



# ‘Open’ Matters More Than ‘World’

Obsessing with square miles often deprives open world games of their magical potential



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**O**pen world games are exhausting. I am aware that this hardly the most earth-shattering opinion in gaming spheres of the present, but ever since committing to full-time writing, it's one that continuously knots itself deeper into my brain. As far as design frameworks go, open world titles possess enormous potential to promote innovation and interactivity with their spaces, binding the player to a single sandbox for its entirety.

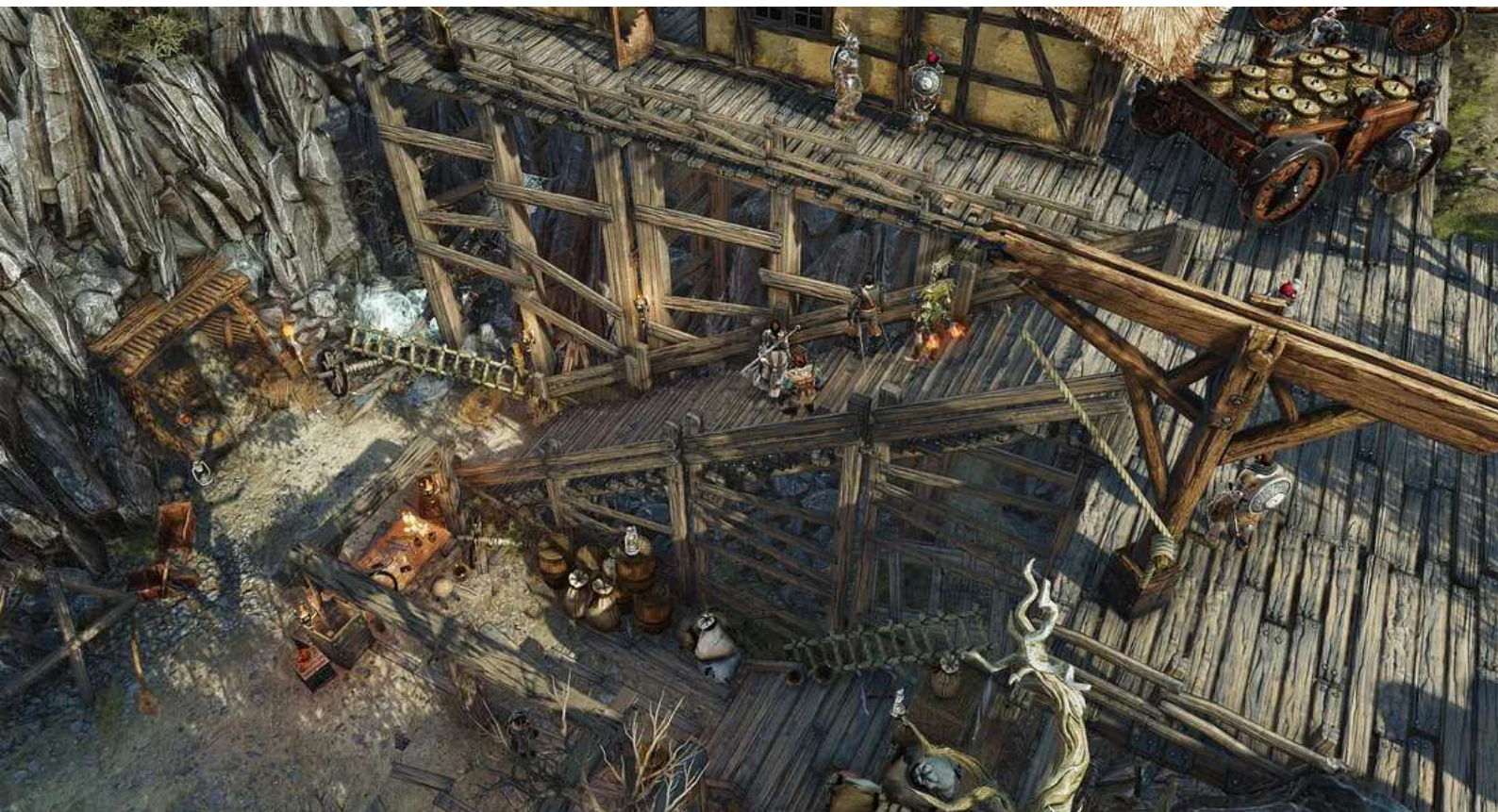
Traditional open-world design unfortunately fails to reward discovery and mastery of the sandbox, instead regressing to a flashy to-do list of errands that do nothing more but repeat banal activities across various points on the map. In these cases, the open-world barely expands on linear design, albeit needlessly extending the time taken to transition from one mission to another.

As the next-generation of consoles looms, feverish speculation has indicated that SSDs and an increase in raw computing power will allow for the realization of more expansive and realistic worlds. While this is all well and good, what use is a vast open-world without anything to do? When the player can't interact or alter an open world in any meaningful way, it's difficult to distinguish these meticulously crafted levels from static paintings.

Thankfully, there's plenty of titles capable of forging a reinvention for the genre that showcase just how eye-opening effective open design can be.

One game that spurred on this piece was Larian's exquisite RPG *Divinity: Original Sin II*, a title comprised of several open worlds that places player experimentation at the forefront. While *Divinity's* scope is nothing to shrug at, each area is fairly compact if compared to other RPGs of its ilk or its more detailed and accessible third-person cousins. Borrowing from its *Dungeons & Dragons* inspirations, *Divinity* truly shines in removing any and all limitations between the player and their world, both in exploration and combat.





Look at all those barrels!

Every door can be destroyed, every object is a potential instrument in battle, every character can be manipulated or murdered. Thanks to how reactive Larian's environments are, every choice and item has tangible ramifications throughout the world. When playing through with my co-op partner, there were countless moments of improvisation where attacking an oil barrel would ignite a hellish inferno or summoning a totem in blood would decay enemies. It's as malleable and exploitable as you make it; one [video](#) from The Spiffing Brit highlights how far telekinesis and a single chest can take you.

It is role-playing in the truest sense, instead of implementing genre aesthetics like skill trees or level upgrades without following through on their potential (\*cough\* *Assassin's Creed* \*cough\*). Some of the most fiendish puzzles involve casting specific elements in tandem to create vivid chain reactions, while deep exploration rewards players with hidden dungeons or entire quest-lines hidden in the peripheries. These are all concepts embedded in the open-world structure, but Larian critically makes them



*Divinity's* primary feature, channeling all of its quest and combat design through its responsive world.

This strategy of splitting a single open-world into several smaller sandboxes has other success stories too — just look at *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, one of the most critically acclaimed open-world games of the past generation. Even if its world is technically a cohesive whole, the design absolutely prioritizes crafting each region with its own visual flavor and while its interactions aren't as complex as *Divinity*, it retains its rewarding exploration and powerful sense of presence. Hopping outside the RPG genre reveals even more possibilities.



Any of these NPCs can be targets in Hitman's Contracts mode.

IO Interactive's *Hitman* reboots adopt the beloved open design of classic entries and magnifies it to an extraordinary level. Each contract is so much more than an arbitrary tailing mission; it's a full-on assassination playground where every NPC and every item is another addition to Agent 47's toolset.

Entering the Italian coastal town of Sapienza, I remember feeling awash with awe at the sheer scope of possibilities at my fingertips, *liberated* rather than exhausted. My approach was completely self-determined; even with a clear on-screen objective, there was nothing to dictate my method towards achieving it. Even better, *Hitman* offers a slew of tweaks that customize the extremes to which the game assists you. Mission Stories tailors the experience for players who would prefer a guided experience, while turning it off completely leaves you on your own, free to sniff out clues yourself or run wild and devise your own Rube Goldberg machine of death.

Open-linear hybrids have been creeping into a whole variety of recent AAA titles, particularly through Sony's first-party output, where both *God of War* and *The Last of Us: Part II* underwent a noticeable transformation in their moment-to-moment gameplay, thanks to the overwhelming influence of open design. In these cases, however, open design has elevated rather than intruded upon their past linear successes.

With *God of War*, the semi-open world traversable by boat created a space between intense combat where Kratos and Atreus' complicated father-son bond could be unraveled. The real-time nature of video game traversal is one of the medium's unique properties that *God of War* explores through its captivating single-shot narrative structure and expansive scope that swallows up its hack and slash predecessors.



The Last of Us: Part II's combat is as brutal as you make it.

The original *Last of Us* was hampered by its rudimentary gameplay systems that couldn't be saved even by its spectacular storytelling. With *Part II*, *Naughty Dog* incorporated open design to greatly expand player options and nuance impeccably tense stealth action. Any title compared favorably to *Metal Gear Solid* should be flattered; in *The Last of Us'* case, its wide levels and freedom of options instantly drew *Phantom Pain* comparisons for numerous players.

The early Hillcrest section is a showpiece for how open design allows *Naughty Dog's* narrative design, AI systems, and stealth mechanics to intersect in thrilling ways. Few gaming memories from this year rival laying a trap bomb in a second-floor bedroom doorway, hiding under a bed, and hearing the menacing growls of hounds patrolling below. This isn't an open-world game, but this situation felt handcrafted and generative thanks to the game's sandbox.



There's still a minimalist beauty found in linear design. In fact, the vast majority of my favorite modern games rarely veer off a beaten track. Looking ahead to the future, though, there is true potential in the open-world formula and how it can evidently enhance titles entrenched in a linear structure. The appeal of the open space - at least for me - is never the size of the space itself but the options it presents.

An enormous world map with a flurry of icons is an effective sedative; a beautifully crafted area with an array of tools and skills at my disposal is an adrenaline shot.

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