

**Fantasies of the North:  
Medievalism and Identity in *Skyrim***

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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The primary text of this thesis is *Skyrim*, a fantasy roleplaying game released in 2011 to huge commercial success and critical acclaim. Through this text, the project explores the intersection of medievalist fantasy, politics, and whiteness. It investigates the parallels between political medievalisms, playful medievalisms, and the ways in which medieval fantasy is used to reinvent or reaffirm white identities.

The Middle Ages, as a time period, an imagined geographic space, and an ideological concept, is often nostalgically recalled as a key element in Western nationalism and identity formation. *Skyrim* provides a major case study through which to interrogate the tropes of medieval fantasy in order to understand how the genre situates itself as a space of creativity and resistance, but in fact maintains conservative social values. Furthermore, it asks how players engage in identity play in medieval fantasy games, and to what extent *Skyrim*'s politics encourage discussion and reflection.

This thesis is highly interdisciplinary in its form and utilises multiple methodologies to explore the construction of the self and the other through medievalism in fantasy. Traditional humanities methods are combined with a survey of players' narrative choices and modes of identification with characters and factions within *Skyrim*, as well as analysis of 'gamer'-activism in popular politics.

Ultimately, although the games explored are established to be highly conservative in their modes of racial representation, the thesis finds that players are actively engaged in identity play. Although this is limited in many ways by game design—especially where medieval fantasy genre conventions are heeded—the potential for game worlds to destabilise racial boundaries and provide a space for identity play is acknowledged, opening up several avenues for further research in the fields of enquiry.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Games and Medievalism

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The harshness of Skyrim has a way of carving a man down to his true self.

General Tullius, *Skyrim*

The impetus for this project was an interest in the storytelling modes of medieval fantasy role-playing games, and the passion with which they are received. The Middle Ages, as both a time period and an ideological concept, is often used as a key element in Western identity formation. I am particularly interested in the parallels between political medievalisms, playful medievalisms, and the ways in which the Middle Ages are used to reinvent or legitimise white identities.

Patrick Geary discusses the utilisation of the Middle Ages in establishing nationalist myths in Europe. His introduction to *The Myth of Nations* particularly highlights the sentiment of heritage leading to a sense of being a *real* British, French, or German citizen.<sup>1</sup> This extends to Western nations beyond Europe, where the appeal to the European Middle Ages as a pre-founding birthplace has long had strong cultural currency. Geary uses the example of Thomas Jefferson wanting to depict Hengist and Horsa on the United States' seal. Supposedly the first Saxon chiefs to arrive in Britain, 'Jefferson argued that it was Hengist and Horsa 'from whom we claim the honor of being descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed.'<sup>2</sup>

This nostalgic reification of medieval cultures continues can be found in many examples throughout the last few centuries. In one such case, the Victorian reinvention of the Vikings functioned as part of the reframing of British culture as being noble seafaring adventurers, a convenient and understandable reflection on the

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Geary, pp. 6–7.

country's identity during a time of Empire-building expansion and colonisation.<sup>3</sup> The medieval images of knighthood and chivalry, along with Nordic purity and Hunnic savagery, were used during the World Wars in the early twentieth century by both Allied and Axis nations to solidify their own identity-related claims to moral—and racial—superiority and undermine their enemies.<sup>4</sup> More directly relevant to the genre, JRR Tolkien's hugely influential *Lord of the Rings* drew inspiration from his scholarly work on philology and medieval literature to create what has been called 'a mythology for England.'<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Tolkien expressed this sentiment in many of his letters, identifying Middle Earth strongly with Northern Europe.<sup>6</sup> The common thread amongst these examples is the solidification of a dominant, pre-existing hegemony. These are examples of cultures ostensibly looking backwards at their glorious histories to reveal a 'true' self, but really participating in a nostalgic reinvention of the past in order to explore, define, and legitimise their present values.

The use of the Middle Ages as a space for exploring identity, particularly privileged identities, is especially significant when taking place in digital, alternate worlds. Within digital role-playing games, players become the heroes of fantasy and are required to take an active role in the narrative. They create their own virtual identities and must interact with, rather than passively consume, the rhetoric of the pseudo-medieval environments in which they play. Fantasy is fundamentally the genre of creativity and imagination, the realm of possibility. In actuality, fantasy games often pride themselves on their believability, and the genre itself 'has a reputation... for being for and about white people.'<sup>7</sup> Medievalism is a tool of Western

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<sup>3</sup> See Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Stefan Goebel, 'Chivalrous Knights versus Iron Warriors: Representations of the Battle of Matériel and Slaughter in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940', in *Picture This: World War I Posters and Visual Culture*, ed. by Pearl James (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), pp. 79–110.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Chance, *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England*, 2nd revised edn (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Dimitra Fimi, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 163–65.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 1.

politics, art, and culture, and often plays a similar role across media in the construction of the self. Much like the previous examples, medieval fantasy continues to centre on nostalgic reimaginings of a white past in order to reinscribe the values of the white present.

Exploring the intersection of medievalist fantasy, politics, and whiteness is the overall aim of this thesis. By exploring how medievalism is in dialogue with identity construction in interactive media, I hope to make a contribution to both the fields of medieval studies and games studies. This project is self-consciously highly interdisciplinary and part of its value is in its willingness to experiment with different approaches and theoretical models. I am hopeful that this will provide new avenues of thought and encourage more critical readings of video games and culture, particularly from the field of Humanities. In terms of its approach to whiteness, the thesis works to problematise what is considered normal and obvious, to make peculiar the familiar. This is in recognition that, by its very nature, dominant ideology is typically rendered invisible or inherent. While this is recognised in whiteness studies, and the prevalence of whiteness in fantasy has been asserted, there is a dearth of work that attempts to articulate the interplay between white identity, current politics and the nostalgic Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> Helen Young's recently published *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature* works on the privilege of whiteness within fantasy and provides a broad look at the genre. The scope of this thesis is much narrower; it aims to provide a more detailed exposition of why and how games privilege and normalise dominant hegemony through their dialogue with the Middle Ages, and to map this onto real-world identity politics.

There is an even more significant lack of work on my primary text, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (henceforth, *Skyrim*). In its short lifespan the game has come to be genre-defining. Though not entirely ground-breaking in nature, it has been praised for the size, and depth of its world, and the immersive feeling engendered by its narrative

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<sup>8</sup> For examinations of whiteness, see Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997); Les Back and Vron Ware, *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics, and Culture* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002); For the most recent exploration of whiteness in fantasy, see Young.

and its use of new technologies.<sup>9</sup> *Skyrim* has become a benchmark, with games set in medieval worlds now measuring themselves against it, and often using these comparisons as a selling point.<sup>10</sup> As yet, there are no published, thesis-length studies on *Skyrim*.

## The Significance of Games

One thing is sure: with more than 95 million European adults playing video games regularly and 253 million games sold at retail in 2009 (with a value of over 8 billion Euros) [Source: Screen Digest Dec 2009], it is important that the industry and policy makers keep in mind the games' place in society.

Simon Little, Managing Director, Interactive Software Federation of Europe<sup>11</sup>

The computer and video game market has grown exponentially in its short half-century history. The Interactive Software Federation of Europe's (ISFE) 2012 European study on games showed that over 25% of those surveyed play games at least once a week, suggesting that one in four European adults could be classified as a regular 'gamer.'<sup>12</sup> In North America, the 2016 survey by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) finds that 63% of U.S. households have at least one person who

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<sup>9</sup> See chapter two for a fuller discussion of *Skyrim*'s approach to creating an immersive world.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the unreleased *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is widely described and praised as being just like *Skyrim* but without supernatural elements: Kevin Dunsmore, 'E3 2015: *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* Is *Skyrim* without Magic', *Hardcore Gamer*, 2015 <<http://www.hardcoregamer.com/2015/06/26/e3-2015-kingdom-come-deliverance-is-skyrim-without-magic/155984/>> [accessed 29 April 2016]; Lorenzo Veloria, '*Kingdom Come: Deliverance* Is a Historically Accurate *Skyrim*', *Gamesradar*, 2016 <<http://www.gamesradar.com/kingdom-come-deliverance-historically-accurate-skyrim/>> [accessed 21 May 2016].

<sup>11</sup> GameVision Europe, *Video Gamers in Europe in 2010* (Interactive Software Federation of Europe, 2010), p. 2 <<http://www.isfe.eu/sites/isfe.eu/files>> [accessed 15 June 2012].

<sup>12</sup> Interactive Software Federation of Europe, *Videogames in Europe: Consumer Study*, European Summary Report, 2012, p. 5 <<http://www.isfe.eu/videogames-europe-2012-consumer-study>> [accessed 29 April 2016].

plays video games for three or more hours per week.<sup>13</sup> The industry is also hugely profitable. Consumers spent a total of \$23.5 billion on the gaming industry—including content, hardware and accessories—in the U.S. in 2015, and the industry was worth nearly £4.2 billion in 2015, an increase of 7.4% from the previous year.<sup>14</sup>

Gaming has become a mainstream activity that can no longer be regarded as the niche hobby of a small subset of people. Though the stereotype persists, games are enjoyed by a much wider variety of people than the young, white males stereotypically associated with gaming.<sup>15</sup> Developers have recognised their wide demographic and are slowly making efforts to embrace and market towards their growing audience, working towards increasing its diversity. Indeed, a recent focus of the industry has been becoming more sensitive to the growing number of female players. The most recent survey by the ESA demonstrates that women represent 41% of the game-playing population, and the ISFE similarly found that 43% of European players were female.<sup>16</sup> Feminist scholars and writers in particular have long been drawing attention to gender inequality in games and gaming culture.<sup>17</sup> This desire for equality and fair, non-stereotypical representation extends to race, sexuality, and ethnicity, both within academia and the games industry itself.<sup>18</sup> The rapid growth of

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<sup>13</sup> Entertainment Software Association, *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry* (USA, 2016), p. 2 <<http://essentialfacts.theesa.com>> [accessed 19 May 2016].

<sup>14</sup> Entertainment Software Association, p. 13; UK Interactive Entertainment, ‘The Games Industry in Numbers’, *UKIE*, 2015, para. 7 <<http://ukie.org.uk/research>> [accessed 21 April 2016].

<sup>15</sup> For an assessment of gender framing in video game coverage and the social construction of age in gaming from 1970-2000, which finds that the media construction of games tends to propagate the stereotype of games being dominated by male adolescents, see Dmitri Williams, ‘The Video Game Lightning Rod’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 6.4 (2003), 523–50 (pp. 529–37).

<sup>16</sup> Entertainment Software Association, p. 3; Interactive Software Federation of Europe, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Compare, for example, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, ed. by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (London: MIT Press, 2000); *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, ed. by Yasmin Bettina Kafai (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Dmitri Williams, ‘Who Plays, How Much and Why? Debunking the Stereotypical Gamer Profile’, *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 13 (2008), 993–1018; David Leonard, ‘The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies’, *Games and Culture*, 1 (2006), 83–88; Christine Caruana, ‘One Game Designer’s Mission to Address Gay Issues

the gaming audience and the notable advancements in the technologies used for interactive entertainment have given credence to the idea that games can be considered a form of entertainment that is becoming elevated to the same level as literature and film in its position as an art form and cultural artefact. The past decade has seen an increasing amount of academic research, in both the humanities and sciences, dedicated to analysing games and understanding players and play itself. Games studies is a fairly new but growing field that covers a broad range of topics across games, from analysing storytelling in interactive entertainment to understanding gaming culture.<sup>19</sup> The influence and impact of games on culture, and vice versa, is significant and the field of games studies is highly interdisciplinary. It now includes many researchers from fields including psychology, child development and cultural studies who are aware of the impact the massively popular form of media will have on its consumers and on culture at large.

Games themselves are growing in complexity and function and, in recent years, the games industry has worked to create games that are able to convey meaningful stories through meaningful play. Salen and Zimmerman consider meaningful play, player's actions effecting outcomes that create meaning, as the goal of successful game design.<sup>20</sup> This can take the form of a simplistic, 'mechanical' response, such as directing the avatar to pick a lock which then opens a door, or a wider, more complex set of reactions, such as a game environment and its narrative changing in response to the player's choices. The latter is a common strategy of the role-playing games in which this thesis is interested.

Many games have at least some form of narrative, often in the form of a backstory that informs gameplay. Even a game as simple as *Space Invaders* suggests a narrative, even if a fairly uncomplicated one. The player must protect their planet from alien invasion; should they fail, their planet is destroyed.<sup>21</sup> More complicated

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in Video Games', *Computer and Video Games*, 20 June 2012  
<<http://www.computerandvideogames.com/354471/one-game-designers-mission-to-address-gay-issues-in-video-games>> [accessed 18 December 2012].

<sup>19</sup> See journals such as *Game Studies*; *Games and Culture*; *Eludamos*; *Loading...*

<sup>20</sup> Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 30–38.

<sup>21</sup> Tomohiro Nishikado, *Space Invaders*, Arcade Taito 8080 (Tokyo, Japan: Taito, 1978).

narratives were seen as early as 1981 when Nintendo's *Donkey Kong* made the first use of cut scenes to show how the story unfolded.<sup>22</sup> Narrative construction in games has evolved dramatically from these simplistic origins. Developers continue to push the boundaries of the medium's potential for storytelling through crafting rich game worlds containing complex cultural and visual, as well as traditional, narratives in order to create an immersive experience. These games work to tell powerful stories which are given meaning by the player's active participation.

While not all games explicitly intend to tell complex stories, many of the most popular and best-selling titles are those that actively try to engage their players with a meaningful narrative. Though developers and consumers often make the story within a game the focus of attention in interviews and reviews, the concept of narrative within games has been something of a contentious issue amongst early games scholars. A major topic in the early days of games studies was the debate between ludologists and narratologists who struggled to agree on the best way to define, analyse and understand video games. Some felt that comparing games to already-existing media and using literary or narrative-based terminology was a useful starting point in game analysis whilst others argued that the interactive qualities of games make them too dissimilar to literature and cinema to use well-established analytical tools, theories and rules devised specifically for those types of media.<sup>23</sup> This debate is no-longer commonplace in games studies with many scholars agreeing that games contain both narrative and formal elements, and that neither should hold a privileged position in games studies.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, this study works brings together traditional literary and cultural theory with theories of play in order to unpack the rhetoric, both procedural and traditional, of games.

Games have long included narratives to drive the player forward. The most common form of linear, traditional storytelling found in early games was mostly

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<sup>22</sup> Nintendo, *Donkey Kong*, Arcade (Kyoto, Japan: Nintendo, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> For an overview of this debate, see Jan Simons, 'Narrative, Games, and Theory', *Games Studies*, 7.1 (2007) <<http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/simons>> [accessed 10 June 2012].

<sup>24</sup> See Jesper Juul, 'Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives', *Games Studies*, 1.1 (2001) <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts>> [accessed 10 June 2012]; Janet Murray, 'The Last Word on Ludology v. Narratology in Games Studies' (presented at the DiGRA, Montreal, 2005) <<http://lmc.gatech.edu/~murray/digra05/lastword.pdf>> [accessed 14 November 2012].

textual. Large elements of the plot would be revealed through on-screen text, often through speech-bubble dialogue. As game engines and the graphical capabilities of computers and consoles improved, games saw the addition of film-like ‘cutscenes’ that added a cinematic element to gameplay alongside greatly improved character animation that has allowed programmers to synchronise voices with their characters’ movements, and to animate lifelike body language and facial expressions.<sup>25</sup> These advances have added to the sense of realism for which many games strive, and have also enabled developers to tell stories and develop characters in much more compelling ways than was previously possible.<sup>26</sup> Games are an interactive medium governed by rules and are unlike cinema and literature which, as Eskelinen and Tronstad and others have noted, ‘only require interpretive activity from their readers, spectators and consumers.’<sup>27</sup> While we should not overlook the interactive elements and the formal, rule-based structure of games—rules are, of course, one of the defining characteristics of any game—it would be similarly unwise to dismiss the literary and cinematic elements of games in the exposition of story and character. Though some scholars have argued against the use of literary theory in deconstructing and understanding games, the fact that the medium shares some of the characteristics and modes of exposition of literature and cinema means that some concepts may be of use to us, much in the way certain literary concepts were of use to scholars of film studies in that field’s infancy. Furthermore, many concepts that originated in literary studies are adapted and built upon by other forms of media. Many elements that would usually be associated with literature and, more particularly, film and theatre are staples of a great deal of modern game design, including storywriting, scriptwriting, world-building, costuming and acting. Film and literary theory can be used productively to deconstruct and understand these shared elements. One straightforward example of where conventional film theory might be applied is to cutscenes. Also tellingly known

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<sup>25</sup> Extensive cutscenes were first used in arcade games the early 1980’s, and were used in home computer games by the late 1980’s. Though they provide a similar function in terms of advancing the story, it was not until the graphical improvements of the 1990’s that cutscenes could really be considered cinematic in nature.

<sup>26</sup> The idea of realism in games is discussed and problematised in chapter 2.

<sup>27</sup> Markku Eskelinen and Ragnhild Tronstad, ‘Video Games and Configurative Performances’, in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), pp. 195–220 (p. 197).

as cinematics, these pre-determined, usually non-interactive, scenes are a popular means of advancing the narrative and their form adopts traditional cinematic techniques from the use of music to the style of camera shots. While stories and narrative should not be focused on at the expense of the medium itself, their role, and the usefulness of interdisciplinary concepts, should not be downplayed. Jesper Juul's more recent work has demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the role played by narrative within games and he argues, in what I suggest is the most profitable way to study games, that 'video games are rules *and* fiction,' that stories and narrative play a large and undeniable role in games alongside the formal rules and structures that make the form so different from other media: 'on an experimental level, fiction *matters* in games, and it is important to remember the duality of the formal and the experimental perspective on fiction in games.'<sup>28</sup>

While all of the previously discussed elements are used to some degree in almost all modern games, the combination of story and immersion is one of the top priorities for developers of role-playing games, and the depth and impact of the narrative is a feature of role-playing games that is prioritised and highly discussed in reviews and advertising. The role-playing genre as found in computer games began in table-top games, sometimes known as pen-and-paper games. Usually played with dice, these are social games in which players describe their character's actions in order to progress through the game, and are a form of collaborative storytelling. In these games one participant is the game master and usually sets the rules, describes the scenery, leads the narrative and acts as arbiter. In computer role-playing games, the game developers take the role of the game-master and create a world, non-player characters and a storyline with which the player can explore and interact. The general idea of a role-playing game, that one may play with and act out a fantasy that is based on the character they create, is highly interesting in terms of what a player may learn or take away from the experience. Film and literature may provide the audience with the opportunity to see a story from a different perspective and to experience narrative through a scripted, primary character, but role-playing games have the potential to

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<sup>28</sup> Jesper Juul, *Half-Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 12, 199; For an exploration of the various ways narrative might be defined in games, see Juul, 'Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives'.

place the player into an alternate subjectivity, to creatively experiment with actions and identity.

Several of the most successful modern role-playing games feature mechanisms that allow player choice to have some degree of influence on the progress and outcome of the story. Though the path can be non-linear, in most games the player is encouraged to progress through the story with the main aim of reaching its conclusion. One might choose to complete extra non-essential missions, commonly known as side-quests, but generally the game's narrative drives the player to continue towards the conclusion of the story at which point the game is considered completed. Open-world role-playing games, on the other hand, are different in that they typically have fewer clearly defined win-lose narrative situations and provide fewer limitations on the way, and the order in which, the story is experienced. Games such as *Minecraft* and *The Sims* series are sandbox-style games in which players are able to simply explore the game and express their creativity—and even adjust the world to change the way they play—without being forced to complete objectives or reach a pre-defined winning scenario. More traditional role-playing games, such as the *Mass Effect* series and *Deus Ex*, sometimes allow the player's choices to affect the outcome of the game, but still require the player to make the conventional progression towards the end of the game, to the completion of the story.<sup>29</sup>

Combining a role-playing game with an open-world game has the potential to provide the player with an opportunity for rich, engaging and creative play, something the developers behind *The Elder Scrolls* series of games have been working towards in their long-running series which promises the player can become 'any type of character you can imagine, and do whatever you want; [in *Skyrim*] the legendary freedom of choice, storytelling, and adventure of The Elder Scrolls comes to life like never before.'<sup>30</sup> This potential for exploration of the self through meaningful play in an interactive environment is central to this project. The negotiation of racial and

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<sup>29</sup> *Minecraft*, Mojang (Mojang, 2011); *The Sims*, Maxis (Electronic Arts, 2000); *Mass Effect*, Bioware (Microsoft Game Studios, 2007); *Deus Ex*, Ion Storm Inc. (Eidos Interactive, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.elderscrolls.com/skyrim>

ethnic identity and self through a digital avatar is a focus of current games research.<sup>31</sup> Interrogating this negotiation alongside the pseudo-historical dialogue of medieval fantasy provides an insight into the political nature of fantasy games and identity.

## Medieval Fantasy

It is difficult to define what exactly is meant when referring to a medieval(ist) fantasy game. There are those games which market themselves directly as ‘medieval,’ being explicit in their commitment to providing an accurate depiction of the Middle Ages, whether based on historical events or figures, or simply telling a story that conveys a *realistic* medieval experience.<sup>32</sup> Other games utilise the well-worn tropes of medieval fantasy to construct a world that, while clearly not grounded in the real world, feels like an *authentic* representation of a medieval past even if not an academically identifiable past. These games are often less limited in their use of fantasy tropes, working with a bricolage of medievalisms, modern and pre-modern elements to create a world that is distinctive and playful, yet recognisably medieval.<sup>33</sup>

Some prefer to use the term ‘neomedieval’ to refer to games that fantasise about the Middle Ages. The ever-changing nature of this term, however, is inherently problematic. The ephemeral quality of ‘neomedieval’ is crucial to its use in describing fragmentary concepts, whether in art or politics.<sup>34</sup> Its very broad application and usage, however, has led me to prefer its more abstract use in referring to the concept of fragmentation in medieval re-imaginings and their resistance of definition, rather than to describe medieval fantasy games more generally as such. This project favours ‘medieval(ist) fantasy,’ or ‘pseudo-medieval’ to refer to games that imagine and

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<sup>31</sup> David R. Dietrich, ‘Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters’, *Sociological Inquiry*, 83.1 (2013), 82–105; D. Williams, T. L. M. Kennedy and R. J. Moore, ‘Behind the Avatar: The Patterns, Practices, and Functions of Role Playing in MMOs’, *Games and Culture*, 6.2 (2011), 171–200; Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White, *Race after the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Paradox Development Studio, *Crusader Kings II* (Stockholm: Paradox Interactive, 2012); Warhorse Studios, *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Prague: Warhorse Studios, 2017).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Blizzard Entertainment, *World of Warcraft* (Irvine: Blizzard Entertainment, 2005); BioWare, *Dragon Age* (Electronic Arts, 2009); The Sims Studio, *The Sims Medieval* (Electronic Arts, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> See chapter three.

reimagine a medieval world, and reserves ‘medieval’ for the description of the historical time period.

This thesis primarily focuses on *Skyrim*, a game set in a recognisably medieval world that takes inspiration from real-world medieval Europe, particularly the history and literature of medieval Scandinavia. In a short video interview with art director Matt Carofano on the art of *Skyrim*, various books on Vikings can be seen in the background of the studio.<sup>35</sup> In a podcast, Carofano also explained that the team wanted to create a more rugged medieval world with depth and complexity. The team suggest that ‘though *Skyrim*’s Nords share some similarities to real-world Vikings, the likeness is superficial – the Nords have their own distinct cultural history.’<sup>36</sup> This is something of a truism, as all Viking-inspired fantasy games provide what we might think of as a superficial representation of Viking culture. Although it is fair to say that Nord history does not map directly onto Viking history, the motifs and cultural borrowing are such that the group is easily read through the Viking archetype, and the setting is explicitly the pseudo-medieval North. As will be explored, the significance of this is the construction of a Northern medieval locale that acts as a space for the reinscribing of myths of white history and white nostalgia.

Not only does *Skyrim* provide a direct and usefully typical example of the genre, it lends itself to being a helpful primary text as its success had led it to become a defining game in the genre. It is one of the most commercially successful games of all time, selling over twenty million copies across multiple platforms.<sup>37</sup> Thus, while other, similar games will be used in minor case studies to demonstrate patterns across the genre, *Skyrim* serves as the primary text for interrogation throughout.

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<sup>35</sup> Ben Hanson, ‘The Art of *Skyrim*’, *www.GameInformer.com*, 2011 <<http://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2011/01/26/the-art-of-skyrim>> [accessed 18 April 2016].

<sup>36</sup> Ray Lederer and Adam Adamowicz, ‘Completely Blue Sky: The Concept of *Skyrim*’, *The Elder Scrolls Official Site*, n.d. <<http://www.elderscrolls.com/community/completely-blue-sky-concept-skyrim-0>> [accessed 30 January 2015].

<sup>37</sup> Jessica Finster, ‘The Elder Scrolls Online Voice Cast Revealed’, *Bethesda Blog*, 2014, para. 7 <<http://www.bethblog.com/2014/01/23/the-elder-scrolls-online-voice-cast-revealed>> [accessed 29 June 2016].

## Methodology

The field of games studies is broad, and scholars are still developing means of analysis unique to and tailored specifically for games, and there is no agreed upon methodology. Some scholars, such as Aarseth, Perron and Wolf, privilege the playing of games above all else, while others note that play does not necessarily have to be the central method.<sup>38</sup> Coming from an English Literature background, I have opted to take a mixed-methods approach to analysis. Firstly, my own gameplay is central to forming a reading of the text. This reading is further generated and articulated by utilising traditional literary and cultural theory alongside an exploration of the rules and procedures of games in order to allow for the fullest examination of the way identity is constructed on both narrative and procedural levels in *Skyrim*. Thus, the thesis explores the dialogue, imagery, languages and material culture, and deconstructs the world to discover its values. These readings have then been linked with modern theories of culture and identity to see how *Skyrim* fits in, explores, destabilises or is in dialogue with the space of its production and the space of its setting.

The very nature of games as an interactive medium means that no two players will have exactly the same experience. This is further accentuated by the non-linear narratives and the open environments utilised by *Skyrim* and many other modern games. Within *Skyrim*, a player may opt to spend several hours exploring and completing all of the available missions in a certain area, and in doing so become very familiar and attached to that location and its inhabitants. This area might form an integral part of their game experience. Conversely, another player may never even visit that location, and thus their recollection of the game, its story, and what was important to them could be quite different. I have tried to control for the non-linear, open-world nature of *Skyrim* by utilising examples from primary narratives that are difficult to avoid, and fundamental aspects of gameplay. Each of these points of analysis were chosen for their relative visibility in the game and thus the likelihood

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<sup>38</sup> Garry Crawford et. al., 'It's Not Just a Game: Contemporary Challenges for Games Research and the Internet', in *Gamers: The Social and Cultural Significance of Online Games*, ed. by Garry Crawford, Victoria K. Gosling, and Ben Light (Routledge, 2013), pp. 281–94.

that it has been experienced by the vast majority of players. When examining in-game artefacts, I opted for *Skyrim*'s two maps as a case study.<sup>39</sup> The in-game map is an important part of the user interface, and the parchment map is seen throughout the game world and is also used in the game's marketing. As such, it felt safe to assume that these maps will almost definitely have been viewed by most, if not all, players. The only extended block of gameplay which is analysed in detail is the game's opening chapter.<sup>40</sup> This section takes the same form for all players and must be played at the beginning of each new game. Another primary case study in the thesis is the character creation kit. This is the default interface through which all players must make a character in order to play the game.

The interactive nature of games and the way that meaning is created through play makes the responses of players an important area for analysis. Thus, the main literary theory subtly at work throughout this thesis is reader response. The fundamentals established by Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss operate throughout my investigation. This values the implied reader over the text itself; the text must be experienced in order to generate meaning, and this meaning arises from the reader's own background, culture, and their expectations of the text.<sup>41</sup> Exploring how players interpret the game's politics and how they engage in identity play is crucial for the applicability of the research. Firstly, I conducted a survey of player choices and preferences in *Skyrim* in 2012, not long after the game's release. Throughout the thesis I have also made occasional reference to player responses and discussions posted on public forums and online spaces, as well as in the form of blogs. While these discussions provide a useful supplement to the responses to my own survey, the bulk of my evidence is typically not placed upon these as they occur in an uncontrolled environment. It is, in some ways, an advantage that these spaces are free from some of the typical limitations of interactive studies, where participants may be encouraged or discouraged from giving natural responses by the formal setup of the investigation. It cannot be ignored, however, that the lack of contextual structure and anonymity of such spaces limits the extent to which I can apply the data.

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<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 2: Cartography.

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>41</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

## Survey: Design

In order to develop a picture of the kinds of narrative choices made by players I developed an online survey. I also wanted to understand whether players applied their own moral frameworks onto games, and to what extent they identified with factions and racial groups within the game. To gain data on these topics I collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative questions helped provide context for the player's responses and gave me a starting point for understanding the decisions made by players, but the qualitative data was of prime importance in being able to explore player's rationale.

After each question the participants were asked for the reasoning or to provide comments on their previous statement. Thus, bulk of the data is qualitative. I have followed Sturtevant's example in prioritising qualitative data in my analysis as it better allows the exploration of complex social phenomena.<sup>42</sup> A limitation of my survey is that it was unable to measure the subtleties of language and pursue follow-questions as is possible in in-person focus groups and interviews. Despite this, the open-ended questions and space for participant commentary in the survey allowed players the opportunity to explain and clarify their rationales in their own words, enabling me to explore the way that they receive and interpret *Skyrim*. Conducting the survey online allowed me access to participants of multiple nationalities and potentially increased the societal spread of my sample. It also placed distance between the researcher and the participant, going some way to reduce deference to the researcher.

The survey consisted of 14 questions, each referring to key choices the player must make in the game, and their own preferences for in-game factions. I also gathered data on age, gender, and nationality in order to establish whether there were patterns of play based on those criteria. Although it is possible to restart the game an infinite number of times, the participants were asked to use their first/primary playthrough of the game when recounting their experiences. This was clarified as

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<sup>42</sup> Paul B. Sturtevant, 'Based on a True History?: The Impact of Popular "Medieval Film" on the Public Understanding of the Middle Ages' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2010), pp. 55–56.

there is prior evidence that players create a “main” character in RPGs, one which is their preferred or most important.<sup>43</sup>

Participants were recruited online through social media communities such as Twitter and Reddit. People shared the survey amongst their own networks and I amassed 299 responses over the course of one week. As this was a fairly general survey intended to be used alongside comments from online forums and reviews, there were very few restrictions on the survey sample aside from an age requirement of 18 years (in order to comply with ethical guidelines), and the requirement that the participant had played at least some of *Skyrim*. Thus, the sample was comprised of participants who self-identified as players of *Skyrim*. As it is difficult, if not impossible, to define the end-point of *Skyrim*, I did not specify that participants should have completed the game.

Standard ethical protocols for my institution were followed and the project received approval from the ethical committee. Alongside specifying an age requirement, a prime ethical consideration was ensuring the anonymity of participants. No personal data, such as names, were collected, and identifying data such as IP addresses were not recorded.

Although I was concerned with the politics of identity and the relationship of the Middle Ages to fantasy, I wanted to investigate whether players would make connections to those topics without prompts. For this reason I did not ask questions or make any references to real world politics or the Middle Ages in the body of the survey.

When compiling the questions I omitted to ask for the racial identity of the respondent. While thinking about the intersection of nostalgia, politics and cultural identity, I felt it important to ask about the players’ national identities alongside choices and preferences, and the way that they interacted with and identified with factions in the game. Only later in the project did it become obvious that I had been unconscious to the invisibility of whiteness and the importance of race in construction of the Western self, and this invisibility has formed a key element in the exploration

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<sup>43</sup> Katherine Bessière, A. Fleming Seay and Sara Kiesler, ‘The Ideal Elf: Identity Exploration in World of Warcraft’, *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 10.4 (2007), 530–35 (p. 531).

of the text's normative depiction of whiteness. Thus, although race forms an important part of the thesis, participants' responses cannot be correlated with their own racial identities. This limitation is reflected upon further in the conclusion.<sup>44</sup>

The qualitative data was analysed using an inductive approach to identify and generate meaning from raw data through categorisation and identification of common themes.<sup>45</sup> At the time of this research there is no published data available on player choice and identity in *Skyrim* or on identity formation in medieval role-playing games. The dearth of work in this area directed me to gather data and examine it for commonalities in order to create a reference point for my own readings, and a starting point for further work in the field. Thomas' general inductive approach is adopted as a straightforward method that enables the researcher 'to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data.... And to develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the text data.'<sup>46</sup>

After closely reading through the responses multiple times, categories were devised based on the common themes that emerged. The responses were then categorised by themes or general ideas. Responses within themes were then subcategorised based on meaning, sentiment, or other subtleties. For example, an association of *Skyrim*'s factions with real world politics might be further subcategorised by positive or negative sentiment. The themes that emerged supplemented my gameplay and informed my readings of *Skyrim* throughout the thesis, and have been discussed where relevant. Where I have directly quoted a participant, a number follows which corresponds to the question to which they were responding. Charts and tables showing quantitative results are in Appendix 1.<sup>47</sup> The numbered questions can be found in Appendix 2.

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<sup>44</sup> See pp. 172-3.

<sup>45</sup> David R. Thomas, 'A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data', *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27.2 (2006), 237-46 (p. 241).

<sup>46</sup> Thomas, p. 238.

<sup>47</sup> Note that the number of complete responses to each section differs slightly as questions could be left unanswered if desired.

## Project Outline

In fantasy, the Middle Ages is more than a time period. It is linked with distinctive narrative elements, topographies, and ideologies that create a particular narrative and visual space. In medieval fantasy where magic and the supernatural often feature alongside the more mundane medieval topoi, the imagined space is often the foundational aspect of the narrative, helping to create a sense of internal logic and consistency. When grounded in the popular perception of the medieval, even fantastical worlds can come to be considered realistic.

By its very nature, fantasy is a genre of imagination, creativity, and speculation. Rather than embrace the absurd, however, medieval fantasy role-playing games usually work hard to make themselves believable, becoming immersive and seeming authentic, thus having the quality of being a true alternate *reality*. Often, the player's sense of authenticity is appealed to through the clever deployment of medievalist tropes, blurring the lines between history and invention. Though the tropes of fantasy are based mostly on the popular conception of the Middle Ages, they still retain a sense of historical legitimacy. The belief in medieval fantasy, even if only in its ability to depict cultural historical truths rather than academic historical understanding, is key to the power of the genre. Thus, the first chapter explores pseudo-medieval world-building in order to understand how 'realism' is a valuable concept to game-spaces, and establishes how 'believability' in a pre-modern, medieval society is achieved in *Skyrim* through its appeal to the realist mode. This section also works to problematise the implicit suggestion that the realist mode is developed as part of an objective perception of the world rather than as a construct particular to certain cultures, particularly the western culture from which the game arose. This un-interrogated sense of seemingly objective knowledge is significant in that it is another aspect of ideological invisibility that runs throughout the thesis.

Fantasy games are, naturally, playful in their construction of medieval environments. They often rely on the construction of an internal history to create depth within the imagined world, as well as manipulating and incorporating real-world understandings of history in order to appeal to historical authenticity. This is done in a variety of ways, using graphics and advanced simulation technology, space and landscape, and artistic and material culture. This chapter selects a few of these

elements: animation mechanics; cartography, both within the game-world and as part of the user interface; and the depiction of in-game religion. It asserts that, in a variety of ways, *Skyrim* is rather conservative in its approach to realism, and also in the ideas it reinscribes regarding what its audience might consider to be medieval.

The main story in *Skyrim* concerns the prophesied return of dragons to Skyrim, led by Alduin, the World Eater. The reappearance of these destructive dragons foreshadows the end of the world, an event which can be stopped only by the player. The player takes up the role of the Dragonborn, a person born with an ancient power gifted by the gods. The rather typical apocalyptic plot is framed by another archetypal subplot: political rebellion of freedom fighters working against foreign colonisers. The second chapter investigates how *Skyrim* engages, whether deliberately or not, with modern politics, particularly with nationalism and Neoconservatism.

Beginning with an investigation into the use of medievalism in politics to demonstrate its common connection with right-wing, anti-globalist attitudes, this chapter explores the popular notion that games are apolitical, a desire expressed through the anti-intellectual Gamergate movement. This chapter explores neomedievalism as a political concept, and also discusses the use of the term as applied to art and entertainment. The Middle Ages remain a topic of cultural significance in the West, as a site of nostalgic identity formation and a space for exploring the West as the legacy of the Middle Ages. This section asks to what extent medieval fantasy functions as a proving ground for political anxiety, particularly where these anxieties relate to nation and identity, and how far *Skyrim* provides a space for political experimentation. It argues that *Skyrim*, though ostensibly presenting the choice for political experimentation and expression, upholds its political normativity throughout, consistent with the conditions around its production.

This chapter also lays the groundwork for the importance of political and cultural identity in fantasy and for the topic of whiteness in crisis. The Gamergate movement serves as a micro example of a privileged community reframing itself as marginal and oppressed through its fear of becoming flooded or diluted by outside identities. More specifically, the movement shows the fragility of white masculinity and the anxieties that can be resisted and quieted through pseudo-medieval play. This real-world example is mapped onto the political usage of medievalism as demonstrated within *Skyrim*.

In order to explore the privileging of whiteness in medieval role-playing games, it is important to establish how non-whiteness is formulated and what function it serves within the text and the genre more broadly. Representations of the other often serve as a foil for the construction of the self, and the racialised groups in *Skyrim* constitute the knowable other in subtle contrast to the unquestioned, unracialised invisibility of whiteness. Chapter three discusses the current models of race in gaming before providing a deeper analysis of how *Skyrim* addresses race and racism, and how players are encouraged or permitted to be playful and engage meaningfully with these concepts.

Role-playing games ostensibly provide the opportunity to imagine the self in the position of the cultural and/or racial other. This chapter utilises Nakamura's concept of 'identity tourism' in order to investigate how players experiment with marginalised identities and how this possibility can increase the complexity and value of play in game-spaces. It also explores the problems with this type of play, especially when environments such as *Skyrim*'s rely so heavily upon racially conservative tropes in both the narrative, visual, and temporal structures of the game-space. Through an examination of the Khajiit race, this chapter demonstrates the prevalence of orientalism, racial essentialism, and oversimplified cultural 'borrowing' in medieval fantasy.

Having explored the depiction of the racial and cultural other, the final chapter considers the construction of the racial self in *Skyrim*. In its dominant position in Western society, whiteness comes to be an unmarked category that is difficult to define. It maintains its privilege by existing outside of clear definition, filling the space between the areas demarcated by those identities typically considered to be 'raced' and therefore knowable. Beginning with an analysis of the tools available for the direct construction of the in-game self, the avatar, this chapter argues that white bodies, particularly male bodies, are privileged within games. In *Skyrim*, this entails the adherence to white standards of beauty, and the presentation of whiteness as being default, directly linked with humanness. The chapter applies the literary techniques of close reading and will use the concept of the 'implied reader' to consider the identity of the implied player, and will demonstrate how the game's narrative and mechanics subtly suggest a white, male player.

Furthermore, this chapter explores *Skyrim*'s imagining of the medieval North and its inhabitants in order to understand how medieval fantasy, via the popular understanding of the Middle Ages, comes to be the locus of the myths of white identity. It argues that this is achieved through the nostalgic understanding of the Middle Ages as a pre-race utopia, in which race politics are simplified and displaced onto non-human others as argued in chapter three. This section will demonstrate, through the use of survey data and audience response, how players have made historical or heritage-based connections to the ethnic constructions in the game world. By examining the visual and narrative differences between the two key races, Imperials and Nords, the chapter also considers to what extent *Skyrim* problematises the romantic medievalism and encourages players to see the peculiarities of whiteness, rendering it visible.

### Establishing Realism

This chapter will explore world-building in fantasy in order to unpack the Middle Ages as a temporal, topographical, and ideological concept. The analysis will establish how realism is achieved in pseudo-medieval games, and how a game-world becomes 'believable.' The fantasy genre is particularly fruitful for exploration primarily because it is overtly fantastical, depicting itself as providing an alternate reality, whilst simultaneously working hard to make itself feel real by modelling itself on the ideologies and social structures of the real world. The chapter will demonstrate how fantasy operates in a realist mode, in that the genre is invested in being convincing and creating settings and narratives that will be deemed 'realistic' by their audiences.

'Realism' is presently a privileged mode of storytelling. Here, the term refers not to the specific literary and artistic movements that followed Romanticism, but to the term in common parlance which holds a broader meaning: to laud something as 'realistic' is to suggest that it is a true or authentic reflection of the world, that it depicts the world the way it really exists. This mode is commonly associated with stories that are considered to be mature in outlook and relevant to the everyday lives of their audience. To be 'meaningful' typically refers to the offering of significant social commentary, or to provide new and relevant ways to explore familiar storytelling themes, such as heroism and morality. This association is particularly pertinent when reviewing the fantasy genre, as this is a literary category that has traditionally been cast as juvenile, intellectually unchallenging and, perhaps at worst, meaningless. The traditionally disapproving view of fantasy is compounded when applied to games as this relatively new media has typically been perceived, by the public and critics alike, as an adolescent pastime with little potential for creating meaning. It is only in recent years that this perception has been challenged and this is an ongoing, rather than complete, process.

Realism, perhaps surprisingly, is a label that is applied to much fantasy media in popular discourses, particularly by developers, consumers, and critics. To describe

something as ‘realistic’ is not to say that the narrative in question works to create a straightforwardly mimetic picture of the culture, society and landscape from which it arises. Indeed, the term is often used to refer to narratives that employ aspects of realism rather than those which strive to present plausible stories in worlds that are fashioned with some sense of documentary objectivity in mind. It is logical to consider that a fantasy narrative, by definition, would be the antithesis of a narrative operating in the realist mode. The nature of fantasy as a genre is to break free of the constraints of the real, modern world to allow its audience to explore the possibilities of alternative worlds, fantastical landscapes, alien cultures, and the supernatural. Within recent years, however, there has been a surge in the popularity of ‘realistic’ fantasy, so-called by fans, journalists and reviewers alike as a genre that works harder to reflect real-world behaviours and ethical issues rather than idealise them. This is not to suggest that this type of fantasy, dark and often cynical in nature, is a new approach to the genre. Authors such as Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, and Philip Pullman have taken similar approaches throughout the modern life of the genre, though perhaps not rising to the level of commercial popularity and readership as gritty fantasy titles which are now considered mainstream. Popular examples George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series of novels, launched to fame by HBO’s television series *Game of Thrones*, and Andrzej Sapkowski’s *The Witcher*, similarly elevated to mainstream-status by CD Projekt RED’s game-adaptation of the same name.

It is useful to note at this point that ‘realism’ takes on varied meanings in popular discussions of games and frequently overlaps with what is meant by ‘immersion’. Once the term was most commonly used as a measure of graphical capabilities: consoles and game engines were critiqued for their ability to render ‘realistic’ graphics and by the race to improve graphical technology continues. At present, graphical capabilities are nearing photorealism, and while this remains a major factor for deciding on how ‘realistic’ a game might be labelled, the desire for pleasing and artistic aesthetics is growing more common. This is evidenced by the increasing recognition of highly-stylised games by popular game awards. The Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences’ Art Direction award was primarily won by games focusing on increased graphical fidelity until 2012, when art-focused games such as *Journey*, *Monument Valley*, and *Ori and the Blind Forest* more consistently took the award. The Spike Awards, running since 2003 and reforming as The Game

Awards in 2014, dropped the long-running Best Graphics category—long won by games aiming for photo-realism—and added a Best Art Direction award in 2015, demonstrating a shift in the way that games' aesthetic qualities are perceived.

Presently, when discussing games, players might use the term 'realism' to refer to, amongst other things: graphical fidelity; the likelihood of the narrative, the physical rules and characteristics governing the game's world; or the culture and society depicted in the game. This plurality of meanings demonstrates that players acknowledge and appreciate that there is a balance to be achieved between mimesis and aesthetics.<sup>48</sup> Thus, making sense of the term *realism* is often dependent upon the context in which it is used.<sup>49</sup>

Within a fantasy setting, expectations of plausibility are limited by the conventions of the genre. Players are, of course, fully aware of the nature of fantasy and the impossibility of its conventions, from invented spaces, races and species to existence of magic and the superhuman feats of strength demonstrated by the stories' heroes. In accepting the impossible elements of fantasy, other factors become important to audiences in the establishment of realism. Firstly, the created world must have a sense of internal consistency. While it may not directly reproduce the laws of the real world, it must demonstrate and uphold its own rules; it must not be surreal. A character may have impossible abilities, but their personality and motivations might demonstrate familiar values and behaviours consistent with Western cultural norms. The game-world need not be a mirror of the real world, but instead a reflection of certain important elements in a *realistic*, i.e., recognisable way. Thus, realism works in fantasy not necessarily to preserve the plausibility of the narrative but to create a world that is believable.

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<sup>48</sup> The idea of 'objective representation' is problematic in itself, and is further discussed in this chapter.

<sup>49</sup> See: Melanie C. Green, 'Transportation Into Narrative Worlds: The Role of Prior Knowledge and Perceived Realism', *Discourse Processes*, 38.2 (2004), 247–66; Charlene Jennett and others, 'Measuring and Defining the Experience of Immersion in Games', *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 66.9 (2008), 641–61; Richard Wages, Stefan M. Grünvogel and Benno Grützmaker, 'How Realistic Is Realism? Considerations on the Aesthetics of Computer Games', in *Entertainment Computing – ICEC 2004*, ed. by Matthias Rauterberg (Berlin: Springer, 2004), pp. 216–25.

See also the concept of 'spatial immersion', an idea added by Bjork and Holopainen to describe the experience of a game-world which is authentic and believable: Staffan Bjork and Jussi Holopainen, *Patterns in Game Design*, Pap/Cdr edition (Hingham, Mass: Charles River Media, 2004), p. 206.

In this context, *realism* tends to be applied to the way that the world is constructed on both a technical and an ideological level. At the technical level, games attempt to build worlds that mimic real-world topographies and tend to be designed so that they operate according to the natural laws governing the real world as much as possible. Technology is also used to populate worlds with ‘believable’ people, made so by their recognisably naturalistic movements and behaviours. At the narrative level, believable worlds are created through artistic attention to material culture and conveying a sense of time through the construction of history. Value is also placed upon the way that the world’s society functions. The actions and values held by the characters are of primary importance and are usually constructed in a way that is relatable and conforms to audience expectations. In this way, a hero’s special abilities and the performance of supernatural feats might be considered less important in establishing whether they are a realistic character than, say, their motivations, perception of the world, and moral outlook.

To the willing audience of fantasy, the genre’s unlikely elements are not dismissed as being unbelievable, but simply are not considered when deciding to what extent a narrative is realistic. Using *Skyrim* as a case study, this chapter will demonstrate the use of material culture, landscape and cartography, and history in the creation of a believable world. It will go on to explore how certain fantasy narratives, in particular the darker narratives previously mentioned, come to be labelled ‘realistic’ or ‘believable’, and will search for trends amongst its chosen examples. From here, I will argue that realism comes to signify an ideological reflection of the real world rather than an objective viewpoint. It will demonstrate how *Skyrim*, and similar RPGs, are perceived as being realistic because they correspond to cultural and technological constructions of realism that are specific to Western culture.

### **World-building: Spatial Narratives**

The construction of a compelling world with a perceived depth of cultural development and consistent internal logic is integral to the fantasy role-playing game. Such a game world is often expected to have a measurable history attested to by the development of its cultures, particularly along martial, material, and religious lines. As will be later explored, the believability of the world and its peoples is closely tied

to the representation of its cultures as well as the temporality of that world and the way that temporality is expressed. *Skyrim*, for example, has an extensive amount of lore that can be discovered through books, in-game conversations, and the general experience of being within the game space.<sup>50</sup> Lore can be engaged with at differing levels; for example, some players may read most of the books and quest dialogue that they encounter, while others may ignore text and only take note of visual cues. Whatever the extent of a player's engagement, the presence of lore as part of a well-developed space is generally considered an important factor when constructing an environment that is to be perceived as *realistic*.<sup>51</sup>

Henry Jenkins has noted that 'it makes sense to think of game designers less as storytellers than as narrative architects' and has argued that a major factor in gaming narrative is the use of compelling play spaces and engaging game environments that aid immersion and facilitate the game's narrative.<sup>52</sup> The focus on space in these types of games has led to the scholarly application of the term *spatial narrative*, in which the active experience of the environment is the primary mode of engagement with the game's narrative.

The desire for spatial narratives extends beyond what might be considered the 'traditional' fantasy role-playing genre and into the wider category of 'open world' games. Commercially successful and critically acclaimed games such as *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Borderlands* have been praised for their open-world elements which allow the player to go beyond the game's main narrative and to play with and explore the environment.<sup>53</sup> Closely related to this is the current trend for branching storylines where the player's actions and choices affect the way that the story progresses. This

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<sup>50</sup> *Lore* is the typical term for a fantasy-world's history or 'backstory.' We tend to refer to *lore* when discussing elements of the world that are important to understanding its wider historical or cultural development, but that are not critical to understanding the present narrative.

<sup>51</sup> Tanya Krzywinska, 'World Creation and Lore: *World of Warcraft* as Rich Text', in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, ed. by Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (London: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 123–41.

<sup>52</sup> Henry Jenkins, 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture', in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (London: MIT Press, 2004); Henry Jenkins, "'Complete Freedom of Movement": Video Games as Gendered Playspace', in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, ed. by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (London: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 262–97.

<sup>53</sup> DMA Design, *Grand Theft Auto III* (Rockstar Games, 2001); Gearbox Software, *Borderlands* (2k Games, 2009).

concept is reminiscent of gamebooks, such as the long-running *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, though its incorporation into modern games is much more subtle.<sup>54</sup> Branching storylines allow players to influence the narrative in a variety of ways such as altering other characters' disposition towards them, affecting which characters live and die, and how the story ends. Though an immersive environment is frequently discussed with regards to games, the expectation is common to most fantasy media and has been a long-term staple of novels, films and non-digital games in the genre. Jenkins cites Jules Verne, Homer and J.R.R. Tolkien as the authors of some of the most famous spatial stories, stories that involve questing and discovery based around a journey. Indeed, the latter's work continues to greatly influence the design of fantasy worlds.<sup>55</sup>

Having an open design that allows for creative play has long been an important element of fantasy role-playing games, which originate in table-top games where the group of players would be led through a narrative by a human game-master. Though the game-master commonly has a basic story in mind, he must react to the player's actions and improvise; his role is not just to tell a story, but to create a framework within which the group can play and experiment; the narrative is an ever-evolving, collaborative effort. This is clearly of huge importance to players, as the idea of narrative architecture has been a driving force in the modern design of games even beyond the fantasy role-playing genre.

### **World-building: Technical Factors**

The breadth, depth and openness of the world is one of the main attractions to *The Elder Scrolls* series. The sense that the game's world is a fully-realised, *living* world is a major selling-point for *The Elder Scrolls* games franchise. By this it is meant that the game gives a strong impression of verisimilitude and a sense that the game-world dynamically responds to players' actions and also operates independently of players' actions. The marketing campaign for *Skyrim*, the fifth game in the series since 1994, focused heavily on promoting its improved Radiant AI technology. This technology

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<sup>54</sup> *Choose Your Own Adventure* (New York: Bantam, 1979).

<sup>55</sup> See Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014); Young, pp. 15–39.

works to create NPCs (non-player characters) that function more sensibly in the environment, engaging in more complex and purposeful behaviour. For example, instead of an NPC permanently standing in one place—regardless of time of day or any other factor that would drive a living person to move location—as had been the trend in earlier games, Radiant AI ensured that NPCs would follow more naturalistic movement patterns based on time of day, status and occupation. A town’s smith, for example, might be seen walking around the forge or working metal during the day. In the evening, the workshop would be closed and the smith themselves would be in their own residence having gone home for the night. The technology governs the NPCs such that they exhibit more standardised human behaviour, such as attending work, visiting places, and walking home at appropriate hours. Thus, the environment itself appears to function without the direct intervention of the player, creating a more believable, immersive world in which to play.

The Radiant AI technology works alongside the Havok Behaviour animation tool. This tool, developed by Irish game development technology company Havok, reduces awkward camera angles and mechanical-seeming animations seen in previous games and helps to create more seamless, smooth body motions that give characters a natural appearance. In earlier *Elder Scrolls* games, and most other earlier RPGs, many NPC movements were scripted in such a way that they seemed unnatural: commonly NPCs would stop what they were doing when the player talked to them no matter how inconvenient or unlikely it might be for them to pause their activity. Alternatively, they would have scripted animations that they would perform whenever engaged so that their movements would soon appear repetitive and robotic. Havok’s Behaviour technology aims to simulate more natural behaviour: for example, when engaging with an NPC the latter might continue their activity as they talk to you. To return to our earlier example, the smith might continue honing a weapon as you engage with them. Alternatively, they might stop what they are doing and take a seat to converse. These more naturalistic behaviours, alongside the fact that they will not engage in the exactly same behaviour every time, help to more fully establish the feeling of immersion.

Using technology to create dynamic, naturalistic-seeming mechanics is an obvious priority when designing RPG worlds. These tools are well-funded by triple-A developers—i.e., the most mainstream and commercialised sector of the industry—

and much emphasis is placed upon the marketing of new immersive and graphical technology in the games' promotional material and reviews.<sup>56</sup> The commercial success of technological developments as well as their marketing potential demonstrates that players are deeply invested in verisimilar depictions of the real world and of human behaviour. Furthermore, the importance of these tools as a factor in establishing the feeling of immersion in a plausible secondary world demonstrates the importance of space and environment in *Skyrim*.

On top of the technology sits the artwork and aesthetics of the game. The huge number of game modifications (henceforth, mods) freely available for download testify to the desire to achieve the highest possible graphical quality, and to the level of player-investment in operating in a *realistic* environment. Currently there are 1096 mods available on the largest mod repository under the category of 'Visuals and Graphics', and 3130 under the Category of 'Models and Textures' on one of the largest *Skyrim* mod repositories online.<sup>57</sup> The most downloaded mod, with over eighteen million downloads, improves the quality of textures in the game, rendering what is labelled a 'HD' (high definition) experience.<sup>58</sup>

The emphasis placed on graphical improvements, both to characters and the environment, implies a direct connection between realism and the cinematic mode. Experienced in a similar way to film, through an onscreen depiction, many games favour the cinematic style of photorealism.<sup>59</sup> This is not to argue that these games accurately depict the natural world, but rather the world as experienced through cinema. Favouring this mode implies that cinema is itself a realistic medium, that the

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Adam Ruch, 'GameSpy: Is Skyrim's AI Storytelling the Future of Gaming?', *GameSpy*, 2012 <<http://uk.pc.gamespy.com/pc/elder-scrolls-v/1217754p1.html>> [accessed 18 October 2015]; See also the official description of the game as 'Epic Fantasy Reborn: *Skyrim* reimagines and revolutionizes the open-world fantasy epic, bringing to life a complete virtual world open for you to explore any way you choose.' Bethesda Game Studios, '*Skyrim*: Overview', *The Elder Scrolls Official Site*, n.d. <<http://www.elderscrolls.com/skyrim/overview>> [accessed 10 September 2015].

<sup>57</sup> 'Skyrim Categories', *Skyrim Nexus*, 2016 <<http://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/categories>> [accessed 26 June 2016].

<sup>58</sup> NebuLa, 'Skyrim HD - 2K Textures', *Skyrim Nexus*, 2016 <<http://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/607/?>> [accessed 28 June 2016].

<sup>59</sup> It is important to note that not all games appeal to the cinematic aesthetic of photorealism. Though personal computers and consoles are advanced enough to display semi-photorealistic graphics, there is a strong trend for games that adopt alternate artistic aesthetics. 'Style' becomes an important factor in the artistic value of these games.

world as viewed through a camera lens is the real world. It appears that most modifications, however, appeal to artistic beauty in their reach towards *realism*. For example, some of the most popular mods make character models more attractive or glamorous according to the typical Western construction of beauty. For women, the most popularly modified characters, this often entails smoother skin and hair, the use of modern makeup and hairstyles, and emphasised lips, eyes, breasts and hips. Landscapes, too, are modified to create an enhanced aesthetic experience: water captures more light and more keenly sparkles while trees and foliage become more dense and lush.

Cinematic photorealism in games is rather limiting in what we might hope would be an open space for play and experimentation. The implication is that photorealism, in its appeal to the cinematic mode, is an objective view of reality rather than simply one perception or a single construction of a reality. Clearly, cinematic photorealism performs a narrative function via its depiction of space and environment. Space is inherently important to open-world RPGs; as the name suggests, the constructed world is an open space in which the players are free to play, experiment and interact with the environment.

As several reviewers have noted, ‘what strikes you very early on in *Skyrim* is that the world itself *is* the story.’<sup>60</sup> The rugged landscape of *Skyrim* with its mixture of snowy tundra, imposing tree-lined mountains and sublime views plays into the audiences expectations of a hard, Northern space. Hostile monsters and bandits inhabit the outside world in open camps while the undead draugr populate the indoor spaces of tombs and barrows, presenting different types of danger throughout the land. Wild animals are also spread across the landscape, some of which, such as bears, will aggressively hunt a player. Foxes can be observed hunting smaller prey—which will bolt if spotted by the hero, a larger predator—demonstrating the violence inherent in nature. Representative of the difficulty and hostility of the Northern landscape, such wild animals can be defeated and subsequently looted for meat and pelts. In this way, nature is depicted as hard yet fair: if one is able to overcome the violence and hardship of this harsh environment, they are justly rewarded. This depiction of a challenging,

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<sup>60</sup> John Bedford, ‘The Elder Scrolls 5: *Skyrim* Review’, *Eurogamer*, 2011  
<<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2011-11-10-the-elder-scrolls-5-skyrim-review>>  
[accessed 3 October 2012].

cold environment is typical of medieval fantasy, particularly those set in the North, in which the typical values of the people tend to align with this depiction of nature.<sup>61</sup> The people of the North—Nords, in this case—are typically hardy and resilient with an outlook that primarily focuses on honour and justice.

The rugged, unforgiving landscape develops a sense of place that seems to match the medieval, pseudo-Viking race. In its sublime, untamed beauty it also signifies the pre-modern North. This is important in establishing the highly resilient and masculine culture of the Nord people.<sup>62</sup> Andrew Elliott has argued that the construction of a historical space is important to the credibility of the narrative. Exploring *Braveheart*, he notes that ‘if the cinematic space of Scotland... matches the viewer’s expectations of what medieval Scotland looked like, then it is deemed to be true.’<sup>63</sup>

Thus, the construction of the space serves the overall narrative of the game in its representation of a culturally recognisable medieval, Northern locale. The space participates in the telling of the story. It is then difficult to truly assert whether the depiction of this space is *realistic*. We can see how the faith placed in graphical fidelity as a measure of realism implicitly denies the possibility for a multiplicity of realities, and ignores the post-modern idea that there is no objective or ‘true’ reality that one might accurately depict. The space is, however, somewhat authentic in that it matches the audiences’ expectations and contributes to the internal consistency of the game-world. Again, we can see the paradoxical nature of ‘realist fantasy’ reasserting itself and becoming problematic when the genre idealises images that purport to be authentic.

## Cartography

In continuing to explore the construction of the environment, we can see that the fictional geography of *Skyrim* adds to the world’s perceived realism. The landscape

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<sup>61</sup> ‘North’ here is used as a genre-type category rather than a geographical location although the fantasy North does usually correspond to the northern reaches of the fantasy-world’s geography.

<sup>62</sup> For a fuller discussion on Nords and masculinity, see chapter five.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew B. R. Elliott, ‘Historical Spaces as Narrative: Mapping Collective Memory onto Cinematic Space’, *Media Fields Journal*, 2013, 1–15 (para. 15).

fairly clearly imitates the dramatic landscapes of Norway—or a similar northern climate—with a common topography that includes mountains, valleys, lakes and rivers. Though the topography of *Skyrim* does not map exactly onto a real-world location, its construction is easily identified as being realistic, that is, having features that are recognisable from the audiences’ experiences of the real world as well as seeing aerial and satellite photography.

Again, this perception of reality as mediated by the cinematic camera lens does little to challenge us by pushing us into a more fantastic environment. The potential for radically different weather or geological formations, for example, is not explored. Some games do take up the opportunity to create more fantastical landscapes. *World of Warcraft*, for example, has many implausible topographical features, from highly unlikely biomes to islands floating in the sky and a ‘wandering isle’ that is in fact the back of the great sea turtle, Shen-zin Su.<sup>64</sup> *World of Warcraft*, however, revels in its mode of storytelling which involves playful use of fantasy clichés, popular culture, and its own game lore. It is not a game that is described, or is marketed, as being *realistic* for either its graphical representations or its narrative mode. *Skyrim* does adopt some fantastical features, but these are primarily aesthetic in nature. For example, Nirn has two moons which can be seen in the night sky.<sup>65</sup> Observation in the game suggests that Secunda, the smaller moon, orbits Masser, the larger body. These celestial bodies are factored into the game’s lore, playing an important role in the culture of the Khajiit race. The use of two moons adds visual interest to the sky, acting as a subtle reminder that this is not quite the real world. They do not, however, have any direct astronomical impact on the planet Nirn and, indeed, it is highly implausible that two lunar bodies would be able to co-exist without the smaller one soon losing orbit. Their addition, then, seems to serve two purposes: firstly, to provide a more romantic and interesting skyscape, and secondly, to add a sense of mysterious exoticism to the Khajiit race.<sup>66</sup> Neither of these purposes offer a significant challenge to the realism more directly inferred by the use of naturalistic topography and weather.

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<sup>64</sup> ‘Pandaren - Game Guide’, *World of Warcraft*, n.d.

<<http://us.battle.net/wow/en/game/race/pandaren>> [accessed 30 March 2015].

<sup>65</sup> The use of multiple moons is a common convention of fantasy and science fiction to convey the sense of another world.

<sup>66</sup> See chapter four. The phase of the moons determines the form a Khajiit born under it will take. It affects the newborn’s size, colour, and markings.

The emphasis on photorealism and, for the most part, obeying natural laws ensures that fantasy coheres with the world around us as experienced through modern, visual media.

Maps are also a particularly interesting feature of *Skyrim*'s realistic construction of the environment. A popular feature of fantasy, maps can provide a sense of grandeur by depicting the scale of the environment and can function as part of the narrative as well as giving the reader the means to visually comprehend the space. Maps are often used in games to provide direction for the player and can be fairly simple and functional. In *Skyrim*, however, as in most role-playing games, the map is just as important as the environment itself in creating a sense of authenticity and furthering the spatial narrative.

There are two major maps of *Skyrim* that the player will regularly encounter. The in-game map, the one the player uses to view the world and to navigate, is rendered in 3D and gives a dynamic, aerial view of *Skyrim* that shows details of the terrain including topographical details, vegetation and snow. Accessed via the map menu, it also has floating markers to show the location of holds and towns, as well as locations such as barrows and caves that the player has discovered. This map gives a satellite-style view of the world, reminiscent of real-world aerial photography or imagery from the commonly-used Google Earth virtual mapping software. *Skyrim*'s in-game map is complete with cloud cover, particularly around the coastline in order to obscure the edges of the territory. This is a visual technique to cover the mechanical boundaries of the game; should the player travel to the edges of *Skyrim* they will encounter impassable mountain ranges and will simply be unable to travel further. Though the player is aware that there are lands and settled provinces outside of *Skyrim*, the obfuscation of the margins by cloud cover blurs the boundaries of the game-world so it is not explicitly obvious that the space is limited. Though these limitations are a practical necessity of game worlds, a break in immersion is avoided by carefully removing the edges from the players' immediate attention.

The use of a satellite map in the first instance is interesting, particularly as the previous two games in the series approach mapping quite differently. *Morrowind* utilised a similar top-down terrain view, although not in 3D, while the map in *Oblivion* was in the more typical ink-on-brown-paper style. *Skyrim*'s satellite map is not as functional as it might be if it had been designed or implemented differently. For

example, roads and entrances are not clearly marked and landmarks are not particularly detailed, meaning that it can be difficult to navigate correctly or find entrances to the places the player wishes to explore. Indeed, this is a source of frustration for some players and the modding community has responded by creating mods that improve the functionality of the map. One of the most popular mods, which renders the map with detailed roads and improved textures, has been downloaded almost seven million times.<sup>67</sup>

In its lack of detailed cartography, it is clear that this map serves a different purpose than what one might expect. Rather than providing a detailed, annotated view of the space, it offers a rough navigational guide. The player can see if they are travelling in the right direction and can do their best to avoid running into impassable mountains or obvious topographic obstacles, but they are otherwise encouraged to explore the world without relying too heavily on the guidance of a map. Furthermore, *Skyrim* is somewhat unusual in that it displays the whole map, with some town markings, from the beginning of the game. While it is true that most of the markers only appear after the player has actually visited the place in question, the terrain itself is always fully visible.<sup>68</sup> Role-playing games of this type typically utilise a map that is mostly obscured by darkness or clouds, commonly called the ‘fog of war’ in the gaming community, in which the terrain is slowly uncovered as the player traverses the land so that their exploration of the game-space becomes part of the mapping process. *Skyrim*’s map, presented in its entirety from the beginning, diverts from this trend and, in doing so, implicitly establishes the notion that this image is no mere map but rather a *realistic* view of the landscape.

This satellite view, given from a vantage point that technology in *Skyrim* could not reach, provides an image with which a modern audience is very familiar. We are used to seeing aerial views of landscapes and satellite images of the earth, thus it might be argued that viewing *Skyrim* through this frame gives the sensation of looking at a fully realised world as it can be ‘seen’ in the same way that we see our own landscapes,

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<sup>67</sup> IcePenguin, ‘A Quality World Map and Solstheim Map - With Roads’, *Skyrim Nexus*, 2015 <<http://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/4929/?>> [accessed 30 March 2016].

<sup>68</sup> Map markers are floating icons that signify the type of location, e.g., a hold or a barrow, along with its name and, in some cases, its completion status. Once a location has been explored and marked, the player can then use the map marker to ‘quick-travel’ back to that zone.

i.e., through the eyes of technologies such as satellite imagery. This, of course, does not take into consideration that very few people ever see the earth from satellite range; most of us see it through the lens of satellite photography. It does, however, remind one of an aerial view as might be seen from an aircraft, an experience that players of the game are somewhat likely to have had. The prevalence of this kind of imagery in modern media, particularly in news, science and documentary formats, lends to its widespread acceptance as an objective viewpoint of the world. In actuality, this satellite map once again presents the audience with a reproduction of an image in the photorealistic style: it reflects our perceptions of the world as mediated through technology. In this way, it presents those perceptions as being a reflection of reality, rather than as a perception.

The implication here is that, as a *realistic* depiction of the space as it truly exists, this is a non-ideological mapping of the game-world. Photorealism is the primary mode of realism in which the audience seems to put most faith and interest, and in solidly adhering to that principle we find a game map that disassociates itself from ideology in favour of realism, right up to the point of being unhelpful in its cartographic and spatial function. This attempted separation demonstrates the extent to which ideologies related to our perception of the world are hidden. The game does not consciously recognise or challenge present-day perceptions of reality, and thus reflects the idea that there exists a discernible, objective, and coherent reality. It denies ideology whilst perpetuating it, an idea to which I will return.<sup>69</sup>

The second map is the one that is seen within the game world, not inside the map menu. It is not part of the game's user interface but forms part of the game-world's aesthetic, and can be found pinned to walls or spread upon tables in the halls, camps, and homes of various NPCs. This map appears as though hand-drawn in ink, in the typical style of maps associated with fantasy narratives.<sup>70</sup> It looks to be drawn on parchment and has a yellow-brown colouring which is uneven in places, giving the object a worn and aged look. Clearly, the parchment map is provided in order to fit more neatly into the pseudo-medieval temporality of its space.<sup>71</sup> Its pen-and-ink

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<sup>69</sup> For more on ideology, see chapter three.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Tolkien's ubiquitous maps of Middle Earth and the associated nostalgia.

<sup>71</sup> See Thomas Rowland, 'We Will Travel by Map: : Maps as Narrative Spaces in Videogames and Medieval Texts', in *Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. by Daniel T. Kline (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 189–201.

aesthetic evokes a sense of culture and history, firstly through its recognisably medievalist styling, and secondly through its presentation as an artistic artefact.<sup>72</sup> This extends beyond its appearance in the game-space as some of the physical releases of *Skyrim* were packaged with a print copy of this map. A limited number of copies were printed on a burlap-type material, giving the map a tactile quality that further adds to the earthy, medievalist aesthetic that is critical to the construction of the game's world. Taking virtual elements of the secondary world and making them available as physical artefacts in the primary world draws the player closer to the secondary world and can begin to blur the lines between the two. This increased connection further encourages the player to engage imaginatively with the mapped game-world. The uneven colouring and darkening of the parchment map might imply use, but it also directly appeals to the common representation of medieval texts in the way that a modern audience is accustomed to seeing them: worn and discoloured by age. It also imitates the style of medieval maps in its hand-drawn appearance, less specific cartography, and marking locations with crests signifying dominion. This imitation is quite superficial, of course, in that it primarily conforms to our expectations of a medieval map—tempered by fantasy world-building over the last century—and does not really bear much similarity to surviving medieval maps. This map, for instance, utilises a compass rose and operates on the modern, Western-centric convention of the top of the map aligning with the north.<sup>73</sup> More critically, it lacks cultural images or aesthetic details that might place the locations or peoples in context with their understanding of the world. This being said, the image still serves to generate a sense of historical authenticity in appealing to the popular imagining of medieval maps and, more broadly, to the imagery with which the Middle Ages are popularly represented.

Medieval cartography itself was often associated with understanding one's place in the world in a religious mode rather than geographic one.<sup>74</sup> These maps are explicitly constructed to demonstrate the order of the world, directly inspired by religious belief, culture and history. This is in opposition to the way in which maps

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<sup>72</sup> Though in actuality, it more closely resembles an Early Modern map. This type of map is popularly associated with the Middle Ages because medievalist fantasy has co-opted this aesthetic.

<sup>73</sup> In around the sixteenth century, following the printing press, this becomes more standardised.

<sup>74</sup> Alfred Hiatt, *Terra Incognita: Mapping the Antipodes before 1600* (London and Chicago: British Library / University of Chicago Press, 2008).

are understood in the modern world, as objective, navigable representations of the land around us.<sup>75</sup> The parchment map, ostensibly used by the inhabitants of *Skyrim*, is clearly set in the modern mode which emphasises the functionality of a map over its form. For the player, the Middle Age-ing of the map through its visual construction is enough to achieve the sense that it is an authentic artefact that belongs in the game world. For the player-character, however, it does not reveal as much as it might about the culture that created it. The map does carry the name of its creator and the year of its production, demonstrating that this is indeed a representation of the space through the experience of one of its inhabitants, but lacks other direct, cultural markers that might reveal something of the viewpoint and background of the cartographer and their people. This is also a relatively new map, dated 4E 182, just under two decades before the events of *Skyrim*, beginning in 4E 201. The race of the cartographer, Nataly (also spelled Natalia) Draverol is unclear, but her name appears on both *Skyrim*'s map and the map for the previous game in the series with dates spanning nearly two-hundred years, and there is some speculation amongst fans that this is a reference to one of the game's interface developers, Natalia Smirnova. Thus, it is entirely possible that the inclusion of the cartographer's name is a gesture on behalf of a game artist rather than a commentary on maps as a conceptual representation of a space.

Such artefacts have the potential to encourage players to reconsider the ideological possibilities of objects that are usually considered to present an objective reality. The lack of other markers alongside the cartographer's name, however, renders the author stamp somewhat impotent in its potential. This potential is similarly untapped in that the map of *Skyrim* remains the same for each separate race that utilises it. As will be further explored in chapter four, each race in *The Elder Scrolls* series has its own cultural, geographical and historical origins, usually vastly different to one another. These cultural differences are not reflected in the maps that are used, which is perhaps a missed opportunity to think about representations of the world as mediated by culture. This is not necessarily something every fantasy world must do, but is conspicuous in its absence in a game such as *Skyrim* in which racial and cultural oppositions are a key factor in the narrative.

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<sup>75</sup> Brian J. Harley, *The Map as Ideology: Knowledge and Power in the History of Cartography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 277–312.

The construction of these two maps in obviously different styles is another means by which the satellite map, accessed as part of the player interface, is presented as a non-ideological, objective representation of the world as it truly appears. Furthermore, the usage of two very different map types, a satellite map alongside the depiction of a traditional-style fantasy map within the game, suggests that audiences of fantasy have somewhat dissonant expectations that need to be fulfilled. Realism is an important factor in the construction of many fantasy worlds and, as has been discussed, this is primarily established through photorealism as can be seen in the satellite map. Medievalist fantasy also has its own set of conventions and tropes that an audience expects to see fulfilled in some way. We can see how this desire is fulfilled in the use of the second map which appeals to the medievalist fantasy aesthetic. Both of these desires seem to co-exist and are satisfied by the utilisation of two different approaches to the same object without conflict.

As we can see, *Skyrim*, and the substantial audiences that are playing and creating in the modding community, is deeply invested in photorealism in terms of the visual world. Somewhat typical of its genre, *Skyrim* is not particularly interested in challenging our perceptions of what *reality* looks like. It leans on traditional, cinematic ideas of realism and in doing so does not really offer a fantastic alternative to the real world in a meaningful way. Instead, it remains conservative in its approach to realism.

## **Culture and Ideology**

The first two sections of this chapter have explored the construction of a realistic game environment through analysis of the game's functions, its aesthetic construction, and an aspect of the user interface. Each example thus far has served to explore elements that construct the game-space. Within this space lie the fictional societies, cultures, histories, and ideologies that underpin the narrative experience of the game. Collectively this cultural background is known as 'lore,' and includes characters, events, and mythology that the player may not actually witness or experience in the game as well as the current events in which the player takes part. Aspects of *Skyrim*'s lore will be explored in detail in other chapters as part of the deconstruction of the game's explicit and implicit engagement with race, identity, and politics; when examining how game environments are constructed with a focus on believability, the

lore functions in a far more direct manner to achieve a sense of realism. As has already been mentioned, internal consistency is critical to engender belief in fantasy worlds, as is the depth that comes from the creation of cultural, mythological, and topographical histories which can be uncovered through play.

Lore, particularly within the fantasy and science fiction genres, is most commonly built around genre-related topoi, drawing on fantasy conventions alongside real-world symbols and ideas that will be understood by most of the intended audience. Not all players will engage deeply with the lore and few will ever explore or learn it in its entirety. Its effects, however, are encountered by all players in their experiences with the racial and cultural markers of each group; it is the diverse societies in fantasy worlds, each with a rich history that contributes to its cultural present as experienced in the game, that provides game worlds like *Skyrim* with the breadth and fullness that we associate with real-world societies.<sup>76</sup> One lore-element that is almost universal within medieval games is the construction of religion. Its ubiquitous nature implies that cultures in historical settings require aspects of religion and spirituality in their societies in order to engender depth. The expectation of religion as an inevitable part of medieval life not only points towards the popular notion of the Middle Ages as a time of high, inescapable religiosity, but is also telling in its implication that religion is a clear marker of pre-modern society. I will examine the role of religion as an important element of *Skyrim*'s world-building and explore the extent to which lore elements act as superficial set-dressing in order to conform to the audiences' expectations of a realistic medieval setting.

Building upon worlds in which lore has already been, and continues to be, established helps to ensure regularity in its cultural markers. In *Skyrim*, most cultures follow the pantheistic religion of the Nine Divines. The Divines incorporated into each pantheon varies slightly between culture and region, but in general they share the same gods—or approximations of the same deities—which have been incorporated cohesively into each specific culture's background. For example, the

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<sup>76</sup> Krzywinska employs Kaveney's term 'thick text' to discuss the intertextuality of expansive game worlds and, along similar lines as this section, explores the role of myth in the creation of lore in *World of Warcraft*: Krzywinska; Roz Kaveney, 'Waking into Dream: Competence Cascades, Thick Texts and the Universalization of the Greek Aesthetic', in *From Alien to the Matrix: Reading Science Fiction Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 1–9.

chief god is known by the Elf races as ‘Auri’El, Time Dragon’ and by the human races as ‘Akatosh, Dragon God of Time.’<sup>77</sup> The deities share many of the same basic representational and narrative elements whilst differing in the finer details, demonstrating cultural divergence and distinctiveness through the reframing of shared stories. For example, while Auri’El/Akatosh is commonly believed to be the first god and hailed as the guardian of time, Auri’El in the Altmer pantheon is believed to be the soul of Aniel, the creator and ‘the soul of all things.’ Auri-El is also claimed to be the ancestor of the Altmer and Bosmer elves.<sup>78</sup> This idea of lineal descent from the first god is unsurprising considering the troubling sense of racial superiority held by the Altmer, an important aspect of *Skyrim*’s plot. The tradition of the first god varies further in the beliefs of the highly-othered Khajiit race. This culture’s pantheon is wide and the in-game books lack detailed study, further exoticising the race through the emphasis of the mystery surrounding their mythology and theology. They believe that Alkosh was the first cat, and though he is depicted as a dragon he has ‘feline features’ and is described by Khajiit as a ‘real big cat.’ He is also associated with heroically repelling an early pogrom in which many Khajiit were mistakenly murdered. Thus, the same dragon-god of time is incorporated into Khajiiti lore through a recasting that is more fitting with their culture: as a heroic, feline figure.

This uniformity in the construction of lore and aesthetic for each culture subtly implies a historical narrative that has culminated in the present-day societies with which the player can interact. Furthermore, this sense of history and regularity within each culture’s implied development is another means by which the developers build towards the crucial sense of internal consistency. Some games utilise religious elements as a narrative justification for their mechanics so that certain rules feel suitable to the environment. Magic and religion are often intertwined in fantasy games, with religion forming part of a fictional society’s backstory and magic used as a mechanic of gameplay. As Bainbridge noted in his exploration of religion in gaming,

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<sup>77</sup> This is with the exception of the Redguard, who refer to him as ‘Ruptga,’ and the Dunmer, who do not seem to recognise Auri’El. Ruptga appears to be the only chief deity who does not take the aspect of a dragon. This further displaces the Redguard culture from that of other humans. For a fuller discussion see chapter four.

<sup>78</sup> These cultural differences are further underscored by their differing symbolism: the symbol of Auri’El, found at the shrine, is a radiant sun, suggestive of his all-encompassing nature. The shrine symbol for Akatosh is a dragon, curled around a chess piece and eating a sword. This is perhaps more related to his control over time and fate.

the same game mechanic can be dressed in a variety of ways: in his example he demonstrates that, in *World of Warcraft*, a hunter might shoot an arrow while a mage launches a fireball to exactly the same effect on the target.<sup>79</sup> Though the mechanic might operate in the same way, the differing aesthetics—natural versus supernatural—convey oppositional meanings. While the mechanic is the same, the intended narrative interpretation differs. Gregory argues that neomedieval religion within games provides an extra source of narration for the game world, providing narrative reasoning for the mechanics of the game and adding to the feeling of realism within the game world.<sup>80</sup> In a useful example, she demonstrates how the constant war and violence of *Shadowbane*, as well as that game’s death and spawning mechanics, is justified by the game world’s mythological history. Thus, the narrative framing of the world can be used by the player to make sense of the game’s mechanics. By balancing mechanics with narrative justifications and using this balance to create a sense of internal consistency, the feeling of immersion can be increased.

Religion and magic share a complex relationship in *Skyrim*. This relationship, and the lore behind it, is integral to the fashioning of believable cultures within the game world. Unlike in *World of Warcraft*, religion in *Skyrim* does not act as a narrative frame to explain the functions of magic. Indeed, it is more typical of medieval fantasy RPGs to differentiate between the two ideas even though their mechanics and effects might be the same. This works in much the same way as the real-world distinction: Benavides notes that, whilst there is clearly an overlap between the two ideas, organised religions separate miracles from magic by making the distinction ‘between legitimate and illegitimate agents, not between efficacious and ineffective activities.’<sup>81</sup>

Typically, the use of magic is the manipulation of some kind of energy, often an abstract, otherworldly force. In *Skyrim*, magic-users manipulate Magicka—a vague

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<sup>79</sup> William Sims Bainbridge, *eGods: Faith Versus Fantasy In Computer Gaming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 167.

<sup>80</sup> Rabia Gregory, ‘Citing the Medieval: Using Religion as World-Building Infrastructure in Fantasy MMORPGS.’, in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, ed. by Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory P. Grieve (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 134–53 (pp. 147–49). Gregory uses the term ‘neomedieval’ to refer to the ‘repurposing of medieval imagery to represent contemporary values and problems’ (p. 135). For a discussion of this term, see chapter 3.

<sup>81</sup> Gustavo Benavides, ‘Magic’, in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. by Robert A. Segal (Oxford: Wiley, 2009), pp. 295–308 (p. 297).

form of energy—in order to have an effect in the world. In the *Dragon Age* series, mages tap into the power of the Fade—a metaphysical realm—while in *The Witcher* series, magic-users harness ‘primordial Chaos.’<sup>82</sup> Each of these game-words also have religions, the power of which is interpreted in a different way. When using magic, the caster is the agent performing a reliable, measurable act of supernatural power. When working within the boundaries of religious belief, the believer has no active agency. Indeed, religion involves supplication and worship: supernatural effects may or may not happen as a result of worship, and the impact of the supplicant is usually untestable. There are times at which the line between magic and faith are blurred in *Skyrim*, such as in the case of the Daedric Princes. These entities, descended from the same essence as the gods, are active forces on Nirn and enlist people to do their—amoral, often immoral—bidding in return for lavish rewards. Primarily though, this kind of active and direct magic is rarely attributed to the Divines proper.

This distinction is perhaps unnecessary in fantasy games, but likely exists in order to help the audience map their own understandings of religion and the supernatural onto the alternative space. Whilst acknowledging that religion cannot be defined definitively, Gavin Flood describes religions as ‘value-laden narratives and behaviours that bind people to their objectives, to each other, and to non-empirical claims and beings.’<sup>83</sup> In this way, fictional religions function more to engender a sense of depth and identity than to encourage the exploration of supernatural power. Flood goes on to explain that ‘religions are less about truth claims and more about identity, less about structures and more about texts, less about abstraction and more about traditions or that which is passed on.’ Fictional religions in fantasy worlds operate in this way, establishing a sense of history and heritage through shared beliefs and modes of worship that may not be testable: thus, magic is utilised as a means of playing with supernatural power, whereas religion operates as part of pseudo-cultural identity formation.

Religion in *Skyrim* is ostensibly a driving factor behind the narrative’s secondary conflict: the Civil War. Many players, however, read this as a battle for power under the guise of a quest for religious freedom. It is commonly held by players

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<sup>82</sup> BioWare; CD Projekt RED, *The Witcher* (Atari, 2007).

<sup>83</sup> Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), p. 47.

that Talos worship was outlawed in order to create strife between Skyrim and the rest of the Empire in order to disrupt Tamriel's unity and weaken its forces so that the Aldmeri Dominion can more easily conquer the realm. Indeed, at a party with the upper classes of Skyrim, High Justiciar Ondolemar notes that 'none of these people cares a whit about the religious aspects of this war,' going some way to confirm that the conflict is entirely political, based on a struggle for power.<sup>84</sup> While some aspects of religion in *Skyrim* act as narrative justifications for the plot, the primary goal of much of the religious lore appears to be in creating the sense of a believable alternate reality through their culturally building and binding, 'value-laden narratives.' I am primarily interested in what is considered appropriate in medieval world-building, and what this can tell us about the popular perceptions of history and of the way we construct cultural realism.

Sometimes the construction of a religion appropriate to the Middle Ages relies upon direct appropriation from the tropes of medieval Christianity, revealing the eurocentrism of medievalism in its appeal to the popular understanding of the period. For example, *The Sims Medieval*, a medieval-themed game emerging from the hugely popular *The Sims* franchise, incorporates a pseudo-Christian faith both as an element of its world-building and as a gameplay mechanic.<sup>85</sup> Of primary importance, the opening credits point the player out to be the Watcher, the supernatural being that gently moulds the world by influencing heroes, i.e., the player-characters, and subsequently shaping the world in which they live.<sup>86</sup> This narrative framing is somewhat different than the typical kingdom simulator or similar medieval strategy games in which the player is usually framed as the monarch.

The monotheistic belief system adopts the trappings of Christianity in a simplistic yet recognisable way. The environment makes use of churches, ceremonial garments, and a consistent set of religious symbols throughout. The omnipresent deity is known as the Watcher, and thus stylised eyes are consistently used in spiritual-

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<sup>84</sup> Ondolemar, 'Diplomatic Immunity.'

<sup>85</sup> The Sims Studio, *The Sims Medieval*; EA Maxis, *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2006).

<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, the game avoids discussing the creation of the world by a deity. The world is described as the player's 'home' where the player has, 'over millennia, watched the land and waited for the first people to arrive.' The player is clearly supernatural and powerful, but the game does not go so far as to put the player directly in the role of the Abrahamic god.

themed decoration. Gameplay elements include the automatic payment of tithes to one's denomination and obtaining positive and negative buffs—for example, drinking from blessed water gives a temporary increase to 'Focus'—by interacting with religious objects or heroes.<sup>87</sup> Players can directly play as a priest of either of the two denominations and can advance through the ranks of their church's hierarchy by performing their daily devotional tasks.

Religious Sims worship the Watcher as part of one of two sects, the Jacobans and the Peterans, likely taking their names from St James and St Peter, the major figures in the development of the Eastern and Western Churches respectively. The two sects worship the same deity but operate under slightly different doctrine, alluding to the schism between the Catholic and Protestant Churches. Jacoban followers believe the Watcher to be vengeful and 'must lead their lives according to a strict moral code lest punishment be delivered.'<sup>88</sup> Their buildings are large, gothic-style cathedrals, 'imposing structure[s] built to inspire awe and fear' and they tend towards a rich, highly-ornamented aesthetic in terms of décor and dress.<sup>89</sup> The Peterans, on the other hand, 'preach compassion and understanding.'<sup>90</sup> They live in monasteries, wear modest habits, and favour humour and humility in their preaching and teachings.

Rather than reproducing particular denominations, the factions play upon the two primary tropes of religion in the Middle Ages. The construction of the fear-mongering Jacobans utilises the notion of the medieval church as an oppressive and authoritarian religious institution; in a generic yet recognisable way, it leans upon the popular tropes of the Catholic Church as being dictatorial, materially excessive, and deeply concerned with punishment. Conversely, the Peterans are a reflection of the popular depiction of medieval monks. Their visual presentation alongside their moralistic focus on the individual and on the importance of an internal spirituality are more reminiscent of the jolly Friar familiar to the nostalgic, pastoral depictions of Merrie England.<sup>91</sup> Obviously, incorporating these ideas as religious caricatures does

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<sup>87</sup> Focus is a primary statistic in the game that, in order to progress efficiently, should be kept as high as possible.

<sup>88</sup> The Sims Studio, *The Sims Medieval Manual* (Electronic Arts, 2011), p. 21.

<sup>89</sup> The Sims Studio, *The Sims Medieval*, Jacoban Cathedral description.

<sup>90</sup> The Sims Studio, *The Sims Medieval Manual*, p. 21.

<sup>91</sup> A key example would be Friar Tuck of various adaptations of Robin Hood. Cf. Wolfgang Reitherman, *Robin Hood* (Walt Disney Productions, 1973); Kevin Reynolds, *Robin Hood*:

not engender depth in the same way as *Skyrim*'s sprawling and more complex theology. Rather than providing a commentary on either of these perceptions of religion in the Middle Ages, *The Sims: Medieval* (TSM hereafter) seems more invested in allowing the player to indulge in their trope of choice, as well as playfully using these ideas to comment on the The Watcher, that is, the player. This is perhaps unsurprising in a game that is explicitly playful, both in terms of its focus on comedy and its parodying of genre-specific tropes: God games, particularly *The Sims* franchise, give the player the freedom to nurture or torture their characters; thus, the Jacoban belief that the Watcher is cruel and vengeful is a comment that may not be lost on players familiar to the genre.<sup>92</sup>

Though there is always an implicit engagement with the spiritual narrative in that the player themselves is the deity, it is possible for the player to have their hero opt out of religious affiliation: all non-priest Sims begin as agnostic. If the hero remains agnostic they will occasionally get one of two buffs, 'Carefree' and 'Searching,' which grant +10 and -10 'Focus' respectively, and the game notifies the player that these occur through 'Lack of Faith.'<sup>93</sup> The balance in the possibility of positive and negative outcomes demonstrates an avoidance to make a moral judgement on faith, but the framing suggests that engagement with religion in some way is unavoidable. Indeed, with agnosticism framed as a 'lack' and atheism not an option, *TSM* aligns itself firmly with the notion of the Middle Ages being a time of inescapable religiosity. This is further emphasised when comparing *TSM* to *The Sims*, the main series in the franchise. *The Sims* is a life simulator, sometimes labelled a virtual dollhouse, and is much more expansive in terms of its worlds and gameplay than *TSM*. While it simulates elements of real societies that are often mediated by religion or spirituality, such as marriage, death, mourning, and festivals, it explicitly avoids any elements of organised religion.<sup>94</sup> Thus, *TSM*'s acknowledgement and

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*Prince of Thieves* (Warner Bros., 1991); Ridley Scott, *Robin Hood* (Universal Pictures, 2010).

<sup>92</sup> For examples of god-games which allow the player to act benevolently or malevolently, see Bullfrog Productions, *Dungeon Keeper* (Electronic Arts, 1997); Lionhead Studios, *Black & White*, PC (EA Games, 2001); 22Cans, *Godus* (22Cans, 2014).

<sup>93</sup> A buff is a temporary effect applied to the player-character, usually with a positive effect on statistics. A negative effect is often called a 'debuff.'

<sup>94</sup> Having said this, it is true that much of the values of *The Sims* lie in the typical values of (liberal) Western society which have been influenced by religion. For example, marriage in *The Sims* is secular and can occur between Sims of either gender, but Sims can only have

engagement with organised religion demonstrates theology to be crucial in the construction of a medieval world, and uses it as a pre-modern marker to separate medieval values from the modern understanding of the real world which, by implication, is much more complicated by its relationship with secularism.

Whilst set in a different genre with a more serious tone, *Skyrim* also upholds the notion that a medieval setting requires engagement with religion and is similar in its usage of religious belief as a pre-modern marker. Unlike *TSM*, *Skyrim* avoids making such direct connections to existing religions. This avoidance of creating direct parallels may imply an endeavour to create a fantastical world that provides a truly different ideological space from that of the present day. Having said this, the structure of the Nine Divines is reminiscent of Greco-Roman mythology and the incorporation of a varied pantheon of gods and heroes maps onto the popular understanding of mythologies in polytheistic cultures, particularly those that preceded later monotheistic dominance, such as Greco-Roman and Norse cultures. For example, a deity of primary importance in *Skyrim* is Talos, or Tiber Septim, the Dragonborn. Born a mortal and raised in *Skyrim*, Tiber Septim conquered and unified Tamriel, heralding the Third Era and forming the Empire that continues to *Skyrim*'s present-day.<sup>95</sup> He is believed to have become a god upon death, and is the ninth deity in the pantheon formerly known as the Eight Divines. As Nura Snow-Shod, a priestess of Talos, explains: 'he's the protector of Man, the Dragon of the North, the patron of all Nords.'<sup>96</sup> At shrines dedicated to Talos, he is depicted as a warrior in full armour driving a sword into a serpent. This appeals to the common, popular image of the beast-slaying hero, and also ties in with the game's own lore in that Talos is the guardian and master of time as the image of the serpent is often associated with the ouroboros symbol. The cyclical nature of time is especially important in *Skyrim* in which the primary conflict is prompted by the dragon Alduin, the World-Eater, who returns to devour the world so that time can begin again. Talos' symbol is reminiscent of the symbol of the hammer Mjölfnir from Norse mythology, while his name is shared with the figure from Greek mythology, forged from Bronze to protect Europa. This blending further helps to establish the game-world as the familiar other: a fantastical,

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one spouse at once and will become unhappy if they discover that their partner is involved in multiple romantic relationships.

<sup>95</sup> The events of *Skyrim* take place in the third century of the Fourth Era, 4E 201.

<sup>96</sup> Nura Snow-Shod, Riften.

temporally distinct world that maintains authenticity through its interweaving of real-world mythology and pseudo-history with its own fictional narratives. To return to Flood's attempts to define religion, 'we recognise a religion when we see it, but must reflexively be aware that our recognition partially constructs it.'<sup>97</sup> Mirroring popular ideas about historical religions helps to establish a belief system that appears more credible, more realistic, because part of its creation relies upon the player's own intellectual construction by way of recognition.

Whilst it avoids direct commentary on currently-existing real-world religions, *Skyrim* does adopt generally recognisable themes in order to create a spiritual background for Tamriel: religious beliefs address the creation of the world and its peoples, the end of the known world, birth and the afterlife, as well as the inclusion of details that differentiate the mythologies of various races and cultures in order to construct and maintaining a diverse yet internally consistent world. For all of the complexity of the theological backstory, however, the incorporation of religious elements in the game tends to primarily serve the construction of believable cultures rather than presenting a critique—or an opportunity to play with—ideas of theology, the politics of organised religion, and the practical aspects of worship. The religious narratives, as with much of the lore, in *Skyrim* are primarily explored diagetically, which is to say that they are only experienced via the player's character within the game-world, mostly through reading books. Where religious-themed quests are available, they are typically fetch-quests that do not reveal much about the way in which religion is practiced, the commandments of faith, or what is believed.<sup>98</sup> For example, after the execution of Roggvir, a Nord who helped Ulfric escape following his successful combat with the Emperor, a quest can be triggered by talking to his young niece. She confides in the player that her mother, Roggvir's sister, is upset by the proceedings and refuses to attend temple. Her mother, Greta, agrees that she should return to temple but 'wouldn't feel right in there without a tie to Talos,' whose worship has been outlawed.<sup>99</sup> She then sends the player on a mission to recover Roggvir's hidden Amulet of Talos, for which she rewards them with gold. Following

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<sup>97</sup> Flood, p. 48.

<sup>98</sup> A fetch-quest is a mission that requires to player to obtain an object and 'fetch' it back to the quest-giver.

<sup>99</sup> Greta, in Solitude, 'Return to Grace'

the outlawing of Talos worship, the Thalmor, a faction of Altmer, conduct an inquisition in Skyrim to enforce the ban. The player may occasionally encounter Thalmor patrols on the roads between cities, some of which are holding prisoners who are presumably suspected of heresy. One quest allows the player to aid the Thalmor in their efforts. When talking to Ondolemar the Justiciar he puns ‘you’re awfully inquisitive, aren’t you? I like that. Perhaps you’d care to solve a little problem I’m having?’<sup>100</sup> He asks the player to break into the house of Ogmund the Skald, a suspected Talos worshipper, and retrieve evidence. If the player accepts the fetch-quest, they can find an Amulet of Talos in the house and return it to Ondolemar who explains that Ogmund will now be ‘taken care of.’ These quests demonstrate that physical symbols, such as amulets and icons, both of which are prevalent in *Skyrim*, are an important element of faith, but little is revealed about the practice or meaning behind them. Furthermore, neither the Talos-worshippers nor the Thalmor discuss and theological reasoning behind the Talos ban, other than that the Aldmer simply do not acknowledge Tiber Septim’s apotheosis.

Arguably the closest example of seeing the practice of religion is when Jarl Elisif requests that the player takes her late husband Torygg’s war horn to the Shrine of Talos as an offering. Upon his death she made offerings to the other Divines, but was unable to visit the Shrine of Talos due to the ban on his worship. Small items, such as books and weapons, can sometimes be found around various shrines, suggesting that material offerings are an important part of worship in Skyrim. Otherwise, it is very rare to encounter NPCs practicing their religion, and there is little information available on the dictates of the various belief systems and how they should be performed.

An exception to the norm in this area are the two quests given by Dinya Balu, a priestess in the Temple of Mara, the mother-goddess of love, in Riften. If the player asks for Mara’s blessing, Dinya will explain that the player must first carry out the work of Mara by encouraging love between others. She immediately drifts into a vision, from which she relays the will of the goddess. The quest is broken into three parts, each of which is given after these visions. The first part concerns Fastred, a young woman in love with a man, Bassianus, of whom her father disapproves.

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<sup>100</sup> Ondolemar, Markath, ‘Search and Seizure’

Bassianus' housemate, Klimmek, is also in love with Fastred and it seems the two had a prior relationship until her infatuation with him waned. Fastred's father informs the player that she is changeable, thus the quest's name: 'Fickle Love.' The player must then choose which lover to encourage; whichever man the player chooses will confess his feelings to Fastred and the two will become a couple. The second part of the chain, 'Embers in Stone,' involves an older pair of potential lovers, a shy scholar and an oblivious housecarl. The player must pay a local singer to compose a piece of poetry for the housecarl and present it as the work of the scholar. The housecarl is surprised but moved by the gesture, stating that the poem 'revealed a depth of feeling I never suspected.'<sup>101</sup> In both quests the player interferes and uses their influence, both social and financial, in order to contrive a relationship. Whilst both quests ostensibly serve to teach the player about love in different situations, it is seemingly up to the player to interpret whether Mara is working through them or if both stories are actually remarkably cynical about the nature of love.

The final part of the chain is less ambiguous as it presents a more direct interaction with the supernatural. Dinya gifts the player with an Amulet of Mara, granting the power to see the ghosts of two lovers who, seemingly trapped in time and unaware that they are dead, are searching for one another. The player reunites the couple who then ascend towards the sky. The talisman allows the player to engage with the afterlife, and to witness a supernatural power rather than simply interfere on the mortal plane as a supposed agent of the goddess. Following this, the player receives the Blessing of Mara, resulting in the permanent buff 'Agent of Mara', providing a 15% increase to spell resistance. It is interesting, though perhaps coincidental, that the reward includes a resistance to magic considering the strained relationship between magic and religion in games and in real-world culture. As a follow-up to this storyline, Dinya offers a quest to hand out missives entitled 'The Warmth of Mara.' The religious pamphlets encourage the worship of Mara and are reminiscent of real-world evangelistic material, reading 'Rejoice, Reader... For Mara's Light Shines Upon YOU!' In taking this quest, the player becomes an activist for the temple and receives a variety of reactions to their evangelising, from positive affirmations of faith to rejection and irritation. As before, by incorporating multiple reactions and perspectives the game does not provide an authorial stance on religion.

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<sup>101</sup> Faleen's letter to Calcemo.

As well as writing pamphlets, the priestess can also be seen offering support to the residents of her town. From her actions we can learn more about the values held by the Cult of Mara such as charity, the disapproval of drunkenness and avoiding prayer, and the support of interracial marriages.<sup>102</sup> These quests provide two of the very few opportunities available for a player to enact faith, and to explore the power of divinity.<sup>103</sup>

Whilst some NPCs will talk about religion when questioned, and a handful of quests deal with worship, the theological lore of *Skyrim* is primarily discovered through reading in-game books and notes. These sources often conflict with one another, reflecting the disparities in real-world mythologies, creation stories, and spiritual practices. The lack of an authoritative narrative voice in the game encourages the player to take a rather postmodern view of religion and politics, one in which there is no singular truth or predefined ideas of morality, which potentially creates space for intellectual experimentation.<sup>104</sup> This is then somewhat limited by the fact that *Skyrim* rather favours a private, individualistic approach to religious practice. Shrines and temples exist and appear to be in use, and NPCs commonly use religious greetings and curses, but it is uncommon to find NPCs acting out their faith and difficult even to discover how—or if—followers are expected to perform religious rites, what those rites might entail, and how they generate meaning. This paradoxical investment and ambivalence surrounding the construction of religion might be another way in which the game tries to leave its space open for the player to fill in their own interpretation but ultimately avoids the issue.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, the idea of faith as an individual matter that is privately performed is perhaps more fitting with the present-day attitude towards religion in the West.

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<sup>102</sup> A parishioner asks if Mara will be angry if she marries someone not of her ‘own kind,’ suggesting that interracial marriage is a social issue for some. This is clearly not always the case, as the game-world includes multiple non-homogenous pairings and rarely demonstrates societal injunctions against these.

<sup>103</sup> One might argue that interactions with the Daedric Princes provide the same opportunity as they are supernatural beings with a magical presence in the world. They are, however, commonly acknowledged as demonic forces without a sense of morality, and tend to interact directly with their worshippers in order to achieve particular goals.

<sup>104</sup> For an examination of the limitations placed upon player choice, see chapter three.

<sup>105</sup> This is similar to the fact that sexual orientation as a concept is avoided altogether (see chapter four).

Thus, religion primarily acts as a form of cultural set-dressing. Religion is clearly an important element of medieval game-world construction as it provides a pre-modern marker that maps efficiently onto popular perceptions of the Middle Ages, where the medieval period as a time prior to Enlightenment thinking was dominated by religious thought. Medieval culture is popularly understood to be marked by greater religiosity than the present-day, and so fictional medieval cultures require mythical and religious backgrounds and beliefs in order to give the sense of being well-rounded and authentic.

Belief in a game-world, established by maintaining the internal consistency of game mechanics, animations, space, lore, and culture, is integral to developing the immersive quality so highly valued in role-playing games. The way that fantasy games value and establish realism makes apparent the paradoxical nature of ‘realistic fantasy.’ By appealing to Western cultural norms, tropes of medievalism, and popular history in the construction of reality, however, these contradictions slip in and out of view. For example, at times the blending of medieval and modern elements—or rather, popular pre-modern markers with present-day cultural norms—is sometimes done so well that the paradoxical nature of the construction seems to vanish from view, only visible upon examination. The depiction of religion in *Skyrim* is one example of this. Religious artefacts and narratives inform the game world in such a way that religion serves as an immersive narrative device, incorporating popular medieval elements to create a setting that is perceived as complex and authentic. Religious behaviour, however, is conspicuous in its absence from a medieval setting. Its omission might be considered an appeal to modern-day values and an attempt to mimic the player’s own social reality in order to encourage the perception of the game-space as ‘real.’

Realism, then, is a crucial yet problematic concept in fantasy games. It can be thought of in terms of a game-space’s mimetic quality or in its authenticity, or perhaps both simultaneously. The paradox of ‘realistic fantasy’ lies in its mutability. *Realism* never quite becomes an explicit synonym for *immersive* and always retains its capacity to regain its traditional sense and refer to the real world. In this mutability, realistic fantasy has an indirectly didactic power, almost invisibly maintaining Western cultural norms as the natural, objective view of reality.

## Chapter 3

### Neomedievalism and The Politics of Medieval Fantasy

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#### **All fantasy is political**

Fantasy has typically been considered low brow, both in terms of academic study and more broadly as a literary genre, and has often been relegated to the realm of kitschy popular culture by scholars and critics. Indeed, Umberto Eco famously described the new wave of medievalist fantasy in the United States as an ‘avalanche of pseudo-medieval pulp in paperbacks, midway between Nazi nostalgia and occultism.’<sup>106</sup> Though in the past few decades many have risen to convincingly argue for fantasy as a meaningful form worthy of academic attention, many scholars still feel pressured to defend work done on fantasy, as evidenced by the justification for studying the genre that often precedes scholarly books and articles.

Although I do not wish to reproduce a lengthy defence of studying fantasy here, it bears mentioning that the importance of fantasy is evident both in its widespread popularity and longevity, and its typical exploration of cultural and ideological values. This is a point of note precisely because the study of fantasy games inspires a great degree of passion in parts of the gaming community. At times, this is expressed as vitriolic and anti-intellectual sentiment, to the point of denying the cultural values of gaming and the fantasy genre.

Whether the text itself is attempting to examine, expose, or strengthen certain cultural ideas, those values can be identified and understood as both a reflection of and a comment upon the society in which it was produced. The same can be said for those texts which do not appear to engage explicitly with identity politics; the mere act of world creation results in a production of ideology. This idea applies to any text, though fantasies of the Middle Ages are particularly interesting to me as their pseudo-historical settings can appeal powerfully to a sense of cultural heritage and national, ethnic, and racial identity.

The resurgence of interest in nostalgic retellings of medieval stories—particularly those based on old Norse literature—in the nineteenth century has been identified as playing an important role in reinforcing British nationalism. These romances, based in an idealised past, helpfully legitimised the expansion of the British Empire within cultural consciousness, formulating colonisation as a justified

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<sup>106</sup> Umberto Eco, ‘Dreaming in the Middle Ages’, in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. by William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986), pp. 61–72 (p. 62).

expression of something fundamental to British identity.<sup>107</sup> Nineteenth-century medievalism was concerned with imagining the British as being innately bold and industrious and valuing freedom and justice, values inherited from their seafaring, heroic ancestors. Medieval history—or rather, medievalist interpretations of history—was researched and revived to set a historical precedent, and to powerfully reinforce religious, political, and nationalist views even in the centuries prior to the Victorian age.<sup>108</sup> Workman explains that though there was a decline in ‘medievalism as a social force, except in the form of fascism’ in the early-twentieth century, the late-twentieth century saw a recovery in popular interest that remains significant in its continued growth across all forms of media.<sup>109</sup>

The nostalgia and sense of national heritage is easily harnessed to encourage pride and patriotism as we can see from the nationalistic revival of the medieval from the Victorian era onwards. This continues today, often in a sinister and blatantly manipulative manner, such as the medievalisms appropriated by the British National Party in their fear-mongering campaign against immigration, against the non-white, non-British other. To demonstrate a brief example, their official shop—whether it is owned and run by the BNP or just licensed and endorsed to sell its party products is unclear—is named Excalibur. The allusion to popular and well-loved British medieval mythology is a clear attempt to conjure a sense of heritage, of pride and belonging in the prospective shopper; this is further enhanced by the logo, a mounted knight carrying a lance upon a Union flag background, and the use of an English blackletter-style font. Here, the tropes of popular medievalism are used to inspire patriotism and give the company, and the party by extension, a sense of historical legitimacy and nationalistic justification, which is highly worrying when we begin to browse their wares. Alongside the expected party badges, mugs, and rosettes, we find a disconcertingly xenophobic array of books. Each book is oddly presented; author and date are usually omitted from the information and most are presented with only title and a short description, so here we must focus our attention. Whether fiction or non-fiction, all of the books focus on the same few subjects: the history of the British Isles, the dangers of immigration to cultural

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<sup>107</sup> See John M. Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture and Cultural Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>108</sup> See Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. xxii–iii; Leslie J. Workman, ‘Editorial’, in *Studies in Medievalism III.1*, ed. by Leslie J. Workman and Heather Arden (London: D.S. Brewer, 1987), pp. 2–4.

<sup>109</sup> Workman, p. 4. It is also worth noting (as Workman does) that the study of the Middle Ages in this period grew substantially even as popular interest was in decline. See Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper, 1993).

identity and national security, and the threat of Islam to western civilisation. A representative sample of the available books and their descriptions might include:

*The Camp of the Saints*: The novel depicts a hypothetical setting whereby Third World mass immigration to France and the West led to the destruction of Western civilization.

*Jihad*: Islam's 1300 year war on western civilisation.

*An English Nationalism*: The theme of this book is that a nation is a group of people who share a communal identity, culture, language, ancestry and history. If a nation is to survive it must maintain its communal boundaries and constantly regenerate itself.<sup>110</sup>

After the medievalist marketing appeals to one's sense of Britishness, the products serve to challenge the security of that identity, to threaten the pleasurable, romantic images evoked by the allusions to the Arthurian myth and the glorious age of chivalry with foreign invasion. Another odd, yet depressingly unsurprising, item available for purchase is the golly doll—Excalibur avoids the traditional name 'gollywog,' perhaps in an attempt to distance itself from the racial slur the term is considered to have spawned. Though not medieval, the image has a connection to British heritage and can evoke the same sense of nostalgia—or embarrassment; the image has disappeared from children's books and advertising but there is still some debate over whether the dolls are racist. The BNP-endorsed Excalibur trots out these dolls in churlish resistance to what I imagine they would describe as political correctness gone mad.

Paradoxically, our imagined Middle Ages provides a simultaneous sense of estrangement and familiarity. The temporal and geographic removal of secondary worlds from our present, primary world, combined with the fantastical elements typical of the genre, creates a space which is distinct from our current reality yet is recognisable enough to be believed. This dual nature of fantasy, being comprised of both the familiar and the strange, was identified as a fundamental element of the genre by J.R.R. Tolkien in 'On Fairy Stories.' As both a scholar and a fantasy author, Tolkien understood the value of fantasy. The wealth of scholarly work on Tolkien's fantasy, and his influence on the genre, convincingly demonstrates the importance and usefulness of studying fantasy.

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<sup>110</sup> Excalibur (online shop), *Books* <<http://www.buyexcalibur.co.uk/products.php?cat=2>> [accessed 11 May 2014].

Tolkien saw the value of fairy stories in aiding a process he termed ‘recovery,’<sup>111</sup> that is, seeing the world anew and recovering our sense of wonder. Brian Attebery notes that, for Tolkien, this need for recovery was not ‘politico-economic in origin but was produced by boredom, habit, false sophistication, and loss of faith.’<sup>112</sup> For Tolkien it seems that meaning in fantasy literature is not necessarily to be negotiated through exploration of real-world social, cultural, and political issues. Instead, meaning and purpose is found in one’s exploration of the human condition, in the rediscovery of the self and the spiritual renewal and growth inspired by the new perspective that, Tolkien argues, fairy stories grant. As Narelle Campbell notes, the ‘creation [of Middle Earth] seeks not to expose or deconstruct, but to construct and mend.’<sup>113</sup> Tolkien claims that the best fairy stories deal with ‘simple or fundamental things,’<sup>114</sup> such as the desire to escape death or to be free from other human constraints, and strongly protested against allegorical readings of *The Lord of the Rings*, most notably with regard to the narrative being a conscious reference to one, or both, of the World Wars. His letters suggest varying levels of irritation with allegorical or moralising readings of his seminal work: ‘I have no didactic purpose, and no allegorical intent. I do not like allegory (...most readers appear to confuse allegory with applicability).’<sup>115</sup> By applicability, Tolkien refers to the wide range of interpretations that can be drawn based on the reader’s own experience:

That there is no allegory does not, of course, say that there is no applicability. There always is. But I should say, if asked, the tale is not really about Power and Dominion: that only sets the wheels going; it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness. Which is hardly more than to say it is a tale written by a Man!<sup>116</sup>

Tolkien’s intention, then, appears to have been in constructing a narrative that would have universal appeal to the most basic and primal human fear: the fear of death. I think Tolkien has succeeded in many respects to convey this idea in *The Lord of the*

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<sup>111</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-Stories’, in *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964).

<sup>112</sup> Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). Read in: Brian Attebery, ‘Fantasy as Mode, Genre, Formula’, in *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, ed. by David Sandner (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), p. 308.

<sup>113</sup> Narelle Campbell, ‘Now and Then: Traces of the Past in Medievalist Fantasy Fiction’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wollongong, 2013), p. 41.

<sup>114</sup> Tolkien, p. 59.

<sup>115</sup> Letter 215 to Walter Allen, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. by Humphrey Carpenter (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981).

<sup>116</sup> Letter 203 to Herbero Schrio, Carpenter.

*Rings*, but it is critical to understand that his conscious intention is, in many ways, unimportant. Audiences, not authors, create meaning and applicability is of primary concern. Tolkien's idea of applicability is in line with the general idea of reception theory, that artistic works are co-generated and 'mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject—through the interaction of author and public.'<sup>117</sup>

The importance of readings above authorial intention is attested in the decades of research into Tolkien's corpus and the many successive fantasy texts that inherit its traditions, engage in textual dialogue, and contribute to the evolution of the genre. Broad issues such as elements of racism, Eurocentrism, and phallocentrism have been identified within *The Lord of the Rings*, and have been explored alongside concepts of masculinity, nationalism, and other cultural ideologies too numerous to mention. Tolkien may not have set out with the intention to explore identity politics in Middle Earth nor to deconstruct contemporary political ideology, but his 'comment upon the world'<sup>118</sup> could not be anything but a cultural product; thus, we can legitimately explore the political resonance of *The Lord of the Rings*, and any fantasy text, without concern for authorial intent. Indeed, the commentary that a text does not explicitly set out to make may prove to be the most telling. All fantasy is the product of the culture from whence it came; thus, all fantasy is political.

## **Gamers are dead**

Fantasy games can be similarly interrogated as cultural products: 'as a cultural medium, games carry embedded beliefs within their systems of representation and their structures, whether game designers intend these ideologies or not.'<sup>119</sup> While some designers make conscious attempts to create artistic games with the explicit aim of encouraging players to critically engage with social or political ideas, most commercial games have no direct aim to critique, deconstruct or explore real-world politics through play. Therefore, games in general must be treated in a similar fashion to worlds created in fantasy literature, that is, as a product of the cultural assumptions and norms of the game's creators.

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<sup>117</sup> Jauss, p. 15.

<sup>118</sup> Tolkien qualified this by saying he hoped it didn't sound too grandiose and solemn. Within the context of the letter, which also included his assertion that he had no didactic aim, I think he used 'comment' in the lightest sense of the word without implying *critique*.

<sup>119</sup> Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (MIT Press, 2009), p. 223.

Games whose primary function is not entertainment have been termed ‘serious games’ in the field of games studies. Though these games can be fun and engaging, their primary goal is didactic or educational. Although the classification of ‘serious games’ is widely debated and there is currently no strict definition of the term, games that broadly fall into this group tend to be related to learning, training, and advertising in categories as diverse as primary and adult education, business management and leadership, military and security, science and healthcare, aviation and engineering, and religion.<sup>120</sup> Serious games on governance and politics are also common. Some appear in the form of sophisticated governmental simulations that give the player control over elements such as domestic and international policy and budgets, usually in a Western political context. Players can then see the outcome of their political decisions through feedback such as voter support, changes in international relations, and economic prosperity.<sup>121</sup> Others focus on specific social and international issues such as recent military conflicts, capitalism and corporate ethics, and gender and sexuality.<sup>122</sup>

Currently, serious games tend to be made by small, independent developers and rarely achieve the financial success and pervasiveness of the high-budget, entertainment games produced by the ‘triple A’ sector of the industry. While the latter may incorporate elements of popular politics or social issues, their primary goal tends to be to provide an entertaining experience that leads to commercial success. The overwhelming popularity of mass-market, blockbuster games is part of the reason I am inclined to critically examine the values that they reflect; of particular interest is the defence of such games as being apolitical and the recent social movements that explicitly reject the political study of games. This desire for games to be exempted from the academic and social criticism common to all art forms has manifested in the anarchic online movement known as *gamergate*. As a phenomenon relatively unique to digital media, it is worth exploring exactly what this anti-intellectual movement has done in some detail. Given the stifling effect that

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<sup>120</sup> Admittedly, this is a brief summary that, for the sake of brevity and relevance, does not fully examine the depths of this complex field of study. For definitions and discussions of ‘serious games’ and their uses, see: David Michael and Sandra Chen, *Serious Games: Games That Educate, Train, and Inform* (Boston: Course Technology Inc, 2005); *Serious Games: Mechanisms and Effects*, ed. by Ute Ritterfeld, Michael Cody, and Peter Vorderer (Oxford: Routledge, 2009); Kurt Squire, ‘Cultural Framing of Computer/Video Games’, *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 2.1 (2002) <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/squire/>> [accessed 29 October 2014].

<sup>121</sup> Cf. Positech Games, *Democracy* (Positech Games, 2005); Ian Bogost, *Oil God* (Persuasive Games, 2005); TheorySpark, *President Forever* (TheorySpark, 2006).

<sup>122</sup> For examples, see Afkar Media, *Tatha Al-Hisar (Under Siege)* (Dar al-Fikr, 2005); Molleindustria, *McDonald’s Videogame* (Molleindustria, 2006); The Fullbright Company, *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013); Lucas Pope, *Papers Please* (3909, 2014).

movements such as this can potentially have on academic, journalistic and cultural understandings of games, and the extent to which dialogue like this has altered discourse within the field and the creation of content in games, an exploration of these developments is necessary to consider the politics of games themselves, particularly in more commercial titles.

The gamergate movement is chaotic and resists clear definition. The group seems to contain multiple clusters with differing ideals and goals, and with no clear leadership or structure it is impossible to accurately state what its proponents aim to achieve. Generally though, the movement is ostensibly concerned with ethics in games journalism—and, by extension, games research—and the fair treatment of the consumer. The movement, however, has been inextricably linked to harassment, particularly of women, and their actions might be characterised as a highly conservative reaction to diversification in games and their audiences.

On 16 August 2014, Eron Gjoni wrote a lengthy blog post bitterly detailing the reasons for the end his relationship with Zoe Quinn, developer of the independent interactive-fiction game *Depression Quest*.<sup>123</sup> In ‘The Zoe Post,’ Gjoni alleged that Quinn had had numerous affairs whilst they were in a relationship including a sexual relationship with Nathan Grayson, a journalist for the popular gaming outlet *Kotaku*. This led readers of the post to allege that Quinn and Grayson’s affair was the motivation for the latter publishing a favourable review of *Depression Quest*. The allegation of nepotism was denied by all parties, including the editor-in-chief of *Kotaku* who stated that Grayson had never written a review of *Depression Quest*.<sup>124</sup> Later Gjoni also clarified that he had made a dating error in his post and that he had no evidence to suggest that Quinn and Grayson’s relationship was anything other than professional prior to the corrected dates.<sup>125</sup> Still, in the wake of ‘The Zoe Post’ Quinn and her family were subjected to waves of online harassment including threats of hacking, rape, and bodily harm.

Those vocal about the scandal stated their concern for ethical misconduct in videogame journalism, citing this case as one incident in a broadly corrupt industry. The online response, however, was perceived by many to be aggressive and misdirected: it primarily targeted Quinn, not the journalist, and tended towards

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<sup>123</sup> ‘Thezoepost’, *Thezoepost*, 2014 <<http://thezoepost.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 29 August 2014].

<sup>124</sup> Stephen Totilo, ‘In Recent Days I’ve Been Asked Several Times’, *Kotaku*, 2014 <<http://kotaku.com/in-recent-days-ive-been-asked-several-times-about-a-pos-1624707346>> [accessed 15 September 2014].

<sup>125</sup> ‘TL;DR’, *Thezoepost*, 2014 <<http://thezoepost.wordpress.com/2014/08/16/tldr-2/>> [accessed 11 November 2014].

misogynistic and sexualised abuse. A quantitative analysis of Tweets using the hashtag #Gamergate, commissioned by *Newsweek*, found that between September 1 to October 23, 2014, Grayson was tweeted at 732 times, relatively little in comparison to the 10,400 tweets received by Quinn. *Newsweek* notes the significance of Quinn, the developer, receiving fourteen times as many gamergate-related tweets as the supposedly corrupt journalist in a debate that was allegedly concerned with journalistic ethics.<sup>126</sup> Quinn was not the only target of online harassers who aligned themselves with gamergate: Anita Sarkeesian—feminist popular culture critic who launched a crowd-funded Youtube video series titled *Tropes vs. Women in Videogames* in 2013 to much hateful backlash—encountered a resurgence in harassment in connection with the gamergate hashtag, and developer Brianna Wu also became a target after mocking gamergate on her Twitter account.

An article by Milo Yiannopoulos, a right-wring writer and prominent advocate of Gamergate, expresses the general feeling of ‘widespread frustration from players that every blog out there seems more concerned with policing misogyny and "transphobia" than reviewing the latest game releases,’<sup>127</sup> and seemingly resents the increasing attention games publications have been devoting to analysis of games and the industry, particularly regarding social equality issues such as gender, racial, and sexual diversity. Indeed, the term ‘Social Justice Warrior’, often abbreviated to SJW, is frequently used across the internet as a pejorative. It is similar in usage to the older term ‘politically correct,’ suggesting that the causes ‘SJWs’ support are simply ‘non-issues’, and either spring from oversensitivity to normal behaviour or from a desire to have greater privilege than others. Gamergate is often described in terms of a crusade against such Social Justice Warriors. The anger and cynicism surrounding the intersection of social justice and video game journalism had already been simmering for some time and can be seen in standalone events preceding the more united front put forth by gamergate proponents. In March 2014 an image was circulated online with a list publications and journalists titled ‘SJW Videogame “Journalists” to Avoid.’ The intention seems to have been twofold: to encourage a boycott of journalists or publications that supported a social justice agenda—though it is unclear what exactly that means—and also to question the integrity of those interested in reporting or commenting upon social issues and

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<sup>126</sup> Taylor Wofford, ‘Is GamerGate About Media Ethics or Harassing Women? Harassment, the Data Shows’, *Newsweek*, 2014 <<http://www.newsweek.com/gamergate-about-media-ethics-or-harassing-women-harassment-data-show-279736>> [accessed 30 October 2014].

<sup>127</sup> Milo Yiannopoulos, ‘Feminist Bullies Tearing the Video Game Industry Apart’, *Breitbart News Network*, 2014, para. 3 <<http://www.breitbart.com/Breitbart-London/2014/09/01/Lying-Greedy-Promiscuous-Feminist-Bullies-are-Tearing-the-Video-Game-Industry-Apart>> [accessed 1 October 2014].

representation in games. The image inspired independent game developer Eric Ford to develop a game that would encourage people to think about the labels applied to one another online, and the way the terms ‘*SJW* and *troll* are used by a small subset of the internet to dismiss people’s opinions.’<sup>128</sup> The game, *Social Justice Warriors*, takes the archetypal characters of medieval fantasy role-playing games and uses them to create a satire that pointedly critiques unproductive modes of debate and questionable behaviour on the internet. Upon opening the game, the options menu gives the following: Battle for Social Justice; Options; Hall of Champions; Don’t Battle for Social Justice. Choosing the last option displays the credits and exits the game, perhaps implying that engaging in such asinine battles is not a requirement or heroic calling, but is in fact a personal choice that is ultimately futile. Indeed, Ford has suggested just that in stating that the opening menu gives the player ‘the most important choice both inside and outside the game... Is refuting every person ready to argue with you on Twitter the best way to spend your limited free time?’<sup>129</sup> This advice rather sidesteps the extent to which gaming culture can formulate a person’s sense of self. The current wave of backlash against the discussion of identity politics—mostly feminism and gender politics—in video games seems to be deeply connected with one’s identity as a ‘gamer.’<sup>130</sup>

One of the articles which fuelled the controversy was Leigh Alexander’s opinion piece on the decline of the stereotypical gamer. The earliest players of games tended to be young, white, middle-class males. Alexander notes that this market was tapped by the first publishers who enabled young players to take part in a macho fantasy and celebrate the feeling of being an outcast.<sup>131</sup> Eventually the medium grew in popularity and its audience expanded rapidly.<sup>132</sup> This evolution included diversification of developers and values as well as content. The gaming press’ current focus on social and cultural issues in games and game culture is merely the next step in the development of the medium as an art form. For some, this is a cause for concern. Game culture is expanding to the point where any newfound inclusivity may reduce its borders to nothing, and playing games will no

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<sup>128</sup> Eric Ford, ‘Releasing a Social Justice Warriors Game’, *Nonadecimal Creative*, 2014, para. 2 <<http://nonadecimal.com/site/releasing-social-justice-warriors/>> [accessed 19 September 2014].

<sup>129</sup> Eric Ford, para. 12.

<sup>130</sup> See Adrienne Shaw, ‘Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity’, *New Media & Society*, 14.1 (2012), 28–44.

<sup>131</sup> Leigh Alexander, ‘“Gamers” Don’t Have to Be Your Audience. “Gamers” Are Over.’, *Gamasutra*, 2014 <[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers\\_dont\\_have\\_to\\_be\\_your\\_audience\\_Gamers\\_are\\_over.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_your_audience_Gamers_are_over.php)> [accessed 1 September 2014].

<sup>132</sup> See chapter 1 for an introduction to the statistics of the game-playing audience.

longer be a niche hobby that bonds together social outsiders: it will no longer be an ‘identity based on difference and separateness.’<sup>133</sup> Alexander polemically claims that ‘gamers are over,’ and that the outrage is simply the death throes of those who cannot face change: ‘it’s hard for them to hear they don’t own anything anymore, that they aren’t the world’s most special-est consumer demographic, that they have to share.’<sup>134</sup>

The development of gaming culture helped to create a sense of belonging, to construct an identity for a portion of the population who are almost rendered invisible by their privilege.<sup>135</sup> Though current data suggests that most of the Western population regularly plays games of some type, some vocal groups of gamers—or perhaps Gamers—continue to maintain that they are an oppressed group, that they suffer discrimination that is tantamount to racism. When confronted with statistics demonstrating an increasingly diverse population of players, a typical response is to question which type of games were surveyed with the implication that one must play certain types of games to be considered a ‘true gamer.’ There almost seems to be an unconscious desire to maintain the outsider status that has historically been part of the stereotype of basement-dwelling, socially-inept games enthusiasts. This is a desire that can only come from the truly privileged, from those who do not have any experience of systematic oppression based on their identity. In a truly conservative moment it appears that some gamers are resisting the progress of social equality by claiming that it is destructive to their own marginalised identity.

Indeed, Alexander’s call that players retire the ‘gamer’ label—and the unwelcoming culture that, for some, it connotes—and welcome progression has been read by many as a statement that ‘gamers are dead,’ that they are irrelevant as a consumer and cultural group.<sup>136</sup> A spate of similar articles at the time fuelled the theory that journalists and radical feminists were conspiring to disenfranchise gamers and to deconstruct their identity, when in reality many of these articles were calling attention to the natural breakdown of a segment of the game-playing

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<sup>133</sup> Dan Golding, ‘The End of Gamers’, *Dan Golding*, 2014  
<<http://dangolding.tumblr.com/post/95985875943/the-end-of-gamers>> [accessed 1 September 2014].

<sup>134</sup> Leigh Alexander, para. 17.

<sup>135</sup> For a full discussion of the invisibility of whiteness, see Chapter 5.

<sup>136</sup> Though Alexander’s article seems to have been a particularly strong catalyst for the movement, calls to retire the label are not new, see: Brandom Sheffield, ‘Opinion: Let’s Retire the Word “Gamer”’, *Gamasutra*, 2013  
<[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/192107/Opinion\\_Lets\\_retire\\_the\\_word\\_gamer.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/192107/Opinion_Lets_retire_the_word_gamer.php)> [accessed 1 September 2014].

population who inflexibly self-identified as gamers, and were pointing to the anti-feminist vitriol as the ‘viciousness that accompanies the death of an identity.’<sup>137</sup>

As well as claiming to be a consumer revolt mobilised to highlight corruption in games journalism, gamergate has recently directed its interest towards academics. A portion of the gamergate movement has accused scholars and critics of politicising games and trying to alter game content via nefarious connections with journalists, developers, and educational and governmental organisations. The main focus of the ire has been directed at the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), a non-profit association for academics, developers, and those interested in games research. A prominent gamergate member, under the pseudonym ‘Sargon of Akkad,’ described the association as ‘the poisoned spring from whence all of this evil flows’ and has stated that DiGRA is likely the hidden catalyst for the gamergate movement.<sup>138</sup> As many games scholars are also educators, this anti-intellectual assault has extended to the accusation of brainwashing students in the classroom. In response to a call for opinions on gamergate, one Reddit user wrote:

My concern with DiGRA is that it is an anti- (or more accurately pseudo) intellectual, ideological group masquerading as a venue for academic pursuits. They are teachers at universities in some cases, and actively try to indoctrinate their students...<sup>139</sup>

The anti-political and anti-academic diatribe has mostly centred on the field of feminism. With great support, Sargon of Akkad has described DiGRA as having been overrun by ‘feminists’ who have taken over the editorial board in order to push

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<sup>137</sup> Golding, para. 8. See also Dan Seitz, ‘Why #GamerGate Is A Lie Gamers Need To Stop Telling Themselves’, *UPROXX*, 2014 <<http://uproxx.com/gammasquad/2014/09/zoe-quinn-gamergate-is-a-lie-gamers-need-to-stop-telling-themselves/>> [accessed 2 September 2014]; Keith Stuart, ‘Gamergate: The Community Is Eating Itself but There Should Be Room for All’, *The Guardian*, 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/03/gamergate-corruption-games-anita-sarkeesian-zoe-quinn>> [accessed 1 September 2014].

<sup>138</sup> Carl Straumsheim, ‘#Gamergate Supporters Attack Digital Games Research Association @insidehighered’, *Inside Higher Ed*, 2014 <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/11/11/gamergate-supporters-attack-digital-games-research-association>> [accessed 11 November 2014].

It should also be noted that GG supporters’ identities are usually protected by screen names. The professional nature of academia, journalism and game development, however, means that their targets operate under their professional identities online. Obviously, this disparity creates an environment of fear and defensiveness on one side, and, to some degree, an environment of unaccountability on the other.

<sup>139</sup> ‘I’m a Reporter Writing about DiGRA. What Should I Know? • /r/KotakuInAction’, *Reddit* <[https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/2lvfzz/im\\_a\\_reporter\\_writing\\_about\\_digra\\_what\\_should\\_i/](https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/2lvfzz/im_a_reporter_writing_about_digra_what_should_i/)> [accessed 11 November 2014].

their ideological agenda.<sup>140</sup> Tellingly, ‘ideologues,’ typically scholars that have done work on gender, are labelled separately from ‘academics’ in his analysis. Mia Consalvo, current president of DiGRA, has remarked that this is an obvious attempt to automatically discredit the work of feminists. She has also stated, without suggesting blame, that the anti-DiGRA section of gamergate ‘have no real knowledge of how academia works, how research works, how things get published, how colleagues in academia relate to each other, know each other and cite each other.’<sup>141</sup> This misunderstanding of the workings of academia appears to extend more broadly to misunderstandings of the concepts used by scholars when discussing identity politics. The colloquial usage of terms like *feminism*, *sexism*, *oppression* and *ideology* often conflicts with what is understood by those terms in academic parlance. Thus, when trying to engage with one another scholars and gamergate supporters are fundamentally speaking a different language. Miscommunication is inevitable and, as a result, it is very difficult to make progress.

This social background is important not only to commentators and researchers who write on games and face a backlash, depending on their line of inquiry, but also to games developers. Including socially progressive content has become, due this reactionary anti-intellectual environment, a political act, which has potential consequences on the media reception and sales of a game. The tension between academics, journalists, and vocal commentators has become a fundamental marketing balance for any games studio hoping for commercial success, and powerful reason to propagate a more conservative set of principles in order to retain the broadest possible appeal based on vocal criticism.

## Defining Neomedievalism

### Neomedievalism in Art

Whether deliberate or not, medievalist fantasy is invested in modern politics, and engages in reimagining and rewriting our traditional perceptions of the Middle Ages.

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<sup>140</sup> *The Feminist Ideological Conquest of DiGRA (Part 1) #GamerGate #NotYourShield*, 2014 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28D6\\_8KuIpc&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28D6_8KuIpc&feature=youtube_gdata_player)> [accessed 9 October 2014].

DiGRA member Torill Elvira Mortensen has since compiled a list of board members and their work which clearly demonstrated that they had conducted a relatively small amount of research on gender in their publication history: Torill Elvira Mortensen, ‘Thinking with My Fingers: DiGRA Board 2014 and Gender Scholarship’, 2014 <<http://torillsin.blogspot.dk/2014/10/digra-board-2014-and-gender-scholarship.html>> [accessed 27 October 2014].

<sup>141</sup> Straumsheim, para. 24.

Although ‘medievalism’ is the usual term for medieval-inspired art, we might call this rewriting ‘neomedievalism.’

[Medievalism is] the study of the Middle Ages, the application of medieval models to contemporary needs, and the inspiration of the Middle Ages in all forms of art and thought.<sup>142</sup>

While this is clearly not an exhaustive explanation of the term, Workman’s broad definition is helpfully succinct and encompasses what I understand to be the primary uses of *medievalism*. Throughout this thesis I have used the term to refer to any art and media that is inspired by or attempts to reproduce, reimagine or fantasise about the Middle Ages; furthermore, this inspiration or reimagining need not be direct. Adding the prefix *neo-* transforms the term into something that has been described as ‘ephemeral’ in that it continues to resist clear definition or simultaneously embody contradictory notions.<sup>143</sup> The term was popularised by Umberto Eco in 1986, referring to popular medievalisms as ‘fantastic neomedievalism,’ perhaps with some derision, as implied by his juxtaposing this neologism with ‘responsible philological examination.’<sup>144</sup> In his chapter ‘Boys to Men: Medievalism and Masculinity in Star Wars and E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial,’ Tom Henthorne simply but rather sensibly uses ‘neomedieval’ to refer to physical and cultural products derived from the middle ages to create a distinction from ‘medieval,’ used to refer to those products from the period itself.<sup>145</sup> In this way, medievalism and neomedievalism can be, and are, used interchangeably; however, many critics have established a difference between the two terms, finding neomedievalism useful to indicate postmodern reflections and constructions of the medieval. In ‘(Re)producing (Neo)Medievalism,’ KellyAnn Fitzpatrick helpfully outlines some of the contradictions in current scholarship: some describe neomedievalism as something different to or outside of medievalism while others argue that, while it is indeed a useful concept, it is encompassed by the category of medievalism and could not exist without this primary concept.<sup>146</sup> In particular, scholars point to—and debate—neomedievalism as a form that is self-aware and self-referential, comprising of a confusingly simultaneous regard and disregard for history, being a sort of pastiche

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<sup>142</sup> Workman, p. 1.

<sup>143</sup> Gwendolyn A. Morgan, ‘Medievalism, Authority, and the Academy’, in *Studies in Medievalism XVII*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer), pp. 55–68 (p. 55).

<sup>144</sup> Eco, ‘Dreaming in the Middle Ages’, p. 63.

<sup>145</sup> Tom Henthorne, ‘Boys to Men: Medievalism and Masculinity in Star Wars and E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial’, in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, ed. by Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson: McFarland, 2004), p. 85.

<sup>146</sup> KellyAnn Fitzpatrick, ‘(Re)Producing (Neo)Medievalism’, in *Defining Neomedievalism(s) II*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 11–20.

that David Marshall calls ‘medievalism-ism’ in its tendency to reproduce and reshape earlier medievalisms.<sup>147</sup>

The website for the Medieval Electronic Multimedia Organisation gives a general definition, proposed for the purpose of encouraging debate:

Histories are purposely fragmented. The illusion of control is made through changes of the illusion, rather than attempted changes of reality. There is no longer a sense of the futile, or at least it is second-staged by an illusionary sense of power and a denial of reality. Medieval concepts and values are purposely rewritten as a conscious vision of an alternative universe (a fantasy of the medieval that is created with forethought). Furthermore, this vision lacks the nostalgia of earlier medievalisms in that it denies history. Contemporary values (feminism, gay rights, modern technological warfare tactics, democracy, capitalism...) dominate and rewrite the traditional perceptions of the European Middle Ages, even infusing other medieval cultures, such as that of Japan.<sup>148</sup>

We can easily see how modern medievalisms, or neomedievalisms, engage in the process of rewriting history; however, it seems extreme to claim that this is a denial of history. Rather, this rewriting process patches together the medieval and the modern in order to create history—a cultural history grounded in a bricolage of ideology, art and temporality that we can comfortingly refer to as *medieval*.<sup>149</sup> If that history becomes accepted into our cultural consciousness we cannot really say that the neomedieval form denies history. Also, the sense of nostalgia is not necessarily lost in these neomedieval forms; indeed, these forms create a feeling of longing for this fragmented, imagined history. Though a narrative might evidently be fantasy, its pseudo-historical basis can subtly convince us that we are somehow looking back at our origins, and the contemporary values that are mixed into this fantasy of the medieval perhaps encourage us to read them as inherently true. While I appreciate the use of the term ‘neomedieval’ in describing the fragmentary and incorporeal nature of medievalism, I am unsure that, more generally, the term replaces medievalism. When playing with any kind of medieval fantasy it is evident that that

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<sup>147</sup> David W. Marshall, ‘Neomedievalism, Identification, and the Haze of Medievalisms’, in *Studies in Medievalism XX: Defining Neomedievalism(s) II*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 21–34 (p. 25).

<sup>148</sup> Carol L. Robinson, ‘Some Basic Definitions to Consider’, *Medieval Electronic Multimedia Organization (MEMO)* <[http://medievalelectronicmultimedia.org/?page\\_id=39](http://medievalelectronicmultimedia.org/?page_id=39)> [accessed 30 April 2016].

<sup>149</sup> Umberto Eco, ‘Living in the New Middle Ages’, in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1998), pp. 73–86.

the narrative is not a factual account of historical events.<sup>150</sup> Dragons and draugr and darkspawn do not exist; Middle Earth and Tamriel are fantasy worlds; anthropomorphised cats and lizards are very much of the imagination. Still, the effect of fantasy, whether labelled medieval or neomedieval, remains the same.<sup>151</sup>

Still, fans frequently debate whether a medieval fantasy narrative is *accurate*. A game or film can be praised or marketed for its fine use of ‘realistic’ armour and weaponry or its ‘historically accurate’ portrayal of period architecture, and sometimes for its believable presentation of pre-modern life. Though these worlds are fantastical, they are frequently visually grounded in material culture and romantic-yet-recognisable landscapes that create some verisimilitude. As I have discussed above, our nostalgia for the Middle Ages and our desire for origins seem to build upon this to create the subtle suggestion within ourselves that the values and ideologies have a semblance of universal or inevitable truth, and that they are known to us ancestrally.

This could be an exciting and progressive way of incorporating modern values into our cultural consciousness; it is true that some medieval-themed games are leaving behind some conservative notions of race, gender, sexuality and democracy in favour of modern values, as Robinson and Clements’ definition suggests. Most games with character-creation allow you to make your character male or female without imposing gender-based limitations. *Skyrim* allows the player to marry an NPC regardless of race or gender: there are around eighty NPCs that are open to marriage with a roughly even split between males and females, although there are currently no eligible Khajiit, Bosmer, male Redguard or male Altmer.<sup>152</sup> Bioware’s *Dragon Age* series has received a great deal of media coverage for its inclusion of bisexual characters that can become romantically involved with the player-character, and the latest game in the series has included its first exclusively gay male character.<sup>153</sup> This is an important step: while the inclusion of bisexual characters is clearly important in terms of widening representation, it can sometimes seem like a compromise that has little to do with the identity of the character and

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<sup>150</sup> Realism in medieval fantasy is typically not achieved by portraying historical events. See chapter 2 for a full discussion on establishing realism in fantasy.

<sup>151</sup> See Paul Sturtevant for work on medievalist media influencing our understanding of history and what is ‘true:’ Sturtevant.

<sup>152</sup> This is significant as two of these races, Khajiit and Redguard, are framed as the racial other. See chapter 4.

<sup>153</sup> Dragon Age, ‘Character Profile: Dorian’ <[http://www.dragonage.com/#!/en\\_US/news/character-profile-dorian](http://www.dragonage.com/#!/en_US/news/character-profile-dorian)> [accessed 9 August 2014].

more to do with providing broad yet inoffensive choices to players, as seems to be the case in *Skyrim* where all eligible NPCs are bisexual.

In principle, this seems like a positive idea as players are then free to create their own narratives involving their characters' relationships with a variety of NPCs, but the one-sexuality-fits-all model can easily be seen as a denial of, or at least a refusal to deal with, alternative and exclusive sexualities. Many games also present the player with a choice of playable races as well as a variety of racialised characters that aren't as easily categorised into the binaries of 'good' and 'evil' as they might have been in earlier fantasy. The possibility that these values might now seem to belong to a nostalgic place to which we desire a return is tempting to consider.

I am, however, not inclined to agree that (neo)medievalism is *dominated* by the optimistically inclusive modern values suggested by MEMO's definition. As evidenced by the use of bisexuality as a catch-all for sexual orientation in *Skyrim*, these forms are frequently complicit in subtle—and sometimes painfully overt—marginalisation of the other; these utopian, humanistic ideals are often found on the surface as a gesture to progressive ideals whilst still embodying traditional values. Constructing worlds and societies in this conservative, traditional mode seems completely counter to the notions of neomedieval fantasy, those of freedom, imagination and irreverence. M. J. Toswell writes that when we discuss medievalism we really mean the 'Western, more specifically the European and North American, approach to the years 500-1500' and responding to this, Amy S. Kaufman asks the obvious yet important question of why this should be the case in the realm of playful, neomedieval fantasy, why we absorb all of the Middle Ages into a homogenising, Western concept of the medieval.<sup>154</sup> This phenomenon will be referred to throughout the rest of the thesis as I explore how *Skyrim* perpetuates Eurocentric attitudes towards the Middle Ages. In order to understand the political significance of *Skyrim*'s medievalism, the term *neomedievalism* lends itself to a political deconstruction.

## Neomedievalism in International Relations

Neomedievalism, in both the artistic and political senses, refers broadly to fragmentation. This discussion of nostalgia and the possibility of return is particularly pertinent to the use of *neomedievalism* in a political, or more

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<sup>154</sup> M. J. Toswell, 'The Tropes of Medievalism', in *Studies in Medievalism XVII*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009), pp. 68–76 (p. 69); Amy S. Kaufman, 'Medieval Unmoored', in *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s) I*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 1–9 (pp. 7–8).

specifically International Relations, usage. The political dimension of medievalisms partly helps to explain the homogenisation of the medieval into a specifically western understanding, and why western cultural norms dominate the field.

While medievalisms can be found in all corners of western politics, *neomedievalism* is a term used to suggest the return to the more fragmented political structures of the Middle Ages; our neomedieval age is marked by the rise of globalisation, transnationalism and a shifting locus of power from state sovereignty towards a 'system of overlapping or segmented authority that characterised mediaeval Christendom.'<sup>155</sup> Bull called this decline of the state system 'New Medievalism.' This is characterised by the challenges to the state's singular, centralised power and authority over its territories posed by 'overlapping authority and multiple loyalty' to entities such as multinational corporations, sub-national governments, regional independence movements, and international state groups; this trend for states grouping together into larger, loosely federal, though not always binding, organisations to provide a greater possibility for peace and security is perhaps most easily exemplified by entities such as the European Union or the United Nations.<sup>156</sup> For many International Relations theorists, neomedievalism is a useful metaphor through which we can examine the challenges faced by the current state system and that we can use as a useful framework to interpret our increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world. Much like its literary definitions, the political neomedieval is a slippery term that relies on analogy and perception of the medieval rather than providing a comparison to the Middle Ages with any historical veracity.

Though it has been a helpful concept for imagining the possibilities of a post-national future, some critics have warned of the dangers of neomedievalism. An online article in *Foreign Policy* magazine incorporates contemporary fears and anxieties into this neomedieval future by appropriating traditional tropes of the 'Dark Age' to essentialise the medieval as a period that must be endured before a new age of enlightenment:

But the Middle Ages were fundamentally a time of fear, uncertainty, plagues, and violence. So, too, their successor. AIDS and SARS, terrorism and piracy, cyclones and rising sea levels -- it is no longer clear how to invest in the future, or what future to invest in. Figuring out how to respond to this new

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<sup>155</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 254.

<sup>156</sup> Bull, p. 245.

world will take decades at least. The next Renaissance is still a long way off.<sup>157</sup>

In his 2007 *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*, Holsinger worries that neomedievalism may not be the progressive resistance to neoconservatism, but in fact a tool of the latter. He says:

[...]neoconservatives may be getting [neomedievalism], recruiting it, exploiting it, and using it to their own tactical advantage as they adapt their juridical and diplomatic languages to the full complexities of the post-9/11 world.<sup>158</sup>

Holsinger explains how the potential freedom from the nation-state model logically creates groups of non-state actors, and how this has already been used as justification for the exclusion of prisoners of war from the protections of the Geneva Convention. Neomedievalism has provided an insidious means of policy-making for the post-9/11 United States as exemplified in the ‘torture papers.’ Members of transnational organisations, such as al Qaeda and the Taliban, are defined as non-state actors in that they did not act on behalf of a nation-state. Afghanistan itself was deemed, by the torture-paper writers, a ‘failed state’ and as such its nationals could also be termed non-state actors.

Using Holsinger’s exploration of 9/11 as a case study, it is clear that artistic medievalism and political neomedievalism holds significant cultural value. The popular conception of the Middle Ages can, and has been, utilised and rhetorically manipulated to reframe the modern political narrative of terror, which resulted in real-world actions and consequences. The breakdown of the modern world state system into non-national groups has been couched as a return to a medieval state, rather than a new development in its own right. Similarly, popular rhetoric surrounding the violent and religiously narrow practices of groups such as Islamic State are often couched in medievalist terms: the group is regularly described as ‘barbarous’ and ‘medieval’, recalling an imagined space where life was brutish and cheap.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Parag Khanna, ‘The Next Big Thing: Neomedievalism’, *Foreign Policy*, 15 April 2009 <[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/04/15/the\\_next\\_big\\_thing\\_neomedievalism](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/04/15/the_next_big_thing_neomedievalism)> [accessed 24 July 2014].

<sup>158</sup> Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007), p. 65.

<sup>159</sup> James Desborough, ‘EXCLUSIVE: ISIS Are “Too Evil” for Homeland, Says Show’s Producer’, *Daily Mail Online*, 2015 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2984496/ISIS-evil-Homeland-medieval-barbarism-not-featuring-hit-series-says-s-executive-producer.html>> [accessed 10 February 2016].

## Relation to Neomedievalism in Games

Medievalist fantasy games sometimes embrace this neomedievalist political breakdown in their world construction, often presenting fragmented and competing power blocks within and across notional national boundaries, fighting for competing, non-national ideologies or power structures. Political structures in fantasy games are regularly shown to be highly de-centralised, with local lords and authorities competing with one another for influence, while central authority is distant and weak. In *Skyrim*, non-political organisations represent an important aspect of the game's social, economic and cultural construction, and these are generally groups with multi-national branches which do not serve the government or legitimate authorities of Tamriel, but provide important sub-narratives within the game. The Thieves' Guild and the Dark Brotherhood, the assassins' guild, are both parts of larger movements on the continent, and both operate completely outside the law of Skyrim and the Empire, allowing the player to explore an illegal, but sanctioned, aspect of the game world. While the more traditional Fighters' and Mages' guilds from the previous Elder Scrolls games were replaced in *Skyrim* with the more culturally localised 'Companions' and 'College', respectively, both organisations are completely apolitical, and take no part or view in the civil war, or any other political activity. All these organisations are powerful institutions, which allow the player to rise the ranks to rule them and exert a strong cultural influence on the game world,<sup>160</sup> but all exist outside the political framework of Skyrim or Tamriel in general, making them all non-state actors in accordance with the needs of a neomedievalist fantasy. The entire main plotline of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* revolves around the player building up the power of their own non-state group, making it a direct political and economic rival of the existing kingdoms nearby. In the game, the player's enemy is a similar non-state group, a cult which is attempting to place their leader on the throne of the Maker, literally making him God. Various other state and non-state organisations take part in the main story, but it is driven predominantly by non-state actors, reflecting the weakness of central authority in medievalist worlds, as well as the neomedievalist political construction of fantasy games.

Nevertheless, despite this adherence to the fragmentary construction of organisations and competing local authorities so common in fantasy games, these game-worlds allow very little real change to occur. The institutions of power in

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<sup>160</sup> Depending on the player's rank in a guild, background NPCs have scripted remarks that you may here as you wander around, commenting on your fame or lack of it.

medieval fantasy games remain staunchly immutable, despite the potentially paradigm-shifting events going on in that society. Where seismic political shifts occur, they do so within a carefully controlled framework, fundamentally upholding the status quo. In *Skyrim*, regardless of which faction you support, you are only able to change who rules, not how they rule. There will still be a High King at the end of the game, one way or another, and the game does not allow for any meaningful political shifts.

Intuitively, we might assume this is for practical reasons and that marked political change within the game world might be beyond the limitations of the medium. The technological constraints of being able to accommodate narrative decisions by the player which could have far-reaching effects on the game world potentially limits the possibility of any real consequences occurring as a result of the player's decision. *Skyrim* is an open-ended game without a formal end-point. Even after completing the primary questline there are still many side quests and sub narratives to experience, and the world to explore. As such, the world must be able to continue to function regardless of the outcome, and so the outcome is limited, both in its scope and in its form, in order to prevent the game world from being too dramatically altered as to render the rest of it unplayable.

Some games allow the player to make extremely dramatic and impactful decisions. In the *Witcher* series, the finale of the second game, *The Assassin of Kings*, allows the player to implicate a powerful group of mages in the political intrigues of the game, as well as choose which of several factions to back at a peace summit. The importance of the consequences of these decisions are made clear, and the player must make a personal trade-off regardless of the decision they make: either they abandon their friend, held captive by a hostile power, or risk losing the chance to denounce to villains of the game. Despite all this, the third game, *The Wild Hunt*, is forced to write a plotline which effectively renders all but the personal decisions made in the second game irrelevant in order to tell a coherent story with a united starting point. This is achieved by having all the political decisions rendered immaterial by the invasion of a powerful expansionist neighbour, fundamentally altering the political dynamic of the game world, and allowing the creators to build a new world of the third game that does not begin by being split into multiple plot instances. Developing a game world that can undergo radical, individual player-driven change adds a potentially impractical level of work to game development. Furthermore, as in the *Witcher* example, major shifts in a game world impact the way that sequels can be produced. It seems impractical to develop multiple, dramatically different instances of a game world to accommodate major player choices in prior games.

This practical limitation—though not an impossibility—serves to reinforce the inherent conservatism of the genre, allowing the player to make decisions that should be meaningful, but which actually carry little observable impact on the game world. This is apparent both in the players’ interactions with high authorities, and with non-state organisations. The outcome of the civil war in *Skyrim* is surprisingly irrelevant to anything which occurs in *Skyrim* outside of Jarls’ throne rooms, while the status of the player in guilds has little practical effect on the world. If the player chooses, they may become the leader of all four guilds, but they are not expected to administer them in any way, nor does their status mean anything aside from enabling some background dialogue from NPCs, much like the dialogue heard when a player is a member of a beast race.<sup>161</sup> The player cannot use their position to influence anyone, nor does their status make any significant difference to how they are treated by NPCs. The underlying assumption the game makes is that power and influence are fundamentally unchangeable, and are carefully controlled and maintained in order to prevent real change from occurring which might modify the game world too dramatically. This technological conservatism speaks to a conservatism in the narrative style of the world, and the way that medieval worlds are understood and constructed.

The medievalist game world also fundamentally structures itself in a traditionalist, conservative understanding of the political world. While Empires and kingdoms are recognised to be malleable, the existence of them is not, nor is the way they are ruled in a significant way. *Skyrim* will continue to exist as a kingdom, with the same political structure and political boundaries, completely independent of anything the player can do. Similarly, in games like *The Witcher* or the *Dragon Age* series, the player is limited to replacing figures of power with those they approve of more; the system itself is unchallengeable. One cannot choose to assume the throne of Orlais or, more dramatically, disband the empire and take the land under your protection in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, even though that would be a logical outcome of one of the main questlines and not beyond the ability of your organisation. In *Skyrim*, it is not possible to institute a republic, or surrender the country to a higher power. The inherently conservative political restrictions of these game worlds are basic world building assumptions, which renders the neomedievalist setting of fragmentary rule and political devolution impotent. While neomedievalism presents a challenge to modern world state, in fantasy games it is subsumed by conservative

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<sup>161</sup> Cf. pp. 122-3, where I highlight players’ recognition and frustration with the game not recognising their racial status, and pp. 139-40 where this lack of practical effect is linked with an implied white reader.

principles, and the devolution of power to the player is strictly limited and controlled.

## **Skyrim: Reflections on World Politics**

This, of course, leads us to question how games practice and engage with politics and to ask whether games can be read or defined using the concept of the neomedieval, in political and artistic terms, at all. Much like the real world, Tamriel is a world facing political change that resembles the conflict between the current real-world state system and the challenges posed by the concepts of neomedievalism manifest in the competing power of inter- and intra-national groups. This political engagement is not uncommon in fantasy and is an important element of some of the most famous fantasy works, but the politics of 2011's *Skyrim* are in stark contrast to, say, those of 1954-5's *The Lord of the Rings*, which takes a more straightforwardly Eurocentric, post-War view.

As a genre that often centres on some form of conflict, medieval fantasy engages with politics. *Skyrim* is expressly concerned with modern-day political issues, particularly ideas of personal freedom, national security, and legitimacy of rule. As an open-world, non-linear game set on the cusp of a civil war, *Skyrim* provides a playful space in which players can test their ideals and experiment with alternative political perspectives. Though the tropes of the genre and the game's own marketing present the battle against the apocalypse as the primary conflict that drives the narrative, the parallel conflict of the impending civil war demonstrates an explicit interest in more mundane politics. Indeed, one might be tempted to read the grand, yet more straightforward, hero-dragon narrative as a visceral metaphor for threat to society brought on by the destruction of traditional ruling hierarchies and the doubt surrounding the political future of the territory.<sup>162</sup> Legalistic attacks against personal freedoms, doubts surrounding the legitimacy of rule and, eventually, civil war itself create an atmosphere of threat and uncertainty: Alduin the dragon is a literal threat to existence, reflecting the less spectacular but more potent fear that political unrest might disrupt society, perhaps to the point of non-recognition.

As is typical of fantasy role-playing games, *Skyrim* invites the player to participate in pre-generated stories by seeking and completing quests. These missions vary in length, difficulty and grandeur: through the primary questline the player investigates the return of dragons to Tamriel, discovers their own

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<sup>162</sup> This is also the case with *Beowulf*, in which the monstrous serves as a foil for the rather more frightening social and political situation.

supernatural gifts and ultimately defeats Alduin the World-Eater, thus preserving existence; other quests include investigating crimes and supernatural disturbances as well as more mundane tasks such as running errands and delivering messages. These quests are scripted by the developers but usually have multiple possible outcomes to preserve the feeling of agency that results from the world appearing to react to the player. As with almost all of the quests in *Skyrim* these missions are optional and can be ignored; indeed, the primary narrative can be postponed indefinitely if the player chooses not to advance the main story.

On the surface, *Skyrim* is a classic hero-narrative in the high fantasy tradition: the scope of its narrative is epic as it follows one hero in the battle of good against evil as the world faces the threat of a supernatural apocalypse. Alduin, known as the World-Eater and worshipped by Nords as the dragon-god of destruction, has returned to Tamriel (the continent) and threatens to destroy all of Nirn (the world). Born with the capability of defeating dragons by speaking in their own tongue, the player-hero must learn to use The Way of the Voice to subdue Alduin and to prevent him from ending the world. We might term this the main narrative—indeed, this is usually referred to as the ‘main quest’ by *Skyrim* guides and players alike. Several narratives run in parallel with the main quest, giving the player the sense that they are playing in a complex, living world. These sub-plots range from the grand narrative of *Skyrim*’s civil war to smaller, more personal stories that have the player running errands and solving more localised, private conflicts. While the threat of the apocalypse serves as the primary narrative drive in the game, it should be noted that players are typically not forced to take any action related to this storyline. Indeed, the player can ignore the primary questline, and all other quests, indefinitely without suffering any consequences.

The civil war questline is arguably the most prominent sub-narrative. This questline ostensibly gives the player the freedom to explore the politics of colonialism and rebellion and play an integral role in bringing peace to *Skyrim*. By siding with the Stormcloaks or the Empire, the player is able to direct the political future of *Skyrim*, either king-making the widow of the former high king, Elisif, or placing the rebellious Ulfric on the throne. While the game places a great deal of contextual importance on the civil war, allowing the player to make an ideological decision about which side they will support, the game mechanics are primarily limited to changing the Jarls of certain cities, depending on which side the player and the NPC supported. Thus, the decision on which side to support has little impact on the game world beyond changing the colour of banners, and allows the player to choose based entirely on how much they agree with the ethos of either party.

This questline is the first non-primary quest introduced to the player, and is given pride of place in the opening sequence of the game itself. This series of missions has the player take part in the war of independence that erupts at the beginning of the game and progresses based on player input. Though this is not considered the primary narrative of the game, it is given a great deal of importance as it provides the frame for most of the player's interactions with Skyrim's inhabitants. The conflict arising from the civil war, in fact, provides the impetus for the first scene of the game; thus, *Skyrim*'s first act is to alert the player to the political nature of the story and to contextualise the player's actions.

The opening scenes of *Skyrim*, which are fixed and cannot be avoided, see the player bound in a cart alongside three other men being drawn to their execution. It is implied that at least two of the men are political prisoners, and it is soon confirmed that the man sitting beside the player is Ulfric Stormcloak, a prominent Nord accused of murdering the High King of Skyrim. The prisoners are bound and the player is unable to control their character except to turn their head to look at, and converse with, their companions. Ulfric is the only prisoner to be gagged and rendered silent: though enforced, his silence imbues upon him a sense of stoicism that is emphasised by a fellow prisoner who, in fear, cannot control his utterances. Lokir, a horse thief mistaken for a Stormcloak rebel, first expresses his anger at being captured then eventually gives way to tears and terror as he realises he is being driven to his execution: 'No, this can't be happening. This isn't happening.'<sup>163</sup> The dishonourable, fear-stricken thief provides an obvious foil to Ulfric's composure, conferring upon the latter an air of dignity. Further to this, the third ungagged prisoner praises Ulfric's cause and offers kind words to his fellow prisoners. Ralof, a member of the Stormcloak rebellion under Ulfric, fulfils a Western audience's expectations of a Viking-type character. Though the Nord model does have some variety in appearance, Ralof and Ulfric seem designed to embody the visual trope of the Viking: both are tall and muscular, sport beards and wear their fair-coloured hair long and decorated with braids. Ralof's personality also conforms to the expectation of the valiant Northman: his loyalty to his leader is unwavering as he faces death, and his patriotic advice to the condemned is that 'a Nord's last thoughts should be of home.'<sup>164</sup> The first characters the player meets in the game are visually and narratively aligned with the popular imagining of the Viking and, though the extent of the conflict is unclear at this point in the story, they are aligned positively with the notion of fighting for freedom. This is not to suggest that *Skyrim*'s races are constructed entirely without complexity. For example, the

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<sup>163</sup> Lokir of Rorikstead. Loc: Helgen. Related quests: 'Unbound.'

<sup>164</sup> Ralof, opening scene.

cowardly horse-thief, Lokir, is also Nordic and does not support the Stormcloaks; his presence, however, serves to emphasise the seemingly noble characteristics of the others. The situation of the player as a prisoner is in keeping with the tradition of previous games in *The Elder Scrolls* series—all start with the player in a similar condition—but in this instance the scene serves to draw the player’s attention to the theme of rebellion which, at this point, is framed by the trope of the honourable Viking warrior.

After arriving in the town, Helgen, the player encounters the Fourth Legion of the Imperial army commanded by General Tullius. All of the prisoners are sentenced to execution without trial though the guards cannot find a record of the player-character’s crimes:

Hadvar: Captain. What should we do? He’s not on the list.

Imperial Captain: Forget the list. He goes to the block.<sup>165</sup>

The casual indifference of the Imperial officers to the player’s fate serves to highlight their character as the representatives of organised government, conformity, and bureaucracy, in contrast to the honour, individualism, stoic courage, and patriotism of the ‘Viking’ Stormcloak characters. Ralof, the most developed non-player character thus far, wryly comments: ‘Empire love their damn lists’ in response to the ledger Hadvar is keeping.<sup>166</sup> As discussed in chapter five, the design of the Imperial race draws heavily on the popular images and traditions associated with the Roman Empire. The Roman imagery in this context aligns the Fourth Legion with the vision of the imperial oppressor bearing down upon its colonies through the ignoble use of military and bureaucratic power. The Roman Empire as a literary device is a double-edged trope, being used to represent civilisation and political success as well as the opposite: domination and oppression. The allusions to oppression, however, are especially evident when juxtaposed with the noble savagery of the Viking trope. The transmutation of the tropes in this fashion is highly typical when aligning the audience with the subjugated, native peoples; thus, it is fair to argue that in this scene players, falling in line with the connotations of these clichés, are most likely to take a sympathetic view of the Stormcloaks.

The Gauls’ faction-specific introduction in the 2004 historical strategy game *Rome: Total War* offers a useful example as it guides the player towards this viewpoint with less subtlety in its description of Rome as a destructive force that

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<sup>165</sup> Opening scene. Loc: Helgen. Quest: Unbound.

<sup>166</sup> It is worth noting that of the survey respondents who made a conscious decision about whether to flee with Hadvar or Ralof, most chose Ralof. Over half the respondents had no idea what was going on and ran around at random.

demands conformity and absorbs and dissolves diverse cultures and traditional ways of life:

And the Romans talk of how they will help us and protect us. They put us to sleep with golden promises. When we wake all we had is gone, stolen. They take our sons and turn them into little Romans, ha! So we fight to keep what is ours, what must stay ours.<sup>167</sup>

This view of the Roman Empire as having a dangerous combination of shrewd diplomacy, martial prowess, and a culture of expansion is typical within popular culture and is characteristic of *Skyrim*'s Imperials. The depiction of Roman culture in this way has frequently been linked with the United States of America—as well as the broader Western political sphere—and has been used to explore questions and anxieties surrounding the USA's self-identification, international policy, and the exportation of 'freedom' and 'civilisation' in its role as a political superpower, both in popular culture and academic discourse.<sup>168</sup>

This opening dialogue and scene is intended to give the player a brief introduction to the political crisis facing *Skyrim*, and characterise the competing factions. The Stormcloaks are portrayed as heroic martyrs, battling for freedom, while the Imperials are an indifferent and oppressive establishment, willing to execute both the player and an unrelated thief simply for being in the wrong place. As this introduction takes place before any of the events which lead into the primary questline, this characterisation of the factions in the civil war should be seen as a mark of the importance of this particular bit of world-building, and the sustained impact it has on the political landscape of the game world.

Eventually the player is forced to approach the block but, in a tense moment before the axe falls, the execution is interrupted by the violent appearance of a dragon and the player is finally able to take full control of their character to make their escape. This sequence of these events and the simultaneous introduction of the war narrative and the hero narrative makes clear that the eschatological story and the political conflict are closely entwined. Indeed, the player later discovers that Alduin's prophesised return would be signalled by key events, the final sign being the declaration of war in *Skyrim*. The dragon threatens to end the world in typical

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<sup>167</sup> Creative Assembly, *Rome: Total War* (Activision, 2004).

<sup>168</sup> Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome?: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008); Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Margaret Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, ed. by Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire Jr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

high-fantasy fashion while the political instability creates a more subtle threat that is perhaps more sinister in its relevance—perhaps we might use Tolkien’s term ‘applicability’—to present-day international conflicts and political fears.

The player’s escape from Helgen is chaotic as Alduin razes the town. The attack is devastating and its impact is felt throughout Skyrim: townsfolk across all of the holds will discuss the news with one another; guards’ ambient dialogue includes mentioning that they are keeping watch for dragons; and citizens will often talk to the player-character of their experiences, thoughts and fears related to the event. Though almost certainly coincidental, there is a telling note to a voice actor within the dialogue file that can be extracted from the game. In the scene, a non-player character is explaining how he became the guardian of his orphaned grandson after Alduin’s return: ‘His parents were at Helgen when, well you know. *Think of Helgen as 9/11.*’<sup>169</sup> The political and the ideological threads of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 merge with the effect of the human devastation in the game, evoking the pervasive image of fear, social breakdown, and political disorder that seems firmly embedded in Western imagination. Though the note is an informal direction and was likely written in a cursory fashion, the thematic connections between the two events are striking in that both entail a devastating act of violence that, within present-day political discourse, signifies a fatal threat to Western values.

Moving through this scene serves to introduce the primary conflicts in the game, the eschatological narrative as well as the political struggle which will frame the player’s experience. The injustice of the Empire as a governing authority and their apparent willingness to abuse their power is indicative of the broad issues that the civil war questline addresses: the morality of colonisation and of rebellion; the extent to which personal freedom should be compromised for the common good; and individualism versus social order. These ideas, as related to the events of 9/11, US-led military interventions in the Middle East, and subsequent effects on legislation and culture in the West, are culturally prominent and commonly used as themes within popular entertainment media.

The idea of empire is strongly resonant in the Western imagination. The British Empire still exists in echoes within popular culture, and the concept of cultural and economic colonisation is one which pervades political thought, journalism, and entertainment media, which both questions and celebrates the superiority and exportation of American-style ‘freedom’. There is a long-standing

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<sup>169</sup> This directorial note is from the full script containing all of *Skyrim*’s dialogue, which can be extracted from the game files using the Creation Kit, released as a modding tool by Bethesda.

notion that, as a country whose origins lie in colonial rebellion and whose founding ideals ostensibly revolve around freedom and independence, the USA cannot be considered an empire. Indeed, Niall Ferguson notes that the denial of the United States' imperial status might be closely tied to the country's ideological origins and the subsequent difficulty in accepting that 'they [American citizens] are redcoats now.'<sup>170</sup> Though Ferguson wonders if, as political commentator Walter Lippman wrote in 1926, America's imperialism is 'more or less unconscious,' there is evidence to suggest that the spread of Anglo-American ideals through military power, culture, and economic dominance is becoming recognised as a form of colonisation.<sup>171</sup> Whilst the war in *Skyrim* is framed in more absolute terms, providing a more typical depiction of colonisation and militaristic rebellion, these ideas are clearly present in the minds of players as they navigate the ethics of *Skyrim*'s governance.

Having previously stated that *Skyrim*'s civil war questline is framed in a fairly straightforward manner using widely recognisable motifs, it is important to note that the game does not present an obvious political divide between conservative and liberal philosophies within the warring factions. Though the player is presented with only two factions, each generally holding opposing political ideals, the construction of each faction is complex enough to offer a challenge to the player and encourage them to consider the extent to which they are willing to compromise the principles of justice and equality.

Consequently, despite the relatively one-sided introduction of the two factions in the introductory sequence, as the player travels and explores the world, the two factions become more nuanced. The heroic, independence-seeking Stormcloak faction is revealed to have a strong xenophobic streak, and the Dunmer population—a dark skinned elven race—of the Stormcloak capital city is regularly abused by the Nord majority. The Stormcloaks are headed by Ulfric Stormcloak, a man that many survey respondents, as well as inhabitants of *Skyrim*, considered to be a power-hungry tyrant, who is less interested in the well-being of *Skyrim* than he is personal ambition. The bureaucratic and oppressive Empire, however, is a force for multiculturalism and tolerance, and the only thing preventing the Aldmeri Dominion, an expansive and destructive empire, from taking *Skyrim* for themselves.

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<sup>170</sup> Niall Ferguson, 'American Democracy: The Perils of Imperialism?', in *America at Risk: Threats to Liberal Self-Government in an Age of Uncertainty*, ed. by Robert Faulkner and Susan M. Shell (University of Michigan Press, 2009), pp. 29–56 (p. 39).

<sup>171</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

While both sides hold differing ideological positions, neither are presented as a ‘good’ or ‘evil’ choice.

The civil war within Skyrim erupts primarily as a consequence of the peace treaty signed by the Empire and the militarily superior Aldmeri Dominion. The signing of the White-Gold Concordat brought an end to the Great War of the Fourth Era upon the condition, amongst others, that the Empire would outlaw the worship of the god Talos within its realm. The treaty heavily favoured the Aldmeri Dominion and included the secession of land in the south of Tamriel, the disbanding of the Blades—an ancient faction of warriors and spies sworn to protect the Dragonborn—and, of particular importance to the Nords, the sanctioning of Aldmeri agents in the persecution of Talos-worshippers.

This theme is taken up by *Skyrim* in which the question of balancing governmental power with basic rights predominantly manifests in the debates for religious freedom and the right to political autonomy. Even imperialist Ferguson concedes that ‘the very act of imposing “freedom” simultaneously subverts it;’ however, the argument that American imperialism is ‘fundamentally liberal’ as Ferguson claims, may go some way to harmonise the cognitive dissonance that surely arises from holding the Western ideals of freedom and democracy alongside being supportive of Western imperialism.<sup>172</sup>

Post-9/11 political rhetoric, particularly that of the Bush administration, worked to make the ethics of American foreign policy appear straightforward and logical. There exists good and evil, and the American government must not only protect its people, but must answer the call to spread freedom and democracy: ‘the rules are clear, and so is the mission, just as in war games.’<sup>173</sup> Indeed, modern warfare games explore similar ideas but frame them, as expected, in recognisable zones of conflict. Such games are frequently criticised for over-simplification of international relations, encouraging American exceptionalism, and for their part in the military-entertainment complex. I would suggest that there are limitations on how one might address the morality of invasive foreign policy and the question of military-cultural colonisation and ideological conversion when the situation imitates recent and ongoing conflicts. Playing through these ideas within their present-day

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<sup>172</sup> Ferguson, ‘American Democracy: The Perils of Imperialism?’, p. 34.

For criticism of the American empire, see Chomsky’s *Hegemony or Survival* (2003) and Chalmers Johnson’s *The Sorrows or Empire* (2004).

<sup>173</sup> *Space Time Play: Synergies Between Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism: The Next Level*, ed. by Friedrich von Borries, Steffen P. Walz, and Matthias Bottger (Springer Science & Business Media, 2007), p. 431.

Not that useful a reference.

settings might potentially provoke a more obviously relevant discussion of modern politics. Within a setting that more explicitly endeavours to mirror the real world, one is bound to be limited by one's experience of recent conflicts and one's own political leanings in a much more conscious way: one's own explicit biases might be harder to overcome in a setting that more closely imitates a real-world situation.

Conversely, I would argue that medieval fantasy games, by merit of their temporal and representational separation from the present, create the space from the modern-day world that is required to explore political ethics without becoming mired in a specific political conflict. Tolkien's 'comment upon the world' quite clearly divided its realm and peoples into the categories of *good* and *evil*, but post-Tolkien fantasy tends not to deal with morality in such a binary fashion. As discussed, *Skyrim*'s political factions are equally problematic, and neither are constructed as being the right answer to the game's political dilemma.

It is also true that neither faction offers the potential for radical political change, or even for an exploration of more straightforward political ideologies. Neither faction offers, for example, viewpoints that might be considered liberal. The Stormcloaks tend to be supported by players with more liberal—and in some cases, romanticised—ideals. These players most commonly cite the right to freedom of religion and the right to independent rule as being paramount, even above the security potentially offered by the Empire: 'freedom is more important than power for a few men in another country/state.' This liberty-focused group might be considered libertarian if it were not for the fact that traditional power structures are under no threat: *Skyrim*'s system of Jarl's overseen by a High King would remain with Ulfric Stormcloak placed on the throne. Nor can the group be defined as liberal. Indeed, many players noted—often with disgust—the xenophobic attitudes and the laws that maintain racial inequality within the province. Though the Stormcloaks are engaged in a war for political freedom, both factions operate under what we might consider to be conservative modes of governance: the Stormcloaks lean towards traditional conservatism with some libertarian ideals, though it must be noted that those libertarian ideals seem to strictly serve their own countrymen and do not apply to non-human races.<sup>174</sup> Each faction operates under traditional, hierarchical rule that functions to maintain power. The notion of traditional rule is important, particularly to the Stormcloaks and their Nord supporters who repeatedly make reference to saving their traditional way of life. Interestingly, some players choose to support the Empire as part of their personal game-playing tradition: some mentioned having

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<sup>174</sup> It might be interesting to note the rise in popularity of libertarian Republicans in the US in the last five years.

saved the Empire in an earlier instalment of *The Elder Scrolls*, and thus felt compelled to maintain that allegiance. Players generally did not use modern political terminology in framing their answers, and only one respondent directly addressed the conservative construction of both factions, stating that ‘the “propagandising tyrants” vs. “racist libertarians” nuance did give me some pause.’

As previously mentioned, the primary social issues within *Skyrim* that are identified by players have no guarantee of being resolved. The most frequently highlighted political concern amongst survey respondents was the racist attitudes of the Stormcloaks and the prejudicial treatment of non-human races.<sup>175</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, there is no opportunity to influence the political system in order to address the social inequality that is so clearly a problem within the game’s constructed society. One cannot dismantle the office of High King altogether, encourage a lasting compromise between the Empire and the Stormcloaks, or push for legislation for the equal treatment of the Khajiit, for example.

There is a growing expectation within gaming culture that the medium should strive to incorporate liberal values, particularly those of equality, inclusivity and fair representation, which is at least in part what the previously discussed gamergate movement has been advocating against.<sup>176</sup> It is true that *Skyrim* works to create a world in which players have the opportunity to express and explore their individuality as they choose, whether that be through race, sexuality, career, morality and so on. These choices for customisation are built into the mechanics of the game: a player can select their race from a varied list, can choose to marry (or not marry) a character of either gender, and can decide which parts of the game to explore and complete and which to ignore. *Skyrim*’s representation of politics, however, provides comparatively fewer opportunities for experimentation. Thus, it would appear that while liberal social values are encoded within the game’s structure, liberalism—or any other mode of governance—is not truly available to explore as a political concept.

We might associate this lack of political identification as a lack of direct investment in politics. This is not, of course, to say that one does not have strong socio-political ideas or viewpoint, merely that one does not feel compelled to directly engage with politics. This lack of direct engagement is perhaps a reflection of the rising levels of voter apathy and governmental distrust in Euro-American

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<sup>175</sup> The depiction of race issues and the potential for change will be further discussed in a later chapter (5).

<sup>176</sup> Cf. Kafai; Williams, ‘Who Plays, How Much and Why? Debunking the Stereotypical Gamer Profile’; Shaw.

politics. Ralof highlights the growing mistrust in the existing form of government in an off-hand but revealing comment as the party arrive in Helgen: ‘funny, when I was a boy, Imperial walls and towers used to make me feel so safe.’<sup>177</sup>

This sense that the ruling powers are no longer serving the best interests of their people is a primary complaint of the Stormcloak rebels and can be read as a reflection of the Western public’s declining trust in traditional government and their growing sense of political powerlessness. Political theorist Ivan Krastev characterised the conflicted political climate of 2012 as a ‘crisis of democracy,’<sup>178</sup> manifesting in the rise of ‘Trumpism’ in the United States and increasing support for right-wing ideals across Europe. This shift does not mark an explicit abandonment of the ideals of freedom and equality—Krastev notes that in Britain the support for a nationalist party grew under the condition that it was ‘not associated with violence and fascist imagery’—but instead reflects a deeper desire to reaffirm traditional national and cultural bonds.<sup>179</sup>

Krastev argues that political and cultural liberalism, alongside the ideal of individualistic freedom, have created space for a variety of fluid identities, for groups marked by their multiplicity. This increased diversity has resulted in a less homogenous society, broadening and differentiating the socio-cultural ideas which previously bonded communities and gave them a sense of a shared identity. Krastev identifies this lack of community, or *demos*, as a primary cause of the xenophobic nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment across European nations: ‘order does not destroy freedom; freedom destroys order.’<sup>180</sup> Globalisation tends to be used as a synonym for social and economic progress, but within recent decades increased interconnectedness and cultural exchange has been associated with the fear of cultural erosion and a loss of identity. The media expresses and explores these fears through its sustained focus on narratives of otherness and nationalistic rhetoric, and globalisation is a much-discussed topic within popular political discourse. Indeed, the fear of losing one’s community, and with it one’s sense of identity and belonging, has been exploited in recent years by right-leaning political parties across Europe and America, as highlighted earlier in this chapter.

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<sup>177</sup> Ralof, Helgen.

<sup>178</sup> Kate Torgovnick May, ‘How Pervasive Has Government Distrust Gotten?’, *TED Blog*, 2012 <<http://blog.ted.com/how-pervasive-has-government-distrust-gotten/>> [accessed 30 September 2015].

<sup>179</sup> Ivan Krastev, ‘Europe’s Democracy Paradox’, *The American Interest*, 1 February 2012, para. 22 <<http://www.the-american-interest.com/2012/02/01/europes-democracy-paradox/>> [accessed 11 March 2015]. This data is from a poll. Unhelpfully, Krastev doesn’t cite the poll or the political party.

<sup>180</sup> Krastev, para. 16.

The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) is one such party that has risen to prominence through its ‘everyman’ façade and its utilisation of the rhetoric of cultural dissolution. This highly conservative right-wing party holds many of the same ideals as the BNP as discussed earlier, but is more subtle in its medievalism. Instead of appealing to tradition and building a nostalgic desire for the return to an imaginary golden age, UKIP stays firmly in the present in its focus on the alleged failure of multiculturalism to create a better society. One of the books on offer in their web-store suggests that ‘we should look beyond the discredited doctrine of Multiculturalism, and focus instead on a united British culture.’<sup>181</sup> It hyperbolically claims that the fear of going against this supposed doctrine has led to crimes such as systemic child abuse and female genital mutilation going unpunished; this is a xenophobic assertion in itself as it implies that these crimes are directly related to an Other culture that refuses adhere to British, i.e. superior, law and morality. While the BNP’s merchandise and branding appeal rather plainly to the fantasy of a glorious Arthurian heritage, *Beyond Multiculturalism* utilises historical fact to signal that now is the time for change: the eight-hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta. Though the document itself has nothing in common with today’s standards of freedom and equality, The Magna Carta has, for centuries, played a role in the construction of values that are considered to be inherently British, those which go ‘to the very root of who and what we are as a nation.’<sup>182</sup>

While, for some, globalisation promises growth and positive multiplicity, there is a tangible concern that continued mixing of peoples and erosion of national borders will result in the dilution of shared identities and the dissolution of long-established cultural communities, ‘therein lies one of the central dilemmas of political life in developed societies: sharing and solidarity can conflict with diversity.’<sup>183</sup> This fear of one’s identity being flooded by the other is further explored in chapter five, and is at the centre of the Gamergate crisis of identity.

As it stands, the attacks on women in the games industry and scholarship, and on feminists and ‘ideologues’ seem to be founded on mostly baseless allegations that are spurred by perceived attacks on the ‘gamer’ identity, something which *Guardian* columnist Jessica Valenti succinctly termed a ‘toxic combination of

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<sup>181</sup> Peter Whittle, ‘Beyond Multiculturalism: Towards a United Future’, *UKIP* <[http://www.ukip.org/peter\\_whittle\\_beyond\\_multiculturalism\\_towards\\_a\\_united\\_future](http://www.ukip.org/peter_whittle_beyond_multiculturalism_towards_a_united_future)> [accessed 30 October 2014].

<sup>182</sup> Whittle.

<sup>183</sup> David Goodheart, ‘Too Diverse?’, *Prospect Magazine*, 2004 <<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/too-diverse-david-goodhart-multiculturalism-britain-immigration-globalisation>> [accessed 11 March 2015].

misinformation, anger and anxious masculinity.’<sup>184</sup> This clearly points to the prevalence and invisibility of conservative ideology in popular culture.

The notion that games and their content are apolitical—or rather, the desire for games to be exempt from political and critical analysis—illustrates the conservative ideologies that are fundamental to western fantasy. The invisibility of these issues (to some players) shows how deeply ingrained these ideas are: they do not stand out because they are taken to be natural. The response has often been to accuse critics—by which I mean reviewers as well as scholars—of forcing their own political agenda on others, bringing personal prejudice into their interpretation, and reading issues in games that simply are not there. Logically taken further and applied to examples, this argument would contend that the decision to create a game set in a medievalist world, to directly transpose real-world cultures onto secondary-world groups, to represent gender, race and sexual identity in specific ways (or not to represent them at all) are not rooted in identity politics. It is to assume that identities that are typically regarded as privileged are read as apolitical.

This really speaks to the depth to which conservative values are embedded within our culture and our entertainment media. The last few years have seen a spate of articles claiming that Conservatives have lost the culture war in the West, and that liberal ideals dominate popular media. Contrary to this, the most popular, best-selling games are usually framed by conservative, i.e. white, western, heteronormative, values, which are often considered inherently true and thus are rendered invisible. This points towards the potential fruitfulness of an exploration into the politics of medievalist fantasy gaming. Medieval fantasy is typically a conservative space and one that speaks nostalgically to a Western sense of heritage and heroic masculinity, which will allow for a particularly helpful case study of this larger cultural assumption of conservatism.<sup>185</sup>

The kinds of political action *Skyrim* allows are really the power that the player (ostensibly) has in real life: the power to elect a leader – that is, with limited choices and only under certain conditions. Obviously, the player has absolute rather than democratic power, and so it is a much more personal exercising of authority,

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<sup>184</sup> Jessica Valenti, ‘Gamergate Is Loud, Dangerous and a Last Grasp at Cultural Dominance by Angry White Men’, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2014, section Comment is free <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/21/gamergate-angry-men-harassing-women>> [accessed 22 October 2014].

<sup>185</sup> Tangentially related is Aronstein’s essay on the attempted recovery of masculinity through medieval literature. This was clearly a culturally conservative moment manifest as a backlash against feminism. Susan Aronstein, ‘The Mythopoetic Men’s Movement and Its Cultural Context’, in *Medievalism and the Quest for the ‘real’ Middle Ages*, ed. by Clare A. Simmons (Oxford: Frank Cass & Co., 2001), pp. 144–59.

though the player does so through a recognisable framework of modern political ideals. The way that the player's choice matters in the game is satisfying; the player's moral or political leanings are important given the absolute agency of the gamer. It is exciting to enjoy the power fantasy of saving the world, as well as to enjoy the fantasy of reshaping the world to best fit one's own ideals, and it satisfies the need for political power, a need exemplified by growing political apathy in the West.

This need can be seen in the identity crisis in the traditionally white, male gamer culture, exemplified by the Gamergate movement, which seeks to anchor games in a conservative, traditional form with which they are most familiar and which they see as representative of them. As a dominant privileged group, the ability to exercise direct power in selecting the political ruler of a fantasy world is an easy replacement for their loss of control in the real world, as the increasing diversification of political power allows politicians from wider social, racial, religious and gender backgrounds to gain authority, and whose views may not align with those of the gamer.

Medieval fantasy games increasingly present large worlds in which the player is allowed and encouraged to explore, as well as to change the world and leave their mark on it. This often manifests in the player being able to make, or influence, political decisions within the societies in the game, giving the player the illusion of narrative control. This manifests particularly in *Skyrim*'s civil war questline, which invites the player to establish the political future of the country, either as part of the Empire or as an independent nation.

Ultimately, however, nothing within the game world changes, regardless of the decisions the player makes. You can choose to support one faction or the other, and both result in continued absolute authority under the same monarchical institution, albeit with different flags flying. The player also never gets to see the outcome of their choice, as the actions which determine the political future occur in some future-planned council which is not included in the game. The player is godlike, but the politics of the world remain static as far as the player can experience them in game, which affirms the traditional assumptions and values of the game world.

While *Skyrim* sets out to create a believable social and political apparatus in the pseudo-medieval world it has created, complete with neomedievalist tropes on political fragmentation, as well as common feudal structures and tropes, the player is ultimately powerless to change the status quo. These systems are fundamental to the

way the game world has been constructed and, by design, cannot be changed, reinforcing the player's complicity in the medievalist conservatism of the world.

## Chapter 4

### Race and Identity Play

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In fantasy, the racial or ethnic self is partially constructed through engagement with the other. Rosemary Jackson proposes that ‘in its broadest sense, fantastic literature has always been concerned with revealing and exploring the interrelations of the ‘I’ and the ‘not-I’, of self and other.’<sup>186</sup> One of the primary characteristics of the high fantasy genre is the hero’s encounter with the other and his battle to overcome the threat it poses to the self. This chapter will examine the legacy of race in modern fantasy in this context, exploring how race is perceived and interacted with in fantasy games.

Critical analysis will form the first part this chapter, exploring relevant race theory, particularly as it applies to fantasy and games. The latter part will incorporate the response of readers in order to understand how race within the text, in this case *Skyrim*, is being received and to explore how they engage and play with race and racism. It will illustrate how *Skyrim*, along with other popular examples from the fantasy gaming genre, constructs its race according to long-standing racial stereotypes. Using the Khajiit race as a case study, I will demonstrate how the game inherits the problematic ideologies of its generic predecessors, particularly in its tendencies towards orientalism. I will also explore how *Skyrim* incorporates racism as a social issue within its own world and how contemporary identity politics, particularly the perceived threat to the Western self, posed by immigration and globalisation, are woven into the narrative, safely displaced from their real-world context.

Importantly, this chapter will use player responses in order to understand how the audience receives the text, providing direct, first hand, evidence of players’ understanding of and attitudes toward race in the game. It will explore the ways in which players incorporate racial identities into their play, and will engage with the notion that play within the virtual fantasy environment can be a means to experiment and critically engage with identity politics in order to provide a fulfilling experience

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<sup>186</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London; New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 53.

that challenges the genre's typically limiting portrayals of race and otherness. Finally, I will endeavour to assess to what extent the other in fantasy functions to superficially challenge and destabilise but then ultimately to protect and strengthen the white, Western self.

## Race in the Fantasy Genre

The term *race* is used in fantasy almost synonymously with *species* as it covers a range of both physical and cultural characteristics. Nathaniel Poor succinctly defines *race* as a term:

used to describe differences in appearance, cultural, and geographical origin for characters. This use is consistent with how race is used in the real world, although in fantasy it is used more broadly.<sup>187</sup>

The term *race* is conflated with *species* as well as encapsulating its real-world definition as a social construct based on distinctions that are not necessarily limited to the physical, even in places where *species* would be the more correct terminology.<sup>188</sup> Unlike *species*, a term used to refer to varieties of all kinds of organisms, *race* is a term that has historically been used to demarcate humans specifically and therefore confers a sense of humanness to the fantasy characters to which it is applied. Though some fantasy peoples are vastly different in terms of biology and origins, *race* implies the presence of culture, values, and subjectivity where *species* does not. While this makes the case for the helpfulness of such a term, the use of the word *race* in fantasy is obviously complicated by its real-world usage and its difficult history (and present). This becomes especially clear when exploring the problematic construction of race in fantasy, which this chapter aims to do.

One might argue that fantasy could be free of the social issues and complicated history associated with the word *race* if it were to simply adopt different terminology. However, ethnic and racial coding is always present within fantasy and the problematic state of popular racial representation could not be solved

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<sup>187</sup> Nathaniel Poor, 'Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Video Games: Acknowledgment and Avoidance', *Games and Culture*, 7.5 (2012), 375–96 (pp. 376–77).

<sup>188</sup> While interracial relationships are not uncommon in fantasy narratives, some go so far as to make clear that certain races are not capable of interbreeding. This is the very definition of species.

by avoiding the term.<sup>189</sup> Alexander Galloway expounds on this suggestion in his example of the *Star Wars* character Jar Jar Binks who, though not a direct visual representation of a terrestrial race, is an alien that ‘conveniently still stick[s] to the gangly comic relief of the blackface minstrel complete with exaggerated facial features and a Jamaican accent.’<sup>190</sup> The use of the term *race* within fantasy is certainly problematic, as Monson explains, it ‘implies hierarchy and focuses on difference, rather than equality and shared humanity.’<sup>191</sup> Regardless of the term, racial and ethnic constructions exist in fantasy game worlds, and are often easily recognisable transplantations of real-world cultures. Video games are an important vehicle of social and racial hegemony and various real-world cultural groups and ethnicities are represented, perhaps unthinkingly, with varying levels of subtlety in fantasy. Stuart Hall explains, ‘representation is a very different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active world of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of *making things mean*.’<sup>192</sup> The tendency of fantasy games to lean on cultural stereotyping whilst using non-human races as a safety net can act as a means of reinforcement of conservative and worrisome social hegemonies.

The history of this tendency can be traced to some of the earliest literature that marked the beginnings of modern fantasy. The work of Tolkien, one of the most celebrated fantasy authors, has long been the subject of an ongoing (highly emotional) debate on racism. The work of J.R.R Tolkien (alongside, though to a lesser extent, that of C.S. Lewis) is often cited as the starting point for genre fantasy. While Tolkien was not the earliest or sole writer in the genre that would become modern fantasy, his work has had a significant and lasting influence on the fantasy literature, films and games of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. *The Lord of the Rings*, along with Tolkien’s other works, essays and letters, established and reinforced a number of features and devices which are now regarded as norms

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<sup>189</sup> Alexander R. Galloway, ‘Does the Whatever Speak?’, in *Race after the Internet*, ed. by Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 119.

<sup>190</sup> Galloway, p. 119.

<sup>191</sup> Melissa J. Monson, ‘Race-Based Fantasy Realm: Essentialism in the World of Warcraft’, *Games and Culture*, 7.1 (2012), 48–71 (p. 54).

<sup>192</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘The Rediscovery of “Ideology”: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies’, in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. by John Storey, 3rd edition (New York: Pearson, 2006), p. 131.

of fantasy, even clichés. This includes many of the genre's conventions regarding the construction of non-human races, particularly elves and orcs, two groups that are now ubiquitous within fantasy.

Some readers have identified problematic elements in the portrayal of race. Peter Edgerly Firchow points out that 'race is an integral aspect of identity',<sup>193</sup> in *The Lord of the Rings*, where clear distinctions are drawn between each of the different races. He goes further to suggest that Tolkien implies an innate predisposition to leadership, adventure, and evil.<sup>194</sup> Though quickly dismissing all charges of racism, Patrick Curry admits that that 'Tolkien's evil creatures are frequently 'swart, slant-eyed,' and tend to come from the south ('the cruel Haradrim') and east ('the wild Easterlings').<sup>195</sup> Also problematic in terms of its Eurocentrism is the persistent use of white/black and light/dark imagery to represent good and evil respectively, as well as the inherent morality generally attributed to the peoples of the West and the East. Following the release of Peter Jackson's massively successful film trilogy, which catapulted *The Lord of the Rings* into mainstream popular culture and saw a renewal of interest in the novels, the debate has raged over whether the work, and by extension Tolkien himself, might be regarded as racist. Fans and scholars alike have spent a great deal of time analysing and decrypting the author's work, appendices, notes and letters to denounce or defend, sometimes quite forcefully, Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* as racist/not racist. While analysing a novel's historical and social context can be helpful in developing an interpretation of that text, the pursuit of an answer as to whether Tolkien was racist is completely unproductive. The answer would not change the presence of the more uncomfortable aspects of racialisation within his work, nor should it impact our readings. The debate only serves to dismiss the reader and, as Barthes famously stated, to tyrannically 'impose a limit on that text... to close the writing.'<sup>196</sup> Thus, questionable aspects of a text can be reduced to the personal inadequacies of the author, denied altogether by a passionate defence of his character, or apologetically explained away by the suggestion that those aspects

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<sup>193</sup> Peter Edgerly Firchow, 'The Politics of Fantasy: The Hobbit and Fascism', *The Midwest Quarterly*, 50.1 (2008), 15 (p. 23).

<sup>194</sup> Firchow, pp. 24, 30.

<sup>195</sup> Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle Earth* (HarperCollins, 2012), pp. 30–31.

<sup>196</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text: Essays* (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 147.

are a product of their time or circumstances. This limits our understanding of representation with a text, of how race is understood and expressed. As Sue Kim states:

In fact, the entire discourse of blame, premised on the idea that racism is solely a personal failing expressed in representation and discourse, limits our understanding of how racialization works.<sup>197</sup>

Texts are, of course, neither created nor read in a cultural vacuum and meanings will be affected by experience and shifts in cultural sensibilities. Tolkien's works remain immensely popular and are, obviously, no longer being read purely in the context of mid twentieth-century Europe and America, or even in English. Exploring the meanings produced by readers, and the influence of those readings on other texts, seems to be a much more interesting and fruitful venture than trying to locate an essential meaning by the impossible task of discovering what the author meant. The racialised depictions of Middle-Earth's people have had a strong influence on the construction of non-human characters in later popular fantasy. Though modern fantasy role-playing games offer something unique in their potential for allowing players to perform otherness, it is arguable that fantasy's racial tropes have narrowed and crystallised over time, particularly in visual media, becoming somewhat crude in their use of racial essentialism and their overt extrapolation from real-world culture and contemporary race relations.

## **Current Models of Race in Gaming**

Popular fantasy role-playing games truly began with the tabletop game, *Dungeons and Dragons*. Players create their own characters and progress through the adventure by verbally describing their character's actions and receiving responses from the Dungeon Master. The Dungeon Master leads the game by setting the scene, describing the results of players' interactions in the imagined world, and acting as referee. The game uses a formal rulebook from which players choose a race, class

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<sup>197</sup> Sue Kim, 'Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in The Lord of the Rings Films', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.4 (2004), 875–907 (p. 881).

and moral alignment, and determine their character's statistics. The rulebook also contains the numerical system for deriving the result of certain actions, such as whether an attack hits or misses, usually based on the outcome of the roll of dice. Though the stories and settings can be devised entirely by the Dungeon Master, there are many structured campaigns available for participants to play through.

Though by its nature *Dungeons and Dragons* encourages improvisation and free-form role-play, the formal aspects of the game, the authoritative rule- and guidebooks, have not subverted the now-traditional Eurocentric approach to fantasy peoples that views the other as exotic or savage or both. The game also furthers the idea of racial determinism: the player selects a race from a list provided, each having its own account of physical, personal and cultural attributes, and then performs the nature of that character as is understood through its rules and description. In providing racial markers and statistics, particularly those that adhere to Eurocentric racial stereotypes, boundaries are drawn around the realm of escapist fantasy and the space for identity-play is actually limited. Mitchell-Smith claims that this unspoken performance of racial determinism suggests that 'identity and behaviour are strictly anchored to' within the space of escapist fantasy.<sup>198</sup> This is not necessarily the case for players of video fantasy role-playing games, as I shall later explore.<sup>199</sup>

The wider issues of the construction of race within fantasy becomes even more obvious in the realm of video gaming, where Eurocentric tropes and long-standing racial stereotypes combined with the transplantation of real-world races and cultures are experienced by millions of fans. An exploration of the construction of race in three hugely successful fantasy role-playing games of the last decade—*World of Warcraft*, *Dragon Age: Origins*, and *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*—will provide a useful foundation for the detailed case studies and analysis of player response to *Skyrim* that follow.

*World of Warcraft* is the most popular massively-multiplayer online game in history, boasting ten million concurrent subscribers at its peak in 2008. It currently

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<sup>198</sup> Ilan Mitchell-Smith, 'Racial Determinism and the Interlocking Economies of Power and Violence in Dungeons and Dragons', in *Co-Opting Culture: Culture and Power in Sociology and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Robert Carley and B. Garrick Harden (Lexington Books, 2009), p. 211.

<sup>199</sup> See 'identity tourism' pp. 119-20.

offers thirteen playable races, including the traditional Orcs and Humans, as well as more original races such as Tauren and Draenei. When creating a character the player can customise hair and skin colour, as well as horn, tail and fur detail where applicable, though such details are purely cosmetic and consist of limited options. Race in the game is, as in most games, a biological fact. Jessica Langer notes that ‘while race in the game is biologically determined, race in the real world is socially determined, which creates a significant rift in perspective.’<sup>200</sup> Race also determines the character’s traditional enemies, culture, and the style and appearance of cities and towns: the Dwarven capital, Ironforge, lies underneath a snowy mountain with a great forge as its central monument while the Orcish capital, Orgimmar, is located in a desert region and comprises of a variety of spike-adorned huts and towers.

Each race belongs to one of two warring factions: the Alliance and the Horde. The Alliance and its members tend to be portrayed as the modern, civilised world, consisting of mostly American and European-style characters, from their accents to their culture and architecture. The Alliance does have some exceptions, particularly in its use of elements of Japanese culture to portray Night Elves, however, Langer explains this by stating that Japan, while not technically Western, is ‘Western-approved.’<sup>201</sup> This might be regarded as the effect of the ‘gradations of whiteness’<sup>202</sup> as discussed by Richard Dyer, in which people who do not identify as white Anglo-Saxon, German or Scandinavian (the whitest of whites) can be still assimilated into Whiteness as a means of convenient unification.<sup>203</sup> It has also been noted that it is very difficult to create a non-white avatar within the game. Humans and Dwarves are the only races that can be customised across the spectrum of light to dark skin, yet these still fall short of creating a sufficiently non-white, non-beastial avatar.<sup>204</sup> David R. Dietrich has found this lack of choice is consistent across a large

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<sup>200</sup> Jessica Langer, ‘The Familiar and the Foreign; Playing (Post)Colonialism in World of Warcraft’, in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, by Hilde Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2011), p. 88.

<sup>201</sup> Langer, p.91.

<sup>202</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (Routledge, 1997), p. 12.

<sup>203</sup> Dyer, *White*, p. 19. I will return to the issue of whiteness in chapter five.

<sup>204</sup> See Tyler Pace, ‘Can an Orc Catch a Cab in Stormwind?: Cybertype Preference in the World of Warcraft Character Creation Interface’, in *CHI ‘08 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, CHI EA ‘08 (New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2008), pp. 2493–

number of online and offline role-playing games and assesses that this lack of choice ‘constitutes of omissions based upon the unquestioned standards of normative whiteness’ and is symptomatic of the Eurocentric whitewashing of fantasy.<sup>205</sup>

Races belonging to the Horde, on the other hand, tend to be portrayed as more aggressive and somewhat animalistic. The faction is known for its love of honour and glory rather than peace and civility. Leigh Schwartz demonstrates that these differences imply not only a Western/non-Western dichotomy, but that the Alliance and the Horde can also be read as representative of the First- and Third-World respectively.<sup>206</sup> Horde races take their cultural and visual cues from Caribbean, African and Native American cultures. Trolls, for example, are a tribal race who speak with a stereotypical Jamaican accent, adorn themselves with bones and teeth, and can be heard using phrases such as ‘stay away from the voodoo, mon.’ The character creation screen describes trolls thus:

Once at home in the jungles of Stranglethorn Vale, the fierce trolls of the Darkspear tribe were pushed out by warring factions. Eventually the Trolls befriended the Orcish Horde and Thrall, the Orcs’ young warchief, convinced the Trolls to travel with him to Kalimdor. Though they cling to their shadowy heritage, the Darkspear Trolls hold a place of honour in the horde.

[*World of Warcraft*, character creation screen: Troll]

The Troll race are portrayed as barbaric and their primitivism is made clear through their unkempt appearance and attire, as well as their exotic, shamanistic religion; highly worrisome for a race that clearly takes its cultural cues from Afro-Caribbean culture and stereotypes. Most of this is so overt that the savage shaman stereotype can be quickly and easily asserted using only the images and race notes provided on the character creation screen and without spending any time exploring the race through play. Langer also identifies the implication of Orcs as noble

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2502 (p. 2499). in which the author discusses a player’s response: ‘one could always play as a dark skinned white guy... But not as a black guy.’

<sup>205</sup> David R. Dietrich, ‘Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters’, *Sociological Inquiry*, 83.1 (2013), 82–105 (p. 99). See also chapter five.

<sup>206</sup> L. Schwartz, ‘Fantasy, Realism, and the Other in Recent Video Games’, *Space and Culture*, 9.3 (2006), 313–25 (p. 319).

savages, a departure from Tolkien's monstrously subhuman orcs, but still 'possibly the most famous backhanded compliment that exists.'<sup>207</sup>

Orcs are described as peaceful race from an alien planet who were enslaved and forced into war on Azeroth, the game world. Now free, they embody a Spartan-esque warrior culture, 'fight[ing] for honour in an alien world that hates and reviles them.'<sup>208</sup> The prominent and sympathetic leader of the Horde faction was—until 2010—an Orc named Thrall, who was captured and raised as a slave by a Human who gave him his unsubtle name. Barbaric in appearance and espousing an arguably primitive warrior culture yet characterised by a fundamental sense of honour and dignity, the Orcs epitomise the noble savage, the uncivilised character who maintains a simplistic and uncorrupted set of essential human values.

This archetypal portrayal of the primitive trolls and their dark religion alongside the savage yet honourable Orcs stand in stark contrast to the Alliance races. Humans and Dwarves, for example, usually follow the Holy Light - a non-theistic church yet one that has clear Western, Judeo-Christian resonances. Both races' character creation screens imply a level of civilised intellectualism: Dwarves are commonly archaeologists and have 'devoted themselves to the pursuit of lost artefacts and ancient knowledge' while Humans have 'mastered the arts of combat, craftsmanship, and magic with stunning efficiency.' For humans, combat is an art form to be mastered, rather than a manifestation of innate aggression. Langer asserts that the visual appearance of the Horde races separate them, and the culture they are drawn from, from humans; as Human is a playable race, these other races are cast as exactly that, Other, non-human. This is highly problematic as, 'implicitly, the game suggests that those players who have Jamaican accent, for instance, are humanoid—but specifically *not* human.'<sup>209</sup>

Further to the characterisation of the Horde races as bestial and other, *World of Warcraft's* Tauren, Trolls and Orcs have had the lowest base Intellect statistics for most of the game's lifespan.<sup>210</sup> Intellect in gaming goes hand-in-hand with magic use,

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<sup>207</sup> Langer, p. 93.

<sup>208</sup> *World of Warcraft*, Character Creations Screen: Orc

<sup>209</sup> Langer, p. 104.

<sup>210</sup> The Horde faction, taking its aesthetic cues from racial others, averaged much lower in base Intellect than the aesthetically-western Alliance until the addition of new races from

and magic in fantasy tends to be associated with knowledge and power, while the game's mechanics also limited which magic-using classes players could combine with these races. Until the 2010 expansion, Orc players wishing to play a magic-based class were limited to playing Shamans or Warlocks, where the latter's power is portrayed as dark and demonic. Similarly, Tauren players were limited to the Druid and Shaman classes, fitting with their obvious connection to the stereotypical model of Native American culture. Furthermore, the Shaman class was originally only available to the Horde, while the Paladin class, the knight-healer, was only available to the Alliance.<sup>211</sup> These issues go unaddressed within the game; as Poor points out, race and racism are 'not viable topics of discussion'<sup>212</sup> in *World of Warcraft*. This is peculiar as racism is clearly an issue within the game's extensive lore. The prominent narrative surrounding Thrall as well as the vehement hatred of non-Orcs by his successor are filled with conflicts spurred by race and othering. Indeed, the entire game franchise is fundamentally built around the concept of warring factions who are allied by race. However, race and racism is not engaged with on any meaningful level within the game.

While *World of Warcraft* might be described as overly simplistic in its stereotypical constructions of race, Bioware's *Dragon Age: Origins* is much more self-aware and attempts to open up the issue of racism within a fantasy world. As with *World of Warcraft*, there is only one human race with no racial subdivisions. Characters can be customised to have light or darker skin, but this has no bearing on the opportunities, narrative or in-game treatment of those characters. Elves, however, are divided into two racial groups: the Dalish and the City elves, and racial tensions are explored through the Elves' hostile relationship with humans and their own uneasy interracial relationship.

Dalish elves are reminiscent of the romantic gypsy stereotype: they live a nomadic life, travelling in caravans, passionately preserving their lore and traditions, and avoiding humans for fear of persecution. They generally frown upon their city-dwelling kin for abandoning their ways, believing they have lost their culture and

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2007 onwards in which races with low base-Intellect were added to the Alliance and races with high base-Intellect were added to the Horde, evening out the average base statistics.

<sup>211</sup> A game expansion in 2007 made these classes available to both factions.

<sup>212</sup> Poor, p. 379.

become pets to humans. City elves live within ghetto-like ‘alienages:’ walled-off and run-down slums within human cities. They are described as having lost their land and culture, existing ‘under the heavy thumb of [their] human overlords,’<sup>213</sup> and are sympathetically portrayed as an abused minority with ‘obvious parallels to Native Americans’ and Jews.<sup>214</sup> The Jewish parallel is particularly clear with the elves being racially and religiously persecuted by multiple aggressors and removed from their homelands at least twice in their history, and held in extreme poverty in slums. Alluding to the persecution and diaspora of Jews in non-human races is a common trope that many players seem to feel brings a sense of ‘gritty realism’ to fantasy. However, these depictions of racial tension seem somewhat superficial, as it is difficult to engage with and often without consequence.

Poor concludes that elves are often used as the racial other in fantasy gaming as they provide a safe distance from which it is possible to explore real-world cultural and social issues. Indeed, it seems clear that writers of fantasy have long used non-human races to avoid possible controversy or painful triggers that may rise from presenting racial tensions in a naturalistic, human setting. He also notes that this may be a problematic avoidance technique in that racial tension amongst humans is often sidestepped in fantasy and the racial implications set by non-human races such as elves are often inconsequential. The game world can rarely be altered by the player’s actions even though in many games the player can choose to play a minority character and complete the storyline, save the world and rise to the status of hero. There are attempts to address this lack of influence in *Dragon Age: Origins*, but with dark results. Depending on the choices made during the game, it is sometimes possible for the elven player to request better treatment and representation for the city elves. A variety of seemingly-positive outcomes are possible but each results in eventual resurfacing of racial tensions in the form of assassinations and riots that lead to severe human-enforced crack-downs on the alienage, demonstrating the futility of change and suggesting that multi-racial or multi-cultural relations are always unstable and inevitably lead to conflict. Though *Dragon Age: Origins* steers safely clear of outright racial commentary by removing

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<sup>213</sup> Codex, *Dragon Age: Origins*.

<sup>214</sup> Poor, p. 384.

identity conflict to the non-human elves, it is clear fantasy remains the site of reflection upon real-world identity politics and fears.

*Skyrim* deviates from the trend of avoiding human racial subcategories. Its world, Tamriel, is home to four human races: Breton, Imperial, Nord, and Redguard. Hailing from different regions of the game world, each race has its own discrete culture, fashion and appearance and is plainly inspired by real-world culture and history. The Breton race alludes to real-world Bretons, the latter hailing from northwest France and southwestern Britain. Their names, often with -ette or -ine endings, call to mind French, as does the use of common, present-day French names such as Francois and Etienne. Usually pale-skinned and adept with magic, their biology recalls their ancient Nordic and Elven ancestry. The Scandinavian-inspired Nords are tall, fair-haired and -skinned, and known for their resistance to cold weather. They are proud and hardy Northern warriors who recall the romantic image of the Viking. The slightly darker-skinned Imperials draw their culture from the Roman Empire. ‘Shrewd diplomats,’<sup>215</sup> they rule most of Tamriel under the leadership of their Emperor. Their armour parallels the common representation of the Roman army as seen in popular films and games with its emphasis on red and gold, and their names are distinctly Latin, such as Cicero, Gaius, Quintus, or Tacitus. Their rule over Tamriel is not secure, and the troubled relationship between Nords and Imperials forms a major part of the plot of the game *Skyrim*.

The Redguard is perhaps the most interesting of the human races as it is the only non-white race and seems to be made of an amalgamation of non-white racial stereotypes rather than a singular, obvious real world culture. Redguard people are native to the arid desert region of Hammerfell and are described on the character creation screen as being: ‘the most naturally talented warriors in Tamriel, innately suited in combat and skilled with weaponry.’<sup>216</sup> Their skin and hair tones are usually dark, but both can range from light brown to almost black; they are described in the Prima Official game guide as ‘dark-skinned [and] wiry-haired,’<sup>217</sup> implying an

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<sup>215</sup> *Skyrim*, character creation: Imperial.

<sup>216</sup> Coincidentally, Hammerfall is the name of an internment camp liberated by Thrall in *World of Warcraft*.

<sup>217</sup> David Hodgson, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim: Prima Official Game Guide* (London: Grafton House, 2011), p. 9.

African appearance.<sup>218</sup> While Redguard non-player characters can appear in a range of armour, many non-player characters can be found in *Skyrim* wearing loose clothes, turbans and scimitars. Combined with their martial prowess this evokes the popular images of the warrior-like, or even bloodthirsty, Saracen.

The real-world resonances of the Redguard are reflected in the perceptions of the race in the game world itself where they are recognised as the alluring yet dangerous other. The collector's edition copy of *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, released in 2006 and preceding *Skyrim* in *The Elder Scrolls* series, was packaged with a promotional booklet designed to be a physical version of one of the many lore books players can collect and read in the games. The book, purportedly produced by Tamriel's Imperial Geographical Society, describes Hammerfell and Redguards thus:

Hammerfell is the eternal outsider of the human lands, either regarded by the Imperial citizen as Tamriel's dark and exotic west or its most tempestuous and dangerous quarter, full of barbarians and cutthroats. Both descriptions are apt, and can be equally attributed to its people, the proud and savage Redguards.<sup>219</sup>

Written from the perspective of Imperials, this overtly illustrates the Redguard as the paradoxical exotic/savage other to the civilised, moral, white-normative races.

The game's mechanics, the inbuilt, programmed rules, also contribute to this picture. Thus, 'race is more than its representation, [...] it is part of the algorithmic logic of games and digital media themselves.'<sup>220</sup> Similar to the way race is actualised through the limitations of race and class combinations in *World of Warcraft*, the Redguards' physical prowess and apparently natural proficiency with weaponry is confirmed by their racial aptitudes: they receive a high starting-bonus with one-handed weapons as well as bonuses to Block and Archery. Interestingly, prior to *Skyrim* Redguards received negative points in Intelligence and Willpower, making

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<sup>218</sup> Dietrich finds that Redguards are one of the few fantasy races that provide at least some options of African hairstyles and features: Dietrich, 'Avatars of Whiteness', p. 93. Poor also notes that Redguards 'look like African Americans.' p. 387.

<sup>219</sup> *A Pocket Guide to the Empire, 1st Edition: Hammerfell* (Bethesda Softworks, 2006).

<sup>220</sup> *Race after the Internet*, ed. by Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 8.

them unviable as magic-using characters. Magic, long associated with knowledge, learning, wisdom and power, particularly in fantasy, was innately out of reach for members of this race who were programmed to be better at physical combat, seemingly more suitable for their savage background. In a conscious decision to remove some of the limitations of previous *Elder Scrolls* games, *Skyrim* has an updated character creation engine which is less restrictive, allowing players to stray more from the previous racial confines to encourage more creativity with their characters. As such, racial statistics such as Intellect and Willpower have been removed and replaced by skills, such as Archery and Lockpicking, which can be levelled up whilst playing, going some way to remove the essentialist readings that can be made of these races. Still, these are fairly minor adjustments that seem to have been made to create more choice for players rather than to address subtle racial essentialism. The much more blatant racial and cultural stereotyping which exists in the aesthetic portrayal of each race remains an issue.

The Redguard stand in stark contrast to the white human races as the non-white other. However, this difference is primarily physical, and though the Redguard are constructed using various Eastern motifs there is little engagement with their racial difference in the game world. Despite their portrayal as the dark-skinned outsider, the Redguard player suffers no direct negative effects as a consequence of their race in *Skyrim*. This is not because Tamriel is a utopian, post-racial world which has surpassed racial and ethnic conflicts, as this is clearly not the case for members of the non-human races, the Khajiit and the Argonians, for whom racism and social prejudice is an integral part of their lore and player-experience within *Skyrim*. It seems that once again direct racial conflict between humans has been avoided in the manner argued by Poor. Instead, it is placed at a safe distance upon non-human characters.

### **Problems with Race - Case study: The Khajiit**

Racism and conflict are integral parts of *Skyrim*'s fantasy world. They are elements that give it a sense of realistic depth by imitation of ideological conflict in the real world. However, the stereotypes that comprise these elements are not mere fantasy; they draw upon long-standing racial tropes and contemporary race politics. The representation and treatment of the Khajiit bears an uncomfortable similarity to the

unfavourable ways Middle Eastern people are typically represented in the West. The political relationship, at least as portrayed in the media, between the West and the Middle East has been strained for some time, particularly since the destruction of New York's World Trade Centre on September 11th 2001.<sup>221</sup> This feeling of conflict has fed through into entertainment media where the East is either romanticised as the location of opulence, as in *World of Warcraft* where the Blood Elf race's architecture and artefacts seem to be inspired by the Eastern world as imagined in Disney's *Aladdin*, or, more frequently, it is the great threat to the West and the enemy of the civilised world, as found in many modern war games such as *Call of Duty*.<sup>222</sup> An examination of the treatment of *Skyrim*'s Arabic-inspired ethnic minority, the Khajiit, and a consideration of in-game racism and its relationship to real-world racial representation and political ideology is pertinent to understanding how fantasy games construct race.

The humanoid Khajiit race is, along with the reptilian Argonian, the most biologically fantastical playable race in *Skyrim*. Exotically feline in appearance, Khajiit are covered in fur, have retractable claws, and are one of only two races that has a tail. They appear to be based on the real-world cat family with a range of appearances that resemble a variety of felids such as lions, lynx and the domestic cat. Both races are fairly atypical within the fantasy genre, and in creating such physically distinct races the developers have given themselves the opportunity to create new and exciting playable races that are different from the Elves, Dwarves and Orcs that traditionally populate fantasy worlds. Racial prejudice, nationalism and freedom are recurring themes throughout the game and the idea of racial persecution is particularly attached to these two races. The races and factions in *Skyrim* war for various reasons, usually pertaining to politics, power and economics, but the discrimination against the so-called 'beast races' is much more fully explored in terms of racial essentialism. Using races that are biologically distinctive from humans provides a degree of separation from the controversial issue of real-

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<sup>221</sup> For a more detailed background of the political relationship between Arabs and the West (particularly America) and the resulting vilification of Arabs, see Tim Jon Semmerling, *'Evil' Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 1–29.

<sup>222</sup> For in-depth examinations of the portrayal of the East in 'realistic' games, see: Vít Šisler, 'Digital Arabs Representation in Video Games', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11.2 (2008), 203–20.

world racism whilst still allowing the player to explore social inequality and injustice. We might read this as the game's narrative performing a critical function of fantasy, as argued by Tolkien, in that it potentially challenges players to see familiar social issues anew through the depiction of oppressed yet sympathetic and relatable characters that seem far removed from our world. However, though players seem to be charmed by the uniqueness of the Khajiit, both their physicality and culture, it only takes a cursory glance to recognise that their construction is built upon an Orientalist fantasy of the East. The Khajiit represent the exotic other in *Skyrim* and present a highly stereotypical image of real-world Middle Eastern culture in an amalgamation of cultural, visual and aural clichés and Oriental topoi.

The Khajiit are immigrants to Skyrim, hailing from the warm, desert land of Elsweyr. Pronounced in exactly the same way as the word *elsewhere*, the game lore suggests that the name is from an ancient Khajiiti proverb, 'perfect society is always elsewhere.' Rather than giving the Khajiit homeland an unusual name, as is common when trying to invoke a sense of distance and the unknown, this race is othered in an entirely transparent way by naming their place of origin as the English word for *not here*, making the Khajiit immediately identifiable as different, as not belonging in Skyrim. Though the storyline suggests that the Khajiit named their home themselves, it seems an odd choice as real-world cultures, of course, do not alienate themselves with their own naming conventions. However, it does add an air of mystery to the race and perhaps even alludes to Thomas More's *Utopia*, literally 'no place,' the home of a perfected version of society. We might read this as the Khajiit's philosophical recognition of the ills of society and an aspiration to create utopia in their own land. This hint at philosophy is quickly lost however, as such moments rarely surface and are not developed. The Khajiit's auto dialogue—recycled phrases used in greeting and bidding farewell when a player interacts with an NPC—most commonly refers to a longing for home and the inhospitality of Skyrim's northern climate, further highlighting their status as outsiders who even seem to be at odds with nature: 'the warm sand of Elsweyr is far away from here... may the sun keep you warm, even in this land of bitter cold.'

Their accents sound somewhat Arabic, particularly the male voices which have a staccato quality, and their culture is littered haphazardly with various Eastern stereotypes. The Khajiit tend to be nomadic; most that are encountered in *Skyrim*

make a living through merchant trade via travelling caravans. The merchants have a culture of hospitality and barter that is strongly reflected in many of their stock phrases such as ‘I have travelled far across Tamriel to serve you’ and ‘Khajiit welcomes you... and also your coin.’ The reference to oneself in the third person, and occasionally the use of the phrase ‘this one’ or ‘Khajiit’ instead of one’s personal name as seen in the previous example, is an interesting feature exhibited by several of the Khajiiti characters. This linguistic quirk adds an immediate, extra layer of foreignness in its peculiarity. This slight but noticeable distance from idiomatic English is also heard in the Khajiit’s tendency to refrain from using contractions and contributes to the subtle suggestion of a language barrier or as the Khajiit as non-native speakers of the common language.

The material goods surrounding their caravans often include rolls of decorative carpet, reminiscent of the ornate Persian carpets that are famously associated with the Middle Eastern region and still an important cultural export for Iran. Their names are resoundingly Eastern in sound and appearance, for example, primary Khajiiti characters include Ri’saad, Atahbah, Ra’zhinda and Ma’jhad. Names are regularly seen in text as they appear whenever a player interacts with a character and Khajiiti names are clear graphological indicators of foreignness that reflect how Arabic is conventionally Romanised. For example, the frequent use of apostrophes to mark out syllabic separation or glottal stops calls to mind the transliteration of Arabic. Even their feline appearance can be linked to the East; cats are commonly associated with Ancient Egypt where they were an important cultural symbol and remain associated with the area in the typically Western romantic mode of imagining the East as a place out-of-time.

Some of the more troubling Western conceptions of the East are present in the depiction of the Khajiit, including their alleged predilection for thievery and drugs. Within the narrative, it is made clear that the caravans are known for dealing in skooma, an illegal narcotic produced in the Khajiiti province and smuggled into Skyrim. This rumour is confirmed by the fact that skooma can be bought from Khajiiti traders, some quests involve the transport of skooma, and some Khajiit can even be overheard discussing their trade and their desperate addiction as in the following scene:

ATAHBAH: My bones ache for the Moonsugar. It has been too long since I tasted it.

RI'SAAD: You know that our supply is limited. It could be a season or more before we get a new shipment from the south.

ATAHBAH: My ears hear the truth in your words, and yet my body shakes with the need.

RI'SAAD: Control yourself! Do not frighten our customers away with your fits!

This image of the Easterner as morally corrupt is deeply rooted in nineteenth-century literature and politics and can be traced through literature and popular culture to the present day.

Orientalists are inveterate liars, they are 'lethargic and suspicious,' and in everything oppose the clarity, directness and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race.<sup>223</sup>

Said—quoting Lord Cromer, the late nineteenth-century British Consul-General of Egypt—neatly summarises the attitude of the Nord towards the Khajiit. In fact, many inhabitants of Skyrim regard the latter as an untrustworthy, corrupting force, so much so that Khajiiti caravans are forbidden from entering cities. Aspects of the narrative and game mechanics do confirm a tendency for illegal activity. Firstly, their inherent racial bonus to the 'sneak' and 'pick-pocketing' abilities suggest that they are inherently predisposed to slyness and stealing. This does not escape the attention of players. Those concerned with perfectly optimising their character's statistics tend to choose the Khajiit on account of these bonuses, often stating that they enjoy playing 'assassin,' 'thief,' or 'ninja' characters. Note that these archetypal characters also have conspicuous ideological connections with the East in popular culture, albeit the Far East in the case of the ninja-like character. The Khajiit also play a large role in providing opportunities to thieves. Players will struggle to sell stolen items as merchants normally will not accept them. However, if the player joins and builds influence with the Thieves' Guild, Khajiit caravan traders can be unlocked as 'fences'—a fence being a merchant that will buy stolen goods

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<sup>223</sup> Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (London: Vintage 1978), p. 39; Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 2, pp. 146-67.

from the character—thus allowing the light-fingered player to make a career of thievery.

Despite all this, the caravan traders can be read sympathetically and are often heard lamenting their predicament as outcasts and rejecting their racial stereotypes:

ATAHBAH: ...these Nords have no love for us. They look upon us and see only thieves and smugglers.

MA'RANDRU-JO: It is a pity, but it cannot be helped. Perhaps if we continue to show that we can be trusted, they will open their cities to our caravans.

ATAHBAH: Hah! I wish that I had your optimism.

This scene is particularly ironic, not only because the negative rumours surrounding the Khajiit are generally confirmed to be true, but also because this is the same Atahbah that can be heard desperately awaiting their next shipment of drugs, as quoted earlier. Similar contradictory dialogue can be found across the caravans. Ahkari appeals for sympathy much like Atahbah, and stoically turns the other cheek: 'when they look upon us, they see only pickpockets and skooma dealers. It is most unfair, but we do our best to ignore them.' Amusingly, he will also confess 'I seem to have an unfortunate talent for getting myself involved in misunderstandings with the law.' Though Ahkari's sly second line is humorous and perhaps even endearing, this consistent rejection of racial stereotypes when all evidence points to their accuracy is particularly troubling. It serves to pay lip-service to the notion that racial profiling is morally wrong while simultaneously propagating the idea that stereotypes contain large elements of truth and that racial essentialism is inescapable - at least for the Other.

Some Nords share similar opinions and are sympathetic to the Khajiit. Ysolda, a Nord trader and quest-giver, has a positive relationship with the trading caravans and will explain that the Khajiit merely have a bad reputation. She tells the player that many are forced to turn to thievery and smuggling through hardship in her common sense phrase: 'a few bad apples spoil the bunch. You know how it is.'<sup>224</sup> Unfortunately, 'a few' is actually the majority of Skyrim's Khajiiti population. In the face of the negative portrayal of the beast-race, this recommendation can do little

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<sup>224</sup> Ysolda (Whiterun).

to redeem the Khajiit or justify their actions. In fact, its real power lies in its demonstration of the potential of individualism amongst the Nord race. The problem of the Khajiit acts as a foil for Ysolda the Nord to make clear that she is not confined by the tendency for isolationism expressed by some of her race. She finds fault in the laws put in place by her kin and rejects the oversimplified labels placed upon her friends. It is peculiar that this elucidation on the plight of the Khajiit and the defence of their reputation does not come from a member of that race itself, but instead from the white Nord. Perhaps some will read this moment as a positive and warming appeal for compassion but this only further patronises the other, those uncivilised folk who are incapable of solving their own problems and breaking free of their racial essentialism.

The Oriental imagery is so unobvious that it might be surprising to note that no respondents explicitly stated the connection of the Khajiit to the East in the way that many players related the Nords to what they imagined would be their real-world counterparts. In actuality, many players responded somewhat positively to this exotic portrayal, noting their intrigue and fascination with the race, its culture and backstory. Though only seven percent of respondents chose to play as a Khajiit on their primary playthrough, the race emerged as the second most-preferred with sixteen percent of respondents stating it as their favourite. The players that chose Khajiit tended to report being attracted to their unique, feline appearance—‘they’re so individual,’ ‘the crazy cat lady in me wins every time’—and being attracted to the exotic lore.<sup>225</sup>

Only 8% of respondents chose the second beast race, the Argonian, as their favourite race, but they also noted that they were drawn by their unique, reptilian appearance.<sup>226</sup> While both races are persecuted by Skyrim’s native population, respondents seemed to focus less on the victimisation of the Argonians than that of the Khajiit, and few players elicited a sympathetic or empathetic emotional response to the Argonian, instead seeing them as ‘badass.’<sup>227</sup> For some players, the beast-races

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<sup>225</sup> Responses are to q. 13.

<sup>226</sup> See fig. 9.

<sup>227</sup> The Dunmer, a member of the elven races, were also a popular choice for favourite race—closely behind the Khajiit at 15%—and also highly disliked by Skyrim’s population, however, the game lore suggests that this conflict is based on a struggle for power rather than outright racism.

seem to add what bell hooks calls ethnic ‘spice,’ a way to add flavour and interest by opening up the possibility of transgression and providing the potential to explore the taboo desires and fantasies that are embedded within the Other.<sup>228</sup> That opportunity is certainly taken up by some players who reported that they adopt an alternate persona, as opposed to playing ‘as themselves’ guided by their own personality and morality, using the beast races to play out a socially transgressive fantasy of being a thief or an assassin and rejecting traditional morality.<sup>229</sup> As one player pithily responded, ‘why would you want to play yourself when you can be a badass reptile person who doesn’t give a shit?’<sup>230</sup>

The racist views that many of *Skyrim*’s inhabitants hold towards the Khajiit might be utilised for a meaningful exploration of the problems of stereotyping and racial essentialism if there was not so much evidence as to their truth. Still, the game is open-ended enough that the Khajiiti player can rebel against these predispositions and subvert the expected behaviour. They are free to decide to avoid a life of crime and steer clear of the skooma trade and liberate themselves by refusing to perform their chosen culture’s stereotypes. However, it should be noted that while this potential may provide an enlightening experience for the player through their own thoughtfulness and personal roleplay, challenging racial essentialism through subversive action has no significant impact on the game environment. The racial slurs yelled by NPCs do not abate and the treatment of and prejudice surrounding minority races cannot be explicitly challenged and is not reassessed.

The non-human races in *Skyrim* do have their complexities: they tend to have well-developed lore and history, language, material culture, are often available as a character choice, and are not merely an inherently evil enemy for the hero to obliterate en masse.<sup>231</sup> However, members of these races, whether players or NPCs,

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<sup>228</sup> bell hooks, ‘Eating the Other’, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), pp. 21–40 (p. 21).

<sup>229</sup> It is important to note that it is unclear to what extent we can attribute this to these races’ narrative construction; as I have already noted, the beast races are algorithmically preset to make excellent assassins, pickpockets and stealth characters.

<sup>230</sup> Responses are to q. 4.

<sup>231</sup> Such criticisms have been made towards games and visual media in naturalistic settings but are also found in criticism of fantasy. See: Kim; André Brock, “‘When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong’”: *Resident Evil 5*, Racial Representation, and Gamers’, *Games and Culture*, 6.5 (2011), 429–52.

have no real way to challenge the problematic stereotypes and cultural appropriations of which they are composed. Indeed, the game's main conflict—the return of dragons set against the tense backdrop of rebellion against the Empire and brewing civil war—does not involve the non-white races at all. The khajiit function in the narrative as a foil for the white races; their presence adds interest and ‘enhance[s] the blank landscape of whiteness.’<sup>232</sup> Though the player, no matter which race s/he chooses, may rise to their destiny, conquer the dragon and save existence, the political and ideological struggles of *Skyrim* will be fought and won by the Nords and the Imperials, that is to say the *white* resistance movement and the *white* empire.<sup>233</sup>

## Freedom Fighters

The game is woven around two major narratives. First is the traditional heroic journey in which the player discovers that they were born with the capability to wield the ancient power of ‘the voice’ and, after developing their powers with an order of monks living at a secluded temple, defeats the dragons threatening Tamriel. The second major storyline is the previously mentioned civil war between the Imperial Legion, which rules of most of the continent of Tamriel, and Nordic rebels in *Skyrim* who demand independence for their province. The player begins with no allegiance to either side and the civil war storyline potentially entangles them in a thorny, highly politicised narrative that itself establishes a space for the player to reflect on and become actively involved in issues of colonialism, civil and ideological freedoms, nationalism, and the politics of war.<sup>234</sup>

Prior to the events of *Skyrim*, the Empire was at war with the Aldmeri Dominion, a faction ruled by the elven-supremacist Thalmor government. Eventually a peace treaty was signed by the emperor which heavily favoured the Thalmor, the dominating force in the Great War. Alongside relinquishing land and tributes to the Thalmor the treaty outlawed the worship of Talos, a deity popular in *Skyrim*, causing a great deal of resentment amongst its mostly Nordic inhabitants.

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<sup>232</sup> hooks, ‘Eating the Other’, p. 29.

<sup>233</sup> See chapter five for a further discussion on whiteness.

<sup>234</sup> For a fuller discussion on the narrative and political implications of the Civil War questline, see chapter three.

Concerned that the Empire has grown weak and given up too much of its power to the Thalmor, Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak now leads the Great Uprising. Ulfric was previously a soldier in the Imperial Army and was captured during the Great War. A dossier produced by the Thalmor that can be found and read in *Skyrim* states that his escape from prison was orchestrated by his captors, allowing him to incite rebellion and cause disruption within the empire. A long civil war that weakens multiple factions is in the interest of the Thalmor and so Ulfric is described as an ‘asset’. The dossier is unclear on whether Ulfric is aware of this fact. The vague document does not directly confirm if he is a spy or a stooge, a crucial distinction which can seriously impact the way the player reads the political situation.

The narrative is further complicated by the lack of a reliable narrator or any authoritative source. Information is not reported to the player directly and must be discovered through play. Data and opinions on the war, its factions and history can be found in books, letters and various documents scattered all over *Skyrim*. Players can speak with members and leaders of each faction, discuss the political situation with the inhabitants of each town, or simply listen in on conversations between NPCs as they explore the game world. It is important to bear in mind that not all players will come across all of the evidence available. Some players will align themselves with one faction and dismiss all contrary evidence as propaganda, some may not investigate at all. This limited and unclear mode of exposition in which players must take an active, exploratory role makes for compelling play.

Indeed, the responses of many players suggested a real engagement with the issues raised by the storyline with genuine consideration of the morality and motivations of each side.<sup>235</sup> Players discussed the storyline using the language of popular politics and often negotiated the narrative with reference to real-world history and modern terminology. For example, the Thalmor were described as ‘nazis,’ by three separate players, while the civil war itself was connected to the Roman invasion of Europe. The Stormcloak’s desire for secession and negativity towards immigration spawned accusations of racism and white supremacy. The

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<sup>235</sup> Though it must be noted that a proportion of the responses chose a faction based on their character’s persona rather than their personal judgement, and others were simply disinterested in the questline and ignored in favour of other quests and pursuing the main narrative.

word ‘racist’ occurred forty five times in the responses of the survey and for many players this was the major factor in choosing to side with the Empire:

The Stormcloaks are racist. I hate them.

Stormcloaks are racist (being black myself this alone was reason enough).

Stormcloak supporters commonly acknowledged the faults of some of its members—often referring specifically to one character rather than the group seemingly to suggest racism as an individual failing—but ultimately provided rationalisations for their choice of allegiance.

Some people say the stormcloaks are racist but the imperials work for the thalmar[sic], who are religiously intolerant - the stormcloak bigotry does not lead to npcs being taken away and tortured!

The non-linear storyline with its conflicting, unreliable information was described as ‘confusing’ and players often discussed the ethical difficulties they faced in choosing to support either faction. Indeed, eighteen percent of players actively chose to remain neutral.

Like in politics the real option and fact are usually in the middle. So staying neutral brings possible facts to light. That might otherwise be missed if taking a side.

Finally, the civil war narrative is notable for its distinct lack of a moralising tone. Neither faction is presented as particularly favourable, nor does either have the whole support of any racial or national groups. The player will often encounter Nords who reject Ulfric’s demand for secession and resent the eruption of conflict. Meanwhile, even though accusations of Nord xenophobia abound in the survey and identifiable in the game, some non-natives can still be heard exclaiming ‘Ulfric has the right of it!’ The complicated and politically problematic situation charges the player with something of an ethical dilemma. The idea of a united empire which might protect itself from another major war is appealing, as is the idealist’s dream of a harmonious world in which citizens can move freely and racism and xenophobia are eliminated. Still, the player has to negotiate the comfort of protection with the loss of personal liberties, including freedom of religion and autonomous rule. For some, there was a fear of Skyrim becoming an ‘isolated, xenophobic backwater’ and

it seemed that the Empire symbolised civilisation and progress, whilst others rejected the colonising power on the basis that such a force is fundamentally wrong. In many cases, players qualified their choices with a statement that neither option was ideal or perfectly aligned with their own sense of morality, and there appeared to the suggestion that the choice was usually the lesser of two evils. After siding with the Stormcloaks, one player noted:

I'm also hoping to leverage this alliance as a way to create a somewhat "federalised" Empire instead of a homogenised centrally-controlled Empire. However, the "propagandising tyrants" vs. "racist libertarians" nuance did give me some pause.

Whilst the basic conflicts at the centre of the civil war storyline are not new in terms of subjects for storytelling, players' frequent references to the importance of ideological and political freedoms, the length to which these can be sacrificed for the 'greater good,' and the acceptable amount of governmental control over such issues reflects a current, contentious socio-political debate. Though the game is set in a pseudo-medieval fantasy world its allusions to real-world conflict are apparent and are being critically engaged with by players on a variety of levels. The genre is operating in the typical mode of reframing the familiar in order to encourage personal exploration and fresh modes of thought. This is further exploited by the medium itself, which gives the player the opportunity to explore their ideas as actions and have those actions, and thus those ideas, challenged. These challenges can occur in numerous ways, for example in the form of the reactions of NPCs and consequences to the narrative and one's avatar. Perhaps most importantly is the ability to experience the game from different points of view and the potential of the medium to challenge a player's own subjectivity.

This becomes politically interesting in terms of the work done on the enemies depicted in modern war games and their role, alongside news and entertainment media, in the construction of ideologies of terrorism and moral and political separation of West and East. As previously mentioned, some players framed their responses in historical references, such as the Roman invasion of Britain and the Second World War, as well as mentioning pseudo-historical films

such as *Braveheart*. The Stormcloaks were twice described with the term ‘freedom fighters’:<sup>236</sup>

The Stormcloaks are horrible racists. I thought they were lovely freedom fighters at first...

The term is commonly used by both news and entertainment media synonymously with *terrorist*. Though the words have similar meanings in popular use, the former has a positive aspect, suggesting a morally justified resistance to oppression, while the latter is used pejoratively, suggesting a person or group that is unlawful, violent, inhumane, even evil. Though the player quoted above eventually rejects the Stormcloaks, they demonstrate the idea that freedom fighters are regarded as ‘lovely,’ and in the statement suggests that the Stormcloak’s racism precludes them from being freedom fighters as though the two labels are mutually exclusive. Identifying this difference is important in offering challenges to typical narratives of resistance which are often binary and provide little in the way of exploration or understanding of the enemy, and frequently serve to maintain the status quo and reinforce conservative ideals.

Schulzke rightly explains that through the connection with an avatar there is a real possibility within video games to gain a subjective understanding of the enemy, however, in his analysis of three recent military games that allow the player to play from the perspective of a terrorist he finds that attempts to fully demonstrate the perspective of terrorists are superficial, and in some cases damaging.<sup>237</sup> Indeed, in the lack of provision of a full analysis of the motivations for resistance terrorists are often ‘defined according to group characteristics, such as religion or ethnicity.’<sup>238</sup> This does happen in *Skyrim* to some extent, where players occasionally described Nords, a race, rather than the Stormcloaks, a political faction, or individuals as being racist and xenophobic, and NPCs themselves apply similar labels and groupings. However, many players demonstrated critical and thoughtful responses to the civil

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<sup>236</sup> The term ‘rebels’ was much more common, but used equally as both a pejorative and a compliment.

<sup>237</sup> Marcus Schulzke, ‘Being a Terrorist: Video Game Simulations of the Other Side of the War on Terror’, *Media, War & Conflict*, 6.3 (2013), 207–20.

<sup>238</sup> Schulzke, p. 211.

war, suggesting a purposeful exploration and engagement with both factions' actions and, more importantly, the motivations and principles behind those actions.

*Skryim*'s setting is clearly far removed from that of modern military FPS<sup>239</sup> games, but in the language of the survey responses we can see players making meanings through a variety of historical and contemporary understandings of war and resistance. This suggests that though *Skryim* is stylistically and generically disconnected from more naturalistic representations of present-day international conflicts, it can still offer a useful space to explore relevant issues that inform our understandings of those conflicts. In military FPS games, players are not usually given a choice of characters and their avatar is normally a fully formed character within the narrative that they can control, rather than one of their own making. There is the possibility that this kind of authorial—that is, game author—control over the player-character can provide a deeper insight into traditionally maligned groups, such as terrorists, as the player has no choice but to inhabit the role created for them. However, in *Skryim* the primary positioning of the player as a neutral entity allows for a more even exploration of the motivations of each side. Also, the player must choose for themselves which side to support and must take an active role in pursuing what they feel is the correct course of action, knowing that their decision will impact the narrative in some way. This use of player choice potentially creates an even stronger connection to the themes explored in this questline, as the player does not just experience it but is an active participant in authoring it.

A key difference from military FPS games is, of course, that both groups of combatants in *Skryim* are mostly white, are inspired by historical European civilisations and some ways exemplify different aspects of the mythic, white ideal.<sup>240</sup> In this way they are removed from many of the subtle racial and ethnic prejudices that can affect our reading of real-world conflicts.

It seems to me that this engagement with resistance that is stylistically, but not thematically, removed from the negative media influence of the current political conflict in the Middle East stems from two sources. The game provides the ability to play as members of the primary races involved in the civil war, allowing the player

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<sup>239</sup> First-person shooter. A genre in which the primary mode of gameplay is shooting enemies from the first-person perspective.

<sup>240</sup> See chapter five for an exploration of this concept.

to embody a member of that group through their avatar and gain the subjectivity of which Schulzke demonstrates such importance. Secondly, as previously mentioned, the depiction of the combatants is far enough removed from present-day military and political conflicts that our common, primary prejudices regarding those can fall away. Indeed, in representing different aspects of whiteness, we might argue that both groups are fundamentally more relatable to the mostly Western audience. This is of course a problematic statement within itself, not to mention that there were no direct references to terrorism or to American and European involvement in the current conflicts in the Middle East. Having said that, I cannot help but speculate that this is likely due to the pseudo-geographical and -historical framing of the story as the political themes themselves are clearly present and received.

Again, fantasy is at work reframing familiar ideas in order to challenge and destabilise common perceptions. Within the civil war narrative, both parties embody a complex variety of values and philosophies without becoming binary opposites, providing subjects that are compellingly drawn outside the more traditional lines of good and evil. The obvious issue here is that the survey respondents did not directly state a link with current social issues, and preferred to refer to historical issues whilst talking in modern, popular political language. Still, the application of players' own ideology and subjective experience demonstrates the powerful potential of video games to create space for thoughtful play that allows players to actively work through political and philosophical ideas.

## **Playing with Race**

Players' responses regarding the self-constructed roles and identities provide the most useful and fertile avenue for exploration of the aforementioned potential of games for presenting alternative subjectivities. As previously discussed, *Skyrim's* game mechanics and constructions of race and in-game racism do little to challenge traditional racial stereotypes. However, many players produced complex meanings from these representations, and some admitted to enjoying the opportunity to take on the role of an in-game racial minority and experience the narrative from the perspective of a marginalised character.

When asked with which group in *Skyrim* players most identified, the vast majority chose Nords or a Nord-dominated faction. However, a small number of players explicitly mentioned feeling particularly connected to groups that they regarded as ‘outsiders,’ as these groups reflected their feelings of societal marginalisation, exclusion or personal rejection.<sup>241</sup> One player identified mostly with the Khajiit as they felt that they too were ‘often left out, roaming around, just freelance’, while another stated that ‘they [Khajiit] are rejected by the main cities in Skyrim, and [it] reminds me of my middle school days.’ Unlike those who may have simply been ‘trying on’ the other for their exotic, unique qualities—in the style of minstrelsy—these types of responses suggested that playing as the marginalised other provided some players with a comforting and familiar starting point for self-exploration and self-expression. Indeed, players’ own life experiences seem to play a key role in in-game identification. For example, the College of Winterhold<sup>242</sup> was a popular response to the question of identification, and eight percent of players explicitly stated that this was due to a personal interest in academia and intellectualism, often alongside revealing that they are currently a student or are more interested in intellectual than physical pursuits:

I am a scholar and I enjoy learning more than fighting.

Mages rely on knowledge and wits over physical ability which most closely represents real life for me.

This resonates with an earlier study which consisted of interviews with separate groups, African American teenagers and European American teenagers, regarding the game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, a 2004 role-playing action-adventure game. The game is noted in the media and scholarship for its stereotypical representations of race and these formulaic portrayals did not go unnoticed by the players. The white players predominantly interpreted the game through the lens of mass media discourses; they keenly identified racial stereotyping and read the game

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<sup>241</sup> Six percent of respondents explicitly stated that they related to a certain group due to their outsider status.

<sup>242</sup> The College of Winterhold is a faction with which a player can become affiliated. It is a guild comprised of magic-users who study and teach the use of magic. Magic is generally viewed with distrust by the population of Skyrim.

intertextually, comparing it with and understanding it through other media in the ‘gangster’ genre.<sup>243</sup> Conversely, the black players responded to the game’s portrayals of race in terms of their own personal, cultural experiences, and ‘used the game as a framework to discuss institutional racism in society.’<sup>244</sup> These players expressed some concern about the racial representations in the game, but were ultimately positive about the game as it ‘featured hip hop music and culture and spoke to issues important to them.’<sup>245</sup> DeVane and Squire concluded that players do not passively consume and accept game imagery, but instead make meanings through their own experiences, knowledge and cultural identities.<sup>246</sup>

Likewise, those players that identified more strongly with marginalised races or factions tended to relate personal experience of social exclusion in their survey responses, and seemed to read the oppression of that group through their own negative social and cultural experiences.

Magic is, of course, a controvertial [sic] topic in Skyrim, and so mages are generally not trusted. Being a homosexual young man myself, this speaks to me in more ways than one.

Similar to the African American group in DeVane and Squire’s study, some players expressed positivity about their identification with marginalised groups. Though the *Skyrim* respondents did not go into as much detail as the *Grand Theft Auto* players, likely due to the limitations of the format, it might be the case that the opportunity to explore and engage with these issues may be a cathartic or even empowering experience for those players. One player embraced the Khajiit, noting that ‘they’re outlandish and quite frankly, weird...which I’m happy to say that I am too.’<sup>247</sup> Other

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<sup>243</sup> They felt that the racial stereotyping was reflected from earlier media in the same genre and that it was used as a game mechanic to guide the player, for instance, to demonstrate which locations were safe or dangerous or to visually communicate which person belonged to which gang. Thus the racial typing might be referred to as an aspect of ‘window dressing’ by Koster (*A Theory of Fun*, 2005), meaning the visuals, themes and environment that sit on top of the mechanics.

<sup>244</sup> Ben DeVane and Kurt D. Squire, ‘The Meaning of Race and Violence in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas’, *Games and Culture*, 3.3–4 (2008), 264–85 (p. 277).

<sup>245</sup> DeVane and Squire, p. 277.

<sup>246</sup> See Iser.

<sup>247</sup> Responses are to q. 14.

players mentioned a preference for choosing characters that are regarded as underdogs or “outsiders” orcs, khajiit, redguard, argonian because they are the least respected and have to earn approval.’<sup>248</sup> Clearly these issues resonate on a variety of levels with the players. Almost all respondents, whether or not they played a minority character or within a marginalised group, chose to explicitly mention the portrayals of racism and inequality within *Skyrim*’s world. This, alongside the empathetic responses such as those in the preceding pages, is a positive indicator that most players enjoyed the opportunity to explore and engage with complex issues of social inequality.

Of course, not all players choosing othered races felt personally connected to those races through their own experiences. It was not uncommon to find players selecting races such as the Khajiit simply through a desire to experience something different and exotic, much like a tourist. Lisa Nakamura has coined the phrase ‘identity tourism’ to describe the practice of appropriating and performing a racial identity other than one’s own in online social spaces. Nakamura notes that this touristic fantasy of ‘passing’ can be traced back to colonial fiction, citing Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* amongst others.<sup>249</sup> In reading Kipling’s *Kim*, Edward Said remarked that the Orient was a place of possibility and adventure:

For what one cannot accomplish in one’s own Western environment— where to try to live out the grand dream of a successful quest is only to keep coming up against one’s own mediocrity and the world’s corruption and degradation— one can do abroad. Isn’t it possible in India to do everything? Be anything? Go anywhere with impunity?<sup>250</sup>

Identity tourism is much the same concept as Oriental tourism. Video games and online culture provide a chance to experience in the exotic, unknown other without stigma or social or economic consequences.<sup>251</sup> As well as setting the

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<sup>248</sup> Responses are to q. 14.

<sup>249</sup> Lisa Nakamura, ‘Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet’, *Works and Days*, 13 (1995), 181–93. <<http://www.humanities.uci.edu/mposter/syllabi/readings/nakamura.html>> [accessed 13 November 2012].

<sup>250</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 192.

<sup>251</sup> Nakamura, ‘Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet’; David Leonard, “‘Live in Your World, Play in Ours’: Race, Video Games, and

precedent for identity tourism, this romantic vision of the East as a liberating, alternate space is very close to the escapist desire that is at the heart of fantasy role-playing. This sense of embodying the other seems to be attractively subversive to some players; those that mentioned their fascination with what they regarded as the highly individual and unique Khajiiti lore seemed to choose the race in order to enjoy the sensation of inhabiting the unknown other and exploring an exoticised race from within.<sup>252</sup> This type of identity play—which is not always racial and can take any form—opens great possibilities for both self-exploration and external societal understanding, and also for personal development through fantasy. For example, Shannon McRae has explored the complexity of sex and gender play in online communities and has noted that, while not fully destabilising gender as a social construct, the fluidity and possibilities of identity tourism certainly problematise and displace traditional gender categorisations.<sup>253</sup> Schulzke also notes the huge potential power of destabilising preconceived notions through experiencing the other via play. Through Žižek, he demonstrates that subjectivising the other, specifically enemies, can present a serious challenge to the traditionally limited narrative of the enemy as the denial of subjective experience is necessary to the construction of an adversary.<sup>254</sup> I would extend this point to suggest that this denial is also fundamental in constructing the other. Games in particular can allow direct access to the other's subjective experiences as they actively 'simulate living as someone else.'<sup>255</sup>

The potential of identity tourism within the medium of gaming is fascinating. Discussing this practice in regards to gender, however, Lisa Nakamura warns that experimentation with identity can ultimately 'enforce preconceived ideas of gender', in that when people enact their experimental identity they often conform to what is socially expected of the role they are playing, generally in order to be recognised by

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Consuming the Other', *SIMILE: Studies In Media & Information Literacy Education*, 3.4 (2003), 1–9 (p. 5).

<sup>252</sup> Nakamura, 'Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet'.

<sup>253</sup> Shannon McRae, 'Coming Apart at the Seams: Sex, Text and the Virtual Body', in *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*, ed. by Lynn Cherny and Elizabeth Reba Weise (Seattle: Seal Press, 1996).

<sup>254</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), p. 46.

<sup>255</sup> Schulzke, p. 212.

others as that particular identity.<sup>256</sup> Thus, in order to ‘pass’ as a female, a male user will act in a manner that would be considered typically feminine so as to be readily accepted as his chosen gender identity in that instance. Nakamura is referring specifically to identity tourism online in a multi-user environment where users are working to ensure their performance is received correctly, but her concerns can be justifiably applied to the single-user environment of *Skyrim* where players appear to play out certain identity stereotypes. Our popular understanding is of course linked to the depiction of such characters, the Khajiiti link to stealth and thievery is a game mechanic as well as a typical trope for exotic Easterners, however the link is cyclical and self-reinforcing. In a later work, Nakamura goes further to argue that cyberspace’s promise of freedom from social constraints and signifiers of otherness, from bodies with stigmas of race, age, ability, and gender, is inevitably broken by the way that users and online imagery ‘reinforce a "postbody" ideology that reproduces the assumptions of the old one.’<sup>257</sup>

These apparently conflicting notions of a space for free and radical re-imaginings of the self and the other alongside behaviours and images that reinforce social hegemony leave the identity tourist in a fluid and constantly fluctuating position. While the theory of identity tourism is usually applied to the study of the internet and cyberspace, virtual spaces in which people can interact with other users, it still serves as a useful concept with which to investigate the racial play of users in an offline, single-player context. Indeed, the concept can be applied to not only the virtual but the physical realm. Eric Lott has identified blackface minstrelsy as a site of racial instability and deduces it to be ‘a form in which transgression and containment coexisted, in which improbably threatening and startlingly sympathetic racial meanings were simultaneously produced and dissolved.’<sup>258</sup> Lott’s work has been utilised in discussions on the other in video games with the suggestion that playing as a black video game character in most games constitutes nothing more than ‘a high-tech form of blackface’ and, rather than providing space for insight,

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<sup>256</sup> Nakamura, ‘Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet’.

<sup>257</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 4–5.

<sup>258</sup> Eric J. Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, Race and American Culture* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 234.

reaffirms white privilege.<sup>259</sup> For most players, the experience of the other is a brief foray into the exotic, a costume that can be removed at any time. Identity play can never fully subsume the real experience of the other into the identity of the self.

Nakamura again quotes to Said illustrate this point:

‘no one, least of all actual whites and non-whites in the colonies, ever forgets that "going native" or playing the Great Game are facts based on rock-like foundations, those of European power. Was there ever a native fooled by the blue or green-eyed Kims and Lawrences who passed among the inferior races as agent adventurers? I doubt it...’<sup>260</sup>

*Skyrim*’s lack of challenges to fantasy’s tropes of race seem to justify the concerns that identity tourism can actually maintain racial stereotyping. Where players might offer an individual challenge to the stereotypes associated with their character’s race and object to the social inequality found within the game world, they cannot reach an explicit resolution for its marginalised characters.<sup>261</sup> Arguably there is an implicit resolution in that the all player-characters regardless of race can achieve the same things, including completing the major storylines and becoming the hero of *Skyrim*, earning reputation with various factions, earning gold and buying property, and joining any of the guilds. However, even after all of this the fate of the Khajiiti traders and the Argonians cannot be changed. Indeed, elements of the game, such as the prejudiced dialogue of some NPCs, remains unchanged even after the player saves *Skyrim*. While Khajiit NPCs are banished beyond city walls, a Khajiit player can enter cities freely even though they should be prohibited; they are never stopped, questioned, nor cast out. NPCs do not withhold quests or information from players against whom they supposedly hold deep racial prejudices. Some game

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<sup>259</sup> D. J. Leonard, ‘Not a Hater, Just Keepin’ It Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies’, *Games and Culture*, 1.1 (2006), 83–88 (p. 86); David Leonard, ‘High Tech Blackface—Race, Sports Video Games and Becoming the Other’, *Intelligent Agent*, 4 (2004) <<http://www.intelligentagent.com>> [accessed 10 March 2014].

<sup>260</sup> Edward Said, ‘Introduction’, in *Kim*, by Rudyard Kipling (New: Penguin, 1987), p. 44 quoted in; Nakamura, ‘Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet’.

<sup>261</sup> A limitation of my survey is that I am unable to conduct follow-up questions in order to ascertain to what extent players internally roleplay their characters and how far they feel that the social issues they raised are resolved at the end of the game. As DeVane and Squire rightly state, it is necessary to watch players in naturalistic settings to fully understand the meanings they make.

critics, outside of my own survey, have noted that these dialogues can be confusing, particularly when an NPC discusses race issues in a friendly manner with the player character who happens to be the race being disparaged. The lack of consequence is jarring for some and highly disruptive to the experience of immersion:

The game went to great lengths to tell me how oppressed Argonians were in Windhelm, but inside the city itself none of it was apparent outside of one scripted sequence. And to top it all off, an NPC actually spoke to me *as if I was a Nord*.<sup>262</sup>

Not only is it irritating for players who are deeply engaging with these issues, this lack of depth effectively mutes the discussion that could spring from a meaningful exploration of and reflection upon racism and prejudice. Furthermore, a player might complete the game on a Khajiit character in order to feel that they have succeeded as the underdog and proven themselves worthy, however, social inequality remains unaddressed. Indeed, the very fact that all of the same opportunities are afforded to players of all races renders the notion of the Khajiit, or other minority races, as disadvantaged and oppressed entirely superficial. There are no real limitations placed upon the other player-character and thus the experience of otherness is significantly limited. This lack of real consequence, both in the game's narrative and to the player's character, actually functions to maintain highly concerning racial stereotypes and affirms the commonly believed idea that social mobility is open to all. Again taking the Khajiit an example, most of the Khajiiti characters affirm the supposedly racist views of the Nords; they are thieves and drug addicts or peddlers. The Khajiiti player however, can choose to rise above these base stereotypes and, as they face no social or legal resistance whatsoever, become Tamriel's hero. This reinforces the idea that social problems, particularly concerning race, are not due to rigid and oppressive societal structures but are simply the failings of individuals.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Richard Naik, 'Breaking the Immersion--Skyrim's Racism Lacks Authenticity', *Game Critics*, 2 December 2011 <<http://www.gamecritics.com/richard-naik/breaking-the-immersion-skyrims-racism-lacks-authenticity>> [accessed 11 June 2012].

<sup>263</sup> Leonard makes a similar suggestion in noting the 'obfuscation of the daily struggles and horrors endured in post-industrial America' in representations of ghetto communities in sports games. David Leonard, 'High Tech Blackface--Race, Sports Video Games and Becoming the Other'.

Ultimately, the fantasy genre is, on the surface, a mode in which familiar structures and ideas can be removed far enough from their origins to seem unfamiliar in order that they might be destabilised. We find that players are aware of and interested in identity play and use their own experience to respond to and engage with politics and racial representation on a critical level. However, the potential for identity play in video games is not fully realised. The construction of *Skyrim*'s fantasy races rely heavily on traditional racial stereotypes which are hard coded into the game as well as being present in the visual renderings and narratives of those characters. Players' attempts to alter the game world, whether through making their marginalised character a hero or taking a side in the civil war, ultimately has no significant outcome. Thus, the creativity of play is limited by the program's capacity to respond to their actions and reflect consequences. We may read this is a limitation of the medium; however, the fantasy genre has a strong tradition of maintaining conservative ideals regarding racial and ethnic identity, to which *Skyrim* offers little challenge.

### Defining Whiteness

Research on race in games has typically focused on exploring the reproduction and reception of problematic stereotypes. It has tended to focus on the construction of non-white characters and racial others as set against an unspecified (white) norm. Richard Dyer identifies the problems of using the term ‘non-white’ to refer to people, or images of people, who are not white. Of particular concern is ‘its negativity, as if people who are not white only have identity by virtue of what they are not.’<sup>264</sup> Dyer makes the case, however, that such a term is helpful when trying to draw attention to the specificity of whiteness without resorting to terms which perpetuate racial dichotomy or the sense that whiteness is unmarked, thus dismissing ‘black’ and ‘coloured’ respectively. In his 2008 article on the disappearance of race (i.e., non-white racial representation) in games, Higgin settles on ‘blackness.’<sup>265</sup> Such terminology has a reductionary effect through combining all of non-white identity and representation into the term ‘black,’ itself a well-used identity label in popular and academic discourse that implies specificity. This same problem occurs with the term ‘person of colour,’ the popular term in online activism and some gaming communities, often abbreviated to POC. These terms carry their own values, and to use them here would leave me conflating complex identities without directly marking out whiteness. Thus I follow in Dyer’s example—and carry his frustration—with the term ‘non-white.’

Defining whiteness is troublesome. Although the thesis has thus far explored issues around the construction of white masculinity, before directly addressing the topic of ‘whiteness’ it first felt necessary to explore the representation of the non-white other.<sup>266</sup> Exploring identities that are typically considered ‘raced’ categories, i.e. non-white identities, proves to be a much simpler task than defining the racial boundaries of whiteness. This is not because white identity is inherently more

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<sup>264</sup> Dyer, *White*, p. 11.

<sup>265</sup> Tanner Higgin, ‘Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games’, *Games and Culture*, 4.1 (2008), 3–26.

<sup>266</sup> X-REF race ch?

complex, but because by its privileged position it escapes racial categorisation. Whiteness is unraced, ordinary, default, merely human. In its rendering as an identity that is outside of race, whiteness is able to resist definition and maintain its non-specificity and normative status.

Dyer's work attempts to see 'white qua white' without focusing on the distinctions between white and the non-white other. He notes that the work of others, particularly Morrison and Said, has suggested that 'white discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject', existing to assist in the construction and exploration of the white self.<sup>267</sup> Whilst recognising this as an issue of white studies, several of *White*'s examples do continue to rest on comparisons with non-white characters.<sup>268</sup> My work has also faced the challenge of exploring whiteness while resisting the temptation of seeing whiteness always as relative to the other; in many ways it feels simple, and can appear to read more clearly, to articulate whiteness against non-whiteness. In the first part of the discussion, I demonstrate how whiteness as the default standard for beauty is maintained in the racial limitations encountered in character creation, and how is most clearly and obviously understood when trying to create non-white characters. Whilst beginning with a discussion of how the dominance of whiteness is maintained through its limiting impact on diversity and marginalising of non-whiteness, this chapter will also endeavour to explore the way that *Skyrim* elucidates the key values of whiteness as set out by medievalist tropes. It will also demonstrate how the game sets up a white, male Nord as the default avatar, and also implies that its audience will largely fit into this race and gender composition.

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<sup>267</sup> Dyer, *White*, p. 11.

<sup>268</sup> Chapter 3 is a notable exception in which the variations in whiteness between white, heterosexual partners in film is explored.

## White Bodies

### Character Creation

The way that fantasy normalises whiteness can be seen in games' propensity to conform to a typical white appearance in its construction of its characters.<sup>269</sup> In terms of the visual appearance of human characters, there is a tendency towards lighter skin tones and a set of hair styles that limit racial diversity, and implicitly uphold white norms of beauty. This is especially evident in the choices available to the player when creating their character, particularly with regards to the human races as this problematically reinforces a connection between markers of whiteness and humanity.<sup>270</sup>

There are four human races to choose from in *Skyrim*: Breton, Imperial, Nord, and Redguard. When creating a character, the player has a variety of options to customise their avatar's appearance. These typically take the form of preset assets with sliders to fine-tune the appearance of each characteristic. For example, the player can choose from nineteen pre-defined nose shapes. After selecting the shape, the height and width of the nose can be adjusted using a slider in order to give it a more unique appearance. This same process is applied to all of the major facial features including eyes, lips, and brow, with additional sliders to adjust the width of the jaw and height of the cheekbones. Shading can be added to different parts of the face from a list of predefined colours to create a more textured and varied skin tone, more closely aligning to a human complexion which is rarely a single, even shade. There is also a complexion slider which allows for the addition of wrinkles and freckles.<sup>271</sup> The character creator also allows the addition of scars, make up and warpaint to add further visual interest and distinguishing details to the character. More general options with less customisation are available for skin colour, hair style, and weight. Each race has

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<sup>269</sup> See Dietrich, 'Avatars of Whiteness'; David Leonard, "'Live in Your World, Play in Ours": Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other', *Studies In Media & Information Literacy Education*, 3.4 (2003), 1–9; Higgin.

<sup>270</sup> Consider, for example, the ubiquity of the *Ascent of Man* image that visualises human evolution from an ape to a white man, suggesting that whiteness is the pinnacle of humanity; to be white is to be human.

<sup>271</sup> Strangely, the few options for freckles seem to always be accompanied by the reddening or localised darkness associated with sunburn and skin damage. In framing freckles as a blemish or sign of damage, the creation kit maintains the typical beauty ideal of clear skin, free of any kind of naturally-occurring features that would mark it as spoilt.

a variety of skin colours ranging from lighter to darker tones that can be chosen via use of a slider. Weight is also chosen along a sliding scale, ranging from very slight to somewhat broad.<sup>272</sup> There are twenty-five to thirty hairstyles, the availability of which is dependent on the chosen race and gender. Each style can be recoloured with a handful of colours considered to be in the natural range of human hair, ranging from blonde through red and brown, darkening to almost black. Two or three shades of grey are also available.

With such a wealth of tools available in the character creation kit, it is odd to find that there are limitations on the way that certain elements, such as skin colour and hair style, can be applied, especially as these elements are some of the most prominent visual markers of race. Each of the human races has a choice of ten skin tones. Bretons, Nords and Imperials share the same colour palette, while Redguards have only darker skin tone options available. The darkest skin colour for each of the other three races is remarkably lighter than the darkest skin colour for Redguards, and these races also have a much paler colour available at the lightest end of their scales. Indeed, the lightest colour available for Redguards, a medium brown, corresponds to the darkest tone of the other three races. As shown, the Nord's darkest shade is perhaps even a touch lighter than the Redguard.

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<sup>272</sup> Of note, whilst the lowest weight option provides a very thin character, the other end of the scale does not accurately represent the spectrum of human bodies. Increasing the weight option widens the character's frame, making them appear stockier and more heavy-set. Whilst thin, lean, broad and muscular body types are available, it is not possible to make heavy or fat characters in *Skyrim*. There is an unjustified exclusion of certain bodies, suggesting that only particular types of bodies are suitable for heroes.



**Redguard Female**  
**Lightest skin tone**  
My screenshot from  
*Skyrim*



**Nord Female**  
**Darkest skin tone**  
My screenshot from  
*Skyrim*

Whilst the inclusion of a distinctly black (or brown) race—as opposed to a white race with a tanned-skin option as the only alternative—is important in creating a diverse and rich environment, the fact is that the range of non-whiteness is covered primarily by this single group. This is particularly problematic when that group is juxtaposed against three other human races who are predominantly white, suggesting a multiplicity amongst varieties and cultures of whiteness and simultaneously containing and restricting non-white culture to a single group.

Although the player's avatar is customisable, each race and gender comes with ten preset characters, avatars which have been premade and packaged with the game. The player can choose a preset and ignore the other options entirely, or they can use the preset as a starting point from which to add further customisation. The way that skin tone has been applied to each of these presets is telling, especially with regards to how they differ between genders (see table 1) which shows the number of preset characters using each skin tone).

Race	Gender	Skin Tone (Lightest - Darkest)									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Breton	M	4	4	2							
Breton	F	5	5								
Imperial	M		1	3	4	1	1				
Imperial	F	1	1	5				2			
Nord	M	3	4	3							
Nord	F	9		1							
Redguard	M	3				2	1	1	1		2
Redguard	F				2	2	1		1	1	3

**Table 1 - Skin Tone by Race and Gender**

The full range of the palette is not utilised for most of the characters, with the majority of the presets using only the lightest 30% of the tones available (i.e. skin tones 1-3). This is especially true for the Bretons and Nords. These characters are amongst the palest of the defaults available, with most falling into the top two lightest colours. Along with other features, such as their naming conventions, their physical whiteness is further evidence that these races are generally characterised as being representative of North-Western European and Scandinavian cultures respectively.<sup>273</sup> The Imperials tend to be placed slightly more towards the middle of the scale, although still primarily fall into the lighter half of the palette. This is also in keeping with their in-game characterisation as an Ancient Roman civilisation. In being white with a slightly more tanned appearance, they convey a white Mediterranean aesthetic. There are two female Imperial presets with a skin colour of 7, lying outside of the main cluster in the 1-3 range, which perhaps hint at the multicultural, cosmopolitanism usually associated with the race.

<sup>273</sup> See chapter four for a fuller discussion of the cultural and historical characterisation of these races.

The Redguard males also share an irregular grouping, with three characters set at the palest skin tone outside of the main cluster. Generally they are more evenly spread across the scale than the other races, utilising 60% of the available skin tones. The Redguard preset characters are unique in their use of the darkest tones in the available palette, being the only characters to use tones 8-10. Bearing in mind that these tones are much darker than the darkest colours available for the other races, it seems clear that the Redguard characters are intended as a distinct, racial other to the Nords, Bretons and Imperials. This correlates with Dietrich's findings regarding the previous two games in the *Elder Scrolls* series, in which their visual construction reinforced 'the in-game characterization of Redguards as the 'black' characters of the *Elder Scrolls* world.'<sup>274</sup> Although Redguard characters are as distinctive in their representation and the construction of their culture as the Nords and Bretons, who fall sharply at the whitest end of the scale, it is interesting that the Redguard presets' skin tones are much more wide ranging, perhaps suggesting that there is a perceived lack of interest or desire to play as a particularly dark-skinned black character. Of the four human races, the potential for black characters is limited to Redguards and, as we will see later, this variability is in many ways confined to the visual design and does not affect the player-character's in-game experience of race.

The tendency towards whiteness is even more striking in the hair choices available for female characters, and the way that skin tones are applied. The darkest skin tones available for females is slightly lighter than the darkest skin tone available for males of the same race. Female skin tones also appear smoother and shinier than the males', perhaps because of the default dirt or hair that tends to be present on male bodies but absent from females'. Consequently, the female characters appear lighter and softer than their male counterparts demonstrating adherence to popular Western beauty standards, which is to say that they conform to the ideal of appearing lighter, whiter. For each of the three explicitly white-aligned races, the female presets (table 1) are constructed with much paler skin tones than their male counterparts of the same race. This is most conspicuous with the Nord female presets of which nine of the ten use the lightest skin tone, while the male Nord presets are more evenly spread between skin tones 1-3. That these ideals should be more applicable to female characters is

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<sup>274</sup> Dietrich, 'Avatars of Whiteness', p. 93. See also my further discussion of the racial characterisation of Redguards in *Skyrim* in chapter four.

telling, particularly as female characters in video games are typically highly sexualised, portrayed as beautiful and desirable through now-standard visual stereotypes.

The hairstyles available are also problematic in both the types of hair available and the way that they are limited to particular races and genders especially as hair can be, like skin, a key ethnic and racial signifier.<sup>275</sup> The character creator provides twenty-six hairstyles from which to choose for female characters of all four human races. Male Bretons, Nords and Imperials can choose from twenty-nine styles, while male Redguards have by far the largest choice with thirty-five different hairstyles. For the female characters and the male non-Redguards, all of the styles but one have a base texture that is either straight or wavy, and is generally shiny.<sup>276</sup> There are no hairstyles based on tight—or even loose—curly textures. This is particularly problematic in that there is almost no representation for tightly curled or ‘African’ hair, nor are there styles that can be worn by real-world people with afro-textured hair, such as cornrows, braids, ‘bantu knots’, or even simply a natural, unstyled hair option with this texture.



**Nord Female Dreadlock Style**

My screenshot from *Skyrim*

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<sup>275</sup> Kobena Mercer, ‘Black Hair/Style Politics’, in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. by Russell Ferguson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 247–64.

<sup>276</sup> See p. 133 for examples of Nord hairstyles. Image from ‘Character Creation: Skyrim’, *Elder Scrolls Wikia* < [http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Character\\_Creation\\_\(Skyrim\)](http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Character_Creation_(Skyrim)) > [accessed 12 May 2016]

The single exception to this—for female humans—is a dreadlock style, with short dreadlocks running along the top and the back of the head as a ‘mohawk’ with the sides shaved. When choosing a hairstyle, the styles associated with white, Western beauty are foremost represented—straight or wavy, typically shiny—with non-white styles and textures included as an afterthought, if it all.

Writing of beauty norms in the United States, Byrd and Tharps point out that ‘since the beauty standards in this country are set according to a White aesthetic—from Miss America to the Barbie doll—Black women are left with precious few places to find an image of beauty that showcases unstraightened tresses and natural styles.’<sup>277</sup> This is a long-discussed issue and the politicisation of ‘black hair’ and its links to ethnicity, racism and an authentic black self remains problematic.



### **Nord Male and Female Hairstyles**

Screenshots from *Skyrim*, via Elder Scrolls Wikia

Investigating the way that these assets are labelled in the Creation Kit further reveals the way that these styles were created with white characters in mind.<sup>278</sup> Of the twenty-six hairstyles usable by female humans, twenty-one are labelled with the

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<sup>277</sup> Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, rev. edn (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2014), p. 154.

<sup>278</sup> The Creation Kit is a program released by Bethesda that is used to view and edit *Skyrim*’s data files. It’s main purpose is to enable users to modify the game and make their own plugins. As it allows access to all of the game’s data, it can be used to mine information and statistics.

prefix ‘HairFemaleNord.’ Four of the styles are prefixed with the label HairFemaleRedguard, two of which are closely-shaved styles. Of the remaining styles, one is a straight bob-length cut, whilst the other is wavy hair in a bun held with decorative hair sticks. It is curious that shaved heads are labelled as Redguard-particular styles rather than as one of the many Nord-labelled styles.<sup>279</sup> Hair is typically regarded as a key marker of femininity, with longer hair being considered especially feminine and thus particularly beautiful and desirable.<sup>280</sup> Wearing the hair in very short or shaved styles can be a marker of resistance against normative racial and gender ideals.

The connection between hair and social power, and the politicisation of style, is particularly evident in the pressure on black women to conform to the dominant, white, standard of feminine expression. Wearing deadlocks, braids and natural afros had, in the twentieth century, been explicitly linked to the reclamation of agency within a black identity and to challenge the dominant norms of femininity. Race scholars tend to agree that wearing certain styles of hair is less associated with radical politics as it might have been fifty years ago, but that black hair has not truly escaped the white gaze and is not read apolitically.<sup>281</sup> Indeed, through a series of interviews Weitz found that in a cultural climate that defines black women as less attractive and feminine, ‘African American women... are far less likely to adopt any strategy that might downplay their femininity,’ selecting hairstyles that they feel convey professionalism and conform to mainstream norms.<sup>282</sup> Typically, this means adhering to straightened or relaxed hairdos, and avoiding those styles associated with radical politics or that might be considered ‘bad hair,’ that is, not long and straight.<sup>283</sup> Those who choose other options seem to be aware of the subversive nature of their style choices. In a variety of explicit and implicit ways the rejection of mainstream hairdos, the markers of dominant white femininity, ‘challenges the ideology that underlies

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<sup>279</sup> It should be noted that the female styles are not racially limited, meaning they can be chosen by female humans of any race, and these labels are only visible when exploring the Creation Kit.

<sup>280</sup> Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women’s Consciousness* (London: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 88–97.

<sup>281</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Banks, pp. 10–18.

<sup>282</sup> Rose Weitz, ‘Women and Their Hair: Seeing Power through Resistance and Accommodation’, *Gender & Society*, 15.5 (2001), 667–86 (p. 678).

<sup>283</sup> For a discussion of ‘good’ and ‘bad hair’, see Banks, pp. 28–31.

subordination.<sup>284</sup> Similarly, Banks explains that hair ‘shapes black women’s consciousness about a host of issues’, informing and performing their individual and group identities.<sup>285</sup> With hair being a prominent marker of both race and femininity, the ability to choose from non-white styles without restriction is of great importance for the expression and exploration of identity in fantasy roleplay.

In addition to this point, it is worth noting that male Redguards are provided with a rather different style set. The six extra styles that can be chosen for characters of this race and gender composition are styles that can be worn with tightly-curved, afro-textured hair, and that are more commonly worn in the real world by people with this hair type. These styles include a full head of dreadlocks, a longer and shorter natural afro, a full head of cornrows, and a number cornrows worn in the middle of the head with the rest of the hair shaved.



### Redguard Male Special Hairstyles

My screenshots from *Skyrim*

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<sup>284</sup> Weitz, p. 680.

<sup>285</sup> Banks, pp. 155–56.

They can also wear the mohawk-style dreadlocks that are available to female humans, but amongst male humans this style is restricted to Redguards. The inclusion of more distinctive ethnic styling for male characters is significant in that it helpfully opens up the possibility to map real-world identities into the fantasy Middle Ages. The problem, however, is that it more clearly throws into relief the politicisation of hair with regards to femininity and race, privileging whiteness whilst simultaneously marginalising femininity. Within popular culture, ‘black hair’ is marketed as less beautiful and less feminine, and is more explicitly attached to blackness than longer, straighter hair coiffed in Eurocentric styles. Thus, ‘white hair’ is flexible, more broadly applicable to femininity and beauty than ‘black hair’, which is politically tied to racial and ethnic resistance. *Skyrim*’s character creator upholds this problematic social construct in its implicit assumption that a female character should be created in a way that fits the dominant discourse of femininity. It ostensibly offers a variety of choices and creative freedom, but does so by presenting Eurocentric choices, marking out whiteness as being adaptable and as having universal qualities of beauty that are not tied to a race or ethnicity.

Writing of changing hairstyles in black hair culture, Paul Dash notes that ‘young people are today borrowing and appropriating many of the styling characteristics intrinsic to the coiffure of other groups,’ across traditional racial and ethnic lines.<sup>286</sup> This cultural sharing of fashion and self-expression is not represented in *Skyrim*’s fantasy world, where female characters can only choose hair from a set that is almost entirely limited to styles that avoid markers of blackness. By not catering for such styles, the possibilities for resistance against a white, normative appearance are contained. Self-definition is confined within the boundaries of mainstream beauty ideals, and those ideas remain privileged.

With somewhat less optimism than Dash, Thompson’s recent study concluded that ‘natural Black hair remains misunderstood, villainized, and eroticized in virtually every facet of society’ and, acknowledging the issues faced by all women in being socialised to conform to unrealistic beauty standards, black women in particular are ‘asked not just to strive to attain mainstream standards of beauty, but to have such

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<sup>286</sup> Paul Dash, ‘Black Hair Culture, Politics and Change’, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 10.1 (2006), 27–37 (pp. 32–33).

standards completely override our natural being.<sup>287</sup> This is not to suggest that there is a correct or ideal way to express black ethnicity through hair; indeed over two decades ago Mercer noted the value of ‘diversity of contemporary black hairstyles... because this variousness testifies to an inventive, improvisational aesthetic.’<sup>288</sup> Writing before Mercer, however, hooks makes clear that personal preference ‘cannot negate the reality that our collective obsession with straightening black hair reflects the psychology of oppression and the impact of racist colonization.’<sup>289</sup> Indeed, this is more complex than simply lacking some styles that might satisfy personal preference. In excluding certain styles for female characters, *Skyrim*’s character creator denies them existence. By extension, those people that would closely identify with ‘black hair’ are simultaneously excluded from representation. Instead, the game defaults to, and reifies, white standards of feminine beauty. In doing so, it also imagines that its default player is white.

Without denying the diversity of real-world natural and coiffed hair amongst black women, the limited styles and textures available from *Skyrim*’s twenty-six female hairstyles implies, or at least privileges, a white player. This lack of choice, denying the existence of such hair textures and styles, implicitly denies the importance of natural black hair to identity and conveys the inevitability of conforming to the dominant, white standard of beauty. As hooks explains: ‘together racism and sexism daily reinforce to all black females via the media, advertizing, etc. that we will not be considered beautiful or desirable if we do not change ourselves, especially our hair.’<sup>290</sup> The lack of stylistic choices available in *Skyrim* for avatar creation reinforces this notion. Neglecting representation of diverse identities in avatar creation is just another way in which non-white identities are marginalised through the media.

This occurrence in role-playing games has additional significance because, as has been previously discussed, the player-character in role-playing games is often created to reflect the self. Without the ability to create a recognisable self—through

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<sup>287</sup> Cheryl Thompson, ‘Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being’, *Women’s Studies*, 38.8 (2009), 831–56 (pp. 855, 854).

<sup>288</sup> Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 128.

<sup>289</sup> bell hooks, ‘Straightening Our Hair’, in *Tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories*, ed. by Pamela Johnson and Juliette Harris (Simon and Schuster, 2001), pp. 111–15 (p. 115).

<sup>290</sup> hooks, ‘Straightening Our Hair’, p. 115.

lack of consideration in design rather than mechanical or graphical limitations—non-white players can be left with the immersion-breaking recognition that they are not the intended player. The medieval fantasy game deliberately places the player in the grand role of the hero but, in placing racial limitations on how this role can be represented, the genre influences the perception of the hero as an archetype. By systematically excluding other kinds of bodies, the game upholds the idea that heroes—central, aspirational characters with power and agency—are white.

## White Readers

To utilise Wolfgang Iser's concept of the implied reader, the assets available for character creation cater to, and therefore imply, a white player by privileging the markers associated with whiteness and limiting any alternatives.<sup>291</sup> Toni Morrison confronted this idea with clarity in her influential work *Playing in the Dark*. She describes becoming aware, through classic literary tropes and language, that as a black woman she is not the implied reader of the literary texts she analyses: 'certainly no American text of the sort I am discussing was ever written *for* black people.'<sup>292</sup> Morrison draws attention to the way that whiteness within literature goes un-interrogated, that its depiction implies a human universality innate to the unraced white character. She also notes the reliance of the American hero upon a subservient other; the values, roles and worth of the white hero is typically explored through the vilification, subservience or fetishisation of the non-white other. In fantasy role-playing games where the focus is entirely upon the decisions and actions of the player, the exploration of the values of heroism, and of the self, is paramount. Morrison's characterisation of early American Romance literature as being filled with the literary language of whiteness and built on the 'power of darkness' applies rather helpfully to the fantasy romance genre: the visual and mechanical language of games is similarly built, privileging whiteness and exploring anxiety, fear and otherness through the non-white.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Iser.

<sup>292</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1993), p. 16.

<sup>293</sup> Morrison, pp. 35–39.

*Skyrim*'s engagement with racism primarily surrounds the beast- and elf-races, with the former fulfilling the role of the marginalised other and the latter performing as racial supremacists. Certainly the social values of the player-hero have the potential to be explored through their reactions to the political and social treatment of marginalised groups, although, as has already been discussed, there are severe limitations on the player's power to effect any kind of social change in the game world.<sup>294</sup> The racial experience of the player, however, sits within the boundaries of this seemingly-universal, un-interrogated whiteness. The restrictions in character creation not only limit the potential for creativity and immersive experiences, but also prevent non-white players from constructing avatars that more closely represent themselves. The human-raced player-hero in *Skyrim* must, in most cases, be drawn within the boundaries of normative whiteness, implicitly excluding non-white players by constructing a world which implies a white reader.

As established, when choosing a human character the markers of humanity, and especially of beauty, favour whiteness. Furthermore, even when choosing a non-human character the player cannot fully embody or experience the racial implications of their choice. As more fully explored in chapter four, the stigma and oppressive treatment of certain races does not apply to the player when their character is one of those races. To return to a primary example, Khajiiti players are not excluded from cities and denied trade and hospitality in the same manner as their NPC kin. These players, however, maintain all of the perks and advantages provided by selecting that race. In the case of the Khajiit, notoriously stereotyped by NPCs as sly thieves, the perks are bonuses to Sneak, Lockpicking, and Pickpocketing. They are a popular choice for stealth builds, and a player can roleplay this type of character and enjoy all of the benefits while suffering none of the social and political consequences of inhabiting that particular racially marked and oppressed body.<sup>295</sup>

Considering it from this angle, the potential for enjoyment in inhabiting the exotic other is somewhat appropriative. Finding pleasure in racial difference and exploiting the benefits without carrying, or even acknowledging, the burden of

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<sup>294</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>295</sup> For common builds for Khajiit characters, see Wikia Contributors, 'Khajiit (Skyrim)', *The Elder Scrolls Wiki* <[http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Khajiit\\_\(Skyrim\)](http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Khajiit_(Skyrim))> [accessed 15 June 2014].

marginalisation might be thought of in relation to real-world cultural appropriation and oppression by privileged groups. In encountering no real consequences to the narrative or gameplay, the player cannot truly experience the effects of race.<sup>296</sup> Thus, even in choosing to play as a non-white character, the player enjoys the privileges of whiteness. The player-hero embodies the kind of universality and multiplicity associated with whiteness and is forced to play from the perspective of a racial superior, participating in the dominant racial discourse of whiteness no matter what race is chosen. In this way the game is more direct in its imagining of a white implied reader.

The universalising whiteness of *Skyrim*'s player-character mechanics add support to Higgin's characterisation of gamespace as the realm of whiteness in MMORPGs, a space in which 'White dominance... has been recast as a racially progressive movement that ejects race in favour of a default, universal whiteness.'<sup>297</sup> *Skyrim* does not explicitly subscribe to this idea of a non- or post-racial society, as can be seen in its attempts to create a multicultural world and to engage with explicit instances of racism and racially-motivated conflict. Its execution of racialisation and race-based mechanics, however, serves to impose a white experience by default upon the player-character. This problem is particularly resonant in medieval-based fantasy environments, as the pseudo-medieval setting implicitly lends historical authority to these white-dominated gamespaces. In turn, this authority subtly reinforces the problematic connection of humanity with whiteness.

This white gamespace constructed as an unchallenged norm is typical in games of this genre. For example, In *Dragon Age: Origins* the darkest-skinned human character seems to fit rather awkwardly in his white surroundings.<sup>298</sup> When playing through the Human Noble campaign—by far the most popular choice with 80% of players selecting this type of character, as demonstrated by Bioware's own telemetry and pointed out by senior writer David Gaider on the official forums—the player-

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<sup>296</sup> Cf. *Dragon Age: Origins*' engagement with race, gender and status in chapter four.

<sup>297</sup> Higgin, pp. 7–8.

<sup>298</sup> Though it should be noted that even the darkest skin tones were criticised by fans for being fairly light, and non-white hairstyles are lacking in similar ways to the *Elder Scrolls* series.

character meets and interacts with their parents.<sup>299</sup> The NPCs of the aristocratic family are all white, even if the player has tried to create a non-white character. It is surely a jarring and disruptive experience for the player to appear racially distinct from their in-game family, and this construction of NPCs further highlights how medieval fantasy games subtly demonstrate the expectation that their players will be white.<sup>300</sup>

Both Dietrich and Young draw on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, explained by Bonilla-Silva in relation to whiteness as, the 'racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites' racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters.'<sup>301</sup> Dietrich points to online spaces and virtual worlds as reflective of the real-world white 'habitus' through their lack of racial diversity. His work notes the power of virtual worlds on their inhabitants and points out the problem of reinforcing ideas of normative whiteness and privilege by limiting the player in the types of characters that can be created.<sup>302</sup> Young focuses on the perceived permanence of such structures and the idea that, in seeming natural, the 'habits of whiteness' are sustained and considered innate.<sup>303</sup>

Corroborating Dietrich's findings from games released from 2000-2010, *Skyrim* is no exception amongst fantasy RPGs in its racial limitations on character creation. Although multiple skin tones and hair styles are available, their overall lightness and the lack of options for hair types, particularly for female avatars, maintains whiteness as the unaddressed norm of beauty. More generally, the lack of potential for racial diversity amongst the four human races of Tamriel signifies whiteness as the default for humanity, implicitly maintaining structures of white

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<sup>299</sup> David Gaider, 'Regarding Player Race in DA3', *The BioWare Forum* <<http://forum.bioware.com/topic/301424-regarding-player-race-in-da3/page-5>> [accessed 17 February 2014].

<sup>300</sup> This is not a practical limitation or a problem of game mechanics; NPCs can be dynamically matched to more closely match the player-character's appearance in order to connect with real-world biological inheritance. In the retro-futuristic, post-apocalyptic game *Fallout 3*, the player-character's father has four possible variants. After the player has customised their character, one of the father's variants is generated based upon the player's own selections so that his skin tone and features are somewhat similar to the player-character, his child. Bethesda Game Studios, *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008).

<sup>301</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, 3rd edn. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), p. 104.

<sup>302</sup> Dietrich, 'Avatars of Whiteness', pp. 84–85.

<sup>303</sup> Young, p. 11.

privilege by shaping itself as a ‘virtual white habitus.’<sup>304</sup> This results in a world with little racial diversity amongst humans, possibly inhibiting the sense of immersion felt by non-white players and propagating the popular concept of a whitewashed Middle Ages. Helen Young notes that ‘when blatant racism does occur in a Fantasy tale, the black reader is rudely jerked from its escapist world.’ This jarring break of immersion is partially the result of recognising that one is not the implied reader of a text. Similar to Morrison’s earlier statement about classic American literature, the fantasy can be broken through subtle hints that this text is not for you, the non-white player. I do not wish to argue that the way human races are set up is deliberately racist or malicious in its design, but the game does sit comfortably and in conformity with a genre that typically regards the Middle Ages as a pre-race utopia. Combined with the game’s setting, these restrictions uphold the notion of a white Middle Ages and sustain the idea of medieval fantasy as the realm of whiteness.

### **White Female NPCs**

The complex relationship between whiteness and femininity, where whiteness is privileged while femininity is marginalised, can be further seen in the construction of white non-player characters within the game world. Women in games typically fall into stereotypical categories, although this is less pronounced for white characters.<sup>305</sup> McCarthy’s 2015 study assessed the connections between racialisation, sexualisation, and aggressiveness in female characters from top-selling video games. She found that white women, the overwhelming majority of women represented in the sample, were typically situated in the middle of the scale with regards to aggression. White female characters were portrayed as more aggressive than Hispanic and ‘other’ characters but less aggressive than black and Asian female characters, leaving them ‘neither... too passive nor too aggressive’ and ‘constructed as the norm’ by being at neither extreme.<sup>306</sup> For these female characters, whiteness invisibly implies a sense of balance

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<sup>304</sup> Cf. Dietrich, ‘Avatars of Whiteness’.

<sup>305</sup> For an examination of gender stereotyping over time and the problems that still remain, cf. Cassell and Jenkins; Kafai.

<sup>306</sup> Kelly McCarthy, ‘Revealing a Spectrum of Racialized Sexuality: Representations of Female Video Game Characters Over Time, 1981-2012’ (unpublished master’s thesis, University of New Mexico, 2015), pp. 47–48.

and normalcy, where white women are not portrayed at the extremes constructed for explicitly raced characters.

Although women are significantly underrepresented in gaming across genres, where female characters appear in games they are overwhelmingly white. With a sample size of over 2000 female characters, McCarthy found that in the top-selling games from 1981-2012, 77% of the female characters were white.<sup>307</sup> This trend seems set to continue, with this year's E3 games showcase announcing fifty-nine new titles from the biggest publishers, only two (3%) of which centred on a female playable protagonist.<sup>308</sup> While the player can select a male or female avatar, this gender disparity exists in the non-player population of *Skyrim* where there are 346 named female characters and 661 named male characters, a difference of almost half. More positively, there are example of female characters in most of the narrative roles, including bodyguards, socialites, vendors, assassins, monsters, and adventurers. How these characters are constructed, both visually and narratively, varies. For some characters, steps have clearly been taken away from problematic stereotypes; however, many problematic stereotypes remain, such as limited narrative functions and hyper-sexualised armour, almost ubiquitous in medieval fantasy. For example, consider Aela the Huntress. A high-ranking member of The Companions, a warrior's guild, she is essentially a Shield-Maiden following in the tradition of her family and her heroism is given, and requires, no explanation. This is unlike Astrid's rise to power in the Dark Brotherhood being motivated by sexual assault, a common trope to 'justify' an empowered woman. Visually, however, Aela is presented according to the typical standards of white beauty, with feminine sexuality as object of the male gaze. She wears revealing armour that would offer her little protection and serves merely to sexualise her body, somewhat undermining her presentation as subject rather than object.

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<sup>307</sup> McCarthy, p. 28.

<sup>308</sup> Anita Sarkeesian, 'Gender Breakdown of Games Showcased at E3 2016', *Feminist Frequency*, 2016 <<https://feministfrequency.com/2016/06/17/gender-breakdown-of-games-showcased-at-e3-2016/>> [accessed 18 June 2016]. Games focusing primarily on a male playable protagonist accounted for 24 (41%) of these new titles, while protagonists of any gender (alike to *Skyrim*) made up 29 (49%) of the total.

Returning to the concept of conservatism in fantasy, the adherence to gendered conservatism seems difficult to break.<sup>309</sup> Its existence is easily visible in *Skyrim*'s female leaders. There are three female characters in key political positions of power as hereditary Jarls. They are, unsurprisingly, white Nords, but provide a superficial level of gender—if not racial—balance to the government. Although their existence implies equality in *Skyrim*'s legal hierarchy, their political influence and performance is limited by the gendered failings of their characters. As Anita Roy pointed out in her review of *White*,

‘For Dyer, the key to understanding whiteness lies in the "spirit", not "soul" or "spirituality" but the very male-gendered spirit of enterprise, from the Wild West to the final frontier of outer space. His analysis of The Jewel in the Crown illustrates how uneasily white femininity fits into this construct, in which "white women have nothing to do and do it very unpleasantly; those who do try to do something fail, go mad or create havoc.’<sup>310</sup>

Dyer was referring to the function of gendered roles in imperialism, expressing the dichotomy set up between white masculinity and white femininity in relation to control (of the self and the other) of empire. Where white masculinity is linked to ‘expansiveness, enterprise, courage and control’, white femininity is associated with ‘doubt and... demise’<sup>311</sup> This characterisation is similarly applicable to the fantasy realm, where the typical discourse concerns the masculine hero who is able to exercise his control over nature—and often the supernatural—and utilise the qualities Dyer associates with white masculinity as part of the construction the hero archetype. The ill-fitting nature of white femininity into the role of the hero is perhaps the result of two disjointed identities represented by one body. The privilege of un-interrogated, unmarked whiteness join with troubled femininity, typically subordinated by the dominant cultural discourse which favours masculinity. This ‘male spirit’ is something to which I will return, but for the moment the concept of white women

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<sup>309</sup> For a fuller discussion of the conservative politics of fantasy, see chapter three.

<sup>310</sup> Anita Roy, ‘White Made Strange’, *Times Higher Education*, 1997, para. 8 <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/white-made-strange/157172.article>> [accessed 10 January 2016]; Dyer, *White*, p. 199.

<sup>311</sup> Dyer, *White*, p. 184.

failing to fit comfortably into the role of the white hero helps to inform the reading of a primary NPC, Elisif the Fair.

### **Women in Power**

As has been discussed, the markers of whiteness are often associated with a desirable, appearance. These normative markers are most obvious in the creation of female avatars, demonstrating a conformity to the typical, white construction and perception of beauty. NPCs are similarly privileged in their construction and characterisation, but of particular interest are some of the white, female NPCs. The characterisation of some of the primary female NPCs has a similar tendency to privilege whiteness, but also operates on the pervasive stereotypes of femininity and the roles of women in medieval fantasy. In particular, they are constructed as emotional and irrational and lacking agency, qualities that are especially problematic in the portrayal of women in positions of authority.

Elisif is the wife of the late Torygg, High King of Skyrim and Jarl of Solitude, the capital city. She is beautiful, young and eager. The game works to convey this by visually rendering her seated demeanour differently to the other Jarls. While the other eight Jarls slump back in their chairs with one hand resting wearily against their heads, she is the only leader to sit upright in her chair, leaning forward attentively. She spends much of the narrative in a potential position of power having taken up the role of Jarl of Solitude in her husband's place. The High ruler of Skyrim is traditionally a Jarl elected by a Moot, a committee of representatives from each of the holds. One of *Skyrim's* lore books explains that at present the vote 'is more formality and theater than anything else.' As Skyrim is part of the Empire and Solitude is the city most closely linked to the Imperials, the current Jarl of Solitude 'has served as High King for generations.'<sup>312</sup> Thus, although she has not yet been approved by the Moot and crowned, Elisif is ideally situated to become the High Queen should the Empire win the civil war. She is, however, in this position directly as a consequence of her marriage rather than through ancestral inheritance. Her status as the wife of Torygg and Jarl only by extension is recognised and discussed by citizens of Skyrim who consistently discuss Elisif in relation to her late husband.

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<sup>312</sup> Abdul-Mujib Ababneh, 'Skyrim's Rule: An Outsider's View', in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, 2011.

There is an atmosphere of doubt regarding Elisif's Jarlship as Sybille, Solitude's powerful and enigmatic Court Wizard, will explain, 'I've seen jarls come and go. This one only became Jarl because her husband died. She'll be replaced in a matter of months.'<sup>313</sup> Odar the cook in Solitude's Blue Palace, is also happy to share gossip with the player. He reveals that 'everyone knows General Tullius wields the real power in Solitude. Elisif? Ah, she's a figurehead. A puppet.'<sup>314</sup>

Indeed, it appears that most of the Jarl's duties are managed by her steward, Falk Firebeard. Elisif's typical greeting is to direct the player to conduct their business with Falk rather than to speak directly to her. While Falk attributes this to her grief, explaining that 'she still mourns greatly for her husband,' his treatment of her is often manipulative and condescending. While he is committed to serving Elisif and fulfilling, their dialogue makes it rather clear that he is the more diplomatically astute of the pair, and that he is adept at tactfully handling the Jarl's resistance whilst also manoeuvring the conversation to reach the outcome he believes is most beneficial. In one conversation, a farmer begs Elisif to send someone to investigate supernatural happenings and she immediately agrees to send a legion. This decision is framed as an overreaction and is much to the irritation of Sybille. The characterisation of femininity as lacking emotional control and rationality is a well-worn stereotype, and is integral to the portrayal of Elisif. Falk steps in to gently move Elisif to a more acceptable decision:

Falk: Perhaps a more... tempered reaction... might be called for?

Elisif: Oh, yes, of course you are right. Falk, tell Captain Aldis I said to assign a few extra soldiers to Dragon Bridge.

The farmer, Varnius, is not entirely satisfied with this plan but Falk steps in to end the conversation. His solution is to send the Dragonborn to investigate rather than commit to the excessive action of sending an entire Legion to take care of such a small, domestic matter. He decisively puts an end to the matter and dismisses the complainant, perhaps before Elisif is moved to speak again:

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<sup>313</sup> Sybille Stentor, Solitude.

<sup>314</sup> Odar, Solitude.

Varnius: Thank you, Jarl Elisif. But about the cave...

Falk: I will have someone take care of the cave as well Varnius, you can rest easy. You're dismissed.

By stepping in to answer for the Jarl after Elisif has been addressed directly, Falk demonstrates his control and affirms the characterisation of the potential High Queen as a powerless figurehead by defusing her overemotional reactions and limiting her speech.

Falk's behaviour is conveyed as a form of paternal kindness, as he seems to act with the Jarl's, and Solitude's, best interests in mind rather than to further his own advancement. This image is enhanced by the sharp juxtaposition of Falk with Erikur, an egotistical thane whose primary concern is financial profit, and who frequently disagrees with Elisif. Falk, on the other hand, is sensitive in his approach, showing tactful support for her ideas whilst gently guiding her away from the particularly poor ones. For example, Elisif wishes to throw an extravagant, and unaffordable, parade to improve the morale of the people. Falk offers a carefully measured response: 'what a... fine idea, my Jarl. However, I would suggest we wait until the war has ended. After all, the General needs his soldiers out in the field, fighting battles against the Stormcloaks.' His rejection, framed as a suggestion, demonstrates his mastery in controlling the Jarl's unreasonable expectations. The rational justification behind his suggestion is perfectly obvious to the player. In explicitly pointing this obvious issue out to the Jarl, Elisif's incompetence is exposed quite clearly.

The troubling depiction of the potential High Queen's incompetence is heightened by the fact that her ideas are typically trivial in their content, usually being of little practical help concerning the predicament of Skyrim. Faced with the rupturing effects of civil war and the apocalyptic return of dragons, Elisif is apparently too focused on her grief and lacking the drive necessary to be an effective leader. One of the quests directly involving Elisif involves modelling some clothing for the Jarl in order to generate business for a local tailor. Elisif is delighted by the outfit, noting the excellent craftsmanship and stating her intention to place an order for a few new dresses. *Skyrim* has many inconsequential or humorous quests, but to connect this particular one to Elisif more explicitly conveys the trivial, domestic nature of her interests, as well as uncomplicatedly reinscribing the stereotype of women being more interested and at ease with fashion than politics. Her concerns are those of the

domestic, private sphere, based around her husband and her own undisciplined feelings and desires, rather than the political or courtly spheres.

In opposition to the more typical structures of heroism, Elisif seems to lack conviction and some elements of her dialogue set her further apart from her kin. This is of particular significance as the Nord race is set up in accordance with the typical ideals and values of white, nostalgic heroism. When entering the Bards College in Solitude, the player will be told that Elisif is cancelling the ancient ritual of The Burning of King Olaf. The festival is centuries old and celebrates the deeds, both heroic and dishonourable, of the mythical King Olaf, an effigy of whom is burned as part of the tradition. After the recent death of High King Torygg, Elisif finds this ritual to be in poor taste, much to the displeasure of bards, vendors, and citizens of Solitude. She can be convinced to change her mind if the Dragonborn recovers, and helps to edit, a lost piece of the Poetic Edda that ‘proves’ that King Olaf was ultimately a scoundrel, but her primary rejection of this time-honoured tradition implies a separation from the will of her people. Nordrs are a proud race of people who highly value their history and traditions and Elisif demonstrates a lack of conviction to these Nordic ideals, marking her as less racially ideal. Furthermore, her religious beliefs are unclear, and she does not make any statement with regards to her stance on the White-Gold Concordat. When her husband died, she made offerings to all of the Divines except Talos, the outlawed, Nord-specific deity. She knows, however, that Torygg would have wanted a proper burial that included placing a tribute at the shrine of Talos. This, she explains, ‘is the way Nordrs are buried in Skyrim’ as she offers the player a quest to take the late King’s warhorn to the shrine.<sup>315</sup> The phrasing of this sentence, specifying *Nordrs* instead of saying *we*, alongside her reluctance to publicly follow her own culture’s—and her beloved husband’s—funerary traditions, imply a distancing from her own race. Similarly, when Falk and Bolgier dismiss her idea for a parade she resignedly says that ‘there’s no changing your stubborn Nord minds.’<sup>316</sup> Her language as well as her behaviour position her on the edges of the Nord culture, a culture defined by its heroic masculinity. Her typically feminine qualities, excessive emotion, frippery, cowardice and inaction, render her ineffective as both a ruler and a Nord.

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<sup>315</sup> Elisif, ‘Elisif’s Tribute,’ Solitude.

<sup>316</sup> Elisif, Solitude.

Elisif demonstrates a desire to exert authority in her realm but is met with excuses and dismissive attitudes from the primarily male advisors and leaders at court. The men around her manage her responsibilities and limit her agency within the court. Her frustration with her lack of control is particularly evident in her relationship with General Tullius. Tullius is the leader of the Imperial Legion in Skyrim and is responsible for directing the war effort. His status as an older, more experienced and well-respected military leader is conveyed visually through his greying hair, worn face, and his elaborate, unique set of armour, a cuirass designed in the Imperial style embossed with the dragon insignia of the Empire. Tullius is constructed much more directly in the traditional heroic mode, being straightforward, honest, and committed to his duty.

He is portrayed as noble and brave, sacrificing his personal life in order to fulfil his oaths and obligations, stating that ‘the harshness of Skyrim has a way of carving a man down to his true self.’<sup>317</sup> Tullius is Elisif’s political opposite, conveying a sense of drive and duty at all times. Elisif enjoys herself at an elegant and lavish aristocratic party, whereas Tullius sulks and explicitly resents being forced to be present. He will tell the player that as an act of diplomacy he cannot refuse the invitation though he has much more important things to do than attend frivolous parties. His attitude engenders the sympathy and respect of the player, and often the respect of his enemies too. Where Elisif tries to reclaim some control over her domain, she is dismissed and met with excuses:

Elisif: Steward, when is my appointment to meet with General Tullius?

There are some issues we must speak about.

Falk: I’m afraid he’s had to reschedule, my grace. By all accounts, waging war takes his every moment.

Elisif: Again? He can’t simply cancel an appointment with the Jarl! He serves in my capital city!

Falk: I’m afraid he can. His authority comes from the emperor, whom you also serve, technically.

Elisif: He uses all of Haafingar’s resources and doesn’t answer to me in the slightest? This hardly seems fair.

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<sup>317</sup> Tullius, Solitude.

Falk: 'Fair' is a word rarely applied to politics, my grace. I'm afraid you must learn to accept this.

Falk tries to compensate for Elisif's inexperience by teaching the Jarl to operate under the rules of politics, and it is possible that this would enlist the player's sympathies for the young ruler. In the face of Tullius' steadfast heroism and dedication to the war effort, however, Elisif's complaints seem all the more juvenile.

At best, Elisif is portrayed as naïve and inexperienced. At worst, she is incompetent and unfit to rule. She is the stereotypical noble wife of medievalist fantasy, defined by her royal husband and confined within the court whilst having little understanding of the politics of court or the world outside it. Returning to Dyer's discussion of white women and uncertainty, Elisif comes to be symbolic of the doubt surrounding the relationship between the Empire and Skyrim. She is handled by the men surrounding her, chief of whom being the Imperial Tullius. A prime concern for members of the Stormcloak rebellion is the loss of Skyrim's sovereignty, of ceding the rights of the Nords to the will of the Imperials. Some of Elisif's citizens recognise that she is a puppet of the Empire, and interacting with her shows that she has very little control over herself or others. Thus, the potential loss of traditional authority and rightful rule in Skyrim is signalled by the ineffective, female figurehead symbolically positioned at the edge of Nord culture.

Although Elisif is one of the most prominent female NPCs, two of the other nine Jarls of *Skyrim* are also women. While it is positive to see female characters in positions of power, their construction is similarly stereotypical in terms of the reliance upon negative tropes of femininity. Given the game's setting, it is unsurprising that both of these characters are also white Nords, but the game does little to re-characterise white femininity outside of the typical discourse that privileges masculinity.

Laila Law-Giver, the Jarl of The Rift, is similarly styled but older than Elisif. She has been designed using the middle-aged complexion type, has two grown children, and her demeanour is much more confident.<sup>318</sup> Her maturity and relaxed

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<sup>318</sup> The Creation Kit shows that the two wrinkled complexions, typically used for middle-aged NPCs, are named 'Complexion\_Age40' and 'Complexion\_Age50.' For older characters, a different texture is used to create characters labelled 'Elders.' These options are not available to the player.

nature imply that she is a more experienced and practiced leader. Regardless, the player quickly discovers that she is similarly incompetent and lacks control over her hold. The Thieves Guild, an organisation for professional criminals, are based in Riften and exert significant influence over the hold's markets, economy, and politics. Laila, however, is ignorant of the corruption in Riften and is unaware of the extent to which the city is controlled by underground factions and manipulative aristocrats. She wholly trusts the words of her steward Anuriel, an infiltrator placed by the Thieves Guild, and is secure in her expression that Riften is safe and fully under her control. She is traditional and honest but lacks that masculine enterprising spirit to prevent her trusting nature from slipping into gullibility. Instead, her ironic claims border on the darkly humorous, as it is obvious to the player that Laila is both arrogant and deluded. Indeed, in her ambient dialogue she will state that 'Maven is one of the few people I can trust,' referring to Maven Black-Briar, head of the powerful Black-Briar family. Maven's brash behaviour emphasises the ignorance of the Jarl; she has no fear in telling the player that 'nothing gets done without my approval in this city. I have the Jarl's ear, and the guards in my pocket. Anyone makes trouble for me and I pay a visit to the Thieves Guild. Make me angry and I contact the Dark Brotherhood,' Skyrim's assassin's guild.<sup>319</sup> In opposition to Elisif, Laila's downfall is actually in embodying too closely the ideal values of Nord culture without fielding the masculine qualities of ingenuity and emotional control. She values trust and expects the loyalty of her followers, but does not have the power of authoritative presence and respect needed to command such loyalty. As the duplicitous Anuriel will explain to the player 'Laila is a simple and traditional woman. Which makes it easy to manipulate her.'<sup>320</sup>

The third female Jarl, Idgrod Ravencrone of Hjaalmarch, is much more advanced in age, as suggested by the 'crone' in her name and the use of the 'Elder' skin-type in her visual design. Interestingly, her (heterosexual) marriage subverts typical gender roles in that her husband serves as her steward. She is a gentle and enigmatic character whose dialogue tends to focus on aphorisms and philosophy. In her maturity and focus on knowledge, Idgrod embodies the typical archetype of the medievalist fantasy sage or prophetess. She seems to value peace and the attainment of wisdom, worrying that the civil war distracts people from the present moment and

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<sup>319</sup> Maven, Riften.

<sup>320</sup> Anuriel, 'Compelling Tribute' (Imperial side), Riften.

the higher principles of learning: ‘there is too much to learn in the world, too much to know, to fight over ‘laws’ that have no real purpose.’<sup>321</sup> Her perspective on her role as Jarl and on the wider world seems to arise from her magical capabilities; she is a mystic who relies on her visions to guide her. Idgrod sees Morthal as a parochial town with ‘little to rule. But there is much to teach. And so I am Jarl.’ She reframes her role as that of a philosophical guide rather than as a commander. Idgrod’s focus on learning, however, does not bring comfort and stability to the lives of her people: ‘the world’s going mad, and our Jarl does what? She hides inside with her ‘visions.’ We need a leader, not some mystic!’<sup>322</sup> When the player first enters Morthal, they encounter an argument between two citizens and the steward, Idgrod’s husband. The citizens had been expressing their doubts and fears over the news of the civil war and the growing disturbances and disquiet in their town. Aslfur explains to the player that they ‘look to the Jarl for leadership,’ but further conversations with townsfolk reveal that they doubt Idgrod’s ability to protect them.<sup>323</sup> Even her own housecarl expresses concern that she is ‘lost in her visions’ and wonders how she will continue to lead if she permanently loses her grip on reality.<sup>324</sup>

Magic is viewed with suspicion and derision in Skyrim. In Morthal especially, the magical arts are feared and unwelcome. It is characterised as a symbol of weakness and corruption, especially in relation to more visible physical strength and vitality. The association of magic with femininity is well-established in both medieval romance and medievalist fantasy.<sup>325</sup> Where female characters appear in medievalist fantasy, they are much more frequently placed in the roles of mystics, healers, sorcerers and prophetesses than males. Feminist scholars have suggested that since the late Middle Ages the use of magic in romance and fantasy is commonly demonised

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<sup>321</sup> Idgrod, Morthal.

<sup>322</sup> Jorgen, Morthal.

<sup>323</sup> Aslfur, Morthal.

<sup>324</sup> Gorm, Morthal.

<sup>325</sup> See Geraldine Heng, ‘Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory’, in *Arthurian Women*, ed. by Thelma S. Fenster (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 97–114; Michael D. Bailey, ‘The Feminization of Witchcraft and the Emerging Idea of the Female Witch in the Late Middle Ages’, *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 19 (2002), 120–34; Amy S. Kaufman, ‘Romancing the Game: Magic, Writing, and the Feminine in *Neverwinter Nights*’, in *Medievalism in Technology Old and New*, ed. by Karl Fugelso and Carol L. Robinson, *Studies in Medievalism*, 16 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 143–58.

and aligned with uncontrolled, unknowable femininity.<sup>326</sup> It is not uncommon for fantasy games to construct a society which is suspicious or intolerant of magic users, especially when the study of magic is considered mysterious and inaccessible to most, and where the limitations of supernatural power are worryingly blurry and undefined. The stereotypically unknowable nature of the feminine is linked closely to the undefined nature of magic. Men can also be magic-users but may be met with the same derision, as magic, like femininity, is framed in opposition to physical masculinity. Mages in *Skyrim* are thought of as arrogant, cunning, and unable to control the supernatural forces they wield. This is distinctly opposite to the perceived honesty of physical work and traditional combat. Masculine power is signified by the physical body, the control over that body, and the ability to exert that power over others.<sup>327</sup> The arrival of a wizard in Morthal is met with fear and intolerance, especially as Idgrod is openly accepting of him. Of note, the wizard Falion is a Redguard and so is marked as an outsider by his race as well as his use of magic. The mistrust of magic in Morthal is further reflected in the portrayal of Idgrod's young son. It is clear he has inherited something of his mother's supernatural gift and he recognises that the Dragonborn is 'different,' perhaps sensing kinship.<sup>328</sup> He realises, however, that other people think that he is mad even though his sister, his guardian, protests 'please don't mind Joric. He's not mad, really he's not.'<sup>329</sup>

Elisif, Laila, and Idgrod are the primary examples of female human NPCs in legitimate positions of power and authority in *Skyrim*.<sup>330</sup> All three belong to the dominant white racial majority in *Skyrim* and each represents a female leader at different stages of her life and career. Laila's experience and confidence, however, does not help her become a better leader than naïve, flustered Elisif. Although Idgrod differs in that she is decisively acting, or choosing not to act, based on her own philosophy, and is not controlled or manipulated as are the others, she still fails to

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<sup>326</sup> Kaufman, 'Romancing the Game: Magic, Writing, and the Feminine in *Neverwinter Nights*', pp. 150–51.

<sup>327</sup> For a further discussion of white masculinity, see chapter five.

<sup>328</sup> Joric, Morthal.

<sup>329</sup> Idgrod the Younger, Morthal.

<sup>330</sup> There exist other socially and politically influential female characters—such as Maven Black-Briar, and Astrid of the Dark Brotherhood—but their power has typically been achieved through questionable or straightforwardly criminal means. As such, they do not reflect the lawful governance of *Skyrim*.

adequately serve her role as a leader and protector of the people. Ultimately, each of the female Jarls is unable to exert any measurable influence on their court or the world outside it. Their position is that of the privileged white noble, but their failings are gendered, signified by their lack of masculine, enterprising and commanding spirit.

## Masculinity and White Myths

### White masculinity

The white ideal constructed and explored by *Skyrim* is inherently a masculine one. Although it is possible to construct a female, non-Nord avatar, the game subtly implies that the avatar will be male and Nord. Certainly, the game's defaults and marketing have a clear suggestion for the ideal hero of *Skyrim*: white, Nord, and masculine. The white 'implied reader' is further demarcated as a male reader.

As previously discussed, *Skyrim*'s mechanics do not privilege or penalise player-characters of any race or gender composition as was the case in previous games. Earlier iterations of the *Elder Scrolls* series gave slightly different base statistics based on gender. In *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, for example, female Redguards started with ten fewer points in Strength but ten extra points in Personality as compared to male Redguards. The character creation system was simplified in *Skyrim* but, although the player-character can be male or female without any bonuses or penalties, the game's advertising heavily suggested a male protagonist.

The gaming canon is overwhelmingly representative of white, male protagonists despite the fact that studies have continually shown video game audiences to be broad and increasingly diverse.<sup>331</sup> This occurs with such regularity that it is now a subject of discussion even outside of activist or academic circles. Mainstream games journalism increasingly complains, often with derisive humour, about the ubiquity of the white, male, slightly-grizzled, thirty-something, brooding hero.<sup>332</sup> Even when a game allows the player to select the gender, physical and racial

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<sup>331</sup> See introduction and chapter four

See Condis for a critique of the gaming canon established by Ready Player One, and its problematic privileging of 'white maleness as the default assumption.' Megan Amber Condis, 'Playing the Game of Literature: Ready Player One, the Ludic Novel, and the Geeky "Canon" of White Masculinity', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39.2 (2016), 1–19; Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One* (London: Arrow, 2012).

<sup>332</sup> Cf. Lucy Prebble, 'Video Games Must Change. Right Now They Are Too White and Too Male', *The Guardian*, 11 March 2014, section Technology <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/mar/11/video-games-too-white-too-male-women-ethnic-diversity>> [accessed 22 March 2016]; Dan Solomon, 'Meet The Many, Many, Many White-Male Protagonists Of This Year's E3 Video Games', *Co.Create*, 2014 <<http://www.fastcocreate.com/3031904/meet-the-many-many-many-white-male-protagonists-of-this-years-e3-video-games>> [accessed 22 March 2016]; Rowan Kaiser, 'The Curse of the Scruffy White Male: Why Representation Matters in Video Games', *IndieWire*,

appearance of the protagonist, marketing campaigns typically centre on a white male lead. This was the case for the hugely popular *Mass Effect* role-playing games in which the marketing featured the male character model for the protagonist, Shepard.<sup>333</sup> In a reaction to an outpouring of fan support for the female version of Shepard, Bioware incorporated the character into the pre-release marketing for the final instalment in the trilogy, including featuring her in a separate, dedicated trailer and using her character model as an alternative in the main trailer. Although released only a few weeks after the original, the first-released cinematic trailer featuring male Shepard was, of course, picked up by news outlets and players upon its release and considered to be the official advert. The number of times the FemShep trailer has been viewed on Youtube is drastically low (201,995) compared to the standard version (3,459,262).<sup>334</sup> The invisible normativity of the male as default character was thrown into further relief by the fact that the second trailer is clearly marked out as an alternative: it is officially labelled as '(FemShep Version)', while the male Shepard trailer has no such qualifier.

*Skyrim* offers no alternative marketing. Both the official trailer and the live-action television advert feature male Nords in the hero role.<sup>335</sup> The official trailer shows scenarios with a few different characters, but as they are all white, male Nords this mainly serves to showcase different class types. Indeed, it seems the difference is in how one outwardly presents their hero; at its most basic, the Dragonborn is distinctively white and male. The voiceover outlines the story before dramatically revealing the one hope in the battle against the returning darkness: 'in their tongue *he*

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2014 <<http://www.indiewire.com/2014/07/the-curse-of-the-scruffy-white-male-why-representation-matters-in-video-games-23990/>> [accessed 22 March 2016]; Keza MacDonald, 'Brooding White Male Video Game Protagonists, Ranked', *Kotaku*, 2016 <<http://kotaku.com/brooding-white-male-video-game-protagonists-ranked-1762597481>> [accessed 22 March 2016].

<sup>333</sup> The protagonist, Shepard, is exactly the same whether a male or female character model is chosen.

<sup>334</sup> *Mass Effect*, *Mass Effect 3: Take Earth Back Cinematic Trailer* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBktyaV9LY>> [accessed 22 June 2016]; *Mass Effect*, *Mass Effect 3: Take Earth Back Trailer (FemShep Version)* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmECZm1RsN8>> [accessed 22 June 2016].

<sup>335</sup> Bethesda Game Studios, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Official Trailer*, n.d. <<http://www.elderscrolls.com/skyrim/media/videos/official-trailer-3/>> [accessed 20 January 2016]; Bethesda Game Studios, *Skyrim: Live-Action TV Commercial*, n.d. <<http://www.elderscrolls.com/skyrim/media/videos/skyrim-live-action-tv-commercial/>> [accessed 20 January 2016].

is Dovakhiin: Dragonborn [emphasis mine].’ Similarly, the game cover spotlights the same masculine character model seen in the video advertising. The trailers for the later-released expansion packs also exclusively feature white, male Nord player-characters.<sup>336</sup> The heteronormativity of the hero is particularly present in the trailer for *Hearthfire*, an expansion which allows the player to build and maintain their own home in Skyrim. The voiceover tells us that once the home is ready the player can ‘move in your spouse,’ whilst showing a visual of the prominent female character Aela the Huntress. The only adult female characters featured in this trailer aside from Aela are a steward and bard that can be hired to serve in the home.

These marketing campaigns unite two ideas: firstly, that the target audience is primarily comprised of white males; secondly, that a white male protagonist, portrayed as visual embodiment of the rugged qualities of heroism, is the most appropriate image to serve as the relatable everyman. As has already been established, gaming audiences do not mirror the overwhelmingly white, masculine narratives of games. Furthermore, through his whiteness, the protagonist is constructed as having not been marked or defined by race, and is ostensibly open to identification by any player. Whiteness suggests a mutable quality, offering an almost ‘blank canvas’ on which the player can project their own identity. The pervasiveness of the white male protagonist in advertising, especially for games which do allow some gender and appearance customisation, heavily implies a white male reader. It imagines fantasy heroes in a traditional—white, male, heteronormative, able—manner, and reiterates the tacit idea that the medieval fantasy genre is a space for a particular group of people.

Nick Yee’s statistics-based *Daedalus Project* found that ‘while players prefer more idealized characters... much of avatar choice seems to revolve around mirroring,’ that is, reflecting the physical traits of the player.<sup>337</sup> Although there are a significant amount of customisation tools in *Skyrim*’s character creator, it is nearly

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<sup>336</sup> Bethesda Game Studios, *Dawnguard*, n.d. <<http://www.elderscrolls.com/skyrim/media/videos/dawnguard-trailer-0/>> [accessed 20 January 2016]; Bethesda Game Studios, *Hearthfire*, n.d. <<http://www.elderscrolls.com/skyrim/media/videos/hearthfire-trailer-0/>> [accessed 20 January 2016]; Bethesda Game Studios, *Dragonborn*, n.d. <<http://www.elderscrolls.com/skyrim/media/videos/dragonborn-trailer-1/>> [accessed 20 January 2016].

<sup>337</sup> Nick Yee, ‘Our Virtual Bodies, Ourselves?’, *The Daedalus Project*, 2008, para. 11 <<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/print/001613.php>> [accessed 18 August 2015].

impossible to design a character outside of gender-specific norms. An idealised physique is the only option for both genders. For men, this ideal is a fit and muscular appearance—even at the extreme ends of the weight settings—and un-adjustably tall height relative to women of the same race. Facial and head hair can be altered, but body hair is fixed at a light layer over the torso, leaving the defined musculature fully visible. Veins visibly bulge under the skin, enhancing the image of a taut, chiselled body. Dyer notes the aspirational value embedded in the statuesque quality of ‘pumped’ white male figures, and suggests that ‘a hard, contoured body does not look like it runs the risk of being merged into other bodies.’<sup>338</sup> Not only is masculine power signified by the muscular form in its potential for physical control, the integrity of the white hero’s body is preserved by its powerful cut and clearly defined boundaries: ‘only a hard, visibly bounded body can resist being submerged into the horror of femininity and non-whiteness.’<sup>339</sup>

Some of the most frequently downloaded mods further alter and refine characters’ appearances, suggesting that players are interested in further idealising the types of bodies available in their game. Rather than create greater body diversity, the most popular mods focus on increasing the perceived attractiveness of characters according to mainstream beauty standards. For female characters this generally means creating a hypersexualised model with highly accentuated hair, eyes, lips, breasts and buttocks. For male characters, the musculature of the body is emphasised. The bodily spectacle of the male hero is related to his powerful physique. The most popular mod for male bodies, with over five million downloads, includes a skin that is free of the default dirt applied to skin textures, and its advertising primarily displays hairless bodies, reminiscent of Classical—and Neoclassical—sculpted statues.<sup>340</sup> Although body hair options are available, the hairiest option is limited to just slightly more than the base game offers, with the highest level being a thin layer of hair across the torso and forearms so that the definition of the muscles is not obscured. It appears that

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<sup>338</sup> Dyer, *White*, p. 152.

<sup>339</sup> Dyer, *White*, p. 153. Dyer links this to Theweleit’s study of masculine anxiety in the German Freikorps, see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988).

<sup>340</sup> Chris57 and FavouredSoul, ‘Better Males - Beautiful Nudes and Faces - New Hairstyles’, *Nexus Mods: Skyrim*, 2011 <<http://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/2488/>> [accessed 22 June 2016]. This mod has been downloaded 5,308,920 times, with 1,052,836 unique downloads.

where the base game avoids obtrusive hypermasculinity, players adapt it so that characters visually fit into traditional, gendered fantasy roles, ensuring that the characters fit more neatly into the space and genre of the game world.

The carefully constructed white masculinity of the hero is also important to the narrative setting of *Skryim*. The value of honour in combat, signified by the desire to gain entry to a warrior's paradise upon death, is a key principle of the northern, medieval warrior aesthetic.<sup>341</sup> Norse mythology is manipulated and reimagined as Nord mythology, and becomes directly associated with white masculinity. Valorous heroes worthy of paradise are consistently white and masculine, with white femininity being acknowledged only by way of tokenism. That a non-Nord, non-male Dragonborn can also—briefly—enter Sovngarde makes little narrative sense, and seems to be a rather awkward but unavoidable misalignment of the game's mechanics with the internal consistency of its world. This is not addressed or problematised by the narrative. Again, this emphasises the implication that the ideal avatar is a male Nord.

The depiction of the Nordic afterlife serves as a useful set piece that illustrates the idealised masculinity of Nord culture through its interaction with real-world Norse mythology. As part of the main questline, the player is required to travel to Sovngarde to seek out fallen heroes' help in defeating Alduin. Sovngarde is a snowy realm, surrounded by mountaintops and shimmering auroras. The location and narrative significance is quite clearly inspired by merging aspects of the afterlife as laid down in Norse mythology. The player is questioned by the towering Nord Tsun on the whale-bridge, mirroring Móðguðr, the guardian of the Gjallarbrú, the bridge over the river Gjöll.<sup>342</sup> The Dragonborn is tested in combat by Tsun, and once bested he allows the player to cross towards the 'Hall of Valor,' the hall of the god Shor. Again, this seems to be a direct reimagining of the Norse myth of Valhöll, where half of those who have died in combat are welcomed by Oðin. Valhöll is the afterlife of fallen men, where the only role for women is that of the servile Valkyrjur. It is an expressly masculine construct, 'portrayed an idealised representation of the best aspects of

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<sup>341</sup> See, for example, *Viking: Battle for Asgard* in which Freya betrays the hero Skarin by denying him his promised place in Valhalla. The player is encouraged to sympathise with Skarin as he enacts his vengeance by releasing Fenrir and destroying the dishonourable gods. The Creative Assembly, *Viking: Battle for Asgard* (Sega, 2008).

<sup>342</sup> Jesse L. Byock, *The Prose Edda* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p. 67.

masculine warrior ideology.<sup>343</sup> It is a hall of plenty with a constant supply of meat and mead, where warriors will spend their days fighting one another for sport and their evenings feasting. Shor's Hall in *Skyrim*'s Nord culture is much the same. The tables are always laid with food, and the hall is lined with enormous vats of mead. Occasionally two of the heroes will battle while onlookers cheer and clap, building their social bonds through vigorous activity:

Sovngarde Fighter 1: By a bold stroke, you bested me, friend.  
Sovngarde Fighter 1: Shor's favor found me today. Let's lift a mug of mead together, our wounds to salve and weariness cure.

The homosocial camaraderie of Sovngarde is established through the traditionally masculine enterprise of physical competition, maintaining the Viking aesthetic of honourable violence and strong bonds of kinship.

The representation of Sovngarde is complicated slightly by the presence of women. There are no Valkyrja analogues to serve the heroes in Shor's Hall, but there are female heroes present. The majority of characters in Sovngarde are simply labelled 'Unnamed Hero' and appear to be randomly generated extras of either gender. They are extraneous to the heroes' hall, significantly unnamed. A central aspect of Sovngarde is the remembrance of great deeds, crucial to which is a name that is linked to the hero's legend and legacy. In accordance with this, the named heroes each have their own discoverable stories and are further marked by having their own special armour which stands out against the generic costumes of the generated extras. Of the eleven named permanent residents—those who are located in Sovngarde regardless of the player's actions—only one is female.<sup>344</sup> Of the seven conditional heroes that can be present depending on the player's actions, one is female.<sup>345</sup> This speaks to the concept of female exceptionalism. The unlikeliness of women as heroes worthy of Sovngarde is highlighted by this gender disparity. In its tokenistic approach to female heroism, the idealised masculinity of the warrior's paradise is not compromised.

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<sup>343</sup> Luke John Murphy, 'Herjans Dísir: Valkyrjur, Supernatural Femininities, and Elite Warrior Culture in the Late Pre-Christian Iron Age' (unpublished master's thesis, Félagsvísindasvið Háskóla Íslands, 2013), p. 111.

<sup>344</sup> Gormlaith Golden-Hilt.

<sup>345</sup> Legate Rikke, the extremely religious and nationalistic Chief Lieutenant of the Imperial Legion.

Furthermore, this is an explicitly white, Nord realm; apparently no other races are permitted entry. This does not apply to the non-Nord Dragonborn, however, as it has been established that the game mostly operates under the assumption of a Nord player-character and is not meaningfully complicated if a hero is of another race.

The Ebony Warrior is a special foe that only appears once the player reaches level 80. He is a powerful enemy and presents a challenge to the character with great rewards if they are successful. Narratively, he is driven by lust for glory, searching for a foe worthy enough to defeat him and send him to Sovngarde. This is a peculiar desire, as the Ebony Warrior is a Redguard and the Nordic afterlife is specific to their own race.<sup>346</sup> Although his role is limited, the Ebony Warrior is an exaggerated figure of Nordic warrior culture in fearlessly searching for a worthy foe to provide him a glorious death in battle. Upon defeat, he groans ‘at last... Sovngarde.’<sup>347</sup> If the player defeats him before they visit Sovngarde he is conspicuously absent, apparently having not been accepted into the ranks of fallen warriors. In this way, cultural beliefs become tied to race in an essentialist fashion. The Redguard warrior’s actions are not enough to secure his place in Shor’s Hall. The qualities of the Nord hero are inherent to their race. Thus, the Viking aesthetic as an ideal of white masculinity is further secured. Furthermore, like the hard, white body, the Nord cultural identity demonstrates its resistance to merging with the other.

Much of Nord culture is built on the perception of the Middle Ages as the time of honourable violence. That is, violence enacted by implicit rules of combat based on fairness and integrity. This is a popular aspect of the medieval warrior aesthetic, particularly when attached to Vikings. The desire to die a good death, i.e., in combat, is a common trope of Viking-themed games and drama. This is of particular importance to the construction of masculine violence in a medieval setting. Hand-to-hand combat is associated with honesty and fairness, where physical skill and bravery are of the utmost importance. This is perhaps most neatly seen in the medievalist tradition for trial by single combat. The brutal violence of physical combat provides the barbaric visual spectacle associated with the Middle Ages while simultaneously

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<sup>346</sup> Note that he is named after the style of his armour—made from ebony—not as an allusion to his skin.

<sup>347</sup> Ebony Warrior.

emphasising the heightened sense of justice in pre-modern warrior culture. The physical trial of the hero typically serves to draw attention to his integrity and commitment to fair play.

As we have seen, the foe is sometimes an honourable enemy and a worthy challenger, such as *Skyrim*'s Ebony Knight and *The Last Kingdom*'s Ubba. In these instances, the warrior kinship is recognised at defeat, and the hero demonstrates his commitment to the higher principles of fair play. The Ebony Knight searches out the Dragonborn as a suitable opponent but does not attack without agreement, and upon defeat seemingly holds no ill will and awaits Sovngarde. Ubba, surrounded by his own men, has no reason to fight Uhtred in single combat but does so in the name of honour. Before dealing the final blow to a fallen Ubba, Uhtred fulfils the latter's well-known wish that he die holding his axe by placing the dropped weapon back into his hands, saying 'go to Valhalla, lord.'<sup>348</sup>

Sometimes such trials have a slightly more straightforward function of proving the hero's masculinity by juxtaposing him with an unworthy enemy. In the History Channel's *Vikings*, Ragnar's success over Earl Haraldson in a duel cements his stance as a man of masculine integrity. The Earl is shown as being sly, using devious tactics in an effort to hold onto his power. Haraldson's political machinations are portrayed as unmanly, going against the implicit code of ideal masculine behaviour. Some sympathy is generated in that he abides by the rules of combat when challenged but, unsurprisingly, he is rather easily defeated by the fearless, hypermasculine Ragnar.

### **White Masculinity: Ulfric**

The genre conceit of the heroic challenge is utilised in *Skyrim*. Prior to the start of the game, Ulfric, leader of the Stormcloaks, challenged High King Torygg. In Nord tradition, this challenge must be accepted and the winner is legitimised as the rightful leader of Skyrim. We have seen how this challenge works in other fantasy media, to highlight the prowess of the hero or the worthiness of an enemy. *Skyrim*, however, complicates this motif by the means of Ulfric's victory. Ulfric, like the Dragonborn, possesses the Way of the Voice, the 'Thu'um'. He shares the same gift as the player-character and can use the power of Dragon Shouts to cause destruction. Sybille,

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<sup>348</sup> Ben Chanan, 'Episode 5', *The Last Kingdom* (BBC Two, 2015), pt. 32:28.

Solitude's court magician, will explain to the player that Ulfric 'ripped Torygg asunder... [by] 'that Shout, that ancient and terrible tongue.'<sup>349</sup>

The Thu'um is a Nordic gift, and Ulfric's possession of it suggests an ancient connection to Skyrim. He is what he would term a 'true son of Skyrim,' being blessed with such a racially important power. Rather than legitimise his claim, however, his use of this power is more closely aligned with the use of magic. As earlier discussed, the use of magic undermines his masculinity, creating a tension between the magical (feminine) properties of the Voice and the lineal (masculine) quality of the ancestral power. This is reflected in the responses of some NPCs and some players to the legitimacy of Torygg's defeat. Sybille's response is sombre and suggestive of quiet shock. Online, players discussed at great length whether Ulfric had in fact cheated by using the Voice. Typically the arguments vary between reading this as the dishonourable use of an unknowable power, and seeing it as acceptable as it is ancient Nord magic.<sup>350</sup>

Ulfric and the Stormcloaks signify the noble, individualistic, tradition-based culture that are typically associated with Vikings in fantasy.<sup>351</sup> With rugged hair and features, bonus resistance to cold, and hardy attitude, these characters seem to belong to their environment. The visual construction of the Nord race alongside the appeal to the motifs of the medieval North connect the race rather explicitly to whiteness. This relies heavily on the sense of nostalgia for a lost European history, a time when people were seemingly closer to nature with more simplistic, honest values. Once again, *Skyrim* complicates the motif by imbuing the Nords with a highly insular attitude. In many ways, the Stormcloaks' fierce, independent spirit is expressed as xenophobia and explicit racism. The express marginalisation of the Khajiiti traders and Dunmer are recognised by many players as being irreconcilable with their own social values.

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<sup>349</sup> Sybille, Solitude.

<sup>350</sup> See, for example, this twenty-six page discussion: th3warr1or, 'To Everyone Saying Ulfric Using the Thu'um against Torygg Was Wrong...', *GameFAQs*, 2011 <<http://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/615803-the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/61442543>> [accessed 22 June 2015].

<sup>351</sup> Not all Nords adhere to Ulfric's values and some characters resist readings based on the archetypal Viking motif. The most prominent characters, however, are constructed upon the Viking sensibility, providing a norm from which other Nords can transgress.

This divides many players. Those who supported the Stormcloaks often spoke of respect in my survey: respect for one another, for tradition and history. A few respondents directly linked the Nords to ‘British tribes fighting off Roman invaders.’ Unsurprisingly, these were British players, likely mapping their own medieval nostalgia onto the (very modern) politics of *Skyrim*.<sup>352</sup> Many survey participants note the difficulty in choosing a side, enjoying the white nostalgia of Ulfric’s world whilst also being troubled by his seemingly anachronistic social views. In this way, we can see how *Skyrim* attempts to complicated white masculinity, and in doing so problematises romantic medievalism.

*Skyrim* allows players to choose a side in the Civil War questline, essentially deciding who will win. The ability to reshape *Skyrim*’s leadership potentially allows players to satisfy their own social and political ideals.<sup>353</sup> A win for the Nords implies the strengthening of traditional, highly conservative values, preserving white masculinity in its least subtle representation. Success for the Imperials has the potential to see a safer *Skyrim*, protected by the combined resources of the wider community: ‘while the Stormcloaks have a good cause, the Empire is the only thing keeping the Thalmor out of *Skyrim*.’ This comes at the cost of some of Nord’s cultural values. Although Ulfric is a problematic character, the game frames the Nord struggle for freedom as mostly sympathetic. When promoting and supporting the Imperial campaign, there is a sense of nostalgic loss in the recognition that the greater good comes at the sacrifice of pieces of Nord culture.

Lamentation aside, the arguments over whether to side with the Stormcloaks or the Imperials are fierce and ongoing.<sup>354</sup> Just this year a Reddit user posted that after six hundred hours of play he had finally decided which side to take.<sup>355</sup> His conclusion

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<sup>352</sup> For an exploration of the politicisation of medievalism, see chapter three.

<sup>353</sup> As discussed in chapter three, the ability to change *Skyrim* is extremely limited, and fundamentally the status quo is upheld.

<sup>354</sup> There are many forum posts across popular sites that are dedicated to this topic. Cf. gaminggodsgod, ‘So Do I Join the Stormcloaks or The Imperial Legion?’, *IGN Boards* <<http://www.ign.com/boards/threads/so-do-i-join-the-stormcloaks-or-the-imperial-legion.206923225/>> [accessed 30 June 2014] (50 posts, 36 authors); WhiskeySierra34, ‘Who Are the Good Guys Stormcloaks or Imperials :: The Elder Scrolls V: *Skyrim* General Discussions’, *Steam Community*, 2015 <<https://steamcommunity.com/app/72850/discussions/0/481115363859969944/>> [accessed 10 February 2016] (201 comments).

<sup>355</sup> ‘After 600h, FINALLY Picked a Side for Civil War! (My Take on Imperial vs Stormcloak)’, *Reddit*, 2016

was that Stormcloaks are the emotional choice, while the Imperials are the rational choice, rather in keeping with the politics of nostalgia. Similarly, 38% of my survey respondents sided with the Empire.

In locating the Imperials within the framework of white masculinity, it becomes quickly apparent that they are essentially a different pole of white identity. Taking their visual and narrative inspiration from the Roman Empire, the Imperials also signify the values of Rome in the modern world. Imperials are marked by their abilities in diplomacy and Speech.<sup>356</sup> They are portrayed as astute politicians and businesspeople, and as an expansionist and cosmopolitan group. Their rule is focused on wealth and mutual stability; it is somewhat collectivist, valuing the greater good.

It is significant that these two pseudo-historical axes of white identity are placed in opposition with one another. Stability is pitted against freedom, and safety and multiculturalism is offered at the risk of losing distinctive aspects of culture. This conflict is symbolic of, even if in a simplified manner, the contemporary political struggles of whiteness in the West. As chapter three demonstrated, there are groups, such as Gamergate and right-wing political parties, which see whiteness in crisis. In providing access to experience the world from these two poles of white, historical identity, *Skyrim* offers the chance to explore the anxiety over whiteness and the place of heritage, freedom and safety in a multicultural and increasingly threatening political environment.

While it is interesting that *Skyrim* is clearly in dialogue with modern politics, a fundamental issue is that this struggle is not directly presented as a racial issue. The medieval motifs are at work in laying out the struggle of whiteness to reshape itself in a changing world, but the game itself does very little to make those struggles peculiar to whiteness. Instead, the story is presented as a political battle over inherently *human* values. Again, whiteness is inscribed as the invisible norm. Overall, while *Skyrim* works to complicate some values of traditional masculinity, it is ultimately normative in its depictions of whiteness that, by its mutability, is never truly under threat.

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<[https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/40m2iv/after\\_600h\\_finally\\_picked\\_a\\_side\\_for\\_civil\\_war\\_my/](https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/40m2iv/after_600h_finally_picked_a_side_for_civil_war_my/)> [accessed 16 April 2016] (1974 upvotes, 637 comments).

<sup>356</sup> The Speech skill increases the ability to persuade NPCs. Imperials begin with a bonus to this skill.

## Conclusion

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Skyrim is a good example of Umberto Eco's bricolage: a layering of nostalgic medievalisms, playful medievalisms, real-world history and culture, and modern ideology. By playing, both consciously and unconsciously, with popular conceptions of the Middle Ages and the tropes of medieval fantasy, it participates in the perpetual rewriting of history, often affirming traditional perceptions of Western culture and the white self. Medievalism, identity politics, conservatism, and fantasy gaming might seem, at first glance, to be disparate topics. In part, this is due to the racial hegemony of whiteness. With whiteness perceived as the default, it is easy to view issues of whiteness as universal, human issues. Each chapter took a key theme of the thesis and demonstrates the thematic links between these ideas, revealing the threads of anxiety over a fracturing white identity running throughout. Analysis of the construction of Skyrim's medieval fantasy world has demonstrated the continued preponderance in fantasy of a Eurocentric Middle Ages that is dominated by a white, patriarchal hegemony. Tracing the way that a white identity is reaffirmed through popular medievalism allowed the thesis to culminate in a more detailed examination of whiteness, and the affirmation of white masculinity, in Skyrim.

Chapter two established the way that fantasy operates, paradoxically, in the realist mode. Skyrim encourages the wilful suspension of disbelief in its world by carefully mixing real-world and fantasy elements in a way that is not only internally consistent, but consistent with player expectations that are developed outside of the game world. Meeting with the popular expectations of a northern landscape, perhaps generated from a mixture of real geography and descriptions or images of other medievalist landscapes, the terrain and climate of Skyrim is portrayed as tough but fair for those who can survive it.

Realism is a slippery term that evades firm definition. When game worlds are referred to as realistic the term conveys a plurality of meanings. The term is suggestive of something that mimics one's real-world experience, or something that is not true but is believable. The layering of fantasy with elements of culture, history, and geography that are considered to be realistic blurs the edges of fantasy: a game world can be understood as fiction with echoes of reality. Furthermore, the

construction of cultural—particularly religion, history, and map-making—are built upon real-world frameworks that privilege Western culture by the implicit assumption that white-dominated Western culture is real culture.

The privileging of whiteness through fantasy is further explored in chapter 3. This chapter discusses neomedievalism in art and politics, and find connections in the idea of fragmentation. Both uses of the term demonstrate the repurposing of perceptions of Middle Ages through a bricolage of medievalisms. This chapter addressed the frequent deployment of medieval tropes in conservative politics. It showed how the tropes of the Eurocentric, whitewashed Middle Ages are fantasy that is reframed as history. This fantasy is mobilised to maintain ideas of white, Western supremacy as pre-written by ‘history,’ particularly by far-right groups. The tropes of medievalism as used actively by certain political groups are the same as those that are utilised in the construction medieval fantasy game worlds. The important difference is that while one sells a fantasy narrative as history, the other ostensibly offers the player agency in the construction of that narrative.

This potential for agency in constructing fantasy narratives is underexploited in the games analysed. The possibility to explore modern-day politics and ideas in a playful space that bears similarities to our own world, but has some distance from our own present reality, is a major strength of the medium. *Skyrim* offers some space to reflect on politics, but the game world is conservative and rigid in its ideas, and the player is rendered complicit by the game’s procedural politics.

Although not fully realised, *Skyrim*’s incorporation of identity politics captured, whether knowingly or not, something of a growing issue within Western culture. In dividing political lines between the medieval and the Classical, two prime loci of white nostalgia and pillars of identity formation, the game hit upon a rift in contemporary world politics: the perceived gap between cultural freedom and globalisation. The chapter explored how this revealed anxiety about the safety of white identity—and implicitly, its dominance—in an increasingly multicultural world.

The Gamergate movement provided a helpful case study for the examination of a privileged identity in crisis. Though the cause was ostensibly to fight for ethical video game journalism, the actions of many self-described Gamergate members

demonstrated a crisis of white masculinity as the ‘gamer’ identity came under attack. Gamers framed themselves as having a marginalised and oppressed identity, and in doing so re-established dominance within their community’s space by more deeply entrenching the idea of the gamer identity. Part of the anti-intellectual agenda of this campaign seemed to be in demanding that games should not be read politically. I have argued that all fantasy is political, engaging as it does with identity, history, and culture, and politics. The privilege of belonging to the normative racial group in Western culture is in the possibility for one to stand outside of racial politics. Denying critique and analysis is a means of implicitly maintaining that privilege.

Skyrim implicitly and explicitly deals with racism. Its constructions of race, particularly the beast-races, rely on problematic stereotypes. Though otherness is superficially displaced from its real-world equivalences by use of fantasy races, the tropes and cultural frameworks of these marginalised races are recognisable as analogous to marginalised real-world peoples. As Chapter 4 points out, this is not a problem singular to Skyrim, but is connected to medievalism and fantasy in such a way that it has become normalised, much like the invisible privilege of whiteness itself.

While problematic, the racial issues of medievalist fantasy do not prevent players from engaging in identity play on various levels. The player responses I gathered demonstrated an empathetic response to issues of social inequality and injustice. For some, the exploration of marginalisation within fantasy provided a positive, empowering experience, especially where those players identified themselves as existing within a marginalised or minority group within real-world society. Perhaps unsurprisingly, real-world experiences feed into the fictional-world and can guide play.

For other players, engaging in identity play is about enjoying difference and the exoticism of the other. Thinking through the lens of Nakamura’s concept of identity tourism, Chapter 4 explored the simultaneous functions of containment and transgression in fantasy race and gender play. I argue that a key limiting factor for transgressive identity play in the game space is the way in which medieval fantasy so consistently privileges whiteness. Skyrim tends towards Orientalism in its construction of the exotic other and, although it commendably demonstrates the pain and injustice of racism and oppression in the narrative of the Khajiit, it lacks

commitment to exploring the lives of its marginalised fictional communities. Although *Skyrim*'s race play is limited, the potential for game worlds to become spaces for the destabilisation and exploration of racial identity—and the willingness of players to engage—is demonstrated here, indicating that further research is necessary to establish how games can become sites of racial instability, experimentation and empathy.

As I have pointed out, it is primarily through comparison with the other that the white self is thrown into relief. Whiteness is the shadow cast by the other; it is something that is rarely perceived until one examines what lies in the space around the more solid constructions of race. To focus on the white self, Chapter 5 explored the practical possibilities and limitations of self-construction, that is, the construction of the avatar. In finding that *Skyrim*'s creation kit has a propensity towards whiteness, I argued that the privileging of white identity and Western culture is found not only in the game's narrative and world-building, but in its mechanics. Game mods can change what is available for players in character creation. This chapter only briefly addresses the use of external modifications in character creation, but there are clearly possibilities for future research into the way that players engage in identity play through the co-authoring enterprise of mods. Whiteness as a norm of beauty is particularly evident in the choices that are available for female human characters in *Skyrim*'s standard creation kit. Drawing on the narrative theory of an implied reader, I suggest that this confinement of self-definition to within the norms of mainstream beauty implies, or at least privileges, a white player.

This discussion of whiteness builds upon the work of prominent race scholars such as hooks and Dyer in its focus on understanding the extent to which whiteness—particularly masculine whiteness—is set out as the norm, privileged by its apparently-open possibilities. As well as providing a discussion on whiteness through its opposition to the racialised other, I have sought to detail the ways in which whiteness is constructed as having the potential for multiplicity, the possibility to be universally representative. Working with these ideas in games, still a relatively new medium, opens up new ways to explore racial construction within fictional worlds, and identity formation without. Identifying whiteness in this way,

rather than focusing solely on the construction of the other, will perhaps enable us to dismantle its invisibility and to more holistically address issues of representation.

## **Reflections**

This project might have been approached using a number of primary texts, thus giving a broader overview of the medieval fantasy genre. The primary aim of the work, however, was to explore the ways in which medieval fantasy is connected to identity, and narrowing its focus to a single primary text has allowed me to examine the complexities of medievalism and identity politics without sacrificing depth for breadth. This narrowed focus is particularly useful to enable coherence in a project which draws together the use of medievalism in game worlds and the real world using multiple methodologies.

This is the first thesis-length project to focus on Skyrim but it should not be the last, as the game is a significant text within the field that is ripe for further study. Outside of the field of medievalism, the overwhelming commercial and critical successes for Skyrim point to the game as an important landmark in the industry. As has been previously noted, Skyrim has been inundated with praise and awards for its detailed world-creation, immersive narratives, and its presentation of complex moral conundrums. Indeed, within the five years since its release Skyrim might already be considered a classic within the genre: in late 2016 the game was re-released as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Special Edition*, a remastered edition that offered graphical and technical enhancements, causing another spike in interest in the game. The remastered edition also included mod support for consoles, allowing console players access to community-created modifications, something previously limited to PC users.

Skyrim's significance within gaming culture is not only measured in financial success, but in the size of its community and the engagement that community continues to show over five years after the game's first release. As alluded to in earlier chapters, players continue to debate the game's conflicts, characters, and morality in online forums and across social media. They also continue to create and download mods, more explicitly affirming the player-as-co-author paradigm. The somewhat brief yet profitable exploration of mods here

demonstrates the potential for further examination of the way that players write and rewrite game worlds. Mods provide us with another pool of data to explore and to add to the analyses gleaned from more traditional social sciences and humanities methods.

Although the scope of this project was limited to a single primary text, I hope that through the comparisons with, and brief analyses of, other medieval fantasy games I have demonstrated some patterns in the way the medieval world is (re)constructed. The main ideas of the thesis might be fruitfully applied, using the similar methods, to other games in greater detail in order to more firmly establish patterns and instances of divergence.

Part of the originality of this project is in its mixed-methods approach, and its approach to using multiple sources as texts for exploration, uniting them through their common threads of medievalism and constructions of the racialised self and other. Close-readings of games through the tools typical of literature and film studies uncovering the nuances of the topoi under examination. Although games have obvious differences to literature and film, as has already been discussed, the usefulness of these tools is in, in part, due to the dialogue of these media with one another. Fantasy role-playing games, alongside games in other categories, employ literary and filmic motifs in many elements of their design, from their narrative formulas and major themes to the visual configuration of characters and the use of cinematic sequences. Taking close readings from one's own gameplay is a helpful starting point for understanding the construction of the game's world and the likely visual and narrative experience of most players, especially after having taking measures to control for the non-linear nature of games.

When reading into the cultural legacies of popular games, it seems to me to be critical to survey the way that particular culture is reacting to and engaging with the game and its ideas. Utilising reception theory has been helpful to demonstrate the importance of the player in generating meanings from the text. The major themes of white identity in crisis—particularly the fear of a loss of culture and heritage—were identified by players, and these fears were even more clearly expressed in real-world politics. The notion of multiculturalism as a threat and the reframing of a clearly dominant white identity as now-marginalised is gaining ground in mainstream discourse, so it is unsurprising that these ideas feed into the meanings

generated by players. The perceived threats, however, are not having any negative systemic impact on whiteness in the game or in the real world. In much the same way as society invisibly privileges whiteness, so too *Skyrim* subtly upholds whiteness as the standard. Using Iser's theory of 'the implied reader', I have established how whiteness is reaffirmed as dominant and default by revealing *Skyrim*'s implied white player.

In this project I experimented with a qualitative and quantitative survey, and qualitative data extrapolated from social media and user forums. These discussions gave me a greater insight into how the texts, particularly *Skyrim*, are popularly interpreted, what is important to players, and how the themes of race, history, and identity manifest in player discourse. Most of the data used in my research—with the exception of the survey I conducted—was, and remains, publicly available on the internet. These forum and social media discussions provide an enormously rich set of qualitative data with which to engage. The scope of this thesis has necessarily limited the space for exploration of all of this data. Future projects might utilise the wealth of data publicly available in order to create a much larger, digitally-managed corpus. From there, more in-depth linguistic analysis might yield more insight into the thematic strands running through player discussions of games, identity, and the Middle Ages. Incorporating social science and linguistic methods into humanities research will, I'm sure, continue to open up new avenues of productive research.

I have made use of the data from my survey throughout the thesis, and the qualitative responses were important in guiding my subsequent research and shaping the thesis. I initially set out to collect data on player choices in *Skyrim*. The aim was to understand on how players connected with factions and races within the game, and to gather information on the importance of history to their experience of *Skyrim*. The spaces for comments within the survey revealed a deep moral and political divide between respondents, one that implicitly reflected the contemporary political climate and major points of contention that surrounded ideas of security and liberty. This led to a deeper reflection of the relevance of medievalism to contemporary politics, and the way that real-world political anxieties are tied up in identity and played out upon the medieval fantasy stage.

Ethnicity and nationality were key elements in the outline of my research at the time, and so the participants were asked their nationality. Through the survey

results and my subsequent research it became clear that the political debates on identity and freedom, that so often used medievalism in their rhetoric, were inextricably bound within subtle—and sometimes unsubtle—racial discourse. Having not asked my survey participants for their racial identities, I have avoided speculating on their relationship to whiteness. While this oversight creates some limitations on the way the data can be used, it rather underscores one of the central ideas of the thesis: the invisibility of race to those who are ‘un-raced.’

This is, of course, a risk of conducting research on one’s own culture. I have approached my exploration of medievalism in the gaming community—and, more broadly, fantasy in Western culture—as a member of that community. As a white, British, lifelong player of games, the identities I have explored are identities I tend to share. My assertion throughout that there is a difficulty in seeing whiteness is perhaps further emphasised by the fact that I, sharing in an identity that does not make me the subject of racial discourse, did not immediately recognise the politics of whiteness as an important factor in the connection of medievalism, fantasy, and contemporary politics in my own culture. With whiteness as the norm, the topic of race—applied to whiteness rather than to non-white people, cultures, or characters—rarely arises.

Although there was a stumbling block in the preliminary design of the research, combining traditional humanities methods with participant-based research has enabled me to connect seemingly disparate segments of popular culture and politics, and demonstrate a thematic connection that points towards an expression of race that permeates Western culture. Within medievalist fantasy games, the nature of whiteness as the invisible default is pervasive.

The UK’s move to leave the European Union in the ‘Brexit’ referendum and the rise of Donald Trump to the US presidency are two important events in Western politics that occurred as this project approached completion. Both the pro-Brexit and pro-Trump campaigns relied on, in part, exploiting white anxieties through xenophobic and anti-other rhetoric. Both campaigns appealed to nationalistic nostalgia and conservative understandings of authentic national identity, and appealed to the idea of being truly British or a real American. Social Anthropology journal’s November 2016 issue included a piece comprised of brief reactions and early thoughts on Brexit from anthropologists. Many noted the racism and

xenophobia linked with the campaign, but there was also an urge to understand how this was a vote of mistrust in the British government, a vote of rebellion borne out of animosity towards the establishment. This included a lack of faith in experts, recalling Michael Gove's claim that 'we don't need experts,' including academics. Without wishing to suggest linearity or cause and effect, it seems clear that the sentiment and many of the fundamental ideologies associated with the Gamergate movement can now be seen in mainstream popular-political discourse. The crisis of gamer identity and the subsequent backlash, in an attempt to reaffirm its boundaries and resisting flooding, might now be read as an early expression of the white anxieties that informed wider political movements now taking place.

In the final paragraph of his PhD thesis on the public perception of medieval film, Paul Sturtevant notes that the understanding of the Middle Ages is constantly shifting, thus each sociological study provides a 'cultural snapshot... of a present culture which quickly becomes the past.' This is, in many ways, true of this project. It provides a snapshot of a key moment of resistance and the expression of racial politics in gaming culture that preceded major shifts in two Western governments. This is not to suggest that there is a direct link between these two political movements, but to state that they are partially fed by the same anxieties about whiteness. It is hoped that this study will provide one of many snapshots that will help formulate a larger picture of identity politics in the current moment.

It is clear that further research in this area is needed to fully understand the complexities of how a crisis of identity, alongside other factors, has impacted contemporary political shifts. What I hope I have made clear is the ways in which games have the potential to encourage players to explore race, history, and identity in a playful space that provokes discussion and reflection. Although *Skyrim* is not radical in its construction of a medieval fantasy world and does not provide a space for perceptible change, the game does raise contentious issues that relate to identity and to players' ethical frameworks. Through its attention to the details of fantasy world-building and its creation of a space that is at once real and fictional, *Skyrim* has motivated lengthy and detailed discussions and debates on race, politics, heritage, and the relation of the Middle Ages to the present day. This power should not be undervalued.

## Appendix 1: Quantitative Results

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Fig. 1: Age

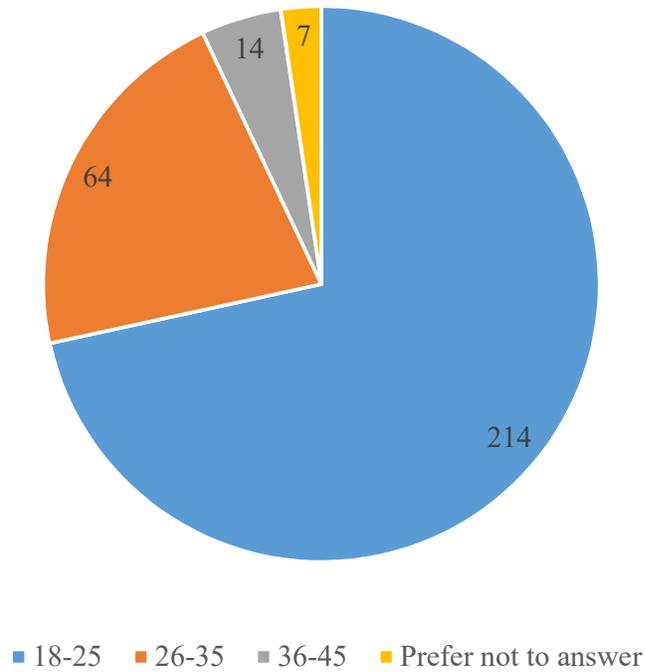


Fig. 2: Gender

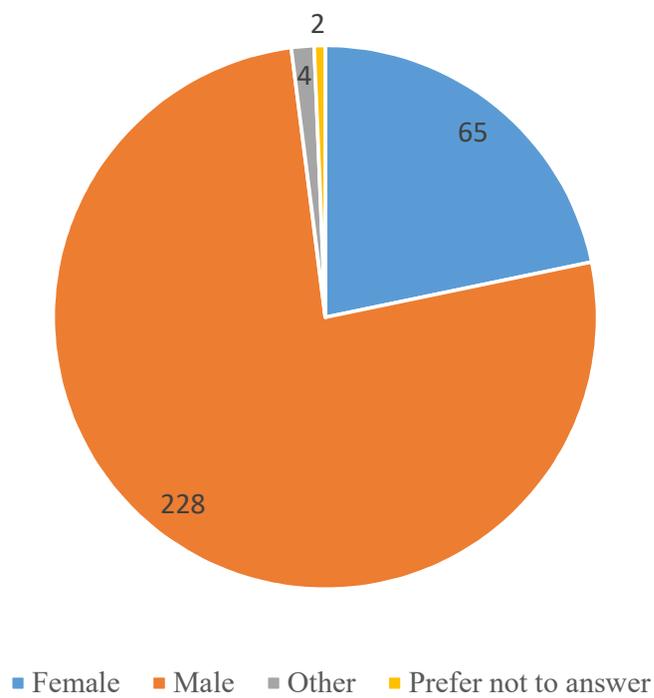


Fig. 3: Nationality	
American/USA	93
Austrian	1
Australian	11
Belgium	2
Brazil	2
British/UK	36
Canadian	21
Danish	1
English	17
Finnish	8
French	1
German	5
Indonesian	1
Irish	1
Italian/Russian	1
Latvian	1
Mexican	1
New Zealand	1
Northern Irish	1
Norwegian	1
Polish	5
Portuguese	1
Racial answer	12
Scottish	1
Serbian	1
South African	1
Swedish	3

These results are given as written by the respondents. The same national identities given under slightly different names (e.g. American and USA) have been conflated, but dual nationalities have been preserved.

Some players typed an ethnicity rather than a country. In this table these have been combined under the term 'racial identity.' The responses of these players are detailed in Fig.4.

US/UK Dual nationality	1
------------------------	---

Fig. 4: Racial answers

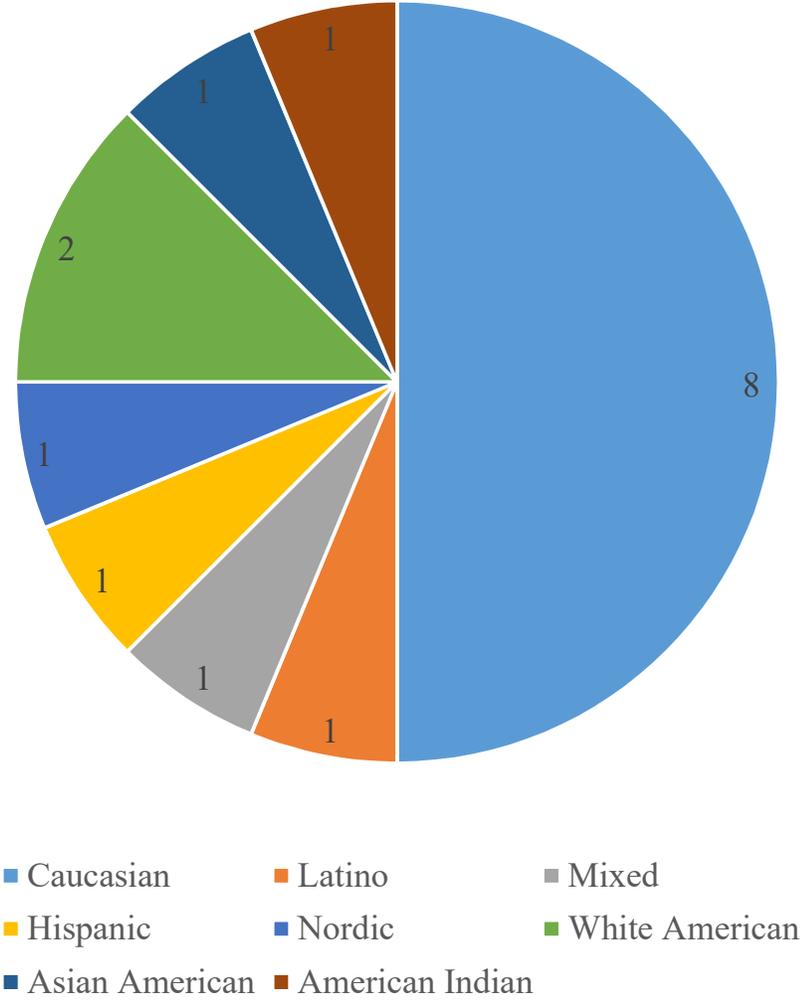
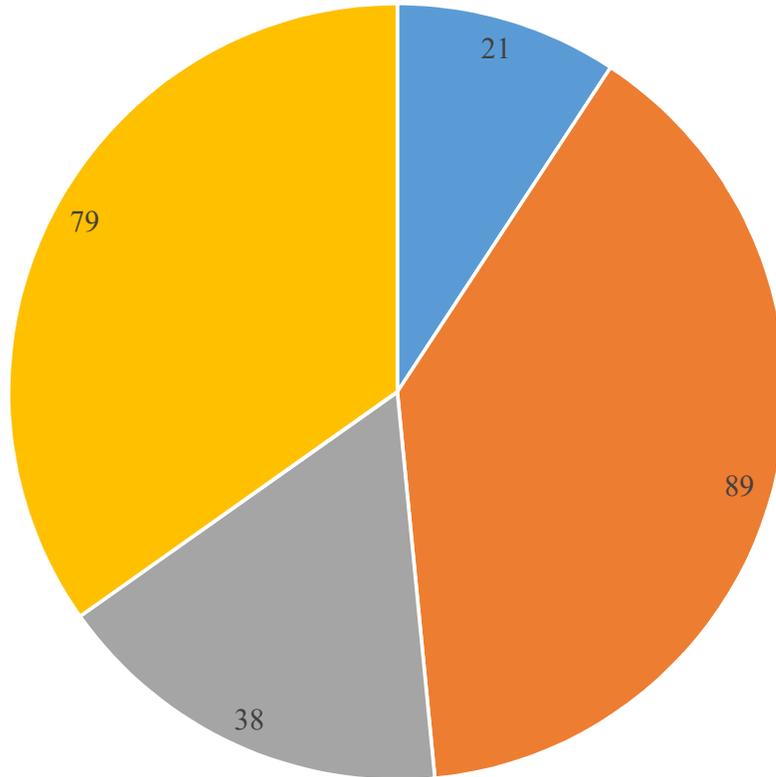


Fig. 5: On your first (or primary) playthrough, do you tend to play and make decisions as yourself, or do you adopt a persona?



- Never. I never play as myself, I always adopt a persona.
- Somewhat. Sometimes I play as myself, other times I adopt a persona.
- No, rarely. I rarely play as myself, I usually adopt a persona.
- Yes, definitely. I play as myself.

Fig. 6: Did you choose to follow Hadvar (Imperial soldier) or Ralof (Stormcloak prisoner) out of Helgen in the opening scene?

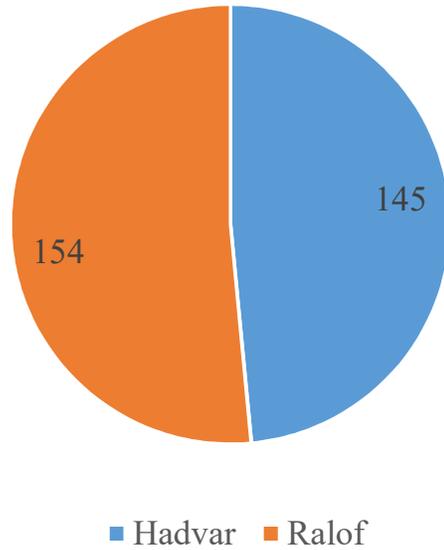


Fig. 7: In the Civil War questline, which side did you choose?

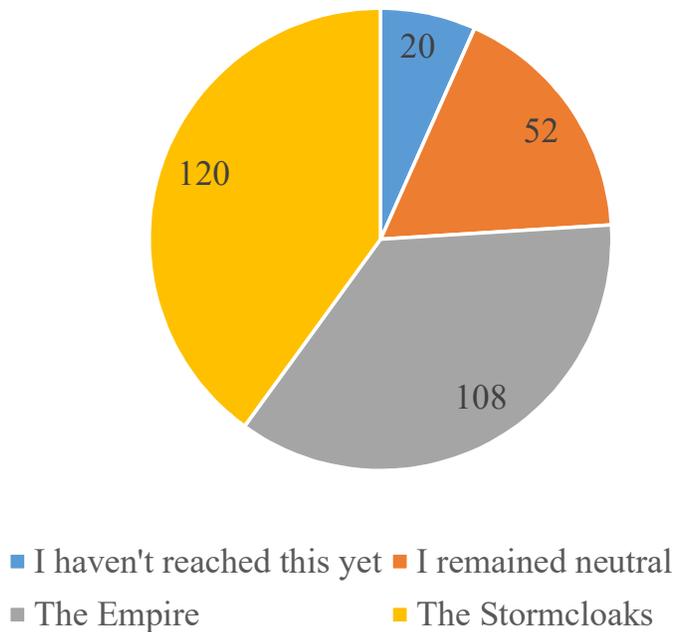
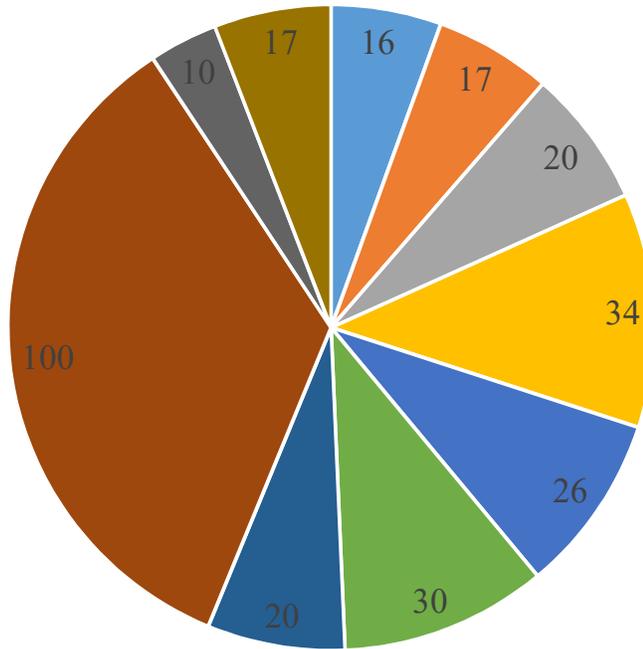
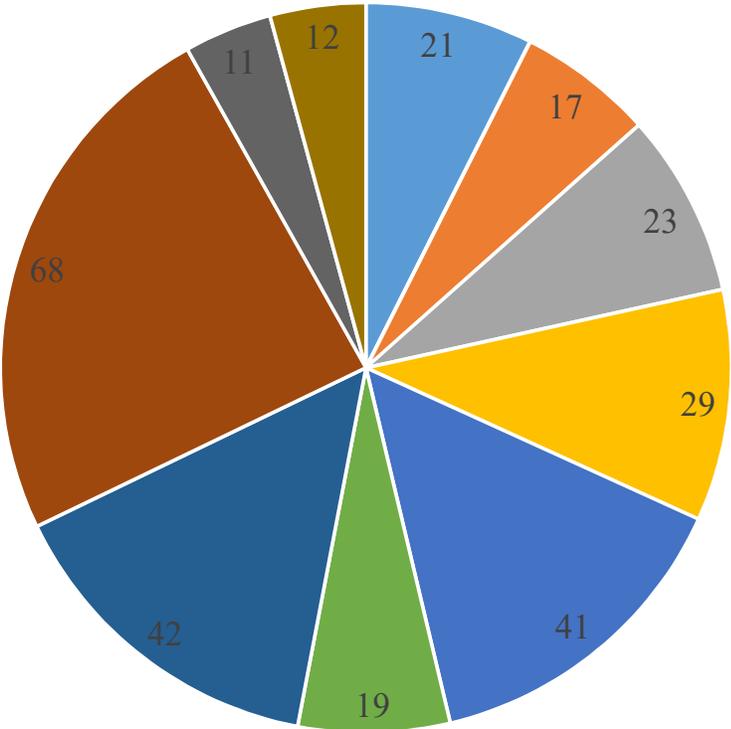


Fig. 8: Which race did you choose?



- Altmer (High Elf)
- Argonian
- Bosmer (Wood Elf)
- Breton
- Dunmer (Dark Elf)
- Imperial
- Khajiit
- Nord
- Orc (Orsimer)
- Redguard

Fig. 9: Which is your favourite playable race?



- Altmer (High Elf)
- Argonian
- Bosmer (Wood Elf)
- Breton
- Dunmer (Dark Elf)
- Imperial
- Khajiit
- Nord
- Orc (Orsimer)
- Redguard

## Appendix 2: Survey Questions

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Each question is optional: any number of questions can be skipped if preferred.

1. **What age range do you fit into?**

[Multiple choice]

- a. 18-25
- b. 26-35
- c. 36-45
- d. Prefer not to answer

2. **What is your gender?**

[Multiple choice]

- a. Female
- b. Male
- c. Other
- d. Prefer not to answer

3. **What is your nationality?**

[Open text field]

4. **On your first (or primary) playthrough, do you tend to play and make decisions as yourself, or do you adopt a persona?**

[Multiple choice]

- a. Never. I never play as myself, I always adopt a persona.
- b. Rarely. I rarely play as myself, I usually adopt a persona.
- c. Somewhat. Sometimes I play as myself, sometimes I adopt a persona.
- d. Always. I definitely play as myself.

5. **Any comments?**

[Open text field]

6. **Did you chose to follow Hadvar (Imperial soldier) or Ralof (Stormcloak prisoner) out of Helgen in the opening scene?**

[Multiple choice]

- a. Hadvar
- b. Ralof

7. **Why did you choose that person?**

[Open text field]

8. **In the Civil War questline, which side did you choose?**

[Multiple choice]

- a. The Empire

- b. The Stormcloaks
- c. I remained neutral
- d. I haven't reached this yet

**9. Why did you make that choice?**

[Open text field]

- i. If you have yet to reach the Civil War questline, which side will you most likely choose?

[Multiple choice, only appears to participants who select 'd' in Q8.]

- a) The Empire
  - b) The Stormcloaks
  - c) I will remain neutral
  - d) I'm not sure
- ii. Why will you make that decision?  
[Open text field]

**10. Which race did you choose?**

[Multiple choice]

- a. Altmer (High Elf)
- b. Argonian
- c. Bosmer (Wood Elf)
- d. Breton
- e. Dunmer (Dark Elf)
- f. Imperial
- g. Khajiit
- h. Nord
- i. Orc (Orsimer)
- j. Redguard

**11. Why did you choose to play that race?**

[Open text field]

**12. Which is your favourite playable race?**

[Multiple choice]

- a. Altmer (High Elf)
- b. Argonian
- c. Bosmer (Wood Elf)
- d. Breton
- e. Dunmer (Dark Elf)
- f. Imperial
- g. Khajiit
- h. Nord
- i. Orc (Orsimer)

j. Redguard

13. **Why is that your favourite race?**

[Open text field]

14. **Which group in Skyrim do you most personally identify with, and for what reason?**

[Open text field]

## Appendix 3: Participant Consent Sheet

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### Participant Consent:

#### Exploring Player Choices and Preferences in *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*

I am a university student conducting a study on the narrative choices and play-style of people who play *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2010). This survey will ask about some of your choices in the game and your personal preferences regarding in-game factions and groups.

The only requirements for participating in this survey are that you have some experience of playing *Skyrim*, and that you are over 18 years old. You are not required to have completed the game.

Please note that this survey will only ask questions about your experience of the base game not including downloadable content.

The survey will take around ten minutes to complete. Each question is optional and you may skip questions if you prefer not to answer them. Your responses are completely anonymous and no identifying information will be collected during this survey.

You may opt out of the survey at any time by closing the window or navigating away from the page before pressing the final 'submit' button. If you do so, your responses will not be recorded.

If you would like more information about this survey or the research please email me, Victoria Cooper, at [redacted for thesis].

By clicking 'Start Survey' I confirm that I meet the above requirements, agree that my answers may be securely stored and used as part of the researcher's doctoral thesis, and understand that I can opt out of the survey at any time before submitting my answers.

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