bookshelves in both Bruma Manor, and to a slightly lesser extent, in Bruma Chapel. The locals have diverse views about how to face the danger. The image of northness in Bruma is that of a cold place which has been struck by adversity. The way Nords are presented is not significantly different from the common idea of the Vikings. The idea
about Northeners lacking in intellect is not new either, but their presentation in Bruma subverts this in a gentle way. Bruma is and remains a dangerous place – especially for people who are from the South.
4. Discussion: Gameplay, representation, and the role of a Northern town

Massively multiplayer online roleplaying games like *The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited* are complex systems where premade content meets the creativity and spontaneity of human players. The game environment and the rules of the game – the gameplay – define what is possible much like the laws of physics limit how it is possible for us to interact with objects and people. Due to the vast number of locations and ways to interact objects, enemies and other players in the game, players have a lot of freedom to play the way they wish to. Players create some of their own content when they roleplay, manage guilds, plan raids, and communicate on the various chat channels offered by the game. Players define their own goals, whether it is to succeed on PvP leaderboards that are based on how fast and how well endgame groups clear endgame content, to be a great crafter, to accumulate as much gold as possible, to complete as many of the predetermined achievements they game offers, or to simply have as much fun as they can while exploring the numerous zones in the game. Players have different goals when it comes to PvP, too. Some prefer to focus on helping their own alliance conquer and control as much of the map as possible, others prefer to show themselves and others how well they can play in a small group against larger groups, others may get joy from being efficient at killing one target in an instant and then managing to retreat back alive. Some prefer large groups of twenty players in Cyrodiil, others prefer small groups, and some run by themselves. Players can, of course, take part in all kinds of activities depending on what they are in the mood for. Due to this variation in player preferences, it is wise for the game developers to offer many types of content in order to attract new players and to keep the old ones subscribing to the game and purchasing products in the Crown Store.

The location of Bruma in a PvP zone enables a variety of gameplay to take place there. Bruma offers new stories, opportunities to advance one’s character and to make progress towards unlocking new achievements, and a chance to occasionally participate in small-scale PvP. PvP content offers a chance to test one’s skills against an actual human opponent, which can be thrilling. Some players may wish to avoid actual PvP fights as much as possible because they do not believe in their skills or fear that the enemy players might act in a rude manner. Yet even for this type of player, Bruma can
offer excitement since one can never know whether an enemy player might be around the next corner, but one can make the avoidance of PvP a minigame of a kind.

Bruma is an easy introduction to PvP for players who are not familiar with it since they can complete PvP content and the likelihood of meeting strong players in big groups is smaller than near actual Alliance War objectives. By luring PvP players to Cyrodiil with the promise of skill points, achievements and new stories, the Cyrodiil quest hubs work together to encourage players to test PvP out. Some of them may even become “true” PvP players in the end. For seasoned PvP players, Bruma can offer easy prey or a chance to have different types of playful fights (some of which may approach trolling levels).

For each player, any particular visit to Bruma will be unique and based on their character’s stats, their skill playing the character, their goals, their general view on PvP and whether they would like to participate in it, campaign status (the number of players present on the campaign per faction and which keeps are owned by which faction), the presence of potential enemies and allies, and other factors.

Narratively, Bruma is a place of conflict and danger. The conflict in Bruma brings out differences in attitudes and thinking between different NPCs individually and culturally. Choices about whether to fight or stay in relative safety, and what each choice may mean about one’s characteristics, are explored. The dialogue in Bruma cleverly discusses traits of individuals and groups, expectations and stereotypes. The way the Imperials Domitia Catullus and Perenius talk about the locals and the way the player character also is able to interact with the locals allows players to make their own choices about who is ‘right’. Simpson (2015) suggests that

> [b]y requiring the players to participate within this complex simulation they can be led to reflect on how these representations reflect real life systems of oppression and national discourse both while they play the game and afterwards. (p. 51)

Domitia’s classic way of imposing a heteroimage on Nords may inspire some players (especially younger ones) to discover something about stereotypes as Kjakur dismisses her by addressing the player with “[d]on’t mind Dommy, she just likes to fuss over me.” Further, Simpson writes,

> [r]acialized tropes of the self and the other are common in both neomedieval and sci-fi works, but the fact that each of these games rely upon settings where the themes of imperialism and race are paramount make them ideal texts for examining how they simulate historical and real-life instances of racial oppression. (p. 24)
Interestingly, even in Bruma, it is the Imperials who are making the statements about the Nords – in the case of Perenius, the generalization is applied to all people living in Bruma, which he describes as a “backwater village”. The dynamic between the center and periphery is strong here. While Northern Europeans – whom Nords may symbolically represent – are not currently oppressed people, it is still good to be mindful of the ways various peoples are represented, and how the discourse about national stereotypes and traits of groups of people work. Games like ESOTU can help with this.

Bruma’s northness does not particularly differ from a stereotypical presentation of North as a cold, remote place where barbaric people live. Thus Bruma in the game perhaps reinforces an image of a kind of ‘Viking type’ northness, but does also provide refreshment for the player’s palate as a different visual environment and as an option to find out more about a new town and its people. Bruma is perhaps slightly more multicultural, however, than one would expect. The Nord culture and Bruma are still bound to an extent by the history that has already been created in the previous Elder Scrolls games and needs to fit in with the lore, however.

As part of the Elder Scrolls world, ESOTU and Bruma interact intertextually with other games in the series on various levels of lore. Bruma in ESOTU serves a role in creating and reinforcing the greater Elder Scrolls world and its history and lore. Bruma interacts intertextually with The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion in particular since there is a town of the same name in that game. As Oblivion’s Bruma’s predecessor, Bruma in ESOTU forges history for Oblivion’s Bruma. The mere existence of the same town in the two games creates a sense of the passing of time, of history. The Elder Scrolls world has a timeline, which makes that world more believable.

In ESOTU, Bruma offers some Player-versus-Environment (PvE) content, but the level of detail of the quests offered in Bruma – the quests are short and straight-forward – combined with the risks associated with being in dialogue mode with Non-Player-Characters in a Player-versus-Player zone suggests that much of the focus in Bruma is related to supporting the PvP side of gameplay. Like Bruma in Oblivion, Bruma in ESOTU provides a fresh visual environment compared to other zones in Cyrodiil, but unlike Oblivion’s Bruma, ESOTU’s Bruma is much less detailed and content filled. It is smaller in size, there are fewer buildings, fewer quests, and the quests offered are of a simpler design. Many of the arguments on gameplay in this thesis likely apply to all the other quest hubs in Cyrodiil as well, at least to an extent – it is mostly the Northern imagery, the themes explored, the
relatively big interior spaces where the questgivers are located, and the inclusion of the Dolmen that is different about Bruma as a quest hub.

While we consider the role and function of Bruma in *ESOTU*, it is good to keep in mind that the game is a huge environment in which players can interact in a number of ways, and set goals of their own choosing. What they do is often influenced by what other people in the game do, including enemies, friends, and random strangers with whom they come into contact. Lehdonvirta (2010) discusses the dichotomy between the so called real world and virtual worlds in his paper ‘Virtual Worlds Don’t Exist: Questioning the Dichotomous Approach in MMO Studies’ in which he details some of the problems with such a dichotomy. He summarizes in his abstract,

> [t]he world of players does not respect the boundaries of an MMO server, as it frequently flows over to other sites and forums. At the same time, other social worlds, such as families and workplaces, penetrate the site of the MMO and are permanently tangled with the players’ world.

The player experience as a whole is not limited to the game itself in *ESOTU* either – players discuss the game on forums, and many *ESOTU* PC players also sometimes use a voice chat client to interact with other players via audio, using software such as Teamspeak 3. In the broader sense, the reasons why people end up doing the activities they do, including why they reach the town of Bruma, can depend on other people as well. Sometimes it is simply nice to spend time with someone, so one may group up with a friend who has his or her own reasons for going to Cyrodiil and visiting Bruma, which is then how a player may end up being there – without any strong specific ingame goal or reason. In that kind of a scenario, Bruma is simply part of the greater fabric of *ESOTU* and other media, providing space and methods for social interaction. Events in Bruma in *ESOTU* are not necessarily only influenced by ingame events – as an example, an event in the player’s physical space, or the player’s physical state itself, maybe require the player to step away from the computer for some time, or to use their hands for eating dinner, while the character yet stays in the game world and can be attacked.

Another theme in this thesis has been the interaction between the ‘core’ and the ‘shell’. Bruma brings these two aspects of games together very well by providing a space that covers multiple functions while still presenting a coherent whole with a narrative of its own. Both the ‘core’ and the ‘shell’ attracts people to visit Bruma, where they may then enjoy aspects of both ‘core’ gameplay, such as fighting, and the ‘shell’ – the visual and audio environment of the place and the narrative content of the quests. Molag Bal’s Dolmen is an essential part of the story of the place, but also
attracts people to visit in order to complete their Dolmen achievements or to try to farm items they desire. The ingame objects can serve a dual purpose – the bookshelves, for instance, both invite people to read the text they contain and thus make them stay longer at the quest hub where they are vulnerable to being attacked, and also say something about the location where they have been placed. The questgiver placement and the interior design of Bruma Chapel and Bruma Manor affect PvP fights in addition to their effects on the atmosphere and narrative. The largest disconnect between the gameplay and the shell in Bruma is probably the way the player character can completely outplay the enemy NPCs, which then results in the breaking of immersion as the friendly NPCs claim that it is dangerous to fight the Dremora – which the player character can then dispose of with ease.

Bruma works well as a small location for small scale PvP and as an introduction to PvP fights for PvE players. Due to the way the quest hub offers different types of gameplay and goals, but does not invite players to stay there for an extremely long time, there are rarely too many players at this location. The large battles are fought at Alliance War objectives, the small battles at quest hubs such as Bruma, where content and gameplay meet to create a coherent, functioning whole.
5. Conclusion

_Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited_ takes an _Elder Scrolls_ lore-consistent yet relatively stereotypical approach to the presentation of northness in Bruma. Bruma is a cold, dangerous place where brave and loyal Nords who appear “dumb” to some outsiders try to defend their town. Players face danger from both NPCs and players in the area. The actual danger to a particular player is a matter of probability, which varies depending on the state of the PvP map, campaign population, player skill, character build, and the number and skill of other players of the same faction in the area and their willingness to fight together. The experience of danger is likely subjective, depending on one’s assessment of one’s objective chances of surviving opposition in the area and the costs associated with one’s character’s death, which include loss of time and a possible dent to one’s ego.

Bruma offers a number of incentives for a player to visit it at least once in order to develop one’s character. The main attractions for Bruma are likely the opportunity to do small scale PvP, to complete Achievements, to explore new content, and to collect the Skyshard located there in order to develop one’s character. On the other hand, Bruma also disincentivizes players from visiting it – it is not attractive for anyone wishing to make a lot of gold, the in-game currency. Nor does player control of Bruma directly affect the Alliance War scoring system nor Emperorship, which is why Bruma does not generally have many PvP players present at its location at a given time. Due to this relative scarceness of players, Bruma is not a good place for serious Alliance Point farming. Nothing, however, prevents people from trying to gain Alliance Points in Bruma, from roleplaying there, or from simply observing other players there. The function of Bruma is multilayered and partially subjective. Players create much of their own experience in the space provided for them according to their own personal goals.

The key element about Bruma is for it to be seen as part of a whole system. Bruma offers incentives to visit it and to avoid it. Bruma offers variety in terms of gameplay and in terms of narrative content. In a massively multiplayer online game which gains its revenue from subscriptions and the use of the Crown Store, and thus from its ability to keep people playing the game, giving options to the players in the form of different types of gameplay and explorable content is crucial.

Just as Bruma is part of a larger context, this thesis should be seen as such as well – a starting point for further research, or a piece of a larger puzzle. One fruitful topic to study would be to compare
the same town presented in two different games – Bruma in *ESOTU*, and Bruma in *Oblivion*. Additionally, Bruma is but one Northern town in the *Elder Scrolls* series – studying the presentation of northness in one or more games in the series would certainly be an enormous undertaking, yet certainly a worthwhile one. Parts of this thesis – especially chapter 3 – could serve as a stepping stone for such a project.

This thesis has explored the way gameplay (“core”) and content (“shell”) interact together to create a full playing experience in *ESOTU*. One small town in a PvP zone manages to pull together many reasons for visiting it for both PvE and PvP focused players. The dismantling of this quest hub in this thesis can serve as an example for other developers of how to build a functioning, healthy location which provides various types of gameplay and brings together different types of players. It would also be interesting to compare the findings of this study regarding the interaction of “core” and “shell” with other locations in other massively multiplayer online roleplaying games.

Despite my extensive experience playing this game and being part of its communities, I am but one person. Individuals have their own priorities and reasons for doing what they do. Thus, it would be interesting to also see a study conducted on what other players think of Bruma and what kinds of experiences they have had there. This thesis could serve as a starting point for drawing up questions for such a study. With a sample large and varied enough, one could gain additional insight and numerical data into player motivations and experiences. However, such studies also have their drawbacks which this thesis compensates for by not being limited only to the answers of the respondents, which may not be thought through in as much detail. On the other hand, I am quite confident that the statements and findings in this thesis have been well argued and will ring true to people who have played the game extensively themselves.

Based on this study, the following steps are recommended for building a well-functioning location for small-scale PvP in an open-world PvP zone in a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game. These steps should help provide a small but steady stream of players to the area, but discourage any buildup of players since the system will not provide consistent, repeatable high-end rewards for players.

- Give everyone an incentive to visit the place at least once per character by offering a small but tangible reward for visiting the place for a short while, such as a small but permanent boost to stats, or something that will make everyday micromanaging tasks a little easier.
- Do provide content which, when completed once, contributes towards Achievements.
• Give players repeatable content with small but guaranteed rewards (such as the daily quests in Bruma, good siege engines from the Dolmen), or great rewards with a low chance to get the drop.
• All content should be clearable by two people at maximum. Most of the content should be soloable (quests, enemy NPC difficulty).
• You should strive to make gameplay and narrative content match each other in order to not break player immersion, but one or two small immersion breaking problems will not likely affect the location in a negative way too much as long as other aspects of the location are working and the gameplay and narrative content are otherwise congruent.
• Do not provide content which would give an incentive to stay at the location for more than thirty minutes. If you offer quests, it may be a good idea for some of the quests to send the player a little farther from the town to fulfill the quest requirements.
• Do not provide (guaranteed) best rewards per time investment for PvE or PvP endgame players at the location (Alliance Points, gold, loot, fame).
• Do not place the location in the middle of a “highway” of traffic between major hubs. If the location is right between major hubs, discourage players in other ways from traveling through the location (by using mechanics that slow players down or make them more vulnerable to attacks, for example).
• Do provide a fun, dramatic, or otherwise interesting PvE environment that is available to be explored at any hour, whether or not there are other players in the area.
Glossary

Alliance Points

Alliance Points (AP) are gained by killing enemies, by healing allies, and by attacking and defending keeps, outposts, scroll temples and resources (farms, lumber mills, mines). They can be used to purchase specific items such as siege engines, filled soul gems, and PvP armor and weapons.

Animation canceling

Animation canceling is a technique which a player can learn to perform in order to increase the character’s outgoing damage per second. Animation canceling also allows a player to play more offensively and defensively at the same time, for example by using an attack skill and canceling the attack skill’s animation with a Dodge Roll, which provides safety from incoming projectiles. The Dodge Roll is an action which can be performed without it affecting how often one can activate an offensive or defensive skill. For a video demonstrating animation canceling in more detail, see Lefty Lucy’s ‘Advanced ESO Animation Cancelling Guide – Pro Tips & How to Optimize Your DPS!’ video on YouTube.

AoE

Area of Effect

Usually refers to damage skills which damage all enemies within a certain area.

Block

Blocking in most cases prevents the character from being knocked backed and CC’d. Blocking reduces the damage of an incoming attack. Blocking with a shield is more effective than blocking with some other weapon.

Build

Build is the comprehensive term for referring to the result of combining specific armor, allocating stat points, Champion Points, and slotting specific skills to achieve a desired result in order to perform well in a particular situation or in general. The build usually also involves an idea of how to make use of the item sets and skills in a fashion that results in great performance.

CC

Crowd Control

Refers to different types of control effects which may prevent a character from moving or using skills for some time.

CC break

Players can free their stunned characters by using stamina. The character plays an animation at that point and becomes free to move and use abilities once again (provided that the character has not been Rooted)

Class

Character Class

The playable character classes in ESOTU are Sorcerer, DragonKnight, Nightblade, and Templar.

Cloak

Nightblade ability which grants invisibility for a brief amount of time
CP Champion Points
Champion Points grant powerful passives for characters that have access to them, granting higher damage, better resistances, and more regeneration for magicka and stamina, among other things.

Cyrodiil The central area of Tamriel. Cyrodiil is the PvP zone in ESOTU

Dodge Roll Every character is able to dodge roll by using stamina. Cannot be activated without enough stamina. A dodge roll frees a character from being Rooted. A character is not able to do anything while the dodge roll animation is playing. Roughly while the dodge roll animation is playing, all incoming projectiles except the Meteor ultimate can be dodged. Many melee abilities can also be dodged, which means that they will not apply damage or side effects to the character

ESOTU The Elder Scrolls Online: Tamriel Unlimited

Farm Farming
A relatively generic term which describes repeating an activity in order to try to gain something – Alliance Points, experience for increasing a character’s level, Champion Points, or a particular piece of loot, such as a powerful helm.

LoS Line of Sight
Affects whether the target can be hit by a single-target skill. An enemy player that has been specially targeted by a player can still be seen behind rocks and walls as a silhouette up to a certain distance if the player does not cloak or enter sneak mode successfully, changing one’s status to ‘hidden’.

Minmax Minmaxing
Optimizing the character’s stats in order to achieve a great build for a character

MMO Massively Multiplayer Online (game)

NPC Non-Player Character

PvE Player-versus-Environment
Players fight enemies that are controlled by the software, not by other players

PvP Player-versus-Player

RPG Roleplaying game

Rooted Status for a character where they cannot run or move. Some abilities ignore this partially. It is possible to activate Streak and to move while rooted, but when the character lands at the new place, it still cannot run if the rooting ability is still active. Dodge roll is one of the more common ways to lose the Rooted status.

Shadow Image
A nightblade teleportation skill which requires advanced planning on the part of the player. Shadow Image is a powerful ability at the hands of experienced and skilled nightblades.
Stats
The numbers which affect the character’s performance, such as the damage the
color character does, how much the character takes damage when hit, and how quickly the
color character’s magicka, health, and stamina regenerate

Streak
A morph of Bolt Escape
A powerful Sorcerer ability. Players may also use the term to refer to all morphs of
Bolt Escape casually. The streak morph ports the character towards the direction the
character is facing, does AoE damage to enemies on the path, and can disorient non-
blocking characters that do not have CC immunity, rendering them unable to use
skills for a brief amount of time
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