



On Overland Travel

Introduction. The Functions of Overland Travel

In the beginning, there was the dungeon. If you were lucky, it had some kind of village nearby (with weaponsmith, tavern and healer as its only inhabitants). But it didn't take long until there was demand for *more* dungeons – and to connect them, some kind of road had to be created, along with the terrain around it. And thus, "overland travel" was born.

Starting with this and drawing from both pen-and-paper RPGs and traditional fantasy literature, we usually expect overland travel in CRPGs to satisfy the following demands:

- connect the dungeons and cities of the game world
- convey the feeling of a non-trivial journey through the wilderness
- illustrate this wilderness so we can get at least a rough idea of the world around us

Nowadays, major game companies fulfill all three points by simply filling out complete areas the size of Russia; since we hobby or indie enthusiasts probably don't have the resources to do that, we need to find another solution. I have browsed a number of classic and modern titles for their concepts – no need to reinvent the wheel, maybe we find something here that suits us. I also think that there's still some untapped design space in here.

Concepts of Overland Travel

As it turns out, there are indeed some "schools" of overland travel design. I have thus grouped the various approaches by their basic idea rather than by title.

Overland is dungeon with different textures (Lands of Lore, Legend of Grimrock II)

Paint your walls with trees instead of stone textures. At first, this seems like the easy way to include a wilderness in your game. It especially satisfies point 2, the non-trivial journey, as you can probably design the "wilderness" maps just as dangerous as the regular dungeon maps; traps or secret undergrowth paths, for instance, are not out of the question. If you connect a city and a castle over such a forest maze (and maybe a mountain maze thereafter, and a cave inbetween), the journey will definitely not be trivial.

There is, of course, the problem of making such a place actually feel like a wilderness; different textures can only go so far. *Legend of Grimrock II* mainly uses two tricks to vastly improve upon the pretty simplistic *Lands of Lore*. First, the barriers block movement, but not necessarily sight –



you can see through tree "walls" and catch a glimpse of what lies on the other side, not to speak of the various rivers that hinder passage through the countryside. Second, the growth of trees does not stop at the standard dungeon wall height, making everything seem more natural. There are also some buildings outside, huge 3D constructs that emphasize the impression of an open sky, but I'd say the high trees would suffice in this respect; using such structures might actually be problematic if you also want to convey the feel of a long-distance journey, since they ruin any sense of wider scale (see below).

By the way, note that an "overgrown ruins" setting similar to Grimrock II would also allow you to include a few doors, mechanical puzzles and similar "unnatural" trappings without disrupting the wilderness feeling too much.

There is a major problem with this method, which are open spaces. It works quite well for forest or mountain regions, where natural barriers can play the role of walls; however, once you wish to include a grassy plain, a desert, icy wastes and similar areas, things become somewhat difficult. The missing barriers would allow the player to both easily navigate the area and evade monster groups and other hazards, basically foregoing the idea of a "non-trivial journey". Therefore, this method is likely suited to scenarios where the wilderness really is not much more than the connecting element.

Dungeons and Overland are on different scales (Ultima I-V, Might & Magic I-V)

This was a very popular concept in older times. Again, both dungeons (and cities etc.) and the worldmap are traversed in the same way, but one step on the worldmap equals hundreds of steps within a detailed area. On the worldmap, these areas show up as just a single space which then acts as a portal to the respective detail map. Essentially, the worldmap is even more abstracted than the rest of the game. One method to support the player's imagination here is measuring the time spent traveling; it might be just a minute of in-game time for a step in a dungeon, but half an hour for a step outside, maybe more depending on the terrain.

The two major schools here are the *Ultima* and *Might & Magic* designs, which differ in a number of ways. The first is of course attributed to the perspective. *Ultima's* top-down view shows the player a much larger area than *Might & Magic's* first-person view, so the world map is correspondingly larger (*Ultima V*: 512x512 squares, *MM 3-5*: 64x96 squares each). However, they also approach the "non-trivial journey" topic quite differently. In *Ultima*, mountains, forests and bodies of water each block your path and can be overcome – if at all – only by specific methods which are not easily available and never all active at the same time (your ship does not allow you to cross mountains as well). This means that you will often have to take winding paths to reach your destinations; and even if it were possible, you would also likely not be willing to



explore every single space of the world map, since it would require regularly changing methods of transport along these very winding paths just to reach a random mountain valley at the end of a river.

In *Might & Magic*, those same mountains, forests and bodies of water are of course present as well, together with even more inhospitable deserts and lava rivers. No need to despair, though, since the methods for crossing these are all easily available, usually long before you would even be able to take on the monsters that crawl those areas. Thus, you will eventually be able to explore the complete world map quite quickly and without much hassle. The journeys through the lands of Terra and Xeen are not made "non-trivial" by the terrain, but rather by said monsters. The next city or dungeon might only be a dozen steps away, but on those steps you will usually have to fight four to five successively more difficult groups of monsters, requiring regular trips back to the starting point for resting, healing, maybe re-equipping – all in all, quite an amount of work. Once you have cleared the path, the journey is done in seconds, but by that point you could also use the town portals or similar magic for instant travel, so it doesn't really matter anymore.

If you wish to go this way in your own game, think about the availability of similar fast travel methods – if you are planning to use any, there's no reason in keeping the path difficult for more than the first time (via respawns etc.). Also think about how much of the world map can be seen and explored without a lot of effort from a certain point on, i.e. once the player has amassed sufficient power. I'll get to that later on.

Regarding the illustration of the wilderness, *Might & Magic* had a problem: 64x96 squares don't leave a lot of space to work with, especially if they are supposed to cover numerous different terrain types. The task of characterizing a certain area was thus left to the various monster types present. Then again, I don't think the designers ever cared.

One curiosity: The *Magic Candle* series did overland travel in the same perspective as *Ultima*, but the world maps were far smaller. The designer thought to counteract this by having every step take up several hours of gametime, draining the characters' endurance accordingly. This meant you would have to go through the campsite procedure every few seconds of real time, making things rather tedious. But then, at least you couldn't call it trivial.

Move between map chunks (Might & Magic VI – IX, Lords of Xulima)

In contrast to the above method, you may wish to have things on the same scale, but then without having to detail a full kingdom (peninsula, continent, whatever). The *Might & Magic* designers (I think they were the first) decided to just rip huge squares out of the world map, filling those in every detail, and then assume the space between those chunks would be uninteresting wilderness.



So whenever you arrive at the edge of one chunk, you get the option to travel to the next chunk in that direction. If you wish to, you are instantly brought there, just three to five days further on the timeline. (The cute thing is that in those games the actual landscapes in those chunks align as if they were actually bordering each other.)

Lords of Xulima is a rather new indie title which has *Might & Magic* gameplay in *Ultima* perspective. I refer to it here because its designers also put some thoughts into the "illustration" aspect. Disregarding the journeys between map chunks, overland travel doesn't take that much more time than dungeon exploration, but rather drains your provisions (of which you can only carry a limited amount) more quickly. Terrain plays a big role here, with desert travels consuming your rations much faster than a walk through lush forest terrain. In addition, characters take frost damage in cold lands if they are not equipped appropriately; in the desert, they regularly become victims of scorpion stings and can watch circling vultures; and of course, each area has its own monsters, herbs, background music and weather (a rather underused aspect).

Move between highlighted locations (*Realms of Arkania*, *Dragon Age*, *Pillars of Eternity*)

In the introduction to his "Adventure Construction Kit", Chris Hopkins wisely said: "Don't waste your time drawing a huge forest if nothing happens there." Not only that, but you would also waste the time of your players with such a forest, which might not be a good thing to do.

Following this adage, some games have taken the "map chunks" idea to the extreme. Whereas the "chunks" would be defined by their dimensions, no matter whether their main feature (a city, for instance) would take up the whole section or not, the "highlighted locations" would fit the dimensions to the main feature, all but eliminating "superfluous" wilderness. You might also see it as a "different scales" overland where players would simply jump between the portals to detail maps, thereby skipping the actual overland journey.

Obviously, this has the advantage that the designers don't have to craft a vast gameworld of which most is irrelevant to the story and the players don't have to search such a gameworld for the few places where the story continues. This makes such a system quite fitting to the requirements of story-heavy and rather linear games.

The problem is that jumping around in such a way will make the traveling pretty trivial and won't offer a lot of opportunities to experience the wilderness. If we can do away with both of those, fine (but if you want to skip the major parts of overland journeys, why are you reading this anyway?), otherwise you will have to implement some kind of encounter system. *Dragon Age* illustrates your trip from one location to the next by tracing your route with a few blood drops (ooh! dark fantasy!) and sometimes throws a random encounter in the way. However, if I am correct, there



are exactly two of those encounters which are repeated over and over, with the exception of one not-so-random encounter where you can acquire an additional party member. As you have either guessed or experienced yourself, this gets old pretty quickly.

The first two parts of the *Realms of Arkania (Das Schwarze Auge)* trilogy send you on a lot of wilderness journeys. They also show you some red dots on a map, but the similarities to *Dragon Age* end there. First, the maps are no abstract location collections, but intended to show the landscape to scale, as you would find it in any of today's map collections. This also means that the journeys are no abstract locations jumps as well; as you have a measurable distance and an assumed traveling speed, the amount of time spent to get from A to B can be calculated. What's more, the game adjusts its depiction of the route to this assumed speed. If you are on a large and fast ship, the journey across the seas will be over in a few real-time seconds. If you are trying to pass a high mountain range, this might take a while in real time as well – although it's difficult to measure, as along the road you will regularly be faced with numerous events.

This is the main difference between *Arkania* and just about every other game I know that handles its overland travels this way: You are not just jumping between locations. Instead, the routes in those games are packed full with both random and fixed events, many of them presented in good old "choose your own adventure" style, i.e. having you choose from a number of alternatives. Beyond the usual random monsters (which are actually few), you might encounter a wandering minstrel, find an unknown path that might be a shortcut, discover a cavern entrance, notice that this might be a great spot to put up camp and search for rare herbs, spot a dragon flying overhead and much more. In the categories of non-trivial travel and illustration of the wilderness, this system scores quite well.

I'm not certain why the *Arkania* games are the only ones that have expanded on this concept with so much detailed content. *Pillars of Eternity* has choice events throughout the game, so why not during wilderness travel? Instead, all we get is a simple message about the time passed. Wasted opportunity in my mind.

Everything is on the same scale (and on one map) (Elder Scrolls games, later Ultimas)

While this is probably the end of evolution for professional game producers, as I said, I don't think it's an option for indies unless your wilderness consists of nothing but the same trees and ogres everywhere. I think *Ultima VI* was the first game which deviated from the usual "different scales" standard; it had all towns and all the wilderness on one map of 1024x1024 "squares". Dungeons not included. For *Temple of Eternity*, I detailed a world of ca. 300,000 squares, including dungeons (and skies); the idea of having to fill a world three or four times as large simply doesn't sound like a practical undertaking for a homebrewn CRPG for me. But feel free to disagree here.



Exceptions

There are singular games which don't really fit any of these categories. *Ultima VIII*, for instance, has an underworld rather than an overland wilderness: the game's major locations are connected through an extensive cave system. Funny idea, but I'm not sure I would like to navigate it each and every time I'd have to go from A to B and back to A. Neither were the designers, which is why they introduced magical transport platforms (aka waypoints), activated with a magical stone. Of course, after a certain number of uses (not that you would be told how many exactly), that stone just disappeared. Yay. Well, regardless of the fact that this particular implementation was not really well received, it shows that there is still space for innovation outside the box.

I'm certain there are other noteworthy travel systems out there. If you have knowledge of one of those, I'd be happy to hear about them.

Building on these concepts

Each of the mentioned ways of handling overland travel has its own benefits and problems and is suited to a certain type of game. However, if my intention was to just create "a fantasy role-playing game", without any particular preconceptions, I have come to the conclusion that I'd likely take the *Realms of Arkania* route. It's the one that makes best use of the powerful force called imagination, and if we are relying on that aspect anyway, we might as well make the best of it, right?

For ease of description, I will break this "use of imagination" into three factors:

- space for using imagination
- reason for using imagination
- rewards for using imagination

Space is pretty easily explained – only a certain amount of terra incognita will prompt the player to wonder what might be there, arousing his curiosity and imagination. Of course, every game begins with that status (not counting the usually very imperfect information its documentation might reveal), but the more information the player can gain by systematic exploration, the less possibility remains for surprising discoveries; and if there is no place for a new discovery to be made because everything is known, there is no space for imagination to unfold. In the earlier *Might & Magic* games, this situation is reached very quickly; in the various "limited" travel systems, i.e. those which focus on detailing only specific parts of the gameworld, it might actually never happen.



Might & Magic III overland map. You can reach this status of perfect information pretty quickly.

If the game gives you hints that these unknown spaces might (!) still hide noteworthy discoveries waiting to be made, you have a **reason** to wonder what may be waiting for you there, inevitably firing up your imagination. *Pillars of Eternity*, as noted above, is another game with limited world information, but since your travels between the highlighted locations take place without any interruption whatsoever, there is no need to imagine what might happen to you. On the bright side, though, the game does not tell you beforehand about the highlighted locations, only revealing them once the story progress sets certain triggers. I found myself hoping that at least a tiny part of the game would take place in the upper right, the edge of the icy mountains. Alas, it was not to be.

You might compare this to "foreshadowing" in a story – the promise that something big and interesting will happen. If we keep that promise, by a thrilling turn of events or a magnificent, unforeseen answer to all questions in case of the story, by a fascinating discovery in case of the game, we are, in a sense, **rewarding** the player for using his imagination, assuring him that we didn't keep him at the edge of his seat for nothing. If we don't deliver on our promises, we are earning ourselves a disappointed player, who will carefully wager if he will ever again let us lead him into unknown lands.

All of this analysis essentially can be summarized by one point: Keeping the player curious. (He will not remain curious if he is under the impression that our final revelation is not worth the wait.) The longer we manage to do that, the longer he will play the game. End of story.

The *Arkania* traveling system does all of this. Because the player is shown only selected locations



and traveling happens only on certain routes, there is a lot of hidden information with which to operate. The various events that can happen during the journey will be enough to raise the player's curiosity at first, and once he has been notified of strange traces which led the party to a dragon cave, he will wonder what might be hidden along the other routes for the rest of the game.

In a fully detailed world like *Skyrim*, where the player has complete information available, this will only work if that world is so incredibly large that the player would still miss that dragon cave if the program didn't give him hints to it. If we have complete information, but the world is not large enough to hide things, like in the earlier *Ultima* games, this doesn't quite work. You don't want a cave entrance to randomly pop up just because the game decided it was time to show it now, do you?

Technically, you might do this within a "different scales" overworld. In this case, you'd let the fact that you are still more an abstract game than a reality simulation work for you; the player would forgive such an artificial revelation here. You might even turn it a little more "realistic" again by making said hidden location show up even if the relevant trigger has not yet been set, but the player stands right next to it. In any case, this would still not work for the part of encounters & events.

Finally, let me mention *Skyrim's* ancestor, *Daggerfall*. Its gameworld has something like 15,000 locations on an area corresponding to the size of Great Britain. So here we would have both **space** and **reason** for using imagination, because in so vast an area literally anything could happen.

Except it didn't. Once you had explored the first dozen or so villages, it turned out that there were very few basic layouts which got reused over and over, only that at the place where village A had the blacksmith you'd in village B find the alchemist instead. Just as disappointing were the randomly generated dungeons, which regularly featured locked-off areas where the generation algorithm simply had forgotten to place an access to. So much for delivering on promises. Which leads to the question, could random generation ever keep such a promise? But that's a topic for another article.

Happy crafting!