



## Interview with Nicolas Lietzau: Approaches to Storytelling, Worldbuilding and Fantasy Geographies in *Enderal* Mod and the *Twelfth World* Novels

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This essay is based on the interview with game developer and writer Nicolas Lietzau and focuses on the role of place and environmental storytelling in digital fantasy RPG (role-playing game) *Enderal: The Shards of Order / Forgotten Stories* (SureAI 2016/2019) and the approaches to narrative and worldbuilding that Lietzau adopted while working as a project lead for the game as well as in his ongoing work on his *Twelfth World* novel series (2019–). The essay offers perspectives from both production and reception points of view and draws on in-game content, earlier interviews with Lietzau,<sup>1</sup> and the interviews conducted by both authors: Evgenia Amey interviewed Lietzau in October 2023, and Garrett “Wereyoi” Moore interviewed Lietzau in 2018, during the creation of a four-part video analysis of *Enderal* on his YouTube channel.<sup>2</sup>

Focusing on the fantasy worlds of *Enderal* and *Twelfth World* novel series, we adopt cultural geography perspectives to consider approaches used in creating immersive fantasy settings and engaging narratives, while balancing the fantastic with coherence and realism with regards to worldbuilding. As examples of indie game development and fantasy writing outside of traditional publishing respectively, *Enderal* and *Twelfth World* allow the writer(s) relative creative freedom, also resulting in a more personal(ized) audience feedback,

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<sup>1</sup> See Angelarts “Enderal Project Lead & Author of Dreams of the Dying: Nicolas Lietzau Interview (Part 1),” “Let’s Interview Ben Britton & Nicolas Lietzau (Part 2),” and “Let’s Interview Ben Britton & Nicolas Lietzau (Part 3).”

<sup>2</sup> See Wereyoi’s “Enderal: A Retrospective | Part 1 – Mechanics” and “Enderal: A Retrospective | Part 2 – Story.”

which offers an opportunity to look more closely at how creators' (sometimes unconventional) approaches and decisions resonate with readers and players.

## **Enderal: The Shards of Order / Forgotten Stories and Nicolas Lietzau's Twelfth World Novel Series**

*Enderal*<sup>3</sup> is a full-conversion, non-commercial mod<sup>4</sup> for Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), by a German developer team, SureAI. *Enderal* is an open-world dark fantasy single-player RPG, and although it is built on the *Skyrim* engine,<sup>5</sup> it can be viewed as a game on its own – set in a unique world, containing original lore and narrative, being fully voice-acted (in English and in German), and featuring an original soundtrack – with a scope impressive for a non-commercial project. In addition to the core team of 7 to 10 developers, numerous other contributors included coders, testers, proofreaders, and more than a hundred voice actors,<sup>6</sup> who invested their time and effort as unpaid volunteers.

During the production of *Enderal*, writing was done alongside the development, which prioritized the narrative and ensured the confluence between narrative, audiovisual and ludic aspects. Lead developer and writer Nicolas Lietzau wrote the story, dialogue, and some of the in-game books. The approach adopted by SureAI resulted in a compelling, story-driven experience that many players appreciated. The mod enjoyed an overwhelmingly positive reception, winning in the category Best Fan Creation at the 2016 Game Awards and being added to the ModDB Hall of Fame. In Steam reviews<sup>7</sup> and online discussions on different platforms,<sup>8</sup> fans particularly praised *Enderal* for its engaging and complex storytelling, soundtrack, and fleshed-out and realistic characters, which also inspired a variety of fan productions (such as fanfiction and fanart) on platforms like Tumblr and Archive of Our Own (AO3).

With the game's release, Lietzau began working on a novel series, which was initially set in the universe of *Enderal* and explores the past of one of the main characters from the game, Jespar. In 2019, Lietzau serialized the first book in the series, *Dreams of the Dying*, on his Patreon and subsequently released it, with notable edits, as a self-published debut novel in 2020. The novel, which chronologically precedes the events of the game, can be read as a stand-alone, and knowledge of the game is not required to understand the plot.

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<sup>3</sup> First released in 2016 as *Enderal: The Shards of Order*, the mod was subsequently released on Steam in 2019 as *Enderal: Forgotten Stories* alongside the DLCs (downloadable content, i.e., additional content for an already released video game that must be downloaded separately). *Enderal* is free to play for anyone who owns a copy of *Skyrim*.

<sup>4</sup> Video game modding involves modification of aspects of a video game by means of software plug-ins, which are commonly produced by fans of the game (Gallagher, Jong, and Sinervo 32). See Rob Gallagher, Carolyn Jong, and Kalervo A. Sinervo's article "Who Wrote the Elder Scrolls? Modders, Developers, and the Mythology of Bethesda Softworks" for more information on *Skyrim* modding.

<sup>5</sup> See Weryoi's "Enderal: A Retrospective | Part 1 – Mechanics" for a detailed analysis of the overhaul of the base game.

<sup>6</sup> See the SureAI website, Weryoi "Part 1"

<sup>7</sup> See Steam page [https://store.steampowered.com/app/933480/Enderal\\_Forgotten\\_Stories/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/933480/Enderal_Forgotten_Stories/)

<sup>8</sup> See Reddit <https://www.reddit.com/r/enderal/>

In spring 2023, Lietzau issued a public announcement that due to a copyright claim, which made trademarking *Enderal* and producing further installments based in that universe problematic, thenceforth his novels would be set in a unique fictional universe, *The Twelfth World*.

## ***Enderal*: Fantastic Geographies, Environmental Storytelling and Sense of Place**

Exploring the fictional continent of *Enderal* in the course of the game, players encounter a variety of landscapes that include biomes ranging from snow-covered mountains and forests to deserts and jungles, and numerous locations, such as ruins, dungeons, and settlements. The story is delivered not only through quest content and dialogue, but also through overheard non-player character (NPC) conversations, bard songs, in-game books, and via environmental storytelling, soundtrack, and game mechanics. Environments in *Enderal* are actively utilized in telling the stories of particular areas, communities, and individual characters as well as the fictional world as a whole (Jenkins 122–126).<sup>9</sup> Echoing Paul Martin’s observation in his study of *Oblivion*, the narrative elements are embedded in the landscape of *Enderal*, and even if the player decides to ignore the main story, the growing threat to the world manifests in a variety of instances: physical evidence of recent events, NPC utterances, and attacks by characters who have succumbed to the Red Madness – a mysterious and spreading disease. Side quests tell their own story, often through narrative embedded in the environment and without the presence of characters, leaving the player to piece the past events together (Jenkins 123–125).

In some regions and locations, the player is given hints of what to expect by reading in-game books, listening to bard songs, and overhearing bits of NPC dialogue. The capital city, Ark, where the player can rest, buy supplies, and purchase a home and where the major part of the main story events take place, is divided into districts based on residents’ status and occupation. In each of those, not only the audiovisual representation of the place is different, but the player will be treated differently by NPCs, invoking different atmospheres and inviting different styles of gameplay. Through players’ connection to NPCs and to in-game locations, *space* becomes *place*, that is, space is imbued with meaning and a sense of place is created, as described in Edward Relph’s 1976 *Place and Placelessness* and Yi-Fu Tuan’s 1974 *Topophilia* and 1977 *Space and Place*.

In an interview conducted in October 2023, Amey discussed the role of place and examples of environmental storytelling in *Enderal* with Lietzau. The interview excerpts have been edited for readability.

**Evgenia Amey:** Regarding the various regions and different biomes, how did you come up with the idea of including this many or these particular ones? And how did you discuss it with the team? Was everyone just throwing out ideas or was it mostly up to you [as a writer and narrative designer]?

<sup>9</sup> Also see Westerside and Holopainen on environmental storytelling in video games. See Jansen on introducing a new dynamic to player-nature relationship in *Skyrim* through ecomodding.

**Nicolas Lietzau:** Well, half and half, I would say. There were certain biomes and regions that had a narrative purpose, so these were discussed beforehand. And besides that, we always knew that we wanted more biomes. Obviously, in video games, you sometimes have to cut corners in terms of realism because the transitions [between regions/biomes in games] are way too fast and some of this stuff wouldn't work in reality. But there was a driving factor in why we designed the world as we did – it was to have more visual diversity. Of course, there are some arguments for limiting something to a single setting, like *Skyrim* did, actually. But I think more diversity in [setting] is a lot better. So, that was one side of the coin, and the other was that some of the regions and areas were, of course, connected to the story.

**EA:** What was your favorite region, in the sense of geography and aura and also the narrative?

**NL:** Silvergrove was my favorite narratively, that's for sure, and there was also a great confluence between the story and the visuals. It came together quite nicely, I think, with this kind of uncanny beauty.

Silvergrove is an area visited during the main quest storyline. The seemingly idyllic, if eerie, seaside village is later revealed to have a darker side, which causes the player character to question the nature of reality during what has been considered by many players to be the most heart-wrenching quest in the game.

The uncanny, strangeness in the familiar, is also utilized in the prologue of the game. What seems to be the player character's childhood home evokes the atmosphere of an idyllic pastoral setting at the start before shattering into a nightmare.<sup>10</sup> Dreams play a significant role in the narrative, so when the player character revisits their childhood home in a dream, it creates an unsettling feeling due to an anticipated encounter with a person from the player character's past.

**EA:** I noticed in my own and others' playthroughs that with the place from the [Prologue quest] – since the first encounter with [someone the player character used to know, as mentioned above] isn't really a nice experience – when you are transported there again, it evokes a sort of topophobia. You are like “oh shit I'm in this place again. I'm going to see [him] again.”

With Silvergrove, it's more gradual. It is a nice-looking place, but [as I enter it in the game] I feel that something is very wrong there. Things are going too well. Everyone likes each other, and they do not want to leave. I don't know if any other medium can do it – to actually be there, walk around, hear these NPCs talking to each other, and you're like, “I'm getting a bad vibe.”

What I also found interesting is that you create a sense of place, the meaning of the place, not just pure geography and atmosphere. And sometimes already in advance, before the player even gets there.

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<sup>10</sup> See Paul Martin's “The Pastoral and the Sublime in *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*” on the sublime and pastoral settings in video games. See also Michael Sangyeob Lee's “Why are non-player characters not creepy anymore? The effect of schema creation on the perception of uncanniness in *Oblivion*” on the uncanny in video games.

**NL:** I think you touched upon something important with the sense of place. Every medium does that to a certain extent, and I think we can really feel it if it's well done. Something I came to realize a while ago – and most people would probably agree – is that games are nonlinear to a certain extent, especially open-world games, but I would argue that any interactive experience in any story is nonlinear. What I mean is that the narrative *is* linear, but you don't experience it in a linear fashion, and that everything touches upon something that happened previously. So, if I set up something at an early point in the story – and I think this again translates to every single creative medium – and then I put something else, let's say 60% into the [player/reader] experience, it changes how you see that early element. You are transported back. That's why I think “linear” is kind of misleading because, yes, a text and a movie and a game might be linear, but actually it's a construct. And you always go back. You go back and forth, and you recontextualize everything you experience.

And getting back to [the sense of place], I think that's why [the player has] this sensation you described in the dreamscape, like, “oh, shit,” it's because everything connects. You have the music, and the first time you get there, you just sense that something is amiss. There's a juxtaposition. You have some horror elements, but then you have this almost Arcadian beauty – the sunset and this beautiful house on the cliff – and so that works. But as you live through it again, as you have the dream again, you have so much more information now. You know what this theme music means. You know who this character is, and everything is starting to make sense. I think that's a very delicate and very fascinating way of creating immersion and actually infusing places with meaning. And because once you have established a certain symbol, whether it's visual, auditory, or contextual, then you can use these symbols to give meaning to your places and evoke certain reactions.

**EA:** And it resonates with our own experiences and other texts.

**NL:** Absolutely. It's intertextual. That's why it's interesting that in every game – especially if you work with humanoid characters or human-like characters and all that – it's almost impossible to create something that's entirely hermetic, completely isolated, and has no connection to the real world because it's connected to our experiences. It's connected to what happens in the world and the current Zeitgeist and all that.

Lietzau also mentions another region in the game, where, amidst the desolated landscape, the player encounters an abandoned village that had been struck by an extreme calamity in the middle of a celebration.

**NL:** I also really like Thalgard, the area that Max Ischreyt designed. I think that's a great example of environmental storytelling. There was no word spoken or no actual quests that took place there, but the visuals alone said so much. So that would probably be my second favorite area.

Thalgard and Whisperwood are two magically contaminated regions the player can explore. Part of the history of these regions is uncovered through in-game books, bard songs as well as side-quests, one of which gives the player a choice to help reverse the contamination in Whisperwood. When asked if, in making these areas, the developer team drew on actual-world ecological concerns, Lietzau commented:

**NL:** With Thalgard and the Whisperwood, it was Max [Ischreyt] and Johannes [Scheer] who created these areas. A lot of this was just their creative freedom, so I'm not sure if I can speak for them, but I will say that, of course, the idea of ecological disaster and that sort of dystopian, post-catastrophe landscape is obviously something that's very much on the minds of our generation. And also, it's something that deeply fascinates me in a sort of uncanny way.

## **Fantasy Worldbuilding: Worldview and Morality**

Worldbuilding can be described as “the process of creating a representation of a fictional world” and covers various aspects of the fictional setting that include geography, society, politics, economics, mythology, history, and the combination of all of these into a consistent and immersive whole (Hergenrader 17). Further conversation with Lietzau in October 2023 revealed how his worldview was reflected in the narrative, worldbuilding and character creation in both the game and his novels. Reflecting on literary and cultural influences that affected his work and discussing how the context of production (Lietzau writing as a German) is different from the context in which the game and the novel were going to be received by Anglophone and wider international audience, he observes: “So much of this is subconscious. Some things that I do in my storytelling, I didn't even know they were particularly German.” The transcultural reception of the game and the novel provide some interesting insights as do the conversations he has had with international fans. The ending(s) in the game, well-received and appreciated by many, has been perceived as “a downer” by a number of players in the US, to Lietzau’s surprise: “I always thought it was bittersweet. I don't think *Enderal* is pessimistic at all. The endings offer a ray of hope”, he comments.

As mentioned earlier, *Enderal* was particularly praised for the story, and Lietzau’s novel likewise received positive reviews. On the other hand, some elements of the narrative did not sit well with all the audience members (Angelarts, “Part 3” 01:01:20–01:01:48). In an earlier interview with Angelarts, Lietzau mentioned that he had received comments criticizing his depiction of the so-called villain in the novel in a humanizing manner and writing protagonists as flawed, which was, in his view, intentional and justified (“Part 3” 3:30–4:20; 8:40–9:10; 16:50–17:19; 01:05:45–01:06:04; 01:08:00–01:08:40; 01:12:05–01:14:21). Lietzau notes, when interviewed by Angelarts (“Part 3”, 01:12:05–01:14:21) and, later, by Amey (see excerpt below), that the idea of there being a thin line between good and evil may not be received well by some audiences, and he acknowledges that, among other things, German history has informed his worldview and influenced how he approaches writing characters in his stories, particularly with regards to morality.

**NL:** I do think that Germany has a very unique position with our role in the Second World War and the Holocaust, and you don't even realize how much that influences you. I think that for the Germans – and I don't want to generalize – but I think it's very hard to think in terms of good and evil. Ironically, it's harder if you're a German to think that some people are good and some people are bad because you know that your grandmother was probably with the bad guys. This understanding, perhaps it's a European thing as well, but I can just speak for myself. I feel like that aspect of my cultural identity really suffuses much of my work – that [good and evil are] like a gradient. You see Dachau here in Munich, you see the concentration camps [when you are] in middle school, you see all these images, and you know that these were actual people like your grandparents who did this.

In line with Lietzau's point of view, he makes sure that his characters do not fall into the extremes of being pure and honorable or, on the other hand, utterly immoral. They have well-outlined motivations and often conflicting obligations, which are reflected in the choices they make, or which the player can make in the game. Lietzau further reflects on how German and other European literature informed his writing in terms of style and themes, which could be regarded as dark and gritty by some readers and players:

**NL:** If I think about the narrative style, German books tend to be very long-winded for the international market because [in German literature] it's seen as a virtue to be not only profound, which I think is a good thing, but also you're supposed to critically examine fundamental aspects of the world and the human experience. ... And also, of course, I do think that German literature tends to be quite [dark]. Especially if you look at the Brothers Grimm and all these fairy tales.

## Writing Games and Novels: Production and Worldbuilding

Besides working on the novel series, Lietzau continues to work in game development. In earlier interviews, he mentioned that he always prioritizes narrative alongside other areas of game development, despite the common sentiment in the game development community “that nobody cares about the story, that people are just going to click through it” and that “storytelling doesn't matter” (Angelarts, “Part 2”, 42:35–42:57).

Interviewed by Amey in 2023, Lietzau talks about addressing aspects of worldbuilding in the novels after departing from the *Enderal* universe and the differences between writing for games and novel writing:

**EA:** If you compare writing for video games and novel writing, which process do you find more satisfactory or to your liking? Also, the freedom that you get, because now you have the novel in the *Twelfth World*, so you're no longer tied to *Enderal* in any way, what are your experiences regarding that?

**NL:** Freedom, yes. I have to say it was a difficult step. It was very much like “OK, now I can really do my thing and it's *my* thing now, and nobody can take that away from me.” Because it was just, even on top of the whole legal situation, that I was kind of frustrated as I developed as a writer – and I've been writing professionally for almost 10 years now – I did notice some things that I would have done differently or that I have felt restrained by. Whether it was Jespar's past and all that – though in general and broad strokes, it is still the same – but mostly some of the worldbuilding aspects were really holding me back. I felt, and it's not that I'm in any way ashamed of *Enderal* or anything like that, that the worldbuilding of a good book is just different. You think more deeply about certain things. You're kind of forced to because there's so much text and there are so many references all the time. You have to start wondering “OK, so was this catastrophe really a million years ago?” And then you realize, “Oh, had it been a million years ago, the world would look quite different. There won't be any ruins anymore.” So you start having to adjust this sort of stuff, and that's basically where I feel quite liberated.

As to comparing video games and novels, I would say that I do still love video game development deeply. [Working on] *Enderal* wasn't always easy, but we had so much creative freedom, and that was the only way a game like this could have been made, in my opinion. So, if I had the choice between video game development with an unlimited budget and great people or novel writing, then I would probably enjoy both equally. But for now, I'm enjoying the novel writing much more.

Before the edited version of *Dreams of the Dying* was published, Lietzau took the chance to perfect the text. He consulted a professional cartographer, a linguist, a zoologist, and a sword-fighting instructor to make different aspects of his world more consistent and, to a degree, realistic. Explanations for some of the changes are offered in the prologue of the book and are covered in detail in Lietzau's blog. One of his blog posts, for instance, describes the changes made to the map of a fictional archipelago, which serves as a setting for the novel, after a consultation with an expert: settlement placement and size, place names, and world origin were re-considered to make the fantasy setting more coherent (Niseamstories). Lietzau further commented on his approach:

“While there's absolutely nothing wrong with creating an unrealistic world, realism *does* affect the plausibility of a world. .... Taking these things into consideration will not only give your world more texture but might even provide you with some interesting plot points.” (emphasis in the original) (Niseamstories, “10 Lessons on Realistic Worldbuilding and Mapmaking”)

Establishing a unique universe in the *Twelfth World* also required changes and allowed for reworking of some of the aspects for consistency and further improvement. Lietzau commented in the interview in October 2023 that he has the story for the subsequent books in the series planned out but is open as to where the writing process will take him. He says he “would like to visit more locations as well, so long as they connect to the narrative in a meaningful way.” As of October 2024, the *Twelfth World* series is intended to be a tetralogy with the second book, *The Cure for Living*, forthcoming.



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