

## **Balmora**

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The static of the screen popped occasionally and emitted that stale, empty, yet seemingly strange smell. The CRT glow shot through the complete darkness of the room, curtains shut, save for the bit of moonlight of the outside world creeping in from behind the edges of the curtain, a reminder. The only thing one could do is look forward into the only obvious source of light in the room – peering into it.

I still remember the first time I ever set foot in Balmora. Or was it the first time? I've played so many video games that I don't even remember exactly when I played what and why.

The point is that I still remember the experience of Balmora in particular, even if some of the specifics escape me now. I often liked to play video games late at night in my room, especially during summer break when I had no obligations. I'd turn off of all the lights, draw my thick, heavy curtains shut, and close my door to keep out any kitchen light. I had many nights similar to this when I was younger.

On the first visit to Balmora's gates, a distinct, low drone can be heard, booming across the clearing, the sound of a transport flea's eight legs pounding into the road at the sky-pier in front of the city gate, causing chips to fall off the clay walls. There are giant, imposing trees and mushrooms towering above, exterior to a city with a mess of immaculate, Cycladic beige and white clay molded houses stacked on top of each other. People and humanoid beasts saunter through town, many with their heads drooping, dragging their feet and dressed in an assortment of rags. The elves stand tall and dignified in flashy robes and enchanted jewelry; the lizard-folk wander aimlessly, walk barefoot, and bear no clan insignias. Elves, bipedal lizards, humans, and magic, but why does it seem so familiar? They wander midday, aimlessly, going nowhere.

Passing forward through the gates, the character is immediately greeted with metal clanking against metal and heavy, hurried footsteps on a brick road, beelining forward, growing louder and louder. After turning, an elf's armor is beaming, reflecting sunlight. "We're watching you, scum," he growls in a deep, scratchy, guttural dialect. He jerks himself around and continues off, his axe rattling on his grieves, the blade edge staring back.

The world and story are finely crafted, perfectly fitting the bill of a fantasy to which one might escape, but what is it really saying? After walking beyond the gates and glancing from side to side, there are strained countenances abound. Flies buzz around, there are empty smashed crates and trash stashed in gangways, apprehensive characters weaving in and out, a dubious jangle of metal underneath their tunics as they approach elves.

On days like this, the metal wire fan would hum in the background, bellowing stale, dry, hot air as it oscillated. Darkness often engulfed the room, as if nothing existed and the screen

pierced a vacuum of space. Beneath that darkness, stacks of books, paper, and notebooks were strewn about haphazardly, and gnats jittered annoyingly around the houseplants. I too usually sat there, as I often did over the summer, stricken with boredom yet unwilling to rest, looking for things to occupy my mind.

There were always cars and buses zooming down the street during nights like this, rubber vibrating against the street. The century old glass panes of the windows in my room would rattle in place whenever one passed, as if about to shatter. Our old basement apartment was situated a block down from a big main street, and there were always people wandering near the window in the moonlight, without worry, drunk from the bar at the corner, as if following a programmed path each night. Hastened footsteps as they passed, their soles slapped against the concrete sidewalk outside the window. It was a mishmash of drunken Loyola students hooting and weary locals mumbling to themselves and sometimes yelling at the underaged rambles. People would argue on the corner, hostile and shouting at one another, the occasional gunshot in the far distance, followed by sirens shrieking through the night. All of this leaked into the room alongside that moonlight rearing its head around the curtains, dueling with the glow of the CRT.

There is a short blurb about Balmora online, released sometime around the game's launch. It described Balmora as a bustling, diverse trading hub with many opportunities and things to do. There were screenshots of big, majestic manors, shopkeepers peddling wares, giant fleas offering transport from town to town, temples, peasants, magic scholars, mercenaries wandering, and guards patrolling the streets with torches. "City of light, City of magic." It seemed different, as if it would be fun to explore, so why did it seem so familiar walking into it for the first time?

Why are video games always painted as another, unique, exotic world? What drew me to it at the time? Why aren't books and cinema also given this (dis)honor? "Oh, it's only a game," "Video games are just an escape!" many would say, as if a sharp retort, especially in the early 2000's when this stuff still wasn't quite as accepted. What makes it different from sticking a nose between the pages of a book for hours on end or binging the latest sci-fi hit on Netflix? The underdeveloped dialogue around video games always made me wonder.

It's in these situations, where the character is gliding across a richly created world such as Balmora's, that I usually saw myself in a nearly pitch-black room, illuminated by that little bit of moonlight, staring back through the screen's reflection every time the black loading screen appeared. Is there really a purpose to it? Is exploring another world truly just exploring another world, or can something more be gleaned from it than that? That flickering glass barrier between the player and the fantasy world such as Balmora's, is it actually there? Is it a window or actually a mirror?